



Saint Gerald of Braga and the fruits of devotion

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Notes on Ethnobotany

Abstract

The Cathedral of Braga, one of Portugal's most iconic religious landmarks, preserves a profound connection between sacred traditions and fertility symbolism. At the core of this association stands Saint Gerald, whose legend recounts a remarkable event—fruits miraculously ripening in the depths of late autumn. This episode gave rise to a lasting ritual: each year, during his feast, his chapel is adorned with fruit, echoing ancient fertility symbols rooted in the same location, where a Roman temple once stood in honor of the Egyptian goddess Isis. Revered as a divine mother and guardian of life, Isis shares striking iconographic parallels with the Christian Virgin of Milk, reinforcing themes of abundance and motherhood. The fruit offerings in Saint Gerald's chapel thus serve as a bridge between pagan and Christian fertility motifs, illustrating the seamless continuity of sacred traditions. Still observed in modern-day Braga, this enduring practice not only sustains religious devotion but also highlights the historical interplay of fertility, divine intercession, and cultural identity, all symbolized through the offering of fruit.

Keywords: Saint Gerald of Braga, fruits and fertility, plants in Christian traditions, cult of Isis, Virgin of Milk.

Saint Gerald and Braga

The city of Braga (Figure 1) was founded by the Romans in 16 BC under the name *Bracara Augusta*, in honour of the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus (63 BC-14 AD), and was the capital of *Conventus Bracarensis*, the southwestern area of the newly founded Roman province of *Gallaecia* (Figure 2), a region that corresponded to the northwest of ancient Hispania, covering a territory that today includes northern Portugal and northwestern Spain (Galicia, Asturias and León). This city is home to the oldest Portuguese cathedral (*Sé Primacial de Braga*) (Figures 3-4) whose construction began in 1070 on a site that was successively occupied by a temple dedicated to the goddess Isis, a Visigoth church and a mosque. The cathedral was consecrated on 28 August 1089 – decades before Portugal was founded in 1143 – and was an important religious centre, playing a central role in the Christianization of the Iberian Peninsula. The Archdiocese of Braga, which administers the cathedral, dates back at least to the third century, according to records of the First Council of Toledo (397-400) and its archbishop still holds the courtesy title of '*Primas Hispaniarum*', the first of *Hispania* (Portugal and Spain) [1, 2].

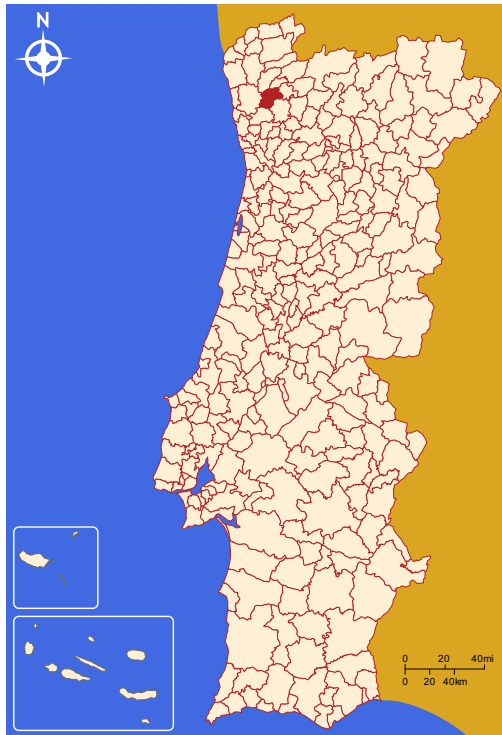


Figure 1. (left). Location of Braga Municipality on the map of Portugal. Creative Commons (Rei-Artur).

Figure 2. (top). Map of northwest of Iberian Peninsula, showing the location of the Roman province of *Gallaecia* and the *Conventus Bracarensis* in the 3rd century AD. Creative Commons (Alexandre Vigo).



Figure 3. Main entrance of Braga Cathedral, a landmark of historical and architectural significance in the Iberian Peninsula. Photo by Benny Marty.



Figure 4. Postcard showing a street leading to Braga Cathedral in the early 20th century. Private collection.

