




"The Salt of the Earth" in the 19th-century Hinterlands


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...A few pinches and the food will have a pleasant flavor, but if you use too much or too little, the meal will lose some of its appeal or become impossible to eat. Its functions go far beyond taste and, as a result, it has become an essential good in supplying many societies, being used in cooking, food preservation, animal feeding, and warfare. The variety of types of salts also defined their different uses in society, with some being suitable for human and animal consumption, and others as raw material for products such as fertilizers and gunpowder.

Márcia Helena Mendes Ferraz explains that the use of saltpeter for the production of fertilizers or acids is more recent and that it used to be utilized more as raw material for gunpowder (Ferraz, 2000, p. 845). Currently, in Brazil, the states of Rio Grande do Norte and Ceará are major producers of sea salt that come from the fluvial/marine plains of each state (Diniz; Vasconcelos, 2017, p. 2).

In the hinterlands, far from the sea, access to salt presented its challenges. Thus, we will discuss, in the following parts of this paper, the production and circulation of salt in the hinterlands of the São Francisco River in the 19th century. We emphasize that we will not only address the salt used in food and preservation but also the saltpeter, which is also a type of salt and will always be referred to in this text as saltpeter.

Regarding our spatial focus, we highlight the stretch currently described as the Middle São Francisco¹ by Orlando de Carvalho, who, in 1937, described the Middle São Francisco as the stretch from Pirapora in Minas Gerais to Juazeiro in Bahia:

Naturally, when we mention the São Francisco River, what comes to the mind of the reader is the stretch called Middle São Francisco, which runs from Pirapora to Juazeiro, over a distance 1,300 kilometers. However, we must not forget the other two stretches of the river: the Upper part, which covers a large area in the west of Minas Gerais, and the Lower part, which encompasses three important northeastern states (Carvalho, 1937, p. 131).

¹ Some references mention the stretch we are focusing on as Middle São Francisco and Lower-Middle São Francisco. In 1976, Brazilian Agricultural Research Corporation (Embrapa) published a study on the soils of the left bank of the São Francisco River and presented the division into three zones: Lower-Middle São Francisco Zone, Middle São Francisco Zone, and Barreiras Zone (Jacomine *et al.*, 1976, p. 10). These three zones are part of what we call the hinterlands of the São Francisco River, which was an expression of regionalization for this area presented here and which was sometimes referred to as the upper hinterlands.

The presence of salt was noted even in the colonial period, even though it did not become a main product of the regional economy. However, it can be observed through its production, commercialization, and consumption as human food, preservative, use in livestock farming and warfare. Even though its production was fundamental for the maintenance of the colonies, salt did not have representativeness in the agenda of export products, as directed by the colonial exploitation system.

Caio Prado Júnior explained that cattle ranching was the main activity in several areas of the hinterlands since the colonial period, with agriculture being practiced on a smaller scale and with many occurrences in subsistence production (Prado Júnior, 2012, p. 67). Also according to Caio Prado, trade was strengthened because many of the hinterlands areas were “[...] points of contact and transit of certain importance” (2012, p. 67-68). Among these areas, he highlighted that in the São Francisco River, there were other activities besides livestock farming: “in the middle stretch of its course, some poor rock salt deposits are exploited, the product of which serves to supply much of the hinterlands of Bahia, Minas Gerais, and even Goiás” (2012, p. 68). This statement by Caio Prado Junior can be attributed to the existing difference between the types of salt, and in this case, the rock salt does not present itself in the form of sea salt, and its exploitation requires other efforts and technical and financial resources for its extraction.

Ângelo Alves Carrara, in turn, emphasized the importance of the São Francisco River as a valuable salt trade route in the 18th century. The São Francisco salt production would have a diversified reach, going as far as Goiás, Rio de Contas, Jacobina, Paracatu, and other stops connected to the São Francisco River by roads and by its tributaries (Carrara, 2006, p. 274).

To some extent, salt was part of the economy in the hinterlands of the São Francisco River with the production of its salterns both in the 18th and 19th centuries. According to Damião Esdras Araújo Arraes, cattle ranching and salt production were complementary activities (Arraes, 2021, p. 16). Along with several agricultural products, livestock, and extractivism, salt ended up composing the picture of what Antonio Guerreiro de Freitas called the ‘economy of the catado’:

The entire population living, in short, around what they themselves defined as the ‘catado’, in this case, the opposite of specialization: a multiplicity of agricultural products, small-scale livestock farming and its derivatives, in addition to extractive activity, with an emphasis on the exploitation of carnauba wax. Of course, without forgetting everything they fished in the rivers, with fish salting being an ever-present activity in several locations

(Freitas, 1999, p. 63).

The diversity of the São Francisco economy also encompassed mining, including the variety of salts. Mining was one of the activities on the horizon of the inhabitants of the hinterlands and the Portuguese in the design of Portuguese-Brazilian territoriality during the process of interiorization of Portuguese colonization.

Márcio Roberto Alves dos Santos highlighted the mining of saltpeter near the mouth of the Salitre River and the São Francisco River in the late 17th century. Between 1696 and 1697, Pedro Barbosa Leal organized two expeditions to research saltpeter reserves with the participation of Dom João de Lencastro (Santos, 2017, p. 144). Thus, the “salterns refer to the practice of saltpeter extraction and the production of ‘salt of the earth’, a name given to salt produced in the colony as opposed to sea salt or that originating from the Kingdom” (Arraes, 2021, p. 16).

Reports on the saltpeter reserves in the São Francisco River valley were transmitted to the Overseas Council in the 1670s and 1690s. The saltpeter works installed at the mouth of the Salitre River had Pedro Barbosa Leal appointed to its administration. According to Márcio Santos, Leal, the person in charge of the extraction, had the profile of a Crown server when he took over the saltpeter works, as he had previously served as a Coronel de Ordenanças (a colonel of ordinances) in Salvador (Santos, 2017, p. 139-140, 333).

By 1698, the saltpeter works already faced its first difficulties centered on two factors: the low yield of the deposits and the rebellion of the indigenous workers (Santos, 2017, p. 333-334). Presumably, the indigenous workers were involved in the extraction and transportation of saltpeter, but under precarious conditions and strong exploitation to the point of engaging in acts that were pointed out by the authorities as rebellion. In 1706, during the government of Luís César de Meneses, the saltpeter works ceased its activities (Santos, 2017, p. 335), despite the importance of the use of saltpeter for defense, as evidenced in 1703, when the general government was pressured to establish a powder house, highlighting the importance of saltpeter: “In the same year [1703], the secretary of state was pressuring the general government, emphasizing the need for saltpeter for the defense of the Kingdom and therefore ordering Dom Rodrigo da Costa to establish a powder house” (Santos, 2017, p. 333).

