

RELIGIOUS ROUTES ON THE LEFT MARGIN OF THE RIVER GUADIANA

ON THE OTHER SIDE
OF THE RIVER,
THE LAND OF CAMBAS



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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-001141), promoted by Campo Arqueológico de Mértola and financed by the European Regional Development Fund ERDF | 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.



ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE RIVER, THE LAND OF CAMBAS

The delimitation of the wide district of Mértola became associated with the political and military vicissitudes of the kingdom between when the town was conquered from the Moors in 1238 and the Treaty of Alcañices in 1297, which established the borders with Castile. In regard to the part on the other side of the Guadiana, its limits oscillated between the wide region donated to the Order of Santiago, in 1239, which extended from the surroundings of Serpa to Alfajar de la Peña and Ayamonte, and the district, which was later on ratified, whose outlines were mostly established along the long waterline of River Chanza, a natural mark that delimited Portugal and Castile in the east, and on the Limas stream, hill contours against Serpa in the north.

In this extended domain known as Cambas, translated from escambo (exchange) with the jurisdiction to which it was subjected in the time of King Denis, between the crown and the knights of Santiago, two parishes were organised, Santana de Cambas and Corte do Pinto, and part of the parish of Mértola, which incorporated a long line on the margin of the Guadiana between the town's surroundings and the district limits to the north.

The scarce and small settlement during medieval times, which was

developed through internal colonisations clearly evidenced by anthroponymy, as we can see from the villages of Corte do Pinto and Vasco Dias (early name given to the village of Santana de Cambas), led to the initial solution of building main churches away from urban centres relatively equidistant from the settlements that made up the parishes. This reality started being questioned in the 16th century with the economic and demographic growth of some of the clusters to the point that they became the centre stage of the parish and the temple had to be moved there. This is what happened with the villages of Vasco Dias and Corte do Pinto, which fostered the construction of new, larger, and richer main churches in their urban areas with the old churches – which had established the identity of the parish and spiritual and religious links between the parishioners – gradually losing importance. This ended up causing other ruptures in the medieval past like a change in the patron saints with the temple of Corte do Pinto no longer being dedicated to Saint Simon and Saint Jude but rather to the worship of Our Lady of Conception as well as the old medieval church of Saint Anne converting to the worship of Saint Benedict. The new main church built in honour of

the 'Holy Mother' led, in turn, to the old village name of Vasco Dias being abandoned, which recalled its settler, and a new and modern identity emerging, Santana de Cambas, which combined the name of the old patron saint with the parish where they recognised themselves.

In addition to the main medieval churches, which were turned into hermitages, and the new 16th-century parish churches, not many temples were created in the wide territory on the other side of the Guadiana, which were the chapels of Saint Lucy (Corte do Pinto), Saint Dominic (Santana de Cambas), and St Brissos/Our Lady of Refuge and the Holy Saviour (Mértola). Except for the latter, which served the settlement of Corte de Sines and had intended to become a parish in the 16th century, the other chapels, built in deserted places, were the object of festive pilgrimages and the devotion of worshippers up to the 18th and 19th centuries: they sought Saint Lucy for protection against eye disorders, Saint Dominic, after a holy bath in a reservoir nearby they would pray to be healed from scabies, and St Brissos and Our Lady of Refuge, after climbing up the steep hill where the temple is found, which divides the surrounding landscape, they would pray for rain and other favours from Nature.

All of them appeared within the framework of medieval piety, but the hermitage dedicated to St Brissos appears to have the oldest historical and sacred marks being associated with a temple that dates back to the 7th century, and in regard to popular religion, it is associated with a legend told by chroniclers in the 16th and 17th centuries about this martyr, who was allegedly born in Mértola, in the hands of the ungodly Romans at the dawn of the 4th century. According to tradition, which they also relayed, St Brissos – 'a man with commendable virtues', – was the brother of Saint Barão and Saint Barbara, who were also from Mértola, a threesome of saints who would provide the basis for the legend of the 'three martyr siblings', which is also incorporated on a wider scale in the legend 'of the seven siblings' that refers to the sacredness of hilltops between Santa Bárbara de Padrões (Castro Verde) and São Gens (Serpa), which are gazing at each other.

