



church

CHURCH OF SAINT PETER OF ABRAGÃO



1. The church in the Middle Ages



1. The church of Saint Peter of Abrugão maintains the Romanesque transept.



2. Built in excellent apparel, the transept presents an outer frieze with vegetal motives, in a solution similar to that of the church of the Monastery of Paço de Sousa (Penafiel).

From the Romanesque period, the Church of Saint Peter of Abrugão, located in the municipality of Penafiel, only maintains the transept. This transept is a significant testimony to regional Romanesque architecture, which should be valued in the context of the *nationalized Romanesque* current of the Sousa and Lower Tâmega Valleys.

The Church of Abrugão's existence is mentioned in as early as 1105, when Paio Peres Romeu donated in his testament the fourth part of *Sancto Petro de Auregam* to the Monastery of the Savior of Paço de Sousa (Penafiel)¹.

However, that church does not match the Romanesque transept it currently hosts, since the latter is dated from the second quarter of the 13th century, corresponding to an edification tradition attributes to the initiative of D. Mafalda, king D. Sancho I's daughter.

The Church of Saint Peter of Abrugão features two stages, distinctive in chronology and style: Romanesque and Baroque.

The main *façade*, as well as the nave, corresponds to a reedification from the second half of the 17th century. The transept and its cross arch represent the only Romanesque elements remaining from the original construction.

Nevertheless, this transept is a delightful sample of Romanesque architecture, whether in its detailed apparel, with large and tightly put panels, and the external frieze, similar to that of the Monastery of the Savior of Paço de Sousa's church (Penafiel), whether in the relation between the lower transept's height and the cross arch capitals' great volume.

¹ MEIRELES, António de Assunção – *Memórias do Mosteiro de Paço de Sousa & Índice dos documentos do arquivo composto por Frei António da Assunção Meireles*. Publishing and preface by Senior Academic founder Alfredo Pimenta. Lisboa: Academia Portuguesa da História, 1942, pp. 6-7.



3. The transept and the nave's pediment are the only elements remaining from the original Romanesque construction.



4. The step buttresses are meant to minimize the infiltration of rain water inside the walls. The sculpted frieze resumes themes of Hispanic-Visigothic tradition, in a solution that is very common in the Sousa Valley's Romanesque.



5. The transept and the cross arch match the remaining portions from the Romanesque period.

The rectangular transept is formed by two spans matching step buttresses on the outside, presenting a solution that is destined to prevent the infiltration of rain water. On the outside, a frieze composed of geometric motives reminds the church decoration from Visigoth and Mozarab periods, whose revival in 13th-century works stands as one of the most interesting and peculiar phenomena of Portuguese Romanesque architecture, which the Sousa and Lower Tâmega Valleys' current singularly evinces.

Inside, the broken arch vault made of stone covers the entire transept structure. The main chapel's decoration features a botanical theme in the sculptures, including the triumph arch which is topped by a rosette, shaped like a five-pointed star, whose decoration reports back to the traditional themes of the flaming swastika, the six-leaved rosettes and the bevelled palm trees. The bulb-like bases, the adjacent columns and the capitals, very wide when considering the transept's short height, present decorative themes similar to those of the Monastery of the Savior of Travanca's main portal (Amarante).

The capitals are a good testimony of Romanesque sculpture. One of them presents atlantes in the corner, supported by leaves, and the other features birds entwined by the neck. Sculpture distribution is well framed in the capitals' echinus. In the left capital, the atlantes' figures, whose heads are at the edge of the echinus, accentuate the column's supporting function, and, in the right capital, the birds confront themselves in the edge, the echinus' central face occupied by an animal head snatching the birds' tails.

This type of capital sculpting, in a very close relation between shape and sculpture disposition, is, precisely, one of the most characteristic and particular aspects of sculpture in the Romanesque period.

Romanesque sculpture was born and developed within the framework of architectural pieces, proclaiming itself as one of the most important innovations brought by this style. It is an architectonic sculpture, not only because it is built in the architecture but also, and fundamentally, because the latter adapts itself, subordinating its motives to the available spaces. This is why characters are often presented in acrobatic positions, where the human figure is stretched or tightened, and animals acquire shapes according to the area in which they are sculpted.

