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THE ARCHAEOLOGY AND EPIGRAPHY OF MAR THOMA NASRANIS (SAINT THOMAS CHRISTIANS): A PICTORIAL REVIEW

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Abstract

The Mar Thoma Nasranis (Saint Thomas Christians) are one of the earliest Christian communities in the world. Numerous patristic writings and ancient documents bear witness to the early presence of the Christian faith in India. Apart from the presence of granite inscriptional tablets, grants engraved on copper plates and Pahlavi inscribed crosses, not many native documents are extant from the pre-Portuguese period. In this paper, I would like to focus on photographic images of some of those valuable inscriptions and discuss their relevance to the historiography of Indian Christianity. Granite inscriptional tablets and the Pahlavi inscribed granite crosses narrate the history of the Saint Thomas Christians in India, the evolution of an inculturated native Christian community and the conflicts related to religio-colonial invasion and suppression. Pahlavi inscribed bas relief crosses tell the story of the migration of Christians from Persia. Interestingly, copies of the crosses show cultural adaptations of South Indian artistic elements. These crosses are evidence of the evolution of a native icon of worship. The inscriptions are found on granite tablets, crosses and altar walls. They are in East and West Syriac, Pahlavi, a middle Persian script and in 'vattezhuthu', an ancient script of the local Malayalam language. They consist of an edict of a local king, accounts of events, prayers or liturgical formulae and funerary inscriptions. The edict of Thazhekkad of the 8-11th century, a recording of a local king giving favours and privileges to Christians inscribed on a granite slab, is one of the most ancient inscriptions still extant. The inscriptional tablet at the ancient church at Muttuchira and the pedestal of the open-air rock cross at the ancient church of Champakulam are examples of inscriptions which record significant events. In addition, there are many funerary inscriptions, one of which, found at the church at Udayamperoor and concerning the death of a Christian king, throws light on the existence of a Christian dynasty in South India. There are several Syriac language inscriptions which range from the ancient Judeo-Christian usage of 'Yah' at the Church at Koratty to inscriptions of Latinised theological content. These treasures of ancient Christianity in India call for research from multiple academic disciplines.

SAINT THOMAS CHRISTIANS OF INDIA

The Christians of Saint Thomas in India are believed to be the community founded by the preaching of Apostle Thomas in the first century AD.

The Apostle Thomas is held to have been sent to preach in the Persian Empire, which during this period extended as far as the north-west of India. Christian communities were founded throughout Persia, and in places such as Herat, in Afghanistan. Traditional accounts hold that Apostle Thomas returned to Jerusalem for the Synod of Jerusalem, and then, during the second dispersal of the apostles, travelled to Socotra, an island in the Arabian Sea, and thence across the sea to South India, making use of the monsoon winds.¹ It is believed that Apostle Thomas landed in Maliamkara, also known as Musiris, near Kodungalloor.

¹ See A. E. Medlycott, *India and Apostle Thomas: an inquiry, with a critical analysis of the Acta Thomae* (London 1905), p. 148.

ARCHAEOLOGY AND EPIGRAPHY IN HISTORICAL STUDIES

Archaeology is an important element in historical studies. Archaeology by definition is the study of human history and prehistory through the excavation of sites and analysis of artefacts and other physical remains.² It is the scientific study of human activity in the past. This includes the study of artefacts, architectural elements, biofacts (organic material like bones, plants, and so on), and the cultural landscape.³

EPIGRAPHY

Written information from the past is available as inscriptions and manuscripts. Inscriptions and manuscripts are invaluable in the study of history as written information.

An inscription is a piece of writing or lettering engraved, etched, incised, traced, stamped or otherwise imprinted into or onto a durable surface.⁴

Palaeography deals with the forms of writings while epigraphy deals with not only the lettering but the subject matter of inscriptions as well.⁵ Epigraphy is a branch of palaeography. The analysis of epigraphic inscriptions is a very important tool for archaeological studies. Epigraphy is the scientific study and interpretation of ancient inscriptions.⁶ Barthold George Niebuhr, sometimes called the ‘father of modern historiography’, recognised that inscriptions are the essential primary sources in the study of antiquity, as documents are for modern history.⁷

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THOMAS CHRISTIANS

ARTEFACTS

- A. Crosses: granite bas relief crosses, open air crosses.
- B. Inscriptions or documentations.
 1. Inscriptions on granite tablets and altar crosses, copper plates, altar walls, funerary inscriptions.
 2. Manuscripts: palm leaf documents (in literature, these are called ‘ola’ which is a Malayalam word for palm leaf).
 3. Church murals which provide evidence concerning ancient practices, such as the customary method of blessing crosses, the attire of the clergy, and the theological understanding of the community.
 4. Plaster art: this is found in some churches built in the post-Portuguese period, depicting certain unusual creatures and animals, probably from Biblical descriptions, and throwing light on certain historical events, including the attack of Tippu Sultan, a Muslim conqueror who attacked several Christian churches and is likely the subject of plaster artworks depicting a tiger and soldiers with a gun.

² Oxford Living Dictionaries, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/archaeology> accessed on 26 January 2019.

³ History of Archaeology, Wikipedia article https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_archaeology accessed on 09 February 2019.

⁴ John Bodet, ‘Epigraphy and the ancient historian’, in John Bodet, ed. *Epigraphic Evidence: Ancient History from Inscriptions* (London, 2001), p. 2.

⁵ John Edwin Sandys, *Latin Epigraphy: An introduction to the study of Latin Inscriptions* (Cambridge 1927), p. 1.

⁶ Oxford Living Dictionaries, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/epigraphy> accessed on 26 January 2019.

⁷ John Bodet, ‘Epigraphy and the ancient historian’, in John Bodet, ed. *Epigraphic Evidence: Ancient History from Inscriptions* (London, 2001), p. 1.

ARCHITECTURAL ELEMENTS

1. The Mailappore tomb.
2. Tombs of the 9th century Fathers Mar Denha, Mar Abo, Mar Younan and Mar Raban.
3. Large open-air rock crosses.
4. Granite altar crosses.
5. The architecture of ancient churches.
6. Granite baptismal fonts.

BIOFACTS AND CULTURAL LANDSCAPES

Excavations at Pattanam near Kodungalloor and excavations at the Mailappore Tomb of Apostle Thomas.

Recent excavations in Pattanam near Kodungalloor in Kerala indicate the presence of a port in a location which is now some distance from the shore, near Pattanam. The archaeological discovery of a wide range of objects, including beads and variety of local, Mediterranean and Roman pottery, reveal a strong maritime trade relation with the Middle East.⁸ Palaeobotanical evidence from the wharf site and a canoe excavated from the Pattanam excavation site provide further indications of the existence of ancient spice trade, operating from the port of Muziris from the 1st century BC to the 4th century AD.⁹ This is a piece of strong evidence that there were all the facilities for Apostle Thomas to arrive in South India in the first century.

CROSSES

Open air Granite crosses are widespread among ancient Saint Thomas Christian settlements. These crosses were probably the earliest places of worship. Many of these crosses are seen on the wayside with facilities for lighting lamps and breaking coconuts: both ritual practices among the native Dravidian communities. The presence of these crosses is commented on in the 1507 *Narrations of Joseph, the Indian*, an account of the descriptions of religious practices and life in late fifteenth and early sixteenth-century India provided by Fr. Joseph, a much-travelled Saint Thomas Christian, to the anonymous author, his companion on a voyage to Portugal.¹⁰

Pahlavi inscribed bas relief crosses are used as altar crosses in ancient Thomas Christian Churches. Details of these crosses are given in the next section of this paper.

