

DISCOVERY OF A PAHLAVI-CROSS FROM GOA: A NEW EVIDENCE FOR PRE-PORTUGUESE CHRISTIAN SETTLEMENT IN KONKAN

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On 27th April 2001, Fr.Cosme Costa S.F.X, an archaeologist –cum-historian belonging to the Pilar Society of Goa discovered a granite stone cross with Pahlavi inscriptions from a bushy place in the premises of St. Peter's chapel, Dando, Agassaim, Goa. That evening I happened to visit the Museum of Pilar Society along with many international scholars like Prof.Lotika Varadarajan (Delhi), Prof. Hamashita Takeshi (Tokyo, Japan), Prof. John Everaert (Ghent University, Belgium), Prof. Joseph Velinkar (Heras Institute, Bombay), Dr. Manuel Malhão Pereira (Lisbon) etc., who have come for taking part in an international Seminar on the "Maritime History of India, 1500-1800 A.D." organized by the Department of History, Goa University. Fr.Cosme Costa drew my attention to this cross, which was by this time brought to the Pilar Museum in the Pilar Seminary (where it is kept till this date), asking me whether I would be

able to date it and explain the historical context against which this cross appeared in Goa. Since it seemed to me to be a discovery of great significance, I discussed these questions with other historians and scholars in our group and made it known to the academic world and general public through my earlier writings in newspapers and magazines¹. In this paper I am trying to make an iconographic and historical study of the Pahlavi-inscribed cross of Goa

Characteristic Features of the Goan Cross

This is a decorated cross with a length of two and a half feet and made on a black granite stone, which turned out to be slightly bluish probably because of its long exposure to water. It has two sets of inscriptions: (1) Pahlavi inscription at the top of the cross in arch form and (2) Portuguese inscription at the bottom (basement) written straight. Almost 1/5 of

¹ See Pius Malekandathil, "Pre-Portuguese Christianity", part I&II, in *Herald*, Panjim, May 6-7, 2001; Pius Malekandathil, "Find of a St.Thomas Cross Relic at Agassaim: Christianity came before the Portuguese to Goa", in *Navhind Times*, Panjim, May 13, 2001; The news of this discovery also came in *Gomantak Times* (see the article of Paul Fernandes, "Goa had links with Asian Christians 1400 yrs ago: Cross with Pahlavi inscription found at Agassaim", in *Gomantak Times*, vol.14, No.78, Panjim, 5th May (Saturday), 2001, pp.1-2), *Indian Express* ("Rare Cross with Pahlavi Inscription Discovered in Goa", *Indian Express*, May 8, 2001), *Times of India*, *Asian Age* (see the article of Pamela d'Mello, "Historians probe Origin of Goa Christianity", in *Asian Age*, Bombay, May 21, p.3), *Gomantak Times Weekender* (see Paul Fernandes, "Lines on 6th century Cross a Mystery", in *Gomantak Times Weekender*, Panjim, pp.1-2), *Indian Currents* ("Rare Cross with Pahlavi Inscription Discovered in Goa", in *Indian Currents*, May 20, 2001, p.45) as well as *New York Times*.

the cross structure having half of the Pahlavi inscription is broken and the torn off piece is not yet discovered. The remnant kept at the Pilar Museum has only 4/5 of the cross structure and the remaining half of the Pahlavi inscription. The Pahlavi inscription of this cross is not yet deciphered. On the other hand the Portuguese inscription is also not complete: some characters are lost with the broken part of the cross. The remaining part of the Portuguese inscriptions runs like this: "...A DE S.TOME...DO R.. ILEZ VS....642..." It is very difficult to find a meaning for these fragmentary letters. However, if we piece together the words in the following way, the meaning becomes rather clear: "*A de S. (São)² Tome...do R. (Região?)³ Ilez (Ilbas?)⁴ vs (vizinhas?)⁵ ...642 (1642)⁶*." It could be roughly translated as "That which belongs to St.Thomas (Christians?) from the region of (the neighbouring) Islands (Tiswadi)... 1642". It is highly probable that the

Portuguese added these words later to the cross at the bottom part to identify it and differentiate it from other crosses. The fact that the Portuguese inscription was done in 1642, almost eleven years before the Coonan Cross oath at Mattancherry, shows that it was so done to differentiate this cross from other ones amidst heightened tension between the Portuguese and the St.Thomas Christians and probably to send messages of caution and warning to those whose were then clinging on to this cross-tradition. Coming to the details of the cross, the Holy Spirit in the form of dove is depicted as descending upon the cross; however the wings are bit extended unlike the Mylapore cross. Marked difference from the cross of Mylapore is also seen at the pedestal part, where three bud-like structures are shown in either side of the Goa cross. The vertical and horizontal beams of the Goan cross are straight and even, whereas in Mylapore

² In old Portuguese writings, S. is an abbreviation of *São* meaning Saint.

³ In the original inscription there is a full stop after R showing that it is an abbreviation. It could be an abbreviation for the word *Região*, which means region.

⁴ It is highly probable that *Ilez* stands for *Ilbas* meaning Islands. In the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries Tiswadi region of Goa was known as "*Ilbas*" or Islands as it is located in between the water systems of river Mandovi and river Zuari. We do not know whether the inscription cutting was done by a sculptor who was unfamiliar with Portuguese letters. It is possible that the mistake in spelling (*Ilez* instead of *Ilbas*) must have come out of this unfamiliarity with Portuguese language.

⁵ It is not clear what exactly "*vs*" stands for. If we take "*vs*" as an abbreviation for *visinhas*, meaning neighbouring or nearby, then it has some sense. If it is taken as a short form of *visinhas*, then it is to be seen whether *visinhas* is used as an adjective or as a noun. As an adjective it would qualify the noun *Ilbas*, making it *Ilbas visinhas* (or neighbouring Islands). It could also stand as a noun meaning neighbouring places: probably as *Ilbas e visinhas* meaning Islands and neighbouring places. However if it was used as a noun there should have been the connecting word "*e*"(and) in between *Ilez* and *vs*. The word *visinhas* could mean either of the two usages. Instead of taking any particular meaning, I am leaving the matter to the readers for interpretation.

