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Colonial Historiography of Malabar: Towards an Alternative to History

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Abstract

This article aims to assess the impact of colonial historiography on precolonial modes of knowledge from Malabar. It examines the colonial writing of the early history of Malabar based on a local tradition centered on Cēramān Perumāḷ in manuals and gazetteers produced in British Malabar and the Indian princely states of Cochin and Travancore in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The colonial-era historians interpreted the contradictions contained in the Perumāḷ tradition as signs of an ahistorical society. This study offers a critique of the conception of ahistoricity and argues that the colonial attempt to historicize the Perumāḷ tradition reveals a gap between Western positivist history and local mythmaking. It reads the contradictions as integral to the tradition and finds that they offer a window into the heterogeneous contexts in which the Perumāḷ served as a founder-hero for rival political, economic, and religious stakeholders in Indian Ocean trade since the twelfth century.

Keywords

Colonialism, Writing of History, Myth

> The true ancient history of Southern India, almost unrecorded by its own people in anything worthy of the name of history, appears as yet only as a faint outline on canvas. Thanks to the untiring labours of European scholars and of one or two native scholars these faint outlines are gradually assuming more distinct lines (Logan, 1887, p. 255).

Introduction

A major impact of colonialism on non-western societies arose from the imposition of the idea of history as it emerged in the West. Colonial agents found colonized societies to be devoid of a historical consciousness. In their endeavors to produce a "true" history of the colony, they nevertheless subjected the very sources they considered to be "unreliable" to historical scrutiny. Therein lay the paradox of history writing in colonial Malabar, in southern India, the legacies of which continue to bear upon contemporary historiography on precolonial Kerala.[1]

This article evaluates the colonial historiography of Malabar, specifically its attempt to write the early history of Malabar using the Cēramān Perumāḷ tradition, which formed the basis for a conception of the Malabari people as ahistorical. It examines four records produced between 1887 and 1911: the *Malabar Manual* (in two volumes) by William Logan, Collector and Magistrate of Malabar; the *Madras District Gazetteers: Malabar* (in two volumes) by C.A. Innes, a Settlement Officer of Malabar; *The Cochin State Manual* by C.A. Menon, a former secretary to the Dewan of Cochin; and *The Travancore State Manual* (in three volumes) by V. Nagam Aiya, the Dewan of Travancore.

The Problem of Ahistoricity

The British colonial rule in nineteenth-century India inaugurated a new kind of Orientalist research into Indian history, one that relied on local records rather than informants. According to Eugenia Vanina, the concept of "ahistoricity" of the Indian mind began to emerge and eventually

1 In Arabic and European literature, the region of Kerala is referred to as Malabar, a word of Arabic origin. From the late eighteenth century, the term Malabar denoted the northern parts of Kerala which came under direct British colonial rule in 1792.

dominate this research (Vanina, 2018, p. 38). This concept presumed that Indians lacked "history" in the sense of both as a record of past events and as the events themselves (Vanina, 2018, p. 33). In the words of Arthur Anthony Macdonell, "early India wrote no history because it never made any"- "early" India here signifying "ancient" and "medieval" India, prior to Muslim conquest (apud Vanina, 2018, p. 33). Among the Orientalists, the "Indophiles" attributed ahistoricity to the unchanging character of Indian society, while the "Indophobes", including James Mill and Hegel, ascribed it to the deceitful nature of Indians that could at best produce only "fables" and "myths" (Vanina, 2018, p. 43). Both, in effect, came to the same conclusion.

Modern historians have approached the problem of ahistoricity in different ways. Representing one end of this spectrum, Ashis Nandy has characterized precolonial Indian society as indeed an "ahistorical society", whose narratives of the past were marked by a "principled forgetfulness" (Nandy, 1995, p. 47). In his view, "historical consciousness", once exported to the nonmodern world, "has not only tended to absolutize the past in cultures that have lived with open-ended concepts of the past or depended on myths, legends, and epics to define their cultural selves, it has also made the historical worldview complicit with many new forms of violence" (Nandy, 1995, p. 44). Nandy rejects formulations that impose the category of history on all constructions of the past or sanction the reduction of all myths to history (Nandy, 1995, p. 45). Acknowledging the special place held by myths in organizing the past in so-called ahistorical societies, Nandy characterizes such societies as "mythic societies" and their nonhistorical reconstructions of the past as "mythography" (Nandy, 1995, p. 45, 47, 63).

Across the Indian Ocean, Shelly Errington (1979) similarly treats "history" as alien to Malay society. Critical of modern attempts to close the gap between Western historical writings and Classical Malay *hikayat* by reconciling the discrepancies between a particular *hikayat* and historical events, Errington instead reopens the gap by dissociating the genre of history from the *hikayat* (Errington, 1979, p. 232). According to Errington, the perception of *hikayat* as a mixture of "mythical" and "real" events is based on the criteria of reality implicit in the historical mode (Errington, 1979, p. 232). By tracing the origins and development of the genre of history in Europe, Errington establishes how this genre contrasts with the *hikayat* in conceptions of the past, time, authorship, and audience. She concludes that "the consciousness which informs historical writing and that which informed Classical Malay *hikayat* are profoundly alien to one another, in impulse as well as in artifact" (Errington, 1979, pp. 232–233).

