



ROCK ART IN THE PERUAÇU RIVER VALLEY, BRAZIL

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ABSTRACT - The research on the rock art of the Rio Peruaçu valley (northern Minas Gerais State, Brazil) has revealed the existence of a rich variety of themes and styles on the several decorated rock walls in a monumental karst landscape. First, we established a detailed framework of the thematic groups and ways of representation, which show eight consecutive chronological and stylistic units. Then, we analyzed how each graphic group chose the sites to be engraved depending on the relationship with preceding levels of decoration (natural sites, location in rock shelters, wall types). Our work initially resulted in a statistic framework of consecutive styles and themes, but it later evolved into a more dynamic view, showing at the same time the continuity of certain behaviours and the changes in the prehistoric players' attitudes, recorded in a graphic universe which includes tens of thousands of images.

RIASSUNTO - Le ricerche sull'arte rupestre della valle del Rio Peruaçu (nel nord dello stato di Minas Gerais) hanno registrato l'esistenza di una grande diversità di temi e di stili sulle numerose pareti decorate in un paesaggio carsico monumentale. Si è dapprima stabilito un quadro dettagliato degli insiemi tematici e dei modi di rappresentazione, che mostrano la successione di otto unità crono-stilistiche. Successivamente, abbiamo studiato come ciascun nuovo insieme di grafie abbia scelto gli ambienti da disegnare in rapporto ai livelli di decorazioni precedenti (siti naturali, ubicazione all'interno dei rifugi, tipi di parete). Il nostro lavoro, che in un primo momento presentava un quadro statistico di successione tematica e stilistica, si è poi evoluto verso uno scenario dinamico, che mostra allo stesso tempo la continuità di alcuni comportamenti e i cambiamenti di atteggiamento degli attori preistorici, registrati in un universo grafico che comprende decine di migliaia di figure.

The Peruaçu river valley is a stunning karst landscape in the north of Minas Gerais state, in central Brazil. The modest dimensions of the river contrast with the monumental limestone cliffs of its canyons and the natural caves of huge dimensions. Forming a grand set by themselves, the rock shelters are found there in various dimensions, morphologies and landscape insertions. Many of them present an abundance of rock art, with remarkable thematic and stylistic diversity. There are several sites with many hundreds of pictograms. At least five of them have more than 1,500 figures: Lapa dos Desenhos, de Rezar, do Caboclo, do Malhador and do Piolho do Urubu. Thus, the context is marked by abundance and diversity, attributes that exerted a direct influence on the approaches to the studies of the region¹.

The studies of the valley rock art have emphasized the characterization of the styles and the establishment of a relative chronology among them. The wide range of rock art may be organized into sets, each one with thematic, stylistic and chronological coherence, and acquiring the generic denomination of stylistic unities. Six broad stylistic unities were defined, one of which (the most frequent on the rock walls) was subdivided into four smaller unities. Hence, the outlined framework of the stylistic unities and its succession comprises eight chronostylistic sets: Agreste tradition; four sets of São Francisco tradition; Piolho do Urubu stylistic unity; Desenhos stylistic unity; and Nordeste tradition. In addition to these, there are other sets of less clear-cut features awaiting further studies.

As chronostylistic analyses were being conducted, they revealed that there may be common characteristic behaviours in each of those sets in regard to first, the choice of sites to be painted, since there was a differentiated occupation of the sites by each of the sets; second, the behaviour of the artists of each set towards the pre-existing rock art on the walls, because forms of interaction among the figures (of different stylistic unities) were observed: intense superimposition, systematic juxtaposition, retouching of old paintings; complete

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¹ From these set, the first and the last, Agreste and Nordeste tradition, were defined in other regions, by the presence of figures compatible with them in the Peruaçu River valley. All other sets were defined in the valley and its neighboring region named Montalvânia.



repainting of old figures; re-appropriation by repainting old figures; overlapping avoidance. The two aspects above are directly intertwined since the choice about where to paint will be, at least, partially influenced by the presence or absence of pre-existing figures. The first aspect received further detailed treatment, because for each set not only the sites to be painted were carefully chosen, but also the interior spaces of these sites. Once again, the pre-existing rock art could be an intervening element.

The systematic analysis of these aspects led to some interesting results. At first, the studies suggested a succession of styles, potentially static, which rested upon classifications based on the similarities and distinctions among the sets of rock art. But then they revealed a dynamic set of analytical unities which related to each other, highlighting the behaviour of the rock art makers. The analyses made it possible to define the unities from graphic attributes and chronological relations, as well as from behaviours that integrated themselves as relevant and characteristic elements of the paintings in the use of their themes and colours.

The results herein synthesized highlight some specific aspects of the behaviours associated with the rock art, mainly of the São Francisco tradition and the Montalvânia complex.

