

CONFERÊNCIA

ILLUSIVE GEMS: THE DISAPPEARANCE OF DIAMONDS FROM GOIÁS*

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Resumo

Esta conferência é o resultado de uma pesquisa histórica sobre as políticas da Coroa portuguesa referentes à mineração dos diamantes em Goiás no século XVIII. Além disso, mostra o embate constante entre os mineradores nos rios Claro e Pilões e as autoridades coloniais.

Palavras-chave: mineração; diamantes; Goiás; século XVIII.

Between about 1730 and 1790, Brazil was the main supplier of diamonds for the world market. The diamond market is very inelastic: if too many were sold, the price would go down dramatically and vice versa. As a consequence of the enormous flood of these glittering gems on the European market in the 1730s, the price collapsed to one third of its original value.¹ In order to end this free fall, the Portuguese king ordered the mines to be closed for several years where after they could be mined by one set of contractors only. It worked: diamonds regained some of their value, and the crown could look forward to a regular income from the profits of these noble stones.

This relative success story of diamond monopolization would be valid for the diamond district in Serro do Frio, Minas Gerais. However,

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diamonds were also found in another, less accessible areas in Brazil: Goiás.² Royal control in this outpost of the empire remained almost impossible, and royal policies that might have worked in Minas Gerais, backfired on the frontier. No one could control diamond mining as officials, soldiers, priests, miners, runaway slaves and Amerindians competed over the diamond rivers Claro and Pilões. Only twenty years after the first findings, could the diamond contract holders mine in the rivers. The result was arrests and disillusionment. Illusive diamonds from the Goiás frontier the Brandt brothers (the diamond contract holders), and many others.

Goiás was one of the most isolated Brazilian captaincies. To the west of Minas Gerais and Bahia, and to the South of the Amazon tributaries, only a few expeditions (*bandeiras*) reached the Amerindian territories. The official *bandeiras* from São Paulo came all in families. Three generations of Bertolomeu Bueno da Silva's finally led to a sponsored journey land inwards.³ The governor of São Paulo send Bueno 2nd to the territories around the Tocantins river, earlier explored by Bueno's father, to search for Amerindians, gold, silver and gems.⁴ Bueno 2nd returned with gold, and with reports of diamonds.⁵ The explorer's (*bandeirante*) findings had immediate consequences: within a decade Goiás would be populated by about 10,000 Luso-Brazilians and as many enslaved africans.⁶ Nevertheless, gold and diamond mining remained precarious, as the frontier delivered many armed renegades, revengeful Amerindians, runaway slaves and underpaid officials and soldiers.

In 1734 Bueno 2nd officially found diamonds in the Kayapó territory, thr rivers Claro and Pilões. The great discoverer send several stones to the governor of the Goiás, who reported this to the king and his Overseas Council in Lisbon.⁷ The metropolitan authorities were less pleased with this crystal find. In stead of capitalizing on these riches, the king and his councillors ordered the rivers to be forbidden zones, were neither diamonds nor gold could be mined. The gems of Serro do Frio were destroying the diamond prize in Europe, more stones would only add to the problems.

The inhabitants of Goiás must have been quite disappointed. In stead of a complimentary letter for the great discovery, the pioneers received a notice that mining was prohibited "for the common good." Not unsurprisingly, the governors and the Municipal Council of Villa Boa

(the Captaincy's capital) wrote several letters to get the ban lifted.⁸ None was to be of any avail, subsequently diamond mining went underground.

Because of its secretive nature, it will be impossible to assess how many diamonds were actually mined in Goiás. Indeed, at which places and even if there were any diamonds in this frontier captaincy has been doubted by some historians.⁹ However, officially, these gems were only found in the Claro and Pilões river, about nine days travel south of Villa Boa. When the official contract holders started to explore these regions, no gems were encountered.¹⁰ There is, however, abundant evidence that illegal diamond miners (*garimpeiros*) had more success.

