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The metamorphosis of Madeira’s Ilhéu do Diego into Forte de São José and the short-lived Principado do Ilhéu da Pontinha

Vincente Bicudo de Castro and Philip Hayward

ABSTRACT

This article examines the serial transformation and resignification of a small islet off the coast of Madeira over the last 250 years. The first phase saw the Ilhéu do Diego modified into a fort (Forte de São José), linked to the mainland, and the second saw the fort incorporated into the seawall that forms the southern edge of the port of Funchal. The history of the fort area subsequently provided the pretext for its assertion as an independent micronation performed in various ways in the period 2007-2017 by a Madeiran resident, Renato Barros, who had become disenchanted with the local government over a disputed development application. The article identifies that history and residual place identities enabled the fort site to be imagined as the Principado do Ilhéu da Pontinha by Barros, in the face of counter-imaginings and interventions by local authorities. and that Barros constructed an entitativity for his claimed principality through the development of symbols, rhetoric and performances.

KEYWORDS

Ilhéu do Diego, Forte de São José, Principado do Ilhéu da Pontinha, Madeira, micronation, islandness, peninsularity

Introduction

[1] Throughout this article we refer to the islet as Ilhéu do Diego, the fort on the island first connected to the mainland and then incorporated into a seawall as Forte de São José, and only use the term Principado do Ilhéu da Pontinha (and its abbreviation as Pontinha) in reference to the short-lived micronation established there between 2007-2017.

Fig. 1 Madeira's position with regard to the north-west African coast and the Iberian Peninsula (Google Maps).

[2] While there is no evidence of human inhabitation of or visitation to Ilhéu do Diego prior to the arrival of the Portuguese, DNA research into mice bones found on the island indicates the mice's origin in northern Europe/Scandinavia, leading to some conjecture that they may have been introduced by Vikings, during a visit of unknown duration, around 1000 years ago (Gündüz, Auffray, Britton-Davidian et al.).

The human history of Ilhéu do Diego, [1] located on the southern edge of the present-day city of Funchal, in Madeira, dates back to the first recorded visit to the area, by Portuguese navigators whose ships had been blown off-course in 1419 while exploring the north-western African coast (Fig. 1). The voyage was part of a concerted attempt by a newly resurgent Portugal, driven by Prince Henry (known as “The Navigator”) (1394-1460), to explore Atlantic trade routes in order to gain national advantage. Historical accounts relate that the mariners credited with discovering Madeira, João Gonçalves Zarco and Tristão Vaz Teixeira, moored off two islets (subsequently named Ilhéu do Diego and Ilhéu Grande) before landing on the densely wooded main island. It has been assumed that the steps cut into Ilhéu do Diego's rock-face and a triangle carved as a guide for mooring ships were made at this time, making the islet the oldest known site of human habitation in the Madeira archipelago. [2] The mariners' fortuitous discovery led to the establishment of a settlement on the island around 1420 and the subsequent establishment of Funchal as the island's main port and administrative centre.



The port of Funchal developed along the coast to the north-east of Ilhéu do Diego from the 1420s onwards and was subject to pirate attacks in the 1500s, leading to increased attention to the security of the settlement in subsequent centuries. A permanent fortification, named Forte de São José, was built on Ilhéu do Diego around 1760, complementing a fort on the neighbouring Ilhéu Grande, constructed in the mid 1630s, named Fortaleza de Nossa Senhora da Conceição (Fig. 2). As Garcia has identified, after Forte de São José was connected to the mainland in 1775, it also became known as Forte de Pontinha (*pontinha* meaning tip or headland). [3] This material connection to the mainland transformed Ilhéu do Diego from an islet, whose watery encirclement was a key element of its perception and a key factor in its visitation and settlement. In this regard we can identify the location as having been “de-islanded” in the late 1700s. Work on the concept of de-islandisation and its processes was first advanced by contributors to Baldacchino, where the

