



THE FIRST TRAVELLERS AND THE ROCK ART OF THE DOURO RESEARCH

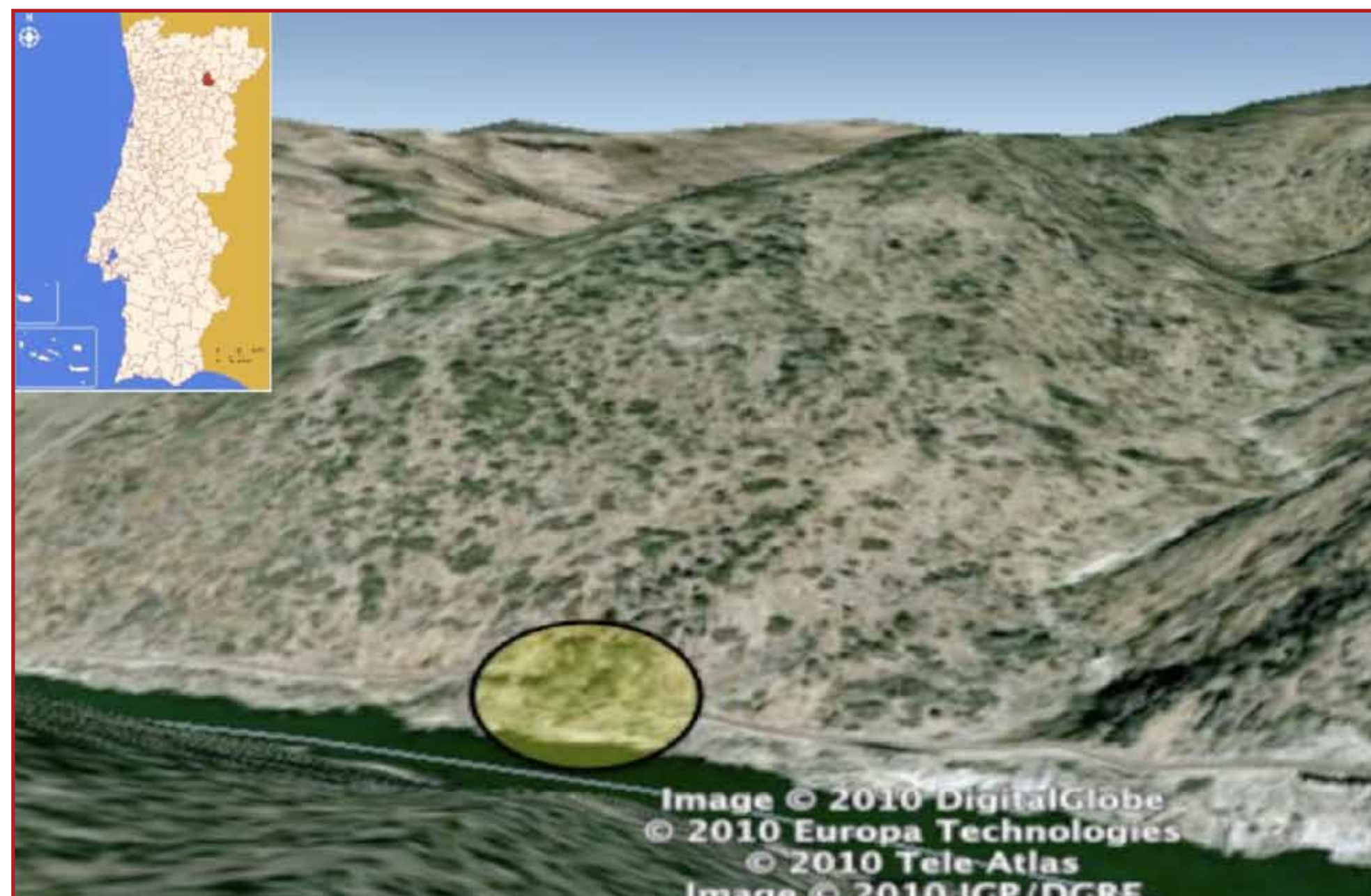


Fig. 1. A – The location of Cachão da Rapa, Carrazada de Ansiães, Bragança, (adapted satellite image, Google Earth).

