

# The War for the Air. Ilha do Sal Airport, between Fascism and Estado Novo

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*Ilha do Sal, Fascism, Estado Novo, Airport, Urban planning*

## /Abstract

The Ilha do Sal – one of the islands of the Cabo Verde archipelago – was a matter of strong interest by the Italian fascist government starting in 1935 with a disputed and contentious “war for the air” between Salazar and Mussolini’s government and the respective Aviation Ministries. The Portuguese Estado Novo decided to provide the Ilha do Sal for use by the Italian aviation company L.A.T.I. (*Linee Aeree Transcontinentali Italiane*), born from the *Ala Littoria* in 1939 and led by Bruno Mussolini, the Duce son. In fact, Ilha do Sal was essential for Italian aviation to complete the “domination” of airlines in South America because represented the last stopover point on European soil before crossing the Atlantic necessary for aerial technical refueling.

The research investigated the construction of the airport in the Ilha do Sal and the relations between Italy and Portugal. The island – defined a “little stone ship” – became an “aeronautical city” built in only 180 days by Italian technicians, and due to the airport, the infrastructures and a new “non-planned” urbanization, the island in 1940 moved from an almost desert land to a population of seven hundred people. With the beginning of the II World War, a “diplomatic war” broke off the relations between the two countries. Nevertheless, this technical Italian urbanization of the Ilha do Sal was totally ignored by Portuguese historiography of that time. After the II WW, the airport returned to Portuguese ownership and the new Alitalia airlines restarted its flights; but the airport was completely modified, partly erasing the work of Italian engineers.

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## Introduction: from Ala Littoria to LATI

In Naples (Italy) at the exhibition *Triennale delle Terre Italiane d'Oltremare*<sup>1</sup> held in 1939-40, Enrico Del Debbio with Egisto Pierotti designed the pavilion for the *Linee Aeree Transcontinentali Italiane (LATI)* commissioned by Bruno Mussolini<sup>2</sup>. This pavilion was built as a platform with a small artificial lake that representing the Atlantic Ocean; a large and curved wing with at the top a seagull (the company's symbol) – modeled by the sculptor Romeo Gregori. In the water, a luminescent tube connects Italy and South America, and the interior decorations were designed by F. Variopinti and M. Vucetich. This "line" was a tube that indicated the air route of LATI, which united Rome, passing through Lisbon and arriving in Brazil, and highlighted a point in the middle of the Ocean: the Cabo Verde islands. [Fig. 1] Why so much interest in these islands that belonged to the Portuguese Salazar's government? What was the relationship and the interests of fascist State for the Ilha do Sal?

The LATI aviation company was officially established on September 11, 1939 from the Direzione Autonoma of the Italian national airline Ala Littoria S. A.<sup>3</sup> to connect as postal services Italy and Latin America (especially Brazil and Argentina) and at the behest of the fascist regime for various reasons, including international prestige<sup>4</sup>. [Fig. 2] The Duce's son, Bruno Mussolini, was appointed as "inventor" and head of the company. The company, initially tried to have agreements between the Italian Ala Littoria, Air France and Deutsche Lufthansa, but this idea didn't reach the expected understanding, cause of the political position of France and the hostility of Germany, which didn't want to fly the Italian aircraft over the colonized African territories as stopover points. So, the Italian fascist government decides to find international agreements with Portugal and Spain. Cabo Verde was the last stop on "European" land before crossing the Atlantic and represented at the time an intermediate stopover necessary for the airplanes refueling.

Then it was necessary to build an airport – very quickly – in addition to establishing land bases, to support ships and submarines, with weather stations and radio points on the Atlantic coast for contact with aircraft. The airline provided weekly passage (in both directions) on the route: Roma - Sevilha - Lisboa - Villa

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1 This exhibition was related to the theme of Italian colonies and followed the exhibitions of the *Mostra internazionale d'arte coloniale* in Roma (1931) and in Napoli (1934). Cf. Vargaftig, *Des empires en carton. Le esposizioni coloniali in Portogallo e in Italia* (1918-1940), 2016.

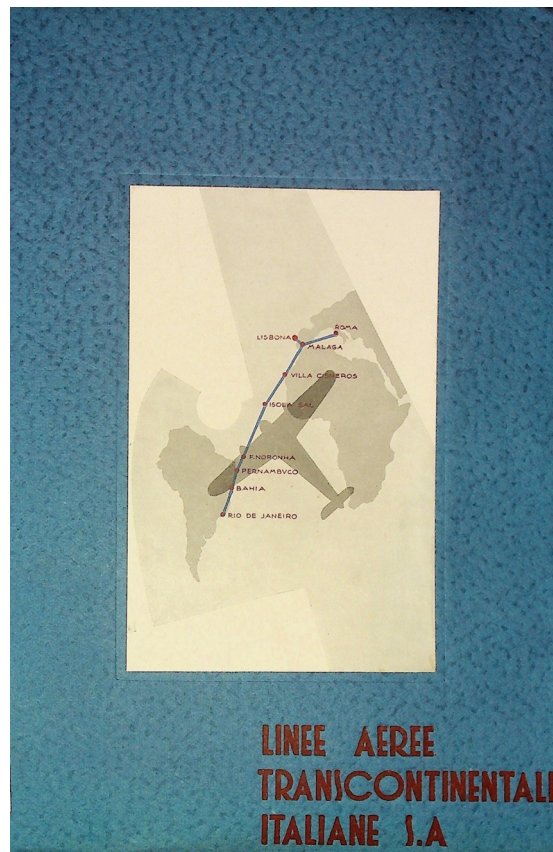
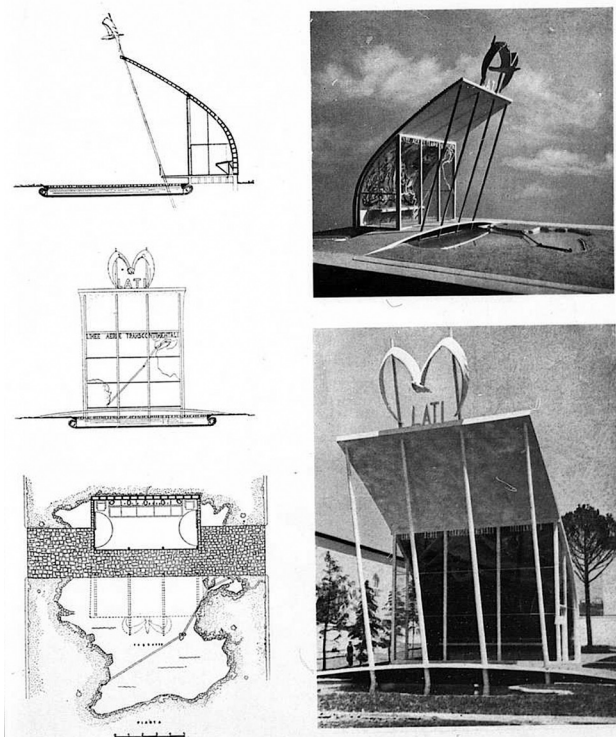
2 Bruno Mussolini (1918-1941) was the son of Benito Mussolini, the Duce. In 1935, he joined the Regia Aeronautica Italiana and became a pilot. At 17 years old, he was Italy's youngest military pilot. He was also one of the directors of the Ala Littoria airline and the "inventor" of the LATI, created to connect Italy and Brazil.

