

20,000 hours rock art

João Luís Sequeira, Joel Santos, Tânia Casimiro, André Texugo & Liliana Veríssimo Carvalho

To cite this article: João Luís Sequeira, Joel Santos, Tânia Casimiro, André Texugo & Liliana Veríssimo Carvalho (26 Feb 2026): 20,000 hours rock art, World Archaeology, DOI: [10.1080/00438243.2026.2626032](https://doi.org/10.1080/00438243.2026.2626032)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00438243.2026.2626032>



© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 26 Feb 2026.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 418



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

20,000 hours rock art

João Luís Sequeira ^a, Joel Santos ^b, Tânia Casimiro ^c, André Texugo ^d
and Liliana Veríssimo Carvalho ^e

^aDepartment of Archaeology, Universidade Do Minho, CSIS NOVA, IHC NOVA, FCT, Braga, Portugal; ^bDepartment of Archaeology, University of Leicester, Leicester, UK; ^cDepartment of Philosophy, University of Stirling, Stirling, UK; ^dDepartment of Archaeology, Universidade de Lisboa, UNIARQ, CEG-IGOT, ARCUS, Lisbon, Portugal; ^eDepartment of Archaeology, ARCUS, Lisbon, Portugal

ABSTRACT

This paper explores a unique case of contemporary rock art on a cement wall at Ponta dos Corvos, Portugal. Over 60 years, individuals carved names, dates, symbols, and messages on the wall, transforming it into a palimpsest of personal and collective memory. What began as informal graffiti has become an archaeological record that reflects the identities, emotions and social practices of successive generations. By applying different methods and analysis, this study examines the wall's inscriptions, framing them as a form of modern rock art. By investigating the motivations and meanings behind these engravings and drawing on testimonies from people who created some of the marks, this paper highlights the importance of contemporary sites in understanding social behaviour and collective identity. The findings contribute to the broader discussion of how contemporary material culture, such as graffiti, should be studied and preserved as cultural heritage.

KEYWORDS

Contemporary archaeology; community memory; graffiti; rock art; identity

Introduction

What is rock art? Traditionally, it refers to human-made markings on natural rock surfaces, often engravings (petroglyphs) or paintings (pictographs), created throughout human history. However, it includes more than just ancient carvings or paintings. It embodies cultural expressions that connect people with landscapes and social rituals, thus giving physical form to intangible cultural heritage (Rozwadowski 2004). Most studies dedicated to rock art are usually associated with ancient cultures and regarded as a means of communication, ritual, or expression of beliefs. Some of these manifestations have become publicly known in several countries, and there is a general feeling that researchers often refer to pre-modern contexts when discussing rock art. But what if we reimagine this concept for the present day? Could a cement wall inscribed with thousands of names, dates and symbols qualify as rock art? We believe it does. And it is not even a question about temporal distance: we are as far in time from Cueva de Las Manos as Cueva de Las Manos is from Lascaux. However, no one would dare say that Las Manos, since it is so far away from Lascaux, is not rock art. This paper aims, as discussed below, to follow the path of other papers challenging those beliefs,

CONTACT Tânia Casimiro  tania.casimiro@stir.ac.uk  Centre for the Sciences of Place and Memory, Department of Philosophy, University of Stirling, Pathfoot building, Office A63, Stirling FK9 4LA, UK

© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

including in rock art studies, not a 20.000 years ago example like Lascaux, but a 20.000 hours ago one.

To avoid ambiguity, we will use 'rock art' to mean human-made markings (PEDS: paintings, engravings, drawings, stencils) on stone or stone-like surfaces, regardless of age, intent, or setting (Zagorov and Hristov 2023), and graffiti to mean unsolicited or informally authorized mark-making in public or publicly accessible places, including engraving, painting, writing and scratching (U. Frederick 2009). Our usage follows archaeological treatments that emphasize continuity in mark-making practices across prehistoric, historic, and contemporary contexts, as well as their shared entanglement with place, audiences and identity (see, e.g. E. C. Casella 2014; Clarke, Frederick, and Hobbins 2017; Fernandes 2009; U. Frederick 2009; Frederick and Clarke 2014). Lohmann (2020) likewise emphasizes that graffiti throughout the centuries constitutes a valuable historical source, challenging the neat separation between 'ancient' rock art and 'modern' graffiti.

The idea that contemporary rock art, whether engravings or graffiti, can be of archaeological interest is not new. There is now a substantial body of archaeological work on historical and contemporary graffiti (e.g. across prisons, detention centres, streetscapes and heritage sites) demonstrating shared methods of recording, analysis and interpretation with rock art research (E. Casella 2009, 2014; Clarke, Frederick, and Hobbins 2017; David and Wilson 2002; Fernandes 2009; U. Frederick 2009; U. K. Frederick 2014, Frederick and Clarke 2014; Orengo and Robinson 2008; Ralph 2014). However, these are still unevenly seen or methodologically recorded in the same way as ancient rock art (Ralph 2014), even though the importance of rock art in contemporary artistic manifestation has been noted (Rozwadowski 2024). This paper explores how contemporary engravings on a wall can be considered rock art, using a contemporary example – a wall at Ponta dos Corvos (Portugal).

For decades, this wall has been engraved with memories: names of passers-by, love declarations, football allegiances and other personal inscriptions. Much like the ancient engravings in remote caves, these markings represent a cultural practice, a collective urge to leave one's mark, to be remembered, signing the landscape (Bradley 1997). In this sense, this modern rock art example offers us a glimpse into the social dynamics of the 20th and 21st centuries, revealing the continuity of human expression through time with a unique advantage: most people who performed those engravings are still alive, and we can talk to them about their motivations. This possibility of linking oral testimony with inscription practice is rare in rock art research and has been mentioned as a major opportunity for contemporary graffiti studies (U. K. Frederick 2014; Nomeikaite 2023). Nomeikaite's work on street art and affective atmospheres underlines how such inscriptions generate emotional and sensory connections with place, further supporting our approach.

