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## The Apocryphal Acts Of Thomas

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## X. India and the Apostolate of St. Thomas

LOURENS P. VAN DEN BOSCH

From olden times the apostle Thomas has occupied an important place in the imagination of Christianity in India, which is reflected in many local traditions in south India. He is regarded as the disciple who preached the gospel on the Indian subcontinent and converted many Christians on the Malabar coast. According to local narratives, he had moved his missionary activities subsequently to the Coromandel coast, where he shed his life as a martyr. He found his last resting place near a city called Mylapore (Madras), where a holy shrine was built, which was rediscovered by the Portuguese at the beginning of the sixteenth century. A church was erected to house the apostle's remains, which was enlarged in 1893 and is nowadays known as the Roman Catholic San Thome Cathedral in Madras. The bones of the saint in the church function as symbolic evidence of the apostolic origin of Christianity in south India and testify as it were to its antiquity. Thus, unto this day Thomas Christians of south India firmly hold on to their conviction that their church is founded directly by the apostle Thomas who brought the gospel to them'. The historical reliability of these traditions is not unproblematic since both local and Portuguese records are not much older than the sixteenth century, and ancient Indian traditions on the apostle Thomas have not yet

<sup>1</sup> A.K. Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India. From the Beginning up to the Middle of the Sixteenth Century I* (Bangalore, 1984) 9-66 at 29ff. Cf. also M. Gielen, *St. Thomas, the Apostle of India* (Kottayam, 1990). See further J.N. Farquhar, 'The Apostle Thomas in South India', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 11 (Manchester, 1927) 20-50, which is based on the local traditions of the Syrian Church in South India and interprets the *ATH* on the basis of these late traditions in a speculative and sometimes phantastic manner.

been found. For this very reason we are thrown back on ancient western sources which might inform us on the apostolate of St. Thomas. The apocryphal *ATH*, probably to be dated to the beginning of the third century and originating from an east Syrian milieu, functions in this context as the most important source to enforce the claim of his missions to India<sup>2</sup>. The *ATH* were, in all probability, written in Syriac, but may have been translated into Greek simultaneously or somewhat later. They relate the journey of the apostle Thomas and his missionary activities in India in a 'romantic' way, like many other hagiographies of the period. According to some scholars, the description has been the result of a rich imagination of the author<sup>3</sup>. This makes the claim of Thomas Christians that their oldest communities were founded by the apostle more problematic. In this context one may ask how one should evaluate the relationship between early Indian Christianity and traditions in the *ATH* and other ancient sources<sup>4</sup>. I shall

H.J.W. Drijvers, 'Thomasakten', in W. Schneemelcher (ed.), *Neutestamentliche Apokryphen II* (Tübingen, 1989<sup>5</sup>) 289-367 at 291-2, transl. R. McL. Wilson, in *NTA II* with an abridged introduction; A.F.J. Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas* (Leiden, 1962) 26, 30-3; see also Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India*, 23f.

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. Drijvers, 'Thomasakten'. 292 with references to secondary literature.

<sup>4</sup> For a recent, but totally unconvincing, attempt to support the historical reliability of Thomas' visit to India see H. Waldmann, *Das Christentum in Indien und der Königsweg der Apostel in Edessa, Indien und Rom* (Tübingen, 1996). The author wrongly states that the dates of Gundophoros and his brother have now been established between 19 and 46 AD (p. 10, 35-42), although the numismatic and other archeological and historical material do not allow such a conclusion. Raschke (see note 13), to which Waldmann refers, mentions the older literature, but does not offer any hard evidence with respect to this matter. But even if Gundophoros would have lived at that time it does not follow that Thomas would have met him personally. Secondly, the supposition seems highly improbable that the tradition of Bartholoniew's visit to India originated in a wrong understanding of Mar-Thoma (via Bar-thoma to Bartho(lo)ma: pp. 13-7). Thirdly, the supposition (pp. 48-9) that Andrapolis should be identified with a city Andronpolis in Egypt is highly speculative and evokes more questions than it offers solutions. Fourthly, Waldmann's supposition (pp. 50-2) that Thomas would have gone twice to India, the second time to South India (after 52 AD), is not substantiated by any ancient source, while the much later Indian traditions are unreliable from a historical point of view. Fifthly, the author incor-

first focus in my paper on the tradition of the apostle Thomas and India according to the *ATH* and discuss the actual information about India. Then I shall deal with some other ancient sources that contain information on missionary activities of the apostles to India and, in line with this, with the existence of Christian communities on the Indian subcontinent. Finally, I shall try to reconstruct the outlines of Christian missions in India in the first four centuries AD and return to the question as to why the *ATH* acquired such an important place in the perception of Indian Christians.

### 1. *India in the Acts of Thomas*

The *ATH* starts with the meeting of the apostles in Jerusalem after Jesus' death and relates that they divide the various regions of the world for their missionary activities." The result is that India falls by lot and division to Judas Thomas, who is also described as the brother of Jesus and the twin brother of the Messiah<sup>6</sup>. Yet Thomas does not feel competent for this task and explicitly refuses to go (1). The next day he is sold by the risen Lord as a slave to a certain Indian merchant Abbanes (Habbân) who searches for a skilled carpenter by order of a king named Gundophoros (Gûdnaphar) (2). The two embark in an unspecified port and sail to a town called Andrapolis in Greek, and Sandarûk in the Syrian text (3). During his stay in the city the apostle gets involved in all kinds of meetings and festivities and testifies to his faith amidst a partly hostile assembly which

rectly suggests that names as Mazdai, Mygdonia, Tertia, etc. might be conceived as Greek or Latin translations of Indian names originating in south India (Mylapure); they all seem to refer to Parthian regions. Sixthly, the author fails to deal adequately with the genre of the text, its audience and its intentions. Seventhly, the author does not seem to know the important contributions by A. Dihle on India in antiquity (see note 10, 12, etc.) and by others (see various notes). In other words, facts and fictions are mixed up in this phantastic book, which pretends to be highly scientific.

<sup>5</sup> Klijn, *Acts of Thomas*, 157f. Cf. also E. Junod, 'Origine, Eusèbe et la tradition sur la répartition des champs de mission des apôtres', in F. Bovon *et al.*, *Les Actes apocryphes des apôtres* (Paris. 1981) 233-48.

<sup>6</sup> Klijn, *Acts of Thomas*, 192 with references to *ATH*. 11, 31 (Greek version) and 39: Drijvers, 'Thomasakten', 291.

is surprised by his wonderful powers. The local king invites Thomas to apply his powers for the well-being of his only daughter who will be married. The apostle's prayer leads to the appearance of the risen Lord Jesus who teaches both bride and bridegroom to preserve themselves from filthy intercourse, a deed of corruption. The bride is impressed and testifies in front of her father to the meeting with her true heavenly Husband who will give her later the taste of life eternal. The king is enraged and instructs to search for Thomas, but the apostle has left the town and has entered the realm of India. There he is commissioned by king Gundaphoros to build a palace, but uses the money he receives for the propagation of the gospel. When the king invites him to account for his behaviour, he defends himself by saying that he has built a heavenly palace. As a consequence of this, he is accused of sorcery and thrown in jail, but is freed after the intercession of the brother of the king, a certain Gad, who dies but is resurrected to life and testifies to the heavenly palace which he has seen in the hereafter (22-24). The king is baptised and preaches the Christian faith throughout the country<sup>7</sup>.

