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THE PREHISTORIC SOCIETY

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archaeological engagements with the material world:

a celebration of the academic achievements of Professor Richard Bradley

edited by

Andrew Meirion Jones, Joshua Pollard, Michael J. Allen and Julie Gardiner

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Images in their Time: new insights into the Galician petroglyphs

Ramón Fábregas Valcarce and Carlos Rodríguez-Rellán

Richard Bradley's research on Iberian open-air rock art has proved essential in understanding its relationship with prehistoric landscapes. However, there remain a number of constraints and issues surrounding the interpretation of open-air rock art which are considered here. A consensus about the chronology of this phenomenon (which places it in the local Bronze Age) has been challenged, with some researchers claiming an Iron Age date for many petroglyphs. This is subject to critical scrutiny and here rejected. Matters are not helped by the absence of a comprehensive catalogue of the open-air rock art, and the fact that most sites have never been studied in depth. An opportunity is also taken to review the interpretation of Galician rock art as an open or hardly-restricted phenomenon, drawing attention to physical constraints that existed on its observation. Another controversial issue among specialists has been the precise relationship between Galician rock art and the domestic sphere, leading to a presentation of dichotomous 'sacred' versus 'domestic' areas. While contemporary settlements might be difficult to detect, this dichotomous image is shown to be erroneous, with human activity being demonstrated in the surroundings of many petroglyphs.

kann dich tausendmal rufen, du stehst nur da, ich
erreich dich nie
Ulla Meinecke, *Zauberformel*

