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New Evidence on the Sixteenth-Century East Syriac Missions in the Malabar Coast: The Muttuchira Inscription (1581 CE) in Context

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ABSTRACT The present study deals with an inscription on a granite stele in the township of Muttuchira, Kottayam District, Kerala, India. The inscription was written in Malayalam, in the ancient Dravidian *vaṭṭeluttu* script, in 1581. It commemorates the erection of a series of open-air crosses, as well as the placement of a Persian Cross, called the Bleeding Cross. The first cross was erected in 1528 and the last one in 1581. The inscription was first published in 1930 and, ever since, several concurrent interpretations thereof have been proposed. However, all the previous transcriptions and interpretations were based on a poorly executed estampage, which gave rise to a series of misunderstandings. This study is based on a new, clearly readable estampage and gives a transcription in *vaṭṭeluttu* Unicode fonts and in Modern Malayalam characters as well as a Modern Malayalam and an English translation, together with a detailed historical interpretation permitted by new material collected in Kerala in the last two and a half decades. The new deciphering of the inscription sheds light on the role of Muttuchira, one of the main centres of the anti-Portuguese and anti-Latin resistance of the local Christians in the sixteenth century, on the origin of the open-air crosses defining the landscape of Central Kerala, and on the vicissitudes of Christian epigraphy in Kerala.

KEYWORDS Open-air crosses and Persian crosses, Nestorian anti-colonial resistance in Kerala, *vaṭṭeluttu* script, Christian epigraphy, bishops and archdeacons

Introduction¹

In Muttuchira, Kottayam district of Kerala, an inscribed granite stele was standing in front of the Church dedicated to the Holy Ghost, belonging to the Syro-Malabar Catholic jurisdiction. As

¹ This English-language study was written parallelly with a Malayalam version, less exhaustive and more popular in character, which was published earlier (Saranya Chandran and Perczel 2023). The present version contains improvements upon the Malayalam version.

it was exposed to the vicissitudes of weather, now the stele has been transferred to a room in the parish building. The inscription was known to the locals before research on it began. In modern scholarship, the first attempt at reading the inscription dates from 1926, and the first publications from 1930.² The stele was erected by a Persian bishop called Mar Šem'on and his archdeacon, Jacob Nadakkal, in 1581 to commemorate the erection of a granite cross in front of the church. The text of the monument was written in Malayalam, in a late version of the old Dravidian *vaṭṭeluttu* script, used for writing Tamil and Malayalam. This happened in a crucial moment of the history of the Syrian Christians of Kerala, when Middle Eastern and Western missionaries were competing for the souls of the indigenous *Suriyāni* (Syrian) Christians—also called Christians of Saint Thomas and *Māppiḷla* Christians (Perczel 2019, 654–62).

The term “missionaries” needs an explanation here. At variance with the common usage, which applies the term only to the religious emissaries coming from Europe, we include here also the representatives of the West Asian Churches, to distinguish them from the local religious elite. In fact, when the European missionaries arrived in the sixteenth century, they encountered a situation in which West Asian bishops, belonging to the Church of the East, were exerting spiritual jurisdiction over the local Christians. The strategic aim of the European missionaries was to replace the West Asian bishops and create a new structure. Soon, they had to realize that the efficiency of their attempts depended on how cleverly they managed to insert themselves in the already existing structure of East-West dynamics. This situation became further complicated by a split in the Church of the East in 1552, which divided this Mother Church into an independent (vulgo: Nestorian) faction and into the Chaldean Church, a faction in a loose union with Rome, while both factions were vying for the spiritual direction of the Indian Christians. The Roman Catholic missionaries, mostly active after this Church received new dogmatic and canonical foundations at the Council of Trent (1545–63), entered as a fourth participant in this strife. Thus, from the perspective of the native Christians, the role of these legates/emissaries/missionaries was analogous—they all represented their rootedness in and their difference from the Western Mother Churches. This situation became further complicated by the coming of West Syriac, Syrian Orthodox and Syrian Catholic, missionaries in the seventeenth century, but this later story does not concern us here. Given the historical and economic conditions, this competition for souls also meant competition for the benefits of the spice trade, as the Indian Syrian Christians were the main spice producers and could choose to whom they would sell their products.³

At the heart of the present publication is a new deciphering of the Muttuchira inscription, based on a new estampage made by Saranya Chandran and Mishel Maria Johnson on August 28, 2021. Its structure is the following: The study is introduced by a survey of the historical background necessary for understanding the context of the inscription. Although such surveys have been given in István Perczel's earlier publications, this one contains new elements, based on recent discoveries. The second part presents the previous attempts at deciphering and translating the Muttuchira inscription. The third part of the study gives a new reading of the inscription: first, a photo of the new estampage, second, a transcription in Unicode *vaṭṭeluttu* fonts, then, a transcription of the *vaṭṭeluttu* text in Modern Malayalam characters, a Modern Malayalam translation, and an English translation. The English translation is provided with de-

² See Joseph 1930 (Joseph₂), Hosten 1936, 349–50 (Joseph₁) and Ayar (1930).

³ See the first Portuguese letter of Mar Jacob in Schurhammer 1934, 10-16; 1963, 338–43; see also Malekandathil 2018.

tailed commentaries, divided into general and specific notes. The study is completed by a series of historical conclusions and a bibliography.

Historical Background

The Arrival of Four East Syriac Bishops in Malabar in 1503

Vasco da Gama (1469–1524), having sailed around the Cape of Good Hope, arrived in India in 1498. Allegedly, one of his aims was to find the legendary Indian Christians, a community living in India since late Antiquity, but he did not meet them in Calicut (Kozhikode), where he landed. The Christians were discovered by the second Portuguese expedition, led by Pedro Alvares Cabral (c. 1467/8–c.1520), who landed in 1500 in Cranganore (Kodungallur). The Christian communities that he found there had had longstanding traditional links with the East Syrian Church of the East. Yet, this connection was dormant for a long time, resulting in a loss of the Syriac culture of the community. The connection was powerfully reanimated by the end of the fifteenth century, due to the mission to Gazarta d-Beth Zabday⁴ of a person who later also travelled to Europe, where he came to be known as Joseph the Indian, and of a certain George, issuing from the aristocratic family of the Pakalōmattam. This was a time when the community managed, after a long pause, to bring Syrian bishops to India. At this moment, Joseph and George became consecrated priests; George received the title of archdeacon, and the two envoys came back accompanied by two bishops (Schurhammer 1934, 14; 1963, 333–34; Perczel 2015, 151–58). This event can be reconstructed based on concurrent sources, the most important being a report written by the monk Rabban ‘Brahim (Abraham) of Beth Slokh (Kirkuk) titled *History of the Blessed Indians and on their Arrival in the City of Gazarta d-Beth Zabday*. Rabban ‘Brahim’s narrative serves as an introduction to the letter on behalf of four Syrian Christian bishops dispatched to India, addressed to their Patriarch, Mar Eliyah V (1502–1503).⁵ The *History* tells the story of the arrival, allegedly in 1489/90, of Joseph and George and their way back to India, while the letter is the first contemporary external eye-witness narrative on the arrival of the Portuguese in India, namely that of the second expedition of Vasco da Gama. Although the letter is written on behalf of four bishops, its author is only one of them, called Mar Denḥā, which becomes clear from the fact that he lists the other three bishops by their honorary titles Mar so-and-so, while he calls himself “Denḥā the stranger.” The letter narrates

⁴ Gazarta is present-day Cizre in Eastern Turkey, close to the Syrian border. Its Syriac and Arabic names (Gazarta/Jazira), meaning ‘island,’ come from the fact that the city is surrounded by the Tigris River from three sides.

⁵ We know about four manuscripts that contain the letter: MS Vat. sir. 204, olim Scandar 5 (see Assemani 1721, 487–88); Ms. or. quart. 802 of the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin (= Sachau 59), ff. 48r–51r (see Sachau 1899, 201–202); Mingana syr. 11, ff. 105r–108r (Mingana 1933, 44), the text in the manuscript is fragmentary; these three manuscripts are listed in Murre-van den Berg 2015, 21 and 322, to which one should add BL Or. 3337, ff.141r–146v (information from Dr. Sebastian Brock, email dated 15.02.2023). According to Sebastian Brock, “Another text in the ms (History of a repentant demon!) is said to have been written in the Monastery or R. Hormizd in AG 1834 = 1522/3. If this applies to the letter too, then this should be the earliest witness” (ibid.). The *History of the Blessed Indians* and the letter were first published with a Latin translation by Joseph Simon Assemani (1725, 589–99) and were republished by Samuel Giamil (1902, 588–600). There are two full English translations to date: by Alfonse Mingana (1926, 468–74), by Georg Schurhammer S.J. (1934, 4–10=1963, 333–38), both based on Assemani’s edition. As news could not spread easily between Gazarta and the Malabar Coast, the bishops thought that their patriarch was still alive. Yet, he had died and was followed by Mār Šem’on VI (1504–1538). On Rabban ‘Brahim of Slokh, see Murre-van den Berg 2009, 254–55, 321–22. Our deepest gratitude is due to Sebastian Brock and Gregory Kessel for enlightening us about the aforementioned manuscripts and about Rabban ‘Brahim.

how the Zamorin of Calicut/ Kozhikode,⁶ incited by his Muslim allies, massacred the Portuguese colony left by Cabral in Calicut, how the survivors fled to the King of Cochin and how, finally, the allied forces of the King of Cochin and the Portuguese defeated the Zamorin. It was after this victory that the Portuguese began to construct the Fort of Cochin. Apparently, the Syrian bishops were impressed by the military strength of Vasco da Gama's armada, consisting of only 400 men, and celebrated their victory as that of Christianity over the Hindus and the Muslims. The letter also relates that the Franks, that is, the Portuguese, residing in the Northern Malabar city of Kannur/Cannanore, where the ship carrying the bishops landed, were very kind to the bishops, gave them new clothes and money, and invited them to celebrate the Qurbana, that is, the Syriac mass, in their church, being very happy seeing this. The author also notices what they consider as odd habits of the Portuguese priests, such as celebrating the mass every day.

