

# From the Margins to the Centre: Brazil in Atlantic and World History

From the earliest encounter, in April 1500, with what the Portuguese named the Island of Vera Cruz, the Land of Santa Cruz, and finally Brazil, the one-time colony and largest state in Latin America has alternately seized and been neglected by global imaginings. Explorer Pedro Cabral departed in short order, bound for the East Indies, but his scribe wrote of a land “so graceful that, if one wants to take advantage of it, everything will grow here” from “the best fruit” to Christianity, which he opined, “should be the most important seed.”<sup>1</sup>

Brazil’s initial promise, relative to New Spain, soon appeared empty: there was no abundance of silver, for instance, that would be mined and traded halfway around the world for exotic goods. For the Portuguese, the eastern spice trade took precedence: in the first decades of the sixteenth century, the clove and nutmeg haul from Amboyna and Banda attracted attention at a time when Brazil’s sugar trade was off to a sputtering start. To the West, the Crown doled out fifteen hereditary captaincies, thirteen of which failed by 1549.

In the world history survey, Brazil can be almost as overlooked as it was by the Portuguese crown: for all its promise, the largest nation in South America yet tends to be drawn in as an ancillary actor, often for comparative purposes, on the global stage. Despite lush and brutal imaginings, Brazil’s narrative can be drowned out, for some, by Spanish American tales of empire, revolution, and reform.

In an effort to better draw Brazil into the world history survey, this paper offers two case studies that point to environmental, food, and gender history. In the first, provisioning during the 1638 Siege of Bahia presents an important moment in the broader Luso (Portuguese)-Dutch conflict. In 1578, Portugal’s succession crisis had led to the kingdom’s 1580 unification with Habsburg Spain; the Dutch, in revolt against Spanish rule since 1569, now seized on the opportunity to challenge Portugal’s claims—all over the world. The Dutch East India Company soon captured the Spice Islands, but the Netherlanders experienced less fortune across the Atlantic: the 1638 Battle for Bahia foreshadowed their ultimate defeat. The short-lived Dutch West India Company challenge for Brazil ended in their final withdrawal by 1654. The second case study shows how the overlooked role of Habsburg princess

Leopoldine in the colony's 1822 independence from Portugal offers up another 'teachable moment' to engage Brazil in Atlantic and world history. In each instance, suggestions for student activities and assessments follow short, primary source-driven discussions.

## Weaponizing Food: Luso-Dutch Wars and the Siege of Bahia (1638)

"Experience has taught us that the conquest of Brazil is permanently threatened by Bahia of all Saints," wrote a Dutch West India Company officer in 1638, "and while the Spanish are masters of Bahia they will have many opportunities to molest us, by land and by sea."<sup>2</sup> Ongoing resistance originating from the captaincy set Company efforts back on a regular basis. The officer noted that the stealth of resistance fighters made it "impossible to track [them], and our soldiers are not as familiar with the *matos* (brush)." Their threat to the cane fields was almost continuous. Despite the Dutch blockade of the northeast coast, the "Spanish have the best port" in Bahia and so, he wrote, "we are in a perpetual state of war."<sup>3</sup>

What accounted for Dutch interest in Brazil? By dint of the 1580 union of Iberian crowns, the United Provinces, over a decade into a revolt against Spanish rule, justified challenges to Portuguese claims east and west. By the second decade of the 1600s, the Portuguese-controlled Spice Islands fell to the commercial-military Dutch East India Company (VOC). The Twelve-Year truce (1609–1621) between Spain and the United Provinces only served to stoke such ambition. From Amboyna to Cochin, the Dutch chipped away at Portuguese profits and delighted their investors. To the west, Brazil's now burgeoning sugar trade beckoned: upon expiration of the truce, the Estates-General granted a charter for the Dutch West India Company to pursue a Grand Design to make Salvador the seat of its would-be South Atlantic empire.

The Luso-Dutch conflict has been cast as the "first global war" –indeed, the two small European states battled for resources the world over.<sup>4</sup> This presents an opportunity to home in on Brazil, via food history—of a different sort. How were soldiers kept fed? An examination of the 1638 Siege of Bahia reveals that local networks and supply lines helped fend off the far better-equipped Dutch, and leads to consideration of how indigenous crops became the food of resistance.

