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## **Rehabilitation of abandoned villages through tourism: a solution for sustainable heritage development?**

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### **Abstract**

Villages which have been abandoned during recent decades as a result of migration from rural areas constitute a serious problem which is all too common in many European countries. The aim of this paper is to examine the problem in Portugal and conduct a comparative study of four villages, set in a range of geographical and socio-economic contexts, which have been rehabilitated. These villages are associated with: different types of vernacular architecture; different types of traditional landscape; contrasting topographic contexts; and different causes of rural abandonment. The findings of this study point to the main requirements for improvement and recommendations are made for suitable developments in terms of the heritage in its broadest sense, including the surrounding landscape. Heritage character is not only important for the preservation of local identity but may also be associated with products and services which are marketed and is thus an essential factor for the socio-economic sustainability of rehabilitated villages.

**Keywords:** Abandoned villages; Rehabilitation; Tourism; Sustainability; Heritage development.

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## 1. Theoretical introduction

The abandonment of settlement in rural areas is a complex matter, since the causes may be economic, social, psychological, or others, such as the impact of European Common Agricultural Policy measures or priorities, or other social issues, associated in particular with low quality of life and lack of well-being. An extreme example of this is abandoned villages, which constitute a serious problem, which is common in many European countries. Many villages present important vernacular heritage features and some are set in cultural landscapes which also present heritage value (Déjeant-Pons, 2008: 30).

As villages are frequently situated in areas that have escaped the pressure of intensive farming, there is often an important natural heritage. There are different approaches to the rehabilitation of villages, some of them associated with tourist development. The transformation of villages, turning them into tourist developments, may be of use in terms of promoting sustainable development provided that a number of conditions are met, such as the preservation and development of the heritage in the global sense, not only giving a contribution towards social sustainability, particularly its historical-cultural dimension (Inacio, 2010:131), but also preserving the local identity and memory of sites (Postiglione & Lupo, 2006). Thus, new forms for the way in which villages function are proposed, while safeguarding the cultural continuity and preserving the individual character of sites as far as possible. Since visitors seek an authentic experience and a range of attractions, the greater the degree to which the character of a village is developed, the more its attractiveness is enhanced, which in turn fosters the economic sustainability of the project. This can be best understood in terms of *glocalisation*: “– the local in the global – expressed through the renewed focus on local tradition, knowledge and identity, but also through growing markets for locally distinctive products and services” (NORAD, 2009: 9).

The principal aim of this paper is, in keeping with the theme we seek to address, *Enhancing sustainable development through rural tourism experiences*. We examine four concrete experiences involving the transformation of a village into a tourist development, with a reasonable degree of contrast between the projects considered, and conduct a critical review of the findings. Thus we are able to gauge which projects are most in keeping with the principles referred to above and highlight the principal failings in each case, providing a contribution towards heritage preservation and development and at the same time enhancing sustainability.

## 2. Literature review

Since the early 1990s there has been an extension of the meaning of heritage to cover not only the built heritage (archaeological and architectural) but also the natural heritage, the landscape heritage and the intangible heritage.



Numerous authors, such as Aplin (2002), Bachoud *et al.* (2002) and Howard (2003), have dealt with the heritage in its new, wider sense, addressing conceptual aspects such as heritage interpretation, conservation, development and management. There is now also a multitude of works dealing with specific areas of heritage, for example: Mason (2002), and Mascarenhas (1995) - the built heritage; Evelpidou *et al.* (2010), Howard (2007), CBD (2004), and Barata & Mascarenhas (2002) – the natural heritage; Capelo *et al.* (2011), Aplin (2007), and Rössler (2000) – the landscape heritage; and Lenzerini (2011), and UNESCO (2003) – the intangible heritage. The analysis of the built heritage was mainly based on AAVV (2004), the major treaty of rural architecture in Portugal.

The need to preserve the rural heritage is also a theme that has been focussed on extensively, for example in Asquith & Vellinga (2006), Young (2006), and Council of Europe (2003).

As for the rehabilitation of abandoned villages for tourism development, several works have been published in different countries, mainly in Europe, and we shall refer only to examples of works that focus on cases in Portugal: Agapito *et al.* (2012), Kastenholz *et al.* (2011), Gomes & Filipe (2011), Filipe & Mascarenhas (2011, 2010a, 2010b), and Figueiredo (2003). Several of these deal with villages which have been valorised in terms of tourism: Pedralva (the first two studies), Aldeia da Mata Pequena (the third study), both of which are examined in the present paper; the following three studies focus on the socio-economic development, including tourism, of villages in ruins.

