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978-1-107-09091-0 - The Admirable Adventures and Strange Fortunes of Master

Anthony Knivet: An English Pirate in Sixteenth-Century Brazil

Edited by Vivien Kogut Lessa De Sá

Excerpt

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## Introduction

In October 1592 English privateer Thomas Cavendish sailed away from the island of São Sebastião in southeast Brazil never to see land again. He had left behind around fifty of his men on the beach to fend for themselves or possibly die at the hands of the Portuguese. Among them was Anthony Knivet who, against all odds, managed not only to survive, but to live to tell the story of his eventful years in Brazil. His account, first published in London in 1625 as “The admirable adventures and strange fortunes of Master Anthonie Knivet,” is now printed for the first time as a separate and annotated edition.

In his “relation,” as he calls it, Knivet recorded several aspects that characterized Brazilian colonial society in its very beginnings: the harsh life at the *engenhos*, the multiracial settlements, the political disputes, the exploitation of labor, and the violent expansion toward the unknown “interior.” The text is a source for understanding the social relationships between Brazil’s early colonizers – landlords, freemen, mercenaries, prisoners, clergymen – and between them and Brazil’s first inhabitants, a myriad of indigenous tribes inhabiting a large part of its territory. Nonetheless, what grants Knivet’s testimony much of its uniqueness is his distinctive point of view as an Englishman caught up in the conflicting and complex encounters between rival European powers and the inhabitants of Brazil, both indigenous peoples and European settlers. His narrative, published thirty-three years after he first arrived in Brazil, remains the country’s oldest extensive account written by an Englishman. It is not surprising that his editor, Samuel Purchas, upon introducing Knivet’s testimony, stated that “in divers expeditions for war and Merchandize with the Portugalls, and escapes from them, [he] traveled thorow more of those savage nations, then perhaps any other before or since.”<sup>1</sup> Although other English travelers touched the coast

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of Brazil in the sixteenth century or even lived there for some time, none wrote such a detailed impression of its land and peoples.

### 1. Brazil in the Sixteenth Century

#### *Knivet and Other Early Chroniclers*

Between 1592 and 1599 Knivet experienced a number of extraordinary adventures that included an escape to Angola in Africa. Most important, he traveled through vast portions of the Brazilian territory, which were then virtually unknown to Europeans, either by being forced to join in expeditions across the backlands in search of gold and Indian slaves, or by attempting to escape from his Portuguese masters through resorting to native tribes living in the interior of what today is the state of São Paulo. During most of the years he spent in Brazil Knivet was a servant either to the governor of Rio de Janeiro, Salvador Correia de Sá, or to his son Martim de Sá. This enabled him, unwillingly though it might have been, to take part in historically relevant enterprises undertaken by the Portuguese, such as the battles against the Potiguar Indians in the north or gold-seeking expeditions in the south. Therefore, by the end of his Brazilian adventure, Knivet had traveled not only across the present-day Brazilian regions of Rio de Janeiro, Minas Gerais, and São Paulo, but also through parts of Bahia, Pernambuco, and Rio Grande do Norte.

The exact time and itinerary of Knivet's various incursions in Brazilian territory are not always easy to determine because of the inconsistency of the dating in his text, but still a rough outline can be traced. He was involved in at least four slave-trading expeditions captained or commissioned by the governor's two sons, Martim and Gonçalo de Sá. He was first sent to the backlands of Rio de Janeiro, in the present-day borders between Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, and Minas Gerais, around 1593, and then again further inland possibly in the next year, to trade for Indian slaves with the Puri and the Goianá. Some two years later, presumably between 1595 and 1597, he took part in a large-scale expedition led by Martim to the valley of the Paraíba River, from which he broke off, ending up living with a tribe of Tamoio for nearly a year in the hinterland of the Mantiqueira hills before traveling with them across the mountains to the coast of Santa Catarina in the south. After his recapture by the Portuguese, he took part in yet another slave-trading expedition, this time under Gonçalo, up along

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the coast of Rio de Janeiro into what today is the state of Espírito Santo. Early in 1599 he traveled again to the interior of São Paulo to help in the prospection for gold led by Governor-General D. Francisco de Sousa. Finally, still in 1599, Knivet embarked with his longtime master, Salvador Correia de Sá, on a sea journey toward Pernambuco, having to complete half of it on foot because of a shipwreck off the coast of Bahia. In Pernambuco, he was enlisted in a military expedition against the Potiguar in Rio Grande do Norte. It was only after his return to Pernambuco, possibly at the end of 1599, that he finally embarked to Lisbon with Salvador. How Knivet managed to return to England remains uncertain.<sup>2</sup>

