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## The Angelim Style and Northeast Brazilian Rock Art

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### Abstract

*The Nordeste Tradition of rock art from Piauí, Brazil, is among the richest prehistoric painting traditions in the Americas. Since the early 1970s several distinct styles of painting have been identified. Research by the author between 1998 and 2001 has led to the identification of a previously unrecognized style of rock art, the Angelim Style. The formal analysis put forth in this essay describes the new style in detail and provides a comparison with the formal and iconographic characteristics of the other local styles.*

The semi-arid highlands (elevation c. 400-600 m) and *caatingas* (a Tupí word meaning "white forests") of southeast Piauí, Brazil (Figure 1), are home to a rich body of rock art and some of the earliest archaeological sites in the Americas. The Franco-Brazilian Archaeological Mission began work in southeast Piauí in the early 1970s and soon thereafter it became apparent that a wide variety of rock art styles existed in the region (Guidon 1973, 1975a, 1975b, 1982, 1983; Guidon and Ogel-Ros 1978; Monzon 1978, 1983; Monzon and Ogel-Ros 1981). To date, over 400 rock art sites have been identified in the 130,000 ha of the park (Figure 2).

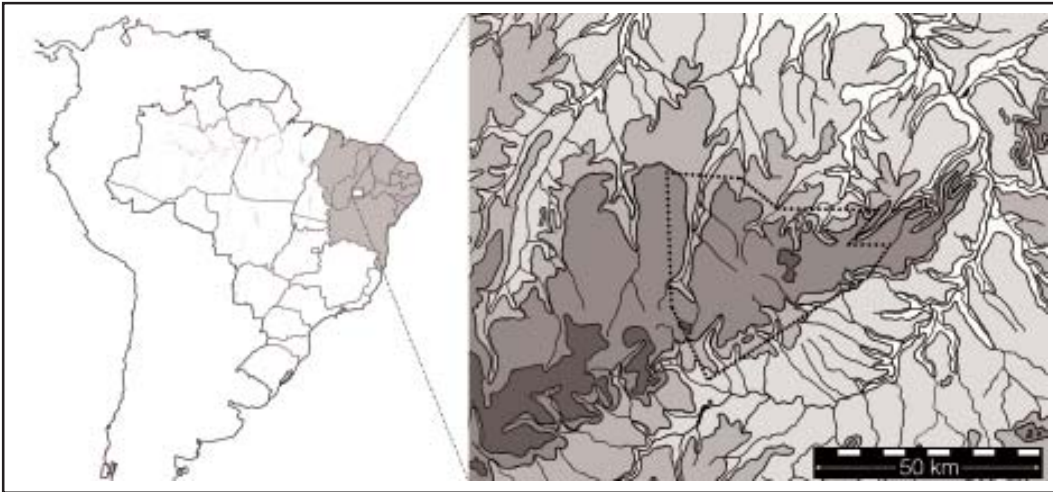
Initially, Niède Guidon (1984) divided the rock art into broad "traditions" based on generalized formal characteristics (Figure 3). The Geometric Tradition, for example, includes all the geometric (non-representational or abstract) painted compositions. The Agreste Tradition (*agreste* means "rustic" or "rough" in Portuguese) includes roughly executed paintings (painted with fingers and hands) featuring bulbous, nondescript anthropomorphs and zoomorphs. Other traditions were designated to include the relatively sparse engraving sites scattered throughout the region (Itacoatiaras do Leste, Itacoatiaras do Oeste and Gongo Traditions; *itacoatiara* is a Tupí word meaning "painted rock"). The most widely represented tradition in the region, which is also found throughout Northeast Brazil, is the Nordeste Tradition.

### Nordeste Tradition Rock Art

The Nordeste Tradition is represented by several distinct styles of painting. The Serra da Capivara Style (Figure 4), the most prolific, is



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**Figure 1.** Northeast Brazil (left) and southeast Piauí (right) with the approximate limits of Serra da Capivara National Park indicated (elevation: 200 to 600 m, in 100 m intervals).

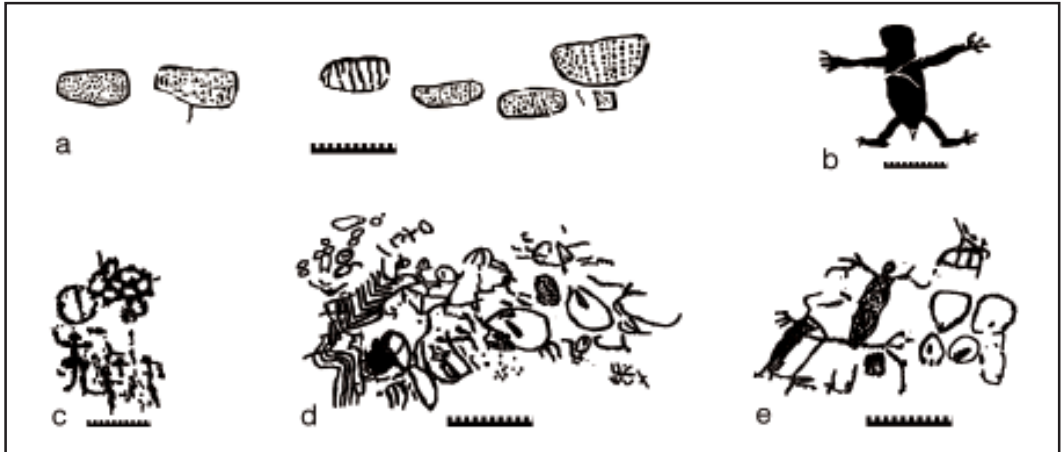


**Figure 2.** Serra da Capivara National Park and approximate locations of selected sites discussed:  
 a) *Angelim do Barreirinho*; b) *Arapoá do Gongo*;  
 c) *Caboclo*; d) *Invenção*; e) *João Arsená*; f) *Pedra Furada*;  
 g) *Salitre*; h) *Viaduto I*.

