

VI. The Seven and Half Churches St. Thomas Founded

As we have seen already, the *Ezharapallikal* (seven and half churches) that St. Thomas the Apostle founded are at Kottakkayal (Kottakkavu. Present day North Paravur) Maliankara (Kodungallur, Crangannoor), Palayoor, Kollam, Niranam, Nilackal (Chayal), Kokkamangalam and Thiruvithamcode (Arapally, that is, Half-Church).

1. Kottakkayal or Kottakavu (Muziris)

St. Thomas landed in Muziris, which was a big harbour, and in this geographical area, St. Thomas founded two Christian communities one at Kottakayal (Kottakkavu) and the other at Maliankara (Kodungallur-Azhikode). (picture 5)

The history of Muziris starts from early 3000 BC when Babylonians, Assyrians and Egyptians came to the Malabar Coast (Kerala) in search for the spices. Later these Middle-East groups were joined by Arabs and Phoenicians. And gradually Muziris entered into the cartography of World trade map. Then onwards Muziris holds the key to a good chunk of Kerala's ancient history now the ancient trade route. The port was a key to the trade between southern India and the Phoenicians, the Persians, the Egyptians, the Greeks and the Roman Empire. The important known commodities exported from Muziris were spices (such as black pepper and malabathron, that is, cinnamon), semi-precious stones (such as beryl including emerald), pearls, diamonds, sapphires, ivory, silk, Gangetic spikenard and tortoise shells. The Romans brought money (in gold coins), peridots, thin clothing, figured linens, multicoloured textiles, sulfide of antimony, copper, tin, lead, coral, raw glass, wine, realgar and orpiment.

Muziris has found mention in the bardic Tamil Sangam literature (300 BC to AD 300) and a number of classical European historical sources. It is generally speculated to be situated around present day Kodungallur, which figures prominently in the ancient history of southern India as a vibrant urban hub of the Chera rulers. A series of excavations were conducted at the village of Pattanam in North Paravur by Kerala Council for Historical Research (an autonomous institution outsourced by Kerala State Department of Archaeology) in 2006-07 and it was announced that the lost port of Muziris was found.

The derivation of the name "Muziris" is said to be from the native Tamil. It is frequently referred to as *Muciri* in Sangam poems, *Muracippattanam* in the Sanskrit epic *Ramayana*, and as *Muyirikottu* in a copper plate of an 11th century Chera ruler.

Navigation of the Red Sea

The author of the Greek travel book *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (1st century AD) gives an elaborate description of the Chera Kingdom and the first markets of Muziris. Pliny the Elder, Roman historian of the first century gives a description of voyages to India in the 1st century AD. He refers to many Indian ports in his *The Natural History*.

Muziris papyrus

This Greek papyrus of the 2nd century AD documents a contract involving an Alexandrian merchant importer and a financier that concerns cargoes, especially of pepper and spices from Muziris. The fragmentary papyrus records details about a cargo consignment (valued at around nine million sesterces) brought back from Muziris on board a Roman merchant ship called the *Hermapollon*. The discovery opened a strong base to ancient international and trade laws in particular and has been studied at length by economists, lawyers as well as historians.

Muziris has found a place in *The Peutinger Map* which is an illustrated *itinerarium* (ancient Roman road map) showing the layout of the road network of the Roman Empire. Peutinger Map, an odd-sized medieval copy of an ancient Roman road map, "with information which could date back to 2nd century AD", in which both Muziris and Tondis are well marked, "with a large lake indicated behind Muziris, and beside which is an icon marked Templ(um) Augusti, widely taken to mean a "Temple of Augustus." A large number of Roman

subjects must have spent months in this region awaiting favourable conditions for return sailings to the Empire. This could explain why the Map records the existence of an Augustan temple.

Great "floods" of Periyar: Muziris disappeared from every known map of antiquity, and without a trace, presumably because of a cataclysmic event in 1341, a "cyclone and floods" in the Periyar that altered the geography of the region.

Archaeological Excavations

A series of excavations conducted at Kodungallur starting from 1945, yielded nothing that went back to before the 13th century. Another excavation was carried out in 1969 by the Archaeological Survey of India at Cheraman Parambu, 2 km north of Kodungallur. Only antiquities of the 13th and 16th century were recovered.