On March 20, Luso-Brazilians soldiers intercepted a letter from Recife indicating that the fleet of Dutch Governor-general Johan Maurits was headed to the Salvador. While the Dutch West India Company had caused damage there over the last decade, they would now assault the Portuguese capital with full intent to conquer, a feat not accomplished since 1624. Spies reported that the Dutch had meat, grain, and other comestibles, but away from Pernambuco, these could only be replenished by sea; the vast quantities of provisions indicated readiness for a drawn-out battle. The Luso-Brazilian resistance's subsequent accounting made clear their own dearth of supplies; and with that, the ground commander

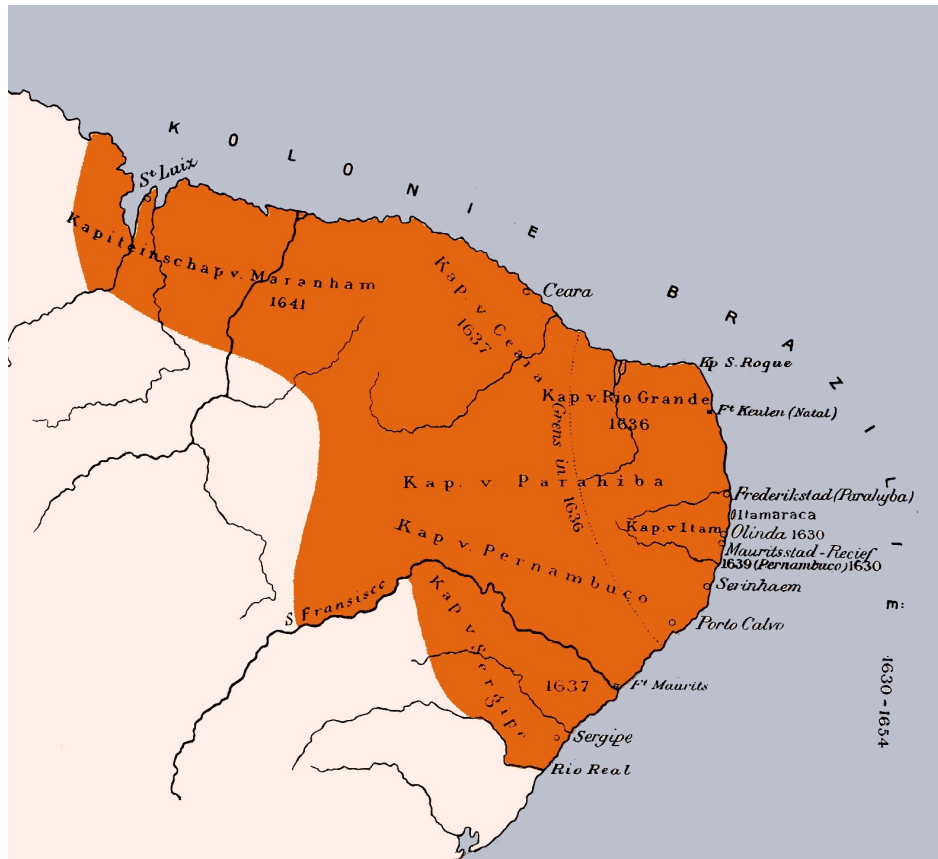


Image 1: "Brazil 1630–1654"

Source: In H. Hettema jr. (ed.), *Groote Historische Schoolatlas ten gebruike bij het onderwijs in de vaderlandsche en algemene geschiedenis*, 1920. Available in the Public Domain. See <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nederlands-Brazilli%C3%AB.jpg>

made haste to authorize the purchase of cattle, wine, olives, and other provisions for the soldiers.<sup>5</sup>

On-the-ground mobilization for food roused Portuguese morale; from April through May, for forty days, they held fast against the better-armed Dutch. Local provisioners drove close to two hundred cows and sheep into the city gates and nearby *moradores* (settlers) gave food to the wounded and infirm. Farmers brought eggs, bread, wine, sweets, and chickens to the hospital.<sup>6</sup> Despite continuous pressure from the Dutch, a few weeks into the battle, one eyewitness remarked that it hardly seemed as if they were under siege, given their freedom of movement and abundance of fresh food.<sup>7</sup>

