An aerial photograph of a town in the Lower Guadiana Valley. In the foreground, a large, light-colored church with a tiled roof and several small, conical spires is visible. The town's buildings are clustered together, and the surrounding landscape is hilly. The title text is overlaid on a semi-transparent yellow rectangle in the upper center.

RELIGIOUS ROUTES IN THE LANDS OF THE LOWER GUADIANA VALLEY

**BETWEEN THE GUADIANA
AND THE BUTTRESSES
OF ALGARVE'S HILLS**

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ROUTES
IN THE LANDS
OF THE LOWER
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RELIGIOUS ROUTES IN THE LANDS OF THE LOWER GUADIANA VALLEY

Daily rituals have seen significant changes in the past decades. The ones remaining are mainly those connected to festivities, identity aspects or those related to holy and supernatural aspects. Many of those are indeed interconnected, and it is their heritage value that keeps them alive, as they must compete against «global» events spread by mass media.

Religious and popular festivities today have a bigger leisure component than a spiritual one but keep guiding the yearly rhythms of rural communities. A The village's festivity and its much-expected dancing party are still moments of sociability where unconscious passage rituals occur.

These expressions of popular spirituality, often alien to the Catholic Church's purposes, are under threat of extinction. Ancient devotions to «obscure» healer saints are replaced by the canonical cult of Our Lady of Fátima. Also threatened, and without records or material forms to document them for future memory, are the pagan rituals passed on from generation to generation, often by women. Rites on the edge of the «acceptable» sphere of ecclesiastic procedures like blessings to protect home and family, praying for the sick and processions to ask for rain are rituals of pagan origin and are currently seen as superstitions, signs

of underdevelopment and lack of culture and formal education.

The artistic value of the materiality associated with these rituals is, beyond doubt, the most studied and well-maintained aspect of the rituals and have seen their valorisation associated with tourism promotion. In that sense, the project «Caminhos da Religiosidade das Terras do Baixo Guadiana» (ALT20-06-5141-FEDER-001123), promoted by Campo Arqueológico de Mértola and financed by the European Regional Development Fund ERDF | Alentejo 2020.

The project's primary goal is to contribute to the valorisation and dissemination of local cultural heritage and to look for its safeguard. The project includes the promotion of environmental values and the relationship with nature, as almost all sacred places of popular spirituality share outstanding landmark positions with important landscape values. In this way, beyond disseminating canonical artistic expressions, the project investigates the popular local manifestations, promoted rural chapels, and recovers legends and traditions. Some of the legends refer to the construction of the shrines spread along the highest hilltops, creating a symbolic protective ring around Mértola's territory.



BETWEEN THE GUADIANA AND THE BUTTRESSES OF ALGARVE'S HILLS

The historical importance of the millennial 'city' of Mértola was based on a wise utilisation of the resources the land had to offer, from the exceptional defence conditions of the steep hills where it took its roots and a near peninsula between two waterways, which was then surrounded by impressive walls making it one of the most important bridgeheads in the south of Spain, to the running Guadiana waters navigated up to the Algarve's distant estuary and then to the great Mediterranean basin and the Atlantic coast, a natural route that turned Alentejo into the main interior port in the Iberian south-west up until the 20th century. Other resources were added to these main ones, such as the rich mining veins, which were explored at different times until recently, and the large pasture of cork oak and Holm oak plantations, where transhumant livestock gathered from near and far.

As the capital of the great Mediterranean civilisation, Mértola welcomed the first Christian communities into its midst, which would flourish within, particularly between the 5th and 8th centuries, and whose presence was embodied into basilican buildings in and out of the walls and into small rural temples nearby, which

served as history backup and a reference after the Christian Reconquest of Mértola, in 1238, which ended the long period of Islamic domination in this territory and led to a cultural rupture – which had always been there – with the Mediterranean world.

Many years went by from the symbolic act of christening the Almohad mosque as Mārtulah – which was then carried out by the knights of the Order of Santiago – devoting it to Saint Mary to the creation of a community of worshippers who identified with the message, values, and mysteries of the Catholic faith. This reality was expressed – among other historical indicators – in the irregular and encompassed way this region's parish map was created between the late 13th century and early 16th century in the south of this town, which was roughly perceived between the right margin of Guadiana and the buttresses of Algarve's hills, where five parishes were organised: the oldest were Espírito Santo and São Pedro de Solis and then São Bartolomeu da Via Glória, São Sebastião dos Carros, and São Miguel do Pinheiro. The settlement's sparse population, weak resources, and dispersion explain this reality and by extension so does the poor presence of the clergy in this

region together with the difficulty of worshippers in fulfilling their religious obligations given the long distance between many places and the medieval parish temples. Some popular worshipping and traditions appeared in this wide-ranging historical framework and were in some cases based on mythical relationships with early Christianity, which was the case of the worship to Saint Barão; toponymic and religious legends were created, which crossed time, like the three and the seven siblings, connected to hermitages and chapels built on hilltops (they represented in any case a symbolic protection of the territory); the memorable structures of old Christian buildings were recovered, which was the case in Mesquita and Mosteiro with the resacralisation of temple ruins in the 8th and 9th centuries, and the relative autonomy of populations became prominent during the process of creating religious spaces.

