

Abreu, M. S. (2003) - Stale propaganda. *Rock Art Research*, 20 (1), Melbourne, p. 58-61

tent', and only 11% were 'in total disagreement';

- The discovery of Côa rock art was something to be 'very proud' of for 70% of the Portuguese and to be 'proud' of for another 26%.

These values are all the more significant since the 1995 political controversy surrounding the fate of the dam and the petroglyphs had given rise to a major division of Portuguese society. Although, at the beginning, opinion polls indicated that a majority was in favour of stopping the dam to preserve the petroglyphs (55% against 30% in June 1995, according to a poll published in the weekly magazine *Visão*), the confusion created by the announcement of the pseudo-scientific dating results obtained by Robert G. Bednarik and Alan Watchman (cf. Bednarik 1995a) brought about a significant erosion of this support. In January 1996, a poll divulged in the *Viva a Liberdade* show of the national channel SIC (Sociedade Independente de Comunicação) two months after the government's decision to preserve the art and create the PAVC was announced indicated that 28% were in favour of the decision, 39% were against, whereas the percentage of undecided had risen from the 15% in June 1995 to 33%.

Five years after its creation, the PAVC is going through a phase of administrative consolidation and preparing for the qualitative leap that the opening of the Canada do Inferno Museum will represent. With this facility, the Park's carrying capacity will increase to values of c. 200 000 visitors per year. This will provide the market basis for local investors to develop the tourist facilities and services which are required to support such a flux and, at the same time, will make it possible for the Côa rock art to play an economic role of regional importance.

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COMMENTS

Stale propaganda

By MILA SIMÕES DE ABREU

Dr Zilhão's paper does not strike me as a serious scientific contribution to understanding the rock art of the Côa valley or its management. Rather I see it as a poorly disguised propaganda exercise excusing his work, first as Director of the Archaeological Park of the Côa Valley (PAVC—Parque Arqueológico do Vale do Côa) and later as Director of the National Portuguese Institute of Archaeology (IPA—Instituto Português de Arqueologia).

Since this paper was written, elections were held in Portugal and a new government took office in April 2002.

Following these events, Dr Zilhão resigned as IPA Director. The new Minister of Culture is slowly trying to correct some of the previous mistakes.

Although the paper is now out of date, its absurdity may help illustrate the present situation of PAVC and the lack of progress in the research of the Côa valley rock art. With this in mind, I shall point out some erroneous misleading information. Others will comment on Zilhão's vision of the facts that involved the disclosure and fight to save the petroglyphs of the Côa valley and suspend the construction of the Foz Côa dam.

Zilhão attempts to broach two quite different issues: research, covered somewhat superficially, followed by a laborious piece on the Park's management.

The bit on research airs Zilhão's usual and much published ideas on the Côa valley rock art (Zilhão 1996, 1997; Zilhão et al. 1997 and Carvalho et al. 1996), which raises nothing new and avoids discussing fresh matters like the controversial Fariseu finds and stratigraphy (Anon. 2000; Abreu and Bednarik 2000).

Briefly acknowledging the existence of evidence from other periods in the Côa valley, Zilhão then concentrates all his description of the 'monument' on its Palaeolithic-style figures. While doing so, he evades the fact that the claim of a Palaeolithic age, for most of the petroglyphs, is still based on style. In fact, many researchers agree with Paul Bahn, who writes, '... we only have stylistic arguments for this, albeit strong' (Bahn 2001: 158).

No adequate dating information is given. The few published dates (Mercier et al. 2001; Aubry et al. 2002) are from sites in the valley but not in clear association with the petroglyphs. Bahn also writes, referring to open-air Siberian rock art, that 'the presence of Palaeolithic settlements in the area in no way provides a date for these images' (Bahn 2001: 156); this specific statement evokes a general concept applying to all rock art, including that on the Côa, which Zilhão disregards.

