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Rock Art and the Côa Valley Archaeological Park: A Case Study in the Preservation of Portugal's Prehistoric Parietal Heritage

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INTRODUCTION: SAVING THE CÔA ROCK ART AND THE REORGANIZATION OF PORTUGUESE ARCHAEOLOGY

Although Nelson Rebanda—the archaeologist working for the electricity company (EDP) that was building a dam in the Côa river—probably discovered the first Côa Valley engraved surface with Palaeolithic motifs (the now well-known Rock 1 of Canada do Inferno) in November 1991, the find was only revealed to the public in November 1994 (Jorge 1995; Rebanda 1995). Subsequently, the first reports on 'important archaeological finds in the Côa Valley' started to appear in the newspapers.

The Canada do Inferno engravings were located upstream and very near to the construction site of the Côa dam. The construction work advanced at a good pace and the completion of the dam would irremediably destroy the engravings. The public revelation of the find instantly triggered a huge controversy since the first specialists to visit the site immediately classified the engravings as being of Palaeolithic style.

As a result of the media attention on the Côa and right after the broadcast of the first TV reports, a pilgrimage to the Côa Valley rock-art surfaces began. Reacting to the first news on an affair that was starting to be known as 'the Côa scandal', IPPAR (the state body that, at the time, was in charge of managing archaeology in Portugal) created, at the end of November 1994, a committee to follow the archaeological rescue work being done in the Côa. Nevertheless, and considering the serious problem created by the

construction of the dam (and the construction work continued), it rapidly became evident that IPPAR was gradually losing control over the situation as it shifted to the public domain.

In December 1994, IPPAR asked UNESCO for an expert opinion to challenge the efforts of EDP (the Portuguese Power Company responsible for the construction of the dam and at the time totally state owned) to demonstrate that the Côa findings were not of Palaeolithic chronology. Throughout 1995, this would be a crucial issue since some defended the position that, if the engravings were not Palaeolithic, their patrimonial value would not be very important and, therefore, the dam could be built!

Hence, in December 1994 at IPPAR's invitation, Jean Clottes visited the newly discovered panels of the Canada do Inferno site. His report, which IPPAR did not make public, confirmed the engravings' Palaeolithic chronology while considering the advantages and disadvantages of submerging the decorated panels or not (Clottes 1995: 143–7). Nevertheless, his conclusions pointed to the study of the engravings prior to their submersion since he stated that the engravings would be better conserved under water, because the Portuguese authorities would not be able to cope with the actions of vandalism. This view, revealed in a press conference in Foz Côa on 16 December 1994, aroused great indignation in the Portuguese media and, consequently, in national public opinion. This was a decisive moment in the escalation of the campaign to save the Côa art that marks the beginning of the true Côa controversy. Nonetheless, as Clottes explained in a more recent article (Clottes 1998: 15–18), at the time when his opinion was publicized few engravings were known. He only had the opportunity to see a small number of panels in Canada do Inferno, since most of the engraved outcrops in this site were (and still are) submerged due to the Douro River (of which the Côa is a tributary) Pocinho dam, built in the early 1980s, which raised the Côa by 12 m. However, Nelson Rebanda had the chance, in autumn 1993, to observe the submerged area of the Canada do Inferno site, rich in Palaeolithic art. Some of the drawings made by his team were seen by Clottes. Presumably, this would have contributed, at the time, to a more exact appraisal of the importance of the Canada do Inferno site. Regrettably, no in-depth survey of archaeology and rock art was carried out in the region prior to 1994 since it was not believed that more sites with engraved outcrops could be found in other areas of the Côa and its tributaries.

In the next few weeks, partly as a reaction to IPPAR's indecision in classifying the engravings under Portuguese Heritage law and to the government's unclear attitude on the Côa controversy, the valley was invaded by the curious and by archaeologists who eventually discovered new sites which, together with sites also uncovered by IPPAR's team, greatly enhanced the significance of

the Côa. Surfaces with engravings were identified in the Penascosa, Ribeira de Piscos, Quinta da Barca, Vermelhosa, and Vale de José Esteves sites, among others. The newly found motifs were immediately publicized by the most important Portuguese media.

