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Art in the landscape: a case study of engravings in Brazil

Introduction

By definition, rock art is the term conventionally used for the marks made by people in the past on walls of caves, rock shelters, outcrops and boulders. It has two distinctive features: painting and engraving. In the former, mineral pigment is used to make images, and in the latter an instrument, usually a sharp stone, is used to remove material from the surface.

Since the second half of the twentieth century, the majority of studies concerning rock art in Brazil have been about figurative paintings, and usually regarding the chronological stylistic definitions, overlooking the surroundings where they were made. The engravings have been far less investigated, possibly because the depictions consist mostly of non-figurative or geometric motifs, and it is considered extremely difficult to make any assumption about their meanings. Therefore the main interest is to investigate this latter form of material culture, considering not only the styles, as has been done with the paintings, but introducing a different approach, observing the art's setting in specific landscapes.

Location of the research area

The area selected for this study is located in the buffer zone of and within of the Serra da Capivara National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, situated in the north-eastern region of Brazil, that houses thousands of archaeological sites and which have been the object of uninterrupted research by an interdisciplinary team of researchers for more than three decades. They have obtained remarkable results, such as the dating for the oldest evidence of human presence in the Americas, over 50,000 years BP.

The richness of the rock art found in this region is impressive, especially the colourful paintings, with figures depicted in an extremely narrative style showing what appear to be hunting or scenes from everyday life. These paintings have been extensively studied over the years: the definition of traditions and stylistic sequences associated with other finds have provided a great deal of information about the region's prehistoric hunters and gatherers. This did not occur with the engravings, which have only been briefly and very generally described, despite also presenting a great variety of motifs and techniques, though quantitatively

inferior. The analysis of the engravings existent in this region will verify whether the characteristics observed elsewhere for this phenomenon have widespread occurrence.

Theoretical and methodological considerations

The theoretical framework regarded as more appropriate for application in this study is Phenomenology - or how ancient people themselves experienced and understood their world - especially the Phenomenology of Landscape, as described by Tilley (1994), focusing on the topography, waters, rocks, locales and paths.

In considering rock art as a communication system, it will be observed whether the engraved motifs' settings were deliberately, rather than haphazardly chosen as a way of conveying information to a distinctive audience: the complex or more elaborate motifs would be located at more important locations, such as at viewpoints or close to sources of water, and possibly would be directed to individuals not frequently in contact. The simpler figures would be depicted at apparently less relevant or public sites, addressed to a more familiar group (Bradley 1997).

This research will replicate some of the methodological procedures adopted by the archaeologist Richard Bradley in works on engraved rock art carried out in England, Scotland and Spain, adequately adapted to the conditions of Brazilian sites. In addition to the usual and recommended techniques for recording the engraved evidence, it is planned to make use of many more practical observations, and particular attention will be paid to the visibility of sites and art in the landscape, as well as other non-visual attributes, like the existence of acoustic properties.

This work will have two main procedures: recording and the subsequent analysis of the sites, motifs and landscapes. The first stage is concerned with the fieldwork, in obtaining the most comprehensive information possible about all the engraving sites and their motifs existent in the above-mentioned area, a task that will be complemented by the collection of data regarding the topographical location of selected sites with paintings, in order to make a comparative analysis regarding the type of art and choice of setting.

While on site, the fieldwork should begin with a careful cleaning and draining of the engraved surfaces, necessary to obtain a better view, followed by the filling of the recording form which will cover all the aspects involving the site, surrounding landscape and especially the motifs: their number, style, location, orientation, dimensions, depth of engraving, technique, superimposition, degree of weathering, association or compositional relationship of images. It would also include the shape and the surface of a marked rock, and especially the intervisibility and accessibility of the sites, important from a phenomenological perspective. Regarding this latter aspect, concomitantly with Bradley's methodology (1993), a technique devised by V. Cummings (2004) will be adopted, which consists in a schematic representation of the landscape, in the form of a diagram, to show the regularities, continuities and main emphases in the placing of sites in the landscape.

To measure the extent and direction of visibility, transects will be carried

out at different control samples, and from these places the width of the view will be recorded by compass bearings, at varied distances.

