

A Short History of Elvas and its Fortification

By Maj. Nick Hallidie

Although there are vestiges of prehistoric and Roman occupation, the foundation of Elvas as a town is due to the Arabs. Indeed, the name comes from the Arabic *Al Bas*, meaning The Strong (place). Compare this with Alhambra, meaning The Red (palace).

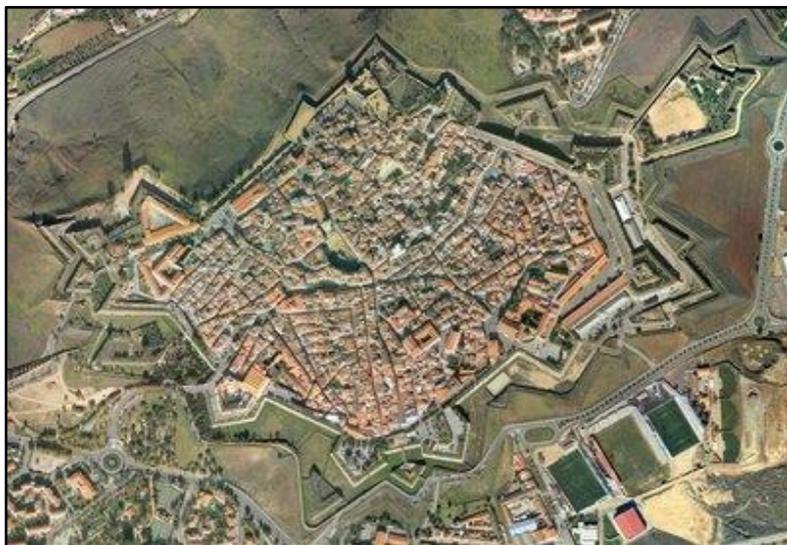
Elvas owes its importance to the dominating height on which the Arabs built the castle, its position astride major north/south and east/west routes, and the availability of adequate water and fertile land.



The 13th Century Moorish castle of Elvas.

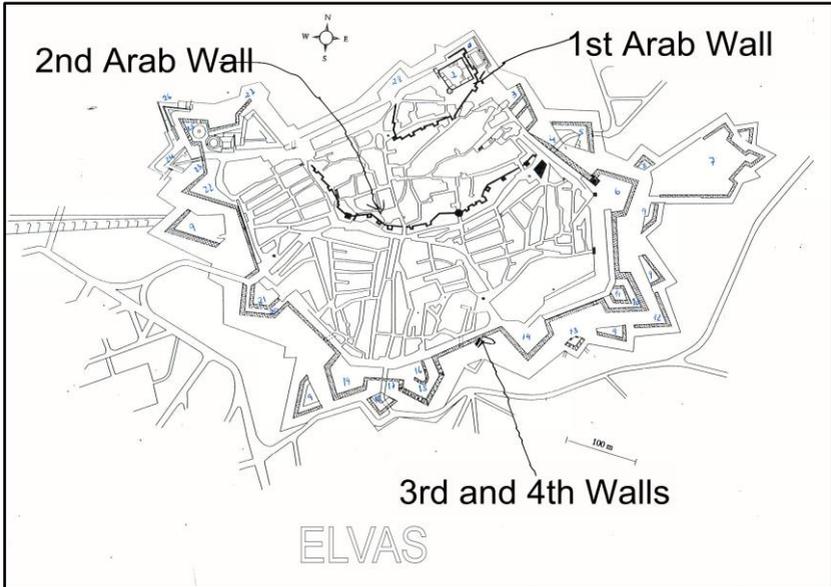
The founding of Elvas would be in the first half of the 8th Century, near the end of the explosive expansion of Islam, following the Prophet's death. The town consisted, initially, of the castle and a small fortified area encompassing the high ground. Although the ensuing centuries could hardly be described as peaceful, the settlement soon developed well beyond these walls, necessitating the building of a second defensive wall. The line of this can still be seen, highlighted by the square towers, which were erected at intervals.