He seeks to establish a relationship between habitation areas and the petroglyphs in two main areas, Penascosa/Barca and Canada do Inferno. There are contradictions in his desperate effort to prove this. He admits the lack of evidence and presents an explanation saying, 'tests showed that an absence is due to erosional processes'. This absence is no proof of any possible association. Citing the contested Fariseu finds does not help his case (Abreu and Bednarik 2000). Zilhão then concedes that this is not so for other panels like one at Piscos.

Zilhão is also incapable of answering criticisms by researchers like Thomas Wyrwoll (2000) on representations of fauna. The question is not the absence of cold Palaeolithic fauna but the documented presence in post-Palaeolithic times of fauna like that depicted in the Côa valley.

The *Capra pyrenaica lusitanica* (Fig. 1) lived in the area until recent times—at least 1892 (Almaça 1992); sadly, the last known *Capra pyrenaica pyrenaica* was found dead near Parque Nacional de Ordesa y Monte Perdido early in 2000 (Huesca).

In a habitual misleading fashion, Zilhão refers in English to those figures as 'ibex'. The scientific name of the

Portuguese 'ibex' or goat is *Capra pyrenaica*, commonly known as *cabra-brava*, *cabra do Gêres*. Indeed, this is called '*Capra Pyrenaica*' on the Park's 'explanatory cards' mentioned in Zilhão's paper (Fig. 2).

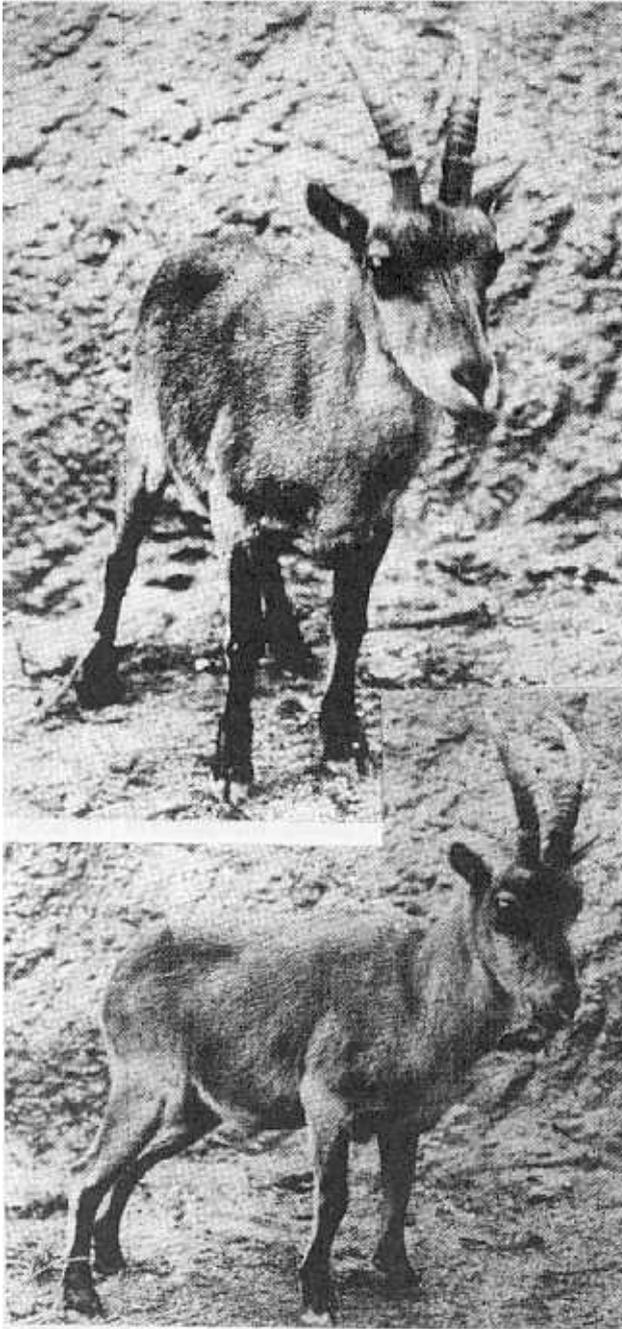


Figure 1. Photographs of the last specimen of *Capra pyrenaica* captured alive (Almaça 1992).

