

SYRIAC MANUSCRIPTS IN INDIA, SYRIAC MANUSCRIPTS FROM INDIA¹

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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 16th 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 6th 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,² 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 13th century also attested to the links between Malabar Christians and the centre of the Church of the East in Bagdad.³ When the region entered the horizon of Latin Christianity, with the arrival of Vasco da Gama in Calicut (Kozhikode) on the 18th 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 15th 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.⁴

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.⁵ The process of

² An alternative hypothesis is that Cosmas means Kallian, near present Mumbai.

³ Quick and updated overview by Debié 2010a. Detailed information in Mundadan 1989.

⁴ Debié 2010b.

⁵ Van der Ploeg 1983.

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