

The first Mesopotamian migration to Kerala: 345 CE

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Introduction

The arrival in Kerala of a large cohort of settlers from Mesopotamia¹ in the 4th century is considered the second most important landmark in the historical narrative of the Syrian Christians of Kerala.² According to the Jacobite Syrian narratives, this migration was instrumental in introducing the fundamentals of their religion, such as Syriac Christian doctrine, liturgy, rite, and practices among the Christians of the region formerly evangelised by St. Thomas Apostle. This remote, nascent community of Christians that later came to be known as the ‘Syrian Christians of Malabar’, also trace to this event, their re-establishment as an ecclesiastically ordered ‘Church’ under the See of Antioch, and the commencement of their links with Antioch, the third most important centres of Christianity after Alexandria and Rome. One of the most important elements of this link was the introduction of the Aramaic-Syriac language as the medium in which all religious activity was to be conducted, its significance and sanctity enhanced by the fact that this was the language in which Christ himself had operated in his earthly life.

¹ Though the settlers were drawn from various cities in the region, this migration will be referred to as the ‘Edessan migration’, as it was led by the bishop of Edessa.

² The ‘Syrian Christians of Kerala’ is a term used by many denominations of Christians in Kerala. During the Portuguese colonial period, the whole Church were reduced to Rome in 1599, but they rebelled against this and rejected Rome in 1653. However, a small faction broke away and returned to Rome forming a new church, referred to as the ‘Romo-Syrians’ and identified by their use of the Latin Rite (or Latin Rite translated into Syriac). Later, the mid-19th century of the British colonial period saw the formation of the Chaldean Syrian Church following the East Syriac Rite. In the last decades of the 19th c., under the reformatory influence of Protestants, a second faction seceded from the old Syrian Christian community and formed the (Reformed) Mar Thoma Syrian Church, and using a liturgy derived from the Syrian Orthodox, but adapted to reflect Protestant dogmas such as the rejection of the intercession of Saints etc. In the early years of the 20th c., a third schism took place when a considerable part of broke away to form the Indian Orthodox Church (also known as *Orthodox Syrian Church*), adopting a nationalistic and independent identity, yet keeping the Syriac liturgy with the mention of the Patriarch of Antioch expurgated. While these five Churches retain the ‘Syrian’ identity in their heritage to a greater or lesser extent, the Syrian Orthodox Church of Kerala continue to be under the See of Antioch and follow the Syriac liturgy. The pejorative term ‘Jacobite’ was added to its name during the struggle for separate identity during the late-19th c. schism, Syrian Orthodox Church forming a strong new denomination but was brought under Rome. This paper is about the narrative history of that Church which Jacobite denomination of

SC literature narrates a sequence of events which they maintain, ultimately triggered the migration from Mesopotamia to what was to them an unheard of, remote, and distant place. This began in the second century, when the nascent small congregations of Christians established in south India began to suffer a slow ‘termination of the priests’ ordained by the Apostle Thomas, and the passing away of ‘knowledgeable teachers.’³

This crisis was aggravated by arrival in south India, of the Persian ‘Prophet’ Mani, and the propagation of his religion through coercive methods.

The Manichaean apostasy of the St. Thomas Christians

Mani

‘Manichaeism’ was a kind of Gnostic-dualistic⁴ religion that offered salvation through special knowledge of spiritual truth revealed only the elect few, and Mani presented himself as the last prophet after the Buddha, Zoroaster and Jesus, and like them, divinely ordained. In many respects his enterprise ran parallel to that of Jesus, in claiming to have received his commission through an angel’s ‘annunciation’, self-revealing baptism, and the manner of his death.

Mani (216–277CE) began propagating his new religion in Mesopotamia-Persia regions, claiming that he was an apostle of Jesus Christ, or alternatively that he himself was either the ‘new Messiah’ or the ‘last Prophet’. Mani structured his religion along the same lines as Christianity, appointing twelve ‘apostles’ and seventy-two ‘evangelists’ mirroring those of Christ.⁵ He performed supernatural feats and converted many to his religion, including for a short time, his contemporary, the Emperor Sapor I of Persia.⁶ In practice, it was a syncretic religion which adopted the beliefs and practices of whatever religious and cultural contexts into which it was introduced, and in India it took on a predominantly Hindu flavour.⁷

³ Vettikunnel LL5,12-13.

⁴ ‘Dualism’ believed in the world being under the opposing principles of the beneficent divine and the destructive demonic. For a brief account, see Ugo Bianchi in: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/dualism-religion/Functions-of-religious-dualism>

⁵ A.F.J. Klijn in his critical edition of the *Acts of Thomas*, quotes a verse from Mani: ‘Victory to our apostle, our Lord Mani and the Twelve, the seventy-two envoys (2003:33), showing the parallels with Christianity, where Christ too had twelve Apostles, and sent out seventy-two Evangelists.

⁶ Mani was eventually put to death on the orders of the same emperor in 277.

⁷ William Logan stated: ‘The doctrine of Manes could not fail of meeting with many admirers in India when he appeared in the character of Buddha, and of Christ..... Transmigration was one of his tenets, and the rule of the life and manners of his disciples was very severe and rigorous. They abstained from flesh, fish, eggs, wine, &c., and the ruler of every district and president of their assemblies was considered as Christ.’ Logan 1887:201. Logan, a British Civil Servant, long-time resident of Kerala and fluent in south Indian languages, is noted for his

Mani's work in South India

The JSC literature refers to Mani by a variety of epithets such as '*Mānikkā-vācākār*' and '*Mānikkāsa*' (*Pukadiyil* 1869:109) in Malayalam, and '*Manik-boshr*' in Syriac,⁸ almost invariably followed by the epithet 'the sorcerer'.

The identity of the individual referred to in the JSC literature as *mānikkā-vācākār* (often elided as *mānikkā-vācērā*) is significant for dating the events. According to the Kandanad Chronicle which treats the subject in some detail, Mani arrived on the Coromandel coast where he began his evangelical mission, converting significant numbers of people including the ruling elite. When the Christians resisted, they were persecuted which triggered the migration of large groups of Christians to the western regions in what is present-day Kerala.⁹ This sequence of events and later particulars affirm that Mani began his Indian career on the south-east or Coromandel coast, the flight of the persecuted Christians indicated only in the east-to-west direction.

The Christians' chose to make their way west along two well-established routes,¹⁰ the first being by ship around peninsular India, arriving at two named ports along the Kerala coast, Thiruvithamcode near the southern tip, and Kollam further up the west coast. The second route was on foot along the plains of the Pandya-country to Coimbatore, an important trading centre of pre-Roman fame, conveniently located near the only mountain pass. But instead of crossing over into Kerala, this group, which later came to be known as the Todas, took refuge in the 2200 metre (7300+feet) high Todamalai (Toda hills) in present-day Ootacamund.¹¹

exhaustive 2-volume *Malabar Manual*, detailing the history and geography and flora and fauna of the land, and its people, their religion and castes, language and culture, economic activities and trade.

⁸ Vettikkunnel, in the Syriac version of his letter to the Dutch Governor uses this term: '*Manik-boshr*'. In his translation of this letter, the Dutch chaplain Jacob Canter Visscher adds the epithet 'the *Tovenar*' (=sorcerer) (Drury 1862:106).

⁹ In the Kandanad Chronicle, see Cheeran 2008:28.

¹⁰ The densely forested high mountains of the Western Ghats that lie on the north-south axis would have posed a formidable barrier to such flights between the two regions.

¹¹ In 1599, when the Portuguese Catholic Archbishop Alexis de Menezes heard about the tradition of this long-lost tribe of St. Thomas Christians living in the mountains like pagans, he conceived the bold enterprise of finding them and returning them to Roman Catholic Christianity. He sent a party of clerics with guides, who with great difficulty scaled the mountains and arrived in Todamalai and met the people, but the place being most remote and lacking in basic amenities, the project was abandoned. See Anton Gouvea's *Jornada*, translated by Pius Malekandathil: (page no. to be added).

‘And when many more years had passed, there set out a sorcerer by the name Manikka-Vacher¹² opposing The Way and Baptism.¹³ And arriving in Mylapore, he performed many conjurings and forbade Baptismal immersions. And because of this all the leading figures of The Way¹⁴, and the Elders, abandoned Baptism and believed Manikka Vacher. And in those days those people who were not shaken, in order that they (themselves) would not abandon the Baptism and The Way,¹⁵ left Hindo-country¹⁶ and arrived in Malayala-country. And those in Malayala-country and those who had arrived from Hindu-country became relatives.’

(Vettikkunnel manuscript: LL7-14.)

Together those that had arrived from the east-coast and those in Malabar were, at this point reported to have constituted 160 families¹⁷ who stood firm as Christians, but because of the absence of priests and the dearth of knowledgeable and influential people to lead the community, as well as the attractions of the pagan milieu in which they lived, the state of the Christians at the time was perilous.¹⁸ When a dispute arose over whether to bury or cremate a deceased elder, the community suffered a catastrophic schism, with 96 families seceding to form a new community called ‘Followers of Mani’ or ‘Mānigrāmmakkār’.¹⁹ With this St. Thomas Christians on the Malabar coast were under threat of becoming extinct from being absorbed entirely back into Hinduism. The arrival of a large cohort of Mesopotamian Christians at this juncture therefore, is interpreted in the SC literature as a divine intervention.

The first Mesopotamian, or ‘Edessan’ migration: 345 CE

The city of Edessa plays a prominent role in the first Mesopotamian migration to Malabar in 345 CE. The city already had a pre-eminent position in the early 4th century Syrian Church of

¹² The name of this ‘prophet’ is given as ‘Mānīk-bōṣr’ in the Syriac version; the Persian ‘prophet’ Mani generally recognised as a subverter of mainstream Christianity in the 3rd c. is inferred.

¹³ ‘Opposing Baptism’= forbidding the initiatory Sacrament of baptism; in effect, proscribing Christianity.

¹⁴ The term used is ‘Mārgakkār’, or ‘Followers of the New Way’= Christianity.

¹⁵ That is, Christianity.

¹⁶ ‘Hindo-country’ signifies generally the Coromandel Coast. This, or ‘Ma’abar’ were the terms used by Arab traders to refer to the east coast till well into the late Medieval times (Yule 1866:258).

¹⁷ The combined number of Christians, from Mylapore and from Malabar.

¹⁸ See Karuthedathu ola, in Appendix xx.

¹⁹ No dates are given for these events. The approximate date of Mani’s work in India being some time when he was in his twenties, it can be surmised that that these events, if they took place at all, were spread over the fifty years of the second half of the 3rd century.

Antioch, as a leading centre of Christians in the region,²⁰ and the second important city after Antioch itself. According to the tradition of the Syrian Church, King Abgar of Edessa was the first king to adopt Christianity.²¹ Later, St. Thomas the Apostle was instrumental in sending Thaddaeus (or Adai in Syriac) to Edessa to preach the Gospel.²² St. Thomas the Apostle himself, according to tradition, passed through Mesopotamia on his way to India.²³

The SC narratives are consistent in all the essentials of the sequence of events relating to the 3rd century persecution by ‘Mani the sorcerer’, the migration of Christians from Mylapore and Kaveripoompattanam on the east coast, to Malabar, and the catastrophic apostasy of the major part of these Christians leaving only a small remnant of confessing Christians, as given in the following literature among others: the Karuthedathu ola manuscript (transcribed by T.K. Joseph 1929, given in full in [Appendix II](#); the 1720 Mathai Vettikkunnel manuscript²⁴; the 1771 *ola* (Para.11-13), Pukadiyil (1869:109-111), Kandanad Chronicle (Cheeran 2008:27-8) and Zachariah 1973: 28-9.

The narrative on the Edessian migration to Malabar in 345AD:

Bishop Joseph of Edessa is said to have had a vision in which St Thomas instructed him send help to the struggling community in Malabar.²⁵ This is the narrative as seen in Vettikkunnel LL13-33:

‘And consequently, of the cohort of one-hundred-and-sixty households, wholly ninety-six households abandoned The Way, and only 64 households stood steadfast in it.

²⁰ For the origins of Urhoi (Edessa), and an early ecclesiastical history of the city, see Michael the Syrian (Matti Moosa 2014:675-6).

²¹ Abgar *Ukkama* or ‘Abgar the Black’, was the king of the then semi-independent kingdom of Osrohoene, a tributary of the Roman Empire. Details of his letter to Jesus, Jesus’ reply, Abgar’s conversion etc. are contained in William Cureton’s *Ancient Syriac Documents relative to the establishment of Christianity in Edessa and the neighbouring countries* (1864). But Abgar’s successors afterwards relapsed into paganism. See also Pratten 1871:1.

²² See Pratten 1871:2.

²³ Bar Hebraeus mentions how St. Thomas passing through the Fort of King Ardashir in Tigris, met and debated with the Persian Magis, converting two leading men and their families to Christianity (Chediath’s Mal. trans of the *Chronicon* 1990 pp17-18).

²⁴ Mathai Vettikkunnel, a SC priest from Manarcadu, Kerala, wrote a letter to the Dutch commander in 1720, outlining the narrative history of the SC, and soliciting his help in defending the SC Church from the depredations of the Catholic Carmelite missionaries at the time. He submitted this letter to them in Malayalam and Syriac versions. J.P.N. Land translated the Syriac version into Latin, with a short commentary in his *Anecdota Syriaca* (Land 1862 Vol.1: Syriac text pp 24-30, Latin translation pp 123-127, titled *De rebus quae acciderunt Syris (in ripa Malabarica) eorumque historia* (=Concerning things that happened in Syria on the Malabar coast, and their history). The Malayalam version is in the archives of the University of Leiden (The Netherlands). Leiden University Archives Or. 1214; Special Collections. Unpublished Malayalam manuscript, translated by Sarah Knight, PhD thesis, 2020.

²⁵ Kandanad Chronicle (2008:28). See a translation of this section, in [Appendix xx.](#), by SK.

In those days in the Kingdom of *Urhai*²⁶, because of a vision seen in a dream by the Bishop who ruled there, by the decree of the Catholicos of the East²⁷ (they) deputed a merchant called Thoma²⁸, a Nasrani²⁹ who dwelt in *Urshilem*³⁰ to go to Malayala to conduct his business³¹ and also to see if there were Nasranis (there). And he boarded ship and disembarked in Malayalam.

After which he summoned the Nasranis from Maliankara and such other places in Tiruvankottu and met them.³² And after speaking to them abundantly, he reassured those sixty-four³³ households of Nasranis of Malayala as though they were his older and younger brothers, and strengthened them. And again, boarding the ship he set off and arrived in *Urishalem*,³⁴ and (he) going to the place where the seat of the Catholicos was, informed him³⁵ of all these affairs, after which, by the order issued by the Catholicos, from the region of *Urhai*,³⁶ the Bishop who governed [the place of Urhoi], along with many priests from Baghdad, Nineveh and *Urishalem*,³⁷ deacons, and Nasranis, and along with them women and young children, set off in the company of the merchant Thoma.³⁸ [They] boarded ship and arriving again in Malayala-country in the Year of Christ 345 disembarked in Maliankara.³⁹

[They] met and conferred with the 64 Nasrani households in Malayala-country, and went together and met the King then reigning over Malayala-country the Lord Chera-kon Perumal. And after having intimated to His Majesty's mind⁴⁰

²⁶ Urhai/Urhoi: = Syriac name for the city now called (Sanli) Urfa, previously known as Edessa, named after its Macedonian namesake. In the mid-4th c., the city was a Roman protectorate (even though the neighbouring city of Nisibis was conquered by the Persians), and its religious life can be gathered from the 4th century pilgrim Etheria's account. See McClure, M.L. and C.L. Feltoe *Etheria's Pilgrimage* 1919: Intro. p.xxv.

²⁷ Catholicos: a Greek term used in Eastern Roman Empire denoting financial or civil offices. After the Council of Nicaea (325), it denotes the suffragan bishop of the See of Antioch.

²⁸ 'Thoma' is the Hebrew/Syriac version of the name 'Thomas'. This merchant is known in SC narratives and ballads invariably as 'Knai Thoma', in clear distinction from *Thoma Sleeha*, 'Apostle Thomas'.

²⁹ *Nasrāni*: It is not certain when exactly this term came to be used to denote the St. Thomas Christians, the earlier term being '*mārgākkār*' (= 'Those of the Way'; See note 48 to L.1).

³⁰ *ūrišalēm* = Syriac rendering of Jerusalem, approximated in Malayalam as 'Yerushalem'.

