

## History of Christianity in India – An Archaeo-linguistic Perspective

(A Review of the Book-*Unmasking the Syriacs: The Hidden Origin of Indian Christianity—An Archaeo-linguistic Approach*)

The Apostle Thomas and his travel to the Indian Peninsula soon after the resurrection of Jesus Christ would be the key response if someone asked about the beginning of Christianity in the Indian subcontinent or the responsibility of spreading the faith in India. His journey to South India and subsequent conversion of the Namboothiri Brahmins of Kerala, followed by his martyrdom at Mylapore, near Chennai, is the most interesting and descriptive narration we would hear from any authentic church historian or believer. Though the story has many illogical twists and turns, contradicting plots, and no proper evidence, it has become a conventional history among believers and non-believers alike. Volumes of explanation and detailing have been done by many church historians, referring mainly to apocryphal, non-canonical, or hagiographic works. Though these explanations are in great volumes, their authenticity is still disputed by many renowned scholars and historians alike.

Numerous academics have researched and written about the beginnings of Indian Christianity and its growth, carefully examining all relevant literary sources (canonical, non-canonical, Gnostic books, etc.), as well as the Mylapore excavations, but they have been unable to draw any firm conclusions because there is no hard evidence. There are three groups of writers who wrote about the origin of Indian Christianity. They are (1) those who support an apostolic activity, such as Apostle Thomas or Apostle Bartolomeo, or both; (2) those who reject any apostolic activity; and (3) those who say there may or may not be an apostolic activity due to a lack of substantial evidence. The third group mainly does not want to get into controversy or go against the popular beliefs of ancient South Indian Christians, who are presently called Syriac Christians or Indian Christians of St. Thomas. The majority who support the apostolic origin of Indian Christianity use the pull and push strategy to explain their position. When I address it as a "pull and push strategy," it means using vague references indicating India with St. Thomas or Bartolomeo from literary (hagiographical, apocryphal, gnostic, etc.) works along with the mythical stories (often from the post-Portuguese period) from the memory of Syriac Christians of South India. The opposite group analyses these references with historical records and textual criticism to expose the veracity of these literary sources. Similarly, they reject the mythical claims of Syriac Christianity, indicating the contradictions within its framework against historical data. These groups often do extensive research on literary evidence and traveller's records to find out the historical truth behind the apostolic claims of Indian Christianity but lack any serious work on archaeological or epigraphic studies except the translations of Pahlavi and other inscriptions of the Mount Cross and Tharissapalli plates. Hence, the apostolicity of Indian Christianity is still considered a riddle among secular scholars.

A recent interesting study by an independent researcher and writer, Mr. Jeevan Philip, throws more light into this centuries-old problem and considerably helps to reach a conclusion. The study has been published under the name "UNMASKING THE SYRIACS: THE HIDDEN ORIGIN OF INDIAN CHRISTIANITY, An Archaeo-linguistic Approach"; it has a unique methodology to crack this historical problem. This study seems to have not only brought out answers to many questions about Indian Christianity, its origin, and apostolicity, but also the group responsible for the Pahlavi crosses of old Tamizhakam. Besides this, the study analyses the evolution and development of Sasanian (Persian) Christianity and its spread towards east—Central Asia, China, and India. It also gives the reader an in-depth understanding of the evolution

of Christian symbols and the influence of other pre-Christian civilizations or other religions on the development and subsequent adoption of these symbols. As indicated in the title, it is primarily based on the archaeological and linguistic studies concerning Christianity, especially eastern Christianity, against the usual methodology followed by the majority using the early writings of church leaders, writers, etc. These writings include mainly apologetics or hagiographic writings; gnostic or apocryphal writings; ancient travelogues of traders or religious people; etc. According to the author, if these suppositions relating to the existence of an apostolic Christianity in India, especially in South India from the first century, are historically correct, there will be material evidence like symbols, artefacts, Christian architectural remains, etc. like in the case of any western or eastern Christianity in the rest of the world. Based on this, the author proposes that if we study and analyse the ancient archaeological remains unearthed from ancient Christian settlements and trade routes, we could identify the peculiar nature or identities or even the evolutionary steps of these materials (artefacts/symbols), which can be compared with those archaeological remains unearthed from the Indian peninsular region. Similarly, if one studies the linguistic identities of different Christian sects, which played a role in the development of Sasanian and Roman Christianity, and further analyses the ancient inscriptions and their translations on those archaeological remains unearthed or their ancient manuscripts, it will certainly help us in identifying the relationship between these sects.

This approach seems to be more practical, evidence-based, and objective-oriented than those built on elevated stories of church leaders and their opponents or writings of their contemporary sects and other religions. The history of Indian Christianity is indeed built on a few vague references and possibilities, often pulled by stories of travellers and post-colonial narratives. Typical church historians frequently rely on mythical stories of Syriac Christianity to establish an apostolic heritage in the absence of material evidence.

