

THE WORK OF ANTÓNIO MENDES COUTINHO – NOTES ON THE BAROQUE ARCHITECTURE IN LAMEGO AND VISEU

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ABSTRACT

António Mendes Coutinho, master mason and architect active in the Portuguese dioceses of Lamego and Viseu in the mid-1700s, is considered to be a disciple of the Italian architect Nicolau Nasoni, who had worked in the region of Porto. Mendes Coutinho is related to the construction of numerous of the most important examples of baroque architecture in the region of Lamego and Viseu, and is frequently indicated as the author of those projects. However, several authors also highlight the hypothesis that some of these works may have another authors, yet unknown and later succeeded by Mendes Coutinho. A careful observation of the chronology, documentation and characteristics of the various works allows the supporting of this hypothesis, as explained through this brief essay.

KEYWORDS

António Mendes Coutinho | Architecture | Lamego | Viseu | Baroque

INTRODUCTION

In the realm of 18th-century Portuguese architectural history, the northern regions stand out for their distinctive Baroque and Rococo characteristics. Among the notable figures in this domain, Nicolau Nasoni, born in Tuscany, Italy, holds a prominent position. His arrival in Porto in late 1725 marked the beginning of his influential role as a catalyst, promoter, and formulator of new architectural paradigms in the region's principal artistic hubs.

A figure often intertwined with Nasoni's narrative is António Mendes Coutinho, a master stonemason active in Lamego and Viseu during the mid-18th century. Coutinho's association with Nasoni is exemplified through their collaboration on the reconstruction of Lamego Cathedral, where the first worked as master stonemason and the second contributed by painting the vaults of the three naves. Mendes Coutinho's footprint extends further, as evidenced by his involvement in various architectural projects across the dioceses of Lamego and Viseu, including noble residences, the Church of the Sanctuary of Nossa Senhora dos Remédios in Lamego (built from 1750), and several churches in Viseu, such as those for the Oratorians of Saint Philip Neri, the Third Order of São Francisco, and Nossa Senhora da Conceição, all designed in 1757.

However, scholarly discourse offers alternative perspectives on Mendes Coutinho's role. M. Gonçalves da Costa and Lucinda Barros Pinto propose that Mendes Coutinho may have functioned solely as a master stonemason on certain projects, rather than as an architect. Their research suggests that while he may have contributed significantly to the construction of the Sanctuary of Nossa Senhora dos Remédios, the architectural design may have originated from an unidentified architect (Costa, 1986: 637; Pinto, 1997: 85). This debate underscores the complexities of attributing roles within historical architectural endeavors.

Through a careful examination of Mendes Coutinho's life trajectory and closely analyzing the architectural features of the structures he built, taking into account the chronology and the available documentation on these buildings, it becomes possible to delineate the extent of his participation both as a master mason and as an architect.

MENDES COUTINHO'S LIFE PATH

António Mendes Coutinho's birth and death records remain unknown, primarily due to the absence of corresponding documentation. Nevertheless, numerous references to his life can be found across various sources, with his application file for qualification to the Holy Office offering the most comprehensive insights into his background and professional milieu¹.

1. "Diligências de António Mendes Coutinho, homem de negocio, n.al da freg.º de São Miguel de Fontoura, tr.º de Vallença do Minho, Arcebisp.º de Braga, e m.os na Cid.e de Lamego, casado com Engracia Maria" – Torre do Tombo National Archive – PT/TT/TSO-CG/A/008-001/2931; Archive – TSO-CG, Habilitações, António, mç. 158, doc. 2495.

Dating from 1765 to 1766, this application process contains significant details about Mendes Coutinho's family origins, revealing his birthplace as Coronel in Fontoura (*São Miguel*), within the municipality of Valença. It also sheds light on the familial background of his wife, Engrácia Maria, who was born in Lamego.

The application dossier portrays Mendes Coutinho not only as an architect but also as a successful businessman based in Lamego. It notes his reputable leather store and substantial annual income. Furthermore, it attests to his property ownership, literacy, lack of illegitimate children, and age, indicating that he was born before 1720.

