Historiographical Encounters in Colonial South India
The *Kēraḷōlpatti*'s Multiple Lives[*]

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Historiography and the Colonial Encounter

At least since the beginning of the nineteenth century, a commonly held view is that there was no real interest in history in South Asia: no historical narrative; only vague and whimsical mythologies.[1] This presumed lack of interest has more specifically qualified Hindu traditions, since Europeans have used the term 'historians' to refer to Muslim authors and scholars of the subcontinent, as in the volumes *History of India as Told by its Own Historians* edited from the papers of Henry Myers Elliot (1808–1853) by John Dowson (1820–1881) between 1867 and 1877. As shown by Romila Thapar, this view does not stand up to an examination of different examples emanating from the pre-colonial era. Thapar masterfully argues that discourses about the past, used for legitimating present practices, are very much present in pre-modern and early modern India—documenting for example the history of dynasties or temples—and that it would be uneasy not to speak of these texts as representing some sort of 'history'.[2] In the same vein, in their work entitled *Textures of Time*, Velcheru Narayan Rao, David Shulman, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam[3] have shown that the region of South India offers a rich field for the observation of pre-colonial historiographical practices. Focusing on the activities of 'village record keepers' (*karaṇams*), the authors show that even if these texts do not correspond to Western 'canonical' historiographical criteria, they constitute narratives about the past that are testimonies to the deep historical consciousness of their respective authors.

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[1] For examples, see ROMILA THAPAR, *The Past before Us: Historical Traditions of Early North India* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2013), 19, and in particular her quotation of EDWARD JAMES RAPSON's *Cambridge History of India*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), stating that: 'In all the large and varied literatures of the Brahmins, Jains and Buddhists there is not to be found a single work which can be compared to the *Histories* in which Herodotus recounts the struggle between the Greeks and the Persians or the *Annals* in which Livy traces the growth and progress of Roman power'.

[2] THAPAR, *The Past before Us*, 696–97.

[3] VELCHERU NARAYAN RAO, DAVID SHULMAN, and SANJAY SUBRAHMANYAM, *Textures of Time: Writing History in South India, 1600–1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

As to the impact of the colonial presence on the conceptualisation of the past, several authors of subaltern studies such as Ranajit Guha have argued that the development of historicism (and history as a discipline) in India is a product of the colonial relationship. One often-quoted example is that of Ramram Basu (1751–1813), a pandit assistant at Fort William College in Calcutta, and the author of *Rāja Pratāpāditya Caritra* (1801), a history of Bengali kings composed under the supervision of the evangelical missionary and orientalist William Carey (1761–1834). For Guha, Basu is the one who introduced modern historiography into the Bengali (and from there, Indian) world under the influence of his British masters.[4] While there are compelling arguments for such a thesis—as show various chapters of the history of the historical discipline in India[5]—it has also been emphasised that cases such as that of Basu cannot be analysed as a mere echo of an imported Western historiographical method but should be considered in the continuity of Persian works of *Tarikh*, while also taking into account a Sanskrit heritage and European influence.[6] This suggests that one should look at such historiographical encounters as complex processes to be recontextualised within their specific contexts of production and reception.

Although it is not helpful to consider any kind of text about the past as 'history',[7] there are at least two possibilities for moving beyond a Eurocentric conception of historical narratives: one can look at culturally specific markers that suggest 'factuality' in a textual content. This is the strategy advocated for by Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam, in the above-mentioned work on 'textures of time'. Another strategy, proposed by the Chicago-based historian of religions Bruce Lincoln, consists in looking not at the content, but at the uses of narratives about the past. As he puts it: 'In my view we would do better to classify narratives not by their content but by the claims that are made by their narrators and the way in which those claims are received by their audience(s)'.[8] Both approaches allow for an analysis of historical narratives as dynamically interacting with other genres of literature, in and out of Europe.[9] Both are also helpful for the study of historiographical encounters, because they consider the larger cultural and social context that accompanies the (dis)qualification of a text as

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[4] RANAJIT GUHA, *History at the Limits of World History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 10–12.

[5] See DIPESH CHAKRABARTY, *The Calling of History: Sir Jadunath Sarkar and His Empire of Truth* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015) for a detailed study of the Indian historian Jadunath Sarkar (1870–1958).

[6] KUMKUM CHATTERJEE, *The Cultures of History in Early Modern India: Persianization and Mughal Culture in Bengal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 133.

[7] See RAO, SHULMAN, and SUBRAHMANYAM, *Textures of Time*, 253.

[8] BRUCE LINCOLN, *Discourse and the Construction of Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 24.

[9] See for example RAO, SHULMAN, and SUBRAHMANYAM, *Textures of Time*, 254–55: 'Nonetheless, we encounter various fascinating mixtures. History can migrate into "pure" literature. […] Over time, perhaps a very long time, the historical impulse becomes encrusted with other intentions, ramifying into stories that may be romantic, didactic, mythic, parodic – in any case, devoid of the textural markers that insist on factuality per se'.

history.[10] Another important point raised by Lincoln is the fact that narratives about the past can be reconfigured in periods of shifting political regimes or societies, to both consolidate positions of power or help resist brutal changes in the political or social structure.[11]

As a very modest attempt at tackling this general theme, I would like to examine the following questions in the light of an example from Kerala at the turn of the eighteenth century: (1) What were the aims of local traditions narrating the region's past, before the arrival of European actors? (2) What kind of historiographical practices did the European actors bring with them, and how did they interact with local narratives about the past? (3) What were, finally, the longer-term consequences of such historiographical encounters?

The *Kēraḷōlpatti* as a textual tradition

Historical context

The region of Kerala, on the South-West coast of the Indian subcontinent, forms a rather homogenous region whose economy is centred on agriculture. In precolonial times, the political system was largely decentralised, with relatively autonomous local centres and communities, although kings such as those of the Perumal dynasty (ca. 800–1200) ruling out of Mahodayapuram (modern Cranganore/Kodungallur) claimed authority on the whole region. The prosperity of the region largely stemmed from trade with distant lands such as Persia, the Arabic Peninsula or China, allowing the rulers of port cities such as the Sāmūtiris of Calicut (modern Kozhikode) to accumulate considerable wealth and power.[12] The society was organised hierarchically, with groups of Brahmins (in particular the Nampūtiri Brahmins) at its top, often grouped in independent settlements and enjoying landowning rights. In the seventeenth and eighteenth century, the region's riches were coveted by various European trading companies: the Portuguese at first, then the Dutch, the French, and finally the British, impacting socio-economic structures in important ways. In that same period, agricultural areas were expanded by non-Brahmanical groups, particularly the Nāyars, to respond to the demands of a growing international trade.[13]

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[10] See LINCOLN, *Discourse and the Construction of Society*, 24: 'For myth most precisely signifies, in its pejorative and condescending usage, a story that members of some other social group (or past era) regard(ed) as true and authoritative, but that the speaker and members of her or his group regard as false'. Cf. RAO, SHULMAN, and SUBRAHMANYAM, *Textures of Time*, 256: 'The history of the loser becomes mere literature in the eyes of the victor'.