[3] See Fortalezas for further details of construction of the fort and the seawall at various stages.

notion is principally explored with regard to bridging. But there are other forms of linkage. These include causeways: fixed transport links across narrow necks of water, some of which are only operative at low tides (e.g. that connecting Cornwall's Saint Michael's Mount to the peninsular mainland) while others (such as the Canso causeway connecting Cape Breton to the Nova Scotia mainland), are usable all-year round (aside from interruptions during storm surge periods). Another type of connection is fostered by harbour walls/breakwaters that incorporate offshore islets into their structures (such as those in Sai harbour in northern Honshu, Japan).

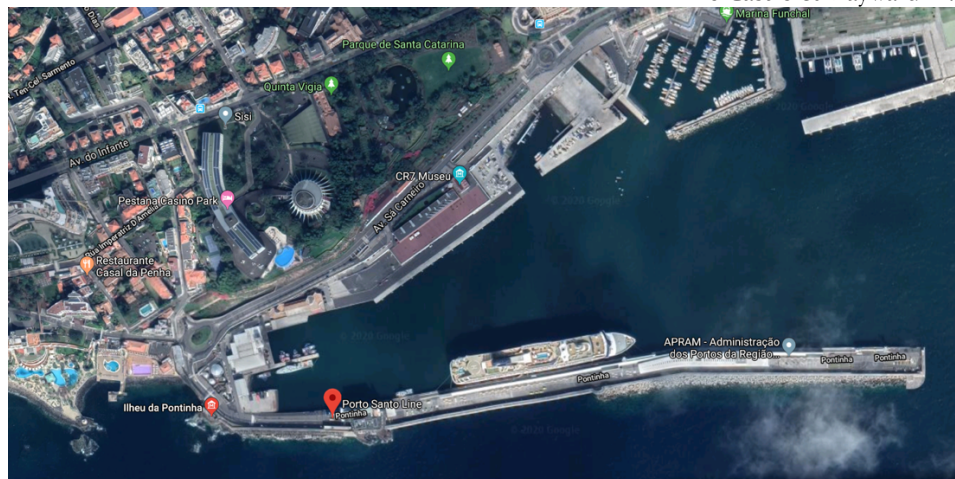
[4] It should be noted that a number of former island sites have retained designations as islands subsequent to the draining/subsidence of surrounding waters and their fixed linkage to land (England's Isle of Ely and Vancouver's Granville Island being respective cases in point). Their names are thereby archaic in that they reflect the islands' pasts rather than their present structures and/or transport logistics.

De-islanded through its fixed link to the mainland, the former islet's name, Ilhéu do Diego, became functionally redundant (and thereby archaic [4]) and the location took the fort as its nomenclative reference point. The latter aspect was reinforced by the fort's position at the end of a (human-constructed) peninsula whose principal purpose was to support a pathway between the shore and (what was newly construed as) the rocky promontory on which it was constructed. The pathway to the fort prioritised the latter as the feature point and *raison d'être* of the peninsula. This resignification of the former Ilhéu do Diego area was however short-lived as another transformation was affected. Forte de São José's status as the material and symbolic focus of the short peninsula was relatively short-lived, as it was partially demolished in 1889 and the rubble was used to construct a stone jetty that connected its remnant to Fortaleza de Nossa Senhora da Conceição, thereby significantly extending the seawall at the southern end of Funchal Harbour. Partially demolished, largely disused and replaced as the end point of a constructed peninsula, the fort (conceived as a distinct place) effectively became a component of an elongated port structure. Just as the *Ilhéu* designation had become redundant in the late 1700s, the fort appellation also faded in relevance. The extension of the stone jetty beyond Fortaleza de Nossa Senhora da Conceição after World War Two (Fig. 3) further diminished the status and residual island identity of both forts.

Fig. 2 Forte de São José, shortly after its connection to the mainland, with Fortaleza de Nossa Senhora da Conceição at rear (unknown artist c1790).



