

A Backgrounder to the Religio-Cultural Context of the West Asian Trading Groups Mentioned in the Tarisāppaḷḷi Copper Plate Grant

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Abstract

The Tarisāppaḷḷi grant of 849 C. E. which is inscribed on copper plates detail the grant of land, privileges and serfs at Kollam to a group of foreign Christian traders led by Maruvan Sāpir Īsō by the governor of Venatu. The names of the witnesses mentioned in the Tarisāppaḷḷi grant refer to the main West Asian trading groups who were involved in the maritime trade of early medieval Kerala. The very nature of the transnational trade networks based on religious identity that linked co-religionists of West Asia and Kerala makes it imperative to study the West Asian religious and cultural backgrounds of these networks in order to understand their impact on early medieval Kerala. The West Asian trading groups include East Syriac Christians popularly known as Nestorian Christians, Persian Jews, Arab Muslims and Zoroastrians. The Christians and Jews were already major trading groups involved in Indian Ocean maritime trade during the time of the Sasānian Empire (224 C. E. – 651 C. E.). The pre-Islamic Arabs who followed varied belief systems were also part of these trading ventures. These same groups continued to be involved in maritime trade even after the advent of Islam. By the time of the early 'Abbāsīd Caliphate and the beginning of the second Chēra kingdom of Kerala to which period the Tarisāppaḷḷi grant is dated to, the Arabs had mainly converted to Islam and the Zoroastrians also joined the group of West Asian traders involved in maritime trade with Kerala. The socio-religious and political contexts of the West Asian trading groups also had an impact on the development of the communities of their co-religionists in Kerala.

Keywords: East Syriac Christians, St. Thomas Christians, Persian Jews, Arab Muslims, Sasānians, Kollam, Chēramān Perumāl.

Introduction

The early medieval period witnessed two major developments in the history of the western Indian Ocean littoral which were to later link up and lead to the renewal of the trade in spices from Kerala. One was the emergence of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula, the defeat of the Sasānid Persians by early Arab Islamic armies and adding of the territories of the former Sasānids to the Early Islamic Caliphate. The second development was the migration of Brāhmins from the northern regions of India along the western Indian coast to Kerala and the establishment of thirty-two Nambudiri Brāhmin settlements in Kerala. These Brāh-

mins then dominated the social and political aspects of Kerala society by building a highly stratified caste-based social structure, introducing wet rice cultivation and establishing a temple-based administrative structure. The support of the Brāhmins then led to the emergence of the second Chēra kingdom in the ninth century C.E. The establishment of political stability resulted in the revival of commercial activities in Kerala. The Early Islamic Caliphate was succeeded by the Ummayyad Caliphate and the ‘Abbāsīd Caliphate after that. The ‘Abbāsīds shifted the capital from Damascus to Iraq and later Baghdad so that they could more efficiently partake of the maritime trade activities of the Indian Ocean. This led to greater involvement of the West Asians in the trade in pepper and other condiments from Kerala leading to the rejuvenation and expansion of pepper trade in Kerala in the ninth century C.E.

The main focus of this paper is to provide a backgrounder to the religious and cultural context of the West Asian trading groups which are mentioned in the *Tarisāppalli* copper grant which is the most important source on trade in early medieval Kerala. One of the hindrances to further research in academia in Kerala on the nature of Kerala’s maritime trade during the early medieval period is a lack of understanding about the religious and cultural context of West Asian trading groups who were active in the western Indian Ocean during this period. This is due to the very nature of the academic structure in Kerala with almost no departments focusing on the history of a region like West Asia which is very vital to research on the history of Kerala. Another challenge is the reluctance to engage with the latest findings from archaeological excavations in countries that form the littoral of the western Indian Ocean which should then be ideally scrutinized to see if this knowledge can help us improve our understanding about Kerala’s extensive maritime relations and their resultant impact on its society. The very nature of the transnational trade networks based on religious identity that linked co-religionists of West Asia and Kerala makes it imperative to understand the West Asian religious and cultural context of the traders from that region so that their impact on Kerala during this period can be understood. While this is the focus on the West Asian context of these networks, with regard to the other end of these networks i.e. in Kerala, the attention will be on trying to identify the sects or factions within the larger West Asian religious trading community who would have arrived in Kerala during this period. The paper will then try to raise certain issues which have to be further explored with regard to the history of the religious communities in Kerala like the Christians and Muslims who are linked to these West Asian trade networks.

East Syriac Christians

We know that the *Tarisāppalli* grant dated to 849 C.E. contains

signatures of West Asian traders in three languages, namely in Sasānian-Pahlavi or Middle Persian, Judeo-Persian and Arabic in Kufic script. On the basis of the languages, the signatories have been respectively described as East Syriac Christians, Persian Jews and Arab Muslims with the exception of three signatories in Sasānian-Pahlavi language who have been described as Zoroastrian. Who were the foreign Christian traders led by Maruvan Sāpir Īsō who were granted land, privileges and serfs at Kollam to built a church and conduct trade by the governor of Venatu. During the time of the Persian Sasānid Empire (third century C.E. to the seventh century C.E.), the East Syriac Christians known more popularly as Nestorian Christians were the major trading community of the empire involved in long-distance maritime trade. It is important to understand the history and structure of this church in order to understand how ethnicity and language were important identity markers even in a seemingly united church.

The origins of Christianity in Persia can actually be traced to the adjacent Aramaic-speaking region of northern Mesopotamia in the city of Edessa, the capital of the small kingdom of Osrhoëne. Osrhoëne was one of the string of buffer states that separated the Roman and Parthian empires in the first centuries C.E. Edessa is today called Urfa and is located in south-eastern Turkey. While the Persian-speaking regions during this period comprise present-day Iran, politically Persia under both the Parthians and the Sasānians consisted also of the Aramaic-speaking territory of Mesopotamia (Buck, 1996: 56-57). Therefore, religious and cultural influences in Mesopotamia also spread to Persia over a period of time. It is considered possible that Christianity had spread from Mesopotamia to Persia even before the end of Parthian rule in 224 C. E (Moffett, 2006: 79). Syriac, a dialect of Aramaic began to be used by the Aramaic-speaking people of Mesopotamia and Syria who converted to Christianity. Their Christian rites, rituals, practices and beliefs began to be collectively termed as Syriac Christianity.

While the kingdom of Osrhoëne was conquered by the Romans in about 214 C. E., Edessa continued to be the centre of Syriac Christians both in the Roman and Parthian empires (Moffett, 2006: 94). Information on links between the Syriac church in Mesopotamia and Persia on the one side and the Christians in India on the other dating to the beginning of the fourth century C. E. are mentioned in historical sources. It is mentioned in the Chronicle of Seert that in about 300 C. E. David, the bishop of Başra left his see or ecclesiastical jurisdiction and departed for India where he converted a large number of people. In the list of bishops who signed the creed of the Council of Nicaea in 325 included the name and title, "John the Persian, of the churches of the whole of Persia and in the great India". Some scholars believe that he was the bishop of Rēv Ardashīr, the ranking see of the province of Fārs

in southeastern Persia. According to Mingana, by the year 340 C. E. the route from Mesopotamia and Persia to India through the Gulf and the western Indian Ocean including the island of Socotra was strewn with bishoprics and monasteries (Moffett, 2006: 100-101).

From about the fourth century C. E. the Syriac church in Mesopotamia and Persia moved towards greater centralization. Though these efforts were not completely successful the bishopric in the Sasānian capital city of Seleucia-Ctesiphon was given primary position among the other Christian centers in Mesopotamia and Persia in the early fourth century C. E. The persecutions conducted by Shāpūr II, the Sasānian emperor from 339 C. E. to 369 C. E. disrupted the plans to build a centralized structure for the church. The beginning of the fourth century C. E. also saw the conversion of Persian Zoroastrians to the Christian religion which created problems for these Christians during the persecution as Zoroastrianism was the state religion of Persia during the Sasānian period. The Persian converts to Christians were therefore specifically targeted during the persecution by the state authorities.

It has to be particularly noted that there are oral traditions in Kerala mentioning the arrival of a Syriac Christian merchant, Thomas of Cana at Kodungalloor along with a group of people including seventy-two Christian families, deacons, priests and a bishop in 345 C. E. They were recognized and given high caste status by the local Indian ruler in Malabar (Mundadan, 1972: 31-42; Moraes, 1964: 61-70; Mingana, 1926: 42-45). There is a debate among scholars on period of arrival of the group led by Thomas of Cana in Kerala. While some scholars support the traditional account of arrival in the fourth century C. E. there are others who state that the ninth century C. E. is the likely period of arrival. Those who support the traditional account state that the date 345 C. E. falls in the early years of the Persian persecution of Christians during the time of Shāpūr II probably leading to Christian refugees seeking shelter in Kerala (Malekandathil, 2010: 2; Kollaparampil, 1986: iii; Vellian, 2001: 1; Narayanan, 2013: 284).

