

BEYOND NATIONAL BORDERS:

The troubled relationship between Corsica and Sardinia (1948-2020)

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Marcel A. Farinelli

<marcelfarinelli@gmail.com>

ABSTRACT: Corsica and Sardinia are two Mediterranean islands, belonging to two different mainland countries: France and Italy. The islands are separated by the Strait of Bonifacio, which at its narrow point is 13 km wide. This has enabled a bond between the population living on both sides. However, this relationship has progressively been disrupted since the 19th century. The islands can be described as an ‘impeded archipelago’, an island group where existing links were not only removed but also potential new relations have been discouraged. Nevertheless, since the second half of the 20th century, Sardinian and Corsican political and economic elites have tried to establish an island-to-island cooperation. Despite their attempts, it was just in 2016 that the Corsican and Sardinian local governments signed an agreement. This article aims to explore the concept of an impeded archipelago through a detailed analysis of the attempts made to establish an island-to-island relationship, and of the elements that have disrupted this relation, from 1948 to 2020. In doing so, it also provides some reflections on the implications and challenges of a fragmented geography and economy for Island Studies.

KEYWORDS: impeded archipelago, trans-border relations, Corsica, Sardinia

Historical background

From the 2nd millennium BCE, Corsica and Sardinia (Figure 1) have been linked with by shared cultural characteristics of the Torrean and the Nuragic civilisations respectively. Over time, coastal areas of both islands were colonised by Phoenician-Carthaginians and Greeks, before being occupied by the Romans, and merged into a single province. After the fall of the Roman Empire, they were never united administratively.

Between 13th and 15th centuries, Corsica and Sardinia were disputed between the Italian maritime republics of Pisa and Genoa, the Crown of Aragon, the Sardinian sovereign entities, called Judicates, and Corsican aristocrats and communes. The Papacy considered the islands a fiefdom, therefore in 1297 Pope Boniface VIII proclaimed the Kingdom of Corsica and Sardinia, giving its sovereignty to the Crown of Aragon. Nonetheless, the kingdom was never formed, and eventually around the end of the 15th century Corsica came under the rule of Genoa, while Sardinia became part of the Spanish Empire. Thus, Corsica received cultural and linguistic influence from the Italian Peninsula, while Sardinia from the Iberian. As a result, the Corsican language is close to Italian dialects, and Sardinian shows influences from

Catalan and Castilian. However, now Catalan and Castilian languages are not understood by either Italians or Corsicans. During the 18th century, the administrative power changed hands and Sardinia was handed to the House of Savoy, which ruled northern Italian territories such as Piedmont, the Aosta Valley and the city of Nice. Meanwhile Corsica after a 40-year revolt against Genoa (1729-1769), was occupied and eventually annexed to France. Despite political divisions, the Strait of Bonifacio remained permeable. During the 17th and 18th centuries, Corsicans settled in the islets of the Strait and parts of northern Sardinia, establishing commercial links with their homelands in Corsica. The presence of Corsican settlers influenced the cultural landscape of the area, called Gallura, and even today their inhabitants speak a Corsican dialect, *Gallurese*.



Figure 1 –The Strait of Bonifacio (Molan 2022, 42)

The association with the actual mainland country (1790, Corsica; 1861, Sardinia) had a negative impact on island-to-island relations but also produced centrifugal tensions on the island/metropole relationships that influenced the historical evolution of these societies. During the 20th century, such tensions led to the formation of regionalists and nationalist movements, claiming autonomy or independence. Due to the cultural links with the Italian Peninsula, Corsica was claimed and eventually occupied by Italy in 1942-43. This context disrupted inter-island relations and pushed French authorities to consider any regionalist or

autonomy-oriented movement in Corsica as Italian irredentism. As a result, after WWII the islands were almost segregated. Sardinia obtained sub-national island jurisdiction (SNIJ) status in 1948 and Corsica did so in 1982. As a result, the following analyses are divided into two separate periods. First, I have considered the period of 1948 to 1982, when both areas were under highly unequal powers: while Sardinia had an elected parliament with limited legislative powers, Corsica was administrated by a Prefect and a consultative non-elected body. In the second period of 1982 to 2020, the island-to-island relations were managed by two similar institutions, albeit with different competencies.

The first attempts

The 1948 Italian Constitution granted autonomy to Sardinia. The status of SNIJ was a long-standing demand of Sardinian Regionalism, which emerged after WWI as the main political movement on the island. Hopes for a better future relied on the development of an economic plan, funded by the central government and controlled by the regional authorities, which would have built infrastructures for developing the island economy, particularly tourism, agriculture, and industry. In this context, the idea of a strong cooperation with Corsica emerged.

