Tracing the Cheraman Perumal

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by

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Introduction

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> In the early political history of Malabar the first figure that emerges from the mist of tradition is Cheraman Perumal, the last of the sovereigns of Chera. He is represented as voluntarily resigning his throne, subdividing his kingdom, and retiring to Mecca to adopt Islam… recently information has been received that his tomb still exists at Sabhai on the Arabian coast, and the dates on it were said to indicate that he… died there in A.H. 216 (A.D. 831).
>
> —William Wilson Hunter et al. From the 1907 *Imperial Gazetteer of India*, Seventeenth Volume[1]

Until relatively recently in a historiographic context, Kerala and the Indian subcontinent as a whole were astonishingly considered places whose Hindu cultures lacked a tradition in history-writing. Indicted as lacking 'fact' or truthful substance, Kerala history-writing was considered too full of mythology or religious matter by various historians to be considered useful for studying the region's history.[2] There is certainly a significant historical tradition to be found however, as historians now more readily realize how much can be learned about a region's history from even mythological sources.[3] As the above quote from the 1907 British-composed *Imperial Gazetteer of India* exemplifies in its historical description of Malabar however, there even was a history to be found in the sense of looking for 'factual' substance such as the tomb of Cheraman Perumal; a history that was readily accessible to those who traveled to Kerala, and could be translated and brought back towards Western traditions of history-writing. Modern historical stories and textbooks also exist with the intention of teaching a form of truth in Indian history, looking back hundreds of years even before the first British colonial histories of India written in gazetteers, district manuals, and handbooks.

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[1] William Wilson Hunter et al., *The Imperial Gazetteer of India*, New ed., Vol. 17 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1908), 56.

[2] Daniel Woolf, *A Global History of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 65.

[3] Scott Kugle and Roxani Eleni Margariti, "Narrating Community: The Qiṣṣat Shakarwatī Farmāḍ and Accounts of Origin in Kerala and around the Indian Ocean," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 60, no. 4 (2017): 337, https://doi.org/10.1163/15685209-12341430.

If multiple historiographical traditions have clashed over the study of Kerala history, from different writers in different periods of time, with colonial interference and with some having claimed that original Indian histories were not histories at all, how can one study and learn about Kerala history using the local narratives available to us? In a 2000 article for the *Journal of World History*, Richard Eaton stresses the urgency of addressing this problem with a look at the subaltern and postmodern traditions of studying Indian history.[4] By first discussing subaltern studies and explaining how their plan to focus on marginalized groups only created a historiographical philosophy that was still centered on the British Raj, he demonstrates the idea that postmodern studies sought to fill in the philosophical gaps that the subaltern left blank.[5] Eaton then spends much of the article discussing how the postmodern tradition has "lost its vitality, at least within India" since the 1990s and the destruction of the Babri Masjid.[6]

While this research project will show how indeed postmodern studies of Kerala history in specific continue to be written since Eaton's work was published, there remain difficulties in these methods to this day regarding issues of agency, essentialism, and the disappearance of pre-British history as Eaton proposes.[7] This project seeks to act as a call to action as an outsider to the field, to show why historians of Kerala should be exploring the varied historiographical epistemologies to fill in the gaps on Kerala history through previously ignored sources, specifically that of the Cheraman Perumal story.

To that end, what seems to be lacking in the study of Kerala historiography is a comparative study to explore similarities and differences present between the varied historiographies of the texts in relation to the story of the Cheraman Perumal. With this modest project, I will explore that by providing an overview of the historiographical 'journey' that the story has traversed through multiple historiographical traditions. I will conclude that there is a need for further post-structuralist study by Kerala history specialists which address the issues Eaton proposes regarding agency, essentialism, and the disappearance of pre-British history.

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[4] Richard Maxwell Eaton, "(Re)Imag(in)Ing Other^{2}ness: A Postmortem for the Postmodern in India," *Journal of World History* 11, no. 1 (2000): 59, https://doi.org/10.1353/jwh.2000.0008.
[5] Ibid., 59, 61, 63.
[6] Ibid., 63.
[7] Ibid., 65.

Background

Before getting more into the historiography of the Cheraman Perumal story, of South Indian history writing in general, and the ways in which this paper seeks to add to the discussion, it is important to first outline the region in which the story is situated, and give a brief outline of the story itself. While the legend of Cheraman Perumal has multiple versions, each with their own differing details of the story, there are a few major points which remain largely the same, to be recounted in general. The story begins in the Kerala region, along the Malabar coast.[8] While some of the older texts used in this research sometimes conflate the terms 'Malabar' and 'Kerala' as one in the same, they are distinct in reality and will be termed here as such.[9] Malabar is confined to the coastal area along the Arabian Sea, and Kerala encompasses this coastal region up to the Western Ghats Mountain Range where the main spoken language is Malayalam, with smaller pockets where Tamil, Telegu, or Kannada are spoken.[10]

The basic outline of the story follows the final king of a Chera dynasty in Kerala, titled 'Cheraman Perumal' or 'Chera King' uniformly with all previous kings of that dynasty. After a long period of rule and nearing the end of his life, the king makes the decision to leave Kerala, with the understanding that he will likely not return. Now the reasoning for this decision varies very greatly from story, but it often has religious significance, with the Perumal deciding to convert from his Hindu beliefs to another religion, usually Islam. The journey he takes is thus a pilgrimage to Mecca in these versions. Due to his advanced age and lack of a clear lineage, the Perumal divides up his kingdom before he departs into a large plurality of smaller kingdoms, each ruled by different people and ministers of his he favored. Those not given direct rulership were in some stories provided with his sword, as well as a mandate to conquer territory for themselves in his honor. As such, the kingdom is split up and the Cheraman Perumal departs, passing away after his religious conversion, often after meeting the prophet Muhammad in person.[11]

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[8] Parliament of India, *States Reorganisation Act*, 1956. ACT NO. 37 OF 1956 (New Delhi, 1956), Section II.5.
It is also important to note the linguistic/ideological differences in the two terms, Kerala is more modernized and is a region based on the linguistic similarities of those living within, reorganized from the British Colonial Malabar District after Indian independence through the States Reorganisation Act of 1956.

[9] William Logan, *Malabar*, Reprint ed., vol. 1, 2 vols. (Madras: Superintendent Government Press, 1951), 2.

[10] A. Sreedhara Menon, *Social and Cultural History of Kerala*, 1st ed. (New Delhi: Sterling, 1979), 3, 328.

[11] Hermann Gundert, *Keralolpatti*, trans. T. Madhava Menon, 1st ed. (Thiruvananthapuram: International School of Dravidian Linguistics, 2003), 64-9.; Zainuddin, *Tuhfat-al-Mujahidin*, trans. S. Muhammad Husayn Nainar (Chennai: University of Madras, 1942), 35-7.

The Three Epistemologies

Understandings in Historiography

> What collapsed in the mid-1980s was the notion of "progress" as a linear teleology that underlay both the capitalist and socialist worldviews.
> —Richard Eaton, 2017[12]

In order to understand the niche in the current study of historiography regarding the case study of Cheraman Perumal in particular and the three-epistemology process I will be using to analyze it, it is important to build a referential context in which to situate Kerala's historiography. To do so, I will here discuss the authors who have spoken about the subject at length, whose own analyses and ideas will be subject to discussion at length in this paper. In the following literature review sections, I will first survey important literature on global and Indian historiography, before discussing historiography specific to South-India, and Kerala. Next, I will delve into the three historiographical epistemologies that will make up the bulk of this project's study and the texts regarding the Cheraman Perumal story itself. Finally, I will discuss the method with which I seek to present the historiographical map of the Cheraman Perumal and conclude on the need for further post-structuralist study of the story.

Global and Indian Historiography

Understanding trends in history-writing is a necessary aspect that is best exemplified by Daniel Woolf's *A Global History of History*. Woolf's goal is to trace a global timeline of history-writing's evolution, and the theories regarding the relationship between Indian histories and Western histories that he lays out are of great significance to this genre. In regards to India, he focuses much on the cultural backgrounds of historiographic differences in the population, particularly the early differences in Muslim-world history-writing versus Hindu and Jain, followed later by Christian-world history-writing.[13] While he does not provide a specific method for

[12] William Wilson Hunter et al., *The Imperial Gazetteer of India*, New ed., Vol. 17 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1908), 56. Richard Maxwell Eaton, "(Re)Imag(in)Ing Other^{2}ness: A Postmortem for the Postmodern in India," *Journal of World History* 11, no. 1 (2000): 59.
[13] Daniel Woolf, *A Global History of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 67, 70, 169.

studying historiographical differences from the aforementioned writers of different cultural backgrounds, this paper will take advantage of his summaries in order to better pinpoint differences within different epistemological methods. Also important in this genre is *Textures of Time,* a book by Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Velcheru Narayana Rao, and David Shulman in which the authors argue that India did in fact have a tradition of history-writing despite what earlier scholars claimed.[14] The theory they display in this book, that history-writing in South India indeed existed simply in a more dramatic genre, will help us understand further how some historiographic traditions from Britain and South India can be compared within the ways they appear in the three epistemologies, and are perhaps more similar than one might think.

South-Indian Historiography

Perhaps the most important author to discuss when studying historiography in India would be Romila Thapar. Specializing in ancient Indian history, Thapar's chapter "Historical Traditions in Early India" in the Oxford History of Historical writing is exemplary of the idea that despite early Indian historical traditions not conforming to "conventional form as we know it now," they still reflect a historical consciousness which are recognizable and useful for understanding the history of the sub-continent as a whole.[15] The definition of 'history' is ever changing compared to the view of it during the European Enlightenment, and to take a step back from the colonialist perspective on writing history is the crucial first step in studying Kerala's history through sources such as the Cheraman Perumal story.[16]

Works like *The Madras School of Orientalism* as edited by Thomas Trautmann are also important to the genre for understanding the origin of histories in the British tradition in South India.[17] Beyond the significance of the book's analysis of the British East India Company's first Surveyor General of India Colin Mackenzie and his collection on Indian history, these works seek to further understand the modes of knowledge acquisition and knowledge production that occurred behind the scenes of British histories of South India which would lead to the 'gazetteers,' the

[14] Velcheru Narayana Rao, David Shulman, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Textures of Time: Writing History in South India, 1600-1800* (New York, NY: Other Press, 2003).
[15] Romila Thapar, "Historical Traditions in Early India: c. 1000 BC to c. AD 600," *The Oxford History of Historical Writing* 1 (2011): 553, https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:osobl/9780199218158.003.0024.
[16] Ibid., 554.
[17] Thomas R. Trautmann, *The Madras School of Orientalism: Producing Knowledge in Colonial South India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015).

British geohistorical surveys of their colonies. Such an understanding of knowledge production directly ties into the study here of seeing analyses of the Cheraman Perumal story as *modes* of knowledge production.

