

Images of an equestrian aristocracy in the rock art of southern Europe in the 1st millennium BC

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Abstract: Regarding the 1st millennium BC there are many archaeological evidences of the use of the horse as a status symbol, in the context of complex societies. This animal, which among some peoples had also a mythological character, appears often represented, besides other examples, on rock art, pottery, sculpture, votive figurines, coins and also in bronze fibulae in the shape of horse riders.

Among the examples of the horse as a status symbol some of the most expressive appear in rock art representations in countries from Southern Europe, such as Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal.

In this paper the author presents several rock art examples of warriors on horseback from the mentioned countries, being some of them the result of his own fieldwork and others collected through iconographic research.

Key-words: Rock art, equestrian aristocracy, Southern Europe, 1st Millennium BC.

Resumo: Relativamente ao I milénio a. C. há diversas evidências arqueológicas do uso do cavalo como um símbolo de estatuto, no contexto de sociedades complexas. Este animal, que entre diversos povos teve também um carácter mitológico, surge frequentemente representado, entre outros exemplos, em arte rupestre, cerâmica, escultura, estatuetas votivas, moedas e ainda em fibulas de bronze com a forma de cavalo e cavaleiro.

Entre os exemplos do cavalo como um símbolo de estatuto, alguns dos mais expressivos aparecem em representações em arte rupestre de países do sul da Europa como a Grécia, Itália, Espanha e Portugal.

Neste artigo, o autor apresenta diversos exemplos de arte rupestre com guerreiros a cavalo, existentes nos países referidos, sendo alguns o resultado de trabalho de campo e outros recolhidos através de investigação iconográfica.

Palavras-Chave: Arte rupestre, aristocracia equestre, Europa do Sul, I milénio a.C.

1. INTRODUCTION

After the process of domestication, the horse became a help in hunting, allowing pursuing, with a larger speed, different species of animals. This kind of activity contributed for developing the skills in horse riding, which would be fundamental for its use as a “war machine”, either attached to chariots, or ridden by warriors that would have advantage over others fighting on foot. Indeed, organized hunting, with examples that are well represented in rock art, requires, besides the control of the horse, the efficient handling of weapons such as the spear or the bow and arrow.

In many cultures from Eurasia, the horse was considered to be an animal of divine origin, always related to the aristocratic sphere, aspects that are deeply connected with its mythical and ritual background, pre-

senting this way a complex symbolism documented by classical literature, iconography and, inclusively, by traditions kept until almost today (Almagro-Gorbea and Torres, 1999).

Within the European stratified societies from Late Bronze Age and the Iron Age, the horse acquires great importance regarding simultaneously a social, military, economic and religious level, becoming this way associated with elites of an equestrian character, which constitute a true aristocracy, with several examples in the European societies from the 1st millennium BC (Coimbra, 2017). Regarding this period there are many archaeological evidences of the use of the horse as a status symbol, in the context of complex societies. This animal, appears then often represented, besides other examples, on rock art, pottery, sculpture, votive figurines, coins, and

also in bronze fibulae in the shape of horse riders, found in the centre of the Iberian Peninsula (Coimbra, 2013). Among the examples of the horse as a status symbol some of the most expressive appear in rock art representations in countries from Southern Europe, such as Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal, which we present in the next pages, being some of them the result of the author's fieldwork and others collected through iconographic research.

This article was initially written with footnotes. Since the editorial guidelines do not allow them, they were included in the text between parentheses.

2. NORTHERN GREECE

In the North of Greece there are many rock art representations of warriors on horseback, exhibiting several weapons at the same time, in order to testify their honour and prestige. The main examples can be found in the region of *Philippi* (Kavala) (Iliadis, 2007; Dimitriadis & Iliadis, 2007; Coimbra & Iliadis, 2011; 2016; Coimbra, et al., 2011; Coimbra, 2015a; 2015b) and of Mount Pangaion (Moutsopoulos, 1971; Iliadis, 2015), which, due to several reasons, has been less studied than *Philippi*. Besides these two regions, there is an interesting image of a horse rider with a long spear at the Gorge of Aggitis, in the Prefecture of *Serres* (Iliadis et al., 2012: 8).

