

AUTHOR BIO

Marcel A. Farinelli (PhD) is a Sardinian-born independent scholar living in Barcelona. Specializing in the contemporary history of Sardinia and Corsica, he has analyzed the evolution of island nationalism and regionalism and the relationship between these two islands, as well as the evolution of the Catalan minority in Alghero.

The Kingdom of Tavolara and the Republic of Malu Entu. Micronations, tourism and sub-state nationalism in two Sardinian near islands

Marcel A. Farinelli

ABSTRACT

Tavolara and Mal di Ventre are two small uninhabited islands a few kilometers off Sardinia's coasts, in Italy, and both were claimed as micronations: the Kingdom of Tavolara and the Republic of Malu Entu. The rationale of these non-state entities is very different. Tavolara is claimed as island kingdom by the descendants of Giuseppe Bertoleoni, a shepherd from Corsica who settled the island in early 19th century, while the Republic of Malu Entu was founded by a political movement campaigning for the independence of Sardinia. The two represent different ways of understanding micronations. While for the former, the alleged statehood is a way of improving the social position of the claimants and promoting economic activity, Malu Entu pretends to be a political entity. Tavolara has no virtual institutions, and is not perceived as a danger by the Italian authorities, on the contrary Malu Entu was actively prosecuted by Italy. The intention of this article is to present and compare the two cases, analyzing the role of the media and the reaction of state authorities.

KEYWORDS

Kingdom of Tavolara, Republic of Malu Entu, Micronation, Sardinia, Italy.

The islands

Tavolara is on the northeast coast of Sardinia, at 4.5 km from the small town of Loiri Porto San Paolo and 18.3 km from the city of Olbia (Fig. 1). It is a 6 km long and 1 km wide limestone massif that in its highest point reaches 565 m. Most of its perimeter is a rocky cliff face and the main landfall is a small beach facing the Sardinian's coast, named Spalmatore di Terra (Fig. 2). A smaller docking area lies on the opposite side, at Cala Levante, through which a lighthouse and the NATO radio facilities can be reached. (Floris 9: 338). Tavolara was known by the Etruscans, Greeks and Romans, who used it as a water and food filling station, and during mid-9th century it appears to have been a railing point for North African corsairs (Della Marmora 360-362). During the 18th century shepherds from Sardinia and Corsica used the island as pasturage, and between late 19th century and the 1960s fishers from the Pontine Islands stayed on it for a few months a year. Today Tavolara is part of the touristic network of North Sardinia, as we will discuss later.

Fig. 1 & 2 A map of the area surrounding Tavolara and a view of the island.

Source:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tavolara_Island

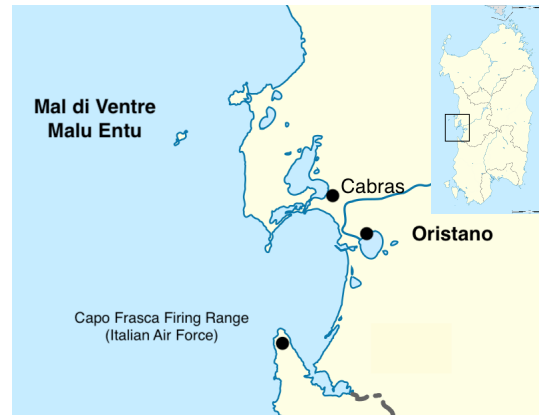


[1] Nuragic was the most important autochthonous civilization in Sardinia, which lasted between 1800 BCE and 238 BCE. Its most representative architecture is the nuraghe, a megalithic fortress, while its most refined artifacts are bronze statuettes and the so-called Giant of Monti Prama, a group of 2/2.5 mt stone sculptures representing athletes and warriors.

Mal di Ventre is a pristine islet of 81 ha that lies off western Sardinia, at 6.5 km from the coast (Figs. 2 & 3), and it belongs to the town of Cabras. It is flat (average 18 m high), covered with scattered vegetation, and with scarce drinkable water. Humans established themselves here from late Bronze Age, when the islet was connected to Sardinia, as testified by the remains of a Nuragic fortress and a Roman villa (Della Marmora 214-215; Floris, 5: 434). [1] The island was no longer inhabited after the fall of the Roman Empire, while it remained a haven for sailors and a seasonal pasture for shepherds. Mal di Ventre is surrounded by coral reefs and rocks and is an important area for both fishing and coral mining. As with Tavolara, the toponym of Mal di Ventre reveals something about the island's characteristics. The Sardinian name is

Malu Entu, “bad wind,” but when it was adapted to Italian it was changed to Mal di Ventre, “stomach ache.” The word appeared more Italian, but it altered the original meaning of the toponym, and so its usefulness. After the mid-20th century, the coral reefs gradually disappeared and fishing activities declined, while boaters and tourists started to arrive. However, the island has remained fairly untouched by mass tourism.

