

Alfândega da Fé

Igreja Matriz de Sambade



Mother Church of Sambade

An edified impression of the economic strength of other times



Sambade is the largest village in the municipality of Alfândega da Fé and its origins are remote. The name “Sambati” appears in documents of the 10th century, and it is assumed that the toponym may have derived from the name of a priest who lived in Asturias in the 7th century, and became notable for fighting the heresy of monothelism. This is not enough, however, for understanding that the parish church of this parish has especially generous dimensions in view of the size of the village, surpassing the mother church of the seat of the municipality in grandness. We have to understand the economic dynamism that existed there in other eras and that, in the 18th century, led the local people to erect such a temple, consistent with necessity and statute. It was the wool combing capital of Trás-os-Montes, and it collected great wealth thanks to the wool trade.



↑ Mother Church of Sambade

It is not known when the construction of the mother church of Samba-de began, nor who designed it. It is presumed to be the work of artists who operated in the region. It would be ready in 1798, although there are works that have continued in the 19th century, such as interior paintings (triumphal arch, ceiling, chancel) and the construction of altarpieces. It is also credible that the church was built precisely on the site where there had been a previous one, presumably Romanesque, whose stones were certainly reused: if we compare the granite on the floor of the chancel with the slab of other parts of the temple, the clearly different degrees of wear indicate the presence of an older stone.

It is also known that the church was built at the expense of the population. It is deduced, from the documentation, that financing came through the Confraternity of Souls and, eventually, other organizations. And it will have taken its time, precisely because of the costs involved in this work, where we can find Baroque, Rococo and Neoclassical elements. It was de-



The main altarpiece, white with golden details, boasts a clearly Neoclassical aesthetic, posterior to the lateral and collateral altars, in Rococo style



dedicated to Our Lady of the Assumption, patron saint of the parish, whose marble image can be appreciated from the outside, in a niche installed on the back facade.

Among the curiosities of this building, classified as a Monument of Public Interest, we point out, at the top of the portal, a scallop with an interrupted semi-circular pediment, which can be seen only as a decorative element proper to the Rocaille style (Rococo is a somewhat derogatory term, invented in the 19th century, which merges the French “rocaille” with the Italian “barocco”), but which some speculate to be an attempt of associating Sambade with the Way of Saint James (although we

do not find references to the apostle in the iconography or the statuary). Actually, the shells can be found in other places of the church, such as the outer niche mentioned above, as would be expected in view of the dominant taste of the time.

The side (and collateral) altarpieces, polychrome, are from the late 18th century, clearly Rococo, while the main altarpiece, in white carving with gold details, was created later (it reads the date of 1830) and it already reflects the Neoclassical style. On the ceiling of the chancel, shorter and narrower than the nave, we can observe paintings depicting Jesus Christ and the four evangelists. We should also mention the two confronting pulpits, in granite, and the five confessionals embedded in the walls.

At the high choir, there is another detail that provides unusual grandeur to a village parish church, accessed by the same spiral staircase that leads to the top of the bell tower. Attached to the body of the church is the vestry, to the left of those looking at the façade; to the right, there is a space known as the House of Souls.





The single nave church was finished in 1798, but much of the art it contains is of the 19th century



Land of wood combers on the slope of the Bornes range

The parish of Sambade, extended under the tutelary figure of the Bornes range (or Monte Mel range), is the second largest in Alfândega da Fé and it has pastoralism and agriculture, particularly the production of chestnuts, as the main activities. In other times, however, it had an important economic role, not only local but also regional, which inevitably fell from the beginning of the 19th century, failing the transition of the statute that it had developed over centuries to an industrial level: it was the main wool and linen production center in a vast territory, with more wool combers there than in the rest of what became the district of Bragança. Today, the dynamics are different, but the past is respected as a cement of identity: next to the mother church, in an old primary school, the Center for Interpretation of the Territory was installed. It is a museum space for the dissemination and defense of local heritage and culture.





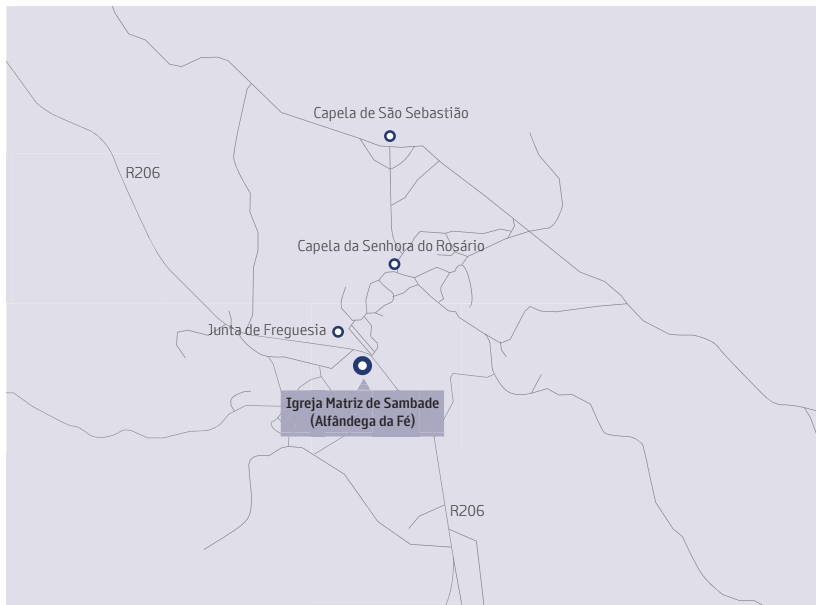


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