INSCRIPTIONAL TABLETS: HISTORICAL DOCUMENTATION

It is unfortunate that most of the manuscripts relating to the history of the St Thomas Christians have been lost, partly due to the climate of South India. Palm leaves are very fragile and not long-lasting. For this reason, copper plates were used for particularly important documentation.

Many documents were systematically destroyed by Portuguese missionaries, who considered them to be vehicles of heresy. During the Portuguese invasion, the Archbishop of Goa, Alexis

⁸ Cyriac Jose and R. K. Mohanty, 'Antiquity Of Christianity in India with special reference to South Central Kerala', *Heritage: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology*, 5 (2017), 108.

⁹ P. J. Cherian, 'Pattanam Archaeological Site: The Wharf Context and the Maritime Exchanges', in M. Staniforth, ed., *Proceedings on the Asia-Pacific Regional Conference on Underwater Cultural Heritage: November 8-12, 2011*, (Manila, 2011), pp. 131-144.

¹⁰ Antony Vallavanthara, *India in 1500 AD: The narratives of Joseph the Indian*, Piscataway, 2002, p. 97. This record of

Dom Menesis, visited all the Thomas Christian churches specifically in order to collect their manuscripts for destruction.¹¹ This was a great loss for historians as most of the liturgical and paraliturgical manuscripts were lost forever, although some were preserved by the families of the clergy.

There are also a large number of inscriptions on granite tablets found around the ancient Thomas Christians communities and churches. Most of them are the funerary inscriptions of prominent persons. There are a few records of events and prayer formulae.

FUNERARY INSCRIPTIONS

The oldest among these is a funerary inscriptional tablet found at the ancient church at Aruvithura, in the eastern part of the Kottayam District in Kerala. There are a number of inscribed funerary tablets displayed in the church. The oldest is from AD 927. This 'vattezhuthu' inscription, which is not completely deciphered, reads "... in the year 102 ...". This could refer to the Malayalam Era (Kolla varsham), in which case the date would correspond to AD 927.

There are a number of funerary inscriptional tablets kept at the church at Udayamperoor, where the infamous Synod of Diamper took place. These tablets offer some evidence for the existence of a Christian dynasty in Kerala. One of the inscriptional tablets placed in the museum at Udayamperoor reads "*chennongalathu partha villarvattam Thoma rajavu nadu neengi, 1500 kumbham randam theyyathi*".¹² This could be rendered in English as 'on the second day of the month of kumbham, in the year 1500 (probably AD 1500), the King of Villarvattam, who resided at Chennamangalam, passed away'.¹³ There was another tablet, now lost, which mentioned the death of "Chenamparampil mathulla thampuram" (Lord/King Mathulla of Chenamparampil).¹⁴

There are a number of inscribed tablets found at churches including Pallippuram church, Kanjoor church, and Kaduthuruthy church, among many others. These talk about the death of certain important persons.¹⁵

¹¹ Joseph Thekkedath, *History of Christianity in India*, vol. ii (Bangalore, 2001), p. 74.

¹² Chronicles of Old church at Udayamperoor. <http://www.synodofdiamper.com/mal/index.php> accessed on 06/03/2019, Dr Jomon Thachil, *Kanjoor Kraisthava pazhama* (2010), p. 25.

¹³ A. S. Anantha Rama Ayyar, 'Six Epitaphs of Udayamperoor', *Travancore Archaeological Series*, vol vi (Trivandrum, 1927), pp. 68-70.

¹⁴ Chronicles of Old Church at Udayamperoor. <http://www.synodofdiamper.com/mal/index.php> accessed on 06/03/2019.

¹⁵ Cyriac Jose and R. K. Mohanty, 'Antiquity Of Christianity in India with special reference to South Central Kerala', *Heritage: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology*, 5 (2017), 122-134.



Saint George's church, Aruvithura, Kottayam Kerala, India. (Syro Malabar Church), funerary inscription



Funerary inscripational tablet, Saint Mary's Forane Church, Kaduthuruthy, Kerala, India. (Syro Malabar Knanaya)



A funerary inscription at Udayamperoor church concerning King Thomas of Villarvattom. Saint Mary's Church (Synod of Diamper Church), Udayamperoor, Ernakulam District, Kerala. Syro Malabar Church)



Funerary inscriptional tablets, Saint Mary's Forane Church, Kanjoor, Ernakualm District, Kerala, India. (Syro Malabar Church)



Funerary inscriptions, Saint Mary's Forane Church, Pallippuram, Alleppey District, Kerala, India.
(Syro Malabar Church.)

NARRATION OF EVENTS

MUTTUCHIRA LITHIC INSCRIPTIONS

The Muttuchira Lithic inscriptional tablet, found at the Ruha D Khudisa Church at Muttuchira, Kottayam, is a rectangular granite slab with inscriptions in two sections narrating events that occurred in AD 1528, 1580 and 1581. Mr T. K. Joseph, an eminent historian of the early twentieth century, considered that this inscriptional tablet was probably made in AD 1581 or later.¹⁶

The first section of the inscription, on the left half of the tablet, records the erection of a cross on the ground by Bishops Mar Denha¹⁷ and Mar Avoo, along with 'Cathanar' ('Pastor' in the local tongue) Giwargis in AD 1528, upon the order of the Lord, and then records that Cathanar Giwargis went to Portugal along with his nephew.

The second section, on the right half of the inscriptional tablet, narrates events in AD 1580 and 1581. In AD 1580, on a Sunday, the 13th day of the month of 'kanni' (Malayalam era), on the feast of Mar Sliva (Holy Cross), this cross was erected and covered with wood/sand. In the same year, on the 18th day of 'kanni', on the feast day, this 'uthira kurishu' (or 'bleeding Cross': a model for the famous bleeding Cross of Mailappore) was erected. In AD 1581, on the day of Good Friday, the 29th day of 'meenam' (Malayalam era month meenam), this granite cross (an open-air granite cross) was erected.¹⁸

¹⁶ T. K. Joseph, 'Notes by T K Joseph on Rev H Hosten S. J., Saint Thomas Christians of Malabar 1490-1504', *Kerala Society Papers Series 5* (1930); reprinted as *Kerala Society Papers* (1997), 254.

¹⁷ Mar Denha is one of the East Syrian Bishops who arrived in AD 1503.

¹⁸ T. K. Joseph, *Malabar Christians and their ancient documents* (Trivandrum, 1929), p. 17 and Appendix IV.

This inscription describes a number of events and throws light on the religio-cultural milieu of the time. These inscriptions must date from during or after AD 1581. Events recorded as taking place in AD 1528 include the erection of a cross on the ground. This suggests the building of a new church on the old site by erecting a cross to bless the ground. It also describes a Cathanar (pastor) travelling to Portugal, recording a friendly phase of the relations between Thomas Christians and the Portuguese missionaries. In 1580, another cross was erected and covered with sand (perhaps this indicates plastering) and another narrative records the erection of the cross which was the model of the Mailappore cross: the Pahlavi inscribed cross, on the feast of Holy Cross. This seems to describe moving the altar cross from the old site to the new site.

This offers evidence for a few historical events:

1. The celebration of the feast of Holy Cross in the month of *kanni*.
2. The terminology *ruthira kurishu* means 'bleeding cross', echoing accounts of the Mailappore cross sweating blood, as reported by Portuguese missionaries.
3. The installation of the open-air granite cross in AD 1581.