³¹ An indication of ongoing trade between Mesopotamia and Malabar.

³² Kandanad Chronicle mentions (2008:28) that this Jerusalemite merchant Thoma identified them as Christians by the crosses they wore in their hair.

³³ The remaining sixty-four Christian families after the majority ninety-six had reverted to Hinduism (L14).

³⁴ At its inception, the seat of the Catholicos in the East was in Seleucia-Ctesiphon, but because of ongoing war between the Persian and Roman empires, the seat moved to Baghdad 8th century, and later to Maraga during the Ilkhanate. It was never in Jerusalem (Chediath 1990:22-25). But here in Vettikkunnel it is stated that Knai Thoma met the Catholicos in Jerusalem, for which there is no clear explanation.

³⁵ This sentence in the Syrian version reads differently as: 'Then [Thomas] showed to the Catholicos what the brothers in Malabar had promised', the meaning of which is unclear. There is no corresponding statement in the Malayalam version.

³⁶ According to the Canon 6 of Nicaea, the Bishopric of Urfa came under the See of Antioch. See also an interpretation of this Canon, in Schaff & Schaff 1910:275–276.

³⁷ The place names generally are rendered in their Syriac forms: *urhōi* (Urfa or Edessa), *bāgudās* (Baghdad), *ninuve* (Nineve) and *ūrišalēm* (Jerusalem) (L21-22).

³⁸ The dialogues between merchant Thoma and the Church hierarchs on two occasions are given in greater detail in the Syriac version of this letter by Vettikkunnel, written at the same time, 1720.

³⁹ This is the same port where St Thomas arrived in 52 (L.2-3), i.e. Kodungallur.

⁴⁰ Malayalam usage indicating deference to the ruler: *tiruvalattil ettichu* = literally, 'raised to his royal mind'.

all the circumstances, His Majesty in his pleasure⁴¹ granted sufficient and more land within the precincts of the land of Kodungallur.⁴² And after which, he granted the Syrian Nasranis innumerable royal privileges to last in perpetuity as long as the sun and moon remain,⁴³ that they may walk and conduct themselves accordingly, and execute as such. And [he] wrote these privileges on copper-plates, and the Lord Chera-kon Perumal in his pleasure gave it, which copper plates they straight away received, and these plates are to be seen (with us) until this day.⁴⁴ After this, within the precincts of the country of Kodungallur, land was marked out⁴⁵ and given to them, where they built a church. And aligning East-West and facing North and South, they also built 472 shop-fronts, and behind the shop-fronts (as many) dwelling houses and lived in accordance with The Way with humility and courtesy for many ages.'

The SC sources are consistent in the name, titles and authority of the hierarch who sent the party, as the Patriarch of Antioch (Eustadius in Pukadiyil 1969:113-4), in conjunction with the Catholicos of the East, and the Patriarch of Jerusalem. While the narrative is detailed in some sources, others have it very briefly as: 'Episcopos Mar Joseph was sent, accompanied by priests (*kassisho*), deacons (*shemmashe*), Christians, small children (*paithangal*) and women' (Pukadiyil 1969:113-4). These narratives, which the SC believe is their authentic history, are also commemorated by the SC in their Ancient Ballads.⁴⁶

The Nirāṇām Chronicle mentions this event only briefly, while Kandanad and Pukadiyil give details, such as the nature of the bishop of Edessa's vision.⁴⁷ While the Kandanad Chronicle

⁴¹ Malayalam usage, meaning 'his royal mind brightened'.

⁴² Muziris or Kodungallur = one of the cities in Chera kingdom. Vettikkunnel gives the impression of it being a sprawling city (L27 and 31), which agrees with early accounts of the place, the port from which pepper was exported from as early as the 1st century CE, as seen in the Periplus of the mid-1st century (Schöff 1912:44, 205, 208-9).

⁴³ A Malayalam trope, meaning, 'in perpetuity'.

⁴⁴ Important documents, especially royal decrees and proclamations were inscribed on copper plates (Prof. Kesavan Veluthatt lists several of these: 'Valappalli Copper-plate of Rajasekhara'; 'Perinchellur Copper-plate', Thiruvalla Coper-plate etc., 2013:24,61; image on p.48). Of similar rectangular shape and dimensions of *olas*, the inscribing was done by gold-smiths, as evidenced in one of the SCM inscriptions (Nair:1859:38).

⁴⁵ In Kandanad Chronicle, the phrase used in Malayalam is '*para-valaññatinakam*' which appears to be a copyist's error. Pukadiyil gives it as 'the area covered by '*oru para nelli chitriatinakam*'=the extent of scattering one bushel of rice-paddy, interpreted as that much area coming within the broadcasting of one bushel (approximately 8 kilogram) of rice-paddy. Both sources follow this with a linear measurement as well.

⁴⁶ See P.U. Lukas 1910 collation of *Ancient Ballads*, republished 2002: 'Women's Ballads' Strophe 4: 'Fair Jerusalem'(p.5); Strophe 5: 'Malankara of Old' (p.6); Strophe 6: 'Today have you forsaken us O Holy Father', and the one titled: 'By the Command of the Three' (p.7-9); 'Kaippuzha palliyude pattu- (Ballad of the Kaipuzha parish-church) Strophe 6 (p.95); and again in more detail in 'The Ballad of Kottayam Great St. Mary's church' (p.60) and 'The Ballad of Kottayam Little St. Mary's church' (p.160) as well as Strophe 4 of 'The Wedding-Ballads' that begin with: 'In the Noble City of Jerusalem', and Strophe 6: 'Today are we sent off O Holy Father?', and Strophe 6-Another Rhythm: 'By the command of the Great Three' (p.). The 'Great three' are interpreted as the Patriarch of Antioch, the Catholicos of the East, and the Bishop of Jerusalem. Zachariah 1973:36-37 also cites some ballads.

⁴⁷ According to these, the Apostle Thomas appeared to the Bishop of Edessa in a vision. See Kandanad (Cheeran:28) for details (translation of relevant section given in Appendix 9.1 Section VI).

lists 40 of the privileges,⁴⁸ Zachariah gives a full list of 72.⁴⁹ This narrative is consistently given, with varying degrees of elaboration of parts, in SC sources: the 1771 *ola* (paragraphs 8, 14-17), Niranam Chronicle p.224, Pukadiyil (1869:113-115), Kandanad Chronicle p.28-30), Philip (1950:67-680, Kaniamparambil (1982:101-2; 1989:13-18). The sources give the impression that it was in the coalescing of the commanding power of the three hierarchs - the Patriarch of Antioch, the Catholicos (of Seleucia) and the Metropolitan of Jerusalem - and the organisational abilities of the merchant Thoma of Jerusalem, that the migration and the successful settling of the Edessans in Malabar was executed, with the general consequence of its enduring impact on the St. Thomas Christians of the region.

Apart from the privileges inscribed on copper-plates, Cheraman Perumal also made subject to them, seventeen castes of people of the artisan and labouring classes to fulfil the Christians' needs, and for their mutual protection. Kaniamparambil (1982:100-109) expands the narrative itself with a discussion, citing external sources, of how the combined body of native and foreign Christians were brought together in a doctrine-based, ecclesiastical and liturgical Church based in 'Malankara', under Antioch.⁵⁰ This also marked the beginning of the time when bishops deputed by Antioch began to arrive, who 'strengthened the Archdeacons and thus the Church progressed in an orderly fashion for the next 480 years.' He elucidates how the unified Christian community acquired its distinctive features from this point onwards, when they began the following traditions of: 1) observing Sunday as day of assembly; 2) praying facing east following the Apostolic tradition, and using prayers of the Institution, baptism, and administration of the *Mūron* (Syriac)=Holy Chrism); 3) burning incense and lighting candles during worship; 4) using West Syriac as their liturgical and devotional language; 5) using the liturgy of St. James; and, 6) using leavened bread in the Eucharist.

Settling of the Christians in Kodungalloor

According to the fuller narratives in the SC primary-source manuscripts of Mathai Vettikunnel (1720), the 1771 *Ola*, the Kandanad Chronicle and many others, and the two important publications, Pukkadiyil (1869) and Philip (1950), they brought valuable gifts to the ruling king Cheraman Perumal in the city of Kodungalloor, who granted them in return, a place to settle and establish themselves as traders. As mentioned, they were also granted a charter of seventy-two honours and privileges by the king, which set them apart from the mainstream population on a parity with the ruling classes, as the privileges were exclusive to princes and the priestly classes of Kerala. These honours and privileges were granted in perpetuity, ensuring the continued and unchallenged safety and prosperity of the Christians.

⁴⁸ In this part of the narrative in Kandanad, the language shows distinct features of Tamil, indicating that he was copying from an archetype that was in Tamil, from a time before Malayalam evolved in late Medieval period.

⁴⁹ This list was discovered in Zachariah's handwritten notes, copied from the Chalakuzhy *ola*, in the MSOC Seminary library in Vettikal (Ernakulam District). See Appendix 9.2, which also includes a slightly different list from Vellian (2001:65-7).

⁵⁰ Kaniamparambil 1982:106-9 lists numerous distinctive features of the Malankara Church from 345 onwards, that they: 1) observed Sunday as the day of assembly; 2) following the Apostolic tradition, they prayed facing east, and used the prayers of the Institution, baptism, and administration of the *Mūron* (Holy Oil); 3) burnt incense and lit candles during worship; 4) used West Syriac in their liturgy and prayers; 5) used the liturgy of St. James; and, 6) used leavened bread in the Eucharist.

The migrant and indigenous sections of the Christian community brought together were called the ‘*Nasrani Māppila of Malankara*’ under the spiritual leadership of the bishop of Edessa, Mar Joseph, who is also thought have instituted a formal clerical hierarchy according to the traditions by Antioch. The honour of priesthood was restored to the same families that had been instituted by the Apostle St Thomas himself, that is, those of Shankarapuri, Pakalomattom, Kalli and Kaliankavu, and the office of the Archdeacon was appointed from among these indigenous priests to lead the people in temporal matters.⁵¹ The Edessans had also brought with them an assurance from Antioch that bishops will be sent to them ‘every twelve years’, who would fulfil all their spiritual needs.⁵² ‘Occupying this position of honour, prestige and doctrinal truth, they instructed us on the way of the True Path.’⁵³

Finding favour with king Cheraman Perumal, the indigenous Christians’ grievances were redressed, they were granted a copper-plate inscribed charter containing all manner of freedoms, rights and privileges, the unified community of Mesopotamian and native Christians were able to practise their religion, and live in freedom and prosperity.

Knai Thoma was given a large piece of land measuring 244 *ānākkōl* (=or the elephant-cubit)⁵⁴, by the charter of Cheraman Perumal, which was within the ambit of the city of Kodungalloor but in the slightly separate land known as ‘*Malankara*’.⁵⁵ The Christians were temporally organised here under the leadership of Knai Thoma by building themselves a new city. In order that they unite together, those of ‘Jerusalem’ and those of Malayala were married together, the nobles of both marrying among themselves and also the dependents correspondingly, so as not ‘lose caste’.⁵⁶ ‘In this manner they were settled, appointing the nobles of settler and indigenous communities together to be traders in silk, gold and silver, and that of the corresponding dependent classes to be traders in *kottal* and *kāyal-charakku*,⁵⁷ thus [demarcated by profession but united as the *Nasranis*] the Children of the Lord decorated their city with bunting and archways, and calling it *Mahā-dēvar-pattanam* (=‘City of the Great God’) in honour of the origin-city of Jerusalem,’⁵⁸ ‘they lived there in strength.’⁵⁹

By this settlement, the two ethnically distinct groups, ie., the indigenous St. Thomas Christians of Malabar and Mesopotamian *Nasranis*, merged to form one Christian community, designated in Malayalam as *Thekkumbhagar* (Southerners) and *Vadakkumbhagar* (Northerners), in accordance with the side of the street they occupied.

⁵¹ Whitehouse (1873:188-9). The only family where priesthood is mentioned as continuing into the 16th century when the Portuguese arrived, appear to be Pakalomattom.

⁵² This is mentioned only in the Ballad titled: ‘*Have you forsaken us today O Holy Father*,’ as an assurance given by the hierarch: ‘Every twelve years I shall send you good bishops as required’. See Lukas 1910:7.

⁵³ Kandanad Chronicle 30-31.

⁵⁴ ‘*ānākkōl*’= a standard measurement of 3 metres; approximately 133 acres.

⁵⁵ There are some indications that this was an island across from the city of Kodungalloor. A SC Ballad commemorates this as ‘*Malankara of Old*’ (Zachariah 1974:6).

⁵⁶ Pukadiyil 1869:116.

⁵⁷ Exact interpretation of these terms has not been determined yet. They could mean sea-trade goods, from *kāyal* =lake or waters, and *charakku*= trade-goods.

⁵⁸ Kandanad Chronicle p.31. The terms ‘Jerusalem’ and ‘Malankara’ appear as significant loci in the *Ballads of the SC*, as in ‘*Fair Jerusalem*’, and Strophe 5 ‘*Malankara of Old*’ (Lukas 1980:5,6).

⁵⁹ Pukadiyil 1869:115. See [Appendix X](#) for translation of the full narrative as given in Kandanad and Pukadiyil.

'Knai Thommen cheppedukal', or, the Copper-plates of Knai Thoma

According to the SC tradition, the charter known as the 'Knai Thommen cheppedukal' (Copper-plate charter of Knai Thoma),⁶⁰ were given to the SC by king Cheraman Perumal in the 4th century CE. From an identical copy of the 16th century that has come down to us, the charter constituted of two rectangular pieces of beaten copper, each '1 ½ palms long and 4 fingers wide'.⁶¹ The first plate was engraved on both sides; the second on one side only, occupying three-fourths of it. These two plates, covered with a blank third, were made up like a case, and secured with two copper clasps.⁶² The text engraved on them are in Grandha characters, that is, the script used by the speakers of the classical *Chen-Tamil* to write Sanskrit language.⁶³



Figure 1. The text of the plates, obverse and reverse of the first plate, either copied letter-by-letter by Duperron in 1758, or copied by the estampage-method when the plates came into the hands of the British official, Colonel Macaulay in c.1806.

The text of the plates, translated phrase-by-phrase, is as follows:

“Swasti Sri! The king of kings hath ordained it! When Raja Sri Bhaskarah Iravah Varma was wielding the sceptre of royalty in an hundred thousand places, in the thirty-sixth year above the second cycle, he vouchsafed, during the time that he sojourned in Muyiri Kottah, to perform a deed, the subject of which is as

⁶⁰ In Malayalam, the term *cheppedu* is a corruption of *chenbu*=copper + *edu*=leaves+ *kal*=pluralisation, =copper-plates.

⁶¹ T.K. Joseph, collating all the available evidence from the earliest Portuguese witnesses: 1930:200. Aguiar's metric dimensions (1930:169-170) of 30cms x 8cms roughly correspond to this.

⁶² Duperron, cited in *The Jews of Malabar*, Editorial, in the Madras Journal and Monthly Register Vol.6 1831:8.

