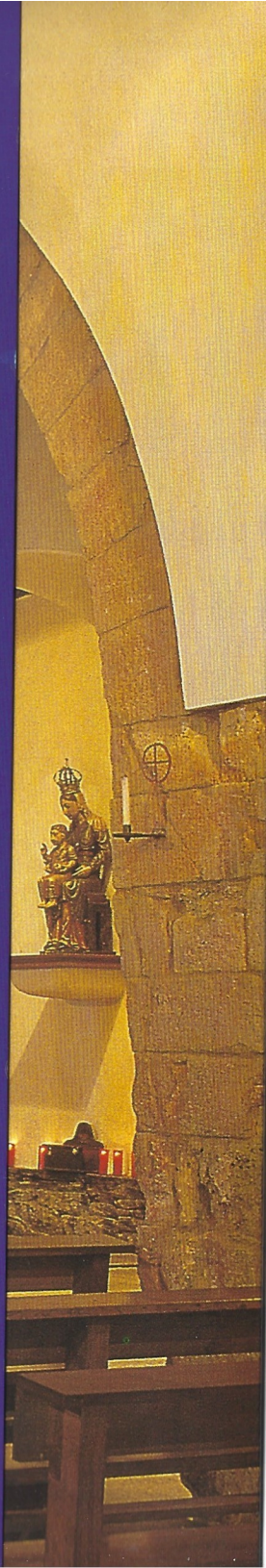




Cebreiro







O Cebreiro



“A halt on the Way”



○ CEBREIRO ○

O Cebreiro is a small village in the province of Lugo, at an altitude of 1,300 metres. consisting of a unique group of buildings: the Sanctuary of Santa Maria La Real, the Inn of San Giraldo de Aurillac, and the pallozas (huts of pre-Roman origin) which, because of their special interest, have been declared of Special National Historical and Cultural Interest. It belongs to the Municipality of Pedrafita do Cebreiro, bordering El Bierzo, in the province of León, and forms the area between the the Sierras of O Courel and Os Ancares. In winter, it has a population of barely a dozen people, but during the year it fills with pilgrims on the the way to Santiago, and is widely known for several reasons, the most important of which is the Miracle, or legend which is said to have happened in the sanctuary.

The village of O Cebreiro is one of the few settlements which can be traced back to Celtic times, and, being the point of entry of the French Santiago Way into Galicia, it has, along with the legend of the Miracle and the reconstructed pallozas, lasted up to the present day.

Nowadays, access is easy. It is 4 kms. from the A6 Madrid - A Coruña motorway, from which it can be reached via Pedrafita. The easiest route from the provinces of Pontevedra and Ourense is via the road linking the village to Sarria, passing through Monforte de Lemos. Once they have climbed the 1,300 metres to the village, pilgrims who here enter Galicia

will find hospitality, kindness, and a warm welcome. At the same time, travellers will feel, at these lofty heights, that they have stepped back



