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**Translating the mythical borders of a country:
Arabic and Portuguese interpretations of a creation myth from Kerala (India)**

The mythical creation of Kerala by Parasuraman, an avatar of Vishnu, was a story that was widely popular on the Western coasts of India during the periods of sustained contact between Portugal and Kerala, from 1498 to 1663. In traditional Malayalam literary sources, the myth served as a basis for defining kingship and the borders of the kingdoms, the breaching of which was in turn represented as a challenge to the mythical orders of the country. In sixteenth-century Arabic writings from Kerala, a portion of the myth gained currency, mainly as a means for defending the indigenous connection between Muslim traders and the country. A version of the myth, corresponding to that of Arabic, was also picked up by the Portuguese traveller Duarte Barbosa as early as 1516 and was later reproduced in the 1572 Portuguese epic *The Lusiads*. In both its Arabic and its Portuguese interpretations, the myth lost some of its mythic potential and was presented more as verifiable history. While in the Arabic sources, elements of the myth coincided with the historic settlement of Arab-Muslims in Kerala, in the Portuguese sources they became part of the imperial project of producing an *exact knowledge* of the newly encountered territories.

Through the examination of selected primary texts in Malayalam, Arabic, and Portuguese, my paper will explore the border-crossings of the Parasuraman myth from Malayalam into Portuguese in the sixteenth-century. One of the questions that this paper attempts to answer is whether the Portuguese adopted the creation myth of Kerala through Arabic sources? In *The Lusiads*, the myth is recounted to the Portuguese travellers by a Muslim trader (*Maometa*) from Kerala, who then goes on to describe the traditions and customs of the country. This is perhaps a sign of existing intellectual exchanges between the Portuguese and the Muslim communities, who by their own accounts were at war with each other.