

## ROCK ART OF MINAS GERAIS, CENTRAL BRAZIL

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In the early 19th century, the naturalist P.W. Lund wrote some observations concerning rock paintings in the Minas Gerais Province. It was only after 1960 that such a matter was referred to in some non specialized publications. The first systematic studies were made in the 1970s by the French-Brazilian Archaeological Mission and at that time the “Setor de Arqueologia” was founded at the Federal University of Minas Gerais. The first investigation was carried out by A. Laming-Emperaire, who was succeeded, after her death, by the senior author. More than 200 rock art sites have been found during the surveys, some of them with hundreds or thousands of pictograms. Some had their figures carefully recorded and published and several sites have been excavated. Our research concentrated mainly in the central and the northeastern parts of the state. This paper provides a synthesis of the rock art of both regions.

**I. The central part: Highlands**

The Highlands are covered by savannas and gallery forest on the “plateaux” and by herbaceous vegetation on the upper parts (Serra Geral). In the Lagoa Santa region, the sites are located near the lakes, scattered in the limestone landscape, and consist of open shelters; some caves have been painted, but only on sunlit walls. In “Serra do Cipó” (Serra Geral), shelters are formed from quartzite, generally near little rivers. The prehistory of the region begins around 15/18000 BP (there are some dated between 20000 and 30000 BP, but their human origin is doubtful). The rock art appears in places used as habitation and/or cemetery sites in the early Holocene. Some paintings also occasionally occur in campsites (Iapa Vermelha IV) or even in completely isolated places (Altamira). Buried paintings show that some pictograms (like those of the Planalto Tradition) belong to the hunter-gatherers of the middle Holocene; others are more recent, and have been made by horticulturists.

Several stylistic units can be seen; some are successive, others have still not been ordered into chronological sequence. Most of the paintings belong to the Planalto Tradition, but various units reveal paintings or engravings that will probably be classified in other traditions.

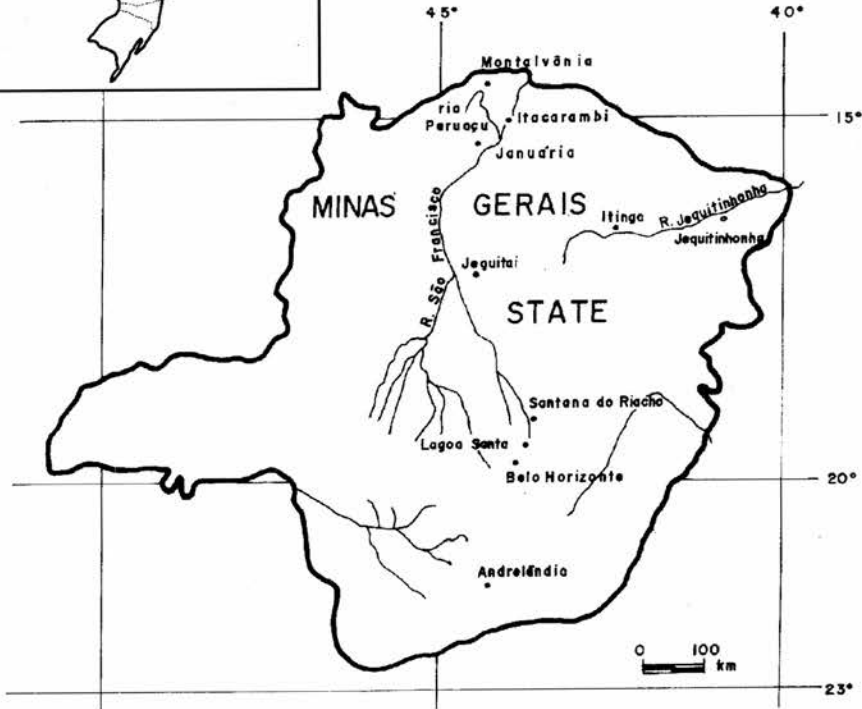
***Planalto Tradition***

All the figures are painted in monochrome, even if later retouching may suggest bichromy. Red is the most common colour; yellow may be present, but black or white are rare. Nevertheless, we could ascertain that weathering can change the colour of the pigments, and what we see now isn't always representative of the original state. Animal representations are the most distinct in the panels, even if they are not the most numerous. Deer are always the most frequent (associated with fish, in some regions). Other quadrupeds appear in certain periods: they are represented by jaguars, ant-eaters, monkeys, armadillos, turtles, tapirs and birds (less numerous). There are no evident compositions, showing scenes, but prevalent associations sometimes suggest a link, for example between deer and fish, that can be seen in several sites.

