



## COMMON THEMES AND REGIONAL IDENTITIES IN EUROPEAN LATE PREHISTORIC FILIFORM ROCK ART

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**ABSTRACT** - Late prehistoric filiform rock art appears with common themes in several countries from southern Europe, mainly in regions of Portugal, Spain, France and Italy. Indeed it is possible to find a common typology of motifs in areas like the Côa Valley, the Spanish Extremadura, Vallée des Merveilles and Valcamonica, among others, consisting, for example in net-patterns, zig-zag, pentagrams, scalariforms, asterisks, cruciforms, tree-like motifs, arrow heads, and so on.

This similarity of motives in several regions can result from the possible contact of different peoples during the Bronze Age or Early Iron Age. However, there are also some differences in the typology of late prehistoric filiform rock art, which can be translated into regional identities.

Besides this analysis of the typology, the author focuses on the problematic of the chronology of this kind of rock art and on the possible meaning of some common motifs, such as the pentagram and the asterisk.

**RIASSUNTO** - L'arte rupestre filiforme della tarda Preistoria si presenta con temi comuni in diversi Paesi dell'Europa meridionale, specialmente in varie regioni del Portogallo, della Spagna, dell'Italia e della Francia. È infatti possibile individuare una comune tipologia di motivi in aree come la Valle del Côa, l'Estremadura spagnola, la Valle delle Meraviglie e la Valcamonica, tra le altre, consistenti per esempio in disegni a rete, zig-zag, pentagrammi, scalariformi, "asterischi" cruciformi, motivi ad albero, punte di freccia, e così via.

Tale somiglianza di motivi in varie regioni può essere il risultato di possibili contatti tra diversi popoli nel corso dell'Età del Bronzo e della prima Età del Ferro. Tuttavia, ci sono anche alcune differenze nella tipologia dell'arte rupestre filiforme tardo-preistorica, che possono essere tradotte in identità regionali.

Oltre a tale analisi tipologica, concernente somiglianze e differenze, l'autore si concentra anche sulla problematica della cronologia di questo tipo di arte rupestre e sul possibile significato di alcuni motivi ricorrenti, come ad esempio il pentagramma e l'"asterisco".

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### INTRODUCTION

Filiform rock art is characterized by having very thin grooves, just scratched on the rock surfaces, produced either by stone or metal tools. In western Europe it appears with a similar typology of motifs in several regions from countries like Portugal, Spain, Andorra, France and Italy. Indeed it is possible to find a common typology of motifs in areas like the Côa Valley, the Spanish Extremadura, the Vallée des Merveilles and Valcamonica, among others, consisting, for example, of net patterns, zigzag, pentagrams, scalariforms, 'asterisks', cruciforms, tree-like motifs, arrow heads and so on.

However, these same figures are frequently found produced with larger grooves, after the use of a *polissoir* technique, first incised on the rock surface and then polished with repeated movements. It is crucial to distinguish engravings made with thin grooves (the true filiform carvings) from others done with medium or thick grooves<sup>1</sup> (which often is not discussed in the published bibliography).

The term 'filiform' is inappropriate for classifying this kind of art, which could be classified as 'incised rock art' after our recent proposal (Coimbra, in press), since it is produced by an incision on the rock surface.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the word 'filiform' must be used for engravings done with a very thin groove.

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<sup>1</sup> This differentiation was proposed by A. Domínguez and Amparo Aldecoa (2007).

<sup>2</sup> Incised rock art can be found usually on open-air schist greywacke surfaces, but it is also present on the walls of several caves from central Spain, some of them with an archeological context, which is helpful in terms of chronology.



Some authors like G. Isetti (1957), D. Seglie (1982) and J. Abélanet (1990), among others, call this art linear, but this term does not seem to be appropriate, because, for example, pecked channels between cup-marks also constitute lines, but they do not represent linear art. Other authors like A. Glory (1947) call it schematic art, but this term is also unsuitable, because there is schematic art which is painted and not incised. So the term 'incised rock art' is more selective, precise and global at the same time.