Regarding the region of *Philippi*, where the author was a member of fieldwork projects in 2005, 2006 and 2010, there are two rock art sites with the mentioned depictions: Prophet Elias and Mana, each one with three rocks. (In Mana there are four rocks, but, so far, on Rock 2 there are no depictions of horse riders. However, this large outcrop is partially buried, with a modern wall as a land mark over it. In the future, if it will be possible to excavate the rest of this rock, new engravings may appear).

All the engravings were made by pecking technique on marble outcrops.

Rock 1 of Prophet Elias has one of the most interesting representations of what can be considered a chief or a very important warrior on horseback, exhibiting several weapons at the same time (Iliadis, 2007: Fig.15; Coimbra, 2015b: Fig.16).

On Rock 2, of the same site, there are several horse riders with weapons, but one example deserves to be highlighted. It consists in a horse rider with several weapons and a conic hat or a ceremonial helmet (Fig.1), which is very similar to the golden examples found at *Schifferstadt* (Germany), dating from Late Bronze Age (Menghin 2000), being another element of prestige present in these engravings.

Rock 3 of Prophet Elias has the largest concentration of horse riders with weapons (Images on Iliadis,

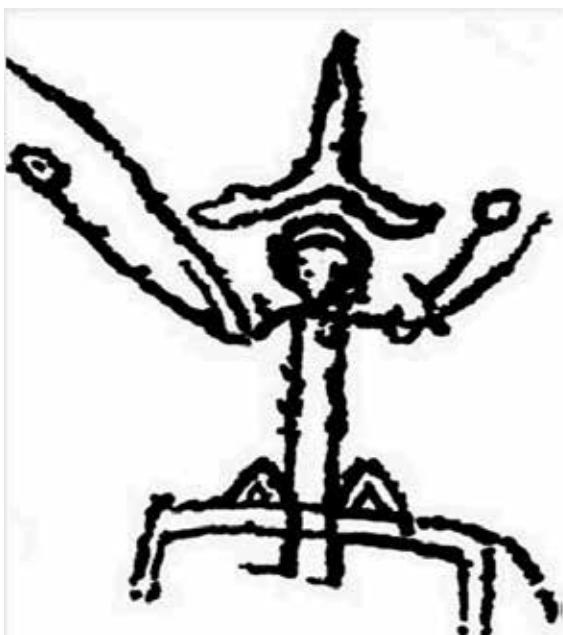


Fig.1 - Horserider from Prophet Elias (adapted from Iliadis, 2007) and ceremonial golden hat from Schifferstadt (after Menghin, 2000).
 Fig.1 - Cavaleiro de Profeta Elias (adaptado de Iliadis, 2007) e chapéu cerimonial em ouro, de Schifferstadt (segundo Menghin, 2000).

2007; Dimitriadis & Iliadis, 2007; Coimbra et al., 2011; Coimbra, 2015a; 2015b).

On the top West of this rock, facing east, a figure of a horse rider with a helmet and feathers (?) is holding a bow and arrow, besides other possible representations of weapons, very eroded (Fig.2). Near this engraving, a horse rider with a spear has also the depiction of a possible armour (Fig.3).

In the rock art site of *Mana*, Rock 1 has the largest concentration of horse riders (Iliadis, 2007; Coimbra, 2015b).

There is a large figure of a horse rider with an armour, a long spear, bow and arrow, sword and other possible weapons, surrounded by other smaller representations of warriors on horseback. This larger figure was certainly the depiction of a chief or of a very important warrior, among a society with different hierarchies.

In a general way, the horseriders of Philippi seem to follow the descriptions from *Iliad* regarding the ideal Bronze Age warrior, “a hero like Achilles,



Fig.2 - Horse rider with helmet.(Photo: F. A. Coimbra; Drawing: Adapted from Iliadis, 2007)
Fig.2 - Cavaleiro com capacete.(Foto: F. A. Coimbra; desenho: adaptado de Iliadis, 2007)