Corsican-Sardinian cooperation was first proposed during the 1920s by a Sardinian economist, Gavino Alivia (1886-1959). However, Alivia's ideas failed to be implemented once Mussolini took power in Italy (1922) as the French-Italian diplomatic relations soured, becoming especially strained after 1938. At the end of WWII, Alivia — then director of a Sardinian bank — relaunched the project to foster the development of both islands and the cooperation between European countries. The cooperation sought was based on the integration of the two island economies. Till then, the diverse geography and history of the two regions had resulted in different economies. Corsica has an alpine-type topography with scarce mineral resources but abundant water, which has favoured cattle breeding and the exploitation of forest resources. In contrast, Sardinia had low mountains, coal and ferrous ore mines, few water resources, and large alluvial plains. This meant that the main activities in Sardinia were sheep breeding, cereal cultivation and mining. As Alivia said, “the two islands together do not add up: they complement each other... they multiply their value” (Oeconomicus, 1954). Sardinia could export agricultural products (mainly wheat and vegetables), as well as industrial products (food industry and construction materials) to Corsica. In return, Corsica could export water, the energy produced by hydroelectrical plants, and raw materials such as wood to Sardinia. In addition, while Corsica needed a seasonal working force, Sardinia was characterised by migration and unemployment. For Alivia, Corsica and Sardinia presented a unique geographical and economic space. However, there was a problem of a lack of communication. While this was not the case between 1860 and 1887, aiding the expansion of the Sardinian economy, when the French-Italian relationship became increasingly tense because of the country's rivalry in North Africa and the Mediterranean, the commercial relationship and communications faltered (Farinelli, 2021). With the establishment of the Italian Fascist regime, the annexation of Corsica became a primary goal for Mussolini. Fascist propaganda and the response of the French government disrupted the contact between islanders further.

After WWII, the relationship had to be rebuilt from scratch. Inspired by Alivia, north Sardinian and south Corsican entrepreneurs established contacts and organised meetings, the very first one being at Ajaccio in 1950. These summits were an initiative of the Rotary Club of Sassari, the main city in north Sardinia, and that of Ajaccio, the capital of Corsica.

The participants were all members of the respective Chambers of Commerce. The Sardinians (whose chamber was previously directed by Alivia) showed most enthusiasm for building economic and commercial links with Corsica. In the 1950s, the two islands were almost segregated, so the first step was implementing the physical connection. At the time, the only route connecting the islands was a ferry linking Bonifacio, in south Corsica, to Santa Teresa Gallura, in north Sardinia. The ferry was small and carried just two cars and, moreover, the two ports were located in narrow rias, with reduced space for maneuvering and poor infrastructure. One of the reasons for this was that the connection was intended to serve tourists rather than the islanders (Betti Carboncini, 2011, 102). Moreover, the existence of heavy customs control at the border was a major hindrance, in particular for cross-border workers and commerce.

Eventually, France and Italy agreed to implement commercial relations by reducing custom taxation and under certain circumstances, passport control. To achieve this, a special visa was issued at the French-Italian border on the mainland by customs authorities. The idea was to speed up the border crossing by workers and tourists, at a moment when tourism was rapidly growing. In 1952 the Chambers of Commerce of Sassari and Ajaccio lobbied the respective island and mainland authorities to apply the same agreement in the Strait of Bonifacio and to implement the connection between Bonifacio and Santa Teresa Gallura. The Sardinians invited the Prefect of Corsica, Marcel Savreaux (1899-1994), to an important celebration in Sassari and were successful in obtaining his support (Savreaux, 1977, pp. 249-260). It was the first time that an institutional delegation from Corsica visited Sardinia since the beginning of the 20th century. But despite the enthusiasm of the Sardinians, the French General Consul in Rome assumed that favouring travel to Sardinia would be detrimental for France. As a result, while the Italian government allocated considerable funds for a specific economic plan for Sardinia, called the Rebirth Plan, the Corsicans protested against the French government for abandoning them (Beauroy, 1954). However, these debates were clouded by worries that Sardinians, stereotyped as poor people prone to criminal activities or disposed to work in the most undesirable professions, would flock into Corsica as illegal aliens. In addition, the fear was that Sardinian immigrants would act as agents of Italian irredentism, spreading propaganda for annexing the island to Italy (Bureau de l'Administration et du Tourisme, 1954, April 30; 1954, April 27). After a long negotiation, an agreement was signed on 7 May 1954 which allowed crossing of the border with an 8-day visa without a passport.

Etiquette is important to understand diplomatic relationships. Negotiations reveal how, from a French perspective, the linkage was problematic. The suspicion that easing the contact would have a negative effect on the Corsican political landscape was evident during the official signature ceremony. The French government expected to sign the agreement in Rome, in the presence of representatives of the Italian government. However, the Italians wanted the ceremony to be held in Sardinia. Finally, the French Prefect accepted a compromise, and the agreement was signed on La Maddalena, the biggest of the islands in the Strait of Bonifacio whose inhabitants are of Corsican origin.

Beyond the problems, freedom of movement albeit limited, was a significant step that increased Corsican-Sardinian relations. The relationship can be quantified, using cargo and passenger traffic data from the ports of Santa Teresa Gallura and Bonifacio¹. In 1954, 702

1. Data about port activity in Sardinia and Corsica are incomplete, and for most of the years the records register just if a ship was "national" or "international". Since all the traffic between Santa Teresa Gallura

passengers arrived at Santa Teresa Gallura from Bonifacio, as well as 30 tons of goods. On the Sardinia to Corsica route, passengers were 661 and goods were 27 tons. In 1955 the increase was significant: 2931 persons and 159 tons were landed at Bonifacio, while at Santa Teresa 3168 passengers and 123 tons of goods arrived. This was the first successful step to create a connection (*Scambi commerciali*, ca. 1955; Regione Autonoma della Sardegna [RAS] 1954, pp. 66-67; 1955, pp. 64-65).

