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SITES WITH ROCK ART IN THE SERRA DE S. MAMEDE, IN THE MEGALITHIC LANDSCAPES OF THE NORTHERN ALENTEJO

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Abstract: *Identifying and studying sites with evidence of rock art in the area of the S. Mamede mountain range (Serra de S. Mamede) in Portugal has been the focus of research projects in the region carried out by students at the University of Évora and supervised by the authors of this paper since 2009.*

Until this project began, it was believed that the areas and sites for this type of pre-historic artistic expression was almost limited to the four small shelters which had been discovered to date. By identifying new, different sites, the number of places with rock art being studied has been increased considerably.

This paper, therefore, aims to reflect on some of these sites' characteristics and to identify some possible premises which can be used to create a study and ground-level investigation method, through knowledge about constant and divergent aspects which each site presents.

Key words: *Rock Art, Serra de S. Mamede, Megalithic Landscape*

ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

The northern Alentejo is recognised for its singular but diverse natural landscape and is remarkable for its almost six hundred megalithic structures. Some are more ostensible, such as the majestic funerary granite architecture in the flatter areas to the south, or the more discreet structures in schist, hidden among the uneven hills further north. Menhirs, distributed throughout the landscape, remind us of the first farming activities carried out by the first communities who searched for a place to settle in the area.

The megalithic menhirs and tombs have been relatively well known for some centuries and are part of everyday life for inhabitants of this part of the “Alem-Tejo” (the land the other side of the River Tagus). Another universe – definitely contemporary with and perhaps fruit of the same hands which dragged and worked on these great rocks to either mark their territory or bury their dead – was only discovered a few years ago: schematic, painted rock art.

Since 2008, we have studied schematic rock paintings in the northern Alentejo, specifically in the Serra de S. Mamede. These paintings fill up the walls and ceilings of some shelters and quartzite outcrops throughout the enormous geo-monument which is the S. Mamede mountain range.

After the first projects, characterised by the enthusiasm and excitement about studying the graphics found in

already discovered shelters, an urgent search began for new sites which not only had pictograms but which would also allow us to gradually unveil and understand the secrets and messages which these first human communities wished to convey and leave as their legacy.

By prospecting the area, which at the beginning systematically covered the whole area but became gradually more focused on specific parts, we began to distinguish and select the sites which, according to some possibly more intuitive than scientific criteria, allowed us to identify new sites with art and new and different types of pictures.

Although rather eclectic, the landscape and orography of the Serra de S. Mamede have some well defined features. One of the most identifiable is the relief, which reaches 1,025 m in height, and is the highest point south of the River Tagus in Portugal. It is worth noting that the peak of S. Mamede is in the relatively flat landscape to the south and west of the district of Portalegre, where the minimum altitude is around 300 m, and this variation in altitude is a factor which makes this quartzite hill range all the more impressive.

This geo-monument lies roughly NW-SE, stretching almost 40 km in length and 10 km in width, in Portuguese territory, and carrying on in the extreme south-east into the Spanish region of Alburquerque, province of Badajoz, where we find similar schematic rock paintings with similar characteristics, both in terms of the landscape itself and the type of pictures and the way they are set out on the rock.