

The reverse transfer in the early colonial period: Sinhala Jewellery in the Portuguese and European courts

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The Iberian adventures beginning in the late 15th Century (the so-called Voyages of Discovery) resulted in the transfer of many botanical and other products across the globe, examples potato, tobacco and tomato to Europe and Asia. The Iberian adventures were also the result of prior accumulation in the 14th to 15th centuries of navigational knowledge and technologies from within the Mediterranean and from Asia, examples of the latter: the New Arithmetic introduced from South Asia by the Arabs, the lateen sail, the compass, the astrolabe and extensive geographical knowledge.

Sri Lanka was the major Asian civilizational entity that fell victim to Portuguese attack. Its practice of Christian induced genocide (via the Pope's Treaty of Tordisellas) resulted in a massive cultural assault on the country. The consequent cultural imposition has been widely documented.

Yet, in a reverse direction, there was a transfer of manufactured cultural products from the Sinhalese into the Portuguese and hence to Europe. This was the Portuguese import of Sinhalese jewellery. A Portuguese queen at the time, Queen Catherine was an avid collector of Sinhalese jewellery who in turn gifted them to many European royal houses as much sought after gifts. Many of these are today found in museums scattered over Europe. Their documentation is found in Portuguese records at the time as well as in recent books on Portuguese jewellery. The illustrated paper describes these manufactured products transferred and now found in European museums such as in Lisbon, Amsterdam, Munich, Paris and London (several photographed by the author). It describes through Portuguese documentation at the time, the transfer process from Sri Lanka to Portugal and beyond. It speculates on the technology used in Sri Lanka at the time comparing Sinhala products and technology with the contemporary European jewellery and its associated technology. It speculates briefly on its impact on the Renaissance in that these collections found their way into Renaissance "curiosity boxes" and helped kindle the European imagination.

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