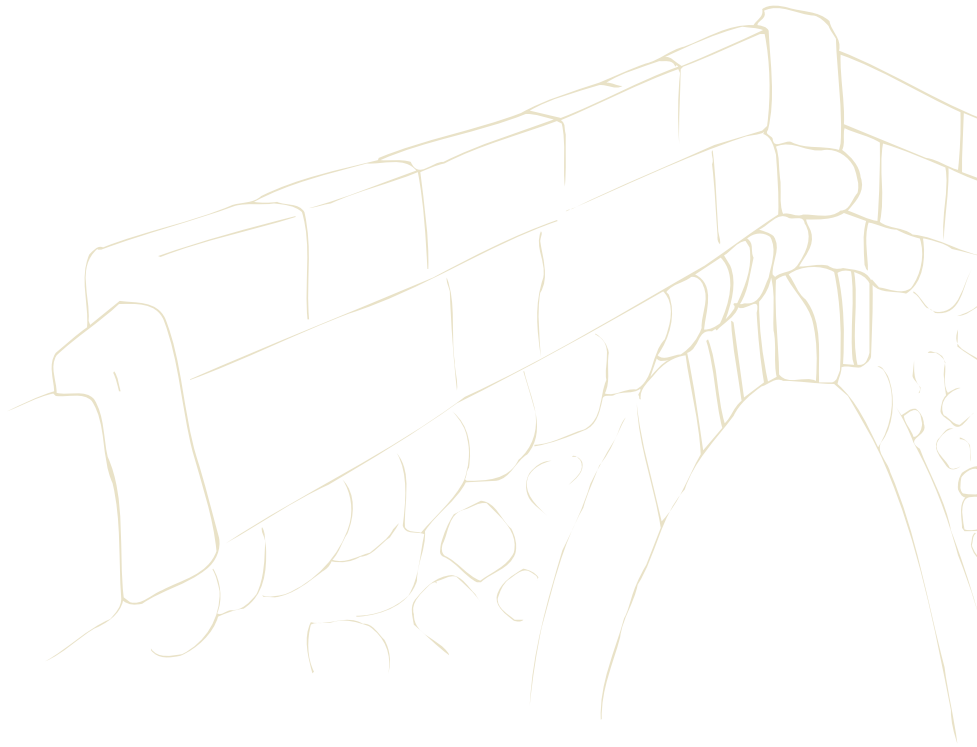


bridges

VILELA BRIDGE AND ESPINDO BRIDGE



Vilela bridge, in the parish of Aveleda, municipality of Lousada, eases the crossing of the Sousa river, establishing the connection between the place of Vilela, West of Caíde de Rei, and the places of Vilar de Nuste and Cartão¹.

In granite masonry, the Vilela Bridge is composed of four perfect arches. The arches are supported in three large blind pillars, reinforced with triangular cut-waters upstream, and squared piers downstream. The spans of the two lateral arches are currently shoaled. The tray is horizontal over the central arches, and rampant at the tops, featuring a pavement of granite tiles and laterally protected by a railing, also made of granite. This bridge's panels do not present any initials, an element often present in medieval bridges.

It is difficult to pin a date to it. This bridge of technical and building characteristics similar to those of the medieval period may correspond to the period when the Sousa Valley saw a greater need to improve circulation, as well as the need to cross the natural obstacle, the Sousa river.



1. At Vilela bridge the arches are supported by three large pillars reinforced with triangular cut-waters to the river's spring.

¹ Various Authors – "Ponte de Vilela". 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. 215.*

Espindo bridge, in the parish of Meinedo, municipality of Lousada, eases the crossing of the Sousa river, establishing the road connection between the places of Bustelo and Boim.

According to a study supervised by the DGEMN², this small bridge is composed of a single perfect arch supported in solid pillars springing directly from the river banks, the one on the left bank, upstream, being protected by a wall or islet.

The span's width lead to the elevation of the arch and the placement of the tray in trestle. It is a granite stone construction with irregularly bonded batters, contrasting with the regular stone bonding of the arch, featuring well cut voussoirs.

It is also difficult to pin a date to this bridge. It resembles a medieval bridge, technically and constructively.



2. Espindo bridge, made of a single arch supported by pillars stemming directly from the banks.

Although the Vilela and Espindo bridges correspond to an advanced chronology, the construction revives, in many ways, the medieval bridges that composed a great deal of the building effort of the Romanesque and Gothic Periods.

The quality of these bridges, their fine water resistance and endurance have forged a much prized and repeated building pattern in the Modern Period and even during the 19th century when, in the framework of the development policies of Fontes Pereira de Melo, the Portuguese road system was greatly renovated.

In the Middle Ages, the great building activity concerning bridges is obviously attached to road history. As Mário Barroca wrote, the necessity to renovate the road network inherited from the late Roman period and inadequate to the new needs was one of the factors that contributed to the widespread construction of bridges³.

