

# Property Rights, Land and Territory in the European Overseas Empires

Direitos de Propriedade, Terra e Território nos Impérios  
Ultramarinos Europeus

Edited by José Vicente Serrão  
Bárbara Direito, Eugénia Rodrigues  
and Susana Münch Miranda

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## Brazilian landscape perception through literary sources (16th-18th centuries)

Ana Duarte Rodrigues<sup>1</sup>

*Abstract:* This study is focused on the visual perceptions of Brazilian landscapes since Pêro Vaz de Caminha first described it until 1800, based on some texts and manuscripts held at the National Library of Portugal. A comparative methodology was used: descriptions of natural and cultivated landscapes found in these texts were compared with the descriptions of some of the most famous and studied texts and with iconographic sources of the same period. The different travellers evaluated and described the New World according to their parameters, thus predominating the idea of abundance, as well as the idea of a land blessed by God. Brazilian landscapes were compared with Portuguese landscapes and the landscapes of other Portuguese colonies and it seems that they were always positively evaluated. The values of difference, exoticism, fertility and complexity have been recognized taking into consideration both the viewer's responses to the totality of the landscape and his ability to discern specific physical components of the landscape, such as species, crops, colours, textures, dimension of the fields, boundaries. I have also concluded that since, in the Early Modern period, South America was less explored than the Old World, the differences between perceptions of natural landscapes and of cultivated agricultural landscapes are not noteworthy, the same having been observed in the iconographic sources of the same period.

*Resumo:* Este estudo centra-se na percepção visual da paisagem brasileira desde que foi descrita por Pêro Vaz de Caminha até cerca de mil e oitocentos, baseado em alguns textos e manuscritos conservados na Biblioteca Nacional de Portugal. A metodologia seguida foi a comparativa: descrições de paisagens naturais e cultivadas encontradas nestes documentos foram comparadas com as descrições de alguns dos textos mais conhecidos e mais estudados, mas também com algumas fontes iconográficas do mesmo período. Os diferentes viajantes avaliaram e descreveram o Novo Mundo com os seus parâmetros e, neste sentido, predomina a ideia de abundância, de toda uma terra abençoada por Deus. As paisagens brasileiras são comparadas com as portuguesas e com as de outras colónias portuguesas e parecem ser sempre avaliadas de forma positiva. Os valores da diferença, do exótico, da fertilidade e da complexidade foram reconhecidos tendo em consideração as respostas do observador face à totalidade da paisagem e a habilidade para discernir componentes físicos específicos da paisagem, como espécies, sementes, cores, texturas, dimensão dos campos e limites. Também concluí que como a América do Sul era no período moderno menos explorada do que a Europa, as diferenças nas descrições entre a percepção da paisagem natural e a percepção da paisagem cultivada não é digna de nota, o mesmo se verificando nas fontes iconográficas do mesmo período.

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<sup>1</sup> Universidade de Lisboa, Faculdade de Ciências, Centro Interuniversitário de História das Ciências e Tecnologia, Portugal, [anaaurelio@gmail.com](mailto:anaaurelio@gmail.com).

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From the moment when Brazil was first discovered in 1500 by Pedro Álvares Cabral until 1800, different kinds of descriptions were written (and drawn) by the several observers who visited the newfound colony<sup>2</sup>. The different origins, education, interests and socio-economic contexts of travellers, merchants, sailors, religious men, pirates and officers, among others, determined what these observers saw and how they described their observations. In this study, I seek to explore the visual perception of Brazilian landscapes in a selection of descriptions of Brazil, both signed and anonymous, which are held at the Portuguese National Library. This study is based on the landscape perception suggested in travel memories and anonymous manuscripts whose writers explored the materiality of Brazilian landscapes and the aesthetic value of this almost untouched land. How can we characterize the descriptions of Brazilian natural and cultivated landscapes? What are the values used to define Brazilian landscapes? What features are described? Do they identify the vegetal species of Brazilian landscapes? What are the shapes of the fields? Do these descriptions have a more religious, political, aesthetical or scientific focus? These are the questions here posed.