Fig. 3 & 4 The area of Mal di Ventre and a view of the island.
Sources: Marcel A. Farinelli
(map adapted from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Italy_Sardinia_location_map.svg) and <http://www.sardegna.digitallibrary.it/index.php?xsl=626&id=15613>.



The Kingdom of Tavolara

To understand the case of Tavolara, we need to focus on the Strait of Bonifacio, the passage between Sardinia and Corsica. By late-15th century the Corsican-Sardinian archipelago was divided between the Crown of Aragon, who controlled Sardinia, and the Republic of Genoa, who governed Corsica. The situation changed during the 18th century, when Sardinia passed to the House of Savoy (1720), while Corsicans rebelled against Genoa (1729-1769). In the last phase of the Corsican revolution, the island was occupied by French troops backing Genoa, and eventually it was annexed to the Kingdom of France in 1790. This situation provoked tensions in the Strait of Bonifacio, where the border was not yet defined. In fact, during the negotiations about Sardinia, the islands in the Strait were not mentioned, turning them into a no-man's-land. Since late 17th century Corsicans from Bonifacio settled the biggest: La Maddalena. Here they founded the homonymous town, while they used the small islets in the area as pasture. They were shepherds, sailors and merchants who thrived smuggling cattle, cheese and wheat from Sardinia to Corsica. When France intervened in Corsica, Sardinian authorities reacted by taking possession of la Maddalena in 1767, claiming sovereignty on the island group today known as The Maddalena Archipelago. The area was disputed

between Turin and Paris, and the inhabitants of La Maddalena continued to live between the two jurisdictions. Corsican settlers increased during the period of Napoleonic Empire, when conscription and political unrest forced many to flee from Corsica. Smuggling also increased, partly due to the British Royal Navy's ships in the Strait of Bonifacio, whose sailors were often the commercial partners of local smugglers (Pira; G. Murgia). In this context, the history of the kingdom of Tavolara began.

It is worthwhile saying that the most relevant source for the micronation's history is the memoirs of the Bertoleoni's descendants (Geremia and Ragnetti). The book merely reports the oral tradition without questioning it, but since it expresses claimants' arguments it will be used as "official history" in what follows.

The story begins in 1807 with Giuseppe Bertoleoni (1778-1849), a Corsican who lived between La Maddalena and the nearby islet of Santa Maria. Bertoleoni apparently married two sisters, maintaining a family on each of the two islands, and he was prosecuted several times. After a pardon, eventually he moved to Tavolara with one of his wives, while he maintained a close link with Santa Maria, La Maddalena and his other family. He stayed so long he considered himself the legal owner of Tavolara, establishing the basis for a successful family business, based on cattle trade with Corsica and Sardinia, and supply to passing ships. The "official history" says that Bertoleoni was recognized as king of Tavolara by Charles Albert, king of Sardinia (1831-1849). The story has so many different versions that is impossible to know exactly when it should have happened. In resume, Charles Albert, who knew about the man living on the island, visited Tavolara and met Giuseppe. During the conversation, Charles Albert addressed Giuseppe as the King of Tavolara, or asked him who he was, and Bertoleoni answered: "the King of Tavolara."

What sounds like a funny story is, from the point of view of the descendants of Giuseppe, a serious matter. In fact, they have since then claimed that Charles Albert was a close friend of Giuseppe, and after the visit he would officially recognize the sovereignty in a document. This would be further confirmed years later by the last King of Sardinia and the first of Italy, Victor Emanuel II. But, even if it is sure that Charles Albert met with Giuseppe and visited the island (Della Marmora 361), there is no record of the recognition, nor any other reliable element to confirm what the oral tradition says. While the descendants of Giuseppe maintain their version, any official documentation has disappeared (Geremia and Ragnetti 202-203).

