

Public archaeology and political dynamics in Portugal

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The two hardest-fought rock art conservation battles in the history of the International Federation of Rock Art Organizations have been the campaigns to save the petroglyph sites in the lower Côa valley of northeastern Portugal and in the Guadiana valley in southeastern Portugal. They have become test cases of rock art conservation and site management issues. This paper summarizes the history of these campaigns and the effects they had on rock art management practices in Portugal. Specific attention is given to the responses of the public archaeologists in this controversy, and to some specific and generic aspects of the issue that are in a general sense relevant to the sociology of state-funded agencies charged with the protection of archaeological resources.

INTRODUCTION

Portugal has a long history of totalitarian government. For many centuries it was governed by oppressive oligarchies of various types, originally based on monarchy and Church, later on military dictatorship. The country has become an effective democracy only in its most recent history; consequently, procedures of popular dissent have a correspondingly short history in Portugal. Nevertheless, these procedures have developed rapidly and have matured in a very short time, and that has included the voice of the public in matters pertaining to the management of archaeological heritage. Indeed, the examples described in this paper could be defined as a 'laboratory situation' for examining changes in heritage management policies that result from a changing political framework. For this reason alone the examples offer valuable lessons, because the nexus of political currents and public archaeology has implications around the world. I therefore propose briefly to review and analyse the revolutionary developments in Portuguese rock art site management that took place during the late 1990s and up to 2002.

Until late 1995, archaeological heritage protection in Portugal was administered by the Instituto Português do Património Arquitectónico e Arqueológico (IPPAR). This organization managed architectural properties as well as a range of archaeological sites, from those of recent historical relevance to Pleistocene sites. IPPAR was dominated by architectural administrators serving the needs of tourism, and the understaffed archaeological wing of this multifaceted agency was primarily concerned with Roman and other 'monuments' of recent periods. Rock art was of such low

priority that the destruction of countless sites was routinely approved by the state. In some cases, IPPAR even 'recorded' the rock art earmarked for obliteration, albeit inadequately. The most severe destruction was usually caused by the construction of dams, the most devastating cases being those of the Fratel dam in the Tagus valley in the 1970s (Serrão et al., 1972) and the Pocinho dam in the Douro valley in the 1980s (Arcà et al., 2001).

The number of sites that fell victim to this form of 'site management' can only be conjectured, but it is certainly substantial and is at least in the hundreds. As a consequence, a large part of the country's rock art has been allowed, by the state-appointed protectors of this irreplaceable heritage, to be destroyed. The way in which this endemic system operated in practice is well illustrated by the reaction of the authorities when the Côa controversy began to unfold. It was this very issue, and the prominent public spectacle that developed from it, that led to a major confrontation beginning in late 1994.

THE CÔA DAM PROJECT

In the late 1980s, the Electricidade de Portugal (EDP) decided to construct a massive holding dam in a southern tributary valley of the Douro river. When Portugal joined the European Union it became compulsory to conduct environmental impact studies, so the archaeological heritage of the Côa valley was examined by a consultant whose specialization was Roman period sites. He located some Roman building remains in the valley to be inundated but

made no mention of the prominent and numerous petroglyph sites there. These major corpora of rock art were well known to local residents and had been studied by a local medical doctor some decades earlier. The study recommended, however, that a team of archaeologists be employed during the dam's construction period to record all archaeological resources in the lower Côa valley, and to conduct salvage work as appropriate.

In 1992, an archaeologist appointed by IPPAR recognized the presence of a large corpus of rock art in the area to be inundated but his claims of the find's importance were apparently ignored. He decided to record the petroglyphs and to prepare a book about them. During November 1994, the waters of the adjacent Pocinho dam, whose extent overlaps with the new Côa reservoir, were lowered to allow the erection of two coffer dams. During this period the archaeologist was able to discover significant numbers of further motifs that had been flooded in the previous decade. When the Pocinho dam was about to be refilled, he requested that the Portuguese Representative of the International Federation of Rock Art Organizations (IFRAO) should come and see the rock art two days before its final inundation in late November. IFRAO declared that the destruction of the rock art was unacceptable and, within days, commenced a campaign to prevent the flooding of the lower Côa valley.