In the 16th century, parish life became generally consolidated, the clergy was regularly present, and there was a wide movement remodelling and creating temples built within the formal framework of the Manueline, Renaissance, and Mannerist language, from the main church of Mértola to

the parish churches of a highly rural nature not forgetting the convent chapels and buildings, which stood within and surrounding the town providing a broader concept of religion to its residents. It was a time that would also last throughout the two following centuries with major artistic renovations inside the temples, from liturgical furnishings to altarpieces and figures, most of which replaced the old medieval masonry altars and wall paintings that covered their walls. Most of them were popular or came from erudite workshops; however, the religion of worshippers was embodied mostly around them continuing old worshipping activities, particularly those to patron saints, others represented a significant growth in devotion occurring before and after the Council of Trent (1545-1563) where the ideals of Counter-Reformation were set out.

Created in the medieval times and throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, Mértola's temples between the Guadiana and Algarve's hills made up a large religious set with the town and its surroundings concentrating most of the buildings, many of which did not survive custom secularism and the lessening of religious practices (among the temples that have disap-

peared, are in ruins, or have been adapted to a different usage are the hermitages of Saint Blaise, Saint Sebastian, and the Holy Saviour, St Francis Convent, and the urban churches and chapels of Saint James, the Holy Spirit, Santo António dos Pescadores, Saint Louis and Our Lady of Mount Carmel, Our Lady of Mercy, and Our Lady of Conception). In spite of the vicissitudes that took away part of its past importance, some cultural traditions remain to this day, such as the night and daily procession Procissão do Senhor dos Passos (procession of the Stations of the Cross), the main religious expression in the district; the festivities honouring the patron saints of many of the temples, mostly the parish ones, and the worship of Saint Barão, the most long-lasting saint in local religion, which managed to stay on the sidelines of the official Church's tight control. Other worshipped figures, with more or less emphasis, crossed the region's collective imagination until recent times, most of which were created around the capacity and power to intercept granted by popular belief, as is the case with collective health with examples like Saint Sebastian – protector par excellence against plagues, which were the

deadliest and most feared diseases in the past –, Saint Blaise, and Saint Lucy, summoned to cure respiratory diseases, rickets, and eyesight; soil fertility made easier by Saint Peter; rain and field fertilisers provided by Our Lady of the Snows and Our Lady of Conception; the protection of cattle and animals whose diseases were appeased by Saint Louis; and happiness on earth provided by Saint Anthony, etc. Some of the worshipped figures were particularly famous for being miracle workers, which was the case of Saint Barão in the hermitage with the same name (he provided protection against all bad luck and benefited male fertility) and Saint Anthony in Mértola's Franciscan convent to whom popular processions were organised.

PARISH OF MÉRTOLA

PARISH CHURCH

The parish church and old mosque is located on the hill of the acropolis, on top of the medieval castle.

- < **Patron Saint** > Our Lady of the Annunciation | Nossa Senhora de Entre Ambas as Águas | Saint Mary
- < **Location** > Largo da Igreja, Mértola, sub-district of Mértola
- < **GPS** > 37.63840682583164, -7.663579279909089
- < **Timeline** > Sacredness of the territory, Roman Temple: 2nd century (?) | Palaeochristian Temple: 5th century et seq (?) | Original Mosque: 9th century (?) | Pre-existent building: Almohad mosque from the second half of the 12th century | Adaptation for the Christian devotion: 1238 et seq | Structural remodelling: 1532-1565 | Recovery and restoration: 1947-1952 | Museum: 2016.



1. General view of the town and the Parish Church of Mértola.

2. Main facade of the Parish Church.





3



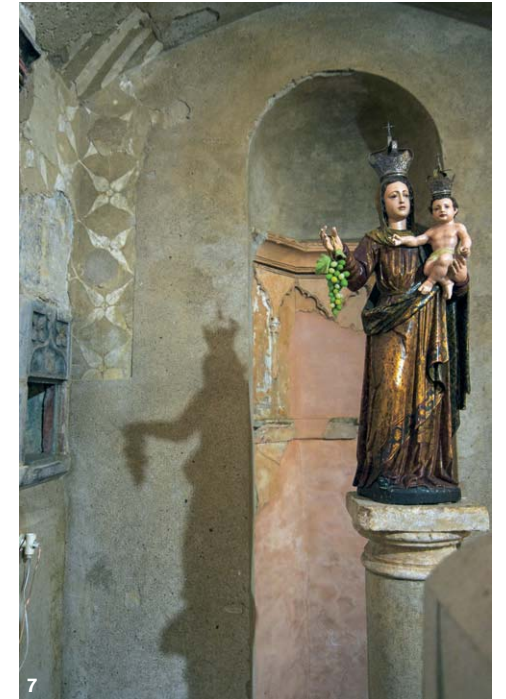
4



6



5



7

- 3. Renaissance main door.
- 4. Islamic door.
- 5. General perspective of the main altar/ mirhab.
- 6. General perspective of the sacristy and the Islamic door.
- 7. Image of Our Lady of the Annunciation.



