

RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Forgotten Piece of History: The Story of the First Municipal Council of Colombo, Sri Lanka

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Abstract: The website of the Municipal Council of Colombo asserts that it was founded in 1865 (Colombo Municipal Council, 2015). This is also the story that is recounted in scholarly histories of Colombo, in modern websites and in popular accounts of the history of the city. The objective of this article is to demonstrate that Colombo had a municipal council as early as the sixteenth century and to illuminate the story of its existence for over 70 years - until well into the seventeenth century. It also explores the functions of the council, its relationship with Portuguese officials who ruled the areas they controlled in Sri Lanka and question of whose interests were represented by this council. The article also contends that this first Municipal Council had a role in Portuguese administration that occasionally extended to policy-making on matters beyond the city.

Keywords: local government, Portuguese colonialism, settlers, cinnamon, coconut, areca nut, land ownership

Statements authorized by the Municipal Council of Colombo and the standard histories of the city assume that it's municipal council was founded in 1865 (de Silva, 1987, pp. 156-157; Hulugalle, 1965, p. 1; Hussein, 2023, pp. 5, 29). This is also the story that is recounted in modern websites, and in popular accounts of the history of the city ("CMC: How it all began", 2025; "Colombo," n.d.; Colombo Municipal Council, 2015; Perera, N., 2024; The Living Heritage Network, n.d.).

However, there was a Municipal Council in Colombo some three hundred years before that time. Only two of the scholarly histories of Colombo published in the last century (Biedermann, 2009; Perera, 1926) even

mention the existence of this previous municipal council and the references to that council in my own previous publications have attracted minimal attention (de Silva, 1972, p. 32; de Silva, 2009, pp. 166-189), although there is plenty of evidence on the existence of this earlier municipal council in Colombo, a council which was active for over 70 years from the late sixteenth century to the mid-seventeenth century.

According to historian Zoltán Biedermann the earliest reference to a municipal council of Colombo occurs in 1583, but as Biedermann himself acknowledges, there are reasons to believe that a *câmara* (municipal council) of Colombo was organized as a functioning body even earlier (*Biblioteca Publica Eborensis*, CV/2-2, ff. 216-221; Biedermann, 2009, p. 439). In fact, the Portuguese in Colombo probably formed such an organization not long after they abandoned the city of Kotte in 1565 because as chronicler Fernão de Queyroz states, when the Portuguese residents of Colombo became aware of the letter from the King of Portugal ordering the shift from Kotte ' 'To my city of Colombo,' they at once assumed the title [of city of Colombo].' (de Queyroz, 1930, p. 421). The destruction of the records of this first municipal council during the seventeenth century wars between the Dutch and the Portugueseⁱ has made it difficult to unearth all the activities of this council or to assess the relative success with which it pursued the objectives for which it was created. These objectives included both reinforcing Portuguese rule in the colony and securing an alternative source of information for the

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Portuguese Crown. Although the Portuguese residents in Colombo applied for a charter of privileges only after the direct annexation of Kotte by the Portuguese in 1597, there is evidence that in the last two decades of the sixteenth century, not only the local monarch Dom João Dharmapala, who reigned as the King of Kotte from 1551 to 1597, but even officials of the King of Portugal, recognized the existence of such a body (Abeyasinghe, 1966, p. 94; *Arquivo Historico Ultramarino* (AHU), Caixa 6, 10.11.1618).

Portuguese colonial settlements in the seventeenth century received two types of charters. Larger and more important settlements like Goa obtained the privileges enjoyed by the city of Lisbon. Smaller settlements such as Macão and Cochin were awarded the more limited privileges allowed to smaller Portuguese cities such as Evora (Boxer, 1965, pp. 5-14, 45). The Portuguese in Colombo aspired only to gain the latter. The provisional grant of these lesser privileges by Viceroy Ayres de Saldanha and Viceroy Alfonso de Castro apparently lapsed due to lack of confirmation by the Portuguese King. A petition of the *câmara* in the 1620s also had no effect. However, in the early 1630s, the Conde de Linhares, Viceroy of India, probably in appreciation of the sacrifices made by the Portuguese *casados* (married settlers) in the war against Kingdom of Kandy, granted the privileges enjoyed by Evora to Colombo. This grant was finally confirmed by the King of Portugal in 1641 (AHU, Codice 210, ff.257v-258; AHU, Codice 211, f. 130; *Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo, Livros das Monções*(ANTT LM), Vol. 18, f. 24lv; Vol. 55, f. 23).

