



THE SYMBOLISM OF THE PENTAGRAM IN WEST EUROPEAN ROCK ART: A SEMIOTIC APPROACH

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Abstract - The symbolism of the pentagram in West European rock art: a semiotic approach

The pentagram, or five-pointed star, is a symbol which appears in the rock art of some countries in western Europe, some examples dating from the Bronze Age, others from the Iron Age and still others from historical periods. The meaning of this motif is not always easy to understand, mainly when it appears isolated, but its association with other engravings allows an easier approach to its symbolism. In order to decode the message of the pentagram, or at least to get near its function, the author uses a methodology which combines semiotics and the observation of the presence of this symbol not only in rock art but also in archeological artefacts that may help to understand better how this motif works among late prehistoric and protohistoric societies. In fact, the presence of this symbol on artefacts and monuments shows a surprising survival from prehistory until the present day, and this also must be considered in order to establish a coherent interpretation. In this way it is possible to observe the contexts in which the symbol appears, to understand its message and to notice social groups by whom the pentagram is used. As an immediate conclusion it can be argued that this symbol is generally a protective sign, but it has also a religious significance among certain European peoples. Thus, in rock art, it appears often associated with warriors or with weapons, being probably a good-luck charm for protection in war. The pentagram appears with religious associations in the Iron Age, in the depiction of deities in the French eastern Pyrenees and with solar symbols in central Portugal. In the 19th century the pentagram was still used by peasants against the evil eye in several European countries, constituting a long tradition of protection.

Riassunto - Il simbolo del pentagramma nell'arte rupestre occidentale: un approccio semiotico

Il pentagramma, o stella a cinque punte, è un simbolo che appare nell'arte rupestre di certi paesi dell'Europa occidentale. Alcuni esemplari risalgono all'età del Bronzo, altri all'età del Ferro, altri ancora sono pertinenti al periodo storico. Non è sempre facile comprendere il significato di questo simbolo, soprattutto quando si presenta isolato. Per contro, l'associazione ad altre incisioni ci permette di avvicinare più facilmente il suo significato. Per decodificare il messaggio del pentagramma o avvicinare la sua funzione, utilizzo un metodo che combina la semiotica e l'osservazione del segno non solo nell'arte rupestre ma anche sui manufatti archeologici che possono aiutarci a comprendere il significato di questo simbolo presso le società preistoriche tarde e protostoriche. In effetti, per stabilire un'interpretazione coerente, occorre considerare la continuità sorprendente di questo simbolo su diversi artefatti e monumenti, dalla preistoria ai giorni nostri. È inoltre possibile studiare i contesti in cui il simbolo appare, comprendere il suo messaggio e osservare i gruppi sociali che lo hanno utilizzato. In via preliminare, potremmo concludere che questo simbolo è genericamente un segno di protezione, che, per alcuni popoli europei, si carica ugualmente di un valore religioso. Nell'arte rupestre viene spesso associato ai guerrieri e alle armi, considerato un porta fortuna durante la guerra. Per quanto concerne il suo valore religioso, durante l'età del Ferro, il pentagramma affianca le raffigurazioni di divinità nei Pirenei orientali francesi e il simbolo solare nel centro del Portogallo.

Nel XIX secolo, la cultura popolare di molti paesi europei utilizzava il simbolo del pentagramma contro il "malocchio", si tratta quindi di una lunga tradizione che attribuisce al pentagramma una funzione di tutela.

Résumé - Le symbolisme du pentagramme dans l'art rupestre d'Europe occidentale : une approche sémiotique

Le pentagramme, une étoile à 5 branches, est un symbole qui apparaît dans l'art rupestre de certains pays d'Europe occidentale. Certains exemples remontent à l'âge du bronze, d'autres à l'âge du fer, d'autres encore à des périodes historiques.

