

The ‘Remains of Faith’: Portuguese-Influenced Ecclesiastical Art and Architecture in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka

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Abstract

The last region in Sri Lanka to come under the influence of the Portuguese was the Northern Kingdom of Jaffna i.e. the Island of Mannar in 1560 and subsequently, the Peninsula of Jaffna in 1619. It is reported that during this period missionaries of the Portuguese Padroado built a great number of churches in the region. Following the expulsion of the Portuguese by the Dutch in the middle of the 17th century, almost every Portuguese influenced religious construction was either destroyed or modified to accommodate their newly established Reformed Faith. However, there was one decisive factor which enabled Portuguese-influenced ecclesiastical art and architecture to thrive during this period of anti-Catholic persecution. This was the insidious help received from the influx of Goan - Oratorian missionaries, who arrived in Sri Lanka at the end of the 17th century. With the advent of the British rule religious freedom was granted. Thus, during the second half of the 19th century, the influx of new European missionaries of Propaganda Fide to the island marked a symbolic end to the 300-year span of Portuguese influence on ecclesiastical construction in Sri Lanka. It can be said that the 30-year war played a decisive role in the elimination of the remains of Portuguese ecclesiastical art and architecture in the northern region. It is against this background that this paper intends to explore both the origins and the current status of Portuguese-influenced ecclesiastical art and architecture within the surviving churches of the old Portuguese mission stations in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka. This study was funded by the Senate Research Committee of the University of Moratuwa under Grant No.SRC/ST/2017/04.

Introduction

Sri Lanka was divided into three autonomous kingdoms when the Portuguese arrived: the south-west kingdom of Kotte, by which name its capital city was also called, the kingdom of Kandy, in the central mountainous region of the island and the kingdom of Jaffna - also called Jaffnapatnam, in the northern region of the island. The kingdom of Jaffna encompassed three distinct areas, each with its own unique geographically influenced fabric: the extreme northern peninsula of Jaffna, the Vanni, which is the forest area of the northern mainland, and the island of Mannar, which extends from east to west, off the north-western coast of the island towards the South Indian shore. Pearl fishing, the core trade between Tuticorin and the island, was the main source of livelihood of the people living in the island of Mannar. Ethnically, the majority of the population was Tamil. The cultural characteristics of these peoples were predominantly Hindu. Their traditions and beliefs were close, but not identical, to those of the people of Southern India¹. Nallur, a suburb of the Jaffna peninsula, served as the capital of the kingdom. During the first half of the 16th century, the Portuguese did not profess much interest in the

kingdom of Jaffna. This was in marked contrast to their ever-increasing involvement in the politics of the kingdoms of Kotte and Kandyⁱⁱ. However, during the second half of the 16th century, as the missionaries began to arrive in the region, the Portuguese showed more interest in the kingdom of Jaffna.

Francis Xavier, who was involved in missionary activities within the fishing coasts of South India commenced his missionary activities in Sri Lanka from the kingdom of Jaffna. The close proximity of the island of Mannar to India exposed many of its inhabitants to the influence of Francis Xavier, and many became desirous of becoming his disciples. However, in 1544, the local ruler of the kingdom in whose dominion Mannar laid was intolerant of this seeming transference of the prime loyalties of his subjects to the crown of Portugal. His anger resulted in almost 600 to 700 neophytes being put to death. The new faith of the inhabitants of the kingdom availed them the right to appeal to the Portuguese for protection against their own ruler. In response the viceroy Dom Constantino de Braganza attempted to conquer the kingdom with the decided intention of punishing the ruler of Jaffna for the persecution of Catholics within his territories. According to Tikiri Abeyasinghe, this expedition led by the viceroy produced several results beneficial to the Portuguese. The most tangible among them was the annexation of the island of Mannar to the Portuguese crown. Thus of all the regions of Sri Lanka that came under the Portuguese rule the island of Mannar was the first place where the royal Portuguese Padroado functioned in the full sense of the wordⁱⁱⁱ.