The Chapel of Saint Gerald (Figure 4), located inside the cathedral, houses the tomb of this saint, the patron saint of the city of Braga, whose annual feast day is celebrated on December 5th. Born into the French nobility, in the diocese of Cahors (Occitania), he entered the Abbey of Saint-Pierre de Moissac, a Benedictine monastic institution under the aegis of the influential Congregation of Cluny. At this abbey, he worked as a librarian and later worked as a teacher in a monastery located in Toledo (Spain). Around 1095-1096, he was elected Bishop of Braga, a position held until his death in 1108. During his episcopate, he dedicated himself to rebuilding the city, which had been deeply affected by successive devastations. He also undertook the reorganization of the diocese and its parish system, encouraged monastic life and gave strength to the liturgy and Christian pastoral care. It was under his rule that the Diocese of Braga regained the *metropolitan* dignity, receiving the pallium from Pope Paschal II (1099-1118) in 1103. This episode was part of a vast series of political and religious actions that marked the dawn of the 12th century in this region of Europe and Saint Gerald maintained a close relationship with the French count Dom Henrique (1066-1112) and his consort, Dona Teresa (c.1180-1130), daughter of Afonso VI (1047-1109), king of León. There is evidence to suggest that it was Saint Gerald who baptised their son, Dom Afonso Henriques (c.1109-1185), who would proclaim himself Portugal's first monarch in 1139, following the growing autonomy of the County of Portugal (*Condado Portucale*) from the Kingdom of León (Ferreira 1928, Martins 1957, Bernardo of Braga 1959).

Saint Gerald died in Bornes (Vila Pouca de Aguiar, Portugal) during a pastoral visit on December 5th, 1108, and his body and brought to Braga. In the 18th century, the chapel that houses his remains was renovated, acquiring its current configuration, with a gilded altarpiece and tile panels illustrating important episodes in his life and work (Figures 5-6) (Ferreira 1928). The altar and the tile panels are rich in plant representations with deep symbolism in the Christian tradition. Notably, the grapevine (*Vitis vinifera* L.) on the altar columns symbolizes the blood of Christ, while acanthus leaves (*Acanthus spinosus* L.) adorn the borders of the tile panels, evoking themes the Passion of Christ, suffering, resurrection and eternity (Ancona 1977). In northern Portugal, Baroque altars were typically crafted from chestnut (*Castanea sativa* Mill.) or oak (*Quercus* sp.) woods.



Figure 5. Chapel of Saint Gerald inside Braga Cathedral. Photo by Diego Grandi.



Figure 6. Azulejo tiles depicting Pope granting Saint Gerald the pallium of the Metropolitan Archdiocese of Braga. Private Collection.

Legend and fruits

A legend has developed around the figure of Saint Gerald that tells of a unique episode. During one of his pastoral visits, at the beginning of December, he fell seriously ill when the land was covered by incessant falling snow. Consumed by a burning fever that weakened him, he asked for some fruit to be brought to him in the hope of quenching his thirst and reviving his body. But he was told that in that region and under the rigours of late Autumn, the trees were devoid of fruit, and that only a few chestnuts might be lying on the ground. Faced with this response, Saint Gerald turned to the servant and ordered him to go and look. The servant approached the door of the humble house where the saint lay. Peering through a narrow crack through which an icy wind was blowing, he was astonished to see that the trees around the yard were miraculously laden with fruit (Saavedra 2014).

In the Cathedral of Braga, this episode has been evoked at least since the 17th century. In *Benedictina Lusitana* (2nd volume, page 300) is written: *The Saint has a very important brotherhood, which celebrates him particularly on his feast day, and his tomb is decorated with citrons, lemons, apples and grapes, recognizing God as the main author of the fruits of the earth and the glorious Saint Gerald as the intercessor for their creation and preservation, and when these fruits are lacking, the tomb is decorated with similar fruits made of wax, thus alluding to what God commanded (...) fruits from the beautiful tree that are citron tree (...) and as citrons are a symbol of love, decorating the saint's tomb with them on his feast day celebrates the singular love that he always had and has for his people in Braga, who also respond to him with great love and devotion* (Thomas 1651).

