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A PORTUGESE CHRISTMAS TREE AROUND 1400?

There is a rather odd paragraph in the Wikipedia article on the Christmas Tree. Today it reads as follows:

At the end of the Middle Ages, an early predecessor appears referred in the Regiment of the **Order of Cister** around 1400, in Alcobaça, Portugal. The Regiment of the local *high-Sacristans* of the Cistercian Order refers to what may be considered the oldest references to the Christmas tree: “Note on how to put the Christmas branch, *scilicet*: On the Christmas eve, you will look for a large Branch of green laurel, and you shall reap many red oranges, and place them on the branches that come of the laurel, specifically as you have seen, and in every orange you shall put a candle, and hang the Branch by a rope in the pole, which shall be by the candle of the *altar-mor*.”[21]

21. *Biblioteca Nacional de Portugal* (National Library of Portugal)—*Codices Alcobacenses* ([1] [Archived](#) 21 February 2013 at the [Wayback Machine](#)); [BN: cod. alc. CLI / 64, Page. 330] Translated (“*Nota de como has de poer o ramo de natal, scilicet: Em vespera de natal, buscarás huu grande Ramo de loureiro verde, e colherás muitas laranjas vermelhas e poer lhas has metidas pelos ramos que dele procedem especificadamente segundo já viste. E em cada hua laranja, poeras hua candea. E pendurarás o dicto Ramo per hua corda na polee que ha de star acerca da lampada do altar moor*”)

The links are all fake or unhelpful. I looked at the Portugese version of the page, but this material was not present at all.

I then found a Facebook page that is probably the source, [here](#):

N: Diz-me Manuel Joaquim Gandra que no seu ‘Portugal Sobrenatural’ (2007) trouxe um dado muito importante para o tema da Árvore de Natal, que para os frades de Alcobaça, no século XV, já seria prática corrente ! Cito com vénia: «Seja como for, já no quatrocentista Regimento dos Sacristãos-Mores da Ordem de Cister de Alcobaça [BN: cod. alc. CLI / 64, fl. 330] se alude ao que poderá considerar-se a mais antiga referência à árvore de Natal em Portugal: “Nota de como has de poer o ramo de natal, scilicet: Em vespera de natal, buscarás huu grande Ramo de loureiro verde, e colherás muitas laranjas vermelhas e poer lhas has metidas pelos ramos que dele procedem especificadamente segundo já viste. E em cada hua laranja, poeras hua candea. E pendurarás o dicto Ramo per hua corda na polee que ha de star acerca da lampada do altar moor”. Em Vilarinho da Castanheira (Carrazeda de Ansiães, Bragança) havia o costume de enfeitar com frutos, peças de caça, fumeiro, etc., a árvore de Natal que era feita no interior da igreja e depois arrematada em leilão».

A source is given: Manuel Joaquim Gandra, *Portugal Sobrenatural* (2007). The author appears to be respectable, and the work appears to be a useful dictionary in several volumes, each thankfully quite cheap (10 euros). Better still a preprint of volume 1 is online at Academia [here](#), and on p.400 one reads:

ÁRVORE DE NATAL

Jorge Dias sustenta que é originária da Alemanha, onde terá aparecido por volta de 1500. Leite de Vasconcelos di-la introduzida em Portugal no último quartel do séc. XIX (*Etnografia Portuguesa*, v. 8, p. 522). Gustavo Barroso prefere apresentá-la como sobrevivência pagã da árvore de Maio. Seja como for, já no quatrocentista *Regimento dos Sacristãos-Mores da Ordem de Cister de Alcobaça* [BN: cod. alc. CLI / 64, fl. 330] se alude ao que poderá considerarse a mais antiga referência à árvore de Natal em Portugal: «Nota de como has de poer o ramo de natal, scilicet: Em vespera de natal, buscarás huu grande Ramo de loureiro verde, e colherás muitas laranjas vermelhas e poer lhas has metidas pelos ramos que dele procedem especificadamente segundo já viste. E em cada hua laranja, poeras hua candeia. E pendurarás o dicto Ramo per hua corda na polee que ha de star acerca da lampada do altar moor». Em Vilarinho da Castanheira (Carrazeda de Ansiães, Bragança) havia o costume de enfeitar com frutos, peças de caça, fumeiro, etc., a árvore de Natal que era feita no interior da igreja e depois arrematada em leilão.