Fig. 3 Map of Funchal Harbour's southern seawall with pins marking locations of Ilhéu/principality of Pontinha (far left) and Fortaleza de Nossa Senhora da Conceição (second left) (Google Maps).



Establishing the Principality

The Forte de São José site was used for various purposes during the 1800s, including as a barracks and jail by the British forces that occupied Madeira in 1801-1807. After its partial demolition in 1888 the site (measuring 187 square metres) was leased to the Blandy family, British residents of Madeira who had become wealthy exporting wine to the United Kingdom. The Blandys installed a crane to load their goods onto ships in the harbour and subsequently purchased the site when it was put up for auction in 1903. The family used the fort area for various purposes, repairing parts of the building and constructing a viewing platform on upper level, before putting it up for sale in 1999 (Fortalezas). The property was purchased by Renato Barros, a local visual arts teacher. After taking possession of the site, Barros started a campaign for the restoration, revaluation and re-classification of the property and sought to raise funds to accomplish this by opening a bar and a museum space. Funchal municipal authorities provisionally approved Barros' proposal for the development of a bar-restaurant with a terrace and gazebo in 2004, but later withdrew consent when Barros amended his plans, and refused to supply electricity to the site, making commercial development of the fort highly problematic. In response to what he regarded as heavy-handed intervention in his affairs by the municipal authority, Barros unilaterally declared the site's independence from Portugal in January 2007, interpreting the phrase "de pura e irrevogável venda" ("pure and irrevocable sale") in the royal charter of sale drawn up in 1903 (*Self Herald*) somewhat tendentiously to assert that the Forte de São José had not been Portuguese territory since the national government sold it off in 1903. In declaring the autonomy of his new "micronation," [5] Barros returned to the historical identity of the site and, in particular, the former island status that gave it defined boundaries and separation from the Madeiran mainland and urban sprawl of Funchal, [6] characterising his micronation as the Principado do Ilhéu da Pontinha (Fig. 4).

[5] See Hayward "Islands and Micronationality" for discussion of the principals of micronationality and their application to island locations. See Bicudo de Castro and Kober for a case study of a coastal micronation resulting from similar disagreements with local authorities over the development of a specific site.

[6] As he asserted, somewhat enigmatically, in Guerra's 2016 documentary *Um Sonho Soberano*, "after being connected to Madeira, it continued to be an island... because if we take a pregnant dog and put it in a henhouse, chicks won't be born, puppies will, isn't that right?"

Fig. 4 Forte de São José/Principado do Ilhéu da Pontinha (centre left) and adjacent seawall and footpath (Joi Cletison Alves, Fortalezas).



Developing his initial rhetorical claim in the face of sustained indifference from the municipal authorities in Funchal, he delivered a request for the detachment of his principality from Portugal to the government's representative in Madeira in 2010 and announced plans for a constitution, currency and anthem. The currency was to be called the *Ponto* (although this was replaced by Bitcoin in 2015), the citizens would be known as *Pontos* and the (unspecified) spoken language was to be known as the *Funcho*. The Principality's national day was set as October 3rd, the date on which Barros identified the islet as having been divested by Portugal. Barros also announced a citizenship charter, registering himself as his Principality's first citizen (with his wife and two children comprising the remainder of the official populace) and adopted a national flag [7] and coat of arms [8] (Figs. 5 and 7).

[7] Complicating matters, Barros also used (portrait format) personal (i.e. "princely") flags showing a white cross on scarlet around the fort site, as reproduced at Atlas Obscura.

[8] Similar to the issue raised in footnote 7 above, another coat of arms was also associated with Pontinha in its early phase, consisting of a shield with top left and bottom right corners showing striped quadrants and top right and bottom left showing the outline of the fort (as featured in an unattributed TV news item excerpted in Guerra).