1983, a large hoard of Roman coins was found at a site around six miles from Pattanam. A series of pioneering excavations carried out by Kerala Council for Historical Research (KCHR, an autonomous institution) at Pattanam from 2007 uncovered a large number of artefacts. So far, seven seasons of excavations (2007–14) are completed by KCHR at Pattanam. "Whether Pattanam was Muziris is not of immediate concern to us," the chief of the Kerala Council for Historical Research recently stated to the media. Even the last field report on the excavations (2013) explicitly shows Pattanam as Muziris.

Discoveries from Pattanam Archaeological research has shown that Pattanam was a port frequented by Romans and it has a long history of habitation dating back to 10th century BC. Its trade links with Rome peaked between 1st century BC and 4th century AD. A large quantity of artifacts represents the maritime contacts of the site with Mediterranean, Red Sea and Indian Ocean rims. The major finds include ceramics, lapidary-related objects, metal objects, coins, architectural ruins, geological, zoological and botanical remains.

The major discoveries from the place called Pattanam include thousands of beads (made of semi-precious stone), sherds of Roman amphora, Chera-era coins made of copper alloys and lead, fragments of Roman glass pillar bowls, terra sigillata, remains of a long wooden boat and associated bollards made of teak and a wharf made of fired brick. The most remarkable find at Pattanam excavations in 2007 was a brick structural wharf complex, with nine bollards to harbour boats and in the midst of this, a highly decayed canoe, all perfectly mummified in mud. The canoe (6 meters long) was made of *Artocarpus hirsutus*, a tree common in Malabar Coast, out of which boats are made. The bollards some of which are still in satisfactory condition was made of teak. Three Tamil-Brahmi scripts were also found in the Pattanam excavations. The last Tamil-Brahmi script (dated to c. 2nd century AD, probably reading "a-ma-na", meaning "a Jaina" in Tamil) was found on a pot-rim at Pattanam. If the rendering and the meaning is not mistaken, it establishes that Jainism was prevalent on the Malabar Coast at least from the 2nd century. This is for the first time the excavators are getting direct evidence relating to a religious system in ancient Kerala.

Jews in Musiris

Study of Jewish settlements is an integral part of Muziris Heritage Project. The Jewish immigration to Kerala was the direct effect of the early commercial contacts with Israel. According to tradition some 10,000 Jews came to Kerala coast in 68 AD in order to escape from religious persecution at home. They landed first at Muziris and founded a settlement. The Jews developed in to a prosperous business community with the generous patronage of the native rulers. They enjoyed a high standing in society till the arrival of the Portuguese who persecuted them and compelled them to leave Kodungallur for Kochi in 1565 temporarily.

St. Thomas is traditionally believed to have sailed to India and landed in Muziris (Azhikode-Kodungallur-N. Paravur) in 52 AD to spread the Christian faith among the Jews, the Jewish diaspora present in Kerala at the time. Kottakkavu Mar Thoma Syro-Malabar Pilgrim Church, North Paravur is a Syro-Malabar church established in 52 AD, the first church in India.

Kottakavu Church situated in the heart of Paravur town in Kerala. It is believed that the Persian Cross, which is preserved in the chapel in front of the church, might have been engraved in rock in 880 AD.

Mar Sabor and Mar Proth came from Persia to Malankara in the 9th century. They built and presided over a number of churches in Malankara operating in accordance with Saint Thomas Christians. The second church of Kottakavu was rebuilt at this time. After their death they were remembered as saints and their name was given to this church. Kottakavu Sliva, a Persian cross engraved on granite stone by Mar Sabor and Mar Proth, is preserved in the chapel in front of the church.

A wooden cross which the saint had planted was kept in the church till the 18th century. But during the siege of Tipu Sultan (A Muslim leader), various churches were demolished, and this cross too was destroyed. The church ransacked at that time was the third one built after the saint's time. The church of 1308 was rebuilt and blessed on 15th August 2002.

The old church, the elephantine wall on the adjacent western side and the pilgrim pond where the Apostle baptized the devotees are all still preserved well. It is known that about 2 acres of land were provisionally allocated by the church for the construction of the Paravur market. It was the Cross that stood in this place from age old days that was converted into the market chapel.

2. Kodungallur (Musiris) (picture 6)

Kodungallur Mar Thoma Church, today known as the Marthoma Pontifical shrine, is considered to be the first church built by St. Thomas the Apostle. The church is situated on the banks of the River Periyar about 6 km from Kodungallur, in the village of Azhikode in Kerala. It is believed that St. Thomas, the apostle landed in Kodungallur on November 21st, 52 A.D. Kodungallur was then part of ancient harbour Musiris (The Marthoma Pontifical shrine is a major pilgrim centre that comes under the Muziris Heritage Project, sponsored by Government).