With only a supply line from Pernambuco, the Dutch fared poorly. One week after Maurits had asked for and was granted a reprieve to collect his dead, the next—and

last—battle resulted in over 2000 Dutch West India casualties and the abrupt departure of the would-be invaders. Two days later, the Dutch armada slipped north to safety. Timed properly, however, the destruction of food supplies could have led to quite a different outcome, a fact not lost on Dutch; they burned a Portuguese supply ship full of flour as they headed home.<sup>8</sup> Luso-Brazilian soldiers set upon and duly recorded Dutch-discarded provisions, an indication of their value: these included seventy-five flasks of wine, goats, an abundance of grain and legumes, as well as bread still baking in the ovens.<sup>9</sup>

The 1638 Battle for Bahia indicates a steady supply of food helped tip the victory for the Portuguese. This episode foreshadows more than final success against the Dutch: it reveals local action, far from the metropole, that would have enduring consequences beyond Brazil. Another glance at food history provides context to the scene. During the Dutch period, the once-lowly but hardy indigenous manioc acquired new status, its flour now cast as “*farinha da guerra*,” or flour of war. Once considered pagan food of the Tupinambá,



Image 2: “Manioc”

Source: Albert Eckhout, 17th c., n.d., oil on canvas, 93cm. x 93cm. Copenhagen, National Museum of Denmark. This work is in the Public Domain. See [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Albert\\_Eckhout\\_-\\_Mandioca.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Albert_Eckhout_-_Mandioca.jpg)

manioc became integrated into the resistance army's rations. Manioc also served as pay, and during the most severe times of war came to be seen as a regular form of wages. This food of war now has a privileged place at the Pernambucan table for the part it played in forcing Dutch surrender. Beyond Brazil, the drawn-out Luso-Dutch conflict had Atlantic, if not global consequences: by the end of the seventeenth century a bankrupted Dutch West India Company relinquished nearly all of its claims in the Western hemisphere.<sup>10</sup>

Class engagement and activity for remote or face-to-face learning on the Dutch in Brazil:

1. Read background information on Dutch Brazil and examine the works of Albert Eckhout and others in Benjamin Breen's blog post "Paintings from Dutch Brazil" here: <https://benjaminbreen.com/2010/11/09/paintings-from-dutch-brazil/>.
2. Group the paintings by subject.
3. What are the dominant themes of these works—and why?
4. Contextualize and reflect: what is the purpose of these works?

## **Maria Leopoldina: from Reactionary Daughter to Revolutionary Regent?**

The siege of Bahia portrays local resistance against Dutch imperial might, but over a century later, in western hemispheric revolutionary histories, Brazil is cast as an undramatic outlier. Tracing the journey of Austrian Princess Leopoldine from sheltered Habsburg daughter to wife of Dom Pedro I of Brazil offers a look past speeches and battlefield heroics. Some Brazilian scholars have cast her as an architect of independence as she encouraged her husband to separate from Portugal. Centering the life of Maria Leopoldina adds dimension to Brazil's move away from the metropole; she bridges Europe and revolutionary America to tell a more global story.

In 1817, Leopoldine, the daughter of Emperor Franz I married Dom Pedro of Braganza heir of Portugal, Brazil, and the Algarves, first in Vienna, by proxy; she then traversed the Atlantic to meet her husband. The nuptials sealed a deal between the Austrians and Portuguese in a bid to bolster their trade and curtail British demands. The British had, after all, escorted the Braganza family to Rio in 1808, as Napoleon's troops descended on Portugal. Seven years later they expected trade restrictions with Brazil to be further scaled back.<sup>11</sup> The marriage between Leopoldine and Pedro was meant to hold British demands in check.

As part of the marriage agreement, Austrian scholars accompanied Maria Leopoldina, as she came to be known, to Brazil. Nearly two centuries prior, Johan Maurits of Dutch-held Brazil made the crossing with artists, naturalists, artisans, and cartographers; but while the Dutch mapped their fleeting colony, the goal of 19th Century scholar-aesthetes was to document the wonders of Brazil; given scientific interest of the times, this would help place



Austria on equal status with more powerful European states. Ever an inquisitive student, keen on plant life and mineralogy, the princess also looked forward to exploring Brazil's natural wonders.

