

The Dutch East India Company (VOC) and Its Use of Company Slaves (*Companies lijfeijgenen*) in Sri Lanka around 1681¹

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Abstract

Focusing on colonial Sri Lanka in the 17th century, the chapter shows what kind of work the VOC used its Company slaves for, who were used in addition to other forms of unfree labour. As the chapter highlights, the Company was also involved in the slave trade, however, sometimes in indirect ways. Moreover, the Company naturally benefited from the fact that it facilitated its (poorly paid) staff to provide themselves with unfree domestic workers. All this is analyzed through abundant archival materials. The nature of the work performed by Company slaves shows that the socio-economic alien and occupier had no choice to successfully exploit the land and keep other competitors out, than by using forced, especially enslaved labour.

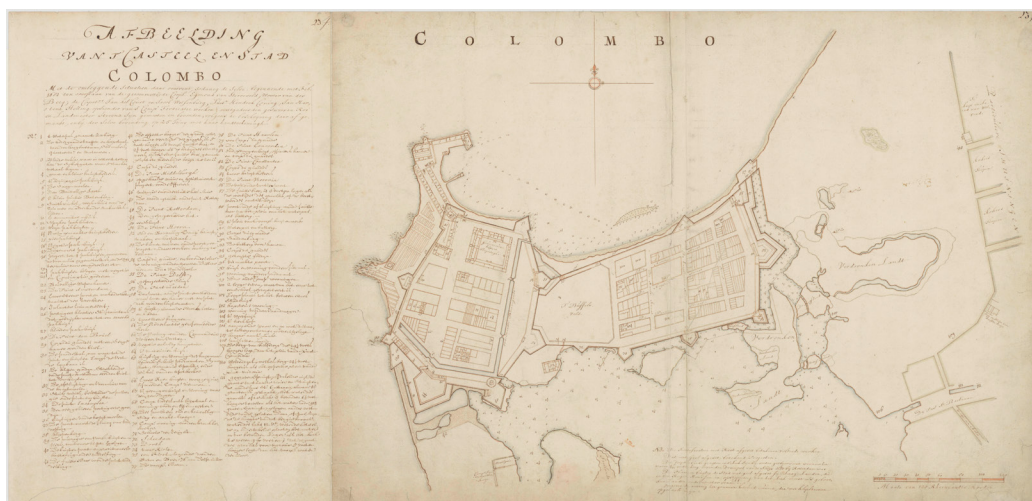
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1. Introduction

When the term slave labour is used, one often refers to forced labour carried out by persons enslaved in Africa, transported under appalling conditions to the American plantations and put to work. However, with the exception of the nutmeg plantations on the Banda Islands (Moluccas, Indonesia), the VOC did not operate plantations where slave labour was involved.² Nevertheless, it is well known that the Company and its personnel made extensive use of slave labour in their colonial settlements and trade posts. Since the VOC's geographic area of operation

¹ The draft version of this chapter was presented as a paper under the title 'The Dutch East India Company (VOC) and the use of non-free labour, especially of the so-called *Companies lijfeijgenen* (Company slaves) in Sri Lanka round 1681' at the conference 'Colonialism, Slavery, and Local Histories in Asia', Växjö, Sweden 15–16 September 2023.

² The nutmeg plantations on the Banda Islands were formally exploited by private entrepreneurs. Their dependency of the Company was of a total character, therefore it is legitimate to call those Enterprises VOC-plantations.



Map 2.1. Colombo in 1681. Map made in Ceylon by Livinius Stevensz, 1681, redrawn c. 1695 by Isaac de Graaff, cartographer, for the VOC Atlas Amsterdam. Colour drawing on paper, 53 x 74 cm. National Archives, The Hague, entry 4.VEL, inv.nr. 944. On the left lies the Fort of Fort Colombo, known as 'the Castle'. At the right side one sees the Oude Stadt (Old Town), residence of Burghers and non-European inhabitants, such as Muslims, Chetties, Tamils and Sinhalese, and their private slaves.

was widespread, from the Cape Province in South Africa to the trading post in far-away Japan, it is self-evident that the character of the many settlements varied considerably. Therefore, the results of the research into the use of slave labour by the Company in the occupied coastal area of Sri Lanka cannot be generalised into a general picture of how the VOC itself made use of slave labour.³

Along the coast of Sri Lanka and inland the VOC possessed forts to protect itself against European competition or threats from the interior kingdom of Kandy.⁴ For the maintenance or construction of these fortifications slave labour was used, the most well-known form of this deployment. The Company used slave labour throughout its forts and neighbouring settlements. In order of size, these were the capital Colombo (*Colombo*), Jaffna (*Jaffanapatnam*) – administrative centre of the district of the same name in the extreme north of the island – the walled port town

³ This chapter will not discuss the use of private slaves by Company employees – generally this involved domestic work in and around the house, and this work would have been the same throughout the Company settlements.

⁴ Since the first contacts, the island was called Ceylon by Europeans. This name, retained at Independence in 1948, was changed to Sri Lanka in 1972. In this chapter, the name Ceylon will mainly be used when referring to the coastal area that was occupied by the VOC.

of Galle (*Gale* or *Punto de Gale*), 112 km south of Colombo (*Colombo*), and then the smaller fortresses, such as Matara (*Mature*) in the south, Kalpitiya (*Calpentijn*) in the middle, Mannar (*Manaar*) in the north, and finally Trincomalee (*Trinconomale*) and Batticaloa (*Batticaloa*) in the east – from the small fortresses Kalutara (*Caliture*) south of Colombo and Negombo (*Negombo*), north of Colombo, I have not found any overviews.⁵ In this chapter the use of the varied deployment of slave labour will be sketched based on a unique source, namely an overview of Company personnel and other dependent workers from 1681, which also provides a list of so-called Company slaves (*'lijfeijgenen'*) for all VOC places.⁶ The lists of 1681 are unique in their detailed description of the nature and location of the tasks performed by the Company slaves, totalling 3,040 persons.⁷ That number was fluctuating: in 1683 a number of 1,413 was reported,⁸ in 1684 the Company owned 2,363 slaves, 'although the majority of them were onbequaam' (unfit for work).⁹

The lists not only provide a unique insight into how the Company's slaves were used, more generally these documents show one of the major tools that the Company had at its disposal to achieve its main goal, namely the economic exploitation of the occupied coastal area of Sri Lanka.

Before I proceed to an extensive description of the use of Company slaves, I will first give a very brief description of the VOC's arrival and later presence in Sri Lanka, followed by the question of why the VOC, assuming that trade relations as they were used to in Europe were not possible and had therefore decided to replace Portugal as a colonial power, then had no other choice, in addition to using all the traditionally compulsory labour of the local population also to make use of slave labour.

⁵ Dutch proper names of places and words used in the 17th century are written in italics, and in the case of quotations from sources used, they are provided with double quotation marks.

⁶ NA, Den Haag (The Hague), VOC 8902, pp. 567–568: *Corte sommarium der voorenstaande 's Comp^e lijfeijgenen op 't geheele Eijlandt Ceijlon* (1681). In documents of the VOC the word *slaaf* (slave) is usually used, next to *man slaaf* (man slave) or *jongen* (boy). Females mostly are mentioned as *slavinnen* or *vrouwen slavinnen*. When the sex is not indicated, the term *lijfeijgenen* was used. This term 'lijfeijgenen' should not be confused with the same word used to denote the land-bound persons (in English: *serfs*) in the Middle Ages and beyond.

⁷ NA, The Hague, VOC 8902: Lists of Company slaves, pp. 555–567.

⁸ *Generale Missiven* IV, p. 569. Listed are: 1,160 Company slaves, men and women, fit (*bequaem*) to serve; 307 unfit due to advanced age and disabilities; 209 almost needy persons; 15 runaways (*weggeloopene*); 99 schoolchildren; 123 infants. Runaways usually found refuge in the territory of the kingdom of Kandy. On many occasions the Company asked Kandy to return those runaways, but the King usually refused to do so. Later in the discussion of the 'List of Company Slaves in Colombo' the phenomenon of running away will be returned to.

⁹ *Generale Missiven* IV, p. 733.

Arrival and later presence of the Company in Ceylon

In 1636, the king of Kandy had invited the VOC to help expel the Portuguese occupiers from the island of Sri Lanka.¹⁰ This resulted in a campaign (1638–1644) in which the Company conquered Batticaloa and Trincomalee in the east, and Galle and Negombo in the southwest. The last two coastal towns controlled the adjacent area where cinnamon trees grew, so that the Company could now take over its exploitation itself. After a ten-year truce, the VOC took up again its struggle to oust the Portuguese from Sri Lanka: their capital Colombo was conquered in 1656, and the northern city Jaffna in 1658, the last stronghold of the Portuguese. The King of Kandy soon understood that one European power had been replaced by another. In the period 1665–1675 the VOC governors Rijcklof van Goens the Elder and his namesake Van Goens Jr tried in vain to get control of the cinnamon-growing areas regained by the Kandians during the earlier Kandyan-Dutch struggle against the Portuguese. The aggressive and costly military adventure ultimately met with resistance from the VOC-management in Batavia and the directors in the Netherlands. The conquest of these areas was halted, but the king of Kandy refused to conclude a treaty with the VOC. So, the VOC's presence remained based on the treaty of 1638, which had stipulated that the Company should hand over conquered Portuguese forts to the king of Kandy as a precondition for obtaining freedom of trade.¹¹ The VOC had no other option than to grit its teeth and accept that its presence was actually only based on its military superiority. At the same time, the king could do nothing but accept the presence of the VOC, where the Company's expression 'servant of His Imperial Majesty' hardly helped to allay his dissatisfaction. The new 'appeasement' policy had some success, because every year since then the Company was allowed to send an embassy to Kandy, where valuable gifts were presented to the king, after which permission was obtained to also have cinnamon peeled in the King's territory by members of the caste of cinnamon peelers, the Chalias.

1.1. Stranger in a foreign land

The VOC's decision to take over the spice trade from the Portuguese in Sri Lanka by establishing itself as a colonial power put the Company in a special situation: it had become 'Lord of the Land' with the tacit consent of Kandy. This meant that, following the example of the Portuguese predecessors, the existing feudal administrative system was adopted, with the replacement of the pyramidal top by VOC officials

¹⁰ Until 1972 the island was named Ceylon.

¹¹ Arasaratnam, 'Dutch Sovereignty in Ceylon', pp. 105–121.

– the local administrators, the headmen at village level and above remained in place. That gave them great power over the population against which the Company could do little or nothing.¹² Be that as it may, the rights and obligations of the local inhabitants, largely farmer families, remained more or less the same, although changes did occur that always benefitted the Company. The Sinhala population in the southwest paid traditional taxes (usually in kind) and performed their corvée (Rajakiriya), because those were services owed to the higher castes and especially to the Company as ‘Lord of the Land’.