With regard to the importance of the rural heritage for the development of rural tourism, a topic that may be regarded as an aspect of cultural tourism, numerous publications have appeared, of which the following are of note: McKercher & Du Cros (2002), Simões & Cristóvão (2003), Pereiro Pérez (2009), and Santos & Souza (2010).

Finally, an appreciation of the importance of the rural heritage for different aspects of tourism sustainability and potential strategies associated with it can be gained from several studies: Mostad *et al.* (1999), William & Ferguson (2005), Postiglione & Lupo (2006), Picard & Robinson (2006), Inacio (2010), and Fien & White (2010). Regarding the rural heritage as a driving force for sustainable development, the main reference is Déjeant-Pons (2013).

### **3. Methodology**

In order to carry out a comparative analysis of villages which have been rehabilitated, four different villages were selected on the basis of the following: firstly, each village had to have been completely rehabilitated (not just in the preliminary stages of rehabilitation); secondly, each village had to be located in different and geographically contrasting regions in mainland Portugal. The following were selected: Póvoa Dão, in the county (*distrito*) of Viseu (Central Beira), Mata Pequena, in the county of Lisbon, São Gregório, in the county of Évora



(Central Alentejo), and Pedralva, in the county of Faro (West Algarve). For the purposes of comparative analysis, tables covering the following aspects of the heritage were drawn up for each village: the built heritage, the natural heritage, the landscape heritage, and the intangible heritage; supplementary tables were also drawn up, covering other aspects examined, mainly in the socio-economic field.

The heritage assessment of the rural villages was based on the following criteria, in accordance with each heritage type:

1) Built heritage (following in part, Mason, 2002, EH, 2008, ICOMOS, 1999, and Mascarenhas, 1995) – criteria by decreasing importance: coherence (of style, form, material, and appearance), effective application of traditional construction systems, character (local distinctiveness - physical context combination), symbolic value (association with important historic events), diversity of rural structures (wells, springs, fountains, aqueducts, cisterns, threshing-floors, barns, oratories, chapels, etc.), village antiquity, existence of significant archaeological structures, historic documents, uniqueness of architectural features, ethnographical value, scientific potential, and landscape quality insertion.

2) Natural heritage (following Barata & Mascarenhas, 2002) – criteria: statute, rarity, specific diversity, structural complexity, biocenotic maturity, ecological fragility, biocenotic feasibility, scientific potential, amenity value, pedagogical value and historic record.

3) Landscape heritage (following Capelo *et al.*, 2011) – criteria by decreasing importance: rarity of the heritage landscape type, coherence degree, scientific potential, built heritage, natural biotic heritage, natural abiotic heritage, conservation degree, conservation statute, antiquity, symbolic importance, pedagogic potential, aesthetical quality, monumentality, craft-or work-related value, range, recreation potential and historic records.

4) Intangible heritage (following Lenzerini, 2011 and UNESCO, 2003) – criteria: existence (or inexistence) of traditional activities, oral traditions, social practices and events in the village.

Regarding the intangible heritage as dependent on the tangible one, the following fields were considered: active master-builders of traditional architecture, active traditional craftsmen, and fairs of industrial arts.

Regarding the intangible heritage as an independent type, the fields considered were: storytellers, legends, phrases and sayings, songs and dances, cooking recipes, pilgrimages and/or processions, popular festivals, and other rituals.

The first and necessary task involved in this study was the analysis of documents in archives and libraries, as there is a scarcity of historical, environmental and socio-economic information about many villages. Field surveys were carried out in the four villages and the surrounding areas, as well as interviews with persons responsible for those development projects, and conversations were also conducted with local residents. Each village was thus the



subject of a specific analysis focusing on the aspects in the tables above. Google Earth large-scale satellite images were used for environmental and landscape recognition. For each village or tourist development, the main strengths and weaknesses were identified with a view to making recommendations for the development of the heritage in its broadest sense.

