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THE BRAZILIAN BANDEIRANTES: HEROES OR VILLAINS?

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The early history and exploration of the Americas are riddled with names such as "Frontiersman," "Pioneer," and "*Coureur de bois"* – each connotatively holding their own value geographically with frontiersman settling the Appalachian territories, pioneers settling West of the Mississippi in the United States, and *Coureurs de bois* settling a vast majority of French Canada. Yet, a commonly unrecognized name is that of the Brazilian Bandeirante. Seemingly similar yet completely different to the North American labeled explorers and settlers, the memory of Brazil's Bandeirantes remains controversial as they did not only what these aforementioned groups did with settling lands, albeit sometimes illegally under international law, but they also gained considerable wealth and power under the guise of capturing new and escaped slaves. Additionally, unlike their North American counterparts, Bandeirantes hailed from an assortment of occupations with "explorer" being far from them. Simply put, Bandeirantes were those individuals who turned to the unexplored heartland of Brazil as they grew tired of marauding pirates found along the Atlantic trade routes as well as a bureaucracy which did little to help them. With prominently displayed statues of *Bandeirantes* facing recent criticism, what then is their role on Brazil's history? Although their impact on Brazil as being positive or negative is still highly contested today, the fact of the matter remains that the Bandeirantes in Brazil did leave an unmistakable impact, expanding Brazil's borders, economy, and overall culture, but with a heavy cost.

When studying Meso and South America, historians typically draw from four main primary accounts to explore historical events during the colonial period, the first being probanzas. Probanzas, otherwise known as "proofs of merit" are primary letters written by conquistadors to their home country to inform their respective monarch of events which have transpired in the Americas – especially regarding the conquering of indigenous lands. Although allowing for more perspectives than the other two sources commonly used by historians as many conquistadors authored these letters home, the contents of the letters were typically consciously altered to highlight the actions of the conquistador – most of the time exaggerating their direct contributions as it meant more *fueros*, rewards, for themselves.[1] The second historical account many historians investigate when studying Meso and South America are that of the letters of Hernan Cortés. Remembered as "the first conquistador" who was responsible for the destruction of the Aztec Empire, the strategies Hernan Cortés' employed against the Aztec, common in Europe at the time, were used as a template for conquest in the New World. As such, his personal diaries as well as his probanzas were ways in which those in Europe could experience what the New World had to offer – gaining so much popularity in the Iberian Peninsula that the Crown would eventually ban them within the empire out of fear his popularity would surpass their own. The third primary account historians look at is the chronicle of Bernal Díaz del Castillo. As a Spanish Conquistador who was under the command of Hernan Cortés, Castillo offers an additional perspective from which to cross examine the probanzas and diaries left by Cortés. The last primary account that is looked at for Central and South America but also other colonial areas of the world are church sponsored documents. With clergy being among the first arrivers, typically only second to military personnel, Christian missionaries did much to establish educational and religious institutions which recorded local histories. These primary accounts serve as good starting perspectives from which to gauge events and include vital context of New World happenings although one must be

careful to consider possible biases. However, thankfully, these are not the only sources available. Municipal records of local settlements serve as additional resources that historians are able to deduce information regarding events in the Americas. Why then, is it common for English speakers to have never heard of the Bandeirantes?

One reason is because unlike other Pre-Hispanic, Pre-Colonial topics such as the conquests of the Aztec and Incan Empires respectively by the Conquistadores, Hernan Cortés and Francisco Pizarro, there are little records outside of local government documents, personal wills, and a few surviving works by Bandeirantes themselves, such as the only remaining four stanzas of an epic written in 1689 by Diogo Grasson Tinoco. On top of that, much of the literature surrounding them has yet to be translated into other languages from its original Portuguese writing since the study to explore the Bandeirantes only began toward the late nineteenth century with the effort of Brazilian historians such as João Capistrano de Abreu and Jaime Cortesão.[2] But who were these Bandeirantes specifically, what did they do and what are they perhaps misidentified as being responsible for? In order to best explore these questions, it is first vital to understand the history of Brazil – at least the origins of it as a nation.

Discovered first by Pedro Álvares Cabral in the year 1500 on his trek to establish a faster route to India around Africa, Brazil's lands were split amongst the Iberian powers of Spain and Portugal under the Treaty of Tordesillas. Giving Portugal rights to all lands found east of a line of demarcation set at 370 leagues west of the Cape Verde Islands, this treaty was established in an effort to avoid potential conflicts over claimed lands between the two exploration and trading giants of the time.[3] Although an initially inherently smart move by Spain as Portugal was their trading rival and not much land was thought to have been East of the line, they would later regret this decision as it provided Portugal with profitable coastal states and gave them access to the abundant Amazon forest rich with Brazilwood – something Spain would have had a relative monopoly over. Named after these trees, Brazil would be colonized by populations similar to Spanish controlled colonial territories in the Americas with those interested in seeking fortune and fame as well as members of the church.

