

# **THE EQUUS PROJECT: A NEW PARADIGM FOR GALICIAN AND NORTHERN PORTUGAL'S ROCK ART**



**Eloy Martínez Soto**  
**Xosé Lois Vilar Pedreira**  
**Xilberte Manso de la Torre**

Presentation delivered at the 20th International Rock Art Conference IFRAO 2018 (Val Camonica, Darfo Boario Terme, Italy, 30th August 2018) during the session *And the Holocene Arrived: Post-Palaeolithic Rock Art Around the World*

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***The Equus Project: a new paradigm for Galician and Northern Portugal's rock art***

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Over a century of research on Galician and Northern Portuguese rock art has consistently identified the deer as the most frequently represented animal, relegating the presence of equids to a marginal, anecdotal role. Within this naturalistic style, equids typically appear only within deer hunting scenes, where the deer dominates the iconographic landscape of Galician petroglyphs.

However, a clear paradigm shift in zoomorphic representation emerges, with its natural boundary located at the Bay of Vigo. South of this point, the deer takes on a secondary role, becoming less prominent in hunting scene engravings. In this new context, deer are pushed into the background by the omnipresence of equids, which establish a new model for hunting scenes in the northwestern Iberian Peninsula.

Equids are depicted in diverse scenarios: alone, in groups, ridden, harassed, or even hunted by humans. As in the deer hunting scenes, equids are often surrounded by anthropomorphic figures on foot or horseback, aided by canines, and shown injured or caught in traps. Despite the change in the central figure, the same iconographic discourse is maintained, reflecting a shift in symbolic focus while preserving traditional narrative structures.

**Keywords:** new paradigm, Equidae, Galician-Portuguese, rock art, Equus Project.

## 1. Introduction.

The growing interest in Galician and Portuguese petroglyphs over the past few years has sparked increased attention among archaeologists and, importantly, archaeology enthusiasts. This renewed focus has led to a broader consideration of the spatial distribution of these engravings, extending beyond the areas previously suspected by many scholars<sup>1</sup>. In this context, it is not surprising that changes in the spatial distribution of outdoor engravings are closely linked to the active collaboration of dedicated prospectors and archaeology aficionados.

Although these collaborators lack formal training in archaeology, they have significantly contributed to expanding current knowledge of Galician and Portuguese rock art. Their efforts have enabled the study of new petroglyphs in locations previously considered insignificant or devoid of representations in specialized literature.

It is precisely within this framework that we, the authors of this paper, seek to draw attention not only to a particular style of naturalistic art from the southern margin of the Bay of Vigo—an area already well-documented in existing literature<sup>2</sup>—but also to distinct representational patterns concerning equids and deer in this region. Specifically, equids are commonly depicted as domesticated or ridden, while deer are primarily shown in hunting scenes. We propose that this distinctive style be recognized as the *Galician-Portuguese Rock Art Group*<sup>3</sup>.

In the following sections, we will analyze several petroglyphs currently under study within the *Equus Project*, which we consider exceptional for several reasons: the depiction of a unique theme (the hunting and harassing of equids), the specific iconography employed in these engravings, the notable absence of deer in most of the petroglyphs, and the strategic placement of these engravings within distinct natural landscapes.

### 1.1. The Equus Project: much more than petroglyphs

The Miñoráns Study Institute (*Instituto de Estudos Miñoráns*) is a non-profit organization dedicated to the conservation, research, protection, and dissemination of cultural heritage and archaeology in general, with a particular focus on petroglyphs. Similarly, the institute is committed to the study and preservation of wild horses, commonly known in Galicia and Portugal as *garrons*, which inhabit the Val Miñor mountains. Through the *Equus Project*, we aim to integrate and structure these parallel and complementary lines of research.

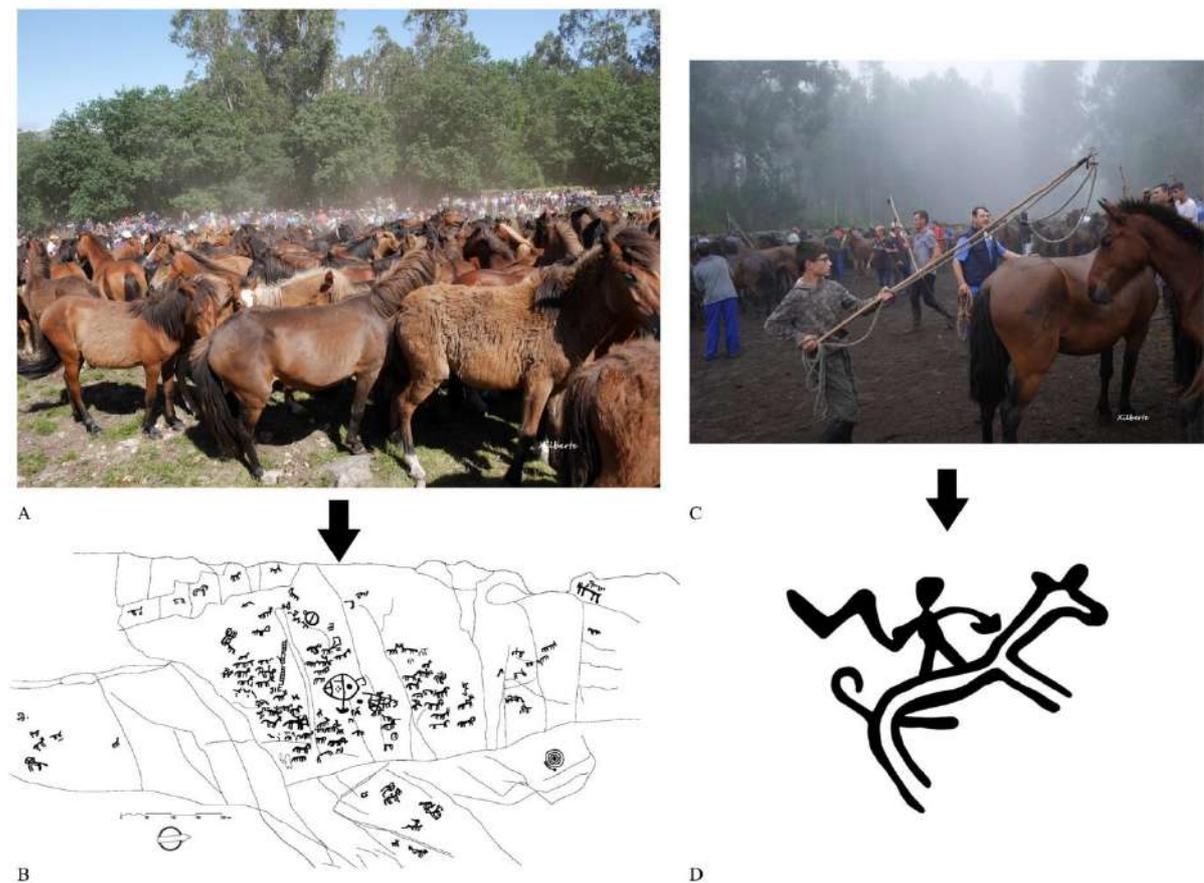
Although it is not the central theme of this paper, it is necessary to briefly elaborate on the *garrons*. These wild horses, a key subject of our research, are found in the mountainous regions of Galicia and northern Portugal. They also inhabit areas in the southern Iberian Peninsula, albeit within different geographical, administrative, and environmental contexts. Most importantly, *garrons* are currently classified as an endangered species, highlighting the urgent need for conservation efforts.



**FIG.1.** Some *Curro*'s scenes. **A.** Owners leading the garrons to the San Cibrán's *Curro* (Gondomar, Galicia). **B.** Garron's crowd at Torroña's *Curro* (Oia, Galicia). **C.** Garrons and owners inside the A Valga's *Curro* (Oia, Galicia). A huge enclosure made of stones. **D.** A Valga's *Curro*. Aerial view.

In the framework of the Equus Project, we are collaborating with owner's affiliations in the field of legal administration, by trying to explain to the autonomous authorities the real facts surrounding the garrons in the Val Miñor mountains and lower Miño (*Baixo Miño* area). The objective is to get rid of the false label that compares wild horses with unclaimed cattle, since they are neither cattle nor unclaimed or ownerless.