After the persecution ended, the Syriac church called the Church of the East once again engaged in creating a centralized organization for the church. The bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon was recognized as the head or patriarch (also known as Catholicos) of the Church of the East during the gathering of all of the bishops of the church at the Synod of Mār Ishāq in 410 C. E. (Moffett, 2006: 152). Therefore, Seleucia-Ctesiphon was raised to the level of a patriarchate. A synod is gathering of church officials held at different levels of the church hierarchy and may or may not include the laity in order to take important decisions and issue important decrees proclaiming the same. In the Synod of Dādīšō held in 424 C. E. it was proclaimed that the Church of the East

was separate from the western church with its centre in Rome (Moffett, 2006: 162; Buck, 1996: 60).

Very soon, the Church of the East was hit by a theological controversy on the true nature of Christ. The roots of the controversy lay in the theological rivalry between the theological schools of the two great patriarchates, Alexandria and Antioch. The Nicene Creed that had been established during the First Council of Nicaea in 325 C. E. had stated that Christ is God and that he is also man. There was a dispute on which element was more strongly represented in the person of Christ. The Alexandrian school laid stress on the divinity of Christ but the Antiochene school laid insistence on the historic, human Christ. Nestorius was a monk from Antioch who was made the patriarch of Constantinople. In one of his sermons there he referred to a dispute between two parties of people on what title should be used to address Mary, the mother of Jesus. One group called Mary, the “Mother of God” and the other party called her “Mother of man”. In Alexandria, the title that was used was “Mother of God” or *Theotokos*. Nestorius stated that he preferred the title “Mother of Christ” as it combined both aspects of Mary. Cyril, patriarch of Alexandria used this opportunity to attack Nestorius because of the earlier theological rivalry. Cyril denounced Nestorius as a heretic. The Council of Ephesus of 431 C. E. was called by the Byzantine emperor to settle the dispute. But it only led to the worsening of the dispute. The council led to the excommunication of Nestorius (Moffett, 2006: 170-175).

In reality, Nestorius’s position is not very different from the orthodox position of both Rome and Constantinople who supported both the divine and human attributes of Christ combined in one person. But his choice of words made it very convenient for his opponents to interpret his position as that of putting forward the idea that Christ existed as two persons, one with a human nature and the other with the divine characteristics. Because Nestorius favoured the title “Mother of Christ”, he and his followers were accused by opponents like Cyril and the Alexandrian theological school of giving more importance to the human nature of Christ, were called Nestorians and were falsely accused of denying the divinity of Christ. In reality, the title Nestorianism does not fit the East Syriac Church or the Assyrian Church of the East as Nestorius’ views were derived from Theodore, the bishop of Mopsuestia who was his mentor at the Antiochene theological school. The correct terminology for describing the theology of the East Syriac Church is Dyophysitism because of their stress on the two natures of Christ. The accusations and campaign of Cyril and his supporters were successful in that they managed to bring about a break between Nestorius and his supporters on the one side and the orthodoxy represented by Rome and Constantinople on the other despite the fact that in

reality the position of the latter two groups were the same¹.

The followers of Cyril who promoted the divinity of Christ were called Monophysites. The Monophysites began to adopt a more extreme position on the divinity of Christ as opposed to the more orthodox position of both Rome and Constantinople. The Monophysites argued that there were no separate human and divine natures in Christ and that the two were combined in the person of Christ. The church as a whole was moving towards a tripartite contest between the Orthodox, Monophysites and the Dyophysites. While the Monophysites were dominant in church politics at the expense of both the Orthodox and Dyophysite factions for a period of time, at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 C. E., the Orthodox position secured its dominant position and declared Monophysitism as a heresy (Moffett, 2006: 177-80). The Monophysites later came to be called the West Syriac Church as they also used Syriac for their liturgy like the East Syriac Church. The West Syriac Church is more popularly known as the Syrian Orthodox Church.² The churches and the Christians under the orthodox centres of Rome and Constantinople were called Chalcedonians after the Council of Chalcedon but they were also called Melkites. This continued till the split between Rome which became the centre of Catholic Church and Constantinople which became the centre of Greek Orthodox Church in the eleventh century C. E.

While the Council of Chalcedon united the churches of the west under the leadership of Rome, the western church lost control of vast regions of Asia and Africa. The Syriac church of Mesopotamia and Persia because of its geographical position away from the main centres of the dispute like Antioch, Alexandria, Constantinople and Rome were initially not affected by the theological dispute. But it finally arrived in Persia through its links with the mother church of Edessa. Persian theological students who later rose to high positions in the clergy of the Syriac church of Mesopotamia and Persia were influenced by the pro-Dyophysite position of the School of the Persians, the theological school they went to in Edessa for their learning (Moffett, 2006: 188-89). The result was a rise in the influence of Dyophysitism in Persia and finally the Church of the East adopted the Dyophysite theology in the Fifth General Synod of the East Syriac Church in 497 C. E. (Moffett, 204). On the other side, Syria under Antioch, which was the centre of Dyophysite theology, drifted towards Monophysitism because of political developments.

With regard to the relations of the East Syriac church with India, in about 410 or 420 C. E. the bishopric of Rēv Ardashīr was elevated to a metropolitanate (archbishopric) and was given jurisdiction over relations with the churches of the Indian subcontinent. The East Syriac Church exercised its ecclesiastical authority over India through Rēv Ar-

dashīr as it was strategically located on the direct sea route to India. The Indian Christians sent their priests to Persia for study (Moffett, 2006: 336). The influence of Persian Christians in India is proved through the discovery of Persian stone crosses in India from Mylapore in Chennai; Anuradhapuram in Sri Lanka; and Goa dating to the sixth century C. E. but will not be discussed here in detail as it has been referred to in other works (Malekandathil, 2006: 5-6; Cereti et al., 2002: 289-93;). In Persia, Ishōʿyahb II, the patriarch of the Church of the East was the leader of the East Syriac Christians when the Arab Muslims captured Persia and he negotiated for his Christians a peaceful settlement of relationship with the new occupiers. The Arab Muslim rulers did not require the Christians and the Jews to convert to Islam. The second caliph of the Rāshidūn Caliphate, Umar concluded peace treaties with the Christians (Moffett, 2006: 336). The Christians and Jews were classified as *dhimmi* or religious minorities.

To prevent the possible influence of other religions on the nomadic Arab tribes who had accepted Islam not so long ago, the Arab Muslim rulers adopted a combination of strategies. The threat was real as the non-Muslims of the former Byzantine and Sasānid empires were more civilized than the nomadic Arabs. The Christian population formed the majority in regions like Syria. The Arab Muslim fighters shunned the cities and settled in the camps which later became garrison cities like Kūfa and Baṣra. The non-Muslim religious communities were grouped into religiously segregated enclaves and their political rights were limited to the bounds of their communities. Service in the army was forbidden to them. But Christians and Jews continued to dominate professions like medicine and trade as they had during the Sasānid period. Christians were highly valued in the administrative system as most of the records were in Greek, Persian and Coptic (Moffet, 2006: 338-39).

The Ummayyad period (661-750 C. E.) was one of tolerance for the Christians as it was characterized by the secularizing and Arabizing of Islam. At the same time, non-Muslims had to pay taxes or tributes and as time went on the taxes grew heavier. Marwan II, the last ruler of the Ummayyad dynasty recognized John II as Jacobite patriarch of Antioch with authority over the Monophysite churches in Asia.³ The ‘Abbāsīd dynasty who replaced the Ummayyads were more orthodox in matters of religion and the situation became more difficult for the Christians. The ‘Abbāsīds, as mentioned in the beginning of this chapter shifted the capital from Damascus to Iraq and later to Baghdad not far away from Seleucia-Ctesiphon, the former capital of the Sasānids in 762 C. E. This fostered greater trade and cultural relations with the east as far away as China. Accordingly, the seat of the East Syriac patriarchate was shifted from Seleucia-Ctesiphon to Baghdad in 775 C. E. In the beginning, relations between the ‘Abbāsīd rulers and the Christians

were not adverse as proved by the debate between the third ‘Abbāsīd caliph Maḥdī and Timothy I, the Nestorian patriarch which was conducted in a cordial manner in 781 C. E. Nevertheless, oppressive and discriminatory practices against Christians prevailed throughout the rule of the ‘Abbāsīds though persecution was rarer. But the tenth ‘Abbāsīd caliph, Mutawakkil (847-861) adopted a rigid Sunni orthodoxy and it soon turned to persecution of Christians (Baumer, 2006: 152; Moffett, 2006: 355-56).

The relations between the East Syriac Church and the St. Thomas Christians of South India were affected by the diversity that was prevalent in the Syriac church. In the earliest period immediately after the centralization of the East Syriac Church, the patriarch or head of the church ordained all the bishops of Asia which included the island of Socotra in the Arabian Sea and South India after 420 C.E. But from 554 C.E. to 790 C.E. the churches of Malabar were ecclesiastically under the Persian metropolitan or archbishop of Fārs province seated at Rēv Ardashīr on the Bushire peninsula which itself was under the patriarchate at Seleucia-Ctesiphon. There were differences among churches in Mesopotamia and Persia on monasticism, ordination of the bishops and on use of language, Syriac was used in Mesopotamia and Sasānian-Pahlavi was used in Fārs. The Bible was translated into Persian in Iran and the language was also adopted for conducting church services in place of Syriac which was the language used in Mesopotamia (Malekandathil, 2010: 7-8; Buck, 1996: 54). Later, Arabic replaced Syriac as the vernacular language of the East Syriac Christians of Mesopotamia during the time of Patriarch Saliba Zakha who was in office from 714 – 728 C.E. (Baumer, 2006:154).