1

CALVÁRIO CHAPEL

The chapel stands near the square of the main church next to a late Gothic cross, which refer to the complex devotion that recalls the martyrdom and crucifixion of Christ.

< **Location** > Largo da Igreja, Mértola, sub-district of Mértola

< **GPS** > 37.6379405671919, -7.663862029295665

< **Timeline** > Origin: late 16th century | Abandoned: early 20th century | Return to worship: 1950-60.



2

1. General view of the chapel.
2. Interior of Calvário Chapel.
3. Christ carrying the cross.



3

CHAPEL OF OUR LADY OF CONCEPTION

The chapel stands on the street with the same name, halfway up the hill to the historic area of the town. Its construction is from the same time as the urban area in-between walls grew and became denser, in the 17th century, being one of the structuring buildings for this reality.

< **Location** > Rua de Nossa Senhora da Conceição, Mértola, sub-district of Mértola

< **GPS** > 37.637186841109454, -7.6640007439056435

< **Timeline** > Origin: mid-17th century.



General view of the chapel – facade.



| MUSEUM CENTRE |

CHURCH OF OUR LADY OF MERCY

The church and its annexes stand on a small public square in front of Porta da Ribeira over the bastion that defended access to the port area, where the Sacred Art Centre of Mértola's Museum is located.

< **Patron Saint-original temple** > Saint James

< **Location** > Largo da Misericórdia, Mértola, sub-district of Mértola

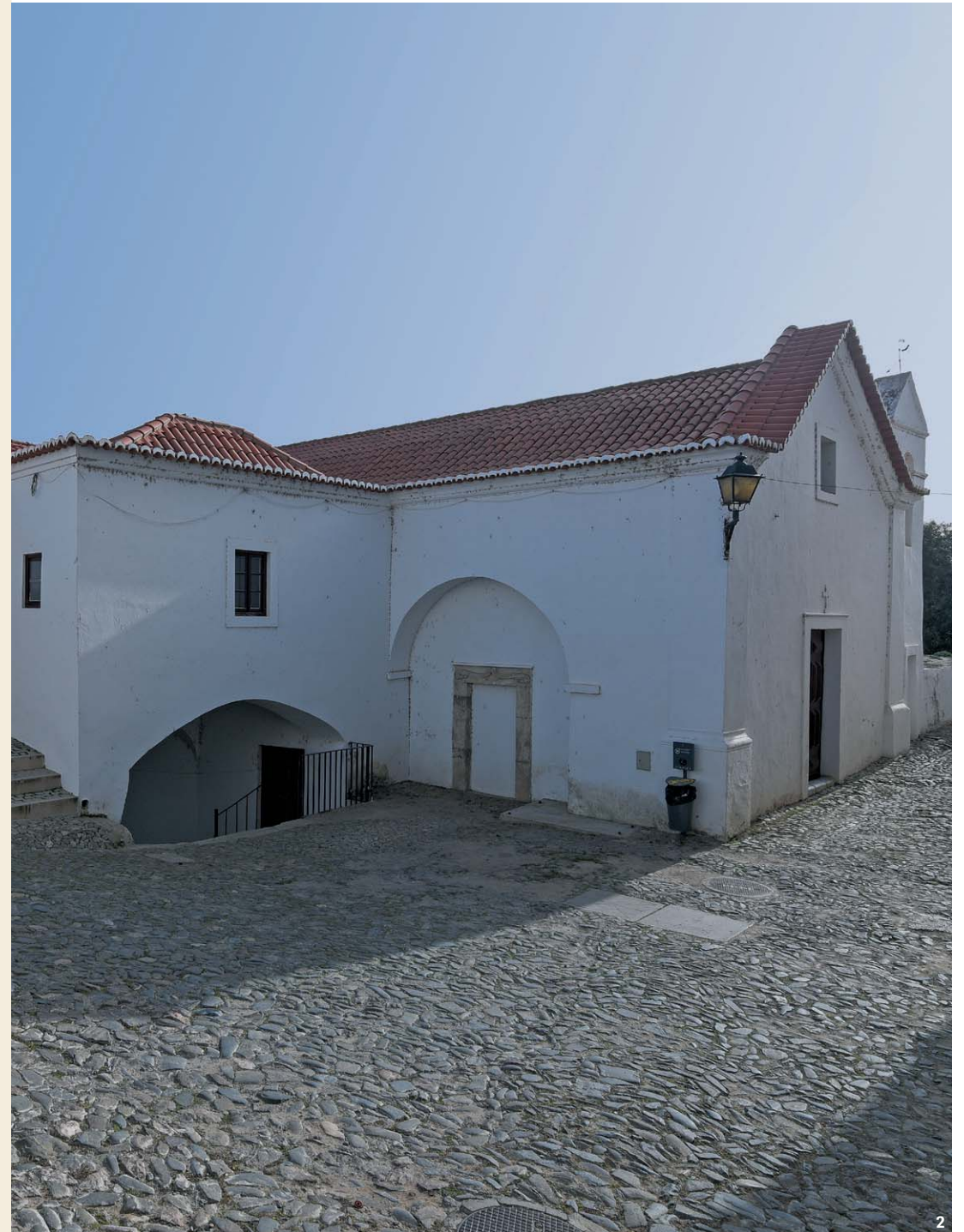
< **GPS** > 37.63580898238534, -7.664769901449576