Actually, garrons are wild animals with owners, that once a year, during traditional festivities that are done all over Galicia known as *curros* (FIG.1) or *rapa das bestas*, what occurs in this festivity, is that the owners gather the herds in an enclosure, normally made of stones, and there, they choose the ones they own and they brand them and cut their mane. This is also done with the new garrons, that afterwards they are kept and bred.



**FIG.2.** A comparative from the approach of ethnoarchaeology. **A.** A herd of garrons being gathered in Torroña's *Curro*. **B.** Hunting scene in *Outeiro dos Lameiros* petroglyph<sup>4</sup> (Baiona, Galicia) After Méndez Quintas, E., & Vilar Pedreira, X.L. (2009) **C.** A man using a hatler stick to get the garrons out of the *curro*. **D.** Horseback rider using a hatler stick in *As Covas de Amorín* petroglyph.

Felipe Bárcena, a Galician zoologist, suggests that the *garrons* found in Galicia, northern Portugal, and Cantabria may be the oldest wild horses still in existence today<sup>5</sup>. This raises an important question: Could this be possible? Although this hypothesis cannot yet be genetically confirmed—as research is still ongoing—from an ethnoarchaeological perspective, we believe that these *garrons* may have served as the equids that inspired our ancestors when depicting hunting scenes on petroglyphs (FIG.2).

## 1.2. The methodology and the field work

The study of equid petroglyph representations in the region spanning southern Pontevedra and northern Portugal is a key focus of our research. This work began over ten years ago and was relaunched in 2015 under the name *Equus Project*, structured as follows:

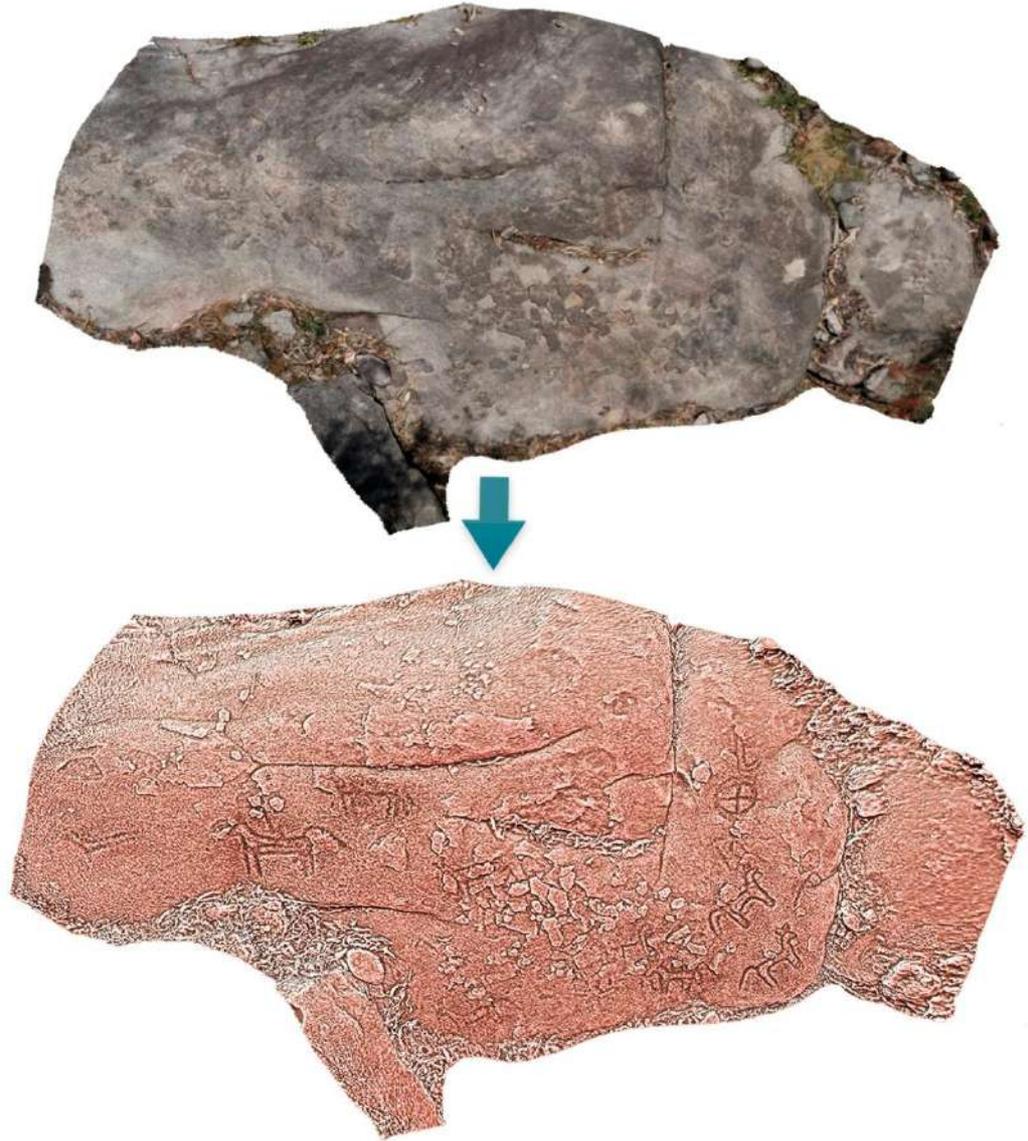
- **Identification of petroglyphs** featuring equid representations.
- **Graphic documentation** of the petroglyphs through techniques such as oblique-light photography, frottage, and photogrammetry.
- **Development of a virtual museum** aimed at raising awareness through online platforms.
- **Definition of the archaeological context** and the geographical distribution of the petroglyphs.
- **Creation of descriptive records** detailing the represented elements, using both micro- and macro-geographic analysis to support comprehensive conclusions.

The data collected will serve as the basis for analyzing stylistic patterns, iconographic discourse, motif frequency, and other relevant aspects of this set of petroglyphs.

### 1.2.1. Photogrammetry: An “Old-new” Ally for the Study of Petroglyphs

One of the greatest challenges in this project is achieving accurate graphic documentation. In addition to conventional photography and photography with oblique illumination, the decoding of the project's iconographic discourse has also relied on more traditional techniques, such as plastic tracing and frottage.

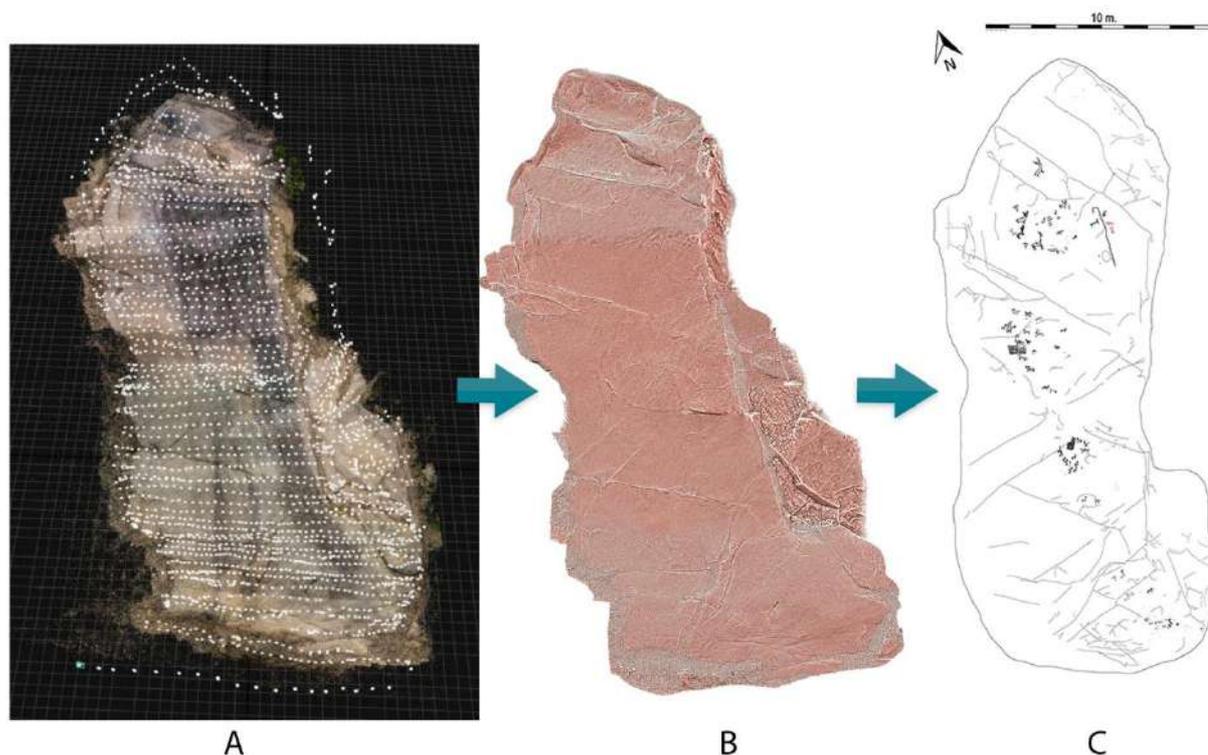
Although frottage is often considered an outdated method, it has proven, and continues to be, highly valuable for deciphering certain engravings found on Galician petroglyphs.