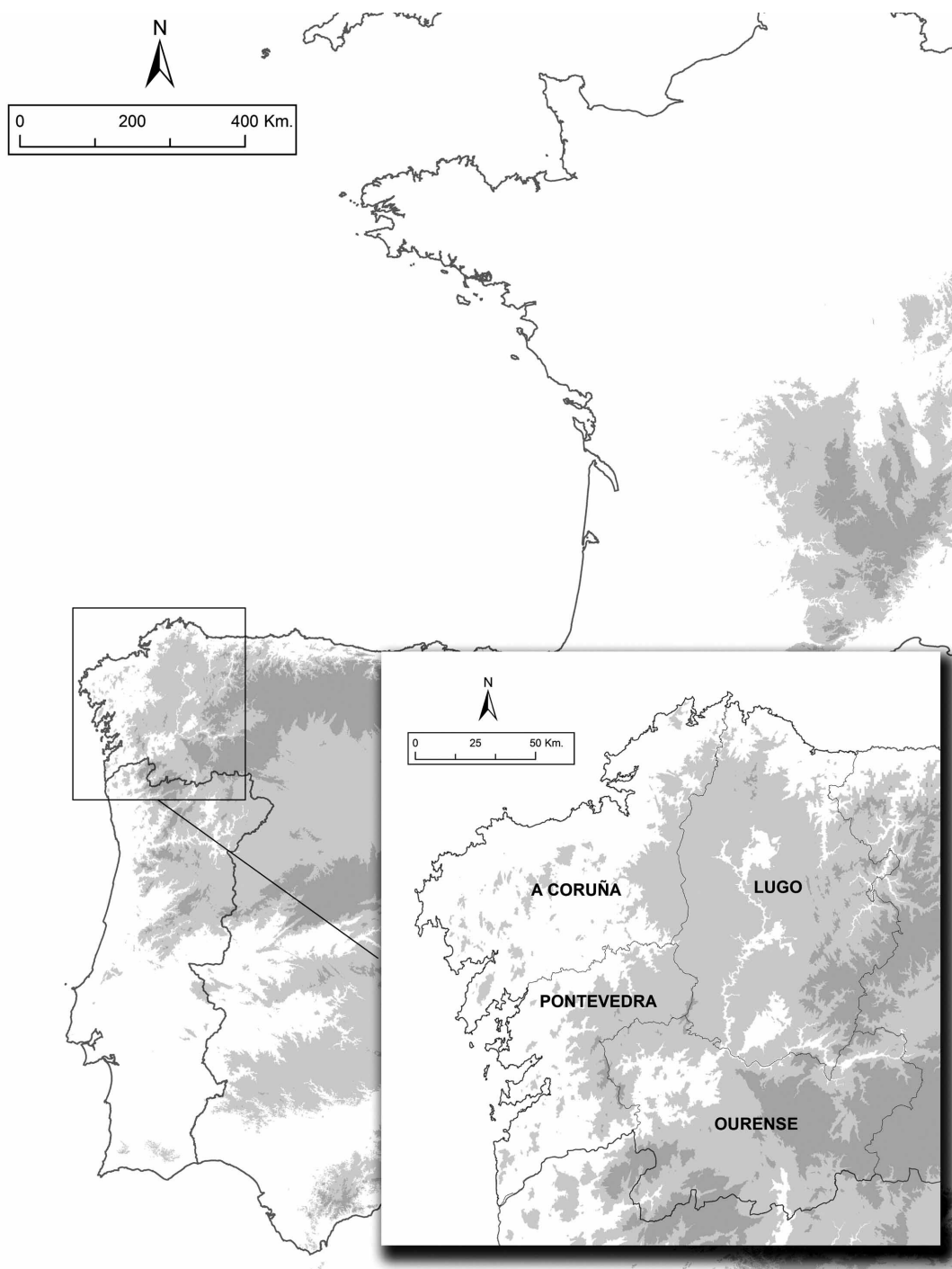
An outline of the issue

The role played by the work of Richard Bradley in North-west Iberia is essential for understanding the present level of knowledge about the open-air rock art phenomenon in this region; such research, embodied in many publications (Bradley 1997; Bradley & Fábregas 1999; Bradley *et al.* 1995, among others), has

profoundly influenced the investigations conducted in this area ever since, in particular those approaching the relationship of rock art with the landscape and surrounding territories. However, after two decades since Bradley's first trip to Galicia, there are still a number of constraints affecting our appraisal of the open-air rock art, hinting at some of the present knowledge having feet of clay.

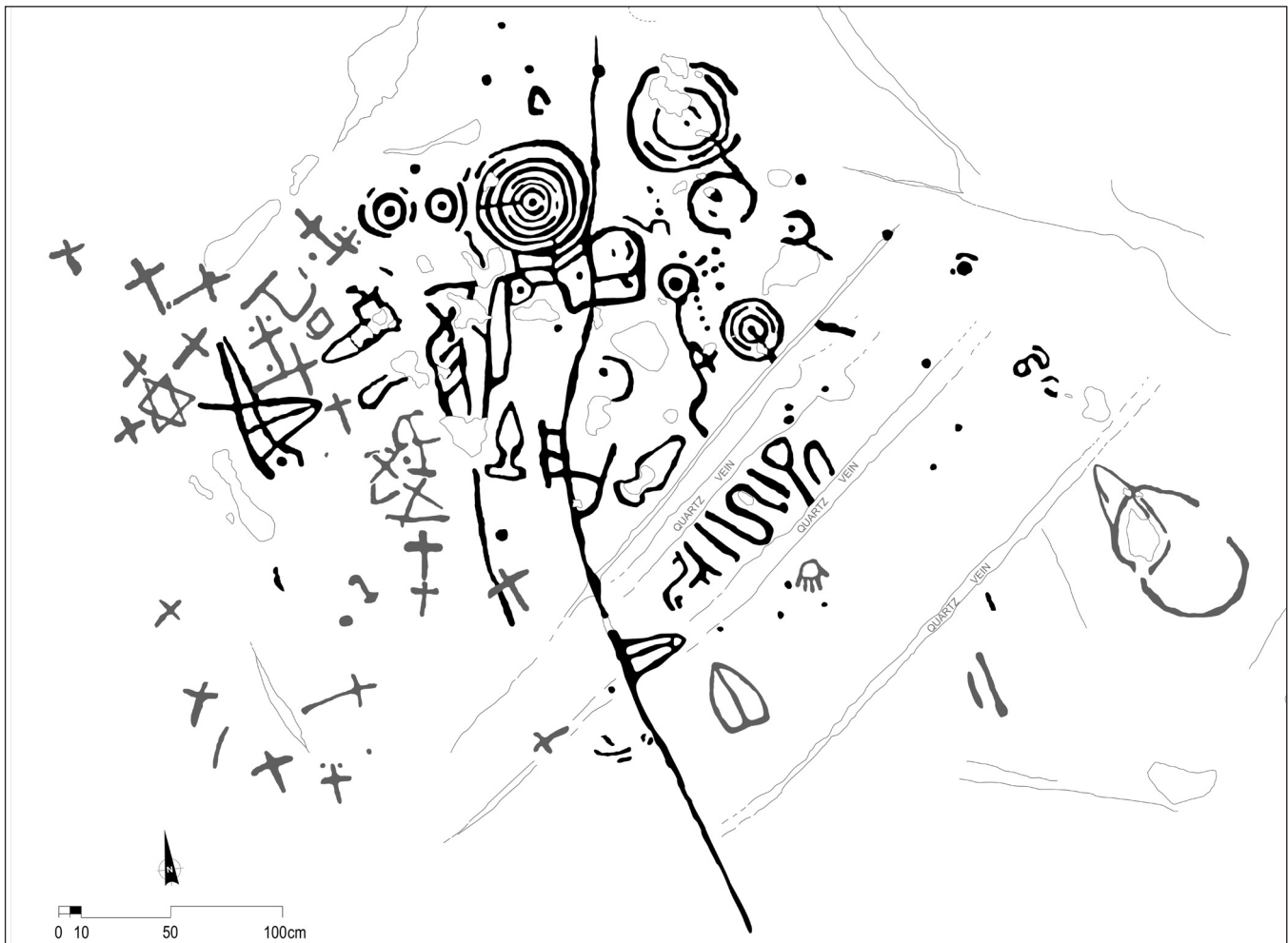
Over 2000 sites are known in the four provinces of Galicia and Northern Portugal (Fig. 24.1), but, in spite of the huge bibliography

