

Moral Concerns About Fish Consumption in Brazil (16th, 17th, and 18th Centuries)

As preocupações morais com o consumo de pescados no Brasil (séculos XVI, XVII e XVIII)

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ABSTRACT In letters, chronicles, and treatises written about Portuguese America between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, fauna and flora became recurring subjects, and in general, this territory came to be admired for the diversity of its natural world. Among the authors responsible for the narratives in Portuguese, there were a large number of Catholics who, amidst information about evangelizing missions and the construction of convents and churches, dedicated themselves to discussing the plants and animals sighted in the tropics. In this study, we will turn to the impressions of Catholic scholars about Brazilian fish. In addition to contemplating the descriptions and attempts of the Portuguese to understand native species, we will explore the moral concerns of priests, friars, and laymen about the consumption of certain fish during the periods of abstinence suggested by the Catholic Church. Thus, our aim is to address the recommendations, warnings and scruples of

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Catholic men that were attributed to manatees, turtles, tortoises and other species during the first centuries of Portuguese colonization.

KEYWORDS Portuguese America, Catholic Church, nature

RESUMO Em cartas, crônicas e tratados escritos sobre a América Portuguesa entre os séculos XVI e XVIII, a fauna e a flora tornaram-se assuntos recorrentes e em geral, este território passou a ser admirado pela diversidade do seu mundo natural. Entre os autores responsáveis pelas narrativas em língua portuguesa houve um grande número de católicos que, em meio às informações sobre as missões evangelizadoras e a edificação de conventos e igrejas, dedicou-se a tratar das plantas e animais avistados nos trópicos. Neste estudo, voltar-nos-emos às impressões dos letrados católicos sobre os pescados brasílicos. Além de contemplarmos as descrições e tentativas dos portugueses em compreender as espécies nativas, exploraremos as preocupações morais de padres, freis e homens leigos sobre o consumo de alguns peixes ao longo dos períodos de abstinência sugeridos pela Igreja Católica. Assim, nosso intuito é abordar as recomendações, advertências e escrúpulos de homens católicos que foram atribuídos aos peixes-boi, tartarugas, jabutis e outras espécies durante os primeiros séculos de colonização portuguesa.

PALAVRAS-CHAVES América Portuguesa, Igreja Católica, natureza

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between Catholic men and Brazil's natural world can be traced back to the earliest accounts of the Portuguese presence in these parts. Father Manoel da Nóbrega, who landed in the tropics accompanied by other members of the Society of Jesus in 1549, reports in one of his first letters that this land "has many fruits of various kinds, and very good ones, which are hardly inferior to those of Portugal," adding that "the sea is home to very good fish." (Nóbrega, 1549, p. 135). Nóbrega's words served several purposes: to inform the sender of the letter, Martin de Azpilcueta Navarro, about what he had found on the

other side of the Atlantic and to present to his confreres the first signs of the abundance of supplies, which were essential for the progress of the evangelizing mission that was being initiated by the Jesuits that year.

The religious figures who traveled to Brazil from the second half of the 17th century onwards—such as the members of the Society of Jesus, the Order of Friars Minor, the Carmelite Order, and the Order of Saint Benedict (Leite, 2006; Martins, 2009; Souza; 2014; Willeke, 1974) – did not undertake their journeys for the purpose of investigating nature, as was the case with the naturalists and botanists of the 18th century.¹ Priests, friars, and other professed men generally devoted themselves to missionary activities, converting natives, and providing spiritual guidance to Catholic settlers. However, amid Christian practices involving the construction of schools, convents, and churches, these Catholics turned their attention to the natural world. After all, how could they survive in this New World without knowing the plants and animals that would be valuable for their sustenance or that would serve to remedy their pains and ailments? In letters, treatises, chronicles, and sermons produced during their stay in the tropics, these men recorded their impressions of the climate, the air, and the animals and plants they saw.

In these accounts written throughout the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries, there was no shortage of references to the large volume of water—both due to the size of the coastline and the rivers that cut through the hinterlands—and, consequently, to the diversity of fish that lived there. Father Fernão Cardim, who wrote about Brazil in the late 16th century, points out that the rivers of this province of Portugal were “innumerable,” endowed with “waters that were usually very beautiful, clear, and healthy,” as well as being “abundant with an infinite variety of fish of various species, many of which are remarkably large, highly prized, and very healthy, and are given to the sick as medicine” (Cardim,

1 From the second half of the 18th century onwards, various scholars devoted themselves to expeditions whose main objective was to map, catalog, and identify the main economic potential of Brazilian fauna and flora. Among the naturalists who took part in these expeditions were Alexandre Domingues Ferreira, Francisco Xavier Ribeiro Sampaio, and Friar José Mariano da Conceição Velloso. See: Conceição (2019); Kury (2004); Prestes (2000).

1925, p. 99). In his work *Do Clima e Terra do Brasil* [On the Climate and Land of Brazil], Cardim points out that, at certain times of the year, the volume of fish exceeded the amount necessary to sustain humans and, therefore, it was common for these fish to be offered to domestic animals, such as pigs that were being “fattened” (Cardim, 1925, p. 100).

The Catholic perspectives that analyzed Brazilian fish focused on a central objective: to understand the blessings that the Creator had bestowed upon tropical waters. Fish, like land animals and birds, were a valuable part of the natural world that served as sustenance for healthy and sick men, and even for other animals. The abundance of aquatic creatures and their ease of capture contributed to the fact that, in a short time, the species that were common on colonial tables and in colonial kitchens aroused the curiosity and even concern of Catholic authors. In the following pages, we will address the questions raised by priests, friars, and laymen about fish considered “strange”² and which, at certain times, could disrupt the virtuous life of Catholics in these lands. Based on writings produced in Portuguese between the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries, we will contemplate Catholic views on manatees, turtles, and tortoises, as well as the moral concerns and warnings that were written about eating their meat.

