



# On the pretext of a conventual amazonian library: books, education, and the mercedarian presence in Belém of Grão-Pará in the 17th and 18th centuries

Luiz Fernando Conde Sangenis\* and Lucia Maria Gonçalves de Andrade

Programa de Pós-Graduação em Educação – Processos Formativos e Desigualdades Sociais, Faculdade de Formação de Professores, Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Rua Francisco Portela, 1470, 24435-005, São Gonçalo, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. \*Author for correspondence. E-mail: lfsangenis@gmail.com

**ABSTRACT.** Mercedaries arrived in the Amazon in 1639, and the following year they founded their first convent in Belém in the independent state of Grão-Pará and Maranhão, at the end of the period of the Iberian Union (1580-1640). Coming from Quito, in the Viceroyalty of Peru, they accompanied Pedro Teixeira's return expedition, across the Amazon River, after the Portuguese had undertaken the ascent and exploration of the river, from Belém to Ecuador. They made an important contribution to the foundation of Belém and to the development of the Amazon region. The convent, an architectural landmark in the city, was an important training center for the Order of Mercy and its friars gained recognition for their intellectual preparation for the exercise of teaching and the promotion of literate culture. The convent library was notable not only for the number of books, but also for the variety and richness of its collection. Nothing remains of it except the information recorded in the Inventory of goods seized from the extinct mercedarian religious in the Captaincy of Pará, a manuscript in the custody of the National Archives, which was produced in 1794, when the mercedarians were expelled from Belém. The study of the bibliographic collection helps to understand how the books supported the missionary and educational functions performed by the members of the Mercedary Order in the Amazon.

**Keywords:** mercedarians; Grão-Pará and Maranhão; history of colonial education; conventual library.

## A pretexto de uma biblioteca conventual amazônica: livros, educação e presença mercedária em Belém do Grão-Pará nos séculos XVII e XVIII

**RESUMO.** Os mercedários chegaram à Amazônia em 1639, e no ano seguinte, fundaram seu primeiro convento em Belém no Estado independente do Grão-Pará e Maranhão, ao final do período da União Ibérica (1580-1640). Vindos de Quito, no Vice-Reino do Peru, acompanharam a expedição de retorno de Pedro Teixeira, através do Rio Amazonas, após os portugueses terem empreendido a subida e a exploração do rio, de Belém ao Equador. Deram importante contribuição à fundação de Belém e ao desenvolvimento da região amazônica. O convento, marco arquitetônico da cidade, foi importante centro de formação da Ordem das Mercês e seus frades conquistaram reconhecimento pelo preparo intelectual para o exercício do ensino e a promoção da cultura letrada. A biblioteca conventual notabilizou-se não apenas pelo número de livros, mas também pela variedade e riqueza do seu acervo. Dela nada sobrou, a não ser as informações registradas no *Inventário dos bens sequestrados aos extintos religiosos mercedários na Capitania do Pará*, manuscrito sob a guarda do Arquivo Nacional, e que foi produzido em 1794, quando da expulsão dos mercedários de Belém. O estudo do espólio bibliográfico ajuda a compreender como os livros deram suporte às funções missionárias e educativas exercidas pelos membros da Ordem Mercedária na Amazônia.

**Palavras-chave:** mercedários; Grão-Pará e Maranhão; história da educação colonial; biblioteca conventual.

## A pretexto de una biblioteca conventual amazónica: libros, educación y presencia mercedaria en Belém do Grão-Pará en los siglos XVII y XVIII

**RESUMEN.** Los mercedarios llegaron a la Amazonía en 1639 y al año siguiente fundaron su primer convento en Belém en el estado independiente de Grão-Pará y Maranhão, al final del período de la Unión Ibérica (1580-1640). Viniendo de Quito, en el Virreinato del Perú, acompañaron la expedición de regreso de Pedro Teixeira, a través del río Amazonas, luego de que los portugueses hubieran emprendido el ascenso y exploración del río, desde Belém hasta Ecuador. Hicieron una importante contribución a la fundación de

Belém y al desarrollo de la región amazónica. El convento, hito arquitectónico de la ciudad, fue un importante centro de formación de la Orden de la Merced y sus frailes ganaron reconocimiento por su preparación intelectual para el ejercicio de la docencia y la promoción de la cultura letrada. La biblioteca del convento destacaba no sólo por la cantidad de libros, sino también por la variedad y riqueza de su colección. De él no queda nada más que la información registrada en el Inventario de bienes incautados a los religiosos mercedarios extintos en la Capitanía de Pará, manuscrito en custodia del Archivo Nacional, que fue producido en 1794, cuando los mercedarios fueron expulsados de Belém. El estudio del acervo bibliográfico ayuda a comprender cómo los libros apoyaron las funciones misioneras y educativas realizadas por los miembros de la Orden Mercedaria en la Amazonía.

**Palabras-clave:** mercedarios; Grão-Pará y Maranhão; historia de la educación colonial; biblioteca conventual.

Received on October 30, 2022.

Accepted on January 12, 2023.

## Introduction

The Mercedarian architectural complex in Belém of Grão-Pará, comprising a temple and convent founded in 1640, exemplifies the influential presence of religious orders in the Amazon region and their significant contributions to education and learning. In the 18th century, it is particularly noteworthy that the Mercedarian convent in Belém maintained a library containing over four thousand volumes, an unusually large collection for the time, even when compared to other conventual libraries of the Metropole during the same period.

Understanding the conquest and colonization of Brazil, especially in the Amazon region, requires acknowledging the crucial role played by religious orders and their missionaries. Mercedarians, Jesuits, Franciscans, Carmelites, Benedictines, and Oratorians were integral to the establishment and governance, both temporal and spiritual, of indigenous settlements and communities, most of which eventually evolved into towns and cities. These religious convents were major catalysts for urban development and were instrumental in promoting architecture and the arts. They also served as the sole centers of education and culture in the colony until the Pombaline period, with convent schools playing a prominent role in educating the youth and their libraries serving as key resources for the advancement of literate culture.

Transitioning from general history to the specific field of the History of Education, no studies have been found that address the presence or activities of Mercedarian friars in the Brazilian educational landscape, particularly during the colonial period. Indeed, the scholarly output—including books, journal articles, conference papers in education and educational history, theses, and dissertations—scarcely addresses the Brazilian colonial period. The few works that do focus on this era almost exclusively examine the missionary and educational activities of the Society of Jesus (Sangenis & Mainka, 2019). This represents a significant gap in historiography, specifically regarding the History of Brazilian Education. It is essential to emphasize that in Brazil, as in the Americas, throughout the colonial period, various religious orders were involved in the catechesis and missionization of indigenous peoples, as well as in the education of indigenous populations and settlers, all under the mandate and sponsorship of the Iberian states' crowns.

The impetus for this study stemmed from an exploration of the bibliographic collection of the Convent of Our Lady of Mercy in Belém, centered on the manuscript titled *Inventory of the Assets Seized from the Extinct Mercedarian Order in the Captaincy of Pará* (4A.COD.0.102), housed in the National Archive. The *Inventory* was compiled after the expulsion of the Mercedarians from the province in 1794, when the King of Portugal ordered the confiscation of their assets to be incorporated into the Crown. Among the confiscated conventual assets, following the expulsion of the Order's members from the city of Belém, the convent's collection of books stands out, stored in the convent's library, the apothecary, and the friars' cells within the convent.

Analyzing the bibliographic collection of the Convent of Mercy in Belém, within the regions of Maranhão and Grão-Pará, based on the 1794 *Inventory* records, is challenging because the physical collection has been lost to time. Only the handwritten records of the works remain, which are not always meticulously detailed. Generally, these records include the author, title, language of the work, and its estimated monetary value, but many references are abbreviated. In a significant number of entries, the abbreviations for both titles and authorship present considerable challenges for identification. There is no reference to the year of publication, nor to the publisher or place of printing.

Despite the considerable effort by those who compiled the *Inventory* to identify, describe, and classify the conventual bibliographic collection, identifying works that were published at least three hundred years ago remains a complex task.

The catalog of books from the Mercedarian convent in Belém is a crucial document for investigating the educational efforts of the Mercedarian friars and their interactions with Amazonian society from the 17th century onward<sup>1</sup>, in what was then the independent state of Maranhão and Grão-Pará. This documentation offers a significant contribution to expanding historiographical knowledge concerning both regional and national histories of education.

## On the origin of the order of mercy and its expansion in the americas

The Order of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mercy was established in the Middle Ages in 1218 through the initiative of Pedro Nolasco, with the support of King James I of Aragon. Initially, it was founded under the title of the Order of the Virgin Mary of Mercy for the Redemption of Captives of Saint Eulalia of Barcelona, within the Kingdom of Aragon. The Order arose from the fervent Christian spirit that characterized the Reconquista, the campaign aimed at reclaiming the Iberian Peninsula from Muslim rule. It received papal approval in 1235. As the Order was created after the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, which prohibited the establishment of new religious rules for emerging institutions, its papal confirmation integrated the Order of Mercy into the group of orders governed by the Rule of Saint Augustine.

