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N. 7
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Fascicolo 27. Luglio 2026
Storia Militare Moderna

a cura di
GIAMPIERO BRUNELLI



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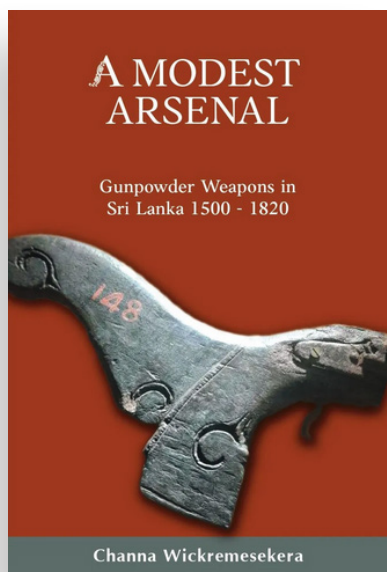


Vienna, Monumento equestre al Principe Eugenio di Savoia, particolare.
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CHANNA WICKREMESEKERA,

*A Modest Arsenal:
Gunpowder Weapons in Sri Lanka,
1500-1820*

(Colombo: Tambapanni Academic Publishers, 2024),
pp. xviii+177, Price LKR 3,500.00, ISBN 978-624-5529-13-1



How far gunpowder weapons were responsible for the intrusion of Western European colonialism in the extra-European world? Further, did the introduction of gunpowder revolutionise warfare and society in the non-Western world? Channa Wickremesekera, a Sri Lankan military historian resident in Australia, in the slim volume under review attempts to tackle the two above mentioned interrelated questions by making a case study of Ceylon (pre-modern name of Sri Lanka) during the early modern period.

Wickremesekera argues that gunpowder was introduced in Sri Lanka by the Portuguese during the first half of the sixteenth century. I think that there is a possibility that gunpowder might have reached Sri Lanka from mainland India. Tamil mercenaries were employed by the Sri Lankan rulers from the eighth century. India had a tradition of using handguns (*nalikas*) and cannons from the late fourteenth century. When the Portuguese came to India during the last decade of the fifteenth century, they found that the Indians were well adept in using gunpowder. Wickremesekera acknowledges that probably in the late thirteenth century, some pyrotechnic devices were used in Sri Lanka by the Tamil mercenaries.

Aggressive Portuguese moves forced the Sri Lankans to use cannons and muskets. The Sri Lankans imported military goods like cannons, sulphur (required for making gunpowder along with charcoal and saltpetre [nitre]) through the Moplah traders of Malabar. The Moplahs had picked up gunpowder technology from the Ottomans in West Asia. Since the Portuguese monopoly in spice (especially cinnamon) trade harmed these Muslim traders, they had a vested interest in aiding the Sri Lankan rulers to oppose the '*feranghis*.' Probably traders from Southeast Asia acquired knowledge about gunpowder weapons from China and aided in the genesis of the incipient gunpowder 'industry' in Sri Lanka.

In 1658, the Portuguese in Sri Lanka were replaced by the Dutch. However, their attempts to move inland like the Portuguese was defeated by ecology. The roadless jungle clad mountainous terrain in the interior of the island made it almost impossible for the Western Europeans to march inland with their heavy artillery. Further, the vegetation covered uneven landscape allowed the Sinhalese armed with bows and arrows to ambush the ponderous columns of European musketeers. Volley firing had no use against the dispersed Sinhalese archers who fired arrows and then rushed towards the infantrymen before they could reload. The Portuguese faced the same problems as they tried to move in the interior of Africa.

In 1796, the Dutch in Sri Lanka were replaced by the British. The British were able to penetrate successfully into the interior of the island kingdom during the first two decades of the nineteenth century. This was possible due to two reasons. One, was managerial. This involved use of indigenous auxiliaries as non-combatants for pulling guns and carrying stores as the British columns marched inland. The second was technological. Introduction of flintlock muskets with their quick firing mechanism (in comparison with muskets) and longer range enabled the Brit-



Flintlock gun, Sri Lanka, 17th-18th Century. Metropolitan Museum. Edward C. Moore Collection, Bequest of Edward C. Moore, 1891. Public Domain.

ish to smash the Sinhalese stockades made with logs. The Burmese also made similar stockades during the three Anglo-Burma Wars (1824-1826, 1852-1853, 1885).

The Ceylonese were able to manufacture matchlocks but not flintlocks. Again, the Sinhalese were able to produce unpurified gunpowder in limited quantities. But, continuous wars required large amount which the indigenous workshops were not able to supply. Nor did the Sinhalese have the technical skill to manufacture shots. So, often the Ceylonese guns were without ammunition. Further, the Sinhalese were able to import some guns from Southeast Asia and south India till the British naval blockade cut these two sources of supply. Even when the Sinhalese had guns, due to lack of training and maintenance facilities, their guns did not function properly nor could their gunners work them efficiently.

Wickremesekera opines that the Sinhalese rulers and their nobility did not go full throttle in integrating the gunpowder technology and techniques with the existing military system. This was because full integration of firepower TTP (to use a modern terminology which stands for tactics, techniques, and procedures) would result in overhaul of their traditional social and political power structure which the ruling elite was unable and unwilling to do. For instance, establish-

ment of a dedicated professional standing elite musketeer corps would result in the destruction of traditional levy of part time soldiers cum peasants who were mobilised via the local rural nobility. So, low caste people were given firearms not the elite ones. Wickremesekera comments that even when the Sinhalese rulers were fighting the British, their main aim was to preserve the hierarchical social structure. This argument is similar to Stewart Gordon's argument regarding India who says that the Indian princes were against full absorption of gunpowder weapons as it would result in the disintegration of the traditional social structure for whose preservation they were fighting. Haphazard amalgamation of firepower technology within their traditional military system did not revolutionise Ceylonese warfare. Hence, the effectiveness of gunpowder weapons in the hands of the Indians and Sri Lankans remained limited.

There have been lots of studies about the impact of gunpowder on indigenous societies and the role firearms played in the construction of British colonialism in mainland South Asia. However, the island of Sri Lanka has been left out by the scholars from their ambit of analysis. Credit is due to Wickremesekera for bringing this island under scanner. He has reconstructed the story from both European archives and also indigenous sources like Sinhalese poems, etc. He shows admirably Sri Lanka's opposition to the Western European encroachments from the sixteenth century and the slow expansion of British power in this island during the first half of the nineteenth century. The author argues rightly that the physical geography of Sri Lanka limited the effectiveness of gunpowder weapons and introduction of firearms did not radically restructure 'native' society and indigenous warmaking. Overall, this volume enriches our understanding of the creation of the colonial rule in the premodern extra-extra European world. This monograph will be of interest to practitioners of Asian history in general and military historians of early modern period in particular. My only regret is that this valuable book will not be easily available in the markets of the UK and the USA.

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Johann Georg Ziesenis (1716-1776). Portrait of Friedrich the Great (1763).
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Storia Militare Moderna

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