So, the *History of the Blessed Indians* tells the story of the Indian delegation to Gazarta in the following way:⁷

Again, in the power of our Lord we are making known the history of the blessed Indians and about their arrival in the city of Gazarta d-Beth Zabday, <which was written by Rabban 'Brahim of Slokh>.⁸

Now, in the year thousand eight hundred and one according to Alexander [1489/90 CE], three Christian faithful men had come from the far-away lands of India to Mar Šem'on, Catholicos Patriarch of the East, so that they may take with them Fathers (*Abāhātā*) to their lands. According to the will of the Creator one of them passed away on the way. Two arrived safely to the Mar Catholicos.⁹ The Mar Catholicos was in the city of Gazarta d-Beth Zabday and he rejoiced upon them with great and abundant joy.¹⁰ One of them was called George, the other Joseph. The Mar Catholicos ordained both as priests in the holy church of Saint George of Gazarta, because they were learned men. He sent the two of them to the holy monastery of the blessed Mar Augen. They took from there two monks who were namesakes, both being called Rabban Joseph. The Mar Catholicos consecrated both as bishops¹¹ in the church of St George. He called one of them Mar Thomas and the other Mar John. He wrote for them wonderful open [recommendation] letters as well as closed and sealed documents, dismissed them with prayers and blessings and sent them, together with the Indians, to the lands of India. With the help of our Lord Christ all four of them arrived there safely. The faithful rejoiced with immense joy upon their arrival and came to their encounter merrily with the gospel, the cross, censer, and lamps, and led them in great procession with psalms and thanksgiving. They consecrated

⁶ The Zamorin (English, derived from the Portuguese *Samorim*, itself derived from the Arabic *Sāmuri*, itself being an abbreviation of the Malayalam *Sāmūtiri*, itself being derived from the Sanskrit *Svāmī Śrī*, becoming in the pronunciation *Svāmītiri*, and meaning "Holy Lord") was the most powerful leader of the Malabar Coast when the Portuguese landed in India. The Zamorin's seat was in Kozhikode/Calicut in Central Kerala, which, after the destruction by a tsunami of the medieval port city of Kondungallur/Cranganore in 1341, emerged as the most important trading port in the Malabar Coast. The Zamorin was favouring Muslim merchants, who had a strong colony and emporium in Kozhikode. Also, he maintained a naval fleet of light sailing ships, commanded by Muslim admirals called the Kunjāli Marakkārs, and served by Muslim sailors. The Kunjāli Marakkārs were fighting the Portuguese from 1520 to 1600, when they were finally defeated, betrayed by the Zamorin.

⁷ Our translation is based on Assemani's edition collated with Mingana syr. 11. Berlin or. 802 (Sachau 59) was collated but we are not indicating its numerous variant readings as they are manifestly secondary. Berlin or. 802 also has many lacunae. We were not able to consult BL. Or. 3337.

⁸ The name of the author cannot be found either in Assemani's edition, or in Mingana syr. 11 but only in Berlin or. 802. In the margin of the same MS, a note: "Wonderful narrative written by Rabban Brahim of Slokh."

⁹ Mingana 11: "to the Catholicos Mār Šem'on."

¹⁰ Mingana 11: "with great joy."

¹¹ From "in the church of Saint George" to "Rabban Mas'ud" there is a lacuna in Mingana 11.

altars and ordained many priests as, since a long time, they [the Indian Christians] were without Fathers (*Abāhātā*). The bishop Mar John stayed in India, while his companion, Mar Thomas, after a short time, returned to the Catholicos and brought to him gifts, offerings, and a slave.

It happened so that, before Mar Thomas was to return to India, Mar Šem'on Catholicos died and departed from this temporal and passing life to the lasting and unending life in the year thousand eight hundred and thirteen of the Greeks [1501/02 CE] and was buried in the monastery of the blessed Mar Augen—may our Lord give rest to his soul in the mansions of the Kingdom! Amen – He was succeeded by Mar Eliyah Catholicos Patriarch, who also took three virtuous monks from the monastery of Mar Augen. One of them was Rabban David the Tall, whom he made a metropolitan, calling him Mar Yahbalāhā; the second was called Rabban George, whom he made a bishop in the name Mar Denḥā; the third was called Rabban Mas'ud, whom he also made a bishop and called him Mar Jacob, <and the aforementioned Mar Thomas, the bishop of India, he consecrated a metropolitan>¹². All of them, he ordained in the monastery of Mar John the Egyptian, the blood brother of the holy Mar Aḥḥā,¹³ which is at the borderland of Gazarta of Zabday, in the year thousand eight hundred and fourteen of the Greeks [1502/03 CE]. He sent all these four Fathers (*Abāhātā*) to the land of India and to the islands of the seas that are between *Dābāj*,¹⁴ *Šin*, and *Māšin*.¹⁵ In the succour of their Lord Christ, all four of them reached and arrived there in peace and calm, and they met the Indian bishop Mar John safe and sound. He and all the blessed faithful there were greatly rejoicing upon the arrival of the Fathers (*Abāhātā*). After one year, they sent a letter to the Catholicos Mar Eliyah. However, before the arrival of the letter, the Catholicos Mar Eliyah had died and was buried in the church of Meskāntā of Mosul.¹⁶ He was succeeded by the Catholicos Patriarch Mar Šem'on. The letter that the aforementioned Fathers sent from India contained what follows. (Assemani 1725, 590-93; Giamil, 588-91)¹⁷

This is a major historical document which, however, raises serious chronological problems. Already Jacques Marie Vosté had observed that the author, Rabban 'Brahim of Beth Slokh, seems to speak about one Mar Šem'on Catholicos, who received the Indian delegation in 1489/90, died in 1501/02, and was buried in the Monastery of Mar Augen (Vosté 1930). Yet, in 1489/90 the patriarch of the Church of the East was Mar Šem'on IV Basidi, whose funerary inscription is extant in the Monastery of Rabban Hormizd, dating his death to 20 February 1808 AG, that is, to 1497 (Harrak 2009, 294–95). According to all the patriarchal lists, he was followed by Mar Šem'on V, who should be the person who, according to this *History*, and also according to a note (a colophon) of Mar Jacob, one of the bishops mentioned in the *History*, in Paris BnF

¹² This clause is missing from Assemani's edition but is there in the Berlin and the Mingana manuscripts.

¹³ Mingana 11: "of Mār Aḥḥā."

¹⁴ In Assemani's edition: Dābāg. However, both Mingana 11, and Berlin or. 802 write دَابَّاج, that is, Dābāj, according to the Garshuni spelling.

¹⁵ The meaning of these expressions is controversial. *Dābāj* is apparently a version of the Arabic *Zābāj*, mentioned in the travelogues of Masudi and Al-Biruni. *Dābāj/Zābāj* is the Arabic name for Java, but in the ancient texts Java meant the entire Indonesian Archipelago (see Yule-Burnell-Crooke 1903, 454–56). *Šin* and *Māšin* (*Mahā-Šin*: Greater China) are probably the Indian names for South-China and North-China but in certain documents *Māšin* is used to indicate the Indochinese peninsula (see *ibid.*, 530–31). See also Schurhammer's note *ad locum*.

¹⁶ The church in Mosul, dedicated to Saint Meskanta, was founded in the tenth century. Presently it belongs to the Chaldean Church.

¹⁷ Our translation differs from those of Mingana 1926, 468, Schurhammer 1934, 2–3, and 1963, 333–34. For further aspects of this story, not treated here, see Perczel 2015, 151–58, and Perczel 2019, 675–79.

syriac 25, f. 7r, died on 1 Ilul (September) of the year 1813 AG (= 1502 CE) (Murre-van den Berg 1999, 240–41).

Mar Jacob's note was first published by François Nau (Nau 1912, 82–84), who erroneously thought that it was written in the hand of Mar Jacob as a colophon of the first part of Paris BnF syriac 25, a psalter, and who, consequently, thought that the manuscript was also written by Mar Jacob. He also made several errors of interpretation, which were taken over by Mingana (1926, 473–74). These errors were mostly corrected by J. P. M. van der Ploeg, who gave a detailed description of the manuscript (1983, 231–244), including a new translation of Mar Jacob's note. Van der Ploeg has proven beyond any reasonable doubt that the manuscript is a Chaldean Catholic Breviary from the seventeenth century and that the note, added on a separate double folio and bound together with the manuscript at a later stage, is not in Mar Jacob's handwriting. István Perczel, who prepared a new description of Paris BnF syr. 25, has added new data about the manuscript and established that it had been the personal breviary of Mar Chandy Parampil (Dom Alexandre de Campos), a native Catholic bishop who reigned from 1663 to 1687 (Perczel 2016a and 2016b). He thought that the note was a letter, which would be possible if we read *ktābā* at the beginning of the text as meaning "letter." However, the whole note is written in the style of the colophons, so that Nau's intuition is justified in this sense. Nevertheless, it cannot be the colophon of BnF syr. 25, as the manuscript, which can be dated to the 1650s–70s, contains the revised Malabar Chaldean Catholic breviary created in the circle of Metropolitan Francisco Roz S.J. (reigned 1601–24). Moreover, the note is clearly a copy with omissions, which were supplemented—apparently by the same hand—above the first line and on the left margin. It also seems that the note was copied in Chandy's handwriting, who tried out his Syriac signature several times on the sheets of the manuscript, so his handwriting is identifiable.

Also, Nau misunderstood the dating of the note/colophon: "In the land of Kollā[m],¹⁸ on the second day of the Resurrection, the year 1815 of the Greeks," corresponding to 8 April 1504, which means that the note was written in Kollam/Quilon in India, after the four bishops arrived in 1503. Yet, Nau translated: "Puis, ce Mar Elie, notre père, ordonna des Pères pour l'Inde ... dans le saint monastère de Mar Jean l'Egyptien, qui est à côté de Gazarta de (Beth) Zabdé, au pays de Koulaz, le second jour de la résurrection, l'an 1815 des grecs." Apparently, Nau missed the final *ālap* of the placename Kollā, standing for Kollam/Quilon, for a *zain*, and so he came up with the fantastic inexistent placename Koulaz. His erroneous reading was taken over not only by Mingana but also by van der Ploeg (1983, 232), and has gone unchallenged up to the present day. Thus, Heleen Murre-van den Berg writes concerning the death of Mar Eliyah V:

We do not know the precise date of Eliya's death, but the above mentioned colophon of Paris 25 (Nau 1912) states that Eliya consecrated metropolitans and bishops for India, in the monastery of Mar Yukhannan the Egyptian near Gazarta Zabdayta on April 8, 1504. (Murre-van den Berg 1999, 242)

As we have seen, 8 April 1504 is the date of Mar Jacob's notice written in Kollam, rather than that of the consecration of the four bishops. This consecration, according to the *History* of Rabban 'Brahim, occurred in 1503, probably shortly after the death of Mar Šem'on V. Therefore, this date cannot be used as a *terminus post quem* for Mar Eliyah's death. Also, as van der Ploeg has proven, Mar Jacob's note should not be considered the colophon of Paris BnF syr. 25. The

¹⁸ The Syriac spelling of the city name is *Kollā*.

of the Greeks (September 1502 to August 1503), the note informs us that they arrived in India in the year 1815 of the Greeks, that is, between September 1503 and April 1504, which is the date of the note, written in Kollam. This can be further specified as the appropriate sailing season was summer, the ships arriving regularly in September with the monsoon winds. Yet, this is not perfectly sure as the Persian Gulf could also be reached via coastal navigation. Be this as it may, the earliest date for the arrival of the bishops is September 1503, so that the time that had elapsed between their consecration and their arrival in India was approximately 10–11 months, if not more. The note also confirms the clause that was missing from Assemani's text but is there in the Berlin and the Mingana manuscripts, according to which, before his return to India, Mar Thomas was consecrated a metropolitan, adding that Mar Yahbalāhā also received the same rank.