Nicholas Dirks and Phillip Wagoner focus on South-Indian history-writing and the assumption of the pre-colonial Indians having no history-writing tradition at all; these two are essential authors to understand when looking at any South-Indian historiography. Within *The Hollow Crown*, Dirks takes a close look at history and 'ethnohistory,' as he describes the study of culture through historical records in Hindu India, and the lack of critical scrutiny made towards the claim against Indian sense of history.[18] Per Dirks, a preoccupation with caste is what saved Indian history-writing from being lost entirely. The use of Indian family histories in studying caste has been demonstrated in many modern texts, something he also discusses in depth in his book *Castes of Mind*.[19] Despite this, they were otherwise designated for use mainly for the colonial census and have been otherwise ignored as useful histories due to mythological and religious foci. He argues that they are very useful for studying cultural history.[20] Wagoner on the other hand focuses on the kingdom of Vijayanagara, an empire which encompassed all of South India, looking to find its political history through looking closely at how local old Indian sources can be used to construct a convincing narrative. He looks at donative inscriptions issued by early Vijayanagara rulers as well as comparing multiple history texts to triangulate realistic information.[21]

Georg Iggers, Q. Edward Wang, and Supriya Mukherjee contribute to the discussion of South India's place in historiography with their work *A Global History of Modern Historiography*. They discuss at length "the problem of trying to assess the relative impact of European modes of historical thinking on a society that was already undergoing a process of modernization."[22] They explain too how history-writing in South-India did in fact conform to modern criteria for the genre at the time, despite existing in seemingly outdated styles for the genre, such as poetry.[23] While the

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[18] Nicholas B. Dirks, *The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 55.
[19] Ibid., 55-6; Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 3.
[20] Dirks, *The Hollow Crown*, 56.
[21] Phillip B. Wagoner, "Harihara, Bukka, and the Sultan: The Delhi Sultanate in the Political Imagination of Vijayanagara," in *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia*, ed. David Gilmartin and Bruce B. Lawrence (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2000): 301.
[22] Georg G. Iggers, Q. Edward Wang, and Supriya Mukherjee, *A Global History of Modern Historiography* (Harlow, England: Pearson Longman, 2008), 97.
[23] Ibid., 98.

authors do not make mention of the Cheraman Perumal story in specific, the relevance to understanding the historiography of literature like it is important in this book. This is especially true regarding the notions of how indigenous historians began to accept the impositions of Western historians that there had been no tradition of Indian historical writing prior to the British.

Kerala

From there, one can zoom into the distinctive historiographical zone that is Kerala itself. Older histories of Kerala in specific have also suffered from the Eurocentric criticisms of lacking a 'true history' in the traditional conventions as Thapar describes, as will be a crux of the positivist epistemology that this project shows. In the current historiography, authors such as M.G.S. Narayanan, Kesavan Veluthat, and Rajan Gurukkal are leading historians of Kerala whose works are essential to the study of Kerala history and historiography. Narayanan's book *Perumals of Kerala* is an extensive history of the Chera Dynasty in Kerala which includes data on the genealogy and the chronology of the Cheras.[24] Kesavan Veluthat is a Keralite historian who specializes in medieval history, whose work *The Early Medieval in South India* includes a prominent chapter in which he discusses the historiography of the *Keralolpatti*, and emphasizes that was used as a historical document with the purpose of validating Brahmanical groups in the region.[25] Veluthat's work "History and Historiography in Constituting a Region" is a work which will be looked at yet more extensively in this paper, for its use of the Cheraman Perumal story and the *Keralolpatti* to discover how historians have come to create "Kerala" as a unit of analysis.[26]

Next, one must look to Richard Eaton and Ashis Nandy to have a good understanding of historiography in the Kerala Region. While Ashis Nandy is more specific to the region than Eaton, the commentary from both are useful together for the purposes of this project. According to Nandy, the city of Cochin in Kerala is one of the few areas in South India which was not affected by Western historiographical traditions. At least, it is an area in which precolonial cultural traditions

[24] M.G.S. Narayanan, *Perumāḷs Of Kerala: Brahmin Oligarchy and Ritual Monarchy: Political and Social Conditions of Kerala under the Cera perumāḷs of makōtai (c. AD 800-AD 1124)* (Thrissur, Kerala: CosmoBooks, 2018).
[25] Kesavan Veluthat, "The Keralolpatti as History," in *The Early Medieval in South India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008): 129-146.
[26] Kesavan Veluthat, "History and Historiography in Constituting a Region: The Case of Kerala," *Studies in People's History* 5, no. 1 (2018): 13, https://doi.org/10.1177/2348448918759852.

remain strong.[27] As Jos Gommans describes in his own analysis of Nandy's many works, Nandy actually rejects the concept of history "as a trustworthy guide for really understanding Cochin's particular story."[28] Instead, the mythical stories such as that of the Cheraman Perumal are embraced as a way to see how the memories and stories of Cochin's inhabitants have built their own history, without the intervention of Western cosmopolitanism. This is an approach that can be commented on in terms of Richard Eaton's views on postmodernism. According to Eaton, the difference between subalternist and postmodernist traditions was that "the former centered agency and voice on… the marginalized, subaltern classes— the other diffused and decentered agency."[29] This was a way to continue to take focus away from Western intervention, as subalternist works were still basing their subjects on the relationship between colonizer and colonized.[30] Nandy focuses entirely on the history of Cochin without basing it on the Dutch and British historical traditions or even resistance to them, giving agency to memories and stories of the region and keeping from essentialism by discussing the existence of a cosmopolitanism in the city long before British arrivals.

Epistemologies and the Cheraman Perumal

I seek to present the story of the Cheraman Perumal by proposing three non-chronological historiographical epistemologies that it has passed through over the years. As one can see from the historiographical discussion South India and Kerala, there is a focus from authors both on the frustrations of comparing the region's history to British colonial history, and on the ways in which historians past and present have attempted to study local Kerala history without the problematic focus on colonial invaders. As such, it became clear that there were multiple clear avenues in which historians have studied the region throughout history. The first is mythological stories themselves as Nandy has suggested, the second is a positivist epistemology which rejects the mythological nature of the local stories, and the third tries to reconcile history and mythology.

This paper will begin with an 'archetypal' epistemology which involves just the original versions of the story which appear via various authors, named as the stories serve as the archetypes

[27] Jos Gommans, "South Asian Cosmopolitanism and the Dutch Microcosms in Seventeenth-Century Kerala," in *Exploring the Dutch Empire: Agents, Networks and Institutions, 1600-2000,* ed. Jos Gommans and Catia Antunes (Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 8.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Eaton, "(Re)Imag(in)Ing Other^{2}ness," 59.
[30] Ibid., 60-1.

upon which the rest of the historiographies were generated. This epistemology is perhaps the most obviously delineated from the others at first glance, being the analytical category that simply contains the various 'original' versions of the story itself. Of course, this category is rather broad, especially when one considers that there is a significant number of different versions of the story out there, in either written or oral history. For the sake of this particular project's scope a representative selection of just four were chosen. The version most often cited in later studies has been the version delineated in the *Keralolpatti*. Alongside this, the English translations and subsequent secondary analysis by modern authors available for the versions in the *Wye Manuscript*, *Mackenzie Manuscripts*, and in the *Qissat Shakarwati Farmad* are used.[31] They will be compared to one another first in exactly where they differ from each other in the narrative of the Cheraman Perumal's journey, followed by how those differences can be contextualized by the authors' cultural and political situations.

These four were chosen as the representatives for a few reasons. For one, they outline the story itself with varying degrees of difference between them, and are most often referenced by later works which discuss the story compared to any other versions out there. Further, these four works provide a wider array of different stories. While details vary to slight degree within any version of the story, most of the stories left out of this selection have smaller, detailed-oriented differences which provide less room for comparison and analysis. Further, some versions of the story are told by later foreign authors such as the Scottish collector William Logan, who will be discussed in the positivist chapter anyway. The *Wye Manuscript* in particular is added to the selection because it has been translated to English by Sebastian Prange, whose other major work on the Cheraman Perumal will be analyzed as well in this project. In the article in which he brings this translation to the forefront, he brings important discussion of Keralite and foreign perspectives on history which will be of great import to analyze further in this paper as it related to Cheraman Perumal as well.[32]

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[31] Transliteration between alphabets effects the spelling of the same work across multiple sources translated to English, which is especially present in the spellings of works such as the Qissat Shakarwati Farmad, and characters such as the Cheraman Perumal. For the sake of consistency and to keep from confusion, in this project I will refer to any character, location, or title with a single spelling, and direct quotes from any source will include the original spellings alongside a note regarding an explanation of who or what is being referenced when necessary.

[32] Gundert, *Keralolpatti*, 64-9.; Prange, "The Pagan King Replies," 162-8.; T.V. Mahalingam, *Mackenzie Manuscripts: Summaries of the Historical Manuscripts in the Mackenzie Collection.* ed. T.V. Mahalingam, comp. Colin Mackenzie, vol. 1 (Madras: University of Madras, 1972), 282-96.

The second category is the 'positivist' epistemology in which 'outside' sources analyze the story with some modicum of skepticism, whether they believe in the story's contents or not. It is a method of external study, in which the story is analyzed by an outsider in that it is someone who treats the original story (or a version of it) with skepticism regarding its historical truth. The first work in this epistemology is somewhat of a bridge between the first and second, as Sheikh Zainuddin writes in the *Tuhfat-al-Mujahidin* first the version of the legend as he understands it from a local Islamicate perspective, a version similar to that described in the *Qissa*. Zainuddin's work was written in 1583 and was translated by S. Muhammad Husayn Nainar in 1942. Following this, he reveals his skepticism for what truth could be found in the tale due to chronological problems he encounters. What is especially interesting is that this specific translation also includes commentary from Husayn Nainar the 1942 translator, who gives too his own analysis which still fits within this group.

The next important works which give outside commentary on the local legends come from British colonial literature. Gazetteers were the geographical index of a region used by the British empire, and in the case of the *Imperial Gazetteer of India*, it was a specifically tailored text that describes not only the geographical bounds of each area of the Indian subcontinent, but the history of each region, city, town, and village that the authors could find sources for.[33] This work includes discussion of the legend from a colonialist perspective and will be further useful. On a smaller scale more specific to the region, William Logan's district manual *Malabar* similarly discusses the story, challenging its legitimacy and looking for a 'truth' in the Cheraman Perumal's life.[34]

The final group of authors to fall into the same category of analysis of the Cheraman Perumal legend are those post-independence authors in India which similarly write to search for legitimacy in the texts such as the *Keralolpatti* or in Zainuddin's version. Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai is perhaps one of the most prominent of these authors, who writes in 1970 to come to a series of conclusions on which aspects of the story could have possibly been true.[35] The final analysis to be studied in this project is that by K.V. Krishna Ayyar in 1966. Krishna Ayyar's view provides an interesting addition to the other texts in that his *A Short History of Kerala* denies any truth in the Cheraman Perumal legend by simply ignoring any aspects of it that could be legendary or mythical.

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[33] William Wilson Hunter, *The Imperial Gazetteer of India*, 2nd ed., Vol. 1 (London: Trübner, 1885), vii.
[34] Logan, *Malabar*.
[35] Kunjan Pillai, *Studies in Kerala History*, 212.

Instead, the author gives only details he believes can be corroborated as a 'true' retelling of the region's political history.[36] Indeed, this epistemological group is marked most specifically by the authors' goal of looking for historical authenticity in the story; trying to understand what parts of the narrative could actually have happened and which parts were impossible. This is true not just of Zainuddin, but also of the British colonial authors of the gazetteers and the *Malabar* district manual, as well as the Keralite and other Indian authors of the mid-twentieth century who each seek to find 'the truth'. This group is really about defining the story in relation to the authors' own beliefs, often trying to recreate a new history of Kerala in their own bounds while using the story as a tool.

The third and final historiographical epistemology regarding the Cheraman Perumal legend is the 'post-structuralist', of more recent literature within which this very project is situated. This epistemology is distinct in that the authors studying the Cheraman Perumal story no longer look for, or truly seem to care about what aspects of the narrative truly happened. Rather the story is studied *for* its mythological elements, and the authors of these analyses use it to try to understand either narrative themes in Kerala literature, or for studying cultural history through the lens of what medieval Keralites wrote about their own understanding of their history. The varied goals of the authors who contribute to this epistemology tend to see agreement in a few specific areas despite the different niches of research they fill, especially in their view that there is a marked absence of local Kerala perspective in the historiographical record for the period in which the Cheraman Perumal legend was written. Sebastian Prange, in his text translating and analyzing the *Wye Manuscript*, is especially vocal in this belief.[37] The historiographical journey of this legend will show how it can serve as a bridge to seeing that Indian perspective through the story's authorship and discourse as it shifted over time.

