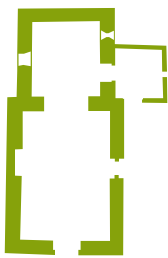




6.

CHURCH
OF SAINT
MAMMES
OF VILA
VERDE



Lugar de São Mamede
Vila Verde
Felgueiras



41° 18' 17.190" N
8° 10' 55.612" W



+351 918 116 488



x



Saint Mammes
17th August



Public Interest
Monument, 2012



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Visiting the Church of Saint Mammes of Vila Verde, bearing in mind the role of cattle protector played by its patron saint and observing its surrounding landscape, is an excellent way to understand the legacy of the historical changes of population and economic conditions that occurred in this mountainous place, which had been previously used for herding.

The Church is located on a site overlooking a majestic landscape, dominating the large Vila Verde valley and showing how, in the Romanesque period, the location of churches followed the habitat of populations, either overlooking the fields, in flatter areas, or over the slopes, in more mountainous areas.

The earliest documentary reference to the Church of Vila Verde is found in the royal inquiries of 1220, in which it was already called “Sancto Mamete of Villa Verde”. At the time it integrated the patronage of the Monastery of Pombeiro (Felgueiras) (p. 30). Although these references prove that the parish and the Church already existed in the early 13th century, the existing temple is the result of a much later renovation.

The Church of Vila Verde features a single nave and a



rectangular chancel, which is narrower and lower than the nave, according to the scheme most commonly used in Portuguese medieval parish architecture.

It is a Romanesque building, i.e., it is based on the typical building and decorative techniques, plan and elevations of the Romanesque architecture, despite belonging to a period when Gothic architecture was already dominating the landscape. It is an excellent example of regional and peripheral architecture.

In fact, it is a construction from the 14th century - that replaced the building documented in the first quarter of the 13th century - as suggested by several elements, especially the composition of the portals and the predominant use of plain modillions.

The traces of 16th-century mural paintings, which are currently very residual, are the result of a commission made by the abbots of the Monastery of Pombeiro. They show that the chancel's lateral walls were painted with a decorative pattern that included bo-

tanic and geometric pattern, as if it were a tapestry. On the back wall, painted as if they were part of an altarpiece, we may also identify the figures of two saints holding croziers; everything suggests that they are *Saint Benedict* and *Saint Bernard*, given that one is wearing a black habit and the other is wearing a white habit.

The decorative patterns used and the formal characteristics of figures show similarities with the programme of other specimens from 1510, like the one of the Monastery of Freixo de Baixo (Amarante) (p. 224) and of the Church of Saint Nicholas (Marco de Canaveses) (p. 179). Also on the chancel's wall, the presence of a coat of arms belonging to the Melos strengthens the connection between the commission of this program and the commendatory abbots of Pombeiro, who were also responsible for several mural paintings campaigns carried out in other churches belonging to their patronage. The paintings on the Church's nave probably date back to the same period.





MURAL PAINTING

The mural painting of Vila Verde show how, sometimes, churches that were not architecturally relevant received pictorial programmes conceived by high-quality artists. This example also shows how the commissioner can play a decisive role in the choice of the artists and pictorial programs, and how erroneous some analyses can be when they consider that the artistic programmes in these rural churches correspond to peripheral and atavistic works.

It is curious to notice that the Church of Vila Verde is both a late architectural solution that was still repeating the Romanesque shapes in the 14th century and an example of modernity when it comes to its mural paintings.

There was another mural painting campaign, probably carried out between 1530 and 1550, which covered the one we have mentioned above. The very faint traces of this painting were subject to a study based on photographic documentation from the 1920's or 30's of the 20th century, which allowed identifying the representation of *Saint Mammes*, the

Church's patron saint. Close to the saint's feet there were depictions of two cheeses, a mug and a sheep, which were clear allusions to the legend that tells the story of his life, as well as his role as the protector of cattle and milk.

This campaign may be compared to another one found in the church of Vila Marim (Vila Real), dated by an inscription from



1549, to the one of the Monastery of Saint Mary of Pombeiro, which presents the same decorative motif on the moulding of a walled-up door that once allowed accessing the cloister, and to one of the programmes of the church of Arnoso (Famalicão), among other examples that belonged to the patronage of the Monastery of Pombeiro and were also commissioned by the commendatory abbots, in this case by António de Melo who, according to the documentary references, was the abbot of Pombeiro between 1526 and 1556.

This pictorial campaign may be ascribed to the painter Arnaus, who signs frescoes of the church of Midões (Barcelos), dated by an inscription from 1535. Arnaus is also the author of the mural painting of the Chapel of Vale (Paredes) (p. 87).

The Church of Vila Verde was progressively abandoned from the second half of the 19th century onwards, following the construction of the new parish church of Vila Verde, located in the village centre. The Church was subject to requalification works between 2005 and 2006, within the scope of the Route of the Romanesque.

SAINT MAMMES

The patron saint, Saint Mammes, is a very ancient devotion in Portugal. In the 10th century, the invocation of this saint was already rather common in parish churches and chapels located on hills, close to the castles built during the Reconquest; this shows the economic interest given to herding and cattle breeding at the time.

According to the legend, Saint Mammes was a shepherd and martyr from Caesarea, Cappadocia (Turkey). He built an oratory in the desert where he preached the Gospel to wild animals. With the milk from the animals he made cheeses, and, following the instructions given by an angel, he would give them to the poor. Pursued by the emperor Aurelian, Mammes was sentenced to be devoured by a leopard, a lion and a bear that, refusing to attack him, knelt at his feet. After having suffered terrible tortures, his relics were taken from Cappadocia to Italy, Germany and France.

Because of his name and due to the fact of being fed by the milk of wild animals, Saint Mammes became the patron saint of wet nurses. The tortures he was subject to also turned him into a protector against bowel diseases. However, its greatest popularity is associated with his reputation as a protector of cattle.

