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TEIXEIRA, Rubenilson Brazão
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Artigos

NATAL, VILA OR CIDADE?

Rubenilson Brazão TEIXEIRA
Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte, Brasil
rubenilson.teixeira@gmail.com

Redalyc: https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=273657844002

Abstract:

In the studies that deal with the history of the city of Natal, capital of Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil, there are contradictory assertions about the urban status it was given when it was founded in 1599. For some authors, it emerged as a vila; for others, as a cidade, two categories of urban settlements included in the Portuguese urban terminology of that period. In this work, we show that it is possible to decide clearly in favor of one of these assertions based upon the analysis of a series of historiographic and documentary evidence and other considerations.

Keywords: Natal, Vila, Cidade, Foundation, Terminology, Municipal administration.

Resumo:

Nos trabalhos que tratam da história da cidade do Natal, capital do Rio Grande do Norte, Brasil, há informações contraditórias sobre qual o status urbano que lhe foi atribuído quando de sua fundação, em 1599. Para alguns autores, ela nasceu como uma vila; para outros, como cidade, duas categorias de localidades que faziam parte da terminologia urbana portuguesa do período. Neste trabalho, mostramos que é possível termos um posicionamento claro a favor de uma dessas afirmativas a partir da análise de uma série de evidências historiográficas, documentais e outras considerações apresentadas.

Palavras-chave: Natal, Vila, Cidade, Fundação, Terminologia, Poder municipal.

Resumen:

Dans les ouvrages qui traitent de l'histoire de la ville de Natal, capitale du Rio Grande do Norte Brésil, il y a des affirmations contradictoires sur le statut urbain qui lui fut attribué lors de sa fondation en 1599. Pour certains auteurs, elle est née comme une vila; pour d'autres, comme une cidade, deux catégories de localités faisant partie de la terminologie urbaine portugaise de l'époque. Dans ce travail, nous montrons qu'il est possible d'avoir une position claire en faveur de l'une de ces déclarations à partir de l'analyse d'un certain nombre d'évidences historiographiques, documentaires et d'autres considérations.

Palabras clave: Natal, Vila, Cidade, Fondation, Terminologie, Pouvoir municipal.

INTRODUCTION

The Cidade do Natal, capital of the State of Rio Grande do Norte, is one of the oldest cities in Brazil. Founded in 1599, it is among the few urban nuclei in the country that emerged during the 16th century. In the rich terminology the Portuguese used to designate different types of urban settlements, there are, in the specialized literature, contradictory assertions about the real title Natal received at its birth. For some, Natal was vila, before becoming cidade. For others, Natal was entitled cidade from the start. Since we do not know any definitive documental proof about this issue, it seems to remain an open question: after all, was Natal born as vila or as cidade? Thus, this article attempts to fulfill an important gap as there is no systematic work arguing in favor of either of the two assertions, as far as we know.

We begin by exposing the meaning and differences of the two terms vila or cidade in the colonial context. A well-known subject for the expert, it is not for the public in general and to whom this article is preferably addressed. We then discuss the authors' assertions on this issue and the foundations for each claim before finally exposing our own conclusion. We hope to shed some light on a subject that still raises doubts and that, depending on the works consulted, either of the two assertions is systematically repeated by later scholars when referring to the urban status of the potiguar capital, that is, capital of the State of Rio Grande do Norte.

As for other urban settlements that also emerged in the 16th century, doubts about their initial urban status do not exist or at least they do not seem so evident. For instance, while places like São Vicente (1532), Olinda (1537), Igarassu (1564) emerged as vilas, Salvador (1549), Rio de Janeiro (1565), João Pessoa (1585) and São Cristovão (1590) were born cidades. Other localities such as São Paulo (1554) or Recife (1537?) existed as inhabited urban nuclei, but with no status of vila or cidade. If founded effectively with this title, Natal (1599) is then the fifth oldest cidade of Brazil.

Before we start the debate, it is important to underline three fundamental aspects. The first one relates to the fact that historiography has valued analytical approaches that set the colonial urban history of Brazil within a broad, intercontinental perspective, as it understands the city as an integral part of international relations of the Portuguese Empire around the Atlantic basin, sometimes including Europe, America, Africa and Asia. The so-called Atlantic History, for instance, started in the early 1970's (RUSSEL-WOOD, 2009). Previous works of our authorship adopted this scale in the study of Natal (TEIXEIRA, 2018). This is not the case in this work, however, firstly because the focus proposed is strictly the city of Natal, even if we do recognize that such a wide scale, involving comparative studies with other cities would be enriching by the parallels that can always be made. When stringently necessary, we allude to other urban realities throughout the text, but only enough to reinforce our argumentation. Secondly, equally or even more important, there are limits imposed for the article.

The second aspect is that the discussion of historiographic sources about or in some way related to the foundation of Natal – which constitutes the essence of this article – involves necessarily the transcription of such sources, and this may give the impression of a descriptive work, a highly reproachable adjective, a true horror in conservative academic environments, as if descriptions in themselves - especially of such a remote period in this city history - could not be considered a contribution to the production of knowledge. However, this article far transcends the mere description, since the documentary sources used are put into perspective mainly by confrontation with one another, a necessary analytical step to answer the central question that motivated it. But to do this, source transcriptions become truly essential.