< **Timeline** > Origin: mid-16th century | Reconstruction: early 18th century | Cease of worship: 1860s | Museum 2001.



1

1. Church of Our Lady of Mercy.
2. General view of the Church and Porta da Ribeira arch.



2

CHAPEL OF OUR LADY OF THE SNOWS

The Chapel of Our Lady of the Snows stands on the same place where there used to be an Islamic and then Christian watchtower, of which it inherited the size and general physiognomy. The temple stands out among the landscape and local imaginary and has hosted popular pilgrimages in the past. It was abandoned in the late 19th century and used to provide accommodation to poor families returning to the worshippers in 1971 following restoration works.

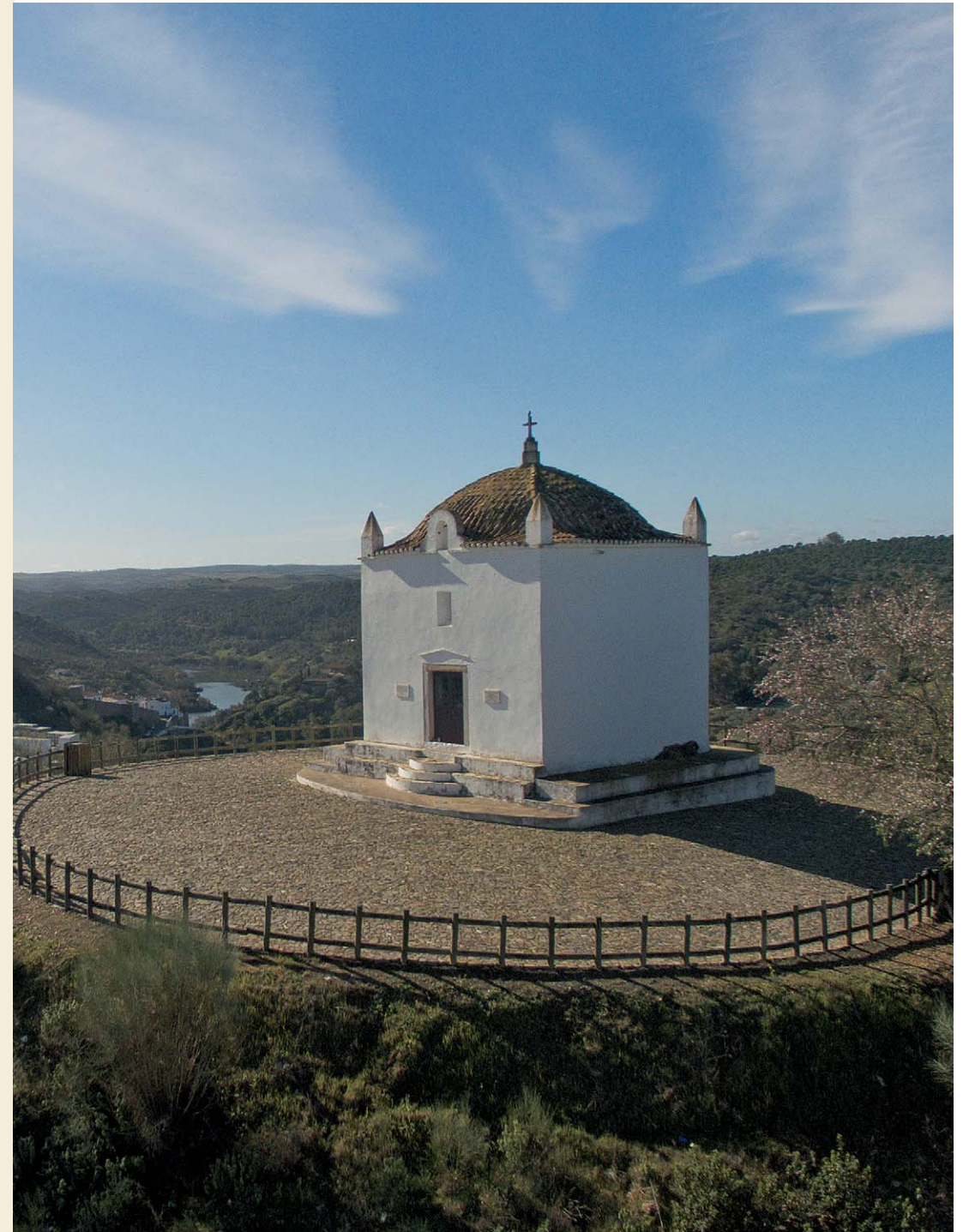
< **Location** > Cerro de Nossa Senhora das Neves, in the suburbs of the town of Mértola, sub-district of Mértola