Now we should return to the next problem raised by the text, namely that of the date of the Indian delegation's visit, and of the identity of the Mar Šem'on who received them. For solving this riddle, Helen Murre-van den Berg proposed that the date of 1801 AG (=1489/90 CE), found in all the manuscripts, might be an error of a copyist, and she proposed that it should be emended to 1811 AG (=1499/1500 CE), so that the Catholicos who received the Indian delegation would be Mar Šem'on V. She argues in the following way:

The *History* tells that the second visit took place only “a short time” (*zabna qallil*) after the first. When one takes into account the time needed for travel in these days, “a short time” might perhaps refer to a few years but is unlikely to denote the more than ten years that elapsed between the first and second visit. I suggest therefore that the date of the first visit needs emendation. The easiest solution might be to read “1811” (1499/1500), rather than “1801.” (Murre-van den Berg 1999, 241)

Yet, the *History* does not say that Mar Thomas returned to India after a short time. It says that “the bishop Mar John stayed in India, while his companion, Mar Thomas, *after a short time*, returned to the Catholicos and brought to him gifts, offerings, and a slave.” Thus, the events unfolded in the following way. Joseph (the Indian) and George (Pakālōmattam) went to Gazarta. From Joseph's narrative, which he told when he reached Portugal, we know that the trip lasted many months. After sailing from Cranganore/Kodungallur to the Persian Gulf, only the land route lasted three months (see Montalboddo 1507, VI, chapter cxxxiii), so we can suppose that they travelled altogether for about 6 months. We do not know how much time the Indian delegation spent in Gazarta, but the chronology of the second mission to India, reconstructed based on the two documents, suggests that we might count one year between the consecration of Mar John and Mar Thomas and their arrival in India. If we follow Murre-van den Berg's hypothesis, this could not have happened before September 1501. Yet, we learn about Joseph that in January or February 1501, he and his brother asked the admiral Pedro Alvares Cabral to take them to Portugal, and that Cabral's ships arrived in Lisbon, with Joseph on board as his brother died on the way, by the end of June 1501 (Montalboddo 1507, VI, chapter cxxix). At that time, Joseph was 40 years old (Montalboddo 1507, VI, chapter cxxx). If we were to accept Heleen Murre-van den Berg's emendation and suppose that the Indian delegation reached Gazarta in 1499/1500, Joseph would not have had the time to reach home and sail to Europe with Cabral. Thus, his mission to Gazarta must have happened ten years earlier, when he was thirty years old, the proper age to be ordained a priest. Therefore, rather than changing the date of the Indian delegation's visit to Gazarta, we might suppose that Rabban 'Brahim had confused between Mar Šem'on IV and V.

There is much confusion about the further fate of the five bishops in India. Schurhammer writes: “Mar John, whom the four others found ‘still’ alive in 1503, seems to have died soon after that date; two of the newcomers, Mar Jaballaha and Mar Denha, died soon after their arrival in India. Mar Thoma, the third one, we find about 1518 giving testimony about the traditions of his church and in 1536 we hear that he had helped little, had taught ‘heresies’, but that he had now repented, had publicly gone to confession and communion and called the Franciscans” (1934, 9-10; 1963, 338).²⁷ Most probably, Schurhammer thought that both Mar Yahbalāhā and Mar Denḥā died shortly after the arrival, because he followed the report of João de Barros, who writes in *Decadas da Asia* about the dispatching of four bishops before his arrival (Barros 1563, 7.11, 306v),

A few years before we entered in India, the Armenian patriarch²⁸ sent four bishops, so that they may divide the land among them as there were many Christians there. Out of whom two died at their arrival. They [that is, the remaining two] divided the land in two parts. The younger one received Kollam, down to Cape Comorin, and the older one resided in Cranganore. This one, as he was a virtuous man, stopped the aforementioned tyranny of baptizing for money. And Nuno da Cunha, when he became governor, was all time favouring him for the virtue that he found in him. In fact, he was much inclined toward the sacerdotal order and the Church rites according to our Roman custom.²⁹

Thus, based on de Barros’ report, Schurhammer thought that the two bishops who had died at the arrival were Mar Yahbalāhā and Mar Denḥā, and the two remaining bishops were Mar Jacob (the older bishop) and Mar Thomas (the younger), Mar Jacob being the “virtuous man” favoured by the governor Nuno da Cunha (1934, 21; 1963, 346). His reconstruction has become standard in later literature. However, this reconstruction suffers of many weaknesses. At the arrival of the four bishops in 1503, there were not four but five East Syriac bishops in the Malabar Coast, because the metropolitan Mar John was still alive. Out of these we have testimonies about the deeds in India of three, namely Mar Thomas, Mar Jacob, and Mar Denḥā, who, as we will see, was alive in 1528, when he erected a cross in Muttuchira according to the inscription published and analysed in the present paper. As we have seen both in the more complete Mingana and Berlin manuscripts of Rabban ‘Brahim’s *History*, and in Mar Jacob’s note in the Paris manuscript, the two senior bishops among the four dispatched in 1503 were Mar Thomas and Mar Yahbalāhā, whom patriarch Eliyah V consecrated metropolitans. Now, if out of the three metropolitans two, namely Mar John and Mar Yahbalāhā, died, then the senior bishop among the remaining three was Mar Thomas, who must have become the metropolitan of Cranganore. Since the Middle Ages, the metropolitan see of India was Cranganore/Kodungalur (Perczel and Mustaṭă 2023). And in fact, Mar Jacob calls himself in his first Portuguese letter written around 1524 and addressed to King John III of Portugal the bishop of the Christians of Kollam (Schurhammer 1934, 10; 1963, 338),³⁰ and does not vindicate for himself the rank of a metropolitan but signs modestly in Syriac: “These are the letters from the feeble Jacob, who is

²⁷ Schurhammer cites here a Portuguese letter by a Franciscan friar, Lourenço de Goes, to the King, repertoried in Schurhammer 1962, 191, 18.

²⁸ The Portuguese systematically confused the Catholicos of the East with the Armenian patriarch.

²⁹ Our translation from the Portuguese. Schurhammer (1934, 21) gives a somewhat different, interpretative translation.

³⁰ *Jacome abuna ssacerdote armenio, que rege aos cristãos na India que dizem de Coulam...* (“Abuna Jacob, the Armenian bishop who rules over the Christians in India who are called those of Kollam...”). Schurhammer, who thought that Mar Jacob was metropolitan of Cranganore remarks that here, *cristãos na India que dizem de Coulam*, means Saint Thomas Christians in general, but this is not the case. Very clearly, Mar Jacob indicates that he is the bishop of Kollam.

and real dates have been forgotten and predated to the eighth century.³⁴ As the Kadamattam church was until recently under Syrian Orthodox, that is, Jacobite, jurisdiction,³⁵ Mar Denḥā's original Nestorian allegiance had also been forgotten and he, having become anonymous, was considered an early Antiochian Jacobite delegate. Now, this Church history gives the following details about Mar Denḥā. First, we are giving a transcript of the Malayalam text as it stands in the manuscript, that is, in early nineteenth-century Malayalam, after which the English translation follows. In the transcription, we followed the peculiarities of the early nineteenth-century orthography, but added, for better comprehensibility, the final letters and *candrakāla*-s as well as punctuation marks, which were not used in the text:

[8v] കുറഞ്ഞൊരു കാലം ലച്ചെന്ന്ന്റെ [9r] പരദേശത്തു നിന്നും രണ്ടു നാല പെര
 ചൈത്താൻമാരുടെ പൊസ്ഥകങ്ങളും പടിച്ചു വശമാക്കി മലങ്കര വെന്ന് ഇറങ്ങി. അവരുടെ
 പെർ മാറാബന്മാരെ വിളിച്ചു വരണം. അവരിൽ ഒരുത്തൻ മാർ ദെഹനാ എന്ന് പേരുള്ള ഒരു
 ക്ഷുദ്രക്കാരൻ കടമറ്റത്ത് പൊഴിയെടുത്ത് തറവാട്ടിൽ ഒരു പാട്രിക്ക് ക്ഷുദ്രങ്ങളും പടിപ്പിച്ച്
 അവരിരുവരും ചൈത്താൻമാരെ കൊണ്ടുള്ള പല പല പ്രത്യക്ഷങ്ങളും
 പ്രവൃത്തിച്ചിരിക്കുന്നകാലങ്ങളിൽ മാർ ദെഹനാ എന്ന് പേരുള്ള ക്ഷുദ്രക്കാരൻ മരിക്കയും ചെയ്തു.
 അയാളുടെ ശിഷ്യൻ കടമറ്റത്തുകാരൻ പാതിരി മാർ ദെഹനാ എന്ന് പേരുള്ള ക്ഷുദ്രക്കാരൻറെ
 അസ്ഥി എടുത്ത് കടമറ്റത്തു പള്ളിയുടെ തെക്കുഭാഗത്തുള്ള ചിമരമെൽ പണി ചെയ്യാപാരമ്പര്യം
 ദെയ്വമാക്കി വച്ച് പാട്രിച്ച്³⁶ ഹോമങ്ങളും പൂജകളും ഘോഷമായിട്ടുള്ള ഉറുപ്പുകളും കഴിച്ച് പല
 പ്രത്യക്ഷങ്ങളും അതിശയങ്ങളും കാണിക്കയും. ചൈത്താൻമാരെ ക്ഷുദ്രത്താൽ പിടിച്ച്
 കീഴടക്കുകയും അവരോടു മർത്തനിയുന്നവർക്ക് പല കടും നാശങ്ങളും ആപത്തുകളും
 അനുഭവിക്കയും.