The first of the works to be analyzed within this third group is *Monsoon Islam*, written by Sebastian Prange in 2018. It is an integral piece of writing to understanding how the Cheraman Perumal story is seen by post-structuralist historians, and how that analysis paints a portion of history in Kerala. In the work, Prange seeks to utilize the story as part of a large project to test the possibilities and limits of how the concept of Monsoon Islam brought together economic, social,

[36] K. V. Krishna Ayyar, *A Short History of Kerala,* 1st ed. (Ernakulam: Pai & Company, 1966).
[37] Prange, "The Pagan King Replies," 153.

and political histories of Muslim trading communities along the medieval Malabar coast.[38] The steps he takes to parse the story of the Cheraman Perumal are important to understand due to his heavy use of archaeological sources to study the story. While those analyses are important for historical study, this paper will focus more on the historiographical aspects in looking at incorporating his analyses of written accounts and discussions. It will be very helpful for analyzing how perspectives on the legend have changed so greatly over the years.

One can get more analytical information from discussing the work "Narrating Community: The *Qissat Shakarwati Farmad* and Accounts of Origin in Kerala and around the Indian Ocean" by Scott Kugle and Roxani Margariti. Focusing more heavily on written sources, Kugle and Margariti study the story which they refer to as the *Qissa* and its effect on the context of Islamic self-definition in Kerala via a comparative approach.[39] The two juxtapose the *Qissa* with a Malayalam folk song as well as other stories of religious conversion, to discuss the self-definition of Islam in Kerala.[40] This analysis will be useful in studying how that was seen through a variety of lenses throughout the past centuries, as I will be using a similarly comparative approach but rather than comparing the *Qissa* version of the Cheraman Perumal story to other folk stories as they do, I will be comparing an array of versions of the legend, including their translation of the *Qissa*, to the analyses of the story throughout Kerala history in order to find threads of disparities in function between authors who seek to understand the legend and its origins.

The final work to be analyzed in this third group is Kesavan Veluthat's 2018 article "History and Historiography in Constituting a Region: The Case of Kerala."[41] In this article, Veluthat questions and defines the region of "Kerala" as a unit of study, utilizing the story to see the "forces that went into defining a region."[42]

It is important to briefly differentiate and note the relationship between this post-structuralist group and the postmodern epistemology that Eaton discusses. The postmodernists of Eaton's description are a group reacting to the perceived failings of the subalternists. While the subalternists studied "failed instances of resistance to colonial domination," the postmodernists met the need to account for those failures by casting "the subalterns' failures in terms of the ability

[38] Sebastian R. Prange, *Monsoon Islam: Trade and Faith on the Medieval Malabar Coast* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 23.
[39] Kugle and Margariti, "Narrating Community," 337.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Veluthat, "History and Historiography in Constituting a Region," 13.
[42] Ibid.

of discursive regimes of power to coopt Indian social classes."[43] He notes as well that the postmodern epistemology is dying out, offering up a 'postmortem' for the group.[44] Post-structuralism as I seek to portray it in this project does not seek to account for the failings of past epistemological groups, but instead to understand the historiographical purpose of past epistemologies and use a combination of mythological and concrete historical sources to come to new conclusions on the region's history.

In studying the legend through the lens of these three historiographic epistemologies, we can better understand the historiographical context surrounding the story, and conclude that there is a need for further post-structuralist study by Kerala history specialists which address the issues Eaton proposed.

Research Aims, Relevance, Methods, and Limitations

In short, this research project seeks to provide an in-depth study of the historiographical journey of the Cheraman Perumal legend. It will do so by delving into the clear pattern among history-writers of the past to separate their works into one of three categories of analysis: the archetypal epistemology in which the text is an originally written version of the story and its author, the positivist epistemology where an 'external' historical author has commented on the story and calls into question the authenticity and 'truth' of the story, and the post-structuralist epistemology which follows how a recent author no longer questions the story's authenticity but instead questions what can be learned from it regardless of whether it is 'true'. What is lacking in this field is a comparative piece to study similarities and differences present between the historiography of the texts throughout these categories. This project seeks to accomplish that as a call to action for the further study of Kerala's history via controversial sources such as the titular legend, and do so by providing an overview of the historiographical 'journey' which the Cheraman Perumal story has been through.

To accomplish this, I will now briefly explain the methods with which I plan to analyze the historiography of the Cheraman Perumal. I will look at a sample of texts which fall into each of the three aforementioned categories, comparing them with each other to reveal how the goals of the authors within each epistemological category vary considerably despite their coming to

[43] Eaton, "(Re)Imag(in)Ing Other^{2}ness," 61.
[44] Ibid., 65.

similar conclusions. This will also allow us to see an overview of how exactly the Cheraman Perumal story has been used by various actors throughout the story's lifetime, to help shape the knowledge-production of the region. Throughout each I will note how the categories are readily apparent in the writing and empathize with the intents of the authors, as well as where the categorizations tend to be murkier, to finally show how comparisons between works which cross the boundaries of these categories would be useful avenues of studying Kerala's history through this legend.

This epistemology-based structure for studying the historiography of the Cheraman Perumal legend has its limitations as well, which must be addressed. The three-part structure has the purpose of easy comparison between historiographical narratives regarding the various versions of the story, by dividing these narratives up into analogous epistemologies to see how the differences between them can hint to the authors' intentions and biases with the story's dissemination. Especially important is comparisons such as when the story or analysis appeared, and similarities between authors backgrounds and the contexts of their texts' creation. While this will give a snapshot of the Cheraman Perumal legend and the historiographical outline of it, this study cannot be regarded as an outline for the historiography of the Kerala region in which the story is based, nor the religious history of the region either. The outline of the Cheraman Perumal's historiographical timeline is but a piece of those puzzles which I believe this paper can contribute to. Other analyses in a similar vein of other historical legends would further contribute to better study of the historiography of Kerala.

The Archetypal Group

Earliest Renditions of the Tale

> Just as the Patamala Nayar was executed, a chariot appeared from the heavens, and the gods invited him to ascend in it… before the chariot could depart, the Perumal bewailed what his fate would be for his unjust action. The Pata Nayar replied: "Go on a Haj pilgrimage… accompany those who follow this Veda in a sailing ship… If you then accompany them on this pilgrimage, you will get half deliverance. —The Cheruman Perumal's instructions for partial deliverance from his sins. From the *Keralolpatti.*[45]

The above quote is taken from the *Keralolpatti*, the extensive Malayalam folk history which details the creation of Kerala and serves to narrate the historical structure of the region's society. The work is both heavily criticized and regularly cited by historians studying the region for reasons made quickly apparent by the constant focus on the Brahmin caste present when reading through the text. Simply put, the work is seen as Brahmanical propaganda used to aid a tight hold onto power by exhibiting a historical right to leadership. Despite this, it is one of the most extensive looks at early Kerala history available, and more importantly for the purposes of this project contains one of the earliest versions of the story of the Cheraman Perumal story available. As such, alongside the renditions present in the *Wye Manuscript*, the *Mackenzie Manuscripts*, and the *Qissat Shakarwati Farmad*, these will create the base layer of studying the archetypal epistemology of the Cheraman Perumal's historiographical outline.

This chapter will seek to go through each of the four original versions of the Cheraman Perumal legend above, synopsizing and analyzing each to reveal a pattern present in the goals of the authors who wrote these stories. It will look at both the religious differences in the versions present as well as the caste and family backgrounds of the authors to help compare differences in their goals, serving as a point of comparison to the later chapters on the positivist and post-structuralist groups as well.

[45] Gundert, *Keralolpatti*, 64.

Keralolpatti

To begin with a brief background for the *Keralolpatti*, the story is an originally Malayalam work that detailed the history of the Kerala region from its creation through to the dynastic kings who ruled it up until the point of its writing. According to T. Madhava Menon, whose translation of the work is the basis of study for this project, the origins of the story appeared in the oral historical tradition, which makes it difficult to determine the story's provenance in time.[46] The oral origins combined with the fact that later chapters in the text deal with the Portuguese arrival on the Malabar carries the possibility as well that the different chapters were originally created very far apart in time. In regards to its origins, the *Keralolpatti* is heavily cited by Menon and others as being originally of Brahmin authorship.[47] This reputation for its connections to the Brahmin caste provides this project with useful information on comparing its version of the Cheraman Perumal story to others, in regards to what the authors sought to accomplish with the story.

The *Keralolpatti*'s version of the Cheraman Perumal tale is one of the most often cited, and from all of the available translated versions detailed in this project is by far the most extensive. With its outward goal of narrating the historical structure of Keralan society, the *Keralolpatti* of course prefaces the story with a chapter discussing the Perumals in general: the origin story of their rule, their relationship with the Brahmin caste, and descriptions of each of the *Perumals* or 'rulers' of the Chera dynasty.[48] The work then proceeds to be the only work of the group which details extensively the rule of the titular Cheraman Perumal *before* the beginning of the story in which he divides the kingdom. Most strikingly of all however, is the story's relationship with the Islamic faith. The inclusion by Brahmins of a story in which a Hindu king converts to Islam and goes into a self-exile seems strange, considering the religio-political implications of such a conversion. In this section, I seek to propose a possible reason for this in order to explore and compare the contexts of each version of the Cheraman Perumal story.

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[46] Ibid., i.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Gundert, *Keralolpatti*, 36.

Synopsis

In the seventh chapter, the authors get to the story which is the topic of this paper. As the authors recount, the story begins with the Cheraman Perumal's wife, who had fallen in love with the Perumal's bodyguard: a Patamala Nayar. When the bodyguard rejected her advances, she vowed revenge and convinced the Cheraman Perumal to have him executed. Once the killing blow is struck to end the Nayar's life, a chariot appeared from the heavens, an invitation from the gods for him to ascend. This of course was a sign to the Perumal that his actions in killing his bodyguard had been unjust, and as such he wished to atone for his sins. Before departing into the afterlife, his dying bodyguard informed him that he should go on a Haj pilgrimage to learn the Fourth Veda: first traveling to Chaturappuram, then Tiruvanchanchazhi, before making his way to Mecca. On the way he would meet a *Chonaka* (Mappila Muslim) man named Veda Azhiyar, and by accompanying him on the pilgrimage and believing their faith, would achieve half deliverance from his sins.[49]

After consulting a great conclave of Vedic scholars, the Cheraman Perumal indeed decided to accompany "the Bouddhas" on this pilgrimage as requested. The translators assert that "Bouddhas" were a synonym for "Muslims," despite the possibility of confusion by the author between the Islamic and Buddhist faiths.[50] By this time however, he was a very old man, and it was uncertain whether he would make it back before his own death. As such, the Cheraman Perumal ordered that his kingdom should be divided up among those he favored. The *Keralolpatti* here goes into the details of the way in which the land was divided, and which of his ministers and favored courtiers were given dominion over which areas of land. Udaya Varman Kolattiri was named the Northern Perumal, and it was announced that if no direct successor arises to the status of Cheraman within 100 years, "the victorious will have the right to rule."[51] In the south, the Venattatikal were granted the right to conquer Onanadu. Rule of Tulunadu was granted to the Cheraman Perumal's brother, while the rule of Polanadu was given to the Poralathiri king. Much smaller tracts of land were distributed among a large number of other people and factions favored by the Perumal.[52]

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[49] Gundert, *Keralolpatti*, 64; P. R. G. Mathur, *The Mappila Fisherfolk of Kerala: A Study in Inter-Relationship between Habitat, Technology, Economy, Society, and Culture* (Kerala Historical Society, Anthropological Survey of India, 1977), 2.
[50] Gundert, *Keralolpatti*, 65.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid., 65-66.

Finally, after detailing how the lands were divided, the Perumal sailed off on his pilgrimage. Following the journey laid out for him by his late bodyguard, he found himself first in Jeddah. Here he met the Prophet Muhammad himself, who renamed the Cheraman Perumal to Tajuddin and converted him to Islam before finally making his way to Mecca. The year in which this happens is purported in the text to correspond with 355 CE however, some two centuries before Muhammad. The story comes to an end with the Cheraman Perumal commanding his followers to spread Islam back to spread Islam in the Malayalam region, before passing away. [53]

As the first work to be analyzed in this series, we have yet little of course to compare with other versions of the story. There is however one important piece of information to note about the *Keralolpatti*, its version of the story, and the points at which there will be narrative differences. The first is the journey's catalyst. According to the *Keralolpatti,* the king in question delivers a death sentence on the falsely accused man, and when he realizes too late that the man was indeed innocent and that in killing him he has sinned, the king is told by the man's dying words that he can receive "half deliverance" from his sins by believing in Islam and going on a Muslim pilgrimage.[54] This catalyst that sets the events of the story in motion is a major point of change in other archetypal versions of the story.