There is knowledge of a rare horse in the nearby Parque Natural do Douro Internacional (pers. comm. PNDI personnel) similar to ones depicted on the rocks of the Côa valley. Called *zebro* by locals, this small strong pony-like horse had a fat belly and a short mane just like a zebra crest. Tradition has it that when Portuguese discoverers first saw zebras in southern Africa (probably *Equus burchelli*, the so-called Chapman's zebra or Damara zebra), they gave them that name, probably because the animals reminded those discoverers of *zebras*.

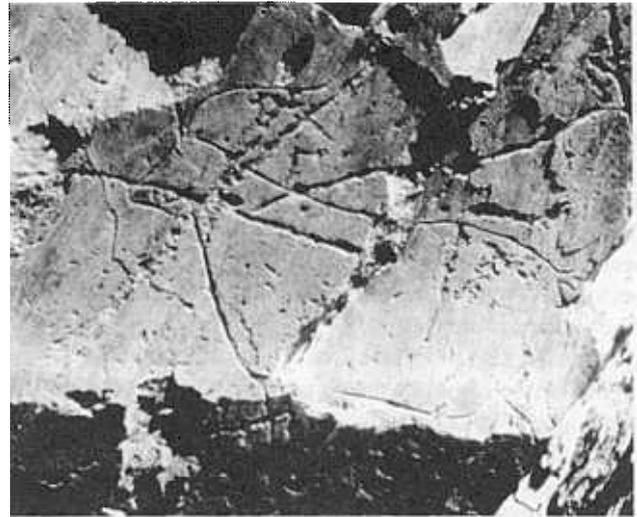


Figure 2. Penascosa Rock 5C: petroglyph of a goat-like zoomorph, possibly *Capra pyrenaica*. (Photo by L. Jaffe.)

We must also remember that Ruy D'Andrade, a Portuguese researcher, discovered a primitive horse in Portugal's Sorraia river region in 1920 (D'Andrade 1926, 1945). The Sorraia horse is not a man-made breed but a direct descendent of a wild indigenous Iberian horse. DNA analyses related it with the Tarpan. Traditionally they were used as working horses and mounts. All this should make us realise there is a strong hypothesis of the continuous presence of horses from the late Ice Age until the present day.

Finally, the striking similarity of local bovine races like the *barrosã* (Fig. 3) to many of the engraved zoomorphs cannot be ignored.



Figure 3. Drawing of a *barrosã* (Ministério da Agricultura information).

All this does not exclude, *per se*, a Palaeolithic age for some of the Côa figures but constitutes information that cannot be excluded in serious research. It is also true that the same lack of direct or directly associated dates also

applies to several cave art sites in Europe.

Should the Côa petroglyphs be a Palaeolithic style made during a more recent period, say around 10 000 – 8000 years ago, that does not make them any less interesting or important—quite the opposite. There is no doubt that the Côa rock art is an exceptional discovery that contributes to knowledge of the earliest open-air rock art in Europe, along with other Iberian sites. Some of them may not be in such spectacular landscapes but they are equally important. Neither Siega Verde nor Domingos Garcia are 'lesser' sites, as Zilhão seems to imply.

I am also a bit puzzled by Zilhão's map in his Figure 1. It is not very clear when the paper was written—its author claims late 2000; however, the bibliography lists a book published in May 2001 (Gonçalves 2001). This means that Zilhão knew of at least TWO other open-air rock art sites: one in the Sabor river in the Douro region, in the north, and the other at Ocreza in the Tagus basin. In 1997, the services of IPA (the institute Zilhão directed) announced the discovery of an aurochs figure in a dam zone destined to substitute that of Foz Côa (Abreu 1997). Although the zone has not been properly surveyed yet, several rock art panels and decorated rockshelters were found (Abreu 2001). The Ocreza river open-air Palaeolithic-style petroglyph was found on 6 September 2000—the first discovery in central/southern Portugal. Members of Zilhão's IPA were aware of the find (Oosterbeek 2000). I cannot think of a reasonably plausible explanation for the omission of these significant discoveries.

