CENTENARY SUPPLEMENT

OF THE

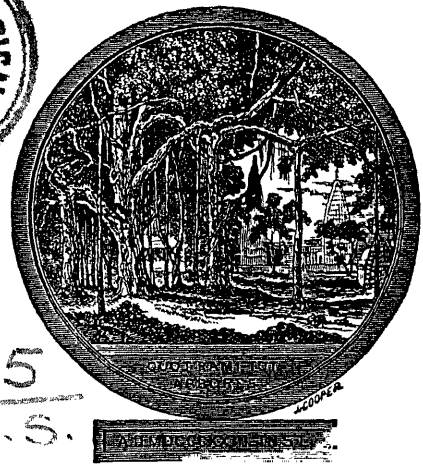
JOURNAL OF THE

ROYAL ASIATIC SOCIETY

1924

BEING A

SELECTION OF PAPERS READ TO THE SOCIETY DURING THE CELEBRATIONS OF JULY, 1923



PUBLISHED BY THE SOCIETY
74 GROSVENOR STREET, LONDON, W.1

OCTOBER, M DCCCC XXIV

1924

The South Indian Tradition of the Apostle Thomas

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I.

ALTHOUGH a great deal has been written concerning St. Thomas's connexion with India, it has so far resulted only in barren controversies and inchoate theories. The finding of the "Gondophares" coins in the Cabul region raised great hopes of a final settlement of the problem; but apart from the (itself doubtful) identification of a single name in the *Acta Thomae*, it has shed little light on the mysteries of Christian origins in India. Nay, it has had positively injurious results, inasmuch as it diverted the attention of scholars into fields far remote from the familiar haunts of the Thomistic tradition. South India is the quarter from which we should expect fresh evidence: the north has no known claims to any connexion with the Apostle. In the south live the Christians of St. Thomas [1]—the so-called "Syrians" who for more than a thousand years have upheld their descent from the Apostle's disciples. There also we have what has been believed from immemorial antiquity to be the tomb of St. Thomas, with various lithic remains of pre-Portuguese Christianity around Madras. South India has a remarkably ancient tradition of St. Thomas; and it is a *living* tradition, not a dead legend. It can be traced back at least to the sixth century A.D., and it still lives in popular memories, not only of Christians, but of others not recognizing the claims of Christianity. The existence of this tradition is known and recognized; but no organized

[1] There are now over 1,000,000 Christians who belong to this ancient body. About one-half of them own allegiance to the Pope, but retain their ancient liturgy and practices. Of the other half the bulk are Jacobites. The Nestorians are very few in number.

attempt has yet been made to explore it. The literature in which that tradition is embodied has not been studied, nor have its monumental remains been scrutinized by experts. Before this is done it would be unfair to pronounce a judgment on the question.

Much thought has been given by scholars to the study of the Edessan (Syriac) tradition of St. Thomas; but that tradition cannot be the primary source for studying the history of the South Indian Church. This latter must be studied in Indian tradition and other sources and not in the distant echo that they may have received on the banks of the Euphrates. Although the Thomas-Christians of Malabar eventually came to possess a Syriac liturgy, their traditions and chronicles are found not in Syriac but in their own native tongue, Malayālam. Similarly, the East Coast tradition is to be sought in Tamil sources.

The Malabar accounts of St. Thomas's apostolate do not, however, exist in easily accessible sources, but in many scattered songs and ballads composed in an archaic language. The most authoritative of these is a poetic work of 450 lines entitled "Thōmā Parvam".[1] In a colophon to that work there is a statement that it was composed in 1601 by Maliekel Thōmā Rambān, forty-eighth in descent from the ancestor (Thōmā) who received baptism from the Apostle's own hands. It purports to be a summary of a longer early work by a nephew of that first convert, written within living memory of the Apostle himself. Such a summary is said to have become necessary in 1601 owing to the destruction of many ancient works at the Synod of Diamper.

The subject matter of "Thōmā Parvam" is a detailed itinerary of the Apostle in South India with vivid accounts of his doings at various centres. It does not contain the story of the dream-vision which forms the backbone of the

[1] This is published in Fr. Bernard's *Christians of St. Thomas* (Malayālam). Various MSS. of this and similar songs are in the writer's possession.

