Environment and Sovereignty in the Antarctic: The Terre Adélie Airstrip
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This paper tells the story of the French effort to build an airstrip in the Antarctic territory of Terre Adélie. In Antarctica more than elsewhere, scientific programs are only as strong as the logistics that support them: in this sense, the airstrip at the heart of this paper was conceived of as both a necessity for French scientific work and a physical symbol of French sovereignty over Terre Adélie. But, in the end, the project failed and the airstrip was never used. Ultimately, the airstrip—its inspiration, construction, and even its collapse—was a performance of sovereignty. But sovereignty performances are rooted in strategic and political dynamics; they can adapt and be adapted as those dynamics change. In the French case, as this paper argues, sovereignty performances took place at the nexus of political strategy and environmental authority. The airstrip story offers a window into how Antarctica’s environment has been shaped by the political desire for authority and how this environment was constructed to fit ideas of empire set out in Paris. The geopolitics of Antarctic space affected the relationship of French civil servants, politicians, and scientists with the white continent—even though many of these actors never set foot there. Over the period considered here, we see the construction of France’s identity as a claimant state and a leader in the Antarctic Treaty System—an identity which was formed, shaped, and altered by the physicality of the Antarctic environment.