

# *Diamantina in the age of Lobo de Mesquita*

The discovery of gold in Brazil during the eighteenth century was accompanied by a process of urbanization, something unknown in the Colony up until that time. The first nucleus of settlement in the mining region was on the banks of the Tripuí, which later gave rise to Vila Rica. Settlement radiated out in all directions from this central location. Thus, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, there was gold mining in Sabará, Serro, Caeté, and Vila Rica, among others, which together comprised what became known as “*as Minas Gerais*” (the General Mines). The fame of the discoveries spread quickly, and enormous contingents of the population began to move to the area.

The transit of settlers to Minas Gerais was possible through the interconnection of different routes that were opened almost simultaneously from São Paulo and Bahia and later, around 1725, directly from Rio de Janeiro. Over the course of the eighteenth century, these were the three principal roads, which, like points of a triangle, connected the shore to the captaincy. The first connection was made from São Paulo, and this stretch was known as the *Caminho Paulista* or *Caminho Velho*. Those who came from Bahia reached Minas Gerais via the *Caminho da Bahia*, or from the *Currais do Sertão*. Finally, there was the road stemming from Rio de Janeiro, generally known as the *Caminho Novo* or *Caminho do Garcia*. Once they entered the captaincy, these three principal roads split into innumerable paths interlinking older and newer settlements.

In contrast to the situation in other regions, in Minas Gerais the establishment of religious orders such as the Society of Jesus, which had been fundamental for

the spread of the Catholic faith in the Colony, was prohibited. Thus it became a responsibility of the residents themselves, in partnership with the state, to organize religious practices. They created brotherhoods that took care of the construction and maintenance of churches and chapels, as well as the promotion of worship, burials, and religious festivities.

The churches were constructed and their interiors ornamented in accordance to the taste of the period, defined today as an artistic style known as the Baroque. This style was characterized by its use of chiaroscuro, its taste for simulacra, the use of curves, of exaggeration, of deformation as a way of accentuating the impression caused by an image. The interior environment of a church was intended to lead the worshipper to a mystical experience, giving him the sensation of floating between heaven and earth, in a state of true spiritual elevation. Countless artists were hired by the brotherhoods to carry out works of architecture, painting, sculpture, and ornamentation. The best-known, the sculptor, wood-carver, and architect Antônio Francisco Lisboa (1730/38-1814), known as Aleijadinho, and the painter Manuel da Costa Ataíde (1762-1830), personify a whole gamut of craftsmen who worked in the region over the course of the century. The Baroque was much more than an artistic style. What we today call Baroque culture marked all aspects of life at the time, including language, attire, and public behavior. They were exterior manifestations of how man saw himself and the society to which he belonged, since the signs of his culture were inscribed in all the elements of the epoch, beginning with the ordering of the urban space itself.

At the end of 1709, as a result of the War of the Emboabas, the captaincy of São Paulo and Minas do Ouro was created. This war pitted settlers from São Paulo, who claimed certain privileges for discovering the mines, against newly-arrived colonists from Portugal, Bahia, and Pernambuco, generally referred to as *emboabas* by those from São Paulo. The first governor of this new captaincy, Antônio de Albuquerque Coelho de Carvalho (1655-1725), strove to give some administrative order to the region. Thus he established the first *vilas* based on the larger urban nuclei which already existed: Vila Rica, Vila de Nossa Senhora do Carmo, and Vila de Nossa Senhora do Sabará. The creation of *vilas* was essential to Portuguese institutional organization. In these *vilas* were erected whipping-posts (*pelourinhos*), generally in stone, which symbolized submission to the Crown. Municipal Councils were also established. These organs of control allowed the elite to participate in local governance and were notably responsible for the regulation of urban space and water supply. It was also in the *vilas* that the principal administrative posts were established, including those responsible for collecting taxes.

By 1720, the population of the region of the Minas do Ouro had already reached the mark of 250 thousand inhabitants, including whites, slaves, and freedmen. With the intent of reducing the distance between the seat of government and the area's population, in that year Dom João V created the captaincy of Minas Gerais, which was separated from São Paulo. The first governor of the new captaincy, Dom Lourenço de Almeida (1680-1750), took office on August 18, 1721, in Vila do Carmo. One of his first measures was to establish the seat of the government in Vila Rica, in order to more closely observe the subjects.

The mining economy created an urbanized and highly miscigenated society, with the broadening of the urban middle classes. However, just as in the sugar-producing regions, this society was heavily based on slave labor. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, in an emblematic phrase, Father Antonil summarized the symbiosis between the sugar economy and slave labor by stating that "*slaves are the hands and the feet of the master of the mill.*" His statement is easily applicable to the mining region, since according to a popular saying of the time, "*without them [slaves] it is impossible to make, maintain, and increase wealth in Brazil.*"

One of the most striking characteristics of Minas Gerais, over the course of the eighteenth century, was the appearance of a significant class of freedmen, also known as *forros* because they became free through *cartas de alforria* (letters of manumission). This class, which clustered around the urban mining centers, did not enjoy the same status as free men, which generally corresponded to the white population, mostly of Portuguese origin. In contrast, the *forros* were made up of portions of the black, Indian, or mixed population, that is, the so-called "men and women of color." Minas Gerais

not only had the largest number of slaves in the Colony, but also the largest freed population at the time.