No direct evidence exists on the composition of the Senate of the Council (*senado da câmara*) of Colombo. However, from the signatures of the petitions forwarded by the Council it appears that there were six regular members apart from the *escrivão* or secretary/writer (AHU, India Caixa 5, 22.10.1617; 6, 21.11.1618; 10, 7.12.1632; 16, 18.1.1644; ANTT LM, Vol. 43, f. 186v; Boxer, 1965, pp. 5-14, 45; *Filmoteca, Livros das Monções*, Vol.14, 115/1-2). This is confirmed by the list of seven signatories listed as officials of the Municipal Council in documents relating to the negotiations of peace with the Kingdom of Kandy in 1617 (de Silva, 2009, p. 161). It seems reasonable to assume that in Colombo, as in Macão, these six regular officials included three *vereadores* or aldermen elected by the citizens, two *juizes ordinarios* or magistrates and a *procurador* or procurator. All of them received salaries during their tenure in office and also received additional perquisites for special duties such as attending official festivities. Data on how the elections of the aldermen and magistrates were conducted in Colombo has not survived but, if the practices were the same as those prevalent in

Macão or Bahia, what occurred involved a complicated system of ballot and lot. Several lists of candidates who were nominated were placed in a sealed container (*pelouro*) which was opened on the day of the election on which occasion, a little boy, chosen at random, was directed to draw out one of the lists. The names on the list thus drawn out by lot were then approved provided that none of the nominees had been convicted of criminal behaviour. Elections to the *câmara* were for three-year terms (Boxer, 1965, pp. 167-168, 176-177). During their term, the *vereadores* were expected to represent the interests of their constituents. The *juizes ordinarios* were not trained lawyers but ordinary citizens vested with legal powers during their term of office. The duty of the *procurador* was to advise the *câmara* on matters relating to the economic life of the city and to represent the interests of the poorer Portuguese settlers (Boxer, 1965, pp. 23, 27). The *escrivão* of the *câmara* of Colombo was appointed for life (*Filmoteca Ultramarina Portuguesa, Livros das Monções*, Vol. 14, 6/2).

The establishment of a municipal council was connected with the transformation of Colombo from a port city 'with primarily commercial purposes to a much more decidedly multifaceted urban centre combining commercial, religious, military, and, finally but crucially, political functions.' (Biedermann, 2009, p. 437). As Biedermann explains, after 1565, with the transfer of the residence of the ruler of Kotte from Kotte to Colombo in 1565, 'The Portuguese *casados* soon emphasized how their city had inherited the pedigree of the "real cidade Da Cota metropolitana e cabessa do reino"' (the royal city of Kotte, metropolis and head of the kingdom) (Biedermann, 2009, p. 438). According to historian S. G. Perera the Town Hall building was located in the middle of Prince Street in modern day Pettah (Perera, 1926, p. 17).ⁱⁱ

From the correspondence and records of the membership of the *câmara* it appears that it was a body representing Portuguese settler concerns and interests. However, it is clear that the King of Portugal and his advisers also saw the Colombo Municipal Council as an important part of a strategy to safeguard Portuguese power in Ceylon.ⁱⁱⁱ It is worth noting that in 1607, Philip, the King of Portugal and Spain, having discussed the matter in his advisory council, decided to promote the settlement of Portuguese within fortified areas that existed (and were to be established in the future) in Ceylon. Ten such areas, including Colombo were specifically identified in the report.^{iv} Portuguese settlers willing to marry 'orphans of the king' - who were poor women sent out to the colonies as brides - were to be encouraged to reside in these forts by allocations of land

for their maintenance (Rivara, 1857-1877, Vol. 6, p. 806). This policy also envisaged the settlement of some locals who had been converted to Christianity in Portuguese forts, but there is no evidence that persons other than the Portuguese and a few men of mixed descent played any role in the Colombo Municipal Council. Indeed, in the case of other Portuguese municipal councils in the colonies, it was a rule that municipal officeholders needed to be Portuguese 'by nationality and birth.'^v In effect, therefore, the *câmara* of Colombo remained largely an instrument of a small number of settlers because, even as late as the 1630s, António Bocarro estimated the number of male Portuguese settlers residing in Colombo at only 350 although João Ribeiro's estimate at 900 was somewhat higher (Bocarro, 1995, p. 11; Ribeiro, 1948, p. 34). Clearly, the total number of Portuguese including family members would have been much higher.

