# The rock-cut tombs necropolis of Moreira de Rei (Trancoso, Guarda): general considerations of an ongoing intervention

A necrópole rupestre de Moreira de Rei (Trancoso, Guarda): considerações gerais de uma intervenção em curso



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Abstract Documented since 960, Moreira de Rei was one of the most prominent places in the region during medieval times. As the foremost heritage site of the early medieval period, the village preserves an extensive necropolis of rock-cut tombs, of which around 150 tombs were known to be scattered over an area coinciding with the churchyard of the Romanesque church of Saint Marinha and its neighbouring buildings. As part of the regualification and enhancement project for this churchyard, promoted by the local authority, the necropolis has been the subject of archaeological excavations focusing on the entire public space surrounding the church since 2018. The work carried out to date has revealed an impressive burial area, from

Resumo Documentada desde 960, Moreira de Rei foi um dos lugares mais destacados da região durante a Idade Média. Como principal testemunho de época altomedieval, a povoação conserva uma extensa necrópole de sepulturas escavadas na rocha, de que se conheciam cerca de 150 túmulos dispersos por uma área hoje coincidente com o largo da igreja românica de Santa Marinha e construções confinantes. No âmbito do projecto de requalificação e valorização deste largo, promovido pela autarquia local, a necrópole tem sido, desde 2018, objecto de escavações que incidem sobre todo o espaço público envolvente à igreja. Os trabalhos realizados revelaram um impressionante espaço funerário, do qual se identificaram cerca de 750 sepulturas,

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which around 750 tombs have been identified, primarily excavated in the granite rocky substrate. Although excavations are still ongoing, some considerations and general data are presented about the context and characteristics of this early medieval necropolis, later converted into a parish cemetery, and about the paleobiological characteristics of the exhumed individuals.

**Keywords**: Rock-cut tomb necropolis; parish cemetery; Early Medieval Period; funerary anthropology; paleoanthropology.

maioritariamente escavadas no substrato rochoso granítico. Embora as escavações estejam ainda em curso, apresentam-se algumas considerações e dados genéricos sobre o contexto e as características desta necrópole altomedieval, posteriormente convertida em cemitério paroquial, e sobre as características paleobiológicas dos indivíduos exumados.

**Palavras-chave**: Necrópole rupestre; cemitério paroquial; sepulturas escavadas na rocha; Alta Idade Média; antropologia funerária; paleoantropologia.

## Introduction

The ancestral settlement of Moreira de Rei, located in the northern interior of the Beiras' region (Guarda district, Trancoso municipality) (Figure 1), preserves an extensive necropolis of rock-cut tombs, of which approximately 70 were initially accounted for (Ferreira, 2000; 2005). Spread over an area that extends beyond the current churchyard of the Romanesque church of Saint Marinha, the tombs - fully or partially visible and more or less eroded - were mainly concentrated: in the posterior area of the religious building, along the sides of the main chapel and the nave's proper side elevation; next to the church's axial portal and underneath the walls of the building that form the square to the west; on one of the flanks of the stone foundation that surrounded a tree next to the pillory; and

on the lower platform of the square, underneath the edges of the retaining wall that delimits it (Figure 2).

Considering what was observable, this necropolis comprised anthropomorphic tombs or indeterminate typology that would predate the existing religious building, as many of the tombs were truncated by its construction. Due to its context and characteristics, the necropolis of Moreira de Rei was already considered one of the largest and most important funerary sites of its kind in Portugal (Barroca, 1990-91) and as one of the most expressive peninsular examples of a necropolis associated with centres of power of the 8th-10th centuries (Martín Viso, 2012).

Despite its scientific and patrimonial importance, the site never integrated a requalification project that made it possible to safeguard and/or enhance the visible tombs, which, in such conditions,



Figure 1. Location of Moreira de Rei.



