



HAND FIGURES IN THE ROCK-ART OF PORTUGAL: AN INTRODUCTION

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SUMMARY

Painted and engraved hand figures are fairly scarce in the panorama of the rock-art in Portugal. No hand stencils are known, but several rock-shelters have notable painted finger marks or so-called 'digits'. Out of the engraved figures, Mão do Homem near Vila Real is an outstanding site. Overall, most of the hand imagery seems to have been made during the Iron Age or later.

RIASSUNTO

Nel panorama dell'arte rupestre del Portogallo il numero di figure di mani dipinte o incise è piuttosto ridotto. Non si conoscono esempi di mano realizzate in negativo ma, curiosamente, sono presenti in diversi ripari sottoroccia vari esempi dei cosiddetti "diti". Tra gli esempi incisi spicca la roccia della "Mão do Homem", un sito nei pressi di Vila Real con diverse figure mani. Cronologicamente la maggior parte delle figure di mano sembra essere stata realizzata nell'età del Ferro o nei periodi successivi.

As a symbol, hand figures from the Palaeolithic period are well known all over world. Archaeologists and other specialists have studied them for decades. Even so, new finds and studies bring these ancient signs to light almost every year. They are known in all kinds of environments, from deserts to high mountains, located in caves, rock-shelters and the open-air. From the technological point of view, they are painted or engraved; in some rare cases, the two techniques were used for the same figure.

There are large and renown assemblages of painted hands that include caves such as Gargas, (LEROI-GOURHAN 1967; GROENEN 1988), more than two hundred sites in the Pyrenees and about seventy sites in Maltravieso in the Spanish Extremadura (RIPOLL *et al.* 1999; CANALS *et al.* 2010), as well as numerous recorded occurrences in many rock-shelters all over Australia (VERBRUGGE 1970). The most common are so-called "negative stencils", made by putting a person's hand on a rock surface and spraying or spitting pigment around it, so leaving an empty area matching the shape of the hand. These types of image are especially common in places such as Cuevas de las Manos, Argentina (GARDIN *et al.* 1970; ROLANDI, ONETTO 1999) and the Franco-Cantabrigian Palaeolithic area (CLOTTES 2008). Instances of this kind of imagery were recently dated to a quite early age at El Castillo cave, in the Cantabrigian region of Spain, where a negative hand-stencil is from 37,300 BP (PIKE *et al.* 2012). Another hand-stencil, at Leang Timpuseng Cave in the Maros-Pangkept karst zone of the Indonesian island of Sulawesi, was claimed to be "the oldest such image

in the world" (AUBERT *et al.* 2014; CYRANOSKY 2014), ascribed to a time 39,900 years ago.

Contrary to what happens with figures such as footprints, there are generally more painted hand figures than engraved ones worldwide. Of these, many are negative stencils, but Portugal is an exception, despite the numerous Palaeolithic-style figures known there. Until now, no Palaeolithic negative hand-stencils have been identified. Hand representations are extremely rare in the country (ABREU 2012). In this paper, the authors examine all types of figures of hands, both whole and partial ones such as the so-called 'digits' or finger marks from the post-Palaeolithic period.

PAINTED HANDS AND 'DIGITS'

The number of whole painted hands is less than 'digits' or finger marks. Several authors refer to painted hand figures in the rock-shelter of Louções, Serra de Arronches, Portalegre (BREUIL 1917, 1935; CASTRO, FERREIRA 1960-1961; PESTANA 1983, 1984, 1987). They are both right and left handed. Pestana notes people placed their palms or the back of their hands on the surface, at times seemingly lacking fingers, suggesting actual or evinced mutilation (PESTANA 1983, p. 2, 1984, p. 2) (Fig. 1). The exact date these hand-figures were supposedly made is uncertain, but the archaeological context is Neolithic or Chalcolithic, the period of the so-called "schematic art" of Iberia.