⁶³ ‘A person knowing the High Tamul language, and understanding the *Kole-Elutta* and *Vatte-Elutta* alphabet, would read and construe it off-hand: but without the former knowledge, the latter would be useless.’ Whish, cited in *The Jews of Malabar*, Editorial, in the Madras Journal and Monthly Register Vol.6 1831:9,14.

follows: — From Yussoof Rabba and his people, in five degrees of persons, we exact the tribute of due awe and deference to our high dignity, and of the usual presents to our royal person; to these we allow the privilege of bearing five kinds of names, of using day-lamps, of wearing long apparel; of using palanquins and umbrellas, copper vessels, trumpets, and drums, of garlands for the person, and garlands to be suspended over their roads; and we have given in full seventy-and-two separate houses ; and we have relinquished all taxes and rates for these; and also for all other houses and churches in other cities; and independent of this bond to him, we have made and given a copper instrument for these latter, separate and distinct. These are to be enjoyed after these, five modes of descent, viz. by Yussoof Rabba himself and his heirs in succession — thus, his male children, and his female children, his nephews, and the nephews of his daughters, in natural succession: an hereditary right to be enjoyed as long as the earth and the moon remain. Sri! I, Govardhana Martandan, of Venadu, witness this deed; I, Kotai Giri Kandun, of Venadavalinada, witness this deed; J, Manavepala Manuviyana, of Eralanada, witness this deed; I, Irayan Chattan, of Valluvanada, witness this deed; I, Kotai Iravi, of Nedumbutaiyur nada, witness this deed; I, Murkan Chattan, inhabitant of Kelpadui nayakam, witness this deed. This is the handwriting of Poranaya Koyraya Kellapan, engraved by Vandra Sherry Kandapan." (Ellis 1844:1-10). ⁶⁴

Ellis gives a more lucid translation as follows:

"Swasti Sri! A Royal Edict. The Act of Privilege vouchsafed by Sri Bhaskara Iravi Varma, when he tarried at Muyiri-Kottah, in the 36th year of the 3^d Cycle, when ruling the land, dispensing justice far and wide throughout his dominions. We have permitted Joseph Rabban, an indisputed line of descent in five degrees of persons; to receive from those subject to his authority, tribute with awe and submission. We allow the exercise and profits of all the crafts; he may use burning lights by day; long raiment, palanquins, umbrellas, drums, trumpets, tambourins, and garlands for the person, and for the roads; and we permit the free property of seventy-two houses. And we relinquish all rates and customs. Moreover other and whatever taxes paid by the houses in the city to the Royal Exchequer he is exempted from; and in order to guarantee to him this exemption, and all the privileges, we have executed this deed on copper- leaves : To Joseph Rabban himself, his male children, his female children, his nephews, and those (the descendants) of his daughters ; in natural succession, so long as the earth and the moon remain. Sri ! I witness this deed, &c. &c &c." ⁶⁵

The named grantor is King Bhaskaran Iravi Varmar, and the grantee is 'Issoopoo Irabban', interpreted as 'Joseph Rabban', and the privileges granted are given in simple and abstract terms as five degrees of legitimate titles. The 'whole' of the grants themselves are listed in a series of succinct terms, including: to receive in his own person, tribute paid to the Sovereign with due 'awe and oblations', the 'rights and enjoyments' of the services of the 'five classes'

⁶⁴ East India Company Civil Servant and philologist F. W. Ellis' translation: *Analysis of the Copper Grant in possession of the Jews of Cochin of the Madras*. Madras Journal of Lit.& Sc. 1844 Vol.31:1-11.

⁶⁵ Ellis 1844 Vol.31:10-11.

that are the five chief trades of the country: carpenters, braziers, blacksmiths, goldsmiths, and toddy drawers. The royal privileges are listed as ‘day-lamps’, ‘long garments’, palanquins, etc., and the recipients were exempt from customs and duties of trade, as well as taxes normally paid by the citizens to the royal exchequer. These privileges are not given exclusively to the one named person but to the whole community, evidenced from the guarantee of the ‘seventy-two free home-steads’. The privileges are guaranteed on the authority of the king: ‘we have made and given a copper instrument’, so that they ‘may enjoy them’, in a ‘hereditary succession of five degrees’ which are listed as: ‘to Joseph Rabban himself and his progeny’, including his male and female children as well as his nephews and the nephews of his daughters.⁶⁶ Above all, the grant is given in perpetuity: ‘so long as the earth and the moon remain.’

When the original set of plates were first seen by the Portuguese in 1544, they were already of an extreme age, the witnesses recording them as being in a fragile and crumbling state.⁶⁷ This extraordinary charter, as noted by scholars, while they show ‘the simplicity of the age in which they were indulged, also argue the high estimation in which the colony was held, as a peaceable and respectable society.’⁶⁸ Other SC narratives elaborate on the circumstances in which the grant was given and the particulars of the privileges:

‘.....after which the merchant Knai Thoma went to the presence of the king of Kerala his majesty Cherakon Perumal and placed before him royal gifts and made known to him all the circumstances, as a result of which His Lordship became pleased and declared: ‘I the lord of the country shall undoubtedly give all that is needed,’ after which utterance, he granted them honours inscribed on copper-plates that they may never be altered until the sun and moon remained, an account of which are as follows⁶⁹

While the SC sources do not give the exact text of the royal grant, their literature and Ancient Ballads elaborate on the concise categories listed in the plates, which included: 11 royal accoutrements, 7 musical instruments, 16 personal ornamentations, 5 city decorations, 2 head ornaments, (permission to wear) elephant-ride, horse-ride, exemption from taxes, and a list of 18 castes ‘given to them’ to do their labouring and artisan jobs: ‘which the king granted to Knai Thoma and his children and his people, and to all those of his religion to enjoy for ever.’⁷⁰ The SC literature also state that 72 honours and privileges were granted to the SC in accordance with the number of families that had arrived with Knai Thoma. These passed into the collective consciousness of the community over the centuries by repetition and generational re-iteration, and by their frequent commemoration, and more importantly, by the actual laying claim and availing themselves of, of the honours and privileges granted to them without being challenged by the noble classes of Kerala to whom alone previously these were permissible. The

⁶⁶ In Kerala’s matrilineal inheritance-system, nephews and nieces are also legitimate heirs.

⁶⁷ A different set of plates known as the ‘Kollam plates’ (granted to the SC in 825 CE) dated by scholars to be 1200 years old, are now in a fragile and slightly crumbling state. By the same token, it can be assumed that the Knai Thoma plates, which were of a similar age 1544, were also in similar age-worn state.

⁶⁸ Whish 1831:9.

⁶⁹ Vettikkunnel LL 24-30; Pukadiyil 1869:114-5; Kandanad p.29. See Appendix ... for a translation from [Pukadiyil by SK](#).

⁷⁰ Fr. K.T. Zachariah’s (d.1980) gives extensive notes on this, in his as yet uncatalogued manuscript of 1835, preserved in the Malankara Syrian Orthodox Theological Seminary, Muanthuruthy, Kerala. Zachariah claims to have copied this from an ola preserved in Chalakuzhy family of Mepral, Kerala. This ola has not been traced to date. Also, a partial list in Pukadiyil 1869:115.

circumstances of the granting of the charter are given in the SC accounts, and these narrative-details are repeated in their Ancient Ballads which are sung on festive occasions.⁷¹ SC narrative histories include partial lists copied from ancient Ola manuscripts.⁷²

The significance of these privileges is to be appreciated in the context of extreme caste-demarcated society of ancient Kerala that prevailed even to the 20th century, where such ordinary rights as personal attire, let alone royal privileges such as riding on elephants, were denied to those in the lower rungs of the caste-hierarchy.⁷³

These Copper-plates of incalculable value to the SC, were in their possession till the mid-16th century. The privileges granted were jealously guarded, and infringements or dilutions of them vigorously resisted by the SC⁷⁴. As Gouvea noted in 1604: 'Presently the Christians feel a lot for not having these manuscripts with which they used to defend themselves before infidel kings who were tampering with their privileges....'.⁷⁵ 'The memory of the tradition was perpetually on their minds,' noted another historian.⁷⁶

With some foresight, king Cheraman Perumal ensured that the privileges were sustained in the event of the loss of the plates, by having the same text engraved on a stone-slab which was 'laid face down at the north-portal' of a certain Hindu temple.⁷⁷ This Temple-stone inscription was invoked most recently in 1773 as recorded in Kandanad Chronicle (p.39) to settle a dispute.⁷⁸

⁷¹ For T.K. Joseph's translation of some of the *Ballads*, see 1927:161-166; and 1928:103-106.

⁷² Pukadiyil (1869:115) gives the number of honours as '72', but lists only 37. Zachariah 1973:33-40 includes a full list of 72, copied from the Chalakuzhy family's *ola* manuscript. There are minor discrepancies between various lists, perhaps as a result of regional variations of language, but the list is essentially the same. See Appendix xxx for a transcript of Zachariah's list.

⁷³ See Bernard S. Cohn's account of how strictures on personal apparel continued in 19th century Kerala, which even the power of British authorities could not dismantle easily. Cohn 1996:139-141.

⁷⁴ Ferroli, citing Gouvea 1939 Vol.I:75 fn5, Malekandathil 2003:18.

⁷⁵ Malekandathil's translation 2003:17. By the time of the Synod of Diamper in 1599, Portuguese authorities, including Archbishop Roz and historian Gouvea were aware of the permanent loss of the Knai Thoma copper-plates.

⁷⁶ D' Aguiar 1930:169. Portuguese Jesuit Fr. Monteiro d'Aguiar appears to hold contradictory views of the importance of the plates, at times denying, and at others, recognising it. Aguiar's Portuguese critical edition was translated into English by the scholarly Jesuit Fr. Henry Hosten S.J. and published as: *The Magna Carta of the SC, in the Kerala Society Papers* 1930:169. Aguiar's many erroneous conclusions are critiqued by Hosten and T.K. Joseph, both being residents of Southern India, the latter being a Malayalam-speaking Keralan scholar and epigraphist, different from the remote scholarship of Aguiar. But it is Aguiar's critical edition, published in Europe, which gained wider popularity and became the source material for much of the 20th c. historical accounts by both European and Indian scholars.

⁷⁷ T.K. Joseph, cited in Kollaparambil 2015:151. Pukadiyil (1869:114) gives: '...after affirming the grant of honours on Knai Thoma by the symbol of the copper-plate charter, this king also witnessed them by a symbol in the foundation-place of the Brahmin-temple in the Trishivaperoor (=Trichur).' Charles Whish 1831:9 gives the location of this temple as in 'Tiruvannur Temple'. Kollaparambil quotes from the *Pānān Pāṭṭu* ballad, reiterating the same. This Temple-stone located at some distance from the SC centres of Kochi etc., being large and within the temple precincts, was not readily available for them to consult. The whereabouts of this stone are unknown at present, though Hosten and Joseph made extensive searches for it in early 20th c.

⁷⁸ The dispute arose when a priest usurped episcopal authority. The two legitimate bishops called a meeting of all the parishes and they petitioned the kings of Travancore and Kochi, who ordered that: 'nothing contrary to what is written in your books and in your traditions would be sanctioned.' To verify this, the Temple-stone slab laid at the north-portal of Kodungalloor temple was lifted and the inscription checked, and the kings ruled that the usurper be stripped of his episcopal robes etc.

In both the SC literature and its Ancient Ballads, the date of the migration is consistently given as 345CE. The Ballads, sung as part of patronal-day celebrations at church or in the domestic context at weddings etc. give the date in the form of a chronogram: *sho-va-la kālathinkal* (Malayalam) meaning, ‘in the year *shō-vā-lā*’, which is interpreted as 345.⁷⁹

Portuguese witnesses of the Copper-plates, and their loss

Outside the SC community, the Portuguese were the first to see the Copper-plates, when they are thought to have been removed from the SC’s custody and came into the possession of the Franciscans between 1542-45. Catholic historians give an account that they were pawned by

Bishop Mar Jacob (d.1550),⁸⁰ and were then acquired by the Franciscans.⁸¹ The Portuguese Governor of India, Martim Afonso de Sousa on a visit to Kochi at some point in the same period (1543-45), was presented with the plates. He recognised the importance of the plates and ordered them deciphered and translated, but no one could be found to do so.⁸² Eventually they procured a translation into Malayalam carried out by a Jewish person, from which a Portuguese translation was made. Portuguese historians Monserrate, Archbishop Ros, Do Couto et.al. were to write their histories of the SC based on this Jewish translation. Roz’s copy attests that the plates were granted to the merchant Thoma 1200 years before Roz’s writing his account in 1604. Roz also maintained that the church in Kodungallur was built by the Merchant

⁷⁹ How this interpretation is arrived at, is given in Cherusseril 1982:7. (For a translation of this page, see Appendix 9.4.) It could also be a Syriac chronogram of alphabet-numeral device, where each of its alphabet has its own assigned numerical value. The Kandanad Chronicle (p.8) gives an example of such a chronogram where it is used as an aid in memorising the number of Church Fathers (318) at the Council of Nicaea, with the word *parslo* (=iron,in Syriac). *parslo* contains five Syriac letters with numeric values as: *Pē* = 80, *Rēš* = 200, *Zayn* = 7, *Lāmad* = 30, *Ālep* = 1; total = 318. This word also adds the signification that the Church Fathers’ decisions were ‘iron-bound’. In a lithic inscription on the front wall of the Jewish synagogue in North Paravūr, a similar Hebrew chronogram is given to denote when the synagogue was built, as ‘*huslam*’, which the Jews of the place interpret as ‘the year 1615’. For details, see Joseph 1930:166-7. Accordingly, in the case of ‘Sho-va-la’ *Sīn*=300, *Waw* =6, *Lāmad* =30; returning a total of 336, a figure clearly at variance with 345. It seems improbable that the date denotes the point when the decision was taken and preparations begun for relocating to India as the SC sources do not indicate this, nor does it give 345 as the date of commencement of the journey, but consistently as the date of arrival in Kodungalloor, all of which point to the subject needing further study.

⁸⁰ See Hosten 1927:183-4. Portuguese writer, Manoel de Faria Y Sousa first introduced the story of the Syrian bishop Mar Jacob pawning his Church’s invaluable charter in penurious circumstances, which were redeemed by the Franciscans, and lost thereafter. This story is repeated by successive scholars without critical evaluation of the persons involved or the circumstances. See lengthy analysis in Hosten 1927:149-150. Also, in Payyappally (Keralan Catholic priest) (2016:31), summarised as: Mar Jacob pawned them to an un-named person as collateral for a loan of 20 cruzados because of his ‘great poverty’, and they were redeemed by the Portuguese Treasurer, de Sequeira.

⁸¹ This account of the circumstances of how the plates changed hands needs to be taken with extreme caution, because, considering the value of the plates, the SC would not have permitted their removal. Similarly, it is to be doubted whether Mar Jacob’s relationship with the Franciscans was an easy or truthful one. Under pressure from the missionaries, Mar Jacob had apostatised to Rome two decades prior to this, but his relationship with them was ambivalent, as evident from his letter to the Pope of 1520s. See copy of two of his letters in Schruhammer 1934:). The account is repeated in Mundadan 1984 Vol.1:110.

⁸² See Hosten 1927:183-4.

Thoma on land he ‘bought’ from Cheraman Perumal.⁸³ Portuguese accounts confirm the salient factors regarding the Knai Thoma plates, their contents, date, the donor, recipients and the nature of the grant, as maintained by the SC and their sources.

Although the exact manner in which this vital monument changed hands from the SC to the Portuguese Franciscans may never be known,⁸⁴ it seems improbable that the bishop of the SC, Mar Jacob, would have pawned them in this manner, but was persuaded to hand them over. It was under pressure from the missionaries that Mar Jacob had apostatised to Rome two decades prior to this, rendering his relationship with them more ambivalent, as is evident from his letters.⁸⁵

Do Couto states that the plates were: ‘still found in the Factory of Cochin ⁸⁶ a very few years ago,’ but when he later searched for them in the Factory wishing to deposit them in the Torre do Tombo,⁸⁷ ‘considering they were such an ancient thing, and so greatly worth keeping and honouring...’, they were reported missing, without leaving a trace of their whereabouts,⁸⁸ the general belief being that they were taken to Portugal by the Franciscans.⁸⁹ What is certain is that the plates were entrusted to the ‘Factor of Cochin’ (Kochi) for safe-keeping, where they remained for many years, and from where they disappeared ‘through carelessness’,⁹⁰ and this happened before 1599. The SC were aggrieved at this loss of their invaluable charter, as these were the only instruments with which they could defend themselves ‘before infidel kings’.⁹¹ This is also the consistent narrative seen in the SC sources.

⁸³ Roz manuscript *Relação da Serra* (A Narrative about Malabar), now in the British Library: MSBL Add 9853, ff.86-99, contains what he claims is a copy of the Jew’s translation of the plates, as well as a large volume of extraneous material relating to the SC origins, which he probably gathered from his personal investigations, being a long-term resident and a Malayalam speaker. Ros maintained that the church in Kodungallur was built by merchant Thoma on land he bought from Cheraman Perumal (Mundadan 1984 Vol.1:110).

⁸⁴ The circumstances given by Catholic historians of how the plates changed hands needs to be taken with extreme caution, given the importance and value of the plates to the SC.

⁸⁵ See copies of two of Mar Jacob’s letters, in Schruhammer 1934:) It is to be doubted whether Mar Jacob’s relationship with the Franciscans was an easy one as stated, except when enfeebled and nearing his end. Mundadan 1984 Vol.1:110. It is well-documented that having been rejected by the SC, he spent his last years (1544 to 1550) in a Franciscan monastery (Aguiar 1930:176).

⁸⁶ Regional headquarters of colonial powers in India began as ‘Factories’, or strong-rooms to store merchandise and records, but later became fortified and became the chiefs’ official residence.

