

Biedermann, Zoltán. The Portuguese in Sri Lanka and South India – Studies in the History of Diplomacy, Empire and Trade, 1500-1650, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz Verlag, 2014, 205 pp. ISBN: 978-3-447-10062-5

Paulo Jorge de Sousa Pinto¹

Zoltán Biedermann is a Senior Lecturer in Luso-Brazilian Studies at the Faculty of Arts & Humanities, University College, London. He has conducted extensive research into the Portuguese Empire in Asia, focusing his attention on diplomacy, imperial literature, and the politics of space. In Portuguese academic circles, he is mostly known as an expert on Sri Lanka, studying the European (mainly Portuguese and Dutch) presence and influence on local politics and diplomacy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. He recently co-edited a volume on Sri Lankan studies (*Sri Lanka at the Crossroads of History* [ed. Z. Biedermann and A. Strathern], London, UCL Press, 2017), resulting from a series of seminars and workshops on the subject.

The Portuguese in Sri Lanka and South India is not a single work, but instead consists of a series of revised and expanded articles and book chapters published between 2005 and 2010. Despite its apparent imbalance, the final result is quite interesting, since it provides a fresh, in-depth approach to Portuguese-Sri Lankan relations, going far beyond the traditional views of “the Portuguese presence in...” Chapter One (“Studying the Portuguese in South Asia and Beyond”) introduces the reader to the general theme of the book and presents the author’s view about recent developments in Portuguese historiography on the subject of the Portuguese empire in Asia. Chapter Two (“Negotiating Empire: Portuguese Diplomacy in Asia in the Sixteenth Century”) presents a broad perspective on the diplomatic strategies and activities followed by the Portuguese in Asia, examining both their formal and informal features. Biedermann underlines the complex and ambiguous diplomacy of the sixteenth-century Portuguese *Estado da Índia*, stressing the process followed by viceroys and political decision-makers in learning about and adapting to Asian diplomatic rituals and practices, as well as the role played by individuals in establishing connections and relations with Asian powers.

¹ CHAM (FCSH-Universidade NOVA de Lisboa/Universidade dos Açores, Portugal). *E-Mail:* paulo.pinto@fcs.unl.pt

A close study of the Sri Lankan political balance and the strategies followed by the Portuguese throughout the sixteenth century is presented in Chapter Three (“From Diplomacy to Conquest: The ‘Matrioshka Principle’ and How it was Overcome in Sri Lanka”). Closely following the political alignments between the Sri Lankan kingdoms and the Portuguese, the “imperial” pretensions of the kingdom of Kotte in relation to smaller political formations, and similar projects developed by the Estado, the author builds up the notion of the ‘Matrioshka Principle,’ including its mechanisms and evolution, until the ‘donation’ made by Dom João Dharmapala and the definitive change in patterns that led to the rupture and the attempts at territorial conquest in the seventeenth century. The debate over a specific moment and episode in this process of transition to “colonial rule,” the so-called Malwana Convention of 1597, is presented and enlarged upon by the author in Chapter Five (“Imperial Incorporation: The ‘Malwana Convention’ and the Lankan Transition to Colonial Rule”).

Previously, Chapter Four (“Imagining Space before Conquest: Two Contrasting Maps of Sri Lanka, 1568–1606”) presents a brief, although stimulating, comparative approach to two different and contrasting views of Sri Lanka: the map of Fernão Vaz Durado (c. 1568); and the Jodocus Hondius print for the Mercator Atlas (1606). The political significance of the different cartographic spaces and their dissimilar visual representations is the main subject here. Chapter Six (“Colonialism and Cosmopolitanism: Colombo, Cannanore, and the Chimera of the Multi-Ethnic Melting-Po(r)t in South Asia”) is the longest text in the book, a comparative view of Cannanore and Colombo and an explanation of their political and social dimensions. The book ends with a final chapter about the role of elephants in colonial Sri Lanka (Chapter 7: “Change and Resilience under Colonial Rule: The Hunting and Trading of Elephants in Sri Lanka, 1500–1800”). An extensive bibliography, an index, and sixteen illustrations complete the volume.

Zoltán Biedermann’s work is a perceptive and accurate look at Portuguese-Sri Lankan relations. It starts from the “Portuguese point of view”—the Portuguese sources—explained within the framework of a “regional history” to unveil the complex political balance of the island and show how it was possible for the Estado da Índia to influence and take advantage of local conditions. It also raises important questions about the Portuguese system itself: What was the role played by informal diplomacy? What arose from the tensions between individual actions and official positions? How effective and durable was the strategy of accommodation to Asian realities? The ambiguous and unclear definition of “empire” (clearly summarized in a single sentence: “the Portuguese empire in

Asia carries in itself a superb principle of uncertainty,” pp. 33-34), the shift that occurred in the 1580s with the contamination of the “Improvised Empire” by the Habsburg model of conquest and dominion, and the way in which the Portuguese and Sri Lankan kingdoms used their own “imperial” traditions are just some of the interesting issues that Biedermann introduces to the reader.

The book is of obvious interest not only to historians studying the Portuguese presence in Asia—both “the empire” and “the expansion”—but also to South Asian scholars, for it provides a fertile combination of new issues and fresh insights into old ones. Moreover, it has an appropriate size and a sufficient number of supportive footnotes, sources, and bibliography. *The Portuguese in Sri Lanka and South India* is also recommended reading for the general public: it never goes too far in terms of academic detail or tedious description. On the contrary, the author has the ability to focus on what is fundamental and meaningful, and his writing is lively and fresh, ironic, and often surprising and humorous.

There are obviously some points that need to be commented upon. The most important one is, perhaps, perfectly visible: a real “book,” i.e. a coordinated and organized work, written from the beginning to the end, would be more useful and clearer than a series of articles, albeit revised and expanded. There is a sense of imbalance when, for instance, one compares Chapters Three and Six with the rest of the book. Secondly, a chapter providing a wider view and offering a broader context for examining some of the issues presented in the “core” of the work would have been interesting. For instance, the questions involving the “conquest” in the Sri Lankan landscape call for a deeper insight into the ideological framework of the Portuguese expansion, its horizons, expectations, and practices, pre- and post-1580. The work of G. Marcocci, *A Consciência de um Império* (Coimbra, 2012), could have been a useful example and a suggestion to be followed. Inserting the “Lankan experience” into other similar (and dissimilar) contexts of the *Estado da Índia* would also have been valuable, offering a comparative approach.

There are also some minor inaccuracies to be found. For instance, the author insists on the incorrect notion that the division of the world through the Treaty signed at Tordesillas gave Portugal the right of conquest granted “by papal decree” (pp. 15, 35). However, the Treaty was a strictly bilateral deal and the Portuguese King claimed his rights upon “the Grace of God” and not as the result of any permission granted by the Pope. Biedermann also suggests that presenting the King of Portugal as more powerful than he was in reality was a universal and advisable strategy in Asia (p. 22), but that this could

actually be quite counterproductive and not at all advisable in Ming China or in Hideyoshi's Japan, for instance.

These are just minor issues. The Portuguese in Sri Lanka and South India is a reliable, stimulating and highly recommended work about the Portuguese presence in Asia, standing as a landmark in the recent historiography about Sri Lanka in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.