

Merchants and Mission in the First Fifteen Hundred Years of the Church in Asia

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Abstract

Business in Mission or BAM is a growing trend in global missions today. Not a new concept, the blending of mercantile activity and spreading of Christian faith has been going on since the earliest decades of the Church. This article explores BAM as a key component in Asian Christian witness over the 1500 years before Western colonial powers appeared on the scene, relating it to similar expressions in Manichaeism, Judaism, Buddhism, and Islam. The spreading of faith and commerce together was not seen as strange, perhaps because the originating context of these faiths was crisscrossed with trade routes from the earliest empires. Besides substantiating this integrated approach to business and mission with abundant reference to significant primary and secondary sources, this article also considers the nature of trade pursued, the routes used, and products traded.

Key words: BAM, business, mission, Asia, merchants, history, Persian Gulf, Maritime Silk Road, Thomas, India, Nestorian, Cosmas Indicopleustes, Church of the East

Business and Mission (BAM) was a key component in Asian Christian witness over the first fifteen hundred years of church history. Of course, BAM has also been important for the spread of other faiths, as we see in the first section of this article in relation to Jews. Islam as well, from its beginnings in the seventh century, spread across Asia with merchant involvement. As Patricia Risso writes, 'In the Muslim context, merchants were often missionaries themselves or were accompanied by them.'¹ It is remarkable that for most of the first millennium and a half, business and mission appears to have taken place almost entirely without the presence of military protection. Much later, after the Portuguese Empire spread into Asia in the late 15th century with Vasco da Gama's arrival off the Malabar coast in Southern India, Western colonial powers combined military protection with business ventures, at times also combining that with mission.

This article discusses the importance in Asia of the 'Silk Roads' - not one road as sometimes thought but several branches² - to the spreading of commerce and faith combined. The Maritime Route across the Indian Ocean via the Persian Gulf was arguably of equal value to the land routes

¹ Risso (1995: 5). A whole separate article could be written exploring Muslim combining of business with mission, including how Islamic Empires such as the Abbasids or later Ottomans used state power to protect their ventures. But how also there were Muslim traders left much more on their own in the Indian Ocean context, or in Central Asia.

² On the silk road, perhaps the most thorough and most recent discussions can be found in Peter Frankopan's book, *A New History of the Silk Road* (2015). In 2018, Frankopan followed it up with *The New Silk Roads*, which brings the present day geo-political context into clear sight. Hansen (2012) has helpful material as well on Baron Von Richtofen coining the phrase in his five volume atlas.

and at certain periods of history was the more important one. This would especially be true for the first nine centuries of the Church in Asia. As Islam spread, particularly from the eighth century through the increase of Arab naval power, the Maritime Route would be less accessible until the Portuguese opened it again in the 1490s.

The importance of specific products for business exchange from East to West will also be noted in this article. Throughout the whole fifteen hundred years spices were important, with pepper featured in the Malabar coast and Christians some of the major players in pepper. Christian merchant monks were also involved in other products, like the pearl trade of the Persian Gulf, musk in Central Asia, and even silkworms crucial to the development of the silk industry in China - and globally to the present day.

Another interesting factor in this research is the development in Asia of organized Christian merchant communities. Sources suggest a much more holistic integration of business and mission than what is often seen today between engaging material pursuits and spreading the faith. Was this perhaps because state political and military power was missing from the equation in those first fifteen hundred years of the Church in Asia? Though we suggest no definitive answer to this question, the question itself is important to keep in context across the spread of Christian history.

This study intentionally focuses on the history of Christianity in Asia in the centuries before the period of Western colonialism. Mission history in Asia generally makes passing reference to the Apostle Thomas, where we will also start below, but then often jumps in one leap to the Portuguese advance across the Indian Ocean in 1498. To do so is to leave out an enormous amount of church history in Asia, resulting in a lack of accurate background material and even contributing to an imperfect and erroneous picture of the period from 1500 to today. This article starts with Thomas not only because of his importance in the tradition of the Church in India, and his coming from the first century, but also because his story incorporates the merchant-mission dynamic so clearly.

