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# Voting offerings as signs of popular religiosity in the Alentejo region: the Hermitage of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, in Azaruja, and the Sanctuary of Lord Jesus of Piety, in Elvas

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***Voting offerings as signs of popular religiosity in the Alentejo region: the Hermitage of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, in Azaruja, and the Sanctuary of Lord Jesus of Piety, in Elvas***

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**Abstract**

In Alentejo, a region in Portugal, there are two especially relevant religious sites. Pilgrims gather in the Hermitage of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, in Azaruja, and in the Sanctuary of Lord Jesus of Piety, in Elvas, since their foundation up to the current time, in order to ask for grace and to give thanks. A notable form of gratitude is thousands of ex-votos, i.e., votive offerings, located in these churches. The ex-votos are offered to different patrons, related to diverse maladies, and they are produced in unique forms and dimensions. They are used as material signs of human recognition once people receive the graces provided by a spiritual entity. Our interest in ex-votos goes beyond the preservation of these objects of popular devotion; we also work with them in our doctoral research, investigating them as a linguistic and cultural source from the 18th and 19th centuries.

**Keywords**

Popular religiosity; Ex-votos; Alentejo; Azaruja; Elvas

## Introduction

*One cannot study Gods while ignoring their images; rites without analyzing the objects and substances manufactured and manipulated by the officiant; or social rules independently of the things which correspond to them (Lévi-Strauss, 1983).*

Part of our research corpus are the data drawn from two religious sites in Alentejo region in Portugal. This data gives the sanctuary a unique characteristic because it could be considered as part of the World heritage.

In addition to the very structure of the churches – typical buildings from the 18th century evincing copious layers of history –, the Hermitage of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, in Azaruja, and the Sanctuary of Lord Jesus of Piety, in Elvas, hold important collections of ex-votos of different types. However, it should be noted that, although our main focus – both on our thesis and, consequently, on this paper – comprises these two religious sites, there are other places for popular devotion in Alentejo region where many ex-votos in different formats and from different periods of time can be found: for instance, the Sanctuary of Our Lady of d'Aires, in Viana do Alentejo.

Thus far, in our doctoral research, we investigate ex-votos (painting types) from the 18th and 19th centuries. Our analysis is based on assumptions from Philology, Historical Linguistics and the History of Language.

Throughout our work we not only aim to set the culture of preservation and circulation of these materials, but also, we propose a comparative study between the texts in Brazilian ex-votos – from the state of Minas Gerais – and Portuguese ex-votos – from Alentejo region.

The term *ex-votos* has its origins in the contraction of the *ex-voto suscepto*, expression. This term was used to designate votive paintings manufactured and offered to religious entities, mainly Catholic, as a retribution for a grace and/or miracle that was granted.

In other words, “the plea, as it comes from the believer, rises up to the divine, then it returns to the believer in the form of a grace, which is paid, as promised, by the offering of an *ex-voto*” (Scarano, 2003, p. 35).

Lapa, in a very particular way, characterises an *ex-voto* as

[...] it is essentially, with no frills, the material testimony of an afflicted cry, uttered from the depths of soul and heart that was heard at the proper time, as a granted prayer, for

the salvation of a loved one or of oneself tormented by the consequences of a shipwreck, a war, a confinement, a bad encounter etc. [...] (Lapa, 1967, p. 1).

To highlight this definition, we can also elucidate that ex-votos are produced in the most varied formats – objects, paintings, replicas of body parts in wax, wood, metal etc. In our research, and, consequently, in this paper, we will focus only on the votive paintings. These objects, therefore, are loaded with historical and cultural marks of those who manufactured them. On this aspect, Silva states that

All the artistic, pictorial, photographic, sculptural and bibliographical images, the small images cast in carved iron, so iconic, among so many others, that are capture and configure the votive object, translating viewpoints. Which are the result of what is seen by one and who is seeing it, and how they see it (Silva, 2015, p. 120).

According to this, we can sustain that, besides their material aspect, the ex-votos convey an immaterial aspect of equal value.

At different times in human history, in different regions and across different cultures, testimonies of gratitude to certain entities can be found. There are, for example, reports of ancient ex-votos left by the Egyptians when traveling by boat along the Nile. Also, according to this author, "the warriors, in antiquity after the conquered victories used to go in procession to the altars of their temples. In there, they left their very weapons which they had used in a battle. This was an expressive EX-VOTO, to the deity, for the military success." (Lapa, 1967, p. 5).

By dichotomizing belief and superstition, or suffering and hope, humanity produced and still produces objects – often vulgar and unpleasant – to symbolically witness a given contractual reality.