Building on contemporary archaeology of graffiti and institutional inscriptions, our approach integrates visual and spatial recording (high-resolution photography and photogrammetry with relief visualization) to document attributes used in rock art studies (motif, technique, superimposition, density, spatial distribution), comparative analysis with established archaeological treatments of contemporary graffiti/inscriptions (e.g. immigration detention and prison contexts) questioning themes of presence, identity, resistance, and memory, and oral histories with authors and community members to link mark-making to lived practices and meanings. This combined framework follows and extends archaeological studies that treat graffiti as both an artefact and an artefact-generating activity, and that explicitly connect inscriptions, audiences, and place (E. C. Casella 2014; Clarke 2014; Clarke, U. K. Frederick 2014; Frederick and Clarke 2014; Clarke, Frederick, and Hobbins 2017). It also aligns with recent surveys of graffiti documentation methods (Valente and Barazzetti

2020), which highlight the importance of photogrammetry and RTI for recording surface inscriptions with archaeological rigour.

In approaching this site, we tacitly apply the methodologies and perspectives of archaeology to a seemingly mundane contemporary feature. This wall is a palimpsest of identities, belonging, remembrance and shared experience. Just as ancient rock art reflected the lives and beliefs of its creators, this wall captures the essence of those who passed by, leaving traces of their existence. This paper argues that contemporary engravings and graffiti, as well as the places where they were made, are much like ancient carvings and are important archaeological artefacts worthy of study, preservation, and reflection.

As we will debate, the evolution of the wall at Ponta dos Corvos as a ‘social canvas’ reflects the relationship between space, memory and community over time. The wall may have gone unnoticed by some, but after people began inscribing their names, messages, and symbols, it became a living record of personal and collective experiences, hard to ignore. Each marking represents a moment in time, an event (Lucas 2008, 2021), whether a declaration of love, a celebration of friendship, or an expression of identity. Over the decades, these individual acts of expression layered upon one another, creating a palimpsest that reveals the changing values, emotions, and social ties of the community. This process illustrates how communities use public spaces to declare their presence. The wall was no longer just a structure to keep people out of the military base. It became a shared space that captured some of the essence of human behaviour, allowing future generations to connect with the personal and communal memories of those who came before.

We have obtained written informed consent for interviews and quotations. We anonymized contributors unless they explicitly authorized being named. We restricted our analysis to publicly accessible surfaces, excluding areas that were restricted on the military base. When using the drone, we have obtained explicit authorization from the military base. We also conducted community consultations and received feedback on preliminary interpretations. A fuller Ethics and Consent statement and Data Availability, if needed, can be requested from the authors.

We contend that this paper’s innovation is twofold. First, we treat a contemporary engraving’s palimpsest on a military boundary wall as rock art, both methodologically and theoretically. Second, we integrate attribute analysis and oral histories to examine how names, dates, love declarations, symbols, and affiliations materialize belonging, risk and rebellion. In doing so, we connect local practices at Ponta dos Corvos to broader archaeological work on graffiti, street-level graffiti production, and comparative studies of mark-making (Bonadio 2021; E. C. Casella 2014; Clarke, Frederick, and Hobbins 2017; David and Wilson 2002; Fernandes 2009; U. K. Frederick 2014, Frederick and Clarke 2014; Nomeikaite 2023; Orenge and Robinson 2008; Ralph 2014; Valente and Barazzetti 2020; Zagorov and Hristov 2023).

Historical and cultural context

The wall we are studying in this paper is in Portugal, more precisely in Miratejo, close to an area known officially as Ponta dos Corvos and unofficially as Ponta do Mato, a few kilometres south of Lisbon (Figure 1). Ponta dos Corvos is located on the border of two different municipalities, Almada and Seixal. This is a sandy peninsula of approximately 2600 metres long by 750 metres wide, with an average height of four metres above sea level (Guerreiro et al. 2013). It is distributed along the West-East direction, connected by a narrow passage to the mainland. The North side of Ponta dos Corvos is a beach by the Tagus River, named ‘Mar da Palha’, giving access to a shallow, quite extensive, and almost horizontal tidal zone with an

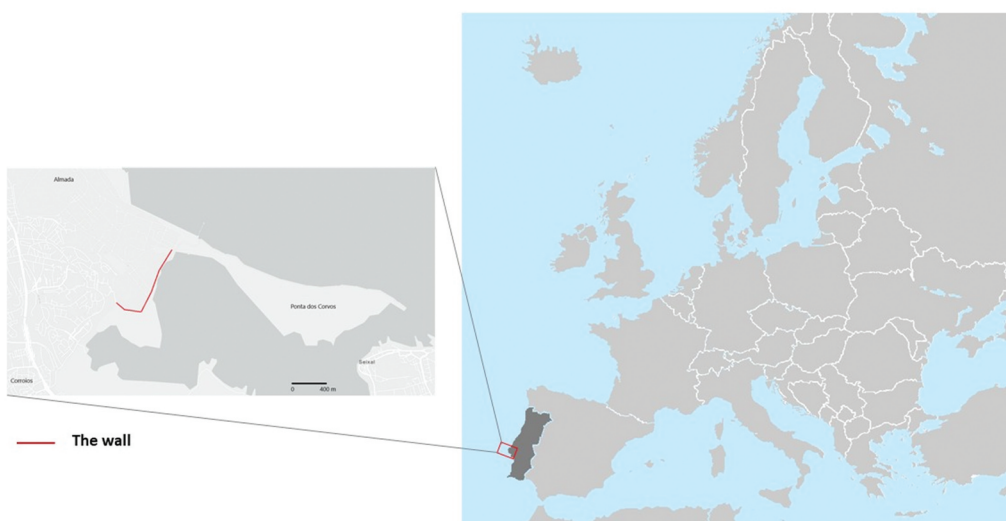


Figure 1. Map with the location of the wall

average elevation of 50 centimetres below sea level (Guerreiro et al. 2013). On the south side, a salt marsh area at the mouths of the Seixal and Corroios streams, known by the local population as ‘sapal’ (the area where frogs dwell, a frog pond), creates a large extension of unbuilt muddy zones. These differences transform Ponta dos Corvos into a combination of two ecosystems (Pina 2019). One is the dune ecosystem, which has been surviving constant disturbances caused by the coastal population’s growth, construction and recreational use. The other is the salt marsh ecosystem, which is more sensitive than the previous one. Both ecosystems are breeding habitats for many biological communities that are still possible to observe in Ponta dos Corvos today, mainly birds. Except for a few Mediterranean pines, the vegetation is not arboreal, and apart from some invasive species, they are all of Mediterranean origin.