Il n'est pas toujours facile de comprendre la signification de ce motif, surtout quand il apparaît isolé. Par contre, son association à d'autres gravures nous permet d'approcher plus facilement son symbolisme. Pour pouvoir décoder le message du pentagramme, ou du moins pour se rapprocher de sa « fonction », j'utilise une méthodologie qui combine la sémiotique et l'observation de la présence de ce symbole non seulement dans l'art rupestre mais aussi dans des artefacts archéologiques qui peuvent aider à mieux comprendre comment ce motif « fonctionnait » dans les sociétés des périodes préhistoriques tardives et protohistoriques. En effet, la présence de ce symbole sur différents artefacts et monuments montre un étonnant renouveau, depuis la préhistoire jusqu'à nos jours, qui doit aussi être pris en considération pour établir une interprétation cohérente.

Ainsi, il est possible d'observer les contextes dans lesquels apparaît le symbole, de comprendre son message et d'observer les groupes sociaux qui utilisent le pentagramme. D'emblée, nous pourrions conclure que ce symbole est, de manière

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générale, un signe de protection, mais il a également un caractère religieux pour certains peuples européens. Dans l'art rupestre, il apparaît souvent en association avec des guerriers ou des armes, et était probablement un porte-bonheur pour se protéger durant la guerre. En ce qui concerne son caractère religieux, durant l'âge du fer le pentagramme apparaissait avec des représentations de dieux dans les Pyrénées orientales françaises et avec des symboles solaires dans le centre du Portugal.

Au XIXe siècle, les paysans utilisaient encore le pentagramme contre « le mauvais œil » dans plusieurs pays européens. Il s'agit donc d'une longue tradition de protection.

INTRODUCTION

As happens with many symbols which appear in archeological remains, the origin of the pentagram is difficult to establish. The oldest example that we know can be seen on pottery from Jemdet Nasr (Mesopotamia), dating from the middle of the fourth millennium BC (Mallowan, 1965), but the presence of this motif in rock art is more recent, probably from the middle of the second millennium BC¹.

The name of the pentagram (or five-pointed star), comes from the Greek word *πενταγρα* (pentalpha), which is composed by *πεντα* (five) and *αλφα* (the first letter of the Greek alphabet); the ancient Greeks² considered that this symbol was formed by the union of five *αλφα* letters (Coimbra, 2008a).

The interpretation of symbols in archeology is not an easy task and it often causes difficulties. Some authors argue that such problems are too large to solve and they do not make interpretations, while others present hard meanings which lead to very subjective results (Coimbra and Dubal, 2008). These are two extreme points of view that must be avoided. In fact, according to Ian Hodder (1987), it is possible to make scientific conclusions from symbols in archaeology, if a strategy is applied, and, in order to avoid subjectivity it is necessary to establish a methodology with the aim of obtaining results that can go "beyond more general speculation" (Renfrew, 1994: 5). Furthermore, the "danger" of the studies about symbolism, as M. Eliade (1979) wrote, lies in hasty generalisations.

Thus, in order to start decoding the message of the pentagram in west European rock art, or at least to get near its function, the methodology used by the author combines semiotics and the observation of the presence of this symbol not only carved on rock surfaces but also in archeological artefacts and historical data. These examples, either of earlier or more recent dating, can be seen, for example, on pottery, coins, rings, and manuscripts, military equipment and funerary stelae from different periods (Coimbra, 2008b).

The meaning of the pentagram in rock art is not always easy to understand, particularly when it appears isolated, but its association with other engravings allows an easier approach to its symbolism. Then it is possible to start to observe the contexts in which it appears.

In this paper we present two of those contexts, which are helpful for understanding the meaning of the pentagram: first, the association with weapons or with warriors; second, the association with hieratic motifs.

PENTAGRAMS IN ROCK ART ASSOCIATED WITH WEAPONS OR WITH WARRIORS

This section presents only some examples of pentagrams associated with weapons or with warriors and does not intend to be a detailed list. Our aim is to have some data for the observation of the contexts in which this symbol appears, in order to make an interpretation.