Refuting the notion of ahistoricity, other historians have argued instead for the presence of powerful modes and genres of history writing in precolonial India, including those in Persian and Arabic (Thapar, 2011a & 2011b; Ali, 2000 & 2012; Roy, 2012; Rao, 2003; Guha, 2004;

Amer, 2016; Asif, 2020). In her study of ancient India and the Sanskrit *itihāsa-purāṇa* traditions, Romila Thapar makes a distinction between historical writing as it emerged in the West and "historical consciousness", which she defines as "an awareness of events and persons from the past, with the claim that what is being narrated happened, as is implicit in the term *itihāsa*: 'thus indeed it was'" (Thapar, 2011a, p. 554). She argues that, while there may not be historical writing of a conventional form as we know it now, there existed constructions of the past that reflected a "sense of history" (Thapar, 2011a, p. 554). Thapar attributes the colonial portrayal of Indian society as ahistorical to not just colonial reasonings of a static society, the Brahmana control over intellectual activities, the lack of political unity, the subordination of the human will to the divine, caste overwhelming the state, or a cyclic concept of time but, more importantly, to the "vantage point of a colonial administration constructing an entirely new history for the colony" (Thapar, 2011a, p. 554).

Writing the Early History of Malabar

The concept of ahistoricity came to dominate the reconstruction of the "ancient" or "early" history of Malabar before the arrival of the Portuguese in colonial-era manuals and gazetteers. This history formed part of a comprehensive account of the colony produced in the manual/gazetteer form by the colonial administrators for the benefit of the empire.

Logan's *Malabar Manual* served as a model for the writing of manuals and gazetteers from Malabar and the neighboring Indian princely states of Travancore and Cochin. Innes, for example, writes in his *Gazetteer* on Malabar:

> Free use has been made of the old Malabar Manual published in 1887 by Mr. W. Logan, Collector of Malabar, whose intimate knowledge of the district and the people renders his work a permanent authority of the utmost value (Innes, 1908, p. iv).

Logan's *Manual* contained detailed descriptions of the land, the people, the flora and fauna, language and literature, history, religion, trade, land revenue, and the administration. In the chapter on History, Logan divided the period before the Portuguese into three sections: Traditionary Ancient History, which reconstructs the "ancient" history of Malabar using local records; Early History from other sources, which reconstructs the same period using foreign records and inscriptions; and 825 to 1498 A.D., which is again largely based on foreign records.

To write the early history of Kerala, the colonial-era historians mainly depended on two local records. The first, the Sanskrit *Kēraḷamāhātmyam* (*The Glory of Kerala*), contained the story of the reclamation of the land of Kerala from the sea by the puranic hero Paraśurāma and his gift of that land to Brahmins[2]. The second, the Malayalam *Kēraḷōlpatti* (*The Origin of Kerala*), chronicled the rule of the land of Kerala by a succession of rulers known as Perumāḷs, who arrived from foreign countries on the invitation of Brahmins, and the partition of the land by the last Perumāḷ, known as Cēramān Perumāḷ, before his conversion and departure from the land. Though not explicitly stated, Logan and the others seem to have relied on the *Kēraḷōlpatti* version published by Hermann Gundert, a German missionary, in 1868[3]. The historians were also aware of parallel (possibly oral) traditions centered on Cēramān Perumāḷ as well as the reception of the Perumāḷ tradition into Arabic and Portuguese works in the sixteenth century. Gundert's *Kēraḷōlpatti* records the conversion of at least two different Perumāḷs, Paḷḷibāṇa Perumāḷ and Cēramān Perumāḷ, to either Buddhism or Islam.[4] The last Cēramān Perumāḷ is said to have abdicated after committing an error of judgement in sentencing one of his guards to death. Before his abdication, the Perumāḷ divided his kingdom extending from Gokarnam to Kanyakumari into seventeen little kingdoms, which included Tulunāḍu, Kōlattunāḍu, Pōlanāḍu, Ēranāḍu, Veṭṭattunāḍu, and Vēṇanāḍu. The Zamorin (ruler of Calicut) was not granted land at this time. Just before the Perumāḷ's departure to Mecca, the Zamorin met and received the Perumāḷ's sword with the dictum "To Die and Kill and Prevail" (Gundert 2003 & 2014). The colonial-era historians were cognizant that both records were "late compilations" - from the seventeenth and eighteenth century respectively - of the region's prevalent traditions (Innes, 1908, p. 23; Menon, 1911, p. 29).

Logan's labeling of these records as a "farrago of legendary nonsense" that, moreover, concealed a Brahmin agenda, was repeated *ad nauseam* in other colonial-era manuals. For instance, in the *Cochin State Manual*, Menon remarked that "Mr. Logan was not unjustified in characterising them as a 'farrago of legendary nonsense, having for definite aim the securing to the Brahman caste of unbounded power and influence in the country'" (Menon, 1911, p. 29).

Innes attributes the ahistoricity of Kerala society to the Hindus who, in his view, "were totally devoid of the historical spirit" (Innes, 1908, p. 23). In the *Travancore State Manual*, Aiya

2 The exact manuscript copy consulted by Logan and the others is unclear. However, the contents of this record were already available in English translation by Gundert in 1844. See the printed edition on https://gundert-portal.de of the Tübingen University. For the Malayalam translation of this work, see Rajeev (2012).

3 The historians do mention other publications by Gundert, such as the Malayalam-English dictionary, Kēraḷapaḻama, and translation of the Jewish and Syrian Christian Copper Plates.

