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Coa issues

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Guadiana petroglyph



One of the thousands of Guadiana petroglyphs now being destroyed

Preamble

The Guadiana issue is closely interwoven with the Coa affair of 1995, when IFRAO opposed the then government of Portugal over its construction of the Coa dam. The government was defeated and the dam construction stopped - at tremendous financial cost to the public. The new government installed the two agencies that are responsible for the Guadiana disaster, IPA and CNART. These were run by the very same people who usurped the IFRAO Coa campaign to sweep them into office.

Criticism of their operation commenced almost immediately, particularly over their 'academic xenophobia', their secrecy of dam building in the Sabor valley (where reputedly there is also rock art), their inaction on the Guadiana, and their inappropriate methods in the preservation and management of the Coa rock art. Here is a paper published in 1996, dealing with the latter aspect.

Systematic vandalism and improper conduct in the Coa valley rock art area

LUDWIG JAFFE

The Parque Arqueológico do Vale do Coa (Archaeological Park of the Coa Valley) officially opened to the public on Saturday, 10 August 1996. Unfortunately, what the public will be officially welcome to see are rock art contexts that have been seriously and systematically vandalised by various authorities and personnel. At present, there is no indication that this devastation will cease; on the contrary, improper practices are formally ignored and are highly likely to continue.

During the campaign to save the Coa valley area, IFRAO had a limited success in preventing the rock art from being entirely and systematically mutilated by those involved in officially approved activities. It seems that Emmanuel Anati's 'neutral' method of

highlighting the petroglyphs (painting and rubbing black colouring over engraved rocks) was not used; however, IFRAO was unable to completely discourage other types of damage inflicted by people working for, or with, IPPAR (the heritage institute) and EDP (the electricity company).

In December 1994 IPPAR passed the responsibility for the rock art in the Coa valley to Mario Varela Gomes and Antonio Martinho Baptista. Gomes' first public statement in January 1995 was to advocate the submersion of the rock art. During the rest of that year Gomes and Baptista participated in, allowed, or did little or nothing to prevent, an onslaught of various ravages and acts of misconduct and bad faith:

1. Casts were allowed to be made on a set of fine panels that are submerged much of the time. The work, carried out by a French firm, disfigured the surfaces and rendered them useless for certain conservation analyses;
2. The scrubbing and removal of lichen and encrustations was endorsed and potentially important information was destroyed;
3. IPPAR personnel were not stopped from constantly touching and rubbing the petroglyphs;
4. Portugal's IFRAO representative was specifically barred from sites while engraved rocks were sprayed and the existing or natural contexts next to the surfaces disturbed by digging;
5. Engraved panels were painted with two different official numbering systems;
6. Nothing was done when a track to one site was enlarged and the rock art locality bulldozed;
7. Due to lack of site supervision, several engraved rocks were contaminated with chalk, charcoal and candle wax;
8. Certain international scholars faced needless delays and interference when they wished to see the sites (e.g., the President of ACASPP, Ben K. Swartz, Jr., was not allowed to photograph one site that had already been well filmed and photographed by the mass media).

In January 1996 Joao Zilhao was given the responsibility for creating the Archaeological Park of the Coa valley; he subsequently decided to continue funding Gomes and Baptista's work in this rock art area against the advice of Portugal's IFRAO office. It is of interest to note that at the moment there is a power vacuum while a new Instituto Portugues de Arqueologia (Portuguese Institute of Archaeology) is being created by the government under Vitor Oliveira Jorge's direction. (Oliveira Jorge, a Porto University professor, was one of the leaders in the fight to save the Coa rock art.) Sadly, Zilhao ignores Oliveira Jorge's authority and speaks directly to the Minister of Culture, Manuel Maria Carrilho.

To illustrate the nature of some of the people Zilhao has chosen to work for him, reference is made to an ugly incident that happened in May 1996. Baptista and Gomes reacted viciously to valid concerns expressed by Mila Simoes de Abreu (the IFRAO Representative in Portugal). In an attack that appeared in the daily newspaper Publico, Baptista and Gomes wrote false accusations against Abreu, insulted IFRAO, calling it 'uma nebulosa organizacao' ('a nebulous organisation'), and derided the Cooperativa Archeologica 'Le Orme dell'Uomo' (an IFRAO member in Italy) as 'uma cooperativa amantes da arte rupestre' ('a co-operative of rock art lovers'). In their hatchet job, Gomes and Baptista (who must be perfectly aware of Abreu's view that researchers from all over the world must be involved in studying the Coa) wrote 'nao precisamos, qual republica das banana, de socorrenos de inteligencia estrangeira' ('we don't need, like a banana republic, to seek aid from foreign intelligence'). Fortunately, this xenophobic mentality does not reflect the good will and generosity Portuguese people usually show to people from abroad.