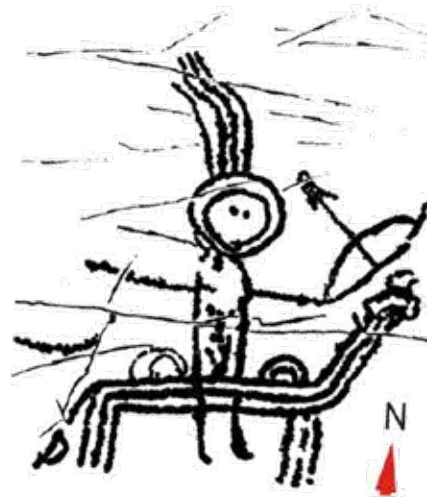


Fig.3 - Horse rider with possible armour. Tracing over polyvinyl plastic sheet.(Photo: F. A. Coimbra)
Fig.3 - Cavaleiro com possível couraça. Levantamento sobre folha de plástico polivinilo.

whose motivation was personal glory, a self-centered ideal typical of tribal warfare” (Anthony & Brown, 2011: 156).

Rock 3 of *Mana* has the representation of a very interesting hunting scene, constituted by two horseriders (one of them with a bow and arrow, besides other weapons, much eroded), which are running after two preys, with the help of several dogs (Coimbra & Iliadis, 2011: Fig.3; 2016: Fig.1). A third warrior on horseback, with several weapons, depicted on the end of this scene, seems to be waiting for striking the chased animals (Fig.4). One of the preys looks like a horse, as it seems to happen on a painting from the tomb of Alexandrovo (Bulgaria), dated from the

4th century BC (Kitov, 2001).

Interestingly, during Bronze Age, in Kazakhstan, horses were hunt to be eaten in mortuary rites (Outram et al. 2012), happening the same situation in Spain, at Atapuerca, after information available at the Museum of Human Evolution, in Burgos.

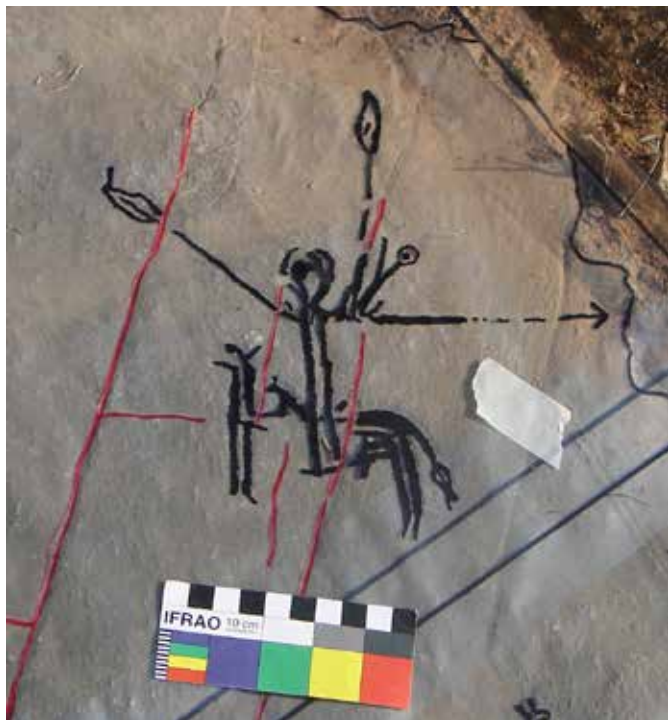


Fig.4 - Third horserider from Rock 3 of Mana. (Tracing and photo: F. A. Coimbra)

Fig.4 - Terceiro cavaleiro da Rocha 3 de Mana (Levantamento e foto: F. A. Coimbra)

3. VALCAMONICA, ITALY

Due to its hundreds of thousands of engravings, Valcamonica is the largest rock art concentration in Europe, “which makes it one of the most important archaeological sources in order to understand the way of life and thought of people living here during post-glacial age” (Marretta, 2011: 8).

The biggest part of the rock art from this valley in the Italian Alps is dated from the Iron Age, being made by the *Camunni*, a population that lived there before the Roman conquest. The rock art figures are gathered around some focal points in the valley, appearing the representations of warriors, with weapons, on horseback mainly in areas such as Naquane, Foppe di Nadro, Seradina-Bedolina, Pià d’Ort and Paspardo. (Naquane, Foppe di Nadro and Seradina-Bedolina

were visited in several different years by the author, being the examples from the other two areas taken from mentioned bibliography).