By then it was clear that the Côa comprised a huge collection of Palaeolithic open-air rock art, that surpassed, for instance, the important Siega Verde site (in Spain but only a few kilometres from the Côa) (Balbín *et al.* 1991, 1995, 1996). The Côa rock-art sites spanned the 17 km between Faia (the site furthest upstream) and the mouth of the Côa. Especially from December 1994 onward, almost all Portuguese archaeologists started to believe that the only way to preserve and study the Côa rock art was to cancel the construction of the dam.

Together with the national movement, a worldwide campaign to save the Côa engravings was also initiated. Different kinds of activists and renowned archaeologists started visiting the Côa, and flooded the highest Portuguese public officials with letters of protest calling for the abandonment of the dam. In Portugal, the 'Movement for the Salvation of the Côa Engravings' was created together with the slogan 'The engravings can't swim', adopted by the high school students of Vila Nova de Foz Côa who strongly defended the preservation of the engravings.

Meanwhile, at the very beginning of 1995, UNESCO, in agreement with IPPAR, sent a second group of experts to the Côa. This mission, led by Mounir Bouchenaki, director of UNESCO's heritage division, had, fundamentally, the aim of assessing the possibility of conserving the engravings while still building the dam. Although the resulting report was very cautious, it proposed that the dam's construction work should be suspended so that in-depth scientific studies might be conducted in order to more fully know and understand what really existed in the Côa Valley. Following Clottes's and our team's own opinion, the report accepted that most of the Côa engravings are of Palaeolithic age.

In Portugal, the role of the media, and particularly of the TV channels, was decisive in the evolution of this whole process which was to maintain its controversial characteristics throughout 1995. Abroad, several prestigious journals and newspapers dedicated editorials and exhaustive articles to the Côa. Likewise, TV channels like the BBC sent their reporters to the Côa. In the foreign media, the Côa rock art always appeared connected with the word 'scandal'.

In the mean time, right after UNESCO's visit, IPPAR, delaying a decision that would always be controversial on what to do regarding the engravings and the dam, created an international scientific committee (comprising A. Beltrán, E. Anati, and J. Clottes) to accompany the study of the Côa rock art. This committee was to meet in Portugal only once, in May 1995.

In the face of enormous media pressure, EDP actively pushed on with the construction of the dam, trying to demonstrate that it was possible to make it compatible with different ways of 'preserving' the engravings. We can characterize the strategy of the company as comprising three different lines of action. First, it attempted to prove that the engravings were not of Palaeolithic age. If that was the case, it would have meant a decrease in the public campaign to save the rock art. Secondly, it ordered the moulding of an engraved panel, thus trying to show that the engravings could be 'saved' through the production of replicas to be exhibited in a museum to be built in Foz Côa. Afterwards, the originals could be submerged. Finally, it cut and removed a big schist panelled block (with no engravings) in order to establish that it would be possible also to remove original engraved surfaces to the above-mentioned museum. All these actions were intensively followed and publicized by the Portuguese media.

However, the attempt to 'directly date' some engravings would prove to be the most spectacular of these actions in terms of the media. Different techniques were employed by Robert Bednarik and Alan Watchman, but also by Fred Phillips and Ronald Dorn. Through the years and even today, only the first continues to claim vehemently that the engravings are of very recent chronology. The conclusions of the preliminary reports on the 'direct dating' experiments, the result of techniques that were not yet fully developed, and were therefore unreliable, were quite dissimilar, some of them pointing to a non-Palaeolithic chronology for the engravings (see Zilhão 1995a, 1995b). Their findings, which were not presented to the scientific community, made the front page, together with the photo of a well-known couple of Palaeolithic horses (see pl. 16), of the most important Portuguese right-wing weekly newspaper with the suggestive title of 'Fraud' (*O Independente*, 7 July 1995). The report, offered to public opinion with a degree of scientific certainty in opposition to the 'stylistic' dating made by the wide community of archaeologists defending a Palaeolithic chronology for the Côa rock art, understandably sparked enormous puzzlement in Portugal.