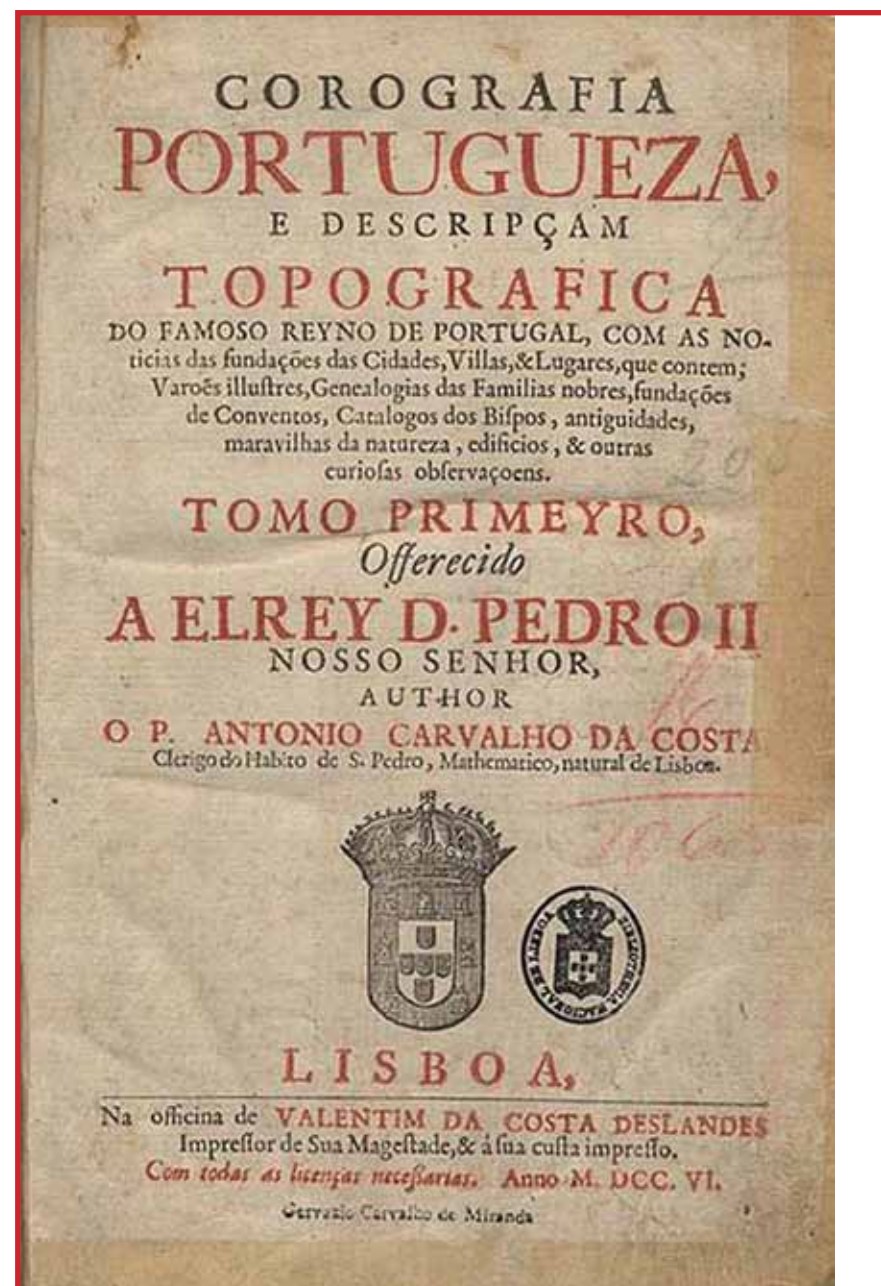
