

PLACING «ROCK ART» IN ITS ARCHAEOLOGICAL
CONTEXT: THE CASE OF THE HIGH DOURO REGION,
AND PARTICULARLY OF THE CÔA AREA
(NORTH OF PORTUGAL) IN LATE PREHISTORY*

(ABSTRACT)

by

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1. The economic system based on the practice of agriculture and husbandry may have been settled in the inland regions of Northern Portugal during the VI/V millenium B.C. (V/IV millenium in conventional 14C dates). Its components may have spread from East to West along the Douro river and its tributaries. We have some indications of this «continental» process of neolithization in the first occupation levels of two rock shelters — Buraco da Pala (Serra de Passos, Mirandela) and Fraga d' Aia (S. João da Pesqueira). These important sites are located in the proximity of two tributaries of the Douro; on the other hand, they are not far from the Foz Côa region. Along with the cereals, the sheep and goats, and new types of artifacts, some schematic or sub-naturalistic paintings may have been produced. These occur in the above mentioned rock shelters, and in some other ones located in the vicinity of Buraco da Pala.

In the upper Côa valley (Faia, Cidadelhe) we know the existence of some painted «rock shelters» which, to the present moment, have not been studied in detail. Located in the granitic area of the valley, they contain anthropomorphic and zoomorphic motifs, the last ones being of «sub-naturalistic» character. It would not surprise us that future analysis (namely, excavations carried out in their vicinity) would confirm the Neolithic chronology of (at least) some of these painted sites. If that should be the case, we would confirm that the Palaeolithic sacred valley of

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the Côa river has continued to be used as a religious place by the first farmers and herds-men of 6.000 years ago.

2. Throughout the IV and III millenia B.C. (or the III and the first half of the II mill. in C14 dates) we observe a process of systematic occupation of the inland regions of Northern Portugal by groups or farmers/herders and metalurgists. A new kind of relationship with the territory is developed. The space occupied by each community is now more restricted, both in the physical and in the conceptual senses. This long term investment of agricultural effort in the same areas created the need for more formal boundaries. Also, it may explain the visibility of new settings for the expression of power, such as settlements surrounded by walls, or areas where a certain amount of «stelae» were concentrated (like at Cabeço da Mina, Vila Flor).

In the Vila Nova de Foz Côa area we find the more important walled settlement of the Chalcolithic and Bronze Ages of Northern Iberian Peninsula: Castelo Velho, in Freixo de Numão. It has been systematically excavated and restored by the author since 1989. It is situated in the top a prominent hill, from which we may observe a large landscape, including the river Côa banks. The central part of the «fortification» is defined by a discontinuous wall built with schist plaques. There, several activities were carried out: storage, grinding, weaving, and the excavations revealed structures and artifacts connected with those activities. Throughout 700 or 800 years of its existence, several phases of architectural transformation affected the settlement. These phases probably relate to different roles played by the site in the surrounding landscape, according to the variable visibility of its «monumental» architecture.

On the right bank of the Douro — outside the Foz Côa area, but only a few kms. in straight line from Castelo Velho — we know the existence of an important cult site — Cabeço da Mina (Vila Flor) — where many anthropomorphic «stelae» have been found. Located on a low hill which is settled in the middle of a fertile valley, Cabeço da Mina seems to correspond to a new conception of the sacred space. In fact, if further research confirms that the place had no previous occupation of the same epoch, then it appears as a «virgin» area which was purposely chosen to create a religious open air precinct.

These new power settings didn't signify that the traditional ritual spaces, like the Côa valley itself, were abandoned; to the contrary. In fact, we find in that valley (Orgal, for instance) some «horned» antropomorphic schematic engravings which are very typical of the Chalcolithic/Bronze Age «rock art» of inland Portugal and Spain. Just to mention some similar stylistic cases, the same motifs occur in petroglyphs of the Tagus valley, or in the painted rock shelters of the interior of our country, from Penas Róias (Mogadouro) in the North, to the Serra dos Louções (Arronches) in the South. And we should not forget the above mentioned paintings

of Faia, near Cidadelhe, which could also be dated to the Chalcolithic or to the Bronze Age.

We should add to all these data the important complex of scratched petroglyphs found in many areas of the Côa; their themes and style clearly connect them with the engravings of Vale da Casa, not far from Pocinho (V^a N^a de Foz Côa). They may belong to the Iron Age, and it is very important to search, by an intensive survey, for related settlement sites throughout the valley.

So, the Côa river is, at the present moment, one of the most prominent areas in the world for the study of «rock art» in close relation to a long human settlement, from the Upper Paleolithic to the Iron Age and beyond. The various ways in which this "wild" landscape was used throughout the times and cultures are a matter of great importance for the prehistorians of Europe and, indeed, of the entire world. Therefore, the Côa valley' cause is now an universal one.

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