

# SYRIAC MANUSCRIPTS IN INDIA, SYRIAC MANUSCRIPTS FROM INDIA<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

*This article deals with Syriac manuscripts copied or preserved in India. It shows how they are a good mirror of the history of Syriac Churches and communities in Kerala: manuscripts copied prior to the arrival of the Portuguese may not have been very numerous and seem to have been mainly intended for liturgical use. From the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards, several script traditions developed which are linked with different communities.*

Tradition affirms that Christianity began in India in the first century CE with the arrival of the apostle Thomas, according to the Apocryphal *Acts of Thomas*. But the few historical details that can be found in this text have more in common with North-West India (modern Pakistan) than with the South-West coast of the Indian peninsula: coins minted on the behalf of Gondophares in the first century and a Parthian inscription of same period

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mentioning king Guduhvara are a reliable echo to the king Gudnaphar of the *Acts of Thomas*, even if no trace of Christianity has been found related to it. As soon as the first part of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, we have an attestation of the existence of a Christian community through the testimony of Cosmas Indicopleustès (*Christian Topography* III, 65, 4-6), who mentions the existence of a bishopric in Calliana (Quilon) on the coast of Malabar,<sup>2</sup> whose bishop is consecrated in Persia. This means that the Christian community was already well organized. It was originally under the rule of the Metropolitan of Persia (Rev Ardashir), before it got its own Metropolitan around 650 under the patriarch Ishoyahb III. Marco Polo in the 13<sup>th</sup> century also attested to the links between Malabar Christians and the centre of the Church of the East in Bagdad.<sup>3</sup> When the region entered the horizon of Latin Christianity, with the arrival of Vasco da Gama in Calicut (Kozhikode) on the 18<sup>th</sup> of May 1498, Portuguese missionaries found a Christian population well integrated in the local society and that was part of what they called “Nestorian Church”.

Even if we have all these testimonies about a Christianity deeply rooted in Syriac tradition and culture, it is almost impossible to know about manuscript copying in India before the arrival of Portuguese missionaries at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. As the copying of manuscripts was a very important task for Syriac Christians, it has to be assumed that manuscripts were copied in Malabar and this is corroborated by some preserved books and the insistence of Portuguese Church officials to deal with them. Moreover, liturgical books would have been necessary but literary and theological books are also mentioned, and all of these could not have come from Mesopotamia. But we have no information about monasteries in India, which is where manuscripts were generally copied and preserved.<sup>4</sup>

The purpose of this short paper is not to make any inventory of the collections of manuscripts copied in India or made in India, as such a project has already been done.<sup>5</sup> The process of

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<sup>2</sup> An alternative hypothesis is that Cosmas means Kallian, near present Mumbai.

<sup>3</sup> Quick and updated overview by Debić 2010a. Detailed information in Mundadan 1989.

<sup>4</sup> Debić 2010b.

<sup>5</sup> Van der Ploeg 1983.

cataloguing Syriac manuscripts in India is under way.<sup>6</sup> Nor is the purpose to give an overview of the different categories of manuscripts preserved. My aim is to put forward some reflections about the way Syriac manuscripts linked with India are an interesting testimony to the history of Syriac Christianity in this region in the last centuries.

### THE FATE OF THE OLDEST MANUSCRIPTS

The question of manuscripts containing errors seems to have been noted first by a Catalan Jesuit, Ros, who arrived in 1584 in Malabar. He was a professor of Syriac in the seminary of Vaipincotta, founded by the Jesuits for the Syriac Christians of Malabar.<sup>7</sup> He made an effort to look into the manuscripts and produced a treatise about the “Nestorian” errors found in these manuscripts. This was probably one of the considerations that led to the decisions concerning the manuscripts made by the participants in the synod of Udayamperoor (Diamper) held in 1599<sup>8</sup> under the direction of Alexis da Menezes. In fact, as Menezes did not know Malayalam or Syriac, he relied upon Ros for this question.<sup>9</sup> One of the decisions was that every Syriac book in possession of someone had to be presented, and then either corrected or burnt.<sup>10</sup> Tradition has been transmitted that many books were thus destroyed by fire.<sup>11</sup>

Unfortunately, the text of the decrees gives no precise information at all about the manuscripts and the collections or the quantity of those that were present in Kerala and were really

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<sup>6</sup> See the catalogue of the collection of SEERI, an important part of it coming for the Library of the Malankara Bishop House in Tiruvalla (Briquel Chatonnet, Desreumaux, Thekeparampil 1997). The collection of the metropolitan see of the Church of the East in Trichur is currently being catalogued by I. Perszel; see also Mar Aprem 1983. For the collection of Pampakuda, Father Johns Konatt is working on it and David Taylor on that of Thozhiyoor.

