

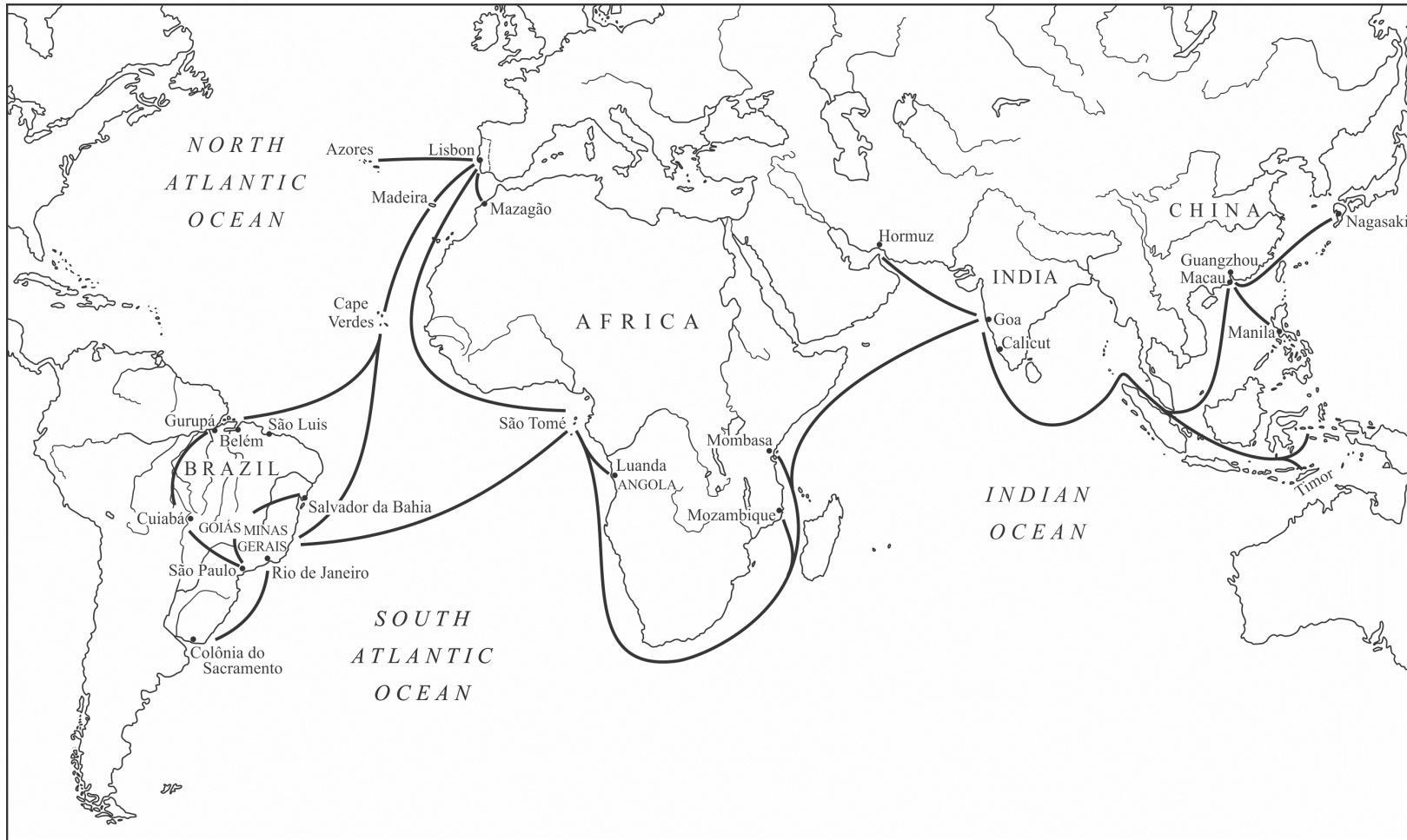
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Power and Corruption in the Early Modern Portuguese World

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Connections Across the Portuguese Seaborne Empire

Chapter 4

Gambling Governors and Gilded Lead

Rodrigo César de Meneses had been serving as governor of São Paulo for nearly five years when he finally set sail for Cuiabá in July 1726. It was the middle of the Brazilian winter—a damp and chilly time in São Paulo. Before assuming power in September 1721, Meneses had received instructions to make the trip to Cuiabá, but with the passage of time he had found a variety of reasons to put it off. “The orders have arrived outside of season,” he explained in a letter to the Overseas Council two years later in October 1723, noting that current water levels prevented him from making the journey.¹ But low water was certainly not the only factor in his procrastination. Today, a flight from São Paulo to Cuiabá takes a mere two and a half hours; in the early eighteenth century, however, the journey involved a river trip that could last anywhere from four months to a year. Braving indigenous attacks, malarial fever, and man-eating fish, the *monçoeiros*—or *bandeirantes* who sailed between São Paulo and Cuiabá—embarked on the journey at great risk to life and limb.² Indeed, historians have traditionally viewed self-preservation as a primary factor in the governor’s delay.³ “I will try to go next year,” he continued, “so long as the sicknesses [*doenças*] have subsided, for this year there was such death among the troops who went . . . that of more than one hundred persons only four escaped with their lives.”⁴ Finally, five years after arriving in São Paulo, Meneses’s excuses had come to an end. After making preparations for a number of months, he would set sail in early July 1726, initially following the same river route that had been used by António Raposo Tavares more than seventy-five years before. Unlike his *bandeirante* predecessor, however, there was no ambiguity in the purpose of Meneses’s journey. As governor of São Paulo, he was not going into the

backlands in search of indigenous slaves or mineral wealth, nor to harass Spanish colonists or missionaries. Rather, he was going to Cuiabá to establish royal authority in what was then one of the most distant and dangerous outposts of colonial Brazil, a burgeoning mining settlement more than a thousand miles away in the very heart of South America.

The story of Rodrigo César de Meneses and his mission to establish royal authority in the hinterlands of São Paulo speaks to the challenges that the colonial bureaucracy faced on the margins of empire. Following the discovery of large quantities of alluvial gold in the interior of Brazil in the early 1690s, the Portuguese crown struggled to govern the many frontier settlements that sprang up throughout the backlands of the Brazilian West. Having little or no allegiance to Lisbon, early explorers rushed deeper and deeper into the wilderness like drunken men fleeing a plague. “[They] only concern themselves with making new discoveries so as to live free from the justices,” one of the crown’s judges would later write. “And when they see that these follow them, they continue to make other discoveries in remote regions where one cannot pursue them owing to the great distance.”⁵ Ruling from afar, the crown and its councilors attempted to harness the energy and vitality of these early prospectors, using patronage to ensure loyalty. And yet, the men and women who poured into the hinterlands of South America in search of gold were subject to a host of other enticements—as were the royal officials who followed in their wake.