Kodungallur lost its ecclesiastical significance and commercial prominence due to the attack of Tipu Sultan and the development of Cochin port in its place. But its historical importance was rightly acknowledged when on the occasion of the 19th centenary celebration of the coming of St. Thomas to India, Holy See, the official seat of the Vatican, thought to offer a befitting gift to St. Thomas Christians in Kerala. Late Eugene Cardinal Tisserant, the then Prefect of Oriental Congregation solemnly brought the bone of the right arm of the apostle from Ortona in Italy and enthroned it in the present Shrine on December 6th, 1953. The bone of the right arm of St. Thomas was brought from Ortona in Italy and enthroned in the present Pontifical shrine. From then on, the shrine at Azhikode has been a great pilgrimage centre attracting thousands from all around the world, irrespective of caste and creed.

The 'Marthoma Smruthi Tharangam' derived from Sanskrit language which means 'the creation of waves of memories regarding St. Thomas' adjacent to the shrine, offers a memorial presentation of the mission of the Apostle. A 3500 square feet mansion built in the Indo-Persian style presents the major episodes in the life of St. Thomas. This programme of 30 minutes duration uses the aid of modern computer technologies and audio visual theatrical effects.

3. Palayur

This church is located at Palayur (also spelt Palayoor), in Thrissur district in Kerala was also a small church originally, still retaining the oldest structure. The credit goes to Rev. Fr. Fenichi who

made vast improvements to the church during the 17th century without compromising on the main sanctity and heritage value of the place. (picture 7)

St. Thomas traveled from Muziris (Kottakkavu or Kodungallur) and landed at Palayur by boat through the backwaters. Palayur, also known as *Bottukulam* because of the historic location of boat jatty, was then a stronghold of the Kerala Nambudri (earlier they were priests in Buddha vihars) and also of Jews. He visited the Jewish merchants at "Judankunnu" (meaning the hill of Jews) in Palayur to preach the Christian gospel. As a proof of Jewish settlements existing when St Thomas arrived here in 52 AD, ruins of a synagogue could be seen near a Hindu temple, close to the church. Temple remnants in the form of broken idols, sculptures and relics of the old temple can also be seen near the precincts of the church, in addition to two large tanks near the west and east gates of the church. St. Thomas was proclaimed 'The Apostle of India' by the Holy See. His skeleton remains were brought to India in 1953 by Cardinal Tisserant.^[8] Furthermore, a document called 'Grandavariola' kept by a local Brahmin family (who had moved out from Palayur during the preaching) testifies to the date of the gospel work of St. Thomas. The document states:

Kali year 3153 (52 AD) the foreigner Thomas Sanyasi came to our village (gramam) preached there and thereby causing.

The place is preserved as a monument to St. Thomas. It is one of the oldest churches in India, second only to Kottakkavu Mar Thoma Church, North Paravur and is called an Apostolic Church credited to the Apostolate of St. Thomas who preached and also started conversion of people to Christianity here.

The Legend

Historical legend records that when St. Thomas landed at Palayur, he witnessed the sight of Namboodiris, after their ablutions in a local tank, offering prayers by chanting mantras (Indian tradition for spiritual transformation) hymns to god in the form of *Argyam* or *Tharpanam* (water held in the palms) of water to the Sun god, a practice also said to be followed in Harappan and Persian cultures. Amused by the sight of water being thrown up by the Nambudiris, from the palms of their hands, which was falling back, he challenged them stating that the water they were offering was not being accepted by the Sun god as it was falling back into the tank. He made a deal with them stating that his God would accept the offer of water if he threw it up in the same way as they did, but water would not fall back. If he proved this then his God was superior and they would have to embrace Christianity. He performed this miracle (summoned the Holy Trinity, completed the sign of the Cross and threw water held in his palms up into the air, which remained still in the air at a height) and with this miracle he converted a number of Namboodiris and Jews in Palayur to Christianity. Thereafter he baptised the converts in a nearby water tank. The Brahmins who did not convert to the faith gave the epithet of the 'Sapa Kadu' or "Cursed Place" to Palayur and migrated to Vembanad to purify themselves.

The Church was built taking some inputs also from the existing Namboodiri Temple...Later it was renovated. But during Tipu Sultan's invasion of Kerala in the 18th century, the church was destroyed by fire. Thereafter it was re-built.

