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## Saint Thomas in the East

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## Abstract

The missionary journeys of Thomas—a disciple of Jesus Christ—were ones of surprising and confronting encounters. Thomas was an early Christian who knew that life could change—which can move a person on to more superhuman endeavours and accomplishments. According to historical tradition, Thomas travelled to the Parthian Empire and India. In this article, the evidence for these historical traditions is presented together for the first time. By bringing together an array of ancient sources, including literary, archaeological, numismatic and epigraphic evidence, this article demonstrates that Thomas's journeys to the East contained elements of religious experience, continuity, and change, set in their historical contexts. Thus, in this article the missionary exploits of Thomas are explored, as are factors of the worlds and contexts he lived and moved in, which highlight the importance of Thomas and his exploits in his own times.

This article presents, in one place, the historical contexts for the missionary journeys of Thomas—a disciple of Jesus Christ—to the Parthian Empire, and India. Explored are his sojourns in the East following Jesus Christ's ascension. Especially examined are Thomas's routes on his two major missionary expeditions to the Parthian Empire and India, his behaviours in those places, and the types of people and conditions he encountered while in those lands. It is demonstrated that while Thomas evangelised among many locals tied to the land through employment and habitation, he also encountered many other travellers in the form of traders—among their numbers the likes of Parthians, Indians, Chinese, Arabs, and Africans. Thus, explored is the world that Thomas often existed in and the types of people who called it home. This article takes an expansive view, is set on a grand scale, and sets the person of Thomas himself within that grand scale. He is approached from the outside inwards, in the quest to understand Thomas as an individual; and he is also approached from the inside outwards, in an effort to understand the environment in, and through, which he lived and moved. This article constitutes the first in-depth study into Thomas's two major missionary sojourns in the East—those of the Parthian Empire and India. Historical method is utilised throughout this article, and it seriously considers the ancient evidence, with respect to modern interpretations of Thomas and his world, in order to understand Thomas, and other ancient figures, in a more thoroughgoing manner. As a historical document, this article refers to ancient literary, archaeological, numismatic, and epigraphic evidence. It considers the ancient Augustan Roman poets' contributions to understandings of the East that Thomas might have encountered. Furthermore, it considers the understanding of nature, and the human world, in the pages of Roman geographers and natural historians. However, the main literary sources for Thomas's movements in the Parthian Empire and India are Eusebius of Caesarea and the *Acts of Thomas*—an early Gnostic Christian work that many historical thinkers, including Pope Benedict XVI, recognise as a truly historical document. This important article presents a fresh approach to Thomas through these means in a unique way in order to highlight the fact that Thomas was more decisive following Jesus's ascension, and on a more consistent basis, than is sometimes recognised. His was a life of determination and devotion to God, and this article is a celebration of Thomas the man, and Thomas the missionary, in a world inhabited by many people—a number of whom were not entirely unlike himself, at times.

### *THOMAS IN THE PARTHIAN EMPIRE*

The world of the East was, at times, quite different to Rome's own, in the West. The Parthian Empire—which was contemporaneous of the Roman Empire—stretched from the Euphrates River in the west to the kingdom of Gondophares I, who reigned from c.AD19 to 46, in the east. His realm's western frontier was located just to the west of the Kabul Valley, and stretched east to just beyond Taxila, in northwest India. Under the Julio-Claudians, and into the Flavian era and beyond, trade flourished between the Roman Empire and the Parthian Empire, as well as Gondophares I's realm and others to the east, throughout India and beyond (Isaac, 1990, p.140).

Syria was a wealthy province, usually recognized as second only to Egypt in terms of wealth, as a province. It existed at the eastern extremity of the Roman Empire. Its huge standing army of Roman legions there was fed and supplied with all the provisions it could need or want. As a result, the Syrian economy was highly engaged by the ongoing trade of ideas and products with lands in the East. Especially engaged was the trade which

stretched eastwards from Antioch, Tyre and Sidon, and other Syrian cities, overland to the Euphrates leg of what modern historians call the “Silk Route”. This trade artery—or rather, series of trade arteries—stretched from Syria to India, Tibet and China, via the Parthian Empire (Isidore of Charax, *Parthian Stations*, 1-19). According to the first century AD Parthian geographer Isidore of Charax, trade from Antioch and other Syrian cities extended to Zeugma—a Roman city on the Euphrates—and from there to nearby Apamia and Anthemusia, down the Euphrates towards the Persian Gulf, and from thence to India and the lands of the Far East (Isidore of Charax, *Parthian Stations*, 1).