Hence, the summer of 1995 was a period of great uncertainty, with EDP carrying on with the dam's construction work since the government, under strong media pressure, demanded merely that the construction should continue at a slower pace. By then, it was becoming clear that only a change of cultural policy in Portugal would allow the Côa engravings to be saved. That was precisely what happened, almost simultaneously with the ample debate that took place in the Turin Congress held in September. Under the spotlight of the Portuguese media (the first time ever at an international rock-art conference), the Portuguese archaeologist João Zilhão thoroughly rebuffed the 'direct dating' techniques and the modern chronology for

the engravings (Zilhão 1995a, 1995b). The Portuguese delegation would leave Turin with the solidarity of an important sector of the international community of archaeologists and prehistorians of art.

In Portugal, 1995 was politically characterized by a long list of electoral acts that would culminate in the October general elections. For that reason, throughout 1995 the Côa welcomed all the main political leaders, especially those in opposition, since few government members went to see the engravings with their own eyes. One of these few, the then Secretary of State for Culture, right in front of the Canada do Inferno panels, swiftly dismissed them as 'children's doodles'! He was crucified in the media, and was also made a laughing stock when Foz Côa High school students offered him a schist plaque with their own doodles, quite different from the Palaeolithic ones!

The different cultural and political sensibilities of the leaders of the main opposition force (the Socialist Party) contributed to the further politicization of the affair when they decided to turn the Côa into one of the central electoral issues by promising the preservation of the rock art in their proposed manifesto. After they won the October elections, the fulfilment of the promise was announced in the November by a ministerial delegation expressly sent to Foz Côa for the occasion. The dam's construction work was stopped *sine die* and all time needed to fully study the Côa rock art was given to the archaeologists.

The following year witnessed the consolidation of the victory of the Côa engravings in contrast to the frustration of the dam builders. Despite minor 'faits divers' (like the creation of a second international scientific committee) and EDP's complaints of huge financial losses (for which the company was later compensated after a successful privatization process), it became increasingly apparent that the Côa rock-art defenders had won the preservation battle.

In a country where heritage was seen as something of minor importance, the political decision that stopped the dam and preserved the engravings *in situ* must be regarded as exceptional, even at a worldwide level, as Clottes has pointed out. Naturally, several factors came together and contributed to such an outcome. First of all, Portugal was at the end of a political cycle characterized, in the preceding ten years, by absolute majorities supporting right-wing governments, all led by the same prime minister. The Côa battle was instrumental in questioning the inconsistent cultural policy followed by those right-wing governments. The socialists, in their struggle to return to power, expertly took advantage of these inconsistencies and presented themselves with an altogether more open attitude to the cultural policy issues that the Côa ended up by symbolizing. It should be noted, nevertheless, that it was a courageous decision that, apparently, implied massive financial

costs. At the end of the process, Portuguese archaeology came of age and finally gained a respected voice that became heard in land management issues (something that, until the Côa, had not happened). The role of the Socialist Minister of Culture, Manuel Maria Carrilho, a firm supporter of the Côa rock art, should be remembered, since his political resolve greatly contributed to the highly satisfactory outcome of the whole process.

On the other hand, the Côa controversy contributed to the public questioning of the economical development policy of high environmental costs represented by the construction of large dams. Nonetheless, this policy was not set aside, at least completely, as was proved by the construction (ordered by the Socialist government) of the Alqueva dam on the Guadiana river. This huge dam, which created the biggest European artificial lake, caused some important rock-art sites to go under water, namely the core site of Cheles on the left (Spanish) river bank.

The salvation of the Côa became definitely consolidated when, in December 1998, UNESCO included the Côa Valley prehistoric rock-art sites in the World Heritage List in one of the organization's fastest scheduling processes. This process marked, symbolically but also *de facto*, the end of the 'Côa battle' and of the most turbulent affair in Portuguese twentieth-century archaeology.

The whole process also gave an important boost to the reorganization of Portuguese archaeology. In May 1997, integrated in the Ministry of Culture, the Portuguese Institute of Archaeology (IPA) was created together with its three dependent services: the National Centre for Rock Art (CNART), the Côa Valley Archaeological Park (PAVC), and the National Centre for Underwater Archaeology (CNANS). The first two are based in Vila Nova de Foz Côa, a small town located in the most undeveloped Portuguese interior, now justly famous due to the Côa rock-art finds.

