





BRIDGE
OF ARCO

MARCO DE CANAVESES

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“I leave you with the intensive works on the paths, the overspending, the inclemency of the air, and the dangers of life that come along with these pilgrimages...”

In FARIA, Manuel Severim – *Notícias de Portugal*.

ON JOURNEY AND TRANSIENCE

Today, we have a perception of mobility that the Medieval or modern man, especially the peasant man, didn't have. Thanks to the technological advances and to the improvement in living conditions that preceded the Industrial Revolution, the notion of leisure journey became increasingly common over the 19th and 20th centuries, prompted by technological advances in terms of transportation and routes. The idea of the “Grand Tour”, which first arose among the aristocracy to be later conquered by the bourgeoisie and is, nowadays, virtually democratized, is far from reflecting the mindset that guided communities 500 or 800 years ago. Travelling was dangerous and expensive. Even the idea spread by recent tourist promotion, which suggests that the Middle Ages were filled with pilgrimages to Santiago de Compostela (Spain), Rome (Italy) and Jerusalem (Israel) is deeply misleading. The Medieval man would not set out on journeys that would imply a rupture with his family ties or with the safety of his home and community. Departing implied writing a will, thus assuming that it could be a one-way trip: “So, most of his mobility didn't go beyond the parish or the sound field of the church bell – the heart of the village – that could be heard – if it was a good bell – about two miles away, which would already imply the crossing of the boundaries of the local community, but very few times crossing the boundaries of the municipality” (Oliveira, 1995: 263).

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Downstream view.

Within this mindset and symbolic framework, the peasant was interested, first of all, in a smaller network of roads that connected the village to the properties within its boundaries, and then in the medium-distance paths that could lead him to the church, other villages of his parish and to the seat of the municipality. The regional routes that went beyond the municipal boundaries, which were generally associated with tolls, royal laws or the circulation of institutional agents (namely tax collectors) would already be regarded as dangerous, ill-fated spaces that conveyed bad news. Those who used them were, usually, people who had been excluded from society or were at its margins: lepers, beggars, anathematized, bandits and thieves¹.

Therefore, it is natural that, out of the small network of paths that were part of the village, the Medieval or Modern man mistrusted anything that arrived from afar with the help of those paths. As António de Oliveira refers, “indeed, beyond the frontier of his home parish, stood the land of the other, of the stranger, of the one who did not belong to the community, the one who was not a neighbour, who was not a resident” (Oliveira, 1995: 262). The idea that roads brought people and ideas closer, which is so widely spread by contemporary advertising, might seem heretical in the eyes and ears of a man from the 13th century². And, nevertheless, the Middle Ages were a time of great mobility, a period in which “the paving of muddy paths, and many others, the construction of bridges and the creation of free crossing ferries were considered welfare services” (Almeida, 1973: 47)³. However, it was a service for the elites, either for the love of God, or for less pious and more political reasons. The fact is that, in a kingdom under construction, true power was increasingly associated with the ability to quickly reach the domains or to execute orders with the promptness expected from a good fiscal and judicial system.

Maybe that’s the reason why bridges, which are elements to unite banks that are often separated by collective hatreds and rivalries and by different jurisdictions, emerge in local imagination as structures marked by individual and collective setbacks, curses and imprecations. The bridge isn’t always a community project, but rather a work “imposed” by an external authority, such as a queen or a saint – so, in the eyes of the community that received it, why wouldn’t it be considered a disadvantage instead of a benefit?

1 Quoting Luís de Valdellano, the author of *História de las instituciones españolas*, Humberto Baquero Moreno (1979: 9) notes that “the domestic trade of Leon and Castile in the Late Middle Ages was not too intense due to the poor state of the roads, the slowness of the means of transport and the acts of banditry suffered by mule riders and oxcart drivers”.

2 In this regard we should meditate on the words of Manuel Severim de Faria, who, in his eighth speech – on pilgrimage – warns against those who make pilgrimages, pointing out the evils that result from the act of travelling: “Of all that is said, one should also consider one’s own homeland, where with little work one may achieve a reputation of greatness, and be consummated in any property or art, which he may profess. And, on the other hand, with how much work, spending, and perils can one can be exposed to during pilgrimages” (Faria & Vaz, 2003: 227).

3 Without contradicting it, we would not emphasise the itinerant fervour with which the author describes the Middle Ages, “a time of invasions and pilgrimages, of trading travels and fairs, of moving courts, of officers and judges who, due to their legal and management duties, travelled around; humanity still hadn’t forgotten the tribal nomadism that was part of its own origins, as highlighted by Bloch and others” (Almeida, 1973: 47). The examples provided by Carlos Alberto Ferreira de Almeida are, at all levels, extravagant: the rich and powerful travelled, as well as those who earned their livelihoods from journeys, such as merchants, hawkers or pedlars. Most of them, stuck to bonds that allowed them to support a family, have a roof over their heads and make ends meet, remained their entire life without crossing the limits of their parish.

