





Manumissions in Penedo, Alagoas: local context, national issues (1840s to 1880s)

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 10.28998/rchv13n26.2022.0021

Received: October 10th, 2022

Approved: November 10th, 2022



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Slavery in Brazil condemned millions of men and women, many of whom were born free, to work forcibly for their owners until the end of their days. Through oppression, physical coercion, and a legal-institutional system, for three centuries, the relations of slave labor shaped the colony and later the independent country. The commitment of Brazilian society led to the spread of slavery throughout the territory, affecting social relations as a whole and making Brazil the last independent nation in the West to abolish it.

Slavery defined distinct social categories; however, there was the possibility of changing status throughout life. Just as leaving the captive condition was a hope for enslaved individuals, the threat of illegal enslavement or re-enslavement hovered over the free and freed non-white individuals. Moreover, beyond the situation of enslavement itself, numerous other forms of coerced labor existed in Colonial and Imperial Brazil.

Data on these pluralities of situations experienced by our ancestors have been unveiled in recent research efforts. As Mamigonian and Grinberg (2021, p. 4) state:

These studies are part of a historiographical movement that has been demonstrating that, in slave-owning Brazil, while there were several possibilities for enslaved individuals to obtain manumission, equally important were the practices of enslavement, the maintenance of old and new forms of lordly dominium, the attempts to extend the Atlantic and internal slave trade, and the difficulties of maintaining the freed status and social security of those who had managed to obtain manumission or who had arrived in Brazil during the period of the illegality of the traffic.

A long and enduring effort on the part of the enslaved population was necessary to change their condition, and after obtaining manumission, a new stage of struggle for the maintenance of freed status began. Even decades after its achievement, their freedom could be questioned, as indicated by the cases of re-enslavement analyzed by Grimberg (2007).

An example of the precariousness of freedom occurred with Manuel Cordonha.¹

¹ The term ‘precariousness of freedom’ has been used to consider the issue of sociability among free and

Born enslaved in Penedo in about 1856, he received a deed of manumission in 1872. However, this deed was never recorded with the notary public, and after a disagreement between him and the former owner, it was torn up, and Cordonha returned to enslavement. Despite the fact that he contested the lordly act through a freedom legal action, formal issues ultimately confirmed his captive status, and he was sold into interprovincial trade.²

The issue of the transience between enslavement and freedom in the context of 19th-century Brazil has been raised in recent studies on the subject. An older point of discussion concerns the role of manumissions in accommodating conflicts in slave-owning societies. This debate dates back to at least the 1940s, with Frank Tannenbaum and the proposition of comparative history between Latin America and the United States. Many authors have already criticized his conclusions, highlighting that the increased possibility of access to manumissions did not mean a milder system of coercion (Lima, 2009; Grinberg, 2001). However, the topic still generates controversy. Some historians focus on the potential of manumissions as an instrument of lordly control, given their private nature – manumissions were, until 1871, strictly private documents dependent on the will of the owners. Others emphasize them as the result of the enslaved individual's articulation to produce conditions for it to be feasible, perceiving it as an achievement.³

In this sense, it is important to emphasize, as many have already done, that it is not possible to generalize the effects of such a complex instrument for the entire period of slavery and all Brazilian regions.⁴ However, I understand that the perspective of Giovanni Levi (2000, p. 45) regarding the strategic use of social norms is a way to think about the place that manumission occupied in Brazilian slave relations. While the possibility of obtaining them through the acceptance of the unequal rules of the game may have accommodated some spirits and contributed to the acceptance of the status quo, on the other hand, it enabled vertical mobility, pressing class consensuses and expanding the possibility of action by individuals from the lower strata of society, contributing to straining normative systems.

The 19th century brought important changes in terms of the paths to escape slavery. As demonstrated by Grinberg (2001), there was an increase in the use of judicial resources in the 19th century to achieve this goal, expressed mainly via freedom legal

freed Black, Brown, and Indigenous individuals in a slave society, in order to analyze the limits and instabilities of their experiences and deepen the understanding of the meanings of freedom in the period (Chalhoub, 2010; Lima, 2005).

² More details about the case of Manoel Cordonha can be found in Teixeira (2017, chap. 6).

³ Among the authors who have researched the discussion, see: Bertin, 2004; Lima, 2004.

⁴ A recent comment on this point can be found in Praxedes & Castro, 2001, p. 352-353.

actions. Thus, negotiations became increasingly judicialized, leading to the progressive intervention of the State in disputes related to freedom. In this sense, the Law of Free Birth or Rio Branco Law, passed on 28 September 1871, played a central role, limiting the free will of owners over the right to manumission, and condemning slavery to an end, freeing the offspring of enslaved women from the yoke of captivity.⁵ The struggles for individual manumission took on an increasingly collective aspect, to the point that, in the last decades of slavery, there was a coordinated action by different sectors in favor of manumissions, with the participation of abolitionists, such as Luiz Gama in São Paulo, and Francisco José Alves in Sergipe, as well as emancipatory societies formed exclusively for this purpose, as occurred in many cities, including Penedo.⁶ Through purchase, propaganda, or litigation, numerous manumissions were obtained through the action of these individuals and institutions, making the theme of freedom increasingly public and hollowing out the lordly power that initially surrounded this instrument.

The increasing condemnation of slavery in the international scene, the economic and technological changes arising from the Second Industrial Revolution, and the threat of the breakdown of family ties caused by the increase in internal trade also impacted the rise in the number of manumissions throughout the 19th century (Moreira, 2007, p. 15). Knowing how to navigate that world, whether by creating ways to accumulate savings or establishing favorable relationships to be able to obtain a manumission without an apparent burden⁷, or with the provision of services, was an essential characteristic of the individuals who are recorded in notary books as having attained freedom. Working against this movement, it should be mentioned that there was an increase in the price of enslaved individuals after the end of the international slave trade, making them more valuable to their owners and making it difficult for enslaved individuals to accumulate enough money to buy their freedom.

To assess the extent to which manumissions affected Brazilian society in the 19th

⁵ An analysis of the transformations of slave relations in the period and their implications for the post-abolition period can be found in Castro (2007).

⁶ On Luiz Gama, see Azevedo (1999); on Francisco José Alves, consult Amaral (2012); and on abolitionist societies, refer to Alonso (2011). The Sociedade Humanitária e Emancipadora Penedense (Humanitarian and Emancipatory Society of Penedo) was created in 1869 and subsisted until 1871; see Ernani Méro (1994, p. 101) and Félix Lima Junior (1975, p. 5) for more information.