- On the rock of Peña Rayá de la Huetre (Las Hurdes, Cáceres, Spain), there is a pentagram associated with an arrow head and halberds³ of the Carrapatas type, whose origin lies in the Early Bronze Age (Figure 1).
- At Biniguarda Vell (Menorca, Spain), on the wall of an artificial cave made for burials, there are two pentagrams associated with an axe and a schematic human figure, probably a warrior (Mascaró Pasarius, 1953-4, Figure I).
- In Italy, this symbol appears in Valcamonica together with swords, axes and spears at Luine and Dos di Custapeta (Ventura, 1996); at Piancogno it can be seen associated with spears from the

1 In rock art there are pentagrams from the Bronze Age, from the Iron Age and from historical periods, but in this paper we do not intend to discuss the problem of the chronology of the symbol.

2 Pythagoras and his followers called the pentagram *υγιεινα* (hugieia), which means 'perfect health' (physical, mental and spiritual), as a mark of perfection. Curiously, the symbol appears on a Greek coin from Pitane, dated from the fourth century BC, associated with Asclepius, the god of health (Vasconcelos, 1918).

3 These weapons are used till the end of Late Bronze Age (Sevillano San José, 1991).



Iron Age (Priuli, 1991); it is also present on Rock 24 at Foppe di Nadro associated with a bow and arrow.

- On the Roca dei Guerrieri (Piancogno) there are several filiform pentagrams associated with warriors from the Late Iron Age, one being depicted on a shield and the others near big axes (Priuli, 1993: 71).
- At Rock 64 from Naquane (Capodiponte), there is a pentagram associated with a duel between two warriors (Figure 2).
- At Rock 57 from Campanine di Cimbergo, there is a pecked pentagram over the head of a big and muscled warrior,⁴ which holds a shield and a weapon (Rossi and Zanetta, 2009: 218–19).
- In France, at the cave of Églises Supérieures d'Ussat-les-Bains (Ariège) there is a filiform pentagram that comes out from the left foot of a warrior which has a shield (?) in his right hand (Glory, 1947).
- The pentagram associated with warriors continues to be used in medieval rock art, indicating an interesting revival, as at Rockshelter 7 from Tiermes-Sotillo de Caracena (Soria, Spain), where the symbol appears with two horse-riders, one of them with a long spear (Gomez Barrera, 1992: 164).
- The pentagram is also present near a military fort from the 17th century in Montedor (Viana do Castelo, Portugal), associated with five cupmarks in the same manner as good-luck charms used in the country at that time and during the 18th century (Coimbra, 2005: Figure 9). Due to the deepness of the grooves and recent *patine* it was probably made by the soldiers from the fort, for protection, during the wars with Spain (1640–68).

PENTAGRAMS ASSOCIATED WITH WEAPONS, WARRIORS OR WAR SCENES ON OTHER ARCHEOLOGICAL REMAINS

As we mentioned before, it is important to look for the presence of this symbol on other archeological remains with the same chronology as the cases depicted on the rock surfaces (and also from more recent periods), in order to understand them better. For example, in a crater from Cerveteri dated from 650 BC, signed by Aristophonos, there is a representation of a battle between two ships, one of them having two pentagrams in front of it (Figure 3).

The five pointed star was used on military equipment until very late, as for example on a Swabian piece of armour found at Conimbriga (Portugal), dating from the 5th century AD.

Some examples of iconography with Muslim warriors show pentagrams on their shields.

This symbol appears in Portugal on several funerary tombstones from the 12th century belonging to the Knights Templar (Figure 4), being once more, through time, associated with warriors (knights).

In 14th-century English literature the pentagram is considered to be present on Sir Gawain's shield in the romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

DISCUSSION

Thus, one of the contexts of the pentagram is a connection with weapons, warriors and war scenes, as it appears on shields at Piancogno, in medieval Muslim iconography and on the shield of Sir Gawain, meaning that it was a symbol known, through time for its protection in war.