#### **4. Summary description of the four villages selected for study and the respective landscape context**

##### **4.1. Póvoa Dão**

The village of Póvoa Dão belongs to the parish of Silgueiros (municipality of Viseu) and occupies an area of about 120 hectares (Pires, 2008) (Figure 1). It is located in the landscape of the upper Dão valley, an open valley whose very steep sides rise to a height ranging from 200 to 600 metres in the area of the village and which is part of a plateau region of mainly granitic rocks (Abreu *et al.*, 2004).

There is evidence of settlement here since Roman times; some isolated artifacts have been unearthed, and a Roman road runs from Viseu to Oliveira do Hospital via Oliveira de Barreiros and Tábua, passing through the village; the section of road in the local area is still in good condition. It is possible that the settlement was originally a Roman *vicus*.

In 1258, the settlement is referred to in the royal commissions (*Inquirições*), conducted during the reign of Afonso II, as 'Póvoa de Jusâ', only later its name being changed to Póvoa Dão. It is known that the village formed part of the legacy associated with the majorat of Loureiro. In the twentieth century, the abandonment of the village was almost total, with only two residents remaining by 1995, but that year marked a turning point in the fortunes of the village, when a development company called *Póvoa Dão S.A.* purchased it. There are currently 35 houses and about 150 inhabitants. As far as the historical heritage is concerned, there is a chapel dedicated to Saint Amaro; when it was founded is unknown but there is a reference dating from 1732 (Pimenta, 1732: 232). Amaro, the patron saint of bone ailments and hunters is venerated on January 15, the occasion of a pilgrimage to the chapel which attracts about a thousand visitors, and also a large gathering of hunters (Vasconcelos, 1998: 418). The landscape differs little from that described by the Priest João Pimenta in 1732. Woods (mainly eucalyptus and pine trees) cover the ridges and steep hillsides. In some places the wood homogeneity is interrupted by the presence of olive groves, vineyards, orchards and kitchen gardens as well as the Dão riparian gallery which is well constituted and still intact, enhancing the biological richness of the landscape (Abreu *et al.*, 2004). Many of the referred cultures, associated with the tourist development, are operated according to an organic farming regime. The pattern of property ownership in the area is characterized by the existence of myriad smallholdings, and agricultural plots (many of them now abandoned) are arranged in terraces and bordered by



vines. Many of the terraces, supported by walls made of large granite blocks, have an ancient origin, endowing the cultural landscape with a certain heritage value.



Figure 1. Póvoa Dão village

Source: photo by Mascarenhas (2012)

#### 4.2. Mata Pequena

The village of Mata Pequena is situated 29 km from Lisbon in the parish of Igreja Nova (municipality of Mafra), and is located in the Penedo do Lexim Special Protection Area, where there is an extinct volcano and an important archaeological site (Figure 2). The surrounding landscape is undulating, marked to the west by a deep, narrow valley carved out by a tributary of the River Cheleiros. There is archaeological evidence of human settlement here since Roman times.

Two references dating from 1758 mention places with the toponym *mata* (wood): Mata das Flores [Flowers Wood], a quarter of a league from Igreja Nova, now known as Mata Grande [Large Wood], and Mata d'Além [Yonder Wood], nearly half a league from Igreja Nova, now known as Mata Pequena [Little Wood] (Vasconcelos, 1758). There are references dating from 1909 to Mata Grande and Mata Pequena (Pereira & Rodrigues, 1909: 923). In the nineteenth century, the population of the village was seventy, but rapid depopulation meant that by 1989 there were only just over half a dozen people living in the settlement (Gomes & Filipe, 2011). Currently, as a result of a rehabilitation project carried out by Diogo Batalha and his wife, there are 14 permanent residents ranging in age from 7 to 84 years (two of whom are farmers) and 20 rehabilitated houses (Multiweb\*Business Inspiration, 2012).

A feature that enhances the surrounding landscape is the well-established riparian gallery of the aforementioned tributary of the River Cheleiros. The remaining landscape is comprised of



enclosures used for agriculture, a mosaic of small fields planted with crops or used for pasture, bounded by hedges or dry stone walls, many of them constructed in terraces. Some were obviously made a long time ago and are now in a state of disrepair, with evidence of agriculture abandonment, in contrast to the situation in 1758, when principally wheat, barley and maize were cultivated (Vasconcelos, 1758). Some of the hedges form a continuum of vegetation, linking the riparian galleries with ridges, endowing the landscape with a rich biological profile (Abreu *et al.*, 2004).



