

DISCOVERING "WHITE GOLD"



CECHAP - Culture, History, Arts
and Heritage Study Centre



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“White Gold”

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BOOK No. 1 COORDINATION - Carlos Filipe

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TEXTS - Amélia Dionísio - CERENA - Centre of Natural Resources and Environment, DECivil, Instituto Superior Técnico, University of Lisbon

Anabela Carvalho - Ferreira de Castro Schools Group, Mem Martins, Sintra

Carlos Filipe - CECHAP | ARTIS - Institute for the History of Art, Faculty of Letters, University of Lisbon

Gustavo Paneiro - CERENA - Centre for Natural Resources and Environment, DECivil, Instituto Superior Técnico, University of Lisbon

Maria João Pereira Coutinho - Institute for the History of Art, Faculty of Social and Human Sciences, NOVA University of Lisbon

Rute Massano Rodrigues - ARTIS - Institute for the History of Art, Faculty of Letters, University of Lisbon

PROOFREADING - Lina Maria Marrafa de Oliveira - CLEPUL - Centre for Portuguese and European Literatures and Cultures, Faculty of Letters, University of Lisbon

PHOTO CREDITS - CERENA - Natural Resources and Environment Centre, DECivil, Instituto Superior Técnico, University of Lisbon

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Hi!

I'm Lourenço!

Some time ago I went to discover the Alentejo with my school. Although I was born there, I still learnt a lot, adding this experience to what was taught in the classroom.

My friend Rosa and a curious little goat called Aurora accompanied me and together we discovered a real “treasure”: the Marbles from Alentejo!

My grandparents were born in Vila Viçosa and had already told me about marble, a very special material that exists in the region and that is very valuable for everyone. At school I had also heard about marble, but only now I understood its true importance!

Come with us on this fantastic journey of discovery!



Let's discover Marble!

Lourenço and Rosa were on a school trip in the Alentejo, and when they arrived near Borba they stopped so that Aurora the goat, the class mascot, could enjoy some pasture from the Alentejo plain. Suddenly, while she was watching her little goat, Rosa spotted in the distance a very white and shiny slope, which looked like snow, and immediately called her friend Lourenço.

- What's going on?

- Take a look at this hillside. It's so white and beautiful. It looks as if it snowed here! - exclaimed Rosa gazing in awe at the landscape stretched out before her.



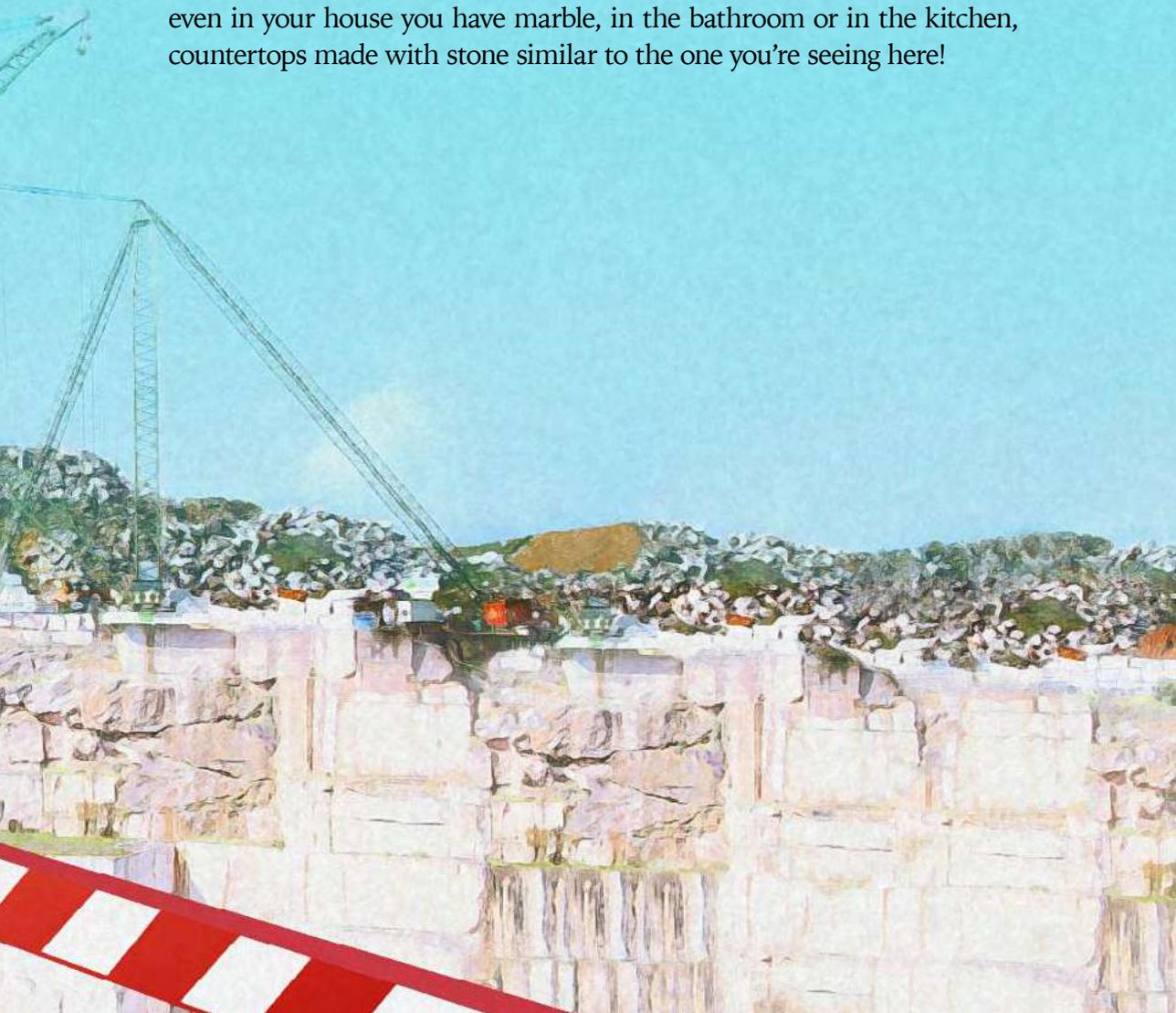
- Oh Rosa! Don't tell me you've never seen marble! - mocked Lourenço.

- Is this marble?

- Yes, this stone is one of our region's riches, they even call it the White Gold of Alentejo. By the way, you will also know that the marbles in Estremoz have been explored since Roman times.

- Ah! I remember the Professor talking about it in class! But I had never seen it like that in the landscape! I remember going with my parents to Vila Viçosa and seeing a beautiful Palace and some white statues in the gardens, and I think I also saw some half-ruined columns made of marble in Évora.

