

church

CHURCH OF SAINT GENES OF BOELHE





## 1. The church in the Middle Ages

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Set on one of the Tâmega river's banks, in a landscaped framing that shows the ancient roots of the territory's occupation, the Church of Saint Genes of Boelhe, in the municipality of Penafiel, is a rather intriguing monument in the context of the Portuguese Romanesque architecture, showing how much the latter offered original – very rural and very local – decorative expressions.

The parish of Saint Genes of Boelhe is featured in 1258's Inquiries, although there is an older document, dated from 1111, testifying the existence of a place named *uilla Boneli*.

Tradition attributes the church's foundation either to D. Sancho's daughter, Pious Mafalda, or to her grandmother, queen D. Mafalda, D. Afonso Henriques' wife, notorious for founding hostels and bridges, a work considered as pious and penitent in the Middle Ages. The queen founded a hostelry in Canaveses, where poor travelers were taken in and cared for, tradition crediting her with the bridge over the Douro river, in Barqueiros, and another bridge, over the Tâmega, as well as the passage boats "for God" in Moledo and Porto de Rei.

The foundation of the church of Saint Peter of Abragão, equally located in the municipality of Penafiel, is also attributed either to Queen D. Mafalda or D. Sancho I's daughter. Truth is that Pious Mafalda was presumably raised by Urraca Viegas de Riba Douro, patron of the monastery of the Savior of Tuías (Marco de Canaveses), precisely in the Honor of Louredo (municipality of Paredes), her tutor's estate<sup>1</sup>. This aspect of her life may have contributed to cement tradition that claims her as the foundress of Boelhe and Abragão. D. Mafalda's will distributed her assets around monasteries and churches, among which the patronage of the church of Louredo and assets left to the Monastery of Paço de Sousa<sup>2</sup>.



1. Set on one of the Tâmega's riversides, the church of Saint Genes of Boelhe testifies to this region's ancient parish network.

1 COELHO, Maria Helena da Cruz – *Arouca. Uma Terra, um Mosteiro, uma Santa*. Arouca: Real Irmandade da Rainha Santa Mafalda/Museu de Arte Sacra de Arouca, 2005, p. 25.

2 IDEM, *ibidem*, pp. 40-41, 110.

Equally worthy of note is the Hermitage Memorial, also in Penafiel, traditionally referred to as a resting spot for the funeral corteges of Pious Mafalda from Rio Tinto to the Monastery of Arouca, which D. Sancho's daughter has reformed.

The church of Saint Genes of Boelhe, with a single rectangular nave and transept, follows the most common design in Portuguese Romanesque architecture. In Entre-Douro-e-Minho, 80% of the remaining churches from this period feature this disposition. The wood coating, in the nave as in the transept, is also the most frequent, mainly in parish churches, since the stone vault, even concerning the transept only, is much more expensive and requires a more complex workshop and hiring masters with vast knowledge in stereometrics, which was not always possible.

Nevertheless, in spite of the Church of Boelhe's apparent simplicity, one should stress the quality in wall construction. The pseudo-isodome ensemble features very well appareled panels where an impressive amount of geometrical and alphabetical signs is visible.

The mason's engravings in the Romanesque buildings have, from an earlier stage, become more common in rural churches, especially from the early 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Although little is known on the workshop's organization in the Portuguese case, the best documented European examples indicate that, when the masons were hired by the piece, acronyms were used to account for their work which, according



2. West and South façades of the church. Composed by a single transept and nave, the church of Saint Genes of Boelhe, albeit its apparent simplicity, displays a good quality in its wall construction.



3. Transept. South and East façades. This church's very well appareled panels display an impressive amount of geometrical and alphabetical signs.



4. Alphabetical and geometrical signs. These masonry markings were used to account for the mason's work. Boelhe's signs, frequent and repeated, suggest that the church was probably made by half a dozen masons.



5. West portal archivolts and capitals showing the beveled edge cuttings, common in the Sousa Valley's rural Romanesque.



6. West portal capital.

to C. A. Ferreira de Almeida, became a powerful way of promoting these initials<sup>3</sup>. These initials are also signs of the mason's prestige, for they correspond to a signature. Boelhe's initials, frequent and repeated, suggest that the church would have been built by half a dozen masons<sup>4</sup>.

There are, nonetheless, signs that correspond to *position markings*, more frequently placed in the stone faces that remained hidden, but sometimes shown in the panel's external face, as it happens in Boelhe, where some of the geometric signs appearing in the arcades would have had that function.