Mountains of the Sierra de Os Ancares

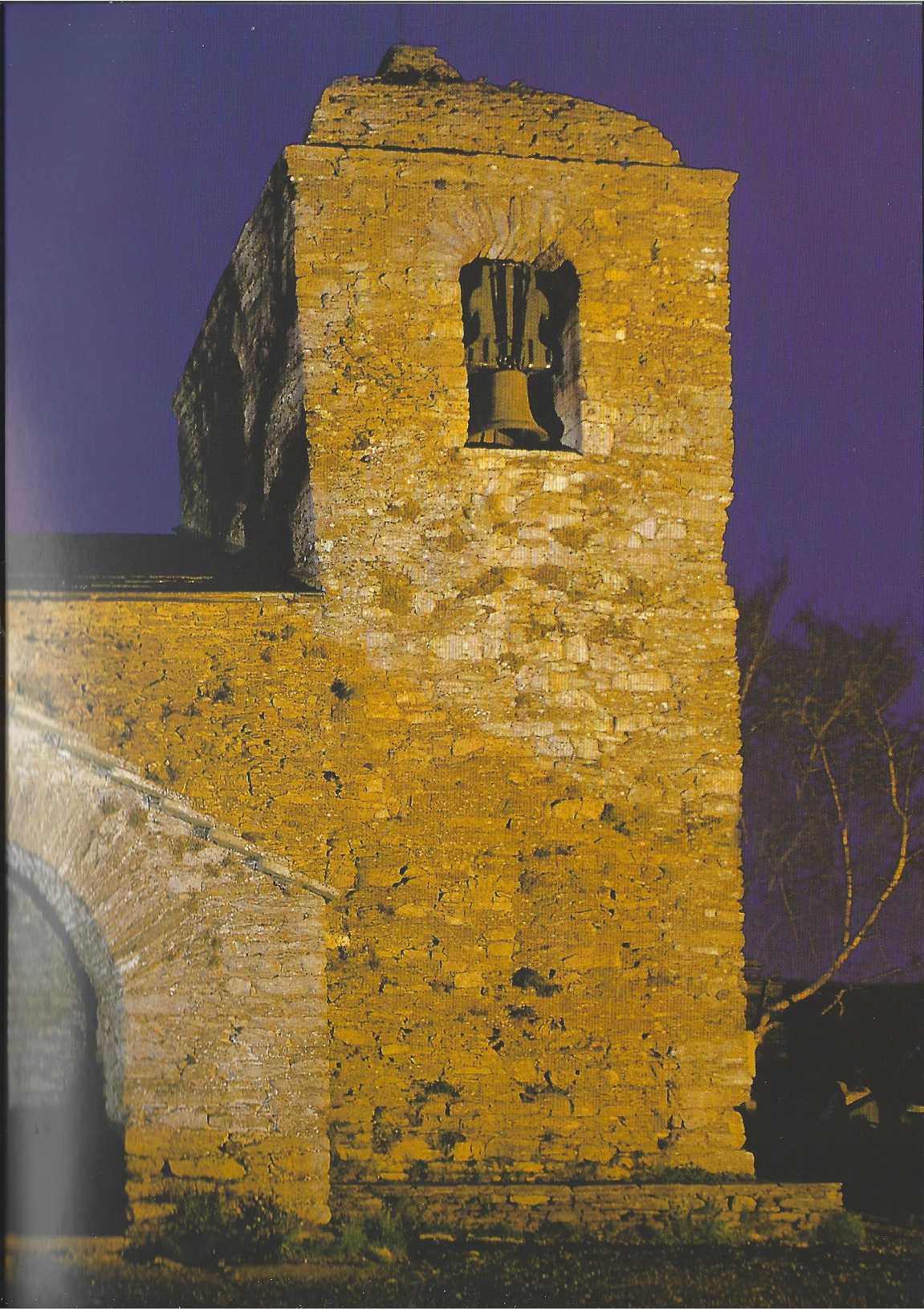
