

# Alexandre Herculano's "A abóbada (1401)": a parodied forgery and coarse replicas of a patriotic narrative about Batalha

PEDRO REDOL

Museus e Monumentos de Portugal, Mosteiro de Santa Maria da Vitória | Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Faculdade de Ciências e Tecnologia, Departamento de Conservação e Restauro

[pedro.redol@museusemonumentos.pt](mailto:pedro.redol@museusemonumentos.pt)

<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1048-8092>

Texto recebido em / Text submitted on: 13/08/2024

Texto aprovado em / Text approved on: 30/01/2025



**Resumo.** O presente artigo debruça-se sobre o conto “A abóbada (1401)”, de Alexandre Herculano, com o objetivo de analisar a origem e o desenvolvimento de uma narrativa que estabeleceu debates nacionais e internacionais em torno da historiografia da arquitetura gótica portuguesa. Começa-se por escrutinar as origens e o desenvolvimento da lenda da abóbada da sala do capítulo da Batalha, ao mesmo tempo que se discute a emergência da moderna historiografia relacionada com o mosteiro. Segue-se a análise crítica do conto de Herculano. A terceira parte avalia o impacto provocado pelos pressupostos que a narrativa de Herculano teve, até recentemente, no discurso historiográfico dedicado ao mosteiro da Batalha, alternando entre as ideias de origem “nacional” e “internacional” da sua arquitetura. Por fim, o artigo discute teorias recentes que permitem ultrapassar esta dicotomia, abrindo uma nova época à história da arquitetura gótica tardia, centrada no emprego dos conceitos de intercâmbio e transnacionalidade artística.

**Palavras-chave.** Nacionalismo, Intercâmbio artístico, Transnacionalidade.

**Abstract.** This article focuses on the short story “A abóbada (1401)” (The vault [1401]) by the Portuguese author Alexandre Herculano with a view to analyse the origin and development of a narrative that established national and international debates on the historiography of the Gothic architecture in Portugal. The article starts by examining the origins and development of the legend of the vault in Batalha’s chapter house, simultaneously with a discussion of the emergence of the monastery’s modern historiography. This is followed by a critical analysis of Herculano’s short story. Part three assesses the impact that, until recently, the tenets generated by Herculano’s narrative have had on the historiographical discourse centred on Batalha’s monastery, which alternated between ideas of a “national” and a “foreign” origin of its architecture. Finally, the article discusses recent theories that allow to overcome this dichotomy, opening a new era to Late Gothic architectural history that centers in the use of the concept of artistic interchange and transnationality.

**Keywords.** Nationalism, Artistic interchange, Transnationality.

## Introduction

Alexandre Herculano (1810-1877), a Portuguese novelist, essayist and historian, is one of the main representatives of Portuguese Romanticism and a firm defender of the establishment of Liberalism in Portugal. The short story “A abóbada” (The vault) was first published in the magazine *O Panorama*, in 1839. Herculano’s text reclaims an old account which narrates the collapse of the chapter house’s vault at the Batalha monastery (fig. 1) and the heroic reconstruction of this vault by the elderly Portuguese architect Afonso Domingues, who had been dismissed from the project to be replaced by Huguet, a foreign master builder from Ireland. The short story was reprinted four times in Herculano’s book *Lendas e Narrativas* (*Legends and Narratives*) during the author’s lifetime, and after his death it was reprinted copious times until the present. The popularity of the original short story and of the collection of which became part did not decline with time; rather it increased throughout the years. Despite its markedly nationalistic and xenophobic content, fascination for the short story was not lessened by the political changes occurred with the end of the Portuguese dictatorship and the beginning of a democratic regime in April 25, 1974, nor by the overture to Europe, as the country became part of the European Union in 1985. Today, “A abóbada” remains a reading option in the list of literary works available to 10<sup>th</sup> grade teachers and students for the Portuguese language subject. Additionally, the success of the story among wide audiences for over 150 years has led to several translations.



**Fig. 1.** Batalha monastery’s west façade. Photograph: Pedro Redol.

The choice of this short story as a case study among Herculano's writings stems from the fact that this narrative has played a central role not only in the origin of the modern historiography of Portuguese Gothic architecture, while it continued to be an obstacle, well into the twentieth century, to its full development. More popular and enduring forms of the short story "A abóbada" appeared in school books, theatre plays, and television series, having originated in the same context as the architectural historiography. However, these alternative forms are not the scope of this article, which will focus on the relationship between the short story and the development of academic historiography of Batalha.

Herculano's short story illustrates the pedagogical role expected from the use of History in romantic literature as a tool used for the construction of a new type of society, anchored on the values of patriotism, freedom, equality and citizenship. Concomitantly, it is also a reaction against the appropriation by British antiquarians, starting in the 1760s, of Batalha's monastery as a masterpiece of English Gothic architecture. This takes place in a wider context of contestation of British interference in Portuguese affairs, as a result of Portugal's political and economic dependence from Great Britain since the Napoleonic Wars (1807-1814). Batalha had been well-known throughout Europe in antiquarian and scholarly circles for its church and monastery had been selected as a case study for discussions of Gothic architecture's origins, which had led to the first systematic architectural survey of a Gothic building, published by the architect James Murphy in London, in 1795 (MURPHY 1795). Besides drawings, Murphy's book also included theoretical discussions about the origins of the Gothic style and it tried to prove that the monastery's design was the work of an English master builder, hired through the intercession of Philippa of Lancaster, King João I's wife. This interpretation was in direct conflict with the Portuguese pre-Romantic and Romantic nationalist narrative, which reclaimed Batalha as a paramount site in the affirmation, if not re-foundation, of the nation. In reality, the monastery was built to fulfill a pious vow made by King João I to the Virgin Mary on the eve of the Battle of Aljubarrota (1385), because from the success of this battle depended Portuguese political independence from Castile.