⁶ Palaeographic study of ancient Portuguese documents shows that the Portuguese had the habit of using frequently the abbreviation of the years in the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries. Here 642 stands for 1642. A.D., of the Gregorian calendar.

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cross the beams are thicker as well as broader towards the end and relatively narrow at the central and converging part.

Place of Discovery and Dating of the Cross

The Pahlavi inscribed cross of Goa was discovered from a bushy place quite adjacent to St. Peter's Chapel of Agassaim, Goa: more exactly in the debris of a wet-mound in the bushes infested by cobra snakes⁷. The inhabitants of the region told that the site was an abandoned and unapproachable area because of the presence of cobras⁸. In an interview with Paul Fernandes, the reporter of *Gomantak Times*, a resident of Dando-Agassaim, named Philip Dias says that the cross has been remaining there for as long as he can remember⁹. The granite-cross, which was lying unattended to in the abandoned area, was exposed to moisture and water, which changed its colour into slightly bluish black. The site is located on the banks of river Zuari, the second largest river in Goa and is very close to Gopakapattanam (Goa Velha)¹⁰, the old capital of Goa till the

arrival of the Portuguese. The fact that the site, from where the cross is discovered, falls within the port area of Gopakapattanam (which was the greatest port not only of Goa but also of the entire Konkan region) is suggestive of the mercantile character of the Christian settlement, to which this cross-tradition was linked.

The dating of the cross is chiefly done on the evidence of the Pahlavi inscription written on the top part of the cross (in arch form), which clearly speaks of an origin before the Islamic-Arab expansion in the eighth century¹¹. In fact Pahlavi was the archaic form, of modern Persian and was the language of West Asian traders (particularly from Fars region) till the islamisation of the Indian Ocean trade. It was the main language of the Christian merchants from Fars region and linked with Indian trade up to 9th century A.D., even though the use of Pahlavi language must have continued in Fars and some parts of Persian Gulf and India till 1040/50, when Fars and other areas of Iran were captured by the Seldjuq dynasty¹². In fact the oldest

⁷ Pius Malekandathil, "Pre-Portuguese Christianity-I" in *Herald*, May 6, 2001, Panjim, p.6

⁸ After the discovery of the cross, the neighbours of the chapel started telling that now they realize that the cobras were in fact protecting and safeguarding the cross from destruction all these years! Of course this is a pious way of interpreting the things by linking cobra with the preservation of cross.

⁹ See the article of Paul Fernandes, "Goa had links with Asian Christians 1400 years ago: Cross with Pahlavi inscription found at Agassaim", in *Gomantak Times*, vol.14, No.78, Panjim, 5th May (Saturday), 2001, p.1

¹⁰ The distance between Agassaim and Gopakapattanam is less than one kilometer.

¹¹ My dating is later confirmed by the Archaeological Survey of India, Goa and Prof. Ranabir Chakravarti of Calcutta University, who did it after verifying the antiquity of the inscription in Pahlavi.

¹² For details about the use of Pahlavi language by the Christian traders from Sasanian empire see Gerd Gropp, "Christian Maritime Trade of Sasanian Age in the Persian Gulf", in *Internationale Archaeologie*, No.6, 1997, p.86; Pius Malekandathil, "St. Thomas Christians: A Historical Analysis of their Origins and Development up to 9th Century AD", A Paper presented at the Seminar on *St. Thomas Christians before the Arrival of the Portuguese*, Liturgical Research Centre of the Syro-Malabar Church, Mount St. Thomas, Thrikkakara, Cochin, 24-25 October, 2001, pp.24-25

of the Pahlavi-inscribed crosses, viz., those of Mylapore and Anirudhapuram, are considered to be of the sixth century AD¹³, which by way of comparison makes us date the Goan cross closer to this period. Certain corroborative evidences also help us in the process of dating this cross. The most important of them is the account of Muhammad Ibn Jarir Tabari who speaks of a commercial envoy being sent to the Sassanid court by the Chalukyan king Pulikesin II (610-642) of Deccan, a geographical unit which then also included Goa¹⁴. It is said that a painting in Cave I at Ajanta represents a return embassy from Persia to the Chalukyan court¹⁵. There is every reason to believe that the Christian merchants from West Asia seem to have intensified their links with the Konkan region in general and Goa in particular during the time of the Chalukyan king Pulikesin II, following this mutual exchange of commercial envoys. Against this background it seems that there was sizeable

number of Christian traders or settlers in Sibor or Chandrapur by the sixth or seventh century A.D, during which period this cross must have taken shape¹⁶. In any case this cross speaks of an origin before the islamisation of the Indian Ocean trade in the eighth century, when began the use of Arabic as the chief medium of communication in exchange centres.

As early as 525 A.D., Cosmas Indicopleustus has referred to Male (Koulam Male or Quilon) and Sibor (Sindabor of the Arab writers or Chandrapur) besides Sindu (Indus), Orrhota (Saurashtra), Kalliana (Kalyan), Parti (?), Mangaruth (Mangalore), Salopatana (?), Nalopatana (Valapattanam?), Pudopatana (Puthupattanam), Marallo (Marava or Marawar) as well as Khaber (Kaveripattanam) as important ports and exchange centers of India with which the Christian traders of Persia had hectic commercial contacts. Out of this Quilon had yielded remnants of Christian settlements in the

¹³ For more details about these crosses see Gerd Gropp, "Die Pahlavi-Inschrift auf dem Thomaskreuz in Madras", in *Archaeologische Mitteilungen aus Iran, Neue Folge* Band 3, Berlin, 1970, pp.267-271; see also Gerd Gropp, "Christian Maritime Trade of Sasanian Age in the Persian Gulf", pp.83-87; Bahramgore T. Anklesaria "The Pahlavi Inscriptions on the Crosses in Southern India", in *Journal of the K.R. Cama Oriental Institute* 39, 1958, pp.64-107; C.P.T. Winckworth, "A New Interpretation of the Pahlavi Cross-Inschrift of Southern India", in T.K. Joseph, (ed.), *Kerala Society Papers*, vol. I & II, pp.159-164; 267-69

¹⁴ Muhammad ibn Jarir Tabari, op.cit., p.1052

¹⁵ G. Yazdani and L. Binyon, *Ajanta, The Colour and Monochrome Reproductions of the Ajanta Frescoes based on Photography*, I, London, 1930-55, pl. XXXVIII.