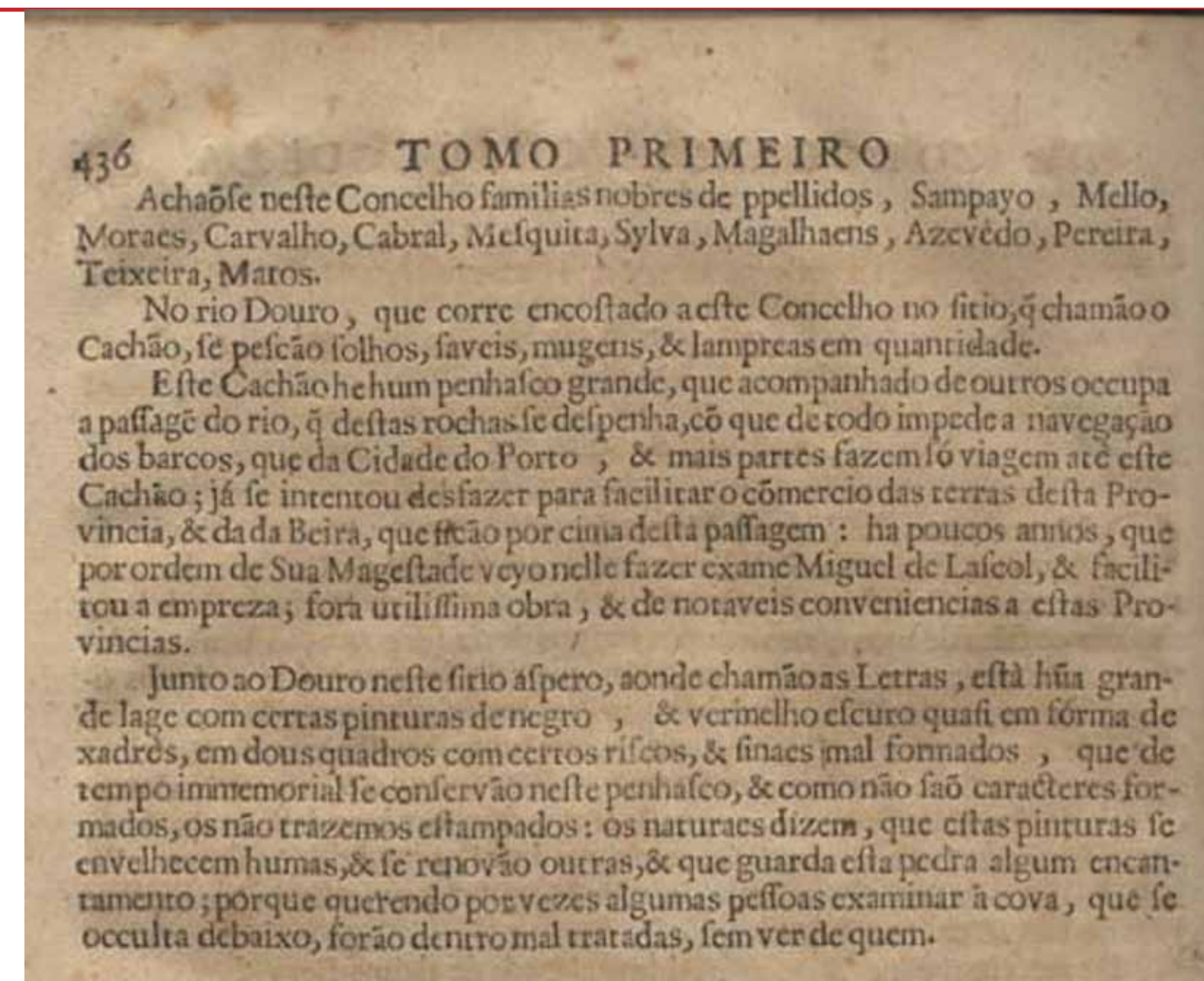