Leopoldina's hopes for a bucolic life, however, were dashed not only by the shock of Brazilian culture and tropical climate, but by increasing conflict between Portuguese troops and Luso-Brazilians. The English traveler Maria Graham, friend to Leopoldina and governess to her children, noted the "jealousy between the Portuguese and Brazilians."<sup>12</sup> Pressured to return to Portugal, King João VI returned home with the royal court but concerned that the crown would lose Brazil to revolutionaries, he decided that his heir Dom Pedro should remain in Rio. Even with his son's presence, tensions ran high, resulting in clashes. In June of 1821, Leopoldina wrote to her father that "the real Brazilians are good and peaceful people, but the Portuguese troops are animated by the worst intentions and my husband, God helps us, loves new ideas . . ."<sup>13</sup> The following year, Pedro had received summons to return to Portugal. He refused, and in an act known as the "Fico" ("I stay") publicly declared his intention to stay and rule Brazil.

Pedro's pronouncement did little to quell unrest. As in Spanish America, Brazil's provinces were not only isolated from each other due to centuries of direct connection to the metropole, but wielded tremendous power in their own right. While the presence of the Portuguese royal family in Brazil vaulted the status of the colony to kingdom and legitimized their continued rule, some captaincies remained loyal to Portugal; others insisted on complete and immediate independence. Thus, Portuguese and Brazilian troops clashed in the streets. At one point, Leopoldine was forced to flee Rio with her children. The traumatic journey indirectly led to the premature death of the first-born royal son.

Maria Leopoldina's letters reveal her admiration for the "noble spirit of the Brazilian people." She explained to her father that "the biggest political error is if our forces did not guarantee a just liberty, aware of the power and grandeur of the beautiful, flowering empire."<sup>14</sup> In August 1822, Dom Pedro left Rio to secure the loyalty of Minas Gerais and then São Paulo, naming Dona Leopoldina as regent in his stead. During Pedro's visit to São Paulo, a letter reached Rio that Lisbon was preparing a large fleet and raising an army of thousands to quell rebellion in Brazil and force home the recalcitrant royals. Members of the cabinet were to be imprisoned and tried for treason in Lisbon.

With this extraordinary news, the Council of State in Brazil convened on the 2nd of September 1822. Minister Jose Bonifácio, Regent D. Leopoldina, and the entire council decided that it was time for Brazil to break ties with Portugal. They then dispatched three letters to D. Pedro, including Leopoldina's plea to her husband: "Pedro," she wrote, "Brazil is like a volcano," explaining that revolutionaries were everywhere—in the palace, among the troops, and even among the Portuguese. "My woman's heart senses disgrace, if we left now for Lisbon. We know how much our country has suffered." She reminded Pedro how

the king and queen of Portugal were now virtual prisoners and at the mercy of the Cortes. Revolutionary unrest rocked the Americas and “with or without your support [Brazil] will separate [from Portugal].” She continued: “the apple is ripe, pluck it before it rots.”<sup>15</sup>

Post-independence, the erstwhile Austrian princess wrote her father that “I will always be Brazilian in my heart, as I am determined to fulfill my duties as wife, mother, and for the gratitude of an honorable people.” As self-appointed liaison between Europe and the newly independent Brazil, she embarked on a letter-writing campaign for diplomatic recognition. She also sought to further ties between Austria and Brazil, proposing her own daughter’s hand in marriage to one of her European cousins.<sup>16</sup>

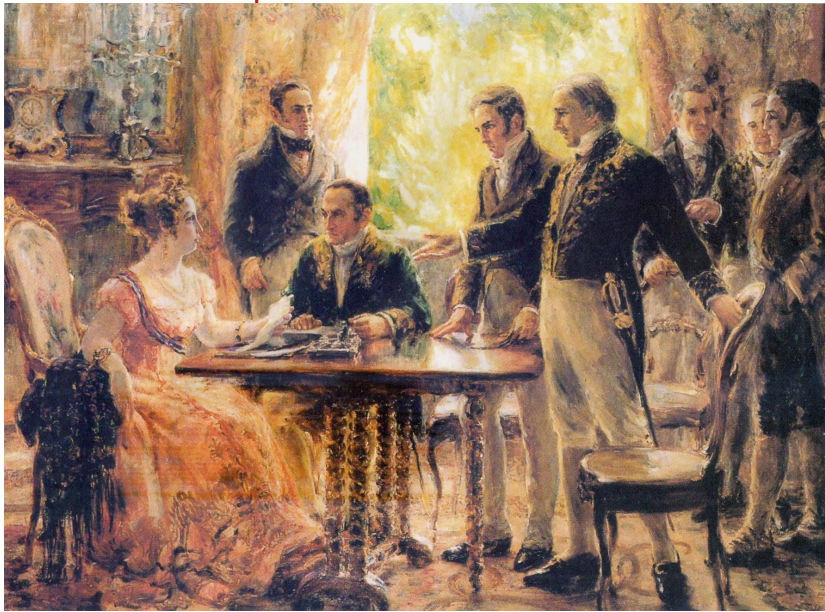
Modern texts on the independence of Brazil tend to focus on and credit Pedro’s dramatic cry (*O Grito*) at Ipiranga or the maneuverings of his minister José Bonifácio de Andrada e Silva. From a military perspective, Brazil stands out as far less significant than the bloody, fraught clashes in Spanish America that resulted in multiple states, dashing visions of a contiguous new nation. While regional challenges yet remain, this did not happen in Brazil. A gendered approach to independence, through the arc of Leopoldina’s actions, may yet offer a “teachable moment”: in this way her fateful transatlantic crossing connects the Old World to the new.<sup>17</sup>