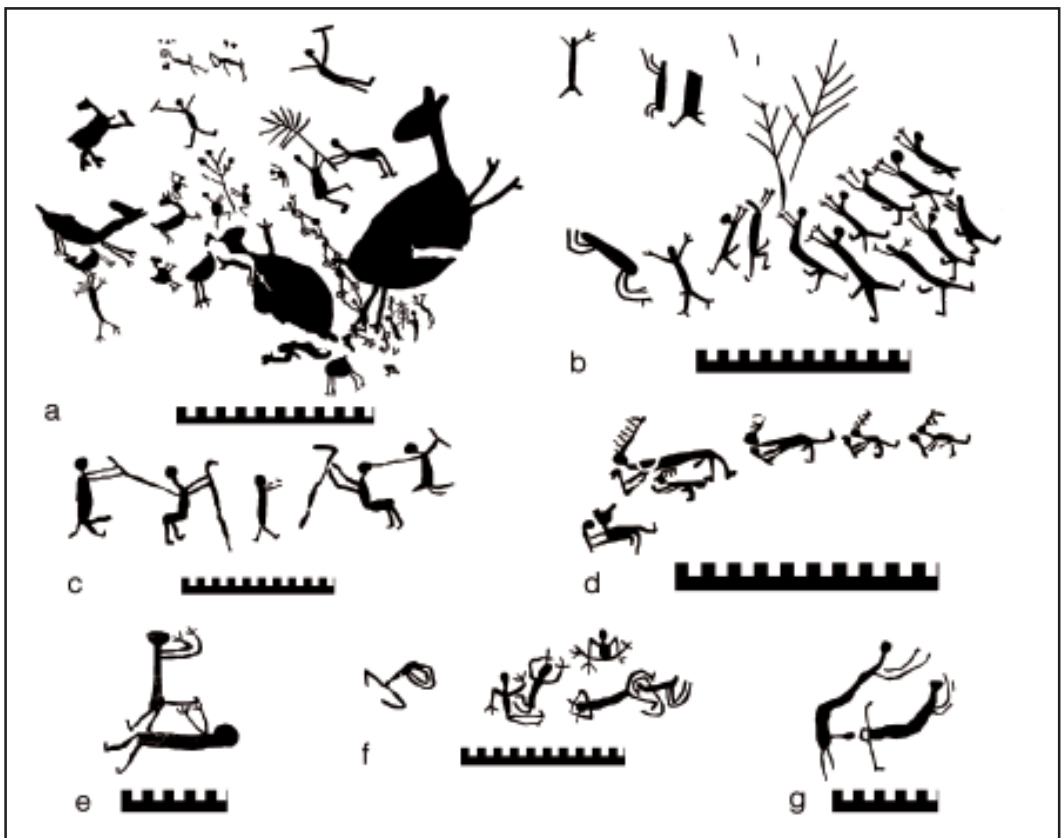
characterized by small, mostly red-monochrome anthropomorphs (3-12 cm, generally) and zoomorphs (10-50 cm, generally). These brush-painted figures frequently suggest movement, with limbs bent as if running or engaging in some other activity. Anthropomorphs generally outnumber zoomorphs, although ratios differ greatly from site to site. The figures are arranged in groups (solitary figures are exceedingly rare) usually with no consistent ground line, taking advantage of any available painting support. The iconography evident in these diverse compositions frequently includes apparent hunting and/or warfare, sex,

and curious arrangements of anthropomorphs in long lines suggesting a group procession, dance or display (these are easily mistaken for mere “tally” marks in some cases as the figures are frequently abstracted down to very simple linear forms).