3 Ala Littoria, established, also-if not mainly-by political will, on October 28, 1934, the day of the 12th anniversary of the Marcia su Roma, with the goal of having one big company that would manage civil air transport in Italy and the colonies, enabling regular connections between Italy, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia. This air transport company came into being by changing the name of SAM Società Aerea Mediterranea, created by Italo Balbo, and absorbing, within a short time, several small companies that operated domestically, such as SISA, Transadriatica, AeroEspresso and SANA, or in the Italian colonies, such as the North African Aviation Company.

4 The first fly of LATI was in 1939, and the last one in 1959.

**P A D I G L I O N E D E L L A L . A . T . I .**  
**ARCHITETTI ENRICO DEL DEBBIO ED EGISTO PIEROTTI**

Questo graziosissimo padiglione si erge sopra una vasca d'acqua che rappresenta l'Oceano Atlantico con l'indicazione, in tubi luminescenti, dei percorsi della L.A.T.I. Entro la vetrina sono gli orari, i cataloghi, il materiale documentario della Società.  
 Il Gabbiano è stato modellato dallo scultore R. Gregori; le decorazioni interne sono di F. Variopinti e M. Vucetich.



Cisneros - Ilha do Sal - Pernambuco - Rio de Janeiro. It was divided into three sectors: the "European" with three planes between Rome and Ilha do Sal, the "Atlantic" with four planes between Ilha do Sal and Pernambuco, and the "American" with three more aircraft, between Pernambuco and Rio de Janeiro<sup>5</sup>. [Fig. 3]

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**The Construction of the Lisbon Airport and the Relationship with Mussolini's Government**

During the regime – both in Portugal and Italy – the challenge of flight represented not only a technological advancement and a chance to visit other countries, but also a necessity for trade and mail transportation.

Despite some timely attempts, it was only in the beginning of the 20th century that born the aviation. The first Portuguese flight took place in 1912, which was followed by a rapid evolution of aerial means due to the technological development associated with the war. From that time, several aeroclub structures

5 The inauguration took place on December 24, 1939, with a flight to Rio de Janeiro, but with the loss of an aircraft (Io-ARPA Savoia Marchetti Sm-38), commanded by Colonel Massai, in the area above Mogador in Morocco. The postal service was organized according to this schedule: mail from all over Italy arrived by train in Rome on Wednesday and on Thursday was transported to Guidonia, where it was loaded onto the plane bound for Seville. Here it received Spanish mail. On Friday the mail traveled from Seville to Lisbon and the Ilha do Sal. On Saturday, on the Ilha do Sal, the mail cargo was transported to Pernambuco and Recife. From Recife, via an American plane, it continued to Rio de Janeiro. In the reverse direction, the mail left on Friday and arrived in Guidonia on Monday afternoon, after which it was transported to Rome and from there throughout Europe. From September 1, 1939, when Germany entered the war, the German postal service was entrusted to the Italian-German consortium CONDOR-LATI. From December 24 of 1939, German transportation was carried out by Italian, South American or U.S. aircraft.

Fig. 1  
 Enrico Del Debbio and Egisto Pierotti, L.A.T.I. Pavilion for the exhibition of Triennale delle Terre Italiane d'Oltremare, Naples, 1939-40 (*Architettura. Rivista del Sindacato Nazionale Fascista Architetti*, no. 1-2, 1941, 61).

Fig. 2  
 Cover of the book *In volo da Roma all'America Latina / Linee aeree transcontinentali italiane s.a.* (Biblioteca Comunale Ariostea, Ferrara. Fondo Quilici)





began to spring up in Portugal, and in 1910 the *Rivista Aeronáutica* began to be published and started the exchanges with foreign aviators. While military aviation was improving its facilities, civil aviation was beginning to take on greater importance, expanding flights beginning in the 1920s with new routes to Brazil, Cabo Verde, Luanda, and São Tomé.

The importance of build an airport in Lisbon was emphasized in an article published in the *Diário de Notícias* on January 12, 1928, in which the idea was to locate it in the Campo Grande area. But the terrain presented some problems related to the geology of the soils and in 1928<sup>6</sup> the Lisbon municipality opted for the construction of the Portela Airport in Sacavém, whose project was drawn up by Francisco Keil do Amaral<sup>7</sup> with the support of Duarte Pacheco, the Minister of Public Works and Communications<sup>8</sup>. In December 1930 - January 1931 there was the first *Crociera aerea transatlantica Italia-Brasile* [Fig. 4] organized by Italo Balbo (Minister of Aeronautics from 1929 to 1933) who visited Lisbon

6 There was in 1928 a preliminary project for an air base in Lisbon: submitted by the *Société d'Études des Ports Aériens Internationaux du Portugal* for the Lisbon Airport, which included descriptive memorandum, correspondence, basis for the establishment of a land airport in Lisbon, descriptive memorandum of the construction of hangars, areas and services, aircraft repair shops, general plan of construction and facilities, plan of the air terminal, elevations, hotel plan and sections, signed by the engineer M. Fl. Ginder (source: Arquivo Nacional Torre do Tombo, PT/AMLSB/CMLSB/UROB-PU/10/427).

7 Francisco Keil do Amaral (1910-1975) also carried out several airport projects, including the Braga airport (1946), the expansion of the Lisbon airport (1946), the S. Jacinto airport in Aveiro (undated), the radio sounding building at the Lisbon airport, the Luanda airport in Angola (1950), and the director's house and development of the Santa Maria airport in the Açores (1950).

8 Sandra Vaz Costa, *O País a Régua e Esquadro. Urbanismo, Arquitectura e Memória na Obra Pública de Duarte Pacheco* (Lisboa: IST Press 2012).