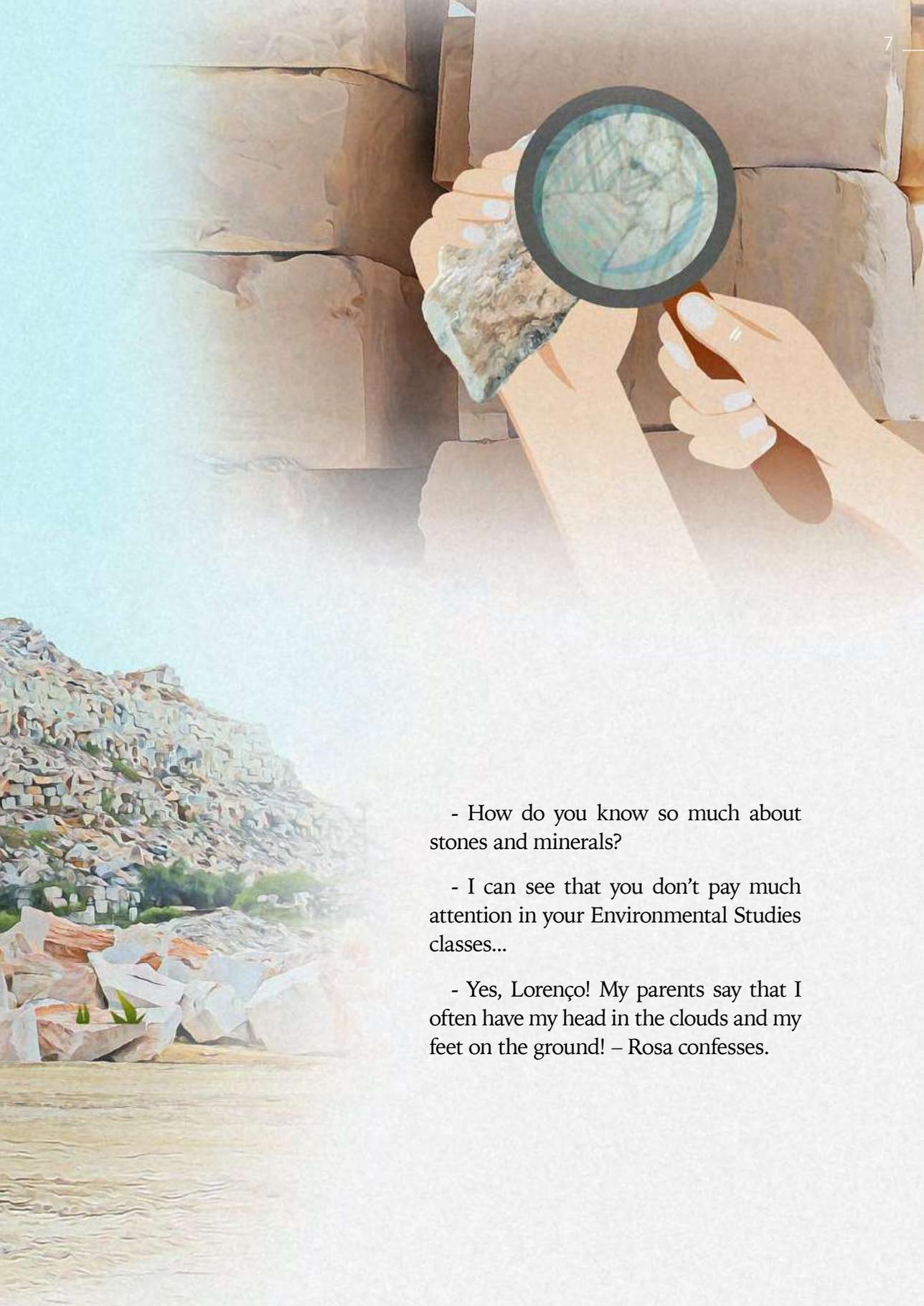
- Yes, Rosa. Those are works of art made with marble, but, maybe, even in your house you have marble, in the bathroom or in the kitchen, countertops made with stone similar to the one you're seeing here!



- Since you know all that, tell me, then, what are these shiny little dots that we are seeing on the stones? Are they diamonds?

- No, Rosa... - said Lourenço, very patiently - The little shiny dots we see are minerals. Diamond is also a mineral, but these little grains are made of another mineral called calcite. Marble is a rock made up of millions of grains of calcite.





- How do you know so much about stones and minerals?

- I can see that you don't pay much attention in your Environmental Studies classes...

- Yes, Lorenço! My parents say that I often have my head in the clouds and my feet on the ground! – Rosa confesses.



- Here is a good starting point for me to continue teaching you a few things. Pay attention: stones, like marble, are natural materials, so they are formed by nature, on the surface or in the depths of the Earth.

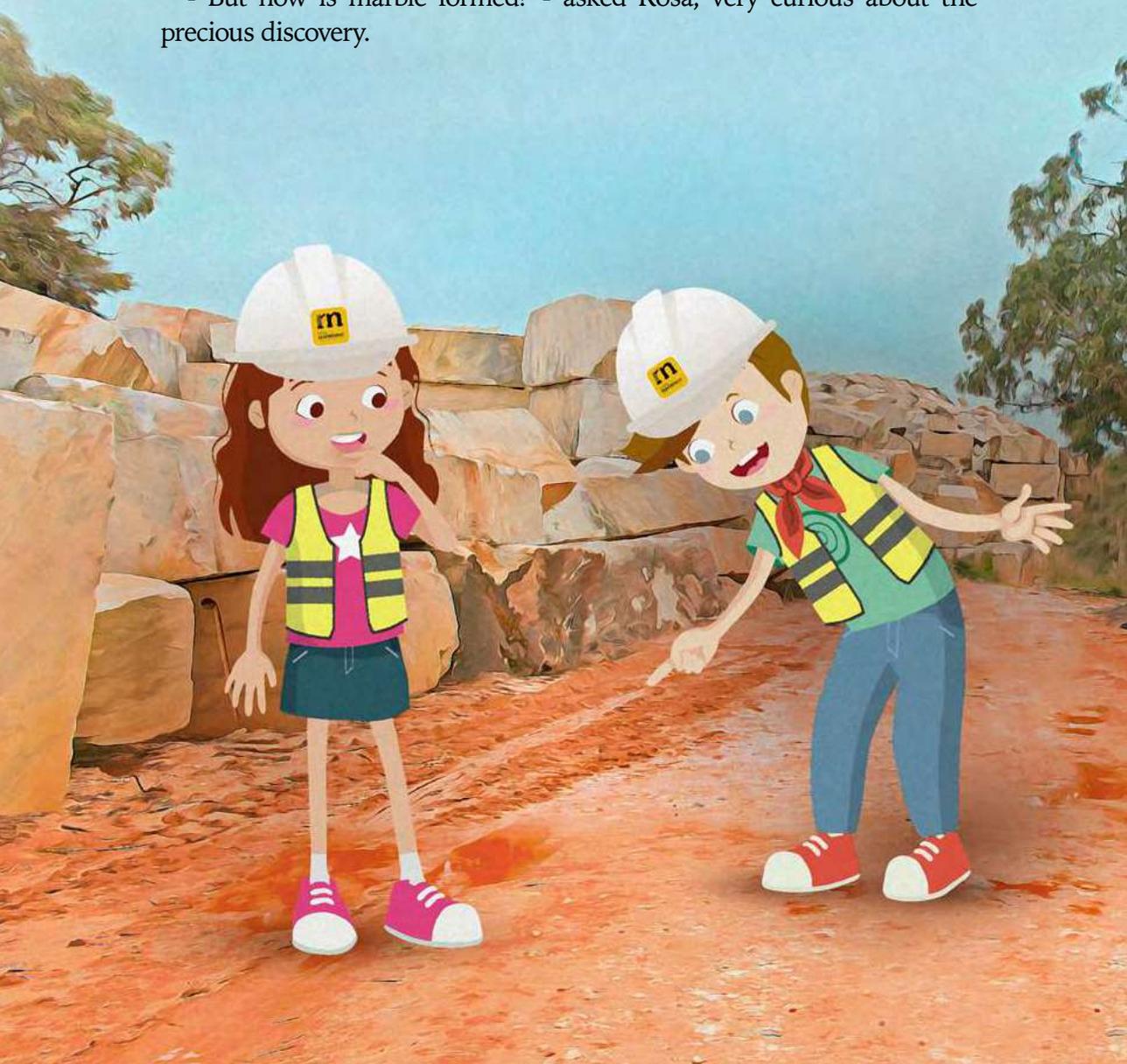
- So, are all the stones like this one? - asked Rosa.

- No, Rosa! There are many other very different stones, and you can see them even without leaving Portugal. You can find granites, schists, limestones, basalts...

- I see. You mean there are other minerals besides calcite! With other colours, some harder than others, some shinier, some more colourful...

- That's right. It is the different minerals that give rocks different features, so they are used to do so many different things. And did you know that soils are also formed from rocks? In this part of the Alentejo the soils are very reddish and clayey, which is why they are not only used for agriculture, but also for making the clay used in pottery and ceramics, which are also part of the Alentejo's heritage!

