

Syriac Written Heritage in Kerala: First Glances in the Enquiry

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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 VIth 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 17th of February to the 14th 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 accomodation, 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 13th century through the 20th century. Most of them can be described according to three categories:

- Building inscriptions;
- Funerary inscriptions;
- Altars inscriptions.

| | | | |
|---------------------------|----------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| കന്യാസ്ത്രീ | kanyāstri | كِنْيَا سْتْرِي | كِنْيَا سْتْرِي |
| പരുഷ | parusha | پَرُوشَا | پَرُوشَا |
| നടുവ് | naduv | نَادُوف | نَادُوف |
| മോതിരം | mōthiram | مُوتِيرَام | مُوتِيرَام |
| നകരി | nakari | نَاكَارِي | نَاكَارِي |
| മക്കൾ | makkal | مَكَّال | مَكَّال |
| പോതെജ്ഞാനം (ബോധജ്ഞാനം) | pōthejnānam | پُوتِهْجَنْنَام | پُوتِهْجَنْنَام |
| വെള്ളം | vellam | وَلَلَام | وَلَلَام |
| തണുപ്പ് | thanuppe | ثَانُف | ثَانُف |
| പെരുപ്പം | peruppam | پَرُف | پَرُف |
| ആടുമാടുകൾ | ātumātukal | أَتُمَاتُكَل | أَتُمَاتُكَل |
| മാനുഷൻ | mānushen | مَانُشَنْ | مَانُشَنْ |
| പള്ളി | palli | پَلِّي | پَلِّي |
| ഇവണ്ണം | ivannam | إِوَانْنَام | إِوَانْنَام |
| ആർ | āre | أَرِي | أَرِي |
| ആരാകുന്തു (ആരാകുന്നു) | ārākuntu | أَرَاكُونْتُو | أَرَاكُونْتُو |
| ഏവൻ | éven | إِيْفَنْ | إِيْفَنْ |
| ഏവൾ | éval | إِيْفَل | إِيْفَل |
| എങ്ങനെ | engane | إِنْجَانِي | إِنْجَانِي |
| എന്ത് | enthe | إِنْتِي | إِنْتِي |
| എറ്റത്താലെ | éttathāle | إِيْتْتَا لِي | إِيْتْتَا لِي |
| കൊറെ | kore | كُورِي | كُورِي |
| ഏറ്റം | éttam | إِيْتْتَام | إِيْتْتَام |
| അറിവ് | ariv | أَرِيْف | أَرِيْف |
| പ്രത്യക്ഷം | prathyaksham | پَرُതْയാക്ഷَام | پَرُതْയാക്ഷَام |
| താക്കോൽ | thākōl | ثَاكُول | ثَاكُول |
| (ശ)ചന്ദ്രൻ | chantran | چَنْدْرَنْ | چَنْدْرَنْ |
| (ശെ)ചെതൽ | chethel | چَيْتَل | چَيْتَل |
| തമ്പുരാൻ | thampurān | ثَام്പُرَان | ثَام്പُرَان |
| എന്റെ തമ്പുരാൻ | ente thampurān | إِنْتِي ثَام്പُرَان | إِنْتِي ثَام്പُرَان |
| ഇവൻ | iven | إِيْفَنْ | إِيْفَنْ |
| ഒൻ (ഒന്ന്) | onte | أَنْتِي | أَنْتِي |
| രണ്ട് | rante | رَانْتِي | رَانْتِي |
| മൂൻ (മൂന്ന്) | mūnte | مُونْتِي | مُونْتِي |
| നാല് | nāle | نَالِي | نَالِي |
| അഞ്ച് | anche | أَنْچِي | أَنْچِي |
| ആറ് | āre | أَرِي | أَرِي |
| ഏഴ് | ézhe | إِيْزِي | إِيْزِي |
| എട്ട് | ette | إِيْتِي | إِيْتِي |
| ഒമ്പത് | ompathe | أَمْبَاتِي | أَمْبَاتِي |
| പത്ത് | pathe | أَطِي | أَطِي |

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 stela on the southern altar in the qastro and inserted in a modern retable (altar piece). The symmetric one on the northern altar bears only a pahlavi 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 lys 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

¹ Ph. GIGNOUX, "The Pahlavi Inscription on Mount Thomas Cross (South India)", *Solving Riddles and Untying Knots. Biblical, Epigraphic and Semitic Studies in Honor of Jonas C. Greenfield*, Winona Lake (Indiana) 1995, p. 411-422.