It is worth bearing in mind that on the 8 November 1994 Baptista saw tracings of the Coa valley's rock art; in the weeks that followed Baptista and Gomes kept very quiet as Abreu

exposed the fact that the existence of the rock art was hushed up for two years while a massive dam was being built. When Abreu called for an international commission to consider the finds, Gomes voiced opposition to involving foreigners. Baptista and Gomes then accepted the consulting positions offered by IPPAR in December of 1994. Both were closely involved in the rationale to submerge the rock art (to 'protect it from vandals'); in fact, on 8 November Baptista spoke of how sedimentation behind dams should protect rock art. During Clottes' December 1994 visit Gomes helped convince him to favour the submersion of the sites (in view of the vandalism of the Mazouco horse, angry dam workers and locals, etc.). The truth is that the worst damage the Mazouco figures suffered occurred when Gomes himself enhanced them using Anati's method.

In summary, lichen and encrustations continue to be removed from decorated rock panels; substantial excavations have continued to wreck existing and natural surroundings next to the rock art surfaces. At least one upright boulder that was embedded next to an impressive panel was dug out and thrown flat. It is quite usual to find cigarette butts, lumps of sticky tape and plastic and other litter lying around rocks where Gomes, Baptista and associated personnel work. These practices violate current views about leaving rock art sites in as pristine and undisturbed condition as possible. Visitors and locals can hardly be expected to cherish and respect this heritage if researchers and assistants, who ought to know better, do not set a good example.

Furthermore, at the beginning of August 1996, Abreu and her colleagues, Jane Kolber (ARARA conservation chairperson) and Paul Firnhaber (ARARA member), were prevented from seeing a site called Barca. They requested permission four times and were defiantly refused access by Helen Moura, a young archaeologist working for Zilhao. The young archaeologist even had the impertinence to have a guard escort Jane Kolber out of the fenced-off site of Penascosa. This never happened before, even during the most difficult periods during the fight to save the Coa valley.

Obviously, Zilhao, Gomes and Baptista do not want any more direct dating to be carried out. For Zilhao, the rock art of the Coa is only important if it is Palaeolithic. In this recent publication, Vale do Coa, published by the Park, Zilhao writes, 'O vale do rio Coa constitui um local unico no mundo por apresentar manifestacoes artisticas de ar livre inseriveis em diversos momentos da Pre-historia e da Historia' ('The Coa river valley forms a unique place in the world for presenting artistic manifestations in the open air from different moments of prehistory and history'). This shows his ignorance and Eurocentric vision of world rock art!

Zilhao now needs to account for the continuing vandalism and misconduct by people working for or with the body he is in charge of.

AARP appeals to IFRAO members, and parties and individuals involved with rock art to affirm or reaffirm their high regard of the present government of Portugal's conscientious decision to save the rock art of the Coa valley. However, one needs to state that this report is tempered by shock and concern over the misconduct and professional and systematic vandalism that threatens the integrity of the rock art.

Several attitudes and practices, with regard to the rock art and with regard to people visiting or investigating the rock art need to be thoroughly and thoughtfully revised. Those responsible for the tutelage of this precious heritage need to be reminded that many future generations will want to enjoy and study it. The possibilities of gathering information from the rock art and associated contexts should not be prejudiced.

The people and leaders of Portugal must be reassured that the rock art of the Coa has fired the imagination and curiosity of people throughout the world. There is an unjustified conviction that if the rock art is not of Palaeolithic age it is insignificant. If this were true, South Africa and Australia would take no pride in their wonderful rock art, much of which is quite recent. There is no earthly need to prove or confirm its importance - the Coa area's rock art is already famous.

In a world where increasing amounts are spent on travel and learning, any astute investor

would not wait for specialists to confirm the importance of the Coa valley's rock art - yet to be born experts will probably still be researching and discussing its existential significance several centuries from now!

What is important is that the Coa valley's rock art, its context and associated evidence should be properly cared for. If people working on the rock art do not know, or cannot learn, how to respect and cherish this unique cultural heritage and treasure, then they must be required to leave it alone.

Joao Zilhao proved that he is not capable of protecting the rock art of the Coa valley and he can not be left in charge of this world heritage.

As before, it is right to demand that an international commission be created to study and protect this world-class site.

Since this request was published the Minister himself has been sacked and his government voted out of office. The man principally responsible for the destruction of Portuguese rock art from 1996 to 2001 as well as the destruction of the credibility of Portuguese archaeology, Professor Joao Zilhao, resigned finally on 6 May 2002, under most acrimonious circumstances. He leaves behind a discipline in need of rebuilding.



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