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Pontada Felipe Maximiliano Estay Sepúlveda

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**PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS OF THE ROCK ART
FROM BURACAS DA SERRA, ALVAIÁZERE (PORTUGAL)**

ESTUDIO PRELIMINAR DEL ARTE RUPESTRE DE LA SIERRA DE BURACAS, ALVAIÁZERE (PORTUGAL)

Dra. Alexandra Figueiredo

Polytechnic Institute of Tomar, Portugal / Geosciences Centre, Portugal
alexfiga@ipt.pt

Dr. Fernando Augusto Coimbra

Geosciences Centre, Portugal / Instituto Terra e Memória, Portugal
coimbra.rockart@yahoo.com

D. Cláudio Monteiro

Association CAAPortugal, Portugal
claudio.monteiro.cr@gmail.pt

D. Nuno Ribeiro

Association APIA, Portugal
nuno.ribeiro@apia.com

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Abstract

This article aims to make public the archaeological site Buracas da Serra (municipality of Alvaiázere), which reveals the presence of a possible engraving of astral character, contributing to the understanding of Late Prehistory and Protohistory in the region. The first archaeological information mentioning the existence of rock art in this area was presented by Alexandra Figueiredo, on a report regarding archaeological work in the dolmen Anta I de Rego da Murta (Rego da Murta, Alvaiázere), in 2003 (Figueiredo, 2003), and developed in a deeper way during the presentation of a PhD thesis, in 2007 (Figueiredo, 2007), mentioning the existence of prehistoric art in the municipality of Alvaiázere, namely engravings and possible paintings on Anta I do Rego da Murta and engravings on the menhir of the same megalithic complex. After this work, archaeological interventions carried out in Alvaiázere and visits to new sites have enabled to reference more traces observed in cave context or on horizontal outcrops located in open spaces, connected with the mentioned megalithic complex or with the Alvaiázere Sierra. These discoveries have led to the proposal of a research project directed to the cavities of the Nabão river (2010-2011), integrated in the project PNTA ANTROPE – Anthropization of spaces – forms of adaptation of the natural resources and continuity of human occupations in Prehistory-and Protohistory in Extremadura (Portugal). One of the recorded sites was an engraving of astral typology, in the site Buracas da Serra. This figure appears isolated, in a cavity oriented to the East. The present symbolism, the carving technique and the proximity to some archaeological sites allows assigning it, chronologically, to a period between Late Prehistory and Protohistory.

Keywords

Rock art – Alvaiázere – Late Prehistory – Protohistory

Resumen

Este artículo pretende hacer público el sitio arqueológico Buracas da Serra, que revela la presencia de un posible grabado de carácter astral, contribuyendo a la comprensión de la Prehistoria y Protohistoria tardía en la región. La primera información arqueológica que menciona la existencia del arte rupestre en esta zona fue presentada por Alexandra Figueiredo en un informe sobre el trabajo arqueológico en el dolmen Anta I de Rego da Murta en 2003 (Figueiredo, 2003) Y se desarrolló de manera más profunda durante la presentación de una tesis doctoral en 2007 (Figueiredo, 2007), mencionando la existencia del arte prehistórico en el municipio de Alvaiázere, a saber, grabados y posibles pinturas sobre Anta I do Rego da Murta y grabados sobre el Menhir del mismo complejo megalítico. Después de este trabajo, las intervenciones arqueológicas llevadas a cabo en Alvaiázere y las visitas a nuevos sitios han permitido referenciar más huellas observadas en el contexto de cuevas o en afloramientos horizontales situados en espacios abiertos relacionados con el mencionado complejo megalítico o con la Sierra de Alvaiázere. Estos descubrimientos han llevado a la propuesta de un proyecto de investigación dirigido a las cavidades del río Nabão (2010-2011), integrado en el proyecto PNTA ANTROPE - Antropización de espacios - formas de adaptación de los recursos naturales y continuidad de las ocupaciones humanas en la Prehistoria -y Protohistoria en Extremadura (Portugal). Uno de los sitios registrados fue un grabado de tipología astral, en el sitio Buracas da Serra. Esta figura aparece aislada, en una cavidad orientada al Este. El simbolismo actual, la técnica de tallado y la proximidad a algunos sitios arqueológicos permiten asignarla, cronológicamente, a un período entre la Prehistoria Tardía y la Protohistoria.