The Order of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mercy was specifically founded to liberate Christian captives held by Muslims. Defining it within the framework of the Middle Ages was no simple task, as the Order introduced distinct and innovative elements that set it apart.

It could not be classified as a monastic order of contemplative communal life like the Benedictines, Carthusians, Cistercians, and Premonstratensians, because contemplation was not its goal; nor as a mendicant order of active life like the Franciscans, Augustinians, Dominicans, and Carmelites, for all of these begged from the faithful for the necessities of survival in exchange for apostolic services; nor as a clerical redemptive religious order like the Trinitarians, because, according to the documentation, it was constituted by lay brothers. The Order of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mercy was a lay order of active communal life, whose purpose was the defense of the faith through redemption or ransom (Order of Mercy, 1998, p. 30).<sup>2</sup>

In its endeavor to draw parallels with both older and newly established religious institutions of the time, the Order was organized similarly to a military religious order. Like many of its contemporaries, its primary objective was the defense of the faith and the confrontation of non-believers through armed conflict, thereby establishing well-equipped and militarily disciplined professional forces.

They had a shield heraldically formed by the white cross on a red background of the Barcelona cathedral and by the royal arms of King James I, who participated in its founding. The use of horses by each friar and shoes like those of the Templars. The title of Master for the supreme hierarch of the Order, a designation used only by military orders; of 'Lieutenant' of the Master, for his representatives in different dioceses and regions; of *Prior*, for the superior of Barcelona; of Commander, for the person in charge of the commandery or house, a title only used by military orders. [...] The Mercedarian Constitutions of 1272 were drafted with military orders in mind. There are provisions not only inspired by but directly copied from those of the Order of Santiago<sup>3</sup>. King James II, in confirming Arnaldo de Amer as Master-General, asserts that the Orders of the Hospitallers, Templars, Calatravans, and those of Uclés (Order of Santiago) have rules similar to those of the Order of Mercy (Order of Mercy, 1998, pp. 31-32, author's emphasis)<sup>4</sup>.

The Mercedarian friars' use of arms, conducted in a manner that avoided scandal among both Christians and Muslims, underscores the parallels between the Order of Mercy and military orders in their mission to redeem captives held by so-called infidels. While they placed a significant emphasis on the struggle against non-believers, the Mercedarians aimed to preserve the faith of Christian captives by rescuing them through peaceful means, resorting to violence only when absolutely necessary for the defense of their redemptive mission.

<sup>1</sup> The State of Maranhão and Grão-Pará, starting in the 17th century, was an independent state with its own government reporting directly to Lisbon. In the 18th century, a reorganization of the northern states took place, leading to its designation as Grão-Pará and Maranhão.

<sup>2</sup> Não se podia classificar como Ordem monástica de vida comum contemplativa como os beneditinos, cartuxos, cistercienses e premonstratenses, porque não era a contemplação o seu objetivo; nem como ordem mendicante de vida ativa como os franciscanos, agostinianos, dominicanos e carmelitas, pois todos esses mendigavam dos fiéis o necessário para sobrevivência em troca de serviços apostólicos; nem como Ordem religiosa redentora clerical com os trinitários, pois foi constituída segundo a documentação por frades leigos. A Ordem de Santa Maria das Mercês era uma Ordem laica de vida ativa em comum, cuja finalidade era a defesa da fé, mediante redenção ou resgate (Ordem das Mercês, 1998, p. 30).

<sup>3</sup> These refer to the constitutions of the Order of Santiago, established in 1175 by King Ferdinand II of León and employed in the fight against the Moors.

<sup>4</sup> Tinham o escudo formado heraldicamente pela Cruz branca sobre o fundo vermelho da catedral de Barcelona, e pelas armas reais do rei Jaime I, que participou de sua fundação. O uso de cavalos por cada frade, de sapatos como os templários. O título de Mestre para o hierarca supremo da Ordem denominação que somente as Ordens militares usavam; de 'Lugar-tenente' do Mestre, para os representantes do mesmo nas distintas dioceses e regiões; de Prior, para o superior de Barcelona; de Comendador, para o encarregado da comenda ou da casa, que só as Ordens militares usavam. [...] As Constituições mercedárias de 1272 foram redigidas tendo em vista as das Ordens militares. Há disposições não só inspiradas, mas sim copiadas das santiaguistas. O rei Jaime II, em confirmação de Arnaldo de Amer como Mestre-Geral, afirma que as Ordens dos hospitalários, templários, calatravos e uclesenhos (São Tiago), têm regra semelhante à das Mercês (Ordem das Mercês, 1998, p. 31-32, grifo do autor).

The Order of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mercy was among the religious institutions selected by the Catholic Monarchs, Isabel and Fernando, to be sent to the Americas. One potential reason for dispatching these religious figures to the New World was their expertise in engaging with people of different faiths, particularly the Muslims of North Africa. Accompanying Columbus's second expedition in 1493 were three Mercedarian friars, four Franciscans, a hermit of Saint Jerome, and three or four clerics (Morán, 1997; Vásquez Fernández, 2006). Records from the Archivo Sevillano de Indias document the establishment of a Mercedarian monastery in Santo Domingo on July 15, 1514 (Vásquez Fernández, 2006).

According to Morán (1992), the presence of the Mercedarian Order began gradually, with an initial phase from 1493 to 1508, followed by a second phase from 1508 to 1520, during which the Order consolidated and expanded. The Mercedarian friars accompanied the conquerors in their campaigns across Mexico, Central America, and Peru, traveling alongside figures like Pizarro and Cortés throughout Spanish territories. Beginning in Nicaragua (1527), they initiated missionary activities in Central America. Later, in 1536, they established a convent in Guatemala, creating a second focal point. With the conquest of Peru (1531-1533), the third phase of the Order's expansion in South America commenced, leading to a permanent settlement in Quito. The Order successfully maintained its presence across this vast region until approximately 1771, when a royal decree mandated the closure of convents, monasteries, and religious houses with fewer than eight members.

According to the research conducted by Román-Álvarez (1990), 327 Mercedarians traveled to the Americas during the 16th century, between 1494 and 1600. His findings indicate that the majority were directed to Peru (150) and its provinces. Others were dispatched to Guatemala (73) and Santo Domingo (50), while only a few initially went to Mexico (12) and the Río de la Plata region (15). In his study, Román-Álvarez considered only those religious figures whose names and motivations for traveling to the Americas were documented, although it is understood that the actual number was likely higher. The establishment of the Mercedarians in New Spain occurred relatively late; however, they were pioneers in Peru and Guatemala. The expeditions are distributed throughout the century, from the 1530s to 1600.

In the Spanish-controlled regions of South America, the Mercedarians established the following provinces: Guatemala in 1564; Los Reyes or Lima in 1564; Chile in 1566; Tucumán and Río de la Plata in 1593; the Antilles and Venezuela in 1604; Quito in 1615; and Mexico in 1616 (Morán, 1992).

At the General Chapter held in Huete in 1686, the Mercedarian Order recognized the need to organize a new legislative code, one that was more up-to-date and better structured. Pope Innocent XI, through the bull *Militantis ecclesiae* issued on May 15, 1687, granted the Mercedarians full authority to reform their laws in both form and substance. A commission was appointed to undertake this codification, and by the end of 1691, it was able to present the text of the new Constitutions to the Apostolic See. Pope Innocent XII formally approved them through the bull *Ex innuncto nobis divinus* on September 7, 1691, with the new Constitutions coming into effect in 1692. These Constitutions, often referred to as the *Constitutions Matritenses* due to their place of publication, were divided into eight distinctions or sections. Each distinction comprised several chapters, which were further subdivided into articles addressing the various aspects of the Order's life and governance. Notably, these Constitutions introduced some entirely new provisions. "The most significant innovation is the sixth distinction: 'the exercise and profession of letters'" (Order of Mercy, 1998, p. 176, author's emphasis).

The Order of Mercy had long enjoyed the privileges associated with mendicant orders, which were granted by various pontiffs over time. Emerging in the 13th century, mendicant orders were characterized by rules that emphasized strict poverty, applicable not only to individual members but also to the convents and the institutions themselves. These orders sustained themselves through alms solicited from their followers, embodying the evangelical ideal of poverty. The earliest mendicant orders included the Carmelites, Franciscans, Dominicans, and Augustinians. The Trinitarians, a redemptive brotherhood, dedicated one-third of the alms they received to the redemption of captives. However, it was Pope Benedict XIII who formally recognized the Mercedarian Order as both mendicant and redemptive through the bull *Aeternus Aeterni Patris* on July 8, 1725, acknowledging that from its inception, the Order had possessed property specifically designated for the ransom of captives.