During the following months the Portuguese government found itself severely criticized in the international media as well as at home (Bednarik, 1995). Its actions were described as 'cultural vandalism' in the editorials of major newspapers, and a series of actions by IFRAO and allied interests led to increasing international condemnation during early 1995. Within Portugal, public opinion was mobilized through a civic action group, the Movimento para a Salvaguarda da Arte Rupestre do Vale do Côa, and the world's first public demonstrations in favour of rock art protection were organized in Foz Côa and Lisbon. One million signatures were collected in a petition to save the valley, a public protest fast was held in Lisbon and there were reports of police brutality as the embattled state attempted to intervene in the manner it would have been accustomed to during totalitarian times. Instead of resolving the matter it merely succeeded in drawing more media attention to its inadequate handling of the controversy. Bearing in mind that the government faced an election later that year, its efforts to bring the matter under control through 'traditional' means only served to weaken its position. In January, it consulted the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and a delegation of French conservation specialists recommended that the dam project be deferred (Bouchenaki et al., 1995). Desperate measures were proposed to avert the abortion of the project, including the consolidation by injected resin of individual rock outcrops and their transport by helicopter to an alternative site. It was even suggested that an undertaking could be made to excavate the sites after the dam had become silted up, some centuries into the

future. By May 1995, the government was forced to halt all construction work at the dam site, having already spent in excess of US\$100 million. It lost the October 1995 national elections by a landslide, and its abysmal performance in the Côa issue was a decisive factor in this result.

One of the first acts of the new government was to fulfil its promise to turn the lower Côa valley into a protected park from which all development was to be excluded. It also established two new state agencies, the Instituto Português de Arqueologia (IPA) and the Centro Nacional de Art Rupestre (CNART), to replace IPPAR. At this point it would seem that the objectives of the action to save the Côa rock art had been achieved, and that the country's political parties had become acutely aware of the need for heritage preservation. The further developments, therefore, provide an important lesson on the interplay between public archaeology and political dynamics.

THE GUADIANA VALLEY PROJECT

The two new state agencies, IPA and CNART, now shared responsibility for the management and preservation of the rock art heritage of Portugal. However, significant deficiencies in the way they operated soon became apparent. In the Côa valley, now protected by World Heritage listing, recording and cleaning of rocks by inappropriate methods continued (Jaffe, 1996). Various chemicals, including bleach, were applied directly to the petroglyphs and they were scrubbed with wooden tools, according to the written admission by the Director of IPA (Zilhão, 1996). In an attempt to locate evidence of Pleistocene occupation numerous sites were churned up, and researchers not associated with these works were excluded from the sites by security guards (Swartz, 1997a; 1997 b). Public sites still lack any form of interpretation for visitors, no attempt has been made to reduce dust generated by vehicular traffic (cf. Watchman, 1998) and CNART tour guides offer interpretations that are simplistic and lack scientific credibility.

Already in mid 1995, at the height of the Côa confrontation, the previous government had sought an alternative dam site in the event that it should lose its bid to complete the Côa dam. It found it in another Douro tributary, the Sabor, where it soon began construction of the Laranjeira dam. Visitors were excluded from the valley and, although it is known that rock art exists there, no reports of it were made public (Arcà et al., 2001). In 1997 a plan, rejected or deferred since 1952, to dam the Guadiana in southeastern Portugal was resurrected. The Alqueva dam would result in the inundation of 250 km², making it the largest man-made lake in Europe. Substantial archaeological salvage operations were undertaken and, according to the Director of this project, no rock art would be submerged by this reservoir. Although approximately 100 archaeologists were working on this project by 2001 (the Guadiana impact studies were begun in the 1980s), no finds of rock art were reported. In

April 2001, however, Spanish researchers described finding a large number of rock art sites in the small area of Spanish territory that was to be inundated by the dam (Collado Giraldo, 2001). Yet there were still no reports from the much greater Portuguese sector of the area. An environmentalist non-government organization (NGO) then received an anonymous tip-off that a large corpus of rock art sites also existed on the Portuguese side. IPA finally admitted the existence of several hundred sites in the Portuguese area to be inundated. This was approximately seven months before the final completion of the Alqueva dam at the end of 2001, and a feverish campaign to record the massive corpus commenced. IFRAO initiated immediate action to defer construction work and demanded that recording standards be greatly improved (Bednarik, 2001). It also launched a petition to save the Guadiana rock art, which attracted the support of thousands of specialists and heritage administrators, and of the International Union for Prehistoric and Protohistoric Sciences.

Equally interesting, however, is the role of the Portuguese authorities responsible for rock art protection. Besides commencing hurriedly to record the rock art as the dam was being completed and the waters began to rise, they attacked everyone who was even slightly critical of their role. The Director of IPA suggested publicly that the reason his teams may not have seen the rock art was because it was perhaps covered by river sand. So, he is suggesting that during the 16 years that the valley was studied, 600–800 petroglyph sites were covered by sediment, but in early 2001 they were all miraculously uncovered. He also claimed that the rock art was not sufficiently important to warrant its preservation, but at no time did he admit that the rock art's existence had been concealed.

