

# Emotions at the surface

Ribeira de Piscos, and the role of emotionality in its establishment as the major Magdalenian site within the open-air Côa Region rock art complex (Portugal)

## Abstract:

*After its dramatic appearance in 1995, with the threat of destruction by a dam counteracted by a worldwide preservation campaign, the open-air rock art in the Côa Valley region fully confirmed the high scientific expectations it raised, with a 30000 yearlong continuous rock art sequence starting in the Upper Paleolithic and up to the Modern Age. It is the world's largest concentration of Upper Paleolithic open-air rock-art, definitely updating the previously established cave art paradigm within European Paleolithic art. With 20000 years of continuous Paleolithic diachrony, from the Gravettian to the Late Glacial and including the Solutrean and Magdalenian periods, the site of Ribeira de Piscos is among the most important, mainly in the Magdalenian period, where it is the largest and arguably the most prominent site in the region. This text examines some particular figures in this site that display explicit and varied emotional aspects. Besides the scarcity of this trait in Paleolithic art, it can be argued that they played an important role in the establishment and evolution of this site during the Magdalenian, and that this emotional aspect may have been symbolically essential in the definition of the site and its prevalence in the region.<sup>1</sup>*

## Key words:

*Rock art; Portugal; Côa Region; Upper Paleolithic; Magdalenian*

## Introduction

It is not often that, with some degree of security, emotional expressions associated with rock art figures are detected. Generally, and regardless of chronology, most rock art motifs from the countless worldwide manifestations of this particular representative expression appear to our eyes as emotionally neutral. If, somewhat abusively, we simplify the figurative myriad present in rock art in three major categories – anthropomorphic, zoomorphic and abstract (and encompassing in the third, to facilitate the argument, other distinct categories of representations, such as weapons, inscriptions, etc.), we can almost immediately discard the pres-

ence of emotionality in the latter, namely when their original meanings are lost (as it almost always happens, especially in the older manifestations, more disconnected from present day populations). As for zoomorphic figures, the vast majority are also emotionally neutral, being simply the inert representation of some given animal, without figurative details that can convey some kind of feeling. In human figures this statement is less assertive, being more frequent the cases of emotional expressions of some kind associated with them. Even so, the larger part of human representations in rock art can also now be considered to be emotionally neutral.

About this emotional neutrality, of rock art in general, it is important to make some observations. First of all, that I am explicitly referring to emotional expressions directly transmitted by the figures and according to what we can assume would be the intentions of their authors. Secondly, that I am not referring to new emotional expressions, that may presently be associated with certain rock art sites or figures but not necessarily connected with their original cultural background. These can assume many facets and have different origins: their special place in certain cultural traditions of the current populations of the regions where they are found, which can be translated into renewed emotional expressions associated with rock art but disconnected from their original meanings and culture; or the emotional expression, necessarily subjective, caused by aesthetic or other aspects of certain figures or types of figures (something that, for example, occurs with some frequency with European Paleolithic art, due to its great antiquity and high aesthetic value). Finally, and thirdly, that this apparent emotional neutrality can admit exceptions, and this text is based precisely on the analysis of a small but significant set of these exceptions within the Paleolithic art of the Côa region, gathered in a short space of a particular site within this vast rock art complex.

The figures of Upper Paleolithic art, and specifically in the European space, fit in general within this apparent emotional neutrality, regardless of the strong passions that this art awakens in its researchers and in the general public, for its evident beauty and the interpretative mystery that surrounds it. But there are relevant exceptions to this rule, with some figures, zoomorphic or anthropomorphic, isolated or in association, in parietal, portable or open-air art, which somehow express some kind of emotional feeling, still interpretable by contemporary eyes. Among several that could be chosen as an example, perhaps the best known to the general public is the famous Shaft Scene

of Lascaux, involving a human, a bird and a bison, and which clearly evokes emotional feelings associated with violence and death (see, for instance, Clottes 2008: 120-1). Another possible example, maybe less known to the general public but more connected with the examples presented in this text, reports to the group of three black-painted bison in the cave of Le Portel, also in France (Clottes 2008: 162, 163), where feelings associated with the ideas of Family and Maternity are evoked, and where the relationship between mother and calf has iconographic (and emotional) similarities with the example to be presented in rock 5 of Ribeira de Piscos. In this way, explicit emotionality, in considerably varied tonalities, is not an unknown feature in European Paleolithic art. But it is, clearly, rare.

In a small aside, since it is not the main theme of this work, I repeated the expression "apparent emotional neutrality" because I believe, albeit indemonstrably, that many, perhaps even most figures in worldwide rock art, in their origin and specific culture and irrespective of chronology, had an important emotional value for the populations that made them. That value should be all the higher the greater the role of rock art in expressing the symbolic and ideological values of those populations. It is ourselves, nowadays, with the disappearance of the cultures that were coeval and authors of these multiple rock art traditions, who are unable to detect and feel the strong emotional side that is always associated with symbolic and ideological aspects.

Exceptions to this neutrality may assume different aspects, depending on factors such as the specific design of the figures (facial expressions, or certain representations of movement, for instance), the context and interactions in which they arise (certain associations of animals or people, for example), or the particular idea that was intended to convey (such as an explicitly sexual context, or the idea of death, or the idea of motherhood – the latter

important in the case of some of the figures from the Côa region here analyzed). Naturally, and as always in Archeology, the interpretation of these emotional expressions is not exempt from subjectivity, and does not necessarily appear automatically and disconnected from the experiences of those who make such interpretations. Such is the case with the figures analyzed in this text, belonging to the site of Ribeira de Piscos and its assemblage of Paleolithic rock art. In some situations, it can be considered a universal interpretation, as is the case of the famous “Man of Piscos”, to whom it is frankly hard to deny emotionality. But others are less evident, and different interpretations are legitimate. However, taking into account the extraordinary rarity of emotional expressions directly associated with European Paleolithic art, the simple fact of being able to gather a relatively large group of figures to which, with more or less arguments, some kind of emotionality can be ascribed is already a remarkable aspect in itself, furthermore when these figures are restricted to a small space that is also different from a scenery point of view, with intimate characteristics and an intense landscape transition that strongly impacts on the senses. It is this coincidence that makes the starting point for this text.

There is a snare that is important to avoid in the type of analysis that I will carry out in this text, and that is to assume that emotional expressions of the Paleolithic communities followed identical patterns to the contemporary ones. Not only can different cultures display emotional aspects in very different ways, but it is not defensible to think that our emotional expressions, after millennia of evolution and cultural learning, can follow identical modes to those of Paleolithic communities, who had a very different cultural background. This way, I do not aim in this text to interpret the meanings and objectives of the emotional expressions detected in some Paleolithic figures or artistic compositions in the Côa region. However, despite the expectable cultural dif-

ferences in the expression of emotion that separate us from the Upper Paleolithic, I firmly believe in a simple postulate, clearly supported by the same biological identity that unites present day humanity with these remote human communities, which is the essential communion in the basic and “visceral” emotions of human beings, in the face of emotional expressions that reflect love or violence, friendship or fear, maternity or death, among others. Taking a concrete example, one I will later return to in the text, that of the idea of “Maternity”, its cultural expression can vary enormously depending on the culture, as well as its symbolic and ideological importance within each culture. But I do not think it is possible to imagine a human culture in which the concept of Maternity is not only not important but does not arouse emotional feelings in the different human members of that culture. It is one of the most basic ideas associated with any human community (and extending beyond Humanity itself into the animal world, which should not be indifferent within the study of Paleolithic art, for example), and no human being endowed with empathy is emotionally indifferent to it, whether today, or over the last tens of thousands of years. The intensity of this feeling will certainly have a wide variability, as well as its expression within each culture. But not its existence, which is inherent to human communities.

I finish this introduction by pointing out that this text, focusing on my professional but very personal experience in the Côa region, does not aim to present, review or summarize the theme of emotionality in rock art, but simply to draw attention to a certain site in the Côa Paleolithic art where this particular aspect assumes an immensely important and unusual relevance.

## The open-air rock art of the Côa Valley, in Portugal

The Côa is a small river located in the Northeast of Portugal close to the border with Spain, running from South to North in a course of approximately 140 km until it joins the Douro, one of the largest rivers in the Iberian Peninsula and the one with the largest and richest watershed. It is this abundance in the fundamental resource that is water that originated a strong concentration of multiple dams along the Douro basin, and is also at the origin of one of the most dramatic and interesting cases of world Archeology in the 20th century: the identification of a new assembly of rock art in the terminal section of the Côa and in the adjacent areas of the Douro, in connection to the construction of a new and colossal dam, in the Côa, just a short distance from its mouth in the Douro. The awareness that this

dam would submerge a huge quantity of the engravings then discovered, and the unprecedented characteristics of this new rock art assemblage, in its long diachrony and, above all, for the immense quantity of a little-known phenomenon until then, the existence of open-air Paleolithic art, brought forward a long strife of activism in favor of preserving the rock art and the non-construction of the dam. The latter, already in an advanced stage of construction at the time when the existence of the rock art was disclosed in November 1994, was a gigantic enterprise, in concrete and in economic cost, and the dispute focused on several aspects that deeply divided the Portuguese society, and had worldwide repercussions. An extremely energetic discussion and considerably prolonged, which daily dominated the Portuguese news agenda for almost a year, where issues such as heritage value in relation to

*Fig. 1. Location of the Côa valley rock art complex, in Portugal and in the Iberian Peninsula, highlighting the main peninsular rivers, as well as the Côa river (adapted from Google Maps/Google Earth: <http://maps-for-free.com>).*



the economic value of a project such as a dam were discussed, different strategies for regional development, the question of water and energy, or the role of heritage in the future of a desertified and economically depressed region such as this. Interestingly, something also intensely discussed was the authenticity and scientific value of those engravings, which was questioned several times, namely the authenticity and antiquity attributed to those considered to be Paleolithic, and which brought the Portuguese and worldwide archeological community to the spotlight in their defense of this new rock art assemblage.