During the inexorable advance of the Christian forces, Elvas was captured and lost several times before it was finally captured by forces under the King D. Sancho II. Among his army were a group of Knights Hospitaller, from their base at Alcochete. They forced their way up the steep rocky slope and broke through at an area known as Corujeira (*The Place of the Owls*). Here they raised an altar which became a hermitage and finally a church dedicated to their Patron Saint, John the Baptist.



Aerial view of the Fortifications of Elvas.

During the first few centuries of Christian rule substantial colonies of Muslims and Jews lived in harmony. The coming of the Inquisition saw the end of tolerance and Jews and Muslims were forced either to convert to Christianity or leave the country. From very early during the Christian expansion south, Portugal developed into the shape it holds today, while Castile advanced south in parallel, but to the East. The Treaty of Alcanices in 1297 established the border which has remained largely unchanged to the present day. Over the centuries Portugal and Castile were at war more times than they were at peace and the frontier between Elvas and Badajoz became the most important point of contact.



The Fortifications of Elvas.

The Fortifications

The First Wall.

This was built by the Moors and was little more than what the Normans would have called a 'Bailey' and is named Alcaçova. It contained the castle, the mosque, two or three streets of houses and an open area for a market. Of the three gates, only two remain. To the south there is the Porta do Miradeiro and to the west the Porta do Templo, so called because it was here the Knights Templar broke through. Just beside this gate can be seen the only doorway of true Arabic design. The most enduring part is on the northern side where the ground falls away steeply. Here the Moors scarped the final few metres leaving a sheer face about 30 feet high.



The First Wall - Porta do Templo (left) and Porta do Miradeiro (right).

The Second Wall.

It was not long before the population expanded and needed further protection. A much more sophisticated wall was constructed, consisting of strong square towers at regular intervals connected by curtain walls. Almost all the towers exist and can be seen easily. One served for many years as the town prison, another was converted into a church tower.

It is worth noting that fortifications built by the Moors have square towers. The Crusaders had found that round towers were inherently stronger and all mediaeval fortifications used them. Large sections of the curtain walls remain, forming the backs of the buildings built against them.



The Second Wall – one of the Towers and remains of the Curtain Walls.

The Third Wall.

Following the Christian conquest, Elvas expanded rapidly and before long an additional line of defence was needed. This is generally known as ‘a Muralha Fernandina’, as it was completed in the reign of D. Fernando IV in about 1340, to allow more urban development within it. It consisted of 22 tower and 12 gates joined by curtain walls. All the work was carried out by the people of Elvas at their own cost although the King allowed the town dispensations on the taxes that would otherwise have been remitted to the Crown.

The 14th Century was a terrible period throughout Europe. A series of wet summers caused widespread crop failures and famine. The Black Death then swept through the weakened populations. Frequent wars between Portugal and Castile, were often centred on the area of Elvas and Badajoz. For these reasons, apart from military construction, it is rare to find any monument of any other type from this period.

In 1383 or 1384, during one of the rare periods of peace between Portugal and Castile when both countries were celebrating the marriage of King Juan I with the Portuguese Princess Dona Beatriz, there occurred an incident which the Spanish know as “*La Caldera del Portugués*” and many think is the origin of the arms of Elvas. One of the events in the festivities was a horse race in the ‘Plaza Alta’ in Badajoz. The young men raced around the square carrying the standard of the city. The winner would be, he who lasted longest. A young Portuguese took part, but instead of continuing around the square, set off for Elvas, 14 miles away, with the standard. All the Spanish horsemen galloped after him. The people of Elvas seeing this mass of horsemen charging from Badajoz and fearing an attack, slammed the gates shut leaving our hero outside. He, realising he had no hope, threw the standard over the walls into the city, crying “*Morre o homem, fica a fama*” – “the man may die, the fame lives on”. He was dragged back to Badajoz and boiled alive in a large caldron in the same Plaza Alta where he had stolen the standard. For many years the event was commemorated by both sides on the day of Corpus Cristi.



The coat-of-arms of Elvas, depicting the legend of the standard.

Mediaeval fortifications relied on the height of the walls for their strength, but with the rapid improvement of artillery, something completely different was needed.