[11] LINCOLN, *Discourse and the Construction of Society*, 25.

[12] See the description of the pre-colonial situation in RAJAN GURUKKAL and RAGHAVA VARIER, *History of Kerala: Prehistoric to the Present* (Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2018), 187: 'Kerala's midland became a land of Malayalam-speaking people, Brahmanical hegemony, Sanskritic intellectualism, hereditary occupations, caste-based hierarchy, agrarian economy, and independent principalities with cosmopolitan ports and inland marketing centres inhabited by Jews, Christians, Islamic Arabs and Chinese traders'.

[13] K. N. GANESH, 'Ownership and control of land in medieval Kerala: *Janmam–kanam* relations during the 16th–18th centuries', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 28, no. 3 (1991): 299–321 (305).

In the eighteenth century, the position of all landowning elites was directly threatened by the Mysore Wars and the new regime imposed on the Malabar region by Tipu Sultan. Indeed, Tipu Sultan was favouring a direct relation to cultivators and marginalising the interests of traditional landholders—a conception that was echoed in the Treaty of Mangalore of 1784 and the Kuttipuram declaration of 1788.[14] Organised in resistance movements and starting rebellions, Brahmanical and Nāyar elites joined the efforts of the British, initially perceived as liberators.[15] With the treaty of Seringapatam (1792), the British took the positions left by Tipu and started building their own administration on the basis of that of Hyder Ali and Tipu.[16] While some rajas started negotiations that ended up recognising the new regime and accepting to pay a tribute, others rebelled against the new power.[17] For example, in the Paḻassi revolts (1793–1797 and 1800–1805), the elites of the Kottayam region fought against the new tax collection schemes proposed by Colonel Alexander McLeod (1792–1849). The second revolt ended in 1805 with the sudden death of Keralavarma Paḻassi Raja (1753–1805).[18] The same period also saw attempts to standardise the relations between landholders, tenants and the East India Company, by creating a system of 'permanent settlement' in South India on the model of that of Bengal (1793). This was Regulation XXV (1802) which in reality gave more power to traditional landholders and 'officialised' their superior position.[19]

The elaboration of a textual oral tradition

Even if some versions present themselves as a condensed version of another work attributed to Tunchan, a famous Nāyar poet of the sixteenth century, the *Kēraḷōlpatti* certainly cannot be attributed to any single author.[20] Its date of composition is impossible to assess with any certainty because this is an oral tradition existing in multiple retellings. Referring to the last events recounted in the version edited by the missionary Hermann Gundert (1814–1893), scholars have suggested a date around the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth century—but this is more a *terminus ad quem* than a composition date.[21] There are manuscripts in

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[14] K. K. N. KURUP, *William Logan and Land Tenure* (Calicut: Sandhya Publications, 1981), 4–5.

[15] KURUP, *William Logan and Land Tenure*, 5.

[16] On the British administrative intervention in the region, see MARGRET FRENZ, *From Contact to Conquest* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) and MARGRET FRENZ, '"A Race of Monsters": South India and the British Civilizing Mission in the Later Eighteenth Century', in *Colonialism as Civilizing Mission: Cultural Ideology in British India*, eds HARALD FISCHER-TINÉ and MICHAEL MANN (London: Anthem, 2004), 49–67 (54–55).

[17] See FRENZ, *From Contact to Conquest*, 105–108.

[18] FRENZ, '"A Race of Monsters"', 59–65.

[19] The Act was initially enforced in the region of Tamil Nadu, but attempts were made to apply it in other provinces of the Madras presidency, such as Malabar. On Kerala, see GANESH, 'Ownership and control of land in medieval Kerala', 321: 'However, with British occupation, the janmis were transformed from customary to statutory landholders, and new privileges, including the right to enhance rent and legal eviction enabled them to sustain themselves as a class, and improve their position'.

[20] See KESAVAN VELUTHAT, *The Early Medieval in South India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 133.

[21] M. G. S. NARAYANAN, 'The Ancient and Medieval History of Kerala: Recent Developments and Rationale for Inter-Disciplinary Approach', *Journal of Kerala History* 3, no. 3–4 (1976): 441–56 (441–42).

sanskritised Malayalam with that title dated in the early seventeenth century and texts with a similar content but a different title that are at least as old, for example texts named *Keraḷamāhātmyam* or *Kēraḷanāṭakam*—a manuscript of the latter, coming from Gundert's papers, has a colophon indicating a date corresponding to 1596.[22] As Veluthat puts it,

> there are many recensions and more copies of this book, at least half a dozen available in print and many more that number in palm leaf manuscripts. In fact, many old houses of landlords and local chieftains had in their collection one or more copies of it.[23]

Therefore, and following Cezary Galewicz, it seems appropriate to speak of '*Kēraḷōlpatti* literature' as a literary genre rather than a specific book.[24] In addition, as Veluthat also noted, an important characteristic of the text is that it was not supposed to be read, but rather performed in front of audiences, for example in the framework of *teyyam* performances at the shrines of local deities.[25] This implies that the narrative was not only meant to provide raw information, but also to please target audiences and communicate aesthetic emotions. Being recreated in multiple contexts of performance in front of diverse groups (also in terms of caste), the narrative acquired a remarkable ductility, explaining why it exists in so many different versions.