Official or even settler control over the Claro and Pilões river area was a difficult task. Bueno 2nd encountered many Kayapó Ameridians, who made Bueno 2nd's bandeira's life quite difficult.¹¹ *Garimpeiros* had to deal with these Ameridians, and relationships were not good. The Kayapó so strongly resisted these *garimpeiro*'s infiltrations, that they beleaguered Villa Boa itself in 1742.¹² Nevertheless, few *garimpeiros* could withstand the appeal of these noble crystals glittering in the forbidden rivers.

The crown policy that the prohibition of diamond mining in Goiás would work was wishful thinking. Local authorities were not able to control the forbidden zone even if they wanted to. Time and again did they write to the authorities in the mother country, that Goiás encompassed a large area the extent of which even the most informed *bandeirante* had no clue.¹³ And although the rivers Claro and Pilões were "only" nine days marching away, Villa Boa neither had the soldiers nor the tax basis to support any suppression of illegal diamond mining. The best the crown could hope for, was that diamond mining would be decreased so that the flow of Brazilian diamonds on the European market diminished. The trade-off would be an increase in illegally sold gems from these interior regions.

In reality, local officials and outside infiltrators competed over the illegal diamond mines. Almost from the beginning denunciations arrived in Lisbon, of the Villa Boa official's involvement in illegal mining. Not long sooner came reports about *paulistas* (people from São Paulo) entering the forbidden diamond district. Some officials and contrabandists have actually been captured, and this documentation gives us an idea on how officials and *garimpeiros* organized diamond mining in Goiás.

The 1741 denunciation of the superintendent of the mines in Goiás, Agostinho Pacheco Telles, is telling how involved the highest officials were in illegal diamond mining.¹⁴ The superintendent explained that he heard from secret spies (*espíes secretas*) that the governor of São Paulo, Dom Luís de Mascarenhas, send a *bandeira* to Goiás with the intention to pan the precious stones in the Pilões river. Telles seemed to be very well informed, since he knew exactly that the organizing persons was Father Custodio Barreto da Costa who came from Serro do Frio, the diamond district in Minas Gerais. The superintendent knew of the priest's meeting in the suburbs of Villa Boa with several people related to the holy man and the governor of São Paulo, and that the *bandeira* would have at least ten slaves to assist in the mining. Telles reacted swiftly with a juridical inquiry and arrests, however, he mentioned that all suspects had to be released under bail, and that he was unable to tell everything since that would put him at great risk.

The involvement of governors and priests in such dark practices should not come as a surprise. Dom Lourenço de Almeida, one of Dom Luís de Mascarenhas's illustrious predecessors a decade earlier had a similar reputation. Under his governorship diamonds were encountered in Minas Gerais. He kept this hidden for the king during several years, so that he could personally profit from this knowledge.¹⁵ Priests had such a bad reputation as contrabandists that the king forbade any religious orders to settle the Mining districts.¹⁶ Clergymen fell under a separate jurisdiction, they had ecclesiastical immunity and they could therefore only with difficult be prosecuted for any crime. This rule proved to be very seductive for many men of the cloth. Moreover, priests were always present in *bandeiras* as early as the sixteenth century. These expeditions to the interior were organized mainly from São Paulo, and they were officially meant to pacify Ameridians into Christianity. There were few measures that the king and council could aspire to take, other than ordering the governor to return to Lisbon, await the results of the official inquiry and order the suspects to be shipped in chains Portugal.

The denunciation demonstrated the organized nature of illegal diamond mining. It followed the patterns of a *bandeira*: sending a larger group of armed people of different plumage to the forbidden rivers. Family ties, connections with authorities in the three captaincies of São Paulo, Minas Gerais and Goiás were of great importance. The skills of the

bandeira's participants, enslaved Africans and overseers that came from both Goiás and the diamond mines in Minas Gerais were essential to its success. The Municipal Council of Villa Boa characterized these *garimpeiros* as "adventurers who do this out of ambition or necessity."¹⁷ However, according to this denunciation they were more than this. These *garimpeiros* were well connected with a wide variety of expertises who were able to put up time and finances for such na uncertain project.

