

*The following item was submitted in response to the Internet invitation of the IPA Webpage to comment on the downgrading of IPA. That site remains a propaganda tool of Professor Zilhão and his supporters, admitting only comments supportive of Zilhão. It is totally opposed to open debate. This AURA site is not, and anyone wishing to comment is invited to do so, including members of the archaeological Mafia of Portugal, including Zilhão and Co.*



## **THE UNDERTAKER OF THE GUADIANA ROCK ART**

The recent decision of the new Portuguese government, one of its first since it came to office, to downgrade the Instituto Português de Arqueologia (IPA) has attracted a great deal of criticism on this forum. It seems to me that many of the commentators are basing their objections on the constant stream of misinformation emanating from the IPA. I would be grateful for the opportunity to more objectively summarise the facts that led to this fiasco.

In late April 2001 a Portuguese NGO called Liga para a Protecção da Natureza announced that there is a large body of rock art in the Guadiana valley, after receiving an anonymous tip-off. The large team of archaeologists working in the area to be destroyed by the Alqueva dam, about 100 of them, claimed that they never noticed the rock art, even though impact studies began in 1985 (under the aegis of the IPA since its formation in 1996).

There are two possibilities to explain this strange tale. Either the archaeologists knew of the rock art and kept silent about it so as not to prevent the construction of the dam (completed at the end of 2001), or they did not know about it. The second possibility does not sound very plausible, and it needs to be remembered that the rock art became known because of an anonymous tip-off (presumably from one of the archaeologists).

The alternative, that the archaeologists concealed the existence of the rock art, is too ghastly to contemplate. But it must be remembered that this happened before in Portuguese archaeology, for instance in the case of the Côa rock art corpus, discovered in 1992, concealed from the public until a chance discovery by officials of the International Federation of Rock Art Organisations (IFRAO) in late November 1994. This led to the Côa campaign and the cessation of dam construction, at great cost to the Portuguese taxpayers. Similarly, construction of yet another reservoir that is to destroy rock art, in the Sabor valley, has proceeded for several years, under conditions of secrecy and with the full approval of the IPA.

When the Guadiana rock art was announced the IPA defended its destruction explicitly, stating that it is not of adequate importance to preserve. But the Guadiana complex of more than 600 sites is much larger than any remaining rock art concentration in Portugal, being in fact one of the largest in Europe. Moreover, IPA opposed and ridiculed the efforts of IFRAO to organise international opposition to the dam and to secure proper recording, and it sabotaged its campaign, heaping abuse on the committees and office holders not only of IFRAO, but also of the International Union of Prehistoric and Protohistoric Sciences (UISPP). As a result of this abuse, the Portuguese government was flooded with official complaints from embassies and individuals, and its Director was sued for defamation.

Within a few weeks of the announcement of the Guadiana rock art, the responsible Minister for Culture was sacked by the government. In early 2002, António Carlos Silva, the archaeologist in charge of the Guadiana project, resigned and published a long declaration of protest, but the main culprits in this affair, the Directors of IPA and CNART (the National Rock Art Centre, an agency within IPA), remained in office. The brief of these two organisations is to protect and preserve the archaeological and rock art heritage of Portugal, a responsibility in which they failed severely and consistently for the past six years. For instance they were greatly censured internationally for destroying the research potential of the World Heritage Côa rock art by “scrubbing it with wooden tools” for the sake of “political expediency” (these are the words of the former IPA Director himself, no less).

Shortly after the electoral victory of the new government in April 2002, on 6 May 2002, the downgrading of IPA and its future accountability were announced. The Director of IPA, Dr João Zilhão, resigned immediately. The Director of CNART, Antonio Martinho Baptista, still remains in his position, but the government has hinted that another agency is yet to be dealt with.

I applaud the new government for its swift and appropriate measures, and I trust that it will continue to repair the damage done to the credibility of Portuguese archaeology over the past six years. Not only have there been so many irregularities and questionable practices in the modus operandi of IPA and its agencies, the personal conduct of its former Director is an equally great concern. Dr Zilhão claims that every scholar who agrees with his point of view is incompetent, and he is not reluctant in publishing this view. As an example I cite some extracts from just one published debate, between him and two eminent American palaeoanthropologists, where he discusses their views of the controversial Lagar Velho human remains:

Their paper is replete with mis-information, mis-use of cladistic and anatomical terminology, mis-quotes, mis-representations, poor logic, general incompetence ... which reveal primarily their ignorance ... nothing in this abysmal piece of scholarship serves to refute our basic premise ... is an inappropriate, inaccurate, and unethical critique of our article ... their attempt at refutation of the admixture hypothesis is pitiful ... a serious breach of scientific etiquette ... they are simply ignorant ... they are intellectually dishonest. Any combination of these interpretations reflects a fundamental incompetence and an attitude which have no place in scientific discourse on human evolution.

(Just for the record, Dr Zilhão's interpretation of the Lagar Velho specimen as a Neanderthal hybrid is almost universally rejected, as indeed he seems to be wrong in most of his claims.) This abusive style of academic discourse is the hallmark of all of Dr Zilhão's work: everyone who disagrees with him is labelled incompetent, and the list of people he has so labelled includes several hundred distinguished scholars. Similarly, any attempt by an international organisation to review the effects of his policies on Portuguese archaeology and heritage have led to emotive outbursts and condemnation. An example is the recent proposal of UISPP to examine the Guadiana fiasco, which led to a fiery response and the resignation of Dr Zilhão from the UISPP Permanent Council. Another independent inquiry, by an American referee the former Director of IPA had himself nominated, noted an endemic form of academic xenophobia in that organisation, and called for the resignation of Dr Zilhão.

He has finally painted himself into a corner and while one can feel sympathy for him, there can be no doubt that Portuguese archaeology will be better off without his influence. He had been leading this discipline into an abyss for the past six years, and as the Undertaker of the Guadiana rock art he has forfeited any right for support from colleagues.

None of this helps the rock art of the Guadiana, condemned to inundation under billions of tonnes of lake sediment as the reservoir silts up over the next 70 years. The nation of Portugal has the same choice it faced in 1995: to needlessly pay a vast sum of money for preserving a significant heritage property, or to lose this heritage forever. But while the Côa mistake only cost in the order of hundreds of millions of dollars, this time the bill would be in the billions. It is the height of professional impertinence that the principal culprit in this dilemma, the Undertaker of the Guadiana rock art, now pleads for support in the discipline.

Respectfully,  
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President of IFRAO