BETWEEN FISH AND OXEN, THE MANATEE

The clergymen involved in the evangelizing missions conducted in the hinterlands and along the coast were most likely the first men to encounter tropical fish. Among the many species observed and described by these individuals were whales and the mysteries surrounding the production of amber, pufferfish and their feared bile, flying fish, porcupine

2 It should be noted that various other animals were considered strange by the Catholic men who wrote about Portuguese America. In general, the living beings mentioned as “strange” were those that differed greatly from the species known in Europe or that had aspects that were still poorly understood by European eyes. Among the Brazilian species that received this designation were the *guará* and the hummingbird. In this study, we will address the case of fish because some creatures—manatees, turtles, and tortoises—were involved in Catholic scruples.

fish, and many other creatures. Amidst the diversity of marine animals, the manatee became a frequent character in pages written in Portuguese. Commonly found in Central and South America, as well as off the west coast of Africa (Brito, 2019, p. 167), manatees were most likely unknown to Europeans before their voyages across the Atlantic, which may explain the profound sense of wonder recorded in their writings. The abundance of water in Portuguese America, especially its large rivers, contributed to the encounter between Europeans and manatees. However, it was through the intermediation of the native peoples, through observation of local habits and customs, that Catholic men learned how to appropriate this animal, both in the methods of capture and the use of its meat and fat (Vieira; Garcia; Brito, 2024, p. 7).

Scholars who wrote about the manatee devoted themselves to the many peculiarities of its body, as did Brother José de Anchieta when he wrote to Father Diego Laynes, General of the Society of Jesus, in May 1560. José de Anchieta arrived in Brazil in 1553 (Leite, 1957, p. 57) and was living in São Vicente when he wrote a twenty-eight-page letter to Father Laynes. Amidst information about the climate, fauna, and flora of the region, the Jesuit narrated the existence of a certain “sea ox,” called *iguaraguá* by the indigenous people, which consisted of a “fish of immense size” (Anchieta, 1933 [1560], p. 107), with the following characteristics:

It exceeds the ox in size; it is covered with hard skin, resembling that of an elephant in color; it has two arms near its chest, with which it swims, and beneath them teats with which it nurses its own young; its mouth is entirely similar to that of an ox (Anchieta, 1933 [1560], p. 107).

At the time of writing, Anchieta devoted himself to a detailed description, and to this end, he resorted to similarities with known species – ox and elephant – to make the Brazilian fish understandable to his correspondent. The detailed account was complemented with information about the taste of its meat, as it was considered “excellent to

eat.” According to Anchieta, those who ate the sea ox “would not know whether to consider it meat or fish,” since its taste resembled both cattle and other known fish (Anchieta, 1933 [1560], p. 107). Along with the meat, it was possible to extract the fat present in the animal’s skin and tail, a fat that, when melted over a fire, could be compared to butter and was used to “season all foods” (Anchieta, 1933 [1560], p. 108).

The diet of the members of the Society of Jesus did not have major restrictions. According to the *Exercícios Espirituais* [Spiritual Exercises], a document written in 1553 by Ignatius of Loyola that guided the conduct of the members of this Order, the religious should eat what was necessary to maintain their health and strength in their missions. It was recommended, whenever possible, to reduce the amount of food and set limits for future meals (Loyola, 1999, p. 46). Special diets were allowed only to deal with illnesses and thus provide a quick recovery for the sick. In normal times, the Society advised priests and brothers to eat the common foods of the regions where they carried out their missionary activities (Gentilcore, 2010, pp. 88-89). Although he does not mention it directly in his letter, it is very likely that Anchieta tried manatee meat during his stay in the tropics, and given its distinctive taste, he wondered whether its consistency was more like meat (referring to oxen and cows) or fish. Despite these reflections, the Jesuit seems to have had no doubts about the animal’s status, posing no questions as to whether the manatee was a fish or an ox. Thus, it is likely that the religious man shared the widespread belief at the time, namely that all animals living under water can be classified as fish (Aristotle, 2006, pp. 53-54).

Still in the 16th century, two other members of the Society of Jesus devoted themselves to writing about the natural world of the tropics, and amid the diversity of species, they devoted a few lines to describe the distinctive manatee. Father Fernão Cardim, newly arrived in Brazil, was one of them. Cardim landed in the tropics in May 1583, accompanying Governor Manuel Telles Barreto, the visitor general of the Order, and other Jesuit priests and brothers (Cardim, 1925, p. 14). During his stay in these parts, the priest wrote several treatises, including *Do Clima e Terra do Brasil e de algumas coisas notáveis que se acham*

assim na terra como no mar [On the Climate and Land of Brazil and some notable things found on land and at sea], published in London in 1625. In this work, which deals with the climate, plants, and vegetation of Portuguese America, the “sea ox” mentioned by Anchieta was identified by Cardim as the “manatee,” a fish “esteemed above all other fish” and considered “very healthy and tasty to eat, whether salted or fresh; and more like beef than fish” (Cardim, 1925, p. 79).

From the account produced, it is possible to understand that both the body and the meat of the manatee seem to have surprised Fernão Cardim. In his treatise, the religious man presents the animal with the following words:

this fish resembles a land animal in appearance, especially an ox: its head is entirely that of an ox, with hide, hair, ears, eyes, and tongue; its eyes are extremely small for its body; it closes and opens them at will, which other fish do not do: above its nostrils, it has two small flaps with which it closes them and breathes through; it cannot stay underwater for long without breathing; it has no fin other than its tail, which is completely round and closed (Cardim, 1925, p. 80).

