Medieval Lighthouses
15C - Site Survey
by Dr Ken Trethewey

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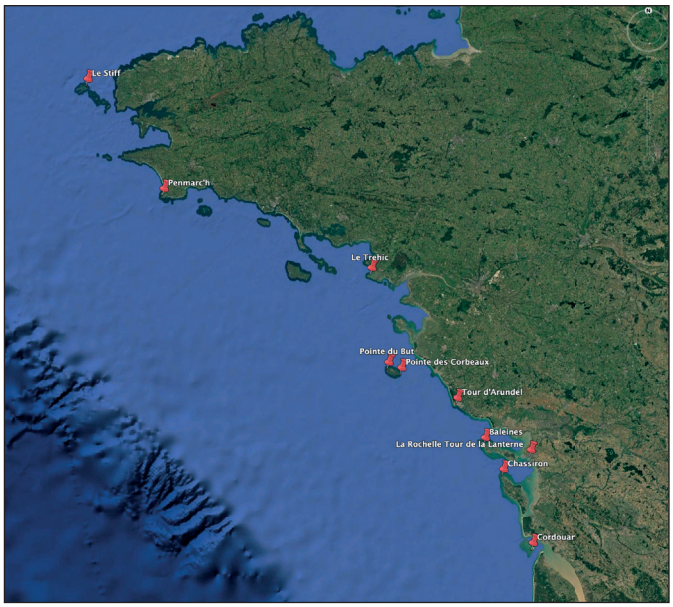


Before 1700, the French Atlantic coast exhibited a fragmented and uneven development of navigational lighting, shaped by local maritime economies, institutional capacity, and the physical character of the shoreline. Three sites can be firmly identified as possessing true lighthouse structures before 1700: Saint-Mathieu, Penmarc'h, and La Rochelle's Tour de la Lanterne. These lights were either monastic (Saint-Mathieu), communal and commercial (Penmarc'h), or urban-civic (La Rochelle), reflecting the medieval pattern whereby lighthouses emerged only where wealthy corporate bodies could fund and maintain them.

A second category comprises late-seventeenth-century state lighthouses, above all Île de Ré (Tour des Baleines, 1674), representing the early phase of royal centralisation under Colbert. Cordouan stands unique, combining a documented medieval beacon tradition (12th–15th c.) with its monumental Renaissance lighthouse (1594–1611), the most advanced European light of its era.

Beyond these, several sites supported informal beacons or harbour lanterns, notably Le Croisic (16th–17th-c. beacon on the Tréhic point) and Les Sables-d'Olonne (harbour lantern on the Tour d'Arundel). These were not lighthouses in the architectural or institutional sense, and they rarely provided continuous night-time service but their value was considerable.

Large islands such as Belle-Île, Noirmoutier, Île d'Yeu, and Île de Sein possessed no pre-1700 lighthouses, despite later significance. Their roles lay in natural daymarks and, occasionally, military or ad hoc fires, not structured navigational lighting.

Overall, the French Atlantic before 1700 shows a patchwork of lights, dominated by a few exceptional centres amid long stretches of unlit coast.

Across the Iberian Atlantic before 1700, true lighthouses were extremely rare. What did exist were ancient survivals (Chipiona, A Coruña), monastic beacons (São Vicente), harbour lights and military signals (Faro, Cádiz, Tarifa, Cascais, Sanlúcar), and a few early-modern, state-built lights (Bugio, São Miguel-o-Anjo).

Portugal's coast shows a patchwork of lighting traditions. There was no medieval coastal lighthouse system, except the monastic beacon at Cabo de São Vicente, a genuine long-lived tradition comparable to Saint-Mathieu in Brittany. A few early modern functional beacons appeared on key promontories (e.g., Cabo Mondego, Peniche/Carvoeiro) from the mid-16th century, but without towers or formal institutions. Two true pre-1700 lighthouse structures stand out: São Miguel-o-Anjo (1527–28) at the Douro which was an early Renaissance lighthouse-chapel, explicitly built for navigation. Bugio (late 17th c.) was located at the Tagus entrance and was the first royal, institutional lighthouse in Portugal. Major capes like Cabo da Roca and Espichel remained unlit until the 18th century.

Spain's Atlantic lighting before 1700 was even less developed structurally, but it preserved two ancient lighthouse traditions. The first was at Chipiona, a site of Roman origin reactivated for navigation in the 15th–17th centuries and serving the Guadalquivir–Seville route. The second was at A Coruña where the Torre de Hércules, a Roman lighthouse, continued as a daymark, and probably as an intermittent light, in medieval and early-modern periods.

