



ORIENTATION

Capivara 2009: a most enjoyable IFRAO Congress

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Here is a brief report of what you have missed if you have not been to the first international rock art congress of ABAR, the Associação Brasileira de Arte Rupestre.

First of all, let it be stated unambiguously that the Brazilian event was the largest rock art congress held so far. This is despite the obvious remoteness of the venue, São Raimundo Nonato: no IFRAO congress has ever been held so far from any major urban centre, which already provides an initial measure of the incredible efforts that characterised every aspect of this event. The attendance at the opening session was approximately 1000 people, seated in an air-conditioned tent of such size that the proceedings at the stage had to be displayed on large monitors of the kind one might see at rock concerts or sport events. Much of the audience could not have visually followed the opening ceremony otherwise, which was presided over by the Governor of the State of Piauí, Wellington Dias (Brazil's first indigenous Governor). The number of people present at the closing concert, held in the natural amphitheatre at the Pedra Furada site, immediately below the huge hole in the sandstone tower that has given the place its name, was even greater. It was confidently estimated to have been about 1600 people (mean of three independent determinations).

These observations may help to convey the scale of the event, but they also provide a glimpse of the complexity of its logistics. The setting, the grounds of the Museo da Homidade Americana and the nearby cultural centre, is a few kilometres from the small town of São Raimundo Nonato, southern Piauí. The area occupied by the numerous facilities extended over several hundred metres, with covered and lit walkways connecting the many lecture rooms, museum buildings, and a multitude of portable buildings housing the reception hall, several exhibitions and poster exhibits, three restaurants to feed the multitudes, two Internet rooms with numerous terminals, police and first aid stations, book exhibits, tourist information and so forth. Therefore structurally the congress site resembled a trade fair or exhibition more than a traditional

scholarly conference, with a correspondingly relaxed atmosphere. This provided the event with a specifically Brazilian ambience, but perhaps more significantly it conveyed the popular appeal rock art is gaining in this country. That was also reflected in the age demography of the attendees, strongly dominated as it was by young people, including many who are deeply dedicated to the country's traditional cultural heritage. This is a particularly interesting phenomenon when it is considered that Brazil, a former colony but one of the world's oldest continuously democratic nations, has matured to the extent that it now embraces its cultural heritage in its entirety rather than selectively. Some other countries, notably Australia, remain immature nations, most of whose public does not regard indigenous cultural heritage as its own, but sees it as 'somebody else's patrimony'. In countries such as Australia, this state remains a major problem in rock art appreciation, management and, most importantly, protection. This stands in stark contrast to mature nations, such as, for instance, France or Britain, whose populations embrace as their own, without hesitation, any cultural heritage on their territory, irrespective of who created it.

This observation may provide a key for why rock art remains so neglected in some parts of the world. Having had the opportunity to work with Niéde Guidon, the congress chairperson, in the Serra da Capivara area in 1987 (Bednarik 1989), it was clear to me that this present state in Brazil is a fairly recent development. Twenty-two years ago Professor Guidon received little encouragement and her support came essentially from her native France. The incredible transformation since then is largely due to her dedication, persistence and, last but not least, personal courage. In 1987, São Raimundo Nonato was a remote village lacking any hotels or restaurants and was accessible only via extremely poor roads. The development that has since occurred in the area is no doubt part of the rapid development of the country as a whole, but to a considerable extent it is also attributable to Guidon's creation of the national parks, museum and research centre, as well as to her extensive social and humanitarian work in the region. She has been awarded the title Brazilian Woman of the Year, her project has become a model for Brazil, and the reverberations of her underlying influence on public attitudes have been far-reaching. They can be compared to the effects of the work of the Leakeys in Kenya. It is perhaps through these effects that today's public attitudes to the indigenous cultural heritage of



Figure 1. Professor Niède Guidon, on the right, with her close colleague Professor Gabriela Martin (photograph by Kay Scaramelli, ANAR, Venezuela).



Figure 2. The children's welcome (photograph by R. G. Bednarik).

Brazil need to be understood. Today Guidon (Fig. 1) and her research project, FUMDHAM, enjoy substantial public and governmental support — of which this congress was a telling demonstration — but this has certainly not always been the case. In the sense that she has largely achieved what she set out to accomplish thirty-six years ago she has truly been a pioneer, and in more ways than one.