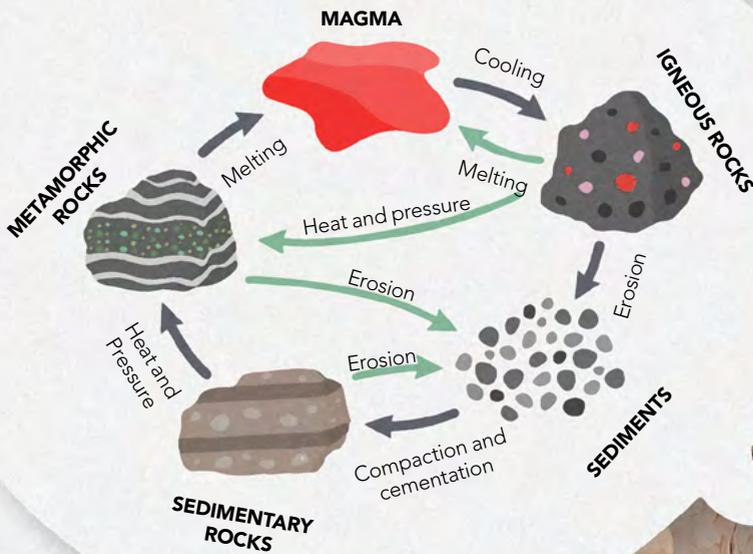
- But how is marble formed? - asked Rosa, very curious about the precious discovery.



Before answering, Lourenço stood up looking very smart, and even the little goat Aurora raised its head and listened.

- There are rocks that form deep inside the Earth and others that form closer to the surface. Our planet is very special and, as Lavoisier said, “nothing is lost, everything is transformed”! Therefore, rocks have formed over many thousands and even millions of years. This is what scientists call the rock cycle, and there are three main types of rocks: sedimentary, metamorphic and igneous.

Marble is a metamorphic rock that was formed from another that already existed - limestone (which is a sedimentary rock) - by the action of high temperatures and the pressure that exists in our planet’s interior.





Rosa was very surprised by this explanation and immediately threw another question:

- So, if marble forms in the interior of the planet, how are we looking at this marble slope?

- Yeah, I'm intrigued too. I think we have to ask our Professor.

Quickly, goat Aurora ran to the Professor and pushed him with her muzzle towards the marble slope where Lourenço and Rosa were. Smiling at Aurora's insistence and listening to the children's intelligent question, the Teacher replied enthusiastically:

- Well, geologists refer to our Planet in the same way that biologists refer to living things. The Earth is a living system and there are complex tectonic plate movements that cause rocks to surface. But this is a story many, many millions of years old.

Suddenly a strange sound was heard coming from the back of the hill. The teacher explained to the students that natural stone is used by man for many purposes, to which Lourenço replied:

- It's true, Professor. Just now you were telling Rosa that you would most likely have some marble pieces in your house, on the kitchen countertop or in the bathroom.

- Exactly, Lourenço - confirmed the Professor - But, in order to be able to make these pieces or works of art and even construction materials, we must exploit this natural resource properly, what can be found in quarries, using appropriate techniques and large machines, to remove the blocks of stone. Hence the noises you are hearing.



- Blocks?! What do you mean? Small blocks of stone, right? - asked Lourenço curiously.

- The blocks removed from the quarries can be very large and weigh thousands of tons, but they are cut with appropriate techniques and machines which have diamond wires with an enormous cutting power and are then cut into smaller blocks which are lifted by cranes and then transported.



While attentively listening to the Professor's explanation, Lourenço wanted to know more:

- So, the machines have to be really big, don't they, Professor?

- Yes, Lourenço, that's true. Just to give you an idea, a tyre on one of these machines, which is capable of transporting a block weighing several hundred tonnes, has a radius about the same as my height.

- Oh, how frightening! - exclaimed Rosa - Isn't it dangerous?

The Professor smiled and agreed:

- Yes Rosa, it is very dangerous for a person who is not qualified to manoeuvre this equipment. The activity in a quarry is only allowed to professionals taught and trained to carry out this work. Besides this, there are Engineers who monitor the whole process and not only that: they look after safety both with the machinery and other issues related to falling stones and much more.

Rosa was reassured by the explanation, but Lourenço wanted to know more.



- What about the environment?

- This is precisely one of the issues that most concerns those responsible for natural stone quarries. In fact, it is not pleasant to see an open quarry in the landscape and, whether we like it or not, the equipment makes noise. But it is precisely because of this that engineers and quarry owners are constantly trying to find and apply environmentally friendly techniques.

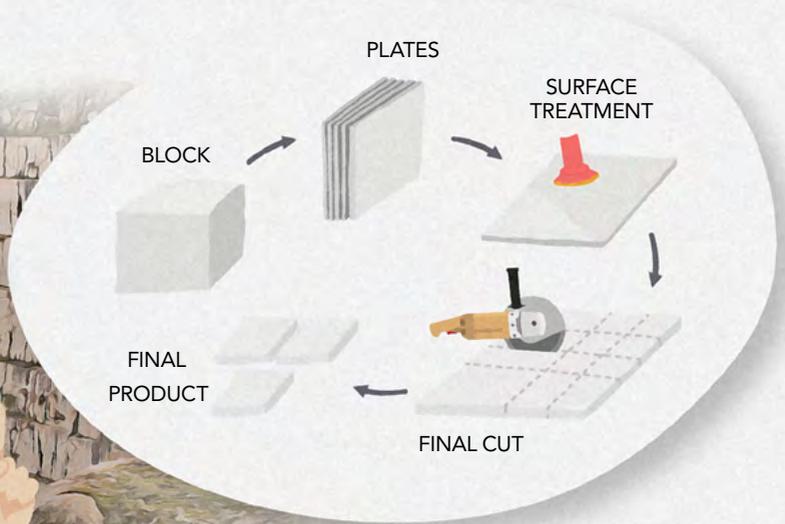
- So where are the blocks transported to? - asked the two friends in unison.

- Well - the Professor continued - usually the stone blocks are transported to a park where they are stored until they are sent somewhere else or put to a certain use. For example, to make floor tiles the blocks are first placed in sawing machines that turn them into slabs.



- But... do those devices immediately turn the marble shiny? - asked Lourenço.

- No, Lourenço. To obtain this finishing, the plates go through several transformation phases, which include polishing to get them shiny, ready to be applied.



- But... - Lourenço came forward again, ready to ask another question, only to be interrupted by the Professor:

- Come on, kids, I think you've had a great lesson in natural stone exploration. Time to get back to the bus, otherwise we'll be late for the rest of our field trip.

On the way to the bus, with little goat Aurora jumping in front of the boys, Rosa whispered in Lourenço's ear:

- When I get home, I'm going to check all the rooms and I'm going to ask my father to take photos of all the stones in my house to show the Professor...

Lourenço smiled and exclaimed: - What a good idea, Rosa! I'm going to do the same.

Workshops and tools

Once on the bus, Rosa, who had been wondering what the teacher had told her about the transformation of the blocks into tiles, couldn't resist asking:

- But not all marble is made into slabs, is it? The statues are not shaped like slabs!

- No, they aren't! - replied the Professor - As I told you before, marble has several applications and not all of them pass through its cutting into slabs. Some marble blocks of the most diverse colours have other uses and are used in stonemasonry and sculptors' workshops.

Lourenço joined in the conversation, explaining to Rosa:

- It is there that they are transformed into sculptures and other beautiful decorations of many shapes. The marble is worked with machines, but also with other tools, some very old, already in use since Roman times.

- I can see you know your stuff! - exclaimed the Professor.