Elsewhere, the Andalusian coast used almenara towers (watchtowers) for military signalling only - not navigation, although there may have been an

ad hoc benefit to mariners. Cádiz, Sanlúcar, Rota, Tarifa, and Bonanza had harbour or defensive lights, but never regulated coastal lights. No continuous light existed in the Strait of Gibraltar until the mid-18th century. Hence the pattern was reliance on ancient inheritances and military signalling, with little centralised coastal lighting before Bourbon reforms.

Spain differed from Portugal in that Portugal created purpose-built, state-maintained lighthouses before 1700 (São Miguel-o-Anjo; Bugio). On the other hand Spain (except for Chipiona) did not build any new lighthouse towers for navigation before the 18th century. Portugal had a monastic beacon tradition (São Vicente); Spain did not. Spanish coasts relied more heavily on military watchtowers (almenaras), not navigational lighting.

France

Le Stiff (1700)

Alternative Name: Ouessant, Ushant
Location: Iles de Ouessant
Lat/Lon: 48.475 , -5.057
Modern Lighthouse On Site: y (1695)
Ecclesiastical: No
Light Type: Island Waypoint
Medieval Structure: Two conjoined white round stone towers
Medieval Structure Exists: Yes
Notes: The lighthouse which is today called Le Stiff was for many years the only lighthouse marking the extremely dangerous western seas around the Island of Ouessant, or Ushant, as it was often known. From its inauguration in 1700, the light was shown during the months of October to March only and it was in 1720 that the light was made permanent, being by far the most significant light on the southern side of the English Channel for a hundred years or more. Lit, with open fires at first, as was its northern counterpart in the English Isles of Scilly, it was later converted to a simple fish-oil burning light with Argand-type reflectors until new, improved oil lights were fitted in 1831. The two fused cylindrical towers are a unique design which, together with the magnificent position on the highest point of this rugged, beautiful isle and the great historical significance of the place, create a lighthouse station par excellence. Fichou dates this lighthouse at 1700. Portolan charts, royal ordonnances, and seventeenth-century pilot books consistently depict Ouessant as a natural landmark and a site of hazards rather than an engineered beacon. The Vauban-era tower at Stiff (1685–1695) represents the earliest substantial construction, but its function as a regulated lighthouse belongs to the post-1700 period, placing Ouessant among the major European light stations whose operational history begins only in the eighteenth century.
Refs: Stevenson p36; Fichou, p53.

St Matthieu (12-13c, 1835)

Alternative Name: Location: Brest
Lat/Lon: 48.33 , -4.773333
Modern Lighthouse On Site: Yes (12-13c)
Ecclesiastical: Yes
Light Type: Ecclesiastical
Medieval Structure: Ecclesiastical - Built structure
Medieval Structure Exists: Yes
Notes: A Roman signal station may have exhibited a light here. However, as an ecclesiastical site, it probably showed lights in early centuries. Pointe Saint-Mathieu constitutes one of the most important pre-1700 French lighthouse sites due to the medieval monastic fire-beacon maintained by the Abbey of Saint-Mathieu from at least the High Middle Ages. Although direct charters describing the light's operation have not survived, a solid meeting of antiquarian testimony, the abbey's maritime privileges, and the architectural dominance of its western tower points to a genuine ecclesiastical lighthouse tradition. This beacon appears to have remained in use into the early modern period, though in a declining state, before its eventual replacement by the 1835 state lighthouse. Saint-Mathieu is thus one of the few Breton examples where pre-1700 lighthouse activity can be confidently assigned to a religious community.
Refs: Hague & Christie p11. ; Hénaff, D Le and J.-P. Kerhervé (eds.), Feux, phares et signaux en Bretagne (Rennes, 2011).

Penmarc`h (14-15c, 1835)

Location: At the Chapelle Notre-Dame-de-la-Joie
Lat/Lon: 47.80598 , -4.372936
Modern Lighthouse On Site: y (Eckmuhl)
Light Type: Communal tour a feu
Medieval Structure: Lightstructure
Medieval Structure Exists: No
Notes: Penmarc'h is one of the most securely recorded medieval lighthouse sites in Atlantic France. A stone lighthouse tower stood on the point by the 15th century and probably earlier, maintained by the prosperous fishing and trading community of Penmarc'h. This tower functioned as a true *tour à feu*, providing an open-flame navigational light for vessels rounding the south-western Breton coastline. Although the tower survived into the 18th century, its lighting role seems to have declined during the 16th–17th centuries as the town's fortunes waned. Modern lighthouses (1835; 1897) later reoccupied the same promontory but represent a separate technical and administrative tradition.