Palabras Claves

Arte rupestre – Alvaiázere – Prehistoria tardía – Protohistoria

Introduction

Alvaiázere is essentially a Karst region, composed by two depressions, the Nabão River Valley, in the West, and Rego da Murta/Cabaços, located in the East. These depressions would have been, over time, the preferred areas for entering and moving across this region¹, being the Late Prehistoric and Protohistoric settlements located in ridge areas.

Also the geological and lithological characteristics divide the region into two types of soils, one of middle-class, more productive, to the East and one of low-quality production, to the West. This Division is done by the central formation that gives rise to the imposing Sierra de Alvaiázere, focusing the largest settlements, including the current city of Alvaiázere, in the area of more productive soil.

Prehistoric populations, in a continuity of occupation since the Palaeolithic, would have set in this region, initially on the more fertile valley and later, after the Calcolithic, occupying areas of a better space control and with more defensive characteristics, as it is observed in Castelo da Loureira (Figueiredo, et. alli. 2014), in Ameixoeira, in Sobral Chão or in Sierra of Alvaiázere².

These populations with constant contacts with inhabitants of other places, as revealed by the archaeological record³ and the analyses to the isotopes of individuals buried in Anta I and II of Rego da Murta⁴, strive to build fortifications, living in their interior, in circular or semicircular houses, built by perishable structures⁵ and performing their cults in very specific areas as in the case of the megalithic complex of Rego da Murta⁶.

¹ A. Figueiredo, "Walking in a Way: Some Conclusions of the Recent Pre-History in Alto Ribatejo Region". In Figueiredo, A. & Leite Velho, G. (eds), *The world is in your eyes. CAA2005. Computer Applications and Quantitative Methods in Archaeology. Proceedings of the 33rd Conference*, Tomar: CAA Portugal, (2007) 353-358.

² P. Félix, "Serra de Alvaiázere: um povoado fortificado do Bronze final no centro de Portugal. Almadan. Almada. 2ª Série: 8, (1999).63-71; A. Figueiredo, "Walking in a Way: Some Conclusions of the Recent Pre-History in Alto Ribatejo Region... 2007.

³ A. Figueiredo, "Walking in a Way: Some Conclusions of the Recent Pre-History in Alto Ribatejo Region..."

⁴ A. Waterman, A. Figueiredo, J. Thomas & D. Peate, "Identifying migrants in the late neolithic burials of the Antas of Rego da Murta (Alvaiázere, Portugal) using strontium isotopes". *Antrope*, nº 0, Dezembro de 2013, Tomar: Centro de Pré-História do Instituto Politécnico de Tomar, (2013) 190-197.

http://www.cph.ipt.pt/download/AntropeDownload/ANTROPE%200/revista_antrope_N0.pdf

⁵ A. Figueiredo, J. Rolão, R. Saraiva, C. Monteiro & R. Pinto, "Resultados das prospeções arqueológicas nas cavidades do Alto Nabão (Leiria - centro de Portugal)", *Revista Memorare*, V.1, Nº 2 Santa Catarina: Universidade do Sul de Santa Catarina, (2014a) 1-26

http://www.portaldeperiodicos.unisul.br/index.php/memorare_grupep/article/view/2381/1692

⁶ A. Figueiredo, "A Anta I do Rego da Murta. Descrição sumária dos trabalhos efetuados em 2003". *Techne*, 9, (2004a) 115-126; A. Figueiredo, "A Anta II de Rego da Murta (Alvaiázere) – Resultados da 1ª campanha de escavações". *Techne* 9, (2004b) 127-138; A. Figueiredo, "Contributo para a análise do megalitismo no Alto Ribatejo: O Complexo Megalítico de Rego da Murta", *Alvaiázere. Almadan* 13, (2005) 134-136; A. Figueiredo, *Complexo Megalítico de Rego da Murta. Pré-história recente do Alto Ribatejo (IV-IIº milénio a.C.): Problemáticas e Interrogações*. Unpublished PhD thesis, Universidade do Porto. (2006); A. Figueiredo, "Walking in a Way: Some Conclusions of the Recent Pre-History in Alto Ribatejo Region". In Figueiredo, A. & Leite Velho, G. (eds), *The world is in your eyes. CAA2005. Computer Applications and Quantitative Methods in Archaeology*.