In the midst of the great Brazilian gold rushes of the early eighteenth century, social networks played multifaceted roles in the relationship between colony and crown. On the one hand, patron-client networks permeated every facet of the system—from the crown’s councilors in Lisbon to local governors, magistrates, and municipal officials in Brazil. And yet, the personal

nature of the bureaucracy provided a medium in which other associations could take root and grow. Indeed, conspiracies involving graft, bribery, and corruption all sprang from the same teeming earth. In the backlands of Brazil, royal government had traditionally been weak, enabling individuals to exploit the bureaucracy for personal gain. In order to more fully understand the negotiated nature of state power, let us return to the story of Rodrigo César de Meneses, using his experiences in São Paulo as a window into the web of human connections that circumscribed the power and reach of the formal colonial state.

Rodrigo César de Meneses was nearly fifty-one years old when he sailed from São Paulo to Cuiabá. The son of Luís César de Meneses, a former governor general of Brazil, and Mariana de Lencastre, a granddaughter of the 1st Count of Aveiras, the governor was a very well-connected aristocrat. His older brother, Vasco Fernandes, the 1st Count of Sabugosa, served as viceroy in Bahia during his tenure in São Paulo, and a brother-in-law served as viceroy in Goa during this same period.⁶ Unlike his more auspicious relatives, however, Meneses would never attain the rank of governor general or viceroy. Initially, in fact, he does not appear to have even had the option of pursuing an executive career. Like many second sons in his day, Meneses began his juvenile years as a student at Coimbra—though he does not appear to have been particularly suited for an academic life.⁷ A temperamental man, the future governor was purported to be quick to anger. In subsequent years, he would be accused of everything from fraud to murder; even his biographer would cede that he was violent.⁸ Thus, when he subsequently had the chance to pursue a military career, Meneses's response should come as no surprise: he dropped out of school, moved to Lisbon, and joined the army.⁹

Notwithstanding the young man's apparent eagerness to leave Coimbra, military service

was unpopular in Portugal and Brazil during this period. Having endured two lengthy conflicts with the Netherlands and Spain over the course of the seventeenth century, Portuguese soldiers had suffered immense hardships and loss. The military, moreover, had a reputation for being a particularly harsh taskmaster, and a soldier's salary—when paid at all—seldom compensated for the risks of military life. In this regard, prospective soldiers had a tradition of resorting to an assortment of techniques to avoid the draft, including feigning madness, pretending to be underage, taking ecclesiastical vows, and even, on occasion, self-mutilation.¹⁰ Although the aversion to military service was particularly strong among the rank and file, it extended to the officer classes as well. Indeed, the crown often struggled to find native sons with the background, training, and discipline to serve in executive capacities, and was frequently forced to employ foreign-born mercenaries—as attested by the large number of foreigners serving in the Portuguese fleet during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹¹ If foreigners gave the Portuguese military an increasingly international flavor, native-born officers would similarly benefit from opportunities to serve abroad in various capacities. A small country on the periphery of Western Europe, Portugal had always been forced to ally itself with its more powerful neighbors, especially the English, but also the Dutch, the French, and even, on occasion, the Spanish. During the early seventeenth century, for example, many Portuguese-born officials served throughout Europe in defense of the Spanish empire, including Dom Filipe de Moura, an early Overseas Councilor who enjoyed a lengthy military career in such diverse places as Italy, Flanders, Germany, the Levant, Barbary, Milan, and France.¹²

The international context in which the Portuguese military functioned was particularly relevant at the end of the seventeenth century as Europe's great powers prepared for the death of Charles II of Spain and the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–1714). In this respect, Portugal

found itself preparing for war, at least partly on account of its strategic location on the western tip of the Iberian Peninsula: an ideal staging point for the invasion of Spain by land or by sea. It was in this vein in 1698 that the crown attempted to ameliorate some of the problems that had traditionally plagued the military. As the Duke of Cadaval proposed to the crown in March of that year, “The first thing Your Majesty must do is to name officers [*cabos*] and to establish a treasury [*vedoria*] for the army with a general paymaster [*pagador geral*].”¹³

Rodrigo César de Meneses’s appointment to serve in one of the crown’s regiments in the first years of the eighteenth century occurred during this period of modernization. Like many other Portuguese officers of the day, Meneses had the opportunity to serve extensively throughout Europe, and would eventually see service in Turkey as well. By the end of the century’s first decade, he had risen through the ranks to become both a *coronel* and *brigadeiro*.¹⁴ Educated in the art of warfare, officers like Meneses benefited immensely from military service, profiting from opportunities to travel, to learn technical skills, and to make connections with the crown and other royal officials (assuming that the officer survived).

In terms of connections, Meneses appears to have made a very good impression upon Dom João V, who was a relatively young monarch when the future governor of São Paulo was commissioned to preside over an infantry regiment at court. Indeed, it was to Meneses that the king turned in 1708 following a four-year affair with the youngest daughter of the Marquis of Cascais. Having promised to marry the girl (in writing, no less)—it was the only way she would agree to reciprocate his affections—the now nineteen-year-old monarch had since had a change of heart, and in order to extract himself from the situation arranged for his lover to marry a military officer at court: Rodrigo César de Meneses. We do not know how the future governor of São Paulo felt about marrying his master’s mistress—nor, for that matter, what must have been

going through the mind of a young woman who suddenly found herself engaged to a *coronel* rather than a king. And yet the words of an old Douro folk song come readily to mind:

<i>Rapariga, tola, tola</i>	[You foolish girl,]
<i>Olha o que tu vais fazer!</i>	[take care what you are going to do!]
<i>Vais casar com um soldado</i>	[You want to marry a soldier,]
<i>Melhor te fora morrer!</i>	[you would be better dead!] ¹⁵

Whether because of a broken heart or the unpopularity of military life, the young woman soon took matters into her own hands. As news of the affair spread through the court in Lisbon, she abandoned king and *coronel* alike, fleeing to a nearby convent and becoming a nun!¹⁶

If the ensuing scandal created immediate difficulties for Meneses at court, he would benefit from similar arrangements in the years ahead. Indeed, the future governor would ultimately owe his bureaucratic rise not only to familial connections, but also to his willingness to receive what others had theretofore refused. In this respect, it was only after a prominent *fidalgo* declined the governorship of São Paulo in late March 1721 that the crown asked Meneses—on very short notice—to step in and take the man’s place.¹⁷ Three days later, the then forty-five-year-old Meneses found himself sailing toward Brazil with the title of governor. He arrived at the port city of Santos the following August after a journey of four and a half months.¹⁸

The captaincy of São Paulo was, of course, a very different place than the city the governor had left behind in Portugal. A rough frontier town that had only recently become a city (*cidade*), São Paulo was not altogether different from what it had been nearly a hundred years before during the days of Raposo Tavares. A gateway into the backlands (*sertões*) of Brazil, the city was built upon a mixed heritage that combined both indigenous and Luso-Brazilian

elements.¹⁹ Descended from Luso-Brazilian fathers and Tupinambá mothers, Paulistas had a reputation for rebelliousness and independence. And yet, the city's inhabitants also maintained very real ties to Portugal. In this respect, the relationship between São Paulo and Lisbon was somewhat ambiguous.²⁰ A June 1674 report from the Overseas Council, for example, asserts that the city was populated by worthy, law-abiding vassals who always responded to royal obligations with speed and diligence,²¹ but the council's own records during the period portray a city that was bubbling with upheaval and civil strife.²² How would the new governor deal with this ambiguity? More to the point, how would the inhabitants of São Paulo respond to his authority?