¹⁶ Prof. Ranabir Chakravarti of Calcutta University, after having verified the antiquity of the inscription in Pahlavi script and analyzing the historical background suggested in his personal letter to me that the cross could be of the seventh century A.D. The Archaeological Survey of India, Goa having studied the antiquity of the granite stone and the inscription said to Fr. Cosme Costa that the cross could be of a very early period (probably of sixth or seventh century), though they did not clearly give a dating. Prof. John Everaert of Ghent University, Belgium who visited the cross as a Seminar delegate, holds the view that it could be as old as Mylapore cross. Prof. Lotika Varadarajan, the Delhi-based historian says that the artifact needs further palaeographic studies and detailed analysis of the inscriptions. Against the background of active presence of Christian traders/settlers in Sibor in the sixth century A.D, as mentioned by Cosmas, it seems highly probable that this cross was of the sixth century A.D.

form of the Tarisappally copper-plate (825A.D.). The newly discovered cross of Agassaim could be considered as the best material evidence for the commercial as well as religious contacts of the West Asian Christians with Goa. There is every possibility to think that some of these Christian traders from Fars region must have settled down in Goa from the sixth century onwards. Probably the bishop of Kalyan, about whom mention was also made by Cosmas Indicopleustes in the sixth century, must have spiritually fed the Christian settlement of Goa during this period.¹⁷ It should be specially mentioned that Sindabor (Chandrapur) or Goa at that time was an important port in the Konkan with hectic trading activities with the ports of Gujarat and Malabar¹⁸.

It seems that the initial mercantile group, which was associated with the cross of Goa was the migrating commercial group from Persia, a fact which is clearly evident from the Pahlavi inscription on the cross. (However the work of all these crosses seems to have been executed in the respective places). But later with the development of commercial networks all over the Indian Ocean, which they seem to have realized also with the help of the native St.Thomas Christians of Kerala and

Mylapore, the composition of this mercantile group must have included many local Christians, as well. Even though the mercantile Christian settlements on the rim of Indian Ocean were predominantly West Asian in the initial phase, with the commencement of joint commercial operations with the help of the St.Thomas Christians of Kerala, these settlements became mixed in the intermediate period and eventually in course of time they seem to have become purely indigenous with lot of elements from St.Thomas Christian community. That must have been the reason why the Portuguese added at a later phase to the Pahlavi inscribed cross of Goa the following words: "*A de S.(Sao)Tome ...do R. (Região?) ..Ilez (Ilhas?) vs (vizinhas?) ..*" that which belongs to St.Thomas (Christians) of the region of the neighbouring Islands(Tiswadi)".¹⁹

Pahlavi Inscription

Though the Pahlavi inscription of Goa cross is not yet deciphered, a comparison with Mylapore cross would show that many of the letters of the Goan cross are differently or wrongly given. This is either because of variation or because of the ignorance of the cutter about the Pahlavi letters. As a result one cannot conclusively

¹⁷ Cosmas Indicopleustes, *La Topographie Chretienne*, tran.by Wanda Wolska, Paris, 1962,pp.3-5

¹⁸ For details see Ranabir Chakravarti, "Coastal Trade and Voyages in Konkan: The Early Medieval Scenario", in *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol.XXXV, N.2, April-June 1998, pp.97-123; Ranabir Chakravarti, "Merchants of Konkan", in *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, XXIII, 2, 1986,pp.212-216; Ranabir Chakravarti, "Candrapura/Sindabur and Gopakapattana: Two Ports on the West Coast of India(AD 1000-1300)", in *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Aligarh, 2000, pp.153-161

¹⁹ For details see Pius Malekandathil, "Christianity came before the Portuguese to Goa" ", in *Navabind Times* (Panorama), Panjim, May 13, 2001,p.1

say whether it was an imperfect imitation of Mylapore cross or a cross independently made on the basis of a set formula and pattern which was in existence and which all the Pahlavi crosses invariably adhered to. The variation in the Pahlavi letters demands deeper palaeographic studies before making any categorical statement. If we suppose that this cross was an imitation of Mylapore cross and then try to find some vague similarity between the fragmentary part of the first line of the inscription on the Goan cross and that of Mylapore cross, it could be read as "MR

'Hmn MŠY...' meaning "Our Lord Messi(ah)..". However it should be remembered that almost two third of the first line of inscription on the cross is lost, which makes us remain clueless in this regard.

.....(1)

.....(1)

.....(1)

Pahlavi-Inscription of Mylapore Cross²⁰

.....(1)

.....Destroyed Part.....(1)

.....(2)

Pahlavi-Inscription of Goan cross²¹

However a marked difference is seen in the second line where the details of the person responsible for the inscription is mentioned. It seems that some letters of this part are wrongly given; however these letters can be exactly deciphered only after a proper analysis of the different ways of writing that the Pahlavi letters had undergone over a considerable period of time. Some of the letters seem to have a vague resemblance to the characters of *vattexbuthu*, which we do not know whether is actual or coincidental because of the linguistic changes. In short, a study



²⁰ Taken from Gerd Gropp, " Die Pahlavi-Inschrift auf dem Thomaskreuz in Madras", in *Archaeologische Mitteilungen aus Iran, Neue Folge* Band 3, Berlin, 1970, p.267

²¹ Copied with the help of Dr.J.Vazhuthanappilly. Utmost care is taken to transcribe the letters as truly as were given on the cross.

by comparing the inscriptions of both the crosses makes it clear that anything can be definitely said only after undertaking a detailed palaeographic study of the inscriptions of Goan cross.

