



## Sanctuaries and accessibility: the case of the Douro region, Portugal

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**Summary** - Most sanctuaries in the Douro region are high and isolated. Pilgrimages and festivals take place there that, at times, involve hundreds of people. As in the past, access, both in and around the sites, is difficult. Even so, International treaties and Portuguese legislation proclaim that all citizens, whatever their disability, have the right to have access to these locations. Here, we analyse the current situation and discuss possible solutions to the problems.

**Keywords:** Accessibility / Douro / Sanctuaries / Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

**Resumo** - A maioria dos santuários na região do Douro estão localizados em locais altos e isolados e são objecto de peregrinações e romarias nas quais participam por vezes centenas de pessoas. Como no passado não só o seu acesso mas também a sua acessibilidade nas proximidades é difícil. Os tratados internacionais e a legislação portuguesa proclamam no entanto que todos os cidadãos seja qual for o seu grau de incapacidade tem o direito de ter acesso a esses locais. Fazemos aqui análise da situação actual e discutimos quais podiam ser as soluções para os problemas detectados.

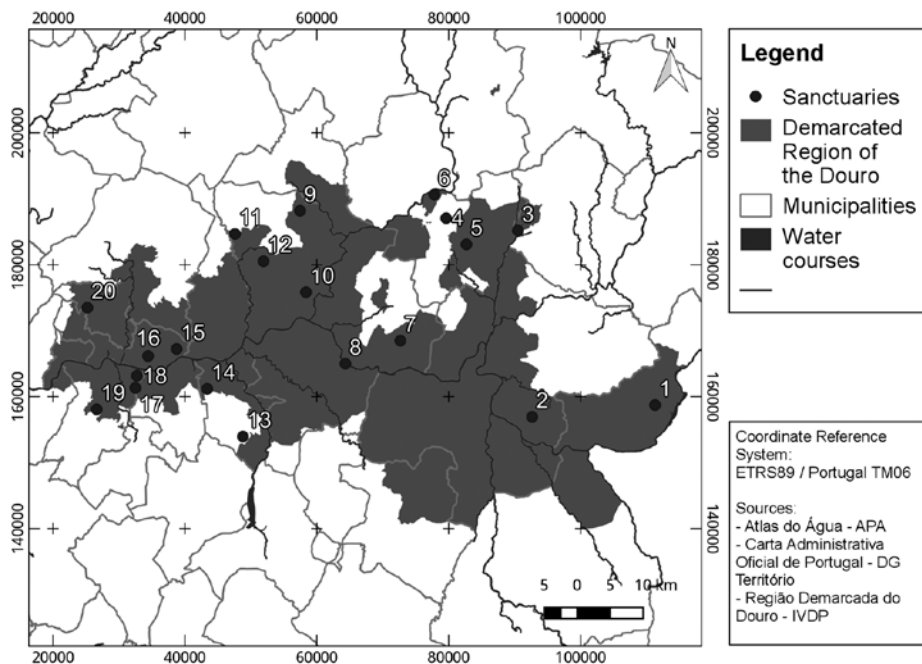
**Palavras chaves:** Acessibilidade / Douro / Santuários / Convenção sobre os Direitos das Pessoas com Deficiência

*À proa dum navio de penedos,  
A navegar num doce mar de mosto,  
Capitão no seu posto  
De comando,  
S. Leonardo vai sulcando...  
Diário IX-XII, 51  
Miguel Torga*

### INTRODUCTION

Most of the Catholic sanctuaries known in the Douro region of Portugal are in high places. There are two salient reasons why this is so.

The first reason is because there is an almost universal notion that the top of the mountains – being close to the sky – are close to God or to Heaven. In many religions, Mountains play an important role (Espírito Santos 2014) They are the home of Gods and Goddesses such as Mount Olympus for the Greeks or Mount Etna, the abode of Vulcan, for the Romans. A single mountain can be sacred for several religious like Mount Sinai, now in Egypt, Holy for the Hebrews, Christians or Muslims, or the mountain of *Kailāśa* (कैलाश), in our days under the Chinese rule, the resting place of for the Shiva family for the Hindu or home of the Buddha Demchok for the Tantra Buddhist. In the Judaic-Christian tradition, with roots in the Old Testament, the word “*bamah*” תּוֹמָב or “*banot*” תּוֹמָבו (plural) refers to a natural or artificial raised space devoted to the cult and was often used as synonymous of place of worship or sanctuary. Many of these high holy places were in the past, and often in the present, the destination of pilgrimage and other types of religious festival. (Duarte & Abreu 2016).



#### *The Sanctuaries of the Douro Region studied*

1. Nossa Senhora dos Montes Ermos 2. Santo Apolinário 3. Nossa Senhora dos Anúncios 4. Nossa Senhora da Assunção 5. Nossa Senhora da Lapa 6. Nossa Senhora dos Remédios 7. Nossa Senhora da Costa 8. São Salvador do Mundo 9. Nossa Senhora da Piedade 10. Nossa Senhora dos Aflitos 11. Santa Bárbara 12. Nossa Senhora da Piedade 13. Santa Luzia 14. Nossa Senhora do Sabroso 15. São Leonardo da Galafura 16. Nossa Senhora das Candeias 17. São Domingos 18. Santa Eufémia 19. Nossa dos Remédios 20. Nossa Senhora do Viso.