ROADS AND BRIDGES: RECORDS AND MEMORY

In contrast to the common idea that the use of stone in the construction of bridges was unusual in national history – thus highlighting the importance of Roman and Romanesque crossings as respectable symbols of permanence and durability – the geographer Orlando Ribeiro says: “the use of stone as a building material in support walls or road protections, in the paving of rural roads, in bridges, in the lining of wells, in livestock corrals and shelters, in buildings designed to store the products of harvests or in human dwellings, is a common trait within the Portuguese territory” (Ribeiro, 2011: 128). In fact, we just need to travel around Portugal to assess the abundance of structures that use stone as a building material⁴. It is a very common material that can be used and reused in different types of constructions, from walls to walkways. However, since the techniques and typologies of rural roads paving works remain rather unknown, they raise doubts to the researcher who intends to seriously study the chronology and evolution of roads. And because many of them crossover waterways, the origin of the bridges that supplement them remain obscure. With a tendency to focus on the Romanization period, archaeology – that could provide information about the building of these structures through its methods – limits itself to circumstantial analyses of hypothetical routes, comparing the sober written testimonies that are available with toponymy and with the few traces that were exhumed or accidentally found (such as milestones) – some of them later displaced or reused.

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One of the first Portuguese researchers who approached the matter of paths and roads in a serious and methodical way, Carlos Alberto Ferreira de Almeida, warned against the existence of frivolous analyses and the fact that historians and archaeologists were mainly focused on the Classical Period:

“Considering all old roads as being Roman, as if these were eternal, and as if after the Romans no other roads were ever built, is a terrible obsession. Considering all old bridges as being Roman, as if the Middle Ages had ignored their construction, or were economically unable to build them, is an even more common obsession” (Almeida, 1968: 16-17).

Indeed, “if roads become grounds for social changes” (Almeida, 1968: 5), they should be studied as part of society, since they are the veins and arteries of this body, the channels through which the social dynamics examined by history unfold. Through its route, its utility and its users, a path, a walkway or a shepherds’ trail is a trace of an expression of collective needs. These paths conveyed good and evil, the plague and the famine, but also the goods, the sons who had

⁴ On the uses of stone and how this material is *seen* and used by the communities, please see Horácio Marçal (1958: 697-755). It is interesting to read what the author of the *Elucidário* says about the bridges in the section “Ponte pedrinha”. “There is among us a large number of places that preserve this name, which resulted from the existence in some point in time of a stone bridge, which may still be preserved; thus being very common and often wooden bridges are, especially in lesser-flowing rivers. Here we see how João Duraens was sharp enough to include in his will the following article: «And I also command three “libras” [former Portuguese currency unit] to the Bridges of Covellas and Balsamom, when their wood is cut». Doc. of Lamego, 1316” (Viterbo, 1865: 153).

left for war, trade and processions. At crossroads, men thought they saw fantastic creatures and feared the presence of thieves and robbers, but this whole universe was sacralised by processions, shrines or chapels.

Roads are eminently public spaces, perhaps the only ones that common people may consider as free of taxes, penalties or bans. But it is also an open place, where danger lurks and crimes are often committed. Maybe that's why it brings together so many fears and desires, which are translated into disputes and recalled in an extraordinary series of narratives.

Bridges, as extensions of paths, are some of the most sanctioned buildings by memory. The existence of a bridge almost always justifies the birth of a legend, either about its construction or its ruin. One of the cases that are most significantly remembered by local and national mythologies is that of the bridge of Amarante. The bridge is inseparable from the figure of Saint Gonçalo, the exorcist thaumaturgy that was turned into a saint by the common man and served as one of the most famous evangelists of the Dominican Order⁵. His effigy, often accompanied by a bridge, is the example of the sacred builder. Other figures, such as queens, princesses or Moors, fill people's imagination and allude to external and distant powers. And rather frequently, as in neighbouring bridge of Aliviada (Marco de Canaveses), it is the devil who takes on the role of bridge builder⁶.

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North bank. Shrines.



Church of Valadares (Baião). Triumphal arch. Painting. *Saint Gonçalo*.