### The Methodology of the Study

The methodology followed in this study is unique and at the same time new to the study of the migration of any religion to distant places from its original geographic area of birth. The transfer of any religion from its geographical origin to different regions or distant locations requires a medium called the movement of people. This movement of people certainly requires a pre-existing purpose/cause like trade or an accidental one like war, calamities etc. Even political/administrative decisions can transport people from one location to another, which in turn causes the migration of religion to distant locations. Even the individual (missionary) attempt requires this medium to propagate the religion to new areas. If one could identify this movement of people, he could easily find the way in which religion migrated into these new territories. Hence, the author logically states that the migration of Christianity towards distant places, especially in South Asia, happened through the Afro-Eurasian trade network. Naturally, whichever Christianity or sect spread this new faith in South Asia would have to have settlements along the ancient socio-commercial network. If they had (nodes of the trade network as explained in the book) settlement of this new faith, they should have left some archaeological evidence such as symbols, artefacts, ornaments, ritual materials, peculiar structures of buildings used in their worship, etc. throughout the nodes of these socio-commercial networks. Studying the archaeological remains unearthed from the trade network and analysing and comparing the structures and styles of these remains with those unearthed from the South Asian region, especially old Thamizhakam, will certainly explain the origin and development of Christianity in that region.

The author proceeds with identifying the Afro-Eurasian trade routes and their socio-commercial networks, followed by an extensive search for unearthed archaeological materials from nodes (trade settlements) of these networks. Before going into details about archaeological materials from the Afro-Eurasian trade routes and their analytical studies and comparisons, the author gives detailed information with respect to archaeological materials unearthed from South Asia, especially South India.

### South Indian Pahlavi Crosses

The book starts with the history of Portuguese excavations leading to the unearthing of the Pahlavi cross from Mylapore, Chennai, in 1547 and proceeds to the other Pahlavi crosses found in South India, along with a similar-looking cross from Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka.<sup>1</sup> Respective information with regards to these copies of Mount Cross, the controversies, and different possible dates of the establishment have been discussed with maximum details to give the reader a preliminary understanding of the subject. This also helps anyone without any knowledge about the prime evidence of early Christianity in India. Interestingly, the author discusses contradicting information related to Portuguese excavations which led to the final discovery of Mount Cross at Mylapore. The Portuguese documentation concerning the early encounters with Nazranies of Malankara (ancient Indian Christians) is discussed along with early descriptions regarding the crosses found by them, certainly used by the author in later chapters to compare with available travellers' narrations. This comparative discussion of the early documentation raises many valid questions about the narrative which Christianity proposes today as the evidence of early evangelization by Saint Thomas. While discussing the other Pahlavi crosses found in the south Indian region, the author gives all the available information regarding the unearthing of these crosses, their possible erection dates, deviations from the Mount cross, etc., which he uses in the later chapters to compare with those ancient crosses found in the socio-commercial networks.

While discussing the only Persian cross unearthed from Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka, the author explains the contradictions in the recent archaeological excavations conducted by Archaeologist John Carswell and his claimed Gil Muhrag (clay bullae) with three seal impressions (one with a supposed Nestorian cross) and a Pahlavi inscription (which often church historians proposes as additional evidence of an ancient Nestorian Christianity in Sri Lanka) quoting the studies of Archaeologist, scholar and an acknowledged expert of Roman coinage Reinhold Walburg.<sup>2</sup> Besides the acclaimed Mount Cross and its copies from the South Indian peninsular region, the book gives information regarding the Taxila cross, Herat cross, and Niranam cross, along with other Buddhist crosses found in Taxila, Pakistan.<sup>3</sup> The first chapter is intended to impart maximum information about the primary archaeological evidence in support of ancient Indian Christianity, usually put forward by church historians in the light of modern studies and other parallel evidence.

### The History and Evolution of the Cross as a Symbol of Christianity

Since the Cross is the prime symbol of Christianity and the only important archaeological evidence available from India, especially from the South Indian region, for this study, the author exclusively goes

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter 1 (all footnotes from the book *Unmasking the Syriacs*)

<sup>2</sup> p.25,26

<sup>3</sup> pp.28-32

into the origin and development of the Cross as a symbol among different civilizations of the world.<sup>4</sup> The second chapter of this book gives the reader interesting as well as thought-provoking facts concerning the evolution of the Symbol of the Cross before Christianity and its adoption by different civilisations of the world. The study of the meaning and representation of the Symbol of the Cross and its further adaptation to Christianity by the fourth century, with the strong support of the Roman Emperor Constantine (306-337 CE.), enlightens the reader about early Christianity and its ancient symbols. In relation to this, the book discusses the possible instruments that could have been used to crucify Jesus with the help of modern archaeological findings and world-famous scholars' studies.<sup>5</sup> This indeed provides us with an opportunity to compare the narrative that we get from the four Gospels. The author describes the historical path in which the early representation of the Symbol of the Cross was found through hidden writings /drawings (Staurogram-Nomina scara writing system) and other artefacts belonging to Christian and pagan believers, which gives us more logical explanations for the lack of archaeological findings of direct Symbol of the Cross or Crucifix during the first two hundred years of Christianity.<sup>6</sup> Though the book questions the very claims of Christianity concerning the symbol of the cross, the cross used for Jesus's crucifixion, or the style of his torture, it confirms the violent death of Jesus at the hands of Roman soldiers through the various archaeological findings, other artefacts, and references from ancient literature.