**Figure 2.** Orthogonal aerial view of Saint Marinha's churchyard before the archaeological intervention (Photo by N'Funções, Lda).

have long since suffered erosion and progressive degradation caused by the continuous passage of people and vehicles. Similarly, the necropolis had never been the object of a research project that contemplated excavations and/or the survey and registration of the various areas in which the tombs were visible.

In fact, the only archaeological intervention carried out in this area took place in 2014, within a context of impact minimization due to the removal of the tree and its stone foundation located next to the Manueline pillory. Albeit the reduced size of the excavated area (about 38 m<sup>2</sup>), 47 tombs were then registered, which - together with the data collected during the surveys to update the municipality's Archaeological Chart allowed increasing the number of tombs of this necropolis to a minimum of 150 exemplars (Lobão and Ferreira, 2016), as well as to perform a more powerful characterization of the funerary area<sup>1</sup>.

Given the above, in 2018, a project was started to improve and enhance the churchyard of the church of Saint Marinha and the three national monuments present therein. Sponsored by the Municipality of Trancoso, this project seeks to ensure the proper preservation and full enjoyment of the relevant heritage assets enclosed in that area, including the landscaping to reframe the pillory, the conversion of the Romanesque church into an interpretive centre and the musealization of certain parts of the necropolis, part of which still have no visible tombs.

For this reason and considering its intrusive component in the subsoil and the buildings, the materialization of this project entails carrying out a large-scale archaeological intervention, also started in 2018, which aims to characterize the church and its square and the exhaustive study of the rupestrian necropolis. In this regard, in addition to the previous registration of the intervention area and the follow-up of the dismantling operations of the pre-existing structures, the archaeological work program includes the excavation of a site of more than 1.000 m<sup>2</sup>, covering the entire area of incidence of the contract, excepting the interior of the religious building (Figure 3)<sup>2</sup>.

# Historical context Moreira de Rei

Located on the eastern side of the homonymous mountain range, Moreira de Rei is, in the words of Alexandre Herculano (*in* Azevedo, 1914), a *kind of an eagle's nest on a heap of rocks*, occupying

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> The main conclusions obtained in the intervention were presented by two of the signatories (J.C.L. / M.C.F.), at the International Congress *Sepulturas Escavadas na Rocha da Fachada Atlântica da Península Ibérica* (Porto, 2017), but, due to their unavailability, they were not published in the respective minutes (Barroca, 2021a).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> The work has been fully supported by the local authority. In the years 2020-21, several archaeology and anthropology students participated under the protocols established between the Municipality of Trancoso and the Universities of Coimbra and Nova de Lisboa.



Figure 3. Location of the intervention area in the village of Moreira de Rei.

a platform of hilly and irregular terrain, surrounded by imposing rock formations or more or less chaotic agglomerations of granite blocks.

Although there are traces of prehistoric occupation on a terrace overlooking the castle and in the village itself (Lobão and Ferreira, 2016), the origins of *Moraria* (the original name of the village) should date back to the early middle ages and will intrinsically be associated with the construction of its castle, whose strategic positioning, in an area of geographic transition between the Central Plateaus and the surface of the Iberian Meseta (Plateau), made it one of the most prominent places in the region during medieval times.

Mentioned for the first time in 960 as one of the castles in the region under the rule of Astur-Leonese counts, Moraria lived through the vicissitudes of its location in a border area until it was definitively integrated into the "Christian world" by the hands of the King of León, Fernando Magno (1055-59) (Barroca, 1990-91). A century later, after the formation of Portugal, D. Afonso Henriques granted it a charter (1162-65) (Mattoso, 2006) and, perhaps still in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the village's castle underwent a profound renovation, asserting its strategic-military relevance, which, however, ended up disappearing during the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

Moreira's vitality was maintained throughout the Middle Ages – as evi-

denced by the existence of three parish seats in the village, the construction of the urban wall and the further expansion of the village outside the walls – but the loss of its military value, combined with other factors, dictated a progressive loss of importance for the village within the regional context, with repercussions on its social, economic and urban development. Despite everything, the municipality of Moreira survived until 1836, when it was extinguished and integrated into Trancoso.