Writing at the end of the 16th century, Cardim produced his account at a time when interpretations of the fauna of the Old and New Worlds were being disseminated in various treatises. Guillaume de Rondelet, the physician responsible for writing *L’histoire entière des poissons* [The entire history of fish], published in 1558, states that fish are animals that share specific characteristics, such as the recurrence of gills, gill covers, and scales and the absence of hair, feathers, and eyelids (Rondelet, 1558, p. 19). It cannot be said for certain that Cardim had read Rondelet’s work, but given his humanistic education (Franca, 2019), it is likely that he was familiar with the references used by the French author—such as the works of Aristotle and Pliny—to interpret animal beings. The theoretical knowledge Cardim acquired during his years of training in Jesuit colleges did not prevent the religious man from being

amazed by a marine creature with eyelids covering its eyes — “it closes them, opens them whenever it wants” — and a face composed of suction cups used for breathing, a breath that, as the author points out, needed to be taken from time to time outside the aquatic environment.

Regarding the flavors extracted from manatee meat, the Jesuit states, in the first lines dedicated to the animal, that “there have been some scruples about eating it on fish days,” since “it tastes more like beef than fish” (Cardim, 1925, pp. 79-80). The scruples consisted of doubts about the existence or not of a particular sin and whether, in view of the act performed, the soul could approach heaven or hell (Bluteau, 1712-1728, p. 229). As recorded by Cardim, scruples regarding manatees occurred at specific times of the year, such as Lent, the forty days of preparation for the solemnities of Good Friday and Easter. During this time, the Catholic Church did not recommend the consumption of endothermic animals—such as oxen and cows—since red meat would refer to the blood of Jesus Christ at the time of his crucifixion and death (Montanari, 1998, p. 313).

The flavor of manatee meat varied according to the ingredients added and the methods of preparation, as evidenced by the Jesuit’s statement that this meat “is cured in the smokehouse like pork or beef, and when cooked with cabbage or other herbs, it tastes like beef, and when roasted, it smells, tastes, and is as fatty as pork, and also has a snout” (Cardim, 1925, p. 80). Despite the many tastes involved in eating this animal, Cardim seems to agree that it was a fish, due to the long time it spent in the water and its physical dimensions, which prevented it from moving outside the rivers.

Father Francisco Soares, author of *Coisas Notáveis do Brasil* [Notable Things of Brazil], included the manatee as one of the “notable” creatures he saw during his stay in Brazil in the late 16th century (Soares, 1966, pp. XIII–XVIII). Like Cardim, Father Soares crossed the Atlantic with the aim of taking part in Portuguese evangelization, and for this reason, he highlights his concerns about the existence of a fish whose meat was very similar in taste to that of cattle. Throughout his account, written between 1591 and 1596, the Jesuit points out that the

similarities between manatees and cattle involved their meat and physical forms. When the meat was cooked with cabbage, “it looks like beef”; when it was prepared with wine and garlic, “it looks like pork loin”; and if the manatee was seasoned with saffron, “it looks like salted mutton” (Soares, 1966, p. 181). Despite the distinct flavors, Father Soares points out that the fish was appreciated by the inhabitants of the tropics, considered a fish that “is very good in every way” (Soares, 1966, p. 181).

According to the priest, Catholic diners reported their concerns about eating the animal during times of penance. In order to maintain abstinence from red meat during Lent, Soares states that “there were already many people who did not want to eat it because it looked like a cow” (Soares, 1966, p. 181). According to Father Soares, this reflection occurred on the initiative of the faithful themselves who attended local masses and was not a behavior motivated by its presence in these lands. In this scenario, Francisco Soares shows himself to be an attentive observer of the moral dilemmas that men and women seemed to face when faced with such tasty food, but which could distance them from the instructions bequeathed by the Church.

Regarding the animal’s body, Soares spared his readers no details and records that “its features resemble those of a land animal,” since it was a “round” fish whose tail narrowed at the end of its body, that is, a small tail, but one endowed with great strength, “like a paddle” (Soares, 1966, p. 181). Its body had no scales, but small red hairs, and instead of fins, it had paddle-like extremities composed of “webbed toes, like those of a duck,” which the animal used to move under water. At the top of its body, there was a distinct face, composed of small eyes with eyelashes, eyes close to a snout that seemed to move — “a snout like that of an ox” — and nostrils that had “two little holes,” through which the animal breathed outside of the water (Soares, 1966, p. 183). Soares, like his Jesuit confreres, was aware that the manatee was a species unknown to the Old World, and therefore resorted to detailed descriptions and different analogies involving familiar beings (e.g., oxen, pigs, ducks, and men) to make the species understandable to his potential readers.

As pointed out by Father Francisco Soares, moral concerns about eating manatee meat were not restricted to professed men, and treatises such as *Diálogos das Grandezas do Brasil* [Dialogues on the Greatness of Brazil], written by Ambrósio Fernandes Brandão in the early 17th century, show that these scruples were shared by lay Catholics. The author, who is identified in the work as Brandônio, was a native of Portugal and resided in Brazil between 1583 and 1618, time during which he served as a plantation owner and was responsible for sugar tithes in the captaincy of Pernambuco (Cortêsão, 2010, p. 10). In his Dialogues, Brandão sets out to gather information on the physical, economic, and social aspects of this land, as well as to present suggestions for better use of natural resources with a view to greater profits and guarantees for the Portuguese Empire (Cortêsão, 2012, p. 17).

Amid the pages of his “Fifth Dialogue” — part of the work dedicated to birds and fish in Portuguese America — Brandônio tells Nuno Álvares, referred to by the author as Alviano, that in Brazilian waters there was a wide variety of fish that were “fat and tasty to eat,” such as “*dorados*, groupers, moray eels, hake, mullet, dogfish, albacore, *bonito*, *lavradores*, swordfish, needlefish, *xaréu*, red mullet, and sardines” (Brandão, 2010, p. 258). Among the many creatures that lived in fresh waters, there was one that stood out for its “strangeness,” the manatee, an animal whose name seemed self-explanatory, as this name “was given to it because its face resembled that of the animal [ox], although it is twice as large, not in height, but in width and length” (Brandão, 2010, p. 258). Due to its large size — close to that of cattle — the animal was fished using harpoons and, as soon as it was removed from the water, its meat was prepared for the delight of diners. According to Brandônio, the fish “has the same flavor and taste as beef, with no difference between the two, so much so that if both meats are mixed in a pan, it is difficult to tell one from the other” (Brandão, 2010, p. 258). The similarity between the flavors of manatee and beef contributed to the fact that preparations involving cattle were replicated with its meat, so it was common to cook it with cabbage, prepare it in the form of pieces and meatballs, “using everything that is used with beef” (Brandão, 2010, p. 258).

