

# *Vila Rica in the Age of Jerônimo de Sousa*

The residents and visitors of Minas Gerais who reached the famous Pico do Itacolomi during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were greeted with a striking panorama. Looking toward the southwest, they could make out the precipitous slopes of the region of São João del-Rei. Turning toward the northeast, they viewed, in the background, the Serra do Caraça, and, a little more to the left, the Serra da Piedade. In the same direction, they could admire the Morro de Santana and the Morro de São Sebastião, forming the ridge upon which sprawled the tortuous urban center known as Vila Rica, which became, in March 1823, the Imperial City of Ouro Preto.

Vila Rica emerged from the coming together of various mining outposts that reflected the disorderly settlement of the earliest times. Between the Serra do Ouro Preto, to the north, and the Serra do Itacolomi, to the south, stretched a valley covered by beautiful greenery, having at its center a river with reddish waters whose bed unfolded in shallow streams mixed with the residues of the mining operations. They called it Ribeirão do Carmo, Rio de Ouro Preto, Vermelho, or Mariana, and it sprang from the merging of the Rio Funil, flowing from the southwest, with the waters that, especially during the rainy seasons, streamed from the surrounding mountains. In this river it was possible to find, during the days of the musicians Jerônimo de Sousa Lobo and Jerônimo de Sousa Queirós, black slaves and freedmen mining for a few *vinténs*, bearing rakes, bowls made out of fig wood and, on the front of their bodies, small pouches where the discovered gold was kept.

Many of the houses in Vila Rica, numbering around two thousand, were built of stone, whitewashed, and two stories tall, and often exhibited tile-covered roofs, straw-covered ceilings, wooden balconies, and fenced corridors. During the second half of the eighteenth century, nearly all the houses featured glass windows in the central area, though in the suburbs small, one-story houses predominated, sometimes without a wooden floor. The yards, which were quite common, contained gardens with a profusion of beautiful flowers, on terraces supported by walls in which ferns and mosses proliferated. The gardens also displayed a variety of vegetables such as artichokes, asparagus, spinach, cabbage, beans, and potatoes, as well as indigenous fruits. The orange, banana, and coffee trees caught the attention of Auguste de Saint-Hilaire, just as a few years earlier the fertility of the peach trees had surprised John Mawe. The Baron of Eschwege also mentioned the prune and apple trees.

In the eighteen-thirties, the city's newly-founded Botanical Garden distributed seeds to some of the citizens. Some residences had been abandoned and others placed for rent, while those already rented or sold saw their value decline. Since the late seventeenth century, Vila Rica witnessed a decline in mining activity. Its population, which totaled twenty thousand souls in the seventeenth-fifties, dropped to eight or nine thousand, according to the 1804 census, a level that would remain constant throughout the nineteenth century. A few years before the Independence, Eschwege, host of many of the travelers who passed through the small town, disappointed the naturalists Spix and Martius when he took them to see

one of the most important mines in the region, owned by Coronel Veloso. Flanked by the Hospício de Jerusalém, on one side, and the new edifice of the Irmandade da Misericórdia, on the other, the mine consisted of a dilapidated gorge filled with stone fragments. This was open-pit mining; the water descended through pit-holes, and mud and gravel were deposited at the bottom of tanks known as *mundéus*. Rich as it may have been in the past, at the time it was leased to black miners for the daily rate of one *pataca*.

This is not to say, however, that the Province of Minas Gerais declined as a whole. From the last quarter of the eighteenth century, and especially after the arrival of the Royal Family from Portugal in 1808, agriculture and cattle raising, which had already been thriving, gained a new impetus as they supplied the Rio de Janeiro market. These circumstances shifted the principal axis of Minas Gerais economy from the gold-bearing *vilas* to the southern region, especially when, from the eighteen-thirties, the coffee economy spread across the Zona da Mata. Vila Rica suffered with these changes, and continued to be markedly provincial over the course of the nineteenth century. There were no parks, bookstores, public libraries, or civic centers, nor other spaces typical of the bourgeois sociability developing in England or France. This was lamented by foreign travelers, always inclined to measure the degree of civilization of the regions visited according to European standards. There was, however, the Opera House, erected in the eighteenth century next to the Igreja do Carmo. There, Saint-Hilaire witnessed a male-only audience seated on benches that were replaced decades later by rows of seats. The hall also featured a curtain painted to represent the four parts of the world, and the spot from which the mulatto actors were prompted.

