

MARINA CAMARGO

*Como  
se faz um  
deserto*



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# The mapping of the Brazilian (de)sertão: *notes about an image in formation* – 19th and 20th centuries

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The lack of clear cartography of the Brazilian interior, particularly in its northern part (broadly speaking, the region currently defined as the Northeast) was still a constant feature in the early decades of the 19th century. The records of a lay traveller like Henry Koster, in *Travels in Brazil* (1816), or the official map produced by John Luffman in 1808 show the existence of huge regions still not fully explored, or rather, unmapped. This lack of knowledge led consequently to problems during the transformation of the former Portuguese colony into an independent Nation, which continued throughout the 19th century. The imperial political elites were engaged in a continuous effort to fill the gaps left by centuries of a policy of geopolitical expertise from the Portuguese Metropolis that meant strict control of the knowledge produced about the colony and particularly that connected to territorial defence and the availability of natural resources.

The efforts of the intellectuals of the time towards constructing this geographical knowledge were more significantly related to the ideological project of Nation building. This same project was also steeped in the written records of the modern observer, a “transient observer” intervening in the landscape in an attempt to apprehend the whole, according to the ideas of Humboldt<sup>1</sup>. It was a project that required the systematised investigation and domination of the physical aspects of the territory, its features, reliefs, hydrographic basins, watercourses and other aspects.

So it therefore became necessary to overcome the image of the country as “just nature”, an Eden, of abundance, and the wonderful and the exotic so common in records from the colonial period. A particular group of the old maps from the colonial period would then be separated out in the search for specific features of parts of an Empire of continental characteristics, such as knowledge of the geographical features of the Brazilian coast for navigation, for example. Later, the need for territorial integration from the second half of the 19th century required the making of new maps conforming to the strict instruments of observation and drawing, initially by military engineers and then by the polytechnics.

For a region of climatic variations bringing periods of drought, the inaccuracy appeared mainly in relation to the advancing and receding boundaries – as can be

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