What is certain is that Giuseppe Bertoleoni, after living on the island for decades, was recognized as its legitimate owner. The relevance of semi-nomadic animal breeding determined land use in Sardinia, so until mid-19th century most of the soil was not private propriety. This was introduced between 1823 and 1839, and as a result one became legitimate owner of a plot if he could prove its continual and exclusive use. This was the case of Giuseppe. In fact, when he established himself on Tavolara others, shepherds like him, were using the island for pasturage, but he was the only one who secured its ownership. Considering this context, the relation with Charles Albert and the claims of sovereignty appear to be a strategy to win the argument between Giuseppe to other pretenders. The strategy was successful,

and for decades the Bertoleoni were the exclusive owners of the island, building some houses and a cemetery where still today one can see the royal graves. But after the first half of 19th century some descendants of Giuseppe sold their properties, and in 1883 the Italian Navy expropriated a part of the island to build a lighthouse, paying to Paolo I 12,000 lire. Part of the family continued to live on Tavolara, while others moved on La Maddalena or to mainland Italy, some of them joining the Italian Navy.

During the 1950s an aristocrat family from mainland Italy, the Marzano, bought estates on Tavolara anticipating a tourism boom in the area and pressing king Paolo II to cede his properties. But shortly after, another portion of Tavolara was expropriated to build some NATO radio facilities, and this restricted the access to the island. In the same period, a group of foreign investors led by the Aga Khan IV, imam of Nizari Ismailism, invested in a high standing tourist compound, called Emerald Coast. The group built up villas, port facilities, hotels and small villages a few kilometers north of Tavolara, and by late 1960s it resulted one of the most exclusive resorts in the Mediterranean (Ruju). In this context, the descendants of the Bertoleoni found themselves in a suitable position, because their properties lay on the flat and sandy strip of land just in front of Sardinia that is the most accessible part of the islet. They abandoned their traditional activities for the touristic economy, first running the boat service between Sardinia and Tavolara, and then turning one of their houses into a hostel. Tavolara became a popular destination for those tourists wishing to experience an “authentic” Sardinia, far from exclusive resorts and overcrowded beaches. Since 1991, the island has hosted the Festival del Cinema di Tavolara, well known by the Italian public, and today is a popular destination for scuba divers, climbers and sailors, among others. Visitors are free to move on the part owned by Bertoleoni’s descendants, while the Marzano and Italian state restricted access to its respective properties. However, tourism did not cause a housing development, and today the most important touristic infrastructures are some small docks, a bar and the restaurant *Da Tonino, il re di Tavolara*, with its partner, *La Corona*. Tonino is the nickname of Antonio Molinas, the actual king of Tavolara who is ruling since 1993, after his brother Carlo II died without a successor. *La Corona* is run by Tonino’s sister.

An almost real story

Today serious historians regard “the king of Tavolara” as a nickname given to Giuseppe (Ferretti), but in the past some writers and journalists took it for a genuine royal title, or at least they were ambiguous. The story of a shepherd-smuggler with two wives and a crown was too good to be ignored, and it became popular among 19th century readers with a romantic idea of the Mediterranean. One of the first to talk about Tavolara was the French writer Valéry. In his travel book about Sardinia, Corsica and the Balearic Islands, he described Giuseppe Bertoleoni as a “shepherd-king” who seemed to embody a kind of a modern Ulysses (Valéry 14-15). The author met the head of the Bertoleoni family, and is the first to report the concession made by Charles Albert, apparently taking it for real. He wrote that Tavolara “was given in some way by the King of Sardinia to a Corsican shepherd, the new monarch produced by his homeland, the only human who, with his family, live in this

[2] All the quotations are translated from French and Italian by the author.

desert” (Valéry 15). [2] The Piedmontese geographer, ethnologist and close friend of Charles Albert, Alberto Ferrero Della Marmora, repeated the story. He confirmed the friendship between Charles Albert and Giuseppe, but he also wrote that Giuseppe was “dubbed king of Tavolara,” and in that way “was called, joking, by the passed Charles Albert during his last visit to Sardinia” (361). Decades later, other relevant French literate talked about Tavolara in a travel guide to the Mediterranean islands: Gastone Vuillier wrote that Tavolara “at the beginning of the century was still a kind of kingdom” treating the story with irony, stressing the bigamy of Giuseppe, who was “mockingly called the king of Tavolara” (492). Nobody was seriously interested in investigating the story, and this ambiguity makes some believe in the existence of the island-kingdom. At the point that in 1896 a popular French magazine announced, retrieving the news from a German one, that a revolution turned Tavolara into a republic. The Italian magazine *L'Illustrazione Italiana* reacted, publishing a long and well-documented reportage. The author deconstructed the story of the kingdom and explained how international press mistook Tavolara for an existing state, to the point that at the end of the 19th century Bertoleoni's descendants received letters asking for various information, from how to purchase a title to proposals of economic partnership (Fumagalli). Nevertheless, decades afterwards someone took the kingdom seriously enough to include it in the *Enciclopedia Universal Ilustrada Europeo-Americana*. Here the entire story of Tavolara (wrongly spelled as Tavolazzo) is resumed, including the republican period and data on its 180 inhabitants (14: 955). In this way the realm was realized in the pages of an encyclopedia, in a manner that recalls the tale *Tlön, Uqbar and Orbis Tertius* by Argentinian writer Jorge Luís Borges, whose plot is an investigation about a mysterious country named in one edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (13-36). In this sense, Tavolara is more a fictional kingdom than a micronation.