⁷ I propose the analytical term ‘apparent burden’ to address manumissions that the documentation names ‘gratuitous’ or ‘without any condition’, considering the observation that it is not possible to speak of manumissions without burden, or gratuitous, given that every deed of freedom is the result of the exploitation of the labor of the enslaved man or woman – or of their parents, in the case of very young children – until the very day when the deed is done (Paiva, 1995, p. 50). I thank Marcio Mocelin for helping to reflect on the most appropriate term.

century and how their effects differed according to the spatiotemporal context, it is necessary to analyze the breadth of the practice in different regions and at different times in history. Case studies provide us with a more general overview of the granting of deeds of manumission. Numerous investigations have been carried out, especially regarding the use of notarial documentation.⁸ The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the debate on the topic, focusing on a specific region not covered by any existing studies on the subject.⁹

The Loyal and Valorous Town of Penedo¹⁰

The town of Penedo, located on the banks of the São Francisco River near its mouth, has its history intertwined with the colonial period. It was one of the first European settlements in the southern region of Pernambuco and, among other prominent historical events, marked the limit of the Dutch occupation in the 1630s. It established itself as the main axis connecting the production of the Lower and Middle São Francisco to the Atlantic Ocean, taking on the characteristic of a commercial city (Cultural Mapping, 2009, p. 36-37). In the 19th century, with the autonomy of Alagoas, it rivaled the emerging town of Maceió as the main port of the province. It gained momentum with the process of political and territorial centralization undertaken by the Second Reign, which brought steam navigation to the interior of the Lower São Francisco, enabling regular routes that connected the Sertão (hinterlands) to the main ports of the Empire since the 1850s. In this same process, it was the location of establishment of an important network of merchants involved in the interprovincial slave trade (Teixeira, 2017).

⁸ Among the numerous works, I highlight those that have utilized a large number of manumissions, such as Eisenberg for Campinas (1989), Moreira e Tassoni for Porto Alegre (2007) and Mattoso, Klein e Engerman for Bahia (1988).

⁹ Considering the extensive bibliography on manumissions, it was necessary to establish certain criteria to select the works with which this paper would engage more directly. Thus, we used only investigations dealing with the Second Reign, which utilized the same typology of documents, employed similar quantification parameters, and listed the impacts of the Law of Free Birth on the results obtained. Similarly, the focus was on works that analyze manumissions outside the main slave-buying provinces in the context of interprovincial trade – Minas Gerais, São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro – considering that the effects of trade may have affected the patterns of manumission in these regions, which would require a more in-depth comparative analysis. The exception is the work of Peter Eisenberg on Campinas, which will be used as an example of a slave-buying region. Due to their many specificities that would influence manumissions, it was decided not to delve too deeply into the comparison with major urban centers of the Empire, such as Salvador, Recife, and Porto Alegre.

¹⁰ The title remained in force for almost the entire 19th century. An example of its application can be found in Halfeld (1994, p. 51). The use of the article ‘o’ is outdated, but I choose to use it because, in addition to having been common in the period under discussion, it does not diverge from the current grammatical rule that provides for its use when geographical accidents are used to name cities, as is the case with Recife.

It was in a favorable context for economic development that the town found itself in the mid-1840s. Although further studies are still needed to better understand the economic development process of the region in the 19th century, it seems that its prosperity continued until the end of the century. The beginning of the construction of the Paulo Afonso Railway, linking Piranhas to Jatobá (now Petrolândia, Pernambuco) in 1878, whose road system was integrated with steam river transport and the Atlantic through Penedo, it is a testimony to this promising moment (Tenório, 1996, p. 105). The town was the residence of merchants involved in the regional and national market, who even made attempts at international trade.¹¹ Important commercial houses established there were in direct contact with capitalists from Recife, Salvador, and Rio de Janeiro and characterized the riverside area of the town, whose rhythm was directed by the back-and-forth of vessels at the port and the weekly fairs. Through its narrow streets that still had a colonial layout, owners, free workers, and enslaved individuals circulated. In the surrounding area of the town, a vast cultivable area produced sugar cane, cotton, rice, subsistence goods, as well as cattle that spread across both banks of the river. The Araújo & Filhos oil company inaugurated the industrial era in Penedo in the 1850s. Thus, it was a regionally important town, to the point that Emperor Dom Pedro II, when visiting it in 1859, stated that it should be the capital of the province of Alagoas (Duarte, 2010, p. 42).

The commercial characteristic of the town and its centrality in the region are important factors in understanding its historical dynamics. However, one should not consider the context of manumissions in the municipality as being strictly urban. The boundaries separating these two contexts were very blurred in the 19th century, and certainly, in a medium-sized town that was not a provincial capital, this circumstance must have been even more pronounced. Moreover, the fact that the area of the municipality of Penedo was extensive and rural should be considered. It is a hybrid context, where the borders were flexible and permeable, just like the enslavement and freedom experienced by the individuals named in the documents on which this paper focus.

¹¹ In 1866, Imperial Decree 3,749 allowed navigation on the São Francisco River directly to the international market, and in the following years, some vessels attempted this, but without substantial progress. See: Teixeira, 2018.

The Documents

This paper analyzed 380 deeds of manumission recorded between 1845 and 1886 concerning the freedom – partial or total¹² – of 413 enslaved individuals. The manumissions were tabulated from 11 notarial books from the 1º Tabelionato da Cidade e Termo do Penedo (a notary public), of which six are now in the collection of the Cartório de 1º Ofício do Penedo (a registry office) and five are in the collection of the Fórum do Penedo (a court house).¹³ The documents cover the years 1845, 1855 to 1863, 1871 to 1882, and 1885 and 1886. In addition to the discontinuity, it is known that they were not the only notarial records in the city, as there was at least one other notary public who also registered deeds of manumission.¹⁴ It is also worth mentioning that not all manumissions were registered with a notary public; many manumissions granted in wills, via the Emancipation Fund, and many other private deeds, such as that of Manuel Cordonha, were never taken to the notary for formal registration. It is, therefore, a sample of part of the manumissions granted in the town during the period; however, the total number of manumissions in Penedo would have been much higher. In any case, spanning five decades, the sources allow for an approximation of the manumission patterns employed, enabling the comparison of the information gathered with the Brazilian historiography on the subject. As the seat of the district that covered the south of Alagoas, the books record manumissions of the other towns on the Alagoas bank of the São Francisco River, mainly Piaçabussu and Pão de Açúcar, in addition to some deeds from the Sergipe bank, mainly Propriá and Vila Nova.

