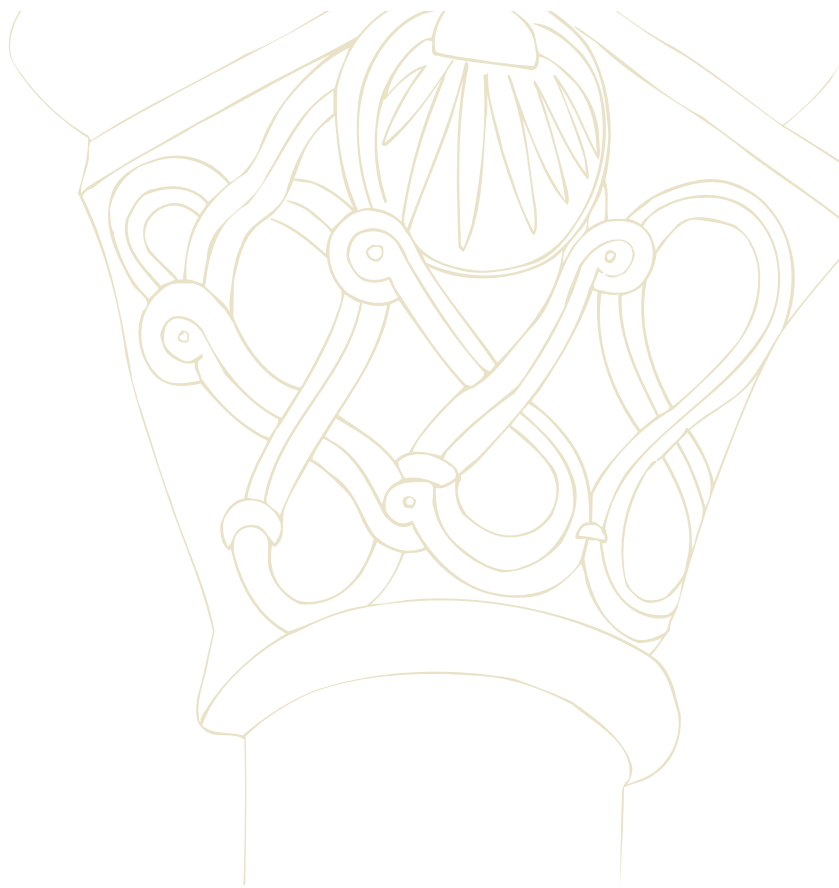




church

CHURCH OF SAINT MARY OF AIRÃES





## 1. The church in the Middle Ages

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The Church of Saint Mary, located in the place of Mosteiro, parish of Airães, in the municipality of Felgueiras, corresponds to an old foundation, documented since 1091<sup>1</sup>. However, the current temple does not conform to such an ancient date.

In 1220's Inquiries, the church is referred to as *ecclesia de Araes*, in the jurisdiction of Felgueiras. In 1258's Inquiries, *Sancte Marie de Araes* is still patroned by the aristocracy and presented by the archbishop of Braga<sup>2</sup>. The church's patronage will suffer consecutive transfers, already belonging to the Crown in 1394, which in turn assigns it to the Order of Aviz. In 1517, it becomes a commend of the Order of Christ<sup>3</sup>.



1. The existence of a church of Saint Mary of Airães has been documented since 1091. However, the medieval construction probably dates back to the late 13th century or even early 14th century.

1 P.M.H. *Diplomata et Chartae*. Lisboa, 1867, doc. DCCXLVI.

2 P.M.H. – *Inquisitiones*. Lisboa, 1888, pp. 73, 166, 209.

3 Cf. documentation quoted in Various Authors – “Santa Maria de Airães”. In *Estudo de Valorização e Salvaguarda das Envolturas aos Monumentos da Rota do Românico do Vale do Sousa. 2ª Fase*. Vol. 2. Porto, 2005, p. 269.

Francisco Xavier da Serra Craesbeeck has registered in 1726 the existence of an inscription, now lost, which was found by the pulpit, referring to the year of 1184 A.D., where it stated:

E(ra) M CC XX II VII / ID (us)<sup>4</sup>

According to Mário Barroca, the inscription was already incomplete in 1726, lacking the indication of the month and, probably, part of the text that could explain the nature of the happening celebrated by the inscription<sup>5</sup>.