Quadrupeds usually compose triadic groups, with a male, a female and a young offspring; fish appear in pairs. Though isolated human representations are absent, small and very schematic linear anthropomorphic figures can appear around a big quadruped; those animals have a stick in the back, reinforcing the idea of a hunting scene. Sometimes, a jaguar seems to be running after a sequence of deer (Santana do Riacho,



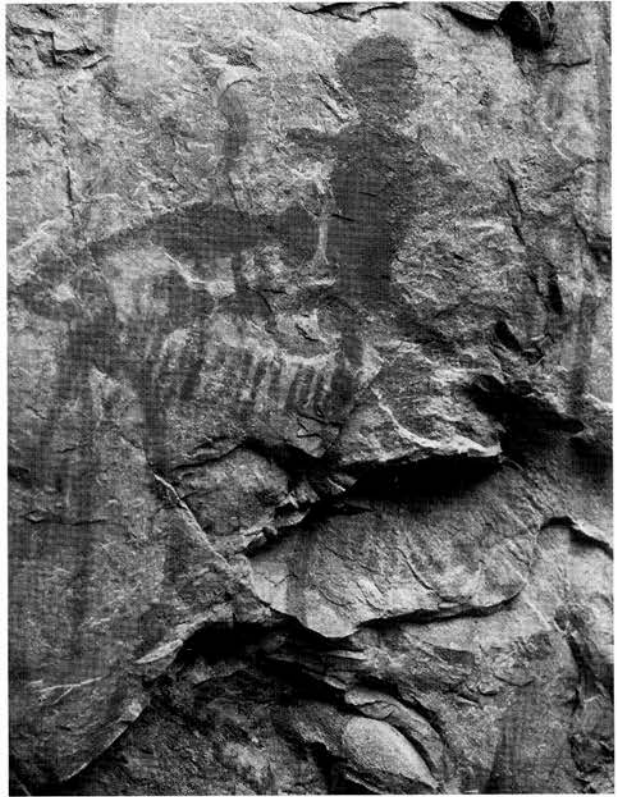
Fig. 54. Map of Minas Gerais.



Cocais). In some sites, the number of geometrical figures is equal to, or greater than, zoomorphic ones. They are mainly sticks (Altamira) or dots (Cocais). Some circular figures appear quite regularly distributed in the sites. It is possible to distinguish some differences from one region to another, and from one period to another, though it is very difficult to say that the same evolutions occur in all the sites.

In Lagoa Santa more recent zoomorphs generally have a filled in body; in ancient periods the body was drawn and only filled with parallel lines. In some places, superimpositions clearly show an evolution. In Sumidouro, for instance, the first paintings of Planalto Tradition are small quadrupeds in red or yellow; later deer and white birds appear. Unfortunately, so far, we have not been able to work out a general sequence for the entire central part of Minas Gerais.

The rock art of the "Serra Geral" has not yet been studied as an isolated unit, but some surveys carried out by the junior author have shown a stylistic unity that is a variation of the Planalto Tradition, characteristic of that chain of mountains. Almost all animals have their bodies filled with parallel lines. Fish are always represented in a vertical position with heads up. Anthropomorphs are not represented in all the sites, but when portrayed they are depicted in small, schematic ways, never isolated. There is a balance between the quantity of the geometric and figurative drawings, but there is a visual dominance of deer. All the paintings are monochromatic with a higher percentage of red. It is interesting to note that there is a very rigid representation particularly for



*Fig. 55. Minas Gerais. Grande Abrigo de Santana do Riacho. Large figures of monkeys. Planalto tradition.*

figurative paintings. They are exactly the same near Belo Horizonte and Grão Mogol (400 km further north).