The *Wye Manuscript*

The next work to be briefly analyzed is the *Wye Manuscript*. In essence, the narrative of this manuscript provides a Keralite historical account of the Portuguese arrival on the Malabar coast. Though the Portuguese were of some topic within the *Keralolpatti* as well, the *Wye Manuscript* provides a more in depth look at another local Keralite perspective that many saw to be missing from this major culturally significant meeting, according to historian Sebastian Prange. In this case, the perspective of a courtier to the ruler of Kozhikode. He explains that European sources had dominated the history of this time period due to a perceived lack of interest in history within Indian society at all.[55] As such, the writing of *A History of the Portuguese Landing in India* written on brab tree leaves and translated to English by John Wye in 1795 helps to provide some of that missing Indian perspective.[56] The original palm leaf document contains similarities in

[53] Ibid., 69.
[54] Ibid., 64.
[55] Prange, "The Pagan King Replies,"153.
[56] Ibid., 155.

content to the *Keralolpatti*, with Prange considering it almost an extension to the famed work, bringing it up to date with the arrival of Vasco de Gama in India. This project looks at one story in particular however, the differences and similarities in how each portray the story of the Cheraman Perumal.

Synopsis

The story of the Cheraman Perumal within the *Wye Manuscript* is remarkably short, compared to accounts given in other texts such as the *Keralolpatti* or the *Mackenzie Manuscripts*. It begins with the Perumal just before departing for Mecca, without explaining his reasons for doing so. It is important to consider however that the manuscript itself, despite on the whole being an account of the Portuguese landing in India, begins sans-introduction with the story of the Cheraman Perumal. While it leaves out any explanation as to *why* the Perumal decided to go on the Haj pilgrimage, the authors do not seem to think that an important aspect of the story for their purposes, as will be later analyzed.

The story begins with the Perumal splitting up the country to different Rajahs, and the author explaining that the Zamorin was "at some distance" from the king at the time and as such was not gifted a kingdom alongside the many others who were.[57] The Zamorin king did return in time before the Perumal departed however, and as such was given the Perumal's seal and sword, alongside the command to "conquer countries and retain them by that sword."[58] The Cheraman Perumal then departed on his journey and the Zamorin king did as was ordered, conquering the territory of Kozhikode. The author then notes that once the Zamorin dynasty had secured power, the city grew prosperous and welcomed Muslim people from several areas of the world. The story comes to a close with the assertion that Zamorins of Kozhikode have become the most powerful Rajahs of Malabar, and the claim that the Cheraman Perumal had trusted in them more than any other due to his gift of the sword and the seal.[59]

The point of difference to note here is of course the disparity between the *Keralolpatti*'s focus on the *reasoning* behind the Cheraman Perumal's actions, compared to the focus of the

[57] Ibid., 162.
[58] Ibid., 163.
[59] Ibid.

writers of the *Wye Manuscript* in the Zamorin's court which was to on the *effects* that his actions had.

The *Mackenzie Manuscripts*

The *Mackenzie Manuscripts* as compiled and edited by T.V. Mahalingam are the summaries of the most important works from the collection of Colonel Colin Mackenzie according to Mahalingam. Working under the rule of the British East India Company, Mackenzie was the Engineer and Surveyor General in Chennai (Known at the time as Madras) in the first two decades of the nineteenth century.[60] Studying and surveying all of South India, he collected these works as originally written in Malayalam, Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, and Marathi.[61] In essence they are locally sourced histories of the region, used by surveyors such as Mackenzie to help the colonial government come to a better understanding of the political history of its people. This of course means that the content of these manuscripts is collected with a colonialist perspective in mind. Though perhaps locally sources histories, they are compiled by someone working directly for the colonial government in British India. Mackenzie's collection in particular is extensive, especially in his works dealing with the Malabar coastal region. The version I am analyzing here are the English translated summaries by a non-British historian, useful in better understanding the originally intended meanings of the stories. For clarification moving forward, Mahalingam refers to each separate written treatise within the collection as a 'tract,' so I will be doing the same for the sake of consistency and clarity.

Synopsis

The structure of the *Mackenzie Manuscripts* is quite different from the others in this archetypal group. These manuscripts come in a collection of many, each describing the story from the point of view of a different Rajah in the Malayalam speaking regions of South India, for the benefit of colonial surveyors to consolidate the territories controlled by the British East India Company. As such, to synopsize the Cheraman Perumal legend as told in these documents, I will be addressing only a few of the many, and pointing out the similarities within each that characterize the story in these manuscripts.

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[60] T.V. Mahalingam, *Mackenzie Manuscripts*, Foreword.
[61] Ibid.

To begin, part 4 of manuscript number 75 regards the story from the point of view of a few different Rajahs. These manuscripts, like the *Wye* manuscript, do little to describe the reasons for Cheraman Perumal's self-exile and division of the country at first, and instead focus on its effects. Simply, these manuscripts name which ruling families were given the right to rule by the Cheraman Perumal. The kings of Cocci were among those who were crowned by the legendary Perumal, as were the Zamorins of Kozhikode. Here, it is explained that the Zamorins here were given the command to extend their territory after receiving Kozhikode, rather than simply the instructions to take all of their lands by force in the first place. These manuscripts do mention however that it was Mecca which the Perumal departed to, rather than a pilgrimage elsewhere.[62]

Once it has been established which of the families rule in which areas, the legend of the Cheraman Perumal is described more explicitly. Having been a king to break the 17-generation long tradition of periods of 12-year rule, he is known here for driving back invaders and ending his rule in some controversy. Like the *Keralolpatti* states, the story began with a dispute between the Perumal and one of his ministers (instead of his bodyguard.) Here, the minister is wrongly accused of immoral conduct towards the queen and is punished with death. Rather than providing the Perumal a route to partial salvation however, the minister inflicts a curse on him as he rises to heaven. According to this manuscript, the event 'affected' the king's mind, causing him to undertake his journey to Mecca.[63] Despite the implications of such a journey within the Islamic faith, the translator is unsure whether the original authors of the manuscript spoke of Islam or Buddhism being the new religion to which the Cheraman Perumal was converting. From here on out, each manuscript is a description of a ruling Rajah in different areas of South India, and any mentions of the Cheraman Perumal are only to state that he was the one who granted the lands to these Rajahs in the first place, as well as the number of Nayar people who were sworn to them at the time of his distribution.[64] These statistics were very important from the administrative point of view of the colonial surveyors such as Mackenzie. Their larger focus compared to the shorter descriptions of the Cheraman Perumal story itself are indicative of the compiler's imperialist goals in putting together this work.

[62] Ibid., 282-3.
[63] Ibid., 284.
[64] Ibid., 284-8.

To briefly discuss the points of comparison with the other works of this group, the *Mackenzie Manuscripts* purport that the Cheraman Perumal began with the same catalyst as that of the *Keralolpatti*, in that the king falsely accused one of his own ministers and sentenced him to death. Rather than provide for the king a means for partial deliverance from his sins however, the dying man here curses the Perumal, causing him to convert as a punishment.

The *Qissat Shakarwati Farmad*

The *Qissat Shakarwati Farmad* is the final original version of the Cheraman Perumal legend which will be discussed in this category. The work began too as an oral history before being written down in Arabic by members of the Mappila Muslim community in Kerala. Now composed in two manuscripts found in the British Library, the story unfortunately does not have a specific author or date ascribed to it. What we can say about the provenance of this story, in thanks to the work of Scott Kugle and Roxani Margariti, is that it was catalogued to have been "plainly written, in various hands, in Malabar," and was likely acquired by the East India Company in 1792.[65] The story was translated to English in Kugle and Margariti's article discussing the story in depth, and the two historians refer to the story throughout simply as "the *Qissa*." They also argue that while the date which it is written is not known, the story is the same as the one described in the *Tuhfat-Al-Mujahidin* in the late 16th century, and therefore it was written at some time before then.[66]

Synopsis

The version of the Cheraman Perumal legend in the *Qissa* describes a different event from the others analyzed so far as the catalyst which spurred the king to split his empire and depart for Mecca. The beginning of the story however, does not start in Kerala. Rather in Mecca, where Muhammad is asked to perform a miracle, to prove he is the prophet of God. As requested, to prove to the people of Medina that he was true, he prayed for God to split the moon in two: a miraculous event which convinced the people who had previously not believed him.

At the same time, this event was witnessed by "li-sultan al-Hind", the ruler of India.[67] This ruler, the Cheraman Perumal, summoned his priests and astrologers, giving them 40 days to

[65] Kugle and Margariti, "Narrating Community," 346-7.
[66] Ibid., 376.
[67] Ibid., 352.

investigate and explain what had happened. They failed to understand how the moon could have been split into two. He then asked Muslim scholars about the event, who also were unable to explain how this event had occurred. It was not until the prophet Muhammad visited the Cheraman Perumal in a dream, telling him the whole story of his miracle and why he performed it. When the Perumal awoke, he swore to celibacy and abstinence from alcohol, and desired to convert to Islam.[68]

He did not make the pilgrimage or conversion right away, however. It was not until sometime later that a group of people from Mecca came to him, where they explained that Muhammad had caused the moon to split: confirming to the Cheraman Perumal that his dream had been true. It was still not until many years later that he joined a group of pilgrims on their way back from Ceylon (Sri Lanka), drawing up a series of intricate details and plans for the division of Kerala unto his ministers before leaving with them back towards Mecca. The *Qissa* describes how pirates attacked the Perumal and his companions on their journey, but that they were protected by the Prophet so that none of them were harmed. Finally, they reached the city of Jeddah, not far from Mecca, where the Prophet himself was staying. There, Muhammad taught the Cheraman Perumal about the Islamic faith, and converted him, retitling him from Shakarwati Farmad to Taj al-Din al-Hindi al-Malabari. The literal translation would be from 'Cheraman Perumal' to 'Crown of the Religion, the Indian, and Malabari."[69]

While this part of the story marks the end of the other versions which laid out the meeting between the Cheraman Perumal and Muhammad, the *Qissa* adds on a bit more. The author states next that the Perumal requested of Muhammad that he pray for the protection of his kingdom. With it divided into so many rulers, some weak, and some strong, he wished for God to ensure the weak ones were not conquered by the strong. While the Perumal stayed for some 5 years after this, he did eventually decide to return to India to build mosques and spread Islam. In the port of Shihr however, he fell ill and passed away, after telling his followers to go on without him, and spread Islam in the Kerala region in his place.

The major difference between this and the previous versions again falls mainly toward the catalyst. Rather than the events of the story happening due to the Cheraman Perumal's own folly

[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid., 338, 356.

in regards to the death of an innocent man, he is here persuaded to the Islamic faith via a miracle performed by Muhammad himself.

Concluding Thoughts

Overall, the histories of the Cheraman Perumal in this archetypal epistemology hold a few significant points of comparison. The histories each followed the final king of the Chera dynasty, a king who was convinced by one reason or another to believe in the Islamic faith. As part of this conversion, he leaves on a pilgrimage from which he does not return, and in anticipation of this, he divides his kingdom up among his ministers, leaving them each to rule their own relatively small territories. One significant difference seems to stem from the authors' concern for whether the tale painted Islam in a better or worse light: a difference which is very visible in the *Mackenzie Manuscripts* compared to the *Qissa*. The other difference can be seen in the *Keralolpatti* as compared to the *Wye Manuscript*, in which the former is more concerned with the original impetus of the story, while the latter is far more concerned with what the story's effects were on contemporary politics. Beyond those differences, it is easy to see the unity in the category of the Cheraman Perumal's history here, where historical authors explain the history in a matter-of-fact manner, and create the original archetypes of the legend as we know it, focusing on the importance of the Cheraman Perumal's legitimization of the rulers in each territory within Kerala.