Fig. 3  
Route line of South Atlantic:  
in the center the Ilha do Sal in  
Cabo Verde (source: In volo da  
Roma all'America Latina / Linee  
aeree transcontinentali italiane  
s.a. - Biblioteca Comunale  
Ariostea, Ferrara. Fondo Quilici)

Fig. 4  
Billboard of *Crociera Aerea  
Transatlantica. aerei in volo  
tra l'Italia, l'Africa e il Brasile*,  
1930, design by Lazzaro  
Umberto (source: [https://  
catalogo.beniculturali.it/detail/  
HistoricOrArtisticProperty/  
0500662744](https://catalogo.beniculturali.it/detail/HistoricOrArtisticProperty/0500662744))

many times during the 1930s<sup>9</sup> attempting to intensify relations with Salazar's government. While in Lisbon they were beginning to think about the airport project, several Italian airport projects were being publicized in architectural journals as *Casabella*, *Architettura - Rivista del sindacato nazionale fascista architetti*, *Edilizia Moderna*<sup>10</sup>, widespread among Portuguese architects. And in 1934 in the exhibition *Esposizione dell'Aeronautica Italiana*<sup>11</sup> in the Palazzo dell'Arte in Milan there was an entire section devoted to the construction of airfields and airports.

In Lisbon, after the choice of the site in Sacavém, Duarte Pacheco strongly supported the airport project: the conditions were favorable, not only because of the type of terrain, but also because of its location in the center of the city, its distance from the Tagus River, its flatness (with no obstacles around it), and the direction of the winds.

In 1938 the Portuguese airplane pilot Humberto Pais in the periodical *Revista do Ar* wrote that "it is necessary to build the airport in Lisbon, but in a modern way"<sup>12</sup>. [Fig. 5] While planning the Lusitanian capital's airport for the great Portuguese exposition of 1940, Italian history intersected with the Portuguese one, forcing the need for an airport in Lisbon. Since the 1930s, the *Ala Littoria* had initiated a series of technical and commercial studies on transatlantic lines PT connecting Europe to South America<sup>13</sup>.

Lisbon represented a very interesting point for Italy as the *Ala Littoria* stopover on the Rome to Rio de Janeiro route. The study for the Lisbon airport – under



9 Several photos of Italo Balbo in Lisbon are preserved in Arquivo Nacional Torre do Tombo, inside the Journal O Século photo archive: "Chegada de Italo Balbo", 31-12-1931 (PT/TT/EPJS/SF/001-001/0021/1462F); "Visita do General Italo Balbo à Casa dos Italianos", 01-01-1932 (PT/TT/EPJS/SF/001-001/0022/0001G); "O General Italo Balbo e Alberto Tuozzi", 09-08-1933, (PT/TT/EPJS/SF/001-001/0026/0922H); "O General Italo Balbo, acompanhado dos srs. Ministros da Guerra e Marinha", 09-08-1933 (PT/TT/EPJS/SF/001-001/0026/0923H); "O Marechal Italo Balbo com o seu traje de aviador, momentos antes da sua partida para Roma", 12-08-1933 (PT/TT/EPJS/SF/001-001/0026/0929H); "O General Italo Balbo passando à Guarda de Honra", 18-09-1933 (PT/TT/EPJS/SF/001-001/0026/1064H).

10 Italian airports published in the magazines: "Aeroporti", *Architettura XII*, no 4, (April 1934): 213-224; "Concorso stazione passeggeri aeroporto di Milano Linate", Arch. Gianluigi Giordani, *Architettura XIII*, no. 4 (April 1935): 222-226; "Stazione per l'aeroporto", Arch. Prampolini, *Edilizia Moderna*, no. 10-11 (August-December 1933): 56-57; "Aeroporti", *Casabella*, no. 80, (August 1934): 24-31; "Aeroporto civile - Ing. Guido Fiorini", *Casabella*, no. 80 (August 1934): 32-35; *L'Architecture D'Aujourd'hui*, no. 9, (1936): 34 (Milan airport), 50 (Venice airport).

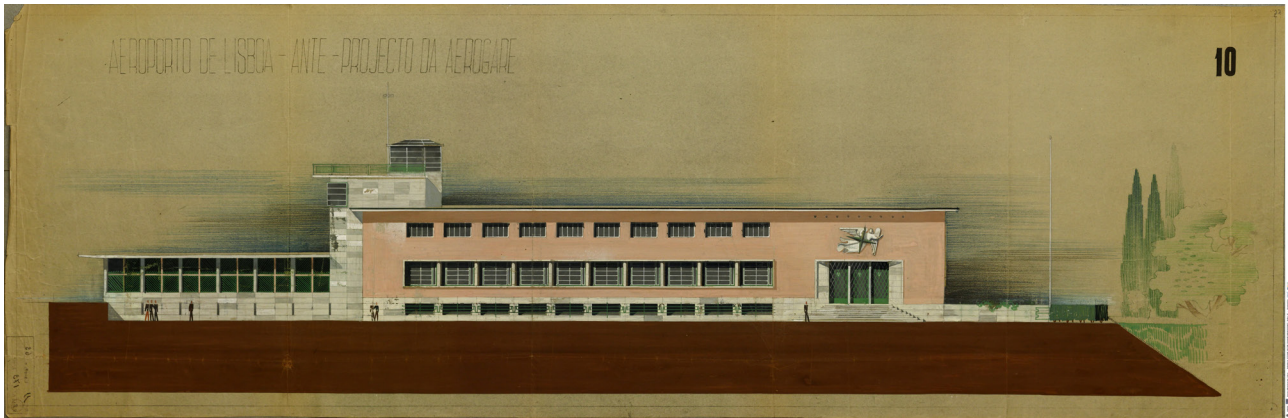
11 For this exhibition dedicated to Italian Aeronautics – one of the most important celebratory events of the fascist twentieth century – the most important architects were called to work, under the supervision of Giuseppe Pagano: BBPR (Sala dei Primi voli e Sala Forlanini), Marcello Nizzoli e Edoardo Persico (Sala delle Medaglie d'oro), Giuseppe Pagano (Sala d'Icaro), Gio Ponti (Sala "più leggero dell'aria"), Franco Albini (Sala dell'Aerodinamica), Luciano Baldessari (Sala Aviazione e Fascismo e Sala Aviazione civile - turismo aereo - posta aerea). Cf. *Esposizione dell'aeronautica italiana*, catalogo ufficiale (Milano: Edizioni d'arte Emilio Bestetti, 1934).

12 Humberto Pais, "Aeroporto de Lisboa", *Revista do Ar*, no. 8 (May 1938): 2-5. (Translation from Portuguese by the author).

13 At that time there were already transatlantic flights operated by Lufthansa and Air France. The difference was that the air service was limited because Lufthansa flew with seaplanes and with the presence of a foothold made by a mechanical arm in the middle of the ocean. In this way, France also had an incomplete service (in air terms) because the planes flew as far as Dakar and then the rest of the crossing was made by ship.