Figure 2. Mata Pequena village

Source: photo by Mascarenhas (2012)

#### 4.3. São Gregório

The village of São Gregório, located in the parish of Santiago de Rio de Moinhos (municipality of Borba), is situated in an area characterized by low hills contrasting with Serra de Ossa (Ossa Hills) to the south-west, where both the geomorphology and vegetation are very different (Figure 3). Reference is made to the settlement in 1556 as belonging to the Order of Avis (Espanca, 1978: 160). Its chapel, dedicated to St Gregory the Great, was probably founded, along with the settlement, by a cobbler, on an estate belonging to Luis Coutinho (Sarayva, 1758: 790). Farm workers resided in the village and laboured on the large estates in the local area (Simões, 2004: 13). The main original feature of the old settlement is the number of houses: twelve in total; each adapted to the characteristics of the respective household and the trade it was involved in (including a tavern, a bakery, a barber's shop and a cobbler's). In 1758 only six people lived in the village (Sarayva, 1758: 787); by 1911 this had risen to 52, and the population increased to 64 residents in 1960, after which there began a decline. By 1981, the village had only 11 inhabitants, and was virtually abandoned in the 1980s, when it was purchased by Gonçalo Guimarães and a tourist development and rehabilitation project was launched (Martins





& Paulo, 2006: 3). There are currently no inhabitants, and the only people who visit are tourists and those working on the development. The surrounding landscape is characterized by the existence of the *montado* (a multifunctional agrosylvopastoral system), while there are also areas of unenclosed farmland, predominantly vineyards and olive groves, along with some irrigated crops. Also of note is an extensive tract of hardwood (eucalyptus) forest to the east, surrounding the Monte das Hortas reservoir. Clearly in an area like this, intensive farming coupled with extensive areas of monoculture forestry seriously limits the potential of the landscape in terms of heritage and biological richness (Abreu *et al.*, 2004).



Figure 3. São Gregório village

Source: photo by Mascarenhas (2011)

#### 4.4. Pedralva

The village of Pedralva is located in parish and municipality of Vila do Bispo (western Algarve), not far from the sea and the limit of South-west Alentejo and Costa Vicentina Natural Park (Figure 4). The village is situated on the side of a hill which is a southern extension of the Aljezur *graben* (Feio, 1983). The origins of the settlement go back to time immemorial; it probably existed in the Middle Ages and it is likely that the village grew up from a settlement (*alcaria*) of the Islamic period (Jesus, 2005: 39). In 1758, there is a reference to the village as part of the municipality of Vila do Bispo (Rozario, 1758: 1047).

Although there is no data on the demographic evolution of the village, data for the local parish provides an idea of how sparsely the area was populated: in the eighteenth century there were about 500 inhabitants, scattered among the settlements of Vila do Bispo, Pedralva and Tabual and on outlying farms; by 1834, the population of the parish had risen to about 900 (Carvalho & Vidigal, 2006: 29). Most houses in the present-day village are built on the slope of



the hill and have a single-sided roof. Constructed primarily using *pisé* (rammed earth), they are often spacious, rectangular or almost square in shape, with doors and windows at the front and rear only, and there is sometimes a peep-window at the side. It is possible that this type of design was subject to Berber influence (Ribeiro, 1961: 93-95).

In 2006, the company *Pedralva-Empreendimentos Turísticos, S.A.* began work on the reconstruction and restoration of the village. Of the 50 existing houses, 30 were purchased by the tourist development company, and 24 have been restored, including the grocer's and the bake-house. The reception building, restaurant and café are new constructions and were purpose-built. The streets, and water and electricity supply systems were renovated in 2009 by the local council, and tourist development operations began in 2010. At present, the village has six of the original residents, who were joined by three foreign couples. Seven houses in the village are second homes, and the remainder are let to tourists.

The surrounding landscape was traditionally dominated by cereal monoculture (part of the area known as the “Algarve bread-basket”). Today there are vast tracts of meadow-land and woods, some horticultural fields along water-courses, and eucalyptus plantations on the slopes of the hills. Even so, this landscape can be considered to possess a something of an identity, due to its good state of preservation and considerable biological richness in terms of both fauna and flora. With regard to the latter, a salient feature is a species of *cistus* endemic to the Alentejo coast, *Cistus palhinhae*, very well adapted to the coastal environment of the region (Abreu *et al.*, 2004).