There is evidence that at least some of these settlers were wealthy, and had extensive land holdings in other parts of the island. According to the summary of the *tombo* (revenue register) of 1614 prepared by Paul E. Pieris (Pieris, 1949, pp. 34, 35, 37, 39, 40, 53) *casados* resident in Colombo owning land included Luis Carvalho (land with 15 coconut trees), Manoel Salgado (three gardens with 800 coconut trees yielding 12,000 nuts worth 60 *larins*, of the trees 20 were used to produce liquor), and António Fernandez (three gardens with 120 coconut trees, of the trees 10 were used to produce liquor) – all three of the above lands located at Gorakana near Panadura, Pero d'Oliveira (land in Negombo with 40 coconut trees), Gaspar Pereira (two gardens in Negombo with 50 and 20 coconut trees each), António Franco (four gardens with 400 coconut trees and four rice fields of 3.5 *amunas* and 4 *kurunis*^{vi} at Panadura and two gardens, one with 500 old coconut trees and the other with 70 trees both at Rayigama), Balthezar Roiz (garden with 3,000 coconut trees, 80 used to produce liquor at Rayigama), Balthezar Moniz (gardens with 600 coconut trees at Kalamulla near Kalutara), Bras Nunes (village holder of Beruwala), Pero Jorge Franco (village holder of Induruwa), and a *casado* of Colombo holding the village of Galmangoda near Bentota. This is not a complete list. An examination of the entries for the area around Negombo in the 1614 *tombo* manuscript in AHU revealed the following additional entries: the garden and houses of Thomé Fernandez (eight coconut trees), and Jorge Fernandez de Abreu (land with 50 coconut trees). In fact, the revenue figures from 1619 indicate that a fifth of the villages in south-west Sri Lanka were held by Portuguese settlers and officials, many of whom resided in Colombo (de Silva, 1972, p. 217). Francisco Bethencourt has emphasized the value of these *casados* for the maintenance of Portuguese power. In his words,

"The importance of the world of the *casados* in India has not been sufficiently stressed by the historiography. The strategy of the Portuguese authorities after the conquest of Goa in 1510 was to encourage marriage with women from the local elites, a practice that was widespread not only in the territories controlled by the Portuguese but in the peripheries of the empire. The strategy also involved the conversion, integration and mobilization of natives for war because of the small numbers of Portuguese in Asia," (Bethencourt, 2007, p. 214).

Disputes between the *câmara* and the chief Portuguese administrative officials were by no means rare. Some of the disputes between the *câmara* and the Captain General who was the administrative and military Head of the Portuguese colony in Ceylon, were due to attempts by the *câmara* to spear-head opposition to a Captain General who appeared to favour his friends or relatives. An example of this was seen in the time of Captain General Nuno Alvares Pereira (1616–1618). Captain General Pereira had not taken any steps to commence judicial proceedings against his two nephews who were accused of lawless behaviour. One of them, Dom Francisco Pereira, was accused of kidnapping a young Portuguese girl and keeping her by force in his house for one and a half months. The other, Manoel Cezar, was accused of using force against officials of the *câmara* and even some Catholic clergy. The *câmara*, in a letter dated 21 November 1617, complained that the relatives of the Captain General had killed many men, and had raped and sexually assaulted many married women (AHU, India Caixa 5. 21. 11. 1617). Disputes with the *câmara* are also recorded in the times of Captains-General Manoel Mascarenhas Homem (1614–1616), and Jorge de Albuquerque (1621–1623). There were no recorded clashes in the times of Captains General Dom Jeronimo de Azevedo (1594–1612) and Constantino de Sá de Noronha (1618–1621 and 1623–1630). However, there were also conflicts between the municipal council and the *Vedor da Fazenda* or Superintendent of Revenue due to efforts of the *Vedor* to impose dues on the *casados* of Colombo or the *Vedor's* efforts to take over revenues accruing to the municipal council for state use. These factors explain the council's clashes with *Vedor* Antão Vaz Freire (ANTT LM, Vol.16. f. 582; de Bulhão Pato, 1880-1883, Vol. 3, p. 398, Vol. 4, pp. 46-47, 355; Rivara, 1857-1877, Vol. 6, pp. 1147, 1218, 1220-1221).

Despite the de facto recognition of its role by administrators, the lack of a formal charter of privileges issued by the King of Portugal handicapped the *câmara*. Thus, when Captain General Dom Nuno Álvares Pereira arrested the officials of the *câmara* and sent them to Goa in 1617 for trial on charges of disobedience, they

could only plead for a pardon, as they had no judicial immunity which they would have had if the *câmara* had been legally authorized by the Crown (ANTT, *Corpo Chronologico*, Part I, Maco 116, doc. 87). Nevertheless, the lack of a formal charter did not prevent the *câmara* of Colombo from exercising many of the rights it claimed. The *oficiais da câmara* (officials of the council) could, and did, correspond directly with the King and in 1618, the municipal council obtained an order from the King specifically forbidding the Captain-General to interfere with the administration of the city.