Finally, we adopted the Portuguese names vila and cidade throughout the text in this English translation, because we are dealing with these terms in a historical perspective that may not find strict corresponding terms in English, even though they are respectively and somehow related to the words "villages" and "towns" or "cities", in this latter language.

THE MEANINGS OF THE TERMS VILA AND CIDADE IN COLONIAL BRAZIL

The meanings of the terms vila and cidade are well-known by experts of colonial Brazil's urban history, and it is easy to find works about this subject (TOPALOV et al. 2014). However, to avoid further elaborations, we prefer to refer to one of our previous works (TEIXEIRA, 2003, p. 53-60), from which we transcribe the definitions of vila and cidade with the addition of some more information. This should suffice, we believe, to establish the difference between these two ways of municipal organization.

Vila refers to a settlement that is the center of a territorial jurisdiction, the seat of a municipality. It is therefore made up of a local government, the town council, that meet in the town-house (Casa de Câmara e Cadeia) with its frontal pillory, both located at the location central square. The term implied, therefore, a political and administrative dimension, and referred to a small urban community holding a certain degree of political autonomy at the municipal sphere. Employed since the colonial times, the word kept this political and administrative connotation until 1938. The Article III of the Decree approved on March 2 of that year determines that the seat of a municipality is now a cidade, and that the municipality and the cidade names should be the same. Since 1938, then, all municipalities have a cidade as their seat. The former vilas, automatically assuming the title of cidade, continued as municipal seats. Obviously, vilas were elevated to the status of cidades before this decree, for example in the 19th century, including in Rio Grande do Norte.

We are referring here to a law applied generically, which simply eliminated the title of vilas to the seats of the municipality throughout Brazil.

The highest hierarchical level of a settlement is a cidade. Like the vila, the cidade also has a particular political status. It is characterized by a local political power, the town council, with its Casa de Câmara e Cadeia and pillory located in the central square, assuming then the seat of a territorial jurisdiction. This said, the cidade is no different from the vila.

There, are, however, outstanding differences between the two terms. Firstly, the Crown allowed captaincy donees (donatários) and other authorities like governors to found only vilas, but never cidades, which was a royal prerogative. Inspired by the Roman Law, the cidade held an independent statute, and could be founded only in territories which were directly subordinated to the King. Finally, only a cidade could be the seat of an archdiocese or more commonly of a diocese. Bishops, first rank nobles, must live in such places only. That is why the Crown had to buy the jurisdiction of the Captaincy of Todos os Santos before founding the cidade de Salvador in 1549 (ABREU, 1997, p. 213-214). Some cidades, like Salvador, received the title of Cidade Real (Royal City). They held a specific statute. Being an essential tool for the Kingdom geopolitics, they received all the attention, including from the standpoint of urban design, since the 16th century. Some settlements could attain a cidade status for other reasons, like São Paulo, in 1711, and Oeiras, in 1761.

The "Vocabulário Portuguez e Latino", a dictionary authored by Rafael de Bluteau, whose 8 volumes were published from 1712 to 1728, distinguishes vila from cidade, and indicates somehow that the latter had more prestige. He defines vila as "an open or encircled povoação (settlement) which is neither a cidade, nor is it too small to be an aldeia. It holds a judge and a town council with its pillory" (BLUTEAU, 1721-1728, p. 489). As for the cidade, he affirms it is the "the kingdom's head" or the "kingdom's key" (ibid., p. 309), a clearly distinct position in relation to the vila. The "Dicionário da Língua Portuguesa", written by Antônio de Morais Silva, also dating from the 18th century is equally explicit as for the distinction between the two. He defines vila as a "povoação less important than a cidade and superior to an aldeia; it holds a judge, a town council and a pillory" (SILVA, 1789, p. 852).

Once the differences between vila and cidade have been established, we should now try to answer the question that motivated this article. In this sense, we propose three items for discussion. The first of them is based on what historiography says, that is, works by authors, consecrated or not, classic or contemporaneous, who discuss the initial urban status of Natal in one way or another. In addition to these authors, for this first item we use a few primary, ancient sources secondarily, due to their importance for this first point. In the second, we analyze exclusively primary sources coeval to the foundation or written in subsequent centuries, in the search for some clue. Finally, as a conclusion, we discuss some complementary arguments to finally give our opinion or final verdict on the subject.

NATAL, VILA OR CIDADE? WHAT HISTORIOGRAPHY SAYS

With no intention of comprehensiveness, there follows some works that dealt with Natal foundation and that indicated its initial urban status. Firstly, we begin with those authors who claim that Natal emerged as vila. So, Rocha Pombo states:

(...) there was already, near the fortress, a povoação named cidade dos Reis. It was not, nevertheless, an appropriate site for the future cidade; they decided to choose an ampler site, in a higher place, at the right bank of the river, about half a league from the fortress (...) within a few months the povoação had been moved, and the chapel, once built, was inaugurated in December of the same year (1599), a Mass being said solemnly on the 25th, they took advantage of this circumstance to give the name Natal to the vila (POMBO, 1921, p. 46-47).