⁵ Gonçalo who, according to tradition was born in Arriconha, Tagilde, located in the current municipality of Vizela, was one of the most famous thaumaturges in Portugal during the Middle Ages. A marginal cult of the Catholic Church, which never considered him a saint, was adopted by the Dominicans in their "plan of pastoral renewal", as Arlindo da Cunha (2003: 81-94) called it. In fact, this article attempts to build a hagio-toponymic inventory about the figure of Gonçalo of Amarante in the Douro Litoral region. On the legend associated with the construction of the bridge of Amarante, please see Jorge Cardoso (1666: 93). The construction of the bridge of Cavês (Cabeceiras de Basto) is ascribed to another religious man from the order of Preachers, Friar Lourenço Mendes.

⁶ On the bridge of Aliviada and its similarities with other stories about the "Devil's bridges", please read Silva (1992: 81-86).

THE BRIDGE OF ARCO

The Bridge of Arco, over the river Ovelha, connects the banks of two parishes, Fohhada and Várzea de Ovelha e Aliviada, and lies at the heart of the former municipality of Gouveia. With a single and slightly pointed arch, its structure is simple: with a trestle-shaped elevation, it takes advantage of the rocky outcrops that exist on both banks, which grant it the sturdiness and verticality it still currently shows. A breakwater was added to the structure, placed against its east face, so it could withstand the impact of debris carried by strong currents. There is also an almost rectangular opening located close to the breakwater, next to the support foundation, allowing water to flow through in times of higher flows⁷. In terms of construction, we should highlight the mismatch between the ashlar placed at the base of the arch, in the pillar located on the right bank, whose position was interrupted by the installation of the centring. That caused a misalignment and disrupted the design of an arch that is more slender and graceful when viewed from the right bank.

The parish priest of Fohhada makes a reference to it, in 1758, using the following words:

“And features another great bridge at the end of this parish, called the Bridge of Arco, by presenting a very large and hideous arch and very small guards. And because the bridge is not flat [with a shallow or flat tray], since it is of stone, safe and old” (Bravo, 1758).

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The Abbot José Franco Bravo is very thorough in his description of the bridges over the river Ovelha⁸, listing eight crossings, four wooden bridges and four stone or masonry bridges. The “wood” ones were located (from upstream to downstream) in Ovelhinha, Ruimendes, Locaia and Santo André da Várzea, and the latter “served the same parish on both sides”. The stone bridges were located in Ovelha (today Aboadela, Amarante), Larim (Gondar, Amarante) (a “masonry” bridge), Arco and Aliviada.

When he mentions the passage of Locaia, the abbot writes down: “it serves this county and both its sides” (Bravo, 1758). We should, therefore, consider the Bridge of Arco as part of a series of infrastructures that complemented the network of roads designed to serve the municipal term, and only from this point of view may we consider it as a Medieval crossing, even though it is hard for us to fit it into the regional Romanesque style as easily as some authors have done it, without presenting any facts to prove that.

Due to the persistence of this trestle-shaped model and to the frequent use of round or broken arches as supporting elements, it becomes really difficult to prove that this is a Romanesque construction merely by making a simple reading of its structure. The absence of initials, though not decisive, would help dating and fitting the Bridge into a chronology marked by the regional displacement of masonry workshops that took part in the construction of various structures, from

⁷ As stated by the abbot of Fohhada when he refers the bridge of Aliviada: “it was quite necessary because of the waters that, during winter floods, always submerge the rocks, making it impossible to cross over without a bridge” (Bravo, 1758).

⁸ On this river, please read what we wrote in Bridge of Fundo de Rua (Amarante).

churches to noble houses and bridges. We weren't able to identify any such signs on the walls of the Bridge of Arco, despite the fact that it complies with the usual construction rules that were applied in Romanesque crossings. However, we say it again: the use of models, ensured by time-served stonemasons who passed them on to the following generations, does not allow us to reach any conclusions about the construction conclusive dates of this type of crossings⁹.

Furthermore, there are no references to its construction in any documents. In a neighbouring region – the massif of Montemuro – we were able to discover only two inscriptions related to the construction of bridges, both associated with a late chronological period – the 18th century – and both linked to local lords¹⁰. Again, it is important to rule out the idea of community bridges as minor crossings resulting from a lack of resources and made of wood or reused staffs, apart from the single or multiple-arch models.

It is likely that the Bridge of Arco is a late construction built during the late Middle Ages, or even during the Modern Period, when commuting and occasional medium-distance journeys related, for instance, to processions, or to the consecration of churches with a tabernacle, required better roads and, consequently, suitable crossings that would make those events possible.

