

Prehistoric Art and the Archaeological and Environmental Park of the Alto Ribatejo: an integrated project

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The North Ribatejo is a ecotonal region defined as the confluence of three main geomorphological units. To the East, one finds the ancient massif granitic, schist and gneiss formations. To the West are located the Secondary limestone massive hills. And to the South, along the river banks, are recorded Tertiary and Quaternary detritic deposits. The middle Tagus basin, with its tributary main rivers (Ocreza, Eiras, Rio Frio, Moinhos, Zêzere, Nabão/Atalaia and Almonda – all in its North bank) unites these different units.

Since the early 1980's, we've been studying the cultural and environmental dynamics of this region, trying to identify eventual adaptation mechanisms, namely in relation to the spread of agro-pastoralism.

Prehistoric art stands as a major expression of past societies, playing a key role in the Neolithization of the territory. Artistic remains include carvings, paintings, decorations on mobile artefacts (namely ceramics) and the morphology of objects and architectural remains (namely megaliths).

In the Ocreza valley, a tributary to the Tagus in its North bank, over 30 carved panels have been recognised, apart from two reddish painted rock shelters.

Carvings include pecked engravings and filiform incisions. Peckings are older, stratigraphically, to the exception of one rock with an Iron age representation.

Neolithic and Chalcolithic pecked carvings include zoomorphs, anthropomorphs, ideomorphs (sub-circular, spirals), and dots (clouds, lines and isolated dots).

Paintings were recognised in two rock shelters. These present an immediate spatial difference regarding the carvings, since these are located in the bottom of the valley, whereas paintings are in the top of a hill. The carvings have an easy access for larger groups, and may be seen looking down; the paintings have a difficult access, for only small groups, and are first seen, once climbing, looking up.

Carvings, although easily seen, are scattered along the valley, and become part of it, as if they were disguised. Paintings are separated from the river, they are part of the mountain, and concentrated in specific shelters, from where they look into the river.

Carved art seems, therefore, more monotonous, a sort of almost daily art, whereas painted art seems more restricted. Even topographically, there is a contrast between the hill (that may be seen from a long distance, but where paintings are few and with a difficult access) and the valley (that may only be seen from within, and where art is dispersed and with an easier access). This is why we may suggest that carvings are records of passage, and paintings are

signs of contact; the former being narrative (of processes) and the later descriptive (of values and identity).

Paintings will be described in another paper, but we may advance they mostly include traits, among which one may recognise some digitations and a hand, apart from ideomorphs (sub-circular, some eventually standing as anthropomorphic symbols).

Rock art is, so far, restricted to the Tagus valley. Neolithic sites to the west also include artistic representations, namely on pottery and painted objects (e.g. bone).

Pecked zoomorphs, that present strong similarities with zoomorphs from the Guadiana valley, may date from the Neolithic, probably from the same period when the first passage-graves were built in the Rio Frio and Zêzere valleys.

Pecked anthropomorphs must be considered Chalcolithic, following known parallels in other rock art contexts.

The remaining representations, carved or painted, will be, mostly, from the late Neolithic, i.e. from mid fourth millennium B.C.

Beyond art alone, we suggest an interpretation framework, that recognises a specificity of the region, derived from its ecotonal character, and archaeologically expressed by a very high density of sites, but in most cases without a major monumentality, suggesting a high population density, a high population mobility crossing the region, and a low capacity to invest in major lasting prestige structures.

So far, field research enabled to identify over 500 prehistoric sites, including a significant number of excavated ones.

These include the Palaeolithic quaternary terraces of *Ribeira da Ponte da Pedra* (Barquinha), that showed the operational chains orienting the lithic industries of the Lower and Middle Palaeolithic, dominated by crude abrupt truncations of mostly quartzite pebbles, the dominant available raw material. Studies revealed that raw material, to a large extent, was the main determining element to take into consideration, which explains technological convergence involving not only older Pleistocene industries, but also Holocene ones, such as the Mesolithic and early Neolithic settlements of *Ribeira das Eiras* (Mação) and *Amoreira* (Abrantes), or the Neolithic foundation layer of *Val da Laje 1* passage grave.