Fingertips were also used to paint, like the sun-like patterns and other figures in the rock-shelter of Pala Pinta, Carlão, Alijó, in the district of Vila Real (SOUSA 1988, ABREU 2012). Besides using fingertips, entire fingers and

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hands were pressed against rock surfaces, resulting in larger patches of paint like those at Pego da Rainha, Mação in the district of Santarém (ABREU 2008) (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a40miNAdt9w>). Similar finger marks can be seen in rock-shelters of the district of Portalegre in the Serra de Arronches, such as at Louções, Gaviões and Ninho do Bufo, Marvão (OLIVEIRA, OLIVEIRA 2012; MARTINS *et al.* 2004). Mário Varela Gomes recorded more than two hundred of these signs in the *Abrigo* Pinho Monteiro (1985). Groups of red digits can be also be found in the central part of the country in the *Abrigo* dos Coelhoos, Zibreira, Torres Novas, in the district of Santarém (OLIVEIRA 2010; MARTINS *et al.* 2004) (Fig. 2).

Recently, Mário Reis from the *Fundação Côa* identified, but has not yet published, two painted hands in the the Côa Valley area at Lapas Cabreiras, Vale de Afonsinho, Figueira de Castelo Rodrigo. The images are hand prints, not negative stencils, and the fingers of both point to the ground, which is rather unusual. One is completely painted in red and fairly naturalistic; the other is rather schematic with elongated fingers and almost no palm. An anthropomorph with “big hands” appears on the same panel. All this suggests some kind of cult of the hand or where the representation could be a type of “*ex-voto*”.

ENGRAVED HANDS

All the other figures known in Portuguese territory were engraved. There are past references to several hand figures that could not be corroborated, such as the “hands” of Varziela, Fergueiras (SARMENTO 1999, p. 325) and the Fraga dos Mouros, Castelo Freixel, in the council of Vila Flor (ALVES 1934, p. 626).

A distinct pecked hand, including wrist and forearm, was engraved among several other figures at Colado, Fraga da Pena, Piodão, Arganil. Figures attributed to the Iron Age much like this are found on rock 73 in the park of Luine, Valcamonica, in the Alps.

Much less naturalistic engravings of hands and forearms are found at “*Mão do Homem*” (literally, Hand of Man), near Vila Real (see Fig. 3). This site encompasses the largest number of this type of figure. Six hands were fully pecked; five include the forearm and at least two, the upper arm. In 1734, Jeronimo Contador de Argote made an unquestionable reference to the rock and its engravings in one of the earliest documents on rock-art known in Europe (ARGOTE 1734, pp. 492-493). At *Mão do Homem*, fingers are exaggerated and the palm is unnaturally small. Several depictions have small cup-marks adorning the ends of the fingertips and similarly with elbows and wrists (ABREU, PEREIRA 2008).

An extreme of simplification is the case of the “hand” of Castro de Mouril. Pinho, Boticas also in the district of Vila Real (MIRANDA *et al.* 1986), where a series of deeply carved cup-marks fit nearly anyones fingers, palm and wrist.

Two well-defined but rough stencil-like contour engravings, apparently of left hands and wrists, on rock 2 of Unhais-o-Velho, Vale do Gato, in the council of Pampilhosa in the centre of Portugal were published

by Carlos Batata and Filomena Gaspar (2009, p. 81).

A similar engraving was found near the megalithic site of Casal Leitão, parish of Reguengo Grande, council of Lourinhã (MATEUS, MATEUS 2008, p. 41). In this case, a finger is incomplete and there is a delineation of a thumb with thumbnail.

WHY THEY WERE MADE

As in the case of the footprints, hand images have been interpreted in many different ways. They could be a sign of presence (e.g., I was here, or there) and could be associated with rites of passage.

In other parts of the world, hand-prints are often small, probably made by thirteen-to-fourteen year-old teenagers, appearing in large clusters at sites such as at Cueva de las Manos in Argentina (GARDIN *et al.* 1970) and Gua Masri II, Borneo, in Indonesia (FAGE, CHAZINE 2010).