THE CÔA VALLEY'S PLEISTOCENE ART

The Côa Valley region contains examples of one of the most prolonged rock-art cycles already documented in western Europe. Although the first finds date back to 1991, its systematic study was only initiated in 1995.

Since 1995, the region's rock-art survey and study, and especially from the moment CNART began its activities, allowed for the identification and systematization of the 'Côa and Upper Douro rupestral artistic cycle'. It is essentially characterized by two main groups, according to the chronological categorization and number of painted or engraved surfaces: the Upper Palaeolithic and the

Iron Age examples. Between these two main groups, separated by more than 10,000 years, some examples of Epipalaeolithic or ancient Neolithic and Bronze Age rock art have also been identified. These demonstrate a real occupation of the area throughout the whole of the Holocene, something also confirmed by the discovery of countless habitation sites. The rock-art inventory carried out by CNART has so far detected 335 engraved and painted surfaces from all these periods in the Côa region alone. Nevertheless, the Palaeolithic rock art is unquestionably the most important component.

Following Western European Pleistocene art canons, the Côa quaternary art's themes, with motifs of true aesthetic and technical quality, are, fundamentally, of a zoomorphic and naturalist character. Equids (horses), bovids (aurochs), caprines (goats and chamois), and cervids (deer and does) constitute the represented fauna, typical of warm climates. Some rare fish complement this bestiary, together with several undetermined zoomorphic figures whose morphology is, however, typologically close to the species already mentioned.

On only two distinct surfaces were several different human representations identified, of which the best known is the ithyphallic anthropomorphous figure of Ribeira de Piscos Rock 2. All have a caricatural or even animal aspect, emblematic of the quaternary humans identified in portable or cave art.

The motifs were, in most cases, engraved with techniques of incision or pounding. In rare cases, only present at Faia, the site furthest upstream, granite shelters provided a reasonable conservation environment for the engraved and red-painted aurochs that can still be seen today. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that other motifs which, today, only present engraved lines may also have been painted.

Except for Faia, where the Côa flows through granite bedrock, all other engravings were executed on smooth vertical graywacke-schist outcrop surfaces that resulted from the tectonic and mechanically driven fracturing movements that forced (and still force) the metamorphic rock to adapt itself to new topographical environments.

In most cases, motifs, though widely superimposed one on another (Fig. 14.1) are well individualized as if hovering in an ideal space, something reinforced by the absence of soil or any vegetational element. Scenes or evident compositions are rare but still remarkable, as in the case of Ribeira de Piscos Rock 1, where two horses are represented with enlaced heads (Pl. 16). Some animals are also represented as having multiple heads with the clear intention of portraying movement (Fig. 14.2). This is an idiosyncratic characteristic of the Côa rock art that can be considered original in the context of Palaeolithic art. On the other hand, a key factor in the comprehension of the Côa art consists of the intentional superimposition of several animals in the same area of the panel, leaving blank other apparently suitable zones of the same surface. Hence, the most densely