In 1770, the Order of Mercy was comprised of:

[...] 229 convents with 4,495 religious members in the following provinces: Aragon 27 convents and 590 religious members, Castile 20 convents and 589 religious members, Valencia 15 convents and 430 religious members,

Andalusia 22 convents and 705 religious members, France 16 convents and 81 religious members, Paris 3 convents and 23 religious members, Italy 7 convents and 75 religious members, Sardinia 5 convents and 70 religious members, Mexico 20 convents and 427 religious members, Santo Domingo 7 convents and 148 religious members, Guatemala 17 convents and 161 religious members, Quito 10 convents and 145 religious members, Lima 15 convents and 271 religious members, Cuzco 12 convents and 310 religious members, Tucumán 12 convents and 227 religious members, Chile 16 convents and 174 religious members, Maranhão 6 convents and 70 religious members (Order of Mercy, 1998, p. 178)<sup>5</sup>.

The Mercedarian Order shared the Amazonian region with other religious orders, including the Jesuits, Franciscans, and Carmelites. Their activities, conducted within territories delineated by the Iberian crowns, undoubtedly reflect distinct characteristics, even as they undertook tasks that were common to all religious orders. Grounded in this understanding, the current research in the field of education holds significant relevance for a deeper exploration of the educational legacy bequeathed by the Mercedarians in the region.

## Circumstances surrounding the arrival of the first mercedarians in Belém do Pará

The arrival of the first Mercedarian friars in the Amazon in 1639 was marked by a series of significant historical events with international ramifications that involved not only Portugal but also other European nations. The conquest and occupation of the Amazon region commenced during the reign of Felipes, a period characterized by the Iberian Union. As noted by Boxer (1969, p. 118), “[...] the Iberian colonial empire, which lasted from 1580 to 1640 and extended from Macau in China to Potosi in Peru, was the first global empire where the sun never set.”

France, England, and the Netherlands resisted the expanding ambitions of the unified Iberian Crown. The Dutch invasion of northeastern Brazil, coupled with attacks on Portuguese possessions along the African coast and in the East, along with incursions by the English and French throughout the empire, precipitated a decline in the prices of sugar, drugs, and spices, which were increasingly arriving in significant quantities at Le Havre, London, and Amsterdam. More critically, these events severely impacted the supply of enslaved people (Teixeira da Silva, 2016).

In the Americas, English, French, and Dutch merchants posed significant threats to Iberian occupation of the region (Wehling, 1999). They began investing in the occupation of territories in the Caribbean Sea and the northern regions of the South American continent, particularly between the deltas of the Orinoco River in present-day Venezuela and the Amazon River. The presence of these foreign powers impeded Madrid's efforts to consolidate its coastal colonial borders (Mauro, 1991).

It is noted that in 1604, Daniel de La Touche, Lord of la Ravardière—who would later command the French expedition in 1612 with the objective of establishing what became known as French Equinox in Maranhão—explored the coasts of Guiana in collaboration with the navigator Jean Mocquet. After surveying the coastline and navigating the Oiapoque and Cayenne rivers, he returned to his homeland (Azevedo, 1893).

In March 1612, a new expedition led by Daniel de La Touche set sail from France, this time destined for Maranhão. By this point, the intrepid explorer had acquired sufficient intelligence to abandon his plans for occupying Guiana in favor of Maranhão, a territory that was undeniably more fertile and conducive to colonization. He obtained a royal patent in October 1610, granting him the authority to establish a colony south of the equatorial line (Azevedo, 1893).

It is likely that his plans were delayed due to the death of King Henry IV in 1610. Nevertheless, the maritime venture attracted the interest of Calvinist investors, including the banker Nicolau de Harley and François de Rasily, who, in collaboration with the French Crown, financed the undertaking. In March 1612, approximately five hundred colonists embarked from the port of Cancale in Brittany aboard three ships, under the command of Daniel de La Touche. On September 8, 1612, Capuchin Franciscans accompanying the French expedition celebrated the first mass, after which the colonists began constructing a fort on the island designated for settlement. This fort, named São Luís, was established in honor of the sovereign, Louis XIII of France (1610-1643).

Upon their arrival in Madrid, news of the French incursion in 1613 prompted King Philip III of Spain—who was also Philip II of Portugal—to instruct the governor of Brazil, Gaspar de Sousa, to establish a presence in

<sup>5</sup> [...] 229 conventos com 4.495 religiosos, nas seguintes províncias: Aragão 27 conventos e 590 religiosos, Castela 20 conventos e 589 religiosos, Valência 15 conventos e 430 religiosos, Andalusia 22 conventos e 705 religiosos, França 16 conventos e 81 religiosos, Paris 3 conventos e 23 religiosos, Itália 7 conventos e 75 religiosos, Sardenha 5 conventos e 70 religiosos, México 20 conventos e 427 religiosos, Santo Domingo 7 conventos e 148 religiosos, Guatemala 17 conventos e 161 religiosos, Quito 10 conventos e 145 religiosos, Lima 15 conventos e 271 religiosos, Cuzco 12 conventos e 310 religiosos, Tucumán 12 conventos e 227 religiosos, Chile 16 conventos e 174 religiosos, Maranhão 6 conventos e 70 religiosos (Ordem das Mercês, 1998, p. 178).

Olinda. This move was intended to strengthen oversight and command of initiatives aimed at expelling the invaders and advancing the exploration and conquest of the region broadly referred to as the "land of the River Amazon."

After the military actions culminated in the Battle of Guaxenduba in November 1614, a truce of nearly one year was established between the Portuguese and the French. However, King Philip III, during negotiations with the King of France, championed Portuguese interests and refused to cede São Luís. In November 1615, the French were definitively expelled and returned to France.

The failure to establish French Equinox in Maranhão did not deter the French from pursuing their ambitions in other geographical regions, now extending further north between the Amazon River and the Orinoco River. In 1626, they made an initial attempt at colonization along the Sinnamary River. By 1634, they founded the city of Caiena, located north of Amapá in present-day French Guiana. From the port of Caiena, the French began their incursions along the southern coast, seeking to secure a foothold at the delta of the Amazon River. However, they were not alone in their aspirations; the English and Dutch were also vying for control of the same territories and attempting to establish a presence in the Amazon River valley.

The riverine connection between the mouth of the Amazon River, situated in the Atlantic, and the Andes posed a substantial threat to the silver mines in Peru (Teixeira da Silva, 2016). This represented a significant danger to the security of the Spanish colonial empire in the Americas. Control of the Amazon River's mouth was crucial for expelling invaders and curtailing the encroachment of foreign competitors. Consequently, the conquest and colonization of Maranhão emerged as a pivotal colonial policy for Philip III of Spain, necessitating the delegation of military responsibilities to the Portuguese.

Given the permeability of the borders between the Portuguese and Spanish Americas, the dividing line established by the Treaty of Tordesillas seemed to lose its significance during the politically unified period of the Iberian Union. To some extent, both Portuguese and Spanish actors operated within a shared colonial space; however, this coexistence did not necessarily result in a peaceful resolution of the competing interests of both nations.

In the context of the Amazon, a mutually beneficial arrangement emerged. The government in Madrid, lacking more effective means to expel foreign intruders, secure territorial dominance, and safeguard its threatened interests, increasingly relied on the Portuguese, granting them the authority to advance deeper into the continent. In turn, the Portuguese were diligent in fulfilling the royal mandates for the exploration and penetration of the Amazon basin, a pursuit that significantly advanced their own interests.

According to the Treaty of Tordesillas, the line of separation between the two crowns passed through the estuary, or very close to Belém. For the sake of facilitating the development of the territory, the Portuguese acted in a common interest with the Castilians, which is why Portugal was under the dominion of Spain. This situation led the Portuguese nation, which maintained its traditions, customs, and a certain degree of autonomy, to strive to decipher the mystery that lay upstream and to take possession of the lands in the name of Spain for Portugal. After gaining independence, the explored and conquered territories were incorporated into the Portuguese heritage (Jobim, 1957, p. 26)<sup>6</sup>.

The founding of Belém, following the conquest of São Luís and under the express orders of the King, was a pivotal act that legitimized the expansion of Portuguese territorial claims in the Amazon. According to Caio Prado Júnior (1971), the establishment of Belém in 1616 was primarily motivated by political and strategic considerations aimed at exerting control over the vast Amazon region. The creation of an urban center was intended to serve as a landmark of possession and a defensive bastion for the immense Amazon basin against foreign incursions. The construction of the Forte do Presépio, which constituted the original nucleus of the city of Belém, was crucial to achieving this objective. As a result, a gradual penetration into the intricate Amazonian hydrographic network began.

