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Lesson in integrity: A reply to Joo Zilho

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Reply to João Zilhão

Robert Bednarik

In the Editor's words, this debate has become 'a smoking battlefield'. This was not my intention, and if I have offended Zilhão personally, let me say that my critique was not directed against his person but against his abysmal performance as Portugal's most senior public archaeologist since 1996. I fully acknowledge his achievements as a scholar in other endeavours and I do admire some of his research work in such fields as the early Upper Palaeolithic transition and the possible genetic role of Neanderthals. Regretfully, his knowledge of rock art and his understanding of its preservation are severely limited (see Zilhão, 2003[AUQUERY1]) and it would be of great value if I could discourage Zilhão from attempting to manage rock art again.

Zilhão not only misunderstood my paper as a whole, he also misunderstood many of the specific points to which he refers. For instance, right at the start he states that I accused him 'of deliberate destruction of the scientific evidence'. This refers to accusations by the Portuguese media that his campaign of scrubbing all lichens from the petroglyphs was intended to prevent the use of lichenometry for estimating rock art ages (Fig. 1). I actually said: 'But I find it outrageous to claim, as the Portuguese press has done (*O'Independente*, 6 September 1996), that Dr Zilhão deliberately scraped off the lichens to render it impossible to date them' (Bednarik, 1996[AUQUERY2]). My view was that his action was attributable to lack of experience. His understanding of the exact opposite of what was said is a fair indication of the general veracity of his rhetoric. He states 'no vehicular traffic is allowed' in the Park when, in fact, *all traffic of people is exclusively by vehicles*; hiking, horse-riding or boating are simply not

permitted. Not only are local villagers complaining bitterly about what they describe as a monopoly of the Park (preventing them from providing services to visitors), it also deprives visitors of such alternatives.

Errors of fact or misunderstandings occur throughout Zilhão's article. Some examples:

- There was no school group in Penascosa on 29 July 1996 (it was the summer holidays).
- Defamation proceedings against Zilhão *were* initiated by at least one party in 2001, and were threatened by six others that I know about. Actions were withdrawn after the offending material was removed, as Zilhão himself observes, 'by ministerial order'.
- Zilhão falsely claims that he has made himself 'available in the past to any kind of investigation of these charges by any recognized international association of professional archaeologists'. The largest such association, the IUPPS[AUQUERY3], appointed a commission (IUPPS, 2001[AUQUERY3]) that was abandoned after his intemperate rejection.
- The statement 'What exactly happened during the conversation between Rebanda and Abreu is known only to the two of them' is false: Ludwig Jaffe was also present.
- The Palaeolithic age of the Côa rock art was not proven, it looks very unconvincing following the refutation of the sham claim for Fariseu (Abreu and Bednarik, 2000[AUQUERY4]). If Zilhão wishes to pursue this issue he must respond to the 22 archaeometric questions addressed directly to him (Bednarik, 2003[AUQUERY5]).
- IPPAR *did* replace IPPAR, because the first

acronym stands for a different name, as Zilhão himself notes.[AUQUERY6]

- I had not stated that the Foz Côa school collected 1million signatures; hence his ‘correction’ is irrelevant.
- It was not I who said that the purported Palaeolithic age of the art was used as a political tool, it was Gonçalves, a Portuguese social scientist, in her excellent analysis of the affair.
- That I ‘solicited a consultancy contract’ is false; I have never sought any consultancy and when I was offered a generous professional fee by the Portuguese government I rejected it twice. I have accepted payment for my research work only once in my life and that was on an occasion in India. I donated the money to a Bhopal orphanage. All my research work for the past 40 years has been conducted at my own expense, because my professional ethics forbid me to benefit from it. If Zilhão had any integrity he would donate to charity all government money he received between 1996 and 2002.
- Zilhão’s claim that only one location of ‘large pecked’ petroglyphs was ‘discovered’ by local residents is false, curious and elitist. Why exclude ‘small’ pecked petroglyphs and incised engravings? *All* petroglyph sites on the Côa were known by *some* local residents during recent centuries, as numerous inscriptions clearly demonstrate. The short valley contains dozens of mills, schist quarries and vineyards. In recent years, petroglyphs were *re-discovered* by several local people, e.g. Castelo Melhor sites by Adriano Ferreira (and previously by Andrade), the Piscos site by the Mayor of Muxagata, Mr Antonio, the Vale de Cabroes and Vermelhusa sites by Jose Constancio ‘Pilerio’.
- The number of rock art sites in the IPA [AUQUERY7]database (453) contrasts with that of IPAAR, the Portuguese NGO dealing with the country’s rock art (approximately 1,000 sites listed), which explains some of Zilhão’s uninformed comments. Concerning removed rock art, I ask that he considers, for instance, the rock of Ardegães de Águas Santas that is being used as an ashtray in the atrium of the Faculty of Science in Porto; the series of decorated boulders languishing in a wine storage room in Cabeço da Mina; or the rock from Venda Nova

that was removed by the EDP [AUQUERY8]only recently, *with Zilhão’s approval*.