**FIG. 3.** Decoding process in rock engravings with thermoclastia. A *Breia 5* petroglyphs (Cardielos, Portugal).

However, in some cases, photogrammetry—whether through laser scanning or, more commonly, using *Structure from Motion* (SfM) techniques with a photographic camera—is the only viable method for reproducing engravings that have been damaged by forest fires. This is particularly true for rocks affected by thermoclastia, such as those in Cardielos (**FIG. 3**).

Reproducing petroglyph patterns is often challenging due to natural imperfections in the rock and human-induced wear. As a result, the interpretation of these petroglyphs can be imprecise and highly subjective. Photogrammetry, however, has proven to be an invaluable tool in achieving a more objective and accurate analysis of these engravings.



**FIG.4.** Complex surfaces decoding process: *A Pedra da Escorrega* petroglyphs case. **A.** Photogrammetry process made by Alexandre González Rivas using Reality Capture software. **B.** Postprocessed 3D model as recorded by Alexandre González Rivas (2017) using Meshlab software. **C.** A *Pedra da Escorrega* preliminary sketch, after Eloy Martínez Soto (2017).

This was clearly demonstrated in the *Pedra da Escorrega* petroglyphs (Valença, Portugal), where 2,870 photographs were required (**FIG. 4**) to accurately reproduce an extensive 30-meter surface with a 40% inclination. This surface had been reused for decades as a natural toboggan and contains over 60 engraved figures.

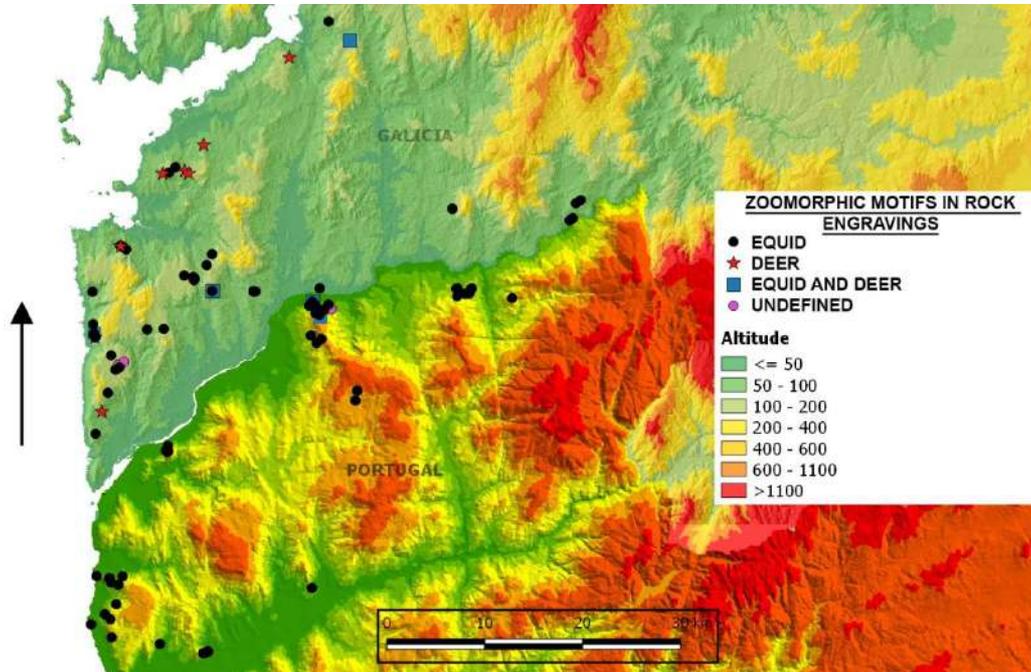
Photogrammetry can be considered a highly promising technique for the study of prehistoric petroglyphs, not only because it enables an objective interpretation of previously illegible motifs, but also due to its potential for enhancement through the integration of other techniques or specialized software<sup>6</sup>. Moreover, this methodology

offers faster and more accurate results than traditional techniques, which tend to be more subjective, such as plastic tracing and frottage. However, it is important to emphasize that throughout this project, fieldwork has remained an essential component, ensuring the prevention of interpretative errors and enabling direct comparison between the three-dimensional models and the petroglyphs *in situ*.

### 1.3 The investigated area.

The study area encompasses southern Galicia (Spain) and northern Portugal, extending up to the Lima River—covering more than 3,400 km<sup>2</sup>. This region features the typical granitic landscape of the Atlantic façade of the northern Iberian Peninsula, characterized by rocky outcroppings scattered across hillsides, spurs, flat platforms, and rocky hills.

In this area (**FIG. 5**), equid representations are predominantly found in the petroglyphs. However, there is an isolated case in Varziela, within the Felgueiras municipality, which extends the area of interest up to the Lima River. This site remains under study, indicating a potential gap in our current research.



**FIG. 5.** Location of the study area and zoomorphism in rock engravings.

Our starting point is the analysis of the northern part of the study area, which we refer to as the *hinge zone*—the transitional area between two symbolic landscapes: one

where the deer dominates rock art and another where equids become the primary figures, replacing the deer.

This *hinge zone* represents a pivotal area of change within Galician and Portuguese rock art, located at the end of the Bay of Vigo and south of the Oitavén river.

#### 1.4. The geographical analysis of the represented motifs

An examination of the specialized bibliography on the depiction of quadrupeds within the naturalistic group of Galician rock art reveals that the most frequently represented animal is, without a doubt, the deer—or at least the one that receives the greatest emphasis. There are hundreds of examples, ranging from the village of Nande in Laxe (*A Coruña*) and *A Pedra Xestosa*, through Carnota, Porto do Son, and the Santiago region, to the significant clusters found in Rianxo, Poio, Moraña, and the core area—both in terms of quantity and quality—comprising *Campo Lameiro*, *Cotobade*, and *Pontecaldelas*.



**FIG.6 .** *Afiada dos Legóns* petroglyph (Pontecaldelas, Galicia). *Frottage* as recorded by M.Ledo

Pontecaldelas, located in the Verdugo River valley, holds the highest concentration of male deer hunting scenes and is home to one of the most significant

petroglyph specimens, *Afiada dos Legóns* (**FIG. 6**), which measures 2.65 meters. Despite this, there is evidence suggesting the presence of a hunting or harassment scene involving an equid at *Outeiro do Pío* (Tourón). Additionally, a few meters higher, equid-riding scenes can be found at *Siribela VI* and *X*.

North of the Bay of Vigo (Galicia, Spain), equids are also represented, with some petroglyphs depicting them as the sole motif. Examples include the petroglyphs of *A Laxe dos Bólos*, *A Chan da Carballeira*, *A Carpinteira*, *A Laxe dos Cabalos*, and *Siribela VI* and *X*. Other instances feature equids either alone or ridden, often integrated into broader narrative scenes, particularly male deer hunting scenes.