The fourth century AD Church historian Eusebius of Caesarea states that Thomas was active in, and around, the Syrian city of Edessa soon after the life of Jesus Christ, appointing his Christian associate Thaddaeus as a preacher and evangelist there. Edessa was located in close vicinity to these western “Silk Route” cities—Zeugma, Apamia and Anthemusia. This evidence reveals that Thomas, upon his first mission to the East, may have extended down the Euphrates leg of the “Silk Route”, heading into the Parthian Empire from Edessa and these cities, and into Parthian territory—a sojourn which may have lasted for a number of years (Eus. *EH*. 1. 13; 2. 1). Eusebius states that after the life of Jesus Christ, the Christian apostles and disciples held a council which chose Thomas for the evangelization of the Parthian Empire. This decision refers specifically to Parthia, as though its empire held importance to him (Eus. *EH*. 3. 1). Interestingly, the earliest Christian centers in Asia east of Judea were located at Edessa, as well as the Parthian kingdom of Adiabene—which was located just east of the Tigris River—and India. Intriguingly, these heralded back to the lifetime of Thomas, and each of these locations were associated with Thomas. Thus, one may conclude that Thomas penetrated as far from the environs of Edessa, on his first mission into Parthian territories, as Adiabene. He may have remained active there for a number of years (Philip, 1998, pp. 9-14; Moffett, 1998, pp. xiv-xv; Bauckham, 2000, p. 175). Indeed, the foundation of Christianity that Thomas laid down between Edessa and Adiabene, via the Euphrates, resonated throughout the ages, resulting in Mari’s successes in the evangelization of Ctesiphon from Nisibis in the following generation, and the presence and sway of the Syriac Fathers Ephrem and Aphrahat of Nisibis later on (Bauckham, 2000, pp. 180-181).

The “Silk Route” that Thomas travelled down, and evangelized upon, and perhaps beyond, on his way to and from Adiabene—and perhaps further afield—was a rich trade artery, with much human traffic to encounter. Many of the people Thomas encountered in Adiabene were land-borne—in other words, tied to the land—throughout their home towns and home cities. Indeed, Thomas himself stayed in various environs, becoming land-borne himself—tied to each location, at least for a time. Thus, he was not entirely unlike those he evangelized among. However, Thomas also encountered numerous travelers there, and in that respect these were people much like himself, too. He evangelized among them, too. Among these were numerous Parthians who traded numerous products along the “Silk Route”, together with Arab, Chinese, Tibetan, Bactrian, and Indian traders, operating in those parts (Turner, 1989, esp. p. 139; Tomber, 2008, esp. pp. 117-125).

The first century AD natural historian Pliny the Elder states that many of the items such traders traded along the “Silk Route”, and its environs, included steel works of art and armaments, leather works, rhubarb, and other foodstuffs like pistachio nuts and peaches, as well as various cooking styles (For rhubarb and the peach, see Pl. *NH*. 37. 128; 15; 44. On steel and leather, see Pl. *NH*. 34. 145. See also Kurz, 1983, pp. 559-567). Poets from

Augustan Rome in the late first century BC and early first century AD would inform one concerning a number of the types of products made available to the Roman Empire from the Parthian Empire, itself. In this respect, these Augustan poets exhibited a conceptualization of the world as a whole, as did Thomas, over and above a sense of local polity, set though it was amidst its relationship to the surrounding world. Most certainly, Thomas spent more time travelling on a global level than these poets. Still, they shared a worldview that at times incorporated the entire world as they knew it, and not just the Roman Empire (On the concept of the world as a whole in Roman literature, see Mittag, Mutschler, 2010, pp. 527-555). Thomas may have expected to see these products throughout Parthia's environs, and no doubt did. The area was well known for its wealth among the Augustan poets, and power, and its loyalty to its Parthian kings that could make outlying realms yield to the Parthian Empire's rule (Prop. 3. 11. 21-26; Hor. *Od.* 1. 29. 4-5; Virg. *Geor.* 4. 209-211; *Aen.* 8. 685-689). The Augustan poet Propertius states that its Caucasus mountain range produced much fine wood for various construction purposes (Prop. 1. 14. 6). The poets Horace and Virgil also state that among other plantations, balsam and nard were produced. Indeed, so suitable were geological and climatic conditions for the cultivation of such products throughout some parts of the Parthian Empire that the plants they originated from grew wild in places (Hor. *Od.* 2. 11. 17; 3. 1. 44; Virg. *Ecl.* 4. 25). Propertius states that among other products, Parthian cities produced much fine myrrhine goblets, and other dining wares, in kilns (Prop. 4. 5. 26). Horace also adds that torque-like neckbands were also produced, reflecting the advanced metallurgy of the people at that time, throughout the Parthian Empire (Hor. *Od.* 3. 6. 12).

### *ROME IN THE EAST*

Thomas clearly travelled from Syria into the Parthian Empire on this first major missionary journey. The province was famous for its army and wealth. The Syrian governor and his advisers, retainers, and cohorts of other employees were responsible for feeding the army stationed throughout Syria. A twenty-five percent levy and tax were placed upon products from the East, reflective of the benefits this trade accrued in Syria, and from Syria for other provinces throughout the empire (Jones, 1974, pp. 127-129; Garnsey, Saller, 1987, pp. 55-56, 62). This was a handsome profit, considering the Parthians often acted as middle-men between the Parthian Empire and the Roman Empire, allowing them to settle on large prices in the West on foodstuffs and other products usually worth much less in their homelands, and those further to the east (Wheeler, 1955, especially p. 154; College, 1967, p. 80; Keall, 1975, pp. 620-632, especially 620-624; Tao, 2007, pp. 87-104, especially 100-101; Tomber, 2008, p. 114).