Besides being present in the countries mentioned, this kind of art also appears in Austria, Kosovo, FYR of Macedonia, Greece and Romania (Coimbra, in press).

The chronology of incised rock art is still a problem that has not been solved, because there are filiform engravings from the Paleolithic till the Middle Ages, and some motifs seem to survive through different chronological periods.

The bibliography presented at the end of this article is only a part of the available publications on this kind of art, which we started to study intensively about 15 years ago.<sup>3</sup>

#### THE TYPOLOGY OF INCISED ROCK ART

During late prehistory, this kind of art is mainly schematic, with many geometric figures such as rectangles and squares of different typology, circles, pentagrams, net patterns, zigzags, cruciforms, scalariforms, 'asterisks', parallel and convergent lines, and so on. However, there are also many examples of a naturalistic style, like anthropomorphic figures, horses, deer, dogs, tree-like motifs and arrow heads, besides other examples. It is among the schematic group that common themes occur more often across Europe, appearing the regional identities usually in the naturalistic style, in spite of some exceptions.

#### Common Themes

In countries such as Portugal, Spain, Andorra, France and Italy it is possible to find a group of very similar schematic motifs,<sup>4</sup> constituting common themes in European Late prehistoric incised rock art (Table 1).

One of the figures which are almost omnipresent in this kind of art is the pentagram, appearing with many examples from Portugal (Alentejo, Beira Interior, Alto Douro), Spain (Extremadura, Castilla y Leon), Andorra, France (Eastern Pyrenees, Mont Bego), Italy (Liguria, Lombardy, Puglia), Austria and Romania (Coimbra, in press). Sometimes this symbol can be found with interesting associations and contexts, which can help to start to understand its meaning, as will be explained later.

The net pattern is another of the most depicted themes in incised rock art, carved with filiform and *polissoir* techniques. For example at Rock 1 of Arroyo Tamujoso (Badajoz, Spain) it is possible to count 33 examples, and it is also present in many other rocks of the same region (Domínguez and Aldecoa, 2007). Besides appearing in 40 rocks from the region of Extremadura (Spain), net patterns can also be seen in Portugal at Alentejo, Beira Interior (Fig. 1) and Trás-os-Montes (Coimbra, in press). In Andorra they appear at Tossal de Cava and Encamp (Casamajor, 2008); in France in the Eastern Pyrenees (Abélanet, 1990) and Mont Bego (De Lumley, 1995); in Italy at Issogne (Val d'Aosta) (Colella, 2005), Foppe di Nadro (Marretta, 2007), Piancogno (Priuli, 1993), at the rock shelter of Cavone (Bari) (Astuti et al., 2008) Monte Beigua (Savona), Lunigiana and Sardinia; in Kosovo at Zatriqi (Thaqi, 2007).

Scalariforms can be found with filiform and *polissoir* techniques, sometimes even in the same rock, as at Rock 1 from Figueiredo (Sertã, Portugal).<sup>5</sup> In Spain they are very common in the Province of Badajoz (Domínguez and Aldecoa, 2007), appearing also in Andorra (Canturri, 1974; Mas, 1977) and France (Colella, 2005b). In Italy they can be found at Val Fredda (Trento) (Dalmeri, 2005) at Issogne (Val d'Aosta) (Colella, 2005) and Monte Beigua (Savona).

The 'asterisk' appears in Portugal (Trás-os-Montes and Beira Interior), Spain (Extremadura, Castilla y Leon), Andorra, France (Eastern Pyrenees, Mont Bego) and Italy (Lombardy, Puglia), with a similar geographical distribution of the zigzag (Coimbra, in press).