The difficulty of the access to the lieu of many sanctuaries frequently is seen as a fundamental part of the spiritual journey of the pilgrim or devotee. Although not necessarily approved by the Church, this can include people going along the path on their knees.

The second reason why high places are chosen to build churches in the Douro is clearly a matter of land organization. The territory of the Upper Douro is characterized by deep Quaternary valleys. On the riverbanks of the Douro and its tributaries, lower areas are often given over to vegetable plots, where one can find orange and other fruit trees. Land lying between the flood line and 200 to 250 metres is largely covered by vineyards surrounded by olive trees. Wine production started long ago, probably even before the Romans arrived. In 1756, the Marquis of Pombal, Prime Minister of King José I, created the *Região Demarcada do Douro* – the oldest DOC region in the world. Wine exported from the area became renown around the word as “*vinho do Porto*” (Port wine). It is still possible to find vineyards with fruit trees like almond, peach and cherry in higher areas of the region that lie between 250 to 500 metres. From that altitude to the tree line at 1100 to 1200 metres, one can find different oaks and similar trees and also, in the



Fig. 1 - Adapted from Accessible Portugal (<http://www.accessibleportugal.com/en/>)

recent decades, pine and eucalyptus. In 2001, UNESCO declared 240,000 hectares of the area a World Heritage site, classifying it as a “cultural landscape”.

#### THE UPPER DOURO SANCTUARIES

In the Upper Douro, most of the twenty known Catholic sanctuaries were built in remote places at 500 to 750 metres above sea level, mainly above and beyond cultivated areas with vineyards and olive trees (Duarte & Abreu 2016). They are generally visible from far away and today are magnificent viewpoints of the Douro landscape such as São Leonardo da Galafura (Fig. 1) and the sanctuary of *Nossa Senhora da Piedade* of Alijó overlooking the Marão-Cabreira-Leomil mountain range. Exceptions include the urban sanctuaries of *Nossa Senhora das Candeias* of Peso da Régua and *Nossa Senhora dos Remédios* of Lamego.

The origin of the Douro sanctuaries is lost in time and in many cases may have roots in prehistoric times, such as at *São Salvador do Mundo* of São João da Pesqueira (Fig. 2). Nevertheless, most of the buildings one can see today were constructed during the Baroque period. In Portugal, the beginning and middle of the seventeenth century was an epoch of great wealth and devotion when many churches and monasteries were built all over the country. The Douro sanctuaries, excepting *Nossa Senhora dos Remédios* of Lamego, are more modest than those of the Minho or Porto regions, but follow the same architectural grammar. Often, they have more than one building (a small chapel) and from the architectural point of view are humble. Even if simple in their architecture, they have ornate and quite elaborate granite elements can be found in many of the façades. Gold and precious stones from Brazil decorate many of the altars. In cases like the sanctuary of *Senhora da Piedade* in Sanfins do Douro, natural-sized wooden statues can be found inside.

#### ACCESS FOR ALL?

The question that started this study is “why talk about accessibility regarding such special places as the sanctuaries of the Douro?” There is a misconception that sees accessibility as a problem only to people with some kind of permanent disability, especially those that cannot walk. Even so, we know that almost all of us have had or will have some kind of temporary impairment. This can include the consequences of an accident or temporary illness, pregnancy, etc. In our days, this can be a problem for an increasing number of people such as the elderly, obese or even parents with children. Disability is a quite controversial concept, so we will not use it because it has different meaning in different cultures and includes kinds of impairment that can be physical, mental, cognitive, intellectual sensory and even of development. We shall deal with “accessibility” in *census latus*, so having in mind people that have difficulties with walking, see-



ing, hearing or talking. In recent decades, the right of full accessibility to all, everywhere, is being defended by international law and this must be addressed in full and in all places.

#### INTERNATIONAL AND PORTUGUESE LAW

When, on the 13 December 2006, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the text of the “The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities”, a new chapter on “Human Rights” opened, with the first Human Rights treaty of the third Millennium signed by 160 signatories and 164 parties (including the European Union).

Article 30 recognises the right to “*Participation in cultural life, recreation, leisure and sport*”. Point 1 clearly mentions “*States Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to take part on an equal basis with others in cultural life, and shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that persons with disabilities:*

- a. *Enjoy access to cultural materials in accessible formats;*
- b. *Enjoy access to television programmes, films, theatre and other cultural activities, in accessible formats;*
- c. *Enjoy access to places for cultural performances or services, such as theatres, museums, cinemas, libraries and tourism services, and, as far as possible, enjoy access to monuments and sites of national cultural importance.”*

Portugal ratified the convention on the 7 May 2009 and today has a strong framework of laws with several *Decretos-leis* (see list below).

