

WORLD HERITAGE LIST

Mediterranean rock art (Spain)

No 874

Identification

<i>Nomination</i>	Rock art of the Mediterranean basin on the Iberian peninsula
<i>Location</i>	Autonomous Communities of Catalonia, Andalusia, Murcia, Valencia, Aragón, and Castilla-La Mancha
<i>State Party</i>	Spain
<i>Date</i>	3 July 1997

Justification by State Party

The rock art of eastern Spain is worthy of being inscribed on the World Heritage List because of its uniqueness, its documentary value, its integration into a landscape that bears the imprint of man but is also of high ecological value, and its fragile and vulnerable nature.

The rock art of eastern Spain is a cultural phenomenon that is exclusive to the Mediterranean basin of the Iberian peninsula. This is due to a number of different factors, some cultural, resulting from the complexity of the cultural processes that took place in this region in later prehistory,* and others related to conservation processes, such as the nature of the rock and specific environmental conditions.

The closest parallels are to be found in North Africa, although the subject matter and techniques are very different. These are two rock-art traditions that are clearly distinct.

The eastern Spanish rock art is an exceptional historical document which, because of its range, provides rare evidence in artistic and documentary terms of the socio-economic realities of prehistory. The scenes that it represents are the first narratives in European prehistory, providing information that would otherwise be inaccessible. This covers a number of different areas:

- *Hunting activities* are those most frequently represented. They show hunting by groups, with complex strategies, and also by individuals, with

details of animal traps and the tracking of wounded animals;

- Among *gathering activities* that are represented, that of honey is the most common. This is exceptional historical material of especial importance to beekeepers;
- The earliest depictions of *combats and executions* appear in Spanish eastern rock art, the latter in the form of archers shooting at their victims;
- Scenes of *domestic daily life* show groups of people sitting and talking, people walking together, seated hunters, the butchering animals, etc;
- Many of the representations of the human figure provide information in minute details of *clothing and personal ornament*, such as different hairstyles, bracelets, arm-rings, and necklaces. They make it possible to sense the beginnings of social inequality in prehistory;
- *Funerary rites* are shown in the form of recumbent corpses and ritual scenes;
- Certain scenes illustrate the *mythologies* of these prehistoric societies: sorcerers in strange costumes are common, as are figures which combine human characteristics with those of animals, such as deer, bulls, and birds;
- *Female figures* are also common, and these seem to represent female deities because of their prominent positions in the scenes depicted and their larger size.

The environment of the eastern Spanish rock art is ecologically and culturally very rich. In recent years management strategies have been developed which consider the cultural and natural heritage as an indissoluble entity. This results from an awareness that they share the same space, evolved side by side, and form a single space-time unit.

Over the entire area of the eastern Spanish art the landscape has certain elements in common - a broken mountain topography of labyrinthine landscapes formed by ravines and precipices.

Human modification of the landscape that was begun by the first Neolithic communities and accelerated during the historic period has less impact on these upland areas where the hunter-gatherer cultures that created the eastern Spanish art evolved. The marginal nature of these lands, almost always unsuited to agriculture, has persisted to the present day. As a result they are the last reserves of very interesting biological communities.

A number of the most threatened European species of raptors are to be found there, such as the Royal Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*), the Partridge Eagle (*Hieraetus fasciatus*), and the Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*). Among the mammals the rarest species in Europe, the Iberian Lynx (*Lynx pardina*), is still to be found in some of the most representative eastern Spanish art areas, such as Nerpio (Albacete), Canal de Navarrés (Valencia), and some parts of the Cuenca and Maestrazgo range. There is still a large number of specimens of the animal most favoured by the

* "Prehistory" is used in this context in the Spanish/French sense, up to the end of the Neolithic period.

prehistoric artists, the Wild Goat (*Capra pyrenaica hispanica*), in the area with the largest concentration of rock-art sites. The existence side by side of a living fauna and that of the prehistoric art gives these areas the exceptional quality of a timeless landscape.

Because it is located in places open to the outside the eastern Spanish art is especially vulnerable. It is exposed to two types of attack, atmospheric and man-made. To understand the magnitude of the problem it is necessary to take into account the nature of the backing of the art, which in most cases consists of limestone, which is locked into an irreversible process of alteration.

The rock shelters in which these paintings are to be found result from differential erosion of limestone. Disintegration under the influence of heat, cold, and wind played an important part in the formation of the shelters, especially during the cold episodes of the Pleistocene, and continue to have an impact, though less severely. In a destructive situation of this kind water infiltrating by means of fissures during warmer periods also contributes by the processes of deposition and concretion by precipitating calcium carbonate.

