

Not a Drop to Drink

by Chris Rose



Two thousand years ago the Romans tried to turn this desert into an oasis, a place full of rivers and lakes and canals. The Romans wanted to build big white temples and big houses under the hot sun. They wanted to turn this desert into a new paradise, full of trees and flowers and fields. They planned to sail their ships across the desert. But they failed. The Romans failed because they looked only at the surface of the land. They tried to make the desert into a paradise with water and trees by digging canals and building aqueducts. They dug canals to connect the sea and the rivers. They built their aqueducts, long pipes to carry water, for many miles across the desert, to carry water from one town to another.

Now, I can still see some of the old aqueducts. There are a few white stone arches under the hot sun in the dry desert. They are falling down. The water in the aqueducts dried up. There is nothing left of the Roman canals. The water in the canals disappeared and the canals filled up with sand again, but if you look carefully it is still possible to see where they were. There are lines across the desert that look like very old roads.

In 1777 a Portuguese explorer called Emanuel de Melo Pimento came to this desert with a plan to turn it into an oasis. At that time in history, everybody was very excited by new discoveries

in science and technology and engineering. Emanuel de Melo Pimento was a man of his times, one of the new scientist-philosopher-engineers who believed that all the problem of people in the world could be solved by science and philosophy. He believed that he could turn the hot, dry desert where nobody had enough water to drink into an oasis, into a utopia. He wanted to build a completely new city here, he wanted to build a completely new country. He wanted to call it "Pimentia", named after himself, of course.

Emanuel de Melo Pimento had a lot of money. He had a lot of money because a lot of rich people in Portugal and Spain gave him money to go around the world and explore. These rich people invested in Emanuel de Melo Pimento's journeys of exploration and discovery. Now they had given him money to build a new city, a new country, a utopia, to create an oasis in the desert. These rich people hoped to become even richer. Emanuel de Melo Pimento took their money and used it not to try and change the surface of the land, like the Romans, but to change what is under the surface of the desert. Emanuel de Melo Pimento wanted to dig canals under the desert, to make big underground rivers where the water would not dry up under the heat of the sun.

He failed, of course.

Some of his plans still survive. I have some of them here in my office in the Institute of Hydrogeological Research where I write this. They are very beautiful works of art. But not one of his plans was ever completed – they needed too much money, more money than even the rich people in Portugal and Spain gave to Emanuel de Melo Pimento. Instead, Emanuel de Melo Pimento spent all the money on building beautiful buildings where he could live and dream of his new city.

From where I write in my office in the Institute I can still see one of the old buildings that Emanuel de Melo Pimento lived in before he went mad and died here. He failed because he tried to look only under the land. The Romans failed because they looked only at the surface of the land. Now, I will

succeed, because I am not looking at the surface of the desert, or under it. I am looking up above the desert. I am looking up at the sky.

Now, at the beginning of the 21st century we have the ability to go up into space. We have the ability to build satellites. Some people have said that I am mad, just like Emanuel de Melo Pimento, but I know that I will succeed. I have spent many years making plans to build satellites that can not only forecast the weather, but change it.

The first of the satellites went up into space last week, and now, using a computer here in my office, I am telling it what to do. The programmes I spent many years planning and designing all work perfectly.

I look up at the sky, and it is starting to rain.

It has now been raining for three weeks. It has not stopped raining for 21 days. At first, the people were very happy to see so much rain.

Now the desert has flooded. Where before there was only sand, now there is water. Where there was desert, now there is sea.

But the rain that has come down from the sky has destroyed many houses. Some people now have nowhere to live. The rain was stronger and heavier than I planned. I was right to look up above the desert, not at its surface or under the sand, but I did not expect the force of nature to be so strong.

Have I too failed? I do not know. Will people in the future think of me as I now think of the Romans and of the failed mad scientist Emanuel de Melo Pimento?

I have turned the desert into a sea. We can now sail ships across the desert, like the Romans dreamed. But the people do not thank me. They have water, but they have nothing to drink.

www.britishcouncil.org/learnenglish