

RUBRICA REPORT(H)A: Environmental Stories

Friar João Baptista do Desterro (1760-1810):

The "agronomist" monk who transformed the seascape of north-west Portugal

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Figura 1 —São Romão de Neiva Monastery (Viana do Castelo)
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At the end of the 18th century, the instability of dune areas and the silting up of river mouths defined the landscape of the coast of north-west Portugal, as various descriptions of the landscape and local institutional documentation evidence. Since the end of the last century, there have been attempts to stabilize these areas, which were so volatile to the wind. However, it was only in the second half of the 18th century that coastal afforestation initiatives intensified.

Since the 15th century, the Congregation of St. Benedict of Portugal has been recording the loss of arable land along the Atlantic. Between the end of 1780 and the invasion of the Napoleonic armies, imbued with a spirit of the agronomic promotion, large plantations of pine trees were ordered in the so-called "Monasteries of the Sea",

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particularly in the Monasteries of São Romão de Neiva and São Martinho de Tibães, managed by a young monk.

Friar João Baptista do Desterro left no record of his thoughts, memories, or diary of his actions as an "agronomist" and administrator of the Benedictine patrimony. However, he left an extensive sign of his management in the documentation of the monasteries where he was receiver and procurator and an indelible mark on the landscape, still visible today to the north of the Neiva River and the south of the Cávado River. This cleric was born João Baptista da Silva on 17 February 1760 in São João da Ribeira (Ponte de Lima). He joined the Order of St Benedict in 1781 at the Monastery of Santo Tirso. The following year, he became a chorister in Refojos de Basto and, months later, moved to Rendufe to study philosophy. In 1783, he began his theological studies at the Monastery of Travanca. After finishing school in 1786, he became a preacher at the Monastery of Tibães. In 1787, he joined the monastery of São Romão de Neiva, where he was appointed monk receiver (in charge of income) and procurator of litigations (in charge of legal proceedings). In 1792, he combined these duties with the position of master builder, which he held until at least 1798.

Despite his short life, his actions for two decades proved decisive for the excellent management of the monasteries he passed through and for the permanent transformation of the coastal landscape. As monk-receiver, he was responsible for increasing the rents by enforcing old debts, restructuring the rents, and multiplying the monasteries' lands while always maintaining a friendly relationship with the peasants. The increase in the parcelled area was achieved by leasing land near the Atlantic and the maninhos, preventing these areas from being reserved solely for forestry, as had been the case in previous centuries. This decision on the commons made him take up the post of procurator of litigations. However, while individual or community pine forests were prevented in these areas, near the Atlantic, north of the River Neiva, the Monastery of São Romão de Neiva promoted the planting of pine nuts, both those that fell spontaneously and those that were bought.

As master builder and as a complement to his role as receiver, he had the stone threshing floor and the receipt room repaired. Nevertheless, he paid particular attention to the water supply. He had the lead pipes lifted and replaced with stone ones and demanded the annual cleaning of the roots ("raposos") that had accumulated and

damaged the aqueducts. He also brought water into the kitchen and changed the oil mill to a place with more water.

Due to the good results to the north of the Neiva River, in the final year of the 18th century, the head of the Congregation of St Benedict in Portugal, Friar Manuel de Santa Rita de Vasconcelos, invited Friar João Baptista to become procurator of the Tibães Monastery in the Couto de Estela e Mendo (Póvoa de Varzim), after 40 years of poor management and deterioration of the parish buildings.

In Estela, Friar João Baptista reformed all the land parcels and multiplied the areas that could be cultivated. Moreover, this monk built and improved the religious, residential, and agricultural buildings in less than a decade. In the first three years, he ploughed up several plots of land, making them produce around 200 bushels of cereals, and shared out the newly acquired land among the new peasants. The increase of land was achieved by converting the scrubland into cereal lands, draining the wetlands with a specially built water pump, and leasing the commons. The draining of the small water ponds was one of the most visible actions, and from 1800 until 1817, the waterlogged areas that became marshlands gave way to highly productive and valued arable land.

At the same time, the pine forest area was increased by more than 3,4 hectares to prevent the sands from advancing over the agricultural fields. Different pine species were used, mainly stone pine, which was used in smaller quantities than other species (maritime pine or Flanders pine). Pine trees were even transplanted from the Tibães green areas, where there were the only nurseries in the region.

In 1807, he returned to São Romão de Neiva as abbot and was exceptionally re-elected in 1810. Coincidentally, that same year, on the eve of celebrating the saint's birth bearing his name, he died of apoplexy.

Friar João Baptista do Desterro was a man of his time and aimed to maximise the agricultural and forestry use of the areas he managed. Without leaving a record of his ideas, it is evident the influence of physiocrats, which the Congregation of Saint Benedict of Portugal applied in all its monastic houses by increasing the arable area, using uncultivated areas and afforestation. The pine tree was one of the icons of this monk's endeavours to fix coastal areas and convert "deserts" into green areas. This project was not unknown to other local institutions and the population, who imitated him at the end of the 18th century, depending on their scale and the means at their disposal.

Suggested bibliography:

Lopes, Ana Isabel (2023). "Fighting drift sands with pine trees: Reforestation of coastal areas of NW Portugal at the end of eighteenth century.", *Journal of Coastal Conservation*, 27, article 42. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11852-023-00969-5>

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Note:

This text is the result of the article cited in the bibliography and participating in a talk ,last July, at the Monastery of São Martinho de Tibães, on agricultural innovations in Minho (18th century), during which a biobibliographical panel on Friar João Baptista do Desterro was inaugurated. This small exhibition, located next to the monastery's ticket office, was prepared with Anabela Ramos (researcher and Tibães monastery technician).

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