The short story "A abóbada" is a good example of a long-lasting tool of nationalist narrative which has influenced the overall understanding of architecture history, splitting it into two divergent categories of "national" and "international" origin until recently. The concept of nation adopted in this article to approach these opposing interpretations stems from Benedict Anderson's nation concept as "an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited

and sovereign” (ANDERSON 1991: 6). These two characteristics generate the contrasting and competing ideas of artistic self-sufficiency, on one the hand, and the foreign art production, on the other hand. From the second quarter of the nineteenth century, Portugal experienced along with other western European nations the emancipation of history as an academic discipline from historical fiction, and concomitantly the emergence of the idea of art’s nationality (PORTER 1998; PASSINI 2012). Despite an ideological connection with the nationalist current in Portuguese Gothic architecture historiography, brought about by Herculano, which ceased in 1946 (see below), the dialectical opposition between ‘national’ and ‘international’ origin survived well into the twenty-first century. A theoretical *volte face* took place only in the 2010’s, when Jean-Marie Guillouët developed the concept of artistic interchange, applied to his research about the west portal of Batalha, as well as other work attributed to Huguet, such as the vaulting system of the chapter house. Guillouët’s hypothesis is an alternative to the concept of circulation of artists, works and models, adding to this the dialectical interaction with the means of hosting and reception, “a set of reflexive relations that must be analysed, as well as the product of their interactions” (GUILLOUËT 2009)<sup>1</sup>. Guillouët uses this concept as a tool of micro-art history, indispensable to the understanding of artistic production in a medieval Europe rich in inter-regional relations, more intense since the last quarter of the fourteenth century. The idea of “national” origin as an antithesis to “international” is replaced by the concept of “transnational”, in agreement with contemporary views of European politics and identity as those of the nineteenth century national identity narratives were in agreement with the broad context in which they were developed.

The historiographical texts used in this study refer specifically to Batalha’s building phases that date between 1386 and 1480, and subsequent commissions by King Manuel I and King João III are thus omitted in this analysis. Furthermore, not all the authors that produced work about Batalha are analysed, as those considered here are not given the same emphasis. Two criteria were used to select and rank the authors mentioned in this article: first the relevance of the historians as representatives of the nationalistic narrative; and second, the impact that the results achieved by each researcher had in the updating of historiography. For example, and despite their importance, Augusto Fuschini, Karl Albrecht Haupt, Marcel Dieulafoy or Élie Lambert are not considered for this article.

---

<sup>1</sup> Preceding this idea, see RECHT 1998 and KURMANN 1998.

## 1. The legend of the vault and the historiography of Batalha before Herculano's short story

The legend of the vault existed prior to Herculano, who used an old-age narrative as the basis for his short story. The oldest record of a legend that describes the collapse of the monastery's chapter house vault during its construction appears in the section of the *História de S. Domingos* (*History of the Dominican Order*) written by Friar Luís de Sousa and first published in 1623. The chronicler writes:

It is said that at the time it was being built, the vault fell twice, with workers' loss of lives. But the King, wishing that the space of the room should not be marred by columns, promised the architect compensation if he prevailed in building it with no support other than that of the walls. Such a promise encouraged him to resume the work, claiming it would be more successful. But the King did not want to risk any more lives and sent from the prisons of the kingdom some men who were sentenced to great punishments to remove the timber trusses (SOUSA 1977: 648).

It is possible that Friar Luís de Sousa's report is based on reality. Indeed, the vault was closed considerably after the completion of the chapter house walls and façade facing the cloister's eastern gallery (fig. 2) (REDOL 2021: 237-254). Both walls and the façade belong to the monastery's first construction phase, which was completed under the direction of Afonso Domingues and no later than 1406 (GUILLOUËT 2011: 51-53). This earlier narrative of the vault's construction includes elements that will re-appear in later versions of the legend: the collapse that happened during the removal of the trusses; the royal decision to build a structure without intermediate supports together with the King's praise and promise of rewarding the architect, if he was successful; and finally, the use of prisoners condemned to long sentences for the removal of the trusses (REDOL 2021: 241-243).





**Fig. 2.** Batalha monastery's chapter hall. Photograph: Pedro Redol.

Friar Luís de Sousa's account became known to a wider audience in 1795, when the Irish architect James Murphy published his architectural survey, and which includes a translation of this account (MURPHY 1795: 45-46), repeated in a travel book by the same author published that year (MURPHY 1795a: 36-37). This legend of the vault survived in the memory of the monastic community until its extinction, as is documented by Julia Pardoe's 1827 account:

They have a singular tradition attached to this noble building [the chapter house]; twice it was built and roofed-in: and twice, when the scaffolding was removed, the walls gave way, and it became one heap of ruins – but the architect would not be thus foiled in this magnificent undertaking; a third time the walls were raised - the richly groined roof, rising spirally at its centre, once more united them; all the best energies of the spirit which had conceived, and the perseverance that had yet again produced, the work, had been exhausted in the undertaking; and Alphonse [sic] Domingues, after having surveyed, with mingled pride and dread, the lordly pile which he had reared, swore if a third time his skill had failed, he would not survive the disgrace, but would find a grave among its ruins. In vain was he dissuaded from what was universally considered an act of voluntary self-immolation;

he walked calmly to the centre of the hall - he issued his directions with an unflinching voice – portion by portion, he saw the mighty beams, which stood perhaps between him and a painful and revolting death, removed by his reluctant assistants – at length the last prop was drawn away – and many covered their eyes with their hands to shut out the miserable spectacle - but there was no necessity for the precaution – the architect stood unharmed and secure – his mighty work was above and around him – vast, magnificent and wonderful! A memorial to his undying genius! (PARDOE 1833: 262-264).

Julia Pardoe visited Batalha monastery, for the first time, in March 1827, returning several times that year while living in Leiria<sup>2</sup>. The information she reported resulted from her personal observations, as well as elements provided by the monastery's friars themselves who hosted her during her visits. In the excerpt quoted above, Pardoe replaces the final episode of the prisoners with the architect's heroic act of staying under the vault during the removal of the trusses, and she identifies him. This reference to Afonso Domingues is significant and shows that the monastic community was aware of the developments of the building's historiography. In fact, the first research about the history of the monument's construction was published in 1827. The research was carried out in 1823 by Brother Francisco de S. Luís during his first period of seclusion at Batalha, where he had the opportunity to read innumerable documents housed at the monastery archive (S. LUÍS 1827: 9-10). These documents would later be transferred to Lisbon's Torre do Tombo, the Crown's archives, in the aftermath of the convent's extinction in 1834. As early as 1729, Brother Manuel dos Santos wrote in *Monarquia Lusitana* (*The Lusitanian Monarchy*): "the master of the work was called Afonso Domingues, a native of the parish of Madalena in Lisbon"<sup>3</sup>. While still quoting Brother Manuel dos Santos, Brother Francisco de S. Luís makes the first reference to one of the only two documentary records, dated December 27, 1402, which established without a doubt the existence of Afonso Domingues as being the monastery's master builder<sup>4</sup>. Brother Francisco de São Luís' rigour of investigation goes hand in hand with his concern to assert national values, which, in his opinion, were not safeguarded by Friar Luís de Sousa and others who had followed on his steps:

---

<sup>2</sup> On Julia Pardoe and the circumstances of her stay in Portugal and visits to Batalha, see ALVES 1989 and REDOL 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Biblioteca Nacional de Portugal, Fundo Alcobacense (alc-302), fols. 1109-1110.

