

MEGALITHS AS ROCK ART IN ALENTEJO, SOUTHERN PORTUGAL

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Abstract: *This paper is based on the available evidence concerning standing stones, as well as broadly contemporaneous rock paintings and carvings in Alentejo. Instead of the traditional perspective, which treats those manifestations as ontologically different—though, on some occasions, tries to compare them or find specific links between them—rock art and megaliths are here considered as parts of the same complex of the Neolithic “packet”, expressed by the development of symbolic devices, and interconnected by a system of beliefs around the validation of the role of man against nature, and, iconographically, mainly built upon schematic ways of representing the human figure. Actually, we can argue that the very concept of “megalithic art”, creating a common ground between both megaliths and rock art, implies a restrictive view, because it highlights the most obvious similarities but hides the fact that, even when they have no carvings or paintings, standing stones are still rock art. We argue that in some sense, those symbolic and ritual manifestations share the same similarities and differences as painting, engraving, and sculpture in modern western art.*

Key-words: *Megaliths – Rock Art – Menhirs*

INTRODUCTION

In Alentejo, as well as in other European prehistoric areas, carvings, paintings and standing stones can be, on one hand, related with different historical contexts; but, on the other, they seem to be different adaptations of the very same purposes to diverse geographical conditions.

Actually, in Alentejo, standing stones exhibit an obvious dependence on the flat granite landscapes, carvings are only found on schistose water-eroded panels (in the main river bottoms), and paintings are restricted to quartzite rockshelters (in mountainous landscapes).

In rock-art interpretations, it is well established that panels were meaningful on their own. Beyond technical qualities such as the smoothness of the surface, other aspects including colour, shape, position, and kind of rock were not selected at random. Finally, the landscapes where the panels are inscribed seem to be decisive for locations of so-called rock-art sanctuaries (Bradley 1997a, 1997b, Ouzman 1998, Scarre 2003). It is clear, in Alentejo as elsewhere, that special points in the landscape were selected, together with peculiar shapes and types of stone.

Of course, conceiving of the standing stones as a development of rock art implies a link going back to the Upper Palaeolithic, in a process of continuity (the Alqueva complex spans from the Palaeolithic until Iron Age) (Collado 2003, Calado 2003) and change (from a naturalistic style displaying mostly animals, to a schematic style representing mostly human figures).

Rock art, including megaliths, may be thought of as the result of a complex way of creating and negotiating a system of symbols, or, in other terms, a graphic language that conveys differing ideologies and social formations. Though sharing the same mental ambiance as the rock art *tout court*, and eventually serving similar purposes, standing stones imply an important innovation in the way

of graphically expressing ideas: they are three-dimensional and large-scale symbols that herald later developments of the statuary and, in some ways, the development of true megalithic architecture (e.g., dolmens).

The anthropomorphic nature of standing stones and the diverse ways they may be arranged together make them appropriate symbols for ritualising and performing social messages, in a process of increasing social and ideological complexity. The symbolic potential of standing stones, meaningfully dispersed on the landscape—frequently arranged in articulation with conspicuous topographic and astronomic features—is, in some cases, amplified by the carved motifs displayed on them.

Finally, and in modern terms, rock art, including standing stones, may be included in the category of landscape architecture or, better yet, *land art*.

IN THE BEGINNING...

In the last decade, the idea that standing stones are the oldest megalithic monuments in Europe has received significant attention, and a great deal of evidence has been found supporting this assumption. Confirmation during the 1980s of the reuse of broken menhirs in some Breton dolmens opened a Pandora's box of new questions. Results from the subsequent observations and studies addressing these questions appear to all be pointing in the same direction. The current list of menhirs that appear to have been reused in the dolmens of Brittany sums up to several-dozen instances, thus leaving little room to doubt the relative antiquity of standing stones, at least in that particular area (Cassen *et al.*, 2000).

In Iberia, partly as a result of the discoveries in Brittany, the revision of old data together with fresh excavations guided by new insights and methodologies has revealed a

