

ROCK ART AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATION IN PORTUGAL: SOME REMARKS*

(ABSTRACT)

by

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The so-called “rock art studies” don’t have a long tradition in Portugal. Most of our archaeologists still think that this field is a minor one, capable of favourising subjectivistic approaches. On the other hand, Portuguese archaeological research has been mainly a site-centred one. Both the systematic survey, and the settlement archaeology, which consider the entire landscape as their object, have not been enough developed. These approaches demand a team based, long term work, and a stability of the infra-structures at the disposal of the archaeologists — precisely the conditions that never existed in Portugal. In our country — as in many others — archaeology is not a profession, but an “activity” with a low social status. Having this situation in mind, it is easy to understand the fact that often the “rock art” has not been integrated in regional research projects. In my view, these projects should consider, without prejudice, every aspect of the human activity in a given area of the territory: different kinds of settlements, burial sites, and other ceremonial or “symbolic” places, like the so-called “rock art” sites. In fact, the study of the “rock art”, when considered as an isolated matter, is, in my opinion, of reduced interest for the building of a mature Prehistory. Therefore, the correct placing of every “rock art” site in its geographical and archaeological context is of vital importance in order to overcome the tendency for isolation of this “field” of archaeology. Researching “rock art” *per se* is, in fact, not only a conventional way of approaching the archaeological record (obviously, every approach is conventional), but a misleading one, because it reifies an aspect of the organization of the prehistoric landscape. This one will be only understandable in the broader

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context of human activity and its environmental background, both in a permanent process of transformation.

In Portugal, after the first, pioneering studies by Santos Júnior, mainly concentrated in the North of the country and made according to an "amateur" methodology, the "turning point" has been the result of the discovery, in the beginnings of the seventies, of the "rock art complex" of the Tagus valley, near the Spanish border. Then, just before the Fratel dam was built, it has been possible to record systematically hundreds of engraved panels (by photography, filming, tracing, and latex modeling). Most of these c. 40.000 individual engravings of the Tagus valley were drawn by the waters of the dam, and they were never extensively published. Anyway, we know that they are all of Holocenic age, and that their style is predominantly schematic, the circle (or compositions which take the circle as a base) being their most characteristic "motif". In the area, open air Early Neolithic settlements are known, as long as passage graves; but the megalithic cemeteries located to the south of the river, on the schist area, were practically demolished by the plantation of eucaliptus. Although the cultural context of the Tagus "rock art" was a matter of concern for the teams working in the zone since the very beginning of the process, the fact is that well structured programme of research, with appropriate funding and technical support, was never settled by the Portuguese authorities. In the lack of such means, everything depends on individual efforts, which sooner or later reach a point of exhaustion.

Anyway, the Tagus "project" has produced the first people seriously concerned with "rock art" in Portugal, like António Martinho Baptista or Mário Varela Gomes, or the deceased Jorge Pinho Monteiro. Other specialists, like Mila Simões de Abreu, were formed abroad.

We need to wait by the 80's — the golden age of our archaeology — to find the first attempts to connect more directly "rock art" sites and their archaeological context. As examples, I may indicate the publication of a group of open air engravings in the area of a fortified chalcolithic settlement (some of them being located under the walls of the settlement), in Santiago do Escoural, Montemor-o-Novo, in the South of the country. Also, the rock shelter of Fraga d'Aia (Paredes da Beira, S. João da Pesqueira) has shown two groups of red paintings, which may partially be related to several structures and artefacts excavated in the shelter sediments.

The endings of the 70's and the 80's were also marked by the systematic study of the "rock art" of the North of Portugal, by researchers like António M. Baptista, Eduardo Jorge Silva, Ana Leite da Cunha, and Maria de Jesus Sanches. The main synthetic views are due to the first of these authors. Anyway, it is the last one (specialy for the Mirandela region, Trás-os-Montes) that exemplifies better the tendency mentioned above to integrate, in the same regional

research project, "rock art", prehistoric settlements, and burial sites, following the ideas presented by Susana Oliveira Jorge in several influential interpretative papers.

Also, during the last two decades the study of the passage grave art of the North of Portugal (paintings and engravings) has greatly improved. Significant studies have been carried out by Eduardo Jorge Silva, Domingos Cruz, Ana L. da Cunha, António M. Baptista and the author of this paper. Made in direct relation to the systematic excavation of some important passage graves, these studies are of major interest to the very interpretation of "conventional" "rock art" sites. In fact, some of the "themes" found, for instance, in the Tagus valley, or in some painted rock shelters, also occur in "megalithic art". Indeed, we may be sure that the difference of contexts doesn't allow us to be simplistic in the "isolation" of motifs or in the interpretation of highly elaborated compositions that need to be contextualized and interpreted with great caution.

Since last November the Portuguese archaeological milieu has been shocked by the astonishing reveal of an authentic "open air gallery" of rock art sites in the Côa valley, in the northeast area of the country. These sites, as everybody knows, are menaced by the project of the construction of a dam. This intention must be reversible when one thinks that in Côa valley we have the most important complex of open air Upper Paleolithic engravings known in the world. This identification was confirmed by the greatest European Upper Paleolithic rock art specialists, and was not, in my view, put in question by the essay of new methods recently used there. The authors of these essays are not prehistorians, and they work in distant parts of the world, knowing absolutely nothing about the Prehistory of Portugal, a speciality which demands decades of study in the field.

But the Côa valley is a new and important opportunity to articulate "rock art" studies and archaeological excavations. That valley also contains engravings or paintings belonging from the Neolithic to the Iron Age. Remains of settled places may still be preserved in the valley, dated not only of the Palaeolithic, but of several of the epochs above mentioned. A few kms. from Vila Nova de Foz Côa, to the west of the river, Susana O. Jorge has been excavating an important fortified settlement since 1989. This site was occupied during the Chalcolithic and the Bronze Age; we know that it is not the only one of its kind and epoch in the region.

We, Portuguese prehistorians, with decades of work dedicated to our country, we attend the Turin Congress with an idea in mind, with a public demand to make. Please help us by all means to protect the Côa valley, which is a world heritage, from the technocratic forces which try, with all their influence, power and money, to build the Foz Côa dam at any cost. The destruction of the Côa valley would be a terrible crime against our common memory. The silence or the

ambiguity of the archaeological and scientific community would be tragic in this crucial moment. We have in our hands, by the strenght of our reason, the capacity of stoping this action. Our victory will prevent other similar cases to be carried out.

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