<sup>4</sup> Published by VITERBO 1899, II: 288-289 and GOMES 2002: 57-58.

This silence, or carelessness of the chronicler, and the lightness and uncertainty with which some other writers spoke of the matter, together with the strange negligence of our natives about things of the motherland, and the latitude that the words of Friar Luís de Sousa seem to give rise to conjecture and discretion, has been the cause that the presumption and foreign pride have arrogated to themselves the glory of the first plan and craftsmanship of this superb building. In fact, no Portuguese credits the Nation, and there are many who, either by excessive fondness for foreign things, or for other even more reprehensible reasons, easily acquiesce to opinions ventured with little foundation and sustained with contempt of the Portuguese (S. LUÍS 1827: 9-10).

The writer's words are in direct response to the great interest that some English antiquarians had in Batalha during the second half of the eighteenth century. This led William Conyngham to commission the architect James Murphy to carry out an extensive graphic survey of the building and demonstrate the English identity of the monastery's first master builder<sup>5</sup>. Murphy would not succeed in his purpose, but that did not stop him from circulating his speculations on the subject:

According to the account of those who are supposed to have had their information from the records preserved in the Royal Archives of Lisbon, the name of the architect of the church was Stephen Stephenson, a native of England. But the Friars Cacegas and De Suisa [sic], who have written the History of Batalha with great accuracy, are silent on this head. They inform us, that the King, desirous of building a monastery superior to any in Europe, invited from distant countries the most celebrated architects that could be found. Now, as gothic architecture at that time flourished in England, it is not improbable that some of its artists might have embraced the invitation of so liberal a Prince, especially as his consort, Queen Philippa, a Princess endowed with many amiable qualities, was the eldest daughter of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, son of Edward the Third<sup>6</sup> (MURPHY 1795a: 44).

It is possible that "those who are supposed to have had their information from the records preserved in the Royal Archives of Lisbon" refers specif-

---

<sup>5</sup> On this topic, see, among others, FREW and WALLACE 1986.

<sup>6</sup> From ORTIGÃO 1896: 27, one learns that in 1845, Alexandre Herculano and the Viscount of Juromenha, with the help of staff from the royal archive at Torre do Tombo searched in vain for the referred documents, in order to satisfy the curiosity of Count Raczyński, mentioned in section three of this article.



ically to those who provided information to the historian José Soares da Silva. Indeed, in one of his books, this author mentions that “the master of this [Batalha’s work] was an Irishman, who then lived in Viana de Caminha and was called David Aquete, as Antonio de Madoreira, a Dominican friar, had mentioned in one of his memoirs” (SILVA 1731: 535). Although Madoreira’s original source has not been identified, it is possible to deduce, as Brother Francisco de S. Luís did, that behind the name Aquete is the name of Huguet. Indeed in 15<sup>th</sup> century documentary sources, the name Huguet is spelled in different manners, including with and without the initial “H”, one variant being Abguete (GOMES 2002: 58). José Soares da Silva may have learned about Huguet through a Dominican scholar who had access, in the monastery’s archive, to documents that refer clearly and at length to the master builder of Batalha. Of especial relevance are the Royal charters – two granted by King Duarte and two by King Afonso V –, all part of the judicial process intended for withdrawing the benefits held by Huguet’s widow which once again would revert to the monastery. It is also possible that José Soares da Silva, like so many others (such as Murphy), could not resist seeking an explanation for the exceptional craftsmanship of the monastery in the arrival of a foreign artist, who might have come to Portugal as part of the Duke of Lancaster’s entourage, or that of his daughter Philippa, when she married King João I.

Prior to the British antiquarians’ interest in Batalha, a general acknowledgement of Afonso Domingues as the architect of Batalha can be traced to the work of Brother Manuel dos Santos and most likely to earlier documents even if they are not clearly identified. Yet, his account was not considered in critical analysis of the building itself until almost a century later, when Brother Francisco de S. Luís truly inaugurated the nationalistic current of the origins of the royal monastery’s architecture. His perspective was in reality intended to defy British pretensions to the authorship of the building’s plans, initiated by Thomas Pitt and further developed by James Murphy and William Beckford (REDOL 2016). Brother Francisco de S. Luís’ study overlaps with the beginning of Liberalism in Portugal, of which he was one of the main defenders – as later was Herculano –, and, as such, he was also a strong opponent to the long-lasting British intrusion in Portuguese political and economic affairs. His text is the first narrative of the history Batalha’s construction that used primary written sources, as well as defined a clear methodology for a critique of those sources, which continues today. However, contrary to the contemporary Gothicizing Romantic movement, the author states that:

It is not my intention to discuss the true character of the Gothic or of the Norman-Gothic architectures. Least of all it is not my intention to discuss the matter of the inferiority or preference of this architectonic style in relation to the Greek and Roman styles. I lack knowledge on the issue, and if I had it, the nature of our work would not permit such a digression (S. LUÍS 1837: 22).

The goal of his work was to identify the monastery's different construction phases – and in this Brother Francisco de S. Luís' work was pioneer. He organized the construction phases by reigns not yet by architects, as it would be the norm later, to prove the existence of a base plan. To this end, Brother Francisco de S. Luís used archival information, together with epigraphic and heraldic evidence found on the monument itself. Stylistic and archaeological analyses, although already present, are still incipient. In relation to the chapter house, he concluded only that, because it was a work belonging to the reign of King João I, the architect represented on the southeast console could only be, in his own words, "one of the oldest masters" (S. LUÍS 1837: 28).