The Positivist Group

Questions of Plausibility

> A People who throughout a thousand and more years have been looking longingly back to an event like the departure of Cheraman Perumal for Mecca, and whose rulers even now assume the sword or sceptre on the understanding that they merely hold it "until the Uncle who has gone to Mecca returns," must be a people whose history presents few landmarks or stepping stones, so to speak.
> —William Logan on the history-writing traditions of the Malayali people. From *Malabar*.[70]

The British Raj, 1858-1947, in the Indian subcontinent was a time in which an enormous amount of historical, statistical, and cultural information was gathered about the region by the foreign empire over its dominion. Mostly in the form of gazetteers and district manuals, these works were generally commissioned by the Imperial Civil Service in India itself, and were fraught with the goals of empire. Despite their writers wishing to gather information in order to efficiently exploit the resources of a region and rule over the population, those commissioned were representatives with backgrounds in history-writing and cultural study. They were taught in the British or larger European traditions of historiography, to distrust sources which lean into mythology and look for data: dates and periods of class rule, social structure and conflict. The criticisms of these Indian histories are clear in the above quote from William Logan, who gives a harsh generalization of their traditions based on his reading of the Cheraman Perumal legend. As this chapter will come to see, however, the imperial British surveyors from the nineteenth century were not the only ones concerned with looking primarily for whether the Cheraman Perumal legend had any truth to it. For a few centuries, the primary consensus on the legend from local Muslim, British, and even later South Indian historians was that it should be dismissed from works of history entirely and demoted to a story only of myth.

This group is defined by 'positivism' in the sense of Auguste Comte, in which scientific knowledge and experienceable fact reign supreme over anything not provable in historic research.[71] The chapter will go through a series of positivist histories on the Cheraman Perumal

[70] Logan, *Malabar*, vii.
[71] Robert C. Scharff, "Positivism, Philosophy of Science, and Self-Understanding in Comte and Mill," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (October 1989): 253, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20014295.

legend, starting with the *Tuhfat-al-Mujahidin* by Sheikh Zainuddin, followed by colonial British gazetteers which sought to survey the history of the Kerala region, and then the later post-independence local Kerala history authors. It will look at the similarities in the goals of the authors within this epistemology, to prepare for the later discussion of how those goals can be compared to the goals of the various authors of the earlier archetypal group.

The *Tuhfat-al-Mujahidin*

As we move onto the positivist epistemology of the Cheraman Perumal's historiography, the first and foremost work to discuss is the *Tuhfat-al-Mujahidin* by Sheikh Zainuddin. Written in 1583, the work is a historic local Malabari Islamic text which seeks to encourage the conversion of the people of South India to Islam.[72] The sheikh sets out to describe the history of the Mappila Muslim people in the area: how they came to be and how their conditions changed, and their relationship as well as that of the other locals with the new arrival of the Portuguese in the region.[73]

Critically for the purposes of this project, Zainuddin includes in his retelling a version of the legend of the Cheraman Perumal, as well as his analysis of it: whether it is true, if so, how much of it is true, and the meaning it has for the Mappila Muslims. The version he tells is without a doubt, the same version that is present in the *Qissat Shakarwati Farmad*. This was pointed out already in 1975 at the earliest by historian Yohanan Friedmann, and a read-through of the full texts of the *Qissa* and of the chapter in the Tuhfat-al-Mujahidin make it quite clear.[74] There are no noticeable differences in the plot or the journey the Cheraman Perumal takes, nor in the reasons for his departure. While the sheikh's retelling goes into far less detail, encompassing only two pages of text compared to the *Qissa*'s fourteen, the focus for Zainuddin is on his analysis of the story rather than the complete retelling of it.[75]

His aim in retelling the legend at all is to describe the origins of the Islamic faith in Malabar. According to the story, the Perumal's followers coming back to spread the religion after his death were the original Mappila Muslims, whose community grew widely due to their mandate from the Perumal himself.[76] This section of the chapter will seek to discuss his goals and how they fit into

[72] Zainuddin, *Tuhfat-al-Mujahidin*, 7.
[73] Ibid., 5, 12-13.
[74] Yohanan Friedmann, "Qissat Shakarwati Farmad: A Tradition concerning the Introduction of Islam to Malabar," *Israel Oriental Studies* V (1975): 234.
[75] Zainuddin, *Tuhfat-al-Mujahidin*, 37.
[76] Ibid., 33-34.

the wider theme of skepticism that is common to all of the works in this chapter, before comparing his goals with those of the *Qissa* and other versions of the legend.

Analysis

Sheikh Zainuddin, after retelling the story, discusses his skepticism regarding its historical validity. His immediate concern is the presence of the Prophet in the story, as he insists that the events must have taken place two hundred years after his life despite the catalyst of the journey being the story of Muhammad performing his miracle of the moon splitting. He also takes issue with the proposed location where the Perumal died, leading him to be further unsure of how much of the story can be true.[77] What is most interesting here however is that despite his problems with the anachronisms in the story, he does not seem to refute it further, like we will see other works in this chapter do. He mentions that it is "a well-known fact" that the Perumal divided up his kingdom following his departure, whenever that may have truly happened, giving out parcels of land to all except for the Zamorins of Kozhikode, who instead were given a sword from the Perumal and permission to conquer their territory by force instead.[78]

It seems to be that the reason for Zainuddin's lack of further rebuttal of the story's truth is that he may understand that the legend's usefulness for his goals does not come from whether it is actually true, but instead from the amount of people in Kerala who believe it. While he makes clear that he does not entirely believe it himself, he does discuss how the belief that other people have for the story have an effect on the contemporary political sphere of Kerala. For example, he says that the Zamorin king of Kozhikode is the most powerful due to his love and respect for Muslims, but claims that all of the "unbelievers" or non-Muslims in Kerala think his power comes from the sword which was given to them by the Perumal. When the Zamorin then goes to war with a neighboring king and wins, he may take some land in the process to end the conflict. However, as Zainuddin explains, when they refuse to give any land, then no power can force them to do so because of the decrees of the Cheraman Perumal, no matter how long ago it was.[79] This shows how much of an impact the legend has on the politics of 1580s Kerala, and therefore how much of

[77] Ibid., 39-40.
[78] Ibid., 40.
[79] Ibid., 41.

an impact the story has on the people who live there. Though Zainuddin may not believe the story, he includes it because its aftermath was a significant part of the Muslim story in the region.

Colonial British Texts

The next pieces of work to fall into this positivist group of historiographical analysis of the Cheraman Perumal legend are the colonial surveys and texts following the rule of the British Raj over the subcontinent from 1858-1947, and influenced heavily by the rule of the British East India Company before that. These texts mostly took the form of gazetteers and district manuals: large surveys commissioned by the Imperial Civil Service in India in order to gather information with which to efficiently exploit the resources of the region and rule over the population. Texts fraught with the goals of empire. The historians and surveyors who wrote these books were taught in the British or larger European traditions of history writing, to distrust sources which lean into mythology and look only for data: dates and periods of class rule, social structure, and conflicts. This philosophy of course finds itself immediately at odds with the contents of the Cheraman Perumal legend, as this section will come to show.

Two such works will be analyzed briefly in this section. First will be the relevant passages from the far larger tome *The Imperial Gazetteer of India,* which was written by the historian William Wilson Hunter. The entire work details the many regions of the subcontinent in alphabetical order, from kingdoms down to villages and was published gradually over the period of 1885-1887. Less detailed than the district manuals which were much more focused on only one region, this gazetteer provides short accounts of almost every facet of Indian history that the author could accumulate. The second work is *Malabar,* the district manual for the titular region along the Malabar coast, which was written in 1887 by William Logan. The work goes into far more detail on the Malabar region itself, and yet Logan prefaces the work by explaining how he wishes he could have written more.

Analysis

Volume four of the 1885 *Imperial Gazetteer of India begins* with a survey of the state of Cochin, on the Malabar Coast in which Hunter briefly mentions the story of the Cheraman Perumal and its relation to the history of the state. Any mention of potentially mythological aspects of the

story are disregarded in this work, for Hunter was only looking to state what he believed to be the empirical and provable facts. As he describes, the state of Cochin was one which rose out of the dismemberment of the Malayalam kingdom which Cheraman Perumal ruled over in the ninth century, before succumbing to invasions from the Portuguese as well as the Zamorins of Kozhikode.[80] The lack of any detailed elaboration on this story is an important aspect of the positivist writing: Hunter did not find the rest of the story useful information for these purposes, likely because so much of it was impossible to accurately corroborate. The only aspects he found to be useful historical data were the date, which this section will delve into later, and the fact that Cochin and the surrounding kingdoms were born from a larger dismembered Malayalam kingdom.

That is the last that Hunter speaks of the story at all, however he died before being able to finish the entire work. In the first decade of the twentieth century his colleagues Herbert Risely, William Meyer, Richard Burn, and James Cotton posthumously finished his work in a new edition. In volume seventeen of this work they describe the Cheraman Perumal as a figure that "emerges from the mist of tradition," who voluntarily resigned his throne and divided his kingdom before traveling to Mecca to adopt Islam.[81] After assigning the date of the story to the ninth century as well, the authors state that the events of the story are unlikely, and that they believed it more likely that if the ruler actually partitioned his kingdom at all, it was something that was forced on him by a foreign invader.

Finally, William Logan in his district manual *Malabar* seems to focus on another version of events. He states that according to the aforementioned work, "the Mappillas [sic] came and gave an account to him of the greatness of their religion. The Perumal, it is said, was convinced, and embraced the Muhammadan… faith."[82] The Brahmans then requested a contest to determine the true religion, a contest which they won. The Perumal cut out the tongues of the Mappilas as a result, and expelled them. Despite this, he did not convert back to Hinduism and left for Mecca. He later places the date to be, very specifically, August twenty-fifth of 825 CE based on a festival occurring on the same day.

What immediately stands out is the date at which the above authors place the events to have taken place. Hunter, his colleagues, Logan, and the earlier Sheikh Zainuddin all placed the

[80] Hunter, *The Imperial Gazetteer of* India, 2nd ed., Vol. 4, 2-3.
[81] Hunter et al., *The Imperial Gazetteer of* India, New ed., Vol 17, 56.
[82] Logan, *Malabar*, 227.

events in the ninth century. While the *Keralolpatti* placed the story in the fourth century and the *Qissa* placed it in the seventh, both Hunter and Zainuddin seemed to instead base their dating on something else, though neither give an exact reasoning for why they believe the story to have taken place in the ninth century. Hunter's colleagues in the new edition of his work, however, are far more specific as to why they believe the ninth century is correct: this is the date which is inscribed in his supposed tomb Sabhai on the Arabian coast.[83]

Post-Independence Positivist Texts

The final texts to fall into this group are those written by South Indian historians of Kerala following the independence of the Indian subcontinent from the British empire. These history texts, though not written by British surveyors, were of course still heavily influenced by the history writing of the previous century. Most importantly for the purposes of this study, still pervasive in these texts is the idea that older Indian models of history writing were not on par with conventional European traditions. The authors remain doubtful of the usefulness of works such as the Cheraman Perumal legend or any of the sources in the archetypal group who write about it.

This section will also be analyzing two works in specific. There are countless histories of Kerala written by local Kerala historians in the decades after independence, but these two were chosen out of the many for a few reasons. The first work is the 1970 *Studies in Kerala History* by Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai, who is chosen for being perhaps one of the most prominent of authors on the subject at the time. His book is a selection of articles written from publications over his entire career, covering a wider range of topics and timeframes, discussing his theories on the Chera dynasties.[84] The second piece is K.V. Krishna Ayyar's *A Short History of Kerala*, published in 1966. The analysis of this work will be briefer, as Krishna Ayyar is a great example of a positivist writer who ignores anything not bound by solid evidence. Legends like that of the Cheraman Perumal are considered useless for studying history, and Kerala's history in this book is sewn together only by verifiable sources and archaeological data.