The possession of Mannar also facilitated the Portuguese attempt to control and exploit the pearl fisheries of the region. This in turn led to a better appreciation of the strategic role of Jaffna among the Portuguese authorities^{iv}. With this increasing awareness of the importance of Jaffna, the Portuguese now sought to bring the kingdom under their authority and finally succeeded in 1619. As in the case of the Kingdom of Kotte, Christianity took root in the northern region, after the Portuguese established their control of the land as in a conquered territory.

The present-day Northern Province is almost entirely defined by the said pre-colonial Kingdom of Jaffna. Portuguese-influenced ecclesiastical art and architecture of the province has not been preserved well. This is due not only to decay, to the natural passage of time and the wear and tear caused by the annual monsoons but also to the ravages inflicted on the region by 30 years of prolonged civil war. The latter has completely dwarfed all other natural factors and elements and has played a pivotal role in virtually eliminating almost all traces of the remaining influence of art and architecture from the Portuguese occupation in Sri Lanka.

Missionary presence in Sri Lanka

Even though the Portuguese presence in Sri Lanka is apparent from 1505, the tangible evangelization commenced around 1543. It followed the arrival of Franciscan missionaries on an ambassadorial mission between the Kingdom of Kotte and the King of Portugal. The Franciscan missionary endeavours, with few exceptions, were limited to the territories of the Kingdom of Kotte. Meanwhile, the Jesuits of the fishing coasts in South India under the leadership of Francis Xavier arrived in the island of Mannar in 1560 as the first missionaries in the Kingdom of Jaffna. However, the permanent and officially endorsed Jesuit mission in Sri Lanka was established in 1602 and was later followed by other religious orders i.e. the Dominicans in 1605 and the Augustinians in 1606. Thus, finally, the mission field of Sri Lanka was shared among four missionary orders from the Portuguese Padroado. The chronicle of Robert Boudens, “The Catholic Church in Ceylon under Dutch Rule”, lists over 160

Portuguese churches and chapels with their respective locations which were built by these missionary orders towards the end of the Portuguese era.

Despite the expulsion of Portuguese missionaries from the country in 1658, Roman Catholicism prospered clandestinely with the help of Goan Oratorian missionaries, who arrived in Sri Lanka incognito in 1687. “They revived the church and attracted more believers to their congregations than the state-supported Dutch Reformed Church”^v. Therefore, the Oratorian missionary work and involvement during the Dutch occupation of Sri Lanka seem to have contributed to the continuity of the Portuguese-influenced ecclesiastical art and architecture. It is thought that this involvement played a key role in the restoration and reconstruction of the territorial network of Catholic churches.

Around the middle of the 19th century, with the political and social reforms of the British administration, the Roman Catholic mission in Sri Lanka too came under new political, cultural and social influences. The administrative jurisdiction of the Catholic Church was shifted from the Portuguese Padroado to the Propaganda Fide, or, in other words, from the Portuguese Crown to the Vatican Sovereignty. During the preceding 150 years, the religious space of the Roman Catholic Church in Sri Lanka was occupied by the Oratorians with their decidedly Portuguese-influenced architectural traditions. The effect of this administrative shift, in the context of art and architecture, was a distinct preference for Italian aesthetics, that followed the new European missionary influence. This shift in styles marked the end of the unwavering influence of the Portuguese on religious architecture in Sri Lanka. The remaining Portuguese influenced churches were limited to a small number which were scattered across the old mission stations, particularly within the Northern Province. It may, however, be observed that currently no churches of original Portuguese character exist in the province.

Thus the origin of the Portuguese influence on the ecclesiastical art and architecture of the province needs to be understood within two different religio-political contexts:

- Direct Portuguese Influence: from mid-16th century to mid-17th century; from the advent of Portuguese missionaries to the end of their mission.
- Indo-Portuguese Influence: from end of mid-17th century to mid-19th century; from the arrival of Goan Oratorian missionaries during the Dutch Period to the establishment of the administration of the new European missionaries during the British Period.

