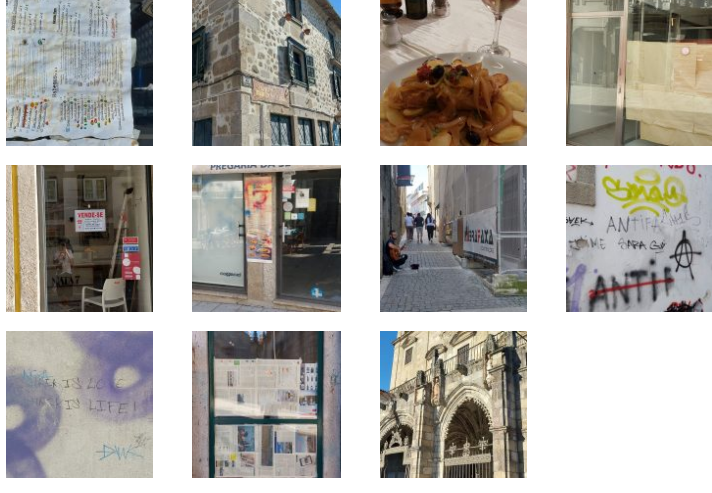




BRAGA 24: A CITY DIVIDED BETWEEN PAST AND FUTURE?

In this year of 2025, the city of Braga is deemed as the “Portuguese Capital of Culture”. The name comes after an unsuccessful attempt to become the “2027 European Capital of Culture” in an election held in 2023. The winner was Évora, which led to the other finalists (Aveiro, Braga and Ponta Delgada) sharing the title of “Portuguese Capital of Culture” successively in 2024, 2025 and 2026, respectively (Magalhães, 2023).

In my case, I arrived in the city in mid-July 2024 and after a few intense days, such as the [date of my arrival](#) and the [misadventures](#) that I’ve narrated in the last few micro-essays, I finally decided to try out the city center and thus get some first impressions “on the spot” of what this bi-millennial city of Roman descent would be like.

When I left home, my intention was to go to a very traditional restaurant and eat a *Bacalhau à Braga*, after all, being in Portugal calls for a *Bacalhau* [Codfish] and nothing could be fairer than having one in the city’s style, right? The chosen destination was the restaurant “*Águas de Bacalhau*” [Codfish Waters], not only because it had ‘bacalhau’ in its name, which for me showed that the dish would be a specialty of the house, but also because of its good reviews and location, very close to the “*Arco da Porta Nova*” [Arch of the New Gate], an iconic monument in the city that symbolizes the ‘open door’ by which the city is commonly referred to.

However, it was I who was left in “codfish waters”, as I arrived after 3pm and the restaurant was already closed. At the time, I still didn’t know that, here in Portugal, staying in “codfish waters” means “to fail, to remain the same, to result in nothing, to be fruitless” (*Academia das Ciências de Lisboa, 2025*), but I soon learned. Another frustration was discovering that the supposedly “traditional” restaurant was not what I had expected, i.e. it had opened in 2022 and the menu showed a rather young and plural identity, both in its language and in the availability of typical dishes from different countries, including my own Brazil and my Argentine neighbors. As I left the “*Águas de Bacalhau*” restaurant and headed towards the “*Arco da Porta Nova*”, I found what would fulfill my initial desire: the “Inácio” restaurant. This was a typical Portuguese restaurant, already from its own construction, a very rustic and classic stone house. Unfortunately, I couldn’t try it out because the restaurant, which had been there since 1931, had been closed for at least three years. I ended my search for a “*bacalhau à Braga*” at the “*La Porta*” restaurant, which I suspected was Spanish; however, it is an Italian restaurant and opened in 2019.



Figure 1. The young menu at “Águas de Bacalhau”

Figure 2. The façade of the traditional “Inácio”

Figure 3. The “Bacalhau à Braga” from “La Porta”

After lunch, I began my walk through the center of Braga, and was soon surprised by the large number of stores that were closed and lots of construction work being carried out throughout the center. Among the closed stores, there were all kinds, from souvenir stores to pastry stores and restaurants. It seemed that for every 2 stores open, there was 1 closed.



