

## THE CUP-MARKS IN ROCK ART IN WESTERN EUROPE. A CONTRIBUTE TO ITS STUDY AND INTERPRETATION



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### Introduction

The cup-marks appear in rock art practically all over the world, but their enigmatic simplicity almost makes impossible any attempt of interpretation. Sure that many authors affirm to have deciphered their meaning, seeing in them the representation of astral maps, receptacles for gifts to the gods, signs of courses of water and symbols of the female sex, among other theories. Though some of those ideas aren't completely despicable, as we are going to see forward, it's incoherent to accept them, in a general way, to every cup-mark dispersed in the world. However there are cases where it seems easier to do an approach to the possible meaning of this motif or to its functionality. One of the aims of this communication it's precisely to spread some of those examples, trying so to contribute to give more light to this subject matter.

During a great deal of time the cup-marks didn't deserve much attention by the majority of the researchers, being almost despised or faced unwillingly. In a corpus about Portuguese Rock Art elaborated by Santos Júnior, the author refers that he didn't point out the rocks "onde aparecem somente covinhas" (SANTOS JÚNIOR, 1940: 29), being this case an example of that contempt. An exception to this way of thinking it's the Italian researcher A. Magni, that in the beginning of the XX century published several articles about rocks with cup-marks (SANSONI *et alli*, 2001: 33).

In the North West of the Iberian Peninsula, the cup-marks appear or isolated in groups of a variable number, or associated with countless motives as concentric circles, spirals, weapons, deer, anthropomorphs and foot prints, among others, being almost an "omnipresence". When they appear isolated they become difficult of dating, because they are carved "desde la prehistoria, hasta nuestros dias" (COSTAS GOBERNA e NOVOA ÁLVAREZ, 1993: 24).

The French archaeologist Denis Peyronney found *in situ*, in La Ferrasie Cave (France), a stone that covered a child's grave, datable according to him, from the Medium Palaeolithic, carved with several cup-marks and a channel. (Fig.1)



**Fig. 1 – Stone of Palaeolithic child's grave from La Ferrasie Cave.  
(After PASTORELLI e CITTON).**

We are dealing, in this case, with the most ancient representation of cup-marks that we know, being possible to see the piece at the Les Eyzies Museum, in France (PASTORELLI e

CITTON, Web page). This example is also the only one that we know of cup-marks, dated from the Palaeolithic, carved in stone. But won't the painted "dots", existing in some caves from the Upper Palaeolithic, be a parallel of those engraved motives ? Won't they have a similar meaning ? Maybe it's a possibility that Fig.2 seems to prove.



**Fig. 2 – Horse and dots at Lascaux Cave.**

The motif that we are studying also appears carved on megalithic monuments from several European countries and in a cave at El Pedroso, in the Douro Valley, between Bragança and Zamora, with artefacts dated, in their majority, from the Copper Age (MANNING, Web page). In this communication we are going to deal mostly with cup-marks pecked on rocks at open air, existing in Western Europe, though giving more prominence to the Rock Art of the North West of the Iberian Peninsula. The other ones, present on megalithic monuments or into caves, will only be occasionally indicated when that will be necessary as an example.

In a chronological way, usually, the Rock Art of the North West of the Iberian Peninsula seems to be made by communities that established in that region “ durante la transición entre el III e el II milénios a.C.” (PEÑA SANTOS *et alli*,1996:85) and “corresponde a poblaciones agrícolas y ganaderas que conocen la metarlugia y el enterramiento en megalitos” (BELTRAN MARTINEZ, 1998: 49). These information is important to understand the art since a territorial perspective, knowing like this some characteristics of the populations that produced it and, so, to try an interpretation that will be the most faithful as possible.

Nowadays the cup-marks begin to get more attention by the researchers, becoming a “campo di studio affascinante e difficile, nel quale le ipotesi sono aperte in molte direzioni”. (PASTORELLI e CITTON, Web page). Next we'll present and develop some of those interpretive possibilities.

