

ICSS/13/OP/367

Date of the Martello Tower at Hambantota

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The Martello Tower in Hambantota in the southern Sri Lanka is the sole example of this fortification type in the country. It is a round gun-tower of two stories on a small hill which was designed to be used as a defence structure. This style originated after a tower in Corsica that caused difficulties to the British during their battles with the French in 1794 and these towers were adapted to the British defensive strategies soon.

The exact date of the construction of Hambantota Martello Tower is not established due to unavailability of records. The suggested dates for the tower vary; one statement said it was constructed shortly after 1796 and another placed the origin of the tower between 1803 and 1806. The first known published reference to the tower is dated to 1806. It is often mentioned that this might have been used during the barricade of the Kandyan Sinhalese in 1803, when they attacked the British held territories.

The objective of this paper is to date the construction of this tower, based on authentic records of the British administration.

According to the records available, Martello Tower at Hambantota was constructed after August 1804. It is evident that Major General D.D. Wemyss, Commander of the Forces in Ceylon, ordered Lt. W. Gosset of the Royal Engineers who was in charge of the engineer department at Galle to construct a round tower to contain fifty people. Records also suggest it was still under construction by mid-1805.

Key words: *Martello Tower at Hambantota, British military defences, Military history, Fortifications*