Textual contents and its aims

In order to understand the text's aims and its uses by both European and Indian actors, it is necessary to give a brief survey of the contents of its most standard version, that edited by Gundert. The text begins with the time of origins and the incarnation of Paraśurāma, Viṣṇu's sixth incarnation, to 'destroy evil kings' in the *kaliyuga*. It continues with the period of the Perumāḷs and ends with a third period, that of the 'kings'—various rulers of Travancore, including, in some versions, the Sāmūtiris of Calicut. The text oscillates between different registers: in places it involves supernatural elements, for example in recounting the origins of Kerala or the divine interventions to counter the arrival of the Portuguese; in other places it reports events in a more factual tone, for example when describing rivalries between the rulers of Kochi, Eranad, and Calicut.[26] This alternating between different registers helps to describe human actions in a continuum with divine acts, and in particular to give a divine origin

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[22] See CEZARY GALEWICZ, 'Editorship and History Making: On Historicizing Modern Editions of Tiruniḷalmāla', *Cracow Indological Studies* 23, no. 1 (2021): 1–33 (2–3).

[23] VELUTHAT, *The Early Medieval in South India*, 133.

[24] CEZARY GALEWICZ, 'Editorship and History Making', 1.

[25] Cf. KESAVAN VELUTHAT, 'History as Performance: A Note on the Keralolpatti', in *Questioning Paradigms, Constructing Histories: A Festschrift for Romila Thapar*, eds KUMKUM ROY and NAINA DAYAL (Delhi: Aleph, 2019), 242–58 (251–54). See T. PAVITHRAN, *Randu Keralothpathi* (Payyanur: Malayalam Department, Payyanur College, 2007, not consulted) for the edition of two versions of the *Kēraḷōlpatti*, one of which stemming from a *teyyam* performance.

[26] HERMANN GUNDERT, ed., *Keralolpatti (The Origin of Malabar)* (Mangalore: Basel Mission Book & Tract Depository, 1868), 100–101 = T. MADHAVA MENON, Eng. transl., *Keralolpatti* (Thiruvananthapuram: International School of Dravidian Linguistics, 2003), 88.

and legitimation to human institutions—a classical feature of *mahātmya*s and *sthalapurāṇa*s.

The first part of the text tells us about Paraśurāma, 'Rāma with the ax', incarnated to bring an end to the reign of unjust kings, and who created the region of Kerala by making it emerge from the Indian Ocean.[27] He peopled it with Brahmins but frightened by the presence of deadly snakes in the region, they left and returned home. Paraśurāma then repopulated the region with 'Arya Brahmins'[28] from the north and gave them an irrevocable right (*janma*) to rule over sixty-four villages.[29] The narrative continues with three crucial points: first, the fact that Paraśurāma installed other deities in temples, shrines and groves, in particular Ayyapan and Bhadrakali, with their respective festivals.[30] This is particularly interesting, because these deities are not typically Sanskritic or Brahmanical, thus demonstrating that the redactors wanted to encompass the whole socio-religious landscape of the region and not only its orthodox Brahmanical component. The second important point is the aetiology of a specific social order, with Brahmins at the top and Nāyars being entrusted with the task of ensuring a correct order in the relations between those with landowning rights and those actually cultivating the soils on these lands.[31] The third crucial point of this part relates to political institutions: to bring an end to endless quarrels, four Brahmanical settlements were designated to lead the others. At a later stage, Brahmins of these villages consulted among themselves to choose a king, leading to the first king of the Perumal dynasty, 'imported' from foreign lands and replaced every twelve years.[32] This shows a particular conception of the relation between religious authorities and political institutions: the latter are controlled by the former, and not the other way around.

The text evokes the central role of Shankara in prescribing rituals and a social order,[33] and describes the social fabric of the region—including the presence of four 'species' of Europeans mentioned in the section on lower-caste peoples: Portuguese,

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[27] The structure of the story can already be found in the *Mahābhārata* 12.49.56–59, but it concerns Maharashtra, not Kerala. The narrative was likely brought by Brahmins when they migrated south (CHRISTOPHE VIELLE, 'How did Paraśurāma come to raise Kerala', in *Irreverent History: Essays for M. G. S. Narayanan*, eds KESAVAN VELUTHAT and DONALD R. DAVIS (Delhi: Primus Books, 2014), 15–32 (15–16) and VELUTHAT, *The Early Medieval in South India*, 135).

[28] GUNDERT, *Keralolpatti*, 3 = MENON, *Keralolpatti*, 26.

[29] GUNDERT, *Keralolpatti*, 10–11 = MENON, *Keralolpatti*, 31.

[30] GUNDERT, *Keralolpatti*, 12 = MENON, *Keralolpatti*, 31–32.

[31] GUNDERT, *Keralolpatti*, 13 = MENON, *Keralolpatti*, 32–33: '[Vedic Brahmins] inducted sudras from several places, and settled them with several rights, privileges and duties; they introduced entailed service [*aḍima*] and tenancy [*kudima*], and ensured *sankalpam* [correct order]; the Nairs were ordained to occupy the *tara* [the portion of a village or administrative unit], and each was sworn to serve as the "eye, the hand and the command" […]. They enacted and enforced that the tenants had subordinate rights, while they had the overlordship and supremacy; to the tenant was the entitlement of *kāṇam* [mortgage], while they [brahmins] retained the *janmam*, and established the customary rights and obligations'. See WILLIAM LOGAN, *Malabar: Manual*, 2 vols (Madras: Government Press, 1887), vol. 1, 133 for a comment about the role of 'supervisors' assigned to Nāyars in this passage.

[32] GUNDERT, *Keralolpatti*, 19 = MENON, *Keralolpatti*, 37.

[33] GUNDERT, *Keralolpatti*, 54 = MENON, *Keralolpatti*, 57. This is of course a tendentious interpretation of Shankara's biography (see VELUTHAT, *The Early Medieval in South India*, 139).

Dutch, French and English people, who wear round hats, occupy islands, erect forts and carry trade.[34] In this first part, the text therefore highlights the cosmic unity of Kerala, a place defined by the righteous action performed on its soil, a *karmabhūmi* set up by Vishnu himself. It is a territory where Brahmins play a cardinal role as its hereditary guardians and as the traditional allies of the kings—which they freely chose, not the other way around.

As Veluthat observes,[35] quite a different ambiance emanates from the last part of the text. It moves to political concerns, focusing on the dynasty of the Calicut Sāmūtiris, with a particular interest in rivalries with other rulers. Significantly, the text evokes the Sāmūtiri's failure to win a confrontation with the lords of Pōḷanāṭu until he worshipped the Goddess (Bhagavati) for six months, after which she granted him victory.[36] In a further passage, a minister of the Calicut king, Mangattachan, organised the killing of sixty 'lords' [*nambimar*s, Brahmins specialising as temple guardians] of a temple and their replacement with those who had done the killing.[37] This part also evokes the arrival of the Portuguese as hostile traders who were soon vanquished thanks to the providential intervention of a local deity, Veṭṭaykkorumakan.[38] It ends with a survey of other kingdoms of the region.