Additional insights into Mendes Coutinho's life are offered in M. Gonçalves da Costa's monograph of the Diocese of Lamego. It confirms his early settlement in Lamego, with records indicating his involvement in the cathedral's reconstruction from at least 1736. Initially serving as an official stonemason, he later ascended to the role of master stonemason, overseeing the site until at least 1754.

A notable detail highlighted by Gonçalves da Costa is a receipt from late 1738 for Cathedral work, signed by an intermediary colleague on Mendes Coutinho's behalf, because he did not know how to write (Costa, 1986: 585). This underscores doubts regarding his capacity to independently design complex projects merely a decade later.

Mendes Coutinho's marital union with Engrácia Maria on 15 April 1736, witnessed by fellow stonemasons João Martins and António Ribeiro, further solidifies his ties within the professional community attached to the cathedral's reconstruction (Costa, 1986: 324). Subsequently, on 20 March 1740 he established a company with his fellow master stonemasons in Lamego, João Lourenço, Manuel Monteiro Supico, and João Martins (Costa, 1986: 367).

In 1749-1750, Mendes Coutinho assumed the role of caretaker (*mordomo-zelador*) of the confraternity of Nossa Senhora dos Remédios in Lamego, maintaining this position until at least 1760 (Pinto, 1997: 84). These various roles and engagements provide a multifaceted portrait of his life and contributions within the architectural and social fabric of his era.

MENDES COUTINHO'S PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITY

The initial records of António Mendes Coutinho's activity emerge in conjunction with the reconstruction endeavors of Lamego's cathedral, commencing in the 1730s. Originating from the medieval era, the cathedral had significantly deteriorated by the early 18th century (Frias, 2013: 226). Despite the diocesan Chapter's efforts to engage Lamego's bishops, substantial renewal only commenced during the vacant seat period in 1733 (Frias, 2013: 226-227).

During this period, Lamego's Chapter summoned architect-carver Miguel Francisco da Silva from Porto in 1733 to draft a renovation or reconstruction plan (Frias, 2013: 227). However, in the subsequent year, architects António Pereira and Nicolau Nasoni, were also called upon for the same purpose (Frias, 2013: 228). Ultimately, António Pereira's proposal was chosen over Nicolau Nasoni's (Frias, 2013: 229). Pereira's design entailed a comprehensive reconstruction while preserving the Lamego cathedral's three-apsed internal layout, akin to the original structure.



Fig. 01. Church of the Nossa Senhora dos Remédios Sanctuary, Lamego, view of the oldest part of the façade (source: author)

Miguel Francisco da Silva, António Pereira and Nicolau Nasoni were renowned for their renovation of Porto's cathedral. This medieval building underwent extensive renovation during a period of vacancy within the Diocese of Porto, which took place from 1717 onwards. António Pereira started his work here in 1719 (Ferreira-Alves, 1987: I - 169), later joined by Nicolau Nasoni in 1725 (Ferreira-Alves, 1987: I - 105), and then by Miguel Francisco da Silva in 1727. Together, these three architects/artists collaborated on numerous enhancements to the cathedral and its attached buildings. Beyond the confines of the Porto cathedral construction site, these architects/artists had already left a relevant mark on Porto's cityscape by the time they were called to Lamego. António Pereira's notable contributions include the design of the São João Novo manor house, completed in 1725 (Ferreira-Alves, 1987: I - 151). It is likely that António Pereira was also responsible for designing the architectural plans of the Santo Ildefonso Church, where he worked as a master stonemason (Ferreira-Alves, 1987: I - 153). Nicolau Nasoni was the architect of the Clérigos Church, whose construction began in 1731. The first phases of construction of this church were supervised by Antonio Pereira and Miguel Francisco da Silva.

Lamego's cathedral underwent its first reconstruction phase from 1735 to 1739, focusing on the reconstruction of the three naves, embellished with vault paintings by Nicolau Nasoni, setting it apart from subsequent construction phases beginning in 1746 (Frias, 2020-21: 104).