In 1621, as part of broader initiatives for the conquest and occupation of the Amazon, Felipe III of Spain established the State of Maranhão, an autonomous entity that was politically independent from the State of Brazil, with its government based in São Luís and directly accountable to the Metropolis. This new state extended from the Oiapoque River to Cape São Roque, encompassing the captaincies of Pará, Cumã, Maranhão, and Ceará (Loureiro, 1978). Cape do Norte, referred to by the French as Cape D'Orange, which corresponds to present-day Amapá, was an area that remained largely unexplored by the Portuguese at the time of the establishment of Maranhão and was occupied by English, Dutch, and French forces. One of the

<sup>6</sup> Pelo Tratado de Tordesillas a linha de separação das duas coroas passava pelo estuário, ou muito próximo de Belém. Para maior facilidade do desenvolvimento do território os portugueses agiam em interesse comum com os castelhanos, por isso Portugal se achava sob o domínio de Espanha. Esse fato fez com que a nação portuguesa, que mantinha as suas tradições, os seus hábitos e certa autonomia, se esforçasse em decifrar o mistério, que se encerra rio acima, e em tomar posse das terras em nome da Espanha para Portugal. Depois que alcançou a independência, os territórios explorados e conquistados ficaram incorporados ao patrimônio português (Jobim, 1957, p. 26).

measures implemented to facilitate the conquest and expulsion of foreign intruders was to designate it as a private captaincy, granted to the Portuguese pioneer Bento Maciel Parente in 1637. However, this captaincy was dissolved following the death of its grantee in 1642, at which point the territory was reincorporated into the Crown and integrated into the captaincy of Pará (Handelmann, 1982).

For a more precise geographical understanding, the newly established State of Maranhão encompassed the present-day states of Ceará, Piauí, Maranhão, Pará, and portions of Amazonas and Amapá, thereby covering the entire northern coastline and nearly the entirety of the Amazon valley. In contrast, the State of Brazil was composed of the captaincies owned by the Crown, extending from Rio Grande do Norte to the captaincy of São Vicente, in addition to various private captaincies.

Consequently, this historical context provides a backdrop for the arrival of the Mercedarians in Belém, a time when the Iberian kingdoms, unified under a single monarch, were embroiled in intense political, geographical, commercial, and diplomatic disputes with various European nations.

## **The expedition of Pedro Teixeira, during which the mercedarian friars traveled from Quito to Belém**

The arrival of the Mercedarians from Quito to Belém is primarily attributed to the remarkable expedition of Pedro Teixeira to the Viceroyalty of Peru. On October 28, 1636, he departed from Belém, embarking on an exploratory journey through the Amazon rivers towards Quito, Ecuador. At the beginning of the journey, he led over 1,200 men, including soldiers, indigenous people, and settlers, not to mention the indigenous women and children who accompanied the group, all traveling in more than 50 large canoes.

Two years after his departure and having achieved the goal of reaching Quito, Pedro Teixeira returned to Belém as the greatest conqueror of the Luso-Brazilian Amazon. Had the expedition upriver not taken place, it would likely have been undertaken by the Spanish traveling downstream, as we will see later, and today's Brazilian Amazon might have been claimed by Spain.

Pedro Teixeira's expedition was itself motivated by unusual events involving Franciscan missionaries from the convent in Quito. According to Azevedo (1901), in 1636, the Franciscan friars sought to expand their spiritual influence by venturing into the region where the Napo and Aguarico rivers converge, aiming to convert more of the indigenous people known as the Encabelados<sup>7</sup> to Christianity. The Franciscan friars were accompanied by a small military escort led by Juan de Palacios. Initially, their relationship with the indigenous people was very cordial, but it soon descended into discord.

The severity of the missionaries, or, as they claimed, the violence of the soldiers, provoked the indigenous people to take up arms. Palacios, armed with a sword and shield, confronted them and was killed. The assailants vanished into the forest following a volley of musket fire. Discouraged by the resistance, the soldiers were ready to abandon their efforts, and the missionaries doubted their ability to convert the indigenous people, so they decided to seek refuge in a safer place while awaiting reinforcements. Among the armed men emerged a Portuguese adventurer named Francisco Fernandes with a remarkable proposal. He had been to Grão-Pará, which he believed could be reached by descending the Napo river. There, he had heard that these rivers could lead to El Dorado and the House of the Sun—a discovery that, if realized, would satisfy even the loftiest ambitions (Azevedo, 1901, p. 29)<sup>8</sup>.

Not everyone believed Francisco Fernandes' proposal, so some of the missionaries returned to Quito. Bernardo Pereira de Berredo (1749) does not mention Francisco Fernandes or his proposals but reports that the priestly missionaries, along with most of the soldiers, returned to Quito. Meanwhile, two lay friars and a few soldiers left Aguarico, or the River of Gold, and headed toward the Napo River. In a small canoe, they embarked downstream into the unknown, or as Berredo (1749, p. 289) put it, “[...] entrusted their fate to the rushing currents of the Amazon River.” According to Anísio Jobim (1957), this group included the two lay friars, Frei Domingos de Brieva and Frei André de Toledo, the Portuguese Francisco Fernandes, who claimed to know Pará, six Spanish soldiers, and some indigenous people.

Many days later, they arrived at the fort of Gurupá<sup>9</sup>, to the surprise of the Portuguese.

<sup>7</sup> According to Azevedo (1901, p. 29), “[...] the ‘espíndões’ referred to this nation in this way because of the custom among both men and women of letting their hair grow so long that it fell below their knees”.

<sup>8</sup> Severidades dos missionários, ou, como allegam estes, violencias dos soldados, levantaram os índios em armas. Saiu-lhes ao encontro Palacios, de espada e rodella, e foi morto por elles. Varridos por uma descarga de arcabuzes, sumiram-se os matadores nos bosques. Mas já os militares desanimavam da resistencia e os religiosos da conversão; por isso decidiram refugiar-se em logar mais seguro, enquanto aguardavam soccorros. Da gente armada sae então um aventureiro portuguez, de nome Francisco Fernandes, com extranhas propostas. Estivera no Grão-Pará, onde, a seu ver, se iria dar, baixando pelo Napo. Lá colhera noticia de que, por aquelles rios, se encontrava o El-Dorado, e a Casa do Sol; descoberta que, realizada, satisfaria as ambições mais intensas (Azevedo, 1901, p. 29).

<sup>9</sup> Gurupá is located in the northeast of Pará, in the physiographic zone of Marajó and the islands, and it was the most advanced Portuguese outpost in the region

Starving, semi-naked, and hypnotized by the terror of the wild, they could barely articulate where they had come from or which lands they had traversed. Lost in the immense solitude and astonished by the vastness of the waters, at times as tumultuous as the ocean, they feared any disastrous encounter with indomitable tribes and considered their survival miraculous (Azevedo, 1901, p. 30)<sup>10</sup>.

The friars recounted that before finding safety, they estimated they had traveled two hundred leagues when they stumbled upon a new, densely populated region inhabited by Omaguá Indians. These natives, being friendly, provided them with provisions. As they continued to journey down the mighty waters, "[...] they did not see El Dorado nor the House of the Sun, but at the mouth of the Tapajós, they were met by fierce Indians who stripped them of everything they carried. Still shaken by the ordeal, they received, as a blessing from heaven, the hospitality of the Portuguese [...]" Azevedo concludes (1901, p. 30).

The travelers were taken to São Luís, where Governor Jacome Raymundo de Noronha resided. After hearing the fugitives' accounts, he felt compelled to undertake a thorough exploration of the river, as the court had repeatedly advised him to do. One of the friars departed for Europe to report the events to the government, while the other, Frei Domingos de Brieva, remained to serve as a guide for the planned expedition to be led by Captain Pedro Teixeira.

Azevedo (1901) reports that

[...] A forty-seven canoes was prepared, most of them large, with over sixty Portuguese soldiers and twelve hundred indigenous rowers and warriors manning them. Including women and children, the total number of people reached two thousand five hundred (Azevedo, 1901, p. 31)<sup>11</sup>.

The objective was to retrace the route back to Quito. From Gurupá, where all units of the expedition gathered, they set off on October 17, 1637. The journey was not easy. Starting with the friar and other recently arrived Spanish soldiers, who were not actually excellent guides. However, the sharpness of Pedro Teixeira and the efforts of his assistants compensated for the inadequacies of these makeshift pilots. As the journey progressed, the loyalty of the indigenous members of the expedition waned. The work was arduous, the hardships were constant, and the uncertainty of the venture dampened spirits. In truth, as Azevedo (1901, p. 32) states, "[...] the indigenous people were there only by force. [...] Many were struck down by illness, with a significant number succumbing; among those who remained healthy, desertions were a daily occurrence".

After almost ten months, on August 15, 1638, Pedro Teixeira arrived at the Payamino River, a tributary of the Napo. From there, he traveled overland towards Quito. The arrival of the travelers in the city caused a great stir, and there was no less astonishment at the return of the Franciscan friar Frei Domingos de Brieva, whom everyone had presumed dead. The most distinguished people of Quito came to greet Pedro Teixeira. The governor was informed in Lima, and they were provided with the itinerary of the journey and a map of the river, which was renamed São Francisco de Quito "[...] because the new discovery was attributed to the Seraphic Order; and because from the city the waters (as the navigators believed) flowed directly to the sea (Azevedo, 1901, p. 33).