4 For the English translation, see Gundert (2003). Manuscript versions and printed editions of the Kēraḷōlpatti are available on https://gundert-portal.de of the Tübingen University.

puts forward a similar reasoning, arguing that the Hindus, though fond of philosophy, poetry, law, mathematics, architecture, music, and drama, "seem never to have cared anything for history" (Aiya, 1906, p. 209). For Logan, on the other hand, "the Malayāḷi race has produced no historians simply because there was little or no history in one sense to record" (Logan, 1887, p. v). Logan attributes this to the lack of noteworthy events in the history of Kerala, with the remarkable exception of the division of Kerala by Cēramān Perumāḷ and his departure to Mecca. He writes:

> A people who throughout a thousand and more years have been looking longingly back to an event like the departure of Chēramān Perumāl for Mecca, and whose rulers even now assume the sword or sceptre on the understanding that they merely hold it "until the Uncle who has gone to Mecca returns must be a people whose history presents few landmarks or stepping stones, so to speak, - a people whose history was almost completed on the day when that wonderful civil constitution was organised which endured unimpaired through so many centuries (Logan, 1887, pp. iv–v).

Complimenting the unchanging character of Kerala society, Logan adds that "happy is the people who have no history" (Logan, 1887, p. iv). This discourse of ahistoricity presented a clean slate for the colonial-era historian to reconstruct the early history of Kerala based on other, more "credible", sources, such as King Ashoka's edicts, Pliny, Ptolemy, Periplus, Al-Bīrūni, Marco Polo, Ibn Batuta, Abdu-r-Razzāk, and the Jewish and Syrian Christian Copper Plates from Kerala[5].

Between the two records, the *Kēraḷōlpatti* was nonetheless considered by colonial-era historians to be much more "worthy of serious analysis" than the *Kēraḷamāhātmyam* (Logan, 1887, p. 222). For Logan, even though the *Kēraḷōlpatti* was full of Brahmanical legends and the dates mentioned in it were "worthless" and "unreliable", historically "there was something to be learnt from it" (Logan, 1887, p. 222). In the evaluation of Innes too, "though full of inconsistencies and vain repetitions", the *Kēraḷōlpatti* suggested "a more popular origin", and "on that account is worthier of serious analysis" (Innes, 1908, p. 37).

Interestingly, the historical analysis of the *Kēraḷōlpatti* largely centered around the figure of the last Perumāḷ, Cēramān Perumāḷ, "the eponymous hero of nearly every Malabar tradition" (Innes, 1908, p. 40). As Innes writes in his *Gazetteer*, "who the Perumal was, and when he left for Mecca, is one of the most interesting of the many problems of Malabar history" (Innes, 1908,

5 On the Jewish and Syrian Christian (Tarisāppaḷḷi) Copper Plates from Kerala, see Narayanan (2018) and Veluthat (2009).

p. 39). At the same time, he acknowledges that "there are also stories of the conversion of a Cheraman Perumal to Buddhism and to Christianity" (Innes, 1908, p. 40). Despite containing such anomalies, the Perumāḷ tradition was nevertheless thought to contain clues to answering questions related to the early history of Kerala: the end of foreign rule by the Cōḻas, the Cēras, and the Pāṇḍyas; the subsequent rise of little kingdoms such as Calicut, Cochin, and Travancore; and the introduction of Islam on the Malabar Coast.

The colonial attempt to historicize the Perumāḷ tradition not only had a precedent in the precolonial era, but that in turn served as a reference point for the colonial-era historian. Challenging the popular Māppiḷa belief of his time that the Perumāḷ converted to Islam in the era of the Prophet (c. 570–632 CE), Zainuddin Makhdum, the author of the sixteenth-century Arabic work *Tuḥfat al-Mujāhidīn* (*Gift to the Holy Warriors*), situates the ruler's conversion in the ninth century. He bases this claim on the report of a tomb of a Malabari ruler named "Abd al-Rahman Samuri" in Zafar in present-day Yemen (Makhdum, 2009, p. 33, 116). Following Makhdum's methodology, Logan and the others attempted to prove the identity of Cēramān Perumāḷ, the era he lived in and partitioned the country, the religion he converted to, and his fate following his conversion.

Logan associates the era of Perumāḷs mentioned in the *Kēraḷōlpatti* with the foreign rule of Kerala by the Cēra, Cōḻa, and Pāṇḍya dynasties (Logan, 1887, p. 225). Like Makhdum, he locates the partition of the country by the last Perumāḷ in the ninth century, which he sees as "an important epoch in the history of Malabar and of the Malayāḷis" (Logan, 1887, p. 243). He identifies Cēramān Perumāḷ with the earlier Paḷḷibāṇa Perumāḷ and asserts that he was indeed the Cēramān Perumāḷ who partitioned the country and converted to Islam (Logan, 1887, p. 232, 241). According to Logan, the partition of the kingdom coincided with the inauguration of the Malayalam Calendar year, known as Kollam on 25 August, 825 CE, and the Onam festival, which celebrated the annual return of the legendary ruler Mahābali from the puranic underworld (Logan, 1887, p. 231)[6]. Logan argues that, since the day of the Onam festival was also the occasion on which a vassal could proclaim his independence from his suzerain, so did the rulers of Travancore and Kōlattunāḍu (known as Southern and Northern Kōlattiris) break away from central rule of Paḷḷibāṇa Perumāḷ/Cēramān Perumāḷ (Logan, 1887, p. 231). Logan's dating also makes the last Perumāḷ a contemporary of the Vedanta philosopher Śaṅkarācārya (788–820 CE), as also claimed by the *Kēraḷōlpatti* (Logan, 1887, p. 238). Logan submits two sets of epigraphic records in support of his argument: the Jewish and Syrian Christian grants (dated to 1000 CE and 849 CE respectively), which he contends proceeded from local rulers (and not the Perumāḷs) and,

