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On Christianity in the Indian Malabar Coast and on the arrival of the Portuguese in a Syriac document from 1504

Taufilos Ğōrğ Şalība, the bishop of the Mountains of Lebanon diocese of the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch, in his account of a pastoral visit of the Church's current patriarch, Mar Iğnaṭiyyos Zakka I 'Īwāš in India (from February, 2 to March, 24, 1982), called that Church "the Pearl of Antioch." The author was a member of the patriarchal delegation and his account was published on the 50th anniversary of patriarch's Mar Iğnaṭiyyos Elias III Šākīr's sudden death in India.¹

The fact that there is such a very small number of works in the Polish language on the beginnings of Christianity in India and its development until the 15th century gives rise to many questions, not to mention that an average Pole is not even aware of the fact of the existence of a Christian Church in

¹ T. G. Saliba, *جوهرة أنطاكية وهي الزيارة الرسولية التي قام بها قداسة البطريرك مار اغناطيوس زكا الأول عيواص للكنيسة السريانية الأنطاكية في الهند The Pearl of Antioch – an apostolic visit paid by His Holiness, Patriarch Mar Iğnaṭiyyos Zakka I 'Īwāš to the Syriac Church of Antioch in India*, Damascus 1982, pp. 192 (after issues 14, 15 and 16 of the *Patriarchal Magazine*, Damascus). Patriarch Mar Iğnaṭiyyos Elias III Šākīr and the accompanying party left for India on the 28 February 1931 from the Iraqi port of Basra aboard the ship "Warsaw." They reached the port of Karachi on Thursday, the 5 March. The next day they boarded a train for Delhi, where they arrived on the 8 March. On Thursday (the 12 March) they set out on a 2-day long train journey to Madras, and after a week-long stay in this city, on Friday (the 21st of March) they headed for Malabar. After an almost year-long stay in India the Patriarch died of heart attack on February 13, 1932 in the town of Manjinikara, near the city of Omalloo/u/r and was buried next to the old St. Stephen church. The Mar Iğnaṭiyyos church was later built above his mausoleum. Currently both churches are situated within the premises of a monastery. Mar Iğnaṭiyyos Elias III Šākīr, the 119th patriarch of Antioch, counting from St. Peter, was the first head of the Church of Antioch to have been buried in India. His mausoleum is a destination of annual pilgrimages on February, 13th which is the date of his death.

India other than the Roman Catholic one. It is also a thought provoking fact that the two visits of the Polish Pope, the blessed John Paul II, in India (in 1986 and 1999) raised no interest at all of Polish historians, theological departments or media in the fascinating history of Christianity in the Indian subcontinent and in other distant countries of Asia. Few, scattered and in most cases very incomplete descriptions in the Polish language are mostly translations from other European languages and they could hardly form a basis for a panorama of the Christianity in that region. At the same time, one can easily find tens of book titles on the subject in the English language, which is obvious, but also in German, French, Latin, Arabic and Malayalam. The earliest of them date back probably to the 16th century, but new books of this kind have been appearing almost incessantly from the early 19th century to date. That is why the initiative to organize this conference in Cracow by Rev. Professor Krzysztof Kościelniak deserves appreciation. One may hope that this pioneering project will break the stereotypes, and result in further meetings of scholars promoting a broader view on Christianity and its richness in a spirit of true partnership. Nowadays, in the times so very difficult for the Christians of the East the knowledge on their history and contribution to our civilization should be spread as wide as possible, which should be accompanied with manifestation of understanding and respect for the centuries-long tradition as well as solidarity and support for their struggle to survive.

It is undeniable that Christianity initially reached Malabar in India, China and other parts of Central Asia and the Far East owing to Assyrian (Syriac) missionaries from Mesopotamia or by travelers from the neighboring regions, who crossed Mesopotamia or traveled along the famous Silk Road to get to these distant lands. This very early presence of Christians in India is documented with numerous confirmed accounts referring to St. Tomas and with material monuments among which the two copper tablets (one of them dated back to the 3rd or 4th century, while the 2nd one to the 8th century) are the most important ones. The text engraved on them includes the names of Mesopotamian shepherds and Christian notables who arrived to India in the 4th, 8th and 9th centuries and mentions privileges granted to them in the local caste system.² Five antique granite crosses have been also preserved as well as the names of successive hierarchs originating from Mesopotamia, although it is difficult to speak about the continuity of contacts.