According to Berredo (1749), Pedro Teixeira departed Quito on February 16, 1639, and arrived in Belém on December 12, 1639. On his journey downstream, he founded the settlement of 'La Franciscana' in honor of the Franciscan missionaries who had worked in that region, located twenty leagues downriver from the Aguarico, also known as the River of Gold. Berredo (1749) transcribes the act of possession recorded in the official books of the Provedoria of Belém do Pará and the Municipal Senate, dated August 16, 1639. The milestone established by Pedro Teixeira in La Franciscana facilitated the expansion of Portuguese territory in the Amazon and its subsequent legitimization. The Treaties of Madrid (1750) and Santo Ildefonso (1777) recognized that a substantial part of the Amazon was under Portuguese dominion.

The Castilian authorities of the Viceroyalty of Peru feared that the Dutch, who were threatening Maranhão and the Brazilian coast, might similarly navigate upriver like the Portuguese. By an order dated November 10, the Viceroy instructed that the Portuguese fleet be abundantly supplied with war munitions and return to Pará along the same route. It was to be accompanied by two witnesses selected "[...] from among those of best repute so that, as eyewitnesses, their reports might garner full credibility at the Court of Madrid." (Berredo, 1749, p. 290).

<sup>10</sup> Famintos, semi-nús, hypnotizados pelo terror dos selvagens, mal sabiam dizer por onde vinham, que terras tinham atravessado. Perdidos na solidão imensa, assombrados do volume das águas, por vezes agitadas como as do oceano, receosos de algum encontro funesto com tribus indomitãs, consideravam milagroso o salvamento (Azevedo, 1901, p. 30).

<sup>11</sup> [...] preparou-se uma armada de quarenta e sete canoas, a maior parte de grande porte; mil e duzentos índios de remo e peleja, mais de sessenta soldados portugueses, as guarneciam; contando as mulheres e crianças, ascendia o numero total a duas mil e quinhentas almas (Azevedo, 1901, p. 31).



The decision regarding who would accompany the return of Pedro Teixeira's expedition as witnesses was prolonged and surrounded by controversy. To the scandal of the Franciscans, two priests from the Society of Jesus were chosen as the witnesses to accompany Pedro Teixeira. This is how Azevedo reports it (1901):

We must not forget the comedic interlude of the journey: the dispute between the Franciscans and Jesuits over the honor and benefits of the discovery. The instructions of the Viceroy included sending people of sufficient authority and learning to the court in Madrid who, by accompanying the expedition downstream, would serve as overseers. The most qualified people from the district offered themselves for the role; the Franciscans claimed it for themselves on acquired rights, but the Jesuits seized the victory. To the great scandal of the lesser friars, the Royal Academy of Quito chose Fathers André de Artieda and Christovam de Acuña<sup>12</sup> of the Society of Jesus for the honorable mission. [...] However, the main character of the expedition gained little glory from it. The Jesuits' name overshadowed that of Pedro Teixeira in the memory of posterity; the lay Franciscans disappeared; no one knows of the soldier Francisco Fernandes, who had the fortunate idea of imitating Pizarro's deserter. The river itself lost its temporary name, which recalled an event involving the Seraphic Order. Christovam de Acuña did not dismiss the legend of the Amazons; on the contrary, he strengthened it with new testimony<sup>13</sup> (Azevedo, 1901, p. 33-34).

As is well known, Father Christoval de Acuña, when publishing his account titled "Nuevo Descubrimiento Del Gran Río de Las Amazonas" in Madrid in 1641, constructed a narrative that—while providing valuable details about Pedro Teixeira's journey, which will serve as a primary source for authors such as Berredo and Azevedo, quoted frequently here—assumes the prerogative of an eyewitness to history in order to obscure and reshape the facts with the clear aim of highlighting the glories of the Society of Jesus.

Finally, without much fanfare, it is Berredo who announces that, in addition to the priests of the Society of Jesus, four Mercedarian friars accompanied Pedro Teixeira's new expedition on its return to Belém:

[...] Fathers Fr. Pedro de la Rua Cirne, Fr. João da Merce, and Fr. Diogo da Conceição, along with their Superior, Fr. Affonso de Armejo, were religious of the Calced Order of Nossa Senhora das Mercês. After the death of the last one, as well as one of the companions along the same route, Fr. Pedro later became the founder of the cities of Belém do Pará and São Luís do Maranhão (Berredo, 1749, p. 294)<sup>14</sup>.

Father Acuña does not write a single line about the Mercedarian friars who traveled with him to Belém.

Seeing the great veneration enjoyed by the Order of Nossa Senhora das Mercês in Quito, due to the Mercedarians being the first propagators of the faith, Pedro Teixeira wished to take relics of the Order with him to Belém, where he believed the friars could establish a convent. On January 24, 1639, Pedro Teixeira formalized his request to the Provincial of the Order of Mercy that the friars be allowed to serve in the much-needed missionary work in Grão-Pará. This request is transcribed in the manuscript titled *News of the foundation of the convent of Blessed Virgin Mary of Mercy in the city of Santa Maria de Belém do Grão-Pará*, which includes the discovery of the Amazon River and other information about the founding of the villages along the Rio Negro by the first members of the congregation (Document 18, 1784). This document, consisting of 21 double sheets, is dated in Belém in the year 1784 and is kept at the National Library in Rio de Janeiro:

Pedro, captain major of Infantry, and discoverer by His Majesty, and captain major of the Portuguese fleet with the authority of Governor, and special captain general by commission of Governor and Captain General Jacome Raymundo de Noronha, to conduct the discovery and all else deemed necessary for the service of God, His Majesty, and the conversion of the Gentiles, and the expansion of that conquest, along with the other officials and captains of his Company and those assisting him, and signed below, request Your Most Reverend Excellency, out of the affection and devotion we hold for the sacred religion of Blessed Virgin of Mary of Mercy, Redemption of Captives, to be so kind as to provide us with religious men who might establish a convent of said Order in our City of Belém, located in Grão-Pará. We hope for great fruit in God and His Most Holy Mother, to be manifested in the souls of the inhabitants of this City and in the conversion of the Gentiles, of whom there is a significant number perishing for lack of doctrine. They have long awaited, through the mercy of God and His Ministers, for this purpose we obligate ourselves and offer a site for the aforementioned foundation, as well as land for all kinds of farming, and livestock

<sup>12</sup> Berredo, instead of Acuña, spells the Jesuit priest's surname as de Cunha. In the Jesuit priest's original work, "Nuevo Descubrimiento Del Gran Río de Las Amazonas," the author's name is spelled Christoval de Acuña

<sup>13</sup> Não devemos esquecer o intermedio comico da viagem: a disputa entre franciscanos e jesuítas, pela honra e proveitos da descoberta. Entrava nas instruções do vice-rei o mandarem-se á côrte de Madrid pessoas de autoridade e letras bastantes que; acompanhando a expedição na baixada, servissem de fiscaes. Offereciam-se para o encargo pessoas das mais qualificadas do districto; com direitos adquiridos requériam para si os franciscanos; mas pertenceu a palma aos jesuítas. Com grande escandalo dos frades menores, a Real Academia de Quito elegeru para a honrosa missão os padres André de Artieda e Christovam de Acuña<sup>13</sup> da Companhia. [...] Não obstante, escassa gloria adquiriu para si a principal personagem della. O nome do jesuita sobrepoz-se ao de Pedro Teixeira na memoria da posteridade; os leigos franciscanos desapareceram; do soldado Francisco Fernandes, que teve a afortunada idéa de imitar o desertor de Pizarro, ninguém sabe. O proprio rio perdeu a denominação passageira, que recordava um facto, em que tomara parte a gente seraphica. Christovam de Acuña não desprezou a lenda das amazonas; avigorou-a, pelo contrario, com testemunho novo (Azevedo, 1901, p. 33-34).

<sup>14</sup> [...] Padres Fr. Pedro de la Rua Cirne, Fr. João da Merce, e Fr. Diogo da Conceição, e Superior dos tres Fr. Affonso de Armejo, Religiosos da Ordem Calçada de Nossa Senhora das Mercês; dos quaes morrendo o ultimo, e hum dos Companheiros no mesmo caminho, foy depois Fr. Pedro o seu Fundador nas Cidades de Belem do Pará, e S. Luiz do Maranhão (Berredo, 1749, p. 294).

for the sustenance of this convent. Regarding the site and land, we will immediately prepare documents to demonstrate our willingness and devotion. Therefore, we kindly ask Your Most Reverend Excellency to grant us the religious men we requested for the aforementioned purpose, and we trust that we will receive charity in this matter, as we rely on Your Most Reverend Excellency's goodwill and support in the spirit of Christendom and Religion (Document 18, 1784, p. 2-3)<sup>15</sup>.

The same manuscript also records the prompt response, dated the same day, in which Frei Francisco Muñoz de Baana, Provincial Vicar of the Province of Nossa Senhora das Mercês, expresses gratitude and positively affirms Pedro Teixeira's request. Accompanying him were two ordained friars and two lay friars.