⁸⁷ Hosten glosses this as ‘the record-room of Goa’ 1927:148: f.n.53.

⁸⁸ Monteiro D’Aguiar 1930:172-3. For the full account of the plates and their disappearance in the 16th century, see Aguiar 1930:169-193, appended with a critical evaluation by Hosten and T.K. Joseph. A similar citation of sources recounting this is in Mundadan 1984 Vol.1:90-98, and Kollaparambil 2015:145-154.

⁸⁹ That the plates existed up to the mid-16th century is supported by several Portuguese sources, in particular, De Couto (writing between 1580 and 1616) and Roz (1604). See, Payyappally 2016:31.

⁹⁰ From near-contemporaries, Gouvea and Archbishop Ros’s accounts. In Hosten 1927:124,150; and T.K. Joseph 1929:13-14.

⁹¹ This last statement of Gouvea is to be understood in its context. According to SC narratives, from the point of Knai Thomas’ arrival and receiving of the Charter, the SC were under the protection of the kings of Kerala through the centuries. However, for the first time, the king of Kochi began to break faith with the SC from the second half of the 16th century onwards, when they became pawns in the hands of the Portuguese colonial’s commercial and religious interests, as is evident in Gouvea’s further account from a Catholic perspective of the convening of the Synod of Diamper, and the same from a Protestant’s perspective as seen in Michael Geddes’ *The History of the Church of Malabar*, 1694.

Challenges to the Edessan migration

Although the plates were of unquestionable importance to the SC, colonial historians from the 19th century have disparaged their authenticity, some relegating them to a mythical status, some questioning their very existence at any time, and these challenges have been perpetuated to the present day.⁹² The plates were seen and written about by successive historians from 1579 till the early Dutch period,⁹³ yet by the late-18th century, historians were questioning whether the Knai Thoma plates ever existed, as neither the Dutch nor the British were able to locate them in Kochi.⁹⁴ They presented alternative accounts, which appear to confuse the Knai Thoma copper plate charter with a later charter (of 825), thus degrading their historic significance to the SC in the 4th century. Milne Rae makes no mention of the Knai Thoma plates as a distinct set, speculating that king Stanu Ravi Gupta who gave the Kollam plates (825) was also called Cheraman Perumal, with the inference that the existence of the Knai Thoma plates and the Edessan migration itself as narrated by the SCM were fictitious (Milne Rae 1892:155-156).⁹⁵

More significantly, a new trend entered the discourse on the SC origins from the 18th century, whereby the SC narrative on the Edessan migration has been challenged and rejected on a number of factors, and alternatives proposed. Some are seen to accept parts of the SC while rejecting others, thus corrupting the SC narrative entirely.⁹⁶ This line of argument is echoed in the writings of prominent Keralan historians as well.⁹⁷ The challenges range from the historicity of Mani's mission in 3rd century South India, the possible confusion of the SC regarding the identities of St. Thomas the Apostle and Knai Thoma, the dating of Cheraman Perumal, the king of Malabar who received, and granted the Edessans permission to settle in

⁹² [cite](#)

⁹³ Dutch minister Jacob Canter Visscher reported that he saw a copy of the plates when he was in Kochi between 1715 and 1724. See Drury 1862:114-5

⁹⁴ Buchanan mentions how Adrian Moens, Governor of Kochi (1770) made a thorough search for the Edessan plates 'and was satisfied that they were irrecoverably lost, or rather, he adds, that *they never existed*' (1814:142).

⁹⁵ Although he claims to seek chronological accuracy, Hough also appear to make this confusion, conflating the Knai Thoma plates with the Kollam plates (see extended treatment in 1839 Voll:102-3,107-9).

⁹⁶ Gillman and Klimkeit (1999:167) accept 'three visits' from abroad: 'the definite one is that of Joseph of Edessa in AD 345', and count Knai Thoma also as one of these visitors, but date him to the 8th century, thus corrupting the SC narrative entirely. They also introduce a Bishop Theophilus visiting in 354, which is entirely absent in SC accounts (p.167).

⁹⁷ Refutations and counter-narratives are seen in the writings of scholars such as Fr. Dr. Placid Podipara and Dr. Mathias Mundadan C.M.I, both authors of scores of books on the subject and both of the Catholic Syro-Malabar Church, and Fr. Dr. Baby Paul of the Indian Orthodox Church. These scholars from these two Churches join Western scholars in rejecting the Jacobite SC narrative on the Edessan migration, arguing that the SC Church was either Nestorian, or Chaldean, or Roman Catholic, before the advent of the Portuguese in Kerala, which none so far have been able to fix upon, often ignoring the fact that the Chaldean Uniate Church originated only in 1553. Their arguments are centred around the main assertion that Jacobite Syrian Orthodox faith and was introduced in Kerala only in 1665 by the rival of Antiochian bishops. But as this theory introduces numerous irreconcilable contradictions and anomalies, it has remained unsubstantiated. Within the Catholic Syro-Malabar Church itself, the narrative promoted by Dr. Podipara and Dr. Mundadan et.al. are contradicted by others such as Fr. Dr. Kollaparambil and many others who belong to the 'Knanaya Diocese' of the same Church, whose members trace their origins to the 4th century arrival of Knai Thoma. Both the Catholic Syro-Malabar Church and the Indian Orthodox Church seceded from the Jacobite Syrian Orthodox Church, the former in 1663 and the latter in 1911.

Kerala, to a later period, and above all, the ownership of Copper-plate charter given by this king to the SC or even its very existence.

The Manichaean persecution of the SC in the late 3rd-early 4th centuries

The individual named as ‘Manikka-vachagar’ is the starting point of this narrative in the SC sources, interpreted as the Persian Mani, and linking the Edessan migration of 345 being the end-result of his forceful proselytization and persecution of the St Thomas Chrsitans. However, a contemporary scholar has argued that this ‘Manikka-vachagar’ of the SC sources refer not to the Persian Mani, but a 9th century Hindu saint and poet, who converted Buddhists to Hinduism.⁹⁸ The assertion was that these ‘Buddhists’ were actually Christians of the Coromandel region, and speculates that when this Hindu saint and poet Manikka-vachagar ‘vanquished’ the Buddhists from Sri Lanka in a debate, which might have included persecution of the Christians in Coromandel, forcing them to flee their homeland. On the basis that this poet Manikka-vachagar lived in the 9th century, the Edessan migration is dated to the 9th century.

Scholars of Tamil sacred verse⁹⁹ do confirm the presence in Tamil-country of a 9th century historical figure, a Saivite poet, called Manikka-Vachakar,¹⁰⁰ but there is no record of this poet persecuting the Christians in Coromandel, forcing them to flee. This speculative narrative is also difficult to reconcile with the dating of the second Mesopotamian migration (the Kollam migration) which is a verified event, where scholars date the copper-plate charter given to this second cohort approximately to 880.¹⁰¹ Moreover, not all SC sources refer to the Persian as ‘Manikka-vachakar’, but variously as ‘Maneekkasa’,¹⁰² and the Syriac version of the Mathai Vettikkunnel manuscript refers to him as ‘*Manik-boshr*’. Visscher interprets the identity of this Mani as the ‘*Tovenar*’, Dutch for ‘sorcerer’.¹⁰³

The most up-to-date scholarly opinion supports the possibility of Manichaeans visiting South India, based on the link between trade routes and the spread of religious ideas.¹⁰⁴ ‘The circumstances of Mani’s journey to India have to be collected from different rather fragmentary sources but it seems clear that it took place in the period between 240 and 242 C.E.’¹⁰⁵ While some historians have conceded that Mani’s arrival in the 3rd century may have taken place,¹⁰⁶ and others have accepted that the Christians on the Coromandel coast suffered persecution in the latter half of the 3rd century,¹⁰⁷ the dominant narrative among contemporary

⁹⁸ Istvan Perczel 2009:199-200.

⁹⁹ Kingsbury and Phillips (1921:2)

¹⁰⁰ ‘*Manikka-Vachakar*’ (="Utterer of Jewel-words". From *manikkyam* =the gem ruby (Kingsbury and Phillips 1921:86). He was a Saivaite poet, whose sacred hymns were widely sung by the devotees.

¹⁰¹ For a discussion of the dating and the signatures on the Kollam copper-plate charter, see Winckworth (1930:320-23) and (Joseph 1930:202).

¹⁰² Pukadiyil 1869:109.

¹⁰³ Drury’s translation 1862:106.

¹⁰⁴ See: Deeg and Gardner 2009:12-13, Kahle 1941:190, and Gnoli 1987:160-166, cited in Pulikkunnel 1999:53.

¹⁰⁵ Deeg, M. & Gardner, I. 2009:12-13.

¹⁰⁶ Whitehouse (1873:47).

¹⁰⁷ Frykenberg (2010:108-110)

historians is to reject wholly the Edessan migration as myths created in Edessa and appropriated by the Christians of Malabar, in terms that are dismissive and in effect, injurious to the integrity of the SC Church of Malabar, as in the following:

‘Scholars have long noticed the coincidence that three of Mani’s foremost disciples were called Addai, Mari and Thomas. It used to be believed that Mani named his followers after their Christian counterparts, the apostles of Mesopotamia, Babylonia and India. There is good reason to believe that exactly the reverse happened. The Manicheans were the first to bear these hallowed names, and third- and fourth-century clerics in Edessa, alarmed at the name recognition these detested pioneers enjoyed both in the Roman Empire and Persia, appropriated the reputations of the three Manichean disciples and relaunched them as Christian missionaries. Aptly, the myth-makers despatched Doubting Thomas to remote India’.¹⁰⁸

The SC sources are unequivocal on the historicity of the Manichaean persecution and its corollary event of the Edessan migration, as seen in detail in the Kandanad Chronicle, Mathai Vettikkunnel, Pukadiyil and others. A fragmentary ola known as the ‘Karuthedathu ola’, retrieved from one of the ancient SC family archives provides a reiteration of it with further details.¹⁰⁹ This *ola* states that in 293 CE, persecution by the Chola king forced the St. Thomas Christians of Kaveri-poompattanam on the east coast, to migrate by ship to Kollam, where they settled amongst Christians there, and that in 315, there was a second wave of persecution in Kollam, which reduced the number of Christians further.¹¹⁰ The presence in the 19th century, of a group of Christians in Tiruvancode (or Thiruvithamcode) who call themselves ‘*Tarutaykkal*’, was noted by historians.¹¹¹ A 19th century Protestant cleric testified that they were: ‘a class of steadfast confessors’ of the True Faith.¹¹² They were reported as stating that ‘their ancestors came there from Tamil country, soon after St. Thomas’s evangelisation of Mylapore.’¹¹³

Another indication of the success of Mani’s proselytising efforts in Malabar is that while the those who resisted proselytization and faced persecution fled the country, those who adhered to Mani’s teachings eventually became strong and influential, acquiring status as a separate ‘caste’ called ‘*Mānigrāmmakkār*’ (=People of the Village of Mani), another mercantile

¹⁰⁸ Wilmshurst 2011:18. Drijvers argues that the legend of the Apostle Addai converting King Abgar was created by Orthodox Christians to ‘outbid the local Manichaean community’, in order to counter the influence of Mani in Edessa (Drijvers 1996 *Early Syriac Christianity: Some Recent Publications* pp165).

¹⁰⁹ T.K. Joseph came by this fragment in the course of his search for forgotten family olas. A transcript of part of it was published in 1929. For a translation, see [Appendix XX](#).

¹¹⁰ Joseph 1931:121.

¹¹¹ *Tarutaykkal* is corrupted from ‘*Dhariyākkal*’ = ‘Non-Wearers’, according to Joseph (1931), a term used to distinguish them from those who accepted Mani’s teachings, and alluding to their refusal to wear the sacred ash of panacean properties distributed by Mani. The text recounts how, faced with persecution, this group also chose rather to flee to the west coast and settle in Thiruvithamcode and Kollam. Joseph 1931:122-23. Gundert’s interpretation (Vol.13,1844:146) is erroneous in this instance.

¹¹² C.M.S. Missionary Rev. Joseph Peet, cited in Gundert 1844:144.

¹¹³ Joseph 1931:122-3.

community.¹¹⁴ Their connection with the SC is a curious and well supported fact.¹¹⁵ Apostasy from Christianity did not seem to have adversely affected the Manichaeans, the Kerala kings' treatment of both being more even-handed. The copper-plate grants they acquired, still extant, are known as '*Iravi Korten Cheppedukal*' (=Copper-plates of Iravi Corten), when read in this context acquire significance, meaning and coherence without confusion.¹¹⁶ Small enclaves of '*Mānigrāmmakkār*' continued to exist the 19th century, in Thiruvithamcode, Kollam, Kayamkulam, Mannar, Kadmatton, as witnessed and recorded by Anglican missionaries. However, even from early ages, they are thought to have been ostracized by both the Hindus and the Christians of Malabar, as they represented 'a mongrel system, a patchwork of Christian heresy and Magian superstition',¹¹⁷ and in later periods their repeated attempts to re-join either the SC or Hindu communities were obstructed by both, because of they had in effect 'lost caste' by apostatising.¹¹⁸ Arguably, it was the contents of one of their texts that Menezes excoriated at the Synod of Diamper as containing: '.... strange names of devils.....it contains also many superstitious exorcisms for the casting out of devils.....which is very common in this diocese'.¹¹⁹

These foundational narratives are treated at length by the Portuguese historian Diego de Couto (writing in the latter part of the 16th century) and Archbishop Roz (1604). Similarly, Gouveia, prefaces his account of the Synod of Diamper with an early history of the SC (1606:14-20), mentioning Knai Thoma ('Armenian named Thome Cana'), Cheraman Perumal (Xarão Perumal), and the copper-plate charter. *These three sources independently* repeat the Jacobite narrative and point to its general recognition prior to 1665, indicating the authenticity of the narratives of early SC history prior to their first encounters with the Europeans. LATER

Conflating the identities of St. Thomas the Apostle and Knai Thoma

¹¹⁴ The CMS Missionary Rev. Joseph Peet noted: 'Manigrammam is the name of a class of Christians, relapsed into heathenism through the influence of a sorcerer (Manica Vachakar?). Some of that class are still to be found near Quilon (=Kollam). Each individual is called a 'Mani', a jewel, on account of their apostasy, and the whole of them constitute now a sub-division of the Sudras. I had indeed been startled by the Indian-looking name 'Iravi Corten' (on their Copper-plates) which does not at all look like the appellation of a Syrian Christian: still I thought myself justified in calling Manigrammam a Christian principality- whatever their Christianity may have consisted in- on the ground that from Meneze's time these grants had been regarded as given to the Syrian colonists. I now venture to conjecture that they were disciples of Mani, a colony of Manicheans, such as the Arabian traveller found in Ceylon.' In notes appended to Gundert's analysis of the Knai-Thomas plates, in, the *Madras Journal of Literature and Science*, Vol.13, 1844:144.

¹¹⁵ See the account of Anglican minister the Rev. Thomas Whitehouse, a long-term resident of Kerala, who treats the subject of '*Mānigrāmmakkār*' extensively. 1873:47-54. This statement of Whitehouse on p.48.

¹¹⁶ In his study of the four related extant Copper-plate charters, T. K. Joseph (1930:5, 201-4) was able to correctly establish their 'granter-grantee' status, and confirmed that the Iravi Corten plates were granted to the trade-guild of '*Mānigrāmmakkār*'.

¹¹⁷ Whitehouse 1873:54.

¹¹⁸ Whitehouse reports that when the C.M.S. Missionary Benjamin Bailey met the '*Mānigrāmmakkār*' of Kadamatton, he found them still practising sorcery, and in Mannar near Niranam, they were reported to have offered annually, human sacrifice 'of a most horrible character' to the Goddess of Panayannurkawu till the middle of the 19th century. See Whitehouse 1873:50-52.

¹¹⁹ Acts of Diamper, Session III, Decree 14 (Zacharia 1994:103). See also Whitehouse 1873:51 where Menezes' extrapolation that this Manichaean book was used by the SC is discussed.

Another confusion introduced into the SC history by the dominant historical accounts, and one not seen in the SC narratives, is the conflation of the identities of St. Thomas the Apostle and Knai Thoma.

