



VALONGO WHARF

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

-22.8966145, -43.1893695



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Executive Summary

Construction works in Rio de Janeiro's Port Region to prepare for the 2014 World Cup, and 2016 Olympics led to the rediscovery of one of the most significant landing points in the Americas for an estimated one million enslaved people between 1811 and 1831. In February 2011, Valongo Wharf was re-excavated by archaeologists. Since this date, an ongoing debate has emerged over how to sensitively memorialise the site. In July 2017, Valongo Wharf was awarded UNESCO World Heritage status, but plans to build a memorial or other commemorative structure on the site have not yet reached fruition. The debate has centred over whether the memorial should highlight the experience of slavery or the cultural contribution of Afro-Brazilians to Brazilian society. Concern that the voices of Afro-Brazilians were not being heard in the decision-making process culminated in 2019 when Brazil's government dissolved a committee formed to oversee the site's management.

Introduction

Valongo Wharf, which is located in Rio de Janeiro and considered the 'most significant landing point of enslaved Africans in the Americas'¹ by UNESCO, was excavated in 2011 as a consequence of urban regeneration works that took place in the city's Port Region in preparation for the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympics. The wharf was made officially inactive in 1831 when slave trading was outlawed in Brazil, but after this point, it was used for smuggling.² Since then and until the present day, the local area has come to be known as Little Africa (*Pequena África*) due to the established Afro-Brazilian community, among whom are descendants of the estimated one million people who were brought to Valongo Wharf under slavery conditions.

There have been various proposals since 2011 to establish a memorial structure at Valongo Wharf, but progress has been slow, and decisions ineffectual. In 2017, disputes intensified when Rio's newly appointed Secretary of Culture announced intentions to construct a 'Museum of Slavery and Liberty,' which prompted expressions of doubt and mistrust from members of the Afro-Brazilian community, as well as from social activists and researchers. The main point of contention has been the perceived failure of governmental institutions to meaningfully engage Afro-Brazilians in the decision-making process for the future of the memorial site. The Secretary of Culture held a series of public hearings in 2017, ostensibly to solicit feedback about the proposed plans to build a museum at Valongo Wharf. In the short term, the public consultations promoted a façade of collaboration, but in practice, Afro-Brazilians have been sidelined since the initial excavation in 2011,³ when community-led proposals to install an 'African Diaspora Memorial' were first cast aside.⁴

This case study reveals the slow pace of Brazilian governmental institutions in taking action to establish a memorial structure at Valongo Wharf that allows for the full participation of the Afro-Brazilian community.

Background

The Transatlantic slave trade

Valongo Wharf Archaeological Site preserves the physical remains of the world's largest slavery disembarkation port from the 19th century. From 1774, enslaved people entered Rio de Janeiro via the beach of Valongo, but in 1811 the wharf was constructed in order to receive the masses of ships arriving at the port. Previously, slaves had arrived in the centre of the city and were auctioned in Rio's main square. As Rio's urban elite became uncomfortable with this set-up, though not with the practice of the slave trade itself, and so the construction of the wharf enabled slave auctions to

¹ UNESCO. "Valongo Wharf Archaeological Site." 2017.

² Gustavo Ribeiro, Mauricio Santoro and Edmund Ruge, 'Explaining Brazil #68: Discovering Rio's Little Africa (Podcast),' The Brazilian Report, July 26 2019.

³ This is also indicative of an ongoing issue of institutional racial injustice that has occurred throughout Brazil's history, which is briefly outlined in 'Background'.

⁴ Tania Andrade Lima, 'Valongo: An Uncomfortable Legacy' *Current Anthropology* Vol 61, no.S22 (2020).

occur at a distance from the city centre.⁵ Between 1811 and 1831, the wharf was in constant use until it was officially decommissioned following the British pressure on Brazil to outlaw slave trading. However, unofficial slave trading still continued in Brazil and at Valongo Wharf, while legislation against the activity was viewed by many merchants and politicians as '*uma lei para ingles ver*' (law for the British to see).⁶