[8v] A few years later, [9r] two or four persons, who studied at depth the books of the devils, came from abroad to Malankara. Their names were known as Mārābhanmār [Mar Abbā-s].³⁷ One of these, who was called Mār Dehanā [that is, Mar Denḥā], a sorcerer (*kṣudrakkān*), taught sorcery to a priest from the *Polīyeṭuttu* family (*taravaṭu*) in Kadamattam (here, *Kāṭamuttam*). The two of them, by the help of the devils, wrought many miracles. At that time the sorcerer called Mār Dehanā died. His disciple, the Kadamattam priest (*Kāṭamattattukāran pātiri*) took the bones of the sorcerer whose name was Mār Dehanā and placed them in the southern wall of the Kadamattam church. He made him a god (*deyvamākkivaccu*), offered him burnt offerings (*hōmam*), worship (*pūja*), festive food-offerings (*ghōṣammāyittulla ūṭtu*) and he showed many wonders and miracles. By sorcery he caught the devils and conquered them. On those who stood against them [apparently against the group of the Kadamattam priest] befell many sorts of calamities and dangers.³⁸

³⁴ Oral information during a visit to the church in 2007.
³⁵ By now, the rival Indian Orthodox Church has taken over the church complex due to the decision of a local court. On the subsequent splits between the native Kerala Syriac Churches and their rivalry, see Menacherry, Balakrishnan, and Perczel 2014.
³⁶ Perhaps standing for പ്രാർത്ഥിച്ചു?
³⁷ The reference is to the four bishops from the Church of the East, Mar Yahbalāhā, Mar Thomas, Mar Jacob, and Mar Denḥā, who arrived in India in 1503.
³⁸ The history is in *MS Mannanam Malayalam 3*, f. 8r-14v, the citation is at fol. 8v-9r. Revised version of an earlier translation by George Kurukkoor, C. A. Anaz, and István Perczel.

1990 മാർച്ച് മാസം ഒന്നാം തീയതി കണ്ടെടുക്കപ്പെട്ട അച്ചന്റെ തിരുശേഷിപ്പ്

Syriac: “The holy relics of the venerable Kadamattam Priest, which were taken from here [that is, were found here] on the first day of the month of Addar [March] in the year 1990 of Our Lord, are placed here.”

Malayalam: “1990, 1st of the month of March: the holy relics of the venerable Father.”

Apparently, as carving the Syriac text has taken most of the space on the slab, there remained little place for the stone-carver to add the Malayalam translation. Thus, he abbreviated the text so that almost only some catchwords have remained.

It is to be noted that, according to the East Syriac practice, only the bodies of dead bishops were buried in the wall of the church that had been their see. Thus, the bones must belong to Mar Denhā, as claimed by the above Church history and not to the *Kāṭamaṭṭattu kattanār*, Paulos Poliyēṭuttu (see Figure 2).



Figure 2 The inscription in the Kadamattam church, commemorating the finding of the bones of Mar Denhā. Courtesy of Susan Visvanathan

Was Mar Denhā introducing magic into Kerala? In fact, the Portuguese sources repeatedly mention a book of soothsaying, called Book of Lots (*Libro de Sortes*), and a book of Persian magic, called *Paresman* or *Parsiman*, interpreted as “Persian Medicine.” Both are prohibited by the same Decree XIV of Chapter XIV of the Third Session of the Synod of Diamper, held by the Portuguese in 1599 (Gouvea 1606, fol. 14r; Cunha Rivara, 33537). Antonio de Gouvea (1575–1628), in his chronicle of the journey of Archbishop Aleixo de Menezes (1559–1617) to the Malabar Coast, also mentions these books, but identifies the two and says that it had its place

among the ecclesiastic books used by the priests of the St Thomas Christians together with their theological and liturgical books:

Tambem estes Christãos vzavuum muyto de hum liuro de sortes, & feitiços, & que chamauão Parismão, que quer dizer mesinha persica, o qual andaua entre os liuros da Igreja.

These Christians had much usage of a book of lots and of magic, which was called Parisman, called by them Persian Medicine, which was going along with the ecclesiastic books. (Gouvea 1606, fol. 60vb)

Recently, in the Konat and Venkadattu family archives, Theres Pattery has identified and described in five manuscripts six copies of the Book of Lots (in Syriac *Ktābā d-Pāl*, in Malayalam *Pālpustakam*), two in Malayalam, and four in Syriac (Pattery 2022, 2033).⁴³ Also, in MS Konat Syr 159 (fol. 285rv) she discovered a short Syriac fragment of the Persian Medicine, which is called in the manuscript *Parāsaman*, followed by an Ayurvedic note on healing, written in Garshuni Malayalam titled “For [using] the *Parāsaman*” (Pattery 2022, 34–37). It is from this note that we understood that the magical text discovered by Theres Pattery, titled “Guardian of the Sick and the Ailing,” is in fact a fragment from the mysterious *Parisman*, hitherto believed to have been lost. *Parāsaman* is apparently a distortion of the title “Persian Book” (*Pārsi Nāme*). It is important that these texts are found in priestly service books, showing that soothsaying and magical healing were part of the spiritual and scientific activity of the Syrian Christian priests and that this habit had been preserved at least until the nineteenth century. From other sources we also know that some priestly families still keep handbooks of magic among their possessions⁴⁴ and the repeated prohibitions of magical practices in the Malabar Catholic canons also testify to the persistence of these practices.

Conforming to the aforementioned Jacobite Church history, Gouvea also attributes the appearance of these soothsaying and magical practices to the mission of Joseph the Indian and George Pakālōmattam. He writes:

These Christians used very much this Book of Lots and of Magic that they called *Parisman* (*Parismão*), which means “Persian Medicine,” and which belonged to the ecclesiastic books... This book was written by two cassanars (priests) who had studied in Persia, because the Christians, seeing that since a long time they had no priests or anybody to teach them the doctrine, sent to Babylonia two skilful young men to study there and to be ordained there, and the theology that they brought from there was such that they came back turned into necromancers and magicians, with which they greatly infected this entire Christendom, and added to the errors which it had already. (Gouvea 1606₂, 61ra)

So, if we can believe our sources, apparently the books of Persian magic and soothsaying were brought to India by this mission. While all the other sources treat the two books as two different works, Gouvea considers them one and the same, perhaps because in the ecclesiastic books the *Parāsaman* immediately followed the *Ktābā d-Pāl/ Pālpustakam*, as it is also the case in MS Konat Syr 159.

⁴³ The manuscripts are Konat Syr 95, 98, 159, 192, and Venkadattu Syr 7. By now, these manuscripts are available with open access in the HMML Reading Room: <https://www.vhmml.org/readingRoom> (project numbers KONA 01 00095; KONA 01 00098; KONA 01 00159; KONA 01 00192; APSTCH KOTT1 01 00007).

⁴⁴ Oral information from a descendent of such a priestly family. Unfortunately, he did not show the book to us.

A detailed study of these practices in the context of West Asian and Indian soothsaying and magical traditions is the subject of Theres Pattery's future Ph.D. thesis, whose results cannot be anticipated here. Our aim in including these details here was to convey this new information on Mar Denḥā, whose traces earlier scholarly literature had lost after his arrival in India.

Mar Abraham and Mar Šem'on

To date we have no information about the exact date of Mar Denḥā's death. If we can believe Schurhammer's report, Mar Thomas was still alive in 1536 (1934, 9–10; 1963, 338).⁴⁵ Mar Jacob died in Cochin, in 1552 (Wicki 1950, 412–13; see also Mundadan 1967, 147). It was at that date that a split occurred within the Church of the East. Part of it joined Rome, so that, besides the "Nestorian" Catholicosate of the East, another, "Chaldean," patriarchate in union with Rome was founded, headed by the patriarch Mar John Sulaqa (1553–55). Apparently, both parties sent bishops to India (Mar Aprem 1977, 24).⁴⁶ The first among the two patriarchs to send a prelate to India was the Nestorian Catholicos Šem'on VII Ishōyahb Bar Mama (1538/9–1558, see Murre-van den Berg 1999, 24243). The person whom he sent was called Mar Abraham. When precisely Mar Abraham arrived in Malabar is not known, but he must have already been there in 1556 (Thekkedath 1988, 37–40; Kollaparambil 1972, 83).⁴⁷ He is first mentioned anonymously as "a heretic, pretending to be a bishop, from the Nestorian sect" in a letter of Luis Fróis, S.J. (1532–1597) to the rector of Coimbra, dated 30 November 1557 (Wicki 1954, 717). A little later, Abdisho IV (1555–67), the successor of John Sulaqa murdered in 1555, sent the brother of John Sulaqa, Mar Joseph Sulaqa, to Malabar as a Chaldean bishop; although consecrated in 1555 or 1556, Mar Joseph could not reach India before the end of 1556, nor Malabar before 1558, when the Portuguese were finally alerted by the presence of Mar Abraham and allowed Mar Joseph, accompanied by another Chaldean bishop, Mar Eliyah, to occupy his see. However, Mar Joseph was captured, accused of Nestorianism, and the Inquisition sent him to Lisbon in 1562.

In 1558, Mar Abraham was captured and forced to confess the Catholic faith in Cochin. We had the good luck of discovering the Syriac text of Mar Abraham's confession of faith in the archives of the Mar Thoma Seminary in Kottayam, in MS Syr 6, at fol. 205rff. It begins with the following words:

Therefore I, the feeble Abraham who, in the grace of Christ Our Lord, but not according to merit, am the Metropolitan of Angamale, that is to say, of the Christians who were taught by Saint Thomas the beloved Apostle, one from the famous Twelve of the blessed Apostles, the Teachers of the four quarters of the world, who, in my flesh and soul have come forth to the Apostolic See of the Holy Catholic Church of Rome (literally: Romania), I, therefore, and all my diocese, we believe with all our heart unanimously and we confess with our mouth the following: That one is the true, omnipotent God, who is unchangeable, invisible, ineffable, incomprehensible, eternal Being, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, united and triple in the hypostases, ungenerated Father and from [...] and Son,

⁴⁵ The doubt arises from a difference between the texts of Schurhammer 1934, and 1963. In republishing his text of 1934, Schurhammer removed the name of Mar Thomas. Is this an accident, or is it because the name is not there in the documents and the identification with Mar Thomas is Schurhammer's interpretation?

⁴⁶ "Both the patriarchs were interested to send bishops to India, the Nestorian line to retain their domination and the new line to establish control over the Indian Church. The Indian Church also was only glad to receive them, perhaps not knowing the split that occurred in the East Syrian Church in 1552 A.D."

