CHAPTER 8

Comparative Perspectives on the Pepper Trade

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This paper aims to elucidate three features related to the importation of South Indian pepper by the Romans in the first to the second centuries CE and by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century: first, the size of the ships required in each era; second, the quantitative dimensions of the import; and third, the dependence of the trade on the ecological and anthropological particularities of the Malabar region in south-western India. It will be shown that the huge pepper production of central Malabar encouraged the deployment of ships with considerable, albeit different, carrying capacities in both eras. Moreover, it will be argued that the remarkable Malabar productivity was largely based on the pepper grown and harvested by the local foraging communities in the foothills of the Western Ghats.

Pepper and Seagoing Ships at the Periyar Delta, in the Sixteenth Century CE . . .

In a letter dated 24 December 1504, Álvaro Vaz, officer of the Portuguese garrison of Cochin, could describe to his king D. Manuel the commercial implications of Portuguese control over the small kingdom of Cochin and the nearby delta of the Periyar River.1 With a patrol of just a few warships to deter

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1 CA III 258: ‘Se vosa Senhorja manda aquy amdar d armada as fustas e bragamtijns que lhe tenho scrltto, que tolhan que nenhuuns çamboquis navegem, com este par de caravellas que qua estam, e, jisso mesmo, se nesta fortezea tem dpositoo xx ou xxx (mil) cruzados, aja por certo que xxx (mil) quintaes de pimenta cad ano se podem recolher, d aquy tee coullam,— xx (mil) aquy, e d hy pera çíma, e os mais lla […] Ora veja vossa Senhorja quanto proueito se d isto segue, e quanto majs certa estara sempre a carregaçam e segurança da partida das naaos, a tempo que nam pasem o risquo que passou o almjrante […] e, em breue tempo, este rrio de coochy he pera ellas mjlhor do mumdo, nem majs seguro, e podem hir per ele açíma b e bj leguoaes, e meter tamto espamto aos senhores que jazem per ele açíma, omde
Muslim traders and funds of 20,000–30,000 cruzados to purchase the commodity, His Highness could secure for his ships as many as 30,000 quintais (more than 1,500 tons) of pepper each year—20,000 from Cochin, and the rest from Quilon.\(^3\)

Very soon, reality surpassed imagination. Tomé Pires, *feitor das drogarias* in Cannanore in 1511, estimated 20,000 bahar (c.3,200 tons) as the yearly production of Malabar, coming from the region between Chettuva (c.70 km north of Cochin) and Kayamkulam (c.90 km south of Cochin).\(^4\) In a letter to D. Manuel dated 31 October 1520,\(^5\) Nuno de Castro argued that from the region

\[^{2}\text{In sixteenth century Portuguese documents, pepper is usually measured either in bahar of Cochin and Quilon (166.272 kg) or in quintais do peso velho (51.405 kg): Lima Felner 1868, 47; Bouchon 1977, ix.}\]

\[^{3}\text{Vaz's estimate is echoed by Leonardo da Ca' Masser and Vincenzo Quirini, each of whom, around 1506, foresaw a yearly import from Cochin to Lisbon of as much as 10,000 bahar or 30,000 to 35,000 canatara of pepper: Da Ca' Masser 33; Quirini 9–10. A similar amount of especiaria is also mentioned by Pacheco Pereira 100.}\]

\[^{4}\text{Pires ii 362 (fol. 129 v.): ‘a pimenta avera no Malabar atee vimte mjll bahares E naçe de chatua athee o Reyno De caya coulam E alguuã pouca por coulam por cranganor E cochim he a escala Desta pimenta a mais perto E onde mais ganham a levam ajmda que seja com trabalho […] a q̃ nacee no senhorio Do Reino De cochim e melhor.’ Very close to Pires' amount are the 60,000 cantera (c.3,000 tons) estimated as the Malabar production by Francisco d’Albuquerque (Francesco dal Bocchier) in 1518: Aubin 1973, 194; maybe directly inspired by Pires is the estimate (20,000 bahar = 60,000 quintais) repeated in a 1569 text, on which see Thomaz 1998, 39.}\]

\[^{5}\text{CA vii 175–176: ‘Senhor nesta terra do Malavar—a saber—de Belymjaom, que he acem de Coulã porto ate ij legoa alê de Cranganor pera Calequt, tenho sabido que se colhe cadano xb (mil) bares de pimenta ate xbj, nô [contando?] a que lhe fica pera velha de hû ano pera outro que se gasta per esta maneira—a saber—na mesma terra se gastarã ij (mil) ij (mil)bc bares dela em seus comeres, e se leva pera fora ê boys e nas cabeças ate ij (mil) bares que sã ja grãdes caminhos abertos pera Cale Care e outras partes do sertâo e a hy hû caminho que se chama Futura, e des Beliãa a levam a cabeça pera Comormy e asy a mais tres caminhos outros que levam a pimenta ê boys e trazê nele arroz e o retorno ha pimenta dos paraos de Panane, Chatua, Cranganor levarã cadano pera Dio ate bç bç bares dela que vã per longo a costa como ja dyse a VA. e os nove myll que pode ficar guardã pera velha ij (mil) ij (mil) bares dela, e nesta velha fazê eles a royndade por que tem mais sostamçia que ha verde que logo cõ pouco}\]