This cycle of destruction and reconstruction of cavities offers the most serious risk to rock paintings. In some cases it is imperative to adopt means of stabilizing the backing rock as much as possible and to slow down the processes of destruction and of covering up the paintings by water action.

This is intimately linked with the second form of threat, from living micro-organisms that lodge in the painted surfaces, such as fungi, algae, and lichens. Their life-cycles result in continuous surface damage, accelerating the processes of destruction of the rock and the paintings. Other organisms also play an adverse role in the destruction of the shelters. The roots of vascular plants burrow into fissures in the rock, in search of nourishment and water. Penetration by roots and their subsequent slow growth create internal pressures which combine with the solution effects of humic acids to destroy the backing rock.

Some animals that favour rocky habitats can also produce threats to rock art exposed to the open air. Flocks of domestic sheep and goats are kept in shelters in some areas and wild goats also take refuge in them, and these may affect the rock by rubbing or through the effect of their excreta.

Among potential accidental impacts may be counted the effects of atmospheric pollution, from acid rain in particular, of forest fires (in two senses, from the direct effect of fire on paintings and from the impact of deforestation on the water cycle).

To these threats should also be added that from human beings, who in some cases may be the most aggressive agents of destruction through their actions, whether unintentional or otherwise. Unhappily, the most damaging man-made impacts are intentional. Ever since this form of cultural expression was discovered at the beginning of the present century, parts or all of some of the most symbolic of them have been mutilated. There have been too many cases where attempts have been made to remove painted figures

from their backing rock and keep them as souvenirs or to sell. To such violent actions should be added the erasure of figures, graffiti, and repeated moistening to make them easier to see, all of which result in the covering up and loss of visibility of many rock-art motifs.

Happily, human actions of this kind are becoming less common, thanks to the higher cultural level of the people, which has increased their respect for the cultural heritage. Closely associated with this process has been the development in recent years of rural tourism, which has wanted to be able to enjoy contemplation of the rock art of eastern Spain as a fundamental element of the landscape.

The fragility and vulnerability of remains of this kind means that it is necessary to take every measure possible to ensure that wider knowledge of this Neolithic heritage does not put its conservation in jeopardy.

[**Note** The State Party does not make any proposals in the nomination dossier concerning the criteria under which it considers the property should be inscribed on the World Heritage List.]

Category of property

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this nomination consists of a group of *sites*.

History and Description

Dating

The Iberian peninsula has a rich heritage of prehistoric rock art. A number of important sites from the Palaeolithic period are known from the region of eastern Spain, where the best examples are from the Solutrean culture (c 19,000-16,000 BC), derived from southern France.

It was not until the advent of Neolithic sedentary communities based on agriculture that the characteristic art of the eastern side of the peninsula developed and flowered. The dating of this art has been the subject of many years of debate among prehistorians. It is now generally accepted that the art is not Palaeolithic, because of the culture that it depicts, but its precise attribution - whether it began in the Epipalaeolithic (from c 10,000 to 5000 BC) or in the full Neolithic that followed - is still not fully established.

The nomination dossier proposes an elegant partial reconciliation of the two points of view: "It is the art of peoples whose cultural roots lay in the Epipalaeolithic, who continued to use primarily hunter-gatherer economic systems, and who gradually incorporated Neolithic elements into their cultural baggage." This may be interpreted as a bracket in time between c 8000 and 3500 BC.

Themes and forms

The rock art of eastern Spain is to be found in shallow rock-shelters and even on exposed rock-faces, all being

visible to a lesser or greater extent by natural light. The great majority of sites contain only paintings, with simple outlines filled with flat colour and little detailing. The outlines are delicately drawn, never more than 3mm thick. There are a few engraved figures, but these, too, are filled with colour.

The predominant colour used was red, in various shades, and black to a lesser extent. White was used in some areas. The figures average 10-30cm in size, but there are many smaller figures, and also some as large as 120cm.

The commonest subject is that of human figures, both male and female, followed in descending order by animal figures (zoomorphs), single objects, and abstract motifs. Archers are the most frequent human subjects, followed by asexual figures, and finally those of women and children. Some of the human figures are shown as elaborately decorated whilst there is no detail of dress on others. Unlike the animal figures, the human subjects are not presented realistically. They are presented from different aspects, unlike the zoomorphs, which are all seen from the side, as in Palaeolithic art.