The São Francisco tradition is the valley's second-oldest chronostylistic unity; it shows predominance of geometric figures, frequently bichromatic, and mostly in red and yellow, also using these colors combined, two by two, with white and black. However, monochromatic figures (in most instances, red) are also very numerous. The figures are generally large, exceeding 40 cm in length, and the occurrence of figures reaching up to 80 cm in length is not uncommon. The zoomorphic figures are less frequent and restricted to few fishes and lizards. The anthropomorph icons are usually schematic, limited to trunk and extended linear limbs, even though bichromatic (the interior yellow and the outline red). The paintings of this large unit are always eye-catching, due to the combination of the chosen walls and their colours, their sizes and their large number. The São Francisco tradition was divided into four chronological subsets, herein defined as SF1, SF2, SF3 and SF4, that share many elements, but keep specificities, with a chronological coherence.

The paintings of the two first sets of the tradition, SF1 and SF2, are highly selective in their site choice. They only occupy sites of large dimensions, with wide and regular sedimentary floors, and they were painted on walls with high visibility, wide and vertical, and with plentiful lighting, in cases like Lapas dos Desenhos, do Caboclo, de Rezar, dos Bichos, do Malhador, do Piolho do Urubu and do Boquete. The figures of these sets gather themselves in various concentrations on the wide vertical walls (and are only present in these panels), rising to several meters above the floor. Sometimes they are more than 10 m high, even where there is no way to climb the rockwalls. The composition of many paintings demanded installing supporting structures to give the painters access to these places. Pioneering most of the sites, the SF1 set generally had no pre-existing figures to guide itself. Only in a few sites, it occupied a panel on which rare huge anthropomorphic figures had been previously painted.

The SF1 figures are usually monochromatic (black, red or white) and mainly geometric figures, generally simpler than those that would be composed later. Many were drawn with parallel or perpendicularly crossed lines. Although there were wide and empty panels, the figures were concentrated in circumscribed graphic spaces.

The SF2 set occupied only the sites already used by the SF1 paintings, maintaining a direct dialogue with them: its figures are distributed in the same graphic spaces defined by the SF1 paintings; superimpositions and overlapping between SF2 figures are avoided, whereas juxtapositions of figures similar to the pre-painted ones are quite numerous. There are also cases of retouching and partial re-painting of figures, as well as the addition of graphic elements (longitudinal and radial strokes) to the pre-existing SF1 figures. SF2 figures are red, yellow or red and yellow. In of the bichromatic figures, the use of each colour is always the same: yellow for the inner parts and red for the outlines. The most complex ones, combining diagonal and perpendicular intersecting lines, are always composed of regular strokes whose width is similar to the human finger. Weapons and other possible tools first appear on the rock walls, repeatedly concentrating themselves on high panels, levelled, exclusively above the highest rock floors. The thematic repertoire thus includes the cartouches that abound, mainly on the highest and most eye-catching panels. The SF2 painted many hundreds of figures on the sites, providing them with exuberant panels.

The Montalvânia complex is the third set to occupy the rock shelters (before the SF3 and SF4). It is defined by the preponderance of anthropomorphic rock art and weapons/tools, along with other linear figures. The anthropomorphic figures, all schematic, appear in an expressive variety of forms and degrees of detail, although in this diversity, there are clear-cut trends like curvilinear limbs (strongly suggesting movement to our eyes), and reduced sizes (less than 30cm).

The set gives priority to discrete spaces like ceilings, niches between calcareous concretions, compartmentalized walls, although some time sit also occupies high and very visible ceilings. Its site choice determines a strong change in the valley landscape. The painters re-occupied all sites painted by the earlier São Francisco

sets, in which they distributed their figures on discrete and compartmentalized panels and also placed them in the midst of the SF1 and SF2 figures, without competing with them in terms of visibility. By their insertion in these panels, the Montalvânia figures frequently keep up a relationship with the preceding figures, composing with them homo-thematic combinations fitting the min to the previously formed structure of the graphic space. Superimpositions are generally carefully avoided (it was only possible to establish the chronology with the previous set due to their scarce occurrence in marginal places and the striking differences in the patina). The above-mentioned change in the valley landscape happened to the extent that the painters of the Montalvânia figures were the first to paint a large number of sites. By means of their intervention, the total number of painted sites in the Peruaçu valley increased from less than 10 to more than 40, including morphologies and site insertions in the landscape very different from the ones chosen by earlier painters. The Montalvânia paintings occur in small caves with low flat ceilings, on the upper third of steep slopes, as well as in small shelters with easy access to the river terraces, showing special interest in medium-sized shelters with stepped ceilings and the horizontal panels with weapons and cartouches of the SF2.

The Montalvânia complex painters incorporate or share some themes from the SF1 and SF2 sets, especially weapons and the very schematic small anthropomorphic themes that are often displayed on the same panels where the former painters had previously painted.

