

WORLD HERITAGE LIST

Côa Valley (Portugal)

No 866

Identification

<i>Nomination</i>	Prehistoric rock-art sites in the Côa Valley
<i>Location</i>	Province of Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro, District of Guarda
<i>State Party</i>	Portugal
<i>Date</i>	25 June 1997

Justification by State Party

The Côa River Valley Archaeological Sites National Monument should be inscribed on the World Heritage List for the following reasons:

- it bears exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition that has disappeared, that of the hunting groups which inhabited Eurasia during Late Glacial times;
- it is a unique example of a landscape that illustrates a significant stage in human history, the Upper Palaeolithic period;
- it is a continuing landscape that retains active role in contemporary society closely associated with the traditional way of life and in which the evolutionary process is still in progress; at the same time it exhibits significant material evidence of its evolution over time.

The main points of the scientific case that underlies these proposals are the following:

- the Côa valley contains prehistoric and historic rock-art sites that form an almost uninterrupted sequence that began more than 20,000 years ago; it may be described as the largest outdoor art-history museum in the world, and the only one in which the “collections” display such a time-depth and such a continuity;
- the great majority of the figures date from the earliest stages of the sequence, the Upper Palaeolithic; stylistic comparison indicates that the oldest rock art in the valley may be Late Gravettian (more than 20,000 years old) and that the first artistic cycle lasted until the end of the Magdalenian (10,000 years ago); human presence over this time-

range has already been confirmed independently by the location and excavation of characteristic and well preserved settlement sites;

- the size of the territory in which the phenomenon occurs and the number of Palaeolithic panels and animal figures engraved in the Côa valley and the adjacent slopes of the Douro are on an unprecedented scale; the only large similar sites hitherto known, both in Spain, are much smaller than Côa;
- the aesthetic quality of many of the Côa Palaeolithic petroglyphs is unmatched; in the realm of representation, some of its features are complete novelties, especially in relation to animation, where movement is often suggested by techniques of drawing that were not to be rediscovered until the advent of 20th century comic strips.

The Côa valley finds also represent the most outstanding evidence to substantiate the need for a Copernican change of perception concerning the meaning of Palaeolithic art. For almost a century, ever since its antiquity was recognized, the non-mobiliary Palaeolithic art of western Europe was thought to be a phenomenon restricted to caves and rock-shelters, to the extent that it was commonly presented under the designation “cave art.” The interpretation of its meaning that has hitherto been the most influential was developed in the 1960s by the French prehistorian André Leroi-Gourhan, who considered it to be religious art. By analogy with the temples of modern religions, caves were conceived as sanctuaries where the images of animals, human beings, and symbols painted, sculpted, and engraved on the walls played an important role in the framework of the cults being celebrated in those places.

The outdoor location of the Côa Palaeolithic petroglyphs and the size of the territory where they are to be found demonstrates that our Upper Palaeolithic forebears left their artistic imprint all over the territories they settled and that, therefore, such behaviour was in no way restricted to the decoration of the walls of caves. In this new light, Palaeolithic art no longer appears as an exclusively religious manifestation confined to underground sanctuaries but acquires a secular dimension, as is also the case among ethnographically documented hunter-gatherers, such as the Aboriginal peoples of Australia.

Following the inspiration provided by ethnographic examples, the preservation of this rock art in a topography that has remained essentially unchanged since the onset of the Upper Pleistocene provides the possibility, for the first time in Upper Palaeolithic studies, the most remote history of members of our own species, to investigate the way in which those ancestors conceptualized the landscapes they inhabited. By contrast with those places that went undecorated, the different clusters where rock art has been found can be considered as especially important parts of the territory. As research progresses, the distribution of the different motifs across the several ensembles of engraved rocks, combined with perceptive analyses of the topographical locations of the latter (in valley bottoms or halfway up slopes, on fluvial beaches favourable for settlement,

or on slopes so steep that camping was impossible, clustered around prominent features of the landscape, or scattered over unobtrusive outcrops) may provide us with information on the religious or secular nature of that importance, as well as on the social or economic significance of these images that we value for their beauty and antiquity.