Concerning the Portuguese scenario for ex-votos, which is of major interest to us, as Lapa points out that

[...] the oldest ex-votos that is known is from 1319. Written on Lourenço Diniz's testament in the following terms: "Item mando q. me ponham ante ho orago de Santarem duas ffeuras de bestas hua de coor baio e outra de mua baya, e duas omagees affeguradas de moy e outra dAffonso Sanches e sejõn de çera" (Lapa, 1967, p. 2).

As it was mentioned before, ex-votos are also present in Brazil, not only in Portugal and other European countries. In Minas Gerais – a distinctive region for several popular devotions –, we have found, for example, collections similar to those present in Azaruja and Elvas. Regarding the existence of ex-votos in Brazil, Castro (emphasis from the source) informs that:

ex-votos became popular in southern and central Europe from the 17th century onwards, mainly in the form of votive paintings. In the 18th century, they were mostly found in countries like Portugal, *where they persist, still in number of a few thousands, despite the political-religious upheavals (1843, 1910), being abandoned to fire and humidity and, also, the vast greed of collectors.* [...] From Portugal this habit came to Brazil, conserving the same aspect as a popular art [...] (Castro, 2012, p. 11).

Since we recognise how fragile this cultural tradition is, we are interested in investigating and collaborating with the preservation of ex-votos.

Throughout next section, we will briefly present the history of devotion in the two religious sites that we explored here. According to Montalvão, “in these spaces, there are the relics that preserve the memory of ancestors and that make it possible to preserve the collective identity throughout generations” (Montalvão, 2012, p. 115).

### **Hermitage of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, in Azaruja**

An oratory with a painting of the Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel is, according to Grilo, the origin of the Hermitage in Azaruja (Grilo, 1996). Local people tell a history of a woman that found this niche in an abandoned house. Once she found it, she asked Our Lady to intercede to cure a disease she had to fight off herself. Having been healed, the woman, spread the grace she obtained to other people from the region. Due to this, she provided a stimulus to start the strong devotion to Our Lady of Mount Carmel in the region.

Located in northern Azaruja, on an elevated foundation, the Hermitage of Our Lady of Mount Carmel was built “on the rural lands of Azaruja, more specifically in Martinho Lopes Lobo de Saldanha’s former heritage, who was the captain of Granadeiros and a lad from the royal house. At the end of the 18th century, this land was integrated into the vast properties of Count of Galveias” (Grilo, 1996, p. 143). Nowadays, it remains a private site, open to the local community for adoration and devotion practices.

The Hermitage of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, although an imposing place of devotion next to such a small civil parish, gathers thousands of objects for graces granted or asked, from the 18th century to the present. According to Grilo, the hermitage is a

typical building from the golden age of religious pilgrimages, both of the taste of the Portuguese from the reigns of D. José and D. Maria and their set of ex-votos – gratulatory altarpieces that cover almost entirely the walls of this temple. We believe that this might be the largest collection of painted ex-votos in Portugal – approximately 1500 copies – the two oldest ones dating back to 1706 and 1754. (Grilo, 1996, p. 142)

The ex-votos located in the Hermitage of Our Lady of Mount Carmel of Azaruja are all dedicated to Our Lady of Mount Carmel. This information is apparently evident at the first sight, but it is not the case for all places. That is explained by the fact that, even though there is a central devotion site, there are, within the same church, other saints who also receive prayers and, consequently, ex-votos.

Concerning this Marian invocation, Oliveira and Alves emphasize that

according to tradition, the Prophet Elijah had prophetically worshipped the future Mother of Jesus, almost a thousand years before her birth, on Mount Carmel, in Palestine. In the traditional iconographic representation, Our Lady of Mount Carmel is portrayed standing, with the Carmelite habit, holding Baby Jesus in her left arm, and the scapular in her right arm. The scapular was originally a long strip of fabric that the monks wore over the habit, covering their chest and their back. The Carmelite scapular derives from a vision of Saint Simon Stock, conceived to him directly from the Virgin guaranteeing salvation for those who wore it constantly (Oliveira, 2018, pp. 115-116).

The couple Ignacio Berrina and Maria Roza (Figure 1), for example, asked in the name of their three children who were affected by different diseases and who were in danger of life.

Themes for ex-votos are diverse. They depict problems that plagued society at that time. Some of them illustrated promises made to recover the health of a loved one, while others asked for an animal, something that was often the family's source of livelihood. The couple Ignacio Berrina and Maria Rosa, for instance, beg for the well-being of their three children,

who were affected by different illnesses, being at the brink of death (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Ex-voto from Ignacio Berrina and Maria Roza (1844). Hermitage of Our Lady of Mount Carmel.

Another example comes from Joze Antonio and Francisco Roiz Pavão who, according to the provided narrative, were unjustly arrested. They then asked Our Lady of Mount Carmel for justice, asking to be released.