But those responsible were not just writers and journalists; the descendants of Giuseppe Bertoleoni also played their part. They used the story to secure their position, first during the 19th century, and then in the 1950s against the newcomers, the Marzano. This time the claimants got the support of Italian public opinion, with the story presented as picturesque and romantic, without investigating its consistency. This is the aspect that emerges most strongly from the media, in TV shows and newsreels such as “Sardegna: l'isola di Tavolara.” Here the Marzano are the landowners wanting to exploit the island as a tourist destination, while the Bertoleoni are the good locals cornered in a small strip of land. But the descendants of the Bertoleoni were the first to take advantage of tourism, exploiting the story of the island kingdom to promote their activities. They have shown no pretense of being recognized as legitimate sovereigns, and the micronation both defines the identity of the family business and acts as a lure for tourists. Tonino, the current king and owner of the famous restaurant, is a very popular figure in Sardinia, and the articles, TV reportage or blog entries in which he appears are numerous (see as example Budroni). Showing sympathy for Tonino, the Sardinian and Italian media treat that the kingdom as a romantic story, generally avoiding mockery but not confirming its authenticity. However, international media are keener to present the kingdom as a genuine state, as BBC did a few years ago, presenting the island as an enchanting place ruled by an aged fisherman and king, happy to host visitors (Stein). But the descendants of Giuseppe are able entrepreneurs more than humble sovereigns, and actually the micronation is not properly

claimed. King Tonino and other family members, on the contrary, are taxpayers and they respect Italian laws while they exploit the story of Tavolara as best as they can. In fact, they use the web and social media just to promote their economic activities: it is the core element of their communicational and promotional strategy ("Ristorante da Tonino").

The Republic of Malu Entu

The case of the Republic of Malu Entu is different. Until the 1960s few shepherds and fishermen visited Mal di Ventre, but by the 1970s a trip to the islet became a common leisure activity, both for locals and tourists ("Isola Mal di Ventre"). However, Mal di Ventre remains outside the main tourist network, given the poor development of the tourist economy in the area (Zoccheddu, "Mal di Ventre"). The increasing human presence had a negative impact on both heritage and environment, raising concerns among the local population. One major issue concerned an archaeological site that was raided several times. Mal di Ventre is located opposite a major coastal archeological site with remnants of the Nuragic and the Phoenician civilizations, with 75 nuraghes (conical towers), the port city of Tharros and the monumental complex of Monti Prama ("Il Sinis di Cabras"). As a result, the islet was part of an area particularly relevant for Sardinian identity.

These concerns led to a protest movement, fueled by the fears that the islet would become a real estate investment. Mal di Ventre was bought in 1972 by the British entrepreneur John Rex Miller, who wanted to develop the island as a tourist destination but protesters did not want to see the area transformed in a new Emerald Coast. In fact, the investments of the Aga Kahn (discussed above) divided public opinion, and for nationalists and left-wing groups alike, the exclusive resort represented colonial oppression (Clemente). For opponents, Sardinia was being treated as a colony by the Italian state, accused of using part of the island as military bases or training camps (it is the most militarized of the Italian's islands, see "Cosa sono le servitù"), of letting multinational companies control its economy, and letting investors privatize islets or entire pieces of shoreline. Among the protesters there was Salvatore "Doddore" Meloni (1943-2017), a truck driver and Sardinian nationalist, who decades later became president of the Republic of Malu Entu. As stated years later, in 1974 he decided, with some activists, to take care of the islet, where they camped during summer (N. Pinna). The movement was heterogeneous and unstructured, but its protest was communicated to the general Italian public when a famous Italian radio journalist broadcasted live from Mal di Ventre. Eventually, in 1997 the entire area was transformed in a maritime reserve.