Landscape perception studies have made it possible to define and evaluate the elements that influence the way individuals react to the landscape. The methodological approach of this study followed a conceptual framework already developed by Zube, Sell and Taylor in 1982, which considers landscape perception to be the result of the interaction between an individual and the landscape, or between a group of people and the landscape<sup>3</sup>. In view of this, the analysis is focused on some landscape descriptions made by several travellers who visited Brazil between 1500 and 1800. Although it is well known that these manuscripts are primarily literary accounts written as diaries, they also provide an extraordinary documentary historical source, which is also interesting for the study of geography and landscape. Like all primary sources, the information supplied by these travel accounts has its advantages and shortcomings, and most of the times it is not a reliable view of the landscape observed, but, instead, the reflex of a landscape perception. The comparison with other literary sources, which are better known and more studied, and with iconographic documents alike, allowed us to check and substantiate some conclusions. Thus, I stress the empirical methodology used to reach preliminary conclusions of Brazilian landscape perception during the Antique Regime and that these should not be interpreted in more than a global manner.

Further studies should be pursued to understand the impact of this experience in European landscape and landscape knowledge<sup>4</sup>. In recent years, various projects have been developed in response to the needs of a more effective comprehension of the past to better preserve our landscape heritage<sup>5</sup>. There is a research project on landscape perception whose aim is to study prehistoric landscapes from a multidisciplinary approach involving visual and acoustic factors. The project's pilot study is examining the area of Stonehenge with primary audio-visual aspects<sup>6</sup>. It is the kind of experimental work that would help us see Brazilian landscapes with the eyes and ears of 16<sup>th</sup> century observers and that should then be intertwined with classical historical sources.

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<sup>2</sup> Most of them were gathered by Pinto de Sousa 1801. See also: Lima 1903; Rodrigues 1907; Basto 1953; Rau and Silva 1954; Cunha 1966; Velloso 1990-91.

<sup>3</sup> On landscape perception see Lothian 1999; Maund 2003; Unwin 1975; Zube, Pit and Anderson 1974; Zube, Sell and Taylor 1982.

<sup>4</sup> Most of these reports, however, remain in the form of manuscript and are not accessible to the public.

<sup>5</sup> On these projects see Gehring, Felber, Kienast, Hunziker, Buchecker and Bauer 2008; Herring 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Project "Landscape & Perception", conducted by Paul Devereux and Jon Wozencroft, Royal College of Art, 2012 (available [here](#)).

## 1. Pêro Vaz de Caminha's vision of the Brazilian landscape

The Portuguese knight Pêro Vaz de Caminha (c. 1450-1500) was appointed royal secretary of Pedro Álvares Cabral's fleet and wrote an emblematic letter with his perception of the Brazilian landscape dated from 1<sup>st</sup> May 1500, the first time Brazil was ever described by Europeans<sup>7</sup>. The first impression caused by the Brazilian landscape was idyllic. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that Caminha's description does not have any religious focus, as the Terrestrial Paradise, for example, did (as it was predicted by Pierre d'Ailly in *Imago Mundi*, which should be located beyond the Equator). The Brazilian landscape is perceived as idyllic because it is described by Caminha as a land of abundance, using a lot intensifying adverbs such as "very beautiful", "very large", "very extensive", "well-favored" or adjectives in the superlative such as "the best fruit". In his letter, which was written as a travel diary and where most of the pages described the native people in a total state of innocence, he includes a last passage on landscape. His words revealed not the Brazilian tropical landscape per se, but his perception of this new land, where the values of fertility, dimension and water abundance stood out, as we can recognize by reading the following excerpt:

*"It appears to me, Sire, that the coast of this country must be a good twenty or twenty-five leagues in length from the most southerly point we saw to the most northerly point we can see from this port. In some parts there are great banks along by the shore, some of which are red and some white; inland it is all flat and very full of large woods. All the coastal country from one point to the other is very flat and very beautiful. As to the jungle, it seemed very large to us seen from the sea; for, look as we would, we could see nothing but land and woods, and the land seemed very extensive. Till now we have been unable to learn if there is gold or silver or any other kind of metal or iron there; we have seen none. However, the air of the country is very healthful, fresh, and as temperate as that of Entre Douro e Minho, we have found the two climates alike at this season. There is a great plenty, an infinitude of waters. The country is so well-favored that if it were rightly cultivated it would yield everything, because of its waters. For all that, the best fruit that could be gathered hence would be, it seems to me, the salvation of these people"* (Pêro Vaz de Caminha, 1<sup>st</sup> May 1500).

