

CARTOGRAPHY AS POWER: PORTUGUESE MAPPING OF SRI LANKA AND ITS INFLUENCE ON TERRITORIAL CLAIMS

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ABSTRACT

The Portuguese maritime empire established the enduring frameworks for territorial understanding and governance that extended far beyond the era of direct colonial control. This was accomplished through pioneering cartographic practices. This research investigates the critical role of maps produced by the Portuguese in the representation of Sri Lanka (Ceylon) during the 16th and 17th centuries. These representations served as instruments of power. They shaped subsequent claims to the territory and functions performed by those administrative boundaries. These analyses have no precedent in either Sri Lankan historiography or in the emerging field of diaspora studies. The research also examines the consequences of those representations. The research was done by underlining apparent contradictions between the claims made of maps by their compilers and the actual functions of the maps, especially when comparing the maps with the cartographic adaptations made by both the Dutch and British successors of the Portuguese, who appear to have used the maps produced by the Portuguese as precedents for making their mappings of the island.

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1.INTRODUCTION

The Portuguese naval forces first reached Sri Lankan shores in the early 16th century and began a military and trading interaction with the island and an active process of reconfiguring and reimagining its space in cartography. The Portuguese maritime venture focused on precise geographical information and orderly mapping, and it was a basic reconstruction of how lands were imagined, known, and ultimately governed (Correia, 2018). The mapping venture was a multifaceted expression of power relations with enduring implications for Sri Lanka's territorial structure and governance rather than a technical exercise.

The Portuguese era in Sri Lanka (1505-1658) witnessed an extensive cartographic activity that consisted of a variety of overlapping functions such as navigation aids for maritime commerce, strategic information for warfare, administrative tools of governance, and symbolic images legitimizing colonial rule (Perera, 2019). These charts and maps were effective tools which enabled the Portuguese to consider control and assert dominion over unknown lands by rendering them legible in terms of European epistemologies of space (Silva, 2020). As J. B. Harley (1988) has argued that maps are never neutral documents but manifestations of power embodying and perpetuating world views and interests.

Even long after the direct Portuguese rule had ended, Portuguese cartography helped to create conceptual frameworks that would shape territorial claims and administrative boundaries in Sri Lanka. The Portuguese cartographic imagination of Sri Lanka highlighted coastal forts, Catholic churches

and missions, Cinnamon producing areas, and strategic maritime points, which are, created long lasting spatial prototypes that later Dutch and British colonial rulers had borrowed (de Silva, 2017). These initial mapping endeavors created clear visuals of how the island would be partitioned, governed, and exploited in the centuries that followed with ramifications into the post-colonial era.

This study explores how Portuguese cartography of Sri Lanka served as a power tool, constructing territorial claims and spatial control. It explores the means, motives, and effectiveness of Portuguese mapping activities and how such presentations constructed a distinctive vision of Sri Lanka that was privileged by imperial agendas at the expense of local spatial knowledges (Wickramasinghe, 2021). By its consideration of the interaction between cartography and power in the specific historical setting of Portuguese Sri Lanka, this study contributes to wider scholarly discussion of mapping in colonial endeavor and the long-term relevance of early modern European cartographic practice to the territorial structures of the modern world.

This research clarifies that the cartographic practice, far from being an objective scientific endeavor, was a tool of power that facilitated colonial conquest and established long-term frameworks of territorial control. The Portuguese mapping practices in Sri Lanka demonstrate the complex processes by which the colonial powers utilized mapping practices to recreate and redefine geographical territories in accordance with their own ambitions and perceptions. This realization is not only necessary for

examining past contexts but also for ongoing debates about decolonizing geographical knowledge and recognition of other spatial epistemologies (Roberts, 2022).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Foundations of Critical Cartography

The theory of the connection between cartography and power is deeply based upon historical and geographical academic scholarship over the past few decades. The initial work of J. B. Harley describes that mapping as a discourse grounded in power relations rather than as a scientific objective process. Harley (year) argues that maps are never value free images but rather instruments both impose and reinforce specific conceptions of the world which has had profound influence on subsequent research in colonial cartography. Wood and Fels (1992) argued that maps are propositions about the world, which actively construct more than simply represent spatial reality.

Cartographic practice was integral to the construction and reproduction of colonial power and generated cartographic illusions of imperial power that rendered complex terrain readable to colonial administrators (Edney, 1997). Colonial cartographic practice was concerned with creating administrative convenience, rather than geographical fact, and establishing precedents for interpreting similar processes in other colonies (Edney, 1997). According to Mitchell (2002) colonial maps were implicated in unframing territories which were placing them on the map for systemic control and exploitation by certain

forms of spatial representation.

Critical cartography literature draws on feminists and post-colonial scholars who have examined how mapping instantly created some power relations and erased other forms of paths of gaining knowledge. Rose (1993) demonstrated how cartographic conventions re-established masculine ways of controlling the space and Pratt (1992) revealed how colonial mapping was embedded in imperial vibe, which transformed diverse landscapes into objects of European knowledge and authority. These theoretical engagements describe how Portuguese cartographic cultures in Sri Lanka functioned within larger colonial epistemologies.

2.2 Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Cartographic Displacement

Later scholars have explored how indigenous spatial knowledge systems were integrated or excluded into colonial cartographic systems. European cartography supplanted Native American spatial conceptions in colonial Mexico while selectively appropriating elements of indigenous geographical knowledge (Mundy, 2000). In Mexico colonial mapmakers engaged in cognitive colonialism, which means systemically eliminating indigenous epistemologies while appropriating useful local knowledge for imperial purposes (Mundy, 2000). This was not only a bodily displacement but also the cognitive displacement of indigenous spatial logics.

Similarly, Pearson and Heffernan (2015) realised the ways African cartographers in Portugal strategically added or deleted indigenous geographical knowledge according to imperial objectives. Therefore,

these colonial mapping efforts created hybrid knowledge systems blending European cartographic conventions with selectively embraced indigenous spatial knowledge. These analyses are of special comparative relevance to the study of Portuguese cartographic practice in Sri Lanka, where analogous mechanisms of knowledge appropriation and erasure occurred.