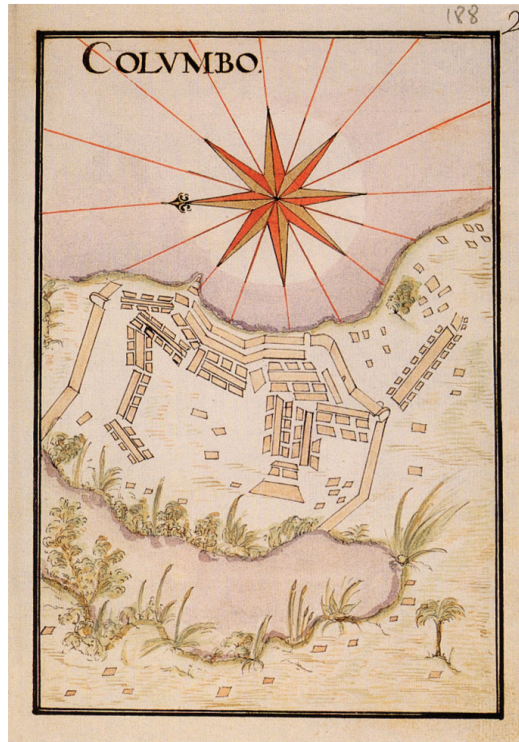
The bulk of the *câmara's* income seems to have come from its *Liberdade* (right) to export forty *bahars* (A *bahar* was about 500 lb) of cinnamon a year. This right or liberty was one which the Portuguese *casados* had obtained from the last indigenous King of Kotte, Don João Dharmapala (1551–1597). The original purpose of the grant was to support the poorer Portuguese settlers among whom the profit from exporting this quantity of cinnamon was to be distributed (Abeyasinghe, 1966, p. 94; AHU, India Caixa 6. 10. 11. 1618). This right continued unchanged under direct Portuguese rule in Kotte (which began in 1597) until 1614. In that year, a viceregal order dated 22 April (following the instructions sent by King Philip of Portugal and Spain dated 9 February 1612) banned all purchase and export of cinnamon, except by the state with effect from 1 January 1615 (de Silva, 1989, p. 34). The total annual export of cinnamon by the state was limited to 1,000 *bahars*.^{vii} This establishment of a state monopoly struck a blow on this lucrative source of revenue for the *câmara*. It was argued by administrative officials that the city's 'liberty' should be abolished because any relaxation of the monopoly on cinnamon would defeat its very purpose, viz., the maximization of royal revenue by rigorous control of its supply. Therefore, the *câmara* of Colombo was forced to find reasons for the continuance of this 'liberty'. On February 14, 1615, in response to the petitions of the *câmara*, the King of Portugal requested that this question should be studied by a *junta* (special committee) in Ceylon (AHU, India Caixa 7, 11.2.1622; ANTT, *Collecção de Sao Vicente*, Livro XIX, doc. 12; ANTT LM, Vol 15, f. 181; de Bulhão Pato, 1880-1883, II, p. 224). The specific recommendation advanced by the *junta* is not known but it seems to have been positive because the *câmara* continued to enjoy the privilege annually until 1619. It would have been difficult to deny the right to the *câmara* while individual Portuguese were given exemptions from the export monopoly. For instance, on 19 November 1615, the *Vedor da Fazenda*, Antão Vaz Freire complained to King Philip of Portugal that the then Viceroy, Dom Jerónimo de Azevedo had given four Portuguese the right to take away 140 *bahars* of cinnamon (de Silva, 1989, p. 34). Also, Captain

Generals Pereira and Homem violated the monopoly by exporting cinnamon on their own while holding office. At length, in 1619, Lançarote de Seixas, *Vedor da Fazenda*, forbade the practice specifically on the grounds that it was contrary to the viceregal order on the monopoly of cinnamon and moreover, reduced royal revenue (ANTT LM, Vol 18, ff. 240-241; *Filmoteca Ultramarina Portuguesa, Reis Vizinhos*, Vol.I, 40/5).