The name of the first bishop of India, after St. Tomas, mentioned in historic sources, was Dada or David. He sailed to Malabar around the year 295 from

² Rev. H. Gundert, *Translation and Analysis of the Ancient Documents Engraved on Copper In Possession of the Syrian Christians and Jews of Malabar*, "Madras Journal of Literature and Science", edited by the Committee of the Madras Literary and Auxiliary Royal Asiatic Society, June 1844 no. 30, pp. 115–146.

the port city of Basra in modern Iraq, which was an Episcopal see as early as in 225, just like Bēt Qatrāye (the state of Qatar which in works by Syriac writers extended also over the present day Oman) and Bēt Lāpāt (GundēŠāpūr in Persian Khuzestan).³ These and other cities were located along the sea route leading from Mesopotamia to India and known since the ancient times. These urban centers, currently with no Christian population at all, were locations of monasteries populated with hundreds of monks. It is also known that the Christians of Malabar were under the jurisdiction of Antioch, chronologically the second apostolic see and the secondary see, Seleucia-Ctesiphon, was established following the 3rd Ecumenical Council. Nevertheless, trends aiming at decentralization and autonomy appeared in the church in India in some periods. Here, it must be noted that these trends were in a way forced by the changing geopolitical situation, both in the Middle East and in India itself, mainly due to the Arab Muslims expansion in the 11th century in this country, and later on also due to the Turkish and Afghan sultanates in the 13th up to 15th century. On the other hand we know that Malabar Christians sometimes had to settle for direct contacts with the Church of the East in Persia, not only due to its geographical closeness and historical ties with the region but also because the ambitions of the church hierarchs, to gain independence from the headquarters of Antiochia or Seleucia-Ctesiphon, were often supported by the political authorities of Persia. Disregarding the few attempts to establish in India Churches of the western type undertaken since the end of the 13th century,⁴ it can be said with certainty that

³ See A. Mingana, *The Early Spread of Christianity in India* (in Arabic translation by Ġirġis Faṭḥalla: فاتحة انتشار المسيحية في الهند, Stokholm: Zahrira 1999, pp. 10–12, 83). Further in the book A. Mingana included an extensive note on the crosses and tablets. In Syriac sources an expression “island bishops” is often found; it refers to the islands in the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf such as Socotra, Qatar, Bahrain and other. For instance in Qatar in 676 a local synod was held attended by 6 bishops, including one archbishop, were present. The synod was chaired by Ġiwargis, the patriarch of the (Assyrian) Church of the East.

⁴ Names, dates and other data on the Roman Catholic Church envoys as well as on their activity can be found in numerous publications, e.g., in: S. H. Moffet, *A History of Christianity In India*, vol. 1, *Beginnings to 1500*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 7th ed., New York 2009, pp. 498–503; Ch. Baumer, *The Church of the East. An Illustrated History of Assyrian Church*, I. B. Tauris, 2nd ed., London-New York 2008, pp. 235–239. For the needs of this paper one should mention John of Montecorvino, a priest sent by Pope Nicholas IV in 1291 to China. He stopped off in India for 13 months where he visited the grave of St. Tomas and was said to have baptized around 100 people. His companion, the Dominican, Nicholas of Pistoia died in Milappur and was buried in the local Syriac St. Thomas’ church. John of Montecorvino was later nominated the Archbishop of China, and India was included under his jurisdiction. In turn in 1328 the Pope appointed Dominican Jordanus the bishop of the port city of Kollam, providing him with a letter addressed to the leaders of St. Thomas Christian community including a demand to recognize the primacy of Rome. In his “Mirabilia” report he wrote: “In this part of India (from Karachi to Malabar) lives a dispersed people calling themselves Christians, but Christians they are not: they have not been granted the blessing of baptism and they know no true faith, and apart from that they believe

before the arrival of the Portuguese Malabar Christians had been fully aware of their affiliation with the above-named sees. Their way of practicing of the faith, preserved in numerous descriptions, had nothing to do with the Greek and Roman tradition. In daily life they spoke their local languages or dialects but for liturgy they used only Syriac. As early as in the 5th century some of their intellectuals studied in famous Mesopotamian centers of scholarship and took an active part in the translation of Greek writings into the Syriac language. One must also remember that a clear separation between the jurisdictions of individual apostolic sees stemmed directly from certain canons of the First and Second Ecumenical Councils (of Nice in 325, and Constantinople in 381),⁵ which however were accepted only by some Churches.