These acts – and particularly the adoption of a flag – are established formal trappings of statehood and represent and perform what Callahan and Ledgerwood refer to as the "entitativity" of groups. The term is derived from psychology where it refers to "the extent to which a group or collective is considered by others to be a real entity having unity, coherence, and internal organization rather than a set of independent individuals" (American Psychology Association). As the second named author of this article has previously asserted, this concept is particularly relevant for micronations in that they:

like nations themselves – can be understood to be performed by rhetoric, by quasi-legal and administrative practices and/or by symbolism and symbolic acts. Symbolic images have a particular strategic value in micronational contexts in signalling the existence of an entity that claims autonomy for itself. (Hayward, "Under the Mermaid Flag" 73)

And, similarly, symbolic images such as flags represent various types of socio-political entities, including "variously archaic, emergent and/or contested" ones, and:

In all of these, the flag serves to assert the existence of what it represents in a loop between the flag-as-thing and the geo-political-entity-as-

thing.... The constant reiteration of the flag as symbol of a something that exists by the entity that it symbolises confirms the validity of the flag as an officially sanctioned and/or definitive symbol of the entity. But micronational flags operate significantly differently in that symbolic manifestations of micronationality, such as flags, passports, websites etc., are often the primary constituents of a (real or virtual) place asserted as a micronation. (ibid 74)

The most significant aspect of Pontinha's flag is its close resemblance to that officially adopted in 1978 for the Região Autónoma da Madeira by the region's autonomous assembly, established in 1976 in the aftermath of Portugal's so-called "Third Revolution," which replaced the country's right-wing government with a left-wing, decolonialist one. The new government created Madeira as an autonomous region following a sustained and violent campaign for Madeiran independence conducted by the (right wing) FLAMA (Frente de Libertação do Arquipélago da Madeira) in 1974-76. While support for FLAMA declined after the region gained autonomy, a number of activists have continued to campaign for full independence for the archipelago, some becoming involved in a new, less confrontational body, FAMA (Fórum para a Autonomia da Madeira), which has been emboldened and encouraged in recent years by independence referenda conducted in Scotland and Catalonia.

Fig. 5 Pontinha's (micro-) national flag



Fig. 6 Madeiran flag



The similarity of Pontinha's flag to that of Madeira's reflects Barros' deep roots in and affection for Funchal, Madeira and Madeiran culture. Indeed, his rejection of Portuguese sovereignty over Pontinha is not so much a rejection of the latter state as the manifestation of his desire for an idealised non-bureaucratic community that does not restrain his impulses and idiosyncrasies. Indeed, in a somewhat paradoxical sequence in Guerra's 2016 documentary

Um Sonho Soberano (“A Sovereign Dream”), Barros refers to Madeiran secessionists as *idiota* (“idiotic”). In these regards, his impulse to create his own micronation resembles those of other individuals, such as Australia’s Leonard Casley, who created his own Principality – Hutt River – as an enclave in Western Australia in 1970 (see de Castro and Kober). Similarly, in trying to create a micronation separate from (modern) Madeira that represents his perception of traditional Madeiran identity, Barros’ project resembles (in miniature) the ambition of the Vectis National Party in the Isle of Wight in the late 1960s, which was, in large part, concerned to preserve (members’ perceptions of) a quintessential Englishness at a time of significant demographic and socio-economic change across the nation (see Grydehøj and Hayward).