Thomas and Habban to India in the First Century

The early third century source *Acts of Thomas* tells the story of the Apostle Thomas and his journey and work in India. Though not all details of this document can be historically verified, it presents a plausible background for a journey to India from West Asia of a Jewish man in the mid-first century. Joining Thomas in his mission to India, according to the *Acts*, is a merchant named Abbanes. Not much is known about this man, but pertinent to this article is that the first apostolic 'team' to India may have included both a businessman and a missionary. According to the document, Abbanes had come to Jerusalem in search of carpenters to bring back to his King in Taxila, named Gondaphorus:

According to the lot, therefore, India fell unto Judas Thomas, which is also the twin: but he would not go, saying that by reason of the weakness of the flesh he could not travel, and 'I am an Hebrew man; how can I go amongst the Indians and preach the truth?' And as he thus reasoned and spake, the Saviour appeared unto him by night and saith to him: Fear not, Thomas, go thou unto India and preach the word there, for my grace is with thee. But he would not obey, saying: Whither thou wouldest send me, send me, but elsewhere, for unto the Indians I will not go.

2 And while he thus spake and thought, it chanced that there was there a certain merchant come from India whose name was Abbanes, sent from the King Gundaphorus [Gundaphorus is a historical personage who reigned over a part of India in the first century after Christ. His coins bear his name in Greek, as Hyndopheres], and having commandment from him to buy a carpenter and bring him unto him.³

Upon meeting Thomas, who had already received a call to go to India, the *Acts* records an interesting commission from the risen Jesus Christ:

‘I, Jesus, the son of Joseph the carpenter, acknowledge that I have sold my slave, Judas by name, unto thee Abbanes, a merchant of Gondaphorus, King of the Indians.’ Now the Lord seeing him walking in the market-place at noon said unto him: Wouldest thou buy a carpenter? And he said to him: Yea. And the Lord said to him: I have a slave that is a carpenter and I desire to sell him. And so saying he showed him Thomas afar off, and agreed with him for three litrae of silver unstamped, and wrote a deed of sale, saying: I, Jesus, the son of Joseph the carpenter, acknowledge that I have sold my slave, Judas by name, unto thee Abbanes, a merchant of Gundaphorus, king of the Indians. And when the deed was finished, the Saviour took Judas Thomas and led him away to Abbanes the merchant, and when Abbanes saw him he said unto him: Is this thy master? And the apostle said: Yea, he is my Lord. And he said: I have bought thee of him. And thy apostle held his peace.

3 And on the day following the apostle arose early, and having prayed and besought the Lord he said: I will go whither thou wilt, Lord Jesus: thy will be done. And he departed unto Abbanes the merchant, taking with him nothing at all save only his price. For the Lord had given it unto him, saying: Let thy price also be with thee, together with my grace, wheresoever thou goest.

And the apostle found Abbanes carrying his baggage on board the ship; so he also began to carry it aboard with him. And when they were embarked in the ship and were set down Abbanes questioned the apostle, saying: What craftsmanship knowest thou? And he said: In wood I can make ploughs and yokes and augers (ox-goads, Syr.), and boats and oars for boats and masts and pulleys; and in stone, pillars and temples and court-houses for kings. And Abbanes the merchant said to him: Yea, it is of such a workman that we have need. They began then to sail homeward; and they had a favourable wind, and sailed prosperously till they reached Andrapolis, a royal city.

Present day traditions of ‘St. Thomas Christians’ of Kerala in modern India trace seven villages there to have had churches planted by the Apostle Thomas. Though impossible to verify with historical certainty, it is also important to hold these traditions with the care they have been held

³ For the *Acts of Thomas* and a critical analysis, see Medlycott (1905). As Medlycott notes, the tradition is highly plausible in part due to the active connections happening already in the first century across the Indian Ocean. Also see the discussion below on the ‘Periplus’ document.

for almost two thousand years by the local people. It is also interesting to consider that each of these villages were thought to have had Jewish communities from perhaps as early as the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem in 586 BC and resulting exile, where some Jews may have fled to the west coast of India. In later centuries after Thomas, Jewish merchant activities would continue and even strengthen up to the ninth century. According to Rabinowitz, these Jewish merchant adventurers were known as ‘Radanites.’⁴ They were part of ‘an active intercourse between Persia and China from the eighth to the end of the ninth century, in which Nestorian Christians, Muslims and Jews took part reaching its zenith in the later years of the ninth century.’⁵

According to some theories, Thomas returned with the merchant on the long sea voyage back to Palestine, most likely landing first at Barygaza, a port which was near the modern Indian city of Surat in Gujarat. Barygaza was an important port that linked the Silk Road branches across North India and into Kashmir and Central Asia to China. In some ways Barygaza was the most important connecting point in the early centuries after Christ for the land and sea routes in trade.