⁴⁷ All the local Church histories also tell the story of Mar Abraham having come first as a Nestorian (see Perczel-Kurukkoor 2011, 298–300).

who was born from the one Father, and Holy Spirit, who from the Father and the Son proceeds eternally; not from two who initiated [the Spirit's existence], and not from two outbreathings, but from the two of them as from only one principle and one outbreathing.⁴⁸

Mar Abraham was deported from Malabar and held in custody in the Portuguese-ruled Moçambique. Yet he managed to escape and to go to Mesopotamia, namely to Gazarta, to the Chaldean Patriarch Abdisho IV (1555–1570), who re-appointed him metropolitan, from where Mar Abraham continued his journey to Rome, to Pope Pius IV (Kollaparambil 1972, 83), by whom he was re-appointed again, and ordained in all the orders, including that of a bishop in 1565 (Thekkedath 1988, 48).⁴⁹ The consecration of Mar Abraham was performed by the Patriarch of Venice (F. Dionysio to E. Mercurian, Cochin, 2 January 1578, in Wicki 1970, 64).

From Rome, Mar Abraham returned to Mesopotamia and reached the Malabar Coast for the second time in 1568. Although he was once again detained in Goa on account of having no authorization from the Portuguese king, in 1570 he managed to escape and reached Kerala. From that time on, he governed the majority of the Malabar Christians until his death in 1597.⁵⁰

In the meantime, Mar Joseph was also allowed to return to Malabar once again in 1564, but was deported a second time in 1568, this time under the accusation of “simony and fake Catholicism.” He died in Rome in 1569, before his case could be examined.⁵¹

Yet, another bishop, with a strict Nestorian allegiance, named Mar Šem'on, also arrived in Kerala, probably in 1576.⁵² He is first mentioned in a letter of Francisco Dionysio, the rector of the Jesuit college in Cochin, to Melchior Dias, dated January 23, 1577, where Dionysio reports about a letter which he received from Mar Abraham, telling him that Šem'on had arrived from Ormuzd and claimed that he was from the Chaldean Church. Thenceforth, a bitter strife began between the two prelates. While Mar Abraham thought that the identity of the community could be maintained even if the Catholic dogmatic, disciplinary and liturgical principles were accepted, if only the Chaldean jurisdiction, the use of the Syriac language, and the liturgical prayers of the Church of the East were kept, Mar Šem'on rejected most of the innovations and wanted a full adherence to the jurisdictional, liturgical and canonical practice of the Church of the East (the Nestorian Church). Threatened by the presence of Mar Šem'on, Mar Abraham approached the Jesuits in Cochin and opened up his community, which was, until then, closed to the Roman mission, to their preaching. This caused Dionysio to exclaim that Mar Abraham “has placed in the hands of the Company himself and all his Christians” (F. Dionysio to E. Mercurian, Wicki 1970, 65).

While Mar Šem'on faced staunch opposition on the part of Mar Abraham and the Jesuit Fathers, he was protected by the Queen of Vadakkumkur (the Pepper Queen), south of the

⁴⁸ Compare this to the definition of the council of Lyons (AD 1274): *Spiritus Sanctus aeternaliter ex Patre et Filio, non tamquam ex duobus principiis, sed tamquam ex uno principio, non duabus spirationibus sed unica spiratione procedit* (“The Holy Spirit proceeds eternally from the Father and Son, not as from two principles, but as from one principle, not via two outbreathings but from a unique outbreathing”). It is unclear, though, whether this is the text that Mar Abraham had to sign in Cochin, or the one that later he signed when he was in Rome.

⁴⁹ Thekkedath, *History of Christianity in India*, vol. II, 48.

⁵⁰ The above reconstruction is a synthesis based on two accounts, that of Thekkedath (1988, 37–49), and of Van der Ploeg (1983, 8–15).

⁵¹ Narrative of F. Dionysio on the St Thomas Christians, Cochin, 4 January 1578, in Wicki 1970, 138. Dionysio claims that Mar Joseph died while on his way, but he had reached Rome, where he was exempted from the charges and died not much later. See Thekkedath 1988, 47.

⁵² This date is suggested by J. Thekkedath based on Francisco Dionysio's letter (cf. 1988, 50 and note 88). This is, therefore, a *terminus ante quem*. See also Beltrami 1933, 103.

Kingdom of Cochin, so that Mar Šem'on stayed in her kingdom, in Kadutthuruthy. He appointed as his Archdeacon the priest Jacob Nadakkal, from an aristocratic family of Muttuchira, near Kadutthuruthy.⁵³ Clearly, Mar Šem'on was inspired by and continued the strategies initiated by Mar Denhā. In 1583, two Franciscan monks coming from Macau took Mar Šem'on under their protection against the Jesuit resistance. In 1584 they took him to Rome, where it was allegedly discovered that he was an impostor, having been neither consecrated as bishop, nor as a priest.⁵⁴ He was confined to a Franciscan friary in Lisbon, from where he corresponded with his Archdeacon until the latter's death in 1593.⁵⁵ Mar Šem'on died in 1599, two years after Mar Abraham (Beltrami 1933, 107; Thekkedath, 1988 5051; Kollaparambil 1972, 83 and 105; and Mar Aprem 1977, 24). After his departure, his party was governed by his Archdeacon. The evidence of the Muttuchira inscription is to be understood against the historical background that has been outlined here.

Earlier Attempts at Deciphering and Translating the Muttuchira Inscription

The inscription was first treated by A.S. Ramanatha Ayar, who transcribed it in Tamil script (1930). He did not give a translation but only an interpretation. It was also transcribed in modern Malayalam characters by T. K. Joseph, based on an estampage of the inscription, where the shapes of the letters were painted,⁵⁶ and translated it first in a letter to H. Hosten SJ, dated January 6, 1926. Hosten published this translation with an interpretation in *Antiquities of San Thomé*.⁵⁷ Later T. K. Joseph revised the transcription and the translation (1930). However, the estampage was not made by T. K. Joseph himself. In a letter to Hosten he wrote: "I received estampages of the Muttuchira inscriptions, about a dozen" (Hosten 1936, 349). Moreover, the estampage was poorly executed and led to many errors. There is a new comprehensive study about the inscriptions and the Muttuchira monuments by Thomas Antony, based on both transcriptions (2015). Recently, István Perczel gave a new, alternative interpretation of the inscription. He followed T. K. Joseph's transcription but also tried to use a high-resolution photo, made by photographer Fabian da Costa in 2007, to emend those readings in the earlier deciphering, which he thought were giving impossible meanings (2018, 95–96). Yet, such a photo is misleading, and the new reading still contained many uncertainties and obvious mistakes, so that there was need of a new, more reliable estampage and of a new study. The new estampage was finally made by Saranya Chandran and Mishel Maria Johns on 28 August 2021, which permitted a reliable deciphering and a new study (see figures 3, 4 and 5).⁵⁸ Thus, what follows is a new reading and interpretation of the inscription, based on the new estampage.

⁵³ See Hosten 1936, 352, citing letters from T. K. Joseph and the Rev Peediyekal, a former vicar of the Muttuchira Church.

⁵⁴ See A. Gouvea 1606₂, 9r-10r. We guess that this information should not be believed.

⁵⁵ Priest Jacob was buried in the Holy Spirit Church of Muttuchira and his inscribed tombstone with the date was found in 1886. See Hosten 1936, 353.

⁵⁶ See a photo of the estampage in Joseph 1930: figure between pages 254 and 255.

⁵⁷ In general, the most detailed study on the Muttuchira inscription and the Persian Cross in Muttuchira is that of Hosten 1936, 341–63. T. K. Joseph's first translation of the inscription, which he modified later, can be found on pages 349–50. It is a bit confusing that Joseph 1930 gives a second, improved transcription and translation, while Hosten 1936 publishes T. K. Joseph's first, by then outdated, one.

⁵⁸ We thank Ms Mishel Maria Jones for her invaluable help.

A new Reading of the Muttuchira Inscription

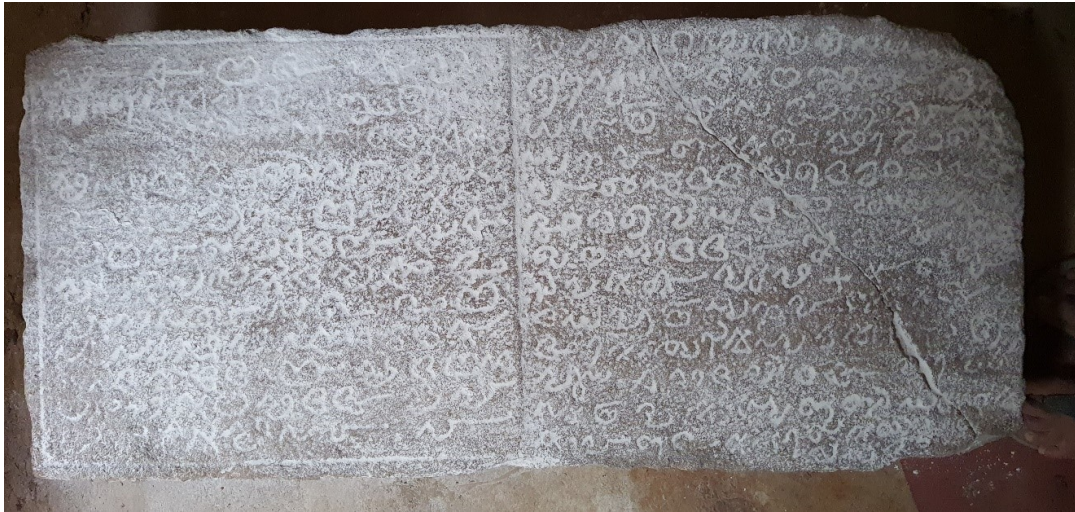


Figure 3 Estampage of the Muttuchira inscription by Saranya Chandran and Mishel Maria Johns