As the second named author of this article has identified elsewhere, flags – and similar symbols – exist in historical contexts in that their components “have symbolic and/or design aspects that relate to, derive from and/or respond to previous vexillological, art historical and/or other visual practices” (Hayward, “Under the Mermaid Flag” 74) that they draw on to assert entitativity. Notably, in these regards, the central motif of the Pontinhan flag and coat of arms (Fig. 7) is the *cross pattée* (a cross whose arms decrease in size from their flared outer edge to narrow necks that converge at the centre), which is also present in metal lattices in the fort (which were installed before Barros’ acquisition of the site). The distinctive cross is often associated with the military religious order of Knights Templar who were active in 12th-15th centuries and played a significant role in Western European crusades to “liberate” the Holy Land from Muslim control. Given that the Knights Templar were not active on Madeira and, indeed, had significantly diminished by the time Funchal was first settled, there is no direct historical connection between them to reinforce Pontinha’s heritage and gravitas by association. Despite this, a story circulated in social media in the late 2000s, which was picked up by some press outlets (see, for instance, *OneIndia*) to the effect that a nail from Christ’s crucifixion brought to the former islet had been found at Pontinha during archaeological excavations, possibly brought by member of the Knights Templar. These claims, conclusively debunked by authors such as Fitzpatrick-Matthews, nevertheless added to the micronational mystique and sense of historical antecedence perceived by aficionados of micronationality and historico-mythology. The national coat of arms (Fig. 7) is also significant for combining the cross with a (stylised) image of the fort (top left quadrant of the shield) above the Latin motto “*verba volant, scripta manent*,” [9] meaning that whereas spoken words are ephemeral written ones are permanent. In the context of Barros’s claim that Pontinha’s micronationality derives from written documentation from 1903, the motto would appear to refer to (and reinforce) the claim.

[9] Literally, “words fly, writings remain.”

Fig. 7 Coat of arms of the Principado da Pontinha (2014 design) (Wikimedia Commons). The coat of arms reproduced here is that currently available as a Wikimedia Commons file, other sources, such as Guerra, show what appear to be (earlier?) variants, with the cross and the fort images being common elements. It is unclear which – if any – is regarded as the definitive version but the Wikimedia version reproduced in this article appears to be the most frequently cited.



[10] Barros’s micronation was also the subject of a six minute long documentary film entitled *Forte São José: Principado da Pontinha* made by Ilídio Ribeiro and Carla Moura (n.d.).

A decade of legal disputes followed Barros’s assertion of micronational sovereignty, with neither the national nor territorial administrations recognising either the Principality’s legitimacy or Barros’ right to ignore local and national planning regulations. National and international media coverage of Barros’ claims (e.g. Heilpern, Dispatcheseuro), including an article by Barros himself published in the *UK Guardian* in 2014, brought attention to the Principality and stimulated tourist interest in visiting the quirky micronation. [10] Indeed, emboldened by the traction he felt he was gaining, he also announced plans for a (micro) university whose degrees would include a core unit entitled “Management of a Country” designed for what described as “the new global elite generations who want to “make the leap” in the face of widespread incompetence worldwide, with regard to the management of public funds in their countries” (Pontinha).

II. Performing and Representing Pontinha

The most sustained representation of the micronation to date has been in Gonçalo Guerra’s 2016 documentary *Um Sonho Soberano*, which premiered at the Madeira Film Festival in April 2016, was screened in independent cinemas in Portugal and featured in several international film festivals. The film provides a sensitive and nuanced depiction of Barros and the relationship between his upbringing in Madeira, his personal circumstances and proclivities and his assumption of the role of head of state in a micronation of his own invention.

[11] For a number of similar responses, see Tripadvisor, which includes visitors’ characterisations of the micronational site as “basic and bonkers” (“DJ of Reading”) and “unusual, quirky, eclectic!” (“SHE2005”).

Um Sonho Soberano is also notable for its representation of Barros publicly performing as the head of state and interacting with both assistants and with visitors. These performances, often undertaken clad in his crown and robe (as represented in the micronational coat of arms, Fig. 7 above), represent enactments of the principality. The micronation, and Barros’ appearance and princely demeanour, are also represented and, in some instances directly commented on, in sequences showing tourists visiting the micronation. The general tenor of tourists’ behaviour suggests a politely amused engagement with both Barros and with Pontinha’s presentation as a micronation. [11] Some of Barros’ other actions are absurd enough to emphasise the underlying ridiculousness of professing micronationality for a partially demolished fort

site located within a busy port's seawall, perhaps the best example being his costumed leap from a ledge into the water on the south side of the breakwater into what he regards as Pontinhan territorial waters.

