

# The borderscape of Punta Tarifa: concurrent invisibilisation practices at Europe's ultimate peninsula

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## **Abstract**

This contribution aims to provide a cultural–geographical reading of the borderscape of Punta Tarifa: the southernmost point of so-called continental Europe and a key site vis-a-vis material and representational Euro-African (dis)connections. It is argued that Punta Tarifa harbours a complex process of symbolic and functional invisibilisation that turns this border landscape into a highly significant scenario within the ongoing European Union bordering process. This invisibilisation process is twofold. On the one hand, it lies with the selective public neglecting/ignoring of a crucial historical episode which challenges mainstream readings of Europe's cultural heritage (the arrival of Tarif and Islam to Tarifa in the year 710). On the other hand, it concerns the veiling of the implemented migration management practices and, more precisely, the opacity surrounding the Migrant Detention Centre situated by Punta Tarifa. Having explored the case of Punta Tarifa, we suggest that a cultural–geographical reading – and hence the shedding of some light – on these and other similar invisibilisation processes is paramount in order to neutralise symbolic and functional exclusionary practices which lie at the heart of current European Union external bordering dynamics.

## **Keywords**

borderscape, European Union, migrant detention centre, Punta Tarifa, Strait of Gibraltar, Tarif

## **Introduction**

This contribution aims to provide a cultural–geographical reading of the southernmost point of so-called continental Europe: Punta Tarifa. Punta Tarifa is situated right on the Strait of Gibraltar, in

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an extreme post of Europe, in one of its meridional peripheries. But some of its daily practices reveal some of the major weaknesses of central European Union (EU) policies. We wish to draw attention to certain features that somehow pull this territory right to the core of a crucial political, cultural and geographical debate: the symbolic and functional bordering of the EU. The scrutiny of Punta Tarifa enables us to shed some light on two important and concurrent invisibilisation practices currently operating in the EU. The first of these refers to the selective neglecting of the historical footprint of Islam within mainstream readings of the EU's cultural legacy, and the second refers to the opacity surrounding migrant confinement spaces within the EU's current external border regime. Taking these into account helps us critically analyse material and representational exclusionary dynamics which lie at the heart of current EU bordering.

### The (dis)connecting borderscape of the ultimate peninsula

Punta Tarifa is the name of the extreme part of the so-called Island of Las Palomas. To be precise, the Island of Las Palomas (0.3 km<sup>2</sup>) is not exactly an island. It once used to be an island indeed, but this is no longer the case. Since the 19th century, it has been connected to the mainland by a causeway, which has become an artificial isthmus. So it would be more precise to describe it as an almost-island, as a true *pae-ninsula* and as a genuine *presqu'île*.

The area of Punta Tarifa is a (kind of human made/socially constructed) peninsula, which is situated at the south end of another peninsula (the Iberian Peninsula), which is in turn situated at the south end of another peninsula (Europe). The area of Punta Tarifa can be seen, therefore, as the last peninsula of a sequence of peninsulas. Like the Russian Matryoshka dolls, this *ultimate peninsula* of Punta Tarifa is a tiny but nuclear European peninsula and is a significant sample of Europe. As such, Punta Tarifa tells us much about the way Europe is bordered, about the way European space is socially and politically made and bounded. In what follows we would like to argue why.

You are in the European southern point [sic]. This sentence can be read (in Spanish, French and English, but not in Arabic) on a notice board at Punta Tarifa (Figure 1). Together with the map drawn next to it, the sentence speaks directly to the European geographical imagination. Both the sentence and the map clearly underline the symbolic singularity of this arena: where the Atlantic and the Mediterranean merge, at the south end of Europe, face to face with the African continent, at the core of the Strait of Gibraltar. And this symbolic uniqueness is stressed and reinforced by means of several interventions in the public space. No signs, however, recall the centuries of Islamic European history that have a major milestone in Tarifa. Neither do any signs indicate that the Island of las Palomas holds a Migrant Detention Centre where migrants, mostly originating from Africa, are detained. These details are missing, and these omissions tell us much about the opacity surrounding some key expressions of past and present Euro-African (dis) connection (Figure 2–7).