The counter denunciation of São Paulo's governor, Dom Luís de Mascarenhas, confirmed the view of the organized way the diamond were illegally taken from the Claro and Pilões rivers.¹⁸ The governor informed the king about an investigation of the activities of the crown judge (*ouvidor*) of Goiás, Manoel Antunes da Fonseca. According to the governor, Antunes had organized na expedition to the forbidden rivers and used his position to protect his friends and to use prisoners for the necessary workforce. Mascarenhas pointed that Antunes had two partners in crime, who had obtained the eleven slaves from a local medic. Antunes got the diamond mining expertise from an experienced African, whom the crown judge himself had arrested and had subsequently lured into cooperation. At that point Mascarenhas send an army commander of the dragoons to Goiás to forcefully expel Antunes' partners from the captaincy, a measure which the judge successfully resisted. Clearly, many officials in Goiás and other captaincies were seduced into illegal diamond mining. The crown policy to prohibit the extraction of these precious stones seemed to backfire and only corrupt the local officials. Crown servants like Antunes had to demonstrate their loyalty to the king by investigating all transgressions of the Portuguese orders. Their juridical inquiries (*devassas*) did not solve illegal diamond mining, if anything, it worsened the situation.

Another form of dealing with illegal mining were legal inquiries or *devassas*. In areas of high incidence of illegal trade, high officials should always have an permanent inquiry (*devassa aberta*) to these pernicious activities. Unfortunately, these *devassas abertas* only led to more backbiting, and hardly diminished the activities of contrabandists. One good example how harmful such an juridical inquiry could be was the one made in 1747 by Antunes. Antunes proved his allegiance to the crown by organizing a massive *devassa* on diamond smuggling. The crown judge found not less than ninety nine persons guilty of illegal gem

fishing.¹⁹ Of those ninety nine suspects, sixty six were white settlers, and thirty three were slaves. Antunes arrested only a few suspects, since the others were not present in Villa Boa and environs.

Antunes' *devassa* had disastrous effects. The governor of Goiás, Dom Marcos de Noronha, attested that it was Antunes who regulated all expeditions to the forbidden rivers, so that his *devassa* would be very suspicious indeed. The suspects got very scared of the crown judge, and they decided to break out of jail. This was not such a good idea, and according to the governor, Antunes had two of them killed by his slave to assert his authority. Given the crown judge's involvement in the diamond extractions, and given that another inquiry by the chief inspector of the treasury (*provedor da fazenda*) found no suspects, gave the governor of Goiás the opinion that the *devassa* would better not be taken serious. After these wild allegations, an inquiry into the inquiry became necessary. In 1753, a high court judge came to assess the situation on the frontier.²⁰ But even to such an experienced law enforcer, it was difficult to prove that either Antunes or his opponents were guilty of any crime. By finding ninety nine persons guilty in Goiás, the crown judge did not make himself popular. This extended itself to his personal life too. After a priest interfered with a personal relationship between the crown official and a married woman, the former was arrested. The vicar reacted by excommunicating anyone who helped Antunes, reason enough for another inquiry into an inquiry by the visiting high court judge.²¹

Law enforcers were involved in the expeditions in the diamond rivers. However, unity was not easily found among the officials, and in this case this even led to two murders. In such situations official inquiries only worsened the relationship between the law enforcers and law obeying citizens in Villa Boa. There was, however, one issue that all could agree on. If swarms of outsiders would go to mine diamonds, many inhabitants of Villa Boa would support stronger measures.

In 1747, reports flooded Villa Boa that *bandeiras* from São Paulo had arrived at the Claro and Pilões rivers. This was exactly at the time that the governor of São Paulo had send a captain of the dragoons to Villa Boa to arrest two of Antunes' friends who were pronounced guilty in a *devassa*. The officer did not get the prisoners, instead, Antunes recruited him for a major expedition to the forbidden zones to capture illegal *garimpeiros*.