Among the rock art from these sites there are some interesting cases representing difference in social status. For example, on Rock 27 of Foppe di Nadro (Fossati, et al., 1991), there’s a good representation of an image of equestrian aristocracy, where a human figure (with a lower status) holds, by the reins, a horse where a “great lord” is seated. Using here a medieval terminology, we can say that the man on the horse is a “knight” and the man on foot is a “squire” (Coimbra, 2017).

Hunting scenes with men on horseback are considered to be representative of a high social status (Fossati, 1991; Marretta, 2018). For example, in the central part of Rock 12 of Seradina it is possible to observe some figures of that kind, being one of the more impressive the case constituted by four deer, followed by five dogs and five horse riders with spears. Near this group, there is another one with three deer, three dogs and three men, constituting the so called “processions” (Marretta, 2018). (Processions of this kind, with chased animals, followed by dogs and hunter appear also on Iron Age pottery from Burgstall, near the border between Austria and Hungary (Fossati, 1991: Fig.114.1).

There are also other cases of hunting scenes with only one horse rider and its prey, as in happens, for example, at Rock 12 of Seradina (Idem, ibidem) and at Rock 7 of Coren (Pià d’Ort), being here the chased animal a goat (Sansoni & Gavaldo, 1995: Fig.16), instead of the more frequent deer that appears on the other scenes.

Another type of procession, without including hunting scenes, appears on Rock 1 from Naquane, in the so-called *Processione del Capo* (Procession of the Chief), where a horserider with a spear, a shield and a crested helmet is followed by some warriors on foot, constituting another example of difference in social status.

Other interesting cases of warriors on horseback can be seen at Naquane, as it happens on Rock 1 (Fig.5), on Rock 50 and on Rock 57, among other examples. In this rock art site there is the particularity of some warriors being represented standing on the back of the horse instead of sitting (Fig.6; Fig.7), what is observed also at Rock 39E of Le Crus (Pià d’Ort), on a scene with three men, each one with a spear, standing on the back of horses (Fossati, 1991: Fig.5; Sansoni & Gavaldo, 1995: Fig.6).

At the place called *Forra di Paspardo* there are very unique paintings dated from Iron Age, depict-

ing horse riders with weapons, as for example “*il cavaliere rosso*” (the red horse rider), with a crested helmet and an axe in his right hand. These figures of warriors on horseback are considered to be important images during Iron Age, representing aristocratic characters, heroes or even divinities (Collela & Sansoni, 2010).

4. SPAIN: NORTH MESETA AND EXTREMADURA

Spain is an area with a strong Celtic Influence. It is well known that “many Celtic societies differentiated people according to both social and religious precepts”