The author adds a footnote: "the povoação did not have a real vila standing. Doctor Tavares de Lyra rightly puts (...) that it is unknown the precise date of the vila foundation, named Cidade do Natal later". In other

words, according to Rocha Pombo, Tavares de Lyra was another historian who endorsed the initial status of vila to Natal. As we shall see further on, the distance between the cidade and the fortress varies from a quarter of a league to one league according to different sources, being more correct the half league (3 km), considering the current straight-line distance between the fortress and the Square André de Albuquerque, Natal's precise foundation site.

Aroldo de Azevedo takes the same standpoint. In a seminal work, this author listed the vilas and cidades that emerged during the colonial period in Brazil. He mentions, at a certain point, that "all seems to indicate that, at the end of the 16th century, there were at least 14 vilas in Brazil" and he provides a table listing them by the country's regions. Natal is one of them. By the way, he also attributes the initial status of vila to São Cristóvão, in the state of Sergipe, founded in 1590, by including it in this group (AZEVEDO, 1956, p. 12).

Reis Filho (2001, p. 348), an inevitable reference in urban history studies in Brazil, also indicates that Natal was vila. Describing the occupation process of Rio Grande do Norte territory since the beginning of colonization, he affirms that

(...) on December 25, 1599, the site of the vila de Natal was demarcated (...) the main building in the area was the Reis Magos Fortress, which kept a close relation with the vila de Natal (...) in 1630, the vila de Natal would have between 25 and 30 houses only (...)

Some local historians also seem to confirm the information that Natal was initially a vila. According to Monteiro (2007, p. 28):

In 1611, the small povoação was elevated to the condition of vila, obtaining a first political and administrative organization formed by a judge, an alderman, a town council clerk and an Indians procurator. By 1614, the denomination "Povoação dos Reis" was substituted by "Cidade do Natal".

Other authors, however, claim that Natal emerged with the title cidade. Medeiros Filho (1991, p. 29-32), analyzing its foundation, makes no comment arguing the status of Natal as cidade, which looks certain for him. He makes a short comparison with the cidade de Filipéia, present-day João Pessoa, founded earlier, to justify one of the early names appearing in one document - "cidade de Santiago"- given to Natal.

Ancient writings, of a similar historiographic nature also support this claim. Among several other works that could be mentioned (CASCUDO, 1999, p. 50), we recall Frei de Jaboatão's work, published in 1761 and republished in 1858:

That happened in 1599, the povoação being quickly initiated a half league away from the fortress, because the site was more appropriate; it was soon built with the honor of cidade, which was named Natal; because it was erected on the Lord's birthday celebration of that same year, having a parish and the main church dedicated to the Very Saint Mary, under the satisfactory mystery of the Presentation. This captaincy was certainly established by royal command (...) this is the start of the Cidade do Natal, Captaincy of Rio Grande do Norte (...) (JABOATÃO, 1858, p. 170)

Câmara Cascudo was the most categoric author to assert that Natal was a cidade from the start. For him, "Natal was never povoação, nor vila. It was born as cidade" (CASCUDO, 1968, p. 217). In another work, he remains emphatic:

Natal was born a cidade. It was never a suburb, vila, or locality. It emerged on the day of Christ's birth, from whom its name derives. It has a simple history, because it was a political designation to its birth rather than a topographic need. In this sense, it has a simple and emotional history (CASCUDO, 1984, online).

Unfortunately, the author does not explain what he means by "topographic need". In any case, there is a third, intermediary and less important position besides these two central ones, consisting of a few authors who seem to contradict themselves by denominating Natal sometimes as vila, sometimes as cidade, even if they may be referring occasionally to a later moment after its foundation. It appears sometimes in works written originally in other languages. Barléus, historian of Dutch Brazil, after referring, in his book written in Latin and published in 1647, to the "vila de Natal" as having a "sad and downcast aspect" adds that "(...) the inhabitants were allowed to build a new cidade (...)" (BARLÉUS, 1974, p. 128). The permission to build a

"new cidade" to replace it seems to contradict the expression vila used. We see that in other works by Dutch authors. Joannes de Laet, describing the conquest of the Captaincy of Rio Grande also refers to Natal either as an aldeia, as a vila or as a cidade (LAET, 1916, p. 340-346). Unlike the Portuguese, the Dutch do not seem to give much importance to the urban hierarchy of the settlements, at least as far as the authorized translations of these two works into Portuguese reveal. Robert Southey, in his monumental work on the history of Brazil, written originally in English in 1810, says that the Reis Magos Fortress

(...) was built upon a rock at the entrance of the River Potengi, and half a league off were a few habitations, which in this thinly peopled country had obtained the name of a city. (SOUTHEY, 1810, p. 483).