#### Translating Pahlavi inscriptions<sup>7</sup>

Though this is the most difficult part of the book due to the logogrammatic nature of a dead language which had been out of use for many centuries, the author made it comparatively simplistic by explaining the basic qualities and peculiarities of the language using studies by world-renowned Pahlavi scholars. A common reader may find the chapter's initial pages exceedingly difficult to understand due to the complex nature of a dead language, but the grouping of the various translations through comparative analysis of the methodology used is quite helpful for a reader to understand the veracity of various claims put forward by these translators.<sup>8</sup> The book contains almost all the available translations by various scholars and epigraphists from the 14th century Canara Brahman to Shilanand Hemraj of 2014.<sup>9</sup> The recent translations by Shilanand Hemraj (which many of the readers might not know about) using a unique way without taking help from the mythical stories of Syriac Christianity (Persian names of prelates or merchants) gives us another realistic possibility except for his support for the sponsor's sect (his translation attempt was sponsored by a Knanite businessman). Unknowingly or knowingly, he opened new possibilities which increased the set of groups responsible for these Pahlavi crosses. The question of the script used for the Pahlavi inscription and its identification/confusion certainly questions the supposed claim of Persian (Syriac) Christianity on the Pahlavi crosses of south India.<sup>10</sup> Estrangelo inscription on one of the Kottayam crosses and its similarities with an 18th-century manuscript produced in Kerala again increase the doubt about the authenticity of the copies of the Pahlavi crosses discovered in Kerala.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Chapter 2, p.33

<sup>5</sup> pp.59-63

<sup>6</sup> pp.50-53

<sup>7</sup> Chapter 3, p.65

<sup>8</sup> pp.82-91

<sup>9</sup> pp.72-82

<sup>10</sup> p.91

<sup>11</sup> p.94

## The Indian Ocean trade and its Socio-commercial network<sup>12</sup>

Before going into the search for archaeological findings from the Afro-Eurasian trade through which the new religion was transferred to South Asia, one must understand the basic history of the Indian Ocean trade network, specifically its origin, development, transportation, materials/goods transferred etc. The author gives us a detailed historical view of the trade through the Indian Ocean, connecting the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal, including its extensions stretching the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, incorporating modern archaeological and genetic studies. This information is corroborated not only by the literary evidence but also by modern techniques like a chemical content analysis done on amphoras unearthed from Israel (recent organic residue analysis by Israeli professor of Archaeology A. Gilboa and team performed on small early iron age Phoenician clay flask provided the first concrete archaeological evidence that such trade took place much earlier).<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the author uses the help of modern ceramic studies to identify the possible groups or nationalities involved in this long-distance trade through the Indian Ocean. The study of ceramic wares unearthed from the ports of the Persian region and other Indian Ocean ports by Katrien Rutten suggests that Mesopotamia was not directly involved in the Indian Ocean trade but instead connected through South Arabian ports such as Qana and Sumhuram. The composition of the imported pottery corpus at Ed-dur and the Persian Gulf differs from that of South Arabian and other Red-Sea ports, indicating the ships carrying goods to South Arabia and Thamizhakam did not enter the Persian Gulf. The Red-Sea ports and other centres like Berenike and Myos-Hormos credited with finding Indian pottery with pepper, Tamil Brahmi inscriptions, Indian RPW (red polished ware), and RW (roulette ware) suggest a direct trade between these regions. On the contrary, the absence of such ceramic shred collections (from the 2nd to 5th century) from the Persian Gulf area suggests no direct trade between South India and the Persian Gulf.<sup>14</sup> This finding perfectly matches the political situation that existed in that region during this period (the Sasanians conquered the Aksumites and their vassals in South Arabia in 575 CE).<sup>15</sup> The book also suggests another piece of corroborative evidence from the genetic study observing mtDNA similarity between the skeletal remains dated between the early Bronze age and the late Roman period (2500BCE–500CE) unearthed from the middle Euphrates valley with Indian mtDNA haplogroups (M65a, M49, and M61). Palanichamy and the group who conducted the study suggest these mtDNA haplogroups are generally absent in Syria but probably belong to the settled Indian traders who migrated along the Indian Ocean trade route through the Red Sea.<sup>16</sup>

The ancient Indian Ocean trade certainly developed a socio-commercial network of people who are mostly settled in ports or main trade/collection centres to facilitate the movement of goods in the most economical way.<sup>17</sup> The difficulties faced by the merchants and their associates in distant lands were overcome by developing a network of similar merchant groups or diasporas, who usually worked together to achieve their mission. These networks of people who facilitated the trade were responsible for the transfer of new religions to distant lands. Even the usual stories of apostolic activity in India, proposed by church historians without any concrete evidence, also require a network of such people for the propagation of their religion. This socio-commercial network usually consists of people from different