Class engagement and activity for remote or face-to-face learning:

1. Investigate the unfolding of Brazil’s independence from Brazil through the texts and images located below.
2. Compare the familiar image of Pedro’s “grito” (Document B) to the painting of Leopoldina meeting with the Council of State (Document A). Students will investigate and consider: which is more “revolutionary”—and why? This may be done as part of an extended or short debate, or in written form. When was each painting created—and why?
3. Students may compare the “revolutionary” activities of Dona Leopoldina to that of other contemporary women engaged in nationalist and independence movements.

## Conclusion

Pacing and coverage present enduring concerns for any history course—and in world history, Brazil gets short shrift. In 1640, as the Dutch made another run at Salvador, Father António Vieira called on divine intervention, stating that “the world is in your hands.”<sup>18</sup> The same might be said for survey instructors. Yet “if one wants to take advantage of it,” Brazil does indeed offer riches, but of a different sort than Pero Vaz Caminha intended more than five centuries prior. Here, deconstructing incidents with an eye towards environmental, gender, and food history can help students contextualize and bring this “graceful” land and its people into world-historical focus.



Document A: "Session of the Council of State," Georgina de Albuquerque, 1922. This painting earned first prize at the 1922 Exposition of Contemporary Art and Retrospective Art of the Independence Centenary. In the Museu Histórico Nacional, Rio de Janeiro. This work is Public Domain. See [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sess%C3%A3o\\_do\\_Conselho\\_de\\_Ministros,\\_da\\_cole%C3%A7%C3%A3o\\_Museu\\_Hist%C3%B3rico\\_Nacional.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sess%C3%A3o_do_Conselho_de_Ministros,_da_cole%C3%A7%C3%A3o_Museu_Hist%C3%B3rico_Nacional.jpg)



Document B: "Independence or Death"

Source: Pedro Américo, 1888, from the Museu Paulista, São Paulo. This work is in the Public Domain. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pedro\\_Am%C3%A9rico\\_-\\_Independ%C3%Aancia\\_ou\\_Morte\\_-\\_Google\\_Art\\_Project.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pedro_Am%C3%A9rico_-_Independ%C3%Aancia_ou_Morte_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg)



**Dr. Suzanne Marie Litrel** is a historian, author, and educator. She most recently served as a researcher for the American Historical Association’s NEH CARES-funded Remote Teaching Resources grant. Before earning her Ph.D. in History, she taught AP World History, International Baccalaureate (IB) 20thc History, and Economics. She has also taught the undergraduate modern world history survey at Georgia State University and “Understanding Latin America” at Kennesaw State University. Suzanne is the author of the Jackie Tempo historical fiction series, developed as enrichment for secondary school world history courses. She is also a contributing writer to Candice Goucher’s four-volume *Women Who Changed the World* (ABC-CLIO, 2021), and co-author of *Notable Women of Colonial Latin America* and *Notable Women of Modern Latin America* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2022). Suzanne’s other manuscript-in-progress, *Negotiating Dutch Brazil: Portuguese Atlantic Resistance and Renewal (1580–1654)*, is under contract with the University of New Mexico Press. She may be reached at [slitrel1@icloud.com](mailto:slitrel1@icloud.com).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Excerpt from Eduardo Mayone Dias, “Brazil’s Birth Certificate: the Letter of Pero Vaz de Caminha, *Pacific Coast Philology*, Vol. 27, no. 1/2 (September 1992), 10–15.