Alviano, attentive to what Brandônio said about this particular fish, reports to his confrere: “for I would have had many scruples if I had eaten this fish on fish days, because I would have understood that I was eating meat” (Brandão, 2010, p. 258). Continuing the discussion, Brandônio explains that the consumption of this animal on “fish days,” a period of abstinence during Lent, had already been “a much-debated issue” among Catholic theologians, who considered it “truly fish and therefore should be received as such, since it lives in the water and never leaves it to graze elsewhere” (Brandão, 2010, p. 259). In his work, Ambrósio Fernandes Brandão does not mention the scholars responsible for reflecting on the status of the manatee, but it is known that, throughout the modern period, the animal became known among European diners, especially by the many travelers who passed along the coast of America. The presence of manatees on the tables of men from the Old World caused the debate raised by Portuguese Catholics to widen and be taken to the clergy, who concluded to the professed of the faith that the animal was, in fact, a fish (Casculo, 1968, p. 91).

According to the Catholic men who crossed the Atlantic between the 16th and 17th centuries, the manatee was a significant sign of the grandeur of divine creation, for only God, endowed with all his powers, would be capable of designing such a distinctive creature, which sometimes resembled a fish and sometimes resembled an ox. Thus, it was not for humans to question creation, but to adapt to it, that is, to identify the appropriate times for its consumption and to refrain from situations that could cause scruples, sins, and regrets. It should be noted that, amid the diversity of Brazilian fauna, the manatee was not the only animal to be pondered by Catholics. Animals that divided their existence between land and water aroused the curiosity and fears of Catholics living in Portuguese America.

FISH THAT WALK, SWIM, AND LAY EGGS

Among professed and lay Catholics, those who wrote about the nature of Portuguese America did much more than just observe species. The

treatises written throughout the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries reflect the extensive efforts of these scholars to identify, name, and classify the species sighted in the tropics (Elliot, 1970, p. 18). In general, it was common for letters, chronicles, and treatises to begin with attempts to compare Brazilian species with those already known in the Old World. After recognizing the similarities between living beings on both sides of the Atlantic, scholars devoted themselves to two processes: learning about the uses attributed to animals and classifying them together with similar creatures.

As observed in the case of manatees, these animals did not have characteristics common with fish, such as scales and eyelids. However, the fact that the animal remained underwater all the time contributed to its identification among fish. Turtles, on the other hand, seem to have required greater reflection on the part of the Catholics who passed through these lands. Ambrósio Fernandes Brandão was one of the men who devoted himself to thinking about the status attributed to this species throughout the pages of *Diálogos das Grandezas do Brasil* [Dialogues on the Greatness of Brazil].

Turtles were presented amid descriptions of *jacundãs*, fish found in fresh water; *piabas* and *saras*, commonly offered to the sick; and *tarariras*, which had many bones that had to be removed by their diners (Brandão, 2010, p. 261). The decision to group turtles with these animals is explained shortly thereafter by Brandônio, who writes: “there are also many turtles, which, despite being marine fish, come to spawn on land, and from the eggs they lay, they raise their young” (Brandão, 2010, p. 261). Alviano, claiming to already know turtles, is surprised only by this animal’s ability to leave the water when spawning and seems to have been interrupted by Brandônio, who concludes his reflections by saying “for it happens as I have said” (Brandão, 2010, p. 261).

As these animals had been known since ancient times, referenced in Pliny’s *Natural History* (Plinio, 2007, p. 408), it is very likely that Brandônio and Alviano had already seen or read about turtles somewhere other than the New World, and for this reason, the author of the Dialogues did not devote as detailed a description to the animal as he

did to the manatee. In the few words used to refer to turtles, Brandônio highlighted two aspects: the fact that this animal is a fish and that it spawns only in a terrestrial environment, indicating its ability to move outside of water. In the dialogue that follows, Alviano does not contest Brandônio's considerations, but expresses his amazement at the various species sighted, saying to his confrere: "you have dealt with so many breeds of fish, of different qualities and natures, that it is confusing to consider their ways" (Brandão, 2010, p. 261).

Alviano's reflections on such a large volume of fish that it seemed to confuse listeners or readers were shared by different men of his time, especially those who, unlike the characters in *the Dialogues*, spent part of their lives in the northern tropics. Writings dedicated to Catholic history and missionary work in the State of Maranhão and Grão-Pará e Maranhão (Amorim, 2005; Bettendorff, 2018; Leite, 1943; Lisboa, 1967; Willeke, 1974) contain several references to turtles, because, although the species were found along the coast, they were more common in Amazonian waters.

Among the reports that mention turtles, the letter written by Father Antônio Vieira during his stay in the captaincy of Pará in 1654 stands out. Addressed to the Providential Father of Brazil at the time, the epistle presents the route followed by the religious man when he left Maranhão and entered the Amazon River. According to Vieira, the purpose of the trip was to direct the indigenous people living in the region to the villages administered by the Society of Jesus located in Pará and Maranhão. On the journey, traveled together with laymen and other clergy, the priest highlights some habits shared by the residents of the banks of the Tocantins River, among which he emphasizes turtle fishing, which took place between October and November. According to the Jesuit, each turtle lays "eighty to one hundred" eggs, all "covered with the same sand, leaving them to the sun and nature" and then returning to the water. A month after spawning, the small eggs would break and, by "instinct of the same nature," the little turtles would come out and head for the riverbed. It should be noted that few survived, because, as Vieira reports, "not even this innocence was forgiven by our Indians,

who ate them and made *matalotagem*, because they are delicious, and there were countless numbers of them” (Vieira, 2008 [1624], p. 278).