It was only in 1966 that Tirrenia assigned a new ship to the route, able to carry not just a couple of cars, but 36 plus trucks and buses. Thanks to this, the Sardinian government proposed to establish two regular bus routes connecting the islands, both for tourists and cross-border workers. The service was planned to be run by the Sardinian public transportation company with a weekly or daily connection. However, this was perceived as a threat by the Corsican companies, who lobbied French authorities to impede Sardinian buses that could load passengers in Corsica. As the Corsicans wanted to avoid additional competition, the Sardinian company was permitted to just carry passengers loaded in Sardinia. This connection was only for tourists and was closed after 10 years with an average of 7 passengers per ride. Sardinians and Corsicans also tried to expand the connections asking their respective national air companies to establish a route between main island airports. In 1957, Corsica succeeded in creating a stop for the Air France flight from Nice-Ajaccio-Tunis in Alghero, north Sardinia. However, in a political context marked by the decolonisation and the end of French rule in North Africa in the year, the air connection lasted just a few months.

Despite the enthusiasm of economists and local politicians, the link between the two islands was not easy to establish. One of the main problems remained the limitations of the port facilities in Bonifacio and Santa Teresa Gallura, which reduced the quantity of goods that could be moved through the Strait. In addition, there was no customs office in Bonifacio (goods were moved to Porto Vecchio or Ajaccio, or the office dispatched a delegate to Bonifacio), while that of Santa Teresa had a limitation in the type and quantity of merchandise that could be authorised. In 1966 the president of the Chamber of Sassari, Mr Passino, in a letter to the Sardinian Authority for Tourism and Transport admitted such limitations and also acknowledged, for the first time, that the Corsican market could be too small for the Sardinian exports (Passino, 1966). This situation lasted until 1967-68 when both ports were allowed to have full working customs offices.

Failed institutionalisation

During the 1950s, the entrepreneurial and financial bourgeoisie were the most interested and active in building a connection, in particular, the Sardinians through the powerful Chamber of Commerce of Sassari, and the Corsicans through the Chamber of Ajaccio. At that time, the Corsican and Sardinian boards for tourism were also involved as the cooperation was intended to favor tourism. Despite supporting the idea of an island-to-island cooperation, most of the politicians remained passive. However, it is worth remembering the difference between the two islands: Sardinian institutions were relatively free to make decisions, while the Corsican one had no such powers and had to depend on the goodwill of the French

and Bonifacio is represented by the ferries crossing the Strait, I used this data to quantify the island-to-island relation.

government. As a result, the negotiations took place between institutions with very different powers.

A partial solution to reduce informality and disparity was proposed by a Corsican politician, Antoine Serafini (1900-1964). A supporter of General De Gaulle, Serafini was a member of the French parliament (in 1951-1955 and 1962-1964) and was Mayor of Ajaccio (in 1949-1953 and 1959-1964). During the May 1958 crisis, Serafini and other Gaullists removed Prefect Marcel Savreaux, who was not an enthusiast for enhanced Corsican-Sardinian relations. As MP, Serafini was a member of the Commission on Transport and Tourism and he was directly involved in the definition of the French-Italian agreements about the Corsican-Sardinian border. As Mayor of the island capital, in September 1963 Serafini welcomed a delegation of Sardinian tourist operators, politicians and entrepreneurs. During the visit, he suggested an ongoing Corsican-Sardinian Conference, a committee formed by the main economic actors of both islands to develop cooperation. Serafini also declared to the French press that the main problem was that Corsica was not as autonomous as Sardinia (Bastianesi, 1963).

Despite the goodwill, the conference was a partial fiasco. The first meeting was scheduled for 23 November 1963, but a series of crisis, including Serafini's sudden death, forced it to be postponed until January 1968 (Bargone, 1968). The reasons for such a delay are not clear, however, from the correspondence between the Prefect of Corsica and the French Ministry of the Interior, it emerges that it was the Corsican members of the commission who postponed it. After the summit, entrepreneurs planned to import timber from Corsica to supply Sardinian furniture factories and to export construction materials from Sardinia. Importantly, in this case, the price paid for the Corsican would have been lower than for importing the same products from France. Other minor trades planned were fish products (eels from Corsica and shellfish from Sardinia), wine (from Sardinia to Corsica) and olives (from Corsica to Sardinia, to be processed into oil). However, for the most part, island-to-island commerce failed to grow as desired, despite the enthusiasm of the Chamber of Sassari (Ghinami 1968). While the Italian authorities requested information several times between 1969 and 1972, the answers of Mr. Passino raised several issues including structural problems such as the poor infrastructure and the lack of labor in Corsica. He pinned the problems on the French authorities for being protectionists. Passino also mentioned an informal agreement between Italian and French producers of concrete and construction materials who had agreed not to compete with each other (Passino 1966, May 2). In the end, only the timber and fish trade developed somewhat. However, there is a lack of data for its quantification.