The main portal has six columns, two of which with prismatic frustum, starting from the bulb-like bases, as with the church portals of Saint Vincent of Sousa, the Savior of Unhão and Saint Mary of Airães (Felgueiras), and ending in capitals similar to corbels.

We bring your attention to these capitals' sculpture originality, with beveled palms, typical of the rural Romanesque of the Sousa Valley, graphic ornaments of crosses within circles, very ancient motives accusing the revival of traditional decorative techniques employed in the Pre-Romanesque architectures of the Visigoth and Mozarab periods, and making this church one of the most accomplished decorative expressions of rural Romanesque.

In the South side of the main façade's pediment remains the arch of the belfry or bell tower that housed the bell.



7. West portal. Note the originality in the making of the sculpted capitals and graphic ornaments of crosses inside circles, pointing to the revival of traditional techniques used in Pre-Romanesque forms of architecture.

3 ALMEIDA, Carlos Alberto Ferreira de – *O Românico. História da Arte em Portugal*. Lisboa: Editorial Presença, 2001, p. 73.

4 IDEM, *ibidem*, p. 121.



8. West and North façades. The exuberance of the corbel sculptures testifies to one of the most emblematic aspects of Romanesque sculpture: the taste for variety. The North façade has received corbels of a more diversified sculpture than the South façade, since the latter was meant to be covered by a porch.

In the lateral South façade, the corbels present themselves as less sculpted, whereas those in the North side, probably because this face was not meant to be hidden by constructions, present motives that span from bull's heads to men carrying stones or even geometric elements.

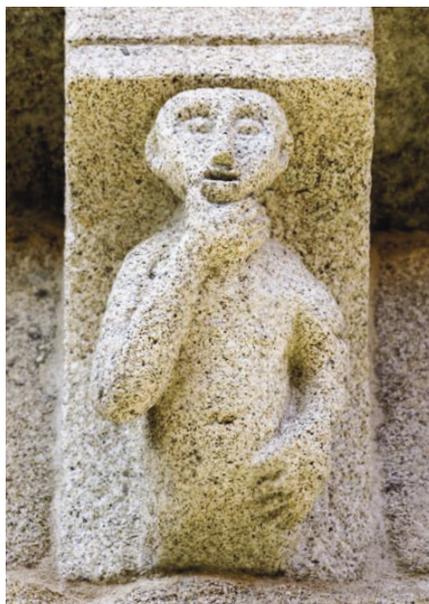
These corbel's sculpture exuberance exemplifies two of the most characteristic aspects of Romanesque sculpture: the taste for variety and the desire to impress.

In fact, in a Romanesque church, the corbels and capitals show a wide variety of motives and themes. It is unusual that, in the same portal, the capitals look all alike. When they do, they usually are already reporting to Proto-Gothic solutions.

To this taste for variety is added the desire to impress. A church bearing such a great variety in the corbels, as is the case of the North façade of Saint Genes of Boelhe, clearly portrays this motivation. Stone craftsmanship has always been impressive, either for its work's quality or for the capacity of presenting a wide range of figures.

These two characteristics indicate that the sobriety in Romanesque architecture is a contemporary value that does not fit in the medieval period. If one cannot deny that Cistercian architecture has predicted the programs with little or no sculpture at all, it is also true that it worked exactly *against* the Romanesque churches' exuberance, for spiritual and practical reasons, well expressed by Saint Bernard.

In the Romanesque period, the color, nowadays, almost totally gone, the shimmer of metals and precious stones, the expressive polychrome images and the ornamented spaces were prized. In fact, it could not have been any other way. A bare church, without an impressive apparatus is, anthropologically and devotionally, unthinkable in the Middle Ages.



9. North façade. Corbel.



10. Corbel. Bovine head, a very frequent theme in the Romanesque art of the Sousa Valley.



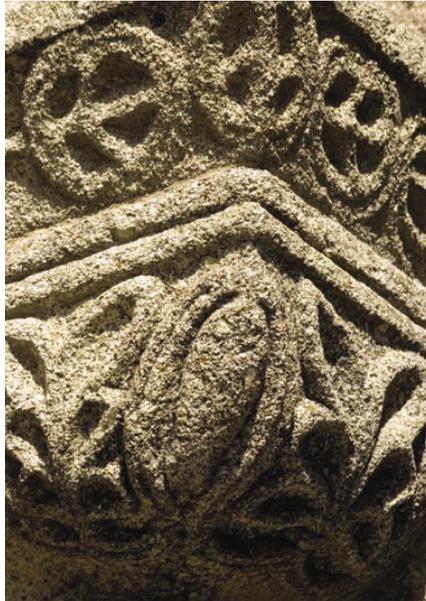
11. North façade corbels.