The indigenous people’s appreciation for small turtles was related to the ease of fishing them, since all they had to do was wait for them to hatch and, in a few minutes, collect those that began their journey toward the water. Another explanation for the residents’ interest was the taste of turtle meat, which, according to Father Vieira, was “like mutton, and is used to make stews that taste more like meat than fish” (Vieira, 2008 [1624], p. 278). The priest’s remarks about the taste of turtle highlight the conceptions that Vieira constructed about the animal. For the religious man, the turtle was a fish, and this was most likely associated with its long periods of time spent underwater. On the other hand, the way it was prepared could confuse diners, because when cooked in a stew,³ its flavor was not like fish but very similar to “meat,” a term commonly used to refer to land animals that were eaten (Bluteau, 1712-1728, p. 152).

More abundant than turtles were the tortoises living in northern Brazil. According to Vieira, this animal “is a very common food source everywhere, and it was they who often satisfied our hunger on this journey” (Vieira, 2008, p. 279). Unlike turtles, Vieira did not refer to tortoises as fish, after all, tortoises “always live on land, never entering the sea or rivers” (Vieira, 2008, p. 279). The many similarities between turtles and tortoises were not mentioned by the Jesuit in his letter, as tortoises were creatures familiar to European eyes, being called *icoteás* in the “Indies of Castile,” as the author points out. According to the priest, the distinctive feature between the two animals was the fact that turtles lived in the water and tortoises remained on land all the time. It is very likely that the physical similarities between the two animals led some individuals to consume tortoises during periods of Catholic penance.

3 The stew consisted of preparing animal protein using animal fat or vegetable oil, resulting in a thick broth. It was not a common preparation among the indigenous peoples of Brazil, having been introduced by the colonizers. Turtle meat had a high fat content, making it popular for stews prepared by the Portuguese (Cascudo, 1968, p. 168).

According to Vieira, despite tortoises remaining on land, they “are considered fish, and as such are eaten on days when meat is forbidden, as it has been ascertained that they are cold-blooded” (Vieira, 2008, p. 279).

The northerners’ view of the tortoise as a “cold-blooded” animal was not wrong. In the first half of the 18th century, the Swede Carl Von Linné published the first edition of his renowned work, *Systema Naturae* (1735), in which he set out to classify God’s creations belonging to the animal, plant, and mineral kingdoms. Linné organized the animal kingdom into six classes—*Quadrupedia*, *Aves*, *Amphibia*, *Pisces*, *Insecta*, and *Vermes*—and initially, the *Amphibia* class was divided into two groups: *serpentina*, which consisted of animals without limbs, and *reptilia*, composed of animals with limbs (Wahlgren, 2011, p. 6).⁴ Turtles and tortoises, such as those found in northern Brazil, were considered part of the *amphibia* animals, specifically the *reptilia*, because they shared common characteristics, such as alternating their stay between the ground and the earth, breathing without exhaling air, and having a rigid body filled with cold blood, that is, they depend on the heat of the environment to warm themselves (Schmidt, 1951, p. 4; Wahlgren, 2011, p. 9-10).

It is very likely that Father Antônio Vieira, writing in the mid-17th century, was familiar with the ancient writings of Pliny and Aristotle, who identified fish as cold-blooded animals, a characteristic commonly associated with the existence of these animals in the aquatic environment. Perhaps, for Vieira, turtles shared this “cold-blooded” condition, but the Jesuit does not express his agreement or disagreement with the identification of tortoises in the same way. In his letter, the author limits himself to presenting the reflections of local residents and consumption during the days when meat was prohibited, offering no evidence that he himself ate tortoises during periods of abstinence from warm-blooded animals.

4 It should be noted that in subsequent editions of *Systema Naturae*, the class *Amphibia* came to include a third order called “Nantes,” which consisted of cartilaginous animals and some fish (Wahlgren, 2011, p. 6).

The conflicts over classifying and identifying which of the creatures, turtle or tortoise, could be consumed during Lent were the focus of a canonical debate and brought to the pulpit of one of the churches in Maranhão by Friar Cristóvão de Lisboa. This Franciscan friar was the first custodian to arrive in Maranhão, in 1624, just ten years after the founding of the custody of Santo Antônio do Brasil, based in Olinda (Amorim, 2005, p. 7). Cristóvão de Lisboa remained in the tropics for just over ten years and was responsible for writing *História dos animais e das Árvores do Maranhão* [History of the Animals and Trees of Maranhão], a work in which he devoted himself to “showing the things of the earth,” thus resulting in a “treatise on birds, plants, fish, and animals” (Lisboa, 1967, p. 23). In his *History*, the cleric devoted a few pages to the *oroanas*, a term used to refer to “sea turtles,” which were abundant in the waters of Maranhão. The scholar’s own reference to the animal (i.e., the sea turtle) implies how the species was interpreted, that is, as an aquatic animal whose stay on land occurred in a single period, only for spawning on the beach sand (Lisboa, 1967, p. 70).

The moral clashes involving turtles and tortoises were exposed by the Franciscan in a letter written in October 1626 and addressed to the Superior of the Order, who resided in Portugal. Although the purpose of the epistle was to gather information about the evangelizing mission, the friar devoted himself to writing about the “offenses that Bento Maciel commits against the Church” (Lisboa, 1626, p. 241). According to Friar Lisboa, Bento Maciel held the position of Captain-General of the Captaincy of Pará and made it difficult for the Franciscans to preach to the indigenous people. The impediments took the form of work that indigenous people were required to perform on Sundays and holy days, when the Church recommended the presence of the faithful at Masses and other solemnities. According to the friar, the Captain was a bad example, and under his influence, “this land was so wanton in the sixth commandment”⁵ (Lisboa, 1626, p. 242).