#### *Sites (and periods) with a dominance of sticks and dots*

Some sites or panels exclusively show sticklines (some with all components of the same colour, others with sticks alternatively red, yellow, or even black or white) painted with the fingers. Sometimes these sort of graphisms are in the same sites with “Planalto” paintings. In some cases, the lines of sticks belong to just one period and appear before Planalto pictograms (Lapa de Sumidouro) or in an intermediate period between two phases of the Planalto Tradition (Sucupira, panel I). The degree of patination generally confirms the chronological difference. In the meantime, this “stick stylistic unit” was named by us “Sumidouro Tradition”. In fact, we are not sure that it is really a Tradition or an Horizon, because it occurs only in some sites.

In the Jequitinhonha river area, some caves have been very recently discovered (Itinga, Jequitinhonha) in the hills, and are almost exclusively decorated with dots and superimposed sticks. At first glance, there is an apparent disorder with thousands of red dots spread over its surface. On closer examination one can observe some geometrical compositions such as parallel lines, filled squares, rectangles and circles. These sites may be linked with the last of the Maxacali Indians, whose territory included that region.

In the Cocais site, Planalto painting and dot clusters are frequently close together; unfortunately, it was not possible to verify the sequence of superimpositions, because of the exfoliation of the pigments.

#### *“Ballet” type pictograms*

A third stylistic unit is later in regional prehistory, probably belonging to the agricultural groups, since it always superimposes the Planalto Tradition (Cocais) or

appears on surfaces where previous Planalto paintings had been cleaned off. The most common figures are linear anthropomorphs, showing their sex. The males are always icthyphallic, frequently represented with a bird's head and an open bill. These anthropomorphs are always disposed in a linear sequence (Cocais, Vargem da Lapa). In Lapa do Ballet, a line of women is drawn in the upper part of the panel (some of them, with big bellies, showing pregnancy), and another line of figures personifying men in the lower part, performing a kind of procession parallel to the women in the top section. They seem to be moving towards the picture of a birth painted on a separate limestone block. In some sites, there are also quadrupeds and birds. Only one colour was used in each site, white (Cocais), black (Ballet) or red (Rei do Mato, Vargem da Lapa, Laranjeiras), but there are also petroglyphs pecked in the limestone (Caieras, Samambaia). In the Lapa Rei do Mato, paintings of this type show very dynamic gestures and recall the "Nordeste Tradition" well known in Northeastern Brazil.

### ***Pit and grooves descriptive unit***

Clusters of small pecked pits and grooves are found in fallen blocks of some shelters, sometimes on oblique parts of the boulders, sometimes on vertical and flat surfaces. In such places, they are not anvil pits or polishing places. They are probably recent in the prehistorical sequence. They have been observed in several other Brazilian states in the early 20th century, though none of the modern archaeologists have studied them yet. There are also small thin grooves that cross, forming grids or converging lines (Escrivaninha, Lapa Vermelha, Cerca Grande).

### ***Historical paintings***

In the Jequitinhonha region, C. M. Guimarães' surveys show that some shelters have been used for refuge by escaped black slaves (the Quilombos). They left on the ceiling of one shelter a war scene between Africans and slave hunters, probably located on the African Coast. Particular attention is drawn to a big sailing ship. In Lapa da Garatuja, religious pictures have also been found. A beautiful and quite complete sightseeing view of the city of Mariana has been recorded in Morro Vermelho Cave, more than 200 km north of the depicted 18th century gold rush time town.

## **II. The Northeastern part and the valley of Rio São Francisco**

The valley of the São Francisco river, some 3000 km long, is a natural route between the central and northeastern part of Brazil. Its alluvial bed lies between limestone components; the forest with caducous trees and cactaceae (Caatinga) stands on the rocky slopes, but the upper parts of the landscape, frequently flat and covered by sandstones, are savanna territory (cerrado). The Lapas (shelters), most common on the slopes, have been painted or engraved, probably from the beginning of the Holocene (buried pigments of anthropic origin are dated from 10,000 BP in Lapa do Boquete), up to the historical period (17th and 18th centuries). The highest concentration of paintings known to date (more than 200 sites) is near Januária, in the Peruaçu Valley. Frequent and clear superimpositions enable us to establish the succession of many stylistic units. Engraved sites are concentrated near Montalvânia (Cochá Valley) 100 km north of the Peruaçu Valley. Rock art sites are numerous in other regions where systematic surveys, so far, have not been made.

