

Paleobiological study of the convento of Santa Maria da Consolação.

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ABSTRACT

On November 6 of 1491 the convent of Santa Maria da Consolação is officially founded, in the city of Porto, becoming the 6th convent belonging to the order of Saint John Evangelist in Portugal. Although relatively small, it soon became one of the most important convents of this order in Portugal, having gone through some stages of renovation to increase its dimensions. By the year 1788 it is already considered one of the wealthiest convents of the city. A few years after the Liberal Revolution, it is demolished and the sold area was turned into a Palace.

The convent was located in the Largo das Cardosas in downtown Porto, an area which is being object of a rehabilitation project that aims to promote residence and tourism through the renovation and construction of new facilities. A Preliminary report was done during the exhumation of the remains, based solely on the skeletal material removed from the ossuaries and coffins. The site held evidence of Christian burial practice with multiple reuse of the graves, and the materials recovered placed made possible to place the site in a 18th century timeline.

Keywords:

Paleobiology; burial; crypt; cloister

RESUM

El 6 novembre de 1491 el convent de Santa Maria da Consolação és oficialment fundat en la ciutat de Porto, convertint-se en el sisè convent pertanyent a l'ordre de Sant Joan Evangelista a Portugal. Encara que relativament petit, aviat es va convertir en un dels convents més importants d'aquesta ordre a Portugal, després d'haver passat per algunes etapes de remodelació per augmentar les seves dimensions. Al voltant de l'any 1788 ja és considerat un dels convents més rics de la ciutat. Pocs anys després de la Revolució Liberal, és demolit i la superfície venuda va esdevenir un Palau. El convent estava situat en el Largo das Cardosas el centre de Porto, una zona que està sent objecte d'un projecte de rehabilitació que té com a objectiu promoure la residència i turisme per mitjà de la renovació i construcció de noves instal·lacions. Un informe preliminar fou realitzat durant l'exhumació de les restes basant-se únicament en el material ossi extret dels osseres i els taüts. El lloc té proves de la pràctica cristiana sepultura amb la reutilització de les tombes múltiples, i els materials recuperats col·locat possible per posar el lloc en una línia de temps del segle 18.

Paraules Clau:

Paleobiologia, enterrament, cripta, claustre.

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THE CONVENT OF SANTA MARIA DA CONSOLAÇÃO : FROM CONVENT TO PALACE

The city of Oporto has always had a strong presence of Christian Catholic religious orders throughout the years, some of which have played an important role in the city, not only at their traditional religious and social level but also in the politics of the city, in this case, acting essentially as mediators between local and central power.

In the year 1490 a wealthy widow D. Viloante Afonso wants to donate part of her possessions to a small chapel, with the purpose of having a burial place. She is persuaded by the bishop of Oporto D. João de Azevedo to contribute instead for the building of a new convent in the city to implement the order of Saint John Evangelist.

After receiving several other contribution for the construction of the convent and with the consent of the Pope, on 6 November 1491 the Convent of Santa Maria da Consolação is officially founded, thus becoming the 6th convent of the order in Portugal.

The convent was relatively small in the dimensions of its dormitories and cloister, having around 30 members living in cloistral confinement.

Due to several pious donations and contributions (ie. Tithe) from its various associated chapels, it became one of the most important convents of this order in Portugal, with capacity to house 35 members and being compared in profits to the head of congregation in Lisbon.

In 1592 the convent started a new stage of construction to increase its dimensions. Later, by the year 1788 the convent was considered one of the wealthiest convents of the city albeit

the smallest and most aged, the plans for a new stage of renovation were cut short by the Liberal Revolution of 1828 that prohibited the presence of religious orders in Portugal. Later in 1837 the convent and church were demolished and the northern side of the area was bought by a rich Brazilian capitalist named Manuel Cardoso Santos who turned the purchased area into a palace known as the Palacio das Cardosas.

EXCAVATION AND EXHUMATION OF THE REMAINS

The convent used to be located in the Largo das Cardosas which is part of the downtown area of the city of Oporto. The City Hall alongside the SRU- “Sociedade de Reabilitação da Baixa Portuense SA” aims to rehabilitated the city’s downtown by reconstructing and building new facilities to promote both residence and tourism on that same area. The entire block that once corresponded to the convent and palace will be turned into a hotel and a public parking lot.

The construction work was preceded by the excavation of the site, which was carried out by the archeological company LOGIARK. The area of intervention was limited to the dormitories, cloister and church/crypt of the Convent of Saint Eloy. The exhumation of the skeletons was carried out by anthropologist Inês Elias and by the author.