5 According to biblical literature, God asked Moses to go to Mount Sinai and, at that meeting, presented him with the “Judicial Laws” that should be respected by all. Among the ten

Throughout the letter, Father Lisboa reports to his Superior that Bento Maciel was very close to Luís Figueira, one of the first Jesuits to mission in the State of Maranhão and Grão-Pará and active, at the time, as Vicar of Pará (Bettendorff, 2018, p. XL). According to the Franciscan, Father Figueira was the “instigator” of the Captain-Major’s actions, seeking to remove the indigenous people from the care of the Friars Minor and keep them within the Jesuit settlements established in the region. Among the criticisms directed by Lisboa at Figueira was the fact that the Jesuit was complicit in some sins committed by local Catholics, such as the consumption of forbidden animals during periods of penance. On this fact, the Franciscan writes:

And he [Father Luís Figueira] confessed to this case, because they told him that we had the letter, ordering them to abstain from turtles on fish days, as there was no reason for me to show that they were not meat, until this was resolved by the superior. He had said publicly from the pulpit that they were fish and as such were eaten before the Pope and in the Bay, and that the holy French religious considered them fish, all of which allegations were lies, and that the instrument considered them meat, but since they did so, they should not eat them, even though it was a great insult, as it was the same as saying that it was reckless and foolish, I being, at that time, a prelate (Lisbon, 1626, pp. 242-243).

From the way in which the Franciscan records his concerns, it is possible to observe that moral reflections on the consumption of turtles had already been discussed among Catholics in the north. According to Father Lisboa, at some point in his public sermons, Father Luís Figueira argued that turtles were fish and, as such, suitable for consumption

guidelines, the sixth commandment recommended that Moses’ followers keep the seventh day of creation for rest, as God did after the creation of the world, and thus, free men, slaves, pilgrims, or animals should work (The Bible, 1885, p. 47-48).

during Lent. Apparently, Figueira's reflections were based on the many similarities between turtles and tortoises and on the considerations that many men had made over the centuries,⁶ that turtles, because they live in aquatic environments, were a type of fish.

In his arguments, Father Lisboa affirms and reiterates that tortoises, because they remain on land, were considered warm-blooded animals, and thus their consumption became a "very serious offense" during periods when abstinence from meat was recommended. The criticism directed at the Jesuit was not only aimed at his ignorance of the conditions of these animals, but mainly at the fact that the religious leader misguided the many Catholics who followed him and led them to commit sins unintentionally. For these reasons, the member of the Order of Friars Minor concludes his narrative by stating that he is forwarding his appeals to the Portuguese Kingdom so that they may be presented to the *Mesa da Consciência* [Conscience Board]⁷ and duly analyzed by the Portuguese ecclesiastical authorities.

Although we do not know what resolutions were issued by *Mesa da Consciência* in response to the facts presented by the Franciscan friar, we do know that debates about whether *jabutis* are fish or meat did not end in the 17th century. In writings produced in the following century, there are other reflections written by Jesuit priests who lived in the states of Maranhão and Grão-Pará. For Father João Daniel, who was a missionary in northern Brazil between 1741 and 1757, turtles were not fish

6 In *History of Animals*, Aristotle defines the turtle as an animal whose constitution does not allow it to live apart from aquatic space. Although its eggs are laid on land for the birth of the young, proximity to water is necessary, as this is where they will spend most of their lives (Aristotle, 2008, p. 78).

7 The *Mesa de Consciência* was created by King John III of Portugal in 1532. The purpose of the institution was to deal with everything related to the conscience of the Portuguese monarch. From 1551 onwards, the Board began to incorporate activities related to the administration of the Military Religious Orders of Christ, Santiago, and Avis. In general, the *Mesa de Consciência e Ordem* was dedicated to analyzing papal bulls issued in the past and future and, based on these documents, verifying and establishing verdicts for the petitions submitted to it. To ensure its optimal functioning, questions addressed to the court, examinations conducted by the Board, and ecclesiastical benefits granted were to be compiled in different record books that could be consulted as needed (Neumann, 2019, pp. 25-28).

or meat but were considered amphibious animals. In his work, *Tesouro Descoberto no máximo rio Amazonas* [Treasure Discovered in the Great Amazon River], written in the second half of the 18th century, the Jesuit gathered information about the land, the people, and the culture of the Amazon region, and dedicated a chapter to discussing the “amphibians of the Amazon River” (Daniel, 2004, p. 129). In the priest’s view, “amphibious fish” were animals composed of “both terrestrial and marine characteristics” and were therefore considered “the most noteworthy in history” (Daniel, 2004, p. 119).

Father João Daniel was not a pioneer in the identification of amphibious animals, for before they became one of the classes of animals recognized by Carl Von Linné in his *Systema Naturae*, amphibians had already been designated as such by Aristotle. In *History of Animals*, the Greek philosopher classified animals according to the environment in which they lived, determining species as terrestrial and aquatic, with terrestrial animals being those that absorbed air and aquatic creatures being those that absorbed water. Some animals, however, were called “amphibians” because they spent their lives between the two main environments, aquatic and terrestrial. Still according to Aristotle, amphibious beings breathed air and gave birth to their young on land, but they fed and spent most of their time underwater (Aristotle, 2008, p. 78).

Aristotle’s reflections seem to have influenced João Daniel in his analyses, since the priest categorized turtles, called *jurarás* by the natives of the land, as part of the amphibians that inhabited Brazil. In the first lines of his description, the Jesuit presents his interpretations of the turtle: “it is an amphibious animal, but its main habitat is in the water, a fish certainly worthy of all esteem, not only because it is large, but also because it is tasty” (Daniel, 2004, p. 130). According to the priest, diners in the north had a great appreciation for turtles because, due to their large size, they could be used in their entirety, making it possible to prepare “seven or more different dishes.” João Daniel seems to have a thorough knowledge of the many preparations made with turtle meat and thus presents a varied menu to the readers of his work: “first the *sarapatel*, second the *sarrabulho*, third the roasted breast, fourth the *fricassée*, fifth

the stew, sixth the soup, seventh the rice” (Daniel, 2004, p. 131). Turtle eggs were as prized as the meat of the animal because, in addition to resembling familiar chicken eggs, they were collected in large quantities, usually 150 to 200 eggs at a time. With turtle eggs, the men and women of Maranhão and Grão-Pará produced a butter, “like cow’s butter,” which, once prepared, could be consumed for long periods of time, making it a staple food on trips across the waters and throughout the hinterlands (Daniel, 2004, p. 133).