Although some testimonies, not clear on their location, refer to the existence of other monuments⁷, so far only were identified menhirs and dolmens in the mentioned megalithic complex and a cist in Sierra de Alvaiázere (Félix, 1999).

Concerning prehistoric art, engravings were observed on the menhir (a crosier and a cup-mark), inside Anta I of Rego da Murta (red spots on the head slabs of the chamber and a zigzag in the chamber's left slab)⁸ and on a horizontal slab, located in the centre of the complex, composed by cup-marks and linear motifs.

The prospection carried out, including in the cavities of the region, allowed the recognition of two more rock art sites: Buracas da Serra and the site of Algar da Água, both present in the Sierra de Alvaiázere. This one, due to its monumentality, would give certain sacredness to this region and a fundamental spatial reference point for those who crossed the area, being visible from Asseiceira (Tomar), located about 40 km to the South, in a straight line (Figure 1).



Figure 1

Image from Googlemaps, with vision from the south of Asseiceira (parish at south of Tomar). The arrow indicates the Mountain of Alvaiázere

Proceedings of the 33rd Conference, Tomar: CAA Portugal, (2007) 353-358; A. Figueiredo, "Rituals and Death cults in recent Prehistory in central Portugal (Alto Ribatejo)". *Documenta Praehistorica* XXXVII, (2010) 85-94. Available online:

<http://revije.ff.uni-lj.si/DocumentaPraehistorica/article/view/37.8/1699>; A. Figueiredo, "O Sítio Arqueológico da Anta I de Rego da Murta". *Antrope 0*, Centro de Pré-História do Instituto Politécnico de Tomar (2013a) 9-17.

http://www.cph.ipt.pt/download/AntropeDownload/ANTROPE%200/revista_antrope_N0.pdf; A. Figueiredo, "Os menires do Complexo Megalítico de Rego da Murta (Alvaiázere, Leiria): resultados das intervenções do Menir I e II de Rego da Murta". *Antrope 0*, Centro de Pré-História do Instituto Politécnico de Tomar: (2013b) 213-225.

http://www.cph.ipt.pt/download/AntropeDownload/ANTROPE%200/revista_antrope_N0.pdf

⁷ L. Oosterbeek, *Echoes from the East: The western network. North Ribatejo (Portugal): an insight to unequal and combined development, 7000-2000B.C.* London, Doctorate thesis presented to the University College London, Tese fotocopiada Tomar: Instituto Politécnico de Tomar, (1994).

⁸ A. Figueiredo, "Walking in a Way: Some Conclusions of the Recent Pre-History in Alto Ribatejo Region...", 2007, vol. II: 148-151, 179-183.

1.- The cave Buracas da Serra

During the work that has been developed within archaeological projects in Alvaiázere, namely ANTROPE and MEDICE projects, approved by DGPC, traces of rock art have been identified in caves and at open air, which we consider appropriate to present. One of these places is the site Buracas da Serra.

The site is located in the coordinates UTM M-0551077 and P-4407738, military chart number 287, European 1979, at 411m above sea level. The access is made along the left side of the road that leads to the top of the mountain (Figure 2).



Figure 2

Cave of Buracas da Serra, Alvaiázere Mountain (Alvaiázere). Photo: Project Medice

The cave is located at half slope of the Sierra, facing East, in a small cavity with two entrance areas. It presents a small shelter, having a relatively small size, composed by a short corridor with a width lesser than 2 meter, crossed to the two access zones. It has also a hole of about 50 centimeters wide, below the entrance that leads to the room with the engraving, connecting to another space, also reduced, where it's only possible crawling.