The inanimate objects depicted are principally weapons of various kinds, preponderantly bows and arrowheads in various forms. Bags, containers, and cords also occur and, infrequently, what may be interpreted as agricultural implements.

The wild animals represented correspond with what is known to have been the Mediterranean fauna in the Holocene period (after 10,000 BC). There are fewer depictions of domestic animals, and it is not always easy to identify them as such. Animals are shown singly and in groups, and sometimes in association with human figures. Most common are bovids and male deer, and in many cases these are accorded prime positions in the shelters.

There are considerable regional differences: for example, in the Maestrazgo group wild boar and bees are very common, whilst the equids and carnivores of further south are absent.

Two groups of scenes can be identified: those showing hunting and gathering activities and those showing social activities.

The first group includes scenes depicting single forest animals through the eyes of a hunter, whilst others show hunting scenes with numerous animals and humans.

Gathering activities are predominantly concerned with collecting honey from wild bees' nests, and some others show fruits being beaten down from trees using sticks. The scenes of social activity are more difficult to characterize; they include fighting, execution, funerary rites, dance, etc.

Distribution

The rock art in the over 700 sites included in the present nomination, in six Autonomous Communities (Provinces), has a number of regional variations, which are not always easy to distinguish.

The following is a broad regional grouping that takes account of the most significant divergences in style and

subject matter that evolved over the millennia when this form of rock art was being practised:

- The northern zone

This group is characterized by the use of single naturalistic zoomorphic figures and the rare appearance of stylized human figures.

- The Maestrazgo and the Lower Ebro

This is one of the most important groups in terms of size and homogeneity. Its most characteristic features are the dynamic hunting scenes, containing human figures depicted in great detail and highly naturalistic animal figures; there are also many scenes of combat.

- Mountain areas of Cuenca and Albarracín

The paintings here are found in shelters and rocks in siliceous rocks. The Albarracín ensembles are notable for their large bovid figures, the largest in the whole of eastern Spanish art. White is used more frequently here as a pigment, and some of the zoomorphs are delineated by engraving.

- The Jucar river cave and the neighbouring mountain area

This special characteristic of this group is the depiction of hunting scenes that are full of action and the wide range of human types.

- The Safor and La Marina regions (Valencia and Alicante)

There are very few examples of eastern Spanish art in these regions, but they are of special interest because of their association with "Macroschematic Art," a distinct contemporary cultural form with an otherwise wholly separate distribution. Hunting and social scenes abound but there are no representations of combat. Wild goats predominate among the animal representations, whilst wild boar and bovids are absent.

- The Segura river basin and neighbouring mountain areas

Zoomorphs predominate in this region, especially equids and bovids. There are also highly naturalistic human figures. Recent discoveries in the Taibilla river valley and the middle Segura have produced an unusual feature, the use of lines to depict ground surfaces.

- Eastern Andalusia

This form of rock art is to be found in two areas of eastern Andalusia - the Los Vêlez region and the foothills of the Sierra Morena. The great majority of the figures are zoomorphs, with a few humans in Los Vêlez and none in the Sierra Morena.

Management and Protection

Legal status

All the sites included in the nomination are listed and protected as Properties of Cultural Interest (*Bienes de Interés Cultural*) under the provisions of Article 40 of the 1985 Spanish Law on the Historic Heritage. This protection extends to a defined zone around each site. Responsibility for the implementation of this protection

is delegated, in conformity with the Spanish Constitution, to the Autonomous Communities in which they are located, each of which has its own laws and regulations relating to monument protection and management.

Management

Ownership of the properties that make up this nomination is shared between public bodies (national, provincial, and communal) and individuals, the majority being in public ownership.

Supervision and management is in the competence of the appropriate agencies (Ministries/Departments of Culture and/or Education of the six autonomous communities). Systematic inspections of the sites are undertaken by professionals (employed variously by provincial archaeological services, state parks, or municipalities) in Catalonia, Aragón, and Valencia, and by volunteers in Andalusia and Murcia; a similar system is currently being set up in Castilla-La Mancha. The report of the ICOMOS expert mission (see below) commented very favourably on the voluntary involvement of municipal and commune authorities and of private associations in the work of protecting and preserving the properties.

Following the promulgation of the 1985 Law, work began on the creation of an exhaustive survey and inventory of rock-art sites, first in Catalonia and then in the other autonomous communities. This took into account descriptive aspects relating to subject matter, techniques, and environmental factors along with evaluations of state of conservation. This work extended to scientific studies related to means of provided the basis for the present nomination.