## 2. Herculano and his narrative

Despite previous discussions and narratives about Batalha's vault and its construction, it was Alexandre Herculano's short story in 1839 that would have a long-lasting effect in the Portuguese national narrative and imaginary. Herculano undoubtedly knew Friar Luís de Sousa's account and could have read Julia Pardoe's version of the legend as well, but there is no evidence that this happened. However, he was certainly aware of the documentation published by Brother Francisco de S. Luís. But Herculano's reinvention of the narrative aimed at the exultation of patriotic values resulted that the short story came to greatly contribute to the development of a national consciousness, in a degree, until then, unknown among the Portuguese. At the same time "A abóbada" gave rise to a new genre of Portuguese historical fiction, in which the author, with fine critical erudition and a subtle sense of irony, elevated himself above the craft of historian. The section below discusses in detail these two aspects of Herculano's "A abóbada" and its impact on a nationalistic type of history.

The tale begins on Kings Day, 1401. For the first time, Huguet, the second documented master builder of Batalha, is presented as an anti-hero. This allows for the exaggeration of his weak physical and moral qualities (which can be understood, *lato sensu*, as a personification of the characteristics of the Brit-

ish people according to Herculano), and contrasts with Afonso Domingues' virtues, who embodies the Portuguese national values. Domingues' virtues include modesty – which does not preclude awareness of his merit and professional competence –, temperance, bravery as a warrior, and mastery in the art of building. None of these virtues is diminished by his advanced age nor by his blindness, instead they are affirmed and rendered visible by the venerable master's behaviour in spite of his physical condition. Huguet – more precisely David Ouguet in the short story – is said to be Irish, having arrived in Portugal as a knight in the Duke of Lancaster's entourage and having become head master of Batalha's construction with the patronage of Queen Philippa, wife of King John I, who had him appointed master builder after Afonso Domingues had become blind. Herculano refers to Huguet as a disciple of William of Wykeham, an explicit and ironic allusion to the hypothesis put forward by William Beckford about the authorship of the west portal of Batalha (BECKFORD 1835: 82-83). With remarkable witticism, Herculano adds to David Huguet's introduction that this information was:

Presented by an old chronicle, which, in ancient times, was housed in Alcobaça, bound in a single volume with the authentic transcripts of the Lamego assemblies, Afonso Henriques' Oath in testimony of Christ's apparition, the feudal charter submitting Alcobaça to Clairvaux, the histories of Laimundo and Beroso, and some other papers of equal veracity and importance, which the Castilians, irked by the Portuguese successes may have seized during the Philippine rule (HERCULANO 1851: 240).

Indeed, Herculano compares the “old chronicle” with forgeries made by the chroniclers from Alcobaça, who also wrote *Monarchia Lusitana*, and included Brother Bernardo de Brito and Brother Manuel dos Santos as pro-restoration or post-restoration supporters of the faction that favoured Portuguese independence in 1640 and were thus in opposition to the Castilian crown. All the documents listed were discredited by Herculano himself in non-fictional historical research. By connecting Huguet's credentials to this list it is equivalent to saying that those credentials, like the other documents, have no credibility at all, or better yet they did not exist. Herculano gives himself permission to create a parody that belittles the old Portuguese historiography, and which becomes a subtle, constant presence in his historical fiction (MURPHY 1972; MARQUES 2012: 17, 138-143). If the parody on the authenticity of the sources represents the independence that the writer of fiction claims in relation to his

role as historian, conversely, it also asserts the constant surreptitious presence of his persona as historian in his fiction<sup>7</sup>.

Returning to the role assigned to Huguet as a substitute for Afonso Domingues in Herculano's short story, the architect is shown accompanying the King on a visit to the recently completed chapter house. While walking through the adjacent cloister, side by side with King João I, Huguet remarks that: "in this part [...] the general design of the building, made by Master Afonso Domingues, has been followed to the letter; for it would be a grave error to destroy the harmony of this piece" (HERCULANO 1851: 249). However, it was Huguet's initiative to build a more striking vault over the chapter house, without consulting Afonso Domingues. This was considered by the King an unreasonable boldness, a disregard for the old master, and imprudent. After the vault's collapse which occurred few moments later, Domingues, despite his blindness, is eventually called in to resolve the problems created by Huguet, and to finish the vault's construction following his original project.

At the core of Herculano's narrative is a patriotic, nationalistic sentiment that will reverberate for years to come. The monastery, particularly through the words that Herculano attributed to Afonso Domingues, becomes an allegory that stands in for an independent and audacious people, unthinkable without "the love for the motherland":

To understand the premise behind the monastery of Santa Maria da Vitória, one has to be Portuguese; one has to have lived through the revolution that crowned the Master of the Order of Avis as King of Portugal; one has to have rioted with the people in front of the adulteress' palace [that is, Leonor Teles, wife of the previous monarch, Fernando I]; one has to have fought at the walls of Lisbon; one has to have been victorious at Aljubarrota. This building is not the work of kings, although I was commissioned by a king to design and build it, but one has to be native commoner, one has to belong to the Portuguese people who declared: we will not be servants to foreigners, and who proved it. Master Ouguet, a scholar in the society of brother workers, worked in the cathedrals of England, France and Germany: it was there that he rose to the rank of master builder; but his soul is not warmed by the love for the motherland; nor, were he warmed by it, is this Portuguese soil his motherland (HERCULANO 1851: 239-240).

---

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of Herculano's historical thought about the Middle Ages, of interest for this article, see GUERREIRO 2016: 58-66.

The hostility towards the Other, the foreigner, pervades the tale, however, veiled in moments of great emotional poignancy. This is the case when the King asks the old master builder to re-erect the vault in his own way. Initially Domingues rejects the request with the pride of an old knight, but, after a while, the King succeeds at persuading him to take over the vast and difficult reconstruction task. Later, in preparation for the removal of the trusses, the tension of the narrative increases. Imbued by the anguish and pleading procession of the prisoners of war recruited to build Huguet's faulty vault, the crowd rushed in to witness such a great prodigy or misfortune. After the trusses had been removed, the old master and knight of Aljubarrota vows to remain on a stone block, beneath the vault's central keystone, for three days, without eating or drinking. He succumbs at the end of the three days, with his dying breath uttering the words "The vault has not fallen... The vault will never fall!" (HERCULANO 1851: 305). Thus, the story reaches its climax in an apotheosis of death that transforms the protagonist into a hero and reinforces the sacredness of the monastery as an altar of the motherland, and by definition the stage for a national, didactic glorification of virtues such as honor, glory, and freedom.

