Religious Heritage Dynamics in Southern Portugal
A systematic assessment towards a sustainable development of Alentejo region

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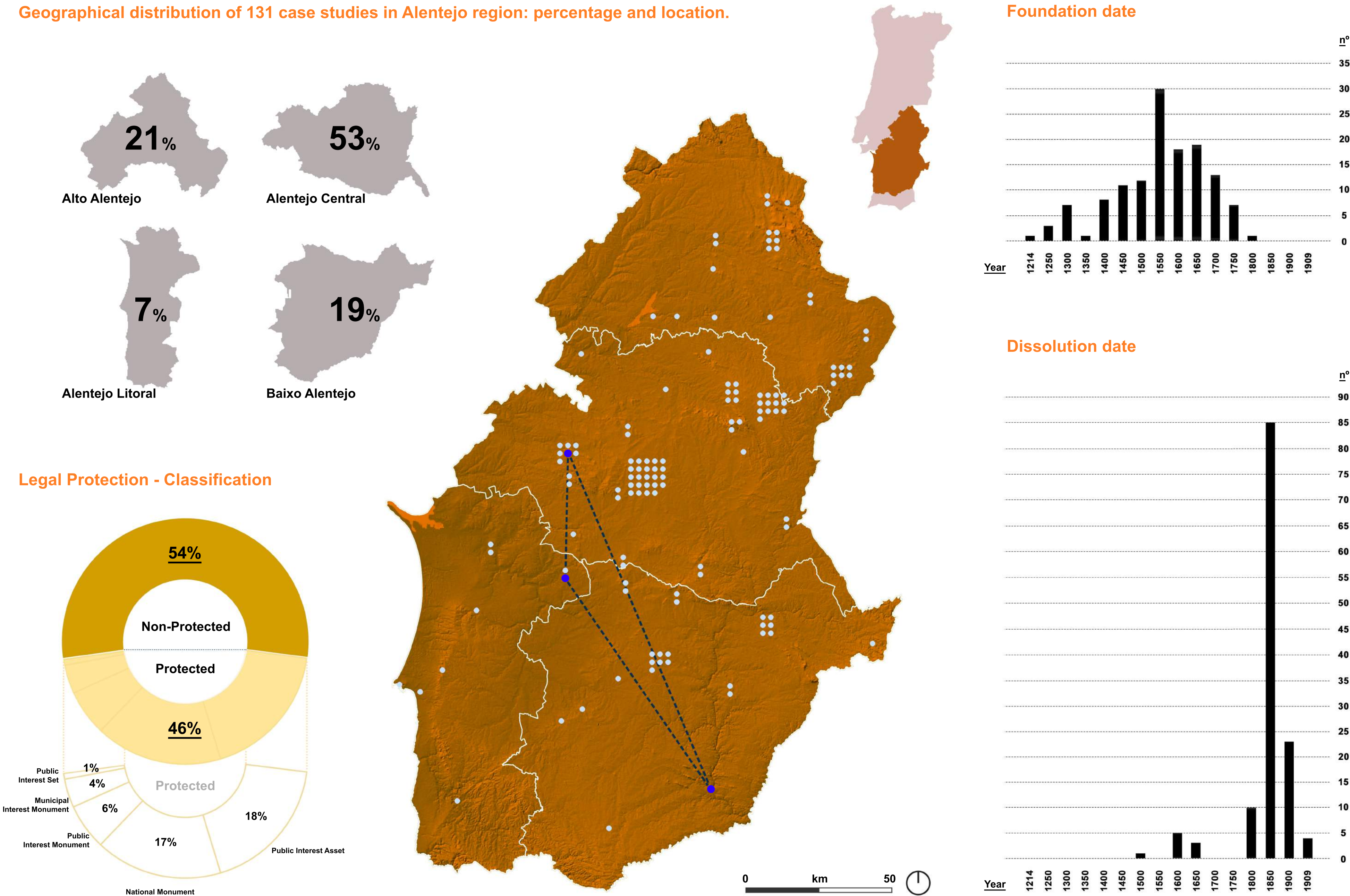
Abstract

Religious built heritage has for centuries played an essential role in Europe, shaping social, economic, environmental and cultural values. Places of worship have constrained territorial development and are still references in current urban and rural areas.

In Portugal – as in the rest of Europe – social issues (less worshipers, priests, pastors and fewer consecrated vocations), but also environmental and economic ones (reduction of parishes and territorial changes) lead to the abandonment, low utilization rate or redundancy of religious buildings.

This study aims a better understanding of the Portuguese religious heritage dynamics, which can contribute to the sustainable development of rural and low-density territories. Starting from Alentejo region (southern-hinterland Portugal), with focus on 131 monasteries and convents, an unprecedented systematic assessment is developed.

This is based on a literature review, census and mapping, on-site surveys, characterization of owners, new uses and conservation state, interviews with local administrations and building owners. Collected data were, then, cross-referenced with regional and municipal policies on culture and heritage. Finally, it is proposed to look at the few cases linked to the cultural and creative activities, investigating this alternative as an engine for more sustainable development in rural and low-density regions.

Keywords

Alentejo (Portugal); cultural and creative activities; religious heritage; reuse; sustainable development

Geographical distribution of 131 case studies in Alentejo region: percentage and location.

- Alto Alentejo — 21%
- Alentejo Central — 53%
- Alentejo Litoral — 7%
- Baixo Alentejo — 19%

Foundation date

Dissolution date

Legal Protection - Classification

- Non-Protected 54%
- Protected 46%
  - Public Interest Set 1%
  - Municipal Interest Monument 4%
  - Public Interest Monument 6%
  - National Monument 17%
  - Public Interest Asset 18%

131 Case Studies

- São Francisco de Mértola
- Nossa Senhora da Graça do Torrão
- São Francisco de Montemor-o-Novo

Ownership

Legend: Private | Public | Not Applicable | Public/Private

Conservation State

Legend: Good | Reasonable | Bad | Ruin | Disappeared

Current Use

Church / Monastic Dependencies categories:
Religious; Cultural and creative; Funerary; Commercial, tourism and services; Military and Security; Storage; Livestock farming; Residential; Educational; Health and Assistential; Political and administrative; Mixed uses; Not applicable; Unused