CHAPTER THREE

BEYOND CINNAMON: DUTCH INTERIOR POLICY 1780-1795

3.1 Introduction

During the hundred fifty years of their presence on Sri Lanka the Dutch produced a huge amount of maps and plans of the island. Recently D. Paranavitana and R.K. de Silva brought these together in one publication. The atlas provides a fine visual overview of the colonial intervention that took place progressively over the years. The early maps show the whole island, with all the Dutch forts along the coast and only the interiors of the southwest and the Jaffna peninsula outlined as Dutch possessions. Often, the rest of the map is filled with bushes, rocks and exotic animals, although sometimes indigenous regional names are given. Early drawings are also found of the various forts on the coast. It is not however until the 1750s that we get a better picture of the various provinces of the interior. Balthus van Lier’s detailed maps of some of the districts of Galle, Colombo and Jaffna reveal some of the increased inland activities discussed in the last chapter.

In 1789, long after the war with Kandy was over, a large map of the whole island was drawn up for Governor Willem Jacob van de Graaff (1785-1794). The boundary between the Dutch and Kandyan regions was drawn by a clear red line, and the designer of the map gave the Dutch a very generous share of the island. What makes it so interesting is that the enormous map provides very detailed information on all areas under Dutch rule including the marginal areas, like the Magampattu and Panoa in the southeast and the Vanni in the north. The areas are split up into administrative sections, churches are shown, villages are named, large water tanks are indicated and even some of the outstanding ancient ruins around Anuradhapura have been given a place on the map. Other maps of the interior drawn up in the same period show us the exact location of cinnamon gardens and plantations in the vicinity of Colombo, and there are detailed plans for irrigation works in the Mannar region and Matara. These maps underscore the fact that the 1780s and 1790s were a period of yet more intense colonial encroachment on the island.

Governor Van de Graaff, who had commissioned these maps, is a forgotten figure in Dutch and Sri Lankan historiography. If he is mentioned at all, it is in relation to the cinnamon plantations or regarding his dramatic fate after he left Ceylon for Batavia. The contemporary sources
present an ambiguous picture of the period and the governor in question. While someone like Jaques Fabrice van Senden, the head of Trincomalee, called him affectionately “the illustrious brother who […] steers the little vessel Ceylon”, Pieter Sluijsken, the commander of Galle repeatedly labelled him authoritarian and selfish and accused him of developing sinister plans and projects on the island.

Selfish or illustrious, it is clear that Van de Graaff was an interesting character. Combined with the dynamic impression that we get from the maps made during his rule, this makes one curious about this last phase of Dutch rule on the island. The events of the 1750s and 1760s foreshadowed the global unrest and political changes of the 1780s. The disintegration of the Mughal empire, the British and French agitation in South India, the rise of strong regional power holders like the Sultan of Mysore and the general declining position of the VOC in the Indian Ocean brought the crisis close to the island, and changes in Dutch policies on interior Sri Lanka should be placed in the context of these developments.

The chapter is divided into two main sections. The first discusses on a more general level these changes in policy as well as the international and local impulses for change. A need for economic resources pushed the Company further inland as it searched for more efficient forms of surplus extraction and actively involved itself in the agricultural production. The last required large investments that could be easily recouped in the long run. The second part of the chapter discusses the changes in policy and the continued colonial intrusion in the core areas. How did this further encroachment affect the relationship between the native headmen and the Company, a relationship that was already tense and problematic before the 1780s, as we saw in the last chapter? Chapter Four also deals with the peripheral areas that, as seen in the map of 1789, were more or less taken over by the colonial government, and it includes a discussion of the new encounters in these underdeveloped regions and the attempts of the colonial officials to impose more direct forms of rule here.

3.2 Changing circumstances – the cinnamon plantations

After years of travelling in the east, the famous Swedish botanist Thunberg resided in Ceylon between 4 January 1777 and 14 March 1778. Following his return to Europe he published a two-volume account of his experiences and he devoted several chapters to his stay on Ceylon. His account includes lengthy descriptions of the island’s flora, and he also gives some insight into the social life on the island. The systematic cultivation of cinnamon attracted his interest. In his description of the garden