Especially notable regarding trade between the Roman Empire and the Parthian Empire was the buying and selling of silks from the East. Silks from China arrived in Syria and Egypt from the Parthian Empire from overland and Persian Gulf trade, often by Parthian traders, and other Parthian middlemen. These arrived at the Euphrates by land and sea. In exchange, Parthian and Indian traders traded Roman goods, reworked to suit Indian and Parthian tastes, throughout markets around the Persian Gulf, and beyond (Schoff, 1912, p.151; Casson, 1989, pp. 28-29; Tomber, 2008, p. 115).

However, there have been very few Roman finds around the Persian Gulf from this period, reflecting the ongoing feud between Rome and Parthia—and revealing that there were relatively few Romans in the area at this time (Bharucha-Irani 2002: 69-72).

Augustan poets wax lyrical concerning the silky threads that seemingly miraculously appeared in Roman markets from far-off leaves in China, via places like the Persian Gulf. Propertius, Virgil and Ovid also mention items of silk reaching Roman markets from Arabia, which may have arrived in Arabia from China before reaching Roman markets from the Persian Gulf, and its environs (Prop. 2. 3. 15; Virg. *Geor.* 2. 121; Ov. *Am.* 1. 14. 5-8).

According to Pliny the Elder, up to 100 million sesterces were invested by Rome in trade with the East every year. Up to half of this sum found its way to India, by land and sea. Given that many Romans knew silk came from China, a substantial percentage of the rest found its way to China, in order to purchase silk, often in its raw state. Often, these purchasers were Parthian middlemen, and other Asian traders, but one may find that given many Romans knew the source of such silk was China, Romans had sojourned to China (Pl. *NH.* 2. 84). This silk was often exported from China in a raw state to Roman markets, whereupon it was transported to weaving plants on public and private estates in Syria, Phoenicia and Egypt. There, they would be turned into fashionable garments and clothes, and other hangings both for houses and other dwellings, and furniture (Sartre 2005: 242). According to the Roman historian Tacitus and the Roman biographer Suetonius, throughout Rome the wearing of silk clothing was often reserved for women, although Gaius (Caligula) and some other Roman men wore silk, at times (Tac. *Ann.* 2. 31; Suet. *Cal.* 52).

In the ancient city of Palmyra in Syria, archaeologists have discovered ancient specimens of silken fabric still with the trade-hall of the Hunan province in China still on them. Cashmere has also been found in Palmyra, originating from the area within and surrounding what is now Afghanistan, in the kingdom of Gondophares I (Sartre 2005: 243). Propertius and Ovid state that other treasures from the East that the Parthians traded with the Roman Empire included other types of linen, pearls, and other fine gems, not to mention spices, exotic parrots and other pets and livestock. These trade features Thomas encountered, both in their final markets in the Roman Empire, and in their more initial sources of supply, throughout the Parthian Empire and India (Prop. 1. 15. 7; 2. 22a. 7-10; 4. 3. 63-64; Ov. *Am.* 2. 6. 1-2; Parker, 2002, pp. 40-95).

As Thomas progressed east, including as he transitioned from his first mission to the Parthian Empire and his second mission to India, he encountered Roman goods like wine and oil—but also Roman gold, silver, and bronze, including some in the form of money. Hoards of gold and silver and bronze Roman coins have been found along the coast of the Indian Ocean as far as east India, especially at the Coimbatore and Karur ports. Amphora (ceramic jars) fragments from the Roman Empire from as far west as Catalan in Spain have been found all along India's shores, especially by its ports, as well. Most of these ports once carried wine, but some also carried oil, from the Roman Empire. Therefore, one may conclude that Rome traded these products for other products from the East, which included the aforementioned silks and cashmere, as well as many others including those mentioned above (Turner, 1989, especially p. 139; Tomber, 2008, especially pp. 117-125; Redhakrishnan, 2009).

Such enterprises were expensive. According to the Muziris Papyrus, a single business loan for overseas trade ventures could cost up to 7 million sesterces (Casson, 1980, p. 35; Temin, 2004, p. 720). The settings of such trade ventures could be vast. Bengal's international trade in ancient times peaked during the first century AD trade that incorporated Gondophares I's Taxila, as well as Sri Lanka, and Arikamedu—and other

sites of the Chola Empire of southeast India, where Roman coinage and Italian and eastern Mediterranean ceramics have been found from the late-first century BC to the mid-first century AD. This indicates that Roman traders were present in the region when Thomas made his sojourn by ship to southern India, as were Indian, Parthian, and Arab traders. Thomas may have even evangelized among their kinds. Thomas encountered numbers of these people from their respective nations of origin, throughout the Parthian Empire and India, on his two major missionary journeys there (Jahan, 2002, p. 135; Tomber, 2008, pp. 130-133, 145).