[83] Hunter et al., *The Imperial Gazetteer of* India, New ed., Vol 17, 56.
[84] Kunjan Pillai, *Studies in Kerala History*.

Analysis

Kunjan Pillai begins his discussion of the Cheraman Perumal of legend in order to aid his theory on the origin of the Kollam Era in the 9th century, which he believes is erroneously attributed to the Cheraman Perumal dividing his kingdom. To do so, he establishes what he believes is incorrect with the story, informing the reader that "the absurdity of the story is more in relation to the part concerning the partition of the country, rather than the Perumal embracing Islam."[85] According to him, a Perumal converting to Islam or even Christianity would not have caused such an uproar, and is therefore a possible truth, however he goes on to claim that the Kerala empire could not have been split up in the way the stories describe before the twelfth century AD. The historical records of Kerala's historical governing bodies showed, according to him, a united region until 1028.[86] Further, he believes that prior writers melded the stories of a Pallibana Perumal who converted to Buddhism, and the Muslim Zamorin of Kozhikode to create the story of the Cheraman Perumal.[87]

Much like the other positivist histories written about the Perumal, Kunjan Pillai spends most of this section doing two things: explaining why the story is not possible, and explaining that "a historian need not even mention the legend of the Pallibana Perumal… This title Cheraman Perumal appears to be the basis of all the legend contained in the *Keralolpatti*. *Keralolpatti* and other works of legend cannot, however, be treated as historical fact." Indeed, the story was considered useless.

Kunjan Pillai comes to a few conclusions. For one, that a king of Kerala *could* have visited Mecca or Medina out of respect to Islam. Second, if that king were a Zamorin then the neighboring and blood-related Kolathiri kings would also have accepted Islam. Third, the conversion of the Perumal would have had to happen in the early twelfth century. Finally, that if he accepted Islam himself, he probably kept that secret, otherwise there would be more concrete records of the event from Muslim travelers in Kerala.[88]

K.V. Krishna Ayyar holds a similar issue with the Cheraman Perumal legend, though he takes a different approach to dismissing the legendary aspects. Rather than say historians *should* dismiss them like is done by Kunjan Pillai, he simply *does* dismiss them. In his chapter on religious

[85] Ibid., 208.
[86] Ibid., 208.
[87] Ibid., 209.
[88] Ibid., 212-3.

stirrings in the region, he mentions that the Cheraman Perumal was the son of a Chera princess and a Chola prince, the Chola dynasty having lost their kingdom and begun to live with the Cheras and the Pandyas in the seventh century. He claims that the Cheraman Perumal went on pilgrimages to the Siva shrines of South India, and despite writing about religious upheaval in the state at the time of a surge in Muslim immigrants to Kerala, he makes no mention of Islam in this chapter at all.[89] Only in a later chapter does he describe in a paragraph that Islam was brought to Kerala by Malik Bin Dinar in 644 AD, who constructed ten mosques at Kodungallur, Kollam, and other locations on the west coast.[90] Notably, Malik Bin Dinar is mentioned in both the *Keralolpatti* and the *Qissa* as having been one of the people sent by the Cheraman Perumal to construct mosques in Kerala in his stead, however Krishna Ayyar does not mention any connection between Bin Dinar and the Perumal.[91]

Concluding Thoughts

The biggest pieces of information concerning some of the earlier authors within this epistemological category are the date in which the story is set as well as who the actual person is that is referred to as 'the Cheraman Perumal'. This seems to be due mainly to two major factors. Foremost, historically there were two separate Chera dynasties to rule over Kerala. The first ruled during the Sangam period from the third century BCE to the third century CE, at the same time that the Pandya and Chola dynasties ruled over neighboring regions. The later Chera dynasty ruled form the ninth until the twelfth century CE.[92] While some versions of the story make reference to those neighboring Pandya and Chola dynasties, Kerala was not split up as described by the story until the eleventh century.[93] This confusion is not helped by the inclusion of the prophet Muhammad who makes an appearance in many versions of the story, as the timeline of his life does not fit within the confines of either dynasty. The other factor leading to the difficulty in pinning down the date of the story is the vague nature of how this king is referenced. Only his title, "Cheraman Perumal" is referenced consistently alongside the fact that he was the final king of his

[89] Krishna Ayyar, *A Short History of Kerala*, 43.
[90] Ibid., 64.
[91] Kugle and Margariti, "Narrating Community," 358.; Gundert, *Keralolpatti*, 69.
[92] Kugle and Margariti, "Narrating Community," 345.
[93] Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai, *Studies in Kerala History* (Trivandrum: National Book Stall, Kottayam, 1970), 208.

dynasty, before splitting his kingdom up amongst his ministers. The only other name he is given is Tajuddin, as bestowed by the prophet Muhammad.[94]

Within the positivist epistemology, there is of course one larger unifying factor between all the texts presented here: the goal of that authors was to find a historic *truth* in which the legendary aspects of the Cheraman Perumal were discarded. While they certainly discussed the story, the conclusion was always that there was no single version of the Cheraman Perumal legend that could hold entirely true, and therefore there was no useful historical data. Simply put, the stories had too many points of contention between each other, and rarely matched up with historical data. While the earlier works of Sheikh Zainuddin and the colonial British texts sought to discover what aspects of the stories were true, agreeing for example on the timeframe at which the legendary king lived and died, the later Krishna Ayyar and Kunjan Pillai claimed that even attributing a time frame to the stories was not useful or not concrete enough to be considered historical.

[94] Gundert, *Keralolpatti*, 69.

The Post-Structuralist Group

History Beyond Empiricism

> In contrast to the… dismissals of the "Story of the Shakarwati Farmad" as ahistorical and unimportant, our analysis is based on the premise that, while modern "history" aims to document past events—their sequence, cause, and effect —on the basis of factual evidence, the genre of "legend" renders events of the past significant to the concerns of communities that tell the legend in their own present.
> —Scott Kugle and Roxani Eleni Margariti. From "Narrating Community."[95]

The statement written by Scott Kugle and Eleni Margariti in their article studying the *Qissa* version of the Cheraman Perumal legend is a quintessential example of the narrative focus of the post-structuralist grouping of authors, as this chapter will come to see. The authors who write in this epistemological group are no longer concerned with finding a concrete, empirical 'truth' in terms of discovering whether certain aspects of the Cheraman Perumal story can be corroborated. Instead, the story is studied for its mythological elements, for a few reasons. For one, it can give historians hints as to the narrative themes present in the society's cultural history. Beyond that, it can also tell us a lot about the goals and principles of the original authors who wrote about the story itself. Arguably, this very project falls into a post-structuralist epistemology in its goal of diving into the historiographical goals of the authors who have written about the Cheraman Perumal story in the past.

This chapter will seek to go through the post-structuralist studies which deal with the Cheraman Perumal legend in a variety of ways, and with differing goals in their research. The first of which will be Sebastian Prange's 2018 work *Monsoon Islam,* an important piece for understanding the current literature that exists on the legend in question. Following this will be Scott Kugle and Roxani Margariti's "Narrating Community," in their study of the *Qissa* version of the text. Finally, I will analyze the work of Kesavan Veluthat in "History and Historiography in Constituting a Region: The Case of Kerala." By looking at the distinct range of goals within the post-structuralist group of the Cheraman Perumal's history-writers, this chapter seeks to show how the Cheraman Perumal remains a useful tool for historical study which can teach us a lot about

[95] Kugle and Margariti, "Narrating Community," 342.

Kerala's history, not in spite of the clashing conclusions of the authors of the positivist and archetypal groups, but rather by virtue of them.

Monsoon Islam

To begin with a brief background and synopsis of *Monsoon Islam* and how it relates to the Cheraman Perumal, Sebastian Prange's central argument for this work is the idea that the process of Islamic expansion to the Indian subcontinent was centrally shaped by the interaction between 'ordinary' Muslims, "ordinary in the sense in [sic] that they were neither representatives of state power nor recognized religious authorities," and non-Muslim societies.[96] He begins the work straight away with a retelling of the Cheraman Perumal legend, in this case seemingly the version from the *Tuhfat-al-Mujahidin*, to enunciate this argument clearly: that while the story from a positivist view certainly has holes and inconsistencies in its retelling, it is more than a collection of false mythologies. Indeed, large parts of it are "consistent with the way in which historians have come to understand the trading world of maritime Asia," in which Muslim communities had been formed by merchants in major trading ports all along the Indian Ocean on a massive scale.[97] The spread of Islam thus came not from a unified attempt to spread the religion, but rather by the connections between merchants and sailors and local rulers, such as the interactions described in the *Tuhfat-al-Mujahidin* with the Cheraman Perumal.

Analysis

Interestingly, in a move tied closely to some of the works in the previous positivist group, Prange uses archaeological evidence rather than literary in order to parse the legend of the Cheraman Perumal when he eventually comes back around to the story in his chapter, "The Mosque". He looks specifically to the construction of the Cheraman Masjid in Kerala, a mosque which was established in the year 629, supposedly by the followers of the Cheraman Perumal on his order.[98] With one of this chapter's arguments being that the legend had a significant role in the creation of an Islamic religious class on the Malabar Coast, he uses the archaeological record as the basis just as the British historians of the positivist group did, but instead of doing so to prove

[96] Prange, *Monsoon Islam, 3.*
[97] Ibid., 2.
[98] Ibid., 92.

the actions *within* the story, he uses it to prove the effects that the story had on the population. Discussing multiple versions of the story, one was written by Duarte Barbosa which I was not able to access the original text of, though Prange asserts it is only "the most general outline of the story" in which Muslim traders converted the Perumal and he left to the "House of Mecca."[99] The other texts were the major versions as similarly discussed in this paper: *Tuhfat-al-Mujahidin,* the *Qissat Shakarwati Farmad,* and the *Keralolpatti.*

By combining the versions of the legend and discussing where truth can be found in the mosques constructed in connection with the Cheraman Perumal, Prange sought a new 'truth' in this work. He connected the dots between versions of the story, and found that the locations of the mosques supposedly constructed on the order of the Perumal were simply the locations of major Muslim commerce along the Malabar coast.[100] While the positivists had hit a wall by rejecting a story due to the mythological and inconsistencies it held, this post-structuralist approach allowed Prange to build a story of commercial expansion of a new religious class from the hints the legend provided. That being said, there is also an interesting point of connection between Prange and the positivists. While others in this group seek purely to build history outside of the structure of 'true events' to be gleaned from the story, Prange still was indeed looking for the truth within the story. The difference between this work and that of the earlier positivists is simply that by accepting the mythological aspects as mythological without rejecting the story in its entirety, he was able to find what he was looking for.

