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Syriac Written Heritage in Kerala: First Glances in the Enquiry

As specialists of Syriac and most scholars interested in the Christian literature of the Near East know, the most famous collections of Syriac manuscripts are currently kept in two main areas. On the one hand, they can be found in Iraq, Turkey, Sinai, Lebanon and Syria, i.e. the regions in which they were made and written. On the other hand, many are kept in the major libraries of Europe and the USA, where many scholars since the Renaissance have gained access to and closely studied Syriac texts among other Oriental documents. One should also add Kerala, where many Syriac manuscripts are kept and studied.

People are always surprised to learn that the most important Christian communities descended from Syriac tradition are actually in Kerala. However, people know Kerala only from pictures of backwaters, elephants, carved wood, pepper and gastronomy – delicious reality. Most people, including scholars, are surprised to learn that Kerala is a very important place for Syriac documents in particular and for the history of the Middle East and Asia in general.

Syriac inscriptions in Kerala

In 1992, Alain Desreumaux and Andrew Palmer exposed at the 6th symposium syriacum in Cambridge the project of an inventory of Syriac inscriptions, which is to be published by volumes according to the country of origin of the inscriptions. A model of descriptive card was established and discussed and a plan of the whole project took form. The Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres took over the task of publishing the RIS, as it publishes Recueil des inscriptions éthiopiennes and Recueil des inscriptions himyarites, as a series which would take over the heritage of Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum.
Many of our colleagues manifested interest in this project and several volumes are in good course of being soon established and published.

When two of us discovered Kerala four years ago, for the Third World Syriac Conference, due to the kind and insistant invitation of Father Jacob Thekeparampil, we thought that establishing the Kerala volume of RIS would be an interesting task. First of all, ancient history of Christianity in Kerala was not so well known. Between the traditions relating to saint Thomas mission, the testimony of Cosmas Indicopleustes in the vii\textsuperscript{th} century and the apparent lack of ancient local testimonies, there was a gap and we thought that such a systematic research could perhaps help to fill it. Secondly, the region which was to be investigated was not so large, so that the inventory could quite easily and quickly be done. Thirdly, we knew that we could rely on Father Jacob and SEERI to investigate in the best conditions.

It was in this context that the epigraphic mission in Kerala was organised with the principal aim of looking for Syriac inscriptions written by the Christians of Kerala, of studying, photographing and copying them, and of preparing a systematic publication of the entire corpus. Our intention was also to study the context of the inscriptions, that is tombs, churches, and monuments, and to make architectural plans and photographs of these contexts.

The expedition was financed by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, through a subvention of the "Sous-Direction des Sciences Sociales, Humaines et de l’Archéologie". The mission took place from the 17\textsuperscript{th} of February to the 14\textsuperscript{th} of March 1996. The participants were the three authors of this paper. The expedition was lodged at the SEERI, where it received the warmest welcome, and found accommodation, means of transport, an excellent library for Syriac studies and all sorts of help. During every visit, we were able to work in excellent conditions and experienced a very helpful collaboration from every one in charge of the sites. The collaboration of Rev. Thomas Koonamakkel and of Deacon K.A. George was also most appreciated.

During our mission, we were able to visit approximately 50 churches and discovered some 50 inscriptions. Dated items range from the beginning of the 13\textsuperscript{th} century through the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. Most of them can be described according to three categories:

- Building inscriptions;
- Funerary inscriptions;
- Altars inscriptions.
We only propose here a quick overview to this corpus of inscriptions, looking at some of them and following, as far as possible, chronological order.

The first important characteristic is the really small number of inscriptions older than the famous synod of Udayamperoor or Diamper, in 1599, when it was decided to condemn and delete all texts and monuments which were not in accordance with the Latin catholic exposition of Faith.

The supposed oldest dated inscription that we found is engraved on the vertical face of a stair of the ancient altar of Pala cathedral. Only the beginning can be seen, due to the presence of a more recent wood altar in front of the central part of the stair. The white-washing of the inscription is to be noted, as it is almost systematic on stone inscriptions (fig. 1).

This very short inscription is written in a very classic estrangela script. We can only read a date, which seems confirmed by an inscription in Malayalam at the other end of the degree. The inscription, or the readable part of it, is short and the information is scanty but if the date is to be accepted, it confirms two points:

- the existence of a stone construction already at the beginning of the thirteenth century, which is an important fact because monuments are often difficult to date.

- the use of Christian era already before the arrival of Latin missions, in contrast with Near Eastern use.

Another inscription which is supposed to be ancient is that of Saint Mary Valliapally of Kottayam. It is written on a grey stelae on the southern altar in the qastroma and inserted in a modern retable (altar piece). The symetric one on the northern altar bears only a pahlevi inscription. These two stones are said originating from Cranganore where saint Thomas is supposed to have accosted, coming from Palestine and, according the tradition, they were brought in Valliapally in 1515.