The various performances of micronationality and, what's more, of the micronationality of a site designated as an island in its official name (despite its being de-islanded since 1775), bears comparison to the annual Bentensai rituals performed on and around Sakurajima islet, which was incorporated into a seawall protecting Sai village port, in northern Honshu (Japan), around the mid-20th Century. [12] As Suwa contends, the syncretic Shinto rituals perform/reconstitute the island in the seawall:

[12] To avoid confusion, it should also be noted that there is another Sakurajima, in southern Kyushu, that has also been de-islanded, in its case by lava flows. See Johnson and Kuwahara for discussion of its remnant islandness.

If an island is an expression of culture (e.g. the environment on material plane), and ideas can be the contents of island... these two cannot be placed under a single paradigm... Here, the island as assemblage... a space which becomes void without a performance. Island becomes real as a result of a magical relationship between the volition and action influencing the material plane. (2017 7, 8)

The “magical” element identified by Suwa with reference to Shinto beliefs and practices around Sakurajima might, less prosaically, be understood in terms of the benign complicity of tourists and/or supporters of Pontinhan micronationality and their affective engagement with the materiality of the former fort site which enclosed and embodied the imagined micronation.

The film and the publicity it brought to the Principality arguably represented the zenith of the micronation's existence with its nadir following in 2017 when Barros was arrested by members of the GNR (Portuguese Republican National Guard) for failing to comply with an order to close his premises (i.e. Pontinha). [13] While he was subsequently released pending trial, his property was put up for auction after he was declared insolvent and has been purchased by a group of *retornados* (returned Madeiran diasporans) with plans to restore the fort as a historical/museum attraction (eschewing the site's contested micronational status), although the attraction has not yet opened. While Barros frequently posts on Pontinha's Facebook page and occasionally contributes to public events as the prince of Ilhéu da Pontinha (see Drummond), he is reduced to the status of an exiled head of a defunct micronation, retaining only the trappings of his assumed princehood.

[13] In a Facebook posting made shortly after Barros' arrest he continued to maintain that Portuguese authorities had no jurisdiction over him and his Principality and reproduced an article that asserted that “Portuguese authorities ostensibly violated public international law by illegally detaining Prince D. Renato in his Principality. And instead of being taken to a Portuguese Judge, he is illegally detained in the GNR – Republican National Guard, which has no competence to intervene, at most it would be the Maritime Police because it is an island” (Hughes).

Conclusion

In our discussions we have attempted to identify the manner in which Barros' Principado do Ilhéu da Pontinha represented a local-level attempt to evade municipal/state authority through the theatricality of declared micronationality and, simultaneously, invoked a former island that had been palimpsestically “overwritten” by successive developments of Funchal's seawall. Barros' seemingly eccentric (and ultimately futile) attempts to escape the “gravity” of the municipality and of the nation state are thereby significant for their attempts to crack the temporal fixity of the fort site (i.e. its current material status rather than its previous form) and to use a former version as a trans-temporal referent. The latter aspect was compounded by Barros' use of a

tendentious document dating from a previous sale of the fort in 1903 as a precept. The two elements were used as the basis of an extended performance that was as gestural as that of Sakurajima's annual Bentensai rituals. In these regards, Guerra's documentary *Um Sonho Soberano* is as significant as performance documentation as it is as an analysis of the phenomenon it represents. The visual signs that served the entitativity of the micronation during its enactment in 2007-2017 (such as the Principality's flag and coat of arms) now linger as relics of a micronation briefly constituted in space but now only performed as a virtual entity through social media platforms.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Gonalo Guerra for providing a copy of his documentary *Um Sonho Soberano* to us with English subtitles and to Ana Catarina Abrantes Garcia for making her doctoral research-in-progress on Funchal available to us and for commenting on the final draft of our manuscript.

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