António Mendes Coutinho assumed the role of master stonemason during the Lamego cathedral's initial reconstruction phase in 1736, alongside João Martins and António Ribeiro (Frias, 2013: 229), who were witnesses to his marriage to Engrácia Maria. Of all the master stonemasons engaged in the Cathedral's reconstruction, Mendes Coutinho maintained the longest tenure on-site. He also oversaw the subsequent phases of work involving the chancel, sacristy, dome, and the chapel of the Blessed Sacrament. During the 1750s, he secured contracts regarding the construction of several wooden carved altarpieces within the Cathedral's interior (Ferreira-Alves, 2008: 90).

Undoubtedly, Mendes Coutinho's association with the diocesan Chapter of Lamego led to his appointment as caretaker of the Confraternity of Nossa Senhora dos Remédios in 1749. By early 1750, he assumed responsibility for overseeing the construction of the new church at the Marian sanctuary, situated atop a hill near the city, a project initiated by Canon José Pinto Teixeira (Pinto, 1997: 65) [fig.01].

The original church, largely reflecting its present-day form, underwent some modifications in the 1800s, notably to the alteration of the facade's upper section, the erection of two bell towers, and an annex behind the sacristy. The construction embodies several key elements. The exterior facade is characterized by a square figure delineated by pilasters, crowned by an interrupted cornice, and raised by an irregular silhouette. Flanking it are distinct volumes comprising the nave, a lengthy low structure, and the chancel, towering with a pyramidal roof atop a quadrangular base [fig.02]. Inside, the nave features curved side walls converging at the triumphal arch, a notable architectural feature for the era [fig.03]. Additionally, the chancel boasts an octagonal floor plan, contributing to its unique interior layout. The ornate Rocaille-style sculptural embellishments adorning both the exterior facades and interior spaces are striking features of the church.

Scholars and historians posit various theories regarding the church's architectural authorship. While certain studies attribute the design to Nicolau Nasoni, some suggest that Mendes Coutinho worked solely as a master stonemason, executing plans crafted by an unnamed architect. The first hypothesis is deemed improbable by Gonçalves da Costa (Costa, 1986: 637). Lucinda Barros Pinto, aligned with da Costa's viewpoint, proposes António Pereira, known for his work on Lamego's cathedral naves, as the likely architect (Pinto, 1997: 93). However, the marked differences between this section of Lamego's cathedral and the Marian sanctuary church challenge such attributions.



Fig. 02. Church of the Nossa Senhora dos Remédios Sanctuary, Lamego, view of the lateral façade (source: author)



Fig. 03. Church of the Nossa Senhora dos Remédios Sanctuary, Lamego, view of the nave towards the chancel (source: author)

This church bears a striking resemblance to the chancel of Lamego's cathedral, whose construction works started merely four years prior. Notably, the curvature of the side walls as they approach the arch framing the main altarpiece mirrors the architectural configuration of the cathedral's chancel. Similarly, the posterior facade of the cathedral's chancel is structured around a square form, culminating in an irregular silhouette, akin to the sanctuary church's design. Moreover, both feature rocaille ornamentation, though the cathedral's adornments lack the lavishness of the sanctuary church.

Gonçalves da Costa speculates about a payment made to a friar from Coimbra, possibly indicating his involvement in the cathedral's post-1746 works (Costa, 1986: 589). Documentation reveals a payment to this friar on 2 July 1752, purportedly for the chancel and sacristy washbasin projects. However, since payments typically precede construction, this payment might pertain to the main altar plans, initiated concurrently, rather than the stonework, which concluded earlier.

Although Duarte Frias attributes the second phase of the cathedral's reconstruction to Mendes Coutinho (Frias, 2020-21: 104), aligning with Gonçalves da Costa and Barros Pinto's stance on his later endeavors, we assert that the master stonemason likely executed both of these works following a designs crafted by an unidentified architect. This supposition gains traction when comparing these works with Mendes Coutinho's later activities, particularly from the late 1750s, and considering the cultural context of the neighboring Diocese of Viseu.