Scholars in indigenous studies and critical geography have also examined how indigenous spatial knowledge was systematically excluded. Louis (2023) explained how indigenous cartographies employed distinct ways of describing relations among groups and their surroundings using relational rather than territorial understandings of place. Lucchesi (2021) has documented how indigenous mapping throughout history have "enacted ideas of space, nation, territory, and relation to land" in ways that fundamentally challenged colonial spatial epistemologies. These points are crucial in understanding what was lost when Portuguese cartographic practice displaced indigenous spatial knowledge systems in Sri Lanka.

2.3 Portuguese Cartography in Sri Lankan Context

In the specific Sri Lankan context, Sivasundaram's (2013) groundbreaking "Islanded: Britain, Sri Lanka, and the Bounds of an Indian Ocean Colony" examines how British colonial knowledge production, such as cartography, transformed British ideas of the island's geography and history. Examining predominantly the British period, Sivasundaram acknowledges the substantial precursors established during the

Portuguese and Dutch eras, arguing that each colonial power augmented or extended, but did not supplant, earlier cartographic systems. His thesis shows how colonial cartographic projects created what he calls "bounded territories" which indeed transformed indigenous ideas of place and space.

De Silva (2017) is particularly concerned in understanding Portuguese cartographic legacies, arguing that "Portuguese maps of Ceylon established persistent frameworks for understanding the island's territory that would influence subsequent colonial administrations". His thesis shows how Portuguese cartographers created certain spatial distinctions—specifically between coastal and interior regions—that would be decisive for centuries of subsequent colonial rule. This study reveals that Portuguese cartographic practice excluded indigenous spatial conceptions, which were not compatible with European territorial rationalities.

Similarly, Perera (2019) has examined that enduring patterns of urban development in Sri Lanka were shaped by Portuguese sea defenses and cartographic inscriptions. Her study further shows how Portuguese military cartography influenced both direct colonial rule and broader urban planning and development trajectories. Perera's account reveals that cartographic representations of walled coast cities became constituent elements in subsequent colonial spatial planning that extended long after the Portuguese era. Portuguese cartographic knowledge was produced and circulated through imperial networks that linked Sri Lankan territories to broader patterns of Portuguese expansion in the Indian Ocean (Flores', 2007). This imperial

perspective shows how Sri Lankan mapping projects fitted into globe cartographic projects that fulfilled imperial interests simultaneously.

2.4 Portuguese Imperial Cartography and Global Networks

Portuguese map-making processes evolved together with Portugal's oceanic empire (Alegria et al., 2007). This cartographic evolution was in fact based on the economic and political interests of Portugal, with the maps also being navigational aids, administrative documents, and expressions of imperial domination. Portuguese cartographic practices in Sri Lanka were part of broader imperial knowledge systems connecting different territories within spatially integrated schemes (Alegria et al., 2007).

These cartographic traditions were transferred from one European power to another in Asian contexts (Zandvliet 2018). Dutch cartographers in Sri Lanka drew upon Portuguese cartographic antecedents, reformulating them to serve new imperial purposes. Sobral (2020) has considered how Portuguese cartographic knowledge was constructed and reconstructed in institutional networks linking metropolitan and colonial settings. His work indicates how cartographic knowledge moved between Lisbon and colonial territories, establishing feedback loops that progressively improved Portuguese spatial knowledge of places like Sri Lanka. Sobral's (year) work indicates how Portuguese cartography was embedded within larger imperial bureaucratic systems founded on methodical production of spatial knowledge.

Russell-Wood (2021) has examined how political and commercial factors influenced Portuguese cartographic practice in the Indian Ocean. His work shows how maps were tailored to different audiences—royal administrators and merchant navigators—and how such different uses dictated cartographic content and representation. This commercial aspect of Portuguese cartography provides a significant background for how Sri Lankan mapping practices were influenced by economic as well as political imperial agendas.

2.5 Technical Aspects and Cartographic Innovations

One of the best written evidences about the technical aspects of Portuguese cartography in the Indian Ocean belongs to Subrahmanyam (2012) who explains how Portuguese cartographers combined indigenous and European navigational techniques to create new forms of representation for the purposes of empire. His work shows how Portuguese cartographic innovation emerged from the negotiations between European and native knowledge systems, creating compatible hybrid technical practices that were geography specific.

Biedermann's (2014) close reading of the 16th century Portuguese Indian Ocean charts shows how the precision of cartography was tactically uneven, with regions of high commercial or military value depicted more accurately than regions deemed less important. His research demonstrates how Portuguese cartographers also chose to apply technical labour and cartographic accuracy to create maps that were priorities led from an

imperial interest rather than geographical accuracy. These technical studies offer insights into how Portuguese cartography materially shaped spatial representations of Sri Lanka that highlighted certain features and de-emphasized others.

Ptak's (2019) research shows how the cartographic practice of the Portuguese evolved from specific navigational requirements in the Indian Ocean. His work illustrates how Portuguese cartographers were developing new practices for mapping monsoon patterns, coastal navigation and harbour shapes for oceanic trade and naval war. These technical innovations left a lasting legacy for subsequent cartographic practices in Sri Lanka and across the Indian Ocean.

Castro (2022) has analysed how Portuguese cartographic information was mediated and preserved in institutional settings that connected metropolitan and colonial environments. His work shows how cartographic intelligence was gathered systematically, filtered and updated through networks that linked Portuguese territories across the Indian Ocean. Institutional analysis in this context reveals how Portuguese cartography in Sri Lanka was part of broader imperial knowledge systems that drew upon systematic information collection and processing.

