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The Portuguese Medieval Castles

An overview



Introduction

The castles that fill our imagination and appear in Portuguese landscape can still tell us a lot about the men who built them, lived in them, defended them and abandoned them. They are an invaluable source of information for military, technological, artistic, political, social and economic history.

The castle, a symbol of feudal society, was an architectural novelty introduced into Portugal during the Middle Ages, although defensive structures – fortified settlements as *castra* – did already exist. The innovative feature of castles lay in the fact that they were exclusively military structures which were designed to house small garrisons. Their appearance in Portugal is related to the country's political history, made up of the advances and retreats that were characteristic of the process of reconquering territory from the Moors. In an age of uncertainty and instability, castles played a vital role in defending the reconquered areas. Moreover, they acted as centres that introduced a new dynamic and development that encouraged the repopulation of these areas. As the reconquest advanced southwards, constant and concerted efforts were made to build and restore castles and towers that would guarantee protection for the people and enable the (re)conquered lands to be properly defended. The Military Orders played an important role in this process of expansion, defence and population of Portugal.

Yet even after the Moors had been driven out, the defence of the realm could not be neglected. The Treaty of Alcañices, signed in 1297, established the Portuguese-Castilian border once and for all. From that moment onwards, the Portuguese crown devoted their efforts to implementing a programme of restoring and building frontier castles. Particular attention was paid to the line of fortresses that stretched along the border, while not neglecting those on the routes that led to the main cities, especially Lisbon (the capital), which was the military key to Portugal in the Middle Ages.

Consequently, castles were built in carefully chosen locations of strategic importance: next to access routes, overlooking rivers and protecting important cities, often taking advantage of natural defensive features such as high places and locations protected by rivers.

These centres of military defence were linked so as to form networks, while they also were defended "at a distance" by watchtowers located in key positions that enable vast areas to be under constant vigilance.

War played a major role in medieval society, although it mainly took the form of sieges and only rarely involved pitched battles. This explains the fundamental im-

portance of castles, whose position was strengthened by the long and clear dominance of defensive measures over means of attack. It is interesting to note that there was a mutual influence between attack and defence in this sort of warfare, in that the evolution of tactics used to attack enemy fortresses forced castle architecture to make significant changes, and vice-versa.

Throughout this evolutionary process, Portuguese castles were affected by several influences, ranging from Moorish to the French styles and those brought back by the crusaders from various European kingdoms. As a result, medieval castles gradually evolved, adapted and integrated new architectural solutions. Having started out as relatively simple structures – *Roqueiro* castle from the ninth to the eleventh centuries – they acquired a far more complex form, leading to *Romanesque* castles (twelfth-thirteenth centuries), which were still designed for “passive defence” and *Gothic* castles (fourteenth-fifteenth centuries), which adopted an attitude of “active defence”. This evolutionary process would culminate at the dawn of the sixteenth century with the emergence of the *bastioned trace castles* that so clearly represent the Modern Period.

This also means that there are hardly any “pure” castles. Even a castle whose dominant characteristics mean it can be classified as belonging to one specific period may have older or far more modern work. Consequently, no two castles are ever the same: every castle is a collection of clues that the visitor must discover and decipher.

The network of Portuguese castles, 1350-1450

In order to understand Portuguese medieval castles, it is important to have an idea both of their number and, above all, of their geographical distribution, since this reveals a strategic plan and an underlying purpose. As we said before, castles were organised into local, regional and even national networks that would safeguard the kingdom as a geographical unit. This was shown by the efforts made to restore and build castles as the reconquest advanced southwards and by the crown’s interest in border castles following the Treaty of Alcañices.

The network of Portuguese castles shows castles that may not have been in the same state of conservation and operation [ready to operate] at the same time. However, examining and interpreting this general map is still valuable as the following lines of defence can be observed:

A string of fortresses along the border (mainly the Castilian frontier but also on the coast), backed up by inner lines further inland running north to south;

Lines that define deeper defensive positions for the decisive strategic points such as Lisbon, starting from Almeida;

Lines along the main communication routes and the major rivers (the Tagus, Mondego, Côa, etc.) and which were designed to block these routes.

Some castles were concentrated into clusters in specific regions, as in the Minho, Beira Alta and especially Alto-Alentejo areas. This happened because they were the obvious routes that the Castilians generally used to enter Portugal and thus required additional defence. In contrast, there are “clear” areas in locations where natural defences (particularly highlands or less navigable rivers) made fortifications unnecessary as in the

north-eastern Trás-os-Montes area and the river Guadiana. Now we will follow the evolution of Portuguese castles, step by step.