In fact, the borderscape of Punta Tarifa has historically been an exceptional witness to various attempts to achieve some sort of physical Euro-African connection. Perhaps the most spectacular is the Atlantropa project, led by the German architect Herman Sörgel in the 1920s. Sörgel's project was aimed at building a huge hydroelectric dam in the Strait of Gibraltar.<sup>1</sup> The construction of the dam (one of the extremes of which would have been in Tarifa) was supposed to subsequently lower the sea level in the Mediterranean. This was supposed to enable the colonisation of newly emerged lands and newly irrigated areas in the Sahara desert. And, more importantly, in turn, this was also supposed to enable the building of railway connections between Europe and Africa: one through



**Figure 1.** Information sign at Punta Tarifa (image by Abel Albet-Mas, 2014).



**Figure 2.** Information signs at Punta Tarifa (image by Keina Espiñeira, 2013).

the Strait of Gibraltar (from Paris to Dakar) and the other through Sicily and Tunisia (from Berlin to Cape Town).

This attempt to achieve a tangible Euro-African linkage connection would have implied turning Africa into a huge physical but also colonial peninsula of Europe. For various reasons, the Atlantropa project was never put into practice. However, nowadays, there is still talk about other projects which are also pharaonic and which are also aimed at physically connecting the two shores of the Strait. The *enlace fijo* (permanent link) between Spain and Morocco, which has been discussed since the 1920s,<sup>2</sup> is a good example of this. And, surprisingly, despite the huge economic cost it would entail, this project has not been discarded. In fact, in 2003, a joint Spanish–Moroccan technical commission – supported by both governments – proposed a



**Figure 3.** Information sign at Punta Tarifa (image by Abel Albet-Mas, 2014).

tunnel as the best option to physically connect Europe and Africa across the Strait of Gibraltar. In the framework of this project, a railway connection through a submarine tunnel would connect Punta Malabata (near Tangier, in Morocco) and Punta Paloma (which is actually within the municipality of Tarifa, in Spain). In this case, as also occurred with Sörgel's Atlantropa, the borderscape of Punta Tarifa is right in the middle of Euro-Africa linking megalomaniac fantasies.

### **Symbolic and functional invisibilisations of EU bordering practices**

The toponym of Tarifa also reveals a narrative of connection between Europe and Africa. Tarifa owes its name to Tarif ibn Malik, who was a commander under Tariq ibn Ziyad. In the year 710 (one year before Tariq – and Islam with him – landed in Gibraltar and, therefore, on the northern shore of the Mediterranean), Tariq sent Tarif on a raid to test the southern coastline of the Iberian Peninsula.<sup>3</sup> This test-raid would give rise to the present toponym of Tarifa.<sup>4</sup> Surprisingly, although Tarif is inscribed in history, literature and even in toponymy, it is almost impossible to find traces of him in Tarifa. No sculptures, no street names. Tarif is somehow hidden – or is not very visible, at least – in official–public remembrance. In contrast, however, it is easy to find explicit official remembrance of the Christian (re)conquest of the city in 1292, in what constitutes a clearly selective romanticising of the cultural–geographical heritage of Tarifa (Figure 4).