< **GPS** > 37.6410662484282, -7.665447671008123

< **Timeline** > Origin: early 17th century | Abandoned: late 19th century | Rehabilitation and restoration: 1971.



General view of the chapel.



CHURCH AND CONVENT OF SAINT FRANCIS

The convent of Saint Francis stands on a rocky hilltop near the town of Mértola overlooking the confluence of the bodies of water from the Oeiras stream and river Guadiana (it connects to the edge of the water through stairs).

< **Location** > Near the town of Mértola

< **GPS** > 37.635010081426664, -7.66675155868376

< **Timeline** > Origin: 1613 | Works and additions: late 17th century / early 18th century | Extinct: 1834.



1

1. General view
of the main altar.



2

2. General view
of the convent.

| MUSEUM CENTRE |



HERMITAGE OF SAINT SEBASTIAN

The 15th-century hermitage of Saint Sebastian was created on the wide platform that runs along the side of river Guadiana near the water mills close to an old necropolis in the old Myrtilis. Collapsed in the great flood of 1876, it was rebuilt and turned into a museum in 1997 and incorporated into the local school (Escola EB 2, 3 /ES de São Sebastião).

< **Location** > Achada de São Sebastião, In the School of S. Sebastião de Mértola, sub-district of Mértola
< **GPS** > 37.644015649112326, -7.654564276641077
< **Timeline** > Origin: 15th century | Reconstruction: approximately 1530 | Abandoned: 1876 | Reconstruction: 1997.

1. Image of Saint Sebastian.
2. General view of the chapel.



| IN RUINS |

HERMITAGE OF SAINT BLAISE

Built on a hill overlooking river Guadiana, the hermitage of Saint Blaise was one of the small temples serving as sanctuary for the suburbs of Mértola. No longer serving for worship since the mid-18th century, it has progressively deteriorated and very little remains from its old structures.

< **Location** > Herdade do Vale d'Évora, sub-district of Mértola
< **GPS** > 37.666346480336074, -7.668212926322872
< **Timeline** > Origin: 15th/16th century | Reconstruction: approximately 1530 | Abandoned: mid-18th century.



General view of the chapel ruins.



1

SAINT BENEDICT CHAPEL

The chapel stands at the entrance to the village, near the old road connecting it to Mértola, on a small hill towering above the settlement's forecastle. It is preceded by a large cobblestone square.

< **Location** > Corte de Gafo de Cima, sub-district of Mértola
< **GPS** > 37.71998080801803, -7.707162478791774
< **Timeline** > Origin: 1592 | Remodelling and works: 18th century; 1882 and 20th century.



2

1. Image of Sait Salvador.
2. General view of the chapel.

S. BARÃO HERMITAGE

The S. Barão hermitage is established on the hilltop with the same name in a prominent position overlooking the surrounding territory. It is enveloped by a large garden (with a picnic area) and preceded by a square.

- < **Location** > Isolated on a high plateau accessed through pathways from the Corte da Velha village located on the valley
- < **GPS** > 37.66630768987786, -7.74224515285026
- < **Timeline** > Origin: 14th century | Reconstruction: 18th century | Abandoned: 20th century | Recovery and enhancement: 2004.



| INCORPORATED INTO A MUSEUM |

HERMITAGE OF THE HOLY SAVIOUR

The remaining structures of the old hermitage are incorporated into a 19th-century barn, which was recently adapted as a museum dedicated to the historical, religious, and archaeological memory of this place (Roman necropolis and settlement from the 3rd to the 5th centuries A.D. and monastery from the 6th-7th centuries).