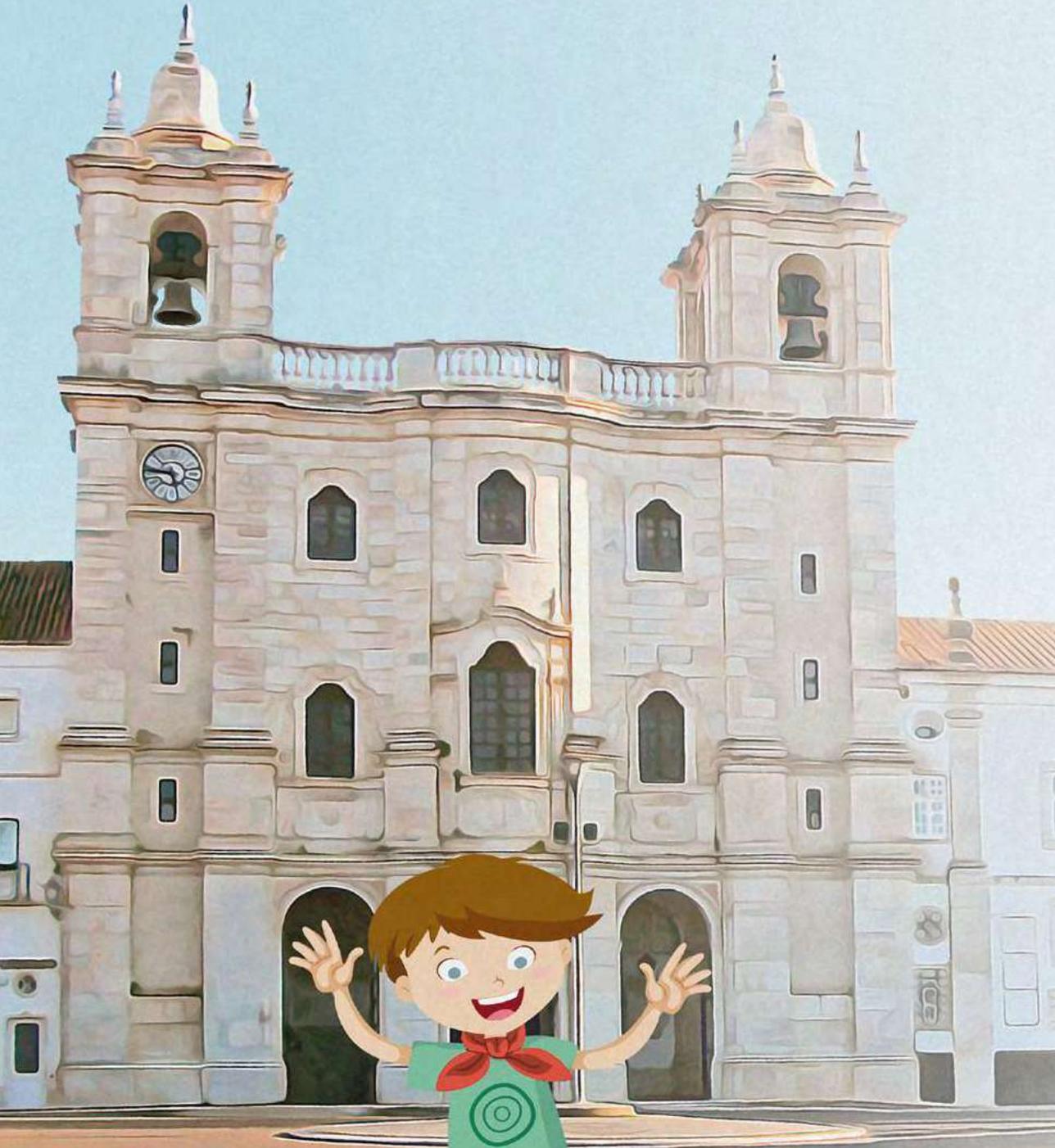
- My grandfather once showed me some tools that belonged to his father, who was a stonemason... They were used for carving marble - said Lourenço with a knowing air.

- I knew you were knowledgeable about the subject. - said the Professor
- I have here some images of some of these tools. Do you want to see them? Each one has its function.



Marbles in Heritage

- So, it's with these tools that they do much of what we see in our monuments? - asked Rosa, between surprise and suspicion - They seem very small, and some monuments are so big... It must be a lot of work! Besides, marble is hard!



- Yes kids, it's a very long and very complicated job, it's not easy and it requires a lot of practice. - explained the Teacher - Any mistake and it's all ruined! When you work with stone, you can't erase with an eraser or paint over it, like you can with a drawing or a painting. However, despite the difficulty, the Estremoz Marble, due to its beauty and quality, has been chosen for many centuries for the most diverse constructions and it appears in exterior and interior cladding, decorative and sculptural elements, such as columns, wedges, frames, staves, capitals, corbels and portals, in flooring (sometimes combined with other stones), and also in sculptures and in the most diverse objects.

- And let me tell you something else - continued the Professor - we find Estremoz marbles not only all over Portugal, but also in other countries - emphasized the Professor.

- Really? – Lourenço wondered.

- Yes, we will talk about that in a moment. As I was saying, we can find Alentejo marble in churches, convents, palaces, castles, fountains, and even in our houses and on the pavements we walk on.

You just haven't noticed... The heritage connected to marble is very vast and it's not only what you see, but it's also present in the trades, in the traditions and in the history. Even someone in your family may have been connected to the work in the quarries, like Lourenço's great-grandfather, to marble carving.

But what is (our) Heritage? Very briefly, we can say that it is the heritage of all of us, passed down between generations, recognised as part of our history and our culture. This heritage is made up of small elements that are ours alone and that make us unique: our landscape, our monuments, our localities, our traditions, among many other small and big things that make us who we are.



Estremoz, Alcáçova, Marble-built keep

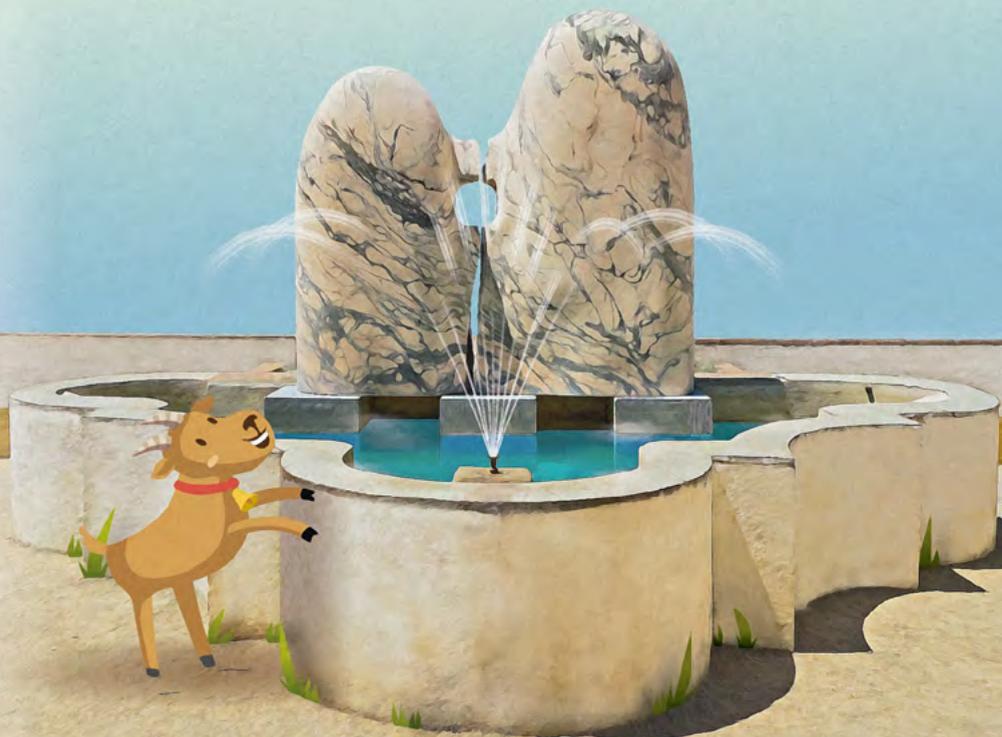
Once upon a time...