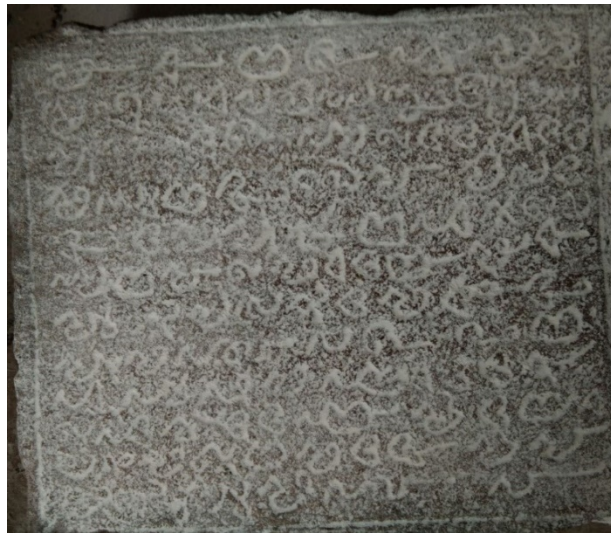


Figure 4 First compartment of the inscription

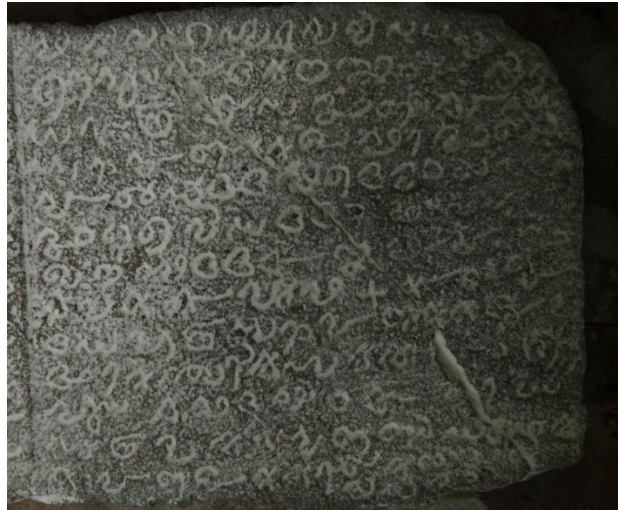


Figure 5 Second compartment of the inscription

Transcription of the Inscription in *vatteluttu* Characters

First compartment:

- 1 $\text{ശ്ശാശ്ശാ ക്കുശ്ശ ശ്ശശ്ശ}$
- 2 $\text{ശ്ശഹ ശ്ശാശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശ ശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശ}$
- 3 $\text{ശ്ശ ശ്ശാശ്ശ ക്കു ശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശ ശ്ശാശ്ശ}$
- 4 $\text{ശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശ ശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശ ശ്ശശ്ശ}$
- 5 $\text{ശ്ശ ശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശ ക്കുശ്ശശ്ശ}$
- 6 $\text{ശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശ ശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശ ശ്ശശ്ശ}$
- 7 $\text{ശ്ശ ക്കുശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശ ശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശ}$
- 8 $\text{ശ്ശശ്ശ ക്കുശ്ശശ്ശ ശ്ശശ്ശ}$
- 9 $\text{ശ്ശ ശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശ ശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശ}$
- 10 $\text{ശ്ശ ശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശ ശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശ}$
- 11 $\text{ശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശ ശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശ ശ്ശ}$
- 12 $\text{ശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശ ക്കുശ്ശ}$

Second compartment:

- 1 $\text{ശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശ ശ്ശാശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശ ശ്ശ}$
- 2 $\text{ശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശ ശ്ശാശ്ശ ക്കുശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശ}$
- 3 $\text{ശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശ ശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശ ശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശ}$
- 4 $\text{ശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശ ശ്ശ ശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശ}$
- 5 $\text{ശ്ശ ശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശ ശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശ}$
- 6 $\text{ശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശ ശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശ ശ്ശശ്ശ}$
- 7 $\text{ശ്ശ ശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശ ശ്ശശ്ശ}$
- 8 $\text{ശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശ + ക്കുശ്ശശ്ശ ശ്ശ}$
- 9 $\text{ശ്ശ ശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശ ശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശ ശ്ശശ്ശ}$
- 10 $\text{ശ്ശശ്ശ ക്കുശ്ശശ്ശ ശ്ശശ്ശ + ശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശ}$
- 11 $\text{ശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശ ശ്ശ ശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശ}$
- 12 $\text{ശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശ}$
- 13 $\text{ശ്ശ ശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശ}$
- 14 ശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശ

Transcription of the *vatteluttu* Text in Modern Malayalam Characters

First compartment:

- 1 മാറാണ ഈചൊ മിചി
- 2 $\text{യഹ പെരനനിട്ശ ശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശ}$
- 3 $\text{ശ്ശ മാത ഈ ലൈതത ചൃതത}$
- 4 $\text{മത്തുന തിളിവാ നിരിത}$
- 5 $\text{തി തമപ്പുരാണറെ കലപ}$
- 6 $\text{പെണയാല മരതാണാ മാറാ}$
- 7 $\text{ശ്ശ കീവരിക്കീത പിരാതി}$
- 8 യുമ കടി ഇതിണ
- 9 റെ ചൊഴമ പൊരതതകാ
- 10 $\text{ല തൊചാതത പൊയി തണറെ}$

Second compartment:

- 1 $\text{മിചിയഹ പെരനനിട്ശ ശ്ശ}$
- 2 $\text{ശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശ മാത കണി ഞായാറ}$
- 3 $\text{ശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശ മാറു തിളിവാടെ}$
- 4 $\text{പെരനാളകക ഇ മര തിളി}$
- 5 $\text{വാ എടുതത മരതതിള പൊണ}$
- 6 $\text{തിഞ്ഞെ നിരിതതി മാറു ചൊമാ}$
- 7 ഒണ മെതതറാണുമ പാതി
- 8 $\text{രി യാക്കോവുമ + കാല ഇ}$
- 9 $\text{ത ശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശ പെരനാളകക ഇ ഉറ}$
- 10 $\text{തിരകകളരിച വെചച + ശ്ശശ്ശശ്ശ}$

11 മരമകെണ മാതതായി പാ
12 തിരിയുമ കടാ |

11 വൃശാമ മാത മീണ ഞായറു ൨൧
12 രുന തുക്കവെള്ളി ആഴച
13 ച നാള ഇകകരില തിളിവാ
14 ണിരിതതി

Modern Malayalam Translation

ക്രിസ്തുവർഷം 1528 ൽ തമ്പുരാന്റെ കല്പനപ്രകാരം മാർ ദെൻഹാ എന്ന മാർ അപ്പായും ഗീവർഗ്ഗീസ്സ് പാതിരിയും ചേർന്ന് ഈ നിലത്ത് വിശുദ്ധ ശ്ലീവാ സ്ഥാപിച്ചു. ഇതിനു ശേഷം അവർ (മാർ ദെൻഹായും ഗീവർഗ്ഗീസ്സ് പാതിരിയും) തന്റെ മരുമകൻ മാത്തു പാതിരിയോടൊപ്പം പോർത്തുകൽ [ആധിപത്യത്തിലുള്ള] ദേശത്ത് പോയി | ക്രിസ്തുവർഷം 1580 ലെ കന്നി മാസം 13 നു മാർ ശ്ലീവായുടെ പെരുന്നാൾക്ക് മാർ ശൈമൊൻ മെത്രാനും യാക്കോബ് പാതിരിയും ചേർന്ന് ഈ മര ശ്ലീവാ എടുത്ത് മരത്തിൽ പൊന്തിച്ച് നിറുത്തി. [ക്രിസ്തുവർഷം] ഇതേ കാലം പതിനെട്ടാം പെരുന്നാൾക്ക് <ധനു- ഡിസംബർ> ഈ അതിരുകരിക്ക് വെച്ചു. [ക്രിസ്തുവർഷം] 1581 ലെ മീനമാസം 24 ദുഃഖവെള്ളിയാഴ്ച ദിവസം ഈ കരയിൽ (തറയിൽ) ശ്ലീവാ സ്ഥാപിച്ചു.

English Translation

In the year 1528 from the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, at this place, by the order of the Lord, Mār Tānā [Denhā] the Mār Avu, together with Kīvarikī [Givargis] pirāti erected a holy cross. After that, they [that is, Mar Denhā and Givargis,] and his [Givargis'] nephew, Māttāyi [Mattai] pātiri, went to the Portuguese [dominated] land. | In the year 1580 from the birth of Christ, on the 13th of the month of Kanni [September], on the feast of the Holy Cross, the bishop Māru Cemāon [Šem'on] and Yākōv pātiri took this wooden cross, raised it on wood⁵⁹ and erected it. In the same year [from the birth of Christ],⁶⁰ at the feast of 18 <Dhanu=December>, they placed this Bleeding Cross. In the year 1581 [from the birth of Christ],⁶¹ the 24th of the month of Mīnam [=March], on Holy Friday, they erected a cross on this basement.

General Notes

1. The inscription is written in *vaṭṭeluttu* characters with some peculiarities. Namely, the stone-carver used an ornamental style, often adding an initial long ear to the character, which may lead to misreadings.
2. Apparently the stone carver was given the task of engraving a given text, perhaps prepared for him on palm-leaves, within a given space. He divided the granite slab into two compartments and started to carve. First, he used the available space quite liberally, shaping large calligraphic letters, which has led to a lack of space as he was approaching the end of the text. Thus, while the first compartment contains 12 lines and 30 words, the second compartment contains 14 lines and 39 words. Also, the expressions in the second compartment have been abbreviated to fit the space. As he was approaching the end, the stone carver even omitted essential parts, which the one who tries to decode the inscription must add to make the text comprehensible. Thus,

⁵⁹ That is, on a wooden basement.

⁶⁰ Apparently, this is the meaning of the sign of the cross before the date. See below, in the special notes.

⁶¹ Abbreviated by a cross.

the text in the first compartment is much clearer than that of the second compartment and the difficulties accumulate as one approaches the end of the text.

3. There were also a few misreadings in the earlier attempts, which here we tried to correct.
4. Recent research on the early modern history of the Syrian Christian community, including the SRITE project for exploring, digitizing, and cataloguing the manuscript archives of the Indian Syrian Christian community,⁶² has revealed new data on the context of the inscription, which had remained unknown to the twentieth-century scholars dealing with it. So, our notes are not only philological but also historical.
5. Set in this context, the inscription proves to be a major document for understanding the early modern history of the Syrian Christian community of Kerala.
6. István Perczel's earlier translation was also based on T. K. Joseph's modern Malayalam transcription. It also contained a couple of conjectures based on Fabian da Costa's high-resolution photograph, which cannot be maintained. Thus, it is revised here.

Specific Notes

In the specific notes below, we are commenting on each part of the inscription, referring to the earlier readings, too.