We should highlight the fact that the Bridge is located in the junction of multiple road branches. One of them derived from a major Medieval road – the same that was still channelling traffic from the “couth” [a type of Portuguese administrative division] of Tabuado, Soalhães, and the hamlet of Giesta to Padrões da Teixeira in the 18th and 19th centuries. This road connected the bridge of Canaveses (Marco de Canaveses) to the road between Amarante and Mesão Frio. In a hamlet with the suggestive name of “Estalagem” [Inn], this road had a branch that connected Várzea de Ovelha to the Bridge of Arco. Nearby, this road was joined by a second branch that came from the church of Folhada (Marco de Canaveses). Once the crossing was made, the road continued towards the church of the Saviour of Monte (Amarante), where it joined another road that came from Canaveses and headed towards Amarante¹¹.

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Detail of the constructive mismatch.

⁹ On the process of creating and building a bridge during the Medieval Period, please see Bridge of Veiga (Lousada).

¹⁰ Please read what we wrote in this regard in Bridges of Panchorra (Resende) and Esmoriz (Baião).

¹¹ PORTUGAL. Depósito dos Trabalhos Geodésicos. *Mappa do distrito entre os rios Douro e Minho* [Material cartográfico/ Cartographic collection]. [Escala/Scale ca 1:193000]. Lisboa: Depósito dos Trabalhos Geodésicos, 1861. Available at [www: <URL: http://purl.pt/22844/2/>](http://purl.pt/22844/2/).



The Bridge as a token of collective memory

Within the sphere of interest and concern about heritage protection, triggered by the legislation enacted on the early days of the Third Republic, the classification of the Bridge of Arco as a Public Interest Building was required in 1977. The reasons that justified this request, according to the memory attached to the petition, highlighted the strategic location of the structure, its possible connection to neighbouring archaeological sites (even if placed outside the chronological arch)¹², traditions and legends and the “architectural perspective, which defined it as “a good specimen from the Romanesque Period”” – however, this was an unjustified assertion¹³.

The process was filed, instructed and deferred between March 21st, 1977, and February 26th, 1982, the date in which, by Decree no. 28 published in the Governmental Official Gazette no. 47, the Bridge of Arco was considered a Public Interest Building. However, this legal protection was not enough to prevent the crossing from suffering, in just a few years, a number of attacks to its structure, especially because it ensures the circulation of motor vehicles between villages located on both banks.

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Upstream view (1977). Source: IHRU archive.



Upstream view (1977). Source: IHRU archive.

¹² We often want to associate archaeological sites and heritage with different chronologies as if one part depended on the other or as if both were part of a heritage ensemble that is usually analyzed according to clearly anachronistic concepts and administrative divisions.

¹³ Processo SIPA.TXT.01493297 a SIPA.TXT.01493262. According to the author of the memoir, the architect Fernando de Azevedo, “this was the bridge that ensured the road connection from Soalhães and Tabuado to Amarante in the Medieval Period, using the roads that passed through the hamlets of Burgo, Aldegão and Castelo, on the left bank of the Ovelha river, and Arco, Pedra da Légua, São Salvador do Monte, on its right bank”.

In an official letter from February 4th, 1986, we learn that a few stones had been knocked down from the parapet and that part of the pavement had collapsed due to the circulation of motor vehicles. The Municipality of Marco de Canaveses – though without prior consultation with the DGEMN – Direção-Geral dos Edifícios e Monumentos Nacionais [General Directorate for Buildings and National Monuments] – was responsible for the project related to a motor vehicle crossing; the city council paved the Bridge with concrete, which would be covered by another layer of pavement “made of granite slabs taken from the demolition of a few old houses located on a nearby site”¹⁴. The city council justified this illegal act alleging that the work had been a preventive measure and claiming some sort of misunderstanding between municipal divisions. There was a promise to comply with the suggestions provided by architect Fernando de Azeredo, the instructor and supervisor of the classification process of the Bridge of Arco.

Despite the legal and officious zeal, the Bridge whose architectural and historical value at the local and regional levels seems indisputable, is still a passageway for motor vehicles. Because it is located far away from the villages, in addition to being subject to the voracious deterioration caused by the natural elements, its structure has already suffered damages caused by human actions. [NR]



Downstream view.



Detail of the drainage channel.

¹⁴ Letter of February 4th, 1986, and signed by Fernando de Azeredo. The changes seem to have been conveyed through a complaint from a local political party.

CHRONOLOGY

1758: the abbot of Fohada mentions and describes the Bridge of Arco;

1982: by Decree no. 28 from February 4th, the Bridge of Arco was considered as a Public Interest Building;

1986: because it was a car passageway, the Bridge suffers a few setbacks, related to its parapet and paving;

2010: the Bridge of Arco becomes part of the Route of the Romanesque.

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