

Politique des “eaux publiques” et affirmation du pouvoir municipal au XVIII^e siècle à Vila Rica (Minas Gerais, Brésil)

La política de las “aguas públicas” y la afirmación del poder municipal en el siglo XVIII en Vila Rica (Minas Gerais, Brasil)

Public Water Policy and the Assertion of Municipal Power in Eighteenth-Century Vila Rica (Minas Gerais, Brazil)

Marjolaine Carles

GEI-CRBC/EHESS, París, Francia. Casa de Velázquez, Madrid, España. marjolaine.carles@casadevelazquez.org

Résumé — La politique de l'eau à Vila Rica (Brésil) au XVIII^e siècle était une préoccupation centrale pour la monarchie portugaise, la municipalité et la population, mêlant des intérêts “communs” et “particuliers”. Cette enquête sur la gestion des eaux urbaines restitue la genèse du statut des eaux publiques au cœur d'une dynamique de colonisation. Le partage se complexifiait avec le développement d'activités parallèlement à l'exploitation minière. De fait, la ressource en abondance et par nature inaliénable, qui relevait du patrimoine royal, est devenue un bien appropriable. Les enjeux spatiaux et économiques de son contrôle garantissaient une autonomie politique à la ville. Ainsi, le programme des eaux publiques est apparu comme un vecteur d'émancipation des autorités municipales dans l'espace colonial.

Resumen — *La política del agua en Vila Rica (Brasil) durante el siglo XVIII era una preocupación esencial a la vez para la monarquía portuguesa, la municipalidad y la población, lo que implicaba intereses “colectivos” e “individuales”. Esta investigación sobre la gestión de las aguas urbanas restituye la génesis del estatuto de las aguas públicas dentro de una dinámica colonizadora. El reparto se volvía más complejo con el desarrollo de actividades inherentes a la minería. Este abundante recurso y naturalmente inalienable que pertenecía al patrimonio real, se convertía en un bien apropiable. Su control implicaba desafíos espaciales y económicos, y le garantizaba a la ciudad una autonomía política. Por lo tanto, el programa de las aguas públicas resulta ser un vector de emancipación de las autoridades municipales dentro del espacio colonial.*

Abstract — *Water policy in eighteenth-century Vila Rica was a major concern for the Portuguese monarchy, the municipality and the local inhabitants, and hence it involved both “common” and “private” interests. In just a few decades, this mining town, located in the center-south of Brazil, expanded swiftly due to the discovery of gold at the end of the seventeenth century. Founded in 1711, a decade later Vila Rica became the governor's headquarters of the captaincy of Minas Gerais.*

This community management case study of water reveals the genesis of the legal statutes of “public waters,” that is to say its creation, its principles and its continuity within the dynamics of Portuguese colonization of Brazil. It argues that the municipal council relied on the emerging concept of “public waters” to impose itself as the authority in charge of natural resource management within the city's “public sphere”.

In examining this theme, we are guided by the following question: in that under-developed environment, how could a physically inalienable resource, which depended on royal patrimony, become an object of collective or individual appropriation? Our findings show that despite its abundance, water was unequally shared. In addition to this, competitive sharing was more complex due to the diversification of urban activities that required the use of water. The “public waters” attribution differed from other legal statutes that applied to waters in general. For example, the “auriferous waters” category was created by royal order in 1720. In fact, altogether the multiplicity and the flexibility of the urban waters regimen underline the institutional organization setting while also underscoring the role of municipal authority.

Spatial and fiscal stakes in water control, simultaneously functional and symbolic, were dominant themes. Indeed, this process secured and affirmed the political and economic autonomy of Vila Rica. These interests had consequences for the territory under municipal control, the growth of the urban population and the volume of public funds. The quality and quantity of the drinking water enhanced the town's image as a “civilized” center. Thus, there was then a clear recognition of how the inhabitants benefited from these policies, especially within a context of rivalry between mining towns and even beyond the local area. In this colonial context, where different spheres of authority commonly clashed, the “public waters” policy seemed to represent a space from which municipal power could exert a degree of autonomy.

Keywords: public waters, town council, power, juridical statutes, Minas Gerais, eighteenth century

Palabras clave: aguas públicas, poder municipal, estatutos jurídicos, Minas Gerais, siglo XVIII

Mots clés: eaux publiques, pouvoir municipal, statuts juridiques, Minas Gerais, XVIII^e siècle

Información Artículo: Recibido: 12 agosto 2013

Revisado: 26 marzo 2014

Aceptado: 10 abril 2014