12. Corbel. Man carrying stone.



13. West portal. Capital and line of ashlars.



14. West portal. Capital and line of ashlars.

The crevices and main portal frames, along with the large amount of alphabetical or geometrical signs shown in the walls, on the inside and the outside, suggest that this church should be dated from the mid or late 13<sup>th</sup> century.

We can say that there are certain elements that characterize and define a new trend in the mid 13<sup>th</sup> century Romanesque of the Sousa Valley and basin of the Lower Tâmega regions, reusing the lingering Pre-Romanesque catalogue of forms. These elements span from the main portal's capitals of Saint Genes of Boelhe or of the Savior of Cabeça Santa (Penafiel), to the arcatures under impost blocks of Saint Vincent of Sousa (Felgueiras) or the botanical beveled friezes of the Savior of Paço de Sousa (Penafiel). This trend, named *nationalized Romanesque*, according to Manuel Monteiro, privileges the botanical decoration applied in capitals, friezes or even impost blocks, usually plain, beveled and clearly designed. Also characteristic is the approach to the classic palm, which is twisted and applied mostly in the decoration of capitals, as for instance, in the church of Saint Genes of Boelhe. [LR]

## 2. The church in the Modern Period

The church of Saint Genes of Boelhe was subject to an intensive restoration campaign in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As a consequence of that campaign, the bareness describing this building's overall aspect derives from the elimination of all the elements added to it along the centuries since its foundation.



From old pictures, we know that, before the restoration works, the church presented quite a different look on the outside from the one we may see today. Certain architectonic elements from the Modern Period were attached to the medieval space, contributing to the church's monumentalization, achieved through the diversity of elements dated from different periods. For instance, adjacent to the main façade's North side, the striking existence of a bell tower possibly dated from the 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. It was a robust architectonic structure of quadrangular design and pyramidal covering.

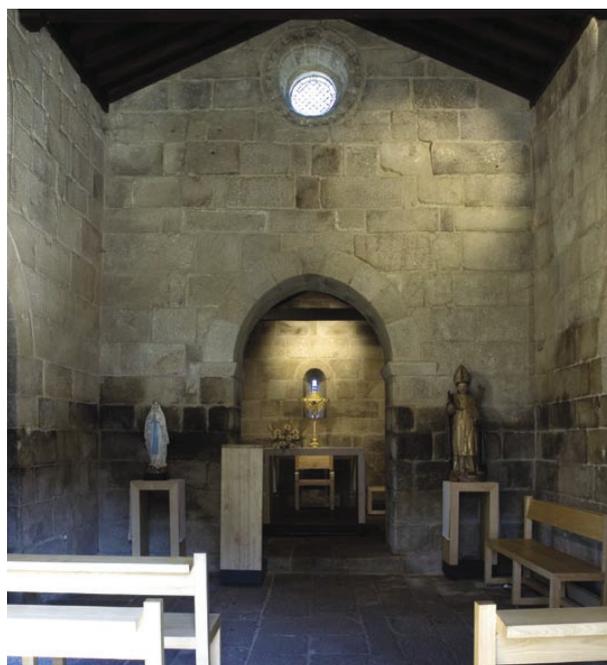
As for the church's transept, and according to maps elaborated before the reconstruction campaign, a deeper and narrower main chapel was visible, having received, with the renovation works, a configuration based in the original church foundations, which were uncovered in the meantime.

There were two collateral altars in the nave, although the maps from the DGEMN show them in the corner, and in the main chapel, the altar was slightly higher in relation to the nave, which was accessed through three steps. These altarpiece structures were executed in carved wood. Adjoined to the interior wall, corresponding to the main façade, was a wooden chancel, lost during the renovation works.

In the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century, the interior of the Church of Saint Genes featured the image of the patron saint in the main altar, accompanied by *Saint Joseph* and *Saint Anne*. The collateral altars, next to the Gospel and the Epistle, on the other hand, housed the images of *Our Lady of the Rosary* and of *Saint Blaise* "with a relic of his own".