Other protective symbols like the swastika can also often be seen on shields and weapons from different periods.⁵ These examples also help to understand the function of the pentagram when this motif appears on protective devices like shields, becoming in this way a personal protection or a good-luck charm. This same function seems to appear already on a ring dating from the 6th century BC found at Galepsos (Greece), and now in the Archaeological Museum of Kavala. The tradition of rings with pentagrams continues during the 10th and 11th centuries in Croatia (VVAA, 1993) and in the 14th and 15th centuries in Greece, during the Byzantine period.⁶

According to Sevillano San José (1991), the pentagram associated with weapons on the rock Peña Rayá de la Huetre can be interpreted as a concept of protection, as a charm against the evil spirits of war, if these engravings really depict a cult to a war deity. The war scene depicted on the crater from Cerveteri, where two pentagrams are certainly protecting the ship on the right of the image, is extremely interesting. This same idea of protection seems to have been the reason for the depiction of the pentagram near Montedor's fort many centuries after.

At Roca dei Guerrieri (Piancogno), the pentagram appears only associated with warriors, and this seems to be intentional, having possibly the aim of communication with other generations.

4 This warrior is known as the Camunian Hercules.

5 Curiously, one of the warriors depicted on the crater by Aristophonos has a seven-branched swastika on his shield.

6 This last example can be seen in the Museum of Byzantine Culture, in Thessaloniki, Greece.

Let us see now another context where the pentagram is used.

PENTAGRAMS IN ROCK ART ASSOCIATED WITH MOTIFS OF HIERATIC CHARACTER

- At Rock 1 from Figueiredo (Sertã, Portugal), two pentagrams are associated with two Greek crosses⁷ (Figure 5), a symbol which, according to Green (1991), in the European Iron Age was used sometimes to represent the sun. This way these two pentagrams may also have an astronomical and, therefore, a religious character, since in prehistory astronomy and religion were very close (Coimbra, 2008c).
- On the wall of an artificial cave at Biniguarda Vell (Menorca, Spain), two pentagrams appear associated with a swastika (Mascaró Pasarius, 1953–4, Figure 1), a symbol with an astronomical origin and religious symbolism.
- In Peyra Escrita (Formiguera, East Pyrenees, France) a pentagram is associated with the depiction of a mask of a possible divinity (Abélanet, 1990: 113, Figure 73; Coimbra, 2008a, Figure 2). Abélanet argues that the characteristic of the eyes of this mask, constituted of rays, may represent a solar god.⁸
- In the cave of Sainte Eulalie (Ariège, France), the depiction of a goddess is associated with three pentagrams, one of them having anthropomorphic characters (Glory, 1947, Figure 3).
- In Coll de la Font Roja (Caixás, East Pyrenees, France) there is a pentagram associated with a figure composed of ten rays with a central cupmark and a kind of tail that may represent a meteor or a comet (Figure 6). In spite of being rare, there are unambiguous representations of comets and meteors in rock art around the world.⁹ These astronomical events must have caused a deep impression on the minds of the observers among the earliest cultures, being probably considered as manifestations from the gods.
- In the same rock there are three more pentagrams around another ten-rayed motif, which is considered a sun symbol¹⁰ by J. Abélanet (1990). However, this one does not have the “tail” mentioned above.
- On the rock known as Lage dos Cantinhos (Zebreal, Vieira do Minho, Portugal), there are some cases of pentagrams, each one inside a circle which has two Latin crosses (Figure 7). These five-pointed stars are considered to be from the Middle Ages (Fontes, 1999).

Medieval superstition sometimes attributed rock carvings to the presence of witches or even the devil. In Latin countries there are many examples of rocks of the witches, devil’s footprints and witches’ footprints, among others.¹¹ In this way, some medieval pentagrams which appear together with earlier carvings may have a hieratic character, that is, they were executed in order to avoid “the evil” represented by the other motifs. This seems to be the case of the big pentagram from Lamelas (Vila Real, Portugal), whose grooves are much deeper than the other carvings nearby (Figure 8). The same may be true at Lage dos Cantinhos, since the other motifs near the five-pointed star are much earlier.