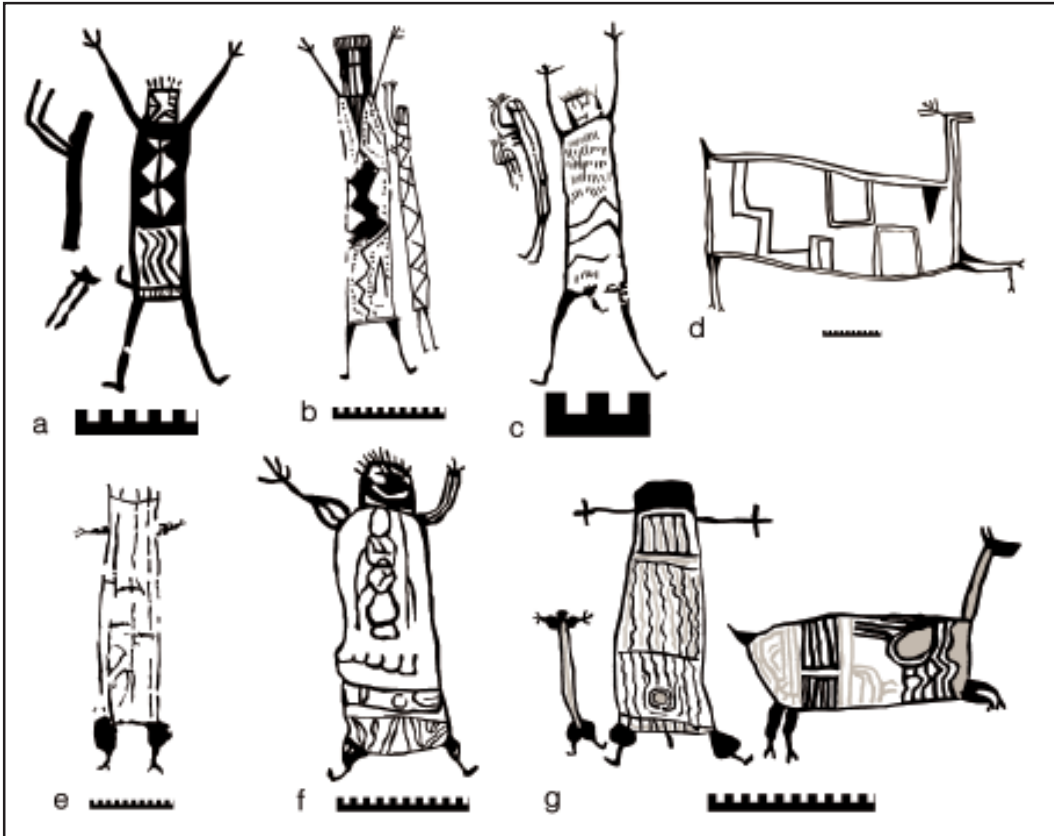
In contrast to the Serra da Capivara Style are compositions featuring elaborate, elongated, occasionally polychrome figures: the Serra Branca Style and the Salitre Subtradition (Figure 5). The Salitre Subtradition should be considered simply a separate style rather than a subtradition (“subtradition” was a designation originally intended to simply indicate a geographic distinction; see Ogel-Ros 1985). The Serra Branca and Salitre Styles are among the most sophisticated figurative paintings in Brazilian rock art. Generally ranging between 20 and 60 cm in size, these paintings exhibit a highly refined sense of draftsmanship, especially in the rigidly rectilinear anthropomorphs of the Serra Branca Style. These figures are usually arranged side by side in a fairly unified horizontal tableau. It is common to have one or more smaller “attendant” figures juxtaposed beside a larger anthropomorph. The larger figures are almost always frontal while the attendant figures, including zoomorphs, are usually in profile. While indications of gender are common, “sex scenes,” such as those common in the Serra da Capivara Style, are absent. The active hunting and/or warfare iconography of the Serra da Capivara Style is replaced in the Serra Branca Style by compositions that appear to stress display



**Figure 3.** Rock art traditions in Serra da Capivara National Park (scale in centimeters): a) Geometric Tradition (from Salitre; red monochrome); b) Agreste Tradition (from Extrema II; red monochrome); c) Itacoatiaras do Leste Tradition (from Riacho Santana); d) Itacoatiaras do Oeste Tradition (from Buraco de Pajéu); e) Gongo Tradition (from Caldeirão do Deolindo) (c, d, and e, adapted from Guidon 1984: pls. 28, 31, 32).



**Figure 4.** The Nordeste Tradition (scale in centimeters; all red monochrome). Serra da Capivara Style examples from a) Entrada do Pajau, b) Extrema II; c) Caldeirão do Rodrigues I; d) Perigoso; e) Sobradinho; f) Roça do Raimundão; g) Baixão da Vaca.



**Figure 5.** *The Nordeste Tradition (scale in centimeters; all red monochrome). Serra Branca Style examples from a) Caboco; b) Morcego; c) Levada do Caldeirão do Dentro; d) Rancharia. Salitre Style examples from e) Laura; f) Boqueirão do Paraguaio I; g) Salitre (red and yellow polychrome).*

