

VILA REAL DE SANTO ANTONIO

PORTUGAL'S ROYAL TOWN OF NEW STRAIGHT TRACKS

In the Society of Leyhunters Newsletter #71 (December 2022) I wrote an article entitled "The Enigma of Medieval Leys" that described how several short north-south Leys in English cities appear to be part of an ancient system of town planning where a town was quartered from the geographic centre creating both east-west and north-south axes. The research put me in mind of the enigmatic and enlightened town of Vila Real de Santo Antonio situated on the Portuguese Eastern Algarve facing Spain across the Guadiana River estuary. The town is less than three centuries old yet exhibits these same ancient planning ideals and is proud to state that it was laid out according to Masonic principles.

On my first visit to Vila Real de Santo Antonio in 2015 I was completely unprepared for the magnificent yet slightly disorienting sight that met my eyes when entering the main town square. A large obelisk stood proudly in the centre and from it radiated 64 pairs of black and white rays marked out in the traditional Portuguese cobblestones. The area marked out was a perfect geometric square surrounded by a symmetrical arrangement of low white buildings with red pantile roofs and with a square building at each corner representing a tower. A taller church with a Freemasonic frontage stood proudly in the centre of the north side of the Square.

THE PRACA REAL (ROYAL SQUARE) OF VILA REAL DE SANTO ANTONIO



A striking feature was that each of the darker coloured rays emanating from the obelisk seemed to be going straight into a window or door of the surrounding buildings while the lighter coloured rays headed for the white wall in between. I was struck by the sheer feeling of peace, balance, and harmony in the town. There were no dowseable earth energy currents that could account for this, presumably the ambience was being created by the geometry itself, a perfect balance between yin and yang.

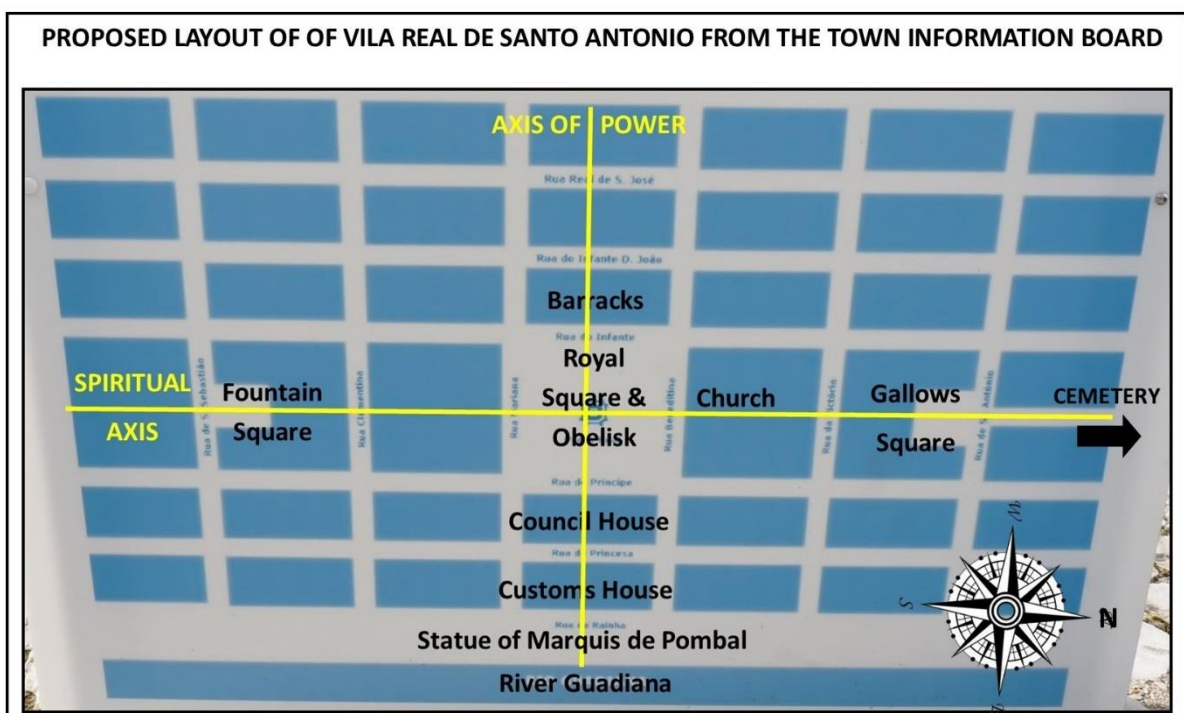
Wandering down towards the riverside I came across a plethora of tourist information boards along a side street that told the story of the town's inception in the 1770s and how it was laid out in a rectilinear fashion according to Masonic principles. The information board that piqued my interest the most read:

“Vila Real de Santo Antonio was founded at the time of the ‘enlightened absolutism’ ideology, as personified by the Marques de Pombal. So, in addition to its main function to control the fisheries in the eastern Algarve, the town symbolically represented the power of the Portuguese State and its affirmation with regard to political, territorial and economic matters in relation to neighbouring Spain. These values were to become mirrored in the very urban organisation of the town”

“The first row of blocks, the most important part of town and comprising the fishing companies and Customs House flanked by two fortified towers, was built facing the Guadiana and Spain. The most relevant part of these was the Customs House where the Portuguese Royal Coat of Arms on it represents national sovereignty”

“The second most important of the urban space that made up the town was the Praca Real (Royal Square) with its obelisk, having, on the eastern side, the Town Hall and the prison [Council House]; to the south the army corps barracks; and to the north the Church”

*“These two complexes – the town façade and the Square – were essential for the urban structure strategy. **If one draws two lines across a map of the town through the obelisk, one going north-south and the other east-west you will find the two strategic axes of the organisation of the most important buildings; the former is the spiritual axis comprising the church and cemetery (located outside the town urban area for health reasons); with the latter line being the axis of power, with the customs, town hall, Obelisk and barracks”***



On entering the tourist information office, I was greeted by a gentleman who was very knowledgeable about the principles of Masonic architecture and enthusiastic to share that knowledge. Soon we were following him around the symmetrical grid of streets learning about how the town had been conceived and laid out.

Vila Real de Santo Antonio was apparently built on virgin ground at the estuary of the Guadiana River where it flows into the Gulf of Cadiz and the Atlantic Ocean. A nearby fishing hamlet of Santo António de Arenilha had been destroyed by the tsunami that was triggered by the devastating earthquake of 1755 that destroyed Lisbon. The town is also only 2 miles southeast of the medieval walled hilltop city of Castro Marim where Portuguese author and researcher Freddy Silva tells us the Portuguese Templars went to ground after the 1307 purge, only to re-emerge unscathed six years later as the Portuguese Order of the Knights of Our Lord Jesus Christ (Ordem de Cristo). Silva claims that King of Portugal at the time, Dinis I, was himself a Templar and that the country of Portugal had been established as the first Templar Nation in the early 12th Century (see 'References & Further Reading' below).

Our guided tour started at the river front where we were informed that what appeared to be a pile of random marble blocks was in fact a statue representing the Marquis of Pombal (1699-1782) who was responsible for the town's layout, having been influenced by the Royal Society, the Freemasons and the Age of Enlightenment. He had become Portugal's Prime Minister to King Jose I after being responsible for the re-building of Lisbon following the 1755 earthquake. He is famed for the style of 'Pombaline' architecture which introduced the first earthquake proof buildings. 20 years later he turned his attention to the establishment of Vila Real de Santo Antonio.