As a cultural landscape, the Côa valley also preserves archaeological prehistoric and historic periods and is today undergoing significant change. Vineyards are expanding as subsistence agriculture and extractive industries decline. Material evidence of the latter is to be preserved in a museum established at the Quinta da Ervamoira, where a Roman site already included in the Côa River Valley Archaeological Sites National Museum is currently under excavation.

[**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 the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a group of *sites*.

History and Description

History

The earliest evidence for human occupation in the Alto Douro region is from the Lower Palaeolithic period (90,000 years ago). There has as yet been no Middle Palaeolithic site found, but the region was clearly favoured in the Upper Palaeolithic. There is a concentration of rock-art and settlement sites along the main rivers, the Douro and its tributaries, the Côa and the Aguiar.

In the Côa valley the known settlements are located in the short section between Quinta da Barca and Salto do Boi, but this does not reflect the situation in early prehistory, owing to the differences in lithology between this area and that further downstream. More intensive cultivation in recent years has also destroyed many settlement sites without record.

Analysis of the archaeological evidence suggests that the valley was occupied recurrently, possibly on a seasonal basis, by small human groups during the Upper Palaeolithic. Their settlements are characterized by pavements of river pebbles and large schist slabs, on which were found thick deposits of the waste from making and trimming stone tools; the acid soil conditions militate against the survival of organic materials such as wood or bone. The activities carried out on these sites were the processing of animal carcasses and the working of hide, bone, wood, and stone. The sources of the stones used indicate that these groups would have moved over a large territory more than 200km in extent.

This form of hunter-gatherer economy lasted from around 22,000 BC for 10,000-12,000 years, at the end of the Magdalenian phase of the Upper Palaeolithic.

The region appears to have been devoid of human occupation until the 6th millennium BC, when incoming groups brought a sedentary Neolithic farming culture to the north-west of the Iberian peninsula. From then on there was continuous occupation through to the present day.

Description

Rock art began with the Upper Palaeolithic period, beginning around 30,000 BC in the Iberian peninsula. More than 300 Palaeolithic cave-art sites have been studied since the discovery in 1879 of Altamira (inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1985). Radiocarbon dating has permitted a relatively close dating of this corpus of material.

The rock art of the Côa valley occurs in three clearly defined clusters, separated by empty stretches. Furthest south is the small group of granite rock-shelter sites at Faia. Some 8km further downstream is the cluster on either side of the river at Quinta da Barca and Penascosa, where the rock is schist. Finally, there is a cluster consisting of a series of occurrences starting at Ribeira de Piscos and continuing down the Côa to its confluence with the Douro. It is postulated, however, that the gap between Faia and Quinta da Barca/Penascosa may be artificial, the Palaeolithic rock art on the soft stone in this stretch not having been capable of resisting natural weathering.

In all 214 decorated panels have been found in 22 separate groups (17 of these are included within the Côa Valley Archaeological Park, the subject of this nomination). Of these, fifteen contain art from the Palaeolithic on 194 panels. It is estimated that these contains at least 1200 Palaeolithic animal figures. The species represented are bovines (aurochs), equids (horses), cervids (red deer), caprines (ibex), and fish (with one apparent human caricature at Ribeira de Piscos). The proportions of each species represented vary from panel to panel and site to site. Bovines predominate, followed by equids; cervids and caprines are present in almost equal numbers.

It is very significant that these species duplicate those found in dated Upper Palaeolithic art elsewhere in south-western Europe. There is no example of any unequivocally domestic animals such as sheep or chickens that were absent from the Pleistocene fauna of the Iberian peninsula. The conventions used are also identical - size, invariable lateral views, twisted rendering of horns, distended bellies, absence of ground lines, etc. One convention that is unique to this group, however, is the frequent use of single bodies with two or even three heads, in an attempt to convey a sensation of movement. This is usually associated with horse figures.