As João Daniel observed, turtles were used in their entirety, becoming a lasting source of food. Because of this, many residents built nurseries so that the animals could be kept close to domestic spaces and later captured more easily. The nurseries, however, could disrupt the lives of Catholic faithful who, when encountering turtles, were confused by an animal that sometimes lived under water and sometimes walked on land. In his work, the Jesuit reports: “and what great confusion this is for gluttons, who cannot fast for Lent, and perhaps not even for a day” (Daniel, 2004, p. 132). It should be noted that the passage may sound confusing to readers of his *Treasure*, since at one point the religious man stated that turtles were very similar to fish. However, would it be appropriate for a virtuous and penitent Christian to eat, during Lent, an animal that walks on the ground alongside warm-blooded creatures? It is likely that, amid the scruples generated, the religious leader’s guidance is to distance oneself from turtle meat during the forty days of penance and save this delicacy for the many other days of the Catholic calendar.

During times of penance, tortoises were considered an appropriate food and, according to João Daniel, “enjoy the privilege of being admitted into the sacred realm of fasting” (Daniel, 2004, p. 134). Although the physical similarities between tortoises and turtles were diverse—such as their habit of retracting their hands, legs, and heads when touched—the differences were also visible. Tortoises were smaller in size, had a lighter-colored shell, and a body covered with red scales. The main distinction was their permanence in swampy terrain and open fields, a factor that contributed to their domestication, and according

to the priest, “they become so domesticated at home that they come to eat from your hand” (Daniel, 2004, p. 134).

Father Luís Figueira and Father João Daniel were missionaries in northern Brazil at different times, the former in the early 17th century and the latter in the early 18th century. Due to the large time gap between the two religious figures, we cannot say for certain that João Daniel read any letters or writings by Luís Figueira about his stay in the tropics. What we observe is that these two brothers of the Society of Jesus shared the same moral interpretation of turtles and tortoises. While Father Cristóvão de Lisboa denounced Figueira’s stance on the consumption of tortoises during Lent, Father João Daniel expressed his agreement with the consumption of these animals during periods of penance. This sharing of knowledge among the Jesuits may not have occurred directly through dialogues between the priests but was probably related to their intellectual formation, which was based on classical knowledge—such as Latin, Greek, poetry, and oratory classes—and the sciences that were consolidating in the modern period, such as mathematics, astronomy, vernacular languages, and literature (Franca, 2019, pp. 49-53; Asúa, 2005, p. XIV).

Before moving on to the final considerations of this brief study, we will contemplate the moral impressions of another Jesuit who served as a missionary in the State of Maranhão and Grão-Pará. Antônio Moreira was a native of Lisbon, a member of the forty-sixth evangelizing mission of the Society of Jesus in northern Brazil, and from 1745 onwards, he served as a missionary in the Tapajós River region (Papavero, 2011, pp. 83-84). During his time in the tropics, until 1757, the priest devoted himself to evangelizing activities and wrote the *Declaração das raridades do Maranhão de peixes, aves, etc.* [Declaration of the rarities of Maranhão in terms of fish, birds, etc.], a manuscript consisting of twelve pages describing the fauna sighted in Grão-Pará.

According to the classification suggested by Father Moreira, on the banks of the rivers of Pará, it was possible to see a large number of animals identified as “amphibians,” such as pacas and capybaras, the latter species described as follows by the author: “they are amphibious

animals that live in the water and outside it in the woods and meadows” (Moreira, 2011, p. 88). Alongside these creatures were chameleons, identified in large numbers and sighted “on the banks of some rivers, because they are amphibians.” The stones on their heads were used, considered a “treasure of medicine and the best fever reducer that has been discovered,” and their meat was highly prized by the indigenous people of the region (Moreira, 2011, p. 91).

Father Antônio Moreira did not mention tortoises among the amphibious animals and, at the beginning of his considerations, he highlighted how it was identified by the inhabitants of the region: “it is considered here to be fish and is eaten on fasting days” (Moreira, 2011, p. 91). Despite the reference to them as fish, the priest points out that *jabutis* were commonly found in the bush and, unlike amphibians, “never go into the water.” Moreira’s observations seem to contradict the old belief that fish consisted only of animals that lived under water. In classifying tortoises as fish, it is very likely that the priest drew on the reflections written and shared by his Jesuit confreres who had traveled through the tropics. Thus, Father Moreira chose to summarize his considerations in a few lines, which demonstrate his agreement with the recognition of the animal as a cold-blooded creature and, therefore, morally acceptable for Catholic fasting.

The *jurarás* were the same size as turtles and equally appreciated by native diners. When referring to the group of animals, tortoises, and *jurarás*, the priest determines that “both are considered fish,” that is, both were possibilities for consumption during Catholic penances (Moreira, 2011, p. 91). Like *jabutis*, *jurarás* were commonly seen on land, usually in grassland regions, and captured using fire. The author’s conclusions point to the fact that these animals were suitable for domestication, possibly because they lived on the ground and could therefore be taken to residential backyards.