Muttuchira inscription, Ruha D Kudisa Forane Church Muttuchira, Kottayam District, Kerala, India.

Kanjoor wooden inscription

“Mishiha pirannittu orairathi nanootti moonnu kalam annu kollam 577 andu mithina maasam ancham theyathi akkara vethethi maari kazhi palaka panithu. Ezhupathettamandu thula maasam ettinu utharam kayatti. Annu naduvile cheelanthi

4 nnu churulu marreettilla. Kumbha maasam pazhe kanakkil 12 kuniak tharachu vithanam vachuvappalasseril assari kele kunjittunnaman ethu ezhuthu".¹⁹

This inscription is talking about the renovation work done in AD 1403, which is clarified in the inscription as Malayalam Era 577. It is interesting to note that the year was described as 'in the year of Christ' 1403 and clarified as 'kollam' 577. This demonstrates that *Anno Domini* dating was used in the pre-Portuguese period.

CHAMPAKULAM OPEN-AIR ROCK CROSS INSCRIPTION

The open-air rock cross at the ancient Marth Maryam Basilica at Champakulam in the Alleppey District of Kerala has an inscription around it in old Malayalam script. This records the renovation of the Church and the replacement of the open-air rock cross. According to the inscription, the cross was placed on the eastern side of the old church. About 670 years after the renovation, in AD 1821, the cross was taken down when the *madbha*²⁰ was restored, and replaced when the cemetery was built in AD 1857.²¹ From this, it can be assumed that in AD 1151 this cross was placed on the eastern side of the church. This is the only cross with documentary evidence of such antiquity.²²



Champakulam open air cross inscription, Marth Maryam Basilica, Champakulam, Alleppey District, Kerala, India (Syro Malabar Church)

Another vattezhuthu inscription at Chamapakulam Marth Maryam Basilica, on a stepping stone which has been eroded away, reads 844. This date could be the Malayalam era, corresponding to AD 1669. This could be a tombstone.

¹⁹ Jomon Thachil, *Kanjoor Kraisthva Pazhama (Christian Antiquities of Kanjoor)* (2010), p. 19.

²⁰ This is the Syriac term for altar.

²¹ Antony Vallavanthara, 'Pazhmayile Paramarthangal', in *Souvenir of the Diamond Jubilee of the Leo XIII Library* (Champakulam, 1974).

²² M. T. Antony, 'Champakulam kalloorkkadu Saint Mary's Church, the Hidden pearl in Nasrani history', Nasrani Syrian Christian network, NSC 2012, <https://www.nasrani.net/2010/01/30/champakulam-kalloorkkadu-st-marys-church/> accessed on 19/05/2019.



Marth Maryam Basilica, Champakulam, Alleppey District, Kerala, India.(Syro Malabar Church), stepping stone inscription.

THE EDICT OF THAZHEKKADU / THAZHEKKAD SASSANAM

This is an edict written in ‘Vattezhuth’ script on a large granite slab found at the base of the open-air rock cross at ‘Thazhekkad’ Church in Trichur District in Kerala. Currently it is kept on the premises of the church. There are inscriptions on both sides.²³ This edict was issued by King Rajasimhan(1028-1043 AD), conferring certain privileges on ‘Chathan vadukan’ and ‘Iravi Kothan’, two local Christian traders who were members of ‘Manigramam’, a trade guild.²⁴ This granite slab is most likely a public copy on a stone of an original copper plate document given to the Christian settlers.²⁵

²³ T. K. Joseph, ‘A Rajasimha Inscription at Thalekkad in Cochin’, *The Indian Antiquary* (1928), 24.

²⁴ Pius Malekkandathil, ‘Spatial and temporal continuities of Merchant Networks in South Asia and the Indian Ocean’, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 50/2/3, (2007), 263.

²⁵ T. K. Joseph, ‘A Rajasimha Inscription at Thalekkad in Cochin’, *The Indian Antiquary* (1928), 30. T. K. Joseph further states that the earliest of the Malabar Christian Coper Plate grants, the Thomas Cana plates of 345 A.D., had a public copy on a stone set up at the northern gate of the Cranganore temple.



Edict of Thazhekkadu, AD 1028-43, in Vattezhuthu script, Saint Sebastian’s Church, Thazhekkadu, Irinjalakkuda, Kerala, India. (Syro Malabar Church.)

KADUTHURUTHY ST MARY’S CHURCH INSCRIPTION.

A granite slab at Kaduthuruthy Saint Mary’s Church in vattezhuthu records the rebuilding of the old church and its consecration by Mar Abraham in AD 1590:

Maran icho mishiah pirannittu 1590 Kollam 765 Kumbham 22 njayarazhcha, palli valuthai paniyan, Mar Avira methranum kathangalum Kurbana kuppayam ittu oru kallu anchu kaikalil pidichu maduvail vechu. Ammeneecho.

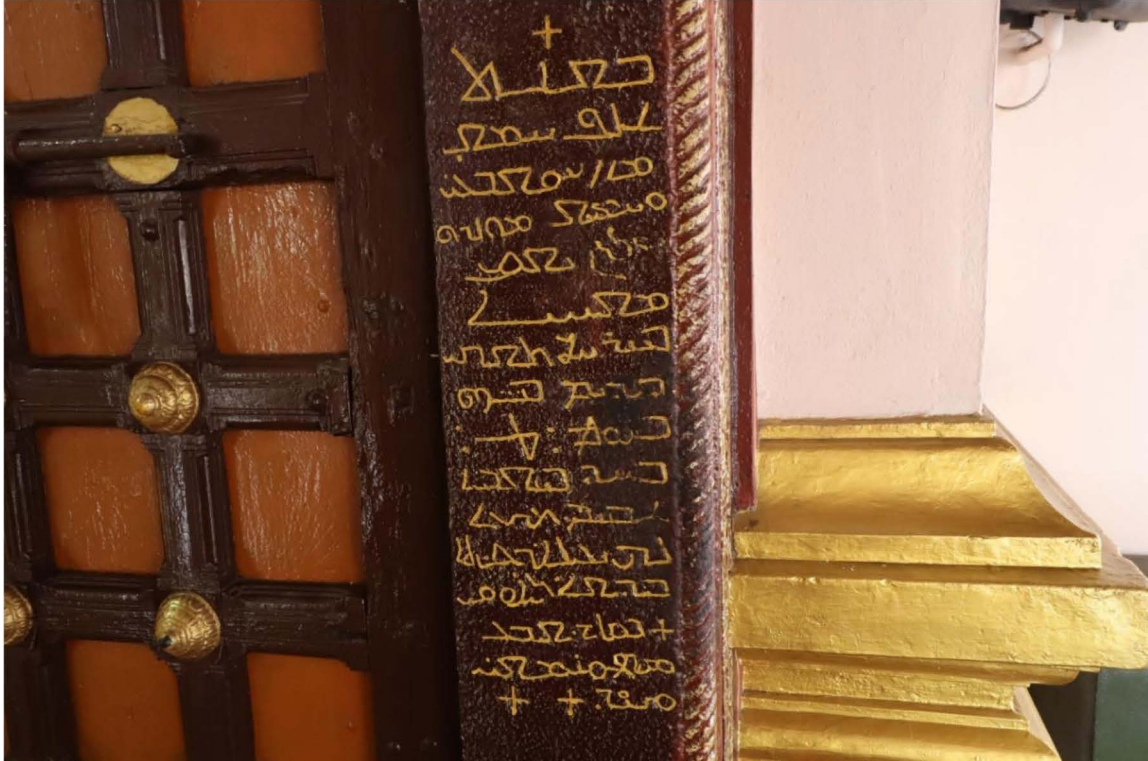
As part of rebuilding the church, Bishop Mar Abraham and the Priests, after wearing vestments, took a stone and placed in the madbha. Amen Jesus.