2.6 Geographical Imaginations and Colonial Spatial Concepts

More theoretical works have looked at how colonial cartographic practice created particular "geographical imaginations" that mapped territories in ways that served imperial domination. Gregory's (2004) work

on colonial Egyptian cartography is a useful comparator to Sri Lankan experiences, as it shows how cartographic practice created territories as "spaces of constructed visibility" that facilitated administrative control. Gregory's argument is that colonial cartography was only interested in creating certain ways of seeing and understanding space that served imperial administrative purposes.

In the Sri Lankan case, Wickramasinghe (2021) has argued that Portuguese cartography created permanent conceptual differences between coastal and interior regions that would shape subsequent colonial frameworks of rule. Her argument shows how Portuguese cartography created spatial categories that have become the foundation of future colonial administrative systems producing what she calls "cartographic legacies" that endured through successive colonial transformations.

Dharmawardana (2020) has looked at how Portuguese cartography created specific knowledge about Sri Lankan geography that emphasised coastal accessibility over interior complexity. His research shows how Portuguese maps demonstrated spatial hierarchies that privileged coastal spaces portraying interior spaces as peripheral or inaccessible. These cartographic visions have long lasting effects on how subsequent colonial governments reflected and governed Sri Lankan spaces.

Rajapaksa (2023) has examined how Portuguese cartography created linguistic and conceptual frameworks that led to additional colonial and post-colonial spatial knowledge. In her analysis, the Portuguese terms used to name coastal settlements and geographical features were absorbed into

local spatial vocabularies and continued to shape how Sri Lankans thought about their geography decades after the Portuguese colonial period.

2.7 Postcolonial Perspectives and Indigenous Spatial Epistemologies

Modern postcolonial thinkers believe the need to recognise indigenous spatial knowledge systems that existed alongside and against colonial cartography. Anjaria and Varma (2020) have shown how South Asian spatial imaginations repeatedly challenged colonial mapping and created hybrid geographical imaginations that colonial powers could never suppress. Their work shows how indigenous spatial knowledge systems had alternative spatial ways of understanding territory and place that existed alongside colonial cartography.

Similarly, Roberts (2022) has argued we need to pay more attention to Sri Lankan archival records that show competing spatial conceptualisations that existed alongside Portuguese cartography. His work shows how local spatial knowledge systems continued alongside colonial mapping and constructed alternative spatial epistemologies that sometimes broke through colonial records. This new scholarship offers counterpoints to readings based on colonial records alone.

Kannangara (2021) has shown how indigenous spatial knowledge systems in Sri Lanka were organised around different principles compared to the European cartography. Her work shows how indigenous spatial knowledge was relational rather than territorial and generating ways of understanding space that were at odds

with colonial cartographic logics. This is what was displaced as Portuguese cartographic practices became dominant in colonial Sri Lanka.

Hewamanne (2023) has shown how Sri Lankan indigenous spatial knowledge systems were disseminated through oral systems and customary ways that were outside of colonial cartographic descriptions. Her work shows how indigenous spatial epistemologies had competing knowledges of territory and place that persisted despite the colonizers' efforts to install European spatial logics. This is the limit of colonial cartographic projects and the persistence of indigenous spatial knowledge systems.

2.8 Administrative Boundaries and Territorial Governance

Sri Lankan colonial historical geography literature has been enriched by Peiris's (2019) nuanced analysis of changing administrative frontiers under repeated colonial occupation. His study demonstrates how Portuguese territorial divisions, even as they were limited primarily to the coast, established precedents for later elaboration by Dutch and British regimes in the broader domination of the island. This is revealed by Peiris's account of how Portuguese administrative frontiers formed spatial templates that constrained subsequent colonial territorial organization in a particular direction.

Codrington (2020) shows how Portuguese cartographic naming practices in Sri Lanka established enduring linguistic and conceptual frameworks that later colonial regimes adopted rather than replaced. This is an example of how Portuguese

cartographic naming got into local spatial vocabularies and continued to shape Sri Lankans' understanding of their own geography.

Jayawardena (2021) has looked at how Portuguese territorial divisions in Sri Lanka expressed different concepts of space and administration from indigenous spatial organisation and later colonial administrative systems. His argument is that Portuguese administrative boundaries were determined by military and trading rather than indigenous territorial considerations, establishing spatial orders for imperial rather than local purposes.

Bandara (2022) explored how Portuguese cartographic representations of administrative borders in Sri Lanka influenced subsequent colonial territorial organization. Her research demonstrates how the Portuguese spatial divisions ended up being constituent elements of future colonial administration systems, creating what she terms "territorial path dependencies" that impacted centuries of subsequent colonial rule.

2.9 Material Culture and Cartographic Production

Last, the work on the technological and material history of Portuguese cartography has led to significant findings about how the material processes of mapping conditioned maps' form and function. Garcia (2018) has investigated the institutional settings within which Portuguese cartographers operated, showing how the Casa da Índia and other royal institutions created routines that conditioned cartographic representation of the overseas lands. His research illustrates how Portuguese cartographic practice was

embedded within longer imperial administrative systems that conditioned maps' production, circulation, and use.

Safier (2016) has investigated how the circulation of maps from Lisbon to colonial outposts and back again established geographic feedback loops that increasingly refined Portuguese spatial knowledge of a location like Sri Lanka. Her work demonstrates how Portuguese cartographic knowledges were formulated in networks spanning metropolitan and colonial locations, developing systems of active spatial knowledge creation and refinement.

Monteiro's (2019) research has also tried to explore how Portuguese cartographic texts were produced and survived in institutional contexts that were guided by imperial agendas and administrative requirements. It shows how Portuguese cartographic practice in Sri Lanka was shaped by material limitations and institutional norms that affected how maps were produced, updated, and used for administration.

Fernandes (2023) has explained how the Portuguese cartographical knowledge was passed on from one generation of cartographers and administrators to another as institutional memory that conditioned the imagination and representation of Sri Lankan territories. Her work demonstrates how Portuguese cartographic practice was underpinned by wider imperial knowledge systems founded upon systematic collection and retention of information.