In addition to the Opera House, there were nevertheless other secular activities. Dr. Diogo de Vasconcelos could not hide his enthusiasm for the elevated stages that were colorfully adorned on days of public spectacles, on the sands of Ouro Preto or Manejo. In well-to-do houses, some of them as richly decorated as those in Rio de Janeiro, there were soirees with women dressed in the French or English style singing *modinhas* or dancing *contredanses*. Education progressed gradually from its eighteenth-century beginnings. In 1825 there were 325 students, largely male, enrolled in Beginning Letters, while only 39 attended middle-level courses, including Latin Grammar, Philosophy, Design, and Anatomy. In 1839, the School of Pharmacy was founded. The press developed steadily from its origins in the eighteenth-century, when the first official shop printed the Prince Regent's speech of April 9, 1822. The *Abelha do Itacolomi*, the *Compilador Mineiro*, and the *Universal*, soon thereafter, set the stage for a series of periodicals characterized by their short life and intense political commitment. Years later appeared the first literary review in Minas Gerais, *O Recreador Mineiro*.

Despite some innovations that seem to suggest a modernization of urban life, Vila Rica remained to a great degree a colonial center where, as night fell, the poor would gather before niches with images of the Virgin to say their vesper prayers. Associative life remained structured around the lay brotherhoods; the feasts and processions, as well as the music, architecture, and painting took on a strongly religious tone. During the eighteenth century, advances in urbanization gave rise to a group of successful artisans and masters, especially builders, who moved up socially by controlling workshops, labor regulations, and civil and religious commissions. At about the middle of the eighteenth century, the Portuguese Manuel Francisco Lisboa (?-1767), who at various times served as a judge for disputes in the carpentry trade, contributed to several *igrejas*, including two mother churches, as well as carried out important civil projects such as the Padre Faria fountain and, especially, the Governors' Palace. Artwork by his son, the mulatto Antônio Francisco Lisboa (c.1730-1814), a Vila Rica native, adorns the Igreja do Carmo, the Capela de São José (Antônio Francisco's brotherhood), and the Igreja de São Francisco de Assis. In 1761, Antônio Francisco Lisboa produced a mahogany table and two benches for the hall of the Secretaria do Governo, as well as two other benches for the office occupied by lower-echelon authorities, in the Governors' Palace. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Manuel da Costa Ataíde (1762-1830) executed projects for various churches, including the Igreja do Carmo and Igreja das Mercês e Perdões. He alone was responsible for painting the Igreja de São Francisco de Assis, including the famous ceiling of the nave. In 1818, he became professor of Architecture and Painting in Mariana. There were also hundreds of professional musicians, among them José Joaquim Emerico Lobo de Mesquita (1746?-1805), Inácio Parreiras Neves (c.1730-c.1794), Marcos Coelho Neto father (1746-1806) and son (1763-1823), Francisco Gomes da Rocha (c.1754-1808), and Jerônimo de Sousa (fl.1721-1826); the last four named neighbors from Bonfim.

The population of Vila Rica in the early nineteenth century was unevenly distributed among its various neighborhoods. Ouro Preto and Antônio Dias, the seats of their respective parishes, were the most populous (the former much more so than the latter); Padre Faria was the least populated. This disproportion reflects the exodus of a substantial number of young workers, caused by the decline in mining. The capital thus took on a markedly bureaucratic character, accommodating a large contingent of administrative, judicial, ecclesiastical, and military officials, who usually resided in the more central neighborhoods. For the same reason, there were countless households headed by women, many of them blacks or *mulatas*. Vila Rica saw an increase in the number of mulattoes, a phenomenon that, to the dismay of the authorities, became widespread in

Minas Gerais during the second half of the eighteenth century. The notable presence of mixed-race musicians and artisans, many of whom belonged to the Irmandade de São José, simply reflected the new demographic makeup. Most residences housed individuals who lived alone, or small families that were either nuclear or modestly extended by a few relatives, slaves, and others. As it was normal according to eighteenth-century standards, most couples lived together without the benefit of marriage, and the number of children born out of wedlock was large.