The accuracy in documenting the engravings is of great importance to recognize as perfectly as possible the engraved motifs. Techniques used in the past to record the figures, such as tracing using transparent plastic sheet, and rubbing or frottage, are nowadays considered invasive and potentially harmful, especially the latter, for causing damage and affecting samples taken for dating (Bahn 1998). Hence, the main method of recording is photography, of individual motifs, entire panels, sites and landscapes.

Regarding the collection and analysis of the data, a multidisciplinary approach is important in order to reach a better understanding of the subject. Where the landscape is concerned, data of the Palaeo-environment, for instance, will be incorporated, as well as a quantitative approach, and other rigorous field methods, which will add more objectivity to the investigation. In dealing with the spatial data, since the landscape and intra-site analyses will be focused in this study, the application of the technology of GIS is considered of paramount importance.

To complement the study, it is important to obtain dating for any of the selected sites, in order to establish a general chronology for the engraved art of the regions especially since it has been pointed out by a specialist (Bednarik 1989) that Pleistocene art could occur at two of the engraving sites located in the selected National Park. However, it is difficult to date rock art and this is particularly the case with engravings. Relative dating methods, such as superpositions and stylistic correlations are widely used, but Absolute dating presents many problems, especially concerning rock weathering and the datable deposits. The varnish covering rock surfaces can be dated, but this method is still very controversial. A possible approach would be to use the relative method to establish a large database for sequential changes in rock art and to test and secure this with a very small number of absolute dates. The potentiality presented for direct dating any of the sites will be assessed during the fieldwork.

Conclusion

The much-needed development of an empirical study regarding the engraved motifs in the comprehensively researched (in archaeological terms) south-eastern region of Piauí has become of paramount importance, since it will provide data about one of most durable and enigmatic archaeological remains that added to those obtained from the paintings, will give a better understanding of the rock art in the context of prehistoric societies.

Another important contribution provided by this study is the approach used: the relationship between the engravings and the landscape setting. In the rock art studies conducted in Brazil, there is a tendency to focus heavily on the stylistic evolution and chronology of the representations, sometimes associated with other excavated finds. The context in which the motifs were created is largely ignored. Therefore, the idea of investigating the rock art in relation to its surrounding landscape is a considerably new perspective, a methodological innovation, that can provide many insights to a past way of life.