Years later, in 1758, this church maintained the three altars, having the altarpiece structure in the main altar, by the Gospel, been doted with a *plank* representing the *Triplex Saint Anne* and, next to the Epistle,

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16. The restoration campaign, undergone in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has granted the interior of the church of Saint Genes of Boelhe with a refined solution.

an image of *Saint Anthony*. The two collateral altars still existed: the one by the Gospel still housed the image of *Our Lady of the Rosary*, and the one by the Epistle, belonging to a brotherhood, housed the images of the *God Child*, nonexistent in earlier years, and that of the miraculous *Saint Blaise*.<sup>5</sup>

Brotherhoods, as religious associations of laymen, were a phenomenon that spread throughout Modern Portugal, as in the entire Catholic Europe. This movement became so relevant that it ended up determining the regulamentary organization of the ecclesiastic institutions. In the year of 1604, pope Clement VIII sent the bases for the effective control of the church over the brotherhoods through the *Quaecumque* bull, demanding that the new associations follow their normative principles of action, as defined in Statutes<sup>6</sup>. Only after having these statutes analyzed by the ecclesiastic institution may the brotherhood be constituted. These normative principles imposed by Rome were incorporated in the regulamentary codes of the diocese's religious life: the *Synodal Constitutions*, from North to South of the country, in the 17<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, include the specific principles of the church's control over the brotherhoods. All parish churches, chapels and sanctuaries took in one or more brotherhoods. It is pertinent to question the reasons for the spreading of these institutions in the Modern Period.

Their function was to promote the divine cult, through the worship of a saint, then turned into the brotherhood's patron, justifying the laymen's associative institution. If the laymen contributed to the promotion of the Catholic cult, as compensation and in a Post-Tridentine society, they were entitled to spiritual and material benefits. The brethren were obliged to participate in the liturgical ceremonies promoted by the brotherhood, namely masses, processions, the brethren's funeral rites, where they presented themselves properly attired with the brotherhood's vestments; on the other hand, support in sickness and in death was a privilege of the brethren. We know that the Post-Tridentine society lived under the stigma of sin and death and the eternal salvation of the soul. Thus, "these functions, performed out of Christian goodwill, as acts of mercy, were almost exclusively taken care of by brotherhoods in the absence of a public authority to do so"<sup>7</sup>. The brotherhoods replaced the fragile public assistance and guaranteed the reward expressed in the salvation of the soul.

They took their place inside the church in privileged altars, according to a defined hierarchy: the most notorious, according to the socioeconomic status of their brethren, occupied the main altars, as well as the main altarpiece and collateral altars. The brethren contributed to the dignification of these private chapels and promoted the acquisition of the necessary objects for liturgical rites, namely gilded altars, imagery, goldsmithing and vestments. The artistic quality of these liturgical objects was proportional to the brotherhood's economic power and, therefore, to the sociocultural status of the laymen associated to it. In the parish level, the brotherhoods were undoubtedly the main responsible party for the transformation of the medieval-rooted sacred space.

The church of Saint Genes of Boelhe hosted, in the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century, two brotherhoods: that of the church's patron, Saint Genes, in the main chapel, whereas that of Our Lady of the Rosary and that of the Holy Name of Jesus<sup>8</sup> were placed in one of the collateral altars. [MJMR/DGS]

5 COELHO, Manuel Ferreira – "O Concelho de Penafiel nas Memórias Paroquiais de 1758". In *Penafiel – Boletim Municipal de Cultura*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Series. Nos. 4-5. Penafiel: Câmara Municipal de Penafiel, 1987-88, pp. 268-271.

6 CARDONA, Paula Cristina Machado – *A Actividade Mecenática das Confrarias nas Matrizes do Vale do Lima nos Séculos XVII a XIX*. Vol. I. Porto: Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto, 2004, pp. 32-43.

7 IDEM, *ibidem*, p. 42.

8 CARDOSO, Padre Luiz – *Diccionario Geográfico ou Notícia Histórica de todas as cidades, villas...* Vol. II. Lisboa: Regia Officina Sylviana e Academia Real. 1747-1751, pp. 196-197.

### 3. Restoration and conservation

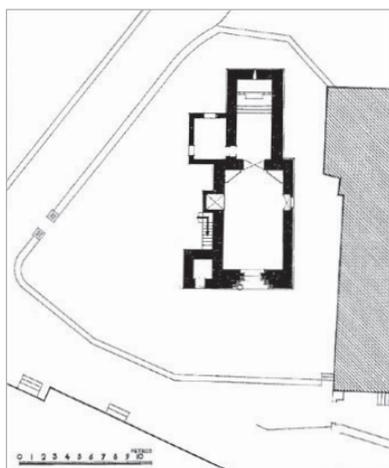
The Church of Saint Genes of Boelhe, as is today, is the result of the restoration campaign that took place between 1929 and 1948, under the initiative of the General Board of Fine-Arts and of the DGEMN.