According to the next part of the story, Judas Thomas passes during his missionary tour throughout India (62) on to another country with a king called Mysdaios (Mazdai) (87) and makes many converts, even among the royal family. In spite of this, he is imprisoned because he is suspected of sorcery and bewitchment of people. The martyrdom in the concluding section of the *ATh* relates how the apostle Thomas is stabbed to death outside the town at the top of a hill where he is also buried (159-69). The final chapter reports that Mysdaios decides to exhume the bones of Thomas in order to exorcise a devil who tortures one of his sons, but he does not find the remains as they have been transported secretly to the West (170). Yet, the king is converted and the son is healed.

As can be seen from this outline, the concrete information about India in the *ATh* is extremely poor<sup>8</sup>. Toponyms are almost lacking,

<sup>7</sup> Cf. also L. Leloir, 'Le baptême du Roi Gundaphor', *Le Muséon* 100 (1987) 225-35 with an analysis of the Armenian traditions about the baptism of King Gundaphoros.

<sup>8</sup> For a description of the boundaries of India in the works of Roman geographers of the Imperial period and the changes in the perception of Christian authors, see H. Gregor, *Das Indienbild des Abendlandes (his zum Ende des 13. Jahrhunderts)* (Vienna, 1964) 11-5.

and material descriptions of everyday life with references to climate, flora and fauna are as good as absent, while the records of concrete persons are concealed in a legendary halo. The references to India are vague and do not convey the impression that the author is well acquainted with its location and with the situation at the spot. India functions as an imaginary landscape in which the acts of the apostle are sketched, but it remains unclear how this imaginary landscape relates to the reality of India as it was known in various circles at that time<sup>9</sup>. Yet many attempts have been made to identify the kings in the *ATH* and to situate at least the few mentioned places in order to reconstruct the beginnings of Christianity in this subcontinent. In this section I shall first deal with the name of the port of disembarkment, Sandariik, and discuss whether the names of the kings offer us any clues to situate the story of the apostle in space and time.

As is mentioned before, Thomas embarks at an unspecified place - Jerusalem seems to be suggested, but this is impossible - and sails by boat to a place called Sandariik, c.q. Andrapolis in the Greek version. Some Greek manuscripts of the *ATH* relate that the name Andrapolis is not the correct name and add the toponym ENADROX, probably a slight corruption of the Syrian Sandarûk, as Albrecht Dihle has shown<sup>10</sup>. The addition of the term *polis* to the incomplete Greek form Andra may have led to a further corruption of the Syrian name. Ernst Herzfeld has suggested to regard the Syrian expression Sandarûk as an imitation of the Persian name Sind(a)rûd, i.e. Indus river". If this is correct, the port of Thomas' disembarkment has to

<sup>9</sup> For the place of imagination in the description of India by Greek travellers see F. Javier Gómez Espeloso, 'L'Inde dans les récits grecs de voyage', in J.C. Carrière *et al.* (eds). *Inde, Grèce ancienne. Regards croisés æi anthropologie de l'espace* (Paris, 1995) 21-37 at 23-4; *ibidem*, C. Jacob, 'L'Inde imaginaire des géographes alexandrins'. 61-80 at 72ff.

<sup>10</sup> A. Dihle, 'Neues zur Thomas-Tradition' (1963), in his *Antike und Orient* (Heidelberg, 1984) 66 note 22.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Dihle, 'Neues zur Thomas-Tradition', 66 note 24 with a reference to also J. Duchesne Guillemin, *La religion de l'Iran ancien* (Paris, 1962) 242, who in turn refers to E. Herzfeld, *Archeological History of Iran* (London, 1935) 62: 'the apostle landed in India, the kingdom of Gundophar, at the port Sandrôkh, a slight clerical error for Sindrôdh, the "river Sindh", hence modern Karachi. old Daibul'.

be located somewhere near the mouth of the river Indus in the Sindh, although he does not specify the name of the port.

The above mentioned hypothesis gains probability in the light of the sea-routes then existing between the Persian Gulf and the region of Sindh, which gradually developed since the fourth century BC<sup>12</sup>. It was by far the most convenient trading route between the Mesopotamian region with the port of Charax Spasinu at the mouth of the Tigris and the region of the Sindh in northwest India". The sea route was well-known since the days of Alexander the Great who collected his army in 325 BC at the mouth of the Indus and sailed back with a part of his army to a port near the Euphrates. This enabled merchants to transport more goods through the regions of Parthia and Bactria (Afghanistan) in a shorter time than the often dangerous roads by land. After the discovery of the regularities underlying the monsoon winds in the first century BC new trading routes came into existence between the red Sea region and various ports along the coast of India, *inter alia*, with a port called Barbarikon at the mouth of the river Sindh.<sup>14</sup>

After the decline of the Mauryan empire in north India at the beginning of the second century BC the Greeks of Bactria invaded the northwestern parts of India (the Punjab and Sindh). In the course of time they acquired the control of the coastal regions as becomes clear from the existence of two Greek cities called Demetrias-Patala and Theophila near the mouth of the Indus, which functioned as important ports in the trade between India and the West'. The

<sup>12</sup> Dihle, *Antike und Orient*, 109-18 ('Der Seeweg nach Indien' [1974]).

<sup>13</sup> W.W. Tam, *The Greeks in Bactria and India* (Cambridge, 1951<sup>2</sup>) 53; M.G. Raschke, 'New Studies in Roman Commerce with the East', ANRW II.9.2 (Berlin, 1978) 604-1361 at 643. Charax Spasinu was a trading port with a motley population of many races and languages. In earlier texts the city is also called Antioch or Alexandria. See further Gregor. *Indienbild*, 20-1 and 86 with references to the *Commonitorium Palladii* by bishop Palladius from Helenopolis of Bithynia (about AD 400) with a description of the most important trade routes to and in India in the fourth century AD.

<sup>14</sup> L. Casson, *Tlie Periplus Maris Erythraei. Text with Introduction, Translation and Commentary* (Princeton, 1989) 11-44, 188ff and appendix III, 283-91.

<sup>15</sup> Tam, *Tlie Greeks in Bactria and India*, 171, 356-7, 362, 368, 371-3; Raschke, 'New Studies in Roman Commerce with the East', 657 and 663.

increase of trade by sea between these two regions in the first century AD thus seems to have created a more international atmosphere in these ports where people with various cultural backgrounds met.<sup>16</sup> If this is correct, the author of the *ATH* may have referred to an unspecified port near the mouth of the Indus river. He evokes its multicultural character by referring to a Hebrew woman who plays the flute (5). When the rather cryptic name Sandarûk as designation for the Indus river was no longer understandable, it was replaced in the Greek text by the more conceivable name Andrapolis, 'city of people'. The later added gloss, 'royal city', explains the town as a royal residence as is evident from the story."

