

# Crossing the Green Line: Frontier, environment and the role of bandeirantes in the conquering of Brazilian territory

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## ABSTRACT

This article's objective is to present, via bibliographic research, the territorial makeup of colonial Brazil (1500-1822) and the Brazilian historical approach at the beginning of the twentieth century that sought to relate questions and concepts of frontier, territoriality, and nature in the historic role of the bandeirante movement. The goal here is to address territorial and geographic questions, but also environmental ones, based on historical geography, and to present arguments that fall in the nexus between history and nature in the debate on Brazilian territorial expansion. The text is grounded in classical works, and works by renown authors on this topic, but we also include discussion of less well known sources. The intent is to identify how the theme of bandeirantes and Brazilian westward expansion can be analyzed differently in the pertinent specialized historical literature.

**Keywords:** Bandeirante; Frontier; Environment; Territory; Western Brazil.

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A geografia é, pois, a ciência que estuda, interpreta, e explica a localização, a área de uma região natural e sua paisagem humana [...] Mas não devemos esquecer de que o homem só vence e suplanta a natureza quando conhece as suas leis e se ajusta ao processo evolutivo a que está sujeito na dinâmica do equilíbrio, para atingir a coexistência científica do Universo. A geografia não é senão uma base e uma condição do homem, livre, porem dentro dos limites postos pela natureza (Botelho 1967 p. 18, 66)

The history of Brazil presents a compelling case study of the limits of nature imposed on mankind. It has been passionately argued by some (perhaps no more stridently than by Clodomir Vianna Moog in his 1964 work *Bandeirantes e pioneiros*) that geography has been the most significant limiting agent in Brazil's economic development – at least compared to the similarly-sized but more recently colonized United States.<sup>3</sup> But when do limits (geographic boundaries) become limitations (obstacles to expansion)? For Brazil this question was tested in its colonial period by those willing to adventure into the vast interior and to explore the new Portuguese territory for resources it might contain. In doing so, those colonists who ventured inward from Brazil's coastal settlements, eventually crossed not only mountains, savannas, thorn thickets (*caatinga*), dense swamps (*patanaís*), and tropical forests, but also the established but inanimate political boundary as well: the line of demarcation between Spanish and Portuguese America as per the Treaty of Tordesillas of 1494 (see Figure 01). These displacements to Brazil's West signified the geographic conquest of the new territory, but also represented the conquest of the wilderness (*sertões*)<sup>4</sup>, many times seen as hostile to the colonizers.

There were different groups of colonial settlers who charted the course for Brazil's dramatic territorial growth. Soon after Portuguese "discovery" in 1500, woodcutters in search of Brazil wood (coveted in Europe for its durability and beauty) tramped the Atlantic forests to harvest the trees but did not establish many permanent settlements<sup>5</sup>. Roman Catholic missionaries (Jesuits, Franciscans, Carmelites, etc.) were among the first Europeans to penetrate the interior to teach Christianity to indigenous peoples. *Sertanistas* were those who ventured into the hinterland (especially in the Northeast) to attempt agricultural pursuits, and *tropas de resgate* went inland to round up Indians (ventures known as *entradas*) to be sold as slaves on the expanding sugar plantations of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

<sup>3</sup> See Moog (1964). For a remarkably similar argument regarding Mexico, see Coatsworth (1978).

<sup>4</sup> The arid lands of Brazil's Northeast (Bahia, Pernambuco, etc.) are referred to as the sertão, but the term is often used generically as well (especially by the colonists and writers of that era) to mean "hinterland" or any of the unsettled areas in Brazil's interior.

<sup>5</sup> For a comprehensive account of the role of Brazil wood in the colonization of Brazil see Souza (1939).

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But far to the south of these northeastern pursuits another frontier was forming. Across the coastal sierra and west from Brazil's first colonial village (São Vicente), Father Manuel da Nóbrega established a Jesuit outpost on the rim of a vast plateau in the 1550's. It was this village, which became known as São Paulo, that served as a hub for an unprecedented, land-based thrust into the interior: the military-style expeditions that were called *Bandeiras*.<sup>6</sup>

**Figure 01.** Colonial Brazil and the Treaty of Tordesillas Line, roughly at 50° longitude. (Notice also the bandeira and entrada routes.)



Source: Morse 1965.

<sup>6</sup> In *The Bandeirantes: The historical Role of the Brazilian Pathfinders*, Richard Morse discusses the uncertain etymology of this term. It is generally believed to have come from the Portuguese word for flag, banner, or insignia “around which expeditionaries rallied” (p. 22). However, it is possible that it could have referred to “a band of men captained by a caudillo” or to a “medieval Portuguese military unit of thirty-six men.” Bandeiras (the expeditions) started in the last half of the sixteenth century and lasted for 200 years.

A study of frontier expansion reveals many insights into the social make-up and character of past and present Brazil. However, what of those individuals and groups of people who dared to test the limits of the natural and political frontier? What thoughts and perceptions of the vast interior motivated their gumption to traverse geographic barriers and internationally accepted territorial lines? What have been the social and environmental results (and the interconnected relationships) of crossing the lines and penetrating the interior?

This study will seek directions to pursue a historic explanation of this problem. It will center on investigating the bandeirantes but will compare the writings of Jesuits and other contemporary colonial Brazilians. Examining the literature of the time and exploring the subsequent historiographical interpretation reveal insights into the way Brazilians have viewed and written about their vast frontier. Important to this investigation will be an effort to extrapolate perceptions of the landscape, mental constructs of the frontier, and ideas on tropical expansion, extraction, and settlement.

Scores of books have been written in Brazil on the history and role of the bandeirantes. The dean of Brazilian bandeirante historiography is Affonso d'Escragno Taunay who from 1924 to 1950 wrote an eleven-volume series (for a total of over 4000 pages!) called *História das bandeiras paulistas*. Alfredo Ellis Junior's *O bandeirismo paulista* (1934) and *Meio século do bandeirismo* (1948) as well as Francisco de Assis Carvalho Franco's 1940 *As bandeiras e bandeirantes de São Paulo* are also comprehensive but draw heavily from Taunay. There are few writings in English on the subject but the best overview is by Richard M. Morse *The Bandeirantes: the Historical Role of the Brazilian Pathfinders* (Morse 1965) and even this collection of essays is written primarily by Brazilian historians.