The organization of the expedition was a major task, and at first the officials needed to clarify the urgency of the situation. The Crown judge called together a town meeting and he invited the whole establishment of Villa Boa.²² In the building of the senate of the Municipal Council the whole congregation heard about the problematic circumstances that lead to this meeting. Antunes told the local establishment that already during the dry periods of the past two years notices came to Antunes that various *bandeiras* came from the Paulista mines to Paracatu. On their way to Cuyabá, Matto Grosso, these miners stayed with full equipment and with their slaves to pan in the rivers Claro and Pilões as well as in its tributaries. These travelers were seen in several different villages in Goiás, and it was clear that they were looking for diamonds and gold.

As was widely known to the inhabitants, illegal diamond mining was against the Crown's interest in patrimony. Given that between one and two thousand miners were "missing", stronger measures had to be taken to avoid any illegal exploitation of the king's treasures. Under pressure of the governor and aided with an order from the king himself, who forced the Crown judge to organize an expedition to the forbidden zones.

Loyalty to the king did not easily translate financial contributions. Expeditions to the Claro and Pilões rivers were dangerous and did cost money. In their grace, the king and governor left it to local resources to contribute in both manpower and pecunia. This was not an easy task, and even official cooperation to fulfill the requirements for the expedition remained doubtful. At first, not all of the soldiers could be committed, as they were performing royal tasks like transportation of task money. The dragoons were willing to help, but the expedition needed extraordinary expenses for armor, horses and bringing in the officer's personal slaves. When the dragoons suggested double salaries the inspector of the royal treasury came up with his own doubts. The inspector had not for gotten any royal orders, and he was not prepared to invest the king's money in any expedition with dubious goals.²³ He argued that it was never evidenced that the people seen near the forbidden rivers were not just travelers to Matto Grosso, since rumors of major gold findings in the captaincy circulated all over. And, even if they were mining in the Claro and Pilões rivers, was this for gold or diamonds?

Given the doubts of the king's officials to finance the expedition, volunteers among the soldiers were hard to find. Orders from the governor to assign half of the soldiers in Villa Boa to this hazardous task were difficult to execute. An option was to recruit military from other places in Goiás, but since distances were large, and the dry season was nearing, the members of the junta filed also that idea. Rather they decided to supplement the expedition with a company of "adventurers" and "colored persons" (*bastardos*) who would obtain a fixed salary. Although fifty three persons volunteered, only ten *bastardos* left on the diamond trip. The money inspector had protected the king's treasure chest with great heroism.²⁴

Under the valiant leadership of a wintered Cornet of the Dragoons, Luís Pimentel de Souza, the company of twenty marched out to experience if the stories about the Claro and Pilões rivers could be confirmed. With an impressive marching time of twenty kilometers a day through Kayapó territory, the soldiers reached the Pilões river on June 16, nine days after they had left Villa Boa.²⁵ It was, however, not until the first day of August until the brave soldiers encountered evidence of diamond panners near the Cayapó river.

At first Souza started destroying huts "ranchos" that the *garimpeiros* had left behind during last year's drought. In his two and half month destructive march the Dragoons and the volunteers would burn more than one hundred huts, destroy about fifty houses. The soldiers found rampant evidence of diamond mining, such as several mounds of stone, and tools that the cornet remembered having encountered in Serro do Frio, the only open diamond district in Minas Gerais.²⁶

The greatest catch was from living humans. In the course of their actions, the cornet caught a well willing informant, the slave Caetano.²⁷ Not only was Caetano willing to inform that he was illegally diamond mining, but he also demonstrated exactly where to find the gems, and the cornet laid his hands on three of the precious stones in the river. In total the cornet and his troops captured five white miners, of which one was a Benedictine priest, and an unknown amount of slaves.²⁸

King and magistrates in faraway Lisbon or governors in São Paulo may legislate the prohibition of diamond mining, but the execution of those orders depended the loyalty of the officials and the cooperation of the people. Local authorities had to side with the more persuasive power,

and in this frontier area that proved was the people. One key to popular power were the *juntas* that were convoked to send out the expedition to the Claro and Pilões rivers in the first place. Another key was the difficulty to prosecute the trespassers that were caught *in flagrante delicta*.