In this context mention should also be made of a different theory which identifies the name Sandarûk with the trading city Hatra in the desert between the Tigris and the Euphrates.<sup>18</sup> The full name of this town would have run Hatre de Sanatrûk. The last part of the name, thus it is suggested, refers to a king of Parthian origin who founded the city in the second century AD. Yet it remains then unclear why the author of the *ATH* would have used this name Sandariik in stead of its common name Hatra and why the translators of the text did not use the common and well-known Greek name Atrai in order to explain which city was intended instead of appealing to the vague expression Andrapolis. Moreover, this interpretation is at odds with the story of the *ATH*, which suggests that Thomas was sailing directly to a port in India and disembarked in the city of Sandarûk (2-4).

Cf. also Casson, *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, 16, 75 with the commentary at 188f). The author of the *Periplus* (middle of the first century AD) who was well-acquainted with the trade between Egypt, the Red Sea region and India, mentions the city of Barbarikon (*Periplus* 39: 13.10-12) at the mouth of the river and Minnagara (*Periplus* 38: 13.3-4) as the former Skythian capital of the region. For the trade see now also F. de Romanis and A. Tchernia (eds), *Early Mediterranean Contacts with India* (New Delhi, 1997), to be read with the review by C.R. Whittaker. *J. Rom. Arch.* 13 (2000) 691f.

<sup>16</sup> For the stark increase in trade between India and the Red Sea region see Casson, *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, 21ff.

<sup>17</sup> Farquhar, 'The Apostle Thomas in North India', incorrectly suggests that the capital of Gundophoros, Taxila, would have been meant on account of the qualification 'royal city'.

<sup>18</sup> G. Huxley, 'Geography in the *Acts of Thomas*', *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 24 (1983) 71-80 at 72f.



A double transfer is not likely, since the text does not offer any clue for this hypothesis.

The name Gundophoros (Gûdnaphar) which is mentioned several times to designate the Indian king at whose court the apostle stayed (e.g. 2; 17) is not unknown to historians from other sources. It is equated with the name Gondophernes which occurs on ancient Indian coins and on the inscriptions from Takht-Bah in the district of Peshawar (Pakistan)<sup>19</sup>, which are nowadays stored in the museum of Lahore. The name is of Parthian origin and may have corresponded to the Persian Vindipharnah, i.e. 'winner of victory'". On coins, Gondophernes is sometimes also denoted by the name Orthagna, a corruption of the Sanskrit expression Verethraghna, 'remover of obstructions'". The Nike figure on his coins may be regarded as an iconographic symbol expressive of this qualification. Gondophernes is described by historians of the region as an Indo-Parthian king, who started his career as a governor (*suren*) of Arachosia, presently situated in modern south Afghanistan. He conquered the central part of the Shaka kingdom, which roughly coincided with parts of the Punjab and Sindh, while the Saurashtra region and the region around Mathura remained outside his control". Thus, he became one of the most powerful kings in the northwestern parts of India at the time. He appealed to the Western imagination which preserved his name as one of the three kings in the Christmas story, though in a mutated form, namely as Gathaspar or Casper<sup>23</sup>. After his death the Indo-Parthian kingdom rapidly declined and became incorporated in new political and geographical configurations. In the first century AD Indo-Parthians, Shakas, c.q. Scythians, and the remnants of the Indo-Greeks

<sup>19</sup> D.C. Sircar, *Indian Epigraphy* (New Delhi, 1965), 245.

<sup>20</sup> Klijn, *Acts of Thomas*, 160 with a reference to F. Justi, *Iranisches Namenbuch* (Marburg, 1895) 368f. See also J. Filiozat, 'La Valeur des Connaissances Gréco-Romaines sur l'Inde', *Journal des Savants* 1981, 97-135 at 133 note 83.

<sup>21</sup> For the numismatic evidence and the dating of various foreign kings between the Bactrian period and period of the Kushanas see now O. Boppearachchi, *Ancient Indian Coins II* (Tumhout, 1998), 177-273 at pp. 219-23 (with a survey of recent literature).

<sup>22</sup> Tam, *Greeks in Bactria and India*, 341, 344-5, 346-7, 352-4.

<sup>23</sup> Herzfeld, *Archeological History of Iran*, 63-6.

frequently fought each other, while yet another wave of invaders from Central Asia made their entrance, the Kushanas<sup>24</sup>.

The complex situation in northwest India between the first century BC and AD makes it very difficult to date its various kings. Various attempts have been made, but none of them gained general assent. Recent studies suggest to place the reign of Gondophernes between 20 and 46 AD, although some scholars argued to date him earlier, somewhere between 30 and 10 BC<sup>25</sup>. The first hypothesis does not exclude the possibility that Thomas visited the kingdom of Gondophernes, but the second one implicitly suggests that the name of this king only functioned as a means to provide the story in the *ATh* with a kind of authenticity by referring to an historical well-known personage. In any case, also the later dating of king Gondophernes does not furnish us with sufficient historical proof that Thomas actually went to India and met him<sup>26</sup>.

It has been argued that the record of a certain Gad (21), a brother of King Gundophoros, might strengthen the argument of historical reliability, if he could be traced in the numismatic material<sup>27</sup>. In this context Gad is equated with a certain Gudana, a name which appears on some Indo-Parthian coins, while on the reverse the name Orthagna

<sup>24</sup> H. Kulke and D. Rotermond, *A History of India* (London, 1986) 75-83. See also M.A.R. Colledge, *The Parthian Period* (Leiden, 1986) 1-4.

<sup>25</sup> For a discussion of the chronology of the Indo-Parthian kings see D. Mac Dowell, 'The Dynasty of the later Indo-Parthians', *Numismatic Chronicle* (1965) 137-148; A. Bivar, *Cambridge History of Iran III* (Cambridge, 1983) 197; G. Fussman, 'Chroniques et Etudes bibliographiques: Chroniques des Etudes Kouchanes (1978-1987)', *Journal Asiatique* 275 (1987), 333-57 at 338: Bopearachchi. *Ancient Indian Coins II*, 208-223. For the older (controversial) view suggesting a dating somewhere between 30 and 10 B.C. see J.E. van Lohuizen-de Leeuw, *The Scythian Period. An Approach to the History, Art, Epigraphy and Paleography of North India from the 1st Century B.C. to the 3rd century A.D.* (Leiden, 1949), at pp. 349-61; cf. J. Festugiere, *Les Actes Apocryphes de Jean et de Thomas* (Genève, 1983), 45f note 1 with critical remarks by J. Filiozat on Van Lohuizen's proposal.