Studies of hand depictions in paleolithic caves by the late Kevin Sharpe and Leslie Van Gelder (2004, 2006a, b; GELDER, SHARPE 2009), mainly on Rouffinac’s so-called finger flutings (also known as spaghetti or macaroni), and later studies by Galeta and colleagues (GALETA *et al.* 2014), reveal these are equally of male and female hands, as well as those of children and young adults. The position of the depictions of children’s hands indicate adults participated by lifting and holding the youngsters up.

Analyses used for painted hand prints and negative stencils cannot be applied to engravings as these do not reflect past realities. Engraved hand shapes are common in the southern states of the United States of America: La Cienega and Three Rivers in New Mexico, Mesa Verde in Colorado, Great Kiva and Canyon Pintado in Arizona, and Horseshoe Canyon in Utah.

The symbolism of the hand in rock-art was recently studied by one of the authors as part of her master degree thesis (ABREU G 2008). Communication, remembrance, protection and even display of power are among the different meanings and reasons depictions of hands could have been made.

Sometimes hands have exaggerated proportions on otherwise naturally shaped anthropomorphs, which are often simply called “big-hands”. These figures display open hands with clearly defined fingers. They are known around the world and seem to have a particular importance in a scene or on a panel, perhaps expressions of extraordinary powers, not only earthly, but supernatural too. Exaggerated hands may show social importance – a chief, the bravest warrior – or perhaps the initiated, or a mystic – a priest or shaman (SANSONI 1976; ABREU, PEREIRA 2008).

Figures of “big-hands” are very rare in Portugal: two anthropomorphs of Penedo do Matrimónio, Vilar de Perdizes, Montalegre, district of Vila Real (BETTERNCOURT *et al.* 2004), others on the rocks of Ferraduras (RIBEIRO 2008) and Abelheira (SANTOS, BAPTISTA 2011) at Vide, council of Seia, district of Coimbra, and the now-destroyed anthropomorph of Pedras Negras, Magoito, Sintra, district of Lisbon (SOUSA 1990). There is also a painted “big-hands” image in the previously mentioned rock-shelter of Lapas Cabreiras, in the Côa Valley.

Hand figures connected with certain events or memories are also common, like the engraved boulder of Le Sante at Capo di Ponte, which is well-documented by Federico Troletti (2010, 2014).

Except for the ambivalent painted shapes in the rock-shelters of Arronches, Portalegre, all hand figures referred to in this text seem to be quite recent, most probably made during the late Iron Age or later. The geographic distribution (map in Fig. 4) shows a prevalence of this kind of imagery north of the Tejo or Tagus

river. Even so, there are a higher number of clusterings of digit figures in the Tagus Valley at sites such as the Abrigo Pinho Monteiro, which has dozens of them (GOMES 1985; OLIVEIRA, GOMES 2014).

In the panorama of the rock-art of Portugal, it is clear that hand figures are presently fairly scarce, probably due to two factors: there are more engravings than paintings and most of this imagery was made during a chronological period (Iron Age) when this type of figure is less common worldwide.

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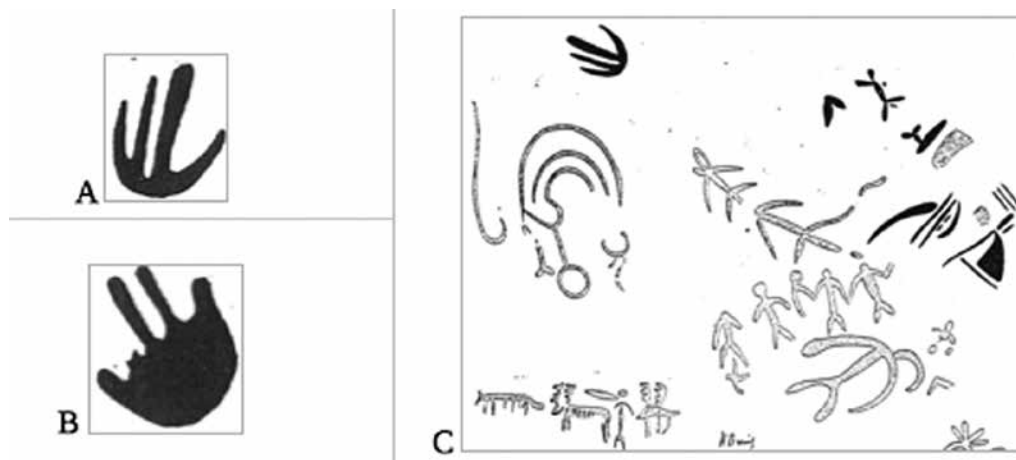


