Historic Roots for Barrier Island Occupation in the Ria Formosa

Paula Bernardo¹, Rosário Bastos², João Alveirinho Dias³

¹Scholar from IMAR, ²University of Algarve, CIACOMAR-Universidade do Algarve, Av.16 de Junho, s/n 8700-311 Olhão, pcterxei@ualg.pt, jdias@ualg.pt
²University Aberta, Universidade Aberta-Delegação Norte, Rua do Ameal, nº752, 4200-055 Porto, rbastos@uiv-ab.pt

Abstract

As part of the Ria Formosa Barrier Island system, the islands of Armona and Culatra were verifiably inhabited towards the end of the 19th century by fishermen originating from nearby councils and their families. The main motive for this occupation seems to have been fishing activity, particularly as linked to sardine fishing structures.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Ria Formosa system of barrier islands is delimited in the west by the Ancão Peninsula, (followed from west to east by the islands Barreta, Culatra, Armona, Tavira and Cabanas) and to the east by Cacela Peninsula (Dias 1988).

According to Dias (1988), is can be assumed that the origin of these islands is related to sea-level fluctuations resulting from glaciations and de-glaciations. The barrier islands of the Ria Formosa have a few peculiar characteristics of interest to researchers, such as the absence of a significant river, or the tidal conditions, which can during spring tide conditions reach amplitudes of up to 4 m, when the more common tidal amplitudes for the establishment of barrier island systems lies closer to 0 to 2m, and 2 to 4m (Leatherman, cit in Dias 1988).

In the past, several authors such as Andrade & Romariz, Dias, Granja (Dias 1988), Esaguy (1984), Weinholz (1978), have been interested in the geo-morphology, and other scientific aspects of the islands. There is, however, a need for research from other areas, in particular from the area of human sciences, to understand the system as a whole, as mankind can be considered to be an intervening factor, acting to alter the object it is influencing. In this context it is, therefore, aim of this study to contribute to the knowledge of historic roots of human occupation on Culatra and Armona Islands.

2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The islands of Culatra and Armona have at present high indices of human occupation. The settlement of Culatra has a relatively permanent population of 612 inhabitants, according to statistics from 2000 (Tomás & Martins 2000). Farol and Armona have a more seasonal occupation related to the summer holiday season.

When were these population centres established and what were the reasons that contributed to this?

An analysis of baptism registries in the parish of Olhão (1859-1896), gives first hints that might contribute to the historical roots of the occupation of Armona e Culatra Islands. The first entry, found in reference to Armona Island, dates from 1891. It says: “(…) nasceu no arraial das armações de sardinha da ilha da Armona, proximo d’esta villa (…)” (‘…was born in the settlement of the sardine fishing structures of Armona Island, near this town…’) (Olhão Parish Registers, 1891, Lvo 33, pp. 9 e 10), which is proof that at this point in time there already were people living at this location. The same reference tells also of the existence of sardine fishing structures, which are also referred to in another entry, this one from 1894, saying: “(…) nasceu no arraial das companhas das armações de sardinha, denominada de Armona (…)” (‘…was born in the settlement of the sardine fishing structures, namely of Armona…’) (Olhão Parish Registers, 1894, Lvo 35, p.20).

It is thus evident that already towards the end of the 19th century there were settlements on Armona Island, and that these settlements were related to fishing activities, namely as related to sardine fishing structures. There is, however, no way yet to identify the location of this settlement. These settlements, called ‘Arraial’, were “agglomerations similar to small villages” (Costa 2000) where it was necessary to temporarily (in case of tuna fishing structures), or permanently (sardines) fix “the fishing population and their respective families in places strategically located in relation to the crafts of the sea” (Costa 2000). Nevertheless, the settlements of Armona ad Culatra Islands appear on the ‘Plano Hidrográfico da Barra e Canaes de Faro e Olhão’ (‘Hydrographic Map of the Inlet and Channels of Faro and Olhão’) of 1916, (Abecasis 1926), and it can thus be assumed that they were already in place at these locations towards the end of the 19th century.
Another aspect corroborating that at the end of the eighteen hundreds Armona Island was already inhabited by fishermen is the fact that, of the three found entries in registers, the fathers of the baptised children were themselves fishermen, their occupation being indicated in the entries as “maritimo” (“seaman”) (Olhão Parish Registers, 1891, 1894, 1896, Lv033, pp. 9 e 10; Lvo 35, p.20 and Lv037, p.40).

