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The "Portuguese Period" Revisited

New Perspectives on Sri Lanka in the Sixteenth Century

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Introduction

Few periods in the history of Sri Lanka carry such a heavy emotional charge as that extending from 1506 to 1658, generally known as the "Portuguese Period".[1] On the one hand, Sri Lankans are generally aware of the rich folklore of Sri Lankan Catholicism, the vast number of people carrying names that are Portuguese in origin and the popularity of *baila* music. On the other hand, a much darker picture also often surfaces regarding the brutality of the Portuguese wars of conquest and what some see as the forced conversion of Lankans to a foreign faith. At a time when many Portuguese institutions still celebrate their country's imperial past uncritically, raising concerns is legitimate. However, we also know that the picture is far more complex than some would like us to believe today. When the past is misused for attacks against

1 This publication is based on a paper delivered at the International Centre for Ethnic Studies on 25 July 2012. I wish to thank Thambirajah Ponnudurai and Harshana Rambukwella for giving me the opportunity to address a large and well-informed Sri Lankan audience and for encouraging me to publish the talk in the ICES pamphlet series. For a more detailed elaboration of the themes here presented, see "The Matrioshka Principle and How it was Overcome": Portuguese and Habsburg Attitudes toward Imperial Authority in Sri Lanka and the Responses of the Rulers of Kotte (1506-1656)', in *Journal of Early Modern History*, 13, 4 (2009), pp. 265-310, and especially my forthcoming book *Connected Empires: Sri Lanka and the Making of Iberian Imperialism in Asia, 1500-1600.*

minorities or practices deemed improper by some defenders of cultural and ethnic purity, then it becomes urgent to raise a voice and point to more nuanced interpretations of the history that Portugal and Sri Lanka share: interpretations that postulate neither a harmless "encounter of cultures" nor a Manichean "clash of civilizations",[2] but a complex, intellectually honest and constructive history of interactions and cross-fertilizations. This essay aims to contribute to the debate by presenting some of the recent historiographical transformations that have changed the way historians see Sri Lanka's transition to colonial rule.

On one of the better-known electronic outlets currently specializing in the spreading of statements about the Portuguese period which, instead of explaining the past, misuse it to make assertions about the present, one can read:

> "Learned Historians and commentators now generally regard the arrival of the Portuguese in the year 1505 as the beginning of the Dark Age in the history of Sri Lanka. The Portuguese through a policy of cunning statecraft and ruthless terror were able to govern the coastal areas of the island for most of the next 150 years, until the Dutch replaced them in 1658."[3]

It would be difficult to write a short summary of the period fraught with more inaccuracies. Neither do historians in general go along with such opinions, nor did the Portuguese arrive in 1505, nor did they govern the coastal areas of Lanka for 150 years. And yet statements of this sort are now commonplace.

2 See Susantha Goonatilake, *A 16th-Century Clash of Civilisations. The Portuguese Presence in Sri Lanka*, Colombo, Vijitha Yapa Publications, 2010.

3 Senaka Weeraratne on http://www.vgweb.org/unethicalconversion/port_rep.htm, last accessed on 6 September 2012.

This is especially sad, since we are today in the enviable position, as historians, to build a much more nuanced picture based on several decades of serious scholarship. After those pioneers who made sources available in English and Portuguese and construed the first consistent narratives of the early colonial past – Paul Pieris, Gabriel Perera, Georg Schurhammer[4] and, in a similar vein though more recently, Martin Quéré and Vito Perniola[5] – a second wave of historians looked at archival materials critically and established much of the factual history of the period as we now accept it: K. N. Goonewardena in the post-independence years, Tikiri Abeyasinghe, Chandra Richard De Silva and

4 Pieris, P. E., *Ceylon: The Portuguese Era Being a History of the Island for the Period 1505-1658*, 2 vols [Colombo, 1913-1914], Reprint Dehiwala, Tisara Prakasakayo, 1992; S. G. Perera, *The Jesuits in Ceylon (In the XVI and XVII centuries)*, De Nobili Press, Madurai, 1941; Fernão de Queiroz, *The Temporal and Spiritual Conquest of Ceylon. Translated by Father S. G. Perera*, Colombo, A. C. Richards Government Printer, 1930; Georg Schurhammer & Ernst August Voretzsch, *Ceylon zur Zeit des Königs Bhuvaneka Bahu und Franz Xavers 1539-1552. Quellen zur Geschichte der Portugiesen, sowie der Franziskaner- und Jesuitenmission auf Ceylon, im Urtext herausgegeben und erklärt*, 2 vols., Leipzig, Verlag der Asia Major, 1928.

5 Vito Perniola, *The Catholic Church in Sri Lanka. The Portuguese Period. Original Documents translated into English*, 3 vols, Dehiwala, Tisara Prakasakayo, 1989-1991; Martin Quéré, *Christianity in Sri Lanka under the Portuguese Padroado, 1597-1658*, Colombo, Colombo Catholic Press, 1995. Also see C. Gaston Perera, *The Portuguese Missionary in 16th and 17th Century Ceylon: The Spiritual Conquest*, Colombo, Vijitha Yapa Publications, 2009. For a review of the latter see *e-Journal of Portuguese History*, 8, 1 (2010), available online at http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Portuguese_Brazilian_Studies/ejph/

George Winius in the nineteen-sixties and seventies, Geneviève Bouchon in the seventies and eighties and Jorge Manuel Flores in the nineties.[6] By the turn of the millennium, one could have been forgiven for thinking that the history of the Portuguese period in Sri Lanka had been established to such high scholarly standards, that not much remained to be done.

More recently, historians have concentrated on re-reading materials and bringing new questions to them. Michael Roberts, whilst not being primarily a specialist in Portuguese sources, has presented important new ideas on the seventeenth century in *Sinhala Consciousness in the Kandyan period.*[7] Alan L. Strathern has done analogous, though arguably more rigorous source-oriented work on the sixteenth century, by combining materials written in Portuguese with scholarship on South Asian Buddhism and kingship theories. Along with a series of challenging articles, Strathern's book *Kingship and Conversion*

6 See K. W. Goonewardena, *The Foundation of Dutch Power in Ceylon 1638-1658*, Amsterdam, Djambatan, 1958; Tikiri Abeyasinghe, *Portuguese Rule in Ceylon 1594–1612*, Colombo, Lake House, 1966; Chandra Richard De Silva, *The Portuguese in Ceylon 1617–1638*, Colombo, H. W. Cave & Co., 1972; George Davison Winius, *The Fatal History of Portuguese Ceylon. Transition to Dutch Rule*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1971; Geneviève Bouchon, 'Les rois de Kotte au début du XVI[e] siècle', *Mare Luso-Indicum* 1 (1971), 65–96 & 163–168; Jorge Manuel Flores, *Os Portugueses e o Mar de Ceilão, 1498–1543: Trato, Diplomacia e Guerra*, Lisbon, Edições Cosmos, 1998. Also see De Silva's excellent recent publication *Portuguese Encounters with Sri Lanka and the Maldives. Translated Texts from the Age of the Discoveries*, Farnham/Burlington, VT, Ashgate Publishing, 2009.

7 Michael Roberts, *Sinhala Consciousness in the Kandyan Period, 1590s–1815*, Colombo, Vijitha Yapa Publications, 2004.

in Sixteenth-Century Sri Lanka: Portuguese Imperialism in a Buddhist Land is the strongest sign yet, that the field is open to methodological innovation.[8] From Strathern's work we have learned about the complexity of Sri Lankan identities in the sixteenth century. By exploring royal conversions to Catholicism and Shaivism, Strathern has shown how difficult it is to maintain the theory of a straightforward relation between Sinhala-ness and the idea of Lanka as a Buddhist island in the sixteenth century. Connections existed but were more complex than is often assumed. Lankans in the sixteenth century looked back at a long history of cross-cultural interactions with people born outside the island. Migration and integration were the rule, not the exception.