Figures 4 to 6: Closed stores in Braga

On my way up to see Sé, Braga’s famous Cathedral, I recognized a street artist that I had seen on a tourist program on my flight to Portugal. However, the space available for his art was already a little smaller, as he shared the tiny street with a building still under construction, making it even more difficult to stop and enjoy his art. Surrounding the artist, I noticed some graffiti that brought a “youthful” soul to the city, although those visiting the center on that sunny Saturday were limited to tourists, “traditional” families (dad, mom and kids) and older people (over 60). Among these street art, I’d like to highlight the graffiti “Shrek is love, Shrek is life” – a very popular meme among the so-called generation Z – and expressions of a political nature, such as an anarchist A and “Antifa” (short for anti-fascist), which appears twice, being crossed out in one of them.



Figure 7 – Musician sharing space with the building under construction



Figures 8 and 9. Graffiti in the city center

At the end of this short walk, I arrive at Braga’s Cathedral. But it’s not this historic monument that catches my eye at first, as I notice that next to it, where a souvenir store is located, there are a number of newspapers covering its façade. The store wasn’t open and the newspapers carried some headlines that denoted Portugal at that time: “*Invest, invest, invest. The companies’ motto for growth*”; “*Inflation risk puts the brakes on euphoria over interest rate cuts*”; “*Banks bet on consumer credit*”; “*Registered unemployment has been on a rise for six months*”; “*Real estate sector considers Simplex positive, but has doubts*”.

When I return my gaze to the imposing Braga Cathedral, I feel the weight of its entire history and disconnect from that moment to imagine how it was built during the Middle Ages. It’s still surreal for me to imagine that the cathedral’s history predates the construction of my homeland as such, that is, before the arrival of the Portuguese in my beloved Brazil. Reflecting on this observation, I turn to Walter Benjamin (1935/2012, p. 19) and the concept of authenticity of the work of art: “The here and now of the original constitutes the concept of its authenticity and on the foundation of this lies the representation of a tradition that has led this object to the present day as being the same and identical object”.

Next to me, there’s a group of elderly Portuguese ladies on a guided tour of the city of Braga. I then hear them: “We should do this more often. I hardly leave the house and I haven’t seen the Cathedral for years”. I sit by the cathedral and watch a group of children playing in the streets, noticing that they don’t look at the cathedral at any time.



Figure 10. The façade and its headlines



Figure 11. The cathedral and its grandeur

The concept of aura, in Walter Benjamin (1935/2012, p. 27), can be understood as “a strange thin fabric of space and time; the unique appearance of a distance, however close it may be”. In my attempt to define the “aura of Braga”, I would explicit a feeling of “time travel”. In this case, for a few moments when I looked at and touched Braga Cathedral, I traveled to a medieval Bracara Augusta. But is this the contemporary Braga?

Cities undergo destructuring and restructuring over time and space, as Lefebvre (1968/2008) tells us. If, when I visited Braga Cathedral, I was able to have this experience of “traveling back in time” and going back to its history, the rest of my walks showed the opposite, with the different buildings under construction, the traditional stores and restaurants that have closed and the timid expressions of youthfulness (teenagers and young adults) on the walls of the city. A youthfulness that I couldn’t see on the ground during my daytime walk, perhaps because they feel more at home in a nighttime environment. It’s also worth pointing out that, during this brief passage, I didn’t come into contact with any Brazilians or other immigrant groups enjoying the city; I only noticed them working, either providing service at restaurant tables or serving customers in stores.

Finally, I’m left wondering whether Braga 25 – the Portuguese capital of culture – will help the city define its current identity or whether an eventual touristification could further cannibalize its identity, commodifying its memories, stories and heritage, in line with recent studies on the city of Porto (Silva, Ribeiro & Araújo, 2022).