Between 1501 to 1866, approximately 4.9 million enslaved people were brought to Brazil via the commercial route established between Europe, Africa and the Americas, and about one million of that number is estimated to have arrived at Valongo Wharf, despite its brief existence.⁷ Leaving the ships, enslaved people had to walk around a mile to reach the slave market. Many arrived in Brazil severely ill or even dead after the treacherous journey, and so near to the wharf site is located the remains of the *Pretos Novos* Cemetery (New Blacks Cemetery), which is considered to be the largest slave cemetery in the Americas. Due to the sustained slave trade activity at Valongo Wharf, the local area came to be known during the 19th century as the 'black city' and, later, Little Africa (*Pequena África*).⁸ The high concentration of slaves and freedmen established a cultural zone characterised by its African heritage that lasted long after slave trading ended, where black communities engaged in work and leisure and even shaped the future of Brazil's identity through the creation of samba and capoeira.⁹

The Legacy of Slavery

In 1843, the decommissioned Valongo Wharf was refurbished and renamed the Empress Wharf (*Cais da Imperatriz*) to commemorate the arrival of Princess Teresa Cristina of Bourbon from Europe. She had migrated to marry Emperor Pedro II of Brazil, the country's last monarch. The construction of the Empress Wharf over Valongo Wharf marked the beginning of Rio de Janeiro's attempt to sanitise the region's history of slavery and African heritage with European veneers. At the turn of the 20th century, Rio welcomed an influx of white Portuguese immigrants, many of whom moved into the traditionally black neighbourhood of Little Africa. Around the same time, Rio's mayor Pereira Passos sought to transform the city into a 'tropical Paris'¹⁰ with a series of urban reforms, which saw the construction of a landscaped building adjacent to Valongo Wharf named the Hanging Gardens of Valongo, containing four prominent statues of Roman deities, the replicas of which can be visited today. As part of these reforms, Valongo Wharf was landfilled in 1911 and left buried until 2011, when archaeological excavations at the site unearthed the top layer stones of the Empress Wharf and, 0.6m beneath these, the bottom layer of rougher, uneven stones belonging to Valongo, the slave wharf.¹¹

⁵ Terrence McCoy, 'More enslaved Africans came to the Americas through this port than anywhere else. Why have so few heard of it?', *Washington Post*, January 17 2022.

⁶ 'Slavery and Abolition in the 19th Century,' Brown University Library, 2012.

⁷ Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional, *Valongo Wharf Archaeological Site: Proposal for Inscription on the World Heritage List*. (IPHAN, January 2016), 141.

⁸ Juliana Arias et al., *Cidades negras: africanos, crioulos e espaços urbanos no Brasil escravista do século*. (São Paulo: Alameda, 2006).

⁹ Ibid; Ricardo Nascimento, 'Visions of Urban Space at Cais do Valongo Capoeira Circle,' *Rio on Watch*, March 29 2013.

¹⁰ MGCF Silva, 'Some considerations about Pereira Passos urban reform,' *Redalyc*, February 2019.

¹¹ Tania Andrade Lima, 'Valongo: An Uncomfortable Legacy' *Current Anthropology* Vol 61, no.S22 (2020).

Excavation and inauguration

The archaeologist, Tania Andrade Lima, led the excavation project of Valongo Wharf that commenced in January 2011. As work got underway, in addition to uncovering the old wharf, Lima and her team discovered dozens of objects pertaining to African religious worship. With the intention of centring the local Afro-Brazilian community in their research, Lima invited several leaders from black organisations to attend a meeting held at Valongo Wharf Archaeological Site on March 17 2011. On the same day, the invited leaders drafted and signed the Valongo Charter, proposing that an African Diaspora Memorial should be inaugurated on March 21, the International Day for the Elimination of Racism. In response to the Charter, the then-president of the Fundação Cultural Palmares (FCP)¹² claimed that a 'Museum of Slavery' would be better than a memorial.¹³ However, until today, neither a memorial nor museum has been built, and it is usually commented by the media that 'the wharf has been unearthed but is still ignored,'¹⁴