His story would be published only in 1625 and remains one of the few firsthand narratives on which much of our current knowledge of sixteenth-century Brazil relies. These early narratives can be seen to belong to two distinct groups. On one hand we have accounts written by Portuguese chroniclers who usually color their writing with an optimistic view of the new possessions, constantly referring to all the riches they might yield. Such accounts were extremely valuable to Portuguese authorities for the amount of useful information they contained, and for this reason remained fairly unknown to Europe at large for a long time, unless they happened to be smuggled by pirates and translated into other languages, as will be seen later in this book. On the other hand we have detailed descriptions of Brazil and its people written by a number of non-Portuguese travelers who visited it early on in the colonial period. Such accounts also emphasized the land's many unexplored treasures and were charged with a sense of revealing hidden information. This often came with a hint that such knowledge might bring profit to fellow countrymen against the Portuguese.

Most of the first Portuguese chroniclers were early Jesuit missionaries who traveled widely over long distances, often far from the settlements, to convert the natives and maintain the faith among Portuguese settlers. Much information can be drawn from the letters these missionaries wrote, in which all their activities and impressions were recorded, and which were then sent to their ecclesiastical authority in Rome.<sup>3</sup> The single most detailed Jesuit text about Brazil is surely the *Tratados da Terra e Gente do Brasil* [*Treatises of the Land and People of Brazil*], written by Fernão Cardim. Cardim went to Brazil in 1583 as a high-ranking Jesuit and lived there for nearly forty years. He traveled across much of the Brazilian territory between 1583 and 1590 as an assistant to the Padre Visitador, a high-ranking Jesuit envoy, and wrote elaborate

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descriptions of everything he saw. In 1601, on his way back to Brazil after a three-year period in Rome, Cardim was captured by English corsairs and taken to London, where he remained in prison for more than a year. Despite his desperate pleas, his papers were confiscated and sold to Richard Hakluyt,<sup>4</sup> who had recently published his famous collection of travel accounts.<sup>5</sup> They were later bought by Samuel Purchas and published in his 1625 collection, *Hakluytus Posthumus or Purchas His Pilgrimes*, along with other important documents on travel. Purchas considered the text the “exactest Treatise of Brasil which I have seene written by any man” and mistakenly suggested the author was a Jesuit member of Cardim’s ill-fated company.<sup>6</sup> Only in 1847 was a copy of the original manuscript found in Portugal, and Cardim’s texts were finally brought to light under his name. They contain some of the first detailed descriptions and impressions of much of the land, the early settlements, the native tribes, and villages.

Another notable work of early historiography was produced by a Franciscan friar in the seventeenth century and remains a rich source for learning about early Brazil. It was written by Vicente do Salvador, who led a thriving ecclesiastic career and lived most of his life in Bahia. In the course of about ten years, which included a sojourn in Lisbon and imprisonment by the Dutch in Bahia, Vicente do Salvador gathered stories from hearsay and consulted the works of earlier chroniclers. In 1627 he finished his *História do Brasil*, which, since the beginning of Brazilian historiography in the mid-nineteenth century, has been considered the first serious “history” of Brazil written by a Brazilian. The manuscript followed a similar story to other early writings about Brazil. It remained long undiscovered in the Portuguese archives, until it was found and studied by one of the early Brazilian historians, F. A. Varnhagen, in the nineteenth century. Although its modern edition is incomplete as a result of the eventful process of publishing, *História do Brasil* remains an essential reference for modern historians.

Alongside the Jesuit reports are two important descriptions of Brazil made by Portuguese laymen: Pero Magalhães de Gândavo and Gabriel Soares de Sousa. Both left generally optimistic accounts containing extensive descriptions of the newly discovered land and its peoples at the beginning of the Portuguese colonization. Gândavo was the first lay Portuguese to publish ethnographic material on Brazil, as well as to outline events of its early colonial vicissitudes. In 1576 he published a work he named *História da Província de Sancta Cruz*,<sup>7</sup> which, despite its historical relevance, fell into oblivion until 1837, when it was

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rediscovered and published in French. A new Portuguese edition would not come out until nearly twenty years later. Although little is known about its author, the *História's* detailed description of the land, the climate, the vegetation, and the people of Brazil may date back to the 1560s. Some of the Brazilian flora and fauna, as well as characteristics of the peoples with whom the Portuguese came into contact, are mentioned for the first time in print by Gândavo. All this makes the *História* an essential source for learning about natural and social features that were rapidly changing under the impact of Portuguese settlement.

