

Memorial sites III- Vilarinho das Furnas

English version

TC 02.36-02.47

This is the Vilarinho das Furnas Dam, in northern Portugal. It was named after a small village that once existed here. The dam waters engulfed it.

TC 02.56-03.06

José Rodrigues

"I was born and raised there. I lived in Vilarinho to the age of 21, when I was drafted into the Army. I know its every nook and cranny."

TC 03.07-03.19

"Many people travel to see the place, and I think it is worth seeing. It's an entire village destroyed."

TC 03.19-03.35

"It is no more. It's History. Once, it existed. It is no more. And it will never be again."

TC 03.37-03.48

In hotter summers or years of drought, when no rains fall, the waters recede and broken stonewalls emerge from the dark slime.

TC 03.49-03.55

The remains of Vilarinho houses form an astounding, desolate sight.

TC 04.05-04.12

Underwater, the ghost village acquires an even stranger, nostalgic aura.

TC 04.16-04.23

We may guess the original structures, and start imagining the villager's way of life, before they were driven out.

TC 04.32-04.40

Their home village was sacrificed to the last dam in the Cávado basin.

TC 04.42-04.54

(Archive text)

1945. " The national yearly production of electrical power barely reached 500 million Kilowatts per hour. And 60% was produced at coal-powered centrals."

TC 04.54-05.03

1951. "Two hydroelectric dams went into production: Castelo de Bode, on the Zêzere River and Venda Nova, on the Cávado River."

TC 05.03-05.17

As WWII ended, the dictatorial regime in Portugal launched a new program, to supply electrical power throughout the country. Building hydroelectrical dams became a priority.

TC 05.18-05.24

Two large hydrographical basins were central to this plan: The Zêzere River basin, in central Portugal, and the Cávado, up north.

TC 05.27-05.32

The first dams started producing energy in 1951.

TC 05.32-05.41

In the north, operations were run by HICA, the Cávado Hydroelectric Co. They changed forever a poor, almost primitive region.

TC 05.43-05.46

António Amaro

" Before works on the dam started, this area was very poor. "

TC 05.47-05.53

" Means of transport were scarce. The villages had no roads, water or electricity."

TC 05.55-06.02

" To reach Montalegre or Venda Nova, most people had to walk. "

TC 06.03-06.09

" They had to travel there, but had no money for fares. "

TC 06.10-06.20

" There was no industry here, no way for people to earn money. They lived off the land."

TC 06.22-06.31

The Rabagão Dam, the largest of 7 dams on the Cávado River, was built in a poor farmland region, isolated from the rest of the country.

TC 06.36-06.42

The Rabagão Dam entailed the flooding of many acres of farmlands.

TC 06.43-06.49

No one contested this - a dictatorial regime brooks no opposition.

TC 06.55-06.58

The generated electricity had to supply the entire country.

TC 07.00-07.14

Hence, a big dam was needed. The wall is 94m high and 2000m long and the lake measures over 210 sq. Km.

TC 07.19-07.22

This impressive construction crowned the dam-building era.

TC 07.23-07.30

No village was sacrificed in this case, but the locals still suffered.

TC 07.31-07.43

Antônio Amaro

" The Rabagão Dam and the workers' quarters were built on lands belonging to the village of Friães. The Friães people were expropriated. "

TC 07.44-08.01

" Yet, while everyone around them got electricity, Friães did not. They still had no tarred roads, running water or electricity. "

TC 08.02-08.04

People's sorrows and frustration did not last long.

TC 08.05-08.08

Before the dam was built, this was a remote region.

TC 08.09-08.17

Work on the dam freed many from the need to till the land, or emigrate.

TC 08.17-08.25

The dam also brought development: roads, regular public transport... The world became somewhat smaller.

TC 08.26-08-41

José Magalhães Calçada

" We were isolated before. Things improved. Our area acquired new life. Many people came to work here. The personnel at the central numbered 80 to 90."

TC 08.41-08.47

" There were gardeners, guards, painters, masons, and so on. "

TC 08.47-08.53

" The dam employed many people. Nowadays, there's only half a dozen workers."

TC 08.55-08.59

(Archive) It was imperative to show this achievement to the world.

TC 08.59-09.08

In its first year of life, 1957, Portuguese TV showed how electricity is produced.

TC 09.09-09.16

One of the Cávado dams was chosen to show off success in energy production.

TC 09.16-09.19

The regime's achievements had to be praised.

TC 09.19-09.23

Archive text

" The key pieces are these paddle wheels. "

TC 09.23-09.32

" For a turbine is like a water mill. Water from a duct drives a wheel. The wheel, connected to an axle, drives a generator, the generator produces electricity. "

TC 09.33-09.35

" And that's it, in everyday language."