Some sources mention that before the arrival of the Portuguese Christians probably accounted for almost half of the population of the coastal cities of Malabar. They were well organized and fairly well educated and lived in conflict with their Muslim neighbors. It may be presumed that like elsewhere, the conflict with the Muslims had both ideological and political background and was also a conflict of ambitions.

“The first brothers” from the West

The Portuguese were the first Europeans to reach India by sea in an organized manner. They arrived there 6 years after the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus. Based on historical sources it may be presumed that the initial intention of the Portuguese fleet organized with the blessing of King Emmanuel I and lead by Vasco da Gama, was not to make competitive “discoveries” but to bring from India pepper, cinnamon and cloves, spices highly valued in Europe. However, soon colonial ambitions and prestigious considerations of the sea power took over; Portugal, Spain and other European kingdoms tried to consolidate their efforts in fear of dangerous Islamic regimes of that time such as the Mamluks in Egypt or the Ottoman Turks. At the same time the countries engaged into large-scale proselytism, which they practiced in a premeditated manner among

that St. Thomas is Christ.” Almost 20 years later the Franciscan bishop John of Marignola, who spent seven months in Kollam, noted that the “Nestorians” hold monopoly over the plantations of pepper and run the weights and measures office, which was in line with the privileges recorded on the aforementioned copper tablets. For more on these and other missionaries see: G. M. Rae, *The Syrian Church in India*, W. Blackwood, [no place of publication] 1892. Newer edition with a great number of printing errors: General-Books.net 2009.

⁵ Rev. A. Baron, Rev. H. Pietras SJ, *Dokumenty soborów powszechnych*, vol. 1, WAM, Cracow 2009. Canon 6 of the Nice Council (in the Polish translation, p. 31) and canon 2 of the Constantinople Council (in the Polish translation, pp. 72–73). “Bishops of the Orient deal only with the Orient”, “Bishops should not give holy orders without a special invitation nor should they fulfill other functions of their office outside of the area of their dioceses.”

the Christians aggregated around other apostolic sees and in the first stage of the European expansion it was difficult to see clearly which of these tasks was a priority. In order to prevent a potential conflict between Portugal and Spain, sea powers peacefully rivaling at that time, Pope Alexander VI entrusted the former power with the Latinization of the eastern part of the contemporary world, while the latter received the task to Latinize the western part.⁶

The Portuguese fleet of four ships reached the Indian port of Calicut in May of 1489, but the visitors were not granted a permission to establish a factory in this location as originally planned.

What Vasco da Gama was unable to achieve was achieved a year later by another Portuguese sailor, Pedro Alvares Cabral. His thirteen ships strong fleet had over one thousand people aboard. The news about numerous Christian communities in Malabar was a great encouragement for this voyage. It turned out that the main source of the information was to be a Jewish merchant baptized by the Portuguese during the first expedition. They had given him the name Gaspar da Gama (Vasco da Gama himself was his godfather) and brought him to Portugal. His parents supposedly originated from Poznań but moved to Alexandria, Egypt as a result of persecution. Gaspar was born there, and when he grew up he took to trading with India. During an audience at King's Emmanuel I court he described the Christians in India as potential allies for the Portuguese but he certainly overrated their numbers and military potential. Still, his accounts must have been considered trustworthy if he served as a guide for both P. A. Cabral's expedition and during Vasco da Gama's second voyage.⁷

P. A. Cabral managed to negotiate with Samudri, the Raja of Calicut his consent for a group of Portuguese merchants to stay in the city. However, the agreement did not last long. After Cabral's departure from Malabar, Raja had all the European visitors killed. When the news about their death reached Portugal, the kingdom organized another expedition. In 1502 twenty ships commanded by Vasco da Gama in the rank of admiral left their home port. The Portuguese managed to seize both the city of Calicut and the city of Cochin. Trade agreements were signed with the Raja of the latter and with rajas of other cities on the west coast of South India.

⁶ H. Tüchle, C. A. Bouman, *Historia Kościoła*, vol. 3, PAX, Warsaw 1986, p. 9. Both the title of this five-volume work and certain statements they include (such as "The Church has now reached out beyond the borders of the West" (*ibid.*, p. 8) are misleading. In both cases the authors refer to the Roman Catholic Church.