Figure 24.1: Map of sites that are discussed



generated, no comprehensive catalogue of the open-air rock art is available as yet. We must conform ourselves with partial syntheses for certain areas in order to assess the contents of this archaeological assemblage: a first attempt at systematic cataloguing is that of García & Peña (1980) who recorded over 500 rocks from the Pontevedra province (the richest area of all); Vázquez (2006) made a statistical study of

about 1006 rocks from all around Galicia, based on published references up to 1991. Along with this, we have other analysis undertaken by us in two areas: Northern Barbanza Peninsula (southwest coast of A Coruña) and the Deza district (interior of the province of Pontevedra), based on a list of, respectively, 164 and 92 rocks (Table 24.1). The results suggest two basic things: most Galician petroglyphs display geometric images



composed of cup-marks and an assorted array of circular motifs, while – except in the North Barbanza – the naturalistic group, made up fundamentally of deer and daggers/halberds is far less represented. The geometric group (those closer to their Atlantic counterparts) are more widespread, reaching well into inland Galicia, while the other is concentrated in the coastal areas, only the weapons occurring occasionally in more interior locations, as in the Deza region.

In addition, most sites have never been studied in depth, so we are not sure about the precise number and nature of the motifs present on the panels, whose observation is usually difficult because of their heavy weathering. Even some of the better known petroglyphs are not well recorded: the systematic use of artificial lights has shown that in 70% of the cases previous studies had ignored a significant part of the existing engravings. A

good example of this may be the petroglyph of Foxa da Vella (Rianxo, A Coruña), much referenced in the literature (Fig. 24.2), in which we discovered daggers, zoomorphs, serpentiforms and circular combinations that had gone unnoticed in previous analyses. Such a state of affairs led us to approach with great caution some chronological proposals for Galician rock art based on alleged frequencies of association between motifs (Santos 2008; Fábregas *et al.* 2009).

In 1991, by the time of Bradley's first involvement with Galician open-air rock art, there was an apparent consensus about the chronology of this phenomenon, roughly spanning the local Bronze Age. Only a little after, Peña and Rey (1993) put forward a new proposal relating the petroglyphs to the 3rd–2nd millennium BC transition, a timespan slightly widened in a later work (2001). Generally accepted by most specialists, it has

Figure 24.2: Foxa da Vella (Rianxo, A Coruña) as recorded by the authors (modern motifs in light gray)

Table 24.1: Presence (%) on the rocks of some prehistoric motifs

	García & Peña (1980)	Vázquez Rozas (2006)	North Barbanza Peninsula	Deza region
Cup-marks	89.56	62.12	52.40	72.83
Circular combinations	75.57	78.62	37.20	41.03
Zoomorphs	19.84	12.82	36.00	–
Weapons	3.81	3.37	2.47	5.43
Labyrinths	0.76	1.98	0.62	–
Total rocks	>500	>1062	164	92

been challenged by certain authors (Santos 2008; Santos & Seoane 2010) contemplating the making of a significant number of images up to the local Iron Age. Therefore, in spite of advancement in knowledge about the Copper Age and Bronze Age periods in north-west Iberia, the dating of the open-air rock art remains a bone of contention, among other reasons due to the intrinsic difficulty of obtaining absolute dates from carvings executed on exposed granitic surfaces where superimpositions are scarce and difficult to assess.