Next stop was Estremoz. As they arrived at the castle, in front of the donjon, Lourenço exclaimed:

- Ahh! Do you see this, Rosa? It's made of marble! And it's so big! And I had passed by this tower so many times and never noticed it.

- Yes, it is almost 27 meters high and more than six hundred years old - explained the Professor - It is very likely that it was built with marble from those quarries we passed by earlier, called "Cerca de Santo António". But now we must continue our journey. There's not much left of the day is and we still have to go to Évora. Now keep your eyes open, we don't have time to see much more, but we will pass by some churches, fountains... See how they look. I will talk about some of them later.

As soon as they arrived in Évora, after giving some water to their pet Aurora, Lourenço remembered the columns Rosa had seen there, and asked the Professor:



- Can we go and see some half-ruined columns that exist in this town?

- I imagine you are talking about the Roman temple in Évora. Let's go and see it and I'll tell you a bit about it.

When they arrived, Rosa, pointing to the columns, said disappointedly:

- I thought they were marble, but they are very dirty! It's a long time since they should have had a bath - he commented with a playful air.

The Professor laughed and explained:



Évora, Roman temple.

- As I have already told you, many hundreds of years ago, when the Romans were still here, the Estremoz marble was already being quarried and used here and in other parts of the Empire in sculptures and buildings, such as temples. In the case of this temple, its construction would have started in the 1st century AD. It is thought to have been dedicated to the cult of the Emperor Augustus. Like other temples, its architecture includes a series of columns, which are called a colonnade. And these columns are made of Estremoz marble!

- Really? All of them? - asked the students.

- A column is composed of three main elements: base, shaft and capital. Here they used white marble in the most important and most ornamented parts: in the bases, and in the capitals. In the shafts they used granite, another stone that is also found in the region, hence the darker colour, Rosa. These capitals are formed by two blocks of Estremoz Marble and are carved according to the Corinthian Order, with the representation of leaves and buds of a plant called acanthus.



Illustration of a Corinthian capital.

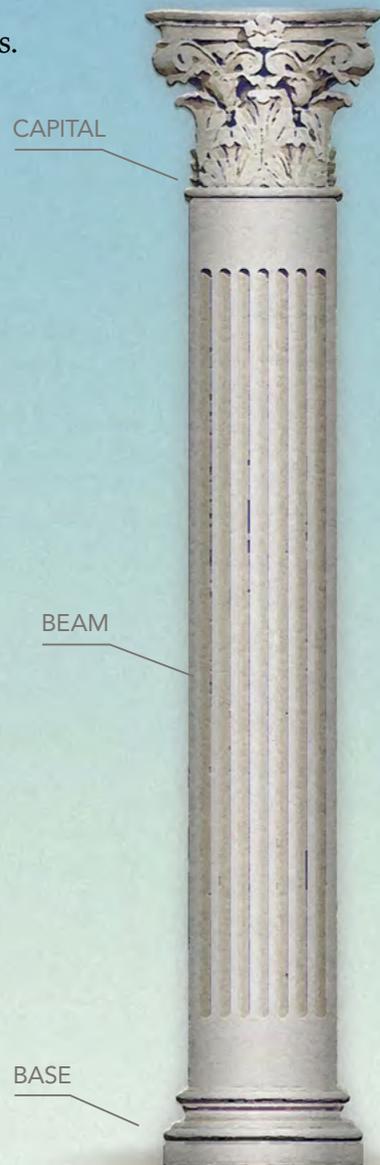


Illustration of Corinthian Column.

- The Professor has just spoken about other countries where you can find monuments made of Alentejo marble - Lourenço recalled.

- It's true! In Spain we find several examples of the use of Estremoz Marble and, since we're talking about very ancient times, I'll mention the Roman Theatre of Mérida, built between the years 16 and 15 BC, even older than this one in Évora. I have a photo here, look at the columns! Do you know this marble? - asked the Professor.

Overflowing with curiosity, the students all ran to try and see. Aurora even swayed, frightened by such a commotion.