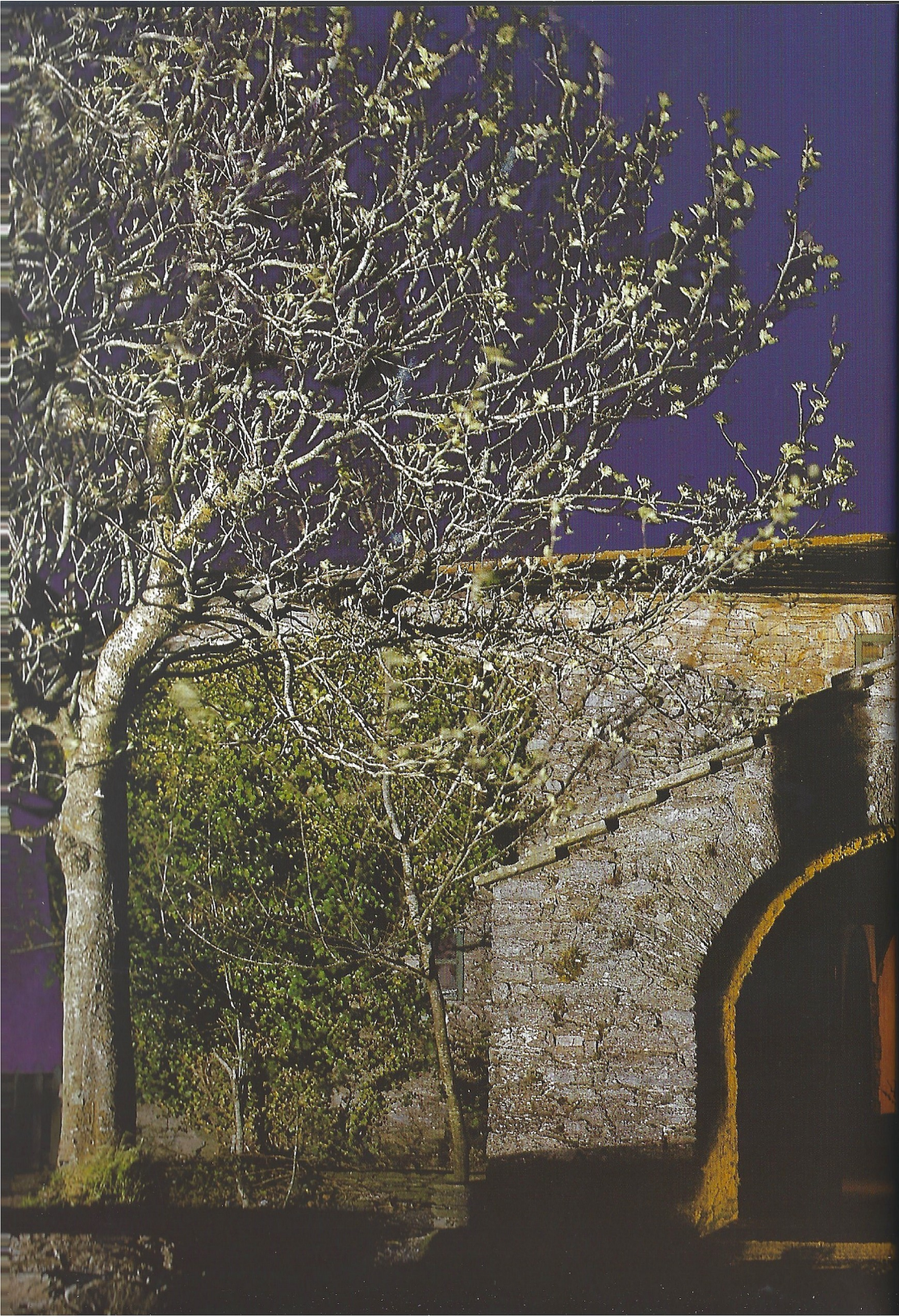