The preparation of the nomination dossier, which is a remarkable work of synthesis and presentation, of considerable scientific value, resulted from a series of working meetings and conferences, organized jointly by the six autonomous communities, which began in February 1996. The *ad hoc* group set up for this project is to become a permanent intercommunity council for rock art, with the full backing of all six autonomous communities, to continue to study the archaeology, protection, and conservation of the sites.

Where rock-art sites are accessible to the public, plans are in existence or in preparation in cultural or natural parks and municipalities for the provision of interpretation centres, either independently or in association with existing museums, and guiding services.

Conservation and Authenticity

Conservation history

The rock art of eastern Spain has been known since the 18th century, but it did not become the subject of scientific study until the early years of the present century, after the long, polemical debate on the authenticity of prehistoric art following the discovery in 1879 of the Altamira Palaeolithic paintings had been resolved. With the discovery of more sites, the problem of dating the eastern Spanish art, referred to earlier, was hotly debated for decades. It was not until the

1980s that systematic survey and inventory work began (see above, *Management*).

Conservation has been carried out in a reactive manner on rock-art sites as they have come to light. Various techniques have been applied, with railings and grilles most often favoured. Recent studies have resulted in the general application of a system of barriers far enough away from paintings to prevent their being touched by visitors but close enough for their details to be appreciated.

Not all the sites listed in the nomination are protected in this way, in some cases because their inaccessibility renders them unlikely to be at risk in this way. All six autonomous communities include protection measures in their management plans. These also provide for the installation of interpretive panels, which are already in place at a number of sites. The standards for this work will be coordinated by the intercommunity council.

The council will also be involved in the development of scientific techniques for the conservation of paintings and their environments. A number of scientific projects are in progress or planned, in association with university departments.

Authenticity

In terms of the fundamental character of the art of eastern Spain, the ICOMOS expert mission report is categorical: "The authenticity of this art does not permit any question. It is an undeniably prehistoric art, created at the end of the last glaciation." A study of the history of its discovery and conservation reveals that there has been no attempt to "restore" the paintings and so their individual authenticity is equally incontestable.

Evaluation

Action by ICOMOS

An ICOMOS expert visited Spain in December 1997. The expert, who is President of the ICOMOS International Rock Art Committee and a world expert on prehistoric rock art, visited all six autonomous communities for discussions with those responsible for the management and study of the eastern Spanish rock-art sites. He was already familiar with many of the sites from previous study tours, and was able to visit a number of others, though it was not feasible for him to have visited all seven hundred.

Qualities

The eastern Spanish rock art is of exceptional quality, providing vivid evidence of human life in the western Mediterranean in the late Palaeolithic and early Neolithic periods. It is, moreover, the only large group of prehistoric rock art surviving anywhere in Europe.

Comparative analysis

There is already a number of prehistoric rock-art sites on the World Heritage List - Tassili n'Ajjer (Algeria), the Vézère valley (France), Altamira (Spain), Sierra de San Francisco (Mexico), and Valcamonica (Italy), along with the sites in Australia. Each of these has its own special characteristics in terms of techniques and subject matter.

The eastern Spanish rock art differs significantly from all of these in several ways: its concentration on group scenes of humans and animals, the relatively small size of the figures, and the depiction of social activities. It is also distinct from the others because of the fact that it is always visible in natural light, because of its location in shallow rock shelters. Finally, it is unique by virtue of representing a period of transition from a hunter-gatherer to a sedentary farming society.

ICOMOS comments

ICOMOS commissioned its International Rock Art Committee to carry out a comparative study of world rock-art sites. The eastern Iberian group of sites is identified as the largest anywhere in Europe. The study goes on to stress that it is distinct from any other group of rock-art sites in Europe or North Africa by virtue of the range of subjects depicted and techniques employed.