According to the *Acts of Thomas*, when the missionary/merchant team came to Taxila, Habbanes’ home area, there were great results. Thomas converted King Gondaphorus to the Christian faith, did miracles and founded churches before leaving for South India where he would plant more churches and die as a martyr near modern day Chennai in Tamil Nadu. Unfortunately, there is no corroborating historical evidence for the stories of Thomas in the North, except the finding in the nineteenth century in Afghanistan of coins with the name King Gondaphorus from a similar time period in the first century.

Taxila was also an important historical place in the same period, the meeting place of three great trade routes for centuries including when Thomas may have come there. These trade routes were 1) east on the ‘King’s highway’ that went across North India to Pataliapura (modern city of Patna) 2) west to Western Asia via Bactria (modern Afghanistan) and 3) north to Kashmir and Central Asia/China. Taxila was a center for education trade, though as Dani writes ‘how Taxila became famous as a university city has never been demonstrated, although it is frequently mentioned as a center of education.’⁶

The only surviving crosses of the Church of the East have been dated to the fifth/sixth centuries and were found in South India in what is now Kerala and Tamil Nadu.⁷ This changed recently with the discovery of a large cross in Northern Pakistan.⁸ More details need to be obtained about the circumstances of this find, but it could be an important confirmation of the existence of the Christian church in that area in earlier centuries.

⁴ The Radanites were Jewish adventurers and merchants known to often speak several languages such as Persian, Roman, Arab, Spanish, Frankish and Slav among others. The name may have come from the similar ‘Radamites’ signifying a geographic description. Their linguistic and cosmopolitan outlook would have suited them for involvement in merchant activities across the Indian Ocean and beyond.

⁵ Rabinowitz (1948: 69).

⁶ Dani (1986: 42). For excavations of Taxila and what remains today, see Marshall (1960).

⁷ For crosses found in South India, see John (1981: 8).

⁸ See article in *Indian Express*, online edition (July 9, 2020). Though this find needs to be investigated further, the sheer size of the cross at seven feet and still intact is remarkable.

There are also existing communities today of Christians in South India that call themselves St. Thomas Christians, but none in the North of the subcontinent of that nature. As will be seen later in this article, the Christians of the Malabar area of Southern India in the first fifteen hundred years became proficient in merchant efforts particularly related to the pepper trade. Did Thomas and Habbanes as a mission/merchant team in the first century establish a model that would be continued in Asia for the next many centuries? The answer to that can't be fully known due to a lack of evidence, but it is intriguing to consider.

The route that the *Acts of Thomas* initially describes Thomas and Habbanes taking is what was later called the Maritime Route across the Indian Ocean. Other accounts even have him making a trip to China before his death, though we have no clear evidence of that; it is plausible when evidence of links across the Indian Ocean at the same period are considered. The primary point emphasized for this article is that mercantile activity was conducted alongside preaching of Christian faith, as noted, by a 'team' of Thomas and Habbanes.

The Maritime Route of the 'Silk Roads'

Another surviving work of the mid-first century is the *Periplus* (or guidebook) of the *Erythraean Sea* which describes the first documented journey across the Indian Ocean. It is 'the painstaking log of a Greek in Egypt, a Roman subject, who steered his vessel into the waters of a great ocean.'⁹ This unknown author, writing 'not later than summer of 62 C.E. and not earlier than summer of 58 C.E.',¹⁰ includes credible details of the types of trade going on as well as settlements along the way. This voyage log shows merchant activities occurring across the Indian Ocean, along what in succeeding centuries would be one of the routes of the Maritime Silk Road. But even decades before the *Periplus* there was a 'great upsurge in travel via the sea routes between India and Egypt.'¹¹

While this document does not directly refer to mission activity going on alongside merchant activities, it shows the plausibility of a voyage like Apostle Thomas' in a similar time frame and with an accompanying merchant like Habbanes. As Casson notes: 'The Periplus makes clear that for the merchants of Roman Egypt, India's west coast was the prime trading area, and the east coast played a distinctly secondary route.'¹² In the *Periplus*, two ports in western India are listed: 'Barygaza', also mentioned in *Acts of Thomas* and Muziris which is Cranganore or modern-day Kollam in Kerala.

An interesting discovery in 1945 on the east coast of India near Pondicherry confirms regular Indian Ocean trade in the first several centuries of the Christian era.¹³ Archaeologists excavated remains of a Roman trading outpost there. Trade was not a new thing in the first century, as there already had been merchants plying their profession across the Indian Ocean, moving goods of various natures across large distances in a growing network of exchange.

⁹ See Schoff (1974: 7).

¹⁰ Schoff (1974: 14).

¹¹ Sedler (1980: 84).

¹² Casson (1989:22).

