

ARCHAEOLOGY IN PORTUGAL: THE GREAT CHALLENGE

by

Vítor Oliveira Jorge*

Abstract: Some thoughts on archaeology in general, and on Portuguese archaeology in particular, are presented here. The author calls attention to the social impact of this activity, giving the Côa valley as an example.

Key-words: Social practice; decisive action; Côa valley.

Resumo: Breve conjunto de reflexões sobre a arqueologia em geral, e portuguesa em particular, chamando a atenção para a importância pública desta actividade, e dando como exemplo o vale do Côa.

Palavras-chave: Prática social; acção eficaz; vale do Côa.

Things which occur in our own epoch always seem to be very important and decisive. But we, as archaeologists and historians, know by experience the results of the work of time. What we face today as a dramatic moment may appear in the future only a trivial question.

Archaeology is connected today with the ideology of heritage, and this pursuit of the remains of the past is itself tied to the practice and mythology of tourism. Apart from a happy few, more and more archaeologists work under the auspices of a gigantic tourist enterprise: to prepare the places to be visited, and to tell a story about them to very varied publics. Are these stories based on the long work of observation and on critical discussion of interpretative hypothesis? Sometimes, yes, but it would be risky to generalize, because a good archaeological project, like any other research process, is something unpredictable and expensive. It takes time and money, and the resulting profits are hard to calculate. So, pressed by those who pay, the archaeologist frequently feels the need to tell a plausible story now. Nobody wants what there is most of – doubts. Everybody, including politicians, expects assertive conclusions, and also, if possible, amusing anecdotes, ideally fitted to the few minutes of attention allowed by their overloaded schedules.

* Professor of Archaeology. Univ. of Porto, Faculty of Arts (FLUP). Department of Heritage Sciences and Techniques (DCTP).

The archaeological process today consists of the adaptation of certain spaces to commodities conceived to create in the consumers some sense of place in a landscape which suffers from a global process of transformation and homogenization – in fact, archaeology participates in the sort of zapping which has become part of our lives. We are asked to create windows into the “past” that anyone may open or close as they wish. Research should be the priority – but the research agenda is never set by the researchers themselves. For archaeology to be a social practice, accepted and supported by an ever-increasing segment of society, researchers have to adapt to what society expects them to produce. In our case, we are asked to prepare two major things for the market: discoveries for the press and sites (including museums, parks, etc.) for visitors. As long as we have done that, we will not only be tolerated, but even increasingly desired. University courses in archaeology will flourish, and many “professionals” will fill the new needs of this immense works yard into which – at least in Portugal – the land is transformed.

In my country (c. 10 million people) c. 75% of the population lives in the coastal belt which extends from Braga in the north to Setúbal in the south. That, and the fact that the municipalities get most of their income from the construction industry, creates an enormous pressure on coastal land, which is seen as the best place to live. Civic leaders are now beginning to understand that cultural activities (including places that attract tourists) are fundamental to put their localities on the map, including for prestigious visitors, and they are engaging more and more archaeologists. Some are also discovering, to their surprise, that the past produces money – especially when it is presented in an appropriate manner, like a 3D guided visit to the wonderful places of remote history. Also, from a certain point of view, culture is much more interesting than any other commodity, in the sense that it gives an aura of taste and distinction that one rarely gets from any other source. Culture and history are the true quality of a land, all the rest being trivial.

The interior of Portugal is seen as a more or less wild area, nice for a holiday, or the ideal place to own a second home. In the meantime, local populations (especially in the south) dream about a scarce resource, water, and consider huge dams the symbol of Paradise itself. To fulfil that common feeling, the enormous Alqueva dam is being built (by the end of 2001) on the Guadiana river. Needless to say, this activity has created an enormous number of temporary posts for archaeology – so everybody is happy.

It is obvious that, being on the periphery, Portugal has an enormous need for good connections by road with Spain, in order to increase the circulation of people and goods (most of our exports go to other European Community countries), and, at the same time, to attract visitors to the depopulated interior, the only way to compensate this major area of the territory for its increasing sense of loss. Unfortunately, these east-west connections, which are vital for Portugal, have been too long neglected. The railway system is incredibly antiquated, and the main roads are dangerous and inefficient. The regional and local traffic circulation networks urgently need to be improved.

So, in the cities – every important population centre dreams about being classified as such – as in the great public works (roads, dams), archaeologists increasingly find jobs, although many feel frustrated by the kind of tasks they have to perform. The best of them would like to have time to think, to search, to read – in short, to learn according to the rhythms of the human being. But, on the contrary, they have to perform as mechanically as the machines that wait behind them to start the development work.

