

1

(Dis)connecting Empires

Towards a Critical History of Early Modern Imperial Connections

Global history has promised redemption from the compartmentalized understandings of the past that dominated the world less than three decades ago. Yet some fundamental spatial and temporal divisions—between early modern and modern, or between Atlantic and Indic—remain in place. The question is: how do we labour against those divisions without losing sight of the faultlines that shaped the lives of people in the past? Where exactly do we draw the line between our own ambitions to overcome compartmentalized approaches to history, and the undeniable fact that past societies did not communicate unrestrictedly across the globe? Can we be critical of the local and the regional without creating an ultimately meaningless hegemony of the global?¹ It is my contention that a critical connected history genuinely concerned with the local as much as with the global is our best bet to face the challenge. Along the way, we may be able to answer questions about temporality, communication, periodization, and the nature of historical change in contexts where formerly disconnected societies began to interact.

‘CONNECTED HISTORY’ AND THE PROBLEM OF SCALE

Whilst global connections between Sri Lanka, Lisbon, Madrid, Rome, Manila and many other places are one theme highlighted in this book, much of the action explored unfolds in relatively confined geographical spaces. Many historians face this dilemma. Letters may have travelled thousands of miles, but they were still written and read in specific loci. An order might have been issued in Madrid in reaction to news coming from Colombo or Goa, and this emerging, global dimension of human agency is clearly a key characteristic of the sixteenth century. Yet actions feeding into the news or resulting from the orders (for example, someone’s coronation or death) still occurred first and foremost locally, in smaller environments, the shape and size of which depended on the mobility that would fit in

¹ On the regional as an important category sitting between the local and the global, see R. Bin Wong, ‘Regions and global history’, in *Writing the History of the Global. Challenges for the 21st century*, edited by Maxine Berg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 83–105.

one day after another of human activity on the ground. Naturally, these more confined places were not isolated either, and might well have multiple, long-distance connections of their own—but they seem different from the emergent global space nevertheless. Where, then, *is* the ground upon which global historians interested in connections labour? If we had to point it out on a world map, what movements would our fingers perform?

One approach is to see the global and the local as two separable categories, fundamentally differing on grounds of their scale. At its simplest, the global is big, and the local small. In fact, in an era of material-based communications the global and the local tend to inhabit different temporalities, which may well offer the firmest anchor for any considerations about scale: whilst in a local theatre of war actions produced consequences within minutes, days or weeks, it could take years for news to travel from, say, India to Iberia and back. Under such a lens, the local appears to relate to the global as a part to the whole. The local inhabits the global, nesting in spaces left untouched by the latter, rather than vice versa. Historians can engage with these complementary dimensions by looking at the past through a zooming lens. They can zoom in, zoom out, then zoom in again somewhere else, and enjoy the complementarity of micro and macro developments unfolding under their eyes.

But where precisely does a zooming-in-and-out approach leave us in our quest to understand the articulations between the local and the global? Among the challenges global history faces today, this remains one of the most demanding. Much recent writing on early colonial interactions boils down, as Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra has pointed out, to local history in new clothes. Even what is by now identifiable as the new mainstream borderland historiography in the Americas often delivers little more than an ultimately infertile succession of studies that, whilst paying lip service to global questions, fail to address the relation between their local subjects and the formation of the global power structures we ultimately wish to understand.² The shortage of conceptual firepower at a supra-local level may well be at the heart of the new historiography's frequent failure to provide a compelling alternative to imperial history.³ Crucially, the inverse is also sometimes the case. Much work has been done to reveal the movement of individuals, commodities and other artefacts across the globe in the early modern period. Global historians have been able to build compelling narratives about the making of the world we live in—writing, as Maxine Berg put it, 'the history of the global'.⁴ Yet the resulting picture of a profusely interconnected world traversed by itinerant people, ideas and things of all sorts is often, as John-Paul Ghobrial has recently taken the courage to warn, impressionistic at best.⁵ One does not have to listen

² Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, 'Entangled Histories: Borderland Historiographies in New Clothes?', *American Historical Review*, 112 (June 2007), pp. 789 and 799. More on borderlands below, in Chapter 5.

³ Pekka Hämäläinen and Samuel Truett, 'On Borderlands', *Journal of American History*, 98, 2 (2011), p. 339.

⁴ Berg, ed., *Writing the History of the Global*.

⁵ John-Paul Ghobrial, 'The Secret Life of Elias of Babylon and the Uses of Global Microhistory', *Past and Present*, 222, 1 (2014), p. 56.

very hard to pick up the signs that global history may be heading into a crisis. ‘The neatly packaged narrative of ever-increasing globalization, interconnectedness and universalization’, a growing number of historians will now agree, may well prove ‘too abstract to be meaningful’.⁶ Studies on immobility are starting to appear alongside the mainstream preoccupation with mobility.

Connective approaches do remain, I believe, our best hope for linking up not only one place with any other, but also the local with the global. Yet clearly, some conceptual refinement is needed. ‘Connected history’, elevated to paradigm status around the turn of the millennium, has been described as ‘an approach to history that focuses on [...] connections that transcend politically bounded territories and connect various parts of the world to one another’.⁷ A ‘focus on interconnections’ was almost naturally at the heart of the new global history journal project launched in Britain in 2006, partly in reaction to what was perceived as the excessively broad and abstract theorizing of American ‘world’ historians.⁸ But exactly what ‘connections’ should consist of, or how they might be theorized in terms of temporality and scale, has never quite been clarified. When the motto of connected histories appeared in the late 1990s, it was sufficiently enthralling for no one to feel hampered by the vagueness of the terminology.⁹ It may have been tempting to see the method as an antithesis to comparative history—after all, the 1997 article was written in reaction to Victor Liebermann’s ongoing work on Eurasian ‘parallels’—but in much of the work of Subrahmanyam himself, the two methods appear as mutually compatible.¹⁰

Where is it, then, that we are heading? Identifying more and more connections has become, like identifying the movement of people and things per se, of limited significance. Clearly, the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries saw a drastic increase in long-distance connections, but we also need to ask questions about how precisely the new links worked or failed to work, and why. In other words, we may need some sort of connection history to consolidate the notion of connected history before the latter becomes so pervasive that it loses relevance—or indeed gives rise to an unhelpful, localist backlash, which is the last thing we need.¹¹ The current

⁶ Maryam Patton, ‘Global Microhistory: One or two things that I know about it’, Blogpost on *JHIBLOG* (September 2015), <https://jhiblog.org/2015/09/09/global-microhistory-one-or-two-things-that-i-know-about-it/> (last accessed 19 October 2017).

⁷ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, ‘Connected Histories: Notes towards a reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 31, 3 (1997), pp. 735–62. Sven Beckert in the AHR Conversation ‘On Transnational History’, *American Historical Review*, 111, 5 (2006), p. 1446.

⁸ William Gervase Clarence-Smith, Kenneth Pomeranz and Peer Vries, ‘Editorial’, *Journal of Global History*, 1, 1 (2006), p. 2.

⁹ On the role that vagueness can play in scholarship, see Patrick Gardiner, *The Nature of Historical Explanation*, reprint (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 81.

¹⁰ Prasannan Parthasarathi has called comparison ‘the poor stepchild of global history’ in ‘Comparison in global history’, in *Writing the History of the Global*, p. 69. Subrahmanyam has repeatedly underlined the importance of systematic comparative work. See e.g. ‘A Tale of Three Empires. Mughals, Ottomans, and Habsburgs in a Comparative Context’, *Common Knowledge*, 12, 1 (2006), pp. 66–92.

¹¹ For a fresh take on failed dialogues, see Ralf Hertel and Michael Kivak, eds., *Early Encounters Between East Asia and Europe: Telling Failures* (Abingdon/New York: Routledge, 2017).

thinking about ‘Global Microhistory’ is important.¹² In this renascent subfield, two strands have appeared: one exploring the global lives of individuals, and another exploring concentrations of global connections in specific places.¹³ Ultimately, such approaches seem to feed on Giddensian structuration theory, and that is in itself an auspicious proposition. Here, the global is ‘a function of system integration or interaction between individuals away from each other in time or space or both’, and thus ‘it is the global that reappears inside the local in the form of distant influences impinging on personal lives and daily activities’.¹⁴

We should make sure that we aim for more than just a peppering of global history with micro-stories, or the exploration of particular individuals and places traversed by a high concentration of global forces. Those narratives are at their most valuable where they engage with the more disconcerting challenges of the ‘glocal’ turn, and the often unstraightforward interactions between the global and the local. The term ‘glocal’ may be awkward and imperfect, but as early modernists we face more than just the duty of keeping an eye on the global when talking about the local, or remembering the local when exploring the global. We need to think about genuinely complex explanations of the past where the local *makes* the global, and vice versa. And where the global *challenges* the local, and vice versa, without linearity. Localization theory as proposed by O. W. Wolters—emphasizing the way societies engage proactively with the foreign and integrate it into their own power structures—shall spring up repeatedly over the following chapters because it offers such a valuable departure from more static, often unidirectional models.¹⁵ It helps explain how overarching, transcontinental forces might be digested into local power structures, but also offers glimpses into how local processes feed into the making of global power structures—and so on, in a pendular movement that ends up transforming everything, from the most remote Sri Lankan town to the global empire, in intensely, but never straightforwardly interconnected ways. Connections as such are, in other words, both large and small in scale; they allow the local to inhabit the global and vice versa; they offer opportunities for the local to produce the global and vice versa; and they will typically do all this whilst facing considerable obstacles, both structural and conjunctural, which call to be studied in depth.

Historians of Iberian expansion in Asia are in a privileged position to make suggestions in this regard. Sanjay Subrahmanyam’s formulation of the connected

¹² Francesca Trivellato, ‘Is There a Future for Italian Microhistory in the Age of Global History?’, *California Italian Studies*, 2, 1 (2011), online publication.

