

Siega Verde: a bungled submission to the World Heritage List

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The soaring masonry structure of the bridge at Siega Verde, built in 1925 north-west of Ciudad Rodrigo, western Spain, is flanked on both sides by the petroglyph site of the same name. It is a superbly crafted structure, rising almost 30 m above the Agueda River, just 2 km west of the village Castillejo de Martin Viejo. To support the great weight of its central piers as well as the high scaffolding required during construction, platforms were carved from the eroding schistose bedrock. These surfaces were created either in 1925, or immediately previously. They bear a series of inscriptions and some zoomorphic petroglyphs. Both these types of rock markings are also prolific for several hundred metres upstream and downstream of the bridge, always in the zone of less than 6 m above the normal river level. In this narrow valley, the size of the catchment area leads to frequent flooding of up to 6 or 8 m which can be of such force that several previous bridges in the immediate vicinity have in the past fallen victim to such turbulent episodes.

One of the animal figures engraved on a pier platform is partly concealed by the stone pier it supports, and another is so close to it that it would have been physically impossible to create it after the commencement of the pier's construction. These motifs are therefore datable with complete precision: they must be younger than the prepared platform's surface, and they must predate the commencement of the pier's construction. It is extremely unlikely that the platform was prepared many years before 1925, therefore these zoomorphs must be just under 90 years old.

Many of the Siega Verde inscriptions have been provided with dates, some of which were used to determine the erosion rate at which the suspended load sediment (of very coarse and angular quartz sand) impacts upon the valley's very soft schist (Bednarik 2009). The petroglyphs experience the same rapid deterioration, implying that, closest to the river's level, they would be worn beyond recognition in under 200 years. With the exception of a few unusual petroglyphs at 6–7 m above the normal water level, which may be significantly earlier, all of the site's rock art is under 400 years old. This is also confirmed by the degree of repatination: whereas all zoomorphic motifs are almost unpatinated, the few high-lying, much earlier petroglyphs are totally repatinated, i.e. they match the dark-brown colour of the adjacent iron-rich mineral accretion. However, these old motifs are non-figurative, of a type described as filiform style, and elsewhere in the region attributed to the Iron Age (e.g. at Vermelhosa, 50 km away but in northern Portugal).

The problem arising from these basic observations

is that all of the site's zoomorphs have been claimed to be of the Upper Palaeolithic, and perhaps around 20 000 years old. This contention is based purely on the perceived style of the animal-shaped petroglyphs. There is no indication of a Pleistocene occupation site at Siega Verde, and this claim ignores the existence of the much older filiforms, over which in some cases zoomorphs have clearly been superimposed (Fig. 1). This interpretation also ignores that some of the animal motifs, which do not include any species not living in the area today, date demonstrably from about 1925, and that those whose fluvial erosion has been quantified, date from the early to mid-20th century.

The issue of the modernity of the Siega Verde rock art is not just an academic subject that can be debated in neutral terms and resolved by reasoned discussion and careful consideration of all the evidence. It is a politically charged issue. Not only have the local authorities developed the site as an archaeological monument of the Palaeolithic period, an excellent interpretation centre and tourist facilities have been installed, promoting the Palaeolithic attribution of the rock art. This is despite the unambiguous statements of local residents of the nearby village that the petroglyphs are of recent times (Hansen 1997), and the scientific opinion that there is no Pleistocene rock art at the site. Moreover, Siega Verde has been admitted for World Heritage listing, and again exclusively on the basis of its claimed, but certainly not demonstrated Palaeolithic antiquity.

One is always thrilled to see rock art sites nominated to the World Heritage List, in whatever part of the world and for whatever reasons. But such nominations should not be made on the basis of misleading information, and the Eurocentric obsession with the importance of Palaeolithic art. This practice serves a political purpose; it reinforces the established bias and skewed understanding of palaeoart beginnings. For instance it helps ignoring the obvious fact that there is far more Pleistocene rock art outside of Europe; in Australia alone, as much as 100 times more Pleistocene rock art may have survived than in Europe, and yet not a single such site has been admitted to the World Heritage List from any other part of the world. This reinforces the perception that Europe is some kind of 'cradle of art'. The obsession with European Pleistocene rock art amounts to a powerful cultural icon, and it prejudices the appreciation of Holocene rock art, thus impairing its protection and preservation. Therefore the incredible over-representation of European cultural heritage on the World Heritage List is in part attributable to this misconception that the Palaeolithic rock art of south-western Europe is the oldest such evidence in the world.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The currently oldest known rock art is in India and South Africa. Moreover, in contrast to the Upper Palaeolithic art of Europe, all Australian rock art of the Pleistocene is of Middle Palaeolithic attribution (belonging to Mode 3 techocomplexes). It is therefore appropriate to enquire why these European fantasies about 'cultural precedence' arose and why they are being perpetuated and reinforced through such policies and practices. This includes the admission to the List of an inordinate number of European sites attributed to the Pleistocene. Already, many of these sites have been inscribed on the basis of contentious age claims, in the Côa valley in Portugal,

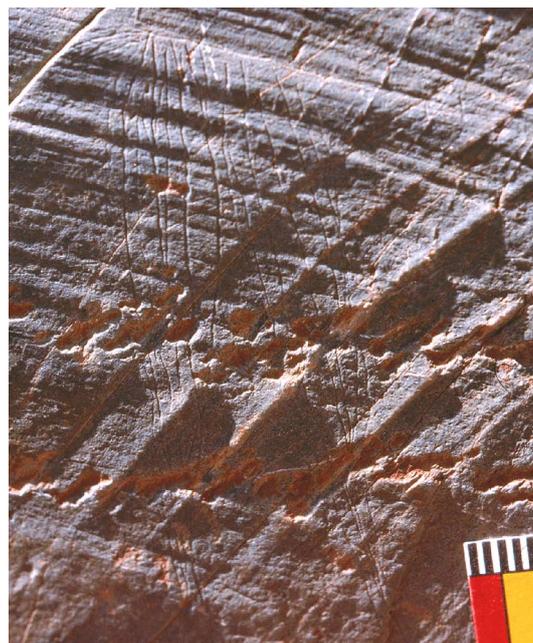


Figure 1. Detail of necklines of lightly patinated so-called Upper Palaeolithic 'horse' superimposed over much earlier, deeply patinated incised lines, probably of the Iron Age.

also supported by stylistic innuendos. There are dozens more Iberian schist petroglyph sites with horse and bull images, are they all to be listed? Of course UNESCO has no control over which sites are being nominated by the member states (which is precisely the reason for the present disproportionate representation of cultural monuments in general), but in the case of the submission of Siega Verde it would have been incumbent upon UNESCO to query the basis of the nomination. The site is certainly fascinating and there is no fundamental objection to its listing, but it must be based on sound information and not wishful attribution. Most particularly, such submission must not be based on the rock art's Pleistocene age because:

1. There are already more Upper Palaeolithic rock art sites on the List than those of all other periods.
2. There already are more rock art sites from Europe on the List than from the combined rest of the world.
3. No credible evidence has been presented for a Pleistocene antiquity of the Siega Verde petroglyphs (stylistic vibes are not evidence), but comprehensive scientific evidence has been presented that the art is of very recent age.
4. The complete absence from the List of Pleistocene rock art from the rest of the

world, where it is far more numerous, suggests that Pleistocene age is not a valid criterion on which Outstanding Universal Value should be based. Unless the intent is to recognise this criterion only when it refers to a European site, in which case we need to ask: is this deliberate and politically guided, or is it attributable to ignoring the rest of the world? •

REFERENCES

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