Unfortunately, Taunay and the others cite surprisingly little from the personal accounts of the bandeirantes. Obvious reasons for this include the fact that few of the bandeirantes were literate, many who were did not go to the trouble to write down their experiences, and many correspondences and records have been subsequently lost in the last 300 years. Morse (1965 p. 5) shares that only a few wills, inventories, and itineraries and "four stanzas of a 1689 epic attributed to Diogo Gasson Tinoco, possibly a bandeirante," remain. However, Brazilian social historian José de Alcântara Machado did same extensive reconstructive history to write his landmark *Vida e morte do bandeirante* (1930). Based on the fact that a great majority of the bandeirantes returned to São Paulo after the expeditions, he examined 450 sixteenth and seventeenth century Paulista inventories and wills "to construct images of the life, times, and society of the bandeirantes."<sup>7</sup> Nobody has continued or added to this valuable

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<sup>7</sup> As translated in an English version called "The Life and Death of the Bandeirante" taken from Alcântara Machado's work and printed in Morse p. 12.

study, but correspondences and fragments of letters have been discovered and reprinted by various historians such as Carvalho Franco, Morse, Capistrano de Abreu (*Capítulos de história colonial* 1930), and E. Bradford Burns (*A Documentary History of Brazil* 1966), and also in the *Revista do Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Brasileiro* (vol. LXIX 1908). These sources, as well as some non-bandeirante writings of the era, will be tapped herein.

While there perhaps has been little researched and written regarding their daily life, much has been postulated about the social and racial make-up of the bandeirantes. All authors emphasize the fact that bandeirantes were *mamelucos* (mestizos) – the product of European and Indian mixed ancestry – which created a unifying factor and aided in the process of state building. Moysés Vellinho, in his 1975 *Fronteira*, refers to this concept as “*integração e solidariedade nacional*” (Vellinho 1975 p. 212). Paulista poet-historian Cassiano Ricardo deals more at length with this subject in *Marcha para Oeste: A influência da bandeira na formação social e política do Brasil* (Ricardo 1959, Ricardo 1970) where he goes as far to suggest that miscegenation resulted in the “*democratização biológica*” of the territory.<sup>8</sup> “Sem mameluco”, he explains, “não teria havido bandeira, sem democratização biológica não teria havido mameluco” (Ricardo 1970 p. 120).

The frontier, described many times as the Brazilian hinterland, had in Cassiano Ricardo (1959) a wider social function. He argued that the territorial conquest and occupation of Brazil was also associated with the development of a national identity, that he defined as “Brazilianess.” In that sense, Cassiano Ricardo was approaching a “Turnerian” vision of the frontier, which might make us consider him as the “Brazilian Turner,” especially through the medium of his work published in 1940 *Marcha para o Oeste: A influencia da bandeira na formação social e política do Brasil* (Ricardo 1959). Literary and symbolic uses to justify the influence of the bandeira in the social and political formation of Brazil gets close to the historic role of the frontier in the construction of an American identity, as proposed by American historian Frederick Jackson Turner in 1893 (Turner 2010). The references to Turner are not completely clear in the Cassiano Ricardo’s work. Nonetheless, we can identify a relationship between his arguments and Turner’s thesis, especially when we observe Ricardo’s references he uses to deal with the theme of the Brazilian frontier. In one explanatory footnote for the third edition of *Marcha para o*

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<sup>8</sup> Apart from presenting the political and social role of the bandeira, Ricardo elaborated the traits that constituted the exploration ethos. In Chapter XIII of the *March to the West*, called “A função dos mitos na Bandeira,” he described the psychosocial references that created the bandeirante movement, based on the founding and orienting legends and myths. The bandeirante recreated the fantastic universe of myths as motivation for the geographic expansion and at the same time, became part of the fabulous storyline. The displacement updated the archetype of the ‘explorer’ in the imagination of the bandeira. The narratives that addressed the representations of wealth reinforced the desire of conquest in the behaviour of the Bandeira - represented as a social movement characterised by the marching group (Ricardo 1959, Dutra e Silva et al. 2014).

*Oeste* published in 1959, entitled “And this is not a fable,” we see the reference to important classical works on the subject, with citations and footnotes about the works of Pierre Monbeig, Viana Moog, Basílio de Magalhães, Sergio Buarque de Holanda, among others, all with strong influences from the Frederick J. Turner’s classic text (Ricardo 1959, Dutra e Silva et al. 2014).

The noted and highly esteemed Brazilian historian Sérgio Buarque de Holanda writes that not only was it a mixture of the races that produced the bandeirante but that the bandeirante was completely dependent on the Indians for survival. His book *Caminhos e fronteiras* (Holanda 1957) analyzes such a dependent relationship (“não importa que fosse uma colaboração absolutamente involuntária e indireita”, p. 23) that was based on survival skills in the sertão such as hunting and fishing techniques, knowledge of edible tropical fruits and vegetables, and acquaintance with river systems and routes through the forests. It was only with indigenous assistance, then, that the bandeirante became “a creature of an American wilderness” (Morse 1965 p. 5). Other research shows that Indians themselves travelled in bandeiras. Muriel Nazzari (1992) argues that Indians often made up the “rank and file” but were organized and led by mameluco settlers. Their help to the Luso-Brazilians on the bandeiras is an obvious understatement.

Yet this perspective is easily lost when reading earlier bandeirante historiography. According to Morse (1965 p. 5, 23), the term “bandeirante” was not used in the historical literature of Brazil until 1740 and was not really given “serious attention” by historians until late in the nineteenth century. These historians, and others into the twentieth century, write of the bandeirantes in extremely heroic terms – as almost self-made demi-gods. Taunay himself lauds the bandeirantes as “homens de ferro” who “dominam a cupidez, a tenacidade, o estoicismo, a sagacidade, o descaso do morte...,” etc. (1975 p. 151-152). In another account, Brazilian historian Jaime Cortesão (1958) studies the life and times of one of the most famous bandeirante leaders, Raposo Tavares. In his book *Raposo Tavares e a formação territorial do Brasil* he concludes that the bandeirantes were “...sobre-humanos pela inaudita capacidade de energia, de perseverança, e... também de generosidade, isenção e sacrifício. Foram cruéis [aos índios]? Por certo. Como cruel foi o homem de século XVII e de todos os tempos...” (1958 p. 406-407). Perhaps this idealization is best summed up by an even more recent Brazilian historian, Hermes Vieira (1967), when he states that the expeditions were

penetrações homéricas... com o belo e cívico exemplo de heroísmo... [e] estímulo garantidor da continuidade do elemento humano no interior da pátria em formação, legaram ambos a raça brasileira esta grandiosa e rústica *Íliada* nacional... de que nos fala... a conquista do nosso território (Vieira 1967 p. 14, 48)