6 On the Malayalam Calendar known as Kollam, see Sarma (1996).

secondly, the rumored existence of the tomb in Zafar, bearing the inscription "Arrived at Zaphār, A.H. 212. Died there A.H. 216", which corresponded with the years 827–832 CE (Logan, 1887, p. 196, 231, 243, 244).

For Innes too, the era of Perumāḷs represented the subjugation of Kerala, especially by the Cōḻas and the Pāṇḍyas in the tenth, eleventh, and thirteenth centuries (Innes, 1908, p. 38). Innes, however, challenges Logan's dating of the conversion and the partition of the kingdom by the Perumāḷ. He disputes the dating of the conversion to the ninth century based on his understanding that Christian and Muslim travelers who visited Kerala between the ninth and fifteenth centuries do not mention such an event (Innes, 1908, p. 40). In light of this, he concludes that the story in its present form was a confusion of two distinct traditions, one relating to partition and the other to conversion (Innes, 1908, p. 40). Based on inscriptions from the fourteenth century and Ibn Batuta's report that "in the country of Malabar there are twelve kings", Innes theorizes that the last of the Perumāḷs ceased to rule between 1320 and 1342 (apud Innes, 1908, p. 40). He locates the partition of the kingdom within this timeframe.

Menon's reading of the *Kēraḷōlpatti* detects a confusion between one tradition relating to the rule of Perumāḷs in the early centuries of the Christian era and another tradition relating to foreign rule by Cōḻas, Pāṇḍyas, and others who were also, in his opinion, addressed as Perumāḷs (Menon, 1911, p. 36). He disputes the chronology provided by Logan and Innes and argues instead that the last Perumāḷ converted to Buddhism in the fifth or sixth century CE, before the introduction of Islam on the coast (Menon, 1911, p. 37). He assigns the division of the kingdom to this early era of Perumāḷs. Like Logan, he asserts that the Jewish and Syrian Christian grants proceeded from local rulers, specifically the rulers of Cochin and Kollam, and not from the Perumāḷs (Menon, 1911, p. 38). He argues that the dedication of the tomb at Zafar to "Abdul Rahiman Samiri" is proof that it was a Zamorin (ruler of Calicut), and not a Perumāḷ who converted to Islam (Menon, 1911, p. 39).

Aiya, like the others, interprets the era of Perumāḷs as the era of foreign rule by Cēras, Cōḻas, and Pāṇḍyas (Aiya, 1906, p. 224). The Perumāḷs were, in his view, viceroys sent by these dynasties. Aiya, however, debunks the stories of conversion and partition. According to him, local dynasties such as Kōlattunāḍu and Travancore were already in existence at the time of the advent of the Perumāḷs and ruled independently of the Perumāḷs. This, he argues, is confirmed by the Jewish and Syrian Christian grants to which local rulers as well as a viceroy sent by the Cēras were signatories (Aiya, 1906, pp. 227–228). Rather than prove or disprove the conversion story, Aiya recognizes the story as an invention of the various religious groups that had at different times colonized the region (Aiya, 1906, p. 235).

For the colonial-era historian, who approached time as linear and events as singular, anachronisms posed an irreconcilable hurdle in determining the identity and chronology of Cēramān Perumāḷ. One of the more glaring anachronisms in the *Kēraḷōlpatti* is related to its claim that the last Perumāḷ – whose reign has been variously dated in the manuals to the sixth, ninth, and fourteenth century – was sent to rule Kerala by Kṛṣṇarāyar of Ānakuṇḍi (Vijayanagara), who ruled in the sixteenth century (Gundert, 2003, p. 52). The presence of this "anachronism" further reinforced the colonial perception of ahistoricity. In the words of Aiya, "it is accounts like this that tend to greatly mar the otherwise valuable historical truths contained in traditions" (Aiya, 1906, pp. 223–24). Logan finds this anachronism to be "sufficiently absurd" that he considers the allusion to Kṛṣṇarāyar to be "inaccurate" (Logan, 1887, pp. 233–34).

The colonial conception of ahistoricity has been both reproduced and challenged by historians from Kerala. The view that precolonial Kerala lacked a historical sensibility has interestingly appeared in the prefaces to publications of historiographical records from Kerala. For example, in the preface to the publication of a court chronicle or *granthavari* from Cochin, the translator S. Raimon writes that Logan has "rightly characterized" local records such as the *Kēraḷōlpatti* as a "farrago of legendary nonsense" (Raimon, 2005, p. ii). On the other hand, following in the line of Thapar, historian Kesavan Veluthat understands "the *Kēraḷōlpatti* as history" (Veluthat, 2009, p. 129). According to Veluthat, the people of Kerala did have a "sense of history" and the *Kēraḷōlpatti* was the form through which "the elite in Kerala chose to express its historical consciousness from time to time" (Veluthat, 2009, p. 130 & 133). As discussed by Velcheru Narayana Rao and others (2003), the impact of Western positivist historiography also led historians from Kerala to look for evidence in "hard" sources such as inscriptions, thus carrying the colonial legacy forward.