The description of non-Sanskritic festivals, the mention of temple guardians killed under the orders of the Sāmūtiri's minister, and the legitimation of the preeminent position of non-Brahmanical ruling families sound as evident dissonances in the general Brahmanical context of the text. Therefore, and contrary to what is sometimes asserted, this part of the text does not mirror pure Brahmanical ideology but rather alludes to a political concern to account for the position of all the groups forming the society.

Cui Bono? Indian and European uses of the *Kēraḷōlpatti* in the early nineteenth century

In the tense context of the advent of a colonial regime, with considerable changes in crucial domains of the society, it is understandable that the local elites tried to use the opportunity of contacts with foreign scholars and administrators to redescribe their socio-political and religious situation in terms favourable to them. The communication of narratives about the past turned out to be a major instrument for this purpose.

Jonathan Duncan (1756–1811)

Born in Scotland and hired at the age of sixteen for working as a writer for the East India Company in Bengal,[39] Jonathan Duncan quickly made his way in the administration of the Company, soon becoming a British officer and the governor of

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[34] GUNDERT, *Keralolpatti*, 61 = MENON, *Keralolpatti*, 60.
[35] VELUTHAT, *The Early Medieval in South India*, 140.
[36] GUNDERT, *Keralolpatti*, 77 = MENON, *Keralolpatti*, 71.
[37] GUNDERT, *Keralolpatti*, 86 = MENON, *Keralolpatti*, 77.
[38] GUNDERT, *Keralolpatti*, 95 = MENON, *Keralolpatti*, 85.
[39] V. A. NARAIN, *The Life and Career of Jonathan Duncan, 1756-1795* (London: SOAS, 1958), 6.

Bombay (from 1795 to 1811). Corresponding with the Company's 'official historiographer', the Scottish scholar John Bruce (1744–1826) in the years 1796–1797, he agreed to provide help in collecting documents, indicating his general agreement with Bruce's views on history writing:[40] Bruce (who himself did not travel to India) was deploring that the EIC seemed only interested in the history of trade, and had expressed the need for sources about local customs in order to write a new history of India. Such historical information, he thought, could successfully be exploited politically in order to consolidate the British sovereignty in India.[41] On a deeper philosophical level, Bruce (and Duncan) can be considered as endorsing values of the Scottish Enlightenment, with a tendency to 'empathise' with the people they were writing about. For history writing, this implied not only a genuine interest for understanding the characteristics of a different civilisation (and its location in the larger picture of all human civilisations), but also an attitude that one could call 'relativist', consisting in not immediately discarding local records about the past, whatever form these might be taking.[42] Dilip Menon has suggested that this attitude was typical of late eighteenth century colonial agents—especially those coming from Scotland—who constituted 'superfluous archives' with the help of native agents, such as Alexander Walker of Bowland (1764–1831)—who also left a version of the *Kēraḷōlpatti* in his archive—or Colin Mackenzie.[43] The same attitude led to a specific conception of how India should be governed, a conception that Martha McLaren called a 'Scottish school of Indian governance'.[44] Another writing by Bruce, his *Historical View of Plans for the Government of British India* (1793) is a perfect example: in it, he argues for a government that preserves as far as possible local forms of power and culture.[45]

After the defeat of Tipu Sultan in 1792, Duncan played a critical role for the establishment of British rule in Malabar. He was part of a group of commissioners appointed by the East India Company to determine how to secure peace and revenue in the region of Malabar. Joining other colonial agents such as W. G. Farmer, Alexander Dow (1735–1779), and Charles Boddam (1762–1817), he had been

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[40] NARAIN, *The Life and Career of Jonathan Duncan*, 234, referring to British Library, IOLR, Bruce's Letter Book, *Home Miscellaneous* 456e, 178–83.

[41] OLIVERA JOKIC, 'Commanding Correspondence: Letters and the "Evidence of Experience" in the Letterbook of John Bruce, the East India Company Historiographer', *The Eighteenth Century* 52, no. 2 (2011): 109–36 (120).

[42] Another Scottish scholar and historian, James Mill (1773–1836), author of the influential *History of British India* (1817), would precisely deny any use to local sources for historical purposes, and would place a utilitarian principle as the ultimate yardstick against which all societies can be ranked.

[43] DILIP MENON, '"A Farrago of Legendary Nonsense"? Myth, time and history in the *Keralolpatti*', in *Retelling Time: Alternative Temporalities from Premodern South Asia*, ed. SHONALEEKA KAUL (London: Routledge, 2022), 185–99 (195).

[44] Cf. MARTHA MCLAREN, *British India & British Scotland, 1780-1830: Career Building, Empire Building, and a Scottish School of Indian Governance* (Akron: The University of Akron press, 2001), 125–27, and her further examples of Scottish historians who wrote about India.

[45] DAVID JOHNSON, *Imagining the Cape Colony: History, Literature, and the South African Nation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 73.

asked to enquire in what manner justice had heretofore been, and may in future be, most advantageously, administered to all classes of the natives; the nature of whose several tenures, and more especially those of the Zamorin of Calicut and of the principal Rajahs and Nayrs and Moplas throughout that and the other parts of the country were to be specified, accompanied with estimates and statements formed on the best material they might be able to procure of the amount of revenue which the several districts are capable of paying.[46]

The mission resulted in the production of several reports which compiled extensive details about the society of Malabar, including its history—anticipating the genre of the colonial gazetteer.[47] In the article he published in the *Asiatick Researches* a few years later, Duncan explained that while staying in Calicut in 1793, he had produced an English translation of the *Kēraḷōlpatti* from a Persian version that itself had been translated from a 'Malabaric [i.e., Malayalam script or language?] copy procured from one of the Rajah of the *Zamorin*'s family'.[48] The text is used to reconstruct a succinct political and cultural history of the region, and especially of Calicut, about which he paraphrases a passage of the text which explains how the institution of the Sāmūtiris came to be.[49] Thus Duncan handled the text as an important source for getting a sociopolitical map of the region, in a genre that—one might suggest—corresponded to Bruce's longing for historical accounts that include information about sociocultural customs, and more generally, to the willingness of many Scottish historians to accept local records as valid sources of knowledge.