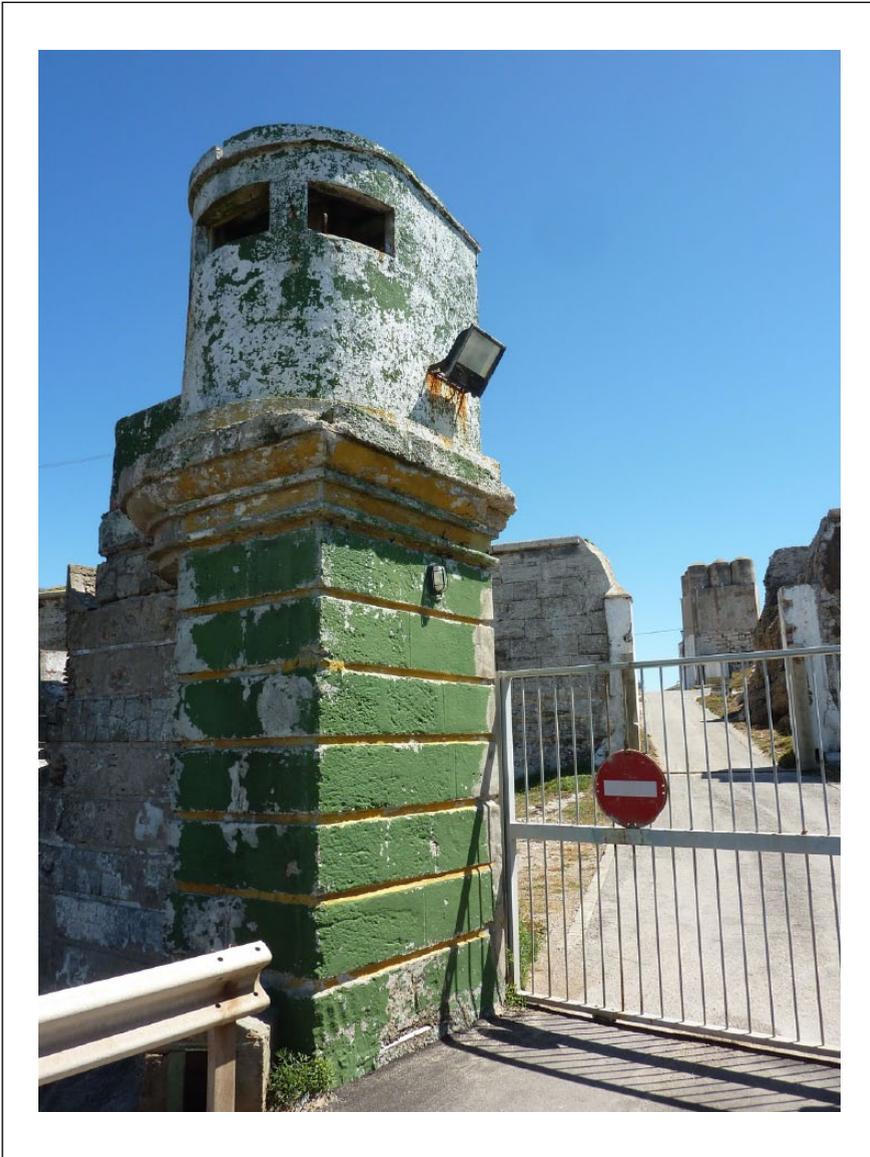
This sort of invisibilisation of Tarif recurs when it comes to speaking about the Migrant Detention Centre located in Punta Tarifa (Figure 5). As pointed out by several organisations, such as APDHA (*Asociación Pro Derechos Humanos de Andalucía*) – which is part of the Migreurop network – the functioning of this Migrant Detention Centre is opaque. It is difficult to access data concerning detained people, carried expulsions or asylum applications. Neither is access allowed



**Figure 4.** Memorial plate in Tarifa (translation: ‘The very loyal, noble and heroic city of Tarifa. Won to the Moors while under the reign of Sancho IV “the brave”, on September 21st, 1292’) (image by Xavier Ferrer-Gallardo, 2013).



**Figure 5.** Information sign describing the landscape of Punta Tarifa, with no reference to the Migrant Detention Centre (image by Abel Albet-Mas, 2014).



**Figure 6.** Gated entry to Punta Tarifa, where the Migrant Detention Centre of Las Palomas is located (image by Abel Albet-Mas, 2014).

to non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or social organisations monitoring internment conditions and human rights protection. This also occurs with the rest of the centres in the EU.<sup>5</sup> However, invisibility and silence are more profound in Punta Tarifa because of the conjunctural essence of this particular centre's location (Figure 6).

The Detention Centre of Punta Tarifa is located in a former prison. It has room for 160 migrants. The prison was used as a migration-border control device for the first time in the early 1990s. It operated as a temporary space for coordinating expulsions and deportations of African undocumented



**Figure 7.** Information sign describing the landscape of Punta Tarifa, with no reference to the Migrant Detention Centre (image by Abel Albet-Mas, 2014).

migrants. In 2002, it was re-opened under the implementation of the System of Integrated External Surveillance (SIVE) on the Spanish southern coasts. Since the establishment of the Migrant Detention Centre of Algeciras in 2003, the centre of Punta Tarifa started to operate as a complementary module, as an extension or annex of it. Based on this ‘emergency’ and provisional nature, Punta Tarifa is still not recognised as a ‘formal’ Migrant Detention Centre. Rather, the centre in Punta Tarifa should be counted as one of the various improvised detention camps currently functioning in Spain.<sup>6</sup> They operate together with the officially recognised Spanish Migrant Detention Centres.<sup>7</sup> And they are part of a growing archipelago of centres that have been mushrooming across the EU and beyond over recent years (Figure 7).<sup>8</sup>

Together with the physical, bureaucratic and biometric fortification of the EU external border (on the one hand) and the externalisation of border controls (on the other), migrant confinement centres constitute an essential pillar of the current EU bordering regime vis-a-vis human mobility. These centres are expected to gain even more relevance in the near future, as new Mobility Partnerships and Readmission Agreements between the EU and third countries will be fully implemented.