Within weeks of the admission that hundreds of rock art sites were known in the Guadiana valley, the government minister responsible, the Minister of Culture, was relieved of his duties; however, the archaeologists responsible for the disaster remained in office. In September 2001 the Union of Prehistoric and Protohistoric Sciences voted to appoint a committee to investigate the Guadiana issues (International Union for Prehistoric and Protohistoric Sciences (UISPP), 2001). This led to a scathing response by the Director of IPA (Zilhão, 2001) and to other unbecoming attacks by him on various individuals and international organizations, which resulted in defamation proceedings. His main objection to the UISPP committee, apart from describing it as incompetent, was that it was 'uninvited', i.e. not invited by him. The huge Alqueva dam was completed in late 2001 and opened in February 2002, an event that was internationally condemned. Within weeks, shortly after publication of his report (Silva and Lanca, 2001), the Director of the Guadiana archaeological salvage project, António Carlos Silva, resigned and in April the government lost the national election.

The newly elected government wasted no time in acting on the state of public archaeology in Portugal, the reputa-

tion of which even the Director of the IPA admitted was in tatters by that time. On 6 May 2002 the government announced the downgrading of IPA and CNART, which prompted the immediate resignation of the Director of IPA, who commenced a campaign to reverse what he called the 'extinction' of public archaeology in Portugal. But what, in fact, occurred was that the new government, concerned about the developments of recent years, merely returned public archaeology to the jurisdiction of IPPAR, without actually dismantling IPA. The new government also promised to improve international collaboration in archaeology, and to decentralize the administration of public archaeology. Many, if not most, archaeologists reacted to this along essentially political lines: IPPAR is seen as a creature of conservative politics, IPA as being a socialist structure.

During June 2002, the major Guadiana rock art concentrations at Cheles were inundated. Most of the valley's rock art has remained unrecorded and, where records do exist, they do not meet any reasonable international recording standards. Clearly there had been insufficient time for recording, and the little time available was further reduced by several months when there were 'too many mosquitoes' in the valley. Moreover, the teams involved in the recording work were inadequately experienced in modern methods and lacked even rudimentary relevant equipment.

DISCUSSION

The first observation to be made about these developments is surely that archaeological heritage should not be a hostage to state-funded technocracies. It is clear that there are several strands of political intrigue involved in the recent history of Portugal's public archaeology. On the surface, IPPAR's longstanding practices of rubber-stamping the wholesale destruction of rock art sites may seem to have been discontinued, but they have been replaced with different and even more insidious strategies. Rather than being the saviour of rock art (the image that they projected), the socialist government from 1995 to 2002 pursued precisely the same policies as the conservatives. But, after its predecessors' experiences, its public archaeology developed a secretive and exclusive format, rejecting any external scrutiny and giving precedence to what it defined as the 'national interest'. New national projects were conducted under explicit conditions of exclusion and, in order to work within this system, archaeologists had to meet specific requirements of confidentiality.

A relevant lesson from the Côa controversy was that 'the political nature of the archaeologists' strategy influenced their scientific discourse' (Gonçalves, 1998: 18): to preserve their claim that the rock art is of Palaeolithic age, they tied its preservation to this age claim and, in fact, demanded that it must be preserved *because* it is of Palaeolithic age. This was a fundamental error of strategy in several respects. Firstly, a Palaeolithic age was far from confirmed – the claim had

been made but not tested. Consequently it was unwise to base a demand for preservation on it. Secondly, such an equation is unacceptable to rock art researchers and site managers worldwide, as it would prejudice demands for preserving Holocene rock art elsewhere. Thirdly, the argument that Holocene rock art is somehow less deserving of preservation than older rock art is emotive and subjective, rather than rational; it is likely to be contradicted by many stakeholders, such as indigenous custodians in other world regions, or researchers specializing in periods other than the Palaeolithic. It follows that the strategy Gonçalves (1998) examines was not only politically motivated, it also implied a lack of consideration of the broader and long-term ramifications.