#### Intervention area

The area where the church of Saint Marinha stands was one of the first burial sites in Moraria, where a necropolis of rock-cut tombs is embedded<sup>3</sup>. Initially, this necropolis was presumably located on the outskirts of the inhabited area and next to the main access road, which then concentrated around the castle, located about 170 m to the south. Hypothetically, it would also be associated with a religious building, of which the invocation to Saint Marinha will be the only remaining evidence. However, some recent theories consider that the polarization of burial sites by churches constitutes a later phenomenon related to the institution of medieval parishes (Martín Viso, 2016; 2021).

Be that as it may, it is certain that, with the implementation of the parochial system in the second half of the 12th century, one of the three medieval parishes of Moreira de Rei was installed on this site, thus maintaining the funerary use of the place. Documented since 1213, the church of Saint Marinha and its churchyard would have established themselves as the main public space in Moreira from an early age. In fact, in addition to being the centre of the religious and spiritual life of the largest parish in the village, fairs occurred in this square, as evidenced by the medieval measures' standard engraved on the church's portal, and it was in this square that political and administrative activity took place as well as legal aspects of the county, materialized in modern times with the construction of the Manueline pillory and the Town Hall.

In late-medieval and modern times, the churchyard would be wider, extending, at least to the north and west, toward areas now occupied by housing. The religious building also boasted a larger volume, as, along with the preserved central body, composed of the nave and chancel, it had side porches, as denounced by the alignment of corbels located at midheight of the nave's walls. These were taken down at an uncertain date, but it is known that, in 1590, the church was provided with a sacristy adjacent to its left-side elevation (Bravo, 1916).

In 1807, due to the church's state of disrepair, the liturgical functions of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Next to Saint Vicent's cross, where the homonymous medieval church would be located, there is also a nucleus of rock-cut tombs, which, however, certainly corresponded to a burial site of familial nature, consisting of two anthropomorphic graves placed abreast (Lobão and Ferreira, 2016).

Saint Marinha were transferred to the church of Saint Mary in the same village (Saldanha, 2016) until, in 1831, the administration of sacraments and burials in that parish ceased, which, however, only became extinct and annexed to that of Saint Mary of Moreira, in 1841. Nevertheless, this did not put an end to the millennial funerary use of the site since, shortly afterwards, the interior of the church itself was converted into the village's cemetery, which was used until 1959, when the restoration of the religious building began.

The decline and subsequent extinction of municipal institutions and the liturgical functions of Saint Marinha had obvious repercussions on the experience and appearance of the churchyard itself, which, in addition to being substantially reconfigured, was the object of urban refurbishment in the second half of the 19th century, acquiring, roughly speaking, the appearance which it presents today. During this improvement, at the entrance to the churchyard, a substantial stone foundation was built, quadrangular and tiered, where an elm tree, locally known as poplar, was planted.

Rivaling the Pillory, the grandeur of the complex formed by this large tree and its caldera extensively defined the image of the place throughout the 20th century. It was one of the elements that most intensely marked the community life of Moreira de Rei, until its removal on January 10, 2014.

# The archaeological / anthropological intervention Methodological notes and generic results

The archaeological excavation of the area surrounding the church of Saint Marinha is based on dividing it into ten sectors, which were established not only to obtain stratigraphic readings in certain sections of the square but also to efficiently articulate both archaeological work and construction actions, as well as with the daily use of the site by its residents. In-depth excavation works were restricted to 7 sectors, and one of the remaining corresponds to the area intervened in 2014.