In November 2011, moved by the intense debates in the national and international media and the exposed graves in the Pretos Novos Cemetery, Rio World Heritage Institute (IRPH)¹⁵ through the Rio de Janeiro City Hall decided to create the Historical and Archaeological Circuit for the Celebration of African Heritage, the first of its kind in Brazil.¹⁶ A few months later, in August 2012, results from archaeological research carried out at Valongo Wharf were presented at an international seminar, 'Heritage, Identity, Education and Culture: Management of Sites and Places of Memory Linked to the Slave Trade and Slavery', hosted by the FCP in conjunction with UNESCO. In the opening ceremony, the Brazilian Minister of Culture and Minister of Racial Equality announced the official request for Valongo Wharf to be considered as a candidate for UNESCO World Heritage status.¹⁷ Ali Moussa Lye, the manager of UNESCO's Slave Routes Project, attended the event and expressed his informal support for Valongo Wharf to receive the title.¹⁸ On 20th November 2013, Black Awareness Day in Brazil, the site was declared a Cultural Heritage of the city of Rio de Janeiro by the IRPH,¹⁹ followed by the unveiling of a plaque recognizing the site as one of the most important 'place[s] of memory of the transatlantic slave trade'²⁰ by Lye and a UNESCO group.

The site of Valongo Wharf was registered and put under the protection of the Service for National Historical and Artistic Patrimony (now known as the Institute for National Historical and Artist Patrimony - IPHAN) in 1983.²¹ However, the Wharf only obtained state protection as a site of cultural relevance in 2011, after its excavation was made necessary due to construction works in the

¹² A public entity for the promotion of black culture in Brazil, linked to the now-dissolved federal Ministry of Culture.

¹³ Tania Andrade Lima, 'Valongo: An Uncomfortable Legacy' *Current Anthropology* Vol 61, no.S22 (2020), S325.

¹⁴ Terrence McCoy, "More enslaved Africans came to the Americas through this port than anywhere else. Why have so few heard of it?", *Washington Post*, January 17 2022.

¹⁵ Rio's heritage protection agency,

¹⁶ Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional, *Valongo Wharf Archaeological Site: Proposal for Inscription on the World Heritage List*. (IPHAN, January 2016), 84.

¹⁷ Drielly Jardim, 'Report: International seminar on 'Heritage, identity and culture: management of sites and places of memory related to the slave trade and slavery,' UNESCO, 20-23 August 2012., 1-2.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁹ Tassia Menezes, "Cais do Valongo: pedras que gritam no tempo". *Conexão UFRJ*. November 20, 2021.

²⁰ Tania Andrade Lima, 'Valongo: An Uncomfortable Legacy' *Current Anthropology* Vol 61, no.S22 (2020), S323.

²¹ Gustavo Racy and V. A. A. Rodrigues, 'Translating slavery: the Valongo Wharf as evidentiary site of 'black' genocide and world heritage,' *Critical Studies* 4.1 (2019): 116.

area as part of the 'Porto Maravilha' urban development project ahead of the World Cup and Olympics. The leader of Valongo Wharf's excavation team, Tania Andrade Lima, spoke out against Brazil's history of failing to properly acknowledge its racial heritage:

The historical archaeology that we practice aims to provide an antidote to this kind of social amnesia, which is why we chose the localization and excavation of Valongo Wharf as the primary aim of our research.²²

Research suggests that significant parts of Brazilian society still subscribe to the popular rhetoric of 'racial democracy,' a 20th-century ideology that negates the existence of institutional racism in the country and, in doing so, 'thwarts the development of a mass movement for racial justice.'²³ Washington Fajardo, the president of the Rio World Heritage Institute and former advisor to Rio's mayor on urban planning, also shared his views on the importance of Valongo Wharf's history as a means to confront the reality of race relations in the country: 'Brazilian society is proud of African derived food, music, and culture, but we don't talk about racism in Brazil. In the cultural heritage field, this has consequences.'²⁴

History of the Contestation

Between 2011 and 2016, there appears to have been consistent, well-founded dialogue between the institutions in charge of the preservation of Valongo Wharf and local black communities. Representatives from organisations promoting Afro-Brazilian culture and racial justice were meaningfully engaged with the memorial site, either as partners in the research carried out by the archaeology team led by Lima in 2011 or as members of the Advisory Committee tasked with drafting the proposal submitted to UNESCO for Valongo Wharf to be inscribed on the World Heritage List.