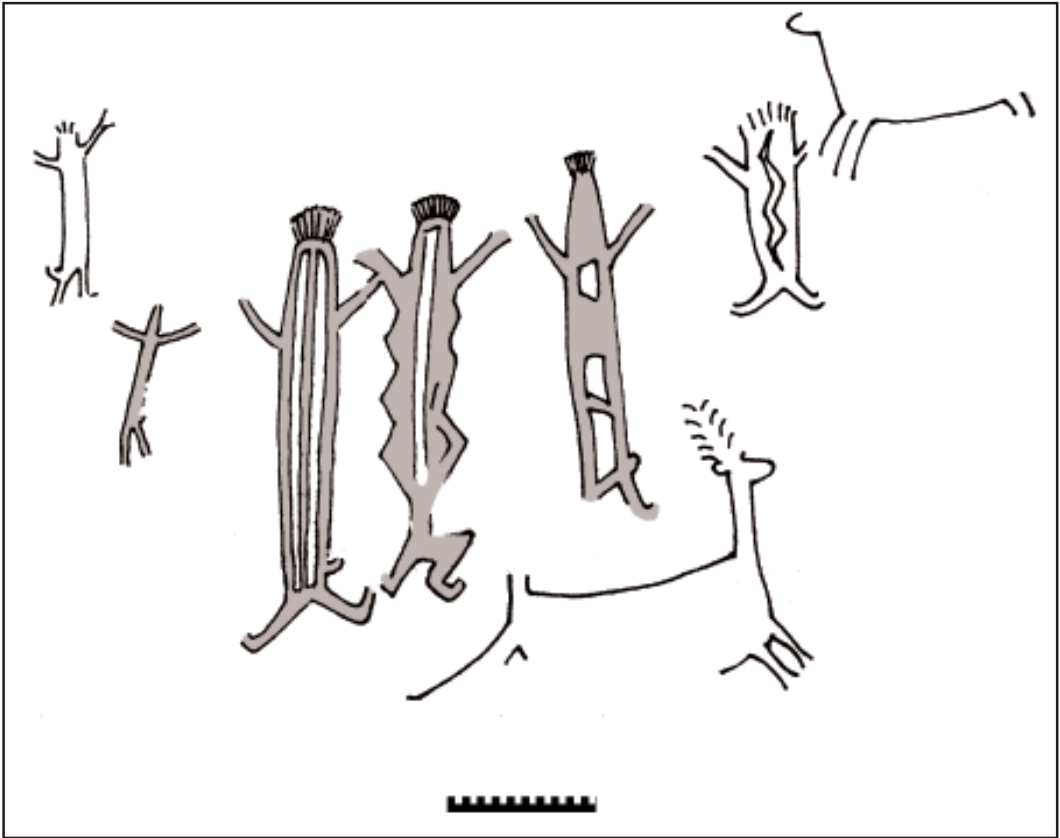
of hunter/warrior status—strongly suggesting the sort of ritual display found elsewhere in pre-Columbian art.

Since these traditions and styles were first introduced by Guidon in 1984 they have remained essentially unchallenged (with the above noted exception of Ogel-Ros 1985). Research by the author between 1998 and 2001, however, has led to the identification of a previously unrecognized style of rock art—the Angelim Style. The fact that this style was not previously recognized was likely due to the original researchers’ approach to classifying painting styles through the use of a methodology that privileged iconology (interpretations of content) over form as a means of defining style. The present analysis defines the new Angelim Style based upon form, not iconography or a presumed iconology. “Style,” as it is used here, simply means “how something is done” (evident in its form), apart from and independent of subject matter (the realm of

iconography) or interpretations of meaning (the realm of iconology; see Panofsky 1955:28-54; for similar approaches to style, see Greer 1995:56-61; Grieder 1996:140-143; Honour and Fleming 2002:vii; Kleiner et al. 2001:xix-xx).

### The Angelim Style

The Angelim Style was named after the site of Angelim do Barreirinho in Serra da Capivara National Park (Figure 2). The site lies at the top of a talus along the southern rim of the Serra Nova (north of the village of Barreirinho). The single composition at the site is in a slightly recessed area of the creamy yellow sandstone wall (Figure 6). Much of the pigment was either very thin originally, or has faded considerably. Since the 1970s, when it was shown to the Franco-Brazilian Archaeological Mission, a large hive of *arapoá* (black bees, *Trigona ruficus*) in an *angelim* tree next to the panel have been partially responsible



**Figure 6.** *The composition at Angelim do Barreirinho (scale in centimeters; red-orange and light yellow polychrome).*

for keeping the paintings free from vandalism. The landowner and original guide for the Franco-Brazilian mission, Sr. Nivaldo, is most responsible for the pristine condition of the site, thanks to his excellent stewardship.

A total of six anthropomorphs and two cervids are still visible, each outlined in light red or orange. Four of the anthropomorphs are filled with white or light yellow. The composition is predominantly horizontal, with the primary anthropomorphs following a slight upward-tilting (left to right) seam in the sandstone bedding. Each of their legs lie in this seam. The two framing anthropomorphs, while smaller, are positioned with their arms along the same line as the arms of the three central figures. The far left anthropomorph breaks this tableau, but is actually at the same height as the far right anthropomorph. The cervids frame the right side of the composition vertically. The lower cervid is juxtaposed with its back running along the same geological seam that runs through the legs of the primary figures.

Three central anthropomorphs dominate the panel (Figure 7). Each are elongated orant figures (frontal anthropomorphs, arms outstretched) with attenuated appendages, apparent "headdresses," and individual internal patterning. Two show clear phalli. They were each most likely executed interior first, with fingers, then outlined with thin (3-4 mm) lines, leaving the appendages open-ended. Two smaller anthropomorphs also have "headdresses" and are less elaborate versions of the central figures. These were possibly painted by a second artist (probably at the same time as the two cervids, based on their line quality, lack of interior fill, and use of available space). One is ithyphallic, and the other has a single interior zigzag design. The last (sixth) anthropomorph is different from the others in the composition. It has more naturalistic proportions, and lacks any internal patterns or apparent head ornamentation. This might have been a later addition by a different hand (a third possible painter). This is also suggested by the fact that it has the most well preserved white pigment—much more visible