The Commercial Expansion of the Christians from West Asia and their Settlements in India

In fact a chain of the Christian settlements on the littoral of India appeared with the commercial expansion realized under the Sassanids, who came to power in Persia with the defeat of the Parthians in 224 A.D., by king Ardashir. He founded or re-founded several ports for carrying out trans-oceanic trade with India, out of which the most important ones were: Rew Ardashir (Rishahr on the Bushire Peninsula), Astarabadh Ardashir (formerly Charax), Bahman Ardashir (Forat of Maisan), Wahasht Ardashir, Kujaran Ardashir (on the Iranian coast) and Batn Ardashir (on the Arabian coast).²² The trade between India and the Sassanid ports in the Persian Gulf continued with vibrancy even during the time of Shahpur II, during whose time a naval fortress was erected at Siraf for monitoring the maritime movements emanating from the Persian Gulf²³.

From fourth century onwards, we have

evidences for the maritime trade contacts of the Sassanids with India. Palladius of the fourth century refers to Sassanid vessels (moving obviously for trade) in the Indian Ocean²⁴. Some time before 415 A.D., the Sassanid ruler Yazdigird I (399-421) was said to have sent the Nestorian Catholicos, a certain Ahai, to Fars to investigate the piracy of ships returning from India and Ceylon²⁵. Now the question is, why a Catholicos was deputed for handling piracy? It was highly probable that the trading groups involved in the maritime trade between India-Ceylon and Persian Gulf were predominantly Christian and in that way he would be in a better position to gather more direct and immediate information about the piratical attacks on them, which, besides, must have been a matter of concern for the church dignitary, as well. It could have also been because of the support, which he, as a Catholicos, would be able to mobilize from the Christian merchant-settlers located on the rim of Indian Ocean to contain the problem of sea-piracy. The early commercial and spiritual expansion of the trading community of the Christians from the Sassanid Empire in South East Asia and China is evident from the resounding title of the bishop, who attended the synod of 410 AD. The title runs as follows:

- ²² D.Whitehouse and A. Williamson, "Sassanian Maritime Trade", in *Iran*, 11, 1973, pp.29-32
- ²³ Pius Malekandathil, "St.Thomas Christians and the Indian Ocean:52AD to 1500 AD", in *Ephrem's Theological Journal*, vol.5, No.2, October 2001, p.187
- ²⁴ D.M.Derrett, "The History of Palladius of the races of India and Brahmans", *Classica et Mediaevalia*, 21, 1961, pp.64-135; D.M.Derrett, "The Theban Scholasticus and Malabar in c.355-60", *J.A.O.S.*, 82, 1962, pp.21-31
- ²⁵ Addai Scher, *La Chronique de Seert in Patrologia Orientalis*, V, pp.324-6; B.E.Colles, "Persian Merchants and Missionaries in Medieval Malaya", in *Journal of the Malayasian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, XLII/2, 1969, pp.10-47

“Metropolitan of the Islands, Seas and Interior, of Dabag, Chin and Macin.” Chin and Macin (Mahachina) were parts of China, whereas Dabag was an island, probably Java²⁶. The Christian merchants from the Fars region played a vital role in integrating Western coast of India within the commercial orbit of the Sassanid empire²⁷.

Because of the monopolistic hold of the Sassanids over Indian Ocean trade, commodities failed to reach Constantinople. In fact the three main channels of Euro-Asian trade viz., the Silk route, the Persian Gulf and the Red sea, through which eastern commodities used to enter the Mediterranean world, were monopolistically controlled by the Sassanids. Hence the Byzantine emperors Justin (518-527) and Justinian (527-565) wanted to break the Sassanid hold on Asiatic trade by seeking

the support of Abyssinian (Ethiopian) Christians, who were asked to go to the markets of south India and Ceylon to fetch silk and spices²⁸. The Sasanid ruler Khusrau I (531-78/9) routed the Ethiopians from Yemen and began to control the trade traffic in Bab-el-Mandeb and in the Red sea, which denied access to the Byzantines and their Ethiopian allies to penetrate into the East including India²⁹.

The important maritime bases of operation for the Sassanids in the Persian Gulf were Siraf, Rew Ardashir and Kharg Island³⁰. The extensive excavations conducted at Siraf brought to lime light the remnants of a Sassanid fort, which was also used as a naval base during the time of Shahpur II³¹. Rew Ardashir was a city on the coast of Fars, founded by Ardashir I³² and from fifth century onwards it was the

²⁶ David Whitehouse and Andrew Williamson, “Sassanian Maritime Trade”, p.47. It should be here specially remembered that there was a tradition in the 16th century Kerala that St.Thomas himself had gone to preach in China, Macin and Java. For details see Antonio de Gouveia, *Jornada*, pp.44-46

²⁷ For details see Pius Malekandathil, “St.Thomas Christians: A Historical Analysis of their Origins and Development up to 9th Century AD”, pp.15-21; David Whitehouse and Andrew Williamson, “Sassanian Maritime Trade”, pp.43-48

²⁸ Procopius, *Wars*, I, 20; Husain ibn Muhammad al-Marghani Thaa’libi, *Histoire des Rois de Perse*, ed.and tran.H.Zotenberg, Paris,1900, pp.615-619; J.B.Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire, AD 395-800*, vol.II, 1889,pp.322-327. Muhammad ibn Jarir Tabari, op.cit., p.965; R.Pankhurst, *An Introduction to the Economic History of Ethiopia from early times to 1800*, London, 1961, pp.33-37. The Ethiopians (the Aksumite kingdom) who embraced Christianity around 300 AD. was considered as an integral part of the eastern Christian world. The St.Thomas Christians of Malabar and the Coptic (referring to Koptos, the old generic term for Egypt) Christians of Ethiopia had good commercial relations in the medieval period. These diversified channels of commerce led to the flow of Sassanid silver *dirham* and the Byzantine gold *nomisma* to the marts of India

²⁹ Muhammad Ibn Jarir Tabari, op.cit.,p.965

³⁰ David Whitehouse and Andrew Williamson, “Sassanian Maritime Trade”, pp.30-43

³¹ Ibid.,pp.33-35

³² Tabari, op.cit., p.820

seat of the Metropolitan of Fars (Persis or Persia)³³. The archaeological excavations conducted by Prof. Ghirshman in Kharg Island unearthed the remnants of a Nestorian monastery with a potential capacity to accommodate about a hundred persons³⁴. This monastery seems to have been the main training center for the formation of the missionaries meant for India and other regions in the Indian Ocean region³⁵.