Proportionally, the number of captives diminished in the same period, but its presence in the total population of Vila Rica – one third at the beginning of the nineteenth century – was a clear sign that this was a slave-owning society. Although the number of household servants was large, slaves were engaged in many other activities. In general, it may be said that the inhabitants of the future Imperial City consisted mostly of *oficiais mecânicos* [metalsmiths, carpenters, bricklayers, defined in opposition to artists: painters, sculptors, musicians], gold prospectors, and merchants of every stripe, in addition to public officials and soldiers. There was also a significant number of individuals who had no work, or euphemistically were said to live “*de sua agência*” [autonomously]. Mawe observed the many tailors, shoemakers, blacksmiths, and tinsmiths, as well as saddle makers that seemed indispensable to him in a place where everyone traveled on horseback. Burton, decades later, found it odd that shop owners, whose establishments were on the first floor of their houses, would spend the day seated at the door conversing with passersby. Import trade was considerable, and the establishments, well-supplied with all sorts of English goods, sold a variety of items. Spix and Martius noted that Vila Rica’s commerce was the most active in the interior of Brazil. There were roads connecting Vila Rica to São Paulo, Bahia, Goiás, and Mato Grosso, as well as to Rio de Janeiro, the busiest one due to the movement of troops. Heading to Rio de Janeiro, seventy

leagues away, there were weekly or monthly caravans laden with local products, including cotton, leather, marmalade, cheeses, precious stones, and gold bars, and returning with salt, wine, chintzes, cloths, hams, mirrors, ironware, and slaves. In the vicinity of Ouro Preto there was also a gunpowder factory and a pottery.

In 1867, the Coluna Saldanha Marinho, the first monument dedicated to the *inconfidente* conspirators, was erected in the city plaza. In that same year, Richard Burton recorded everyday references to Maria Joaquina Dorotéia (1767-1853), already strongly identified as Marília de Dirceu, Tomás Antônio Gonzaga (1744-c.1810), Cláudio Manuel da Costa (1729-1789), and other political insurgents. This suggests that a memory of the Inconfidência uprising was being created at the time. Vila Rica was the site of important political events in the decades that followed the conspiracy of 1789. News arriving from Lisbon in 1821, taken as signs of a desire for re-colonization, gave rise to radical propositions, though held by a minority, which aimed at the creation of a Confederation of United States separate from the other Brazilian provinces. The first visit by Prince Regent Dom Pedro to the region was successfully intended to put out this fire. After stopping at the Capão do Lana and making certain that the rebels were little inclined to fight troops coming from the south of the Captaincy, he solemnly entered Vila Rica, thus taking a decisive step in the direction of making Brazil independent. However, one decade later, Dom Pedro received from Minas Gerais a lukewarm reception that sealed his destiny, shortly before his abdication.

In 1833, the Imperial City would still be the site of a military revolt promoted by sectors of the local elite that were dissatisfied with recent administrative measures that curtailed the power of the Municipal Councils. In 1842, at last, the residents witnessed the arrival of the Baron of Caxias, commander of the troops that would confront the liberals that resisted the conservative measures. Though destitute and provincial, old Vila Rica still lived as a capital.