As I shall argue, the arrival of the Portuguese was not perceived in the beginning as a rupture, but as an event comparable to earlier arrivals of other groups and thus to be dealt with along the lines of earlier interactions. The challenge to historians is to explain the changes that occurred over a period of nine decades that lapsed between the first Portuguese arrival in the island in 1506 and the beginning of the conquest of Ceylon in the mid-1590s. How did the Portuguese go from commerce to conquest, and why? What made them change their minds along the way between 1506 and 1594? How, where and

8 Alan L. Strathern, *Kingship and Conversion in Sixteenth-Century Sri Lanka. Portuguese Imperialism in a Buddhist Land*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007 (also available as a South Asian co-publication through Vijitha Yapa, 2010). Also see 'The Vijaya Origin Myth of Sri Lanka and the Strangeness of Kingship', in *Past and Present*, 203 (May 2009), pp. 3-28 and 'Sri Lanka in the Long Early Modern Period: Its Place in a Comparative Theory of Second Millennium Eurasian History', in *Modern Asian Studies*, 43, 4 (July 2009), pp. 809-864.

by whom were the gradually changing decisions made, when exactly did the most important shifts occur, what challenges did they respond to, and whose interest did they serve? These may be seemingly basic questions, but they are essential for bringing Luso-Lankan history back in touch with the wider developments of Early Modern history on the one hand, and Sri Lankan history in the more narrow sense on the other. The early imperial encounter in Sri Lanka calls for a critical revision today so that we can move away from old presumptions about European agency and Lankan passivity. The goal is to identify connections between two distant nations that saw their paths intertwine in the sixteenth century and both lost out to the later developments of European imperialism in Asia. To achieve this, the paradigm of "connected histories" as laid out in recent years by Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Serge Gruzinski and others is of fundamental importance.[9]

Portuguese expansion history has benefitted greatly over the last two decades from a wider deconstruction of the notion that Empires thrive essentially on policies designed in their centres.[10]

9 See Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'Connected Histories: Notes towards a re-configuration of Early Modern Eurasia', in *Modern Asian Studies*, 31, 3 (1997), pp. 735-762. Subrahmanyam has also repeatedly underlined the importance of systematic comparative work, for example in 'A Tale of Three Empires. Mughals, Ottomans, and Habsburgs in a Comparative Context', in *Common Knowledge*, 12, 1 (2006), pp. 66-92.

10 See above all Luís Filipe Thomaz, *De Ceuta a Timor*, 2nd ed., Lisbon, Difel, 1994; Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Portuguese Empire in Asia 1500–1700. A Political and Economic History*, London, Longman, 1993; *id.*, 'The Tail Wags the Dog: Sub-Imperialism and the *Estado da Índia*, 1570-1600', in *Improvising Empire: Portuguese Trade and Settlement in the Bay of Bengal*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press India, 1990, pp. 137-160.

Historians now acknowledge the importance of developments in areas that were for long dismissed as the peripheries of European Empires. This bears relevance for Sri Lanka because it allows us to pay attention not only to the push factors of Portuguese expansion, but also the pull factors. It permits to raise the question of what attracted the Portuguese to the island in the first place, what made them stay when there was no official policy of conquest and what prompted them to gradually get involved in local wars rather than just trading in local exports. It ultimately paves the way for a re-integration of Portuguese activities into the Lankan political context from which they have been artificially detached. Both sides stand to win from such a stance: the Portuguese, because it helps understand the often odd dynamics of an Empire – some define it as a network – so thinly spread out from Morocco to Japan, that no unified chain of command was possible; and Sri Lankans, because an entire century of history hitherto thought to result essentially from external forces, is brought back into the realm of the country's own past. That this may be perceived by some as an attempt to acquit the Portuguese of their historical responsibilities in Sri Lanka is natural, but the following pages shall leave little doubt as to what the shared responsibilities in the early transition to colonial rule were. One aspect that seriously undermines any efforts today at writing national histories is the fact that the nation as such is not a compellingly meaningful unit of analysis for the sixteenth century. It is not, I would argue, primarily from the competition of nations that violence arises in Early Modern South Asia, but from the competition of groups – and sometimes individuals – with complex, often shifting and contradictory allegiances and agendas. These we need to understand before we dare to judge.

Beyond the myth of conquistadorism: trade and factional strife

A significant part of the historiographical problems that we have inherited arise from the nature of our source materials. The beginnings of the Luso-Lankan encounter are crucial for an understanding of later developments, yet they are also especially difficult to assess because our perception is so heavily fraught by the knowledge of what came later. Anachronism – the explanation of historical events in the light of later developments – is one of the fundamental problems that haunt the historiography of the Early Modern period and that, we need to avoid. The challenge is to assess events such as those that took place in Kotte and Colombo in 1506 rigorously in function of what people knew and wanted to achieve at that particular moment. Nobody could know, then, that the Portuguese would one day develop an appetite for the conquest of the island, let alone that South Asia would centuries later become a playground of British, French or Japanese imperialism. To understand the first encounter, we need to see how people used their memories of the past and their understanding of the situation as it unfolded, to negotiate a mutually meaningful and acceptable outcome. There are overall very few Sinhalese or Tamil sources for the sixteenth century, so the bulk of our materials is written in Portuguese (which does not mean that they all *are* Portuguese – they are indeed all part of Lankan heritage). Portuguese chronicles such as those of João de Barros, Fernão Lopes de Castanheda or Fernão de Queiroz were written decades after the first contacts with the overtly declared objective of glorifying Portuguese activities

and integrating them into a grand narrative of temporal and spiritual conquest.[11]

Once we look at the sources produced closer to the actual events, the picture is much less glorious. Sanjay Subrahmanyam's biography of Vasco da Gama is a good example of how the grand narrative of discovery and conquest is easily deconstructed, causing distress among nationalist historians on both sides of the divide.[12] As soon as we go a little beyond the manipulations of the official chronicles, we find Gama to have been a common Portuguese noble with the common moral and material ambitions of most other nobles of his time – a man ill-prepared to understand his Indian counterparts, incapable of fully grasping the importance of the events that he participated in and caught up in all sorts of internal conflicts, given that there was never a clear and uncontested line of action in Portugal for imperial expansion. Talking about a "Vasco da Gama period" of Asian history and drawing a straight line from the events at Calicut in 1498 to, say, the conquest of Kandy in 1815 or the birth of the British Raj in 1858, makes little or no sense at all.

Whilst there is no biography of Lourenço de Almeida comparable to that of Gama, the surviving materials show

11 See João de Barros, *Ásia de João de Barros. Dos feitos que os Portugueses fizeram no descobrimento e conquista dos mares e terras do Oriente*, 4th ed. by António Baião & Luís F. Lindley Sintra [Coimbra, 1932], reprint, 4 vols., Lisbon, Imprensa Nacional-Casa da Moeda, 1988-2001; Fernão Lopes de Castanheda, *História do Descobrimento e Conquista da Índia pelos Portugueses*, ed. M. Lopes de Almeida, 2 vols., Porto, Lello & Irmão Editores, 1979; Gaspar Correia, *Lendas da Índia*, ed. M. Lopes de Almeida, 4 vols., Porto, Lello & Irmão Editores, 1975; Fernão de Queiroz, *Conquista Temporal e Espiritual de Ceilão*, Colombo, The Government Press, 1916.