Penmarc'h therefore constitutes an essential example of a communal medieval lighthouse in Brittany. We note that medieval Penmarc'h was centred around Saint-Pierre and Saint- Guénolé, with Saint-Pierre functioning as the principal maritime quarter in the 14th–16th centuries. The old stone tower described in early modern texts is consistently associated with the ancient port area, not the later Napoleonic/19th-century lighthouse reserve. The present Eckmühl site was not a medieval maritime focus; it became the chosen site only when a major land-based, high-elevation light was needed in the 19th century. The remains or footprint of the medieval lighthouse tower lie near the Chapelle de la Joie / Saint-Pierre area. 18th-century naval charts mark an old "tour" as a daymark, and 19th-century reports describe the old tower's dismantling shortly before the 1835 lighthouse was built.
Refs: Hénaff, D Le and J.-P. Kerhervé (eds.), Feux, phares et signaux en Bretagne (Rennes, 2011).

Tréhic (1550)
Alternative Name: Le Croisic
Location: Le Croisic
Lat/Lon: 47.30067 , -2.5214
Modern Lighthouse On Site: No
Light Type: Harbour
Medieval Structure: Beacon
Medieval Structure Exists: No
Notes: Le Croisic presents no evidence for a medieval lighthouse; the settlement used natural daymarks and pilotage throughout the Middle Ages. In the 16th century, however, a navigational beacon fire was established at the Pointe du Tréhic, marking an early attempt at night-time signalling for the busy local fisheries and Loire coastal traffic. This beacon functioned through the 17th century but never developed into a masonry lighthouse before 1700. Continuous, state-backed lighthouse construction began only in the 19th century, culminating in the modern Phare du Tréhic. Le Croisic therefore belongs to the category of early-modern beacon sites, not medieval lighthouse sites.

Pointe du But (16-17c)
Alternative Name: Location: Île d'Yeu
Lat/Lon: 46.7254 , -2.3986
Modern Lighthouse On Site: No
Light Type: Beacon
Medieval Structure Exists: No
Notes: Although geographically ideal for a signal tower, Pointe du But shows no evidence of a medieval or early-modern lighthouse. Medieval documents, portolans, and pilot books do not record any beacon or light on Île d'Yeu, and 17th-century charts indicate only a daymark-like representation of the natural headland. Local fires, if ever lit, were informal and not part of a structured lighthouse service. The first authentic lighthouse installations on the island date to the 19th century. Thus, Pointe du But must be classified as a non-light site before 1700, despite its natural prominence.

Pointe des Corbeaux (16-17c, 1862)
Alternative Name: Île d'Yeu
Location: Île d'Yeu
Lat/Lon: 46.6901 , -2.2847
Modern Lighthouse On Site: y (1862)
Ecclesiastical: No
Light Type: Waypoint
Medieval Structure: Occasional fires
Medieval Structure Exists: No
Notes: Contrary to some popular island traditions, Île d'Yeu possessed no medieval lighthouse and no documented navigational beacon before 1700. The island appears throughout medieval and early modern hydrographic sources purely as a natural hazard and landfall, not a lit point. A few hints of local signalling exist, particularly near Pointe du But, but none meets the criteria for a structured or continuous lighthouse service. The first true lighthouse was constructed only in the 19th century, at Pointe des Corbeaux. Île d'Yeu should therefore be classified as a non-light site in the pre-1700 period, with at most informal local fires that left no institutional or cartographic record.

Tour d`Arundel (13c; 1593)
Alternative Name: La Chaume Location: La Chaume, Les Sable de Olonnes
Lat/Lon: 46.494 , -1.795
Modern Lighthouse On Site: Tour Ecclesiastical:
Light Type: Harbour light
Ecclesiastical: No
Medieval Structure: Large grey square stone tower, with white lantern
Medieval Structure Exists: Yes
Notes: The Tour d'Arundel (Arundel Tower) in Les Sables-d'Olonne is an old, fortified tower in the La Chaume district, part of the 15th-century Saint-Clair castle. It was used to guide ships and later transformed into a lighthouse in 1593, serving as a key beacon on the Vendée coast.
Refs: Stevenson p20; Fichou, p20.