Kaduthuruthy inscription in vattezhuthu, Saint Mary’s Forane Church, Kaduthuruthy, Kottayam District, Kerala, India. (Syro Malabar Church, Knanaya)

MULANTHURUTHY INSCRIPTION

This inscription in Estrangela records the installation of the main door of the Syriac orthodox church at Mulanthuruthy in AD 1575.²⁶



Mulanthuruthy inscription, Marthomman Jacobite Syrian cathedral, Mulanthuruthy, Kerala, India.
(Syriac Orthodox)

PRAYER FORMULAE/THEOLOGICAL FORMULAE

PAHLAVI INSCRIPTIONS ON ALTAR CROSSES

Prayer formulae are found on the granite altar crosses. The Pahlavi inscribed granite crosses of South India are a type of granite bas relief crosses with Pahlavi inscriptions. Antonio Gouvea reported that during the visit of Archbishop Menesis, almost all of the ancient churches were adorned with these crosses - he described these crosses as 'Saint Thomas' Crosses', as they were called by the people of the time. This could mean that these were the religio-cultural symbol of the Saint Thomas Christians in the seventeenth century. During the same period, due to the excavations of Portuguese missionaries at Mailappore, the 'miraculous cross of Mailappore' was found at the tomb of Saint Thomas the Apostle, and immediately became famous.

Several scholars deciphered these Pahlavi inscriptions, which were the subject of discussions in reputed oriental scholastic forums. There are several versions of these translations:

²⁶ Francoise Briquel Chatonnet, Alain Desreumaux and Jacob Thekkeparampil, *Recueil Des Inscriptions Syriaques*, vol. i: *Kerala* (Paris, 2008), p. 142.

1. In punishment by the Cross, was the suffering of this One, he who is the true Christ and the God above, and Guide ever pure. (A C Burnell 1878)²⁷
2. Who believes in the Mishiha (Syriac word for Christ-Anointed) and God above, and in the Holy Ghost is redeemed through the Grace of Him who bore the Cross. (Martin Haug 1874)²⁸
3. He whom the suffering of the self-same Mishiha, the forgiving and upraising, has saved, is offering the plea whose origin was the agony of this. (E M West 1896)²⁹
4. One who is the true Mishiha the reconciler, raising him ever purifies from virtue from the crucifixion of Him. (Baron De Harlez (1892)³⁰
5. Four readings of Pahlavi and Parsi scholar Dastur Darab Peshotan Sanjana (1914)³¹
 - i. Such was the affliction of the wounding and spearing of him who was faithful Mishiha, a forgiver, of superior dignity the descendant of Chahr Bukht.
 - ii. This was the affliction of the spearing and wounding of him on the cross who was the faithful Mishiha, the merciful one, the descendant of the Great Abraham, the descendant of Chahr Bukht.
 - iii. He of whom the faithful Mishiha was a forgiver, highly exalted, redeemed from the four, was due to the affliction of spearing and wounding on the Cross.
 - iv. This was the affliction on the cross even of the messenger of Jehova.
6. I, a beautiful bird from Nineveh, have come to this country, written by Mar Shapur. Holy Misiha, the forgiver, freed me from thorn (afflictions). Dr J J Modi 1923-26)³²
7. C P T Winkworth 1929
 - i. My Lord Christ have mercy on Afras, son of Chahr bukht, the Syrian who cut this.³³
 - ii. My Lord Christ have mercy upon Afras the son of Chahr bukht, the Syrian who preserved this.³⁴
 - iii. My Lord Christ, have mercy upon Afras, son of Chahr bukht , the Syrian who put it around.³⁵
8. Our Lord Jesus Christ have mercy about son of Chaharbuxt, son of George who erects this. (W B Henning 1958).³⁶
9. Lord Mishiha, (Christ) saviour too, and supreme revelation too (of) four Apostles Syrians who saved this. /Lord and saviour and supreme revelation of the four apostles gave salvation (B T Anklesaria 1958)³⁷

²⁷ A. C. Burnell, 'On some Pahlavi inscriptions in South India', *The Indian Antiquary* (1874), 314.

²⁸ A. C. Burnell, 'On some Pahlavi inscriptions in South India', *The Indian Antiquary* (1874), 314. B. T. Anklesaria, 'The Pahlavi inscriptions on the Crosses of Southern India', *Journal of K R Kama Oriental Institute* 39 (1958), 68.

²⁹ E. W. West, 'Inscriptions around Crosses in South India', *Epigraphia Indica* 4 (1896-97), 175.

³⁰ J. J. Modi, 'A Christian Cross with a Pahlavi inscription recently discovered in the Travancore state', *Asiatic papers part IV, Papers read before the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, (1929) 1-18. B. T. Anklesaria, 'The Pahlavi inscriptions on the Crosses of Southern India', *Journal of K R Kama Oriental Institute* 39 (1958), 68.

³¹ B. T. Anklesaria, 'The Pahlavi inscriptions on the Crosses of Southern India', *Journal of K R Kama Oriental Institute* 39 (1958), 69.

³² J. J. Modi, 'A Christian Cross with a Pahlavi inscription recently discovered in the Travancore state', *Asiatic papers part IV, Papers read before the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, (1929) 1-18.

³³ C. P. T. Winkworth, 'A new interpretation of the Pahlavi Cross inscriptions of Southern India', *The Journal of Theological Studies*, 30/119 (1929), 237-244. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23950669>

³⁴ T. K. Joseph, 'Revised interpretation of the Pahlavi Cross inscriptions of South India', *Kerala Society Papers Series 5* (1930); reprinted as *Kerala Society Papers* (1997), 267-269.

³⁵ T. K. Joseph, 'Revised interpretation of the Pahlavi Cross inscriptions of South India', *Kerala Society Papers Series 5* (1930); reprinted as *Kerala Society Papers* (1997), 267-269.

³⁶ Carlo C. Cereti, Luca M. Olivieri, Joseph Vazhuthanapalli, 'The problem of the Saint Thomas Crosses and related questions. Epigraphical surveys and preliminary research', *East and West* 52 (2002), 285-310.

³⁷ B. T. Anklesaria, 'The Pahlavi inscriptions on the Crosses of Southern India', *Journal of K R Kama Oriental Institute* 39 (1958), 70.

10. May our Lord Messiah have mercy on Gabriel, son of Chaharbokht, grandson of Durzad who made this (cross) (Gerd Gropp 1970)³⁸
11. May our Lord the Messiah have mercy upon Sabriso, son of Chaharboxt the deft, who sculpted this (Cross) (Philippe Gignoux 1995)³⁹
12. Our Lord Christ, have pity on Sabriso, son of Chaharboxt, son of Suray who bore (brought?) this (Cross) (Carlo G Cereti, Luca M Olivieri, Fr Joseph Vazhuthanappalli (CICAAR-CASI) 2002)⁴⁰
13. My Lord is the Mishihā and life-giver, who be praised forever because of salvation. Indeed, the Lord suffered crucifixion to redeem us. (Shailanand Hemraj 2014)⁴¹

These crosses bear the story of the migration and integration of the Persian Christians into the Indian Church.