Myths or reality? On the issue of racial integration, it should be understood that the bandeirantes were of mixed blood and indeed depended on the wilderness knowledge of the Indians. But the above examples are testimony to a contradictory sense of racial harmony that exudes through the frontier historiography of Brazil. Bradford Burns (1980) epitomizes this ambivalence regarding race, frontier, and national unity:

The three groups, Indian, European, and African, lived and mixed together with, all factors considered, a minimum of friction, although the brutality of the experience for the Indians and blacks should not be dismissed. In the process, three continents fused sexually, socially, linguistically, and culturally to form a nation much more homogeneous than any other of comparable size. A hybrid civilization emerged and so did a new type of person, the Brazilian, the compounded product of extraordinary diverse elements. It would not be an exaggeration to affirm that this new “race” conquered the new land (Burn 1980 p. 56 - emphasis added).

Miscegenation in Brazil occurred with far greater regularity than, say, in the United States, but as Alistair Hennessy (1978 p. 13) observed: “[t]he Brazilian equivalent of the frontier myth is the myth of racial harmony...”. Brazilian *mestiçagem* did not bring with it equality and harmony. For this paper, it is important to ask what role the bandeirantes played in this “brutality” towards Indians and blacks. And how did the idea of “conquest” affect not only the colonists’ inter-relations with the Indians, but also their concepts of the land? These specifically frontier issues can be addressed by following the processes of interior expansion and the course of bandeirante history.

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The colonial “conquest” of Brazil should be divided into three phases: the search for land, primarily for agriculture in the Northeast, and the missionary (usually Jesuit) interior penetration (ca. 1550 to the early or mid-1600’s); the bandeirantes’ westward explorations for land, slaves, and minerals (late 1500’s to mid 1700’s); and the geopolitical thrust south to Rio Grande do Sul and Uruguay in the eighteenth century. Each phase will be evaluated below to ascertain images, feelings, and reactions towards nature and the vast new frontier that lay before these early Luso-Brazilians. This article does not pretend to discuss all of these phases, but instead seeks to focus on the historic role of the bandeirantes in Brazilian history, and especially in the relation between history and nature. There is yet to be written an environmental history of the bandeirante experience on the Brazilian frontier. Donald Worster (1988) defines “environmental history” as “the role and place of nature in human life” (Worster 1998 p. 292) and the history of “the interactions people have had with nature in past times,

how ecological transformations have shaped the course of history and how humans are creatures of the natural world” (Worster 1988, vii).<sup>9</sup>

In the early phase of colonial history, many Portuguese settlers envisioned Brazil as an island. Because of Brazil’s “bulge” into the Atlantic and because of gross fifteenth and sixteenth century cartographic miscalculations, the island theory remained well into the mid- 1600’s (See Jaime Cortesão’s study on the territorial formation of Brazil for a detailed discussion of this notion). Viewing the territory as an island accelerated the idea of Portuguese hegemony in the new land. However, as knowledge was gained regarding Brazil’s place on a continent the island theory gave way to vastness. Discrepancies developed over the exact location of the Tordesillas line (Figure 02) but where the line was located meant very little to most colonists with ideas of expansion. A cursory review of writings from this time period reveals that vastness and abundance are common perceptions of the land. In his valuable *Tratado da terra do Brasil*, colonial historian Pedro Magalhães de Gandavo wrote in 1576 of the “fertilidade e abundância da terra” (Gandavo 1912 p. 25). With the spirit of colonial expectation he continues: “A terra desta nova Lusitânia... prometendo tanta riqueza, e prosperidade aos que forem buscar...” (Gandavo 1912 p. 61). In 1587 Captain Gabriel Soares de Sousa (1938) wrote from his post in Bahia that the land was “a maior e mais formosa que se sabe pelo mundo, assim em grandeza como em fertilidade e riqueza... e mui abastecida de mantimentos naturais da terra” (Sousa 1938 p. 123). Brazilian historian Teodoro Sampaio’s 1899 research unveiled similar language. In his essay “The Sertão Before the Conquest” (translated and reprinted in Morse, 1965) he states that many other writers of time spoke of the “inexhaustible” nature of the land (Sampaio 1965 p. 40).

The second phase of interior expansion is that of the bandeirantes (roughly from the late 1500’s to the mid-1700’s). Their inward penetrations of Brazil are often divided into two cycles: slave raiding and mineral explorations. To understand these cycles one should first become acquainted with who exactly these pathfinders of the Brazilian wilderness were, from what backgrounds they hailed, something of the social make-up of their society, and what motivated their sense of adventurism.

As mentioned earlier, Machado's 1930 *Vida e morte do bandeirante* is the best social history source of the bandeira era (Machado 1965). He argues that the bandeirantes’ organizational structure was unequivocally modeled after their Paulista patriarchal family structure. He explains that “the family