The Roqueiro Castle (IXth-XIth centuries)

Castles appeared in the area now called Portugal within the historical and military context of the early Christian reconquest. Thus, they were first built in the Entre-Douro-e-Minho area (Northern Portugal) in the mid-ninth century, before spreading to other regions and multiplying in number in the tenth and especially eleventh centuries.

It was the sense of insecurity caused by Moorish raids and Norman incursions that led to the construction of refuges where people could take shelter whenever danger threatened. The previously used system of fortified settlements was not appropriated for settlements that spread across fertile valleys, so a new type of purely military architectural structure - the castle - developed. Subsequently, the system used to defend the territory changed to one based on a network of castles.

Roqueiro castles were relatively simple structures: small spaces enclosed by walls. The primitive walls were made of roughly hewn stone that was not held by mortar, while embankments and ditches were also used as defence mechanisms.

The builders took advantage of all natural defences, constructing the castles on high locations that enable a watch to be kept over the surrounding areas, and using outcrops of granite which made it easier to build the walls. Both the building and the defence of these castles were made easier by their small size.

In addition to these castles, which were built due to the initiative of the local people, the process of building castles led to the appearance of another type: the condal castle built by the feudal nobility. These were much less common and used more sophisticated architectural solutions, with square or rectangular ground plans.

Few of these structures have survived, partly due to their fragility, but also because many were destroyed by later work, specifically Romanesque and Gothic rebuilding. Let us consider now an almost unique example.

The Castle of Penela

Penela (c. 20 km SE from Coimbra, in the Center of Portugal, not far from the Sea) is a roqueiro castle that was rebuilt by the governor of Coimbra, D. Sesnando Davides, after Fernando Magno reconquered the city in 1064. It reveals some characteristics of this type, as it stands on a high point and has natural defences. The wall is built on an outcrop of limestone rock and surrounds a small bailey with a water-tank. Although it has been rebuilt several times, it maintains the form of a Sesnandine castle, which the Romanesque-Gothic alterations adapted to become the keep.

The Romanesque Castle (XIIth-XIIIth centuries)

During the twelfth century, the architecture of Portuguese castles was open to a variety of influences and developed significantly. Some changes are difficult to assess, such as the influence of other European countries, brought by French noblemen who came to Portugal with Count D. Henrique (the father of the first king of Portugal). The in-

fluence of others such as the Almoravids (the Muslim dynasty that ruled part of the Iberian Pe-ninsula between c. 1086-1150) and contact with the Orient is more apparent.

Nonetheless, it was the Templars who made by far the greatest contribution, since they had extremely advanced knowledge of military architecture.

One leading figure was Master D. Gualdim Pais, who had learned in the Orient during the Second Crusade. His period as Master of the Order of the Templars in Portugal (1156-1195) was decisive in terms of the development of Portuguese medieval military architecture. The contribution made by the Hospitallers, while discreet, was also of some significance.

The following are the main characteristics and innovations introduced by Romanesque castle:

- Castles were essentially for “passive defence” and were designed to withstand long sieges. Its main element was the “keep” (*vide infra*). They had high walls that were supposedly impregnable. Storing water was also fundamental in surviving a siege, which explains the presence of water-tanks inside castles.
- The Romanesque castle fundamentally consisted of a small, walled bailey with only one or two gates – the main gate and the postern – as any opening in the walls would be vulnerable.
- The walls had a wall-walk or “way of the rounds” along the top, protected by a parapet with rectangular or pentagonal merlons that were approximately the same width as the openings between them.
- The number of towers set into the walls was increased. The towers were generally square, which made them easier to build, and were used to divide the very long sections of wall and defend the most advanced angles.
- Mechanisms such as arrow-loops developed enabling weapons to be fired from inside the castle.
- The innovations brought from the Orient by D. Gualdim Pais included battens, a sloped thickening built on the outer base of the wall.
- The Templars are also associated to the earliest *boardings* (derived from the French word *bourd*) built in Portugal. The upper part of the keep at Longroiva (in the NE of Portugal), built by D. Gualdim Pais in 1174, has regularly putlog holes, where poles to support this wooden gallery were inserted. *Hoarding* means a wooden gallery built on the upper part of the walls next to the battlements but outside the walls, thereby allowing missiles to be dropped towards the base. They were normally covered galleries and had an outward-sloping roof. Since they were made of wood, they did not survive long and proved to be extremely vulnerable to the enemy’s stone missiles and inflammable materials. Consequently, they were later built using stone and changed name to machicolations. The only evidence of hoarding existence (the structures themselves have long disappeared) are the holes used to support them, as shown by the keep of the castle of Longroiva.