In this context, Mal di Ventre assumed an important role for a group of Sardinian independentists. Sardinia is home to the oldest ethno-regionalist movement in Italy, represented at the time by the Sardinian Action Party (SAP), founded in 1921 to convert Sardinia into a sub-national island jurisdiction. This goal was reached in 1948, but by late 1960s a more radical nationalism emerged, aiming to establish an independent Sardinian republic. At the end of the 1970s the SAP adopted national liberation as the ultimate goal and vaguely talked about "the Sardinian way towards Socialism."

Eventually, the party increased their votes, obtaining the presidency of the island government in 1984-1989 (Farinelli). In 1981 a group of nationalists, some of them members of SAP, were accused of planning an armed coup with the support of Libya, but after several trials only a few were found guilty (Bellu “Agguati, guerriglia e sequestri,” “Separatismo sardo”). Part of the plan consisted in landing on Mal di Ventre to declare the Sardinian Republic, according to statements by Salvatore Meloni, regarded as one of the leaders (“Ritratti” 1: 10:15-11:43). Meloni, who changed his version several times, stated that in 1979 Mal di Ventre was beyond Italian territorial waters. This served as the pretext to declare the Sardinian independent republic upon it, and the recognition by Libya would grant viability to the new state. But the legal basis for such an operation was weak. First, the islet was inhabited and without any infrastructure. But moreover, even if the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea establishing territorial waters limit within 12 NM was signed in 1982, Italy had adopted the norm before, in 1974. Therefore, the islet and its surrounding waters were under Italian sovereignty.

The planned uprising is still today an unclear affair, and public opinion has remained divided since it was uncovered: some regard it as invented by the Italian intelligence to discredit the SAP and Sardinian nationalism, while others consider it real. Whether true or false, what is important is that the planned declaration of independence sets the ground for the establishment, in 2008, of the *Repubblica de Malu Entu*. In fact, Salvatore Meloni gained visibility during the trial. Asking to speak in Sardinian and going on hunger strike, he became a popular figure, although very controversial. Meloni divided Sardinian nationalism accusing SAP of being involved in the uprising, and was expelled from the party. The activist then founded his personal organization, the Sardinian Independentist Party, whose acronym in Sardinian is PARIS, “together.” But voters failed to elect any representative to the island parliament, and Meloni failed to place himself as a leading political figure. In 1984 he was sentenced to 9 years’ detention and permanent interdiction from public service for plotting against state unity, and once out, he promised to rejoin activism after his retirement. He has continued to visit, and camp on, the island, setting the ground for claiming its property for usucaption.

Once retired, Meloni organized the micronation. During the night of 24-25 August 2008 he landed on Mal di Ventre with a group of 5 independentists, and declared the Republic of Malu Entu. They organized a camp, raised their micronational flag (the same of PARIS) and formed a provisional government, with Meloni as president. To imitate a full operational state, the group named Meloni’s tent the “Presidential Palace” and gave it an address: Seafront Street 1. According to Meloni and his followers, they dispatched the declaration of independence to the President of the Italian Republic, the Secretary-General of the UN and the European Union, along with complaints about the violation of their territorial waters and airspace by Italy (“Benvenuti nella repubblica”; N. Pinna). Their strategy was to campaign for the independence of Sardinia, obtaining the attention of international organizations and capitalizing on tourism to get visibility. And indeed, they raised the interest of Italian public opinion, and the island attracted more tourists that year (“No all’arrivo dei nudisti”). Meloni, dressed in shorts and a white T-shirt with the coat of arms of the micronation, released interviews and improvised press conferences on the small beach crowded with tourists,

journalists and cabinet's members (see "Repubblica di Malu Entu"). The micronation's government protested against the owner of Mal di Ventre, who was struggling to avoid the establishment of the maritime reserve. In 1998 Rex Miller denounced local authorities for having not considered his rights, but then he tried to sell his property to Cabras Town Council or Sardinia's government, without succeeding (Zoccheddu "Sconfitto il padrone inglese"). In 2008 Miller was negotiating the purchase with a nudist association, while local ecologists were pressing Sardinian government to buy the islet, when Meloni intervened in this dispute. He claimed the property of Mal di Ventre for acquisitive prescription and – in the case he did not succeed – he asked for €1 from every visitor and then launched a fundraising campaign.