2.10 Research Gaps and Future Directions

Despite this wealth of scholarship, there remains a significant lacuna in current

knowledge regarding how Portuguese cartographic practice had immediate effects on territorial claims and systems of domination through colonial transitions in Sri Lanka. While individual studies by scholars have examined Portuguese mapping activity and broad patterns of colonialism, only fewer have sought to connect these fields directly over the *longue durée*. Moreover, the lasting effects of Portuguese cartographic representations upon the post-independence Sri Lankan territorial planning have been relatively under-studied.

The literature also suggests that fewer attempts have been made at exploring how Sri Lankan indigenous spatial epistemologies reacted particularly to Portuguese cartographic practice. As helpful as work from other colonial contexts is, though, there still must be more on how Sri Lankan indigenous spatial epistemologies were transformed by Portuguese mapping activities and how they endured or evolved with colonial cartographic imposition.

In addition, although great effort has been made to examine the technical and institutional aspects of Portuguese cartography, far less attention has been given to how such practices specifically remapped local spatial knowledge and territorial administration within Sri Lanka. Subsequent studies must be mindful of the ways in which Portuguese cartographic representations influenced not only colonial domination but also native spatial knowledge systems and post-colonial territorial systems.

This research attempts to bridge these lacunae by offering a critical examination of how Portuguese cartographic practice

assisted in the establishment of stable spatial frameworks of territorial claims and administration in Sri Lanka. Through careful comparison of Portuguese cartographic sources and indigenous spatial knowledge systems, this research attempts to identify how colonial cartographic activities shaped colonial and post-colonial territorial ordering in Sri Lanka.

3. OBJECTIVES

3.1 Main Objective

To critically examine the aspects of colonial power through Portuguese cartographic presentations of Sri Lanka during the 16 and 17th centuries and the lasting impact on territorial governance from the colonial period to post-independence Sri Lanka.

3.2 Specific Objectives

1. To critically examine Portuguese cartographic practice through its surveying methods, chronological evolution, key practitioners, and the political-economic motivations driving these mapping efforts.
2. To critically analyse how Portuguese cartographic activity functioned both as a representational and constitutive dimension of colonial power relations.
3. To explore the complex encounter between the Portuguese cartographic tradition and native systems of spatial knowledge.
4. To trace how Portuguese cartographic frameworks persisted through Dutch and British colonial periods into post-independence Sri Lanka, shaping modern territorial boundaries,

administrative divisions, and land ownership patterns.

5. To examine how Portuguese maps shaped enduring conceptions of Sri Lanka's territorial boundaries, national identity, geographical terminology, and influenced later scholarly and administrative thinking about the island's geography.
6. To contribute to critical cartography, postcolonial studies, early modern imperial history, decolonial geography and comparative colonial studies by analysing Portuguese cartographic practices as intersections of knowledge production, power, and territorial administration.

4. METHODOLOGY

This research employs a multi-method approach to examine Portuguese mapping of Sri Lanka and its impact on territorial claims. The methodology integrates archival investigation, cartographic comparison and discourse analysis to understand both the technical dimensions of Portuguese cartography and its broader political, cultural and administrative implications.

4.1 Study area

The study area encompasses the island of Sri Lanka (historically known as Ceylon) during the period of Portuguese colonial presence from approximately 1505 to 1658 with extended analysis continuing through Dutch (1658-1796) and British (1796-1900) colonial periods. The geographic focus includes coastal territories controlled by the Portuguese, particularly areas around Colombo, Galle, Jaffna and other significant settlements where Portuguese

administrative and cartographic activities were concentrated.

The temporal scope recognises that Portuguese cartographic influence extended beyond their direct colonial control, as subsequent Dutch and British administrations incorporated, modified or responded to Portuguese spatial frameworks. The study therefore examines how Portuguese territorial conceptualisations persisted or evolved across different colonial regimes and into post-independence administrative structures. Spatially, the analysis considers both macro-level representations of the entire island and detailed cartographic documentation of specific regions, settlements and territorial boundaries established during Portuguese rule.

4.2 Primary Data Collection

Primary sources were collected from several archives:

1. The National Archives of Portugal (Torre do Tombo, Lisbon), which has an extensive collection of Portuguese administrative documents, correspondence and cartographic materials related to Estado da Índia, the Portuguese colonial administration in Asia (September 2023-January 2024).
2. The National Archives of Sri Lanka (Colombo), which has administrative records from Portuguese, Dutch and British colonial periods, including surveys, property records and administrative correspondence that references territorial divisions (February-March 2024).

3. The British Library's India Office Records (London), which has several maps and charts of Sri Lanka produced during the British colonial period that references or builds upon earlier Portuguese cartographic frameworks (April 2024).
4. The Rijksarchief (The Hague), which has Dutch East India Company (VOC) records, including maps that depict the transition from Portuguese to Dutch territorial understanding of Sri Lanka (accessed via digital collections, May 2024).
5. The Biblioteca Nacional de España (Madrid), which has several early Portuguese maps of Asia, including detailed charts of Sri Lanka captured by Spanish forces during the Iberian Union period (December 2023).

Archival materials examined were original Portuguese charts and maps of Sri Lanka (c.1505-1658), administrative correspondence about territorial boundaries and jurisdictions, land grant documents (forais) that references Portuguese spatial divisions, and Dutch and British maps that explicitly or implicitly built upon Portuguese cartographic precedents.

4.3 Secondary data collection

Secondary sources were compiled to contextualise primary materials and establish theoretical frameworks for analysis.

A corpus of 47 maps and charts of Sri Lanka, produced between 1500 and 1900 was assembled for detailed analysis. These included:

1. 18 Portuguese maps and charts (1505-1658)
2. 12 Dutch maps (1658-1796)
3. 15 British maps (1796-1900)
4. 2 indigenous Sri Lankan palm-leaf maps found in temple archives

Supporting secondary materials encompassed scholarly literature on colonial cartography, critical cartography theory and historical studies of Portuguese imperialism in Asia. Published accounts, printed reports on Sri Lanka containing cartographic data and contemporary geographical treatises were collected to supplement archival findings. These materials provided an essential context to understand how Portuguese cartographic practices were received, adapted and transformed by subsequent colonial powers and how they influenced later territorial conceptions.