### **Description and attempt of interpretation of rocks with cup-marks**

We begin with two extremely interesting cases, not really of rocks, but of two carved stones, that present cup-marks, and both found in the Castro de Guifões, an Iron Age village near Matosinhos, in the outskirts of Oporto. One of those stones is a rectangular shaped “altar”, with 84 cm long, 35 cm wide, 27 cm thick and having fourteen cup-marks engraved on one of the faces. (Fig. 3). The top is polished by the deliberate action of Man, showing a circular depression and it was found inside a construction “que tanto podia ser habitação como local de reunião” (SANTOS, 1962:112).



**Fig. 3 – “Altar” with cup-marks from Castro de Guifões.**

Nowadays the religious characteristics of Rock Art are well accepted. This way, we think that we are before a piece used for cult practices instead of decorative ones, being the cup-marks an integrate part of the symbolic and spiritual world of the men that lived in Castro de Guifões as well as those that used them on megaliths, on petroglyphs and in caves from several countries.

The other stone, found into one of the walls of a building identified by J. N. dos Santos as a “sanctuary” (SANTOS, 1963: 6), has engraved a kind of swastika, associated to nine cup-marks, that in Italy is known as Camunian Rose. It also presents other engravings among which there are seven more cup-marks, some of them associated to the possible depiction of “crosiers”, that are usually identified as symbols of power (COIMBRA, 1999: 107). (Fig. 4)



**Fig. 4 – Cup-marks associated to a swastika and to “crosiers”.**

The symbolic and religious character hold by the swastika is very well known, appearing here closely associated to the cup-marks, also them with a great importance in the prehistoric and protohistoric symbolism, as one can notice through these two examples and many others. Nowadays the cup-marks appear as a motif to which importance should be given and should not be despised, as some decades ago, for being “only” cup-marks. These appear also associated to swastikas, in Galicia, Spain, on petroglyphs as Portela da Laxe (Viascón, Pontevedra) and Coruxo (Vigo) and in Valcamonica the Camunian Roses are very numerous. In one of the swastikas from Portela da Laxe, there’s a central cup-mark that looks like an

rotation axis for the first symbol, transmitting the idea of another functionality, of another meaning.

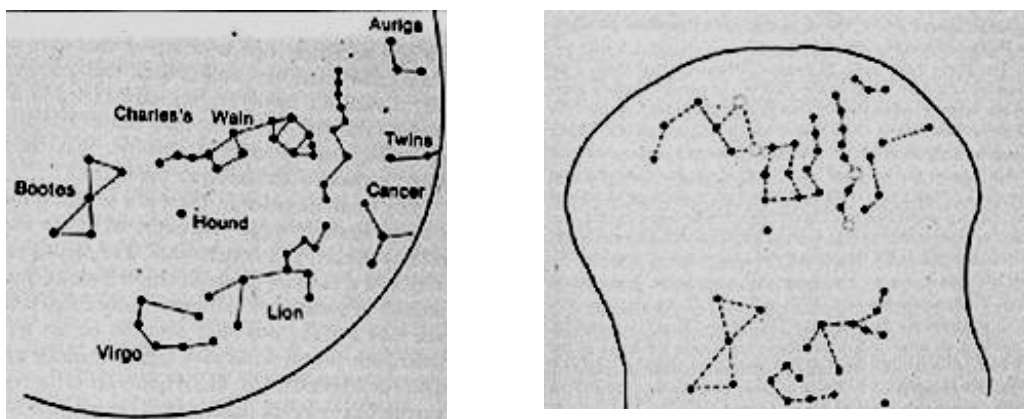
We have already made the reference that, in some cases, the interpretation of cup-marks is easier. Let's pass to the examples:

in Sweden there are Bronze Age engravings where the cup-marks clearly appear as representations of the female Sex. (fig. 5). The same happens in Italy, at Valcamonica, with female anthropomorphs from Paspardo (rock 4), Naquane (rock 32) and Campanine. At this place, a very beautiful couple of Neolithic "prayers" appears also with two cup-marks pointing out the woman's breasts (FOSSATI, JAFFE e ABREU, 1991: 14). At Valtellina, on Rupe Magna, appears also a female anthropomorph with a cup-mark representing the sex, surely existing other examples in Northern Italy, as it happens still at Coren del Valento.