<sup>26</sup> Klijn, *Acts of Thomas*, 27; Huxley, 'Geography in the Acts of Thomas',

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<sup>27</sup> A Vath, *Der hl. Thomas, der Apostel Indiens, eine Untersuchung über den historischen Gehalt der Thomas-Legende* (Aachen, 1925) 29, 77; Gießen, *St. Thomas*, 127.

is mentioned. Thus, Gad is closely associated with Gondophemes by the Gudana-Orthagna coins and it is even suggested that he might have reigned after the death of Gondophemes. Their common title Orthagna, 'remover of resistance', might then be interpreted as an indication of their close relationship<sup>28</sup>. Be this as it may, also another and more likely interpretation has been offered, which proposes to regard the expression Gudana on the Indo-Parthian coins as an adjective derived from Guda, just as Kushana is derived from Kusha. Gudana is then regarded as a pedigree-indication of Gondophernes, in the style of Kushana<sup>29</sup>. If this is correct, the coins with Gudana on the one side and the title Orthagna on the other one can not refer to two persons, c.q. the king and a close relation (brother or brother-in-law), but to only one person, namely king Gondophernes, who in the last years of his reign introduced this kind of minting. This view seems to be corroborated by the fact that not Gudana (Gad) was the successor of Gondophernes, but most likely a certain Pakores. Nevertheless, the whole reconstruction remains doubtful due to the lack of substantial evidence<sup>30</sup>.

This leads us to the question as to how to evaluate the historical references in the *ATH*. The answer, in as far as Gad is concerned, seems to point to an invention, which may have been based on a

<sup>28</sup> See also E. Herzfeld. *Sâkastân = Archäologische Mitteilungen aus Iran* 4 (1931-2) 79-80.

<sup>29</sup> Van Lohuizen-de Leeuw, *Scythian Period*, 357 with references to the literature by S. Konow, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, XLVI and J.F. Fleet, 'St. Thomas and Gondophemes', *J. Royal Asiatic Soc.* 1905, 223-36.

<sup>30</sup> Van Lohuizen-de Leeuw, *Scythian Period*, 359f. enumerates various (older) theories. For the recent numismatic evidence see Boppearachchi, *Ancient Indian Coins*, 219ff and 267-9, who on the basis of this numismatic material distinguishes four or five Indo-Parthian kings, Gondophares, Abdagases, Pakores, Orthagnes and possibly a certain Gondophares II. Yet Abdagases proclaims himself on some coins as the son of the brother of Guduphares. c.q. Gondophares, which seems to suggest that he acknowledges the authority of Gondophares. The Orthagnes coins refer on the reverse to Gudapharasa/Gadanasa or to Gadanasa, thus suggesting that Gondophares belonged to the pedigree of the Gadanases and was further qualified by the title Orthagna, 'remover of obstruction'. Most of these rulers remain highly elusive due to the lack of concrete historical information which goes beyond the numismatic evidence.

wrong interpretation of coins. But also the other references to possibly historical persons in the *ATH* are so elusive that they do not strengthen the hypothesis that Thomas ever visited India. This concerns Thomas' visit to the realm of king Mysdaios (Mazdai) after his departure from the kingdom of Gundaphoros. According to the story, he meets some relations of the king and makes new converts. Indian tradition, as we have mentioned before, situates this realm in south India and locates the martyrdom of the apostle near Mylapore<sup>31</sup>. Yet, a closer inspection of the names of the king and his relations suggests another direction. Names as Charisios (Kharish), Mysdaios (Mazdai) (89), and Mygdonia (82, 89, etc.) do not seem to point to south India at all, but may at best refer to the northwestern part of India with its Greek, Parthian and Persian influences. The same applies for the name of a general called Sifur (Sapor) and also for the name of a son of Mysdaios (Mazdai), a certain Ouzanes or Vazân, which might go back to Persian name Wj'en<sup>32</sup>.

In spite of these indications which point to the Parthian sphere of influence in the northwestern part of India, three Greek manuscripts seem to locate the kingdom of Mysdaios in a different continent and suggest a Himyarite India in south Arabia, across the Red Sea from Aksum<sup>33</sup>. The presence of Indians in this region between the first century BC and AD is well known due to the discovery of new sea routes between the south India and the Red Sea.<sup>34</sup> Yet this location hardly seems probable, because the *ATH* does not suggest that Thomas travelled by ship to the kingdom of Mysdaios. Moreover, it is stated that the bones of the apostle were secretly conveyed to the West. If the tomb of the apostle had been located somewhere in south Arabia, it would have been more natural to suppose that the remains of the apostle had been transported to the eastern or northeastern

<sup>31</sup> Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India*, 25f.

<sup>32</sup> Klijn, *Acts of Thomas*, 264, 267-8, 272, 290. Cf. also Huxley, 'Geography', 77-78 with note 39. Herzfeld, *Archeological History of Iran*, 64 suggests that these names might refer to historical persons who became the heroes of the love romance of the *Shâhnâme*. See also Farquhar, 'The Apostle Thomas in South India', 33.

<sup>33</sup> Huxley, 'Geography', 76f.

<sup>34</sup> Casson, *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, 12ff; R. Salomon, 'Epigraphic remains of Indian traders in Egypt'. *JAOS* 111 (1991) 731-6.

direction, because the tomb of the apostle was also situated in Edessa, at least according to ancient traditions from the fourth century AD<sup>35</sup>. For this reason it seems probable that the author of the *Ath* imagined the kingdom of Mysdaios somewhere in the neighbourhood of the kingdom of Gundophoros, which explains why the bones of the apostle were carried westwards. The Greek manuscripts may offer therefore a reinterpretation of the place of the martyrdom and testify to a further elaboration, convenient to certain Christians in south Arabia and Ethiopia, who had connections with the gnostic milieu of Syrian Christianity<sup>36</sup>.

In a nutshell: the data in the *Ath* which might provide us with some historical and geographical information about Thomas' journey are so elusive that there is insufficient evidence to corroborate the hypothesis that the apostle actually went to India. The record of the name Gundophoros and the description of Thomas' sea journey to his kingdom show at best that the author of the *Ath* had a vague general knowledge of India and its former kings. The question may now arise as to how he had acquired this knowledge, and the answer should at least allow for the fact that the author to all probability lived in Edessa or its surroundings. For this very reason it has been suggested that he may have derived his knowledge about north India from local Edessan traditions in the first two centuries AD. These traditions may have been rooted in brisk trade connections between the two regions and subsequent cultural relations. Porphyry relates that the Edessan philosopher Bardesanes wrote a book on India and its customs<sup>37</sup>.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. also N. Tajadod, *Les porteurs de lumière. Péripiéties de l'église chrétienne de Perse III<sup>e</sup> - VII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris, 1993). 158f. He suggests that a pupil of Bardesanes edited the *Ath* and dates the transport of the reliques of Thomas to Edessa in the year 232 AD. From this time onwards, Edessa would have been the centre of the cult of St. Thomas. Yet this author does not mention the sources on which he bases himself, but it might be supposed that he refers to later (Latin) manuscripts which mention Edessa as the place of the tomb; see K. Zelser (ed.), *Die alten Lateinischen Thomasakten* (Texte und Untersuchungen, vol. 122) (Berlin 1977) 41 and 76; *idem*, p. VI with a reference to Gregory of Tours.