TC 09.36-09.41

" Let's go down into the central, into the turbine room, where electricity is produced."

TC 09.42-09.51

" At Caniçada, to make best use of natural conditions, the turbine room is underground, 134 meters below the surface. "

TC 09.53-09.57

" The lift takes 2 minutes 45 seconds to the bottom. "

TC 09.57-10.03

" It has a telephone, for security. It's mostly used internally, but you can connect to any national number. "

TC 10.03-10.05

" So, the descent may be used to make necessary calls."

TC 10.06-10.10

Today, the lift is still in use, though its use may not be the same.

TC 10.10-10.18

Much has changed. Now, these dams can be run by a handful of workers. They are controlled from Lisbon.

TC 10.18-10.23

The seven dams together now employ just over 100 workers.

TC 10.23-10.32

José Magalhães Calçada

" When the works were at their height, about 10,000 men worked here."

TC 10.32-10.41

" Add to that their families. So, a lot of housing was needed. Since then, most of the houses were destroyed. "

TC 10.41-10.43

" They worked and lived here several years. "

TC 10.44-10.48

"It's a big dam, and it involved a lot of work."

TC 10.49-10.56

Archive text

" Working in this harsh mountain region, employees need some comfort for themselves and their families."

Texto arquivo

TC 10.56-11.05

" An urbanization was created. It had 33 well-appointed houses and a leisure center, in a lovely setting."

TC 11.06-11.10

" It has every social need, even a chapel, in a wooded corner propitious to mystic quietude."

TC 11.12-11.27

At Rabagão, workers and their families numbered at one time 15,000 people. HICA built residential quarters that were more like a village. Here, workers had all they needed, from a grocery to a school.

TC 11.31-11.35

(Archive text) " A-e-i-o-u. The Hydroelectric also built a school."

TC 11.36-11.43

Such social measures were applied in all great dam works, and the system lasted as long as Salazar's regime.

António Amaro

TC 11.52-12.00

" They built a residential area that still stands, with well-designed houses..."

TC 12.01-12.10

" good roads and public gardens. Sports facilities..."

TC 12.10-12.30

" a football pitch and a club for the workers, with bar and a hall for dancing and shows. "

TC 12.31-12.52

" They had a cinema, too. At the fresh produce market, you could buy vegetables, meat and fish."

TC 12.53-13.02

" There was a post office, a hospital, a morgue, every essential service."

TC 13.03-13.11

Gardeners, carpenters and engineers were transferred to other projects and the modern, comfortable quarters gradually became neglected.

TC 13.11-13.17

Today, the houses belong to HICA's former employees, or to new owners.

TC 13.18-13.21

The hotel is the noblest building.

TC 13.21-13.30

Owned by the Electricity Corporation, it is held as a high point of Portuguese modernist architecture. It was designed by Januário Godinho who also designed the entire complex.

TC 13.31-13.38

It was used for chief engineers and technicians with no allocated house.

TC 13.39-13.44

Such was the case of the first two Doctors called in to treat workers.

TC 13.45-14.14

José Souto

"In 1957, there was an outbreak of flu, the Asian flu, which killed patients that had Silicosis, a professional disease. Without adequate medical assistance, many terminal patients decided they wanted to die in their hometown. This caused a mass exodus."

TC 14.15-14.24

" Without workers, it was impossible to complete Phase 2 of construction. "

TC 14.24-14.31

" So, the company had to set up medical services for the sick. That's how our services started."

TC 14.32-14.37

Once works were complete, most workers were transferred to another project.

14.38-14.42

The Alto Rabagão Dam went into operation in 1964.

TC 14.42-14.46

But HICA and the country still needed more energy.

TC 14.46-14.49

At the western end of the Cavado, there was an ideal site.

TC 14.49-14.55

The Bouro region was chosen for the last dam on the Cávado basin.

TC 14.55-15.00

The small village of Vilarinho das Furnas must be sacrificed to progress.

TC 15.01-15.07

The residents in this remote corner tried in vain to resist the invasion.

TC 15.08-15.31

João Rodrigues

“ We had an image of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception. She was our attorney, our protector. We made promises to her, we trusted that she would protect us, but the process was relentless. Eventually, we had to face reality. We had to leave.”

TC 15.31-15.47

Their prayers went unattended. Soon, the start of works was announced. Edicts warned people to abandon their houses by November 30, 1970, the day set to start filling the containment lake.

TC 15.47-15.54

The engineering project was final. The population had to resign itself.

TC 16.01-16.07

They were about to lose their lands and their peculiar way of life.

TC 16.07-16.15

As in Rabagão, the locals' mainstays were farming, cattle, wine and corn.