**Fig. 5 – Cup-marks as a symbol of the female sex, Sweden.**

At Dalby, Denmark, there are cup-marks engraved in such a way that they suggest constellations (Fig. 6). We think that it's rational that the prehistoric man who worshiped the sun, the moon and the mountains, between others aspects of Nature, also had felt reverence for the magnificence of the starry sky and had represented it on it's artistic manifestations.



**Fig. 6 – Cup-marks at Dalby. Above, the representation of some constellations**

In the North of Portugal, at Montedor, Viana do Castelo, there's a rock with a pentagram deeply carved, among which "arms" one can see five cup-marks. The rock is situated near a small fort, by the sea, from the seventeenth century and the engravings should belong to the same period. Some contemporaries amulets are constituted by a pentagram between which "arms" there are precisely five small holes that represent the five wounds of Christ. We are dealing with good-luck charms destined to protect from evil anyone that used them and they were very common in Portugal in the eighteenth century. We think that the engraving at Montedor would be one of these good-luck charms, having been made by the habitants of the fort for their protection. The cup-marks, representing here the five wounds of Christ, associate the pentagram, a symbol used in Portugal still today against evil, joining like this the faith to the magical and protective power of the five pointed star, in a way of reinforcing the good-luck charm. Once more we are before the use of the cup-marks with a religious purpose.

In the roman rupestrian sanctuary of Panóias (Vila Real, Portugal), there's an inscription dated from the second – third centuries A.D., near a rock with cup-marks, that reveals the practice of sacrifices and tells that the victim's blood should be "versato nelle vaschette vicine", while "le viscere invece vengono bruciate nelle cavità quadrate", according to a translation by S. Gavaldo e B. Corona (SANSONI e GAVALDO, 1995: 186). This example seems to support the theories that see the cup-marks as receptacles for liquids used in religious rituals. The same thing happens at Ca' Bianchi di Torre S. Maria (Valmalenco, Italy), where a small rock with cup-marks was put, in recent times, in front of the chapel dedicated to the Virgin. The local population traditionally uses the cup-marks as "piccole acquasantiere durante la recita del S. Rosario" (SANSONI *et alli*, 2001:31).

In the rock of Saint Eufémia at Covide (Terras de Bouro, Braga, Portugal) there are several cup-marks associated to foot prints (fig. 6), as it happens at Pegadinhas de S. Gonçalo em Luzim (Penafiel, Oporto). The two rocks must have been places of worship in Late Bronze Age. In the first one there's, curiously, a continuous worship, because the local population still today goes there to hold religious ceremonies near a stone cross that was put in the middle of the rock. In the second half of the twentieth century an altar was erected near the engravings. These are "explained" through a legend which tells us that the foot prints belong to Saint Eufémia and the cup-marks are the marks of her knees when she kneeled on the rock to pray, passing so this place being worshiped.



**Fig. 7 – Pegadinhas de S. Gonçalo. Association of cup-marks and foot prints.**

Other prehistoric altars but with cup-marks only exist in the North of Portugal, as for instance at Monte da Saia (Barcelos, Braga), where there's a rock with thirty three cup-marks and the date of 1674, in which middle one can see the cross of the monastic order of Christ, heir of the Templar's Knights in Portugal (COIMBRA, 1998). The cup-marks have much more erosion than the cross and the date, being therefore much older. At Citânia de Briteiros (Guimarães, Braga), an important Iron Age village, there are several engravings among which there's a group of cup-marks on a small rock, existing other similar examples in Portugal dated from Bronze Age and others dated from Iron Age. The same happens in Galicia, North of Spain, where there are rocks with cup-marks at Castro de St<sup>a</sup> Tecla, at Monte Penide and at Oia, all in Pontevedra region, speaking only about some examples datable from Bronze Age.