The earliest evidence of human presence on this site dates back to the Roman invasions, around the 1st century BC. Some authors (Alarcão 1988) had already considered the Roman occupation of the area possible due to its proximity to other Roman sites. However, it was not until 2013 that real evidence was found at Ponta dos Corvos (Raposo, Santos, and Henrique 2014) with the discovery of ceramic sherds.

There is no archaeological evidence or written sources for occupation after the Romans, and later occupation is only confirmed in the 16th century. From this period onwards, there is still architectural evidence in place and written sources (Nabais 1981; Raposo, Santos, and Henrique 2014) that testify to the existence of three tide mills used to grind cereals, such as wheat and rye.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Ponta dos Corvos became the place of three codfish drying factories: Companhia Atlântica de Pesca, Sociedade Lisbonense de Pesca do Bacalhau, Lda. and Companhia Luso-Brasileira (Verissimo 2009). The factories were located in this area due to the dry conditions and the ease of water access. It is still possible to observe the ruined buildings of the first two abovementioned factories, although they have undergone huge transformations and are far from their original aspect due to the 1940’s-60’s refurbishments. The industrial building owned by Companhia Atlântica operated until the 1990s, when it was finally closed (Verissimo 2009).

Until the 20th century, this area was mainly composed of farms. In 1937, Arsenal do Alfeite, a military naval base, was established, although it was only inaugurated in 1939. It is located in the Royal Estate of Alfeite, which has existed since at least the 16th century (Law No. 28,408 on 31 December 1937, as quoted in Silva 2008). In 1958, the current military naval base was renewed under Portuguese law (n.º 41,989, 3 December 1958). Part of the wall of this military base is our archaeological context. The military boundary condition is important, since comparative studies show that institutional frontiers frequently accumulate inscriptions as acts of presence and negotiation with authority (E. Casella 2009; Clarke, Frederick, and Hobbins 2017).

We do not know when the wall was built, and we could not find any cartographic evidence of its construction. The site is located on the southern periphery of the complex, so we do not know whether the wall was completed by the late 1930's. However, we are certainly sure of one thing: by the 1960's, the wall was already there. The oldest engraving we identified is dated 1961 (which does not mean that older, undated ones do not exist), while the most recent is from 2023. The long chronological span and accumulation of marks constitute a classic palimpsest, as understood in contemporary graffiti/inscription studies, which successive episodes materialize social memory on a shared surface (U. Frederick 2009, 2014).

The wall extends for 900 metres, although the part of artistic manifestations, from the first to the last drawing, is 650 metres. The wall varies in height from a little over two to three metres at some points, depending on the natural slope of the terrain. Since it was impossible to get permission to visit the interior of the military base, we are unaware of its thickness. It was built with clay bricks of six holes joined with cement. Its surface was covered with a homogeneous yellowish mortar roughly 1,5 centimetres thick (Figure 2). The segments discussed in this work share a common characteristic along most of their length: the plaster, made of cement-and-sand mortar, is softer, making it easier to carve with a sharper object like a pocketknife or a screwdriver, typically a metal tool. This feature also contributes to the gradual crumbling of the plaster due to repeated engravings. Sections of the



Figure 2. Detail of the wall with bricks and mortar

wall have been repaired due to vehicle accidents or material degradation, and some of the engravings have disappeared. Some of these gaps occur precisely where the palimpsest is most intense. The loss in zones of dense reworking is consistent with observations in other inscription-rich surfaces, where re-engraving accelerates weathering/repair cycles (U. K. Frederick 2014). Nevertheless, engraving anything on this wall requires time, effort, and a sharp tool. However, it seems that leaving a message on this structure was a common practice for at least two generations in Miratejo. Comparable multi-generational inscription practices have been reported in remote Australian contexts as expressions of belonging and continuity (Clarke, Frederick, and Hobbins 2017; U. Frederick 2009; U. K. Frederick 2014).

The wall is long but not straight, and it changes direction at certain inflexions, one of which is near one of the gates to the Alfeite military complex. While the areas farther from the gates are a palimpsest of inscriptions, there are relatively few marks near the areas where the gates exist. However, some folks did take the risk, as the gate itself bears scratched messages, suggesting either less military activity in the area or the boldness of some individuals. Concentrations away from surveillance points and selective risk-taking near gates echo the spatial patterns seen in detention and prison facilities, as well as infrastructure-edge graffiti (Clarke, Frederick, and Hobbins 2017; U. K. Frederick 2014).

Methods and results

We first recorded the wall in June 2022. The first methods of recording were photos and filming. This permitted us to register the length of the wall. However, these could not be used as sources for studying the engraving (which was very useful for the few painted graffiti), and every time we needed to confirm something, we had to return to Ponta dos Corvos. The solution was to do a photogrammetric survey.

To do this, we used a DJI Phantom 4 Pro drone to capture high-resolution aerial imagery of the site, rather than the more commonly used Reflex Camera, due to the extensive length of the wall, which spans 650 metres (Colomina and Molina 2014; Hugenholtz et al. 2013). The data was subsequently processed using Reality Capture software to generate a detailed digital surface model (DSM), a method frequently utilized for accurate 3D reconstructions in archaeological contexts (Campana 2017; Remondino et al. 2011) (Figure 3).