Unlike Gândavo, whose life history remains obscure, much is known about Gabriel Soares de Sousa and his life in Brazil. He arrived in Bahia from Portugal in 1569 and became a successful landowner. In 1587, desirous of obtaining financial support from the king for his mining enterprises, he wrote a thorough description of Brazil's riches and resources and of its recent history. Although he is often stern when describing the natives, Sousa clearly tries to draw attention to all the undiscovered wealth that Brazil could yield. Sousa's work earned him the king's favor, but – like many of the works previously mentioned – was not published until the nineteenth century, under the name *Tratado Descritivo do Brasil em 1587*.

The fact that Gândavo's, Cardim's, and Sousa's works remained unknown for nearly 300 years can be explained by the Portuguese policy of secrecy during the colonial period, which imposed strict control over publishing material liable to circulate among enemy countries. The chroniclers themselves were aware of the risk. As Sousa put it, should the contents of his treatise reach the "enemies of our holy Catholic faith," the "Lutherans" would certainly "equip their fleets and come to people this province," seeing the "great virtues of the State of Brazil."<sup>8</sup>

While Portugal feared that any information regarding Brazil might leak and fall into enemy hands, the few accounts made by non-Portuguese were being edited and re-edited in Germany, France, Holland, and England. These accounts made by European travelers who spent some time in Brazil are the second set of sources available to us about the country's early history. The most detailed and best known of them are the works written by German Hans Staden and Frenchmen André Thevet and Jean de Léry.<sup>9</sup>

Staden, about whom more will be said later in this book, was twice in Brazil between 1548 and 1554. In 1552, during his second sojourn there, he was made prisoner by the Tupinambá Indians while working as a mercenary gunner at the Fort of Bertioga, on the coast of São Paulo.

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For most of the nine months he spent with the tribe, Staden awaited the ritual execution in which he would be eaten, but he was able to save himself partly by making successful predictions to the local chief. His amazing book, published in Marburg in 1557, contains one of the first detailed descriptions of native habits, rituals, and warfare. It also includes minute descriptions of cannibalistic rituals, reports of which were becoming a source of fascination and amazement to Europeans. In this sense it is not surprising that Staden's work, along with its gallery of impressive woodcuts, was soon translated from German and widely published throughout Europe.

Both Léry and Thevet took part – although at different moments – in the failed French attempt to establish a permanent colony in Rio de Janeiro in 1555 under the orders of Nicholas de Villegaignon. Despite their differences and disagreements, Léry being a Reformed pastor and Thevet a Franciscan priest, both published detailed descriptions of the land and the people of Brazil in a time when very few Portuguese settlements existed. André Thevet, who held important posts in the French court, spent ten weeks in Brazil, acting as chaplain for the incipient French colony in Rio de Janeiro. Soon after returning, Thevet published an account of what he saw and heard in Brazil, which became widely read in Europe in the decades following its publication. Thomas Hacket, upon dedicating the English translation to Sir Henry Sidney in 1568, called it “a thing very rare, and of such exquisite doing, as before this time the like hath not ben heard of.”<sup>10</sup> Differently from Thevet, Jean de Léry joined the Calvinist mission to Villegaignon's colony in 1556 and remained a few months in the area of Guanabara Bay, mostly living among the Tupinambá. He published his account only twenty years after his return, and finally released it largely as a response to Thevet's accusations against the Protestant mission and to what he saw as Thevet's ethnographic imprecisions. The two French accounts provide a remarkable picture of parts of Brazil prior to extensive European occupation because the Portuguese had not yet settled in the areas Léry and Thevet visited.

### *The Portuguese Colony*

Systematic Portuguese occupation of the Terra de Santa Cruz had begun in the 1530s, although the territory itself had been officially discovered by Pedro Álvares Cabral and claimed by the Portuguese crown in 1500.<sup>11</sup> In the early sixteenth century, however, it was the thriving

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possessions in the East and in Africa that attracted Portugal's attention while Brazil remained almost completely "undiscovered." However, with the increase in the French illegal commerce of brazil-wood that had been quickly developing along Brazil's extensive coastline Portugal was eventually forced to send successive coast guard expeditions. These expeditions sailed down the coast, from its northernmost cape (Cabo de Santo Agostinho), capturing French ships and building *feitorias* with the help of friendly natives who bartered their labor for knives, hatchets, mirrors, and the like. These *feitorias* were primitive shacks surrounded by palisades used for stocking brazil-wood and placed at strategic capes or inlets.