The upper Palaeolithic is represented in the region, namely in caves (e.g. *Gruta do Caldeirão*, *Gruta da Nascente do Rio Almonda*), but is absent from the Tagus quaternary detritic deposits. The only Palaeolithic site in this area is the carved headless horse in the Ocreza valley.

Mesolithic shell middens are absent, to the exception of the epipalaeolithic cave of *Casal do Papagaio* (Fátima, Ourém), but numerous macrolithic contexts are known. Previously attributed to the Lower Palaeolithic, our geo-archaeological approach proved the Holocenic chronology of many of these macrolithic contexts.

The earliest Neolithic is introduced in the region through two routes. One, occupying part of the limestone area, starts with burial cave contexts with cardial or epicardial pottery (caves of *Caldeirão*, *Nossa Senhora das Lapas*, *Almonda* and, later, *Cadaval* and even a cave as further North as the *Alvaiázere* mountain). It's origin is, likely, the Atlantic coast, where Neolithic sailors might have arrived from Central Mediterranean. The other route, that occupies the Eastern and Southern territories, is dominated by macrolithic contexts associated to plain coarse pottery. These are dominant in settlements like *Amoreira* (Tagus valley), but also in the foundation layers of passage graves (e.g. *Val da Laje*). Their origin is to be found to the Southeast, in the Alentejo, suggesting an inland spread of the Neolithic.

Carved unidentifiable zoomorphs are also to be found in the region (*Ocreza*, *Mação*), marking the westernmost limit of the Tagus valley rock art complex. They suggest a conceptual similarity to the fantastic zoomorphs of the Guadiana, and may remain as silent witness of the first agro-pastoral advance from inland Iberia into the Alto Ribatejo. A process that is parallel to the use of *Cumes* hill (Ferreira do Zêzere) as a sort of “sacred mountain” in the western area (Nabão valley).

The progressive economic and social complexification is reflected in the monumentalization of megaliths (first the eastern passage graves of *Jogada*, Abrantes and *Rio Frio*, *Mação*, later also the first western megaliths in the limestone area, menhirs in *Rego da Murta* and *Olas*, followed by *passage graves*, occasionally with cup marks). Through the late Neolithic and Chalcolithic, evidence of stronger contacts between later epicardial and inland traditions are to be found in cave burials (e.g. *Gruta dos Ossos*, *Lapa da Galinha*), megaliths (*Rego da Murta 1*, *Lapas*) or the new big top hill settlements located in the Tagus and Zêzere valleys (*Santa Margarida*, *Constância*, *Maxial*).

It is, also, in this context that most Tagus and Ocreza carvings have been made, followed by the rock-shelter paintings of *Pego da Rainha*.

Single burials (with beaker or carinated pottery, alongside with copper daggers, halberds and stone wrist guards) reoccupying older necropolis (e.g. the passage graves of *Val da Laje 1* and *Rio Frio*, or the cave of *Senhora das Lapas*), together with the first open settlements like *Fonte Quente* (Tomar) or *Pinhal da Coelheira* (Tramagal, Abrantes), mark the beginning of the Bronze age. Later Bronze age has delivered important remains in various settlements, including several bronze artefacts.

Later periods also include relevant material remains. This is the case of the roman *villae* (*Cardillium*), *vicus* (*Pedregoso*) or *civitas* (*Sellium*), of the palaeochristian period (*Quinta da Légua* and *Pedreira*, Abrantes, or *Quinta dos Álamos*, Golegã), and later occupations through the middle ages into the industrial period.

All these remains provide a dispersed immersion into past scenarios, that is already offered in some cases (e.g. the archaeology centre of Barquinha, the prehistoric art Museum in

Mação or the agriculture museum of Riachos), supported by the research facilities of the Prehistory Centre and laboratories of the Polytechnic Institute and other research centres and associations.

The park that is now being created is an integrated approach, involving the inventory, protection, study and presentation of these past landscapes. It is targeted to the local population first (about 300.000 people) and aims to welcome 50.000 visitors in its first year of full activity, together with the continuation of the series of publications, organization of congresses, coordination of specialised libraries, network of laboratories, education and training, and the creation of new jobs related to these activities.