In Italy the prospect is identical to the countries of the Iberian Peninsula, with cup-marked "altars" at Central Valtellina as for instance at Alpe Grum (rock 1), San Bartolomeo (rock 1B), Triangia and San Giacomo Valley (Valchiavenna), among others (SANSONI, GAVALDO E GASTALDI, 1999: 161-175). Obviously there are in Italy other places with rocks carved only with cup-marks, but we don't indicate them in this article to avoid that it becomes boring, the same happening regarding to the rocks of the same kind from Scotland, England and Estonia.

There are countless cases of cup-marks which significance is really difficult to reach, being almost impossible any interpretive approach. Let's see some examples:

one of the daggers from Monte da Laje (Valença, Portugal) with cup-marks in its interior (SILVA e CUNHA, 1986:153); a funerary Bronze Age stele, from Alamillo, nowadays at the Provincial Museum of Ciudad Real, Spain, where an alignment of five cup-marks is on the left side of a warrior; countless cases of cup-marks in the interior of concentric circles, associated to deer, weapons, idols and anthropomorphs, among others (PEÑA SANTOS, 1979: 409).

But we cannot forget that what is not deciphered to the men of the twenty first century, was well known at least by some prehistoric men. And we say "some" because not everybody would have the "key" to interpret completely the "messages" of the engravings, that would be reserved to the priests only (PEÑA SANTOS e REY GARCIA, 1993: 36). Perhaps it would be good for the rulers that not all the community would have access to those "messages" and we think that they even should hide them, in a certain way, from men of other regions. According to Richard Bradley, "perhaps abstract motifs were chosen because their meanings were never meant to be disclosed to the casual observer. The use of such a specialised vocabulary would have ensured that access to that information could be carefully controlled" (BRADLEY, 1995:5). Then the large variety of engravings' compositions done with abstract motives, what surely should lead to the necessity of a good knowledge of the used "language".

In spite of the interpretation's difficulties created by some motives, as in the case of the cup-marks, we think that its study is useful because it allows to sound out the prehistoric men's mind. As Dolores Sartorio says, "descifrar los primeros balbuceos del alma de la Humanidad me parece labor no sólo interesante, sino necesaria (SARTORIO, 1957: 63).

### **Final note**

This communication about cup-marks has only an introductory character, intending, above all, to inform the rock art researchers about some particular cases that could help to understand better the meaning of this motif. Therefore, the target was the description, followed by short interpretive theories, reducing the questions of chronological character to the essential. The introductory character indicated is due also to the fact that this is the first time that we study the cup-marks in a more developed way, on the contrary of other symbols like the swastika that we exhaustively research since 1993. However, the methodology of

this article has some aspects of that one that we've been using for nine years in Symbolic Archaeology, as for instance: "o levantamento bibliográfico exaustivo sobre o assunto (...). Levantamento iconográfico o mais completo possível, quer sobre a área estudada, quer de zonas exteriores" (COIMBRA, 1996:366); observation about in what monuments do the cup-marks appear, about what is their function and about what are the association contexts of these motives with other symbols. It's necessary not to forget that in a strongly schematic or symbolic art the same motif may hide very different meanings, specially when included in several contexts (JORGE, 1983:54).

The idea of this communication's theme was suggested by Prof. Umberto Sansoni, who gently invited us to present a paper to the XVIII Valcamonica Symposium, in which unfortunately we could not participate due to several unforeseen.

In a way of conclusion, we want to record that is important to carry out congresses and other events about symbolism, with the aim of changing ideas and defining some methodologies to face the immense dispersed data that exists. The elaboration of projects of collaboration between researchers from different countries will have, no doubt, a great benefit in the interpretation of Rock Art and its better understanding by nowadays society. This also will bring benefits to the conservation of that art, because in this matter there's still a lot of work to do, as everybody knows.

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