For the record it is necessary to add that at the beginning of 2001 a Spanish team started surveying and studying a major rock art area on the Guadiana river's left bank in Spain (Collado 2001). In April that year, further petroglyphs were found on the Guadiana's right bank in Portugal.

Appeals of IFRAO (2001) and UISPP (2001) went in vain and did not succeed in saving the area. Worse, the standards of documentation recommended by IFRAO's President (Bednarik 2001) were not applied. While Spanish colleagues used time-tested technology to record all the decorated surfaces in Spain, the same was not true for the decorated surfaces in Portugal. All these petroglyphs now lie deep under the waters of the Alqueva dam reservoir (Bednarik 2002).

Altogether, approximately 800 rocks were identified on both banks. Several surfaces had Palaeolithic-style figures. As IPA Director, Dr Zilhão denigrated the discoveries, which may explain why he would not include the Guadiana's Palaeolithic-style figures on his map.

The open-air Côa rock art might be considered a 'Copernican revolution' by a European Palaeolithic researcher like Zilhão. Most rock art researchers around the world, including some cave art specialists (Bahn 2001) merely see it as placing 'European' rock art in its place in the world—one where truly ancient rock art in the open is already well known and has been so for decades.

As rock art researcher and also as Portuguese citizen, I am embarrassed by and dislike ridiculous jingoistic nationalism seeking to transform the Côa into the most important

rock art site in the world, as, for example, PAVC guides would have visitors believe. This brings me to the next part of Zilhão's paper: managing the Park of the Côa.

This is not the place for full evaluation of how PAVC was run over the last years. I shall limit my commentary to some of the most pertinent issues. The lower Côa valley stretches out over 17 kilometres and has 24 rock art sites with 260 panels in the open—it is not a cave. Trying to follow the strategy of cave art areas like Altamira or Lascaux proved to be one of the first management mistakes. Controlling the number of visitors is different from reducing them to few dozen a day. Zilhão's lack of experience with rock art management was probably part of the problem.

While he was the director of PAVC, Zilhão created a system whereby it was only possible to visit by booking guided tours in the Park's four-wheel drive vehicles. To this day one cannot hike to any of the officially open sites. The pattern of guided visits follows a standard scheme that does not earnestly take into account considerations like age, education or interest. It matters not if the visitor is a young student or a keen amateur, the 'cassette-tape' is always the same. Over the years, I repeatedly found myself in the embarrassing position of taking students or colleagues to a site I discovered (in that I was the first rock art researcher to see it and make it public) and being forced to listen to a guide explaining the place.

School visits are complicated by the fact that only eight people can go on each guided trip. Guides also drive the vehicles, so these are unused for much of the day. Failure to foster private initiatives meant visits were restricted to those conducted by PAVC guides. Management practices killed off or stunted the growth of private enterprise. It is a major problem. Everything is run by PAVC, from the visits to selling coffee and souvenirs. This even disadvantages small businesses such as village coffee bars that were there before.

In recent years the situation became even more absurd. Now, babies and toddlers under three years old cannot visit the Park at any time during the year—the reason given is that it is too hot. At Piscos, this prohibition extends to youngsters aged up to eight years old. Families with small children are unreasonably penalised. Before PAVC came to be, I used to do what local people did for centuries—take my small children down to the valley bottom where the locals herded, went fishing or followed other pursuits. My family and I used to see the rock art and on hot days we often waded or swam in the river. All this is now also prohibited.

Although several areas of PAVC may be unsuitable for some visitors, the lack of alternatives is a crass mistake. There are no areas disabled people can visit, which is unfortunate when one considers that places like Penascosa are on level ground with easy access by suitable vehicles. A further example of inanity is the ban on umbrellas, even in heavy rain; PAVC personnel say they could damage the petroglyphs—possible of course but the same can be said of so many other things.