Italian authorities approached the affair as an issue of environment protection and public order, exploiting the contrasts that Meloni's action generated with other political movements and, significantly, with ecologist associations. The local section of WWF denounced Meloni and his followers for compromising the natural reserve, treating them as some of the many illegal campers who arrive each year on the islet, causing a considerable loss of reputation for the independentists. But another concern was represented by some neo-fascists who landed on Mal di Ventre. The scene was surreal, with the Sardinian independentists looking at the Fascists on the opposite side of the islet, raising the flag and singing and with the police force and tourists as spectators (Carta). The fascist group eventually returned on mainland Sardinia, leaving Mal di Ventre to the independentists. They remained until January 2009, when Italian authorities landed on Mal di Ventre while the activists were on mainland Sardinia. Their camp was removed, but the activists returned in a couple of days ("Mal di Ventre, i ribelli indagati"). Meloni and his cabinet were prosecuted for several environmental crimes, including dumping trash and building temporary structures (a shelter made of wood and plastics) in a protected area, but charges were eventually dropped in 2016 (Carta "Repubblica"). After being forced out, Meloni and his followers continued to visit the island and to campaign for Sardinian independence, exploiting the image of the Republic of Malu Entu in demonstrations and symbolic acts. But, as we will see, the group remained isolated. The story of the President of the micronation had a dramatic turn in 2017, when he was arrested again, this time for fiscal offences not linked to Malu Entu. Protesting for what he considered another chapter in a long political persecution, Meloni died in prison while on hunger strike. It was the ultimate act of a long, lone and eccentric career in political activism, that raised critics inside and outside the nationalist camp, criticism that was motivated by the negative reputation that Meloni's actions gave to Sardinian independence movement.

National liberation in a swimsuit

The Republic of Malu Entu's affair is well known among the Sardinian public and secured the attention also of the main Italian media, where the presence of Sardinia is usually marginal. The way its supporters used the media, and the attitude of the same media towards them, differs between the so-called separatist plot of 1981 to the establishment of the micronation in 2008-2009. When the plot for the independence of Sardinia emerged, Italian newspapers took it as a serious threat to national unity. Italy was then under attack by the

left-wing armed group the Red Brigades, who tried also to start a guerrilla campaign in Sardinia, where most of their members were in jail (Bellu & Paracchini). During the same years, central Sardinia experienced a recrudescence in rural criminality, reflecting a considerable lack of State authority. To give a more detailed context, one should consider the relationship between Italy and Gaddafi's Libya, characterized by periodical tensions, and the outbreak in Corsica of political violence between island nationalists, French unionists and the French Government. Thus, it is quite clear why Italian authorities and public opinion took seriously the initiative of Meloni and his followers. For their part, international correspondents paid little attention, publishing few lines when the trial ended in 1985, as *The New York Times* did ("Italian Court Convicts").

Sardinian public opinion did not entirely share this point of view. Someone expressed concerns about the radicalization of Sardinian nationalism, others were critical of the way the investigation was conducted. During the trial, such a gap emerged between the plan and its viability that some commentators suggested either it was a fantasy shared by marginal members of Sardinian nationalism, or it was invented by Italian intelligence to discredit Sardinian nationalism and its main representative force, SAP (Francioni, Bellu "Complotto separatista"). Recently, elements proving this version were discovered in Italian archives, but the issue is still not clear (Mannironi).

The context was different in 2008. The group of micronationalists got the interest of both Sardinian, Italian and international public opinion, with the main Sardinian TV network broadcasting images of the island during the daily news. But this attention, paradoxically, backfired on the intention of the promoters to present their acts as part of a serious political struggle. Meloni did everything but present himself as a respectable leader of a political movement or a head of a (micro)nation, and he was perceived as a picturesque character. At the start of summer, he talked with reporters in shorts and t-shirt, sitting on a deckchair in front of his "presidential palace." Unlike other cases of micronationality, the image that the activists gave was that of a group of friends spending a day at the beach: the president and his associates did not wear uniforms or other signs of sovereignty, except for a t-shirt with a small logo of the Republic; there was little attention to aspects as state ceremony and liturgy; and there was a gap between the seriousness of the issues (the independence of Sardinia) and the performance of the activists. In other words, Meloni and his followers seemed disinterested in giving the illusion of statehood, and Malu Entu thereby appeared as a parodical state. This is clear considering the micronation's ensign. Meloni did not use the Sardinian flag, nor anything related to it, regarded by a sector of Sardinian nationalism as a flag imposed by external powers. [3] Malu Entu adopted the same flag of Meloni's party, in which were assembled archeological elements, a reinterpreted Middle Ages coat of arms and the blue and red colours of the main Sardinian football clubs (Cagliari and Torres). Other independentists did not take such a flag seriously, and the fact that a photo showing one activist defending the flag with a water gun became popular (Fig. 5), did not help the image of the micronation.