After a long period of absence, motivated by the fear of idolatry which drew sculpted representations away from the temples throughout the High Middle Ages, figurative sculpture charges in, full of meaning,



6. Transept interior. The mural painting and the main altarpiece, from the Modern Period, have adapted to the Romanesque construction of this transept covered by a broken barrel arch.

7. Transept. Capital with atlases.





8. Transept. Capital with entwined birds.



9. The entwined motive decorating the capital abacus and the transept frieze follow a very common model from the Sousa Valley's Romanesque.

76 highly underlining its expressive values. Between the 5th and the 10th century, throughout all of Western Europe, sculpture had almost vanished, especially concerning figurative themes, then strongly connoted with idolatry and paganism. It will reappear very slowly in pilgrimage sites, as a casing for relics, or in the early 11th century, already in architectural pieces like capitals and span frames.

The adaptation of sculpture to architecture in the Romanesque period is one of the factors that contribute to its singular character, because the sculpting process favors the figure's distortion. But there are other equally powerful factors, like sacred and symbolic motivations.

From the conjugation of the elements in the transept of Saint Peter of Abragão, which should be understood in the context of the *nationalized Romanesque* current of the Sousa and Lower Tâmega Valleys², we believe we are in the presence of a monument traceable to a period between the first and the second quarter of the 13th century.

Documentation from the late 15th and early 16th century indicates that, following the usual rule in preserving churches and respective replenishment, it was up to the priests or commendataries to look after the transept, sacristy and priest's house. It was their duty to have repairs and ornaments done and to provide the main chapel with liturgical vestments. The parishioners, i.e., the parish's inhabitants, were in charge of the nave's maintenance, renovation and reconstruction and of looking after and renewing its content: *outward altars* and all the devotional ornaments and objects³. This norm has necessarily lead to chronological discrepancies in both parts of the temples, according to diligence, financial means available and motivation. The renovation of Saint Peter of Abragão's nave should be viewed in this context. The demographic growth or the precarious state of the Romanesque nave would have dictated its reedification. [LR]

² ALMEIDA, Carlos Alberto Ferreira de – *História da Arte em Portugal. O Românico*. Lisboa: Publicações Alfa, 1986, p. 95.

³ Documentation is explicit as to the division of these attributions. Cf. SOARES, Franquelim Neiva – "Ensino e Arte na Região de Guimarães através dos Livros de Visitações do século XVI". In *Revista de Guimarães*, Vol. 93., Jan.-Dec., Guimarães, 1983, p. 366 and *passim*, and the documentation published by DIAS, Pedro – *Visitações da Ordem de Cristo de 1507 a 1510. Aspectos Artísticos*. Coimbra, 1979.



10. The sacristy, the nave, the West façade and the tower correspond to the Modern Period restoration.

2. The church in the Modern Period

2. 1. Architecture and space distribution

In the Church of Saint Peter of Abrugão it is possible to identify, as we have seen, two distinct construction stages, corresponding to this temple's foundation period, and the posterior improvement that took place in the Modern Period. This building's chief interest resides particularly in the existing harmony between the diverse artistic components from those two periods, transforming this monument into an important landmark in the *Route of the Romanesque of the Sousa Valley*, since the remaining patrimony represents the paradigm of the happy coexistence of elements with such eclectic aesthetic features in terms of shape and meaning. An altarpiece with Baroque gilding was introduced in a main chapel of medieval design and small dimension; the original stone ceilings were decorated with scattered pictoric elements following a vocabulary from the mid 18th century. The ensemble radiates a climate where the 18th century's artistic equipments do not have enough space to breathe.

Partaking of this building's Modern Period comprehension is the analysis of the existing artistic and architectural elements, as well as data from documental sources offering a virtual representation of how the space used to present itself in the 18th century. The approach to the Modern Period's components will start precisely with the information gathered in those texts.



11. The Modern Period restoration has totally rebuilt the church nave.

Around 1747, the church space, composed of a main chapel and nave, integrated three altars, namely: the main altar, where the images of *Saint Peter* and of *Saint Paul* were, accompanying the *Holy Sacrament*, and two collateral altars placed by the Gospel and the Epistle, which hosted, respectively, the images of *Our Lady of the Rosary* and of *Saint Lucia*. It is also known that, around this time, this temple was an abbey of Royal Patronage, having been first presented by the Marquis of Fontes.