A view from within

One of the main features of Galician rock art is its great variability, increasing along with the growth in the number of petroglyphs. Thus, in the last decade we observe the discovery of art sites of a distinct nature and also new types of images that are incorporated into the iconographic corpus with the result that, quite often, earlier assumptions must now be duly qualified. With respect to the dating of this phenomenon, despite the difficulties already mentioned, we feel that there are several threads of evidence that we can follow with an aim to at least overcome partially this daunting obstacle on the way to understanding the wider context of Galician petroglyphs.

The cup-marks and circles, being the most common representations, are quite difficult to date, for the simplicity of the first leads to a well attested resilience, being often associated with Neolithic mounds, but also lasting into historic times. The curvilinear motifs are not easy to date either for, in sharp contrast with Irish cases, they are seldom carved on Galician megalithic slabs and only a few portable objects, such as the Rechaba discs display curvilinear designs (Fábregas 1992; Fig. 24.3). It seems reasonable though, taking into account this scanty evidence together with that of similar carvings in the British Isles and Ireland (Bradley 2007, 97; 2009, 114–9), that

the circles could go back to the later 4th/early 3rd millennium BC, while, almost certainly, persisting until the 3rd/2nd millennia BC transition.

The Neolithic anchoring for the circular themes is shared by other, less common, motifs such as the boxed U's from Pozo Ventura (Poio, Pontevedra) or the single circles within an oval enclosure found there and at Coto da Braña 3 (Cotobade, Pontevedra) which resemble megalithic examples, not just in a formal sense, but also in the way they structure themselves on the panels (Sartal 1999; Costas & Pereira 2006; Alves 2008) (Fig. 24.4).

But within the mainstream of Galician petroglyphs, the representations of weapons (halberds and daggers) constitute the most valuable chronological yardstick, since these may be indirectly dated by comparison with their metallic counterparts. In the case of the halberds, though the examples found in north-west Iberia lack a clear context, their British prototypes have a chronology of *c.* 2200–2050 BC, while in the Argar culture their presence in the funerary record goes between 2000 and 1800 BC (Fábregas *et al.* 2009). Daggers have not such a clear-cut timespan, their typology being more difficult to assess on the carvings, yet they seemingly reproduce items ranging from the Bell Beaker times to the local early Bronze Age and are at least partly contemporary with halberds (Peña 2003).

The north-west Iberian rock art, being located outdoors, has usually been considered as a phenomenon whose contemplation would be little restricted, in contrast, for example, with megalithic art. Therefore, petroglyphs were traditionally regarded as easily to perceive and, therefore, virtually accessible to anyone going about the prehistoric landscape. This concept is related to the notion of the open-air rock art as, basically, a method of regulation of the space devised by early farmer groups still with a high degree of mobility that would not be often in direct contact (Bradley 1997); an 'intergroup'