<sup>2</sup> Adriaen van der Dussen, *Relatório sobre as capitânias conquistadas no Brasil pelos holandeses: suas condições econômicas e sociais (1639)*, translated by José Antônio Gonsalves de Mello (Rio de Janeiro: Instituto do Açúcar e do Alcool, 1947), 137.

<sup>3</sup> Dussen, *Relatório*, 137–138.

<sup>4</sup> See Piet Emmer, “The First Global War: the Dutch Versus Iberia in Asia, Africa, and the New World, 1590–1609,” *e-Journal Portuguese History* (hereafter known as e-JPH), Vol. 1, no 1 (Summer 2003), 1–14.

<sup>5</sup> Bispo D. Juan de Palafox Y Mendoza, “Guerra en la parte del Brasil,” cited in Pablo Antonio Iglesias Magalhães’ “A Relacion de la Vitoria que Alcanzaron las Armas Catolicas en la Baia de Todos Santos do Bispo D. Juan de Palafox Y Mendoza,” *Topoi*, Vol. 12, no. 23 (December 2011), 58.

<sup>6</sup> Manuel Fernandes de Figueredo, “Holandeses na Bahia,” cited in Pablo Antonio Magalhaes’ “A relação do medico Manoel de Fernandes, em 1638,” a chapter in Marcos Galindos, ed., *Episódios Baiânos* (Recife: Nectar, 2010), 272.

<sup>7</sup> Suzanne Litrel, “Negotiating Dutch Brazil: Vassals, Rebels, and ‘Wild Nations of People,’” Ph.D. dissertation, Georgia State University, January 2020. See Chapter 5, especially pp. 193–199.

<sup>8</sup> Duarte de Albuquerque Coelho, *Memórias diárias da Guerra do Brasil, 1630–1638* (Recife: Secretaria do Interior, 1944), journal entry of May 28, 1638, 295.

<sup>9</sup> “Relação por meio breve e verdadeira dos successos que houve nesta Bahia em o cerco que lhe pôs o Conde Nassau,” Henrique Moniz Telles (1638) as cited in Pablo Antonio Magalhães, “A Relacion de la Vitoria . . .” 261.

<sup>10</sup> For additional reading on Dutch Brazil and the context of the West India Company challenge for Brazil and the South Atlantic, please see Wim Klooster's *The Dutch Moment: War, Trade and Settlement in the Seventeenth Century Atlantic World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016), Micheal van Groesen's *The Legacy of Dutch Brazil* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), and Elizabeth A Sutton's *Cartography and Capitalism in the Dutch Golden Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), as well as Schwartz, Stuart B. Schwartz, ed.'s *Early Brazil: A Documentary Collection* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> Gabriel Paquette, "Portugal and the Luso-Atlantic World in the Age of Revolutions," *Historia*, Vol. 32, no 1 (January/June 2013), 184.

<sup>12</sup> Nicolás Barbosa Lopez, "The Exiled Insider: The Ambivalent Reception of Maria Graham's Journal of a Voyage to Brazil (1824)," *e-JPH*, Vol. 16, no. 1 (2018), 64. For an open source, see <https://dx.doi.org/10.7301/Z0WH2NHN>. Accessed on September 20, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Luiz Norton, *A corte de Portugal no Brasil: notas, alguns documentos diplomáticos, e cartas da imperatriz Leopoldina* (São Paulo: Companhia Editora Nacional, 2008), 441.

<sup>14</sup> Luiz Norton, *A corte de Portugal no Brasil*, 455.

<sup>15</sup> Paulo D. Rezzutti, *Leopoldina: a história não contada* (Rio de Janeiro: Leya Press, 2017), 81.

<sup>16</sup> Rezzutti, *Leopoldina: a história não contada*, 245.

<sup>17</sup> For additional reading on Empress Leopoldina and the world in which she lived, see Lady Maria Calcott's *Journal of a voyage to Brazil: and residence there, during part of the years 1821, 1822, 1823* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green [etc.], 1824). This is available online. Please also see the last chapter of Laurentino Gomes' *1808: The Flight of the Emperor; How a Weak Prince, a Mad Queen, and the British Navy Tricked Napoleon and Changed the New World* (Guilford: Lyons Press, 2007).

<sup>18</sup> António Vieira, "Sermão pelo bom successo das armas de Portugal contra as de Holanda." A sermon delivered in 1640, in *O Chrysostomo Portuguez, IV* (Lisbon: Editora de Mattos Moreira & Co., 1881), 50.