Of concern is Zilhão’s attempt to detract from the *re-discovery* of Côa rock art by José Silvério de Campos Henriques Salgado de Andrade (1940[AUQUERY9]). That author was quite explicit: ‘*petroglifos de época muito remota*’ (petroglyphs of a very remote age) do not grow on garden walls. Andrade also makes it very clear (‘*foi chamada a atenção*’[AUQUERY17]) that someone else drew his attention to these petroglyphs: he has the integrity to admit that he was not ‘the discoverer’. Why is Zilhão misleading the reader about the history of *re-discovery*?

Similarly, he goes to extraordinary lengths to dispute that the Côa campaign was spearheaded by IFRAO [AUQUERY10]and led by Abreu – who, with two MPs, addressed the media in Parliament on 29 November 1994, demanding the suspension of the dam construction. Zilhão himself played no role for the subsequent months of the campaign, joining it only when it became apparent that Abreu might actually prevail. I feel considerable indignation when the achievements of the woman who put so much on the line, whose car was shot at during the campaign and who, today, still suffers from the consequences of her actions to save rock art, should be disparaged by the very same man whom I blame for the Guadiana disaster. Being primarily a ‘politician’ (who stood for office in the last national elections) and an archaeologist secondarily, he kept well out of any activity that might look controversial. He was not at the Foz Côa demonstration or at any other event that could have prejudiced his ambitions for high office. He has no first-hand knowledge of the violence at the 70-day public fast, of which I have a full account. The initial attempt by the police to eject the protesters was repelled when, after a call for help using a radio station (TSF), approximately 300 people assembled spontaneously to place themselves between the police and the fasters. There is a report of a truck attempting to run over participants and, on 8 July 1995, their tents were torn down and banners defaced with obscenities. Zilhão does not even know when the fast ended (he claims it ended on 12 May).

On close examination Zilhão’s paper is such a

litany of misinterpretations, errors of fact and looseness with the truth that it would be a Herculean task to unravel each point. The reader, I think, is not interested in point scoring nor in unproductive polemics. I therefore move on to more important generic matters.

To deserve the status of a professional body, public archaeologists must be accountable under law. Who polices the integrity of public archaeologists, and why has not one been sued for professional misconduct or malpractice? Surely nobody would suggest that no public archaeologist has ever done wrong, so why are *some* associations of professional archaeologists reluctant to take to task aberrant practitioners? Zilhão seems to provide an answer in his abusive 2001 response to UISPP[AUQUERY11], emphasizing that an ‘inspection’ was an ‘extremely dangerous precedent’. The politically adept or influential can enlist the support of compliant organizations and individuals. The reason for Zilhão’s impertinent rejection of the right of IUPPS to check his handiwork was, in his own words (2001), that they ‘were not invited’ – *invited by him*. His idea of his professional culpability as a public servant is that only colleagues he has invited, and who are supportive, obligated or beholden to him, may comment on his work.

It is precisely because there are no external or independent restraints on recalcitrant public archaeologists that a journal such as this one provides an invaluable service to the discipline. Zilhão’s claim that he knows of no instance where the destruction of rock art was ‘approved’ by the Portuguese state is logically identical to the claim that certain war criminals cannot be linked to atrocities by documentary evidence. State-condoned acts of rock art destruction have been endemic throughout the 20th and now into the 21st century in Portugal but, according to Zilhão, nobody was responsible at the Tejo sites (Fratel and others); Vale da Casa; the sites recorded by the late Abbe Baçal in the 1930s; Alfaião, Fraga da Ferradura; Rio de Onor, Letras do Cabeço da Velha; Montouto, Fragas da Boavista; Vilar de Lomba, Fraga da Estrela; Ousilhão, Fraga da Vela; or the many Guadiana sites. Zilhão’s defence is highly relevant, because in the case with which I am most particularly concerned, the recent

Guadiana tragedy, he now effectively accuses ‘the Spanish’. Indeed, IFRAO itself should be blamed for the disaster, he implies. But the dam was not built by either Spain or IFRAO, it was built by a government agency of Portugal, and the protection of the rock art was the exclusive responsibility of IPA/CNART[AUQUERY12].