*Marco Antonio Silveira*  
(Universidade Federal de Ouro Preto)

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ANASTASIA, Carla Maria Junho; LEMOS, Carmem Silvia; JULIÃO, Letícia. Dos bandeirantes aos modernistas: um estudo histórico sobre Vila Rica. *Oficina do Inconfidência*, Ouro Preto, ano 1, p.18-132, dez. 1999.
- ANDRADE, Francisco Eduardo de. Poder local e herança colonial em Mariana: faces da Revolta do “Ano da Fumaça.” In: *Termo de Mariana*. Mariana: Universidade Federal de Ouro Preto, 1998. p.127-135.
- BUNBURY, Charles James Fox. *Viagem de um naturalista inglês ao Rio de Janeiro e Minas Gerais (1833-1835)*. Belo Horizonte: Itatiaia; São Paulo: Editora da Universidade de São Paulo, 1981. 123p.
- BURTON, Richard. *Viagem do Rio de Janeiro a Morro Velho*. Belo Horizonte: Itatiaia; São Paulo: Editora da Universidade de São Paulo, 1976. 366p.
- CARVALHO, Feu de. Reminiscências. *Revista do Arquivo Público Mineiro*, Belo Horizonte, v.19, 1921, p.149-162 e 267-353; v.20, 1924, p.339-352.
- CONTINUAÇÃO das Províncias [Portarias?] que Sua Alteza Real o Príncipe Regente do Brasil foi servido dar durante a sua estada na Província de Minas Gerais. *Revista do Arquivo Público Mineiro*, Belo Horizonte, v.1, 1896, p.375-406.
- CORRÊA MOURÃO, Paulo Kruger. *As igrejas setecentistas de Minas*. Belo Horizonte: Itatiaia, 1986. 180p.
- CUNHA MATOS, Raimundo José da. *Corografia histórica da Província de Minas Gerais, 1837*. Belo Horizonte: Itatiaia; São Paulo: Editora da Universidade de São Paulo, 1981, 2v.
- ESCHWEGE, Barão de. Notícias e reflexões estatísticas da Província de Minas Gerais. *Revista do Arquivo Público Mineiro*, Belo Horizonte, v.4, 1899, p.737-762.
- INSTRUÇÃO PÚBLICA: primeiras aulas e escolas de Minas Gerais (1721-1860). *Revista do Arquivo Público Mineiro*, Belo Horizonte, v.24, 1933, p.362-363.
- A INSTRUÇÃO PÚBLICA e particular em Minas Gerais nos anos de 1824 e 1825. *Revista do Arquivo Público Mineiro*, Belo Horizonte, v.3, 1898, p.639-673.
- O JARDIM BOTÂNICO de Ouro Preto em 1835. *Revista do Arquivo Público Mineiro*, Belo Horizonte, v.3, 1898, p.774-777.
- LUNA, Francisco Vidal; COSTA, Iraci del Nero da. *Minas Colonial: economia e sociedade*. São Paulo: FIPE, Pioneira, 1982, 85p.
- MARTINS, Judith. *Dicionário de artistas e artífices dos séculos XVIII e XIX*. Rio de Janeiro: MEC, 1974, 2v.
- MATHIAS, Herculano Gomes. *Um recenseamento na Capitania de Minas Gerais: Vila Rica, 1804*. Rio de Janeiro: Arquivo Nacional, 1969, 209p.
- MAWE, John. *Viagens ao interior do Brasil*. Belo Horizonte: Itatiaia; São Paulo: Editora da Universidade de São Paulo, 1978, 243p.
- RAMOS, Donald. Marriage and family in Colonial Vila Rica. *Hispanic American Historical Review*, v.55, n.2, maio 1975, p.200-225.
- RIBEIRO DE VASCONCELOS, Diogo Pereira. Memórias sobre a Capitania de Minas Gerais. *Revista do Arquivo Público Mineiro*, Belo Horizonte, v.6, 1901, p.757-965.
- SAINT-HILAIRE, Auguste de. *Viagem pelas Províncias do Rio de Janeiro e Minas Gerais*. Belo Horizonte: Itatiaia, 2000. 378p.
- SPIX, Johann Baptist von; MARTIUS, Carl Friedrich von. *Viagem pelo Brasil (1817-1820)*. Belo Horizonte: Itatiaia; São Paulo: Editora da Universidade de São Paulo, 1981. 3v.
- VASCONCELOS, Sylvio de. *Vila Rica: formação e desenvolvimento, residências*. Rio de Janeiro: MEC, 1956, 318p.