At this stage, the city council brought in a new issue. It pointed out that the city of Colombo was growing rapidly in population and yet, lacked many of the basic facilities needed for a city. It was pointed out that as the revenues of the *câmara*, apart from those derived from the cinnamon concession, were meagre. It was argued that only the restoration of the right to export 40 *bahars* of cinnamon would provide the revenue needed to provide such facilities. However, Fernão de Albuquerque, the Portuguese Governor in Goa, did not favour the restoration of the privilege. The Governor's reluctance to agree with the *câmara* could well have influenced the vociferous opposition by the *câmara* to actions of the Governor's son, Jorge de Albuquerque who served as Captain General of Ceylon, 1621–1623. The *câmara* complained to the King of Portugal about Jorge de Albuquerque's misuse of royal funds (ANTT LM, Vol 18, ff. 239-241).^{viii} The council would have been very unhappy to see that Governor Fernão de Albuquerque, who rejected the *câmara's* request for an exemption from the state monopoly of cinnamon, had given his son Jorge permission to export 50 *bahars* of cinnamon annually on his own account, in violation of the royal monopoly. No wonder, the *câmara* complained that the cinnamon monopoly was a monopoly only as far as the poor were concerned. There is some evidence that influential officials continued to attempt to smuggle cinnamon for their own profit in the 1620s (Pirani, 2016, pp. 73-74). The request for the resumption of the 'liberty' received favour only after the *câmara* obtained the support of Fernão de Albuquerque's successor, Dom Francisco da Gama, *Conde da Vidigueira*, Portuguese Viceroy and Governor of India (1597–1600 and 1622–1628) during his second term in office. The King of Portugal, on da Gama's recommendation, agreed to restore the 'liberty' in January 1624 (ANTT LM, Vol 18, ff. 240-241, Vol 19, f. 24). A year later, however, the King qualified the grant by ordering on 25 March 1625 that all revenues from this 'liberty' should be used for the fortification of Colombo (ANTT LM, Vol 21, ff. 139, 159; *Arquivo General de Simancas* (AGS-SP), Vol. 1519, f. 25v). This order was probably provoked by a request of the *câmara* to the King for funding to finance the improved fortification of the city (de Bulhão Pato, 1880–1883, I, p. 182). This royal requirement was adhered throughout the

Figure 1

Sketch Drawn by Constantino de Sa de Miranda in 1624, *Biblioteca Nacional de Madrid. Ms. 8930, f. 188r.*



Note. Published in Jorge Manuel Flores, *Os Olhos do Rei: Desenhos e Descrições Portuguesas da Ilha de Ceilão (1624, 1638)*, Lisbon: Comissão Nacional para as Comemorações dos Descobrimientos Portugueses, 2001, p. 66.

next fifteen years with the cinnamon revenues being used to rebuild the walls of Colombo Fort, cast artillery and purchase arms (See Figure 1 for walls of Fort). In fact, in times of emergency, such as after the Portuguese defeat at Randeniwela in 1630, individual Portuguese residents of Colombo were entrusted with the repair of specific parts of the walls of the fort (de Silva, 1972, p. 116; *Filmoteca Ultramarina Portuguesa, Livros das Monções*, Vol. 19A, 22/2-3). In the 1640s, in view of the Dutch threat, the allowance given to the *câmara* was increased to 100 *bahars* a year (ANTT LM, Vol 57, f. 145). That decision might have been prompted by the fact that, by that time, the revenue from the state monopoly of cinnamon which had paid for only about a third of all state expenses in Sri Lanka in the first decade after its imposition and gave the Crown a handsome annual profit from the late 1620s (de Silva, 1972, pp. 226-235).

The Municipal Council of Colombo clearly needed other revenues to provide facilities for the Portuguese residents of Colombo. Since no records of the discussions in the *câmara* or the decisions taken by it survive, the evidence for its activities need to be gleaned from

correspondence sent to Lisbon. The evidence from those records indicates that the projects given priority by the *câmara* included the construction of a storehouse for provisions, a slaughter house to secure the supply of meat, a new building for the *câmara*, and a jail (AGS-SP, Vol. 1473, f. 539; ANTT LM, Vol. 12, ff. 134-135, Vol. 18, ff. 240v-241v, Vol.19, f.24v). To fund such necessities the *câmara* had a few other sources of revenue. One of them was the right to rent some of the ferries across the Kelani river located within a few miles of Colombo Fort. In January 1607, Captain General Dom Jeronimo de Azevedo had granted to the council the revenues from all ferries within the limits of the city (Abeyasinghe, 1966, pp. 95-96). Up to the late 1620's, however, only three of the four ferries so granted were handed over to the council because a Portuguese settler, Fernão Sanches, had successfully asserted his rights to the ferry at Wattala (AHU, India Caixa 4.2.1.1616.; ANTT LM, Vol. 21, f. 133, Vol.24, f. 450; *Filmoteca Ultramarina Portuguesa, Livros das Monções*, Vol. 12, 1, 2-3). Apart from this revenue it is possible that the *câmara* gained some income from the rents of municipal property, taxes on non-staple foods and fines imposed on

those who violated municipal regulations (Boxer, 1965, p. 10). The council also probably collected revenues due from municipal lands.

