

NAGEL OF THE VANNI.

By E. H. V.

To readers of the Journal, who find pastime in sport, the Vanni conjures visions of tracking in pathless forests, of exciting encounters, or of silent vigils at water holes. A few others have traversed the country on their official circuits. But to the large majority, to whom the Vanni is but a name, there will be a quickening of interest when they realise the progress which this vast and inhospitable area made under the administration of the Dutch.

The Vanni, which consists of the Districts of Vavuniya and Mullaitivu, covered an area of about 2000 square miles in the days of the Dutch.

When the Portuguese captured Jaffnapatam, they held nominal sway over the Vanni, but their dominion did not extend beyond the sea-coast, nor could they exercise any control over the restless chieftains of the Vanni and their followers.

The Dutch, who succeeded the Portuguese, were not content to hold this shadowy suzerainty. They demanded an annual tribute of elephants, though this demand had frequently to be enforced by a resort to arms. In 1782 these continued skirmishes were terminated by vigorous military action taken by the Dutch and the Vanni was reduced to submission. A most determined resistance was made by one of the native princesses, the Vannichi Maria Sembatte, whom the Dutch were obliged to take prisoner and detain in the Fort of Colombo. This "warrior queen" is entitled to rank in history as the Boadicea of Ceylon.

When the Dutch took possession of the Vanni, they found the people in a most demoralised condition, fast sinking to the habits of their neighbours, the Veddahs. Paddy was the medium of exchange, for no coin was to be found in the country. The dead were buried in shallow graves and the remains were dug up and eaten by jackals. There were no walls and the people shared the water-holes with the beasts of the forest. No more paddy was grown than was necessary for immediate needs.

The administration of this desolate tract was entrusted to Thomas Nagel, as Land Regent.

Thomas Nagel, who was born on the 15th January, 1740, was an officer in the Dutch army. He was Extra-ord. Vuurwerker at Jaffna in 1767, Ord. Vuurwerker en Landmeeter at Jaffna in 1769,

Lieutenant in 1780 and Captain in 1789. It is of interest to mention that the title of "Lieutenant Fireworker" in the Artillery, which was in use in the British army up to the first decade of the nineteenth century, was a rank below that of Lieutenant.

The choice of Thomas Nagel as Land Regent was probably due to the fact that he was the officer in command of the expedition which pacified the Vanni. But he proved to be as wise an administrator as he was a successful soldier, and he soon won the allegiance of the Vanniyas or chieftains by leaving them in peaceful possession of their private property. To the inhabitants he promised and afforded protection, while he remitted their tithe for three years and besides made advances to them of money and other necessaries.

Baldaeus' account of a march through the Vanni will shew the consideration shewn by the Dutch to the inhabitants: "As we marched through the country of Wannias, we kept a most exact discipline; and as we had no great plenty of provisions, we allowed only a small measure of rice every day to each soldier, rather than incommode the inhabitants."

The security afforded by the Dutch administration led to a progressive increase in the cultivation of paddy, dry grains and other agricultural products.

Thomas Nagel introduced the cultivation of manioc (cassava) into the Vanni. The claim made by Bennett in his "Capabilities of Ceylon" that he was responsible for the introduction of cassava from Mauritius to Ceylon is denied by J. P. Lewis, who points out that the credit lies with Captain Thomas Nagel, who cultivated it in the Vanni.

The Vanni has been always celebrated for a vast number of rare medicinal plants, herbs and roots. The other staple products were elephant tusks, cattle, deer, wax, honey, milk and ghee. All that the inhabitants of the Vanni needed from the outside world were cloth, salt and salt fish.

The careful allotment of land to individuals was regulated by the Vanni *thombo*, and several receiving godowns were established, so that the inhabitants had little difficulty in paying the tithe.

Thomas Nagel administered the affairs of the Vanni so successfully that Turnour states that his own procedure in making grants of land was "adopted in imitation of Captain Nagel," the late Dutch administrator of the Vanni. Probably the most useful provision in this procedure is the following:

"The land and customs of the Wannys make these grants valid, so long as the person receiving them continues to cultivate the land granted, which reverts to Government on being avowedly abandoned, or on the cultivation being discontinued during three successive years."

It was a provision conceived in the best interests of the land holder and the government.

It would appear that Thomas Nagel's tenure of the Vanni was in the nature of a farm under the Dutch company.

