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The New Côa Museum and the Preservation of the Côa Valley Rock Art

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On the 30th of June 2010, the new Côa Museum was inaugurated in a ceremony presided by the Portuguese Prime-minister José Sócrates. The event marks the end of a long and sometimes controversial process, initiated in 1994. The Côa Valley rock art in Northern Portugal was discovered in 1991 during construction of a huge dam in the Côa Valley, a tributary of the Douro River. Nevertheless, the find was only made public in 1994, sparking huge controversy, both in Portugal and abroad, since the dam's construction would flood the rock art panels already identified. That same year, more sites were discovered, hosting rock art which, based on stylistic comparison methods, was attributed to the Upper Paleolithic. These new finds made clear to archaeologists the extreme importance of the Côa Valley, as it suggested a change of paradigm in the study and interpretation of West Europe Upper Paleolithic rock art. In fact, far from being a phenomenon only to be found deep inside underground galleries (such as the Altamira and Lascaux caves), rock art from the period might also have been located in the open-air as the more than 400 rock art panels of Upper Paleolithic chronology found so far in the Côa demonstrate. However, during the controversy years (1994-96) the Portuguese government was undecided regarding the preservation of the rock art due to the huge investment already done in the dam's construction. Several options were considered such as the removal of some of the most significant panels or even the construction of glass protection domes that later could be assessed by visitors in swimsuits and using a diving apparatus! Archaeologists argued that the rock art only had its full meaning if left in its original landscape context besides drawing attention to the momentous scientific, artistic and cultural importance of the rock art. In 1995, a newly elected

government decided to pause construction work and commissioned a scientific report to a team led by Portuguese archaeologist João Zilhão. In 1996, based on the findings of the report, backed by an international committee of experts that attested the Upper Paleolithic chronology of the most ancient rock art in the Côa, the Portuguese government decided to abandon the construction of the dam. The Côa Valley Archaeological Park (PAVC), which was given the duty to manage, preserve and present to the public the engravings, was created in the following year. In 1998, UNESCO, in the swiftest scheduling procedure ever, decided to include the Côa Valley prehistoric rock art in the World Heritage List.

According to the latest data, the Côa Valley rock art complex comprises around 900 outcrops with rock art and a total of some 6000 individual motifs. These are scattered along the last 17 kms. of the Côa River and also, immediately after the Côa's mouth, on the banks of the Douro River, in a total of 40 plus rock art sites. To half of the existent motifs an Upper Paleolithic chronology can be ascertained. The rest of motifs belong to the Iron Age (the second most important rock art period in the Côa), to the Neolithic and Chalcolithic and also to the Historical and Contemporary periods. Motifs were engraved resorting to three techniques: pecking, abrasion and fine line incision. The very low percentage of painted motifs belongs mostly to the Neolithic period. Data from the Fariseu site definitely proved the Upper Paleolithic chronology of the most ancient rock art period in the Côa. This site, besides yielding the first examples of Upper Paleolithic portable art in the Côa, as 70 decorated slabs were found, revealed a 5x3 m. outcrop (Fariseu rock 1) possessing more than 94 engraved motifs. Since this outcrop was almost completely covered in sediments, several archaeological excavation campaigns allowed for the identification of sealed and well-dated layers in direct contact with the engraved motifs. Thermoluminescence dating methods - aided by Optically Stimulated Luminescence to date the sediment deposition process - of materials found in these layers (heated quartzite pebbles) provided the minimum age for the most ancient Côa Valley rock art of 18 400 BP. This date confirmed the early stylistic attribution of rock art to the Upper Paleolithic. Nevertheless, it is believed that the dates obtained in the excavation of Fariseu rock 1 provide only a terminus post quem to the archaic period of the Côa Valley rock art, which is believed to have started date some 25 thousand years ago.