Archaeology socializes itself precisely at the same time as it becomes a product like any other. This is unavoidable. What we have to do is to be aware of this new situation, and take it to its logical conclusion. Archaeology must not become simply a prestige item, a symbol or a superficial interest, but something deeply anchored in the popular consciousness. For that, we need to decide priorities and to invest seriously in them.

Extraordinary discoveries are made only if survey activities extend to the whole country; but even when it is wisely decided that the object of those discoveries should be conserved for the future, subsequent actions are not always sufficient, thus causing much confusion. We live in a society which is based on resource management, and if a certain archaeological landscape, or site, or museum, is considered a fundamental resource for part of the country, then we need to act accordingly.

We cannot stop half-way – we need to take decisive action to transform a potential richness into a real one. We need to take the full consequences of the previous decisions, at any cost. If culture, if the quality of the landscape and its memory, are realities that are not taken as remains, or products for elite consumers, or decorative items, but factors of citizenship and of social cohesion and equilibrium that need to be built now, then we need to take decisive action to improve archaeology in all its dimensions. We need to connect public offices to serve primary national objectives. We need to connect local, regional, and national decision-makers, state funds and private initiatives, so as to create exemplary situations that function as models for the rest of the country. In doing so, we will raise the level of public consciousness, thus democratising culture as a daily practice.

Archaeological monuments, sites, or landscapes are our common references in lived space, not in an abstract past. Improving archaeology is an attitude that assumes that more and more people will use their free time to enrich their lives, their imagination, not simply to attend football matches, spend their weekends in soulless shopping centres or their holidays on sunny beaches. Will the decision-makers understand this great challenge, and the role of archaeology in it? Will many young archaeologists refuse to give the best part of their lives to a practice of “rescue archaeology” which is unavoidable but, if hegemonic, is actually a fraud? Will anyone resist this transformation of archaeology into a commodity, and do something better, something which, though difficult, is infinitely cleverer?

I know that it is not easy. I know that people who like to question are few. Archaeological theory – who cares? Archaeology as a responsible public activity – what for, as long the salary keeps coming in? For the vast majority, these discussions are simply a waste of time. I know that most people, in all walks of life, prefer comfort and agreement to hard work and effort. We cannot impose a critical standpoint. But does anybody ever remember those who simply obeyed and carried on with their lives? Of course you do not have to get out of the herd, or to be remembered in the future. But it is our awareness of the future now, in the present, that makes us happiest.

We dreamed about an archaeology that would make us happier. We still need to fight for that. This is a Portuguese problem, but I know it is not only ours. It is an Iberian one, and a problem of the entire planet. Here, archaeology meets environmental issues. Did you know that (according to Salvador Rivas Martinez) Portugal and Spain have the greatest plant biodiversity in the entire European Union? What are we doing to build a common policy of heritage improvement, making the public departments of culture, science, environment and planning work together and put into practice national priorities long established by specialists? What are we waiting for?

Look at the case of Côa: we have a unique valley, full of Paleolithic and other engravings, known all over the world. We need a general project for the region, including small dams to regularize the water course, a tunnel to keep the Canada do Inferno (one of the best concentrations of engravings) permanently drained (the area is affected by the general rise of the Douro caused by the building of dams), and also a museum. This, if built in the area projected for the abandoned Foz Côa dam, would be ideally situated. We need urgently to overcome difficulties here – we cannot fail in such an important matter. This is a matter for the Portuguese, for Europeans, for all humanity. Those in charge must find a solution soon, and not lose this unique opportunity.

As for the Museum of Art and Archaeology of the Côa Valley, it should obviously include a wide range of aspects: in order of importance – local Palaeolithic art and its European parallels in caves and open air sites; other examples of Portuguese and Iberian rock art, so that visitors can understand the diversity of styles and chronologies in the Côa valley, and their relationships on the Peninsular level. But the Museum should also give an idea of the whole Côa region: its natural resources, its ethnography, its prehistory and history. It should show visitors the importance of the engravings, but, at the same time, interest them in visiting other “tourist” destinations in the area. This would please local people, creating jobs and new opportunities.

This is a good example of how archaeology could, in our society, be something not only academic, but shared by everybody, and thus make a real contribution for the good of all. This is a case that illustrates what I have said above: when we take an important decision, we cannot do only half the action – we need to go further to make the decision irreversible and to guarantee success. If archaeology is called to this great challenge, if it is not just a university matter, but of public concern. So, let’s make the move in this new direction, but let’s do it as professionals, who reach their goals. We cannot go only half-way.