- “In the year 1528 from the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, at this place, by the order of the Lord, Mār *Tānā* [Denḥā] the Mār *Avu*...”

Joseph₁: “By the command of the king [of Kaṭutturutti], in 1528 A.D., Mar Denaha, and Mar Abo...” Joseph₂: ... “Mar Tana (Denha) and Mar Avu (Abo)...” Ayar: “under the orders of the Patriarch (*tamburān*).” Antony: “by the command of the Thamburan (king of Kaduthuruthy? Or is it the Lord Almighty?).”

Tampurān, meaning “Lord,” is one of the standard names of God in Malayalam, used by all the denominations. While it can mean a king, it is never used for the patriarch. Here, quite obviously, it means God.⁶³

Hosten: “Mar Tana ... must have been the Mar Dinha of 1504. Who was Mar Abo? Fontana ... and Lucas de S. Catharina ... say that “a Dominican, Ambrose, was Archbishop of the St. Thomas Christians in about 1526” “... Might this ‘Ambrosio’ be concealed under the name Abo ...?” (1936, 354); Ramanatha Ayar: “it enumerates a few bishops who had been in charge of the Syrian church of Malabar in the beginning of the sixteenth century A. D., such as Mār Denha and Mār Givargis (George)” (1930, 76).

Thus, Ramanatha Ayar skips “Mār Avu,” which he read as “Marayū,” due to the similarity of the consonantal sign *wa* with that of *ya* in the *vaṭṭeluttu* script. Most probably he thought that “Marayū” would be the title of Givargis pātiri and identified it with the honorary title Mar (“Lord”) of Syrian Christian bishops. Hosten, too, tried to find a bishop whose name it could be. Yet, apparently, “Mār Avu” is not a name but means “Mār Abbā” (pronounced as “Mār Awā,” in the East Syriac dialect), meaning “Holy Father,” that is, “bishop.” See above, concerning the arrival of East Syriac bishops, specifically of Mar Denḥā.

- “...together with *Kīvarikūt* [Givargis] *pirāti*...”

⁶² See *Digitization of Syriac Manuscripts in Southern India*, last accessed on 29 January 2024. <https://cems.ceu.edu/digitization-syriac-manuscripts-southern-india>.

⁶³ On this, see in more detail Perczel 2018, 97.

Pirāti is an error of the stone-carver and stands instead of *pātiri*, derived from the Portuguese word *padre*, “Father.” Hosten cites T.K. Joseph’s translation: “together with Fra/Friar George.” Hosten thought that this “Friar George” might have been a Franciscan friar, because of the Portuguese title *padre*. He speculated that the inscription might testify to very cordial relations between the local Christians and the Latin Church. Ramanatha Ayar writes “Mār Givargis,” that is, he took him for a bishop. Apparently, he interpreted the Marayu read by him in this way. Yet, apparently, the term *pātiri/padre* must have been adopted at an early date to designate simply “priest,” independently of their relation to the Latin Church as, in the same Muttuchira inscription, in the right compartment, the priest Jacob, the archdeacon of the Nestorian bishop Mar Šem’on, is also called *pātiri*. Also, in the apologetic Church history cited above, the Kadamattam priest, now called *Kāṭamattattu kattanār*, is called *Kāṭamattattukaran pātiri*, meaning the same thing. So, *pātiri* simply means “priest,” without any further connotation. The inscription writes his name as *Kīvarikīt*, which was most probably pronounced as *Kīvarikīs*, as the *vaṭṭeluttu ta* grapheme can represent several phonemes, namely *ta*, *tha*, *da*, *dha*, and *sa*.

This Givargīs *pātiri* must have been the archdeacon of the Nestorian bishop Mar Denḥā. Thus, he was of the Pakālōmattam family of the archdeacons. It would be difficult to identify him with George Pakālōmattam, the first Archdeacon, who in 1490, went to bring the Nestorian bishops to India, as that was 38 years earlier. For this reason, I. Perczel identified this Givargis *pātiri* with George the Elder, the nephew of the first Archdeacon, who invited Mar Abraham to India sometime in the early 1550s (2018, 101).

- “... erected a holy cross.” (എതമത്തുന തിളിവാ നിരിതതി).

തിളിവാ—*tiḷivā* should be pronounced as *siḷivā* (see previous note). This is derived from the Syriac ܫܠܝܒܐ—*šlivā*, ‘cross’, according to the East Syriac pronunciation. The inscription calls the open-air crosses *tiḷivā/siḷivā*.

- “After that, they [that is, Mar Denḥā and Givargis,] and his [Givargis’] nephew, *Mattāyi* [Mattai] *pātiri*, went to the Portuguese [dominated] land...”

Joseph_{1,2}: “Thereafter he [Fra George] went to Portugal together with his nephew, Father Matthew.” Ramanatha Ayar: “After them is mentioned Mattāyi pādiri, who went to Portugal and who is represented as the *marumagaṇ* of one of the bishops.” I. Perczel: “That he [Archdeacon George] went to Portugal together with one of his nephews is not surprising, although I do not know about other sources mentioning this trip.”

Indeed, there is no data of such a trip anywhere in our sources and there is a much simpler interpretation of this statement. We think that the inscription does not testify to a putative travel of Givargis and Mattai to Portugal but simply speaks about “the Portuguese [dominated] land,” meaning by this the Cochin kingdom, distinguishing it from Vadakkumkur, over which the Portuguese had no sway. As seen above, Mar Denḥā stayed in Kadamattam, while the headquarters and the residence of the Pakālōmattam family was in Kuravilangad, both in the Cochin kingdom, which we think is meant by “Portuguese [dominated] land” here.

- “In the year 1580 from the birth of Christ, on the 13th of the month of Kaṇṇi [September], on the feast of the Holy Cross...”

This shows that Mar Šem’on and the priest Jacob were celebrating the Feast of Mar Šlibā, the Holy Cross, on the 13th of September, according to the custom of the Church of the East (Nestor-

ian Church), the Roman calendar placing it on the 14th of the same month. Later, in 1599, a decree of the Synod of Diamper ordered the change of the date. Mar Abraham had agreed with the Jesuits to celebrate the Catholic feasts, but it is unclear when this agreement took place.

- “... the bishop *Māru Cemāon* [Šem’on] and *Yākōv pātiri* took this wooden cross, raised it on wood and erected it.”

Joseph₁: “This holy cross [the Persian cross] was taken and set up [on the wall] covered with wood [*reredos*] by Bishop Mar Simeon and Father Jacob”; Joseph₂: “this holy cross was taken, covered with wood, and set up by Bishop Mar Simeon and Father Jacob”; Ramanatha Ayar: “The bishop Mar Simeon, together with his vicar (*pāḍiri*) Jacob is said to have taken out this wooden cross (*mara-tiḷivā*)” (1930, 76); I. Perczel: “... having taken this Mār Siḷivā which had been broken and assembled, erected it.”

Here, Ramanatha Ayar’s reading *i mara tiḷivā* is correct over against T. K. Joseph’s *i Mār Tiḷivā* (ഇ മാര് തിളിവ) followed also by I. Perczel, so that the text speaks about a “wooden cross” and not a “holy cross.” Also, T. K. Joseph had read, based on his estampage, *marattil potiñña*, which he interpreted as ‘covered by wood’, and thought that, as there was a Persian cross (a granite copy of the bas-relief ‘Bleeding Cross’ at Saint Thomas Mount in Mylapore, Chennai), which was found in the altar of the church in a wooden frame, this Mār Siḷivā could refer to the Persian cross. Yet, the Persian cross is called in the next session *udirakkuricu*, ‘Bleeding cross’, using the European loanword *kuricu* derived apparently from the Latin *crux*, *crucis*, rather than from the Portuguese *cruz*, signifying “cross.” Thus, the text clearly distinguishes between the open-air crosses, which it calls with a Syro-Malayalam term Mār Tiḷivā/Siḷivā, and the bas-relief Bleeding Cross, for which it uses a Luso-Malayalam term *udirakkuricu*. Also, the text distinguishes between the “erection” of the open-air crosses, for which it uses the Malayalam verb *niṛittuka/niṛuttuka* (നിറത്തുക/നിറുത്തുക), from the “placement” (in the altar) of the Persian cross, for which it uses the Malayalam verb *vekkuka* (വെക്കുക). Apparently, this cross had earlier fallen and was re-erected in 1580.

Where we are reading, based on the new estampage, *marattil poṅtiññū* (മാരതതിള പൊങ്ങിത്ത): “raised it on wood,” T. K. Joseph had read *marattil potiñña*: “covered by wood.” Ramanatha Ayar’s reading was *mandil (mardil) podiñe*. With the *mandil* variant this would have meant “covered by sand.” Apparently, both Joseph and Ayar were working on the same estampage, and did not see the letter *na* at the end of line 5. Perczel, dissatisfied with the apparent lack of sense of these solutions, tried to read the words based on a high-resolution photo made by Fabian da Costa in 2007 and came up with a fantastic *mareducānē pōrudiñña* reading, which he interpreted as “which had been broken and assembled.” This reading is not justified by the new estampage. Based on the new reading, by 1580, the same wooden cross originally erected by Mar Denḥā and Givargis Pakālōmattam needed to be renewed and was erected on a wooden basement.

- “In the same year [from the birth of Christ], at the feast of 18 <Dhanu=December>, they placed this Bleeding Cross.”

Joseph₁: “On the feast of the 18th of December (?), this – *tāra* (?) [the bell-metal cross (?)] was set up”. Joseph₂: “The same year on the feast of the 18th (December) this bleeding cross ... was placed.” Ramanatha Ayar does not comment on this part of the inscription. Originally, T. K. Joseph was not able to read the word *udirakkuricu*, “Bleeding Cross”, hence the speculations,

which he corrected later. Thus, the inscription also commemorates that the Persian Cross was placed in the altar “on the Feast of the 18th of the same year.” This feast is the Catholic Feast of the Expectation of our Lady on 18 December, eight days before Christmas, which, in India, had also become the Feast of the Bleeding Cross. In fact, it was reported that the bas-relief Persian Cross in Mailapur, Chennai, unearthed in 1547 at Saint Thomas Mount having petrified drops of blood on it, which was placed in the church newly built there by the Portuguese and dedicated to the Expectation, was repeatedly sweating and bleeding at the Feast of the Expectation in 1547 and, thereon, almost every year.⁶⁴ Thus we see the staunch Nestorian opposition of Mar Šem’on and Jacob Nadakkal celebrating a Catholic feast, introduced with great solemnity by the Portuguese.