in time. When we enter the Sanctuary and the Inn, we immediately feel as if we are in medieval times, and as we go into any of the pallozas, as if we are in the Celtic Age. We find ourselves in a magical world - a feeling which is felt even more strongly as we step into the Sanctuary.

On 8th and 9th September, the festival of Santa Maria La Real and the Holy Miracle is held, when crowds of more than 50,000 devout pilgrims come to ask favours of the Virgin.



Aerial view of O Cebreiro



HISTORY OF O CEBREIRO

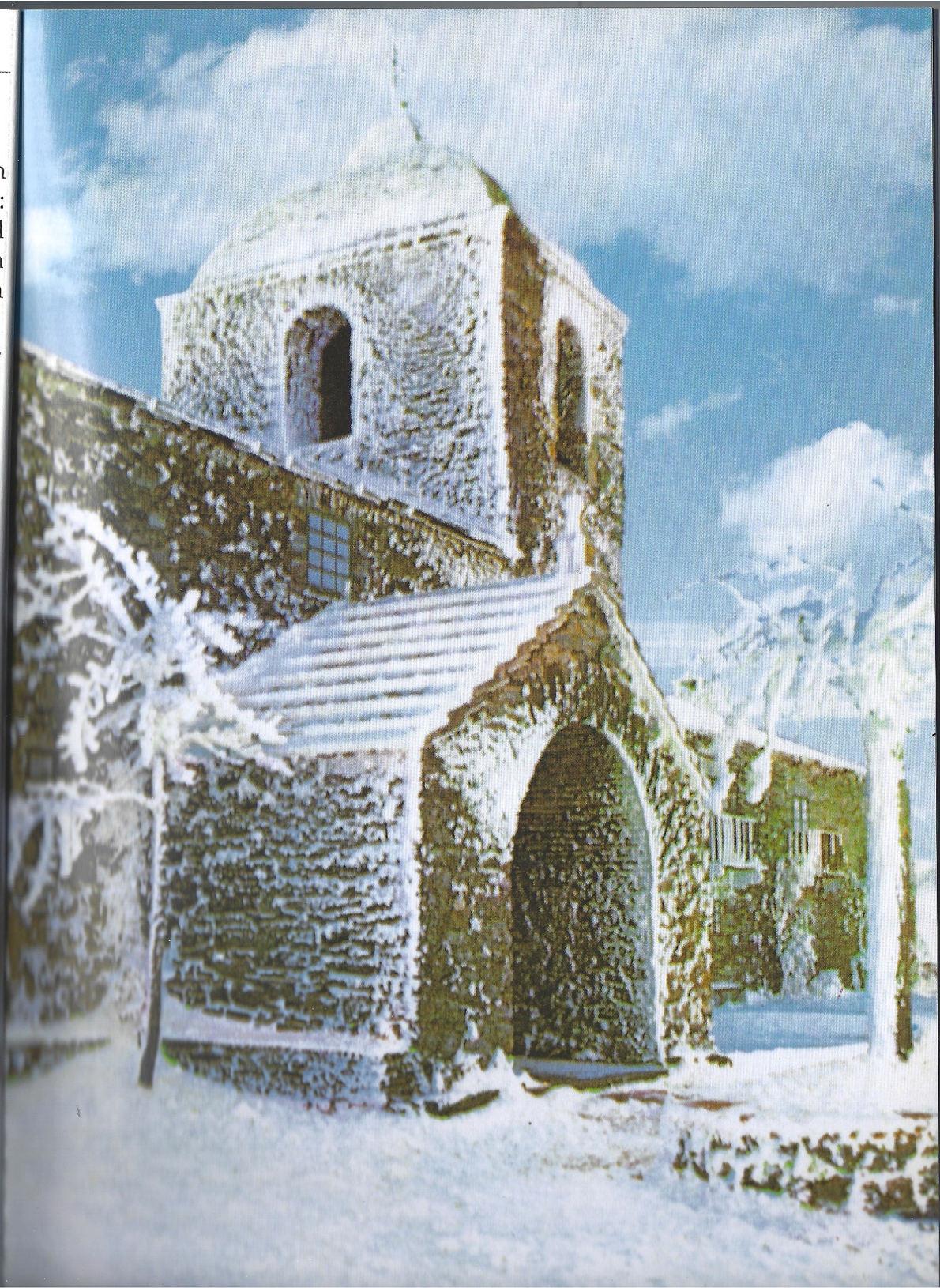
This area, with its history and legends, has been a rich exploration ground for researchers from different fields: historians, sociologists, ethnologists, geologists, etc. and because of these people, and most especially D. Elías Valiña Sampedro, O Cebreiro has become an important landmark on the Santiago Way.

Under the Romans, the district of O Cebreiro (Mons Februarii), was an access point to the way which, via Triacastela, led to the interior of Galicia, and the most deeply-rooted and earliest settlements in Galicia were to be found here, as can be evidenced by the pallozas which still survive to this day. However, it was the discovery of the tomb of Saint James the Apostle, in 820, and the beginning of pilgrimages to Compostela that gave this small village, with its hospital-inn for pilgrims, such importance.