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<sup>12</sup> Chapter 4, p.97

<sup>13</sup> P.116

<sup>14</sup> pp. 110-112

<sup>15</sup> p.113

<sup>16</sup> p.113,114

<sup>17</sup> p.116

nationalities, ethnicities, and religions having skills or potential required for transnational trade, such as merchants, shipowners & sailors, creditors or financiers, caravan operators or their agents, procuring agents etc. The interaction between people belonging to different religions and nationalities settled in distant places to facilitate long-distance trade, which was primarily responsible for the transfer of new religions to these distant lands. Once the Afro-Eurasian socio-commercial network towards South Asia is identified with unearthed archaeological remains like crosses, other artefacts or architecture related to Christianity, it is easy to analyse and compare them to find out the similarities and connections of those Christian sects responsible for these unearthed archaeological findings. The book suggests that the comparative study of the archaeological findings from these socio-commercial networks certainly gives us historical facts concerning the migration of Christianity towards distant places.

### Archaeological evidence from ancient trade routes

The book kept two chapters (chapters 5 & 6)<sup>18</sup> to elaborate on the archaeological findings from these ancient sites (nodes) of the Afro-Eurasian trade network to India, especially the south Indian region. Since Christianity reached the Indian subcontinent through this trade network, there would be archaeological evidence buried under the ancient sites of these socio-commercial networks. In these two chapters, the author gives all the available data related to archaeological findings from these trade routes and important ancient sites related to them. These findings are from reputed archaeological excavations and research conducted under the direct supervision of world-renowned archaeologists and scholars. Some of these excavations, which are continuing at the respective sites, are also included in the book. The findings from these excavations, such as ancient crosses, other artefacts, and church buildings, are studied with respect to different ancient trade routes, regions, and ancient empires to understand the migration of Christianity, its different sects, symbols, characteristics, and their further evolution under the influence of other contemporary religions. The comparative study of this archaeological evidence provides us with remarkably interesting results about the migration of Christianity towards the eastern world and further to the South Asian region. The author uses the epigraphic and other archaeological evidence along with other artefacts found from these trade routes to distinguish the different sects of Christianity, Gnostic Christianity, and other contemporary religions in the geographical region of the Sasanian empire, its vassal states, Central Asia, and even China. This analysis is again used by the author to compare and study the archaeological evidence of Indian Christianity to arrive at an evidence-based conclusion.

### Splayed Armed Crosses with Blobs as Serifs—An Identity of Sasanian Christianity.<sup>19</sup>

The identification of splayed arm crosses with small roundels as serifs at the corners of the arms of crosses and in between provides an identity of crosses from the Sasanian empire and its vassal states. It is interesting to observe the author's analysis based on the comparative study of crosses unearthed from the Sasanian (Persian) empire. The Christian symbol of the cross migrated to Roman Syria and then to the Persian Empire from the Mediterranean, like the migration of Christianity itself. Greek Christianity, which used splayed arm crosses along with two blobs as serifs (later used three blobs), passed it on to Sasanian Christianity, which also used a two-blob system and later extensively used three blobs as decorations. So, wherever Sasanian Christianity went, they took their splayed armed crosses and developed them further under the influence of other contemporary sects and religions like Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism,

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<sup>18</sup> p.128 & 181

<sup>19</sup> pp.152-161

Buddhism etc. This identity can be found in all sects of Syriac Christianity (Nestorians, Jacobites, Melkites, etc.), including the Manichaean church (the author refers to the origin of the Manichaean church as a subset of Syriac Christianity in its initial days)<sup>20</sup> and the evidence also found from respective ancient sites belongs to these sects in Persia, Central Asia, or even China. The study on the evolutionary path of the symbol of the cross used by different sects of Christianity and other religions like Manichaeism and Buddhism, its acculturation or syncretic development due to the influence of other factors used by the author to study and compare the cross symbols excavated from South Asia, especially the Indian peninsular region.

#### Crosses with spread wings from the Sasanian Empire.<sup>21</sup>

One of the exciting findings of this study is the identification of spread-wing motifs on the crosses of the Sasanian empire and its vassal states. The Persian crosses of South India have a leaf or flower petal-like formations from the base of the cross raising upward (sometimes downwards) in a direction usually identified with the lotus flower, often interpreted as an Indian adaptation to Nestorian Christianity. This was generally claimed to have the support of crosses unearthed from Guangzhou, China and Mongolia, often representing a clear lotus formation, probably a Buddhist adaptation.<sup>22</sup> But the study based on archaeological remains unearthed from Mesopotamia and the Fars regions of the Sasanian Empire indicates the said ornamentation is nothing but the adoption of Fly-Wing/Spread-Wing emblems depicted on the crowns of Sasanian Kings.<sup>23</sup> The author describes the incorporation of this emblem into the Splayed armed Crosses of Syriac-Manichaean Christianity as subordination or respect to the Sasanian Empire when all religions which have a Roman origin or connections were considered enemies of the Sassanid dynasty. This was followed by Zoroastrianism, the official religion of the Sassanid dynasty. To overcome this hostility, different Christian sects of the Sasanian Empire and its vassal states, like Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, etc., incorporated the prestigious emblem of the Zoroastrians/Sassanids into their crosses.<sup>24</sup>