BIBLIOGRAFIA BARROS, J. C. Freitas, *A Árvore de Natal (suas origens históricas)*, in *Mensário das Casas do Povo*, v. 8 (1953), p. 7; DIAS, A. Jorge, *A Árvore de Natal*, in *Dois Distritos da Beira Litoral*, v. 1 n. 36 (1953)

This in turn is doubtless derived from the other sources transmitted in Portuguese, and it would probably be beyond those of us without access to Portuguese libraries to trace this back to its origin.

However there is a manuscript reference in there: to the national library of Portugal, collection “Codices Alcobacenses” – the mss from the monastery of Alcobaça – shelfmark “cod. alc. CLI / 64”, and a “page number”.

I had never heard of the Alcobaça manuscripts, but in fact a great number of them are online [here](#), and downloadable in PDF. They are medieval Latin manuscripts, mostly of medieval writers, although there are bibles and some patristic texts in there.

I was unable to locate “CLI”, but an enquiry to the library brought a swift and gracious response that “CLI” was an old catalogue number, and since 1920 that manuscript was cod. alc. 64. Unhappily, the story continued, the manuscript was one of a number stolen from the BNP in 1948. She wrote:

The present shelfmark corresponds now only to the Arabic numbering, the Latin numbering was part of a referencing system prior to the 20th century.

These are *Portuguese Sacristy regulations*, concerning mass and other liturgical ceremonies at Alcobaça, a 15th century parchment manuscript of 32 folio. Unfortunately, this manuscript has been missing since 1948, when a serious theft occurred at the National Library of Lisbon. I can provide you with

a more complete description of this codex, as we have some information in the old catalogs.

This is bad news. What we want, of course, is the original Latin text and some context. If the manuscript was only 32 folios, this also suggests that the “page 330” relates to something else.

Another article on Academia [here](#) informs us that a partial 19th century copy exists of the manuscript (p.436, n.27). But the author does not identify where this “copy” might be found.

I was then lucky enough to locate some more information about the manuscript online, in an article: C. F. Barreira, “Do benzimento das monjas. A profissão monástica feminina nos códices de Alcobaça”, in *Lusitania Sacra*, 37 (2018) 189-213, discussing how the monks gave support to nuns:

De acordo com o Alc. 64, Regimento dos Sacristães-Mores, redigido no abaciado de D. Estevão de Aguiar (1431 - 1446), hoje desaparecido da Biblioteca Nacional, mas conhecido por transcrições de Gabriel Pereira⁹⁰ e Saul A. Gomes⁹¹, as freiras...

According to Alc. 64, *Sacristy Regulations*, written in the abbacy of D. Estevão de Aguiar (1431-46), today no longer in the *Biblioteca Nacional*, but known through transcriptions by Gabriel Pereira [90] and Saul A. Gomes [91], the nuns....

90. Gabriel Pereira, “Trechos portugueses dos séculos XIV e XV”, *Boletim da segunda classe da Academia das Ciências*, 5 (1911) 319-328.

91. Saul A. Gomes, “A vida litúrgica entre os monges de Alcobaça”..., p. 423-448 and Idem, “Uma paisagem para a oração”..., p. 19-56.

The Pereira article is old, but does not seem to be online as far as I could tell, unless it is at HathiTrust [here](#). Dr Gomes has a very extensive Academia page [here](#), thankfully, but neither article seems to be listed. The first seems to be Gomes, Saul António, “A vida litúrgica entre os monges de Alcobaça em meados de Quatrocentos: o Regimento dos Sacristaes-Mores” in: A. Carreiras (ed), *Mosteiros cistercienses. História, Arte, Espiritualidade e Património. Actas do Congresso realizado em Alcobaça, nos dias 14 a 17 de Junho de 2012* (Vol. 1-3), Pt. 2 (2013) p. 423-448; the other is Gomes, Saúl, “Uma paisagem para a oração: o Mosteiro de Alcobaça em Quatrocentos”, in Iria Goncalves (ed.), *Paisagens rurais e urbanas: fontes, metodologías, problemáticas*. Atas das Terceiras Jornadas. Lisboa: Centro de Estudos Históricos, (2007) 19-56. Neither book seems to be accessible, and British libraries contain no copy of either, strangely.

That’s as far as we can go for now.

Clearly this obscure custom has nothing to do with, and did not lead to, the modern Christmas tree, which originates in Alsace, in Selestat, in 1521 and is about as German an artefact as one can imagine. Decorating greenery is not of itself a mark of the Christmas tree, but a commonplace of humanity.

But it is most interesting all the same.