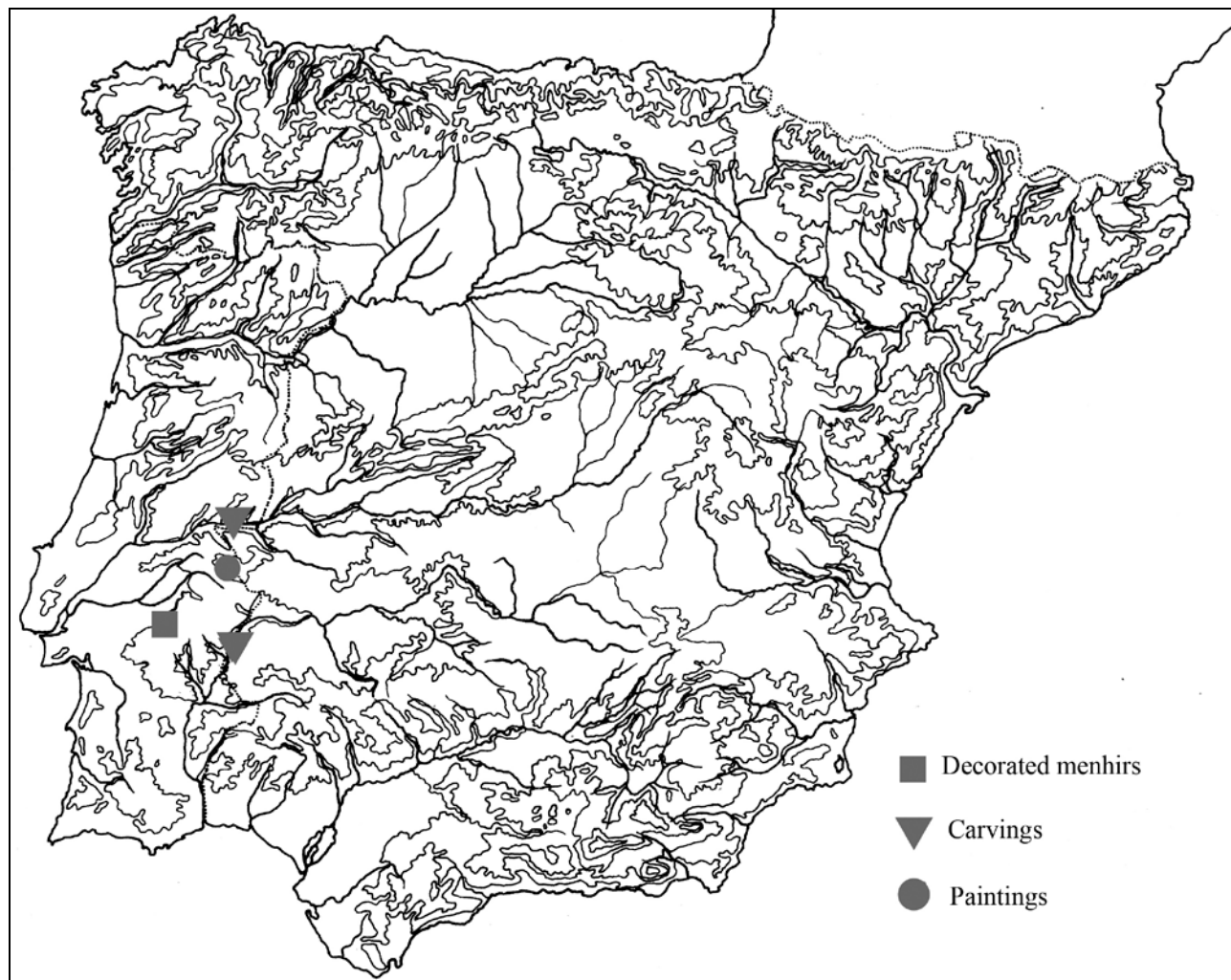


Fig. 4.1. Distribution of menhirs and rock art in Alentejo

similar situation. Thus, Iberian menhirs appear to have been, as in Brittany, reused for the construction of dolmens (Calado 2004). Further, those few absolute dates available, some obtained through analyses of materials embedded inside menhir sockets, tend to confirm the early existence of these monuments (Oliveira 1997, Gomes 1994, 1996, Calado D., *et al.*, this volume). This means that, at least in Brittany and Iberia, if standing stones (either alone or grouped) are one manifestation of megalithic architecture, they must be placed in the very beginning of the development of such architecture. In other words, when the first menhirs were erected, the concept of a dolmen had probably not yet been conceived.

THE CONTEXT

Menhirs seemingly arose during a period when significant changes were taking place throughout Atlantic Europe. The last communities of hunter-gatherers were experiencing the impact of a revolution in almost all aspects of their lifeways (economic, technological, and ideological). This revolution was but one stage in a sequence that had

started some one-thousand years earlier in the eastern Mediterranean. Although the main domesticates (cereals and ovicaprids), pottery, and polished stone tools were certainly brought from that nuclear area, some of the most distinctive features of the western Neolithic seem to have no counterparts in the eastern Mediterranean. Among those features that appear native to Western Europe, menhirs are the most striking.