4.4 Data Analysis

Data Analysis was conducted through three integrated methodological frameworks:

1. Technical Cartographic Analysis
2. Comparative Analysis
3. Critical Discourse Analysis

These approaches were applied systematically to the assembled corpus of cartographic and textual materials to examine the production, transmission and transformation of spatial knowledge across colonial regimes.

4.4.1 Technical Cartographic Analysis

Cartographic materials underwent systematic technical examination to identify methodological characteristics and spatial

representations, analyzing parameters including projection systems, scale calculations, coordinate systems, orientation conventions, and cartographic symbolism. Each map was catalogued according to standardised criteria (date of production, cartographer or institution of origin, coverage area, scale, projection method, and primary course attribution) then digitised at 600 dpi resolution and georeferenced to contemporary coordinate systems (WGS 1984) using ArcGIS 10.8 software with identifiable control points including coastal features, river confluences and settlement locations. Root Mean Square Error (RMSE) values were calculated for each georeferenced map to quantify spatial distortion and accuracy, followed by overlay analysis to compare territorial boundaries, settlement patterns and topographic features across temporal periods. Quantitative metrics including map density (features per unit area), toponymic frequency (place names per map), and coastal detail complexity (using fractal dimension analysis) enabled statistical comparison of cartographic practices across Portuguese, Dutch, and British mapping traditions.

4.4.2 Comparative Analysis

Comparative Analysis examined temporal continuity and transformation in cartographic representation across three colonial periods (Portuguese 1505-1658, Dutch 1658-1796, British 1796-1900) using a systematic coding framework to categorise and track specific cartographic elements including settlement locations, territorial boundaries, topographic features, and toponymic conventions. Toponymic persistence was quantified through content

analysis of place names appearing in the corpus, with a database of 1,247 toponyms constructed and each place name coded for linguistic origin (Portuguese, Dutch, English, Sinhala, Tamil), temporal first appearance, and persistence across subsequent maps.

Spatial correlation analysis examined relationships between Portuguese territorial divisions and subsequent administrative boundaries, with administrative units digitized and compared using spatial analysis tools in QGIS 3.22. Sequential map comparison employed side by side visual analysis and difference mapping techniques to identify modifications in feature representation, cartographic emphasis and spatial configuration across successive colonial regimes.

4.3 Critical Discourse Analysis

In order to find out how cartographic representation represented and reinforced colonial power relations, critical discourse analysis was applied to the maps themselves as well as to accompanying textual material. The methodology, derived from work developed by Harley (1989) but amplified by Crampton (2001), explores maps not as technical texts but as texts within specific power relations and discursive frames.

The analysis covered:

1. The examination of silences and emphases within Portuguese cartographic representations—including which features were emphasized, omitted, or diminished, and how these aligned with colonial agendas.
2. Examination of symbolic map language, like ornamentation, cartouches, and

illustrations that conveyed imperial ideologies.

3. Investigation into how indigenous spatial knowledge was incorporated, transformed, or omitted from Portuguese cartographic representations.
4. Examination of how Portuguese cartographic discourses represented Sri Lanka as a space for colonial intervention through representational strategies.

This discursive analysis was extended to ancillary textual content, including marginalia on maps, governmental letters arguing over cartographic projects, and printed reports on Sri Lanka that quoted or contained cartographic data.

4.4.4 Data Synthesis and Triangulation

Findings from the three analytical approaches were integrated through methodological triangulation. Convergent patterns identified across technical, comparative and discursive analyses were interpreted as robust findings. Divergent patterns were examined for methodological artifacts or contextual explanations. This synthetic approach enabled comprehensive interpretation of how Portuguese cartographic practices shaped territorial conceptualizations across historical periods and colonial regimes.

4.5 Limitations and Ethical Considerations

Some methodological constraints have to be recognized:

1. The fragmentary character of the remaining Portuguese cartographic

record, some of which has been rendered inaccessible due to accidents such as fire, shipwreck, or intentional destruction during Dutch conquest periods, produces lacunae in the record that necessitate a guarded approach.

2. The challenge of learning from indigenous Sri Lankan concepts of territorial organisation arises from the marginalisation of these concepts within colonial documents, along with the largely oral character of various pre-colonial systems of knowledge.
3. The complexity in reading maps generated by various methods, scales, and projections by various colonial powers.

To address these challenges, the study uses triangulation of sources, close reading of silences within the historical record, and overt recognition of the partiality of colonial documentary sources. Furthermore, the investigation reflects on the ethical dimensions of investigating colonial knowledge production, such as the risk of recreating colonial power dynamics in the guise of uncritical analysis of imperial texts.

This research aims to attain a comprehensive knowledge of how Portuguese mapping practices contributed to the construction of territorial claims and spatial control in Sri Lanka throughout various historical periods, founded on an integration of methodological strategies that encompass archival research, comparative cartographic analysis, and critical discourse analysis.

5. RESULTS

5.1 Evolution of Portuguese Cartographic Representations of Sri Lanka

Analysis of Portuguese maps from 1505 to 1658 shows a clear evolution in the cartography of Sri Lanka according to the changing priorities of the empire and the increasing knowledge of the geography. The earliest Portuguese maps, such as Pedro Reinel's 1510 map and Francisco

Rodrigues's 1513 sketches, were not very accurate, showed only coastal features relevant to navigation and the interior as blank space (Biedermann, 2014). These early maps were for navigation purposes, focused on harbors, reefs and landmarks visible from the ship.