12 Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Career and Legend of Vasco da Gama*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997.

clearly that the first Portuguese Captain to have officially visited Sri Lanka in 1506 was a commerce-oriented young noble with very limited ambitions regarding the island. Much to the contrary of what the later chronicler Fernao de Queiroz would want us to believe, Almeida did not come as a conqueror.[13] The Almeidas – most notably Lourenço's father, the viceroy Dom Francisco de Almeida – have been identified as standing very close to a commercialist lobby consisting of a group of Portuguese merchants established in Cochin during the early years of the century, along with their allies at the Portuguese Royal Court. The so-called "Cochin group" generally opposed Crown policies involving the deployment of military resources and the construction of forts, favouring instead free trade through channels often considered illegal by the authorities in Lisbon.[14] This is not to say that Almeida's intentions in Colombo were immaculate: he too wanted to enrich himself and gain merits to obtain privileges from his king, and he too, like so many, was willing to do this at the expense of others, engaging in a mix of trade and violence. Importantly, however, there was no clear strategic vision on the Portuguese side in 1506 about to how to proceed beyond the establishment of a basic agreement, permitting access to the island's main export commodity, Cinnamon.

Research over the past twenty years has emphasised the lack of a Portuguese grand strategy of expansion in Asia in the early 1500's and highlighted the deep divisions that existed within Portuguese society regarding the best way to proceed

13 Cf. Queiroz, *Conquista Temporal e Espiritual de Ceilão*, p. 138.

14 See Inácio Guerreiro & Vítor Gaspar Rodrigues, 'O "grupo de Cochim" e a oposição a Afonso de Albuquerque', in *Studia*, 51 (1992), pp. 119-144.

East of the Cape. Many Portuguese in the early years of the century felt not so much as discoverers in Asian waters but as a tiny group of intruders in an intensely interconnected and competitive region, incorporating some of the strongest economies of the world. As one observer put it at the time, it was not the Portuguese who discovered Asia, but Asia that discovered the Portuguese.[15] The stronger side economically was Asia, as it had been for a millennium and a half and is today bound to become again. Politically and militarily, too, the Portuguese were forced to search for niches in order to thrive. Their main field of action was the sea, from where they targeted certain ports and towns exposed to maritime trade and polities vulnerable to naval pressure. If Portugal had an Empire at all, it was fragmented, fissiparous and fraught by internal dissent – like most pre-modern empires indeed, with the added difficulty of operating primarily on the waters and having extremely scattered positions on the land. The early Portuguese Empire explored vast stretches of Maritime Asia without generally getting deeply involved in local affairs; not, at least, beyond relations of trade and – often commercial fixated – diplomacy.[16] The goal in the early years was generally not to

15 Jorge Flores, '"They have discovered us". The Portuguese and the Trading World of the Indian Ocean', in Jay Levenson, ed., *Encompassing the Globe. Portugal and the World in the 16th and 17th centuries*, Washington DC, Freer and Sackler Galleries, 2007, vol. II, pp. 185-193.

16 See Biedermann, 'Portuguese Diplomacy in Asia in the Sixteenth Century. A Preliminary Overview', in *Itinerario* (Leiden), 29, 2 (Summer 2005), p. 13-37 and Stefan Halikowski-Smith, '"The Friendship of Kings was in the Ambassadors": Portuguese Diplomatic Embassies in Asia and Africa during the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries', in *Portuguese Studies*, 22, 1 (2006), pp. 101-134.

conquer more than some key positions such as Goa, Malacca or Hormuz, while no comparable plans were made for Sri Lanka.[17] The earliest territorial conquests in Asia occurred around the island of Goa under poorly understood circumstances in the mid-sixteenth century. Spiritual conquest as a systematic Crown-sponsored enterprise did not begin until four decades after the first contacts and in some places much later.

Though the Portuguese Crown held, by papal decrees that can quite rightly be seen as outrageous at a distance of five centuries, what it perceived as a "right of conquest" in all countries to the east of the line of Tordesillas (1494), this inherently imperial mandate was only rarely put into practice in Asia before 1600. The Portuguese felt that they held a theoretical right to lay claims on territories (a *ius ad rem* rather than a *ius in re*), and this is precisely the sense in which Manuel I (r.1495-1521) introduced the notion of "Lord of the Conquest [...] of India" into his royal title. While a full-fledged occupation was deemed neither feasible nor really desirable, the Portuguese Crown felt entitled to receive tribute (*páreas*) from African and Asian rulers or establish relations of "friendship" where, in return for military assistance, the Portuguese would gain access

17 On the history of Portuguese expansion in Asia in the sixteenth century see Thomaz, *De Ceuta a Timor*; Subrahmanyam, *The Portuguese Empire in Asia*; Anthony Disney, *A History of Portugal and the Portuguese Empire*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, vol. 2.

to local commodities.[18] Ceylonese cinnamon, it was thus hoped, could be had at low cost and without a deeper involvement in Lankan affairs, either through vassalage or friendship. But the plan was overall very blurry and in practice more driven by commercial pre-occupations in tune with the interests of the traders of Cochin, than by any grand imperial design.

Lankan motivation and Portuguese reluctance: new light on the early contacts

On the other side of the divide, the ruling Raja of Kotte, Dharma Parakramabahu IX (r. 1489-1513) and his court had much more precise ideas about what to do with the newcomers.[19] There was more than one reason for the Crown of Kotte to engage with the Portuguese seriously. It is important to point out, in the first place, that tributary arrangements were no novelty in the

18 The framework of legal fictions that allowed the Portuguese Crown to conceptualize *conquest* as a right to levy tribute rather than an extension of direct rule over peoples and territories is analysed in detail in António Vasconcelos de Saldanha, *Iustum Imperium. Dos tratados como fundamento do império dos portugueses no Oriente. Estudo de história do direito internacional e do direito português*, Lisbon/Macao, Insituto Português do Oriente, 1997.

19 The reign of Dharma Parakramabahu IX has been examined most thoroughly in Bouchon, 'Les rois de Kotte au début du XVI^{e} siècle'. The accuracy of Bouchon's analysis leaves no room for doubt regarding the existence of this ruler and his legitimacy in Kotte at the time. This disproves entirely the confused argumentation of Mendis Rohandeera, 'Dharma Parakramabahu IX: The False King of Ceylon Inflated by the Portuguese Historians – A Historiographical Perspective', in *Vidyodaya Journal of Social Sciences*, 7 (1996), pp. 13-45. Also see G. P. V. Somaratne, 'Rules of succession to the Throne of Kotte', in *Aquinas Journal*, VII (August 1991), pp. 17-32.

region. They had been an integral part of interstate relations in and around Sri Lanka and South India for centuries. This pre-existing framework made it relatively easy for a number of small polities in the region to accommodate Portuguese expansionism, often in the hope of using the newcomers' military capabilities especially on the sea, to subvert existing hierarchies. Such arrangements involved the use of violence, but violence was evidently not a novelty in South Asian interstate relations: it was a pervasive mechanism of power building like anywhere else and was used proactively at all levels. In Sri Lanka, the concept had developed during the later medieval period that the Kings of Kotte could claim the titles of *maharajadirajan* or even *cakravarti*[20] while their influence remained limited to the island and their position, dependent on paying allegiance to a foreign power. Far from contradictory, these two aspects of the Lankan imperial imagination went hand in hand. The maintenance of external tributary relations by the symbolic overlords of Sri Lanka, the rulers of Kotte, prevented lesser rulers in the island from obtaining similar foreign support. Parakramabahu VI (r. c1411–1466), the most enduringly celebrated late medieval cakravarti of Sri Lanka, united the