The First Churches in the Kingdom of Jaffna

The Christian population of Mannar belonged mainly to the castes of the *Paravas* and of the *Careas*. The Jesuits built three churches for the *Careas* and one for the *Paravas*, correspondingly in Erukkilampiddi, Thoddavali, Karisal (Carcel) and Patim. When the church in Erukkilampiddi was renovated in 1572, it became the first church built in stone and mortar^{vi}. Though the Franciscans worked alongside the Jesuits in the island of Mannar, they limited themselves to providing spiritual support to the Portuguese settlement, building a small monastery and a church dedicated to Mary, the Mother of God, next to the fortress. The ruler of the kingdom maintained his authority and prevented any missionary work from being carried out outside of Mannar. Following the Portuguese expedition of 1591, the kingdom of Jaffna definitively came under Portuguese influence. However, the local ruler managed to maintain some independence and resisted the advance of Catholic missionary work in his kingdom. Despite this resistance, the Franciscans managed to obtain his permission to build a church and dedicated it to Our Lady of Victory. It was recorded as a church with “vaulted roof and clerestory”. Later, greater missionary progress was made in the peninsula after it became the

possession of the Portuguese in 1619. The church of Our Lady of Victory moved to a new site, inside the fort, where it then became famous as the shrine of Our Lady of Miracles^{vii}.

From Mannar, the Franciscans extended their mission to the district of Mantota, on the immediate mainland facing the island to the east. It is recorded that they built five churches in the district: the church of Our Lady of Health in the village of Mantota, the church of Our Lady of Good Voyage at Arippu, the church of Our Lady of Redemption at Nanaddan, the church of St. James at Pereangali and the church of the Holy Cross at Chitaveli^{viii}. In the context of the construction of new churches in the vicinity of Jaffna, the Franciscans first built a church in the island of Tanadiva (Kayts). It was dedicated to St. John the Baptist and would later become the centre for the growth of the Catholic community, which was organised around the churches of St. Thomas in Allaipiddy, Our Lady of Health in Velanai and Our Lady in Charavane^{ix}. Paulo da Trindade provides a list of twenty-five Franciscan churches that were built during that period in Jaffna, which do not include those on the island of Tanadiva, Mannar and Mantota.

The Jesuits, who came to the island in 1623, built fourteen large churches in the Jaffna peninsula. They were grouped under 'Residencies' or 'Stations', places where a priest resided. There were twelve such residencies, herein listed in order, beginning from the one nearest to the mainland and then going from East to West, as follows: 1. Kottandarkulum - Archangel of St. Michael, 2. Pallai - Juses, 3. Tampakamam - Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, 4. Mukamali - All Saints, 5. Achchuvely - the Holy Ghost, 6. Mailiddy - Our Lady of the Angels, 7. Tellippalai - SS. Peter and Paul, 8. Mallakam - St. Ignatius, 9. Pandattarippu - Our Lady of Mercy, 10. Chankanai - Holy Trinity, 11. Vaddukkodai - Assumption of Our Lady and 12. Karativu - Our Lady of Refuge. The largest and the best situated in the entire province was the church Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Tampakamum while Our Lady of Refuge in Karativu was the first Jesuit church built in Jaffna^x.

Philip Baldaeus who served as the sole *Predikant* of the Reformed Church during the period of the Dutch invasion compiled several notes and illustrations on the remaining Portuguese ecclesiastical constructions in the northern kingdom. They included about twenty-six engravings of churches with their parish houses and schools, ranging from mere structures of mud, with sticks and thatch roof, to more important churches built of stone, coral or brick. However the historical accuracy ascribable to his illustrations is questionable and his drawings may essentially describe the main architectural elements of the church precincts (as may be substantiated later on in this paper).