To explore the specificities of Penedo, while not disregarding the registered documents from other localities, some of the data was tabulated into two categories in a

¹² Although it is an important point, the limitations of this paper prevent a deeper exploration of the issue of partial manumissions. However, it is worth noting that 39 enslaved individuals were granted partial freedom, 22 of whom were owned by more than one heir and were granted freedom from some of them.

¹³ The documentation related to the Registry Office likely includes all copies from that collection. In the case of the Court House, there are more documents of this type, but it was not possible to scrutinize it all given the current state of organization of the collection. It is worth mentioning that despite a significant volume of conserved documents in several public and private institutions in Penedo, the absence of an adequate policy for organization, conservation, and access to the collections makes research in the town extremely difficult. The democratization of access to the documentary heritage is essential so that more aspects of the region's history can contribute to the development of historiographical production in Alagoas and Brazil.

¹⁴ According to the Almanack da Província of 1874, in addition to Americo Jose Barreiros Lyra, responsible for the 1st notary public located at Praça São Gonçalo do Amarante, number 4, there was a 2nd notary, Joaquim da Natividade Reis Caco, located at Rua Sete de Setembro, number 27. Almanack da Província de Alagoas 1874. Maceió: Typ Social de Amintas & Soares, 1874. Available at: Hemeroteca Nacional da Biblioteca Nacional. <https://bndigital.bn.gov.br/hemeroteca-digital/>. Access date: 1 Sept. 2022.

few of the analyzes. The first category involved an overall examination of all the recorded deeds of manumission in the 11 notarial books used in this investigation. The second category has a specific focus and considered only those deeds that were registered in the municipality of Penedo, taking into account the locality where the deed was originally registered, in addition to those directly done with the notary.

Regarding the diachronic analysis of the sources, we chose to work with a single marker related to the enactment of the Law of Free Birth. Thus, when useful for the analysis, the deeds are divided into two sections: dated before and after 28 September 1871. There were 192 enslaved individuals freed before and 221 after. It is worth mentioning that the dating of the deeds used for this classification is that of the granting, not of the registration in the notary books.

Manumissions in Penedo

In the mid-19th century, Penedo had a considerable enslaved population, albeit declining, mainly due to interprovincial trade that had been keeping the port or the town working since the late 1840s, taking to other regions of the country, especially the Southeast, not only enslaved individuals from the municipality but also from the entire region of the Lower São Francisco and beyond (Teixeira, 2017). In 1848, the population maps produced by the presidency of the province estimated that the Penedo District, which covered the entire Alagoas bank of the Lower São Francisco at that time, had about 40,000 people, of which 10% were enslaved individuals. In the same year, the parish of Penedo registered around 12,000 souls, with the proportion of enslaved individuals at 14%, indicating that the largest Alagoas town in the Lower São Francisco tended to concentrate the enslaved individuals in the region. In 1872, the district was split,¹⁵ leading to a reduction in its population to almost 29,000 people, of which 9% were enslaved individuals. In the same year, the parish had about 18,000 souls, of which only 5% were enslaved individuals.¹⁶ The data indicates that the town experienced a relative decrease in the enslaved population proportionally greater than the region. The fact that the urban

¹⁵ The easternmost part of the region came to be under the jurisdiction of the new District of Mata Grande.

¹⁶ There are two estimates from close years in which a significantly larger population of enslaved people is listed, around 12% and 18%. However, both cases are approximate estimates, and in this sense, it is more reliable to use the data from the 1871 Census. See: Espíndola (2001, p. 97); PASSOS, José Alexandre. Mappa da população da provincia das Alagoas. *In*: Relatório lido perante a Assembléa Legislativa da provincia das Alagoas no acto de sua installação em 16 de março de 1870 pelo presidente da mesma o exm. sr. dr. José Bento da Cunha Figueiredo Junior. Maceió, Typ. Commercial de A.J. da Costa, 1870.

enslaved population became one of the main targets of the interprovincial trade and also had greater access to manumissions, especially paid ones, could be a plausible explanation for this difference. However, to gauge accurately the number of deeds of manumission granted in the municipality, it is important to note that during the period under consideration, the enslaved population counted at specific times in the municipality of Penedo fluctuated between 900 and 2,200 people.

Among the 413 individual manumissions recorded in the sources, we have:

Table 1 – Individual manumissions in the Notarial Books of Penedo (1845-1886) by location.

Location	Freed Individuals
Penedo	297
Alagoas – other locations	59
Bahia	3
Sergipe	19
Unidentified	35
Total	413

Source: 11 Notarial Books of the 1º Tabelionato (notary public) of the Town of Penedo, between 1845 and 1886, incomplete series. Collection of the Fórum do Penedo (courthouse) and the Cartório do 1º Ofício do Penedo (registry office).

From the data above, it is possible to see that the majority – 72% – of the manumissions recorded in the books were granted in Penedo. It is a considerable proportion, representing a substantial number of deeds of manumission. When analyzed by gender, the deeds present the following data:

Table 2 – Individual manumissions in the Notarial Books of Penedo by gender (Livros de Notas e Transmissões, 1845-1886).

Gender/Sample	Penedo		All Locations	
Women	184	62%	256	62%
Men	112	38%	156	38%
Undeclared	1		1	

Source: 11 Notarial Books of the 1º Tabelionato (notary public) of the Town of Penedo, between 1845 and 1886, incomplete series. Collection of the Fórum do Penedo (courthouse) and the Cartório do 1º Ofício do Penedo (registry office).

The historiography on manumissions is practically unanimous in pointing to a

higher incidence of deeds granted to women. Penedo was no exception. Both there and in the general calculation, the proportion of the recorded deeds granted to women reaches 62%, while 38% are granted to men.¹⁷ Compared to other regions of the country, the 1st Notary Public of Penedo recorded a high proportion of deeds granted to women, amounting to almost two letters granted to them for every one granted to men.¹⁸

One of the reasons suggested for this higher proportion would be the lower value of manumissions for women, which would increase the possibility of their attainment through payment. As will be shown later, the incidence of paid manumissions in the municipality is high, but when crossing the data between paid manumissions and those without apparent burden, we find that among the former, women accounted for a total of 62%, and among those granted without apparent burden, this proportion was 61%, revealing little difference between the two variables. Thus, I tend to agree with Katia Almeida (2006, p. 109-110), who, when analyzing the deeds of manumission in Rio das Contas, does not give much importance to the lower value of women as an explanation for their higher incidence in terms of manumissions.