C P T Winkworth studied the Mailappore cross, two crosses of Kottayam and the cross at Kadamattom and noted in 1929 that these inscriptions are unintelligent copies of an original. He found that there are only a few minor differences: some letters are not cut correctly, some are cut upside down and there is a mirror image character on the Kadamattom Cross. He proposed that these are copies of an original, made from estampages on a paper or parchment from the original and arranged in such a way as to reproduce the inscriptions, and that while doing so, the sculptor used the reverse side of the medium to cut a certain character, tried to correct a straight line into a curved line without erasing the former, and omitted certain portions. Using this calligraphic analysis, Winkworth concluded that the smaller Kottayam Cross inscription is the original, the Mailappore cross is an intelligent copy of it (that is, there are no major aberrations), while the larger Kottayam cross shows some aberrations, and the Kadamattom cross shows significant aberrations.⁴² This is reflected in the translation of Mr J J Modi as shown earlier. Winkworth's arguments were presented in the 17th International Congress of Orientalists held at Oxford in 1928 and were generally accepted by the Iranian scholars who were also present.⁴³

More crosses were subsequently discovered, and B T Anklesaria had the opportunity to study the crosses at Mailappore, Kottayam, Kadamattom, Alengad and Muttuchira, as well as the previous interpretations. Anklesaria commented that the inscription on Alengad cross was most likely the original and the most ancient, perhaps dating to as early as AD 340, based on orthographic and epigraphic evidence. Anklesaria found that the 9th-word 'suriha' is cut correctly only on the Alengad cross, the conjunct 'ich' at the end of the third word and the seventh word are cut distinctly on the Alengad cross and the smaller Kottayam Cross, but the 'ich' at the end of the third word is dropped on the larger Kottayam Cross. The 'ch' of the eighth word 'chahar-bap' is connected by mistake to the 'ich' of the seventh word in both Kottayam crosses, but is cut

³⁸ George Nedungatt, *Quest for the Historical Thomas, Apostle of India, a re-reading of Evidence* (Bangalore, 2008), p. 386, citing G Gropp, 'Die Pahlavi – Inschrift auf dem Thomaskrus in Madras', *Archaeologische Mitteilungen aus Iran* 3 (1970), 267-271.

³⁹ George Nedungatt, op. cit. pp. 385-386, citing Philippe Gignoux, 'The Pahlavi inscriptions on Mount Thomas Cross (South India)', in Ziony Zevit, Seymour Gitin, and Michael Sokoloff, eds, *Solving Riddles and Untying Knots: Biblical, Epigraphic, and Semitic Studies in Honor of Jonas C. Greenfield* (Winona Lake, 1995), pp. 411-422.

⁴⁰ Carlo C. Cereti, Luca M. Olivieri, Joseph Vazhuthanappalli, 'The problem of the Saint Thomas Crosses and related questions. Epigraphical surveys and preliminary research', *East and West* 52 (2002), 285-310.

⁴¹ Shailanand Hemraj, 'Pahlavi text and Imagery context of the Persian Cross in South India, Part I', *Asian Journal of Religious studies* 60/1 (2015), 20.

⁴² C. P. T. Winkworth, 'A New Interpretation of the Pahlavi Cross-Inscriptions of Southern India', *The Journal of Theological studies* 30/119 (1929), 237-244.

⁴³ Joseph T K, 'The Kottayam Cross Inscription', *Kerala Society Papers Series 5* (1930); reprinted as *Kerala Society Papers* (1997), 269.

correctly on the Alengad cross. Also the conjunct u is prefixed to the fourth word ‘madam’ only on the Alengad cross.⁴⁴

The Alengad cross has a crack at the right lower part, which makes the b in the 11th word read as a v, but the letter is correctly written on both Kottayam Crosses, the Mailappore cross and Muttuchira cross. This confirms that this crack was formed after the inscription was copied. This crack might have formed when the old church at Alenagd, where this cross was placed like an altar cross, was burned down in a war between kingdoms of Parur and Mangattu in AD 1603, as described by Antonio Gouvea.⁴⁵

Considering the opinions of Winkworth and Anklesaria, it becomes clear that these crosses with a prayer formula inscribed in Pahlavi script originally belonged to the Pahlavi speaking migrant Persian Christians. These crosses with inscriptions were copied locally by sculptors who did not know Pahlavi. Calligraphic evidence suggests that the Alengad cross could be the original and could be from the period around AD 340. It was copied by local Christian congregations with minor aberrations to the inscriptions and gradual changes in the design of the cross, with local adaptations taking place along the east coast of South India, so that the Mailappore cross, for instance, is distinguished by artistic elements, such as distinctive pillars and Makara Torana, which have been adopted from the local culture.



Alengad Sliva, Saint Mary's Church Alengad, Ernakulam District, Kerala, India. (Syro Malabar Church).

⁴⁴ B. T. Anklesaria, 'The Pahlavi inscriptions on the Crosses of Southern India', *Journal of K R Kama Oriental Institute* 39 (1958), 70.

⁴⁵ M. T. Antony, 'Alengad Sliva, the neglected jewel of the ancient Christian settlement of Alengad', *The Harp* 30 (2014), 271.



Kottayam Valia Palli Cross, Pahlavi inscriptions. Saint Mary's Knanaya Valiyapalli, Kottayam, Kerala, India. (Syriac Orthodox).



Kottayam Valiya Palli cross, Pahlavi and Syriac inscriptions, Saint Mary's Knanaya Valiyapalli, Kottayam, Kerala, India. (Syriac Orthodox).



Mailappore Cross, Mailappore, Tamilnadu, India. Pahlavi inscriptions, Our Lady of Expectation Shrine, Parangimalai, Chennai, Tamilnadu, India.



Kadamattom Cross, Saint Goerge Church Kadamattom, Ernakulam District, Kerala, India, (Malankara Orthodox Church).



Kothanalloor Cross, no inscriptions. SS Gaevasis and Proctasius Church, Kothanalloor, Kottayam, Kerala India.(Syro Malabar Church).



Muttuchira Sliva with Pahlavi inscriptions, Ruha D Kudisa Forane Church Muttuchira, Kottayam, Kerala, India (Syro Malabar Church).

‘YAH’ ON THE KORATTY OPEN AIR ROCK CROSS.

The ancient open-air cross at the church of Koratty in the Ernakulam District of Kerala of the Syro-Malabar Church has Syriac inscriptions on it. This open-air cross looks very old, with facilities for lighting oil lamps. The cross has two horizontal arms, a short slab on the top of it and a longer one in the usual position, some distance below the top one. The inscriptions are in 3 lines, on the top horizontal arm, on the vertical piece between the two horizontal arms and the bottom horizontal arm.

The top line reads: ‘Hana isho nasraya malca d ihoodaya’ meaning ‘This one is Jesus the nasrite, the king of Jews’

The second line reads: ‘Yah.’ This is the Syriac version of the Tetragrammaton of the name of God.

The third line reads: ‘Hana emreh d alaha hoo daskal hatheeth d’ alma’ meaning ‘Behold the Lamb of God who took away the sins of the World’.⁴⁶

The use of this ancient form, Yah, is highly significant. The Tetragrammaton (Hebrew YHWH) is the name of God in the Old Testament, with vowels added by scholars thought to represent the most likely vocalisation. In Syriac manuscripts, the usage is ‘Mari Yah’, meaning Lord God. This inscription is a classic example of the Judeo-Christian nature of Christianity in South India.