1

- < **Location** > Monte do Mosteiro (northern cluster), sub-district of Mértola
- < **GPS** > 37.78968912274825, -7.725253664552176
- < **Timeline** > Sacredness of the place (monastery): 6th century (?) | Origin (chapel): 16th/17th centuries | Abandoned: 19th century | Museum: 2010.



- 1. Image of Sait Salvador.
- 2. General view of the chapel.

2

PARISH OF SAINT SEBASTIAN

PARISH CHURCH

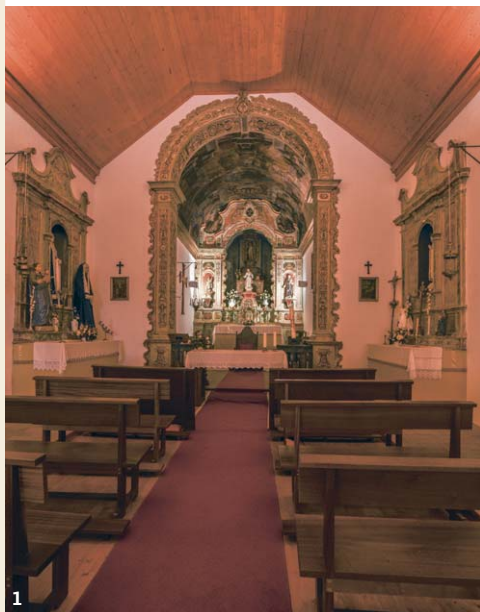
The parish church is located next to the public cemetery, which is on a small hill overlooking the surrounding meadows and the village's urban area.

< **Patron Saint** > Saint Sebastian

< **Location** > São Sebastião dos Carros, sub-district of Mértola

< **GPS** > 37.55997432231469, -7.7694321180986945

< **Timeline** > Origin: 1530s | Remodelling: 17th century and 1760s.



1



2

1. View from inside the church.

2. Altar of Our Lady of Sorrows.



3

3. General view of the church.

4. Parish church facade.



4

PARISH OF SÃO BARTOLOMEU DA VIA GLÓRIA

PARISH CHURCH

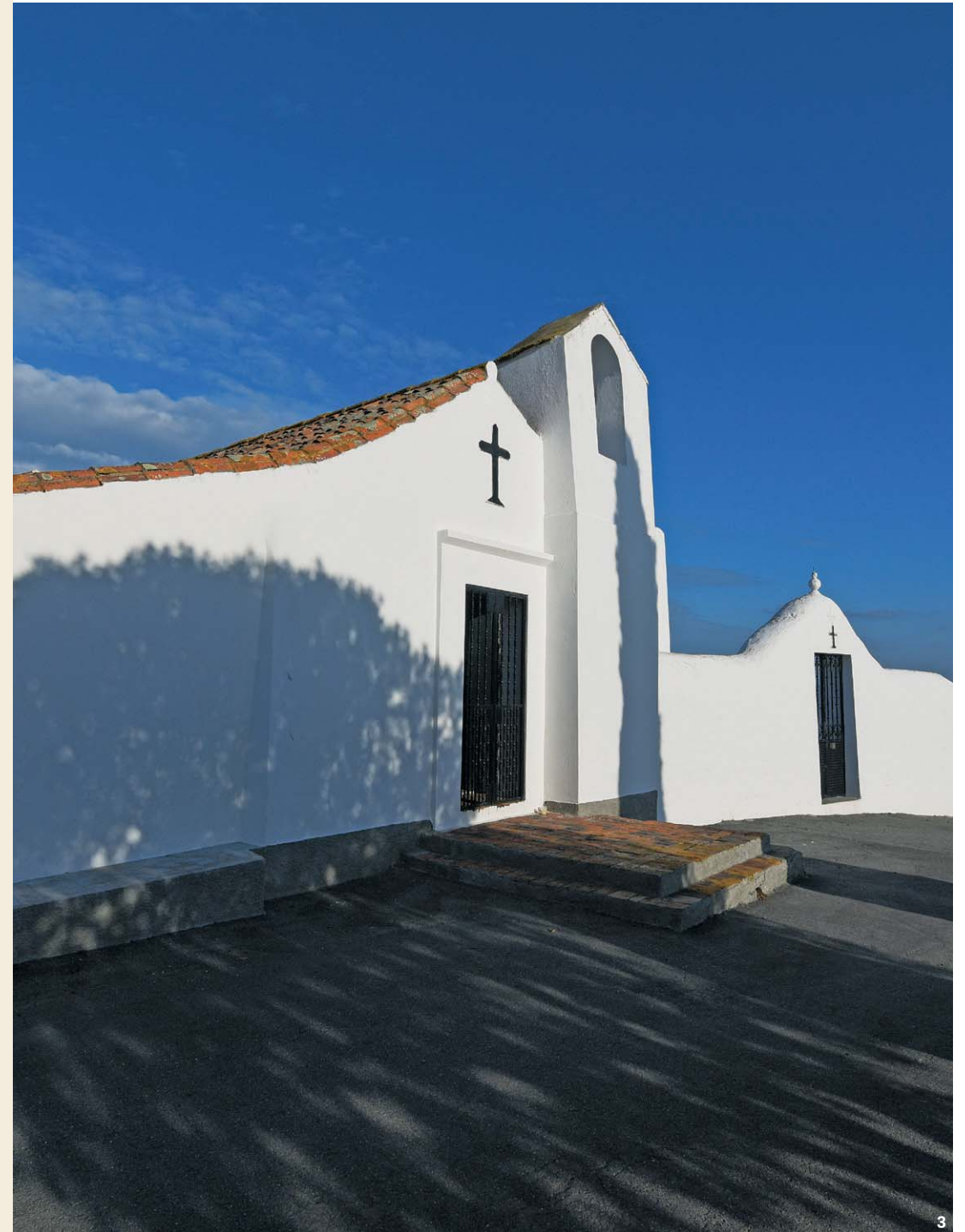
The parish church is isolated in a rural environment, on a hill between the village of São Bartolomeu and the Vascão stream. The public cemetery is adjoined.