20 Originally meaning "Turner of the Wheel" or "World Conqueror" in the ancient Buddhist ideology of kingship – see Stanley J. Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer: a study of Buddhism and polity in Thailand against a historical background*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1976 – this term was increasingly used again in Sri Lanka from the thirteenth century, reflecting an influx of more markedly Hinduized South Indian conceptions where the military might of the ruler gained importance, thus connoting a "supreme overlord" ruling primarily by power (*danda*) rather than through claims to the virtuous path (*dhamma*); see John C. Holt, *The Buddhist Visnu: Religious Transformation, Politics and Culture*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2004, p. 42.

island under his symbolic overlordship while paying tribute to Ming China, a power that had intervened decisively in Kotte in the early 1400s.[21] Around 1500, the Kings of Kotte were paying allegiance to a much smaller and less symbolically significant, though regionally influential polity, the Kingdom of Kollam in the south of Kerala, obtaining regiments of Karava soldiers in exchange for their payments.[22]

It comes as no surprise, then, that Dharma Parakramabahu IX agreed so readily to hand over a large amount of Cinnamon to the Portuguese in 1506. Though historians have tended to interpret this gesture as a rather naïve sign of spontaneous friendliness – a "simple gift", as one author put it – it is quite

21 The events of 1410-12 are analysed in some detail in Senarat Paranavitana, 'The Kotte Kingdom up to 1505', in *University of Ceylon History of Ceylon*, vol. I, part 2, pp. 663-683. This author has been attacked by G. P. V. Somaratne in 'Grand Eunuch Ho and Ceylon', in *JCBRAS*, New Series, XV (1971), pp. 36-47 over a number of details. The latter, in his turn, received criticism from K. M. M. Werake, 'A re-examination of Chinese Relations with Sri Lanka during the 15th century A. D.', in *Modern Sri Lanka Studies*, II, 1-2 (Jan/Dec 1987), pp. 89-102. None of the criticisms does, however, fundamentally affect the core hypothesis formulated by Paranavitana with regard to factional strife at Kotte and its resolution through external intervention. For a comparison of Chinese and Portuguese maritime policy, see Roderich Ptak, 'China and Portugal at Sea. The Early Ming Trading System and the *Estado da Índia* Compared', in *Revista de Cultura*, 13/14 (Macao, Jan/Jun. 1991), pp. 21-38.

22 *A Suma Oriental de Tomé Pires e o Livro de Francisco Rodrigues*, ed. Armando Cortesão, Coimbra, 1978, p. 188. According to the *Mukkara Hatana* Kotte received a platoon of Karava warriors in 1508, precisely at a time when Dharma Parakramabahu IX refused to make a tributary payment to the Portuguese: see M. D. Raghavan, *The Karava of Ceylon. Society and Culture*, Colombo, K.V.G. de Silva & Sons, 1961, pp. 5–14 and Strathern, *Kingship and Conversion*, p. 22.

clear that Dharma Parakramabahu acted pragmatically and with a strategic aim. The present was made in order to create a bond between the Crown of Kotte and the Portuguese, excluding others in the island from becoming friendly with them and securing an option for military assistance in the future. The widely known fact that Cochin had used the Portuguese presence to free itself from Calicut's overlordship, shed additional favourable light on the possibility of having Lusitanian troops in the island. In fact, by 1510, Kotte rejected Kollam's overlordship and minted coins of its own, in what was then seen as a direct consequence of its good relations with the Portuguese.[23] Thus the relatively peaceful start of Portuguese-Sri Lankan interactions is best explained as the combined result of two factors: on the one hand, the non-invasive nature of early Portuguese imperialism – the Portuguese were often aggressive, but also acutely aware that their base of power was on the sea, not on the land; and on the other hand, the political experience of Lankan rulers in handling external powers as a means of consolidating the internal imperial project of Kotte.

This constellation helps shed further light on the events of the following decades. In 1513 the Portuguese received a demand from Kotte for the establishment of a permanent garrison at Colombo.[24] The construction of a Portuguese fort

23 Pires, *Suma Oriental*, pp. 184-185.

24 Letter from Afonso de Albuquerque to Manuel I, Cannanore, 30 November 1513, published in *Cartas de Afonso de Albuquerque seguidas de documentos que as elucidam*, ed. R. A. Bulhão Pato, 7 vols., Lisbon, Academia das Ciências, 1884-1935, vol. I, p. 138: "the king of *ceilam* [was] dead; there were two sons [of his] there divided about the succession to the kingdom; I was told that one of them [Vijayabahu] had sent word to Cochin requesting help and [saying that] if they wanted a fortress, he would offer a place for it".

adjacent to the island's main port – favoured by Manuel I but opposed by the Governor Afonso de Albuquerque – finally went ahead in 1518.[25] Vijayabahu VI (r.1513-21) granted a piece of land, today buried under the concrete of the modern port of Colombo, for the establishment of a trading post and a garrison that he hoped might assist him. It was after opposition arose under rather obscure circumstances to the Portuguese landing (the outbreak of violence seems to have been fuelled by some of the ruler's opponents), that the Sinhalese ruler was forced into what the Portuguese sources refer to as a relation of "vassalage", though the following decades leave little doubt that this concept remained imbued with a principle of mutuality from the Lankan point of view. The most immediate problems arose after 1518, due to the half-heartedness of the Portuguese presence at Colombo. The fortress – serving essentially as a fortified trading depot – was built on an isolated peninsula in the northern Galbokka area, at a noticeable distance from the town of Colombo, then thriving around where the Pettah is today.[26] A moat was built, and soldiers had strict orders not to venture into the land at any time. By 1524, the post had to be abandoned again because the new ruler of Kotte, Bhuvanekabahu VII (r.1521-1551), saw no

25 According to the chronicler João de Barros, Albuquerque received repeated royal orders for the establishment of a fortress, but resisted tenaciously (*Ásia*, vol. III, fol. 28). The events of 1518 are further described in Correia, *Lendas*, vol. I, pp. 539-540 and Castanheda, *História*, vol. I, pp. 939-942.

26 The history of this early fort and the subsequent transformations of Colombo under Portuguese influence are discussed in Biedermann, 'Colombo versus Cannanore. Contrasting Structures of Two Early Colonial Port Cities in South Asia', in *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 53, 2 (2009), pp. 413-459.

use in having a fortress in his kingdom with troops he could not use.[27] Ironically, the earliest attempt at a sustained Luso-Lankan interaction was a failure not due to an excess of imperial interventionism on the Portuguese side, but rather to a lack of it. Although it must have been a good augur from a Sri Lankan point of view that the Portuguese respected the integrity of Kotte by not invading the kingdom, the inability of the Portuguese to supply troops in correspondence with the Lankan expectations, whilst still demanding tribute, posed an obvious problem. This remained a central and largely unsettled issue in the practical management of Luso-Lankan relations during the following decades. But it did not impede the dialogue from going ahead.