The process of the changing of power from the Sasānian to Arab Islamic lasted for more than a century creating difficulties to the Nestorian church. Seleucia-Ctesiphon fell to the Arab Muslims in 637 C. E., but the province of Fārs fell only in 649 C.E. The patriarch lost contact with and control over southern Iran who traditionally sought independence. Even after the re-establishment of imperial unity, the metropolitan of Rēv Ardashīr refused to accept the authority of the Patriarch. But the patriarch Timothy I enjoyed the support of the Arabs and he removed India from the ecclesiastical control of the metropolitan of Rēv Ardashīr (Baumer, 2006: 153). Timothy appointed what is considered as the first known metropolitan in India in 790 C. E. and forced the rebellious bishops to surrender. Despite such attempts, Pahlavi continued to be used in South India till 1040-50 when the Metropolitan of Rēv Ardashīr was finally extinguished due to the rise of the Seljuk rulers in Iran. It is highly probable that Syriac came to be used as a liturgical and ecclesiastical language in Malabar only after these developments in the eleventh century, when the church of Kerala got directly linked with the seat of the East Syrian Church. This answers the question on

the identity of the East Syriac traders who arrived in Kollam under Maruvan Sāpir Īsō in the early ninth century C. E. They were likely to be Persian Christians as is proved in the use of Sasānian-Pahlavi in the *Tarisāppalli* copper plate grant and the Persian stone crosses discovered in Mylpore, near Chennai; Anuradhapuram in Sri Lanka; and in Goa dating even earlier to the sixth century C. E. (Mingana, 1926: 467; Malekandathil, 2010: 7-8).

The members of the East Syriac Church, including the laity and the clergy were heavily involved in both overland trade connecting Mesopotamia and Persia with China through Central Asia and the maritime trade of the Indian Ocean again extending all the way to China as both merchants and sailors (Carter, 2008: 105). In fact, Syriac Christianity – not Zoroastrianism – was officially regarded by the Tang Chinese Empire (617 C. E. – 907 C. E.) as the ‘The Persian Religion’ (Godwin, 2018: 15). Evidence for involvement of the church in maritime trade is available in the *Tarisāppalli* grant of Kollam in 849 C. E. The Sasānian rulers had already established a system whereby only traders from recognised religions such as East Syriac Christianity would be allowed to partake of long-distance maritime trade activities in the Indian Ocean completely excluding the many heretical sects of West Asia. The situation was different during the Parthian and earliest period of the Sasānian Empire. For example, Samuel N. C. Lieu in his work on Manichaeism quotes from the Cologne Mani-Codex pointing out that Mani, the founder of Manichaeism had left for India from the Gulf port of Forat and arrived at Deb one of the important ports of the Indus Delta in the third century C. E. to spread his new belief system during the last years of Ardashīr I. In later periods, it became much more difficult for Manichaean missionaries to use the maritime route from Forat because of the East Syriac Christian control over the maritime activities (Lieu, 1985: 55-56, 58). But even in the later Sasānian, early Islamic and early ‘Abbāsīd periods, monitoring the overland trade routes were not so easy. During the ‘Abbāsīd period the Manichaeans were persecuted and many fled to Central Asia where they were favoured by the Uighur Turks (Lieu, 1985: 83-84).

The maritime contacts of the East Syriac Church with South India were conducted through a network of Christian settlements in the Gulf region. Most of these settlements included churches and some also had monasteries. Archaeological excavations have been conducted in many of these sites and they can provide information on the nature of the relations between the church in Persia and the Thomas Christians in south India. The locations of the Christian sites in the Gulf are Khārg island off the coast of Iran; al-Qusur on the island of Failaka and another site on the island of Akkaz, both in Kuwait; Jubayl and Thaj in Saudi Arabia; Sir Bani Yas Island in the territory of Abu Dhabi, United

Arab Emirates (Carter, 2008: 71). Because of historical textual evidence for the presence of Christianity in the Gulf between the fourth century C. E. and 676 C. E. (Seray, 1996: 316-321), the excavators of these sites had dated these sites to this time frame (Carter, 2008: 72). But a re-evaluation of archaeological evidence from sites by Derek Kennet and Robert Carter has led to a revised chronological sequence.

While these sites including East Syriac Christian churches and monasteries were earlier dated to the late Sasānian period, they are now thought to be from the Early Islamic and Early ‘Abbāsīd periods. It is now understood that the Sasānians effectively diverted all long-distance trade in the Gulf towards the Persian coast, especially Fārs region and away from the Arabian side (Ulrich, 2011: 382). The heyday of the Arabian side of the Gulf region began only with the advent of Islam in the seventh century A. D. The early Muslim rulers did not interfere with the Christian-dominated pearl trade of the Gulf, but rather taxed it. It encouraged the survival of Christian communities in remote areas of the Gulf like Bani Yas. In the same way that Christian monasteries in inland Arabia had functioned as caravanserais so did the monastery at Sir Bani Yas Island act as a maritime staging post. This situation led to a burst of Christian activity in the Gulf in the latter part of the seventh century. But the most mature phase of the missionary activity of the East Syriac Church was during the later eighth and early ninth centuries C. E., under the patriarch Timothy I coinciding with the date of the *Tarisāppalli* grant (Carter, 2008: 105).

What is the significance of the re-evaluation of the dating of these sites for understanding the nature of the relations between the church in Persia and the Thomas Christians of South India? The extensive monastic complex on the island of Khārg off the coast of Iran was earlier dated to the fifth-sixth century C. E. But now it is dated to the ninth century C. E. on the basis of a more detailed study of the available archaeological evidence (Kennet, 2007: 92). The island also had commercial significance as it was well known for its pearls (Carter, 2008: 104-105). It is understood that the Khārg monastery could accommodate one hundred persons at a time most of whom were sent to India for missionary activities (Whitehouse and Williamson, 1973: 43).

The ninth century saw the establishment of St. Thomas Christian settlements in Kerala like Kāyamkuḷam, Athirampuzha and Kottayam as part of the expanding pepper trade. The next century witnessed the emergence of even larger number of Christian settlements such as Nāgapuzha, Manjapra, Māvelikara, Pazhuvil, Arakuzha, Nediaśāla, Kadamattom, Kaṭatturutti Cheriapally and Kunnamkuḷam (Malekandathil, 2010: 45). This was also the period in which the society in Kerala was undergoing transformation as part of the establishment of caste hierarchy under the influence of the dominant Nambudiri Brāhmins.

Buddhist and Jain trading groups were being pushed back from their dominant status in trade and Christians and Jews were increasingly being promoted to replace them. The St. Thomas Christians did not have the institutional capabilities or the resources for organizing proselytization at a large scale. The evidence from Khārg could point out to an expansion of Christian proselytes in Kerala from the indigenous society who joined the St. Thomas Christians to overcome the loss of social status and limiting of access to economic resources because of their former religious beliefs.

Kollam and the Thomas Traditions

Christianity in the south Indian state of Kerala is widely believed by the St. Thomas Christians of Kerala to have originated with the apostolic mission of Judas Thomas, the apostle of Jesus Christ in the first century C. E. Most of these traditions are today preserved in the form of collections of songs titled Rambānpāttu and Mārgam-kali-pāttu. According to the Rambānpāttu, Thomas arrived in Kerala in 50 C. E. (Nedungatt, 2008: 361) and converted some among the indigenous population including from among the highest priestly caste of the Vedic religion, the Brāhmins to Christianity. The Mārgam-kali-pāttu mentions that the apostle established seven crosses (and not churches as is widely thought) in seven locations in Kerala one of which was at Kollam (Nedungatt, 2008: 357). The claim that the Apostle Thomas converted Nambudiri Brāhmins to Christianity is questioned by historians because the period of establishment of settlements by these Brāhmins is much later than the first century C. E.

According to Kesavan Veluthat, the earliest settlement of the Nambudiri Brāhmins was established in northern Kerala in between the end of the Saṅgam period in the third century C. E. and the seventh century C. E. (Veluthat, 2013: 23-24). Subsequently, settlements were established in a southwards direction until there were thirty-two Nambudiri Brāhmin settlements from north to south Kerala only by the time of the eighth century C. E. There was no way that there was a Brāhmin settlement in central Kerala in the first century C. E.⁴ But Brāhmin families who faced ostracism and were expelled from the community would have to join the St. Thomas Christians who were placed in an intermediary position in the caste hierarchy to gain a modicum of respect and recognition.⁵ This is what is likely to have been the basis for the traditions on conversion of Nambudiri Brāhmins by Apostle Thomas to Christianity at Pālayūr and other settlements mentioned in the Thomas traditions.

