


Chapter 12

The Defense of Santa Catarina Island: A Disputed Territory in Portuguese America

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ABSTRACT

This chapter will analyze the Spanish invasion on the island of Santa Catarina in 1777, and the strategies for maintaining territorial control in Portuguese America. The geographic space and its political functions will be examined, with a particular focus on the importance of maintaining, defending and preserving the Portuguese empire. This geopolitical space underwent significant changes. The fear of invasions, conquests, raids or even small enemy advances, transformed the island. Firstly, several forts and strongholds were built, and, gradually, the arrival of Azorean and Madeiran migrants transformed the island's environment. This policy was nevertheless unable to contain the advance of Spanish troops. In 1777, D. Pedro de Cevallos invaded the island without any resistance. In the same year, Portugal and Spain signed the Treaty of Santo Ildefonso, which returned the territory to the Portuguese.

INTRODUCTION

Between the late seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries, the contested region at the southernmost tip of the Americas was gradually incorporated into the Portuguese Empire. The military and commercial outpost of Colônia do Sacramento, founded in 1680, was established on the left bank of the Río de la Plata—directly

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opposite Buenos Aires—on territory that today forms part of the Republic of Uruguay. Strategically situated, the settlement served a dual function for the Portuguese: to offset the loss of access to both legal and illicit trade with southern Spanish America, particularly the lucrative silver of Potosí, and to consolidate a permanent military presence in the region. Colônia do Sacramento never constituted a captaincy, nor was it elevated to the status of a town. The establishment of the center was not accepted by the authorities of Hispanic America, and consequently it was attacked, besieged, invaded and destroyed by the Spanish and rebuilt by the Portuguese, in a cycle of almost a century of war. Following repeated attacks on Colônia do Sacramento, Portuguese authorities formulated a strategic plan to occupy the southernmost territories of Brazil—corresponding to present-day Rio Grande do Sul and Santa Catarina—in order to strengthen their geopolitical presence and secure the region against Spanish incursions. The discovery of gold in the backlands of Minas Gerais and São Paulo forced the Portuguese empire to expand and consolidate its colonies in southern America. However, Portuguese was at odds with Spanish expansion in the same area. The Hispanic forces of the Jesuit missions advanced into Paraguay, east of the Paraná and Uruguay rivers, and other provinces near the Río de la Plata.² For a long time, Luiz Ferrand de Almeida's (1973) thesis prevailed regarding Colônia do Sacramento. He characterized the settlement as little more than a den of smugglers—an area primarily responsible for the circulation of Potosina silver through illicit networks toward the central regions of the empire. While smuggling has often been highlighted in historiography as a central element in the power dynamics of the region, other interpretations emphasize its strategic territorial significance in the ongoing struggle between Portuguese and Spanish forces for control of the settlement (Monteiro, 1937; Monteiro, 1979; Barreto, 1979).

Paulo Possamai (2004) and Fabrício Prado (2002) sought to bring new discussions about the role of the square in the Portuguese colonial space. While the first prioritized daily relationships in the citadel during the period 1715-1735, the second sought to examine knowledge about “social groups present in the city, their interests, the type of society that was organized, and the regional insertion that Sacramento and its inhabitants had”. Based on the notion of the Portuguese Empire and the open border, Prado (2002, pp. 20-21) sought to transcend the notion of “smugglers’ nest”, through the social and commercial significance of the urban space of the Colônia do Sacramento.

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