By observing their pattern and structure, the book explains the further evolution of these spread wings, which are incorporated into the splayed armed crosses of Sasanian Christianity. It has been observed that the fly wing/spread wing pattern changes its shapes from the sword, ribbons, leaves, clouds, and flower petals with the geographical region, i.e., from Mesopotamia, Fars, Central Asia, and further to China. The study notices an interesting pattern in which the spread wing depicted in splayed arm crosses during the Sassanid period certainly follows the style depicted on the headgear of Persian kings. This can be observed even in bordering states like Armenia, Georgia, etc. But the style changes when we go out of the main centres of the Persian empire or places where Zoroastrianism had much less hold in different forms like flower petals, leaves, clouds etc. When we reach the area of the central Asian border with China or in proper China, the change becomes more prominent, and anthropomorphic figures begin to appear, along with splayed armed crosses.<sup>25</sup>

The Chinese replaced the Sasanian fly wing/spread wings of Ahura Mazda-the emblem of the Sassanid dynasty with a Buddhist lotus on the base of the cross symbol, which church historians of Indian

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<sup>20</sup> p.212, 301, 302

<sup>21</sup> pp.162-180

<sup>22</sup> pp.203-218,246-253

<sup>23</sup> pp.162-175

<sup>24</sup> pp.166-170

<sup>25</sup> pp. 246-254; 218-224.

Christianity wrongly identified with the Pahlavi crosses of South India. The Pahlavi crosses of South India depict the spread wings of Ahura Mazda used by the Sassanids on their crowns rather than the Lotus (complete flower) used in Chinese crosses (Tang & Yuan period). The author substantiates his proposal with archaeological evidence unearthed from the region comprising Persia, Central Asia, and China. To find the possible path of the evolution of the cross, the author compares Christian crosses of different sects with Manichaeism and Buddhist crosses, which are all unearthed from the region.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, a detailed discussion of the evolution of religious symbols and their respective meanings gives us a more logical explanation of the syncretism among eastern religions. This detailed study suggests the wings incorporated into the splayed armed crosses from the Sassanian empire undergo a syncretic evolution, imbibing the cultural milieu of Buddhist China—a perfect example of acculturation.

The second chapter on searching for Pahlavi crosses (chapter:6) discusses the evolution of Christianity and its represented symbols in Central Asia and China. It is an in-depth investigation based on archaeological findings from the region by multi-disciplinary teams led by world-renowned archaeologists of different nationalities. The close relationship between Nestorians and Manichaeism in China is also studied with the help of various headstones, inscriptions, and other information from travellers like Marco Polo, Matteo Ricci, etc., revealing the path on which Chinese Christianity evolved. The author's explanation of the Jigjiao/Quinjiao (Chinese) cross<sup>27</sup> evolution through the influence of different Sasanian and Central Asian Christianity, along with contemporary religions like Buddhism and Manichaeism, is supported by a large number of archaeological findings from the region, like Nikolai Puntuzov cross, Armenian Crosses, Tombstone inscriptions of Yelikewen Mar Solomon (Shlimen), Manichaean wall hanging from Seiun-Ji Temple, Kofu City, Japan, etc., helping the reader to understand the complexity of the history of religions in this part of the world.

Finding the archaeological remains of Christianity along the socio-commercial Network (which probably transferred Christianity to the Indian subcontinent) and its comparative study to understand the logical and evidence-based development of different sects of Christianity, its mutual interactions with other contemporary religions, etc. can be used to find the relations or role in developing Indian Christianity. Though this methodology is new to the study of Indian Christianity, it is evidence-based, which is more plausible than the vague literary references and hagiographies produced by various church writers. The results of comparative analysis of archaeological data collected from different trade routes and ancient settlements were used by the author to understand the role of different sects of Sasanian (Persian), Mediterranean, and Egypto-Ethiopian Christianity in the origin and development of Indian Christianity, especially in old Tamizhakam.

The result of the comparative study of various unearthed crosses, other artefacts, and architectural remains is completely different from those limited artefacts and crosses unearthed from South India or even from the entire Indian Peninsular region. The study indicates that the archaeological findings from the ancient sites of South India or Sri Lanka produced no similar splayed armed crosses or any additional artefacts remotely resembling Persian or Mesopotamian Christianity. Surprisingly, the ancient inscriptions, manuscripts, or architectural remains associated with Christianity discovered in South India or Sri Lanka generally date from the post-13th century. Naturally, a question arises here: had there been any role or connections with Malankara Nazranies (ancient South Indian Christians), there would have

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<sup>26</sup> pp.225-236

<sup>27</sup> pp.217-242

been plenty of archaeological material available like in Mesopotamia, Central Asia, or China, where Syriac Christianity played an important role in spreading the belief. The only archaeological evidence unearthed from the South Indian region is the few copies of Pahlavi inscribed crosses, which have characteristic differences from Mesopotamian splayed arm crosses with blobs and other decorations. The historical evolution of the symbol of crosses belongs to different sects of Christianity and other religions like Buddhism and Manichaeism observed in the book and the lack of archaeological material similar to the Persian, Central Asian, and Chinese geographical regions in the Indian subcontinent suggests a completely different origin and development of Indian Christianity.