According to other writings researched by Cascudo (1999, p. 54-55), to which he does not provide the complete reference, Robert Southey also calls it vila, contradicting the quotation above. The same contradiction may appear in some Portuguese-speaking authors. Tavares de Lyra, who, according to Rocha Pombo's quotation transcribed earlier corroborates the thesis of vila for Natal, also affirms that Natal emerged as cidade, at least in the passage below

Calm as for the Indians, because of the peace made with them, Jerônimo de Albuquerque endeavored to found a povoação nearby the fortress. This povoação was named cidade de Natal on December, 25 of that same year (1599) (LYRA, 2008, p. 43).

A last example of this rather minor tendency in our view can be detected in another classical scholar of urban history in Brazil, Paulo Santos:

(...) Under the protection of the fortress, the povoação de Natal was erected (...) it is possible that the Jesuit Samperes was not unfamiliar with the construction of the cidade built in the fortress' shadow (...) even though at the occasion the cidade was only a skimpy hamlet (...) [and refering to the foundation of the city of Fortaleza] the colonization of the northeast coast, concluded with the erection of the cidade de Filipéia de Nossa Senhora das Neves and of the vilas de São Cristóvão and Natal, continued with that of the east-west coast (...) (SANTOS, 2008, p. 104-105).

This intermediary position seems to complicate the debate further, since vila and cidade were quite distinct urban categories, as we have noticed. In any case, it is important to underline the flagrant contradiction in historiographic sources, old and especially new, over the real urban status of the potiguar capital. Are the primary sources, from the time of the cidade foundation or from the following decades capable of shedding light on this issue?

WHAT PRIMARY SOURCES SAY

His Majesty being informed from Paraíba about the damage coming from Rio Grande, where the French traded with the Potiguar Indians, and from where they also went out to plunder the ships going to or coming from Portugal, taking not only the goods but also the people and selling them to the heathen for them to devour them, and wishing to quell such an evil, he wrote to Manuel Mascaranhas Homem, captain-major from Pernambuco, ordering him to go there quickly in order to erect a fortress and a povoação, and that all should be done with Feliciano Coelho's advice and help, to whom he also wrote, and to the General Governor D. Francisco de Sousa, who should furnish provisions and the necessary powers to spend from his treasure all that was financially necessary (...) once peace agreements had been reached with the Indians, as mentioned, a povoação soon began to be built a league away from the fortress, which they call cidade dos Reis [Kings' city], ruled by the fortress' captain that the King is used to sending every three years (DO SALVADOR , 1885-1886, p. 152, 158).

This excerpt is part of Frei Vicente do Salvador's book, he who is considered the first historian of Brazil. Reporting about its foundation, he refers to Natal as "a povoação which they call cidade dos Reis". Since the verb is at the present tense – "call" – and considering the year of its publication, 1627, the title cidade might not have been in use since its foundation, because 28 years had passed between Natal foundation (1599) and

this report publication. However, as we shall see below, other documentary sources written by the time of Natal's emergence call it cidade invariably.

Before we continue, a brief reference should be made, nonetheless, to the term povoação that appears in this and in so many other documents. For readers less acquainted with the terminology of urban nuclei in the colonial period, the use of this word may induce some suspicion that Natal was not even vila at its birth. Even though the word's current meanings include "place, hamlet, city, village, small settlement" (DICIONÁRIO PRIBERAM, 2008-2013, online), we normally use it at present to designate a real unexpressive place. It is hardly used to designate a city (cidade).

The sense of the word povoação was general and could also designate any kind of settlement in the colonial period, but unlike the present time, it was frequently used to designate a vila or a cidade, for instance. D. João the 3rd's Regiment addressed to Tomé de Souza, first General Governor of Brazil, in 1548, entrusts him with a set of royal instructions to the government of Brazil that he was about to assume, among which the foundation of Salvador, the first and most important cidade of Brazil, which would function as the colony's capital until 1763. Nevertheless, the King refers to it as a povoação:

I, the King, let you, Tomé de Sousa, noble of my house, know that seeing how much helpful it is to God and to me to preserve and to ennoble the captaincies and povoações of Brazilian lands and to command the best way to ensure its settlement for the exaltation of our Holy Faith and for the benefit of my Kingdoms and domains, and of their peoples, I ordered that a fortress and a big and strong povoação be built in those lands, in a convenient place, from where they can support and help other povoações, promote justice and provide the actions that are supposed to be taken to my service and to my economic affairs and to the well-being of all; and being informed that the Bahia de todos os Santos is the most convenient place on the coast of Brazil to have that povoação and seat built, because of the port disposition and the rivers that stream into it, as well as because of the goodness, fertility and health of the land, and for other reasons, I have decided that be built in Bahia the povoação and seat, and for that reason should go there military forces composed of people, artillery, weapons and ammunition and anything else that might be required (REGIMENTO, 1548, online).

Pedro de Magalhães Gandavo wrote in 1570:

The Captaincy of Bahia de Todos os Santos is one hundred leagues away from Pernambuco at 13 degrees. Land of the King our Lord, where the governors, bishop and general judge of the entire coast reside. This is the land the Portuguese settled the most in Brazil. There are three povoações, the most important being the cidade de Salvador (GANDAVO, 2008, p. 37).