Likewise, there are no references to Kollam, one of the seven settlements supposedly established by Thomas before the ninth century C. E. The settlement of Kollam was first mentioned in historical sources in the Arabic work of Suleiman titled *Salsalat-al-Taverika* dated to 841

C. E. where Kollam was referred to as Koulam Mali. No references to Kollam can be found before this period (Malekandathil, 2010: 43).⁶ Foreign Christian traders from the Middle East who were concentrated in the coastal regions of Kerala were allowed to establish trade settlements by the rulers of the second Cēra dynasty or their governors. Kollam is an example of such a trade settlement whose leader, Maruvan Sāpir Īsō was given rights and privileges to maintain the church and trade settlement as documented in the *Tarisāppaḷli* copper plates in 849 C. E. by the local governor of the Cēras. What emerges is that the Thomas traditions in their present form were developed in medieval Kerala by adding on to existing traditions by three sections of Christians in Kerala including prominent indigenous St. Thomas Christian trading settlements involved in the spice trade, settlements of newly converted St. Thomas Christians from the Nambudiri Brāhmin community and the foreign West Asia Christian traders of the settlement of Kollam. By this effort, they were able to claim legitimacy and antiquity among the larger St. Thomas Christian community of Kerala.⁷

There are also examples of how other traditions were added on or altered to confirm the Thomas tradition of the establishment of seven churches by the Apostle Thomas in the first century C. E. One of the challenges with regard to Kollam in this regard is the fact that the settlement would have been well known especially in the context of the *Tarisāppaḷli* grant and the origin of the Christian settlement there in the ninth century C. E. There was the need to create a tradition linking Kollam with the account of the first century C. E. arrival of Apostle Thomas. There is a tradition that the church established by Thomas was situated on a promontory just outside the city of Kollam. That church is said to have been rebuilt and enlarged in the third century. It was favoured by several royal grants. At the end of the eighth century C. E. it fell victim to the erosion by the Arabian Sea (Nedungatt, 2008: 351). This tradition conveniently covers the gap between the first century C. E. and the beginning of the ninth century C. E. An archaeological excavation at the said location and also further research on historical written and oral accounts will help clarify lingering questions on this matter.

Persian Jews

Another trading group that was involved in maritime trade with Kerala during the Sasānian period were the Persian Jews. Here, the term Persian Jews is used to describe Jews from both Mesopotamia and Persia. The Jews who had been brought as exiles from the southern kingdom of Judah by the Babylonians had been settled in huge numbers in Babylonia i.e. in the land between the Euphrates and Tigris in southern Mesopotamia. While some of them returned to establish the Second Temple of Jerusalem and settle in Judaea after the Achae-

menid Persians freed them, the vast majority chose to remain in Babylonia. Large number of Jews began to settle in Persia as well including Iṣfāhān. During the time of the Arab Muslim invasion, many of Jews were still present in Babylonia. A large number of Jews lived in the vicinity of Sūra, the location of one of two great Babylonian Talmudic academies.

There was a sizeable Jewish population at Hīra, which was formerly the capital of the Arab Lakhmid kingdom controlled by the Banu Lakhm tribe. Hīra was close to Neharde'a which was major centre of Babylonian Judaism and seat of the exilarch of the Jews. Another major Jewish centre was al-Anbār which was close to Pumbedita (now the city of Fallujah in western Iraq) the latter being the seat of the other great Babylonian Talmudic academy (Gil, 2004: 58). While the Persian Jews had used Babylonian Aramaic, they shifted to writing in the Persian language in Hebrew script known as Judaeo-Persian a change that occurred due to the rise of the Sasānians who began promoting Persian religion and culture as opposed to the earlier Parthians of nomadic origin who drew from various influences such as Hellenic, Babylonian and Persian. Judaeo-Persian is the language used by the Jewish signatories of the *Tarisāppalli* grant.

During the Sasānian period, the Jews were in a much more favourable position with the Sasānian rulers in comparison to the Christians (Daryaee, 2006: 497-98; Moffett :128-29). The Jews could have been the most important source of the transmission of knowledge about the Achaemenids to the Sasanians (Daryaee, 2006: 498). The Achaemenids were a previous Persian dynasty that ruled from the sixth century B. C.E. to the beginning of the fourth century B. C. E. when the last Achaemenid ruler was deposed by Alexander. The Achaemenids policy of freeing the Jews from the slavery imposed on them by the former Babylonian rulers in the sixth century is mentioned in the Bible. By reminding the Sasānid rulers that they were treated well by the Achaemenids, the Jews ensured a favourable position during Sasānian rule.

The leader of the Jewish community in Sasānian Persia was the exilarch who was recognized by the Sasānian state. He was usually allowed to govern the Jews through his own system of administration (Morony, 1974: 117). By the time of the late Sasānian period, the Jews were organized into a very well developed community complete with a system of religious law, urban institutions, schools and synagogues. The religious scholars of the community produced the Babylonian Talmud, a written collection of civil and ceremonial law. These scholars who produced the Talmud were able to apply the religious law to the life of the community including the lay followers through various institutional means (Morony, 1974: 114).

After the Arab Muslim conquest, the Jews and Christians were allowed to follow their religious laws and the religious and social regulations of the Qur'ān were not imposed on them. The situation favoured the continued communal development of both Jews and Christians which led to an increase in religious authority and to the division in the Jewish community between religious and secular powers in the Umayyad period. The split was between the rabbis or religious scholars represented by the Gaonim (singular gaon) or the leaders of Babylonian Talmudic academies including the two great academies of Sūra and Pumbedita on the one side and the family of the exilarchs on the other. The Umayyad rulers recognised the right of the exilarch to appoint judges and heads of the Rabbinic schools but the right to interpret the law was reserved for the rabbis. But this situation changed even further turning the office of the exilarch into merely that of a ceremonial character.

In 730 C. E. the division between the religious and secular powers in the Jewish community and dual rule of exilarch and gaon (head of the school of Sūra which became the most prominent academy by then) was regarded as established. Judges for the rabbinic courts were appointed jointly by the exilarch and gaon while each gaon had the right of judicial review over the judges under his jurisdiction. The exilarch's revenues were limited to districts and towns designated by the state, and he lost his claim to religious authority and his jurisdiction over criminal cases. By the time of the eighth century, dynastic succession to the position of exilarch was being undermined by concept of election. The Gaonim held the deciding voice in the choice of a successor from the family of the exilarch (Morony, 1974: 122-24).

Unfortunately, there is very less information on the exact nature of the relations between the Persian Jews and the indigenous Jews of Kerala, the Malabāri Jews. But a useful model that can be applied here to understand the possible nature of the relationship between the two groups especially in the area of trade is the concept of trade diaspora used by Philip D. Curtin. Curtin refers to traders who would remove themselves physically from their home community and go to live as aliens in another town important in the life of the host community. There, the stranger merchants could settle down and learn the language, the customs, and the commercial ways of their hosts forming a trade diaspora in the host society. They could then serve as cross-cultural brokers, helping and encouraging trade between the host society and people of their own origin who moved along the trade routes. At this stage, a distinction appeared between the merchants who moved and settled and those who continued to move back and forth (Curtin, 1984: 3).

The possibility of the situation in the context of the Persian Jew's

trade activities in Kerala confirming exactly to Curtin's trade diaspora model is less as there is no evidence as yet available of Persian Jews having formed permanent settlements in Kerala. In such a context the section who would act as cross-cultural brokers between the Persian Jews and indigenous society in Kerala would not be members of the Persian Jewish trading community itself but could instead be the Malabāri Jews. There is evidence of Persian Jewish influence on the Malabāri Jews. The twelfth century C. E. Jewish traveller Benjamin of Tudela in his account on Kollam mentions that the indigenous Jews of Kollam were familiar with the Talmud (Adler, 1907: 92). The decline of trade relations between Persia and the Gulf region on the one side and Kerala on the other is likely to have led to the replacement of foreign Jewish merchants from the former region with Jews from Fātimid Egypt who traded with Kerala in later times.

Arab Muslims

Historical sources begin referring to the role of the pre-Islamic Arabs in trade since the late centuries B. C. E. The Nabataean kingdom located in present day Jordan was involved in the incense trade transporting the frankincense and myrrh from southern Arabia to ports in the Mediterranean Sea (Young, 2001: 97). The settlement of Gerrha on the north-eastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula and the south Arabian kingdoms of present day Yemen had been involved in maritime trade with India even before the first century B.C.E (Kennet, 2007: 109; Forbes, 1981: 64). The pre-Islamic Arabs were famed as mariners and for their knowledge of navigation. The major sites of pre-Islamic Arabs in India were Chaul, Kalyān, Sopara and the coast of Kerala (Shah, 1975: 2). With the discovery of the use of the monsoon wind system to cross the mid-ocean and the knowledge about latitudes from the first century C. E. onwards, there would have been Arab seamen and traders who would have arrived in Kerala using the maritime trade routes linking southern Arabia with other parts of the Indian Ocean littoral. Andrew Forbes in his paper on Southern Arabia and the spread of Islam in the central Indian Ocean archipelagos has stated that the Arab traders had established colonies at various points on the Indian Ocean littoral, notably in East Africa, Southeast Asia and on the Malabar Coast.⁸ These traders and sailors intermarried with the local womenfolk resulting in the emergence of new ethnic and cultural groups like the Swāhili in East Africa and the Māpillā on the Malabar Coast. The fact that these areas are today linked by their common acceptance of the Shāfi'ī legal school or madhhab of Sunni Islam which is prevalent in Yemen is cited by Forbes as proof that these regions of the Indian Ocean littoral were connected in the pre-Islamic period itself (Forbes, 1981: 66-67).