Fig. 1 - Serra de Arronches, Valdejunto - Lapa dos Louções. A - A partial hand; B - An apparently mutilated hand (Castro, Ferreira 1960-61, fig. Estampa II); C - One of the scenes with the presence of a hand (Breuil 1917, p. 22, fig. 3).

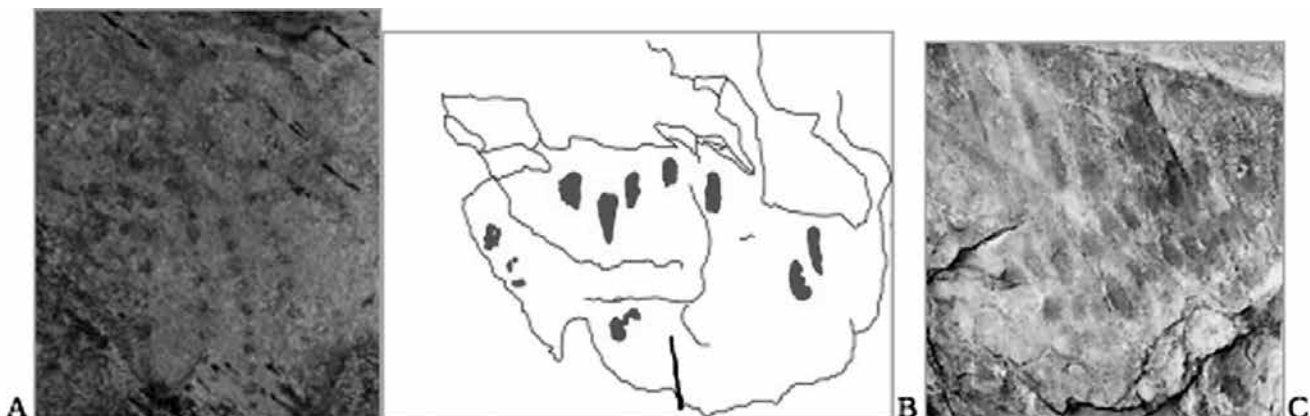


Fig. 2 A - Vila Rea, Alijó, Carlão, Pala Pinta, sun-like figure made with a fingertip (Photo Mila Simões de Abreu); B - Santarém, Pego da Rainha - red painted digits (Tracing by D. Cardoso); C - Portalegre, Marvão, Nido do Bufo, group of painted digits (Photo Ribeiro).



Fig. 3 - Vila Real, Adoufe, Mão do Homem. A - Detail of the largest engraved hand on the rock. B - The different engraved hands present in the surface (Abreu, Pereira 2008).