Open-air Rock Cross Koratty, Kerala, India with inscription ‘Yah’ (Saint Mary’s Church, Koratty, Thrissur, Kerala, India, Syro Malabar Church).

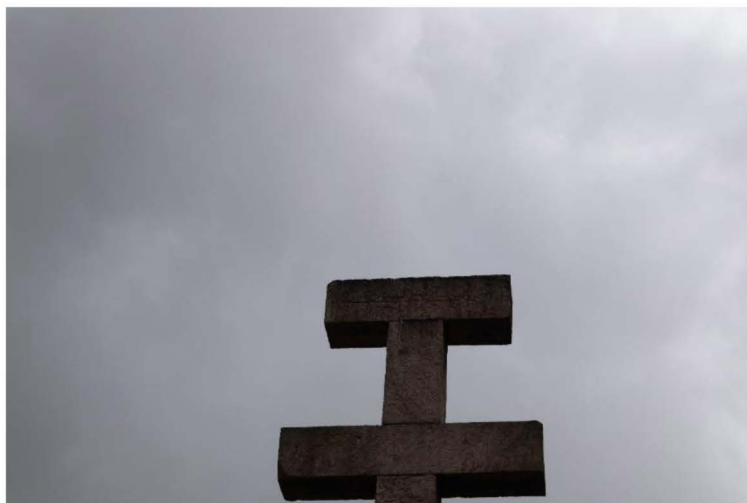
⁴⁶ Françoise Briquel Chatonnet, Alain Desreumaux and Jacob Thekkeparampil, *Recueil Des Inscriptions Syriaques*, vol. i: *Kerala* (Paris, 2008), p. 81.



Open-air Rock Cross, Koratty, Kerala, India with inscription 'Yah' (Saint Mary's Church, Koratty, Thrissur, Kerala, India, Syro Malabar Church).
(Picture courtesy: Rev Dr Jacob Thekkeparampil)

INSCRIPTION ON MUZHIKULAM OPEN-AIR ROCK CROSS

The open-air cross at the Syro Malabar Church at Muzhikkulam, Ernakulam District in Kerala is the same shape as the Koratty cross, with two cross arms. There is a line of Syriac inscription on the top cross arm which reads: 'Hanau Malka d ihoodaya' 'This one is the King of Jews'.⁴⁷



Saint Mary's Church, Moozhikulam Ernakulam District, Kerala India. Syriac inscription on open-air rock cross.

⁴⁷ Françoise Briquel Chatonnet, Alain Desreumaux and Jacob Thekkeparampil, *Recueil Des Inscriptions Syriaques*, vol. i: *Kerala* (Paris, 2008), p. 140.

INSCRIPTION ON OPEN-AIR ROCK CROSS OF *KOTTAYAM VALIYA PALLI*

This is an ancient church that belongs to the Knanaya Jacobite Syrian Church at Kottayam, popularly known as *Kottayam Valiya Palli*, the Great Church of Kottayam. This open-air rock cross also has a top horizontal bar on which a cross is engraved, and on the right-hand side of the cross Syriac letters are engraved in two lines, ‘Hes’: ‘Noon’.

Below this is written ‘noon’, ‘meem’, ‘yod’. This is the abbreviation of INRI in Syriac: ‘Hana isho nasraya malca d ihoodaya’.⁴⁸



Kottayam Valia Palli, open-air rock cross inscription. (Saint Mary’s Knanaya Valiya Palli, Kottayam, Kerala, India. (Syriac Orthodox Church Knanaya). (Picture courtesy: Rev Dr Jacob Thekkeparampil)

PALLIPPURAM GRANITE CROSS

This is a small granite cross found in the premises of the ancient church at Pallippuram in Alleppey District in Kerala. The cross shows a few Syriac letters on the top end where the INRI is seen usually. This could be an abbreviation of INRI in Syriac as yod, noon, meem, yod. But the letters are not very clear: the second character seems to be noon, followed by meem and then beth. It could be that the inscriber was illiterate in Syriac characters and so copied the characters incorrectly, or made them indistinct in an attempt at correcting earlier mistakes. The third character, ‘meem’, shows some indistinct cuts, suggesting there was an attempt to correct it. The inscription could also be a year denoted in Syriac characters.

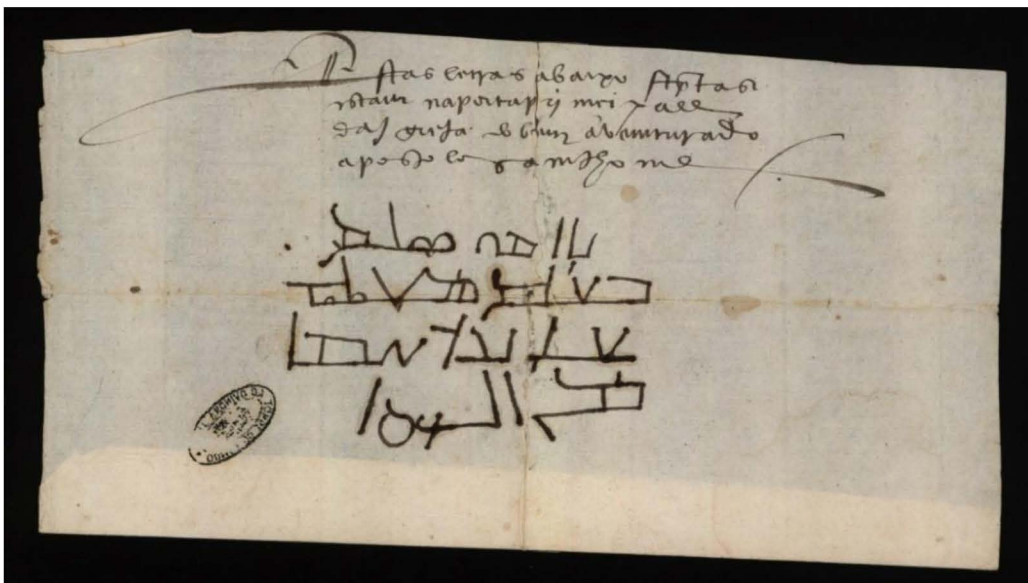
⁴⁸ Françoise Briquel Chatonnet, Alain Desreumaux and Jacob Thekkeparampil, *Recueil Des Inscriptions Syriaques*, vol. i: *Kerala* (Paris, 2008), p. 97.



Pallippuram church: Syriac inscription on a cross. Saint Mary's Forane Church, Pallippuram, Alleppey District, Kerala, India. (Syro Malabar Church).

MAILAPPORE SAINT THOMAS TOMB CHURCH INSCRIPTION

This is an unknown inscription noted by an early Portuguese traveller at the main door of the Tomb of Saint Thomas at Mailappore, Chennai. The inscription was copied down on paper and sent to the Portuguese National Archive (Arquivo Nacional de Torre do Tombo) in Lisbon. This was published in 1964 in the volume 'As Gavetas da Torre do Tombo Vol IV, (Gaveta XV Macos 1-15)'. The person who sent the copy to Lisbon accompanied the copy of the inscription with a note: 'these letters below written are in the main door of the Church of the well adventured Apostle Saint Thomas'.



Copy of Mailappore inscriptions kept in Portuguese archives at Lisbon.