4. Kokkamangalam

Kokkamangalam is a village in Alappuzha district of Kerala state, south India. It is situated in between Cochin and Kumarakom and on the western shore of Vembanad Lake, 5 km east of the town of Cherthala, which has the nearest railway station. (picture 8)

A church was erected in this village, which was a traditional place of coconut processing cottage industry and numerous small coir spinning units. The present church was rebuilt in 1900 on the same site. Local attractions include picnic boating at Kokkamangalam.

Thanneermukkom saltwater barrier, Pathiramanal Island, Kumarakom bird sanctuary are among the places of interest nearby. The Cochin International Airport is 70 kilometers from Kokkamangalam.

St. Thomas sailed to Kokkamangalam where he preached the gospel for about a year. 1600 people converted to Christianity through him according to the narration in "Rampaan Paattu" (Rampaan Song), an ancient form of Christian folk-song prevalent in Kerala. He formed a Christian community at Kokkamangalam and enshrined a Cross for the faithful. The cross reputedly erected by the Apostle Thomas in Kokkamangalam (the original one is at Pallippuram; the replica in stone was erected in 2002). This cross was later cut off by saboteurs, and thrown into the Lake Vembanad, through which it floated up to Pallippuram, where it is enshrined (according to the legend in oral tradition).

The Relic of Apostle St. Thomas enshrined here was brought from Ortona in Italy by Pope John Paul II in November 1999. Special Novena prayers are held on Friday evenings to venerate the Relic. Devotees who aspire for jobs in foreign countries seek the intercession of the Apostle.

Inside the church, one can see the portrait of St. Thomas, which was brought from the Carmelite Monastery Mannanam in 1897 by "Albhutha Mathai", pursuant to a revelation.

5. St. Mary's Orthodox Syrian Church – Niranam (picture 9)

Niranam Pally, popularly known as Niranam Valiya Pally or St. Mary's Orthodox Syrian Church, founded by Thomas the Apostle one of the twelve Apostles of Jesus Christ, around AD 54. The church was reconstructed several times since then. The stones in the church shows the reconstruction in 1259.

On his way from Kollam in northeast direction St. Thomas arrived at Niranam "Thrikpaleswaram" by sea. He converted two Namboodiri families named Pattamukkil, & Thayyil and two Nair families named Manki, & Madathilan to Christianity.¹ These are the first four families which has been converted by St. Thomas to Christianity.

Thomas also is believed to have given priestly powers to the members of Pattamukkil family. Priests from Pattamukkil family used to stay there and done priesthood and governed Niranam church and its properties in the ancient days. Tharavad is surrounded from three sides of Niranam Church

It is believed to be one of the oldest churches in Kerala and thus in India as well as among the oldest ones in the world. The architecture shows striking similarities to ancient temple architecture. It is believed to have been established by St. Thomas.

The present building, supposedly the fourth, was constructed in 1912 and was renovated during the year 2000. There are five altars at Niranam church. The main altar, the central one, is in the name of Saint Mary. This is used for regular services of the church.

There are two altars on the north and south of the main one. The altar on the northern side is consecrated to Saint George and the altar on the southern side is consecrated in the name of Mar Behnam.

There are two smaller altars, to the front of the main altar. The north among these is in the name of Saint Thomas. It is also the shrine of Mar Thoma II.

The southern among the small altars is consecrated to Saint Stephen. This is also the shrine of Mar Thoma V.

¹ This is a bit controversial because caste system was introduced in Kerala by Sankara in the 8th century AD, and Hindus came to Kerala only in the 5th century AD. So, whether they were Nair caste (the lowest caste in Hindu religion namely Sudra) is debated. Most probably they were people who were not Namboodiris.

The tall granite cross at the right side of the entrance is a relic of the past, probably from 1259, the time at which the third renovation of the church building took place. The base of the cross has carvings resembling a Hindu Temple.

Analysis of soil says that during the first century, Niranam and the surrounding places were coastal region. Probably, it was a place where the river joined the sea. Some historians are of the opinion that the name Niranam derived from an old name '*Neer Mannu*', which meant land with water. Presence of water bodies enabled travel through water and it is believed that the Apostle reached Niranam in a ship (it might be a big boat). During the 14th century, there was a great flood and the geography of the area changed a lot because the sea retreated exposing a lot of land.

Even today, there is a place at Niranam, near Kolarayar - a tributary of River Pampa - named '*Thomathukadavu*', which is supposed to be the spot where St. Thomas got down from the ship. The word '*Thomathukadavu*' might have emerged from '*Thoma Vanna Kadavu*', which means the jetty where Thomas came.