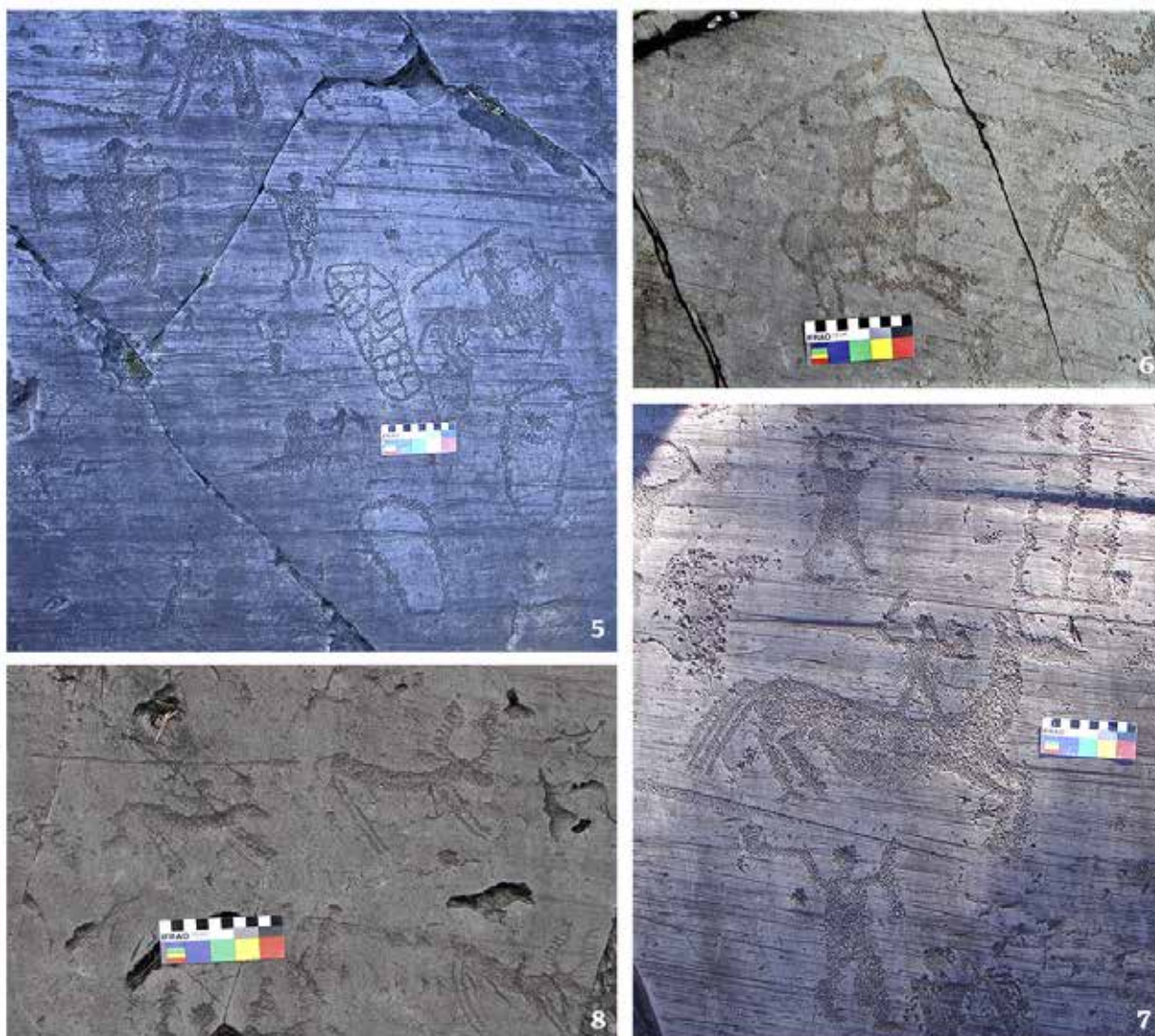


Fig.5 - Rock 1 of Naquane. Man on horseback with a spear, associated with footprints. (Photo: F. A. Coimbra).

Fig.5 - Rocha 1 de Naquane. Homem a cavalo com uma lança, associado com podomorfos (Foto: F. A. Coimbra)

Fig.6 - Rock 1 of Naquane. Man with a spear standing on the horse. (Photo: F. A. Coimbra).

Fig.6 - Rocha 1 de Naquane. Homem com uma lança, em pé sobre o cavalo (Photo: F. A. Coimbra)

Fig.7 - Rock 50 of Naquane. Warrior with sword and shield standing on a horse. (Photo: F. A. Coimbra).

Fig.7 - Rocha 50 de Naquane. Guerreiro com espada e escudo em pé sobre um cavalo (Photo: F. A. Coimbra).

Fig.8 - Man with a spear, on horseback, hunting a deer. Detail of Rock 12 of Seradina-Bedolina. (Photo: F. A. Coimbra).

Fig.8 - Homem com uma lança, a cavalo, caçando um veado. Detalhe da Rocha 12 de Seradina-Bedolina . (Photo: F. A. Coimbra).

(Wait 1995: 509). For example, in the Celtiberian area (North Meseta), there were equestrian elites that could have had symbols to distinguish them from the rest of the society, as it seems to be the case of several bronze fibulae in the shape of a horse (Fig.9) and sometimes of horse and rider (Almagro-Gorbea, & Torres, 1999) (Fibulae as the symbol of distinguished members of society are present also some centuries later in Roman Dacia, in the 1st half of the 3rd century AD, where the members of the Illyrian chivalry used those objects with the shape of a swastika constituted by four heads of horses (Coimbra, 2017: Fig.7).