The concerns with production and royal administration present in this activity

indicate how important saltpeter was for the colonial economy. According to Erivaldo Fagundes Neves, saltpeter was an important element for supplying the army, and in the 18th century, the Portuguese State was dependent on English gunpowder, making the deposits in the Portuguese colony in America a relief in times of scarcity (Neves, 2007, p. 130).

Neves highlighted, more precisely, the saltpeter deposits of Monte Alto, on the border with Minas Gerais and near the eastern bank of the São Francisco River, which were discovered by Pedro Leolino Mariz and began operating in 1758:

Saltpeter, niter, or potassium nitrate, was a strategic mineral for the munitioning of armies, police, and hunting, one of the most practiced sports of the time worldwide. Portugal used to supply itself with this strategic raw material in its Asian possessions, which it had lost to England. It was, therefore, in need of it and depended on English gunpowder. The mines discovered by Pedro Leolino Mariz in Montes Altos, in the first half of the 18th century, were exploited from 1758. The saltpeter deposits of Montes Altos were not the only ones in Bahia; this mineral was already being exploited in Santo Antônio do Pambu (currently Curaçá) (Neves, 2007, p. 130).

The discoveries of the saltpeter deposits of Monte Alto, according to Danielle da Silva Ramos (2020), were one of the attractive elements for the process of occupation of the upper hinterlands. Together with livestock farming and agriculture, it allowed for settlement in the area and the establishment of regional elites:

It is in this context of ‘agricultural renaissance’ that, in the upper hinterlands of Bahia, extensive agriculture and livestock farming stimulated the creation of productive units, with people different origins, some of whom established themselves as an enriched landowning class. The paths opened for saltpeter extraction, the movement of people to the region, combined with the expansion of agriculture and livestock farming between 1790 and 1850, made up the context for considering the consolidation and profile of the elite of the hinterlands in the region, paying attention to the economic and political processes of the period in question (Ramos, 2020, p. 4).

The extraction of saltpeter did not occur steadily, and in many occasions, mining activities were interrupted or reduced. Márcia Helena Mendes Ferraz mentioned the

military and politician Augusto Fausto de Souza², who, in 1872, believed that the failure of the saltpeter exploitation in Brazil was related to the lack of technical knowledge of extraction and the precariousness of transportation for this material, which lost part of its content when crossing rivers or encountering rain along the way:

In our country, the production of saltpeter would have been abandoned, according to Souza, due to a lack of technical knowledge in the extraction and transportation of the material. It turns out that saltpeter was transported in bags or 'bruacas' (leather bags) on the back of animals to the powder factories. A journey that lasted several days under sun and rain. More water passed through the containers during river crossings. In the final calculation of the price of saltpeter, the producers wanted to compensate for what they had lost to the waters. Consequently, the saltpeter of Minas Gerais ended up costing much more than the imported product (Ferraz, 2000, p. 848).

The technical difficulties, especially with transportation and locomotion, led to increase in the product's cost, as explained above. The need for studies to make saltpeter exploitation viable dates back to the colonial period and involved the participation of naturalists, as previously recorded.

Fróes Abreu stated that at the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century, saltpeter was studied in Ceará and in the hinterlands of the São Francisco River. Furthermore, the General Government financed the journeys of naturalists such as João da Silva Feijó to Ceará in 1799 to assess the conditions for saltpeter exploitation (Abreu, 1937, p. 313). Feijó was a naturalist born in Rio de Janeiro in 1760 and was reportedly one of the first disciples of the professor of Chemistry and Natural History at the University of Coimbra, the Italian Domingos Vandelli. Moreover, Feijó was a corresponding member of the Royal Academy of Sciences of Lisbon. The investigations in Ceará took place after the provision of 25 February 1799 in which Dona Maria I, Queen of Portugal, had determined that he study the regional natural potentials (Silva, 2007, p. 182) During this same period, there was also an experiment with the artificial production of saltpeter in Portugal stimulated by the Portuguese government. At the same time, in

² Augusto Fausto de Souza (1835 – 1890) was a Brazilian military officer with a background in Mathematics and Physical Sciences from the Military School. In addition to his military career, which included a prominent participation in the war against Paraguay, he was also a member of the Brazilian Historical and Geographical Institute, and author of military works. He was also appointed president of the province of Santa Catarina between 1888 and 1889 (Blake, 1883, p. 354-355) (Memória Política de Santa Catarina, 2020).

the colony, several royal charters aimed to encourage saltpeter production in the colonies (Pereira, 2014, p. 513-515).

Expeditions in captaincies such as São Paulo and in the hinterlands of Bahia, Pernambuco, Ceará, Piauí, and Maranhão were organized with some positive results, although not enough to make the production economically viable and competitive (Pereira, 2014, p. 517-519). According to Magnus Roberto de Mello Pereira, the captaincy of Minas Gerais was the only one that presented satisfactory results in terms of salt production:

The captaincy of Minas was the only one in which the exploitation of small deposits, resulted from the old policies, was somewhat expressive. They even came to supply Powder Factory of Vila Rica and that of Rodrigo de Freitas Lagoon, in Rio de Janeiro (Pereira, 2014, p. 521).

In the 19th century, Ignácio Accioli de Cerqueira e Silva emphasized in his report titled “Informação ou descrição topográfica e politica do rio de S. Francisco” (Topographical and political information or description of the São Francisco River) that the farms with land rich with saltpeter were the most valued, and in them, cattle made large holes called ‘barreiras’ and ate the clay.³ The consumption of salts by cattle is related to dietary supplementation, including the technique of adding salts to the animals’ feed, which was already known at the beginning of the 19th century (Sagrilo, 2015, p. 43).