In the SC sources, the narratives of the first century arrival of St. Thomas the Apostle, and the arrival and establishment of the first cohort of settlers from Mesopotamia three centuries later, are never seen to be given in a confused or imprecise manner, but in an uncomplicated, simple, linear arc.¹²⁰ The term *Mar Thoma Sleeha* is used to denote the Apostle exclusively, *sleeha*, meaning ‘Apostle’ in Syriac. The merchant Thoma is consistently denoted as ‘*Knai Thoma*’, the term ‘*Knai*’ meaning ‘the merchant’. Knai Thoma is consistently mentioned in a number of the SC sources, with a detailed narrative of his commissioning, arrival, and establishment of the community in Malabar.¹²¹

While this narrative comes from the SC community itself, it is corroborated by external sources. The British ethnographer Edgar Thurston has recorded¹²² references to Knai Thoma and the story of the Edessan migration as heard from in the narrative history of some other communities in Kerala.¹²³ Thurston’s accounts in this regard are significant as they indicate correspondences in the early histories of several different communities, and how some specific ones came to be attached to the SC.¹²⁴ LATER

However, the identity of Knai Thoma is the subject of debate and speculation in the works of a number of dominant Western historians, as well as some prominent Indian ones, with a number of alternative identities proposed.

For example, he has been designated as an ‘Armenian merchant’ by some,¹²⁵ while others stated he was a ‘bishop’. La Croze, writing in 1724,¹²⁶ contended that Knai Thoma as a ‘wealthy Armenian who settled in their country in the sixth century’ and who was the progenitor the SC, and that they were actually ‘two races’, being the ‘spurious’ and ‘legitimate’ children of their founder.¹²⁷ Writing a few years later in 1728, the Maronite-Catholic scholar

¹²⁰ Kandanad Chronicle 2008:28-31. A translation given in Appendix 9.1. See also the detailed account in Pukadiyil 1869:101-118.

¹²¹ Kandanad Chronicle 2008:28-31; Pukadiyil 1869:113-118. For a translation, see Appendix XX.

¹²² Thurston (1909) in his *Castes and Tribes of South India* in six volumes, recorded what each caste in Kerala believe was their history.

¹²³ The Hindu Tiyya community informed Thurston of the service rendered to Cheraman Perumal by Knai Thoma in bringing them back to Malabar from their self-exile in Sri Lanka (Thurston 1909 Vol.VII:110-11).

¹²⁴ Without reference to the SC, the Izhava community reported to Thurston the copper-plate charter given by Cheraman Perumal to Knai Thoma, and that a copy of the charter, inscribed on stone, was ‘laid face-down at the north-gate’ of the Trissur temple. See Thurston Vol VII:110-111). Move this

¹²⁵ Mundadan, citing 16 and 17th century Portuguese writers’ views, 1984:91-5; Hough also indulges in this speculative treatment of Knai Thoma, 1839 Vol.I:94. See also Assemani.

¹²⁶ Maturin Veyssiére La Croze’s *Histoire du christianisme des Indes*, written without visiting Kerala or consulting any SC sources, became a critical work referenced by many later historians such as James Hough (1839), and his opinions about the SC were misconstrued as authentic. Le Bas thought he held ‘a grudge’ against the Catholic Archbishop Alexis de Menezes as the architect of corrupting the SC to Catholicism, thereby ‘removing everything that could have brought the Malabar Christians to the Reformed Church’ (1831:90).

¹²⁷ Cited in Le Bas 1831:266-7.

Assemani¹²⁸ asserted that Knai Thoma was a ‘Nestorian bishop’, supporting this claim with further particulars that he was sent to India in 800 AD by the Nestorian Patriarch Timotheus.¹²⁹ After proposing this argument, Assemani developed the narrative that this individual bearing an episcopal title could have had two wives, one noble and the other common, and found himself in an utterly confused state, acquiescing that it was ‘unheard of’ that even a ‘heretical’ Nestorian bishop should have two wives, ‘together or successively’, and hastily concluded that it ‘must have been an allegory’ for having ‘two Churches to administer’, that is, one in Kodungallur and one in Angamali.¹³⁰ Even more strangely, some late 18th century Catholic historians maintained that Knai Thoma was ‘unknown’ to the Syrians.¹³¹

The Rev. James Hough¹³² built on the opinions of La Croze and Assemani, concluding that Knai Thoma was a ‘Nestorian bishop’, dating his arrival to c.800, and asserting that Knai Thoma was deputed to Malabar by the Nestorian Patriarch Timotheus.¹³³ Prominent secular historians¹³⁴ also theorised that as Mani also had a disciple called ‘Thomas’,¹³⁵ the SC most probably confused this Thomas (disciple of Mani) with Thomas the Apostle, and Knai Thoma the Jerusalemite merchant. In the early 20th century, the same arguments were asserted by Monteiro D’ Aguiar in his critical edition of Archbishop Ros.¹³⁶ Even though the numerous erroneous statements that underpinned these false and speculative histories, including the persistently alleged Manichaean identity of Knai Thoma, were robustly refuted by the leading SC historian T. K. Joseph,¹³⁷ Assemani and Aguiar’s accounts appears to be the source that is picked up by many Western historians of the subsequent period of the 20th century, thus ascribing validity to numerous erroneous assertions. On the basis of this, they put forward the argument that the interrelated narratives of the Thomasine evangelisation of Malabar, the Manichaean apostasy and the Edessan migration were unreliable.¹³⁸

These conclusions are generally based on speculative discussion in the first instance, and developed further and asserted as ‘authentic history’, but unsupported with specific evidence,

¹²⁸ Assemani was ...

¹²⁹ Assemani 1728 tom. III part 2:442).

¹³⁰ Assemani’s perception that there were ‘two Churches’ in Kerala, that of Kodungalloor and *Angamaly*, arose from a misunderstanding. The SC considered Kodungalloor and *Kollam* as their ‘home cities’, deriving from the two Mesopotamian migrations, one of 345 and the other of 825, where they settled under royal protection. Angamali was not a SC centre until as late as the 9th or 10th centuries. In official contexts, the SC were not identified by reference to a ‘diocese’ or ‘Church’, but rather by ‘places of origin’. ‘Until 1867, when registration of deeds was introduced in Travancore, all their title-deeds of landed properties described the names of the executors and acceptors with the special mention of *Mahādevārpaṭanam* (Kodungalloor) or *Kurakkēṇikkollam* (Kollam) as the case might be, to which the Syrians concerned claimed to belong’ (Philip 1950:95).

¹³¹ Paolino e S. Bartolomeo (1796), Johnston’s translation 1830:90.

¹³² Hough was Chaplain to the East India company, and friend of the CMS missionaries based in Kottayam, and with them visited the SC parishes in the 1820s.

¹³³ See Hough 1839 Vol.1:72-73, 92-97; and footnote p.96. Le Bas, in *Life of Bishop Middleton* also states that Knai Thoma was deputed to Malabar by the Nestorian Patriarch Timotheus.

¹³⁴ Hunter 1866:231-2.

¹³⁵ Mani is said to have had twelve Apostles and 72 Evangelists, mirroring those of Christ, introducing confusion equally among the Christians and later scholars.

¹³⁶ Portuguese Jesuit Fr. Monteiro D’ Aguiar 1930:170a.

¹³⁷ D’Aguiar’s article, in Portuguese, was published in the *Epoca* Lisbon, (undated, ca.1925-29) with Hosten’s English translation appearing in 1930. Hosten and T.K. Joseph challenges Aguiar on numerous counts, and is given extensive critical treatment. Aguiar also states that Knai Thoma had two wives, a Palestinian and a native Malabarian, (p.171a, and Hosten’s rejection p.186b), which is not supported in any of the sources of the Jacobite Syrian Christians. See Kerala Society Papers, Series 4, 1930:169-200.

¹³⁸ Burnell 1873:3-5; Hunter 1886:230-237.

and can only be understood rather to be the result of a frame of reference that assumed that the early Malabar Church was a Nestorian church, and was sustained by the Church of the East.

With repeated citations and cross-references, these scholarly assertions imparted such an authoritative tone and veracity to these confusing narratives in the Western discourse on the SC, that the field became an almost impenetrable tract of misinformation, and these theories continued to be broadly the narrative on the SC in various permutations to the present day.

It nevertheless has to be noted that even in the course of the 19th century, more well-informed and able writers of Syrian ecclesiastical affairs, who asserted that ‘Thomas of Cana’ was an Aramite, i.e. a Syrian by nation; and was not an Armenian.¹³⁹ Others pointed out that referring to Knai Thoma as an ‘Armenian’ was an error arising from the Portuguese interpretation of ‘*Aramaeus*’ (=Syrian) as ‘*Armenian*’, on the evidence that the Malabar Christians are known as ‘Syrians’ and not ‘Armenians’, and that the liturgical language they use is Syriac, and not Armenian.¹⁴⁰ But this was not picked up by later historians.

To the SC, Knai Thoma was neither a bishop, a Manichaean evangelist, nor a practitioner of concubinage. He was most probably a Jerusalemite Jewish-Christian, a rich merchant of exemplary leadership qualities. He was obedient to his religious hierarchs that upon hearing of the troubling vision the Bishop of Edessa had seen, he volunteered to go and ascertain the facts about the Christians in India brought to Christ by the work and martyrdom of St. Thomas.¹⁴¹ His resourcefulness in organising and leading the migrant party to safely land in Kodungalloor is set out in detail in SC Ballads. He is an integral part of the narrative of the Edessan migration as given consistently in the SC literature, and the place he holds in the SC consciousness is a highly esteemed and honourable one, as reflected in the Ballads that have been sung in their religious and social life from time immemorial.¹⁴² His winning ways that saw the king Cheraman Perumal befriend him and accord not just him and his people, but all the Christians of Malabar, peaceful settlement and freedom to practice their religion, and honour him and the Christians with rights and privileges, portray a man of utmost moral rectitude and constancy. This is the only narrative that is found in the SC literature and Ballads, and the veracity of which they stand not in the least doubt.

‘Northerner - Southerner’ distinctions

As early as in the Portuguese period of 16th century, a confusion originated about the specification of an endogamous group of SC called the ‘*Knanayakkar*’ (the Knai-folk) or the ‘Southerners’, distinct from the main body of SC or ‘Northerners’. Finding the terms difficult to interpret, the Portuguese Catholic writers tended to dismiss them, determining the distinctions as of little importance. At the Synod of Diamper, Menezes demanded that such divisions be removed and that the SC operate as one entity, and the abrogation of the distinction was included in the Decrees of the Synod.

¹³⁹ Thomas Yeates 1818:158-9. Yeates clarified that it was from this ‘Armenian’ identity of Knai Thoma that some other historians had developed the theory that all the Edessans that arrived including their bishop, were Armenians, and also ‘perhaps Nestorians’, but he refutes both.

¹⁴⁰ Whitehouse 1873:60.

¹⁴¹ This was the substance of St. Thomas’ words in the Bishop’s vision, as recorded in SC sources. See Kandanad Chronicle p.28; Pukadiyil 1869:113.

¹⁴² See Niramam Chronicle (edited by Paul Manalil 2002:115), Kandanad Chronicle (edited by Cheeran 2008:31), E.M. Philip 1950:85-6, Zachariah 1973:32 and many more.

It is possible that these confusions may have entered the Dutch and later British perception of the Church, diminishing the credibility of the SC religious identity. Encountering the presence of this distinction among the SC, 18th and 19th century European historians were so entirely dismissive of the tradition underlying it, that they were unable to grasp its significance altogether.¹⁴³ Its origins can be seen in a deprecatory remark in Gouvea's account of 1606, and getting progressively embellished in by subsequent historians. The Anglican cleric Wrede, writing after a visit to the SC in around 1806, concluded that the SC were derived from Knai Thoma and his two wives, one foreign and one native ('of some low cast'), and that disputes about his inheritance led them to separate, with one settling in the southern parts and the other in the northern parts of Malabar, and that their descendants preserved this mutual enmity.¹⁴⁴

However, the SC sources relate this distinction as originating from the Mesopotamian settler and indigenous Christians being settled in the north and south sides of the same street.

'Those of noble birth from among the Nasranis who came from Jerusalem, and those of noble birth from among the Nasranis of Malayala were united in marriage and became relatives. In the same way, 'so as not to lose caste', those of a lower estate from among the newly arrived, and those of a lower estate or bonded to the native Nasranis were united as relatives together. And one row of four-hundred shops was constructed for the 'Greater' Ones' or the '*periyoor*' (=from *periyavar* or greater ones) on the northern range, and another row of seventy-two shops (were constructed) for the Lesser Ones, together classed as *cheriyoor* (corruption of *cheriyavar* = the lesser ones), on the southern range, and this was instituted for as long as humanity existed'.¹⁴⁵

Clear distinctions were instituted between the Northerners and Southerners in terms of their trade and social customer, culturally demarcating the two groups. The explanation of the difference between the two groups is clear and consistent among the SCs, and so it is surprising that some Western writers chose to develop alternative explanations, with no supporting evidence. These alternative narratives were later picked up by some indigenous writers, too. For example, Malekandathil claims the SC account is a fabricated story 'to carve out a pre-eminent position' in society and 'to legitimize their socio-economic empowerment'.¹⁴⁶ Other accounts include attributing the origin of this distinction to two different branches of Knai Thoma's family,¹⁴⁷ or to their settling in the northern and southern regions of Kerala¹⁴⁸ even though it was clear that Kodungalloor alone was their residence.

This is supported by a list of particularities of rites and practices set into place that would become the 'traditions' of each group, that is, the nobles and their dependants, and would 'set them apart in perpetuity', such as occupations and laws of inheritance. Each community was also prescribed distinct cultural practices to follow, such as those relating to marriage ceremonies, so as to distinguish them in perpetuity. This, the SC believe, was the reason for there being two distinct communities among them, though bound by the same faith, religious

¹⁴³ As a consequence, they also failed to grasp the practical implications of this distinction when the CMS missionaries made concerted efforts to unite the Syrians with the Anglican Church, as will be seen in due course.

¹⁴⁴ Wrede 1817:365

¹⁴⁵ Kandanad (2008:30-31).

¹⁴⁶ This is how Malekandathil, in his translation of Gouvea, has explained it. 2003:20 fn. 26.

¹⁴⁷ 'All Syrian Christians now were descended from the two branches of the merchant's family, one descended from his Jerusalemit wife and the other from his Malabar wife' Whitehouse 1873:61.

¹⁴⁸ Whitehouse 1873:64.

practices and episcopal provenance, and it was in this state that the Portuguese found them in the 16th century. Regardless of Meneze's injunctions against it, this distinction continues to the present day, with the Southerners keeping their ethnic identity distinct by practising strict endogamy, and the Northerners marrying freely among other Syrian Christians.

The historicity of Cheraman Perumal

As with Knai Thoma, Cheraman Perumal the ruler of 4th century ruler of Kerala, is also an integral part of the narrative of the SC.¹⁴⁹ Some Western historians reject the linking of Cheraman Perumal with the Edessan migration arguing that the Perumals began ruling Kerala only from the 8th century onwards. Some of Kerala's secular historians also maintain that there is no evidence for this king at this period,¹⁵⁰ basing their argument on the absence of references to Cheraman Perumal in the texts of the Medieval travellers, notably, Marco Polo, Ibn Batuta, Friar Odoric, Nicolo Conti and Abd al Razaak who visited Malabar. However, these travellers visited Malabar only in the late medieval period when the name of this king may not have been at the forefront of their interlocutors' minds, and they stayed only briefly to have gathered any information systematically.

The Portuguese state historian Diego do Couto on the other hand, was in India 40-50 years, was fluent in Malayalam, and his account is consistent with the SC's in all its particulars. Do Couto (1616), writing at the height of the Portuguese supremacy in Malabar, cites the 'Brahmins of Calicut' he consulted attesting to the country having been ruled by a king by the name 'Xarao' (Cheraman) Perumal, who was linked to the SC narrative of the Edessan migration and the granting of the Copper-plate charter of privileges to Knai Thoma.¹⁵¹ De Couto described him as the 'best' and 'most famous' of all of Keralan kings, who was 'so affectionate towards the Christians of S. Thomas the Apostle who lived in Cranganore that he did not do anything without them'. This is supported by other records, where Cheraman Perumal is a recurring figure in the origin-stories of several diverse castes of Kerala.¹⁵² As scholars have noted, '*Cheramān Perumāl* is not the name of an individual, but of every member of a race of kings of the Chera dynasty', and the 4th century Perumal is not confused with any other kings of the same title.¹⁵³

Alternative dates and alternative narratives

In dating the Edessan migration, several Western historians from the early 18th century onwards have strongly argued for dates that are at considerable variance with the SC date of 345.¹⁵⁴ The highly influential historian James Hough's reason (1839) for rejecting this date was the argument that the SC might have confused this migration of 345 with the migration of a second

¹⁴⁹ Niraṇām Chronicle (2002:115), Kandanad Chronicle (2008:31), Philip (1950:85-6) and Zachariah 1973:32).