Although the church presents three naves, the sole survivors from the Romanesque construction, originally bearing only one nave, are the transept, of rectangular design covered by a broken barrel vault, and the central part of the main façade, turned to the West.

The transept has two flights and accuses, in the arch frames, models from Gothic architecture. The capital featuring kneeling angels with chandeliers, by the Gospel, corresponds to a more evolved subject matter, equally distinctive of the Gothic period.

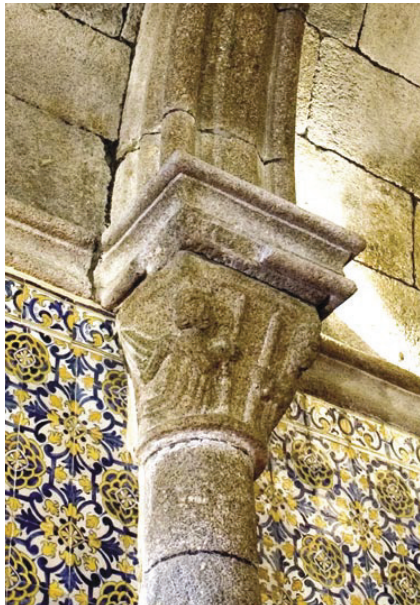


2. Although the church is composed of three naves, planimetrics corresponding to an enlargement made in the Modern Period, the Romanesque construction featured a single nave.

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3. Transept. The arch frames follow models from the Gothic Period.



4. Transept capital. The capital, bearing two kneeling angels holding chandeliers, follows a theme already belonging to the Gothic Period.

4 CRAESBEECK, Francisco Xavier da Serra – *Memórias Ressuscitadas da Província de Entre Douro e Minho no ano de 1726*. Vol. II. Ponte de Lima: Edições Carvalhos de Basto, Lda., 1992, pp. 11-12.

5 BARROCA, Mário Jorge – *Epigrafia Medieval Portuguesa (862-1422)*. *Corpus Epigráfico Medieval Português*. Vol. II, T. I. Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian/Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, 2000, p. 461.





5. The transept presents a cornice over small arches, a solution common to Saint Vincent of Sousa (Felgueiras), Saint Peter of Ferreira (Paços de Ferreira) and a few portions of the Monastery of the Savior of Paço de Sousa (Penafiel).

The crevices find parallels in the churches of the Monastery of Saint Peter of Cête (Paredes) and of the Savior of Paço de Sousa (Penafiel). On the outside, the transept's cornice is sustained by small arches, a common feature in the churches of Saint Vincent of Sousa (Felgueiras), Saint Peter of Ferreira (Paços de Ferreira) and the lateral naves of the Monastery of the Savior of Paço de Sousa's church.

In the main façade, the portal bears a disposition similar to that of the portals in the churches of Saint Vincent of Sousa, the Savior of Unhão and Saint Peter of Ferreira. It is encased in a pentagonal stone structure projecting from the façade in order to look deeper. The four archivolts present no decoration and the capitals' shape and size already point to Gothic solutions. The decoration of the bases and plinths follows the region's classic models.

North of the transept, the bell tower rises, difficult to place in time, although the entrance and illumination spans seem to belong to the Gothic period.

At the church's basing, bolstered panels of Roman typology suggest the existence of a former building from that period in the vicinity, maybe even a primitive Paleo-Christian or Suevi-Visigoth church.

Borrowing solutions from the Romanesque of the Sousa Valley, this church, given the late aspect of certain elements like the axial portal's capitals and the transept's frames and capitals, is probably dated from the late 13<sup>th</sup> or even early 14<sup>th</sup> century. It is therefore a paradigmatic exemplar of how long this region's Romanesque construction pattern endured.

One of the most significant and peculiar aspects of Romanesque architecture in the Sousa Valley resides precisely in the prolonged acceptance of the building models and decorative solutions that characterize the Romanesque period.