<sup>7</sup> Thaliath, p. 15-16.

<sup>8</sup> 20-26 June 1599.

<sup>9</sup> Thaliath 1958, p. 27.

<sup>10</sup> Decree 14 “condemns many Syrian books, forbids all Christian to read them and commands that they be destroyed” Zacharia 1994, p. 98-103. The 15th decree is relative to “errors and heresies in the breviaries and common prayer to be corrected”.

<sup>11</sup> Chabot 1909. Thaliath 1958, p. 31.

destroyed.<sup>12</sup> The extent of this so-called “auto-da-fé” has been the subject of some discussion. The decree only lists texts that were considered heretical and had to be destroyed. What is to be noted is that every category of text specific to the Church of the East is involved, including Apocryphal (“The infancy of our Saviour”), Patristic, Theological (“Margarita Fidei”), canonical (the book of the Synods), homilies or even lives of saints (Rabban Hormizd and many others), as well as medical and magical texts. The whole span of the literature of the Church of the East is evoked. Does this mean that all these texts were attested in manuscripts of the Church of Malabar? Or, that the list was made with a more theoretical point of view, taking into account all “Nestorian” texts in case one of them could be once discovered there? It is not possible to decide conclusively but the second option is surely plausible. This means that the decree cannot be taken as a source of information about texts seen in Malabar manuscripts by the Portuguese or about the real extent of literature preserved in India.

The places where these manuscripts that were to be checked were preserved are not mentioned in the decrees; it only asserts that “this bishopric is full of books writ in the Syrian tongue by Nestorian heretics” and orders that “no person, of what quality and condition soever, shall henceforward presume to keep, translate, read or hear read to others any of the following books.” One of the books “called Parisman, or the Persian Medicine” is said to be “very common in this diocese; most curates having this book.” No mention is made of a monastery or a library, only of personal belongings of priests. It does not preclude the existence of such libraries but does not prove that manuscripts were really numerous in Malabar prior to the arrival of the Portuguese.

One of these manuscripts is preserved in the Vatican Library (Vat. Sir. 22).<sup>13</sup> It is a biblical book, a Lectionary of the epistles of Paul copied in the royal town of Scengala, in the church of Mar Quriaqos, “in the time of Mar Yahballaha the fifth, Turk, catholicos of the Orient, in the year 1612,” according to the Seleucid era (i.e., 1300-1301 CE). This is probably the only one preserved that was copied before any contact with Europe. It is significant that this is preserved outside India: it was brought to

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<sup>12</sup> All citations are made according to the English translation of Zacharia 1994.

<sup>13</sup> Assemani 1758-1759, p. 187-188.

Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, before the synod of Diamper, as its binding seems to be typical of European bindings of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>14</sup> Its use was liturgical.

A number of other extant manuscripts date back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century; they are posterior to the arrival of the Portuguese, but prior to the synod of Diamper. The Vatican Library preserves two manuscripts copied in Angamaly in 1558 CE (Vat. Sir. 2 and 3), one containing the Pentateuch and the other the first Prophets and Ketuvim. The date is also given according to the *kollam* era used in Malabar (733 kollam).<sup>15</sup> The text of the Second Prophets was copied two years earlier in the church of Mar Sabor Aphrot (Shâhpur and Aphrahat) in the town of Pharaor (Vat. Sir. 4) and a New Testament was completed on the 6<sup>th</sup> of Adad 1510 CE (1821 AG), in the town of Cranganore. An office of the feasts according to the rites of the monastery of Mar Gabriel and Mar Abraham near Mosul was also copied in Angamaly in 1562 (Vat. Sir. 85). There is also a New Testament, whose content follows the use of the Syriac Christians (Vat. Sir. 17), lacking the episode of the adulterous woman in John, the epistles of Jacob, 2 Peter, and 2 John as well as the Book of Revelation. Some manuscripts were copied by Joseph, metropolitan of India, on his way from Gazarta to Malabar, a long journey in which he had to go through Mozambique and was detained in Bassein near Bombay, where he learned Latin ritual (Vat. Sir. 45, 46, 65, 66, 88, 89, 128). These are but few examples of the transfer to Europe of some old manuscripts from Malabar. It is to be noted that these manuscripts are almost exclusively of Biblical, Canonical, or Liturgical nature. It may mean that in Malabar before the arrival of the Portuguese, manuscripts would have been copied mainly for the use of liturgy and church life.