The Muslims (Moren) and Chitties (Chetties) were foreigners in the eyes of the Company, and provided substitute services that could be bought off – an example of a hated activity was the work at the VOC fortifications for twelve days a year.¹³

The corvée and taxes brought benefits to the Company, but were not a solution to the fact that the Western-styled Company was a stranger and remained so in an Asian society in which, generally speaking, the agricultural society remained closed and in which the Muslim and Chitty traders traditionally formed the *trait d’union* with the outside world.¹⁴ There was no free and available labour force, with the exception of some skilled craftsmen who could be hired.

Apart from this, in an agricultural society there were many activities that were carried out within the family: caring for the fruit trees in one’s own yard and picking the fruits (think of the important coconut tree), or caring for the livestock (think of the buffalo, the important draft animal). This was the type of labour to which the Company did not have normal access, but it would have caused great difficulty if this kind of work could not have been provided. An example related to the artillery of the forts can make this clear: no artillery without gunpowder; no gunpowder without a powder mill; no powder mill without buffaloes; no buffaloes without shepherds and grass cutters. Alas, cattle shepherds and grass cutters live with their families in the villages, far from the Dutch forts. They are children and elderly people, perhaps handicapped members of the family. So, in order to deter the British you need strong forts with threatening artillery, and of course gun powder. Without those shepherds and grass cutters that would be difficult to realise. However, those who can do such jobs are not available unless they are bought. Many more such examples will follow in the descriptions below, but it is clear that the absence of free workers had to do with the non-existence of typical Dutch

¹² Arasaratnam, ‘The Indigenous Ruling Class under Colonial rule in Dutch Maritime Ceylon’. See also: Remco Raben, *The Ethnic and Spatial Order of Two Colonial Cities 1600–1800*, p. 223.

¹³ For a short history of the Uliyam services, see Raben, *The Ethnic and Spatial Order of Two Colonial Cities 1600–1800*, pp. 227–230.

¹⁴ Muslims and Chitties: both groups have an Indian background and were important as retail traders who had good trade contacts with the ‘Overkust’ (Coromandel/Madurai in South India).

institutions and infrastructure. There were no hospitals in Sri Lanka, so there were no nurses, etc. available. There were no orphanages, so there was no group of free assistants or maids to be hired. The European carpenters, blacksmiths or masons had no children or apprentices around who could do small jobs or could be sent for a message. A solution had to be found to accomplish this often modest work, because without it the VOC could not work on its objectives.

Of course, the jobs mentioned above are just part of the work carried out by Company slaves. Other typical tasks were related to loading and unloading of the VOC-ships and shallows, for most of the dock-hands were slaves who were taken away from the maintenance of the fortifications (their regular 'daily work', due to the seasonal traffic in the port). And to end with the most important thing: the maintenance work on the forts was indispensable for the continued presence of the Company on the island.

1.2. Slavery in Ceylon

The phenomenon of *Rajakiriya* has already been mentioned above, which applied to certain groups of the Sinhalese – in areas inhabited by Tamils in the north and north-east, this system of *corvée* also existed, albeit with some differences. The colonial predecessors of the VOC, the Portuguese, as 'Lord of the Land' also made use of this, but like their successors, it did not offer them a solution for the fulfilment of many tasks. Because there existed no slavery in Central and South Sri Lanka (with the exception of a small group that had to perform specific unclean tasks (such as laying out the deceased from families of certain high Kandyan castes), the Portuguese used slaves imported from elsewhere – areas of origin were South India, Southeast Asia and Southern Africa. This did not involve 'cattle slavery', the brutal system that would arise in the Atlantic from the end of the 16th century, but these enslaved persons performed mainly domestic work.

In Sri Lanka the VOC followed in the footsteps of the Portuguese but greatly expanded the import of enslaved people, not only from nearby South India, but also from the Indonesian Archipelago. It was striking that the first massive deployment of slave labour had to combat a shortage of *agrestic* labour: the king of Kandy was so angry that his Dutch ally was not prepared to hand over the conquered Colombo to him in 1656 that he ordered the Sinhalese population to leave the coastal area and move to Kandy. The result was a food crisis and the VOC could only solve this by importing slaves *en masse*, particularly from South India.

The situation was different in the north. The system there was that members of some low castes were obliged to perform (mainly) *agrestic* labour, but that these *serfs*, in the relevant literature mostly called slaves, were not allowed to be sold outside the territory of the Jaffna province.

1.3. *Options*

It is important to realise that Company slave labour coexisted with other forms of non-free labour. Think of forced labour imposed by VOC administrators as a punishment for disorder, theft, violence, non-payment of debts or refusal to work. Or think about the work spoken of above, imposed on Muslims and Chitties.

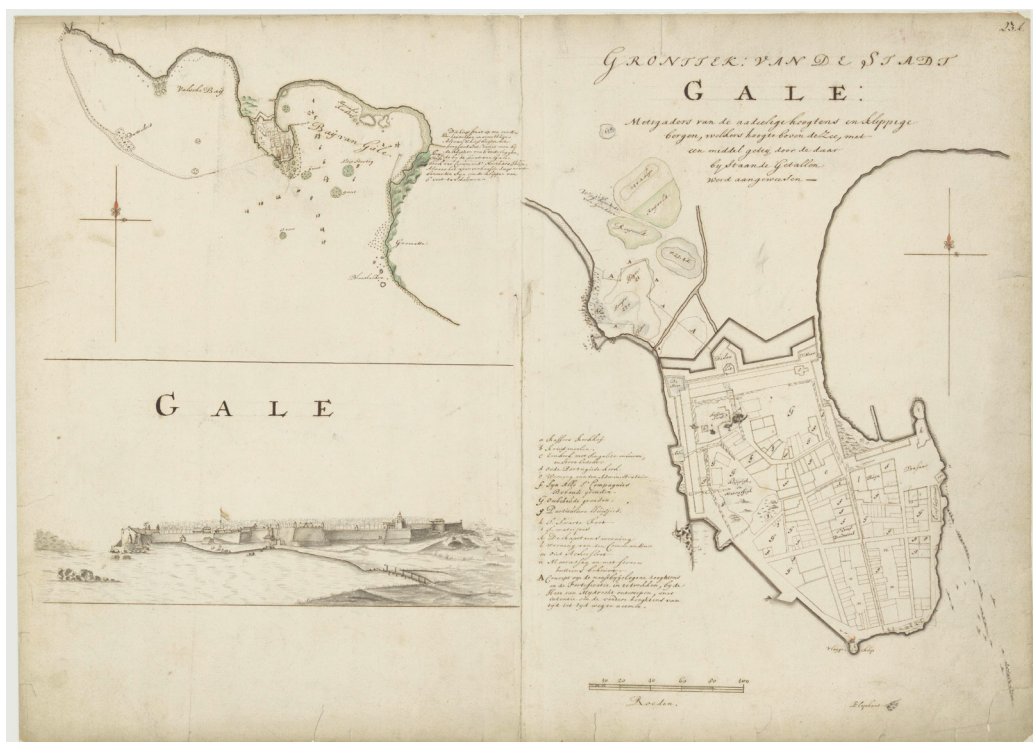
To understand why non-free labour was unavoidable for the VOC to get done certain activities, a large number of circumstances and conditions must be considered. Which work could best be carried out by personnel brought in from Europe? What were the possibilities of an alternative choice, for example by hiring local personnel – carpenters, blacksmiths, etc.? What were the financial consequences of such choices? The choices also depended on the area where the decision had to be made, for Sri Lanka was economically and culturally very diverse. In the northern and dry district of Jaffna (Jaffanapatnam), largely inhabited by Hindu Tamils, the situation was very different from the wet, fertile southwest, where the Buddhist Sinhalese formed by far the majority. The above-mentioned Muslims and Chitties lived along the coast, in the Company's territory, and also in the coastal strips that were (still) in the hands of Kandy.¹⁵ The directors of the Company were quite well informed about the various circumstances, and knew – or thought they knew – what they, as 'Lord of the Land', could ask the population, based on customary law and tradition, interpreted often in favour of the Company. It should be noted that the VOC regarded *corvées* and in general caste obligations as a generally acceptable form of labour by free inhabitants, in a situation where we now would speak of forced labour in most cases.

2. A search through the lists of Company slaves in 1681

2.1. *Company settlements: enclaves in a rural society*

To give some context to the Company's use of slaves in Ceylon, I will begin with a sketch of daily life in the coastal area occupied and exploited by the VOC. Since the colonisation by the Portuguese, some urban centres had sprung up on the coast, but the extent of these should not be exaggerated. These were small areas, almost enclaves in the countryside, consisting of a fort and neighbourhood adjacent to it.

¹⁵ In February 1766, a peace treaty was signed by the Company and the King of Kandy. This ended the war with which the king supported the uprising that had broken out in the south of the Company territory at the end of March 1761. Under this treaty, Kandy ceded the coastal area that had not yet been in the hands of the VOC.



Map 2.2. Galle in the late 17th century. Map made in Ceylon by an unknown surveyor, redrawn c. 1695 by Isaac de Graaff, cartographer, for the VOC Atlas Amsterdam. Colour drawing on paper, 53 x 74 cm. National Archives, The Hague, entry 4.VEL, inv.nr. 1054. Zooming in on the map on the National Archives website will reveal locations where Company slaves worked, such as comps. paardestal (horse stable) and comps. hospitaal (hospital).

Only in the case of Colombo can we speak of a real urban settlement, called the Oude Stadt ('Old Town').¹⁶ The stadt next to Jaffna Fort was nothing more than a small neighbourhood – only the street pattern with a limited number of streets and cross streets was a bit reminiscent of a European city. Only the walled town of Galle, though modest in size, had the character of a town. The smaller forts only had modest built surroundings, never larger than a simple hamlet. Outside of this the countryside started, especially in the vicinity of the sparsely inhabited forts. From their colonial enclaves the VOC administered an immense rural countryside – the number of Sri Lankan inhabitants in the entire coastal area under VOC administration is estimated at around 500,000.

¹⁶ See Raben, *The Ethnic and Spatial Order of Two Colonial Cities 1600–1800*, pp. 182–196.

As indicated above, the Company benefitted from taxes and corvée services provided by the local population, but essentially its presence was all about the production of the cinnamon, during two periods per year, by the members of the Salagama caste or Chalias, who peeled the precious bark in the forests, after which others took care of the transport of the dried bark to the VOC warehouses at the coast.