In his famous 18th century dictionary, Rafael de Bluteau defined povoação as the "inhabitants of a place, vila or cidade; a settled place or the place, vila or cidade, like when one says big or small povoação" (BLUTEAU, 1721-1728, p. 662). This general sense is disclosed also in the definitions of vila and its comparison with cidade transcribed earlier in this work.

The first historians who chronicled the birth of Natal also mention Royal orders for the construction of a fortress and for the foundation of a povoação, just like D. João the 3rd had done decades earlier in relation to the cidade de Salvador. Similarly to Frei Vicente de Salvador, in a passage transcribed above, Frei de Jaboatão provides the same information

All was reported to the Catholic Filipe, and to suppress so much damage and insolence [by the French and Indians] the King ordered Manoel Mascarenhas Homem, Governor of Pernambuco, and Feliciano Coelho from Paraíba, to go to Rio Grande where they should erect a fortress and povoação (JABOATÃO, 1761, p. 167).

The author of such orders was the Spanish King Filipe the 2nd – Spain and Portugal were united under the same Crown – by means of the Royal letters dated November 9, 1596 and March 15, 1597. If by no means this is enough to prove the initial urban status of cidade to Natal, since the term povoação could also designate a vila, for instance, it does not exclude it either. It is other documental evidence, and there are plenty, that lead us to conclude that they should refer to the foundation of a cidade. The precious letter dated December 19,

1599, written by priest Pero Rodrigues, a Jesuit missionary contemporaneous with the foundation of Natal, is one such evidence. He makes it clear that His Majesty Filipe the 2nd "ordered" the fortress construction; priest Francisco Pinto, on his turn, writing on May 19, 1599, mentions that the foundation of the cidade was expected, as we shall see below. (LEITE, 1938, p. 515-516, 525). In the context of Rio Grande, such orders were necessary as part of the effort to expel the French who had already virtually taken control of the potiguar coast by the end of that century. Many documents of that time make constant references to this unpleasant French presence to the Portuguese.

The primary documentation, written by the time of Natal foundation, always entitles it cidade, no matter the different names it occasionally received, like "cidade de Santiago" or "cidade dos Reis". One of the most interesting documents, because it precedes its foundation, is priest Francisco Pinto's letter, mentioned earlier. Dated May 19, 1599, or about seven months before the date usually accepted for the potiguar capital foundation, December 25, he reports, among other things, that for a good missionary work among the Indians it was necessary "(...) a good residence in the new cidade that is about to be founded around a half league away from Rio Grande Fortress" (LEITE, 1938, p. 516, 525). That is, it was cidade even before coming into existence.

Another report issued by the Santiago shipwreck survivors mentions that the "(...) new cidade de Santiago that is on its beginning has three stone and lime houses" (BRITO, 1905, p. 60), an understandable remark for a cidade where the few existing dwellings were made mostly of clay. Curiously enough, they give the same name of the ship to Natal. Diogo de Campos Moreno, on his turn, writing in 1609, observes that "(...) half a league off the Reis Magos Fortress there is a small povoação, that derives from it and which they call cidade (MORENO, 1609, online).

So far, we have privileged documents written by the time of Natal foundation. Nonetheless, the name cidade or "cidade do Natal", terms that appear throughout the centuries – and not "cidade de Natal", something Cascudo (1955, p. 29) also sustains – are also recorded along the decades after its foundation. Priest Pero Castilho, reporting the missions he and other missionaries did among the Indians of the Captaincy of Rio Grande in a letter dated May 10, 1614, describes a visit they made to Natal and to Reis Magos Fortress:

On the Dominica de Passione, we went to the cidade [Natal] where we stayed until the Holy Saturday (...) giving the Confession and all else that our duty could offer them; from here we went twice to the King's Fortress to do the same, and there we also said the Mass (...) with the permission of the Priest of that Captaincy, who in the cidade and the Captain in the Fortress both thanked us deeply (...) (LEITE, 1945, p. 519).

Another example can be found in the account by captain-major of Rio Grande, Domingos da Beiga, around 1630:

The Rio Grande Fortress is the biggest and best designed found in the State of Brazil (...) eighty soldiers are stationed in it (...) a quarter of a league away is located the povoação they call cidade do Natal. It has a good church, but the povoação is very tiny because its inhabitants live in their farms where many of them have very noble houses. The cidade holds a town council judge, a judge and other officials of the town council. This captaincy has up to three hundred inhabitants, most of them having family, slaves and cattle pounds (...) (LYRA, 2008, p. 57-59)

In all the official documentation - letters, acts, patents, etc., along its history in the colonial period and even in the 19th century - we have never found any reference to Natal as vila, whereas the term cidade abounds. By asking the King for measures to help the captaincy, captain-major Antônio Vaz Gondim gave us one of the many available examples. He begins his letter by saying "I arrived at cidade do Natal, Captaincy of Rio Grande (...)" and concludes with "Cidade do Natal, December 8, 1673. Antônio Vaz Gondim" (AHU_ACL_CU_018, Cx. 1, D. 14, fls. 673-674).