< **Patron Saint** > Saint Bartholomew

< **Location** > São Bartolomeu da Via Glória, sub-district of Mértola

< **GPS** > 37.5130473744838, -7.704892296834053

< **Timeline** > Origin: 6th-7th centuries | Re-founded: 14th century | Reconstruction: 1530-1565; Extensions-remodelling: 18th-19th-20th centuries.



1. View from inside the church.

2. Carved altarpiece of the main chapel.

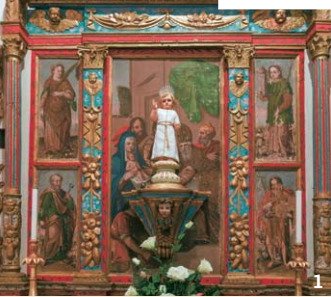
3. General view of the church.

PARISH OF SÃO MIGUEL DO PINHEIRO

PARISH CHURCH

The parish church is isolated on a hill near the villages of Monte do Gato and São Miguel do Pinheiro next to the public cemetery.

- < **Patron Saint** > Saint Michael
- < **Location** > São Miguel do Pinheiro, sub-district of Mértola
- < **GPS** > 37.53524113884998, -7.831383278431794
- < **Timeline** > Origin: 14th-15th centuries | Construction: approximately 1515 | Extensions-remodelling: 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries.



1. Interior of the church.
2. Interior of the church (general view of the main altar).
3. General view of the church.



1

CHAPEL OF SAINT ANNE

The chapel is located on a hillside close to the small place named after it (Monte Santana), which registered as a medieval settlement of the mountainous component of the territory adjoining river Vascão.

< **Location** > Monte Santana, sub-district of Mértola

< **GPS** > 37.47500842927765, -7.829442486735397

< **Timeline** > Origin: 14th/15th century | Remodelling: second half of the 16th century | Reconstruction: mid-18th century | Preservation and Restoration: 2020.



2

1. *Ex-votos* (small painted panels from the 18th century).

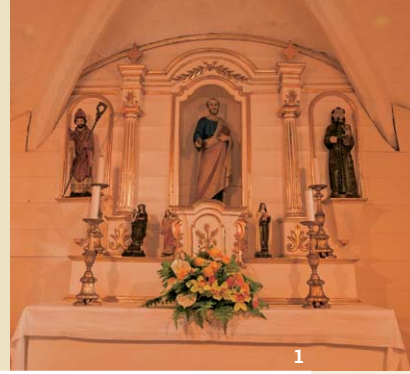
2. Interior of the chapel (general perspective of the main altar).

3. General view of the chapel.



3

PARISH OF SÃO PEDRO DE SOLIS



PARISH CHURCH

The parish church stands around the village on a hill overlooking the urban area, next to the public cemetery.