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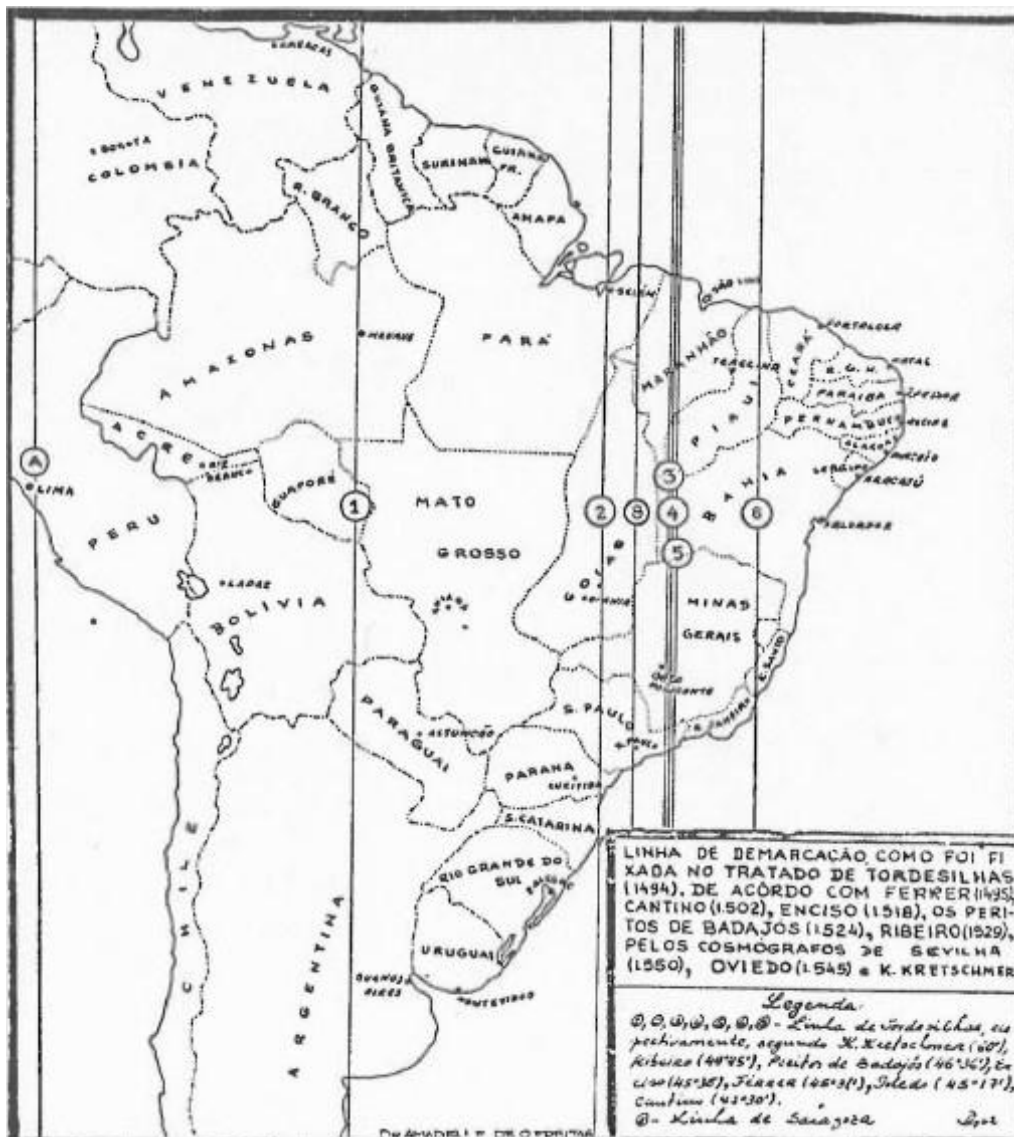
<sup>9</sup> Alistair Hennessy suggests in his study of the Latin American frontier that “[t]he whole question of visual reaction to landscape awaits exploration in the case of Latin America” (1978, pp. 186-187). There is, however, a growing number of works available regarding the current environmental scenario in the Amazonian rainforest. See for example Meggers (1971), Mahar (1979), Schrnink & Wood (1984), Dean (1987), Hecht & Cockburn (1990), Hecht (2013) and Almeida (1992), to list a few of the better studies. Regarding to environmental history of the Brazilian Atlantic Forest, see Dean (1995), who also deals somewhat with the different waves of bandeirantes, with some great analysis (see especially pp. 81-82, 90, and 156).



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group, an organization for defence, requires a head who leads and governs militarily in the Roman manner... [with] the incontestable authority of the family father” (Machado 1965 p. 12-13).<sup>10</sup> Tito Lívio Ferreira’s *Gênese social da gente bandeirante* (1944) can also be used to study this family system but really adds very little to the Machado thesis. Richard Morse agrees with Machado and adds that the pathfinders were “headmen of a rigorous family system... a severe patriarchal code of equity and honor” (Morse 1965 p. 4).

**Figure 02.** Tordesilhas discrepancies (the correct line is nº 2)



Source: Freitas 1975.

<sup>10</sup> And fathers they were! Alcântara Machado’s research on Paulista wills from this period reveals that many bandeirantes had ten to twelve legitimate children and often as many illegitimates as well, due to multiple marriages and black and Indian concubinage. One fair-minded Paulista recognized in his will that “there remain sane bastards... I do not know precisely how many are mine... it shall remain on the mothers’ declare” (Machado 1965 p.13).

Cassiano Ricardo (1959) addresses this same issue but takes it one step farther to suggest that the patriarchy of the Paulista family structure was repeated in the kinship clan, the bandeiras, and eventually to the whole of the Brazilian nation. Several theories have evolved regarding the motivation for bandeirante westward adventures. Machado places the motive squarely on the presence and lure of the sertão (hinterlands):

The sertão arouses not merely their ambition for gain. It grips their imagination, embodying as it splendidly does, the unexpected and the mysterious with all the virile joys of risk and struggle... It is there that one meets the forces of destruction, mobilized against the invader by rebellious nature: jaguars, wild cats, and many other untamed beasts, deserts, and miasmas, fever, and poisons. In its caves and shadowy lairs dwell the one-legged devil, the will-o'-the-wisp, the bogey and the petulant demons of the waters and woods. All this combines to make the sertão a permanent provocation to the imagination and adventurous spirit of the conquerers and the inhabitants of the land... Pervading each moment of the history of São Paulo de Piratininga we feel the presence of the sertão, guardian spirit or evil genius presiding over life and death. [At all points in history] the landscape suddenly leaps forth... etching the horizon with the profile of its miraculous mountains... or as a gust of wind wafting unexpectedly the fragrant breath of virgin forest, the dull clap of a gunshot, and the whir of feathered arrow... From early childhood, the sixteenth and seventeenth century Paulista breathes an air saturated with sertanismo. The sertão is the everyday reality (Machado 1965 p. 65, 67).

These are powerful and weighty words pregnant with meaning and insight to the environmental historian. Much can be extrapolated regarding man's relation with nature. Another social historian, Alfredo Ellis Junior, concurs with Machado. Three chapters of his *Capítulos da história social de São Paulo* (1944) consider the bandeirantes (although there is surprisingly little documentation on the social make-up of bandeirante society) in which he explains that they were "moldado pelo ambiente geográfico" (Ellis Junior 1944 p. 361). But while Machado and Ellis Junior believe "geographic factors" to have been the engine behind the bandeiras, they also admit to "economic determinants" (Machado 1965 p. 66). They acknowledge that most Paulistas were extremely poor and looked to the sertão for improving their ability to care for their families.<sup>11</sup> Ellis Junior posits that everyone in São Paulo was interested in the *movimento sertanista* which they saw as "uma grande fonte de renda econômica da qual todos dependiam" (Ellis Junior 1944 p. 361). Morse puts yet more stock in this economic rationale. "Looking westward," he postulates, "he [the bandeirante] was drawn not to another, distant ocean but to the heartland of a continent which might providentially redeem him from penury" (Morse 1965 p. 4).<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Machado (1965) provides a detailed picture of the poverty of a bandeirante. He explains that he wore "almost all his attire on his person" (for an apparel description, see p. 71) and carried a few necessities, utensils, tools, and items to trade with Indians. Often young boys went on bandeiras as a way to help relieve the economic pressures at home.