Further exploration of the new constellation of ‘waiting areas’ for migrants is of crucial importance in order to monitor the evolving process of EU external bounding. In this vein, Creswell’s notion of ‘constellation of mobility, that entails considering the historical existence of fragile senses of movement, meaning, and practice marked by distinct forms of Mobile politics of regulation’<sup>9</sup> might prove operative in order to further theoretically excavate the way the EU constructs and reproduces both its material and its representational limits. In so far as it implicates not only particular patterns of movement (and hence also non-movement) but also representations of this (non)movement and ways of practising this (non)movement, it might be an invitation to avoid historical amnesia when thinking about current practices of bordering and human (im)mobility in EU politics and regulations.

The double invisibilisation hovering over the borderscape of Punta Tarifa tells us much about the selective symbolic and functional bordering of (EU)rope. The invisibilisation of the historical footprint of Islam in the forging of today's Europe and the invisibilisation of current migrant detention spaces and practices are two illustrative examples of how the EU is bounded.

What and how are representational landmarks kept out or expelled from the EU project? What and how are people/humans (im)mobilised at the EU border? The borderscape of the ultimate peninsula of Punta Tarifa offers an unbeatable anchoring point to address these questions and to continue to critically analyse the myriad material, representational, past and present exclusionary dynamics which lie at the heart of the current EU bordering process.

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### Notes

1. See C.Troll, J.van Eimern and W.Daume, 'Herman Sörgel's Atlantropa in Geographischer Sicht', *Erdkunde*, 4(3/4), 1950, pp. 177–88; P.G.Martínez, 'Atlantropa: El sueño del Mediterráneo', *Neutra. Revista del Colegio Oficial de Arquitectos de Andalucía Occidental*, 14, 2006, p. 128; P.Christensen, 'Dam Nation: Imaging and Imagining the 'Middle East' in Herman Sörgel's Atlantropa', *International Journal of Islamic Architecture*, 1(2), 2012, pp. 325–46.
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6. In Spain, provisional detention camps for immigrants have been identified in the military quarters of Las Raíces in Tenerife, La Isleta in Gran Canaria and Las Palomas in Tarifa. Also, transit areas and dependencies for rejected people in ports (Algeciras) and airports (Madrid-Barajas, Barcelona-El Prat and Fuerteventura). The eight operative Migrant Detention Centres (CIE) are located in Algeciras, Barcelona, Fuerteventura, Las Palmas, Madrid, Murcia, Santa Cruz de Tenerife and Valencia. Moreover, there are two Centres of Temporary Stay for Immigrants (CETI) situated exclusively in the cities of Ceuta and Melilla, characterised by their semi-open regime: migrants can enter and leave the CETI during daylight hours using an identification card. See Espai per a la desobediència a les fronteres, 'La vida en la frontera: internamiento y expulsiones' in AA.VV. *Frontera Sur* (Barcelona: Virus, 2008), pp. 210–40.
7. See A.Jarrín-Morán, D.Rodríguez-García and J.de-Lucas, 'Los Centros de Internamiento para Extranjeros en España: una evaluación crítica', *Revista CIDOB d'Afers Internacionals*, 99, 2012, pp. 201–20.

8. See X.Ferrer-Gallardo and A.Albet-Mas, 'EU-Limboscapes: Ceuta and the Proliferation of Migrant Detention Spaces across the European Union', *European Urban and Regional Studies*. Epub ahead of print 11 November 2013. DOI: 10.1177/0969776413508766. For a cartographical representation of the camps, see <<http://www.closesthecamp.org>>
9. T.Cresswell, 'Towards a Politics of Mobility', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 28(1), 2010, p. 17.

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