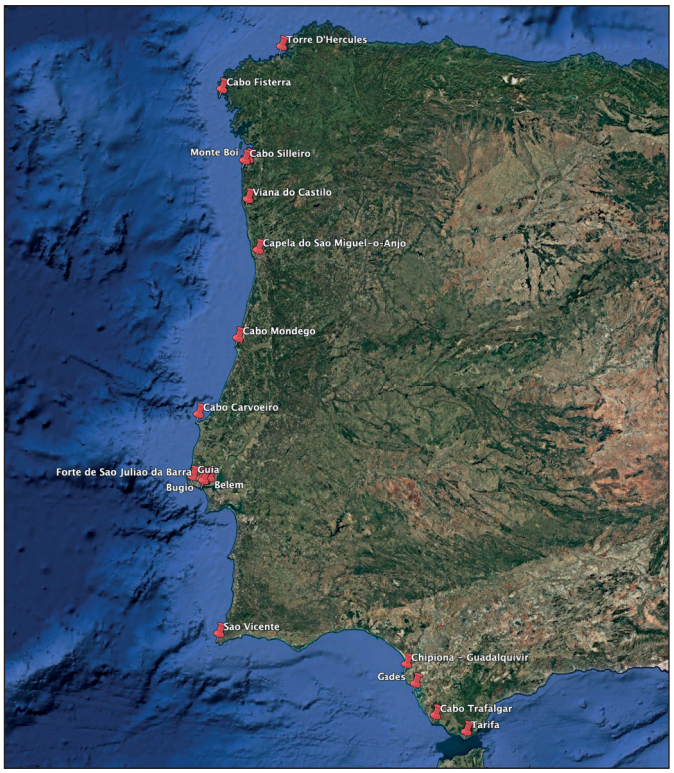
Les Baleines (1674, 1854)
Alternative Name: Île de Ré
Location: Île de Ré
Lat/Lon: 46.24463 , -1.56196
Modern Lighthouse On Site: y (1854)
Ecclesiastical: No
Light Type: Waypoint
Medieval Structure: Built structure with brazier
Medieval Structure Exists: Yes - Old Tower of the Whales

Notes: Île de Ré had no medieval lighthouse, but its western headland, Pointe des Baleines, became the site of a major early-modern lighthouse with the construction of the Tour des Baleines (1674) under Louis XIV. This tower—a state-funded structure equipped with an open fire—served as a crucial navigational reference for vessels approaching the Pertuis d'Antioche, La Rochelle, and Rochefort. Its location and documented operation place it among the earliest purpose-built lighthouses of the French Atlantic coast. Oil light was inefficient so replaced with coal fire inside a glazed lantern. The 1674 tower survived until the mid-19th century, when it was superseded by the modern Phare des Baleines (1854). As such, Île de Ré is a pre-1700 lighthouse site, but one whose lighthouse tradition begins only in the late 17th century.
Refs: Stevenson p35, 36; Fichou, p53

La Rochelle (1468)
Alternative Name: Tour de la Lanterne
Location: La Rochelle
Lat/Lon: 46.1558 , -1.157
Modern Lighthouse On Site: No
Ecclesiastical: No
Light Type: Harbour light
Medieval Structure Exists: Yes (1468)
Notes: Stevenson records a light from 1445-75. Fichou gives a date of 1468. The Tour de la Lanterne at La Rochelle represents one of the clearest and best-documented examples of a medieval lighthouse in France. The current 15th-century tower was explicitly constructed as a tour à feu, equipped with a lantern fire supported by the wealthy maritime commune of La Rochelle. Its elevated conical spire and harbour-side placement made it a true coastal lighthouse rather than a simple harbour marker. Documentary records confirm the maintenance of the light through the 15th–17th centuries, with continued but reduced use into the early modern period. The Tour de la Lanterne thus occupies a central position in the history of pre-1700 lighthouse architecture on the Atlantic coast, second only to Cordouan in symbolic and operational significance.
Refs: Stevenson p20; Hague & Christie p11, 21, Zemke, p27; Fichou, p20.

Chassiron (1685, 1836)
Alternative Name: Île d'Oléron Location: Île d'Oléron
Lat/Lon: 46.047 , -1.41
Modern Lighthouse On Site: y (1836)
Ecclesiastical: No
Light Type: Waypoint
Medieval Structure: Built structure with brazier
Medieval Structure Exists: No
Notes: Coal or wood fires replaced inefficient oil lamps in 1733. Chassiron had two grates to distinguish it from Cordouan. Île d'Oléron did not possess a medieval lighthouse. The island's northern point at Chassiron, although ideally positioned for navigation, shows no evidence of a navigational light before the late 17th century. A tower constructed around 1685 is sometimes described as an early lighthouse, but this early structure appears to have functioned mainly as a daymark with an intermittently used beacon fire, rather than as a permanent, regulated lighthouse. The first fully operational lighthouse on the island dates from the early 1700s, and the present tower (1830s) continues that later tradition.
Refs: Stevenson p35, 36; Fichou, p53.