In 1578, the young King D. Sebastião led a disastrous expedition to Morocco. The Portuguese army was annihilated and D. Sebastião was presumed killed, but no body was ever produced. This led to a cult of 'Sebastianismo', in which it was hoped that the young king would miraculously reappear and save Portugal in its hour of peril. Since he had no children, the crown passed to his great-uncle Cardinal Prince Henrique, an aged bachelor who died soon after. Some nine powers now had a claim to the throne, including Queen Elizabeth of England and the Curia of Rome, but the strongest of all was Felipe II of Spain who was the grandson of the Portuguese King D Manuel I. His claim was supported by the majority of the aristocracy, and in 1580, Felipe acceded to the Portuguese throne. Felipe II was a sympathetic king, but his successors were not. Spanish grandees were appointed to the most important and lucrative posts and all the landward fortifications were neglected and allowed to fall into disrepair.

The Fourth Wall.

By 1640 resentment to increasing Spanish domination led to greater support for D. João 1, the Duke of Braganza. Despite his reluctance he was declared King by popular acclaim on 1st December. It was an advantage that the Spanish armies were heavily engaged in Catalonia and the Netherlands. Despite this there was vicious fighting between troops from Badajoz and Elvas and Olivença. There was an urgent need to modernise the fortifications.

The increasing power of artillery meant that walls needed to be much thicker and efforts had to be made to keep the enemy's guns as far as possible from the fortress. In the early 16th Century Italian engineers began designing bastions to provide extra strength. This was adopted and developed in the Low Countries during their eighty years of war with Spain.

In Portugal, a School of Military Architecture had existed for some time, which would have been abreast of the latest developments. In 1641, a Flemish Jesuit Missionary was shipwrecked off Lisbon called Joannes Ciermans, who was born in 's-Hertogenbosch, in 1602. In addition to training as a priest, he developed great aptitude for mathematics and engineering. He was a contemporary of Galileo and Descartes, with whom he corresponded and he had also designed a mechanical calculator. He came to the notice of the King, who persuaded him to remain in Portugal and help design the fortifications. This willingness to change direction was to be his downfall later.

It was also in 16th Century Italy that a standardised system of mathematical notation was accepted. Mathematicians throughout Europe were able to develop their studies and the subject that was best funded was the design of defensive fortifications. Long and esoteric arguments about the preferred angle of bastion faces, the lengths of curtain walls and much else occupied these academics. The engineers had to adapt these principles to the ground where they were to be built. Elvas was fortunate to have had a brilliant mathematician, who was also a brilliant engineer, with a good eye for the ground.

To cover every eventuality of a breach, Ciermans, used practically every element in the military engineer's tool chest. The Fernandine walls were trebled in thickness, bastions replaced the towers, and ravelins and glacis slopes were built. Any army wishing to capture the fortress must appreciate that apart from deception, subversion or starvation, it is necessary to breach the walls to obtain access. A breach is considered feasible if an infantryman can climb it without using his hands. To achieve this, the attacker must hit the base of the wall with heavy shot weighing 18 to 24 pounds and the guns must be within 400 to 500 yards of the wall. But when the attacking force entered the ditch, it would come under fire from at least two directions, from the bastions.



The 17th Century fortifications, with the ditch and a bastion.

These massive works were being built at the same time as the 8 km long Aqueduct was being completed, bringing much needed water to the town. Work had started on its construction in 1498, but for various reasons it took over 124 years to complete.



The 8 km long Aqueduct, dating from 1498.

To be effective, defence, must be in depth. For this, outlying forts were required. The first of these was Fort of Santa Lucia, which was connected to the town to the north by a covered way from the gate of the fort, and by a long tunnel leading to the barracks, the ends of which are still visible. The construction of this fort and the development of the walls of the town were constantly hampered by raids from Spain. However, all did not go in Spain's favour. The Portuguese captured many Spanish villages and even laid siege to Badajoz. It was a period of great turmoil. Later on a number of smaller 'fortins' were built further out, designed to slow down the attacking force. The fortins of São Mamede to the east and São Pedro to the west still exist, and both have tunnels, or 'galerias', linking them to the Fort of Santa Lucia.