Pêro Vaz de Caminha does not give us the description we might expected of someone who was seeing the Brazilian land for the first time from the sea. There is no description of a tropical beach with white sand, palm trees, and blue-turquoise sea, or of a forest with luxuriant vegetation enhanced by detailed aesthetical visions or sensory experiences. Instead, he gives an account of someone who is evaluating it and describing it using his own vocabulary and mental structure. Brazil is described as a blessed land. Pêro Vaz de Caminha described it according to his Christian parameters as if he was seeing Eden: he first describes the innocence of the people and only afterwards goes on to describe the abundance of water, vegetation and fruits of the landscape. Throughout history, the focus of the descriptions of Brazilian landscapes has differed from Caminha's, but the idea of abundance and of a privileged land blessed by God seems to last.

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<sup>7</sup> Published by Casal 1817. See also Cortesão 1943; Arroyo 1971; Castro 2009; among others. On the voyage of Pedro Álvares Cabral see Greenlee 1938: 3-33; Ley 2000: 41-59; Pereira 1999; Guirado 2001.

## 2. Brazilian landscape perception in literary sources after Caminha

Following Caminha, travellers from different origins and in different contexts have left their testimony of Brazil<sup>8</sup>. Adopting different genres of literature, they all share the circumstance of having been seduced by the Brazilian land and landscape. Most of the texts are about history, administration, geography, and many of them are travellers' journals. What makes them interesting is to see that even when it was not a direct subject, they would leave some perception of Brazilian land and landscape. For example, some descriptions conveyed a wilder and more fantastic vision of Brazil, as if it was a wonderland. This is expressed by Abbot Prévost's (Engel 1939) texts and in Jean François de La Harpe's *Abrégé de l'histoire générale des voyages* (1780), where Brazil is presented as a fabulous, wild and strange land. Again, these are not descriptions of tropical landscapes similar to those we are used to associate with the Brazilian coast (for someone arriving by boat this would be the first vision of the Brazilian landscape), but, instead, a place where one would be as astonished as Alice in Wonderland.

Some other texts have a scientific focus, or at least an ambition of doing so. Such are the cases of Hans Staden's *Truth History and description of a Wild Land* (1557), Jean de Léry's *Historia Navigationis in Brasiliam* (1578), Fernão Cardim's *Tratados da Terra e da Gente do Brasil*, written circa 1580 (Magalhães and Paraíso 2009) and Willem Piso's *Historia Naturalis Brasiliae* (1648), among others. Descriptions offering a scientific vision of the Brazilian landscape became predominant throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century. For example, Captain James Cook, Joseph Banks and Charles Solander, who travelled in the ship Endeavour in 1768, claimed they were totally dedicated to science. Joseph Banks argued they "*intended to examine the Natural History of the countries we shall touch. For the execution of this understanding, I have with me proper People who, as well as myself, have made that science their particular study*" (Domingues 2012: 184). In addition, Willem Piso's treatise is the first compendium on Brazilian Natural History, mainly of animal and vegetal biology.

There are also several books and documents on the Brazilian geography concerned with defining the territory's borders, and which are most of the times complemented with important cartographic sources. Such are the cases of Pedro de Santo Eliseu's *Description of Amazons*' (1746) or Francisco de Seixas' borders' descriptions (1786).

Some of the most important literary sources for Brazilian studies are travel journals. Although most travellers were describing their journey, they became seduced by the landscape's beauties and by the soft climate<sup>9</sup>. Arthur Bowes Smith (1750-1790), aboard

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<sup>8</sup> Such were the cases of the Italian merchant Amerigo Vespucci (1454-1512), the Portuguese sailor Pero de Magalhães de Gândavo, the Portuguese counsellor António Galvão (c. 1490-1557), the German mercenary and explorer Hans Staden (1525-1579), the English writer Richard Hakluyt (c. 1552-1616), the Portuguese Jesuit Fernão Cardim (1549-1625), the Dutch naturalist and physician Willem Piso (1611-1678), the British aristocrat George Anson (1697-1762), the Frenchmen Abbot Prévost (1697-1783) and Jean François de La Harpe (1739-1803), the Englishmen Thomas Lindley (1706-1781), Captain James Cook (1728-1779), Charles Solander (1733-1782), Joseph Banks (1743-1820), the British mineralogist John Mawe (1764-1829), the Englishman Henry Koster (1793-1820), the German engineer and army officer Wilhelm Ludwig von Eschwege (1777-1855), known as the Baron of Eschwege, and the German Prince Maximilian of Wied-Neuwied (1782-1867), just to mention the most well-known. On this period of Brazilian history see Southey 1822.