In Domingues' words, "the spears used in the battle of Aljubarrota had written that 'the Portuguese servants and vassals are indeed free'" (HERCULANO 1851: 281). The values of medieval chivalry surpassed political values. The tale concludes with the jurisconsult João das Regras, stating when King João I asks him to give to the Queen an account of Huguet's temporary removal: "I am working hard to make the Master of Avis a King; but I always find a king's champion" (HERCULANO 1851: 286). It is implicit, however, that politics cannot be dispensed with, nor its adjustment to conveniences, which is hardly consonant with virtue. This reflects Herculano's disappointment with the politicians of his time and embodies a set of convictions regarding the constitutional monarchy that has earned him the epithet of "moderate liberal". However, the author's belief in a progressive country prevails, as a result of a greater collective awareness of Portuguese identity, affirmed by opposition to what is defined as non-Portuguese.

### **3. Literary narrative and Batalha's Gothic architecture history: an entanglement**

The claiming of Portuguese authorship for the monastery's architectural plan, a current that goes back to the eighteenth century's Alcobaça's chronicles, gained new impetus in the nineteenth century with Brother Francisco de S.



Luís. This work is at odds with James Murphy and other British scholars and travelers who defended an international (even British) origin for the monastery's design. Ten years after Brother Francisco de S. Luís published his work, Herculano's "A abóbada" would focus on a specific building to exalt the thesis of national authorship, albeit with critical reserve, veiledly decried through the author's irony. The exaltation of a national origin took a life of its own and developed to an extent unforeseen by Herculano, and which he did not intend. But the conditions were in place for another debate on the meaning of national or international authorship, rather than of architectural criticism itself.

The historiography of Portuguese architecture became more systematic during the 1840s, particularly due to the work by the Brazilian Viscount Francisco Adolfo de Varnhagen – creator of the concept "Manueline art" –, and especially due to the work of Count Athanasz Raczynski, a well-traveled art critic and collector, and Prussian ambassador to Portugal from 1842 to 1848 (ROSMANINHO 1993; ROSMANINHO s. d.). However, the consolidation of architectural history as an academic discipline did not happen until the early twentieth century, after half a century of dispersed studies, ranging from the most amateur to the most scholarly works. Virtually none of these works undertakes a systematic and comprehensive critique of all the available sources, nor do they yet make use of formal comparison of buildings and of architectural elements. Nevertheless, most of these studies were conditioned by the nationalist prejudice established by Herculano's much-read short story "A abóbada". Fundamentally the question that, at the time, needed to be answered was whether the work on the Batalha Monastery – and not just the famous vault – had a Portuguese or foreign origin. Given the recent purpose of achieving a collective sense of national identity, developed in the political context of a recent constitutional monarchy, the answer to the question of origin was no small matter in a building that commemorated the first decisive moment in the reaffirmation of Portuguese political independence.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the commitment to the narrative crystallized by Herculano was not uniform, but without doubt this narrative generated the distinction between sympathizers of the nationalist and of the international theses. To endorse a national origin for Batalha's master builder is denounced by some authors – both Portuguese scholars and others – as a parochial and biased perspective. Among the Portuguese supporters of an international origin for Batalha's first master builder are the Viscount of Condeixa and Ramalho Ortigão, both representing a perspective that Portugal was a place of a cosmopolitan culture. In 1892, the Viscount of Condeixa published, in Paris and Lisbon, an ill-advised monograph on the monastery

of Batalha (CONDEIXA 1892) and, in 1896, Ramalho Ortigão published the first revision of the monument's historiography (ORTIGÃO 1896: 20-54). It is worth quoting Ramalho Ortigão who demonstrates how effectively, and for more than half a century, Herculano's narrative continued casting a shadow on Batalha's architectural critique:

Since "A abóbada" first appeared in *Panorama* until now, Batalha became invariably the great marble book, the immortal poem, the Portuguese Divine Comedy, the ultimate triumphant affirmation of our Portuguese national identity established by the people's resolve, by the sword of the Master of Avis, by Nuno Álvares Pereira's spear, and by João das Regras' pen (ORTIGÃO 1896: 22-23).

While the early historiography of Batalha is generally characterized by a level of methodological imprecision, two nineteenth century authors stand out for their more rigorous approaches that escape the reductionism of the nationalist vs. internationalist visions. Inácio Vilhena de Barbosa, a historian and archaeologist was the first author to make the connection between some of the building's construction phases and different architects who are referred in documents, and even if in an incipient way this author attempted to advance in the characterization of their work. Furthermore, Vilhena Barbosa introduced the hypotheses that Afonso Domingues may have traveled abroad, perhaps to England, before working at the Batalha monastery, and that Huguet, because of his name, may have instead been French (BARBOSA 1886: 1-40). The second author worth noting is the historian and paleographer Sousa Viterbo, who discovered the second and, to date, last document (dated from 1406) that mentions Afonso Domingues, providing evidence that Domingues and Huguet overlapped at Batalha. This information is fundamental to suggest an interchange between the two master builders and to understand the building as the result of such interaction (VITERBO 1899: 21-23).