Besides those particular fibulae, the Celtiberian tribes from *Numancia* used a bronze banner in the shape of a horseman sitting in a double headed horse (Almagro-Gorbea & Lorrio, 2004; Royo, 2005), seeming to be a representation of the *heros equitans*, with the aim of justifying a mythical past and legitimate the social power of the equestrian elites (Coimbra and Oosterbeek, 2012), which appear also depicted on pottery (Fig.10). The idea of the need of legitimating the social power of these dominating equestrian elites, justified by a mythical past, can also be seen on G. Rossi (2009) and on V. Tirador (2011).

According to M. Almagro-Gorbea (2005), the *heros*



Fig.9 - Fibula in the shape of a horse. (Photo: F. A. Coimbra)

Fig.9 - Fibula com a forma de um cavalo (Photo: F. A. Coimbra)

equitans, the hero horseman, is the hero founder of the city or of the social group, always strictly associated to the horse that presents the character of a local divinity.

In the Iberian Peninsula, these equestrian aristocracies constituted a social class that controlled the political and economic power in the pre-Roman forti-

fied settlements, in a similar process documented in the entire Ancient World since Greece, the Etruscan, Rome and the Celtic world beyond the Pyrenees and the Alps (Almagro-Gorbea, 2005).

Scenes with differences of social status among warriors can be seen, for example, in the rock art from *Cerro de San Isidro* (Domingo Garcia, Segovia),



Fig.10 - Pottery from *Numancia* depicting a warrior and his horse. (Photo: F. A. Coimbra)

Fig.10 - Cerâmica de Numância representando um guerreiro e o seu cavalo (Photo: F. A. Coimbra)

where it's possible to observe two of them on horseback, exhibiting a sword and a shield and other two on foot, being one with only a sword and the other with what seems to be a spear, not having shields (Fig.11). This social difference appears in the same province of Segovia, at *Sierra de Guadarrama*, in a scene where a horserider has a sword and a shield, surrounded by other warriors on foot, some of them having also a sword and shield, others with clubs (?) and finally others without any weapons (Fig.12). In the top of this scene it seems to be another representation of a man on horseback with a possible shield but it is unclear, probably due to weathering of the engravings and also to some cracks on the outcrop. In the province of Soria there are several examples of horseriders with spears, as it happens at rock art sites such as *Barranco de la Mata*, *Tiermes-Sotillos* and *Cañada del Monte* (Gómez Barrera, 1992; Royo Guillen, 2004: Fig.31).

Hunting scenes are also documented, as for example, in some engravings from the Hillfort of *Yecla de Yeltes* (Salamanca), where a horse rider with a spear runs after two preys (Royo Guillen, 2004: Fig. 34). However this kind of scenes is less frequent than the examples that occur more often in Valcamonica. Besides the previous mentioned examples, done by

pecking, at the place called *Arroyo del Horcajo I* (Zaragoza) there is a horserider with a long spear (Royo Guillen, 2015: Fig.20), elaborated by incised filiform technique, which was used also in another example from *Molino Manzán* (Cheles), in Extremadura. (Hipolito Collado, Pers. Comm.)

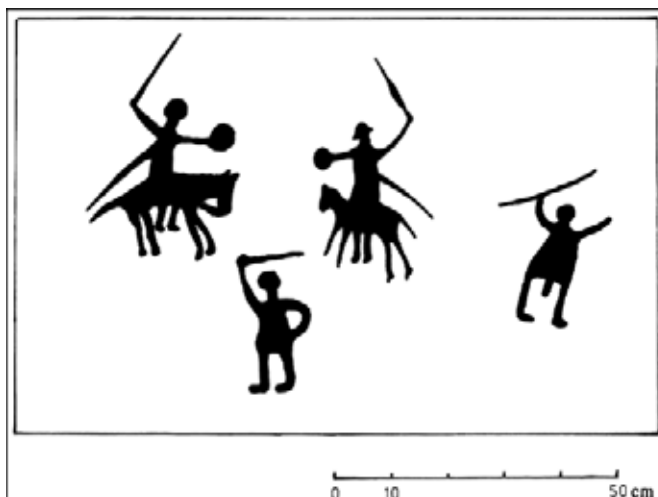


Fig.11 - Warriors with weapons on horseback. Cerro de San Isidro de Domingo García. (After Royo Guillen, 2004)