In summary, during the period of direct Portuguese influence, the peninsula of Jaffna was divided into thirty-two parishes which along with the islands seem to have been provided with thirty-four churches. In terms of architectural models as per Carita, two types of church models were built. The first was the small church with a single nave, while the other, the most prominent and the principal type in the larger churches, had three naves. These three naves were formed by two rows of masonry columns. The chancels and the sanctuaries of the churches were commonly barrel - vaulted and separated by a triumphal arch. Some of these church façades were crowned by curvilinear baroque gables. The types of structures mentioned are best exemplified in the fragmented old-Portuguese church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin found within the Kalpitiya Fort, and the church of the Holy Trinity, Chankanai, respectively.

The First Wave of Portuguese Dilution

As already indicated, the first wave of the dilution of Portuguese-influenced architecture was carried out by the Dutch during the mid-17th Century. The Dutch, meaning to spread Protestantism on the island after the expatriate of the Portuguese, decided on mostly destroying and remodelling Portuguese-influenced ecclesiastical constructions.

Despite the fact that a substantial number of buildings built by the Portuguese do not exist due to either their destruction during the Dutch Occupation or the natural climatic wear and tear on the island, the Portuguese church of Assumption of Our Lady in Vaddukodai still continues to be used, but under a different Christian administrative denomination. It is currently being used as the Cathedral Church of the Jaffna Diocese of the Church of South India. The building has been subjected to several modifications over the centuries, under different ecclesiastical regimes. Therefore the simplicity of the existing interior relates to Reformed worship. Thus, today the interior of the church has been rendered unrecognisable and inconsistent to the components and styles that resonated during the Portuguese occupation. However, the original Portuguese nave and aisles separated by semi-circular interconnecting arches which are supported by massive round pillars over 3 feet in diameter which end in plain square capitals, are still intact. This may help one understand how other Jesuits churches were originally constructed. According to an inscription dated 1678, the façade of the church was evidently altered by the Dutch in accordance with their Calvinistic taste. The “Baldaeus Engravings” however depict a structure of two or three storeys which appears to be inaccurate and tends to confirm the criticisms from Heydt who states the following: “Philip Baldaeus’ engravings were worked out either from verbal visual representations or they had been done by quite an amateur hand”.^{xi}



Fig.1: View of original Portuguese nave - Church of Assumption of Our Lady in Vaddukodai.

In addition to the Portuguese church in Vaddukodai, the Holy Trinity Church in Chankanai is a prominent Portuguese period architectural relic which was built in 1641. It has a nave and chancel separated by a triumphal arch. The façade and the nave pillars are entirely destroyed and the church now only consists of nave walls and chancel. It is not known as to what degree the Dutch modified the original structure, but the Baldaeus illustration in this instance seems

to confirm that it was not subject to major interventions. The length of the nave is 110 feet and 6 inches and the width is 31 feet and 8 inches. The walls of the nave, built of coral-stone, had a width of 4 feet and 2 inches. The chancel is vaulted in coral-stone and is separated from the nave by a high stone arch, 3 feet and 6 inches thick. The internal length of the chancel is 28 feet and 6 inches with a width of 20 feet. According to Lewis, the circumference of the nave pillars were 7 feet and 6 inches.



Fig. 2: Ruins of the old Portuguese Church of Holy Trinity in Chankanai.

In comparison with Indo-Portuguese influenced architectural culture, the larger churches built during the early Oratorian mission in the province appear to be generally characterised by the succession of two rows of wooden columns in its nave. It can be suggested that as an alternative to the Portuguese period's masonry columns, the Oratorians introduced wooden columns to support the heavy timber roof construction. This innovation also helps to expand the nave in terms of its width and height. The spatial organization of this model is quite similar to the Portuguese typology and therefore seems to indicate the successful assimilation of preceding influences, consolidated over many centuries.

The 'Remains of Faith'

The architectural heritage typifying Oratorian constructions is well expressed in the surviving structure of St. Jame's in Kilaly, once the battle ground that embroiled the north for 30 years. Church activity was restored by the devotees of the area as recently as six years ago, after a 17 years occupation by military forces. The remaining Indo-Portuguese details of artistic and architectural interest in the church are mostly its ornate slender wooden columns. Furthermore, the wall behind the altar contains an elaborate and ornamented wooden retable, which dominates the space and creates a main focal point. In addition, the aisles evolved within this

model, and this facilitated the placement of two symmetrical arches located on either side of the triumphal arch, marking the passages to the corresponding lateral chancels.



