



22.

**CHURCH**  
OF THE  
SAVIOUR  
OF CABEÇA  
SANTA



-  Praça Carlos Pereira Soares, Cabeça Santa Penafiel

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-  41° 7' 55.394" N  
8° 16' 48.143" W

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-  +351 918 116 488

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-  Saturday, 6.30 pm  
Sunday, 8 am

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-  Divine Saviour  
6<sup>th</sup> August

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-  National Monument  
1927

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A visit to the Church of the Saviour of Cabeça Santa is an excellent opportunity to understand Portuguese Romanesque architecture. The solutions adopted reveal influences from the Porto cathedral and the church of Saint Martin of Cedofeita, located in the same city, demonstrating how the mobility of the teams of artists favoured the travelling of shapes.

In the royal inquiries of 1258, the Church is already mentioned under the title “Saviour of Gândara”, a name it kept until the 16<sup>th</sup> century when it also begins being referred to as “Cabeça Santa” [Holy Head], thus alluding to a skull that was kept in a silver reliquary and displayed on its own altar, in the Church’s nave.

The composition of the portals and the sculptures of the capitals are very similar to the ones of the church of Saint Martin of Cedofeita which, in turn, depicts decorative solutions very close to those that were used in the Romanesque building of the Porto cathedral. So, the architectural sculpture of Cabeça Santa results from the combination of models with a direct French influence, of models from the region of Porto, and also of models inspired and influenced by Pre-Romanesque sculpture.



The influences of the Porto cathedral and of the church of Saint Martin of Cedofeita suggest that this parish Church probably dates back to the first decades of the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

The lateral portals, present in almost all Portuguese Romanesque churches, had a much more significant value in terms of use than the main portal. The lateral portals were used to enter to and exit from the daily religious services. The wider and monumental main portal, where there is a higher concentration of sculptures, was primarily intended to be used as an entry and exit for processions and in more solemn moments of the liturgical calendar. In the religious buildings of the Romanesque period, the western portal was understood as the Gate of Heaven or as the Portico of Glory. The will to protect the churches' entrances, as well as the burial space that was often located in front of them, was materialised through the representation of sacred themes in the portals, but also with the inclusion

of other elements, such as sculptures of scary or powerful animals and of signs with magical value, i.e., sculptural motifs such as crosses and sun wheels, able to protect entrances and defend the church against all evils.

It is within this context that, in the Church of Cabeça Santa, the western portal features a tympanum with bovine heads. On the capitals there are affronted birds, a typically Romanesque motif that adjusts the figures to the architectural piece (capital). On one of the capitals there is a lying figure who is being grabbed by an animal's mouth, alluding to the idea of the man trapped by sin.

On the south façade there are still a few corbels and an eave that prove the existence of a porch with a shed roof. These porches, which were placed against the lateral façades of the churches, and sometimes also against their main façade, as in the case of the Church of the Monastery of Ferreira (Paços de Ferreira) (p. 66), could be used for different purposes.



## THE RELIC

Although the identity of the holy character to whom the relic belonged remains unknown, the truth is that its reputation as a miracle worker with intercessory powers against several diseases and the bites of rabid dogs attracted devotions and pilgrimages from devotees who worshipped it on Saint John the Baptist's day, pleading for or thanking its miracles.

Jorge Cardoso, in *Agiológio lusitano...*, a work published in 1666 with the intention of clarifying the true origin of the relic, describes it as follows: "The name of the celestial man was hidden by time, but the devil has recently disclosed it. It so happened that this venerable relic belonged to a berserker, and when he was told it belonged to the glorious Baptist, the enemy replied: You are wrong because it is not his but from another holy man with the same name. And although the devil is the father of lies, he often speaks the truth in similar cases, through divine permission".

The same author records the existence and veneration of 37 holy heads in Portuguese territory in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In the Middle Ages, the skulls attributed to, alleged or real, martyrs and saints were the most appreciated relics; this phenomenon lasted well into the Modern Period.

They were associated with burials spaces and the celebration of funeral rites, as well as with gathering and sheltering sites. In the Romanesque period, the church was usually the parish's noblest building. Besides from its sacred and liturgical purposes, the church - being the parish's focal point - was the set for many of the population's daily activities, namely meetings, notary acts and commercial trades, which were sheltered by the porches.

In the churchyard, on a granite outcrop, there are still three graves carved in the

rock. We are still able to find three medieval sarcophagi with their corresponding lids leaning against the south wall of the Church of Cabeça Santa.

Currently, the interior of the Church is almost completely deprived of colour, altars, paintings, images or other type of liturgical and devotional furniture. The capitals of the chancel arch, which are also very similar to the ones of the church of Saint Martin of Cedofeita, are its only decorative element.

What stands out both in the nave and





in the chevet is the good-quality granite stonework, typical of the Portuguese Romanesque style. However, we should note that this completely sober appearance is the result of a restoration campaign carried out in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In terms of Romanesque architecture, our time is the depository of an image which is very far from reality. Mistakenly, in our culture, the archetype of a medieval church is always associated with sobriety, with the absence of colour, with a preference for visible stones. However, this idea is completely wrong. Plain and monochrome churches were, mentally and devotionally, inconceivable in the Middle Ages.

The space that is currently known as the chapel of Our Lady of the Rosary, which we can access through the Church's nave, defines an autonomous space with a rectangular plan and stands as a distinctive landmark of the transformation of the medieval structure. According to documents dated 1758, we were able to assess that, at the time, it was called the chapel of the Blessed Sacrament, an invocation that greatly explains its construction in this Church's nave.

From the decorative standpoint, this space is rather balanced and refined in

terms of the language adopted: the aesthetic taste typical of the Portuguese Baroque style is mainly present in the peculiar combination of gilded woodworks, tiles and blackwood with the yellow metal appliqués of the turned railings that define the separation between this chapel and the Church's nave.

The initial project anticipated the removal of the bell tower adjoined to the building, but its demolition went against the interest of the local population, so it was disassembled and rebuilt close to the churchyard's end.

The same project also included the demolition of the chapel of Our Lady of the Rosary, which is attached to the Church's body. Although the chapel was an element from the Modern Period, much like the bell tower, the decision was to keep it given that it was a legacy of the people's building effort and an element of local identity and memory.

The restoration works that were carried out in the chapel were focused on repairing and gilding the woodworks, while replacing the missing woodwork elements, replacing tiles, restoring blackwood pieces and building the arch's pilasters.