<sup>9</sup> "*This province is at sight very delicious and fresh in a great manner: it is all dressed with very high and thick trees, irrigated with the waters from many and very powerful streams of which the whole land participates, where greenness always remains with that temperance spring offers us here in April and May. And this causes that there is no cold there, or ruins of winter offending its plants, as it does to ours*



the ship *Lady Penrhyn* in 1787, described Rio de Janeiro's natural beauty and the birds, butterflies, insects, flowers and the diversity of leaves. There are also Portuguese travel journals such as the one by Pero Lopes de Sousa (1530-1532) (Guirado 2000) or the one by Francisco José de Lacerda Almeida (1788), which are particularly interesting because they offer a human dimension to the travel and navigation's descriptions.

Furthermore, there is a group of descriptions that have embodied a romanticist sensibility and a fascination for the exotic, although these are found in a chronological frame slightly later than the ones we are dealing with here. Such is the case of Thomas Lindley's *Narrative of a voyage to Brasil* (1805), John Mawe's *Travels in the interior of Brazil* (1802), Henry Koster's *Travels in Brazil* (1817)<sup>10</sup>, Wilhelm Ludwig von Eschwege's journal<sup>11</sup> and Maximiliano of Wied-Neuwied's *Reise nach Brasilien* (1820). The latter were highly sensitive to perceive the beauty of exotic landscapes. They searched for what was different instead of what was comparable with European patterns. And, in view of this, they are much closer to the European idea of Brazilian tropical landscape.

Still, the idea of a land of abundance and blessed by God and by nature, in accordance with Caminha's first description, is easily recognizable in these writings.

### 3. Brazilian landscape perception in some Portuguese manuscripts

There is a group of signed and anonymous writings on Brazil in the Portuguese National Library, which are not as famous as the descriptions mentioned above<sup>12</sup>. Most of the descriptions are anonymous, but a few of them are signed<sup>13</sup>. These are the cases of the manuscript written between 1585 and 1587 by Gabriel Soares de Sousa (-1592)<sup>14</sup>, the above-mentioned manuscript by Bento Sanches de Orta (1739-1795), who was sent to Brazil by the Portuguese government to chart the limits of the Portuguese territory, or the manuscript by the military officer Joaquim José Lisboa who wrote the *Descrição curiosa das principaes producções, rios, e animaes do Brazil, principalmente da capitania de Minas Geraes. The Manual do agricultor brasileiro: obra indispensável a todo o Senhor do engenho, fazendeiro e lavrador, por apresentar huma idéa geral e philosophica da agricultura applicada ao Brasil*, by C. A. Taunay and L. Riedel and published in Rio de Janeiro in 1839, is also interesting because, besides descriptions of nature and cultivated areas, it provides another kind of information about history,

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here. And this is as Nature is with all the causes of this district, and in such a way it has balanced in the temperance of the air, that it is never too cold or too hot", (Gândavo, quoted by Guirado 2003: 137). [In this study, all quotations originally in Portuguese were translated into English by the author.]

<sup>10</sup> Also known as Henrique da Costa (Costa 1817).

<sup>11</sup> He was hired by the Portuguese Royal House to study the geology of Brazil and to evaluate how to take advantage from it. He wrote *Journal von Brasilien*, Weimar, 1818; *Nachrichten aus Portugal und dessen colonien mineralogischen und Bergmann inhalts*, Brunswick, 1820; *Geognostisch Gemaelde Von Brasilien und dem wahrscheinlichen muttergestein der diamanten*, Braunschweig, 1824; *Pluto Brasiliensis*, 1833.