Fig. 2. A – The cover of the book "Corografia portugueza e descripçam topografica do famoso reyno de Portugal (1706), Tomo I. B -- Reference in text (page 436) to the Cachão da Rapa rock paintings.



Humanist scholars revived the term *chorography* during the Renaissance. Later, authors published physical and human chorographies about places and areas in Portugal. It would seem they made extensive visits to the places and areas described. Historical sources, often with information from local inhabitants, enrich topographic descriptions. These resemble what we now call travel "guides". Some texts refer to archaeological sites and how locals and visitors perceived them.

Father António Carvalho da Costa (Lisbon 1650 – 1715) was a renown Portuguese astronomer and geographer. It was he who made the first reference to a rock-art in the Douro. It appears in the first volume of an opera entitled, "*Corografia Portugueza e descripçam topografica do famoso reyno de Portugal, com as noticias das fundações das cidades, Villas, & Lugares, que contem; Varões illustres, Genelogias das familias nobre, fundação de Conventos, catalo dos Bispo, antiguidades, maravilhas da natureza, edificios, e outras curiosas observações*". This publication of 1706 is one of the earliest references to rock paintings in the world

The opera, as the long title explains, was a detailed compilation of all kinds of information, from genealogical and historical to the wonders of nature as well as other curiosities. It is not clear under which of these "labels" the reference to rock-art appears, but in chapter IV, "*Da Villa de Anciães*", page 436, Costa writes,

"*Junto ao Douro nesse sitio aspero, aonde chamão as Letras, esta hua grande lage com certas pinturas de negro & vermelho escuro quasi em forma de xadrès, em dous quadrados com certos riscos, & sinas mal formados, que de tempo immemorial se conservão nesse penhasco, & como, como nao são caracteres formados, os não trazemos estampados: os naturais dizem que estas pinturas se envelhecem humas, & se renovão outras, & que guarda esta pedra algum encantamento; porque querendo por vezes algumas pessoas examinar a cova, que se occulta debaixo, forão dentro mal tratadas sem ver de quem.*" (COSTA 1706:436)

or "Along the Douro in that rough place, that they call Letters this great rock with certain pictures in black & dark red almost in the form of chess, in two square and in certain scratches & malformed sign, from time immemorial are preserve in that cliff, & as such are not characters well form, we do not bring them printed: the natives say that these paintings some get old & others renew & this rock holds some enchantment, because sometimes some people wanting to examine the cave, which is hidden under, where badly treated without seeing by whom".

The text describes the site now known as *Cachão da Rapa*, Ribalonga, in the municipality of Carrazada de Ansiães, District of Bragança, in the north of Portugal on the banks of the Douro river. Called by locals "*Curral das Letras*" (Corral of the Letters), or "Letras" (letters) in short, it is a spectacular five-metre-high granite wall with more than 30 paintings. By and large, the images depict groups of squares arranged in checkerboard-like patterns and series of parallel lines. The colours range from bright red to a rare dark-bluish-red with a contrast between the boards and the inside of the image. Costa presented the figure as "*formados, que de tempo immemorial*" (made in immemorial time), attributing their execution to the remote past but not specifying when. He also gave us information about what the local population saw, noting that some images became more clear and others vanished. This probably depended on what moment of day or even period of year people saw the figures. It is known that during the winter, due to the moisture on the rock wall, painted figures can be clearer.

In Portugal, especially in the interior north, inhabitants often view rock-art with "wonder" and sensations of "miracle" or "evil". Costa describes a rock with paintings and engravings that folk thought were enchanted or had some kind of treasure inside. Such notions and tales are often why people end up destroying these rocks.

Cachão da Rapa is remote and in a quite dangerous place. So far, the site survives and remains in quite good condition. The paintings can only be reached by following the CP (*Caminhos de Ferro de Portugal*) Tua railway

line. They are above the tunnel of Alegria by the 142 kilometre "milestone", about 2 km from Riabalonga Station. Access is rather more difficult these days than in the past. It is not an advisable spot for tourism.

Did Costa ever visit the place? It is probable he transcribed facts gathered by others, but difficult to know by whom and when the information was transmitted. There is no doubt the description is fair, written in an almost "modern" social media style.

How many individuals read this description and visited the place? This is unknown. It is probable several once did so. Other documents with references to the site of Cachão were written a few years later at the beginning of the seventh century. One is a report of 1721 entitled "*Memórias de Anciães*" by Father João Pinto de Moraes (rector of the church of São Baptista Extra-Muros) and António Sousa Pinto from the village of Marzagão. Others descriptions were published in Lisbon by Jerónimo Contador de Argote (1676 – 1749), a member of Portuguese Royal Academy of History, in *Memórias para a História Ecclesiastica de Braga Primaz das Hespanhas* (ARGOTE 1734) and *De antiquitatibus conventus bracaraugustani* (ARGOTE 1738) but probably many other early references are still to be found.