Appendix

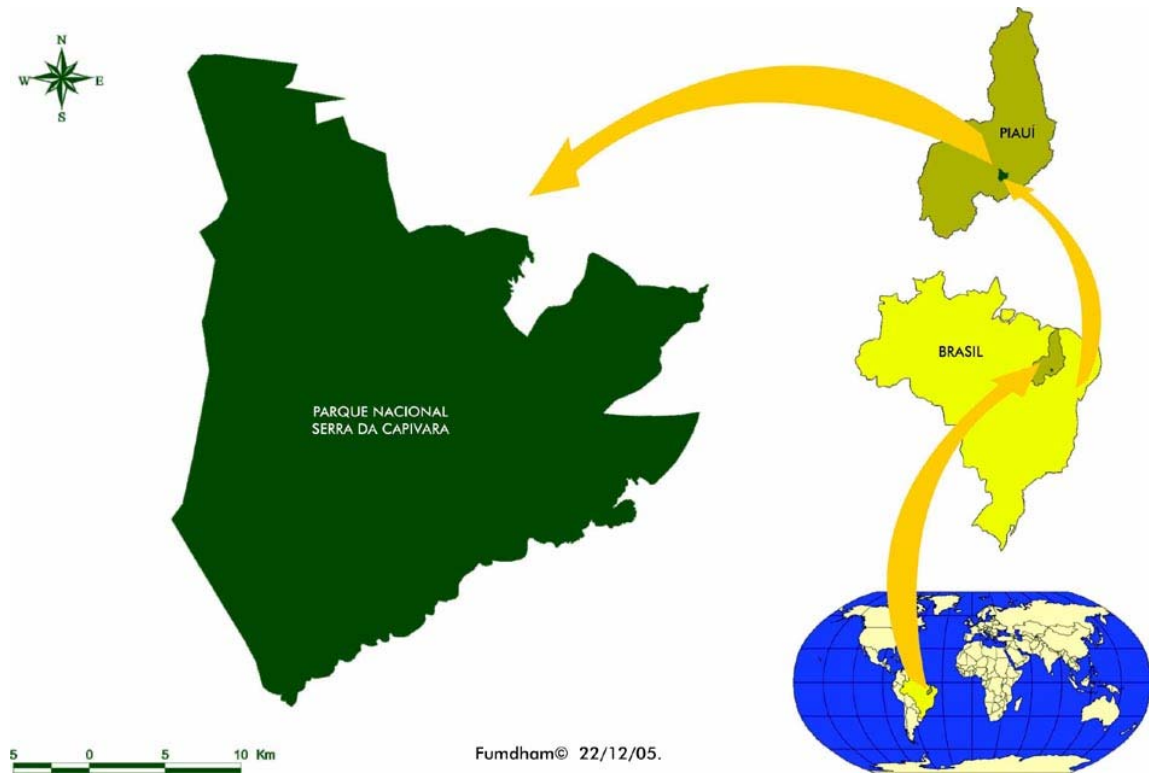


Fig. 1.1 Location of the research area. Reproduced by permission of FUMDHAM.



Fig. 1.2 Serra da Capivara National Park. Photo FUMDHAM

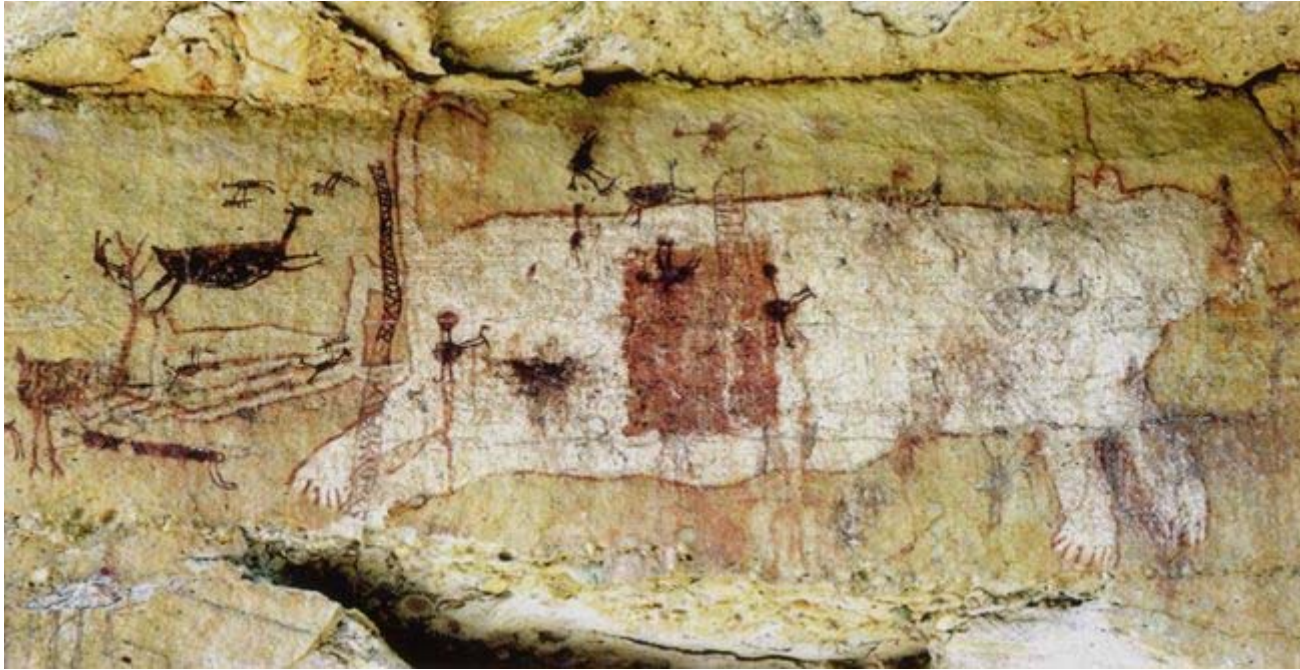


Fig. 1.3 Prehistoric Painting. Photo FUMDHAM



Fig. 1.4 Prehistoric engraving. Photo FUMDHAM

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