TC 16.16-16.21

But what really set Vilarinho apart was its communitarian economy.

TC 16.21-16.27

The villagers shared all farm work and other tasks.

TC 16.45-16.51

Neighbours lent a hand at sowing, harvesting and threshing.

TC 16.52-17.00

Mutual support was vital in a village that had to be self-sustaining. The mountain gave it shelter, but cut it off from the rest of the country.

TC 17.03-17.08

José Rodrigues

"There was plenty of production. Life was good."

TC 17.10-17.21

"The land was fruitful, we lacked nothing. We made good ham and sausages. We raised all kinds of cattle and ate it. We did everything in communal system."

TC 17.22-17.28

"We all worked like slaves, but we ate very well."

TC 17.28-17.33

"We had good cattle, everything."

TC 17.34-17.36

The communitarian system had its laws.

TC 17.36-17.50

To ensure compliance, spokesmen for the families held a weekly assembly. It was presided by a judge, chosen in rotation among married men, with a tenure of 6 months.

17.51-17.56

The assembly made decisions concerning the community.

TC 18.04-18.20

Manuel Antunes

"Each family appointed its spokesman. They'd meet every Thursday to discuss current collective problems. They made their decisions by majority vote, and everyone complied."

TC 18.20-18.22

Sofia Leite

"What kind of decisions did they make?"

TC 18.22-18.32

"All kinds, from simple matters, such as road repairs and the best ways to tend cattle, to setting the "vezeiras" - each man's turn to take his cattle grazing."

TC 18.32-18.46

" The first time I went on a vezeira, I thought I was climbing to Heaven. We lived in a deep valley, and I went up the mountain with my grandfather. I was only 4 or 5. We stayed in the Vidual lodge."

TC 18.47-18.55

Vilarinho's communitarian system, which endured to the last, was the object of research and many academic studies.

TC 19.00-19.10

Jorge Dias, a reputed ethnographer, published a study in the 50's. In his book, he describes minutely the vilagers' way of life.

TC 19.12-19.19

As its end drew near, this small village gained notoriety. It attracted much interest and curiosity.

TC 19.20-19.26

Portuguese film-maker António Campos made this ethnographic film in 1970.

TC 19.26-19.35

He lived in Vilarinho during its last year, recording local life to the end.

TC 19.36-19.40

Teresa Trigo

" We loaded 24 tractors. We went in the morning and they took us back at nightfall."

TC 19.41-19.48

" Sometimes, we'd stay the night, to load the tractor first thing in the morning and get to other tasks. "

TC 19.50-19.57

"We took down roofs and all the wood, all day long. At night, the tractors brought us back."

TC 19.57-20.12

"We did it all with playful spirit; not as if we were turning our back on the place for good. But it was goodbye. "

TC 20.14-20.20

"We may still visit the place, but no one will ever live there again."

TC 20.20-20.24

Vilarinho had at the time about 240 residents.

TC 20.25-20.31

When they left, they tried to take as much as they could, clothing, furniture, even their house's stones and roof beams.

TC 20.34-20.41

They were given compensations for their homes and lands, and they had to accept HICA's payouts with resignation.

TC 20.41-20.49

Claims for just compensation only arose after the 1974 revolution.

TC 20.49-20.56

(Archive) Joaquim Barroso "They acted as appraisers, sellers and buyers. They had it all their own way. They paid us what they liked."

TC 20.56-21.26

(Archive) Machado Lima "All contacts with the Vilarinho population are done through an Expropriation and Compensations Office. Over and above the real value of the property, we paid them extra compensation for the personal value of the land. In general, they were not unhappy with the expropriation payments."

TC 21.26-21.40 Manuel Antunes

" About those compensations: I took the trouble to measure my father's lands. Including houses and mills, he got an average of 0.25-euro cents per sq meter."

TC 21.40-21.57

"If we do not consider any buildings, then he got about a fifth of that. At the time, one sardine cost half a cent. So, they'd have to give about 2 square meters to buy a sardine."

TC 21.57-22.00

For the entire village, they paid out about 110,000 euros.

TC 22.02-22.07

That was less than the total cost of the workers' quarters HICA built.

TC 22.08-22.16

At Vilarinho, those quarters were not as splendid as those at Rabagão. Once works were completed, the houses were simply abandoned.

TC 22.25-22.33

The Vilarinho Dam was inaugurated with great pomp in May 1972, by the Premier, Marcelo Caetano.

TC 22.47-23.04

The villagers had to find new homes in other towns, and learn a new way of life. They had to forsake their neighbourly ties, their communitarian ways, and accept the fact their village now lay underwater.