Unlike *jabutis* and *jurarás*, the turtle was presented by the Jesuit in the topic entitled “Of fish and shellfish.” As the priest observes, turtles were found “of various breeds, small and large,” also “shaped like tortoises,” but in much larger proportions, with some reaching “four palms

and more in length and three and more in width” (Moreira, 2011, p. 93). Father Moreira’s choice to group turtles together with other aquatic animals—*pirarucus*, swordfish, dolphins, and manatees—meant that the author did not elaborate further on his understanding of this animal. The Jesuit’s moral considerations regarding its consumption were addressed with the following words: “on fish day, only the turtle provides a feast of more than 12 different dishes, all of them with an exquisite and⁸ flavor, with meat better than the best mutton in Portugal” (Moreira, 2011, p. 93-94). In the Jesuit’s perspective, the fact that turtles live underwater left no doubt about their consumption during certain periods of the Catholic calendar, and the fact that the animal is large seemed to make life easier for penitents. Thus, the capture of a single large turtle was enough to guarantee diverse and tasty meals that, in addition to feeding the body, helped guide the soul on the path to virtue.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

For Catholics, God was responsible for the creation of the world, beginning his work in the Garden of Eden, where he designed all living beings, animals, and plants, which, a few days later, would be named by Adam and Eve, the first human beings. Thus, the understanding shared by the Catholic faith is that all divine creation is good and occupies the place chosen by the Creator (Wirzba, 2011, p. 2). Priests, friars, and lay people who traveled across the Atlantic from the 1500s onwards were given a wide variety of missions, including identifying the creatures that God had bequeathed to the New World and determining where they belonged. As pointed out in this brief study,⁹ some species seemed

8 The term is applied according to its meaning in Spanish, which encompasses the idea of “excellent” (Papavero, 2011, p. 93).

9 This article is part of doctoral research entitled “Nature and religion in Brazil (16th, 17th, and 18th centuries),” whose main objective was to understand the impressions of Catholic scholars—priests, friars, monks, and laymen—about the natural world of the tropics. The writings on fish or “water animals,” as they were mentioned by authors who passed through Portuguese America, were analyzed in the third chapter of the study, which addressed the

to defy this divine order, especially in relation to their habitat, such as manatees, turtles, and tortoises.

Unlike monsters and sea men, these animals did not seem to be deviant beings, endowed with mysteries to be unraveled (Taunay, 1998; Taunay, 19__). In the case of manatees, although their features seemed to confuse Portuguese observers due to their many similarities with cattle, the main concern involved the proper consumption of their meat. After all, could a marine animal so similar to cattle, whose meat was prepared in the same way as cattle, be eaten during Lent? And in relation to turtles and tortoises, was it possible for Catholics to consume these animals during periods of penance from “meat” and still ensure that their souls remained virtuous? The moral concerns of Catholics regarding the consumption of these animals demonstrate that care for the soul, especially due to the belief in the possibility of salvation after death, did not depend solely on regular attendance at Mass and Catholic celebrations, but was also related to daily habits.

It should be noted that, in this study, we do not focus on the relationship between humans and animals solely from the perspective of food, but rather on how the consumption of fish was involved in caring for the Christian soul. To understand this distinct relationship, we approached a historiography that, since the second half of the 20th century, has sought to understand how human sensitivity to nature was constructed, that is, how humans interacted and related directly to the natural environment and the living beings that inhabited it (Asúa, 2005; Duarte, 2019; Santos, 2020; Thomas, 1988). Similarly, we attempt to establish a dialogue with environmental historiography in order to understand the relationships between the human and non-human worlds in detail, not only through the actions that individuals took to survive in unknown spaces, but also through the way in which certain

ways of manipulating and making better use of these animals; metaphors involving aquatic beings, in order to alert the Catholic population about their conduct; the distress of many men in the face of men and sea monsters; and finally, doubts about the condition of some species that were sometimes on land and sometimes under water.

environments, such as aquatic environments, shaped human intentions (Brito, 2023, pp. 151-152). As we enter a delimited space—the waters of Portuguese America—we observe how they ceased to be exclusively a space for obtaining sustenance or for navigation and became a space for moral reflection on the condition of the different animals sighted. Although descriptions of manatees and turtles contain utilitarian concerns of colonizers and missionaries, we note how doubts about the preparation of meat and the extraction of shells were gradually replaced by moral appeals, which indicate scruples and fears about eating these fish during Lent and other periods of penance.

In the field of environmental historiography, recent decades have been marked by the development of an area specifically dedicated to the study of American marine life in its natural habitats and how these were appropriated in different ways by native peoples and, later, by European colonizers (Brito, 2023; Vieira; Garcia; Brito, 2024). The paradoxes identified in the ways in which indigenous peoples and Europeans related to the animals of the New World help us to identify the place attributed to aquatic creatures. While indigenous peoples understood manatees and turtles as animals that were easy to catch and of great nutritional value, the Portuguese seemed to adopt some of these practices in their daily lives, especially fishing methods. When we address Catholic appropriations of these animals, we approach marine environmental historiography, which allows us to identify the different ways of consuming marine beings. If, among the natives, the concern was for sustenance, among Catholics, the concern manifests itself through scruples caused by a diet that could induce mortal sin.

The space in which these animals were inserted—breathing above the waters or walking on the ground—directly influenced the relationship built by Catholic men (Brito, 2023, p. 153). The environment was more than a living space; it was an element capable of directly influencing the condition attributed to manatees, turtles, and tortoises. Especially in the northern tropics, where turtles were abundant, this attention to the consumption of aquatic creatures should be redoubled, and it seems that the religious orders that established themselves in

Brazil did not share the same conclusion about the ways of eating turtles and tortoises in Catholic diets. While for the Jesuits, tortoises were a rich source of sustenance during Lent, the Franciscans restricted themselves to the consumption of large turtles, since the latter, unlike tortoises, remained underwater for long periods of time. As for manatees, the conclusion reached was that, yes, they were fish, but at the first sign of repentance, the recommendation was abstinence and enjoyment after the end of penance. After Lent, abstinence, and penance, Catholics would be allowed to contemplate and enjoy divine creation, which, despite its distinctive features, proved to be valuable, diverse, and a treat for the inhabitants of Portuguese America.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The entire data set supporting the results of this study has been published in the article itself.

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