Fig. 5  
Cover of *Revista do Ar*, 8, May 1938.





the responsibility of Keil do Amaral with engineers Santos Silva and Lopes Monteiro – began in February 1936, after some studies by Dutch engineers. However, the preliminary project was not delivered until two years later, on September 1, 1938<sup>14</sup>. The architect Keil de Amaral, at that time, enjoyed some government support, having designed the Portuguese pavilion in Paris in 1937, the Parque de Atrações inside the Exposição do Mundo Português in 1940, and being considered “the architect of the city of Lisbon” with the projects for Monsanto, Campo Grande, and Parque Eduardo VII.

In 1939-40 earthworks for the airport were carried out and in 1940-41 the construction of the four paved runways; the construction of the terminal began in 1940-41 and was inaugurated in 1942. The airport building was relatively small, fifty meters long and twenty meters wide, with a traditional pitched roof, a control tower, and two volumes of thirty meters high. It was “a work of great formal richness, but one that showed a certain contradiction in its exterior image, with something traditional and an error of scale”; the scale and domestic language that “while the architect’s intention to favor humanistic and welcoming values is clear, (...) the theme of the building was evident only in the discreet counterpoint of the control tower with the rest of the built mass”<sup>15</sup>. [Fig. 6] The external appearance contrasted with the more current and modern-looking interior space, and perhaps this “uncertainty” was due to the year of design – the 1940 – a time of imposition of a certain “nationalistic” architecture desired by Salazar; or perhaps because it was a new typology in that period in Portugal for the public works. Despite this, the airport project was presented as one of the “big events” at the regime’s major exhibition of the *15 Anos de Obras Públicas* (1947). [Fig. 7]

14 On the development of the construction of the Lisbon airport published in the newspapers (surveyed by the author): *Boletim da Câmara Municipal de Lisboa*, no. 135, (1929); *Cumpriu-se o Ar*, catálogo manuscrito da exposição na Torre de Belém (October 17, 1988); *Cinquentenário da Aeronáutica militar*, Secretaria de Estado da Cultura: Lisboa, 1964; *Diário de Notícias* in the days: 30 April 1927; 11 June 1927; 19 July 1927; 12 January 1928; 25 January 1928; 31 January 1928; 15 May 1930; 14 August 1930; 25 October 1934; 14 February 1937; 28 July 1938; 21 February 1940; 16 October 1942; 22 October 1942; *Ilustração*, no. 17, 1933, 10-11; *Ilustração*, no. 228, 1935, 14-15; *O Notícias Ilustrado*, no. 10, 1928; *Século Ilustrado*, no. 67, 1939; *Revista do Ar*: no. 8, no. 10, no. 15, no. 26, no. 28, no. 31, no. 32, no. 33, no. 34, no. 41, no. 56, no.61, no. 62, no. 64; *Boletim da Ordens dos Engenheiros*, no. 48, December 1940, 551-564.

15 Francisco Pires Keil Do Amaral, ed., *Keil Amaral Arquitecto 1910-1975* (Lisboa: Associação dos Arquitectos Portugueses 1992), 65.

Fig. 6  
Francisco Keil do Amaral, elevation drawing of the Lisbon terminal airport, s.d. (source: Câmara Municipal de Lisboa, Divisão do Arquivo Municipal, ref: PT-AMLSB-CMLSBAH-PURB-002-03937-Folha 41).



### The Italian airport urbanization of Ilha do Sal

The privileged position of the Cabo Verde archipelago in the South Atlantic – as a stopover between Europe, America, and southern Africa – had been evident since the first air travels in 1922: Gago Coutinho and Sacadura Cabral had made stopovers at São Vicente and Ilha de Santiago on their fly across the Atlantic to Brazil. In 1925, the Brazilian seaplane JAHU, flying between Europe and Brazil, had stopped at Ilha de Santiago and in January 1935, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs – through diplomatic representations in Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires – had sent a request to the Portuguese Ministry of Aeronautics, while Air France turned its attentions to the Ilha do Sal.

In 1934, Augusto de Castro of the Portuguese delegation in Rome had sent an Italian request to the Minister of Foreign Affairs to establish a commercial airline to South America because the trip from Rome to Brazil is 13,767 kilometers long and required a technical stop mid-flight. De Castro met with General Giuseppe Valle – as undersecretary of state of the Ministry of Aeronautics (from 1933 to 1936) – authorized by Mussolini at the Italian Ministry of Aeronautics – a meeting with the Director of the Italian Civil Air Force, the General Aldo Pellegrini.

Among the first hypotheses presented by Italy was a proposal to establish an Italo-Portuguese Company with capital in both countries. The undersecretary of Aeronautics said through De Castro's words:

Within a year Italy will possess the most powerful and best civil aviation aircraft in the world. These planes are under construction. Under these conditions and with these aircraft, Italy intends to establish in the coming year a commercial airline connecting Rome to Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro. This line could have two stops: one in Gibraltar and the other in Cabo Verde if the Portuguese government is in favor. Otherwise, the

Fig. 7

Francisco Keil do Amaral, Lisbon terminal airport, c. 1947 (source: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Col. Estúdio Horácio Novais / FCG Biblioteca de Arte e Arquivos).

line will go through Vila Cisneiros. The Italian government is not asking for, nor does it want, any kind of monopoly, because 'it has always been and will continue to be a defender of freedom of the air'. It only wishes to know if the Portuguese government is in favor of establishing a base in Cabo Verde<sup>16</sup>.

These early contacts were followed by a break due to the conflict in Ethiopia (1935-1936) as the Ala Littoria had the aircraft used in East Africa.

In 1937, Italy sought confirmation from Portugal that it could use the Ilha do Sal as an air stopover, a request that was granted by Salazar despite some concerns.