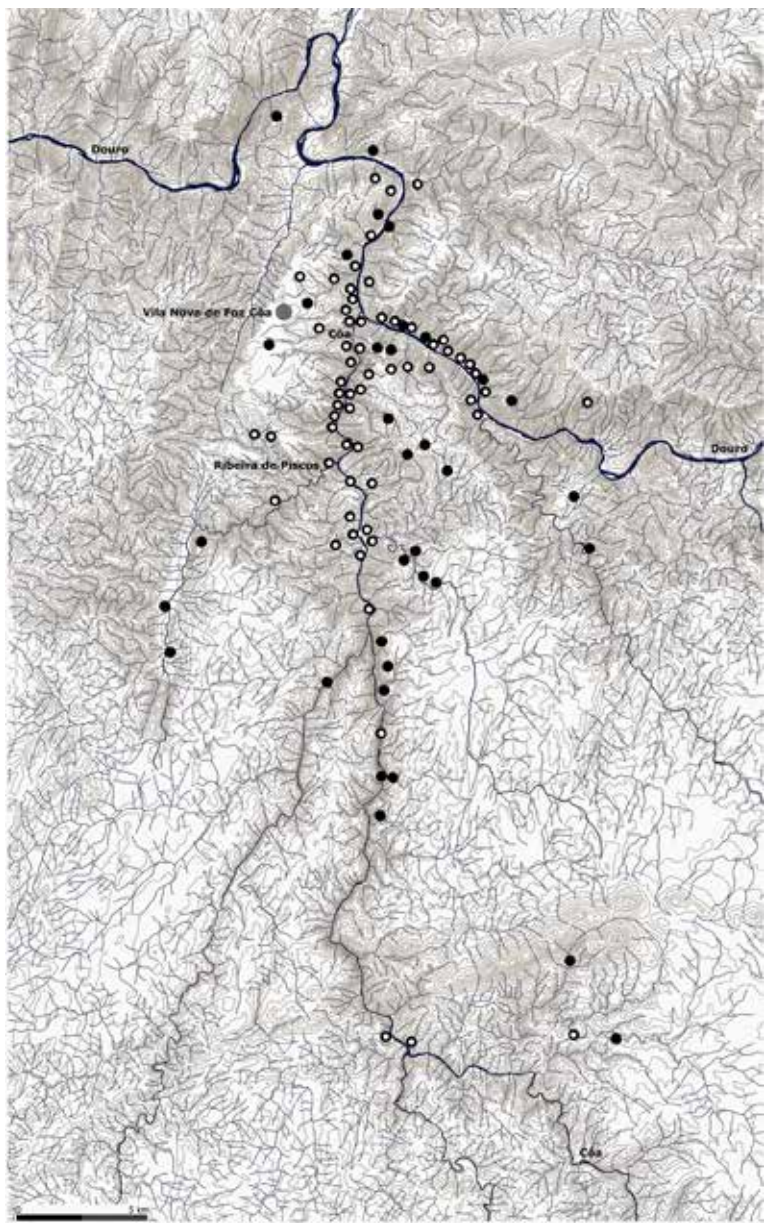
This is not the place to deal in detail with this intense controversy.<sup>2</sup> What is important is to remember its final outcome, which resulted in the termination of the construction of the dam and the full safeguarding of the rock art in the region, with the creation of the Côa Valley Archeological Park in 1996, the same year that were inaugurated public visits to the art of Côa, declared World Heritage by UNESCO in 1998, in a process that was consolidated in 2010 with the opening of the Côa Museum. In these past 25 years, archeological research has been carried out on rock art and other archeological remains in the region, with numerous publications, many of which can be freely consulted in the open bibliographic repository of the Côa Valley Archeological Park<sup>3</sup>. On a personal note, I started working in the region in 2005, assuming the direction of the survey and inventory of the Côa rock art, having also dedicated with ever greater intensity to its photographic registration (see Reis 2020a), which has allowed me, in the past fifteen years, to come to know in great detail the reality of the art of the Côa. A first descriptive inventory of the art of Côa has already been published (Reis 2012; 2013; 2014), and a second one, far more extensive and complete, is currently being prepared.

The rock art of the Côa region is spread over an extended area corresponding to

the final section of the Côa river, in an approximate extension of 30 km, and entering the adjacent stretch of the Douro river, in an approximate extension of 17 km, to both sides of the mouth of the Côa. The vast majority of the rock art figures in the region were engraved, with only the occasional use of painting, especially with red ochre and almost all restricted to Late Prehistory (although with some very rare but notable Paleolithic exceptions). As for the engraved figures, it is worth noting the great predominance of the fine line incision technique, in almost all the detected chronological phases. In general terms, it can be said that around 80% of the inventoried figures in the art of the Côa are incised, with the less intense use of painting and of the pecking and abrasion techniques. Incision is a particularly suitable technique for the smooth and regular vertical surfaces of the schist outcrops that punctuate the slopes of the region and where the vast majority of the inventoried rock art is found, despite the existence of figures of great importance also in a few outcrops of granite and quartzite geology. In quantitative terms, 97 different sites with rock art are inventoried at this moment (November 2021), with a total of 1336 decorated rocks and 29 other types of registers (sets of portable art, loose stones with decoration remains, decorated stelae or statues-menhirs, various rural structures with engravings on the construction stones), in a total of 1365 rock art registers. In these, more than 14000 figures have been inventoried so far, in an enormous typological, stylistic and chronological diversity. This inventory is far from complete: new sites, new registers and new figures continue to be discovered. In a final summary, and although the best-known component of the Côa art is in its earliest moments, it is far from restricted to the Upper Paleolithic and has a remarkable continuity of 30000 years until the 20th century, and it is normal for figures from different chronologies to share the same spaces and the same surfaces. Of the Upper Paleolithic art, I will present a brief description further below. Post-Paleolithic

art can be divided into three major phases: Late Prehistory, Iron Age and Historical Period, summarized below in a very synthetic way.

Fig. 2. Simplified cartography of the Côa art region. The dots mark all the decorated sites known in the region. The internal white dots indicate the sites with Paleolithic art. Also signaled is the location of the Ribeira de Piscos site (adapted from Carta Corográfica de Portugal – scale 1:50,000, Instituto Geográfico e Cadastral, extracts from sheets 11-C, 11-D, 15-A, 15-B, 15-C, 15-D).



Late Prehistoric art is the least abundant in the Côa region, being restricted to 88 rocks and four other registers, existing in 35 sites and with a total of just over 1500 inventoried figures, much less than in the other chronological periods. It can be divided into two phases. The first, in the Epipaleolithic, represents the sequence of the Upper Paleolithic culture to the early Holocene. Its rock art, in a style that in the Iberian Peninsula is often called Subnaturalist, is still characteristic of a hunter-gatherer culture, being stylistically descended from the figures of the later phase of the Upper Paleolithic. With a chronology still poorly established, especially in its limits and evolution, but which may oscillate between the IX/VIII and the VI/V millennia BCE, it is characterized by the predominance of animal representations, with emphasis on cervine and caprine. Its human figures are stylistically also related to those known in the Late Glacial, with long and slender bodies and limbs but, in the Côa, until now exclusively painted, as opposed to the exclusively engraved Paleolithic human figures (Reis 2020b). On the contrary, animal representations in the Côa region are mostly engraved, although with some known painted examples (see figures in Baptista 1999: 159), and seemingly with an evolutionary trend from the more naturalist (Baptista 1999: 138-9; 2009: 182-3) to the less naturalist (Baptista and Gomes 1997: 268, 269).

The second phase, which can be approximately marked between the V and II millennia BCE, corresponds to the rock art of the agricultural communities and, in the Côa region, belonging to its dominant mode in the Iberian Peninsula, the so-called Schematic Art (see, for instance, Alves 2003; 2009). Now with predominance of painted figures, these, in the Côa region, share the space with occasional engraved figures. The symbolic predominance is now given to the human representation, which is systematically reduced to the simplified scheme of the human silhouette (providing the name

given to this artistic expression), which may, in extreme but abundant cases, be limited to the simplest cross representation. Something similar happens with the now minority zoomorphic representations, almost always unidentifiable in their kind, and which are sometimes accompanied by abstract representations (for the Côa region see examples in Baptista 1999: 161-6; Reis *et al.* 2017). On the other hand, there are also low quantities of non-figurative engravings, namely linear engravings or cup-marks, which may belong to Late Prehistory but are not easily associated with these two phases (Reis 2014: 43-7).

Rock art from the end of Late Prehistory, namely in the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE, is poorly understood in the Côa region, and is only well established in the decoration of a statue-menhir (Reis 2013: 52-3). Thus, the transition to the Iron Age rock art in the following millennium is also poorly understood. This new artistic period is just slightly behind the Upper Paleolithic art in terms of the number of sites (53) and decorated registers (540 – 537 rocks and three other registers), and already widely exceeds it in the number of inventoried figures (around 5700). It is a strongly expressive art, sometimes with groups of figures that seem to evoke narratives, with stories and characters of which history did not retain a name. Technically, incision dominates absolutely, composing figures of a style generally recognizable as “Mediterranean”, with generic parallels in the Ancient World at the edge of the Mediterranean Sea, and with, as expectable, a greater proximity with other decorative sets in the Iberian Peninsula, whether in rock art (Guillén 2009), whether also in other supports, such as jewelry, sculpture (for example, Martínez 1990) or in ceramic decoration (see Zaldívar 1989). The figurative spectrum is varied, starting with human representation, which is divided into several types, such as horsemen (armed or not), warriors (armed figures by definition), and different types of unarmed figures, including some rare hybrids and equally rare female figures. Animals are

very abundant, with immense predominance of horses and cervine, followed by canids and wild boars, and far rarer representations of bovine, birds, fish or snakes. Weapons are relatively abundant (with great emphasis on spears, but including straight swords, sickle-shaped swords and sickle-shaped knives, daggers and shields), and may appear either isolated or directly handled by human figures. There is also an immense variety and quantity of abstract figures, which must have been essential to give specific meanings and symbolisms to the different associations of figures. Also important are the inscriptions, in spite of the continued incomprehension of their meaning, because their considerable number (almost fifty) configures the existence of a new Iron Age region and culture with knowledge of writing, albeit rudimentary. Human representations, although quantitatively not very significant in total (around 250 known examples) and being absent from many of the decorated rocks (they are found in less than a fifth of the known registers in the region), seem to constitute the fulcrum of rock art from this period, being the figures around which the rest seem to congregate (examples in Baptista 1999: 167-81; Luís 2008b; 2009; 2015; Reis 2014: 52-4; 2021b).

Art from the Historical Period closes the rock art cycle of the Côa region. It is preferable to use this designation, since it is still uncertain whether there are or not any engraved figures dating from the Middle Ages, with a few possible candidates for this chronology. However, it is evident that the vast majority of the engravings in this phase are from the Modern or Contemporary Periods, and the many engraved dates that are found throughout the region allow this art to be chronologically marked between the beginning of the 17th century and the present, although, as mentioned, with the possibility that some older figures, possibly from the 15th and 16th centuries, may exist. They are dispersed throughout the region, appearing in 61 sites and 315 registers (302 rocks and 13 other registers), with

more than 2300 inventoried figures. It is a highly varied art, in its styles and themes, but also less organized than in previous periods, with some notorious authorial individualism in many situations. Even so, the religious theme is the most abundant and important, which is understandable in an expression of a rural population of the Ancient Regime (examples in Baptista and Gomes 1997: 270-1, 287, 299-302, 304; Baptista 1999: 182-6; Diez and Luís 2003; Reis 2014: 54-7).