Bhuvanekabahu VII and his rivals: Lankan diplomacy on the global stage

Whilst Bhuvanekabahu VII encouraged the dismantlement of the fort at Colombo, he had no interest in severing ties with the Portuguese altogether. In his early correspondence with the Portuguese monarch, Bhuvanekabahu emphasised the need to maintain a special relationship based on the payment of tribute in exchange for troops. His main concern was to obtain from John III, that Portuguese soldiers be placed under his own personal command, instead of being stationed in a fortress under the command of an officer receiving orders from Goa or making autonomous decisions. The whole purpose of luring troops to Ceylon was, logically, to make use of them against Kotte's enemies and against the ruler's internal detractors. Despite the difficulty in fully conveying this need to the Portuguese side,

27 On the Portuguese context of the abandonment see Flores, *Os Portugueses*, pp. 152-153.

primarily due to the mounting pressure from Mayadunne, the rising ruler of Sitawaka, Bhuvanekabahu VII soon developed a relationship of military dependence. He would pay large sums of money and hand over large amounts of Cinnamon to the Portuguese in support for military assistance that was always just about sufficient to allow him to survive. On the other hand, the Portuguese developed a financial dependence on Bhuvanekabahu. John III also seems to have felt symbolically more and more committed to his vassal. The relationship between Bhuvanekabahu VII and the king of Portugal is thus extremely interesting. Despite all the inevitable misunderstandings, there was between the two monarchs a fundamental agreement regarding each other's legitimacy as "overlord" and "vassal". This was made possible by a common platform of political conceptions that both sides could understand.[28]

As mentioned already, much of the power exerted in Sri Lanka even by the greatest monarchs of Kotte was imperial in the symbolic, non-intrusive sense of the word. The kings of Kotte acted as Emperors in Lanka, not because they conquered other kingdoms to govern them directly, but because they were capable of keeping other kings under control through relations of tributary overlordship. Their principal aim was to keep the rulers around Kotte quiet. In order to do so, it was crucial to keep a monopoly on the external tributary relation with the Portuguese Crown. Ideally, from a Kottean point of view, a non-invasive imperial project could thus unfold outside of the island while another smaller one would be free to thrive inside. This means the two empires could live and deal with each other

28 From here on the argumentation highlights a number of points made in 'The Matrioshka Principle' and *Connected Empires* (see note 1).

as a pair of nesting dolls. I have called this arrangement the "Matrioshka Principle": there would be an intact little Empire pursuing its policies in Lanka placed within another, larger empire going about its business on the seas.[29] Kotte would pursue its theoretically undamaged imperial project within Sri Lanka, as if the island were a bubble, protected on the outside by a mightier empire, the Portuguese *Estado da Índia* governed from Goa. This idea had been at the core of what Dharma Parakramabahu IX attempted to convey to the Portuguese in 1506, when he declared that "whilst the Christians would be Lords of the sea, he would be Lord of the land".[30] This is also what Bhuvanekabahu VII counted on until the end of his life, as expressed in a number of documents dating from the 1520s, 1530s and 1540s.

In both cases – the Portuguese Empire and the Kottean Empire – the overlord defined his authority according to a principle of suzerainty and not a principle of expanding sovereignty or, as we would put it, direct rule. Power relations were, in both cases, based on the logics of indirect control, materialised in relations of vassalage, implying periodic, symbolically laden acts of submission and tributary payments. Within the theoretical realm of the Empire of Kotte, yet outside

29 Biedermann, 'The Matrioshka Principle'.

30 "*Und sprach weren die Cristen herren von dem mer so wer her herr von dem land*": Letter (in German) by Valentim Fernandes to Stephan Gabler, Lisbon, 26 June 1510, published with a faulty Portuguese translation by Albin Beau in António Brásio, 'Uma carta inédita de Valentim Fernandes', in *Boletim da Biblioteca da Universidade de Coimbra*, 24 (1960), p. 344. The wording is by the author of the letter, but the content of the declaration fits into its historical context. Cf. Correia, *Lendas*, I, p. 649.

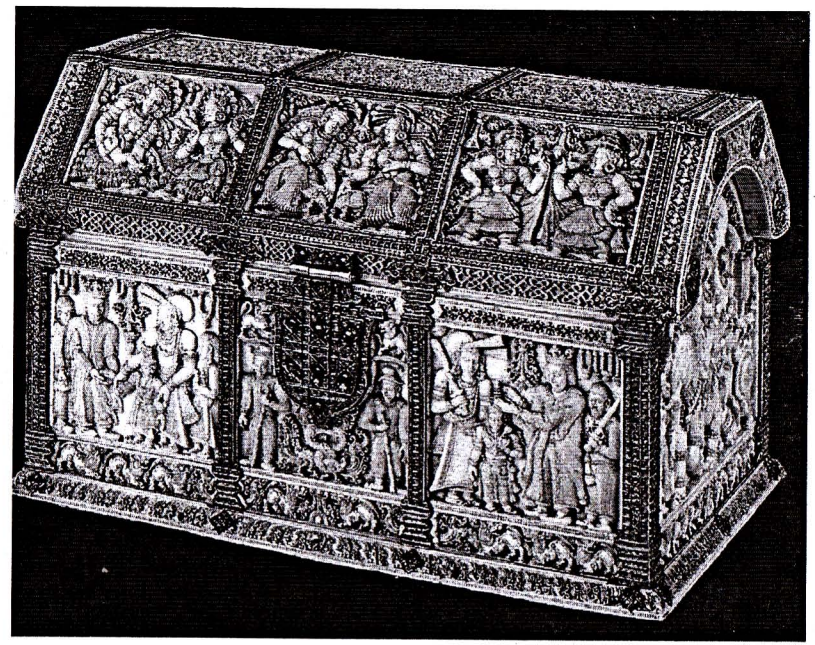
the boundaries of the kingdom of Kotte *stricto sensu*, a number of smaller polities remained intact, run by rulers of their own (generally *rajas*, a word rendered in Portuguese as *reis*). It was to keep this complex system under control within Sri Lanka that Bhuvanekabahu VII sought the assistance of the Portuguese, not to mention the need to employ reliable bodyguards in a courtly environment characterised by intense competition. Given that Bhuvanekabahu defended his position for almost three decades, it is reasonable to argue that, whilst paving the way for colonial domination in the longer term, he was a fairly successful monarch in his own time. His greatest diplomatic offensive for example, with an ambassador sent to Lisbon in 1541, was ultimately a success, in that it kept the Portuguese King and Queen convinced of the importance of not dropping him and replacing him by one of numerous rivals.

The deal reached in Lisbon in 1542, which confirmed Bhuvanekabahu's grandson Dharmapala as a successor to the throne, was put on display on one of the finest pieces of Lankan ivory carving ever produced, the coronation casket now preserved in Munich. On the left end of the casket, Bhuvanekabahu is represented sitting on the lion throne wearing a Lankan crown and holding a lotus flower, an emblem of the Buddha. On his two sides are most probably his two brothers, Mayadunne and Rayigam Bandara, rulers of symbolically subordinate kingdoms acknowledging – or so he wished – his overlordship, though in practice Mayadunne was his fiercest rival. The opposite end has the monarch riding an elephant amidst other royal emblems such as fly whisks and a parasol. But most importantly, the front panel shows the coronation of the effigy of Dharmapala by John III as imagined in Kotte along with the swearing of an oath of allegiance. Whilst it is still a

matter of debate whom exactly some of the figures represent, it is clear that the Lankan character handing over the effigy to the Portuguese King – either Bhuvanekabahu or his *purohita* Sri Ramaraksa – is seen as a partner equal in status and in no way infringed by the deal as far as his authority in Sri Lanka is concerned.[31]

This said, Bhuvanekabahu VII still faced a number of problems threatening to undermine the political arrangement thus imagined. Firstly, the fact that John III and his counsellors never quite understood the importance of dispatching troops to Sri Lanka in accordance with the demands of Bhuvanekabahu: what the Sinhalese monarch wanted, was Portuguese soldiers who could be placed directly under his own command. In fact, Lisbon never allowed soldiers to become full subjects of the Sinhalese monarch, fearful perhaps of the religious implications of such a move, or simply incapable of grasping the concept as such. In this they differed from South Indian rulers who, when dispatching men to Lanka, had always handed them over fully, allowing them to settle locally and become attached to the Sinhalese monarchs and the land they were given to live on. The second problem was that many private Portuguese traders and mercenaries operating in the region behaved rather haphazardly and often disrespected royal orders, regardless of whether they came from Kotte or from Lisbon. This undermined the authority of both John III and Bhuvankebahu VII. Finally,

31 The casket's iconography is analysed along different lines in Amin Jaffer and Melanie Schwabe, 'A Group of Sixteenth-Century Ivory Caskets from Ceylon', in *Apollo*, 445 (1999), 3–14 and Annemarie Jordan & Johannes Beltz, *Elfenbeine aus Ceylon. Luxugüter für Katharina von Habsburg (1507-1578)*, Zurich, Museum Rietberg, 2010. Also see Strathern, *Kingship and Conversion*, pp. 64-71.