By all accounts, the observations of Peter Eisenberg (1989) continue to be valid when analyzing the female predominance in deeds of manumission. According to the author, one should reflect on the issue from two points of view. On the part of those granting the deeds, female labor and gender conditions in a patriarchal society allowed for closer proximity between women and their masters and mistresses, providing them with more opportunities to negotiate a deed of manumission, even in the harsh context of sexual violence and all kinds of abuse.

From the perspective of the enslaved individuals, prioritizing women in freedom projects, especially those involving paid manumissions, reflected a family project aimed at freeing future generations, given the fact that the condition of enslavement was passed on at birth. Therefore, freeing women, in most cases, involved not only the freedom of the individual but also that of the children they would have, and this factor would have

¹⁷ There is no change in the proportion if we separate the manumissions with burden from those without apparent burden.

¹⁸ Peter Eisenberg (1989, p. 266) on Campinas presents 51.9% of women for the period between 1798 and 1888, with the peak of the difference occurring between 1875 and 1885 when the proportion of women reached 62%. Maria de Fátima Pires (2006, p. 149) observed the proportion of 55% of women in Rio das Contas in the 1870s, and Katia Almeida, analyzing the entire 19th century in the same region, does not see the proportion of women surpassing 59%. In Paraíba, Galliza (1979, p. 140) found a proportion of 57% women for the period 1850-1888, identical to what Amaral (2007, p. 197) observed for the region of Cotinguiba, Sergipe, between 1860-1888. Thiago Araújo (2008, p. 196) obtains basically equivalent numbers of manumissions of women (50.3%) and men in Cruz Alta, Rio Grande do Sul, in the period from 1850 to 1888, noting that the male enslaved population was larger in the region.

affected some family strategies. Even after 1871, this perspective remained valid, as young children remained tied to the master due to maternal enslavement.¹⁹

It is also necessary to consider manumissions received as compensation for the bearing of enslaved offspring. Although there are only two records of this practice in the set of documents – I will return to one of them shortly – other manumissions may also have been motivated by this factor.²⁰ In the case of the Lower São Francisco region, it should be noted that the São Bento Monastery, which owned a large slaveholding property in the São Francisco Islands near Penedo, considered employing the practice of manumitting enslaved women who bore many children since 1780, and in 1866 effectively formalized it (Costa, 2020, p. 183-185). These ideas might have circulated, encouraging owners to adopt them inspired by the religious model.²¹

All these circumstances contribute to the explanation of this predominance of women among the freed. The Penedo data support this perception and stand out insofar as they present an even higher proportion than in most of the locations for which we have quantitative research on manumissions. The data become even more interesting when realizing that there was a decline in the female population among the enslaved, as shown in the table:

Table 3 – Enslaved population in the population counts of the parish of Penedo by gender.

Gender/Year	1848	%	1872	%
Women	882	51%	363	37%
Men	850	49%	608	63%
Total	1,732		971	

Source: Falla dirigida á Assembleia Legislativa da provincia das Alagoas, na abertura da segunda sessão ordinaria da setima legislatura, pelo excellentissimo presidente da mesma provincia, o coronel Antonio Nunes de Aguiar, no dia 18 de março de 1849. Pernambuco, Typ. de Santos & Companhia, 1849. Recenseamento do Império do Brazil, 1872.

¹⁹ A rare record of the intentionality of enslaved individuals in this regard was made by Marie Graham in 1822. The traveler wrote down in her diary the knowledge she had about an enslaved man who had the possibility of accumulating savings. Firstly, he freed his wife so that their children would be born free, and only in a second moment did he set himself free (Slenes, 2011, p. 207).

²⁰ Cartório do 1º Ofício do Penedo. Livro de notas número 21, Livro de lançamento de proações, cartas de liberdade e outros, 1870-1871, p. 81. Livro de notas número 25, Livro de lançamento de proações, cartas de liberdade e outros, 1879-1881, folha 35v.

²¹ However, the notation in deeds of manumission stating that they were ‘rewards’ for ‘bearing enslaved individuals’ appears in several studies that delve into the reading of a large number of deeds of manumission, although they are never very numerous. Peter Eisenberg (1989, p. 265-266), having seen more than 2,347 deeds of manumission, found but a single case – in addition to two others in which the freed woman was the master’s own mother. Praxedes and Castro (2001, p. 368) highlight a case found among the 699 analyzed in Minas Gerais (Diamantina and São João de Rey), and Teixeira (2012, p. 10) found another six among the 568 people freed in Mariana. Kátia Almeida (2006, p. 118), in a set of 1,777 freed individuals in Rio das Contas, identified 19 cases of freedom justified this way.

As I have already pointed out, the decrease in the enslaved population in Penedo during the period under consideration can be partly attributed to interprovincial trade. Based on the analysis of manumissions, it is possible to suggest that they also contributed to this decline. Considering that research on interprovincial trade in Alagoas points to a relative balance between men and women exported in the 1850s and a slight male majority in other decades (Teixeira, 2021, p. 272), it can be suggested that the remarkable predominance of women among those freed significantly contributed to the gender imbalance in the enslaved population between the two counts.

It is noteworthy that, after the Law of Free Birth, when women were already a minority among the captive population, their number increased in proportion among those freed by manumission. Before 1871, they represented 61%, and after the Law, 63% of those manumitted. The data lead to the perception that, when it comes to the experience of freedom from enslavement, one must consider that there were, in general, more women than men among the category of those freed.

Another trend that research points to is the greater incidence of deeds granted to individuals born in Brazil. Again, it is important to note the demographic configuration of the population of Penedo during the period in question. Certainly, as the decades of the 19th century passed, there was a significant decrease in the African population, given the definitive end of international slave trade in the 1850s. At the time of the first national census in 1872, the African population of Penedo was 5%.²² In the deeds of manumission, considering only those in which information about the origin of the individual was recorded, enslaved Africans manumitted were 19%.²³ Unfortunately, the lack of more data prevents us from delving much further into these considerations, but the number of freed Africans, considering the period in question, is quite significant. Although the majority is identified simply as African, the origins of eight individuals are specified as ‘Angolan’, one as ‘Congolese’, one as ‘gentile from Guinea’ and four as ‘Nagos’.