In large part, the answers to these questions would be shaped by the region's past. Until the beginning of the eighteenth century, São Paulo was situated within what remained of the donatary captaincy of São Vicente. Accordingly, its inhabitants traditionally looked not to Portuguese kings, but rather to a series of *capitães donatários*, or lord proprietors, for government: the counts of Monsanto (a household that had been awarded the additional title of Marquis of Cascais in the mid-seventeenth century). In their capacity as the region's lord proprietors, the counts of Monsanto received a portion of taxes and other proceeds from the environs of São Paulo and also appointed the captain-major and other local officials (though such appointments had to be confirmed by the crown).²³ This would all change, however, in the early eighteenth century. In 1709, the 2nd Marquis of Cascais—the same *fidalgos* whose daughter had fled to a nunnery the year before—sold his proprietary rights over São Paulo to the Portuguese crown.²⁴ Shortly thereafter, the Overseas Council subdivided the sprawling captaincy of Rio de Janeiro, combining Minas Gerais with the new royal holdings in São Paulo to create a distinct captaincy of São Paulo and Minas Gerais.²⁵

Although it initially appeared that these bureaucratic changes would adversely affect the autonomy of São Paulo, in practice the city's inhabitants continued to maintain a great deal of political independence. In large part, this stemmed from the fact that the captaincy's governors did not particularly like rustic São Paulo, preferring to live more than three hundred miles away in Vila do Carmo (the modern day city of Mariana in the state of Minas Gerais).²⁶ This would all change a decade later when the Overseas Council subdivided the crown's holdings again in late 1720. In order to more effectively govern the expanding *sertão*, the tribunal separated São Paulo from Minas, creating an independent captaincy that stretched out to what is today Mato Grosso and Goiás in the north and to Colônia do Sacramento in the south, an area that included more than 2.5 million square kilometers (roughly the size of modern-day Argentina).²⁷

The crown's decision to create a separate captaincy based out of São Paulo fits within a larger administrative strategy implemented by the Overseas Council during this period. As royal interests shifted further and further into the *sertão* following the discovery of large quantities of gold in southern Brazil, the crown found it increasingly difficult to effectively govern the region's existing captaincies. In response to these difficulties, the Overseas Council implemented a series of administrative reforms over the course of the eighteenth century. In part, these included the establishment of new captaincies in southern Brazil, including the separation of São Paulo from Minas Gerais shortly before Rodrigo César de Meneses arrived in the region in 1721. Additionally, similar administrative changes would follow in the years ahead. The captaincies of Mato Grosso and Goiás would be carved out of São Paulo in 1748, a second high court (*relação*) would be established in Rio de Janeiro in 1751, and finally the colonial capital would be moved from Bahia to Rio de Janeiro in 1767. In each instance, these administrative changes were in response to political, economic, and international developments stemming from the discovery of

gold in the backlands of Brazil during the late seventeenth century.²⁸

We do not know the exact date and place of the first great gold strikes in Brazil. It is apparent, however, that rumors of gold had begun to circulate through the region by the early 1690s.²⁹ In late 1692, António Pais de Sande, an aging member of the Overseas Council who had left Lisbon to serve as governor of Rio de Janeiro, reported rumors that large quantities of gold had been discovered in the *sertão* by Paulistas.³⁰ Sande was commissioned to investigate the claim and bring the newly discovered mines under royal jurisdiction. Shortly after journeying into the *sertão* in June 1694, however, he suffered a major stroke that left him paralyzed and unable to speak.³¹ He died eight months later in February 1695. And yet, if the crown's initial attempts to gather news was a failure, reports of the region's wealth soon spread throughout Brazil, Portugal, and the rest of the overseas empire, leading to the first great gold rush of the western hemisphere. In the years that followed, swarms of prospectors flooded São Paulo's *sertões* in search of gold along the region's banks and streams. "Each year a crowd of Portuguese and of foreigners come out in the fleets in order to go to the Mines," wrote the Jesuit Antonil in his *Cultura e opulência do Brasil* (1711). "From the cities, towns, plantations, and backlands of Brazil come Whites, Colored, and Blacks, together with many Amerindians employed by the Paulistas. The mixture is of all sorts and conditions of persons: men and women; young and old; poor and rich; nobles and commoners; laymen, clergy, and religious of different orders, many of which have neither house nor convent in Brazil."³²

Although the Overseas Council had initially urged the crown to take a wait-and-see approach to these events, by the beginning of the eighteenth century it was apparent that the draw of the region's gold was not a temporary aberration, and that the economic and demographic changes occurring in the region would require a political response—if the crown

were going to be able to profit from the collection of the *quinto real*, or royal fifths.³³

According to Iberian custom, the crown had certain rights that pertained to minerals extracted from the subsoil. In this regard, it had traditionally levied a tax of one-fifth on any gold or silver found in Brazil and throughout the rest of Portugal's overseas empire.³⁴ Although Brazil's golden age is traditionally associated with the eighteenth century, in fact, varying quantities of the substance had already been found in the interior of São Paulo since the mid-1500s. Indeed, the crown had previously provided instructions on the collection of the royal fifths as early as August 1618.³⁵ It was not until the beginning of the eighteenth century, however, that the crown attempted to collect this tax on a large scale and in a systematic manner—coinciding, of course, with the great gold rushes of the period. In these circumstances, the Overseas Council first took up the matter of the royal fifths in April 1702, drafting statutes that outlined the responsibilities and jurisdictions of a superintendent (*superintendente*), treasurer (*guarda mor*), and other officials in the mines.³⁶

Yet, if it was a simple matter for the Overseas Council to lay claim to the region's gold, it was a far more difficult business for royal officials in Brazil to actually collect the royal fifths. Smuggling and fraud had always been rampant in Portuguese America, and the crown's agents in Brazil were not always competent or trustworthy. Significantly, social connections often lay at the heart of such conspiracies, complicating the crown's ability to prevent and to punish criminal behavior. In 1703, for example, the Overseas Council was particularly concerned after São Paulo's first mining superintendent, José Vás Pinto, abandoned his post because of the difficulties of working in the region. "Since the liberty of the Paulistas is so great that they have dared to commit crimes and smuggle gold even in the presence of Your Majesty's minister," the Overseas Council wrote to the king after receiving news of Pinto's departure, "they will do so

now to a much greater extent. . . . For even if he could not administer justice with exactitude, by administering it in any manner at all he showed them that they were part of Your Majesty's empire. And now that there is no minister, they will be even more absolute and will do their works even more freely, for without the virtue of justice in the mines, we can do nothing more than wait for their ruin.³⁷

In the months and years ahead, the Overseas Council attempted to ensure the continued profitability of Brazil's mining regions by instituting various administrative reforms and by sending an ever greater number of officials to the region.³⁸ Among these bureaucrats was the new governor of São Paulo, Rodrigo César de Meneses, who first arrived at the port of Santos in mid-August 1721.