In spite of being more naturalistic than schematic, tree-like motifs (Fig. 2) and arrow heads are also among the common themes in incised rock art and thus are analysed here. The first of those are present in Portugal (Trás-os-Montes and Beira Interior), Spain (Castilla y Leon) (Sanchidrian, 2005), Andorra (Canturri, 1974), France (Eastern Pyrenees, Mont Bego) (Abélanet, 1990; De Lumley, 1995) Italy (Val d'Aosta and Lombardy) (Colella, 2005) and Greece (Evros)<sup>6</sup>. They are also found in Portugal (Beira Interior), Spain (Extremadura, Castilla y Leon), Andorra, France (Mont Bego), Italy (Lombardy and Puglia) and Romania. Figures like the cruciform and parallel and convergent lines are among the most common examples across Europe (Coimbra, in press).

3 For a wider list of bibliography see Coimbra, in press.

4 This similarity of motifs is analysed together for examples with a thin groove (filiform) and for the cases with a medium/thick groove.

5 They can also be found at Alentejo (Calado et al., 2008) and at Trás-os-Montes.

6 Personal information from Giorgos Iliadis, who is studying the recently discovered rock art at Evros, in northern Greece.

The wide presence of similar motifs across several European countries can result from contacts of different peoples in late prehistory, seeming to be a logical explanation for the existence of these figures in regions that are far from each other.

### *Regional identities*

In incised rock art, besides many common themes there are also differences in the typological characteristics from one country to another, which are regional, since they appear only in restricted areas, with some very interesting and very diverse examples. In this article it is only possible to consider some of the most outstanding.

- The anthropomorphic figures with strange ‘hats’ from Vale da Casa, Douro Valley, Portugal (Baptista, 2000: Fig.8).
- The anthropomorphic figures with shaved heads in the front and long hair in the back,<sup>7</sup> from Rock 3 of Vermelhosa, Douro Valley, Portugal.
- The anthropomorphic figures with a rayed circle instead of a head, and hands and feet looking like tree branches (Abélanet, 1990: Fig. 72).
- The orants (?) from La Tune de La Varaime, Drôme, France (Fig. 3). P. Hameau (1992) considers them to be tree-like motifs associated with pectiniforms. However, these examples seem to show arms in a ‘w’ position (unlike in tree-like motifs), big hands, head, body,<sup>8</sup> legs and sex, being therefore very probably anthropomorphic figures.
- The warriors with shields and axes of La Tène D type, from the Roccia dei Guerrieri, Piancogno, Italy (Priuli, 1993: 53).

### CHRONOLOGY

For many years, incised rock art did not receive much attention from researchers, who only looked at it from historical periods. But this view has been changing slowly, mainly in the Iberian Peninsula, after the discovery of a new important nucleus of this kind of art in the regions of Extremadura and Castilla y León, in Spain, and the Douro and Côa Valleys in Portugal.

In fact, some motifs which appear in open air-sites, like net patterns, zigzag, scalariforms and arrow heads, among others, are also present on the walls of several caves from Castilla y León, where archaeological excavations found contexts from about 3000 BC to 1500 BC, where the engravings were probably from the same period (Sanchidrián, 2005). Furthermore, the same kind of motifs appears also on clay tablets from several Chalcolithic settlements from the Iberian Peninsula, like Vila Nova de São Pedro, in the centre of Portugal (Fig.4).

In the 1950s G. Isetti (1957) considered that the filiform engravings from Mont Bego were superimposed by other pecked motifs, being therefore older than these. Later on, De Lumley (1995) argued the opposite. But, in fact, the two situations occur – incised motifs covered by pecked ones (Fig. 5) and vice versa – as also happens in the Ocreza Valley (Portugal).

Recently, N. Bianchi (2010a) published engravings from Mont Bego, where superimpositions of pecked motifs over incised ones are evident. The same author also presented filiform depictions of spearheads from Bronze Age, showing that there are incised engravings in this area much before historical times (2010b).