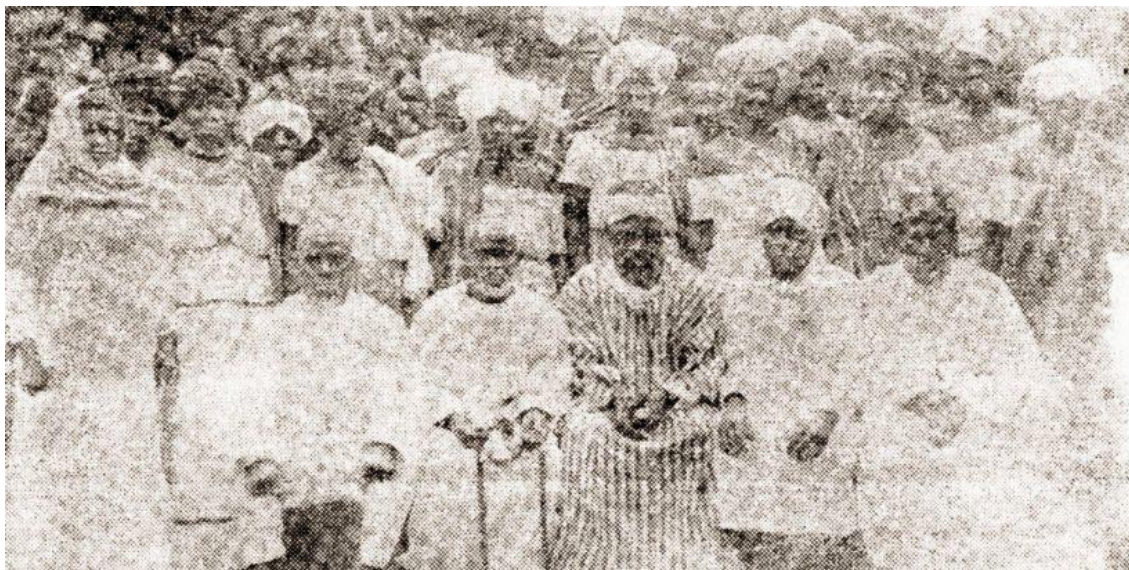
The existence of an important African community in Penedo has been known since the work of Melo Moraes Filho (2002) in the early 20th century when the author recalled a celebration of the dead organized by the African population in the city. In addition, known in Alagoas historiography is a photography from the late 19th century

²² BRAZIL. Recenseamento do Império do Brasil, 1872.

²³ In total, there are 51 enslaved Africans and 215 enslaved Brazilians with their origins recorded. In the Penedo set, the numbers are 35 and 162 respectively, presenting in this second set a slightly lower proportion with 18% of Africans among those manumitted.

that registered a group of Islamized Africans.

Photograph 1 – Malês (Black Muslims) in Penedo.



Source: <https://www.historiadealagoas.com.br/negros-muculmanos-em-alagoas-os- males.html>. The photograph can be found printed in the work of Abelardo Duarte, 1958.

The data obtained from the deeds of manumission, although very incomplete, indicate the presence of a community from West Africa, by identifying four Nagos (from the Yoruba people). On the other hand, he recalls that it was not only from this region that enslaved Africans arrived in Penedo. Certainly, a significant part of these individuals attaining deeds of manumission in the city between 1845 and 1885 were illegally introduced into Brazil after the law of 18321.

This is explicitly stated in the deed of manumission of Joana. Without her age having been registered, she received, in 1886, in the town of Penedo, a deed of manumission without apparent burden under the justification: “in accordance with the law of 7 November 1831, since it was proven that she was imported after the said law”.²⁴ It is the only deed of manumission among the researched documentation that mentions the legislation related to the end of the Atlantic slave trade, but it exemplifies well the Brazilian reality of the 19th century, in which over 800,000 people were illegally introduced as slaves.²⁵ Joana was one of these people; she lived for at least three decades as a slave but must have benefited from the growing abolitionist movement that

²⁴ Cartório do 1º Ofício do Penedo. Livro de notas número 28, Livro de lançamento de proclamações, cartas de liberdade e outros, 1885-1886, folha 145.

²⁵ Slavevoyages. Available at: [www.slavevoyages.org]. Access date: 22 Mar 2021.

intensified the mobilization for the liberation of those who, more than 50 years after the law, still lived under the condition of illegal enslavement on Brazilian soil.

Other cases of manumission that also refer to the legislation concern the absence of registration, as provided for in the Law of Free Birth of 1871.²⁶ This occurred with Lucinda, Manoel, and Izac, enslaved individuals owned by Clara Sophia do Espírito Santo, a resident of Ilha do Ouro. Perhaps because she lived far from the town, the mistress did not register the captives in the legal timeframe, and in 1876, citing this absence of register, the three attained their freedom.²⁷ Both in this and in the case of Joana, one can perceive the actions of the enslaved individuals in favor of their freedom, using national legislation as a tool, disrupting the private nature that the landowning class sought to give to the granting of manumissions.

Following in line with the majority of research, a significant incidence of deeds of manumission granted to older people was observed in Penedo.

Table 4 – Manumissions by age in Penedo (Livros de Notas e Transmissões, 1845-1886)*.

Age/ Sample	Penedo		Notarial Books		Manumissions without apparent burden		Enslaved population in the 1872 census	Age
0 to 14	54	25%	77	27%	42	38%	40%	0 to 15
15 to 43	93	43%	114	41%	38	35%	46%	16 to 40
43+	70	32%	90	32%	30	27%	14%	40+
	217		281		110			

Source: 11 Notarial Books of the 1º Tabelionato (notary public) of the Town of Penedo, between 1845 and 1886, incomplete series. Collection of the Fórum do Penedo (courthouse) and the Cartório do 1º Ofício do Penedo (registry office). Recenseamento do Império do Brasil, 1872.

*Considering only manumissions containing information about age.

²⁶ According to the Law, enslaved individuals who were not registered within the legal timeframe – initially 1872, later extended to 1873 – should be considered free. Although not as frequent, there are records of this type of case in historiography, such as in Almeida (2006, p. 81). In Alagoas, Silva (2017, p. 40) identified six enslaved individuals who also attained freedom for the same reason.