To protect the profitable cinnamon monopoly against European competitors, it was essential to maintain a ring of fortifications along the coast. Earthmoving, digging, lugging, chopping, that was the picture of every day. The Dutch artist Esaias Boursse left an interesting pictorial account of this in his *Tijkenboeck* (1662).¹⁷ Specialised 'kraal breekers' were active in mining coral in Mannar Bay and around Jaffna, but also in the south – tourists still watch from the glass bottom boats admiring the living coral of the Hikkaduwa Coral Reef. In the interior, laterite was dug to obtain square clay-like blocks, which hardened in the open air into usable building blocks. Most forts had a powder mill powered by buffaloes. Adult Company slaves worked on the mill, children and women cut grass for the buffaloes. Others emptied the poop barrels in which the soldiers of the bastions relieved themselves daily, and emptied them at designated places on land or in the sea. Everywhere in and around the forts, in addition to the hard work at the fortifications, there were small jobs such as mentioned above: cattle had to be herded, horses cared for in the horse stable, drinking water had to be fetched, etc., etc. Much of the light work was done by old women and small children – they were also used to carry lime, sand and stones, officially in modest portions 'just to learn the job'. Slaves also worked as washers, work that in the villages was practised by members of the washer casts. Women often worked as cooks or nurses in the hospitals or as maids in the orphanages in the urban VOC places.

2.2. *Matara*

The fortress of Matara, about 40 kilometres from Galle, lay on an elongated peninsula, about a kilometre long and 200 metres wide, between the Nilwala River and the sea. The peninsula was (and is) closed by a simple rampart with a gate; at both ends is a half-bastion and in the middle is a bastion ('punt') – on those humble strongholds the soldiers on duty stood guard. Behind the rampart lay the house and office of the *Dessave of Matara* (the VOC administrator over the local population), some smaller houses for other European personnel, a church, barracks for the garrison – including warehouses and a 'combuijs' (galley) – and a few huts lodging local personnel who worked in the elephant stables; there was also a warehouse for the cinnamon bark. From the list we learn that there also

¹⁷ Wagenaar and Beumer, 'Esaias Bourse's "Tijkenboeck"', pp. 312–331.

Table 2.1: 3040 Company slaves in Ceylon, 1681

	Man fit ¹	Women fit ¹	Men above age 50	Women above age 50	Children aged 6–14 fit ¹	Men not fit ¹	Women not fit ¹	Children not fit ¹	Children aged 2–5 ²	School children	Totals
Colombo & District	471	539	31	44	281	84	149	2	213	179	1993
Galle ³	172	122			90 ⁴	4	35	55	35		511
Matara ³	13	23					6		2 ⁵		44
Jaffna ⁶	50	8			7	3	1		1 ⁷		70
Mannar	54	28			7 ⁸	6	6	19 ⁸			120
Kalpitya	37	7				2	2	10 ⁹			58
Trincomalee	57	37			33		4 ¹⁰	17 ¹¹			148
Batticaloa	68	24					1	3			96
TOTALS	922	788	31	44	418	99	204	106	249	179	3040 ¹²

Notes:

- 1. Fit: in the Dutch text one reads ‘tot dienst(en) onbequaam’ (incapable of service).
- 2. In the Dutch text one reads ‘zuigelingen’, which can refer to babies or to young children (kleene kinderen), 2–5 years old.
- 3. The 1681 summary list of Company slaves gives figures for Galle and Matara together but have been split here.
- 4. The 1681 summary list for Galle & Matara gives 90 children of the category 6–14 years old, unspecified by sex. The separate list of Galle & Matara mentions 81 ‘opkomende jongens’ (growing boys) in one place and 62 ‘meisjes’ (girls) elsewhere. After some calculation I suppose that of these 62 girls 7 can be assigned to the category of children aged 6–14 years and fit for service, and that the 55 children in the section ‘kinderen onbequaam’ (in the table ‘Children not fit’) must be girls.
- 5. In the separate list of Galle & Matara, two girls in Matara are mentioned ‘who are still of little service’. The age group is not specified.

6. The separate file from Jaffna lists two different groups of slaves, e.g. overkust slaven (slaves from the Coromandel Coast) and hierlandtse slaven (persons born as slaves in the Commandment of Jaffna).
 7. The separate file from Jaffna lists in the group of 'overkust slaven' a mother with her child 'nog zuigende, 't laaste in 't hospitaal' (a mother with her child still suckling, the last in the hospital) – possibly a wet-nurse in the hospital fed the baby so that the mother could work.
 8. The separate list of Mannar speaks of '26 kinderen als 7 groote en 10 kleene' (26 children, being seven big kids and nineteen small ones). The 'kleene' children are further specified as 2, 3, 4 and 5 years old. The big kids will have fallen into the category of under-fourteen.
 9. The separate rol or lijst (list) of Kalptiya speaks about 'kleine kinderen die niet doen' (young children who are doing nothing [that is: doing no service]). Their age is sometimes mentioned as being 2, 3, 4, 5 years.
 10. In the separate list of Trincomalee one reads about 4 women 'oude en tot wercken onbequaam' (old and not fit for service).
 11. The separate file of Trincomalee lists 50 children, 17 of whom are still (in Dutch: nog) unqualified to work and reports 4 children as 'impotent' (disabled) – these four are not included in this general overview.
 12. This number approaches the number of permanent paid servants of the Company, Europeans and Eurasians, in 1694: 3026.
- Source:** National Archives (NA), The Hague, 1.04.02 (VOC), inv.nr. 8902, Copies of missives and reports received by the Governor General and Councilors in Batavia, 10 July 1681, 567–568: 'Corte sommarium der voorensstaande Comp^e lijfeijgenen op 't geheele Eijlandt Ceijlon' (1681). The preceding pages contain the detailed overviews of the Company slaves in Colombo & Colombo district (555–558), in Galle & Matara (559–562), Jaffna (562–563), Mannar (563), Kalptiya (564), Trincomalee (564–565) and Batticaloa (566).

was a small hospital – I know no map or print mentioning this. The hinterland of Matara was economically important, for in this part of Company territory most cinnamon trees could be found. Many elephants were also caught in that area. The wild elephants were tamed immediately after capture and then transferred to the stables on the Matara Peninsula to await further transport to northerly Jaffna for sale to South Indian customers.

In Matara the Company had 44 slaves at its disposal: 13 men and 23 women who were qualified ('bequaam') for work; 6 women who were 'onbequaam' and two very young girls who did not yet have to work. Four men worked elsewhere in the district, as well as two women.

The mention of a basket maker is interesting. On drawings by the aforementioned Esaias Boursse, made in 1662, we see women at work at the fortifications of Colombo. They are most likely Company slaves who use baskets of local design to transport earth, lime, etc. The baskets will have been destined for the same purpose in Matara but could also have been used for other purposes. Four Company slaves working as masons were sent elsewhere, two to Galle and two to Katuwana (*Catoene*) – there a new fort was under construction. Given the still difficult relationship with Kandy, completion of that fort at the frontier was considered a priority.

The division of duties of Company slaves was as follows:

Table 2.2: 44 Company slaves in Matara, 1681

Males 13		Artisans	General Services	Daily Work	Care	No service/ Not fit
2	Worked with the carpenter	2				
4	Masons (2 > Katunawa, 2 > Galle)			4		
1	Basket maker	1				
1	Worked in the (cinnamon) warehouses		1			
2	Worked in the hospital				2	
1	Attendant in the Company horse stable		1			
2	Empty the poop barrels of the bastions		2			

Females 31		Artisans	General Services	Daily Work	Care	No service/ Not fit
23	Transport of roof tiles, bricks, clay, loading & unloading of the shallops			23		
(1)	Works in Fort Katunawa with the masons]		(1)			
(1)	Works in gunpowder mill in <i>Billigam</i> (now: Weligama)		(1)			
6	Old and not fit, no service					6
2	'Girls, not yet able to do much service'		2			
Totals		3	6	27	2	6

Source: National Archives, The Hague, VOC 8902, p. 559–562.

2.3. *Galle*

Galle (the English name since the British took over the administration in 1796) was the administrative centre of the Commandment of the same name, consisting of the Gale Korle and the Dessavonie of Matara.

Table 2.3: *Company slaves in Galle, 1681*

Males 176		Artisans	General	Daily Work	Care	No service/ Not fit
12	With the boss blacksmith ¹	12				
8	With the carpenters, 1 of them as apprentice	8				
8	Masons, '5 who already doing good services'	8				
8	5 Stonecutters ('steenpickers'), 1 with the blacksmith, 1 'fire blower', 1 charcoal burner	8				
2	1 <i>mocquedon</i> (supervisor) and 1 spinner at the wick workshop ²	2				

2	Aids in drilling and blowing up cliffs	2			
9	At the gunpowder mill ³	9			
4	In the warehouses (rice, salt, food, textiles)		4		
6	(‘Nederlands’) hospital			6	
2	Work in the kitchen, get firewood			2	
1	In the orphanage, gets firewood			1	
4	Attendants in the horse stable	4			
4	Attending/ milking of cows	4			
2	Emptying poop barrels of bastions, serving the military at the Corps de Garde			2	
1	Work with the sexton/church			1	
3	Kaffirs with the fiscal ⁴	3			
1	Tamil (‘Malabar’) clerk ⁵	1			
4	<i>Mocquedons</i> with the prisoners at the Public Works		4		
4	Not fit, sewing rice bags, doing light work			4	
7	6 cliff drillers in Katunawa, 1 oil burner in Billigam (now: Weligama)	7			
84	Daily Work (‘Dagelijksche arbeid’) ⁶		84		
<i>subtotals</i>		56	16	88	12
				4	
Females					
157		<i>Artisans</i>	<i>General</i>	<i>Daily Work</i>	<i>Care</i>
					<i>No service/ Not fit</i>
1	Midwife			1	
2	Kitchen, serving meals			2	
3	Slave hospital, general help for the sick			3	
1	Orphanage, gets drinking water			1	

1	Brings drill bits from cliff drillers to and from the blacksmith	1				
5	Mocquedons 'dagelijksche arbeijdt' (Daily services)		5			
109	'Dagelijksche arbeijdt' (Daily work)		109			
19	Too weak, still with children, wick making				19	
11	10 pick oakum, 1 <i>mocquedon</i>				11	
5	Blind people				5	
	<i>subtotal</i>	–	1	114	7	35
Children 178		Artisans	General	Daily Work	Care	No service/ Not fit
<i>Jongens 81</i>						
1	With boss carpenter	1				
1	Apprentice basket making	1				
8	With the masons	8				
3	With stone drillers	3				
1	Makes handles in the 'materiaalhuis'	1				
1	Son of a Dutch father ('van een Hollandse vader'		1			
44	'Kleen en groot' (small and big children) who bring lime and stones/bricks to the masons			44		
22	Not yet serving, get some training in transporting lime and bricks					22
<i>Meisjes 62</i>						
31	Transport lime and bricks			31		
31	No service, trained to transport lime and sand					31