The inauguration of the Museum marks the beginning of a new chapter in the conservation,

management and divulgation of the Côa rock art, since the Portuguese Government approved the creation of a new structure (a Foundation) that will be in charge of running both the PAVC and the Côa Museum. Due to the restrictive visitation system that was put in place by the PAVC in order to avoid the dangers of mass tourism exploitation, visits to the quite pristine rock art sites have been kept to a minimum. Nevertheless, since the Park's creation in 1997, more than 200 thousand tourists have visited the three rock art sites open to the public (Penascosa, Canada do Inferno and Ribeira de Piscos). The Museum was built with the aim of acting as a portal to the 'real' art galleries that exist along the river Côa Valley. During seasonal peak times, tourist demand for visits to the rock art sites could not be met due to the restrictive protection visitation system. Therefore, the Museum will give a chance to all tourists of obtaining information on the Côa while seeing some of the most emblematic Côa figures on the rock art replicas the Museum displays.

The new Museum, which will also host the PAVC offices, was designed by Camilo Rebelo and Tiago Pimentel, a team of young Portuguese architects. The idea behind the building's conception is that "the Paleolithic art in the Côa Valley is perhaps man's first land art manifestation" (<http://www.archdaily.com/52866/museum-of-art-and-archaeology-of-the-coa-valley-camilo-rebelo/>). In spite of being the second largest museum in Portugal, it sits gracefully, with some of its volume below ground, on top of the hill that oversees the mouth of the Côa, an area that possesses the highest concentration of Upper Paleolithic rock art in the PAVC. If from afar the edifice resembles a large outcrop erupting from the soil, closer inspection reinforces this perception since the 'natural' makeup of the façade results from the use of local grinded schist in the composition of irregularly molded concrete.

The exhibition area is divided into several areas. Room A highlights the fact that the Côa is a World Heritage site while offering an interactive bird's eye view perspective on the valley and its rock art. Room B integrates the Côa's Upper Paleolithic environment within the long geological process of landscape formation also exhibiting some of the human made tools from the period recovered during excavation of habitat sites in the area. Room C discusses the explanatory theories for rock art in the light of the specific characteristics of the Côa Valley rock art. Room D offers an interactive exploration of the archaic sanctuary located in the ample natural amphitheatre made up by Penascosa and Quinta da Barca rock art sites. Room E displays a replica of Fariseu Rock 1 and the Upper Paleolithic portable art slabs recovered during excavation

of this site. Finally, Room F looks at the history behind the finding of the petroglyphs while addressing rock art from more recent periods such as the Iron Age. Besides the mentioned Fariseu rock 1, there are three more replicas of Upper Paleolithic panels chosen due to their significance but also to the fact that these are quite inaccessible rock art surfaces. The permanent exhibition final room (G) displays a modern art work by the Portuguese sculptor Alberto Carneiro entitled “Mandala tree for the Côa engravers”. It aims to establish a dialogue between the ages old Côa prehistoric imagery and contemporary art. There are also three temporary exhibition rooms that, at the moment, present a set of contemporary Portuguese artworks that bear some connection with the Côa rock art.

The Museum does not aim to substitute a visit to the existent sites but to be the gateway that will allow visitors to further explore the rock art that lies below in the Côa and Douro valleys. For instance, visits to Canada do Inferno rock art site will now depart from the Museum. In the future, visits to the surrounding rock art panels will also be possible. The Museum will also be a welcoming center for rock art researchers that want to study the Côa taking advantage of the large library devoted to rock art the PAVC possesses. There is also an Educational Services facility that will have on offer different experimental archaeology workshops targeted at school audiences and the general public. An Auditorium that will host on demand presentations for large groups on the Côa Valley rock art or other activities and a Restaurant/Cafeteria complete the Museum's available facilities. A new website (www.arte-coa.pt) groups relevant information on how to visit both the Museum and the Park's rock art sites and a large amount of data on the Côa Valley rock art.

It is believed that the Museum will also be an important factor in the further development of regional socio-economical life as it will attract more visitors, create new jobs and foster an upgrade of tourism activities in the area. Visitors' numbers for the first month of opening are quite encouraging for an infrastructure located in the less developed and populated interior area of Portugal. From the 30th of June until the 31st of August 2010, 10 thousand individuals have visited the Museum. General appreciation by tourists of the visit experience is also quite favorable. The Museum is regarded as being successful in combining modern architectural lines, the spectacular surrounding landscape and the presentation, in a pedagogic and appealing fashion, of the Côa Valley rock art and its overall context.