<sup>12</sup> While Morse believes that economic considerations first prompted the bandeiras, he agrees with Machado that what sustained them over the *longue durée* was something more: "Penury and subsistence agriculture... do not sufficiently explain

One way to make money from the hinterland was to round up Indians who dwelled there and sell them as slaves. This propelled the bandeirantes westward and into the vast interior domain. In *Bandeiras e bandeirantes de São Paulo* (1940), Carvalho Franco quotes from the mid-1500's expedition of Jorge Moreira (sent by Governor Mem de Sá) who captured Indians not only as a source of income but also as a divinely inspired way to subjugate the people and the land for Portugal: "Esperamos em Nosso Senhor que seja isto princípio para esta terra segurar e o gentio se sujeitar" (Franco 1940 p. 25).

Many early documents mention the goal of gathering Indian slaves, yet one historian, Muriel Nazzari (1992), would have us believe that slave raiding was a somewhat clandestine by-product of the Paulista forays into the hinterlands. In her article "Transition Toward Slavery" (1992) she argues that capturing Indians was the bandeiras' "covert purpose" when they were "explicitly" searching for gold and diamonds (Nazarri 1992 p. 133). This is a surprising pronouncement since it is not based on fresh evidence she has uncovered but instead, according to her footnotes, relies on the standard bandeirante historians like Taunay, Morse, Ellis Junior, etc. – all of whom write openly about the slaving bandeiras. Ellis Junior (1934), in fact, goes so far to state in his now aging but still pertinent work *O bandeirismo paulista* that the "prime objective" of the bandeiras was "the hunting of Indians." Carvalho Franco (1940) states that the "bandeiras escravagistas" started in the second half of the seventeenth century, although other historians date them earlier, especially if one includes the Bahian *entradas*. Jaime Cortesão (1958), however, speaks of the main difference between the *entradas* of the Northeast and the Paulista slaving excursions: Indians and *mestiços* participated in the bandeiras, forming what Cortesão refers to as a "Luso-Tupi" structure (see also Muriel Nazzari 1992).

The slaving raids bring back to the surface the issues of race and racial harmony in Paulista society. While the idea of nation building through the sexual fusion of races has been addressed earlier in this essay, Cortesão argues that the Indian influence on unity goes farther than interbreeding. He posits the theory that suggests the Euro-Brazilians' close association with Indians (i.e. as bandeirantes, etc.) compelled them to form a society in some ways similar to the indigenous ones not bound by imaginary boundaries:

Peoples gifted with a great talent for expansion, did not the Tupi-Guarani and the Arawak possess a geographic culture, even if rudimentary, which corresponded to the area into which they were displaced? And might not they have communicated among themselves, and, as in the case of ethnic and cultural fusion, transmitted to the Europeans a notion of territorial unity that was incompatible with the Treaty of Tordesilhas? (Cortesão 1958 p. 21).

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the magnitude and persistence of the exploits of the bandeirantes. One is led to speculate about other orders and motivations and dreams and legends which gave them force" (p.15).

Yet even with this frontier phenomenon firmly in place racial equality was hardly realized. Indians were still rounded up to be sold as slaves (often in collusion with Indian leaders who traded their people for “toys and bangles,” to quote Alexander Marchant in his essay “From Barter to Slavery,” (Marchant 1942 p. 47), and when that labor supply was no longer available the Portuguese started shipping blacks from colonial Africa. Marchant presents an interesting case that shows that it was the Indians themselves who eventually withdrew from the slave-barter system (when they “became satiated with what the Portuguese offered”, p. 70) that stimulated trans-Atlantic slaving.

Out on the frontier, some of these Africans eventually teamed up with Paulista bandeiras. Little is known regarding this social dimension of the bandeirante experience thus making it an area for future research potential.

Brazilians label the second bandeirante cycle “as fronteiras metalíferas.” Visions of gold, silver, and precious stones fueled by legends of El Dorado-like cities and mountains of gold and diamonds pushed the bandeirantes ever west-ward. Figure 03 shows where the mineral frontiers developed. It was at these locations that environmental impact was more sustained than with quests for farmlands and slaves. Speaking of “a conquista do metal,” Hermes Vieira writes in *Bandeiras e escravagismo no Brasil* (1967 p. 33) that “graças a essa fartura, subitamente o planalto central brasileiro transformou-se. De zona rude e inteiramente deserta, passou, da noite para o dia, a aglomerado febril. Imagine-se que convergiram para ali, em dois anos, cerca de trinta mil lavaceiros!”

While obviously no succinctly environmental records were kept for the mining areas, one can imagine the transformations that were incurred on the land with thirty thousand prospectors descending on the sertão in a short two years from the discovery of gold (1693). A demographic result with social ramifications was the exodus of people from cities, especially São Paulo, to seek their fortunes. If interior depopulation occurred during the slaving cycle then urban depopulation occurred during the mining.