Fig. 04. Third Order of São Francisco Church, Viseu, view of the façade (source: author)

Some architectural attributes that highlight the Nossa Senhora dos Remédios Church are indicative of a relationship with the dominant architectural culture in Viseu, such as the planimetric organization and its volumetric development. In Viseu there were already at least two religious buildings with octagonal chancels, namely the chapel of the bishop's summer house in Fontelo (Moreira, 2000: 89-90) and the Third Order of Nossa Senhora do Carmo Church, built in 1734-38 (Castilho, 2012: 170-173). The same planimetric organization appears on a third church in Viseu, namely the Third Order of São Francisco Church, built from 1757 until 1763 under the direction of Mendes Coutinho [fig.04].

The fact that this church was built seven years after the Nossa Senhora dos Remédios Church in Lamego suggests that the architectural design had already spread to the nearby diocese before Mendes Coutinho arrived in Viseu in 1757. However, further study of this church in Viseu provides valuable information for understanding this process.

In 1757, Mendes Coutinho undertook the task of reconstructing the Third Order of São Francisco Church in Viseu. It's worth noting that the religious order had previously initiated the construction of a church in 1746 (Castilho, 2012: 175). However, nearing the completion of the masonry work in the vault, structural issues emerged, leading to the cessation of construction. The unfinished structures were subsequently demolished, resulting in the suspension of the project for several years (Castilho, 2012: 176). Construction resumed in 1757 under Mendes Coutinho's supervision, as indicated by his role as an assistant in the contract for another project, the manor house Casa da Calçada (Castilho, 2012: 218).

The Third Order of São Francisco Church shares remarkable similarities with the Nossa Senhora dos Remédios Church in Lamego. These resemblances include the octagonal interior design of the chancel and its volumetric structure, echoing the sanctuary church in Lamego. Moreover, the paired windows on the front facade closely resemble those of the Marian sanctuary church, while the interior arrangement of windows and doors exhibits nearly identical patterns in both churches. Similarly, the ornamentation on the facade and chancel of this church are similar to that of Lamego's cathedral chancel. However, the nave and side facades feature simpler ornamentation compared to Lamego's sanctuary church.

This absence of elaborate ornamentation is also evident in two other churches in Viseu, both designed by Mendes Coutinho in 1757: the Nossa Senhora da Conceição Church and the church of the convent of the Oratorians of Saint Philip Neri. Barros Pinto argues that due to planimetric disparities, Mendes Coutinho cannot be solely credited as the architect responsible for the three churches in Viseu and the Lamego church (Pinto, 1997: 85).

The Nossa Senhora da Conceição Church is a modest structure built with limited resources and a small financial allocation. In turn, the church of the Oratorians is an important work of episcopal initiative. It is in 1757 that Viseu's Bishop D. Júlio Francisco de Oliveira decided to build a church for the Oratorians' convent [fig.05], choosing a plan designed by Mendes Coutinho out of six proposals presented to him by several proponents (Castilho, 2012: 165).

The Oratorians' church shares several features with Lamego's sanctuary church and the chancel of Lamego's cathedral. However, notable differences arise in the proportions of its facade, lacking the square proportion seen in those earlier works.



Fig. 05. Church of the convent of the Oratorians of Saint Philip Neri, Viseu, view of the façade (source: author)



Fig. 06. Church of the convent of the Oratorians of Saint Philip Neri, Viseu, view of the nave (source: author)



Fig. 07. Church of the convent of the Oratorians of Saint Philip Neri, Viseu, view of the chancel (source: author)

Within the interior, the curving walls of the nave converge towards the triumphal arch, akin to Lamego's sanctuary church, albeit without its elegant geometry [fig.06]. Similarly, the side walls of this church, along with the Nossa Senhora da Conceição Church and the nave of the Franciscans' church, lack rocaille ornamentation.

The chancel of the Oratorians' church features large windows and doors, echoing designs seen in Lamego's cathedral and the Nossa Senhora dos Remédios Church. However, there is once more an absence of ornamentation and an impoverishment of proportions [fig.07]. Additionally, the overabundance of windows in a confined space leads to compositional redundancy, where various elements clash with each other. These characteristics persist in Mendes Coutinho's later architectural works.