### ***The Peruaçu Valley***

*São Francisco Tradition*: the most ancient stylistic unit is the São Francisco Tradition, that exists in almost all of the sites. In the Peruaçu Valley, the pictograms are painted, and are placed mainly on the central part of the walls, on specially chosen smooth surfaces. Sometimes paintings have been made on very high panels, whose access is difficult and dangerous (18 m high, on the ceiling above a stalagmite, in Lapa dos Bichos). Almost all the figures are geometric, frequently bichromatic. There are also some clusters of instruments (mainly spears) and isolated animals such as snakes,

lizards, fish and birds. These naturalistic figures are all monochromatic. Red and yellow are the most common colours; black and white seem to appear more recently, and black is frequently used to retouch previous bichromatic figures (Lapa do Malhador). In the valley of Peruaçu spatial and/or chronological variations of the Sao Francisco Tradition were noticeable. “Januária” style is represented by linear figures, rarely bichromatic. “Caboclo” style is characterized by rectangular, yellow, filled in surfaces, with geometric red (or red and black) decorative elements superimposed. “Rezar” style



*Fig. 56. Minas Gerais. Rezar cave in Peruaçu valley. An enormous site with rock paintings.*



*Fig. 57. Minas Gerais. Lapa do Boquete. Yellow-reddish geometric figures of the Januária style. The snake is an important element and appears in many rock-shelters of the Peruaçu Valley.*



shows great oval bichromatic figures that recall Egyptian “cartouches”. The Januaria style may appear isolated or with one of the other two variations in the sites.

“*Peruaçu/Urubu*” stylistic unit is the name we gave to naturalistic paintings, generally superimposed upon São Francisco figures. They are mostly monochromatic birds and quadrupeds. In some sites or panels, we noticed a thematic “specialization” (a maize field in Lapa dos Desenhos, ant-eaters in Lapa do Indio, spiders in Lapa do Boquete, etc.).

“*Desenhos*” Tradition”: small pecked petroglyphs show deer, jaguars, birds and some schematic anthropomorphs. These figures are clearly more recent than the Peruaçu/Urubu ones. In various sites, “Desenhos” artists spread a layer of red pigment upon the former pictograms (São Francisco and Peruaçu/Urubu paintings) in order to cover them up and prepare a new surface on which their engravings could be clearly seen. “Desenhos” petroglyphs have been made on fallen blocks, or at the bottom of the calcareous walls.

The “*Nordeste*” Tradition has been previously defined in Piauí State, some 1,000 km north of Minas Gerais. In Peruaçu Valley, one variety of this Tradition can be found in many sites, and appears to be “recent” in the relative chronology. Probably, “nordest” people came along the Peruaçu river some hundred years ago. Their paintings are characterized by small (5/15 cm) monochromatic figures, generally in black (sometimes with charcoal), mainly clusters of dynamic anthropomorphs suggesting ritual scenes around a tree, and sexual intercourse. Stick alignments are also common, and, in several sites, small animals (emus or quadrupeds) seem to be running after each other in an horizontal sequence. Almost all “Nordeste” figures are placed on marginal or lower parts of the sites, sometimes on rough surfaces neglected by the previous traditions (Lapa dos Cavalos). Some very small shelters disdained by all the other “artists” (Lapa do Limoeiro) were made profitable by a little exigency. The “Nordeste” graphisms appear only rarely on smooth, large places, superimposing São Francisco or Urubu pictures (Janelao, Lourenco).

Some unclassified engravings also exist in Peruaçu Valley, as pits and grooves, frequently found where the “Desenhos” Tradition is present.



Fig. 58. Detail of the photo on the right side.



*Fig. 59. Minas Gerais, Lapa dos Desenhos. This panel displays a vertical sequence of paintings that reaches 7 meters high. Note the black figures over the Januária style.*

### ***Out of the Peruaçu Valley***

Only a few examples will be given from outside the Peruaçu Valley.

*Montalvânia region*, 100 km northeast of Peruaçu shows local “facies” of the São Francisco Tradition in its 60 known shelters. There are very few types of linear figures.