In the 1620s and 1630s the *câmara* continued to defend the interests of the *casados*. This is clearly seen in a dispute over the payment of customs dues. On 3 October 1584, King Dom João Dharmapala had granted all Portuguese *casados* and their descendants freedom from paying customs dues for any goods imported or exported by them from Colombo. After the death of Dharmapala, following a request by the *casados* to confirm this grant, Viceroy Dom Francisco da Gama, *Conde da Vidigueira*, agreed to respect this privilege (de Silva, 1975, p. 110). However, when in 1612, the *câmara* asked that the privilege be confirmed by the King of Portugal, the authorities in Lisbon rejected the request. Nevertheless, for some reason, Portuguese settlers continued to be exempt from customs duties for the next decade (AHU, Índia Caixa 3. 2.10.1613, Índia Caixa 4. 2. 1. 1616; de Bulhão Pato, 1880-1883, II, p. 224; *Filmoteca Ultramarina Portuguesa, Livros das Monções*, Vol. 12, 1/2-3). The issue was raised again in the 1620s, by which time the growth in the number of Portuguese settlers in Colombo had begun to have adverse effects on the customs revenue of Colombo Port. Dom Francisco da Gama, who had returned to serve as Portuguese Viceroy of India for another term, when confronted with this issue, instructed the *Vedor* of Ceylon at the end of 1624, to apply the exemption from customs duty only in the case of *casados* who had actually assisted King Dharmapala. The descendants of these *casados* were also entitled to this privilege but only if they continued to reside in Colombo. All new settlers thus lost the privilege of exemption from customs dues. This decision was confirmed in an *assento* (decision) of the *Conselho da Fazenda*, Goa on 17 March 1625 (*Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo* (ANTT), *Manuscritos da Convento da Graça, Tomo 6D*, pp. 328-329; *Biblioteca Nacional, Fundo Geral*, 1983, ff., 62v-63; *Filmoteca Ultramarina Portuguesa, Livros das Monções*, Vol. 19D, 101/ 3-4; Pissurlencar, 1951, p. 510). This did not settle the issue. In 1627, this issue was put before the King of Portugal, and he laid down two principles to guide action on the question. First, no one was to have complete exemption from customs dues. Secondly, some concession in the form of payment of lower duties might be allowed to those who had benefited from King Dharmapala's grant (AHU, Codice 285, f. 70; ANTT LM, Vol. 24, f. 375). However, no settlement seems to have been imposed as a result of this ruling. During the vicereignty of the *Conde de Linhares* (1629–1635), the guiding principle remained the *assento* of 17 March 1625. The *câmara* continued its efforts to restore this privilege to all Portuguese residents

of Colombo and finally achieved success in the 1640s. By that time, with Dutch attacks on Portuguese Ceylon, it was realized that Portuguese strength in the island had to be maintained at all costs and that for this greater inducements for new settlers was a necessity. This was all the more so at a time when warfare had limited the landholding incomes of the *casados*. Thus, on 5 March 1643, the *Conselho da Fazenda* in Goa ruled that all Portuguese settlers in Colombo should receive exemption from custom duties (AHU, Codice 210, f. 257v; ANTT LM, Vol. 52, f. 73).

The *câmara* achieved a swifter victory in its campaign to obtain special rights for *casados* who held garden lands in the environs of Colombo. The rights of the settlers to these lands dated from the time of Captain General Dom Jeronimo de Azevedo who directed the settlers to take possession of and to cultivate waste lands around the city. This was reinforced by a 1607 decree of the Acting Governor of Portuguese India (Abeyasinghe, 1966, p. 60). By the time Antão Vaz Freire was making the *tombo* of 1614, the settlers had held these lands for years without paying any dues. Vaz Freire wanted to impose the standard quit rent of 12% of revenue on these lands or failing that, at least to impose the tax on coconut palms (*pol aya*). However, as a result of representations made by the council which also held some of these lands in its corporate capacity, orders were sent from Lisbon in the 1620s granting these lands in perpetuity, free of all dues (Abeyasinghe, 1966, pp. 96-97; AGS-SP, Vol. 1473, f. 539; de Bulhão Pato, 1880-1883, V, p. 366). It is not known whether this exemption applied to lands held by Colombo's Portuguese residents in areas far away from the city.

One area in which the *câmara* of Colombo saw no success was in respect of the imposition of the compulsory purchase of areca nut, a nut which was chewed with betel leaves and was in demand in India. In the times before Portuguese rule, the kings of Kotte had received a certain amount of areca nuts as dues, but landholders could sell the rest of the crop at market prices. Sometime during the Captain Generalship of Dom Jeronimo de Azevedo a new regulation was imposed decreeing the sale of all areca nut to the state at a fixed low price of four *larins* per *amuna* (AHU, Índia Caixa 3. 2.10.1613, Índia Caixa 4.2. 1. 1616; de Bulhão Pato, 1880-1883, II, p. 224; *Filmoteca Ultramarina Portuguesa, Livros das Monções*, Vol. 12, 1/2-3). As the market price was about three times that amount, this monopoly brought an enhanced revenue to the state because the 1599 revenue register compiled by Jorge Florim de Almeida estimated that 2,234 *amunas* of areca nut were due to the state from royal villages alone (de Silva, 1975, p. 96). Even after