[3] The actual official flag of Sardinia is contested by part of the Sardinian independentism. For more information, see Sedda.

Fig. 5 & 6 An activist defending the PARIS/Malu Entu's flag (left) and Salvatore Meloni talking to the press and bathers (right).

Source:

<http://repubblicademaluentu.blogspot.com> and

<https://repubblicamaluentu.blogspot.com/>.



For the most part, the attitude of the media was to parody the entire story. They considered Meloni and his followers a picturesque group of friends embracing a naïve demonstration that eventually compromised entire Sardinian nationalism (Ceccarelli; Cesare; A. Pinna). In fact, the Italian press had previously treated Sardinian nationalism as a mere folkloric phenomenon, giving it little political relevance. This attitude changed after the Lega Nord, a movement claiming independence or autonomy for northern Italy, became increasingly popular during the 1990s. [4] Italian newspapers mocked the images of the Lega's annual rally, where thousands of supporters in Celtic dress celebrated Padania, the "real" nation that Italy supposedly oppresses. The independentists of Malu Entu were depicted as a summer version of those of Lega, a group of friends with bizarre political ideas led by a retired truck driver, and the micronation was dismissed as a parody. In this context, few showed solidarity, with many Sardinian nationalists regarding the micronation as a shame for the entire movement (M. Murgia). On the contrary, Meloni and his followers were supported by Mario Borghezio, European MP of Lega Nord, a racist popular for his far-right opinions. The name of Malu Entu was further damaged in 2014, when Meloni and one of his ministers were involved, with some Lega activists, into a plan for the independence of Veneto and Sardinia ("Secessionisti veneti").

[4] The attitude of SAP towards Lega Nord was ambiguous. The two movements ran together in some local and national elections, while were rivals in others. The actual President of the Sardinian Autonomous Region is from SAP, supported by Lega.

The way the web was used is an element that adds inconsistency to the micronation. While today micronational supporters exploit the web to generate

the illusion of statehood, Malu Entu did not. Its promoters opened two blogs in September 2008, but there are no posts explaining the reasons for supporting the micronation (but there are some asking for funds). The republic has also a YouTube page with 6 videos and a Facebook account, whose last post was of 2012, but the quality of videos and articles posted is poor. The group failed to use the web both to grant a virtual existence of Malu Entu and to gain support in Sardinia, having instead the reverse effect. In fact, in Sardinia the performances of Meloni and his followers were ridiculed as a Sunday activism, and an actor even caricatured Meloni in a TV show.

Outside Sardinia, perceptions were different. The story raised interest in the press, mostly European, with Malu Entu appearing in important newspapers (see Squire; Paz-López). Such articles are built around the topic of the a-historical dimension of islands, represented as spaces where serious things cannot happen. With this attitude, more than explaining the reasons behind the micronation, the international press presented it as a picturesque and extravagant, but largely without mockery. These articles did not explain the context, and the result was that Meloni appeared as an important leader of Sardinian nationalism, while he was not. In other words, Malu Entu was taken more seriously by international press than the Italian and Sardinian, and this had important consequences. Despite Malu Entu's government lack of care for its digital image, it is recognized as an established micronation on the web. Malu Entu has a Wikipedia page in 12 languages, a detailed entry in the libertarian blog *Self Herald* and in the most relevant web site about vexillology, 'Flags of the World'. Here the affair is presented as a serious issue, with few criticisms about the real support that Meloni enjoyed in Sardinia. Given the limited knowledge of the Sardinian political context by international audiences, the result is that Malu Entu ended up being identified as representative of the entire Sardinian nationalism, and Meloni regarded as one of its leaders.