The inscription is in four lines. Eminent Syriac scholar Professor Sebastian Brock, of Oxford University, has commented that this is not easy to read but that some words are definitely clear. The reading is as follows (doubtful letters have ? after them in the transcription):

| | | |
|--------|-----------------|----------------------|
| Line 1 | n'mr? s?lq? | there has ascended |
| Line 2 | bshl?m mshy?h?? | in peace Christ |
| Line 3 | sh'l(n?) rhm' | he asks for us mercy |
| Line 4 | mn 'lh' | from God |

Another possible reading of the first line and half of the second could be:

n'mr kwlmn
bshm

let everyone say in the name of ..., but kwlmn would be awkward Syriac, and the expected kwl'nsh does not seem possible.

Rev Dr Thomas Koonammakkal, a Syriac scholar from India, has deciphered as follows:

| | | |
|--------|--------------|--|
| Line 1 | lth' m' shlm | to Thomas peace |
| Line 2 | bshm mshyh' | in the name of Christ/in the peace of Christ |
| Line 3 | shly Inwhm' | rest until resurrection |
| Line 4 | mn 'lh' | from God |

Rev Dr Thomas Koonammakkal has commented that one of the letters is written incorrectly, and that there could have been an attempt to correct the initial incorrect inscription, resulting in two possible readings for line 2.

Both these readings are similar. This is a drawing of the inscription by someone who is illiterate in Syriac, which makes translation difficult.

THE INSCRIPTION AT THE SAINT THOMAS CATHEDRAL PALAI, KOTTAYAM.

This could be one of the oldest inscriptions. This is located on a large granite slab at the base of the back wall of the madbha. The middle section of the slab is not visible as the reredos is built over it. On the end of the slab, to the right of the reredos, Syriac inscriptions are partially visible. On the portion of the slab visible to the left of the reredos, there are four old Malayalam digits which read 1702.

The Syriac inscription on the right-hand side is Estrangela and is in two lines.

Briquel Chatonnet and Thekkeparampil interpreted this as possibly 1203, or Greek era 2003, which could be AD 1692,⁴⁹ but the Malayalam inscription clearly states 1703. As the inscription is only partially visible, interpretation is difficult. The top line reads "at the date of August the third...". If the bottom line reads Gamal and the bottom line is read as a number, it will give the year 1203.

⁴⁹ Françoise Briquel Chatonnet, Alain Desreumaux and Jacob Thekkeparampil, *Recueil Des Inscriptions Syriaques*, vol. i: *Kerala* (Paris, 2008), pp. 156-157.



Saint Thomas's Cathedral old Church, Palai, Kottayam, Kerala, India
(Syro Malabar Church), Syriac inscription



Saint Thomas old Cathedral Church, Palai, Kottayam District, Kerala, India. (Syro Malabar Church). Old Malayalam digits denote the year AD 1703.

ALTAR INSCRIPTIONS.

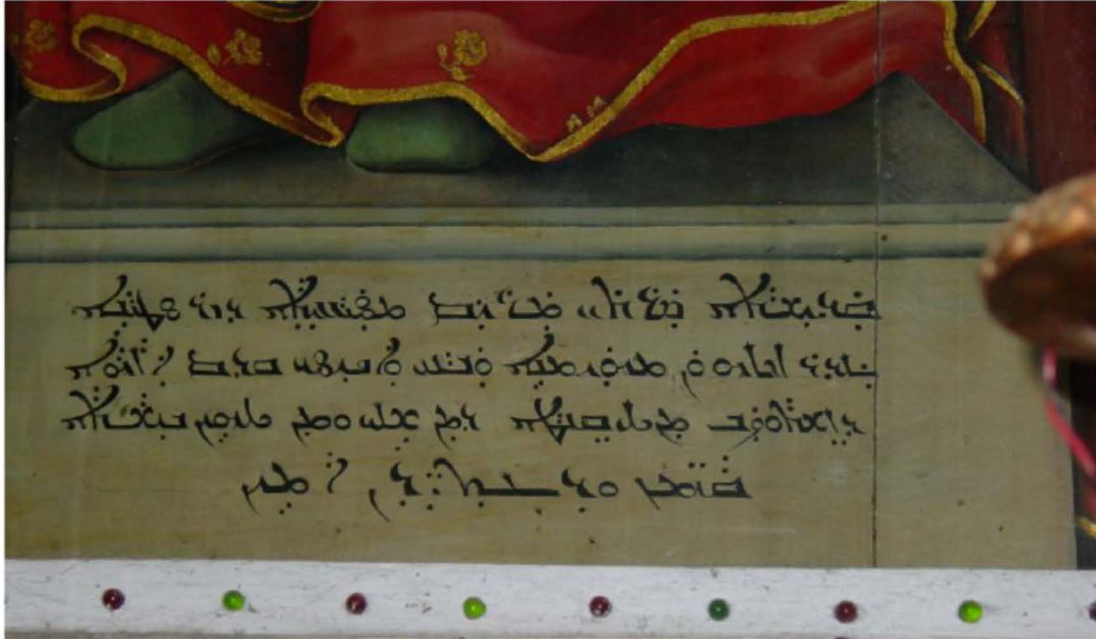
There are Syriac inscriptions on the altars of churches at Pallippuram, Champakulam, Kudamaloor, Muttuchira, Kottayam Valiyapalli, Kaduthuruthy and many others. Some of the modern ones have Latin content; Kandeesa Sebastianose and Kandeesa Domingos at Pallippuram church, for instance, are purely Latin in origin. At Champakulam and Muttuchira, the decorative ribbon bands held by the angels on the reredos carry Syriac inscriptions. At Kudamaloor, a prayer formula in Syriac is inscribed below an icon of Saint Mary.



Saint Mary's Forane Church, Pallippuram, Alleppey District, Kerala, India. (Syro Malabar Church),
'Kandeesa Sebastianose'



Saint Mary's Forane Church, Pallippuram, Alleppey District, Kerala, India. (Syro Malabar Church),
'Kandeesa Domingose'.



Saint Mary's Forane Church, Kudamaloor, Kottayam, Kerala, India. (Syro Malabar Church)
(Picture courtesy: Rev Dr Jacob Thekkeparampil)

This altar inscription at Kudamaloor reads:

“Saint Marth Maryam, the help of the Christians, help all the faithful, pray and intercede before God, for us to be delivered from all unexpected danger and from all ills present and future, Amen”.⁵⁰

MANUSCRIPTS

There are large numbers of palm-leaf documents available in most of the ancient churches. Most of these are ecclesiastical documents such as marriage or baptism registers. There are a few chronicles available.

MURALS.

MURALS OF ARCHDEACONS AND BISHOPS.

Murals are common in ancient Thomas Christian Churches. It is not clear if any of these are pre-Portuguese. The Roman Catholic themes and attire seen in many of them suggest that these could be post-Portuguese. Many of the murals show attire and other aspects of the contemporary prelates and clergy of the Saint Thomas Christians. The Roman Catholic mitre of the Chaldean Bishops and Archdeacons shows the effects of Latinisation. The blessing cross on the murals confirms the practice of blessing crosses.

⁵⁰ Francoise Briquel Chatonnet, Alain Desreumaux and Jacob Thekkeparampil, *Recueil Des Inscriptions Syriaques*, vol. i: *Kerala* (Paris, 2008), p. 102.

