

Portugal's Distinctive Rock Art Rescued, Now Acclaimed as Unique in the World

I count myself as a fairly well informed amateur when it comes to our Ice Age ancestors' artistic endeavors which seem to have flourished between 40,000 and 10,000 years ago, particularly in Europe. It is exciting indeed to see the growing touristic interest in travelling to see and learn about the art created under a variety of very challenging conditions so long ago. The summer of 2013 expanded my own appreciation of ancient rock art beyond France and Spain into a country where the predictable limestone geology that normally encourages cave formations is virtually non-existent.



Crossing the Spanish border into northeastern Portugal, I drove a short distance to the Côa Valley, declared in 1994 by pre-eminent prehistoric scholar, Jean Clottes, to be "the biggest open air site of Palaeolithic rock art in Europe, if not the world." In the valley lies a vast art gallery 17 kilometers long, clearly demonstrating the creativity of our ancestors, from the Upper Palaeolithic Age to the Iron Age. Setting aside pre-conceived notions of early humans only creating their art inside caves, here in plain view scattered across a much more accessible landscape are vertical flat-surfaced "panels" of hard granite-like rock revealing an artistic vitality that casts light on the earliest human social, economic and even spiritual life.

Today small groups of adventurous modern humans access these treasures in guide-driven 4x4 jeeps, then go on foot in search of renderings of mountain goats, horses, aurochs (large wild cattle), deer and even warriors brandishing spears. They are no careless doodles to fill time in a hunter-gatherer's day: they have flow, substance, detail, animals in herds or alone, turning heads for a graceful backward glance or lying in repose with legs tucked neatly under. And perhaps most amazing, this diverse array of engravings has been determinedly chiseled into the hard flat surfaces of schist rock using only the simplest of handmade flint or quartz tools.



Exposed to the elements for millennia, many carvings achieved through the three techniques of sketching, pecking and abrasion have become almost invisible to the untrained eye while some more sheltered panels remain clearly defined. They provide windows on a lifestyle where rivers provided water for drinking and catching fish, trees grew along the banks for shelter from the elements and animal herds offered food in abundance. The course of the river has not changed from ancient days, so it is easy to imagine this landscape that was occupied tens of thousands of years ago by animals and humans.

In more recent times, generations of subsistence farmers and shepherds in this still-remote, sparsely-populated region of Portugal were surely aware of the decorated rocks, even adding a sketch or two of their own. Understandably they did not recognize the antiquity or unique significance of the earlier carvings so local inhabitants never thought them worth mentioning. When the antiquity of the site was proven in the 1990s, it was almost too late to save the rock art from a watery grave.

In 1995 construction on the second of two dams to be built on the Côa River (a tributary of the Douro River) was already underway, soon to flood the lower levels of the valley and bury large areas of this newly-documented pre-historic find under water. In fact, the first dam had already submerged an unknown number of Palaeolithic carvings where they remain today. Powerful proponents of the dam project moved swiftly to discredit the age and importance of the extensive site. However, with world interest mobilized by archaeologists and UNESCO, and anti-dam campaigns mounted by Portuguese citizens of every age whose slogan became “the carvings can’t swim”, the threat to the Côa Valley’s ancient rock art was soon over.

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UNESCO also moved quickly, declaring the Côa Valley a World Heritage Site of great cultural significance in 1998. Their selection committee expanded this prestigious recognition by bundling Siega Verde, located across the Spanish border on another Douro tributary, with the massive Côa collection. Hundreds of panels with thousands of animal figures (5,000 to date in Côa and around 440 in Siega Verde) were carved in the same period between 25,000 and 10,000 years, underscoring the importance of “the most remarkable open-air ensemble of Palaeolithic art” ever found. The story of this site is far from over, with archaeologists identifying more panels with every field survey they conduct.

Though this unique heritage destination remains largely unfamiliar to the world’s travellers, Europeans have had the Côa Valley Archaeological Park (<http://arte-coa.pt/index.php?Language=en>) and its impressive inter-active museum on their travel radar for several years. Opened in 2010, the museum itself perches on a cliff-top a few kilometres outside Vila Nova de Foz Côa between the Côa and Douro Rivers. State-of-the-art in design and in use of technology, its construction was 70% funded by the European Union. If possible, visitors should allow time for a thorough tour of the museum before heading out on their field tours.

Guided tours to rock art sites within the Archaeological Park are restricted to four of the most important sites in the Côa Valley. Walking over rough terrain is necessary, so practical clothing and footwear are advised. Though most people arrive in the warmer months, the park is open year round except for Mondays and a few public holidays. The region is particularly beautiful in early spring when almond trees are in bloom and in autumn when grape leaves turn fiery red. Guided tours should be booked in advance, tel: +351 279 768 260/1 or email: visitas.pavc@igespas.pt.

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