A distinctive approach was adopted to facilitate the automatic detection of symbols by reorienting the model: the vertical plane of the wall was shifted to a horizontal position. This unorthodox method of rotating the axis of the wall from vertical to horizontal allowed for enhanced visibility of the forms and engravings, enabling a more precise analysis (Kokalj, Zakšek, and Oštir 2011). This reorientation made it possible to apply the Relief Toolbox Visualization techniques, as proposed by (Kokalj and Somrak 2019; Zakšek et al. 2011), despite these techniques typically being used for the detection of archaeological sites and structures (Bewley, Crutchley, and Shell 2005; Opitz and Cowley 2013). By repurposing these methods in a non-traditional context, we were able to significantly highlight the reliefs and carvings on the wall, allowing for a more precise and more detailed interpretation of the artistic manifestations (Kokalj and Somrak 2019; Kokalj, Zakšek, and Oštir 2011).

The whole wall is characterized in a similar way. Besides random letters of uncertain meaning, most of the legible graffiti consists of personal names such as Vera, Carlos, Vítor, Alexandre, Mário, Maria, João, Sara, Sérgio, Sandra, Cristina, Paulo, Nuno, Telmo, Jaime, Alice, Hugo, along with a few surnames like Barbosa, Ramalho, or Fidalgo, to mention a few. Possible nicknames also appear, for

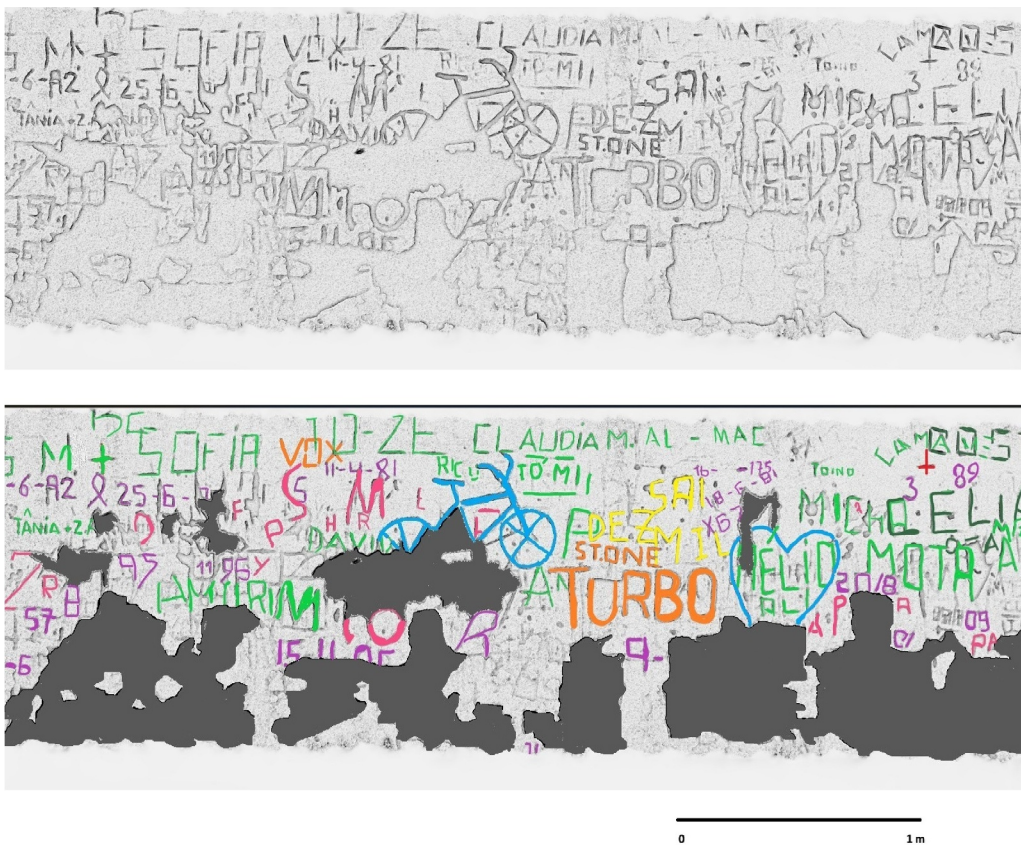


Figure 3. Detail of the photogrammetric survey of the wall and the same image with colour identification of engravings: names and surnames (green); nicknames (orange); dates and numbers (purple); symbols (blue); isolated letters (pink); and phrases (yellow).

example, Turbo, Alfacinha, Jójó, Cigana, and Tóni. Some of these names are accompanied by dates, being the earliest, as mentioned, from 1961. While we cannot be certain that such inscriptions were made at the same time as the date suggests, they at least indicate how individuals wished to situate their presence in time.

Alongside these, there are cultural references to football clubs or supporter groups (F.C. Porto, S. L. Benfica, and Sporting C.P., with no references to smaller clubs), to music bands (W.A.S.P.), and to widely known symbols such as the anarchy symbol or the hippy peace symbol from the nuclear disarmament campaign (Figures 4 and 5).

Pairing two names was frequent, often linked by a plus sign (+), and enclosed within a rectangle or a heart symbol. In one case, the two names are joined by the English word 'LOVES'. While such engravings may suggest a romantic declaration, like 'João + Sónia', it is important to acknowledge alternative interpretations, such as friendship or solidarity, especially where names may be ambiguous in gender (e.g. 'Zé' as a diminutive of José or Maria José). Similarly, combinations like 'Maria + Joana' should not automatically be read as love declarations. In one instance, three names are grouped, which may point to a circle of friends or another kind of relationship. Occasionally,



Figure 4. Engravings on the wall with personal names



Figure 5. Engravings on the wall with personal names and a love message

descriptive words are added to a name, providing further context (sometimes affectionate, sometimes derogatory). In other cases, one of the names is scratched out, perhaps as an intentional act of *damnatio memoriae*, reflecting conflict, rejection, or the rewriting of relationships.