<i>Infants</i> 35					
male	23				23
female	12				12
<i>Children subtotal</i>	14	1	75	–	88
TOTALS	Artisans	General	Daily Work	Care	Not Fit
511	70	18	277	19	127

Notes:

1. At the smithy three of them are cleaning several weapons ('het geweer' in the armory, five 'slaan voor' (that is: prepare the finer work of the blacksmith), the other four operate the bellows ('trekken de blaasbalgen').
2. The *mocquedon* not only oversees the wick makers but also is responsible for 'in en uijt sluijten der gecondamneerde swarten en Hollanders, en andere dingen meer' (responsible 'for putting on and taking off the shackles of condemned blacks and Hollanders, and much more'). 'Blacks' here refers to local Sri Lankan people, such as unwilling cinnamon peelers, thieves, or other locals who in the eyes of the Company showed criminal behaviour.
3. The entry reads: '9 at the gunpowder mill: 2 of these are used at the millstones to push the made gunpowder under again and again, and the others carry, sift and bring gunpowder, etc.'
4. The word *kaffir* (Dutch *kaffer/ caffer*) is now generally regarded as an ethnic slur. At the VOC *rakkers*, assistants of the *fiskaal* ('fiscal' or public prosecutor and maintainer of public order) were called *kaffer* ('kaffir'). Although they were often enslaved persons, they were not necessarily of African descent.
5. Born Jaffna serfs (see further 2.6 Jaffna), were not allowed to be transferred outside the province. Therefore, this enslaved 'Malabar' must be a Malabar speaking person, or himself enslaved at the Coromandel coast (now: Tamil Nadu, India). He might have functioned as a *trait d'union* between the VOC and the Muslim population in and around Galle, or as a translator of documents, of witnesses, etc.

Source: National Archives, The Hague, VOC 8902, p. 559–561.

Galle was especially important as a port city. The large VOC ships on their way to Batavia (Jakarta) made a stopover there, while some of the 'return ships' (retour-schepen) from Batavia sailed via Ceylon to load the precious cinnamon and textiles imported from South India. Some large VOC ships sailed from the Netherlands to Galle to return directly to the Netherlands. In the months of October and November the large ships from the Netherlands and Batavia arrived; in principle they first anchored in Colombo and then sailed on to Galle. The ships left Galle for the Netherlands in February and November, while March and April were suitable for sailing from Galle to Batavia (or returning). Therefore, the busiest periods in the ports of Colombo and Galle were October–November and February–March (sometimes in these months the ships sailed back and forth between Galle-Colombo and Galle-Matara). In addition to loading and unloading, ship repairs also had to be

carried out – an extensive inspection was required before the ships were allowed to return to the Netherlands.

Galle was also an important destination for the small chialoupes, cargo sloops, which sailed between the VOC places along the Ceylonese coast, as well as connecting Ceylon to various places in South India – notably with Tuticorin, to which the administration resorted under the governor of VOC Ceylon.

In the 18th century, the fortifications at the sea side were considerably expanded. In 1681 the emphasis still was on the huge bastions with connecting walls on the landward side. Of all the VOC forts, this was the only one that had the shape of a walled town. The capital of Colombo and the administrative centre in the north, Jaffna, consisted of a large fortress both called ‘Castle’ (‘Kasteel’), and outside a very small town, in the documents called ‘Oude Stadt’ (Old Town). There stayed the Eurasians and Muslims, with a large number of private slaves – though I have no details of the amount of private slaves in Ceylon in 1681, the average may have been c. 4 slaves in every household of Burghers (Eurasians) and European personnel (only military officers had private slaves, most soldiers did without), so in 1681 it might have been a total of c. 1000. Outside Galle Fort lived only a small group of people who were directly affiliated with the VOC.

Notable among these (and other lists) is the work of ‘cliff drilling’, in which numerous individuals were involved. Blacksmiths had to make special drills to drill holes for the explosives. Some slaves (often older women, or children) had the task of returning blunt drills to the blacksmith and collecting updated ones. Special wooden tubes were made by the carpenter to get the gunpowder deep enough into the relevant rock. In one of Galle’s entries it says: ‘two at the “klipspringers” (who blow up the cliffs), one of them carries the “kruijsack” (powder bag) and assists them in breaking the clips, the other as *mocquedon* overseeing the cliff drillers’. This was how they organised natural stone building material for the construction of the fort. There were also numerous cliffs in Galle Bay, some of which were dangerously submerged and therefore buoyed with warning flags. As far as I know, these cliffs were only removed with explosives in the 19th century.

Some entries provide special information that I had not found before. I give two examples. The first is about the slaves who took care of the cows (‘koeebeesten’): two apparently stayed with them outside the city, did the milking and looked after them; two others carried the milk to the fort. Unfortunately, it is not stated who or what the milk was intended for, but the daily delivery may have been intended for feeding young children (for most adults are lactose intolerant), perhaps also for use in the bakery. The second example concerns the entry ‘kind van een Hollandse vader’ (child of a Dutch father). That almost calls for a separate article! What is going on here? In Roman-Dutch law, the rule was: ‘the fruit follows the mother’, that is, in the case of an out-of-wedlock birth, a child has the status of its mother:

free/non-free. This father, possibly a soldier (not necessarily coming from the Dutch Republic, he could also have been a German or Scandinavian soldier) had apparently had an affair, short or long, with a 'slave girl' of the Company, which had resulted in a child. That child must have looked no different from other children resulting from a relationship between Europeans and Asian women (mostly descendants of previously freed slaves), but this boy had the status of non-free attached to him. If the slave girl in question had been privately owned, such a kin would have had a chance of being manumitted by his father. Now that the mother was owned by the Company, emancipation was out of the question. The boy will have remained a slave all his life.

In every town/fort there was a 'Nederlands' hospital, and usually also a smaller hospital for the slaves. Galle's list provides useful information about the surgeon's work in such a hospital. One of the slaves, for example, fetched firewood for the still ('distilleerhuijs') as well as for the 'Berberij gasten' (the fellows in Beruwala who were burning lime from the coral stones. So, we learn the hospital had a still; however, it is not known what has been brewed, perhaps arak, perhaps special medicines. That requires further investigation. We have, however, an interesting drawing of such a still in an album (c. 1679) by Paul Hermann, surgeon at the hospital of Colombo (1672–1679), so we know how it looked.¹⁸ Another slave helped the surgeon 'with pounding', so with making medicines with the mortar, and was further charged with sweeping, sanding, and more.

2.4. *Kalpitiya*

The fort was strategically located at the estuary of the bay, making it easy to block trade from the port town of Puttalam on the opposite side. This was the only port on the west coast possessed by the king of Kandy, but the VOC prevented the sailing from Puttalam as much as possible. To this end, it had a number of patrol vessels that operated off the coast to detain 'Moorse' (Muslim) ships that maintained illegal – in the eyes of the VOC that is – trade contacts with South Indian ports on behalf of the King of Kandy. Officially, a Company pass was required for this, but these were rarely issued to them. This was one of the diplomatic points of contention between the VOC and the King. The latter, however, had two trump cards: 1) it could refuse to use the coastal route to bring elephants to Jaffna from the south – which hindered trade with Indian merchants; 2) he could refuse to let the cinnamon peelers cross the border to peel cinnamon in the King's Land – it was on his territory that the best cinnamon grew.

¹⁸ Natural History Museum, London: Herbarium by Paul Hermann (1646–1695), c. 1679, *Icones*, Vol. 5, f. 307.

Table 2.4: 58 Company slaves in Kalpitya, 1681

Males 39		Artisans	General	Daily Work	Care	No service/ Not fit
1	Apprentice with the blacksmith	1				
1	Apprentice with the carpenter	1				
3	Sawing planks, also loading/ unloading	3 ¹				
2	Charcoal burners	2				
1	Works in the warehouse		1			
6	Work at the elephant stables		6			
1	Gets water for smith & carpenter		1			
2	Gets water for general labourers		2			
2	Work in Company's garden		2			
1	Works with the surgeon				1	
2	Sick, doing no services					2
17	General services, loading/ unloading			17 ²		
Females 9		Artisans	General	Daily Work	Care	No service/ Not fit
2	Sick, no services					2
7	Work in the new coconut garden		7			
Children 10		Artisans	General	Daily Work	Care	No service/ Not fit
	small children, no services					10
Totals		7	19	17	1	14

Notes:

1. These persons could also be placed under Maintenance/Daily Work.
2. Presumably, these people do the so-called 'Daily Work', which also includes work on the fortifications.

Source: National Archives, The Hague, VOC 8902, p. 564.

The following comment could also be made in connection with the other forts, but the isolated position of Fort Kalpitiya makes it clear once again how dependent such a military fort is. Of course, in case of war and siege, wells, gardens, etc. outside the fort in question are inaccessible, but for strategic stockpiling and for daily use, the gardens outside the fort are indispensable. Vegetables, herbs, and especially coconuts were essential for existence. Every Sri Lankan household had a 'thuijn', that is, a yard with coconut trees and fruit trees. You picked the necessary vitamin C in the area, everyone knew what leaves were needed for your daily meal, so the Company here had its own yard, and managed to survive that way.

2.5. *Mannar*

The fortress and settlement of Mannar were modest in size but played a strategic and economic role of some importance. The fort controlled the coastal road, along which elephants from the south were transferred to Jaffna every year for sale. *Choya* roots (*Oldenlandia umbellata*) were collected there, which were used to dye red cloth from India – the roots were also exported. The area was most famous for pearl fishing, but this happened only after long intervals. When inspections showed that there were enough oyster shells in which pearls had formed, specialised fishermen from far and wide came with their vessels to the Gulf of Mannar, near the Dutch fort of Aripo (now: Arippe). This was normally only manned with six soldiers, but during the pearl fishery their number was considerably increased. Then a hundred or more soldiers were posted along the coast to keep order – entire villages were built along the beach with hundreds of temporary huts.

Table 2.5: 120 Company slaves in Mannar, 1681

All slaves: 60 males, 34 females, 26 children (of which: 7 children aged 6–12 19 children aged 2–5)		<i>Artisans</i>	<i>General Services</i>	<i>Daily Work</i>	<i>Care</i>	<i>No service/ Not fit</i>
serve in various places 20:						
1	Warehouse		1			
2	Armory	2				
1	Smithy	1				
2	Masons	2				
2	Apprentices carpenter	2				
1	Hospital				1	
1	Horse stable		1			
10	Get drinking water for fortress, house of the Chief, for the hospital		10			
12	sick not fit for work					12
19	small children age 2-5					19
7	Children age 6-12					
62	Males & women					
69				69		
Total 120		7	12	69	1	31

Source: National Archives, The Hague, VOC 8902, p. 563.