6. St. Thomas Church, Nilakkal (picture 10)

The Nilakkal St. Thomas Church was established by St. Thomas the Apostle in Nilakkal (or sometimes known as Chayal). There was a mountain route of trade between Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Saint Thomas, along with his disciple, baptized 1100 people here.

In 1902, during the British period, the remains of an ancient Christian church and cemetery were accidentally discovered in the forest area of the south of the Western Ghats, on the road to the ancient Hindu shrine of Sabarimala (Sabarimala is one of the largest annual Hindu pilgrimages in the world with an estimated 45–50 million devotees visiting every year). The British took an interest in the discovery since it was suspected that the church was built in the first century. Pulikkottil Joseph Mar Dionysius, the Malankara Metropolitan wrote to the Diwan of Travancore, that this site was one of the seven churches established by St. Thomas, and that the British Resident, Mr. Hannington, had promised Rs. 20,000 to build a church on this site. One of the arguments used by the Metropolitan to convince the Diwan about the need of a Church on this site was that “the establishment of an intermediate settlement at Nilakkal will be a great boon to the thousands of Hindu devotees who annually repair to the forest temple” of Sabarimala. Nothing came out of the petition, obviously.

The site was discovered again, once more by an Orthodox layman serving in the Forest Department of the Government of Travancore, in early 1940's. A church bell and a large cross had been found from this site. Again the Orthodox Church appealed to the Diwan of Travancore, to assign the land to the church. The response of the Diwan, Sir C. P. Ramaswamy Iyer, no friend of the Christians was an order to remove the bell and the cross to some unknown place, and to begin construction of a Hindu temple on the spot. The present Hindu temple in Nilakkal was thus built in 1946.

The third 'discovery' of the site was in independent India, in February 1957, this time also by a priest of the Orthodox Church. The basement of a church building and several graves (all east west, a sign that it was Christian burial place) were found from here.

The presence of a Hindu temple near the Christian site created a controversy and this delayed the building of a church. However, both communities, with mutual trust, solved the 'Church construction issue' amicably, fully supported by the government. A new church has been built under the joint auspices of all the Christian denominations at the site mutually agreed upon by all parties concerned, a little distance away from the earlier site. Being the first church built far away from the coast, efforts were made to preserve it as a symbol of the heritage from St. Thomas.

7. Kollam Church

Kollam was a port city of the Chera Dynasty until the formation of the independent Venad kingdom, of which it became the capital. Prior to that, Kollam was considered one of the four early entrepots in the global sea trade around the 13th century, along with Alexandria and Cairo in Egypt.

Kollam was a major harbor and trade centre. It was the second largest port in Kerala by volume of cargo handled and facilities. St Thomas established a church near the port. V. Nagam Aiya in his *Travancore State Manual* records that in 822, two Bishops, Mar Sabor and Mar Proth, settled in Kollam (Quilon) with their followers. Two years later the Malabar Era began (824) and Quilon became the premier city of the Malabar Coastregion ahead of Travancore and Cochin.

The church in Kollam was destroyed during a transgression of the land by Arabian Sea. There were attempts of reconstruction, but without great success. However, in the year 1986 Pope John Paul II, when he visited India for the beatification of St. Alphonsa, laid the foundation stone for a church to be constructed at the spot which is the present Port Church or Our Lady of Purification Church. And the church construction was completed in 1993. An old church is also maintained, and the surrounding walls have the history of St. Thomas depicted in paintings.

8. Thiruvithamcode Church (picture 11)

The eighth church which Thomas founded is known as *Arapally*, which is popularly interpreted as half-church (*ara* means 'half,' *pally* means 'church'). But, now it is interpreted as *Arajan's Pally*, that is, King's Church, or Royal Church (*Arajan* means 'king'), named after Chera King Uthiyan Cheralathan.

This church is also known as *Thomayar Kovil* (Shrine of Thomas), located in Thiruvithamcode, Tamil Nadu, India (Today it is known as St. Mary's Orthodox Church, Amalagiri). It is one of the world's oldest churches that still has daily prayers and it has three main parts built in the 17th century and a 20th century entrance hall.

It is believed to be founded in 63 A. D. The Christian communities in Kerala believe that the historic Thiruvithamcode Arappally, also called Amalagiri church was named by the Chera King Uthiyan Cheralathan. It is about 20 km from Nagercoil town, and 2 km from Thuckalay.