Lacking the incredible capital generation Spain gained from their colonial possessions in the Americas and holding a different perspective of what they wanted to use their colonial possessions for, Portugal utilized a governing system which placed Brazil as part of their production line where raw materials were collected and sold from its African and Asian colonies in European markets. However, after reports of French merchants directly trading with Native Groups, John III determined a more permanent Portuguese presence was required. Titled the "Donatary System," Brazil was first governed by "donatary captains" who were responsible for the colonization and defense of their respective lands in return for profits, the right to name establish administrators under them, as well as dispense justice.[4] The equivalent of Dukes in Medieval European society, the lands of donatary captains stretched from the Atlantic Ocean to the line of demarcation set by the Treaty of Tordesillas, marked by Portuguese commander Martim Afonso de Sousa in 1530. Although effective in pushing the French out of Brazil, "of the twelve allotted captaincies, four were never settled; four were settled briefly; and only four, including São Vicente, produced permanent communities"(Morse 1965, 8).[5] Therefore, in 1549, in addition to the donatary system, a central government led by a governor in which all captains would report to was established. Wishing to first secure the coastal regions and return whatever profit the coastal

regions could provide, the crown nominated a seasoned military leader by the name of Tomé de Sousa as the first governor of Brazil.[6]

Although the introduction of sugar plantations were lucrative in addition to the harvesting of Brazilwood, it did not take long for the Portuguese Crown to be displeased when the anticipated profits did not match their imagined "rivers of gold" predictions. Further disgruntled by the news of Spain discovering silver mines within their developing colonial possessions in the Andes region, the Portuguese Crown unofficially urged its colonists to begin pushing inland in the hopes of finding riches.[7]

Using *bandeiras*, literally translating to flags, to mark areas of interest as well as denote where they had traveled, Portuguese flagbearers, *Bandeirantes*, slowly explored the interior with the hopes of establishing a labor force, discovering gold, and solidifying Portuguese influence in the region. Through these sanctioned searches of fortune, Bandeirantes inadvertently depopulated the region of local indigenous groups as some were taken back to the coast to be bartered and sold as slaves while many of those who remained succumbed to the illnesses that these explorers brought with them – recreating the epidemics which followed the arrival of Christopher Columbus and Hernan Cortés of the preceding years on a smaller scale. [8] Of these excursions into the interior there were four kinds. The first and most common towards the beginning of these efforts involved groups of five to six men whose intent was solely to locate sources of profit – that being runaway African slaves, indigenous peoples worthwhile to enslave, and jewels such as gold and emeralds.[9] With such small numbers, these groups of men likened to thugs could move quickly and typically tried to first identify where indigenous groups were based, and then either come back later with more men or avoid the area altogether. Oswald Andrade, early to mid-20th century Brazilian poet responsible for helping found Brazilian modernism, captures the lucrative nature of this first group's exploits in one of his poems surrounding the motives of the Bandeirantes,

> With forty white men / And my son
>
> And four troops from my ditches
>
> Escoteyra people with gunpowder and lead
>
> Your Lordship / You should consider that this discovery
>
> It is the most important consideration / In a lot of income
>
> And also emeralds.[10]

Among the least documented type of excursion, these Bandeirantes were quested by the Crown to explore the interior and were given rights to lands through *sesmarias* as well as annually salaried occupations within the Brazilian government if they returned with goods and actionable knowledge. Yet, with little accountability outside of the lead *sertanista*, or frontiersman, of the group, it was not uncommon for Bandeirantes to not only accept these rewards, but also ignore royal decrees and take as many captives as they could back with them – including the families of the men they enslaved – for additional wealth.[11]

In an attempt to better regulate these expeditions, the second type of excursion was those which were put together by local governors such as those of São Paulo or Goiás. No longer funded mostly by private entrepreneurs, the goals of these second type of expeditions held similar objectives, yet for different reasons. By identifying and defending the location of gold mines and enslaving the indigenous populations, these state-sanctioned *bandeiras* aimed to protect local captaincies from threat as well as convert some native groups to Christianity. A consequence of having increasing direct state involvement meant that in addition to adventurers, these bands of Bandeirantes included a chaplain, notary, interpreter, and indigenous peoples, therefore having much better documentation of their efforts.[12] The third type of Bandeira slightly differed in its purpose compared with the first two types.