The typical elements that compose these hunting scenes include the deer—depicted as hunted or harassed—the weapon (either embedded in the deer's body or held by the anthropomorphic figure), the human figure (either on foot or on horseback) pursuing the deer, and the dogs assisting in the hunting sequence. Additionally, traps are represented using reticular patterns or lines that symbolize fences used to corral the targeted animal.

South of the Bay of Vigo, the presence of deer becomes less prominent. The *Miñoráns Study Institute* (*Instituto de Estudos Miñoráns*, IEM) undertook the analysis of hunting scenes depicted in Galician and Northern Portuguese petroglyphs<sup>7</sup>, initially identifying nearly 30 engraved surfaces based on existing academic research.

However, further bibliographical and fieldwork expanded this number to around fifty male deer hunting scenes within the previously described geographical area. Notable exceptions include *Os Bidóns* (Amoedo, Pazos de Borbén), *Os Morouzos* (Pedornes, Oia), and potentially *A Quinta dos Galegos* (Verdoejo, Valença).

Not far to the south, in *Pontecaldelas*, specifically in *San Martiño de Ventosela* (*Redondela*), the petroglyph of *A Pedreira*<sup>8</sup> (**FIG.7**) presents an example where the only animals depicted are equids, represented in both schematic and more naturalistic or realistic styles. This petroglyph clearly marks the *hinge zone* previously defined.



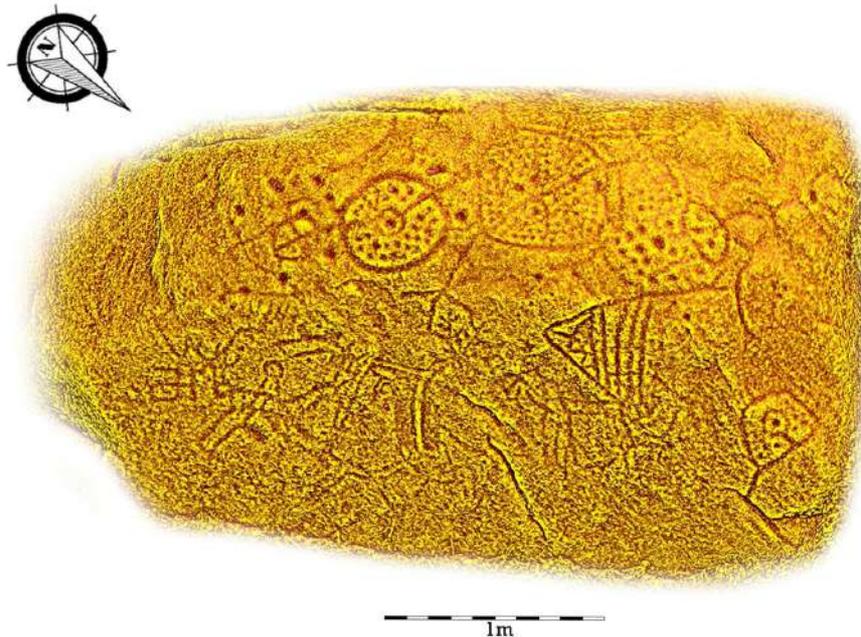
**FIG.7.** A *Pedreira* petroglyph (Redondela, Spain). Postprocessed 3D model as recorded by E. Martínez (2017).

South of *Ventoseia (Redondela)* and *Amoedo (Pazos de Borbén)*, the world of rock art changes completely. Our study focuses on the area stretching from here to *Arbo* and *Monção*, reaching the sea. Throughout this region, abstract art predominates, including cup marks, circular patterns, spirals, three labyrinths, and, of course, lines that either cover the rock surfaces or form figures that cannot be defined beyond a formal description.

In this vast area, deer representations are scarce. More than fifteen years ago, approximately 300 samples were recorded across Galicia, yet in this specific region, we have identified only a few examples. These include one petroglyph in *Coto do Corno* (*Carnota, Redondela*), another in *Os Bidóns* (*Amoedo, Pazos de Borbén*) (**FIG. 8**), and a complex hunting scene in *As Millaradas* (*Matamá, Vigo*). Additional examples include a single deer in *O Sueido* (*Chandebrito, Nigrán*), another in *A Tomada das Medoñas* (*Priegue, Nigrán*), and one isolated figure on the vast surface of *As Portaxes* (*Tebra, Tomiño*). In *Chan da Devesa do Rei* (*Sabarís, Baiona*), one deer is depicted alongside two other zoomorphs as part of the scene, while two deer are represented in *A Chan das Tomadas* (*Chandebrito, Nigrán*). A single deer is also mentioned in the petroglyph of *Figueiredo* (*Río Vilar, Pedornes, Oia*).

In *A Quinta dos Galegos* (*Verdoejo, Valença*), the presence of deer remains uncertain due to the absence of antlers on the figures. However, in the petroglyphs of *Pinal do Rei* (*Marzán, O Rosal*) and *A Pedra da Escorrega* (*Verdoejo, Valença*), clear and well-defined deer figures can be observed.

In conclusion, we have identified twelve surfaces featuring deer representations, in stark contrast to over one hundred surfaces where equids are the predominant figures.



**FIG.8.** A deer hunting scene in *Os Bidóns* petroglyph (*Pazos de Borbén, Spain*). Postprocessed 3D model as recorded by E. Martínez (2017).

We continue with the thematic characterization of this area, where recurring motifs include reticular patterns and navicular-shaped fixed mills. The former do not extend north of the Bay of Vigo—except for a single example found in *A Carrasca, Marín (Galicia)*. These reticular motifs are typically regular and symmetrical, usually consisting of 7, 8, or 9 squares per side, and they appear either in isolation or alongside other elements such as cup marks, equids, navicular-shaped fixed mills, spirals, and, in some cases, labyrinths (*Monção, Portugal*).

We acknowledge that navicular-shaped fixed mills are not conventional artistic motifs but rather functional objects whose exact purpose remains debated. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that many of these structures share space with other symbolic elements, such as cup marks, circular combinations, deer (*O Coto do Corno, Galicia*), spirals (*O Outeiro da Campana, Galicia*), and reticular patterns (*O Carballoso, Galicia*). In several instances, they are found within the same areas as other characteristic motifs of regional rock art.



**FIG. 9.** Equids -ridden and alone- sharing space with antropomorphs, abstract and footprints motifs, and an two undefined motifs in the center of the scene in Penedo de S. Gonçalo petroglyph (Felgueiras, Portugal).

Between the south of the Bay of Vigo and the Lima River, extending to *Penedo de São Gonçalo*<sup>9</sup> (*Varziela, Felgueiras, FIG. 9*), there are more than 100 petroglyphs depicting equids that exhibit similar behaviors to those found in the deer petroglyphs north of the *ría de Vigo*. However, the primary subject changes: the harassed and hunted animal is now the equid, pursued by humans either on foot or on horseback.

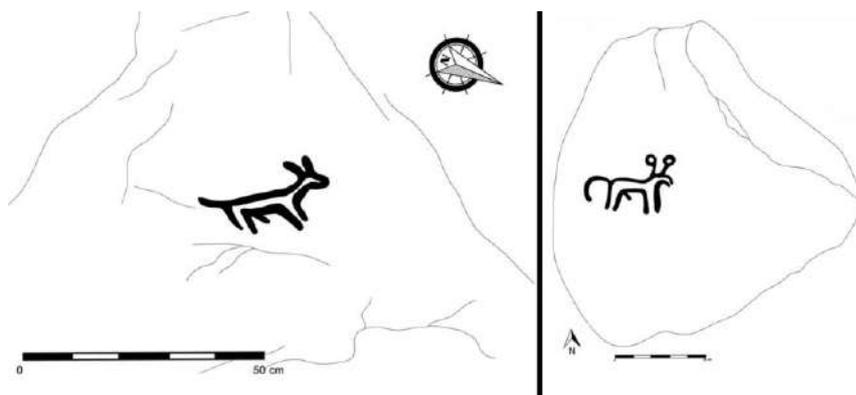
In some cases, there are indications of weapons in the hands of the anthropomorphic figures—though rarely depicted on the backs of the equids—as well as the presence of traps and fences. Additionally, equids are sometimes represented alone, being ridden, or integrated into more complex compositions, such as woodland scenes or circular arrangements, as seen in *Chão do Moinho de Vento (A Breia, Cardielos, Viana do Castelo)*.