⁷ Extensive information on this is provided by S. Subrahmanyam, *The Career and Legend of Vasco da Gama*, Cambridge University Press, USA, pp. 145–163, who calls these persecutions of Jews in Poznań (at the end of the 15th c.) "pogroms." According to Gaspar the numbers of Christian men able to carry the weapons in India was allegedly 212 thousand, including 74 thousand soldiers and cavalymen and over 2100 war elephants. These rather unrealistic numbers were later supposedly spread among the Catholic kings in Europe by King Emmanuel I.

All the available sources clearly point out to initial euphoria of the local Christians on meeting the European brothers in faith, who had been unknown to them before. P. A. Cabral befriended a Malabar priest named Yausef. Their friendship encouraged Yausef to accompany Cabral on the return trip to Europe. He was said to have visited Lisbon, Rome and Venice, and based on the information and observations he shared with his hosts a book entitled *A journey of Yausef of India* was allegedly published in 1507.⁸ He even met the Pope, the earlier mentioned Alexander VI when in Rome. Asked by the Pope by what right the Nestorian patriarch exercised his jurisdiction over the Church of Malabar, he replied: “The one who was in charge of the Church in Antioch was St. Peter, who appointed his successor before leaving for Rome. The current patriarch is his next successor.”⁹

In 1503, having received a warning that Muslims (in literature referred to as the “Moors”, “Saracens” or “Mohammedans”) commanded by the Raja of Calicut plan to attack the Portuguese and their ally, the Raja of Cochin, the local Christians sent envoys to Vasco da Gama carrying the emblem of their unattained state in hope to find an ally in him. Reportedly the brave Portuguese sailor was given the scepter of a Christian king named or nicknamed Beliarte¹⁰ defeated by Muslims. However da Gama who saw them only as heretics treated this gesture as a sign of allegiance. If we are to believe the account provided by C. Buchanan, the following words were said during this meeting: To the envoy’s statement that Christians have over one hundred churches (sic!) in Malabar, Vasco da Gama replied: “They shall belong to the Pope”! Hearing this, they asked: “Who is the Pope? We have not heard about him! No matter what your Christianity is, we derive from the place where Christ’s followers

⁸ The book was probably written in Latin and for this reason it cannot be found on the list of the first Syriac books printed in Europe in movable typeface. M. Abdalla, O drukarstwie w językach arabskim i syriackim i jego pionierach w XVI wieku. Paper delivered at the 8th Conference of Polish Arabists, Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies, Faculty of Oriental Studies, University of Warsaw, 8–10 May 2009. G. M. Rae, *The Syrian Church in India*, op. cit., p. 94, maintains that P. A. Cabral brought “two Syrian brothers” from India to Portugal.

⁹ This is stressed by Mar Severios Ya’qūb Tūma, *تاريخ الكنيسة السريانية الهندية*, *History of the Syriac Church in India*, Beirut 1951, p. 41, referring to works by two authors: Th. Whitehouse, *Lingerings of Light in a Dark Land: Being Researches into the Past History and Present Conditions of the Syrian Church in Malabar*, London 1873, p. 81–82 and E. M. Philip, *The Indian Church of St Thomas*, Kottayam 1950, p. 136. St. Peter is the first patriarch of both the “Nestorian” and “Jacobite” Churches.

¹⁰ Rev. Hugh Pearson, M.A. (of St John’s College, Oxford), *Rev. Claudius Buchanan. D.D., in some parts abridged and enlarged from dr. Buchanan’s Christian Researches in Asia*, published by the American Tract Society, New York [year of publication unknown], p. 305; G. M. Rae, *The Syrian Church in India*, op. cit., p. 77; S. Subrahmanyam, *The Career and Legend of Vasco da Gama*, op. cit., p. 94, doubts that Malabar Christians had such ambitions. He presumes that this alleged king could have been a bishop, archdeacon or a famous merchant.

were called Christians for the first time.”¹¹ This account confirms the above mentioned words of Yausef on the affiliation of the Church of Malabar to the Antioch see, which is strongly emphasized by Mar Severios Ya‘qūb Tūma.