The Palaeolithic artists used several different engraving techniques:

- Fine-line incision using a hard resistant tool (used for outlines and striated body fills);

- Pecking, ie direct or indirect percussion (outlines and details of body cover);
- Abrasion of the surface (to accentuate figures created by incision or pecking);
- Scraping (a technique for producing colour differentiation by the selective removal of surface layers).

In cases where only outlines of figures can be discerned, it is suggested that these may originally have been painted with mineral and vegetable pigments.

The number of engravings outlined by pecking and incision is almost identical. Most of the bovinds and equids are pecked, one-third of the caprines, and almost none of the cervids.

The Côa engravings represent a fully outdoor art (with the exception of those in the Faia rock shelters). This is usually the case in later prehistory (cp the World Heritage sites of Alta and Tanum in Norway and Sweden respectively), but it is almost unknown in the Palaeolithic. The engraved panels are always on vertical rock faces, but the possibility of their having disappeared from horizontal or inclined surfaces cannot be ruled out. Following the Palaeolithic tradition, surface variations of the rock itself is used effectively in order to impart relief to the figures.

The Côa material is not all Upper Palaeolithic; certain groups or panels are of later date, from the Neolithic to the early modern period, whilst many are palimpsests. Palaeolithic figures overlie one another or are overlaid with figures from one or more later periods. Stylistic analysis combined with study of the degree of weathering of the engraved lines and other marks has enabled scholars to differentiate not only between Palaeolithic and later material, but also between different stages in the Upper Palaeolithic itself, from the Gravettian through to the Magdalenian phases.

It is worth commenting on the scientific debate about the age of the Côa rock art during the mid 1990s, after it had first been brought to the attention of the scientific community. At that time some rock-art specialists were sceptical about the Upper Palaeolithic date assigned to the earlier material, basing their objections on geological considerations and radiocarbon analysis. However, subsequent research and analysis has refuted the arguments put forward at that time for an earliest date of around 5000 BC, and there is now general agreement among specialists that the Upper Palaeolithic dating is correct.

Management and Protection

Legal status

The Côa Valley archaeological sites were classified as a National Monument in 1997, under the provisions of the Portuguese Basic Heritage Law No 13 (1985). This requires classified monuments and the special protection zones round them (see below) to be preserved in their existing condition, any intervention or modification requiring authorization by the Ministry of Culture. The provisions of Government Resolutions

4/96 and 42/96, which established the Archaeological Park, also apply to the nominated property.

Large areas of the lower Côa region lying within the PAVC ZEP are already protected as a National Ecological Reserve (*Reserva Ecológica Nacional* - REN) and as a National Agricultural Reserve (*Reserva Agrícola Nacional* - REN), affording additional landscape protection to the environs of the archaeological sites

Management

The Côa River Archaeological Park (*Parque Arqueológico do Vale do Côa* - PAVC) is a department of the Portuguese Institute of Archaeology (*Instituto Português de Arqueologia* - IPA), created by Law No 117/97. This body is statutorily responsible for the management, protection, and presentation of the monuments and the creation of museum facilities. The area currently included within the Park is 208.5km², with a perimeter of 86.5km. However, it is intended that it should be extended when important rock-art sites are subsequently discovered outside existing boundaries.

The Basic Heritage Law requires the creation of a Special Protection Zone (*Zona Especial de Protecção* - ZEP) around National Monuments. The PAVC Directorate is also responsible for control over any proposed development or changes in the ZEP as well.

Ownership of properties within the PAVC and its ZEP is largely private. A programme of public acquisition of archaeological sites is in progress; elsewhere (including the ZEP) private owners of what is a primarily rural area are being encouraged to maintain their traditional agricultural activities.

The management of National Monuments and their ZEPs must be made through Preservation Plans (*Planos de Salvaguardia*) prepared by the Ministry of Culture. The Plan for the PAVC is in the course of preparation.