PENTAGRAMS ASSOCIATED WITH HIERATIC MOTIFS ON OTHER ARCHEOLOGICAL REMAINS AND MONUMENTS

There are several cases of pentagrams with different chronologies associated with hieratic motives.

- One of the oldest can be seen on the bottom of a ritual vessel¹² that was found in the prehistoric settlement of Cuccuru, Arrius (Cabras, Oristano, Sardinia). The symbol appears surrounded by concentric circles, with rayed lines in the interior and schematic human figures (Lilliu, 1999: 372, Figure 357).
- More recent is a seventh-century BC funerary stele from Marano di Castenaso (Bologna, Italy), on which the five-pointed star appears,¹³ and an *askos* from the 6th century BC found at Lavello (Potenza, Reggio de Calabria), with pentagrams associated with a funerary procession (Bandinelli and Giuliano, 1974, Figure 263).¹⁴
- In the fourth century BC this symbol is present on a Greek coin from Pitane, associated with

7 This kind of cross has four arms the same size.

8 On the same rock there is an anthropomorphic figure whose head is a circle with rays, indicating maybe another or the same divinity (Abélanet, 1990, Figure 72).

9 See Coimbra (2010a).

10 There are similar examples of these ‘suns’ with pentagrams in the place known as Pla de Vallelles (Prunet), in the French Pyrenees (Abélanet, 1990).

11 Several examples are available in Coimbra (2010b).

12 This artefact, whose chronology is still uncertain, belongs to a private collection (Lilliu, 1999).

13 Personal information from Alessandro Viesti, Italian archeologist.

14 This *askos* belongs to the collection of the National Museum from Reggio di Calabria, closed for restoration.



Asclepius, the god of health (Vasconcelos, 1918).

- In the early Christian era it can be seen on a funerary inscription of a little girl who died at the age of ten (Figure 9).
- From the same period there is an interesting tombstone with a bird biting grapes and three pentagrams over an ivy leaf (Figure 10).
- On a manuscript from the 12th century belonging to the monastery of Lorvão (Portugal), there is a drawing where a saint is holding the Chi Rho and the Grail in order to exorcise a demon which is keeping five souls captive. Other symbols, two pentagrams and a swastika, are present to reinforce the exorcism.
- In the Middle Ages there are many examples of pentagrams on funerary stele from Portugal, some of them used by the Knights Templar, as mentioned before.
- This symbol can also be seen on several churches from the same period. For example, it appears on the façade of the church of Santa Maria do Olival (Tomar, Portugal), where 22 Master Templars were buried. It is also present in other churches in Portugal and Spain and is associated with a Christian cross on a bronze bell from the church of Santa Cruz (Coimbra, Portugal), with the date 1294.
- In 18th-century German literature, in *Faust*, by Goethe, the pentagram is considered to have the power to avoid evil.
- In the same period the pentagram is used on Portuguese good-luck charms for children and during the 19th century, across almost all of Europe, peasants often used pentagrams near house doors and windows (Figure 11) against the evil eye¹⁵ (Vasconcelos, 1918).

DISCUSSION

This second context, where the pentagram appears associated with hieratic characters, permits the consideration of this motif as a sacred or a religious symbol.