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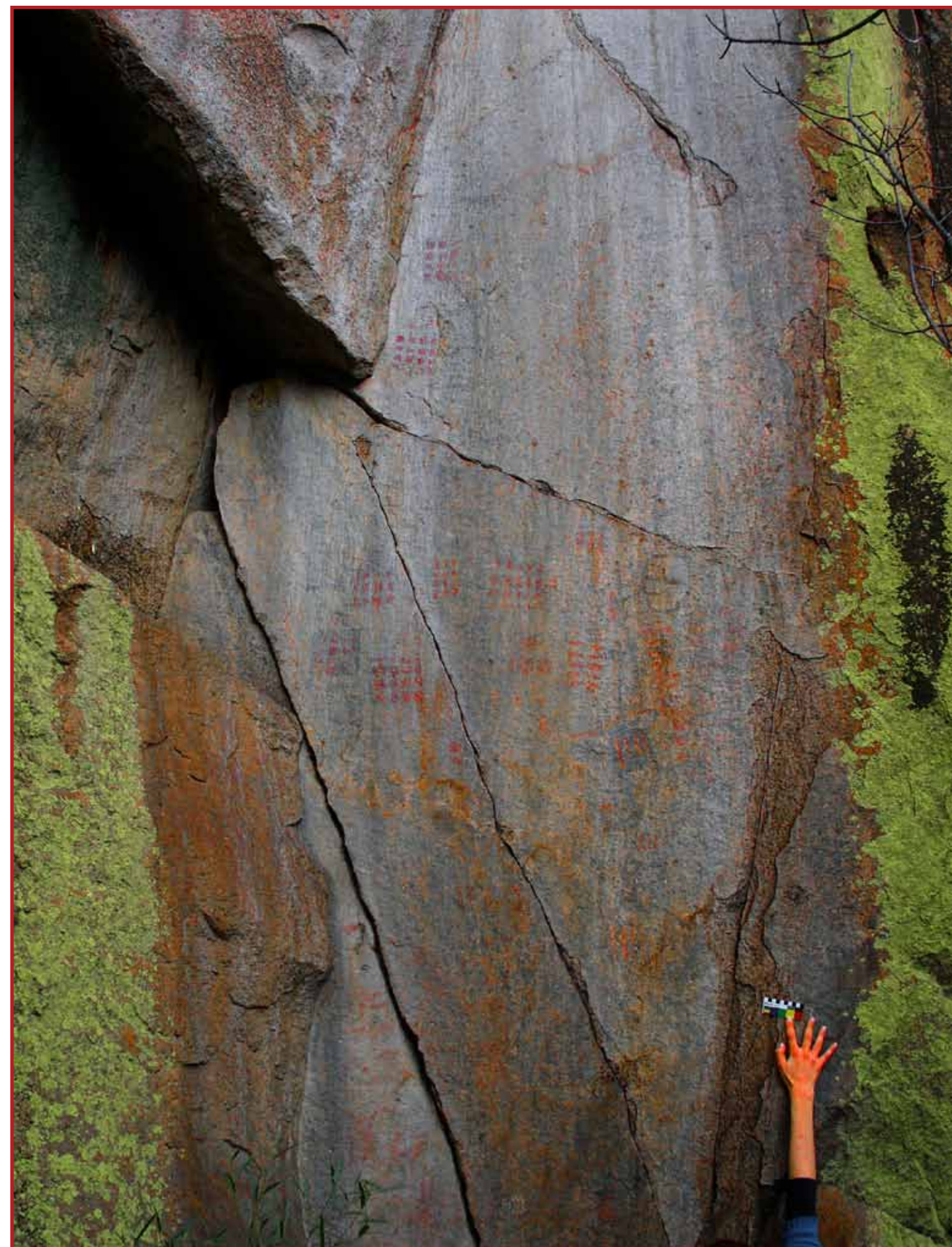


Fig. 3 – Douro, Cachão da Rapa, main decorated area with the "checkerboard" figures (Photo Angelo Fossati for Projecto "Gravado no Tempo").

