

KAREL STANĚK, *SEN O NOVÉM PORTUGALSKU V TROPECH: PORTUGALSKÝ POKUS O OSÍDLENÍ ŠRÍ LANKY (1580–1630)* [A DREAM ABOUT A NEW PORTUGAL IN THE TROPICS: A PORTUGUESE ATTEMPT TO COLONIZE SRI LANKA (1580–1630)], PRAHA: SCRIPTORIUM 2017, ISBN 978-80-88013-46-4, 350 P.



Karel Staněk, a Czech historian and expert on Portuguese studies of the young generation, working in the National Library in Prague at the moment, presents to readers a supplemented and modified version of his dissertation *A Portuguese Attempt to Colonize Sri Lanka (1580–1630)* he defended at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University in 2014. The work is based on outcomes of a study taking place in Portuguese archives, and in-depth study of numerous pieces of professional literature. It is dedicated to activities of the Portuguese on Sri Lanka, mostly to their attempt to convert the island to “a new Portugal” or “a new Brazil” between the years 1580 and 1630.

In the Introduction of the book, the author deals with Portuguese activities on the island from 1506 onwards, and the Colombo fort construction in 1518. Slow beginnings caused by a marginal role played by Ceylon in the concept of Portuguese viceroys changed after 1554 when Portuguese settlers began arriving in the island, whose quantity, activities and lives the author analyses in detail. The Portuguese engagement in the political development of the Kingdom of Kotte had been gradually increasing in the course of the 16th century. The King of that empire, João Dharmapala, baptized in 1580, bequeathed his country to the Portuguese monarch in case he would have died having no heir; such a situation would arise and the country would be taken over by the Portuguese after the death of the dynasty in 1597. Subsequent donations given by monarchs of the Kingdom of Kandy (1626) and Jaffna (1633) led to another increase in Portuguese power. This development resulted in Portuguese plans to take Sri Lanka over and gradually colonize the whole territory.

The Portuguese succeeded in taking either direct or indirect control over coastal regions; however, the Kingdom of Kandy situated in the central plateau of the island was able to resist the Portuguese army. On the other hand, the Kingdom failed to defeat the Portuguese and expel them from the sea regions. What is worth appreciating being the author’s description of both of the armies’ sides in the context of depicting these events as well as the reasons leading to the defeat of the Portuguese in the Sinhalese-Portuguese War.

Then a Portuguese colonization project was launched by an ambitious kingly project from the years 1607–1608. Although partial achievements such as forming Sinhalese-Portuguese mix-race community, attempts to Christianize the region, or accepting some of the basic elements of the Portuguese culture cannot be negated, from the viewpoint of the original intention this attempt ended up with disillusion and failure. A dream about the new Portuguese empire in the tropics faded away. The author analyses a number of demographic, military, social/cultural and religious reasons why the Portuguese failed. He regards inability to arrive at a compromise with the King of Kandy, arrogant attitude towards the natives, breaking smallish Portuguese human and material resources, but mostly the limited time as major causes. There is no doubt that the Asian centralised empires’ ability to put up effective resistance and to rapidly take over partial modernization elements played the role too. Yet the author



considers Portuguese attempt to colonize the region potentially viable, however the foregoing limits, primarily that small amount of time the Portuguese had at disposal, proved themselves to be determining. The colonisation, in fact, perished after the catastrophic defeat in the Battle of Randeniwela in 1630 where the Portuguese had been defeated by the Kandyan forces. Nevertheless, nor after that event the Portuguese were disposed to revise their approach so they would be finally defeated by the Dutch in 1658, who would expel them from the island in the name of the emperors of the Kingdom of Kandy.

The author, who has been long devoting himself to the history of Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands and overseas expansion of these countries in the early modern times places the historic events on Sri Lanka in a wider context of the Portuguese and Dutch colonial expansion. He compares the development on Sri Lanka with other regions in the Portuguese empire without succumbing to extensive depicting excursions. However, he has taken into his heart partial reproaches by those opposing his dissertation, which benefits the work since it is more synoptic and logical, so easier to understand by the community of readers. His study also considers numerous previously neglected factors; it gains deeper and more analysing immersion in the cultural and economic relations between the Portuguese and Sinhalese and Tamil population. What deserves appreciation is more skilful and apt formulations of the outcomes that make them more plausible, which is best perceptible in dense but brilliantly conceived closing sections within single chapters as well as the complete work. It is an extraordinarily valuable and unique sort of work, whose attractiveness is emphasised by slightly graphic and visual interpretation. It definitely deserves the professional and general public's attention.

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