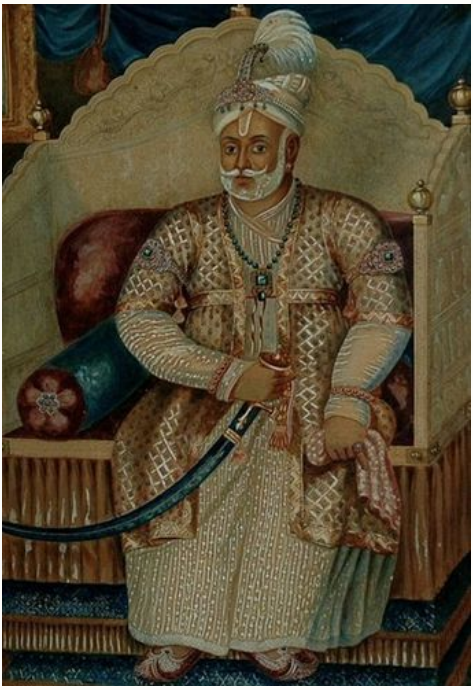


Facts Did you know

Royal death taboos: sanctified deathbeds and bricked-up walls in Kerala

Royal Death Taboos: Sanctified Deathbeds and Bricked-Up Walls in Kerala

In pre-modern Kerala, custom decided where a monarch's body left the palace. According to Jacobus Canter Visscher, an 18th-century Dutch chaplain, the Rajahs of Cochin retired to specially sanctified places when dangerously ill. These places were Trichur, Kaikanoer, or Tripunithura. On

their deathbeds, they gave 200 or 300 cows to Brahmins, along with money and jewels to relatives. All remaining possessions passed to the successor. In Travancore, Samuel Mateer recorded an even more remarkable precaution. The royal corpse was placed in a silk-draped, jasmine-garlanded State palanquin. It was carried out through a breach knocked into the wall, not through the doorway. This avoided polluting the gate. The wall was then rebuilt so the departed spirit could not return through the entrance to trouble the living. Furthermore, the palace in which a Travancore sovereign died was sealed off and left vacant. All its furniture and contents were preserved untouched for one or two generations before being reopened. So care was taken, whenever possible, for younger royals to die in an unoccupied palace that could be spared.