Bronze Age carving

Santa Maria La Real and Inn →





Group of pallozas

The inn, probably originally a palloza, was founded by Benedictine monks around the middle of the IX century, and King Alfonso VI placed it under the control of the French abbey of Aurillac. The hospital received various donations and privileges, particularly from Alfonso VI and Alfonso VII, later upheld by Fernando II. On their journey to Galicia in 1486 the Catholic Kings asked Pope Innocence VII for permission to adequately restore the inn and hospital and link them to the Monks of the Benedictine Congregation of Valladolid, a request which was granted under Pope Alexander VI. This marked the beginning of a new period in its history, since, changing its dependency from a French order to a Spanish house, it gave up its category of Monastery to become a simple Priory, with the obligation, as with any priory, to use part of its income for the upkeep of the Mother House of Valladolid. All the prosperity it had acquired soon began to dwindle, due to wars, the interference of the nobles, and the bad administration of its

assets, and in the XVI century it entered into irreversible decline, since it became involved in various disputes which caused it to gradually lose the privileges it had previously acquired. This period also coincided with the decline of pilgrimages to Santiago. The XVII and XVIII centuries were no better than the previous, since the fire in 1641, when the priory was completely burned down, and the lawsuits it had to finance, kept it in a state of decline - as is exemplified by the fact that on 1st March 1722 O Cebreiro had to ask for a loan of 2,000 ducats, and from that moment on it was always in debt and Valladolid had to offer it help.



Winter in O Cebreiro



This decline became even more evident as time went on and the monks were expelled from O Cebreiro as a result of the introduction of Mendizábal's laws to sell church lands in 1835. O Cebreiro was no exception, and in 1858, as a result of this law stripping church assets, the Monastery of O Cebreiro ceased to exist as such and the Benedictine monks were obliged to leave. D. Eliàs describes it thus:

"After being in charge of the hospital for ten centuries, helping pilgrims and other needy people, the monks of S. Benedict were obliged, in August 1858, to leave El Cebreiro, as a consequence of the impious laws of confiscation passed by the Spanish government."