Within the framework of worshipped figures that emerged and established themselves in the temples (altars and religious images) the devotion to saints is clearly higher than the Marian or Christ devotions (mostly depicted in the images of Our Lady of the Rosary and Baby Jesus). If we witnessed – due to the

catechism fostered by the church in the 16th century – an attempt at Marian worshipping (the hermitage being dedicated to St Brissos and Our Lady of Refuge and the new main church of Corte do Pinto being dedicated to Our Lady of Conception are an example of this), the parishioners tended to focus their daily devotion on saints given high powers of intercession by popular religion, such as Saint Sebastian (evils of the plague); Saint Peter (good harvest);

Saint Michael and Saint Louis (cattle protection); Saint Amarus (leg diseases); and Saint Anthony (miracle worker par excellence), etc.

With a progressive custom secularism and the easing of religious practices, the devotional marks in this important part of Mértola are currently mostly present in the festivals for the patron saints like those dedicated to Saint Anne, in Cambas, and Our Lady of Conception, in Corte do Pinto, both in August.

PARISH OF NOSSA SENHORA DA CONCEIÇÃO DE CORTE DO PINTO

PARISH CHURCH OF CORTE PINTO

The church stands in the centre of the village, on a hill. It was clearly the structuring element of the settlement's urban fabric with roads leading to the temple and its square.

< **Patron Sant** > Our Lady of Conception

< **Original Patron Sant** > Simon and Saint Jude

< **Location** > Largo D. José do Patrocínio, Bispo de Beja, Corte do Pinto, sub-district of Mértola

< **GPS** > 37.70306543790452, -7.481351471968558

< **Timeline** > Origin: 1550s | Remodelling: 18th-19th-20th centuries.



1

1. General view of the church.
2. Main facade of the Parish Church.



2



3. e 5. General view of the church interior.

4. Secondary altar.

6. Santa Luzia.

7. Main altar.

PARISH OF SANTANA DE CAMBAS

PARISH CHURCH OF SAINT ANNE

The church is located in the village formerly known as Vasco Dias, which is currently the village of Santana de Cambas, in the peripheral part to the west. Its location is also associated with the road network of the surrounding territory and the routes leading to different places of the parish when it was established in the village of Vasco Dias, future Santana de Cambas.

< **Patron Sant** > Saint Anne

< **Location** > *Medieval location* (14th-century origin): Deserted place in Cambas. *Modern location* (16th-century origin): Rua Tomás António Revez, Santana de Cambas, sub-district of Mértola

< **GPS** > 37.62405998771115, -7.526870930581644

< **Timeline** > Origin: 1565-1566 | Additions – remodelling: 17th-18th-19th-20th centuries.

General view of the church's exterior.





1. General view of main altar.

2. e 4. General view of the interior of the church.

3. Secondary altar.

5. Main facade of the Parish Church.

SAINT DOMINIC CHURCH

The original temple to worships Saint Dominic was sacrificed when the mine expanded and was built a new one.

< **Patron Sant** > Saint Domingo

< **Location** > *Original location: São Domingos Hill between the Cambas and Chanza streams. Current location: Rua Catarina Eufémia, Mina de São Domingos, sub-district of Mértola*

< **GPS** > 37.67338655439394, -7.499136973141307

< **Timeline** > Origin: 14th-15th century | Disappeared: 19th century (third quarter) | Re-founded: 19th century.



1

1. Old photograph of Mina de São Domingos with the church that was destroyed.
2. General view of the church.



2



CHAPEL OF OUR LADY OF REFUGE

The chapel is located on a prominent hill in the suburbs of Mértola near which there are traces of human occupation dating back to the 5th to 9th centuries and fragments have been found belonging to an altar stand from a 7th-century temple, which should correspond to when this place was originally turned sacred. The formal composition and volumetry of this building dates back to 1989.

1

< Original Patron Sant > St Brissos

< Location > Cerro de Nossa Senhora do Amparo, sub-district of Mértola

< GPS > 37.64137602073235, -7.588700978548295

< Timeline > Sacredness of the place: 7th century (?) | Origin: 14th/15th century | Abandoned: 1910s | Re-founded: 1989

< Popular piety> Novena praying for rain during long droughts.

1. S. Brissos (?) (Museu Arte Sacra Mértola).

2. General view of the chapel's exterior.



2

CHAPEL OF THE HOLY SAVIOUR

The chapel is located on a hill on the eastern strip of the settlement and was built by initiative of a farmer with the participation of the people, in 1935, as inscribed on the façade.

< Original Patron Sant > Saint Salvador

< Location > Village of Corte de Sines, sub-district of Mértola

< GPS > 37.71120614062922, -7.608040789157953

< Timeline > Origin: 14th century? | Reconstruction: mid-16th century

| Re-founded: 1935.

General view
of the chapel.



FOR MORE INFORMATION

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Hermitage of Saint Benedict (temple in ruins, original parish church of Cambas).



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