In general, to optimise resources and quickly assess the real size of the necropolis, in these sectors, it was intended to excavate the terrain that covered the rock-cut tombs. Therefore, regardless of its chronology or nature, when a stratum extended into a tomb with defined limits, its excavation, as a rule, was interrupted right at the level of the upper outline of the tomb cavity. Despite not providing a correct photographic record of the chronostratigraphic evolution of the churchyard, this methodological option - which was not fully implemented due to the identification of some areas with burials in open pits in the ground - proved to be globally appropriate, insofar as being associated with the use of the site as a cemetery a single deposit of land was observed, which fills almost all the tombs. In fact, based on the characteristics of the soil, different stages of use of the funerary area were not detected and, with few exceptions, it was not possible to define the depositional sequence of the burials, as the interfacial elements that configure either the pit tombs on the ground or the sets of overlapping rock-cut tombs were not identified.

Subsequently, a complete photographic record of the intervened area was carried out; based on this, a sketch of the necropolis was drawn for referencing the tombs and, posteriorly, the second stage of the work began, that is, the excavation of the filling dirt in the funerary structures.

Generally, the stratigraphic sequence observed in the intervened sectors can be grouped into four main phases. The first, represented by a thin stratum that covered the rock in a small area northwest of the church, indicates a chalcolithic and probably protohistoric occupation of this area of the village.

The second constitutes the stage of funerary use of the square, which will be referred to below. It also includes two stone alignments, quite ruined and, for the time being, difficult to interpret regarding chronology and function, identified to the north and south of the church nave, as well as several strata of medieval chronology recorded in the southernmost part of the excavated area, relating its use to the "world of the living".

The third phase corresponds to the requalification of Saint Marinha's church square carried out in the second half of the 19th century, which gave it the general appearance it had at the beginning of the archaeological intervention.

Finally, the last phase includes several deposits, mostly dating from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century or already from the present century, which is related to leveling/treatment actions of the land surface, with the works of restoration of the church and remodelling of the surrounding buildings and with the installation of various urban infrastructures, which affected many tombs.

### The necropolis of Moreira de Rei

The works carried out so far (January 2023) have made it possible to recognize an impressive burial site, from which around 750 tombs have been identified. but whose number will be much higher since the necropolis extends, in all guadrants, to the outside the intervention area (Figures 4-6). Given the current state of the intervention, still very incipient in terms of records and cross-referencing of data obtained in the field, it is extemporaneous to make any detailed approach to the necropolis and the set of individuals exhumed, as such we present, essentially, some preliminary data and general considerations on certain aspects considered, for the time being, most relevant.

Among the inventoried tombs, 87 correspond to open pits dug in the soil, while most of the remaining are excavated in the rock. There are also records, especially in the area northwest of the church, of some tombs structured with loose stones and, more frequently, tombs with various mixed solutions, which combine excavation of the granite rock substrate with the delimitation with stones in areas where the substrate is absent, due to the natural slope of the land or the presence of a previous tomb cavity. Probably, the percentage of the latter type of structures will be much higher, insofar as part of the incomplete tombs considered to be rupestrian for the time being, may be included in this group, although, however, it is not easy in many cases to determine whether they belong to one or another typology carefully.

Although with variations to the northwest and southwest, the tombs generally obey the canonical orientation, featuring the headrest in the west quadrant so that the deceased would face east, towards Jerusalem.

Indeed due to post-depositional alterations related to the long diachrony of funerary use of the area, so far, only three tombs sealed with lids have been observed (two rock-cut graves and one dug in the soil), as well as some others (all excavated in the rock) that partially preserved the cover, which was made up of several slabs or irregular granite stones, placed transversely in relation to the tomb and, in one case, with the joints filled with half tubular roof tiles. Two funerary stelae were also detected, which were no longer in their original context, being reused on the sidewalk of the end of the 19th century, which paved the church square to the south.