As mentioned, the wall is 900 metres long, though engravings only occur over an area of about 650 metres. Above, the wall extends upwards with a metal fence and below lies a cement

skirting. For most of its length, the wall is built of brick masonry with a mortar made of sand and cement, finished with a thinner surface layer of cement. This surface layer provides the canvas on which graffiti has been inscribed over the decades, with variations in depth ranging from 0.5 cm to 1 cm. The graffiti was made using a variety of metallic tools (oral testimonies mention things such as pocketknives, nails, or house keys). Given project constraints, the present study, although considering the wall as a whole, only does a thorough analysis on a small section (Figure 3), covering approximately 6 square metres. This area is located 236 metres from the gate of the military base. The choice of this part of the wall was not random. We chose this 6 square metres panel because it offers the most representative and analysable unit of the wall with high inscription density and full motif/technique range within the typical reach band, good preservation with minimal repairs (hence reliable legibility), safe access for photogrammetry, and a stratified position at a known distance from the gate.

In this sample, there are gaps in the wall that are more frequent in the lower and middle parts, a pattern also consistent with most of the wall. This may be explained by three factors:

- (1) The mortar of the lower levels is in closer contact with the ground, which results in higher accumulation and retention of absorbed humidity. This leads to processes such as efflorescence and crypto efflorescence, which progressively destroy the molecular bonds of the mortar, eventually causing its micro-pulverization and consequent detachment (Charola 2000; Doehne and Price 2010, 24; Tavares 2009, 176).
- (2) The fact that the wall runs parallel to a road with frequent motor vehicle traffic also means that vibrations contribute to detachments, resulting in lacunae (Stambolov and de Boer 1976, 29).
- (3) Graffiti tends to proliferate more in these lower and middle areas, as they are easier to inscribe. This leads to the reuse and overwriting of graffiti, like a palimpsest, thereby weakening the mortar layer.

The survey of this wall section presents 62 (100%) examples of inscriptions divided into six different categories (Table 1): names (and surnames) (11 – 18%), nicknames (8 – 13%), dates and numbers (19 – 31%), symbols (3 – 5%), isolated letters (20 – 32%), and phrases (1 – 2%). These are graphically identified in the image by different colours, respectively green, orange, purple, blue, pink and yellow (Figure 3). We considered ‘names’ as the name that is given to a child when it is born and surname as the family name. There is no possibility of mistaking this with nicknames since in Portugal, there is an official list of names that is possible to give a child upon birth (IRN 2024), while nicknames are attributed later in life. Our attribution of numbers and dates may not be straightforward, since some numbers may have once been dates. As for isolated letters, there is no way to know whether they were once names. Symbols are representations of objects or ideas, and what we call sentences can be either sayings or proverbs that make sense at a certain time and place. Inscriptions are mostly horizontal, but some are diagonally arranged to fit available space, often overlapping older ones. It is noticeable that some words and drawings remain incomplete due to the loss/pulverization of the mortar. The ‘names’ and ‘nicknames’ categories, excluding isolated letters, represent 45% of the inscriptions, precisely the same percentage as the ‘dates and numbers’ category. Although the number of names matches the number of dates, the temptation to associate them should be resisted, as this correspondence appears to be accidental; on the wall itself, names can rarely be directly linked to dates or numbers. The results obtained from the analysis of this section of the wall seem to confirm our first impression that names and dates are the most common feature, however, caution is needed, as such extrapolation from a reduced section under analysis could be misleading.

Table 1. List of the engravings discovered in the survey of the wall section (Figure 3)

Names (and surnames)	Nicknames
TURBO	TOINO
SM + SOFIA	MICHA
CLAUDIA M.	TÓ - MI
CAMANE	RICO
AMORIM	ST.ONE
TÂNIA + Z[E]	VOX
CELIA	AL - MAC
MOTA	TO-ZE
HÉLIO ALI[CE]	Dates and numbers
DAVI[D]	? -6-92 e 25-6-?
COS[TA]	11-4-98
Isolated letters	16-
D	-175
F	18-6-81
P	X67
SM	20/8
E	9-
HR	95
E	11-95-
TO	15-11-?
R	5
AN	8
P	57
AP	-6
ZR	71
Y	3
C/	89
MF+	09
O=A	Symbols
A	[BMX Bike]
PA	Heart
bc	Inverted Cross
Phrases	
SAI DEZ MIL	

We complemented inscription recording with semi-structured oral histories to elicit the hidden transcripts of practice and place. Participants were recruited via local social-media groups among Miratejo residents who frequented Ponta dos Corvos (1960's–2000's). Interviews were conducted via email. We asked about first visits, companions, motives for carving (or not), tools, meanings of paired names/symbols, awareness of surveillance, and subsequent returns.

Meaning of the inscriptions

It was this research's primary concern to try to identify the people responsible for those engravings over the 60 years. In the early 1960's, when we identified the first date, the Ponta dos Corvos area was still a highly frequented place. The codfish factories employed hundreds of workers (Verissimo 2009), the naval base already existed, and the area was already a beach zone.

In contemporary archaeology, conjectures are more accessible to confirm since some of the subjects involved are still alive. We searched online and found groups on social media for people who lived in Miratejo a few decades ago. In the Facebook group 'Miratejo in the 80's', we posted the following message (the original was in Portuguese): 'Good afternoon, we would like to ask the group a question. On the way to Ponta dos Corvos, there is a wall on the left-hand side (which belongs to

Arsenal do Alfeite). This wall is covered with thousands of names of different people from the 1960's to 2020. Has anyone here ever written on this wall or know someone who has?'

The responses poured in, with the most common ones being: 'Everyone who lived in Miratejo in the 70's, 80's, and 90's, or 'Anyone who did not write in it had sad teenage years'. One respondent even shared, 'I think that wall is like a memory wall – I wrote on it, and so did my brother, who is no longer with us. He wrote in the 70's, and I wrote in the 80's. On the way to the beach, it was a mandatory stop'. These people were contacted individually (only those who authorized us to do so will have their names mentioned), and the conversations became even more interesting as we could ask questions that answered our initial doubts. The reasons behind these actions were the most intriguing but not always conscious, and the most frequent response we heard was, 'We did it because we had to, because everyone else was doing it' (information by Carla Fonseca). Patricia Almeida told us, 'Ponta do Mato was a sacred place. Bonfires at night, the first drinks, guitars, and everyone singing'. Paulo Coimbra said to us that 'in the 90's, especially between 1994 and 1995, we went into large groups and wrote in that spot. I think it was to mark that teenage phase, and because others had done it before us'.