As C. A. Ferreira de Almeida refers, from the 12th century till the 13th century, improving roads and building bridges is considered as merciful deeds.

Saint Gonçalo of Amarante and Saint Lourenço Mendes, responsible for the construction of the bridges of Amarante and Cavês, respectively, were sanctified by the people, just like Saint Benizet of Avignon (France) and Saint Domingo of Calzada (Rioja, Spain)⁴, demonstrating that this phenomenon of considering the construction of bridges as pious works was common in other European countries.

2 Various Authors – "Ponte de Espindo". In *Estudo de Valorização e Salvaguarda das Envolventes aos Monumentos da Rota do Românico do Vale do Sousa. 2ª Fase*. Vol. 1. Porto, 2005, p. 196.

3 ALMEIDA, C. A. Ferreira de and BARROCA, Mário Jorge – *O Gótico. História da Arte em Portugal*. Lisboa: Editorial Presença, 2002, p. 125.

4 ALMEIDA, C. A. Ferreira de – *O Românico. História da Arte em Portugal*. Lisboa: Editorial Presença, 2001, pp. 148-149.



3. To the river basin, Vilela Bridge's cut-waters are quadrangular.

In the wills of kings, noblemen and clergy are several references to donations for the construction of bridges. D. Afonso Henriques contributed to the construction of the bridges of Coimbra, Ave (Bagunte, Vila do Conde) and Piores, in the Douro river.

The bridges of the Romanesque period were more careful with their foundations than the Roman bridges, seeking firmer grounds for construction. This is why, in C. A. Ferreira de Almeida's opinion, medieval bridges lasted better to bad weather and floods.

The Romanesque bridges usually feature great arches whose height sometimes imposes a trestle bridge, that is, of double ramp, as a solution. They widely develop the cut-waters upstream and the piers downstream⁵.

In the Gothic period, the bridge building technique is not much different from the solutions of the Romanesque bridge, albeit a more systematical usage of a trestle and arch (or arches) structure, with wider amplitude in the middle, so as to provide less resistance to water when floods occur. The Gothic bridge is also more monumental-looking.

For its proportion and because it consecrates an important and very ancient path, partially integrating a former Roman bridge, the Ponte de Lima bridge is a work from the second quarter of the 14th century which should be pointed out for its remarkable construction. It is composed of eighteen slightly broken arches and corresponds to a new typology, present in other bridges of the roads of Santiago, and revived in the North of Portugal in Ponte da Barca and Vilar de Mouros. Next to the village, the bridge was integrated in a door of the fencing and, in the right bank of the Lima river, it featured a tower.

This monumentalization of bridges, fortifying them, is an innovation from the Gothic period, as Mário Barroca pointed out. The Barcelos bridge also had a tower attached to the Palace of the Count. This bridge, composed of six uneven arches, is presumably from the end of the first quarter of the 14th century, the chapel of Our Lady of the Bridge being from the same period. The Sequeiros bridge, over the Cõa river (Vale Longo, Sabugal) preserves part of a squared tower, and the Aramenha bridge (Marvão) chose to have the tower in a slightly withdrawn place. Better known is the monumentalized bridge of Ucanha (Tarouca) which, like in the two last mentioned exemplars, is already from the 15th century⁶.

Also noteworthy are the Gothic bridges of Langoncinha (Famalicão) over the Ave, with six arches, Prado (Vila Verde) over the Cávado, structured in nine arches, and Caves (Cabeceiras de Basto), already documented in the 13th century, over the Tâmega, in the nearby regions of Minho and Trás-os-Montes.

Building bridges left deep traces in the Portuguese medieval landscape. According to C. A. Ferreira de Almeida, among the civil architecture of the Romanesque period, emphasis should be placed on the numerous bridges built at the time "for the interest that was then devoted to them, for the impact they represented, for the transformation of the landscape they always brought along, for the technical and economical means they required and for the benefits they provided to communication and men"⁷.

The conservation and recovery works of the Vilela and Espindo bridges were focused in consolidating the structure, cleaning and removing biologic pathologies and landscaping the surrounding area, and they were conducted within the *Route of the Romanesque of the Sousa Valley* project.



4. At Espindo bridge, the span has forced the elevation of the arch and the positioning of the tray in trestle.

5 ALMEIDA, C. A. Ferreira de – *O Românico. História da Arte em Portugal*. Lisboa: Editorial Presença, 2001, pp. 138-140.

6 ALMEIDA, C. A. Ferreira de; BARROCA, Mário Jorge – *O Gótico. História da Arte em Portugal*. Lisboa: Editorial Presença, 2002, pp. 124-128.

7 ALMEIDA, C. A. Ferreira de – *O Românico. História da Arte em Portugal*. Lisboa: Editorial Presença, 2001, p.149.