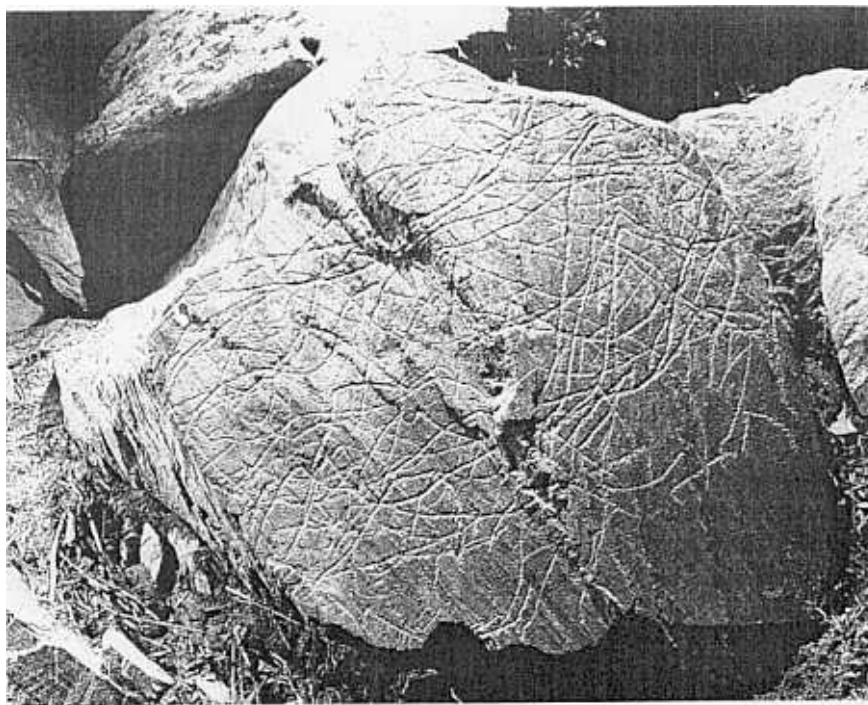


Fig. 14.1. Quinta da barca's Rock 1, also known as the 'spaghetti rock'

engraved panels constitute true palimpsests of rich figurative stratigraphies, a valuable resource in stylistic evolution studies. Sometimes, these intentional superimpositions used lines from previously engraved animals (Figure 14.3), a feature that might suggest a sort of symbolic reutilization of older grooves.

The excavation in December 1999 of a habitation site located right in front of Farizeu's Rock 1 (Aubry and Baptista 2000; Baptista 2001) exposed a panel, of which only the tip was known, packed with superimposed engravings that presented all the formal and stylistic attributes of Côa rock art. Layers containing lithic assemblages ascribable to periods from the Proto-Solutrean to the Magdalenian sealed the panel. This demonstrates that the structured and intentional accumulation of motifs in the same areas of the Côa panels processes itself in the same cultural context, most likely in the Gravettian period, the pinnacle of the quaternary artistic cycle (Fig. 14.4):

Samples for absolute dating were collected from the sealed layers (Fig. 14.4), and the results await publication. Farizeu has also provided the first examples of portable art in the Côa: two Magdalenian small schist plaques with fine-line incisions of a geometric and zoomorphic nature (Fig. 14.5).



Fig. 14.2. Example of a zoomorphic motif featuring two heads with the clear intention of portraying movement



Fig. 14.3. A goat on Penascosa's Rock 5

Almost every month the CNART or PAVC teams, working in a complementary fashion, find new rock art. This was the case with Ribeira de Piscos rock 24—of which some figures were already known—when a PAVC excavation unearthed some more engraved motifs. Together with the exhaustive CNART documentation work on this panel, which allowed for the identification of new, barely visible but exquisite fine-line incised motifs (Figs. 14.6 and 14.7),

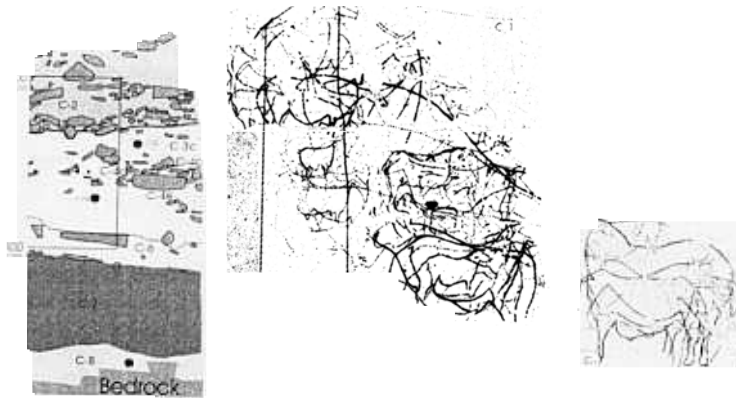


Fig. 14.4. Schematic representation of the stratigraphic layers (C1 to C7) that almost completely covered Farizeu's Rock 1



Fig. 14.5. Detail of the portable art plaque found during the excavation of Farizeu's Rock 1

the multi-disciplinary study of rock 24 and its archaeological context revealed an extremely important Ca art surface. Once again, it was proven that in the case of rock art there is always much more than what immediately meets the eye (Figs. 14.8 and 14.9). It also demonstrates that rock-art investigation

(especially in a site such as the Côa that possesses more than 300 different surfaces with more than 2,000 individual rock-art motifs located in areas difficult to reach) is a prolonged process if one expects satisfactory results that truly characterize the full significance of a panel or a rock-art site.