It has been suggested that conflicts spiked significantly in 2017 as a result of profound political change, which began when Marcelo Crivella became Rio's Mayor in January.²⁵ Representing the conservative *Republicanos* party, Crivella is a registered bishop of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, a denomination notorious for its intolerance of Afro-Brazilian religions.²⁶ In December 2016, Crivella appointed a new Cultural Secretary for Rio, Nilcemar Nogueira, herself an Afro-Brazilian descent, who announced intentions to build a slavery museum at Valongo Wharf. This seemingly overwrote plans to create a Memorial of the African Diaspora on the site, a commitment made that same year by the Institute for National Historical and Artistic Patrimony²⁷ (IPHAN) with UNESCO and ratified by city hall.²⁸ The construction of such a memorial had initially been proposed in 2011 in the 'Valongo Charter,' signed by several leaders from the Afro-Brazilian

²² Tania Andrade Lima, 'Valongo: An Uncomfortable Legacy' *Current Anthropology* Vol 61, no.S22 (2020), S317.

²³ Sharon Stanley, 'The persistence of myth: Brazil's undead 'racial democracy' *Contemporary Political Theory* (2021).

²⁴ Gregory Scruggs, 'How a 29-Year-Old Designer Is Reinventing the Urban Monument,' *NextCity*, November 16 2015.

²⁵ Simone Pondé Vassallo and Luz Stella Rodríguez Cáceres, 'Conflicts, truths and politics at the Museum of Slavery and Liberty in Rio de Janeiro,' *Anthropological Horizons* 53 (2019), 59.

²⁶ Sarah Rachel Neace, 'Religious Tension in Brazil: The Rise of Militant Pentecostalism and Implications for Afro-Brazilian Religions,' UC Santa Barbara Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2016.

²⁷ A federal agency linked to the Ministry of Tourism and charged with Valongo Wharf's management since 2012.

²⁸ Simone Pondé Vassallo and Luz Stella Rodríguez Cáceres, 'Conflicts, truths and politics at the Museum of Slavery and Liberty in Rio de Janeiro,' *Anthropological Horizons* 53 (2019).

community who visited Valongo Wharf Archaeological Site and were moved by the excavated findings.²⁹ However, Nogueira took over with plans to create a museum that would be municipally-led, not federally-led, and funded privately despite the certified global significance of the site.³⁰ In doing so, she also displaced the previous memorial project and each of the actors associated with it.

The Museum of Slavery and Liberty and the Valongo Wharf Museum

At the start of 2017, news outlets began to report that Nilcemar Nogueira, the Cultural Secretary appointed by newly elected Mayor Marcelo Crivela, was setting out plans for a museum to be built at Valongo Wharf. On March 10th, 2017, Nogueira put together a working group to devise a course of action for the municipal creation of the provisionally named 'Museum of Slavery and Liberty',³¹ discharging the federal-level plans for a public memorial as set out in the IPHAN dossier submitted to UNESCO.³² In May 2017, Rio's Federal University held a panel discussion to address the following public debate. The panel consisted of a student moderator and two experts, Cristina Lodi, an architect and coordinator of the museum and Myrian Sepúlveda dos Santos, a cultural sociologist. After the panellists' presentation, the audience inquired about the inclusion of Afro-Brazilians in the project. The questions regarded the diversity of people in charge of the project. For instance, it was asked, 'How is it possible that this panel about a Museum of Slavery and Liberty can be composed of just white people?' and 'Can you say how many black people are working on [the museum project]?'.

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In response to a multitude of criticism from the public, especially from the Black communities who had long opposed this kind of establishment on the site,³⁴ Nogueira hosted a public hearing on August 11, 2017, to address mounting concerns which had, by then, attracted the attention of the international press.³⁵ Several representatives from black cultural organisations were invited, including Marcelo Dias of the Unified Black Movement, Damião Braga, President of the Pedra do Sal Quilombo, Doctor Maria Moura, an Ekedí figure in the Afro-Brazilian religious tradition of Candomblé and Ana Maria de la Merced Guimarães, Director of the New Blacks Institute. Braga argued that 'it is an obligation, it is the duty of the state, to take care of this patrimony.'³⁶ He continued, explaining that debating the name of the proposed museum was a waste of time when the residents of 'Little Africa' themselves were not being taken care of.³⁷ The proposed name, Museu da Escravidão e da Liberdade ('Museum of Slavery and Liberty'), contracts to MEL, problematically spelling out 'honey', conflicting with the brutal histories to be exhibited. The Black writer, Nei Lopes, deplored the name

²⁹ Tania Andrade Lima, 'Valongo: An Uncomfortable Legacy' *Current Anthropology* Vol 61, no. S22 (2020).