Three laymen brotherhoods were headquartered in its altars, under the protection of the Holy Sacrament, of Our Lady of the Rosary and of the Souls.⁴

In a later text, the *Memories of the Parish*, dated from the year of 1758, this church still maintained the three altars – the main altar and two collateral altars –, the document further referring that the collateral altar to the Epistle's side was dedicated to the *Holy Name of Jesus*. The brotherhoods are also mentioned, the Brotherhood of the Holy Sacrament, the Brotherhood of Our Lady of the Rosary and the Brotherhood of the Souls remaining, and with a new addition, the one of the *Sucino*. Let us confer with the documental reading:

“(…) has three altars, namely that of the larger chapel which goes by the name of the Holy Sacrament, the altar of Our Lady of the Rosary and the altar of the Holy Name of Jesus, it has no naves; the featured brotherhoods are: firstly, that of the Holy Sacrament, secondly, that of Our Lady of the Rosary, thirdly, the one of the *Socino*, fourthly, the Brotherhood of the Souls”⁵

It is known that the multiplication of brotherhoods inside the sacred space is a movement that developed in the 17th and 18th centuries, and that their altar (or chapel) placement follows a hierarchic principle in the disposition of the sacred space: the most prestigious are located in the main chapels, whereas the others are placed in the naves' altars.

This building's exterior has features that are unmistakably posterior to the Medieval Period, except for the main chapel's volume, which presents traits from 13th century Portuguese Romanesque style, from which we point out: the volume, the walls and the vaulted cover. The remaining elements are dated from the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, according to the architectonic language.

The main façade and the remaining construction projections that define the nave are simple and austere, with a balanced distribution and absolutely clear design, placing them in the 17th century. This dating is reinforced by the existing inscriptions in the masonry. Through this testimony, we know that in the year of 1668 there was a reedification of the nave, under the patron Abbot Ambrósio Vaz Golias. Considering the nave's dilapidated state, the abbot endeavours the reforming campaign for the dignification of the old temple. Let us read the inscription visible on the portal's lintel from the main façade:

«BREVIS.DOMVS.QVONDAM/PENITVS/SVBMERSA/RVINIS. /NVNGAVTEM.INLONGIVS.DENVO SVRGIT. OPVS. / ANNO ◊ DNI ◊ 1668.»;



12. West portal. The 1668 inscription tells of the reform under Abbot Ambrósio Vaz Golias order.

4 CARDOSO, Padre Luiz – *Diccionario Geográfico ou Notícia Histórica de todas as cidades, villas...* Vol. I. Lisboa: Regia Officina Sylviana e Academia Real, 1747-1751, pp. 19-21.

5 COELHO, Manuel Ferreira – “O Concelho de Penafiel nas Memórias Paroquiais de 1758”. In *Penafiel – Boletim Municipal de Cultura*. 3rd Series. Nos. 4-5. Penafiel: Câmara Municipal de Penafiel, 1987-88, pp. 261-263.

The epigraphy inside the church, in the sub-choir area, next to the Gospel, corroborates abbot Golias' responsibility for the renovation:

«ESTA/IGREJA.PELOS.ANNOS.DOS/OR.ED/1200 MANDOV.EDI-
FICAR.ARAINHA/D.MAFALDA.FILHA. DELREI.D SANC/HO PRIMEIRO
DONOME NESTE REINO E/MVLHE.DELREI D HENRIQVE PRIMEI/RO
DO NOME.EM CASTELLA: E POR SE AR/RVINAR FOI REEDIFICADA
E ACCRESC/ENTADA. NO ANNO DE 1668. PELO IND/IGNO.SACER-
DOTE ABBADE DELLA.AM/BROSIO.VAZ.GOLIAZ.CVIOS OSSOS/
DESCANSAÕ NESTA SEPULTURA ◊ S.I.P.L.»⁶.

This temple's front is organized by the vertical lining of a central axis that stands out for the succession of the rectangular entrance portal, rectangular window and Latin cross at the vortex of the triangular pediment. As for the bell tower, next to the façade on the North side, its dating process corresponds to a later intervention, from the 19th century – which can be traceable through the bulb-like finishing placed at the angles of the tower's cover. Bearing a quadrangular design and a robust appearance, this tower is conceived in two main registers, marked by a projecting cornice, the first corresponding to the basing and the second to the opening level of the windows hosting the bells.