¹³ See Brodie Waddell, ‘What is microhistory now?’, Blogpost at *Many-headed-monster* (June 2017). <https://manyheadedmonster.wordpress.com/2017/06/20/what-is-microhistory-now/> (last accessed 5 November 2017). Waddell cites as examples for the ‘global lives’ approach John-Paul Ghobrial’s ‘The Secret Life of Elias of Babylon and the Uses of Global Microhistory’, *Past and Present*, 222, 1 (2014), pp. 51–93, and for the ‘global places’ approach Benjamin Kaplan’s *Cunegonde’s Kidnapping: A Story of Religious Conflict in the Age of Enlightenment* (New Haven, CT/London: Yale University Press, 2014), along with the current unpublished work of Maxine Berg on British Columbia.

¹⁴ Jean-Sébastien Guy, ‘What is Global and What is Local? A Theoretical Discussion Around Globalization’, *Parsons Journal for Information Mapping*, 1, 2 (2009), pp. 1–2.

¹⁵ O. W. Wolters, *History, culture, and region in Southeast Asian perspectives*, 2nd revised edition (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).

histories method emerged in the 1990s precisely out of his engagement with the then burgeoning historiography of the Portuguese empire in Asia. Acknowledging the importance of Iberian-based transcontinental connections, sticking to solid archival methodologies, and questioning the pertinence of a binary division between Europe and Asia at the same time, had been at the core of a lively historiographical school initiated in the 1970s by the French historians Jean Aubin and Denys Lombard, developed in the 1980s by their disciple Luís Filipe Thomaz and other Portuguese scholars, and finally digested for the Anglophone public in the 1990s by Subrahmanyam.¹⁶ For the followers of the so-called ‘Luso-Asianist’ approach, the *Estado da Índia*, the political formation built by the Portuguese in the East along with numerous other, unofficial forms of mercantile, missionary and military presence, functioned as an intricate hub of connections messing rather thoroughly with traditional notions of scale and with the customary metageography of continents. It was both tiny (being based in seaports) and vast (establishing navigational links between India and Europe). It was both insignificant when compared to the great landbound empires of the time, and yet highly influential, when connected with its surroundings, as suggested by the deep transformations that societies in and around those contact nodes underwent. Rather than seeing the *Estado* as a European polity in Asia, historians began to understand how it functioned as an Asian polity in its own right or, more pointedly, a polity participating in the emerging realities of an early modern Maritime Asia intertwined with Maritime Europe, gradually forming something that was novel to all sides involved.¹⁷

‘CONNECTED HISTORY’ AND THE PROBLEM OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

To understand this transcontinental, in-between space where the established metageography of ‘Asia’ versus ‘Europe’ can begin to dissolve without glossing over other boundaries that did in fact exist, the study of communications was and is key. There are, to begin with, materialities to be understood that conditioned the way information and ideas moved across the world or not—perhaps a daunting perspective, but not an uninteresting one if we think of a ‘material turn’ that grounds power in materiality, and vice versa.¹⁸ Words might be written on goldleaf

¹⁶ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Portuguese Empire in Asia 1500–1700. A Political and Economic History* (London: Longman, 1993).

¹⁷ See especially the journal *Mare Luso-Indicum* (École Pratique des Hautes Études/Librairie Droz) published under the direction of Aubin and Geneviève Bouchin, with the occasional participation of M. N. Pearson, in the 1970s, and its successor *Moyen-Orient et Océan Indien, XVIe–XIXe siècles* (Société d’histoire de l’Orient/L’Harmattan) since 1984. The journals *Mare Liberum* (CNCDP, Lisbon) and *Anais de História de Além-Mar* (CHAM, Lisbon) have carried on some of the legacy, though gradually retreating into less transnational terrain. One of the most accessible anthologies of the Luso-Asianist scholarship remains the collection of articles in Sanjay Subrahmanyam, ed., *Sinners and Saints. The Successors of Vasco da Gama* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995).

¹⁸ See Tony Bennett and Patrick Joyce, ‘Material powers: Introduction’, in *Material Powers: Cultural Studies, History and the Material Turn*, edited by Tony Bennett and Patrick Joyce (London/New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 1–22.

or paper, passed through palace doors or the gates of a fort, carried along jungle paths or kept in ship cabins by soldiers, traders or priests, whispered in the middle of the night, lost in a shipwreck, or proclaimed with pomp to large audiences. For the present study, these aspects are more important than the economic backdrop against which communications occurred. I have not found a clear enough link between the political developments covered in this book and fluctuations of prices or trade patterns to pursue an integrated political-economic approach. My attempts at thinking about the shift to conquest in relation to the cost of procuring cinnamon, for example, were dispiriting. I have, in contrast, found abundant signs that communication methods and—to borrow an expression put to good use by John-Paul Ghobrial—‘information flows’ played a key role.¹⁹

Naturally, the most fascinating aspect to emerge from these materials is not just how, after 1500, people from Portugal were suddenly able to travel a long distance around the Cape. It is the way Portuguese and Lankan men and women could, for the first time in history, see each other in flesh and blood, hear each other’s voices, exchange gifts and goods, fight or convene to engage in increasingly complex negotiations, with increasingly wide-ranging implications. The challenge then becomes to explore the mechanisms by which people established meaningful connections and kept them alive or not, often against significant linguistic, social, and political odds, on grounds of imperfect acts of communication—so much so that the present enquiry into the history of early imperial connections can be read as a communications-based history of political change.

How were people at the beginning of the early modern period to communicate if they barely understood each other’s language? Is it not the case that, as a historian of Portuguese literature once put it, the expansion into a world full of ‘unknown’ languages must have generated countless ‘zones of communicational silence’?²⁰ Portuguese and Sri Lankan political discourses became connectable, I will argue, because the historical actors involved developed an interest in treating them as connectable and maintaining a meaningful interaction even when they knew that it might not be perfect. People keep communicating even in a world full of flawed translations because, as Sidney Mintz forthrightly put it, meanings arise ‘out of use, as people use substances in social relationships’.²¹ As every linguist knows, communication is about more than just the unambiguous rendering of verbally presented contents. It generates mutual understandings and misunderstandings through the performance of communicational and speech acts, often

¹⁹ Which is not to say that a revisiting of the enormously important work of Portugal’s greatest economic historian, Vitorino Magalhães Godinho, would not be desirable. I have, for example, come across a fair amount of documents that could be used to correct established chronologies of the cinnamon price evolution, although the panorama remains patchy. Cf. *Os Descobrimentos e a Economia Mundial. 2a edição correcta e ampliada*, 4 vols. (Lisbon: Presença, 1981–3). On the notion of ‘information flow’, see John-Paul Ghobrial, *The Whispers of Cities. Information Flows in Istanbul, London, and Paris in the Age of William Trumbull* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. vii–viii.

²⁰ Maria Leonor Carvalhão Buescu, *O estudo das línguas exóticas no século XVI* (Lisbon: Instituto de Cultura e Língua Portuguesa, 1983), pp. 21–5.

²¹ Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Viking Press, 1985), p. 17.

across considerable semiotic gaps. Fortunately, early modernists are today inclined to consider communicational processes in the larger sense of the word—that is, including the acts surrounding the utterance of words and writing of texts—as key historical factors, namely in the formation of the state.²² Some of the most stimulating scholarship produced in recent years pertains to what has been designated in France and Germany as the ‘cultural history of the political’ (*histoire culturelle du politique/Kulturgeschichte des Politischen*).²³ Communication, representation, and performance constitute vital links in this thriving new historiography between individual and group agency on the one hand and the creation of new power symbols and structures on the other. The symbolic communication that powered (perhaps excessively) Geertz’s ‘Theatre State’ has been brought to early modern Europe, and is changing the nature of the game.²⁴

Ironically, of course, much of this scholarship remains primarily preoccupied with the formation of European states,²⁵ but it is beginning to open doors to an integrated study of European, African, and Asian power structures in the early modern period. Cultural historians of the political have decided to embrace an ample and open concept not only of communication, but also of culture.²⁶ European early modernists remained long fixated on the role played by political philosophy and the rise of new institutions in the making of the state. South Asianists, in their turn, long cultivated a comparable obsession with the political role of religion. In both cases, the focus on a single aspect not only obscured the rest of the picture, it also hindered historiographical connections between the continents. To adopt a transversal approach centred on the study of communication, translation, and representation appears as a refreshingly simple way forward to de-reify and decompartmentalize continental histories, whilst still maintaining the possibility of disruption. It is, as Nicholas Dirks once put it, a matter of concentrating on the ‘cultural construction of power’, whichever part of the world and whichever aspect of culture we are looking at, and even if more than one culture is involved.²⁷

²² See for example Ronald Asch and Dagmar Freist, eds., *Staatsbildung als kultureller Prozess. Strukturwandel und Legitimation von Herrschaft in der Frühen Neuzeit* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2005).

²³ Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, ed., *Was heißt Kulturgeschichte des Politischen?* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2005).

²⁴ Clifford Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980). Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, ‘Rituals of Decision Making? Early Modern European Assemblies of Estates as Acts of Symbolic Communication’, in *Political Order and the Forms of Communication in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, edited by Yoshihisa Hattori (Rome: La Viella, 2014), pp. 63–95.

²⁵ See Birgit Emich, ‘Frühneuzeitliche Staatsbildung und politische Kultur. Für die Veralltäglichung eines Konzepts’, *Zeitschrift für historische Forschung*, 35 (2005), pp. 191–205.

²⁶ Which is not to say that this comes without further risks. As Anne Kane put it, ‘while it is now widely accepted that culture [...] is as constitutive of social structure, social order, and social change as material and institutional forces, and causally significant in historical events, transformations, and processes, the problem of how to access and deploy the explanatory power of culture in historical accounts remains vexing’. ‘Reconstructing Culture in Historical Explanation: Narratives as Cultural Structure and Practice’, *History and Theory*, 39, 3 (Oct. 2000), p. 311.