Upper Palaeolithic ritualized understanding of the decorated space that privileged the Côa Valley beach areas confirms that the monumentalization of the landscape, of the herbivorous fauna, and also of the watercourses, has manifested itself since Gravettian times. Engraving episodes continued, albeit less intensely, throughout the Solutrean until, at least, the early Magdalenian. During this long period, we can consider the Côa Valley as a vast open-air 'sanctuary', traversed and understood by successive generations of Upper Palaeolithic hunter-artists.

The late discovery of such a vast region, artistically monumentalized by fossil humans, is mostly due to its relative isolation in the most undeveloped interior of Portugal. Ironically, it is this fact that today allows for the enjoyment of a largely unaltered human heritage in its contextual landscape. This is one of the reasons why it was felt to be extremely important, after its significance was established, to create an archaeological park with the specific goal of conserving the Côa rock art and presenting it to the public. Hence the PAVC was born.

THE CÔA VALLEY ARCHAEOLOGICAL PARK

After the November 1995 governmental decision to cancel the construction of the Côa dam, the PAVC was formally created in August 1996. It became Portugal's first archaeological park. Portuguese legislation did not even allow for the existence of archaeological parks, and a lengthy legal process in order to acknowledge it under the law had to be initiated from the beginning. Meanwhile, the park was integrated with the Portuguese Institute for Archaeology.

The demarcation of the PAVC's territory, which occurred in parallel with the first intensive study of the region's rock art, aimed to integrate all the rock-art sites known at the time, whether of Upper Palaeolithic chronology or not. That is the reason why UNESCO included all the prehistoric rock-art sites in the World Heritage List.

The PAVC is responsible for the preservation, promotion, and enhancement of the Côa rock art and its landscape, but also of other archaeological sites located within its territory, a depressed and sparsely populated area; it is also one of the Park's objectives to aid in its sustainable, natural, and heritage-friendly

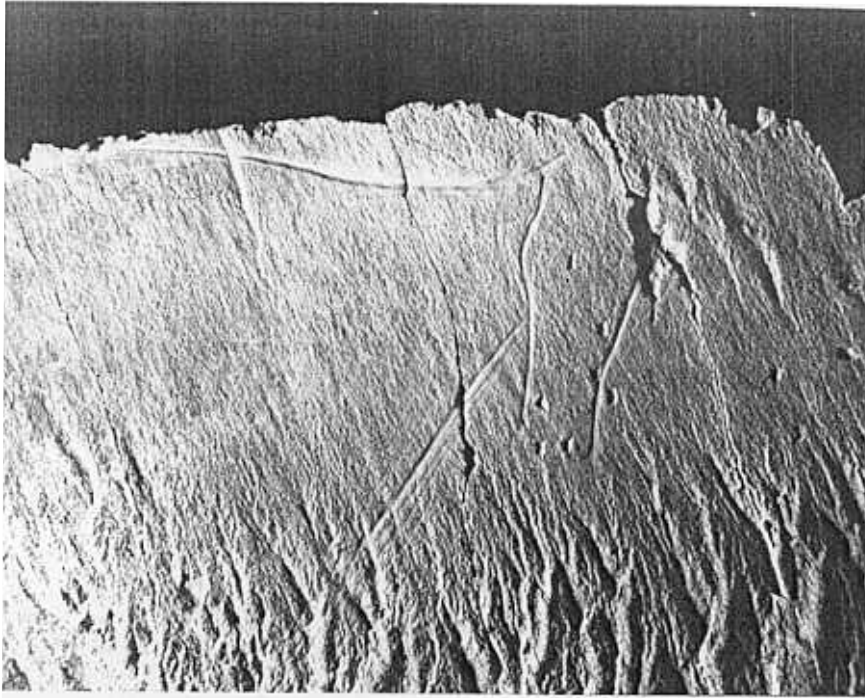


Fig. 14.6. Detail of a finely incised aurochs on Ribeira de Piscos's Rock 24, with the head in frontal perspective