This list is special because the information clearly shows what the workforce was really about. It first summaries: 60 male and 34 female slaves, and further ‘26 kinderen, als 7 groote and 19 kleene’, a total of 120. From that number three categories of Company slaves are subtracted: 20 slaves (exceptionally not specified by sex) who served at different places; 12 ‘siecken en onbequaam tot den arbeitjdt’ (not fit to do any labour), and finally 19 children aged 2, 3, 4, and five years. Then the text of the list continues: ‘51 [subtracted] from 120, remainder is 69, who work at the fortress’. After which the author goes on to state that four chained prisoners also worked at the fortifications – that also happened in other places. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss the subject of this kind of forced labour in more detail, but it would be useful to do some more research to determine the extent to which the Justice Department took into account the need for this type of forced labour by convicts.

Be that as it may, the compilation of this list of Company slaves in Mannar clearly shows how important the share of slaves was in the construction and maintenance of the fortification works. That would also be the case in later years. For example, a 1694 list gives Mannar a total of 104 Company slaves, 38 of whom serve on the Common Works – a relatively smaller number, but still significant.¹⁹

2.6. *Jaffna*

Table 2.6: 70 Company slaves in Jaffna, 1681

46 'Overkust' Slaves (from Coromandel)		Artisans	General Services	Daily Work	Care	No service/ Not fit
Males 40						
3	2 Dyers, 1 weaver	3				
2	With the cooper	1				
1	Basket maker	1				
5	At the carpenter's yard	5				
5	With the blacksmith	5				
1	Sail-maker	1				
11	Masons	11				
1	Warehouses	1				
4	Horse stable		4			
3	Hospital				3	
2	Old and not fit					2
2	'Caffers' with the Fiscal ¹		2			
1	Assists masons	1				
Females 6		Artisans	General Services	Daily Work	Care	No service/ Not fit
1	Brings meals to the masons		1			
2	Old woman & daughter in garden		2			
2	Mother with suckling child				2	
1	Old woman sweeps Slave Lodge		1			

¹⁹ National Archives, The Hague, VOC 1544, p. 1218 verso: List of Company slaves in Mannar in 1694.

24 'Hierlandtse' (local) slaves 24 <i>Male 16</i>		<i>Artisans</i>	<i>General Services</i>	<i>Daily Work</i>	<i>Care</i>	<i>No service/ Not fit</i>
5	Apprentice blacksmith & armoury	5				
4	Work in the warehouses	4				
3	Works in the horse stable	3				
2	Children of 10, with the mother					2
2	Blind father & son of about 10, work in silkworm garden					2
<i>Female 8</i>		<i>Artisans</i>	<i>General Services</i>	<i>Daily Work</i>	<i>Care</i>	<i>No service/ Not fit</i>
1	hospital				1	
7	3 old women, 4 girls 5–10, cleaning <i>Corps de Guardes</i> & bastions		7			
TOTALS		41	17	–	6	6

Note:

1. See Galle 2.3, Table 2.3, note 4.

Source: National Archives, The Hague, VOC 8902, pp. 562–563.

The first line of the list is interesting because of its division into two distinct categories of slaves, namely 'Overkust slaven' – slaves from the Coromandel coast – and 'Hierlandtse slaven' – persons born as slaves in the Jaffna commandment. It is quite possible that not all of the Overkust slaves originated from the Coromandel (also called Textile Coast) – some might have transferred from other parts of South India, possibly also from regions stretching along the Bay of Bengal such as Arakan,²⁰ and many even could have been transferred from distant islands of the Indonesian archipelago.

Be that as it may, the division is clear: one group consisted of persons from outside the island, the others were indigenous inhabitants of the Jaffna district. Traditionally, three categories of non-free groups lived in this province: the Covia (Koviyar), Nallua (Nalavar) and Palla (Pallar), slaves held only in the Jaffna district. Only the Covia were used as domestic servants. Most of Nallua and Palla slaves

²⁰ During its apogee the kingdom of Arakan, now Rakhine State in Myanmar, covered half of what is now Bangladesh, the whole of present day Rakhine State and part of Lower Burma. The VOC opened a first office in 1608, and established a permanent factory in the capital Mrauk U in 1635 – that was closed in 1675.

worked in the fields, and like the Covias, they were prohibited from being sold and allowed to leave the district. Therefore, their status is seen as a kind of serfdom, comparable to the serfs in medieval Europe.²¹

Another document, also drawn up in 1681, shows that the *Hierlandtse* slaves may have been recruited from the *Nallua* cast. The relevant document listing the 257 local servants working for the Company in Jaffna mentions a 'hooft aratchie [chief aratchie] van de 's Compag^s Nalluas' who heads this group of non-free servants. It is not entirely clear to what extent the Company, as 'Lord of the Land', believed that it could dispose of these non-free workers. A detail in the heading of the list of Company slaves of Jaffna seems to confirm this. The headline reads: 'Indication of the Comps. serfs, slaves and female slaves on the closing of the books ult^o. February 1681 in Jaffanapatnam; still well and alive and for what tasks they were used in the service of the Lord ('Heer')'. Sinnappah Arasaratnam writes: 'The documents of the period [i.e. the 17th and 18th centuries] repeatedly mention slavery, but give no practical details about the exact nature of slavery (...). When the *Thesawalamai* was codified [the customs of the Tamil inhabitants of the Province of Jaffna, 1707], the rights of slaves were carefully written down (...) There were many who were listed as state slaves and required to work for the state. After a few years, the Dutch gave them a monthly wage, the savings from this enabled them to buy their freedom'.²² The activities of the Company slaves were also very diverse in Jaffna. Three men were engaged in work related to the textiles imported from Tuticorin or other places at the 'Overkust'.²³ One of them was a weaver, the other two were listed as dyers who finished the white cloth imported from

²¹ Sinnappah Arasaratnam wrote about them: 'Encouraged by the ambiguities in Dutch law, which interpreted *adimai* or bonded status of landless labourers as slave labor, *vellalar* landowners claimed ownership of these landless labourers similar to western slavery,' in Arasaratnam, 'Sri Lanka's Tamils: Under Colonial Rule', p. 38.

For an ample discussion on the *Nallua* and *Palla* slaves, see: Schrikker and Ekama, 'Through the Lens of Slavery', pp. 188–191. See also Wickramasinghe and Schrikker, 'The Ambivalence of Freedom', pp. 497–519.

Arasaratnam, 'Social History of a Dominant Caste Society', 387, writes that 'It is possible that the bondage of the Koviars, to the extent that it existed, only extended to ritual purposes such as their obligations at funerary sites of the *Vellalar* and their temple festivals'. About the *Pallar* he writes that they were 'probably the only caste performing bonded service to the *Vellalar* in any long-term subjection and they were agricultural labourers.'

²² Sinnappah Arasaratnam, 'Historical foundations of the economy of the Tamils of North Sri Lanka', Chelvanakam Memorial Lectures, Jaffna 1982, p. 18. Reprinted with same title and pagination in Arasaratnam, *Ceylon and the Dutch, 1600–1800*.

²³ Tuticorin (*Tutucorijn*), now called Thoothukudi, and the other minor coastal outposts of Madurai (*Madure*) were administered by the Governor of Ceylon, hence his title Governor and Director of [Dutch] Ceylon and its Dependencies (underlining LJW).

India using natural dye extracted from the *chaya* roots. Twenty-five slaves were employed in the Company workshops: two in the cooper's workshop; two in the carpenter's yard; five in the forge; two worked with the sail-maker and eleven assisted the mason in the fortification works. Interesting is the addition about the last mentioned slaves, that they 'learn this trade'. It is a confirmation of the fact that the Company always tried to economise, and training slaves to get skilled workers avoided the costly transfer and maintenance of personnel from Europe. It also reduced the number of local artisans to be hired (who, of course, earned less than their European colleagues). The High Government in Batavia wrote to the directors in Patria on 29 April 1681 that the authorities of Ceylon had selected the most able and fast-learning slaves to be trained for the various trades. This was approved by the High Government, who responded that 'his was generally a useful exercise', and therefore the training of Companies slaves had to be followed in the other VOC establishments.²⁴

The Company in Jaffna owned only six female slaves. One delivered meals to the masons working at the fortifications, while an 'old and decrepit' woman worked in the gardens with her daughter. Another woman had a baby and worked in the hospital. This is difficult to interpret. Do we see some kind of compassion here? Or are we witnessing a pure profit mentality, which forces vulnerable and dependent people to be exploited to the limit? The last mentioned female slave in the list was of old age and did cleaning work in the prison ('tronck') and in the slave lodge ('slaven huijs') – the mention of the slave lodge is special, since legends of maps of Jaffna make no mention of such accommodation. In most forts, the Company housed its slaves in the *materiaal* huis (storage for tools, equipment and the like). In Colombo, the large number of Companies slaves were initially housed below the wall of one of the strongholds, later in the barracks of the *Slaaven Quartier* (Slave Quarters), located on a peninsula in the Lack of Colombo: it is still called Slave Island.²⁵

The above list shows that the Company slaves in Jaffna performed the same work as the slaves elsewhere in coastal Ceylon. Of the sixteen men, five were apprentices in the smithy and armoury; four worked in the Company's warehouses and three others worked in the stables. Two children aged '8 tot 10' lived with their mother in the fort, usually referred to as the Castle. A stone-blind father lived with his 10-year-old son in the silkworm garden ('sijdeworm thuijn'), where he took care

²⁴ *Generale Missiven* IV, 1675–1685, p. 455.

²⁵ See the website 'Virtual Slave Island (Kompanna-veediya) – Contested Space and Everyday Life in Colombo, 1650 – Present' (June 5, 2024) – URL: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/15a22827013b-439782f13a9d2edb812f> (accessed 28-5-2025). The 'StoryMap' is the result of a project started in 2020 and initiated by Dr. Alicia Schrikker, associate professor at Leiden University (History Department).

of the mulberries and the silkworm breeding – this was quite a new Company enterprise! One of the female slaves worked in the hospital, while seven women did cleaning in the various guard rooms (*Corps de garde*) and on the bastions – this group consisted of three older women and four girls between the ages of 5–10.