As the crown began to take a more active role in the administration of São Paulo and the region round about, royal agents met with increasing resistance. Although local officials had complained in the past that São Paulo had been neglected during the period of its joint captaincy with Minas Gerais (1709–1720), it seems doubtful that these same officials would have been enthusiastic about the arrival of the new governor—notwithstanding the pomp and ceremony that celebrated his arrival.³⁹ Indeed, as Meneses first disembarked at the port of Santos, we know that he was greeted by at least one official who was not happy to meet the new governor. In a letter the previous month, the local military commander of Santos had confessed that he preferred being subject to faraway Rio de Janeiro—as opposed to an all-too-near Meneses.⁴⁰ Although the officer received the new governor respectfully, he would come to detest the man in the weeks that followed. In the coming months, the two would argue over the poor condition of the port's fortifications (which Meneses blamed on local officials), and eventually the port's commander would request to be transferred away because of conflicts with the new governor.⁴¹ It is apparent

in this regard that Meneses left a very poor impression of himself during his initial arrival in Santos. Indeed, as Meneses made his way up the steep path from Santos to the city of São Paulo, the local commander's frustrations made their way into print. Writing to a former superior, the commander wryly noted that in addition to the numerous complaints Meneses had made about the port at Santos, he probably would not like the state of the road between Santos and São Paulo either.⁴²

In fact, Rodrigo César de Meneses does not appear to have liked the captaincy of São Paulo as a whole. His letters portray a region in chaos: decaying fortifications, a recordless archive, uppity subordinates, rampant gambling, widespread criminal activity, and a jail that was more like a sieve than a prison.⁴³ "The prisoners can flee whenever they want," he wrote, "for the walls [of the jail] are in such terrible condition that they can be breached without any instrument but one's hands."⁴⁴ Although the governor would later boast of his accomplishments in the region, in more candid moments he confessed to frustration, disappointment, and even physical exhaustion. As he explained in a letter to his cousin the following November, "Since taking office, I have not had a moment's rest."⁴⁵

Among the new governor's many worries were an increasing number of distant mining settlements cropping up throughout the *sertão*. As backland explorers found new sources of wealth deeper and deeper in the interior, the ability of royal officials to administer justice—and more especially to collect the royal fifths—was becoming increasingly compromised. Among important gold strikes made prior to the governor's arrival was an especially promising find along the banks of the River Cuiabá in 1718.⁴⁶ Journeying through the *sertão* in search of indigenous slaves, Paulista *bandeirantes* instead stumbled upon large quantities of gold. Using their muskets to dig into the river's banks, they quickly lined their pockets, then sent news to

royal officials in São Paulo in order to stake their claims to the find. Significantly, personal connections again complicated the bureaucracy's ability to establish royal authority and collect the royal fifths. As the social networks of the day went to work proliferating rumors, news of the strike quickly spread beyond the bureaucracy. The following year the banks of the Cuiabá were flooded with immigrants. As one of the region's earliest chroniclers recounted, "From Minas Gerais, Rio de Janeiro, and the whole captaincy of São Paulo, flocked many people, leaving their houses, goods, wives, and children, pouring into these backlands as if they were the Land of Promise or the hidden Paradise in which God placed our first parents."⁴⁷

When he arrived in São Paulo in early September 1721, Rodrigo César de Meneses suddenly found himself at the point of embarkation of this latest gold rush. Writing to the crown a week later, Meneses reported that although news was still sketchy, he had been informed that more than two thousand Paulistas had recently abandoned the city in order to make the lengthy journey to the new mines of Cuiabá.⁴⁸ With the passage of time, the governor's information would become more specific. In December 1721, Meneses wrote to his counterpart in Rio de Janeiro indicating that the discoveries in Cuiabá were much more profitable than originally anticipated, then passed along identical information to the crown as well as to his older brother, the viceroy in Bahia.⁴⁹ "Of the new discovery of the mines of Cuiabá, there has been repeated news," he wrote, "and all of it is good."⁵⁰ Eight months later, Meneses was even surer of himself. "My hopes for the new mines of Cuiabá have been confirmed," he wrote to his brother in Bahia, "and they are not only permanent, but also abundant with gold and great in extension." Significantly, Meneses asked his brother to forward the news to Lisbon. "[It] cannot but cause small pleasure to His Majesty," he wrote.⁵¹

Meneses clearly intended to profit from the discovery of the mines in Cuiabá—if not

from the gold itself, then from the gratitude of a generous king. In many ways, royal patronage served to reinforce the behavior of governors like Meneses. Drawing upon early modern concepts of justice and grace, royal patronage imitated biblical teachings and beliefs.⁵² All titles, offices, and other *mercês* granted by the crown were intended to recompense faithful vassals just as the blessings of eternity would one day reward the righteous. More specifically, royal patronage imitated Christ's relationship with the Church, providing an opportunity for the crown to exercise grace by rewarding justice. The system of *mercês* employed by Portugal's kings was an incentive-based tradition that was founded on a concept of bounded omnipotence. "But is not Christ . . . Lord of all?" explained the Jesuit Father António Vieira. "Yes, he is. Can he not therefore give everything to anyone in any manner? When it is just, yes; when not, no."⁵³ In practice, of course, kings were not gods, and in this sense were not limited by the laws that governed deity. For his part, Father Vieira—a councilor and confessor to various kings—realized as much: "There is nothing that is understood better and followed less in the courts of kings than the distinction between justice and grace. . . . I do not deny kings their power to bestow grace, for it is very fitting of royal magnificence and generosity, but grace should only come once the obligations of justice have been satisfied."⁵⁴

In order to bridge the gap between grace and justice, early modern jurists employed a third concept: merit. Thus, when the crown appointed Meneses to serve as governor of São Paulo, it did so because of his "merits" (*merecimentos*).⁵⁵ Similarly, when António Pais de Sande was awarded the office of governor of Rio de Janeiro, it was again on account of his merits (or, more specifically, because of "the satisfaction with which he has accomplished everything relating to my service").⁵⁶ In theory, merits could consist of nearly any act; in practice, standard merits included such things as important overseas assignments or missions; injuries, wounds, or

other impediments received while defending the crown; and promises made by the crown to family members or forebears. In each case, the crown exercised grace and justice by rewarding vassals for specific services. As an example, the retirement of Manuel Barbosa Brandão is particularly illustrative. A royal archivist at the beginning of the eighteenth century, Brandão was granted a generous retirement in July 1717 on account of his merits. He had gone blind following “thirty years, four months, and eight days” of royal service (spent scrutinizing the handwriting of royal bureaucrats!).⁵⁷