Locally funded and staffed, the third type of Bandeira were essentially local militias with a few *pedestres*, or foot soldiers, and were charged with protecting colonial towns either through strict defense or via attacking nearby indigenous communities. Typically funded by slaveholders and supplied by farmers within colonial communities, these Bandeiras were both used legitimately for protection but also as another way in which to acquire indigenous slaves.[13]

The fourth type of outing was that of spreading Jesuit tradition. Called *entrada*, or entrance, these expeditions were led by Jesuit priests who wished to convert non-Christian indigenous populations to Christianity to, "save their souls." Although not armed themselves, these priests were typically accompanied by either "civilized" Natives who were, or colonial military officers who, in addition to protecting these priests, usually had less philanthropic goals.[14] However, due to the difference in opinion between groups such as the Bandeirantes and the Jesuits in regards to the use of Native groups for forced labor, the latter group eventually lost much of their privileges within Brazil with the Paulista Independence Movement of 1641 and so these types of missions were more rare than the other three.[15] To this end, Bandeirantes were first used to scout Brazil's lands, then established a labor force in the form of enslaving Natives, and then looked for ways to profit not only for the state but themselves.

Although starting with small bands of men looking for fame and fortune, these groups eventually grew, with some consisting of nearly two hundred to three hundred men by the latter part of the 18th century.[16] With such sizeable groups, only a few Bandeirantes rose above the rest to be remembered as great.

One of the early Bandeirantes tasked with the sole purpose of enslaving Natives was André Fernandes of Parnaíba. With a small group of around thirty men, Fernandes supposedly persuaded three thousand of the Caatingas peoples to voluntarily venture with them to São Paulo. However, on the journey there, the Caatingas revolted and returned to their homes located near the juncture of the Tocantins and the Araguaia rivers so the Bandeira returned with very little captives.[17] Although not returning with the volume of captives he had wished, this failure was relative as it was stories such as these that spurred legends and inspired future incursions into the interior for the chance of incredible wealth. One such inspired Bandeirante was Paulista Antônio Pedroso de Alvarenga who organized Bandeiras to try to make a name for himself.

Leading an expedition in 1615 to conquer the Apuatiaras group while also looking for mines at the urging of the colonial governor, Pedroso de Alvarenga led a diverse group of mixed

backgrounds. While little documentation has survived to describe his encounters, the mere distance he traveled– more than three hundred leagues, approximately 1035 miles, in total - was the farthest any Bandeirante had traveled at that time.[18] Although it took him an additional two years to return to São Paulo, his distance became a challenge for other adventures to best, and his findings proved valuable to future explorers.

Jumping ahead some odd sixty years, Bartolomeu Bueno de Silva was renowned as one of the most ruthless Bandeira leaders by the 1680s. A famous sertanista, he and his son of the same name searched for the *Martírios*, a mythical mountain range said to be made of pure gold by the earlier Antonio Pires de Campos. Drawing the interest of other great Bandeirantes such as Bartolomeu Pais de Abreu as well as the colonial governor Dom Rodrigo César de Meneses, Bueno de Silva set out with 152 armed men and thirty-nine horses in July of 1722.[19] Losing men along the way to starvation, disease, mutiny and other afflictions, Bueno de Silva returned some three odd years later with only a quarter of his original men and a mere thirty-two *oitavas* of gold. Undeterred, he organized another expedition the following year following a lead of untapped gold mines in the Vila Boa region. Taking a different approach to better secure the gold that had alluded him before, Bueno de Silva kidnapped the local indigenous Goiá women and forced the men of local tribes to reveal where they had unearthed the gold which adorned many of the women's necklaces. Although not the most principled approach, this enabled Bueno de Silva to redeem himself upon his return to São Paulo – earning eight thousand oitavas of gold.[20] As a reward, the Portuguese Crown granted him the title of regent captain, *sesmarias* (land grants), and the ability to tax river crossings for three generations. However, he lost this taxing right in 1733 and eventually fell into heavy debt from his adventures – of which he mostly paid for himself – then died in 1740.[21] Thus was the life of a Brazilian Bandeirante – exploring and profiting off of the interior of Brazil and its indigenous populations in the name of the Portuguese Crown. Yet, there remains an inadvertent consequence of the activities undertaken by the Bandeirantes.