Cordouan (1360, 1570/1612)
Location: River Gironde, Bordeaux
Lat/Lon: 44.84007 , -0.572007
Modern Lighthouse On Site: Yes - Cordouan
Ecclesiastical: Yes
Light Type: Ecclesiastical
Medieval Structure: Ecclesiastical - Built structure
Medieval Structure Exists: Yes
Notes: A Roman signal station may have exhibited a light. Charlemagne seems to have ordered a light here. In the 12c a beacon was maintained by monks of St Nicolas and light dues were collected through the 13-14c. A chapel is shown on maps in 1409 and this was probably lit. A beacon was still active in the 15c. See text p110ff. Cordouan stands alone in French lighthouse history as both a medieval beacon site and a Renaissance architectural lighthouse of exceptional ambition. Medieval documents from the 12th century onward attest to a monastic fire-beaconguiding ships into the Gironde. This modest structure was dramatically replaced between 1594 and 1611 by the great royal lighthouse of Louis de Foix, a multi-storey palace-tower that served as one of Europe's most advanced navigational aids before 1700. Cordouan's 17th-century operation established a lighthouse service unmatched in scale, symbolism, or technical sophistication until the age of Fresnel. Thus, Cordouan is a central pillar of any pre-1700 lighthouse
Refs: Stevenson p17, 21, 27, 30, 31; Zemke p26; Hague & Christie p9, 11.



Spain

Torre de Hércules (100, 16-17c, 1788) Extinguished: 400

Alternative Name: Julio Briga, Tower (Torre) of Hercules, Corunna, Brigantum, Flavium
Location: La Coruna Lat/Lon: 43.3861 , -8.4043
Modern Lighthouse On Site: y (100)
Light Type: Waypoint
Medieval Structure: Built structure
Medieval Structure Exists: Yes
Notes: The Torre de Hércules at A Coruña represents the longest-lived lighthouse site in the Atlantic world. Constructed in the 1st century CE as a Roman lighthouse, the tower persisted throughout the early and central Middle Ages as a dominant daymark and maritime monument. Although formal night lighting may have lapsed for long periods, the structure itself was never abandoned. From the 16th century onward, with the rise of Coruña as a naval and commercial hub, the tower regained its status as an active lighthouse, with documented use in the 16th and 17th centuries. Seventeenth-century renovations preserved the Roman fabric while adapting the tower to renewed maritime signalling. Thus, by 1700, the Torre de Hércules stood as a rare example of continuous navigational service from antiquity into the early modern era.
Refs: Zemke (1992), p18, 19, 20, 22, 23; Hague (1974), p2; Stevenson (1959), p2, 10; Giardina (2010), p114-117; Antonio Rodríguez Colmenero, El faro romano de Brigantium (A Coruña, 1999). Ramón Yzquierdo Perrín, La Torre de Hércules, faro romano (A Coruña, 1992); Manuel Barea, Faros de España: Historia y Arquitectura (Madrid, 2008).

Finisterre, Cabo (14-15c, 1853)

Alternative Name: Cabo Fisterra
Lat/Lon: 42.88236 , -9.27195
Modern Lighthouse On Site: y (1853)
Light Type: Waypoint/Landfall
Medieval Structure: Ad Hoc Beacon
Medieval Structure Exists: No
Notes: Cape Finisterre occupies a unique place in culture and geography as the “end of the earth,” with archaeological evidence for an Iron Age and Roman cult-site (*Ara Solis*) on Monte do Facho and strong literary traditions of fire rituals on the headland. These strands, together with medieval pilgrimage and later coastal practice, make it highly probable that beacon fires were sometimes kept for mariners, but they never crystallised into a permanent, tower-based lighthouse service before 1700. Early modern rutters treat Fisterra as a conspicuous yet unlit cape, and no royal lighthouse ordinances include it. The first true lighthouse there dates from 1853, making this a long but informal tradition of headland fires rather than replacing a medieval “faro” in the strict sense.

Monte Boi (16-17c)

Alternative Name: Bayona, Baiona, Fortaleza de Monterreal
Location: Baiona
Lat/Lon: 42.1269 , -8.85116
Modern Lighthouse On Site: No
Light Type: Military Harbour
Medieval Structure: Fortified structure
Medieval Structure Exists: No
Notes: The medieval fortress at Monte Boi had watchtowers and signal fires. A few 16th–17th c. references mention *señales* (signals) for maritime approaches. These appear to be military warning fires, not navigational lighthouses. No permanent lightkeeping staff or taxed lighthouse service is recorded. Baiona is a potential pre-1700 signal site, but not a true lighthouse. Like others it was a defensive beacon, not a mariner’s light.