²⁷ Nicholas B. Dirks, *The Hollow Crown. Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 5.

Early modern global interactions, especially those of the sixteenth century, are best understood as open-ended communicational processes involving multiple, dynamically evolving groups and polities, rather than clearly delimited entities pertaining to the domain of ‘us’ encountering ‘them’, or ‘them’ reacting to ‘us’. Change occurs historically as agency itself takes successive different forms and goes through variations of scale. Communication and imperial expansion can and have been theorized as structures rather than events—integral building blocks, that is, of the unfolding project of western hegemony—but the approach I favour especially for the period before 1600 is less clear-cut.²⁸ It aspires to a dissection of early imperial interactions as processes shaped by cross-cultural, performance-laden dialogues unfolding in a world marked by quickly evolving capabilities for translation, shifting borders, and power relations. ‘Evolving’, to be sure, is not to be read as signalling linear development, let alone a linear movement towards modernity. Quite the contrary.

FROM ‘COMMERCE’ TO ‘CONQUEST’? TACKLING THE GHOST OF PHASEOLOGY

A focus on the *shifting* dynamics of interaction and communication is fundamental in our field. Observing the unfolding of asymmetric power relations between ‘discoverers’ and ‘discovered’ has been a preoccupation among historians for some time. Much has been written about transitions from ‘contact’ to ‘annihilation’ (Peter Mancall) or to ‘removal’ (James Merrell), about the successive stages of ‘alliance, conquest, and conversion’ (Steve J. Stern) or, in one of the most remarkable pieces of New World revisionism, on the possibility that ‘domination’ may have preceded—and indeed done well without—‘dominance’ (Gonzalo Lamana).²⁹ Analogous ideas have been around for Asia, where the differences between early and high colonial interactions are even more manifest than in the Americas, for many years. In contrast to the advocates of the ‘Vasco da Gama epoch’ approach, who in the post-independence years embraced the notion that the Portuguese explorer single-handedly disrupted the natural flow of Asian history,³⁰ historians including Holden Furber, Michael N. Pearson, Blair King or Anthony Reid began

²⁸ Cf. Patrick Wolfe, ‘Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native’, *Journal of Genocide Research*, 8, 4 (2006), pp. 387–409.

²⁹ James H. Merrell, *The Indians’ New World. Catawbas and their Neighbors from European Contact through the Era of Removal* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1989). Steve J. Stern, ‘Paradigms of Conquest: History, Historiography, and Politics’, *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 24 (1992), pp. 1–34. Gonzalo Lamana, *Domination without Dominance: Inca-Spanish Encounters in Early Colonial Peru* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

³⁰ See K. M. Panikkar, *Asia and Western Dominance. A Survey of the Vasco da Gama Epoch of Asian History, 1498–1945* (London: Alan & Unwin, 1953). The expression resurfaces repeatedly, as in A. J. R. Russell-Wood, *A World on the Move. The Portuguese in Africa, Asia, and America, 1415–1800* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), p. 6, or Coral Bell, *The End of the Vasco da Gama Era. The Next Landscape in World Politics* (Sydney: Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2007).

from the late 1960s to talk about a prolonged age of ‘partnership’ or ‘commerce’ leading up to the better-known period of ‘dominion’ (Pearson).³¹

Such approaches have been extremely valuable and important. They do involve, however, the risk of reinforcing linear interpretations of the past. A rigid handling of the notion of process may here end up implying inevitable progressions from ‘commerce to conquest’, logically entailing a degradation of relations from consensus to confrontation.³² Such theories are problematic: first, because conquest sometimes preceded commerce, and much of the time war and trade were inextricably intertwined affairs anyway;³³ and second, because the phases into which global interactions have been sliced up are often still grounded in the temporality of European expansion.³⁴ The lack of integration between the history of what is presumed to be the expanding party, and that of the receiving side, reveals a doggedly entrenched overestimation of the push versus the pull factors. If one considers the very different receptions of the Portuguese in two such proximate places as Calicut and Cochin, within the same few months in 1498, the picture simply does not square with the phases so nonchalantly thrown around by historians. Different Asian elites had different interests and approaches. One struggles to see any valid alternative to observing *both* sides as equivalent, fully proactive agents of encounter, at least in order to understand how things got going. Romain Bertrand has branded this approach as an ‘*histoire à parts égales*’ (nodding, with a critical twist, to Lucien Febvre’s *histoire à part entière*), a history where all sides involved are given equal standing per principle, regardless of the outcomes that hindsight tells us about.³⁵ In general, such stories involve complicated combinations of continuity and change, rather than clear-cut progressions from one stage of interaction to the next. Early modern interactions involve confusing fluctuations, intertwinements, bifurcations, and inversions. As we shall see, there were misunderstandings even as communications grew, and signs of mutual understanding even as dialogues collapsed.

³¹ Holden Furber, ‘Asia and the West as Partners before “Empire” and After’, *Journal of Asian Studies*, 28, 4 (1969), pp. 711–21; Blair L. King and M. N. Pearson, *The Age of Partnership: Europeans in Asia before Dominion* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1979); Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450–1680* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988).

³² See Mark T. Berger’s portentous review article ‘From Commerce to Conquest: The Dynamics of British Mercantile Imperialism in Eighteenth-Century Bengal, and the Foundation of the British Indian Empire’, *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, 22, 1 (1990), pp. 44–62, which does, despite the title, pay attention to the inextricable intertwining of commercial and political dynamics or, as the author puts it, to the existence of ‘a number of complementary impulses’ (p. 60).

³³ See, most pertinently, the analysis of this intertwinement in overseas politics under Manuel I by Luís Filipe F. R. Thomaz, ‘Factions, interests and messianism: The politics of Portuguese expansion in the East, 1500–1521’, *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 28, 1 (1991), pp. 97–109. A preoccupation with this complexity may well have prompted Charles Boxer to invert the order of ‘commerce and conquest’ in the title one of his later books: *Portuguese Conquest and Commerce in Southern Asia, 1500–1750* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1985).

³⁴ Raymond F. Betts, *Europe Overseas: Phases of Imperialism* (New York: Basic Books, 1968). Perhaps a good alternative to ‘phases’ is indeed ‘faces’, as in Phillip Darby, *The Three Faces of Imperialism: British and American Approaches to Asia and Africa, 1870–1970* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987).

³⁵ Romain Bertrand, *L’histoire à parts égales. Récits d’une rencontre, Orient-Occident (XVIe–XVIIe siècle)* (Paris: Seuil, 2011). Lucien Febvre, *Pour une histoire à part entière* (Paris: SEVPEN, 1962).

THE Pervasiveness of Violence:
Revisiting the ‘Age of Partnership’

Any approach to inter-cultural communication and connected histories will inevitably run into the challenge of redistributing agency without downplaying the brutal realities of encounter. The subtext in the Age of Partnership theory has often been that, prior to the arrival of the Europeans, the Asian seas were a neutral space, a quiet home to peaceful cosmopolitan trade. This amounts to a watered-down version of Polanyi’s and Revere’s old theory of protected and unmilitarized commercial spaces on the fringes of great land-bound empires.³⁶ Against such a backdrop, partnership during the early modern period often appears as a survival of older practices *despite* the European intrusion, while breakdowns then result *from* it. This is only useful inasmuch as it allows for a due recognition of the resilience of Asian societies. There is indeed no way around the fact that in the sixteenth century it was often the Portuguese who felt ‘discovered’ by their Asian counterparts, compelled to occupy unstable positions in diplomacy, warfare, and trade despite all the glorious fuss of the chronicles, usually written decades later.³⁷ One could thus argue that during the early colonial period the older logics of Asian political and commercial culture prevailed over the gradually emerging forces of the new European system, and were *then* steadily eroded.

However, it is also becoming increasingly clear that what characterizes the system in Maritime Asia before 1500 is not so much a staunch commitment to peaceful transnational commerce, but some of that—especially at the symbolic level—along with a deeply rooted, pervasive culture of violence commensurable to that of other parts of the world. It may be time to take a critical distance from such theories as that, for example, of Sheldon Pollock about the fundamental contrasts between ‘Indic’ and ‘Latin’ empire building. For Pollock, the so-called Sanskrit cosmopolis expanded peacefully through conviction, as opposed to the Roman empire, which grew through conquest—in a contrast that, for the author, remained meaningful even centuries after the demise of Rome.³⁸ Clearly, the essentializing impulse carrying the entire comparison calls to be revisited. Already it is clear that, as Alan Strathern has pointed out most recently, precisely on the fringes of the Sanskrit cosmopolis the beautiful and the sacred, from which this particular formation is supposed to have drawn its strength, appears thoroughly ‘plunged into the dirty work of political competition and group struggle in a way that is all

³⁶ Robert Revere, “No Man’s Coast”: Ports of Trade in the Eastern Mediterranean’, *Trade and Market in Early Empires*, edited by Karl Polanyi (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1957), pp. 38–63.

³⁷ Jorge M. Flores, “They have discovered us”. The Portuguese and the Trading World of the Indian Ocean’, in *Encompassing the Globe. Portugal and the World in the 16th and 17th centuries*, edited by Jay Levenson (Washington, DC: Freer and Sackler Gallery, 2007), vol. II, pp. 185–93.

³⁸ Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009), pp. 163–88. For a recent romanticized vision of the pre-Portuguese Indian Ocean, see Akhil Gupta, ‘Globalization and Difference: Cosmopolitanism before the Nation-State’, *Transforming Cultures e-Journal*, 3, 2 (2008).

too familiar from other parts of the world'.³⁹ The closer one looks, the more one doubts whether a peaceful pre-European Indian Ocean is anything else than the projection of a twentieth-century dream.