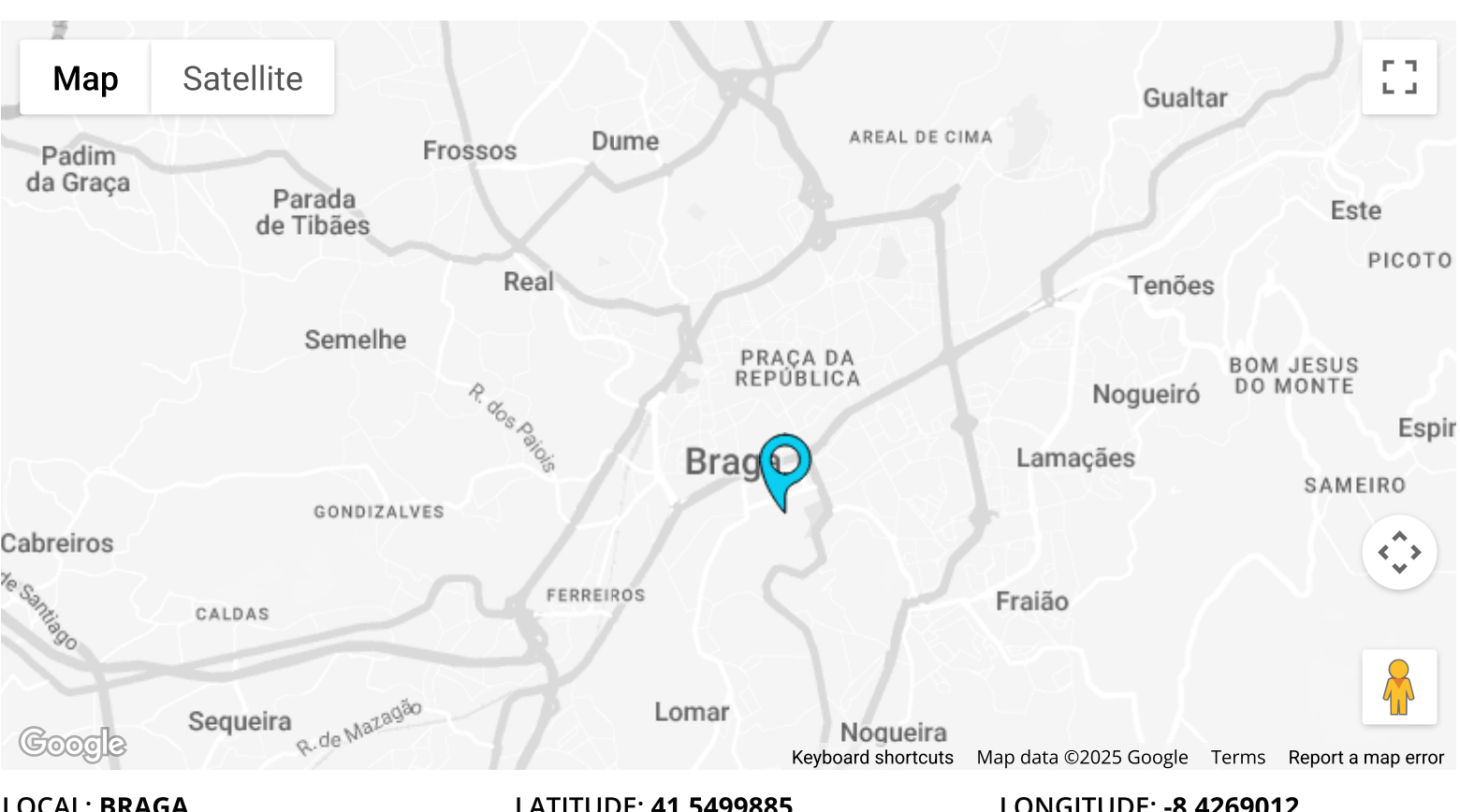
Text and images: [Lucas Novais](#) (CECS/University of Minho)

Published in April 17, 2025

References

- Academia das Ciências de Lisboa. (2025). *Ficar em águas de bacalhau – Dicionário da Língua Portuguesa*. Dicionário da Língua Portuguesa. Acessado em February 26, 2025, a partir de <https://dicionario.acad-ciencias.pt/curiosidades/ficar-em-aguas-de-bacalhau/>
- Benjamin, W. (1935/2012). *A obra de arte na época de sua reprodutibilidade técnica* (F. D. A. P. Machado, Trad.). Zouk.
- Lefebvre, H. (1968/2008). *O direito à cidade* (R. E. F. Frias, Trad.). Centauro Editora.
- Magalhães, P. (2023, April 12). Braga usará título de Capital Portuguesa da Cultura para “celebrar” criação nacional. *Público*. https://www.publico.pt/2023/04/12/local/noticia/braga-usara-titulo-capital-portuguesa-cultura-celebrar-criacao-nacional-2045890#google_vignette
- Silva, M., Ribeiro, R., & Araújo, E. (2022). The tourist era in the city of Porto: Enchantment, suspension and (un)sustainability. In Z. Pinto-Coelho & H. Pires (Eds.), *The City of the Senses, the Senses in the City* (pp. 103-129). UMinho Editora.

LOCALIZAÇÃO



< PREVIOUS POST