Naturally, being important to make a summary of the reality of all the art of the Côa, the specific theme of this text belongs in the Upper Paleolithic art, which has always been the best-known in the region and which will now deserve a slightly more developed summary than the previous ones.

At the time of their identification and public disclosure, the most notorious aspect about the engravings that were considered Paleolithic in the Côa region, in addition to their abundance and antiquity, was the fact that they appeared engraved in full open-air outcrops, and not in the darkness of limestone caves as was the norm until then. Open-air art was not a totally unknown phenomenon at the time, with some dispersed examples in Western Europe, such as Fornols-Haut in France, or Mazouco and Domingo García in Portugal and Spain (Jorge *et al.* 1981; López and González 1992; Sacchi 2008). But, until then, it was considered a marginal phenomenon within European Paleolithic art. It is with the immensity of the Côa's engravings that the paradigm changes (see Baptista 1999; 2009), with open-air art entering the normality of Paleolithic artistic expression, along with cave art and portable art. This change was strongly supported by the divulgation, also around this time, of other large and important Paleolithic open-air groups in Spain, such as Siega Verde, located quite close to the Côa (González and Behrmann 2006; Marcos and Cuesta 2019), or Domingo García, strongly expanded after the single figure

initially known (López and González 1999). Being still today a mostly European phenomenon and more focused on the Iberian Peninsula, as demonstrated by the high number of new sites identified since then (see Spanish and Portuguese summaries in Marcos 2021; Reis 2021c, its expansion has taken place in recent years, with new and important findings in Germany (Grote et al. 2018; Welker 2016), the Nile valley in Egypt (for instance, Huyge and Klaes 2012; Kelany 2014), or in Azerbaijan (Farajova 2012; 2014).

In the Côa region, open-air Paleolithic art extends across its entire area, with the widest distribution of all the chronological periods, being found in the greatest number of sites (61) and in the largest number of registers (620, with 611 decorated rocks and nine other registers, including three sets of portable art, two of which of important dimension (Aubry et al. 2017; Santos et al. 2018.), and some loose blocks). The number of inventoried figures already exceeds 4400, an ample amount only inferior to the number of Iron Age motifs.

Within European Paleolithic art, the art of the Côa has its greatest originality and vitality in the fact that it is in the open-air. But, in its other general characteristics, it fits perfectly in the European standard, in its chronology, styles and themes. This harmony makes it legitimate that here, as in most European sites, the terminology imported from France is used to define its chronological evolution.

The themes are typical, with some elements of originality. Representations of large herbivores clearly dominate, with the classic combination of the well-known zoomorphic tetralogy of European Paleolithic art: equine, bovine (in the Côa restricted to aurochs - *Bos primigenius*, with a single possible bison), caprine (with the representation of at least one of the wild Iberian subspecies) and cervine, these overwhelmingly represented by *Cervus elaphus*, but also with some possible and very rare representations of reindeer

(*Rangifer tarandus*) or fallow deer (*Dama dama*). Other zoomorphic representations are absolutely occasional, with scarce cases of birds, felines, mustelids, perhaps a bear, in addition to the aforementioned bison, and with a noticeable absence of mammoths or elephants, as well as rhinos or wolves. An exception is the representation of fish, which are also rare in almost the entire Paleolithic diachrony of the Côa art (with a single known example of an older chronology), but which explode quantitatively in the final phase of this art, with dozens of known examples (Reis 2021c)

Signs are rare and little varied in the early phase of the Côa Paleolithic art, but become much more abundant from the Magdalenian and until the end of the Paleolithic cycle, matching in quantity the zoomorphic representations and having a wide typological variety, and also in their complexity, with mostly simple signs (clusters of lines, sets of parallel lines, meanders, ...) but with many others of far more complex forms. Anthropomorphic figures, as usual in Europe, are rare, around fifty, but with typological and chronological variety, some of them absolutely remarkable in their expressiveness and originality (Reis 2020b).

Chronologically, current data suggests a continuation of approximately 20000 years in the making of Paleolithic art in the Côa region. Its beginning may be around 30000 BP, considering the stratigraphic insertion of a set of lithic tools whose traceological analysis suggests that they were used in pecking (that is, possibly in the making of rock art) on schist surfaces (Aubry 2001: 262; Plisson 2009). This chronology was long in agreement with the known data for the Upper Paleolithic human occupation in the region, which suggested its beginning in the Gravettian, around 30000 BP (see Aubry 2001; 2009), although recent works raise the possibility of an older beginning of this occupation and, therefore, the consequent possibility of an older beginning for rock art (Aubry et al. 2015: 24; 2018: 63). In addition to

the always necessary stylistic comparison with other assemblages of European Paleolithic art, other chronological data were obtained from the archeological works at the Fariseu site, where a decorated rock covered by Paleolithic strata was excavated (Aubry and Sampaio 2008a; 2008b), and with additional information added by the discovery of abundant portable art in the same excavation (Santos *et al.* 2018). In very recent works, a new excavation exhumed another decorated rock under similar circumstances, but with the possibility of further improving the chronological data on the Côa Paleolithic art (Aubry *et al.* 2020a; 2020b). The data already obtained permits to affirm that the end of the Paleolithic cycle in the Côa region should be around 10000 BP, entering already post-glacial times, at the beginning of the Holocene.

In this way, adding all the existing chronological data to the always essential stylistic analysis and comparison, it can be safely said that the Côa Paleolithic art may have started in early Gravettian, continuing uninterruptedly through the Solutrean and Magdalenian, and ending at the Late Glacial. But, if this variation and stylistic evolution is detectable and conforms to the usual terminology of French origin, it does not imply the inexistence of forms and rhythms proper to the evolution of Paleolithic art in the region, with a specifically local phasing. The comprehension of this phasing has undergone its own evolution in recent years (Baptista 1999; 2009; Santos 2012; 2015; 2017). But it is essential to keep in mind that this phased division is not based solely on a strict stylistic analysis, but aims to capture both continuities and changes in a conjunction of various aspects that make it possible to distinguish, in an artistic representation that is nonetheless essentially culturally unified in its 20000-year-long diachrony, the major features that translate into changes in rock art: in its symbology, territoriality, thematic, technical variability, visual perception, connection with other figures and, certainly, also in style, showing, when

analyzed together, evolutionary trends within the same cultural reality. I therefore consider that the division of Paleolithic art in the Côa region is better fitted into three major phases (Santos 2012). This, in turn, does not imply that these three phases are characterized by total internal uniformity. There can be detected, namely in the most easily apprehended feature which is stylistic analysis, variations within each phase, which actually tend to increase and complexify with time. They may relate to the existence of evolutionary sub-phases, or to the temporal simultaneity of different trends and “schools”, and both hypotheses are legitimate and potentially coexistent. But I believe it is more useful and interesting the large time scale comprehension of the great evolutionary tendencies, over a cultural and stylistic micro-division of particularly challenging detection and dating. And I also believe that it is very important to maintain the notion, well expressed in the Côa region, that Paleolithic art, regardless of its stages and evolutionary trends, maintains a very strong global unity throughout its lifetime. That unity may also be translated into an always renewed connection between the new and the old, in which the making of any given new figure at any given time and in any given place in the region does not seem to be always a radically new act and freed from previous connections, but being rather linked to the already existing assemblage, to which it will be added in a new whole, that will continue to influence the idealization of the symbolism expressed by art.

Phase 1, at the beginning of the development of Paleolithic art in the region, may cover the entire Gravettian period and partially extend to the Solutrean. It is not easy to strictly establish a partition for the next phase, not least because some rare figures appear, possibly Magdalenian but which, in the technical and visual way they fit into the landscape and in the relationship with sets of previous figures, may show a superior symbolic connection with this first phase. But, leaving these difficult

cases temporarily aside, the tipping point between Phases 1 and 2 appears to be mainly in the Solutrean, granting Phase 1 a duration of approximately 10 000 years, maybe longer, between the approximately 30000 BP estimated for the beginning of art in the region and the 20/19000 BP of the Solutrean peak. The art of this period is, territorially, the most restricted in the region, being limited almost exclusively to the Côa river in relatively few sites. Of these, the main ones accumulate a large number of figures in many decorated rocks and tend to be associated with river terraces with potential for human occupation, already established in some cases. Others are smaller, with few rocks and few figures, seeming to have a status more connected with landscape signaling. But all the sites and almost all the decorated rocks share a location in the vicinity of the Côa riverbed (with the exception of a single figure located over the Douro), with implantations that tend to be accessible, at a stage when art is mostly intended to be easily visible. Figures are of considerable dimensions, typically several tens of centimeters, but regularly exceeding one meter or more in size. In technical terms, pecking predominates, often completed by abrasion, with incision being rarer, though it can be used as a previous sketch or to complete parts of figures, with the association of the three techniques in a single figure appearing with some frequency. There are also several cases where figures accumulate in the upper parts of the vertical surfaces, or forming intense superimpositions of multiple figures, sometimes occupying the entire available surface. Thus, in addition to its privileged location for access, the technique, the dimension and the location within the panel are so many other factors that increase the visibility of this Paleolithic art in the first phase, reinforcing the idea that a privileged visual perception after their making is one of the essential factors in the symbology of these figures and in their connection with the human groups that made them, and subsequently observed them.

As for the represented themes, the zoomorphic tetralogy is dominated by the pair horse/aurochs, followed by caprine and by less abundant representations of cervine, with other animal species being absolutely negligible, with the exception of some rare chamois (*Rupicapra rupicapra*). In general terms, animals are represented in profile, with the engraved lines defining the contour, with large bellies and pronounced backs, little detailed heads, a single front or rear leg, and having in general few anatomical details. The proportions and shapes tend to be correct and species identification is, generally, accessible. In this way, Phase 1 can be generally characterized for its representations of naturalistic but somewhat stereotyped animals, designed to be easily visible and interpretable. As a further detail, it is mainly at this stage that the representation of movement through the repetition of heads appears with greater abundance, a particularly important feature in the Côa Paleolithic art in the context of European art. On the other hand, there are also signs, but they are rare, except for clusters of lines. They are almost always incised (unlike zoomorphic figures) and in very simple forms.