Some of the unearthed crosses that church historians put forward as Persian crosses, for example, the Taxila cross, probably have a Buddhist origin, as suggested in the book based on materials unearthed by excavations from the region.<sup>28</sup> The author provides historical examples of Buddhist and Manichaean crosses along with the respective philosophy behind the incorporation of these cross symbols other than Christianity.<sup>29</sup> The church historians' argument, especially for Syriac churches, goes against the historical fact that the cross symbols were also used by Manichaeans and Buddhists. The book also gives examples, along with the principles behind the adoption of these symbols by other religions like the Manichaeans, Buddhists, etc. Though it took 150 years after A.C. Burnell, an archaeologist and Indian civil servant during British rule, suggested that the Pahlavi crosses of south India could be the work of the Manichaean Church,<sup>30</sup> the conclusion is now supported by concrete evidence.

### The Symbolism of Mount Cross: A Semiotic Explanation

To study the Pahlavi crosses of south India, the author first identifies the possible original and oldest among them based on scholars' suggestions with respect to the design, structure, rock-cut style, and inscriptions.<sup>31</sup> Then he follows the different translations from Canara Brahmin to the latest one by Shilanand Hemraj.<sup>32</sup> To understand a dead language like Pahlavi and its peculiarities like logogrammatic nature and ideograms, the writer does a basic study with the help of known Pahlavi scholars.<sup>33</sup> The initial explanations (transliteration and translations), followed by a comparative study by grouping these (14 no.) translations based on the methodology the epigraphist-scholars followed, give the reader a basic idea of the veracity of these claimed translations.<sup>34</sup> The latest translation by Shilanand Hemraj, sponsored by a businessman who belonged to a Syriac Christian sect of Kerala (Knanite), knowingly or unknowingly, comes up with the most logical and probably closest to the facts, which also practically disproves the Church historians' claims.<sup>35</sup> Most of the people who know the translations of Pahlavi crosses were not aware of the one brought out recently by this linguist and epigraphic-paleographic researcher (of Allahabad University) named Shilanand Hemraj. The author states that the methodology and the selection of words of Pahlavi based on the possible purpose of the bas-relief cross inscription indicate its greater

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<sup>28</sup> pp.28-32

<sup>29</sup> pp.225-237

<sup>30</sup> P.75, 292, 300

<sup>31</sup> P.264

<sup>32</sup> P.81

<sup>33</sup> pp.65-72

<sup>34</sup> pp.72-91

<sup>35</sup> P.81

accuracy than the previous translations, which are mostly based on the stories of Syriac Christianity. Thus, Hemraj's translation broadened the set of contenders responsible for the Pahlavi crosses of South India.<sup>36</sup>

The next fascinating piece of information the author put forward is the imagery represented by the different elements of the bas-relief structure. The Fleur-de-lis cross, or clover-shaped cross, represents Jesus and his crucifixion, while the supposed flower petals from the base of the cross, promoted by church historians, do not represent the lotus flower but rather the fly wing/spread wing (wings of Ahura Mazda) pattern of the Sasanian symbol of prestige.<sup>37</sup> This has been explained by various archaeological findings from the Sasanian empire and Central Asia. The inverted dove represents Paraclete Mar Mani, the Manichaean prophet, who himself claimed to be offered by the historical Jesus.<sup>38</sup>

If I borrow the words of the author, Manichaeism postulates two ontological principles—Light and Darkness. The universe is divided into the Light realm and the Dark realm, where all souls want to be saved from the clutches of the Land of the Dark, which binds the souls (light particles) of living matter. The land of the dark is populated with creatures like Makaras. The role of the Manichaean god (prophet) Jesus adopted from Christianity is to save the souls of humans through his crucifixion and suffering from the clutches of creatures of dark forces like Makara. The demonic creature of the Land of Darkness of Manichaean cosmology has an artistic and theological representation in Manichaean iconography, while Persian Christianity has nothing to do with the Makara, the demonic creature depicted in religions like Manichaeism, Hinduism, and Buddhism.<sup>39</sup>

The two Makaras depicted on the capitals of the beautifully crafted pillars represent the Dark forces belonging to the Dark realm, one of the main constituents of the two Manichaean ontological principles. However, the Makara has no historical value in Christianity, particularly in Syriac Christianity, and no other cross has ever been attached to the Makara, a symbol of the Dark or a demonic creature present in Manichaean, Buddhist, or Hindu cosmology. Several church historians attempted to portray the Makara as a cultural adaptation of Indian traditions, ignoring the Makara's significance in Indian or Buddhist mythology. These forced comparisons or explanations are intended to portray the Pahlavi crosses as evidence of early Christianity in South India.