³⁰ Simone Pondé Vassallo and Luz Stella Rodríguez Cáceres, 'Conflicts, truths and politics at the Museum of Slavery and Liberty in Rio de Janeiro,' *Anthropological Horizons* 53 (2019).

³¹ With Municipal Decree no. 42.929.

³² Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional, Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional, Valongo Wharf Archaeological Site: Proposal for Inscription on the World Heritage List. (IPHAN, January 2016).

³³ Kiratiana Freelon. "Rio Is Debating Creation of a Slavery Museum." *NextCity*. August 31 2017.

³⁴ Tania Andrade Lima, "Valongo: An Uncomfortable Legacy," *Current Anthropology* 61, no. 22 (2020): 317-327.

³⁵ Kiratiana Freelon, "Rio de Janeiro's Black History is Being Erased, But Not Without a Fight,," *Independent*, April 6 2017.

³⁶ Raine Robichaud, 'City Council Hearing Discusses Polemic Proposed 'Slavery and Freedom Museum,' *Rio on Watch*, August 16 2017.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

MEL as 'a permanent exhibition of a holocaust [...] a catastrophe which reverberates until today.'³⁸ In March, Lopes had equally expressed doubts on social media about the narratives that such a museum would promote, believing that enslaved African peoples should be acknowledged:

For having bequeathed to Brazil and the world an invaluable cultural heritage, expressed in new and exciting ways of thinking, acting, working, creating, producing, living in short. Rather than a slavery museum, it would be much better to design a museum of African heritage.³⁹

On November 25th, 2017, during the seminar 'For a museum about the truth', another one of several public consultations held by Nogueira, the former Minister for Racial Equality, Edson Santos, impelled the Secretary, 'Listen to us, but decide.'⁴⁰ On that occasion, the participants were able to suggest a name for the new museum. Results showed 39.7% favouring the 'Museum of Afro-Brazilian History and Culture', 35.9% in favour of the 'Museum of Slavery and Freedom and 9.6% Afro-Brazilian Historical Museum.'⁴¹ Plans to construct a museum at Valongo Wharf are still underway, but the provisional name has been changed following public consultations and is currently 'Valongo Wharf Interpretation Centre' (*Centro de Interpretação do Cais do Valongo*).⁴² Despite Nogueira soliciting opinions from the Black community, many still felt unheard.

Between 2018 and 2019, plans for a museum slowly progressed despite the criticisms. In November 2018, three days before the official ceremony for Valongo Wharf to receive its World Heritage status, the US Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation donated \$500,000 (439,822€) in resources. Marcelo Brito, IPHAN's director of cooperation and development, claimed it would contribute to the future of Valongo Wharf 'as an open-air museum, as [an element] from the past that must be preserved.'⁴³ In response, the director of the Pretos Novos Institute, a museum for the slave cemetery whose government funding was cut in March 2017,⁴⁴ commented that '[the government] should invest in existing local institutions [...] Having a thematic museum is important, but it is not very clear what some of these institutions will even do, or whether they will help or compete with our projects.'⁴⁵ However, in September 2019, a further \$1.2m was donated by the Chinese investor, State Grid Brazil Holding, to contribute towards lights, signage and surveillance cameras for the new 'open-air museum.'⁴⁶

Despite receiving significant private donations, no visible improvements have been made to the

³⁸ Simone Pondé Vassallo and Luz Stella Rodríguez Cáceres. "Conflicts, truths and politics at the Museum of Slavery and Liberty in Rio de Janeiro." *Anthropological Horizons* 53 (2019). 47-80.

³⁹ Víncius Lisboa, 'Future Museum of Slavery and Freedom receives first object of the collection,' *Agência Brasil*, March 21, 2017.

⁴⁰ Simone Pondé Vassallo and Luz Stella Rodríguez Cáceres, 'Conflicts, truths and politics at the Museum of Slavery and Liberty in Rio de Janeiro,' *Anthropological Horizons* 53 (2019), 63.

⁴¹ Municipal Department of Culture Press Department, 'Seminar for a 'Museum About the Truth' Gathered Names from the Arts, Research and the Black Movement,' Rio Municipal Department of Culture, November 27 2017.