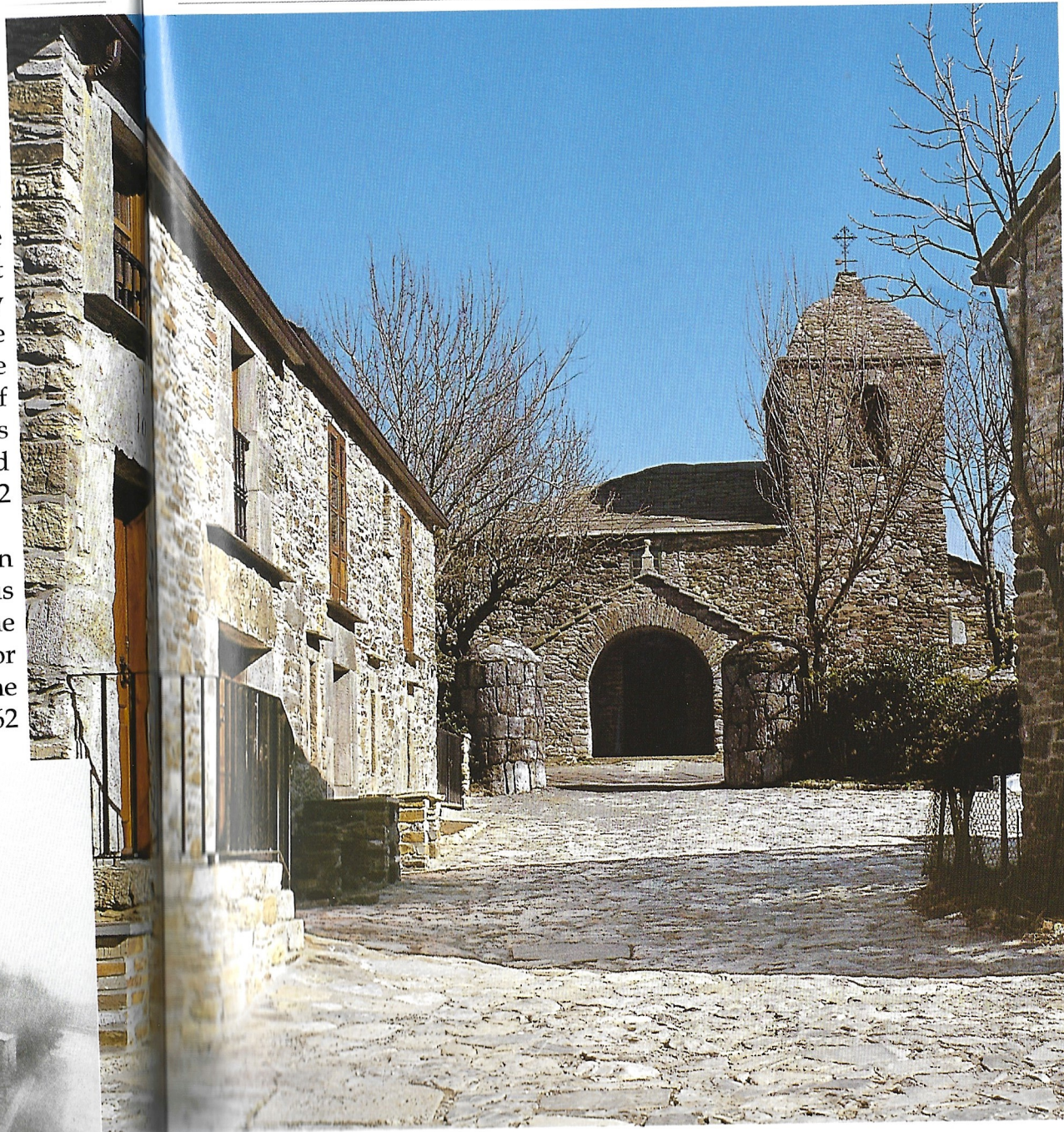


◀ Night view Sanctuary and surrounding buildings

SANTA MARIA LA REAL

The parish church of Santa María la Real of O Cebreiro belongs to the diocese of Lugo. Its present priest, takes special care of the conservation and decoration of the sanctuary, and all religious music can be heard inside the sanctuary. The sanctuary is Pre-Romanic, from the IX century, and possesses some unusual features, one of the most striking of which is the fact that it is sunk into the ground as a protection from the heavy snowstorms which hit this area during winter. Together with the rest of the village, it has been restored since 1962 at the expense of the State Architectural Department under the instructions of the architect Pons-Sorolla y Arnau. The pink colour of the naves inside the church is due to the two fires it suffered in 1450 and 1441. The apses are rectangular and pre-Romanic, and until 1962 were covered with plastering and reredoses.

Once inside the Sanctuary, we find on our left the baptistry, in a space which separates it from the nave of the church, thus fulfilling the ancient canon of keeping the church separate. The baptismal font is an architectural gem which has been used for immersion baptism, a practise which was discontinued in the 13th century. The baptistry has a lantern, uncovered in the 1962



In the mist.

Main street and Sanctuary



restoration, - evidence of the early church's former days of glory.

The walls of the naves, with rectangular apses, nowadays show their bare stone. In the left nave a chapel of Saint Benedict, in memory of the Benedictine monks who founded and ruled this monastery, provides further evidence of the history of the Sanctuary. At the base of the altar in this chapel is a tomb containing the remains of D. Elias Valiña Sampedro, the "Priest of O Cebreiro", bearing an extensive inscription on its stone.