The technical difficulties experienced in the extraction and transportation of saltpeter hindered attempts at enterprises of this nature. Ignácio Accioli de Cerqueira e Silva addressed not only saltpeter but also the salt for human consumption, which was also extracted in the salterns of the São Francisco. The aforementioned report by Accioli, published in 1847, was prompted by the consultation of the Belgian civil engineer Mr. X. Tarte with the Imperial State to obtain information on the São Francisco River in order to request exclusivity for the exploitation of navigation on this river, which was rejected by the Brazilian government (Silva, 2021, p. 111-112).

³ CERQUEIRA E SILVA, Ignacio Accioli de. Informação, ou descrição topographica e politica do Rio de S. Francisco, escrita em virtude de ordens imperiaes, e apresentada ao governo provincial da Bahia. *Revista do Instituto Geographico e Historico da Bahia*, Salvador, Typ. Guaycurú de Domingos Guedes Cabral, 1847, n. 62. p. 05-167. 1936. p. 39.

In the “Descrições práticas da província da Bahia” (Practical descriptions of the province of Bahia) by Durval Vieira de Aguiar, published in 1889⁴, the locality of São Desidério – linked to the county of Barreiras, which, in turn, was part of the term of the town of Campo Largo in the district of the same name – had a terrain with a lot of saltpeter “which was used only by the rocketeers there”.⁵ The rocketeers produced both fireworks for festive days and improvised, with a greater quantity of gunpowder, the making of bullets. This occupation already existed in colonial society and posed a risk, as it was volatile and required special care in handling its products. Other metals were used as raw materials for these products, especially the sodium extracted from the saltpeter-rich soil of the hinterlands.

The ‘salts of the earth’ drew attention to the possibilities of use and economic exploitation. As we have seen, saltpeter had part of its use related to the production of gunpowder to supply firearms in the face of existing scarcity. In the capital of the captaincy of Bahia, there was always concern with the construction of a powder house, to safeguard its use as well as to keep the raw material safe. During the Iberian Union, a powder house was installed on the premises of the Santa Casa de Misericórdia da Bahia; during the 17th century there were several attempts to build a specific building and, finally, in the 19th century, it was transferred to what was called the Campo da Pólvora (powder field), as there was a powder house there.

The German civil engineer based in Brazil, Henrique Guilherme Fernando Halfeld, traveled in the early 1850s along the São Francisco River from the Pirapora waterfall to the mouth on behalf of the imperial government. The objective of this adventure was to analyze the navigability conditions to establish mechanisms to facilitate this purpose, whose report was published in 1860, in Rio de Janeiro. Halfeld’s observations went beyond geomorphological aspects; thus, the engineer provided information on the commercial and productive conditions of each stretch he passed through, recording the varied production in the hinterlands of the São Francisco River in several stretches of his journey.⁶

⁴ According to Ruy Hermann de Araújo Medeiros and Sérgio Eduardo Montes Castanho (2012, p. 417), the first edition was executed by the typography of the Diário da Bahia in 1888, but the printing was only completed in 1889,

⁵ AGUIAR, Durval Vieira de. Campo Largo. In: AGUIAR, Durval Vieira de. *Descrições práticas da província da Bahia: com declaração de todas as distâncias intermediárias das cidades, vilas e povoações*. Rio de Janeiro: Cátedra; Brasília: Instituto Nacional do Livro, 1979. p. 47-48.

⁶ HALFELD, Henrique Guilherme Fernando. *Atlas e Relatório concernente a exploração do Rio de S. Francisco: desde a cachoeira da Pirapóra até ao oceano atlântico, levantado por ordem do governo de S.M.I. o senhor Dom Pedro II*. Rio de Janeiro: Lithographia imperial de Eduardo Rensburg, 1860.

In Barra, the import trade was characterized as diversified with products originating from various points in Bahia (including Salvador, Juazeiro, and Remanso), Goiás, and Minas Gerais. The products were also varied, including dry goods, wet goods, wood, cereals, and salt. Exportation occurred on a smaller scale compared to importation, and agriculture was described as lagging and unable to supply the trade.

Regarding agricultural production, Halfeld highlighted the cultivation of cassava, sugar cane, rice, beans, corn, and the work involved in salt mining. The German engineer found that the salt mining was not related to the presence of rock salt, which, according to him, was not found in the region.⁷ Narjara Graziella Chaves de Araujo, Daniel da Silva Sousa, and Narla Sathler Musse (2012) explained that rock salt is one of the forms in which salt presents itself after areas previously submerged by seawater dry up.

Halite, commonly known as salt (NaCl), comes in two forms: Sea Salt, which is extracted through the evaporation of seawater, or Rock Salt, which is extracted from underground mines that were once submerged by seawater, and have dried up (Araujo; Sousa; Mousse, 2012, p. 01).

Further down the river, Halfeld also highlighted the export of salt from Xique-Xique, with a trade volume of approximately 1,000 to 2,000 alqueires (traditional unit of measurement in Portuguese). This salt was extracted from the salterns of Assuruá and neighboring areas.⁸ In 1888, Durval Aguiar reported that the Itaparica lagoon in Xique-Xique was one of the sources of salt: “Behind the Serra de Santo Inácio (a mountain range) there is a large lagoon called Itaparica, from which a lot of salt is extracted in the vicinity”.⁹

Nine leagues later, between the Island of Salinas and the Island do Povo, Halfeld found another point of trade and production of salt, which was extracted from the salt-rich clay. At this moment, Halfeld described the branch of the São Francisco River that gave access, on the left bank, to a stream that passed through the Santo Antonio hamlet,

⁷ HALFELD, Henrique Guilherme Fernando. *Atlas e Relatório concernente a exploração do Rio de S. Francisco: desde a cachoeira da Pirapóra até ao oceano atlântico*, levantado por ordem do governo de S.M.I. o senhor Dom Pedro II. Rio de Janeiro: Lithographia imperial de Eduardo Rensburg, 1860. p. 22

⁸ HALFELD, Henrique Guilherme Fernando. *Atlas e Relatório concernente a exploração do Rio de S. Francisco: desde a cachoeira da Pirapóra até ao oceano atlântico*, levantado por ordem do governo de S.M.I. o senhor Dom Pedro II. Rio de Janeiro: Lithographia imperial de Eduardo Rensburg, 1860. p. 24

⁹ AGUIAR, Durval Vieira de. *Descrições práticas da Província da Bahia com declaração de todas as distâncias intermediárias das cidades, vilas e povoações*. Rio de Janeiro: Cátedra; Brasília: Instituto Nacional do Livro, 1979. p. 58

which belonged to Pilão Arcado and was one of the points of salt production. The annual export was around 4,000 to 5,000 alqueires, which were carried in a “leather bag (*broaca*), whose price depends on the existence of more or less buyers, and ranges from an average of Rs 2\$000 to 5\$000”.¹⁰