The extension of the commercial activities of these Persian Christians into the Indian Ocean region resulted in the formation of several trading colonies by them on its rim, followed by migration of Christians in considerable numbers. In fact these Christian settlements were located near the important trade centres or the collection centers or the halting places of long-distance trade, where temporary stay was necessitated by the monsoon factor. The traders from West Asia moving to South East Asia had to halt at Malabar or some other place on the western coast of India for a considerable period of time till they got favourable wind for their long-

distance voyage through Bay of Bengal, where the north-east monsoon obstructed navigation during the period between October and February. In the Arabian sea, similarly, the southwest monsoon hindered trans-oceanic voyages during the period between May and September. The Christian merchants, who used to halt till they got favourable monsoon laid also foundation for some of the principal settlements like that of Ceylon, Quilon, Sindabor or Goa, Kalyan etc., which swelled in size, with the inflow of people in the succeeding periods. In course of time many Christian traders from West Asia began to settle down on the fringes of Indian Ocean, from where easy movement of commodities and people to destinations of their choice was possible. These settlements seem to have been linked mutually by the network of exchange systems, in which they actively took part and interestingly commerce was a major unifying factor for these Diasporas.

Interestingly most of the Pahlavi-inscribed crosses were found on the fringes of Indian Ocean, which developed as the

³³ J. St. Martin, *Memoires historiques et geographiques sur l'Armenie*, vol. II, Paris, 1819, p. 372; J. Marquart, *Eransahr nach der Geographie des Ps. Moses Chorenaci*, Berlin, 1901, pp. 138 and 147. The Nestorians, who were particularly numerous in northern Mesopotamia, formed an important minority in the Sassanid empire and from time to time Nestorians filled key positions in the administration.

³⁴ R. Ghirshman, *The Island of Kharg*, Tehran, 1960, pl. 12ff.

³⁵ David Whitehouse and Andrew Williamson, "Sassanian Maritime Trade", p. 43. They make this inference on the ground that traditionally the captains approaching Basra used to put in at Kharg to engage a pilot before entering the Shatt al-Arab and the island thus played a significant role in the maritime trade of the Gulf. The importance of this monastery is to be seen against the background of the missionary expansionist activities of the Nestorians and the ecclesiastical administration of Indian church by the metropolitan of Rew Ardashir. For a detailed discussion on whether the St. Thomas Christians were Nestorians, see Luis Filipe F.R. Thomaz, "Were the St. Thomas Christians looked upon as Heretics?", in *The Portuguese and the Socio-Cultural Changes in India: 1500-1800*, ed. by K.S. Mathew, Teotonio R. de Souza and Pius Malekandathil, Fundação Oriente, 2001.

settlement pockets for the mercantile-cum-migrating Christians from West Asia. In fact with the discovery from Goa, the number of crosses with Pahlavi inscriptions found all over the world has gone up to nine: one in Anirudhapuram in Sri Lanka and the remaining eight in India viz., Mylapore, Kottayam (Cheriapally and Valiapally), Kothanalloor, Muttuchira, Kadamattam, Alengad and Goa. Among the various Pahlavi-inscribed crosses found in India, the one in St. Thomas church of Mylapore³⁶ seems to be the oldest, which is traced back to the 6th century A.D., and the Anirudhapuram cross could also be of an early date. However, the crosses of Kottayam, Kothanalloor, Muttuchira, Kadamattam and Alengad seem to have been copies made later from the cross of Mylapore and are the only surviving ones sent from there to the old churches of Malabar located in the interior³⁷.

C.P.T. Winckworth has translated the inscription of Mylapore as: "My Lord Christ, have mercy upon Afras son of Chaharbukht, the Syrian, who cut this."³⁸

However the translation of Gerd Gropp (1970) is different: "*Unser Herr Messias erbarme sich über Gabriel, den Sohn des Chaharbokht, den Enkel des Durzad, der dies (Kreuz) anfertigte*" which could be translated as "Our Lord Messiah may show mercy on Gabriel, the son of Chaharbokht (literally meaning having four sons), the grandson of Durzad (literally meaning born in distant land), who made this (cross)³⁹". However, it should be specially mentioned that scholars have not yet reached at an agreement on deciphering the cross-inscription, which for want of vowel-usage and familiarity with the letter-carvings of the inscription, was read differently.

The Christian settlements that arose on the rim of Indian Ocean, were spiritually fed by the Metropolitan of Fars. Rew Ardashir on the coast of Fars was the seat of the Metropolitan of Fars (Persis), from where he attended to the spiritual needs of Bahrain, Oman, Socotora and India. From 554 AD to 790 the Metropolitan of Fars with his seat in Rew Ardashir (which was

³⁶ C.P.T. Winckworth, "A New Interpretation of the Pahlavi Cross-Inscription of Southern India", in T.K. Joseph, (ed.), *Kerala Society Papers*, vol. I&II, pp.159-164;267-69

³⁷ These crosses are considered to be copies of the Mylapore cross on the basis of the fact all these crosses carry the same Pahlavi inscription as that of Mylapore and the churches where these crosses are found were built at a later period after 8/9th centuries (except Muttuchira). See also Gerd Gropp, "Die Pahlavi-Inschrift", p. 267

³⁸ For details see C.P.T. Winckworth, "A New Interpretation of the Pahlavi Cross-Inscription of Southern India", in T.K. Joseph, (ed.), *Kerala Society Papers*, vol. I&II, pp.161-164. Winckworth has later revised his reading and interpretation as follows: "My Lord Christ, have mercy upon Afras, son of Chaharbukht, the Syrian, who preserved this (cross)." For details see "Revised Interpretation of the Pahlavi Cross Inscription of Southern India", in T.K. Joseph, (ed.), *Kerala Society Papers*, vol. I&II, pp.267-269.