If this church's chronology matches the Gothic period, considering Gothic construction is already expressive in Portugal since the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, notably, in the cloister of the Old See of Coimbra and in the Monastery of Saint Mary of Alcobaça, we stress, nevertheless, that both styles, Romanesque and Gothic, coexist in time and, sometimes, also in the same building. In Portuguese territory, the regions between the



6. West façade. The portal is inserted in a stone structure stemming from the façade to appear deeper, a solution similar to the portals of the churches of the Savior of Unhão (Felgueiras), Saint Vincent of Sousa (Felgueiras) and Saint Peter of Ferreira (Paços de Ferreira).

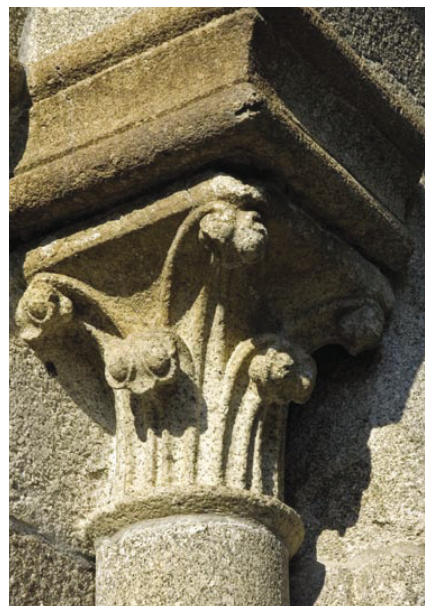








8. West portal. Capital.



9. West portal. Capital.

rivers Douro and Minho, Trás-os-Montes and Beiras adopt Romanesque solutions until the 14<sup>th</sup> century and, sometimes, till the 16<sup>th</sup> century, mixing them with aspects from Gothic architecture, as is the case with the Church of Saint Mary of Airães. In the Sousa Valley, to this prolonged and broader presence of the Romanesque is also added the region's unique taste for botanical and geometric decoration, whose patterns and techniques have been defined in the Romanesque period. [LR]

## 2. The church in the Modern Period

To understand this building and its artistic aspects dated from the Modern Period, we need to bear in mind that it arises from an important commend at the time from the Military Orders of Malta and of Christ<sup>6</sup>, which is why, as a result of the extinction of Religious Orders in Portugal, this church was only delivered to the parish in 1834. This fact becomes relevant for understanding the many investments made to dote this temple and also to decode the amazing and significant proportion it assumes, considering it was a building which only acquired the status of head of parish in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1726, under the Church of Saint Mary of Airães, and as subsidiaries, were the chapels of Saint Maurus, Our Lady of the Assumption and Our Lady of Nazareth. We also know that next to the church was "a large

7. West portal. The capitals present Gothic solutions, whereas the bases and plinths follow models from the Romanesque of the Sousa Valley region.

6 According to CRAESBEECK, in 1726, this church was the rectorate of Mitra and commend of the Order of Christ. See CRAESBEECK, Francisco Xavier da Serra – *Memórias Ressuscitadas da Província de Entre Douro e Minho no ano de 1726*. Vol. II. Ponte de Lima: Ed. Carvalhos de Basto Lda., 1992, p. 11.





10. The

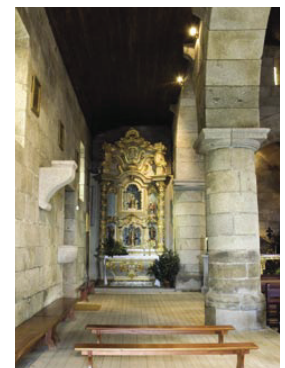
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group of houses for the rectors' dwellings, as well as the large and old houses of the commendators". In this church, coexisting with medieval elements, mostly visible in terms of the architectonic structure, are others added in later periods, resulting in a rich ensemble for its aesthetic diversity. Various components are featured over the Post-Tridentine artistic additions, namely, regarding the artistic furnishings. This church interior's renovation, through space modeling arts, has been through several stages, guided by the evolution of the artistic currents. Every time a religious institution had prodigal economic resources, time's stamp was imprinted in the monument with the renovation of its liturgical apparel: new, richer and more sumptuous vestments, pieces in silver and gold, altars, painted or sculpted images of saints. This wide assortment of objects composing and integrating the sacred space follow the general artistic evolutions, and thus, when a church, guild or brotherhood orders some of these equipments, the latest artistic manifestations are always sought. If the most avant-garde artistic manifestations of each period are witnessed in religious arts, the acquisition of an artistic object by an institution, on the other hand, was always associated with a manifestation of religious and devotional zeal. To endow the parish church with new apparel was seen as an act of devotion. In the Modern Period, as in others, laymen and religious folk wanted to offer "the best to God". It is not, therefore, odd to witness the renovation of the sacred space through complementary arts: altarpiece gilding, painting, tiling, garmenting, and goldsmithing, among others. But when material resources are abundant, the strongest and deepest renovation goes through the transformation of the architecture, rebuilding the entire building or some of its parts.