Pilão Arcado had its salt production highlighted by Halfeld - in addition to cattle ranching and cultivation of cassava, rice, beans, and other food crops. The salterns listed in the report were:

The one at the Hamlet of Sobrado, those at the settlements of Sobradinho, Salitre, Itaparica, Juréma d’Aldeia, Sargento, Paté, Abreus, Pacuhy, Baixa Grande, Riacho da Casa Nova, and Fazenda Casa Nova, which produce and export around 4,000 to 5,000 alqueires; Estrema, Arêas e o Joá, Salgadinho de Dentro, Salgadinho de Fôra, and Salina Grande, with 6,000 to 10,000 alqueires, of which the last three salterns being one to five leagues away from the Hamlet of Remanso; and also Salinas do Jatobá with 600 to 700 alqueires; Brejo da Prasida, Batateira, and Brejo Secco with 600 to 1,000 alqueires, the latter being yellow in color; Tronqueira and Salinas do Sacco with 3,000 to 4,000 alqueires; Santo Antonio das Salinas with 4,000 to 5,000 alqueires; Sentocé, Mocambo de Boi, and Assuruá with 1,000 alqueires, the best, the heaviest, and the most sought after, still presenting a black color, the salt from the salterns of Brejo do Zacharias, which supplies 10,000 to 12,000 alqueires; finally, the salt from the salterns of Campo Largo and Imbuzeiro, which is very white and crystalline. Also, on the banks of the Tarraxi stream, there are some salterns, so that, by an approximate calculation, all those salterns mentioned, and some with a higher production, have a total of 40,000 to 50,000 alqueires of salt, whose value in the salterns is, on average, depending to the number of buyers, from Rs 2\$000 to 5\$000 per alqueire; but I saw, in 1853, in the town of Carinhonha, it being bought for Rs 15\$000 an alqueire, and for Rs 18\$000 in the Manga hamlet, because at that time there was a great shortage throughout the extent of the river from Pilão Arcado to the Mouth of Rio das Velhas.¹¹

The salt, therefore, produced in Pilão Arcado circulated via the São Francisco River, reaching Minas Gerais. Long before reaching the town of Pilão Arcado, when he was still in Minas Gerais, Halfeld already emphasized the presence of salt from this locality in the trade of Minas Gerais, which, due to the then low productivity, was difficult to sell.¹² The production of salt was also noted by the engineer Halfeld in Sento Sé and

¹⁰ HALFELD, Henrique Guilherme Fernando. *Atlas e Relatório concernente a exploração do Rio de S. Francisco: desde a cachoeira da Pirapóra até ao oceano atlântico, levantado por ordem do governo de S.M.I. o senhor Dom Pedro II.* Rio de Janeiro: Lithographia imperial de Eduardo Rensburg, 1860. p. 25

¹¹ HALFELD, Henrique Guilherme Fernando. *Atlas e Relatório concernente a exploração do Rio de S. Francisco: desde a cachoeira da Pirapóra até ao oceano atlântico, levantado por ordem do governo de S.M.I. o senhor Dom Pedro II.* Rio de Janeiro: Lithographia imperial de Eduardo Rensburg, 1860. p. 27

¹² HALFELD, Henrique Guilherme Fernando. *Atlas e Relatório concernente a exploração do Rio de S. Francisco: desde a cachoeira da Pirapóra até ao oceano atlântico, levantado por ordem do governo de S.M.I.*

Juazeiro.¹³

It is also important to highlight that the main outlet for the salt produced in Bahia to reach Minas Gerais was not via the São Francisco River. The commercial flow via the Jequitinhonha River was much more intense for the outflow of salt production, at least in the records of the presidents of the province of Bahia, than the route via the São Francisco River. Bahia exported more salt to other provinces than outside Brazil. Between 1852 and 1855, approximately 350 alqueires of salt were exported outside of Brazil from Bahia, yielding Rs 120\$000 (one hundred and twenty thousand réis). During the same period, Bahia exported 50,696 alqueires of salt to other provinces, yielding over 24:000\$000 (twenty-four contos de réis).¹⁴

The Jequitinhonha River was an important route for salt, among other products, to Minas Gerais, to the point of receiving constant attention in several reports written by provincial presidents. The greatest difficulty pointed out by the authorities was occasionally the navigability conditions and frequently the actions of indigenous peoples.¹⁵

We emphasize that, in the mid-19th century, navigation projects on the Jequitinhonha River were discussed as one of the alternatives for the outflow of products from Minas Gerais to the sea. According to Renata Ferreira de Oliveira, imperial authorities attributed the indigenous presence in the region as the motivating element of the difficulties of commercial circulation, as was the case of the canoeists who navigated apprehensively with loads of salt for fear of attacks on the Jequitinhonha River (Oliveira, 2022, p. 266-267).

The salt marketed via the Jequitinhonha River was possibly related to costal production. The production from the São Francisco River, such as that of the salterns of the Towns of Santo Antonio and Brejo do Zacarias, circulated through a route more linked to the hinterlands. The salterns of Santo Antonio had already been highlighted in 1834 by the justice of the peace of Pilão Arcado, Dionísio Barreto Lima, who mentioned the towns of Santo Antonio and Brejo do Zacharias with economic activities related to salt

o senhor Dom Pedro II. Rio de Janeiro: Lithographia imperial de Eduardo Rensburg, 1860. p. 04

¹³ HALFELD, Henrique Guilherme Fernando. *Atlas e Relatório concernente a exploração do Rio de S. Francisco: desde a cachoeira da Pirapóra até ao oceano atlântico, levantado por ordem do governo de S.M.I. o senhor Dom Pedro II.* Rio de Janeiro: Lithographia imperial de Eduardo Rensburg, 1860. p. 28-34

¹⁴ BIBLIOTECA NACIONAL DIGITAL. MONCORVO E LIMA, Alvaro Tiberio de. *Falla recitada na abertura da Assembléa Legislativa da Bahia.* Bahia, Typographia de A. Olavo da França Guerra e Comp., 1856.