As a token of gratitude for the liberation of Cochin Portugal received the land on which a castle called the Emmanuel’s Castle was built in the years 1504–1505 and where the first Roman Catholic church of St. Francis was erected. The Portuguese eventually “cast anchor” in India for good only after Vasco da Gama’s third expedition in 1524. This time he was sent there by King John III, Emmanuel’s I successor. Vasco da Gama replaced the former viceroy of Portugal in India and considerably strengthened his country’s influences in the region. However, he died in this very year and was buried in the abovementioned church. His remains were moved to Portugal only fifteen years later.

Before the Portuguese came to India the Church of Malabar had still had contacts with the Mesopotamian homeland. Information referring to this fact can be found in the below document in the Syriac language.¹² Its content reflects the joy of the local Syriac Christians on the arrival of the Portuguese. However, later the relations with the visitors deteriorated, which gave rise to a great deal of bad emotions, mainly, as mentioned before, due to the preplanned policy of proselytism and hegemony pursued by Rome and its European allies in the 16th century (but also earlier). In fact this policy was followed not only in India but also in the Middle East and almost in every region inhabited by a non-Roman Christian population. In this century Uniate Churches became to crop up. They were given various names referring more or less to their mother Churches. To realize the scale of this activity one should remember that European missionaries

¹¹ C. Buchanan, *Christian Researches in Asia: with Notices of the Translation of the Scriptures into the Oriental Languages*, 5th ed., London: Printed by G. Sidney for T. Cadell and W. Davies, in the Strand 1812, pp. 106–108; A. S. Atiya, *A History of Eastern Christianity*, PAX, Warsaw 1978, p. 313; Mar Severios Ya‘qūb Tūma, *History of the Syriac Church in India*, op. cit., p. 44. The authors quoted maintain it was Vasco da Gama who was said to have seen so many churches, which seems fairly unlikely as at that time the Portuguese did not feel safe enough in India to travel freely in the country.

¹² J. S. Assemanus (Assemani السمعاني), *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, Clementino-Vaticana, vol. 3, part I, Georg Olmus Verlag, Hildesheim-New York 1975, pp. 590–599. Without an access to the original it is difficult to guess in which of the three Syriac systems of writing the letter was written. This is probably why in all volumes of the *Bibliotheca Assemani* uses the Western font *serto*, used also by the Maronites since as a Maronite he was best acquainted with this font. Referring to an English version of the work by cardinal Eugène Tisserant, *Eastern Christianity in India*, London 1957, pp. 24–25, A. S. Atiya, *A History of Eastern Christianity*, op. cit., p. 312, notes that this unique document is deposited in the archives of Vatican (MS. Vat. Syr. 204) and that it was supposedly brought to Rome by A. Scander, a missionary working in the East in the years 1718–1721. From the information provided by A. S. Atiya it transpires that the letter had been perhaps written in the eastern font, which was erroneously called “Chaldean” by E. Tisserant. The Uniate community torn away from the Church of the East, called by the Vatican “the Chaldeans”, was formed only dozens of years later.

and those who use it today are not in the least right, while the other one being completely untrue – this issue deserves a separate publication.

Shorter or longer fragments of the above letter can be found in many works; some of them are quoted in the relevant footnotes. As mentioned before, the whole text of the letter was quoted by Assemani, a Maronite, i.e., a Uniate author, in his historic work *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, thought to be probably the earliest or one of the earliest in Europe complementary works devoted to Syriac literature. And it is perhaps only owing to this fact that the letter has not shared the fate of other documents of the Indian Church thrown into fire on orders of Alexis de Menezes, Jesuit Archbishop of Goa, after the Synod of Diamper (1599), because it was sent to Mesopotamia, where it was then stored in the Church archives only later to be transferred to Europe during a big scale operation of buying out, or simply stealing, of manuscripts. It is also possible that the letter (or its copy) could be one of few texts that did not fall into the hands of Alexis de Menezes in India, since, like the other few books, it was a part of one of the Indian hierarchs' private collection of books. To make the picture complete it is worth mentioning that acquiring of Syriac books, and at any cost too, was practiced not only by the Roman Catholic missionaries or the won-over Uniates, as Assemani (1687–1768) himself, who were sent to the Middle East for this very purpose for instance from the Maronite College opened in Rome in 1584, but also by the Anglicans. Such trade was observed in every place which the missionaries were able to reach.⁴⁶ This explains why so many more Syriac manuscripts can be found in the Vatican library and in different book collections in other European countries with the colonial past (though not only) and in the USA, than in India or in the Middle East.