Finally, ancient cartography also seems to endorse the title cidade to Natal since very early. Two of a series of maps drawn by the famous royal cartographer João Teixeira de Albernaz the 1st (the Elder), collected and published in 1640, display the entire coast of the Captaincy of Rio Grande. In one of them, showing the east coast (Figure 1), he locates Natal, naming it "cidade do Rio Grande", the Reis Magos Fortress, as well as the Potengi River and other geographical features of the coast, some with names which have remained up to the present, like the Doce and Ceará Rivers, the present-day Ceará-Mirim.

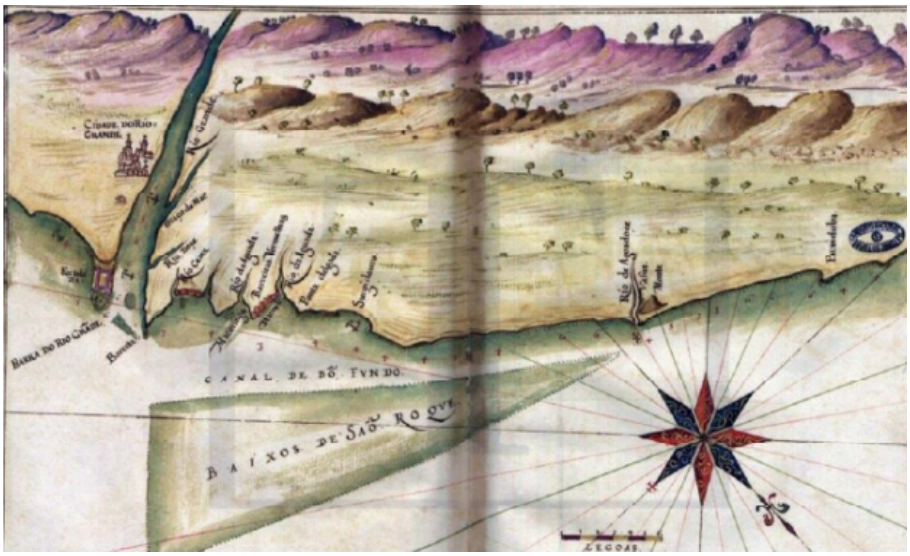

FIGURE 1
The east coast of the Captaincy of Rio Grande (1640)

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The institution of a vila or of a cidade presupposed, as we noticed, the organization of a municipal administration. This said, there is an odd fact about Natal. If it was born cidade, it is strange, to say the least, that the first historical record known about its municipal organization dates from 1611, that is, 12 years after the cidade was established, according to this account by Diogo de Campos Moreno, of 1612:

There is one more povoação upriver, a half league off the Fortress (...) in which there are up to 25 white inhabitants poorly sheltered, out of the fortress duties, and up to 80 inhabitants living off their subsistence crops, fishing nets and main farms of the captaincy. They asked for a government administration, which was conceded in 1611 by the Governor D. Diogo de Menezes, who, with the backing of the Tribunal (Relação), elected judge, councilor and town council clerk, council procurator and Indian procurators (...) with the orders of this Sir this captaincy was demarcated with Paraíba in the year 1611 at the River Guaiahug (...) (MORENO, 1612, p. 559-560).

According to this report, not only the municipal administration was instituted, but the limits between the captaincies of Rio Grande and Paraíba were established in 1611. The institution of the municipal government announced by Diogo de Campos Moreno could be either of a vila or of a cidade, since he does not specify the urban status he is referring to. This raises two possibilities: 1) Natal emerged as a povoação without any municipal status in 1599 and was elevated to vila in 1611; 2) Natal originated with a cidade status, but the municipal power that represented this status for some reason was not yet properly organized.

we promptly discard the first possibility, which resembles that of those who advocate that Natal arose as a vila, or rather, it was not even a vila at the time of its foundation. The evidence discussed so far does not substantiate this. Those who claim it could still argue that, since the foundation of a cidade was a Royal prerogative, the fact that it was Diogo de Menezes, the Governor General, who organized the local municipal

power can only indicate that it was a vila. However, this Royal prerogative was surely guaranteed even without the physical presence of the sovereign in Brazilian lands to do so. Just like the King D. João III, who commanded Tomé de Souza to establish Salvador, Diogo de Menezes would not have instituted the town council of Natal, a fundamental step for the emergence of a cidade, without Royal order or consent.

This leads us directly to the second possibility, but not without some complication. If Natal's municipal power was instituted only in 1611, how come it was a cidade since its foundation, more than a decade before? This would also refute the conviction of those who claim that it was founded as a cidade. After all, it lacked the municipal power that legitimizes this title. Firstly, mention needs to be made to another document that indicates that the town council was already in place before 1611. A report on land distribution of the Captaincy of Rio Grande, a kind of a regulation act for urban and rural lands of all the territory of the emerging captaincy, dated 1614, asserts that

(...) the piece of land number seventy-five Jerônimo de Albuquerque conceded to the Council of this cidade on January 6, 1605, it spans from the River of this cidade until the high mounds and from the Guarmime River until the sea, it is useful to cattle raising and to some woods for the houses (TEIXEIRA, 2014, p. 115).