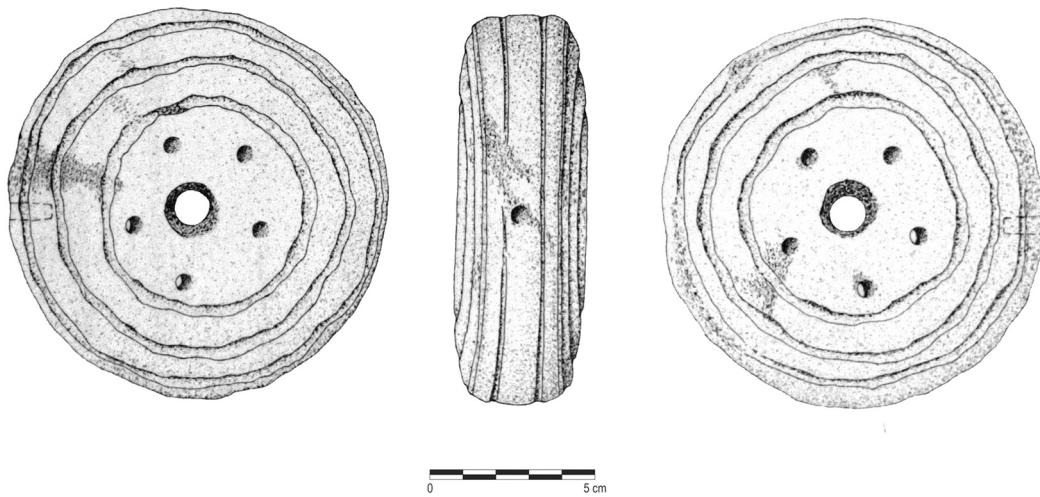
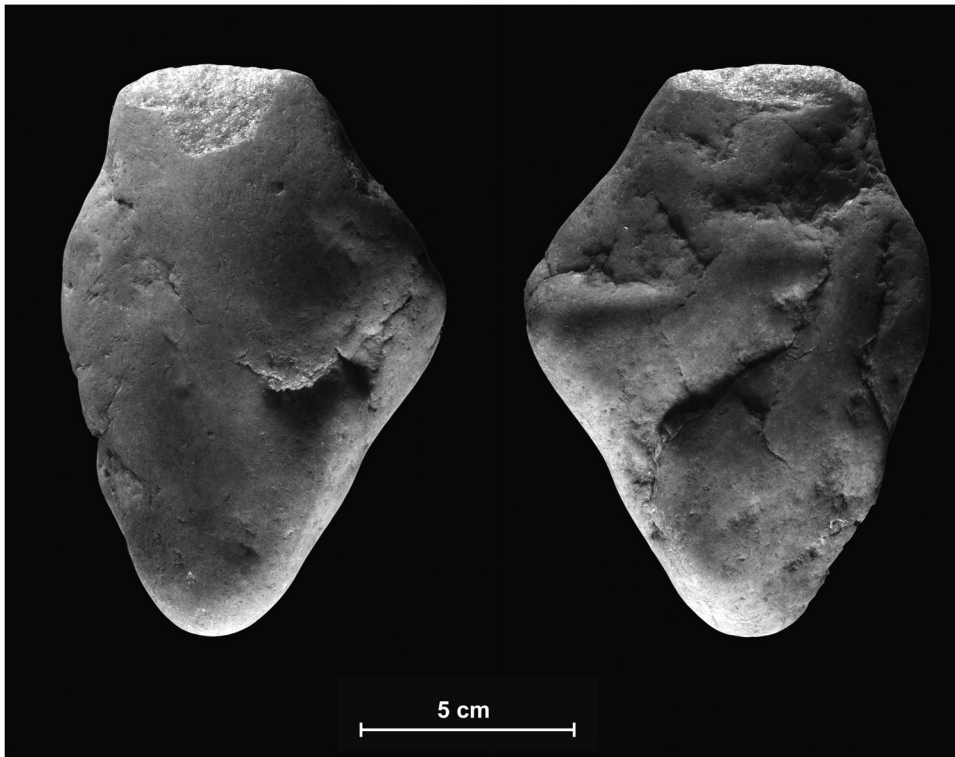


Figure 24.3: Top: Rechaba stone disc, with a decorative pattern of concentric circles; bottom: boulder with percussion marks recovered in Os Mouchos petroglyph (Rianxo, A Coruña)



communication mechanism – a sort of code of signals or messages – designed to mediate in the use of the landscape by neighbouring groups, establishing preferential or exclusive access by one of them to specific spaces with an economic and/or symbolic significance.

However, the evidence that a considerable proportion of the petroglyphs are located far from major pathways and from those points allowing a direct control of the most economically attractive areas (Peña & Rey 2001; Fábregas *et al.* 2010), together with the possible

existence of strategies which enabled people to modulate the perceptibility of the carvings from the surrounding space (by selecting more or less conspicuous rocks and profiting from the contrast between the colour of the grooves and that of the rock surface), has led us to review the interpretation of the Galician rock art as an open or hardly-restricted phenomenon; endorsing our revisionist approach come also the recent finds of prehistoric art inside small granitic rock-shelters.