<sup>12</sup> Such are the cases of Almeida 1788; Brito 1592; *Compêndio de Geografia* c. 1700; *Descrição geographica...* 1750; *Geografia Física...* 1701; Orta 1789; Eliseu 1746; Seixas 1763-1786; Sousa 1585-1587; Vila Real 1792-1793.

<sup>13</sup> Such is the case of *Geografia Física...* 1701. See also *Descrição geographica...* 1752, which includes descriptions of the Colony of Sacramento (1681) and a description of Recife, the latter by José de Araújo (1734).

<sup>14</sup> Sousa 1587.

geography, administration and people's costumes, thus highlighting some particular aspects of Brazilian landscape perception.

There is one problem when trying to analyse landscape perception through anonymous texts. This perception resulted from subjective analyses and they depended on the viewer's own mental structure and context. Since we do not know who these authors were, the logics behind their arguments and perceptions are very difficult to grasp. However, they can be thought as a group of observers: Christians, specifically Catholics, and Europeans, specifically Portuguese. Thus, these texts offer the perception of Portuguese Catholic observers of Brazilian landscapes. In view of this, as a group, they are no longer anonymous, since we know who they were as a group. That explains why landscapes were described according to Christian parameters and always in comparison with Portugal, as we can see in the examples of Gabriel Soares de Sousa's manuscript: fig-trees were described as being better than the Portuguese because they were not attacked by insects; orange-trees spread a even better perfume than those cultivated in Portugal; even pineapples, which did not exist in Portugal, were compared with those that were brought into the country (BNP, RES 183, p. 95). Sometimes, the comparison was not made only with Portugal, but also with other territories of the Portuguese Empire and even with Spain. Such was the case of sugarcane, whose cultivation was compared with its cultivation in the islands of Cape Verde, from where it had been acclimatized, Madeira, S. Tomé, Canarias, Spain, and India (BNP, RES 183, p. 94). In the end, Brazil always stood out as the most outstanding land. A possible explanation for this finding may be that these individuals perceived the components associated with abundance and fertility as the most important factors to positively affect the visual quality of the whole landscape. Isabel Maria Madaleno, in *As cidade das mangueiras: agricultura urbana em Belém do Pará* (Madaleno 2002), analyses the abundance of the land and its fertility in species, and demonstrates that these were aspects that were important for the city's landscape but also for its production, even if most of the times lands were not cultivated. Overall, research findings show that observers expressed a high value towards Brazilian natural and cultivated landscapes. These findings are further supported by the presence of elements that created complexity, enabled grandiosity and indicated fertility in the landscape, but especially because of their waters.

The main idea shared by these texts is the idea of abundance: abundance of land, of water, of fruit-trees, animals, metals or precious stones. The huge extensions of fresh waters are described<sup>15</sup> and associated with the fertility of the land. The surprise and admiration for the abundance of fresh water started with Caminha and culminated with the superb discovery of the Amazon River<sup>16</sup>. In fact, the idea of huge rivers that drive you into virgin and exotic forests is still associated with Brazil until this very day. Travel accounts reveal that, during this whole period, the image of tree crops or fruit-tree crops predominated over the image of herbaceous or horticultural crops. We are constantly finding references to orange-trees, fig trees and pineapple-trees, among others. Vegetation was usually discussed from the perspective of individual plant species. The second main idea that stands out from these writings is the beauty of Brazil. The aesthetical evaluation of the Brazilian landscape is overwhelming: Brazil

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<sup>15</sup> As we can see by Gândavo's description: "(...) henceforth it is not possible to pass through due to a very big waterfall (...). This river proceeds from a very large lake that is at the core of the earth, where it is said that there are a lot of settlements whose inhabitants (according to their fame) possess great wealth of gold and precious stones" (quoted by Guirado 2003: 137).

<sup>16</sup> As it is evident from Eliseu 1746.

was described as the most beautiful land<sup>17</sup>, and its wilderness was also highly appreciated. The third topic I want to stress is that the distinction between nature (as “*the whole universe of every created thing before mankind became civilized*”<sup>18</sup>) and cultivated landscapes in Brazil is not as clear as in Europe. In this continent, boundaries, land texture, lot shape and crop texture are all physical components that help distinguish nature from cultivated landscapes.