Phase 2 seems to start still in the Solutrean, perhaps at its end around 18000 BP, and continuing through the Magdalenian. It may end around 13000 BP, or somewhat later, thus having an approximate duration of 5000 years. The older Phase 1 sites continue nearly all to be engraved, but several new sites appear, expanding along the Côa towards its mouth and entering the Douro. Relating to the previous phase, the number of sites increases, as well as the number of decorated rocks and engraved figures, although on a not too marked rise. Just as notorious as the territorial expansion is the partial loss of the public and visible character of the rock art. This loss is partly due to new locations, not always close to water or in easily accessible places; to the change in technique, with incision being utterly predominant in relation to the more sporadic pecking and

abrasion; and to the tendency to decrease figures size, although some close to or greater than one meter still appear. Animal figures continue to be represented in profile, usually with a simple outline as before, but with striated outline appearing now with some frequency. The dense agglomerations and superimpositions disappear, with figures being orderly disposed on the surfaces and rarely occupying the elevated areas, with a frequent placement in the more central and accessible areas of the vertical surfaces. As for landscape relationship, the dense agglomerations of Phase 1 almost cease to exist and decorated rocks mostly appear isolated or in small groups, only in one case (in Ribeira de Piscos) concentrating on a large group. The zoomorphic tetralogy remains, but now the four main animal species are quantitatively equivalent, and some rare animals also appear, such as felines or mustelids. Some human figures also appear for the first time, with emphasis on Ribeira de Piscos, and signs now assume a great importance in relation to the previous phase, in quantity and in their variety and complexity, ceasing to have the almost passive aspect in their extreme simplicity that characterized Phase 1, and gaining an important role in the language transmitted by rock art. As for animal figures, stylistic diversity is appreciable, suggesting a more complex internal evolution at this stage. Some figures, which can be placed in this Phase 2 due to differences in technique, location or visualization compared to the previous ones, may be stylistically attributed to the Solutrean, (probably at its end), thus making the phase transition. But most belong more clearly to the Magdalenian. In their relative stylistic diversity, the most important characteristic of animal representation at this stage is the search for great naturalism, sometimes exacerbated, with great use of anatomical details and very perfect representations of body shape and proportionality, making figures of great beauty and expressiveness, seldom stereotyped. Expressiveness is maintained in many of the human figures, but not the naturalism, with human rep-

resentations taking on simplified or grotesque forms, occasionally even reaching the monstrous.

Phase 3, in sequence to the Magdalenian, corresponds to the end of the Upper Paleolithic, ending already in post-glacial times. The cultural designation attributable to this period assumes a great variability, partly related to the cultural and artistic variability present at the end of the European Upper Paleolithic, but also partly due to the lack of terminological clarification. So, among other expressions, this artistic phase can be called Late Magdalenian, post-Magdalenian, Azilian, Style V, Epipaleolithic, Final (or Late) Paleolithic, or Late Glacial. This is not the place to discuss and try to unify terminology. I prefer to use the expression "Late Glacial", to designate a cultural and artistic phase that, following the Magdalenian but diverging from it in important aspects, corresponds to the end of the glacial period and its transition to the beginning of the Holocene. In the Côa region, the exact time limits for this phase are still uncertain, but stratigraphic and portable art data from the excavation of the Fariseu site indicate that they belong approximately between 12500 and 10500 BP. The abundant portable art from Fariseu belongs nearly all in this period, and has a broad correspondence in the art engraved on the rocks of the region. But not all styles are represented in the portable art, and it is possible that Late Glacial art could be extended a little more in time, perhaps making the transition with the Magdalenian around 13000 BP and possibly enduring over time, perhaps to 10000 BP or even more. However, clearer data is lacking for a more precise demarcation.

It is at this stage that Paleolithic art reaches its maximum dispersion, now covering the entire area of the region, in a vast quantitative leap in relation to the previous phases, in the number of sites, decorated rocks and engraved figures. This expansion is not just territorial, it is also topographical, surpassing now, in a

tendency already timidly initiated in the previous phase, the topographic limitations in the implantation of art: in Phase 3, any place with adequate surfaces can be a candidate for the existence of Late Glacial figures, something that was not true in the previous two phases. The employed technique is now almost exclusively incision, with only very sporadic examples of the use of pecking, and the search for suitable conditions for the visual perception of the figures is less important, with chosen rocks often having difficult locations or very small dimensions, besides the wide dispersion that probably did not facilitate their specialized knowledge inside the Paleolithic communities. This invisibility is also reinforced by the incision technique and, above all, by the small size of the immense majority of the figures, in the order of 10 to 20 cm, and with some that are truly minuscule, with the smallest just over 1 cm in size. Thematic change is also notorious. In zoomorphic representations, the tetralogy remains, but with evident changes in the previous quantitative balance: cervine assume great preponderance, followed by caprine and, at a greater distance, horses. Aurochs, in turn, although present, become residual, contrary to the increased numbers in representations of fishes, which at this stage assume considerable importance, just below the horses. A few rare birds and felines join the bestiary. Human figures continue to be residually made, as in the previous phase, but with a drastic stylistic change, now becoming highly stereotyped human forms. Something similar happens with zoomorphic representations, but now with a very large stylistic diversity, far superior to previous phases. Animal representation in profile remains the norm, but with a wide variety of technical modalities; simple outline, striated outline (total or partial), or interior of the body modeled by striation (also total or partial). The essential difference is in the characteristics of the design of the figures: Magdalenian naturalism is followed by Late Glacial geometrism. Figures tend to assume geometrical outlines, with frequent incorrectness of body

proportions, as well as rarity of anatomical details. As for signs, they now assume a unique importance, both in quantity and diversity, and with a remarkable quantity of signs of high formal complexity.

### **The site of Ribeira de Piscos and its importance in the Magdalenian period**

The rock art site of Ribeira de Piscos (for simplicity, to be referred onward only as “Piscos”) corresponds to a stream that flows into the left bank of the Côa river, just under 7 km from the meeting of this river with the Douro. It is one of the Côa art sites open to public visit (together with Canada do Inferno and Penascosa and also, since very recently, Fariseu). It is also one of those few sites in the region with the entire sequence of the Côa rock art, from its beginning in Phase 1 of the Upper Paleolithic to the Contemporary Period. Thus, a few paintings and pecked engravings from Late Prehistory are known, as well as some incised Iron Age engravings and several incised and pecked engravings from the Modern and Contemporary Periods. But, regardless of the interest of all these later vestiges, the great scientific value of Piscos lies in its outstanding Upper Paleolithic art, with some traits that make it one of the most diverse and original in the region. And, also for the Upper Paleolithic, Piscos is one of the sites whose art covers the entire regional diachrony, having figures from all the three phases above identified and described. Some of its rocks and motifs have already been widely mentioned in several publications (see especially Baptista 1999; 2008; 2009), and all the tracings already carried out on the Paleolithic rocks of the site were recently brought together (Santos 2017). However, before briefly describing the evolution of this ensemble, there is another aspect that is important for the theme that motivates this text – the emotional exceptionality of a group of figures in Piscos – which is the specific topography of the site, its particular insertion in the landscape of the region, and the way it



*Fig. 3. An upper view over the Piscos stream, with the arrow signaling its mouth on the left bank of the Côa river (the photograph is by the author, as all other photographs presented in this text).*

shaped the implantation of its rock art (see also Reis 2012: 29-31).

The Piscos stream is one of the main tributaries of the Côa river, almost 25 km long.

However, the rock art site that borrows its name is limited to the last 2700 m of its course, extending also to short stretches of the banks of the Côa on both sides of the mouth of the stream. In turn, in these

*Fig. 4. The closed landscape inside the Piscos stream, over the main group of decorated rocks on its left bank. Its mouth and the Côa river are visible on the left of the image.*



2700 m of extension of the stream where the varied rocks of the site are dispersed, the main concentration appears in a space of 150 m quite close to the mouth, with the mentioned and also important extension to the Côa margin. It is here, in this transition from the interior of the stream to the Côa, that the essential characteristics of the Paleolithic art of this site were defined. In the landscape, this transition is extremely marked, and has today an obvious influence in the human senses (as repeatedly verified in the public visits made to this Côa art site), arousing emotions to those who, in such a short space, suddenly transit from one beautiful landscape to another, equally beautiful but very different.

The internal space of the stream is a deep and closed valley, marked at the top of the left slope by a large rocky ridge that visually imposes itself on those who pass. This closure of the landscape, but still with visual grandeur due to this slope and its ridge, has a tremendously sudden transition, even overwhelming, when the mouth of the stream is reached and the Côa is suddenly seen. This one is also, generally, a relatively closed valley and of reduced visual amplitudes, but this point corresponds precisely to an excep-

tion to this rule, with an open valley of a large visual amplitude, extending to the highest mountain in the Côa region, its most dominant topographical mark. It is not possible, obviously, to determine the aesthetic opinions of Paleolithic communities. But, looking at the usual reactions of present-day visitors to the site, it is legitimate to think that it probably did not go unnoticed. To what extent it may or may not have influenced the making and the symbolism of the here present Paleolithic art is a matter of speculation. Nonetheless, within the inevitable subjectivity of aesthetic and landscape appraisals, it is possible to state something more objective: a landscape transition as marked as this is unparalleled in other places in the region, which tend to be more homogeneous from this point of view. Is it a mere coincidence that this transition in the landscape, which usually arouses emotional feelings in its current observers, has its correspondence in the existence of an extraordinarily rare set of Paleolithic figures in which this rarity manifests itself precisely in their display of characteristics liable to emotional interpretation?

Let us now move on to a brief description of the Piscos Paleolithic art and its evolution. In the collection of the 59 decorated

*Fig. 5. On the slope over the Côa just downstream from the mouth of the Piscos stream (visible at the right side of the image), a panoramic view of the open landscape that the Côa valley assumes in this area.*



rocks on this site, 37 have Paleolithic engravings, with a total of 390 figures identified so far. Archeological survey is not yet closed, but the final result should not differ substantially from what is currently known. In Phase 1, the Piscos site presents some figures of remarkable quality, but it cannot be considered within the most important sites of this phase in the region. It is not directly associated with potential areas with Paleolithic occupation and has scarce decorated rocks attributable to this phase. Actually, its location appears as intermediate between the main artistic groups of this phase, which appear both upstream (Penascosa and Quinta da Barca) and downstream (Fariseu, Canada do Inferno), and the existing decorated rocks appear above all as large landscape markers. This interpretation is reinforced by the particular characteristics of the two main decorated rocks of this phase, rocks 13 and 15, with figures of a style clearly attributable to the Gravettian. Both appear directly over the Côa, a few dozen meters downstream from the mouth of Piscos and at some distance from each other. Both have very large figures that, not just for the dimension but also because of the width and depth of the pecked lines, would have been visible from a considerable distance at the time they were made. On rock 15, placed at the base of the slope just above the Côa, there is a large deer, approximately 1,5 m long, associated with two other smaller figures. More impressive is rock 13: placed on a vast vertical surface inserted in a high massif, it is elevated over the river and only with a narrow platform underlying the high decorated surface, where three enormous aurochs appear, each approximately 2 m in length. The characteristics of both rocks and their engravings, with greater emphasis on rock 13, suggest that they were designed to be perceived at a distance, even from the opposite bank of the Côa (which is not a wide river), and it should be remembered that the freshness of the lines at the time of their engraving would make an intense chromatic contrast with the surface of the panel.