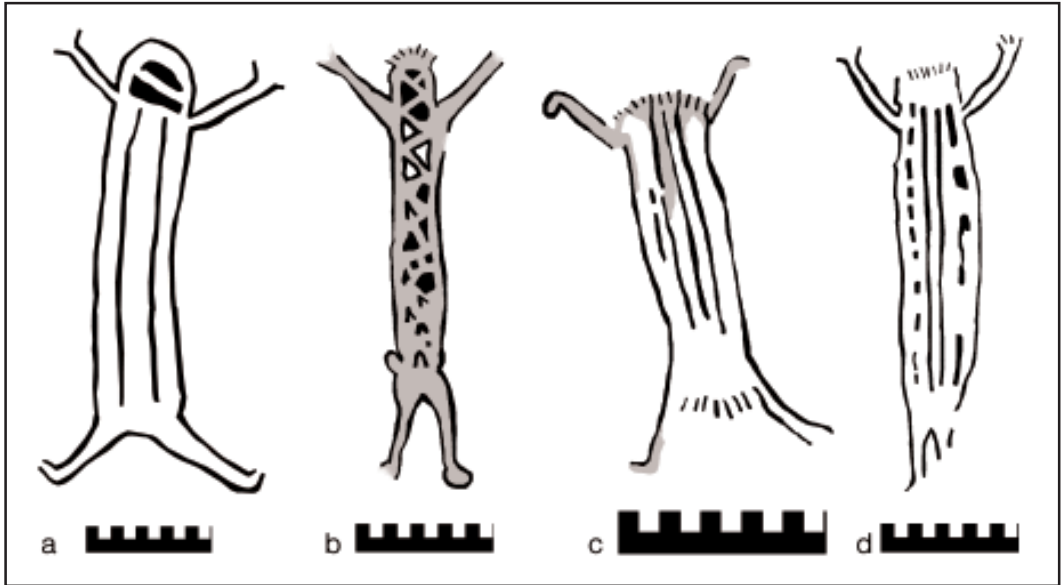
**Figure 7.** *Central anthropomorphs from Angelim do Barreirinho.*

than the white or light yellow fill in the other figures.

The two cervids share the same open-ended treatment as the anthropomorphs, exhibiting a very graceful approach to depicting the contours. The outlines of each (albeit partial) cervid reveal a very sophisticated break with the “oval torso and attached lines for legs” convention of the Serra da Capivara Style. The appendages (legs, tail, and neck) are outlined and treated as part of the overall form rather than as mere one-line attachments to the torso. For example, the line of the bottom cervid’s back stops abruptly where the nape begins. The neck and head were not *added to* the torso; instead, they were depicted as a

*continuation* of the form. The transition from neck to chest is a continuous line, perhaps a single brushstroke, with only a slight curve indicating the chest area.

The front legs are depicted as open-ended forms with slightly fluted termini suggesting hoofs. The area of the legs closest to the torso has a slight bulge, suggesting the cervid’s natural musculature. The outline of the torso is broken by the legs in the same manner as it was at the neck transition—the overall torso shape is not compromised. The torso line continues around the belly of the cervid maintaining a consistent outline. A short line, perpendicular to the lines of the legs, is added to fill the gap and maintain



**Figure 8.** Solitary Angelim Style anthropomorphs (scale in centimeters) from a) Caboclo (red monochrome); b) Calderão da Vaca (dark red and white polychrome); c) Pedra Furada (red and white polychrome); d) Levada do Caldeirão do Dentro (red monochrome).

the continuity of the torso line—preserving the overall integrity of the form, despite the gap where the legs connect. The line of the rear leg is one continuous brushstroke forming the rump and part of the open-contour tail. The legs of the upper cervid are suggested by three parallel, open-ended curved lines—the negative space between the lines is used as a design element. This same use of negative space is also seen in the treatment of the lower cervid’s rack, which is represented by a series of short parallel unconnected lines, like a herringbone pattern. The heads are ovals, at a right angle to the line of the neck, with the ears represented as an oval at the back of the head of the lower cervid. Close observation reveals that the entire form of a galloping cervid was expressed with only a few brushstrokes, each carefully preconceived so as to keep the integrity of the overall form foremost in mind.

### General Characteristics of the Style

Angelim do Barreirinho is rare among other Angelim Style compositions, having numerous anthropomorphs and associated zoomorphs in a single panel. Angelim Style motifs (especially anthropomorphs) are almost always limited to a very few isolated examples at each site (Figure 8). Pedra Furada and Angelim do Barreirinho each

have the most examples of this style in the sites studied to date. Pedra Furada has hundreds of motifs representing many different styles, but only a handful in the Angelim Style scattered across the site. Angelim do Barreirinho, on the other hand, is one of the rare sites in the region with only a single style of rock art present. Solitary zoomorphs (usually cervids) are the most common compositions in this style, although some compositions with groups of zoomorphs are also found.