Whilst the Portuguese as newcomers to the region certainly brought with them new military tactics and technologies (not gunpowder itself, but canons mounted on high board ships, for example), the militarization of the ocean and its ports was no novelty. A system of navigational permits imposed by force had been in place in the Red Sea centuries before it was adopted by the Portuguese.⁴⁰ Instances of militarization in the waters around India, Persia and Arabia were, as highlighted by Sebastian Prange, numerous.⁴¹ Violence was commonplace on the land and on the sea, explaining the fast adaptation of Muslim commercial warlords to Portuguese tactics, soon matched by the Portuguese apprenticeship of South Asian methods.⁴²

That the harsh realities thus emerging mirror the systemic violence described by historians of late medieval Iberia amounts to a significant historiographical convergence.⁴³ In both instances, the recognition of the pervasiveness of violence corrects earlier romantic ideas about the tolerational nature of medieval spaces—namely Iberia before the Inquisition and the Indic before the Portuguese—whilst also limiting the scope for a simplistic denunciatory stance. To recognize a certain permanence of conflict helps us, perhaps better than anything else, integrate early European activities into Asian history. It opens the door to a world of communications built around the possibility of politically and socially meaningful, mutually understandable violence. In fact, this is why the notion of 'contained conflict', thrown into the debate by Subrahmanyam almost three decades ago, is so appealing.⁴⁴ It comes as a recognition that there was a pressing propensity on all sides involved in the early modern encounter to constantly measure forces, to extort concessions and thus make the markets, as well as political and social structures, work. Force was seen as a virtue across the board. It is precisely its pervasiveness and legitimacy that allowed it to remain contained. Only gradually—and this can of course be read as the more significant part of the story—did one side come up with a *kind* of violence leaving no space for compromise, dislodging commensurable

³⁹ Alan Strathern, 'The digestion of the foreign in Lankan history, c. 500–1818, in *Sri Lanka at the Crossroads of History*', edited by Zoltán Biedermann and Alan Strathern (London: UCL Press, 2017), p. 225.

⁴⁰ Luís Filipe F. R. Thomaz, 'Precedents and Parallels of the Portuguese *Cartaz* System', in *The Portuguese, Indian Ocean, and European Bridgeheads, 1500–1800: Festschrift in Honour of Professor K. S. Mathew*, edited by Pius Malekandathil and Jamal Mohammed (Tellicherry: IRSSH, 2001), pp. 67–85.

⁴¹ Sebastian R. Prange, 'A Trade of No Dishonor: Piracy, Commerce, and Community in the Western Indian Ocean, Twelfth to Sixteenth Century', *American Historical Review*, 116, 5 (2011), pp. 1269–93.

⁴² On adaptations in terms of naval technology, see Vítor Rodrigues, 'A evolução da arte da Guerra dos Portugueses no Oriente (1498–1622)' (PhD dissertation, Instituto de Investigação Científica Tropical, Lisbon, 1998). On 'apprenticeship' see Jean Aubin, 'L'apprentissage de l'Inde. Cochin, 1503–1504', *Moyen-Orient et Océan Indien, XVIe–XIXe siècles*, 4 (1987), pp. 1–96.

⁴³ David Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

⁴⁴ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Political Economy of Commerce: Southern India, 1500–1650* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), especially pp. 252–4.

power practices and upsetting the relative balance of forces. To recognize the pervasiveness of violence does not entail minimizing the impact of European activities, it simply introduces an important nuance.

As we shall see, in 1506 there was not even a moment of hesitation on the South Asian side to co-opt the Portuguese as military allies and mercenaries for local warfare, that is, to harness their violent potential. If the Portuguese had such a success in Sri Lanka and South India as power brokers during the sixteenth century, it was above all due to, and not in spite of, the political and social frameworks in which they came to act. Societies were prepared for considerable levels of physical violence to be exerted regularly by exogenous as well as indigenous agents. It is within a larger transcultural system pervaded by political and social uses of violence—often expressed of course, as we shall see, through a language emphasizing the ultimately harmonious goals of the measuring of forces—that the dialogue between Portuguese and Sri Lankans can be found to be most firmly anchored. But dialogue about what?

EMPIRES AS NETWORKS: THE PROBLEM OF MAPPING IMPERIAL SPACE

Empires and the imperial have been the focus of much attention over the past decades, but there is still remarkable uncertainty surrounding those words. If communications evolved unstraightforwardly and violence was a crucial, transversal factor underlying the early imperial encounter, it is equally important to emphasize the obvious, namely that none of this was practised by state actors in the modern sense of the word. The autonomous state with its increasingly efficacious attempts at monopolizing violence and creating coherent, mutually exclusive spaces of sovereignty interconnected by formal diplomatic channels was just about starting to appear on the horizon. Whether we speak of empires, kingdoms or other political formations for this period, one thing that the historiography of the last four decades has made visible is the fragility and fragmentedness of such bodies politic.

The recognition of the fragility of polities traditionally seen as precursors of modern nation states has been at the heart of key scholarly transformations in South Asia *and* Iberia. We are now in a position to connect the histories and the historiographies of the two regions. Historians of Portugal have, since the 1980s, radically questioned the monolithic nature of the late medieval and early modern state. This revisionism, especially in António Hespanha's *The Vespers of Leviathan* from 1987 (a work widely read by students of history in southern Europe, but ignored elsewhere), has come as a vigorous reaction to a longstanding tradition of considering medieval Portugal as a precocious absolutist state.⁴⁵ And whilst

⁴⁵ António Manuel Hespanha, *As Vésperas do Leviathan. Instituições e poder político, Portugal—séc. XVII* (Coimbra: Livraria Almedina, 1994). See also the echoes of this stance across the reference multi-volume History of Portugal, José Mattoso, ed., *História de Portugal*, 8 vols. (Lisbon: Círculo de Leitores, 1993–4).

Hespanha's attempts at foraging into imperial history have remained less convincing, the relevance of his findings for imperial history is undeniable.⁴⁶

How should a kingdom with such a fragile institutional backbone as Portugal have been able to build a solid, well-structured empire overseas? It is in the work of Luís Filipe Thomaz that this doubt comes most compellingly explored. Portuguese expansion, Thomaz has argued (perhaps at times excessively, but certainly driving home a key point), was deeply conditioned by internal factional divisions, especially between a 'commercialist' and a 'militarist' party at court. The rivalries played out globally, not just within the empire but also beyond its borders, through diplomatic and commercial rivalries reaching deep into Asian societies where Portuguese agents were active. This historiographical development resonates well with the emergence, especially in Cambridge, of studies into British imperial history exploring the fragilities of the body politic, and the empire's reliance on local collaborations. The Luso-Asianist approach has also delivered the most influential definition of Portugal's empire in Asia, re-branding it as a network, rather than a coherent imperial space.⁴⁷ Even critics of Thomaz agree that the old, nationalistic notion of a highly centralized empire cannot be revived.⁴⁸ Only recently have historians of the Spanish empire begun to follow an analogous, albeit more timid experiment, by exploring the notion of a 'polycentric monarchy'.⁴⁹

The network paradigm deserves highlighting here in connection with changes in South Asian historiography.⁵⁰ Networks may be conveniently defined for our purpose, following the Indianist Monica L. Smith, as 'structures of interaction that include component parts linked not only to a single central point, but also to each other'. In a network, Smith adds, 'nodes and connectors are dependent upon each other, with a large potential number of combinations that enable those links to be sustained in a robust but flexible manner'.⁵¹ Smith, perhaps the scholar who has most vigorously questioned the established notion of empire in pre-modern India, has suggested that we regard polities such as that of the Maurya as complex

⁴⁶ See António Manuel Hespanha and Catarina Madeira Santos, 'Os Poderes num Império Oceânico', in *História de Portugal*, edited by José Mattoso, vol. 4, pp. 395–413. Shortly after, an important multi-volume reference work was published: Francisco Bethencourt and Kirti Chaudhuri, eds., *História da Expansão Portuguesa*, 5 vols. (Lisbon: Círculo de Leitores, 1998).

⁴⁷ Luís Filipe F. R. Thomaz, *De Ceuta a Timor*, 2nd ed. (Lisbon: Difel, 1994), p. 210. This must be seen in connection with the second volume, titled *Les réseaux asiatiques* ('The Asian networks'), of Denys Lombard, *Le carrefour javanais. Essai d'histoire globale* (Paris: Éditions de l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 1990). Also see Anthony Disney, 'What was the Estado da Índia? Four Contrasting Images', *Indica*, 38, 1–2 (2001), pp. 161–8.

⁴⁸ Francisco Bethencourt thus proposes the image of a 'nebula of power' in 'Political configurations and local powers', in *Portuguese Oceanic Expansion, 1400–1800*, edited by Francisco Bethencourt and Diogo Ramada Curto (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 199 and 221. Again, *nébuleuse* is a concept that appears developed, albeit with a slightly different meaning, in Lombard, *Le Carrefour javanais*.

⁴⁹ Pedro Cardim, Tamar Herzog, José Javier Ruiz Ibáñez and Gaetano Sabatini, eds., *Polycentric Monarchies. How Did Early Modern Spain and Portugal Achieve and Maintain a Global Hegemony?* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2012).

⁵⁰ See Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'State Formation and Transformation in Early Modern India and Southeast Asia', *Itinerario*, 12, 1 (1988), pp. 91–109.

⁵¹ Monica L. Smith, 'Networks, Territories, and the Cartography of Ancient States', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 95, 4 (2005), p. 838.

combinations of territories, corridors and networks, with a strong emphasis on the latter two components connecting imperial nodes across vast expanses of administratively empty space.⁵² This is not to say that these polities were not ‘proper’ empires, but rather to enrich our understanding of pre-modern empires as polities built upon their own spatial, cultural, and communicational logics.