A wide range of variations exists in terms of the surfaces used, the locations, and the surrounding environments—all of which require further analysis.

## 2. Results

### 2.1. A new paradigm in hunting scenes

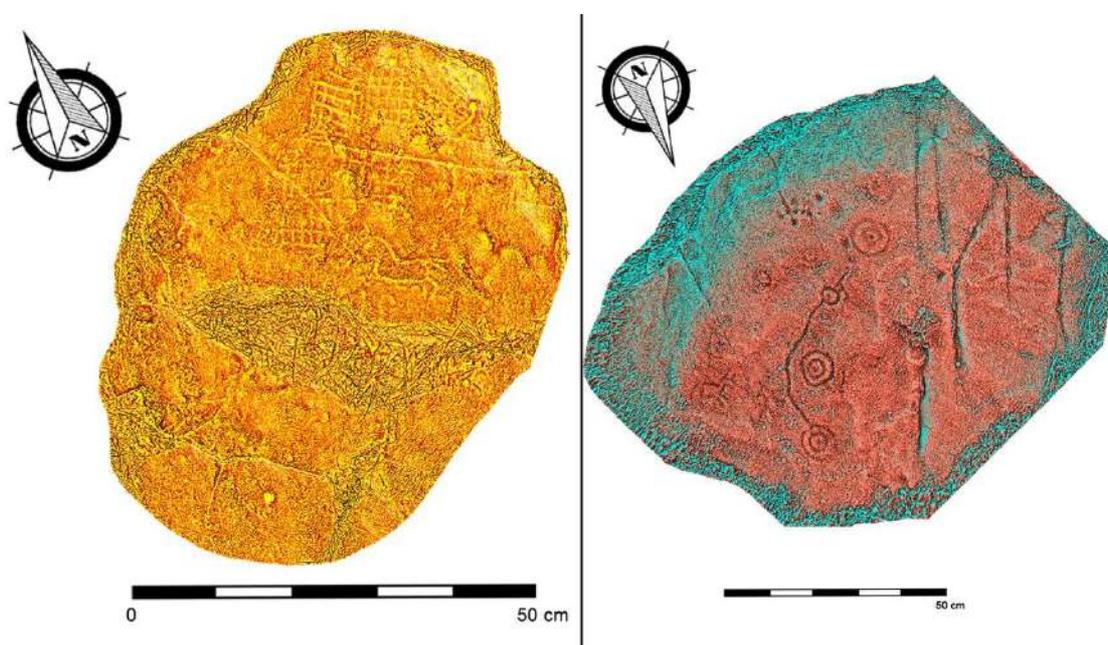
Behind this exhaustive analysis of equid representations in Galician-Portuguese rock art lies a series of conclusions that we present as the working hypothesis of this study, which requires further corroboration.



**FIG. 10.** Some equids are represented alone and with sexual attributes in Os Outeiros Grandes 4 –left- petroglyph (Gondomar, Galicia) - and in A Breia 6 –right- petroglyph (Cardielos, Portugal). After E.Martínez (2017).

Before proceeding, it is essential to clarify the criteria used to classify figures as equids. This classification is based on specific characteristics: the absence of antlers, the presence of a long tail, the existence of ears instead of horns, and the structure of the neck and snout—the former oriented forward and the latter pointing downward.

Given the schematic nature of this type of art, where details are often minimal, complete precision is not always possible, nor are all these characteristics consistently present in a single figure. As a result, it can sometimes be challenging to clearly identify figures as equids with absolute certainty. While some figures can be confidently defined as zoomorphs or quadrupeds, confirming them as equids is not always possible.



**FIG. 11.** **Left.** Partial view of *O Outeiro* petroglyph (Monção, Portugal). **Right.** *Outeiro do Río Loureiro IV* petroglyph (Cangas do Morrazo, Galicia). Postprocessed 3D models as recorded by E.Martínez (2017).

The presence of equids in various Galician petroglyphs, particularly within deer hunting scenes, is a well-documented phenomenon. However, in these scenes, equids generally play a secondary role, often depicted as ridden animals, while the deer remains the dominant figure, frequently portrayed as the primary target in hunting narratives. This is evident, for example, in the *Río de Angueira*<sup>10</sup> petroglyph, where horseback riders are shown harassing deer. A similar arrangement appears in the *Pinal do Rei* and *Laxe das Lebres* petroglyphs, where equids again take a subordinate position within deer hunting scenes.

An atypical depiction is found in *A Breia 6* (*Cardielos, Portugal*), where the equid is neither ridden nor involved in a deer hunting scene (FIG. 10). A comparable instance can be observed in the *O Outeiro* and *Outeiro do Río Loureiro IV* petroglyphs (FIG. 11).

For decades, research on Galician and Northern Portuguese rock art has established that the deer is the most frequently represented animal, with equids often considered anecdotal. This perspective was echoed by Manuel Santos Estévez, who once questioned<sup>11</sup>: “*Why is it always the deer and not another animal that is hunted in the Galician rock engravings?*”

However, current research allows us to challenge this assertion. It is now evident that the role of equids in Galician and Northern Portuguese rock art is more significant than previously believed.

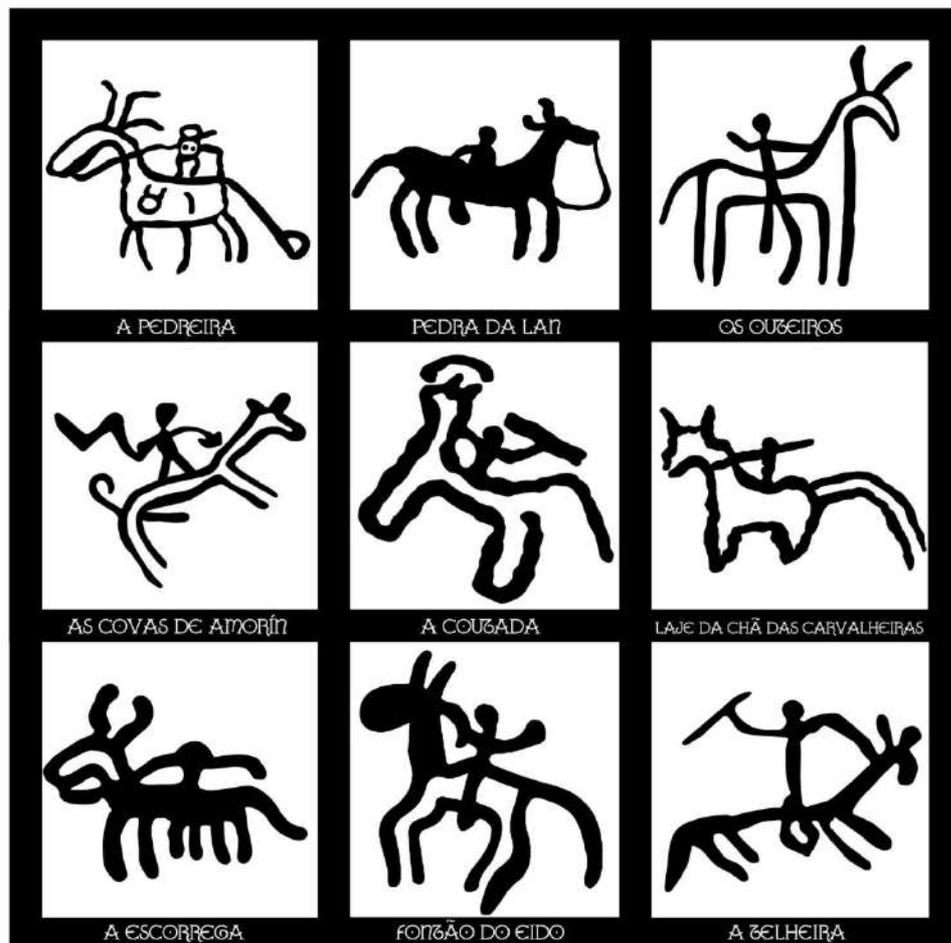
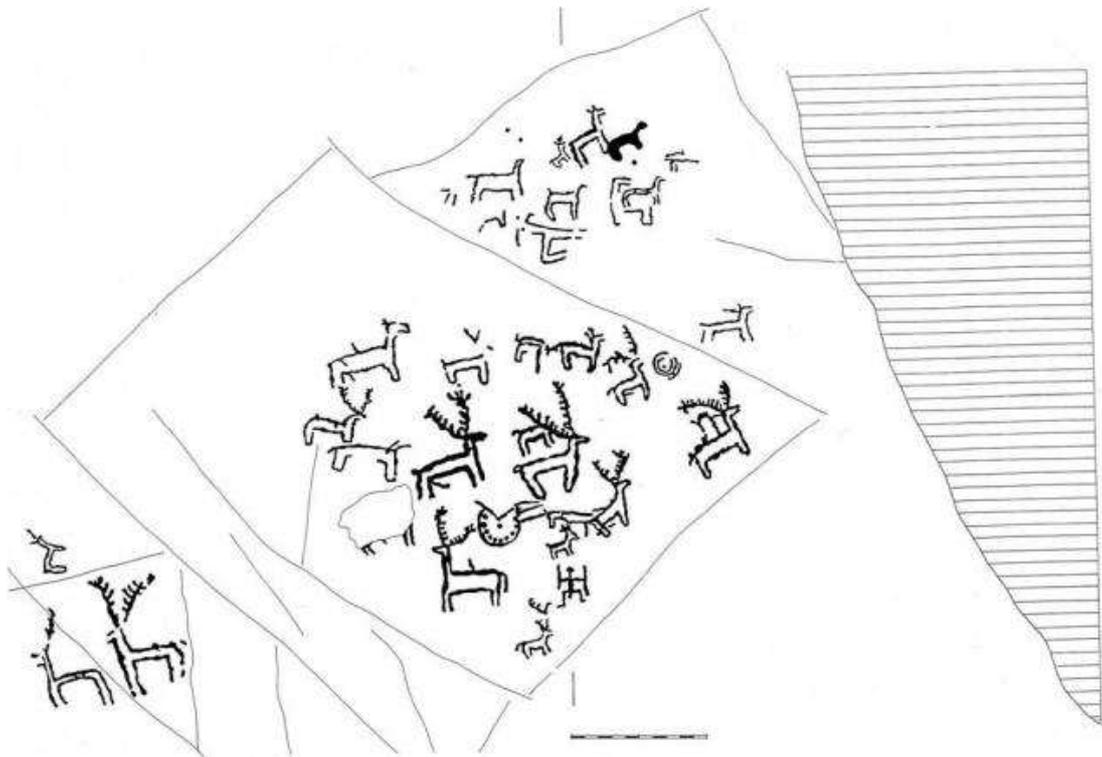