Table 1: Professions and origins of the progenitors of Armona Island, Parish Registers entries from 1859 to 1896.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>NUMBER</th>
<th>ENTRY</th>
<th>PROFESSION OF FATHER</th>
<th>ORIGIN OF PARENTS</th>
<th>SOURCE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1896</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Seaman</td>
<td>Santa Maria de Tavira</td>
<td>Olhão Parish</td>
<td>Lv033</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1894</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1896</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1894</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1896</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The fishing structure (‘armação’) existing there and “denominated Armona” had a basket (‘copo’) in Valencia style. These structures were considered fixed devices to fish mainly tuna and sardines (D’Eça 1929). “The sardine fishing structure is released into the shallow sea, in general close to the coast line” (Mascarenhas 1915), hence these fishing structures with Valencia baskets fished in depths around 20 to 40m (Nascimento 1948). The Valencia system was different from the traditional structures, introducing the ‘copejo’, “a mobile net that today is known as ‘copo’: “ (cup, or basket) (Galvão 1953) a type that had been in use in the area of the fishing port of Olhão since 1884/1885; and of which there were already in 1896 known up to six structures in the areas with the following names: Cabeça dos Mortos, S. Lourenço, Vergões, Armona, Barra da Fuzeta e Livramento (Nobre 1984), along the entire length of the Ria Formosa. This type of structures “stopped being used in Olhão around 1927”. (Terramoto, M.D. A armação de sardinha à valenciana, Jornal do Pescador Lisbon, Ano XXVI, nº.304, Maio de 1964).

Another interesting aspect is related to the origin of the parents of children referred to in the same sources; in all three cases they originate from Tavira (Table 1).

Due to the scarcity of entries no precipitated conclusions will be drawn here, such as the fact that the settling and occupation occurred through fishermen from neighbouring councils, even though the data from most records seems to point in that direction.

Also the occupation of the island of Culatra seems to be related to fishing activities, as the several entries refer to the fact that births occurred in “(...) arraial das armações de sardinha (...)” (‘the settlement of the sardine fishing structures’) (Olhão Parish Registers, 1893, Lvo 34, p.26), and is corroborated by the mention of the profession of masculine progenitors, since all of them (those present in the registers) are seamen.

Silva Lopes wrote in 1841 referring to Culatra Island: “there is a sand bank here called Culatra, where the towing nets are only released at low-tide, and the ruins of the Fort of S. Lourenço are completely surrounded by the sea”. This description does not mention to any permanent settlement on the island (at the date the letter was written). It should also be pointed out, that the documents consulted for the present study cover the period from 1859 to 1896 and that the first unmistakable mention to Culatra Island only appears in 1889.

The analysis of registered entries suggests that already at the end of the 19th century there were two settlements. This hypothesis is justified by the descriptions of the birthplace of baptised children’s. Allusions are made to “(...) arraial das armações de sardinha do pharol do cabo de Sancta Maria proximo d’esta villa (...)”(Olhão) (“..., the settlement of sardine fishing structures of Pharol at Cabo de Santa Maria next to this town [Olhão]...) (Olhão Parish Registers, 1895, Lvo 36, pp.115 and 116) and which would be a small agglomeration in the westernmost part of the island, next to the lighthouse (‘farol’). This lighthouse was described as “next to the Cabo de Sancta Maria, with fixed white light...and which was built in 1856, located at N. 16º E. and 2 miles from that cape with northern latitude 36° 59’, 24°, 02 and western longitude 7º, 51’, 49”, 38 from Greenwich” (Loureiro 1909), [according to the lighthouse authority, the construction dates from 1851 and was improved in 1921 changing the height of the tower from 35,5 to 42m (personal comm.)]. This lighthouse pointed out the Bispo Inlet which opened in 1861 “breaking Barreta Island a little bit up drift from the cabo de Sancta Maria” (Loureiro 1909). The Bispo Inlet appears on the Hydrographic Map of the Inlets and Ports of Faro and Olhão surveyed from 1870 to 1873 by B.M.F. de Andrade, hydrographic engineer (sic) and the captains of the army A. J. Perry and G. A. Perry and published in Abecassis (1926).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>NUMBER</th>
<th>PROFESSION</th>
<th>ORIGIN OF PARENTS</th>
<th>SOURCE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1889</td>
<td>Luz, Tavira</td>
<td>Conceição de Tavira</td>
<td>Olhão Parish POOLH/001Lv030</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1893</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Seaman</td>
<td>Cacela, V.R.S. António</td>
<td>Olhão Parish POOLH/001Lv034</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1894</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Seaman</td>
<td>Quarteira, Loulé</td>
<td>Olhão Parish POOLH/001Lv035</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1895</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Seaman</td>
<td>Moncara-pacho</td>
<td>Olhão Parish POOLH/001Lv036</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1896</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Seaman</td>
<td>Cacela, V.R.S.</td>
<td>Olhão Parish POOLH/001Lv037</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It can be seen on the map that the Bispo Inlet can be found between Barreta and Culatra Islands, where later, in 1927/29, the artificial Faro-Olhão Inlet would be opened (Weinholtz 1964).