Colin Mackenzie (1754–1821)

A few years later, several versions of the text appeared in the collection of documents gathered by another Scottish figure, Colin Mackenzie. Born in a family of traders in Stornoway on the island of Lewis, Mackenzie did not follow any academic curriculum. His personal experiences in Scotland were formative and would arguably contribute to shape his attitude as to his work in India. In particular, he was witness to a process of modernisation and Anglicisation of the Highlands (involving the progressive replacement of the Scottish Gaelic language by English) which he perceived as a brutal process, as the well-being of the local population was not given much consideration. It might have encouraged Mackenzie to valorise vernacular epistemic traditions.[50]

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[46] British Library, IOLR, 'Instructions to Duncan and Boddam', *Home Miscellaneous* 585 [Notes from correspondence concerning Malabar], 195–97, quoted in NARAIN, *The Life and Career of Jonathan Duncan,* 260–61.

[47] For example, *Malabar Report. 11 October 1793, Reports and Regulations, Malabar 1792–1793*, on which see NARAIN, *The Life and Career of Jonathan Duncan,* 284–85.

[48] JONATHAN DUNCAN, 'Historical Remarks on the Coast of Malabar with Some Description of the Manner of Its Inhabitants', *Asiatick Researches* 5 (1798): 1–36 (1).

[49] DUNCAN, 'Historical Remarks', 6, which roughly corresponds to GUNDERT, *Keralolpatti*, 70 = MENON, *Keralolpatti*, 67–68, about the origins of Calicut and its Zamorin.

[50] Cf. TOBIAS WOLFFHARDT, *Unearthing the Past to Forge the Future. Colin Mackenzie, the Early Colonial State, and the Comprehensive Survey of India* (New York: Berghahn, 2018), 40: 'His experience of the radical modernization of the Highlands, to which he retained a very ambivalent attitude throughout his life. On the one hand he was genuinely convinced of the logic of "improvement", but for all his enthusiasm for

Beyond the important role he came to play in the colonial administration,[51] Mackenzie is famous for his extensive collection of about 1,500 manuscripts in the beginning of the nineteenth century spanning the whole of South India.[52] The general purpose of his operation was to obtain the necessary information to 'take decisions about a variety of claims concerning property rights'[53] by collecting documents in vernacular languages. Evidence shows however that he accumulated a large number of documents that were not all useful for that stated purpose. As is well known, Mackenzie was very dependent on his Indian helpers: not fluent in vernacular languages, he relied heavily not only on interpreters and 'collectors' but also and especially on native scholars. The plan of document collection was actually designed in 1804, with the collaboration of a scholar Mackenzie met in 1796, Kavelli Venkata Borayya (1776–1803), soon joined by his brothers Lakshmayya and Ramaswami.[54] These Brahmins and their own—Brahmin, Jain, or Christian—assistants were instructed to find written records about the past while also conducting interviews about 'ancient customs, laws or historical facts'.[55] As he wrote:

> Regular historical narratives and tracts are seldom found among the natives; such notices as exist are generally preserved in the form of religious legends and popular poems and stories. Yet exceptions appear though rare, which induce an opinion that others may exist, that have escaped the ravages of time and the troubles of the Country.[56]

It is therefore quite understandable that the resulting collection strongly reflects the point of view of these collaborators and their interlocutors.[57] Mackenzie's lack of academic background as well as the above-mentioned experiences in Scotland during his youth might explain—perhaps more than a generic reference to the 'Scottish Enlightenment'—why he gave credit to these vernacular documents. While he did not

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reform he was also in favour of moderation; he believed that changes should always be in the interests of the local population, paying due respect to their cultural notions'.

[51] He played a key role in the fall of Seringapatam against Tipu Sultan and later held the position of 'Surveyor General of India'.

[52] First stored in Madras/Chennai, the collection is spread today between archives in Chennai (Government Oriental Manuscripts Library and Research Centre) and London (British Library, IOLR). Recent work on the Mackenzie collection includes PHILLIP B. WAGONER, 'Precolonial Intellectuals and the Production of Colonial Knowledge', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 45, no. 4 (2003): 783–814; SU FANG NG, 'Indian Interpreters in the Making of Colonial Historiography: New Light on Mark Wilks's *Historical Sketches of the South of India* (1810–1817)', *The English Historical Review* 134, no. 569 (2019): 821–54, and ANNE VIGUIER, 'Collection Mackenzie (La)', in *Encyclopédie des historiographies: Afriques, Amériques, Asies*, eds NATHALIE KOUAMÉ, ÉRIC MEYER, and ANNE VIGUIER, 2 vols (Paris: Presses de l'Inalco, 2020), vol. 1, 333–52.

[53] RAMA SUNDARI MANTENA, *The Origins of Modern Historiography in India. Antiquarianism and Philology, 1780-1880* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 70.

[54] See MANTENA, *The Origins of Modern Historiography in India*, chap. 3, 'The Kavalli Brothers'.

[55] MANTENA, *The Origins of Modern Historiography in India*, 67. See also WAGONER, 'Precolonial Intellectuals and the Production of Colonial Knowledge', 792, for the names of further Indian assistants.

[56] 'Memorandum', February 1808, in British Library, IOLR Eur Mack Misc 108 (and other similar documents in the same volume), reprinted in MANTENA, *The Origins of Modern Historiography in India*, Appendix 1, 187–90, about Mackenzie's instructions given to his assistants on their hunt for documents.

[57] See WAGONER, 'Precolonial Intellectuals and the Production of Colonial Knowledge', for an argument about how Mackenzie's interlocutors have informed his own interest for epigraphical sources.

produce himself any historical synthesis (with the exception of two articles on Sri Lanka and the Jains),[58] his historiographical practice can be described as that of an antiquarian, accumulating as much data as possible, with the conviction that the quantity could palliate the lack of factual precision.