The increasing evidence of the existence

Figure 24.4: *Coto da Braña 3* (Cotobade, Pontevedra) and *Pozo Ventura* (Poio, Pontevedra) (after A. de la Peña)



of physical constraints in the observation of petroglyphs, coupled with the acceptance of a certain ‘wish to hide’ that could exist in some of the open-air rock art sites, indicates the potential existence of an aim to define different levels of access to the petroglyphs and, according to them, of different audiences, a possibility that was first recognised in the Galician rock art by Richard Bradley (2002; 2009). At the same time, this fact makes clear the need to review the idea of this phenomenon as a simple ‘landscape marker’ meant to be seen by a broad audience, eventually surpassing the community responsible for the carvings to reach out other neighbouring and rival groups.

Consistent with this ‘open’ character, Galician petroglyphs were traditionally conceived – with very few exceptions (like the engravings of weapons) – as a phenomenon addressed to a general, passive and low-skilled audience. As stated before, there is a vast array of figures, geometric and naturalistic, sometimes amounting to complex scenes of hunting and riding. It is possible that many of these motifs had a relatively constrained

range of meanings while others would have been more polysemic (ie, a halberd or a human figure as compared to a cup-mark or a circular combination). However, the meaning of these images could be profoundly mutable from both a synchronic and diachronic point of view, since it would depend, to a great extent, on the characteristics of their audience, so that a given panel could encompass several layers of meaning, from practical information for accessing daily resources to sacred knowledge, and they would be available to the observer in so far as it had command of the necessary clues (Bradley 2002; 2009). This concept of audience substantially increases the polysemy of the petroglyphs while admitting a more active role to the observers; likewise, this circumstance, by itself, could have modulated the degree of accessibility of each petroglyph in an even more effective way than physical constraints did.

Around the rocks

For years now, one of the controversial issues among specialists has been the precise relationship between Galician rock art and the domestic sphere. The main obstacle to

this definition was the lack of data about the latter, which only recently could be overcome. Most researchers point to the coastal plain and mid-slope valleys as the preferential spaces for settlement, in contrast to the peaks and elevations – the ‘megalithic space’ – less densely occupied (Fábregas 2009; Peña & Rey 2001); other authors opted for an opposite view, considering precisely those higher areas more suitable for habitation, while the valleys would remain relatively empty (Santos 2010).

The difficulties associated with dense vegetation, the aggressive post-depositional processes, and the marked invisibility of the settlements themselves led to most of these being recorded through the work of commercial archaeology linked to major public works (generally of linear courses such as highways, railroads, pipelines, etc) whose results, although essential for our appraisal of the matter, often provide a partial picture.

The available data seem to suggest that around the mid-3rd millennium BC, coinciding with the introduction to the north-west of the Bell Beaker ware and a relative improvement in weather conditions (Fábregas *et al.* 2003), an expansion to the ‘megalithic space’ on the top of the sierras would have occurred, without meaning the abandonment of the areas occupied earlier. Although keeping much of its itinerant nature, settlements grow more complex at this point, probably in parallel with the increase of social asymmetry. Precisely at this time, the main creative impulse of the open-air rock art would have taken place, in a context of economic intensification involving an exploitation of different biotopes, necessary to sustain the processes described above.

In parallel to the notion of the alleged duality between densely settled zones and others virtually unoccupied, some authors have developed a dialectics of ‘sacred’ versus ‘domestic’ areas; in our view these schemes have somewhat curtailed the understanding of the open-air rock art as well as the space and the social context in which it arises. A number of authors (Edmonds 1999; Díaz-Andreu 2001; Insoll 2004; Bradley 2005) have strongly criticised the definition of ‘sacred’ and ‘ritual’ as opposed to and separate from ‘secular’ and ‘domestic’, a criticism particularly relevant to our case study, due to the proliferation in the last two decades of concepts such as ‘sacred landscapes’ (Parcero *et al.* 1998), a term that

loosely encompasses those places with a large accumulation of monuments (either megaliths or rock art), of which domestic activity would have been virtually ‘expelled’. In the case of Galician rock art, such segregation is mainly caused by a specific interest to frame the rock art in a period – the Iron Age – in which the separation begins to become clearer but also, to some extent, by the use of a rigid concept of ‘sacred’ and ‘ritual’.