There may be various reasons for the failure of this conference. First, there was a disagreement between the island's and central government's political and economic institutions. Even if island politicians and economic actors showed commitment to the linkage, respective mainland governments had other priorities. This was evident for Corsica, where the *Conseil Général* did not enjoy the same freedom of maneuver as the Sardinian regional government. Moreover, when Corsican politicians participated in the establishment of the island-to-island relations during the 1960s, French authorities worked to impede cooperation. This is evident when in September 1965, a delegation visited Sardinia. It was formed both by representatives of the French government (the Prefect, Marcel Turon), and Corsican politicians who were MPs in Paris, and members of the *Conseil Général* (Jean Zuccarelli, François Giacobbi and Auguste-Cincinnatus Taviani). In the meeting, the participants expected to sanction the beginning of an institutional collaboration. For the Corsicans, it was also a chance to study Italy's commitment to the south and its larger islands. The French government, at that time, was setting up a regional development plan and the

visit was part of a trip to Southern Italy to study the Italian regional institutions. The Prefect was worried that the Corsicans, faced with the Sardinian progress in agriculture, tourism and industry, would be convinced that the solution to Corsica's problems lay in obtaining autonomy. And so, the Prefect tried postponing the trip, even using the pretext of the tensions produced by the construction of a power line. The Prefect also participated in the meeting with the Italian consulate in Bastia, accused of spreading irredentist propaganda. The power line, known as Carbo-Sarda, was planned to bring electricity produced in Sardinia to mainland Italy. The line passed through Corsica but without any benefits for the islanders. As a result, Corsican landowners who had the line passing in their properties protested and some transmission towers were blown up. These factors created an adverse environment for the Corsica-Sardinia relationship and were further exploited by the Prefect (all the documents are in ADCS, 252 W 14.).

Contributing to this adverse environment, the Corsican delegation to Sardinia was surveilled by French intelligence after being alarmed by the statements made by influential Corsican politicians. François Giacobbi (1919-1997), was impressed by the Italian effort in Sardinia and Auguste-Cincinnatus Taviani (1899-1988), declared that Corsica should be a region (Le Commissaire chef du SDRG, 1965; l'effort consenti par l'Italie, 1965; Premières impressions, 1965). The French feared that inspired by Sardinia, the members of the *Conseil Générale* would demand a similar autonomous regime. This went beyond the regionalist reform that Paris was undertaking, and French intelligence feared that the example represented by Sardinia would be useful for the growing regionalist movement in Corsica. The documentation explicitly mentions articles by Max Simeoni (1929-2023), one of the leaders of the movement and enthusiast of interisland cooperation. Moreover, admiration for Sardinian autonomy was no secret and Corsican journalists themselves reported that some delegates were impressed by the progress made by Sardinia and that Corsica must be an autonomous SNIJ (Silvani, 1965). The Prefect himself was so concerned that during a discourse he delivered in Cagliari, he insisted that their trip had "neither the character of an international negotiation nor that of the search for a status that would prove unsuitable for France's only metropolitan island department" (Notre voyage, 1965). The Prefect in his report to the Ministry of the Interior confirmed these concerns and acknowledged that the delegates were so impressed that they no longer considered Sardinia a backward island (Le Préfet de la Corse 1965, October 15.). The final document prepared by the Corsican delegation shows both admiration for what Italy had done and criticism for the attitude of French governments towards Corsica. But above all, it affirmed how "this population [the Sardinians] will no longer be judged for the emigrants who come to Corsica in search of work". A sentence that sets aside the negative image that was dominant during the previous twenty years.

Communication breakdown

The Prefect's attitude was ambiguous. While in public he showed a desire to foster more fluid relations, privately he was concerned about the risks involved. On one side, the Prefect and the French central authorities feared that Sardinia's tourism industry would end up eclipsing Corsica, making the island a second-rate destination. On the other, there was a concern about the influence that the Sardinian political landscape – an SNIJ with a Regionalist movement evolving into Nationalism – would have on Corsica.

Tourism was one of the reasons why the cooperation was prevented, as the two islands were competitors. Tourism has been a significant economic activity in Corsica since the second

half of the 19th century. In 1957 France prepared an economic plan for the island in which tourism was to be the driving force. However, this plan was delayed because of the political turmoil that affected France during decolonisation in Algeria. Moreover, its application slowed due to the opposition by the Corsican's growing regionalism (for a summarised account of the evolution of Corsican Regionalism/Nationalism, see Paci, 2023a). As a result, at the end of the 1960s, the difference in infrastructures for tourism between Corsica and Sardinia was great and was recognised in reports by the Corsican delegation that visited Sardinia in 1965 (see ADCS 323 W62). Sardinia was considered a rival because of the large number of hotel rooms, lower prices and the quality of the service offered by workers trained in public hotelier schools. On the contrary, Corsica had few hotels and largely untrained staff due to the lack of vocational schools. To add to this, Corsica was even more concerned by the luxury resort known as Emerald Coast, promoted by a consortium led by the prince of the Ismaili, Karim Aga Khan IV. The investment, albeit contested by some political groups, eventually was welcomed by the Sardinian government. In 1963-65 the first kilometers of pristine coast was developed with hotels, luxurious villas, port facilities and even a brand-new village, Porto Cervo (today the resort counts 8,000 buildings on 55 km of coast).