| | | | |
|---------------------------|----------------|-----------------|------------------|
| കന്യാസ്ത്രീ | kanyāstri | كِنْيَا سْتْرِي | كِنْيَا سْتْرِي |
| പരുഷ | parusha | پَرُوشَا | پَرُوشَا |
| നടുവ് | naduv | نَدُوب | نَدُوب |
| മോതിരം | mōthiram | مُوتِيرَام | مُوتِيرَام |
| നകരി | nakari | نَاكِرِي | نَاكِرِي |
| മക്കൾ | makkal | مَكَّال | مَكَّال |
| പോതെജ്ഞാനം (ബോധജ്ഞാനം) | pōthejnānam | پُوتِجْنَانَام | پُوتِجْنَانَام |
| വെള്ളം | vellam | وَلَلَام | وَلَلَام |
| തണ്ണൂപ്പ് | thanuppe | ثَانُوب | ثَانُوب |
| പെരുപ്പം | peruppam | پَرُوب | پَرُوب |
| ആടുമാടുകൾ | ātumātukal | أَتُمَاتُكَل | أَتُمَاتُكَل |
| മാനുഷൻ | mānushen | مَانُشَن | مَانُشَن |
| പള്ളി | palli | پَلِّي | پَلِّي |
| ഇവണ്ണം | ivannam | إِوَانْنَام | إِوَانْنَام |
| ആർ | āre | أَر | أَر |
| ആരാകുന്നു (ആരാകുന്നു) | ārākuntu | أَرَاكُونْتُو | أَرَاكُونْتُو |
| ഏവൻ | éven | إِيَوَنْ | إِيَوَنْ |
| ഏവൾ | éval | إِيَوَال | إِيَوَال |
| എങ്ങനെ | engane | إِنِّغَان | إِنِّغَان |
| എന്ത് | enthe | إِنْت | إِنْت |
| എറ്റത്താലെ | éttathāle | إِيَتْتَا ل | إِي. 2. 2. 2. 2. |
| കൊറെ | kore | كُور | كُور |
| ഏറ്റം | éttam | إِي. 2. 2. | إِي. 2. 2. |
| അറിവ് | ariv | أَرِي. 2. | أَرِي. 2. |
| പ്രത്യക്ഷം | prathyaksham | پَرُതْയാ. 2. 2. | پَرُതْയാ. 2. 2. |
| താക്കോൽ | thākōl | ثَا. 2. 2. | ثَا. 2. 2. |
| (ശ)ചന്ദ്രൻ | chantran | چَانْتْرَان | چَانْتْرَان |
| (ശശ)ചെന്തൽ | chetel | چِتَل | چِتَل |
| തമ്പുരാൻ | thampurān | ثَام്പُرَان | ثَام്പُرَان |
| എന്റെ തമ്പുരാൻ | ente thampurān | إِنْتِ. 2. 2. | إِن. 2. 2. |
| ഇവൻ | iven | إِي. 2. | إ. 2. |
| ഒൻ (ഒന്ന്) | onte | أَنْ. 2. | أ. 2. |
| രണ്ട് | rante | رَان. 2. | ر. 2. |
| മൂൻ (മൂന്ന്) | mūnte | مُ. 2. | മ. 2. |
| നാല് | nāle | نَال | ن. 2. |
| അഞ്ച് | anche | أَنْ. 2. | അ. 2. |
| ആറ് | āre | أ. 2. | അ. 2. |
| ഏഴ് | ézhe | إِي. 2. | ഇ. 2. |
| എട്ട് | ette | إِي. 2. | ഇ. 2. |
| ഒമ്പത് | ompathe | أ. 2. 2. | അ. 2. |
| പത്ത് | pathe | أ. 2. | അ. 2. |

Christian Lange (Bamberg)*

The Descent of Mary and the Syriac Commentary on the Diatessaron

Introduction

For many years Mar Aprem has shown an interest in Biblical studies and discussed various Biblical questions and problems. It, therefore, seems appropriate to honour his Grace with a modest contribution to this special volume of the 'Harp' which is dedicated to Mar Aprem – a contribution which deals with a Biblical problem: the descent of Mary and the Syriac Commentary on the Diatessaron, which tradition – fittingly - attributes to Mar Aprem's patron saint, Ephraem the Syrian.

For long the text of this only surviving Commentary¹ on the earliest form of the Syriac New Testament, the harmony of the four Gospels or Diatessaron, was known merely through an Armenian translation.² But in 1957 and around fifteen years ago, new Syriac fragments of the

* The abbreviation of journals and monographs follows the suggestions of Sebastian BROCK, *Syriac Studies. A classified Bibliography (1960-1990)*, Kaslik 1996.

1 There are also fragments of a commentary on the Diatessaron which Mar Aba, a disciple of Ephraem's, might have composed. Cf. J. R. HARRIS, *The Diatessaron of Tatian*, London 1890, 92-94, and G. REININK, "Neue Fragmente zum Diatessaronkommentar des Ephremschüler Aba", *OLP* 11 (1980), 117-133.

2 Text edition by Louis LELOIR, *Saint Éphrem. Commentaire de l'évangile concordant (version arménienne)*, Louvain 1953 (CSCO 137 SA 1).



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