The wealth produced from the mining of gold and diamonds in the captaincy was such that it led to a reorientation of the dynamic of the Portuguese Empire in the eighteenth century, with the gradual displacement of its economic center to Brazil. It is reckoned that, in Minas Gerais alone, the official production of gold added up to 650 tons, and that of diamonds reached the astounding total of somewhat over three million carats. But in spite of this wealth, during this entire time, tax collection was a difficult task for the Crown. The chief tax was the *Quinto*, which by royal right could be levied on any production of metals, in this case, on gold. It was supposed to amount to a fifth of the total produced, but it did not always occur. In fact, the collection of the *Quinto* was marked by irregularities, and the sums and the forms of collection varied during the *oitocentos*. Frequently, the authorities had to negotiate the rate that would be charged, and the Councils played an important role in these negotiations. Only from 1750 was the rate of twenty per cent of the official production consolidated.

Collecting taxes on diamonds was more complicated. Extraction was entrusted to individuals from 1720 to 1734, and during this period an annual poll tax was established. This *taxa de capitação*, which varied over the course of the century, was levied on the slave work-force employed in the mines. In 1734, the *Demarcação Diamantina* was established, a quadrilateral centering on Arraial do Tejuco, where the Contractor and Intendant of diamonds lived. In this year, and until 1739, the extraction of diamonds was prohibited with the purpose of raising the price per carat on world markets. Between 1739 and 1771, the Crown established a new system for diamond production, which was apparently easier to enforce. It consisted of contracts to be auctioned every four years, to an individual or a partnership. Beginning in 1740, six contracts were signed, some of which were renewed, thus extending the originally established period of four years. Chief judge João Fernandes de Oliveira (1728-?), companion of the famous Chica da Silva (?-1796), is the most renowned of the diamond contractors. However, in 1772 the Crown completely took over diamond production, creating a company for this purpose, the *Real Extração dos Diamantes*, a system which continued in force until after Independence.

Arraial do Tejuco, center of the *Demarcação Diamantina*, was established with the mining of the Piruruca and Grande rivers, which were exclusively gold-bearing. From 1720 to 1750, the little *arraial* began to grow as more diamonds were discovered in the rivers. The settlement centered around the plaza where the mother church of Santo Antônio was erected. It exhibited a "quadrangular, concentrated and reticulated" appearance, different from the other urban centers in Minas Gerais, which were generally more spread out

and disorderly. From a distance, the *arraial* resembled a little manger, due to the rustic simplicity of its houses and chapels, constructed out of mud and stone. The white-painted constructions clambered one over another, snaking their way up the hillside, sprinkled between little gardens of fruit trees, flowers and vegetables, an oasis in the midst of the inhospitable and stony landscape. The houses, whitewashed on the outside, were covered with tiles.

In Tejuco, initially, the brotherhoods were housed in the interior of the mother church, where they possessed the four lateral altars. The brotherhoods of Nosso Senhor dos Passos, Nossa Senhora do Terço, das Almas, and of the Santíssimo Sacramento, mainly composed of free whites, were especially notable. Later the churches of Rosário dos Pretos, Nossa Senhora do Carmo, São Francisco, Mercês, Amparo, Bonfim, and others were constructed.

Arraial do Tejuco was not a small settlement by the standards of the period. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the French traveler Auguste de Saint-Hilaire was amazed by the environment of luxury and wealth that he found there. Local commerce thrived with stores filled with imported objects, such as crockery from England and India, all transported on donkey back. It was in Tejuco that Saint-Hilaire encountered the most flourishing intellectual scene in the captaincy,

where the educated elite was capable of speaking French fluently. During the seventeen-fifties the *arraial* had an Opera House, where well-known pieces of the day were staged. The brotherhoods also hired musicians to write and perform new works for the different annual feasts, including Holy Week, Ash Wednesday, *Corpus Christi*, and *Senhor dos Passos*. The mulatto composer José Joaquim Emerico Lobo de Mesquita stood out among the approximately 120 musicians active in Tejuco during the eighteenth century, becoming their best-known representative.

A census of Tejuco in 1774 showed that, among the 511 heads of households, the number of free men was almost equal to that of freed slaves. There was opportunity in the Diamantina society for men and women of color to achieve their liberty. Once admitted to the world of the free, many of them were able to accumulate possessions and to blend in. Their presence, though important at the time, has been relegated to oblivion. The history books, however sporadically, registered these freedmen and their *mestiço* descent largely as exceptions, as in the case of the ex-slave Chica da Silva, who used her sensuality in order to win the heart of the powerful diamond merchant. Although forgotten, the history of the mining region, especially in the diamond area, was atavistically linked to the presence of this non-white population.

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