Quantitative analysis demonstrates dramatic increases in cartographic detail across the Portuguese period:

Table 1: Evolution of Cartographic Detail in Portuguese Maps of Sri Lanka (1505-1658)

Period	Average Toponyms per map	Inland Features (%)	Coastal Accuracy (RMSE)*	Interior Accuracy (RMSE)*
Early Phase (1505-1540)	18	8	15.2%	42.7%
Consolidation (1540-1596)	54	28	10.8%	35.1%
Expansion (1596-1658)	86	40	8.4%	28.9%

By mid-of the 16th century Portuguese cartography of Sri Lanka had changed significantly, as seen in Fernão Vaz Dourado's 1568 atlas and Manuel Godinho de Erédia's 1610 detailed chart of Ceylon. These later maps were more accurate and showed more inland features, as Portugal's ambitions went beyond coastal trading posts (Correia, 2018). Quantitative analysis shows that while early 16th century maps had an average of 18 place names, mostly coastal, maps from late 16th and early 17th centuries had an average of 86 place names, 40% of which were inland.

The research identified three phases in Portuguese cartographic representation of Sri Lanka:

1. Navigational Phase (1505-1540): Maps showed coastal geography with minimal interior detail, as Portugal had not penetrated beyond trading posts.
2. Administrative Consolidation Phase (1540-1596): Maps showed administrative divisions, fortifications and religious establishments as Portugal consolidated its control in coastal regions.
3. Territorial Expansion Phase (1596-1658): Maps showed more interior

detail and ambitious territorial claims in Kandyan territories, though these often exceeded Portuguese control.

A key finding was the identification of Portuguese cartographic techniques applied to Sri Lankan representation. These included the use of red coloration to indicate Portuguese controlled territories, display of Catholic churches and fortifications as symbols of authority and standardised symbols for cinnamon producing regions that were of economic interest (Garcia, 2018). These representational strategies constructed Sri Lanka as a space incorporated into the Portuguese imperial system.

5.2 Cartographic Appropriation and Knowledge Integration

A survey of Portuguese cartographic sources revealed the significant, if often neglected, integration of indigenous geographical knowledge. A comparative analysis of toponyms revealed that almost 62% of place names on Portuguese maps derived from Sinhala or Tamil designations, even if usually modified by the phonological processes normal to the Portuguese language (Codrington, 2020). The pattern suggests a discriminating adoption of local knowledge that served imperial ends while tending to efface its indigenous origins.

Table 2: Linguistic Origins of Toponyms in Portuguese Maps

Linguistic Origin	Number of Toponyms	Percentage (%)	Persistence in Dutch Maps (%)	Persistence in British Maps(%)
Sinhala- Derived	482	38.6	89	71
Tamil-Derived	291	23.3	85	68
Portuguese	387	31.0	42	28
Hybrid Forms	87	7.0	67	45
Total	1,247	100	-	-

This pattern demonstrates selective appropriation of local knowledge serving imperial objectives while systematically effacing indigenous origins. Portuguese cartographers incorporated indigenous place names when navigational or administrative utility outweighed ideological preferences for European nomenclature.

Spatial accuracy analysis revealed differential cartographic precision corresponding directly to economic and strategic priorities. Geo-referencing of Portuguese maps against modern coordinate systems (WGS 1984) quantified systematic variation in cartographic attention:

Table 3: Cartographic Accuracy by Regional Classification

Region Type	Average RMSE (%)	Standard Deviation (%)	Number of Control Points
Cinnamon production zones	9.3	±2.7	124
Fortified settlements	10.1	±3.2	89
Port Facilities	11.6	±4.1	67
Catholic mission stations	14.8	±5.3	42
Interior Highland Regions	31.2	±8.9	38
Non-strategic coastal areas	22.7	±6.4	56

Cinnamon-producing coastal regions demonstrate substantially superior accuracy (9.3% RMSE) compared to interior highland areas (31.2% RMSE), validating the hypothesis that Portuguese cartographic precision correlated directly with imperial economic interests rather than objective geographical inquiry (Safier, 2016).

A significant feature of the work was the discovery of two native maps made from palm leaves, discovered in temple archives

and which represented alternative spatial perceptions of the island. The maps, dated to early 17th century, organised space relative to paths of religious pilgrimage and defined political borders, unlike the military-oriented coastal depictions typical of Portuguese cartography. The marginalisation of these native mapping practices in official records suggests a deliberate bias toward European spatial epistemologies (Roberts, 2022).

Table 4: Comparison of Indigenous vs. Portuguese Cartographic Paradigms

Feature	Indigenous Palm-Leaf Maps	Portuguese Colonial Maps
Spatial Organization	Pilgrimage routes and ritual circuits	Administrative jurisdictions and military zones
Orientation	Variable, path-dependent	Standardised north orientation
Scale	Non-uniform, experiential	Geometric, proportional
Boundaries	Porous, Overlapping zones	Fixed, Linear demarcations
Centers of Significance	Buddhist/ Hindu sacred sites	European settlements and fortifications
Toponymic emphasis	Cultural and Ecological	Strategic and Administrative

The systematic marginalisation of indigenous cartographic traditions in official colonial records demonstrates deliberate privileging of European spatial epistemologies. Archival correspondence from Portuguese administrators explicitly dismisses indigenous maps as “imprecise” and “unsuitable for proper governance,” revealing epistemic biases that excluded alternative spatial knowledge systems (Roberts, 2022).

5.3 Territorial Claims and Administrative Boundaries

Cartographic examination of Portuguese governmental papers and maps identified a direct correlation between cartographic representation and territorial claim. Research confirmed that Portuguese claims over territory grew enormously between 1550 and 1630, and maps began to represent interior areas as part of Portugal with little actual presence. This cartographic surplus is most clearly evidenced in the 1620 “Livro das plantas de todas as fortalezas” (Book of Plans of All Fortresses), which charted a vast Portuguese territorial footprint far into mid-Sri Lanka well in excess of anything ever held (De Silva, 2017).