- It appears together with religious symbols like the swastika (at Biniguarda Vell and in the manuscript from Lorvão).
- It is associated with deities (Peyra Escrita, Cave of Sainte Eulalie, coin from Pitane).
- It appears together with astronomical motifs (Coll de la Font Roja, Pla de Vaelles, Rock 1 from Figueiredo).
- It is seen in funerary cults from different chronologies (stele from Marano di Castenaso, *askos* from Lavello, early Christian inscription and tombstone, Knights Templar stela) and in Christian monuments (several churches in Portugal and Spain). It is also present with the Christian cross (Laje dos Cantinhos, bell from Santa Cruz).
- It is used as a charm against evil (literature and popular mentality).
- The early Christian tombstone where three pentagrams are associated with an ivy leaf, a motif that in Roman times used to mean immortality is very interesting.
- On Rock 1 from Figueiredo the pentagrams are depicted in a way that seems to be a kind of writing, because in one row this symbol is at the right of the cross and on the other row it is on the left. This seems to be intentional for transmitting some communication for future generations and the same idea can be observed regarding the pentagrams associated with the swastika, with the deities and with the astronomical motifs.

Symbolism and the intention of communication can also be seen through the several examples of pentagrams depicted in other archeological remains besides rock art.

CONCLUSIONS

Through the examples presented in this paper it can be seen that the pentagram is a motif which has been used in a symbolic way from prehistory until the present times, and this extraordinary survival is important to better understand its meaning.

It was also noticed that sometimes this symbol appears with a religious character. However it is important to keep in mind, as Eliade (1975) argued, that no religious tradition is kept indefinitely without modifications, produced either by new spiritual creations, by acquisition, symbiosis or eli-

¹⁵ There are popular beliefs in several European countries that the pentagram has the power to prevent the devil, vampires or evil spirits from entering houses (Vasconcelos, 1918). Still today, in some villages in Portugal, peasants also continue to use this symbol against the evil eye.

mination. This could explain some uses of the pentagram during historical times.

Besides other meanings which can occur in the pentagram's symbolism¹⁶ due to cultural contacts, a protective role of this motif can be seen through time and space on many different archeological, historical and ethnographical remains. For example, it is used by warriors, soldiers and knights, from different cultures, from the Iron Age until the 12th and 13th centuries, and 14th-century English literature considers it to be depicted on Sir Gawain's shield.

The idea of protection seems also to be present at Roccia del Villaggio (Rock of the Village) in Piancogno, where pentagrams are associated with the depiction of huts (Figure 12). Curiously, during the 19th century, the five-pointed star was still used to protect houses in most of Europe. The protective role of this symbol may have its origins in another meaning, when it appears in a religious or sacred context. In fact the association of the pentagram with deities and sacred symbols and its presence in the funerary cults of different peoples and chronologies give the idea that having such importance it must have been presented to society as a visible sign of a belief. And it is that high status that explains the extraordinary survival of the pentagram until today.

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16 In this paper we focus only on the two presented contexts where the pentagram is analysed.

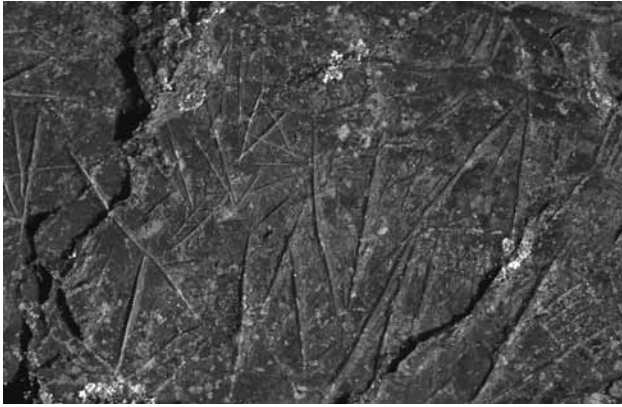


Fig.1 – Peña Rayá de la Huetre (Photo: Carmen Sevillano).



Fig.2 – Pentagram associated with warriors. (After Priuli, 1991).