Efforts to prove or refute aspects of the Perumāḷ tradition using inscriptions strengthened after the independence of the region from the British Empire in 1947. In a continuation of Elamkulam P.N. Kunjan Pillai's work in this field, M.G.S. Narayanan (2018) has made two important interventions into the historical study of the Perumāḷ tradition, based on recently deciphered Cēra inscriptions. First, he identifies the era of Perumāḷs mentioned in the *Kēraḷōlpatti* with the hereditary Cēra rule from their capital in Makotai (near Kodungallur) from 800 CE to 1124 CE (Narayanan, 2018, p. 20). This challenged the colonial view that each of the Perumāḷs either represented the Cōḻa, Cēra, or Pāṇḍya empires, or were viceroys sent by them. He argues that "Cēramān Perumāḷ" was not the name of a particular ruler but a generic title, meaning "great lord of the Cheras", borne by all the rulers – a point already hinted at by some of the colonial-era historians (apud Prange, 2018, p. 95; Day, 1863, p. 42). He ascribes the partition of Kerala – or the disintegration of central rule, as he reads it – to the time of Rāma Kulaśēkhara (1089–1122 CE),

the last of the Perumāḷs (Narayanan, 2018, p. 73). Second, with the support of an inscription from 1122 CE of Vikrama Cōḻa, Narayanan proposes that under internal and external political pressure, Kulaśēkhara likely fled the country by sea with the aid of Arab-Muslim traders (Narayanan, 2018, p. 129). Finding merit in the report of a tomb in Zafar, Narayanan supports the Islamic tradition that the Perumāḷ traveled to Mecca and converted to Islam, albeit in the twelfth century (Narayanan, 2018, p. 129). He understands the post-Cēra kingdoms to have risen to prominence independently after the "disappearance" of the last Cēra king (Narayanan, 2018, p. 132). Thus, as noted by Sebastian Prange, the study of the Perumāḷ tradition based on inscriptions bereaved the tradition of "both its chronology and eponymous protagonist" (Prange, 2018, p. 95).

Critical of the colonial methodology of sorting out the wheat from the chaff by sifting the Perumāḷ tradition for a reliable timeline of events, Prange (2018) has instead attempted to trace the origins of the tradition. Focusing on the conversion story, he presents an Arabic manuscript titled *Qiṣṣat Shakarwatī Farmāḍ* (*Story of the Cakṛavarti Cēramān Perumāḷ*) as the oldest and the most comprehensive recorded version of Cēramān Perumāḷ's Islamic conversion. This record not only narrates the story of the conversion of Cēramān Perumāḷ at the time of the Prophet but also details the establishment of ten mosques along the Malabar Coast by emissaries sent by the Perumāḷ (Kugle; Margariti, 2017). By locating the mosques and dating their foundation, Prange dates the tradition of the convert king to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (Prange, 2018, p. 108)[7]. Emphasizing the purpose of the tradition over its historicity, he argues that the legend of Perumāḷ's conversion served to sanction the legitimacy of an Arab-dominated *ulamā* in Malabar at a time of rapid growth of Muslim trade and settlement on the Malabar Coast (Prange, 2018, p. 108). By dating and contextualizing, Prange, in his own words, brings the tradition from the "story-world of myth into the realm of history" (Prange, 2018, p. 107).

Notwithstanding their varied interpretations, epigraphic sources have remained central to the historical inquiry into the Perumāḷ tradition found in the *Kēraḷōlpatti*. These have typically included the Jewish and Syrian Christian Copper Plates from Kerala, mosque inscriptions, the report of the Zafar tomb inscription, and Cēra and Cōḻa inscriptions. Their study has illuminated crucial periods in Kerala history such as the chronology of Cēra rule and the founding of the first mosques on the Malabar Coast. The latest studies by Narayanan and Prange provide us with the epigraphical insight that Cēra rule ended in 1124 CE and the oldest mosque in Malabar (at Madayi) that can be reliably dated was also founded in 1124 CE (Prange, 2018, p. 50). While

7 Prange's dating diverges from the dating of the tradition by Kugle and Margariti to the sixteenth century in the context of Muslim-Portuguese trade wars.

Narayanan dates the "partition" of Kerala and the "conversion" of Perumāḷ to this time, Prange locates the origins of the Islamic conversion story also in this period.

Epigraphic analysis has, however, not quite resolved the mystery of Cēramān Perumāḷ. The Perumāḷ's identity and chronology still eludes the historian of precolonial Kerala. A major obstacle appears to be the Perumāḷ's anachronistic association with several important events in Kerala history such as "the founding of principalities, temples, churches and mosques, the establishment of the Kollam era, the inauguration of the Onam festival, the introduction of the matrilineal system and the settlement of different communities" (Narayanan, 2018, p. 31). The traditions contained in the *Kēraḷōlpatti* variously project the Perumāḷ as a contemporary of the seventh-century Prophet Muhammad, the ninth-century philosopher Śaṅkarācārya, and the sixteenth-century Vijayanagara ruler Kṛṣṇarāyar (Gundert, 2003). The Perumāḷ's travel itinerary varies from tradition to tradition, shifting from Mecca to Mylapore and to the Ganges. Questions remain as to why there are competing claims of the conversion of Cēramān Perumāḷ to Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, and so on, and why kingdoms like Calicut, Cochin, Cannanore, and Travancore that emerged at different time periods claim that Cēramān Perumāḷ had divided his kingdom among them.