"Narrating Community"

The next post-structuralist work that utilizes the Cheraman Perumal legend is "Narrating Community", by Scott Kugle and Roxani Margariti. The 2017 work is a comparative discourse juxtaposing the *Qissat Shakarwati Farmad* with a Malayalam folk song and other narratives of conversion. The goal for Kugle and Margariti is to look at narrative archetypes in Malayalam historic literature, specifically to discover how "just or enlightened kings" were sponsors of community.[101] To synopsize, the authors agreed early on that while the legend has been previously dispelled for its impossible to prove historicity, it is simply a story "shrouded in mist", and like a

[99] Ibid., 94.
[100] Ibid., 98.
[101] Kugle and Margariti, "Narrating Community," 337.

misty mountain draws in explorers, so too did the mist of legend seem inviting to the authors.[102] In this article, they provide a full translation of the story to English as was used for previous analysis, before analyzing the motifs and structures for comparison with similar origin stories from other Muslim communities.[103]

Analysis

There is a distinct similarity to Prange's work that would come out the following year that is immediately visible upon analyzing the post-structural ideas present in this text. Kugle and Margariti seek here to discover the origins of Islamic community along the Malabar coast, just as he did. The distinct difference however is that while Prange looked for concrete evidence of the community's construction by seeking out the mosques built supposedly by order of the Cheraman Perumal and building from there, Kugle and Margariti instead look for strictly literary sources: how the Islamic communities in the region historically self-identified via the histories they wrote about themselves. They look at the motifs present, comparing those motifs with ones found in sources for similar stories of conversion that were not specific to the Cheraman Perumal. In doing so, they form the essence of post-structuralist thought regarding the legend: they are not looking for any empiric facts in the account of what happened in regards to the date, place, and actions taken by the characters in the story. Rather, the focus is entirely on how the narrative present reflect the Mappila Muslims' group identity.[104]

"History and Historiography in Constituting a Region"

The final study to be analyzed as part of the Cheraman Perumal's post-structuralist historiographies is Kesavan Veluthat's 2018 article "History and Historiography in Constituting a Region: The Case of Kerala."[105] Veluthat is a Keralite historian and professor who specializes in medieval Kerala history. The work in question, published in *Studies in People's History*, analyzes an aspect of historiography that has not yet been touched upon in this paper: the most significant unit of analysis which historians use when studying Kerala. That unit of course being the region of Kerala itself. For a historiographer, it is important to understand why historians break their study

[102] Ibid., 338.
[103] Ibid., 338-9.
[104] Ibid., 340.
[105] Veluthat, "History and Historiography in Constituting a Region," 13.

into the confines of specific regions, and whether those boundaries are of relative use to the history they are trying to study. Veluthat does just that in this paper, "looking for the identity of Kerala in sources from the Malayalam-speaking region and to examine [sic] how the two categories… the 'local' and the 'global'… were constituted."[106]

To that end, Veluthat utilizes the story of the Cheraman Perumal alongside other sources to discover "the forces that went into defining a region," as well as examining how past historians have tried to normalize the region's use as a unit of analysis.[107]

Analysis

The use of the Cheraman Perumal story by Veluthat in this article is relatively muted compared to the previous works, where it was a major focus of Kugle and Margariti's article and of Prange's chapter. In abiding with the post-structuralist norms of deconstructing 'truth' to be found in the narrative of the Cheraman Perumal, he instead looks to see what else can be learned from the story's contents, this time trying to find some of the earliest dates in which 'Kerala' is used to define a separate political unit from the neighboring regions. In specific, the regnal years of various Chera Perumals are used to date the beginning of a loose uniformity in the region.[108]

It was after the fall of the Chera kingdom when the rulers of the many splintered principalities began to claim to derive their authority from the donation of the Cheraman Perumal. To Veluthat, this point served as a moment in time in which there is historical record of all of the kingdoms from Venad in the south to Kolattunad in the north which shared this historical tradition and identity, stemming from the decree of the Cheraman Perumal. It is not important here to understand whether the decree and the events that led to it were true or not, only that the story assisted in creating a shared identity, an identity created much in the image of how the Brahman caste wished for it to through the *Keralolpatti* as well.[109]

Concluding Thoughts

The greatest unifying factor in all of these texts has clearly been, at the risk of repetition, the dismissal of the notion that it is problematic that the Cheraman Perumal's story is muddled by

[106] Ibid.
[107] Ibid., 14.
[108] Ibid., 16.
[109] Ibid., 21-2, 24.

mythology and events that cannot be corroborated. But what truly stands out here is actually the noticeable difference in the goals of these authors. Rather than attempting to either reconstruct a political history of Kerala or establish a de jure authority by means of a religious history as the previous epistemological groups were rather unified in doing, the authors of this group each had a different use for the Cheraman Perumal story in constructing different aspects of Kerala history. Prange sought to use the text's major locations as a hint for understanding the spread of Islam along the Indian Ocean coastlines, and to demonstrate how the religion spread through means of laymen rather than religious authority. Kugle and Margariti used the story in order to compare narrative motifs in the history writings of people living along the Malabar coast. Veluthat looked to deconstruct and understand the origins of a Keralite identity to find how useful the regional distinction is for historians at all. These differing goals show how the identity of the post-structuralist epistemology seems to be based in finding a large variety of unconventional ways of using the Cheraman Perumal story, unconcerned with whether it holds the full 'truth.'

Analysis and Conclusions

Looking Forward

> Since historical traditions of diverse cultures inevitably differ in their form, comparative studies have to be more precise and differentiated than they have been so far.
> —Romila Thapar, "Historical Traditions in Early India: *c*. 1000 BC to *c*. AD 600"[110]

With the explorations of each of the 3 groups finally concluded, it comes time to analyze the similarities and the differences found between them, to summarize the patterns within and come to a conclusion on why the Cheraman Perumal story should become a basis for further study of Kerala's historiography, and why controversially substantiable sources are more helpful than harmful for studying a region's cultural history.

This section will begin with a post-structuralist type analysis of the groups themselves in the same order that they were discussed in the paper thus far. As such, to begin we have the archetypal group of works, starting with the Keralolpatti.

Analyzing the Three Groups

The Archetypal Group

As the story of the Cheraman Perumal was written by different authors along different periods of time, the most important thing to note right away is the places within the story where changes occur. This is because as authors have different goals in recreating this story, they may ensure that the pieces of the story which are important to their narrative fit what they want to purvey. Of course, the challenge therein is finding which pieces of the story are changed due to that wish to spread an author's potentially biased narrative, and which pieces of the story differentiate due simply to the widespread nature of the legend. Much like how words get jumbled around in the children's game 'Telephone': when a story passes through oral tradition, or even written tradition over great lengths of time, it will undergo unintentional change.

The major point to take note of the *Keralolpatti*'s version of the story is the journey's catalyst. According to the work, the king in question delivers the sentence of death upon a man

[110] Thapar, "Historical Traditions in Early India," 554.

falsely and vengefully accused of wrongdoing by the Perumal's wife. When he realizes too late that that he has sinned, the king is told by the dying man that while he cannot atone for such a great sin unless he goes on a Muslim pilgrimage and believes the Islamic faith, in which case he can receive "half deliverance."[111] This poses a very interesting note, especially when one considers the descriptions from historians such as V.I. Subramoniam, Sebastian Prange, E. Kunjan Pillai, and others that the *Keralolpatti* is written through the historical consciousness of a Brahminical elite.[112]

The question is, why would a source of Brahminical propaganda include a text in which the conversion to Islam is considered a way to atone for sins, even if only achieving a "half deliverance" as is described? It could be an example of either religious acceptance present between Hindu and Muslim in the region, however it could of course also be an example of the lines between religion simply being blurred in an area where, historically, mandates from old rulers were considered sacred be they Muslim or Hindu. According to Prange, the Brahmin elite were one of the stronger holdouts against the increasing rates of conversion to Islam along the Malabar coast, where local lower-caste rulers had been tolerating the practice for economic reasons.[113] The story as written in the *Keralolpatti* seems at first to contradict that, with the Islamic faith being described in the text literally as "the Fourth Veda."[114] I do not believe this is necessarily a contradiction at all. Instead, it would seem to me that the version of the story in the *Keralolpatti* seems to be a way for the Brahminical elite to take control of a narrative in which a once-Hindu king converted to Islam and went into self-exile. As this analysis later looks into the originally Muslim versions of the story and how they differ from the *Keralolpatti*, it will be easy to see just how damaging their narratives could be to the continued dominance of the Brahmin caste, at a time where as Prange points out, conversion to Islam is firmly established and prospering on the Malabar coast despite Hindu rule.[115] By establishing a text in which both Brahmin dominance is asserted *and* conversion to Islam is shown to be permissible in the way of half deliverance from some sins which the original Vedas do not allow, the *Keralolpatti* and its version of the Cheraman Perumal legend could possibly be seen as a way to maintain Brahmins' status at a time when religious thought was shifting in the region.

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[111] Gundert, *Keralolpatti*, 64.
[112] Gundert, *Keralolpatti*, i.; Kunjan Pillai, *Studies in Kerala History*, 208-9; Prange, "The Pagan King Replies," 156.
[113] Prange, *Monsoon Islam*, 101.
[114] Gundert, *Keralolpatti*, 64.
[115] Prange, *Monsoon Islam*, 101.

The original authors of the *Wye Manuscript* had an extremely clear difference in their intentions in portraying the legend compared to that of the *Keralolpatti*. While the *Keralolpatti* had an in-depth description of the story, beginning with the Cheraman Perumal's reasoning for leaving the kingdom behind, the authors of the *Wye Manuscript* seemed to feel no need to include this. Instead of the causes, the effects of the Perumal's absence were considered more important. As is explained by Phillip Wagoner in his article discussing the founding of the fourteenth century Vijayanagara dynasty, Indian foundation myths often necessitate the founder of any kingdom be given the right to rule by a previous king, as well as often a divine right. What is more important than the religious relationship is the political relationship between an old ruler and one who is bestowed a new kingdom.[116] That is very clear in this text, where no longer is the discussion of *why* a king converted to Islam relevant to the narrative, but rather the impact it had in the Perumal dividing his kingdom and granting lands to his councilors. In specific, the land of Kozhikode to the Zamorin. As Wagoner demonstrated, it was an important signifier of a 'right to rule' for the Zamorins when they described the Portuguese landing in their territory to have had their dynasty granted its powers by a previously established ruler. Prange mentions himself that the inclusion of the story seems to serve only as a description of the Chera king's mandate for the Zamorin's ancestor.[117] According to Mahmood Kooria, another explanation for why the *Wye Manuscript* lacks focus on the details of the story could be that the manuscript was originally included in the *Tuhfat-al-Mujahidin* itself, though Prange and Kooria disagree on this theory.[118] While the *Keralolpatti* acted as a way to maintain the status quo of the Brahmin caste, this version of the legend seems to serve the Zamorin rulers in a similar way: reiterating their mandate of sovereignty. The major difference is that it does so without the extra baggage of compensating for conflicting religious beliefs between the author and the intended audience. As such, the discussion of religion was deemed unnecessary by the writers.

Moving next to the *Mackenzie Manuscripts,* being compiled together in the way they are, these texts provide an outlook not far from what both the *Keralolpatti* and the *Wye Manuscript* sought to produce separately. For one, Mackenzie's compiled tracts indeed bring their version of the 'full story' to light. According to these stories, the Cheraman Perumal followed essentially the

[116] Wagoner, "Harihara, Bukka, and the Sultan," 307.
[117] Prange, "The Pagan King Replies,"157.
[118] Mahmood Kooria, "Does the Pagan King Reply? Malayalam Documents on the Portuguese Arrival in India," *Itinerario* 43, no. 3 (2019): 424, https://doi.org/10.1017/s0165115319000536.

same journey as was outlined in the *Keralolpatti* beyond a few key differences. While the king did falsely accuse one of his own people of immoral conduct and sentence him to die, rather than provide a means to salvation the dying man cursed the king, affecting his mind and causing him to convert.[119] While the journey he takes is still purported to be to Mecca, the tract here is vague in describing the conversion to be either to Islam or Buddhism. This is a marked change from the *Keralolpatti* which sought to place a more 'acceptable' light upon the conversion, even if not a significantly 'good' light on it in the eyes of the Brahmin caste.

Regardless of the interpretation here that a curse had been placed on the Perumal, this tract and the others compiled within the *Mackenzie Manuscripts* all do seem to still rely on the king's notable departure as a mandate of sovereignty to secure their right to rule. Much like how the Zamorins in the *Wye Manuscript* emphasized that the Perumal had granted them the right to conquer Kozhikode, these manuscripts all focus mostly on the same story for different kingdoms who received similar boons. That is why the purpose behind the original writing of these manuscripts does seem to have the same or similar goals to the *Wye Manuscript*. In the same tradition explained earlier by Phillip Wagoner, the rulers who wrote these used the legend of the Cheraman Perumal as a way to strengthen their claim to the territory over which they ruled.