If we turn now to the oldest manuscripts preserved in Kerala collections, we find for example the *Nomocanon* of Bar Hebraeus, a very precious manuscript of the Occidental tradition copied in 1290 in the Middle East, only four years after the death of the author, probably copied directly from the autograph. It is Ms. 33 in the collection of Fr. Johns Konatt in Pampakuda.<sup>16</sup> It was only

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<sup>14</sup> Levi della Vida 1939, p. 176. Van der Ploeg 1983, p. 187-188.

<sup>15</sup> Briquel Chatonnet 1998.

<sup>16</sup> Van der Ploeg 1983, p. 163. Briquel Chatonnet, Desreumaux, Thekeparampil 1996, p. 929-931.

brought to Kerala in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: according to a note added to the Ms, it was given to the priest Mattai, *malpono* of Malabar in 1893 CE. In the collection of the Saint Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute, a *Beth Gazo* is preserved (SEERI 41) that was copied in 1588 CE in the monastery of Mar Zakkai, in the land of Gargar. A first restoration of the manuscript was made in the Middle East, using a paper with *tre lune* watermarks, characteristic of the Italian fabrics intended for the Ottoman empire.<sup>17</sup> On the East Syriac side, the collection of the metropolitan of the Church of the East in Trichur preserves a *Nomocanon* of Abdisho of Nisibis,<sup>18</sup> a manuscript copied in 1291 CE, during the lifetime of the author. But it also contains notes attesting its presence in the Middle East at least through 1525 and perhaps later.<sup>19</sup> Also in the same collection, there is an interesting manuscript that preserves Apocryphal texts. It was copied in 1615. As it contains a text that was condemned in Diamper, the *Book of the Bee*, we assumed in our study of 1998 that it was copied in the Middle East and brought afterwards, but it is in fact difficult to say.<sup>20</sup>

I. Perczel made an interesting study about manuscripts found in Kerala and preserving texts condemned by the synod of Diamper.<sup>21</sup> None of them seem to be older than the synod. Some seem to have been copied in the Middle East and brought to Kerala later. Others may have been copied in Kerala, but it is not possible to know if the model was imported from the Middle East. What is interesting is that not a few of them are preserved in “Jacobite” collections. As some Christians in Kerala established relationships with the Jacobite patriarch in the 17<sup>th</sup> and from then onwards preserved relations with the Middle East, the preservation of such texts in those libraries could be a hint that these texts came from the Middle East and were not preserved through the events of Diamper. The alternative hypothesis would be that these communities which were not under the control of Rome had more freedom to preserve texts condemned by the Latin Church, even if they were of Syro-Oriental origin.

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<sup>17</sup> Briquel Chatonnet, Desreumaux, Thekeparampil 1997, p. 437-439.

<sup>18</sup> Mar Aprem 1983.

<sup>19</sup> Perczel 2006, p. 89-90. Mar Aprem, Perczel, Kaufhold 2005.

<sup>20</sup> Briquel Chatonnet, Desreumaux, Thekeparampil 1998.

<sup>21</sup> Perczel 2006.

It cannot be only by chance that the most ancient manuscripts copied in Malabar are preserved in European collections, and mainly in the Vatican Library, and that the most ancient manuscripts preserved in Malabar were copied in the Middle East and were brought to Malabar in later centuries. This means that the eradication of ancient manuscripts carried out in India was done quite thoroughly and that the Vatican Library was the most efficient place for preservation of manuscripts coming from communities under suspicion of heresy. The second point to be noted is that the few ancient manuscripts preserved are all linked with liturgy and every day life of the Church. We have no indication of a large development of the copying of manuscripts in Kerala for a more intellectual use, but it is not possible to say whether it reflects the actual situation of the Church of Malabar prior to the arrival of the Portuguese or whether it is due to a very efficient destruction. The manuscripts preserved in the Vatican library are more consistent with the first option.

