

# DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

DA ACADEMIA REAL DAS CIÊNCIAS AO FINAL DO ESTADO NOVO

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**ABREU, João Capistrano de** (Mecejana, state of Ceará, 1853 - Rio de Janeiro, 1927)

A Brazilian historian, born in 1853 in Mecejana, state of Ceará, who died in 1927 in the city of Rio de Janeiro. He completed his studies in his home province and in Pernambuco, but did not go on to university. In Fortaleza, he took part in the "Escola Popular" [*People's School*], a positivist-inspired initiative aimed at disseminating knowledge through this perspective, and began his work in literary criticism. At the age of 22, he travelled to Rio de Janeiro with letters of recommendation from influential people from his homeland, including the already renowned novelist and politician from Ceará, José de Alencar, whom he had helped to research Ceará folklore. At the Court, he worked with the bookseller and publisher Garnier and taught at a prestigious school, *Externato Aquino* (*Aquino Day School*). In 1879, he began to work regularly in the press, initially writing literary criticism articles for the *Gazeta de Notícias* and became an employee of the National Library. In this role, he collaborated on the *Catálogo da Exposição de História do Brasil* (*Brazilian History Exhibition Catalogue*), in 1881, a monumental display of Brazilian historical documents. In recognition, he was awarded a knighthood of the Order of the Rose by the imperial government. Meanwhile, he continued his studies of languages and Brazil's history. In 1883, he applied to teach History at *Colégio Pedro II* [*Pedro II School*], a role he secured through a contest in which he stood out for the originality of his thesis. Already fully integrated into the intellectual circles of the Court, in 1887, he was elected to the *Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Brasileiro* [*Brazilian Historical and Geographical Institute*]. Alongside his teaching work, he also devoted himself to translations, such as those of the works of Wappoeus, *A terra e o homem* [*Earth and Man*], Selin, *Geografia geral do Brasil* [*General Geography of Brazil*] and Kirchhoff, *O homem e a terra* [*Man and Earth*] all from German, among other languages. At the same time, he dedicated himself to publishing historical texts, such as the *História do Brasil* [*History of Brazil*] by Friar Vicente do Salvador, in whose "Prolegomena" he introduced the author and work, published in 1889, the *Primeira Visitação do Santo Ofício às partes do Brasil* (*Confissões da Bahia*) [*First visit of the Holy Office to Brazil (Confessions of Bahia)*] published in 1922 in a limited edition, later published in 1935 by the *Sociedade Capistrano de Abreu* [*Capistrano de Abreu Society*], and the annotations to the *História Geral do Brasil* [*General History of Brazil*] by Varnhagen, among others. In 1899, when the teaching position of Brazilian History was eliminated, he was able to devote himself entirely to historical research. His favourite subjects were the discovery of Brazil, territorial expansion, the formation of social groups and communications between the different captaincies, as well as ethnographic research, including on indigenous languages. This research resulted in works published in book form, such as *O Brasil no século XVI. Estudos. A armada de D. Nuno Manuel* [*Brazil in the 16th century. Studies. The armada of Nuno Manuel*] (1880), the contest thesis, *o Descobrimento do Brasil e*



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*seu desenvolvimento no século XVI* (*the Discovery of Brazil and its development in the 16th century*) (1883) and *Capítulos de história colonial* [*Chapters of Brazil's Colonial History*] (1907). Separate works were later published in book form: *Caminhos antigos e povoamento do Brasil* [*Old paths and the settlement of Brazil*] (1st Ed. 1930), *Ensaio e Estudos* [*Essays and Studies*] (four series, published respectively in 1931, 1932, 1938 and 1976) and *Rã-Txã-Hu- Ni-Ku-i; a língua dos Caxinauás do rio Ibucuí, afluente do Muru* [*Rã-Txã-Hu- Ni-Ku-i; the language of the Caxinauás of the Ibucuí river, a tributary of the Muru*] (1941). He primarily focused on the study of colonial matters, especially those of the 16th century, with only a few of his articles addressing the Brazilian imperial period following 1822, producing no work on republican Brazil. Although he showed little interest in subjects closest to his own time, he nonetheless created a well-known timeline marking the height of imperial history, *Fases do Segundo Império* [*Phases of the Second Empire*].