The monastery's twentieth century historiography opens with two studies that bear witness to the considerable methodological advances that took place in the previous century, but which results have different significance. The first is a study-guide of Batalha by the historian and art critic Joaquim de Vasconcelos (VASCONCELOS 1905), and the second a book by the Scottish architect and historian Walter Crum Watson, entitled *Portuguese Architecture* (WATSON 1908). Vasconcelos' work is first and foremost a manifesto of intentions with a view to writing a monograph on the monastery of Batalha, which he never wrote. Consistent with his Germanistic background and the vast knowledge

that the author had of medieval European architecture, based both on his own research and on other authors' work, Vasconcelos starts by discussing methodological issues, followed by an annotated bibliography, and lengthy considerations on questions of collective virtue and moral symbolism. In this he follows Herculano's canon, although without mentioning the short story "A abóbada" explicitly. The methodology of architectural criticism advocated by Joaquim de Vasconcelos was, in fact, put into practice by Walter Crum Watson who is responsible for a successful renewal of the historiography of Batalha. His unbiased analysis is based upon a balanced and detailed reflection on the information provided by written sources allied with an exhaustive technical analysis of the building, equipped with appropriate vocabulary, and comparing elements of Batalha with other monuments – starting with Portuguese case studies and moving beyond – while excluding previous work hypotheses. Watson was a pioneer in attributing specific work to Domingues and to Huguet, and in the assessment he makes about the formation of the latter:

Probably the plan of the church, and perhaps the eastern chapel and lower part of the transept, are the work of Afonso Domingues, and all the peculiarities, the strange windows, the cusped arches, the English-looking pinnacles, as well as all the constructive skill, are due to Huguet, his successor, who may perhaps have travelled in France and England, and had come back to Portugal with increased knowledge of how to build, but with a rather confused idea of the ornamental detail he had seen abroad (WATSON 1908: 90).

Walter Crum Watson's legacy would lay the foundations for the historiography of Portuguese Gothic architecture in the 20th and 21st centuries, with Reynaldo dos Santos, Vergílio Correia and Mário Tavares Chicó, the most important scholars in the period between 1927 and 1959. However, efforts to reconstruct Huguet's formation from the analysis of his work would not be undertaken again until the 2010s, while Afonso Domingos training has not yet been totally clarified.

In 1927, Reynaldo dos Santos, a physician and professor at Lisbon's Medical School, but who was also a remarkable art historian, had the merit of clearly differentiating between Afonso Domingues' work and that of Huguet in the monastery of Batalha, which is now acknowledged to not have been completed during the lifetime of the former. This is particularly relevant in what concerns Reynaldo dos Santos' assessment of the legendary chapter house, particularly his research on the walls and respective openings and façades, as well as the

vault, which he definitely attributes to Huguet. “It was therefore more natural that he, and not Afonso Domingues, should be the architect depicted on the southeast corner corbel” (SANTOS 1927: 675) (fig. 3). With Reynaldo dos Santos there was a break with the explicit reference to Herculano’s narrative of “A abóbada” in the art history *milieu*.



**Fig. 3.** An architect depicted on a corbel in Batalha’s chapter hall. Photograph: Pedro Redol.

With Correia and Chicó, architectural history will become a university field of study in Portugal at the Faculties of Arts in both Coimbra and Lisbon. The brilliant career of Chicó benefited from the visits he made to countless Gothic buildings throughout Europe, and was also affirmed by his participation in international academic production, beginning with his time at the École Nationale des Chartes in Paris between 1937 and 1939. Both Correia and Chicó recognized the pioneering spirit and the quality of Watson’s research conclusions, an unequivocal testimony to his intellectual honesty. Vergílio Correia mentions “the irreplaceable Watson” (CORREIA 1929: 25), while

Mário Chicó, forty years after the publication of his book, reminds us that Watson is “the author of the best overall work on our monuments” (CHICÓ 1944: 5). The contribution of Vergílio Correia and, in particular, that of Mário Chicó to the archaeological and formal comparative study of Gothic buildings was fundamental in the development of the argumentation that later was to sustain the characterization of Huguet’s artistic profile and an understanding of the circulation and exchange of knowledge in the late Gothic Portuguese sites, particularly Batalha. Thus, conditions were being created to overcome a simple binary way of thinking, conditioned mainly by the enduring and irreconcilable ideas of “national” and “foreign” origin powerfully crystallized in Herculano’s “A abóbada”.

However, in 1946, the Herculanian narrative was going to have a last reappearance, in a rather unexpected manner, with the publication of *Arte Portuguesa* (*Portuguese Art*) by João Barreira, a physician and, between 1919 and 1936, professor of aesthetics and art history at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Lisbon and at the School of Fine Arts also in Lisbon. The text he dedicates to the monastery in what was considered a work of reference reduces “the origins of Batalha” to the authorship of the basic project, claiming that it was a national monument. In his book, characterized by an ornate writing style resembling more a nineteenth-century piece of work, the author overlooks all the developments and achievements that Batalha’s historiography had accomplished during the one hundred years prior to the publication of *Arte Portuguesa*, including the most recent writings. Emphasizing Herculano’s short story, Barreira says of the master builder of Batalha:

This architect who we can now call Afonso Domingues was revered by a noble literary tradition, and embodies in that name all the efforts of successive generations just as the Greeks made Daedalus the symbol of the progressive effort of several hives of artists (BARREIRA 1946: 146).

And about the King who commissioned the work Barreira adds:

João I was no longer a nobleman merely fulfilling an individual vow, the King was the Messiah of a people fulfilling the aspirations of that ethnic group defining its robust organization and asserting its zealous independence (BARREIRA 1946: 148).

One inevitably questions the motivation behind such obsolete narrative, which becomes even more remarkable considering that its author created the



concept “artistic nomadism”. Barreira applies this concept to the so-called Manueline master builders, active during King Manuel I’s rule (1495-1521), to explain their work. He believed the work of this period resulted from a combination of different contributions originated in several western European regions, and as such Barreira denationalized the architectonic work. Bearing in mind that João Barreira neither sought nor received favours from the *Estado Novo* dictatorial regime (1933-1974), which favoured the Herculean version of events, his text on Batalha should be understood not only as a reflection of the late-Romantic ideals of the author’s generation (Barreira was born in 1866), but also as one of the components of unbalanced academic quality between his scholarly production and that of other researchers. Conversely, with enormous credit in the academic *milieu*, Reynaldo dos Santos may be considered, in the 1940s, the main representative of the State’s official ideology, through the narratives of art history, specifically those that developed the connection between Manueline artistic style and the Discoveries. Meanwhile in other social contexts, “A Abóbada” enjoyed one of the most popular periods of readership as an unquestioned narrative in History themed books used in primary school until as late as 1974. The short story presented in comic book style marks the school memories of most Portuguese who perceive it as the authentic narrative of Batalha’s chapter house.