In the western environs of the Indian Ocean, Roman coins from this period have been found as far down south the east African seaboard as Tanzania/Zanzibar, Kenya, Uganda, Zimbabwe, and even as far as South Africa. This indicates that since Rome invested so heavily in trade with the East, so too did it invest in trade with eastern Africa, with Roman traders, alongside Indian, Parthian, and Arab traders trading Roman coins in those parts after receiving them via trade with Romans. In addition, Africans from these parts took an active role in trade with these peoples, being present in Indian, Parthian, and Arabian ports, as well—Africans which Thomas came across on his missionary travels throughout the Parthian Empire, and India (Horton 1996: 446-448; Tomber 2008: 98). Indeed, just as it appears that there were sea trade routes between the Red Sea and eastern Africa, so too were there active maritime trade routes between Africa and the Parthian Empire during this period, which were used by Arabs, Parthians, and Indians, as well as Africans, bringing goods into Parthian markets that Thomas visited while passing through the Parthian Empire—some of which that were destined not only for Roman markets immediately to the west, but also for Parthian markets throughout the Parthian Empire, and Indian markets immediately to the east, too (Tomber 2008: 99).

Separate Parthian satraps and their separate industries traded with different roles to play, including in their use of the Persian Gulf, and different trade routes throughout the Indian Ocean. Some satraps especially used maritime trade routes to trade Parthian ceramics with Indian port markets. Other satraps traded these products in other markets, including throughout the Parthian Empire, in which Thomas purchased goods and services (Tomber, 2007, pp. 974, 977-981; Tomber, 2008, pp. 152-170; Gregoratti, 2019, pp. 54, 59-60).

It is accepted by modern historians that Indians traded with the Far East along maritime trade arteries, throughout the Indonesian archipelago, and onwards north to China. Indeed, many of the trade markets in these areas they shared with Chinese traders, as well as throughout the Indian Ocean, alongside Parthians, Arabs, and Romans—nationalities of traders that Thomas encountered (Rostovtzeff, 1936, pp. 248-249; Rostovtzeff, 1963, pp. 576-577; Yü, 1967, pp. 173-178; Finley, 1985, pp. 177-178; Fitzpatrick, 2011, pp. 27, 45). In fact, ancient Chinese literary sources reveal that Chinese traders were present as far east as Japan, and as far west as the Indus Valley, and the Persian Gulf, using ports with Indians along the way. Some of these Thomas encountered, though probably few to the west of the Persian Gulf, if any (Yü, 1967, p. 175; Millar, 1998, pp. 507-531; Fitzpatrick, 2011, pp. 43-45).

Southeast Asian contact with northern Australia extends back millennia. Given it is traceable as far back in history as the appearance of the Dingo in Australia from c.4,500BC, and onwards to the introduction of widespread foundations of settlements in and around the Torres Strait from 500BC onwards, with shared shell mounds along Australia's northern coasts and the introduction of the shell fishing hook to northern

Australia from Southeast Asians around AD800, it is clear that a number of traders who used Southeast Asian ports with Indian and Chinese maritime traders also traded along northern Australian coasts. Indeed, Indian and Chinese traders may have been counted among their number. In the Parthian and Indian ports Thomas encountered, there were traders adept at trading as far east, and south, as those parts described above. Indeed, Thomas himself may have encountered a number of these traders in the East, especially while sojourning throughout the Parthian Empire and India, evangelizing among them as he went. For, although Thomas was originally from the Roman Empire, as he travelled east, his immediate environment and general focus was further to the east, where Indian traders, and traders from other realms, embarked for such parts (Hiscock, 2008, p. 148; Attenbrow, 2010, pp. 16-34; Veth, O'Connor, 2013, pp. 35, 39).

### *THE ACTS OF THOMAS*

Besides Thomas's first missionary journey to the Parthian Empire, it appears that Thomas also journeyed to the Indo-Parthian kingdom of Gondophares I, and other parts of India, on a second, and larger, missionary tour. Technically, India included Gondophares I's realm. At the time, India extended from Afghanistan and Pakistan in the west, to Bangladesh and Myanmar to the east, and Bhutan and Nepal in the north to Sri Lanka to the south. India was known by the Augustan poets as a beautiful, highly populated land, and was regarded as a land of the dawn, and rising sun, at the edges of the world, together with other lands of the Far East. It is unknown how many Romans travelled as far east as India and China, but given that a number of Romans knew about those lands—as evidenced by the works of the Augustan poets themselves—this indicates that a number of Romans believed not only that these lands existed, but also that there were other populated lands around them, otherwise unattested in Roman literature, and even beyond, like Japan, and even the Indonesian archipelago and Australia (Prop. 2. 10. 15-18; Hor. *Od.* 1. 12.53-56; Virg. *Geor.* 2. 114-121; 2. 137-138; 3. 26; *Aen.* 7. 605-608; 8. 685-689; *Ov. Met.* 1. 776-779).

