The Sea leads to the North: Guaxenduba (1614) and the conquering of São Luís *du Maragan*

Portuguese expansion was a time of commercial activity, cultural exchange, and military confrontation. The establishment of colonies in South America meant controlling the territory, and this inevitably led to confrontations with indigenous peoples. The sea also brought other European powers to challenge Portuguese control of the vast territory, adding more enemies to fight against. This proved to be a long, arduous, and sometimes nearly impossible effort that stretched Portugal's limited resources to its very limit.

Occupation in South America began sometime between 1534 and 1536, after the territory had been divided into fourteen '*capitanias heriditárias*'. Three great expeditions were dispatched from Lisbon to colonize the Maranhão region, but all met with disaster. The failed expeditions to colonize the region slowed Portuguese progress towards the northernmost regions; battles had to be fought to secure each region before the army could move to the next region. Since the occupation was limited to the coastal border, progress had to be forced against the Brazilian Indians and other Europeans. The main efforts were directed at Bahia and regions to the south of the actual state. Fighting began in 1531–1532, but the main military campaigns for expansion started in the middle of the century.

The long march to the North would only begin in 1575. The Portuguese met increasing numbers of French troops, especially when approaching the northernmost regions of the Rio Grande do Norte in 1597 and the Ceará in 1603–1604.

The type of war fought in the Portuguese colonial space was a global-scale phenomenon. Multiple global influences that were linked turned the war into a process

of adaptation to different geographical domains, such as the Atlantic, Mediterranean, or the Orient. As the confrontation developed over the years, the needs of each specific operational environment were met in different fashions. For instance, in 1558–1559 in Brazil, cavalry was employed by Mem de Sá during his campaigns in Pirajá and Itapoã, similar to methods used in Spanish Mexico. Cavalry, however, would be absent in latter operations, and this was apparently met with a greater reliance on indigenous allies. This turned out to be a common practice by both the Portuguese and French during the fighting in the Maranhão region.

The battle of Guaxenduba which effectively put an end to the French enterprise—also known as 'France équinoxiale'—is an interesting case study. This is because of not only the strategic significance of the battle, but also because it is well documented in a number of sources, including first-hand accounts from both sides. It is not our intention to discuss this battle in detail, but only to underline some aspects of the battle that will provide a comparison between the opposing armies.

The capital of the French presence in Maranhão was the city of Saint-Louis, founded in 1594. By 1612, the small village had developed into a city defended by strong fortified walls, reinforced by 500 newly arrived colonists. This caused deep concern amongst the Portuguese leadership, and expelling the French before they could become too strong to be defeated was felt to the most urgent need. However, it took the Portuguese side a year to put an expedition into the field because of the scarcity of resources. The main force sailed from Recife on 23 August 1614, and met with the Indian contingent at the Rio Grande.

In all accounts of the battle, the most obvious difference between the French and Portuguese armies was their respective size: approximately 500 French soldiers and 1,500 allied *Tupinanbás*, against approximately a total of 500 men, both Portuguese and

their *Tabajaras* allies. However, other differences had a greater impact on the battlefield and the result of the battle.

The first difference was the leadership.

The most capable officers were the senior most officers. The overall Commander —the *‘mameluco’*— of the Portuguese side, Jerónimo de Albuquerque of Maranhão, was a Brazilian veteran, just like his father. The master sergeant Diogo de Campos Moreno was another veteran with even wider military experience, as he had also fought in Flanders. Finally, the military engineer Francisco Frias (de Mesquita) was in charge of improving several of the Brazilian fortifications. He was responsible for the drawing of plans and the building of the fort of Santa Maria, which provided support to troops during the Guaxenduba campaign.

Another important difference between the armies was that on the Portuguese side, the officer-to-soldier ratio increased due to the small number of available troops. At 66, the number of infantry captains was remarkable. This certainly had a very positive effect on the way the men were led in the field.

Finally, the most important difference was the indigenous troops that would play a significant role during the campaign. The relationship between the European soldiers, on both sides, and their respective Indian allies poses a major question: was this collaboration treated the same way by both the French and the Portuguese?

We understand the answer to this question to be in the negative. First, one must remember that many—if not the majority—of the Portuguese officers had moved across the wide colonial territory, across geographies, meeting diverse military cultures. Thus, adapting their fighting methods to specific operational environments was, for the Portuguese, an attitude that rose from necessity. In 1576, the Portuguese military writer Martim Afonso de Melo made a formal categorization between war against armed

people—that is, the Europeans—and against unarmed people. This second group would be fought without the usual pike and shot tactics, but instead by taking advantage of fire weapons and the soldiers' mobility.

This brings us to a final and most crucial difference between the two armies: the troop deployment and battlefield tactics.

The French forces were formed separating European soldiers from their indigenous allies. This was not the case of Portuguese: European and Brazilians deployed and fought in close articulation. As the main frontal assault was delivered, another column turned the enemy's flank. This was made in strickt silence – orders were issued for '*no drums should be beaten*' – and under cover of dense vegetation. The troops took advantage of mobility, as most soldiers wore no body armor, as opposed to the well equipped and lavishly dressed French.

There are also some extraordinary examples of the so-called cultural exchanges between the Europeans and Brazilian Indians within the military universe. The *Tabajaras* allies would dress in European-style '*casacas*'. However, Martim Soares Moreno, who lived among the Potiguaras, fought the French naked, shaved, painted black, and armed with a bow, like an Indian.

In his remarkable book *'Warfare in Atlantic Africa'*, John Thornton stressed that most research on such topic is still anchored to specific European concepts like the idea of 'Military Revolution'. This Eurocentric concept assumed, even if unconsciously, a devaluation of the military capabilities of indigenous African and American societies, in contrast with the technological superiority of the Europeans. This is not intended to explain why battles were won or lost, but rather to analyse the nature of war in a context exceeding the boundaries of Europe, and to emphasize the diffusion of fighting techniques, avoiding the military trajectory of Europe as a unique explanatory basis.

Rather than explain why battles were won or lost, the analysis main focus should focus on the nature of war in a context exceeding the boundaries of Europe, emphasizing the diffusion and articulation of diverse fighting techniques from both sides of the Atlantic.