Basing much of their knowledge and excursions on the adventures of previous Bandeirantes, these explorers created early infrastructure for the interior of Brazil as they passed through areas. While many historians focus directly on the excursions themselves, many do not consider the necessary logistics to not only make the expedition possible, but also how it impacts the surrounding geography.[22] For example, Bandeirantes commonly utilized identical walking paths to one another as it would allow for directions given by previous Bandeirantes to be usable. Although not in the traditional sense of officially maintained avenues of transport, this was the early creation of roads within the interior of Brazil.[23] With the creation of roads, towns were soon to follow. Although bringing supplies with them in their travels, unlike their northern explorer counterparts, Brazilian Bandeirantes could not bring all of the materials they required on their journeys due to the terrain they had to traverse. Therefore, although early Bandeirantes utilized Native groups for the replenishment of their supplies, towns were increasingly settled by Portuguese colonists alongside displaced indigenous groups. With so many Bandeirantes in need of supplies, a market was created in which both groups could earn a livelihood. With the depopulation of indigenous groups in the surrounding areas over the course of two hundred years during the 17th and 18th centuries, regions such as Mato Grosso, Mato Grosso do Sul, Amazonas, Pará, and Tocantins slowly became more settled as a result of these Bandeiras for the benefit of both future Bandeirantes as well as nonexplorers – being incorporated into Portuguese territory

under the Treaty of Madrid in 1750.[24] Understanding this, how then are the Bandeirantes perceived today in Brazil?

Located in the popular Ibirapuera Park of São Paulo stands an enormous horizontal monument at approximately 36 feet high, 26 feet wide, and 144 feet long. Called the *Monument to the Bandeiras*, its depiction of two Europeans atop horses leading a group of twenty six men of differing races, a Native woman carrying an infant, and a man pushing a barge to shore in grey granite fills its viewers with a sense of heroism and patriotism towards the Bandeirantes as great explorers and adventurers responsible for the settlement of Brazil. Prevalent in Brazil following its centennial anniversary of independence in the early 20th century, this theme was the traditional narrative promoted for the Bandeirantes. However, following legislation during the 20th century which increasingly recognized indigenous lands, some scholars began to question the comprehensiveness of the Bandeirantes' legacy. Pursuing this, Brazilian historian Katia Maria Abud published an article in 1986 stating that the traditional Bandeirante image was a carefully crafted by both past and current elites to promote their self-empowered agenda and ignore the more heinous acts committed by the Bandeirantes. Yet, nothing truly came of this conversation outside of academic banter until the 21st century.[25]

Although the *Monument to the Bandeiras* directly relates to the memory of the Bandeirantes by physically depicting them, since its creation in 1954, the public transformed it into a stage where they could make their voice heard regarding other matters, usually by placing objects on the statues themselves.[26] However, in 2013, protestors used this created space as a way in which to publicly protest the image of the Bandeirantes themselves by graffitiing the words "Bandeirantes assassinos," calling the Bandeirantes "murderers."[27] The next day, a public march of approximately four thousand people marched on São Paulo in protest of the non-comprehensive Bandeirante image and demanded it be amended. So went the next few years, with the monument being vandalized in response to political events which the public did not agree with – efforts being renewed by the most recent international controversy of the death of George Floyd while in police custody in the United States.[28] The criticisms leveled at the Bandeirantes then include inaccuracies akin to that of the narrative surrounding the Spanish Conquistadors – as overstated and exaggerated – and remembering them not as heroes for their actions, but genocidal monsters.

Therefore, the simple answer as to how the Bandeirantes are perceived today in Brazil is – it's complicated. The Bandeirantes are to Brazil as the slavery issue and the images of the Confederate South are to the United States. With this being an ongoing debate, it is difficult to determine how Brazilian authorities and scholars can appropriately modernize the depiction of its past to be more holistic while simultaneously maintaining the true impact of the Bandeirantes in the settlement of Brazil – of which is unmistakable.[29] From providing the Portuguese and local government entities wealth that enabled them to more easily govern, settlement of incredibly difficult territories, and the dissemination of Portugal's culture and religion – of which Brazil is built upon and gives the Brazilian people unity, it was the effort of the Bandeirantes that allowed for the modern Brazilian state to be built. Yet, the way the Bandeirantes accomplished this do originate from selfish and outright evil acts with the enslavement and trade of indigenous peoples, killing of millions of Natives through the introduction of disease, and exploitation of resources. Part of what makes Brazil's Bandeirantes so complicated to interpret is it both positively and negatively impacts Brazilians based off their ancestry – of which many Brazilians have mixed