Capistrano de Abreu's intellectual life and work were marked by two clear development phases. From his youth until 1883, when he defended his thesis, his preference was decidedly *scientific*. Like many of his generation, he rejected the romantic aesthetics and eclectic philosophy that had dominated Brazilian cultural life until the late 1860s, he engaged with positivism, particularly the work of Littré, as well as the writings of Taine, Buckle, Haeckel, and Spencer. He would adopt Spencer's version of evolutionism, especially in his work on *O descobrimento do Brasil e seu desenvolvimento no século XVI*. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Capistrano did not adhere to any specific doctrine. Instead, he aimed to apply multiple approaches based on the questions he was addressing at the time. This methodological eclecticism surprised many and critic Valentim Magalhães even accused him of engaging in "polygamy or polyandry of ideas". For this reason, it's more accurate to view him as a proponent of *scientifics*, as he accepted the epistemological assumptions of the doctrines regarded as scientific at the time. This included beliefs in the Newtonian common root, the pursuit of natural laws, the objectivity of scientific knowledge, and the reduction of individual and social behaviour to biological and physical categories. Grounded in this common foundation, the methodological differences stemming from various perspectives, such as positivism and evolutionism, did not interest him, as he never conformed to the limitations of any single doctrine, nor did he become a sectarian supporter of any of them. During this phase, his primary focus, as expressed in an 1874 work on "contemporary Brazilian literature", was to identify certain "fundamental laws" of Brazilian formation that would explain the development of the country's society and culture, which he perceived as reacting to the conditions of the physical and social environment. This attitude would lead to a certain degree of marginalization in an environment where intellectual life was centred around a "republic of letters" and doctrinal hubs that occasionally identified themselves as "schools" or even "sects." Despite the brilliance that Valentim Magalhães recognized in him, it reflected a broader sense of estrangement that accompanied Capistrano de Abreu's social reception throughout his life.

The thesis on the discovery of Brazil and the outlines of Brazilian society in the first century was a scientific work, predominantly, though not exclusively, influenced by Spencerian thought. Throughout the 1880s and the following decade, however, Capistrano de Abreu became aware of the fragility of the interpretations based on

scientific determinism and the reduction of history, geography, and anthropology to the *diktat* of the natural sciences. His reading of German authors in those fields and his increasingly refined knowledge of archival documentation, as well as his propensity to deny the doctrinaire spirit, led him to abandon not only characteristically positivist or Spencerian explanations, but also the entire scientific foundation. He became an author who valued a thorough study of sources regarding the topic being researched rather than relying on dogma and preconceived ideas that simply used historical documents to confirm those existing beliefs. The emphasis Capistrano placed on sources in his interpretations does not imply that he became just another scholar focused on trivial details, as another contemporary, Silvio Romero — who held a rigidly Spencerian view — accused him of being. He remained engaged with the historical issues he deemed most significant for understanding Brazil's formation, but now deriving his conclusions from a solid foundation of interpretation. This second phase, typically *hermeneutic* is reflected in his mature works, such as *Capítulos de História colonial*, book published in 1907. However, a declaration of theoretical-methodological faith is not to be expected, as would become customary in the social sciences in the latter half of the 20th century. Between the scientific thesis of 1883 and the hermeneutic book of 1907, there is a transition in which this perspective is increasingly emphasised, with the author not feeling the need to justify his new position. It simply makes this clear throughout the interpretation. He seldom made the effort to discuss it, even informally. However, in private correspondence to the historian Afonso Taunay, in 1917, he casually remarked, "I was once absolutely Spencerist; I've changed..."

While Francisco Adolfo de Varnhagen's work centred around the State as the central character, Capistrano de Abreu focused on Brazilian society. This interest was shared by the entire scientific generation and is reflected in its key figures, such as Silvio Romero, Euclides da Cunha, Joaquim Nabuco, and Rui Barbosa. After addressing the challenge of reorganising the country post-independence, including establishing the state and political framework, this generation, despite its individual differences, recognized the societal issues at hand: the end of slavery, immigration, miscegenation, and progress — a magical concept that they all regarded as the metasynthesis. From this focus on society resulted Capistrano's use of categories such as consensus, natural economy, urban economy, patriarchy, "emotion of superiority", "emotion of inferiority", "military society", and "industrial society". Initially, these concepts were influenced by pure positivist or evolutionist thought, but he later began to naturalize them whenever they were supported by documentary evidence. He also included additional categories based on his own documentary experiences, which were not merely created by him: piabirus, flags, expeditions, municipalities, crafts, and leather civilization.