There is yet another decorative set, placed still over the Côa but nearly almost inside the stream, in rock 16, which may belong to this first phase, although there are legitimate doubts as to whether its two pecked cervine (or chamois?) do not already belong to the following phase. But the other rock that still belongs to Phase 1 differs considerably from the previous ones, starting with its location: it is inside the stream, more than two hundred meters away from its mouth. This is rock 1 of Piscos, undoubtedly one of the best-known and more prominent rocks in all the art of the Côa, and that can be considered as the starting point for the reflection that is the basis of this text. It presents only two zoomorphic figures associated to a small pecked linear sign. The two animals are horses, which face each other crossing their heads, in a representation of a natural act of equine sociability. The technique and, above all, the style of the figures place them yet in Phase 1, with large and dilated bellies, the absence of anatomical details and a single front and rear leg, in an absolute profile very characteristic of this phase. But, on the other hand, the specific characteristics of the heads, with the brush-like raised mane and the snout in the typical format designated as "duck beak", denounce the chronology, which can be placed in the Solutrean. Which means, if this interpretation is correct, that this rock may be a few thousand years more recent than rocks 13 and 15 (within the same phase but belonging to the Gravettian), in the final moments of Phase 1 and announcing the transition to Phase 2.

This new phase, which in Piscos does not seem to have figures that can be placed in Late Solutrean, thus being fully Magdalenian, is widely represented in the final stretch of the stream around rock 1, and also extending to the Côa. In all, it appears in 17 or 18 rocks (with the doubts related to rock 16), with almost 250 figures identified. This makes Piscos the site in the region with the highest relative amount of decorated rocks from



Fig. 6. Inside the Piscos stream, the main group of Paleolithic decorated rocks. The ones that are highlighted in the text are signaled by their number.

this phase (slightly less than on the large slope of the Foz do Côa site, but this one has four times more decorated rocks than Piscos) and, both in relative and absolute terms, it is the site with the largest number of Magdalenian figures in the entire region. In other words, in a strictly quantitative analysis, Piscos is the largest Phase 2 site in the region. To this can be added a qualitative analysis: being the Magdalenian animal representation characterized by a search for extreme naturalism, it is in Piscos that most of the best figures in the region come together (with some relevant exceptions in other sites), to which are added many signs and, above all, an astonishing collection of anthropomorphic figures, unparalleled in the region, be it for their number or, especially, for their originality, variety and expressiveness, both isolated or in coherent associations. That is, all factors combine to consider Piscos as the most important site of the Magdalenian art of the Côa, its center and essential reference for this period. And this exceptionality is further reinforced by looking beyond the individual figures and taking into consideration the figurative ensemble of each decorated rock.

There are several of the Piscos rocks that easily enter into the hierarchy of the most distinguished decorated rocks of the Côa Paleolithic art, such as rocks 2, 3 or 6, among others. But none is as remarkable as rock 24 (Baptista 2008). Located on the Côa bank immediately upstream of the mouth of the stream, this way parted from the main group of Magdalenian rocks of the site, inside the stream, this rock may probably deserve the distinction of being considered as the most outstanding decorated rock of the entire art of the Côa. This distinction begins with its physical characteristics, with the decoration being placed on the multiple small, scaled panels that make up the front surface, giving it a very different and very original look in the region. It continues with quantity, with this rock grouping about two thirds of all the Magdalenian figures on the site. And it ends with the quality and originality of the engraved repertoire, both of the animal figures – where a rare mustelid punctuates, some high-quality horses and caprine and, above all, the largest and most impressive collection of aurochs figures in the region – and also of the an-



*Fig. 7. Above, the Paleolithic decorated rocks over the Côa on either side of the mouth of the Piscos stream, and signaling the position of rock 24. Below, an image of rock 24, with its many decorated panels.*

thropomorphic figures, with about twenty to be found precisely in this rock.

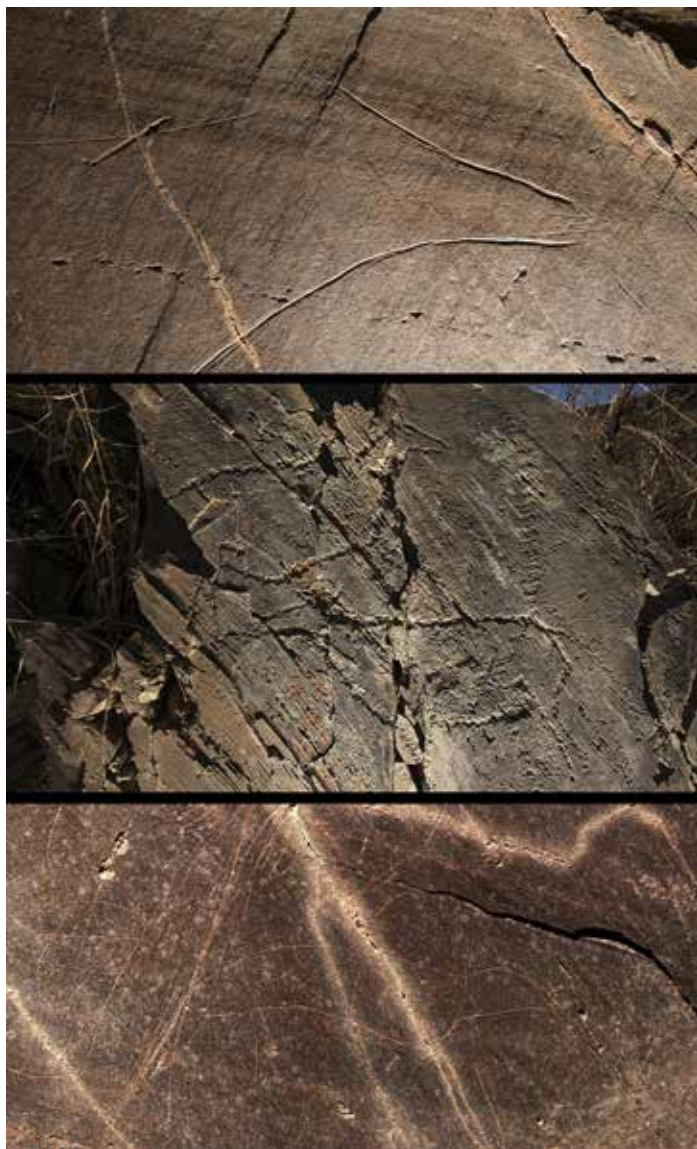
Phase 3 appears as a continuation of the trends manifested in the Magdalenian, but with fewer decorated rocks and fewer figures (little more than a hundred) and, above all, a smaller figurative variety and expressiveness, with a noticeable absence of human figures, so important in the previous phase. Thus, from an exceptional site in the Magdalenian, Piscos evolves in the

Late Glacial to a site that is still important, but just normal. As a tendency in line with what is known in the region, it is worth noting the great expansion in the distribution, with the new engravings going up the valley and reaching a maximum extension of 2700 m from the mouth of the stream, and with some rocks decorated in quite high areas on the slope, contrary to the previous propensity to remain close to the riverbed. Most of the decorated rocks of this last phase have few figures, with

emphasis on the collection of figures from rock 4, and with the exception of rock 51, the only rock in the site of this phase with unusual characteristics, due to its singular collection of dozens of signs.

### **Special imagery: the emotional display of a particular group of figures in Piscos**

Of the approximately 250 Magdalenian motifs that make Piscos the most important site of this period in the Cõa region, divided between animal, human and abstract representations, the vast majority



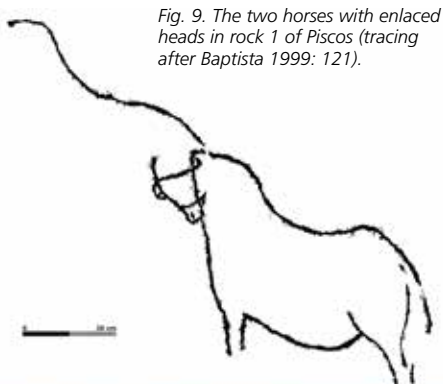
*Fig. 8. Some images of "normal" zoomorphic figures in the Piscos site, with apparent emotional neutrality. Above, detail of a doe's head in rock 2. In the middle, two cervine (or chamois?) in rock 16. Below, a possible mustelid in rock 24.*

have characteristics that can be considered “normal”, and do not stand out within the theme chosen for this text. This applies to several of the human figures, too simple in their design to express any kind of detectable feeling in modern times. It applies to signs, emotionally neutral by definition from the moment their meaning is hidden from us. And it also applies to most animal figures, regardless of their greater or lesser technical and aesthetic mastery, as they do not normally show any kind of emotional transmission to the current observer. But there are some exceptions, which are the main theme of this text. And, being undoubtedly a minority in the large group of figures in Piscos, they are quantitatively very significant in the regional and European context for this type of expressiveness, with a concentration far above the very occasional isolated figure that can be found elsewhere in the Côa region and which also expresses some kind of emotion. An example could be the possible mating scene at the Penascosa site (Baptista 2009, 152), or the Late Glacial deer at the Vale de José Esteves site, which is placed as if observing a group of does, with its body pierced by five or six spears.

It is now the time to describe these figures in Piscos. They are divided into two main iconographic groups: human and animal figures. But, in terms of the emotional expressiveness that needs to be interpreted, they fall into three broad categories: coherent groups of animals, which can be considered to be intentionally represented in relation to each other, and which by their attitude or mutual relationship display or evoke some kind of feeling; human figures, isolated or in association, who through their attitude or expression display or evoke some type of emotional feeling; human or animal figures that were represented with the head turned towards the observer (the body may or not be in profile) and that, through the representation of the eyes in a frontal position, interact directly with the observer. These last figures are all concentrated in rock 24 of Piscos, and they share a particu-

lar artistic mastery. It may be noteworthy to say that there are some other figures (all zoomorphic) in the region that also have their heads in a frontal position, but do not awaken the reflections exposed here. The main reason lies in the absence of the eyes, whose presence in these figures of Piscos, still very noticeable today despite their miniature dimensions, cannot but trigger an emotional reaction on the part of any observer, due to the visual interaction developed with the figure, with the strong illusion that it returns the gaze. A well-known instance of the power of this illusion is found in the famous Mona Lisa painting, by Leonardo da Vinci (see also Figure 19).