roots.[30] The Bandeirante question therefore is part of the growing international, or rather Western-world topic of how to address slavery as well as the mistreatment of indigenous populations which followed the discovery of the Americas in 1492. To date, there is no consensus amongst nations on how to do this appropriately as each nation respectively completed different actions against different groups of peoples. Proposed solutions have included more holistic educational curriculums which explore previously undiscussed aspects of history, such as the genocide of indigenous populations and the overall horridness of the institution that was slavery, the removal of statues which embody antiquated ideals relating to either of these issues, and paying reparations to those families affected – all to mixed success. The question of presentism cannot be overstated when discussing how best to modernize the public's perception of the past as laws and morals change with time. With rising tensions over the past century, the world has increasingly been rightfully questioning the comprehensiveness of the histories taught to younger generations. While curriculums have altered for the better, the world has a long way to go before it has done right by the groups it has historically and systemically wronged. In the case of the Bandeirantes' effect in Brazil, they did aid in its settlement but through unnecessarily nefarious means – as did most explorers of the time. It is a difficult conversation to say the least and is an issue which will require patience from all parties in order to be solved appropriately. For the time being, there are two things that must be done in order to host a productive conversation in not only Brazil, but the world. Firstly, historians must continue to translate, analyze, and research narratives regarding historical figures such as early explorers, settlers, and founders. Secondly, Brazilian historians must build upon the works of individuals such as João Capistrano de Abreu and Jaime Cortesão, supplementing information they discussed with more recent research. By accomplishing these two tasks, historians and public servants can have an effective conversation on how best to remember and interpret historical figures such as Brazil's Bandeirantes, the American Pioneers, French-Canadian Coureur des Bois, and more.

NOTES

[1] Matthew Restall, *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest*, (Vancouver: Langara College, 2016), 12-14.
[2] Richard M. Morse, *The Bandeirantes; the Historical Role of the Brazilian Pathfinders*. [First edition], (New York: Knopf, 1965), 5-6, 101.
[3] Mark A. Burkholder, and Lyman L. Johnson, *Colonial Latin America*, (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2010), 41.
[4] Ibid, 100-104.
[5] Richard M. Morse, *The Bandeirantes; the Historical Role of the Brazilian Pathfinders*. [First edition], 7-10.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Clodomir Vianna Moog, *Bandeirantes and Pioneers*, 92 – 95.
[8] Capistrano de Abreu, *Capítulos de História Colonial,* (Rio de Janeiro: Sociedade Capistrano de Abreu, 1928), 65.
[9] Mary C Karasch, *Before Brasília: Frontier Life in Central*, 65.
[10] Oswald Andrade, *Pau Brasil's Contributions to the Consecration of the Bandeirantes in the 1920s: Complete Works*, (São Paulo: Global, 2003), 117.
[11] Mary C Karasch, *Before Brasília: Frontier Life in Central*, 65.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid, 65 – 66.
[15]Luiz Felipe de Alencastro, *Trade in the Living, The: The Formation of Brazil in the South Atlantic, Sixteenth to Seventeenth Centuries*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 2018), 201-202.
[16] NP Macdonald, "The Bandeirantes of Brazil," *History Today* 2, no. 12 (December 12, 1952).
[17] Mary C Karasch, *Before Brasília: Frontier Life in Central*, 68.
[18] Ibid, 68.
[19] Ibid, 69 – 70.
[20] Ibid, 69 – 70.
[21] Ibid, 71.
[22] Ellen Churchill Semple, *Influences of Geographic Environment*.
[23] "Brazil Info: Bandeirantes," Virtual Brazil, accessed September 7, 2020, http://www.v-brazil.com/information/history/bandeirantes.html.
[24] Ellen Churchill Semple, *Influences of Geographic Environment*, (New York: Henry Holland Company, 1947). ; "Bandeirantes."
[25] Renato Cymbalista, "What to Do with the Bandeirantes: A Challenged Monument in São Paulo, Brazil." *City* 24, no. 3/4 (June 2020): 605–15.
[26]Maria de Fátima Morethy Couto, "Exploring Brazil with the Bandeirantes: Reactions to a Public Artwork in the City of São Paulo," *De Arte* 54, no. 2 (June 2019): 65–82.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Renato Cymbalista, "What to Do with the Bandeirantes: A Challenged Monument in São Paulo, Brazil," 605–15.
[29] Thomas E. Skidmore, *Brazil: Five Centuries of Change*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[30] Darcy Ribeiro, and Gregory Rabassa. *The Brazilian People: The Formation and Meaning of Brazil*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000).

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