The text mentions that the fruits used to decorate the chapel altar were citrons (*Citrus medica* L.), lemons [*Citrus × limon* (L.) Osbeck], apples [*Malus domestica* (Suckow) Borkh.] and grapes (*Vitis vinifera* L.). None of these species and hybrids is indigenous to the agricultural flora of Portugal. Currently, the fruits used to decorate the altar are those available on the market, at the beginning of December, including tropical species such as pineapple [*Ananas comosus* (L.) Merr.], banana (*Musa acuminata* Colla) and orange [*Citrus × sinensis* (L.) Osbeck], which can be imported or produced both in mainland Portugal and in the Azores and Madeira archipelagos. Although citrons are now rarely used, they are still grown in the Braga region and on the island of Madeira, but their use in gastronomy and traditional pharmacopoeia has become very rare.



Figure 7. Fruits displayed in the Chapel of Saint Gerald. Photo by Braga Cathedral (Sé de Braga).



Figure 8. Statue of Saint Gerald adorned with fruits. Photo by Braga Cathedral (*Sé de Braga*).

The administration of the Cathedral of Braga purchases the fruits, and, on December 4th, the officials place them in the Chapel of Saint Gerald (Figures 7 to 9). The following day, a mass is celebrated in memory of the saint, presided over by the archbishop, with the presence of the Braga Cathedral Chapter and representatives of the city's civil institutions. During this ceremony, a basket of fruit is offered to the Archbishop of Braga and another basket of fruit to Braga Mayor, in a symbolic

gesture of continuity and devotion. On December 6th, the fruit is carefully removed from the chapel and distributed to several charitable institutions, thus perpetuating the tradition's long-standing social aid dimension.



Figure 9. Chapel and tomb of Saint Gerald (December 5th). Photo by Braga Cathedral (*Sé de Braga*).

Since the beginning of the 21st century, primary school pupils from a local school have been putting on a theatre performance entitled '*Saint Gerald and the Miracle of the Fruit*'. This initiative, organized by the Educational Service of the Braga Cathedral Treasury-Museum in partnership with the school, brings together around 500 children from the city. As well as honouring the memory of the saint, it strengthens community ties and consolidates cultural identity, using fruit as the central symbol in the development of the ceremony and in passing on this legacy to future generations (Figure 10-12).



Figure 10. A child portraying Saint Gerald in the play depicting the Miracle of the Fruit. Photo by Braga City Council (CMBraga).



Figure 11. A child portraying a tree full of fruit. Photo by Braga City Council (CMBraga).



Figure 12. Distributing fruit to the children who will be watching the play. Photo by Braga City Council (CMBraga).

Fruits and Fertility

Over the centuries, Braga Cathedral has undergone successive transformations, reflected in the various architectural styles that have shaped it – from Romanesque to Gothic, from Manueline to Baroque. Among the countless elements incorporated into its structure, an epigraphic stone of Roman origin stands out, embedded in the exterior wall of the Chapel of Saint Gerald facing the street of Our Lady of Milk. The Latin inscription engraved on it is an eloquent vestige of the cult of Isis, suggesting that during the Roman occupation, the site would have housed a temple dedicated to the veneration of this Egyptian goddess (Figure 13). The inscription bears witness to the sacred continuity of this space, linking it to other religious traditions. The epigraphic text reads as follows (Morais 2009):

ISIDI AVG SACRVM
LVCRETIA FIDA SACERD PERP
ROM ET AVG
CONVENTVS BRACAR[A]AUG D

[Consecrated to Isis Augusta, Lucretia Fida, perpetual priestess of Rome and Augustus, of the Bracaraugustanus Convent, gives (this monument)]