The Keep

The greatest innovation brought by the Romanesque castle was the appearance of the keep. Also due to the influence of the Templars, keeps were later adopted by Portuguese military architecture. The first appeared in the second half of the twelfth century (when D. Gualdim Pais was the Master of the Order) in Tomar (1160), Almourol (1171), Penas Róias (1172) and Longroiva (1174). These buildings also featured inscriptions, which indicate how novel they were.

The keep was then located in the centre of the bailey, standing away from the walls. It was also set on the highest part so that missiles could be fired out over the wall. When possible, it stood on an outcrop of rock that offered better defence. Rarely less than 10 meters high, they could reach between fifteen and twenty meters, were occasionally even higher and normally had a square or rectangular ground plan. The ground floor had no entrance. Instead, the door was located on the first floor and access was via wooden stairs that could be brought inside in case of danger. The keep was designed as an ultimate defensive stronghold, one that was capable of sustained resistance even after the rest of the castle had fallen. In a sense, it was a fortress within a fortress, and thus became a symbol of power.

The castle of Pombal

This is an excellent example of “Romanesque castle”: Pombal (c. 40 km S from Coimbra). The construction work on Pombal castle, a fine example of Romanesque Templar military architecture, started in 1156. Its keep, built by D. Gualdim Pais in 1171, has batters in all four sides. The tower is broad and not very tall, with two buttresses on the main façade due to construction problems. It stands away from the walls in the centre of the bailey, and access is via a door on the first floor. There are nine rectangular towers located in the long sections of the wall and marking each re-entrance. There are other characteristic features of the Romanesque castle: two gates, a wall-walk, arrow-loops, a water-tank and a section of batters next to the main gate.

The Gothic Castle (XIVth-XVth centuries)

In Portugal, the late XIIIth century and, more importantly, the XIVth century saw the triumph of the Gothic castle, which appeared relatively late in comparison to the rest of the Europe. Its emergence in Portugal is associated to the fact that King Afonso III came to the throne in 1248, bringing major influences from his long time in France that were reflected in civil and military architecture. Indeed, the first signs of change appeared in his reign, when the first machicolations appeared in Melgaço in 1263 and alterations were introduced in some border castles. However, it was only during King Dinis’ long reign (1279-1325) that the Gothic style was properly introduced and established itself in Portuguese military architecture. This process was related to the Crown’s aim of controlling and maintaining all such fortresses. The important programme of building and restoring castles during Dinis’ reign was also linked to the Treaty of Alcañices, signed in 1279, which definitively established the Portuguese bor-

der. Dinis' rebuilding programme followed a strategic plan as it was applied to castles that kept their strategic importance in relation to the newly defined border.

The main innovation of the Gothic castle was that it adopted an attitude of "active defence". This was related to developments in the art of attacking, which increasingly involved machines. A new type of castle emerged. Not only was it designed to withstand enemy attack, but also to counterattack using innovative ways and means. Sure of its defensive capacities, the Gothic castle was relatively free from its previous dependence on a high location, which even led to castles being built on plains.

- One of the first innovations was the new structure surrounding the main gate, which started being flanked by one or two towers.
- The number of towers in the walls increased, considerably reducing the distance between each tower. This space was often less than twelve meters, thereby enabling weapons to be fired at attackers around the base of the neighbouring tower.
- The use of round turrets spread, as they were stronger and cheaper to build. They were very common in regions with soft stone, such as Alentejo. This development was due to Moorish influence, since the late stages of the reconquest (middle thirteenth century) brought the Christians into contact with the highly developed military architecture of the Almohads (the Muslim dynasty that ruled part of the Iberian Peninsula between c. 1150-1212).
- The wall-walks became wider to allow the garrison easier movement. The stairs to reach these wall-walks consisted of stone blocks set against walls, whereas they had previously been cut into the walls. Battlements became lower and broader, so reducing the openings and therefore improving conditions for the defenders.
- Conditions for firing were also improved. The number of arrow-loops in the battlements was increased and they stopped being just vertical, developing into cruciform shapes that suited both longbows and crossbows.
- Keeps started being set against the wall. Often in a corner or at some other strategic position where they could defend more vulnerable areas, specifically the gates. This change of position was linked to the new concept of "active defence". Polygonal (pentagonal and hexagonal) keeps that offered a broader range of fire appeared, dating from the King Dinis or after. Keeps became larger and their residential space increased.