Bhuvanekabahu had to battle against the fact that many of his rivals in Lanka made their own attempts at developing relations of vassalage with the Portuguese to further their own agendas.

These three factors put pressure on the Luso-Kottean alliance, especially in the fifth decade of the century. Between 1542 and 1545, several other Lankan rulers and throne pretenders approached the Portuguese with the overtly proclaimed aim of dislodging Bhuvanekabahu VII from his position as sole ally.[32] Their principal objective was to obtain contracts of vassalage and, as a part of the deal, military support. Among these men, there were disgruntled princes from Kotte such as Jugo Bandara and two other young men of royal lineage

32 These diplomatic offensives are the subject of chapter 3 of *Connected Empires*.

known to us as Dom João and Dom Luís. All three felt ill-treated by Bhuvanekabahu who had chosen his recently born grandson Dharmapala to succeed him on the throne. Dom João and Dom Luís escaped from Kotte in 1543 and made their way to Goa, where they developed an intense diplomatic activity to convince the Portuguese Governor to mount an expedition to Sri Lanka and replace the ruler of Kotte. Others proceeded similarly: Varathoya, the brother of King Sankili of Jaffna, made contact with the Governor Martim Afonso de Sousa and his Jesuit ally Francis Xavier in the early 1540s and almost succeeded in triggering a major Portuguese expedition to Jaffna, a kingdom that the Portuguese now began to perceive as a part of *Ceilão*. The King of Kandy – possibly Vikramabahu – was equally eager not to be left behind: in 1542, he hired the Portuguese adventurer Nuno Álvares Pereira to write letters on his behalf to Goa, urging the Governor to send him troops for his struggle against Bhuvanekabahu and Mayadunne, king of Sitawaka.[33] When the dealings of the king of Kandy began to go sour in the later 1540's, his son Karaliyadde Kumara Bandara promptly opened another diplomatic front, himself promising to become a faithful vassal to the Portuguese Crown, in return for military support against his own father. The list of candidates for vassalage would not be complete without Mayadunne himself who, in his urge to displace Bhuvanekabahu from the throne in Kotte, approached the Portuguese repeatedly. He too proposed essentially the same arrangement that all other Lankan rulers had in mind since

33 Identification of the king as being Vikramabahu by Pieris & Fitzler, *Ceylon and Portugal*, part I, *Kings and Christians 1539-1552*, Leipzig, 1927, p. 5 and O. M. Da Silva, *Vikrama Bahu of Kandy, The Portuguese and the Franciscans 1542-1551*, Colombo, 1967. No compelling proof is given, however. Cf. Tikiri Abyasinghe, 'The Politics of Survival', p. 11.

the beginning of the century: making tributary payments in exchange for military support.[34]

As mentioned, paying tribute to the Portuguese to obtain a military advantage was seen as an acceptable strategy in line with traditional political practices – and indeed the Portuguese were not the only external allies of Lankan rulers, just the best-documented ones. The Lankan elites acted as swiftly, firmly and proactively as possible. They could not know that pulling the Portuguese onto the Lankan military stage would have disastrous consequences in the long run, because they believed – and quite rightly so at the time – that the Portuguese Empire had no interest in conquering territories and exploiting them through direct rule. Indeed they were stringently aware that enticing the Portuguese authorities into dispatching troops to the Island was a challenge because John III remained interested in keeping military expenses down whilst maximising profits from the cinnamon trade. Everyone acted quite logically within the existing political, military and cultural framework of their own time and did what they could in the pursuit of their own political goals. None of this was *per se* seen as unacceptable at that time. As the *Rajavaliya* put with regard to Bhuvanekabahu VII, the problem was not so much the fact that he invited the Portuguese to join him, but the fact that he let them gain too much influence once they were in the island.[35]

34 All these initiatives are profusely documented in Schurhammer & Voretzsch, *Ceylon zur Zeit des Königs Bhuvaneka Bahu*, but have never been analysed in much detail by historians.

35 See *The Rājāvaliya or a Historical Narrative of the Sinhalese Kings from Vijaya to Vimala Dharmasuriya II*, ed. B. Gunasekra, Colombo, Ceylon Government, 1926 (reprint New Delhi, Asian Educational Services, 1995), pp. 78-79.

Significantly as well, the Lankan diplomatic offensive of the 1540's saw the development of another aspect with far-reaching consequences in the future – consequences that, once again, no-one could foresee. For almost half a century, the Portuguese Crown had been rather lax with regard to putting into practice the proclaimed ideal of spreading the Catholic faith. But towards the turn from the fourth to the fifth decade, things changed. A new bishopric was established in Goa and developed in the later 1530s, the Jesuits arrived in Asia in the early 1540s, and in 1543 a group of Franciscan missionaries disembarked at Colombo, setting up a church and engaging in the task of converting the elite of Kotte.[36] News spread quickly that the Portuguese authorities were now keen to see religious activities develop. The princes of Kotte Jugo, Dom João and Dom Luís were among the first to make use of this understanding. But soon others did the same. One by one, members of the Lankan elite seeking to be accepted as tributaries (the word employed was usually *vassalos*) added a crucial element to the proposals they made to the Portuguese authorities: they promised to convert. This may seem particularly tragic if one takes into consideration that no-one forced them to do so and that all they intended to do was boosting their credibility in attempts to gain diplomatic allies. On the other hand, it is also crucial to underline that these individuals had a very limited understanding of what conversion meant to Catholic zealots. They were quite probably not fully aware that taking baptism would imply, from the perspective of most Catholic missionaries, abandoning Buddhist and/or Hindu practices. Integrating deities of Indian provenance into the

36 Their activities are at the heart of Strathern's analysis in *Kingship and Conversion.*

Lankan pantheon had been a longstanding practice, and adding another God to the picture did not at first seem as dramatic an act, as it later turned out to be.[37] Nor could they, naturally, foresee that sixty years later, entire populations would become exposed to missionary pressure. Lankan princes and rulers, promising to convert, were taking advantage of a heightened sensibility to religious matters in the Portuguese sphere, seeing a political opportunity for the enhancement of traditional Lankan diplomacy. They did so without understanding the larger, game-changing dynamics emerging in the West: the beginnings of Catholic counter-reformation, the increasing confessional dimension of state politics in Europe and the establishment of the Inquisition in Portugal. None of this could they appreciate at that time.