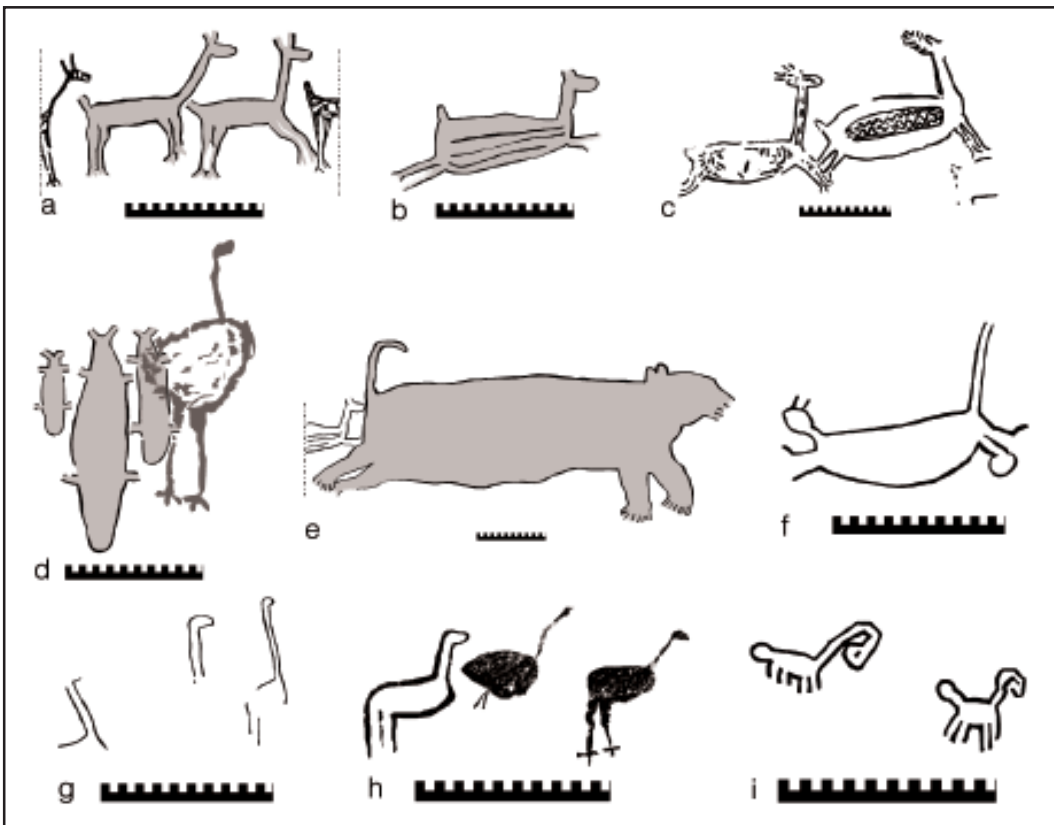
Angelim Style paintings are frequently polychrome. The interiors of the figures were executed in white or yellow, primarily with finger-width lines. The outlines are usually red or orange, executed with brush strokes about 3-4 mm wide. Some white interiors are still very clear, but others have faded considerably. The outlines conform to the interior shapes, indicating that they were most likely painted after the interiors rather than serving as an outline to be subsequently filled in. Appendages are usually outlined with the ends terminating in either parallel or slightly fluted open-ended lines. The most unique and diagnostic feature of these paintings is this use of open-ended contours. This was addressed by Guidon and Anne-Marie Pessis in their analyses of other local styles (Guidon 1984:178, 183; 1998:45; 1991:55; Pessis 1987:270, 292, 319; Pessis and

Guidon 1992:27), but was not recognized as formal evidence of a separate, distinct style.

The most formally consistent figures from site to site are the cervids. Their legs are frequently suggested by three parallel curving lines. When present, the rack is suggested by a series of short parallel brushstrokes. The torso shapes are never compromised. The torso line between the front and hind legs is perfectly consistent with the contour on either side. Transitions from torso to neck to head always maintain the integrity of the interior shape. This further supports the idea that in the polychrome figures the interiors were executed first, establishing the shape of the figure, with the outlines executed later. This is important to understand, since the white pigment recipes used were less permanent than the red or orange recipes. This has resulted in the almost complete loss of the interior pigment in some figures. What

appear at first glance to be monochrome figures may in fact have been polychrome originally. Monochrome figures and zoomorphs other than cervids also occur, yet even in these instances the same integrity of form is maintained (Figure 9).

With rare exceptions Angelim Style compositions do not appear to have been intentionally juxtaposed with figures of other styles, although the reverse is suggested. The Angelim Style cervid from Pedra Furada (Figure 10) is located in the center of a small oval niche in the massive rockshelter wall. Above and below the Angelim Style cervid are several Serra da Capivara Style figures, which were most likely added later since they are relegated to the periphery of the niche. This selection of a natural niche is common in the style. The solitary zoomorphs from Serrinha I and Cajueiro (Figure 9f and i), were likewise placed in small oval niches.



**Figure 9.** Angelim Style cervids from (scale in centimeters) a) Arapoá do Gongo (red and yellow polychrome; between two Serra da Capivara Style cervids); b) Viaduto I (red and white polychrome); c) Invenção (white monochrome). Other Angelim Style zoomorphs: “fish” at d) Roça do Raimundão (red and yellow polychrome; superimposed over a Serra da Capivara Style rhea); “felines” at e) Viaduto I (red and white polychrome) and f) Serrinha I (red monochrome); “rheas” at g) Invenção (white monochrome) and h) Roça do Raimundão (red monochrome; with two Serra da Capivara Style rheas in front); “monkeys” at i) Cajueiro.