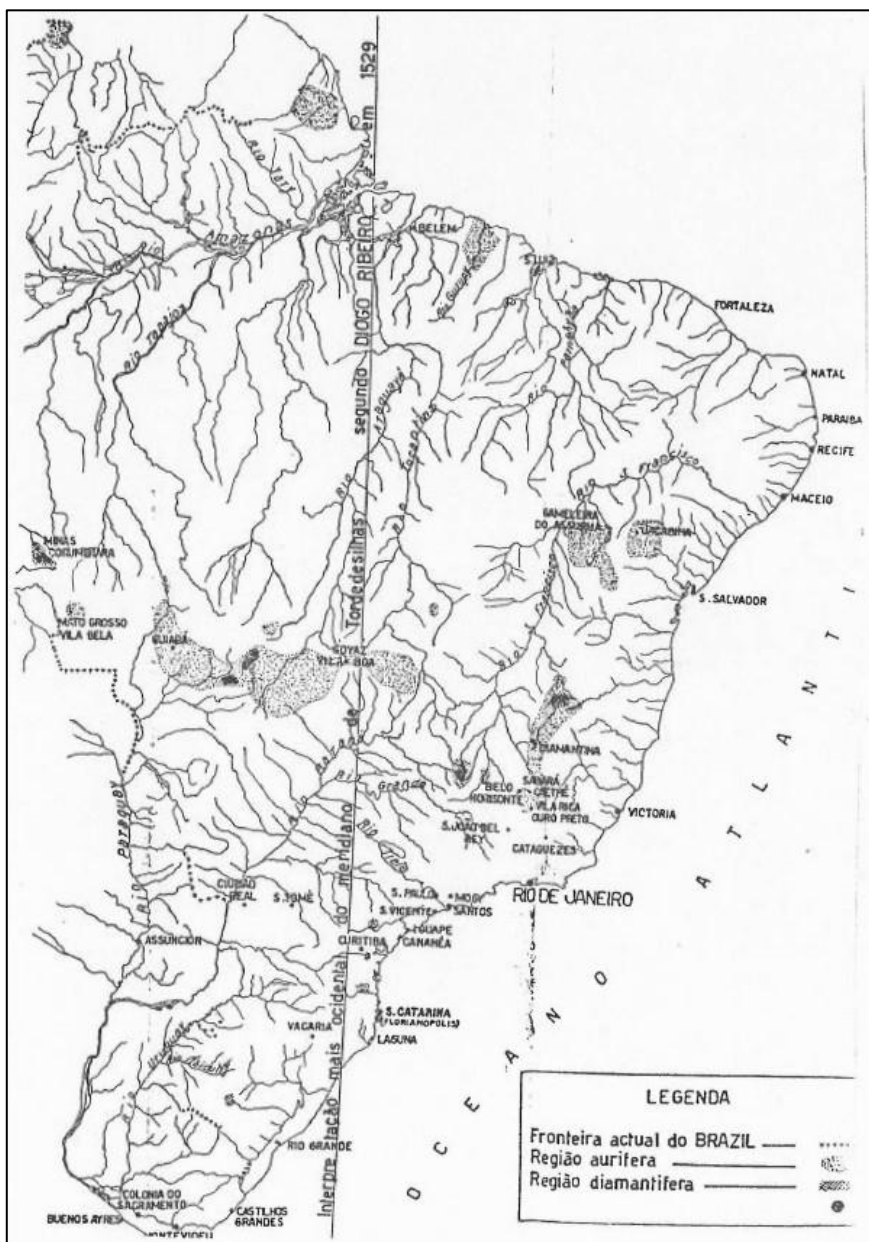
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But of more important interest to this paper is the attempt to discern and interpret the bandeirantes’ reaction to and relation with the frontier environment which confronted them. The most common theme running through contemporary accounts and subsequent historiography is that of nature's obstacles. Francisco do Mello Pahleta’s description of his bandeira of 1722-1723 is typical in

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that it highlights the horrors of the obstacles in the way of his inward march. In a narrative of his journey, reprinted in Capistrano de Abreu (1982), Mello Pahleta's language betrays his inner feelings and mental constructs regarding the natural world around him. He writes that it was "nossa fatal viagem" and terms like "rio horrível," "terribilidade das pedras," and "cachoeiras horríveis," are the norm in describing the journey (Pahleta 1982 p. 306-310). Waterfalls were related as a "grande trabalho... passando... umas atrás das outras" (especially na the Tapajós and Tocantins). Amapá was "tão terrível e tão monstruoso e horrível que aos mesmos naturais das cachoeiras mete horror e faz desanimar" (Pahleta 1982 p. 307). There are no descriptions of the falls' beauty.

Figure 03. The mineral frontiers



Source: Cunha 1945.

A similar picture of rivers and nature is painted by José Peixoto da Silva (translated and reprinted in E. Bradford Burns, *Documentary History*, 1966) from his 1734 bandeira in what is today Goiás. This valuable and rare journal tells of the obstacles and hardships endured by Peixoto da Silva and his companions. Hunger permeates the writing (over forty men died of starvation on this particular bandeira and he states that “I owe it to my horse that I stayed alive”) and thus there are detailed descriptions of plants and animals of the forest that he learned to be edible, including monkeys, tapirs, and macaws. When food was not readily found he depended on finding and “subduing” Indians to provide him with food. (At one point, he promises to say several novenas to Saint Anthony if he would help him find such Indians!) Reliance on nature, religion, and indigenous people for survival in the tropical wilderness subsumes a feeling of helplessness and complete dependence, which for many of European stock was a new and different experience.

Peixoto da Silva goes on to describe other obstacles of nature he faced in the hinterlands. One night “so great was the persecution of bats... that we slept very little, it was troublesome to free ourselves from them. By now we were naked and the minute we closed our eyes they bit into us... so that we awoke covered with blood” (Peixoto da Silva 1966 p. 111). Other impedimenta included unfriendly Indians, waterfalls (measured in height by palm trees – one of which on the Tocantins River he thought to be 500 palms high!), whirlpools, rapids, torrential downpours – many of which he and his companions had to sleep through without any shelter, swarms of mosquitoes, and illnesses such as malaria and stomach poisoning (he mentions at one point on the trip they ate the seeds of the ginip fruit which made them so sick they resorted to using small sticks “to aid nature in evicting the poison” (Peixoto da Silva 1966 p. 112).

And yet they still came! By the hundreds the bandeirantes poured into the backlands despite the obstacles of nature. Amadeu Cunha addresses this apparent contradiction in *Sertões e fronteiras do Brasil* (1945). He suggests that Brazil was “uma criação paradoxal, antitético, de espantosas contradições, a que a Providência deu todas as riquezas imaginarias, mas também misérias sem socorro” (Cunha 1945 p. 56). Modern historians have delighted in recounting these tales and have created an almost epic story of the bandeirista spirit and its role in the creation and geographical cohesion of Brazil, i.e. compared to the political fragmentation of Spanish South and Central America. Taunay leads this coterie of Brazilian historians in singing the praises of the bandeirantes with Ellis Junior<sup>13</sup>, Carvalho Franco, Vianna, Vieira, and even Freyre following suit. Freyre says in *Novo mundo nos*

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<sup>13</sup> Ellis Junior lauds the bandeirante effort but proposes an interesting side hypothesis that merits attention. He looks at the issue and idea of vastness and abundance, as per the common colonial impression of the Brazilian backlands, but relates

*tropicos* that the vast area and the obstacles like Indians, insects, wild animals, rains, deserts, mountains, and swamps were “um desafio a capacidade brasileiro” (Freyre 1971 p. 128).