At the same time vertical means of fire called machicolations spread. This consists of a small stone balcony set on projecting brackets and with large round openings called murder-holes that enable large stones to be dropped near the base of the walls and towers. These were a natural development of the hoardings! The earliest machicolations were used on the gatehouses of

castles and keeps. They later spread to all sides of keeps and, under King João I, were located at castle corners, forerunners of modern watchtowers. Very rarely - as it was more costly - a running balcony (machicoulis) was chosen, as in the keeps of Melgaço, Monforte de Rio Livre, and Penamacor, which all date from the time of King Dinis. Although it was King Afonso III who introduced them in Melgaço in 1263, the use of machicolations dates predominantly from the time of King Dinis.

The barbican

The final innovation in the Gothic castle was the barbican; a wall that was lower than the main wall and built a few meters outside it. The purpose was to create a first obstacle or barrier to attackers and their siege engines. The barbican might cover just the area around the gate, the keep or any other particularly vulnerable area that required additional defence as found in Montemor-o-Velho. Alternatively, as found at Sabugal, it could surround all or almost all the fortification, in which case it was called an “extended barbican”. The normally clear space between the main wall and the barbican was called the “killing ground” and was generally only a few meters wide. Barbicans were probably introduced in Portugal in the reign of King Dinis (1279-1325).

The Castle of Sabugal: a beautiful example of a Gothic castle

Sabugal (in the Center-East of Portugal, quite near the border with Spain) has a geometrical (rectangular) ground plan with square towers in the corners. The pentagonal keep is set against the outside of the wall so as to defend the gate. The machicolations allow anyone attempting to enter to be shot at, while the protection is completed by the extended barbican with a bent entrance, which forces attacking troops to follow a route that exposes them to fire from above. There is also a broad wall-walk and respective stairs against the wall. The castle of Sabugal has the main characteristics of the Gothic castle. Founded by Alfonso IX of Leon, King Dinis conquered it in 1296 and made major alterations.

Late / Final evolution of Gothic Castles

In the second half of the fourteenth century, Gothic castles started to adopt an increasingly residential appearance. This was first applied to the keep, which involved extending its walls and creating larger windows on the upper floors to guarantee better lighting and proper ventilation. Examples include the keeps in Bragança, Estremoz and Beja, all of which are closely linked to King João I.

At the end of the Middle Age, some of the Portugal’s old fortresses were converted into temporary or permanent residences for kings and lords. A major contributing factor to this process was the development of fireplaces, chimneys, kitchens and some sophisticated finishes – such as wood panelling – which made castles more comfortable and welcoming. Lamego, Montemor-o-Velho and especially Leiria, Estremoz and Óbidos are all examples of this.

Penedono, Porto de Mós and Ourém are three other highly elaborated examples from the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries.

The Castle of Leiria

Leiria (in the Center-West of Portugal, c. 70 km S from Coimbra) is the finest example of a castle transformed into a residence. King João I ordered a New Palace to be built on the sunny south-facing façade of the castle, maintaining its flanking towers but interrupting the walkway and closing the battlements. The inward-opening *loggias*, the magnificent Gothic bays and the spacious and welcoming halls and chambers are all of note.

The transition to bastioned trace castles (XVth – XVIth centuries)

From the middle of the fifteenth century onwards, castles faced new challenges as the use of firearms spread. The triumph of artillery in sieges brought major alterations to the relationship between forms of defence and attack, which had traditionally favoured the former. If castles were to maintain their impregnability and upgrade their capacity to respond, they again needed to rethink their structure. Consequently, the height of the walls was reduced and they were thickened so as to offer a smaller and more resistant target to the new artillery. Yet this was not an overnight change. For a long period, the new weapons were used alongside traditional means such as scaling the walls, which was effectively countered by the walls' great height and by towers.

There was a parallel trend towards reinforcing outworks such as barbicans, an advance wall that was an invaluable barrier against destructive enemy fire. This established the conditions for the appearance of the first bastions, with their characteristic angular (arrow-head) forms, which were often reinforced with a steep glacis that made it difficult to attack directly and, above all, would deflect missiles or cause them to ricochet. However, castles did not merely withstand the new weaponry, they also took it inside so that it could be used against attack. Consequently, gun-ports were built into the walls, towers and barbicans, often adapting what had been Romanesque or Gothic arrow-loops. Later, especially designed casemates were built and properly located to maximise their firepower. In the Iberian Peninsula, this process of maximising the use of firearms inside fortresses appeared at relatively late stage. Until the mid-fifteenth century (third quarter), firearms were mainly fired from parapets and wall-walks – open air spaces – which minimised the complex problems caused by the fumes that this new form of artillery produced, mainly due to poor sealing.