The challenge is in significant measure to think about imperial space as something different from territory. Whilst historians have learned to appreciate empires as a counterweight to the nation state, there is still some hesitation in accepting that imperial space is not just a larger or more complex variety of national space. The lack of distinction distorts our perception of early global encounters. As pointed out three decades ago by Eric Wolf, ‘the habit of treating named entities such as Iroquois, Greece, Persia or the United States as fixed entities opposed to one another by stable internal and external boundaries interferes with our ability to understand their mutual encounter and confrontation’.⁵³ Most history books still come with maps to help situate the events they describe but, at the same time, also create a fundamental misunderstanding regarding the polities they portray.⁵⁴ Maps as we have come to use them tend to suggest the existence of territories in a sense borrowed from the modern nation state. Other constellations such as the hierarchically ordered, dynamically interacting networks of pulsating political centres, as we shall see them unfold in sixteenth-century Sri Lanka, are simply very difficult to describe cartographically. Because maps maintain the fiction of representing the spatial configurations of the world as it is, the territories they outline on paper then become powerful, quasi-natural entities to which historical polities seem to conform logically.⁵⁵ This is, intriguingly, not only a modern problem. Islands and peninsulas, of course, have for long served as the ultimate deceit offering the illusion of ‘given’ territories: they appear to have been drawn by nature itself. The idea that their outline somehow predisposes societies to fill them with a single polity has proven enormously influential both in Sri Lanka and in the Iberian Peninsula.⁵⁶ To overcome this problem and re-map what, with Lauren Benton, we could call the ‘imperfect geographies’ of the early modern imperial terrain, we need to un-map it first.⁵⁷

Above all, we need to face the simple fact that the space in which interactions developed was *itself* unfolding as a meaningful setting during the period under

⁵² Monica L. Smith, ‘Territories, Corridors, and Networks: A Biological Model for the Premodern State’, *Complexity*, 12, 4 (2005), pp. 28–35.

⁵³ Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982), p. 7.

⁵⁴ This is indeed often the case for Sri Lanka, e.g. in Malyn Newitt, *A History of Portuguese Expansion, 1400–1668* (London/New York: Routledge, 2005).

⁵⁵ On the obsession of historians with the construction of national spaces, cf. John H. Elliott, ‘A Europe of Composite Monarchies’, in *Past and Present*, 137 (Nov. 1992), p. 50.

⁵⁶ On the role played by islands in the making of the European imagination of the Atlantic, see John R. Gillis, *Islands of the Mind: How the Human Imagination Created the Atlantic World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004). Also see Juan Gil, ‘As Ilhas Imaginárias’, *Oceanos*, 46 (Abril/Junho 2001), pp. 11–24.

⁵⁷ Lauren Benton, *A Search for Sovereignty. Law and Geography in European Empires, 1400–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 4.

scrutiny. To study ‘the Portuguese presence in Ceylon’, we must first consider what ‘Ceylon’ and ‘presence in’ ought to signify. As Jean-Claude Waquet, Odile Goerg and Rebecca Rogers have put it, space in the historical narrative calls to be understood not as a pre-existing condition ‘upstream’ to history (*‘en amont’*) but rather as something that results from it ‘downstream’ (*‘en aval’*).⁵⁸ We need to venture into this study without assuming that Sri Lanka as a whole, or even the kingdom of Kōtṭe as a part of it, meant anything at all to the Portuguese in 1506. We will have to listen to the words used at the time and infer the mental images hiding behind them to allow the picture to grow gradually, long before we even start creating our own, new maps.⁵⁹ This can only be done by exploring the complex cumulative effects of a myriad representational (and, as outlined above, communicational) acts. In the process, Lankan ideas about the insular space will necessarily be key.

EMPIRES AS HIERARCHICAL BODIES: LAYERED SOVEREIGNTIES IN A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

What was it, then, that populated the mental maps of Lankan and Portuguese men and women interacting in the sixteenth century? If one of the aims of this book is to trace the history of the often subtle and transient images that communicating historical agents operated with at the intersection between two larger, porous and pulsating imperial spheres, then what building blocks can we expect to have been deployed in the first place? It seems important not to replace one methodological monster (the exposure of past polities to an anachronistic concept of territoriality) by another (a simplistic reduction of everything pre-modern to ‘nodes’, ‘edges’ and other concepts borrowed from network theory). The networks at play in the sixteenth century were traversed by very complex understandings of political hierarchy, power projection, scale, and political space. Even some embryonic form of modern territoriality was involved. But the crucial aspect is that everything was much less structured in space than has traditionally been assumed.

Perhaps the best way to come to grips with this is by beginning at the lower end of the scale, and approaching it through the so-called ‘little kingdom’ theory. As a scholarly concept, the little kingdom stems from the work of Bernard Cohn on North India.⁶⁰ It has been developed by Nicholas Dirks (on Tamil Nadu), Georg

⁵⁸ Jean-Claude Waquet, Odile Goerg and Rebecca Rogers, ‘Introduction’, in *Les espaces de l'historien. Études d'historiographie* (Strasbourg: Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg, 2000), p. 11. On the wider logics of the ‘spatial turn’ see Jürgen Osterhammel, ‘Die Wiederkehr des Raumes. Geopolitik, Geohistorie und historische Geographie’, *Neue Politische Literatur*, 43 (1998), pp. 374–97.

⁵⁹ On the importance and polyvalence of images cf. Sigrid Weigel, ‘Bilder als Hauptakteure auf dem Schauplatz der Erkenntnis. Zur poiesis und episteme sprachlicher und visueller Bilder’ in *Ästhetik Erfahrung*, edited by Jörg Huber (Zurich/Vienna/New York: Institut für Theorie der Gestaltung und Kunst/Voldemeer/Springer, 2004), pp. 191–212.

⁶⁰ See Georg Berkemer and Margret Frenz, ‘Little Kingdoms or Princely States? Trajectories towards a (theoretical) conception’, *Indian Historical Review*, 32, 2 (2005), pp. 104–21. The history of the concept is drafted in Bernhard Schnepel and Georg Berkemer, ‘History of the Model’, in *Sharing Sovereignty. The Little Kingdom in South Asia*, edited by G. Berkemer and Margret Frenz (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 2003), pp. 11–20.

Berkemer (on the multi-polity frameworks of medieval and early modern Kalinga) and Margret Frenz (on eighteenth-century Kerala), among others.⁶¹ At the most basic level, a little kingdom is a small polity, often geographically marginal, near the bottom of a hierarchy descending from the imperial to the local.⁶² What makes the concept most interesting for imperial historians is the fact that little kingdoms function as the units of a wider system based on a non-linear relationship between kingship and territory, allowing for flexible personal interactions between rulers in hierarchically complex, multi-polity networks. Whether the notion of a 'segmentary state', borrowed by Burton Stein from Africanists, describes such realities well, is far from clear.⁶³ A less polemic, more straightforward designation has taken hold among scholars of Sri Lanka, who now talk of 'tributary overlordship'.⁶⁴ Such systems contain a multitude of political centres, one of them tends to constitute their ritual apex at any given moment, and the others tend to be subject to it through forms of periodically renewed ritual submission. The rulers of the kingdoms set around the core of the system 'exercise actual sovereignty over their respective segments, while remaining ritually aligned to and dependent on an overlord.'⁶⁵ Crucially as well, the mechanism that allowed for the articulation between overlord and vassal could be replicated at more than one level and in various, often complicated combinations.⁶⁶

In a virulent attack on the concept of 'little kingdom', the German Indianist Rahul Peter Das has argued that all such theorizing is pointless given the impossibility of giving an unambiguous translation of the word *rāja* itself. As a philologist, Das sees it best rendered by *rex* or *ruler*, rather than *king*. This, in his opinion, exposes the entire theory as untenable.⁶⁷ There is, to be sure, no doubt that translating any word constitutes a challenge, and that fully translating words referring to

⁶¹ Bernard S. Cohn, 'Political Systems in Eighteenth-Century India: The Banaras Region', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 82, 3 (1962), pp. 312–20; Nicholas Dirks, 'The Structure and Meaning of Political Relations in a South Indian Little Kingdom', *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 13 (1979), pp. 169–206; Georg Berkemer, *Little Kingdoms in Kalinga. Ideologie, Legitimation und Politik regionaler Eliten* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1993); Margret Frenz, *Vom Herrscher zum Untertan. Spannungsverhältnis zwischen lokaler Herrschaftsstruktur und der Kolonialverwaltung zu Beginn der Britischen Herrschaft, 1790–1805* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2000).

⁶² Barbara N. Ramusack, *The Indian Princes and their States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 5. Nicholas B. Dirks designates it as the 'lowest level of the late precolonial state'. *The Hollow Crown*, p. 5.

⁶³ See David Arnold, 'Introduction to Burton Stein's *History of India*', in Burton Stein, *A History of India*, 2nd edition, revised and edited by David Arnold (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. xviii–xx.

⁶⁴ Michael Roberts, 'The Collective Consciousness of the Sinhalese During the Kandyan Era: Manichean Images, Associational Logic', *Asian Ethnicity*, 3, 1 (Mar. 2002), p. 32.

⁶⁵ Schnepel and Berkemer, 'History of the Model', p. 13.

⁶⁶ Cf. Charles Henry Alexandrowicz's famous classification of rulers as: (a) sovereigns who, in relation with other rulers, only figure as suzerains; (b) sovereigns who, whilst being suzerains towards some vassal rulers, were *also* themselves vassals of other suzerains; (c) sovereigns who were vassals of one or more suzerains and could shift their allegiance; and (d) vassals who functioned as 'quasi-sovereigns', attempting to access category (c). *An Introduction to the History of the Law of Nations (16th, 17th and 18th Centuries)* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), pp. 15–16.