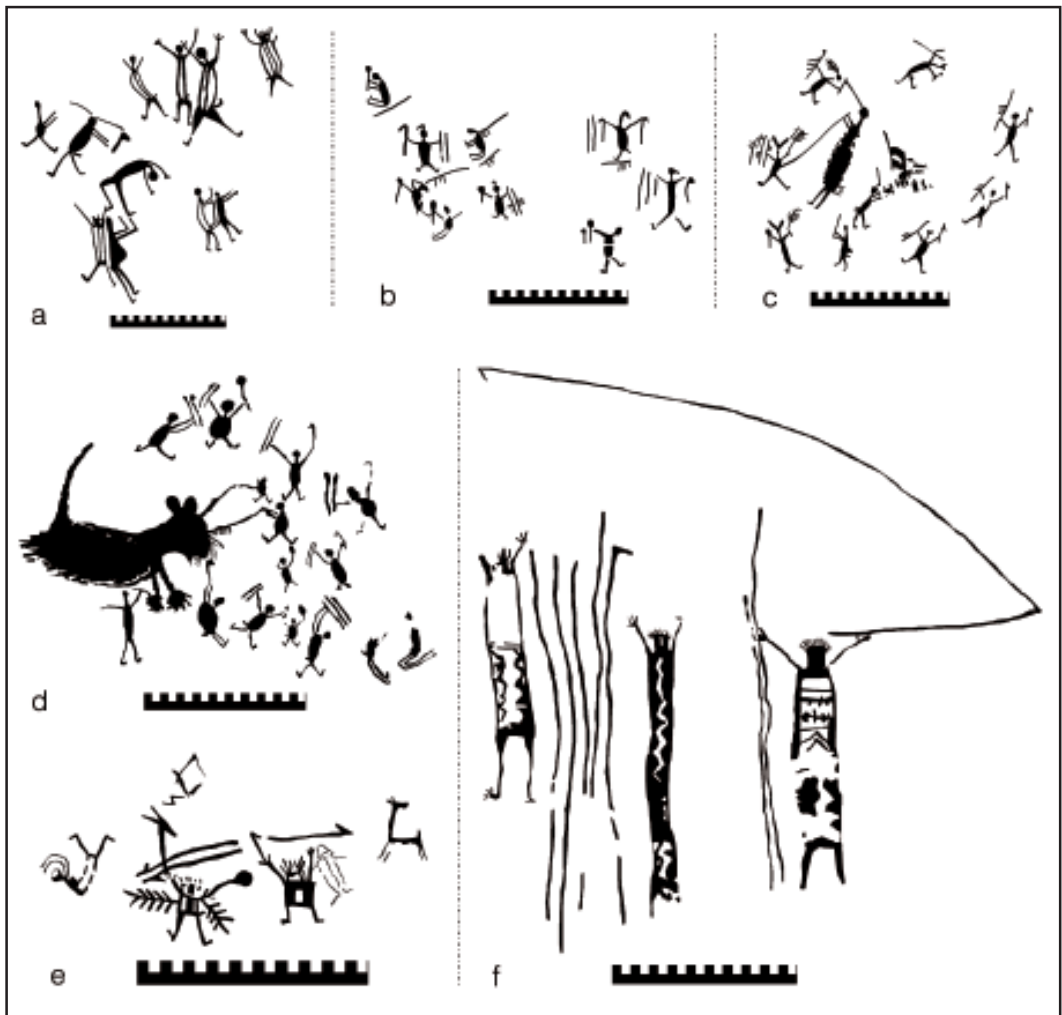


### Iconography of the Angelim Style

Isolated anthropomorphs (orant) or zoomorphs, formal groups of anthropomorphs or zoomorphs, and anthropomorph/zoomorph pairs are characteristic of Angelim Style compositions. In this sense, the iconography of the Angelim Style is consistent with the Serra Branca and Salitre Styles. Zoomorphs are the most common representations. While the position of the cervids' legs suggest movement (consistent in the other styles), the anthropomorphs are characteristically static, frontal, orant figures (found primarily in the Serra Branca and Salitre Styles). The most significant iconographic quality



**Figure 10.** *Angelim Style cervid from Pedra Furada (38 cm long; red and white polychrome; with smaller Serra da Capivara Style cervid below).*



**Figure 11.** *Hunting and/or warfare iconography (scale in centimeters; all red monochrome): a) an “execution” scene from Caboclo; and dart-thrower iconography from b) Arapoá do Gongo; c) João Arsená; d) Serrinha I; e) Canoas da Serra Vermelha; and f) Baixa da Cabaceira.*

	Years B.C.	10,000	9,000	8,000	7,000	6,000	5,000	4,000	3,000	2,000	1,000 1
<b>Guidon (1986)</b>											
Serra da Capivara											
Serra Branca											
Salitre											
<b>Pessis (1989)</b>											
Serra da Capivara											
Serra Branca											
<b>Guidon (1998)</b>											
Nordeste Tradition											
<b>Pessis (1999)</b>											
Serra da Capivara											
Serra Branca											
	Years B.C.	10,000	9,000	8,000	7,000	6,000	5,000	4,000	3,000	2,000	1,000 1

**Table 1.** Various chronologies of the Nordeste Tradition that have been proposed by Guidon and Pessis, based upon a presumed evolution from one style to another.

of the Angelim Style is the lack of any “hunting” or “warfare” iconography. It would be presumptive to call this a “pastoral” or “passivist” style, but accurate to note that no indications of violence are found in these compositions.