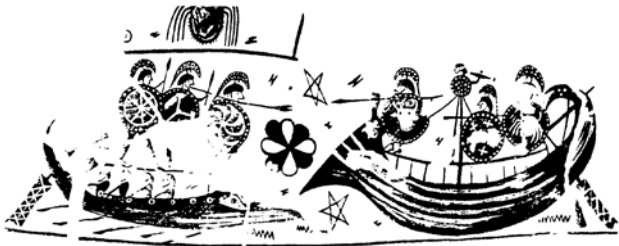


Fig.3 – Pentagrams associated with war scene. (After Bandinelli; Giuliano, 1974).



Fig.4 – Knights' Templar funerary tombstones. (Photo: Fernando Coimbra)



Fig.5 – Rock 1 from Figueiredo. (Photo: Fernando Coimbra)

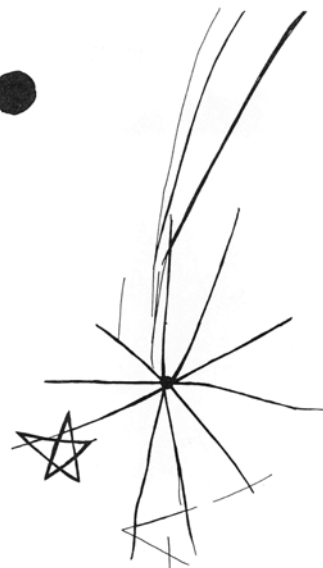


Fig.6 – Pentagram associated with astral motif. (After Abélanet, 1990).

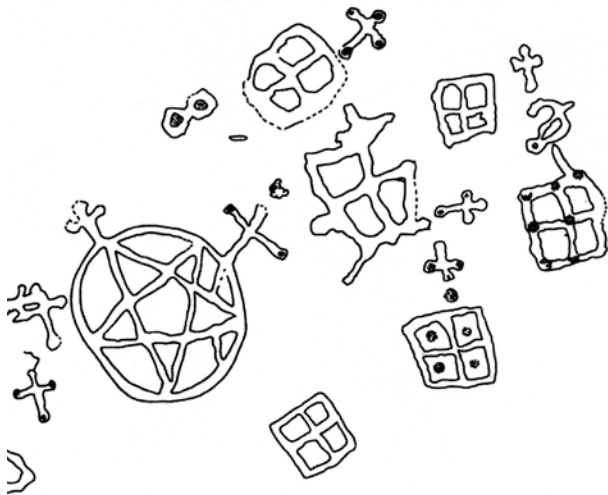


Fig.7 – Lage dos Cantinhos. (After Fontes, 1999).



Fig.8 – Medieval (?) pentagram from Lamelas. (Photo: Fernando Coimbra)

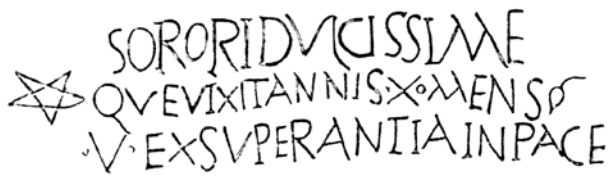


Fig.9 – Christian Funerary inscription with pentagram. (After Leclerq, 1939).

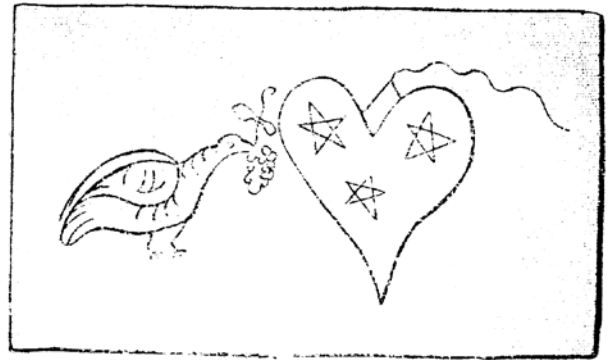


Fig.10 – Christian funerary tombstone. (After Leclerq, 1924).



Fig.11 – Pentagrams near windows. (Photo: Fernando Coimbra)



Fig.12 - Roccia del Villaggio. (After Priuli, 1993)