

Medieval Structural Remains From St. Hormis Church, Angamaly

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Abstract

The central purpose of this paper is to analyse the structural remains found at the church of St. Hormis in Angamaly in central Kerala and its association with late sixteenth century church architecture in Kerala. This late 16th century building is closely associated with Mar Abraham, the last Chaldean bishop sent by the Patriarchs of Babylon to Malabar. Angamaly was often mentioned in contemporary documents as the seat of Mar Abraham from 1568 to 1597. The Synod of Angamaly was convened by Mar Abraham in 1583. He died at Angamaly in 1597 and was buried in this church. Though these facts were well known and comprehensively studied based on missionary letters, travellers accounts, native accounts and the letters written by Mar Abraham, the recent archaeological discoveries have given a new insight into the medieval religious conditions in Kerala and the role of Christians in it.

Keywords: Angamaly, St. Hormis church, Mar Abraham, tombstone.

Early History of Angamaly

Angamaly is a town in Periyar basin in Kerala. The earliest archaeological evidence from Periyar basin includes polished stone axes of the Neolithic culture. Continuous settlement began during the Iron Age with the Megalithic culture. Many sites with Urn burials and Cist burials dated between 500 BCE and CE 500 were found along the Manjaly River and the palaeochannels of the River Periyar (Chedambath, 1988, Peter 2002, Varghese & Jomon, 2002:127-8). A Dolmenoid Cist burial with iron chisels, and models of a plough and two animals were found at Kidangoor near Angamaly (Chedambath, 1988, Gurukkal & Varier, 1999:114).

Gradually, Angamaly emerged as a trading town during the early historic period. The active trade during first and second centuries CE can be attested from the find of silver punch marked coins from Kodussery near Angamaly (Varghese & Jomon, 2002:128). This formed the backdrop for the emergence of Angamaly as one of the earliest

Christian settlements in Kerala. This fact is backed by a tradition that, the earliest group of Christian traders who settled in Angamaly migrated from Palayur (Varghese & Jomon, 2002: 130). The earliest church was near St. George church (Angamaly Valiya Palli) which is dated to 5th century CE, no structural evidence backing it could be found in explorations.

A structure of port-hierarchy was developing in coastal Kerala from the ninth to eighteenth centuries with new port settlements developing in the hinterland (Malekandathil in Sharma (Ed.), 2010:76). Angamaly was well connected through the inland waterways with the coastal settlements of Kodungallur, Palayur and Paravur. Thus, it seems more probable that, small groups of Christian traders migrated from Kodungallur to Angamaly from ninth century CE following the attack by Muhammedans that affected trade (Jomon, 2006:27). Since ninth century, the church in Malabar was also receiving bishops from Persia to various ports such as Kollam and Kodungallur. The Chaldean-Persian bishops Mar Joseph, Mar Abdisho, Mar Jacob and Mar Abraham visited at Angamaly in fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Between 9th and 12th centuries, Kodungallur was active in trade. Grants were issued by the Cheraman Perumal rulers and local chieftains to the newly built churches and synagogues.

Since 1540s, the Jesuit missionaries were setting up their spheres of influence in Malabar largely with support from the Portuguese. Christian missionaries of the Society of Jesus (Jesuit) reached India in 1541 itself (Mathew in Mathew (Ed) 2016: xxiv). The Jesuits had a seminary at Vaipikotta in Chendamangalam from 1584-1663 to train priests in Syrian rite (*Ibid*). Jesuit presence in Angamaly, a settlement of St. Thomas Christians, was to assume significance much later. Mar Abraham gave permission to Jesuit missionaries to work among the St. Thomas Christians in and around Angamaly (*Ibid*).

Medieval remains from St. Hormis church

In 2015 as the St. Hormis church was being renovated, archaeological evidence of a late 16th century building and a tomb like structure were unearthed. As the church was being renovated, there was no possibility for a systematic excavation. Within the limited time and space available, efforts were made to look for structural remains of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. A scientific clearance of the debris was done in the area of the *madubaha* or sanctum sanctorum of the present church. All the finds were documented and recorded systemati-

cally and was compared with other contemporary sites in Kerala. It was then corroborated using data from historical sources.

