

An aerial photograph of a village in Alentejo, Portugal. In the upper left, a small white church with a bell tower sits atop a hill. Below it, a dirt road leads down to a cluster of houses. The foreground is dominated by the dense, tiled roofs of the village, showing a mix of traditional and more modern buildings. The background shows rolling hills under a clear sky.

RELIGIOUS ROUTES IN ALCARIA RUIVA AND SÃO JOÃO DOS CALDEIREIROS

**BETWEEN THE FLAT
AND HIGHLANDS**

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Daily rituals have seen significant changes in the past decades. The ones remaining are mainly those connected to festivities, identity aspects or those related to holy and supernatural aspects. Many of those are indeed interconnected, and it is their heritage value that keeps them alive, as they must compete against «global» events spread by mass media.

Religious and popular festivities today have a bigger leisure component than a spiritual one but keep guiding the yearly rhythms of rural communities. A The village's festivity and its much-expected dancing party are still moments of sociability where unconscious passage rituals occur.

These expressions of popular spirituality, often alien to the Catholic Church's purposes, are under threat of extinction. Ancient devotions to «obscure» healer saints are replaced by the canonical cult of Our Lady of Fátima. Also threatened, and without records or material forms to document them for future memory, are the pagan rituals passed on from generation to generation, often by women. Rites on the edge of the «acceptable» sphere of ecclesiastic procedures like blessings to protect home and family, praying for the sick and processions to ask for rain are rituals of pagan origin and are currently seen as superstitions, signs of underdevelopment and lack of culture and formal education.

The artistic value of the materiality associated with these rituals is, beyond doubt, the most studied and well-maintained aspect of the rituals and have seen their valorisation associated with tourism promotion. In that sense, the project «Os Caminhos da Religiosidade» (ALT20-06-5141-FEDER-001124), promoted by Campo Arqueológico de Mértola and financed by the European Regional Development Fund ERDF I Alentejo 2020, intends to display local rituals as an identity and differential trait of the region.

The project's primary goal is to contribute to the valorisation and dissemination of local cultural heritage and to look for its safeguard. The project includes the promotion of environmental values and the relationship with nature, as almost all sacred places of popular spirituality share outstanding landmark positions with important landscape values. In this way, beyond disseminating canonical artistic expressions, the project investigates the popular local manifestations, promoted rural chapels, and recovers legends and traditions. Some of the legends refer to the construction of the shrines spread along the highest hilltops, creating a symbolic protective ring around Mértola's territory.

THE FLAT AND HIGHLANDS

The creation of parishes in the wide district of Mértola was an extremely slow and discontinuous process, which was only finished in the early modern era. The surrounding parishes of Our Lady of Remedy (which later became Our Lady of Conception) in Alcaria Ruiva and São João Batista dos Marques (which later became Caldeireiros) – the former was created in the late 13th century while the latter was created in the early 16th century – are a paradigmatic example of this historical reality. The former was created early on propelled by the Christian Reconquest and established in the relative wealth of a territory under an old village. The latter was created later on due to weaker resources, low population density, and dispersion of the people, which influenced the feeling of belonging and spiritual communion among the parishioners. On the other hand, these are two model cases of the poor condition of rural main churches, which have been submitted for centuries to cyclical remodelling and reconstruction works as well as the little presence of secondary temples, hermitages, and chapels making the places in the popular religious imaginary more sacred.

The parish of São João dos Caldeireiros never had these characteristic temples before or after its formation and that of Alcaria Ruiva, in almost eight centuries of existence, only saw the medieval hermitage of Saint Lawrence being

raised near the Terges e Cobres stream and the 17th-century Chapel of Our Lady of Conception on a hill by the village. Both were the scene for devotional demonstrations in the 17th and 18th centuries, which were associated with thaumaturgy and shaped the religious history of the parish. In the case of the Chapel of Our Lady of Conception, we know that pilgrimages took place there throughout those centuries and churchgoers attended it all-year-round, particularly on Saturday night, looking for the ‘infinite wonders’ the Virgin provided.

The notoriety acquired by the small temple and the fame of Our Lady of Conception as a miracle worker had a deep impact on the 18th-century process of recreating the parish identity of Alcaria Ruiva, which was unusual in the context of the time and was embodied in the chapel’s upgrade to main church (it was abandoned and in ruins) leading to the end of a worship to Our Lady of Remedy as the patron saint.