²⁷ With the same justification, Teodora obtained a deed of manumission in the same year. Cartório do 1º Ofício do Penedo. Livro de notas número 25, Livro de lançamento de procurações, cartas de liberdade e outros. 1879-1881, folha 108 verso e Livro de notas número 24, Livro de lançamento de procurações, cartas de liberdade e outros. 1875-1879, folha 40.

Indeed, there is a significant representation of the population over 43 years of age among the manumitted (32%), a fact that gains more prominence when comparing the proportion that this age group represented among the enslaved population in 1872 (14%). According to Eisenberg (1989, p. 274), who also observes the trend of a greater representation of older enslaved individuals in manumissions compared to their proportion in the enslaved population, one of the factors that explain this phenomenon would be that older individuals were on an upward curve in terms of savings and a downward curve in terms of value, favoring paid manumissions.

On the other hand, the many years of ‘good service’ and proximity to the owners would act to favor manumissions for length of service and ‘gratuitous’ manumissions. As Araújo (2008, p. 198) states, these relationships were based on “an owner’s counterpart inserted within a policy of dominium that linked the possibility of manumission to the good services provided by the enslaved individuals, just as the good services provided by the enslaved individuals were also conditioned to the perspective of freedom”. A delicate negotiation, a lifelong project, therefore. In another extreme, sometimes these cases could only indicate owners manumitting the elderly to relieve themselves of the duty of care that these individuals might begin to require without being able to continue as useful servants.

As for the age group, it is also worth noting that, isolating the set of manumissions without apparent burden and performing the same analysis by age (the highlighted column in Table 4), there is a significant increase in manumissions granted to children under 15 years of age, totaling 38%, while the following age groups account for 35% and 27%. This fact seems to indicate that often the effort of enslaved individuals to comply with the condition of subservience that was expected of them by the owner could have a family goal. Thus, mothers and fathers remained enslaved but secured the freedom of their children, who, being worth less in the slave market became a ‘cheaper’ option in the game of concessions and obligations that these delicate relationships of dominium implied.

This is evidenced by manumissions such as that of Francisca, a newborn, who, according to the source, was the legitimate daughter ‘of my slaves João and Luísa’.²⁸ The literature also records cases of children being freed because they were the children of the masters. In the Penedo sample, there is no record of this justification, mainly because

²⁸ Acervo do Fórum de Penedo. Cartório do 1o Tabelião de Penedo. Livro de registros de escrituras e notas, 1859-1861, folha 8 verso.

often in these cases, freedom was granted at the baptismal font, and the deeds were not registered with a notary public. However, this circumstance is recorded indirectly in the deed of manumission of Maria Pastora, an African woman over 30 years of age, who was freed in Vila Nova in 1860, under the justification of the widower that he was doing it “both for the good services she has provided me, and because, due to my frailty, I had an illicit copulation with her, which resulted in a child, whom I promptly freed”.²⁹ This example, in addition to illustrating a reason for the significant occurrence of children being freed, exemplifies what was mentioned earlier about deeds granted to women.

Coming to the last point of analysis of the quantitative data that I will address in this paper, it is worth highlighting some issues related to the mode and type of manumission. Research on the topic does not follow a standard in this classification. Here, they were divided into two modes: with burden and without apparent burden. In the first case, there are deeds that were granted through some agreement of future work or financial compensation (past, present, and/or future). Thus, the deeds of manumission with burden were grouped into three types: payment, services, and payment/services. Among the paid ones were included all letters in which masters received values or goods in exchange for the freedom of the enslaved individual, regardless of whether this payment was made by the freed individuals themselves, their relatives, third parties, or by the State through the Emancipation Fund.

The second mode, without apparent burden, includes all deeds of manumission in which there is no financial compensation or expressed conditions. As I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the absence of this exchange relationship in the granting of manumission should in no way be seen as ‘gratuitous’ or ‘without burden’, given the past exploitation of the labor and/or body of the enslaved individual, as well as the concessions that had to be made in the negotiation to attain the document. An example is the case of Maria Pastora mentioned two paragraphs above or of Guilhermina, an African woman, who in 1866, at 27 years of age, attained the deed “both for the good services and for having provided me with 10 offspring, the children she had during her time of enslavement”.³⁰

²⁹ Acervo do Fórum de Penedo. Cartório do 1º Tabelião de Penedo. Livro de registros de escrituras e notas, 1859-1861, folha 79.

³⁰ Cartório do 1º Ofício do Penedo. Livro de notas número 21, Livro de lançamento de procurações, cartas de liberdade e outros, 1870-1871, folha 81. It should not go unnoticed the fact that the deed of manumission attests, based on Guilhermina’s age, that she was enslaved illegally, considering that she was born around 1840, and would have arrived in Brazil necessarily after the 1831 Law that prohibited the slave trade. This is not an exceptional case. The confirmation through legal documents that Africans were introduced to Brazil after the law was common. Guilhermina’s situation is even more complex because, despite the

Many deeds that were registered as ‘gratuitous’ often hid previous agreements for freedom that are impossible to verify. For example, Fernando, a resident of Penedo, who registered his deed with the notary four days after receiving it, with the following lordly justification: “as the sole heir of my late brother, Vicar Antônio José de Oliveira, and wanting to respect his wishes in his final days of existence”.³¹ Formally, it is a deed of manumission without apparent burden, but it is quite plausible to think that the dying man's desire to free the enslaved individual was not sudden, but that the promise of this manumission at the time of his death was a strategy of dominium used throughout the life of the master. Several manumissions registered as ‘gratuitous’ should fit into the category of “service provision for an indefinite period”, as they were promised to be granted after the death of the master, but the sources do not expose this situation.

In view of these considerations, the quantitative data that point to the fact that the majority of the freed individuals had to pay or provide services to the masters to obtain their freedom in Penedo are even more significant:

Table 5 – Manumission in Penedo by type (Livros de Notas e Transmissões, 1845- 1886).