³⁹ Gerd Gropp, "Die Pahlavi-Inschrift auf dem Thomaskreuz in Madras", in *Archaeologische Mitteilungen aus Iran*, Neue Folge Band 3, 1970, pp.267-271. In 1997, he gave another translation: "Our Lord Messiah may show mercy over Gabriel, son of Chaharbokht. Long life may be for him who made this (cross)" Gerd Gropp, "Christian Maritime Trade of Sasanian Age in the Persian Gulf", p.86

differently named as Reshar, Rishar or Rashar) separated his diocese from the patriarch of Ctesiphon and kept his church as a parallel ecclesiastical unit distinct from Ctesiphon. While the church of Mesopotamia (Cetsiphon) had the liturgical celebrations in Syriac, the church of Fars (Persia) had its own Bible translation in Pahlavi language (translation by bishop Ma'na) as early as 420 A.D., and was used in contrast to Psita Bible⁴⁰. The Pahlavi-using ecclesiastical unit of Fars had spiritual jurisdiction over a great part of Indian Ocean regions. The Catholicos Isho-Yab III (650-58) records that in his day the Metropolitan of Rew Ardashir was responsible not only for the dioceses of Fars alone, but also for "India", a geographical concept in which he included the places between the maritime borders of the Sassanid kingdom to the country called QLH (Syriac QLH is equivalent to the Arabic place name Qal'ah, an important entrepot in the Malaya peninsula), covering a distance of 1200 *parasangs* and extending up to the doors of South East Asia⁴¹.

The available evidences attest to the fact that the Pahlavi language used in Fars was

also extended to south west India, where the missionaries from Fars catered to the spiritual needs of the native Christians. The fact that the "stone-crosses" discovered in south-west India carry Pahlavi inscriptions and the copper plates granted to Mar Sapor and Mar Peroz bear Pahlavi signatures (the names of the witnesses using Pahlavi script are distinctly Christian)⁴² speaks of the dominant use of Pahlavi language in the Christian settlements and churches of Malabar as well as coastal western India. Gerd Gropp says that up to 1040/50, when the Seldjuq dynasty of Iran overran Rew Ardshir, the church of Fars used Pahlavi language and ordained bishops for Oman, Socotora and India. It was only after this development that the bishops for the Gulf and India were ordained by the patriarch of Baghdad⁴³.

Is it a Manichaeian Cross ?

Recently there is a strong move among some writers to attribute the crosses with Pahlavi inscription to Manichaeians, which does not seem to have any historical basis at all. A.C. Burnell while trying to read the Pahlavi inscription in 1873 associated

⁴⁰ Ibid., p.965; Gerd Gropp, "Christian Maritime Trade of Sasanian Age in the Persian Gulf", p.85; E.Schau, "Vom Christentum in der Persis", pp.960ff; See also Richard N.Fyre, "Bahrain under the Sasanians", in Daniel Potts(ed.), *Dilmun: New Studies in the Archaeology and Early History of Bahrain*, Berlin, 1983, p.169. The church of Ctesiphon opted for Syriac in order to make its medium distinct from Pahlavi, a language that was predominantly used by the Zoroastrians. However, the church of Fars with its satellite ecclesiastical units in the Indian Ocean seems to have made its separation from Ctesiphon Patriarch evident by adhering to the use of Pahlavi language.

⁴¹ O.Braun, *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium: Scriptores Syri*, II, p.252; B.E. Colles, "Persian Merchants and Missionaries", pp.20-21

⁴² See the copy of the copper plates given in T.A. Gopinatha Rao, *Travancore Archaeological Series*, vol.II, Madras, 1916, pp.66-86. For a study on the Pahlavi signatures of the Quilon copper plates see, C.P.T. Winckworth, "Notes on the Pahlavi Signatures of the Quilon Copper Plates", in T.K. Joseph, *Kerala Society Papers*, pp.320-323

⁴³ Gerd Gropp, "Christian Maritime Trade of Sasanian Age in the Persian Gulf", p.86

mistakenly the Pahlavi cross with the Manichaeian community⁴⁴. This mistake took place at a time when research in this area was still in an embryonic stage. Remember that Burnell was the first European to attempt a translation of the Pahlavi inscription on the cross. Now with the passage of 128 years after the publication of his work, lot of new discoveries have been made through archival researches and archaeological excavations, which make historians reject his view as historically wrong⁴⁵. True that some Manichaeian texts speak of Manichaeian missionaries traveling to India⁴⁶. If it was a Manichaeian cross it should have been found in places, where Manichaeian doctrines got wide acceptance. Since it had more lasting impact on the western church than on Indian church, the crosses with Pahlavi inscription should have been found more in Europe; but so far none is discovered from Europe or Northern Africa (where Manichaeian influence was more vibrantly felt) or from the heartland of Manichaeianism viz., West Asia or Central Asia. Manichaeian influence all over the church was felt more in the monastic way of life than in the life of laity and its impact on the ordinary lay Christians seems to have been considerably insignificant.

