

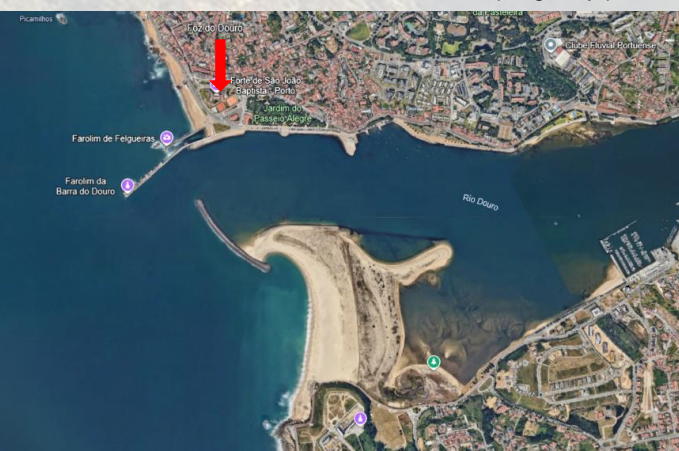
# #1340 'The Burials of the Church of São João da Foz: Pilgrimage and Funerary Symbolism'

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## Introduction

This study presents the burials unearthed at the Church of São João da Foz, within the Fort of São João Baptista (Oporto, Portugal). Funerary artefacts such as scallop shells (*Pecten maximus*) and jet figurines of Santiago suggest strong links to the Camino de Santiago, revealing how pilgrimage beliefs shaped burial practices and spiritual symbolism in medieval and early modern contexts. The Fortress of São João Baptista da Foz do Douro, commonly known as the “Castelo da Foz,” was built on a rocky promontory at the southwesternmost tip of the city of Porto, right at the mouth of the Douro River (Real et al., 1990: 1).



Chronology of the Church	Event
Prehistory	Evidence of prehistoric materials, a level of a clay floor with post holes
Roman Era	Roman altar integrated into the foundations of the small medieval hermitage
10/11th Century	Construction of a small rectangular hermitage (16 m) — beneath the current Fort of São João Baptista
1145	Donation of the hermitage by D. Afonso Henriques and D. Mafalda to the Premonstratensian Order
1211	Donation of the Couto da Foz to the Monastery of Santo Tirso
1527–1546	Demolition of the medieval hermitage to the construction of the new Renaissance church and adjoining building (design by Francesco da Cremona) by D. Miguel da Silva, Commendatory Abbot of the Monastery of Santo Tirso
1570–1578	Construction of the fortress, featuring four bastions, at the mouth of the Douro River
1640–1653	Transformation of the church into a military structure: Partial demolition of the church, leaving only the chancel, with the construction of a new outer wall and a moat (on the north and east sides)
1756	Masses are prohibited in the fortress chapel
1961	Deactivation of the Fort

(Real et al., 1990; Osório, 1994; Polido, 2013)

Archaeological excavations were concentrated inside the Renaissance church and some adjacent buildings (Dias et al., 1987: 1). This site comprises a complex architectural structure, as it brings together remains of various constructions that were successively demolished or adapted to new needs. There are three architectural ensembles present at this location: **the fortress**, which includes the group of four bastions and the surrounding “false-braga”; **the Renaissance church** and the building that is believed to have been designed as the residence of D. Miguel da Silva; **the pre-Romanesque church** and the adjoining “hospice” that housed the monks of the small Benedictine community (Real et al., 1991: 1; Osório, 2021; Osório, 1994).

At the Church of São João da Foz, two main phases of burials have generally been identified: a) from the 13th century to the late 15th century, in the medieval hermitage, the graves are stone-structured and, in most cases, covered with slabs; b) from the 16th to the 17th centuries, the graves are of the “covacho” type (pits dug into the ground without any type of covering), located in the Renaissance church (Real et al., 1991: 8; personal information from Isabel Osório). In both phases, several levels of burials were detected.

A total of 216 graves were excavated; however, many other graves were destroyed during various renovations of the site, and others were not excavated as they were located outside the area affected by the fortress redevelopment works (personal information from Isabel Osório). Some burials were cut through by later structures or interments. Several reductions were identified, carried out to allow for the reuse of the graves. An ossuary dating from the period of occupation of the medieval hermitage was also discovered, located in the northeast corner of the church nave (Real et al., 1989: 4).

The grave goods recovered, mostly dating from the second half of the 16th century, include coins, adornments, everyday items, and religious objects. Associated with the skeletons were several rosaries, generally made of wooden or paste beads, although most of the crucifixes were missing; the beads are usually arranged around the neck and resting on the chest.

**Three small jet sculptures of Saint James the Pilgrim (Santiago Peregrino) were found inside modern graves. Two scallop shells, also associated with the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, were identified—one of which was found over the bones of a skeleton’s hand** (Real et al., 1989: 15).