#### THE DEVELOPMENT OF SEVERAL TRADITIONS

While some manuscripts from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries are preserved, what is really striking is the large number of manuscripts copied in the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. This emphasizes the importance that was accorded to the task of copying in the different churches of Kerala until a very recent period. These manuscripts can be organized into three groups according to the writing tradition to which they belong. It is to be noted that the copying of manuscripts and the writing of inscriptions<sup>22</sup> were both made in the same periods and in the same church contexts.

The first group is composed of manuscripts in Serto script. These are the result of the establishment of links between some Christians in Malabar and the patriarchate of Antioch in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Two major missions from the Syro-Orthodox Church tied these links in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, that of Mar Gregorios from 1665 to 1672 and that of Mar Basilio from Tur Abdin and Mar Iwanios who both arrived in Kerala in 1685.<sup>23</sup> The fruits of the mission of these two dignitaries are commemorated by a long inscription in

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<sup>22</sup> Briquel Chatonnet, Desreumaux, Thekeparampil 2008.

<sup>23</sup> About these missions, see Thekkedath 1988, p. 100-104.

Mar-Thoma-Cheriyapalli church in Kothamangalam.<sup>24</sup> The second important period began with the arrival of Qūrillos Mar Yūyaqīm in 1846, who came from Tur Abdin as the Syro-orthodox metropolitan of Malabar and stayed till his death in 1874. This explains why the Serto script was imported into Kerala and even why the specific 19<sup>th</sup> century form of the script, which had been developed in the Tur Abdin region, was also in use in Kerala. A lot of manuscripts were copied in this very classical Serto script, examples of which are also found in inscriptions.

The second group is that of manuscripts copied in the regular Oriental script. Most of these manuscripts are preserved in the collection of the metropolitan of the Church of the East in Trissur. They are linked with the reestablishment of the Church of the East in Kerala in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and its tight relations with the head of the Church, in Iraq and the States. In this case also, Keralese manuscripts are, graphically speaking, in the major trend of their Church.

The major originality of Keralese manuscripts lies in a particular form of script used in the Syro-Malabar community, which derives from the Chaldean script but took very specific characters, accentuating its specific traits, mainly from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Its form has been studied elsewhere and named Syro-keralese script.<sup>25</sup> What is to be emphasized here is the historical situation that led to its development. From the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the church of Malabar was the object of an intense process of Latinization and was very much marked by the adoption of the liturgy and traditions of the Roman Catholic Church. Links were dropped with the Patriarch of the Church of the East who was at that time in residence in Gazarta, in the mountainous region of North East Mesopotamia. The synod of Diamper even rejected the solution which would have placed the Syriac Indian Church under the jurisdiction of the Chaldean patriarch, at that time in communion with Rome,<sup>26</sup> and established its dependence on the Portuguese Church. However, the end of the first union between Rome and the Church of the East soon invalidated any such solution and the Church of Kerala was put directly under Portuguese and Roman rule. Syriac culture and

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<sup>24</sup> Briquel Chatonnet, Desreumaux, Thekeparampil 2008, p. 89-93.

<sup>25</sup> Briquel Chatonnet et Desreumaux 2010.

<sup>26</sup> Thekkedath 1988, p.72.



language were not abandoned but were used inside this new framework, which implied cutting all relations with the centre of Syriac culture. Syriac culture developed on an independent basis in the Syro-malabar Church. In this case, the script of manuscripts and inscriptions is a very symbolic reflection of the evolution of the community, which went its own way apart from its sister in the Middle East.

One emblematic example of this feature is the very rich and impressive collection of manuscripts from Saint-Joseph monastery in Mannanam, which belongs to the CMI congregation (Carmelites of Mary Immaculate). Many books preserved in this collection are written with this script, and the collection contains a good number of Syriac texts of spirituality of the Roman-Catholic Church translated from Latin, such as the *Imitation of Jesus-Christ*. Keralese script can thus be linked to a Latinized content of the manuscripts and it is also a very representative symbol of the history of the Syro-Malabar Church.

It is thus difficult to say whether manuscript copying was very much developed in Kerala prior to the confrontation with Latin Church. However, such an encounter was certainly fatal to the existing manuscripts, although it did not harm the tradition of copying them. It could well have been the contrary: recent manuscripts are numerous. Through the different traditions of writing and copying Syriac manuscripts in the last three centuries, we can see an echo of the history of Christians from the Syriac tradition in Kerala and of their links or lack of links with their mother or sister Churches in the Middle East.

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