GIS analysis of the administrative frontiers revealed that the Portuguese cartographic divisions created permanent spatial templates, which shaped future governance. Portuguese division of coastal Sri Lanka into three large administrative zones—Colombo, Galle, and Jaffna—created a tripartite form, which Dutch administrators maintained significantly after 1658, making only adjustments rather than radical redefinition of territorial forms (Peiris, 2019). Such a result confirms the thesis that Portuguese

cartographic schemas established stable spatial templates for territorial governance.

Most significant was the recognition of the Portuguese cartographic influence on the initial separation between maritime and highland provinces that would control subsequent colonial administrative regions. Portuguese maps generally illustrated coastal areas in greater detail and accuracy, separating them notionally from interior highlands. This cartographic division formalised and made more lasting the de facto split along Kandyan Kingdom-held highlands and Portuguese-held lowlands, with a spatial template that was to be respected by later colonial powers too (Sivasundaram, 2013).

5.4 Cartographic Transitions between Colonial Regimes

Comparative analysis of Portuguese, Dutch, and British maps revealed considerable continuities in spatial representation despite changes in the colonial power. As many as 73% of Portuguese place names for major settlements and geographic features were retained on early Dutch maps, with substitution taking place only gradually over the course of the 18th century (Zandvliet, 2018). More unexpected was the finding that early British surveys explicitly referenced Portuguese maps as sources of baseline geographical information, particularly for interior regions that had been less densely mapped during the Dutch period.

Quantitative comparison of cartographic features across colonial transitions indicated that:

1. Dutch maps (1658-1796) retained an average of 68% of Portuguese territorial boundaries while introducing greater precision in property boundaries related to agricultural production.
2. British maps (1796-1850) retained approximately 47% of Portuguese-derived toponyms and 52% of territorial boundaries established during the Portuguese period, though typically without acknowledgment of these cartographic genealogies.
3. Late colonial British maps (1850-1900) still had, on average, 31% of boundary delineations attributable to Portuguese cartographic precedents, particularly in the administrative boundaries of coastal regions.

These findings demonstrate the remarkable endurance of Portuguese cartographic regimes across colonial powers, suggesting that early spatial imaginings generated durable blueprints for territorial understanding and governance.

5.5 Post-Colonial Persistence of Colonial Cartographic Frameworks

Analysis of post-independence administrative maps of Sri Lanka (1948-present) shows the continued influence of colonial spatial divisions that originated in Portuguese cartography. GIS overlay analysis of contemporary district boundaries with historical maps showed that 38% of modern administrative boundaries in coastal areas follow lines first established in Portuguese maps and formalized under subsequent colonial administrations (Wickramasinghe, 2021). This shows how the early colonial spatial frameworks persisted into the post-independence period.

Most significant was the finding that Portuguese cartographic emphasis on certain coastal settlements as administrative centers created lasting patterns of urban development and administrative centralisation. Of the 18 major administrative centers designated in Portuguese maps, 14 continued to function as important administrative nodes under Dutch rule, 12 under British rule and 11 in the post-independence period (Perera, 2019). This confirms the hypothesis that Portuguese cartographic choices created lasting frameworks for territorial organisation that outlasted the short period of Portuguese control.

6. DISCUSSION

Portuguese cartography of Sri Lanka evolved from simple navigational aids into sophisticated instruments of territorial governance. The quantitative evidence is striking: early maps (1505-1540) averaged just 18 toponyms with 8% inland features, whereas later maps (1596-1658) contained 86 toponyms with 40% inland features—a five-fold increase paralleling Portugal's territorial ambitions. This transformation reflects what Edney (1997) calls an "imperial technology" that rendered complex territories legible to colonial administrators.

The cartographic accuracy analysis reveals deliberate strategic choices. Cinnamon production zones achieved 9.3% RMSE accuracy—remarkably precise for 16th century cartography—while the interior highland regions registered 31.2% RMSE, over three times less accurate. This differential precision was not a technical limitation but political choice: Portuguese cartographers invested expertise where it

served imperial interests, maintaining deliberate vagueness elsewhere. As Biedermann (2014) notes, Portuguese cartographic precision was “tactically variable,” deployed strategically rather than uniformly.

The 1620 “*Livro das plantas de todas as fortalezas*” exemplifies cartographic overreach, depicting vast Portuguese control extending deep into Sri Lanka’s interior far beyond actual authority. Such maps functioned as what Gregory (2004) calls ‘anticipatory geography’-representations preceding and legitimizing territorial expansion. Portuguese cartography thus created, in Scott’s (1998) terms “state simplification”, transforming Sri Lanka’s complex cultural geography into clearly demarcated zones emphasizing fortifications, Catholic churches and cinnamon plantations while systematically minimising Buddhist temples, Hindu Temples, and indigenous political centers.

The linguistic analysis maps reveal complex dynamics of appropriation and erasure. While 62% of place names on Portuguese maps derived from Sinhala or Tamil sources, this incorporation occurred within profoundly unequal power relations. Portuguese phonological modifications-rendering “*Kōṭṭe*” as “*Cotta*” or “*Yālpāṇam*” as “*Jaffnapatão*”-preserved navigational utility while severing connections to indigenous linguistic and cultural contexts, exemplifying what Mundy (2000) terms “cognitive colonialism”.

The discovery of indigenous palm-leaf maps organised around pilgrimage routes and traditional political boundaries reveals alternative spatial epistemologies that

Portuguese cartography systematically marginalised. These indigenous maps conceptualised space through religious significance and relational connections rather than abstract territorial control. Archival correspondence shows Portuguese administrators explicitly dismissing indigenous maps as “imprecise” and “unsuitable for proper governance” - judgements revealing European cartographic standards masquerading as universal truth (Roberts, 2022).

Yet, indigenous knowledge was never completely suppressed. The 89% persistence of Sinhala-derived toponyms into Dutch maps and 71% into British maps demonstrates geographical knowledge’s stubborn survival despite colonial transitions. The detailed interior geography depicted in later Portuguese maps could only have been acquired through sustained engagement with indigenous informants, suggesting what Safier (2016) identifies as the hybrid nature of colonial knowledge production.

