HIGH VERSUS LOW: PORTUGUESE AND DUTCH FORTIFICATION TRADITIONS MEET IN COLONIAL BRAZIL (1500–1654)

Oscar F. Hefting

Introduction

When Christopher Columbus discovered America in 1492 for the Spanish Crown, new opportunities presented themselves to traders and adventurers. The scope of this 'New World' was as yet unknown. The two great maritime powers of the time, Spain and Portugal, wasted no time in dividing the booty in 1493 and, at the same time, the rest of the world. Pope Alexander VI acted as arbitrator. The following year, the final division was laid down in the small Spanish town of Tordesillas. Spain was given control over all the regions west of the meridian which ran 370 legas (c. 600 km) west of the Cape Verde islands. Portugal received the territory east of this, which amounted to the Atlantic region and the possessions in Asia.

Thanks to this Treaty of Tordesillas, Portugal was able to claim Brazil. To fill in this immense territory, the king divided it into fifteen capitaniaes, and to each of these states was appointed a Governor. The capital of Brazil was São Salvador on the Baía de Todos os Santos (All Saints' Bay) in Capitania of Bahia. Several European countries opposed this division of the world and sent expeditions to the area. At the beginning of the sixteenth century the French attempted to gain a firm footing there by setting up small trading posts along the coast. Since it was impossible for the Portuguese to control the 8000-km-long coastline, these outposts often went undisturbed for some length of time. They traded with the Indians mainly in brazilwood, tobacco, cotton, herbs and spices. Between 1612 and 1615 the French even had a small colony in the northern state of Maranhão.

From the end of the sixteenth century, the Dutch, French, English and Irish established a number of trading posts and settlements at the mouth of the Amazon in order to trade with the Indians. In 2002, the

---

soil scientist Wim Sombroek, who died in 2003, reported that he had found evidence for the locations of two of these forts, Fort Orange and Fort Nassau, along the bank of the Rio Xingu, a tributary of the Amazon. An orientation campaign of the Atlas of Dutch Brazil research team discovered these two spots in 2008 and will conduct further investigation here in the next years. In 1616 the Portuguese managed to expel these Northern Europeans from the Amazon delta and built a fort on the south of the estuary, at Belém (Pará). From here various military expeditions were sent out, and within ten years they had the entire territory under control. This 'peace' was sustained until the Dutch started to think bigger, and several years later sent a fleet across the ocean to conquer the whole of Brazil (Figure 10.1).