This work in the façade and church nave is included in the Mannerist current, within an austere and depurated taste.

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2.2. Gilding and painting



13. Altar and collateral altarpiece in gilded polychrome. Notice the quality of *Our Lady of the Rosary's* image, in the center of the altarpiece.

Inside the church there are other elements reinforcing its Baroque aesthetic component, mainly visible in the altarpiece structures from the collateral altars and the main altar, and also in the polychrome painting on the stone wall next to the triumph arch and the main chapel's walls and ceiling. This pictoric solution on the medieval walls was the solution for an update on the medieval climate.

The collateral altars are in the nave, with style components pointing to different timeframes, covered by quadrangular panels, painted sky, projecting from the triumph arch's wall, much like a baldachin, where little stars are painted on a blue foreground.

The collateral altar by the Gospel presents an altarpiece structure in Joanine polychrome gilding from around 1740s, which is marked, from the composition point of view, by the placement of four columns with torso-like frustum and the first third delimited, dividing the altarpiece body into three vertical strips on which the corbels sustain the images. Over the structure's entablature, signalled by a game of back and forth, the finishing ensues, flanked by two angels sitting on top of volutes turning to the central area, where a crown was sculpted and a small trimming with curtains reinforces its presence.

⁶ "This church was erected in the year of 1200 under the order of queen D. Mafalda, daughter of king D. Sancho the 1st in this kingdom and wife of king D. Henrique the 1st of Castile. Because it was dilapidated, it was re-erected and enlarged in the year of 1668 by the unworthy abbot priest Ambrosio Vaz Golias, whose remains rest in this grave. [Mason's initials]". [N. T.]

The decorative motives consist mainly of botanical elements, especially flowers (not only sculpted but also painted over the panel walls serving as image backdrops), also presenting winged angel heads in the images' corbels and shells topping the small baldachins that frame the images on the lateral vertical strips. Note that the altar table is not the original, resulting from an intervention dated from after the execution of the remaining elements. From this altar's artwork ensemble, we point your attention to the aesthetic quality of the image of *Our Lady of the Rosary*, placed on the altar's main corbel.

As to the collateral altarpiece by the Epistle, certain traits pin it to a more distant date in relation to that of the afore described altarpiece. In fact, the design of its components, as well as the decoration applied, fit it in the Portuguese Mannerist gilding, which ruled in the 17th century. Nevertheless, note that the composition of its elements is similar to that of the Joanine altarpiece, for it is also distributed according to the definition of three vertical fields, now signalled by two columns and two pilasters, sustaining an entablature over which lies the altarpiece's trimming.

This altarpiece's structure probably influenced the design of the Joanine counterpart by the Gospel, whose execution was presided by the preoccupation of making a harmonious ensemble, despite the differences in style. Furthermore, one of the principles overruling these transformations was aesthetic unity. The Mannerist altarpiece was not replaced, but it served as a model to the new altarpiece apparel made about sixty years later.

Much like what is witnessed with the Joanine altarpiece, the base, composed of the altar table, is not part of the remaining structure, since it probably derived from a recent renovation. The chosen decoration lies mainly in delicate botanical elements, articulated on occasion with small urns, visible whether in the column pedestals' main faces or in the winged angel heads delimiting the first decorated third of the entablature's columns and frieze. The altarpiece's lateral spaces include paintings depicting, from bottom to top, on the left side strip, *Mary Magdalene*, *Saint Andrew*, and on the right side, *Saint Roch*.

In the space belonging to the main chapel one finds the altarpiece dominating the entire back wall, which is a hybrid structure, since it is composed of several elements whose formal characteristics match diverse styles. The golden surface is not original, raising some doubts as to the ensemble's authenticity. The base of the altarpiece, in polychrome wood, results from a recent intervention, with a succession of other elements that appear to be fragments of a primitive structure, like the columns in national style gilding, set on pedestals and corbels, framing the tribune for the Eucharistic throne. Among these columns are niches keeping the images of *Saint Peter* and of *Our Lady of the Conception*, by the Gospel and the Epistle, respectively. The finishing area assumes a design already closer to the typical Joanine gilding, considering the animation of the elements achieved through the introduction of the curved front segments framing the top of the perfect arch that define the tribune's design, these being overlapped by a large trimming, further projecting itself from the structure. On the other hand, there are other elements, spread throughout the whole altarpiece, arising from very recent interventions to the structure, such is the case of the Eucharistic throne, whose engraved shapes have little artistic quality and a questionable production timeframe.