Conclusions

The cases presented show two opposing ways of understanding micronationality. The kingdom of Tavolara is rooted in a combination of administrative accident and lack of state authority. From this point of view, it is reminiscent of the accidental state entities that emerged after WWII in Bonin/Ogasawara Islands and Iwo-Jima (Long), and can be compared to two other Italian anomalies, the Principality of Seborga, or the disappeared medieval republic of Cospaia, in Italy. The three are cases in which a territory has been forgotten in diplomatic negotiations, or its borders have been wrongly indicated, creating a power vacuum and terra nullius condition in which a new sovereign entity can exist. But such political entities are unlikely to succeed in a world organized under the Westphalian model of sovereignty, and in fact the most successful is the case of Cospaia, a communal republic that lasted from 1440 until 1826 (McFarland 2020). Tavolara is better compared to the micronation known as the Principality of Seborga. As with Tavolara, the claim relies on the presumption that Seborga was never formally possessed by the House of Savoy, so in 1861 it could not be merged with the Kingdom of Italy. And, as in Tavolara, the claim has never been taken seriously, but regarded as a way to attract visitors. Nevertheless, the micronationalists of Seborga can count on more reliable archive records (in

that the principality existed in the past), and through the display of micronational paraphernalia and a well-managed web presence, they give the illusion of statehood. In this sense, the micronation is an important element of the local economy: one can buy micronational merchandising in the bureau of tourist information.

For Tavolara there are no archive records proving the existence of the kingdom, and the actual descendants of Giuseppe Bertoleoni show little interest in performing as legitimate monarchs. One can find few signs of statehood on the island, except for a faded family coat of arms on the abandoned Bertoleoni house, and the graves of the passed kings. Tavolara has no merchandising, no virtual existence or political pretensions, and it is part of a familiar business. In this sense, it is a very peculiar case: its rationale is not political, but cannot be reduced as a way to promote tourism. At the root of its existence there were the efforts of Giuseppe Bertoleoni to secure the property of the island, something exploited by his descendants every time it was threaten. Since the 1960s, however, a sense of romantic nostalgia for a disappeared Mediterranean world became the core element of the tourist business of Giuseppe Bertoleoni's descendants. Nevertheless, it is a small-scale familiar enterprise and there is a strong sentimental connection between the island and the alleged royal family, so that Tavolara cannot be compared to ambitious business-driven micronations, as North Dumpling Island (Butkus), or to cases as Outer Baldonia, promoted by wealthy men in search of leisure and adventure (MacKinnon). Nevertheless, as the latter, it belongs to what Hayward called the “prehistory of micronationalism” (“Islands and Micronationality”), and it should be considered a precursor of the phenomenon. Tavolara is an unintentional micronation. Rooted on an oral tradition, it served to claim land ownership and as a means of social promotion; taken as a real story by some authors, the fiction has become an attractive to the island, where the tourist business is almost monopolized by the descendants of the Bertoleoni.

Malu Entu is a politically driven micronation that failed to gain the support of what should have been its audience. Its leader, Salvatore Meloni, was a divisive figure in Sardinian nationalism long before declaring the independence of Malu Entu. Thanks to his involvement in the uncovered uprising of early 1980s, Meloni gained a reputation of uncompromising independentist and assembled a small political movement. But his activities turned detrimental for the entire movement with the establishment of the micronation. In this respect, Malu Entu is reminiscent of Forvik, the micronation declared by Stuart “Captain Calamity” Hill (Grydehøj). The parallel is striking: the two micronations were declared during the Summer of 2008 by extravagant and popular figures as part of a political struggle in which they were marginal. Both happened when the Scottish independence referendum became a relevant issue for Nationalist movements across Europe, resulting in a greater interest for sub-state nationalism. This was an excellent opportunity to gain visibility, but was wasted. Meloni failed to explain the reasons behind his protest, and showed a lack of interest in his public image and that of the micronation, resulting in both being ridiculed and criticized. Paradoxically, Malu Entu had more solidarity from Lega Nord than from Sardinian nationalism, and this made the situation worst. After Malu Entu, Meloni continued his political activism while having trouble with Italian courts, both for economic activities and his

involvement in unrealistic plans for uprisings. He became more and more a parodic figure, but the spectacularism of his actions made him in the eyes of Italian and international public opinion a representative of the Sardinian independence movement. Hill played a similar role, and resembles Meloni even in his many trials for fiscal matters. The popularity and naivety of both created a parodic image of two serious political movements. Malu Entu shows, like Forvik, that a micronation linked to a self-determination movement is likely to be depicted as a parody, thus resulting in a loss of reliability of the same movement. On the contrary, when a micronation's rationale is not political, or there is no real claim of sovereignty, it is regarded with romanticism and nostalgia, as shown by Tavolara. In a state reduced to a micro scale, even the more serious elements of statehood appear as a humorous version of what can be observed in a real state.

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