<sup>36</sup> Huxley, 'Geography', 78f.

<sup>37</sup> See H.J.W. Drijvers, 'Hatra, Palmyra und Edessa. Die Städte der syrisch-mesopotamischen Wiiste in politischer, kultur-historischer und religionsgeschichtlicher Bedeutung'. *ANRW* 11.8 (Berlin, 1978) 799-906 at 894; *idem*, 'Thomasakten', 292 with reference to Porphyry, *FGrHist* 719 F 1.

The author of *ATH* may therefore have used existing local knowledge of India in order to construct his legendary frame story of Thomas' journey to India. Yet facts and fictions were mixed in order to realise the aims the author probably had in mind, namely the foundation of the claim that not only Parthia but also India was the exclusive domain of Thomas' missionary activities. He thus suggested that with his missions to India the apostle Thomas had preached his gospel unto the ends of the earth<sup>38</sup>.

## 2. *Ancient traditions on Christianity in India*

The view propounded in the *ATH* that Thomas went to India to preach the gospel seems to be an innovation with respect to older traditions. Pre-Nicaean authors such as, for instance, Clement of Alexandria (\*-215) and Origen (185-254) link the apostolate of Thomas with Parthia<sup>39</sup>. Origen relates: 'When the holy apostles and disciples of our Saviour were scattered over the world, Thomas, so the tradition has it, obtained as his portion Parthia'<sup>40</sup>. Yet it is not clear whether these two authors meant to say that Thomas traversed the whole of Parthia including the northwestern region of India. They only refer to a tradition which suggests a connection of Thomas with Parthia. This tradition may have been based on the close bonds of the apostle with Edessa which formed a part of the Parthian empire during the first two centuries AD and was sometimes described as 'the daughter of Parthia'<sup>41</sup>.

Eusebius relates that Thomas was divinely moved to send Thaddeus as an herald and evangelist of the teachings about Christ to

<sup>38</sup> For a general view on the imagination of the ends of the earth see also J.S. Romm, *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought. Geography, Exploration and Fiction* (Princeton, 1992).

<sup>39</sup> See Klijn, *Acts of Thomas*, 27 and 158 with reference to the relevant places. Cf. A. Mignana, 'The early spread of Christianity in India', *Bulletin of the John Ryland Library X* (1926), 435-514, particularly at 443-447.

<sup>40</sup> Eusebius, *HE* 3.1.1: 'Thomas obtained Parthia by lot'. Cf. also Junod, 'Origine, Eusèbe et la tradition sur la répartition des champs de mission des apôtres', 233-48; Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India*, 27.

<sup>41</sup> Klijn, *Acts of Thomas*, 30-3; Drijvers, 'Thomasakten', 290 with a reference to his 'Hatra, Palmyra und Edessa', 885ff.

Edessa<sup>42</sup>, and the Syrian *Doctrina Addai* reports a similar tradition that Thomas sent the apostle Addai to Edessa<sup>43</sup>. These two statements seem to suggest that Thomas did not visit Edessa, but limited himself to the organisation of the mission to Parthia, which had been assigned to him by lot<sup>44</sup>. Also the other ancient sources preceding the *ATH* do not inform us about his missionary journeys. They only relate that the apostle was forced by lot to take his missionary responsibility. The author of the *ATH* undoubtedly referred to this notion of compulsion when he stated that India fell by lot and division to Judas Thomas. In other words, it seems that, according to tradition, Thomas did not like to travel to remote countries. The *ATH* mentions two main reasons for this reluctance, namely bodily weakness and linguistic problems that complicated the communication. Yet the text makes it also clear that India was assigned to Thomas as his missionary field, and not to any of the other apostles. Thus, it suggests India as the exclusive domain of Judas Thomas and further reinforced this claim by the miraculous intervention of the risen Lord.

Although the most ancient traditions do not describe Thomas as an enthusiastic missionary and traveller, the miraculous story of his sale by the risen Lord to the Indian merchant Habbanes (Abbnh) leads him directly from Jerusalem to India where he died<sup>45</sup>. In spite of this, the apostle became clearly connected with Edessa, and two sources from the fourth century testify to this fact. Ephraem Syrus (306-70) relates that the apostle's relics were venerated in a shrine in Edessa. In addition to this, we have the testimony by the female pilgrim Egeria, who visited the city in AD 384 (*Peregrinatio Egeriae*

<sup>42</sup> Eusebius, *HE* 1.13.4. Cf. also J.W. Mc Crindle. *Christian Topography of Cosmas, an Egyptian Monk* (London 1897, repr. New York, 1970) 72 referring to Cosmas Indicopleustes 2.147: 'For it was in the Roman dominions that the preaching of Christianity first became current in the days of the Apostles, and it was immediately afterwards extended to Persia by the apostle Thaddaeus'.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Drijvers, 'Thomasakten', 292.

<sup>44</sup> See note 40.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Th. Schermann, *Propheten und apostellegenden* (Texte und Untersuchungen 31.3) (Leipzig, 1907), 274: 'Von einem Märtyrertode des Thomas weiss die älteste Überlieferung noch nichts. Der Gnostiker Herakleon lässt ihn einen natürlichen Todes gestorben sein', with a reference to Clement, *Alex. Strom.* IV 9, 71 and 73 (ed. Stahlin 1906) 280f.

17)<sup>46</sup>. The tradition of the tomb of the apostle in Edessa may have older roots in the third century AD and be at the basis of the report in the *ATH* that the apostle's bones were secretly removed from the kingdom of Mysdaios in India and transported to the West (170). With this transport from the periphery to the centre the author may have indirectly indicated that Christians in Mesopotamia, and particularly in Edessa, at that time regarded their region, c.q. their city, as the centre of Thomas' apostolate. Thus, Edessan Christianity propagated itself as the centre from where the gospel of Thomas was preached unto the most remote parts of the Parthian Empire, namely the northwestern regions of India. India was then seen as belonging to the outer sphere of influence of Edessan Christianity due to the fact that small communities of Christians came into existence in the northern and western regions of India on account of trade and commerce between Mesopotamia and Indian cities along the sea coast of the Sindh.

In this context the question may arise as to why the author of the *ATH* describes the apostle's journey directly from Jerusalem to India, and not from Jerusalem to Edessa, and from there to India, for this would have stressed the position of Edessa. As we have seen, the *ATH* suggests that from the very beginning of the missions in Jerusalem India be allotted to St. Thomas. Its author thus seems to accentuate the primacy and the authority of Judas Thomas over India. He makes it implicitly clear that missionary traditions which might connect other apostles with India had at least to acknowledge the claim of Thomas and his inheritors.