**Figure 2.** Ex-voto from Joze Antonio and Francisco Roiz Pavão (1845). Hermitage of Our Lady of Mount Carmel.

On the other hand, Ventura Rozado begs Our Lady of Mount Carmel to recover two cows that had fled.



**Figure 3.** Ex-voto from Ventura Rozado (1860). Hermitage of Our Lady of Mount Carmel.

Since ex-votos are representations of graces that were achieved, certainly, all the devotees mentioned before had their prayers attended and their problems solved by the intercession of Our Lady of Mount Carmel.

### **The Sanctuary of Lord Jesus of Piety, in Elvas**

As expected for any popular devotion, the cult of Lord Jesus of Piety in Elvas surfaced from a legendary tale. Father Manuel Antunes – born in Barbacena, in 1698 (this information was retrieved from the Baptism Book in the parish church of Barbacena, lot 122/02, 1694-1731, f 23v., by the researcher Tânia Morais Rico) – after falling from a mule twice, he found himself in peril of death, resorting to the Lord Jesus Crucified:

Desperate, he invokes the sacrifice of Our Lord on the Cross as the only possibility of redemption and salvation from the tragedy that was haunting him. If God allowed him to get better from his injury, and do not suffer any relapse as a result of these falls, Father Manuel Antunes promised to hold a mass in that place and to recover the cross. Leaning against the cross, resting and praying, he begins to feel better and,

with his mule, he traveled back to the Horta dos Passarinhos and arrived to his destination with no harm, nothing afflicted him again. The summer was over and he didn't suffer any illness or ailment as a result of the falls and, to fulfil his promise, he ordered a new cross and the image of Christ Crucified to be painted on it, calling him Lord Jesus of Piety, dedicating the place to this invocation (Rico, 2018, pp. 13-14).

From this narrative, we can see that the ex-votive gesture of Father Manuel Antunes gave rise to this cult, around 1737, which crossed the times and remains today. After other miracles and the popularization of the power of Lord Jesus da Piedade, the number of believers increased and, therefore, adaptations were needed to be made in the place. First, a cover for the cross was provided. Then, someone donated part of a land and the construction of a chapel was provided. According to Rico, citing the Confraternity Commitment of 1739, the chapel "was built 'with all the exquisite and unique architecture' and its aspect is revealed to us through a singular testimony" (Rico, 2018, p. 38). In the Sanctuary there is a 1737 ex-vow that features a painting that characterize the primitive chapel.

Good Lord Jesus of Piety is well-known and, according to Gama,

to the Lord of Piety of Elvas, people from all over the places experienced with him the deepest emotions. They used to get there on foot by open roads or shortcuts. Usually having their flesh in sores, their limbs aching, their muscles tired, leaving arduous paths of blood behind. But, even passing through all this situation and effort they had hope that no words were enough to translate it. They got there rode on agile and powerful steeds or on humble and slow donkeys; some got there driving the distinctive cars, specifically from the Alentejo, which sheltered them from the sun harming during the summer time or insulated them from the cold and rain during the rigors of winter (Gama, 1965, p. 49).

Considering the growing number of devotees of Lord Jesus of Piety in Elvas, the rudimentary hermitage was in need of being expanded. It is important to be noted that, although pecuniary offerings are conventionally part of the payment of a promise, the expansion of the hermitage was only possible through donations from faithful believers, who frequented the space of devotion. The sanctuary as it stands today is a religious site of impressive scale, which received and is still receiving many pilgrims throughout the years. It is important to highlight that the

magnificence of this religious space provides evidence not only for the strength of the popular devotion but also provides economic influences of the brotherhood that have been settled there.

Unique ex-votos can be found in the sanctuary. There are, for example, some ex-votos that have signs referring to historical facts, such as the French invasions (see Figures 4 and 5). Concerning this feature, citing the *Jornal Sentinela da Fronteira* – number 116, of May 1882 –, Lapa calls attention to the fact that, for voting paintings of Lord Jesus of Piety of Elvas,

in most paintings from the 18th century, there is no image of the Lord Jesus of Piety because, after the French invasion, the First Empire soldiers, when departing from Elvas, following the Convention of Sintra, cut out the images of the paintings and carried with them. They used them around their necks in bags as a protection against the evils of the war which they were going to face in France. (Lapa, 1967, p. 13)



**Figure 4.** Ex-voto by Joze Pacheco (1740). Sanctuary of Lord Jesus of Piety, in Elvas.



**Figure 5.** Ex-voto by Manoel Nunes (1749). Sanctuary of Lord Jesus of Piety, in Elvas.

These ex-votos in Figure 4 and Figure 5, part of a collection in the Sanctuary of Lord Jesus of Piety in Elvas, provide evidence for interpreting that voting offerings have several historical layers: a history of devotion (which precedes the ex-voto's confection), a tradition of crafting this type of material (the tradition of this specific genre), a history of circulation and conservation of this material and also other stories.