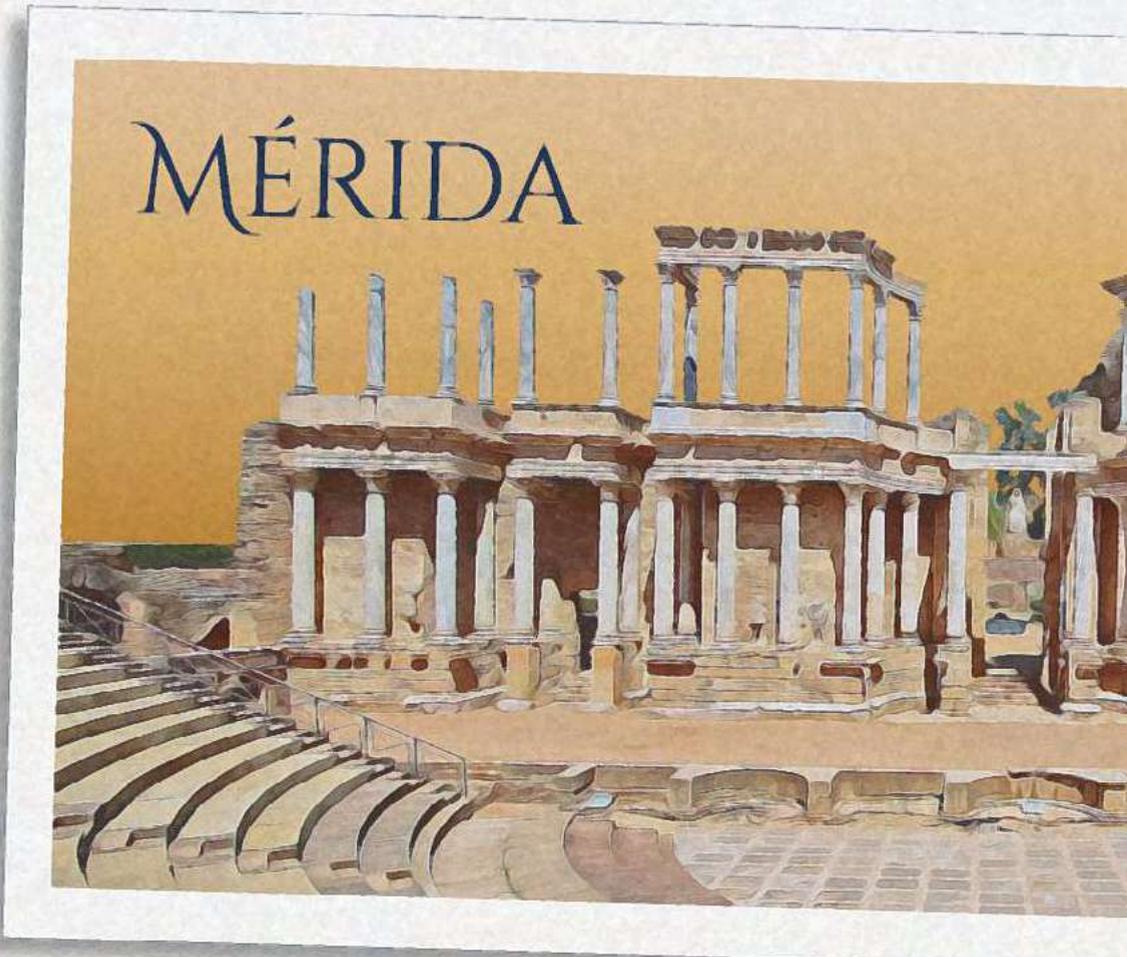


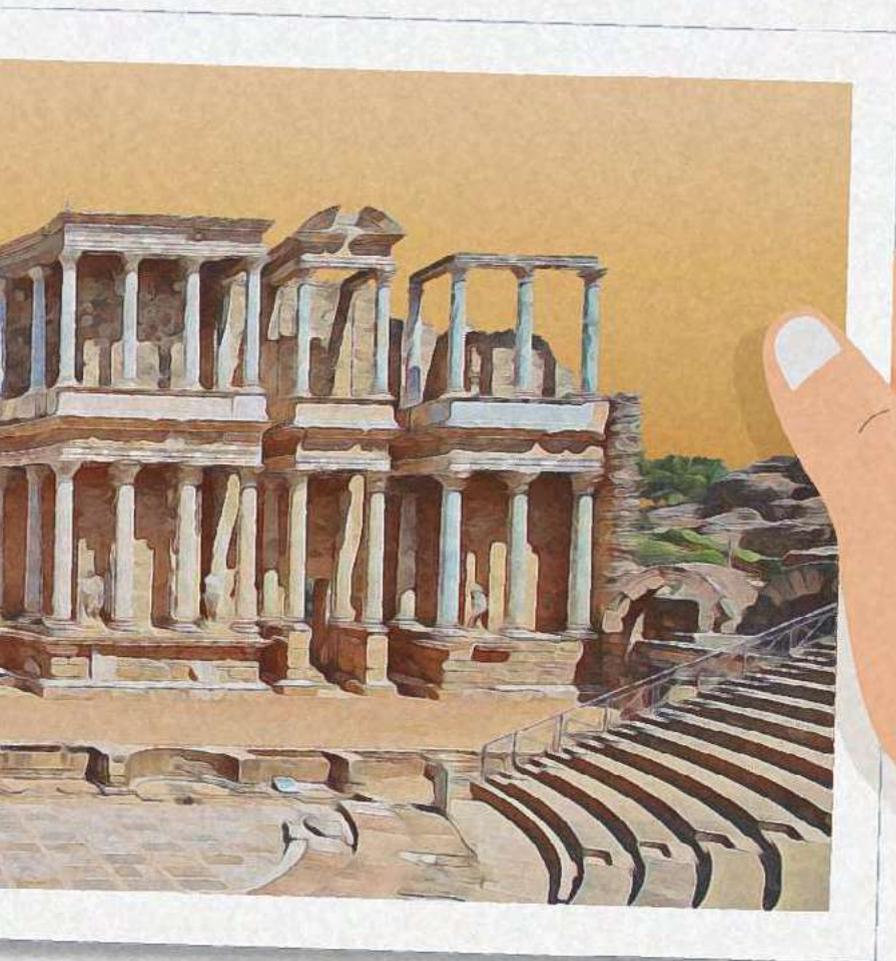
Illustration of a postcard representing the Roman theatre of Mérida. Marbles from the quarries of Vila Viçosa.

- It's very similar to something we've seen before! - exclaimed Lourenço and Rosa in amazement.

- Yes, it is," agreed the Professor, "and do you know why? Because it comes from exactly the same place, from Estremoz!"

- Professor, I'd so like to see more things. Do we have to go back to school now? - asked Rosa a bit sadly.

- Relax, we still have time for a short walk. For example, here in Évora Cathedral we can also find Estremoz Marble, but now we are going to know some examples of what we call water architecture - said the Professor.



Intrigued, the boys looked at each other and started whispering:

- From water?! They're houses made of water?!

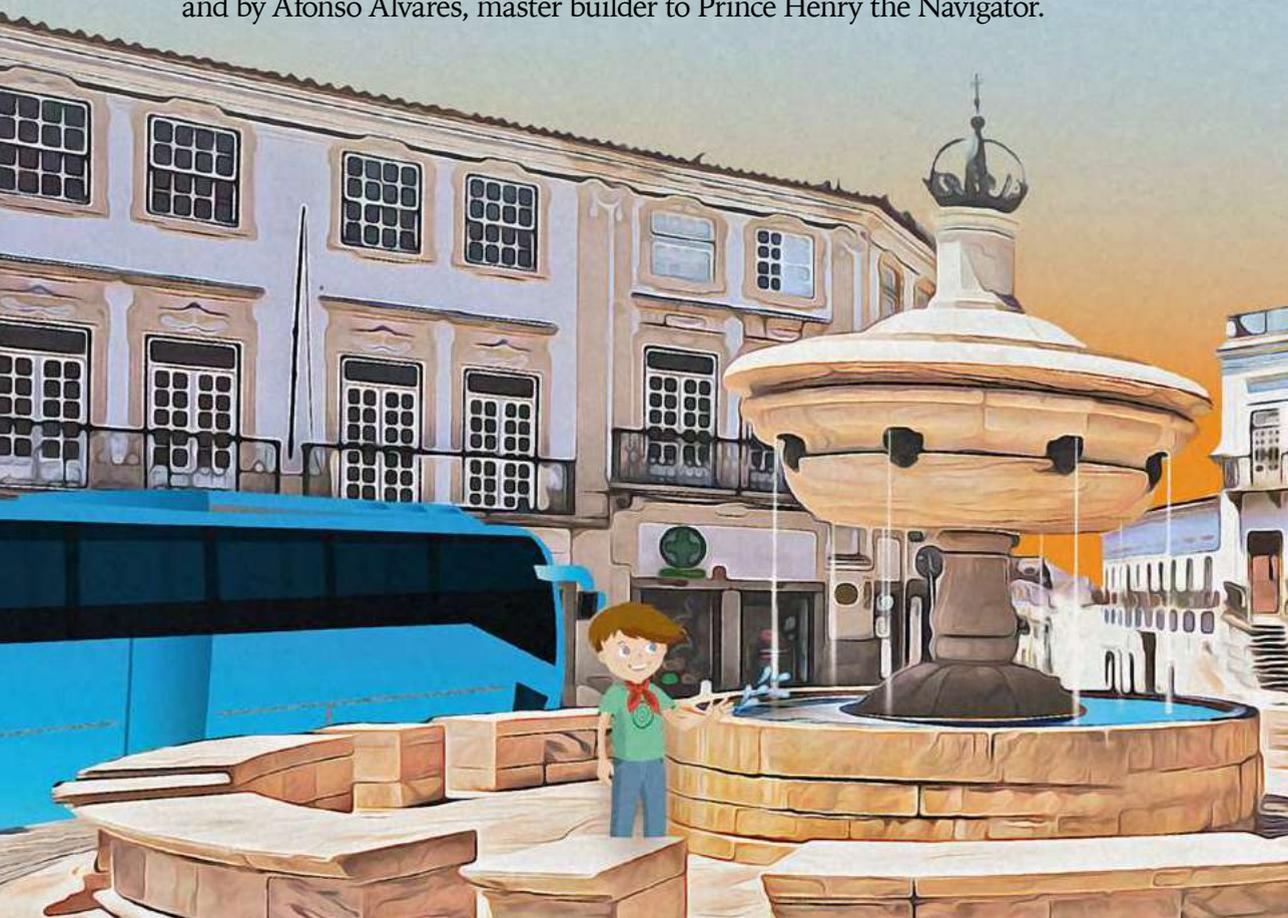
The Professor listened to them and soon clarified:

- No! I'm talking about the fountains, which we also call fountains, where marble is more directly associated with water. For many years, these were very important structures for the populations, as it was through them that the water supply was guaranteed. Note that there was no piped water as today and people had to fetch water from fountains.

- Have you seen how much work it was, Rosa? - asked Lourenço. If we wanted to take a bath, we had to go to the fountain many times, and even to give water to Aurora we had to fetch it! - he said, looking tired just imagining such a thing.

- Yes children, it was complicated. But let's continue...- said the Professor, continuing with the explanation.

- As could not be otherwise, these constructions are made with the materials of the region, in this case marble, so they show a great richness. Here in Évora we see the fountain in Praça do Giraldo, dating from 1573 and by Afonso Álvares, master builder to Prince Henry the Navigator.