The Syriac inscription¹ is engraved under a relief depicting a nestorian quadrata cross, whose branches end in lvs flowers. The cross is erected on three degrees and topped by a dove, painted in white. On both sides, there are pilasters topped by capitals. The concave

curve is decorated by a garland, around which a pahlavi inscription is engraved. The Syriac inscription and a rosace decoration are situated on the bottom of the stelae. This model of traditional Christian oriental cross is well known in Kerala, where it has been in common use among orthodox, nestorian and catholic churches. (fig. 2)

The script is nestorian, rather round. Vertical strokes are short and almost not higher than the body of the letters. Olaph are alternatively of classical shape, or as vertical strokes. Shin have a peculiar form, open in the higher part. The inscription was painted in white inside the engraving of letters, but not very acutely. Some letters were not repainted, or badly, and can only be felt with the finger, such as the zain in ܡܢܐ, which is perfectly engraved. On the contrary, an erroneous painted stroke joins the two olaph of ܪ and ܟ. It can be tentatively dated from the xvi-th century but one cannot exclude a later date. The text is a quotation of Galates 6, 14.

“There is nothing of which to boast myself, but for the cross of my Lord, Jesus-Christ”

Another curiosity is the inscription engraved on the cross, near the same church of Saint Mary Valliapally. Quite a number of such high crosses are to be found in the enclosures near churches in Kerala. Only one is dated, that of Udayamperoor which was erected on occasion of the synod of 1599, but it is difficult to know whether it comes in a long tradition or if this was the first one. So it is impossible to propose a datation of these few letters.

As soon as Latin missionaries arrived, the influence is sensible, even before the synod of Udayamperoor. One of the best examples of this phenomenon is the inscription engraved on the ark at the entrance of the church of Mulanthuruthy, which commemorates the building of the door of the sanctuary. It is written in an estrangela script, with cursive characteristics, such as for waw, mim and he which are closed, olaph whose form is some time very near serto form, shin as a simple triangle open at the base. Here again, the painting covering the inscription differs in some details of the firstly engraved one. Two eras, christian and local, are used. The inscription was made in 1575 AD. (fig 3)

The most striking character of this inscription is the use of some particular expressions such as ܟܕܬܐ ܟܠܐ ܟܝܐ ܐܬܠܢܐ instead of the expected Syriac expression ܟܕܬܐ ܟܠܐ ܬܠܢܐ.
to refer to this sanctuary. We wonder if it could possibly be an
indication of latin (or european) influence.

Some nine years later, the Kuravilangad bell was melted, in 1584
AD, that is still before the synod of Diamper. The inscription is cast in
relief and goes on all around the bell on two registers. It is painted in
white, with nestorian letters. A little cross was engraved over the first
line and inside the second, to point out the beginning of lines. It is 63
cm high and its basic circumference is 136 cm. (fig. 4)

The dedication of this type of object, in itself, does not seem to fit
with a local tradition and shows occidental influence, even if it bears
a Syriac inscription. Once again, we read the expression
 الموجودة للسيدة مريم "for the church saint Mary" instead of
levin hazzel. And last but not least, the qualification
sawtayik and not sayyid, which would be normally
used in the Oriental Church, as it is still now the case in Trichur, shows
also latin influence, even before Diamper synod.

Latinisation and normalisation were accentuated after the synod.
One exemple is to be found on funerary stones in the gastrona of
the church of Kuravilangad. The first one, 1543, has already the same
appearance as such monuments in european churches. It is written
in Syriac and Malayalam, with a medaillon in Latin letters. The second
one, in English, Syriac and Malayalam, keeps the memory of Lord
Alexander de Campo, born in Kuravilangad, whose Portuguese name
is a translation of the native one. He died in 1687. The decoration in
low relief is typically european and English language is used. What
is notable, in this context, is the use of Syriac. Both inscriptions use
oriental script, nestorian, with typical shapes of letters.

This latin influence gets a special explanation in this case.
Alexander de Campo was made bishop of Malabar by Rome, and
played a special part in trying to reduce the schism which occured in
Mattanchery in 1653. There, an important part of the community had
rejected Roman and Jesuit authority and chosen for itself an
archidiacon for all India, with secret help of Hollandese who were
trying to reduce ties with Portugal. It is well known that Mar Thomas
the First tried to reset ties with Syriac hierarchy. But he could not
establish contact either with Mar Elias X, in Rabban Hormizd, north
of Mossoul, nor with Simon XIII Denha, in Qotchannes in the Hakkari
Mountains. So, in order to reestablish a Syriac tradition in conformity
with the apostolic line, he got in contact with the syro-orthodox
patriarch in Deir ez-Zafaran, in Tur Abdin.