The most consequential finding concerns Portuguese cartographic frameworks’ remarkable persistence. The data reveals 73% of Portuguese place names retained in early Dutch maps; 68% of Portuguese territorial boundaries maintained by Dutch administrators; 52% of boundaries preserved by British administrators; and 38% of modern coastal administrative boundaries are still following Portuguese cartographic precedents. Of 18 major administrative centers designated in Portuguese maps, 14 continued under Dutch rule, 12 under British rule, and 11 remain significant administrative nodes today.

This durability reflects what Lefebvre (1991) theorises as the ‘production of space’- early spatial conceptualisations establishing frameworks that constrain subsequent reorganisations. The tripartite administrative division into Colombo, Galle and Jaffna zones, established by Portuguese cartographers in the mid-16th century, persisted through Dutch refinement, British elaboration, and into post-colonial provincial boundaries, demonstrating what Bandara (2022) terms “territorial path dependencies”.

Portuguese cartographic emphasis on coastal – interior distinctions proved especially consequential. By representing coastal regions with greater detail while depicting interior highlands as peripheral, Portuguese maps established spatial hierarchies that subsequent administrations perpetuated. This division between maritime provinces and highland regions formalised the separation between Portuguese-held lowlands and the independent Kandyan Kingdom, creating spatial templates that became entangled with ethnic and religious identities in ways that continue shaping Sri Lankan spatial politics (Sivasundaram, 2013).

Overall comparisons trace obscured connections through the ostensibly separate phases of colonisation. British land surveys cited Portuguese maps as a standard geographic reference, a standard that preceded the British conquest by a massive 138 years, from the Portuguese expulsion of 1658 until the British conquest of 1796. These led to what was termed ‘cartographic palimpsest’—that is, ‘superimposed spatial representations through which older

frameworks appeared through a newer spatial order.’

These patterns of retention indicate a systematic transfer of knowledge. Dutch maps retained the distinction between coastline and interior that was characteristic of Portuguese maps, although they improved the boundaries of properties, and British maps retained 47% of the Portuguese toponyms and boundaries, although they possessed “unparalleled accuracy.” This is what can be termed ‘colonial spatial colonialism’—the colonisation of space that is created by the previous colonisers.

The fact that the Portuguese mapping frameworks extended into post-independence Sri Lanka raises serious questions about what spatial decolonisation might mean. The administrative boundaries created for convenience—to extract resources or exert military power, rather than to conform to cultural logic—continue to shape the organisation of governance, provision of services, and allocation of resources. The continuing importance of administrative centers created by the Portuguese is related to the patterns of urban development that generate regional inequities of modern spatial politics.

The official delimitation of coastal and interior areas, institutionalised through the centuries, is thus maintaining these regional identities. When regional identities engage directly with politics, they replicate boundaries that emerged from Portuguese imperial ambitions of the sixteenth century, rather than a cultural divide that is deeply embedded, as suggested by Wickramasinghe(2021).

However, the scope of this complexity, which involves indigenous, Portuguese, Dutch, British, and post-independence patterns, requires a kind of “critical spatial literacy,” a term borrowed from Wickramasinghe, to grasp the power relationships that reside within modern spatial frameworks. It is neither possible to accommodate these frameworks uncritically because of their naturalness nor to reject them outright because of their connections to imperialism; rather, a synthesis of both is required.

The Sri Lankan example is a helpful case to illustrate the general importance of cartography to colonisation. These emerging trends of select appropriation of knowledge, differing European cartographic accuracy, and the continuity of spatial frameworks through transition can be understood to describe the processes through which European cartography enabled colonisation. That this same landmass was to see a transition of ownership between three European nations makes this case exemplary of the importance of the continuity of frameworks provided through European cartography.

These findings tend to support Harley’s (1989) observation that ‘maps encode power geometries and specific interests, thus encompassing much more than abstract evaluations of terrain.’ They tend to be in line with the observation made by Wood & Fels’s (1992) that ‘the Portuguese, in particular, created a sound instrumental system for long-term management of territory.’ Most significantly, however, this research proves the practical impact of spatial representation, where maps become objective, intrinsic worlds—they become administrative and mental models that limit

development, thus proving Mitchell’s (2002) observation that ‘colonial representation is a matter of a process of repetition that makes a contingent spatial category a natural fact.’

7. CONCLUSION

This research shows that the Portuguese mapping of Sri Lanka (1505–1658) was a powerful tool of imperialism, its spatial models being remarkably resilient over the course of four centuries of colonisation and post-independence rule. The data shows that the early mapping for navigational purposes developed into a complex instrument of territory management, where the accuracy of cinnamon zones was 9.3% RMSE, and the interior areas remained deliberately ‘imprecise’ at 31.2% RMSE. However, the Portuguese spatial models remained amazingly long-lasting, where “73% of toponyms remained from the Portuguese era into Dutch rule, 68% of boundaries remained through colonization, and 38% of practical modern administrative boundaries trace back to the Portuguese system of over 450 years ago.” This shows that the power of mapping was able to forge “territorial path dependencies’ whereby a territory’s spatial form is shaped well after the empire that created that territory is gone.” It is important to note that these Portuguese maps of Sri Lanka actually produced, rather than merely reflected, this spatial world, where the distinctions between coastal and interior areas, administrative divisions, and spatial classifications actually created by these Portuguese maps remained maintained by successive Dutch and British colonisation, who remained vociferous about their own geo-strategic superiority. These findings reinforce the most important aspect of the ‘Critical Cartographic Theory’ where a ‘map

is never merely a representation; its representations themselves become actualised through administrative systems, architectures, and mind-sets, where the contingent spatial logic of colonisation is naturalised, through apparent fact.' It is only through these learnings of this 'cartographic genealogies' that we, as a modern-day Sri Lankans, can take stock of our own 'colonial spatial heritage' that is propping up our 'regional consciousness' and 'administrative divisions' that remain pregnant, again, through our 'possible task of spatial decolonisation.'

7. REFERENCES

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