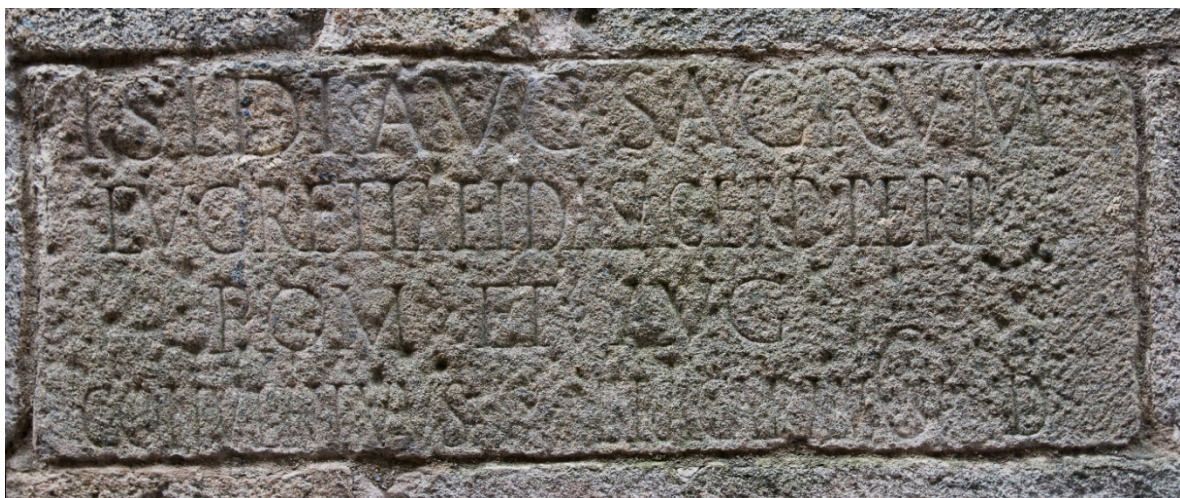


Figure 13. Epigraphic inscription on the exterior wall of the Chapel of Saint Gerald, evoking the Egyptian goddess, Isis. Private Collection.

The goddess Isis was one of the most prominent deities of Ancient Egypt and exerted an influence that transcended the country's borders when her cult was assimilated by the Greco-Roman world. Her action was central to the myth of Osiris, as it was Isis who restored the life of her husband (and brother) Osiris after he had been murdered and dismembered by Seth. From the mystical union between Isis and Osiris was born Horus, destined for the throne of Egypt and to establish the lineage of the divine pharaohs. The act of resuscitation undertaken by Isis was rather unique in the Egyptian pantheon, as no other deity possessed the ability to restore life, however fleetingly. Her position as mistress of the funerary mysteries consolidated her as queen of the realm of the dead, helping souls during the transition to immortality. At the same time, as the mother of Horus, Isis became an archetype of motherhood and child protection, being widely represented breastfeeding her son (Figure 14), an image that legitimized the pharaoh's sacredness (Wilkinson 2003, Bøgh 2013).

This iconography of the divine mother nurturing her child is echoed in medieval Christianity in the figure of the Virgin of Milk (*Virgo Lactans*), one of the most expressive Marian representations. This image exalts not only Mary's divine motherhood and Christ's humanity, but also her intercession as Mother of the Church. In medieval and Renaissance sacred art, the Virgin of Milk occupied a prominent place in the devotional context but was gradually relegated to oblivion with the Counter Reformation, which favoured more restrained and austere Marian iconographies (Olson 2014).

In the city of Braga, this tradition is perpetuated in an important sculpture of the Virgin of Milk (Figure 15), dated c.1519 and attributed to Nicolau de Chanterene (c.1470-1551), a French sculptor living in Portugal. A copy was placed on the outside wall of the Chapel of Saint Gerald, facing the street, replacing the original which is now in the Cathedral Museum. This image is part of the Iberian Renaissance and translates, in stone, the perpetuity of divine motherhood, which, from Isis to Mary, spans the ages as a symbol of protection, fertility and grace.

In December, the fruits that adorn the altar of Saint Gerald evoke an ancient symbolism of fertility, taking us back to the sacred representations of Isis and the Virgin of Milk. Since ancient times, the fertility of the earth and the female womb has been expressed through abundant fruitfulness, a sign of divine grace and the perpetuation of life. Isis, in Egyptian tradition, was the great nurturing mother, while the Virgin of Milk, in medieval Christianity, reiterated this link between the sacred and the nurturing of creation. In the chapel of Saint Gerald, the presence of fruit enshrines this same idea, uniting sacredness, abundance and the generous gift of fertility.

Declarations

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Photo credits: The intellectual property of the photos is credited in the captions.

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[1] Braga Cathedral <https://se-braga.pt>

[2] Braga City Council www.cm-braga.pt



Figure 14. Statuette of Isis nursing Horus, Ptolemaic Period (332-30 B.C.), Egypt, Faience, Joseph Pulitzer Bequest Fund, 1955, 55.121.5. Metropolitan Museum of Arte, New York, USA.



Figure 15. *Virgin of Milk*, attributed to Nicolau de Chanterene (c.1519). Photo by Manuel V. Botelho.