¹³ For Roman trading post in the city of Arikamedu on India's east coast, see Wheeler (1946).

A few centuries later, evidence of links across the Indian Ocean more directly connecting mission and business came from the work of navigator and monk Cosmas Indicopleustes [India-sailor]. Writing the *Christian Topography* during 554-560 C.E., Cosmas mentions churches in various parts of India and Ceylon.¹⁴ As Andre Wink writes, ‘Meanwhile, extensive Sasanid or Nestorian Christian colonies had arisen by the 5th century on the Arabian coast, in India, Malabar and Sri Lanka, and even, to a lesser extent, beyond.’¹⁵

There are questions about how much Cosmas personally witnessed the things he wrote about. But it is interesting that he was both a merchant and a monk, given his writings about sixth century traffic across the Maritime Routes to India and China. As Parker writes in his study of the development of ‘Roman India’, ‘Cosmas’ India, like that in the *Periplus*, is part of a trading zone that stretched all the way to the Red Sea and the African coast.’¹⁶

The importance of the Maritime Silk Road in centuries leading up to the eighth included monastic centers of the Church of the East in places like Socotra in the Arabian Sea and Siraf in the Persian Gulf, where monk-missionaries and merchants could stop in, receive hospitality and refreshment for the ongoing journey. Socotra, called the island of tranquility, is now part of the modern nation of Yemen. In Christian tradition, St. Thomas introduced the gospel there on his way with Habbanes via the Red Sea to India. Cosmas came there in 524 but did not land, calling it ‘subject to the Nestorian church.’ According to Doe, rock drawings on the island could be in the shape of crosses, though no gravestones have been found as of yet.¹⁷ Archaeological digs on the island have not been as easily allowed as in the Persian Gulf, perhaps due to its administrative control by Yemen.

Siraf lessened in importance for the Church by the tenth century when Islam had consolidated its rule over Persia. But Arab geographical texts tell us that ‘Siraf was the most important port on the Persian Gulf in the ninth and tenth centuries.’¹⁸ Archaeological finds there have uncovered Chinese porcelain and stoneware, dated to the T’ang dynasty of seventh-ninth century China. South Indian ceramics were also found there. As Lamb notes, ‘Trade between Siraf and Quilon in Travancore (Malabar coast of South India) might possibly have left its trace in the shape of South Indian ceramics, a field in which, for this period, our ignorance is surprisingly great.’¹⁹

An abiding image in Church of the East liturgical literature and poems in its first fifteen hundred years was the symbol of ‘coming into the Harbour.’ Perhaps the most well-known Church poet in the early centuries was St. Ephrem, called ‘the Harp of the Holy Spirit.’ In his poem, he described the monastery as a ‘harbour of chastity.’ According to writer Eric Hambye, this description was important ‘all the more so that the maritime environment of Mesopotamia-Persia and the sea-faring habits of the East Syrian monks could easily lead to the use of such an imagery.’²⁰ The use of this imagery suggests on the one hand a familiarity with sea travel, and on the other an awareness of the tension inherent in being a monk out in the everyday world of business engagement; both the

¹⁴ For the *Christian Topography* of Cosmas and a critical analysis, see Winstedt (1909).

¹⁵ Wink (1991: 48).

¹⁶ Parker (2008: 142).

¹⁷ Doe (1992: 10).

¹⁸ Lamb (1964: 5).

¹⁹ :17

²⁰ Hambye (1972: 410).

monastery with its expected chastity and the harbour near where many monasteries were located, reflected realities well known to the Church in Asia.

When the trade along the Silk Roads is described in history it can at times leave the impression that the land routes were the only avenue of East-West trade transmission and exchange. But the Maritime Route was of similar importance, and at some periods of history was the greater due to blockages of the land route. The Maritime Route at times came via the Red Sea into the Indian Ocean, but for the Church of the East the Persian Gulf particularly up to the ninth century was a vital one both for trade and for mission.

Sassanid Pearl Trade in the Persian Gulf and beyond

The Persian Gulf leading up to Islam's expansion in the eighth and ninth centuries had an extensive network of Christian monasteries and churches. As Wink writes, 'The Persian Gulf was to a large extent Nestorian Christian, and as a consequence Nestorian influence, next to Zoroastrianism, spread throughout the Indian Ocean.'²¹ These Christians were primarily Mesopotamians and Persians, roughly corresponding to the modern nations of Iraq and Iran, with perhaps some Indians that had ventured across the Ocean. Trade was an important part of the practice of their life and faith.

