

37.

MONASTERY OF SAINT MARY OF VILA BOA DO BISPO



Av. P. António da Cunha
Machado, Vila Boa do
Bispo, Marco de Canaveses



41° 7' 49.40" N
8° 13' 13.79" W



+351 918 116 488



Sunday
11 am



Saint Mary
15th August



NM (Church/Tombs)
PIB (Monastery), 1977



P. 25



P. 25



x

Mentioned in 11th and 12th century documents as the Monastery of Saint Mary of Vila Boa, this convent was already associated with the Canons Regular of Saint Augustine in the mid-12th century. According to tradition, the Monastery of Vila Boa was founded between 990 and 1022 by Monio Viegas - the brother of Sisnando and the bishop of Porto between 1049 and 1085 - on the site of the battle between Christians and Muslims, in which Sisnando was killed and, thus, immortalised. Ever since its foundation, this Monastery can be associated with the lineage of the Gascos from Ribadouro, a noble family of great influence at the time. Being the lords of a large number of monasteries that were strategically located along the tributaries of the river Douro, on both banks and along the paths of the Reconquest, these noblemen controlled a wide geographical area to the north and south of the Douro. Despite its strategic location, this territory presented favourable conditions to monastic life: it was avoided by travellers for being uneven and had recently been ploughed and repopulated with inhabitants that, in the following centuries, proved to be well rooted. For some time, we could identify members



of the Gascos family, direct descendants of their lineage, who were in possession of assets in Vila Boa do Bispo or within the current parish territory.

Its importance was such that it even received the land charter from King Afonso Henriques (k. 1143-1185), the first king of Portugal, in 1141, and was granted special privileges by the pontiffs of the time: the priors of the Monastery were allowed to use a mitre (*Papal Brief* of Lucius II, 1144) and received the distinction which allowed them to use a crosier (*Bull* of Anastasius IV, 1153). In the 13th and 14th centuries, Vila Boa do Bispo was one of the richest and most powerful monasteries in the region.

The Romanesque traces that remain (and that were still left visible after the major 17th-century renovation) demonstrate the richness of this Monastery's histori-

cal path. Considering its location, we do believe that the work that significantly transformed this Church reused most of the Romanesque building.

It is on the Church's façade that we find the most original elements from the Romanesque period. Despite being incomplete, the two blind arcades that flank the main portal, completely transformed during the Modern Period, show, in the region of the Baixo Tâmega, a solution that became popular in the Romanesque style developed around the Braga-Rates axis, but that we also find in the Monastery of Pombeiro (Felgueiras) (p. 30): above the voussoirs there are animals facing forward which, given the evolved and late nature of their design, were probably made in the turn of the 12th to the 13th century. Reflecting foreign influences, this way of decorating the façade was

THE MIRACLES OF THE BISHOP SISNANDO

According to the chronicles, it was nearly a league away from the Monastery that the bishop Sisnando - who had been living for a while in the Monastery of Saint Mary of Vila Boa, founded by his brother - was surprised by the Moors at a hermitage while celebrating Mass. After being murdered by the infidels, he was supposedly buried by the monks of the Monastery under the chancel's altar in a stone grave. According to friar Nicolau de Santa Maria and friar Timóteo dos Mártires, after hearing of the miracles performed close to Sisnando's grave, the bishop of Porto, Pedro Rabaldis (episc. 1138-1145), visited it in 1142. However, due to the deplorable state in which he found the chapel, he ordered the transfer of the martyred bishop's body to Vila Boa. However, it was thanks to the 17th-century chronicles that the epithet "do Bispo" [of the Bishop] began being used.

probably unique in Portugal, what would turn the Monastery of Vila Boa do Bispo into a *unicum* within the context of Portuguese Romanesque architecture.

Under the chancel's cornice we are still able to see the Romanesque modillions, one of which depicting a face that takes up all the available space. On the south side of the Church, in the nave, the clearly Romanesque narrow crevices were revealed. Based on its visible elements, we can say that the primitive chancel was probably square with a stone vault (as revealed by the buttresses) and that it would have also been externally decorated with blind arcades. But the most significant element is a very well-preserved capital that evokes the theme of the two-tailed mermaid. Judging by the traces of

arches revealed inside the Church, we are also led to assume that it would have also been decorated with blind arcades.