It is striking that nowhere in the list are Company slaves mentioned who worked on the Public Works. The VOC archives of Jaffna have largely been lost and data cannot always be found in the reports sent to Colombo (and eventually forwarded to Batavia and the Netherlands). Fortunately, we do have data from 1697, which appear in the 'Memorie' ('Mémorial') prepared by Commander Hendrick Zwaardcroon, which he left behind for the administrators in Jaffna when he left for Cochin at the Malabar Coast to solve some problems there. He wrote: 'The Company's slaves here are few in number, consisting of 82 individuals, including men, boys, women and children. But no more are required, as the *Oeliaars* perform many of the duties for which slaves would be otherwise required. They are engaged in the stable, the warehouses, the arsenal, the hospital, and [work] with the ship-builders and masons. The only pay they receive is 3 *fanams*, and a *parra* of rice per month, except some of the masons [who got higher payment, 4–6 *fanams*].'²⁶ Earlier in his Memorandum, Zwaardcroon wrote about the conscript 'Oelias' (who had to do *Uliyam* service, also named *oeliammers*). He called them extremely lazy in the performance of their services, even though it was only 3 days a month, or 12 days a year. Apparently, many were in a position to buy off this duty (2 pence a day or one rixdollar for a whole year. In 1695 2,001 rixdollar and 9 *stuivers* (penny) in fines were paid by 24,021 persons who were registered for Uliam service, and in the following year the amount for the months of January–August was 1,053 rixdollar 9 *stuiver* for 12,640 men, with the result that the Company had to miss the work of 36,661 men. It is therefore expected, writes Zwaardcroon, 'that the work on the Castle [the fort] will be significantly delayed, and idem with regard to the loading and unloading of the ships, the work at the wharf, at the powder mill, at the quarry of San Pedro, at the lime-burning, at the cutting of wood at the border with the area of the Wann, the digging and breaking of coral stone near the islands, the burning of charcoal for the smithy, etc.' That is why the buying-off of the Uliyam service was not always allowed by the Company, with serious consequences for the population, as J.C. Wolf shows in his book 'Travels to Ceylon'. It contains a report from 1764 in which the then Dessave of Jaffna protested against the endless labour of the forced *corvée* at the fortifications of Jaffna by the inhabitants of the district.²⁷

²⁶ *Memoir of Hendrick Zwaardcroon, commandeur of Jaffnapatam*, p. 78.

²⁷ In a memorandum to the governor of VOC Ceylon (I.W. Falck, 1765–1785) the Dessave of Jaffna, Noëll Anthonij Lebeck, describes how, during a working visit to the country, a large crowd of residents 'with bitter cries' requested to be released from 'the arduous work at the fortifications (...) and again

2.7. Trincomalee

In 1639, the VOC captured this fort built by the Portuguese (1622), but when relations deteriorated after the initially workable cooperation between the VOC and Kandy, the fort was handed over to King Raja Sinha II (r. 1635–1687), who then had it demolished. When the alliance between the king and the VOC fell apart, the Dutch built a new fortress in 1665 at the beginning of the sea-piercing peninsula. The VOC area on the land side of the fort was small, but this settlement still had economic significance because in the hinterland, King's Land, wood was cut for the other VOC places on the island. Large warships could safely moor in the bay, making Trincomalee a good springboard for actions towards the Indian mainland. That was the reason for the French to try to get this fort under control, which succeeded briefly in 1672. More than a century later, in 1781, an English fleet managed to take Trincomalee – that was during the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War (1780–1784). Then Trincomalee could only be recaptured with French help.

Table 2.7: 148 Company slaves in Trincomalee, 1681

Males 57		Artisans	General Services	Daily Work	Care	No service/ Not fit
3	Work with the blacksmith	3				
3	Coal burners for the blacksmiths ¹	3				
1	Work with the 'Hollandse timmerlieden' (Dutch carpenters) ²	1				
14	Carry coral stone for the lime kilns ³			14		
1	Works at the bakery ⁴	1				
1	Works in the warehouses		1			
1	Works in the ['Nederlands'] hospital				1	
1	Works in the slave hospital				1	
3	Chop fire wood for the Commander, minister and military captain ⁵		3			

to be reinstated with the usual services of the Lord, otherwise they would have to perish in poverty and misery'. In: Wolf, *Reizen naar Ceilon, nevens een volledige beschrijving van dat eiland en van Japanapatnam: gedurende een verblyf van zestien jaaren (...)*.

3	Work in de <i>Clappus</i> -thuijn (coconut garden)	3				
3	Work in <i>Groente thuijn</i> (vegetable garden)	3				
3	Work in the Company horse stable	3				
1	Attendant of cows	1				
1	Elephant stable ⁶	1				
12	'Dagelijkse arbeijdt' (Daily Work) ⁷		12			
1	<i>Mocquedon</i> [overseer <i>Gemeene Werken</i>] ⁷		1			
4	Sick					4
1	Works elsewhere	1				
Females 41		<i>Artisans</i>	<i>General Services</i>	<i>Daily Work</i>	<i>Care</i>	<i>No service/ Not fit</i>
23	'Dagelijkse arbeijdt' (Daily Work) ⁷		23			
6	Work at Erckelencheene (<i>NB: location not found</i>)	6				
8	Sick					8
4	'Oud en tot het wercken onbequaam' (old and not fit for services)					4
Children 50		<i>Artisans</i>	<i>General Services</i>	<i>Daily Work</i>	<i>Care</i>	<i>No service/ Not fit</i>
22	'dagelijckse wercken' (Daily Work) ⁷		22			
1	Attendant of cows	1				
1	Attendant 'Clappus thuijn'	1				
1	['Nederlands'] Hospital				1	
1	Cooks for the overseers of the slaves ⁸	1				
1	House of the 'commandeur' ⁵	1				
4	'Impotenten' (disabled)					4
17	'Tot arbeijden nog onbequaam' (not yet qualified for services) ⁹					17

2	Work for two 'Europiaanse op Erckelencheese' (NB: <i>place not located</i>)					2
Totals		8	26	72	3	39

Notes to Table 2.7:

1. Nowhere is it stated who cuts and supplies the wood used for this purpose.
 2. Apparently there are also hired local carpenters.
 3. As near Kalpitiya, Mannar and Jaffna, there were coral reefs near Trincomalee where coral could be broken. This was about burning coral, not breaking coral to saw 'kraalsteen' (coral stones).
 4. The wheat needed for the bakery came from the Cape Colony in South Africa.
 5. The 'Commandeur', actually the 'Chief', the minister and the military captain all had slaves of their own, but the services of the Company slaves were available to them as emoluments to their position.
 6. It is not clear whether these are elephants brought from 'King's Land', as payment by Kandy of war debts or otherwise.
 7. A *moquedon* served as overseer of the Public Works or overseer of the slaves – these terms coincide because the slaves usually laboured at the fortification works. Those activities never stopped, hence the name 'daily work'.
 8. The list mentions 'sitters' – plural, also called *moquedon*. The other sitter(s) were probably of European or Eurasian descent.
 9. These are probably 'little children', aged 2–5 years.
- Source: National Archives, The Hague, VOC 8902, pp. 564–565.

2.8. Batticaloa

In 1602, the first two merchant ships under the command of Joris van Spilbergen visited the east coast of Sri Lanka. King Vimala Dharma Suriya I (r.1592–1604) received him warmly when it appeared that the Dutch could possibly play a role in expelling the Portuguese from the island, because Spilbergen posed as a representative of Prince Maurice of Holland (stadtholder 1585–1625). This first meeting became famous through the travelogue 'Historical Journal' (1605). A year after Spilbergen, Sebald de Weert, vice admiral of the first VOC fleet sent to Asia, arrived to inquire whether the king would keep to the agreements. His mission failed due to misconduct of this Dutchman. The king felt insulted and threatened and had him executed. Thirty years later, King Raja Sinha II asked the now powerful VOC for help against the Portuguese. As a test of their skills, Fort Batticaloa was captured in 1638. Economically, the place was only important because of the logging in the

hinterland – building materials were essential in the first expansive years of the VOC's establishment in Ceylon.

Table 2.8: 96 Company slaves in Batticaloa, 1681

Males 68		Payment ¹ p/m in rixdollars	Artisans	General Services	Daily Work	Care	No service/ Not fit
3	Work in the smithy	1/6	3				
1	Blacksmith	1/2	1				
6	Coal burners for the smithy ¹	1/6	6				
12	Sawing timber	1/4	12				
2	['Nederlands'] hospital	1/6				2	
2	Work in de Compagny Garden	1/6		2			
1	Attendants of cows	1/6		1			
36	'Gemeene wercken' (Public Works)	1/6			36		
5	Sick	1/6					5
Females 25		Payment ¹ p/m in rixdollars	Artisans	General Services	Daily Work	Care	No service/ Not fit
24	'Gemeene wercken' (Public Works)	1/10			24		
1	'Blindt en onbequaam tot eenige dienst' ((blind and not fit for service)	1/10					1

Children	'Door jonckheijdt nog onbequaam' (because of young age still not fit)	1/15				3
TOTALS		22	3	60	2	9

Notes to Table 2.8:

1. Who cuts and supplies the wood used for this purpose is not mentioned.
2. For information on this payment, see Arasaratnam's comment in 2.5 (Jaffna). The blacksmith and his assistants will have worked, as in the other forts, to make hoops for barrels, various ironwork for gun carriages, locks and doors, chains and fetters for prisoners, etc. The list also states that all slaves received two 'chelas' (sarongs) given 'to cover their body'. In addition, each man received 1 *parra* (40 pounds) of rice per month, plus salt & pepper. The women received $\frac{3}{4}$ *parra* rice, plus salt & pepper. There were also 'condemned persons', who performed forced labour at the Gemeene Werken (Public Works): 1 'European' and 3 'inboorlingen' (natives). They each received 2 *parras* of rice per month, also 2 *chelas* (cloth, or *sarong*). The first received a monthly allowance of $\frac{3}{5}$ rixdollar, the other three each received $\frac{1}{6}$ rixdollar.

Source: NA, Den Haag, VOC 8902, p. 566.

2.9. Colombo

After the capture of Colombo in 1656, the VOC administrators realised that the size of the Portuguese stronghold could not be successfully defended. It was therefore decided to separate the core area, which they called the Castle, from the residential area. Due to the war with Kandy, the full demolition of the ramparts of the 'Oude Stadt' (Old Town) had to be postponed until the end of the 17th century. Seventy years after the British takeover, modern warfare made the ramparts of the old 'Castle' obsolete. Therefore, between c. 1869–1871 Colombo's defences were almost completely demolished.²⁸

The specific list for Colombo gives a figure of 1993 Company slaves. The German VOC soldier Christopher Schweitzer gives the following short description before his departure for Amsterdam in January 1682: '(...) without the walls, between them and the sea, are the huts where nearly four thousand slaves, belonging to the Company, lie at night. They are of different nations, and are constantly kept at work: their huts are very little, made up with nothing but straw and leaves. There

²⁸ Mendis, *The Fortress of Colombo*, pp. 56–69. See also the pre-publication at Academia.edu of Chryshane Mendis, *Colombo. The History of Its Fortifications*. URL: https://www.academia.edu/109341973/COLOMBO_The_History_of_Its_Fortifications_Preprint, visited May 28, 2025.

are Dutch men to look over ‘em, who are called Mucadons [moquedons]; each of them have 70, 80, or 100 to oversee, and must give an account of ‘em’.²⁹

A small Slave Gate (‘Slave Poort’), known in the British Period as Postern Gate, provided access to this stretch of beach – the gate still exists, but is inaccessible to the public as it is located on the grounds of the Navy Headquarters near the Port. Schweitzer exaggerates the number of Company slaves, but the stretch of beach became too small to accommodate them all and so before 1692 a piece of land was designated south of the Castle that could be well guarded and remains known as Slave Island (*Slaven Eijland*).