Acta Thomae version.[1] However, in this work also, the Apostle accompanies the merchant Ābān; but the king who sent the merchant is called vaguely, " a King of the Chōla country." Accompanied by that merchant, St. Thomas sailed from Arabia in the year A.D. 50, and landed at Māleankara (near Cranganore, the ancient capital of Malabar), which is still the sacred spot of " Syrian " Christians, and is situated in the very heart of the Christian country. Without tarrying there long, the Apostle crossed over to the Chola country to interview the king. After preaching there for some time he sailed from Mylapore for Malacca and China.[2] Returning to India in December, A.D. 51, he made Malabar his principal field of work. At Cranganore he converted the reigning Chēraman king and many Brahmin families and Jewish colonists. The king was baptized, and received the name Andrew; and his nephew, Ceppa (Peter), was ordained high-priest. From Cranganore he travelled successively to Kollam (= Quilon), Threkpāleswaram, Chāyal (on the Hills), Gôkka-mangalam, Kôttakāvu Parur, and Pālayur. He converted many at these seven centres, and originated the seven churches of Malabar.[3] He again went to the Chōla country at the instance of the king, his employer; and there followed many of the scenes depicted in the *Acta*. Subsequently he returned to Malabar, and made a tour of all the seven Christian centres. Finally, at Chāyal, he took leave of his loving disciples.

[1] But the story of the dream-vision is found in another song called " Margam Kali Pāṭṭu ", used more by the Sudhists, who are supposed to be descended from Mesopotamian colonists. See P. U. Luke, *Ancient Songs of Syrian Christians* (Mal.).

[2] On the connexion of St. Thomas with China see a suggestive, if queer, work, *Asian Christology and Mahayana*, by E. A. Gordon, 1921.

[3] The tradition is that the Apostle planted crosses in these seven centres. Sir R. C. Temple (*I.A.*, 1921, p. 158) regards this as damaging the whole Thomistic tradition, since the worship of the Cross is not regarded as having prevailed so early among Christians. This raises a highly controversial point, which cannot be settled before Eastern Christian symbolism and art have been explored. At its worst it may be a subsequent interpolation; but this, if true, cannot by itself demolish the whole tradition.

Returning again to the East Coast, he was stabbed to death near Mylapore by a set of embrāns or sacrificing Hindu priests. This was on 3rd July, A.D. 72; and it was decided to keep this day as the feast of the Apostle, which it is to this day in Malabar. Thus ends the account.

Around this nucleus there arose subsequently a whole collection of subsidiary legends, of miracles performed by the Apostle, of wonderful cures effected by him, discussions with Brahmins, flying with peacocks, and so forth. These are all embodied in a nebula of folk-lore; and many of them exist in the form of wedding songs.

Evidently there is nothing fantastic about the main account given above. It agrees very well with the known facts of South Indian history. The places mentioned are mostly historic centres, more or less known to Hindu tradition as well. Māleankara was a part of the great mart and metropolis Cranganore, then called "Thiruvanchi" and "Musiri". It was the greatest Indian trade-centre of the time, the favourite resort of Greek and Roman traders, who called it "Muziris".[1] Subsequently it came to be called "Makodai", which still figures in Malabar legends as the Christian city. Pālayur also is an ancient trading centre well known to Roman traders, and is located to the north of Cranganore. Ptolemy describes it as an inland town (117·51 degrees). Kottakāvu-Parur was rather like a suburb of Cranganore. Both these places figure also in the Brahmin work *Kēralolpatti*. Kollam, the modern Quilon, was a celebrated port and a former capital of the Vēnad dynasty (Travancore). Trekpālēsvaram and Neranom[2] were then great Hindu

[1] There was then going on a very brisk intercourse between the Malabar Coast and Western Asia. Alexandria was then the centre of Eastern trade, and every year more than 100 vessels used to sail to India with the help of the monsoons (discovered by Hippalus in A.D. 47 and hence called after him). Pliny (A.D. 50–60) calls Muzīris "the nearest mart of India" (bk. vi, chap. xxvi).