In the *Qissat Shakarwati Farmad,* we see a story that makes some wider turns away from the events as laid out in the *Keralolpatti*. The *Qissa* is the first version of the story which is written from a Muslim point of view. As such, it details the events of the Cheraman Perumal's story and his relationship with meeting the prophet Muhammad more than any of the other stories, which focus more on his time within Kerala. The events which act as the catalyst for the Perumal's actions are far different as well, with it being a miracle performed by Muhammad and witnessed by the Perumal which cause him to eventually make the pilgrimage and convert. As is argued by Kugle and Margariti, the purpose for the writing of the *Qissa* is also quite different from the goals that other works seemed to have. The *Qissa* was a legend of community origin, whose purpose was to explain the origins of the Islamic community in Kerala.[120]

I agree however more along the lines of Prange's analysis of the text, that the main goals of this text's propagation were to establish a space for Islam on the coast with a historical basis.[121]

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[119] Mahalingam, *Mackenzie Manuscripts*, 284.
[120] Kugle and Margariti, "Narrating Community," 338.
[121] Prange, *Monsoon Islam,* 107.

As with the previous versions of the story, the writers were seeking to utilize the idea of a historical 'right' or mandate by a previously recognized ruler to carve out a piece of the cultural territory, and have documentation to back up their right to exist within that space.

By and large, my concluding thoughts on this epistemological category of the Cheraman Perumal's historiographical outline are that the largest common pattern within every single text here is found in the way the authors use history as 'evidence' for their own claims. Each story within the group follows more or less the same pattern with widely varying details: The Cheraman Perumal ruled over Kerala, decided to go on a pilgrimage to Mecca, divided his kingdom up among his ministers, departed to convert to another religion (usually Islam), perished before he could return, and his followers returned in his stead.

The details of each story differed according to the goals of the author, either playing down or up the influence and acceptability of Islam in Kerala in each case. But what remained was at the base of every story, an author who wanted to show how their group of people was given the right to an area based on this king's journey. For the *Keralolpatti,* the Brahmin caste wanted to secure their status at the top of the caste system during a time of increased Muslim influence in the region. For the *Wye Manuscript* and *Mackenzie Manuscripts,* the authors wanted to simply emphasize the fact that their ancestors were among those gifted kingdoms by the Cheraman Perumal, explaining why they held the right to rule over their kingdom. And the Mappila Muslims of the *Qissa* wanted to explain how the followers of the Cheraman Perumal were also given the explicit duty to settle in Kerala, as granted to them before he perished.

This pattern is, to me, a great connector for this archetypal epistemology of the legend's historiography. It shows how the original stories all had reasons, be they subconscious or conscious changes by the authors, to be different. And those differences stemmed from authors of different groups utilizing the story for the purpose of securing their own standings in Kerala.

The Positivist Group

To begin with the analysis of the *Tuhfat-al-Mujahidin*'s contribution to the Cheraman Perumal's historiography, it is important to briefly consider how the goals of the author can be compared and contrasted with those of works from the archetypal group. Zainuddin and the authors of the *Qissa* are perhaps the most obvious choice of comparison, as both recite the same general story in their works, an Islamic perspective in which a miracle performed by Muhammad is the

catalyst which drives the Cheraman Perumal to self-exile and conversion. The two works both wished to explain the importance of the origin of the Muslim community in Kerala. In the original *Qissa*, that was to situate the space for Islam on the Malabar Coast via a historical mandate from the ruler of the region itself. Sheikh Zainuddin uses the *Qissa*'s story to then demonstrate to his readers exactly how the political power held by the story serves their community. According to him, the mandates left by rulers of old such as the Cheraman Perumal are sacrosanct to the people of Kerala. Just as the varied rulers use the legend to maintain de jure rule over their territories, the Mappila Muslims can use the story to maintain their right to have a community in Kerala too. Thus the reason for Zainuddin's lack of further rebuttal of the story's truth seems to be that he understands that the power of the legend does not come from whether it is true at all, instead it comes from how many people within Kerala believe it.

Continuing into the colonial British texts, it is interesting to see how the works of this group thus far have agreed on two things which split from the works in the archetypal group. For one, they are all skeptical of the truth behind the story. Each refuse to believe the events happened exactly as any version has described. For the British surveyors, the imperial motivations as well as British historical traditions shine through in this work. They believe that they are the first to actually bring any 'real' history writing to the Indian subcontinent with stories such as the Cheraman Perumal being too full of mythology, even going as far as to say of them "Happy is the people who have no history."[122] These works are filled instead with only data that can be corroborated, and is thus useful for understanding the diplomatic and political history of the region. That brings us to the second thing which all of this group's works have thus far agreed upon: the date. The fact that the works in the archetypal group were all over the place in terms of dating the events was what seemed to be the biggest problem for authors in this group. Using the archaeological evidence of the Perumal's tomb, the British authors ascribed the events to the ninth century, while simultaneously agreeing that the inclusion of anachronistic characters made them skeptical.

Moving next to the positivist texts from the second half of the twentieth century, I found Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai's statements and conclusions about the story to be very interesting in terms of how they relate to the other authors in this group, and in the archetypal group as well. Essentially, Kunjan Pillai argues that the legend should be simply ignored by historians, before

[122] Logan, *Malabar*, vi.

going on for about four more pages to discuss it and conclude on the possibilities he feels exist on the truthful aspects of it.[123] This is especially poignant when juxtaposed with the writing of Krishna Ayyar, who directly exercised that advice and did not include any material in his history of Kerala that could not be corroborated, or was muddled by mythology.

As with the authors who wrote the archetypal variants of the Cheraman Perumal story, the authors in this positivist group mostly use the Cheraman Perumal story as a tool. The authors of the archetypal group wished for their tool to be treated as mostly true, wanting to show how their group of people was given the right to exist in an area based on the journey of a king. The major difference is that in the positivist group, the authors instead had the goals of understanding Kerala's history through lenses that did not conform to any of the major teleological narratives of the earlier groups. Concerned with either the goals of understanding the political history of a region for the sake of imperialist governance, or constructing a history that fit in with Western European traditions of history-writing, the authors of this positivist group were building a history of Kerala as a sort of formulaic timeline, to fit a writing-tradition rather than to fit a narrative of a people's de jure presence.

The Post-Structuralist Group

Finally, we come to the post-structuralist group. This section will begin with *Monsoon Islam* by Sebastian Prange, who I think ties in as a very good bridge between the positivist and the post-structuralist groups. With a further focus on the archaeological and empirical sources for his project, he finds a way to utilize the Cheraman Perumal legend by linking both literary and archaeological sources to document the creation of a new Islamic religious class on the coast.[124] This technique of triangulating sources is reminiscent of Phillip Wagoner, who uses a similar technique to find reliable information on the Vijayanagara.[125] While the positivist group was solely focused on the empirical, and in some cases rejected major aspects of the Cheraman Perumal legend, Prange could use some of those elements of the story that had shaky consistencies to understand why the focus of the writers were on certain locations along the Malabar coast.

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[123] Kunjan Pillai, *Studies in Kerala History*, 209-213.
[124] Prange, *Monsoon Islam*, 93.
[125] Phillip B. Wagoner, "Harihara, Bukka, and the Sultan," 301.

Scott Kugle and Roxani Margariti, on the other hand, take an approach that is more consistently focused on narrative. Looking for the archetype of the "just or enlightened kings," the use of the Cheraman Perumal story (specifically the *Qissa*), was to compare it with other narratives and Malayalam folk songs. By focusing on just the literary and not looking to corroborate events, this strays further from the intents of the positivist group.

Kesavan Veluthat's study of Kerala of course uses the legend with an entirely new goal in mind: to understand the origins and the definition of the word 'Kerala' as a unit of historical and historiographical analysis. What I think is especially interesting about this work is that while it is possibly the most deeply 'post-structuralist' work in this analysis in that Veluthat is literally deconstructing the root at which all Kerala history studies are based, the work is also reliant on not just varied sources from the archetypal group, but on a positivist source as well specifically the work of Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai.[126] Overall, the post-structuralist group can be defined by this willingness to use the Cheraman Perumal legend in a variety of ways in spite of difficulties corroborating the truth of it, though of course there are far fewer within this group thus far.

Also relevant to the post-structuralist group, however, is seemingly a tendency to romanticize the harmonious religious context of the precolonial world. For example, the previously mentioned idea that it was religious harmony which allowed for Brahmin acceptance of a story in which the Cheraman Perumal converted to Islam within the *Keralolpatti*. While some such as Prange already address this briefly, in identifying the struggle for Mappila Muslims to create a sense of community within the region, it is something that should be further addressed in closer studies of religious dichotomy in Kerala.

Conclusion

This research project set out as a comparative historiographical piece to create a conversation between the extremely varied histories of Kerala based on the story of the Cheraman Perumal, and to act as a call to action for specialists on Kerala's history. To bring to light not just that the story of the Cheraman Perumal, in each of its multiple iterations, is a useful source for understanding the cultural and even political history of Kerala, but that the seemingly antithetical epistemologies have each built a historiographical structure from which the study of Kerala's history can be enhanced for future research. Richard Eaton expressed concerns regarding

[126] Veluthat, "History and Historiography in Constituting a Region," 16.

essentialism, issues of agency, and the disappearance of pre-British sources in the study of South India. With the conversation between these epistemological groups, this project serves to insist that those difficulties can yet be engaged and answered.

It is important to understand, when looking back through a variety of epistemologies in a historiographical context, the authors' goals for their writing. After all, these authors are producers of knowledge, and shaped the understanding of Kerala's past for their contemporaries. The works in the archetypal group, in which the Cheraman Perumal legend first appeared in a recorded context, each had a similar goal: to represent a group of people for whom they wished to establish a de jure right to establishment in Kerala. Be it the Brahmins, the Zamorins of Kozhikode, or recently established Muslim communities, each pointed to the mythical authority of the Cheraman Perumal to show their contemporaries that they had been granted status. These sources, pre-colonial in authorship even if muddied here by translation, are histories as written by local agents.

For the positivist historians, this goal shifted ever so slightly. The story of the Cheraman Perumal remained a tool, but with their goals shifting to a broader base, it was one in which they sought to place under a microscope the legitimacy of the different versions of the story. Each of the historians from Zainuddin to Kunjan Pillai sought to construct a history of Kerala and introduced a chapter in the historiography of the Cheraman Perumal which exposed the inconsistencies within, while simultaneously exposing the agency of the story and the diversity of cultures held by Kerala's early medieval historians. While Sheikh Zainuddin did not believe the details of the story, he commented on the power and agency it had over those who believed it to hold up immense political claims. Then the commentaries from Logan, Hunter, Krishna Ayyar, and Kunjan Pillai on the contradicting nature of the earlier versions worked to demonstrate that the people of Kerala are not an essentialist monolith, and instead are a diverse field of actors and historians producing knowledge and contributing to the same sources.

And finally, the goals of the post-structuralist group are to eliminate the final complications. They have shown that history and historiography can be studied via the Cheraman Perumal story despite its multitude of versions and inconsistencies. Indeed, it is exactly those inconsistencies that act as an avenue for studying the history of Kerala, not by trying to decipher which parts of each version are the 'correct' events, but instead by using it as a means to study historians, who are producers of knowledge by their very nature.

Contemporary authors on Kerala history and that even of South India as a whole, such as Daniel Woolf, Romila Thapar, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, have shown that historical authorship on Kerala and South India was damaging due to its insistence that the region's peoples did not have a culture in history-writing, despite the fact that indeed they did. More such as Thomas Trautmann went on to establish just how British history-writing traditions found themselves supplanting older traditions. I believe the Cheraman Perumal legend shows that there remains an avenue of studying the multitude of history-writing traditions that have contributed to the history of Kerala, via historiographical review.

With a heavy focus on the themes found in these post-structuralist papers, the Cheraman Perumal story should be considered for the exemplary source it is in studying the region's history. Not just in the archetypal forms in which it was originally recorded, but also in the forms it took in going through centuries of analysis by positivists, post-structuralists, and everyone in between. By understanding the pre-British sources and the agency found in the story, and by creating a non-essentialist history through the understanding of just how many actors were present in the creation and propagation of the story, historians can create a path forward. The legend of the Cheraman Perumal is an insufficiently tapped trove of data on the history of Kerala, indispensable for the furthering of historical study of the region.

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