Table 2.9: 1993 Company slaves in Colombo in 1681

Males, Females & Children	Admini- stration & Justice	Artisans	General Services	Daily Work	Care	No service/ Not fit
Working for the office of the Governor (15), of the Commander (4), in the secretariats (13), in the prison (2).	34					
Working with the sail-maker (4), carpenter (47), cooper (3), blacksmith (16); in the armoury (15); as stone-cutters (7), matmak- ers (65), masons (4).		161				
Collecting drinking water (7), Stables (15), Washers (38), gunpowder mill (16), tile factory & herding (159), equipment house (11), several jobs at different places (17). ¹			263			
‘Daily work’: maintenance of fortress, loading/ unloading of vessels.				1015		

²⁹ Schweitzer, ‘A Relation of a Voyage to and Through the East-Indies from the Year 1675 to 1683 by Christopher Schewitzer [Schweitzer]’, p. 343.

'Malabar' Apothecary (7), hospital (21), midwives (5), orphanage (6), schoolmas- ter (4)					43	
Pregnant women (13), women after giving birth (7), patients in the hospitals (59), blind & lame persons (17), infants (198), runaways (13), one old Tupas (1), schoolchildren (169).					477	
1993	34	161	263	1015	43	477

Note:

1. One person, at the moment of the listing, is 'a black sexton' being 'not fit'. Perhaps he can be connected to the large Christian Chitty community in Colombo. A few others work at the several warehouses.

Source: National Archives, The Hague, VOC 8902, p. 555–558.

The data on the Company slaves in Colombo are organised in the same way as the general overview ('corte sommarium') on pp. 567–568 of the relevant NA, VOC 8902. (see Table 2.1). In order to present the large amount of data clearly and somewhat comparable to the other tables, a different arrangement has been chosen compared with the original document. As a result, the data for numbers of men, women and children are not included in the new table, therefore commentary will be provided on a selection of these data. Also, not everyone's workplace or nature of work has been specified, this will be partly covered by a further explanation below. However, the reader has already been able to get an impression of the different workshops and types of work from the treatment of the other places.

The addition of the 'Administration and Justice' category is intended to draw attention to Colombo's special position as the capital of the VOC Government Ceylon. The enslaved workers at the offices of the Governor and Commander were all men, while the secretariats employed five men, one woman and one child aged about 10–14. In Colombo, female slaves were in the majority (732 against 586) – the document does not provide a definitive answer about the sex of the children.

A 'black' surgeon worked in the slave hospital. His origin is not stated, but the fact that six slaves were working in the 'Malabar' apothecary suggests that he was a Tamil, as were his three assistants. Striking is the mention of a man and a boy (aged 10–14) who applied bandages at the work sites – apparently quite a few accidents occurred during the heavy work days at the fortifications. Ten men and two women

worked in the Dutch Hospital, reserved for European employees, mainly soldiers and sailors. Among the Orphanage staff, women outnumbered men 4 to 2.

As was the case at the other places, several boys aged 10–14 were apprenticed to European craftsmen, entirely in accordance with the instructions of the Company's management to train as many slaves as possible in order to save on European staff. A number of 281 children were put to work, almost fifteen percent of all Company slaves.

The Colombo list adds a few interesting details to what we already learned from the other lists. For example, there were 41 women who wove mats, with the following comment: 'In the mat-house women worked who recently had delivered but were sick and had small children, [and also other] women who in all honesty made mats and were used for all kinds of services'.³⁰ The mats were certainly intended to be used in the ship's holds to cover the several layers of transported goods and spices.

Two entries should not be left without comment. The first is the mention of 159 people who worked at the tile factory ('pannebackerij') and also acted as shepherds: 76 men (eighteen 'not fit' and ten over fifty years old) and 41 women (six 'not fit' and eight over 50 years old); they worked together with seventeen children.

The last comment concerns the 179 schoolchildren. We don't know much about young enslaved persons, but the large number who received education is remarkable. In Galle and Colombo there were 'Mallabar' schools, where slave children probably also went to learn to write and read Tamil, maybe to become *moquedons* (supervisors) or clerks in one of the offices. I found no information about enslaved girls going to Malabar school. However, orphans, boys and girl (most of them of Eurasian descent) went to school together, like in the Netherlands).

The list of Company slaves in Colombo is extremely rich in information. Not only does it show the large and diverse amount of tasks assigned to the slaves, but we also learn a lot about the goings-on in the various workshops through the many details. Workshops have been greatly changed by mechanisation for a century or more, with the result that many readers will not understand what old documents are telling. A few examples.

What happens in the armoury of a fortress? Apparently, there was a blacksmith shop there, because two Company slaves worked at the bellows: the charcoal (later coal was imported from England) had to burn well to get iron red hot, otherwise you couldn't do anything with it. There were also two 'turning the stone' – this informs us about the large whetstone, an indispensable tool for blacksmiths and carpenters. Then there were two sawyers who among other tasks helped making gun carriages. And

³⁰ The entry reads: 'Vrouwen in 't mat huijs, sijnde sieckelijke uijt de craam comende en kleene kinderen hebbende, [en]vrouwen die eerlijk matten maacken en tot allerhande diensten worden gebruikt'.

finally, there were nine whose task was ‘to keep the gun clean’ – under gun one should think of all kinds of weapons: not only firearms, but also stabbing weapons, etc.

And how did things go at the carpenter’s yards? Carpenters were divided into two groups: the housecarpenters and the shipwrights. Twenty-two Company slaves worked for the ‘boss of the Dutch carpenters’ (being the shipwright). Two of them worked at the whetstone, but apparently it was used less often than the one at the forge, because the two slaves also did other work: pecking tar and boiling resin (‘harpuijs’).³¹ Then there were no fewer than eleven sawyers and seven ‘who learn ship carpentry’.

Colombo was also an important VOC port: ships from the Netherlands or Batavia often moored there first and the vessels that maintained the connection with other places in Ceylon or South India were also maintained there. It is therefore not surprising that we read in the list of Colombo that numerous slaves were trained. This did not only apply to the carpenter’s yard. The sail-maker had four, the cooper had three apprentices – these are recorded as boys (‘jongens’), they may have been young people, from the age of 12 and onwards, but often the word ‘boy’ was used for any male slave. To come back to the carpenters: 24 slaves worked with the ‘baas van de swarte timmerlieden’ (boss of the black [Sinhalese] carpenters) who learned the job of the ‘huijs timmerlieden’ and worked on all kinds of ‘daily work’ – they were supervised by a *mocquedon*, an old man who apparently couldn’t do anything else. From this information we also learn that the slaves in the shipyard mainly worked together with Dutch people or other Europeans and that the staff of the ‘huijs timmerwerf’ (the other yard) mainly consisted of people with an Asian background.

Sixteen slaves worked at the forge (‘smitswinckel’), one turned ‘the stone’; three made the three metre long sticks for the ‘pick lance’, the weapon of the pikemen (*piekenier*); two were especially engaged in making crowbars and cliff-drills (necessary for rock-drilling; one worked with the ‘fine blacksmiths’, another at the coppersmith (‘coperslager’) and five stood at the bellows.

Also interesting is the information about the washers of cloth (‘lijwaat’). Vessels from Tuticorin on the ‘Overkust’ unloaded the purchased textiles in Galle or Colombo. There it was sorted, counted and checked for quality; then washed and bleached, and finally repacked for further distribution – a lot of them were sold in Ceylon, or annually given to the cinnamon peelers and Company slaves, while an unknown quantity was shipped to Holland. Washing and bleaching was done by ‘the Sinhalese washers’, assisted by a retinue of Company slaves: six men, six women and thirteen children. This entry is a good example of the cooperation between Company slaves and free local labourers. Incidentally, the slaves themselves apparently had a

³¹ *Harpuijs/resin*: *harpuijs* is a fused mixture of boiled linseed oil, rosin and stearin, to protect wooden surfaces, such as masts, yards, etc.

number of items of clothing, as thirteen of them (two men, four women and seven children) are recorded as doing the washing of all the slaves' clothes.

3. Some more commentary on the employment of Company slaves

Classifying the tasks as they are described – often summarily – in the lists of Company slaves turned out to be no easy task. Let me give one example: should someone who collects water for the workers at the fortification also be included under the relevant heading ('Daily work'), or under the heading of 'general services'? I don't think the answer interferes with the final results. Most of the entries speak plain language, as the table (2.9) makes clear. The number of slaves in the category 'Maintenance/Daily Work' of all forts together, 1536, is just over half of the total number of Company slaves in Ceylon (3040). I will therefore comment on that section first.

3.1. *The 'Daily Work'*

In the lists of Company slaves in 1681, the terms 'Daily Work' and 'Public Works' are mentioned several times in direct connection with reports of activities such as 'loading and unloading'. It shows how the rhythm of the year unfolds in Company life, that considered the protection of the monopolised trade in the precious cinnamon above everything else. The maintenance and renovation of the fortifications were Task One everywhere. Its implementation was only interrupted when ships or smaller craft had arrived or were about to depart. Then the relevant group of Company slaves was taken from their work on the (dry) ditches, the ramparts, etc. to take cargo off board or, conversely, to bring cargo on board. This work they executed in cooperation with the personnel of the Maritime Service ('Zeedienst') and the crew of the ships and vessels. When that job was accomplished, work on the fortifications was immediately resumed. Of course, stopping water collecting, emptying poop barrels, etc., etc. was not an option. That is why a separation was maintained between the 'Daily Work' and other work, the 'general services', which we see from the dichotomy between these two categories in all lists, albeit not always explicitly expressed.