Thus the historical background of this congress can illuminate several of its aspects. Its distinctively Brazilian flavour was undeniable, universally evident, and included some touching moments — for instance when at the end of the opening ceremony a large contingent of local schoolchildren filed into the front space, each child carrying a different national emblem and holding up a sign with the word 'Welcome' in the corresponding language (Fig. 2). There was the moment when Professor Guidon was requested to inaugurate a new set of postage stamps especially issued for the occasion. I was also astounded when, on the evening of the opening day, the Governor suddenly and entirely unannounced appeared as some twenty of us had their dinner at our hotel, but without his usual substantial security detail, apologising for interrupting my meal and addressing me as the representative of IFRAO. I cannot imagine that such a high-ranking statesman would so casually abandon official protocol in any other major country, but this style may well explain his palpable popularity with the public.



Figure 3. A most enjoyable IFRAO Congress: from left Judith Trujillo and Guillermo Muñoz (Colombia), Luiz Oosterbeek and Mila Simões de Abreu (photograph by Kay Scaramelli).

The ultimate substance of the event was much the same as we have come to expect of IFRAO congresses generically: a smorgasbord of hundreds of wide-ranging scholarly presentations. Here they were grouped into a total of some twenty-five symposia, held simultaneously in nine lecture halls. So the choice was never easy for participants. As has become standard practice, the papers covered a wide range of topics connected with rock art or in some ways providing supporting evidence for the study of rock art. Brazilian presenters dominated the program overwhelmingly, but there were also numerous contributions of other Latin American presenters, while those from Europe and North America were somewhat less in evidence. The remaining continents were hardly represented; the number of participants from both Asia and Australia could be counted on the fingers of one hand respectively.

A particularly pleasant surprise at this congress was the high standard of rock art research now being conducted in Brazil, typically by young, bright, innovative and information-hungry scholars. It seems that in contrast to the older research traditions of some other continents, Brazil — and to some extent much of Latin America — is not weighted down so much by tradition and by old models that are propped up by tenacious defence even when in reality they may be superseded. This very young and distinctively dynamic discipline of Brazilian (and other Latin American) palaeoart research is more skewed towards scientific approaches than that of most other world regions. As shown by the academic standards of many of their papers, these young researchers are very well trained, confident and decidedly driven by personal enthusiasm. This is of particular interest in a country in which archaeology is not even a recognised profession. (The previous president of the republic vetoed an application by the discipline for professional status.)

Rock art, on the other hand, is now evidently

UNESCO and global rock art

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The Dampier Campaign, brought to the attention of the UNESCO Division of Cultural Heritage and the World Heritage Centre in 2005, has together with other factors recently led to important developments in the consideration given to rock art by UNESCO. From 5 to 9 September 2005, UNESCO held the International Conference on Rock Art with the Musée national de préhistoire and the Centre National de préhistoire in Les Eyzies-de-Tayac, Dordogne, France, chaired by Dr Jean-Jacques Cleyet-Merle (SAMPRO 2009) (Fig. 1). I presented a discussion proposal highlighting some key issues concerning global rock art, reproduced below (pp. 238–240), and reported the plight of the Dampier Cultural Precinct, where resource companies had been allowed to destroy about 95000 petroglyphs – roughly a quarter of the total rock art of Murujuga (Burrup) that had survived to the 1960s. This coincided with a growing concern by the World Heritage Centre that the UNESCO World Heritage List had become progressively more ‘unrepresentative and distorted’, and was increasingly ‘lacking in credibility’ (Sanz 2008).

It is against this background that in 2008 and 2009 the World Heritage Committee, encouraged by the government of Spain, embarked on a series of conferences exploring the representation of pre-Historic sites and monuments on the World Heritage List (WHL). In an effort to enhance the underrepresented categories of sites and improve geographical coverage, the World Heritage Committee decided at its July 2008 meeting in Quebec to develop a ‘global strategy for a representative, balanced and credible WHL’, and to embark on a thematic study for this purpose, funded by the government of Spain. At its inception in 1972, the WHL List was based on a ‘monumental’ concept of cultural heritage, which in the decades since has evolved through the ways in which different societies perceive themselves. In 1972 the idea of cultural heritage had

been largely embodied in and confined to built heritage. Since then the focus has shifted from outstanding monuments to considering cultural phenomena as complex and multidimensional. UNESCO had already noted since 1994 that the definition of ‘World Heritage’ had to be adapted to changing understanding, to provide a comprehensive framework and operational methodology for implementing the *World Heritage Convention*.