The different types of tomb cavities allow, right from the start, the establishment of two distinct phases in the uninterrupted usage of the necropolis, which is evidenced by a change in funeral practices or, at least, in the forms of burial. While the tombs totally or partially organized with stones fit into the same timeframe as rock-cut tombs, burials in open pits dug in the ground overlap with those two types, constituting a more current reality, which, however, appears to have coexisted with usual reuse and disruption of previous funerary structures.

Concerning the oldest stage, regardless of the constructive technique of the tombs and excluding those of undetermined morpho-typology, the necropolis is almost entirely composed of anthropomorphic tombs, mostly trapezoidal and well-delineated contours, although often asymmetrical and often arched at the edges. These general characteristics also apply to child / juvenile tombs, which are present in large numbers and scattered throughout the funerary area.

The tombs tend to be distributed in a relatively orderly and highly concentrated manner and occupy an area that will be clearly demarcated, with their eastern and south limits already defined, with greater or lesser precision (the first coincides, to a large extent, with that of the excavation and the second should correspond to the current outline of the square)<sup>4</sup>. Not-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Probably, to the north, it will extend to the town's urban wall and, to the southwest, to the ancestral access road to the castle. The rest of the west flank includes, at least, the nearest dwelling to the church.



**Figure 4.** Aerial view of Saint Marinha's churchyard after the end of the first excavation phase (Photo by Beira Alta TV).



Figure 5. Partial view of Saint Marinha's churchyard after the end of the first excavation phase (Photo by N'Funções, Lda.).



Figure 6. General plan (sketch) of the necropolis of Moreira de Rei (Jan-23).

withstanding those mentioned above, the regular arrangement of the tombs is, to a large extent, concealed by the nuances in their orientation and, above all, by the dense occupation of space, which is accentuated by the multiple examples of overlapping tombs, in which the most recent ones nullify or reconfigure the preexisting cavities.

The overlapping of tombs, being rare in early medieval necropolises, constitutes a common feature of parish cemeteries, as a result of changes that have occurred, in the meantime, in terms of mentalities, social and religious organization of communities and, consequently,

funeral practices. In this sense, as can also be observed in other sites with a similar historical evolution (Barroca, 2021b), the practice of excavating tombs in the rock in the necropolis of Moreira continued until a late moment. However, it still with an imprecise timeframe, this is undoubtedly posterior to the edification of the current church of Saint Marinha, whose construction generally dates back to the 13th century, although some researchers believe that it may precede back to the end of the previous century (Rodrigues, 2007; 2008) and others admit, by contrast, that it may date from the beginning of the fourteenth century (Almeida, 2001). In fact, on

the church's façade there are three sets of two overlapping tombs which, if, on the one hand, demonstrate the precedence (also evidenced by other cases) of rockcut graves relative to the religious building, on the other hand, attest to the opposite, that is the existence of this type of tombs posterior to the church (Figure 7). In this context, it is also worth mentioning the existing recess at the level of the church's foundations, next to its northwest corner, so that one of the tombs was visible, which suggests that the memory of the deceased buried there remained strongly present when the construction of the temple's nave began (Figure 8). Therefore, and given the general chronology of this burial trend (Martín Viso, 2014; Barroca, 2021b), the image patented by the Rupestrian necropolis and other tombs associated with it, which configure the first stage of funerary use of the site, results from a continuous evolution, which began with the settlement's foundation in the 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries and disseminated. at least, until the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

The inhumation in rock-cut tombs (if not their very opening) lasted until much later times, already integrated into the second phase of the funerary use of area since the scarce ritual remains collected in this type of tombs does not allow, in most cases, to go back the chronology of the respective burials to a period before the 15th-16th centuries. However, most of the individuals did not have associated assets and the remaining materials included in the tombs' filling soils, in general, do not even allow the attribution of a broad *post quem* dating of the buried, so it is unknown whether this phenomenon of late reuse of the rock cavities was widespread and how long it lasted, considering the weak sedimentary potential of the terrain and the use of the churchyard as a cemetery until 1831.