In the next section, certain examples of linguistic phenomena extracted from two ex-votos, that are part of our research corpus will be presented. So, this section could be considered as an example of part of the focus given in our research about the ex-votos.

### **Ex-votos as evidence of a language state**

These peculiar objects of popular devotion attracted the attention of researchers from different research fields. This is explained by the fact that ex-votos are usually highlighted as:

naïve description of the *miracle*, where the anonymous author placed all his talent: the position of the figures, almost always on their knees and in single line, and subtitles with curious expressions that intent to translate feelings and emotions; (Gama, 1965, p. 256).

Through a linguistic analysis, it is possible to recognise the description text in ex-votos as an evidence for a language state. Silva (Mattos e Silva, 1992; 2004; 2008), when discussing the authenticity of using non-literary texts to assess past states of a language, claims that such documents can contribute to the study on morphology, on the lexicon and on the relationship between spelling and phonic realisations. In this sense, the ex-votos of the 18th and 19th centuries are relevant sources, alongside other non-literary material, to study the popular language from those periods, since they were predominantly produced by non-professionals, described by Valladares as “miracle sketchers” (Valladares, 1965, p. 21). Thus, we can also comprehend, with a diachronic look at the sources, as stated by Cohen, that it will be possible to “realise that the contemporary language is the result of a long historical process, which currently hides, under an apparent synchronic homogeneity, other historical dimensions” (Cohen, 2017, p. 1).

Using conservative reproductions of two ex-votos, we intend to present some examples of linguistic phenomena. In addition to purely orthographic issues – such as double letters, irregular word boundaries (considering current orthography as a comparison parameter) etc. – the ex-voto (Figure 6) provides some clues about the possible phonic realization of some words, evidenced by the usage of different forms when compared with contemporary ones, such as: *prigo* (vs. *perigo*) and *milhoras* (vs. *melhoras*).



**Figure 6.** Ex-voto by Manoel Velladas (1807). Hermitage of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Azaruja.

*M.<sup>e</sup> que Fes N. S.<sup>a</sup> Do Carmo, a Manoel Velladas da Fg.<sup>a</sup> de Alqueva T<sup>o</sup> de Portel: Estando, è prigo de vida, emvocado o patrocino da mesma Sr.<sup>a</sup> Recebeo Saude, e Milhoras Anno de 1807*

*Merce que fez Nossa Senhora do Carmo à Manoel Velladas, da Freguesia de Alqueva, termo de Portel. Estando em perigo de vida e invocando o patrocínio da mesma Senhora, recebeu saúde e melhoras. Ano de 1807.*

On the following ex-voto (Figure 7), for example, there is a word boundary between *grave-* and *-mente*, corresponding to the word *gravemente*, which suggests the interpretation that it is a compound word. This interpretation is discussed in Câmara Junior's morpho-phonological analysis of adverbs formed by *-mente*, interpreted as compounds in Portuguese (Câmara Junior, 1970).



**Figure 7.** Ex-voto by Manoel Velladas (1807). Hermitage of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Azaruja.

*Milagre q̃. N. S. do Carmo fez, a Violante de Jesus q̃. estando grave=mente duente sepegou e seu marido com a dita S.<sup>a</sup> a qul se a chou boa, anno de 1868 Sebastião Luiz*

*Milagre que Nossa Senhora do Carmo fez à Violante de Jesus, que estando gravemente doente se apegou, ela e seu marido, com a dita Senhora, a qual se achou boa. Ano de 1868. Sebastião Luiz.*

## **Final Remarks**

This paper explored two major objectives. First, we intended to focus on two sites of popular devotion in Alentejo region, Portugal, and the collections of ex-votos that we found there. There are unique objects in the two locations, both in Azaruja and Elvas. These materials are in danger of being lost by (fire, humidity, insects, theft, carelessness etc.).

So, we should highlight that these materials deserve an especial attention as data to be researched, as well as they need the effective recognition by the competent authorities and even the country itself to preserve such a fragile heritage.

Our second objective was to register and promulgate our ongoing doctoral research. In this historical and unique field of investigating ex-votos in an interdisciplinary way, we aim to find material for our research labour. These ex-votos were chosen as a research topic due to the possibility of describing, to some extent, the popular Portuguese written language production in a Brazilian region and a Portuguese region (Minas Gerais and Alentejo, respectively).

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### **Conflicts of interests**

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

### **Data availability**

The data and materials supporting the results of this study are available in open access at the USP Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations via DOI: <https://doi.org/10.11606/T.8.2024.tde-20082024-084724>.

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