There has been a broad diversity of historiographical interpretation of the relation of the bandeiras to the natural environment. Sergio Buarque de Holanda’s *Monções* (1945) is the best study of the “monsoons” or the canoe convoys which penetrated the Paraná and Paraguay frontiers by way of “o transporte fluvial” or “as estradas móveis” (Holanda 1945 p. 19, 75). Excellent descriptions of the landscape and dependence on natural resources for survival are presented through the lens of these canoe bandeirantes in their pursuit of gold and Luso-Brazilian hegemony in the southeast corner of the territory.

David Davidson (1970) also examines the importance of fluvial systems in territorial expansion and looks at a less studied area, the Madeira-Xingu-Tapajós riverine network of upper Goiás, Maranhão, and Pará (straight north on the opposite side of the map from Buarque de Holanda’s study of the *monções*). Referring to the Madeira River as a “bureaucratic life-line”, Davidson, who studied under Richard Morse at Yale, creatively shows the importance of these hydrological resources for not only bringing bandeirante parties into the frontier to explore for slaves and minerals, but also their importance in servicing the more tedious task of colonizing and maintaining control over the area, what he calls “the winning of the west” (Davidson 1970 p. i, 2).

The Taunay volumes and most other standard bandeirante texts trace the history of the mining frontiers. A thorough study of the “regiões diamantíferas” is presented in Amadeu Cunha’s *Sertões e fronteiras do Brasil* and one of the better exposés on the emerald front is Eduardo Barreiro’s *Roteiro das esmeraldas: a bandeira de Fernão Dias Pais* (1979), although Barreiro draws heavily on Taunay.

But whether it was slaves, gold, diamonds, or emeralds that drew the bandeirantes into the backlands, one common product resulted: an increased knowledge of the land. Amadeu Cunha writes that with the bandeiras “começou o conhecimento geográfico do Brasil... dos desertos, serras, rios, e florestas” (Cunha 1945 p. 189). What changes came with this increased understanding?

Many authors on frontier expansion in colonial Brazil speak of these changes as environmental adaptations. Freyre’s thesis is that of “lusotropical” adjustments – Portuguese society with a Brazilian twist, while Cortesão states that the environment “permitiu a formação e o desenvolvimento dum novo conceito de vida, a livre lei da Natureza...” (Cortesão 1958 p. 405). Ellis

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how massive hunger on the bandeiras shows the inability of the frontier to support population incursions: “a abundância entretanto não era tanta que desse para abastecer uma tropa numerosa” (Ellis Junior 1944 p. 362).

Junior suggests that the Luso-Brazilians were “moldado pelo ambiente geográfico” (Ellis Junior 1944 p. 361) and, he also states that “o fator geográfico brasileiro é que é o responsável não só pela heterogeneização da gente ao longo deste país, como no seu desenvolvimento em matéria de eficiência” (Ellis Junior 1948 p. 192). According to Buarque de Holanda (1957), however, that adaptation came only with the help of the indigenous peoples. Alistair Hennessy concurs and states that “adaptation to the environment was through miscegenation... a striking example of adaptation to the New World environment, identifying with the interior and rejecting the effete ways of coastal society” (Hennessy 1978 p. 12, 51). Buarque de Holanda (1986), however, writes in his last book *O Extremo Oeste* (written in the 1970's and published posthumously in 1986), that adjustment was no easy task, but rather “um combate... para sobreviver e adaptar-se ao sertão inóspito” (Holanda 1986 p. 7).

But not all writers describe the sertão so disparagingly. In his 1902 book *Os sertões*, Euclides da Cunha (1957) takes a different, indeed more aesthetic, viewpoint. According to Cunha the sertão “e um paraíso... tem manhãs sem par... [e] é maravilhosamente exuberante” (Cunha 1957 p. 43, 46). After the rains, “O sertão e um vale fértil... é um pomar vistíssimo, sem dono... a natureza compraz-se em um jogo de antíteses” (Cunha 1957 p. 46). Likewise the *caatinga* “é um efeito explicável de adaptação as condições estreitas, tenaz e inflexível” (Cunha 1957 p. 34). Eduardo Barreiro also speaks of the sertão as “um deserto de natureza exuberante e multiforme” (Barreiro 1979 p. 49), but rare are these types of references to nature in Brazilian historiography.

Like Buarque de Holanda, Cunha (1986) writes of man's “combat” to survive in such environments, but his language is different (and certainly ahead of his time): “O homem luta com as árvores, com as reservas. É um combate feroz, anônimo, terrivelmente obscuro” (Cunha 1957 p. 46). One chapter is entitled “Como se faz um deserto” and deals with the process of desertification from the abuse of fire management in agricultural areas. He states that the agent for such change is man: “um agente geológico notável – o homem... um terrível fazedor de desertos” (Cunha 1957 p. 48-49). This is a unique declaration for 1902 in Latin America. In fact it predates by more than thirty years the seminal work on a similar topic in the United States, *Deserts on the March*, by Paul Sears (1935), an ecological botanist at the University of Oklahoma, who forecast the desertification of the Great Plains from agricultural abuses which erupted in the dust bowl years of the Great Depression. Cunha (1957) goes on to write “Como se extingue o deserto” in which he indicts irrigation and proposes as a solution a reduction in the “violento drenagem” (Cunha 1957 p. 54-55) of wetlands and a reduction in the use of fertilizers.



But while da Cunha can be contrasted against those who write of environmental adaptation there are still others who speak of environmental conditioning. Brazilian geographer Caio Lóssio Botelho (1967) discusses this theme in a chapter entitled *Dinâmica do meio como condicionante de um processo e estágio civilizatórios* in his book *Brasil: a Europa dos trópicos*. He differs with the geographic determinist school of thinking in that “o fator ambiental e meio geográfico” was more of a “desafio natural” than an environmental “determinante” (Botelho 1967 p. 63). In another sense, Richard Morse and David Davidson agree in that they speak of the significance of São Paulo’s geographic location as a conditioning element for frontier expansion. This theory of “place” has a school of its own.<sup>14</sup>

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The final phase to be discussed regarding bandeirantes and the colonial expansion of Brazil is the thrust to the South on the geopolitical frontier. There are fewer accounts on this dimension of expansionism that relate to the environment, nature, and the colonists’ perceptions of the landscape. Certainly, Buarque de Holanda’s comprehensive study of the *monções*, however, would be a good starting place as it deals with the Paraná and Paraguay waterways and how the Luso-Brazilians “conquered” that frontier. Buarque de Holanda unearths valuable accounts of the bandeirantes’ dependence on wildlife and fish for survival and some descriptions of the rivers the expeditions travelled.