#### ACCESSIBLY IN THE DOURO SANCTUARIES

Of the twenty sanctuaries (map 1) studied, at present there are no facilities or materials are provide for the blind or deaf-mute. Access is a major problem in most of them and this affects a large group like motor impaired people in wheel-chairs, the blind and those with reduced mobility such as the elderly, pregnant and families with children.

#### List of sanctuaries of the Douro region

Nº	Municipality	Nome of sanctuary	Access to sanctuary	Access to inside of the church
1	Freixo de Espada à Cinta	Nossa Senhora dos Montes Ermos	Yes	Yes - Small Step
2	Torre de Moncorvo	Santo Apolinário	Yes	Yes but Difficult
3	Alfandega da Fé	Nossa Senhora dos Anúncios	Yes	Yes With Steps
4	Vila Flor	Nossa Senhora da Assunção	No	No
5	Vila Flor	Nossa Senhora da Lapa	No	No
6	Vila Flor	Nossa Senhora dos Remédios	Yes	Yes with Steps
7	Carrazeda de Ansiães	Nossa Senhora da Costa	No	No
8	São João da Pesqueira	São Salvador do Mundo	No	No
9	Alijó	Nossa Senhora da Piedade	Yes	No
10	Alijó	Nossa Senhora dos Aflitos	No	No
11	Alijó	Santa Bárbara	No	No
12	Alijó	Nossa Senhora da Piedade	Yes	Yes
13	Tabuaço	Santa Luzia	No	No
14	Tabuaço	Nossa Senhora do Sabroso	No	No
15	Peso da Régua	São Leonardo de Galafura	No	No
16	Peso da Régua	Nossa Senhora das Candeias	Yes	Yes
17	Armanar	São Domingos	Yes	No
18	Lamego	Santa Eufémia	No	No
19	Lamego	Nossa dos Remédios	Yes	No
20	Santa Marta de Penaguião	Nossa Senhora do Viso	Yes	Yes



Fig. 2 - Vila Flor, Sanctuary of Nossa Senhora dos Anúncios (Photo CM-Vila Flor)



Fig. 3 - Alfândega da Fé, Sanctuary of Nossa Senhora dos Anúncios, aerial view (Adl. google maps)



Fig. 5 - Access to São Salvador do Mundo Sanctuary, São João da Pesqueira (Photo MSA)



Fig. 4 - Car access to Sanctuary of Nossa Senhora dos Aflitos, Pegarinhos, Alijó (Photo Pegarinhos.com)



Fig. 6 - A "ramp" at São Salvador do Mundo Sanctuary, São João da Pesqueira (Photo MSA)



The area of the sanctuary can only be reached by a person in wheelchair in the cases of *Nossa Senhora dos Montes Ermos*, *Santo Apolinário*, *Nossa Senhora dos Anúncios*, *Nossa Senhora dos Remédios*, *Nossa Senhora da Costa*, *Nossa Senhora da Piedade*, *Nossa Senhora da Piedade*, *Nossa Senhora das Candeias*, *São Domingos*, *Nossa dos Remédios* and *Nossa Senhora do Viso*. Out of that list, only in six (*Nossa Senhora dos Montes Ermos*, *Santo Apolinário*, *Nossa Senhora dos Remédios*, *Nossa Senhora da Piedade*, *Nossa Senhora das Candeias*, *Nossa Senhora do Viso*) could a the person could enter the Chapel or Church.

Changing this situation and applying the law and stipulations of the convention is not complicated. To help the blind, placards with texts in Braille with high relief could be installed, much like at the rock art site of Dos Sotto Laiolo in Valcamonica (Abreu et al. 2014). For those with hearing difficulties, including the deaf-mute, written documentation could be printed and displayed during processions and other events, or a translator and interpreter of sign language could be available. The use of new technologies, especially smart phones and apps, could provide the blind and the visually impaired with audio-descriptions and those with hearing problems, with text and sign language translation.

Resolving the case of access to these sanctuaries for people with mobility problems (those in wheelchairs, parents with push-chairs or the elderly) is much the same as for the visual impaired – it is complicated and in many cases very expensive because it requires extensive transformation. Nonetheless, small things help, like putting wooden or metal ramps at the entrance of most of the churches, but attention must be paid to the project and work must avoid creating conditions like the extremely dangerous ramp at São Salvador do Mundo.

#### CONCLUSIONS

According to the international convention signed by Portugal, all people with impairment should be able to access and enjoy visiting the sanctuaries of the Douro. To start changing the present situation, it will be necessary to conduct a comprehensive study that can provide solutions.

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#### Legislation

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Decreto-lei (Decree Law) No. 163/2006. Defines accessibility conditions to be met in the design and construction of public spaces, community facilities and public and residential buildings.  
Lei (Law) No. 67/2007. Approves the tort liability of the state.  
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RAR - Assembly Resolution of the Republic No. 56/2009. Approves the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, adopted in New York on 30 March 2007.  
RAR - Assembly Resolution of the Republic No. 131 and 132/2012. It urges the Government a strategy to promote accessible tourism in Portugal.  
RCM - Resolution of the Council of Ministers No. 24/2013. Approving the revision of the National Strategic Plan for Tourism (PENT) for 2013-2015.