Although most of the figures described below are of an evident Magdalenian chronology, it is essential to note that the first example of emotional expressiveness in Piscos appears before this period, with



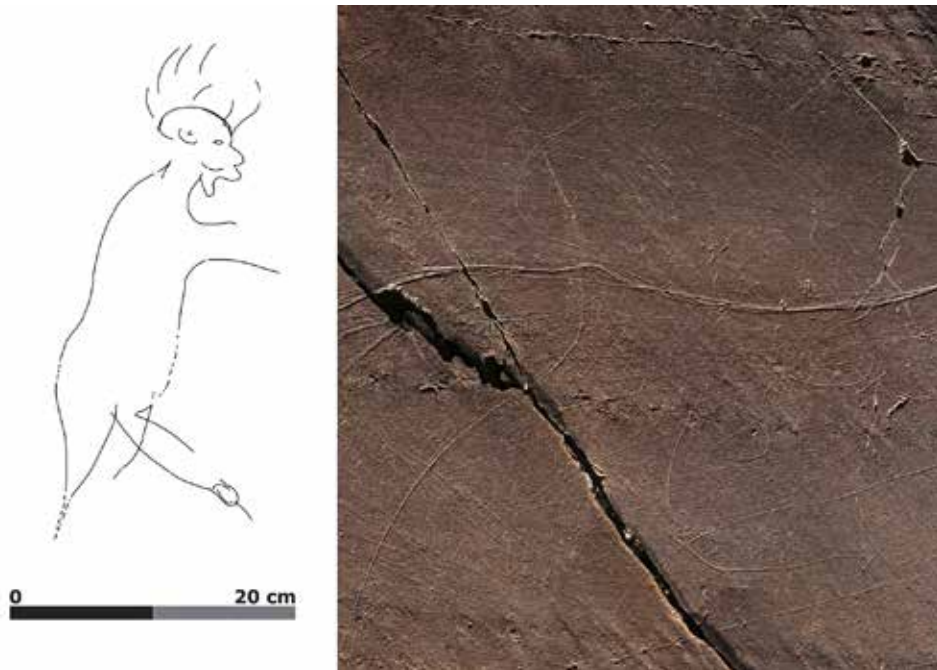
*Fig. 9. The two horses with enlarged heads in rock 1 of Piscos (tracing after Baptista 1999: 121).*



the last rock of the Gravettian/Solutrean phase to be decorated and the first in the interior of the stream's valley, with the engravings placed on the left bank at a very short distance from the water and without obstacles in between. It is rock 1, with the two cross-headed horses, dated from the Solutrean, as mentioned. It is one of the chief masterpieces of Paleolithic art, executed in one moment by one hand with immense artistic mastery, denoted by the perfect proportionality, naturalism and symmetry of the two figures, in the use of the natural convexity of the surface to give volume to the horse on the right, or the lack of necessity to complete the figure on the left, as the drawing of its back and head were sufficient to obtain the desired effect. This effect, as it seems, was the representation of the physical and emotional interaction between the two figures, suggested by the intercrossing of the two heads – the reproduction

by the Paleolithic artist of a well-known equine social gesture, in which no human observer is mistaken when interpreting it as a mutual gesture of tenderness, without denoting fear or aggression. It is a gesture that can have different objectives and protagonists, and can be done by different members of a group of horses. The representation is not sufficiently explicit in this respect and it is not possible to say with certainty what the gender of the two figures may be, but the difference in head sizes suggests some sexual dimorphism, with the larger and more elongated head of the horse on the left being comparatively more appropriate to a male, as opposed to the smaller head of a possible female on the right (and whose belly is enlarged by a natural convexity of the rock). Thus, to the palpable gesture of tenderness or friendship automatically implied in the crossing of the heads, it is not unreasonable to suggest the intentionality

*Fig. 10. The highly sexualized figure of the "Man of Pisco", in rock 2 of this site (tracing after Baptista 1999: 126). On the right side, photographic detail of the figure's head and upper torso.*



of something else, in association with a male/female pair.

Another 10 m to the side to rock 1, on the first outcrop that appears downstream of it and also placed on the free margin of the Piscos stream, another figure with obvious emotional characteristics appears. Engraved by fine incision in rock 2 and sharing the surface with several other

Magdalenian figures, it is the well-known “Man of Piscos”, the first Paleolithic anthropomorphic figure identified in the Côa region. Greater in size than usual in the region (it measures 50 cm in height, largely surpassing all other Paleolithic anthropomorphic figures, which are typically between 10 and 20 cm, sometimes less), it portrays a man in profile, with a large head realistically drawn and with an open mouth, arm extended forward, legs only outlined but with a large erect phallus, of an exaggeratedly disproportionate dimension and also drawn very naturally, from whose end exits a small trace. The state of obvious sexual arousal of the figure, in conjunction with the animation of the mouth and arm and the aforementioned small trace, combine to make obvious the interpretation that it is the representation of the precise moment of the orgasm of the character in question (see also Angulo and Diez 2009). The emotionality of the figure does not require much explanation, being the most obvious of all that I will mention here, but it is important to mention that it is not limited to the mere physiological illustration of a human act with intrinsically emotional characteristics, and that the figure, in its intense expressiveness (body and facial), also radiates the emotion that accompanies the represented physicality.

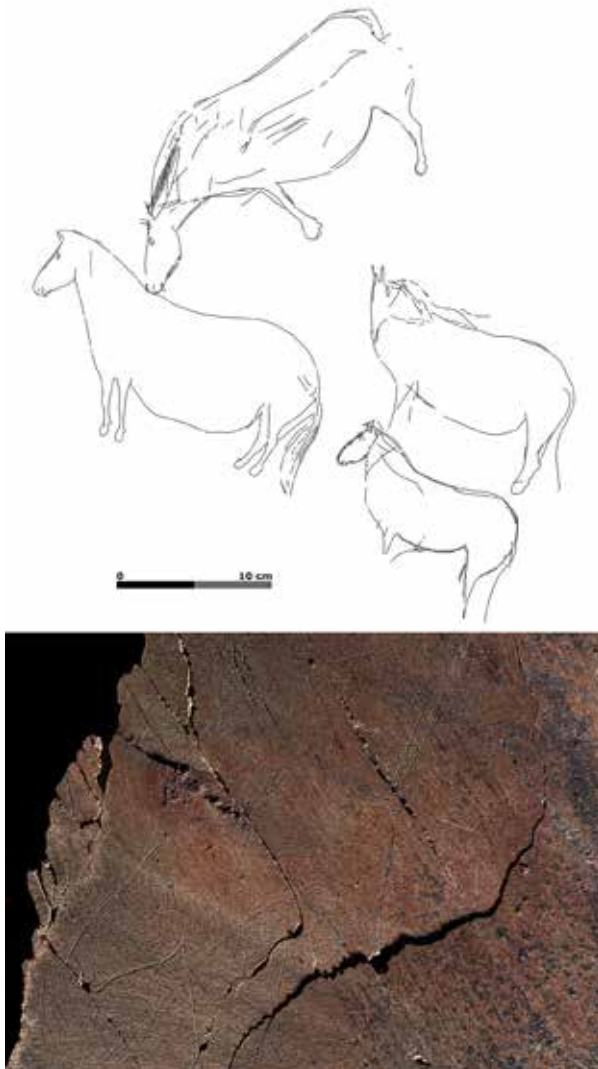
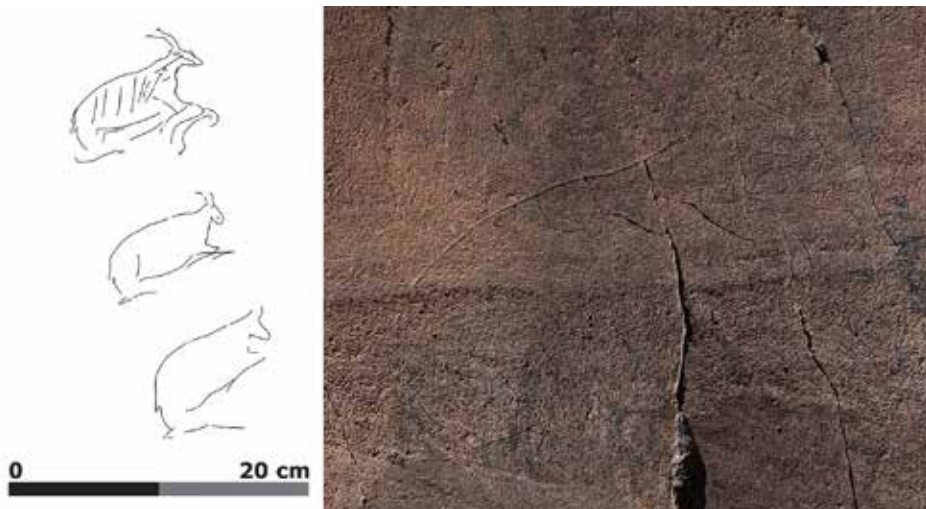


Fig. 11. Group of four horses in rock 3 of Piscos (tracing after Baptista 1999: 129). Below, photographic detail of the heads of the two on the left.

About 30 or 40 m above rocks 1 and 2 there is a small panel with an excellent multi-colored surface, on the periphery of a wide rock massif, presenting a group of four small incised horses. Extraordinarily weathered, they are extremely difficult to see, and only the heads of two of them are usually well perceived. With an enormous delicacy and naturalism in their design, they can be considered among the most beautiful figures of all the art of the C  a. With the tracing it becomes possible to properly appreciate the whole assembly: the four horses are stylistically identical, assuredly made by the same hand. Two are in profile and look placidly forward, while another turns his head back, and the fourth, represented obliquely in perspective, touches with his head and mouth on the flank of the first. They clearly form a coherent group of horses, but the scenic effect is not limited to the grouping, as is often the case with representations of herds of Paleolithic animals. In their posture, the four animals present themselves in a very calm way, emanating a feeling of peaceful placidity.

A similar but even more marked and manifest feeling is found in rock 7, located some distance upstream of rock 3, also away from the stream and at the base of a vast outcrop ensemble. Besides a deer with its head turned back and which does not appear to be related to the other figures, the iconographic ensemble is dominated by an almost vertical sequence of three caprine, stylistically identical and turned to the right. These, who by their placement convey the clear feeling of being in perspective in relation to each other, share the detail of being all in a sitting position. This is an important aspect to this reasoning, as sitting animals are something extraordinarily rare in Paleolithic art, and these three figures are, actually, the only ones so far found in the region, something remarkable in the middle of the well over 2000 representations of quadruped animals already signaled. And the obvious feeling emanating from the three figures, even clearer and more evident than in the previous example, is that of tranquility, of three animals that, in their sitting posture, feel no threat.

Fig. 12. The three sitting wild goats in rock 7 of Piscos (tracing modified from Baptista and Gomes 1997: 326). On the right side, photographic detail of the upper one. Note the extreme erasure of the trace, making the visibility of this figure very challenging, as with so many other figures in the C  a region.





*Fig. 13. Two horses in rock 5 of Piscos, that may possibly be interpreted as a mare and her foal (tracing modified from Baptista and Gomes 1997: 324). On the right side, photographic detail of the head and upper body of the latter.*

The last example inside the stream appears on rock 5, located just above rock 7. In a small panel inserted in a large rocky massif, only two figures appear: two horses, both turned to the left, in an oblique position adapted to the shape of the panel, a larger figure ahead, a smaller one behind. Stylistically, they have some small differences, which may raise the question of whether or not they were made by the same hand and whether they correspond to an intentional composition, but they are also sufficiently similar for this hypothesis to be perfectly plausible, and it should be noted that both have repeated internal traces along the contour lines. The interpretation that immediately arises is that it is a mare followed by her calf, with a correct proportionality of the respective dimensions. And the emotionality that here arises does not result so much from the posture or expressiveness of the two figures, but from the idea that follows the advanced interpretation: the idea of Maternity, always powerful in human history.