Manichaeianism, while combining the teachings of Zoroastrianism, Buddhism and Christianity, upheld the radical dualism of matter and spirit (principle of evil and principle of good) and taught that the devil, which was the evil principle, created matter and human body. As a result the Manichaeians condemned human marriage, which is attributed to the principle of evil and the formation of the human body is presented as the work of the devil. The conception of children in their mother's womb is viewed as something, which was brought about through the activity of the devil. So the Manichaeians forbade marriage to the "Perfect". Till 13th century AD, Manichaeian perception of reality continued as a strong undercurrent in the heterodox monastic movements of the western church. Priscillian (385) advocated Manichaeianism in Spain and despised marriage and looked down upon women as they are said to be coming under the realm of "evil", which the council of Braga (561AD) in Portugal condemned as heresy. In the medieval period, the Manichaeian teachings were upheld in Europe by the heterodox monastic movements of the Albigensians (from 1180 onwards) and the Waldensians in France as well as the

⁴⁴ See A.C.Burnell, "Pahlavi Inscriptions in South India", in *Indian Antiquary*, 3, November, 1874

⁴⁵ Now nobody gives much value to Burnell's translation of Pahlavi inscription, which runs as follows: "In punishment by the Cross the suffering of this who is the true Christ and God above and guide ever pure". A.C.Burnell, "Pahlavi Inscriptions in South India", in *Indian Antiquary*, 3, November, 1874, p.313. He was in fact falsely attributing Manichaeian concepts into the Pahlavi inscription to project it as a Manichaeian remnant. Neither Winckworth nor Gerd Gropp nor any other scholar of the twentieth century accepted his interpretation to be true; on the other hand, they have given completely different translations.

⁴⁶ For details see Werner Sundermann(ed), *Mitteliranische manichäische Texte kirchengeschichtlichen Inhalts*, in *Berliner Turfantexte*, XI, (Akademie der Wissenschaften der DDR Zentralinstitut für alte Geschichte und Archäologie), Berlin, 1981, see particularly pp.56-57.

Lombards in Italy. Pope Innocent III condemned their teachings as heresy in 1208 upholding the sanctity of marriage and the salvific role of woman in church. The presence of some Manichaeans in India does not mean that the St. Thomas Christians adhered to their teachings, as the presence of Manichaeans in Europe and their influence on the heterodox monastic movements for a considerable period of time do not mean that the western church was Manichaean⁴⁷. Presence of some Manichaeans in India is not a conclusive proof for their influence on St. Thomas Christians. Moreover, so far no historical evidence is discovered either from India, or from the heartland of Manichaeism in Iran, Central Asia and the fringes of

Mediterranean to link these Pahlavi crosses with Manichaean community. Till we get stronger historical reasons and evidences to show this linkage, one has to exercise caution in labeling an identity or equating this cross with Manichaeism.

Later Historical Evidences for the Existence of the Pre-Portuguese Christian Community in Goa

In fact the stone cross of Agassaim has thrown light on the presence of a pre-Portuguese Christian community that existed in Goa having links with West Asian church and the St. Thomas Christians of Kerala. This Christian community seems to have had an unbroken and continuous history of existence in Goa from the time

⁴⁷ For details on Manichaeism see Adam A.(ed), *Texte zum Manichäismus*, Berlin, 1954; Andreas, F.C. und W.Henning(ed.), *Mitteliranische Manichaica aus Chinesisch-Turkestan*, SPAW, Phil.-hist.Kl.Berlin, I, 1932; II, 1933, III, 1934; Asmussen J.P., *Manichaean Literature*, Delmar, New York, 1975; Baur F.C., *Das manichäische Religionssystem*, Tübingen, 1831; Boyce M, *The Manichaean Hymn-Cycles in Parthian*, London, 1954;; Boyce M, *A Catalogue of the Iranian Manuscripts in Manichean Script in the German Turfan Collection*, Berlin, 1960; Boyce M, *A Reader in Manichaean Middle Persian and Parthian*, Tehran-Lüttich, 1975; Gershevitch, I., *A Grammar of Manichaean Sogdian*, Oxford, 1961; Henning W.B., *Neue Materialien zur Geschichte des Manichäismus*, in ZDMG, 90, 1936; Henning W.B., *Ein manichäisches Bet- und Beichtbuch*, APAW, 1936, Phil.-hist.Kl., 10, Berlin, 1937; Henrichs, A., und L.Koenen, *Ein griechischer Mani Codex* (P.Colon.inv.nr.4780), in *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, 5, 1970; Jackson A.V.Williams, *Researches in Manichaeism, with Special Reference to the Turfan Fragments*, New York, 1932; Kessler K., *Mani, Forschungen über die manichäische Religion*, I, Berlin, 1889; Klima, O., *Manis Zeit und Leben*, Prag, 1962; Le Coq, A.V., *Türkische Manichaica aus Chotscho III*, APAW, 1922, Nr. 2; Müller F.W.K., und W.Lentz, *Soghdische Texte II*, SPAW, Phil.-hist.Kl., Berlin, 1934; Polotsky H.J.(ed.), *Manichäische Homilien*, Stuttgart, 1934; Polotsky, H.J., *Manichäismus*, in RE Suupl.VI, Stuttgart, 1940; Salemann, C., "Ein Bruchstück manichäischen Schrifttums in Asiatischen Museum", in *Mem.de l'Acad.Imp.des Sciences de St.Petersbourg VIII ser. VI.*, 6, St.Petersburg, 1904; Salemann, C., "Manichaeische Studien, I, Die mittelpersischen texte in revidierter transcription , mit glossar und grammatischen bemerkungen, in *Mem.de l'Acad.Imp.des Sciences de St.Petersbourg VIII ser, VIII*, 10, St.Petersburg, 1908; Salemann, C., "Manichaica III-IV", in *Bull. de l'Acad .Imp.des Sciences de St.Petersbourg*, 1912; Schaefer H.H, "Urform und Fortbildung des manichäischen Systems", in *Vorträge der Bibliothek Warburg*, IV, Vorträge 1924-1925, Leipzig, 1927; Schmidt, C. und H.J.Polotsky, *Ein Mani-Fund in Ägypten, Originalschriften des Mani und seiner Schüler*, in SPAW, 1933; Sundermann, W., *Mittelpersische und parthische kosmogonische und Parabeltexte der Manichäe*, Berlin, 1973, BTT IV; Sundermann, W., *Iranische Lebensbeschreibungen Manis*, in AOHavn, 36, 1974; Tsui Chi, Mo Ni Chiao Hsia Pu Tsan, "The Lower (Second) Section of the Manichaean Hymns", in BSOAS, 11, 1943; Waldschmidt, E., und W.Lentz, *Manichäische Dogmatik aus chinesischen und iranischen Texten*, in SPAW, Phil.-hist.Kl., Berlin, 1933; Widengren, G., *Mani und Manichäismus*, Stuttgart, 1961

