

HEADING REPORT(H)A: The theatre of nature and the world

«Threatened by the sands of the Ocean sea!»: The Church of São Paio of Fão as an observatory for environmental changes (Fão, Esposende, Portugal)

Ana Isabel Lopes¹



Church of São Paio of Fão/Parish Church of Fão

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The parish church of Fão (41°30'44.2"N 8°46'21.9"W), a community in the northwest coast of Portugal (Esposende municipality), is a representative space of its population vulnerability and resilience against the «areias impelidas pelo vento» (literally «wind-driven sands») that destroyed the church and made agricultural fields infertile.

¹ Faculdade de Letras, Universidade do Porto (<https://flup.academia.edu/AnaisabelAlvesLopes>).

The primitive medieval church of Fão and its necropolis were buried by a sandstorm in the late 14th century (Cunha, 1994). A local legend says that during this "areosa" (sand storm) the population fled and took refuge in a higher place, but after their return to the inhabited place, nothing was left of their loved ancestral graves or their agriculture goods. The survivors began to excavate, starting from the riverside (Cávado river) and Faro mount, using the "masseira fields" technique, which implies digging wide and rectangular pits in sand dunes, and allows to shelter the cultures and houses from the winds and sands movements. This storm shaped a new riverside, and, as the population could not find their relatives and their assets, they built a wayside shrine for future memory, where a new parish church was then built (Lopes, 2019). Currently, the church does not show evidences of this wayside shrine because the works made in the second half of the 17th century only maintained part of the original plan.

Since the end of the 14th century, historical descriptions of the total destruction or severe degradation of several churches and, in extreme cases, the disappearance of villages, due to the occurrence of storms, marine submersions and a strong coastal sediment supply along the entire European Atlantic coast and North Sea, corroborate this local legend (Sarrazin, 2012). The destruction of the parish's sacred space led to the construction of a new building in an inner space, more protected from the "windy sands", which caused a new population settlement and a reconfiguration of the old parish space.

Between the 17th and the mid-nineteenth centuries, São Paio's church, was the most western point of the community and, therefore, more open to the sea and more vulnerable to the wind-driven sands. On certain occasions, the building was so buried that goats grazed in its roof (Chaves, 1924). Its serious degradation made impossible to perform church service, and the religious ceremonies were several times transferred to Lapa church (now Our Lady of Fátima) or to Bom Jesus church (Mariz, 1997).

In order to avoid sand accumulation and defend the church and the crop fields, local fiscal taxes on meat and wine consumption were collected (1587-1597, 1634-1644, 1662, c. 1750, 1826-1869), with royal authorization, to sustain the successive restoration works, that were, however, insufficient and worthless (Lopes, 2019). Similarly, the Esposende Municipality, the Parish Council and some local confraternities financed the

church's reconstruction works, which led to conflicts and disagreements about the reconstruction options and the works to be carried out (Mariz, 1999). Architecturally, the problem with the “windy sands” was minimized by the build of a frontal door on the opposite side to the Atlantic ocean, and by two walls, erected on the east and on the west side, having the newest construction (1839) 15 palms high (about 3,3 meters).

Moreover, in the 19th century, daily hired women and men put «empanadas» (wood stakes) on the south of the church, to prevent sand accumulation around it, mainly in the summer, when north winds occur more frequently in this territory. The workers also removed the sand piled up, from the south of the church to the north, near Cávado river, so that the current of the river could take the sand back to the Atlantic Ocean.

Historical records on sand accumulation and church damages, local taxes requests or even interventions records inform us about periods of more or less sedimentation, dunes movements or wind activity (Lopes, 2019), enabling the definition of losses and damages phases caused by climatic extremes and changes, which explain communities survival and allow to compare meteorological phenomena that occurred in this location with other realities in the North Atlantic, contributing to a broader analysis of European meteorological and environmental changes.

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