However, the author explains the artistic representation of Makara by detailing the concept from different traditions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Manichaeism, etc. Makara is a well-known aquatic animal which can swallow any sea creature and inflict damage to any sea vessel. The Pahlavi cross of Mount Mylapore has been represented along with pearls coming out of two Makara's mouths seated on the capitals of the pillars, forming an arch over the cross and descending dove combination. The pearls coming out of these two Makara's mouths escape through a vent placed in the middle of the arch formation. The author suggests that this depiction of Makara with pearls perfectly symbolises the Manichaean dualism and entrapment of human souls by the Dark forces. The ultimate aim of the Manichaean religion is to help human souls (light particles represented by pearls) be released from the entrapment of dark forces (the dark realm). This artistic imagery can be well explained by Manichaean dualism and the role of Jesus in the Manichaean scheme of salvation. The cross with fly wings represents the Manichaean Jesus, the prime saviour of souls from the clutches of the dark forces such as Makara through his crucifixion and sufferings.

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<sup>36</sup> P.90,91

<sup>37</sup> pp.162-175

<sup>38</sup> pp.267,268

<sup>39</sup> P.270

The descending Dove represents Mar Mani, the prophet of the Manichaeian pantheon who claimed himself as the paraclete of the historical Jesus offered to his followers. The author explains that the depiction of pearls from the mouth of Makaras going up is possibly a representation of emancipating the bounded souls from the clutches of Makara, the representative of the entrapper of human souls, the creature of the land of Dark by the power of Manichaeian Yishu (Jesus), which is symbolised by the Manichaeian cross of Mount St. Thomas. Interestingly, according to the author, this is very much parallel with the imagery represented by the portrait found at a Manichaeian temple at Qocho by A. Lee Van Coq in 1907 CE, which displays a Manichaeian Jesus with a Mesopotamian cross of splayed arms.<sup>40</sup>

The author substantiates his findings further with the eighth-century Chinese Manichaeian Hymn Scroll housed in the British Library (S.2659/or 8210), a hymn in praise of Jesus and calling on him to save the souls from the attack of Makaras to understand the detailed imagery depicted in the Mount Cross of Mylapore.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, readers should remember the respective uncertainty expressed by various translations of Pahlavi inscriptions detailed in chapter 3.<sup>42</sup> I.e., the translation by Shilanand Hemraj, the Manichaeian Hymn Scroll detailing the role of Makaras in Manichaeian Cosmology, the imagery represented by Makaras and Pearls encircling the Mount Cross, the role of Jesus in Manicheism represented by Sasanian spread-wing crosses, the Paraclete Mar Mani represented by a descending dove, etc., are undoubtedly explaining the ownership of the Pahlavi Cross of Mylapore.

Contrary to popular stories promoted by the Church and their historians without any convincing evidence, the book suggests a more convincing proposition based on archaeological data and comparative studies spread across the Afro-Eurasian trade network. Many contradictions and disturbing reports from the excavators and the early travellers' accounts regarding the Mylapore myth, often questioned based on logical deduction, suggest a second look at the origin of Christianity and its claims in South India. The book also meticulously questions the first historical account by an unknown traveller in the Indian Ocean, popularly called Cosmas Indicopleustes, often quoted by the church and secular historians alike in support of ancient Indian Christianity in connection with Persian Christianity. The traveller in his book clearly states that the information (Christianity in South India and Sri Lanka) was collected from his fellow travellers, which questions the accuracy of his witness.<sup>43</sup> Presently, scholars are divided on the ground on whether the traveller visited south India or not, based on the content and purpose of his book. There is a possibility that the Persian Christianity witnessed by the informer of Cosmas Indicopleustes could have come across a Gnostic sect, possibly a Manichaeian church in South India and Sri Lanka. The presence of a Manichaeian colony in Sri Lanka was again reported by another 10th-century traveller named Abu Zaid (916 CE), whose source was another frequent trader (a merchant called Sulaiman in 851 CE) who often visited the area.<sup>44</sup>

Hence, if anyone records all the information-the geographical location of the original Pahlavi crosses (Mylapore, Anuradhapura & Goa); ambiguity of previous Pahlavi translations on these crosses followed by Shilanand Hemraj's latest attempt with more accuracy and methodology; absence of archaeological materials from South India with respect to Syriac Christianity prior to the 14th century; not even a single

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<sup>40</sup> pp 268- 274

<sup>41</sup> P.271

<sup>42</sup> P.72-91

<sup>43</sup> P.24,25;290,291;303,304;320

<sup>44</sup> P.296,297

piece of ancient Splayed armed cross symbols unearthed from South India; not a single piece of Syriac inscription, engraving or manuscripts, headstones prior to the 14th century; the secret conducting of excavations at Mylapore and the opposition from the Latin scholars regarding the two full skeletons unearthed from the St. Thomas Mount; Chronological comparative analysis of Mylapore travellers' reports; the archaeological remains (Mongoloid looking statues) from Mylapore excavation site; etc.-on a spreadsheet , all converge into a single point that the Pahlavi cross and Mylapore myth has nothing to offer as evidence to an ancient Christianity or St. Thomas Martyrdom in South India.