If Meneses intended to use the mines of Cuiabá to ingratiate himself with the Portuguese crown, he was hardly alone. Among the petitions received by the Overseas Council during this period was one that came from the man who had first discovered gold in the region: Pascoal Moreira Cabral Leme. In his late-sixties, Cabral Leme came from a prominent Paulista family. Like many of his contemporaries in the region, he had spent the better part of his life leading expeditions into the *sertão*. Indeed, as early as 1682 we find him leading a *bandeira* in the region of modern-day Mato Grosso do Sul, guiding a mixed band of whites, slaves, and native allies in search of indigenous labor.⁵⁸ Described as a generous and charitable man by contemporaneous sources, Cabral Leme was also said to have been unpolished and barely literate—though the man’s flowing script and flourishing signature tell a very different story.⁵⁹ Writing from the mines in July 1722, Cabral Leme claimed that his discoveries in Cuiabá had been made on the crown’s behalf. “I have been six years in these *sertões*,” he began, “employed in the royal service . . . striving to discover gold, silver, and precious stones.” Like many who petitioned for royal favor, Cabral Leme was very much aware that the success of his efforts would not only depend upon royal grace and justice, but more especially upon his own merits and worthiness. To this end, in the remainder of his letter he highlighted the suffering and sacrifices he had

endured, the services he had rendered, and the difficult circumstances in which he currently found himself. “After passing through great risks to life on river and land,” he continued,

I discovered a stream . . . with much gold, of which Your Majesty received a part. . . . And from this stream there was found various smaller streams, and all have given good gold . . . and I expect to discover that these mines in every particular are like the great ones of [Minas] Gerais with many gold fields for the royal treasury. . . . And now finding myself destitute of funds, and with a family—including a wife, two daughters, and a son—I beg Your Majesty to cast your eyes down upon this your loyal servant even as you will, and confirm upon me the occupation which I currently exercise of treasurer [*guarda-mor*] of these gold mines in the *sertão* of Cuiabá and also the position of captain-major [*capitão-mor regente*], it being very convenient for the increase of the royal treasury and also for the tranquility of this people.⁶⁰

The petition subsequently made its way from Cuiabá to São Paulo, from there to Rio de Janeiro, and finally on to Lisbon with the fleet. Twelve months later, the discoverer’s letter had finally arrived in the chambers of the Overseas Council at the Portuguese court.⁶¹

If the distance between Portugal and Cuiabá threatened to hinder the crown’s ability to reward Leme in a timely manner, his petition would ultimately face more than just traveling difficulties. Once in the possession of the Overseas Council, petitions often had a tendency to languish unread for extended periods. At the center of an increasingly complex bureaucracy, the tribunal was notoriously unable to keep pace with the deluge of petitions that arrived each year with the fleet.⁶² To complicate matters, moreover, the council was only a part of the larger administrative structure in Lisbon and frequently had to rely upon the assistance of other

tribunals, including the Board of Conscience and Orders, the Council of Treasury, the Desembargo do Paço, the Council of State, and the Secretaries of State. Consequently, as relevant overseas paperwork made its way through the royal bureaucracy it was not uncommon for particular petitions to become lost (on a temporary or permanent basis), and this, in turn, frequently led to all sorts of interesting scenarios. In cases where new papers were created by the Overseas Council to replace those that had been lost in another tribunal, for example, the original paperwork would sometimes be found months or years later. With multiple copies of the same petition making their way through the system, it was theoretically possible for a petitioner to receive multiple *mercês* for a single petition, or else to be denied a *mercê* in one instance and then awarded it in another.⁶³

In addition to circulating overseas petitions within the larger colonial bureaucracy in Lisbon, the Overseas Council frequently sent them abroad for consultation as well. In fact, this is precisely what happened to Cabral Leme's petition. Rather than forwarding the Paulista's requests directly to the crown, the Overseas Council instead sent the petition back to São Paulo. Writing to Governor Meneses in July 1723, the council included a copy of Leme's original petition and asked Meneses to verify the man's claims.⁶⁴ In many ways, the council's decision to send the petition back to São Paulo reflected the tribunal's connections to Portugal's larger colonial bureaucracy and was a natural consequence of its relationship with overseas governors and magistrates in Brazil and elsewhere. Although there were instances in which individual councilors did not trust particular overseas governors or magistrates, in practice the Overseas Council frequently sought the advice of local officials when making recommendations about the merits and worthiness of the crown's overseas vassals. This was particularly the case when there were not any active members of the tribunal who had personally lived or worked in a particular

overseas location. For São Paulo, this was especially true during the early eighteenth century, when, with a few noted exceptions, the Overseas Council had very few members in its ranks who had previously traveled or served in the regions of southern Brazil.⁶⁵ Accordingly, the council was forced to rely primarily upon the advice of local officials serving in São Paulo and its environs when it received petitions from the region.

For overseas governors and other officials, the opportunity to influence decision-making in Lisbon was one of the perks associated with overseas service. Correspondence between colonial officials and individual members of the Overseas Council was generally friendly, but also formal and, at times, even fawning (particularly by today's standards). Linked to the same aristocratic and magisterial classes from which council members were drawn, overseas governors and magistrates were invariably deferential to the tribunal, placing themselves at the service of its members. The flattering nature of such correspondence is clearly illustrated in the letters of the day. In the early 1690s, for example, the governor general of Brazil wrote to the president of the Overseas Council, acknowledging the latter's role in securing his overseas appointment and pledging his very life to the man's service: "My Lord, not a single ship has arrived in the port of this city. And the principal consequence of this is that I do not have news of Your Excellency which I am always desiring and which my obligation and love requires, owing to the mercy that you have shown me—which I shall confess even until the last drop of blood in my veins."⁶⁶ Standing to benefit from the largesse of individual councilors, overseas governors and magistrates were careful to please the very same superiors who (with a certain amount of luck) might one day be their colleagues!