In the Iberian Peninsula there are also incised representations of Bronze Age weapons, like for example the halberds from Peña Rayá (Cáceres, Spain) (Sevillano, 1991) and from Rocha Escrita de Ridevides, in the north of Portugal.

Another important discovery regarding the chronology of incised rock art took place at the megalithic complex of Sa Mandra (Sassari, Sardinia), dated from the beginning of the second millennium BC, where a slab with parallel and convergent lines associated with small pecked cup-marks can be seen.<sup>9</sup>

Still before historical times are the incised engravings from the rockshelter of Cavone (Bari, Italy), very close to a site with materials from Early Bronze Age (Astuti et al., 2008).

In Valcamonica there are several filiform engravings covered by datable motifs, which provide at least a protohistoric chronology<sup>10</sup> for that kind of art (Priuli, 1991).

7 Drawing reproduced in the Museum of Côa.

8 The body has tree-like characteristics, but that happens, for example, in the recently discovered Iron Age anthropomorphic engravings from the Côa Valley, which show unambiguous heads, legs and feet.

9 Near this complex, another rock with the same kind of motif was found under the earth. These important discoveries were presented by Paola Basoli in the XXIV Valcamonica Symposium (2011), but unfortunately they were not published (because, probably, the article was not sent in time for the Proceedings).

10 For example, on Rock 61 from Campanina a filiform netpattern is covered by a protohistoric pecked footprint (Rossi; Zanetta, 2009: 231).



## INTERPRETATION

Incised rock art has a huge diversity of motifs, of which some are very difficult to interpret, but there are some cases where an approach to their possible meaning(s) is feasible. But before doing so, is important to establish a methodology of interpretation, in order to avoid subjectivity. In this article we follow the approach based on cognitive processual archeology proposed by Renfrew, to whom, instead of trying to decipher a meaning of a symbol, it is important first 'to examine the ways in which symbols were used' (Renfrew, 1994:6). This procedure allows us to analyse associations and to observe how a symbol functions, especially if the same motif appears on different contemporary archeological remains like rock art, pottery, jewellery and so on.

This methodology will lead to an interpretation that can be considered to have an objective character, instead of subjective (Coimbra, 2008), because it allows us to establish the contexts of the utilization of symbols. In this section we make some considerations about the interpretation of two motifs: the pentagram and the 'asterisk'.

We present here only some conclusions of our research on the pentagram in the last nine years, mainly what was published in the Proceedings of the XXIV Valcamonica Symposium (Coimbra, 2011). In this publication we noted that the pentagram in rock art appears often in two contexts: associated with weapons and warriors; associated with motifs of a hieratic character. The first one has several examples in Spain, France and Italy, like the Rock of Peña Rayá (Cáceres, Spain), where a pentagram is associated with halberds from the Bronze Age (Sevillano, 1991), the cave of Églises Supérieures d'Ussat-les-Bains (Ariège), where the symbol comes out of the left foot of a warrior (Glory, 1947), and several cases in Valcamonica<sup>11</sup>.

Regarding the second context, the pentagram appears, for example at Rock 1 from Figueiredo (Sertã, Portugal), associated with motifs of an astronomical character (Coimbra, 2011: Fig.5); at Biniguarda Vell (Menorca, Spain), associated with a swastika (Mascaró, 1953–4: Fig.1), a symbol with an astronomical origin and religious symbolism; at Peyra Escrita (Formiguera, Eastern Pyrenees, France), associated with the depiction of a mask of a possible divinity (Abélanet, 1990: Fig. 73); in the cave of Sainte Eulalie (Ariège, France), together with the depiction of a goddess (Glory, 1947: Fig. 3).

These cases allow us to consider the pentagram as a symbol for protection in war and as a sacred or a religious symbol, according not only to rock art examples but also iconography available on other archeological remains and, of course, according to the contexts in which the symbol is depicted.