As for the tombs corresponding to open pits in the soil, which also form the last stage of the funerary occupation of the area, they are chronologically part of a period that encompasses the entire modern era until the end of the churchyard's burial function, as evidenced by some of the exhumed individuals that were probably already buried in the last decades of activity of the necropolis.

The burials in soil pits were limited to two areas of the churchyard: one to the northwest of the church and another to the south. In most cases, it was impossible to determine the morphology of the cavities of this type since the corresponding interfacial elements were not detected. This aspect also prevented understanding the depositional sequence of the burials, which, in this way, can only be reconstituted in the office, with the juxtaposition of the surveys carried out. However, the existence of tombs cut by later burials is also documented at this stage.

To date, 737 of the identified graves have been intervened, i.e., 87 open tombs in the soil (=OTS) and 650 rock-cut tombs (=RCT), among which 46.7 % (344) had osteological remains (Figure 6). From a total of 340 individuals in the primary



**Figure 7.** Superimposed tombs that testify to the anteriority / posterity of rock-cut tombs in relation to the church.



Figure 8. Re-entrance of the Church's foundations so as not to hide a rock-cut tomb.

position, exhumed from 327 graves (87 OTS and 240 RCT), 154 had a secondary burial associated (Figure 9). 52 isolated ossuaries were also exhumed, 32 in rock-cut tombs (Figure 10) and 20 in pits in the ground. In addition, 72 other graves contained scattered osteological remains.

Whenever it was possible to assess, it was found that most individuals were lying in dorsal decubitus, with the skull resting on the occipital, with the upper limbs flexed (or semi-/hyper-flexed) at the elbow's level and oriented towards the torso or pelvis, and with elongated and parallel lower limbs. As exceptions, there were five individuals with at least one extended upper limb, eight individuals with lower limbs crossed at the tibias' level and four non-adult inhumations lying in lateral decubitus.

Only 12 of the individuals, dating from the modern era, were accompanied by funerary items of a ritual nature (chap-lets/rosaries), adornment (earrings and pins), or clothing-related items (shoes, buttons, and buckles), thus revealing – together with the almost total absence of this type of artifacts in the lands of the necropolis – that Christian material dispossession would be the widespread practice, even in more recent periods.

The osteological remains show poor preservation and a high degree of fragmentation due to various taphonomy factors. The acidity and granularity of the soil, the presence of roots, the action of



Figure 9. Primary burials with associated ossuary.



Figure 10. Secondary burial in rock-cut tomb.

fauna, the adverse weather conditions, and the centuries-old mechanical action on the surface in areas with low sediment potential (Figure 11) vehemently conditioned the reading of anatomical regions essential to the elaboration of a paleobiological profile. Additionally, this difficulty was aggravated by the *post mortem* disturbance resulting from the constant reuse of the funerary area (Figure 12).

Among primary and secondary burials already exhumed, a minimum number of 607 individuals were accounted for. Considering the bone robustness, it is likely that this number will increase. So far, approximately 44% of the primary burials (149/340) correspond to adult individuals, some of whom are identified as young adults, with at least 29 being female and 17 males. Among the 65 nonadults, 2 would be less than two years old, 31 between three and ten years old and 4 between ten and seventeen years old.

Macroscopically, some signs of physiological stress were visible, with few episodes of cribra orbitalia and porotic hyperostosis, and lesions in the field of paleopathology, mainly oral (severe dental wear, caries, enamel hypoplasia), degenerative (articular and non-articular) and infectious, with some tibias and femurs showing signs of infection healed and active at the time of death. Occasionally, some fractures were also registered, essentially in the ribs and the distal end of the radius. A case of Sacroiliac Coalition, spondylolysis and DISH (Diffuse Idiopathic Skeletal Hyperostosis) should also be highlighted.



**Figure 11.** Primary burial with compacted ossuary over the lower limbs.



Figure 12. Sequential primary burials.

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