After 1994, political manoeuvring became the hallmark of Portuguese state archaeology, and the objectionable technical practices of the past continued unabated. Indeed, in one case, the Director of IPA even admitted that the two were linked, when he conceded that his scrubbing of the Côa petroglyphs was politically motivated (Zilhão, 1996). But there are further fundamental lessons for heritage site management to be gleaned from the circumstances surrounding the saving of the Côa rock art. When a powerful and well-established Cultural Resource Management (CRM) agency with a long history of neglect and collusion with other state agencies was publicly exposed, this led to swift public reaction at the ballot box but to only cosmetic changes to the offending agency itself. In a healthy democratic system, state technocracies can be subjected to effective criticism but that does not necessarily entail their ultimate accountability. Indeed, the brazenness of the offending establishment in the Portuguese example even suggests that such agencies are well aware of their relative immunity, and what is quaintly defined as 'the will of the people' is of little concern to them. To them, a public controversy of the scale of the Côa issue means nothing more than the necessity to offer up a few individuals as sacrificial lambs and to conduct operations by more covert means. This is not only disturbing in the political sense, in terms of the cynicism implied, it also indicates that the protection of the CRM estate cannot be expected to be guaranteed by a technocratic system run by the state.

One perspective that may help us appreciate the issues is to consider the situation in a country where rock art is claimed as part of an existing cultural system, such as by indigenous peoples in Australia or the Americas, for instance. In these circumstances it is clear that the CRM agencies exercise no executive control over the cultural resource and are expected to defer to political interests in any matter of importance. They are effectively answerable not only to the government but also to specific client groups. This shows that such a system of limited control is realistically possible and it does exist already in such countries as Australia. The principle can easily be extended to circumstances where the rock art is not the property of a living culture. Whose property, then, is it? In the case of the Côa

rock art it is generally acknowledged that a great part of it dates from the last two or three centuries. It would seem, then, to belong to the local communities, who have lived in this region for many centuries and whose recent ancestors created the art. This applies even in the presence of a small prehistoric component.

Finally, who 'owns' the prehistoric component of rock art? Certainly it should not be the state, which in all countries has acquired its sovereignty through conquest, colonization or the dispossession of indigenous populations at some point in history. The state can at best act as a guarantor, as a custodian. The true owner of such art corpora can only be humanity as a whole, which merely confirms that the practice of governments to appoint a technocracy as the unencumbered administrator of rock art must be reviewed, whatever the circumstances. While it is accepted that, for purely practical reasons, such an administering agency is required, its powers over the resource in question need to be moderated by some form of independent, peer-review-like system.

CONCLUSION

The aspect of the Guadiana affair that is most difficult to understand is that it followed in the wake of the Côa fiasco, which has cost the public of Portugal so dearly. It was precisely this painful experience in 1995 that was directly responsible for the establishment of IPA and CNART, yet in all the subsequent years, it is claimed, it never occurred to these organizations to examine the location of the largest reservoir ever built in Europe to see if rock art was affected. The entire purpose of CNART is to study and protect the rock art of Portugal, yet it claims it took no interest whatsoever in either the country's largest site complex or its largest construction project. Indeed, contract conditions of the participants in the project's environmental impact study prevent them from making public statements about their project, which appears to explain why the public was alerted by an anonymous tip-off. Of particular concern is that both the impact studies and the archaeological salvage work were conducted under the authority of the *Empresa de Desenvolvimento e Infraestruturas do Alqueva*, which is the very same agency that built the dam. The concept of a conflict of interest does not seem to have been appreciated, either by the Portuguese authorities or by the relevant European Union agencies who blindly accepted the environmental impact assessment by the dam builders themselves.

Public archaeology in Portugal has allowed itself to become embroiled in several highly publicized controversies and, in the process, has become so politicized that it has little academic credibility left. This experience demonstrates how easily such a deterioration can occur in a relatively short time. It is a fundamental truism that archaeology depends on the goodwill of the public, which for all practical purposes funds this pursuit entirely. Most especially this is

the case in public archaeology. In contrast to disciplines that are economically based, archaeology is not an economically viable field. Therefore, if archaeology projects a public image of itself that is less than wholesome, it must anticipate a negative reaction from the public and the state. In Portugal, the image of public archaeology is now so tarnished, because of its excesses between 1996 and 2002, that it will take many years of diligent work to recover public credibility. The disgraced former Director of IPA argues that criticism of him 'serves to create confusion, and boosts a rejection of archaeology by the media and the public – those folks who never know what exactly it is they want and are fighting each other anyway' (Zilhão, 2001). But this is very much like the sorcerer's apprentice who bemoans his lack of control over the ghosts he himself summoned. Public archaeology would do well not to conjure up powers over which it cannot expect to exercise control, by challenging international agencies that exist in part to keep a check on such technocracies, and by using politics and the media to further individual ambitions.

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