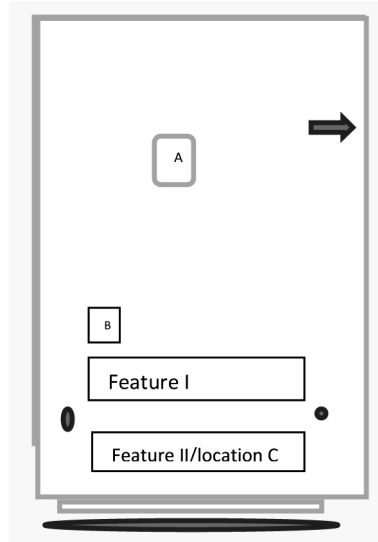


Figure 1: Ground plan of St. Hormis Church¹

The objectives of the work were as follows:

- a. To identify archaeological remains dating to 16th and 17th centuries at St. Hormis Church at Angamaly.
- b. To identify the different structural phases in the site and different modes of construction.
- c. To locate the tomb of Mar Abraham.
- d. To collect sepulchral remains if any
- e. To conduct chemical analysis and scientific dating.

Trial Trenches

One of the objectives was to locate the burial of Mar Abraham for which trial trenches were laid. Feature II may be identified as a tomb on the basis of architectural features, locational features and on the basis of archival documents. The grave fill was carefully removed and samples were taken. The fill was sieved for recovering small finds. A unique number was given to each dig and as the soil texture and colour changed. The entire operation was done manually. Vertical photo of the trenches was taken before, during and after the clearance. The samples were collected and recorded with site code, context number and sample number.

Tomb of Mar Abraham

Mar Abraham was the last Chaldean bishop of Malabar. He reached Angamaly in 1556-57 but was sent back by the Portuguese. Later he became a Nestorian reconciled with Catholic Church. He was ordained as a priest in Rome and then came to Goa and subsequently to Angamaly. He served as the Archbishop of Angamaly for twenty-nine years from 1569 till his death in 1597.

Three possible locations of the tomb were identified on the basis of archival documents:

- a. Location A: In front of the sanctuary in the middle of the aisle
- b. Location B: Right side of the sanctuary near the steps towards the aisle
- c. Location C: Right side of the sanctuary close to the altar wall in the eastern end of the sanctuary (*Figure 1*)

Scientific clearance at locations A and B were not rewarding. But, in location C foundation wall of an old building was unearthed (Feature I) at a depth of 3.1 feet. At the depth of 6.3 feet, towards east of the wall, a tomb like feature (Feature I) was found. The distance between Feature I and II was 1.25 metres and both appeared to be contemporary (*Figure 1*).

Feature I

The church now in the name of St. Hormis and in the name of Rabban Hormisda in sixteenth century has been in continuous use for the past 450 years. In Location C, foundation of an old structure was unearthed at a depth of 3.1 feet. The structure is not of dry masonry. Within this Feature two laterite bricks were joined with mud mortar. But the most common mortar used in its construction is lime mortar. A fine paste of lime was applied as top coat or putty. The size of the laterite blocks (average dimensions: 40x28x20 cm) is similar to those excavated at Kottapuram fort. On account of similarities in architecture at St. Hormis church and Kottapuram fort, Feature I can be dated between c. AD 1550 and AD 1650. Detailed investigations are required to substantiate this.

Feature II

Feature II is a rectangular pit running parallel to Feature I with a dimension of 7 feet length x 1.25 feet width x 6.3 feet depth (*Figure.1*). During the work in the sanctuary for renovation, the tomb of Mar Abraham measuring 1.25 meter in breadth, 2 meters in length and

1.5-2 meters in depth was discovered on 18 September 2015 (Mathew in Mathew (Ed) 2016: 211)

Lime plaster

Its base and three walls (east, west and south) were plastered with lime putty having an average thickness of approximately 10 mm. This pit runs parallel to Feature I and is aligned north-south.

Partition wall

Four courses of smaller laterite bricks joined with mud mortar partitions this pit in the middle. The nature of plaster and size of bricks in the partition wall is different from the side walls. The eastern wall is plastered only till this partition. The lime plastering over the western wall continues parallel to Feature I (*Figure. 1*).

Western and southern walls of Feature II

Walls on the western and southern sides are fairly intact. The wall is made of seven to eight courses of laterite bricks placed horizontally. Only two courses of laterite blocks remain on the northern side.

