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A PORTUGUESE CHRISTMAS TREE AROUND 1400? – PART TWO

A couple of days ago I started to track down a rather odd paragraph in the Wikipedia article on Christmas trees, and I wrote a blog post on it [here](#). The article reads:

At the end of the Middle Ages, an early predecessor [of the Christmas tree] 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-moor*.”[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*”)

This in fact refers to a now lost manuscript that once belonged to the Cistercian monastery of Alcobaca in Portugal. Those manuscripts are now in the Portuguese national library, the Biblioteca Nacional. This particular one was 32 pages long, and was one of a number which contained sacristy regulations for the monastery. Originally numbered cod. alc. 151, the manuscript was renumbered as cod. alc. 64 some time during the 20th century. Many of the Codices Alcobacenses are online; but not this one, which was stolen from the library in 1948. A couple of articles contain transcriptions of portions, but I was unable to obtain these.

Since then, a kind correspondent has sent me a copy of [Gabriel Pereira, “Trechos portugueses dos séculos XIV e XV”, *Boletim da segunda classe da Academia das Ciências*, 5 \(1911\) 319-328](#), which I have uploaded and link to [here](#). It is full of interest.

Firstly, the manuscript was not in Latin, but written in *Portuguese*! This immediately raises questions about just how old the manuscript was. Pereira does not offer much of a date: he notes that one entry refers to Dom Estavo da Guair, and a regulation by him from 1435. So the document cannot predate this, but must be later. He says that it was written in a 15th century hand. He also states that the document clearly remained in use, because of marginalia in the writing of the 16th and 17th century.

Secondly, the mysterious reference in Wikipedia to “p.330” is explained! For p.330 of

Pereira is as follows:

A pag. 13 aparece a palavra *hu*, á margem *onde*. Outras notas aparecem que mostram que nos seculos XVI e XVII o texto já precisava de esclarecimentos, e que certas regras estavam esquecidas.

Do Ramo que se ponha uespera de natal com candeas e tochas e ciryos.

Nota de como has de poer o ramo de natal. s. Em uespera de natal: buscaras hũa grande Ramo de loureiro uerde. e colheras mujtas laranjas uermelhas e poerlhas has metidas pelos ramos q̃ dele procedem spacificadamente segundo ia uiste. E em cada hũa laranja: poeras hũa candeas. E pendoraras o dicto ramo per hũa corda na polee que ha de star acerca da lampada do altar moor. E as lo de acender: quando compeçarem a missa do galo. e mais. XX. tochas e IIII.^o cirios. e candeas que abastem. e todalas riliquias e plata da sancristia.

Da festa do Corpus Christi.

Nota que dom Stevam daguiar abbade ordenou na Era do nascimento de mil e quatrocentos XXXV. annos. que a festa do corpo de deus se nom fizesse aa v.^a f.^a mais ao domingo siguínte. E pera esto mandou comprar a leirea todolos jogos que perteencem aa sobredicta festa: aa custa do m.^o s. quatro caras de angeos com sas diademas. e gastoamentos de aas: com seus latigos. e fiuelas. E tres caras de patriarchas com suas diademas e cruces. Sam Pedro com sua crocha e barua e chaue. E onze cabeladuras de apostolos. com suas barbas e diademas e cada huum com seu tormento com que foram martirizados. E quatro euan- gelistas pintadas. E hua cara de diaboo com sua uistimenta: e botas e cadea. E outra saya e botas doutro diaboo pequeno. Item hua serpe.

Regi. da procissom da dicta festa.

Nota o Regimento de como ham dhir em na procissom da dicta festa. Primeiramente a gayola ha de seer mui

This, then, is the source for the Wikipedia text, although the latter has plainly been copied and “improved” many times since Pereira in 1911.

Do Ramo que se ponha vespera de natal con candeas e tochas e ciryos.

Nota de como has de poer o ramo de natal. s[cilicet]. 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. E as lo de acender: quando compecarem a missa do galo, e mais. xx. tochas e iii. cirios, e candeas que abastem, e todalas riliquias e plata da sancristia.

Using Google translate I get this:

Concerning the branch which is put up on Christmas Eve with candles, torches and cirios (?)

Note how the Christmas branch must be. i.e. On Christmas Eve, you must look for a large green laurel branch, and you will pick many red oranges and put them in the branches that come from it specifically as you have seen. And into each orange you will insert a candle. And you will hang the aforesaid branch by its rope on the pole which stands over the lamp on the main altar. And light the lights: when the mass of the *galo* starts, and also 20 torches and 40 *cirios*. And the candles that you bring (?), and all the relics and plate of the sacristy.

I don't know any Portugese or Spanish - contributions welcome! - but that gives us some idea of what the sense is.

I also discovered a modern catalogue entry for the manuscript at Berkeley, [here](#). This contained the interesting information that a partial copy of the manuscript Alc. 64 exists, made in the 19th century, and today filed with other items in a manuscript in the Portugese national library:

Lisboa: Biblioteca Nacional, MSS. 203, n. 18. 1876? - 1920?.

It's manuscript 203, although I believe it is not online, and item 18 within it.

So there we have the backstory. It's not a tree, not from 1400, not a precursor of the German invention of the Christmas tree, early in the 16th century - maybe around the same time as cod. Alc. 64 was written - but it is certainly an interesting parallel.