Eventually, none of the projects formulated in the 1540s by Lankan rulers and princes, in collaboration with Portuguese missionaries and mercenaries, resulted in any decisive military intervention, but the promises of conversion did have a lasting effect, in that they undermined the position of the one monarch who refused to take baptism, Bhuvanekabahu VII. The man with the ambition of being *cakravarti* managed to navigate the agitated waters of the decade with great diplomatic skill, but at the end he succumbed. In 1551 he was killed in what is likely to have been an assassination orchestrated by the new Portuguese viceroy Dom Afonso de Noronha. A new garrison was established in Colombo that same year and fortification works began in 1554. To many, this was a turning point in the Luso-Lankan relation. And yet, the bond that Bhuvanekabahu

37 The most comprehensive discussion of what conversion meant to the Lankan elites in the sixteenth century is in Strathern, *Kingship and Conversion.*

managed to create with the Portuguese Crown remained of vital importance in subsequent years. It was around Kotte that Portuguese activities remained most significant during the second half of the century, whilst conquest was out of the question for another four decades.

The spiralling costs of intervention: Dharmapala and the Portuguese

The successor of Bhuvanekabahu, Dharmapala (r.1551–97), was still a child, his position destabilised by the circumstances of his grandfather's death. He was eventually baptised by the Franciscans in (or shortly before) 1557 and re-named as Dom João in honour of the Portuguese monarch. The conversion posed fundamental problems of legitimacy in terms of Lankan traditions of kingship, as discussed by Strathern. By abandoning his role as a protector of the Buddhist Sangha, the young ruler alienated many of his subjects. This may seem to indicate rather unambiguously that the balance of mutual benefits was becoming more and more unfavourable to the Sri Lankan side, that things were moving towards a state of affairs where one side would eventually conquer the other. But despite his "spiritual defeat" in 1557, Dharmapala had a very long reign, lasting from 1551 to 1597 and, as documents that have recently surfaced in the Spanish national archives reveal, remained politically proactive until very late in his life. Indeed he married for a second time in the 1580s in the hope of producing an heir to the throne at a time when, according to most historians, he was not more than a shadow of his former self, a "puppet king" – as one author has put it – serving as "clay in the hands of the Portuguese".[38] Whilst

38 Goonatilake, *A 16th-Century Clash of Civilizations*, p. 82.

Dharmapala's fragilities are evident, he did maintain a grasp of the situation in Kotte and pulled strings in the complex dynastic politics connecting the various political centres of the island at least until the late 1580s. Even though other rulers in Sitawaka and Kandy vigorously challenged his position as a potential all-Lankan overlord standing in the line of succession to rulers like Parakramabahu VI and Bhuvanekabahu VII, Dharmapala did secure his vassalage to Lisbon for over four otherwise very troubled decades and remained a symbolically significant central figure of Sri Lankan politics throughout this period. After 1557, the Portuguese were drawn deeper and deeper into local wars siding with Kotte, mostly against the will of the authorities in Goa. Formally, Ceylon remained outside of the Empire with the exception of the garrison at Colombo and the expenses were soon deemed disproportionate by the Portuguese Crown.

The wars fought by the Portuguese were brutal, but it is important to underline that Portuguese troops were generally only a fraction of all troops involved in the campaigns opposing Kotte to Sitawaka during these decades, and not necessarily the leading element they were later to become. Often they were little more than auxiliary participants in conflicts that were well beyond their grasp and control. It is naturally important to acknowledge that temple destructions began to occur during these years. The first Buddhist building to suffer pillage had been the Temple of the Tooth at Kotte during the turmoil after Bhuvanekabahu's death in 1551, and it had been largely due to the greed-driven and diplomatically disastrous tactics of the recently appointed viceroy Dom Afonso de Noronha. The history of the public destruction of the Tooth relic in Goa is well known and will leave any reader today revolted: these are instances of religious intolerance at its worst. Other

deplorable episodes of heritage destruction occurred during the following decades, and the fact that, before 1600, many were due to military motivations rather than to a concerted religious policy, takes little away from their vileness. It seems important, nevertheless, to underline how the situation was different from that in the Spanish conquests of the New World, where territories and populations formally incorporated into the Empire were systematically exploited, converted and forced into accepting a new political and spatial order very shortly after the first contacts. Nothing nearly as pervasive occurred in Sri Lanka before 1600, and even for the subsequent decades of Portuguese rule in the southwestern lowlands, the comparison with New Spain or Peru is rather problematic.

When Kotte was surrounded by Sitawakan troops in 1565, the Royal Court was transferred to Colombo. A new capital city thus emerged that remains the political, cultural and economic centre of the country today.[39] This solution had been recommended by some in Goa and in other parts of the Estado, and it certainly was a severe blow to the image of the Kottean monarchy, exposing as it did its fragility in contrast with the growing power of Sitawaka. But it was implemented with the full support of Dharmapala and his closest allies at the Kottean Court, and it was also a symbol of the monarchy's resilience. During the following two decades, the number of troops financed by the Portuguese Crown in Lanka kept increasing, and soon it was felt in Lisbon and Goa that expenses in the island were spiralling out of control. Continuously threatened by the new King of Sitawaka, Rajasinha I (r.1578–93), Colombo became a costly enclave for the Estado, a source of expenditure

39 See Biedermann, 'Colombo versus Cannanore'.

benefitting the Lankan elite around Dharmapala and a growing community of Portuguese-Lankan families in Colombo, more than anyone else.

Towards conquest: from the donation of Kotte to the death of Dharmapala

What is it then that changed in the later part of the century, leading the Portuguese authorities in Goa and in Lisbon to decide to engage actively in a military project designated as the "conquest of Ceylon"? The picture is complex and there is space in the present essay only to sketch out very briefly a selection of aspects. Firstly, it is important to acknowledge that for decades, even while the Portuguese Crown remained attached to Kotte and reluctant to invest more military resources than strictly necessary for the maintenance of its overlordship, many Portuguese individuals did formulate projects for the conquest of the island. In the minds especially of petty officers, with few other opportunities in the Empire, the old ethos of Iberian re-conquest converged with ideas of all-Lankan rule, championed by Lankan actors, especially in the 1540s. In peripheral contexts, and especially among men like Nuno Álvares Pereira, the secretary of the king of Kandy, ideas about sweeping conquests had emerged in connection with Lankan ideas of tributary overlordship. These projects were systematically rejected by the higher echelons of the Portuguese imperial apparatus. None of them – not even the religiously tainted plans of the 1540s – were sufficient to move Lisbon to take action until the late sixteenth century. Other developments of an altogether different nature were thus necessary to cause an inflection of policy in the 1590s.

The second factor to highlight lies at the level of juridical discourses and practices. What plans of conquest formulated by

Portuguese adventurers and Lankan throne pretenders could not achieve, a single legal document did: the paper known as the "donation of Kotte" made an impact at the highest possible level in a decisive moment of Portuguese and Sri Lankan history. On 12 August 1580, amidst the turmoil of the longest siege laid on Colombo by Rajasingha I of Sitawaka, Dharmapala signed a testamentary donation by which, on his death, the throne of Kotte would be bestowed upon the King of Portugal. This document was backed by small but powerful Kottean elite still attached to him. Again, the document is explicit in stating the central role of Portuguese military assistance for the development of a Lankan political project – it thus stands in continuity with numerous proposals made by Bhuvanekabahu VII, Mayadunne and many others throughout the sixteenth century. The dismembered Lankan Empire of Kotte was to be rebuilt with the help of Portuguese arms, Rajasingha defeated and the *cakravarti* project revived. Kotte would cease to be the predominantly (though never exclusively) Buddhist polity it had once been, but it would carry on its imperial heritage in a new form under Portuguese protection. It is not clear who exactly Dharmapala expected to govern this polity – a Lankan noble or a Portuguese officer, or someone standing in-between. But in many aspects, the document prolongs the tradition of political proposals made over the previous seven decades by Lankan rulers.