In the same year in São Vicente (Cabo Verde), José Lopes da Silva – vice-consul of Brazil in São Vicente – communicated to the Cape Verdean population the words of Mussolini, with a clear propaganda intent. In his speech, beginning with the history of Italy, the city of Rome as *Urbe*, capital of the “ancient” world and “mother city” of all peoples, he said: “I have come to this point and to these conclusions to speak of Mussolini, the greatest of men of the present time and one of the greatest of all times-present, past and future”<sup>17</sup>. In this ‘exaltation’ of Italian history, Lopes da Silva traces the Italian history from the Middle Ages to the relation with Ancient Greece, its great artistic and cultural figures, justifying the arrival of Mussolini as the “savior of the homeland”:

It is then that he appears, more than a man, a superman to save Italy and perhaps Latin and Western civilization. He is an envoy, a savior whom God has raised up for Italy and for the Latin race! (...) And this *super-homem* is Benito Mussolini (...) who reorganizes the state, restores order, dignifies power, deifies patriotism, and founds the corporate state. He drains the centuries-old swamps (the areas of the Agropontino). But he does more. He spreads Instruction through Education, founding schools all over the country (...). I have been asked if he is greater than Hitler. I have no hesitation: the Duce is much greater than the Führer.<sup>18</sup>

Meanwhile, in Portugal, in agreement with Ala Littoria, had been sent some engineers to study the Cabo Verde archipelago and to assess which was the best terrain for the aerodrome: the best solution, cause bringing together the necessary conditions for a land and sea airport, they decided for the Ilha do Sal<sup>19</sup>. [Fig. 8]

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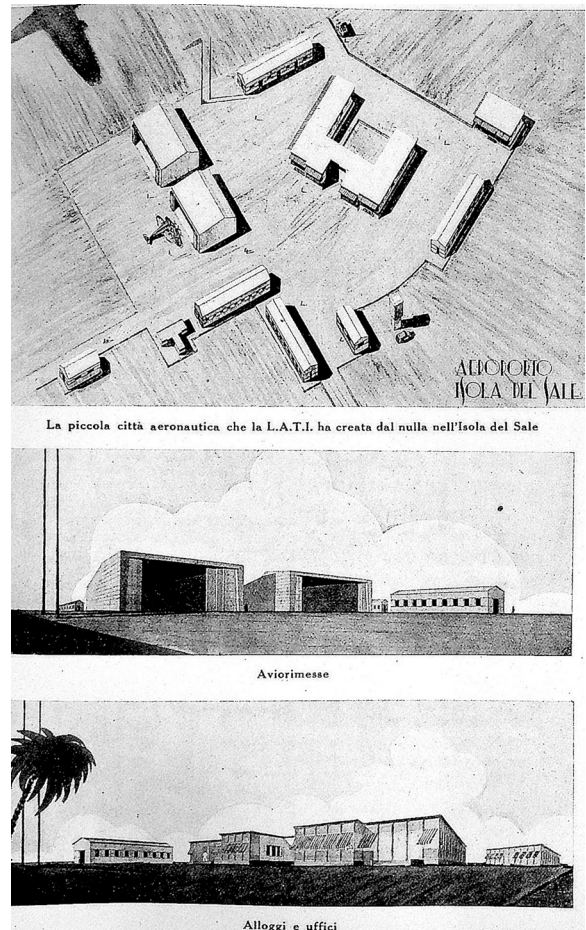
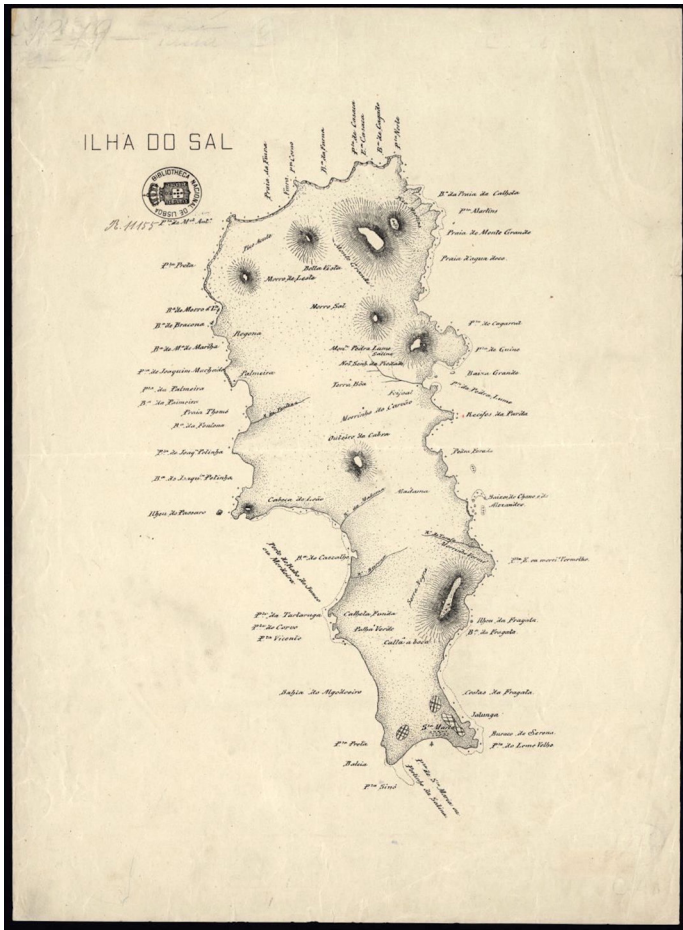
16 Source: Arquivo Nacional Torre do Tombo, PT/ANTT/Arquivo Salazar/NE-4D/cx. 379, pt. 1 e pt. 2, f. 43. Letter from Augusto de Castro dated March 2, 1934. In a subsequent letter, dated March 31, 1934, it is reported that a training ship, belonging to the Aeronautica Militare Italiana will transport a technician to study the territory of Cabo Verde. (These words are underlined in the original letter; translation from Portuguese by the author).

17 José Lopes da Silva, “Mussolini,” in *Jornal do Brasil*. (Rio de Janeiro: Ed. Oficinas Graphicas, 1937), 5. (Translation from Portuguese by the author).

18 José Lopes da Silva, “Mussolini,” in *Jornal do Brasil*. (Rio de Janeiro: Ed. Oficinas Graphicas, 1937), 6. (Translation from Portuguese by the author).

19 Source: Arquivo Nacional Torre do Tombo, PT/ANTT/Arquivo Salazar/PC-24 A/cx. 682, pt. 2. This report was sent to the President of the Council from the Secretariat of the National Aviation Council, by Lieutenant Colonel Carlos Esteves Beja who had studied the conditions necessary for the construction of an aerodrome, choosing from several islands: S. Tiago, S. Vicente, Brava, Fogo, S. Antão, S. Luzia, S. Nicolau, Boavista, Maio, and Ilha do





The group of specialists chose the location of Espargos, an area that was still “wild” and in which were built at the beginning: the airport, a flight assistance center, a weather and radio station, an aircraft hangar and a series of other buildings for the crew. It was from the construction of the airport – still visible today in the central part of the island – that the urban organization of the city of Espargos was structured, a center of urbanization that generated the spread of settlements on this island.

Between January 24 and 25, 1938, three Italian planes – called “Sorci Verdi”<sup>20</sup>– carried out the flight Italy-Brazil (Guidonia-Dakar-Rio de Janeiro)<sup>21</sup>, having among the pilots Bruno Mussolini. This flight was gloriously celebrated by the Duce on the cover of *Corriere della Sera* on January 26, 1938, calling it “Power and Glory of the fascist Ala Littoria” and like a “wonderful venture that arouses the admiration of the entire world”.<sup>22</sup>

Sal. The study and report were carried out together with the Delegate of the National Aeronautical Council, in collaboration with delegates of the KLM Companies (Dutch colonel H. Steensma) and Ala Littoria (with lieutenant colonel Carlo Tonnini).