Moreover, as attested by the manuals, the people of Kerala not only continued to look "longingly back to an event like the departure of Chēramān Perumāl" but also looked forward to the return of the Perumāḷ (Logan, 1887, p. v). The colonial-era historians make a note of two "relics" that commemorated Cēramān Perumāḷ's conversion and partition of Kerala. The first is the Sword of Perumāḷ which, as per the *Kēraḷōlpatti*, the Zamorins of Calicut had received from the last Perumāḷ with the dictum "To Die and Kill and Prevail" (Gundert, 2003, p. 67; Gundert, 2014, p. 145). Logan and other historians from the period affirm that the Sword of Perumāḷ was still preserved in the Zamorin's palace (Logan, 1887, p. 166; Innes, 1908, p. 39; Day, 1863, p. 44).

The second "relic" relates to an oath taken by rulers in their coronation ceremony. Logan writes that the rulers of Travancore "have still to declare at their coronations that they hold their territories only on sufferance until their kinsman returns from Mecca" (Logan, 1887, p. 245). Innes observes a similar practice in Calicut where it was customary for the Zamorin to declare that "he will only rule until his uncle returns" (Innes, 1908, p. 39). To honor the conversion of Cēramān Perumāḷ to Islam, the Zamorin is also said to have followed the custom of accepting betel leaf from the hands of a Māppiḷa woman as part of their coronation ceremony (Innes, 1908, p. 39). These "relics" from the colonial present suggest that the Perumāḷ tradition was a living force that continued to shape the present and the future of the Malabar polities.

Ironically, even positivist history was not without myth. In what seems like an attempt to invest British imperialism with mythic power derived from the Perumāḷ, Logan claims that the "Honorable Company's 'merchants' and 'writers' […] assumed the sword and sceptre of the land" in 1792 when the British annexed the Zamorin's territories (Logan, 1887, p. vi). Partaking in the process of mythmaking, Logan uses a sketch of the sword with the inscription "Die and Kill and Annex" (reproduced in Malayalam and in English) as the frontispiece to the first volume of his *Malabar Manual*. More than a "relic", here the Sword of Perumāḷ becomes an enduring symbol of political authority in the colonial present.

Cēramān Perumāḷ as a Maritime Founder-Hero

"History", as Jan Assmann has argued, "turns into myth as soon as it is remembered, narrated, and used, that is, woven into the fabric of the present" (Assmann, 1997, p. 14). Following a vertical line of enquiry, which he calls "Moses the Egyptian", Assmann investigates how a tradition of memory is formed around a common theme, event, or an individual such as Moses. He uses the methodology of discourse (in the restricted sense of debate) to seek out the concatenation of texts which are based on each other and treat or negotiate a common subject matter, extending over generations and centuries, even millennia (Assmann, 1997, p. 15). Assmann proposes mnemohistory as a framework for analyzing the tradition of memory formed around Moses. According to him, the task of mnemohistory consists not in separating the historical from the mythical but in analyzing the mythical elements in a tradition and discovering their hidden agenda (Assmann, 1997, p. 10).

Mnemohistory provides a useful lens for understanding the role of Cēramān Perumāḷ as a figure of myth and memory. The so-called inconsistencies, anachronisms, improbabilities, falsehoods, misstatements, exaggerations, and contradictions that challenged the positivist historian of the *Kēraḷōlpatti* can be read as products of the transmutation of history into myth, and as such, integral to the work of myth. Rather than resolve the contradictions contained in the Perumāḷ tradition, as colonial and postcolonial scholars have done, the following section takes a closer look at the contradictory discourse that shaped it. I argue that these contradictions stemmed from the Perumāḷ's role as a founder-hero par excellence who could be claimed, molded, imagined, and deployed in heterogeneous contexts across both time and space. The Indian Ocean offers a useful framework for examining Perumāḷ's role as a maritime founder-hero.

The emergence of Cēramān Perumāḷ as a founder-hero appears to have coincided with the rise of mercantile city-states and merchant republics along the Malabar Coast and the wider

Indian Ocean world from the twelfth century onwards – a period that has been defined as the "Age of Commerce" by Anthony Reid (1990) in the context of Southeast Asia. This period saw the rise of port-centered city-states such as Melaka, Aden, Hurmuz, Kotte, Kilwa, Mombasa, and Malindi as well as Calicut, Cochin and Cannanore on the Malabar Coast (Subrahmanyam, 1995). Pius Malekandathil traces the emergence of Calicut as a port-based state to the "revitalization" of trade on the Malabar Coast following the opening of an international trade route between Cairo and Calicut. The Karimi traders from Cairo stimulated this trade by settling in Calicut, prompting the Zamorins to shift their capital from their inland base to Calicut in the thirteenth century (Malekandathil, 2013, pp. 85–86). The port-cities attracted trading groups from diverse regions and religious backgrounds, who lived under conditions of what Michael Pearson terms "extraterritoriality" (Pearson, 1987, p. 13). This implied a common residential area, a headman, separate law codes, and inter-group cooperation (Pearson, 1987, p. 13). The period also witnessed the adoption of Islam by major states involved in the Indian Ocean trade and the formation of a localized Islamic identity (Reid, 1990; Prange, 2018). On the Malabar Coast, foreign Muslims and the indigenous Māppiḷa Muslim community controlled a major part of the Indian Ocean trade (Beaujard, 2019). The arrival of European powers from the late fifteenth century onwards saw the rise of other city-states, notably Cochin, that challenged the might of the Zamorin and the dominance of the Muslim trading groups.