¹⁵ BIBLIOTECA NACIONAL DIGITAL. WANDERLEY, João Maurício. *Falla recitada na abertura da Assembléa Legislativa da Bahia.* Bahia, Typographia de A. Olavo da França Guerra e Comp., 1855.

extraction and sugar cane cultivation.¹⁶

In 1846, the municipal and orphans' judge, Joaquim José da Rocha, responded to the president of the province regarding a request made by the provincial authority to send objects related to Natural History, especially concerning the mineral kingdom. Rocha reported the existence of signs of gemstones in the region and highlighted the 'table salt' mines whose production was exported to Piauí by animal transport and to Minas Gerais by navigation.¹⁷

The Judge of the District of Campo Largo, Joaquim Ferreira Bandeira, in 1883, when sending information about the territory under his jurisdiction to the president of the province, mentioned the salt trade in the town of Barreiras. He indicated that traders from Goiás preferred the emerging settlement on the banks of the Rio Grande River than having to go to Belém, in the province of Pará, due to the slow navigation of the Tocantins River.¹⁸

Durval Vieira de Aguiar, in 1888, mentioned the settlement of Riacho da Casa Nova (in Pilão Arcado) and Barreiras (in the district of Campo Largo) as two points of sale of salt. The former relied on salt as the main export product, utilizing the production of the salterns of Pilão Arcado, whose quality was praised for its superiority and the presence of fine salt similar to refined salt.¹⁹

The latter, Barreiras, was indicated as an important point of trade, especially for merchants from Goiás who sought the variety of products from the region:

All these products are exported through 'Barreiras', which is the true trading port of the area and where substantial transactions involving the buying and selling of mangabeira rubber are already taking place. This rubber is brought by the inhabitants of the fields of Minas and Goiás, who supply themselves there with natural products, especially the salt of the earth, which is an article with much demand to export.²⁰

¹⁶ APEB. Seção colonial e provincial. Série: Governo da Província (Justiça): Correspondência recebida de Juízes – Pilão Arcado – 1828 – 1879. Maço: 2533.

¹⁷ APEB. Seção colonial e provincial. Série: Governo da Província (Justiça): Correspondência recebida de Juízes – Pilão Arcado – 1828 – 1879. Maço: 2533.

¹⁸ APEB. Seção colonial e provincial. Série: Correspondência dos Juízes Campo Largo (1873 – 1889). Maço 2314.

¹⁹ AGUIAR, Durval Vieira de. *Descrições práticas da Província da Bahia com declaração de todas as distâncias intermediárias das cidades, vilas e povoações*. Rio de Janeiro: Catedra; Brasília: Instituto Nacional do Livro, 1979. p. 62-63.

²⁰ AGUIAR, Durval Vieira de. *Descrições práticas da Província da Bahia com declaração de todas as distâncias intermediárias das cidades, vilas e povoações*. Rio de Janeiro: Catedra; Brasília: Instituto Nacional do Livro, 1979. p. 48.

The diversity of salts became evident when Durval Aguiar mentioned the mines located north of the town of Campo Largo, on the way to the town of Santa Rita do Rio Preto, as these salt mines were ‘perhaps the largest in the province’²¹ and were located on the estates of Umbuzeirinho, Salobro, and Atravessada. However, the production of this salt had little use for food seasoning and was more used in animal feed:

This salt is of little use for food seasoning, as it is very dark and causes cramps and drastic effects to those who, except for the habit, use it; generally, it is used for feeding animals, which, consuming it, fatten and have smooth and glossy fur; and when they are not given this salt ration, they go lick the soil that contains it; and they are so busy with it that it seems like they are eating dirt, which confounded many ancient explorers.²²

Salt was, therefore, one of the products within the diversity of the economy of the São Francisco. Antonio Guerreiro de Freitas emphasized the importance of salt, whose production and commercialization developed after the colonial period. Its importance, according to Freitas, lay in its role in food preservation (Freitas, 1992, p. 239-240), but it also, as seen, was of use in animal nutritional balance within livestock farming.

The salt, as a product, might seem commercially negligible, but its scarcity influenced other products such as beef. According to Alisson Eugênio, ranchers in the province of Minas Gerais warned about the wear and tear of pasture and watering holes, leading to an increased demand for salt for the nutritional complement for cattle. Thus, the scarcity of salt and the increase in beef consumption in Rio de Janeiro would have contributed to the rise in the price of meat and, consequently, inflation (Eugênio, 2011, p. 89-90).

The problems caused by the scarcity of salt were already known and Bruno Aidar explained that the lack of salt in the captaincy of São Paulo affected its economy due to its impacts on livestock farming: “Without salt, the cattle died in the pens, and the pigs could not be slaughtered, as there was no salt for curing the meat. The entire production of bacon was compromised” (Aidar, 2016, p. 172).

²¹ AGUIAR, Durval Vieira de. *Descrições práticas da Província da Bahia com declaração de todas as distâncias intermediárias das cidades, vilas e povoações*. Rio de Janeiro: Cátedra; Brasília: Instituto Nacional do Livro, 1979. p. 50.

²² AGUIAR, Durval Vieira de. *Descrições práticas da Província da Bahia com declaração de todas as distâncias intermediárias das cidades, vilas e povoações*. Rio de Janeiro: Cátedra; Brasília: Instituto Nacional do Livro, 1979. p. 50.

The difficulties with the distribution of salt were related to the actions of intermediaries and the interests of local and regional authorities (Aidar, 2016). With a view to expanding access to salt, increasing demand, and encouraging salt production, the Portuguese Crown issued a permit on 24 October 1801 abolishing exclusivity in the commercialization of salt, but in order to ensure collection, taxes on salt were also created (Aidar, 2016, p. 179).

In Rio Grande do Sul, the salt industry might have been a driving force in the sale of salt. In the 19th century, salt was imported from Rio de Janeiro and Montevideo (Berute, 2012). In the province of Amazonas, traders carried a series of products attractive for indigenous peoples, including salt, which, along with other goods, was exchanged for rubber, chestnuts, cocoa, among other products (Henrique; Morais, 2014, p. 59). The salt commercialized in Rio Grande do Sul, in Amazonas, and in other provinces had different origins. The sale of salt was much more related to imports (between provinces or from abroad), and part of this production was linked to regional production and circulation (Chaves, 2001). At the regional level, the hinterlands of the São Francisco were a point of production and a commercial route. The salt trade was present in several stretches of the São Francisco River, such as in the Remanso hamlet.²³ When he was in Pilão Arcado, Halfeld raised a hypothesis for the presence of salt near the São Francisco River: According to him, there was no evidence of the presence of rock salt similar to other mines such as in Norwich, England, or in Wieliczka, Poland.

