



2.

CHURCH OF SAINT VINCENT OF SOUSA



Lugar da Igreja
Sousa
Felgueiras



41° 20' 37.685" N
8° 14' 56.145" W



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Sunday, 9.30 am
Thursday, 8 pm



Saint Vincent
22nd January



National Monument
1977



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A visit to the Church of Saint Vincent of Sousa is an excellent opportunity to understand how the Portuguese Romanesque style developed quite unique solutions. The sculpture on the west portal is a rich legacy of such uniqueness. Although its sculpture features botanic motifs and does not show any iconographic themes, the refined composition of the portal, as well as the quality of its sculpture are good examples of the symbolic value portals had in the Romanesque period.

The solemnization of the portals did not always correspond to the execution of iconographic programmes with imagery references, thus reproducing programmes with religious themes, like the ones we find in the church of São Pedro de Rates (Póvoa de Varzim), in the church of Rio Mau (Vila do Conde), in the Braga cathedral or in the church of Bravães (Ponte da Barca), among others.

There is an obvious preference for programmes similar to the one of Saint Vincent of Sousa in the Sousa and Baixo Tâmega basins. However, the absence of figures does not imply an absence of meaning. The care given to its decoration, or rather, to its embellishment is, in itself, a way of turning the portal into a symbol of the Door of Heaven.



The Church of Saint Vincent of Sousa still preserves two Romanesque inscriptions with a remarkable importance for the analysis of its history. The inscription that commemorates the dedication of the Church is engraved on the external face of the nave's wall, to the right of the temple's north portal. It proves that the Church was consecrated in 1214. The other inscription is even older and dates back to 1162. It is a funerary or commemorative inscription associated with the construction of an arcosolium opened on the external face of the chancel's south wall.

The Church features a longitudinal plan with a single nave and a rectangular chancel (which was rebuilt in the Modern Period), thus showing a bell tower that was built as a wall and adjoined to the chancel's south façade.

On the main façade, facing west, we find a portal embedded into a pentagonal and protruding stone structure that allows

more depth to the portico. The portal features four round-arch archivolts resting on three columns with bulb-shaped bases, plinths decorated with intertwined motifs, cylindrical shafts that alternate with prismatic shafts - a common solution in this region -, capitals and imposts decorated with bevelled botanic motifs, with the particularity that the outer capital on the right side represents a face on the angle.

The lateral walls are surmounted by small arches resting on plain corbels which support the cornice, as in the case of the Church of Airães (Felgueiras) (p. 47). The walls present two windows whose profile indicates they were opened in the Modern Period.

The portal of the north façade features two archivolts and a tympanum with the representation of a cross surrounded by intertwined motifs. The portal of the south façade bears a simple structure and a plain tympanum.





INSCRIPTIONS

The inscription that commemorates the dedication of the Church says:

E(ra) M CC 2 II PR[i]DIE KaLendaS SepTemBRIS DEDICATA FUIT / EC(c)LesiaM S(an) CT(i) VINCENCII M(arti)RIS A BRAC(r)ARE(n)SI ARCHI / EP (iscop)O DMNO STEPHANO DOMNO FERNANDO / REIMUNDI PRELATO ISTIus EC(c) L(esi)E EXISTENTE.

The ceremony of the dedication of the Church was presided over by the archbishop of Braga, Estêvão Soares da Silva, who held this position between 1212 and 1228. The dedication was promoted by the Church's prelate, Fernando Raimundo. According to the canonical recommendations for the conduction of this type of ceremonies, August 31st 1214 was a Sunday.

The funerary inscription says: Era M^a CC^a +.

These two inscriptions allow us to conclude that the chancel was the first part of the Church to be built, which is consistent with the traditional construction rhythm in the Romanesque period. In fact, from what is known about the construction methods of this period – despite the absence of documentation on Romanesque workshops in Portugal – the works began with the construction of the chevet, followed by the west façade; the nave's walls were built afterwards.

Of course, this process does not correspond to a rule, but the analysis of the walls and a few documents are signs that this constructive process was actually applied. Consecrating the church's chevet as soon as it was finished was also common practice, allowing the celebration of divine worship while the remaining sections were still being built.

The inscription engraved in the arcosolium, which proves that the Romanesque chevet was already built in the third quarter of the 12th century, is an important piece of information to learn about the history of Saint Vincent of Sousa. This section of the Church, as well as the triumphal arch that separates it from the nave, were renovated in the Modern Period, and the stepped plinth is the only remain of the Romanesque period.





On the south façade, halfway up the wall, there is an eave supported by corbels; these elements prove the existence of a porch with a shed roof or a cloister. As usual in medieval buildings, the cloisters were typically located on the south side, because that is the side of the sun and so, warmer; the other monastic quarters, such as the chapter house, the refectory and the dormitory, among others, were organized around them.

The existence of porches on the south side was also very frequent for the same symbolic reasons and motivations, given that the north side, which was used to place porches, galilees or chapels, was destined to funerary rituals and burials because it was the dark side, the side of night and death. This is why the sculptures with apotropaic motivations, i.e., the ones that have the purpose and the power of driving away negative forces, are most frequently found in north-facing portals.

Here we find sculpted animals showing their ferociousness such as dogs, lions or serpents, hybrid and fantastic animals, like griffins or harpies, or simply crosses surrounded by intertwined motifs, or even five-point stars, Solomon's knots and other similar signs. However,

this type of sculpture was not exclusive of north-facing portals, as proven by the cross surrounded by intertwined motifs we may find on the tympanum of the south portal of Saint Vincent of Sousa. It is simply more frequent in those cases.

Despite being surmounted by elements from later periods, the bell tower - adjacent to the south side - may structurally correspond to the medieval bell tower. We should note that, on its base, there is a portal that probably dates back to the Middle Ages, thus suggesting the relationship between the Church, the tower and the construction that was addressed to the temple's south wall.

Inside the Church we find an ensemble of Baroque woodwork and paintings from the Modern Period, together with a series of architectural elements from the 17th and 18th centuries. The pictorial programme shown in the 30 ceiling panels depicts a cycle dedicated to the Church's patron saint - Saint Vincent, in a series of 30 scenes of the life and miracles of that saint.

The campaign for the requalification of the Church of Sousa began in the 1980s. The parish was responsible for the conservation works carried out in the Church.