With the past examples concentrated in a short space inside the stream but in different rocks, the next (and relatively abundant) examples are all found in a single rock, the aforementioned rock 24 of Piscos, scattered over several of the more than 30 individual panels on this extraordinary decorated surface, with a location apart from the rest, already on the open space on the banks of the Cõa close to the mouth of the stream. In addition to being more abundant, these examples bring together human and zoomorphic figures, in always original and expressive forms.

Continuing with the previous example connected with the idea of Maternity, the same is again expressed, even more clearly, in panel 17 of rock 24. In the midst of a congregation of multiple lines that are very difficult to perceive visually, the graphic tracing allows to distinguish a female figure, with a large belly dilated by pregnancy. Unfortunately, the head was lost due to fracture, while the volume of the belly is enhanced by its placement in a



Fig. 14. In panel 17 of rock 24 of Piscos, a pregnant woman, holding her dilated belly with her hands (tracing after Baptista 2009: 91). On the right side, note the convexity of the panel, that helps to highlight the curved belly.

Fig. 15. In panel 7 of rock 24 of Piscos, the expressive and dynamic figure of a walking human. (tracing after Baptista 2009: 91).



convex area of the panel, in what appears to be an intentional effect. Once again, the emotional feeling related to the idea of Maternity very obviously appears here, but the sentimentality connected with the figure is perhaps further enhanced by a small but significant figurative detail: the woman stretches her arms down and holds her belly underneath with her hands, in a typical gesture of femininity and which, at least in our eyes (in Paleolithic eyes also?) is a poignant touch.

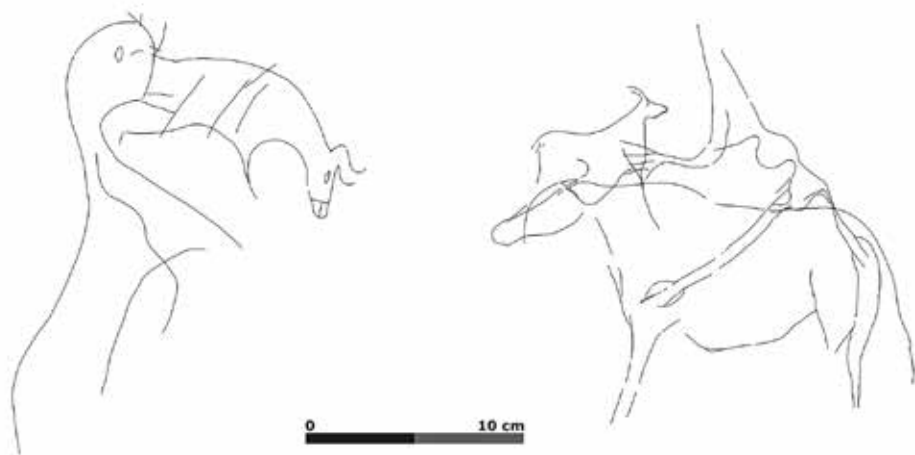
Panel 7 shows four human figures, two of which appear in a very dynamic way. In one case, headless and with a less pronounced dynamics, the figure appears without any particular sentiments (something similar could be said of another figure in panel 13). But the other is different. Placed in profile, with a wide and pronounced head of almost animalesque characteristics, it has an arm and hand projected forward, while the left leg also advances, in a clear representation of a person decidedly in motion. The scenic dynamics of the figure provides it with an obvious emotionality, although hard to characterize.

On panels 5 and 6, located side by side, there are two figures with different

characteristics from the others and, in this case, somewhat disturbing. Panel 5 presents what may be, perhaps, the most surreal of all the Côa art figures: from an anodyne human figure in profile, summed up to the essential features of its figure (rounded head with eye, body and arms only outlined) emerges an aurochs. "Emerge" is the correct word: the animal comes out, incomplete in perspective, from the face of the figure, and it is not even from its mouth, which is not represented, but from the frontal area of the head. It is important to note that it is not a positional coincidence or an occasional overlap. It is a clear intention to make an animal, in this case an aurochs, come out of the head of a strange human figure.

As for panel 6, it has another peculiar figure, in which the strangeness results from its positioning, its action and its shape. It appears positioned on the back of an aurochs, almost as if "riding" it. It extends its arm, which ends in a claw-like hand, with which he appears to be holding a small male goat. Finally, the whole figure, which has no head, has grotesque characteristics, somewhat animalistic, maybe even reaching the monstrous.

Fig. 16. In panels 5 (on the left) and 6 (on the right) of rock 24 of Piscos, the two most surreal figures in the entire Côa region (modified from Bantista 2009: 98-9).



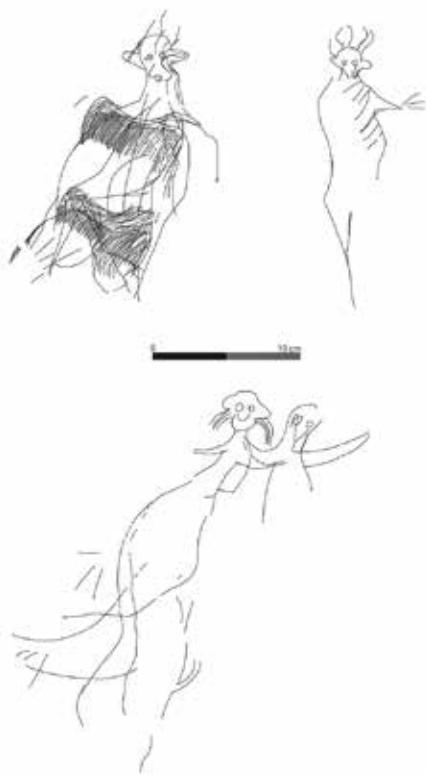


Fig. 17. On the left side, tracings of the forward-looking human figures in panel 2 (above left), 3 (above right) and 4 (below) of rock 24 of Piscos (after Baptista 2009: 91). On the right side, photographic detail of the head and upper body of the figure in panel 3.

In both cases, the emotionality associated with these figures originates mainly from their strangeness and deviation from the normal, which is recognizable by anyone anywhere, whether today or in the Upper Paleolithic.

The last four human figures to be highlighted in this text appear in contiguous panels, sketched in a frontal position and directly facing the viewers, with the additional detail of the eyes being also represented, in a clear reinforcement of the visual interaction between figure and observer. In panel 4 it is a duo of figures, of indefinite gender (despite what appears

to be the “whiskers” of one of them), who embrace each other by the shoulders while looking straight on. Despite their lack of facial expression (common to all four figures), there is an obvious sentimentality in the embrace of this duo, which may have different interpretations (fraternal? friendly? loving? another?). The frontal visual interaction reinforces this feeling, as in the other two figures. In panel 3, it is a possibly masculine figure, with only a sketched body that seems to be wrapped in clothes, and with a peculiar head with lines at the top, in which the two frontal eyes stand out. The same is true of the figure on panel 2, with a simi-

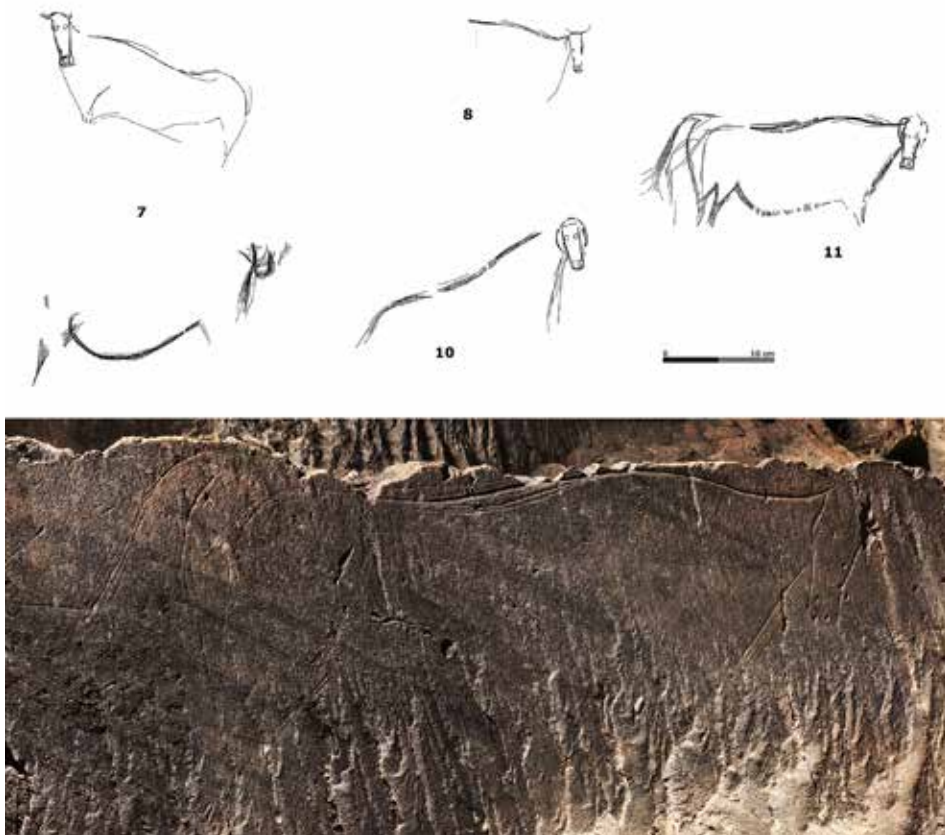


Fig. 18. Above, the tracings of the five forward-looking aurochs in rock 24 of Piscos. The numbers indicate their panels (adapted from Santos 2017, vol. 2: 133, 136, 137, 138). Below, a photograph of the one in panel 11.

lar head but even more grotesque, with physical characteristics that look feminine, in an interpretation reinforced by the possible representation of clothing at the waist and chest. Their similarity and lateral proximity suggest the intentionality of their representation as a pair, suggestively female/male. Their emotionality stems from the intensity of the gaze at the observer, that in the female figure can only be guessed by the graphic tracing, since the engraved lines are now almost invisible, although still perfectly observable in the male figure.

Finally, similarly to the previous examples and equally placed in the same left area

of the rock, there is a set of animal figures that visually interact with the observer, with head facing forward and eyes that stare directly at those who watch them. Altogether, they are five aurochs, stylistically very similar, two on panel 7 and the others on panels 8, 10 and 11. With great probability, the same hand may have made them all (Baptista 2009: 156-157) and, although they appear in different panels, they are grouped in the same sector of the rock, with the possible intention to be perceived simultaneously (see Santos 2017, vol. 2: 320). The artistic mastery and the intense naturalism of the representations, with emphasis on the figures in panels 10 and 11, immensely reinforce the

emotionality already present in the visual interaction with the observer, with the placid and melancholic look characteristic of bovines revealed in the expression, who follows everywhere whoever looks at them.