The first official Portuguese colonial enterprise took place in 1530, when D. João III sent an expedition under Martim Afonso de Souza with the task of founding a permanent Portuguese settlement in Brazil, preferably close to the River Plate, about which promising news of silver finds had recently reached the peninsula.<sup>12</sup> Souza traveled down the coast, setting marble landmarks bearing the Portuguese emblems in strategic places, and sent several expeditions inland in search of gold and precious stones. After exploring the River Plate and discovering that it in fact belonged to Spain, he sailed some degrees to the north and founded the villages of São Vicente, on the coast, and Santo André da Borda do Campo, on the plateau.

Soon after, in 1534, D. João III decided to establish the donatory system by which the immense territory was divided into fifteen strips of land that were then granted to twelve different "donatories," or men of trust of the king. Several of these men had served as valiant soldiers in India and Africa, others were distinguished civil servants working for the crown in Lisbon. Each hereditary captaincy, as they came to be known, comprised roughly fifty leagues of coastline, although two donatories preferred owning two strips of twenty-five. The inland limit of each lot was the imaginary line drawn by the Treaty of Tordesillas, a document issued by the pope in 1494 – before Brazil had been discovered – and signed by Portugal and Spain. According to the treaty, Portugal was entitled to all land discovered up to 370 leagues west of the islands of Cape Verde.

The "hereditary captains" were entitled to the land and the people on it, having enough power to enforce the law and punish when necessary. They were free to enslave natives captured in "just" wars, that is, those who belonged to tribes considered enemies of the Portuguese. They could allot pieces of land to settlers and were also commissioned



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with the task of exploring the new territory in order to discover any riches that it might offer. They had, however, to provide for the establishment of villages and sugar mills entirely at their own expense. They were also expected to ship back to Portugal a percentage of all the goods exploited on their land, although most of the profit reverted to them.

Ten years later the donatory system had proved a complete failure. At the time, eight of the original fifteen captaincies had not been settled. Of those captaincies where colonization had been attempted, several had been abandoned by their settlers because of food shortage or internal dissensions between the captains and settlers or between the captains and the religious authorities. This was made even worse by the fact that successive attempts at finding mineral riches equivalent to those in the neighboring Spanish possessions proved all the more elusive; all that the vast land of Brazil seemed to yield was brazil-wood and sugar cane, a crop first brought from the East and that adapted very well in the flat and damp lands of the northeast.

When natives killed and ate the donatory of Bahia, the Portuguese king decided to repossess that province and to reformulate the donatory system as a whole. In an attempt to centralize power and to regain control over its new colony, the Portuguese crown established the General Government in 1548. The “governor-general,” as a direct representative of the king in Brazil, was in charge of enforcing the law and appointing officials to rule over the land. The first governor-general, Tomé de Souza, arrived in 1549 and established the seat of government at present-day Salvador, in Bahia, a city he helped build. Tomé de Souza’s fleet also brought the first missionaries from the recently created Jesuit order that would, from then on, play a decisive role in the early colonization of Brazil.

Despite the failure of the donatory system, two captaincies managed to reach a certain level of prosperity. Pernambuco, in the northeast, profited from its fertile soil for the plantation of sugar cane and quickly became the most prosperous one under Duarte Coelho. By the 1570s there were already twenty-three sugar mills producing extensive amounts of sugar that could be easily shipped back to Portugal from its good port, Recife. São Vicente, the other successful captaincy, became a center for the systematic search for gold and precious stones, but profited mostly from the slave trade undertaken by its first settlers. These would fit out expeditions, also known as *bandeiras*, to look for gold and capture natives then sold as slaves to mill owners along the coast. In the



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meantime, the history of Rio de Janeiro, where Knivet arrived in late 1592, was to follow a different path.

Originally belonging to Martim Afonso de Sousa, the captaincy of Rio de Janeiro remained vacant until the mid-1550s, while being a favored haven for illegal French trade in brazil-wood and other commodities. This paved the way, in 1555, for the establishment of the “Antarctic France” on an island in Guanabara Bay, just across from present-day Rio de Janeiro. The French colony – founded by Nicholas de Villegaignon, a French soldier with an illustrious career, with the help of local Tamoio Indians – epitomized not only the lasting French threat to Portuguese possessions in South America but also the strength of their alliances with the natives.

Villegaignon’s colony lasted until 1565, when the third governor-general, Mem de Sá, with the help of his nephew Estácio, several Portuguese settlers, and an army of allied natives from São Vicente, managed to destroy the French settlement and to found a new village, São Sebastião do Rio de Janeiro. Upon its founding on the left margin of Guanabara Bay, the village was placed under the jurisdiction of the Sá family, represented by Mem de Sá. The new village was to play an important role after 1573, when the government of Brazil was split into two regions and Rio de Janeiro became the seat of southern administration, while the village of Salvador stood for the northern provinces. Mem de Sá granted land to the Portuguese from São Vicente who had campaigned with him against the French and the Tamoio living in the region. These would be the first settlers in Rio de Janeiro.