One of the most well-known aspects of the Neolithic revolution is the importance of anthropomorphic motifs. Such motifs contrast starkly with the zoomorphic figures that dominated previous periods (i.e., the Palaeolithic and Epipalaeolithic). In the Levant, those anthropomorphic representations are typically in the form of clay or stone figurines. Such figurines are quite rare in the central and western Mediterranean. Lime-plaster statues, also common anthropomorphic figures in the Levant, are completely absent elsewhere in the Mediterranean. In Iberia, painted and pecked rock-panel motifs, broadly attributed to the Neolithic or the Early Bronze Age, reference the human figure. Usually such motifs are schematic images associated with geometric motifs (mostly circles and



Fig. 4.2. Painted anthropomorphic motif in the rock shelter of Gaivões (Arronches)

wavy lines). Although anthropomorphic pillars have been found at a few sites in the Anatolian Peninsula (Cauvin 1999, Verhoeven 2002, Lewis-Williams 2005), menhirs seemingly have no parallels in the East.

Another important feature of most Neolithic cultures is the emergence of monumentality, expressed in many different ways. The cultic buildings of the Near East and earthen funerary structures in Western Europe share two basic similarities with menhirs. They involve a significant amount of labor to be built, and they reflect a strong sense of distinctiveness and power once constructed.

QUESTIONS OF MEANING

There is no general agreement about the meaning or the function of menhirs. Most authors accept that they are, in some way, anthropomorphic figures. This idea is reinforced by comparisons with the statue-menhirs that spread into different parts of Europe during the subsequent millennia until the Iron Age (D'Anna 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, Philippon 2002, Bueno & Balbín 2002, 2003). Actually, it is possible that all menhirs were basically conceived of as statues, with more or less explicit anthropomorphic details. Of course, reference to the human body does not contradict other meanings and functions frequently attributed to the menhirs, such as territorial markers, religious constructions, or mnemonics that substantiated social structures.



Fig. 4.3. Carved anthropomorphic motifs of the Alqueva Rock art complex

Whatever meanings these features had—and it is quite possible that they conveyed different messages in different regions and times—we assume that they, in ways similar to rock-art motifs, were primarily symbols. As anthropomorphic symbols, menhirs may have even related to ancestor cults, possibly as a result of the establishment of lineages in a society experiencing ever-increasing complexity.

MENHIRS AS ROCK ART

We suggest that menhirs arose as a peculiar development in the tradition of rock art, the origin of which can be traced back, at least in the European world, to the Upper Palaeolithic. In fact, likely precursors for the three-dimensional character of menhirs may be found in European Palaeolithic art. Feminine (Venus) figurines or, in a broader sense, some mobile art artefacts may be reasonably considered examples of such. If we conceive of menhirs as anthropomorphic symbols, an obvious difference between such symbols and those of earlier periods is the noticeable absence of a naturalistic character, an innovation shared by most Neolithic rock-art motifs.

The most significant innovation during the dawn of the Neolithic was, however, the scale of menhirs. The size of these monoliths has frequently led investigators to classify them as some kind of architecture which can be compared with megalithic enclosures. But this classification does not work well when we are faced with megalithic alignments or with single menhirs. We must remember, however, that architecture and sculpture are modern classifications, and menhirs could be, from our point of view, entities that bridge between these



Fig. 4.4. The single standing stone of Monte da Ribeira (Reguengos de Monsaraz)

classificatory concepts. The chronological sequence of megaliths observed in some European megalithic areas, specifically Brittany, Alentejo, and Algarve, begins with menhirs and ends with dolmens. This sequence could be translated as a development from sculpture to architecture, although some of the basic implications and meanings appear to have been retained.

The amount of necessary labour implied by the size of some menhirs and dolmens evokes another important feature of the Neolithic cultures—monumentality. This aspect has a close relationship with a newly emerging set of attitudes towards nature that are manifest in the Neolithic economy and that resulted from changes in the social use of the natural resources. These behaviors and attitudes appear to be directly related to an emerging trend toward changing landscapes and the need to establish anchors in space.

In contrast with other forms of Neolithic monumentality, megaliths involve the use of raw stones, suggesting a peculiar validation of the materiality itself and thus keeping a strong link with an important feature of rock art (Scarre 2003). Although conceived as symbols on their own, menhirs could also be used as canvases to paint or carve other symbols. As we shall see, groups of menhirs could also be arranged on the landscape to build large-scale sets of symbolic features. On such a level, menhirs evoke geoglyphs.