⁶⁷ Rahul Peter Das, 'Little Kingdoms and Big Theories of History. Review of *Little Kingdoms in Kalinga: Ideologie, Legitimation und Politik regionaler Eliten* by Georg Berkemer', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 117, 1 (1997), pp. 127–34.

abstract concepts may ultimately be impossible. But it is rather startling how Das expects this universal dilemma to destabilize the little kingdom as an analytical tool, that is, a concept grounded precisely in the acceptance of the ultimate impossibility of fully translating anything from the past into the present.⁶⁸ Even more importantly, an essentialist critique fails to take into account the possibility of translation occurring, however imperfectly to the eyes of the modern philologist, in past historical contexts. Translation as such, describable in the widest sense as an ‘act of mediation based on language’, is a practice deeply steeped in history.⁶⁹ If one accepts the possibility of complex mediations based on a combination of verbal and visual or iconic forms (images, mental images and spatial representations at the intersection of writing, speaking, imagining and drawing), then a range of perspectives emerges where linguistically precise renderings are only a relatively small part of a much wider constellation of meanings. Translation operates in an intermediate space, somewhere in-between the source and the target culture, and this ‘third space’—or whatever we may wish to call it—is an important subject of inquiry.

Whilst post-1750 developments suggest that Europeans may have begun to underline the differences between South Asian *rājas* and European *kings*—the British ditched those translations and went over to designating the former as ‘chiefs’ or ‘princes’ in the second half of the eighteenth century⁷⁰—this was not the case in previous centuries. Both the Portuguese and the Dutch were quick to translate the term *rāja* as *rei* or *koning*, even in places such as Batticaloa or Wellassa in eastern Sri Lanka, where modern anthropologists would be inclined to speak of chiefdoms. The pervasiveness of this logic of understanding through imperfect translation has already been pointed out by Ivana Elbl in a little-noticed article on the Portuguese encounter with West Africa.⁷¹ Whenever the word *rei* (king) or *reino* (kingdom) was used by the Portuguese to render a political situation in a different culture during the sixteenth century, this was because the institution and its symbolic space were perceived as being sufficiently well translated by the word. The category was not directly dependent on scale. Both Batticaloa and China could be seen as *reinos*.

Crucially, any king might head a kingdom and yet also pay tribute to another ruler further up in a dynamic constellation of powers. In fact, this not such a far cry from the complex hierarchies in place in Europe during the late medieval and part of the early modern period. Here, too, it was common for rulers to acknowledge the superiority of the Holy Empire and the Papacy, whilst acting as independent

⁶⁸ See Berkemer and Frenz, ‘Little Kingdoms or Princely States?’, p. 115.

⁶⁹ In German, a ‘sprachbasierter Vermittlungsakt’, as in Daniel G. König, ‘Übersetzungen und Wissenstransfer. Zu einem Aspekt der Beziehungen zwischen lateinisch-christlicher und arabisch-islamischer Welt’, *Trivium*, 8 (2011), p. 6 (<http://trivium.revues.org/3875>, last accessed 5 November 2017). Bibliography on the subject in Paula G. Rubel and Abraham Rosman, eds., *Translating Cultures. Perspectives on Translation and Anthropology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003).

⁷⁰ Bernard S. Cohn, ‘Political Systems in Eighteenth Century India: the Benares Region’, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 82, 3 (1962), pp. 312–20.

⁷¹ Ivana Elbl, ‘Cross-Cultural Trade and Diplomacy: Portuguese Relations with West Africa, 1441–1521’, *Journal of World History*, 3, 2 (1992), pp. 194–6.

kings (and even seeking to submit other, lesser rulers).⁷² Although the word *imperium* came to be associated in Europe with an emerging idea of sovereignty as early as the twelfth century, it also remained imbued with the recognition that the late Roman Empire had become a complex body of which other kingdoms were ‘dependencies’ (Saint Isidore), the empire as a whole forming no longer ‘a unitary and integrative territorial *imperium*, but rather an *imperium* in the form of a composite monarchy, linking disparate realms and territories under a single, supreme head’.⁷³

Again, we need to pay attention to the small units that, together, allowed the system to work. Take for example Portugal. Its medieval embryo was a county known as *Condado Portucalense*, forming part of a wider Iberian system of small polities articulated through mechanisms of personal allegiance. As the Castilian monarchy expanded but struggled to exert direct control over lands conquered from Islamic powers in the south—which in fact constituted a complicated mosaic in its own right—they opted for indirect control based on personal allegiance. The first count of Portucale, Henry (r.1093–1112), was brought in from Burgundy to impose order in the area. Once in place, Henry acted independently within his fief, though he remained a vassal of Alphons VI, king of León, Castile, Galicia and Toledo. In fact, Alphons VI styled himself, between 1077 and 1109, as *Imperator totius Hispanie* precisely on grounds of various personal relations of overlordship. In significant measure, his emperorship was based on the perceived ability to secure the symbolic submission of other lords to the centre of the realm. To understand this empire, historians have had to accept the inadequacy of territoriality as an interpretive key.⁷⁴

Later, under Henry’s son Alphons (r.1112–1185), the county of Portucale broke loose and grew into an independent kingdom only to begin its own tradition of subjecting others.⁷⁵ It became, in the longer run, one of many cases where claims to *imperium* served as signs of a consolidated sovereignty in the broad sense of independence from former overlords.⁷⁶ In the mid-thirteenth century, the kings of Portugal conquered the Algarve, which maintained its formal status as a separate kingdom.⁷⁷ From the fifteenth century, rulers claimed dominion over parts of North Africa (the ‘Algarve beyond the sea’), and then added other forms of lordship (*senhorio*) across West Africa, Ethiopia, Arabia, Persia and India to their title.⁷⁸

⁷² Cf. Garrett Mattingly, *Renaissance Diplomacy* (Boston, MA/Cambridge: Houghton Mifflin/Riverside Press, 1955), pp. 27–8 and Donald Matthew, *The Medieval European Community* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1977), pp. 255–7. Also see A. B. Bozeman, *Politics and Culture in International History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960), pp. 240–54.

⁷³ David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 30 and 33.

⁷⁴ Cf. Richard Fletcher, ‘The Early Middle Ages, 700–1250’, in *Spain. A History*, edited by Raymond Carr (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 63–89.

⁷⁵ A key exploration of early Portuguese History is José Mattoso, *Identificação de um país. Ensaio sobre As Origens de Portugal, 1096–1325*, 2 vols. (Lisbon: Estampa, 1985).

⁷⁶ Cf. Armitage, *The Ideological Origins*, p. 30.

⁷⁷ In fact, the formula ‘king of the Algarve’ was added to the royal title after the first conquest of the *taifa* capital Silves in 1189, and maintained even after the town was retaken by Muslim forces until 1242.

⁷⁸ The ‘Algarve beyond the sea’ was included in the title after various conquests in Morocco made between 1458 and 1471, and the ‘lordship of Guinea’ in 1486.

As soon as it crossed the sea, the expansionist process reverted to forcing foreign rulers into paying tribute rather than conquering lands. All this unfolded, of course, while the kings of Portugal remained vassals of the pope, whose authority in international matters they often accepted and to whom they offered periodical manifestations of allegiance. At the apogee of his imperial triumphs, Manuel I of Portugal (r.1495–1521) still showed his obedience to the Vatican. He sought legitimation through bulls and treaties to protect his realm from French and Castilian interference—whilst also doing everything in his reach to reduce the influence of the Roman Church within his own emerging empire.

None of this is easily translated into maps, and yet it was the spatially dynamic ground upon which Europeans could maintain dialogues about kingship and empire with other powers overseas. Recognizing each other's rulers as kings and emperors, even when there were evident differences in terms of power and courtly culture (and not necessarily to the advantage of the Portuguese), was a first and fundamental step in establishing a politically meaningful communication. It was the indispensable pre-condition for any kind of pact or agreement, even if it then led to symbolic submission of one part to the other. Kings could, once they recognized each other as such, engage in diplomatic exchanges on a notionally equal footing—and then negotiate their relation to each other within a complex hierarchical system such as that described above. This worked in part because kingship per se was seen as something that could bear qualification: a *mahārājan* or 'big king' could and would be designated by the Portuguese as a '*rei grande*'; a lesser ruler might, in contrast, come to be called a '*rei pequeno*'. A culturalist, historicist approach that pays attention to the symbolic forms negotiated by actors in the past is here not fundamentally incompatible with a more abstract hermeneutic stance grounded in modern ideal-types.⁷⁹ The two complement each other well, because the analytical concept of 'little king' can be made to refer back to historical uses of the words *rāja* and *rei*. Together, the two readings counteract essentialist approaches to the question of how to define kingship or empire 'as such'.