Weapons (utilitarian or ritual) are frequently depicted in the other styles (Figure 11). Dart-thrower iconography is particularly prevalent in the region. The Serra da Capivara Style compositions from Arapoá do Gongo, João Arsená and Serrinha I (Figure 11b, c and d) show groups of figures wielding dart-throwers and darts, as well as other probable weapons. The figures in these scenes appear to represent a group effort, either against an animal (a feline at Serrinha I) or each other (Arapoá do Gongo and João Arsená). The pair of figures at Canoas da Serra Vermelha (Figure 11e), on the other hand, do not seem to be interacting with the other figures in the composition. This painting appears to represent a *display of their status* as “hunters” or “warriors” (perhaps with mythological connotations). The trio from Baixa da Cabaceira (Figure 11f) suggests this idea of status display

even more profoundly. The anthropomorphs exhibit the same refined draftsmanship and elongated rectilinearity characteristic of the Serra Branca Style. Despite the fact that only speculative iconological interpretations are possible, it is significant to note that the widespread “hunting/warrior” iconography is absent in the Angelim Style.

### Relative Chronology of the Angelim Style

Superimpositions of one style over another provide the only available evidence of the Angelim Style’s relative chronology within the Nordeste Tradition. Various chronologies of the Nordeste Tradition have been proposed by Guidon and Pessis based upon a presumed evolution from one style to another, as summarized in Table 1. According to these authors, the Serra da Capivara Style marked the appearance of the Nordeste Tradition around 10,000 B.C. This style eventually “evolved” (ca. 6000-8000 B.C.) into the Serra Branca and Salitre Styles. These mark the apex of the “Nordeste peoples” (Guidon 1998:48).



**Figure 12.** *Angelim Style figures at Viaduto I (see Figure 9 b and e) with superimposed Serra da Capivara Style figures.*

As mentioned, the cervid from Pedra Furada (Figure 10) was most likely painted earlier than the Serra da Capivara Style figures above and below it. This is not a superimposition. The most favorable location in the painted area is occupied by the Angelim Style cervid and the other figures occur just below and above it. These latter figures could have been painted first, leaving the center of the niche unpainted, but the locations of other Serra da Capivara Style figures suggests that the painters preferred to center their compositions in available areas, rather than relegate them to the peripheries. This same situation is evident with the pair of Angelim Style cervids at Arapoá do Gongo (Figure 7a), which were framed by two Serra da Capivara Style cervids. At Viaduto I, the Angelim Style “feline” has several Serra da Capivara Style figures painted over it (Figure 12). Two partial Angelim Style anthropomorphs at Figuras do Angical have small Salitre Style anthropomorphs superimposed over them. At the opposite end of the site, however, a polychrome Angelim Style anthropomorph was painted over a Serra da Capivara Style cervid.

Absolute dates (AMS  $^{14}\text{C}$ ) from Angelim Style pigment samples would help to secure the chronology of the paintings, but these are not available. From the few examples of

superimpositioning available, the Angelim Style was contemporary with the Serra da Capivara Style (under Serra da Capivara Style figures at Viaduto I, and over those at Roça do Raimundão and Invenção). The relative positioning of the Serra da Capivara Style figures from Pedra Furada and Arapoá do Gongo (framing the Angelim Style figures) suggest they were painted later at these sites (after the Angelim Style figures). The Salitre Style anthropomorphs were painted over the Angelim Style figures at Figuras do Angical, hence later.

Considering the paucity of known Angelim Style compositions in Serra da Capivara National Park (versus the immense corpus of Nordeste Tradition rock art), two possibilities exist. Either the style was only used in rare circumstances (being occasion-specific; see Winter 1998:71) or the style existed for only a relatively brief span of time in the region. The Serra da Capivara Style appeared earlier (by c. 9570-8700 B.C. [9650  $\pm$  100 B.P. BETA-32972]; Guidon 1989) but survived longer in the area. The Salitre Style appears to have been later than the Angelim Style, but with only two secure examples of superimpositioning (in a single panel at Figuras do Angical) this remains a tentative conclusion. Iconographically, the Angelim and Salitre Styles are similar enough

to have been closely related in meaning, and perhaps contemporary with each other (“hunting/warfare” iconography is also absent in the Salitre Style compositions studied to date).

If the most recent chronology of the other styles proposed by Pessis (1989, 1999) is accurate, the Angelim Style would probably date to between 6000 and 4000 B.C. Ethnographic evidence of Northeast and Central Brazilian Indian art production in the context of seasonal ceremonies suggests, however, that the Serra Branca, Salitre and Angelim Styles might date to the period *after* the establishment of the current climatic regime (post-“Climatic Optimum;” see Schmitz 1987), or between 2500 and 500 B.C. This would effectively broaden the Nordeste Tradition chronology.

## Summary

Style is a matter of form, not iconography or iconology. The analysis presented here reveals a unique and previously overlooked style of rock art in Northeast Brazil—the Angelim Style. The defining characteristics of this style, especially the use of open-contour forms, are clearly observable. The iconography, with the exception of hunting/warfare imagery, is consistent with the most sophisticated paintings of the Nordeste Tradition (the Serra Branca and Salitre Styles). It is therefore reasonable to consider the Angelim Style as another manifestation of that widespread tradition. The relative paucity of Angelim Style compositions suggests it was either fairly short-lived in the region or was a style used only in rare circumstances. The research that led to the identification of this style also led to the discovery of Angelim Style paintings 350 km southeast in the state of Bahia (Morales and Cunha 2004). Future research promises to further expand our understanding of Nordeste Tradition rock art, one of the richest and most sophisticated prehistoric painting traditions in the Americas.

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