Fig. 3: Exterior view of Church of St. James in Kilaly.

Most of the Oratorian churches wooden column capitals are usually morticed with four-sided traditional decorative brackets which carry the load of the large beams, as seen in the St. James's church. Many architectural details of these columns seem to have been influenced by vernacular Hindu temples (*Kovils*) in the province. Curved retables are another significant architectural element which exemplify Portuguese-influenced art in Orient. In most Oratorian churches within the island of Mannar the wall behind the altar was ornate, with wooden retables that follow old Portuguese artistic traditions. The finest example is the old Oratorian retable which has been reinstated at the new church of Our Lady of Victory in Pesalai. The overall composition and layout of these retables bear clear reference to their counterparts in southern Indian churches which are featured with curved gilt work, painted relief work and sculptures. However, it can also be observed that figurative motifs drawn from the local tradition have been incorporated into these elaborate works of art. The most noteworthy example is the retable at the old church of St. Joseph in Kathankulam.



Fig. 4: Wooden retablo at the Church of Our Lady of Victory in Pesalai

After the 30-year conflict, the post-war reconstruction resulted in the gradual disappearance of Portuguese-influenced art and architecture. The effects of that reconstruction can be observed in the church of St. Mary's on the island of Mannar. The spatial layout of the old Oratorian-influenced church building was identical to that of the Portuguese church of the Holy Trinity in Chankanai. The author of this article was fortunate to be able to do a measured drawing of the old church before its demolition.

Today, it is incontrovertibly cataclysmic that a church such as St. Mary's in Mannar, which was of significant aesthetic and historic value, has been razed and then reconstructed (with much religious fervour) in the complete absence of its original Portuguese artistic and architectural characteristics. The architectural layers of style and design established over the 300 years of the various shades of Portuguese influence have all been swept away by simplistic post-war reconstruction that has failed to take history into account.

ⁱ Lewcock, R., *The Architecture of an Island: The Living Heritage of Sri Lanka*, Colombo: Barefoot (Pvt) Ltd., 2014, p.53.

ⁱⁱ Abeysinghe, T. *Jaffna under the Portuguese*, Colombo: Lake House Printers & Publishers Ltd., 1986, p.1.

ⁱⁱⁱ Quere, M., *Christianity in Sri Lanka under the Portuguese Padroado 1597-1658*, Colombo: Catholic Press, 1995, p.143.

^{iv} Abeysinghe, T. *Jaffna under the Portuguese*, Colombo: Lake House Printers & Publishers Ltd., 1986, p.2.

^v Somaratna, G. P., "Sri Lanka: History of Christian Missions", R. E. Hedlund, *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of South Asian Christianity*, p. 647-451, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012, p.648.

^{vi} Carita, H., Portuguese-Influenced Religious Architecture in Ceylon: Creation, Types and Continuity. In J. Flores, *Re-exploring the Links: History and Constructed Histories between Portugal and Sri Lanka* (p. 261-278). Lisbon: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2007, p.266.

^{vii} Don Peter, "Studies in Ceylon Church History", Colombo: Catholic Press, 1963, p.46.

^{viii} Quere, M., *Christianity in Sri Lanka under the Portuguese Padroado 1597-1658*, Colombo: Catholic Press, 1995, p.158.

^{ix} Carita, H., Portuguese-Influenced Religious Architecture in Ceylon: Creation, Types and Continuity, J. Flores, *Re-exploring the Links: History and Constructed Histories between Portugal and Sri Lanka*, p. 261-278, Lisbon: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2007, p.270.

^x Perera, S., *The Jesuits in Ceylon: In the XVI and XVII Centuries*, Madura: De Nobili Press, 1941, p.104.

^{xi} Silva, R. K., *Illustrations and views of Dutch Ceylon, 1602-1796*, London: Serendib Publications, 1988, p.316.

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