After Chicó, the twentieth-century architecture historiography of Batalha follows the path opened by his research, but without innovating much in relation to work previously produced, continuing to be grounded upon the same dual premise of an opposition between “national” and “international” approaches (rather than “foreign” at this stage). This trend includes period overviews by Jorge Henrique Pais da Silva (SILVA 1986: 47-55), Pedro Dias (DIAS 1994: 119-127) and Paulo Pereira (PEREIRA 1995: 332-433), and several monographies by José Custódio Vieira da Silva (SILVA 1997)<sup>8</sup>. Ralph Gottschich’s dissertation, defended at the Technische Universität of Dresden in 2001 and published in 2012 is also part of this general trend (GOTTSCHLICH 2012).

Although the importance of Huguet’s work in Batalha and his foreign origin have been recognized by the majority of architecture historians during the twentieth century, clarification of the specific characteristics of his work in connection with his career and training, including his earlier apprenticeship was carried out consistently only by Jean-Marie Guilloët in the 2010s (GUILLOUËT 2010-2012; GUILLOUËT 2011). This was achieved on the basis of broad research about the location of Huguet’s earlier apprenticeship,

---

<sup>8</sup> Although in the same theoretical framework, the research by Vieira da Silva proposes new artistic connections to the former Crown of Aragon.

as well as about the territories he visited and where he worked on his path to Portugal. And last but not the least, his work in Batalha as a secondary master mason under the orders of Afonso Domingues was established through the analysis of the building itself<sup>9</sup>. This transnational approach, using the concept of “artistic interchange” opened possibilities for a dynamic understanding of the artists’ activity, previously hindered by the irreducible opposition of “national” *versus* “foreign/international” master builders that had its origin in nationalistic narratives, but above all under the influence of Herculano’s “A abóbada”.

## Conclusion

The results presented in this article are brief and an in-depth investigation would be necessary to further explore what has been presented here. The short story “A abóbada” was used, during the Portuguese liberal period, as a nationalist pedagogical tool. On the one hand it fostered the restoration of an old legend, and, on the other hand, it contradicted the idea disseminated by English antiquarians that the layout of the monastery of Batalha was of English authorship. The short story celebrates the virtues and merits of the Portuguese, and in particular of the master builder Afonso Domingues, contrasting with the vices and shortcomings of the British, namely the master mason Huguet. In addition, “A abóbada” includes a set of subtleties that pass, among other aspects, for irony in the evaluation of historical sources, letting transpire, at all times, both the historian’s craft and the clear ideological consciousness that Herculano is imbued with.

From 1840 on, the atmosphere created by the short story “A abóbada” greatly influenced the incipient Portuguese critique of Gothic architecture undertaken by a number of Portuguese and intellectuals from other countries, leading to the creation of a dichotomy pertaining to the monastery’s architectonic authorship: a national party in conflict with a foreign origin party, while from the 1940s on, foreign became “international”. The development of these ideas was not a continuous, linear or a uniform process rather it comprised major breaks in the advancement of knowledge production. However, these breaks did not prevent the emergence of innovations which, in most cases, took a long time to be considered by subsequent research. The works by Vilhena Barbosa, Sousa Viterbo and Watson fall into this category. From the early twentieth century, the theoretical and methodological development of architectural

---

<sup>9</sup> This aspect was discussed at length in REDOL and JORGE 2023.

historiography will blur the explicit references to Herculano's narrative, with some exceptions, as is the case with João Barreira. Although the analysis of Gothic architecture and, in particular, that of Batalha monastery remained polarised around the ideas of "national" and "international" origin until the early twenty-first century, this dichotomy was only fully supplanted with new approaches that allow for a more comprehensive understanding of Huguet's artistic personality, previously made impossible by the nationalist-grounded cleavage that persisted more than thirty years after the fall of the fascist regime in Portugal.

Future research should prioritise shedding light on the formation of Afonso Domingues' artistic character. Chicó had already suggested formal affinities between Domingues' work and the ambulatory of Lisbon cathedral, in which he recognises formal relationships with existing Portuguese buildings, while also making comparisons with the cathedrals of Toledo and Beauvais. It remains to corroborate the meaning of these formal comparisons through a broader investigation into the artistic interchange that it was likely to exist in such an ambitious and unusual work as was the monastery of Batalha at its foundation.

## Bibliography

- ALVES, Maria Luísa Fernandez (1989). *O Portugal de Julia Pardoe: uma visão romântica e feminina*. Lisboa: Instituto Nacional de Investigação Científica/Centro de Estudos Comparados de Línguas e Literaturas Modernas.
- ANDERSON, Benedict (1991). *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. London/New York: Verso.
- BARBOSA, Inácio de Vilhena (1886). *Monumentos de Portugal, historicos, artisticos e archeologicos*. Lisboa: Castro Irmãos.
- BARREIRA, João (1946). *Arte portuguesa: arquitectura e escultura*, vol. II. Lisboa: Edições Excelsior.
- BECKFORD, William (1835). *Recollections of an excursion to the monasteries of Alcobaça and Batalha*. London: Richard Bentley.
- CHICÓ, Mário Tavares (1944). "O problema das fontes de inspiração da igreja do Mosteiro da Batalha e a cabeceira Gótica da catedral de Lisboa", in *Arquitectura da Idade Média em Portugal: dois estudos acerca da igreja do Mosteiro da Batalha*. Lisboa: Instituto para a Alta Cultura.
- CONDEIXA, Visconde de (1892). *O Mosteiro da Batalha em Portugal/Le Monastère de Batalha en Portugal*. Lisboa/Paris: Manuel Gomes/Firmin-Didot & Cie.