Despite the efforts to create a common tourist market, the two islands were competing for the same resources. Sardinia's post-WWII transformation alarmed French authorities in Corsica and the state agencies for tourism promotion, which feared that Sardinia's hotel network would be difficult competition to beat. Thus, while tourism should have been the driving force of the island-to-island relationship, the ideas about the complementarity of the economies failed to play out. The Corsican and Sardinian tourist sectors were competing and not complementary. In the aftermath of the first and only meeting of the Corsican-Sardinian committee, optimism gave way to resignation.

The other element that undermined the island-to-island relation was the political context in Corsica where regionalism became radicalised, eventually evolving into nationalism. In 1971, Corsican activists leaked the content of a study made by the Hudson Institute and commissioned by the French Government for planning the economic development which was perceived as a plan to erase native culture. For Corsica, depopulated and in constant economic crisis, the study proposed two radically different solutions: a) substituting the Corsicans with new settlers (in this way, the growing nationalism would be not a problem and the lack of workforce would be solved); b) protecting the local community, its language and culture and using Corsican identity to promote the island as "authentic tourism" destination. The French government had opted for the first solution and kept the study and its decision secret. In the following years, there was an escalation of tension until in 1975 the leader of Corsican nationalism, Edmond Simeoni (1934-2018) led an armed commando action. Simeoni took over a wine depot and farm of a non-Corsican settler to denounce the situation. The property was stormed by French police, and the action ended with the death of two policemen and the wounding of one of the occupants. In a further escalation, the year after, different groups converged to form the National Liberation Front of Corsica (FLNC), an armed group aimed to liberate the island from France. Particularly between 1976 and 1981, the tension was so high that the island-to-island relations vanished from the political agenda. In such a context, the existence of the Nationalist movement on both islands, as we will see later, was an issue that worried French and Italian intelligence and disrupted the cross-border relation.

A renewed relationship

The two islands were so loosely connected that in 1975 Sardinian newspapers didn't have any on-the-scene reporters in Corsica. The first articles about the 1975 crisis were written by the correspondents in Paris based on the French press. No clearer example exists of the disconnection (Uccisi in Corsica, 1975; Gli autonomisti corsi, 1975). In 1975 the Prefect, a Corsican, for the first time, accused the Italian immigrants of being responsible for the radicalisation, but without providing any evidence. In turn, the Italians were also worried about a radicalisation of the Sardinian political landscape and wanted to impede contact between the two island nationalist factions. In addition to the political violence, the French and Italians also had to deal with the increasing activity of Corsican and Sardinian bandits. There was a constant flow of criminals between islands to avoid being caught by the police or killed in a feud. In these circumstances, the Strait of Bonifacio was strictly surveilled. However, the situation changed after 1982 when Corsica was granted the status of SNIJ and the representative of the central Government was complemented by an elected body, the Corsican Assembly. It was an important move to calm down the tensions and from the point of view of the island-to-island relation. From that moment, the two islands had similar institutions and could make some decisions without depending on the mainland governments. Nevertheless, the relation was influenced by a substantial difference in the powers that island institutions could exercise. The Corsican SNIJ had just administrative powers and was established by a common law. It was not constitutional, as was the case in Sardinia, and thus could be revoked by the French Parliament at any time.

The first actions in this new context were in the field of research and university education. In November 1982, the Regional Institute for Administration of Bastia organised a Sardinian-Corsican seminary on islandness, with the participation of politicians, economists, and experts in administration from both islands. As in the 1960s, the participants were confident about the complementarity of the two economies and in order to develop commerce and cooperation they proposed to form a permanent commission for inter-insular cooperation (*Revue de Sciences*, 1982; Pastorel et Olivesi, 1990). However, as the Corsican political scientist Claude Olivesi observed years later, "despite the fact that the participants, and above all the political representatives, agreed on the need to set it up as quickly as possible, this commission was not followed up... no doubt due to a lack of political will" (Olivesi, 1989, p. 32). Despite this, the academic relationship between the Sardinian universities (Sassari and Cagliari) and the new University of Corsica opened optimistically in 1981. In 1983, an interdisciplinary research centre called Institut du Développement des Iles Méditerranéennes (IDIM) was created in Corsica and in the following years it established relations with Sardinian universities. This was a pioneering initiative in the emergence of Island Studies, although its role seems not to have been recognised in academic literature. The IDIM aimed at analysing different island experiences and promoting the creation of a database useful for island governance. One of its first initiatives was a workshop on economy and development called *Rencontre corso-sarde: filières et développement local* (Cahiers de l'IDIM, 1987). Sardinians and Corsicans met again to study common economic issues by analysing case studies, but nothing was done. In the 1990s, IDIM entered a period of crisis and ceased its activities (Masterheim, 2006, 11-17). Despite the enthusiastic statements of the first meeting, for the next years, the academic relations were not supported by any organisation or institution, and instead, they depended on the personal relation between Sardinians and Corsican scholars.