The site revealed the presence of an isolated engraving, expressed by deep incisions made with a thin and hard artefact, probably metal. The figure is on the left, about 1, 50 m high, on the wall. The incisions cross roughly in the centre, forming an "asterisk" or a star motif (Figure 3). The grooves are rather deep, presenting more than 0,5 cm in the center.



Figure 3
The engraving of Buracas da Serra, Alvaiázere Mountain (Alvaiázere)
Photo: Project Medice

The area where the engraving is located seems apparently to be polished, if compared with the remaining rocky surface roughness (Figure 3). The choice of the place for its representation is also interesting, because it gives a certain dimensional body to the figure. This one has 6 rays, being the one that is facing the ground different from the others, extending in extension and opening up at the end of it. Also one of the rays on the inferior right presents an open trace, relatively imperfect, if compared with the others (Figure 4).



Figure 4

Detail of the engraving observed in Buracas da Serra. Photo: Project Medicine

However, the incision technique noted in the top row of this ray seems to have been made for an intentional reason, to mark a clear decision on the representation. The differentiation in the reproduction of the rays can be related with the concrete analogy of the observed reality, namely its connection to the representation of a comet or a meteor, regarding the track that the figure makes.

The engraving is about 10 cm long and presents, between the lower and the upper beam, an orientation from Southwest to Northeast, taking into account its position in the cave. We didn't notice any other engravings or paintings and we also didn't register any artefacts or evidence of occupation for other purposes.

2.- Interpretation

"Asterisks", as they are designated by the archaeological community, constitute a widely represented motif within the incised rock art of southern Europe. One of its earliest depictions appears on a slab of Tal-Qadi temple (Malta), dating from Late Neolithic, where

several examples, with a different number of rays, are associated to what seems to be a lunar representation (Figure 5), displaying possibly stars in a night sky⁹.



Figure 5

Slab from Tal-Qadi with asterisks and a crescent moon (?) (Photo Daniel Cilia)

The same association with a crescent moon is observed at El Canchon, Vegas de Coria (Caceres), in Spain¹⁰, however, here, with a chronology attributed to Protohistory.

from this country is notorious the site Castillo de Pinofranqueado, where there's an "asterisk" associated to the representation of a Late Bronze Age sword, or the site Cancho de los Letreros (Tejeda y Segoyuela, Salamanca) (Sevillano, 1991). In Andorra these figures appear also at Tossal de Cava (Casamajor i Esteban, 2008) and, in the Eastern French Pyrenees, they can be seen on Rock A of Peyra Escrita, at Pont de les Cabres (Err) and in Collada dels Planes (Abélanet, 1990: 117; 137-138; 148). In the latter case the "asterisk" appears with a kind of tail, associated with a five-pointed star, having been, as we consider for Buracas da Serra, interpreted as a comet or a meteor (Figure 6).

⁹ F. A. Coimbra, "Common themes and regional identities in European Late Prehistoric filiform rock art". XXV Valcamonica Symposium. Capo di Ponte: Centro Camuno di Studi Preistorici, (2013b), fig. 6; F. A. Coimbra, "Late Prehistoric incised rock art in southern Europe: a contribution for its typology". In Coimbra, F. A. y Sansoni, U. (eds). Post-Palaeolithic filiform rock art in Western Europe. Oxford: Archaeopress, (2016) 1-12.

¹⁰ M^a. C. Sevillano, Grabados Rupestres en la Comarca de las Hurdes (Cáceres). Universidad de Salamanca, (1991) 261.