Gondophares I's kingdom stretched from just west of the Kabul Valley in Afghanistan to the Punjab in Pakistan, and east to the ancient Indian and Greek capital Taxila, in the Indus River tributary region in present-day India. Taxila appears to have been Gondophares I's main capital. It was a university city, attracting Hindu, Jain, Buddhist, Zoroastrian and Greek teachers, students and followers, and no doubt various Jewish thinkers. In fact, Taxila was a major trading hub of western India. This metropolitan city was strategically located, importing and exporting to and from Bactria, central Asia, the Indus Valley, and various locales further abroad, around the Indian Ocean. Finds there include Roman metals, glass, gems, ceramics, and coinage. Taxila received Roman goods and traded these and many other products with central Asia, and the Far East (Chakrabarti, 2004, p. 285; Tomber, 2008, pp. 122-123). Archaeological excavations carried out there have shown that Taxila's only palace was extremely modest (James, 2011, p. 137). However, it is believed that at times under Gondophares I, this kingdom may have been more powerful and influential than much of the eastern extremities of the Parthian Empire itself (Moffett, 1998, p. 30).

Our main historical source for the Indian mission of Thomas is an early Gnostic Christian work, the *Acts of Thomas*. This work appears to have been written by an early Gnostic Christian with historical intent, sometime in the early third century AD (Klijn,



2003, p. 4). According to modern historian Neill, it stands as a genuine attempt to describe Thomas's evangelical mission to India, and it cannot be proven as otherwise (Neill, 1984, p. 26). Modern historian Nedungatt, and others, also maintain the "irreplaceable" validity of the work, pointing out it was not written in the style of many historical works today, but in the style of the biblical book of Acts, painstakingly, over a period of time by various hands, using different written and oral historical sources and traditions from Parthia and India, somewhere in or beyond the ancient northern Mesopotamian kingdom of Edessa, in a Syriac script (Myers, 2006, pp. 95-112; Tubach, 2006, pp. 49-116, esp. 112-113; Nedungatt, 2011, pp. 535, 539, 541, 545, 555). The Syriac *Doctrine of the Twelve Apostles* mentions a letter written by Thomas which refers to the biblical book of Acts. The *Doctrine of the Twelve Apostles* is believed by scholars to have been written around the time of the *Acts of Thomas*. Thus, McGrath argues that this letter, and perhaps others like it by Thomas and other contemporaneous Christian authors, were instrumental in the production of the *Acts of Thomas* by serving as valuable source material. As a result, McGrath argues, the *Acts of Thomas* constitutes a historically sound work, in itself (McGrath, 2008, pp. 307-309).

The work's information on India appears to be historically accurate. Furthermore, there have been numerous ancient Eastern Syriac words and syllables incorporated into the Malayalam dialects of the Malabar regions of southern India over many centuries. Therefore, it may be argued that there were various early copies of the *Acts of Thomas* in ancient Eastern Syriac dialects that were later to influence the Malayalam language, which were copied and transferred to Edessa and the Roman Empire in the West (Frohnmeier, 2004, p. 284; Turek, 2011, pp. 117; 123-130, see 124 n. 37; Nedungatt, 2011, p. 553).

As Bremmer and Cosgrove argue, the work's immediate audiences were the authors' circles of friends, acquaintances, and other networks, within and without their churches. Reading similarly, but in a historical sense, as an ancient Greek novel, the *Acts of Thomas* may have been read widely among noble Christian Roman women, and men, from the time of its initial circulation, throughout the Roman Empire in the early third century AD (Bremmer, 2001a, pp. 74-90; Bremmer, 2001b, pp. 149-170; Cosgrove, 2015, p. 257).

### THOMAS AND GONDOPHARES I

Frykenberg maintains India was first evangelized by Thomas (Frykenberg, 2008, p. 3). According to the *Acts of Thomas*, Gondophares I had dispatched his servant and scout Abbanes to Judea to recruit a master-carpenter. He recruited Thomas from his employer, who the text regards as ultimately Jesus Christ. For, the *Acts of Thomas* is a literary account meant for both literal and symbolic interpretation (*Acts of Thomas*, 17; Bornkamm, 1933, pp. 18-23; La Fargue, 1985, pp. 58-76; Drijvers, 1992, pp. 326-327). According to the *Acts of Thomas*, Abbanes had become aware that Thomas had already overseen the building of temples and courthouses. When Gondophares I learned from Thomas himself of these matters, he employed him to immediately construct a large-scale palace for himself (*Acts of Thomas*, 17). Thus, as Bornkamm and Pesthy point out, Thomas's sale and purchase helped bring salvation to others he preached to in the East. His carpentry skills were used as a means to serve God, and others, evangelically (Bornkamm, 1933, p. 19; Pesthy, 2001, p. 72).