Pedro Teixeira made an invaluable contribution to securing the vast Amazon Basin for Portugal. Teixeira was appointed to the position of captain major of Grão-Pará, taking office in February 1640; however, he held this position for only a short time, until May 1641. On July 4 of that same year, he passed away in Belém, the city he helped to found.

The Order of Nossa Senhora das Mercês, of Spanish origin, had been active in the Viceroyalty of Peru since the 16th century. Pedro de la Rua Cirne and his companions established the first Mercedarian convent in the Amazon in Belém in 1640.

The main activities of the Mercedarians in the territory of the former province of Maranhão and Grão-Pará were missions and doctrinal centers, distributed along the Negro and Urubu Rivers. The Mercedarian Order had three convents in Maranhão by 1751; in 1660, it founded the Saracá mission, which later became the town of Silves, considered the oldest settlement in the present state of Amazonas; and, in 1663, it founded the missions of São Pedro Nolasco and São Raimundo Nonato, both located on the Urubu River (Rezende, 2006).

## The convent

As mentioned in the Introduction, the initial construction of the Church and Convent of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mercy in Belém began in March 1640, just a few months after the Mercedarian religious arrived in Belém from Quito in 1639.

Regarding the founding of the Convent, one must again refer to the manuscript titled *News of the foundation of the convent of Blessed Virgin Mary of Mercy in the city of Santa Maria de Belém do Grão-Pará*." (Documento 18, 1784).

Another important reference is the work by Eugênio Ferraz, in its second revised and expanded edition, published in 2000, titled "Convento dos Mercedários de Belém do Pará: Breve histórico de sua recuperação.

The Mercedarians began their work by building a hospice with a chapel. They received from the land donor, Mateos Cabral, "[...] seven cows, to start their herd" (Ferraz, 2000, p. 37). Indeed, these seven cows multiplied into a large herd, as the Order eventually became the owner of several cattle ranches. By the late 1600s, they already owned small farms on the outskirts of the city, including the Val-de-Cães farm, where the Belém International Airport is now located, as well as properties on Joannes Island, now Marajó, which were donated to the religious order by the Baron of Ilha Grande de Joannes in 1696 and 1726. Over time, their cattle-raising activities made them quite prosperous, creating a favorable situation for undertaking new construction in 1748 to expand the church and convent.

According to studies by Luiz Mott (2009), which draw on previously unpublished documentation, he revises a long-standing belief repeated by many researchers. The version accepted until then, which Mott challenges, claimed that the first Mercedarian constructions in Belém were initially made of wattle and daub, later enhanced with more sophisticated earthen walls. However, Mott (2009, p. 13, emphasis in original) asserts "[...] that between the original primitive wattle constructions and the monumental 18th-century buildings, there was a significant reconstruction of this Convent using 'stone and lime'." This information is important because the use of higher-quality construction materials suggests that the religious community was able to secure sufficient resources for more robust construction. This indicates that the convent became an architectural landmark of the growing city center earlier than previously thought.

<sup>15</sup> Dis Pedro Teixeira, capitam mór de Infantaria, e descobrimento por S. Mage., e capitam mór da armada Portuguesa com poder de Governador, e capitam mór general particular por comissão do Governador, e capitam general Jacome Raymundo de Noronha, para fazer nesta occasião o descobrimento e tudo o mais que convier ao serviço de Deos, S. Mage. e bem da Gentilidade e sua conversão, e augmento daquelle conquista, e os mais officiaes e capitaens da sua Companhia e com elle assistentes, e abaixo assignados. Pedimos a V.P.M.R. pelo affecto e devoção que temos a sagrada religião de Nossa Senhora das Mercês, Redempção de Captivos, seja servido darmos Religiosos para que em nossa Cidade de Bellém, cituada no Grão-Pará, possam fundar hum Convento da dita Ordem pelo grande fruto que esperamos em Deos e sua Santíssima May, que se hade fazer em Almas dos moradores da dita Cidade, e conversão da Gentilidade que ha grande numero, e perecem por falta de Doutrina que já agoardão pela mizericordia de Deos e de seus Ministros para o que nos obrigamos e offerecemos citio para a dita Fundação, e terras para todo o gênero de Lavoiras, e gado para sustento do dito Convento, e do citio e Terras faremos logo Escripturas para que se veja a nossa vontade e devoção, supposta que pedimos a V.P.M.R. com toda a efficacia seja servido concedernos os Religiosos que pedimos para o effeito sobredito que nisso recebemos caridade, como confiamos na pessoa de V.P.M.R. Christandade, e Religião sermos depachados com toda amizade e favor (Documento 18, 1784, p. 2-3).

In 1665, at the back of the convent near the Guajará Bay, the Forte de São Pedro Nolasco was built for the military protection of the city. The religious order had ceded their rights for this construction, and in return, they demanded that access to the fort be through the convent's enclosure along the riverbank, and that it be named São Pedro Nolasco in honor of the founder of the order.

Around 1790, the monumental construction of the temple and convent, which still stand today, was completed in a simple Baroque style using stone masonry. The building was designed by the Bolognese architect Antônio José Landi.

In 1794, the religious members were expelled from the province, and by 1797, the convent's premises housed the Customs Headquarters. In 1835, at the height of the Cabanagem revolt, it was used as a military arsenal. Subsequently, it served various functions, including the War Train, the Militia Barracks, the War Arsenal, the Provincial Postal Receivership, the Artillery Corps, and the Hunters Battalion. Throughout the 19th century, the church was abandoned and closed for many years, used as a storage facility and suffering from vandalism and theft of many of its works. Restoration efforts that allowed the reopening of the church in 1913 were owed to the second Archbishop of Belém do Pará, D. Santino Maria da Silva Coutinho (1868–1939). In 1978, a fire destroyed almost the entire convent, though the church was largely unaffected. By 1986, the entire complex was fully restored and designated as a heritage site by IPHAN.

In 2018, the portal.ufpa.br reported that the Federal University of Pará was authorized by the Union's Heritage Department to occupy the former building of the Mercedarian Convent. According to Professor Thais Sanjat (Federal University of Pará [UFPA], 2018), mentioned in the news article, "The choice of the Mercedarian Convent for the installation of activities was due to its architectural and cultural significance." This building, located in the Praça Barão do Rio Branco in Belém, PA, has bravely withstood the test of time and served as the backdrop for various important historical and political events in the country.

The grandeur of the civil works, carried out in successive phases of expanding the architectural complex, underscores the significant role the Order played in the Amazon. This highlights the need for further studies, particularly in the field of education, due to numerous historical testimonies regarding the friars' substantial intellectual preparation for teaching and the promotion of a cultured and literate society.

## The library

The convent library holds significance not merely due to its number of books but also because of the diversity and richness of its collection. The library, or the inventoried collection of books, includes volumes stored in the main Library of the convent, as well as those housed in the apothecary and the friars' cells, reflecting a wide range of subjects and interests.

The *Inventory* offers detailed insights into the book titles present in both the friars' cells and the convent library, as well as the number of volumes dispersed throughout the convent's different areas, along with the total collection count. The quantity of books found in various friars' cells was substantial. Fr. José Francisco de Andrade's cell contained 86 titles. Fr. João da Veiga's cell was notable for having the largest collection, with a total of 305 books, including works in Latin, Greek, French, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese. Fr. Manuel Borges had 28 works, Fr. João Jozé Craveiro had 12, and Fr. José da Costa had 59 books.

A total of more than four thousand volumes were inventoried, categorized by subject. Notable areas of focus included Dogmatic Theology, Moral Theology, Liturgy, Homiletics, Canon Law, Civil Law, Natural Law and the Cultured Nations of Europe, Natural Sciences, and Humanities. Among these, Latin was the most prevalent language.

In terms of the number of books, few convent libraries from the same period had as many works, even those in Portugal or Lisbon (Campos, 2013). The *Inventory* meticulously lists all the possessions left by the friars in the church and convent, organized by room. It provides detailed accounts not only of the books—our primary interest—but also of furniture, liturgical objects, personal belongings, and other artifacts, along with their estimated values. This document allows us to identify the book titles, the number of copies, and the languages in which they were written. The source is available for consultation in physical form and is in good condition, though there are no microfilm or digital versions. However, the document has been photographed in full, which greatly facilitates access to the necessary information for research development.

Arthur Cezar Ferreira Reis, a historian and former governor of Amazonas, drawing on information he obtained from the catalog of the convent library located in the Pará Library and Archive, which we believe holds content similar to what is found in the *Inventory*, asserts:

The Mercedarians distinguished themselves as educators. The house in Quito was one of the great centers of intellectual work in the neighboring kingdom. In Belém, not forgetting their spiritual occupation, in addition to the 'preachings and confessions' they engaged in, they opened schools for the children of settlers, termed novices, teaching 'good manners and Latin.' [...] Regarding the education of the youth, the Mercedarians, continuing the task that had marked the beginnings of their activity in the far north, transformed the convent in Belém into a major center of learning, where young men from Pará had access to an excellent library that included fields such as History, Geography, Natural Sciences, Philosophy, Theology, Canon Law, and Latin Studies. French, Latin, and Portuguese classics were also present. There were several hundred volumes, in addition to what was found in each religious's cell. In summary, it was a magnificent sector of high culture that dignified the Amazon (Reis, 1942, pp. 30 and 33, author's emphasis)<sup>16</sup>.