The figures of SF3 and SF4 occupied the panels after the Montalvânia ones. The site choice suffered a significant change in relation to the SF1 and SF2 sets. The large sites, originally painted by the São Francisco sets, were all re-occupied, with an increase in the number of figures, maintaining not only the general themes of the tradition, but also the thematic emphasis that the SF2 had defined in each site (cartouches in Lapa dos Desenhos, geometric complexes in Lapa do Caboclo, networks and diamond-shaped figures in Lapa de Rezar, geometric complexes and cartouches in Abrigo do Malhador).

The SF3 is less prolific and its figures are marked by less regular strokes than SF2 figures. It shows big blurred figures composed of wide bands of little regularity, instead of the finer strokes of SF2. There is a clear thematic reduction, with the disappearance of zoomorphic figures and the anthropomorphic ones getting scarce. From the São Francisco tradition, SF3 is the one which stresses more superimpositions with oldest figures, usually compromising their visibility. Its rock art incorporates black colour, which frequently combines with the red colour. Although its figures are eye-catching, they are not the most numerous in the large sites, where older paintings abound. Its site choice, as already mentioned, comprises all the large sites with SF1 and SF2 figures, expanding in relation to them by occupying sites used by Montalvânia. However, regarding the latest ones, there seems to be a choice for only those with wide vertical panels. SF3 does not re-occupy the ceilings and sites with the discrete panels that Montalvânia painters had used.

The arrival of the SF4 figures promotes an explosion of colours. Its rock art composes all possible combinations of the red, yellow, black and white colours, used two by two, also making many trichromatic figures. The set significantly increases the number of paintings in the large sites, with wide vertical panels, always maintaining the graphic space compartmentalization defined by the preceding rock art and the thematic emphasis of each of these sites. The superimpositions' avoidance of compromising the visibility of the previous figures is remarkable, with several figures that model themselves throughout the empty spaces of the much painted panels.

SF4 is the set that shows the most recurrent and diverse signs of interaction with the previous rock art, from the other São Francisco sets and Montalvânia complex. Its site choice incorporates almost all shelters previously painted, except only for exclusive Montalvânia complex sites, of small size and at very high points of the slopes, or near the terraces of the rivers, without wide panels. Its painters, meanwhile avoid obliterating superimpositions, re-painted several themes, retouched others and incorporated the pre-existing figures in new compositions. Even more, at times they painted the outline of the oldest monochromatic figures with a second colour, which gives these figures an even more similar aspect to the figures painted entirely by them. Their thematic repertoire resumes all the themes of SF1 and SF2 moments (besides the geometrical, fishes and lizards), as well as the large geometrical complexes, whose degree of sophistication is incremented, generating a wide range of figures. The Montalvânia repertoire also seems to be integrated by SF4 painters, with a clear interest in the anthropomorphic, composed with a diversity of forms and unprecedented sizes among the São Francisco tradition.

The subsequent sets, Piolho de Urubu and Desenhos stylistic unities, and Nordeste tradition, also feature sites and rock wall choices, as well as very characteristic and distinct from each other behaviours towards the pre-existing rock art. The big rupture in themes, style and behaviour involving the SF4 set and the Piolho de Urubu paintings that follow them is remarkable. Piolho do Urubu is a set dominated by zoomorphic and phyto-morphic figures, always large and monochromatic, that overlap without apparent interaction with the oldest



figures, defining very different graphic spaces (on the lower part of the walls) from those established by São Francisco and Montalvânia. Desenhos unit figures are deer and birds petroglyphs, pecked also on the lower part of the walls and, mainly, on boulders fallen on the floor of the shelters. When previous paintings exist on the part where they wanted to peck, they cleaned the surface by covering it with a red painted layer, and only then made the petroglyphs. Considerations about other aspects of their behaviours and their successors in the Desenhos stylistic unity and Nordeste tradition will not be discussed here. However, a striking feature of discontinuity is established by them, that will be repeated in the Nordeste tradition (whose painters gave priority to the anthropomorphic miniatures, displayed in scenes, painting on empty rock walls, in many sites).

The intense interaction between São Francisco tradition and Montalvânia complex on the rock walls is noticeable, illustrating a vehement interest and appropriation of the previous rock art by each new painter who intervenes on the walls. Though the original meanings of the figures are not maintained, there is clearly a will to preserve them, even giving them a new significance within a new composition. The structure of the graphic space in the sites, with wide and large walls and their condition of concentrating many figures is maintained. The Montalvânia complex transforms the valley, with the inclusion of many other places in the set of the painted landscape, but at the same time, it carefully maintains the use of previously painted places, incorporating them. The canyon that used to have less than 10 large painted shelters, through the painters transformed itself into a network of many painted places, in several compartments along its whole extension. Despite the transformation of the valley landscape, the old decorated places remain as prominent. Certainly, there is an attribution system and a guidance of behaviour, and though changing in some aspects it partially preserves other characteristics. Similarly, it can be stated that the behaviour of the SF4 set painters features multiple forms of intervention with a clear characteristic of continuity, whereas it lets subtle changes be noticed. The changes are mostly stylistic, with a painting practice oriented by the preceding rock art in many aspects, for instance the site choice, the panels' selection, the structure of the graphic space and the thematic repertoire.