Certainly Rodrigo César de Meneses showed himself to be deferential to the Overseas Council during his tenure in São Paulo. Descended from a prominent family and with a brother

and brother-in-law concurrently serving as viceroys in Bahia and Goa, the governor of São Paulo most certainly would have had high expectations about his own future. The recent discovery of the mines of Cuiabá, moreover, stood to be an immense boon to his future career. “As soon as I took possession of this government,” Meneses wrote to the crown in February 1722, “I sought with all care to ascertain precise news of the new discovery [Cuiabá] so that with greater clarity and brevity I could give an account of it to Your Majesty.” Concluded Meneses of Cuiabá, “The abundance of gold is much greater than even its discoverers promised.”⁶⁷ It was very much in this promising yet deferential context that Meneses would subsequently receive a request from the Overseas Council in Lisbon (in duplicate) asking for additional information about Pascoal Moreira Cabral Leme, the man who had actually discovered the new mines. By now it was mid-1724. More than two years had passed since Leme had originally sent his petition to the crown.

Although Rodrigo César de Meneses had never personally met Cabral Leme, he had by this time already formed an opinion about him. While Cabral Leme’s fellow Paulistas had initially elected him to serve as the mine’s captain-major, Meneses had subsequently replaced him with another Paulista, João Falcão Diaz, one of the governor’s local allies. In this respect, it seems likely that Cabral Leme’s petition to the crown was originally made in response to the governor’s actions removing him from office. Responding to the questions of the Overseas Council in August 1724, Governor Meneses confirmed that Cabral Leme had, in fact, been the discoverer of Cuiabá. However, the governor did not believe that he was entirely worthy of the offices that he was seeking. Although Meneses ceded that Cabral Leme should probably have the office of treasurer confirmed upon him, he did not feel that the man was worthy of the office of captain-major, explaining that he was too old and otherwise had “little disposition and activity” for it.⁶⁸

The governor's recommendations subsequently made their way back to Lisbon. Thereafter, there is no record of any further actions being taken in the matter (beyond the governor's response being filed in the council's archives). In fact, by the time the petition had made its way back to the chambers of the Overseas Council in mid-1725, the entire matter was moot. By then, three years had passed since Cabral Leme had written to the crown, and in the interim he had died, probably of natural causes—though Brazil's mining districts were notorious for murders and other violent deaths.⁶⁹

São Paulo had always had a very violent reputation—as the region's new governor was quickly finding out. In this respect, although Meneses was optimistic about the profitability of the new mines of Cuiabá—trusting in his ability to establish royal authority in this faraway region—he was not altogether pleased with the social and demographic consequences that the mines were then causing in São Paulo. “On account of the reports circulating through these captaincies of the new discovery of the Mines of Cuiabá,” he complained to the crown in September 1722, “the City has filled with people coming from Minas Gerais and from other parts, most being penniless men, poor, and debtors.”⁷⁰ Spilling into the city's streets and taverns, many of São Paulo's new arrivals were, in fact, on the run from creditors and royal officials in other parts of Brazil. Once in São Paulo, moreover, many took up gambling, fighting, and other criminal activities as they waited for their chance to journey to the new mines.⁷¹ In this respect, the distance and nature of travel between São Paulo and the new settlements in Cuiabá very much complicated the governor's ability to maintain order in the region. Employing a series of rivers that crisscrossed through the backlands of South America, the journey from São Paulo to Cuiabá was both dangerous and lengthy, and its seasonal nature meant that would-be prospectors were forced to remain in São Paulo for as long as eight months before journeying on to Cuiabá,

depending upon the timing of their arrival.

Although the history of the eighteenth-century river journeys between São Paulo and Cuiabá is treated at length elsewhere, a short description is required in order to understand the context in which the governor was operating. On account of seasonal water levels, the journey between São Paulo and Cuiabá could only be undertaken during certain times of the year, leading locals to refer to it by the same term that mariners used to describe the seasonal voyage between Lisbon and Goa: a monsoon (*monção*). The term was in fact fitting—not only because of the seasonal nature of the endeavor, but more especially since the journey between São Paulo and Cuiabá generally took the same length of time traditionally required for the voyage between Lisbon and Goa: five to seven months. (The return from Cuiabá, on the other hand, could often be completed in as short a length of time as two months because the canoes were not laden with provisions and most of the journey was downstream.) Outbound voyages usually left Porto Feliz (near modern-day São Paulo) between March and mid-June (though some monsoons occasionally embarked as late as October).⁷² The journeys themselves consisted of large contingents of canoes that traveled together for reasons of safety. The canoes were generally made from hollowed out tree trunks—the largest of which could hold up to eighteen people. A crew of at least eight or nine was generally required to man the vessels, including a pilot and assistant pilot, five or six rowers, and a look-out man, or *proeiro*, who watched for rapids and other dangers.⁷³

The journey itself was extremely dangerous. Hazards not only included a host of natural difficulties—rapids, portages, the danger of piranhas, snakes, venomous insects, disease, and so forth—but also the perils of Amerindian attacks.⁷⁴ Raiding a monsoon in 1725, the Paiaguá—an aquatic people in the region of modern-day Paraguay—annihilated all but two members of a

convoy that had included more than six hundred people.⁷⁵ In another attack five years later the Paiaguá ambushed a monsoon carrying more than four hundred people and sixty *arrobas* of gold.⁷⁶ Killing the monsoon's passengers and seizing the cargo, the Paiaguá subsequently took the gold to Asunción, where they traded it for tin.⁷⁷ “And so much blood was shed that the waters turned from crystal clear to pale rose,” an early chronicler later recounted of the encounter.⁷⁸ In response to such attacks, early *monçoeiros* sought alternative routes to Cuiabá. The original route—following the Tietê, Paraná, Pardo, Anhandui, Aquidauana, Paraguay, and Cuiabá Rivers—was soon replaced by a similar route that largely avoided the Paraguay. In addition to contributing to the safety and well-being of those who accompanied the monsoons, the route change was also part of the crown's attempts to prevent smuggling along the Paraguay River—an area that bordered Spanish territory.⁷⁹ Situated along Brazil's western periphery—a nebulous region that was largely outside the control of either the Portuguese or Spanish crowns—the location of the new mines provided early settlers with ample opportunities to smuggle gold through Spanish dominions and thus avoid paying taxes to the Portuguese crown.

Preventing the loss of the region's gold to Spanish America would remain one of the primary preoccupations of Rodrigo César de Meneses in the years ahead. “After having settled on opening a way to the new mines of Cuiabá by the most convenient route,” the governor wrote to the crown in September 1722, “it appeared best to prevent there being any other because of the harm that would be caused to the good collection of the royal fifths.” Moreover, by limiting the routes into the region, Meneses not only hoped to prevent smuggling but also to thwart Spanish attempts to gather news about Portuguese settlements. “It seems best to prevent them from continuing along that way,” the governor continued, referring to the original river route between São Paulo and Cuiabá, “since the Castilians customarily come to a stopping place there each year

. . . in order to observe if the Paulistas have founded a settlement there or made any other discoveries.”⁸⁰ In this sense, the ambiguous nature of the region’s borders not only complicated the governor’s attempts to establish royal authority, but more especially to defend remote mining settlements like Cuiabá from foreign incursions.