Emílio Castro (1968), an important scholar of the history of the Mercedarian Order in Brazil, confirms the commendable references regarding the qualities of the apostolic and educational activities carried out by the Mercedarians in the Amazon.

In addition to the Missions and Doctrinal Centers, the Mercedarians of Grão-Pará dedicated themselves with tireless effort to the education of youth, a mission for which they were exceptionally well-prepared, as they came from Ecuador, where the Mercedarian Order had reached a high level of culture (Castro, 1968, p. 29)<sup>17</sup>.

The high cultural and educational standards of these religious figures, as highlighted in the two preceding references, can be attributed to their origins in Quito, where they participated in Pedro Teixeira's expedition. Their mission was to mitigate the shortage of priests and religious assistance in the province of Maranhão, a challenge exacerbated by the Dutch blockade during their conflict with Spain, whose Crown controlled all of Brazil during the period of the Iberian Union. In Quito, the Mercedarian friars were renowned for their exemplary education and held in high esteem, significantly contributing to the advancement of culture and education in that Spanish Vice-Kingdom.

The examination of the index of books listed in the Inventory does not allow us to definitively conclude that the works collected and cataloged were subjects of substantial reading by the friars, as a direct correlation between book possession and actual reading is not always established. It is also essential to consider that there is no information regarding the size and contents of the convent's collection prior to the assets recorded in the Inventory. Given the value of such items at the time, one cannot dismiss the possibility that the collection may have been larger, and that some books could have been lost or misallocated by third parties. At this point, we can only confidently assert that we are dealing with works that were accessible for reading in the common library and, at times, in the friars' cells. This close proximity may indicate a more intimate and affectionate relationship with the books. Nevertheless, the collection described in the estate of the Convento das Mercês de Belém provides valuable insights into how the library supported the missionary functions of preaching, soul healing, education, and teaching carried out by the members of the order in that independent state of the Amazon.

From the perspective of Library Science, Parada (2011) asserts that it is possible to study how the convent library contributes to the attainment of institutional objectives.

In our context, therefore, the library becomes the place where the friars go to seek the tools, primarily the books, that should provide the intellectual support for their own learning and for their clerical profession. It is here that the importance of the library lies, understood as a location that holds one of the most precious treasures of the convent: the books. The conventual library serves an essential role in providing spiritual and intellectual support to the members of the institution in order to better contribute to the development of their talents and to ensure the excellent performance of the tasks entrusted to them. The library is not substantive; it does not exist on its own, but rather 's a function' of the institution to which it belongs<sup>18</sup> (Parada, 2011, p. 59, our translation ).<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Os mercedários distinguíam-se como educadores. A casa de Quito era um dos grandes centros de trabalho cerebral do Reino Vizinho. Em Belém, não esquecendo essa ocupação espiritual, além das 'pregações e confissões' a que se entregaram, abriram escolas para os filhos dos colonos, a título de noviços, ensinando 'bons costumes e latim'. [...] No tocante à educação da mocidade, os Mercedários, prosseguindo na tarefa que lhes tinha marcado os começos da atividade no extremo-norte, transformaram o convento de Belém num grande centro de ensino, onde estudaram os moços paraenses que ali dispunham de uma ótima biblioteca, compreendendo os campos da História, da Geografia, das Ciências Naturais, da Filosofia, da Teologia, do Direito Canônico, das Latinidades. Os clássicos franceses, latinos e lusitanos estavam presentes. Algumas centenas de volumes, além do que constava na cela de cada religioso. Um setor magnífico, enfim, de alta cultura, que dignificava a Amazônia (Reis, 1942, p. 30 e 33, grifo do autor)

<sup>17</sup> Além das Missões e Núcleos Doutrinários os mercedários do Grão-Pará se dedicaram com infatigável porfia à educação da juventude, missão para qual estavam excelentemente preparados, já que provinham do Equador, onde a Ordem Mercedária tinha alcançado um elevado nível de cultura (Castro, 1968, p. 29)

<sup>18</sup> Em nosso contexto, portanto, a biblioteca torna-se o lugar onde os frades vão buscar as ferramentas, principalmente os livros, que devem dar cobertura intelectual à sua própria aprendizagem e ao próprio exercício da profissão clerical. É aqui que reside a importância da biblioteca, entendida como local que guarda um dos mais preciosos tesouros do convento, os livros. A biblioteca conventual é um local que desempenha uma função essencial de apoio e apoio espiritual e intelectual aos membros da instituição de forma a melhor contribuir para o desenvolvimento dos seus talentos e como garantia do excelente desempenho das tarefas que lhes são confiadas. A biblioteca não é substantiva, não existe por si mesma, mas 'é uma função' da instituição a que pertence (Parada, 2011, p. 59, tradução nossa)

<sup>19</sup> Our translation of Parada's texts from Spanish to Portuguese: "En nuestro contexto, por tanto, la biblioteca pasa a ser el lugar al que los frailes van a buscar los útiles, mayoritariamente libros, que han de dar cobertura intelectual a su propio aprendizaje y al ejercicio mismo de la profesión clerical. Aquí radica la importancia de la biblioteca entendida

The 'function of the book' within the convent, as articulated by Parada (2011), is invariably linked to the mission and responsibilities of the religious order. Ultimately, it is intended to deepen one's own faith and to reinforce the faith of the church members.

In general, the book is an instrument for devotion, for mental and individual prayer, and for collective reading; a tool that supports the intellectual formation of the religious and ensures better preparation for the exercise of the apostolate; it also becomes the foundational memory and the rule, as well as one of the supreme arguments of authority and the basis for teaching and research tasks<sup>20</sup> (Parada, 2011, p. 72, our translation).<sup>21</sup>

Parada posits that the establishment of a convent library, from its inception, is purposefully intended to address the spiritual and pastoral needs of the religious community. Consequently, convent libraries do not house books whose purpose is not formative or aligned with their missionary endeavors. While the central theme is fundamentally religious, there are also various related disciplines, as the friar is required to undertake a wide array of educational and spiritual responsibilities. Thus, the library functions not merely as a repository of memory but as "[...] a space for a dialectical relationship between books and readers, evolving with each historical period" (Parada, 2011, p. 73).

## Final considerations

In conclusion, while not attempting to exhaust the topic, several questions remain open for exploration. What role did the convent library of the Mercedarians in Belém do Grão-Pará play in the broader context of its mission? Can this collection serve as a clear reflection of the educational content received by the friars in preparation for their missionary activities? In what ways did the bibliographic resources of the convent contribute to the formative, educational, and spiritual functions of the Order? To what extent does it enable the possibility of constructing a history of pedagogical ideas based on the presence or absence of specific authors and works? These thought-provoking questions challenge us and may guide future research based on the analysis of the collection outlined in the *Inventary*.

The Church, especially through its religious orders, maintained a monopoly on education until the late 18th century. During this time, convent libraries were the main centers of culture and intellectual formation for Brazilian youth. As the country grew wealthier, it became increasingly feasible for families to send their children to study at the University of Coimbra and a select few other European institutions.

In Brazil, following Pombal's prohibition on the establishment of new convents and the introduction of secular education through the implementation of royal classes, the role of convents in the education of intellectuals and young people diminished by the late 18th century. A series of additional restrictions imposed on religious orders during the Imperial period, such as the ban on accepting new candidates, led to their decline and near extinction. On May 19, 1835, a circular was issued banning the novitiate, which exacerbated this deterioration. Without the recruitment of new members, the existing clergy aged and gradually disappeared, leaving the remaining few unable to handle all the required duties. Convents, once centers of culture, urban expansion, and city development, no longer embodied the vitality of the past. Their role as cultural hubs began to fall into irreversible decline.

The imperial government, with the purpose of assessing the condition of the convents in the northern part of the country, sent Gonçalves Dias to undertake this task. In his account of what he found in São Luís do Maranhão, the poet reports that:

The Mercedarians once had a large and extensive library: it is recalled that some people still remember the time when, while attending school, they would go with their companions to browse the convent's library, playfully throwing books at each other, with no one intervening to put a stop to it. The books were damaged or disappeared: the remaining ones fit on three small shelves arranged on top, with no other order than the cobwebs that connect them (Moraes, 2006, p. 26)<sup>22</sup>.

como emplazamiento que custodia uno de los más preciados thesaurus del convento, los libros. La biblioteca conventual es un lugar que ejerce una función imprescindible de sostén y de apoyo espiritual e intelectual a los miembros de la institución para así mejor contribuir al desarrollo de sus talentos y como garantía del desempeño excelente de las tareas que tienen encomendadas. La biblioteca no es sustantiva, no existe por sí misma, sino que 'es en función de' la institución a la que pertenece".