The rock formation of the São Francisco River was described by Halfeld as ‘primitive’, and he mentioned the presence of gneiss (or schist, as he himself confirmed to be a better classification) and itacolumite, which would be a representative of mica schist, talc schist, or transitional minerals as observed in a stretch further up the river with clay schist and limestone formations. Halfeld concluded that the salt-rich rock formations, such as sandstone, marl, chalk, salt-rich clay and calcium sulfate were missing.²⁴ The salt was in the soil:

The salt extracted in these regions is impregnated in the soil, and soils mixed with clay, in the western layers, which cover, but only superficially, the aforementioned rock formations to a greater or lesser extent at various points,

²³ HALFELD, Henrique Guilherme Fernando. *Atlas e Relatório concernente a exploração do Rio de S. Francisco: desde a cachoeira da Pirapóra até ao oceano atlântico, levantado por ordem do governo de S.M.I. o senhor Dom Pedro II.* Rio de Janeiro: Lithographia imperial de Eduardo Rensburg, 1860. p. 28-34.

²⁴ HALFELD, Henrique Guilherme Fernando. *Atlas e Relatório concernente a exploração do Rio de S. Francisco: desde a cachoeira da Pirapóra até ao oceano atlântico, levantado por ordem do governo de S.M.I. o senhor Dom Pedro II.* Rio de Janeiro: Lithographia imperial de Eduardo Rensburg, 1860. p. 27

or it is found in the lowlands or lagoons where it is led by floods of rainwater.²⁵

In other words, for Halfeld, there was no justification for the presence of salt other than an accumulation provided by the damming of seawater thousands of years ago:

I am inclined to think that the Itaparica mountain range, composed of grit or sandstone, a new or fluvial formation, which appears in the valley of the São Francisco River at various points, such as in the aforementioned mountain range, and also at Itacutiara, Bréjo, Itacaratú, and the mountains near Monte Escuro, etc., served as a dam or dike for an extensive sea of saltwater, which has been drained and disappeared through the breakage of said mountains on the line of the current São Francisco River, that is, at the heights of the Itaparica waterfall, which intercepted the grit (sandstone) that makes up that mountain range from the top of its peak to the granite that serves as a seat for the said sandstone; the salt of the seawater impregnated the soil when it covered them.²⁶

He concluded the hypothesis by imagining that the salts had been conducted by the rainwater, dissolving part of the calcium chloride, magnesium chloride, and potassium nitrate and carrying them to the lagoons and shallows of the region.²⁷ We, have, then, a technical perspective on the presence of salt in the soil of the São Francisco hinterlands, as the view of the German engineer addressed three aspects: the geological, the commercial and the productive.

Halfeld also suggested that the production method be adapted to that used in Europe to achieve a better use of production processes.²⁸ The method used consisted of applying leaching techniques and, after crystallization and the formation of bricks, these are broken into 'coches' which are then packed in rawhide bags per alqueire of salt. He did not explain what the European method was, but considered it better in terms of utilization and more efficient in separating the parts harmful to health.²⁹

²⁵ HALFELD, Henrique Guilherme Fernando. *Atlas e Relatório concernente a exploração do Rio de S. Francisco: desde a cachoeira da Pirapóra até ao oceano atlântico*, levantado por ordem do governo de S.M.I. o senhor Dom Pedro II. Rio de Janeiro: Lithographia imperial de Eduardo Rensburg, 1860. p. 27

²⁶ HALFELD, Henrique Guilherme Fernando. *Atlas e Relatório concernente a exploração do Rio de S. Francisco: desde a cachoeira da Pirapóra até ao oceano atlântico*, levantado por ordem do governo de S.M.I. o senhor Dom Pedro II. Rio de Janeiro: Lithographia imperial de Eduardo Rensburg, 1860. p. 27

²⁷ HALFELD, Henrique Guilherme Fernando. *Atlas e Relatório concernente a exploração do Rio de S. Francisco: desde a cachoeira da Pirapóra até ao oceano atlântico*, levantado por ordem do governo de S.M.I. o senhor Dom Pedro II. Rio de Janeiro: Lithographia imperial de Eduardo Rensburg, 1860. p. 31

²⁸ HALFELD, Henrique Guilherme Fernando. *Atlas e Relatório concernente a exploração do Rio de S. Francisco: desde a cachoeira da Pirapóra até ao oceano atlântico*, levantado por ordem do governo de S.M.I. o senhor Dom Pedro II. Rio de Janeiro: Lithographia imperial de Eduardo Rensburg, 1860. p. 31.

²⁹ HALFELD, Henrique Guilherme Fernando. *Atlas e Relatório concernente a exploração do Rio de S.*

In 1855, the judge of the district of the São Francisco River, Francisco Mariani, responded to the president of the province who had requested information about the district. Mariani highlighted the presence of salterns in all municipalities of the district and detailed the technique used for extraction, which occurred by evaporation in Barra and Xique-Xique, and by boiling in Santa Rita and Campo Largo.

According to Francisco Mariani, salt production met the local demand and the surplus was exported mainly to the provinces of Goiás, Minas Gerais, and Piauí. The judge warned of the decline of the salterns that were disappearing and that the method used was the same as about 100 years before when salt production started. The method referred to was the leaching subject to the action of the sun or fire.³⁰

Ignácio Accioli Cerqueira e Silva also expressed concern about the salt production techniques in the hinterlands of the São Francisco River. In Cerqueira e Silva's report, published a few years before Halfeld's journey along the São Francisco River, a proposal was presented for a more suitable and profitable use of salts in these hinterlands.

In 1847, Cerqueira e Silva reported that the salt production in the hinterlands of the São Francisco was higher in the early 19th century.³¹ This observation demonstrates a situation of decline in this activity, which was also observed by Halfeld a few years later. Among the main salterns mentioned by Ignacio Accioli Cerqueira e Silva were Sento Sé, Brejo do Zacarias, and Campo Largo. Thus, two were on the banks of the São Francisco River and one on the Rio Grande.³² Among the salterns that were extinct were those around Assuruá in Xique-Xique and those on the banks of the Rio Preto.³³ We suspect that, between the report by Cerqueira e Silva in 1847 and Halfeld's journey from 1852 to 1854, salt production may have recovered near Assuruá as mentioned in the previous account of this activity.