The ritual probably had a polymorphic and variable nature and – as defined by its own conventions – could have materialised in many different ways and in relation to a variety of objects and contexts, ranging from those ceremonies of local, informal and ephemeral character to others highly organised and encoded (Bradley 2000) and may be simultaneously sacred and secular (Insoll 2004). In this sense, if we accept the idea that ritual does not have the sole purpose of communicating or transmitting religious beliefs and that mythological and/or symbolic features are a fundamental aspect of day-to-day activities, it becomes unnecessary to propose such a divide (Tilley 1994; Bradley 2000).

The data derived from the local archaeological record point towards the view that ritual and daily life are intertwined. The documentation of clearly ritual items, such as the ‘megalithic idols’ in the middle of a domestic site (Fábregas *et al.* 2007), the identification of structures for the segregation of the habitation space with close similarities to megalithic constructions (Gianotti & Cancela 2005) or, directly, the discovery of sites where the domestic and funerary-ritual spheres appear to be mixed and even confused (Vázquez Liz 2005; Aboal *et al.* 2005), lead us to think that prior to, and during the time of development of the petroglyphs everyday life and ritual would have been deeply interrelated.

Archaeological work at rock art sites also reinforces that idea: the few excavations have recorded the existence of elements with a possible ritual and domestic nature, as occurs in As Campurras site (Gondomar, Pontevedra): a petroglyph with several cup-marks beside which was documented a small pavement and an engraved *stela* as well as remains of huts and post-holes together with lithics and pottery; the whole area was surrounded by a bank (Villar 2008). The radiocarbon dates from the dwelling and the palaeosol coeval

to the *stela* (and probably to the petroglyph), roughly correspond to the first half of the 4th millennium BC (*ibid.*). Something very similar was reported at Betote (Sarria, Lugo), where a granitic outcrop displaying cup-marks was encircled by a lithic ring. Outside it, lithic and ceramic materials assignable to the Chalcolithic or Early Bronze Age (Cano 2008), as well as fire structures and ditches were found.

Another example comes from Crastoeiro (Vila Real, Portugal): the excavations undertaken around two petroglyphs displaying circular combinations and cup-marks documented stone pavings dating to the Second Iron Age, showing that these places were still relevant at that time; however, the finds of sherds belonging to the Final Neolithic and the Bronze Age could indicate that the panels were first carved during those periods (Dinis & Bettencourt 2009).

Special attention should be paid to the excavation at the foot of the petroglyph in Laxe dos Carballos (Campo Lameiro, Pontevedra). Although the results are considered preliminary (Santos 2008; Santos & Seoane 2010), this fact did not prevent the excavators from using it as a foundation stone for a controversial shift on the timing of almost the entire Galician rock art, which is ascribed by them to the 1st millennium BC. This interpretation is based on the existence of a layer, containing a channel and a post-hole, roughly dated between the 8th and 4th centuries BC, which has been related to the 'time of use' of the petroglyph on the basis of their consideration as the surface during the engraving episodes, since it 'coincides with the lower limit of the distribution of the carvings' (Santos & Seoane 2010, 22). While the aforementioned level might be truly linked with activities held in front of the petroglyph at that later period, its alleged association with the entire engraving process is rather dubious. We believe that an argument based on such an extraordinary stratigraphic relationship must be handled with extreme caution, especially taking into account the complex soil processes documented in this area (Kaal *et al.* 2008) and the vast archaeological implications arising from this interpretation, for which –moreover– further support is hardly found in north-west Iberia.

With the exception of the mentioned sites, the space immediately adjacent to the petroglyphs usually provides very little material,

probably due to the shallow depth of the terrain and the often intense erosion, as observed in the petroglyphs of A Gurita (Porto do Son, A Coruña), Foxa da Vella and Os Mouchos (both in Rianxo, A Coruña) where only several boulders with evidence of percussions – probably used for the engraving of the motifs – could be recovered (Fig. 24.3), or Pedra das Procesións (Gondomar, Pontevedra), one of the largest petroglyphs in Galicia, depicting halberds and daggers, whose excavation only recovered a quartzite core with several flake removals, a piece of granite with evidence of abrasion and two small blocks of ochre, thought to be related to prehistoric painting (Vázquez 2005).

It is rather more common to find evidence of anthropogenic activities in a radius of a few hundred meters from the petroglyphs, where soils may be deeper. One good example was provided by the archaeological excavations carried out during the construction of the Rock Art Interpretation Centre of Campo Lameiro (Pontevedra), the area with the highest density of petroglyphs in north-west Iberia: a few hundred metres from several spectacular rock art sites, the foundations of many prehistoric huts were found (López & Méndez 2010); unfortunately, a precise chronology is not available yet.