The PAVC currently has a permanent staff that includes five archaeologists, who are responsible for research and management of public access, and twelve trained guides who accompany visitors to the three sites open to the public, where there is 24-hour surveillance. All visits must be guided and groups are limited to a maximum of eight people. It is intended to open more sites in the years to come. There will be unrestricted access to the site at Canada do Inferno, where the museum complex is being built.

Conservation and Authenticity

Conservation history

The wealth and archaeological importance of the Palaeolithic and later rock art in the Côa valley became known to the scientific community in the early 1990s, when survey work was carried out in advance of the construction of a dam that would result in the flooding of the valley and the submergence of the rock art. It was suggested that submergence beneath the waters of the proposed artificial lake would ensure the long-term protection of the rock art, but this was disproved when

similar sites that had already been submerged by the construction of a minor dam nearby became available for study when the waters were temporarily drained. A vigorous public relations campaign was therefore launched by Portuguese archaeologists to ensure that the Côa rock art was not submerged, and this attracted international publicity. As a result of intense international public, political, and scientific pressure, the Portuguese authorities finally abandoned the dam project at the end of 1995. A special fund for the development of the region (PROCOA) was set up with a capital of US\$ 150 million by the Portuguese Government in 1996, and of this US \$16 million was made available for the establishment of PAVC up to 1999.

Studies on the problems of conservation of the rock art and its presentation to the public are in progress at the IPA, with international collaboration.

Authenticity

The authenticity of the rock art on the Côa valley sites is total.

Evaluation

Action by ICOMOS

An ICOMOS expert mission visited the nominated property in January 1998. ICOMOS also consulted several leading international experts in prehistoric rock art.

Qualities and comparative study

The Côa valley assemblage of engraved open-air Upper Palaeolithic rock art is a masterpiece of prehistoric art of a type not hitherto known in such quantity anywhere in the world.

ICOMOS recommendations for future action

There is some confusion in the nomination dossier as to precisely what is proposed for inscription on the World Heritage List. The justification supplied by the State Party and the original name (National Monument of the Côa River Valley Archaeological Sites) suggested that this nomination might be considered as a cultural landscape. However, scrutiny of the documentation indicated that what is being proposed for inscription is in fact a series of discrete rock-art sites, and that the surrounding landscape, which constitutes the Special Protection Zone (ZEP), is the proposed buffer zone. This would seem to ICOMOS to be a more appropriate property or group of properties for inscription, and in keeping with the name of the property in the dossier. The surrounding landscape is one of considerable character, but its historical relationship with the prehistoric sites is tenuous, since the archaeological record shows a long period of abandonment between c 10,000 and 5000 BC.

ICOMOS suggested that the title of the nominated property be revised to "Prehistoric rock-art sites in the Côa valley" so as to avoid further ambiguity, and this proposal was accepted by the State Party.

Brief description

The exceptional concentration of rock engravings from the Upper Palaeolithic period, from 22,000 to 10,000 BC, is the most outstanding example of the early manifestation of human artistic creation in this for anywhere in the world.

Recommendation

That this property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criteria i and iii*:

Criterion i: The Upper Palaeolithic rock-art of the Côa valley is an outstanding example of the sudden flowering of creative genius at the dawn of human cultural development.

Criterion iii: The Côa valley rock art throws light on the social, economic, and spiritual life on the life of the early ancestor of humankind in a wholly exceptional manner.