The main bibliographic source for the study of the restoration endeavored by the DGEMN and the reconstitution of the building's memory during the Modern Period is the *Boletim da Direcção Geral dos Edifícios e Monumentos Nacionais* n.º. 62 (DGEMN's 62<sup>nd</sup> Bulletin)<sup>9</sup>. This document comprises an historic notice of the temple of Saint Genes by D. João Castro, with a chapter devoted to the pre-restoration period and another to the reconstitution works.

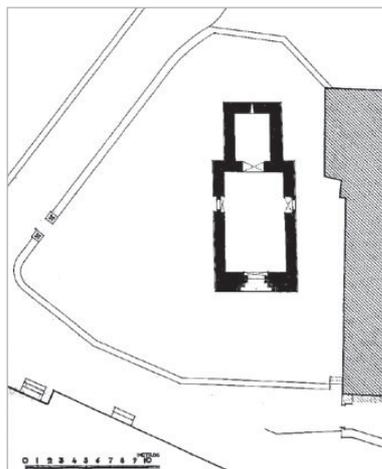
As aforementioned, the Church of Saint Genes of Boelhe saw deep modifications during the Modern Period. The main purpose of the restoration campaign, which took place during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was to restore, even if symbolically, the medieval architecture that the church would have presented in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. To materialize this purpose, the entire inner content from the Modern Period was removed. In 1905, the Ministry of Public Works elaborated an intervention project<sup>10</sup> for the temple of Saint Genes of Boelhe, which was never followed through.

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From the restoration works conducted by the DGEMN, we bring the attention to the main chapel's reduction, following the Romanesque paradigm, the reedification of the South façade, intending to correct irregularities, the demolition of the bell tower and the choir and the reedification of the belfry, in front of the church, reconstituting its primitive aspect through the elements found. Inside, we stress the unblocking



17. Map of the church before restoration.



18. Map of the church after restoration.

<sup>9</sup> *Boletim da Direcção Geral dos Edifícios e Monumentos Nacionais*. No. 62, Lisboa: DGEMN, December 1950.

<sup>10</sup> TOMÉ, Miguel – *Património e Restauro em Portugal*. Vols. I, II and III. Porto: Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto, 1998.

of the North door, the replacement of the main altar and the exclusion of the remaining modern altars. The restoration works were interrupted from 1937 to 1948, finished later on after building the main altar in stone, placing stained glass windows, replacing the covering system, fixing the parvis and transferring the cemetery's location.

In recent years, conservation and enhancement works have affected the building, within the *Route of the Romanesque of the Sousa Valley* project, which included archaeological counseling and survey, conducted in the parvis. [MB]

## Chronology

13<sup>th</sup> century – Construction of the church;

17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries – Enlargement of the main chapel;

1928 – Beginning of the restoration works;

1930/1932 – Reconstruction works: rebuilding the walls, cornice, cornice ornaments and belfry; removing all the existing mortar inside the church; disassembling the bell tower; rebuilding the primitive main chapel; lowering and tiling the church and chapel's pavement;

1935 – Reconstruction works: disassembling and transferring the main chapel's back wall to its original place, rebuilding the nave's crevices; tiling the nave and main chapel; placing steps and landings in the main portico;

1936 – Reconstruction works: placing three external doors; assembling and tending the roofs;

1950 – Restoration works: disassembling the entire South façade, repositioning all the elements in their original places; demolishing the walls that extended the transept and building its front in the place indicated by the foundations; disassembling and rebuilding the belfry; unblocking the nave's lateral door; compressing the foundation; covering a door that existed in the main chapel's North façade; restoring the triumph arch pediment, crevices; building concrete merlons and a new coating; cleaning and repairing joints, placing stained glass windows; replacing the cross from the main façade; laying tiles in the nave and main chapel; placing the stone-made main altar; laying an external pavement around the church; setting new doors; transferring the cemetery and general repairs to the parvis;

1971 – Conservation works in the covering and the electric installation;

1986 – Conservation works and roofing recovery;

2003/2004 – General conservation and enhancement of the building within the *Route of the Romanesque of the Sousa Valley* project.