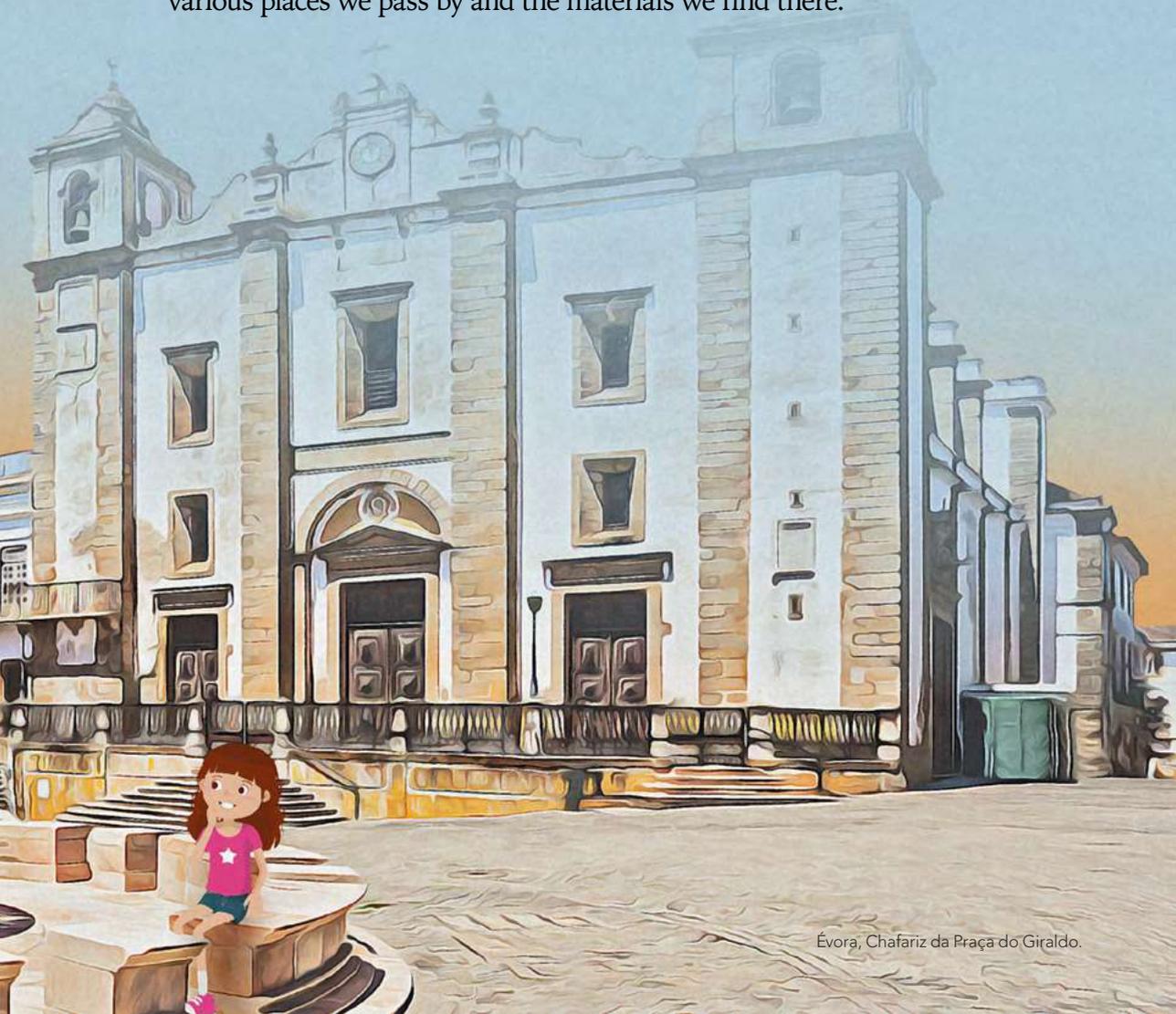


It is circular in shape and made of white Estremoz marble. Older than this is the fountain of the Largo das Portas de Moura, from 1556, probably designed by Diogo de Torralva.

- How cute! - exclaimed Lourenço - I have seen many fountains, but I had never paid attention to the materials they are made of!

- Now you've noticed, and so have your colleagues. And there are many more. We don't have time to go there anymore, but a more recent example, completed around 1785, is the fountain of Dona Maria or Bicas, in Borba. It is large, all made of marble from the region and has been classified as a National Monument since 1910.

- Come on kids, now we really have to get back to school. Tomorrow I'll continue talking to you about marble and its applications. In the meantime, make the most of the journey back home by noticing the various places we pass by and the materials we find there.



Marble in churches, convents, palaces and other buildings

- Good morning! - exclaimed the Professor happily as he entered the classroom the next morning. – Did you enjoy our journey? As soon as we can we are going to make another one, to show you Évora better and also Estremoz, Borba and Vila Viçosa and their monuments.

- Yes! That's great! - the students whispered enthusiastically.

- I liked it very much, tonight I even dreamt about marble. - Rosa went straight ahead.

- I loved the trip too, I learnt a lot! - said Lourenço.



- Today I am going to keep talking with you about marbles, because there is still a lot to see and to learn - said the Professor - I will show you pictures as I speak.

Let's travel from the classroom!

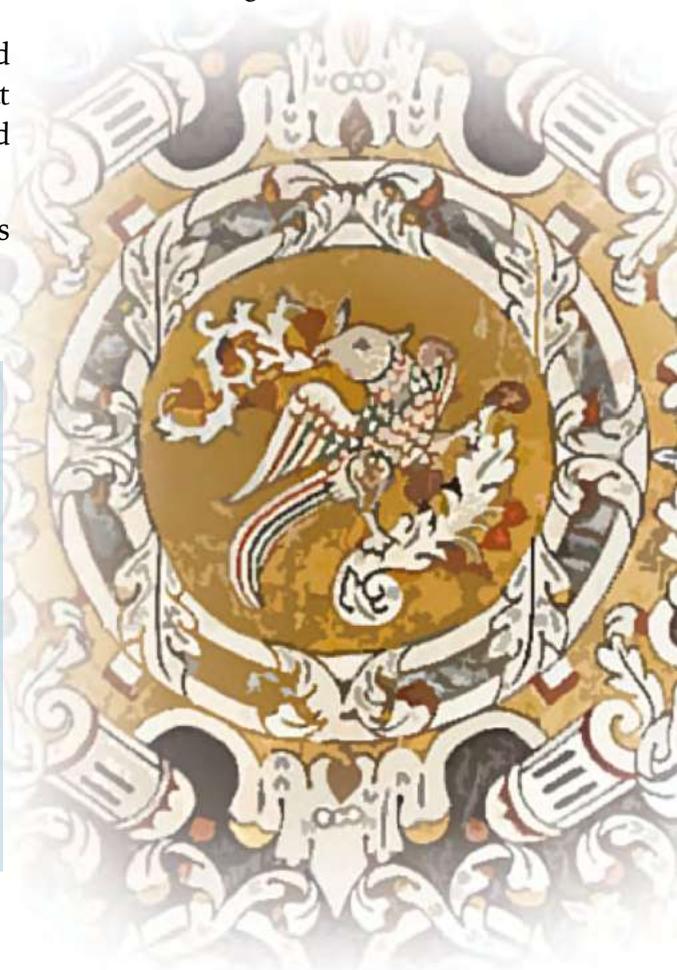
And the explanation began:

- You may have already noticed that many churches and ancient convents are true museums! Most of the time they were commissioned by kings, queens, princes and princesses, or by very important people, and magnificent works of art have been gathered in them over the ages. In many of these buildings, the Estremoz Marble is often present, either in the façades or in the interior, in altarpieces, pulpits, washbasins, baptismal fountains, webs or cancels, sculptures and other decorative elements, sometimes combined with other ornamental rocks, like those that can be found in the Lisbon area and surroundings.

- You can also find the so-called inlays, a decorative technique that was widely used in the 17th and 18th centuries in many buildings.

- How beautiful! - the students exclaimed almost in unison.

The inlays were used on floors and walls, and to produce beautiful effects, limestones and marbles of the most diverse colours were used. In them we can sometimes find the whites and pinks of Estremoz, as well as the greys. The stone inlays of the 17th and 18th centuries made in Portugal were direct heirs of a Roman technique.