The *Kēraḷōlpatti* appears at different places in the archive, forming a large part of the collection's Malayalam texts. It includes at least two versions in Malayalam, two translations in English, and one in Tamil.[59] The English translations are partial and deal exclusively with the first part of the text—the one that legitimises the position of Brahmins in their role of *janmakāran*s.[60] Even if it was not published at that point, the preservation of the text in Mackenzie's archive, and its cataloguing singled it out as having a special status, as one of the rare written testimony about the history of Kerala. For a while, it seems that the evocation of local traditions about land tenures as we find them in the *Kēraḷōlpatti* (and other similar documents) had an effect in actual policies. For example, Mackenzie's colleague Mark Wilks (1759–1831) grew very critical of the view—coming out of London—that individual property claims should be ignored and that the government was the *de facto* absolute owner of all property and could therefore sell it (!) to *zamindar*s who would then manage it. He concluded that the intended policies advocating for a 'permanent settlement' were not only unjust but also entirely inapplicable in South India.[61]

Hermann Gundert (1814–1893)

Slightly later, the German missionary of the Basel Mission and pioneer of Malayalam studies, Hermann Gundert, took interest in understanding the past of the region he

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[58] COLIN MACKENZIE, 'Remarks on some Antiquities on the West and South Coasts of Ceylon', *Asiatick Researches* 6 (1800): 425–54, and COLIN MACKENZIE, 'Account of the Jains', *Asiatick Researches* 9 (1807): 244–86, which both follow closely the descriptive accounts of his informants.

[59] The references to the two English translations (1 and 2), two Malayalam version (3 and 4) and the Tamil version (5) are as follows: (1) British Library, IOLR Eur Mack Misc 5.5, JAMES SUTHERLAND COTTON, JARL CHARPENTIER, and EDWARD HAMILTON JOHNSTON, *Mackenzie General and Miscellaneous Collections Catalogue* (London: British Library, 1992), 57 ['literally translated from the original Maleilen Sargga Charit = Malayalam Sarga Carita']; (2) IOLR Eur Mack Misc 5.6, COTTON, CHARPENTIER, and JOHNSTON, *Mackenzie General and Miscellaneous Collections Catalogue*, 58 [a translation by Thomas Ogilvie Surgeon, Bombay (1770–1802), 'deviating from the previous one on different points']; (3) WILLIAM TAYLOR, *Catalogue Raisonnée of Oriental Manuscripts in the Library of the (Late) College Fort St George*, 3 vols, vol. 1 (Madras: H. Smith, at the Fort St. George Gazette Press, 1857), 667, MS no. 1959 ['a book on 140 talipat leaves, small but thick, and in good order', telling about the legend of *Parasu Rama* and the *Artha Brahmans*] = HORACE HAYMAN WILSON, *Mackenzie Collection: A Descriptive Catalogue of the Oriental Manuscripts and Other Articles Illustrative of the Literature, History, Statistics and Antiquities of the South of India; Collected by the Late Lieut-Col. Colin Mackenzie* (Calcutta: Asiatic Press, 1882), 347–62 [with a paraphrase/translation of the text's first part] (4) TAYLOR, *Catalogue Raisonnée*, vol. 1, 667, MS no. 1956 ['A work in prose, written on 53 talipat leaves, of medium size, telling a legendary account of the formation of the Malayalam country by *Parasu Rama*'], and (5) TAYLOR, *Catalogue Raisonnée*, vol. 3, 296 (Tamil translation).

[60] The summary of the text in Wilson's catalogue is also limited to the first part of the version edited by Gundert: WILSON, *Mackenzie Collection*, 347–62.

[61] MARK WILKS, *Historical Sketches of the South of India in an Attempt to Trace the History of Mysoor*, 3 vols, vol. 1 (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1810), chap. 5 (titled 'On the Landed Property of India'), in particular p. 171. See FRENZ, *From Contact to Conquest*, 111, for an analysis of the differences between the local concept of *janma* and that of 'ownership' brought by the British.

was posted in, Kerala. After studies in philosophy and theology at the University of Tubingen, Gundert was versed in the 'new' methods of textual criticism that were developing at that time in Germany. Upon his arrival in Kerala, Gundert learned Malayalam and Sanskrit with multiple munshis,[62] one of whom taught him spoken Sanskrit and helped him to 'assemble material from native books for a Malayalam grammar'.[63] In these conditions, it is not entirely unfounded to speculate that Gundert's work on the *Kēraḷōlpatti* was a collaborative work, perhaps involving the very same scholar mentioned in his 1839 correspondences. A handwritten summary of a text described as 'Kerala Mahatmyam' in *shloka*s is precisely dated from the years 1839–1840, showing Gundert's early involvement with the text.[64] Encouraged by the other missionaries of the Basel Mission Gottfried Weigle (1816–1855) and Hermann Mögling (1811–1881) who referred to the mention of the *Kēraḷōlpatti* in H. H. Wilson's catalogue of the Mackenzie collection,[65] Gundert worked towards making an edited and published version of the text. He was well aware that the text had many variants,[66] and even if he was familiar with the methods of textual criticism, his work nowhere resembled a critical edition. More significantly perhaps: without being entirely explicit about it, Gundert brought the idea—very common in the context of German philology[67]—that the true 'spirit' ('Geist') of a society could be revealed by looking at texts talking about its origins. He thus explained that his new 'rearranged' version would 'give to those who are less fond of such objects a tolerable overall picture of our people, as well as a better appreciation of what is true about it'.[68] The text was one

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[62] See ALBRECHT FRENZ and SCARIA ZACHARIA, *Dr Hermann Gundert and the Malayalam Language: Biography and Critical Studies* (Changanassery: Centre for Kerala Studies, 1993), 89: 'At times, Gundert had five Munshis or teachers to instruct him in all known Malayalam and Sanskrit sciences. He travelled at least once a month to a place in the surrounding region. He was thus able to learn much from the people's behaviour and their talk. He collected whatever he could find for his literary work'.

[63] See a passage of Gundert's report of 15 November 1839 sent to Basel ('Letters', Hermann Gundert Portal, accessed 23 March 2024, https://www.gundert-portal.de/cache/letters/TXT/HG39/H151139.TXT): 'This man, to whom I give Rs. 10 a month, knows almost all Hindu learning by heart and is dear and estimable to me for his sense of truth. If a brother feels the need to go into Sanskrit etc. it seems to me far better that he should learn to speak and read it properly at the same time, rather than to learn to recopy it in European colleges. With his help I have also learnt a Malayalam Grammar from native books and authorities, and completed the syntax' (my translation).

[64] 'Manuscripts on Kēraḷa history', Tübingen Universitätsbibliothek, accessed 23 March 2024, http://idb.ub.uni-tuebingen.de/opendigi/MaI864_04#p=1. The text mentions the names Baber and Putucheri, on which see FRENZ and ZACHARIA, *Dr Hermann Gundert*, 89: 'Baber must have been none other than the former Sub-Collector and the conqueror of Pazhassi Raja. The name Putucheri suggests a native' (my translation).