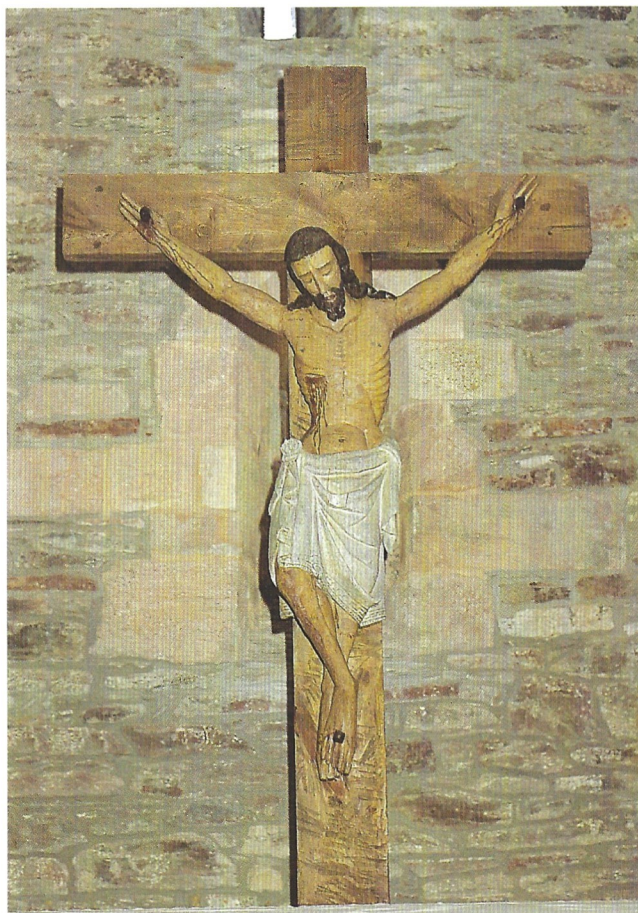
On the high altar which dominates the whole church is a recent carving of Christ which is a replica of an image of the Christ Crucified, the original of which is housed in the Madrid Museum of Sacred Art Sculpture. The High Altar gives leads to the sacristy, shielded by the back of the main vault of the church and of the chapel of Saint Benedict.

Continuing round the inside of the church, we come to the chapel on the right called the chapel of the Holy Miracle, which is where the most interesting pieces are to be found. The first to attract our attention is the image of Santa Maria La Real of O Cebreiro- the Virgin of Healing or of The Miracle. It is a romanica carving representing the Virgin Mary with the Infant at her breast, and formerly stood over the High Altar. The most



← Santa Maria La Real. Exterior

Central nave of the Sanctuary



Christ. XII century carving.

popular legend is that the Virgin bent her head in adoration of The Miracle, but some also add that the Infant she has in her arms "opened his eyes" for the same reason. The image has undergone many restorations, the last of which was in 1971 by the Santiago sculptor Alfonso Sanmartin. D. Elías describes the process to us thus:

"She had the Infant sitting on her breast. Now she has him on one hand. The head is not the original. It is difficult to achieve a good restoration of this image. This image is still highly venerated throughout the extensive district of O Cebreiro, in the current provinces of Lugo and León.

In the current restoration works of the church an attempt has been made not to separate this altar image

from the relics, in order to better sustain the legend. A base set into the side wall of the relics chapel supports this venerated image of Santa Maria La Real of O Cebreiro, known in the village as the Virgin of the Holy Miracle."

The church got the name of Santa Maria La Real (Royal Holy Mary) because it was declared the sanctuary of royal protection, since it was continuously endowed with royal privileges.

The great devotion which the faithful feel throughout the region of Galicia and Leon towards O Cebreiro is evidenced by the pilgrimages which are held on 8th and 8th September every year. Pilgrims especially from Galicia come to the festival of Our Lady, on 8th September, since in

Santa Maria La Real. Romanic carving ➔



the area of León The Virgin of the Holm Oak of Ponferrada, patron saint of the region of El Bierzo, is celebrated on the same day. The festival of the Holy Miracle is on 9th September, when more than 60,000 devotees from León and Galicians gather in the region around O Cebreiro.

The altar of this nave is overlooked by an object in the shape of a safe, with a glass front, which holds several objects inside. In the upper part are the chalice and the paten, objects on which it is alleged the Miracle of O Cebreiro occurred. They are two romanic gems, belonging to the XII century, which are mentioned in the Catalogue of European Romanic Art. Much has been written about this chalice, since it is considered as the Holy Grail of Galicia, and human imagination has gone as far as saying that it inspired Wagner to dedicate his opera "Parsifal" to it. What is certainly true is that the Romanic Chalice of O Cebreiro, because of its symbolic significance, features on the current Arms of Galicia.

We can also admire in this showcase the reliquary donated by the Catholic Kings in 1486 to hold the remains of the body and blood which the host and wine became, according to the legend of the Holy Miracle, which shall be later explained.