Cabo Silleiro (1924)

Lat/Lon: 41.1112 , -9.8992
Modern Lighthouse On Site: Yes
Light Type: Waypoint
Medieval Structure: Beacon
Medieval Structure Exists: No
Notes: This is the only headland between Finisterre and Portugal where some historians have speculated

about early signalling. The cape appears on 16th–17th c. Iberian charts with a distinctive prominence and local traditions (recorded later) say fires were sometimes lit for ships approaching Baiona and Vigo. But there is no documentary evidence for this. Thus there is no certainty of a lightstructure before the 20th century.

Portugal

Viana do Castelo (16-17c)

Location: Viana do Castelo
Lat/Lon: 41.69176 , -8.8344
Modern Lighthouse On Site: No
Light Type: Harbour
Medieval Structure: Fire lights
Medieval Structure Exists: No
Notes: The northern Portuguese Atlantic coast begins without evidence for pre-1700 coastal lightstructures. At Caminha, despite the presence of the fortified monastery of Ínsua, no navigational beacon is documented before 1700; any fires were defensive. At Viana do Castelo, a major Renaissance seaport, the available documentation suggests intermittent harbour lanterns used to mark the bar of the Lima River, but no permanent lighthouse structure nor royal lightkeeping service. Thus, the first meaningful Portuguese pre-1700 light sites lie further south, beginning with Cabo Mondego and later Bugio at the mouth of the Tagus.

Sao Miguel-o-Anjo (1527)

Location: Oporto
Lat/Lon: 41.147 , -8.666795
Modern Lighthouse On Site: No
Ecclesiastical: Yes
Light Type: Harbour light
Medieval Structure: Ecclesiastical, built structure
Medieval Structure Exists: Yes
Notes: This is believed to be the oldest European lighthouse that still survives in its original state. São Miguel-o-Anjo at the mouth of the Douro constitutes the earliest purpose-built lighthouse in Portugal and one of the earliest in Atlantic Europe. Built in 1527–1528 as a combined lighthouse and devotional chapel, it provided a regulated light for ships approaching the hazardous Douro bar at a time when Porto was emerging as a major commercial port. Its Renaissance form, lantern platform, and documented maintenance distinguish it sharply from informal beacons. The light functioned throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, making São Miguel- o-Anjo one of the few clearly documented Portuguese lighthouse sites before 1700. The surviving structure stands today as an exceptional example of early-modern lighthouse architecture.
Refs: João Vieira Caldas, A Capela de São Miguel-o-Anjo: História e Arquitectura (Porto, 1987). Proves its 1527–28 lighthouse function.

Cabo Mondego (1550, 1922)

Lat/Lon: 40.191 , -8.905
Modern Lighthouse On Site: Yes
Light Type: Waypoint
Medieval Structure:
Medieval Structure Exists: No
Notes: Cabo Mondego is the earliest securely documented Portuguese coastal beacon site, though not a lighthouse in the architectural sense. No medieval lightstructure is recorded, but from the mid-16th century onward, pilot books and local administrative references confirm the operation of a beacon fire at or near the cape. This light served maritime traffic seeking the Mondego River and provided a key navigational reference along Portugal's central Atlantic coast. The beacon was maintained through to the 17th century but never developed into a masonry lighthouse before modern times. The modern tower represents a new phase, distinct from the early lightkeeping tradition.
Refs: Mariana de Carvalho, "Faróis e sinais marítimos na costa portuguesa antes de 1800," Revista da Faculdade de Letras (Porto) 2012.

Cabo Carvoeiro (1550, 1790, 1893)

Alternative Name: Peniche
Location: Peniche
Lat/Lon: 39.3607 , -9.44075
Modern Lighthouse On Site: y (1893)
Ecclesiastical: No
Light Type: Waypoint
Medieval Structure: Beacon fires
Medieval Structure Exists: No
Notes: Peniche, specifically the headland of Cabo Carvoeiro, did not host a medieval lightstructure but developed a clear early tradition for beacons. From the mid–16th century onward, rutters and coastal navigation instructions refer to fires lit on or near the cape, used to guide vessels rounding the hazardous Peniche–Berlengas corridor. These signals were not continuous and did not involve a dedicated structure; they represent community or local maritime lighting rather than royal lighthouse service. No lighthouse tower existed before 1700, and the first formal lighthouse was erected only in 1790.
Refs: Mariana de Carvalho, "Faróis e sinais marítimos na costa portuguesa antes de 1800," Revista da Faculdade de Letras (Porto) 2012.