[2] The church of Trekpālēswaram is said to have been refounded later at the adjacent place of Neranom, which thereby took the place of the former.

centres. The latter is perhaps the "Nirmannu" (Niganda ?) mentioned in the *Kēralolpatti*,[1] and may be identified with the "Nelcynda" of the Græco-Roman geographers. Chāyal is no more in inhabited country, having been subsequently deserted. Recently, however, it was explored, and parts of a huge granite cross was found there embedded in virgin forest.

Associated with these various places there are interesting local traditions, and besides there exist valuable monumental remains at many of them. The local remnants of Pālayur are particularly noteworthy. The Apostle is said to have performed a great miracle there at the temple tank, and many Brahmins received baptism from him. Those who remained obdurate solemnly cursed the town and swore never to return to it. Even now Brahmins would not drink water or chew betel-nut within the boundaries of Pālayur. The Brahmins of the neighbouring places still seem to keep vivid recollections of this secession from their ranks. The principal temple is said to have been transformed into a place of Christian worship. The Portuguese found there many of the vestiges of the old Hindu temple; and even to-day broken remnants of Hindu images are found in the churchyard. Similar local legends are told also of Kottakāvu-Parur, of Neranom, and other Christian centres; and there are still many signs of former Hindu worship in those localities.

There is nothing improbable about the account of the Apostle converting many Brahmin families.[2] It is admitted on all hands in Malabar that many Christian families have sprung from Brahmin ancestors. There are various sociological facts which make it highly probable. The tradition is that at least thirty-two Brahmin families accepted the new

[1] See *Kēralolpatti* (Mangalore B.M. Press), p. 27.

[2] That there were Aryan Brahmins already in Malabar is very likely from (i) the occurrence of Sanskrit place-names at the time, and (ii) from certain notes of the geographer Ptolemy (second century A.D.). See McCrindle's *Ptolemy*, pp. 170–1. This subject, however, has not been properly studied so far.

faith. Four of them were raised to the high-priestly status; i.e., the high priests were to be selected from those families only. Subsequently, only one of those families had the privilege, namely, Pakalomattam (at Koravilangad), which solely supplied bishops and archdeacons to the Church till the beginning of the nineteenth century. Nor is the conversion of the King a mere concoction, as will be shown presently.

II.

The tradition of St. Thomas's apostolate in South India is not confined to Christians, but is shared also by their Hindu neighbours. Both in Malabar and on the East Coast there are well-known legends among high-caste Hindus concerning the doings of the Apostle; and these are particularly valuable, as they support the authenticity of the Christian version.

The best-known collection of social and religious legends in Malabar is the Brahmin work called *Kēralolpatti*. Indeed, it was written to support the social and religious claims of the Nambūdiri Brahmins; and the date of its composition cannot be exactly ascertained. Nevertheless, when it speaks of matters wherein the authors had no apparent interest—and *a fortiori* when their interest was adverse—we might give a greater value to its testimony than we would in the case of its principal contents. The *Kēralolpatti* account says that a certain foreigner, Thoman, who is spoken of as a "*Sarva-veda-vigrahan*" (= opponent of all vedas), came to Malabar and converted to his "Bouddha" faith[1] many prominent people of the land, including the reigning Chēramān king, Bāna Perumāl. He had many formal discussions with the assembled Brahmins, but neither side could convince the other. The king finally tried the well-known "kumbha" test (i.e. challenging the parties to guess the contents of a sealed pot), in which also both parties alike succeeded. It was then decided that there was not much

[1] All non-Hindu religions, including Christianity, have been called "Bouddha" in Malabar; and this practice is continued even to-day.

difference between the two opposing religions. The king had four churches built for the new worship, viz. Chāyal, Neranom, Kokkamangalam, Kottakavu; and gave him and his followers many privileges. Finally he himself embraced the new faith, and, abdicating in favour of his nephew Kulasēkhara, sailed in a ship to Mocha.