Therefore, it is emphasized that a set of processes involving rock art and painters' behaviour, with implications and interpretive possibilities, needs to be intensely explored. Did the unities express ethnic differences, or only ideological changes? Does the alternation of São Francisco and Montalvânia units express the existence of a boundary between two territories during the Middle Holocene (one dominated by São Francisco tradition people; the other dominated by the Montalvânia complex (in the Montalvânia region, 150 km north, where some intrusive São Francisco pictograms can be seen)? Our present work in the region appraises these issues and examines in detail other aspects (like the forms of composing figures, their spatial organization and thematic associations) that will bring forward new features of this large and complex set of pictorial practices of the Peruaçu river valley.

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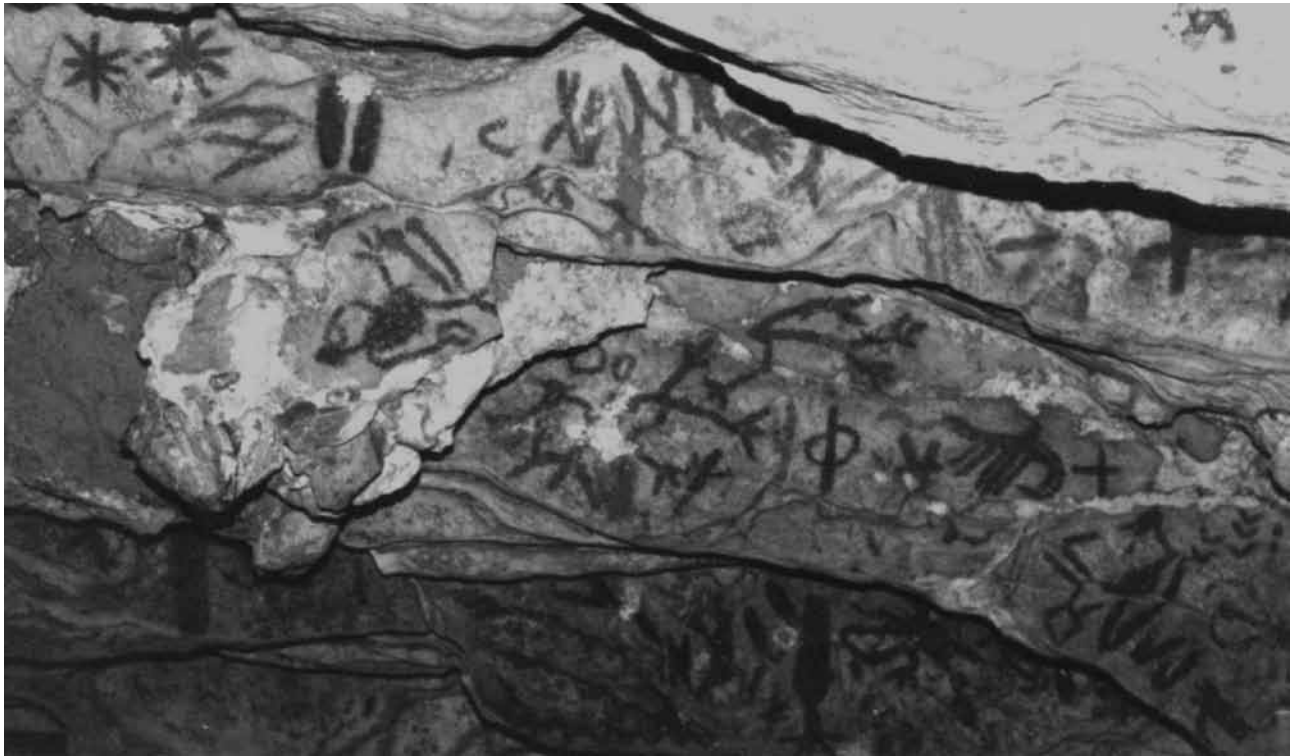
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Lapa do Cobaclo: the different moments of São Francisco tradition painted over ancient anthropomorphic picture



The Montalvânia complex paintings among the geometric pictures of São Francisco tradition



Montalvânia complex exclusive panel over a low roof of Lapa do Tikão



Final composition of a panel at lapa dos Desenhos (Peruaçu valley, Minas Gerais), composed by the four moments of São Francisco tradition and the Montalvânia complex