- CORREIA, Vergílio (1929). *Batalha: estudo historico-artistico-arqueologico do Mosteiro da Batalha*. 2 vols. Lisboa: Litographia Nacional.
- DIAS, Pedro (1994). *A arquitectura gótica Portuguesa*. Lisboa: Editorial Estampa.
- FREW, John; WALLACE, Carey (1986). "Thomas Pitt, Portugal and the gothic cult of Batalha". *The Burlington Magazine*, 128, 1001, 579-585.
- GOMES, Saul António (2002). *Fontes históricas e artísticas do Mosteiro e da Vila da Batalha* (Séculos XIV a XVIII), vol. I. Lisboa: Instituto Português do Património Arquitectónico.
- GOTTSCHLICH, Ralph (2012). *Das Kloster Santa Maria da Vitória in Batalha und seine Stellung in der iberischen Sakralarchitektur des Spätmittelalters*. Hidesheim/ Zurich/New York: Georg Olms Verlag.
- GUERREIRO, Pedro Alexandre Martins (2016). *History, nation and politics: the Middle Ages in modern Portugal (1890-1947)*. Lisboa: Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas da Universidade Nova de Lisboa.
- GUILLOUËT, Jean-Marie (2009). "Les transferts artistiques: un outil opératoire pour l'histoire de l'art médiéval?". *Histoire de l'Art*, 64, 17-25.
- GUILLOUËT, Jean-Marie (2010-2012). "Le portail de Santa Maria da Vitória (Portugal) ou l'art européen à ses confins". *Revue de l'Art*, 168, 31-44.
- GUILLOUËT, Jean-Marie (2011). *Le portail de Santa Maria da Vitória de Batalha et l'Art Européen de son Temps: circulations des artistes et des formes dans l'Europe gothique / O portal de Santa Maria da Vitória da Batalha e a arte europeia do seu tempo: circulação dos artistas e das formas na Europa gótica*. Leiria: Textiverso.
- HERCULANO, Alexandre (1851). "A abóbada (1401)", in *Lendas e narrativas*. Lisboa: Viúva Bertrand e Filhos.
- KURMANN, Peter (1998). "Mobilité des artistes ou mobilité des modèles? À propos des modèles de l'atelier des sculpteurs rémois". *Revue de l'Art*, 120, 23-34.
- MARQUES, Ana Maria dos Santos (2012). *O Anacronismo no romance histórico português oitocentista*. Porto: Centro de Investigação Transdisciplinar Cultura, Espaço e Memória/Edições Afrontamento.
- MURPHY, James (1795). *Plans, elevations, sections and views of the church of Batalha*. London: I. & J. Taylor.
- MURPHY, James (1795a). *Travels in Portugal*. London: Successors to Mr. Cadell.
- MURPHY, Terrance Joseph (1972). "Alexandre Herculano's essays; parodies of reconstructions of the Portuguese past". *Revista de Letras*, 14, 199-209.
- ORTIGÃO, Ramalho (1896). *O Culto da arte em Portugal*. Lisbon: A. M. Pereira.
- PARDOE, Julia Pardoe (1833). *Traits and Traditions of Portugal Collected during a Residence in that Country*, vol. I. London: Saunders & Otley.

- PASSINI, Michela (2012). *La fabrique de l'art national: le nationalisme et les origines de l'histoire de l'art en France et en Allemagne, 1870-1933*. Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme.
- PEREIRA, Paulo (1995). *História da arte portuguesa*, vol. I. Lisboa: Temas & Debates.
- PORTER, Dale H. (1998). "The gold in Fort Knox: historical fiction in the context of historiography". *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 26, 2/3, 315-350.
- RECHT, Roland (1998). "La circulation des artistes, des œuvres, des modèles dans l'Europe médiévale". *Revue de l'Art*, 120, 5-10.
- REDOL, Pedro (2015). "Julia Pardoe, uma inglesa no Mosteiro da Batalha in 1827". *Cadernos de Estudos Leirienses*, 6, 211-226.
- REDOL, Pedro (2016). "William Beckford e o Mosteiro da Batalha". *Journal of Anglo-Portuguese Studies*, 25, 79-121.
- REDOL, Pedro (2021). "'A Abóbada (1401)', de Alexandre Herculano: antecedentes, receção, crítica histórica e ironia". *Anais Leirienses*, 10, 237-254.
- REDOL, Pedro; JORGE, Orlindo (2023). "The royal funerary chapels of Batalha: prestige, innovation and identity (1415-1515)", in *Loci sepulcrales: places of memory and burial in the Middle Ages*. Basel: Fédération Internationale des Instituts d'Études Médiévales, 85-114.
- ROSMANINHO, Nuno (1993). *A Historiografia artística portuguesa de Raczyński ao Dealbar do Estado Novo (1846-1935)*. Coimbra: Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Coimbra.
- ROSMANINHO, Nuno (s. d.), "História da arte (século XIX)", in *Dicionário de historiadores portugueses: da Academia Real das Ciências ao final do Estado Novo*. [http://dichp.bnportugal.pt/imagens/hist\\_arte.pdf](http://dichp.bnportugal.pt/imagens/hist_arte.pdf) [accessed on 02.10.2020].
- S. LUÍS, Brother Francisco de (1827). "Memoria historica sobre as obras do real Mosteiro de Santa Maria da Victoria", in *Memorias da Academia Real das Sciencias*, vol. X. Lisboa: Typografia da Academia Real das Sciencias, 1-71.
- SANTOS, Reynaldo dos (1927). *Guia de Portugal: Estremadura, Alentejo e Algarve*, vol. II. Lisboa: Biblioteca Nacional de Lisboa.
- SILVA, Jorge Henrique Pais da (1986). *Páginas de história da arte*, vol. I. Lisboa: Editorial Estampa.
- SILVA, José Custódio Vieira da (1997). *O fascínio do fim: viagens pelo final da Idade Média*. Lisboa: Livros Horizonte.
- SILVA, José Soares da (1731). *Memorias para a historia de Portugal, compreendendo o governo delrey D. João I*, vol. II. Lisboa: Officina de Joseph Antonio da Silva.



- SOUSA, Friar Luís de Sousa (1977). *História de S. Domingos*. Ed. by M. Lopes de Almeida. 2 vols. Porto: Lello e Irmão Editores.
- VASCONCELOS, Joaquim de (1905). *Batalha: Convento de Santa Maria da Vitória*. Porto: Emílio Biel & C.<sup>a</sup> – Editores.
- VITERBO, Sousa (1899). *Diccionario historico e documental dos architectos, engenheiros e constructores portuguezes*. 3 vols. Lisboa: Casa da Moeda - Imprensa Nacional.
- WATSON, Walter Crum (1908). *Portuguese architecture*. London: Archibald and Constable and Company.