⁴² Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico, 'Started executive project for the installation of the Valongo Wharf Interpretation Center,' IPHAN, November 23 2020.

⁴³ Angeletti, Gabriella. "Rio de Janeiro's Unesco-listed slave wharf receives nearly \$2m for renovation." *The Art Newspaper*. September 24 2019.

⁴⁴ Claire Jones, 'Largest Slave Cemetery Battles to Continue 'Saying the Unspeakable' During 2017 Museum Week,' *Rio on Watch*, May 16 2017.

⁴⁵ Gabriella Angeletti, 'Rio de Janeiro's slave wharf museum gains ground,' *The Art Newspaper*, February 1 2019.

⁴⁶ Gabriella Angeletti, 'Rio de Janeiro's Unesco-listed slave wharf receives nearly \$2m for renovation,' *The Art Newspaper*, September 24 2019.

memorial site of Valongo Wharf, which now appears neglected.⁴⁷ Due to failures to properly maintain the site and engage the local community, in September 2021, the Federal Public Ministry and the Federal Public Defender's Office filed a public action lawsuit against IPHAN,⁴⁸ the governmental institute primarily responsible for Valongo Wharf's preservation.

Decision-Making Processes

In November 2011, the Rio World Heritage Institute (IRPH), a municipal organisation, created the 'Historical and Archaeological Circuit for the Celebration of African Heritage', which would tie Valongo Wharf with other sites of importance to Afro-Brazilian heritage in the vicinity. To this end, IRPH formed a curatorial working group of representatives from Rio's black communities, along with public administrators and academics, to provide input on the development.⁴⁹ Dulce Vasconcello president of the Municipal Council in Defence of Black Rights, stated on behalf of the black community: 'This was our first time being consulted on an urban redevelopment project.'⁵⁰ The group proceeded to draft the 'Valongo Recommendations', a research report that set out aims to build a memorial and to promote Valongo Wharf as more than just a stop on a tourist circuit, but rather a place for reflection and education about Brazil's history of racial injustice. The report was presented to the public on June 26th and submitted to Mayor Eduardo Paes on July 1st, the same day that the Valongo Wharf and the associated Circuit were inaugurated by the mayor himself. However, 'Valongo Recommendations' did not receive attention nor acknowledgement from Mayor Paes.⁵¹

Obtaining UNESCO World Heritage Status

In April 2012, Valongo Wharf Archaeological Site was listed as an officially protected archaeological site at the federal level, following its registration with the Institute for National Historical and Artistic Patrimony (IPHAN, linked to the Ministry of Culture and the Local Authority of Rio de Janeiro City). From this point forward, IPHAN assumed control of the site's management, conservation and promotion, and in January 2014, the Institute's proposal for Valongo Wharf's World Heritage application was accepted. In September 2014, IPHAN set up an Advising Committee to progress the application, composed of members from the black community, researchers, professors and representatives from all three levels of government 'to assure social participation, its legitimacy and authenticity, as well as the community inclusion' as per UNESCO's requirements.⁵² The final application was submitted in February 2017, which consisted of a 508-page dossier outlining Valongo Wharf's international historical value and included proposals to build a public memorial 'as outlined in the Letter of Recommendations of Valongo.'⁵³ On July 9, 2017, UNESCO accepted and added Valongo Wharf to the World Heritage List, categorised as a sensitive memory site, affording it

⁴⁷ Valongo Wharf currently holds a 1-star visitor rating on worldheritage.org. Some visitor reviews cite the lack of information and signage as justification for low ratings.

⁴⁸ Minutes - meeting 09/01/21 - Galpão das Docas - Wharf Valongo Management Committee. (Rio de Janeiro: Ministerio Publico Federal, 2021).

⁴⁹ With Municipal Decree no.34.803/2011.

⁵⁰ Gregory Scruggs, 'How a 29-Year-Old Designer Is Reinventing the Urban Monument,' NextCity, November 16 2015, 4.

⁵¹ Tania Andrade Lima, 'Valongo: An Uncomfortable Legacy' *Current Anthropology* Vol 61, no.S22 (2020), S323.

⁵² UNESCO Office in Brasilia, 'Valongo Pier (Rio de Janeiro) may become another World Heritage site in Brazil,' UNESCO, October 8 2014.