## Conclusion.

### Emotions at the center and origin of the ideological symbolism of the Magdalenian art of the site of Ribeira de Piscos

Taking a look at the long evolution of the Paleolithic decoration in Piscos, it can be said that its characteristics are relatively normal in the early Gravettian phase, when it corresponds to a small site on the Cõa with unusually large engravings that stand out in the landscape but, besides the dimension, without additional aspects much different from the other figures of this phase. The same can be said of the final phase of the site, at the Late Gla-

cial, with a wide group of engravings but which do not especially stand out in the art from this period in the region. Where the site differs is in the middle phase, corresponding to the Magdalenian, when it becomes the largest and most varied of the artistic sites in the region, perhaps even its epicenter, and where some figures with unusual characteristics accumulate. Looking at the previous description and inventory of these figures, it may appear that they are not that many within the almost 250 figures identified from this phase in Piscos. However, in the known reality of European Paleolithic art, where the art of the Cõa is perfectly integrated, this number of figures is immensely high, considering the European standard. Also, it cannot be considered that there is uniformity in this set of figures. Within a style generally similar and attributable to the Magdalenian (with the relevant Solutrean exception of the two horses in rock 1), there is a variety of types and situations:

*Fig. 19. At the entrance of the Cõa Museum, receiving visitors in a mirrored image, an increased replica of the frontal looking aurochs from panel 11 of rock 24 of Piscos. Note, despite the lateral angle of the image, how his gaze continues to face the observer, in an optical illusion well known in the art world.*



what unites them is the expression of some kind of emotional feeling, in marked contrast to the apparent emotional neutrality of the other figures. And another factor of union is their placement along a short physical space, in the order of 200 m in extension, but in which there is a sudden and dramatic landscape transition, unparalleled in the region and which, as an influencer of the human senses, may also be related to the special figurative emotivity of this site.

The temporal evolution of the execution of these figures is also revealing. Naturally, there is no objective data allowing to accurately trace the decorative evolution in Piscos, especially among the figures considered to be Magdalenian. Which was the first, which the last, and how their engraving was delineated in time, is not something that can be defined. But there is an objective fact that, with the current information, can be safely stated. In the first decoration phase of Piscos, at the Gravettian, some few and large figures were placed on the hillside over the Côa. It is at the end of that phase, perhaps some 20000 years ago in the Solutrean period, that something changed in the way Paleolithic populations viewed this place. And that change resulted in the engraving of two singular figures inside the Piscos stream, away from the previous location. We tend to place them still within Phase 1, in the first and oldest period of the Côa art, and several of their technical and stylistic characteristics, as well as the specific chronology that is conferred on them, justify this attribution. But there is something special about these two figures, which suggests a change from the previous paradigm and the beginning of a new phase, and that is the special physical interaction between them, a simple gesture of communication in the crossing of the heads which, to the human eyes of those who see them, evokes a strong emotional feeling in the recognition of the affective interaction transmitted by this gesture. Thus, these figures of rock 1 of Piscos appear in a transition of phases in the

Paleolithic art of the Côa, and announce new paths in this art and, especially, in its expression at the Piscos site. It should be noted that, considering the chronological estimates of the known figures in Piscos, when this surface is decorated inside the stream it will remain isolated, without being accompanied by the engraving of new figures, for a long time, maybe two or three thousand years, perhaps even more. But nothing suggests that it may at some point have been forgotten by the Paleolithic communities responsible for that art. Because, when during the Magdalenian there is a renewal and strong intensification of the decoration inside the stream, many of the new rocks will appear in the immediate surroundings of the rock 1 and, above all, because some of these new engravings will resume the emotional expressiveness previously patent, in such an original way in the region, in the two horses of rock 1. The same happens, and with even greater creativity, in the emotional expressiveness of the figures of rock 24, the most original and extraordinary decorated rock of the art of the Côa and which, and here I believe that this location is not accidental, appears precisely in Piscos. Likewise, it should also not be a coincidence that the most intense and obvious emotional expressiveness of any figure in the art of the Côa appears so close to rock 1, in the "Man of Piscos". Nor does it seem occasional that the only zoomorphic figures represented in a quietly seated position in all the art of the Côa, an extremely rare specific form of representation in all European Paleolithic art, again appear in Piscos. The same can be said of the two human representations that refer to the surreal and the supernatural. Or of the astonishing visual interaction between engraved figures and their human observers, without any other parallel in the region, and which once again appears in Piscos. As for the strongly emotional idea of Maternity transmitted by some figures, both human and animal, it is not entirely exclusive to the Piscos site in the Côa region, there are other notable examples involving groups of animals, namely in the

Vale de José Esteves or Foz do Côa sites. But these are more recent, dating from the Late Glacial, and the two examples in Piscos are the only ones attributable to the Magdalenian and, again and perhaps not by chance, placed on this site and in the vicinity of the other mentioned figures.

The latter examples in other sites, and particularly the one of Vale de José Esteves, are interesting to recall an important, albeit obvious, aspect in the appreciation of Paleolithic rock art and its predominance of zoomorphic representations: this is an art made by people and for people, and its purpose, mysterious as it continues to be for scientific research, was certainly not a purely naturalistic representation of reality. On rock 16 of Vale de José Esteves there is a group of three representations of cervine, aligned and with a stylistic uniformity that denotes a unique authorship (see Baptista 2009: 114-119). Behind appears a large male deer, with great antlers. In the front there is a doe, without antlers, smaller and more delicate than the male. In the middle, in the protected space between the two larger figures, a third appears, but now of small dimension, proportionally consistent with the representation of a cervine calf. Researchers in the Côa region informally named these figures as "The family", and that very same idea is invariably recognized by visitors at the Côa Museum, where they have a prominent place. However, and objectively, it is difficult to recognize a naturalistic representation of a cervine family group in these three figures. Such a representation should include a dominant male, two or three secondary males, several females and, at the right time, their offspring. This almost automatic present recognition of the family aspect of the three figures originates, in my opinion, from their obvious correlation with the human nuclear family: mother, father, infant. Is it a mere coincidence? Or was this correlation, so natural to our contemporary eyes, already so in the eyes of the Paleolithic communities? It may very well have been so, after all, and of course, rock art is a phenom-

enon of human communities, symbolically reflecting their ideologies and views of the world, it is a way of situating those communities within the world around them. We can here, for example, make a correlation with the figures from rock 1 of Piscos. Accepting that it is a representation of a male and female equestrian pair, it seems almost inevitable to symbolically correlate this connection, together with the affectionate or loving relationship gesture that unites them, with the typical human pair.

This reflection leads now towards the final conclusion of this text. European Paleolithic art, since its first scientific identification more than 150 years ago, has generated endless discussions about its purpose, meaning, its place in the thinking of the communities that made it. Especially since the innovative works of Annette Laming-Emperaire or André Leroi-Gourhan, the discussion has intensified and diversified, and many works and ideas continue to emerge. And, nonetheless, we are still far from deciphering it. In the loss of its interpretative codes, it is more useful an approach on its organization, at various levels, or to try to understand its place in the mentality and ideological transmission of coeval communities. For my part, and admitting right now my inability to move decisively towards its better understanding, similar to that of so many other archeologists, I consider that Paleolithic art is not a minor phenomenon within the way of life at the time. Instead, it would have been a fundamental manifestation of the social cohesion of the communities, through the visual and perennial expression, transmissible to the successive generations that also add to it, of an ideological symbolism that can be considered "cosmogonic", in the sense (and only in that sense) it should have provided an explanation of the World, and of the place of Man in that world. Such an explanation, regardless of its specific meanings and forms, provides a fundamental sense of belonging and security and can be considered as essential for human communities as the economic

activity necessary for physical survival. It is in this way, and returning to the introduction of this text, that I assume that most figures of Paleolithic rock art are only apparently emotionally neutral, and held for the possessors of their meanings and purposes their very own emotional charge (and, as is typical of human nature, also subject to personal subjectivities, and certainly differentiated between different types of figures in different places and occasions). What is different about a place like Ribeira de Piscos is that this apparent emotional neutrality of most of its figures, similar to that of most European Paleolithic art in its multiple places and supports, gives place in some other figures, in a reduced quantity in strictly relative terms but very significant in comparison with the European reality, to a declared expression of emotional feelings. These figures are almost restricted to a particular chronological phase of the Côa Paleolithic art but, on this site, they are found since the origin of that phase and can be considered as potentially defining its prevalent symbolic characteristics. And, since Piscos seems to be the main site of this phase in the enormous Côa art complex, and possibly even its radiating center, perhaps these emotionally charged figures were instrumental in the definition and evolution of the specific symbolism of Magdalenian art in the Côa.

In short, the communities of the region chose, in the permanent visual exhibition of the fundamental symbols to their life, to directly display their emotionality. In a way, we should see it as entirely natural, after all they were human, and emotional manifestations are one of the strongest and typical aspects of Humanity.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This text was first published in Russian in *Stratum Plus* magazine (Reis 2021a). The version now presented is the original English version used for the translation, with minor changes and corrections. It is also important to say that the ideas I try here to express matured over the years of contact and learning with the site and its engravings and with the whole immense assemblage of the art of the Côa, contact made when guiding visits to the site or carrying out archeological works, especially survey or photography. And they also matured with the many conversations and cross-reflections with the archeologists and rock art guides of the Côa Valley Archeological Park, with some of these guides, archeologists and friends having a knowledge of the site previous to mine and also having ideas about its engraved set that anticipate in many ways those I express here. To all I express my acknowledgements, for the intense learning and evolution of thoughts and ideas they provided me. And I particularly highlight my archeologist colleague and office-sharer at the Côa Museum, Dalila Correia, with whom I have discussed this subject at length and whose opinions strongly influenced the final result of this text.

<sup>2</sup> About which here follow some of the main bibliographic references: Bahn 1995a, 1995b; Baptista 1999: 7-13; 2000; 2009: 43-63; 2014; Baptista and Gomes 1995; Clottes 1995; Clottes et al. 1995; Gonçalves et al. 2001; Luís 2008a: 22-9; Zilhão 2004. On the specific issue of the "direct" dating of the Côa Paleolithic engravings, which raised so much stir at the time and which, ironically enough, perhaps had an important contribution to its final safeguard, see Bednarik 1995; Beltrán 1996; Dorn 1997; Phillips et al. 1997; Soares 1995a; 1995b; Watchman 1995; 1996; Zilhão 1995a; 1995b.

<sup>3</sup> <https://comum.rcaap.pt/handle/10400.26/19193>

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