The asterisk seems to be related to astronomical representations. When it appears inside a circle it can be a depiction of the sun, but when it is represented isolated the interpretation is more difficult. However, there are examples when it is easier to establish a meaning, for instance the asterisk from Coll de la Font Roja (Caixàs, Eastern Pyrenees, France, with ten rays starting from a central small cup-mark and a kind of a tail, constituting maybe the representation of a meteor<sup>12</sup> or a comet (Coimbra, 2011: Fig.6).

Another interesting case is a limestone slab<sup>13</sup> from the Maltese temple of Tal-Qadi, dated between 3000 BC and 2500 BC, where several asterisks appear associated with a crescent moon (Fig.6). In this example, the asterisks certainly represent stars in a night sky, which may have been worshiped by prehistoric man, besides the sun and the moon.

## FINAL NOTE

The common themes presented here constitute true examples of rock art as a source of history, allowing us to become aware of contacts between late prehistoric peoples across Europe. It is the more coherent interpretation for the presence of similar motifs in distant regions. Otherwise, by what reason should men produce, at the same time, the same type of symbols in Portugal, Romania, Spain and Greece without mutual contact?

Regarding the regional identities analysed in this article, they seem to reflect cultural aspects of particular communities, constituting also a source for the history of these peoples. For example, the tradition of shaving the front part of the head, probably in order to have a more ferocious aspect and intimidate the enemy, illustrates the mentality of the warriors from the Alto Douro in Portugal. The anthropomorphic figures with a rayed circle instead of head seem to depict a religious belief in a solar deity in the French East Pyrenees during the

11 At Piancogno it can be seen associated with spears from the Iron Age (Priuli, 1991, 1993); on Rock 24 from Foppe di Nadroit is associated with a bow and arrow; on the Rocciadei Guerrieri (Piancogno) there are several filiform pentagrams associated with warriors from the Late Iron Age, one on a shield and the others near axes (Priuli, 1993: 71); at Rock 64 from Naquane, there is a pentagram associated with a duel between two warriors; at Rock 57 from Campanine di Cimbergo, there is a pecked pentagram over the head of a big warrior, who holds a shield and a weapon (Rossi; Zanetta, 2009: 218-219).

12 In spite of being rare, there are unambiguous representations of comets and meteors in rock art in different parts of the world. The great visual impact of these astronomical events must have caused a deep impression on the minds of observers among prehistoric cultures, being probably considered as manifestations of the gods and thus carved on rocks.

13 This slab was discovered in 1927. Since the temple was already much destroyed, the slab was taken to the National Museum of Archaeology, in Valletta, Malta, where it is still kept. Personal information from Frank Ventura and Linda Eneix.

Iron Age. The warriors depicted on the Roccia dei Guerrieri (Piancogno) show details of their kind of weapons, which are rarely found complete in archaeological excavations.

Constant new discoveries of incised rock art in different European countries show that there is still a lot of work to do on the typology, chronology and interpretation of this kind of engravings. In order to achieve these aims it is important to establish more discussions among the researchers who study incised rock art and to publish the results of the various surveys more frequently.

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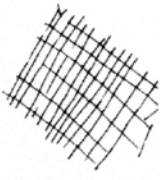
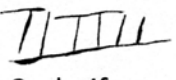

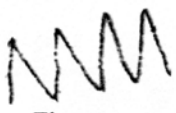


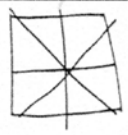

	PO	EX	CL	AN	EP	FA	CO	LI	VA	LO	SA	PU	KO	GR	RO	
 Pentagram	X	X	X	X	X	X		X		X		X				X
 Net-pattern	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X			
 Scalariform	X	X		X			X	X	X	X						
 "Asterisk"	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X						
 Zig-zag	X	X	X	X	X	X			X			X				
 Tree like	X		X	X	X	X			X	X			X	X		
 Arrow head	X	X	X	X		X				X		X				X
 Square	X	X		X	X		X	X								
 "Greek Cross"	X	X		X			X						X			

TABLE 1 - Presence (x) of the most common motives in different areas.