The first baptism entries from this location date from 1893, 1895 and 1896. There is another one from 1894 that refers to a structure “called Pardal” localised “next to the cabo de Sancta Maria” (Olhão Parish Registers, 1894, Lvo 35, pp.48 and 49), and that supposedly is located on Culatra, since the entries refer to this island.

In the easternmost extremity of Culatra Island there would have been another settlement linked to fishing structures, hence a register entry from 1889 saying: “nasceu na ilha, no arraial das armações que fica em frente d’esta villa junto á barra” (‘there was born on the island, in the settlement of fishing structures in front of this village next to the inlet’) (Olhão Parish Registers, 1889, Lvo 30, p.64). Considering that the location was supposedly in front of Olhão, the referred to inlet must be the Nova Inlet shown on the previously mentioned Hydrographic Map of 1916. However, the only entry that makes explicit reference to “ilha da Culatra, fronteira a esta villa [de Olhão]” (‘Culatra Island, located in front of this town [Olhão]’) dates from 1895 (Olhão Parish Registers, 1895, Lvo 36, p.21).

Another doubt that arises in this study is linked to the location of Sancta Maria Island, referred to in a register entry: “ilha de Sancta Maria, proxima á barra do porto desta villa” (‘Sancta Maria Island, next to the inlet of the port of this village’) (Olhão Parish Registers, 1893, Lvo 34, p.99).

In the description of the coast of the Algarve by Adolfo Loureiro (1909) he refers to: “(...)prolonga-se a costa até a barra do Ancão, rasgadura que se abre n’ella, seguindo depois a ilha da Barreta até a ilha e Cabo de Sancta Maria, onde se formou a barra chamada do Bispo. Esta ilha e a da Culatra, que se lhe segue (...)” (‘...continues along the coast until Ancão Inlet, a tear that goes through it, and followed by Barreta Island until the Island and Cape of Sancta Maria, where an inlet has formed called Bispo. This island, and that of Culatra which follows...’). This description indicates that at this point (1909) an island (maybe sand bank would be more appropriate) existed between Barreta and Culatra and which would have disappeared subsequently due to the dynamics of the system, or as consequence of the opening of the artificial inlet in 1927/29.

Similarly to Armona Island, also on Culatra it can be observed that all parents of baptised children (six) originated from neighbouring councils (Table 2). It is therefore necessary to question, or even refuse the idea expressed in Martinho & Martinho (1982), Mendes (1986) and Tomás & Martins (2000), that Culatra Island was colonised by fishermen originating from Armona Island. The analysis of the previous table does not indicate any entry from natural progenitors from the referred island.

As complement and curiosity it can be pointed out that the initial housings on the island consisted merely of sedges, and wood. Probably they were only replaced by more permanent masonry constructions in the 20th century (Costa 2000).
In the concrete case of the Culatra agglomeration this alteration only occurred towards the end of the sixties, when the “construção a balde” (construction with cement) was initiated (Tomás & Martins 2000).

According to stories told by the older inhabitants of Culatra, the name of the island was subjected to several alterations in the course of time. It has been called at some point in the past “Ilha dos Leprosos” (‘Lepers Island’), since it was here that people infected with the disease were sent; it has also been called “Ilha dos Cães” (‘Dogs Island’) and has only later been called by its present name “Ilha da Culatra” (‘Island of the Gun Breech’) (Tomás & Martins 2000).

There are two versions that ‘justify’ this name of the island:

That a gun was found on the island, and was hence to forth known as “Ilha da Culatra”;

That the island has the form of a gun breech, which gave it its name (Tomás & Martins 2000).

HISTORICAL SOURCES AND REFERENCES

MANUSCRIPTED HISTORICAL SOURCES
Olhão Parish Registers (Baptisms), 1889 (Lvo 30)
Olhão Parish Registers (Baptisms), 1891 (Lvo 33)
Olhão Parish Registers (Baptisms), 1893 (Lvo 34)
Olhão Parish Registers (Baptisms), 1894 (Lvo 35)
Olhão Parish Registers (Baptisms), 1895 (Lvo 36)
Olhão Parish Registers (Baptisms), 1896 (Lvo 37)

PRINTED HISTORICAL SOURCES
“Jornal do Pescador”, Lisboa, Ano XXVI, n°.304, Maio de 1964

REFERENCES