In forwarding on the 8th February, 1796, a packet with papers in the Dutch language obtained from Nagel to Lord Hobart, Governor and President in Council, Mr. John Jervis, Assistant Resident at Jaffna, wrote:

"I have every reason to believe the provinces of the Vanni will become shortly very valuable to the English Company, and I am not probably too sanguine in affirming that they will be more so, with due management and attention, than even the districts dependent on Jaffnapatam".

He adds:

"While every praise is to be given to Mr. Nagel for the improvement he has made in the Vanni, it is but too evident that his lease of that country was particularly advantageous to and favourable to his own interests."

It was good administration and good business on the part of Thomas Nagel that prosperity attended all three parties to the transaction, the Dutch Government, the farmer and the inhabitants resident on the farm.

That Thomas Nagel should have prospered in the face of difficulties, which we, in our more enlightened times, consider formidable and almost insuperable, is a tribute to his initiative, energy and organising ability.

Thomas Nagel handed over to Jervis a minute on the subject of his administration, "which is so voluminous, and enters into such particular detail, that it cannot be immediately copied".

Thomas Nagel's advice was frequently sought by the British officials. His experience and his shrewd penetrating wit were found to be of the highest value. On one occasion when Jervis consulted him on the collection of revenue, he remarked, "The Malabars will always say, according to their custom, that they cannot pay".

Thomas Nagel was Land Regent in the Vanni from 1783 to 1795. There is a record that on one occasion he obtained leave for his *dhoney* to go from Kayts to Mullaitivu to remove his furniture.

In our own times we have instances of places being re-named in honour of famous men. Certainly Mullaitivu has a great claim to be known as Nagel town, for Thomas Nagel founded it by selecting the site as the head-quarters of his administration, and by erecting a fort there for the security of the Dutch conquests. Before this there had been only four or five huts on the sea-shore.

Those who have seen the poor buildings which form the Assistant Government Agent's quarters and the public offices should realise that, in the days of the Dutch, Mullaitivu was far more important than it is now. The residence of the Dutch Commanding Officer was a very spacious two storeyed building, larger and more commodious than any of the dwelling houses at Trincomalee. A hall on the ground floor of the centre building measured 60 feet in length and the room above it was of corresponding dimensions. Percival described the situation of "Malativoe" as "very romantic and delightful" and Cordiner was of the same opinion.

The question of moving to another site was considered in 1816, but it was pointed out that the existing site had been selected by Nagel, and Turnour had "given up all idea of finding one better adapted for all purposes from its central situation". Forbes thought the same.

Thomas Nagel married three times and Jervis mentions that he had a numerous family. His first wife, Hendrina Philipina Vos, daughter of Hendrik Marten Vos of Bussenbot and Johanna Corlier, died on the 23rd June, 1774. His second wife was Johanna Sophia, daughter of Johannes Louis Brochet de la Touperse of Metz and Ursula Magdalena Otley. His third wife, whom he married on 23rd July, 1797, was Petronella Numan, widow of the Rev. Johannes Engelbert Hugonis.

One of Thomas Nagel's daughters, Carolina, married at Jaffna on 4th July, 1802, Lieutenant Richard William Cotgrave, the first "Civil Engineer" under British rule. Gerrit Joan Nagel, who had been in the Dutch Engineer corps and continued to live at Jaffna after the island was ceded to the British, was probably a son of Thomas Nagel.

There was also a Lieutenant Nagel in the 97th Regiment, who married at Galle on 26th March, 1831, a daughter of Francis Dickson.

The Rev. C. A. Koch (aged 74), Chaplain of Holy Trinity Church, Colombo, stated at an interview published in the *Ceylon Independent* of 30th July, 1907, that he had known seven generations of one family named Nagel. He remembered the funeral of the first and he baptised the seventh three years ago. He had stayed at Nagel's house in Jaffna, and there it was he entertained the present Metropolitan of India, when he paid his first visit to Jaffna as Bishop of Colombo, the visit lasting for fourteen days. Nagel's grand-daughter was married to a District Judge, close to whose house was the famous tamarind tree, under which Baldaeus used to preach and which stood in the market place at Point Pedro.

Thomas Nagel died on the 9th May, 1823, and there is a tombstone erected to his memory in the Pettah Cemetery, Jaffna.