STATUE OF THE MARQUIS OF POMBAL FACING BOTH THE CUSTOMS HOUSE AND THE RIVER



Our guide explained that everything in Vila Real de Santo Antonio has a hidden meaning. The four blocks at the bottom (the plinth) represented four masonic squares. The two classical columns above (the legs) represented the Greek and Roman influence. The three horizontal blocks (the torso) above this represented books, learning and wisdom. The head represented justice, being the wig of a judge. Curiously there was no face and only one arm. This was because it faces both directions at once. Facing across river to Spain it holds a sceptre in the left hand whilst facing into Portugal along the Axis of Power the sceptre is in the right hand.

This statue was the easternmost marker on the east-west Axis of Power standing between the River and the Customs House which was central to the town façade and whose main door it was perfectly aligned with. Flanked by the fisheries buildings, the Customs House controlled all the goods going in and out of the town, putting an end to the rampant smuggling that the area had once enjoyed. Directly behind the Customs House and built to exactly the same proportions, was the Council House incorporating the Town Hall and Prison and facing into the main square with its central Obelisk. At the opposite side of the Square, and again of the same style and proportions, stood the military barracks which has now been replaced with a cultural centre.

Running north-south across the orthogonal grid of blocks and streets was the Spiritual Axis. Immediately north of the Obelisk is the Church, unusually with the entrance in the south and main altar in the North. Two blocks away in either direction were two smaller squares. The one to the south being the Fountain Square and the one to the north being the Gallows Square where both the town Well and the Gallows were located, perhaps to deter would be smugglers. Further north the axis leads to the town cemetery, again symmetrically laid out.

The Layout formed a rectangle of the ratio 3.5:1, with the short sides oriented east-west, and the long ones oriented north-south parallel to the river. The rectangle of blocks measures 0.27 miles by 0.16 miles (430m x 260m). When the Spiritual Axis is extended northwards to the small Chapel in the Cemetery it doubles to 0.43 miles (860m).