The southern frontier of the early and mid-1700’s marks the beginning of colonial Brazil’s efforts to establish tangible territorial boundaries. Freitas (1975 p. 106) submits that “a Linha de Tordesilhas era um dos maiores absurdos e paradoxos da moderna cartografia brasileira... não há historiador sério que não diga e repita que a linha nunca foi fixada.” The southern-most terrestrial tip of the line was in coastal Santa Catarina; to the west lay Paraná, Rio Grande do Sul, the rest of Santa Catarina, and of course Paraguay and Uruguay. Colonial political trouble erupted here because, unlike the rest of the Tordesillas frontier, this was the only place where Spanish and Portuguese communities were so near each other. Nevertheless, it was the bandeirantes from Brazil who made active advances against the Spanish to augment Portuguese colonial control of the region – including Colônia de Sacramento (Uruguay) which Spain also claimed.

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<sup>14</sup> For an expanded theoretical discussion (although not specifically regarding São Paulo and the Brazilian frontier) see David Robinson’s essay “The Language and Significance of Place in Latin America” (Agnew & Duncan 1989).

Different theories have evolved regarding the nature of this conflict. The cultural aspects of the geopolitical dilemma are discussed in Moysés Vellinho (1975). Vellinho's thesis is that the frontier was not so much a dividing line but rather a confrontation of cultures in the Rio Grande/Uruguay region. Teixeira (1972), on the other hand, suggests that it was really more of a question of diplomatic and political history and less a phenomenon of natural boundaries. And finally, Moniz Bandeira (an exquisite source-citation surname to conclude with) posits two different theories regarding the southern frontier: the Portuguese propensity for natural boundaries (rivers, estuaries, etc.) and economic considerations. Bandeira (1985) draws on archival data to advance both of these theories. Her conclusion is that the primary reason for Brazil's expansionism, however, is for capital investment and to widen the sphere of opportunity for colonial European emigrants. The Uruguay/Rio Grande question was settled diplomatically but only after a display of power in the region by Brazil and its bandeirante history of crossing the line to spread its influence.

## CONCLUSIONS

The end of the story of the Brazilian frontier has yet to be written. Today Amazônia is Brazil's economic, territorial, and environmental frontier. Many comparisons have been drawn between the bandeirante experience of westward expansion and that of the industrial and agricultural advancement into the backlands of Amazônia. Indeed one frequently reads (or hears) of the "bandeirante spirit" for national development. Politicians have received great "mileage" from the emotion it stirs. One harkens to Getúlio Vargas' 1939 speech when he called on Brazilians to become "modern bandeirantes... in a new crusade of national expansion" (as reprinted in Morse 1965 p. 33). Freitas (1975) writes at great length about the evolution of "bandeiriologia" with its "vortice de fatores complexos de caracter psico-racial, econômico, e telúrico" (Freitas 1975 p. 169, 140). He states how it has bred "protobandeirantes" and "antibandeirantes" in Brazilian society.

For colonial Brazil the impact of the bandeirante movement cannot go underreported. But the end of the bandeiras was a bellwether for other phenomena: the mines' depletion had begun, settlements had arisen all over the vast frontier, and Brazil's borders had been securely established with the Treaty of Madrid of 1750 which was roughly the time of the last bandeiras. Burns (1966) suggests that the treaty and the boundaries it secured (nearly as they are today, minus some modifications in the far west, northwest, and southeast that the Baron of Rio Branco firmed up around the turn of the century) was the "principal result of the bandeirante activity" (Burns 1966 p. 121).<sup>15</sup> Thus by 1750 the

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<sup>15</sup> Richard Morse goes as far to suggest that another result of the bandeirantes (at least in a very indirect way) was how they precipitated the French Revolution! He contends that the gold they discovered was sent to Portugal who sold it to Great

geopolitical reap had been transformed from Portuguese influence solely in the “bulge” of Brazil to Luso-Brazilian hegemony to the Peruvian border.

For modern Brazil, an example of the use of the bandeirante image and myth for the conquest and occupation of the Brazilian West can be perceived in the colonization policies of the less populated areas of central Brazil and in the western parts of the states of São Paulo, Paraná, and Santa Catarina. In that context, the work of Cassiano Ricardo (1959) assumes a fundamental role, since it can serve as the principal ideological instrument used in the understanding of the frontier as a space of Brazilianness, of the true bandeirante spirit and ethos. By encouraging the march to the West, the displacement and the territorial conquest of that Brazilian region in the twentieth century, the historic bandeirism can be utilized as symbol and myth (Smith 2009), in the conquest of Brazilian territory and in the use of the category West as a new Brazilian frontier (Dutra e Silva et al. 2014). There is a monument to the bandeirantes in São Paulo, but the real monument of their courage, suffering, zeal, but also to their greed, terror against Native people, and actions to begin a long history of environmental change is the legacy of their endeavors: an expanded but transformed Brazil.

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Britain which “hastened the English Industrial Revolution and with it the decline of the French industry and therefore the advent of the French Revolution” (p. 27).

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## Cruzando a Linha Verde: Fronteira, meio ambiente e o papel dos bandeirantes na conquista do território Brasileiro

### RESUMO

Este artigo tem por objetivo apresentar, a partir de vasta pesquisa bibliográfica, a constituição territorial do Brasil Colonial (1500-1822) e a abordagem historiográfica brasileira relacionada aos temas e conceitos como fronteira, territorialidade e natureza. O enfoque do recorte metodológico é a vinculação desses temas como o papel histórico do movimento bandeirante. A proposta é discutir as questões territoriais, geográficas e ambientais, numa discussão fundamentada nos pressupostos teórico-

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metodológicos da história ambiental. Para tanto, a partir da análise historiográfica, propomos apresentar as questões relacionadas a história e natureza no debate sobre a conquista territorial no Brasil. O texto procurou se fundamentar em obras clássicas e em autores de reconhecido diálogo com o tema, como também, procuramos inserir leituras e fontes periféricas, na intenção de identificar como essa temática se aproxima em diferentes referências da literatura especializada. O movimento bandeirante tem papel privilegiado como agente da análise historiográfica.

**Palavras-chave:** Bandeirante; Fronteira; Meio Ambiente; Território; Oeste do Brasil.

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