Guia (16c, 17c, 1864)

Alternative Name: Cascais, Santa Marta
Location: Cascais
Lat/Lon: 38.6956 , -9.4464

Modern Lighthouse On Site: y (1864)
Ecclesiastical: No
Light Type: Harbour Medieval Structure: Medieval Structure Exists: No
Notes: Cascais, and particularly the point of Santa Marta, held a significant role in the early-modern maritime system of the Tagus, but not as a lighthouse. From the 16th century onward, Cascais served as a pilotage and anchorage station where harbour lanterns and signal fires were displayed to coordinate the movement of ships entering Lisbon. These lights were intermittent, local, and related to military and pilot signalling rather than regulated coastal illumination. No dedicated lighthouse tower, keeper service, or royal ordinance confirms a true lighthouse at Cascais before 1700. The first proper lighthouse structure at Santa Marta was constructed only in 1864.

Torre de Belém (1521)

Alternative Name: Lisboa
Location: Lisbon
Lat/Lon: 38.691 , -9.216
Modern Lighthouse On Site: No
Light Type: Harbour light
Medieval Structure: Built structure
Medieval Structure Exists: Yes
Notes: The Belém tower played a central symbolic and defensive role in the maritime life of early-modern Lisbon, but it never functioned as a true lighthouse before 1700. Although fires and lanterns were occasionally shown from the tower for military signalling and fleet control, these were not regulated navigational lights with continuous service. Pilotage into the Tagus relied on daymarks and local expertise until the construction of the Bugio lighthouse in the later 17th century. Belém therefore belongs in the category of pre-1700 signal sites, not lightstructure sites
Refs: Zemke, p27

São Julião (16-17c, 1775)

Alternative Name: Forte de São Julião da Barra
Location: Lisbon
Lat/Lon: 38.6747 , -9.3251
Modern Lighthouse On Site: y (1775)
Light Type: Fortification
Medieval Structure Exists: No
Notes: São Julião da Barra served as the premier coastal fortress controlling the entrance to the Tagus but never functioned as a lighthouse before 1700. Although fires, lanterns, and flag signals were routinely used from its ramparts for defensive communication and coordination of bar pilotage, no evidence indicates the existence of a continuous, regulated light for navigation. Its architectural form, documentary profile, and consistent treatment in rutters confirm that São Julião was a shore signal station, not a lighthouse. The role of offshore navigational lighting at the Tagus passed instead to Bugio in the late 17th century.

Bugio (1643-57, 1802)

Alternative Name: Fort Sao Lourenço, Torre do Bugio (Bugio Tower)
Location: Lisbon Lat/Lon: 38.66056 , -9.29887
Modern Lighthouse On Site: y (1802)
Light Type: Island
Medieval Structure: Defensive beacon
Medieval Structure Exists: No
Notes: Bugio, standing on the offshore shoal at the mouth of the Tagus, represents the earliest institutional, Crown-operated lighthouse in Portugal. Built initially as a circular artillery fort during the Restoration War (1640–1657), it soon acquired a regulated navigational light, documented by the late 17th century and intended to guide the dense international traffic entering Lisbon. This development reflects a shift from informal signalling at Belém and São Julião toward a centralized, professional system of maritime lighting. Before 1700, Bugio functioned as the only fully institutionalised Portuguese lighthouse, making it the cornerstone of early modern Portuguese lightkeeping.
Refs: Ana Margarida Dias Martins, O Forte de São Lourenço do Bugio (Lisboa: IPPAR, 2002). Architectural and archival study; covers 17th-century lantern.

† *Cabo de São Vicente (6-15c, 16-17c, 1846)*

Location: Cape St. Vincent
Lat/Lon: 37.023 , -8.9965
Modern Lighthouse On Site: y (1846)
Ecclesiastical: Yes
Light Type: Waypoint
Medieval Structure: Monastic structures
Medieval Structure Exists: No
Notes: Cabo de São Vicente is one of the very few Atlantic headlands with a continuous, documented light tradition before 1700. Rooted in ancient ritual fires, the cape became home to a Christian monastic community whose members maintained beacon fires for the benefit of mariners from at least the 12th century onward. This monastic beacon continued through the early modern period, supplemented by fortification-based signals at Sagres and Belixe. Although there was no tower lighthouse before 1700, the evidence for a continuous navigational beacon is unusually strong. Today's lighthouse thus represents the modern phase of a lighting tradition extending back many centuries.
Refs: Helena Catarino, O Promontório Sacro: História e Arqueologia do Cabo de São Vicente (Lisboa, 2008). Key resource for monastic beacon tradition and medieval references.

