



# Saint Thomas Crosses: The Pahlavi-Inscribed Granite Crosses of South India



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## Introduction

Pahlavi-inscribed granite bas-relief crosses, found in ancient Christian settlements in South India, are the most ancient artefacts of Saint Thomas Christians in India. The script found on these tablets was established as 'Pahlavi', a script used to write Middle Iranian languages. Similar crosses have also been excavated in South Asia and as far east as China, suggesting the religio-cultural patrimony of the East Syriac Christians across this vast area. Scholars have studied these crosses and presented in many reputed oriental conferences and published in many academic journals. It has been agreed that these inscriptions were 'unintelligent' copies of an original template by 'estampage', a process of lifting a copy of the original by pressing paper onto its inked surface (Winkworth 1929:237–239).

These crosses were dated from the 7th century, as the Pahlavi script died out after the collapse of the Sasanian Empire in AD 651. This assumption was based on studies of the famous Saint Thomas Mount Cross at Mailappore and the crosses at Valiyapally Church in Kottayam. More crosses were later excavated, and further epigraphic studies suggest that the Pahlavi-inscribed cross at Alangad may be from as early as the 4th century.





Fig. 1: The Mount Cross

The Mount Cross is the most famous of this genre of crosses. It was excavated from Mailappore, at what is believed to be the site of the martyrdom and the burial of Saint Thomas the Apostle. Saint Thomas Christians have had the tradition of an annual pilgrimage to Mailappore from ancient times. There are several ancient documents that confirm the importance of this site (Medleycot :69–73).<sup>[vii]</sup>

When the Portuguese arrived, they found the ruins of a monastery at Periyamalai (Saint Thomas Mount), Mailappore. They built a small oratory on this foundation in 1523. Twenty-four years later, they decided to build a larger church, and when excavation began, they found buried in the ground a granite tablet, its engraved front facing down (Joseph, 1928:222–223). This granite tablet has raised edges and a rounded top. The Pahlavi inscriptions are on this rounded edge, with a small cross between the two parts of the inscription. The cross is carved in a niche flanked by two pillars, with an arch above. The rounded arch originates from the open mouth of an aquatic-type figure, the makara.

The cross has three steps at the base. Three downward- and three upward-facing petals have the appearance of a lotus, on which the cross is erected. The arms of the cross end in a three-bud pattern with an additional bud at the end; the bottom arm of the cross is slightly longer. A dove faces down towards the top arm.



3. *Li(mun) ahrob (ahlob) Mashiah avakhshahi min kharbokht (Holy Messiah, the forgiver, free me from thorn/affliction)*

#### 4. **Kothanalloor Cross**



*Fig. 5: Kothanalloor cross*





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