We also find on this altar a valuable embossed silver tabernacle representing the funeral urn holding the remains of the holy apostle James in the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. On the



Altar of Saint Benedict

High Altar →



side wall of the same altar we can see two humble tombs with anthropomorphic features, under a pointed arch set into the wall. According to popular legend, these are the burial places of the monk and farmer who were present at the Miracle.



Side nave, with Santa Maria La Real and the altar of the Holy Miracle

THE HOLY MIRACLE

The Holy Miracle, or Miracle of the Eucharist, is an event which has made O Cebreiro and its monastery famous throughout Europe. Both oral and written tradition described this legend woven around the Church of O Cebreiro, corroborated by several historic and archeological sources which support the following facts:

"A monk from Aurillac was celebrating Mass in this chapel in the XIV century. A farmer from a nearby village, called Barxa Maior, went up to O Cebreiro in the middle of a snowstorm to hear the Holy Mass. The monk who was holding the Mass, a man of little faith, scorned the trouble the farmer had taken. At the moment of the Consecration, the monk perceived that the Host had turned into visible flesh, and that the Chalice into blood which boiled over and stained the corporals. The corporal with the blood remained on the Chalice and the Host in the Paten."

One of the most classic accounts is that given by Father Yepes, a Benedictine chronicler, who related what happened in the following way:

"Around the year 1300 there lived a subject of the house of O Cebreiro in a village half a league distant by the name of Baixa Maior, and such was his devotion to the Holy Sacrament of Mass that neither work nor harsh weather would keep him from hearing the Mass. This is an area battered on all sides by winds, such that there are snowdrifts which not only block the paths but cover the houses, and even the monastery, church and hospital are often entombed in snow. And there within they often live by fires and candlelight, for on many days the light from the sky is seldom seen, and had not charity (which neither rivers nor skies can kill) kept the monks there entertained in their service of the poor, it seems the place would have been impossible to please any man. One harsh and stormy day, the good man, battling against wind, snow and tempest, beat a way through the snowdrifts to reach the church.

Therein was a monk saying Mass, full heedless of the fact that in such toilsome weather, it was possible that nobody would attend. He had already consecrated the Host and the Chalice when the man arrived and, startled upon seeing him, the monk scorned the man to himself, saying: "Who is this man, who comes in such a heavy tempest, and so wearied, in order to see a piece of bread and wine!" The Lord works his wonders in the depths of the earth and in hidden places, even so far, on that day and in that church, as to turn the Host into flesh and the wine into blood, and, thus revealing His Greatness, did open the eyes of the wretched man who had doubted and rewarded the good man for such great display of devotion in coming to attend Mass in spite of such hardships..." (Yepes, General Cronicle of the Order of Saint Benedict, vol. IV)

Dr. Molina Ambrosio de Morales and a long list of scholars also continued to accept the event as having really happened. Moreover, several Popes, including Innocence VIII in 1436 and Alexander VI in 1496, mention this miracle in papal bulls.

*Holy Miracle and XVIth century reliquary and chalice:
XIIIth century Holy Grail*





D. Elías Valiña, after the restoration of the village.



September festivities in O Cebreiro.



D. Elías with some pilgrims and the Professor Dr. García, of the Papal University of Salamanca.

What also gave strength to the legend of this miracle is the fact that the Catholic Kings, on a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela in 1486, were guests of the monks, saw the Miracle and later donated the reliquary in which the Miracle has been kept to this day.

THE LEGEND OF THE HOLY GRAIL

The Holy Grail is the name given to the cup with which Jesus Christ celebrated the Last Supper. A legend grew up around it of great importance in the Middle Ages, related to King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table who wandered in search of this precious treasure.

Some versions of this legend suggest that the Chalice of O Cebreiro is the Galician Holy Grail, about which there are many different theories as to its true location. Some say that the Sanctuary of O Cebreiro is where the Holy Grail is kept and that it had an influence on the opera "Parsifal", composed by Wagner in 1882, and has been immortalized in the work of the poet D. Ramon Cabanillas "O Cabaleiro do Santo Grial".



Snow gives a magical touch to the churchyard of Santa Maria La Real