ASTRAEA GOES GLOBAL: TOWARDS A CONNECTED HISTORY OF THE IMPERIAL THEME

As we move from observing the building blocks of imperial systems to appreciating the general principle of empire, the picture gains further coherence. Again, there needs to be a conceptual overture at the onset of our operations, and we are

⁷⁹ Cf. Justin Stagl, 'Szentistische, hermeneutische und phänomenologische Grundlagen der Ethnologie', in *Grundfragen der Ethnologie. Beiträge zur gegenwärtigen Theorie-Diskussion*, edited by J. Stagl and W. Schmied-Kowarzik (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1993), pp. 18–42. On the threads that connect Weber to Geertz, see David N. Gellner, *The Anthropology of Buddhism and Hinduism. Weberian Themes* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 62–9. On the polemic that opposed Weber and the phenomenologist Alfred Schütz (author of *Der sinnhafte Aufbau der sozialen Welt*, 1932), see John R. Hall, 'Cultural Meaning and Cultural Structures in Historical Explanation', *History and Theory*, 39, 3 (2000), pp. 335–40. The tensions are further explored in Stagl, 'Szentistische, hermeneutische und phänomenologische Grundlagen', pp. 15–49.

lucky today to have a vast literature that is very open-minded about what can be considered an empire. The complexities of the early modern European state system have received great attention especially thanks to historians interested in composite monarchies as the dominant political form of the early modern period. Frances Yates, Franz Bosbach, Helmut G. Koenigsberger, John H. Elliott, Anthony Pagden, James Muldoon, John M. Headley, and David Armitage have all emphasized the importance of empires or composite states as opposed to smaller, more compact polities announcing the nation state.⁸⁰ The number of political formations considered imperial has thus grown fast. It now includes, along with the Holy Roman Empire and León–Castile, Alfredian England and also sixteenth-century Britain as it confronted Ireland before venturing further into the Atlantic. At the intersection of the European system with the Islamic world, attention has turned to the Ottoman appropriation of Byzantine imperial symbols. In the southwestern and northeastern corners of the continent, remarkable materials have emerged regarding the imperial tradition of the Nasrid rulers of Granada, and the imperial ambitions of the kings of Lithuania.⁸¹

Beyond Europe, the proliferation of empires in recent scholarship reveals further overtures at the analytical level. In New World studies, the Aztec and Inca empires now share space with other imperial formations such as those of the Powhatan, the Comanche, the Iroquois, the Lakotas, or the Osages.⁸² In West Africa, it has become possible to theorize about the empires of Ghana, Mali and Songhay.⁸³ What all these cases have in common is that the term ‘imperial’ builds on the analytical principle of suzerainty—or overlordship—as opposed to that of sovereignty, which carries a more narrow sense of undivided, unchecked direct control over a territory and its people. ‘Imperial’ here refers to what in Michael Doyle’s

⁸⁰ Yates, *Astraea*; Franz Bosbach, *Monarchia Universalis. Ein politischer Leitbegriff der frühen Neuzeit* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988); H. G. Koenigsberger, ‘Dominium Regale or Dominium Politicum et Regale’, in *Politicians and Virtuosi: Essays in Early Modern History* (London: Hambledon Press, 1986); John H. Elliott, ‘A Europe of Composite Monarchies’, *Past and Present*, 137 (Nov. 1992), pp. 48–71; Anthony Pagden, *Lords of all the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain and France, c.1500–c.1800* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995); James Muldoon, *Empire and Order. The Concept of Empire, 800–1800* (London/New York: MacMillan/St Martin’s, 1999); John M. Headley, several pieces in *Church, Empire and World. The Quest for Universal Order, 1520–1640* (Aldershot: Ashgate Variorum, 1997); Armitage, *The Ideological Origins*.

⁸¹ On the usage of the imperial title by the Ottomans in competition with Charles V, see Gülrü Necipoğlu, ‘Suleyman the Magnificent and the Representation of Power in the Context of Ottoman-Hapsburg-Papal Rivalry’, *Art Bulletin*, 71 (1989), pp. 401–27. On the connections between the Nasrid imperial discourse especially in architecture, and its appropriation by Charles V, see Cammy Brothers, ‘The Renaissance Reception of the Alhambra: The Letters of Andrea Navagero and the Palace of Charles V’, *Muqarnas*, 11 (1994), pp. 79–102, especially p. 90. The connections between Roman and Islamic symbologies of universality in art and architecture have been highlighted by Oleg Grabar, ‘From Dome of Heaven to Pleasure Dome’, *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 49, 1 (1990), pp. 15–21 as well as in his classic *The Formation of Islamic Art* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1973), pp. 147–53. Also see the interesting recent discussion of empire as an eric concept in Zenonas Norkus, *An Unproclaimed Empire: The Grand Duchy of Lithuania from the viewpoint of Comparative Historical Sociology of Empires* (London/New York: Routledge, 2017).

⁸² Pekka Hämmäläinen, *The Comanche Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 3, note 3.

⁸³ David C. Conrad, *Empires of Medieval West Africa. Ghana, Mali and Songhay*, revised edition (New York: Chelsea House, 2010).

classificatory order of empires amounts to ‘formal’ but ‘indirect’ dominion, put into practice through the submission of local rulers to a distant overlord in a multi-layered system where the local is only tentatively integrated with the supra-local.⁸⁴ It is generally, as Schnepel and Berkemer have put it for the South Asian context, about building legitimacy and authority rather than power and command.⁸⁵

There is no denying that suzerainty took very different forms in Sri Lanka as compared to the Portuguese empire (or indeed Virginia, or Mali), and it is naturally legitimate to emphasize those differences. But, as a concept that highlights the importance of indirect as opposed to more direct mechanisms of control, suzerainty resonates well with historical realities across the continents. Methodologically, this takes us a significant step forward in the evaluation of the supposed clash of early Portuguese (and, to some extent, European) imperialism with the political systems of Africa and Asia. If global history is about recognizing a nominally level playing field in a golden age of empires preceding the emergence of Hobsbawm’s more narrowly defined ‘Age of Empire’, then the de-essentialization of our tools of analysis offers a chance for getting closer to how empire and imperial interactions worked in the sixteenth century.

Crucially, this is again not only a matter of re-thinking our analytical arsenal built around accommodating terms such as empire, kingdom or kingship.⁸⁶ Etic considerations open the door to emic contemplations of the usage of words in the past. The rulers of Kōt̄te are a good example in this regard. Over the course of this study, they will greet us repeatedly as great kings (*mahārājan*), kings of kings (*mahārājadīrājan*), and even imperial ‘Turners of the Wheel’ (*cakravarti*), a title carrying Universalist aspirations. As such they also appear in the Portuguese and Dutch texts of the period: they are *rei grande*, *emperador*, or *keijzer*. Similar hierarchizations can be observed elsewhere. Princess Matoaka was represented in seventeenth-century England as a ‘daughter to the Mighty Prince Powhatan Emperour of Attanoughkomouck alias Virginia?’⁸⁷ Portuguese travellers to West Africa wrote about ‘Mandimansa, emperor of all these kings’ (*Mandimansa, emperador de todos estes reis*). And Italians spoke of ‘lo Imperador de Meli [...] *gran signor di negri*’⁸⁸ Many more examples, suggesting the need for a systematic study of the historical nomenclature, can be found in the travel literature and geographical writings of the early modern period.⁸⁹

Sixteenth-century Europeans went through a process of recognizing the imperial nature of numerous polities in Asia, Africa and America at the same time as imperial claims proliferated in Europe (in fact, we may still be far from understanding in

⁸⁴ Michael Doyle, *Empires* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986).

⁸⁵ Schnepel and Berkemer, ‘History of the Model’, p. 13.

⁸⁶ Gardiner, *The Nature of Historical Explanation*, p. 60.

⁸⁷ ‘FILIA POTENTISS: PRINC: POWHATANI IMP: VIRGINIÆ’, translated into English below the medallion in a widely circulated engraving by Simon van de Passe, London, 1616.

⁸⁸ Both quoted in Elbl, ‘Cross-Cultural Trade and Diplomacy’, p. 195.

⁸⁹ Some are given in Giuseppe Marcocci, ‘Too Much to Rule. States and Empires across the Early Modern World’, *Journal of Early Modern History*, 20, 6 (2016), pp. 511–25.

which direction causality worked).⁹⁰ Frances Yates expounded in *Astraea* how the idea of empire circulated, and really grew in many directions, almost rhizomatically, throughout sixteenth-century Europe. The Imperial Theme contributed to the political performances of rulers in Germany, Italy, France, Britain and Spain. Charles V could have told a tale about imperial claims popping up, irritatingly, everywhere around him. Whilst it is possible to identify a genealogical tree for the imperial idea in earlier centuries, by the 1500s it was so ubiquitous that the common trunk, though still remembered, became less and less relevant. If one thing has come out of the countless attempts at pinning down what exactly an empire ‘is’ or ‘was’, then it is that no clear-cut definition can be found.⁹¹ The imperial theme, however, offers us the possibility of tackling empire not as an entity but as a process or, to keep it closer to the vocabulary of the cultural history of the political, a performative act or stance grounded in the language and spatial perceptions of its time. In addition to anything that might *de facto* smack of imperial structures, it required something fundamental that the German historian Ulrich Leitner has called ‘*imperiale Selbstsicht*’, that is, the way a polity sees itself as being imperial—which of course only works fully if others also recognize (or can be made to recognize) such claims.⁹²

It is really only at this discursive, performative and self-reflexive level that we can come anywhere near a satisfying definition of empire. *Being imperial* in the sixteenth century was, in sum, a performative act—a carefully staged claim—it was usually particular rather than universal despite any Universalist echoes, and it was relational in nature.⁹³ Across Europe, it was not (or not just) about tracing back one’s political genealogy to Rome anymore. It was most importantly about affirming oneself, and being perceived by others, as independent and as imperial in the European—and increasingly the global—theatres of diplomacy, trade and war. The same applies to the vast majority of interactions between polities around the globe. No empire was ever defined by its absolute size, or reach or complexity, but only by its ability to be accepted as being imperial by others.

Naturally, as anyone familiar with the sixteenth century will be aware, not all rulers with imperial ambitions effectively employed the words ‘empire’ and ‘emperor’.

⁹⁰ See for the Portuguese side, António Vasconcelos de Saldanha, *Iustum Imperium. Dos tratados como fundamento do império dos portugueses no Oriente. Estudo de história do direito internacional e do direito português* (Lisbon/Macao: Fundação Oriente/Instituto Português do Oriente, 1997), pp. 309–17. On changes to imperial titulature in China under the Manchus, and what this may imply for the use of the word ‘emperor’, see Catherine Jami, ‘Imperial Science Written in Manchu in Early Qing China: Does It Matter?’, in *Looking at It from Asia: The Processes that Shaped the Sources of History of Science*, edited by F. Bretelle-Establet (Boston, MA: Springer, 2010), pp. 371–91.