The first international conference of specialists to address this matter was held in Paris from 3–4 November 2008. It defined three thematic areas, rock art, human evolution and pre-Historic properties, all of which were represented by eighteen international specialists (Fig. 2), who met with representatives of ICCROM, IUCN, ICOMOS and the World Heritage Centre. Again I presented the plight of the Dampier monument. This meeting resulted in an action plan involving three separate conferences to address the three thematic subject areas. The meeting dealing with the representation of human evolution was held in Burgos, Spain, 21 to 25 March 2009 (20 participants); the rock art specialists met at uKhahlamba/Drakensberg,



Figure 2. Some of the rock art specialists consulted by the World Heritage Centre, November 2008: from left R. G. Bednarik, C. Chippindale and J. Clottes (photograph by Giriraj Kumar).



Figure 1. The participants of the International Conference on Rock Art, Les Eyzies-de-Tayac, September 2005, in front of a castle. The convener, Jean-Jacques Cleyet-Merle, is on the far left (photograph by Arsen Faradzhev).



Figure 4. Wide artificial dripline above paintings at Toca do Estevo 3 (R. G. Bednarik)

accepted by the Brazilian public as a significant component of the country's cultural heritage. In that sense it has entered the mainstream of public consciousness, for better or for worse, and has become closely associated with the Brazilian commitment to issues of conservation generally. Again, the projects in southern Piauí illustrate this integration of rock art into public conservation awareness. Many of the rock art sites I had seen in the 1980s have become publicly accessible in this now World Heritage-listed monument, The National Park Serra da Capivara, and conservation measures are evident everywhere. There are extensive artificial driplines at many shelters (Fig. 4), unobtrusive channelling of water is visible to the careful observer, termite control (but avoiding removal of termite tunnels), and the dozens of public sites have extensive boardwalks and established, sign-posted tracks. At sites subjected to laminar mass exfoliation, such as Toca do Estevo 1 and 4, extensive stabilisation efforts of exfoliating substrates are much in evidence (Fig. 5). Although most of the rock art occurs on sandstone facies (there are also limestone and schist sites), these are of considerable textural variability, which together with the wide variety of site morphologies has posed a corresponding variety of conservation challenges. There are strata of poorly cemented, highly friable sandstone as well as more stable deposits; even weakly metamorphosed mudstone occurs at some sites; while layers of more resistant conglomerates are often responsible for the formation of shelters. This variety has engendered a number of tailored responses by the conservators of IPHAN, the Brazilian agency managing the national parks of the area, that are very similar to what one tends to find in other, well-managed semi-arid rock art regions of the world.

In Brazil, the legal framework of cultural heritage management is geared towards the involvement of NGOs, which have considerable judicial rights and have begun to follow the example of Guidon's FUMDHAM, now defined as exemplary by government. While



Figure 5. Stabilisation work at Toca do Estevo (R. G. Bednarik).

protective legislation is comprehensive and appropriate measures are in place, its practical application remains problematic. Noteworthy is an emphasis that Brazilian heritage is the property of all, including the people of other countries, supporting the notion of a universal patrimony. Community-based initiatives have begun to appear, such as the project of one small town of just 2000 people, who somehow raised the money to purchase the land on which the Parque Serra Antonio in Minas Gerais is now located. They built their own interpretation centre, re-vegetated a degraded area and provided public interpretation of the site, which in turn has already led to economic benefits.

ABAR, the association of Brazilian rock art researchers, is one of the more recently affiliated member organisations of IFRAO (in 2001; see *RAR* 18: 134), but this congress has established its unparalleled effectiveness in staging such a large event and in meeting the very considerable logistical challenges it engendered. Most other IFRAO members would not pretend to be able to match this performance, simply because securing public support on such a scale would be impossible for them — at least at this stage. But as this event has demonstrated, public appreciation and concern for rock art can be cultivated as it has been in Brazil, by deeply committed and utterly dedicated, persevering individuals like Professor Guidon. She has shown all of us that there is considerable scope in improving the status of rock art; she has set a new standard and an example for all of us to follow. For this lesson IFRAO is as grateful as for the staging this most enjoyable event. Naturally, Guidon has had to involve many helpers, people such as APAAR representative Mila Simões de Abreu, Chris Bucu and many others. IFRAO thanks them all, as I am sure all participants do.