Upon first arriving in São Paulo and seeing the sorry state of the region’s coastal fortifications, Rodrigo César de Meneses—an army officer who had spent the last eighteen years of his life serving in foreign wars—had been particularly concerned about the possibility of foreign invasion.⁸¹ In fact, the region’s recent history supported the governor’s preoccupations. During the War of the Spanish Succession a decade before, French privateers had sacked and plundered Portuguese settlements across the Atlantic—including the city of Rio de Janeiro in September and October 1711.⁸² In the years that followed there was a flurry of correspondence about foreign ships that lurked along Brazilian coasts waiting for opportunities to prey on unsuspecting settlements and shipping.⁸³ In turn, royal officials continued to write extensively about the need to strengthen coastal fortifications—though the continuing nature of the correspondence would seem to indicate that very little was ever accomplished to this end.⁸⁴

As the region’s gold mines became more and more profitable in the years that followed—not only in the interior, but also along the coasts—fear of assaults by foreign pirates and others steadily increased. After spending a year in São Paulo and becoming acquainted with the difficulties and prohibitive costs associated with coastal defense, Governor Meneses came up with a rather drastic solution to the quandary: If foreigners were attracted to Brazil’s southern coasts because of gold, then the simplest way to keep them out would be to stop mining it! “In the past there were discoveries of gold in the Vila of Pernaguá,” Meneses wrote to the crown in a September 1722 letter explaining his ideas—and actions—in this regard. “And because the

inhabitants there continued to explore deposits that were not profitable and which yielded even less to the royal treasury of Your Majesty, I have ordained that they suspend their work, not only for this reason but also because of the harm that could come to that people and land by the invasion of foreign enemies—the *vila* being located on the coasts of the sea without fortifications or other defenses.”⁸⁵

As might be expected, the colonial bureaucracy in Lisbon was not especially sympathetic to Meneses’s reasoning. Indeed, individual Overseas Councilors—far away in the relative security of the tribunal’s quarters in Lisbon—went so far as to question the governor’s fitness for office. Whether or not the crown profited from the region’s gold, they explained, the *vila* in question would still be subject to foreign invasion until the coasts were properly defended. Under these circumstances, all that the governor had succeeded in doing was to rob the royal treasury of future wealth. In terms of bringing gold to the royal treasury, the council concluded, “even a little is better than nothing.”⁸⁶

One of the primary preoccupations of the Overseas Council during this period and in subsequent years was to secure Portugal’s claims to Cuiabá and other settlements deep in the interior of South America.⁸⁷ Intriguingly, the creation of a separate captaincy based out of São Paulo had originally been on account of the discovery of the mines of Cuiabá in 1718. As noted earlier, when they were discovered these mines were nominally situated in the joint captaincy of São Paulo and Minas Gerais, then governed from Vila do Carmo by Dom Pedro Miguel de Almeida e Portugal, the 3rd Count of Assumar.⁸⁸ Upon receiving news of the discovery in January 1719, Assumar initially ordered the Paulistas to abandon the new mines since—by any reasonable interpretation of the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494)—they were likely in Spanish territory. Three months later when it became apparent that there were no nearby Spanish

settlements—just a small Jesuit mission on the other side of the Paraguay—and that there was really no way to keep the Paulistas out, Assumar recommended that the crown create a separate captaincy based out of São Paulo that would be able to better ensure Portugal’s claims to the new mines. The following October, the Overseas Council endorsed Assumar’s advice, and the crown thereafter created the captaincy of São Paulo in January 1720.⁸⁹ In this sense, Rodrigo César de Meneses ultimately owed his position as governor of the new captaincy not only to his connections at court, but also to the Paulista *bandeirantes* who first discovered the mines of Cuiabá—the very same group of people who were now causing him such grief in São Paulo!

Significantly, the same decree that had established the captaincy of São Paulo also required the region’s new governor to found a settlement in the distant *sertões* of South America. “By resolution of the twenty-fourth of January of the present year [1720] and in consultation with my Overseas Council regarding the new mines [of Cuiabá],” the crown wrote, “it is fitting to ordain that a settlement be founded in that quarter, for once established it can hinder the Spaniards from occupying that district.”⁹⁰ In this sense, the establishment of the town of Cuiabá was not only intended to ensure control of the region’s gold, but more especially to secure control of the region itself from Spanish authorities. First conceived in the chambers of the Overseas Council in Lisbon, the establishment of the town of Cuiabá was part of the same Luso-Spanish rivalry that had played a role in holding the Portuguese empire together since the time of the Portuguese Restoration. In this respect, the council had not only sent Meneses to govern the captaincy of São Paulo, but also to establish royal authority in the very heart of South America. And yet, notwithstanding the explicit nature of his orders, Meneses initially remained in the city of São Paulo for nearly five years—setting it in order, according to his own account—before finally setting out for the new mines in early July 1726.⁹¹

In many ways, the story of Rodrigo César de Meneses provides a counterpoint to the centralized authority of the Overseas Council in Lisbon. Although the council was a powerful metropolitan institution, its powers were limited by both state and freelance agents in colonial Brazil, including governors, magistrates, military officers, municipal councilors, and others.⁹² In this sense, the roles played by social networks in the eighteenth century were not altogether different than during the days of António Raposo Tavares nearly a hundred years before. In both cases, the relationship between local and centralized authority was bridged by a series of personal connections that spanned the Portuguese Atlantic.

Patronage was, of course, a prominent part of such connections. Based on traditions of gentility and honor, patron-client networks functioned at every level of society. On the one hand, the crown and its councilors used patronage to ensure the loyalty of overseas officials. It was in this context that Rodrigo César de Meneses wrote to the crown, boasting of the newly discovered mines of Cuiabá. At the same time, overseas officials like Meneses established their own network of clients that could be used to further royal interests. Shortly before Meneses's arrival in São Paulo, for example, one local official had expressed confidence that the new governor would be able to provide incentives for the Paulistas to discover new sources of wealth. Implying that gold was the lifeblood of monarchies, the man indicated that Meneses would “motivate the poor Paulistas to seek a way to create new blood and to open new paths.”⁹³ For their part, the local inhabitants of São Paulo continued to seek royal favors for their “services” to the crown—as in the case of Pascoal Moreira Cabral Leme—while at the same time being motivated by local factors that had traditionally spurred the region's exploration, including precious metals and indigenous slaves. More generally, similar patterns of behavior could be observed in the actions

of governors, magistrates, and other overseas officials. In each case, individuals on the margins of empire—not unlike their counterparts in the empire’s institutional center—were motivated by multiple factors, including the interests of the crown, family members, friends, acquaintances, and enemies, and of course their own personal interests.