Spain

Guadalquivir (1450, 1867)

Alternative Name: Punta del Perro, Torre de Chipiona
Location: Chipiona
Lat/Lon: 36.738 , -6.442
Modern Lighthouse On Site: y (1867)
Light Type: Waypoint
Medieval Structure:
Medieval Structure Exists: No
Notes: The mouth of the Guadalquivir was one of the most important navigational points in the early modern Atlantic, and its lighthouse history reflects this. The Torre de Chipiona, originally a Roman lighthouse, continued as a major seamark throughout the Middle Ages and was re-established as a functional lighthouse during the rise of the Indies trade. By the 16th and 17th centuries, Chipiona operated as a regulated beacon guiding fleets into Sanlúcar and onward to Seville, making it one of the few true pre-1700 lighthouses on the Iberian Atlantic.
Refs: Carmen del Camino Martínez, El Faro de Chipiona: Historia y Tradición (Sevilla: Diputación Provincial, 1990); Manuel Barea, Faros de España: Historia y Arquitectura (Madrid, 2008).

Gades (-1100, 100, 1776,1855, 1908)

Alternative Names: Gadir, Gadira, Eritheia, Eriteia
Location: Cadiz. Gadir was originally an island.
Lat/Lon: 36.52955, -6.300888
Modern Lighthouse On Site: Yes (1908)
Ecclesiastical: No
Light Function: Harbour light
Light Form: Local fires and lanterns
Medieval Structure Exists: No
Notes: The great importance of Cadiz as a maritime centre emphasises its role in providing navigational assistance. However, there are many possibilities for lights here, but sadly it is not possible to identify any single location from the many options. There was a strong linkage to the entrance to the estuary of Guadalquivir leading to Seville. The coastal defences, especially the Castillo de San Sebastián, displayed intermittent fires and lanterns used for military signalling, fleet communication, and harbour control. These lights were not maintained for navigation and were never described as lighthouses in contemporary rutters. The city relied on the major offshore lighthouse at Chipiona (Guadalquivir) to guide vessels into its approaches.
References: Zemke pp 16, 22, 23; Hague & Christie pp 2, 11; Giardina (2010), p113-114; Peman, Cesar: Las Fuentes Literarias de la Antiguedad y Fundacion de Cadiz, Madrid (1954); Ordonez Agulla, Salvador: El Faro de Gades y Las Fuentes Medievales. In: II Congresso Peninsular de Historia Antiga; Ordonez Agulla, Salvador: El Faro de Gades y Las Fuentes Medievales. In: II Congresso Peninsular de Historia Antiga; Carmen Barceló & Julio Navarro, Las torres almenaras del Reino de Granada (Granada, 1994); José Antonio Calderón Quijano, Fortificaciones y señalización marítima en Andalucía (Sevilla, 1960); Manuel Barea, Faros de España: Historia y Arquitectura (Madrid, 2008).
AL References: 78, 105, 107-9, 111-4, 116-8, 123, 131, 268
Antiquity: Yes; Phoenician: Yes; Greek Colony: No; Greek Classical: No; Roman: Yes; Byzantine: Yes; Venetian: Yes; Genoese: Yes; Ottoman: Yes; Islamic: Yes; Local: Yes; Activity Index: 9

Cape Trafalgar (1860)

Alternative Name:
Location: Lat/Lon: 36.1829, -6.0531
Modern Lighthouse On Site: y (1860)
Light Type: Waypoint
Medieval Structure:
Medieval Structure Exists: No
Notes: Despite its later fame, Cabo Trafalgar had no lighthouse or navigational beacon before 1700. In antiquity and the Middle Ages, it functioned solely as a daymark. Early-modern Spain built a chain of coastal defence towers along the Andalusian coast, including at Trafalgar, but these *torres almenaras* served exclusively for anti-corsair signalling, not maritime navigation. Rutters and royal maritime records never assign a light to Trafalgar, focusing instead on Chipiona and Sanlúcar for the Gulf of Cádiz, and Tarifa for the approaches to the Strait.

Tarifa (1588, 1813)

Location: Straits of Gibraltar
Lat/Lon: 36.0012, -5.6095
Modern Lighthouse On Site: Yes (1813)
Ecclesiastical: No
Light Function: Waypoint/watchtower
Light Form: Beacon fires and local lanterns
Medieval Structure Exists: No
Notes: Before 1700, Tarifa functioned as a military watch and signalling post built in 1588, not a lightstructure. Although fires and smoke signals were shown from its tower these belonged to the inland *almenara* warning network and were intended to alert garrisons, not to guide mariners. Contemporary rutters treat Tarifa as a daymark, never associating it with a navigational light. Only in the mid-18th century did the Spanish Crown establish a true lighthouse at the site. Thus, Tarifa should be classified in a pre-1700 survey as a signal station, not a lighthouse, complementing but clearly distinct from functioning lights such as Chipiona and A Coruña.
Refs: Carmen Barceló & Julio Navarro, Las torres almenaras del Reino de Granada (Granada, 1994).