Over the last few decades, more archaeological evidence has come to light of these monasteries in the Persian Gulf. One of these monastic settlements excavated in the last fifty years is on the island of Kharg, on the eastern side of the Gulf and according to Whitehouse: 'traditionally, captains approaching Basra put in at Kharg to engage a pilot before entering the Shat-al Arab and the Island thus played a significant role in the maritime trade of the Gulf.'²² Ruins of a Church of the East monastery, as well as tombs with crosses in the same style as used by the Church, were also found according to findings published in 1960 by Ghirshman.²³ Only three to four hours from Kharg by ship going eastwards down the Gulf was another Church of the East administrative center or Metropolitan, Rev-Ardeshir.

Both of these Church centers were along trading routes as well as near some of the best areas for the pearl trade of the day in the south and eastern parts of the Gulf. As Hellyer writes, both Kharg and Rev-Ardeshir 'lie close to the best pearling banks in the Southern Gulf.'²⁴ We do not know of course the specific motivation why these monastic centers were founded where they were. As with the land routes in Asia, the monasteries as mission centers were often founded on these very routes. The Persian Gulf on the Maritime Route was no exception.

Writers like Brian Colless have observed how important the pearling trade was for the Church of the East, titling his latest book of Syrian mystical writings *The Wisdom of the Pearl*. According to Colless, a 'pearler' is a 'pearl fisher or a pearl trader, a person who dives for pearls or deals in pearls.'²⁵ The pearl trade had been important in Asian trade for several centuries, with it even being

²¹ Wink (1991: 50).

²² Whitehouse (1973: 43).

²³ Ghirshman (1960: 7).

²⁴ Hellyer (2001: 97).

²⁵ Colless (2008: 1)

mentioned in the *Periplus* in the first century.²⁶ One of the largest markets for the pearl trade in the first nine centuries after Christ was the city of Argaris, on the east coast of India. Pearls and products with pearls were also in demand in China, helping stimulate trade routes from the Persian Gulf via India and on to China.²⁷

Many of these merchants in the pearl trade were Persian or Sassanid Christians, living within the Sassanian Empire which lasted until the late seventh century when it was overwhelmed by Arabs. The Sassanid of Persia were known for merchant activities and used primarily the Old Persian language of Pahlavi until at least the ninth century when the dominance of Arabic strengthened. The Church in its mercantile activities across Asia also used Pahlavi to some degree, though Syriac continued to be the ecclesial and liturgical language. Both languages were important for blending of trade and witness due to the overall organization of the Church in Asia. As Gouvea notes, from as early as 420 C.E. ‘St. Thomas Christians and other mercantile settlements in the Indian Ocean region were spiritually administered by the West Asian church through Persian church headquartered at Rev Ardarshir.’²⁸

Archaeological evidence for Persian Christian influence comes from the finding of nine Pahlavi inscribed stone crosses. As Gouvea writes these inscriptions ‘attesting to the settlements of Pahlavi speaking mercantile communities, were unearthed from Indian Ocean region.’²⁹ The Indian Ocean links and connections were formed and strengthened by the spread of the Christian faith, but also by merchant activities and associations from Mesopotamia and Persia in West Asia via South and Central Asia to South-east Asia and China.

South Indian Pepper Trade and the Copper Charters

In South India, where the Church had presence since the early centuries after Christ, important evidence for early ninth century business and mission is available. Copper plate charters, a normal way of communicating royal decrees and chronicles, still exist in Kottayam, Kerala, describing the favor and even land given by the King to a group of arriving Christian merchants and missionaries.³⁰ This land was given for the building of a church, but it seems as well that merchant activity by Christians was involved. Both the spreading of faith and involvement in trade were going hand in hand at this period in early ninth century South India.

In one of the sections of the Charters seen below, two associations of Jewish and Christian traders are listed, Anjuwannam and Manigramam. These sections of the copper charters refer to the existence of groups of Jewish and Christian traders that were in operation in the period of these charters:

²⁶ Bounois (2004: 134).

²⁷ For more on the trade between Rome and India in the early centuries, see Begley (1991).

²⁸ Gouvea (1603: xl).