Europe, autonomy and islandness

It was the establishment of the European Union that created a favorable environment for Corsican-Sardinian cooperation and provided the legal frame to overcome the obstacles represented by national borders. After 1973, many of the new members of the European Economic Union (EEC) (today, the European Union [EU]) were either island countries or nations with a significant part of the population residing on islands (Great Britain, Ireland, Denmark, Greece, Spain and Portugal). As a result, the European institutions became more receptive to islandness (Biggi, 2006; Warrington and Milne, 2018, 178). In the same year, the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions (CPMR), a French association bringing together maritime and peripheral regions of both EEC and non-EEC member states (currently involving 11 countries) was established. Analysing European policies towards islands, Deborah Paci states that after being left “in a kind of political and juridical no man’s land” for decades, with the commission “the islands obtained their first recognition” (2023, p.40). In 1980, an Islands Commission was founded as part of CPMR and it played an important role in raising the awareness of island issues in European institutions. The most significant consequence of this new context was the recognition that islands, particularly in the Mediterranean, deserve special policies to combat insularity (Council of Europe, 1987; The European Council, 1988, 10). In 1984, the Commission for Regional Policies and Territorial Development asked Spanish MEP Juan Cabezón Alonso to draw up a report on the problems of Corsica and Sardinia. The document asserted that economic backwardness and isolation could be overcome by developing the interisland relationship, proposing the same solutions advanced by Alivia in the 1950s and by the Hudson Institute in the early 1970s. For the first time, the European Parliament approved a resolution for Corsica and Sardinia, pointing out that “despite their proximity, the economic, social and cultural links between the two islands are insufficient due to their over-dependence on their respective mainland countries”. As a solution, the document suggested, “establishing by 1992 a policy for the development of economic, cultural and social exchanges between the two islands, especially through the development of maritime and air communications” (European Union, 1989, 503-509).

An objective of the EU socialist parties was the recognition of insularity as a major reason for the underdevelopment of island territories. So, the Corsican branch of the national *Partie Socialiste* (PS) organised a meeting with Sardinian MPs to discuss how to enforce the EP’s resolutions (the results were published in *Cahiers de l’IDIM*, 1990). In November, the Corsican Assembly approved a motion submitted by socialist Laurent Croce, establishing a commission to approach the Sardinian government regarding the development of relations between the two islands (Croce, 1989). Once again, according to Olivesi (1999, 753), the lack of funds and a legal framework prevented the proposal from having practical results even if approved. Once again, while the island politicians seemed interested in the relationship, priorities on the mainland remained different even though the French Minister of Internal Affairs proposed the implementation of the Corsican SNIJ to tackle the resurgence of political violence in Corsica (Farinelli, 2020). In this context, the Minister organised a meeting in Corsica, entitled the *Colloques des Iles*, inviting politicians and scholars from Jersey, Guernsey, Madeira, Crete, Balearic Islands and Sardinia. The conference was oriented to perceptions of islands being disadvantaged by their geography and its rationale was to show concern for Corsica’s problems, but without conceding an autonomy such as that held by Sardinia. Nevertheless, it was part of a process of reform of the SNIJ and was held during an economic crisis that resulted in a strike of public workers asking for economic compensation because of the higher cost of living in respect to mainland France. Facing this concern, the attitude of the French government remained ambiguous. On one side, the General Inspector of Finance, Robert Toulemon, stated that commerce with Sardinia would benefit Corsican

consumers by reducing prices of common goods. He even proposed connecting the islands through a bridge². However, in contradiction, the report of another finance inspector, Michel Prada, pointed out that the import of agricultural products from Sardinia would be detrimental to the local economy. Prada stated that to protect the fragile Corsican economy it was necessary to strengthen links with the French market (Prada, 1989).

The *Colloque des Iles* had no consequences mostly because there was no agreement between France and Italy to enable cross-border relations. Once again, the European institutions filled the vacuum through the cross-border cooperation program known as Interreg. The purpose of the project was to improve networking, foster economic exchanges and cooperation in research, to valorise shared natural resources and increase mutual knowledge among the populations. Interreg did not target island relationships but, rather aimed to foster cross-border relations between France and Italy. For this reason, Interreg was mainly aimed at building better infrastructures in the area of the Strait of Bonifacio, fundamental for developing commerce. The success of this program is reflected in data obtained during its implementation showing an increase in traffic between Bonifacio and Santa Teresa Gallura (Farinelli, 2021, 331-332). Due to the positive impact of the Interreg program, after 2006 Sardinia and Corsica were no longer considered areas deserving of special policies. As a result, Interreg was not focused just on island territories but extended to a wider region comprising island and mainland territories. From 1989 on while some major problems continued to impede it (as I discuss in the next section), Interreg represented the most effective investment in the building of island-to-island relations,

Collaboration across the Strait

An element that both fostered the relationship between the two islands and at the same time acted as a source of disruption was the management of the Strait of Bonifacio. The area was environmentally sensitive due to the presence of several uninhabited small islands and rocks that were ideal for nesting seabirds and diverse fish fauna. However, this ideal habitation was seriously threatened in the 1960s due to the opening of a petrochemical plant on the Sardinia shore at Porto Torres, significantly increasing cargo ship traffic and tourism. Concerns furthermore increased when in 1973 the Italian government allowed the US Navy to deploy a support ship for nuclear submarines on the islet of Santo Stefano, in the Archipelago of La Maddalena. The decision alarmed Corsican society as it followed the revelation in 1972 that the Italian company Montedison was dumping harmful sludge off the coast of Corsica, in international waters. The protest movement became so radicalised due to the indifference of the French and Italian authorities that one of the Italian ships used to dump the polluting mud was blown up. This was an important step in the radicalisation of Corsican Nationalism.