20 In the dialect of the Roma area, the word “sorci” means “rats”; the name “sorci verdi” came out because three green rats were painted on the fuselage of Italian airplanes. For this reason, the Italian expression “see green rats” is became an expression to tell another person that “bad things are about to happen”.

21 It is important to remember that, at the time, the flight served only to transport postal equipment, excluding passengers, although in 1939 Bruno Mussolini stated in an interview in *Le Vie dell’Aria* magazine that it might become a passenger line in the future.

22 “Il volo Italia-Brasile compiuto”, *Corriere della Sera* (January 26, 1938), Anno XVI, first page. (Translation from Italian by the author).

Fig. 8  
Map of Ilha do Sal before the airport of Espargos, 1892c. (source: Biblioteca Nacional de Lisboa; also published in: José de Sena Cristiano, *Roteiro do Arquipélago de Cabo Verde*. Lisboa: Typographia do Jornal das Colónias Portuguesas, 1892).

Fig. 9  
Drawings of the planivolumetric, airplane hangars and offices of the “Città Aeronautica della LATI” (source: *In volo da Roma all’America Latina / Linee aeree transcontinentali italiane s.a.* - Biblioteca Comunale Ariostea, Ferrara. Fondo Quilici)

From the company's records is possible to document that the materials and the builders had been sent from Italy. The first five people had embarked on the steamboat Anfora, which left Genoa on July 16, 1939, and arrived on the Ilha Sal on August 7. Meanwhile, the steamship Tagliamento departed from Genoa on July 16 and arrived on September 7, and the ship Anna Martini departed on July 19 and arrived on September 7: the last two ships remained moored for some time in the Spanish port of Las Palmas, waiting further orders from Italy, due to Germany's entry into the War and the still uncertain Italian position.

Officially only in August 1939 – with a letter from the Portuguese Ministry of Foreign Affairs – Salazar's government approved the concession to Italy to use the Ilha do Sal, in exchange for the development of the Lisbon airport:

It is ready to donation on a provisional basis and in anticipation of a future formal agreement, authorization for the establishment by Società Aerea Italiana Ala Littoria of an airline to South America with regular stops in Lisbon and Cabo Verde (...), but on condition that as soon as the Lisbon airport is completed, it will be the first point of arrival and the last point of departure in Europe (...). The Portuguese government requests that, in exchange for the authorization now granted, the Italian government authorize Portuguese commercial aircraft, on a possible route between Portugal and its colonies, to fly over and land in Italian territories in Africa<sup>23</sup>.

In Lisbon, therefore, increased the need to complete the Portela Airport project. While waiting for the required authorizations from Portugal, the first Italians to arrive in Ilha do Sal began to build several small structures to store the materials and to have a shelter. They began some experimental flights between Rome and Ilha do Sal on October 13, 1939, when finally, the Portuguese government declared that it was possible to begin the works for the Cape Verdean airport. The Italians present on the Ilha do Sal, together with the population recruited for the works – workers also arrived from other nearby islands, in totaling about 300 people<sup>24</sup> – began the construction of the airport terminal. Many materials used arrived from Italy and others – like iron, wood, and concrete – from the island of São Vicente. **[Fig. 9]**

A radio-reception station pavilion, a meteorological and a radio-goniometer centers were built; as well as offices and workers' quarters, two metal-frame hangars (27 x 21 meters) and three pavilions (36 x 8 meters). **[Fig. 10]** Uninterrupted and with careful but very quick work, the employees, and passengers housing pavilion and a wooden "colonial style" passengers' station with a bar, restaurant, a hall, and thirty rooms.

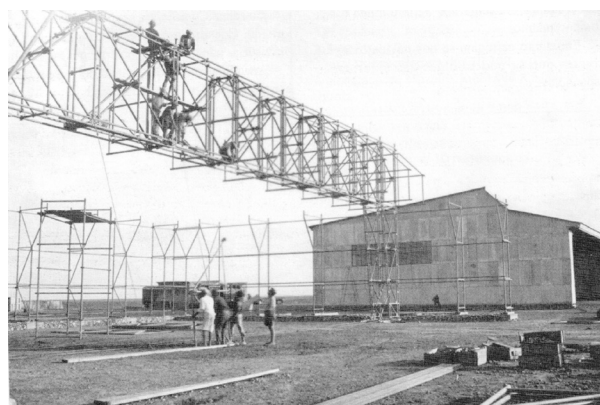
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<sup>23</sup> Source: Arquivo Nacional Torre do Tombo, PT/ANTT/AOS/CO/OP-1C; cx. 479, pt.1, 2-3. Letter of the 10 August 1939. (Translation from Portuguese by the author).

<sup>24</sup> The workers came from all the islands of Cabo Verde. This connection to Italy is evidenced by the fact that when the Italian pilots had to return to Italy there was a big emigration of Cape Verdeans to Europe and to Italy. Cf. Pedro Gois, *Emigração cabo-verdeana para (e na) Europa e a sua inserção em mercados de trabalho locais: Lisboa, Milão, Roterdão*. (Lisbona: ed., ACIDI, ACIME 2006).

However, this “Italian urbanization” work does not appear in either the books or publications of the time, probably because it was mostly a more “technical” infrastructure, even though these works generated an early urban planning in the center of the island. An article published on November 18, 1939, entitled “Rome-Rio de Janeiro” explains the choice of site and the work done by Italian workers in Cabo Verde:

Colonel Biseo flying over there going to look around on the African coasts and in the Ocean recognized in a small island in the Cabo Verde archipelago (...) a suitable terrain. An island? A few square kilometers surmounted by a volcanic cone that has the rare prerogative of containing in its crater a kind of salt lake, which is precisely what gives the island its name, with its natural salt pans where a hundred Negroes work. There was a Portuguese camp there. They get to fix it up for the new purposes and place the necessary facilities. There was until recently hardly a single white person on Ilha do Sal, in the middle of the immense oceanic solitude. Now it is the Italian ‘center’ of the Atlantic. It was necessary to ensure not only the landing, but also the living and resting conditions for the Atlantic crews arriving there, alternating between outward and return crews. So housing for pilots, marconigraph station, engine services and repair hangars, spare parts storage, gasoline service. Bruno Mussolini wished that personnel destined to watch over the Atlantic could, if they wished, can live there with their families. So everything had to be provided, starting with the materials for the moles – there is no port and we had to build a port for the materials and fuel by having ships arrive from Italy – the storage facilities, the meals, and also the homemade furniture. The Ilha do Sal is a small, immobile, solitary stone ship, the center and key of the entire system of points that will permit for a regular transatlantic service<sup>25</sup>.