¹⁵⁰ Sreedhara Menon 1991:115; Kesavan Veluthattu

¹⁵¹ Do Couto's original in Portuguese in: Barros & Couto 1616:523-524. It is translated with commentary by Hosten, in *Indian Antiquary* 1927 Vol. 56:148.

<https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.78738/page/n171/mode/2up>.

For an independent translation of these pages from Portuguese into English, see Appendix 8.

¹⁵² Thurston (1909 Vol.II:467-8).

¹⁵³ C. W. Whish 1831:11. T.K. Joseph also notes: 'Cheraman Perumal and *Cocurangon* are very often wrongly taken as proper names, but these are nothing more than **Malayalam common nouns**, as *Cocurangon* is a Portuguese corruption of *Ko-Cherakon*, meaning 'His Majesty, the Chera Emperor'. 1929:13, f.n.4.

¹⁵⁴ La Croze (1724) first challenged the date (cited by Hough 1839 Vol.I:95-97). Hough dated it precisely to 780 (1839 Vol.1:94), Whitehouse (1873:48) to 800, and the Jesuit historian Ferroli (1939:63) more vaguely to 'the eighth and ninth centuries'

cohort of Mesopotamians in the 9th century, for which corroborating evidence still exist.¹⁵⁵ The alternative dates were put forward in the context of their dating the arrival of Christianity in Malabar itself, not in 52 CE as the SC maintained, but at a later period, and not by the agency of St. Thomas, but through unrecorded arrivals of merchants or refugees. This view is reiterated in the 20th century by Robert Frykenberg who proposes successive waves of refugees and settlers arriving in Malabar, resulting from the ‘Great Persian Persecutions that stretched from 340-401’, without reference to the Edessan migration.¹⁵⁶ Thus, the dominant Western scholarly conclusion at present is that this first Mesopotamian migration could only have happened later, citing Cosmas Indicopleustes’ witness and the Catholicos-Patriarch Timothy I’s letter, as evidence that the SC ‘belonged to the jurisdiction of the Catholicos Patriarch of the East from at least the sixth century’.¹⁵⁷

All these historians base their arguments on the basis of three key points of reference: 1) the introduction of Christianity in Malabar in the 6th century (Cosmas Indicopleustes and Patriarch Timothy), 2) the Kollam copper plates as evidence of a Mesopotamian migration, and 3) the SC Church was Nestorian. The actual arguments they give are speculative within those three points of reference. The case in favour of the 345 date is that a) this is given consistently in the Jacobite SC; b) no positive evidence is produced to support later dates, and c) if the assumption of Nestorianism is removed, there is no reason to doubt the 345 date.¹⁵⁸

The 345 date was supported by early European writers, such as Monserrate (1579), Archbishop Roz (1604) and Diego de Couto (1610). Similarly, Gouvea, prefaces his account of the Synod of Diamper with an early history of the SC (1606:14-20), mentioning Knai Thoma (‘Armenian named Thome Cana’), Cheraman Perumal (Xarão Perumal), and the copper-plate charter, without rejecting the 345 dating.

Coming down to the early 19th century, the SC accounts continued to be supported in the Western discourse on the origins of the SC. It was reported then: ‘it is evident that the Christians were still in India 110 years previous to the banishment of Nestorius,’ upon ‘unexceptionable evidence.’¹⁵⁹

Challenges and revision of the date to a later period entered Western discourse in early 18th century with Assemani La Croze and others, and their accounts became the only accepted narrative about the SC origins, the origin-stories of the SC relating to Knai Thoma, the Copper-plate charter and the date becoming subsumed to fit this narrative. Assemani described Knai Thoma as a Nestorian bishop,¹⁶⁰ Assemani described the SCM as being Nestorians from the 6th century, receiving bishops from Babylonia, and refers to Knai Thoma¹⁶¹ as ‘Archbishop of Persia who was a leading prelate of that sect’.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁵ Hough 1839 Vol.I:109.

¹⁵⁶ Frykenberg 2010:107-8.

¹⁵⁷ Perczel 2009:200-201.

¹⁵⁸ The alleged Nestorian identity of the SC being a far more complex topic, will be dealt with in a separate chapter. Its significance for the 345 date is that Nestorianism as a dogma was not developed until the 5th century.

¹⁵⁹ From a letter dated 1821, of Thomas H. Baber, a British East India Company official with first-hand knowledge of the SC, cited in *The Jews of Malabar*, (The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register 1831, Vol.6:8).

¹⁶⁰ Cited in Whitehouse (1873:60).

¹⁶¹ In SCM accounts, he was a 4th century merchant who brought the Edessan settlers.

¹⁶² As cited in Hough 1839 Vol I:86.

From the claim that he was Armenian several historians have developed a theory that all the Edessans that arrived including their bishop, were Armenians, and also perhaps Nestorians (despite the fact that the Armenians were not Nestorian in doctrine).¹⁶³

Writing in 1803, Jospeh Wrede, one of the first Anglican missionaries to visit Malabar¹⁶⁴ asserted that the SC were Nestorian from the beginning, and assigned the introduction of Christianity to Malabar, to 'Syrian adventurers' who came to Malabar in the 5th century.¹⁶⁵ With Rev. Kerr's report on the Syrians of 1806 for Lord Bentinck of the Government of Madras (Yeates 1818:192), confusion of the names of St. Thomas the Apostle and Knai Thoma entered the discourse, with the statement that the actions 'of a certain Syrian preacher, named Thomas, have been by error ascribed to the Holy Apostle' (Yeates 1818:147-8). Although Hough noted critically that Assemani 'laboured hard to throw discredit upon this Armenian merchant...',¹⁶⁶ Hough and many other Western historians still maintained that Knai Thoma was a Nestorian bishop or merchant.¹⁶⁷ Richard Garbe, citing 19th century authors such as Burnell and Hunter, rejects the St Thomas and Edessan migration traditions of the SCM, arguing that in their isolation and ignorance, they had mixed names of the three Thomases (St Thomas, Thomas a disciple of Mani, and Knai Thoma) and concentrated them upon one person of the Apostle.¹⁶⁸

These interpretations and assessments of the history of the SCs in distant Kerala, a place which often the historians had not visited, and whose language they were often unfamiliar with which denied them access to their literature, appears to have been made through misinterpretation, or inaccessibility to SC sources, or to promote particular narratives, such as the SC's 'Nesortorian' identity of the SC promoted in their time.

The 'Jewish Copper-plates'

The Jesuit Fathers who had arrived in Kerala in the mid-16th century recognised that 'the plates of Knai Thoma' were the most important monument of the SC's history, from which had emanated all the markers of their religion. Unable to find competent translators of the text, they entrusted the task with a Jewish individual, handing him an estampaged copy of the plates. Several key Portuguese historians based their accounts of the SC on this Jewish interpretation, most prominent among them being that of the Jesuit Father A. Monserrate¹⁶⁹, the Augustinian

¹⁶³ According to Schurhammer, 'Armenian' was a Portuguese mis-translation of 'Aramaeo' which Schurhammer glosses as 'Chaldean' (1934:10, footnote 33), ie. a former Nestorian, now a Catholic Uniate.

¹⁶⁴ Baron Von Wrede 1803 *Account of the St. Thomas Christians on the coast of Malabar* in Asiatic Researches Vol. VII, pp.362-80.

¹⁶⁵ Wrede 1803:379.

¹⁶⁶ Hough 1839 Vol.1:96.

¹⁶⁷ Hough 1839 Vol.I:32-68; Hough 1839 Vol.1:72-73, 92-97 and footnote p.96; Same in Drury 1862:89-90, Burnell 1873:2-4; Hunter 1886:235-6; and Milne Rae 1892:15. Milne Rae dismissed the first five centuries of SC Church history as nothing more than merely the 'phenomenon of tradition' (Milne Rae 1892:24), and Mingana shows his absolute conviction along similar lines Mingana 1926:509-510.

¹⁶⁸ Garbe 1959:144. Garbe, of German origin, and Sanskrit scholar: his 1914 work *India and Christendom* was translated in 1959.

¹⁶⁹ Monserrate's 'Information about the Christians of St. Thomas' 1579, translated from the Portuguese and cited at length, with commentary, by H. Hosten, in *Thomas Cana and his Copper-plate grant*. In, *Indian Antiquary*, Vol 56, 1927: 121-8, 147-54, and 177-186.

Fra. Anton Gouvea¹⁷⁰, Archbishop Francisco Ros,¹⁷¹ and Diego do Couto.¹⁷² Of these, Ros' lengthy manuscript gained widespread publicity among European scholars.¹⁷³

After the Portuguese Jesuits, the copied plates in the possession of the Jews of Kochi were seen a hundred years later, by the French palaeographer Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron in around 1758, who being dissatisfied by some translations he obtained, painstakingly copied each letter of the text by hand and left it to others to attempt a translation.¹⁷⁴ Duperron stated that Tamil readers of the late 18th century: 'all acknowledged they could not understand a single word of the inscription'.¹⁷⁵ In 1773, Adrian Moens, the Dutch Commander in Kochi published a translation of what he called the 'Jewish Copper-plate charter', from which time this term became firmly attached to the plates.¹⁷⁶ When the British came to power in Kerala after the expulsion of the Dutch in late 18th century, Claudius Buchanan, Chaplain to the East India Company viewed the plates in 1806-7 when he visited the Jewish synagogue.¹⁷⁷ Significantly, from this point the designation of plates had moved from: 'the plates in the possession of the Jewish community' as the Portuguese writers referred to them, to 'the Jewish plates'.¹⁷⁸ Authentic translation and interpretation of the 'Jewish plates' were accomplished and critical editions published by three palaeographers of early 19th century, Charles M. Whish in 1831, followed by Hermann Gundert in 1844,¹⁷⁹ and C. W. Ellis¹⁸⁰ in 1844. Ellis interpreted the text without any reference to the provenance of the plates. Gundert noted that the Jewish plates' translation into Malayalam and Hebrew were made not from the inscription on the plates, but were loose translations, with 'tradition only guiding the interpreter in fixing the meanings'.¹⁸¹ He noted numerous errors in fixing the meanings of terms, and erroneous interpretation, the translation not being particularised but using only abstract terms and excluding details (Gundert 1844a:135-9). He concluded that the Hebrew translation was also unreliable for the grave misinterpretations of terms (Gundert 1844b:13).

¹⁷⁰ The origins-stories are found scattered in the Gouvea's account of the Synod of Diamper, *Jornada of the Archbishop of Goa Alexis de Meneses*, 1606.

¹⁷¹ Ros: *Relação sobre a Serra*, 1604. Translated from the Portuguese and cited at length, with commentary, by H. Hosten, in *Thomas Cana and his Copper-plate grant*. In, *Indian Antiquary*, Vol 56, 1927: 121-8, 147-54, and 177-186.

¹⁷² Do Couto, in the *Decades* Vol. VII, 1610-16. Do Couto had lived in Malabar some 40-50 years, spoke Malayalam, and was one of the contributors to the official Portuguese colonial history in India, the *Decades*.

¹⁷³ Ros' manuscript found its way to the British Museum (Brit. Mus. Addl.9853), where it was widely cited and entered the Western discourse on the SC. But they did not contain a copy of the content of the plates, 'neither in impression nor in transcript.' See T.K. Joseph, *Indian Antiquary* 1929:13, footnote 5.

¹⁷⁴ See Appendix 5a for images of Duperron's copy of the plates.

¹⁷⁵ Duperron, cited in *The Jews of Malabar*, Editorial, in the Madras Journal and Monthly Register Vol.6 1831:8.

¹⁷⁶

For details, see Whish 1831:12-13.

¹⁷⁷ Buchanan provides a summary of the translation of the plates, though he does not mention its provenance 1812:135-6.

¹⁷⁸ Whish 1831:12-13.

¹⁷⁹ In: *Translation and Analysis of the ancient documents engraved on copper in possession of the Syrian Christians and Jews of Malabar*, in the *Madras Journal of Literature and Science*, No. 30, April 1844:115-146. Gundert, of German Protestant origins, was famed in northern Kerala as a missionary-scholar, Grammarian and philologist in South Indian languages.

¹⁸⁰

¹⁸¹ Gundert 1844:136.

Increasing interest in the SC and their origins among the diverse British writers of the 19th century saw the designation of the plates as ‘Jewish’ from Moens’ and Buchanan’s time further strengthened in scholarly opinion, with the assertion that the charter was in fact granted to the Jewish community of Kochi.¹⁸² Generations of subsequent historians developed this further, their interpretations of the ‘Jewish plates’ stretching further than they would go to fit that narrative, thus eclipsing the SC claims on the charter.

One of the factors strengthening this was the flaws contained in the late-16th-early-17th century Portuguese historians’ accounts based on the 16th century translation. As the version of the text presented in Monserrat, Ros and Do Couto et al.’s did not contain a single line-for-line translation from the plates, it became evident that the translation obtained by the Jesuit Fathers between 1545 and 1579 was nothing but a narrative gathered from the SC community, and passed on to satisfy the curiosity of the Jesuit Fathers by the Jewish translator. They mentioned broadly, the arrival of the ‘rich merchant Knai Thoma’, the king Cheraman Perumal granting him permission to settle and a charter inscribed on copper-plates etc., but these accounts did not exhibit any characteristics of a royal charter, nor any markers common to such charters given by kings in southern India,¹⁸³ but rather a narrative sequence of events, most probably received from a 17th century Syrian Christian, with the ‘translator’ filling in the gaps as he thought fit. Ros’ rambling account in particular also lacked cogency and coherence in the narrative.¹⁸⁴ By continued repetition and cross-citation Ros’s text and other imperfect translations of the late-18th and early-19th centuries, the errors became magnified,¹⁸⁵ justifying the rejection of the plates by scholars as lacking in authenticity. By mid-19th century, the

¹⁸² On hearing of these ‘interesting people’ (the SC), all manner of Europeans in this period set about writing the so-called ‘definitive account’ of them - travellers, East India Company and British colonial officials, missionaries and military-men. Their works are notably far greater in number and also the more popular and easily accessible, entrenching their often highly prejudiced and erroneous opinions which were nevertheless presented as facts.

¹⁸³ Do Couto also mentioned that this ancient ‘memorial’ of the SC was: ‘remarkable and declares many things which deserve knowing’, persuading him to copy ‘word for word’ from it, which he included in his VII th *Decada*, but this was not the case. See extended quotation from Do Couto’s original text, translated into English, in, Hosten 1927:148.

¹⁸⁴ The many errors in Ros were compounded in its 20th century translation by Fr. J. Monteiro D’Aguiar S.J., which in turn formed the basis of many 20th c. accounts. Aguiar’s critical edition of Ros was translated this into English, and published as *The Magna Carta of the SC*, in Kerala Society Papers 1930:169, with comprehensive commentary by Fr. Henry Hosten S.J. and T.K. Joseph.

¹⁸⁵ The compounding of the errors and speculations can be seen at full length in Hosten’s articles in the Indian Antiquary, beginning with J.P.N. Land’s imperfect translation of Mathai Vettikkunnel’s letter to the Dutch Commander in 1720, Assemani’s weighty but erroneous assertions, and those of the many amateur historians, travellers, missionaries and military men, such as (Captain Swanston), and Hosten himself adding his own errors to it. See: *Thomas Cana and his Copper-Plate Grant*, in Indian Antiquary Vol.56, 1927: 41-46, 81-88, 121-147, 164-166, and 177-186. While the Jacobite Syrian historian T.K. Joseph made strong efforts to correct them, he is seen to be overwhelmed by the volume of errors, some newly introduced as speculations by Hosten. See *Indian Antiquary* Vol.56, 1927:161-166.

<https://archive.org/details/in.gov.ignca.15283/page/n339/mode/2up>.