FIG. 12. Some of the equids with horseback riders included in the Equus Project.

When we began this project in 2015, our objective was to investigate hunting scenes in Galicia and northern Portugal with the aim of reaching meaningful conclusions. After studying more than 130 petroglyphs, we identified a paradigm shift in zoomorphic representation, with its natural boundary located at the end of the Bay of Vigo. South of this point, the deer assumes a secondary role and appears less frequently in rock engravings depicting deer hunting scenes.

In this new context, deer are relegated to the background by the dominant presence of equids, which can be considered a new model for hunting scenes in the petroglyphs of the northwestern Iberian Peninsula.



**FIG.13.** A hunting scene of male deer in *Nabal de Martiño* (Pontecaldelas, Galicia) as recorded by A.De la Peña Santos (2001).

Equids are represented in various scenarios. They appear alone, sometimes with their sexual attributes highlighted, similar to the depiction of male deer with large antlers in Galician petroglyphs (**FIG. 10**). They are also shown alone but surrounded by reticular motifs, as seen in the *O Outeiro* petroglyph (**FIG. 11**). Additionally, equids are depicted in groups, ridden in different styles (**FIG. 12**), harassed, or even hunted by humans.

As in the male deer hunting scenes (FIG. 13), equids are surrounded by anthropomorphic figures, either on foot or on horseback (*Outeiro dos Lameiros*, FIG. 2), assisted by canines (*Laje da Chã das Carvalheiras*, FIG. 14), injured (*A Telheira*, FIG. 15), or falling into traps formed by reticular motifs (*Tomada da Regueira dos Barreiros*, FIG. 18).

Some petroglyphs also capture aspects of equid ethology, similar to how deer behavior is depicted. Several authors<sup>12</sup> have noted these behavioral elements in Galician petroglyphs, such as *Rotea de Mendo*, *O Xubiño*, *Laxe do Cuco*, and *Laxe das Tenxiñas*. In this context, we suggest that the petroglyph at *A Tomada da Regueira dos Barreiros* may represent the only known mating scene between equids, while *A Coutada 2* appears to depict a fight between two confronting equids.

The same iconographic discourse observed in deer scenes is maintained here, with the only difference being the change in the central figure.



FIG. 14. *Laje da Chã das Carvalheiras* petroglyph (Caminha, Portugal) as recorded by E.Martínez (2017).

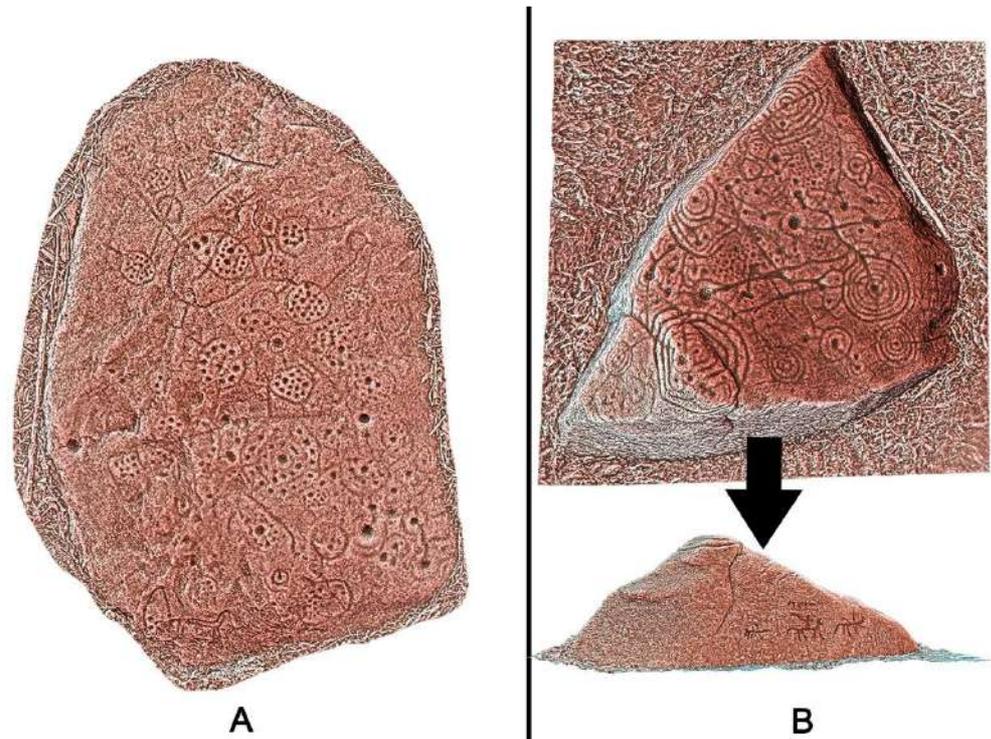
There are also large compositions where equids play varying roles. In some cases, the equid is the dominant figure, while in others, it is obscured within a complex array of abstract motifs, as seen in the *O Cabrón* and *Tapada de Ozão* petroglyphs (FIG. 16).



FIG. 15. An equid hunting scene as seen in *A Telheira* petroglyph (Verdoejo, Portugal). Night photography with oblique lighting. E.Martínez (2017).

In relation to equids, we can also observe the sharing and development of iconographic discourse through a series of recurring symbolic elements. These include spirals, cup and ring marks, reticulated motifs, and other undefined patterns. On a macro-spatial level, equid representations often coexist with reticulated designs or navicular-shaped fixed mills.

It is highly probable that equids held some form of immaterial significance, potentially serving apotropaic, prestigious, totemic, or other symbolic functions.