The structure of letter includes two parts. In the first part the following facts are worth noting:

⁴⁶ Hunting for “heretic” books in monasteries in Lebanon and their destruction by burning by Jesuit Giovanni Battista Eliano in the years 1578–1580 is described for instance by authors such as I. Armala, *History of the Syriac Church*, op. cit., p. 204; M. Moosa, *The Maronites in History*, Gorgias Press, 2005 (2nd ed.), pp. 245–252; Ph. Terrazi, *أصدق ما كان عن تاريخ لبنان وصفحة من أخبار السريان*, *The Most true history of Lebanon and a page from the book of knowledge about the Assyrians*, vol. I, Beirut 1948, pp. 94–100, 146–148. Burning of books with time replaced with less drastic methods such as deletion or amending of the text to make it conforming with the doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church was in fact an implementation of the decrees adopted at the Council of Trent (1545–1563), which according to the decisions taken there were planned to be used not only in the Roman Catholic church but also beyond it, all over the world. These and other “regulations” introduced at the times of Popes Pius IV and Paul IV remained valid for over 300 years. See H. Tüchle, C. A. Bouman, *Historia Kościoła*, op. cit., p. 130. A list of seventeen manuscripts stored in Vatican, with visible marks of deletion and amendment with titles and information on their contents, A. Mingana, *The Early Spread of Christianity in India*, op. cit., pp. 89–92. Also it needs to be reminded that, e.g., in south-east Turkey and in north Iraq, European missionaries often bribed the local Kurds to obtain for them manuscripts from the Assyrian monasteries by force.

– The visitors from India were indigenous Indians, but they bore typical Syriac names that are popular in the Middle East and without any doubt represented the multitude of the local believers. This is evident from the way they were farewelled on departure and greeted on return, which was the same as the ceremonies practiced in Mesopotamia. Thus, it can be said, that also in terms of the names chosen and religious folklore the Christian Indians to a certain degree adopted and cultivated the Middle East patterns.

– The recognition of the primacy of the patriarch of the Church of Mesopotamia. He consecrated successive bishops and sent them to India, regardless of whether they were native Indians or Assyrians. The hierarchy of the Church in India included both the former and the latter all the time. Hardships and dangers associated with months-long journey did not prevent them from keeping in contact. This was all the more troublesome and even discouraging, as the residence of the patriarch in Mesopotamia was not stationary but was often moved from one place to another depending on a political situation at a given time, but was always the centre. The patriarch's apostolic letters to the followers in India as well as the letters he received from the country, and the mutual exchange of gifts by the parties reflect the fact of the recognition of his jurisdiction and great respect that his office enjoyed among the believers.

– The fact that the Authors of the letter just refer to themselves as Christians, putting no emphasis on the name of the Church they are presenting indicates that at that time there were no divisions in the Christian community of India. A succession of schisms took place after the Portuguese and later the Dutch and English influences had strengthened. The new Latin rite, Uniate, Protestant, Anglican and other Churches started to emerge. The history of the Church in India may actually be split into two periods: before and after the Synod of Diamper.

In the other part of the letter the following elements are evident:

– The hierarchs in India are proud of their patriarch. Aware of the history and contribution of their Church they compare the present patriarch to his most eminent predecessors. They are also convinced that he is St. Peter's deputy and the fact that they refer to him as to "the Pope of our days" may suggest, that they already had some contacts with the Portuguese from whom they could have heard that the only true shepherd resides elsewhere, in the West, with which they surely disagreed. Also in this part of the letter the authors refer to Christianity in general and not to the particular Church they belong to. It is evident that at that time they had no sense whatsoever of the lurking proselytism which they had not known before, and of the imminent break up of their Church.

– Valuable mentions on the size of the Christian community, its good condition and on the erection of new churches and information that the "monastery" of St. Thomas is under reconstruction – these data give grounds for a conclusion that the Church in India was growing. The concise information to the effect

that both the old and new churches are taken care of by Christians, does not necessarily mean that these Christians were Portuguese, although we know that the first individual Roman Catholic missionaries arrived to visit St. Thomas' grave as early as at the end of the 13th century.

