

GABRIEL SOARES DE SOUSA (ca. 1540–1591)
DESCRIPTIVE TREATISE ON BRAZIL (1587)

Always presenting a strong front to their adversaries, the Tupinambás remained the masters of this land for many years, until the arrival of the Portuguese. This information has been gathered from both the Tupinambás and the Tupinaés, for they pass the story down from generation to generation.

Having become masters of the territory around Bahia, the tribe then divided up into sundry groups, owing to the sundry differences that grew up between them. They split into separate villages, and finally enmity developed. . . Fierce battles took place daily. Both sides ate some of their captives, while the remainder became their captors' slaves. . . They fought ferociously against one another at sea, in naval battles aboard canoes. Between the islands, they laid ambushes for one another. The death toll was very heavy everywhere, cannibalism took place, and both sides took captives as well. That situation continued until the arrival of the Portuguese.

In every Tupinambá village there exists a headman, but they only follow him when at war. Then they show a degree of obedience toward him, according to the trust they have in his vigor and experience. But in time of peace, everyone does as he sees fit. . . . Every village has [such] a chief. He must be an elder among the Indians and a man with a family. For that reason, the other villages show him respect. They inhabit the village for as long as the palm branches on their houses avoid rot: they last for three or four years. When once the branches let a lot of rain into their houses, the Indians transfer their village elsewhere.

The Tupinambás' only masterpieces are when they fashion baskets from palm leaves, as well as when they make other containers from the same leaves for their own use and in their own special style. They make their own bows and arrows. They produce very skillful artifacts from straw padding and from woodcarvings . . .

When these heathens seek to catch a lot of fish either from freshwater rivers or from saltwater inlets, they stretch a net of canes across such waterways and drive the fish downstream toward them. Then they throw into the water a large quantity of crushed herbs called timbó. That serves to poison the fish that then float to the surface, and in that way they catch vast numbers of them.

These Indians cure themselves of boils and pimples by applying the juice of medicinal herbs that they have at their disposal. Indeed, they bring about some quite remarkable cures . . .

The Tupinambás have a great knowledge of the land on which they set foot. . . they are greatly appreciated when the Portuguese propose to wage war in some quarter. The Tupinambás are always sent on ahead to reconnoiter the terrain, to guide the rest of the party along the route that they should follow . . .

Taken from Gabriel Soares de Sousa, "Tupinambás," in *Early Brazil: A Documentary Collection to 1700*, edited by Stuart B. Schwartz and translated by Clive Willis and Stuart B. Schwartz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 118–119, 121, 129, 135–137.