of Cosmas Indicopleustes (525 A.D.) till the end of the 17th or the beginning of 18th century when this cross was thrown out of the place of worship against the backdrop of increased tensions between the St.Thomas Christians and the Portuguese following the Coonan Cross oath⁴⁸. In fact the evidence for the existence of this Christian community came to the notice of the Portuguese, for the first time, immediately after the conquest of Goa in 1510 in the form of a cross. Francisco de Souza in *Oriente Conquistado* refers to this cross which was found hidden away in a wall a few days after the occupation of Goa in 1510. It was from this cross that *Rua do Crucifixo* of Goa was said to have got its name. The newly discovered cross was then taken in procession to the church for veneration.⁴⁹ Though unfortunately we do not have further details about it, it is almost certain that the cross, which the early Portuguese happened to find accidentally from the demolished building of Goa and created lot of sensation among them, was an object of veneration for this pre-Portuguese Christian community of Goa. Fr.H.Otto Mascarenhas found in this cross,

discovered in 1510, a very convincing evidence to substantiate the presence of St.Thomas Christians in Goa and as early as from 1953 onwards he was writing frequently on this topic⁵⁰.

This pre-Portuguese Christian community of Goa seems to have preferred very much to cling on to St.Thomas tradition. The Christians of Goa venerating St.Thomas, to which St.Francis Xavier makes reference, could be none other than the pre-Portuguese Christians linked with West Asia and the St.Thomas Christians of Kerala. In a letter written by St.Francis Xavier to St.Ignatius Loyola tells about the great devotion of the Christians of Goa to St.Thomas and requests St.Ignatius to obtain from the Holy Father(Pope) the grant of plenary indulgence on the occasion of the feast of the Apostle. He writes: "In the first place, His Holiness, because of the great respect which the people have for glorious Apostle St.Thomas, the patron of India, should grant to all those who confessed and received communion on the occasion of his feast and its octave a plenary indulgence".⁵¹

⁴⁸ Only those churches which remained with the Jacobites (like those of Kottayam) or outside the direct control of the Portuguese power (as in the case of Mylapore church on the Coromandel coast, where the increasing presence of the Dutch was felt) could preserve the Pahlavi-inscribed crosses intact. Other crosses seem to have been partly destroyed or thrown out of centres of worship against this background of heightened tension.

⁴⁹ Francisco de Souza, *Oriente Conquistado a Jesu Christo pelos Padres da Companhia de Jesus da Provincia de Goa*, I,Lisboa, 1710, pp.14-15; See also ANTT, *Corpo Cronologico*, I,Maço 17, doc. 30.Letter of Fr.Domingos de Sousa sent to the king D.Manuel from Goa, dated 22-12-1514

⁵⁰ For details see the articles of Fr.H.O.Mascarenhas in *The Examiner*, 104,Bombay, 1953, p.7; Fr.H.O. Mascarenhas, "Fr. Schurhammer's Explanation", in *The Examiner*, Bombay, 1953, pp.133-134; Fr.H.O.Mascarenhas, "Pre-Portuguese Christianity and St.Francis Xavier", in *The Examiner*, Bombay, 1953, pp.192-194

⁵¹ Georg Schurhammer, *Francis Xavier: His Life and Times*, vol.II, Rome, 1977,pp.271;276

In fact Fr. H.Otto Mascarenhas in his article published in the *New Leader* in 1970 argues that many of these Christians, to whom St.Francis Xavier refers, were St.Thomas Christians linked with Kerala and settled down in Goa before the arrival of the Portuguese. He also refers to a community in Goa called *Thomase*, who, at present, probably because of the vicissitudes to which they were subjected to over a considerable period of time, turned out to be Hindus. Even after being drifted away to Hinduism, they still followed many Christian customs, as well⁵². It is highly probable that they must have been the descendants of the St.Thomas Christians, who came and settled in Goa from Kerala. Even in his thesis in Konkani "*Konkanachem Kristanvponn*" submitted at the Gregorian University of Rome, Fr.Mascarenhas refers his grand mother having seen crosses of this type (then he was evidently referring to the cross discovered from Goa in 1510) on hills near Colvale during her younger days, which coincides probably with the early part of the 19th century.⁵³

In short, with the discovery of a Pahlavi-

inscribed cross from Goa, the debates initiated in 1950s by Fr.H.O.Mascarenhas regarding the presence of St.Thomas Christians in pre-Portuguese Goa has taken a decisive turn. This Pahlavi cross is a good archaeological evidence to substantiate the presence of a sizeable Christian community in Goa in the early medieval period, whose religious and economic identity was shaped very much by its continuous links with the West Asian Christians of Fars and the St.Thomas Christians of Kerala. However, one has to wait till a detailed study of the cross- inscription is done to make the exact dating of this Pre-Portuguese Christian settlement. It is highly probable that this commercially oriented Christian settlement must have taken shape in Goa at a time when the West Asian Christians and the St.Thomas Christians jointly undertook commercial and missionary expansion in the Indian Ocean regions, making use of the economic opportunities offered by the increasing maritime activities of the Sassanids of Persia.

⁵² See the article of H.Otto Mascarenhas in *New Leader* dated June 20, 1970

⁵³ Paul Fernandes, "Lines on 6th century Cross a Mystery", in *Gomantak Times Weekender*, Panjim, p.2

Truth and Love are wings that cannot be separated,
for Truth without Love is unable to fly,
so too Love without Truth is unable to soar up:
their yoke is one of harmony.

(Faith 20:12)