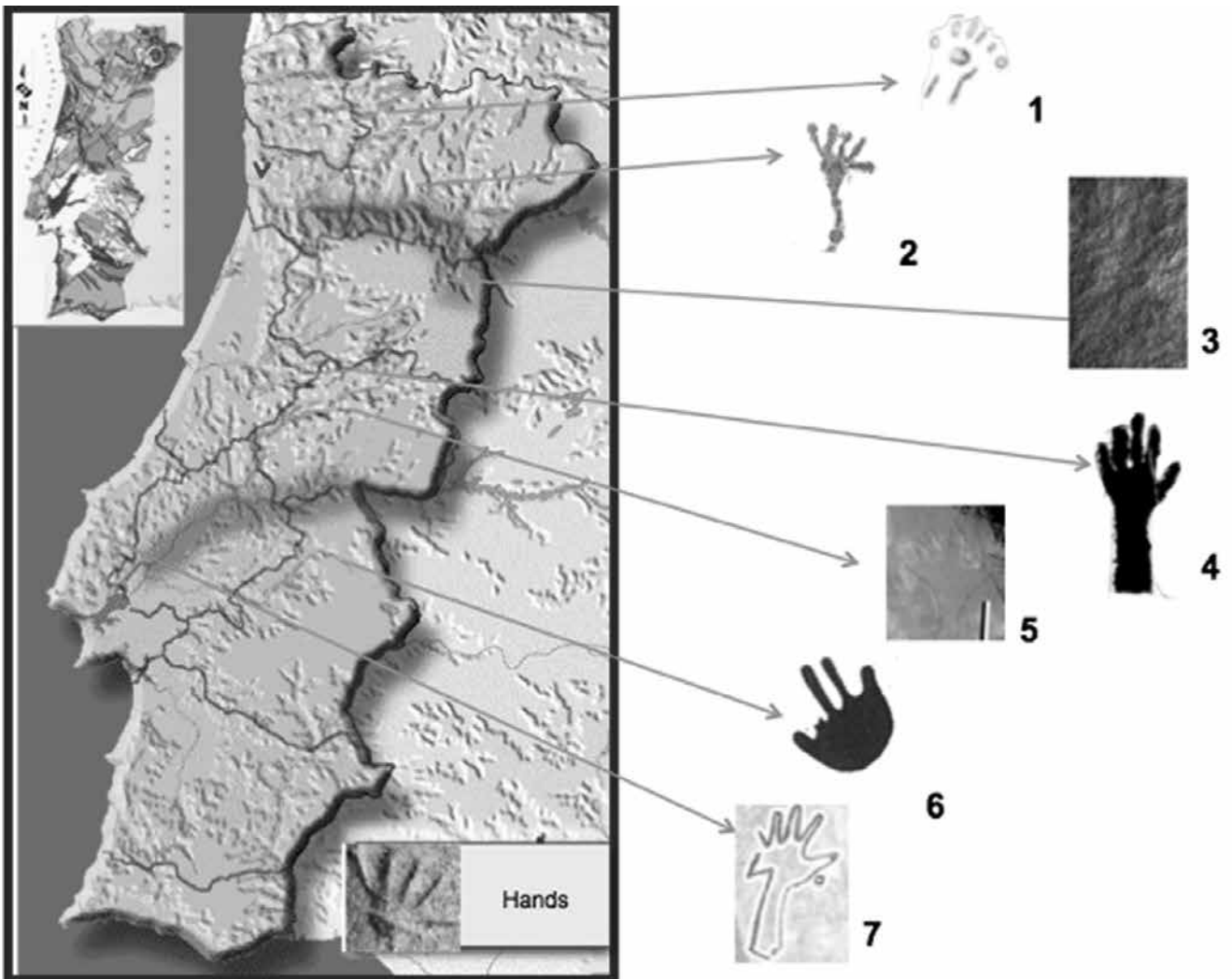


Fig. 4 - Distribution map of hand figures: 1 - Vila Real, Boticas, Castro de Mouril; 2 - Vila Real, Adoufe, Mão do Homem; 3 - Guarda, Figueira de Castelo Rodrigo, Vale de Afonsinho, Lapas Cabreiras; 4 - Coimbra, Arganil, Piodão, Colado, Fraga da Pena; 5 - Coimbra, Pampilhosa, Unhais-o-Velhor, Vale do Gato; 6 - Portalegre, Arronches, Esperança; 7 - Lisboa, Lourinhã, Casal Leitão.

