

HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE COCONUT INDUSTRY OF CEYLON

By M. L. M. SALGADO,

Acting Director and Soil Chemist, Coconut Research Institute.

PART I

Summary

The Coconut (*Cocos Nucifera* Linn) is regarded to be of ancient origin and cultivated by people of Ceylon for its various uses. Some say that it was of South American Origin while others hold the view that it is of an Asiatic Origin.

Von Martius asserted in his book entitled *Historia Naturalia Palmarum*, that the original habitat of this palm was on the West Coast of Central America and the adjacent Islands of the Pacific.

In 1826 De Candolle stated with Historical evidence that the Eastern Archipelago near Sumatra and Java was the original habitat of the coconut from whence the nuts floated east and west. Small and Burkhill showed that its dispersal about the Pacific Coasts was due to European Nations and occurred after the date of Columbus. Friderici thought that the coconut was brought to the West Coast of Central America from Polynesia. The Italian Palm Specialist Beccaril (1916-1917) concluded that South-West Asia was the home of *Cocos Nucifera* Linn. Mayuranathan traced its origin to North-West of New Guinea. In India Marco Polo discovered the existence of coconuts in the thirteenth century but felt that it had been introduced there three to four thousand years ago.

Earliest records show that reference to coconuts in Ceylon was made by Megasthenes Ambassador of Seleucus Nicator to the Indian King Chandragupta about the year 300 B.C. Fa Hian in the fifth century A.D. claimed to have found coconuts and arrack available in Ceylon. Arab Traders Ibn Wahab and Abu Seyd are said to have had draughts of arrack in Ceylon, in the fifth century A.D.

Hence it is evident that the coconut was established in Ceylon by the dispersal and dissemination from the original home of *Cocos Nucifera* Linn either by the hand of man or by nature.



Experiment, however, has shown that coconuts can germinate and continue so whilst floating in sea for 110 days and thus being carried 3,000 miles away from their origin by ocean currents. Thus, in favourable circumstances, coconuts washed by in Tropical shores and could have established themselves without human agency. But the hand of man must have been the most active agent in the spreading of the coconut palm.

Tradition shows that a king of Ceylon suffering from a certain disease was guided by a miraculous vision to go to the Southern Coast near Weligama and live there eating the coconut fruit and bathing in the sea. (Kustaraja Gala).

According to *Mahawansa* king Agga Boddhi I is supposed to have caused a coconut plantation between Dondra and Weligama in A.D. 589. This, perhaps may have been the first coconut plantation in Ceylon. History also records that kings like Parakrama Bahu II and Parakrama the Great encouraged coconut plantation. The Minister of Parakrama the Great is said to have formed a coconut plantation between Bentota and Kalutara. Thereafter people living in the coast, realising the many uses of the coconut palm may have planted it along the coast.

Portuguese, apparently did not devote much attention to the cultivation of coconuts, but history shows that arrack and toddy were drunk by Portuguese, Dutch and English soldiers in Ceylon.

On the other hand, Dutch get the credit for having given a fillip to the industry. It is recorded that Governor Van Imhoff gave the area between Colombo and Kalutara to persons desirous of cultivating coconuts.

This may have been done with an eye on Commercial gains and with a view to increase Government income by way of Taxes.

However, history shows that when the British took over power from the Dutch, the entire coastal plain from Chilaw to Maṭara was an almost uninterrupted coconut plantation. The area was estimated to contain to million trees (i.e. 142,000 acres at 70 trees to the acre.†)

Systematic cultivation of coconuts in recent times began in 1841 when Jaffna and Batticaloa, were opened out in coconuts at a great cost. Europeans opened out plantations in Chilaw, Puttalam and Kalpitiya area and from 1860 onwards cultivation spread inland in the Western and North-Western Provinces. In the South alone 5,000 acres were estimated to be under coconuts. In early twentieth century coconuts were also planted in the Sabaragamuwa and the Central Provinces. According to Ferguson in 1902 there were 14,348 acres under coconuts in the Central Province and 5½ million nuts were collected in the Province of Uva.

‡ The cultivation gradually extended to North-Central Province and to Mullaitivu District. In 1860 there were 250,000 acres under coconuts in Ceylon with 20 million full grown trees. In 1903 there were 650,000 acres with 52 million trees. Of these 30 per cent, were estimated to be large estates and 70 per cent smallholdings.

The present acreage in Ceylon under coconuts is over 1,000,000 acres.‡

†Colvin R. de Silva: *History of the British Occupation of Ceylon*, page

‡Census of Agriculture 1952: iii. Coconut Plantations.