At first, as Turek points out, early Indian Thomasine church services proceeded similarly to other early Christian services throughout the eastern provinces of the Roman

Empire, using Aramaic and Syriac as their common language, or *lingua franca* (Turek, 2011, pp. 115-116). Turek also maintains that local Christian traditions in India, under Thomas, may have developed due to the distance between India and the major Christian centers of the Roman Empire (Turek, 2011, p. 115). Certainly, Atiya, Baumer, and Turek point out the existence of a local organized Christianity in Malayalam-speaking Kerala, in Malabar. These modern historians argue that this feature existed there as early as the second century AD (Atiya, 1978, p. 311; Baumer, 2008, p. 26; Turek, 2011, p. 115). These claims are based on both written and oral history. Nedungatt notes India's attachment to oral history is at times a weakness, but at other times a great strength, for historiography using purely written means is a rather recent phenomenon in India. Thus, the existence of an early local Christianity in Kerala is given greater weight, in terms of amount, and types, of evidence (Nedungatt, 2008, pp. 256, 259). Over time, these local communities appear to have become well-versed in Indian Thomasine beliefs and practices, based upon local Christian teachings and teachings surrounding ritualized initiations. According to La Fargue, Hartin, and Cosgrove, some of these teachings provided the ancient cultural context of the literary source known as the *Acts of Thomas*, so that while the uninitiated knew only what was disclosed by the work, the initiated could interpret the book on a deeper level, and anticipate most, if not all, of its intended outcomes (La Fargue, 1985, pp. 213-214; Hartin, 2006, p. 253; Cosgrove, 2015, pp. 257-258).

Evidence suggests that Thomas left for India a little over a decade after the ascension of Jesus Christ, sometime after the close of his first missionary journey to Adiabene and its environs from Edessa. Modern historians Gillman, Klimkeit, and James believe he made his way to Alexandria, perhaps by land, or from the Judean harbor of Caesarea (Maritima), before journeying by land to the Red Sea for the sea journey to India (Gillman & Klimkeit, 1999, p. 160; James, 2011, pp. 135-136). Modern historians Gillman, Klimkeit, and James argue that after reaching southern India, and making his way to the kingdom of Gondophares I, Thomas again fulfilled the decision made at the council of apostles and disciples mentioned earlier in this article and crossed further west into the realm of the Parthian Empire. However, they also claim that while there, he irritated locals with his Gospel message, and was killed there by crowds. They argue that centuries after this episode, the writer of the *Acts of Thomas* supposedly turned it into Thomas's famous execution by Indian soldiers just outside the ancient Indian city of Madras, in order to simply make his death resemble that of Jesus's own. Thus, they argue, Thomas's death was a mirror to the life of Thomas's hero, Jesus Christ of Nazareth, who died by execution at the hands of Roman soldiers at Golgotha, just outside the ancient Judean city of Jerusalem (Gillman & Klimkeit, 1999, p. 54; James, 2011, pp. 135, 138).

However, the *Acts of Thomas* demonstrates that Thomas had a more lasting legacy. Gondophares I was a descendant of Suren, the victorious Parthian general over Marcus Crassus and his Roman army at the Battle of Carrhae, in 53 BC. The name "Gondophares" was a name and an imperial title, much like "Augustus" was throughout the Roman Empire, and a number of kings from this kingdom from the first century AD bear this name and title. The given name of Gondophares I appears to have been "Sasea." As a royal monarch of the Suren line, he was related to the Parthian King of kings (Senior, 1997, pp. 1-10; James, 2011, p. 137). That the reign of Gondophares I actually existed until AD 46 is proven by a famous stone tablet and numerous coins. This stone tablet was discovered in the ruins of Takhti Bahi near the ancient Buddhist city of Peshawar, in the Kashmir district of the Punjab region, in present-day Pakistan (Tarn, 1951, pp. 348-381; Pothan,

1963, p. 13; Moraes, 1964, pp. 22-24; Senior, 1997, pp. 1-10; Moffett, 1998, p. 29). Coins bearing Gondophares I's name in ancient Indian and Greek scripts, have been found in present-day Afghanistan, and throughout the Punjab in present-day Pakistan (Gardner, 1886, pp. xiii-xiv, 103-106, 174; Medlycott, 1905, pp. 3-10; Smith, 1906, pp. 36-38, 54-56; Moffett, 1998, p. 29). According to the *Acts of Thomas*, it was to this famous king's realm that Thomas eventually came and stayed for quite some time (On the *Acts of Thomas* as a diatribe but with a factual basis, see Thapur, 1966, p. 134; Basham, 1971, p. 345; Rawlinson, 1975, pp. 425-441, esp. 432; Moffett, 1998, p. 25).