José Marcelo Giffoni pointed out that, in the first half of the 19th century, salt was a strategic product for Brazil due to its importance "in feeding the workforce that drives

Francisco: desde a cachoeira da Pirapóra até ao oceano atlântico, levantado por ordem do governo de S.M.I. o senhor Dom Pedro II. Rio de Janeiro: Lithographia imperial de Eduardo Rensburg, 1860. p. 31

³⁰ APEB. Seção provincial e colonial. Série: Correspondências dos juizes Barra do Rio São Francisco (1850-1885. Maço, 2252.

³¹ CERQUEIRA E SILVA, Ignacio Accioli de. Informação, ou descrição topographica e politica do Rio de S. Francisco, escrita em virtude de ordens imperiaes, e apresentada ao governo provincial da Bahia. Salvador: Typ. Guaycurú de Domingos Guedes Cabral, 1847. In: *Revista do Instituto Geographico e Historico da Bahia*, n. 62. p. 05-167. 1936. p. 37

³² Tributary of the left bank of the São Francisco River.

³³ The Rio Preto is a tributary of the left bank of the Rio Grande. CERQUEIRA E SILVA, Ignacio Accioli de. Informação, ou descrição topographica e politica do Rio de S. Francisco, escrita em virtude de ordens imperiaes, e apresentada ao governo provincial da Bahia. Salvador: Typ. Guaycurú de Domingos Guedes Cabral, 1847. In: *Revista do Instituto Geographico e Historico da Bahia*, n. 62. p. 05-167. 1936. p. 37

both the domestic market and the agricultural export, and the population in general” (Giffoni, 2000, p. 70). Moreover, Giffoni also pointed out that the salt industry was stimulated by the presence of the Royal Family in 1808, generating greed over salt-rich lands in Brazil (*Ibid.*).

The best period of production was, according to Cerqueira e Silva, between July and October.³⁴ This is the period of drought, which according to the Bahia Planning Center (CEPLAB), can be indicated as the dry season (which would be in winter). The average precipitation was measured to be less than 10 mm within the dry season:

The dry season happens during winter, usually between June and August, and November, with precipitation of less than 10 mm, while the rainy season happens from November to March, with precipitation exceeding 100 mm. In the driest area, only one rainy month (March) is recorded, with annual precipitation of 500 mm (Bahia, 1979, p. 16).

The data collected by CEPLAB is related to the period from 1911 to 1967, but we highlight that the markings are in corresponding periods of the year with little variation. This characteristic of the São Francisco River basin and, in particular, its middle section, clearly marks the work in agriculture and salt extraction.

The salt production technique described by Cerqueira e Silva does not differ from Halfeld’s description. According to him, the steps would be as follows: 1) after the ponds dry up, the salt from the edges is precipitated. The low water level enhances the effect of evaporation; 2) the salt mixed with the sludge is collected in the uncovered space of the flood; 3) leaching is done in large trays in the sun or under fire; 4) the salt is packed in leather bags (*surrões*).³⁵

Ignácio Accioli Cerqueira e Silva pointed out a slightly different explanation from Halfeld for the presence of salt in the hinterlands of the São Francisco. Quoting the naturalist Dr. Vieira Couto, Cerqueira e Silva explained: “it is assumed [...] that the salt

³⁴ CERQUEIRA E SILVA, Ignácio Accioli de. Informação, ou descrição topographica e politica do Rio de S. Francisco, escrita em virtude de ordens imperiaes, e apresentada ao governo provincial da Bahia. Salvador: Typ. Guaycurú de Domingos Guedes Cabral, 1847. In: *Revista do Instituto Geographico e Historico da Bahia*, n. 62. p. 05-167. 1936. p. 37; 39.

³⁵ CERQUEIRA E SILVA, Ignácio Accioli de. Informação, ou descrição topographica e politica do Rio de S. Francisco, escrita em virtude de ordens imperiaes, e apresentada ao governo provincial da Bahia. Salvador: Typ. Guaycurú de Domingos Guedes Cabral, 1847. In: *Revista do Instituto Geographico e Historico da Bahia*, n. 62. p. 05-167, 1936. p. 39

comes to these lagoons by seepage from the depths of the earth, where there are large deposits of sea salt [...]"³⁶ Shortly thereafter, he indicated the naturalist's suggestion for better use of the salterns, which consisted of mastering techniques for setting up tanks or salt evaporation ponds to create a clean surface where, through evaporation, the salt would be made available on a clean floor.³⁷ This was the explanation that Ignacio Accioli used to as the basis for his proposal to improve salt activities.

Comparing the information from both reports, we have two perspectives: while Ignacio Accioli Cerqueira e Silva sought to rely on a naturalist scholar to explain the presence of salt in the soil and then elaborate a proposal for better product yield, Guilherme Halfeld, on the other hand, used geological knowledge, which likely formed part of his education as a civil engineer, to explain how salt was accumulated in the soil and indicate a way out. However, Halfeld's proposal, as already mentioned, was extremely limited compared to that of Cerqueira e Silva, who, in addition to presenting the hypotheses of Dr. Vieira Couto for the presence of salt and its better utilization, concluded with an explanation of what he considered ideal within the regional conditions.

The idea of Ignacio Accioli Cerqueira e Silva, based on the proposition of Vieira Couto, to boost salt production consisted of the creation of a saltern that would served as a model for individuals and that would be managed by a 'philosopher' in such a way that it would function as a pedagogical instrument for private investments. Thus, an occupation would be created for the population, and those who showed better use of 'lessons' would be granted 'some exemptions'.³⁸

Thus, Ignacio Accioli presented a proposal to boost salt production in the hinterlands of the São Francisco, but based on the reflections of the naturalist Vieira Couto. Both reports - by Cerqueira e Silva and Halfeld - pointed to paths for revitalizing the regional economy in the São Francisco and among the products covered, salt was included. This debate was related to navigation, which was a recurring concern of both

³⁶ CERQUEIRA E SILVA, Ignacio Accioli de. Informação, ou descrição topographica e politica do Rio de S. Francisco, escrita em virtude de ordens imperiaes, e apresentada ao governo provincial da Bahia. Salvador: Typ. Guaycurú de Domingos Guedes Cabral, 1847. In: *Revista do Instituto Geographico e Historico da Bahia*, n. 62. p. 05-167, 1936. p. 37

³⁷ CERQUEIRA E SILVA, Ignacio Accioli de. Informação, ou descrição topographica e politica do Rio de S. Francisco, escrita em virtude de ordens imperiaes, e apresentada ao governo provincial da Bahia. Salvador: Typ. Guaycurú de Domingos Guedes Cabral, 1847. In: *Revista do Instituto Geographico e Historico da Bahia*, n. 62. p. 05-167. 1936. p. 37-38.