When asked why they went to Ponta dos Corvos, they said, 'It was the place where everyone went. During the day to the beach, during the night to the old factories and mills'. The curious thing is that we also found similar engravings inside the mills, though in smaller numbers ([Figure 6](#)), revealing that identity markers are scattered across the landscape and not just in one specific place.

In an attempt to make a clear connection between testimonies and engravings, two different people told us they were clearly able to identify the place where their names were engraved, while the majority did not remember. One of them even mentioned that her name, RUTE, was engraved several times, showing where those recordings were. When asked about what object was used, the answer was 'any available metal tool'. Reflecting on the emotions engravers felt when engraving the wall, and the emotions they feel now, three decades later, they have stronger feelings today than



Figure 6. Engraving on one of the mills

when their names were engraved many years ago. During the interviews, there was a sense of nostalgia, of a time when life was simple and without major concerns.

Ponta dos Corvos was the chosen gathering place for the teenagers and young adults of Miratejo during their free time. It was their territory. Writing on the wall was a collective social experience, a feeling of belonging to a community that understood them. Explaining to them that writing on a wall had archaeological importance and that the concept of community was relevant to contemporary archaeology reminded us of the words of Mats Burström (2008, 34): 'The insight that objects still remembered from one's own time can already be of archaeological interest leaves a strong impression on many and generates reflection'. This was the reflection we generated: more than just a simple wall, it was a generational collective heritage.

From an anthropological perspective, the discussion emerged on the need for archaeology to be clearly in synchronization with the local community. The recording has been completed, and we are analysing it. The next step is to involve the community in this project, a process we have already started. Making them feel that this site and these memories were not just built by Vera, Carlos, Vítor, Alexandre, Mário, Maria, João, Sara, Sérgio, Sandra, Cristina, Paulo, Nuno, Telmo, Jaime, Alice, Hugo, and others, but that they are all fundamental in recognizing and preserving this site as heritage worth knowing and safeguarding, because part of what they once were still exists.

Many of our interview subjects told us they never returned to that place ever again when they became adults. When asked why, most of them replied, 'it was a site of my young years, and those memories are safely kept'.

The messages written over 60 years reveal curious aspects of young Miratejo residents' social practices, as well as the challenge of leaving their mark on a structure they all knew belonged to a military institution. Many of the authors of these messages humorously wondered if they would be arrested if they confessed, since they knew they were doing something that should not be done. Yes, it was wrong, but they were willing to accept the challenge. Consciously or unconsciously, writing on the wall meant belonging to something bigger, to a generation fitting in each time and space. The wall froze their memories, and the emotions and feelings these people experienced found a generational continuity they weren't even aware of.

We must add that this wall, although exceptional, is not unique. In several parts of Portugal, we have encountered such manifestations in different sizes and shapes from north to south (Coelho et al. 2011). The problem is that these are seldom published or even considered to be of social importance. This means that although they exist, we cannot say what kind of groups and memories the other occurrences reflect.

Discussion

The wall at Ponta dos Corvos plays a vital role in shaping collective identity, much like prehistoric communities used rock art to mark territory or express belonging. Just as ancient peoples outlined symbols and figures onto stone surfaces to communicate their presence, affiliations, and beliefs, the individuals who inscribed this wall were engaging in a similar act of territorial and social assertion. Each name, date, or symbol on the wall is not just a personal signature but a declaration of one's place within a community and a broader cultural landscape.

Over time, these individual expressions coalesce into a shared narrative, embodying the collective memory of those who interacted with the wall. It serves as a focal point for the community's identity, symbolizing not just the lives of individuals but the communal experiences, values, and histories that bind them together. 'Memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images,

and objects' in a *Lieux de Mémoire*, a physical site of memory, which is what the wall is all about (Nora 1989). Maurice Halbwachs wrote that 'individuals always use social frameworks when they remember' and that there are as many memories as there are groups (Halbwachs 1941, 40). The repetition of names and symbols across generations reflects a continuity of belonging to those groups that share the same memory, where writing on the wall becomes a rite of passage or an act of solidarity with those who came before.

Like prehistoric rock art, which helped to define group territories and reinforce social bonds, the Ponta dos Corvos wall serves as a public and communal identity marker. It represents a tangible connection between people and place, where collective identity is continually reaffirmed by inscribing personal stories onto a shared surface. This blending of personal and communal expression strengthens the wall's role as a social artefact, preserving individual memories and reinforcing a sense of belonging and shared identity over time.

The emotional and cultural significance of the inscriptions on the Ponta dos Corvos wall is deeply entrenched in personal experiences and shared social dynamics, reflected in the diverse range of engravings, particularly love declarations, expressions of friendship, and acts of rebellion. The love declarations carved into the wall, often accompanied by symbols of hearts or a combination of names, are tangible expressions of intimate emotions. They capture moments of affection that people wish to make permanent, revealing an emotionally engaged space. Similarly, friendship plays a significant role, as pairs or groups of names inscribed together suggest bonds forged through shared experiences, whether casual outings or defining moments of adolescence. These inscriptions mark a sense of belonging to a close-knit community, symbolizing solidarity and collective memory.

Beyond love and friendship, the wall also serves as a platform for shared rebellion, viewed as an act of defiance, becoming a means of challenging norms or asserting personal and group identity in opposition to authority. Following James Scott, we treat carving on a surveilled military boundary as an everyday form of resistance: quiet, individualizing, low-risk acts that aggregate into consequential politics despite avoiding open confrontation (Scott 1989). For instance, inscribing names or messages on a military wall can be seen as symbolic resistance against control or conformity, allowing individuals to claim space for their voices. Together, these elements reflect the wall's cultural significance, representing not just individual emotions but a collective narrative of connection, resistance, and identity-building within the community.