The Sasānians had made efforts to bring regions of al-'Umān and al-Bahrayn in the Gulf under their dominance during some phases⁹. In

an effort to boost Persia's maritime trade activities with India, King Ardashīr I (225-241 C. E.) who founded the Sasānian Empire transplanted members of the Azd 'Umān tribal confederation of al-'Umān to Fārs and the Kirmān-Makrān coast (Malekandathil, 2010: 2). Information contained in an inscription of Shāpūr I (241-272 C. E.) discovered at Naqsh-I Rustan shows that Sasānian relations with the al-'Umān and al-Bahrayn went back to the Empire's early history (al-Naboodah, 1992: 81). Many of the Azdī Arabs of al-'Umān became Persianized and adopted the Zoroastrian religion (Hourani, 1951: 45). During the Sasānian period, the two major centers of maritime trade in al-'Umān were Ṣuhār and Dibā which used to receive and dispatch cargoes from ships to and from India and China (al-Naboodah, 1992: 82). Ibn Habīb (d. 860 A. D.) mentioned in his work, *Kitāb al-muhabbar* (Book of Refinement) that merchants from Sind, India and China visited Dibā, the port located at the foot of the Ruus al-Jibal of the Musandam Peninsula during periodic fairs and markets that were held in the sixth and seventh century C. E. (Agius, 2008: 54).

The pre-Islamic Arabs of the Gulf littoral who were involved in maritime activities in general were heavily influenced by Persian culture. As mentioned earlier, during the late Sasānian period, most of the trade was diverted away from the Arabian coast to Persia. But a recent discovery has confirmed that 'Umān was part of the late Sasānian military and commercial networks as it could not be avoided due to geographical reasons (al-Jahwari et al., 2018: 736).¹⁰ This means that the pre-Islamic Arabs who were involved in maritime trade with India would have been Persianised Arabs from the Persian coast and Oman and also Arabs from ports in southern Arabia which had been occupied by the Persians in the last stage of the Sasānian Empire.¹¹ The region of al-Bahrayn would not have been part of these interactions with India in the late Sasānian period.

There was a period of instability during the early Islamic military campaigns and especially the Riddah wars following the death of the Prophet Muhammad, when many Arab tribes of the Peninsula who had earlier accepted Islam renounced the religion. The Arab Muslims waged a series of campaigns to bring back these rebellious tribes to the fold of Islam. This disrupted the economy of the Gulf region. It was only during the late Rāshidūn, i.e. rule of the first four 'rightly-guided' Caliphs after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, and early Ummayyad periods that Gulf commercial centres began to recover and trade started to thrive again. 'Umānī relations with India and Africa began to expand during the Umayyad period and by the eighth century C. E., a group of 'Umānī merchants established a trading post in Ceylon. This revival after the decline during the early days of Islam, led to the creation of a great Muslim maritime trade in the Indian Ocean from which the

ports of both al-‘Umān and al-Bahrayn benefitted. The importance of al-‘Umān as a commercial centre increased during the Abbāsīd period as it located at the entrance to the Gulf.

Besides al-‘Umān, al-Bahrayn was the other region in the Gulf which had good maritime trade relations with India and Sri Lanka during this period. The end of the Sasānian period and the revival of trade under a unified Arab Muslim empire meant that the entire Gulf including al-Bahrayn benefitted from the new developments. The situation of the late Sasānian period when al-Bahrayn was kept out of the trade networks as part of Sasānian policy was reversed. The merchants of Dārīn which was an important trade centre in al-Bahrayn for at least three or four generations after Islam, monopolised the Indian perfume trade and were the main suppliers of musk to Arabia. Other important commercial centres in al-Bahrayn during the rise of Islam were Hajar and al-Mushaqqar. Arabs would come from various regions in the Peninsula to its markets- supervised by a Persian agent named al-Mundhir bin Sāwā – buying Indian and Chinese products that arrived via the major coastal ports of al-Bahrayn namely Dārīn, Qaṭīf and ‘Uqayr. During this period, the coastal region of al-Bahrayn known as al-Khaṭṭ which contained the prominent ports like Dārīn and Qaṭīf had a population consisting of several races, namely Persians, Indians and Sinhalese as well as Arabs. They continued to maintain contact with their respective mother countries ((al-Naboodah, 1992: 83-85).

Despite the transition from Sasānian to Islamic rule, there was not much change in the nature of the maritime trade that was conducted from the region with India or in the cultural background of the trading groups. Persian traders including East Syriac Christians continued their trade with India, China and Africa under their new Muslim masters. The situation was not very different in the case of the Arab Muslims as well. With the exception of traders from al-Bahrayn who re-entered the long-distance trade circuits after the end of the Sasānian period, it was mostly Arabs who were active in trade during the Sasānid period who continued to be involved in such activities in the Early Islamic period under the guise of a new identity as Muslims. After the Islamic conquest, for the Arabs there was no choice between idolatrous polytheism and Islam. Arabs must be Muslim or die. There was no possibility of evading the death penalty by payment of taxes (Moffett, 336-37).

This meant that the Persianised Arabs like the Azdī and other such groups from eastern Arabia would have had to convert to Islam and that too mainly the Sunni branch of Islam. The nomadic (*badu*) and the sedentary (*hadr*) tribes of Central Arabia and the borderlands of Syria and Mesopotamia who formed most of the recruits for the early Arab-Islamic armies did not enter into trade or other professions leaving the army. The Arab Islamic armies established garrison towns like

Kūfa and Baṣra in southern Mesopotamia in the seventh century C.E. The Arab Muslim commanders and soldiers who settled in Mesopotamia and Persia did not involve in other economic activities as they acted as military and administrative elites. Therefore the earlier arrangements of trade under other religious communities continued.

Even the Ummayyad Caliphate was characterized by an Arab spirit. The early ‘Abbāsids on the other hand were more internationally oriented which led to certain developments and the entry of the Arabs who settled in Mesopotamia and Persia into long-distance maritime trade. From the ninth century, Turkish slaves swarmed into Baghdad. Since the policy of territorial expansion had ended, the Arabs gave up their military careers under the command of the Caliph and joined other ethnic groups to pursue administrative, commercial, scholarly and religious careers (Liu, 1996: 172). Therefore the earliest Arab Muslims who would have arrived in Kerala for trade purposes would not have been from the tribes of Central Arabia and the borderlands of Syria and Mesopotamia but Arab Muslims from the Persian coast, al-Bahrayn, al ‘Umān and Yemen.¹² But a recent discovery in a mosque in Kerala could provide proof of an exception to this general tendency especially with regard to the region of Hejaz. It will be discussed in detail later on in this chapter. Arab Muslims from mainland Persia and Mesopotamia would have begun involving in trade with Kerala only from the ninth century onwards C. E. Another development during the ‘Abbāsīd period was the fast spreading conversion of ethnic Persians including Persian Christians to the Sunni branch of Islam (Buck, 1996: 70). It was only later during the sixteenth century that Persians converted to the Shia branch of Islam after the Safavid rulers officially recognised Shia Islam as the state religion. This paper is not looking into the very prominent role of the Persian Muslims in Indian Ocean trade as they are not mentioned in the *Tarisāppalli* copper plate grant.

A word needs to be mentioned of the Ibādiyya sect of Oman. This sect is different from both the Sunni and Shia sects of Islam. They believe that the leader of the Muslims should be a worthy Imām elected by the notables of the community including the *ulamā* or clergy, tribal leaders and the elders. This is different from the political structure of the Sunnis who were initially ruled by the leading family of the Quraysh tribe and later by other dynasties and from the Shias who believed that the rulers should be the descendents of Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet. In terms of ideology they are related to the Khārijite, the first faction which separated from the main body of Muslims. But they rejected the extremism and violence of the Khārijites. The Ibādiyya first emerged in Baṣra and mostly consisted of mawālī or non-Arab clients of Arab tribes and that too of humble origin. But it soon gained support from a section of the traders of Baṣra. The Ibādiyya were also

in an alliance with the Muhallabids, a family belonging to the Azd 'Umān tribal confederation and who had influence in the province of Khurāsān as governors. But both groups were persecuted by al-Hajjāj, the governor of Iraq during Umayyad rule in the late seventh century C. E. and early eighth century C. E. and many Ibādīs were exiled to al 'Uman. The Ibādī traders of Azdī origin from Baṣra also carried the Ibādī ideology to al 'Umān from where the Azd 'Umān originated. Al 'Umān developed a strong Ibādī base. (Savage, 1990: 7-11). They managed to establish a short-lived Ibādī Imāmate in 'Umān (745-49 C. E.)