⁹¹ From the vast literature on the subject, see Susan Alcock et al., eds., *Empires. Perspectives from Archaeology and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), and the discussion on the Portuguese *Estado* in Sanjay Subrahmanyam, ‘Written on Water: designs and dynamics in the Portuguese *Estado da Índia*’, *ibid.*, pp. 42–69, where the author suggests adopting a dynamic and ‘minimalist’ definition of empire.

⁹² See the useful distinction between imperial ‘structures’ and ‘processes’ in Ulrich Leitner, ‘Der imperiale Ordnungskomplex. Die theoretische Fiktion eines politischen Systems’, in *Imperien und Reiche in der Weltgeschichte*, edited by Michael Gehler and Robert Rollinger (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2014), vol. II, pp. 1415–2.

⁹³ Cf. Armitage, *The Ideological Origins*, p. 31.

Is an emic perspective on empire possible at all in such cases? The answer is still affirmative. Rulers made their ambitions resonate through other words and gestures, widely understood and accepted as equivalents or quasi-equivalents. Most famously, Phillip II (r.1556–98) could not claim the imperial title once his father Charles (r.1516–56) had ‘returned’ it to Austria. He had to use the word ‘Monarch’ instead (while nurturing the thought of adopting the title ‘Emperor of the Indies’), and yet rulers across the continents knew perfectly well that he was an imperial overlord, and recognized him as such.⁹⁴ As for Portugal, it would have been odd for John III (r.1521–57) explicitly to call himself an emperor, with Charles V being both his neighbour and brother-in-law. But the kings of the Avis dynasty did not refrain from boasting a royal title containing every indication that their dominion was imperial.⁹⁵ Manuel I not only surrounded himself with enormously expensive tapestries illustrating his global imperial reach.⁹⁶ He and his son John III were also ‘By the Grace of God King of Portugal and the Algarves on this side of the Sea and beyond, Lord of the Conquest, Navigation and Commerce of Ethiopia, Arabia, Persia and India’, a title adopted after the return of Pedro Álvares Cabral, the official discoverer of Brazil, from India in 1501.⁹⁷ In fact, in a letter to Manuel I from 1505, the first viceroy of India Francisco de Almeida wrote after having obtained tribute from some rulers in East Africa and India that ‘Your Highness shall be [proclaimed] Emperor of this world here [i.e. the “Indies”]’. No other argument was given than the fact that Manuel had become king of kings. After the submission of the king of Hormuz in 1507, Almeida reiterated that ‘Your Highness should not hesitate too much in calling Yourself *Imperador*, because never has a Prince had more justification to be [an emperor]’.⁹⁸

The kings of Portugal never laid a claim to *imperium* by using the word as such, but they did, and systematically so, refer to themselves as ‘kings of kings’⁹⁹ and as ‘lords’ (*senhores*) entitled to dominion over others along the shores of the Atlantic and Indian Oceans. This was widely understood as an imperial project, even if it was not *the* imperial project of Charles V. It was ultimately about claiming imperial status on the ground that they were overlords to a number of rulers.¹⁰⁰ During the second half of the century Manuel’s grandson Sebastian (r.1568–78) began to style himself as ‘Majesty’ (*majestade*) precisely to underscore this imperial reach. Incidentally, the wider geopolitics of this will hardly come across as polemic. Whilst formally there was still only one imperial title in Europe, the Vatican had had to give its blessing in the late fifteenth century, well before the arrival of Charles V in Spain, to a division of the globe that was clearly imperial. It allowed for the legal

⁹⁴ Pagden, ‘Fellow Citizens and Imperial Subjects. Conquest and sovereignty in Europe’s overseas empires’, *History and Theory*, 44, 4 (2005), p. 32.

⁹⁵ Luís Filipe F. R. Thomaz, ‘L’idée impériale manuéline’, in *La découverte, le Portugal et l’Europe, Actes du Colloque*, edited by Jean Aubin (Paris: Fondation Calouste Gulbenkian, 1990), pp. 35–103.

⁹⁶ Pedro Dias, *À Maneira de Portugal. Uma tapeçaria inédita* (Porto: VOC Antiquidades, 2007), pp. 24–7.

⁹⁷ Disney, *History of Portugal*, vol. 2, p. 127.

⁹⁸ Both letters quoted in Saldanha, *Iustum Imperium*, p. 321.

⁹⁹ On the Portuguese idea of being ‘*Rei de Reis*’ see Saldanha, *Iustum Imperium*, pp. 321–31.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Armitage, *The Ideological Origins*, p. 33.

pursuit of virtually unlimited direct or indirect dominion by the Portuguese and Castilian crowns in each of their hemispheres, and offered a basis for the justification of later military conquest. Ever since the complex negotiations leading up to the treaties of Alcáçovas (1479) and Tordesillas (1494) the Portuguese and the Castilian kings behaved as formally sanctioned, potential overlords on a global scale. While a fully-fledged occupation was not deemed feasible in the far-flung corners of the earth, the treaties allowed the Portuguese rulers to demand tribute from other rulers.¹⁰¹

Interestingly, it was in this function precisely that the Portuguese elite *also* began to see imperial constellations emerge on more distant horizons. Inevitably, decision-makers across the empire were drawn into the complex logics of inter-polity hierarchization in other continents.¹⁰² Once they operated in Maritime Asia, the Portuguese not only developed an understanding of other regional hierarchies such as that involving the ‘sultans’ of Pasai, Malacca and Bengal and the many *rājas* surrounding them as minor rulers—they also became a part of those.¹⁰³ By 1519, the sultan of Ternate in the Moluccas, Abu Hayat, was writing to Manuel I addressing him as *Sultian Purtukal* precisely in this sense, recognizing him as a king superior to other kings along the lines of what *he* understood imperial hierarchies to be.¹⁰⁴ Incidentally, the word used for tribute, *páreas*, had earlier entered the Romance languages of Iberia from the Islamic tradition, through the practices of competing medieval *taifa* kingdoms in the south of the Iberian Peninsula paying tribute for military protection by Christian powers in the north. The rulers of those polities had been known in Castile as ‘*reyezuelos*’—literally, ‘little kings’.¹⁰⁵

The geographical movement built into the argument is deliberate: we are in no position at this point to decide on what paths exactly all these connectable notions of kingship and empire spread across the Eurasian ecumene. There are some signs, further to be investigated, that the diplomatic culture lubricating complex hierarchical systems such as those described here may have had deep roots in the Islamic world.¹⁰⁶ But at the very least, we can ascertain that the conceptual analogies prepared the ground for dialogues. In the sixteenth century, there was a critical mass of polities across the globe operating on grounds of analogous, or even homologous, strategies of power building, acting and soon interacting imperially, without conquering in the modern sense of the word—and understanding that they could measure forces and negotiate precisely on such grounds. This is what makes the encounter of the Portuguese with Asia particularly relevant to global

¹⁰¹ Thomaz, *De Ceuta a Timor*, p. 219.

¹⁰² See Biedermann, *The Portuguese in Sri Lanka and South India*, pp. 7–32.

¹⁰³ Tomé Pires, *Summa Oriental*, p. 398.

¹⁰⁴ Saldanha, *Iustum Imperium*, p. 323.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Saldanha, *Iustum Imperium*, pp. 642–54, the classical study on Castile being Hilda Grassotti, ‘Para la historia del botín y de las parias en León y Castilla’, *Cuadernos de Historia de España*, 41–2 (1965), pp. 43–83.

¹⁰⁶ Zoltán Biedermann, Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello, eds., *Global Gifts. The Material Culture of Diplomacy in Early Modern Eurasia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018). A further parallel suggesting other, more complicated connections in the medieval period might be the ‘great gifts’ (*mahadanas*) practiced among Hindu rulers in South India. Cf. Dirks, *The Hollow Crown*, p. 37.

historians. In Sri Lanka, what unfolded was not simply the encounter of one people with another, but of one imperially minded society acting on the global stage with another, imperially minded society acting on a smaller, but conceptually commensurable, stage. The understanding of what it was to be a *rājadhīrājan* in sixteenth-century Kōṭṭe converged with the Portuguese understanding of being *rei de reis* (king of kings). People understood this and acted upon it. The performance of styling oneself as *senhor da conquista*, *rei de reis* or *mahārājadhīrājan*, typically investing more in the staging of such claims than in the formation of well-structured territories, boundaries, or administrative apparatuses, were central to Lankan and Portuguese politics, as they were in many other parts of the globe.

Although the systems were far from identical—and we shall see many differences emerge over the following chapters—their interpersonal, non-territorial logics of power building made them notionally and practically interconnectable. Polities that, each in its own way, combined universalist ideas with a non-intrusionist, suzerainty-based stance on expansion, could meet and, effectively, talk to each other. This resulted in a precarious balance, but a balance nonetheless. With Portugal and Kōṭṭe, the polities chosen for the present study may strike the reader as small and, by some measures, insignificant in comparison to the empires of the Habsburgs, the Ottomans, the Mughals or the Ming. But in the way they interacted, in how they generated communicational flows connecting distant corners of the earth and feeding into political processes with a global impact in the longer run—namely, the first Habsburg conquest in South Asia, preparing the ground for Dutch and British interventions—they exemplify how global history is made at the intersection of distant societies structurally predisposed and willing to talk.

Each of the aspects touched upon in this introductory chapter points to the possibilities of connection and disconnection, convergence and divergence, diplomacy and conquest, not so much as mutually exclusive, but rather as profoundly intertwined aspects of the historical past. Ours is a task of observing how these aspects held each other in balance, fluctuating more or less intensively as cross-cultural interactions unfolded, until the dialogue broke down—temporarily at least, for we know little about what happened next. There is reason to assume that stories comparable to the one we are about to delve into abound across the globe.