Fig. 14.7. Complete drawing of the same aurochs presented in Fig. 14.6

development (see Fernandes 2003). The PAVC comprises a corpus of rock-art guides and a small team of archaeologists who survey the land and selectively excavate some of the sites found which correspond to diverse human occupa-

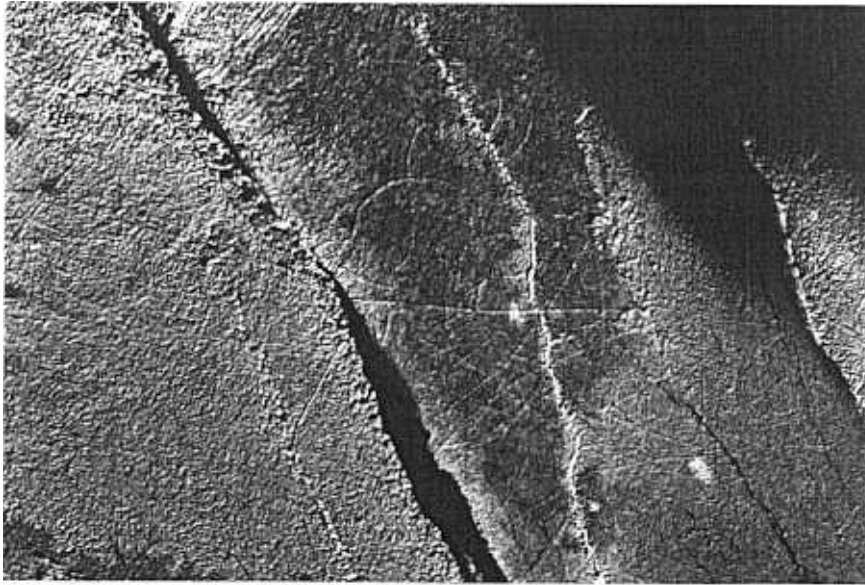


Fig. 14.8. Detail of one of the fine-line incised anthropomorphic motifs present on Ribeira de Piscos's Rock 24

tions from Palaeolithic times until the present. The PAVC archaeologists are also responsible for land management issues within the park's territory, for monitoring economic activities that have an influence on the landscape (vineyards or quarries, for instance), for the direct management of the rock-art sites, and for the conservation of the rock-art surfaces. In fact, one of the authors of this paper coordinates the Conservation Program of the Côa Valley Rock Art (see Fernandes 2004). For obvious reasons, in its first few years, the PAVC has directed its efforts towards the investigation of the several Upper Palaeolithic habitation and encampment sites already detected, whose number by now adds up to more than thirty. The effort has paid off because it has provided archaeological contexts for the Côa's prehistoric rock art, thus proving that human occupation in the region has existed since at least Upper Palaeolithic times. Let us remember that, at first, the chronology for the Côa rock art was proposed by purely stylistic comparative methods. Other methods (namely, archaeological investigation) have now validated those first proposals.

Of the twenty-nine different rock-art sites already identified only three are open to the public: Canada do Inferno, Ribeira de Piscos, and Penascosa. These are areas where numerous Palaeolithic engravings are concentrated. For security and conservation reasons these three sites are under direct



Fig. 14.9. Drawing of the same anthropomorphic motif as in Fig. 14.8

Foz da Ribeira de Piscos
rocha 24 painel 3
Côa

surveillance twenty-four hours per day through the services of a private security company. In the near future other sites may also be opened to the public, such as Quinta da Barca (located in front of the Penascosa site on the other side of the river) or sites adjacent to the mouth of the Côa. All other sites should remain, for the time being, inaccessible to the general public, although available for visitation by rock-art experts and researchers. There are several reasons for keeping these sites closed to the public. The first consists of



Fig. 14.10. Front and back views of the same anthropomorphic motif as in Fig. 14.9. The front view is shown on the left and the back view on the right. The front view shows a stylized figure with a large head and a long, thin body. The back view shows the same figure from the opposite side, highlighting the thickness of the rock and the way the motif is carved into it. The text on the right side of the image provides a detailed description of the motif and its location.

Fig. 14.10. Front and back views of the same anthropomorphic motif as in Fig. 14.9.