The stressing of this opinion makes sense if we consider the ancient testimonies that mention the apostolate of Bartholomew to India. Eusebius of Caesarea mentions that Pantaenus from Alexandria, the teacher of Clement<sup>47</sup>, went as far as India to proclaim the gospel of Christ to the heathens in the East. In this context he relates: 'It is said that he [Pantaenus] went to the Indians and the tradition is that he found that among some of those there who had known Christ the gospel according to Matthew had preceded his coming; for Bartholomew, one of the apostles, had preached to them and left

<sup>46</sup> See also H.J.W. Drijvers, 'Abgar Legend', in NTA I, 492f.

<sup>47</sup> Eusebius, HE 6.6.1. Cf. also Dihle, 'Neues zur Thomas-Tradition', 68-71.



them the writings of Matthew in Hebrew letters'''. This tradition may go back to the second half of the second century AD and suggests connections between Alexandria and India which are confirmed by some other reports<sup>48</sup>.

Yet it remains unclear where exactly we should locate the India of this tradition<sup>50</sup>. According to some authorities, the India of Bartholomew mentioned by Eusebius should be situated in Ethiopia or Arabia Felix and referred to Indian traders who lived along the coast of the Red Sea and on the island Socotra in the first two centuries<sup>51</sup>. They had settled in this region after the discovery of the monsoon by Hippalos (second half of the first century BC) had enabled them to make the long sea journey. Their presence is confirmed by other sources, for instance, in Berenice at the Red Sea, a main port for the trade with India''. But it should also be noted that Egyptian ships sailed along the southern monsoon route to south India during the first two centuries AD<sup>51</sup>. Many Graeco-Egyptian coins of the imperial period have been found on the Malabar and Coromandel coasts and attest to the presence of Graeco-Egyptian settlements of traders<sup>51</sup>. It has been suggested that these contacts diminished at the beginning of the third century AD, after the Roman

<sup>48</sup> Eusebius, *HE* 5.10.1-4, transl. K. Lake (Loeb).

<sup>49</sup> See also Dihle, 'Neues zur Thomas-Tradition'. 68-71, 74 with note 72 referring to Philostorgios 18.15f; Mundadan. *History of Christianity in India*, 65 note 92.

<sup>50</sup> See also Gregor, *Indienbild*, 86-7 with note 153 who refers to some later sources.

<sup>51</sup> Mundadan. *History of Christianity in India*, 65; cf. Dihle. 'Neues zur Thomas-Tradition'. 68.

<sup>52</sup> Casson, *The Periplus Maris Erythraei*, 20f. For the epigraphical material see R. Salomon, 'Epigraphic remains of Indian traders in Egypt', *JAOS* 111 (1991), 731-6.

<sup>53</sup> Dihle, 'Der Seeweg nach Indien', and 'Die entdeckungs-geschichtlichen Voraussetzungen des Indienhandels der Römischen Kaiserzeit', in *Antike und Orient*, 109-18 and 118-152, at 119-123 (with a description of the monsoon-passage); Gregor, *Indienbild*, 21 and Klijn, *Acts of Thomas*. 158.

<sup>54</sup> Dihle, 'Neues zur Thomas-Tradition', 69 note 38 and 72 note 54; idem. 'Indienhandel der römischen Kaiserzeit'. 141f. Cf. also M. Wheeler, *Rome beyond the Imperial Frontiers* (London, 1954). 170ff with a description of the archeological remains of Arikamedu (near Pondicherry), a trade colony from the Roman period between the second century BC unto the second century AD. For a recent study on South India, see R.Krishnamurti, *Late*

Empire lost control over the Red Sea region, and instability increased<sup>55</sup>. Anyhow, it does not seem very plausible to situate India somewhere in Ethiopia or Arabia Felix, when Indian and Western traders in this region could easily point to a country at the other side of the ocean. Moreover, Eusebius did not have Ethiopia in mind, because he clearly spoke about the heathens in the east, thus suggesting a different direction and certainly not the south. For these very reasons, it seems more probable to me to situate the India in Eusebius' report on Pantaenus and Bartholemew on the Indian subcontinent itself.<sup>56</sup>

The presence of Graeco-Egyptian settlements, as attested by coins and other artefacts, along the west and south coast of India and their very absence along the northern coast seems to indicate that in particular connections existed between Alexandria, the Red Sea and south India. Dihle has suggested that Christians from Alexandria and

*Roman Copper Coins from South India: Karur and Madurai* (Madras, 1994) 3f.

<sup>55</sup> Dihle, 'Neues zur Thomas-Tradition', 71-3 with note 56; Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India*, 69.

<sup>56</sup> Dihle, 'Neues zur Thomas-Tradition', 68f; Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India*, 65f with references to G.M. Moraes, *A History of Christianity in India AD 52-1542* (Bombay, 1964) 35-45 and A.C. Perumalil, *The Apostles in India* (Patna, 1971). However, one still might argue that Eusebius incorrectly associated Pantaenus' trip (to the Indians) with the Indian subcontinent, while Pantaenus actually referred to the Indians in Ethiopia and Arabia Felix when he was writing about Bartholomew's mission to the Indians. According to Eusebius, some Indians knew Christ and had been acquainted with the gospel according to Matthew in Hebrew letters, which had been brought to them by Bartholomew. Later traditions seem to confirm a connection between Bartholomew and Egypt, so that it is not impossible that Bartholomew and his disciples expanded their missionary activities in Egypt (and abroad) along the trading routes. If these observations are correct, the small Christian communities as far as Arabia Felix and Ethiopia might have come into existence in the second century AD. Moreover, it is not impossible that Indian traders there might have been converted, as Pantaenus suggests. In line with this, it does not seem implausible to me that these Christians may have transported their religion in the course of time to India along these sea routes, where they spread it in small pockets along the coast of Kerala and Malabar, but additional evidence of Indian Christians communities along the Red Sea (and also in India) during this early period is for the time being virtually absent.

Egypt regularly travelled during the first two centuries AD to Ethiopia and Arabia Felix, and from there to south India where they settled in seaports. They may have formed small Christian communities with customs and beliefs which somewhat differed from their Christian brothers and sisters originating from the Mesopotamian region.?’

The tradition of the missionary activities of Bartholomew in India also occurs in the *Passio Bar-rolomaei* of the fourth/fifth century. This highly legendary text presupposes the same geographical frame of India as is sketched above and may indicate that the Bartholomew tradition originates from Graeco-Roman Egypt of the High imperial period<sup>58</sup>. In spite of this, we do not hear about the existence of Christian communities in India that appealed to Bartholomew as their founder. The Alexandrian merchant and traveller Cosmas Indicopleustes who visited India in the first half of the sixth century AD does not tell us anything about Bartholomew traditions in his *Christian Topography*<sup>59</sup>. He found churches with Christians in Taprobane (Ceylon) with a clergy and a body of believers, and also along the coast of Male (the Malabar Coast) and in another place called Calliana, which had a bishop appointed from Persia<sup>60</sup>. The same Cosmas relates elsewhere that a church of Persian Christians existed in one of the trading ports of Ceylon with a presbyter appointed from Persia and a deacon, which was in the possession of a complete ecclesiastical ritual. He further describes the Sindhu river as the boundary between Persia and India and also mentions the most notable places of trade in India: Sindhu, Orrotha (Saurashtra), Calliana, Sibor, and the five markets of Male (Malabar) which export pepper<sup>61</sup>. The town Calliana has been identified by some scholars

<sup>57</sup> Dihle, 'Neues zur Thomas-Tradition'. 68ff.

