

Gibralfaro Castle. History [1]

The Gibralfaro fortress dominates the whole city, and is situated on the crest of a long rise located 132 m above sea level, whose steep slopes descend toward the sea and toward the city. From time immemorial this fortress was the great watchtower used not only to observe the population settled at its feet to the west, but also the access to it by land and sea. It occupies an area of 21,310 m², including the Coracha (fortified walkway) and the barbican, with a perimeter protected by 1,310 metres of wall. The interior enclosure occupies 12,630 m², and is enclosed by a strong wall measuring 733 m and consisting of 30 sections and 8 towers, most of which are solid.



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Gibralfaro Castle was built in the 14th century to house troops and protect the Alcazaba, making it the most impregnable fortress of all al-Andalus. It receives its name from toponymic references (*Yabal*, in Arabic, meaning hilltop and *Faruh*, a word in Ayamí that comes from the Greek *faros*, or lighthouse), and is mentioned in the sources in relation to the existence of a religious *ribat* in the 12th century, that was home to a holy man, although it is not possible to say whether some type of fortification existed in the 13th century. Previously, it had been used by the Phoenicians and Romans (remains of ceramics and architectural structures have been found from the Phoenician-Punic period). The type of fortification corresponds to a fairly late model from the 13th century, with the date of its construction being accepted as the reign of Yusuf I, between 1344 and 1354. It is known that it had not been finished on his death and that it was completed under the reign of his son Muhammad V, adapting it to the needs imposed by advances in artillery and military tactics, which made it necessary to create a system of protection or bastion for the Alcazaba. Gibralfaro was the last and main bastion or defensive redoubt, and it communicated with the Alcazaba through a fortified walkway, the Coracha, which was its only point of access.

The hilltop site provides it with a strategic position, dominating the whole city and the bay.[\[1\]](#) [[#_ftn1](#)] Imagine the imposing image offered by these fortifications in their time, when the hilltop was totally devoid of vegetation to facilitate defence and to prevent ambushes. The only access was through a monumental door, which was accessed from the Coracha and communicated with the barbican that surrounds the entire outer perimeter. It presents the typical layout of a “bent entrance” opening into a large tower that is protected by a double door that cuts the barbican, and that forms a small courtyard in its interior, with an area for the guard troops. The vaulted roof conserves a very beautiful example of *lacería* (regular interlacing patterns) work in cut brick forming 8-pointed stars, and in the interior another 12-pointed design is glazed in black, white and blue.

Gibralfaro is currently accessed via openings in the area of the barbican, located in the east and in one of the sections of wall in the southern face, next to the Interpretation Centre. There are three other openings in the walls, all from the Christian era, and opened in order to facilitate access to the interior for supplies or military equipment.

On the upper part of its walls is the wall-walk, or patrol path, protected over much of its length by battlements, topped by pyramid-shaped capstones, some of which have been lost. The base of the walls, the foundation and plinth, is made of masonry, of medium-sized stones and slate rubble held together with lime and sand. Above this the wall is rammed earth, and everything is plastered with lime mortar that both waterproofs it and gives it a

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 uniform finish. In some sections the painted decoration, imitating large ashlar, can still be appreciated. The arches, vaults, doorposts and interior areas of the doors are mostly brick, responding to the numerous repairs carried out at different times.

The barbican that completely surrounds the castle is conserved in perfect condition, since it was largely rebuilt in the Christian period. The small number of archaeological excavations carried out in the last decade have shown that after the Christian occupation the part closest to the Airón well was turned into a fortress. These also documented the existence of a cobbled street surrounding the wall of the mosque's qibla, erected by the Arabs at an unknown date.

Important elements in the grounds of the castle include the Airón well, 40 meters deep and excavated into the living rock to reach a vein of water that still exists today, and a system of rainwater collection that uses man-made channels to carry the water to several underground cisterns, all covered with vaults of brick, except the largest of them, which is octagonal in shape and opens in the centre of the fortification. There are also two bread ovens built in the Christian period, several sentry boxes from different periods, and of different types and locations, and the building that was the former gunpowder magazine, which has now been converted into an Interpretation Centre.

After the occupation of Gibralfaro by the Castilian troops, its mosque was consecrated as a church dedicated to Saint Louis, Bishop of Toulouse. From that moment on, the fortress was used as a barracks and prison, until in 1925 it was ceded to the City Council and came to be used by the public.

The strategic importance of Malaga justified that after its conquest, the Catholic Monarchs used the tithe on lime, tile and brick for the repair and conservation of the city's fortifications.

During the Spanish War of Independence, the castle was the object of important fortification works and the scene of several events. Faced with strong pressure from the Spanish army and the guerrillas opposing the French occupation from 1812, the French began their withdrawal from Andalusia. They blew up all the fortifications they had built in Gibralfaro: as the last units of the French army left the city, the mines placed in the castle blew up Torre Nueva (New Tower), the external defences, the barracks, the seaward battery and the gunpowder store.

From this moment on, there is little news of interest regarding the state of the fortress, which due to its precarious defensive conditions was only used as a military prison. The progressive expansion of the Coracha district led to constructions climbing the hill along the path that started from the old dock.

In 1977 the task of completing demolition of the military buildings was undertaken, together with work on the gardens to improve tourism. From 1986 onwards, the City Council agreed to ask the Andalusian Regional Government to restore it. This project was carried out in three phases between 1989 and 1999, and included the restoration of walls and towers, interior paths, provision of toilets, parking areas, etc.

Once the aforementioned works were completed, the City Council undertook other work to improve the condition of the fortress: providing handrails and security grilles along the visit route, installing drinking water, providing a kiosk-bar, night lighting, etc. Of particular note was the inauguration on 29 July 1998 of an Interpretation Centre in the building that formerly housed the gunpowder magazine. This presents the life of the Castle as a military garrison and coastal watchtower from 1487 to 1925.

[1]The information presented in these texts was extracted from the study by Fanny de CARRANZA SELL, "El Castillo de Gibralfaro en la historia de Málaga", Revista Péndulo, nº XVI, Colegio Oficial de Ingenieros Técnicos Industriales de Málaga, 2002, pages 174-185.

[2] Photograph or situation on a general level.

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