To define my analysis of long-standing rock art site management practices in Portugal as an attack on Portugal is as irrational as it is to read it as a personal attack on Zilhão. The institutions of public archaeology are, I think, open to criticism in any democracy. In both the Cõa and Guadiana cases, the public of Portugal agreed with IFRAO’s viewpoint at the ballot box. If the people of Portugal had felt that we had attacked their nation or country, as Zilhão argues, they would not have removed the two governments in question. Nor did I attack Portuguese archaeology as such; I have always emphasized that there are numerous archaeologists of outstanding integrity, competence and statesmanship in that country (e.g. Raposo, Oosterbeek, Jorge). There are, of course, also some scoundrels, but one finds them in the public archaeology of any country. To criticize the IFRAO ‘associates’ for bringing this issue into the open misses the point entirely: it is part of IFRAO’s charter to protect rock art against public archaeologists around the world. These servants of the state have destroyed rock art, or facilitated its destruction, in almost every country and it happens to be my role to challenge them. I was elected IFRAO Convener for that purpose. That *some* public archaeologists of Portugal have been among the main offenders is a matter of public record, and I would be negligent in my office if I did not at least try to render rogue archaeologists accountable. IFRAO has not the slightest nationalist preferences, and we are currently extremely critical of *some* of the public archaeologists of, among other countries, Australia (Bednarik 2002[AUQUERY13]). If Zilhão can point to a European country whose public archaeologists have *approved or condoned* the destruction of *more* rock art than he and his colleagues have, then I would be most grateful to him and would certainly focus my attention on this alternative offender. But I make no apologies for pursuing public archaeologists anywhere that misuse their

positions of power to approve or condone rock art destruction.

At least Zilhão does acknowledge in his diatribe that it is IFRAO he opposes, the body he called ‘a bunch of loonies’ in 1998, and that his many attacks on at least eight individual officeholders, including me, is simply his way of dealing with IFRAO. Yet, towards the end of his verbose rhetoric, he approves of IFRAO members who have been critical of other IFRAO operatives. So he approves of mechanisms of dissent, such as employed by IFRAO, but not when they are applied to him. Since Zilhão is a political entity first it is important to understand his ambiguous position on accountability and dissent. Zilhão would have us believe that the foremost bodies of public archaeology should not be subjected to dissent unless, coming from ‘invited’ bodies, it is tame.

Finally, Zilhão chides me for comments about professional competence. In the Guadiana disaster, a force of approximately 100 archaeologists conducted the largest cultural resources project in all of Europe. The rock art occurs along the river, the natural focus of the valley, along which there was a great deal of foot traffic. Archaeologists walked past spectacular, prominent and highly visible decorated rocks not thousands, but tens of thousands of times over the years. Even Zilhão himself admits that there were at least a thousand decorated panels, and that the Spanish, who were not building a dam and had no funding for a massive survey, had no trouble finding the rock art on their patch. Portuguese archaeology had just experienced a period of intensive soul searching over rock art through the Côa affair, yet this army of archaeologists, at work for years, supposedly never even noticed the existence of this huge corpus of rock art. But the Guadiana valley is not in some remote tropical jungle, endless outback or tundra. Most rock art in the enormous expanse of the Sahara is known and recorded today, and it did *not* take 90,000 person-days to fail in finding a single site, a single panel!

Zilhão is trying to tell us that his archaeologists saw nothing in all these years. I refuse to accept that such consummate incompetence could even be possible. It is therefore not I, but Zilhão who claims that his archaeologists were incredibly incompetent, whereas I believe that they were competent but were required to keep silent about the rock art so as not to jeopardize the dam project. (An anonymous person, no doubt one of the archaeologists, blew the whistle and informed the Liga para a Protecção da Natureza; Abreu et al., 2001.[AUQUERY14]) As the man in charge of the Guadiana fiasco, Zilhão has never publicly reprimanded anyone for this ‘blunder’. Instead, he has adopted the dishonest rhetoric of his Côa predecessors and he ruthlessly defends the dam. To him, there are ‘bad dams’ and ‘good dams’: those he opposes and those he approves. Zilhão now peddles the very same cynical argument our opponents used at the Côa: that the rock art will be recoverable after the silted-up dams are abandoned. I responded to this blatant misrepresentation then (Bednarik, 1995[AUQUERY15]) and the same response applies now: who does he propose will pay for the removal of billions of tonnes of silt and gravel late this century? Not only has he defined his own archaeologists as utterly inept, he now hopes to fool the readers of this journal.

Robert Bednarik is the Convener and Editor of the International Federation of Rock Art Organizations (IFRAO). Almost half of his nearly 1000 publications have appeared in refereed scientific journals, and they include several books.

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