Period of Time/Mode	With Burden						Without Apparent Burden	
	Payment	%	Services	%	Payment/Services	%		%
Before 28 Sept. 1871	76	40%	58	30%	2	1%	56	29%
After 29 Sept. 1871	111	50.5%	18	8%	3	1.5%	89	40%
Total	187	45.5%	76	18.5%	5	1%	145	35%

Source: 11 Notarial Books of the 1º Tabelionato (notary public) of the Town of Penedo, between 1845 and 1886, incomplete series. Collection of the Fórum do Penedo (courthouse) and the Cartório do 1º Ofício do Penedo (registry office).

evidence of the crime appearing on the same document that freed her, which theoretically contained in itself the prerogative of law, her children, who were born during the illegal enslavement of their mother, continued to be enslaved

³¹ Cartório do 1º Ofício do Penedo. Livro de notas número 26, Livro de lançamento de procurações, cartas de liberdade e outros, 1881-1882, folha 126.

As shown in Table 5, manumissions with burden were the majority, totaling 65%. Among them, paid manumissions were predominant, accounting for 45.5% of the total, thus forming the most common means of attaining manumission in Penedo at the time. Information on who was responsible for bearing this cost is scarce, but there is a record of 29 deeds paid by the enslaved individuals themselves, 9 paid by relatives (4 by mothers, 3 by husbands and 2 by godparents), and 5 by third parties, along with a case in which the mother – enslaved – paid for the freedom of the young José, who was one year old, with her own resources combined with the aid of the Humanitarian and Emancipatory Society of Penedo.³² Seven cases stand out (four before the Law of Free Birth) in which the freed individuals presented a portion of their value at the time of the granting of manumission and settled the rest in future installments. In other contexts, cases similar to these were called ‘coartação’ (coarctation) (Paiva, 1995). However, as explained by Almeida (2006, p. 59), the “difference between coarctation and the payment in the installments lies in the fact that the coarted enslaved individuals usually move away from the direct control of their masters and, with their written or verbal authorization, obtain resources with which to pay for their manumission”. Only in-depth research can clarify what the commitments established between owners and enslaved individuals were in these cases. In any case, it is a mode of manumission characterized by financial compensation.

In comparison to other regions, Penedo stands out for a low occurrence of manumissions exchanged for services, totaling about 18.5%. Manumissions that involved the maintenance of labor relations between the master and the freed individual had the death of the master, the mistress, the couple, or some relative as the deadline for the actual exercise of freedom – in addition to three cases in which the services were to last until the mistresses married. In other words, these are manumissions with the provision of services for an indefinite period, as there was no way to predict when these events would occur. In general, historiography indicates that the majority of the deeds conditioned to a period of service defined by the death of the owners.³³

³² Cartório do 1º Ofício do Penedo. Livro de notas número 21, Livro de lançamento de procurações, cartas de liberdade e outros, 1870-1871, p. 87.

³³ This occurred in Caetitê and Rio das Contas between 1870 and 1888 (Pires, 2006, p. 147). In a careful survey of manumissions in Cruz Alta, Araújo (2008, p. 220) finds only five of them with an established time of service until 1884. In Campinas, they were slightly more numerous, but still, those until the death of the owner accounted for two-thirds of the manumissions conditioned to the provision of services (Einsenber, 1982, p. 287).

Regarding manumissions without apparent burden, they totaled 35% of all deeds, but experienced a significant positive fluctuation, from 28% to 41%, after the Law of Free Birth. This circumstance has been observed in historiography, such as in Cotinguiba, Sergipe (Amaral, 2007), and in Campinas (Eisenberg, 1989). However, there are studies such as that of Almeida (2006) in Bahia, which records a very subtle increase, and those like that of Araújo (2008, p. 195) in Rio Grande do Sul, which reveals the decrease of deeds without apparent burden after 1871. Regional contexts had an impact on the effects of the Law on the granting of deeds of manumission without apparent burden, and this seems to be an important point of attention to advance in the analysis of the role of manumissions in Brazil.

Law 2,040, known for having ‘freed the wombs’ of enslaved women, also legislated on manumissions, guaranteeing the right of the enslaved to buy their freedom, eliminating the possibility of revocation for ingratitude. It also created the Emancipation Fund, which meant active involvement of the State in the allocation of resources for manumission. Historiography argues about how the law was fundamental in the process of disintegration of slavery, becoming a milestone of the interference of state powers in the relations of dominium that were previously restricted to the private sphere (Chalhoub, 1990; Cunha, 1986).

In the case of Penedo, in addition to the increase in manumissions without apparent burden, there was also an increase in paid deeds of manumission and a decrease in those conditioned to the provision of services. A hypothesis yet to be investigated for the case of Penedo would be the influence of the growing change in public opinion on slavery in the practice of manumission. Although more studies are needed, there are indications that ideas in favor of manumission were in vogue in the town in the late 1860s, as evidenced by the creation of the Humanitarian and Emancipatory Society of Penedo in 1869, responsible, in fact, for paying two of the manumissions analyzed here.³⁴ Evidently, this process had its limitations, and many people still conservatively clung to their slave property and the value it represented in their assets, even though they criticized the institution. However, despite these obstacles, as Stuart Schwartz (2001, p. 217) reminds us, “The economic imperatives of slavery always operated in a cultural context”. Public

³⁴ Cartório do 1º Ofício do Penedo. Livro de notas número 21, Livro de lançamento de procurações, cartas de liberdade e outros. 1870-1871, folha 87 e Livro de notas número 22, Livro de lançamento de procurações, cartas de liberdade e outros. 1871, folha 12. In addition to these two deeds, there is a record of the freedom of a girl at the founding of the association, in December 1869. See the 1870 Report cited in footnote 15, p. 65-66.

mobilization could be a way to encourage the practice, which, in any case, could operate as a reinforcement of bonds of dependence ties of freed individuals with former owners before formal abolition. Moreover, the law created provisions for mandatory manumission that would have reinforced this situation.

It is in this sense that the increase in paid manumissions after 1871 can be understood. There are records of eight cases of manumission by arbitration, a possibility opened by the law to guarantee freedom to the enslaved individual who had savings. If the presented amount was not accepted, under the claim that it was insufficient, the enslaved person appealed, through a representative, to the Orphans' Judge for the price of their manumission to be established (Mendonça, 1999, p. 221-223). Cases that went to arbitration, therefore, point only to those unsuccessful negotiations. Driven by the right to accumulate and present savings to attain manumission, several other enslaved individuals must have been prompted to negotiate their freedom and resolved the issue without having to resort to this legal instrument.