<sup>20</sup> De modo geral, o livro é um instrumento para a devoção, para a oração mental e individual e para a leitura coletiva; ferramenta de apoio na formação intelectual do religioso e garante sua melhor preparação para o exercício do apostolado; torna-se também a memória fundacional e da regra e um dos argumentos de autoridade supremos, e fundamento das tarefas docentes e investigadoras (Parada, 2011, p. 72, tradução nossa)

<sup>21</sup> "En general el libro es un instrumento para la devoción, para la oración mental individual y la lectura colectiva; herramienta de apoyo en la formación intelectual del religioso y garante de su mejor preparación para el ejercicio del apostolado; deviene además la memoria fundacional y de la regla y uno de los 'argumentos de autoridad' supremos, y fundamento de las tareas docentes e investigadoras".

<sup>22</sup> As mercês tiveram em outro tempo uma grande e vasta livraria: lembram-se que ainda algumas pessoas do tempo em que, frequentando as escolas, lá iam com seus companheiros gazejar na livraria do convento e por brinquedo se atiravam com os livros uns aos outros, sem que alguém intervisse para lhes pôr cobro. Estragaram-se ou desapareceram: os que

The poet's account offers insight into the decline of the convents of various religious orders that operated during the same period and within the same geographical area. Notably, Gonçalves Dias examined the condition of the convent in São Luís do Maranhão, yet we still lack sources that provide further clarification regarding the nature of its library, beyond his testimony. Additionally, he makes no mention of the library in the convent of Belém.

The conventual libraries were plundered and disappeared by the end of the 18th century. However, dioceses equipped with libraries were established. By the early 19th century, the context had changed, and the influence of religious figures on Brazil's intellectual movement gradually diminished.

## References

- Azevedo, J. L. (1893) *Estudos da história paraense*. Belém, PA: Tavares Cardoso & Irmão.
- Azevedo, J. L. (1901). *Os jesuítas no Grão-Pará, suas missões e a colonização: bosquejo histórico com vários documentos inéditos*. Lisboa, PT: Tavares Cardoso & Irmão.
- Berredo, B. P. (1749). *Annaes historicos do Estado do Maranhão em que se da noticias do seu descobrimento, e tudo o mais que nelle tem succedido desde o anno em que foy descuberto até o de 1718*. Lisboa, PT: Officina de Francisco Luiz Ameno.
- Boxer, C. (1969). *O império colonial português (1414-1825)*. Lisboa, PT: Edições 70.
- Campos, F. M. A. S. G. (2013). *Bibliotecas de história: aspectos da posse e uso dos livros em instituições religiosas de Lisboa nos finais do século XVIII* (Tese de Doutorado em História). Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Lisboa.
- Castro, E. S. (1968). *Mercedários no Brasil ontem e hoje*. Rio de Janeiro, RJ: Imprensa Nacional.
- Documento 18. (1784). *Notícias da fundação do convento de Nossa Senhora das Mercês desta cidade de Santa Maria de Belém do Grão-Pará, onde se inclui o descobrimento do Rio das Amazonas e outras notícias mais da fundação das aldeias do rio Negro pelos primeiros religiosos da congregação* (Manuscrito, Coleção Alexandre Rodrigues Ferreira. Proveniente da Coleção Carvalho, CEHB n. 9.389. ABN v. 72, p. 118).. Belém, PA. Recuperado de [https://objdigital.bn.br/objdigital2/acervo\\_digital/div\\_manuscritos/mss1456696/mss1456696.pdf](https://objdigital.bn.br/objdigital2/acervo_digital/div_manuscritos/mss1456696/mss1456696.pdf)
- Ferraz, E. (2000). *Convento dos mercedários de Belém do Pará: breve histórico e registro de sua recuperação*. Belo Horizonte, MG: C/Arte.
- Handelmann, H. (1982). *História do Brasil*. Belo Horizonte, MG: Editora Itatiaia.
- Inventário dos bens sequestrados aos extintos religiosos mercedários na Capitania do Pará*. (1794). [Manuscrito]. Arquivo Nacional, Seção Histórica, 4A.COD.0.102.
- Jobim, A. (1957). *O Amazonas, sua história: ensaio antropogeográfico e político*. São Paulo, SP: Companhia Editora Nacional.
- Loureiro, A. J. S. (1978). *Síntese da história do Amazonas*. Manaus, AM: Editora Metro Cúbico.
- Mauro, F. (1991). *O Império Luso-Brasileiro: 1620-1750*. Lisboa, PT: Estampa.
- Moraes, R. B. (2006). *Livros e bibliotecas no Brasil colonial* (2a. ed.). Brasília, DF: Briquet Lemos.
- Morán, P. B. (1977). *El envío de misioneros a América durante la época española*. Salamanca, ES: Universidad Pontificia.
- Morán, P. B. (1992). *Religiosos en hispanoamérica*. Madrid, ES: MAPFRE.
- Mott, L. (2009). Travessuras de um frade sodomita no Convento das Mercês de Belém do Pará (1652-1658). *Revista Estudos Amazônicos*, 4(2), 11-35.
- Ordem das Mercês. (1998). *A ordem de Santa Maria das Mercês (1218-1992): síntese histórica*. Rio de Janeiro, RJ: Instituto Histórico de la Ordem de las Mercês/Vicariato da Ordem das Mercês do Brasil.
- Parada, C. R. (2011). Las bibliotecas conventuales desde la biblioteconomía: la antigua biblioteca del convento de La Merced de Barcelona *Itinerantes*. *Revista de Historia y Religión*, 1(1), 57-76.
- Prado Júnior, C. (1971). *História econômica do Brasil*. São Paulo, SP: Brasiliense.
- Reis, A. C. F. (1942). *A conquista espiritual da Amazônia*. São Paulo, SP: Escolas Profissionais Salesianas.

- Rezende, T. V. F. (2006). *A conquista e a ocupação da Amazônia brasileira no período colonial: a definição de fronteiras* [Tese de Doutorado em História]. Faculdade de Letras, Filosofia e Ciências Humanas, Universidade de São Paulo. São Paulo.
- Román-Álvarez, J. (1990). A Ordem da Misericórdia. Sua contribuição para a evangelização americana. *Evangelização e teologia na América (século XVI)*. Navarra, ES: Serviço de Publicações da Universidade de Navarra. Recuperado de <https://dadun.unav.edu/bitstream/10171/4719/1/JOSE%20ROMAN%20ALVAREZ.pdf>
- Sangenis, L. F. C., & Mianka, P. J. (2019). Presença franciscana e supremacia jesuítica no campo da História e da História da Educação na época colonial – um diagnóstico na pesquisa historiográfica a partir da análise dos CBHE da SBHE. *Revista Brasileira de História da Educação*, 19(49), 1-24.  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4025/rbhe.v19.2019.e061>
- Teixeira da Silva, F. C. (2016). A conquista e colonização da América portuguesa. In M. Y. Linhares, *História geral do Brasil* (p. 15-68). Rio de Janeiro, RJ: Elsevier.
- Universidade Federal do Pará [UFPA]. *UFPA ocupará prédio do antigo Convento Mercedários*. Recuperado de <https://www.portal.ufpa.br/index.php/ultimas-noticias2/8165-ufpa-ocupara-predio-do-antigo-convento-dos-mercedarios>
- Vásquez Fernández, L. (2006). Evangelización pacificadora de los mercedários durante la conquista del Perú: visión global en la que se señala, al final, al pacificador P. Bovadilla. *Estudios Humanísticos*, 1(5), 71-92.  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18002/ehh.v0i5.3079>
- Wehling, A. (1999). *Formação do Brasil colonial*. Rio de Janeiro, RJ: Nova Fronteira.

#### INFORMATION ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Luiz Fernando Conde Sangenis:** Doctor in Education (UFF), Full Professor at the Faculty of Teacher Education at UERJ, Coordinator of the Graduate Program in Education – Formative Processes of Social Inequalities, Leader of the International Network of Franciscan Studies in Brazil and of the Seraphicus Research Group ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2833-0365>  
E-mail: [lfsangenis@gmail.com](mailto:lfsangenis@gmail.com)

**Lucia Maria Gonçalves de Andrade:** Bachelor's Degree in Pedagogy (UERJ), former scholarship holder of the Internal Complementary Internship (UERJ), Master's degree from the Graduate Program in Education – Formative Processes of Social Inequalities, former CAPES Master's scholarship holder, member of the Seraphicus Research Group.  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5773-5903>  
E-mail: [luciamga3@gmail.com](mailto:luciamga3@gmail.com)

#### NOTE:

The authors were responsible for the conception, analysis, and interpretation of the data; writing and critical revision of the manuscript content; and for approving the final version to be published