

2.25 Church Burials of Dutch Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

After expelling the Portuguese from the coasts of Sri Lanka it was the Dutch who ruled the Maritime Province. The Dutch were successful in the total expulsion of the Portuguese in 1658 with the surrender of Jaffna (de Silva, 2005: 11). One of the principle testimonies and living legacies of Dutch rule in Sri Lanka are its churches. Only three Reformed Churches built during the heyday of the Dutch remain standing to the present day (Brohier, 2001). They are the Dutch Reformed Church at Wolvendaal (also known as Adirippuveediya Palliya), the Galle Dutch Reformed Church and the Matara Dutch Reformed Church.

These churches are fine examples of Dutch architectural tradition executed by local craftsmen. Although the deceased are traditionally buried in a cemetery adjoining the church it is significant that these churches also entomb Dutch Governors of Sri Lanka, their kin and other notable families within the church building itself (de Silva and Beumer, 1988). Several tombstones found within the church are used as paving for the floor. In addition the remains of deceased persons were also placed within the walls of the church. It was customary for the Dutch to bury the dead within the Church and they appear to have carried on this tradition in Sri Lanka as well as Batavia (Modern day Jakarta, Indonesia). Burial inside the church was reserved for those who could pay the highest sum and many Christians believed that burial within or near the church was a way to be close to God (Sloan, 2002: 8).

This paper hopes to discuss various features of these tombstones especially as they reveal several important clues of past life to archaeologists i.e. the carvings for instance suggest the use of local craftsmen, and the motifs used on the tombstones also have different symbolic meanings. Important families also have their coat of arms emblazoned on their tombstones, which indicate a social hierarchy. Through the study of these tombstones we may also better understand the attitude people had towards death, which is essential to understand society as a whole.

References:

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