Eastern wall of Feature II

There is evidence for post-construction disturbance. The eastern wall which is the outer wall is most damaged. On the eastern side, the upper courses are disturbed.

Floor of Feature II

The floor of Feature II is paved with four laterite bricks each laid horizontally. It is then plastered with a layer of fine lime putty probably to seal it. Beneath this layer, natural soil is found.

Headstone

The associated features within tombs provide vital clues to interpret the function of the Feature II as a tomb. One such defining aspect is the presence of a stone on the southern end probably as a headstone. The headstone is a laterite brick measuring 2 feet in length and 1 foot in width placed horizontally. This brick is smaller in size and not plastered. Its alignment is also different from the rest of the structure. The dimension of the headstone is similar to the bricks in the partition wall on north and both were perhaps part of a burial. The headstone is finely chiselled and carefully placed on the southern end of the rectangular pit. Based on contextual evidence, we can understand that the orientation of the tomb was south-north with head placed on the southern side.

Sepulchral or Non-Sepulchral Burial?

Though a tomb can be identified in the site was a corpse ever

interred here? No human remains were found in the tomb. The tomb could have been a ceremonial burial though such an occurrence does not match with the documentary evidence. There is a dominant belief that Mar Abraham was indeed buried here. This was evident in the enthusiasm the discovery of the tomb evoked in the public and clergy. Various sects among the St. Thomas Christians supported the fact that Mar Abraham was buried here in 1597 and that the tomb has been at last found.

We do not possess any detailed account of Mar Abraham's burial (Thevarmannil 2016: 211). The earliest testimony to Abraham's burial in the church of St. Hormis which was built by Mar Abraham himself is by Fr. Raulin (Hough 1845 C.fr Thevarmannil 2016: 211). Hough adds that, Mar Abraham was buried in the church as per his wish. He was ailing for almost two years according to contemporary Jesuit priests and a papal document was issued soon after the death of Mar Abraham in 1600 (Thevarmannil in Mathew (Ed) 2016: 208).

Tombstone

Tombstones are not regular features of burials in medieval Kerala. However, tombs of prominent personalities such as Mar Abraham are likely to be 'signified' by a tombstone. Cyriac Thevarmannil in his comprehensive study of Mar Abraham as part of his doctoral dissertation observed that, the tomb marked at the entrance to the sanctuary is only 'alleged' to be the one of Mar Abraham. The tomb was not opened and the slab over the tomb bore no inscription (Thevarmannil 1965Cfr. Mathew Ed: 2010). During interviews while the tomb and structural remains were being unearthed during the renovation of the church of St. Hormis in 2016, the local residents testified to 'seeing a slab with some writing till 1960s'.

Following the death of Mar Abraham, Archdeacon continued to administer from St. Hormis church. Through the Synod of Daimper two years later, the Goan Archbishop wished to end the Chaldean jurisdiction of Babylonian patriarchs in Malabar. Under these circumstances, Mar Abraham's Nestorian origins and his acceptance of catholic faith were being questioned in the documents sent by the Jesuit priests. The possibility of the mortal remains of Mar Abraham, the last Chaldean Persian bishop of Malabar being removed from Angamaly also cannot be ruled out. There is evidence of heavy disturbance in later layers in the site which could have destroyed the tomb.

Evidence for Disturbance in Features I and II

There have been at least two phases of construction at St. Hormis church after its construction in late 16th century. There was a brief phase of destruction of the church by Tipu Sultan in late eighteenth century. The roof had burnt down and the façade of the church was damaged.

There was a phase of reconstruction afterwards in early nineteenth century. The façade and roof were rebuilt. An inscription on the *seelanthi* (one of the axial timbers in the roof frame) of St. Hormis church gives the year 1803 CE for this reconstruction. The inscription in *Arya Ezhuthu/ Grantha* script mentions that the church was reconstructed thirteen years after it was damaged during Tipu Sultan's attack on Angamaly. The names of the carpenter, and two trustees (*kaikkaran*) with their family names (*Mundadan* and *Nedungadan*) are also mentioned (Payyapilly 2016: 180, Mundadan 2016: pers. comm)

Inscriptions are also found on the roof frame (*utharam* and *kazhukol*) of the churches at Kanjoor, Meloor (Payyapilly 2016: 179, Padayatty 2003: 36-7) and Akaparambu (Thomas 2016: Personal information). The reconstruction of St. Sebastian's church at Kanjoor in Ernakulam district was also in 1802 CE. Interestingly, this church has a mural painting showing native army fighting the army of Tipu Sultan (Peter and Gopi 2009:45). Another early nineteenth century find from this church is a bronze lamp donated by Sakthan Thampuran, the king of Kochi along with a land grant as provision for oil.