PO- Portugal; EX- Extremadura; CL- Castilla y León; AN- Andorra; EP- Eastern Pyrenees; FA- French Alps; CO- Corsica; LI- Liguria; VA- Val d'Aosta; LO- Lombardy; SA- Sardinia; PU- Puglia; KO- Kosova; GR- Greece; RO- Romania.



Fig. 1 – Net-pattern from Rock 1 of Figueiredo.  
(Photo: F. Coimbra)



Fig. 2 – Tree like motif, Rock 1 from Figueiredo  
(Photo: F. Coimbra)

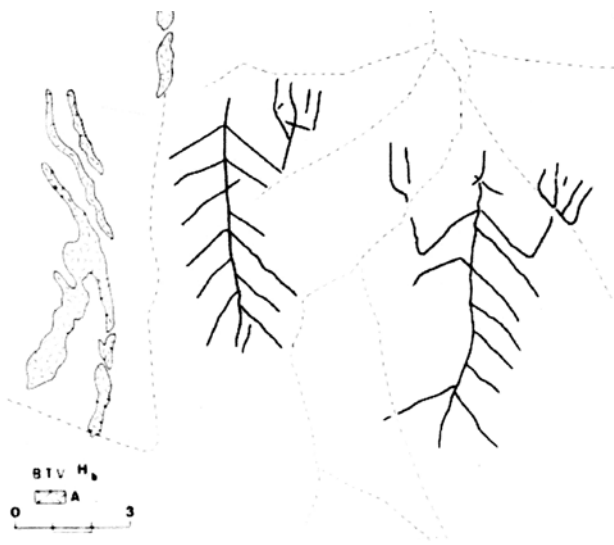


Fig. 3 – Filiform orants from La Tune de La Varaine  
(After Hameau, 1992)

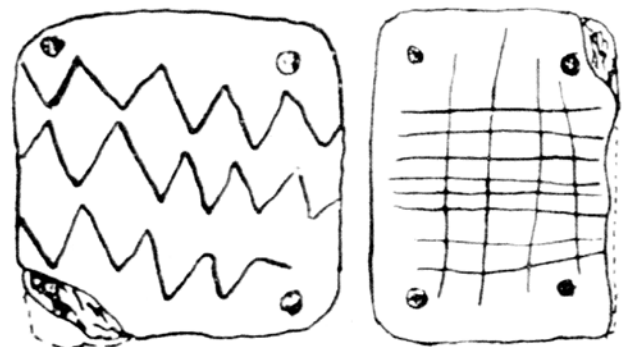


Fig. 4 – Calcolithic clay tablets with incised motives  
(After Paço & Jalhay, 1971)

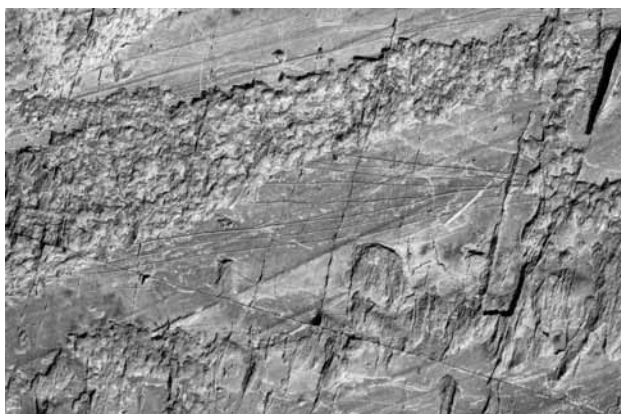


Fig. 5 – Filiform motives overlapped by pecked motives  
(Photo N. Bianchi)



Fig. 6 – Neolithic slab with “asterisks” as stars  
(Photo: D. Cilia)