In 1974, a Corsican magazine revealed the presence of radioactive substances in the Strait. The author blamed the Italian, French and US governments, and also the population and the Mayor of La Maddalena, who were accused of being in favour of the US facilities because of economic reasons (Colonna, 1974). It was only after decades that this issue succeeded in fostering cooperation between Sardinian and Corsican environmental associations and political parties when in 2003-2005 public opinion of both islands was shocked by a nuclear

² When this article was written, Mr. Toulemon's report was not accessible for researchers. Its content were retrieved by the local press, and were mostly accessible through the issue of *Corse-Matin* published on May 25 1989.

submarine accident in the Strait. While attempts were made to keep the accident secret, the Sardinian press got wind of it. Backed enthusiastically by one of the Nationalist parties in Corsica, the Corsican Nation Party, the incident caused outrage among both the Sardinian and Corsican populations (F.G., 2003). In this case, Corsican and Sardinian political forces and environmentalist organisations worked together and disproved the official version of the event which claimed that there was no danger of contamination. The Commission de Recherche et d'Information Indépendantes sur la Radioactivité (CRIRAD), an independent French entity, confirmed the contamination of the water. A meeting was held in Bonifacio which was attended by about 200 people from both islands including representatives of CRIRAD, World Wildlife Fund Gallura, the Corsican environmental association ABCDE, and Corsican and Sardinian nationalist parties (F.G., 2004). This was one of the most relevant political struggles that put together islanders from the two sides of the Strait. It resulted in a motion being passed by the Sardinian parliament, asking for the closure of the US base. These events started a hard negotiation between RAS, the Italian Ministry of Defense, and the US Department of Defense. Finally, in November 2005 the closure of the base was announced, and the US Navy withdrew in 2008 (F.G., 2005; Frailis, 2005).

While the nuclear risk had been averted, that of pollution from cargo ships remained present. Although navigation was dangerous for large ships, due to the presence of islets and rocks, the Strait of Bonifacio was still used extensively for the passage of cargo ships. After 1986 large oil tankers passed regularly, causing worries in the local population. As a result, WWF Gallura, and the main parties representing island nationalism (the SAP, for Sardinia, and the UCP for Corsica) once again collaborated (Fornari, 2010, 183-194). In 1989, SAP and UCP proposed a ban on the passage of tankers as they were considered the most dangerous forms of shipping. However, shipwrecks and pollution continued as Bonifacio was an international strait and therefore France and Italy could not prevent free navigation. Eventually, the nationalists and environmentalists had some success when on 19 January 1993 French and Italian Ministers of the Environment, as well as representatives of the Corsican and Sardinian governments, committed themselves to the creation of an international park comprising the small islands and surrounding waters between Corsica and Sardinia. This same year, following the advice of the International Maritime Organisation, the French and Italian governments prevented the navigation of national cargo and oil tankers through the Strait (IMO, 1993). Nevertheless, the accord was regarded only by French and Italian vessels, which contributed a small portion of the 5,110 tankers that crossed the straits in 1992-93 (D'Amico, 1993). As a result, cargo ships with dangerous materials continued to transit, raising further protests from environmentalists and nationalists. In the years that followed, in a bid to extend their capacity to control transit through these waters, France and Italy, offered to provide local pilots experienced in crossing the Straits. Unfortunately, this was not an obligation.

Nonetheless, the marine reserve, managed by the two islands' SNIJs was an important improvement in the inter-insular cooperation. Its establishment, even if decided by central governments, was a direct consequence of the joint protest of Corsican and Sardinian activists, as well as the lobby of Nationalist MPs in the European Parliament. The idea of a transnational park was so innovative that the proposal proved hard to achieve. In fact, between 1994 and 1999, both countries, under the auspices of the first Interreg program, each established a reserve on their sides of the Strait. The problem was how to merge the two reserves into one, and how to manage a park extended across borders and subject to different legislative systems. The solution was arrived at by the European institutions, in 2007 by establishing the European Group of Transnational Cooperation (EGTC), an administrative tool to develop the Interreg programs. Between 2010 and 2012, an EGTC was formed to

manage the park, consisting of a committee of members of the two authorities in charge of the respective national parks. Unfortunately, a series of issues, including bureaucracy, tensions among local administrations, and the receivership of the Archipelago di La Maddalena National Park between 2016 and 2018 (Parco internazionale, 2013; Il ministero, 2016), have prevented EGTC from functioning properly. Today, the problem of how to overcome the different national legislations and manage the area as a single park remains.