The emphasis on society was complemented by another characteristic aspect of historical analysis of his time, which would soon evolve with the emergence of the university system. It pertains to the awareness of the interplay between historical and geographical factors. In Capistrano de Abreu, we can still observe the clear

complementarity between the two aspects, that the increasingly specialised approaches in European and North American universities would render airtight, separated by their respective methodologies and the strict boundaries set on topics of time and space. His awareness of geographical conditions, though not deterministic, led him to emphasise the physical location of Portugal ("destined for maritime life") and São Paulo ("driven toward the hinterland"), noting the presence of the caatinga instead of forests, which favoured cattle expansion in the northeast, and identified the segregation of three geopopulational areas in the colony — sea, forest, and hinterland. He also pointed out how the state of Maranhão was formed due to the challenges of navigation between Salvador and São Luís, among many other examples. Other anthropogeographical aspects, as he referred to them, included the Portuguese use of indigenous paths — the piabirus — and the significance of the occupation of indigenous tribes across multiple territories. To clarify this, he created a classic depiction of the indigenous population in Brazil, taking into account the distribution of the Tupi tribes and other nations, while also emphasising their relationships with the Caraíbas in the northern part of the colony. For his conclusions, he compared colonial documents with contemporary ethnographic research conducted by figures such as General Couto de Magalhães and his correspondent Karl Von den Steinen.

The interaction between space and population was crucial in his interpretations, leading to the identification of the key axes of colonization: São Vicente (with population growth extending to Rio de Janeiro, Minas Gerais, Goiás, and Mato Grosso), Bahia (extending into Piauí and Maranhão), Pernambuco (extending into Paraíba, Rio Grande do Norte, and Ceará), and Maranhão (Amazon). He regarded the settlement of the area between the São Francisco River and the Parnaíba River as "the most important issue in Brazilian history", as it facilitated the connection between the centre-north and centre-south regions of Brazil. He applied the same geo-historically inspired reasoning to the colonization of Minas Gerais, identifying the regions of Ouro Preto, Mariana-Sabará, Caeté, Serro, and Pitangui-São João D'El Rei as its regional expansion centres. However, the explanation goes beyond geographical interpretation: Capistrano examines the socioeconomic and political dimensions of territorial expansion, which leads him to view the struggle for territory as the central issue in Brazilian history, focusing on problems related to sesmarias [land distribution system] and the legitimisation of land ownership. Furthermore, particularly after studying the economics of Gustav Schmoeller, the importance of the effective occupation of the ecumene becomes clear. The economic and social influence of the sugar mills and tobacco plantations was determined by the cost of transporting their products. Outside the boundaries of this area, he noted, a "nature economy" was brewing, a problem was only solved in regions where there was good river flow or on the coastline. The author is also credited with the pioneering systematic analysis of the social and economic differences between the sugarcane and cattle-breeding regions. Here, social mobility was heightened not only due to the predominance of the cowboy's free labour but also by his material advancement, as he received calves in exchange for his work, which subsequently became new herds. The diverse dynamics of the cattle-breeding region inspired Capistrano to create one of the most vivid and well-known descriptions of the

"leather civilisation": "Leather was the door of the huts, the rough bed on the hard floor and later the bed for childbirth; leather was all the ropes, the rubber for carrying water, the mocó [pouch] or saddlebag for carrying food, the stretcher for storing clothes, the backpack to mill corn for the horses, the bridle to hold them when travelling... the clothes for entering the woods."