There are plenty of tumulary elements in Vila Boa do Bispo. Besides the funerary inscription of Monio Viegas, the "Gasco" (engraved on the lid of a sarcophagus sheltered by an arcosolium located in the Monastery's cloister) - which places his demise in 1022, although the inscription would have probably been made in the 13th century -, we should notice the three sarcophagi found in this Church. In the nave, on the left, two of them are surrounded by arcosolia; one of them was opened in the 20th century, the other is coeval of the tomb it houses. The former keeps the remains of Nicolau Martins (d. 25th November 1348), whose lying statue shows the miter and the

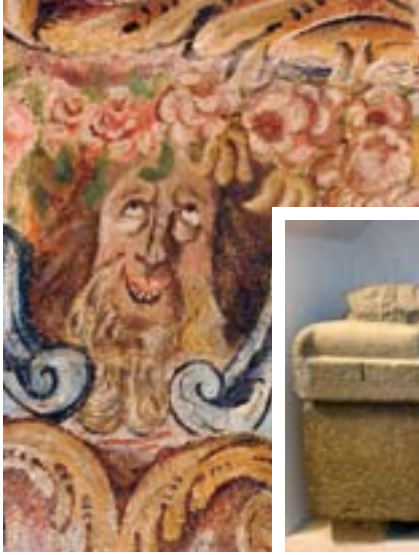


crossier, whose use was allowed to the Monastery's priors by Rome. Inside the latter lies Júrio Geraldes (d. 30th January 1381), who was depicted wearing civilian clothing (he was the chief magistrate for the Entre-Douro-e-Minho region during the reign of King Fernando (k. 1367-1383), holding a sheathed sword and with a harrier at his feet, a symbol of nobility associated with people who practice hunting. It is believed that these two tombs with lying statues were commissioned by the chief magistrate after 1362 to the workshop of Master João Garcia de Toledo. They are among the best examples of lying statues in the Entre-Douro-e-Minho region and, generally speaking, of granite statues in Portugal, due to their unusual quality. Finally, in the Monastery's churchyard we find the tomb of Salvado Pires that was probably made approximately in the same period as the other two. Its inscription identifies the prior's lineage - Milhaços and Peixões -, confirmed by the coat of arms.

In the 16th century this Monastery began being managed by Commanders and in the following century the chronicles praised the importance of the legend associated with the foundation of this monastic institution. So, it was within this context that the Romanesque Church was given a new look. As indicated by the various cartouches that are strategically placed inside the building, the main changes occurred between 1599 and 1686.

The chancel has a Baroque atmosphere. The cobalt-blue-on-white tile lining of the lateral walls combines the composition of an individual figure on the upper register with an elaborate composition of floral motifs in large vases, flanked by hybrid female figures surrounded by twisted leaves. The main altarpiece was designed according to the National Baroque taste. The coffered ceiling, which is also Baroque, gave way to a series of 17th-century mural paintings discovered behind it in 2012.





The nave is dominated by *trompe-l'oeil* paintings, both with the use of marbled effects (on the sacristy's door, the pulpit and the arch that supports the choir) and with scenographic decorations. In the chapel of the Blessed Sacrament, there are plenty of fake architectural elements and the common floral ornamentation with brutesque elements is much to the

Baroque celebration taste. The National Style [1690-1725] collateral altars evoke the Sacred Heart of Jesus and Our Lady of the Rosary, while the lateral one evokes Our Lady of the Rosary of Fátima. An extravagant balcony with a balustrade and fake marbled effects, on the left side of the nave, features a base decorated with *chinoiserie*.

THE MURAL PAINTING

It was during an intervention carried out in 2006 that the Romanesque traces were emphasized, creating a chiaroscuro effect between the granite and the internal and external whitewashed walls. The fact that the plaster layer was restored in the Romanesque Church of Vila Boa do Bispo already in the 21st century is rather curious, because it contradicts the most common practice in the previous century in terms of intervention in Romanesque churches, which was precisely the removal of plaster layers. We should also notice that, as a result of the most recent intervention, it is now possible to admire the 17th-century painting that depicts hagiographic themes and covers the vault, which had been hidden by the coffered ceiling.