<sup>58</sup> Ibidem, 69-71.

<sup>59</sup> I quote from the new edition by W. Wolska-Conus, *Cosmas Indicopleustes: Topographie Chrétienne*, 3 vols (Paris, 1968-73). See also Mc Crindle, *Christian Topography of Cosmas*, IV-VIII: X-XI; E.O. Winstedt (ed), *The Indian Topography of Cosmas Indicopleustes* (Cambridge, 1909).

<sup>60</sup> Cosmas Indicopleustes 3.65, cf. Mc Crindle, *Christian Topography of Cosmas*, 119.

<sup>61</sup> Cosmas Indicopleustes 11.16, cf. Mc Crindle. *Christian Topography of Cosmas*. 336f.

with the ancient Indian town Kalyan(a) which is situated at the north-eastern end of the Thana creek near present-day Bombay. The town was an ancient port and its name actually means 'happy' or 'felix'. By extension the region and its inhabitants came to be known as India Felix.

The facts mentioned by Cosmas indicate that Christians originating from Persia - the region northwest of the Indus - came to dominate the Christian communities along the west coast of south India and on the island Taprobane. Persian bishops, presbyters and deacons were consecrated and the religious orientation had shifted from Egypt and Alexandria to the region of Parthia, which according to more ancient traditions was connected with Thomas. Be that as it may, the tradition of Bartholomew's mission to south India was not totally lost. According to the seventh-century Pseudo-Sophronius, Bartholomew had preached to the Indians who are called 'Happy'. With these words he seems to have referred to a Greek tradition which related that the apostle went to India Felix.<sup>62</sup> Thus, until early medieval times the tradition of Bartholomew's mission to India remained known in western tradition.

### 3. *A reconstruction of the beginnings of Christianity in India*

It may be clear that a reconstruction of the early history of Christianity in India is a problematic affair due to the paucity of reliable reports in the relevant sources. The *ATh* does not inform us about the real situation of Thomas' mission in India, but describes the apostle's appearance in an imaginative Indian landscape reconstructed with the help of local traditions, known in Edessa and surroundings. Its author did not direct himself to Indians, but to kindred spirits in the region and made the apostle to a mouthpiece of his gnostic teachings. Yet, by connecting Thomas with India, instead of with Parthia, he introduced an innovation in the tradition. By claiming India as the missionary field for Thomas, he implicitly made his readers responsible for a successful follow up of the missions in the region. This suggests at least the presence of some Christian communities in north India at the time that the author wrote his *ATh*.

<sup>62</sup> See Mundadan. *History of Christianity in India*, 66 for the reference to Farquhar, 'The Apostle Thomas in North India'.

In line with this claim, one may view Syrian Christianity as successor to the apostolate of St. Thomas, which implied the pastoral care for Christian communities in India, for whom the brother of Jesus had given his life. Thus, the author of the *ATH* not only focused the attention of his readers on the lofty message of Judas Thomas, but also on an imaginary India for whom they were responsible. In summary: the meeting between Judas Thomas and the various persons mentioned in the *ATH* was a creation of the author, in which he expounded his deep gnostic truths in the imaginary historical landscape of northwest India which he only knew from local traditions.

A reconstruction of Christianity in the Indian subcontinent in the first five centuries AD provides us with the following schematic picture. Small Christian communities may have been founded by missionaries from the Syrian and Mesopotamian region along the north-western coast of India as a consequence of the brisk trading between the Persian Gulf and region of the Sindh. Similar communities were probably founded by Egyptian missionaries in trading towns along the Malabar and Coromandel coast. Dihle has soundly argued that in the course of time the connections between these south Indian communities and Egypt (Alexandria) became more problematic due to the diminishing influence of the Roman Empire in the Red Sea. This led to instability in the region with local conflicts between Arab and Abessinian potentates. As a consequence of this, the commerce along the sea routes between south India and the Red Sea sharply dropped at the beginning of the third century<sup>63</sup>. Thus, the Christian communities in south India became cut off from their mother church in Alexandria and reoriented themselves towards the Mesopotamian and Persian region with its existing traditions of Thomas.

The *ATH* which actually envisioned the northwestern part of India as the imaginary landscape of Thomas' apostolate subsequently became instrumental to a broader missionary goal, in which India was redefined. In the course of time, this India also came to include the regions in south India, where the apostle Bartholomew, according to tradition, once had preached his gospel. In any case, informal knowledge of south India seems to have been virtually absent in Edessa during the second century. With the loss of direct trading

<sup>63</sup> Dihle, 'Neues zur Thomas-Tradition', 71-7.

routes between the Red Sea and south India, other alternatives in the Mesopotamian region became intensified. Thus, the monsoon routes between Charax Spasinu (Basra) at the mouth of the Euphrates and the northern and western ports in the Indian subcontinent became the most busy trade connections of the time<sup>64</sup>. These routes enjoyed the special interest of the Sasanid kings in their endeavour to extend their sphere of influence. The intensive trade between Charax Spasinu and various ports along the coast of north and west India from the beginning of the third century seems to have led to more intensive contacts between the churches in the Mesopotamian and Persian region and Indian Christian communities. Dihle refers in this context to an early medieval Nestorian report of the journey of the metropolitan David of Charax (Basra) in 296/97 to India and suggests that this trip may have led him not only to north India which was already in touch with the Syro-Persian Church, but also to south India in order to include the deserted Christian communities in south and west India into his

In any case, it is obvious that the influence of the Syro-Persian church in west and south India increased in the following centuries as becomes clear from various later reports. The tradition of Bartholomew went into oblivion and was replaced by the missions of Thomas to India, as proclaimed by the *ATH*. This tradition provided Indian Christianity with another direct claim to its apostolic origin and seems to have been an important means in the missionary policy of the Syro-Persian church.

When the Portuguese landed on the Malabar coast in the sixteenth century they found Christians communities in Kerala who had kept the East Syrian traditions of St. Thomas alive in their folk-songs<sup>65</sup>. These folk traditions seem to have older roots, because we also learn from the Venetian traveller Marco Polo (1254-1325) about the 'burial place of Messer St. Thomas, the Apostle'. Marco Polo visited some parts of Ceylon and the Malabar coast during his passage

<sup>64</sup> Cf. also Drijvers, 'Hatra, Palmyra und Edessa', 893ff.

<sup>65</sup> Herzfeld, *Archeological History of Iran*, 103-4; Farquhar, 'The Apostle Thomas in South India', 42-3; Dihle, 'Neues zur Thomas Tradition', 73 with note 63.