The onset of the 'Abbāsīd Caliphate improved the conditions of both the Ibādiyya and the Muhallabids. The Ibādīs established a second Ibādī Imāmate in 'Umān (793-893 C. E.). While the 'Umāni coast including Ṣuhār was controlled by the 'Abbāsīds, the interior was held by the Ibādī Imāmate. The later turn towards Sunni orthodoxy by the 'Abbāsīds meant that the Ibādiyya were not as tolerated as they had been previously under the early 'Abbāsīds. The Ibādīs in turn adopted a stance called taḳiyya or kitmān by which they hid their religious allegiance from non- Ibādī Muslims or ruling class. This was sanctioned in Ibādī practice. For example, two secret Ibādī sympathizers functioned as the first 'Abbāsīd governors in 'Umān. What is the significance of the Ibādiyya in understanding the role of Arab Muslims in the maritime trade of Kerala during the early medieval period? While the Ibādī Imāmate was located in interior 'Umān they certainly had influence among traders and in Ṣuhār. It should be remembered that Ibādī Islam spread to 'Umān through the network of traders including Azdī Arabs. So it can be expected that the Ibādīs did form an important group among the Arab Muslims who traded with Kerala. There is evidence of the role of the Ibādī Imāmate in maritime trade and its role in preserving 'Umān's prosperity. The Ibādī Imām Ghassān bin 'Abd Allāh (r. 807-822 C. E.) rid the 'Umān coast of pirates, 'Abd al-Malik bin Hamīd's reign (r. 822-841) is described as one of prosperity and al-Muhannā bin Jayfar (r. 841-851) enjoyed stability during the beginning of his rule (Gaiser, 2010: 185). There is no evidence of the sectarian influence of the Ibādiyya among the Muslims of Kerala. This can be attributed to a number of factors. These include the non-existence of an aggressive proselytizing tendency on behalf of the Ibādīs, the exclusive Arab tribal nature adopted by the Ibādiyya after its spread among the tribes in northern Oman and finally the decline of Persia, Iraq and the Gulf region after the Mongol invasion of the mid-thirteenth century and their replacement by Mameluke Egypt in dominating West Asia's trade with Kerala.

Advent of Islam in Kerala

The advent of Islam in Kerala is traced to the conversion of the last Chēra ruler of the second Chēra dynasty the rulers of which used

to hold the title Chēramān Perumāḷ. This tradition is narrated in an Arabic manuscript titled *Qiṣṣat Shakarwatī Farmād* written by an anonymous author. The tradition in brief is that the last Chēramān Perumāḷ witnessed in Kerala a miracle of the splitting of the moon performed by the Prophet Muhammad in Arabia. The king was astonished about the occurrence but did not get a satisfactory explanation from his astronomers. The Prophet then appeared to him in a dream and told him that he himself performed the miracle. The king then desired to embrace Islam. A few years later, a group of dervishes one of whom was a renowned Sheikh came to India on their way to visit the footprint of Adam in Ceylon. The king confirmed from them that it was the Prophet who had performed the miracle. On their way back to Arabia the last Chēramān Perumāḷ accompanied them before which he divided his kingdom between several persons.

The king met the Prophet at Jidda in Arabia and converted to Islam. The members of the family of Habīb bin Mālīk, a notable of the tribe of Quraysh to which the Prophet belonged agreed to accompany the Chēramān back to Kerala to propagate Islam. These family members included Mālīk bin Dīnar¹³, Sharaf al-Dīn bin Malik and others. On their return journey, the king fell ill in al-Shihr, a port city in Yemen. Realising that he would not be able to make back to Kerala he wrote a letter of introduction for his companions to be given to the rulers in Kerala and provided advice to them on what they should do in Kerala. After the Chēramān passed away, the remaining party reached Kodaṅgallūr and gave the letter of the Chēramān to the ruler of the city after which they were welcomed and provided houses and agricultural land. The story then goes on to describe the establishment of the first mosques in ten locations in Kerala and in the southern part of neighbouring state of Karnataka namely, Kollam, Kodaṅgallūr, Cāliyath, Fandārina, Darmafatan, Jarfattan, Haylī, Kāñjirakkūttu, Manjarūr and Fakanūr¹⁴ (Friedmann, 1975: 235-39).

The famous Muslim scholar of Kerala of the sixteenth century Zayn al-Dīn al-Malbarī al-Malabarī mentions the conversion of the Chēramān Perumāḷ to Islam in his famous work *Tuḥfat al-Mujāhidīn fi bad Akhbār al-Purtuqāliyyīn*. According to Zayn al-Dīn the conversion of Chēramān Perumāḷ took place only in the first half of the ninth century C. E. and he ruled out the possibility of the king meeting the Prophet (Makhdam, 2006: 33). There is mention of this tradition also in the Brāhminical text *Kēralōlpathi* where it confuses various rulers who abandoned deference to the Brāhmins by adopting Buddhism, Shaivite renunciation or Islam. It mentions that Buddhists tell of a king who left for Mecca, a king who was not the great Chēramān Perumāḷ but one who ruled after the Chēra dynasty decayed and who should be called properly Kerala Rāja (King of Kerala). This source points out

the popular conflation of early Buddhists and Jains with later Muslims (Kugle and Margariti, 2017: 346, n. 26). According to M. G. S. Narayanan the Chēra ruler who converted to Islam was the last Chēramān Perumāḷ or the last ruler of second Chēra dynasty. He quotes from the second volume of William Logan's work *Malabar* which states that the date mentioned in the foundation plaque at the mosque of Mādāyi is 1124 C. E. This according to Narayanan is a copper plate inscription and is evidence for his argument that it was the last Chēramān Perumāḷ who converted to Islam as according to him the last known date of the last Chēramān is 1122 C. E. and it was friends of this last Chēramān who established the first ten mosques of the south-west coast of India including Mādāyi (Narayanan, 2013: 485, Index B. 25).

A recent critical review of Narayanan's view regarding the advent of Islam has questioned the assumption that there is a copper plate inscription at the Mādāyi mosque with the date 1124 C. E. Instead, Abdullah Anjilath has referred to an inscription on a wooden plank which merely mentions that it was written in the fifth year meaning the fifth year of the Islamic calendar i.e. Hijra 5 or 627 C. E. as the foundation year of the mosque. Anjilath also states that there is no copper plate inscription bearing the date 1124 C. E. in the mosque. He attributes the mistaken notion that there is an inscription in Mādāyi mosque referring to 1124 C. E. to the colonial historian Robert Sewell (Sewell, 1882: 242) whose version was then repeated by the scholars who followed including Logan and M. G. S. Narayanan who did not verify this information. Narayanan's argument that the last Chēramān Perumāḷ's conversion to Islam ended the second Chēra dynasty is based on the inscription at the Mādāyi mosque (Anjilath, 2018: 75-76). But the inscription referring to the fifth year of the Islamic calendar at Mādāyi mosque was published in the 1928-29 Annual Report of South Indian Epigraphy (ARSIE) (Anjilath, 2015: 40-42).

Besides this inscription, Anjilath also points out to two other inscriptions, one at the mosque at Kasargode dated to Hijra 22 or 643 C. E. and the inscription at the Mālik bin Dīnar mosque at Sreekandāpuram dated to Hijra 74 or 693 C. E.¹⁵ Anjilath states that the dating of these inscriptions in the three mosques is proof of the presence of Arabs in Kerala in the pre-Islamic period itself and that the conversion of the last Chēramān Perumāḷ to Islam does not have any historical veracity (Anjilath, 2015: 45). But that raises the tantalizing question about the possibility of the message of Islam being transmitted from Medina through Indian Ocean trade routes to Arab traders at Mādāyi in Kerala. The inscription at Mādāyi is written in the calligraphic style and sentence structure that prevailed in Hejaz during the early years of Islam (Anjilath, 2018: 76). Medina at that time was the sole centre of Islam in Hejaz during its contest with Mecca from where the Prophet and his

followers had been forced to leave. This means that pre-Islamic Arabs, including from Hijaz and not just ‘Umān and Yemen, would have developed regular trade relations with Kerala in the immediate period before the advent of Islam without which a mosque would not have been established at Mādāyi at this point of time. Such issues have to be explored more deeply before a formal conclusion can be arrived at on this matter.

It was not just Arab Muslim traders who would have arrived in Kerala at this time. There also would have been other categories of Arab Muslims who arrived through maritime routes to Kerala. An oral tradition of Muslims of Sri Lanka and south India mentions the arrival of some Muslims of peninsular Arabia who were dissatisfied with the policies of the Ummayyad caliph ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān in the eighth century C. E. They decided to leave the land proceeding from the Euphrates southward and made settlements on the Konkan coast and further in south India, Sri Lanka and at Malacca (Mahroof, 1993: 172). It is well known that there was political strife and violent clashes among Muslims even during the time of the Rāshidūn caliphate. It is very much possible that groups who dissented with the Muslim ruler would have left the land using the trade routes for places where their own Arab brethren had already settled like south India or Sri Lanka. It is also stated that an Arab missionary and scholar, al-Hājj ‘Abd Allāh ibn Anwar came to Trichi, when the Cholas were in power and he built a mosque there in 738 C. E. (Mahroof, 1993: 173).

