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ARCHITECTURES OF THE SOUL:
MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES TO THE EXPERIENCES
AND LANDSCAPES OF SECLUSION AND SOLITUDE

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INTRODUCTION

The search for wilderness as space and the possibility which it represents of more radical religious experiences comes in hand with Western culture, and has marked its development. The expressions of this are manifold, from voluntary reclusion or eremitical life to a secluded existence experienced within the shape of a community. The seek for solitude and hermitage remained to mark moments of crisis and renewal in the Western world throughout the middle ages and the early modern period. Those experiences accompanied the development of the urban and peri-urban landscapes, influencing them. A consequence of this was the transformation of territorially isolated and peripheral areas. At the same time, the pursuit of solitude and seclusion, either through monastic or hermitic experiences, flourished in other cultures and religious traditions, from Buddhism to Islam, adding stimulating perspectives to the understanding of such religious phenomena in broader terms.

This book is named after the international seminar “Architectures of the Soul”, whose first editions took place in Lisbon at the ISCTE-University Institute of Lisbon in 2017 and 2018. Their aim was to promote discussion around the architecture and landscapes associated with spiritual practices tied to solitude and seclusion, in their various forms – both within given spiritual and religious traditions, and in more secularized forms – and the ways in which such practices relate to, transform, or create a particular landscape.

The seminars originated in the coming together, as coordinators, of Rolando Volzone, a researcher at DINÂMIA'CET-Iscte, and João Luís Inglês Fontes, from the Institute of Medieval Studies and a Professor at the School of Social Sciences and Humanities in NOVA University Lisbon. Departing from different perspectives – architecture and history – they converged in the will to better understand the significance of hermitism in late medieval Portugal, regarding the

“men of poor life”, whose communities spread through Southern Portugal during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, as well as other types of religious experience, having in common the same search for solitude, within or beyond the established religious orders. The two coordinators were supported by Professor Paula André (DINÂMIA'CET-Iscte) and Professor Paulo Simões Rodrigues (CHAIA-UÉ).

Building upon similar studies conducted across the Mediterranean, the seminar promoted the scientific study and discussion around architecture and landscape associated with religious and spiritual practices, grounded in the experience of seclusion and solitude. The meetings gave origin to a platform from which to approach the subject in a multidisciplinary way, combining history, architecture, landscape architecture, cultural heritage studies, the digital humanities, and computer science, for a more deeply integrated, comparative understanding of such religious practices and their spiritual and material dimensions.

The multidisciplinary approach is reflected also in the collaboration established between the four research centres supporting the seminars from the very beginning: DINÂMIA'CET-Iscte, the Centre for Socioeconomic and Territorial Studies at ISCTE–University Institute of Lisbon; the IEM, Institute for Medieval Studies in NOVA University of Lisbon; the CHAIA, Centre for Art History and Artistic Research in the University of Évora; and the CEHR, Centre of Religious History Studies in the Portuguese Catholic University, the latter joining the organising committee from the second edition onwards.

This book is organised around four themes underlying the two seminars, including 22 texts and 37 authors, transdisciplinary and transnational contributions, taking a diachronic perspective.

The first section, entitled “History of Eremitical/Monastic Life”, opens with a stimulating reflection on the history of hermitism as a phenomenon in the medieval West, considering its tensions and paradoxes, and questioning the several roles taken by this religious form of life during the middle ages. Between body and soul, struggle and contemplation, hiding and familiarity, marginality, prophecy and the powerful denouncing of the vices of the Church, obedience and autonomy, hermitism grew more comprehensive during times of spiritual renewal; leading, in many cases, to either the surfacing of new religious orders or the renewal of others, in search of a more authentic and rigorous spiritual life. The other two texts lead us to contexts more urban in nature, where solitude and the desert could also be found and experienced, deliberately moving towards seclusion. Maria del Mar Graña Cid discusses the *emparedadas* and *beatas* in medieval Córdoba, showing how the settlements' location was particularly revealing of their

importance and functions, in relation to other types of a regulated religious life. Marta Sena Augusto and Vidal Gómez Martínez go through a similar analysis, regarding the cell, built by Saint John of Matha in Rome, in relation to Rome's topography, adding particular significance to this hermit's demanding experience.

Section II, on "The Materiality of Eremitical/Monastic Experiences", includes five case studies on monastic and conventual architecture, from all across Portugal. The first three concern the examination of the monastic buildings of three religious orders: the Cistercian hermitage and former monastery of São Pedro das Águias; the Carthusian monastery in Évora, whose conception at the end of the sixteenth century comes strictly linked to the particular relation established between the solitude experienced in the cell and the spaces designed for communitarian life; and the Franciscan convent of Nossa Senhora da Esperança in Portimão, tied to the reformed branch of the Strict Observance, whose concern was to erect poor and humble convents in the urban peripheries. Fernanda Campos introduces the topic of early modern monastic libraries, namely the "new library" at the Cistercian monastery of Alcobça, inaugurated in 1701, explaining how new architectural and artistic solutions allowed for a combination of the library's practical role and the commemoration of the monastery's grandeur. Finally, from distant Bangladesh comes an examination of the influences of eremitical architecture on the Sixty Dome Mosque.

In turn, the section entitled "Landscapes of the Soul" puts forward a macro approach to the geographical distribution of eremitical settlements belonging to the Congregation of Serra de Ossa in Portugal, the Basilian rupestrian settlements in Southern Italy, and the sacred landscape in Serbia. The final contribution, by Núria Jornet-Benito, delivers the conclusions from three research projects on the geography and topography of distinctive religious forms in the Iberian kingdoms and Sicily during the middle ages, using tools from the digital humanities, such as the GIS methodologies.

Lastly, the fourth section, named "Solitude and Contemporary Readings", revisits a large number of conservation and rehabilitation projects employing traditional techniques (such as in the Franciscan convent in Alferrara, by architects Sofia Aleixo and Victor Mestre), and others relating to the construction of new religious and residential buildings taking inspiration from monastic experiences and the ideals of seclusion. The preservation of religious heritage sites in rural and urban areas of both Spain and Portugal is the subject matter of the last five papers, the emphasis being on the application of 3D digital surveys for documenting and adding value to convent and monastic complexes.

We would like to end by thanking again the four research centres that have supported us not only in organising the Seminars but also in seeing this book to print. This has allowed us to include such a large number of contributions, to reach a wider public, and to help stimulate scientific discussion and new research. Only then will this book have achieved its purpose.

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