Figure 4. Pedralva village

Source: photo by Mascarenhas (2011)

## 5. Results of the comparative study and critical analysis

As indicated in the methodology section, a heritage assessment was carried out on each village, covering the built heritage, the natural heritage, the landscape heritage, the intangible heritage and other features, especially those of a socio-economic nature (Table 1).



The following findings of the comparative analysis are of note:

1) Built heritage – as regards the overall state of preservation of the villages, great efforts have been made to ensure that São Gregório (SG) is in a very good state of preservation, while Póvoa Dão (PD) and Mata Pequena (MP) are moderately well preserved. While traditional rehabilitation techniques have been used on a large scale in these three villages, in Pedralva (PA) such techniques have not always been used and as a result some buildings are out of character (especially the restaurant and certain houses). In PD, some architectural features not follow the traditional models (for example, the chimney design adopted). With regard to the religious heritage, two of the villages (SG and PD) have a chapel with heritage value. It should be noted that in PD a Roman road in good condition runs through the village.

2) Natural heritage – the project that takes best advantage of the potential of the natural heritage is undoubtedly PD, while in PA there are also important elements nearby which could be exploited as well as possible tourist itineraries. In MP, no consideration has been given to improvement of the natural heritage. Only in PD have information boards been installed and leaflets produced dealing with a range of topics. A few interpretation boards have been introduced in SG.

3) Landscape heritage – the landscapes in which PD and MP are set are of great heritage value, and the quality of the landscape surrounding SG and PA is also good. None of the villages have set landscape heritage improvement as a priority objective.

4) Intangible heritage – PA and PD are especially strong in this field. In the former, the local cuisine is an important feature, with four annual gastronomy fairs and support for storytelling meetings based on the fascinating local legends. In the latter, there is the regional cuisine, a pilgrimage to the chapel of Saint Amaro and an annual gathering of hunters, of whom Amaro is the patron saint. The production and marketing of handicrafts is an important feature in both villages.

Table 1. Estimate of heritage development

	Póvoa Dão (PD)	Mata Pequena (MP)	São Gregório (SG)	Pedralva (PA)	Totals
Built heritage	3	3	5	2	13
Natural heritage	4	1	2	2	9
Landscape heritage	2	1	1	1	5
Intangible heritage	4	2	2	4	12
Totals	13	7	10	9	

Notes: Scale: 1 - minimum level; 5 - maximum level

Source: Authors

## 6. Conclusion

The village of Póvoa Dão is the tourist development which best displays the range of different types of heritage (Table 1).



Overall, with in all cases there is a concern for the preservation and improvement of the built heritage. However, this is the case neither with the natural heritage, which is afforded scant consideration (with the exception of Póvoa Dão), or the landscape heritage, which is largely ignored in all cases. Although the intangible heritage is generally considered, from a variety of perspectives, this aspect should be deepened, and indeed there is the potential for economic benefits of different kinds to be derived in this field (Table 1).

In order to make visits to the villages more attractive for visitors, there is a need, in our view, for a formal system of information displays to be installed, and what is even more important, the setting up in each village of an interpretation centre (and also, if possible, a museological space) to provide an insight into the geo-historical and anthropological context, as well as dealing with a range of heritage topics.

The preservation and improvement of the different types of heritage not only serves to strengthen the local identity but also enables the profile of each village, with its respective specific characteristics and the surrounding heritage and landscape character, to be raised. It is important to keep in mind the fact that sustainable tourism is based on the attractions and past experience of the local area while seeking to increase the benefits and reduce the costs of tourism development (Mostad *et al.*, 1999). Territories and landscapes are both complex structures charged with meaning, which can best produce memory through their distinct character (Postiglione & Lupo, 2006). Thus, the cultural diversity of rehabilitated settlements and their landscapes contributes towards the heterogeneity of their tourist developments, which may be regarded as an advantage at the national level (UNESCO, 1996). It is worth noting, however, that the proliferation of such developments, involving villages with very similar heritage characteristics, may have already produced counterproductive effects (Figueiredo, 2003), in particular in terms of reduced attractiveness, leading to situations that encourage a reduction in the desired level of sustainability.

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