Structural remains at Kottapuram Fort: A Comparison

Eight burial features were found in the excavations at Kottapuram Fort in Trissur district from 2010-13 (Hemachandran 2015 pers. comm, Reema M.S 2015: Pers. Comm). These are dated between mid-16th and mid-17th centuries and can be classified into two types.

- a. Burial without tombstone or covering slab
- b. Burial marked by tombstone or covering slab

Three extended burials without tombs were found in the trenches A2, D1 and XB1. In trenches A2 and A3, five tombstones were found within an area of 20 m². Tombstones were confined to this area and are closely spaced suggesting this could have been a cemetery or burial ground in use between mid-16th and mid-17th centuries.

Certain broad similarities can be noticed between the tombs at St. Hormis church, Angamaly and Kottapuram fort as both are contemporary. In both sites, laterite blocks were used in building structures as

well as tombs. Mud mortar was used in joining the coping stones of the tomb in Kottapuram and in the partition wall of the tomb in St. Hormis church, Angamaly. Lime mortar was used for the rest of the construction. The chemical composition of the lime mortar used in masonry and lime putty used in plastering in both sites is similar. This suggests contemporaneity and use of similar building technology.

However, the relation between burial without tombstone and burial with tombstone is not clear at Kottapuram. One tomb in Kottapuram fort was empty. It is presumed that, this tomb was either disturbed later or may have been a commemorative burial (Reema, 2015. Pers. comm). The rest two tombs had extended human burials with covering slabs. The tomb at Angamaly did not have any burial remains and may have been a commemorative burial. It was empty except for a few broken iron and bronze objects.

Site	Tomb in A3 Kottapuram Fort	Feature II St. Hormis church
length	200	213
breadth	70	38
Width	150	97

Table 1:

Dimensions of the tombs at Kottapuram fort and St. Hormis Church (in metric scale)

Ancient human remains from archaeological contexts can be dated using various methods and by DNA mapping. Soil samples are tested for presence of humic acid, nitrogen and PH is measured. The soil samples from the tomb in Angamaly Kizhakkeppally are being analysed and results will be compared with sites like Sambaloor and Kottapuram.

Structural Remains of sixteenth century Church

The structural remains of the foundation wall of a church was found at a depth of around two metres from the present surface. Based on the orientation of the structure, lime masonry and lime plaster, it can be dated to late 16th century. Two pillar bases or post-holes were found above the foundation wall. Eight courses of laterite blocks remain intact in the wall. The wall was built of laterite blocks set in lime mortar and then plastered with lime putty. From a section exposed on the western wall, three structural phases can be noticed. The walls of the church are one metre thick and built of laterite bricks. The wall is

plastered using fine lime plaster. It has been lime washed and many layers can still be seen.

On the northern side of the madubaha, there is an arched doorway built of granite. It has prominent chisel marks and two circular holes for fixing the massive wooden door. The base of the granite doorway has a vatteluthu inscription but little is known about its content (Varghese & Jomon, 2002: 69). It is possible to date the church of St. Hormis, Angamaly on palaeographic grounds. The following were found in the site.

- a. Foundation wall
- b. Debris
- c. Laterite bricks
- d. Lime plaster
- e. Lime masonry
- f. Pillar base/ posthole
- g. Flat roof tiles
- h. Arched granite doorway with a vatteluthu inscription

Structural Phases	Features
I	Foundation and courses of laterite wall of the church built in late 16 th century (c.1569-83)
II	Restored in early 19 th century (c.1803-04)
III	Renovated using rcc and rubble foundation (c.1955)
IV	Restored in 2014-16

Table 2: Structural phases at St. Hormis Church, Angamaly

Flat roof tiles

Roof tiles are the most common and widespread structural evidence found in medieval sites in Kerala. The flat roof tile or marodu is found in many medieval sites in Kerala. Much evidence in these sites has been overlooked and, the tiles (roof tiles and floor tiles) can be analysed to fix the chronology of a site (Peter 2016).

