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Fact and fiction in the Côa valley

By ALAN WATCHMAN

A major problem with this paper is trying to sift the grains of fact from the chaff of fiction. Without a background and understanding of the Côa controversy, especially the independent scientific dating projects, the paper is believable. However, the biased reporting of the age of the rock carvings leads the informed reader to suspect that other aspects of the paper may not be critically represented.

Particular concerns relate to some inaccurate and misleading statements. For example, the contention that '*Raw-material proveniences* (my emphasis) show that the region was permanently inhabited by human groups which maintained geographically extensive networks of contact, circulation and exchange' is incomprehensible, illogical and unsubstantiated. How can the source of earth materials indicate levels of human occupation in an area?

Describing the rock art as Palaeolithic, but then saying that the motifs '*seem to date to the Gravettian and the Solutrean*' gives a glimpse as to the uncertainty in Dr Zilhão's mind about the real age of the carvings. Could they also seem to date to a much more recent period?

Labelling some of the carved animals 'species' as 'aurochsen' and 'ibex' reflects biased personal opinion. They could also be cows and goats!

The uncritical conviction that 'some very large figures are *certainly not* related to habitation. This *must* be the case, for instance, with the group of three "aurochsen"...' reveals passionate belief from personal interpretation of the carvings, but without any substantive evidence. There are other biases and errors, but to counter them individually establishes the paper as credible, which it is not.

Arguments concerning the probable age of the carvings have been proposed and debated. In 1995, during the political controversy in Portugal, many people believed that the dam should be stopped because the petroglyphs were Palaeolithic. The old age was the key reason why they needed to be saved from flooding. The scientific analyses carried out by Robert Bednarik (1995a) and I (Watchman 1995) to estimate the age of the so-called Palaeolithic carvings provided a much younger perspective. Dorn (1997) and Phillips et al. (1997) have provided support for the Palaeolithic hypothesis. However, the decision about protecting the Côa valley carvings was made by the Portuguese government based on the findings of a UNESCO panel of experts, who believe that stylistically the carvings are Palaeolithic. It is for this reason that there is now a UNESCO-sponsored World Heritage archaeological park and tourism in the Côa valley. The need for ongoing re-

search, conservation and management is unchallenged.

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Questions for Dr Zilhão

By ROBERT G. BEDNARIK

I am grateful to Dr Zilhão for offering his views on the research and management of the Côa petroglyph corpus for discussion. However, his report contains many inaccuracies that must not go unchallenged. Some relate to matters that one can argue about, being matters of opinion; some concern serious omissions that need clarification; and some *cannot* be argued about because they are matters of fact.

But first some points of agreement. Dr Zilhão mentions the planned but 'somewhat delayed' museum at the Côa dam site. Its construction has been forcefully demanded by IFRAO (to prevent recommencement of dam construction), most especially by Jack Steinbring in 1998. But ominously these delays continue, and as of early 2003 the museum project has not progressed at all. There is a privately owned, very well presented museum at Quinta da Ervamoira, within the Park, built after 1995 and fully completed in 1998. And concerning the wines produced at that property, I do agree with Dr Zilhão that they are superb.

I can also agree unreservedly on the question of the broad effects of the Côa campaign. Campaigners for preserving rock art anywhere in the world can take note that 100% of a sample of Portuguese high school students and 97% of the general population knew about the rock art. This extremely high level of awareness is without doubt attributable to the IFRAO campaign led by Mila Simões de Abreu. It demonstrates the value and potential long-term benefits for rock art protection of conducting high-profile media campaigns of this kind.

Matters of opinion

Dr Zilhão suggests that, 'originally, the valley's Palaeolithic representations were colour-treated', based on his identification of 'red paint' on one 'aurochsen' petroglyph at Faia. This illustrates his loose application of deductive reasoning. He ignores the dearth of painted petroglyphs in authentic Palaeolithic rock art (i.e. the Franco-Cantabrian cave art) and generalises from one instance to the whole corpus. He fails to show that what he sees on the Faia figure is indeed paint residue, here or in his other publications. But most importantly, how does he reconcile the complete and global lack of any Pleistocene paint residues on exposed rock surfaces with his extraordinary claim that the