²⁹ :xl

³⁰ It is not surprising that a record of Christians giving mercantile rights and even church land would be recorded on copper charts. For centuries that was the accepted way the rulers of Malabar communicated their royal decrees. In T’ang China in a similar period it was via stone pillars called Steles, that the Church of the East communicated their history and faith, especially on a surviving Stele carved in 781 C.E. and now in a museum in the city of Xian.

f. Mine own relations, whoever they be, whatever the charges be, shall never have the right there to speak as heads of the land dealing with subjects. Let the six hundred, the Anjuwannam and Manigramam [Jewish and Christian principalities] be the protectors.

g. Let them, even Anjuwannam and Manigramam, act both with the Church and with the land, according to the manner detailed in this copper-deed for the time that earth, moon and sun exist.

k. With the sanction of the Palace-major Vyaraka Devar, who has given to these [the Palliyar] the 72 jammi right, such as for marriages [or procession], the elephant's back, the earth, the water, etc, at all events, [marks of nobility], and with the concurrence of His Excellency the Ayyan Adigal, His Excellency Rama, the ministers and officers, the six hundred, and the Lords of Punnatala and Pulacudi, let Anjuwannam and Manigramam carry out this unrestricted possession right in the manner described by this copper-deed for the time that earth, moon and sun exist.

l. If any injustice be done to these, [not clear who, either the Palliyar, or Anjuwannam and Manigramam], they may withhold the tribute and remedy themselves the injury done to them. Should they themselves commit a crime, they are themselves to have the investigation of it.

m. And let whatever the two chieftains in Anjuwannam and Manigramam, who have taken the water as trustees for this town, may do in unison be counted for one act.³¹

The nature of these groups is not clear from this source but may have been 'associations of merchants' or an artisan class. The reference to these two merchant groups on the copper charters is the first time they were referred to in a surviving inscription. According to Gurukkal the Manigramam 'was a large organization of big merchants, probably the Syrian Christians, with numerous regional bases of operation in South India.'³² It is not clear what specific trade Christians were primarily engaged in, but according to Gurukkal it may have been pepper.

An important city of the Serra (original meaning of word is 'hills', but was also what inland Malabar was called) was Angamali, perhaps already a Metropolitan centre of the Church by the early ninth century. From Angamali, still existing as a bustling modern city today in Kerala,³³ the pepper was brought to the coast for shipping back across the Indian Ocean as well as perhaps onwards to China. For the Christians involved in the pepper trade, it functioned much as pearling did for the Church of the East in the Persian Gulf. Whether pearls or pepper, having specific merchant products was part of Christian life and witness in Asia.

These merchant associations active in the Indian Ocean mentioned in the copper plates were not new. The Geniza papers discovered in Cairo in the early 1960's suggested the presence of similar

³¹ For the copper charters and analysis, see John (1981). On one of my visits to Kottayam in 2006, I was only able to see a facsimile of the charters held in a church-run museum due to their protected nature.

³² Gurukkal, in John (1981:58).

³³ In 2007 I was able to visit Angamali for the first time, now a crowded modern Indian city.

groups many centuries ago. S.D. Gotein calls the papers ‘not an archive, but a wastepaper basket’ in that many kinds of records were dumped in an unorganized manner. These documents date to the late eleventh century but refer to much earlier periods as well. In these materials there is a Christian merchant mentioned related to the Indian Ocean trade. According to Gotein ‘the relationship with him’ to merchant activities ‘is referred to in a manner which shows that it was by no means anything peculiar.’³⁴ These papers show that Christians, at least to some degree, were involved in business on the Maritime Route. They also attest that the ‘India trade was the backbone of international economy in the middle ages in general and inside the Islamic world in particular.’³⁵

The Christian merchant associations lasted at least until the Portuguese began consolidating their power on the Malabar coast as the 16th century began. According to one Portuguese document of 1503, the Christian ‘guild’ still survived in Cochin. The document indicated that Christians were excluded from ‘weighing of the pepper to the profit of the Muslims’, and it was Albuquerque who defended them.³⁶ Unfortunately, Portuguese leaders like Albuquerque would not continue to protect these Christians out of prejudice against their ‘Eastern’ and different ways of practicing their faith, and pressures increased on them not only from Muslims but from these Western Christians.

What is interesting, however, is the multi-ethnic context these trading groups functioned in, seen from signatures on the copper plate charters. Languages included Pahlavi, Hebrew, and Kufic, indicating the presence of Persians, Jews, and at least some Arabs.³⁷ As John writes, ‘The Pahlavi, Kufic, and Hebrew signatures at the end of the charter have been studied and identified as those of merchants of Arabia, Persia and Israel.’³⁸ Arab traders may have reached the Malabar Coast within decades after Muhammed’s death, and seem to have been given certain status among the Malabar rulers, as were the Christians.³⁹ For both faiths, business was part of that favorable entry.

