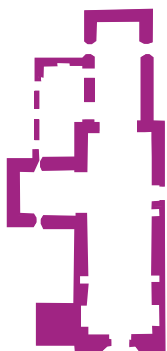




42.

CHURCH OF SAINT MARTIN OF SOALHÃES



Avenida da Igreja
Soalhães
Marco de Canaveses



41° 9' 37.94" N
8° 5' 48.39" W



+351 918 116 488



Saturday, 5.30 pm
Sunday, 9.15 am



Saint Martin
11th November



National Monument
1977



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The existing Church of Soalhães was probably founded over a basilica in which relics of Saint Martin would have been kept in the late 9th century. Soalhães was still being referred to as a monastery in the 12th century. In any case, this Church emerges in a territory that was particularly coveted by the medieval nobility, and the importance of the area led its lords to adopt its toponym as their surname, like in the case of João Martins, called “de Soalhães”, the bishop of Lisbon and archbishop of Braga.

Despite the historical weight associated with the Church of Soalhães, especially during the centuries of the so-called High Middle Ages (12th to 14th centuries), there are only a few traces that tell us of such period because the Church was deeply transformed in the 18th century. So, from the medieval period there are three (visible) remaining elements, which we believe were only preserved as proofs of an antiquity that was willingly reasserted in this monument.

The main portal, which already features a proto-Gothic arrangement, probably dates back to the 16th century. It has no tympanum and its archivolts are still resting



THE LORDS OF SOALHÃES

From then onwards, the descendants of the 14th-century prelate João Martins de Soalhães were always connected to the fates of the area. Among the several rights granted to the bishop - which he bonded to a majorat in 1304 (whose management was first assumed by his son, Vasco Anes de Soalhães and then by his descendants) - was the patronage of the tempting abbey. The succession within the majorat seems to have been a peaceful issue until the arrival of Joana de Vasconcelos Menezes e Noronha (1625-1653), who married the 7th viscount of Vila Nova de Cerveira.

It is possible that her descendants, Tomás Teles da Silva and Maria Xavier de Lima, the 12th viscountess of Vila Nova de Cerveira, were the ones responsible for the major Baroque campaign carried out in the Church, probably in 1733. The uniformity between the decorative grammar of the nave and of the chapel of Saint Michael could then be explained by the sponsoring activity of the lords of the patronage, although the nave was usually under the parishioners' responsibility.

on columns whose capitals, despite being worn away, show sculpted botanic and animal motifs (a bird with open wings). However, their naturalism is obvious. This chronology is hardly surprising if we take into account that it was only in 1304 that João Martins de Soalhães received the abbey and bounded it to a majorat. The tomb sheltered by an arcosolium found in the chancel, on the Epistle side, fits into this chronology. The fact that this tomb is located in the chancel immediately suggests us that this would be someone from the high nobility, surely related

to the Church's patronage. Although there is no knowledge about who is actually buried in it, because the grave does not have an inscription, the truth is that someone tried to keep a memory of the deceased through a series of eight coats of arms. The plain shields, framed by micro-architectures with a clear Gothic flavour, still show traces of polychromy. Finally, inside the window that surmounts the main portal and illuminates the nave's interior - whose design is already modern -, we also see a frame dotted by pearls of an unquestionable medieval flavour, a





motif widely spread across the surrounding region. Their presence confirms that, at least, the structure of the Romanesque façade was kept during the works carried out in the 18th century.

All the other elements that shape this Church already tell us of a different age, a different liturgy, a different spirit, different aesthetics and, finally, a different taste. Outside, the tower adjoined to the north side of the main façade, with its bulb-shaped top, the curvilinear oculus that surmounts the main portal, the large windows that, in the main (and lateral) façade, flood the Church's interior with light, the classicist pinnacles that top the angles of the Church's different volumes, tell us of the same Baroque-flavoured language, despite its regional nature and a certain restraint which is clearly associated with it. Opposite to what would be expected, the first impression the visitor has, while entering the main parish Church of Soalhães, is that of a profusion of colours and materials. Here, we may say that the Baroque style, which the bulk of this decorative grammar belongs to, did justice to the axiomatic expression "horror vacui". Nothing was left without ornament. The gilded woodwork and the tile panels took care of that.

Regarding the body, these interventions may have been carried out in 1733, the year carved on a medallion placed in the middle of the high choir's balustrade. From this space it is possible to obtain an overall view of the investment made in the decoration of the nave's body – a somewhat eccentric investment when compared to other main parish churches, particularly if we take into account the fact that the highest contribution for works carried out in this space was given by the parishioners. However, the eccentricity of the work, the value or the ornamentation and the profusion of materials, techniques and even tastes may be justified by the Church's status.

On the nave's body there are large tile panels which are typical from the 18th century. The scenes where the dramatization of the gestures created by the depicted figures is very obvious were drawn using cobalt blue, which was a much appreciated colour in that period. The scenes of *Moses and the brazen serpent* and of the *Samaritan woman and Jesus talking to His disciples* (on the left), as well as the one of *Moses getting water from the source in the desert* (on the right) were framed by monumental Baroque casings that are true glossaries of the Baroque vocabulary. In the chapel dedicated to Saint Michael there are also tile panels, which include the depiction of Michael, the archangel, as a psychopomp, acting simultaneously as a judge and a guide of souls.

In the Church's nave, above the tile lining, we find a level of half-relief polychrome panels that include *chinoiserie*, which are surrounded by decorated woodworks with botanic motifs and human figures. These panels, made by various hands, depict scenes from the Passion of Christ: *Vision in the Garden*, *Arrest and Mocking of the Saviour* (on the left), *Crowning with Thorns and Torture*, and *Ecce*



Homo (on the right); the composition ends with a Calvary displayed over the chancel arch, facing the nave.

There is a noticeable catechetical and spiritual homogeneity, drawing our attention to the sacrificial path and the charitable world; the depiction of Our Lady of Sorrows and the panels associated with Saint Martin's life stand out from this ensemble. The woodwork ornaments create a unity that includes the lining of the chancel arch (surmounted by a Crucifixion), the parapets of the pulpits and two collateral altars, one of Saint Peter and the other of Saint Paul. Also on the right side, there is an altarpiece that fits into the transition from the National Style [1690-1725] to the Johannine style.

Compared with the nave, the chancel looks particularly deprived of ornaments, thus contradicting the idea that this nobler space, under the patron's or the ab-

bot's responsibility, should have received higher investments. The only sign of the patron's prestige is the tomb, which probably received the body of one of the first heirs of the majorat or of his descendants between the 13th and the 14th centuries. At first sight, the Neoclassical main altarpiece contrasts with the rest of the Church, where the celebration of colour is more than obvious. Adopting a language inspired by classical architecture, the predominance of the bright white with elegant golden notes houses the images of Saint Martin of Tours and Saint Lucy. Both the nave and the chancel feature woodwork decorations on the ceiling. On the central panels of the nave we identify hagiographic depictions while the rest of the panels show botanic decorations. In the chancel, the chromatic and design sobriety of the coffered ceiling are not comparable to the work covering the nave.



DON'T MISS OUT

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- 8.8 km: Almofrela – “Aldeia de Portugal” (p. 272)
- 10 km: Megalithic Set of the Aboboreira Mountain (p. 272)