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architectures of the soul

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RELIGIOUS HERITAGE

understanding the past,
shaping the future

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Monastery of Batalha (Portugal)

Book of Abstracts

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10. Sacral Landscapes. Mylapore and the St. Thomas Mount, Chennai (India)

The alleged “discovery” of the St. Thomas’ tomb and relics near Mylapore (Chennai) in 1522 was a significant and prestigious event for the Portuguese Crown and for its patronage of evangelical enterprise in the East. From that time onwards, the St. Thomas Mount - where tradition had it that the Apostle was martyred -, and the settlement of Mylapore - where his relics were laid to rest - polarized Portuguese building activity. The settlement flourished, eclipsing the earlier Portuguese trading outpost at Pulicate. However, the settlement of

Mylapore was never fully integrated into the “Estado da Índia,” as its residents clung to a precarious autonomy, while officially recognizing a non-European sovereignty. This presence was initially negotiated with the Vijayanagar Empire, and later with several other powers, including the Golconda Sultanate and the Mughals. During the 16th and 17th centuries, Franciscans, Dominicans, Jesuits and Augustinian established several religious structures and rural properties, in Mylapore, the St. Thomas Mount and also in the surrounding areas. Most churches were reformed at later stages, and many were radically transformed by 18th or 19th century interventions. Landscape interventions were particularly important to the St. Thomas Mount, which developed as a pilgrimage center with a Via Crucis and other shrines. Arguably, in these interventions, influence of Dutch, British or French architecture was stronger than in the province and capital city of Old Goa. These Early Modern churches and landscapes remain mostly un-researched, and understanding their history and heritage significance entails mapping and reconstituting a completely transformed area of Chennai. By cross-referencing visual and written documents, and using map regression, this paper proposes a new reading for Mylapore’s “Indo-Portuguese” historical layer, focusing on the relations between the sacral landscapes and religious architecture of Mylapore and St. Thomas Mount.

Keywords: religious, architecture, urbanism, Portuguese, India

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