**FIG. 16.** Equids lost amongst a world of abstract figures. **A.** *O Cabrón* (Arbo, Galicia). **B.** *Tapada de Ozão* (Valença, Portugal).

### 3. Discussion

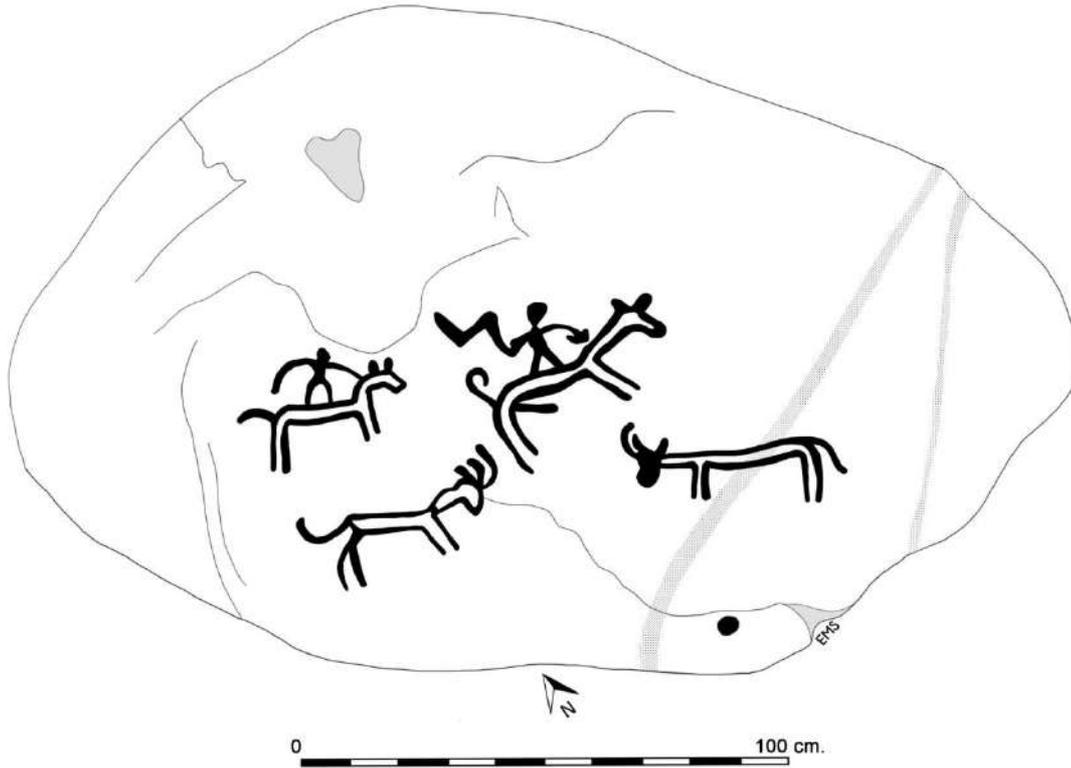
We define a geographical area of equid representation extending from the end of the *Bay of Vigo* to the *Lima River* in the east, which flows into the *Atlantic Ocean*. This area is referred to as the *Galician-Portuguese Rock Art Group*.

There is a particular case in *Felgueiras* (*As Pegadas de São Gonçalo* petroglyph, FIG. 9) that may indicate a gap in our current research. Therefore, it is essential to continue searching for new rock engravings in this and surrounding areas to challenge and potentially revise established paradigms. As the saying goes, “*You make the path as you go.*”

In this region, the thematic content of zoomorphic petroglyphs changes significantly. In the northern part, the most frequently depicted animal is the deer, particularly in hunting scenes where male deer are the primary targets. However, south of the adjacent *Redondela/Pazos de Borbén* zone and the *Oitavén River*, the equid

becomes the predominant figure—depicted as harassed, hunted, and often central to the narrative.

The *A Pedreira* petroglyph (*San Martiño de Ventosela*), where all the represented animals are equids, serves as a marker for the *hinge zone* or *inflexion area*, beyond which the depiction of deer in rock engravings diminishes considerably.



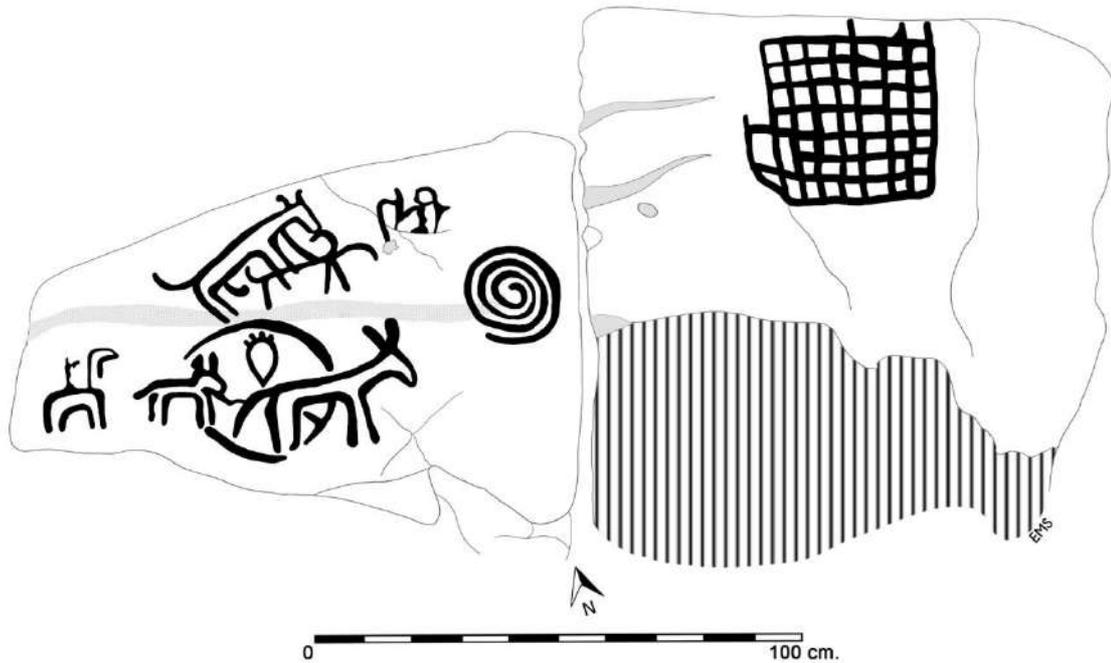
**FIG.17.** A harassment scene in *As Covas de Amorín* (Gondomar, Galicia), as recorded by E.Martínez (2017).

There are few examples of deer scenes in this *hinge zone*, with only 11 identified instances. In summary, deer representations account for less than 10% across more than 100 surfaces featuring equids.

When analyzing hunting scenes with equids, the iconographic structure resembles that found north of the *Bay of Vigo*. In these scenes, the equid is the harassed and hunted animal, accompanied by canines, anthropomorphic figures (either on foot or horseback), traps, fences, and abstract artistic patterns.

The area with the highest frequency of equid representations intersects with navicular-shaped fixed mills, an artifact commonly associated with rock art patterns, alongside reticular symbols. We have documented hundreds of examples of these two

elements. In the northern area of the *Bay of Vigo*, fixed mills are primarily found in *O Morrazo*, while in *Marín*, only one reticular symbol has been identified. In the broader area dominated by deer iconography, navicular-shaped fixed mills appear in only four isolated locations.



**FIG. 18.** A harassment scene as a result of live hunting or capturing, in *A Tomada da Regueira dos Barreiros* (Gondomar, Galicia). After E.Martínez (2017).

To clearly identify a male deer hunting scene, we typically look for the presence of an individual wielding spears. However, there are exceptions, such as in *Os Mouchos*, where the deer is hunted without visible spears or arrows. These cases, though, are rare among the more than 50 documented scenes.

In contrast to deer hunting scenes, there are only a few clear examples of the hunting and killing of horses: *A Telheira* (*Verdoejo, Portugal*), *A Coutada 2* (*As Neves, Galicia*), and possibly *Outeiro dos Lameiros* (*Sabarís, Galicia*). Most other instances involve scenes of harassment (**FIG. 17**), as seen in *As Covas de Amorín* (*Gondomar, Galicia*), or forms of live hunting and capture, as depicted in *A Tomada da Regueira dos Barreiros* (**FIG. 18**), *As Covas de Amorín*, and *Baixada da Barca*<sup>13</sup>.

