

## HEADING REPORT(H)A: The theatre of nature and the world



**Citânia de Briteiros (Guimarães, north of Portugal): reconstructed round house, with a cork oak at the rear (c.1874).** Photograph by Francisco Martins

Sarmiento, reproduced from collodion negative on glass plate

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### ON AN OLD CORK OAK IN CITÂNIA DE BRITEIROS

1. This cork oak—*sobreiro* to the Portuguese—is a tree with a pronounced base, an ancient sentinel that emerges as if it were a rock at the highest hilltop. Its trunk reaches a few metres in height, where a long branch derives from it, the last testimony of a once leafy treetop, and the ultimate sign of a tree that has witnessed the passage of centuries until its eventual demise. It still remains upright on top of São Romão hill, in Briteiros, near Guimarães, in Portugal's north, the place where Francisco Martins Sarmiento (1833–1899) came to reveal a dead city. In the tree's exposed interior, we find glimpses of unexpected signs of life: a green lizard has settled here, large ants wander among wood fragments, strange mushrooms erupt

from the interstices of the bark. This once powerful cork oak is now dead, but it still shelters diverse forms of life. The time spent in nurturing a living tree of flowing sap, made of wood cells, covered with cork and perennial foliage, a copious generator of acorns, is now succeeded by the time of a slow disassembling, cellulose degradation, internal emptying of the trunk, final collapse of the crown, gradual decomposition of the cork – in short, the time to become dust that returns to dust.

2. In an ancient view of São Romão hill, captured by Martins Sarmiento around 1874, this cork oak is an identifiable tree, rising up near the singular chapel erected by popular devotion on the hilltop. The tree towers above the line that circumscribes the elevation of the hill: a conspicuous trunk supporting a dense treetop against the background sky. Around it, a scattering of flimsy and less expressive trees, dispersed among archaeological remains brought to light by excavations undertaken in the 1870s. The remainder of the hill is a wooded solitude. In other views by the same pioneer photographer there are two recently reconstructed round houses over which the cork oak looms as a sentinel. Why has the notable archaeologist preserved this particular tree in a spot liable to removal of land and exhumation of stones and other findings? Why has he resisted an archaeological suspicion of what could be hidden under its roots? This encapsulates the very mystery of this tree, under which shade the archaeologist and his assistants, women and men, might have sheltered during the first excavation campaigns – *sobreiro*, *sombreiro*: cork oak, a welcoming parasol.

3. Walking attentively through the Citânia, we come across another ancient cork oak, not far away from the most conspicuous one on top of the hill. It rises at a lower level, the reason why its branches barely emerge in the first photographs. This other tree is still very much alive, and renews itself with light green leaves every spring. A stone circle has been built at the base of both trees, an outward sign that at a certain moment someone protected them from archaeological fever by providing a place of rest under their benign shade. These two trees were photographed much later by Álvaro Martins for an article on Citânia de Briteiros published in the September 1930 issue of *Ilustração*. They also feature in an aerial photograph taken in February 1938 by Major Aviator Pinheiro Correia, currently displayed at the entrance to the library of Sociedade Martins Sarmiento. These were, very possibly, the trees that generated the cork oak grove that today covers part of the Citânia, evoking a pristine wooded ambience dating back to the time when the Lusitanians, in the words of Strabo, fed for two thirds of the year on bread made from acorn flour. These were pedunculate oak (*Quercus robur* L.) acorns, according to the Greek geographer's text, although nothing precludes the consumption of cork oak (*Quercus suber* L.) acorns, which, by the way, do taste better. Cork oaks are certainly still common today in the Citânia's surrounding landscape, just like pedunculate oaks, and have a peculiar expression in the

*Sabroso* toponym, the name of another hill seen at a certain distance. Here is located a *castro* also excavated by Martins Sarmento; the name of the hill is possibly a collective derivation from the Latin name for the cork oak, *suber*, and suggests the profusion of these trees since ancient times. Towards a different direction, northwest of the Citânia, on a ridge that circumscribes the river Ave valley, separating the municipalities of Guimarães and Braga, rises a granite hilltop whose name is a direct reference to the bark (*cortiça*) of the cork oak: *Santa Marta das Cortiças*. Located next to the archaeological station excavated by Albano Belino (1863–1906) at the end of the nineteenth century, now crowned by the cork oaks that survived the disastrous fires of October 2017, this hilltop and its vernacular name, do represent here the *genius loci*. Ancient companions, cork oaks and humans have shaped the landscape of the Ave valley across a long trajectory, albeit at different paces, leaving marks that still persist under the relentless transformations of the rural territory.

4. In November 2018, at the exhibition *Depois do Tempo* [After Time] at Casa da Memória in Guimarães, photographer Duarte Belo presented two images captured at Citânia de Briteiros: one of the decrepit cork oak seen from the side where an electrical discharge left a groove in its trunk; the other of a remarkable pine tree (which I will address on a subsequent occasion). In the release of the book resulting from the exhibition, geographer Álvaro Domingues called the old cork oak a ‘family tree’. Rightly so: it is a tree that defines the spirit of the place and connects us to the ancient times in which the Citânia was inhabited. A tree that has lived for centuries and whose shape now seems to have been sculpted by time. Its interior is a dying flame.

5. We asked sculptor Paulo Neves to sound out the tree and, if he so wished, to convey to us his omen. The visit was short, and the prognosis was brief: the state of the cork oak no longer allows a sculptural intervention. However, even without the hand of another sculptor but time, isn’t this tree, in itself, a work of art? Perhaps the answer can be found in quietly contemplating this centuries-long icon of *castro* culture.

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## CORK OAK, NATIONAL TREE OF PORTUGAL

At the end of 2011, the cork oak was unanimously established as the national tree of Portugal, a status enshrined in the Resolution of the Assembly of the Republic No. 15/2012. This resolution reflects the importance of the cork oak as a national heritage that characterizes the environment and the landscape, integrating Portuguese history and culture, as well as scientific research.

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