– Geographical data on the Indian territory and on Indian state, especially on Malabar region and its most important cities and information on distances or the length of the Indian borders, measured in days or months (of travel by foot) was probably provided to the authors on their arrival. This is also true of the route and duration of the Portuguese fleet's voyage. Although the arrival of the Portuguese must have been an important event, there is no mention of Africa, and no information on the order of the sea voyages in the letter. Neither the name of Vasco da Gama nor of P. A. Cabral appears in it. The description is fairly general; for instance, the number of six ships taking part in the first voyage is incorrect as the first expedition involved four ships, the second – thirteen and the third one – twenty ships. The information about the killing of the seventy Portuguese sailors and five priests in Calicut indicates, that the authors refer to the second expedition (the first crew commanded by Vasco da Gama was 160–170 strong, and the crew commanded by P. A. Cabral – counted over one thousand people). If we are to believe the authors of the letter the attack was inspired by Muslims from Calicut, who managed to convince the Raja, referred to as “pagan”, that the Portuguese may turn out to be occupants. Upset with the death of their companions the Portuguese looked for shelter at Syriac Christians' quarters in Cochin. And in spite of being “pagan” too the local Raja offered them protection, for which he had to pay a price, as he was forced to escape from the city along with the Portuguese. Thus can we presume that Christians of Cochin were a significant community and that the lives of the visitors from Europe were saved owing to their intervention? The letter does not mention whether the local Christians were also attacked by the Raja of Calicut.

– The use of force by the Portuguese, who arrived by sea to the relief of their compatriots and defeated the Raja of Calicut. Their good relations with the Raja of Cochin resulted in building of a castle in the city. The fortress was equipped with military equipment such as bombards, ballistae, catapults, and iron bows, brought from Portugal, and was manned with experienced soldiers. The Portuguese fleet must have been powerful; probably this refers to the second expedition of Vasco da Gama. However the Raja of Calicut did not accept the defeat he had suffered and launched another unsuccessful attack on the Portuguese, which cost him thousands of dead troops and destruction of his fleet including the death of the Muslim crew. Another important aspect should be noted: already at this stage of the Portuguese presence a local political conflict and military confrontation between the rajas of Calicut and Cochin took place.

– This victory must have inspired fear in the region and surely did help the Portuguese in starting commercial relations with other cities on the Malabar coast, for instance, they bought large quantities of pepper in Kannanur and although the raja of this city also was “pagan” he offered them a location and a large building where they established a trading post. Perhaps he did this because he felt he had no choice or he believed in the assurances of the Portuguese that they were interested only in trading.

– The visit of the authors of the letter at the Portuguese post in the city of Kannanur. The meeting must have been pleasant for both sides if the members of the delegation were hosted there for over two months. They participated in daily liturgies celebrated by Portuguese priests and only once they were asked to celebrate liturgy according to the Syriac rite. This happened on the eight Sunday after Pentecost, that is at the turn of July and August 1503 or 1504. Referring to this Sunday as Nausardil, or Nusardil, proves Syriac influences on the liturgical calendar of the Church.

– The return of the delegation to their Syriac Christian community. In the letter we only find information that the return journey lasted eight days. No destination name is given, however it cannot be excluded that it was Cochin, where – as mentioned before – relatively many Portuguese stayed. The fact that the delegation successfully reached the destination indicates that they had a safe journey. Presumably, despite being the followers of the same religion as the Portuguese the local Christians did not become an object of revenge by the Malabar Muslims gripped by a great fear of the powerful Europeans.

– The closing of the letter with a plea to the heavenly Emmanuel to protect the earthly Emmanuel, the king of the Portuguese.

Summing up

The information presented in the above quoted letter in numerous aspects confirms information given in many other sources on the Church in India, though discrepancies are evident in many other aspects. The conformities include depiction of Portuguese’s vigorous efforts to enter spice trade with India as well as the fact that they had met with rather cool reception from Malabar rajahs. The reason for such attitude could be the fact that not all the local rajahs believed in peaceful intentions of the visitors arriving from distant lands on a well armed fleet of ships, which eventually resulted in serious clashes between them, although a religious factor of the animosities cannot be altogether excluded. The main contentious matters, on the other hand, setting aside immaterial details, included undoubtedly the absence in the available version of this letter of the Fathers of the Syriac Church in India of any mention whatsoever on the subjects of the talks they held with the Portuguese. This is totally incomprehensible, especially in the