Flat roof tiles are usually found on surface near medieval structures. For the first time, it has been found in a structural context at St. Hormis church. Since it was found in along the foundation debris of Feature I the tiles can be dated to late sixteenth century and belong to the first structural phase. Each tile is approximately 10 mm thick and 8-10 cm wide but were broken radially. The tile has a curved tip at the top end to fix it on the planks of the roof frame and a triangular tip at the bottom.

Same tiles were also found in the land filling that took place before construction in 1950s in the third structural phase. Since the earliest construction here is only in late sixteenth century the flat roof tiles can be thus dated to this period. Previously, marodu were dated between c. 900-1200 CE. A large number of flat roof tiles many in fresh condition and intact formed a part of the wall of the temple atop a hill at Rayiranellur which is associated with Naranathu Bhranthan and the myth of Parayipetta Panthirukulam. From the in-situ find of flat roof tiles from the church of St. Hormis, Angamaly we may presume that, flat roof tiles were in use as late as sixteenth century.

Summary and Discussion

Based on oral, written and archaeological evidence, Feature II at St. Hormis Church can be identified as a tomb. There is historical evidence for it being the tomb of Mar Abraham. Bishops are usually buried in the madubaha or sanctuary of the church and this tomb was found in the sanctuary. Hence, Feature II seems to be the tomb of Mar Abraham. There is no evidence for any other burial in this church though there is evidence for continuity of St. Hormis church. There are indications of post-depositional disturbance in the tomb.

From excavated remains and exposed burials in Kottapuram fort, Sambaloor church and St. Hormis church we can understand that at least till seventeenth century, coffin burial was uncommon. Bishops and priests were usually buried inside the church and in the sanctuary. Others were buried in and around the church.

We can also infer the following factors from recent archaeological finds. St. Hormis church was the cathedral church of Mar Abraham and was built sometime between 1569-1583. A tomb was found at a depth of 4.5 feet from its floor level. The careful lime plastering of the walls and north-south orientation.³ The associated features with the tomb include a head stone and artefacts including a brass/bronze ritualistic chain. There is ample documentary evidence for the construction of a church and for the burial of Mar Abraham in the church of St. Hormis. Oral testimonies testify the subsequent destruction and disturbance in the site. There is archaeological evidence for repeated disturbances at the site due to attacks and later construction.

The structural remains such as tiles and burials found in the churches in Kerala need to be recovered more carefully and studied more systematically by integrating various categories of evidence. The burial contexts provide vital clues in identifying past individuals. The structural remains of ancient churches and associated artefacts are the best evidence for understanding the origin and growth of church in

Kerala. A database of tombs and burials covering dimensions, inscriptions, nature of burials, materials used, soil samples, orientation, bone samples and list of grave goods have to be prepared. Each burial or tomb has to be photographed and cemeteries have to be mapped. The churches with inscriptions in Vatteluthu, Koleluthu, Grantha, Garzoni, Syriac, Latin, Portuguese, Dutch and English have to be mapped and systematically examined to see the religious interactions in pre-Modern period.

After the death of Mar Abraham, Archdeacon was appointed as the Vicar Apostolic along with two Jesuit consultants. During this period, the tensions between Goan archbishop and St. Thomas Christians increased. The Synod of Diamper in 1599 put an end to the Chaldean jurisdiction of the Babylonian Patriarchs in Malabar. The church of St. Hormis at Angamaly witnessed these historic events.

Notes

1. Area in black indicate structural features such as altar in the madubaha and two circles indicate the pillars. The elongated structure in front of altar is the tomb feature. Location A is where a tomb was marked on the floor of the church. The arrow indicates north.
2. P.V Sreenivasan, Department of Chemistry, Union Christian College, Aluva.
3. During the 16th and 17th centuries the Persian influence over the church in Malabar was waning. The European domination in church matters was articulated through the Synod of Diamper in 1599. Before that the burials were oriented south-north or north-south. At present, the bishops of the East Syriac rite are buried in seated position in Antiochian tradition which was introduced in 18th century (Abraham, 2015).

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