— Aerial view of the Castelo da Foz; — Area where excavations took place following the restoration of the fortress in the late 20th century; — Excavation plan revealing the foundations of the medieval hermitage; — Roman altar found in the wall of the small hermitage; — Grave still covered by stone slabs; — Grave formed by a simple stone-lined box; — Group of graves in “covacho” after skeletons were exhumed; — plan of the church and part of the fortress: red and yellow: 10th-11th to 15th centuries, orange: first half of the 16th century; gray: second half of the 16th and 17th centuries (courtesy of Câmara Municipal do Porto | DMCP – DMGPC).



The **scallop shell, *pecten maximus* or *pecten jacobaeus***, is one of the most enduring and recognizable symbols of the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. From medieval times, pilgrims arriving at the western edges of Galicia—lands perceived as liminal,—would collect scallop shells on the shores of Fisterra or buy them from vendors in Santiago. **These shells**, as recorded in Book III of the *Codex Calixtinus*, **functioned as devotional objects and proof of having reached the “last frontier of the physical world”** (Singul, 2018: 66–67). According to the *Codex Calixtinus*, pilgrims wore the shell on their cloaks or hats as a symbol of the virtuous life they were to lead after completing their journey, having been spiritually renewed through penance and ritual purification (Singul, 2018: 67). The shell was thus both souvenir and sacramental token, testifying to the pilgrim’s inner transformation. Folk legends surrounding the shell also reinforced its mystical associations. One popular Galician and Portuguese tale recounts how a Portuguese prince and his horse, swept into the sea, were saved by divine intervention and emerged miraculously covered in shells—interpreted as a sign of Santiago’s protection and the legitimacy of the pilgrimage (Fraguas, 1995: 7). Beyond its devotional and narrative roles, the shell also carried symbolic meanings deeply rooted in ancient traditions. As Ferro (1995: 93–94) explains, the shell’s association with femininity, fertility, and rebirth spans from classical mythology to the Renaissance. Venus, goddess of love, famously emerges from a shell, underscoring its role as a symbol of life and transformation. In early Christian iconography, shells adorned sarcophagi as **metaphors for resurrection and were later incorporated into baptismal rituals, linking the shell with spiritual rebirth—much like the rebirth experienced by the penitent pilgrim**. The shell’s visibility in Compostela’s material culture reinforces its emblematic power. It appears in funerary contexts—on gravestones and in pilgrim burials—as well as in ecclesiastical architecture and liturgical objects (Lafuente, 1995: 40–42). Thus, the scallop shell embodies multiple layers of meaning: it is a geographical marker, a devotional emblem, a commercial item, a mythic symbol, and an expression of personal transformation. As such, it encapsulates the profound cultural and spiritual significance of the Jacobean pilgrimage.



The collected remains include ceramics, ornaments, coins and pins. The oldest materials date back to the 10th–11th centuries. The ceramics range from the 10th–11th centuries to the present day, with a particular focus on the wide variety of shapes from the 16th and early 17th centuries. Ornamental objects include rings, earrings, **necklace beads**, uniform buttons and a buckle. Religious objects include: Three practically intact **rosaries**, rosary beads, **crucifixes**, **two scallop valves** and **several medals**. **Three small Santiago figurines made of jet**. Other objects include numerous pins for fastening shrouds and items of everyday use, such as thimbles and net weights made of rolled pebbles. There are also several coins (Dias et al., 1987; Real et al., 1988; Osório 1993). The second Scallop shell and the crucifix photos by ©Manuela Ribeiro.

**The burials of pilgrims to Santiago de Compostela reveal, in some cases, a significant set of personal objects that testify that even after completing the pilgrimage, some of these individuals were buried with items that identified them as pilgrims**, reflecting the profound spiritual significance of the journey and the desire to perpetuate that condition into eternity. This is the case with some of the burials at the Church of São João da Foz, where, alongside other devotional objects, **two scallop shells** and **three small jet figurines** were exhumed. These pieces are of rather simple and schematic craftsmanship (16th–17th centuries). One of them features a double perforation on the front. The pieces range from 4 to 5.5 cm in height (Menéndez Menéndez, 2024: 54; Osório, 2021: 39–40; Proyecto Azabache). **“It should be noted that these types of objects [Santigos], in addition to serving as a testimony or memento of pilgrimage and as a protective amulet for the return journey, may also have been purchased as souvenirs to later be given as gifts and worn—as adornment or amulet—by someone who had not undertaken the Camino themselves”** (Menéndez Menéndez, 2024: 54). Another small jet figurine of Santiago was unearthed during excavations of Metro do Porto construction works at Campo 24 de Agosto (Botelho & Gomes, 2004). Both the scallop shells and the **jet figurines could be found sewn onto garments or hats**, hanging from the belt or hat, or even placed alongside the body at the time of burial, as is the case **of the scallop shell discovered in the hands of the exhumed body at the Church of Castelo da Foz**.