As Gondophares I had reigned to AD46, one may pinpoint that Thomas arrived in India in AD45/46. As the scholarly Pope Benedict XVI has revealed, some historians believe that Thomas went to Parthia by land first, and then sailed to western and then southern India. Still, Benedict XVI reminds us with assurance that the historical traditions in the *Acts of Thomas* are trustworthy (Pope Benedict XVI, 2007, p. 93; Nedungatt, 2011, pp. 534, 556). For, according to tradition in India, and the *Acts of Thomas* itself, Jesus Christ's disciple's first arrival point was on the Malabar Coast. There he founded seven churches, by the ancient port-city of Muziris (Ayyer, 1926, pp. 13-16). This is entirely probable, given the *Acts of Thomas* characterizes Thomas as a carpenter (*Acts of Thomas*, 1. 1). The first century AD Jewish historian Josephus states there were "no lack of carpenters" in Galilee during his own lifetime—the region where Thomas came from (Jos. *JB*. 3. 505). However, historian James has claimed it was actually Bartholomew (Bar Tolmai) who went to Malabar, and Thomas (Bar Thoma) who went to the Indus Valley, and that the *Acts of Thomas* purposefully and anachronistically unites these two separate sojourns of these individuals (James, 2011, p. 140).

#### ARRIVAL AND MONSOONS

Actually, the Indian tradition for Thomas in Malabar is not inconsequential. By AD40, according to the Roman tract, *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, published around AD60, the monsoon wind's secrets guarded for so long by Parthians and Arabs, were betrayed by a Greek merchant to the Romans. Prevailing winds gust ships to India from the mouth of the Red Sea during summer, and back again from India to the Red Sea during winter. The round trip usually took ninety-four days, including a three-week voyage down the Red Sea. However, by going "off the wind", a vessel could sail in a roundabout circular fashion in a southern direction from the mouth of the Red Sea, potentially bringing the ship easily to the Malabar coast. Thus, according to this scenario, Thomas probably arrived in India in the summer of AD45 (*The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*; Moffett, 1998, p. 31). Modern historians believe there was a Jewish population at Malabar at this time, which attracted Thomas to that location by ship (Thomas, 1954, cited by James, 2011, p. 138).

According to the first century AD Tiberian Roman geographer Strabo, writing around the time of Jesus Christ, around one-hundred and twenty ships sailed from Egypt for India each year. The inevitable increase, once the Romans knew about the monsoon winds, would have been substantial, for according to Warmington, some ships after AD40 weighed two-hundred to three-hundred tonnes (Strab. 2. 5. 12; Warmington, 1928, pp. 6-10). Thus, that Thomas sailed for southern India before heading northwards towards Gondophares I's kingdom is a likely historical scenario. According to the *Acts of Thomas*, his first stop was known as Adrapolis in Greek, or Sandaruk in Syriac. This may have been Andhra on India's south-eastern coast, in the southern Indian Tamil Chola Empire. For,

Warmington has found evidence of Greek traders from the red Sea among the ancient Chola people (Warmington, 1928, p. 61). After a brief missionary sojourn there, Thomas appears to have made his way across to the Malabar Coast, directly west on India's south-western coastline, where he declared his true and final "arrival" (Moffett, 1998, p. 26). From the Malabar Coast, Thomas returned to the Chola Empire briefly, before once again heading back to Malabar (Warmington, 1928, pp. 45-50, 83). Thomas's determination to travel throughout India is impressive, considering that upon initial commission for India while in Judea, Thomas protested, as the *Acts of Thomas* states. But after some cajoling and an encouraging vision of Jesus Christ, he acquiesced and happily went, to appear before kings, and dignitaries, and other people, alike (*Acts of Thomas*, 1. 1; Moffett, 1998, pp. 25-26).

### THOMAS IN INDIA

The king of Adrapolis (or Andhra) was initially an amicable king to Thomas, inviting the disciple of Jesus to a banquet at his daughter's wedding. There he sang to, and with, a female Hebrew-Indian playing an oboe-like wind instrument that the *Acts of Thomas* calls an *Aulos* (Greek: αὐλός). Thomas did not embrace her in a sexual manner (*Acts of Thomas*, 1. 6-7). On the *Aulos*, see West, 1992, pp. 81-109; Landels, 2000, pp. 24-46. On Thomas singing to the female Hebrew-Indian piper, see Marcovich, 1981, pp. 367-385; Klijn, 2003, pp. 8-9; Klauck, 2008, p. 142; Cosgrove, 2015, pp. 256-260). According to the *Acts of Thomas*, the disciple was ejected from this wedding because he espoused virginity and chastity, and the ascetic life (*Acts of Thomas*, 1. 11, 12). Farquhar and James both claim this may be due to the *Acts of Thomas*'s Gnostic bias—a bias that sometimes held sex to be unspiritual (James, 2011, p. 135). But Paul stated emphatically that all of Jesus's disciples were married. This number, of course, included Thomas (1 Cor 5:9). Thus, Thomas might have spurned this musician's advanced because his wife accompanied him to India. There is no evidence that Thomas attempted to engineer an abstinent church in India (Eus. *EH*. 2. 9). Indeed, the India which included Gondophares I's kingdom was wealthy, and that makes the argument for Thomas's teachings against marital sex at elite levels and otherwise for the sake of conserving society—a claim put forward by Ayyer and Moffett—mostly redundant (Ayyer, 1926, pp. 13-16; Moffett, 1998, p. 34).