⁵³ Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional, Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional, *Valongo Wharf Archaeological Site: Proposal for Inscription on the World Heritage List*. (IPHAN, January 2016), 169.

the same recognition as Auschwitz and Hiroshima.

In 2022, the Federal Public Ministry (MPF) and the Federal Public Defender's Office (DPU) visited the port area.⁵⁴ On this occasion, experts and the media commented that the site runs the risk of losing the UNESCO World Heritage Status once the wharf is still far from presenting all the revitalization actions promised to UNESCO. Tourist signs have not yet been installed, and the region continues to suffer from flooding. Anthropologist Milton Guran assesses that the scenario is one of abandonment. However, after the media published the story, IPHAN sent a note informing that the Valongo Wharf does not run the risk of losing the title of World Heritage Site. The note also highlights that Unesco did not contact IPHAN in this sense.⁵⁵

Neglecting Responsibilities

On September 1, 2021, the MPF and the DPU held a meeting to declare they had filed a civil action lawsuit to compel IPHAN to re-establish Valongo Wharf's Steering Committee which had been formed in 2018 to fulfil UNESCO World Heritage maintenance requirements. This committee had been disbanded by presidential decree 9759/2019,⁵⁶ that is to say, under President Jair Bolsonaro's charge. Questions have been raised about the maintenance of the archaeological site, which has been suffering from flooding. One year prior, a municipal worker sent to fix a faulty drain at Valongo Wharf was hospitalised after receiving an electric shock.⁵⁷ During the meeting held by the MPF with the Institute for Development and Management (IDG) and forty representations from cultural and racial equality organisations local to Valongo Wharf,⁵⁸ it was explained that the civil action was being filed because IPHAN had failed to heed the recommendation issue made on May 17, 2021, following a public hearing to discuss the site's maintenance problems, including flooding and vandalism. The recommendation issue urged IPHAN to

Retake the Valongo Steering Committee, properly preserve the archaeological site, publicise the developed projects and their respective rendering of accounts, promote the integration and coordination of the various bodies, secretariats and institutions involved and act in a network with the cultural and community organisations in Little Africa, ensuring them protagonism due to the promotion of their culture.⁵⁹

The Republic's Attorney, Sergio Suima, who led the meeting, stressed that IPHAN had not ensured the effective participation of the local community in the design and execution of projects related to Valongo Wharf. Suima emphasised that the responsibilities of the various institutions involved were 'fragmented, as a result of negligence by the Brazilian State,'⁶⁰ and highlighted the importance of prioritising Valongo Wharf for the formation of national identity, not for the purpose of foreign tourism. Brazilian anthropologist Milton Guran, who was part of the team that worked on the UNESCO application for the site, stresses that 'the least that Brazil can do is recognize this crime

⁵⁴ Solimar Luz. "Cais do Valongo corre risco de perder título de patrimônio da Unesco". Radioagência Nacional. May 17 2022.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Social Communication Office Attorney of the Republic in Rio de Janeiro, 'MPF files action for Iphan to reinstate the Valongo Wharf Management Committee,' MPF, September 10 2021.

⁵⁷ RJ1, 'Funcionário da prefeitura leva choque ao tentar tirar água do Cais do Valongo, alagado há dias', g1, July 22 2020.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Minutes - meeting 09/01/21 - Galpão das Docas - Wharf Valongo Management Committee, (Rio de Janeiro: Ministerio Publico Federal, 2021).

⁶⁰ Ibid.

against humanity.⁶¹ The protection and recognition of the Valongo Wharf is a way to admit that Brazil was the country that received more slaves in the world and, therefore, is the country that has the greatest obligation to Africa and their descendants, who represent the largest Black population outside of Africa.⁶²

In July 2022, a public hearing in the Chamber's Culture Committee reunited *quilombolas*, representatives of the Public Ministry and professionals of history, anthropology and urbanism that demanded adequate protection of the Valongo Wharf.⁶³ On occasion, it was emphasised how the site had been the target of legal disputes, management conflicts, police investigations and low investment in the protection of its collections. All of this was evidenced by the *quilombola* and archaeological research consultant Damião dos Santos' report, which states that the population around the wharf is still neglected.⁶⁴ Public authorities such as the Public Prosecutor of the state, Jaime Mitropoulos, informed the audience that the Public Ministry has already taken actions to reconstitute the Valongo Wharf Management Committee, along with the installation of the Research Centre and its Collection. The plan is to encourage ethno-educational tourism in the community. Furthermore, the City of Rio de Janeiro informed that it has been trying to fill the lack of the Management Committee using the Valongo Circle, which includes several actors involved in heritage management, inspection and protection.⁶⁵ Notwithstanding, the sentiment among the participants was that the Valongo Wharf should serve as a "mirror" for society to learn from past mistakes and advance in its civilising process.⁶⁶