< **Patron Saint** > Saint Peter

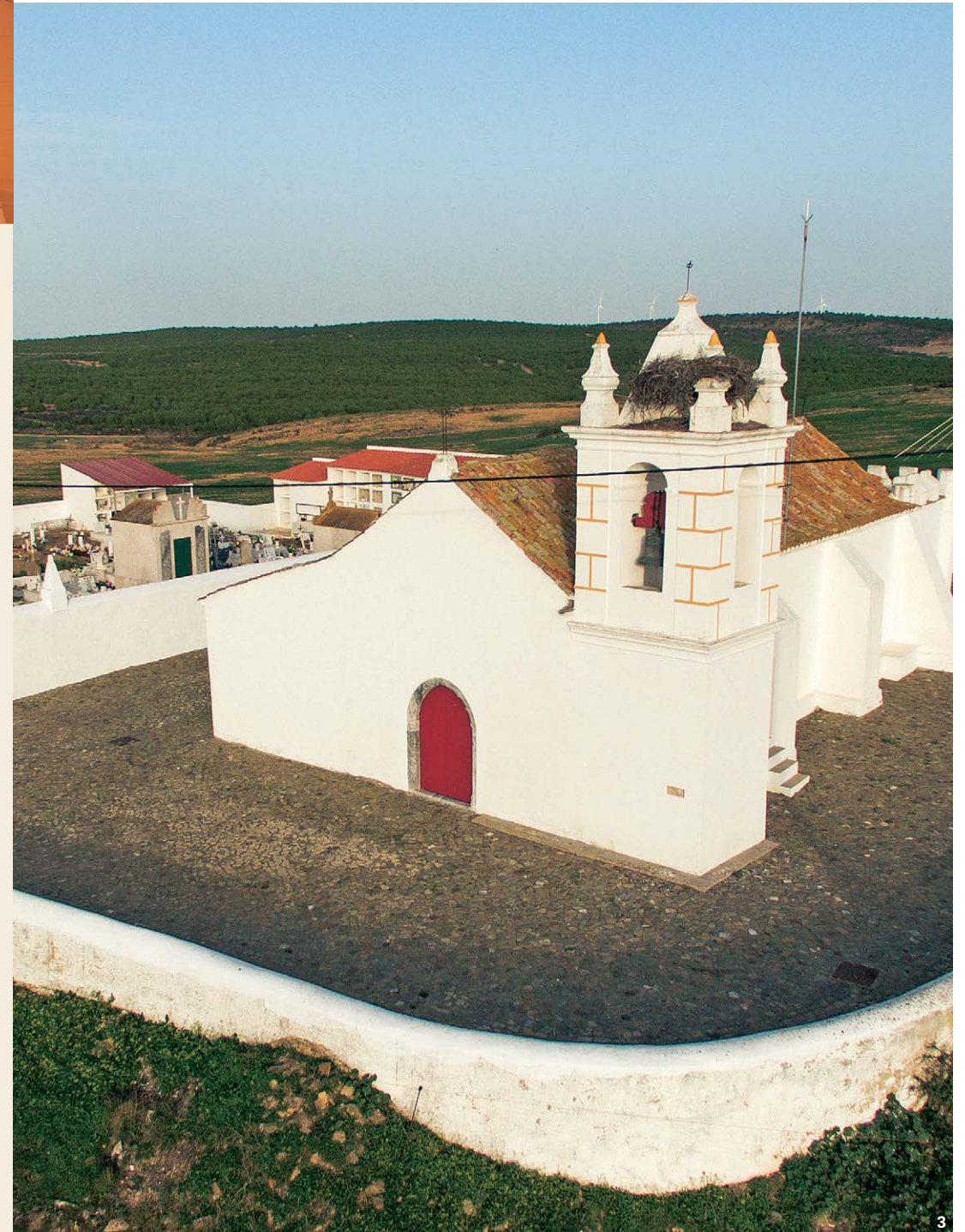
< **Location** > São Pedro de Solis, sub-district of Mértola

< **GPS** > 37.49898070135851, -7.902358168313449

< **Timeline** > Origin: 14th-15th century | Remodelling: late 15th century
| Reconstruction: 1540s | Extension: 17th century.



1. Main altar.
2. View from inside the church.
3. General view of the church.



PARISH OF ESPÍRITO SANTO



PARISH CHURCH

The parish church is isolated on a hill near the village of Espírito Santo, in Mértola, to the west of the urban area. It is next to the public cemetery.

< **Patron Saint** > Holy Spirit

< **Location** > Espírito Santo, Mértola.

< **GPS** > 37.54105142957441, -7.649111141342693

< **Timeline** > Origin: 13th-14th centuries | Construction: approximately 1565 | Extensions-remodelling: 18th-19th-20th centuries.



1 e 2. Secondary altars.

3. Church interior (overview with naves and main altar).

4. General view of the church.





HERMITAGE OF OUR LADY OF THE SNOWS

The chapel is located on a prominent hill in the suburbs of the village of Mesquita overlooking the old path that leads to one of river Guadiana's main fords in front of Pomarão, through which the important port operations took place in the mining complex of São Domingos.

< **Original Patron Saint** > Saint Mary 'of the flower'

< **Location** > Cerro de Nossa Senhora das Neves, in the suburbs of the village of Mesquita, sub-district of Mértola

< **GPS** > 37.53721496458013, -7.5321131957939516

< **Timeline** > Sacredness of the place: 6th-9th centuries (?) | Origin: 13th/14th century | Reconstruction: 18th century.



1 e 3. General view of the hermitage.
2. View from inside the chapel.

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