To sum up, there was a shift towards the bastioned trace castles that are characteristic of the Modern Period.

Bastion

The bastion was the most characteristic architectural feature of a bastioned trace fortification. It consisted of a small pentagonal fortification with three salient and two re-entrant angles that housed artillery and was located at a salient point of the fortress. Each bastion was designed as a part of a group so that each one protected its neighbours with crossfire.

Conclusion

Visiting and studying a castle is always an opportunity to learn History, to understand the importance of the Nature and to search the relationship between men: who lived in community, but also who make war. We see castles as a symbol of a historic period but we must have in mind that once they were also a symbol of the power.

To learn more on Portuguese medieval castles

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Figures



Figure 1 – The network of Portuguese castles. 1350-1450.



Figure 2 – Penela (Center-West of Portugal, near Coimbra). Castle of D. Sesnando

◆ THE PORTUGUESE MEDIEVAL CASTLES ◆

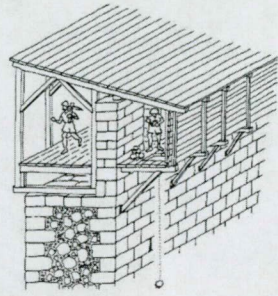


Figure 3 – Longroiva (North-East of Portugal): the keep and visible putlog holes to support the hoarding

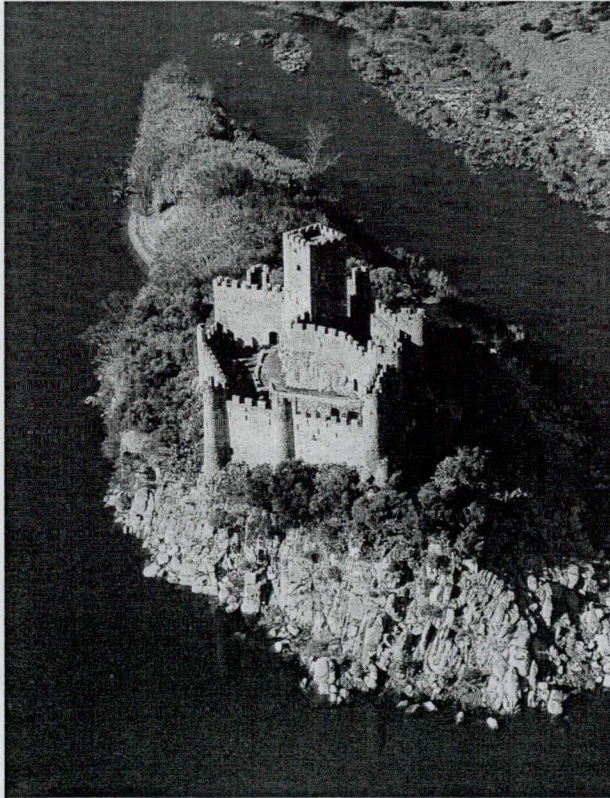


Figure 4 – Almourol castle (Center-West of Portugal, near Tomar)

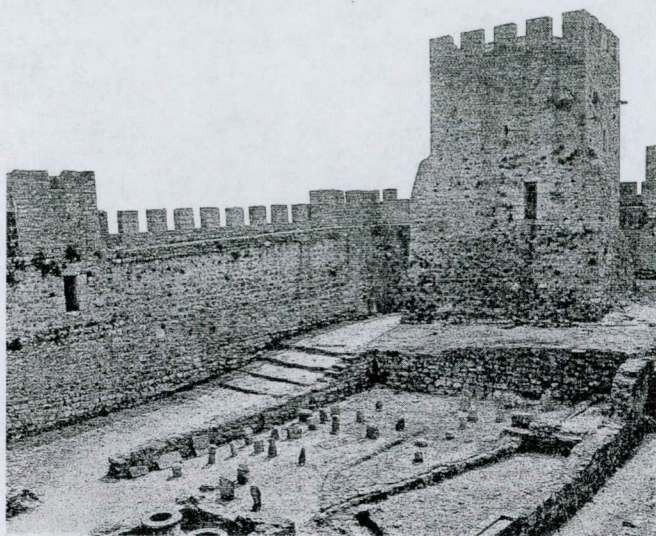


Figure 5 – Pombal (Center-West of Portugal, between Coimbra and Leiria): view of the castle interior