The distinction between the coastal region and the interior, the maritime regions and the hinterland, and the mills and cattle-breeding was a *leit-motiv* in Capistrano's interpretation. He believed that this difference reflected not only a geographical or economic divide but also significant social disparities. In maritime colonisations, he noted, there was often a shortage of women, which created challenges for family creation and morality, leading to the segregation of women — a theme that Gilberto Freire would revisit — and a lack of love in marriages. Nevertheless, he observed a distinction between families from coastal regions, which he regarded as "freer and more harmonious", and those from the interior, which he viewed as more independent, similar to the farms they owned. In any case, he did not overlook miscegenation, concubinage, and the patriarchal reality of colonial family life, which he encapsulated in a well-known formula in Brazilian historical and sociological literature: "grim father, submissive wife, oppressed children."

In contrast to other liberals like Rui Barbosa and Silvio Romero, who supported Pombal's modernisation efforts and held a distinct antipathy toward the Jesuits, the sceptical and agnostic Capistrano de Abreu had a positive view of their role in colonial history. Agreeing with the analogy that Schäffer had drawn between Calvinism and Jesuitism, he highlighted the order's economic, social, and educational contributions in Brazil, even asserting that he favoured Jesuits rather than the settlers. He consistently emphasised their role as "educators of youth" and "founders of American linguistics." In his correspondence with João Lucio de Azevedo, he emphasised the Ignatians' love for the land, stating that "the Jesuit is a patriot of the land where he works", and he did not view them as cosmopolitan, contrary to the perspective suggested by the Portuguese historian's analysis. He also recognised the strong influence of the clergy in Brazil, a Portuguese legacy that shaped the colonial mindset and would only be replaced later by the baccalaureate mindset. The population's deeply religious attitude was also reflected, as he noted, in their frequent prayers and in the attire of the master of the *casa grande* [big house], who wore multiple rosary beads and relics pinned to his clothing. Still focusing on mindsets, in his first significant work published in 1874 and set within a scientific context, he identified an "emotion of superiority" among coastal families and an "emotion of inferiority" among those in the interior. As the colony progressed, attitudes gradually reversed. In the conflicts between the *Paulistas* and the *Emboabas* over control of the mines at the beginning of the 18th century, I could already see a glimpse of this transition, where a local identity was asserted at the expense of "foreigners" — even though these "foreigners" were settlers from other captaincies rather than native Portuguese. Eighteenth-century literature, with its local themes — such as Basílio da Gama's "Uruguai" and Santa Rita Durão's "Caramuru", along with the poets from Minas Gerais — marked another step in this direction. However, only at the time of independence did Capistrano de Abreu admit a complete



perspective shift, with the "emotion of superiority" of the Brazilians over the Portuguese and the clear affirmation of a national consciousness.

He would return to the topic that earned him a teaching position at Colégio Pedro II — the discovery of Brazil — on other occasions in 1883. In 1900, in connection with the celebrations of the fourth centenary, in 1905 and 1908, in addition to references in the *Capítulos de História Colonial* and in *Caminhos Antigos e Povoamento do Brasil*. The thesis, which effectively consisted of two parts — one addressing the discovery itself and the other focusing on 16th-century Brazil — was predominantly Spencerian, particularly in the second part where Capistrano combined evolutionary categories with documentary sources. The work was an important contribution to definitively establishing the Portuguese role in the discovery, dismissing what he called French and Spanish pretensions. Although he acknowledged the Spanish chronological priority over Cabral and dismissed the French claim, he stated, "The sociological solution is different; we owe nothing to the Spanish, as they had no influence on our primitive life; they are much less relevant to our history than the French. From a sociological point of view, the Portuguese were the discoverers."