In other cases, although the domestic nature of the sites found in the immediate vicinity of the petroglyphs cannot be proven beyond doubt, at least human activity has been demonstrated: in the surroundings of the petroglyph of Os Sagueiros (Rodeiro, Pontevedra), composed of several cup-marks, small quantities of lithics and pottery were recovered on the surface, including Bell-Beaker sherds; also 100 m from the aforementioned Pedra das Procesións, a pottery scatter was reported, featuring Chalcolithic pottery. The systematic fieldwalking around the carved rocks of Poza da Lagoa and Coto da Fenteira (Redondela, Pontevedra) led to the detection of several pottery scatters that could be tied to radiocarbon determinations framing them in the earlier Bronze Age; interestingly, one of the petroglyphs at Poza displayed several halberds and daggers (Fábregas 2009).

Beyond the petroglyphs

The Galician open-air rock art is a complex event, open to analysis from multiple per-

spectives, thus making it one of the most dynamic study subjects from the recent prehistory of north-west Iberia. One of the main issues is precisely its chronology: as stated before, we think that, with present knowledge, there is little doubt that the ‘hard core’ of this phenomenon mainly belongs to the 3rd millennium BC. Nevertheless, this is also a phenomenon with a long history so there are motifs that arguably have roots in the local Neolithic and, likewise, there are indications that, long after their inception, some carved surfaces retained a degree of significance, up to the Late Bronze or the Iron Age.

When approaching the chronology of the petroglyphs we must consider their biography and sometimes several stages or ‘strata of significance’ might be distinguished: an initial one when the carvings were executed, an action perhaps linked to social gatherings or ritual activity; a second phase would contemplate the continuing use of the carved panels, with eventual additions or maintenance activities (as to the latter, we must bear in mind the evidence of repainting on megalithic slabs (see Carrera 2011) and also the signals of groove refreshing on certain surfaces) and deposition of materials or objects; a third stage would take place when the original use or meaning of the art was lost but the local communities, remaining aware of its presence, had still some interaction with the carved panels, adding new motifs or taking protective measures, including desecration or engraving apotropaic images such as crosses.

In this regard, we should note that the reading of rock art images involves knowledge, memories and iconic associations, all culturally mediated processes (Tilley 2008) affecting the ability to interpret the images and their perception too. From our present perspective, characterised by a profound visual nature in which sight is a primary sense for social development, is difficult to understand that a given individual may be unable to perceive certain images. Yet our experience with Galician traditional peasant societies – immersed in a less visual world – indicates that, quite often, they would be unable to perceive part of the motifs recorded in petroglyphs, despite having lived with them for centuries.

Working in areas close to the large concentrations of rock art, we have confirmed that most petroglyphs had gone unnoticed for

rural communities, even those panels with greater monumentality. Interestingly, this ‘inability’ would have fundamentally affected the figurative motifs (zoomorphs and, less so, weapons). In contrast, geometric motifs did not go so unnoticed, being formally close to daily items such as wheels or pans. It is no coincidence, in our view, that precisely these motifs are more affected by destruction and/or Christianisation episodes, as in Pedra Escrita (Oia, Pontevedra). In complex panels, with different kinds of figures, crosses and other modern motifs tend to concentrate exclusively or preferentially around the geometric elements, as seen in Pedra da Boullosa and Chanda Lagoa (Campo Lameiro, Pontevedra) or in Pedra Xestosa (Laxe, A Coruña).

The few studies on the folklore concur with our observations: Aparicio (1995; 1996) remarks the short number of panels associated to legends or myths. This folklore is indifferent to the motif being displayed but, curiously, it is mostly linked to crosses and other modern motifs, suggesting that these stories are relatively modern (*ibid.*), in contrast with megaliths or hill-forts, objects of attention and superstitions by the Galician peasantry ever since. We noted this same pattern when doing field work in the North Barbanza Peninsula, where, despite the monumentality of many panels, the few legends recorded were linked to peculiar formations in the landscape, while the petroglyphs themselves had gone virtually unnoticed. This may be due to the absence among these populations of the iconic associations necessary to ‘read’ the images and even to identify them as man-made products, although this hypothesis must be tested with further fieldwork.

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