light of the fact that they were their guests for over two months. What I mean, are quoted above, let us call them, “threats” voiced by the Portuguese that the Syrian churches in India shall belong to the Pope. A question may be asked at this point: Was this fragment, if it indeed was a part of the letter, intentionally omitted by Assemani in his book? Assemani was a follower of the Church of Lebanon annexed by Rome and was active in the Maronite College established in Rome, to which talented Lebanese Uniates were brought, especially those devoted to papacy. All the sources that mention the contemplated letter refer to its version published by Assemani. Thus it may be presumed that Assemani could have been the first to get hold of the document, for instance through one of the hierarchs from a group separated from the ancient Church of Mesopotamia, named Chaldeans by the Pope.⁴⁷ The document could have been kept in the earlier mentioned Rabban Hormizd monastery, which after the schism in the Church of Mesopotamia in the mid 16th century became the possession of the Chaldean group. The patriarch, who was the addressee of the letter, resided in it. Rabban Hormizd was also a home monastery of monk Sulaqa ordained on the 20th of February 1553 in Rome by Pope Julius III the first patriarch of the Uniate (Chaldean) Church in Mesopotamia.

There is nothing to indicate in the letter that the successors of its authors will become so much disillusioned after a time shorter than one century from the events they describe; their authentic joy on the arrival of their brothers from distant Europe eventually turned into a struggle to survive and to preserve their identity. As mentioned before, the intention of the Portuguese visitors was to cut the Malabar Christians away from their roots and to achieve this they took great efforts to block the flow of clergymen from Mesopotamia to India. Those who managed to come were treated in an extremely harsh manner. The Portuguese even went as far as to put obstacles to the entry of other Catholic, non-Portuguese clergymen to the area under their control. Therefore it is understandable that implementing the plan of complete Latinization of the local Christians, they had a rather unfriendly attitude towards the hierarchs from Mesopotamia, who had become the Uniates only recently. Bishop Yausef, a brother of the earlier mentioned patriarch Sulaqa, when deported from India even went to Rome to

⁴⁷ This hypothesis can be corroborated for instance by the fact that the writing in which the letter had been written was referred to as Chaldean and not Syriac, as noted instance by a Uniate Syriac bishop, A. A. Abūna in his work *History of the Syriac Church of the East*, op. cit., vol. 3, p. 100. I. Armala, *History of the Syriac Church*, op. cit., p. 369, who wrote: “Pope Eugene IV (1431–1447) in his bulla of 7 July 1445 announced that the Assyrians who have joined the Roman Church in Cyprus should be called Chaldeans. The name, however, became common only 150 years later, during the time in office of the Chaldean patriarch Joseph I (1681–1707). Up to that time they were referred to by a two component word: ChaldoAssyrians. To be exact one should add that those of them who live in villages near Mosul still call themselves the Assyrians.”

complain to the Pope about it.⁴⁸ A true manifestation of the real lack of respect and understanding for the history and tradition of the local Christians was observed at the Synod of Diamper (1599), in the non-Catholic literature referred to as the “synod of thieves,”⁴⁹ and the Catholic sources described as follows: “Christians of St. Thomas entered into a union with Rome. Their unique rite was looked at askance. Attempts to subjugate them to the Latin rite lead to partial breakup of the union.”⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Syriac bishop Atalla had even less luck. He was sent to India by Coptic patriarch of Alexandria probably in order to outwit the Portuguese. “In 1652 he arrived to Surat, from where he headed for Majlappur. The news about his arrival electrified the local community, but the Jesuits arrested him quickly. He was sent back to Goa, and brought before the Holy Inquisition tribunal and burnt at the stake in 1654 as a heretic.” A. S. Atiya, *A History of Eastern Christianity*, op. cit., p. 314.

⁴⁹ To find out about these deserving severe condemnation endeavors of Alexis de Menezes in the period preceding the synod and about the participants and the canons of the synod see for instance Mar Severios Ya’qūb Tūma, *History of the Syriac Church in India*, op. cit., pp. 52–62. The quoted author, a later patriarch of the Syrian orthodox Church of Antioch (Ignatius Jacob III, 1957–1980) refers to the period before the Synod of Diamper as the first wave of persecution, and the period after this synod, as the second wave of persecution.

⁵⁰ H. Tüchle, C. A. Bouman, *Historia Kościoła*, vol. 3., op. cit., p. 200. The 16th century history of the Roman Church, described in this five-volume work, translated into the Polish language without commentary, leaves no doubt that Rome actually did not regard Christians of other than Roman Catholic rites as Christians.