Preliminary analysis during field work

The preliminary analysis done during the field work did not take into account the bones from the sediments of the upper layers that had been previously removed. So the figures amounted to 31 burials with 16 ossuaries. In what the burials were concerned 20 belonged to adults and 11 subadults. Of the adults, 12 were determined male, 2 female, and 6 were undetermined. However, when the bones from the sediments of the upper layers are taken into account the figures increase reasonably.

Funerary Anthropology

In most cases the bodies had been laid on their backs with the head toward the east and feet toward the west – with minor variation to accompany the structure of the cloister. The hands were placed above the body mostly over the waist, the feet were usually found placed parallel to each other. In most cases the body was placed inside a wooden coffin in the center of the grave occupying most of its space, with the ossuary piled up around it. Some of the subadults were buried at the same level, one at each end of the grave. In the case of the crypt it is possible that some of the children had been buried in a shroud or possibly with some ornament due to the high number of metal pieces resembling pins that were found mostly around the head.

It was determined that the ossuaries were formed due to constant reutilization of some of the graves, which led to the need to push aside the last skeletal remains from a previous burial to accommodate a new coffin.

Some items of clothing such as shoes and fragments of textile were found as well as religious medals, coins, rosary beads, and part of the inner lining of the coffins.

Assessment of Context Timeline and burial practice

The materials found at the graves consisted in crucifixes, rosary beads, coins, medals, shoes and small fragments of clothes. They are consistent with an 18th century chronology and are similar to the materials found during the excavation of a graveyard belonging to the convent of Carmelites that was considered to date back to the 18th century.

It was possible to observe a difference between the treatment of the corpses of the crypt and cloister, being that in the first all the skeletons showed evidence of lime, on the other hand, in

the graves from the cloister very few individuals had evidence of such treatment.

Tafonomic alterations

In what concerns tafonomical changes, it was possible to observe the presence of roots, the influence of the humidity of the soil and in the case of the coffins there's evidence of decomposition in open space (container). There was also evidence of contact with iron and metals. It was also observed that some small objects (like nails from coffins etc) often got stuck to the bones.

It was possible to observe the presence of faunal bones mixed with human bone especially in those considered sedimentary bones.

PALEOBIOLOGY OF THE BURIED POPULATION: PERSPECTIVES OF AN ONGOING STUDY

This study is being done in the context of a masters dissertation, and aims to make the paleobiological assessment of a total of approximately 75 individuals belonging to the population exhumed from both the Convent's crypt and cloister. This number was calculated adding the numbers of the estimated minimum number of individuals of all the ossuaries and sedimentary bones to the number of skeletons buried in coffins.

The sample

The sample is composed by adult males and females, and subadults – children infants and fetuses. Of those 75, 56 correspond to adults and the remaining 19 to subadults. They result from 19 burials in wooden coffins, 4 ossuaries and sediments removed from the upper layers.

This study comprises two different situations found at the site, burial in wooden coffins and ossuaries (reductions), and also sedimentary bones - that were removed by the archaeologists before we started the exhumation.

Considering that the site was a masculine convent we expected to be before a selected population consisting of mostly male adults with possible some degree of degenerative pathology. However, it is known that patrons and other people from the higher ranks of society that gave pious donations throughout the course of their lives often had the right to be buried within the convent grounds.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

As it was already mentioned this is an ongoing study that aims to provide an accurate portrayal of the paleobiological profile of the population buried in this convent, through the determination of age at death, sex, average height, general state of health and the recording of some morphological traits.

The current analysis comprises 56 (74.6%) adults and 19 subadults (25.3%) consisting of a total of 75 individuals exhumed from the convent. For the most part, the sample it is possible to observe the prevalence of male adults over the fourth decade of life, followed by a relatively high number of subadults under the age of 5 years, and some women.

In terms of pathological conditions, the most predominant is degenerative, but there are some cases with evidence of traumatic lesions, infections and a few cases of neoplastic lesions. Most of the degenerative lesions were found in the vertebral column and in the bones of the hands and feet, there was also evidence of ankylosis of the sternum with the first costal rib and of the knee joint. Traumatic lesions consisted in bone formation (callus and remodeled fractures). In the case of infectious disease it was possible to note the presence of active periostitis specially in the tibiae, and a few cases of osteomyelitis affecting the tibia and a ulna in the case of the adults, in what concerns the subadults it was observed bone deposition on the long bones and in some cases on the shoulder

blade. In terms of neoplastic pathology it was possible to observe benign tumors (button like osteoma)

Concerning Oral pathology 202 teeth were analyzed, of which 149 were found isolated and 53 found in situ (in a total of 14 comprising 11 mandibles and 3 maxillas). There was found evidence of tartar in 70 teeth (34.6% of the total number of teeth studied), caries in 45 teeth (30.2%) periodontal disease (15%), and ante-mortem tooth loss in 9 specimens (64.2%), of which 7 (50%) involve the loss of more than two teeth, of the total of 14 mandibles and maxillas.

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