ALTERNATIVE SYMBOLS, ALTERNATIVE LANDSCAPES

Menhirs are not ubiquitous manifestations. Contemporaneous societies that shared similar developments did not invest in the same types of monuments. These different choices may be explained in some cases by differences in availability of raw materials; however, there are many situations where such explanations do not appear likely. In the case of menhirs in Central Alentejo, the notorious cultural specificity of the phenomenon within the context of Iberia can be attributed to a specific cultural background, substantiated on the Sado-Tejo late Mesolithic communities (M. Calado 2002, 2003, 2004). Though menhirs were not present in the Sado and Tejo estuaries—areas without available stone blocks—some evidence exists that wooden posts were used in the construction of ritual structures. These structures show some formal similarities to the layout of Alentejan megalithic enclosures (Calado 2004).

If the scope of inquiry is expanded, some poorly understood intra-regional singularities are identified that may address other questions. In Alentejo, menhirs seem to be restricted to granite outcrops, with virtually no exception. In the schistose landscapes, we find only stone carvings that are, interestingly, confined to the valley bottoms of main rivers (Calado 2003). In areas of quartzitic bedrock, artistic manifestations are reduced to paintings. Rockshelters located in mountainous environments appear to have been the preferred mediums for such symbolism (Oliveira 2003).

This panorama allows us to stress the roles of landscapes, and the different symbolic meanings they could convey, as active partners in the genesis of rock art. Carving, painting, and sculpture appear dependent on different raw materials, and therefore on landscapes, although it would also be possible to find alternate historical developments in these differences. When we map this observations we can easily conclude that they are not perfectly adjacent. In Alentejo, we find large areas that were occupied prehistorically that appear devoid of menhirs, carvings, or paintings, thus suggesting that at least some regions may have been incorporated in large territories where appropriate natural conditions were not available. For the moment, only the rock-art complex of the Guadiana (in parallel with the Tagus) seems to have begun during the