the imposition of the monopoly, a number of Portuguese officials were allowed to collect specified quantities of areca nut at the fixed low price and sell it in the open market. These allowances ranged from 800 *amunas* for the Captain General to 20 to 30 *amunas* for each Captain in the army (Abeyasinghe, 1966, pp. 154-159). The *câmara* of Colombo did not oppose the compulsory purchase of areca nut *per se*, but wanted an exemption from it for the lands and villages held by married settlers. There were many such settlers. For example, the *tombo* of 1614 records that Bras Nunes, a Portuguese resident of Colombo held Beruwala and had eight gardens of areca nut there which together produced 4.25 *amunas* of areca nut (Pieris, 1949, p. 40). The *casados* petitioned the King in 1617, and again in 1621, for the termination of the policy of compulsory purchase by the state, hoping to use the abolition to make profits by cornering the market for themselves. In response to the petitions, the *Conselho da Fazenda* (Treasury Council) in Lisbon proposed that the abolition of compulsory purchase of areca nut could be considered, but only if the quit rents paid by village holders was raised to compensate for the loss of revenue to the state. This idea clearly received no support and the state monopoly remained (de Silva, 1972, pp. 207-210).

There is also evidence to indicate that the council's power and influence was not confined to the city of Colombo. The *câmara* had no statutory duty to advise the Captain General on matters of policy but in times of crisis such as in 1617 and 1638, the Captain General consulted the *câmara* to obtain advice and support. In 1617 for instance, Captain General Nuno Álvares Pereira set up a special council to advise him and approve his actions in negotiating a treaty of peace with King Senerat of Kandy. This council included the officials of the *câmara* of Colombo (de Silva, 1972, p. 32, 2009, pp. 161, 167-169). Later, when Captain General Constantino de Sá de Noronha took possession of Trincomalee in 1623, the king protested about this breach of the Peace Treaty of 1617, not only to the Captain General but also to the *câmara* of Colombo (de Silva, 1972, p. 67). Also, in 1636, Captain General Diogo de Mello de Castro wishing to declare war on and invade Kandy consulted with the officials of the *câmara* as well as the Captain of Colombo. He was advised to await more definite news of the King's activities and he complied (ANTT LM, Vol. 43. ff. 188-189). The officials of the *câmara* were also consulted along with other dignitaries, by the Captain General just before the surrender of Colombo to the Dutch in 1656 (De Queyroz, 1930, p. 982).

These instances certainly indicate official recognition of the political influence of the council on matters beyond

the concerns of the city of Colombo. That impression is reinforced when we see that after the death of Captain General Constantino de Sá de Noronha in 1630, the letter of succession that he left behind was opened in the council chamber in the presence of members of the *câmara* as well as other important Portuguese officials (de Silva, 1972, p. 116). It should also be noted that in that same year, the *câmara* played a role in persuading the commander of a galley visiting Colombo on its way to Goa, to stop for a while in port, thus enabling soldiers, artillery and other munitions to be unloaded when needed for the defence of Colombo (de Silva, 1972, pp. 112-117). Also, in 1632, the *câmara* was a vocal advocate for negotiating a peace treaty with the King of Kandy (de Silva, 1972, p. 138).

All this evidence supports the assertion by Francisco Bethencourt on the key role played by municipal councils in the Portuguese empire: "Overstretched and fragmentary territories across four continents were held together through flexible institutions, such as municipalities and confraternities, while governors and captains created a certain level of political and cultural homogenization at the top" (Bethencourt, 2021, p. 15).

However, there were occasions when a policy which the *câmara* proposed did not find favour with the Portuguese administration. One such instance related to its recommendation in 1638 to Captain General de Melo de Castro not to invade Kandy. The Captain General rejected the recommendation with disastrous consequences (ANTT LM, Vol. 41. f. 7v, Vol. 43. ff. 17-18v). Another such effort was the endeavour to obtain for the *casados*, a role in a plan to settle a group of local soldiers (called *lascarins*) and their families near Colombo Fort. The Portuguese army in Ceylon had a contingent of a few hundred soldiers supplemented by a group of *casados* during times of crisis. However, the bulk of the army was made up of thousands of *lascarins* who were obliged to serve in the army in return for the land they held. The authorities in Lisbon clearly felt that the loyalty of these *lascarins* could be best secured by settling them in fortified settlements close to Colombo, because the allocation of land to them near Colombo would provide their families security against threats by rebels who rose up against Portuguese rule. As early as 1607, orders from Lisbon urged the establishment of such settlements (Abeyasinghe 1966, pp. 59, 61; de Silva, 1972, p. 78).^{ix} However, the lands around Colombo had already been allocated and most of it was held by the *casados* of Colombo who were reluctant to give up their lands (*Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo*, Lisbon, *Livros das Monções*, Vol. 26. f. 313). The *casados*

probably saw this issue as a means of enhancing both their income and their role in the armed forces. In a letter dated 20 November 1615, the *câmara* proposed that the *casados* should be given the task of providing sustenance to the *lascarins* and that they should be allotted lands with a revenue of 100 *pardaos* a year for each *lascarin* maintained by them (AHU, Índia Caixa 6.21.11.1618). However, Fernão de Albuquerque, the Portuguese Governor of India to whom this matter was referred to, decided against this proposal. He concluded that it would only serve the private interests of the settlers who would obtain bands of personal retainers whom they would use in private quarrels as well as in times of war (ANTT LM, Vol. 16. f. 561).