Zilhão also presents long considerations on the Park and the public. I am very surprised to see that some are

based on erroneous data. Excluding the 1996 inauguration year and 1997, visitor numbers provided by PAVC (Table 1) show a modest increase until 2000 followed by an abrupt plunge.

All except one of Zilhão's numbers differ from those given by PAVC, his showing around 2000 more visitors per year than official figures. The exception is his total from 10 August 1996 to 31 December 2000, which is identical to that for official visitor numbers. We can see he needs to validate his claim that PAVC consistently attracted over 20 000 visitors a year; the problem is that official figures were roughly 2000 BELOW the 20 000 required for this propaganda exercise. It seems he 'corrected' the official figures.

Visitor numbers

Year	Zilhão	Official
1996 - 97	*	28 162
1998	20 070	18 072
1999	20 202	18 203
2000	20 339	18 339
Total 1996 - 2000	82 776	82 776
2001	-	16 036
2002	-	15 405

* Must be 22 165 to fit Zilhão's 82 776 total, which is identical to that for official visitor numbers between 1996 and 2000.

Types of visitors

Year	Foreign visitors	Students
1996 - 97	429	
1998	1411	
1999	1642	
2000	2262	
2001	2763	3635
2002	3248	3426
Total	11 755	7061

Table 1. Tables showing visitor numbers. PAVC personnel provided official numbers in March 2003.

Another interesting thing is that the numbers show an average of 65 visitors a day over six years, a number far below the Park's potential, even taking into consideration severe restrictions.

Official foreign visitor numbers are interesting and show some growth. However, the general trend suggests the Portuguese public has adversely reacted to the management of PAVC.

Student numbers show that schools are not among the priorities of PAVC. Complex visiting schemes discourage teachers. The elitism Zilhão parades (45% have a university degree) is not something to be proud of; it should really be the reverse—the Côa is one of the few cultural matters appealing to a wide public.

I have no doubt that most of the visitors could be very satisfied with a visit to the Côa—the beauty of the valley

and impact of the petroglyphs make it possible. Reading through the Park's complaints book I noticed most had to do with bureaucracy preventing the individuals from visiting the Park. Some of the most common complaints were against the reservations process that excluded passers-by who wanted to visit, against the system that excluded larger groups and against visits being cancelled due to small arrival delays.

In the final part of his article, Zilhão presents the idea that everything will change and that the number of visitors will increase with the opening of a museum. Most of us may welcome the idea of a 'museum' or a visitor centre with additional information. On the other hand, we must keep in mind two things: the valley is the real 'museum' and it is unlikely that either it or a museum could ever consistently attract around 200 000 visitors a year.

I am apprehensive of the idea that copies can substitute the real thing. It can make sense for caves or exhibitions but becomes particularly dangerous when it emerges as a solution to the destruction of the original. In other words, if so many visitors will be happy to see copies, why not build the dam and 'preserve' the originals under water?

A so-called 'minimisation' approach was recently applied in Portugal in the case of heritage destroyed by the Guadiana river's Alqueva dam (see <http://mc2.vicnet.net.au/home/guadiana/web/index.html>). Zilhão and members of his institute contented themselves with photographs and partial tracing of panels with thousands of petroglyphs that ended up deep under water.

In conclusion, I would like to add that the present Minister of Culture created a commission and asked a select number of researchers their opinion regarding the previous Côa Museum project. I, like the majority, agreed that the project of the architect Maia Pinto, who is also the current Director of PAVC, was difficult to build and too expensive. Above all, I am against the impropriety caused by the PAVC Director also having been engaged as the architect of the prospective museum. Anyway, even if its location in the dam cutting was original, that project did not fulfil the right requirements. Maia Pinto's project was abandoned last November and the commission and other specialists chose another location for a new project near the mouth of the Côa with spectacular views of the Douro.

Currently, PAVC is practically paralysed by the previous bureaucracy and wrong decisions. Along with other Portuguese colleagues, let us hope PAVC gets on the right track and provides the successful service that the local community, the wider national and international community and, last but not least, the rock art itself deserve.

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