Joseph also gives translations of SC Ballads narrating in detail the story of the Edessan migration in *Thomas Cana*, in Indian Antiquary Vol.56, 1927:161-166 (first part), and continued in: *Thomas Cana*, in Indian Antiquary Vol 57, 1928: 103-106. <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.501822/page/n241/mode/2up> Joseph and Hosten’s extended commentary on *Thomas Cana* follow, on pp. 117-124; 160-163; and 209-214.

scholarly consensus converged on the assertion that the Jewish plates were the only authentic ones, dismissing the SC origin-story of the 4th century Mesopotamian migration and the Copper-plate charter of Knai Thoma as unfounded and unhistorical, and this has become the dominant Western historical narrative to the present day.

Whish's landmark translation of 1831

Charles M. Whish, the classical Tamil (*Chen-Tamil*) scholar made the first satisfactory translation of Duperron's copy of the Jewish plates.¹⁸⁶ It was noted for the first time that rather than being a rambling third person account with superfluous details, the text was in fact terse and short, each phrase dense with meaning. It bore the hallmarks of a royal decree, in terms of style, linguistic features and formal conventions as seen in other similar copper-plate charters Whish had studied, such as the consecutive text of invocation, grantor, grantee, abstract categories of grants, witnesses, and the name of the engraver.¹⁸⁷ The grantor was not named in the plates as '*Cheraman Perumal*' as the Jewish and the SC community had both claimed, but rather as '*Bhaskara Iravi Varmar*', and Whish interpreted the former to mean not a personal name but a dynastical name, that is, '*King of the Chera Dynasty*', and Bhaskara Iravi Varmar as his proper name. The name of the grantee was given not as 'Knai Thoma' as the claim was, but as '*Issoopoo Irabban*', interpreted as Joseph Rabban (=monk).

Significantly, Whish also made the claim that this text on the Jewish plates was in fact the inscription he had earlier transcribed and translated, found on a stone in a certain temple in central Kerala, because of the word-for-word correspondence between the two inscriptions. On interpreting the 'Jewish plates', Whish noticed a correspondence between the 'Jewish plates' and the Temple-stone inscription on many levels, including and his 'family' of '72 householders', and other particulars, and stated: 'The letters of the metal plate are precisely those on the stones in the Tiruvunnur Kshetram (=temple),¹⁸⁸ which I formerly deciphered...'. Based on the parallels he noticed, he concluded that the text of the 'Jewish plates' was the charter of king Cheraman Perumal, the name recurring in the SC narratives of the Edessan migration and Knai Thoma. He argued that these plates were granted not to the Jews, but to Knai Thoma, the Syrian merchant, in other words, that these were in fact the celebrated SC copper-plate charter, granted by Cheraman Perumal to the Mar Joseph, the Bishop of Edessa who accompanied merchant Knai Thoma and party to Malabar. Whish's translation and annotation of these plates remain the most reliable and complete, and his interpretations of the various terms the most coherent to date, introducing a new perspective on the matter, and more significantly, the only one which agrees with what the SC themselves had consistently asserted throughout the five-hundred years of their encounters with the European scholars. Whish's translation was corroborated by the almost identical translations of Gundert and Ellis who followed him a decade later. Perhaps unaware of the Temple-stone inscription, Gundert and

¹⁸⁶ Whish's report is cited extensively in '*The Jews of Malabar*', in the of Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register (1831) Vol. 6, 1831:8-14.

¹⁸⁷ See Whish 1831:10 footnote *.

¹⁸⁸ The reference is to an engraving on a stone-slab at a temple Kodungallur. This is also mentioned by the Kerala Catholic historian, Kollaparambil (2015:151). Kollaparambil also quotes from the *Pānān Pāṭṭu* ballad, reiterating the same. The whereabouts of this stone are unknown at present. Hosten and T.K. Jacob made extensive searches for it in early 20th c. without success. cite

Ellis made no mention of the correspondence Whish had noted, and worked on the assumption that the grants were given to the Jews, which appears to have hampered their interpretations. Nevertheless, their interpretations gained wider acceptance among subsequent scholars, while Whish's interpretations of the Temple-stone inscription and the plates were forgotten.

Interestingly, Ros' translation of what he had understood to be the SC plates deriving from the Jew's translation, bears none of the features Which had noted in textual terms, the text of which could not conceivably fit into the three sides of the plates.¹⁸⁹ This confirms Whish's conclusion that Ros' 'translation' was not based on the inscription itself, but rather a lengthy narrative derived from various SC informants.

Discrepancies

In the context of the historiography of the translation of the plates above, and Whish's conclusions, some serious inherent discrepancies between the text of the inscription and the context of the granting of the plates can be noted:

Early Portuguese never mentioned the Jewish plates

None of the Portuguese historians expressed any doubts regarding the ownership of the plates or their translation when they received them in the 16th century, but rather validated the plates as the property of the SC, and its contents as the history of the SC as they narrated it.¹⁹⁰ In fact, all these accounts referred to them as the 'Christians' plates' or the 'Thomas Cananeo plates', indicating that Monserrate, the first Portuguese historian to discuss this authoritatively, had no knowledge of a Jewish claim on them, nor did Gouvea question the SC's claim over them. In 1604 when Ros wrote his account of the SC origins, there is no mention that the plates belonged to the Jewish community. Many later historians have traced the loss of the plates from multiple sources, none of them mentioning their contested ownership. Duperron, who manually copied the plates in about 1758, most probably relaying the information he received from the Jewish community, referred to the plates as belonging to the Christians of Malabar, rather than the Jews.¹⁹¹

Age of the plates

As seen earlier (2.2), when the Portuguese friars first saw it in 1544, the plates were already in a fragile and crumbling state. This is not surprising, as another well-authenticated monument called the *Kollam-plates* given to the SC by in 825 CE are

¹⁸⁹ Monteiro D'Aguiar: 'The Maga Charta of St. Thomas Christians', in, Kerala Society Papers 1930, Series 4 pp.169-183. Also, Fr. Henry Hosten's own translation alongside Aguiar's in two parallel columns pp.181-183, followed by a very exhaustive commentary by Hosten and Jacobite SC scholar T.K. Joseph pp.183-200. For a comparison of the two texts, see Appendix 5f.

¹⁹⁰ Do Couto stated how the places and churches instituted by Knai Thoma and Bishop Joseph of Edessa continued to his day, and how: 'they keep in many things their memory and antiquity, and, among them certain *padrões* (memorials), and on plates of metal, of lands and revenues, granted by those kings for the building of those Temples'.

¹⁹¹ Whish, Madras Journal Vol 6, 1831:14.

now 1200-years old, and they are at present in a fragile and slightly crumbling state.¹⁹² By the same token, it can be assumed that the Knai Thoma plates which were also about 1200 years old when the Portuguese saw them in 1544, they would have been in this state, as these plates were already ‘over a thousand years old’.¹⁹³

The age of the ‘Jewish’ plates show that they are not the originals, but 16th c. copies.¹⁹⁴ The ‘Jewish’ plates on the other hand, were newer and fresher, evidently because the Jewish translator was handed only an estampaged copy of the original which retained a newer appearance, and letters more freshly inscribed.¹⁹⁵ Duperron noted in 1769 that the two plates of copper were ‘in good preservation’.¹⁹⁶ Gundert described them as: ‘Although the oldest, it is the best written,’ meaning that the inscription was newer and clearer. Gundert also remarked on the newness of the Jewish plates themselves.¹⁹⁷

Correspondences with the Temple-stone inscription

Whish identifies the correspondence between the ‘Jewish’ plates’ text and the inscription on the Temple-stone slab that king Cheraman Perumal in his wisdom had taken the precaution to be inscribed and ‘laid face down at the north-portal’ of a certain Hindu temple’,¹⁹⁸ leading him to conclude that the Copper-plate charter preserved in the Jewish synagogue of Kochi was the SC charter of Knai Thoma.¹⁹⁹ The SC had consistently made reference to this stone inscription that would have attested their claims, but which had remained un-located, un-transcribed, and the correspondence unnoticed. Whish was the first scholar to have noticed

¹⁹² See Hosten’s analysis and T.K. Joseph’ s commentary, in *Thomas Cana and his copper-plate Grant*, in Indian Antiquary Vol. 56, 1927:149.

¹⁹³ Hosten cites from Father Lucena, writing in 1600 about the plates as ‘....tablets of metal which were found in India in one of the first three years that Father Master Francis was in India. They presented them to the Governor Martim Affonso de Sousa, with the writing already almost spoilt by age, and the letters and the language were new to all, as they were very old.’ *Thomas Cana and his copper-plate Grant*, Indian Antiquary 1927:149.

¹⁹⁴ This was possible by the process of estampage, and most likely, known in Kerala.

¹⁹⁵ Kookel Keloo Nair, in his study of three sets of plates, the ‘*Kollam plates*’ of 9th c., the ‘*Manigramma plates*’ of 12th century and the Jewish plates, affirm this, noting how the last one was the easiest to read.

¹⁹⁶ Duperron, cited in *The Jews of Malabar*, Editorial, in the Madras Journal and Monthly Register Vol.6 1831:8.

¹⁹⁷ Gundert 1844:135-9.

¹⁹⁸ Whish’s translations of the Tiruvannur Temple stone inscription can be seen in 1931:9, and the Jewish plates on p.10. The full text of Whish’s translation of the Temple-stone and the Jewish plates are given in tabular form for comparison, in Appendix 5d. A tabular comparison of Ros, Whish and Ellis is in Appendix 5f. ‘The letters of the metal plate are precisely those on the stones in the Tiruvannur Kshetram (=temple), which I formerly deciphered...’ Whish 1831:9.

¹⁹⁹ Whish’s translations of the Tiruvannur Temple stone inscription can be seen in 1931:9, and the Jewish plates on p.10. The full text of Whish’s translation of the Temple-stone and the Jewish plates are given in tabular form for comparison, in Appendix 5d. A tabular comparison of Ros, Whish and Ellis is in Appendix 5f.

the three-way correspondence between the text of the plates, the stone inscription, and the broad argument contained in Archbishop Ros' lengthy paraphrasing of it.²⁰⁰

Absence of correspondences between text and context

A third factor that weakens the authenticity of the plates in the synagogue is that the Jewish community does not have a back-story concerning the granting of this charter to one of their rabbis. This is evidenced by a comparison of the erroneous translation of the synagogue-plates as reported by Commander Moen and Buchanan,²⁰¹ and the translation of the Hebrew version of the plates given in Gundert. The reader cannot fail to be struck by the extraordinary discrepancies between the two, and suggests the probability that it was Commander Moen's mistranslation that first introduced the idea that the plates were given to the Jewish community. Although superficial correspondences can be seen, 'in the substance, object, and terms of the grant, as well as the names of the grantor and witnesses, the two versions are as unlike as two chapters, taken at random, in the Bible.'²⁰² Whish observes: 'the native translators from knowing a few terms, mistaking a few others, and guessing at a consistent whole, contrive to get up a version which may be correct in one or two trivial points, whilst it is completely false as to the substance.'²⁰³

The Jewish community of Kochi do not appear to have a historical account that gives a narrative, either textual, or oral, or by long-held tradition, of who 'Issoop Iramban' (=Joseph the monk) was, what the circumstances were of his arrival in Malabar, who the community was that he was representing, what the relevance was of the '72 households' was, or in what context Cheraman Perumal deigned to make this extraordinary gift to him.²⁰⁴ On the other hand, every point of detail of the contents of the charter corresponds with details in the SC literature, ballads and oral tradition of the SC community and its religious and social identity.

Add here, Wolff's observations on the Jewish plates- make comparison table??

Researches and missionary labours among the Jews, Mohammedans, and other sects

by Wolff, Joseph, 1795-1862: 1837:307-8.

²⁰⁰ See critical edition of Ros' text, in Hosten 1927: 121, 147 and 177; and Aguiar 1930:180-82.

²⁰¹ Buchanan 1812:135-6.

²⁰² Whish 1831:13.

²⁰³ Whish 1831:12-13.

²⁰⁴ Historians of the Jews of Kochi themselves are undecided about the provenance of the plates. As noted in the Jewish Encyclopaedia: 'The date of this charter as well as other details and the exact rule of the Malabar Rajah, King Bhaskara Ravi Varma, remain controversial and have not yet been definitely fixed until today.' P. 58 of

https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Journals/ProcAmAcadJRes/30/Cochin_in_Jewish_History*.html
See also: <https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/8104-india>, which states the same ambiguity.

At that time some dispute took place between the King of Cochin and the Dutch, in which dispute the King of Cochin was killed by the Dutch, who then returned and settled in the town of Sailan; but after they were gone, the Portuguese came with the people of Malabar with fury, and murdered, plundered and burnt the market-place, and the synagogues of the Jews, on account of their having afforded protection to the Dutch. There was at that time a book found in the synagogue, called Sepher Yashar, which contained a journal from the day the Jews came into Malabar, till that day; and also other precious books, as canticles, poetry, and hymns; all were burnt, and the Jews were persecuted in divers ways, and afterwards threatened to be put to death. But at that time the Dutch returned to Cochin, and in a few days the fortress surrendered to the Commodore Petre de Beder, Admiral Van Goz, in the year 1663. And when the Jews heard that the fort had surrendered to the Dutch, they were rejoiced; and those who had fled to the villages, returned, and settled in their respective places, and built up the ruins thereof. And at that time a Prince of renown lived among them, Castiel by name,* and by the grace of God, blessed be his name for ever, the Jews found grace and favour in the eyes of the Dutch, and the people of Malabar and the Kings and Princes, and were assisted, and lived in safety under the protection of the Dutch, in the Malabar at Cochin.

TRANSLATION OF THE HEBREW ACCOUNT GIVEN BY MOSES SARFATI.

I might have given the translation from the original which I have before me, made by Mr. C. M. Whish, which Mr. Barber at Bombay kindly gave me; but I think, as the Jews perhaps have understood it better, I had rather give it from the Hebrew.

“In the peace of God: He is God that created the earth according to his will, and to Him I lift up my hands, who for more than a hundred thousand years is the Ruler in His dominion, yea for ever and ever. In this day, I sitting in Cranganore, in the thirty-sixth year of my kingdom, I have decreed with firmness and power, to give as an inheritance to Joseph Rabban, with firmness and power, five kinds of privileges, and these are:

* A Jewish German book, which has the title *שְׁאֵלָה יִשְׂרָאֵל*: “Remnant of Israel,” has given a pretty exact account of the Jews of Cochin. The Jew Castiel is named Governor of Cochin.

1. Possession of elephants and horses.
2. Ordering to make straight the road.
3. To make proselytes from five nations.
4. The use of palanquins and umbrellas.
5. The use of vessels.

Above all, I have given seventy-two houses, and assured a relinquishment of all taxes for their houses and synagogues, over which there may have been a Prince, Head and Governor; and beside this decree, we have given a copper-plate, which shall be given to Joseph Rabban, to him, to his seed, and his children's children, to bridegroom and bride, all the time that his seed endureth, and as long as sun and moon endure." Then seven witnesses are signed.

THIS IS AN ACCOUNT OF SOME SPANISH JEWS, WHO CAME TO COCHIN
FROM EUROPE.

In the year 1686, according to the Christians, in the time that Commodore Gilmer Vos Burg was Governor in the city of Cochin, four merchants came from Amsterdam, and these are their names: Moses Pereira di Pavia, Isaac Irgas, Isaac Muchat, and Abraham Bort of the denomination of the Sefardim, and they saw the places wherein the Jews lived, and they rejoiced, and they wished to live with them, and they wrote to Amsterdam about the Jews and about the scarcity of books. When the holy congregation of Amsterdam received this news, they sent to Cochin all kinds of books, and they printed every year books and sent them to Cochin. Therefore we follow the rites of the Sefardim.

ACCOUNTS OF THE WHITE AND BLACK JEWS.

In the land of Hindoostaun, the Malyalem metropolis Cochin, those are called white Jews, who came after the destruction of the second temple, from the Holy Land, and they have only one synagogue.

Evolution of the conflicted narrative in 19th century

The inability of the SC to produce their Copper-plate charter and defend their case, was one of the important reasons why their claim on the plates became, in the short period of about fifty years, challenged by early-19th century scholars. As a result of complex colonial-historical factors in the 15th to mid-18th centuries, the SC Church was in an enfeebled state, with no centralised locus for its bishops and most of its assets, monuments, sacred books and historical *Olas* (palm-leaf manuscripts) destroyed or lost, and they had retreated into hinterlands of Kerala from the major port cities along the coast. While they were secretive and reluctant to meet them,²⁰⁵ in their encounters with the British Protestant colonial officials they were able to consistently narrate their origin-stories,²⁰⁶ they were unable to produce any material evidence or literature of the same.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁵ See Buchanan's account of how he met the SC bishop and priests in remote places, and with what difficulty he brought them into his confidence 1812:74-6.

