

The Coat of Arms of the City of Lisbon

By Jorge Serpa

My subject today is the coat of arms of Lisbon, the capital city of our host country. We are all familiar with the ubiquitous image of the little sailing vessel with two ravens on her. We are probably less familiar with the fascinating story that the image depicts. Let me just say as a teaser that it involves saints, villains, kings and... winemakers!

It all started with St. Vincent, a.k.a. St. Vincent of Zaragoza, St. Vincent of Huesca, St. Vincent the Martyr, St. Vincent the Deacon, et cetera. St. Vincent was born in Osca (today Huesca, Spain), but soon moved to Caesar Augusta (now Zaragoza, also in Spain) where he served as deacon to the town's bishop, Valerius. St. Vincent was somewhat unfortunate, as he lived during the days of Emperor Diocletian's persecution of Christians. As a matter of fact, he ended up imprisoned and martyred by proconsul Dacian in Valencia in 304 AD. Ok, but... how do we go from here to the coat of arms?

Next let me tell you a bit about a clifty, barren and windswept promontory at the southwestern corner of Portugal, near Sagres. This dramatic headland, known today as Cape St. Vincent, has fascinated mankind throughout history. During the Neolithic, the area was the stage for many sacred acts, as demonstrated by the existence of numerous monoliths from that era. The Romans called it Promontorium Sacrum, the Holy Promontory. (Note however that a few historians, based on their interpretation of Strabo's Geographica, suggest that the Promontorium Sacrum designation may have referred to the equally clifty promontory of Sagres, a few minutes of latitude further south but not as far west as Cape St. Vincent.) Today, Cape St. Vincent is home to one of the world's great lighthouses (equipped with one of the largest Fresnel lenses ever built) and to the highest concentration of marine life in Portugal (including some types of rare birds such as Bonelli's eagles). The panoramic views from the cape are also absolutely super. Great! ...but what about the coat of arms?

Onwards to the next piece of puzzle! You may have heard of a certain King Afonso Henriques. Well, he turns out to be the one who, against great odds, defeated his mother (yes, his mother!) and her allies from Galicia and Leon at the battle of St. Mamede in 1128. This battle was the starting point of the country known today as... Portugal: young Afonso Henriques—he was around 18 years old at St. Mamede—would proclaim himself as the first king of an independent Portugal in 1139. King Afonso Henriques spent his entire life fighting. He fought facing south, against the Moors, and facing east, against some of his relatives on the other side of the border who never quite accepted his victory at St. Mamede. One of King Afonso Henriques's most prized conquests was beautiful Lisbon, taken from the Moors for the last time in the year of 1147.

Most historians are untypically in agreement with most of the story up to this point. The next chapter requires a bit more faith. It turns out that in the 8th century, the remnants of St. Vincent's body "appeared" in the region of Cape St. Vincent. Really? Well...! How? There are various versions. According to the most popular one, after Vincent's death, Dacian, fretful of having the burial place of the deacon turned into a shrine, had his body tied up to a mill stone and tossed to the water. Miraculously, the body washed up ashore. Dacian then had the martyr's body thrown to the swamps to be eaten by vultures. Equally miraculously, a flock of ravens protected the body and prevented that from happening. Eventually



the body was picked up by a pious widow and buried by the town's walls. How do we know all this? It's pretty much based on Liber Peristephanon, a book on martyrs written by Aurelius Prudentius Clemens, a Roman poet from the 4th century. Once the Roman empire accepted Christianity, a little martyrdom was built over the remains of the body. (Some years later, the martyrdom was replaced by the church of San Vicente de la Roqueta, one of the earliest churches in the Iberian Peninsula, predating even the arrival of the Moors.) Early in the 8th century, a few Christians of Valencia, concerned with the approaching "infidels," dug up the remnants of the body and moved them to the Cape St. Vincent's region. Soon after, a little chapel was built over the saint's new burial site. Based on writings by Abu Abd Allah Muhammad al-Idrisi al-Qurtubi al-Hasani al-Sabti, a well known Muslim

geographer, cartographer and traveler from the 12th century (but let's call him Al-Idrisi, for short!), this chapel is believed to have been located a bit inland from the cape. According to popular myth, the ravens that had prevented the body of the saint from being eaten by the vultures continued to protect it over the years, going as far as accompanying the corpse on its move from Valencia to the cape. (Ok, probably not exactly the same birds but their descendants. ...well, I told you that this bit requires a bit of faith!) Curiously enough, the same Al-Idrisi refers to ravens that flew over the chapel, "their absence having never been registered. The priests who serve in the chapel tell of marvelous deeds performed by these ravens, but if others were to repeat these stories, they would hardly be believed by those who heard them." Not surprisingly, Al-Idrisi refers to the chapel as Kanisah al-Ghurab, i.e., the Church of the Raven.

Last chapter! In one of the many skirmishes during the reconquest of Lisbon in 1147, King Afonso Henriques made a votive offering to St. Vincent, should he and his fighters survive. You know the outcome! As a result of the offering, King Afonso Henriques ordered the construction of the monastery of St. Vincent Outside the Walls, built supposedly at the site of the skirmish (hence its location outside the town's walls; the present monastery, built in the 17th century on the site of the original one, is one of Portugal's most important mannerist buildings, and is the pantheon for the kings and queens of the House of Braganza). But it must have been a really bad skirmish, because apparently the monastery alone was not enough: in 1173, King Afonso Henriques ordered the remnants of the saint's body exhumed and brought by ship from Cape St. Vincent to Lisbon, where they arrived on September 15, 1173. On the next day, they were moved to the Sé of Lisbon, where they've stayed since then. The cult of St. Vincent became so popular among Lisboaetas that he was declared the Patron Saint of the city. According to popular myth, the ravens from the little chapel by the cape (descendants of those which had already protected the saint's body in Valencia, remember?), followed the funeral cortège to Lisbon.

It is the move by boat of the remnants of the saint's body from Cape St. Vincent to Lisbon accompanied by the ravens that is depicted on Lisbon's coat of arms.

"But this cannot be the end of the story," you say. "What about the winemakers?" Well, it turns out that St. Vincent is also the Patron Saint to this class of "miracle makers" of our days. Well worth a toast the next time that you have a glass of wine in front of you!

Bringing the story to our days:

- 1 - During the last visit of Pope Benedict XVI to Portugal, his gift from the Archdiocese of Lisbon was a piece of the relic from St. Vincent's body. (Probably not as useful as the cork handbag that Secretary Clinton received from President Cavaco Silva, but that's my own personal opinion!)
- 2 - The oldest representation of Lisbon's coat of arms that survives to our day is the one on the water fountain at the Largo do Andaluz (in Picoas), dating back to 1336.
- 3 - And what happened to the birds? Until recently they flew freely through the cloisters of the Sé of Lisbon, but concerned with the damage that they were causing, they were moved to the nearby castle of St. Jorge.