In summary, while Lamego's buildings showcase ornate stonework with rich architectural details, the Oratorians' church lacks such embellishment. Instead, there is an overemphasis on decorative architectural elements, resulting in redundancy—an aspect absent in Lamego's architectural landscape.

Comparing the four churches analytically, Barros Pinto contends that the churches at Lamego's sanctuary and Viseu's Oratorians building exhibit the greatest similarity, notably in the curvature of their nave side walls. However, Barros Pinto does not explore, likely due to insufficient data, the notable resemblance between the chancels of Lamego's sanctuary and Viseu's Franciscans churches, nor the similarities in the arrangement of windows and doors along their nave walls. Despite this, Barros Pinto's conclusions hold merit, particularly in highlighting the likelihood that Mendes Coutinho solely served as a master stonemason in the construction of Lamego's Marian church, executing a design conceived by another architect.

Given these disparities, we posit that the architect of Lamego's Marian church was not Mendes Coutinho but another author who had knowledge of Viseu's architectural traditions, particularly centralized chancel organization, as evidenced in the Carmelite church in Viseu, a model replicated in Lamego twelve years later.

Nevertheless, uncertainty persists regarding the authorship of the Franciscan Church of Viseu's project, prompting two hypotheses. The first suggests that the 1746 project for this church was the work of the unidentified architect behind Nossa Senhora dos Remédios Church and Lamego cathedral's chancel. Under this premise, Mendes Coutinho likely simplified and revised the 1746 design in 1757. The second hypothesis posits that Mendes Coutinho was the sole architect of the final church design, disregarding any previous plans.

Several factors incline us toward favoring the first hypothesis over the second. Notably, the ornamental stonework in Viseu's Franciscan church bears a closer resemblance to that of Lamego's church than to the Oratorians'. Additionally, the sculptural motifs in these two churches share more similarities with the ornamental elements adorning Casa do Cimo de Vila, a manor house erected in Viseu in 1747 by José Ribeiro Alves, the master stonemason responsible for the unfinished Franciscan church and son of António Ribeiro, who collaborated with Mendes Coutinho on the reconstruction of Lamego's cathedral. This suggests that the ornamental stonework pieces originally intended for the 1746 construction were reused in 1757. Documentary evidence indicating the interruption of the initial construction during the final phase of stonework further supports this hypothesis. It's plausible that the first project for the Franciscan church in Viseu served as a reference for Lamego's Nossa Senhora dos Remédios Church, explaining the introduction of the chancel's planimetric model to the city devoid of prior local tradition.

Conversely, it seems improbable that Mendes Coutinho would employ such elaborate ornamentation and meticulous proportions on the facade of the Franciscan church in Viseu but not in his other projects.

FINAL NOTES

In tracing the trajectory of António Mendes Coutinho's professional path, the church of the convent of the Oratorians of Saint Philip Neri emerges as a pivotal milestone, heralding a discernible shift in the architectural characteristics of his works as a master stonemason. Historical records unequivocally attribute the project to Mendes Coutinho as the architect of the church, thereby affirming his distinctive ornamental and architectural preferences. This significance is magnified when contrasted with his attribution solely as a master stonemason in the church of Lamego's sanctuary, and his speculated involvement in salvaging the Franciscans' church in Viseu from the ruins of an abandoned 1746 endeavor.

Our analysis posits that Mendes Coutinho perpetuated the legacy of an anonymous architect active in the region south of the Douro until the early 1750s, whose oeuvre epitomized rocaille ornamentation and intricate spatial design, exemplified in structures like the Nossa Senhora dos Remédios Church and the chancel of Lamego's cathedral. Consequently, we discern two distinct phases in local Baroque architecture: one preceding the mid-1750s, during which Mendes Coutinho functioned solely as a master stonemason; and another thereafter, marked by his dual role as both master stonemason and architect, wherein he streamlined architectural paradigms established in the earlier phase.

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