In 1567 the primitive village was transferred from its original position, at the foot of a mountain known to this day as Sugar Loaf, to a high hill further into the bay, named after the patron saint of the newly founded village – Saint Sebastian. There the Portuguese built a Jesuit church, a college, and administration buildings. The common houses, however, soon spread along the beach before the hill, and this would become the true village center. This beach became the main harbor for the landing and loading of goods and slaves, and it is precisely there that Knivet first arrived in Rio de Janeiro, some twenty-five years later.

In political terms, the sixteenth century and part of the seventeenth century in Rio de Janeiro were deeply determined by the presence of the Sá family. Salvador Correia de Sá, the elder, related to the founder of the town, Estácio de Sá, and to Mem de Sá, was twice governor of Rio de Janeiro (1569–72 and 1577–99). His son Martim de Sá and his grandson Salvador Correia de Sá e Benevides were later also governors

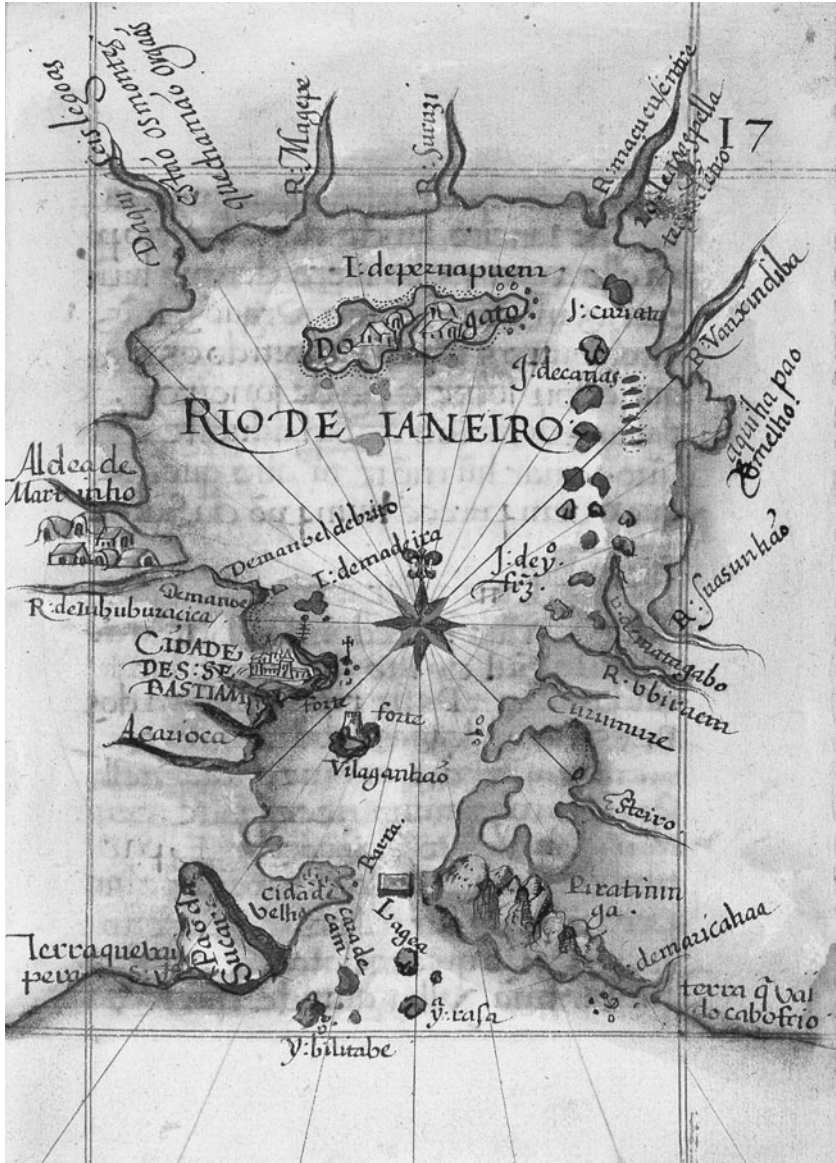
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1. Guanabara Bay in the late sixteenth century.

*Source:* Roteiro de todos os sinais, conhecimentos, fundos, baixos, alturas, e derrotas que há na costa do Brasil desde o cabo de Santo Agostinho até ao estreito de Fernão de Magalhães, by Luis Teixeira, c. 1574. Courtesy of Jaime Acioli.