After hastily leaving the realms of Adrapolis and the Malabar coast, Thomas headed north to Gondophares I's kingdom extending around the Saraswati and Indus Rivers. Gondophares I was initially a benevolent patron to Thomas. He commissioned Thomas to build a new large-scale palace for himself, perhaps in Taxila itself. Thomas began building but leaving the building site of the new palace briefly, which was still under construction, he ventured out, and he saw parts of the kingdom that was Gondophares I's, and the appearance of that kingdom shocked him, f. For, what he saw appeared to be poverty among Gondophares I's lower classes, or castes. Thomas was moved to do something about it. Thereupon, he gave the remaining money at his disposal for the building project away to the poor (*Acts of Thomas*, 1. 19-20). No large-scale palace has ever been found that belonged to Gondophares I—at Taxila, or elsewhere. Thus, the tradition that Thomas was commissioned by Gondophares I to build a new large-scale palace there—which seems natural for such a major urban center as Taxila—that Thomas refused to build, may be concluded to be historically accurate (James, 2011, p. 137).

At this point, according to the *Acts of Thomas*, Gondophares I became enraged at

Thomas, and threw Thomas in a prison for a time. However, he eventually relented, and let Thomas go. The *Acts of Thomas* states that Thomas then made for Misdaeus's (Mazdai, in Syriac) realm, in Madras in eastern India, most likely just to the north of Andhra, but not before appointing a head-deacon over his churches in Gondophares I's territory (*Acts of Thomas*, 2. 22-27; 7. 66). The Kushans would later overrun Gondophares I's kingdom. Farquhar and James have argued that earlier incursions sparked Thomas's idea to move from Gondophares I's kingdom to Misdaeus's own (James, 2011, p. 140). King Misdaeus might be king Vasudeva of Mathura, which was under Zoroastrian influence (Fleet, 1905, p. 235).

In Misdaeus' realm, Thomas initially found contentment, preaching to thousands as he had already done in Adrapolis, and in Gondophares I's realm. But treachery seemed to be lurking. When Thomas apparently raised the idea of shunning the marriage-bed between himself and a woman, he was led to a hillock just outside a city and speared to death. It appears that locals wished Thomas to settle down there, and perhaps sire a dynasty among them. However, the disciple refused, perhaps for health or moral reasons. In response, he was executed by those same locals. According to the *Acts of Thomas*, his last poignant words there were:

My Lord and my God, my hope and redeemer and leader and guide in all the lands. I have fulfilled your work and accomplished your command. I have become a slave; therefore today I receive freedom"(*Acts of Thomas*, 13. 167).

According to local tradition from Madras, Thomas died near Mylapore. A tomb which is believed to inter him, and which stands in great reverence today, is located at Mylapore, and it celebrates his life and personality. A later tradition from Edessa in northern Mesopotamia holds that the remains of Thomas's body were taken from southern India to Edessa in the second century AD (James, 2011, p. 142).

Some modern historians believe that the tradition of Thomas in southern India is a later Christian invention that foists the tradition of the fleeing of Christians from Persia south to southern India with the persecution of the Sasanid Persian King of kings, Shapur II in the mid-fourth century AD onto the first century AD (Gillman & Klimkeit, 1999, pp. 161-163). However, these Christians found some descendants of Thomas's initial followers there, through whom Thomas founded the southern Indian church, suggesting these later Christian migrants were preceded by earlier Thomasine Christians—perhaps deriving from Thomas himself (James, 2011, pp. 142-143).

## CONCLUSION

Having set forth the narrative of Thomas's missions in the East, with their historical contexts, this article has indicated that Thomas' missions to the Parthian Empire, and the Indian subcontinent, were met with much traffic of goods and ideas. Thomas's missionary world was one of fluidity of human movement within and beyond the realms he passed through, but with a clear focus upon the Parthian Empire and India. Thomas's life was an extraordinary one. He lived and moved among many people who were tied to the land, or tied to travel, by land or by sea. A number of these travelled vast distances for the purposes of trade, and no doubt constituted those Thomas helped evangelize, throughout his missionary travels. Today, Christians in these parts still call themselves: "Thomas

Christians". The population numbers of India, at the time, were large. But there was mass-exploitation on the part of a number of its rulers, including Gondophares I. Thomas's evangelistic teachings were designed to allow the populations of the Parthian Empire and India to exert at least some caution against such forces at work in people's lives. However, Thomas also enriched many people's lives, and he still enriches the lives of many people across India, and the world, today. This reveals that one's wealth can be of gold or silver, but also if that person's true wealth is within himself or herself, that person can love God and others enough to converse with them about God. The missionary trekker Thomas espoused such a maxim, and lived it out, to a great extent throughout his life, which extended around many parts of the world—marking him as an extraordinary human being, even today.

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