This document – which, by the way, repeats the word cidade abundantly – indicates that the "council of this cidade" – that is, the town council – was in place in January 1605. This information clearly contradicts the institution of the town council only in 1611, unless it was revoked between 1605 and 1611. Whatever the case, even if existing in 1605, it is not yet possible to conclude this municipal government was instituted at the very act of Natal foundation, because there is a lapse of time of around five years between December 25, 1599, date of its foundation, and January 6, 1605, when the piece of land was conceded to the council.

There is, nevertheless, a more convincing argument in favor of the status of cidade to Natal at its origin, independently of the installation or not of a local government at the occasion. It is essentially the same rationale Maurício de Abreu used to reject some suppositions that Rio de Janeiro would not have emerged as cidade in 1565, when it occupied the first site - that is, the place or area occupied by an urban settlement – because the town council had not been instituted by then. Let him explain it himself:

Some scholars argued in the past that the cidade do Rio de Janeiro, as a legal materiality, would have come into being only in 1567, when Men de Sá transferred the settlement to its definitive site. Mello Moraes (1881: 35-42), especially, pleaded this thesis (...) to him, that donation charter was valueless in law terms, because "Estácio de Sá [could not concede] a piece of land to the Council, because there existed no cidade, nor council...". According to this thinking, only after the displacement to the new site the governments of the captaincy and of the municipality would have been instituted, that is why only since then the documents would have legal validity (...) It was from 1567 onwards that the public administration could be plainly installed (...) this does not mean, however, that it is only after that the cidade emerged as an institution (...) founded by the Crown, Rio de Janeiro gained the title of cidade from the start (...) the process so well described by Fustel de Coulanges (1975: 106) to characterize the ancient city was repeated there, one which "... was not formed with the passing of time by a slow growth of the amount of men and constructions ... [but which was founded] at once, entirely in a single day". Obviously, what was meant by that is that the institution cidade was created in a single strike, by the decision of whom had the right to do so; its materialization could take place little by little (ABREU, 2000, p. 6-7).

In other words, Rio de Janeiro was juridically, or in institutional terms, cidade since its foundation in 1565, regardless of not counting immediately on the establishment of the town council. Like Natal, it was a cidade by law, even though it might not be in fact. Maurício de Abreu also reminds that the cidade was founded by the Crown, because, as we have underlined, the foundation of a cidade was exclusively a Royal prerogative. Besides, the Captaincy of Rio de Janeiro was a Royal Captaincy, or of His Majesty, meaning it had been reverted to the Crown, that is, the land pertained to the King, another requirement for a cidade to be founded.

Well, the same conditions were in place when Natal was born. It was the King Filipe, the 2nd of Spain and the 1st of Portugal, who ordered the foundation of the potiguar capital. The Captaincy of Rio Grande, on its turn, did not belong to the captaincy donee João de Barros, nor to his children at that time, because it had been reverted to the Crown, that is, it was a Royal Captaincy since the last decades of the 16th century (LYRA, 2008, p. 31). Diogo de Campos Moreno, in his precious report of 1612, makes a clear distinction between what he calls the donee's captaincies and His Majesty's captaincies:

All these provinces or captaincies try to separate and are sustained by violence due to their produce, reaching more development the ones which the royal arm took care of when the captaincy donees failed (in the purpose of settling and conquering). Examples of this latter case are Bahia de Todos os Santos, Rio de Janeiro, Paraíba and Rio Grande, all of them today belonging to His Majesty, this condition having made their povoações and farms grow every day (MORENO, 1612, p. 521).

Diogo de Campos Moreno cites Bahia de Todos os Santos, Rio de Janeiro, Paraíba and Rio Grande as examples of Captaincies belonging to His Majesty - the ones the Crown took hold of when the captaincy donees failed to conquer and settle. Coincidentally, and not by accident, they are the same in which a cidade had been founded since the previous century: Salvador, Rio de Janeiro, Filipéia, present-day João Pessoa and Natal, respectively. This is one more argument strengthening the urban status of Natal as cidade at its foundation. Because he cited examples, he probably did not include the Captaincy of Sergipe d'El Rei, where another cidade had been founded before the end of the 16th century (1590), São Cristóvão, first capital of Sergipe. But, in another part of the document (p. 543) he affirms that "(...) a povoação located by the River Sergipe has clay, thatched-roof houses with small thatch, that they call cidade de São Cristóvão".