Here the engraver, feeling that he was running out of space, used the abbreviation + for *miciyahaperanniṭṭū* (മിചിയഹറ പെറന്നിട്) “from the birth of Christ.” For the same reason, he also omitted the month, which should have been indicated, and wrote only that the Bleeding Cross was placed (in the altar) “at the feast of 18” (see figure 6).



Figure 66 The Muttuchira Persian Cross. Foto Fabian da Costa.

- “In the year 1581 [from the birth of Christ], the 24th of the month of Mīnam, on Holy Friday, they erected a cross on this basement.”

Joseph: “On Good Friday, Mīnam 29, 1581, this granite cross was erected.” Joseph: “This granite cross was set up on Good Friday, 29th March 1581.” Ramanatha Ayar: “[Mār Simeon and *pāḍiri* Jacob] “have consecrated a stone cross (*kariṅgal-tiḷivā*) instead, on Good Friday, the 29th day of

⁶⁴ See Hosten 1936, 350, n. 1, and Mundadan 1984, 422-24. See also the narrative of F. Dionysio on the St Thomas Christians, 4 January 1578 in Wicki 1970, 135 on the Cross sweating during three hours on 18 December 1576.

Mīnam in A. D. 1581.” I. Perczel: “In 1581, on the 24th of the month of *Mīnam* [March], on Holy Friday, they erected this granite *siivā* [cross].”

Here again, the scribe has abbreviated by a cross symbol the expression “from the birth of Christ.” Both T.K. Joseph and Ramanatha Ayar had read the date 29 Mīnam (March according to the “New Counting”). Yet in the year 1581, Good Friday fell on March 24. It is true that the number 24 (௨௪) in the inscription could be easily read as 29 (௨௯), even the second digit resembles 9 (௯), rather than 4 (௪), as the number has a long calligraphic introductory ear. However, it is the habit of the scribe of the inscription to start the letters with such introductory lines. This is difficult to decide. So, the date is either 24, which is the correct date for Holy Friday in 1581 as has been suggested by Perczel, or the scribe misread the text that he had to carve and missed ௪ for ௯.

Both T. K. Joseph and Ramanatha Ayar had read *ikkariṅgal tiḷivā*, “this granite cross,” and they were followed by Antony and Perczel. Yet, there is no *ṅga* in the inscription, which says *ikkariḷ tiḷivā nīritti*. According to Gundert’s dictionary, *kara* (கா) is a polyvalent word that can mean “shore,” “riverside,” “boundary,” “land,” even “parish” (1872, 217). In Tamil, the word *karai* (கரை) has approximately the same meanings. Yet, Gundert notes that the original meaning of the Dravidian word is “irregular surface,” “hillock.” At the same time, *karu* (கரு) as an adjective means “black,” “hard.” and, as a noun, “figure,” “mould,” “embryo,” “the best or inmost part” (1872, 221). However, none of these meanings would give a satisfactory sense to the sentence. It would be obvious to translate the locative *ikkariḷ* as “at this place,” “land,” “parish,” but this would be pleonastic, as the previous story relates the erection of subsequent crosses at this very place and it would be unclear why Mar Šem’on and *Yākōvpātiri* would have replaced the cross that they had erected half a year earlier on a wooden basement, were it not for the fact that they changed something. However, in Tamil, *karu* (கரு) has a larger array of meanings, including those of “central elevation,” “foundation,” “basement,” and we think that this is the meaning of the locative *ikkariḷ* here: “on this basement.”⁶⁵ In fact, in the sixteenth century, Tamil and Malayalam were much less divergent than they are now. Apparently, the expression is in parallel with the *marattil poṅtiññū* of the previous story of erecting a wooden cross on a wooden basement, so that the inscription celebrates that Mar Šem’on and *Yākōv pātiri* erected in 1581, at the feast of Holy Friday, a new cross on a new, obviously granite, basement. Most probably, the new cross was already made also in granite, so that the previous interpreters had caught the meaning of the sentence even without correctly deciphering the text (see figure 7).

⁶⁵ See *Tamil Dictionary*. Last accessed on July 2, 2024. <https://agarathi.com/word/%e0%ae%95%e0%ae%b0%e0%af%81>.



Figure 7 The present granite cross in front of the Muttuchira church. According to the inscription on its basement, it was erected in 1624. Foto Fabian da Costa.

Conclusions

The Muttuchira granite inscription, which we have tried to decipher and analyse here, is a major document of the early modern history of the Kerala Syrian/St Thomas Christian community. It enlightens several points that had remained obscure in the sixteenth-century history of the Indian Syrian Christian community and of its interactions with the Portuguese colonisers. On the other hand, interpreted against the background of the documents cited in the Introduction to this study, its details become more comprehensible.

The inscription tells the story of successive erections of crosses in Muttuchira, one of the centres of the resistance against the Portuguese colonial pressure and against the Latinising tendencies, a place in the small kingdom of Vadakkumkur, outside the Cochin kingdom, which the inscription calls “Portuguese (dominated) land.” This region, south of the Cochin kingdom and north of the diocese of Kollam, was the diocese ruled by Mar Denḥā when the three East Syriac prelates, surviving out of the original five who were there in 1504 when Mar Denḥā wrote his letter to Catholicos Mar Eliyah V, “divided among them the land,” in the words of João de Barros. This region that was outside the Cochin kingdom and coastal Kollam ruled by the Portuguese, had become the centre of the anti-Portuguese and anti-Latin resistance, so that it was only natural that later the staunch Nestorian Mar Šem’ōn also chose it for his headquarters.

Crosses are the most symbolic emblems of the community. The erection of an open-air cross was the first act of building a new church, that is, of founding a new parish. The open-air cross stood and still stands in front of the main entrance to the church, on its Western side. It has been suggested that this custom was a European influence, perhaps adopted from

Portuguese Catholic practice (Reitz 2001; Perczel 2016, 43–45). Yet, the Muttuchira inscription does not confirm this view. In 1528, when the first Muttuchira wooden cross was erected, the Portuguese presence was a fresh novelty. Moreover, Mar Denḥā who erected it, was a staunch opponent of the European innovations. While it is true that, the Nestorian stand of those who ordered the inscription—namely of Mar Šem'on and of the priest Jacob Nadakkal— notwithstanding, the inscription testifies to strong Portuguese influence (such as the usage of the AD calculus, the identification of the Malayalam months with the European ones, and the celebration of the feast of the Bleeding Cross on December 18), this mirrors a late sixteenth-century situation and cannot be projected back to 1528.

The first cross, a wooden one, was erected by Mar Denḥā and Givargis Pakālōmaṭṭam. This is an important fact to realize, as historians had supposed that Mar Denḥā had died shortly after his arrival (Schurhammer 1934, 9–10; 1963, 338). However, not only do we find him alive in 1528, but concurrent data—partly cited in the Introduction—show that he animated the anti-Portuguese resistance of the local Christians, while Mar Jacob and Mar Thomas adopted a conciliatory attitude. Thus, Mar Thomas and Mar Jacob, who had nothing to fear from the Portuguese, dwelled in the coastal areas and occupied the sees of Cranganore/Kodungallur and Kollam, while Mar Denḥā chose as his see Muttuchira, outside the Cochin kingdom dominated by the Portuguese. The next information about the move of Mar Denḥā and Givargis “to the Portuguese (dominated) land,” that is, to the kingdom of Cochin, indicates that Muttuchira temporarily lost its importance as the hub for the anti-Portuguese resistance. In his latest period we find Mar Denḥā in Kadamattam, where he was also buried in the wall of the church.

Muttuchira regained this significance when it became the residence of Mar Šem'on. This event was apparently commemorated by the re-erection of the earlier cross on a new wooden basement and by the placement of a granite copy of the Mailapur Persian cross on the altar. Probably, Mar Šem'on brought this Persian cross, one of the treasured relics of the community, from somewhere else. Apparently, the financial situation of the Muttuchira community had permitted that, only half a year after these events, the wooden cross could be replaced by a granite one, raised on a new, granite basement, an event for the commemoration of which our inscription was written. The inscription also permits us to draw a conclusion for the dating of the granite crosses that can be seen in front of many ancient churches in Kerala. Most probably, none of them are older than the late sixteenth century. Just like in Muttuchira, they must have replaced older wooden crosses.

This new reading of the Muttuchira inscription, combined with the testimony of an array of documents, partly known and partly newly found, written in Malayalam, Syriac, and Portuguese, will permit us to rewrite the history of the East Syriac missions of 1490 and 1503, including that of the activity in India of the bishops and their local interlocutors, as well as the survival of their heritage in the sixteenth, seventeenth centuries. This history had been studied hitherto only through the distorting mirror of the European (mainly Portuguese) sources. The present study, based on larger and more variegated material than many previous ones, intends to be just one more step in this post-colonial rewriting process.

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Fragment of the “Persian Book of Medicine” (*Parāsaman*), Syriac

MS Konat Syr 159, fol. 285rv, available open access in the HMML Reading Room: <https://www.vhmml.org/readingRoom> (project no. KONA 01 00159).

Mar Abraham's confession of Catholic faith, Syriac

MS Mar Thoma Theological Seminary, Kottayam, Syriac 6, fol. 205r–210v, available with open access in the HMML Reading Room: <https://www.vhmml.org/readingRoom> (project no. APSTCH MTS 01 00006).

Inscriptions

Muttuchira inscription, Malayalam, *vaṭṭeluttu* script

Estampage made by Saranya Chandran and Mishel Maria Johnson on August 28, 2021, Figures 3–5, transcription in Unicode *vaṭṭeluttu* characters and in Modern Malayalam script, Modern Malayalam and English translations, pp. 17–19 in this study.

Also, Saranya Chandran and István Perczel. 2023. “*Muṭṭuciṛa likhitam oru punarvāyam: Suriyāni kristyānikaḷum yurōpyan miṣaṇarimārum tammiluḷḷa ādyakāla vinimayaṅṅal*,” see below, pp. 139–39.

Inscription commemorating the finding of the bones of Mar Denḥā, Syriac and Malayalam

Inscription in the southern wall of the Kadamattam church, Figure 2, transcription in West Syriac *Serto* and Modern Malayalam scripts, and English translation, pp. 12–13 in this study.

Also, Saranya Chandran and István Perczel. 2023. “*Muṭṭuciṛa likhitam oru punarvāyam: Suriyāni kristyānikaḷum yurōpyan miṣaṇarimārum tammiluḷḷa ādyakāla vinimayaṅṅal*,” see below, pp. 144–46.

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