Conclusion

As shown by the long summary presented in this article, the much-dreamed-of economic relationship was hard to realise, and for decades commerce turned out to be limited. While the first attempts were made in the 1950s, the inter-insular relation evolved positively only after France accorded autonomy to Corsica in 1982. The development of the EEC/EC/EU provided institutional tools to establish cross-border cooperation, resulting in funds for the infrastructure connecting the islands. These factors had an evident result, improving the capacity of the ports of Bonifacio and Santa Teresa Gallura to link the two islands. The data of port traffic, even if incomplete and irregular as identified, shows that while goods and passengers passing the Strait in 1954 were just 64 tons and 1,363 respectively; in 1980, they increased to 2,195 tons and 130,126 passengers. While the figures remained similar until 1988-1989, they have grown steadily to the present day. This can be credited mostly to the Interreg programs and the evolution of the political context. The latest data from 2018 shows that the total amount of goods and passengers crossing the Strait was 18,922 tons and 274,177 respectively. Despite their small size and the difficulties of access from both land and sea, the two ports remain the only ones with regular daily connections throughout the year. The economies of the two islands, therefore, seem capable of integrating, even though the great difference in the size of the two markets represents a limitation. Moreover, Corsica is not able to absorb all of Sardinia's production, because it is too small a market. Another limitation could be the competence of the tourist sectors but, as shown by Baldacchino and Duarte Ferreira (2013), this can be overcome by promoting diversity. The Corsican-Sardinian archipelago is geographically and culturally so complex that this should not be a problem.

It is evident that in an impeded archipelago whose islands are dependencies of different mainland countries, linkage and cooperation are disrupted by the central government's agendas, political tensions, and geopolitical contrasts. The will to develop a relationship, expressed by economic actors, political movements, and institutions, is secondary to national interests and chances to develop a relationship depend on the degree of autonomy of the island territory from the mainland country. Archipelagoes are impeded when the geographical space is disputed or divided among different Nations states and, as a result, inter-insular bonds, assemblages and networks are discouraged, or removed. A similar case is that of San Andrés Islands (Colombia) and Corn Islands (Nicaragua), two island groups bonded by kinship, commerce and culture, whose relation has been progressively disrupted by nation-building processes, mainland countries' agendas and geopolitical tensions. Comparatively, this kinship process started more recently for the Sardinian-Corsican case, whereas the inhabitants of the Southern Caribbean Islands still maintain familiar ties across the island groups (Garcia Ch, 2024). At the same time, there is no stable maritime network among the islands, and they do not have any autonomous administrative body to lobby mainland governments to establish a connection. A more radical case is that of the Diomedede Islands, in the Bering Strait. In this specific case, the archipelago is formed by the islands of Big Diomedede (Russia) and Small Diomedede (USA), separated by 3.8 km of water. For most of

the year, the water is frozen and connects the archipelago, enabling the Iñupiat community to move between the islands. During the Cold War, the area acquired a geopolitical relevance (being dubbed the 'Ice Curtain') and in 1948 the USSR decided to evacuate the local population, removing familiar ties with the nearby island and preventing any cross-border relation. This decision dismantled family and economic networks assembling both islands. In respect to those cases, Corsica and Sardinia have more chances to resist mainland government decisions, because they are SNIJs of EU member countries. The super national legal frame, as that of the EU, is fundamental for building cross-border relations.

A more general conclusion that can be drawn from this research regarding Island Studies and archipelago perspective is that politically fragmented island geography implies that archipelagos (and aquapelagos) must be analysed with considerations of how political divisions reflect on research, mostly in fields of history, politics, and social sciences. In the past, scholars tended to adopt a nation-state perspective, limiting the area of their inquiries to that designed by the national borders, and thus ignoring familiar and economic ties, kinship or practices that enable linkages. Adopting an archipelagic perspective on disputed geography means going beyond the national borders, providing a more complex and rich analysis of a contested space as an impeded archipelago. At the same time, this article demonstrates that in research on island-to-island relations, the transport networks must be considered, and historical archives could reveal relevant information to understand their establishment, and eventually quantify the relation with data. In this sense, this article draws inspiration from the seminal work of Anim-Addo about maritime connections in the British Caribbean (2013).

The Sardinian-Corsican case also proves that cooperation between political forces and/or civic associations is fundamental to establishing an island-to-island relation in a politically fragmented space, as shown with regard to the Strait of Bonifacio. Here, nationalist and regionalist parties, environmentalist associations and local communities joined forces for a common political goal, the protection of this fragile maritime area. Even if the Strait is still complex, the withdrawal of the US Navy and the end of political violence, announced by FLNC in 2015, removed elements of tension between Corsica and Sardinia. In this context, the establishment of the international park, despite the difficulties in its management, is a fundamental step towards inter-island cooperation and is a signal that the political landscape is now more favourable for cooperation. This is also the result of the resistance of the local population, a fundamental element in shaping policies and laws that will acknowledge the sovereignty of the local communities over the maritime area (Garcia Ch, 2024, 23). All these are elements that go beyond national borders, envisioning shared sovereignty for a fragile maritime area. Further contributing to the kinship, the year 2016 seems to have been a turning point when the Corsican and Sardinian governments signed the first agreement for cooperation in different areas, such as education, environment, and commerce. Another agreement followed to implement this relation but, unfortunately, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the process. The building of the island-to-island relationship is still a work in progress and several problems persist, however, now the will of Sardinian and Corsican political classes seems evident. Time will tell what the future holds for these islands.

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