³⁸ CERQUEIRA E SILVA, Ignacio Accioli de. Informação, ou descrição topographica e politica do Rio de S. Francisco, escrita em virtude de ordens imperiaes, e apresentada ao governo provincial da Bahia. Salvador: Typ. Guaycurú de Domingos Guedes Cabral, 1847. In: *Revista do Instituto Geographico e Historico da Bahia*, n. 62. p. 05 - 167. 1936. p. 38.

the Imperial State and the local authorities of the São Francisco hinterlands.

The presence of salt in the São Francisco economy was reported by local authorities at various times. Both judges and city councils informed the provincial president about the presence of salt in the local economy. Pilão Arcado, as already mentioned, highlighted some salt-producing settlements and the destination of this commodity. This was, perhaps, the municipality that managed to obtain the best yield from the salterns in the hinterlands of the São Francisco. The city council of Campo Largo, a town located on the banks of the Rio Grande – a tributary of the left bank of the São Francisco River – requested the provincial assembly in 1853 to create some taxes to improve municipal revenue. Among the proposals was the suggestion of charging 80 réis per alqueire of salt exported from the municipality.³⁹

Three years later, commenting on the impact of the scarcity in Salvador on the price of foodstuffs in the district, Francisco Mariani mentioned salt as one of the products affected by the influence of the price of beef, given the difficulties caused by floods and inundations in previous seasons. The main mines were in the districts of the São Francisco River and Sento Sé. Finally, in addition to the waters, the salt mines were exhausted and subject to taxes that were suffocating considering the situation experienced, according to Mariani.⁴⁰

In 1872, the city council of Santa Rita do Rio Preto – a town located on the banks of the Rio Preto (a tributary of the left bank of the Rio Grande) – asked the parish priest, Antonio Florêncio Alvares Monteiro, to prepare a report with the information requested by the president of the province about the locality. Monteiro provided a long description of the geography and the local economic production, where the soil was rich in “salts of sodium, potassium, chloride, phosphorus, iron, and aluminum”.⁴¹ The salt extracted from the lagoons in the region were not composed of ‘chlorine and sodium’ and did not have ‘cubic cleavage (like sea salt)’ and its base was composed of “potassium and some copper salts, due to the existence of these latter salts in the copper utensils used in its production”.⁴² The presence of iron salts, potassium salts, sodium salts, and aluminum

³⁹ APEB. Seção colonial e provincial. Série: Correspondência recebidas das câmaras das vilas e câmara de Salvador. Sub-série: Correspondência recebida da câmara Campo Largo (1846 – 1889). Maço: 1288.

⁴⁰ APEB. Seção colonial e provincial. Série Governo da Província (Justiça): Correspondência recebida de Juízes – Rio São Francisco – 1829 – 1870. Maço: 2568

⁴¹ APEB. Seção colonial e provincial. Série: Correspondências recebidas das câmaras das vilas e câmara de Salvador. Sub-série: Correspondências recebidas da câmara de Santa Rita do Rio Preto (1860 – 1873). Maço: 1423.

⁴² APEB. Seção colonial e provincial. Série: Correspondências recebidas das câmaras das vilas e câmara de Salvador. Sub-série: Correspondências recebidas da câmara de Santa Rita do Rio Preto (1860 – 1873).

salts in some soils would make, according to Monteiro, the soil favorable for sugar cane cultivation. Still, the parish priest lamented the lack of instruments to analyze the chemical composition of the salts.⁴³

Technical limitation made research difficult, but a lot of information was produced by travelers, naturalists, and regional authorities. The latter, when they had academic education, often responded to consultations made by city councils or even the provincial government, as evidenced by the role played by Father Antonio Florêncio Alvares Monteiro in Santa Rita do Rio Preto.

The effort to explore the interior of the territory dates back to much earlier periods when naturalists traveled through the hinterlands of the captaincies to investigate the possibilities of economic exploitation through mining. During the monarchical regime, new expeditions into the interior were sponsored by the Imperial Government to investigate the economic possibilities, such as the journey of Guilherme Halfeld along the São Francisco River to analyze its navigability conditions. This journey also allowed for observations of the economic conditions and commercial possibilities.

Maço: 1423.

⁴³ APEB. Seção colonial e provincial. Série: Correspondências recebidas das câmaras das vilas e câmara de Salvador. Sub-série: Correspondências recebidas da câmara de Santa Rita do Rio Preto (1860 – 1873). Maço: 1423.

Final Remarks

Salt and saltpeter were present in the hinterlands of the São Francisco River, and despite the technical difficulties in its production chain and circulation, they were traded in several river ports. Minas Gerais and Goiás were provinces where the salt from the hinterlands of the São Francisco River in Bahia was consumed. While the São Francisco River served as the main route to Minas Gerais, its left bank tributaries facilitated trade between inhabitants of more remote areas of Bahia and Goiás residents seeking salt and other products.

For intellectuals of the Imperial State who prepared reports on the São Francisco River, the salterns were part of the diversified economy of the São Francisco hinterlands and were thus presented as an economic alternative to be encouraged. The extent of the circulation of the products from the hinterlands of the São Francisco transcended provincial boundaries.

The search for saltpeter lost importance to salt as the difficulties of extraction and circulation combined with a demand for a product useful not only for food preparation but also for the preservation of beef and fish.

Thus, Halfeld's journey took place in the 1850s, and the report was published in 1860; Cerqueira e Silva published a report with economic information on the hinterlands of the São Francisco River in 1847. The so-called 'economy of the catado' was emphasized by Halfeld, and salt was a part of it, as had already been highlighted by Ignácio Accioli Cerqueira e Silva almost ten years earlier.

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