The number of altars and respective devotions was, in the year of 1758, very different from the current one. The main chapel was doted with a golden altarpiece and sacrarium; four collateral altars in the naves, two in the central nave, considered by the author of this information from the 18<sup>th</sup> century as "the body of the church", and one in each lateral nave. In the North nave there was the chapel of Saint Luzia, a very representative invoking of the parish's devotional universe. The festivity honoring Saint Luzia takes place on December 13<sup>th</sup>, with the presence of "many people from the vicinities in pilgrimage". In the opposite



11. Epistle nave.



12. Gospel nave.



13. Altarpiece. Built in the *rocaille* fashion, this altarpiece dates back to the late 18th century, integrating the images of *Saint Joseph*, *Saint Anne* (teaching the Virgin how to read), *Saint Joaquim*, *Saint Anthony*, the *Virgin with Child* and *Saint Lucia*.



14. Altarpiece. In *rocaille* design, but with a structure altered later on, in the middle section, this altarpiece holds the images of the *Sacred Heart of Jesus* and of the *Sacred Heart of Mary*.

nave, Saint Anthony's altarpiece. Of the two altarpieces in the central nave, we only know that one was dedicated to the Holy Name of Jesus, under the responsibility of the Brotherhood bearing the same name as the chapel<sup>7</sup>. The gilding ensemble currently presented by the church is posterior to this information from 1758, testifying to yet another renovation in the sacred space of the Church of Airães. (FOT. 8686)

There are two collateral altarpieces, placed in the back walls of the lateral naves, in white and golden gilding. These pieces, dated from the last quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, are organized according to a slightly concave structure and feature a basing formed by a table with projecting altar, whose decoration includes seashell elements in the *rocaille* fashion. In the altarpiece core are lateral columns (one on each side) with a frustum marked in its first third and decorated with botanical motives. These columns frame a central panel organized in two horizontal registers, as one may see in the altar by the Gospel, which still preserves the original structure.

By both of this final altarpiece's sides small overlapping niches are torn, framing the structure's center, two on each side, and hosting small-sized sculptures. In the altarpiece center are two niches, also holding imagery and with an interior painted with botanical motives drawn in gold, blue and red over a light blue background.

<sup>7</sup> 1758's Parish Memories, transcribed by RODRIGUES, José Carlos Meneses – *Retábulos no Baixo Tâmega e no Vale do Sousa (séculos XVII-XIX)*. Vol. III. Porto, 2004. PhD thesis in Art History presented to the Faculty of Arts of the University of Porto, p. 686.



On these altars' finishing one may notice cut spalders, framed by two robust fins, bearing botanical motives, combined with seashells, dominant traits in its decoration. (FOT. 8684)

Imagery is fundamental to the enhancement of these altarpiece structures, especially considering the quality presented by the ensemble. Thus, in the collateral altar by the Gospel are, in the altarpiece core's lower niches, from left to right, the images of *Saint Joseph*, *Saint Anne* (teaching the Virgin how to read) and of *Saint Joaquim*, which are exceeded in the upper level by those of *Saint Anthony*, the *Virgin with Child* and *Saint Luzia*.

As for the sculptures gathered in the collateral altar by the Epistle – whose structure was modified since the altarpiece's core was altered with the tearing of a large carved niche –, there are recent pieces like the images of the *Sacred Heart of Jesus* and the *Sacred Heart of Mary*.

Asides from the altarpieces, there are other pieces also worthy of mention, like the images of *Saint Quiteria* and of *Saint Bartholomew* from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and the images of *Saint Roch* and of *Saint Michael the Archangel*, dated from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, to which the iconographic attributes are missing, present in a corbel next to the Epistle.