In his later studies, between 1900 and 1908, he outlined various aspects of the discovery expedition and the armadas of 1501 and 1503, which Varnhagen had left unresolved. Therefore, Brazilian historiography is built upon the early research of Varnhagen, along with the corrections and conclusions made by Capistrano de Abreu. By dismissing the old debate of chance versus intentionality in the discovery as irrelevant, he focused on issues that remained controversial at the time, such as the location of arrival, the authenticity of Caminha's letter, and the presence of Duarte Pacheco Pereira in the region. As a great heurist, he rigorously established the available sources and their use by successive historians. In his analyses, he focused on the level of geographical and technical knowledge possessed by the Portuguese during the period of discoveries, aiming to avoid anachronisms. He contextualized maritime expansion within the wider scope of European involvement in the Atlantic since the Middle Ages and emphasised the crucial role of King John II in reviving the efforts that ultimately led the Portuguese to India and the discovery of Brazil. For him, King Manuel merely reaped the rewards of the previous reign. His detailed analysis of Caminha's letter is noteworthy. After refuting the hypothesis of inauthenticity that was circulating at the time, Capistrano conducts his first analysis of the narrative structure, categorising it as follows: fast-forward to the discovery; a description of the initial contact with the indigenous people; a relatively minor emphasis of Mass, although he acknowledges the influence of Friar Henrique; new descriptions of the indigenous people; and comparisons between the opposing cultures. He offered a positive assessment of Caminha's narrative talent, appreciating the quantitative information and the praise of nature, while also emphasising his sympathy and favourable opinion of the indigenous people. The limitation he identifies in the scribe's text is the absence of astronomical data, which is crucial for navigation in the prevailing conditions and in largely uncharted areas.

Another classic text of colonial historiography is the concluding balance in the book *Capítulos de história colonial*, titled "três séculos depois" [three Centuries Later]. In it, Capistrano de Abreu perceives in 1808 an absence of...



a "national and even capitanial spirit", with the country being characterised by fragmentation in a multitude of different areas. According to him, the situation would change with the transfer of the Court, which is why he maintained a positive view of King John VI. In 1808, he stated that there were "five ethnographic groups, united by an active community of language and a passive community of religion, shaped by the environmental conditions of five different regions. They exhibited great enthusiasm for the natural riches of the land and felt aversion or contempt for the Portuguese, yet did not hold any particular disdain for one another — this is the result of three centuries of history."

Throughout his life, Capistrano de Abreu engaged with historiographical work and the human sciences more broadly. His correspondence is filled with references to works on history, economics, sociology, anthropology, geography, and psychology, and his personal library was notably extensive given the circumstances of his environment. Regarding his chosen topics and methodological approaches, he consistently kept up with current publications — books and magazines in English, German, French, and Spanish — while also maintaining frequent contact with Portugal. Despite the absence of institutional infrastructure — evidenced, as José Honório Rodrigues noted, by the then limited university offerings reduced to scarce courses in law, medicine, and engineering —, Capistrano de Abreu systematically leveraged a network of research relationships. This network included not only his colleagues at the Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Brasileiro but also other intellectuals in Rio de Janeiro and correspondents both in Brazil and abroad. Among them, the Portuguese João Lucio de Azevedo, who had lived in Brazil for an extended period and possessed extensive knowledge of colonial documentation, stands out for the depth of his exchanges and the significance of the experiences and opinions exchanged.

Although he appreciated his misanthropy and stated in a letter to his friend Mario de Alencar, the writer's son, that "fortunately I had pupils, but I never had disciples, nor did I covet them", Capistrano de Abreu's influence on Brazilian historiography was profoundly significant. He certainly had disciples, including Afonso Taunay and, above all, Rodolfo Garcia, and was admired by young historians of the time, such as Pedro Calmon and Artur Cezar Ferreira Reis, who visited him at his home in Botafogo. In addition to these contributions, José Honório Rodrigues edited the *Correspondência [Correspondence]* in the 1950s and published his complete works in the 1970s. Shortly after his death, the Sociedade Capistrano de Abreu was established to publish his scattered works, promote his studies, and reward new contributions to Brazilian history. His impact on Brazilian historiography is comparable only to that of Varnhagen. In addition to their differences in generation and historical perspective, Capistrano de Abreu focused on presenting a political and administrative view of the country's history, while he emphasised social aspects and territorial formation from a sociological perspective. His interpretations of topics such as expeditions and flags, land and sea routes, territorial integration, the relationship between the sea and the hinterland, and the role of indigenous peoples in the country's social formation have been permanently integrated into historiography and left a lasting impact.

He was a member of the Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Brasileiro, which he attended throughout his life, although he was not particularly enthusiastic about academia. In a letter to João Lucio de Azevedo in 1917, he mentioned that he had been

invited to join the *Academia Brasileira de Letras* [Brazilian Academy of Letters] when it was founded, in 1897, but he declined, stating, "I was enrolled in the *Academia Humana* [Human Academy] without being asked, and I already find it too much..."

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