It is difficult to estimate exactly the value of this legend. Certainly it is important as an admission on the part of Brahmins of the formidable nature of the rivalry between Hinduism and the new religion. In many respects it agrees with the Christian account; the principal difference is that it is written from the Hindu standpoint. But it cannot be an accurate account. It confuses the Apostle Thomas with the merchant Knāyi Thoma[1] ("Thomas of Cana"). But, as the latter person figures in Christian tradition only as a merchant and as a layman, and not as a priest or missionary, we may conclude that Knāyi Thoma had nothing to do with the incident narrated above. The mistake must have been due to mixing up two separate legends. Further, it must be pointed out also that the detailed account of the conflict with the Bouddhas is not found in all versions of the *Kēralol-ppatti*. Many of them speak of it only in general terms.[2]

The mention of King Bāna Perumāl in the account is important. The chronology of the Chera kings has not been fixed with any certainty, and we know little about the history of Malabar in those early days. Yet if Bāna may be identified with the king Bāna Varaman mentioned in early Tamil works, we might place him between the years A.D. 50 and 80 (according to the late Mr. Kanakasabhai Pillai's

[1] According to Malabar tradition he led a colony of Mesopotamian Christians in A.D. 345. Recent critics place him in the eighth century, but on no special ground, except that the other date is too early, according to their own chronological conceptions.

[2] The writer has two palm-leaf copies in which the complete account appears. The story above narrated is on leaves 9–12. The same story is found in a shortened form in the printed version (Mangalore), pp. 28–31.

calculation based on the Gajabāhu synchronism).[1] Further, Bāna came later to be called "Palli Bāna", from his connexion with non-Hindu places of worship.[2] The marvellous spread of Christianity in Malabar and the uprooting of Hinduism from many of its flourishing centres cannot be easily explained, unless we attribute it to some active royal patronage. It would not have been possible for a handful of converts to turn Brahmin strongholds like Pālayur, Parur, and Neranom into Christian centres. However this may be, the converted king does not seem to have established a Christian dynasty of his own. His Hindu nephew must have succeeded him according to the normal Malabar custom, and only the vague memory of a Bouddha king remained. Subsequently another Chēra king embraced Islam, as is well known.

III.

The Malabar tradition has not much to say about the doings of St. Thomas on the Eastern Coast. But there are independent legends there about the Apostle, and to these we now turn. One of these, still remembered by the Brahmins around Mylapore, is specially noteworthy, inasmuch as it gives a clue to solve the Gondophares riddle.

This legend is as follows:—At the time when St. Thomas came to preach in Mylapore, the reigning king of that place was Kandappa[3] of the fisherman caste. The Apostle came to be known to him by a miracle which the holy man worked in bringing ashore by the mere touch of his hand an immense piece of wood floating out in the sea. The king became pleased with him and built many churches for him, one of which was within the royal fort. St. Thomas was also made preceptor to Kandappa's son. The ministers and other Brahmins became jealous of the holy man, and plotted against

[1] *Tamils 1,800 Years Ago*, ch. i.

[2] "Palli" in Malabar means a Christian church or other place of non-Hindu worship.

[3] Or Kandapparaser (= King Kandappa). "Araser" in Tamil means king.

him, but with little success. The king and his son became Christians. Yet the Brahmins were still powerful, and they persecuted the Apostle. They assaulted him repeatedly, but he always escaped unhurt. Finally he died a natural death, worn out by fatigue and privations. He was given a solemn burial in Mylapore. Many years after this event, a ship came from the Apostle's land, and, led by a Divine light, the sailors identified the place where Thomas's body lay entombed, and they carried away the relics to their country. A chapel was built on the spot.[1]

It is difficult to ascertain the value of this remarkable legend. Its antiquity cannot be questioned, as portions of it are reported by mediaeval European travellers. John de Marignoli, in particular, gives the story of the huge log, although he has added to it many more details.[2] The Portuguese found ruins of Christian chapels in and around Mylapore. Some of them existed at least in the sixth century A.D. The Kandappa legend also is ancient and widespread. That king is inextricably associated with St. Thomas in the East Coast tradition, although not well known in Malabar. There is still preserved in the Mylapore Church a stone slab with the image of the Apostle on one side, and what is popularly believed to be that of Kandappa on the other. Some of the works of art found there are said to show evident signs of West-Asian influence.

The claim of Mylapore to possess St. Thomas's tomb stands on more trustworthy evidence than is usually granted. Although recent writers have tried to discredit this belief, ancient tradition both in India and Western Asia unmistakably points to Mylapore as the Apostle's shrine. It can be traced not merely to Marco Polo's days (twelfth century) but to a much earlier date. A Persian monk who lived in the

[1] A version of this legend was published in a Tamil journal, *Sumitren*, in 1900. It appeared in French in *Annales de la Société des Missions Étrangères* of Paris.