Brief description

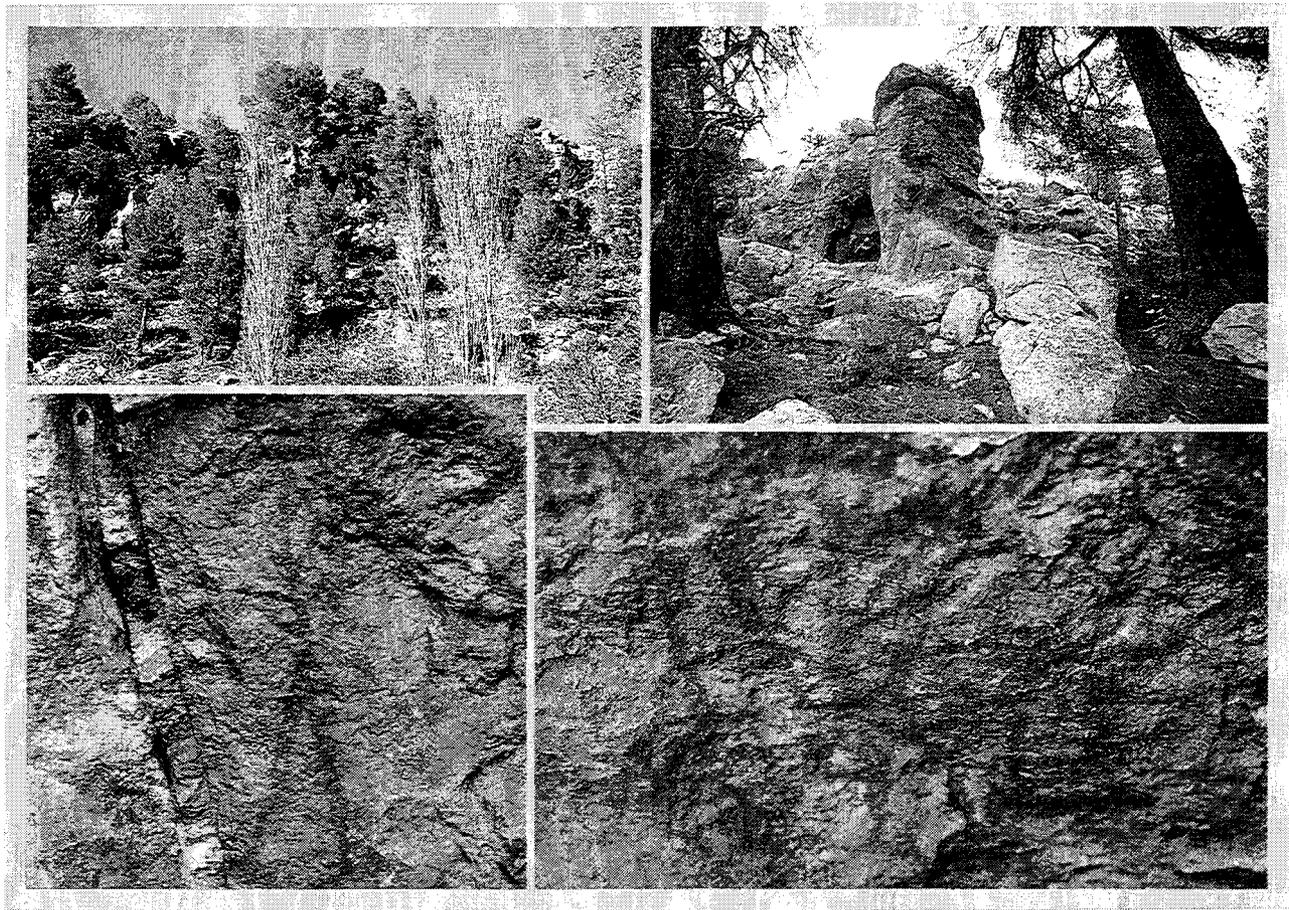
The late prehistoric rock art sites of the Mediterranean seaboard of the Iberian peninsula are an exceptionally large group in which the way of life in a critical phase of human development is vividly and graphically depicted in paintings that are unique in style and subject matter.

Recommendation

That this property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *critera iii*:

Criteria iii: The corpus of late prehistoric mural paintings in the Mediterranean basin of eastern Spain is the largest group of rock-art sites anywhere in Europe, and provides an exceptional picture of human life in a seminal period of human cultural evolution.

ICOMOS, October 1998



**Art rupestre du bassin méditerranéen de la péninsule ibérique /
Rock art of the Mediterranean basin on the Iberian peninsula :
Abris sous roche et scènes de chasse (Moratalla, Murcie) /
Rock shelter and hunting scenes (Moratalla, Murcia)**



**Art rupestre du bassin méditerranéen de la péninsule ibérique /
Rock art of the Mediterranean basin on the Iberian peninsula :
Cerf (Albarracin, Aragon) / Deer (Albarracin, Aragon)**