Friedman has mentioned in his commentary on *Qiṣat Shakarwatī Farmād* that the tradition of the conversion of a Chēra ruler to Islam provided legitimacy and respect to the Māpillā Muslim community of Kerala among whom the tradition is very popular (Friedmann, 1975: 244). This has very strong parallels with the Thomas traditions of St. Thomas Christians of Kerala. Both these traditions point out to the conversion of an individual or group belonging to political or socio-cultural elite with the Chēramān Perumāḷ in the case of the Muslims and Nambudiri Brāhmins in the case of the Christians providing legitimacy and status to both these communities in a highly stratified caste-based social structure. When it is proven that it is historically untenable for the said event to have occurred during the time mentioned in the tradition; the entire tradition is rejected out of hand. Such a position does not take into account the manner in which these traditions are constructed. A traditional account is often constructed over a long period of time with each generation adding on to what had been originally stated either in oral or written form forming layers of tradition in one single account. In most instances, these traditions reflect the views and interests of the elites both religious and secular of the religious community under concern. For example, the elites of a dominant trade settlements might add

the name of their settlements to the already existing list of the earliest settlements of a community preserved in an origin tradition. The case of the St. Thomas Christians has been already mentioned. In the case of the Muslims, a text named *Rihalathulmulk* written by ‘Umar bin Muhammad Suhrawardi mentions eighteen original settlements of the Muslims of Kerala, adding eight more to the original ten (Bahawudeen, 2004: 40-41; Randathani, 2007: 35-36).

In fact, the very practice of mentioning a list of original settlements of a West Asian religious community could have been a practice which emerged in early medieval Kerala especially if the memory of the earliest settlements in the case of Christians and Jews had been lost. The West Asian religious communities might have been influenced by each other with regard to this practice adopting certain elements or features from each other’s traditions. If an event occurred later on whereby an individual or group from the elite sections of indigenous society converted to the West Asian religious community it is then described as having occurred as part of the events that led to the origin of the community to enhance the overall prestige and legitimacy of the community. It also has to be noticed that the event of the conversion of the elite itself is embellished with additions or borrowings from other traditions of sections of the religious community to which she has converted located in some other region or part of the globe. This is possible because these traditions have been transmitted through trade and commercial networks that bound communities belonging to the same religion spread out across a continent or even continents. For example Friedman refers to similarities in the tradition of the conversion of Chēramān Perumāi to the conversion of Sheikh Ratan and that of King Bhoja of Ujjain (Friedmann, 1975: 242-243). This means that historical-critical methods need to be employed in the efforts to separate the layers of tradition hidden within a single origin account. In this effort the earliest events pertaining to the origin of a religious community can be separated from events that occurred later on. It might also turn out that certain events or individuals mentioned in a tradition were purely imaginary.

Zoroastrians

Three names in the list of Sasānian-Pahlavi names are introduced by the term *az weh-dēnān* meaning ‘among those of the Good Religion’. In a paper jointly published by Carlo G. Cereti, Luca M. Olivieri and Joseph Vazhuthanapally in 2002 in the journal *East and West*, it has been pointed out that these are Zoroastrian names and refers to traders belonging to that religion who were active in Kollam during this period. This is important for the history of the Zoroastrian community in India. It can be an important reference point for studying the involvement of this community in Indian Ocean maritime trade. This has to be studied

in conjunction with Sasānian inscriptions in the Buddhist cave complex at Kanheri on the northern outskirts of the city of Mumbai dated to the eleventh century C. E. engraved by some Zoroastrian traders who visited the complex (Cereti et al., 2002: 293, 301-302).

Before the Sasānian period, Zoroastrianism was the religion of the Achaemenid Persian Empire that lasted from the sixth century B. C. E. to the end of the fourth century B. C. E. But the faith that was practised at that time was not as centralised as it was to become during the Sasānian period. The Greek/Macedonian Seleucids and the Parthian rulers from Central Asia who followed the Achaemenids did not promote Zoroastrianism as a state religion. The basic concept of Zoroastrianism is cosmological dualism of two warring gods in eternal conflict. Good people are supposed to follow the good god, Ahura-Mazda or Ormuzd and worship in fire. The evil god is Ahirman.

It is believed that a lot of changes occurred to Zoroastrianism by the time of the Sasānians. Additions included astrology, practice of exposing the dead to the sun and the birds and rituals of magic. Village priests called the *mobeds* also called *magi* by the Greeks and Romans burned and tended the sacred fires the Zoroastrian temples. Above the village *mobeds* there was a network of higher-ranking regional *mobeds* like bishops, and the whole was headed by a chief priest titled *mobadan-mobed* or *archimagus*. It was Tansar, the *mobadan-mobed* or chief priest of the first Sasānian ruler Ardashīr who urged the centralisation of all the empire's fire temples under the authority of the central "royal fire" temple of Ištakhr in Fārs province which was the homeland of the Sasānian dynasty, and the prohibition of independent temples. But in the beginning, the Sasānian rulers did not impose an intolerant version of Zoroastrianism on the population as they were not strictly orthodox. They favoured a variant cult within Zoroastrianism called Zurvanism which laid emphasis on monotheism which undermined the radical dualism of orthodox Zoroastrianism. But the second chief priest Kartīr was more intolerant and it led to a crackdown by the state on non-orthodox Zoroastrian and non-Zoroastrian religions and sects (Moffett, 2006: 106-109).

There is evidence for the involvement of ethnic Persian Zoroastrian trading community in the overland trade routes connecting West Asia with Central Asia and China during the Sasānid period. But in the realm of maritime trade there is lesser evidence for Zoroastrian involvement. As mentioned earlier "Persian traders" in the context of maritime trade at this time referred to mostly East Syriac Christians and Persian Jews. But the advent of Islam brought about a change in the situation. Under the Arab rulers, the more privileged category of religions were categorised as "People of the Book". This included Islam, Christianity and Judaism. The next category was the pagans. The Zoroastrians came to

be considered as on a higher plane than idolators but they were more repressed than the Christians and there were large-scale conversion of ethnic Persians to Islam (Moffett, 2006: 336). It is in this context that Zoroastrians begin to be identified as distinctive group of traders in the Indian Ocean maritime exchanges and the settlement of Zoroastrian refugees in India who came to be known as Parsīs took place.

Conclusion

The names of the witnesses mentioned in the *Tarisāppalli* grant of 849 C. E. refer to the main West Asian trading groups who were involved in the maritime trade of early medieval Kerala. These include East Syriac Christians popularly known as Nestorian Christians, Persian Jews, Arab Muslims and Zoroastrians. The Christians and Jews were already major trading groups involved in Indian Ocean maritime trade during the time of the Sasānian Empire (224 C. E. – 651 C. E.) consisting of Persia and Mesopotamia. The pre-Islamic Arabs many of whom were Persianised also followed other belief systems such as paganism, Christianity, their own version of Judaism and monotheism were also part of these trading ventures. These same groups continued to be involved in maritime trade even after the advent of Islam. By the time of the early ‘Abbāsīd Caliphate and the beginning of the second Chēra kingdom of Kerala to which period the *Tarisāppalli* grant is dated to, the Arabs had mainly converted to Islam and the Zoroastrians also joined the group of West Asian traders involved in maritime trade with Kerala. While Syriac Christianity first emerged in the Aramaic-speaking region of northern Mesopotamia it soon spread to the Persian-speaking areas. This resulted in two ethnic and linguistic groups being part of the East Syriac Church who were mainly Syriac (a dialect of Aramaic) –speaking Christians and Persian-speaking Christians.

The church went through several phases of persecution, re-structuring and theological controversy before it emerged as a strong nation-wide religion within the Sasānian Empire. By the time of the late Sasānians, the East Syriac Church was heavily involved in overland and maritime trade networks extending all the way to China. The transition from Sasānian to Islamic rule resulted in a dispute between the patriarch of the church located in Seleucia-Ctesiphon and the metropolitan of Rēv Ardashīr who was supposed to be ecclesiastically under the patriarch over the matter of control of churches in the Gulf, Socotra Island and India. The issue was finally resolved ecclesiastically in favour of the patriarch but the metropolitan of Rēv Ardashīr continued to have influence over the Christians of south India on the matter of rituals and use of liturgical language until the evangelical province of Rēv Ardashīr was extinguished in the eleventh century C. E. The East Syriac Church conducted its maritime trade with south India and Sri

Lanka through a network of churches and monasteries located in the Gulf which were earlier dated to the late Sasānian period. But recent reviews of such archaeological evidence have led to a revised chronological sequence and these sites have now been dated to the early Islamic and early ‘Abbāsīd periods. This dating has to be studied closer as it has repercussions for studies on expansion of St. Thomas Christian settlements in Kerala. The beginning of the Christian settlement of Kollam which is described as having been established by the Apostle Thomas in the first century C. E. should instead be placed in the beginning of the ninth century C. E. as there is no historical evidence for the existence of Kollam during this period.