TC 23.05-23.14

José Rodrigues

“ The people were worried. Where would they go? What could they do? How would they relate with other people they didn't know at all? ”

TC 23.14-23.28

“Besides, they were villagers, country folk, so they felt inferior to townspeople. ”

TC 23.29-23.42

“ My father told me – and I can recollect some of it – that when he came to this new place, he had much to learn. They had different uses. Even the way they worked the land was different.”

TC 23.48-23.50

The villagers became dispersed in other towns.

TC 23.51-24.02

The family of José Rodrigues made a home close to the city of Braga. Here, he set up a small ethnographic museum with salvaged objects.

TC 24.02-24.11

He gathered a collection of implements used daily by his family, such as a chestnut griller and a chamberpot.

TC 24.18-24.29

João Rodrigues also chose to live close to a large urban centre. Here, there is no need to cross mountains to get to school or hospital and there are supermarkets.

TC 24.32-24.43

The old isolation is broken. But, to remember Vilarinho, he also brought stones from the old house. One serves as lintel to the stable.

TC 24.44-25.07

João Rodrigues

"This was the lintel over a gate in our house. My maternal grandfather built it. It led into a yard where we threshed barley. On Sundays, we danced the *Cana Verde* and *Chula* on the yard, to concertinas. "

TC 25.07-25.09

"Young people gathered there for generations. "

TC 25.12-25.20

"I paid my dues there as well, either dancing or playing the concertina."

TC 25.22-25.30

Teresa Trigo's new home is less than 10 Km from Vilarinho Dam. She wanted to stay close to her ancestral home.

TC 25.31-25.44

Teresa Trigo

" Here, we still get a little of the aroma of Vilarinho, the fresh smell of the mountain. The people were warm there, like nowhere else. That's why I stayed here. "

TC 25.45-25.54

"I'm not unhappy here. I can't forget my home village, my neighbours, but I think this is a good place, too, conveniently near everything. "

TC 25.55-26.02

" We have butcheries, every kind of shop; we are close to the main road..."

TC 26.04-26.12

"I'll never forget Vilarinho. But we must learn to forget, because we'll never go back there. I shan't forget it. "

TC 26.16-26.20

"Here, at least, I can still breathe its pure air."

TC 26.21-26.30

Despite the nostalgia, their life conditions did improve. The whole region around the Cavado dams developed, thanks to tourism.

TC 26.30-26.41

The disappearance of their farmlands and their village was a harsh blow, until the villagers began to realise the benefits they could derive.

TC 26.42-26.50

José Rodrigues

" The surrounding region developed, particularly São João do Campo, largely at the cost of Vilarinho, of what happened to Vilarinho."

TC 26.50-27.19

" Many people that came to work in the dam settled in the area. Some set up businesses and groceries and boarding houses. Once the dam was complete, some stayed on, with HICA or other companies. The area developed a good deal. Later, it started attracting tourism."

TC 27.20-27.24

Vilarinho Dam took the place of the village of Vilarinho.

TC 27.25-27.31

Today, however, residents of nearby villages might wish a similar fate.

TC 27.32-27.46

João Rodrigues

" Let me tell you a true story. There's a fellow who still lives in an isolated mountain village, Levada, in the parish of Cibões. We were in the Army together, in Guinea Bissau. "

TC 27.46-28.21

" One day, he invited me over to his village. "João, you must come and taste my wine." I saw he lived in a remote, isolated place, and I said, "You know, Tóino," (that's how we all address each other), "in Vilarinho we had an image of Our Lady "and we prayed to her that the dam would not be built." Now I tell you, try and find a saint, a good miracle-worker, and pray."Pray that he brings a dam to you, to pull you out of this solitude."

TC 28.21-28.40

" He replied, "But João, we are so happy here." "Sure, Tóino, we were also very happy in Vilarinho, "before we got to know a more comfortable, convenient place, "closer to everything."Of course, Vilarinho stays in our heart, "but you'll see that you, too, will easily forgo your dear Levada."

TC 28.41-28.47

The locals lost their lands, and a communitarian way of life that had endured for centuries.

TC 28.48-28.53

Yet, the Vilarinho people found new ways without forsaking their roots.

TC 28.54-28.58

They founded an association –AFURNA- and an ethnographic museum.

TC 28.59-29.06

In hot summers, when the lake waters recede, the ghost village reappears.

CREDITS

Photography: João Luis Azevedo

Sound: António Garcia

Video Editing: Paulo Alexandre

Image Research: Luisa Vaz, Sofia Leite

Audio Post-production: António Garcia

Production: Ana Lucas

Direction: Sofia Leite

ENGLISH VERSION

Translation: José H. Neto

Subtitle insertion: Teresa Sustelo

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