In the context of the reorganization of trade and politics on the Malabar Coast following the collapse of the Cēra kingdom in the early twelfth century, Cēramān Perumāḷ appears to have displaced or replaced Paraśurāma, the protagonist of *Kēraḷamāhātmyam* and the founder-hero of Brahmins from Kerala. Creation myths centered on Paraśurāma contain parallels elsewhere in India. In Gujarat, Saurashtra, Konkan, and Karnataka, distinct groups of Brahmins have claimed that the lands they settled were created by Paraśurāma (Veluthat, 2013). Such mythmaking paralleled the processes of Brahmin migrations along the western coast of India and their extensive control over lands in regions that they settled (Veluthat, 2013, pp. 24–25). The Brahmin settlements in Kerala were involved in royal governance and represented at the Cēra royal court through the king's council (Veluthat, 2013, p. 26). The disintegration of the Cēra kingdom and the rise of minor port-centered city-states seem to have necessitated the creation of a new founder-hero, Cēramān Perumāḷ, who could legitimize the political and commercial aspirations of new socio-political groups on the Malabar Coast. In this changed context of littoral state formation, it is probable that non-Brahmin groups were at the helm of creating this new founder-hero.

Among the heterogeneous contexts in which the Perumāḷ functioned as a founder-hero in post-Cēra Malabar, two events stand out for their mythic potential: Cēramān Perumāḷ's division of Kerala and his conversion. The chronology of these two events created the greatest disagreement

among the colonial historiographers, frustrating their attempts to prove the identity of the Perumāḷ. Even Narayanan's dating of these events to the collapse of the Cēra kingdom and his identification of the last Perumāḷ with Rāma Kulaśēkhara (1089–1122 CE) have not resolved the mystery of Cēramān Perumāḷ. The events of partition and conversion remain shrouded in myth especially because of their transformation into sites of political, economic, and religious contestation among the rulers and merchants of the Malabar Coast.

The partition story assumed great importance among the ruling elites of Kerala who legitimized their claim to succession through the Perumāḷ, even as they challenged the legitimacy of rival rulers. The origin myths produced by different city-states of Kerala that emerged at different time periods claimed that Cēramān Perumāḷ, the last ruler of undivided Kerala, divided his country among his successors, a claim which thus elevated him to the status of their founder-hero. The contestations over Perumāḷ paralleled rivalries in trade and the scramble for new ports, markets, and trade partners in the context of reorientation of trade in the Indian Ocean. The origin myth of Calicut, for example, asserts that its ruler, the Zamorin, received the Sword of Perumāḷ with the injunction "To Die and Kill and Prevail," which justified the ruler's right to conquer major centers of Indian Ocean trade along the Malabar Coast (Gundert, 2003, p. 67; Gundert, 2014, p. 145). The origin myth of Cochin – a rival city-state that rose to prominence in the sixteenth century after forging an alliance with the Portuguese – challenged the Zamorin's imperial ambitions by submitting that the Perumāḷ conferred the "overlordship" of Kerala to its rulers as they were the maternal nephews and hence the rightful heirs of the Perumāḷ according to the law of matrilineal succession. The myth also questions the political legitimacy of the rulers of Calicut by disparaging them as "the sons of Cheraman Perumal" (Raimon, 2005, p. 3). The Perumāḷ's role as founder-hero was not restricted to the Hindu-ruled kingdoms of Kerala. The Muslim-ruled merchant republic of Arakkal, which emerged in the late sixteenth century in response to Portuguese attacks on the Māppiḷa trade of Cannanore, too fashioned itself as a successor to the Perumāḷ. Claiming matrilineal descent, the kingdom traced its origins to a "nephew" of the Perumāḷ who had converted to Islam to honor the conversion of his "uncle" (Malieckal, 2005, p. 307).

Such claims of legitimacy were bolstered by the different merchant-religious communities of Kerala, each claiming their own ruler to be the legitimate successor to the great Perumāḷ. Thus, bonds of friendship and reciprocity between merchants and rulers also converged on the figure of Cēramān Perumāḷ. Against the backdrop of commercial and religious conflicts with the Portuguese in the sixteenth century, the Muslim elite from Calicut reinforced their alliance with the Zamorin by invoking the Perumāḷ as their shared hero. For instance, in his poem *Fat'ḥ al-Mubīn* (*The Complete Victory*), Qadi Muhammad refers to the Zamorin as the "heir of the King of Malabar,

who gave him the sword" (Muhammad, 2015, p. 20, verse 23). Legitimizing the Zamorin's claim to succession under the matrilineal law of kingship, he qualifies the Perumāḷ's identity as the Zamorin's "uncle" (Muhammad, 2015, p. 69, verse 524). He attributes the Zamorin's victories in wars against the Portuguese to "the hidden influence of the prayer which the Holy Prophet said for the uncle of the Zamorin on the day of the cleavage of the moon" (Muhammad, 2015, p. 69, verse 524).