Conclusion

The wall at Ponta dos Corvos transcends its physical presence as a military boundary, becoming a living testament to the emotional and social currents that have shaped the Miratejo community over the past 60 years. Much like ancient rock art, it represents a collective narrative in which personal expressions coalesce into a shared cultural memory. The engravings, ranging from love declarations to symbols of rebellion, reflect the continuity of human expression across time, where individuals, driven by the desire to assert their identity and leave a mark, participate in a communal act of remembering.

This wall illustrates how contemporary urban environments can serve as modern palimpsests, capturing the evolving values, relationships, emotions, and struggles of the people who interact with them. It stands as an archaeological artefact of great significance, preserving the voices and memories of generations. Engraving names, symbols, and emotions onto the wall was not merely

a fleeting act of adolescence but a symbolic gesture that bound individuals to their community and the place they inhabited.

The continued study and preservation of this site are both essential, not only for understanding the social history of Miratejo but also for acknowledging the importance of contemporary rock art as part of the archaeological record. By framing these engravings as individual and collective acts of expression, we gain insight into the relationship between people, memory, and place, a relationship that spans the dawn of humankind to the present day. Like many ancient rock art sites, this wall ensures that the stories of those who came before are etched into the landscape, remembered, and shared for future generations.

We would like to conclude with a thought-provoking idea that could inspire future research and discussions. Specifically, could the experience and knowledge gained from talking with and interviewing living individuals offer valuable insights into the emotions and behaviours of people from ancient times? By examining contemporary perspectives, we might uncover parallels that shed light on human experience throughout history. We believe that exploring how modern communication and emotional expressions align or differ from those in earlier societies could deepen our understanding of cultural evolution and the timeless qualities of human nature. However, the wall gains new inscriptions practically every day, which means that social practices are neither static nor have they ceased. They are still active.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank all the people who wrote on the wall who provided us with information about their activities.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

No specific funding was received for this work.

ORCID

João Luís Sequeira  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2237-1104>

Joel Santos  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5796-9213>

Tânia Casimiro  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9471-6194>

André Texugo  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9735-5523>

Liliana Veríssimo Carvalho  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5286-2724>

Data availability statement

The authors will make any data available upon request.

Ethic approval

Authors confirm that they have obtained written informed consent to publish the details from the affected individual present in this paper.

References

- Alarcão, J. 1988. *Roman Portugal*. Vol. II. Warminster: Aris and Phillips Ltd, Fasc. 2.
- Bewley, R. H., S. P. Crutchley, and C. A. Shell. 2005. "New Light on an Ancient Landscape: LiDAR Survey in the Stonehenge World Heritage Site." *Antiquity* 79 (305): 636–647. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003598X00114577>.
- Bonadio, E. 2021. "Preservation and Heritagisation of Street Art and Graffiti." In *Research Handbook on Intellectual Property and Cultural Heritage*, edited by I. Stamatoudi, 1–18. Cheltenham: Elgar.
- Bradley, R. 1997. *Rock Art and the Prehistory of Atlantic Europe Signing the Land*. London: Routledge.
- Burström, M. 2008. "Looking Into the Recent Past." *Current Swedish Archaeology* 14-15:21–36. <https://doi.org/10.37718/CSA.2008.02>.
- Campana, S. 2017. "Drones in Archaeology. State-of-the-Art and Future Perspectives." *Archaeological Prospection* 24 (4): 275–296. <https://doi.org/10.1002/arp.1569>.
- Casella, E. 2009. "Written on the Walls. Inmate Graffiti Within Places of Confinement." In *The Archaeology of Institutional Life*, edited by A. Beisaw and J. Gibb, 172–189. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.
- Casella, E. C. 2014. "Enmeshed Inscriptions: Reading the Graffiti of Australia's Convict Past." *Australian Archaeology* 78 (1): 108–112. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03122417.2014.11682006>.
- Charola, A. 2000. "Salts in the Deterioration of Porous Materials: An Overview." *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation* 39 (3): 327–343. <https://doi.org/10.1179/019713600806113176>.
- Clarke, A., U. Frederick, and P. Hobbins. 2017. "'No Complaints': Counter-Narratives of Immigration and Detention in Graffiti at North Head Immigration Detention Centre, Australia 1973–76." *World Archaeology* 49 (3): 404–422. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00438243.2017.1334582>.
- Coelho, S., P. Xavier, D. Neves, R. Dias, L. Carvalho, R. Morais, and S. Figueiredo. 2011. "A Rocha do Pitogaio (Ferradosa, Alfândega da Fé): imagens rupestres Modernas e Contemporâneas e as suas possibilidades de estudo." In *JIA2011, IV Jornadas de Jovens em Investigação Arqueológica*, edited by J. Cascalheira and C. Gonçalves, 183–189. Faro: Universidade do Algarve.
- Colomina, I., and P. Molina. 2014. "Unmanned Aerial Systems for Photogrammetry and Remote Sensing: A Review." *ISPRS Journal of Photogrammetry and Remote Sensing* 92:79–97. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.isprsjprs.2014.02.013>.
- David, B., and M. Wilson. 2002. "Spaces of Resistance: Graffiti and Indigenous Place Markings in the Early European Contact Period of Northern Australia." In *Inscribed Landscapes: Marking and Making Place*, edited by B. David and M. Wilson, 42–60. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Doehne, E., and C. Price. 2010. *Stone Conservation: A Overview of Current Research*. 2nd ed. Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute.
- Fernandes, A. B. 2009. "Vandalism, Graffiti or 'Just' Rock Art? The Case of a Recent Engraving in the Côa Valley Rock Art Complex in Portugal." In *Proceedings of the IFRAO 2009 World Congress*, Piauí, Brazil, 729–742. FUMDHAM.
- Frederick, U. 2009. "Revolution Is the New Black: Graffiti/Art and Mark-Making Practices." *Archaeologies* 5 (2): 210–237. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11759-009-9107-y>.
- Frederick, U., and A. Clarke. 2014. "Signs of the Times: Archaeological Approaches to Historical and Contemporary Graffiti." *Australian Archaeology* 78 (1): 54–57.
- Frederick, U. K. 2014. "Shake Well Midden: An Archaeology of Contemporary Graffiti Production in Perth, Western Australia." *Australian Archaeology* 78 (1): 93–99. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03122417.2014.11682004>.
- Guerreiro, M., F. Oliveira, P. Freire, and A. Rilo. 2013. *Evolução Recente da Praia do Alfeite do Estuário Do Tejo*. Lisboa: LNEC (Relatório Técnico do Projecto MorFeed).
- Halbwachs, M. 1941. *On Collective Memory*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Hugenholtz, C. H., J. Walker, O. Brown, and S. Myshak. 2013. "Earthwork Volumetrics with an Unmanned Aerial Vehicle and Softcopy Photogrammetry." *Journal of Surveying Engineering* 139 (1): 1–6. [https://doi.org/10.1061/\(ASCE\)SU.1943-5428.0000138](https://doi.org/10.1061/(ASCE)SU.1943-5428.0000138).

