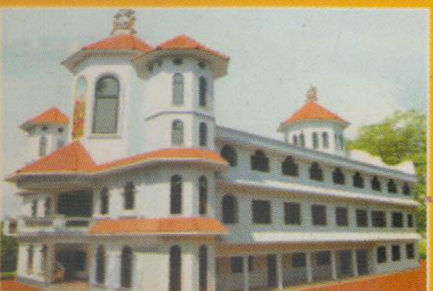
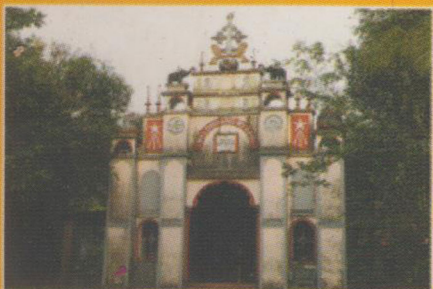
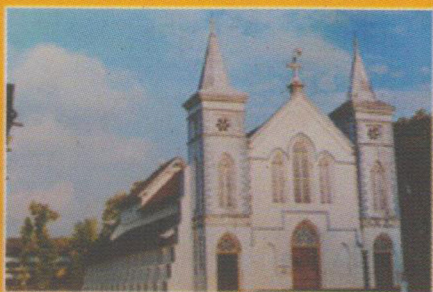




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ELEMENTS OF SYRO-MALABAR HISTORY



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ELEMENTS OF SYRO-MALABAR HISTORY

Thomas Koonammakkal



Beth Aprem Nazrani Dayra
Kuravilangad
Dukrana 2012



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PREFACE

Beth Aprem Nazrani Dayra is established in the Eparchy of Palai between Kuravilangad and Kaduthuruthy in order to promote Christian Aramaic (Syriac) studies and to live East-Syrian monastic spirituality. All are welcome there for the prayer life and studies (with prior intimation). This is the second booklet published from there. I express my cordial thanks to my brother Jose Kurian for the idea and sponsorship of this booklet. I am grateful to Sunish George and Thalikaasthanath Thoma Mathai for its publication.

Koonammakkal Thoma Kathanar

ELEMENTS OF SYRO-MALABAR HISTORY

Introduction

Contacts between Mediterranean world, Mesopotamia, Persia and India began before fourth millennium BC. During the third and second millennium BC Indus valley and Sumer had very flourishing civilisations. Ancient tablets discovered from Ur the home town of the ancestors of Abraham indicates the existence of trade between Sumer and Indus valley. The Brahmi script of India and Sumerian are related. Gradually Dravidians from the Indus Valley were pushed to the south and north India underwent Arianization. The contacts between Phoenicia and South India go back to second millennium BC. Jews came into contact with south India in the tenth century BC following the commercial enterprises of Solomon. They were following the footsteps of Phoenicians from the Tsur and Sidon. The king Hiram of Tsur, the contemporary of Solomon (972-932 BC) promoted international trade with South Indian Coast. Spices like pepper, ginger, precious gems, ivory, gold, peacocks, apes etc. were

¹S. S. Koder, Kerala and her Jews, (Ernakulam 1965), p.2; IKg 9:26-28, 10:22.

exotic attractions from South India. According to Koder, the first Jewish colony of South India goes back to the days of King Solomon¹. After Solomon, Jews underwent the exiles in Assyria in 734-732 BC and Babylonia in sixth and fifth centuries BC. Gradually the deported Jews began to engage in international commerce especially with South India. Ordinary Jews forgot Hebrew and became speakers of Aramaic, the language of international trade. Babylon of this period was the greatest international market of the world. It was dependent and related to South India by sea route which extended even up to southern China.

In the seventh century BC South India served as meeting point between traders from East and West. Teakwood, sandal, rice, and other articles mentioned above were fascinating items in this trade. Teakwood from South India had been excavated in the Moon temple of Ur. Palace of Nebuchadenazzar (604-562 BC) was decorated with Indian wood². Babylonian captivity of the Jews was terminated by Persian emperor Cyrus in 539 BC. But many of the Jews interested in international commercial enterprises remained in Babylon. Some of them settled in Malabar Coast³. Jewish exiles of Assyria were scattered among many peoples and countries. Some of them got settled in different parts of India. These two groups of exilic Jews were Aramaic speakers. In the second and first centuries BC, another group of Jews migrated to South India. So we see a pre-exilic, exilic, and post-exilic Jewish emigration in South India.

²J. Kennedy "Early commerce of Babylon and India", JRAS, 1898.

³S. S. Koder, op.cit, p.4.

The Roman army conquered Egypt in 30 BC and took over the control of international commerce through Egypt. 120 ships used to sail every year from Red sea to the Malabar Coast. Within 40 days the Monsoon winds brought them to the Coast. With the help of opposite Monsoons these ships used to return to Egypt in the same year. Emperors Augustus (27 BC-14 AD) and Tiberius (14-37 AD) promoted trade between Egypt and Malabar Coast. More than 500 coins of Augustus have been discovered in South India. The coins of Emperor Tiberius from South India number over 1000. These are clear indication of the flourishing trade in the first century BC and the first century AD. The Persian, Arab, and the Egyptian navigators already knew the course of Monsoon winds. These already-existing knowledge was "**discovered**" by the Greek Hippalus. Thus a long kept secret was divulged probably during the reign of Ptolemy Euergetes (146-116 BC). Later the so-called discovery of Hippalus was divulged to Romans in the first half of the first century AD. According to Peutinger tablets from the second century AD Egypt, there is a temple of Augustus at Muziris near modern Kodungallur region⁴. The new discoveries from the archaeological excavations of Pattanam (a part of ancient Muziris) in 2007 have necessitated the rewriting of the history of Malabar Coast⁵. Naturally many Aramaic speaking Jewish settlers and traders were in Malabar Coast during this period. Roman trade expansion accelerated the presence of Jewish settlers and traders.

⁴ G. F. Hourani, Arab sea fairing in the Indian ocean in ancient and medieval times, (Beirut 1963), pp. 24ff. H. G. Rawlingson, Intercourse between and the western world, (Cambridge 1916), pp. 121.

⁵The Hindu, December 9, 2009, pp. 18, May 16, 2010 pp. 24, March 14, 2011, pp.18, October 26, 2011, pp.8.



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