Christians in Asia in the first fifteen hundred years were using the Maritime Route of the Silk Roads to spread their faith alongside business commodities like pepper. Janet Abu-Lughod calls South India, and particularly Malabar, a ‘true hinge’ between the trading centers of the Gulf and China.⁴⁰ It is no accident that Malabar (modern day Indian state of Kerala) was also the place where copper charters were given to groups of Christians in the early ninth century. Even then India and China were linked with the area of the Gulf and then farther to the west as well.

Two Arab accounts of mercantile activity from this period mention stopping in Southern India. From these two accounts, Hourani has re-constructed a possible trade route in the mid-ninth century from the Gulf to China via India with time tables of the voyage. These same routes across

³⁴ Gotein (1963: 205).

³⁵ :188 These documents also attest to the involvement in this trade of Jews and Muslims, and Hindus as well. Not all of these merchants could be proved to be sharing their faith alongside trade, but that the documents record their faith is interesting.

³⁶ Chaudhury (1999: 47).

³⁷ Kufic was the oldest Arabic script in calligraphy, modified from the Nabataean script. It was used in the early Islamic centuries, and got its name from the southern Iraq city of Kufa, known to be an intellectual center in the earlier period.

³⁸ John (1981: 65).

³⁹ For more on the Muslim expansion into the Indian Ocean and Malabar Coast, see Wink (1991).

⁴⁰ Abu-Lughod (1989: 259).

the Ocean may have been followed by monk-missionaries of the Church coming from Mesopotamia and Persia. Never easy due to frequent storms, the sea route was still a busy thoroughfare for many centuries.

As Hourani notes, ‘The history of the Arabs in this ocean is one of expanding commerce, which reached its peak in the ninth century of the Christian era.’⁴¹ As seen by the signatures on the copper charters, Christians and Muslims along with people of other faiths served side by side in this trade and in the sharing of faith. It was not at all extraordinary. For the Arab Muslims, ‘Ocean shipping to China and India by Arab sailors had become routine by the mid-ninth century, when ships sailed from the Gulf and the Red Sea for a year’s round trip to China.’⁴²

Sogdians and the Central Asia ‘Silk Road’

A common stopping point along the land route, which also became a strong Christian centre between the third and fifth centuries, was the oasis of Merv. Now in the modern-day Central Asia nation of Turkmenistan, Merv was an important point for trade in these centuries even for Indian merchants. According to Bounois, Merv was ‘much visited by Indian merchants who had crossed Bactria. Christians had buildings there, and a monastery to the north of the Buddhist structures.’⁴³

Some of the most common travelers along the land Silk Roads in this period were the Sogdians, a mostly unknown people group today. In Central Asia they were known for extensive mercantile activities. They had their own Kingdom, called Sogdiana, spanning an area now consisting of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and other parts of Central Asia. They had close family connections and carried their trade into China. Sogdian language became important in trade for Central Asia for centuries ‘thus reinforcing the role of the Sogdians as spreaders of culture.’⁴⁴

But what is also fascinating about the Sogdians is that many of them became fervent followers of Christ and part of the Church of the East in Asia.⁴⁵ Along with an attraction to Christianity, the Sogdians were attracted to the religion founded by the Persian named Mani, the Manicheans. This latter group flourished for a time in Central Asia, starting monasteries along the Silk Roads as did the Church of the East. In the early centuries before Islam grew in Central Asia, the Manicheans were Christianity’s main competitor, along with Buddhism.⁴⁶ All three faiths along the Silk Roads had a close connection between merchant activity and the sharing of their faith.

In Syriac, the liturgical and trade language of the Church of the East still used in places today like Iraq and Southern India, the word for merchant was *tgr.* But it was also used for someone who shares the gospel of Christ. Thus, in those early centuries in Asia, merchants and missionaries were described by the same word! A Syriac hymn from the fourth century includes the following verse:

Travel well-girt like merchants

⁴¹ Hourani (1995: 83).

⁴² Chanda (2007: 47).

⁴³ Bounois (2004: 220).