The Saint Lawrence Chapel fulfilled other goals throughout its long historical trajectory. It was for centuries the temple where residents of small settlements in the ‘far reaches’ of the parish gained spiritual fulfilment, buried their dead, and tightened community bonds. As with many others, it was also subjected to successive remodelling, namely in the mid-17th century when it acquired the formal structure and composi-

tion that made it to our days (the building is in ruins). It also experienced different restorations of its altars and the worshipped images therein, which followed the evolution of religious sentiment. One stood out more than the others, which was Our Lady of the Head, whose prayer translates her sense of purpose (healing headaches and other head illnesses). A miracle worker and the object of pilgrimages highly attended by worshippers from different places, she became the temple’s patron saint together with Saint Lawrence in the 17th century.

These demonstrations of popular piety have been in the historical memory of the parish of Alcaria Ruiva for a long time. On the other hand, the vicissitudes and events that defined the evolution of its main church and change in patron saint were forgotten. The temple is now different from what it was in the past, since it has been deprived of its old altars and part of the images (the images that are no longer being worshipped are in Mértola’s Museum of Sacred Art). Among the worshipped images that are no longer in use, the following stand out: Our Lady of Remedy, the original patron saint of the parish, Saint Sebastian, Saint Anthony, Saint Benedict, Saint Louis, and Saint Lucy, which characterised the local religious experience for many centuries. Currently, the faith of parishioners is centred on Our Lady of Fatima, the Sacred Heart, and Our Lady of Conception.

Although the main church of São João dos Caldeireiros did not stay on the sidelines of the custom secularism and the evolution of religious sentiment over the past centuries, it maintains a substantial part of the universe of devotion of the 16th to 18th centuries and some old traditions like the festivities honouring the patron saint (June 24th) from the procession to the community dinner. Albeit they are far from the aura and devotional intensity of the past, the images of the patron saint, Our Lady of Help, Saint Lucy, Saint Amarus, Saint Sebastian, Saint Anthony, Saint Peter, and Saint Louis appear among others to the worshippers in different altars forming due to their diversity and time frame a substantial display of local religiousness and the work of popular saints.

PARISH OF OUR LADY OF CONCEPTION OF ALCARIA RUIVA

PARISH CHURCH

The parish church is located on a hill west of the village overlooking the urban area that extends along the adjoining hedges.

- < **Patron Saint** > Our Lady of Conception (18th-21st centuries)
- < **Original Patron Saint** > Our Lady of Remedy (13th-18th centuries)
- < **Original Location** > The urban area of the village of Alcaria Ruiva
- < **Current Location** > Alcaria Ruiva, sub-district of Mértola
- < **GPS** > 37.7085275057056, -7.784240711689064
- < **Timeline** > First temple (Parish Church of Our Lady of Remedy): Origin: 13th century | Reconstruction – remodelling: 14th, 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries | Abandoned – approximately 1740 | Second temple (Hermitage – Parish Church of Our Lady of Conception): Origin: 17th century | Reconstruction – remodelling: 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries.



1. General views of the church and village.





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- 2. General view of the church.
- 3. General view of the church interior.
- 4. Our Lady of Conception.
- 5. Baptismal font.

| TEMPLE IN RUINS |

HERMITAGE OF SAINT LAWRENCE | OUR LADY OF THE HEAD

The hermitage is located in a deserted place in the northern end of Mértola, on a hill overlooking the Terges stream. It is in a private property.

< **Patron Saint** > Saint Lawrence (19th-21st centuries) and Our Lady of the Head (17th-21st centuries)

