

The Eastern Province in Portuguese Times

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What the Eastern Province is today was in the late medieval period part of the Kotte kingdom and later formed part of the newborn Kandyan kingdom. With the break-up of the Island polity in the 14th century the independent kingdom that emerged in the central highlands under Senasammata Vikramabahu extended its boundaries to the eastern seaboard to include the provinces of Bintenne and Tamankaduwa.

The control that Kandy exercised over this region is demonstrated by many factors. Since the approach to Kandy was sealed on the west as well as the north by hostile forces, the accepted approach to Kandy by friendly foreign powers was from the East. That Kandyan kings treated this region as under their sway is illustrated by, for instance, that Karaliyadde was prepared to allow the Portuguese a factory in Trincomalee. The Portuguese themselves had recognized the suzerainty of Kandyan kings over this region and this is shown by the fact that they accepted this fact in the Peace Treaty of 1617.

The eastern regions formed an essential part of the economy of the Kandyan kingdom. For one thing, its flat plains, its fertile soil and many streams made it excellent terrain for cultivation. The accounts of Barros and Queiros show that the region was almost the rice-bowl of the Kingdom and supplemented the sparse yields of its terraced paddies of the hills. For another, its multitude of small ports and harbours enabled the Kandyans to use the eastern littoral for the conduct of its import/export trade.

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Another indication of Kandyan dominance in the region is that it exercised control over the renowned “pagoda” at Trincomalee which was the centre of religious veneration by pilgrims far and wide. That it was a Buddhist centre and under Buddhist control is made clear, when Portuguese chroniclers refer to its management being in the hands of “ganezes” and “sangatheras”, the terms Portuguese use to refer to Buddhist monks.

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