The Persian Jews situation was much more favourable than that of the Christians because of the relationship they had with the previous Achaemenid Persian dynasty. The development of the institutional structure of the Persian Jews later led to a split between the religious and secular authorities within the Jewish community during the Umayyad Caliphate. The Persian Jews would have developed relations with the indigenous Malabāri Jews of Kerala for purposes of trade. During the Sasānian period, it was mainly Persianised Arabs from the Fārs and the Kirmān-Makrān coast of Persia and al-‘Umān; and Arabs belonging to other belief systems from Yemen who would have been involved in maritime trade with Kerala. The region of al-Bahrayn was excluded from these transactions as the Sasānians tried to divert trade away from the Arabian coast to Persia. al-‘Umān could not be avoided because of geographical and strategic reasons. With the advent of Islam these same groups continued to be involved with maritime trade along with the addition of Arab Muslims from al-Bahrayn. The tribes of Central Arabia and the borderlands of Syria and Mesopotamia who formed the rank and file of early Arab Islamic armies would join trade activities only in the ninth century C. E. after the policy of the territorial expansion of the Islamic Empire came to an end. An exception to this could have been the region of Hejaz which could have had maritime relations with Kerala in the earliest period of Islam evidence for which was obtained from the mosque at Mādāyi. The Ibādī Arab Muslims of al-‘Umān would have been an important group engaged in trade with Kerala.

The advent of Islam in Kerala has been traditionally attributed to the conversion of the last Chēra ruler or Chēramān Perumāl to Islam during the time of the Prophet Muhammad. He is believed to have gone to Mecca, personally met the Prophet and converted to Islam. The companions of the last Chēramān Perumāl led by Mālik bin Dīnar is supposed to have come back and established ten mosques in Kerala and southern Karnataka. M . G. S. Narayanan had stated in his work that the last Chēramān Perumāl converted to Islam in 1122 C.

E. based on an inscription at Mādāyi mosque dated to 1124 C. E. He suggests that the companions of the last ruler would have established the mosques including the one at Mādāyi in 1124 C. E. But a recent critical review of this view has pointed out that there is no such inscription at the Mādāyi mosque instead there is a wooden plank with an inscription dated to Hijra 5 or 627 C. E. pointing out to the year of the foundation of the mosque. This mistake has been attributed to the colonial historian Robert Sewell whose views were then repeated by later historians without verification. The recent reviewer Abdullah Anjilath has also pointed out the inscriptions at the mosques at Kasargode and Sreekandāpuram also dated to the first century of the Islamic calendar and that the last Chēramān Perumāḷ's conversion has no historical veracity. This is presented as evidence for the presence of pre-Islamic Arabs in Kerala who would have converted to Islam at a very early period. Christian and Muslim origin traditions of Kerala have to be studied using historical-critical methods as layers of traditions belonging to different time periods could have been coalesced into a unified narrative for purposes of cohesion and providing legitimacy to the community concerned. Zoroastrianism assumed a more unified and centralised structure during the Sasānian Empire as it was accepted by the rulers as the state religion. There is evidence for the involvement of ethnic Persian Zoroastrian trading community in the overland trade routes connecting West Asia with Central Asia and China during the Sasānid period. But in the realm of maritime trade there is lesser evidence for Zoroastrian involvement. The advent of Islam brought about a change in the situation of the Zoroastrians as they began to be persecuted by the Muslim rulers. This also signalled the emergence of the ethnic Persian Zoroastrians as traders in the maritime trade of the Indian Ocean and settlements of this community in India who were called Parsīs.

Notes

1. The church representing the East Syriac Church in Kerala today is the Chaldean-Syrian Church of Thrissur town and its environs and its members are called 'Surāis' by other Christians such as the Syrian Catholics who form the majority Christian denomination in Thrissur referring to the liturgical language used by the Chaldean-Syrians. Surāi means Syriac in Malayalam.
2. The two factions in Kerala representing this tradition are the Malankara Syrian Orthodox Church and the Malankara Jacobite Syrian Orthodox Church. The two factions split when the Malankara Syrian Orthodox Church refused to accept the ecclesiastical authority of the Syrian Oriental Orthodox Church with its headquarters in Damascus, Syria.
3. Monophysite Christians had migrated to Persia when they faced persecution from the Byzantine Empire whose official faith was Melkite Christianity.

4. This is mentioned in M. G. S. Narayanan's introduction to George Menachery's book. See Menachery 2005: 10.
5. The arguments in favour of this thesis will be elaborated in detail in a forthcoming paper of the author on the Pālayūr tradition.
6. Cosmas Indicopleustes in the sixth century C. E. work titled *Christian Topography* mentions a place named Male where pepper is grown in abundance with a strong presence of Christians. See McCrindle, 2010: 119, 366. K. P. Padmanabha Menon in the work *A History of Kerala: Vol. I* mentions that Male refers to Kollam on the basis of Suleiman's mention of Koulam Mali in the ninth century C. E. See Menon 1924: 271. But it is not possible to prove if Cosmas's reference was to Kollam or not. Rather, Male refers to a region where pepper was grown and not a specific location. Cosmas specifically mentions that there were five ports in the region of Male which export pepper namely Parti, Mangarouth, Salopatana, Nalopatana and Poudopatana. While the other ports are not identified, Mangarouth has been identified with Mangalore. See McCrindle, 2010: 366-67. Therefore, only the eighth century reference can be taken as the first reference to Kollam.
7. This does not mean that the possibility of the Apostle Thomas coming to Kerala can be ruled out as this could be part of the older traditions to which newer ones regarding the seven churches were added on at a later period in time.
8. The Muslims of the Lakshwadeep or Laccadive islands believe that Islam was brought to the area by Ubaidullah in 644 C. E. which led to the conversion of the people of these islands to the new religion. Ubaidulah's tomb is located on Andrott or Androth Island. See Bahawudeen, 2004: 37.
9. Al-'Umān and Al-Bahrain here does not merely mean the modern day nation-states Oman and Bahrain. In earlier periods, the terms al-'Umān and al-Bahrain referred to much larger geographical areas. The term al-'Umān meant the present day United Arab Emirates and the northern portion of modern day Oman while al-Bahrain refers to present day island-nation of Bahrain, Kuwait, the north-eastern coastal tract of Saudi Arabia and the Qatar peninsula.
10. A portion of the Omani coast extends very close to the Iranian coast forming a strategically important choke point called the Strait of Hormuz. It lies at the entrance to the Gulf and any power which wishes to militarily and economically dominate the Gulf has to have domination over the Strait of Hormuz and this particular portion of the Omani coast. Regarding the view that there is no archaeological evidence of late Sasānian presence in the famous northern Omani port city of Ṣuhār confirming the historical references to such an influence it is pointed out that large-scale excavation at Ṣuhār is impossible due to the present state of urban development. Also centuries of development of palm gardens surrounding the city have destroyed many areas from an archaeological perspective. So it is not possible to completely rule out the possibility of Sasānian presence in Ṣuhār See Ulrich, 2011: 380.
11. The Persianised Arabs of the pre-Islamic period would have been from Fārs and the Kirmān-Makrān coast of Persia and al-'Umān. But there were pre-Islamic Arabs mainly in Yemen who also followed other belief systems such as paganism, Christianity, their own version of Judaism and also a group called

the Hanīf who practiced a pre-Islamic mode of monotheism and rejected idolatry.

12. Yemen's maritime trade would have suffered during the Riddah wars just as in eastern Arabia but would have recovered and prospered from the time of the late Rāshidūn Caliphate.
13. It is now understood that Mālik bn Dīnar was the prominent historical personality who was associated with the founding of the earliest mosques in Kerala and southern Karnataka. He was from Baṣra and is believed to be of Iranian origin rather than Arab. He was a disciple of the famous Sufi Hasan of Baṣra who died in 744 C. E. After his mission to Kerala he went to Khurāsān where he died. See Randathani, 2007: 28. The attempt to add Mālik bn Dīnar to the event of the conversion of Chēramān Perumāl and present him as a member of the tribe of the Prophet was to link-up historical and mythical elements to give coherence to the origin account of the Muslims of Kerala which also had the intention of gaining legitimacy for the community. This was by portraying the conversion of the main ruler of the land and also linking that event directly with the Prophet and his tribe, the Quraysh. For the purpose of this study it has to be noted that Mālik bn Dīnar was associated with those groups who were already involved in Indian Ocean trade rather than the tribes of Central Arabia and the borderlands of Syria and Mesopotamia who joined these activities only at a later stage.
14. Fakanūr (Barakūr) and Manjarūr (Mangalore) are in Karnataka. Kāñjirakkūttu is probably Kasargode. Haylī is the present Mādāyi. Jarfattan may be identified as Kharapaṭṭaṇa now known as Karipātt. Dahfattan may be Dharmapṭṭaṇa, now known as Dharmāṭam. Fandārīna is Pantalāyini Kollam. Chāliyath is Chāliyam near Beypore. See Naryanan, 2013: 345.
15. Information on the three inscriptions was also provided in a Malayalam work published in 2004 which itself has quoted from another work titled *History of Muslims* by V. A. Ahamadul Kabir which the author does not have access to. See Bahawudeen, 2004: 41. The date of Ahamdul Kabir's work is also not provided.

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