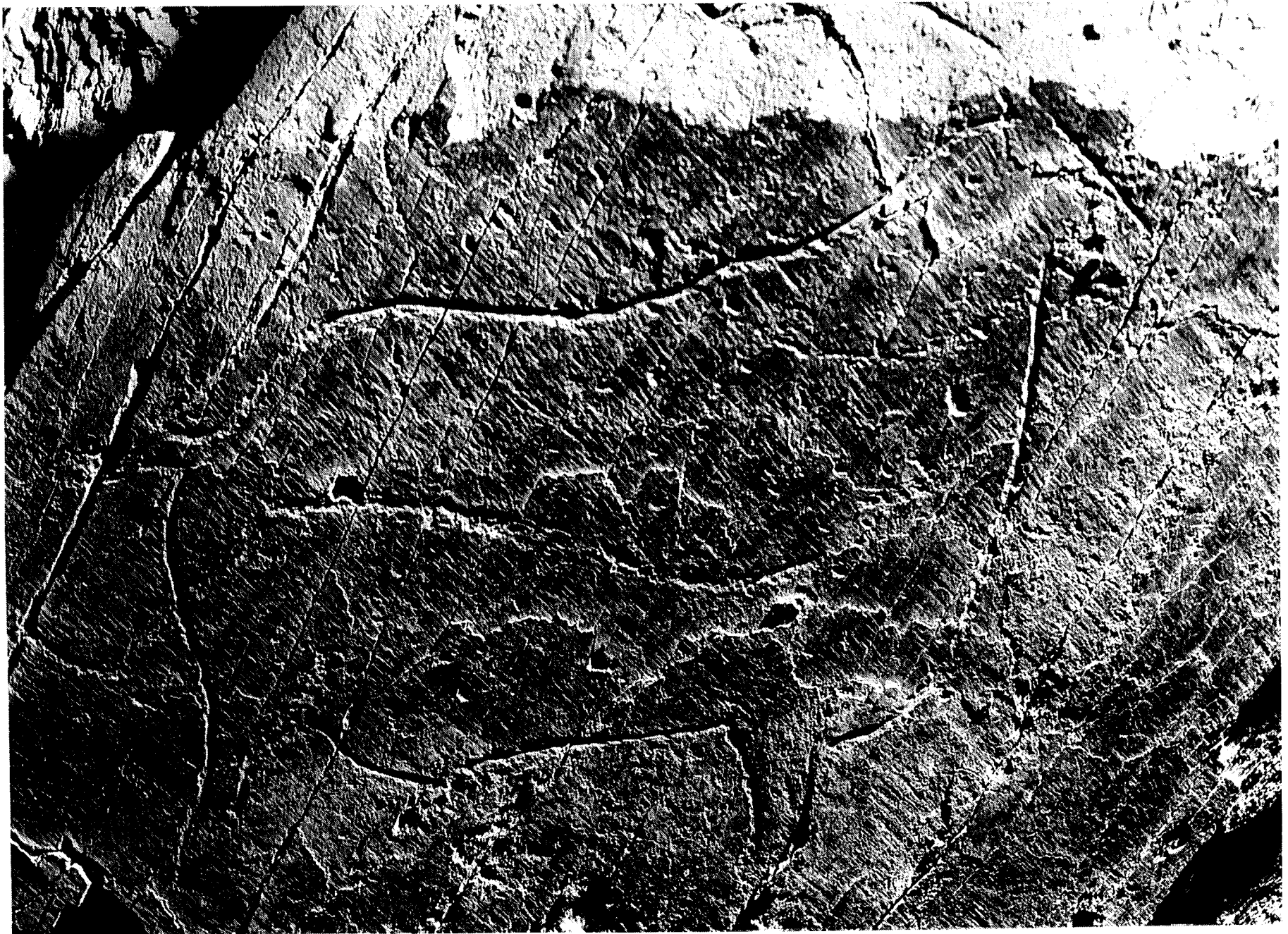
ICOMOS, October 1998

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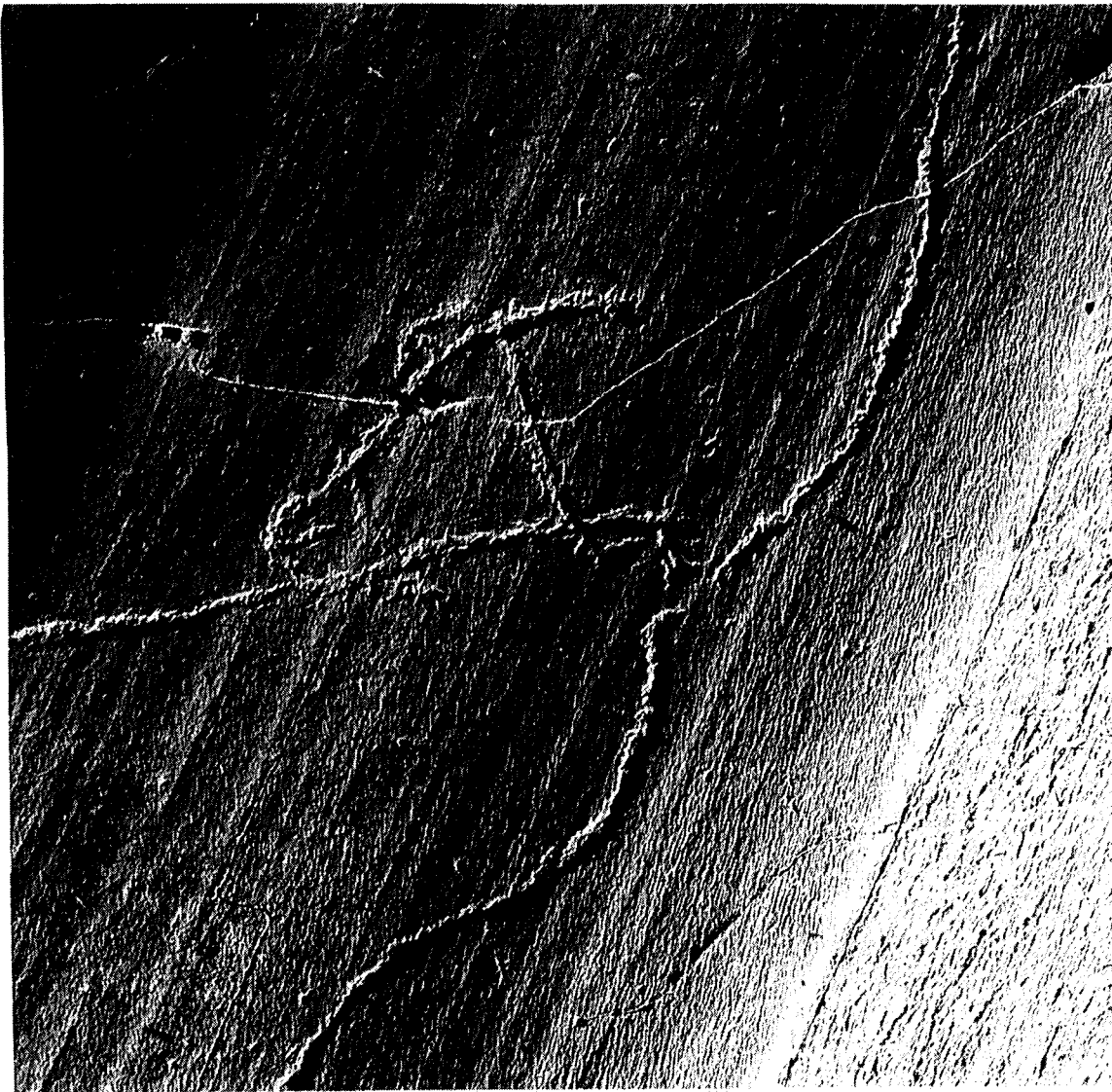
Legal status of sites
in the lower Côa Valley



Monument national des sites archéologiques de la vallée du fleuve Côa /
National Monument of the Côa River Valley Archaeological Sites :
Délimitation du parc archéologique / Archeological park delimitation



**Monument national des sites archéologiques de la vallée du fleuve CÔa / National Monument of the CÔa River Valley Archaeological Sites :
Gravure d'ibex / Engraving of ibex**



**Monument national des sites archéologiques de la vallée du fleuve CÔa / National Monument of the CÔa River Valley Archaeological Sites :
Gravure de chevaux / Engraving of horses**