[65] See ALBRECHT FRENZ, *Hermann Gundert: Quellen zu seinem Leben und Werk* (Ulm: Süddeutsche Verlagsgesellschaft, 1991), 116, for a reproduction of a letter of Mögling and Weigle to Gundert (dated 14 February 1842).

[66] As is evident from his mention of a 'Kerala Ulpatti of the Nasrani [Christian]', on which see letter of 19 November 1843 ('Letters', Hermann Gundert Portal, accessed 23 March 2024, https://gundert-portal.de/cache/letters/TXT/HG43/H191143.TXT).

[67] For several examples of the link between philology and nation building, especially in the German context, see MAURICE OLENDER, *The Languages of Paradise: Race, Religion, and Philology in the Nineteenth Century* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2009).

[68] See his letter to the Basel mission committee, 20 January 1841 ('Letters', Hermann Gundert Portal, accessed 23 March 2024, https://www.gundert-portal.de/cache/letters/TXT/HG41/H200141.

of the first Malayalam texts printed on the press of the Basel Mission in Mangalore, in 1843, and became a great success, with periodical reprints.
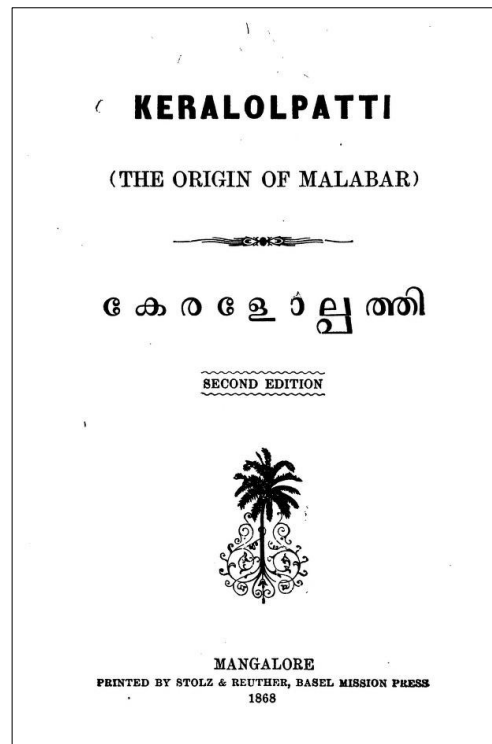

Fig 1. Frontispiece of *Kēraḷōlpatti*, second edition, Mangalore: Basel Mission Press, 1868. Available in the public domain (Google Books)

While this printed edition of the text did not suppress the tradition of oral retellings,[69] it froze the text into one version, thought to be the most original; it also brought it out of the communities that had kept it and made it available for individual readership to a broader audience. Thus, the production of a printed edition gave to the work the status of a classical book, ready to circulate in schools and other arenas. As Frenz noted, it became one of the founding stones of a Keralite national narrative.[70]

TXT). 'Certainly its [of the *Kēraḷōlpatti*] existence (although not in its present form) is older than the Puranas that were pieced together on its basis; I think the order in which I have set it will at least give to those who are less fond of such things an acceptable overall picture of our people [*unseres Völkleins*], as well as a better appreciation of what is true about it' (my translation). See also his letter from Kottayam, 9 November 1843 ('Letters', Hermann Gundert Portal, accessed 23 March 2024, https://gundert-portal.de/cache/letters/TXT/HG43/H091143.TXT), about the popularity of the edited version of the text.

[69] GALEWICZ, 'Editorship and History Making', 23. See also STUART H. BLACKBURN, *Print, Folklore, and Nationalism in Colonial South India* (Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2006) for a similar observation about other cases in South India.

[70] FRENZ, *Hermann Gundert*, 118–19, 'With this work, Gundert played a decisive role in helping the Malayalis rediscover their identity. For him, dealing with the ancient history of Kerala was a matter close

In his monumental work titled *Malabar* (1887), William Logan (1814–1914), a former judge who spent twenty years in the South Indian region, described the text as 'full of Brahmanical legends'.[71] Despite acknowledging the interest-laden character of the narrative,[72] he used several passages of Gundert's edited text to reconstruct the history of the region, either by selective readings or metaphorical interpretations.[73] At the same time, he took part in reflections about the tenancy bill's revision for the region of Malabar. Worried about agricultural productivity, and in the context of recurring famines, he strongly defended the position of land cultivators and their rights of tenancy. Against him, Brahmins defended the other side: that of their hereditary *janmam* rights, quoting from the *Kēraḷōlpatti* on the hierarchical relationship between Brahmins possessing the land and tenants cultivating it, clearly using the text (probably in the version edited by Gundert[74]) to legitimate their pretensions.

Variations on the Kēraḷōlpatti

As we mentioned earlier, it is helpful to think of the *Kēraḷōlpatti* as an oral textual tradition recreated for each of its performance to fit the preferences of the target audience. An interesting example of such a rewriting is a text titled *Memoir of the Birth of Parasha-Rama* (*sic*), and translated from Marathi by Suba Rao, one of Mackenzie's assistants, which conveys a message that is opposed to that of the *Kēraḷōlpatti*.[75] Indeed, like most versions of the *Kēraḷōlpatti*, it features the perpetual conflicts among Brahmins that have been trusted to be Kerala's guardians, their inability to solve the situation, and Paraśurāma's decision to banish them from the land entirely. Upon what, the text continues, Paraśurāma 'created a new land by issuing his command to the king of the Ocean, which land is called Mallialla (or the unclean land), therefore it is not proper for the Bramins [*sic*] to reside on that ground'. The text continues:

> When the Bramins divided the other lands, they remained there, performing devotion and different ceremonies, and not being competent to bear weapons nor having power to destroy the wicked nor to protect the good; therefore everywhere there was a great terror of robbers; therefore the Bramins being afraid, Bhoome-Davee (the Goddess of the Earth) complained to the God Brumma-Dava, saying 'the earth is in great confusion and I am not able to suffer it'. Then God ordered kings of the sun race to rule the Empire as in former times.

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to his heart. There is much to suggest that the spark between Gundert and the Malayalis was ignited by the Kerala Utpatti and it still forms the content of the connection today'.

[71] LOGAN, *Malabar*, vol. 1, 222: 'The *Keralolpatti* too is full of Brahmanical legends, but historically, there is something to be learnt from it'.

[72] LOGAN, *Malabar*, vol. 1, 244.