<sup>66</sup> Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India*, 29ff; idem, *Sixteenth-Century Traditions of St. Thomas Christians in India* (Bangalore. 1970) 60-7. See also M.N. Pearson, *The Portuguese in India* (Cambridge. 1987) 119.

from China to Italy in 1293, but did not go on pilgrimage to the shrine<sup>67</sup>. His report is rather incoherent and runs as follows: 'The body of St. Thomas lies in the province of Maabar in a little town. There are few inhabitants, and merchants do not visit the place; for there is nothing in the way of merchandise that could be got from it, and it is a very out-of-the-way spot. But it is a great place of pilgrimage both for Christians and Saracens. For I assure you that the Saracens of this country have great faith in him and declare that he was a Saracen and a great prophet and call him *aviarun*, that is to say "holy man"<sup>68</sup>.

It is not exactly clear which region is meant by Maabar, but Marco Polo distinguished it from the Malabar coast<sup>69</sup>. Yet, he gives us a clear hint when he states that the kingdom of Maabar is the same as Chola<sup>70</sup>, thus referring to the kingdom of the Cholas who reigned between 850-1279 with varying success in the regions of the Coromandel coast, north of the river Cauvery<sup>71</sup>. The name Maabar may have been a corruption of the name of Mahabali(puram), an important Hindu town in this region with a port, and by extension he may have referred to the surrounding regions<sup>72</sup>. In this connection Marco Polo also speaks about ships which sailed between Maabar and Madagascar and Zanzibar. If the identification of Maabar with Mahabalipuram and its surroundings is correct, it is in harmony with the indigenous tradition which localises the burial place of Thomas in the neighbourhood of present day Madras, 60 km north of Mahabalipuram.

<sup>67</sup> For Marco Polo see W. Th. Elwert, s.v. 'Marco Polo', *RGG IV* (Tübingen, 19603) 742f. Cf. also A.L. Basham, *The Wonder That Was India* (London, 1963 revised edition) 346 with the wrong suggestion that Polo saw the tomb.

<sup>68</sup> Marco Polo, *The Travels of Marco Polo. Translated and with an Introduction by Ronald Latam* (Harmondsworth, 1958) 274.

<sup>69</sup> Marco Polo, *Travels*, 289f.

<sup>70</sup> Marco Polo, *Travels*, 277.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. W. Haig (ed), *The Cambridge History of India: Turks and Afghans III* (London, 1928<sup>1</sup>, reprint New Delhi), chapter XVIII (W. Haig): 'Hindu States in Southern India, AD 1000-1565', pp. 467-99.

<sup>72</sup> Marco Polo, *Travels*, 287: this localization is in accordance with Polo's statement that the realm of Quilon lays about 500 miles southwest of Maabar.

Yet it remains unclear why the Saracens would have paid their homage to St. Thomas who has no special place in the Islam, unless one suggests that the practice refers to popular Islam with its veneration of saints and their burial places. A closer investigation of Marco Polo's description of India shows that facts and fictions are often mixed up and that his story about Thomas is from hearsay, probably from Thomas Christians on the Malabar coast<sup>73</sup>. We do not have any other data of that period that the grave of the apostle would have been a great place of pilgrimage for Saracens and Christians. Nevertheless, it should be acknowledged that a tradition might have existed among the Thomas Christians of the Malabar coast which localised the burial place of the apostle Thomas on the Coromandal coast. This tradition was incorporated by Marco Polo and connected with various other legendary stories in his travel report.

The tradition of Thomas' burial place somewhere in the kingdom of Maabar suits with the custom of the East Syrian church to connect the apostolate of Thomas with all the places where this church in the imagination of its followers had been influential at one time or other, and even made him preach in China. The first Portuguese informant who wrote about the existence of the tomb of St. Thomas in Mylapore was Diego Femandes. In a letter of 1517, he reported that he had rediscovered the tomb of the apostle and brought about an official inquiry by the Portuguese king in 1533, in which he also functioned as the main witness. He stated that his testimony was based on the information he had gathered from the oldest inhabitants of Mylapore: brahmins and other people. Yet he was silent on the question whether the tomb was venerated at the time by local Thomas Christians and whether it functioned as a real place of pilgrimage. In this context one may ask oneself why brahmins and other old people of the village would pass down this tradition? It seems not besides the mark to suggest that Femandes may have been inspired by the itinerary of Marco Polo which was printed for the first time in Portuguese in 1502<sup>74</sup>. Anyhow, the leader of the royal investigation, a certain

<sup>73</sup> Marco Polo, *Travels*, 274f. The story of the earth of the burial place with its beneficial effects seems to have been derived from the last chapter of the *ATH*.

<sup>74</sup> Elwert, 'Marco Polo', 739: first edition in German 1477, Latin 1484, Italian 1496, Portuguese 1502, Spanish, 1503, French 1556 and English, 1579. See also Pearson, *The Portuguese in India*, 83-4, who mentions that



Miguel Ferreira, concluded that the oldest people of the land, Muslims and Hindus, Indians and foreigners all testified to the same thing 'as if they were speaking with one mouth'''' The Portuguese thus 'rediscovered' the tomb of St. Thomas in what once seems to have been the grave of a nameless saint and returned the holy spot to the Thomas Christians in south India. They renamed Mylapure in 1545 in Sao Thomé, under which name the place may have been known to Arabian navigators and merchants in the sixteenth century<sup>76</sup>.

It falls outside the scope of this paper to deal with the deeper motives of the Portuguese, but one may guess that they hoped to win the support of Thomas Christians in their endeavour of colonial expansion in India. Yet, at another level the discovery of the remains of the apostle proved to be counterproductive. It is true that the Thomas Christians incorporated this innovation of tradition, but they used the material presence of the apostle also as an argument in their opposition to the religious authority of Rome. The remains of St. Thomas testified to the fact that Indian Christians could appeal to an independent apostolic succession which went back to the brother of the Lord. Thus the ancient imagination of Thomas' visit to India became condensed in a visible tomb which acquired new symbolic functions in an age of colonial and religious expansion.

as early as 1507 a preliminary expedition was sent by Viceroy Almeida of Goa to the Coromandel coast in order to investigate the situation at the spot and to look for the tomb of St. Thomas.

<sup>75</sup> Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India*, 41.

<sup>76</sup> G.R. Tibbetts, *Arab Navigation in the Indian Ocean before the Coming of the Portuguese* (London, 1971) 467 with a reference to the port of Mylapure, a corruption of the name Mahabalipuram (four miles to the north of Covelong near Madras). Cf. also R. Strasser, *Südindien. Land der Dravidas und Tausend Tempel* (Stuttgart, 1984) 182 with a reference to a certain Sulaiman at-Tajir (the merchant) who in AD 851 mentions a place Batuma (bait Thomas: house of Thomas) in the region. Yet the most ancient manuscripts do not mention this place at all; cf. G. Ferrand, *Voyage du Marchand Arabe Sulayman en Inde et en Chine. Rédigé en 851 suivi de remarques par Abu Zayd Hasan (vers 916)* (Paris, 1921). The reference to Batuma may have been a later interpolation.