The donation of 1580 expresses a desire for continuity where soon there was to be a dramatic change. It is not only a decisive document for the history of Sri Lanka but also one that goes well beyond the limits of earlier Luso-Lankan history. By a remarkable coincidence, Portugal itself ceased to be an independent kingdom shortly after the contract was set up. In

a protracted process that unfolded between 1580 and 1581, the Portuguese Crown passed into the hands of Philip II of Spain and became a part of the Catholic Monarchy: Philip, it was said, inherited, bought and conquered Portugal at the same time. Although the Spanish and the Portuguese parts of the Monarchy remained formally separate, things began to change in Lisbon and in the Estado as well, and Ceylon is in many ways an example of how these transformations occurred. Once the donation of Kotte reached the court of Philip II, the imperial authorities bit the bait thrown out by Dharmapala and his courtly elite. Obtaining a kingdom by inheritance, or indeed by donation, was not a novelty to the Habsburgs. The document was examined by a council of jurists and found valid. After decades of royal resistance against a deeper involvement in the island, the Portuguese Crown – now a part of the Spanish Monarchy – accepted the idea. Philip II and his counsellors hardly realised the full extent of the donation's consequences for Portugal. And of course, once again, the Sinhalese elite remaining in Colombo did not quite realise what it was getting itself into either. But at that time, it seemed a sensible thing to do.

Finally, a third factor intervened. In 1593, Rajasingha died and the kingdom of Sitawaka imploded. Suddenly there was a perception that this might be an occasion not only to re-establish the territorial boundaries of Kotte – a kingdom which, after all, Philip II was bound to inherit – but also to extend power well beyond those lines. In 1594, three years before Dharmapala passed away, Goa created the General Captaincy of the conquest of Ceylon, a new military title, leaving little margin for doubts regarding its goals. Two years later, in 1596, the newly appointed viceroy of India, Francisco da Gama, was summoned to Madrid before he left for India and given vigorous instructions for

the implementation of this project, now finally backed by the Crown: the full and complete conquest of Ceylon.[40]

This is perhaps the most crucial and less understood turning point in Sri Lankan history during the period under consideration. As mentioned already, Dharmapala had transferred to the Portuguese Crown – and thus, unknowingly, to Philip II of Spain – not only the right to rule over Kotte, but also the larger duty to rebuild the imperial power of Kotte throughout the island. As we now know, what Dharmapala was referring to was a system of tributary overlordship by which Kotte claimed suzerainty over the rest of Lanka, not full sovereignty: the mandate implied indirect control (comparable to the older sense of the word *conquista*, as contained by the Portuguese royal title at the beginning of the century), not direct conquest (as practiced in the New World and, by then, also in the Philippines by the Spanish). This one crucial point, Philip II failed to understand. He thus gave orders for something to be done that had never been done before: the establishment of a new kingdom – formally, its status was to remain that of *reino*, like most other parts of the Monarchy – within a space that had never served such a purpose, the island as a whole. In other words, the target was now the establishment of a unified territory that had never existed before, combining the outer spatial framework that had contained the *cakravarti* ideal (the apparently natural space of the island as a whole) with the

40 I analyse the process of decision-making in 'Ruptura imperial ou realização de um velho plano português? O conturbado início da conquista de Ceilão em 1594', in Santiago Hernández Martínez, ed., *Governo, administração e representação do poder no Portugal e seus territórios ultramarinos no período dos Áustrias (1580-1640)*, Lisbon, Tinta da China / Centro de História de Além-Mar, 2011, pp. 147-176.

nascent European concept of the territorial state. The old system of tributary relations, to which the Portuguese dynasty of Avis had adapted comparatively well, broke down. The concept of tributary overlordship, which had worked in the politically fragmented landscape of late medieval Sri Lanka, was replaced by a new type of policy, driven by the idea of full conquest. With conquest came the idea of politically unifying an island that had never been under the direct government of a single monarch, at least not along the lines imagined by the Habsburgs. Along with this came other disruptive ideas including the prospect of systematically converting the island's population to Catholicism, redistributing lands and restructuring the elite in a manner comparable, to some extent, to other parts of the Empire in the New World.

The transition was perhaps less dramatic than one might expect – as a matter of fact, it was not imposed without the collaboration of part of the Lankan elite[41] – but within a decade from Dharmapala's death, the changes in the Lankan southwest were visible to all. During much of the first half of the seventeenth century, vast stretches of Sri Lanka plunged into widespread wars of attrition. The history of the Catholic missions during those years leaves little doubt that, whilst forced conversions were not deemed legitimate, many developments occurred in a grey zone between the impulse of compelling Lankans to take up the new creed and the need to leave them room to convert, following their free will. Much of this history remains to be written from a critical perspective. It seems important, moreover, to underline at this point that these were

41 See Biedermann, 'The "Malwana Convention" revisited. Notes on the Lankan transition to Iberian rule', in Gaston Perera, ed., *The Portuguese in the Orient*, Colombo, ICES, 2010, pp. 29-48.

not quintessentially "Spanish" strategies as opposed to a more tolerant "Portuguese" stance. They were developments that parts of the Portuguese imperial apparatus embraced wholeheartedly, hoping to overthrow existing lobbies and to make their Empire more efficient and, from their own point of view, more in tune with the latest political development of their time. It now became an officially proclaimed objective to unify the entire island under the name of *Ceilão* and, in the manner of what was by then perceived as a desirable political goal in large parts of Europe, encourage its population to adopt a single religion: Catholicism.

The island as a whole thus became a surface for the projection of a new political idea, dramatically out of touch with the multi-religious and multi-centric realities of Lankan society. And yet, however we may judge these developments, none of what happened after 1594 had been foreseeable in 1580, when Dharmapala signed the donation of Kotte, nor in 1557, when he was baptised, let alone in 1541, when Bhuvanekabahu VII sent his embassy to Lisbon, or in 1506, when Dharma Parakramabahu IX engaged in negotiations with the Portuguese.

Conclusion

Historians have always faced the challenge of providing intelligible overarching interpretations and explanations of historical processes whilst keeping an eye on the precise historical contexts in which people acted in the past. By focusing on the role of the Lankan elites in the build-up to Portuguese rule, I am not attempting to neutralise Portugal's historical responsibility for atrocities committed against people and patrimony in the island. I do, however, believe firmly that the analysis of the historical processes involved needs to reflect the complexity of

the information conveyed by the sources. Recent developments in the historiography of the so-called "Portuguese period" of Sri Lanka – indeed, this is a decidedly Lankan period during which the Portuguese gained influence only very gradually – show how much can be done by posing new questions and, above all, keeping our eyes open to new interpretations rather than enshrining old certainties.

The sixteenth century saw old Lankan traditions of welcoming and using foreigners coincide with the development of new imperial strategies at a global scale and the birth of an Empire – the Catholic Monarchy of Philip II – different from anything the world had seen before. One of the more disconcerting aspects of the latter is that Iberian imperialism in Asia was, to some extent at least, generated in Asia itself and took a long time to emerge as a coherent political project fully incorporated into the policies of the imperial centre. Attempting to explain Sri Lanka's first steps towards colonial domination by looking at Goa, Lisbon or Madrid alone, leads us to no conclusive results. Much of the story unfolded in the island as the result of local politics. Blaming those who interacted with the Portuguese in the sixteenth-century Lanka as traitors does not take us any further either: no society has ever lived in complete isolation, and certainly not in such a densely interconnected region as Maritime Asia. It is from the shared histories of Portugal and Sri Lanka that the developments highlighted in this essay emerge. What we are left with is a shared responsibility to engage with this past and make it better understood.

ICES

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