Parallel to the altarpiece structure, note the polychrome painting on stone, filling this space's projections and the barrel vault ceiling. The depicted shapes, over light blue background in the ceiling and grey back-



14. Collateral altarpiece of Mannerist structure.



15. Main altarpiece.

ground in the projections, vary between flourish cornucopias and seashell elements, with other botanical elements present as well. The color palette used here includes blues, reds, oranges, yellows and also greens. This coating dates from the second half of the 18th century, also establishing its presence on the triumph arch's wall. It is a painting of poor design, from which we note only the decorative effect.

Looking at the main chapel's ensemble, we see a cramped space, lacking the necessary dimension to let the altarpiece apparel breathe. It is, nonetheless, a paradigm, where the medieval sense of space was not altered and, therefore, the new Post-Trident arts have not fulfilled their purpose of space dramatization. The sacristy holds a medium-sized painting representing the *Calvary* – the lines reveal a predominance of design over painting technique: the shape treatment uses a very strong outline, with a deficient approach towards anatomy. The frame is in good quality carved wood, dating the sculpted shapes back to the 17th century. There are two other paintings, dated from the 19th century, depicting two local members of the Brotherhood of the Holy Sacrament, namely, the Commendator Rodrigo José de Mello e Sousa and José António de Matos, emigrant in Brazil. [MJMR/DGS]

3. Restoration and conservation

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This church has undergone restoration in 1845, at the expenses of José António de Matos, living in Brazil and born in this parish, in an attitude that the contemporary press classified as of “mercy and patriotism”. Frequent donations from *Brazilians* were meant for the renovation or edification of new churches in the parishes where they were born, funding new altars, bells and clocks, a sponsorship that usually earned them a commend. Even absent in Brazil, they took the place of *judges* in brotherhoods, insuring the contributions for further renovations.

The church, which was threatening to crumble, was renovated under the supervision of Francisco Monteiro Guedes Meireles de Brito, a faithful executor of the benefactor's will, preserving the building's distinctive and primitive character, that of a worshipped church “whose origin is almost as old as that of the monarchy”⁷.

Even though it is not possible to ascertain which elements were modified by 1845's works, it is significant that the presiding idea was to preserve the “distinctive and primitive character”, making it a restoration and not a preservation or *modernization* assignment, surely motivated by the traditional prestige that attributes the church's foundation to D. Mafalda.

This intervention should be framed within the wider restoration phenomenon in Portugal in the 19th century. The restoration of the Monastery of Batalha, initiated in 1840 and continued throughout the whole century, has set a fundamental steppingstone in the history of architectonic restoration, which is visible in the fact that, from that decade on, reports on restorations conducted in the entire country, or the intention of conducting them, are never amiss.

7 ROSAS, Lúcia Maria Cardoso – *Monumentos Pátrios. A arquitectura religiosa medieval – património e restauro (1835-1928)*. Vol. 2. Porto: Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto, 1995, p. 19.



The great quality of its architecture, the emblematic value it entails, the fact that it was the first Portuguese monument worthy of an alluringly illustrated foreign publication, the prestigious thrust given to construction projects under king D. Fernando II and the restoration concept gained with Luís Mousinho de Albuquerque, made the monumental ensemble of Batalha a model-monument as far as 19th century restoration goes.

Within the *Route of the Romanesque of the Sousa Valley* project, the Church of Saint Peter of Abragão has undergone improvement works, inside and in the surrounding space. [LR/MB]

Chronology

11th-12th century – Original edification (lost);

13th century – Romanesque edification;

1668 – Reconstruction of the nave;

1820 – Inclusion of the bell tower;

1975 – Suspension of the pavement's removal, preservation of the original pavement;

1991 – Replacement of the exterior doors;

1993 – Restoration of the main altar's gilding;

2004/2006 – General church preservation within the *Route of the Romanesque of the Sousa Valley* project: cleaning, reinforcing and painting the exterior spans, replacing some joinery and electric installation; preserving and restoring the painting of the Calvary in the sacristy; preserving the portiere, preservation works on the interior and sacristy, and renovation of the surrounding urban area.

16. Abragão's transept was endowed with a decorative frieze that emphasizes the symbolic importance of this church element.