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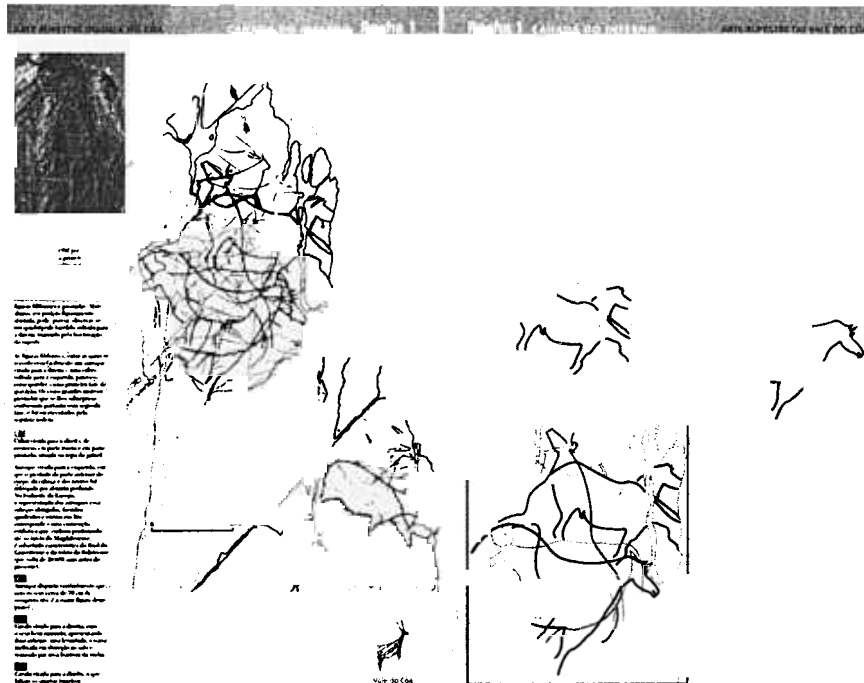


Fig. 14.10. Front and back of one of the explanatory cards used by the PAVC guides

conservation and security issues. The second lies in the difficulty of access to those sites. Following the preservation strategy which was one of the reasons for its creation, the PAVC has no intention of improving the picturesque tracks that led to some sites or of constructing new ones to take visitors to still pristine rock-art locations. Likewise, it does not plan to harden the dramatic precipitous slopes where most sites are located so that the public can visit these sites in total safety. The sites currently open (together with the planned construction of a museum) already provide an informative and comprehensive insight into the Côa Valley rock art (see Fernandes 2003).

The visits to the rock-art sites are always personalized. The park possesses a fleet of 4×4 vehicles driven by the PAVC's qualified guides who show and explain the rock art panels to visitors. Since many motifs are difficult to observe (especially by untrained eyes), the PAVC together with CNART created a card (see Fig. 14.10) on which each motif is individualized and the panel's artistic composition is explained to visitors. The PAVC guides, young persons from the region who, thanks to the park's creation, could settle in the area, went through rigorous training in rock art and today form a corps of guides that is unparalleled in Portugal.

At the same time, the construction of a Museum of Art and Archaeology of the Côa Valley is in preparation. Its construction is an ancient promise of the Portuguese government. Initially it was planned to build the museum in the very place where the dam had begun to be built. That project, whose localization was a result of the political issues behind the whole Côa affair, was later abandoned. Another site has been chosen, and a young team of Portuguese architects won an international call for proposals. The museum, whose new project has in the mean time been approved by the government, is to be built near the Côa's mouth.

The creation of the museum will give visitors an opportunity to more fully appreciate the Côa Valley rock art. In effect, the great majority of Palaeolithic motifs are very difficult to observe, due to the use of the fine-line incision technique which today makes these motifs almost invisible. On the other hand, it is impossible (even if advisable, conservation-wise) to make all sites available for visits. Therefore, only a structure such as the museum will allow for a more transversal explanation and public presentation of the Côa rock-art cycle. The museum will also take some pressure off the sites open to public visitation, which nevertheless will continue to receive visitors, allowing for an increase in visitor numbers which will help to meet local expectations for development.

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