Furthermore, anyone analysing the data collected concerning the origin and development of Syriac/Sasanian/ Persian Christianity over those geographical regions and their syncretic interaction with other contemporary religions gives us a more accurate picture of these Pahlavi crosses presently available in South India. Finally, the artistic symbolization used in the structure of the Mount Cross, suggested by the author with the help of Manichaeon literature and the cultural and religious suppositions of Makara, indicates the presence of Manichaeon colonies in Mylapore and other locations like Goa and Anuradhapura, later used by Portuguese and Syriac Christianity to stretch the antiquity of Indian Christianity to an early period.

Migration of Thomas Cana (Knaithomman) -Is it historically correct?<sup>45</sup>

The book discusses this matter in depth with the help of archaeological (especially ceramic studies mentioned earlier) as well as literary evidence. The author also refers to the opinions of famous Syriac scholars like Dr. Alphonse Mingana to substantiate his proposition.<sup>46</sup> As I mentioned earlier, the Persian direct trade with South India possibly started only after the Sasanian conquest of the Aksumite empire and its vassal states in South Arabia in 575 CE. It is also noted that the ceramic studies on the trade route also give us more clarity on the trade with the Persian empire and old Thamizhakam (South India).<sup>47</sup>

The author has done great work by compiling all the available documents and information related to Knanaya Christians for those who are interested in the subject.<sup>48</sup> Though there were books specifically written by Knanites, mostly mythical stories spread by believers, the author compiled all the data/documents available from the past in a tabular form with chronological order so that future researchers could get all the references for their study.<sup>49</sup> The methodology used to calculate the date of the Knaithommen migration is well explained with such a possibility discussed using archaeological findings and other scientific studies.<sup>50</sup>

## The Manichaeon Church and Indian Christianity

It was a matter of discussion from the times of A.C. Burnell, who suggested a Manichaeon/Gnostic presence in South India, probably responsible for the Pahlavi crosses. This author has opened a long-standing issue again with modern archaeological findings, the latest Manichaeon studies, and Afro-Eurasian trade history. Had there been a Manichaeon presence in South India, there would have been

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<sup>45</sup> Chapter- 9, P.308

<sup>46</sup> p.315

<sup>47</sup> P.110,112

<sup>48</sup> pp 307-328

<sup>49</sup> pp.309-312

<sup>50</sup> p.316

some leftovers available today. Naturally, a question arises—where are they today? This book indeed traces the possible remnants of the ancient Manichean church based on the latest research.<sup>51</sup>

Despite all these tall claims, from apostolic activities to Syrian colonization, the origin of Indian Christianity is still shrouded in mystery. The book, as its name suggests, tries to trace the unknown origin of Indian Christianity based on material evidence rather than blindly resorting to canonical, hagiographic, or gnostic literature. But the author cross-checks the material evidence with the known literature, including travellers' records, to find the historicity of his proposition. Surprisingly, the archaeological evidence found from India and other Afro-Eurasian trade networks has something unique to tell us about the origin of Indian Christianity. Through an extensive search for archaeological evidence and its comparative analysis, cross-checking with trade and political history, and resorting to genetic, ceramic, and other modern studies, compared with the literary evidence, the author meticulously suggests an extremely late origin of Indian Christianity, probably post 10th century CE. This may be very problematic for those who still harp on old stories without any material evidence, but as far as historical studies are concerned, this work is certainly an asset to reckon with. However, there is no significant effect on Indian Christianity as far as religion and way of life are concerned. This study questions only the misguided claims, which are largely a product of colonial intentions to extend the origin of Indian Christianity towards the time of the apostles.

Based on the study, the author postulates that there existed different groups, which can be termed Pre-Proto-Orthodox, that had nothing to do with Nicene Christianity or its beliefs. These groups co-existed with other Gnostic groups like Manichaeans all along the trade network, competing with themselves for the original church of the historical Jesus. Fortunately, or unfortunately, the Edict of Milan in 313 CE changed the future of the religion called Christianity, and the proto-Orthodox group took over as brand holders. The Nestorian merchants who accidentally came into direct trade with South India in the post-9/10th century period might be responsible for converting these gnostic groups or pre-proto-Orthodox groups into their sect of Christianity. Thus, the origin of the Christian religion came into existence in this part of the world.

Indeed, this book is a fascinating read for both curious Christians and non-Christians. If the reader takes a little bit of effort to understand the technical terms and scientific methodology used, it will surely expand one's world of knowledge and understanding of Christianity and its evolution, especially in the eastern part of the world. This work is an excellent example of what modern scientific fields like archaeology, ceramic studies, numismatics, epigraphy, palaeography, codicology, genetics, etc. can do to our longstanding historiography.

**Book: Unmasking the Syriacs: The Hidden Origin of Indian Christianity – An Archaeo-linguistic Approach**

Author: Jeevan Philip

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Available: Amazon, Notion Press, Barnes & Noble, Walmart & many more leading booksellers around the world.

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<sup>51</sup> pp.290-305;307-328