Fig.11 - Guerreiros armados a cavalo. Cerro de San Isidro de Domingo García. (Segundo Royo Guillen, 2004)



Fig.12 - Engravings from Sierra de Guadarrama. (After Royo Guillen, 2004)

Fig.12 - Gravuras rupestres da Serra de Guadarrama (Segundo Royo Guillen, 2004)

5. PORTUGAL: THE VALLEYS OF THE CÔA, DOURO, SABOR AND GUADIANA RIVERS

In what concerns the Côa Valley, the majority of the engravings attributed to the Iron Age is concentrated

near the confluence of this river with the Douro (Baptista, 2000; Reis, 2012, 2013, 2014), being all these examples produced on schist outcrops by incised filiform technique. Despite the advances in prospection and the discovery of new sites, so far only fifty panels of 455 rocks from this period were traced, being the largest part still unpublished (Luís, 2015). For example, there are mentions to figures of warriors on horseback from places such as *Cavalaria*, *Canada da Moreira*, *Orgal* and *Meijapão*, among others from the Côa Valley (Baptista & Reis, 2008b), generally without any good images available.

Regarding the published examples, one of the more interesting is a horserider with a spear, which is overlapping a Palaeolithic engraving, from Rock 1 of *Vermelhana* (Fig.13). The same rock has another case of a warrior with a spear, on horseback (Abreu et al. 2000: Fig.7).

In the place called *Paço*, an interesting schist plaque was discovered (Luís, 2015), having representations of horseriders with weapons (Fig.14).

On Rock 3 of *Vermelhana* an interesting scene of a duel is represented, where two warriors throw spears, to each other, while one of them has his horse attached with the reins to his belt (Abreu et al. 2000: Fig.2; Luís, 2008: Fig.6). The use of fighting on foot was practised by some Protohistoric peoples from the region, after an evident demonstration of prestige (Luís, 2008).



Fig.13 - Horse rider with a spear. Rock 1 of *Vermelhana*. (Photo: Mário Varela Gomes)
Fig.13 - Cavaleiro com lança. Rocha 1 da *Vermelhana* (Foto: Mário Varela Gomes)



Fig.14 - Horserider with spear from *Paço*. (After Luís, 2015)
Fig.14 - Cavaleiro com lança de *Paço* (Segundo Luís, 2015)

Indeed, as A. M. Baptista (2000: 28) well stated, “the iconography of this period reflects the typical mentality of highly stratified warrior societies – representation of human figures provided with weapons on horseback, either integrating scenes of ritual fighting, or hunting with spears and accompanied by dogs”, as it happens also in the rock art from other countries presented in this article.

One interesting example of a hunting scene appears on Rock 23 from *Vale da Casa*, with the representation of a warrior with a dart, hunting a deer, assisted by dogs (Baptista, 2000: Fig. 9). This rock art complex is located in the Douro valley, unfortunately submerged by the waters of the dam of *Pocinho*.

Near the mouth of the Côa River, there’s another deer hunting scene, on Rock 177, with the representation of two horseriders and two warriors on foot, all with darts, following a deer (Baptista & Reis, 2008a; Luís, 2015: 65). In the North of Portugal there is another deer hunting scene, found on a rock from the Hillfort of *Sanfins*, dating from Iron Age, but its location is outside the areas studied here.

Regarding the valley of the Sabor River, archaeological excavations in the fortified Iron Age settlement of *Castelinho* (Santos et al., 2012), in the municipality of Torre de Moncorvo, allowed discovering 521 schist plaques with incised rock art with filiform grooves, having some of them representations of horseriders (Fig.15) with weapons (Neves & Figueiredo, 2015),

existing also other cases only with the depiction of horses (Silva, 2020). The fact of having been discovered in an archaeological context is an extremely important contribute for the precision of the chronology of the Iron Age Rock Art of the Côa Valley (Luís, 2015), since the iconography from both sites is quite similar.