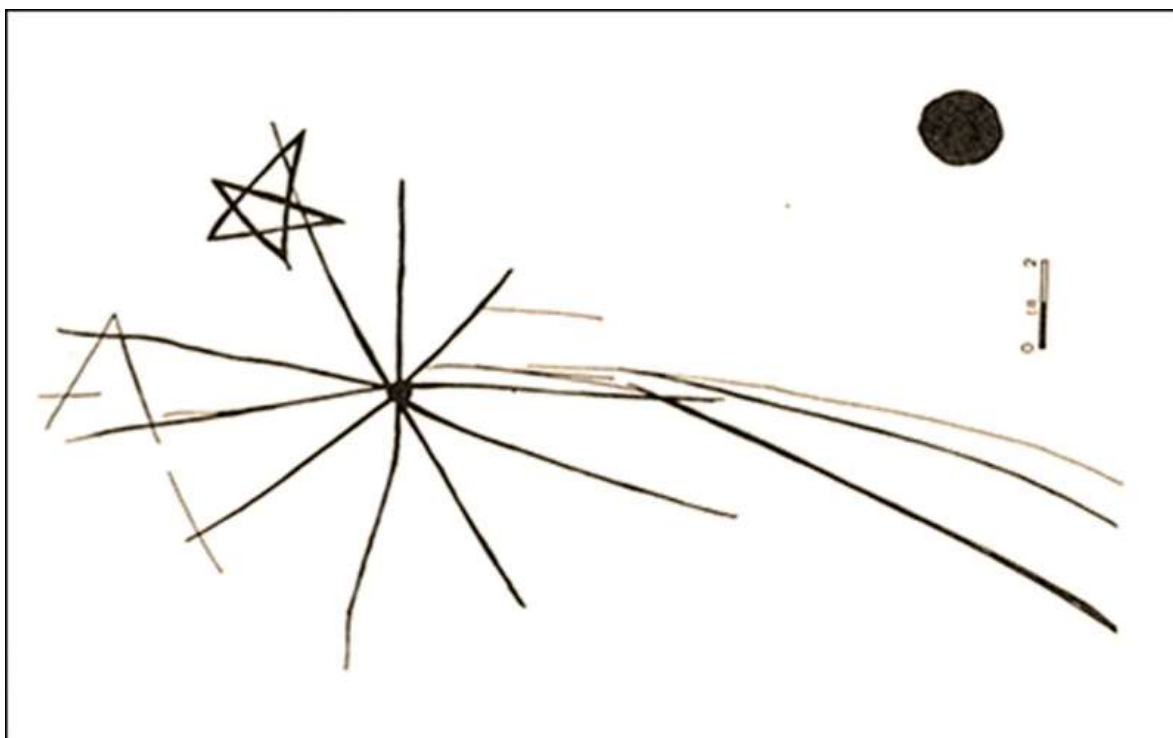


Figure 6

“Asterisk” from Coll de la Font Roja (Caixás, France). (After Abélanet, 1990)

In Portugal, this type of representation, it is registered at the site Levadas V, in the hydrographical basin of Ribeira do Alvôco, at Vide, (Seia)¹¹, in Rock 2 of Figueiredo (Sertã), in Pedra Escrita do Poço da Moura (Vila Flor)¹², or in Rock 13 of Ocreza river (Mação). This last example is associated to other incisions without constituting a figure (Europreart, n/dated). Interestingly, as in the cave Buracas da Serra, one of the rays of this image is bigger than the other.

So, in a general way, all these parallels of the Iberian Peninsula and the Pyrenees, just to indicate some examples, are done in a very thin groove, with a Protohistoric chronology, being represented with a number of rays that can range from 5 up to 12¹³. The engraving of Buracas da Serra presents, unlike the mentioned examples, a fairly thick and deep incision, well outlined, with the intention of a line quite determined.

¹¹ N. M. Ribeiro, Manifestaciones de Arte Rupestre en las cuecas hidrográficas de los ríos Ceira, Alva y en las áreas limítrofes de las cuecas hidrográficas de los ríos Zêzere y rio Unhais. Unpublished Phd Thesis. Universidad de Salamanca, (2014) 1517-1520.

¹² F. A. Coimbra, “Common themes and regional identities in European Late Prehistoric filiform rock art”. XXV Valcamonica Symposium. Capo di Ponte: Centro Camuno di Studi Preistorici, (2013b); F. A. Coimbra & S. Garcés, “Filiform and “polissoir” rock art between the Tagus and Mondego rivers (Portugal): inventory, typology, parallels and chronology”. In: Mailland, F., Coimbra, F. A y Prestipino, C., (eds.), Quaderni del Mediterraneo, 2. Milesimo: Istituto Internazionale di Studi Liguri, (2015) 46-77.