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The construction also included a series of necessary infrastructure, such as seven kilometers of roads around the camp, 6000 square meters of hangars, a water reservoir for the capacity of 400.000 liters, a power plant, sewage facilities with the excavation of 500 meters of sewer and eight septic tanks. They built the office and housing pavilions from lightweight materials, the customs, and planting of palm trees: in total, a 1,500,000-square-meter work of land<sup>26</sup>.

The official opening of the airline in Ilha do Sal was on December 15, 1939, and the construction of the entire airport system took only one hundred and

25 “Roma-Rio de Janeiro. I piloti e gli apparecchi in servizio - Una lettera in America in poco più di trentasei ore - La “Centrale italiana dell’Atlantico”, *Corriere della Sera* (November 18, 1939). (Translation from Italian by the author).

26 Gherardo Lazzeri, Adalberto Pellegrino. *Sal. A Ilha de Cabo Verde que entro una história da Aviação Comercial Italiana* (Firenze: Lo Gisma Editore 2002), 49.

Fig. 10  
Photo of the construction of the hangar in Ilha do Sal (source: Lazzeri, G.; Pellegrino, A. *Sal. A Ilha de Cabo Verde que entrou na história da Aviação Comercial Italiana*. Firenze: Lo Gisma Editore, 2002, 40).





eighty days, concluding all work for LATI on April 11, 1940, with seven hundred inhabitants on the island<sup>27</sup>. [Fig. 11]

In the newspaper *Il Resto del Carlino* of February 4, 1940 in the article “La Città Areonautica all’Isola del Sale” [Fig. 12], Piero Pedrazza explains how the urbanization of the island occurred through the Italian works:

it is a temporary village, living its last days because on January 7 our compatriots will move to the new, rational one, created all by them with their own arms (...). The rest we can imagine it: everything necessarily had to be brought to the Island, starting with water; then furrows had to be traced on the land that correspond to the project of the new “aeronautical village” name that may seem too pretentious but is not at all. (...) ... all solidly built with wise technical criteria, the prodigious fruit of Italian labor. In a few years the ‘city’ will appear unrecognizable, enriched by new buildings, and surrounded, we hope, by a thick curtain of plantations<sup>28</sup>.

Others Italian magazines also talked about this project, such as *Le Vie dell’Aria* – a magazine that was sent to Portugal – as “L’organizzazione dei servizi aerei transcontinentali italiani - in un’intervista col Comandante Bruno Mussolini” [Fig. 13] or “I ‘sorci verdi’ all’isola del Sale” and “Roma-Rio de Janeiro e ritorno con il postale atlantico della L.A.T.I.” and “L’organizzazione del servizio aereo transcontinentale italiano<sup>29</sup>.”

27 “Instalações da LATI na Ilha do Sal, Cabo Verde” (source: Arquivo Nacional Torre do Tombo, PT/TT/AOS/D-J/012/0018/00041).

28 Piero Pedrazza, “La Città Areonautica all’Isola del Sale”, *Il Resto del Carlino* (February 4, 1940). (Translation from Italian by the author).

29 *Le Vie dell’Aria*, no. 57 (December 16, 1939): 1 (cover); *Le Vie dell’Aria*, no. 3 (January 20, 1940): 6; *Le Vie dell’Aria*, no. 5 (February 3, 1940): 6; *Le Vie dell’Aria*, no. 7 (February 17, 1940): 1 (cover).

Fig. 11  
Italian LATI airport in Ilha do Sal (source: Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo, Agência Geral do Ultramar, Cabo Verde, cx. 22, no. 17494, ref. PT/TT/AGU/002/017494).



There were more than 200 flights between Italy and Brazil, and the air base operated until December 1941, when – due to increasing difficulties caused by the war – the United States ordered the air connection to be closed. In 1942 all LATI equipment was looted by the Brazilian government.

Then the properties of LATI in 1942 were acquired by Portugal<sup>30</sup> and it is understood – by analyzing the inventory of acquisitions – that the work done by the Italians was an “initial urbanization” of the island even though the construction was of a “technical” and not a “planned city”.

There was also another political motivation for the closure of the Italian base and its acquisition by Portugal, due to the concern arising from the presence of Italians on the island, reported earlier in 1939, at their first arrivals:

I have news that another 20,000 volumes have recently arrived, and more Italians and their families are expected. With this concession, the Italians will have the most suitable island in the archipelago as an air base and will be installed in larger numbers than the metropolitans and Cape Verdean civilians who live there, and in a few years they will ‘italianize’ the island, and it will not be surprising if they then make the usual claims<sup>31</sup>.

In another letter, addressed to Salazar in 1941, the Portuguese Minister of Colonies expressed the urgency of adopting a solution by purchasing the island’s Italian assets:

By way of information, it is reported that the ship Rapido which made transports for the Italians to the Ilha do Sal, has been placed on the Black-list by the British authorities. The stay of the Italians on the island appears to be very delicate in two aspects: the first is the impossibility of exercising effective surveillance over their radiotelegraphic communications, made in code, which could allow abuses, contrary to our situation of neutrality, as well as the provision of navigation information in the Atlantic, obtained from aircraft, information on ships in our ports and also the provision of information on belligerent ships and aircraft seen from the island (...). The second is the problem, and it’s possible, of a claim to future ownership of Ilha do Sal, or at least the land they used<sup>32</sup>.

Meanwhile Keil do Amaral – who had designed the Lisbon airport – had also designed (an undated drawing) a Hotel for the Ilha do Sal airport, published in the brochure “Aeródromos” of the exhibition of *15 Anos de Obras Públicas*. [Fig. 14]



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30 Source: Arquivo Nacional Torre do Tombo, PT/ANTT/AOS/CO/OP - 1C cx. 479, pt. 1, 5; and also see: “Processo respeitante à indemnização pela cedência das instalações, da linee aerea transcontinentali italiane - L.A.T.I. na ilha do Sal”, Secretaria-Geral da Presidência do Conselho de Ministros, Gabinete do Presidente, cx. 188, proc. 1363/109, no. 3 (source: Arquivo Nacional Torre do Tombo, PT/TT/SGPCM-GPC/1363/00003).

31 Source: Arquivo Nacional Torre do Tombo, PT/ANTT/AOS/UL-10, cx. 765, pt. 15. Letter of 9 October 1939. (Translation from Portuguese by the author).