Interestingly, in some plaques from *Castelinho*, the riders are depicted standing on the back of the horse (Neves & Figueiredo, 2015: Fig.8), as it happens in several examples from Valcamonica mentioned above. The hillfort of *Crestelos* (Silva et al. 2016), in the Municipality of Mogadouro, was discovered some years after *Castelinho*, revealing 104 plaques with similar figures (Fig.16). However, as it happens at *Castelinho*, the majority have geometric representations.

According to Silva (2020), the analysis of the contexts, of the iconographic parallels and of the weapons that appear depicted with the horseriders allows to date these plaques in a period between the 4th and the 1st century BC

Interestingly, in the Guadiana Valley, on Rock 3 of

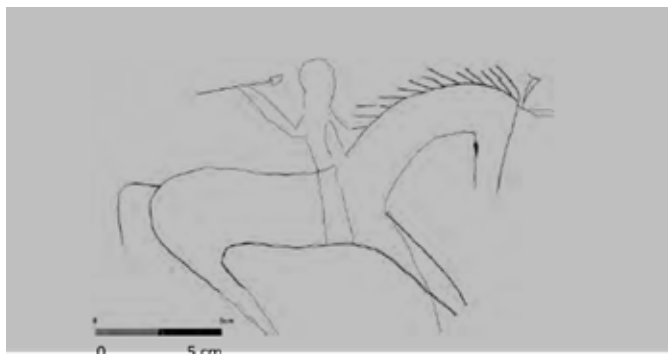


Fig. 15 - Plaque 92 from *Castelinho* with warrior on horseback. (After Silva, 2020)

Fig. 15 - Placa 92 de *Castelinho* com guerreiro a cavalo (Segundo Silva, 2020)

Mocissos there is another scene of a warrior standing in the back of his horse, holding a spear and a possible shield (Baptista, 2002: Fig.8), seeming to be guided by the animal and by three water birds, all in the same direction (Coimbra, 2013). Unfortunately this and other rocks of the valley are under the waters of the *Alqueva* dam, having been the time for study this rock art site very limited for the team that

worked there. That is probably why the indication of the north on the only drawing available is lacking, what doesn't allow finding out if the animals are



Fig. 16 - Plaque from *Crestelos* with horseriders. (After Silva, 2020)
Fig. 16 - Placa de *Crestelos* com cavaleiros. (Segundo Silva, 2020)

moving to the west, where, in Celtic mythology, is the access to the Otherworld (Green, 1992).

6. CONCLUSIONS

A recent review of the iconography on Late Bronze Age pottery from the eastern Mediterranean reveals that “horseback riding, which is widely held to be an Iron Age development (of especially the 9th and 8th centuries BC), was practised by members of the aristocracies throughout the eastern Mediterranean as early as the 13th century BC” (Kelder 2012: 1). They seem to fit the descriptions from *Iliad* regarding the ideal Bronze Age warrior, whose motivation was personal glory, a self-centered ideal typical of tribal warfare (Anthony & Brown, 2011).

However, the examples of horseriders from Northern Greece seem to have a more recent chronology. For the moment, risking advancing a date, it seems possible that these representations may have occurred in a time span from the 6th century BC to the 3rd century BC, or maybe even earlier (Coimbra, 2015b). In what concerns the rock art from this region it must be taken in consideration that the area of Mount Pangaion is less studied than the examples from Philippi, what can lead, in the future, to new developments in the chronological framework of these engravings.

All the rock art examples presented in this article seem to correspond to the representation of a true equestrian aristocracy, probably evoking the heros

equitans – the hero horse rider – with the aim of justifying a mythical past and legitimate their social power (Royo, 2005; Tirador García, 2011).

Furthermore, besides other initial intentions, there seems to be also a relation between the representations of horseriders with weapons and their voyage to the Otherworld. Greco-Latin classical literature and iconography available on pottery, jewellery, sculpture, coins and tombstones from the 2nd half of the first millennium BC, from several parts of Europe, reveal the horse as a guide of souls in the afterlife, having therefore a psychopomp character also as other zoomorphic figures such as water birds.

The association of the horse with a solar symbolism and the belief in an Afterlife (Quesada Sanz & Gabaldón Martínez, 2010; Coimbra, 2017) leads to the existence of rock art scenes where equestrian elites are represented as distinguished ancestors, with the intention of being perpetuated in the iconography of the 1st millennium BC in Southern Europe and beyond.

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