[2] See *Cathay and the Way Thither*, vol. iii, p. 250.

sixth century A.D., Zādoē, contemporary of Mar Yonān, is described as "prêtre et solitaire, chef du monastère de Saint-Thomas dans le pays de l'Inde, dont le siege est fixé sous le pays des qaṭrayē à Ceylan l'île noire".[1] Again, Gregory of Tours in the same century records the accounts he heard from a pilgrim, Theodorus, who "had been to that part of India where lay the body of Apostle Thomas, where also he saw a monastery and church of striking dimensions". Evidently both these passages refer to Mylapore. To these may be added the testimony of the two Muhammadan travellers who call Mylapore "Betuma", which apparently means "the House of Thoma",[2] and the entry in the Anglo-Saxon chronicle of King Alfred having sent messengers to India with offerings to the shrine of St. Thomas. From the twelfth century every western traveller of any consequence mentions Mylapore and its shrine. In this connexion we might also remember that the Malabar Christians have all along been in the habit of going on pilgrimages to Mylapore, even after Christianity died out there. Mylapore has besides many lithic remains to show—statues, crosses, and other materials.[3] The famous cross with Pahlavi inscriptions might very well have been set up before the tenth century.

In spite of the above noteworthy facts Mr. W. R. Philips would not rest content without finding some site in Kirman to locate the tomb of Thomas. He could not otherwise explain the name "Kalamina"; but the Malabar Christian tradition interprets Calamina as Little Mount,[4] the name of one of the Thomistic mounts near Madras.

The East Coast legend of Kandappa, supported by the

[1] See Labrourt, *Le Christianisme dans l'Empire Perse sous la Dynastie Sassanide* (224-632), p. 306.

[2] See Renaudot, *Ancient Accounts of India and China by two Mahammadan Travellers in the Ninth Century*, 1733, pp. 79–81.

[3] See Fr. H. Hosten's notes on San Thomé in *Report of the Indian Historical Records Commission*, 1922.

[4] "Calamina" is supposed to be a form of the Syriac word "Galmona" (hillock). It has been also interpreted as a corrupt form of "Coromandel".

time-honoured Malabar tradition, ought at least to shake our belief in the recently established connexion between St. Thomas and the Indo-Parthian king. This latter theory stands merely on the probable identification of the Gûdnaphar of the *Acta*[1] with the Gadaphara or Gudapharasa known from certain coins found in the Cabul region. One is apt to doubt the value of such an identification when one remembers that the *Acta* is at most a historical romance woven round a story which must have originally come from India. Such a romance containing un-Indian names and customs, and showing hardly any acquaintance with India, cannot legitimately be regarded as an historical document.

The traditions above noted have to be scrutinized by scholars before a historical verdict can be passed on them. Tradition by itself cannot make history; but when, as in the present case, a tradition is sufficiently ancient, and well attested by monumental remains and confirmed by independent testimony from diverse quarters, the historian has a duty to take it seriously. The whole South Indian tradition concerning St. Thomas cannot be regarded as history; yet there must necessarily be some substratum of truth in it. Milne Rae rashly discredited the whole tradition and even claimed that it was not Thomas but the Thomas-legend that travelled into India. This theory is even more fantastic than all the pious fables that came to be clustered round the original facts of St. Thomas's apostolate. Sir Henry Yule, who has studied the South Indian tradition at close quarters, thought that in its simple form it could hardly be questioned. A more extensive study of that tradition would perhaps lead us to the conclusion arrived at by an impartial Englishman a hundred years ago,[2] that "we have as good authority that Apostle Thomas died in India as that Apostle Peter died at Rome".

[1] According to the Syriac version, which is the original one.

[2] Claudius Buchanan, *Christian Researches in Asia*, 1814, p. 135. Bishop Heber also thought the same. See *Indian Journal*, ii, p. 178: "It may be . . . as readily believed that St. Thomas was slain at Meilapur as that St. Paul was beheaded in Rome or that Leonidas fell at Thermopylae."