Occasionally, elements of the Portuguese administration showed concern about limiting the influence of the Colombo Municipal Council on broader affairs of administration. In 1623, following representations by Fernão de Albuquerque, the Portuguese Governor of India, and his son Jorge de Albuquerque, the Captain-General of Ceylon, the Portuguese King forbade the *câmara* to issue testimonials of merit for services rendered to the Crown. In practice, however, this prohibition seems to have had little effect, for such testimonials were issued even as late as 1630 (Abeyasinghe, 1966, p. 98; ANTT LM, Vol. 16. ff. 118, 582, Vol.17. f. 12; de Bulhão Pato, 1880-1883, Vol. 4, p. 355; Rivara, 1857-1877, Vol. 6, 1147). Overall, as Cesar Pirani has pointed out, there were tensions between the interests of the Portuguese ruler in Lisbon and the many Portuguese administrators and Portuguese settlers in the colonies who were entrusted with implementing royal orders and this sometimes resulted in inefficiencies in the implementation of policy (Pirani, 2016, pp. 88-116).

The story of the first Municipal Council of Colombo ends in 1656 with the fall of Colombo to Dutch forces assisted by the army of the ruler of Kandy. It is clear that the *câmara* was seen by the Portuguese as part of their colonial administrative apparatus and that the council was consulted when important questions arose. The council was also held responsible for the provision of municipal facilities. It essentially represented the interests of a few hundred Portuguese settlers. The destructive wars of the time have ensured that it is very difficult for us to recreate many of the daily operations of this institution but surviving archival records do give us a glimpse of the workings of the first municipal council that existed in Ceylon (Sri Lanka). Unfortunately, there has been no study of how major urban areas in Sri Lanka were administered in the period after 1656 up to the early nineteenth century. This might be an area worthy of the attention of an enterprising scholar.

Endnotes

- i. For a broader discussion on the difficulties of writing the local and regional histories of areas that fell under colonial rule in the early modern period, see de Silva, 2024.
- ii. Mendis, 2017, p. 58 also mentions the existence of a Town Hall. According to Barbara Consolini (2006, p. 6), "Along the Rua Direita the most relevant buildings were found: beautiful residential dwellings with inner courtyards, the church of S.Paulo and, in front of it the Câmara, the Portuguese town hall."
- iii. In this essay, the appellation Lanka or Sri Lanka will be used interchangeably with the colonial designation Ceylon. The Portuguese term for the country was Ceilão.
- iv. The other places identified in standing orders issued to *Vedor da Fazenda* Antão Vaz Freire were Puttalam, Chilaw, Negombo, Panadura, Kalutara, Alutgama, Galle, Weligama, and Matara. In some of them the forts had not yet been built (Abeyasinghe, 1966, p. 60).
- v. For example, an order for Goa of the King of Portugal dated 25 March 1542 laid down that officeholders needed to be '*portuguezes de nação e geração*.' (Rivara, 1857, Fasc. II. *Livro dos privilegios da Cidade de Goa*, pp. 115-116). A late seventeenth century ruling for Macao specifies '*Christianos Velhos Portuguezes de Nasção e Geração*' (Old Christians, Portuguese by nationality and birth) (Murias, 1943, pp. 174-175).
- vi. An *amuna* denoted an area of land on which about six bushels of paddy could be sown - approximately two and a half acres. An *amuna* equals 40 *kurunis*.
- vii. For a good accounts of the imposition of the cinnamon monopoly, see Abeyasinghe (1966, pp. 143-150) and Pirani (2016, pp. 52-76). For further information on the production and sale of cinnamon in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries see de Silva (1972, pp. 190-201; 1989).
- viii. The *câmara's* accusations of corruption were echoed and amplified in a letter from *Vedor da Fazenda*, Lançarote de Seixas dated 20 November 1623 to the King of Portugal (AHU *Codice* 35, ff. 24-24v). For details of Jorge de Albuquerque's efforts to enrich himself see, de Silva (1972, pp. 60-62).
- ix. The fortified settlements proposed in the 1620s included Peliyagoda and Mulleriyawa.

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