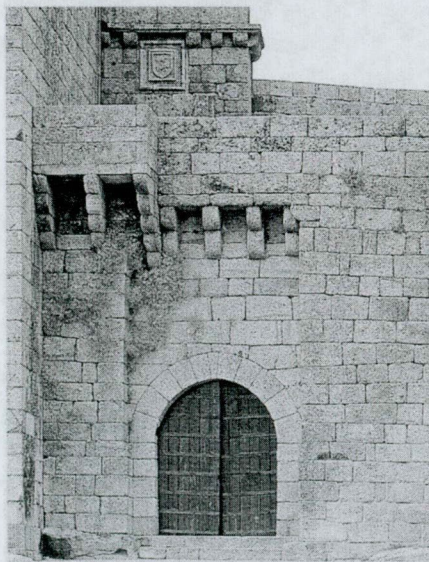


Figure 6 – Belmonte (Center-East of Portugal): machicolations over the entrance to the castle



Figure 7 – Sabugal (Center-East of Portugal): view of the castle



Figure 8 – Leiria (Center-West of Portugal): view of the castle, including the New Palace. [Photo: Wikicommons]

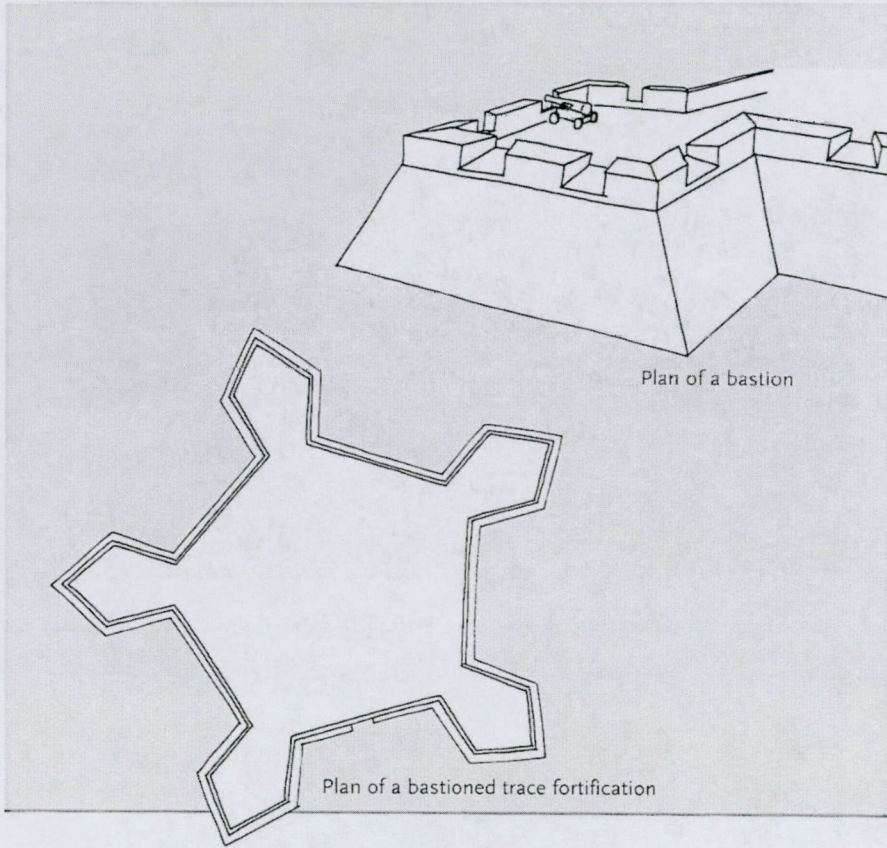


Figure 9 – Plan of a bastion

Absztrakt

Középkori portugál várak
Áttekintés

Ebben a tanulmányban a portugál katonai erődítmények története kerül bemutatásra a reconquista tükrében, megjelenésüktől kezdve egészen a 15. századig (amikor már megkezdődött az átmenet a modern építészetbe). Az írás többek között kitér a katonai rendek közreműködésére, a Szent Föld katonai építészetének tapasztalataira és az Ibériai-félsziget muszlim katonai építészetének hatására. A tanulmányt számos kép is követi a 11-15. századi portugál középkori várakról.