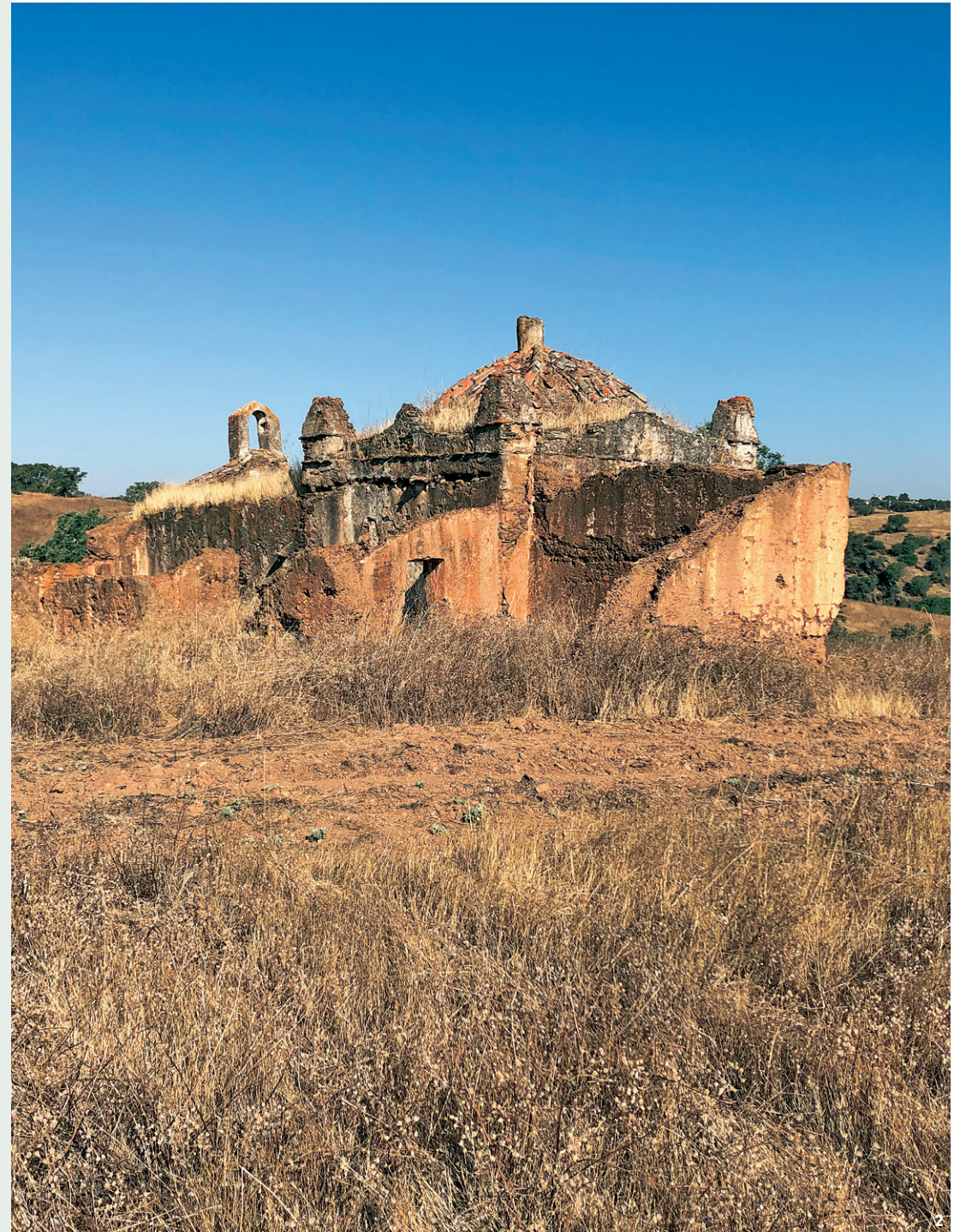
< **Location** > Alcaria Ruiva, sub-district of Mértola

< **GPS** > 37.847192512459316, -7.79118820718361

< **Timeline** > Origin: 14th-15th century | Reconstruction – remodelling: 17th century | Abandoned: 20th century.



1. Main altar.
2. General view of the chapel.



PARISH OF SÃO JOÃO DOS CALDEIREIROS

PARISH CHURCH

The parish church stands near the village on a hill overlooking the urban area and the old path through the hills connecting Mértola to Almodôvar along which some of the settlements incorporating the parish district of São João were structured.

< **Patron Saint** > Saint John the Baptist

< **Location** > São João dos Caldeireiros, sub-district of Mértola

< **GPS** > 37.616070037531266, -7.788768982441765

< **Toponymy** > Village of Marques (14th-16th centuries) | Village of São João dos Marques (16th-18th centuries) | Village of São João dos Caldeireiros (18th-21st centuries)

< **Timeline** > Origin: Approximately 1515-1530 | Reconstruction – remodelling: 17th, 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries.



1. General views of the church and village.





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- 2. Main altar.
- 3. General view of the church interior.
- 4. General view of the church.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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Our Lady of Conception of Alcacia Ruiva.



Our Lady of Remedy of Alcacia Ruiva.



Saint Lawrence.



Our Lady of the Head.





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Partnership:



Follow the routes on <https://www.camertola.pt/info/projetos>