¹³ F. A. Coimbra, “Late Prehistoric incised rock art in southern Europe: a contribution for its typology”. In Coimbra, F. A. y Sansoni, U. (eds). Post-Palaeolithic filiform rock art in Western Europe. Oxford: Archaeopress, (2016) 1-12, table 1.

A careful analysis, taking into account the size and each ray trait, seems to us, in its representation, to expose one or two tails, which may be in this way, by analogy, also compared with the possible representation of a comet or a meteor. The possible tails are located to the South and the second, not so obvious, to the Southeast, being the latter, however, debatable.

However, the presence of comets with two tails is quite common, being almost always one of the tails much more evident and long than the second (this one usually caused by solar winds) (Figure 7). For example, Comet Hale-Bopp, one among the numerous comets that might have occurred in Late Prehistory and Protohistory, makes an orbit, passing close to the Earth approximately every 4000 years, in 2007 registered two tails, one wide and more visible and another, to the right, less evident.



Figure 7

Photo from comet Hale-Bopp, by Thomas Lowe.

This comet has an orbit passing the Earth approximately each 4000 years
(<http://ptsoft.net/vastro/arquivo/Marco97/hale.htm>)

3.- Final statements

The "asterisk of Buracas da Serra, located in the Sierra of Alvaiázere, having a line of larger dimensions can effectively constitute a representation of a meteor or a comet. This kind of figures, despite not being very frequent in rock art, they appear in several

parts of the world¹⁴. In Portugal, an interesting example can be seen in the prehistoric paintings of Pala Pinta rockshelter, at Alijó, which were studied in a multidisciplinary way, involving experts from archaeology and astronomy, among other disciplines¹⁵.

The typology of cometary representations in rock art is varied, since a naturalistic style to a schematic one. Interestingly, a comet observed in Rome, shortly after the death of Caesar, was considered as a good omen by Augustus and engraved on the reverse of a denarius from the late 1st century BC, resembling an “asterisk” of eight rays (Figure 8), having a similar typology to several examples of cometary representations in rock art.



Figure 8

Denarius from Augustus with the depiction of a comet (After Modoetica Numismatae)

Regarding the engraving mentioned in this article it is essential to make further and deeper research, either of correlation with other sites in the region, particularly those that have rock art such as Algar da Água, which is located about 500 m from Buracas da Serra¹⁶ or the analysis of astronomical possibilities. Furthermore, even that Buracas da Serra doesn't have a large dimension, not been recognized inner accesses to other spaces or galleries, the development of further work, as for example archaeological excavations inside the cave, could provide more concrete elements for a safer chronological frame, in what concerns the engraving presented here.

¹⁴ F. A. Coimbra, “The sky on the rocks: cometary images in rock art”. *Actas do Congresso Internacional de Arte Rupestre “Global Art 2009”*, Brasil: Serra da Capivara, (2010) 635-646; F. A. Coimbra, “Astronomical representations in rock art: examples of the cognitive and spiritual processes of non-literate people, in *The Intellectual and spiritual expressions of non literate people*”. In Anati, E., Oosterbeek, L. y Mailland, F. (eds.), XVI UISPP Conference, Florianópolis (2012) 37-44; F. A. Coimbra, “Rock Art and Archaeoastronomy: some theoretical considerations towards a methodological approach”. *Actas do Congresso ASP, Mação*. (in press).

¹⁵ Projecto Pala Pinta, Uma abordagem multidisciplinar à arte rupestre pré-histórica, (2014) <https://palapinta.wordpress.com/>

¹⁶ A. Figueiredo, A. Tognoli, C. Monteiro, R. Saraiva, R. Gonçalves & S. Figueiredo, “O sítio de habitat pré-histórico de Loureira (Alvaiázere – Leiria – centro de Portugal)” *Revista Memorare*, v. 1, n. 3. Santa Catarina: Universidade do Sul de Santa Catarina, (2014b) 52-67. http://www.portaldeperiodicos.unisul.br/index.php/memorare_grupep/article/view/2512/1795

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