[73] For example, the snakes feared by the first immigrants are interpreted as representing Jains (LOGAN, *Malabar*, vol. 1, 244; VELUTHAT, *The Early Medieval in South India*, 130).

[74] The translated portion of the text in KURUP, *William Logan and Land Tenure*, 65, perfectly matches Gundert's text (GUNDERT, *Keralolpatti*, 13 = MENON, *Keralolpatti*, 32–33).

[75] British Library, IOLR Eur Mack Misc 5.1 (described in COTTON, CHARPENTIER and JOHNSTON, *Mackenzie General and Miscellaneous Collections Catalogue*, 53), *Memoir of the Birth of Parasha-Rama: Translated from the Marattas by Sooba Rao Bramin, December 31ˢᵗ 1802*.

This is then a very different point of view than the one we examined earlier, making the region of Kerala (Mallialla/Malayalam) an 'impure house' (*mala illam*) for Brahmins. In addition, they are described as weak, incapable of defending just causes, and unable to rule independently—a reversal of the relation to political power as described in the standard *Kēraḷōlpatti*. Even if this text cannot be dated with any certainty, its message and the language of its composition (Marathi) suggest that it might be representing propaganda from the rulers of the Marathi empire—with perhaps even an allusion to Shivaji's (1630–1680) claims as a descendent of the prestigious solar dynasty of kings.

Another alternative retelling 'capitalising' on the *Kēraḷōlpatti* is the Kannada *Grāmapaddhati*, found in the papers of Basel Mission missionaries working in the Tulu region.[76] In that text (as in Gundert's *Kēraḷōlpatti*), Paraśurāma slays the *kṣatriya*s, creates a new land out of the Ocean and gives it to Brahmins. From this point however, the story diverges: since no Brahmin would accept to move there, Paraśurāma converted a caste of Tulu-speaking fishers into Brahmins. After a few peripeties (involving another group of Brahmins coming from the north but ending up leaving the region), Nāyars and Tulu-speaking Brahmins take possession of most of the land. The text represents thus another counter-narrative that gives an aetiology to the different Brahmanical groups of the region and legitimates the land-managing rights of other castes than Brahmins. As Veluthat noted, this very probably reflects the diverging situations of Brahmin groups in Kerala and South Canara.[77]

The central role that the *Kēraḷōlpatti* played in the creation of a regional identity after it was 'canonised' by Gundert's print edition made it a privileged target for the production of competing narratives. Indeed, during the course of the nineteenth century, the Paraśurāma story became a focus for dissident retellings developed in the wake of movements promoting their respective identity claims. A contemporary of Narayana Guru (1855–1928) with whom he shared the anti-caste rhetoric, Chattampi Svamikal (1853–1924) composed a work on Kerala's past titled *Prācīna Malayāḷaṃ* (1899) ('The Ancient Region of Malayalam').[78] In this text Svamikal developed a new interpretation of the Paraśurāma narrative in which not Brahmins, but Nāyars— identified as the original, Dravidian, inhabitants of the country—are the legitimate owners of the land. The region stretching along the coast from the southern tip of India to Maharashtra thus became their legitimate domain.[79] The text thus reverses the

[76] Translated in NAGENDRA RAO, *Brahmanas of South India* (Delhi: Kalpaz Publications, 2005), Appendix 1 (pp. 175–85).

[77] VELUTHAT, *The Early Medieval in South India*, 137: 'The landed wealth in South Canara was not under the control of the Brahmanical groups as much as it was in Kerala. And, therefore, the importance that the Brahmanas of Kerala had in polity and society was not matched by what their counterparts in South Canara had. As it was much greater in the case of Kerala, it would take none less than Parasurama to be not only the creator of the land but also the donor to the Brahmana groups'.

[78] CHATTAMPI SVAMIKAL, *Prācīna Malayāḷaṃ* (1889; Pala: Sahridaya Books, 2010), available online: https://archive.org/details/PracheenaMalayalam-SriChattampiSwamikal.

[79] DILIP MENON, 'Writing History in Colonial Times: Polemic and the Recovery of Self in Late Nineteenth-century South India', in *History and Theory in a Global Frame*, theme issue 53, *History and Theory*

Brahmin-centric narrative of the *Kēraḷōḷpatti* and legitimises the superior position of groups classified as low caste: a move perfectly typical of this period which sees the development of strong anti-Brahmin regional movements.

In sum, the *Kēraḷōḷpatti* textual tradition constitutes a reservoir of different patterns about central institutions, such as landholding rights and hierarchical relations between various groups, which could be activated in various circumstances—a process already underway in precolonial times. The events affecting the region by the end of the eighteenth century made multiple reconfigurations of the narrative necessary. In that process, the prestige, print press, and historiographical practices brought by European actors were all crucial to making one version of the story more authoritative than others.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can come back to the questions that we raised at the beginning. As to interactions between local traditions talking about the region's past and the arrival of European actors, one can certainly observe that there was no sudden introduction of a 'historical consciousness': there were indeed preexisting narratives about the past that were claiming both authority and factuality, and these had already a long history of reformulations when they came in contact with European actors. These narratives were hybridised not with a generic 'Western historical consciousness', but with different types of discourses about the past: an historiography interested in comparing civilisations and understanding them through their own records (as in the case of Duncan), an antiquarian historiography interested to find as many records as possible that would allow, *in fine*, a better political control (as in the case of Mackenzie/Wilks), or a search for the origins of a group through editorial work (as in the case of Gundert). The edition, cataloguing, and/or English paraphrase of these texts *de facto* erased the community-based context of their composition and offered them to new audiences: in the case of Duncan and Mackenzie, British administrators and scholars; and in the case of Gundert, orientalists, missionaries and Malayalam-speaking people.

Finally, the historiographical encounters that we surveyed here had lasting effects: they paved the way for the development of more competing (and compelling) narratives up to the present day, across literary genres and media.[80] Indeed, in all of this, the materiality of the texts—including not only the material support but also the conditions of conservation, the translations, paraphrases, new editions, and changes in reading/performing practices—is a central dimension that impacted the success of such narratives in no small way.

54, no. 4 (2015): 64–83 (80). On Chattampi Svamikal's life and teachings, see JOHN W. GLADSTONE, *Protestant Christianity and People's Movements in Kerala* (Trivandrum: Seminary Productions, 1984), 215–223.
[80] Cf. BRUCE LINCOLN, *Between History and Myth: Stories of Harald Fairhair and the Founding of the State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 119.