- IRN (Instituto dos Registos e do Notariado). 2024. "Lista de Nomes Próprios". Accessed October 25, 2025. <https://irn.justica.gov.pt/Portals/33/Regras%20Nome%20Proprio/Lista%20Nomes%20Pr%C3%B3prios.pdf?ver=WNDmmwiSO3uacofjmNoxEQ%3D%3D>.
- Kokalj, Ž., and M. Somrak. 2019. "Why Not a Single Image? Combining Visualizations to Facilitate Fieldwork and On-Screen Mapping." *Remote Sensing* 11 (7): 747. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rs11070747>.
- Kokalj, Ž., K. Zakšek, and K. Oštir. 2011. "Sky-View Factor as a Relief Visualization Technique." *Remote Sensing* 3 (2): 398–415. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rs3020398>.
- Lohmann, P. 2020. "Historical Graffiti: The State of the Art." *Journal of Early Modern Studies* 9:37–57. <https://doi.org/10.13128/jems-2279-7149-11189>.
- Lucas, G. 2008. "Time and Archaeological Event." *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 18 (1): 59–65. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S095977430800005X>.
- Lucas, G. 2021. *Making Time. The Archaeology of Time Revisited*. London: Routledge.
- Nabais, A. 1981. "Moinhos de Maré no concelho do Seixal no passado e no presente." In *Actas Do 2º Encontro Nacional das Associações de defesa do Património Cultural e Natural*, 33–40. Braga: Camara Municipal de Braga.
- Nomeikaite, L. 2023. "Street Art, Heritage and Affective Atmospheres." *Cultural Geographies* 30 (4): 569–588. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14744740231161556>.
- Nora, P. 1989. "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire." *Representations* 26:7–24. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2928520>.
- Opitz, R., and D. Cowley. 2013. *Interpreting Archaeological Topography: Airborne Laser Scanning, 3D Data and Ground Observation*. Oxford: Oxbow Books.
- Orengo, H., and D. Robinson. 2008. "Contemporary Engagements Within Corridors of the Past: Temporal Elasticity, Graffiti and the Materiality of St Rock Street, Barcelona." *Journal of Material Culture* 13 (3): 267–286. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359183508095496>.
- Pina, A. R. 2019. "Vegetação da Restinga do Alfeite e Sua Gestão." MA diss., University of Évora.
- Ralph, J. 2014. "Graffiti Archaeology." In *Encyclopedia of Global Archaeology*, edited by C. Smith, 3102–3107. New York: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4419-0465-2_551.
- Raposo, J., C. Santos, and J. C. Henrique. 2014. "Ponta do Mato (Seixal): geoarqueologia e ocupação humana da frente ribeirinha." *Actas 2º Encontro Sobre o Património de Almada e do Seixal, Seixal, Camara Municipal do Seixal*: 17–29.
- Remondino, F., M. G. Spera, E. Nocerino, F. Menna, and F. Nex. 2011. "State of the Art in High Density Image Matching." *The Photogrammetric Record* 26 (136): 360–391. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phor.12063>.
- Rozwadowski, A. 2004. *Symbols Through Time: Interpreting the Rock Art of Central Asia*. Poznam: Institute of Eastern Studies.
- Rozwadowski, A. 2024. "Giving Rock Art New Life: Combining Past Images, Identity and Contemporary Art." *Antiquity* 98 (402). <https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2024.135>.
- Scott, J. 1989. "Everyday Forms of Resistance." *The Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies* 4:33–62. <https://doi.org/10.22439/cjas.v4i1.1765>.
- Silva, F. 2008. "Ruralidade em Almada e Seixal nos séculos XVIII e XIX. Imagem, Paisagem e Memória." MA diss., Lisboa: Universidade Aberta.
- Stambolov, T., and J. de Boer. 1976. *The Deterioration and Conservation of Porous Building Materials in Monuments - a Review of the Literature*. Rome: International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and the Restoration of Cultural Property.
- Tavares, M. 2009. "A Conservação e o Restauro de Revestimentos Exteriores de Edifícios Antigos. Uma Metodologia de Estudo e Reparação." Phd Thesis. Lisboa: LNEC, Universidade Técnica de Lisboa/Faculdade de Arquitectura.
- Valente, R., and L. Barazzetti. 2020. "Methods for Ancient Wall Graffiti Documentation: Overview and Applications." *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports* 34:102616. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jasrep.2020.102616>.
- Verissimo, F. 2009. "A Ponta dos corvos e as secas do bacalhau." *Ecomuseu Informação* 50:16–17.
- Zagorov, V., and H. Hristov. 2023. "Contemporary Graffiti as a Tool for Studying Prehistoric Art: A Classification Attempt." *Human Arenas* 8:1145–1161. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42087-023-00369z>.
- Zakšek, K., K. Oštir, and Ž. Kokalj. 2011. "Sky-View Factor as a Relief Visualization Technique." *Remote Sensing* 3 (2): 398–415.