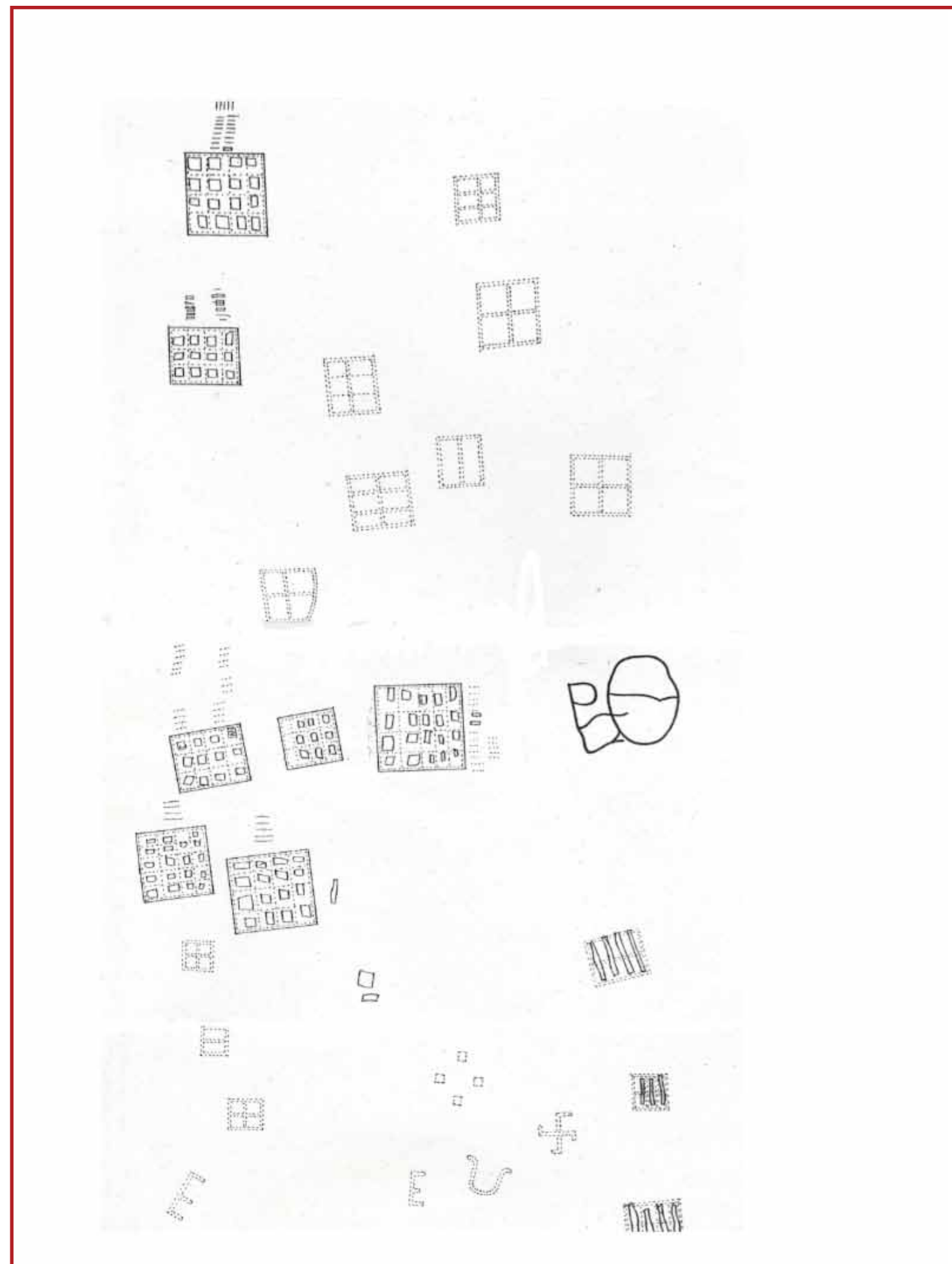


Fig. 4 – Drawing of the paintings of Cahão da Rapa published by Joaquim Possidónio da Silva in 1887 made using sketches by a railway engineer.



Fig. 5 – Douro, Cachão da Rapa, detail of the "checkerboard" painted figures (Photo Angelo Fossati for Projecto "Gravado no Tempo").