TOMBS OF MAR DENHA, MAR RABBAN, MAR YAUNAN AND MAR AVO (AD 905)

There are a few ancient palm leaf documents kept in certain families as a chronicle of the Saint Thomas Christians. In 1930, T. K. Joseph reported that, on 26th of April the same year, he had discovered the existence of a paper manuscript, the property of the Karuthedathu family at Mavelikkara in Travancore. As per the manuscript itself, it is a history of Malabar Church copied from older manuscripts handed down through the generations. This manuscript narrates the arrival of a Bishop Mar Denha in AD 905 (ME 80) at Kollam with three other persons, Rabban, Yaunan and Maravan. It also states that Younan was buried at the church at Udayamperoor, Raaban was buried in Chennithala Thekkeveetil Kuruvila's house at Chennithala in Niranam Parish, Denha was buried at Kottakku purathu Kodasserry Kannamkulam Mappila's house and Maravan was buried at Thevalakkara church.⁵¹ The same information is found in the Chronicles of Niranam⁵² (Niranam Grandhavy), one of the ancient manuscripts kept by the Kaniyanthra family in Kottayam as a palm-leaf manuscript.⁵³ Both these palm leaf manuscripts could be versions of an ancient manuscript handed down through the generations by making copies.

The Tomb of Mar Denha is still kept by the Valiyaveetil family at Kudassanadu near Pandalam in Kerala. The Tomb of Mar Rabban is kept at Chennithala near Mavelikkara in Kerala. The Tomb of Maravan (Mar Abo) is at Saint Mary's Orthodox Church at Thevalakkara. The Tomb of Mar Younan was at the Syro Malabar Church at Udayamperoor, but this tomb along with a few other tombs at the Madbha of the church was removed during renovations in 1929, placed in a vessel, and buried in the Church.⁵⁴

CAVE MONASTERY OF MAR YAUNAN AT KURAVILANGADU

It has been documented that there was an east Syrian monastery at Kuravilangadu inhabited by Persian monks.⁵⁵ On the side of a steep hill near Kuravilangadu, there is a cave which is called Yaunakkuzhy⁵⁶ by local people, meaning the pit of Yaunan or cave of Younan. For generations, even the Hindu families in the locality kept alive an oral tradition that Yaunan Nivya (Prophet Yaunan-Jonah) lived in this cave. Common people now conflate this Yaunan with the Biblical Prophet Yaunan (Jonah). The reason for this could be the annual celebration of a three-day fast in the nearby ancient church of Kuravilangadu, commemorating Jonah's three days in the belly of the great fish. In fact, it was Mar Younan, who arrived in AD 905, who lived in the monastery at Yaunakkuzhy. The cave was large enough for human habitation, according to my own interview with local people from older generations who once entered the cave. Today, the opening of the cave is covered with rock and sand. This could have been one of many cave monasteries in India, in parallel with the East Syrian cave monasteries in Persia.⁵⁷

⁵¹ T. K. Joseph, 'Notes by T K Joseph on Rev H Hosten S. J., Saint Thomas Christians of Malabar 1490-1504', *Kerala Society Papers Series 5* (1930); reprinted as *Kerala Society Papers* (1997), 255.

⁵² A Palm leaf manuscript kept in Kaniyanthra family. It seems that this was written down in the time around 1773, possibly following oral traditions. There were several copies of it in different families.

⁵³ M. Kurian Thomas, *Niranam grandhavy, Padhanavum samshodhanavum* (Kottayam, 2000), p. 82.

⁵⁴ Udayamperoor Pazhaya palliyude nalagamam (Malayalam)(Chronicles of Udayamperoor old church) <http://www.synodofdiamper.com/mal/index.php> accessed on 29 January 2020

⁵⁵ Fra Paulino Da San Bartolomeo, *Voyage to the East Indies, Translated from German by William Johnston*, (London, 1800), pp. 123-124.

⁵⁶ T. K. Joseph, 'A Travancore inscription in Greek Script', *Journal of Indian History* 28 (1949), 183-184.

⁵⁷ John Bowman, 'The Christian Monastery on the island of Kharg', *Australian Journal of Biblical Archaeology* 2 (1974-75) 49-64.



Tomb of East Syrian Bishop Mar Denha, Kadassanadu, Pandalam, Kerala, India.



Tomb of East Syrian Monk Rabaan at Chennithala, Kerala, India



Opening of the cave monastery of Mar Yaunan at Kuravilangadu, Kerala, India (now covered with rocks).



Tomb of Mar Abo- Maravan-Thevalakkara, St Mary's Orthodox Church, Kollam District, Kerala, India.



Tomb of Mar Abo- Maravan-Thevalakkara, St Mary's Orthodox Church. A granite slab with an engraved flower-ornamented cross: Saint Mary's Orthodox Syrian Church, Thevalakkara, Kollam District, Kerala, India.

CHURCH ARCHITECTURE

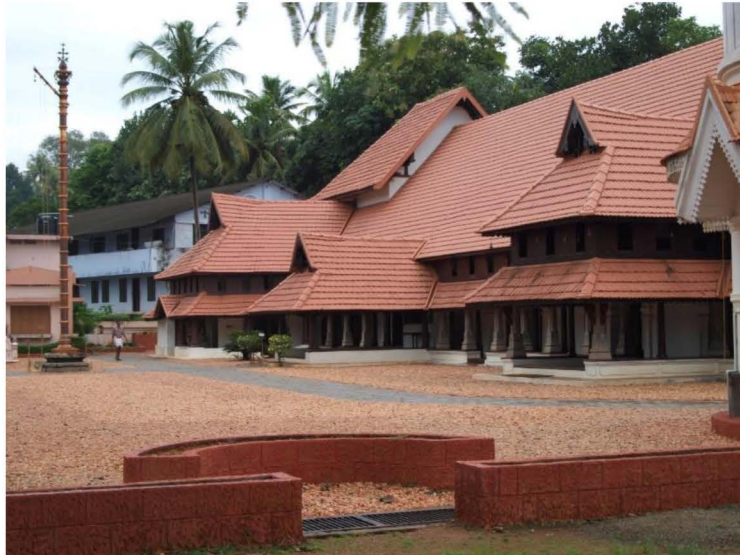
Before the arrival of the Portuguese missionaries, Saint Thomas Christian Churches were indistinct from Hindu temples in their architecture. There were no facades; instead, an Indo-Chinese roof structure covered a wooden gable. In front of these ancient churches stood large open-air granite crosses. Joseph, the Indian Cathanar (priest), who visited Rome and Venice in AD 1502, described the large crosses erected at the foundation of churches in his interview with the Signoria of Venice, confirming the pre-Portuguese existence of the open-air rock crosses.⁵⁸

These are only a sample of the available Christian archaeology in India. The Christian archaeology of India has not been explored sufficiently. There are several ancient sites that need excavation and research.



Karthikapalli Saint Thomas Orthodox Church, Kerala, India. One of the typical architectural styles of Thomas Christian churches.

⁵⁸ Antony Vallavanthara, *India in 1500 A.D.: the narratives of Joseph, the Indian* (Piscataway, 2001), pp. 167, 273.



Kalloppara Saint Mary's Orthodox Church, Kerala, India: note Indo-Chinese architecture of the roof.



Palm leaf documents, SS Gevasis and Proctasius Church, Kothanalloor (Syro Malabar Church) Church of Kandeasangal- Kottayam District, Kerala, India.



Plaster art at Mar Sabor Afroath Church, Akapparampu, Ernakulam District, Kerala, India. (Syriac Orthodox)



Plaster art at Saint Mary's Church, Kalloppa, Pathanamthitta District, Kerala, India. (Syriac Orthodox).



Baptismal font, Saint Mary's Forane Church, Kanjoor, Ernakulam District, Kerala, India. (Syro Malabar Church).



Baptismal font, Saint Thomas' Forane Church, Mailakombu, Idukki District Kerala, India. (Syro Malabar Church).

مجلتہ قرآن