Another fundamental clue for describing and identifying artistic elements in this building originated in renovations within the post-Trento context is the tiling from the main chapel's lateral projections.

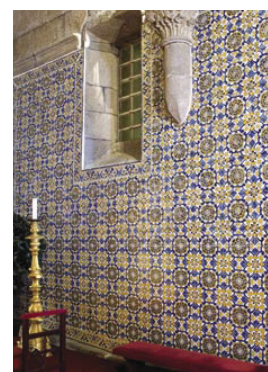
It is a nucleus of polychrome glazed tiles from the 17<sup>th</sup> century whose units are repetitive modules forming a 2x2 pattern<sup>8</sup>, which, multiplied derives into a ceramic canvas fully covering the lateral walls in that space. The pattern's decorative motive is the camellia, drawn in blue and yellow over a white background from the main rotation axis marked by a small flower. Straight blue elements develop around the camellia, establishing a connection between several patterns repeated in the whole.

As far as the bordering decoration, a trimming goes all around the composition with a repetitive pattern composed of two glazed tiles: botanical elements, painted in blue and yellow over a white background, draw «C's» that develop from an oval axial element marked in blue with a yellow core<sup>9</sup>.

The impact caused by this tiling in the main chapel's space is striking. Remarkably odd, however, is the absence of a gilded altarpiece which would probably complete the whole. After all, gilding and glazed tile were the types of furnishings that always stood together in most of the Portuguese sacred spaces from the Modern Period.

Over the sacristy, which corresponds to the South volume adjacent to the main chapel, covering one story, we note the existence of a singular piece: small apparel, of Rococo lines, hosts a set of images, with a noteworthy artistic quality, probably integrated in a nativity scene of larger dimension.

Finally, one must also stress that this building has suffered renovation works in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which probably altered its aspect. The extent of this intervention is unknown, however, the absence of certain key elements like the main altarpiece and other components is notorious. An example of this intervention is the central nave's coverage, in wood, forming a barrel vault with a painting in the center dedicated to the devotional saint. [MJMR/DGS]



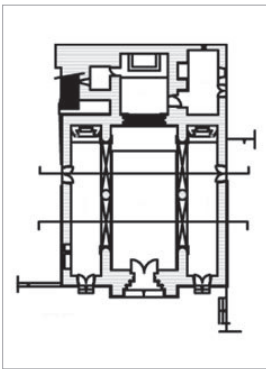
15. Transept. 16th century tiles.

8 Identified by Santos Simões as P-226. See SIMÕES, J.M. dos Santos – *Azulejaria em Portugal no Século XVII*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. T. I. Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 1997, p. 47.

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*Idem*, p. 148.

### 3. Conservation and requalification



16. Map of the church after restoration.

During the Modern Period, as we have seen earlier, we have witnessed a renovation of the liturgical space in religious buildings. This is translated into great reforms, as the Church of Saint Mary of Airães exemplifies, with the enlargement of the lateral naves and the transformation of the religious temple's interior.

In the 1970s, preservation and requalification works were conducted under the guidance of Porto's Auxiliary Bishop, D. Domingos de Pinho Brandão, and of the architect Solla Campos. The project intended to return the medieval root to Saint Mary of Airães' temple, in the church's exterior as in its interior. The work was particularly focused on fixing the coverage, the final placement of the altars, restoring the sacristy and conducting archaeological surveys inside.

In the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, several preservation works are conducted at the expenses of the parish and the Factory Committee, under the guidance of the DGEMN. The surrounding area's maintenance and the construction of supporting equipments are the local autarchy's responsibility.

Between 2004 and 2007, general preservation works are conducted, considering the building's good condition, within the *Route of the Romanesque of the Sousa Valley* project. [MB]

## Chronology

11<sup>th</sup> century – Church foundation;

13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries – Romanesque edification;

17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries – Enlargement of the lateral naves, and renovation and transformation of the interiors;

1980 – Several preservation and restoration works conducted by the parish under the technical guidance of the DGEMN;

1989 – Preservation and restoration works, coverage, exterior draining and electric installation;

1992 – General improvement works to the coverage, restoration of the ceiling and altar;

2004/2007 – Preservation and maintenance works to the building and tiling, and restoration of sculptures under the *Route of the Romanesque of the Sousa Valley* project.