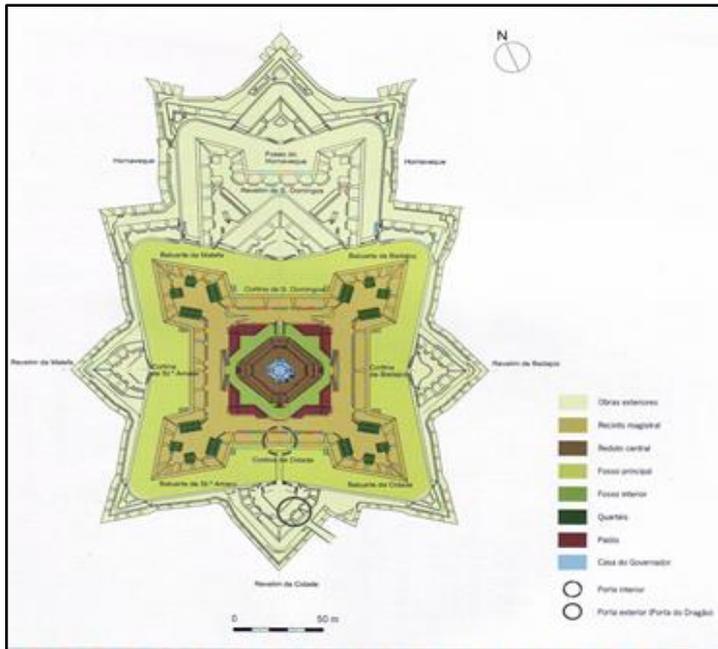
Forte de Graça.



An aerial view of the 'star-shaped' Forte de Graça, built from 1763 - 1792.

One weak point had been ignored, which was the high ground to the north, known as the Serra de Nossa Senhora de Graça.

Although this ground was nearly 1,000 yards from the town, modern artillery could now bombard the town from there. D. José I ordered a fort to be constructed there in 1763, under Count von Lippe, whom he had nominated Commander in Chief of the Portuguese Army. This fort probably represents the peak of that type of fortification.



Plan of Forte de Graça

Begun during this period, it took nearly 30 years to complete, employing 6,000 men and 4,000 animals, which was a severe drain on the local agriculture. The work was largely overseen by the French émigré, Guillaume-Luis-Antoine de Valleré. The massive strength of this fort was never really put to the test. The Spanish approached it during the *'Guerra das Laranjas'* in 1802. In 1811, after Marshal Soult had captured Badajoz, this was one of the factors that persuaded him that Elvas was too hard a nut to crack. It was occupied by the French in 1808 however, after the invasion by Junot, as D. João VI had ordered the Portuguese to receive the French as friends.

From then onwards, the fortifications became largely irrelevant. However the immense effort required for their construction and the impressive effect they have on the countryside mean they are for ever a source of great pride to the 'Elvenses'. For many years, Forte de Graça was used as either a political or a military prison.

On 30th June, 2012, at the beginning of the 36th session of the World Heritage Committee, UNESCO declared that the fortifications of Elvas were to be classified as a World Heritage site. This decision was warmly greeted in Elvas, especially by the Mayor, José António Rondão Almeida, who had been working for this goal since taking up office in 1995.

With a perimeter of 12 kilometres, and covering an area of 300 hectares, the fortifications of Elvas are the largest of its type in the world. In 2014, work began on the restoration of the Forte de Graça, which was completed in 2015, and it has justifiably become a major tourist attraction.

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Nick Hallidie is a longstanding member of the Society and has contributed articles over the years. He was a professional soldier for 23 years in the Green Howards. Retiring to Portugal, where he spent the next 27 years, he assumed the chairmanship of the association formed to care for the British Cemetery in Elvas – The Friends of the British Cemetery in Elvas. In this role he was responsible for organising memorials to the regiments that fought at Albuera and Badajo and led several tours to these important actions. He also advised the military novelist Allan Mallinson. He has now retired to Sudbury, in Suffolk.