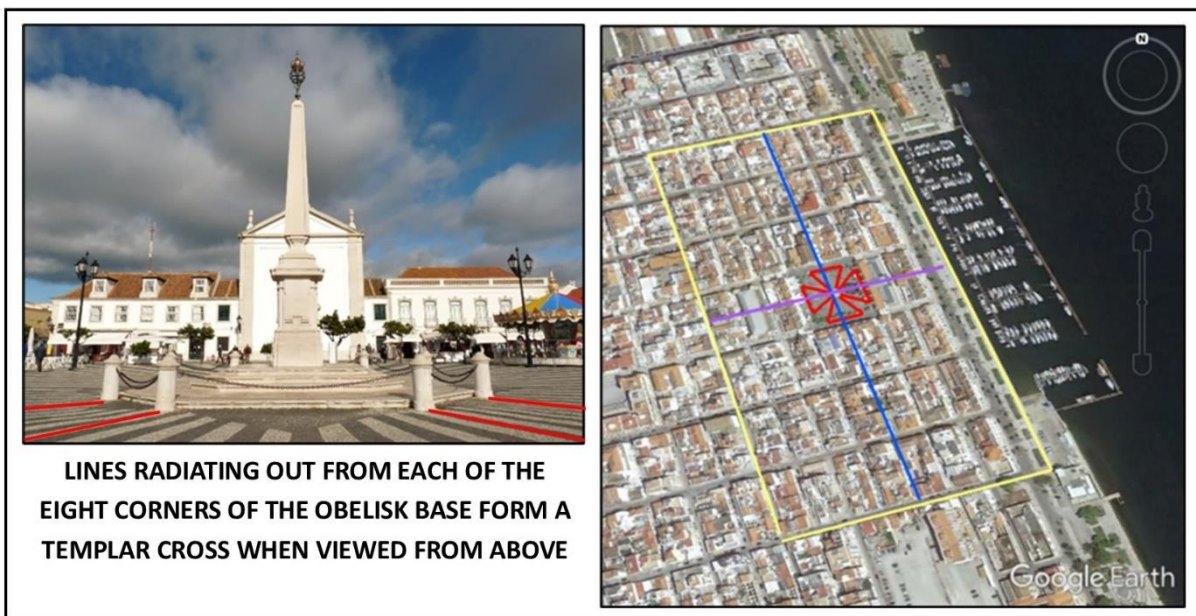
The Power of Centre

Having studied the information in 'The Power of Centre' by Gary Biltcliffe and Caroline Hoare when I was researching the York, Cambridge and Oxford Leys, I realised that Vila Real de Santo Antonio is a modern example of how the ancient rules of town planning still apply today in some places. The geographic centre of this new town had been established and an obelisk placed there to mark it. A crown which would catch the first rays of the rising and setting sun, had been placed on top of the obelisk and the perfect square in which it stood named the Praca Real (**Royal Square**) signifying Kingship. The surrounding streets had then been named after members of the Royal family in order of succession. A north-south **Spiritual Axis** had been established from the Obelisk along which sites associated with birth, marriage, death and religion had been placed. An east-west **Power Axis** also radiated from the obelisk with sites associated with power and governance – the statue of the Marquis of Pombal, the Customs House that controlled the flow of goods, the Town Hall, Prison and the military barracks.

The Templar Cross in the Royal Square

Our guide told us that Freemasonic symbols could be found in the town plan – a square and compass and triangles centred on the obelisk. These he said were related to the Fibonacci sequence 1,1,2,3,5,8 and so on but he didn't elaborate further.

Whilst studying my photographs to write this article I noticed that the obelisk stands on an eight-sided base with four of the sides being much shorter than the others. Given the perfect symmetry of everything else in the town, I was curious about this. At each corner is a small pillar from which an iron chain is hung, presumably to deter the curious Dowser from getting too close. Using an aerial view of the square, I marked the pair of lines that radiated out from each of the eight pillars. I then connected the lines that were parallel to the longest sides of the obelisk base along the outside of square. To my complete surprise I realised that I had drawn a perfect Templar Cross.



Conclusion

Only 250 years ago we find new straight tracks being laid down in a corner of Portugal that was of strategic importance to the Portuguese Templars. These effectively form Leys in that they have several strategic sites aligned along a short distance. Perhaps the north-south Medieval Leys that we find in some English cities consisting of several of Churches in less than one a mile were originally designed to be the spiritual axis of that particular city?

The spiritual axis of Vila Real de Santo Antonio is oriented slightly west of north at virtually the exact same angle as the Oxford and York Leys which, like the Belinus Line (Spine of Albion) may have been oriented to the constellation Cygnus

Perhaps the current balanced ambience of the town emanates from combination of the yin of the Spiritual Axis and the yang of the Axis of Power coming into harmony in the centre and then radiating that ambience outwards.

Other towns and cities have rectilinear street patterns include Lisbon, Valletta in Malta and Washington DC which has been analysed in detail by Nicholas Mann (see 'References & Further Reading' below). These new straight tracks laid down according to Freemasonic principles may serve to show us how some of the old straight tracks that we enjoy studying could have originated.

End Note

I am putting the finishing touches to this article whilst staying on a campsite a few miles west of Vila Real de Santo Antonio. I am grateful that I had the foresight to photograph all the information boards back in 2015 because when I visited a few days ago they were notable by their absence and the tourist information office was closed. Perhaps this enigmatic town is no longer willing to share the Masonic principles to which it was designed with passing Leyhunter cum Dowsers who show a little too much curiosity.

Mave Calvert, January 2023

References and Further Reading:

Biltcilffe, Gary & Hoare, Caroline. The Spine of Albion. Sacred Lands Publishing (2012)

Biltcilffe, Gary & Hoare, Caroline. The Power of Centre. Sacred Lands Publishing (2018)

Calvert Mave, The Enigma of Medieval Leys. Society of Leyhunters Newsletter #71 (December 2022)

Mann, Nicholas R. The Sacred Geometry of Washington DC: The Integrity and Power of the Original Design. Green Magic Publishing (2006)

Silva, Freddy. First Templar Nation: How Eleven Knights created a New Country and a Refuge for the Grail. (2017)