²⁰⁶ See the *Report on the Syrian Christians* by East India Company Chaplain Rev. R. H. Kerr 1806:522-555.

²⁰⁷ Colonel Macaulay, the Resident of the East India Company in Travancore in the early 19th century is said to have 'discovered' the SC plates in the Kochi archives. This is unlikely to have been the case as they were established as lost in the 16th century, and any artifacts stored in the Portuguese Fort in Mattancherry could not have survived the destruction of it by the Dutch and later British bombardment. It is possible that the 16th century copy of the plates held in the Jewish synagogue came into Macaulay's hands through the then Chief

20th century amendments

Some amendments to the interpretations of terms in the translations of Whish, Gundert and Ellis were proposed a hundred years later by scholars, notably the Jacobite Syrian scholar, T.K. Joseph and Fr. Henry Hosten S.J., and others, and were published as a lively on-going debate in leading English and Malayalam journals of the time. Their critical edition, with extended commentaries from opposing Catholic, Protestant and Jacobite SC perspectives, make an invaluable contribution towards settling the controversy regarding the plates.

Impact of the Edessan migration of 345 AD:

The narrative of the Edessan migration and assimilation and its impact on their Christianity is seen as a fundamental tenet of their history, shaping their religious, cultural and social identity.

Cultural

Indian and Edessan religious and ethnic cultures merged to form an assimilated Christian culture, with the Church informing almost all aspects of religious life, in public worship and private prayer. They assembled in church for prayers every day where the prayers might have been in Syriac and the rites Antiochian, but in their public worship and private prayer, fasting and feasts, and in ceremonies attending weddings and funerals, their Judeo-Christian and Hindu-Christian identities were interleaved²⁰⁸ with the ritual acts such as bathing before prayer and lighting oil-wick lamps at granite steles, and caste was observed and pollution distances maintained.²⁰⁹

Priesthood and religious practices

Episcopacy was not extended to the new Christian community, but they were given an assurance that bishops will be sent to them every twelve years, who would fulfil all their spiritual needs. Antioch was to be the sole source of episcopal provenance and Holy Chrism. From the occasionally arriving bishops would emanate all other episcopal functions such as priestly ordinations and religious instruction. The native Archdeacon, whose office carried great dignity, and represented the community before pagan rulers.

In the enmeshing of Antiochian rites which was the template for all aspects of their religion, and the restored priesthood of the native Christian families chosen by St. Thomas the Apostle, lay the concept of how the SC articulated their identity, that they were followers of : *Mārthōmmāyute mārgavum valipādum*, that is, followers of ‘the Way and Tradition of St Thomas’.

Numerous distinctive features of the Syrian Church of Malankara are thought to have originated from 345 onwards, that they:

Magistrate Thomas Flower, after an unfortunate incident involving Claudio Buchanan when he visited in 1806-7, as recounted in Buchanan's *Christian Researches* (1812:139-140).

²⁰⁸ On the basis of girls being excluded from all inheritance of their father's properties, Wrede observed a 'singular' proof of Jewish-Christian origins p.368..

²⁰⁹ The SCs' daily assembly for prayers in the church, morning, noon and evening was observed and commented upon by 16th century Portuguese writers.

- observed Sunday as the day of assembly;
- used West Syriac in their liturgy and prayers;
- used the liturgy of St. James;
- used leavened bread in the Eucharist.²¹⁰
- following the Apostolic tradition, prayed facing east, and used prayers of the Institution, baptism, and administration of the *Mūron* (Holy Oil);
- and, burnt incense and lit candles during worship.

In allowing foreign ecclesiasts to arrive periodically and govern over his Christian subjects, successive kings of Kerala appeared not to have feared for the integrity and prosperity of his state, and the Christians appear to have returned this trust and favour with absolute fealty to them, and being good in the martial arts, rendered them their service.

Social

How Knai Thoma won over the Cheraman Perumal's favour to such an extent that the king was inspired to grant him such honours and privileges that put the Christians on a parity with the noble classes of the country, and ensured their safety, wealth and prosperity 'as long as the sun and moon remained' is a matter of great curiosity. The SC sources' explanation for this unprecedented generosity is given as Knai Thoma laying before the king a 'bushel of gold and precious gems, enough for a crown'. But it was precisely the privileges and honours granted by Cheraman Perumal that became the foundation on which their safety was ensured and status elevated in society.²¹¹ By the Perumal's charter, all freedoms and provisions were made there for the immigrant Mesopotamian as well as indigenous Christians to live together as one community, practice their religion, and follow the former's traditional livelihood of trade, exempt from mercantile and royal tithes and remittances. The considerably large area of land, enclosed by 'privileged boundary' accorded them safety ('asylum') from the hand of any authorities, challenges or violence from any quarter, whether royal, religious or social.²¹²

By the royal patronage extended to them by Cheraman Perumals' charter, they received social acceptability and regulation as a noble class of people integrated into the caste-structure of the country. By the Perumal's granting of his own title to Knai Thoma, the Christians received the title '*Māppila*' (from *mahā-pilla* = 'honoured' or 'royal son', and royal privileges. Seventeen other castes were assigned to the SC to be their helpers and associates for mutual protection and welfare.²¹³ Pukadiyil elaborates their function as: 'If any nobles or princelings or authorities of the village or temple harm any of them, these seventeen castes are to unite with the Christians and redress the wrong committed and enforce penalties. Similarly, if any Christian is assaulted by a lower caste, in accordance with the crime, the seventeen castes were to settle it for the Christians, even to the extent of capital punishment. The enclosure of their 'city' was to the Christians the ultimate safe space where no others could enter freely, and where they were safe from assault or depredation of any kind.²¹⁴

Progress

Tax exemptions and other latitudes allowed them to become rich and prosperous. These privileges were jealously guarded, and infringements or dilutions of them vigorously resisted.²¹⁵ From the list of honours bestowed on them, it also appears that their

²¹⁰ See Kaniamparambil 1982:106-9.

²¹¹ Pukadiyil 1869:114-8.

²¹² Hosten 1927:123,126.

²¹³ See Appendix 3 para 15, 16,17. Pukadiyil also gives a list of 15 castes assigned to the SC 1869:116.

²¹⁴ Pukadiyil 1869:119, Aguiar 1930:180-1; Ferroli, citing Gouveia,1939 vol.1:75.

²¹⁵ See Gouveia / Malekandathil 2003:17,18; and Ferroli S.J.1939 Vol.1:75fn5.

social rank was next only to that of the kings and Brahmins of the country, in that they were allowed to enjoy all the symbols of Malabar's social elite at the time, such as wearing gold, riding elephants, freedom from heavy taxation, hunting, and music, ululations and cheers that embellished their progress on festive-days. While they lived modest lives on ordinary days, they were disposed to display these honours and their wealth, at patronal-feast days and high days such as weddings.²¹⁶ The SCM, in return, gained social esteem and honour by their attention to religious duties, truthful dealings, martial prowess, and loyalty to their rulers.

Transmission

The arrival of Knai Thoma accompanied by ecclesiastics and foreign-looking, foreign-language-speaking people in their midst must have been extraordinary events, so momentous that the people who witnessed them never forgot them. As in the case of other castes, these events were versified in ballads and nurtured by frequent repetition, entering the people's consciousness as indelible memories, thus forming the framework of their religious and social identity, and self-perception. These ballads are not recited nor shared by any other community of Christians in Kerala, but exclusive to the indigenous Jacobite Syrians and Knanaya Syrians who trace their origins collectively to the Mesopotamian city of *Uraha*.²¹⁷ Edessa or Urfha has come to represent the homeland the settlers left behind, and is a recurring motif in their narratives and Ballads.

Conclusion

When the Bishop of Edessa, the temporal agent of the Divine intervention and Knai Thoma of Jerusalem arrived in Malabar in 345AD in the company of a large cohort of Mesopotamian families, it would of necessity have been a phenomenal event in the country at large. Equally, the prospect of enhancing of the country's maritime trade due to the foreigners' connections abroad could not have failed to impress the country at large, promoting the general acceptance of the granting of honours and privileges to them, considering how jealously these were guarded as prerogatives of the noble and priestly classes. Syrian sources identify this as the pivotal point and platform from which the indigenous Church grew in prosperity and prominence.²¹⁸

It strengthened, both in spiritual and temporal terms, the confessing local Christian community that had not apostatised following the activities of Mani, and saw their transition from a beleaguered remnant community to a royally protected, socially esteemed and ecclesiastically ordered Church. The Copper-plate charter granted to Knai Thoma became the legal basis upon which the Christians received all freedoms of the country including that of practicing their religion, and the foundation upon which their later prosperity was built.

²¹⁶ Hough Vol.I:318-329 gives a lengthy account of the life and manner of the SC, and observes that it was the honourable position accorded to the SC bishops by the native people and kings, that fuelled the Jesuits desire to appropriate that position (p.319). W.J. Richards gives a lengthy account of the impact of the Edessan migration 1908:83-88. Aguiar mentions the prosperity and wealth at the time of the Portuguese arrival (1930:177).

²¹⁷ After a lacuna in the 19th-20th centuries, the SC have revived the singing of the Ballads on festive days, especially the Edessan 'Southerners', perhaps because of a stronger attachment to the stories of their sojourn.

²¹⁸ See Mathai Vettikkunnel's *Letter to the Dutch Governor*, Appendix xx.

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Extra edited notes first prepared for website but not included

From the 18th century onwards, historians questioned whether the Knai Thoma plates ever existed, as neither the Dutch nor the British were able to locate the originals in Kochi. (Buchanan mentions how Adrian Moens, Governor of Kochi (1770) made a thorough search for the Knai Thommen plates 'and was satisfied that they were irrecoverably lost, or rather, he adds, that they never existed' (1814:142). British historians who attempted to write histories of the Syrian Christians, with very few exceptions, present alternative accounts which appear to confuse the Knai Thoma copper-plates with the Kollam copper-plates of a later era (of 825), thus degrading their historic significance to the SCM in the 4th century. Milne Rae makes no mention of the Knai Thoma plates as a distinct set, speculating that king Stanu Ravi Gupta who gave the Kollam plates was also called Cheraman Perumal, with the inference that the existence of Knai Thoma plates and the Edessan migration itself as narrated

by the JSC were fictitious (Milne Rae 1892:155-156). Although James Hough claims to seek historical and chronological accuracy, he also succumbs to the same confusion, conflating the Knai Thoma plates with the Kollam plates (see extended treatment in Hough 1839 VolI:102-3,107-9).

For a better evaluation of the Knai Thoma plates of circa 345 (hereafter, KTP), earliest witnesses of the KTP and their transcription of the Portuguese authorities in the 16th century need to be sought. According to Portuguese accounts of the late-16th to early-17th centuries, the last record of the original plates was that they were in the possession of the Franciscan missionaries in the mid-16th century, from which point they were ‘lost’ (Monteiro D’Aguiar 1930:172-3). According to Aguiar, the existence of these plates was noted by Portuguese and early Dutch sources, spanning 16th-18th centuries (De Couto, writing between 1580 & 1616, Gouvea 1606, and Roz 1604). This is also discussed in Payyappally 2016:31. Visscher reported that he saw a copy of the plates when he was in Kochi between 1715 and 1724 (Drury 1862:114-5). (For a detailed account of the plates and their disappearance in the 16th century, see Aguiar Kerala Society Papers (1930:169-193).

Appended to it is a critical evaluation by Hosten and T.K. Joseph. Further sources are given in Mundadan 1984 Vol.1:90-98, and Kollaparambil 2015:145-154.) Aguiar’s analysis, based on Portuguese accounts, confirms the salient factors regarding the plates, (their contents, date, the donor, and recipient), and these appears to be in concordance with the tradition the JSC and mentioned in their sources. These can be summarised as follows (all citations from D’Aguiar:1930) :

1. The plates were in the possession of the JSC when the Portuguese arrived (p.169);
2. Portuguese historian Damiao de Goes (in his time, a famous Philosopher, Humanist, Guardian of the Royal Archives in Lisbon, and later, co-author of the ‘Chronicles of the Happy King Dom Manuel’ Lisbon 1566–67) erroneously states that these plates were given to St. Thomas, but this may have either a misunderstanding of his informant’s words clearly distinguishing between “Thoma Sleeha” (Thomas the Apostle) and Knai Thoma as clearly maintained by the JSC, or a translator’s error. But in all other particulars, the account agrees with the JSC accounts. According to Goes, The Christians of Kerala attributed great importance to the KTP, ‘as a valuable means of proving the antiquity of their Church and community....They still preserved some of the contained therein....the memory which tradition had perpetuated for them throughout the centuries’ (p.169).
3. The KTP were constituted of 2 thin rectangular pieces of copper bound with a ring.
4. They mention the social, political and religious privileges granted to them in perpetuity.
5. The grantor was Cheraman Perumal.
6. The receiver was Joseph Rabban, meaning, ‘Joseph the Monk’. This is an anomaly, as the JSC sources invariably refer to him as ‘Joseph, bishop of Uraha’. But, in the Syrian Church’s tradition, at least from the Council of Nicaea, bishops were monks, making the designation ‘Joseph Rabban’ not inaccurate.
7. It is in keeping with the Church tradition of according greater honour to the clergy, that the grant was made out to the bishop rather than to the secular leader of the settler-party,

Knai Thoma. This is especially noteworthy, as being a celibate, the bishop would not have had successors whereas KT did, and who according to the text, were beneficiaries of the grant in perpetuity.

Syrian sources do not give the exact text of the royal grant, only enumerating the honours and privileges granted to them by the king, which may have been a part of the copper plate text. Zachariah gives this list, copied from the Chalakuzhy family's ola manuscript (1973:33-40). The list in the 1771 ola (Appendix 3 paragraph 15) includes the '17 Castes' assigned to the Syrians, to be their helpers and associates for mutual protection and welfare (Appendix 3 para 16 and 17).

Disappearance of the KTP

Portuguese historians of this period give a slightly far-fetched account of the disappearance of the KTP, that they were "pawned by Bishop Mar Jacob" (who died in around 1550), but that they were subsequently redeemed by the Portuguese Franciscans. They attest that the Franciscans took the Knai Thoma copper-plates to Portugal. Payyappally (Keralan Catholic priest) gives a lengthier account of their disappearance (2016:31), summarised as follows: Mar Jacob pawned them to an un-named person as collateral for a loan of 20 cruzados because of his 'great poverty'; they were redeemed by the Port. Treasurer, de Sequeira, who then showed them to Alphonso de Sousa, Governor of Kochi, and then the plates were translated into Portuguese. This translation was copied by Roz in his manuscript *Relaçao da Serra* (A Narrative about Malabar), which is now in the British Library: MSBL Add 9853, ff.86-99. From this point they were lost. Roz's copy attests that the plates were granted to the merchant Thoma 1200 years before Roz's writing his account in 1604. Roz also maintained that the church in Kodungallur was built by merchant Thoma on land he bought from Cheraman Perumal (Mundadan 1984 Vol.1:110). Although the exact manner in which this vital monument changed hands from the SCM to the Portuguese Franciscans may never be known, it is possible their bishop Mar Jacob (who had apostatised to Rome) was persuaded to hand them over. It is a well-documented fact that having been rejected by the SCM, he spent his last years (1545 to 1550) in a Franciscan monastery (Aguiar 1930:176). The full contents of the plates may never be known, although Syrian sources give details of parts of the text (Zachariah 1973:33-40). Roz's copy is the earliest extant translation of the plates, and is consistent with the narrative that is prevalent among the SCM. The most recent exhaustive search for the Knai Thoma plates in Portugal was done in 1925-6. According to Fr. Hosten and T.K. Joseph (), a certain Keralan barrister Mr. Panikkar, friend of Joseph, at the latter's behest, 'ransacked' the Torre do Tombo (National Archives of Lisbon), with the help of its Director General, without any success in locating the plates. (See Hosten and Joseph in Kerala Soc. Papers 1927b:185-6.)

The most reliable complete translation with annotations of the so-called 'Jewish Plates' plates appears to be that of the 19th century British scholar of the Tamil language, C.M. Whish. Whish observes the close parallel between the contents of these plates and, a) granite-slab inscription found at a temple (Editorial in The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register 1831 Vol.VI:11), and b) those in the possession of the Jews of Kochi. 'Cherumān Perumāl is not the name of an individual, but of every member of a race of kings of the Chera dynasty'.