A similar alignment of interests between the Dutch traders and the ruler of Cochin becomes apparent in the Dutch reception of the Perumāḷ tradition. In the context of the political rivalry between the rulers of Cochin and Calicut, Jacob Canter Visscher (a Dutch chaplain settled in Cochin) presents a variation of the origin myth that supports the succession claim of the Cochin rulers. At the same time, his iteration of the myth discredits the legitimacy of the Zamorins. Visscher writes that when the Perumāḷ divided up his kingdom (before his departure to either the Ganges or to Mecca), he gave Calicut to his illegitimate children, "who according to the law could not inherit", and Cochin to his nephews, "who were lawful heirs of the crown". Visscher adds that the Perumāḷ gave his sword to the Zamorin and his shield to the king of Cochin, making them heads of two dominant factions in the country (Visscher, 1862, p. 50). The Dutch also targeted the Sword of Perumāḷ as part of their strategic alliance with the Cochin rulers, possibly because it was important material evidence of the Perumāḷ tradition and a powerful symbol of the Zamorin's political supremacy in the region. In 1670, Dutch forces broke into the temple where the Sword of Perumāḷ was preserved, smashed the idol, killed the priest, and broke the sword - which was later restored from the pieces (Ayyar, 1938, p. 223; Narayanan, 2018, p. 146).

Cēramān Perumāḷ also served as a founder-hero of the merchant-religious communities of the rival city-states of Kerala. The Perumāḷ was variously claimed by these communities to have converted to Buddhism, Jainism, Christianity, and Islam. The Portuguese chronicler Diogo de Couto, for instance, records the prevalent tradition among the St. Thomas Christians (Syrian Christians) of Cochin that the Perumāḷ converted to Christianity and went on a pilgrimage to Mylapore (in present-day Tamil Nadu) (Couto, Decada VII, Book X, apud Ayyar, 1938, p. 65). The anonymous *Qiṣṣat Shakarwatī Farmāḍ*, Makhdum's *Tuḥfat al-Mujāhidīn* and Qadi Muhammad's *Fat'ḥ al-Mubīn* maintain instead that the Perumāḷ converted to Islam and went to Mecca. Furthermore, the *Qiṣṣat Shakarwatī Farmāḍ* stages the intercommunal conflict between Muslim, Jewish and Christian trading groups by claiming that the Perumāḷ chose Islam over Judaism and Christianity, finding the Quran to be far superior to the Torah and the Gospel (Kugle; Margariti, 2017, p. 354)[8].

8 Based on Prange's dating of the tradition to the twelfth or thirteenth century, the conflict can be dated to that period.

The Muslim conversion myths centered on Cēramān Perumāḷ provide a timeline that is significantly at odds with the historical time attributed to the last Cēra ruler by Narayanan. The *Qiṣṣat Shakarwatī Farmāḍ* claims the conversion and partition to have occurred in the era of the Prophet, making the ruler a contemporary of the Prophet. The Muslim conversion myths also present the greatest diversity in terms of geographic locations, adding new locations to the existing story to accommodate new social realities. The myths provide an elaborate itinerary for the Perumāḷ's journey from Malabar to Arabia, including locations that were connected to Muslim trade in the Indian Ocean. The Perumāḷ tradition also traveled to locations beyond Malabar where Muslims from Malabar had moved and settled. For instance, the origin myth of the Lakshadweep islands traces the first settlement of the islands to a shipwreck on one of the islands of a search party that had left Malabar in pursuit of the Perumāḷ (Innes, 1908, p. 521). The myth not only reflects the islands' historical ties to Malabar but also heightens the mystery surrounding the circumstances that led to the departure of the Perumāḷ from Malabar. The pursuit story in fact contradicts the *Kēraḷōlpatti's* claim that the Perumāḷ left his country voluntarily to adopt the fourth Veda (interpreted as Islam) to expiate his sin of erroneously sentencing his guard to death (Gundert, 2003, p. 64). Whether the ruler converted voluntarily or in secret is one among the many puzzles that the Perumāḷ tradition throws up to the historian, the answers to which could have interesting implications for our understanding of Kerala history.

Conclusion

This article has assessed the impact of colonial historiography of Malabar on precolonial modes of knowledge by focusing on its writing of the early history of Malabar based on the Cēramān Perumāḷ tradition. It argued that the colonial attempt to historicize the tradition and prove the identity and chronology of Cēramān Perumāḷ exposed a gap between Western positivist history and local mythmaking. The study has proposed the framework of myth for recognizing Cēramān Perumāḷ as a timeless hero. Against the colonial interpretation of the contradictions in the Perumāḷ tradition as signs of an ahistorical society, the article has read them as integral to the tradition and found that they offered a window into the heterogeneous contexts in which Cēramān Perumāḷ functioned as a founder-hero for rival political, economic, and religious stakeholders in Indian Ocean trade since the twelfth century. The Perumāḷ as founder-hero was arguably a product of the reorientation of trade on the Malabar Coast, which intensified conflict and competition between different interest groups. This was especially so after the arrival of the Portuguese when Perumāḷ's role as founder-hero extended to newly emerged kingdoms like Cannanore. As attested by the manuals, the Perumāḷ tradition and its hero remained functional even after the arrival of

the Dutch in the seventeenth century as well as during the colonial context of nineteenth century, contrary to the colonial view that the tradition belonged to the "ancient" or "early" history of Kerala.

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