In the hills, most of the figures are pecked petroglyphs made at the bottom of limestone walls and on the floors of the shelters. Weapons are very numerous, sometimes composing over 20% of the engravings, even in large sites (Poseidon). Biomorphic types like turtles (or men?) and feet are also common, but the geometric forms predominate. These engravings constitute the "Montalvania facies". Other stylistic units appear in a few places; "Peruaçu/Urubu" probably exists in Serra Preta sites, with long-legged black quadrupeds. The petroglyphs of the "Desenhos" Tradition superimpose São Francisco paintings in Lapa do Gigante. The "Nordeste Tradition" was not recognized in Montalvania during the 1976 and 1977 surveys, but it is probably present, as suggested by anthropomorphic alignments or scenes found in the Mamoneira Shelter, and Lapa do Dragão.

*In the Itacarambi region*, on the hills that stand near São Francisco Valley, between Peruaçu and Montalvânia, the pictograms were influenced by both regions including the "Nordeste Tradition".

*In the higher valley of Rio São Francisco*, near Jequitaiá, nice linear bichromatic figures are typical of a regional style.

*In Andrelândia*, the mountains that separate Minas Gerais from the ocean contain many monochromatic lizards which are associated with the linear geometrical figures in a local variety of the São Francisco Tradition.

## Conclusion

In spite of the first attempts at synthesis, there is not yet a general framework for Brazilian rock art. For this reason, it is still difficult to put the cultural implications of the sites that we are studying into a wider context. However, the works in other Brazilian states enable us to make some comparisons.

1) Planalto Tradition probably belongs to a great animalistic "supertradition" (with Urubu units?) that may have spread to the southern state of Paraná and Bahia in the North.

2) The São Francisco tradition probably used the route of the river to spread its influence from the upper part (in Minas Gerais with a rich and polychromic style) to its mouth, near the ocean, (Sergipe state, in a monochromic style). This geometrical Tradition however is not limited to the great rivers: recent works of Vialou and Querejazu Lewis show that this Tradition could also have reached Mato Grosso, and even the Bolivian Lowlands.

3) The Nordeste Tradition, represented mainly by the anthropomorphic style ("Serra Talhada") was first recognized in Piauí State. There is no doubt that it recently reached Minas Gerais (Peruaçu Valley); perhaps the Ballet stylistic unit is its more southern manifestation (Lagoa Santa region).

Based on the geographical variability of rock art, we expect to be able to recognize the territory of the different tribes, and maybe we shall be able to link the diffusion of more recent rock art Traditions with the Indian migrations of the proto-historic period.

The excavations and pigment analysis that we have done in several decorated shelters provided us with data to associate rock art with archaeological layers; the best example is the Santana do Riacho Shelter.

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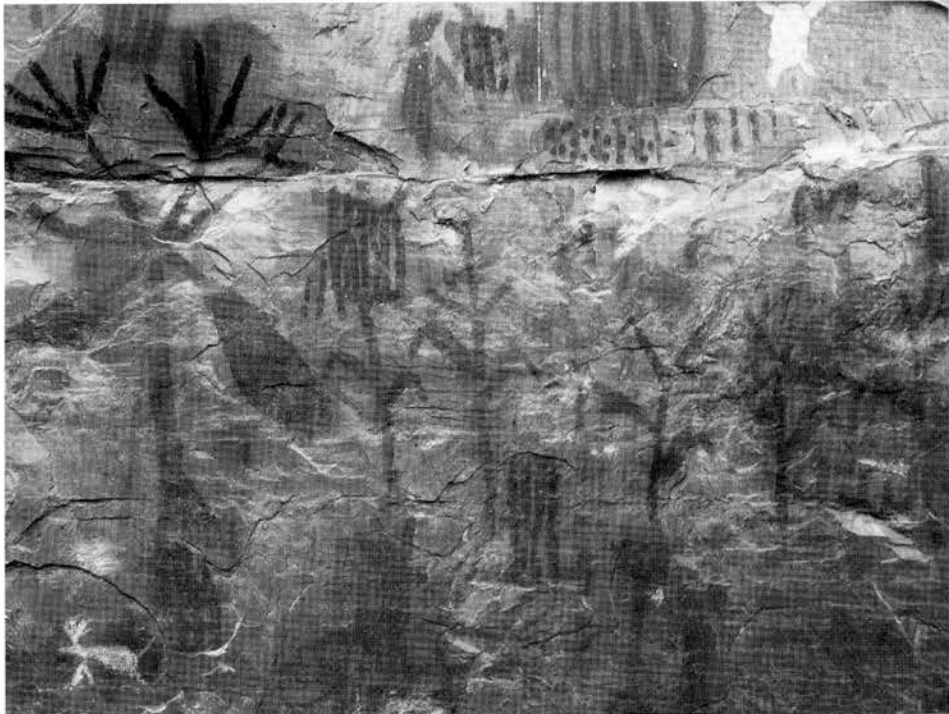
Fig. 60. Minas Gerais, *Lapa do Caboclo*. Panel with a series of superimposed paintings of the São Francisco tradition. Two stylized human figures wear masks and bracelets.