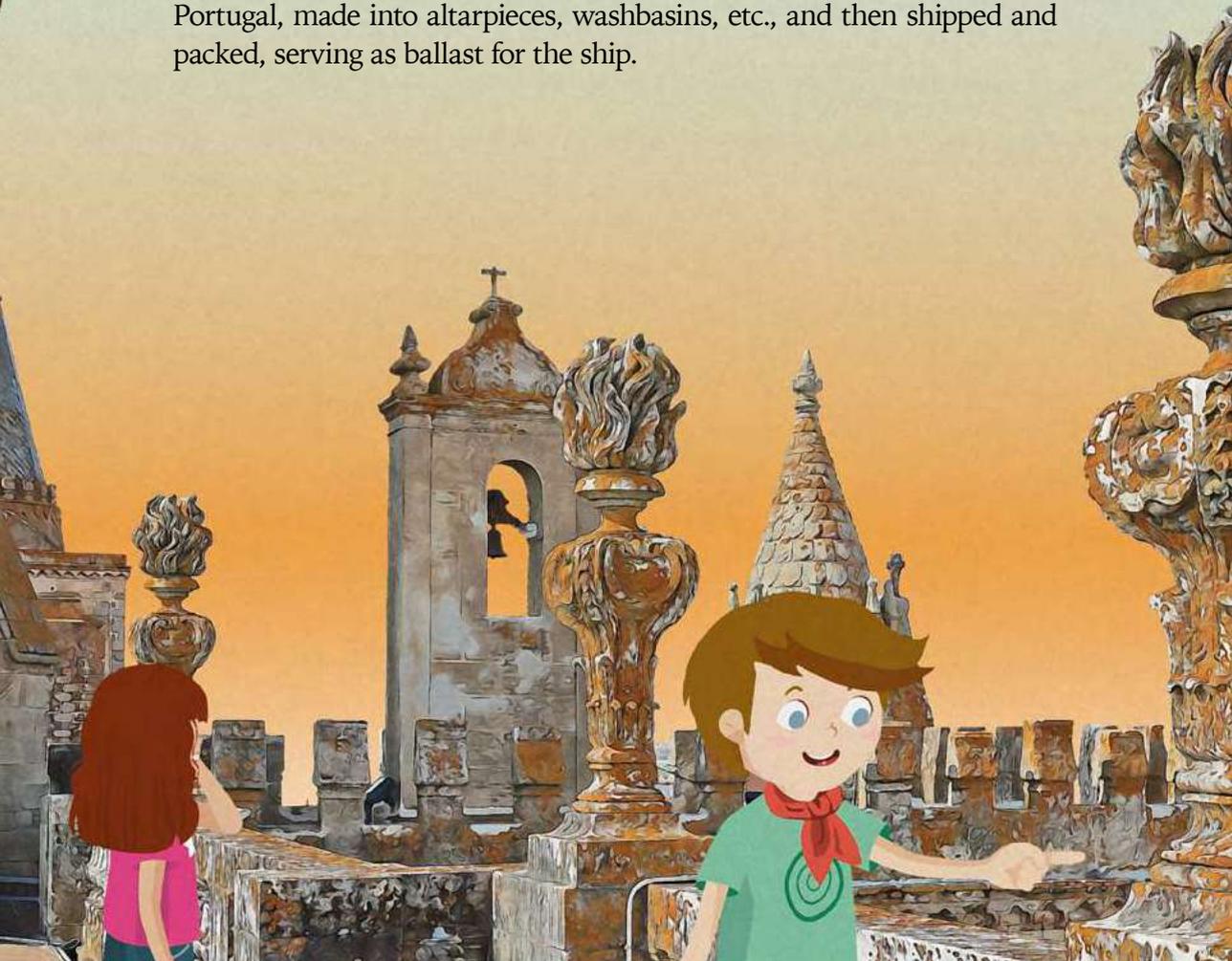


- In the Alentejo we can find Estremoz marbles in many places, some of them very well known, such as the Sé of Évora, the church of Santa Maria de Estremoz or the Convent of the Agostinhos of Vila Viçosa.

- But remember that you can also find Alentejo marbles in other regions. In Lisbon, for example, we can see them in the chancel of the church of the Jerónimos Monastery, in the church of São Roque or in the sacristy of the Santo Antão-o-Novo College and, in the central area, in buildings like the Nossa Senhora do Rosário basilica, in Fátima.

- And we cannot forget that the Portuguese took the marbles out of the country - continued the Professor - In the 17th and 18th centuries, Portuguese marbles and limestones went to Brazil and Africa, where they were applied in churches, monasteries and convents.

The most common limestone was Lioz, extracted and worked in Portugal, made into altarpieces, washbasins, etc., and then shipped and packed, serving as ballast for the ship.





Along with the load followed a mason's officer, who, once the package arrived at its destination, was responsible for placing the pieces in the place for which they had been designed. In the old Santo António Convent in Rio de Janeiro you will find a Portuguese lavabo carved out of Estremoz marble!

- As well as religious architecture, Estremoz marble is also present in civil architecture, in royal palaces and other buildings. For example, in the Palacete dos Morgados Cardosos and the Paços do Concelho in Borba, in the Quinta do Carmo and in the Antigo Solar dos Albergaria in Estremoz.

- And have you visited the Paço dos Duques de Bragança, in Vila Viçosa? - asked the Professor.

- I've been there once, but I haven't visited it - replied Lourenço. But I remember that it's very big, with lots of windows.

- The Paço de Vila Viçosa was started in the early years of the 16th century and some time later its extensive façade, which is 110 metres long, would come to receive the white marble and reddish marble cladding that it still bears today, making the façade of the Palace much more beautiful.

- In Lisbon we also have fine examples of marble from the Alentejo. For example, in the building of the National Assembly which, during the monarchy, from 1834 onwards, was called Palácio das Cortes and which had been the Monastery of São Bento da Saúde, started to be built at the end of the 16th century.

- Look Rosa, it's the building we usually see on TV! - said Lourenço to Rosa, amazed.



Vila Viçosa, Façade of the Paço dos Duques de Bragança.

- Yes, I am talking about a place that is well known to all and very important - said the Professor, continuing. - At the end of the 19th century, beginning of the 20th century, when works were carried out there, an important architect called Miguel Ventura Terra used the Estremoz marble on some walls, and on column and pilaster capitals, combined with stones from the Lisbon and Sintra region, such as lioz and incarnadão.

- Next time you see this building on TV, you'll know that there's Alentejo marble there!

- Don't forget what you have learned! - concluded the Professor - And if you go to Lisbon and take the underground, pay attention! Even there, in several stations, you can find marbles from the Alentejo in coverings and sculptures!



Ruivina
Marble

White Marble

RING! - the doorbell rang.

- Break time! - the teacher announced - You can go out.

When he passed Rosa and Lourenço he asked them:

- So, did you enjoy travelling through the universe of marbles?

- Sure, Professor! - they replied together.

- I had no idea that marbles were in so many places, that some are so old and used in so many ways! When will we see more? We could go back to Estremoz and Évora, go to Borba, Vila Viçosa, Lisbon, and even Mérida - suggested Lourenço, enthusiastically seconded by Rosa, and little goat Aurora, hopping around the boys, anticipating more adventures.



- Very good. You've even memorised the locations. - praised the Professor - I will tell you a secret. When we stopped yesterday for Aurora to graze, I already knew that there was a treasure there that you would like to discover...

I wasn't wrong! While we are not going on another study trip, try to find marbles where you live and where you walk and try to find out more in books and on the internet. Make a list, take photos and ask your relatives... You may be surprised.

- You see Aurora... You have helped to discover a treasure. - said Rosa while petting the goat, as it gently swayed, happy for its "find".

- Yes, the Marble of Estremoz is really a treasure and it's our heritage! We have to value it as it deserves and take good care of it. - Lourenço remarked.



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Estremoz

Borba

Vila Viçosa

Évora