As far as we know, none of the authors arguing that Natal was born as vila or as cidade offers a systematic argumentation in favor of either of the two assertions. One of the few who sketched an explanation was Rocha Pombo:

It was almost a simple military camp. There was no justice, no council meeting. If the term cidade or vila was employed, it was out of habit, not an official title (...) only in 1611 the vila was instituted by the General Governor D. Diogo de Menezes (...) it is only from then on, that Natal becomes vila (...) (POMBO, 1921, p. 56)

This author, who was echoed by more recent ones, like Monteiro (2007), claims that Natal was entitled vila in 1611. Well, the document he is referring to, Diogo de Campos Moreno's account mentioned and partly transcribed earlier, by no means declares that the local administration instituted was that of a vila and the analyzed evidence witness in favor of the cidade. We believe that the organization of the municipal power in 1611 only officialized a preexisting situation, that of a settlement with a cidade status since its foundation. As we saw, the "Council of this cidade" was already in place since January 1605 at least. We do not know any document denominating Natal as vila, as Rocha Pombo maintains. Also, there is no base for Monteiro's (2007) assertion, transcribed above, to whom "(...) By 1614, the denomination "Povoação dos Reis" was substituted by "Cidade do Natal". As we have seen, the term cidade was already in use even before its foundation. Moreover, those who dispute in favor of the initial status of vila for the potiguar capital would probably have to demonstrate also when Natal became cidade, which, once more, is not proven.

Unlike the generic expression povoação, those of vila and cidade certainly were not used indiscriminately, as argued by Rocha Pombo to the early days of Natal, precisely because of the importance and prestige these expressions revealed. Besides, there is no primary documental evidence available proving the use of the expression vila for Natal along its history, at least by Portuguese speaking authors, which is fundamental to this debate. Surely, translations into Portuguese from some documental sources written in other languages - which by the way do not seem to be abundant – may have used it, and even so contradictorily designating it cidade as well, as we have seen. In any case, the settlers who witnessed the birth of Natal and who called it cidade were probably deeply aware of its meaning and implications.

Finally, one should question why such a precarious settlement emerged with the title of cidade. In fact, it is not difficult to suppose, even without documentary support, that Natal was indeed an extremely precarious settlement when it came into being. Nonetheless, the debate is not over what Natal was in fact, but what it was by law, that is, which urban status it assumed independently of holding a municipal power from the outset, something we will probably never know, or of its physical or populational condition. Obviously, the different denominations employed, especially povoação, vila and cidade, did not necessarily reflect the level of urban development or growth, especially in the colonial period.

Diogo de Menezes, General Governor of Brazil, writing on December 04, 1608 to King Filipe, the 3rd of Spain and the 2nd of Portugal – he was the son of Filipe the 2nd of Spain and the 1st of Portugal, the same sovereign who had ordered the foundation of Natal – somehow provides an answer. Describing the precarious situation of Paraíba and Rio Grande Fortresses and the measures he took to restore them, he adds that

(...) writing on June 18, Your Majesty ordered me that in Rio Grande should be no more than thirty soldiers and four bombers, one Captain, one 2nd lieutenant (alferes), one Sargent and in Paraíba twenty, counting on the same militaries, what I have provided and commanded, but it seemed convenient to me to remind Your Majesty that as far as the Rio Grande Fortress is concerned there is at least a need for soldiers, there are fifty because it is very far to be relieved by the povoação, which is established but has no inhabitants and the post is very important and among the praças of the militia, absences are commonplace, and for thirty soldiers it is necessary to have forty praças (text stressed in italics by us) (MENEZES, Documento 13. Coleção Pernambuco, 12, 02, 2004 n° 021).

The "no inhabitants" statement cannot be understood literally, because however tiny, the cidade did have some inhabitants, not to mention the military stationed at the Reis Magos Fortress. But, more important still, Diogo de Menezes also reveals indirectly why Natal was a cidade: like the fortress, it was a "very important post", something that certainly resulted from their geographical location and hence their strategic and military importance, requiring the presence of militias formed by praças who should probably be stationed also within the cidade proper. It is fitting to remind that among other meanings for the word praça in the colonial period, it had a military connotation, as "praças soldiers" (BLUTEAU, 1721-1728, p. 667). The General Governor seems to clearly distinguish them from simple soldiers, presupposing, perhaps, some specialization.

Natal was indeed so meager that centuries later, in the beginning of the 19th century, it still did not deserve the title cidade (KOSTER, 1816, p. 68-69). However, it was an instrument of international "geopolitics", to use a current term, throughout its history and as such, it was supposed to be a major landmark since its birth, a Portuguese sentinel in the constant territorial dispute of that time. A settlement entitled as cidade, even if extremely precarious, certainly conveyed a message to other nations aspiring that territory: the Portuguese settlers were present in this strategic geographical point of Brazil and South America and would not let go easily.

The several considerations put forward in this article lead us to conclude that Natal was born with the status of cidade. The primary, manuscript and cartographic sources, but also several other arguments which have been exposed make us share Câmara Cascudo's convictions, he who was the most categorical of the authors claiming Natal was never a vila, but emerged as cidade. Therefore, unless new documental proof to the contrary comes to light, Natal, capital of Rio Grande do Norte, is included among the first five cidades to be born in Brazil before the end of the 16th century.

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