



Nota breve | Short note

Biotic representations in the church of Nossa Senhora da Luz, Santiago Island, Cabo Verde

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The representation of animals in Gothic architecture is frequent (e.g., bestiaries) and authors mention their allegorical sense with symbolic and narrative meanings, representing vices, virtues and guardians, contrasting the physical and spiritual worlds (Marques 2007, Dilnes 2021).

The church of Nossa Senhora da Luz, in Alcatrazes Bay, southeast of Santiago Island, was built circa 1495–1510s (Teixeira & Fernandes 2012). Alcatrazes was formerly the name of the church's village and the capital of one of the two captaincies of Santiago (the northern one), ruled by Diogo Afonso, navigator that discovered Santiago together with the António de Noli between 1456–1460 (Pires 2012). Alcatrazes and Ribeira Grande (the southern captaincy capital city, currently Cidade Velha) started to be populated with southern Portuguese in 1462 by order of Prince Henry. In 1527, the northern captaincy's capital changed to Vila da Praia (currently Cidade da Praia), and Alcatrazes lost

its inhabitants (Pires 2012).

The building is rectangular and facing East (Fig. 1A), with a nave ended by a pointed limestone arch with columns with carved chapter friezes followed by the chancel with a round limestone arch (Fig. 1B). The pointed arch is an example of stone craftsmanship; the chapters have biotic motifs: *Acanthus* leaves, a shell (Fig. 1C), and one *sui generis* reptile in the northern chapter (Fig. 1D). The latter is anatomically well represented, differing from the schematic ones represented in southern Gothic Portuguese religious buildings (Silva 1989, Marques 2010).

Six native reptile species occur on Santiago; three of geckos (two *Tarentola* and one *Hemidactylus*), and three of *Chioninia* skinks (Vasconcelos *et al.* 2013). The goal of this work was to identify the reptile of the chapter and discuss its presence as an element of this church. For that, photos of the motif and reptile species occurring in the area, and training with a herpetologist were taken.



Fig. 1. Pictures of the church of Nossa Senhora da Luz and details of its architectural and biotic elements (photos by M. Pacheco). **A)** Surroundings of the church in Alcatrazes Bay, southeast of Santiago Island. **B)** Unhewn limestone pointed arch in the transition of the nave to the chancel with square, recessed columns with biotic representations in the chapters. **C)** The northern chapter with *Acanthus* leaves, a shell on the edge, and **D)** a gecko facing the altar. **D)** Photo of an individual of an endemic *Tarentola* species of Santiago.

The reptile was identified as a gecko due to its morphology (well-defined neck), body proportions (shorter trunk length/ wider head than skinks), and limb position (Miralles *et al.* 2011, Vasconcelos *et al.* 2012). Between the two possible genera, it was identified as *Tarentola* due to its wider head and orbits than *Hemidactylus* (Arnold *et al.* 2008, Vasconcelos *et al.* 2012).

It was impossible to distinguish it between *Tarentola darwini* and *Tarentola rudis*, the two Santiago endemics, as both occur in rocky areas in the southeast (Vasconcelos *et al.* 2013).

Gecko representation in chapters of religious buildings can be found in Portugal and former Portuguese colonies, with several morphologies. The representation of this gecko shows the craftsman's sensitivity to nature, and its ability to adapt artistic and literary traditions and technical knowledge from the kingdom to the new African context to which he became familiar. The study of geckos' symbolic importance may help reduce the general aversion of human populations towards them (Ceríaco & Marques 2013), which is an obstacle to conservation plans (Vasconcelos 2013).

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