32 Source: Arquivo Nacional Torre do Tombo, PT/ANTT/AOS/CO/OP - 1C cx. 479, pt. 2, 13-18. Letter of 16 October 1941. (Translation Portuguese Italian by the author).

Fig. 12  
Article published, “La Città Aeronautica all’Isola del Sale” (source: *Il Resto del Carlino*, 4 February 1940)

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# LE VIE DELL'ARIA

RIVISTA DI AERONAUTICA  
RIVISTA DI GIOTTO  
RIVISTA DI METEOROLOGIA  
RIVISTA DI MEDICINA  
RIVISTA DI AERONAUTICA  
RIVISTA DI AERONAUTICA

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Abbonamenti: Annuo L. 12.000  
Semestrale L. 6.000  
Trimestrale L. 3.000  
Quartale L. 1.500  
Giornale L. 500

## L'organizzazione dei servizi aerei transcontinentali italiani

in una intervista col Comandante Bruno Mussolini



Veduta di un nostro aeroporto di notte

### LA GUERRA IN OCCIDENTE

## Attacchi aerei contro sommergibili

... e a. a. quando, l'attacco...

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**INSTALAÇÕES AERÉAS DA "L.A.T.I." NA ILHA DO SAL**

Por motivos de ordem militar, o Governo Português, em fins de Setembro p.p., ocupou as instalações da base aérea da "L.A.T.I." na Ilha do Sal, no Arquipélago de Cabo Verde.

Da nossa parte tinha-se pedido uma indemnização de 49 milhões de Liras, a qual mais tarde foi reduzida para 35 milhões.

Segundo relação técnica feita por conta do Ministério da Guerra a importância por nós pedida não seria aceitável por parte do Governo Português.

Contudo, em via oficiosa, o Ministério da Guerra fez saber estar disposto a examinar novamente a questão de comum acordo para se chegar a um entendimento.

É necessário que as conversações a este respeito sejam oportunamente aceleradas e que se proceda à liquidação da indemnização que nos compete.

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Fig. 13  
Article published, "L'organizzazione dei servizi aerei transcontinentali italiani" (source: *Le Vie dell'Aria*, 16 December 1939)

Fig. 14  
Drawing for the airport Hotel in Ilha do Sal, (source: brochure "Aeródromos" of the exhibition of 15 Anos de Obras Púlicas 1932-1947)

Fig. 15  
Letter from the Portuguese government to the Legazione d'Italia about the occupation of the "Instalações Aereas da 'L.A.T.I.' na Ilha do Sal", 1942c. (source: Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo, Arquivo Oliveira Salazar, NE-2F, cx. 434, pt. 41, ref. PT/TT/AOS/D-J/012/0018/00041).

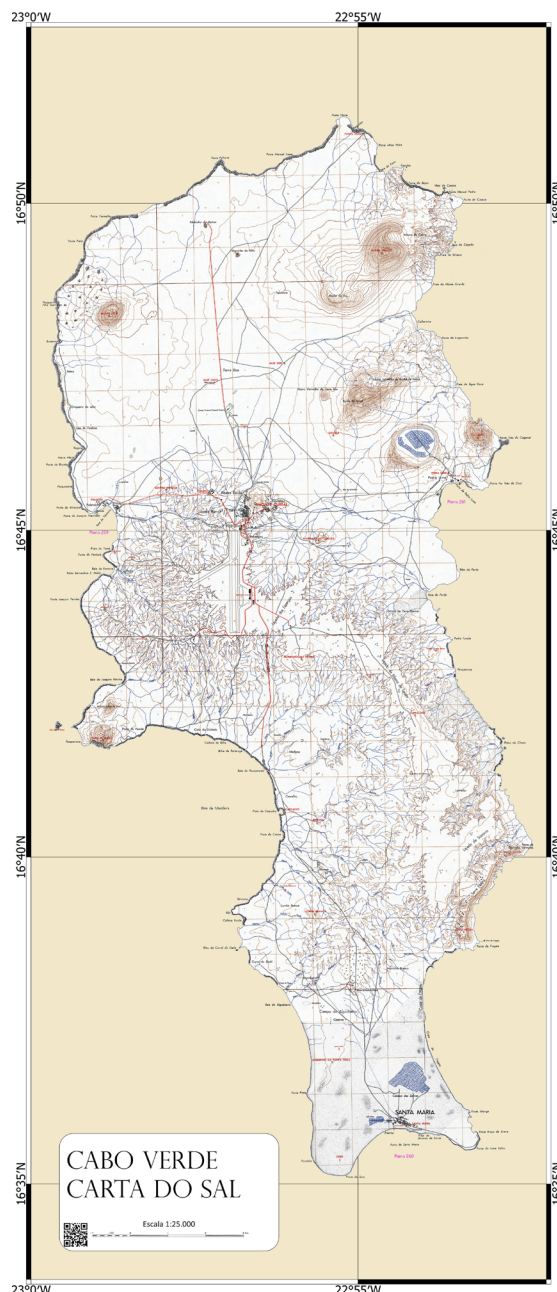
In 1947 the government of Rio de Janeiro had recommended the creation of a new airport on the Ilha do Sal, which was essential to regulate the operation of airline, and the Portuguese government ordered the urgent construction of the Sal airport by decree-law 36585 of November 12, 1947.

In 1948, Portugal permanently acquired all the Italian installations, holding the ownership of the air base, although it was too expensive to transport and bring all the equipment back to Italian territory. [Fig. 15]

After the II World War, it was the Italian company Alitalia that took over the coordination of connections to South America, using Dakar as an intermediate stop. Only from May 1949 the Italian flights to South America restarted to use this route with the base in Ilha do Sal, with the new airport opened to international traffic on May 15, 1949<sup>33</sup>. [Fig. 16]

This Italian fascist event was totally removed from Portuguese historiography, so much that it did not appear in 1947, in the official catalogue *Livro de Ouro* on the important Estado Novo exhibition *15 Anos das Obras Públicas (1932-1947)*.

This 'chapter' of Portuguese history, geographically outside the borders of Europe but directly linked to the central government, underlines the political and difficult diplomatic relations between Italian Fascism and the Portuguese Estado Novo. At the same time, it denotes the Salazar's desire to look its own originality – ideological, political, cultural, architectural – which is reflected in the architecture of public works and demonstrates the position of the Salazarist state and its regime.



33 The flight from Italy began in Roma-Ciampino, after an hour and a half arrived in Milano-Malpensa; then continued to Lisboa at Portela airport. From there it would take another seven-hour flight to arrive in the Ilha do Sal.

Fig. 16 Map of Ilha do Sal after the construction of the new airport, n.d. (source: Fotos Avulso, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/fotosavulso/50913395008/in/album-72157699211595190/>).

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