Local officials understood the need to cooperate with the local population, as they would otherwise face rebellion. The king's treasurer and intendant of the mines in Goiás was the most realistic magistrate in Villa Boa, who had already shed doubts on the expedition in its earlier stages. In a burning letter to the Governor of São Paulo, he argued that the people were not going to give in to any such prohibitions if beautiful glittering treasures are in marching distance of Villa Boa and on the road to Cuyabá.²⁹ The treasurer admitted to the failure of crown policies to restrict the access to the diamond mines. He went even one step further by asking for a pardon for the trespassers that were caught, because this was the normal procedure if rebellions threatened to result from any execution of the laws.

The authorities in Goiás, São Paulo and Portugal came to realize that stronger measures were needed to curb the illegal gem mining in this frontier district of Brazil. As a follow up to the expedition, the treasurer ordered that sixteen *bastardos* and their cornet were to stay in the Claro and Pilões area during the drought season.³⁰ Furthermore, given the vast amounts of "rebels thieves, and insolent people" the governor ordered two other commanders to join the cornet, one of them being Bueno 3rd.³¹ Fierce confrontations led to more proactive measures. Finally the crown decided to strengthen the government of Goiás by sending a governor whose principal task came to bring order to the diamond zones. Gomes Freire de Andrade, the celebrated governor of Rio de Janeiro, Minas Gerais and Colonia de Sacramento put order in the disorderly situation. He came up to Villa Boa, made the definite demarcation of the new diamond district, determined the guarding posts and put the stiff penalty of confiscation of goods, and ten years of exile to Angola for any civil or clerical trespasser entering the forbidden zone.³² Since the diamond reports were positive, the crown copied the Serro do Frio situation upon this Brazilian frontier area, and gave the contract holders, the Brandt brothers, a monopoly on mining in the area. If failed, the Brandt brothers claimed to have found hardly any diamonds and only in a very limited area. The brothers moved their slaves to Minas Gerais.³³ In the end, the contractor

was send in chains to Lisbon, as he employed far more slaves than were allowed in his contract, and he was a major suspect in a large diamond smuggling scheme.³⁴

The crown jealously guarded their right to mine diamonds even though very few were ever found in the forbidden district. The policy continued with fierce opposition of the local authorities and establishment. Repeated petitions arrived in Lisbon to open up the Claro and Pilões rivers for legalized colonization.³⁵ They fell on deaf ears, and the colonists had to live illegally in those areas and risk prosecution until 1801. Given the distances and the limited authority of the crown in Goiás, local officials hardly ever enforced these crown policies. However, once in a while some trespassers were prosecuted and send of the captaincy to Lisbon for trial.³⁶

Luís Palacin, the most prominent Goiania historian on mining has argued that there were never any diamonds in the captaincy.³⁷ Few were ever found and administered in an official way. The fact that we will never know how many of these illusive gems were found in the Goiás rivers stems straight from these royal prohibitions. Diamond mining continued illegally, since the crown and crown officials tried to control an uncontrollable situation. Royal paranoia followed by putting strong restriction on diamond mining in Goiás the policies backfired. Officially very few gems were in Goiás, as much of them were mined illegally and uncontrolled even by the contractor. Organized *bandeiras* ran through the Brazilian frontier, mining for diamonds whenever they liked. Although some contrabandists were arrested, but this could only have been the tip of the iceberg in the territory of “wild” Kayapó, runaway slaves and lawless *bandeirantes*.

Abstract

The lecture deals with the Portuguese Crown policy on diamond mining over the rivers Claro and Pilões in Goiás (Brazil). Despite the royal prohibition local officials and outside infiltrators competed over the illegal diamond mines in the XVIIIth century.

Key-words: Goiás; diamond mining; Portuguese crown policy.

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