Some animals are depicted alone, either ridden or not, and there are also large compositions where the equid plays different roles. In some cases, the equid is the dominant figure, while in others, it is obscured within a complex array of abstract motifs.

The areas featuring petroglyphs with equid hunting scenes are sometimes associated with enclosures used to contain the equids, known as *curros* (FIG. 19). These enclosures are often concave in shape, as illustrated in the *As Covas de Amorín* petroglyph (*Donas, Gondomar*), where two horseback riders are shown harassing two equids. One of the riders holds an object resembling a handler's stick, similar to those currently used by owners to guide *garrons* out of the *curro*.

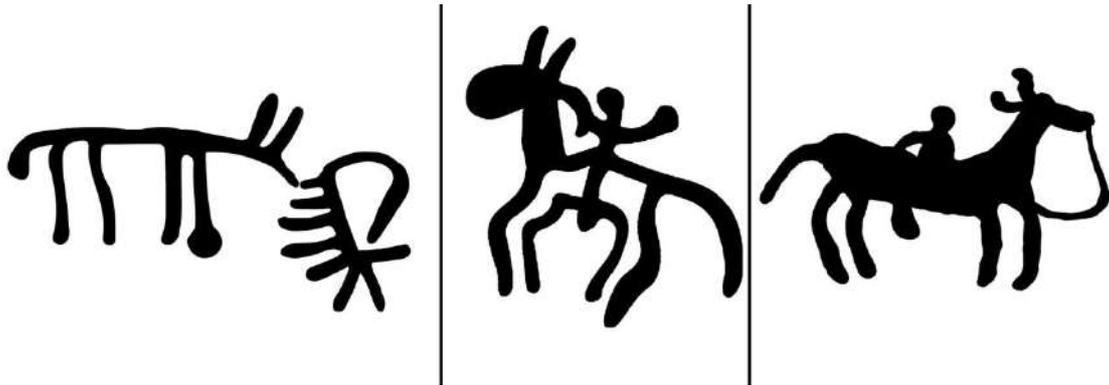


**FIG.19.** Ethnographic parallels. **A.** Enclosure made of stones, known as *curro*, in A Valga (Oia, Galicia). **B.** *As Covas de Amorín* petroglyph emplacement (Gondomar, Galicia).

Three distinct styles can be identified on the surfaces where equids are represented (FIG. 20):

1. **Schematic Style:** This style uses a single dorsal-cervical line to define the body, from which the limbs extend. A noteworthy example is a large schematic quadruped recently discovered in the *A Coutada 2* petroglyph (*As Neves, Galicia*), measuring nearly one meter in length (FIG. 21). This figure is believed to be the largest schematic quadruped found to date in Galicia and northern Portugal.
2. **Naturalistic Style:** Characterized by the use of double lines to outline the animal, providing a more detailed and realistic depiction.
3. **Hollow Technique:** This method involves first outlining the figure and then hollowing out the interior to create the final shape.

In some engravings, these techniques coexist within the same composition, as observed in the *A Coutada 2* petroglyph (FIG. 21).



**FIG.20.** Three different styles on surfaces where equids are represented. A schematic style (**left**, O Sobral petroglyph, Gondomar, Galicia). A naturalistic style using double lines (**center**, Fontão do Eido petroglyph, Valença, Portugal) and hollow technique (**right**, *Pedra da Lan* petroglyph, Oia, Galicia).

#### 4. Conclusions

When we first initiated the *Equus Project* at the *Miñoráns Study Institute*, we structured it around four fundamental pillars.

The first pillar involves the **administrative struggle** for the recognition of *garrons* as wild animals with owners, requiring specific *ad hoc* legislation. This

legislation should not classify them as unclaimed cattle but rather as wild horses under human stewardship.

The second pillar focuses on the **preservation and study of the tradition of *curros*** through the lens of ethnoarchaeology, recognizing wild horses as equally significant as humans within this cultural context.

The **third pillar** centers on understanding the origins and genetic lineage of the *garrons*. This objective is being pursued with the invaluable assistance of *David Posada*, a geneticist at *Vigo University*, with whom we expect to share new findings soon.

The **fourth pillar**, and the core of this study, is the **analysis and graphic representation of equids in Galician and Northern Portuguese rock art**.

The initial hypothesis of this project posits that, following the last glaciation (*Würm*), less cold-adapted wildlife migrated southward from the Russian steppes in search of shelter. It is, therefore, not unreasonable to consider that equids may have been present in this region for thousands of years, becoming a subject of human study and artistic representation.

The *garrons*, or wild horses with owners that roam freely in our mountain ranges, could be the descendants of this ancient migration that began thousands of years ago in northern Europe. They may represent the **only population of wild equids in the world that has not undergone reintroduction**.

Consequently, the wild horses we refer to could be the very ones depicted in prehistoric rock engravings. These equids might have been domesticated for various purposes—meat production, riding, plowing fields, pulling carts, or carrying heavy loads.

The question of **domestication** remains open: Was it an imported practice from Central Europe, or did it develop locally as an independent process? Unfortunately, the completion of genetic studies remains pending due to the project's ambitious scope and high costs. Additionally, accurately **dating prehistoric engravings** remains a controversial issue within the academic community.

Finally, though it requires further detailed research, the **chronology of horse-riding in prehistoric times** raises important questions: Did this practice emerge during the Iron Age, as previously suggested? Or could it date back to an earlier period, such as the Chalcolithic or even the Bronze Age?

#### 4.1. Confirming the paradigm: An exceptional case in *A Coutada* petroglyph

On December 7, 2017, several members of the *Miñoráns Study Institute* discovered a petroglyph in the mountains of *Taboexa (As Neves, Galicia)* that supports the new paradigm we advocate in this study regarding equid hunting scenes (**FIG. 21**).

Covering an area of approximately 47.7 m<sup>2</sup> (with dimensions of 10.5 meters by 6 meters), the petroglyph features a hunting scene where humans are depicted armed, either on foot or mounted on horseback. Accompanied by canines, they are shown harassing and hunting several equids, some of which are visibly injured.

This surface contains a remarkable concentration of motifs: 40 naturalistic designs, alongside numerous dots, simple circles, circles with a central dot, an isolated score, and a cruciform figure. All these elements are arranged and adapted to a slightly elevated rock surface, enhancing the visibility and complexity of the scene.



**FIG. 21.** *A Coutada 2* petroglyphs (As Neves, Galicia) after E.Martínez (2018).

Within the non-abstract representations, two major stylistic groups stand out: one of a schematic nature, characterized by simple or double lines to define body volume, and another defined by the hollowing or complete emptying of figures, commonly known as the edging technique.

Among these figures, equids are the most prominent, with possible representations of canines as well. In addition to these animal depictions, several human figures are also present, rendered in both the schematic style and using the hollow technique. Notably, one of the most visible equids in the rock art set features the depiction of a jockey, emphasizing its importance within the composition.

The scene appears to convey a complex meaning. Based on stylistic criteria, it suggests multiple prehistoric phases during which the engravings were created. Particularly significant is the superposition of the large hollowed equid over a cluster of dots, indicating a potentially meaningful chronological relationship between the elements.

This newly identified yet ancient collection of rock art engravings from southern Galicia and northern Portugal clearly positions the equid as the dominant animal in the iconographic narrative.

## 4.2. Acknowledgments

This project is part of a research initiative developed at the Miñoráns Study Institute (*Instituto de Estudos Miñoráns*, IEM). However, it would not have been possible without the contributions of several collaborators who, although not trained as archaeologists, played a fundamental role in assembling the pieces of the puzzle. These contributors are **Cándido Verde**, **José Álvarez** (also known as *O Buraco*), **Manolo Ledo**, **Bruno Centelles**, and **José Antonio Viña**. They were responsible for discovering the most significant rock art deposit included in this project.

We are also grateful to **Marie Collazo** for her valuable suggestions, which helped improve the presentation preceding this paper, as well as her assistance with the English editing.

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