This way of organising the jobs is confirmed by the instruction issued in 1681 by the Governor, asking the Commander of Galle not to start new projects at the fortifications until the start of the so-called 'quiet period' ('leedige tijdt'): during the busy time of the arrival and departure of the large ships the Company slaves

were much needed for loading and unloading, and the like.³² Some sources indicate that the Company had problems acquiring enough slaves for employment on the defence works. In 1686, Hendrik Adriaen van Rheede – sent to the Dutch East Indies as Commissioner General in 1685 to combat corruption by Company officers – instructed Jacob Jorisz. Pits, governor (1681–1686) of the Company's settlements in the Coromandel 'to buy as many male and female slaves as could be had'.³³ He also had to issue an ordinance prohibiting Company personnel from buying slaves for their own account and thus preventing the Company from acquiring enough slaves itself. This could jeopardise the work on the fortifications, while the VOC not only had to fear European competitors, such as England and France, but also faced problems with the kingdom of Kandy. Although the VOC was initially seen by Kandy as a useful ally against Portugal, the relationship between the unequal allies had quickly deteriorated after 1658. As said before, around 1680 the Company tried to establish a policy of appeasement, but this did not immediately lead to success, and the forts and their garrisons remained the main instruments for safeguarding the exploitation of the country.

3.2. 'General Services' (*Diverse Diensten*)

There is certainly a strong argument for labelling the work at the fortifications and the so-called 'Daily Work' as the essential activities to be executed. Nevertheless, there is much more to be said about it. The Company had seized a large part of the coastal strip of the island by force of arms (expanded to the entire coast after the war in 1766), and had managed to establish itself in a short time as 'Lord of the Land' in the occupied territory. But the VOC remained an outsider in many respects. Enterprises in the Netherlands or elsewhere in Europe could make use of existing migratory labour or could profit from existing labour markets; however, such was not the case in Asia. Although the population on the coast was more varied than in the interior, the coastal strip was also mainly agricultural area – only the new, large coconut tree plantations formed a new phenomenon. In the villages, life mainly remained as it was, which meant that the Company itself, and in an exceptional way, had to organise its necessary workforce. Local craftsmen could be hired, but it was clear from the start that slaves brought in from outside were essential to the existence and survival of the new colonial power in Ceylon.

³² *Generale Missiven* IV, p. 452.

³³ National Archives, The Hague, VOC 8814, Copies of missives and reports, received by Governor-General & Councillors in Batavia, from the respective VOC-offices: Coromandel, p. 29v-30r: ordinance issued by Governor & Councils of Coromandel, 23 January 1687.

When we look at the different tasks, as shown in the various tables, this is very clear. Buffaloes moved the powder mills, so you need herders to watch them, cut grass, etc. The same goes for the horse stables. The governor and the commanders used the carriage in the – space-limited – urban areas, and high envoys were also picked up from the ‘gravets’ with these carriages. Understandably, no staff from the home country could be brought in for the horse stables. A variety of tasks, often of a very simple nature, had to be performed: these are included in the section ‘Various Services’. Hospitals were a new phenomenon: Their own staff (surgeons of various ranks) had to be supplemented with local surgeons, nurses, food preparers and distributors, etc. These were mainly slaves. They are included in the ‘Care’ section, including a few helpers who worked in the various orphanages – another new phenomenon. As can be seen in the lists, slaves also worked in the separate slave hospitals.

The number of apprentices with the blacksmiths and at the carpenters’ yards is striking. It soon became general policy of the Company to train as many craftsmen as possible to supplement the personnel brought in from Europe. This is taught by an example from sources about the wharf island of Onrust (Pulau Onrust) in the Bay of Batavia (Jakarta): Company slaves were trained there by the ship’s carpenters through simple odd jobs.³⁴[1]

To make watertight criteria is difficult: should charcoal burners be included in the group of craftsmen, or elsewhere? As much as possible the short descriptions in the lists are kept, which helps the reader to make their own judgment.

Another striking phenomenon emerges in the section ‘No services / Incompetent’ (‘Geen diensten/ Onbequaam’). Extensive commentary is not necessary. It is clear that very small children did not yet perform services, that young children already had to cooperate, though to a limited extent (‘learning to carry lime and sand...’), but children aged 12–14 years already fully participated – as was the case everywhere in the past, also in the Netherlands.

Table 2.10 gives a different approach of the total number of Company slaves than I expressed in Table 2.1. This makes it easier to make a comparison with the number of ‘Local Servants’. And more: the original list of Colombo is quite different from that of the other forts (more similar to Table 2.1), and will be updated later. That has little consequence for the final interpretation of the data.

³⁴ Van Dam, *Beschrijvinge van de Oostindische Compagnie*, Boek 3, pp. 177–178, 202.

Table 2.10: Company slaves in Ceylon, 1681

	<i>Totals</i>	<i>Admini- stration</i>	<i>Artisans</i>	<i>General services</i>	<i>Daily Work</i>	<i>Care/ Hospital</i>	<i>No service/ Not fit</i>
Matara	44		3	6	27	2	6
Galle	511		71	17	277	19	127
Kalpitiya	58		7	19	17	1	14
Mannar	120		7	12	69	1	31
Jaffna	70		41	17	–	6	6
Trincomalee	148		8	26	72	3	39
Batticaloa	96		22	3	60	2	9
Colombo	1993	34	161	263	1015	43	477
TOTALS	3040	34	320	363	1537	77	709
percentage	100 %	1.1 %	10.5 %	12 %	50.6 %	2.5 %	23.3 %

Source: National Archives, The Hague, VOC 8902, pp. 559–568.

4. A greater picture: Indigenous servants, European & Eurasian personnel and Company slaves

Table 2.11 shows the paid workforce of ‘Inlandse dienaren’, something like ‘indigenous’ servants. Nowadays the term ‘local’ is preferred, but it is actually inaccurate, because it would also include Ceylon-born employees of Eurasian descent. The VOC listed the ‘Oosterlingen’, the military from Java and the Moluccas (capital Ambon) as ‘inlandse dienaren’. They were no Ceylonese ‘inlandse’ soldiers, but they were viewed from the VOC’s position as ruler in the Indonesian Archipelago: there these soldiers were of course ‘indigenous’.

The so-called *lascorines* (the term for indigenous soldiers taken over from the earlier Portuguese administration) are mentioned in a separate list inserted in the documents of VOC 8902. Their main task was maintaining order in the villages; they also surveyed the cinnamon peeling (the peelers had their own *lascorins*) and stood guard at the sentries of the outposts and gravets (sometimes under the authority of a European sergeant or corporal). They were also used by the village chiefs or *majorals* to give the villagers certain orders, for example when it was time to hand over the prescribed part of their harvest, etc. This all took place far beyond the forts, but the Company administrators had a lot to do with this, especially the *dessaves*, the European chiefs at the top of the native governance pyramid.

Table 2.11: Indigenous Company personnel Ceylon, 1681

	Tupasses	Javanese, Ambonese soldiers	Sinhalese soldiers	Tamil soldiers	Interpreters	Local surgeons	Local artisans	Sailors	General services	Schoolmasters	Totals
Galle, Matara	17	–	–	–	5	1 ¹	5	16	16	74	134
Colombo	26	41	6	–	4	1	40	–	47	39	204
Kalpitiya	–	–	–	24	1	1	2	28	4	1	61
Mannar	2	–	–	45	4	2	–	1	4	–	58
Jaffna	20	–	–	204	10	2	–	5	6	10	257
Trincomalee	–	–	–	36	3	1	8	–	16	1	65
Batticaloa	5	–	51	–	3	1	9	–	82	–	151
TOTALS ²	70	41	57	309	30	9	64	50	175	125	930

Notes:

- 1. The surgeon is listed as a Tupas.
 - 2. The list also mentions the VOC settlement in Madura, South India (main place Tuticorin), with 183 persons.
- Source: National Archives, The Hague, VOC 8902, pp. 553–554: Corte sommarium van 's Comp^s. inlandtse dienaaren op 't geheel Eijland Ceijlon op Ult^e. februarij 1681 in weesen geweest.

Table 2.11 shows that local people were hired for a variety of tasks. In view of what was said above, the columns ‘Local surgeons’, ‘Local artisans’ and ‘General services’ are the most relevant here. Employees of various origins therefore worked side by side, especially in the craft quarters – in most places Asians formed the majority.

Table 2.12: European Company personnel Ceylon, 1681

	<i>Military</i>	<i>Sailors</i>	<i>Surgeons</i>	<i>Artisans</i>	<i>Commerce, Administration Justice</i>	<i>General Services</i>
Colombo	1061	202	16	73	61	16
Galle & Matara	453	86	7	23	30	10
Jaffna Mannar Kalpitiya	441	78	8	10	36	7
Trincomalee & Batticaloa	261	99	6	20	21	7
Totals	2216	465	37	126	148	40

Source: National Archives, The Hague, VOC 8902, pp. 537–538: Corte sommarium van alle 's Comp^s. dienaaren Ult^o. februarij Anno 1681 op Ceijlon bescheijden.

It is clear that the Company in Ceylon relied heavily on slave labour and on that of hired local labour. If we want to show which groups walked and worked together, we better subtract the soldiers and sailors from the total of European servants (2216), and also subtract soldiers, sailors and schoolmasters (who worked in the villages outside, sometimes far away from the forts) from the indigenous servants (930). Then there remains island-wide 251 ‘European’ personnel who had more or less daily dealings with Company slaves, and some 278 hired indigenous personnel idem.

This however does not complete the picture, for in the households of European and Eurasian personnel an average of about four private slaves worked as domestic personnel engaged in cooking, cleaning, going to the market, emptying the poop barrels, etc. Although I have no precise data on the number of these private slaves, an estimate of about a thousand is not an exaggeration. Table 2.13 gives an impression of who was walking around, within and nearby the VOC forts. However, these numbers exclude a few categories of inhabitants (particularly concerning the population of the larger settlements of Colombo, Galle and Jaffna), namely the family members of the Burghers and other servants of Eurasian origin, and family

members of Muslims and Chetties living in the Old Towns of Colombo and Jaffna, or who lived within the walled town of Galle. Their number is difficult to estimate (500?) and is therefore not included in the overview below.

Of course, the situation in the several fortresses varied. Colombo, for example, had the most local craftsmen and its Old Town also housed the greatest number of Muslim and Chitty residents. Nevertheless, the following calculation may give a good impression of what the daily situation in the VOC settlements in the coastal area of Ceylon looked like:

Table 2.13. VOC settlements in the coastal areas.

Company slaves:	3,040	(66.5 %)
Private slaves	1,000	(21.0 %)
Indigenous servants (without soldiers, sailors, schoolmasters)	278	(6.1 %)
European and Eurasian personnel (without military and sailors)	251	(5.5 %)
Total	4,569	(100 %)

These are the people who interacted with each other on a daily basis. If we could travel through time and take a walk in and around the VOC fortifications, we would become acquainted with a coloured society whose character was determined by the way in which the Company managed to realise its profit motive. Wherever you lived, in or around the VOC forts, or in the countryside: the essence of the exploitation colony was seen everywhere.