Fig. 61. Minas Gerais, *Lapa do Caboclo*. Large bichromatic figures of Caboclo style, São Francisco tradition.



*Fig. 62. Minas Gerais, Lapa Escrivida. Pecked petroglyphs made on the floors of limestone shelters at Monalvânia region. Feet biomorphic types and weapons are typical of this local facies of the São Francisco.*



*Fig. 63. Minas Gerais, Lapa dos Desenhos. A black painted maize field and “buriti” palm tree of the late “Peruaçu-Urubu” style is superimposed on São Francisco bichromal paintings. Some late pecked petroglyphs of Desenhos tradition can be seen down left.*

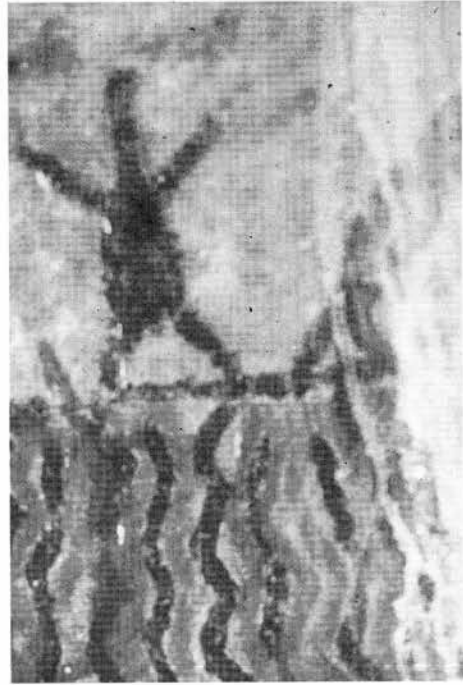


Fig. 64. Minas Gerais, Lapa da Mamoneira. Painted figures of the Montalvânia region.

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*Riassunto:*

Centinaia di siti rupestri sono stati scoperti nel corso degli ultimi anni nello Stato di Minas Gerais (Brasile). Sugli altipiani dominano le figure naturalistiche della Tradizione "Planalto", con diversi stili successivi o regionali. Nella vallata del rio São Francisco, si trovano soprattutto dei grafismi geometrici della tradizione São Francisco", ma si nota anche la presenza di diverse altre unità stilistiche (particolarmente quelle dette "Nordeste"). Lo studio combinato delle sovrapposizioni, dei colori e delle scrostature, unitamente agli scavi hanno permesso di stabilire sequenze cronologiche locali. Parallelamente, sono in corso studi topografici e di associazioni tematiche e cromatiche.

*Summary:*

*In the last years hundreds of petroglyphic sites have been discovered in Minas Gerais in Brazil. In the highlands the "Planalto" tradition dominates. It includes several chronological and regional styles of naturalistic figures. In the valley of the São Francisco river geometric pictograms are most common but other different styles are present (especially the "Nordeste"). The combined study of superpositions, colours and depositions with excavations has enabled us to construct local chronologies. Simultaneously we continue to study the topography and the thematic and chromatic associations.*

*Résumé:*

On a découvert des centaines de sites rupestres au cours des dernières années dans l'état de Minas Gerais (Brésil). Sur les plateaux, dominant les figures naturalistes de la Tradition "Planalto", avec plusieurs styles successifs ou régionaux. Dans la vallée du rio São Francisco, on trouve surtout les graphismes géométriques de la Tradition "São Francisco", mais on note aussi la présence de diverses autres unités stylistiques (particulièrement celle dite "Nordeste"). L'étude combinée des superpositions, des patines et des écaillures ainsi que les fouilles ont permis d'établir des séquences chronologiques locales. Parallèlement, les études topographiques et d'association thématique et chromatique sont en cours.