The reconstruction of agricultural landscapes from these documents is a difficult task, since these documents hardly provide any details of such landscapes. Information about the features of the fields is quite sparse and almost restricted to general appreciations about the fields’ beauty, fertilization, leafy trees and plants. Agricultural lands were lands designated for food production. However, in addition to this productive aspect, they also had the potential to create a wide variety of landscapes. Agriculture has introduced significant changes in land property and in the visual perception of landscape, but since, in the Early Modern period, South America was less explored than the Old World, the difference perceived in the descriptions is less noteworthy because it is as if the interface between nature with its geographic and biophysical conditions and the aesthetic, economic and cultural values of a colonial society was continuously against the need to define boundaries and property. The strength of nature seems to have won the battle against the need of defining limits and of humanizing and Christianizing the wild and enchanted land of Brazil. The interpretation made of the selected books and manuscripts match the conclusions that were drawn about the difficulty of defining the boundaries of property. The orienting perceptions are bound up with the territory system, where the landscape, including basins, slopes of mountains, and rivers, were not delimited as owned properties by House groups. In the Early Modern period, boundary landmarks and significant places within each territory of the Old World were named, but the same did not happen in Brazil.

The total absence of boundaries or any kind of differentiation between territories is also recognizable in the Dutch Frans Post’s (1612-1680) paintings of sugar production farms. Here, it is not possible to separate cultivated landscapes from nature, since the overview provided by the painter was of a unique type of landscape. The only identifying element is the building of the *engenho* (sugar mill). Everything else was “natural” landscape. The Brazilian landscape perception and its depictions raise several questions, especially after defining our interest in matching this painter’s work with the texts that were studied. However, these paintings do not provide much new information, since, again, they do not present any boundaries between natural landscapes and cultivated landscapes, as it would be expected from a sugar production farm. Frans Post’s interest in the Brazilian exotic flora is clear from the details in the depiction of the different vegetal species. These details had a privileged role in his work. The cultural construction of the Brazilian landscape through words and paintings immediately converges in Frans Post’s work. This was accomplished not only because of the clear link the Dutch landscape painter established between painting and location – Brazil – (which Frans Post visited and painted in the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century); but also because of his particular understanding of nature and painting.

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<sup>17</sup> Gândavo believed Brazil was “*in a great way, delightful and pleasant to the human sight*”, in Gândavo 1980: 81.

<sup>18</sup> “Nature” 1974: 562.

## Conclusion

Brazilian landscapes were perceived and described by Portuguese authors taking into consideration their political, religious and cultural values. To summarize the general descriptions of these anonymous travellers we may say that there was a permanent admiration for what was frequently considered an idyllic landscape. The vocabulary that was used to describe Brazil intended to magnify what had been seen. Apart from that, there was also a lack of vocabulary stressing the tropical landscape, something that was probably beyond their understanding. These preliminary results reveal that it was not the tropical landscape *per se* that was assessed. Instead, it was the scale and abundance of the landscape elements that lead to positive assessments. Besides, there was also a surprisingly broad consensus among different writings regarding the Brazilian landscape's major features.

The values of fertility, abundance, scale and wonder have been identified when taking into consideration both the observer's responses to the totality of the landscape and, particularly, his ability to discern specific physical components of the landscape, such as fruit-trees, resemblances with Portugal and other areas of the empire, or the lack of boundaries. These findings may provide some preliminary insights into the Old World's perception of the Brazilian landscape (and landscape perception, in general) during the Early Modern period. They can be a starting point for a deeper study, one that includes audio-visual data survey to capture the sensory experience of natural surroundings, such an important aspect to landscape perception. We should try to look and listen as if we had our eyes and ears in the period of the discoveries, in order to explore the effects of tropical forests' acoustics and vision on visitors. Only then should we go back to the texts. Implications will emerge for landscape perception studies and historical sources analyses. In view of the research completed so far, the landscape descriptions seem to be directly associated with the Old World and its European parameters, as well as with its mental and linguistic structure.

In conclusion, the overall perception of travellers visiting Brazil over a period of more than three hundred years is that of an abundant and fertile landscape without any perceptible boundaries between wilderness and productive agricultural areas. Hence, the Brazilian landscape's overall perception offers a vision of a unified land.

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