Federal Recognition as a National Identity Formation Archeological Site

In November 2021, Brazilian Senate approved Bill no.2000/21 which recognises the 'archaeological site of Valongo Wharf [...] as an Afro-Brazilian historical-cultural heritage, essential to the formation of national identity.'⁶⁷ It sets up guidelines for its protection as a consequence of the title of World Heritage Site by UNESCO. The destiny of this project of law is currently in the hands of the Finance and Taxation Commission, and afterwards, it will proceed for sanction or veto by the President of the Republic. Deputy Benedita da Silva, organiser of the last public hearing in July 2022, bets on its approval, and understands that Bill no. 2000/21 does not prejudice ordinary resources as these aspects are being dealt with by the Finance and Taxation Commission of the Chambers of Deputies.⁶⁸

Summary and Conclusions

⁶¹ Terrence McCoy. "More enslaved Africans came to the Americas through this port than anywhere else. Why have so few heard of it?", Washington Post, January 17 2022.

⁶² Terrence McCoy. "More enslaved Africans came to the Americas through this port than anywhere else. Why have so few heard of it?", Washington Post, January 17 2022.

⁶³ José Carlos Oliveira. "Especialistas cobram a proteção dos patrimônios histórico e humano do Cais do Valongo" Agência Câmara de Notícias. July 13 2022.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Translated by author, Project of Law PL 2000/21 of 25 November 2021 recognising Valongo Wharf as an essential heritage to the formation of national identity.

⁶⁸ Oliveira, José Carlos. "Especialistas cobram a proteção dos patrimônios histórico e humano do Cais do Valongo" Agência Câmara de Notícias. July 13, 2022.

In 2011, the Port Zone of Rio de Janeiro's urban revival rediscovered the Valongo Wharf's remains. It is estimated that from 1811 to 1842, approximately half a million Africans arrived in this location, making it one of the most important place[s] of memory of the transatlantic slave trade in the world. When the excavation began, the national and international media quickly publicised the news, and several events provided a first look at the cruelty of slavery in Brazil. The Valongo Wharf and the future African Diaspora Memorial would bring with them a new imagination and a new project for the Brazilian nation, which has long struggled with the ideology of a "racial democracy".

In the first years after the end of the excavation, there appears to have been consistent dialogues between the institutions in charge of preserving Valongo Wharf and local black communities. Nevertheless, it has been suggested by several researchers that conflicts spiked significantly in 2017 as a result of profound political change in the federal and municipal governments. In the same year, after a long process that involved changes in the control of the wharf's management, conservation and promotion between the municipal, state and federal spheres, the site obtained UNESCO's World Heritage Status. It was listed as a sensitive memory site, gaining the same recognition as Auschwitz and Hiroshima. Subsequently, Rio's city hall and Brazil's National Institute of Historical and Artistic Heritage announced they would build an educational museum dedicated to the site. However, until today neither a memorial nor a museum has been built. Furthermore, the museum project can only be understood at the heart of a broader political disagreement that involves disputes between the municipal administration of Paes and Crivella. Echoing changes in federal management with president Dilma Rousseff.

Over more than ten years, there have been several commitments that should have been fulfilled. Consequently, the Valongo Wharf survives with little attention but exists at significant risk. From 2019 to 2022, it has been speculated that the site runs the risk of losing its UNESCO Status. This case study calls attention to the fact that this historic site and the communities involved are not treated with the importance they deserve. Finally, it sheds light on how Brazil has historically refused to face questions of race, preferring instead to understand itself through the lens of class and being described by the intellectual elites as a 'racial democracy' created by intermarriage and free from the racism that exists in other countries.

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About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon, and, although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

About IHJR at EuroClio

The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at EuroClio - European Association for History Educators in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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