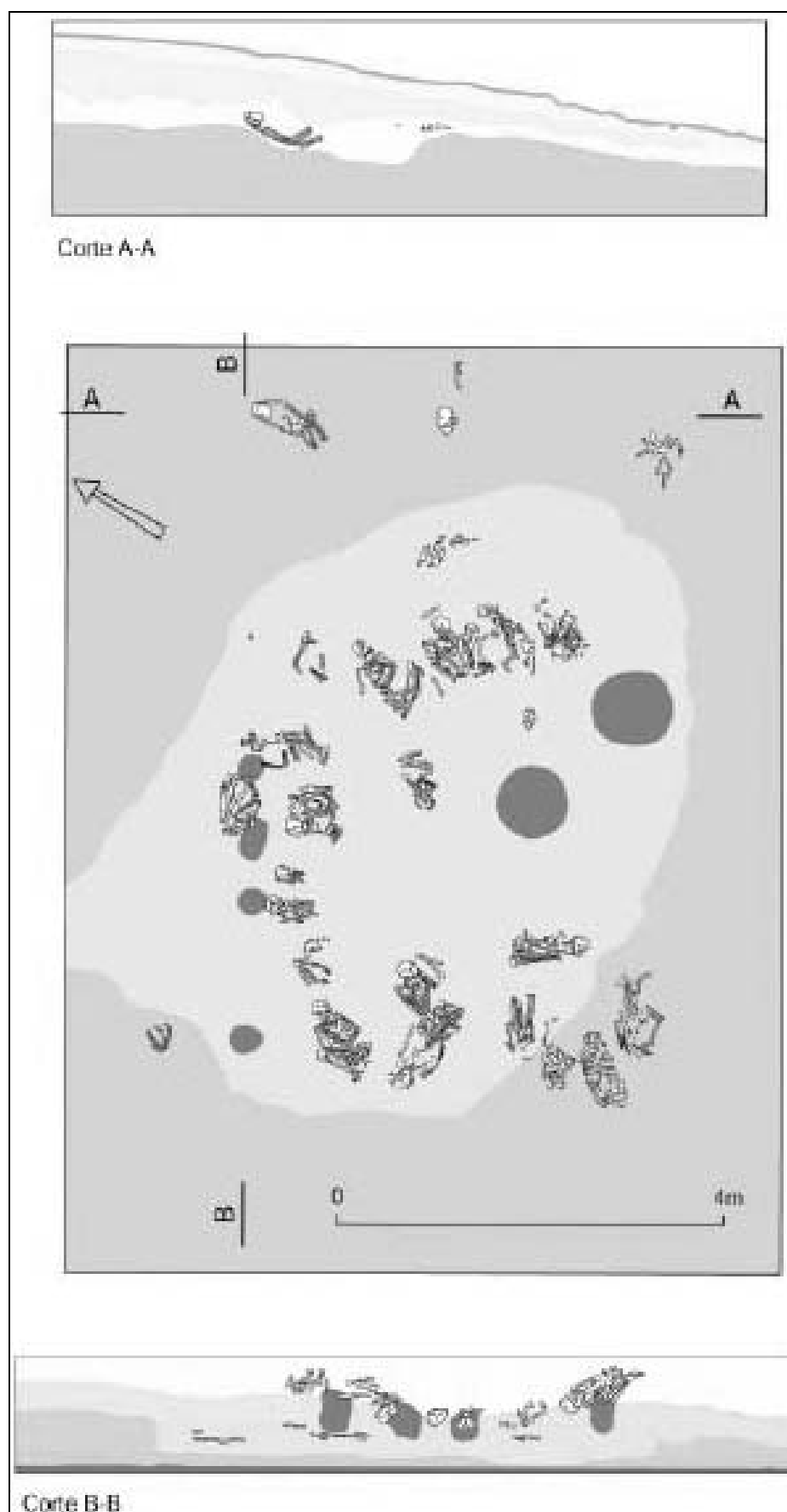


Fig. 4.5. Plan of the Mesolithic shell-midden of Romeiras in the Sado Valley, showing the horse-shoe shaped stone setting, similar to the Alentejan megalithic enclosures

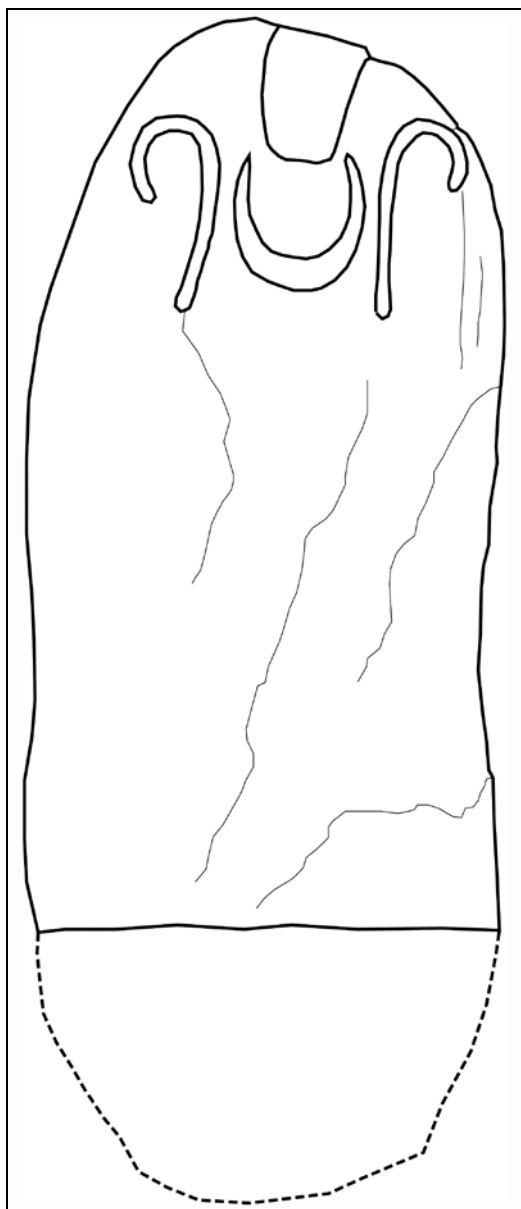


Fig. 4.6. Bas-relief motifs carved on a menhir from the enclosure of Vale Maria do Meio (Évora)

Palaeolithic. Here, appearances of paintings and menhirs are likely to be more limited within specific times and cultures.

Curiously, and somewhat contradictorily, we find almost no similarities between motifs carved on menhirs and those that are carved or painted in the other contexts. We previously suggested a Late Mesolithic genesis for part of the peculiar set of motifs, reinvented and amplified in a process of social fission, responsible for regional Mesolithic-Neolithic transitions (Calado 2003, 2004). Further suggesting the cultural specificity of each rock-art "kingdom" or territory is the virtual absence of Neolithic rock art in Escoural cave, despite the facts that the cave was occupied during the Early and Late Neolithic, and that is located only a few miles from Almendres.

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