

Portuguese Encounters with Sri Lanka and the Maldives. Translated Texts from the Age of the Discoveries, edited by Chandra R. de Silva, Farnham / Burlington, VT, Ashgate Publishing, 2009. ISBN978-0-7546-0186-9

Zoltán Biedermann¹

It is one of the paradoxes of Sri Lankan history that the bulk of the historical source material for the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was written in the language of the island's first European occupiers, the Portuguese. Letters, reports, surveys and chronicles were produced assiduously by the newcomers to reflect upon the realities encountered in Sri Lanka, as in so many other places. It has thus become common for Sri Lankanists interested in the Early Modern period to engage with Portuguese texts. As a consequence, making such texts available in English translation has been one of the priorities of scholars working on the subject since the glory days of the *Journal of the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* in the late nineteenth century and the *Ceylon Antiquary and Literary Register* in the 1910s-30s. Amongst the most significant English translations of Portuguese sources are Father Gabriel Perera's version of Fernão de Queiroz's *Temporal and Spiritual Conquest of Ceylon* (Colombo, 1930) and Vito Perniola's three volumes of sources in *The Catholic Church in Sri Lanka – The Portuguese Period* (Dehiwala, 1989-91).

Chandra Richard de Silva's *Portuguese Encounters with Sri Lanka and the Maldives* draws on some of this scholarship, whilst also adding a number of new translations that offer fresh insights into the history of Luso-Lankan encounters. This is a well-presented collection of historical texts accompanied by an introduction, maps and illustrations, short comments to the documents, and a brief but useful bibliography of primary and secondary sources. Given the vast amount of Portuguese materials on Sri Lanka, the main challenge in the production of this book has been to make a representative selection of texts depicting the principal encounters between colonizers and colonized—a pair of categories which, as De Silva points out, need to be seen “not as fixed entities, but as a historically shifting pair of social categories” (xiv). With this caveat in mind, Silva has set out to present a number of texts that deal with Luso-Lankan encounters from different, often contradictory perspectives, highlighting the complexity of the histories that unfolded after the first encounter of 1506.

The earliest recorded encounter in Sri Lanka, for example, is presented through a letter written by King Manuel I in 1507, in combination with three accounts by later Portuguese chroniclers (João de Barros, Gaspar Correia, Fernão de Queiroz) and three Sinhalese versions of the story (taken from the *Rajavaliya*, the *Sitawaka Hatana*, and the *Maha Hatana*). Taken together, these texts provide a complex and richly textured narrative of the first encounter. The following chapters deal with Portuguese descriptions of Sri Lanka and its peoples (chapter 2); the interactions of King John III with Bhuvanekabahu VII, whose reign from 1521 to 1551 saw the stabilization of commercial and diplomatic ties between Kotte in the Southwest of Sri Lanka and Portugal (chapter 3); the religious and political encounters in the mountain kingdom of Kandy (chapter 4); the conquest of Jaffna in the North of the island (chapter 5); and the negotiations around the Luso-Kandyan Peace Treaty of 1617 (chapter 6). It may strike the reader that no later episodes are included, but the author rightly considers that a number of aspects of Luso-Lankan history not covered by this book would deserve to be treated separately. Instead of exploring the last decades of the Portuguese official presence in the island, De Silva has indeed included almost fifty pages of materials dealing with the Maldives, a very rarely studied territory of Portuguese presence in Asia. Together with the recent unpublished research of Jorge Santos Alves (forthcoming), this chapter throws light on a rarely studied subject, namely, the active role played by the Portuguese in the local and regional struggles for power in and around the Maldives.

The publication of this volume by Chandra Richard de Silva is particularly welcome for two reasons. First, De Silva has authored one of the foremost monographs on Portuguese politics in Ceylon (*The Portuguese in Ceylon 1618-1638*, Colombo, 1972) and a large number of significant, often definitive

¹ Birkbeck College, University of London. E-mail: zoltanbiedermann@yahoo.com

articles on related subjects. He is thus the foremost senior authority in the field, and one who also has kept abreast of more recent work by younger scholars such as Alan Strathern, Jorge Flores and the author of these lines. It may be worth remembering that the first Portuguese register of revenues put together for Ceylon by Jorge Frolim de Almeida in 1599 was unearthed by Chandra Richard and Daya de Silva in the National Archives of Lisbon from among some rather obscure papers of the Goan Augustinians in the late 1960s. Second, De Silva is one of the very few scholars working today with a command of Portuguese and Sinhala, the latter being particularly difficult to tackle in texts from the Early Modern period.

This is important not only for the obvious scholarly depth that such a versatility brings to De Silva's work, but also because it makes it easier for it to be accepted in Sri Lanka today as a valid alternative to traditional nationalistic narratives. De Silva makes a convincing case in his introduction that it is crucial to take into account "the growing understanding that groups of European colonizers had their own conflicting motivations and objectives," thus avoiding, amongst other things, the "dangers of conflating policymakers in Europe with colonizers on the ground" (xiii). Perhaps even more importantly—and this is the point that is most likely to cause controversy—it is essential to bear in mind the evident and yet often underestimated fact that the "colonized were not mere victims but had their own agendas and occasionally successfully manipulated the colonial powers" (xiii). Sri Lanka is, despite the often extreme brutality with which the Portuguese proceeded in the island as mercenaries, conquerors and missionaries, a paradigmatic case with regard to the role played by the local elites in the consolidation of Portuguese power. This is a matter that is not always easily conveyed to the Sinhala nationalist elite in our time, and yet it emerges compellingly from the materials collected and published in this book.