More generally, the personal nature of the bureaucracy created opportunities that could be exploited in myriad other ways. Forced to rely upon local officials and others to implement royal policies, the crown’s councilors could never be entirely certain that their decisions would be implemented, respected, or have the consequences that they intended. In this respect, the ambiguous relationship between the crown and its overseas vassals created a dilemma for the Overseas Council and other elements of the colonial bureaucracy in Lisbon. Given the fact that personal interests frequently diverged from royal interests, who could be trusted (and, in turn, rewarded) with control of royal authority abroad? As we shall see in the next section, this was a question that not only pertained to Brazil, but also to the merchants, *fidalgos*, and royal officials who populated other parts of the Portuguese colonial world. Before moving on to Portuguese Asia, however, let us return to South America and the story of Rodrigo César de Meneses, using the final years of his life to personify the dilemmas and constraints the crown’s agents faced as they attempted to establish royal authority in distant lands.

By the time he finally set sail for Cuiabá in early July 1726, Rodrigo César de Meneses had proven himself to be a valuable royal agent. In a period of five years, he had encouraged the colonization of São Paulo’s *sertões*, fortified the region’s coasts, and otherwise set a large part of the captaincy in order. As one early twentieth-century historian would later write of the governor’s term in São Paulo, “After his government there were no more Paulistas, just the

captaincy of São Paulo.”⁹⁴ And yet, according to Meneses’s own account, his most audacious exploits would not occur in São Paulo proper, but rather in a burgeoning mining settlement more than a thousand miles away in the very heart of South America. “Of all the services that I have rendered in my life to His Majesty,” Meneses later wrote, “the greatest undertaking that I have ever attempted is to journey into the *sertão*.”⁹⁵

Rodrigo César de Meneses was entering the sixth decade of his life when he finally set sail for Cuiabá. It was the middle of the Brazilian winter, and the waters of the Tietê would have been cold and uninviting. Sailing at the head of a flotilla of three hundred canoes, the governor was accompanied by a veritable army of more than three thousand bureaucrats, soldiers, and slaves. Braving indigenous attacks, malarial fever, and man-eating fish, the governor’s journey was not without incidents.⁹⁶ “Many people died of drowning,” he later recalled, “and various canoes were lost because of the many waterfalls in the rivers and also because of the furious rapids . . . from which no one was immune. And I myself lost a load of provisions from the kingdom intended to sustain me—of which even the paddles could not be saved—and also a part of my crockery [*copa*] and wardrobe [*roupa*].”⁹⁷ In addition to lost luggage, the governor suffered a number of other indignities, including the disappearance of his cook (who had been dragged off into the wilderness by a jaguar). After arriving in Cuiabá four months later, he complained that he had been forced to sustain himself on wild fruits, monkeys, parrots, snakes, and even, on occasion, caimans.⁹⁸

It is impossible to know how the journey’s dangers affected the governor’s mind-set. His biographer speculates that his personality changed during the journey.⁹⁹ His initial behavior in the mines can perhaps provide some insight into his thoughts. Shortly after arriving in Cuiabá, he appears to have made a conscious decision to use his position for personal gain—probably to

reimburse himself for the losses he had sustained along the way as well as because of the high cost of living in the region.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, his first act as governor was to create Cuiabá's first lottery, raffling off four German muskets and a small broken organ for exorbitant entry fees.¹⁰¹

Thereafter, Meneses turned his attention to more traditional affairs of state, founding the Royal Town of the Senhor Bom Jesus de Cuiabá on January 1, 1727, and subsequently implementing a series of reforms in order to establish royal authority in the region.¹⁰²

Not unlike Pascoal Moreira Cabral Leme, the old Paulista who had first discovered the region's mines, Rodrigo César de Meneses clearly intended to profit from his time in the district—if not from the gold, then from the gratitude of a grateful king. “I do not want to be one to speak of service that I have rendered for Your Majesty in both the captaincy and the *sertão*,” he wrote to the crown shortly after his arrival in Cuiabá, “. . . but I hope that my utility will be believed coming from the tongues of others who have witnessed it.”¹⁰³ Among the governor's many responsibilities, he took a very personal interest in overseeing the royal-fifths, the 20 percent tax levied on gold. Writing to Lisbon in early March 1727, Meneses boasted that his efforts had met with resounding success. As a token of the region's devotion, he explained, three chests of gold would soon arrive in Portugal containing the taxes he had collected.¹⁰⁴ In early 1728, the three chests arrived in Lisbon. Brought before the royal court, they were to be opened by the king himself. One can imagine the monarch's satisfaction upon receiving such tokens of distant devotion. And yet satisfaction turned quickly to shock. Though the official seals and locks had never been broken, the three chests had already been emptied. In place of gold, they contained a very different substance: lead! A flurry of inquiries and accusations followed, but like the monarch's missing taxes, the perpetrator of this mysterious crime would never be found.¹⁰⁵

What had happened to the gold that the good governor had so carefully gathered from faraway Cuiabá? How was it possible to explain that the official seals and locks had never been tampered with? In fact, a variety of accounts were put forward in the years that followed. According to some, a miracle had taken place: God had transformed the gold into lead in order to punish the king for taxing the region with excessive zeal.¹⁰⁶ Others said that there had never been any gold at all, and that the chests had purposely been sent with lead as a subterfuge to convince those who saw them in São Paulo that the mines were indeed profitable (and therefore worth the risks associated with the monsoons).¹⁰⁷ Still others believed that there was a much more mundane explanation. Among the latter were the members of the Overseas Council who would spend the next two decades trying to solve one of the most sensational crimes ever committed in colonial Brazil.¹⁰⁸

Among the crime's most prominent suspects was a graying gentleman with a very colorful past.¹⁰⁹ Having dropped out of Coimbra as a boy, subsequently accepted a governorship that no one else wanted, then risked his life on a journey that he did not want to begin, Rodrigo César de Meneses was a second son who, in a manner of speaking, had always come in second. (Indeed, he had nearly been forced to marry the king's mistress, once upon a time!) It should come as no surprise then that upon returning to Lisbon, the former governor of São Paulo was not promoted to serve as viceroy, was not given a noble title, and was not even allowed to retire. Instead, he was rewarded for his "services" in São Paulo with an appointment to govern another difficult and trying region, ironically one that was traditionally reserved for exiles, convicts, and other criminals: Portuguese Angola.¹¹⁰ And yet, in this particular instance Governor Meneses was arguably a very lucky man. Indeed, on account of his many family connections he was never formally charged with doing what so many suspected he had done. What had happened to the

three chests of gold from Cuiabá? How was it that their official seals and locks had never been broken? In fact, the answer to this riddle passed from human knowledge more than 250 years ago when the individual who masterminded this audacious fraud took his secrets with him to the grave. Not unlike the ambiguities that blur our understanding of human connections, the story of the first governor of São Paulo swings on the same twisting hinge: perspective. For his part, Rodrigo César de Meneses lived out his remaining years in Portuguese Africa, then died—a very wealthy man—on an obscure date in 1738 at the age of sixty-three.¹¹¹