Still, regarding the impacts of legislation on manumissions, the existence of only two records of manumissions paid by the Emancipation Fund in the notarial books confirms what was said at the beginning of this text regarding the data presented here consisting only of a sample of the total manumissions granted in the town. In a survey conducted in the copies of *Jornal do Penedo* (the local newspaper), information was found about two moments in which there was collective manumission via the Fund, one in 1876 and another in 1881.³⁵ The newspaper published the names of the enslaved individuals benefited in Penedo and their former masters, totaling 27 individuals. These manumissions are not included in the analyzed set of documents. They even might not have been registered with the registry since the emancipation notice through the Fund signed by the Orphans' Judge was an official document.

Robert Conrad (1978, p. 137-141) inaugurated a version in historiography about the little quantitative impact that the Fund would have had on manumissions. Recent studies have been challenging this statement. Welington Silva (2017), analyzing the northernmost region of Alagoas, perceives the generation of an important social dynamic involving the application of the Fund. In Sergipe, Josué Sobrinho (2000, p. 115) indicates that 38% of the paid manumissions were carried out through its resources between 1873

³⁵ The Fund was established by Law 2,040 in 1871 and regulated in 1872, but the first manumission paid with State resources only happened in 1875 (Silva, 2017, p. 82). Instituto Histórico e Geográfico de Alagoas. *Jornal do Penedo*, Cidade do Penedo, ano 6, n. 1, 12 jan. 1876 e ano 11, n. 4, 05 fev. 1881.

and 1886. In the context of medium-sized commercial towns like Penedo, in which information circulated rapidly between the urban and rural areas, the impacts that news about state-funded manumissions caused among the population should not be negligible.

In any case, it is noteworthy that the majority of the freed individuals in the sample attained a deed of manumission with a burden, which reinforces the agency of the enslaved person in attaining manumission. Managing to accumulate savings, relying on the support of third parties, engaging in dialogue about the possibility of manumission, even if it was necessary to wait for the death of the master, and conforming to the requirements to be contemplated by the Fund were all situations that involved negotiation. Acceptance of the rules of the game to attain one's own benefits should not be seen as absolute submission. As James Scott (2013, p. 265-266) reminds us, most subordinates conform to the designs of dominant systems not because they have internalized their norms, but because a structure of surveillance, retribution, and punishment makes it prudent for them to do so.

The enslaved population of Penedo, as well as that of the entire Brazil, saw the possibility of manumission as an objective through which they built individual and collective projects that marked their experiences while enslaved. This observation does not minimize the violence of slavery. Rather, it makes the analysis of slave society more complex, both with regard to those who lived and died under this condition, and in terms of considering the experience of being a free Black, Brown or Indigenous man or woman in an exclusionary and oppressive society. Despite this, there were possibilities for confrontations and possible strategies that could be adopted to achieve degrees of autonomy and work on individual projects different from the slave-owning ideology.

Final remarks

Throughout this paper, information contained mainly in the Livros de Notas e Transmissões (notarial books) of the 1º Tabelionato do Penedo (notary public) was presented about deeds of manumission. There were two main objectives in analyzing this source. The first was to open a discussion with Brazilian historiography on the subject, seeking to understand whether the practice of manumission in Penedo had specificities compared to the research that has been conducted, aiming for a deeper, regionalized, and temporally marked understanding of the importance that the granting of manumissions had in the history of Brazil. The second objective was, based on the analysis of this specific event, to contribute to the historiographical production on Penedo, the main urban center of the Lower São Francisco region. Regarding the first point, the quantification of the deeds of manumission indicates that the behavior regarding manumissions in the region presents characteristics very close to what has been observed throughout Brazil. The predominance of women, the significant presence of older individuals, and the high incidence of deeds with burdens are the highlights. The large number of paid deeds is quite significant, as is the absence of manumissions in exchange for a predetermined period of service. These deeds have been analyzed from the perspective of the transformations in the labor world over the 19th century. The freedom attained through the accumulation of goods or capital by enslaved individuals reveals complex negotiations, as do those that provided for the payment of installments after the signing of the document. As research advances, this characteristic of manumission is increasingly being evidenced, reshaping its importance in the history of labor relations in 19th-century Brazil.

Moving on to the second point, I reiterate that the deeds presented here do not refer to the total number of those granted in the municipality and that the data from population estimates are fragile, both due to the methods employed for the counting and to the demarcation of the territorial spaces to which they pertain. Nevertheless, I venture to make some observations about the quantitative impact of these deeds among the enslaved population of Penedo.

Dividing the total number of people freed in the town of Penedo (297) recorded in the foundational documentation used in this paper by the 24 years in which the books recorded deeds (1845, 1855 to 1863, 1871 to 1882, 1885 and 1886) yields an estimate of 12 manumissions per year. Considering these figures as minimum numbers, some

considerations are possible. It can be assumed that the frequency with which people attained their freedom through purchase, provision of services, or the delicate daily relationships that led to obtaining them without apparent burden was a frequent topic of conversation in the town. Speculations about the reasons why certain individuals manumitted someone, how somebody managed to gather so much money, the expectations of what the freed individuals would do after attaining their freedom, or reflections on what changed or remained the same in their lives after emancipation must have circulated along the banks of the São Francisco River, making the subject a commonplace topic and fueling the hopes of those still living under enslavement.

The perception of the viability of escaping enslavement, however, should not be misleading. As pointed out in the introduction to the paper, Penedo was a town that articulated an important route for interprovincial trade, which remained vigorous throughout the period addressed here. The hope of freedom went hand in hand with the fear of being sold outside the province, and there is no doubt that owners knew how to balance these two weights on the scale to sophisticate the relations of dominium and submission at a time when the institution seemed increasingly close to its end.

Moreover, a deed of manumission did not sever the ties binding the individual to slave society once and for all. It was difficult and dangerous to leave one's region as a Black, Brown or Indigenous man or woman in a context of constant threats of illegal enslavement. It is more likely that the majority of the freed individuals, for the sake of convenience, fear, and the desire to remain close to their network of relationships, remained very close to their former masters. By custom or strategy, they would have maintained their old relationships, engendered in a dynamic of producing dependents that, like slavery, continues to influence Brazilian society to this day. However, within the complex tensions that permeate relationships between unequal individuals in a hierarchical society, these people had an effective experience of triumph and built their lives beyond the condition of enslavement.

Sources:

Archive of the Cartório do 1º Ofício (registry office) of Penedo

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Translators: Paula Granato Aymoré Martins; Ana Paula Gonçalves Lacerda; Bruna Queiroz Assunção and Nayara Souza de Oliveira.

Layout and technical review: Joel Santos Reis.