⁴⁴ :244

⁴⁵ Folz (1999: 13)

⁴⁶ :16

That we may gain the world.
Convert men to me,
Fill creation with teaching.⁴⁷

As seen in this early hymn of the Church, traveling the world as merchants and converting men to Christ were inter-connected. The Sogdians, like other Christians along trade routes over land and sea, helped spread the Christian faith, thereby becoming perhaps some of the earliest business and mission activists. As Folz notes, ‘the Sogdian merchants were for centuries among the most successful in Asia, and their trading activities formed the major link connecting East and West.’⁴⁸

A document discovered in the Dunghang caves of far western China by explorer Aurel Stein in 1907 is titled *Ancient Letters of Sogdian Traders*. In it Stein describes the ‘Sogdian mercantile guilds in China and Central Asian colonies linking India and China. Sogdian merchants and families in T’ang China may have numbered in the thousands.’⁴⁹ Though by the ninth century onwards Sogdian dominance faded due to the growth of Islam, it is important to note that Sogdians also organized their merchant activities into ‘mercantile guilds.’ This is similar to what was seen with the Christian guilds on the Malabar coast and at a similar period in history. It is interesting to consider whether there were exchanges between these guilds in Central Asia and South Asia, though the copper charters of Malabar reviewed earlier do not specifically mention the Sogdians in their list of faiths and peoples.

A possibility of connection does come, however, from a document discovered by Aurel Stein in the Dunghang caves in 1907. Sen notes that the ‘Sogdian letter’ suggested the ‘existence of Indian merchant colonies alongside Sogdian guilds in Loulan and Shanshan regions of the Taklamakan desert.’⁵⁰ This was along the Southern branch of the Silk Road in western China, separated by the forbidding desert where Dunghang is located. Could there have been Indian Christian guilds also in operation there in China at that time in the eighth-ninth centuries, and in contact with similar Sogdian guilds?

Archaeological discoveries also confirm in Central Asia the presence of both trade and witness activities of the Sogdians. In what is now the nation of Kyrgyzstan, excavations begun in 1995 found a complex that included three churches. As Klein notes, a Sogdian trading post was also discovered at the same site.⁵¹

Other Merchant-Mission efforts in the first 1500 years in Asia

As with Sogdians, there were others combining BAM-like activities in the first fifteen hundred years of Christianity in Asia. A fairly mysterious story due to the lack of more detailed information is that of two Church of the East monks who came to Constantinople in about 550 or 551, received by Emperor Justinian. According to an account written by Procopius of Caesarea (d. 562) in his

⁴⁷ Folz (1999: 62).

⁴⁸ :13

⁴⁹ Sen (2004: 161).

⁵⁰ :162

⁵¹ Klein (2004: 30).

history called *War of the Goths, Book 4, Chapter 17*, these two monks announced they had come from India and had lived a long time in the East.⁵²

But what they said next greatly interested the Emperor, announcing they knew how silk was made, silk being a strong commodity of interest in the period. These Christian monks said they could bring him eggs to produce caterpillars needed for a silk industry. These monk-middlemen, about whom next to nothing is known, for whatever motives had smuggled the eggs from China to Byzantium sparking silk production in Europe.

Another part of Asia that would take on greater significance in the Western colonial period is what is now Indonesia. Under four centuries of Dutch rule, the spice trade would have a great importance. In earlier centuries, merchant links with India and on to China were in existence. As O.W. Wolters writes, 'it would be wrong to underestimate the significance of the early Indian trade with Indonesia, even though so little can be said about it.'⁵³ This may have included Church of the East missionaries coming from other parts of Asia into the southeastern part of the continent from the seventh century onwards.

Just north of Indonesia is a place called Kalah, now the modern city of Klang in West Malaysia. Kalah, according to Colless, was one of the places 'that had been visited some time before 650 C.E. by Syrian Christian monks from Mesopotamia, Persia and Arabia and no doubt by their mercantile compatriots also.'⁵⁴ While direct evidence is sparse, Whitehouse argues that there was actually a Church of the East community in Kalah in the period up to the ninth century, and the fact that it was a 'leading entrepôt (or trading center) in the medieval Islamic period, suggests strongly some there were merchants.'⁵⁵

The Malaya peninsula was another branch of the Maritime route between the Persian Gulf and China. It is therefore highly plausible that Kalah could have been this kind of trading and mission center, emphasizing all the more that Church of the East missionaries not only had a zeal for their faith, but also for merchant activities. This was also true of the Muslim merchant/missionaries as they carried their faith into places like Malaya and Indonesia. One of the products they would become known for exchanging in later centuries was coffee, called by some 'Islamic wine.'⁵⁶

Later Issues of Western Colonialism in Asia in the Next Five Hundred Years

As Western colonialism in Asia began with the Portuguese in 1498 off the coast of Malabar, it primarily consisted of powers at least nominally identified with Christian faith. To varying degrees, merchant activities for profit of the homelands was combined with mission efforts carried out under the flag of the given budding empire, whether it was Portugal, Spain, France, England, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, or the United States - and often also with its military protection. Hence the mixture and complexity of motivations for greed and profit alongside concern for salvation of subject peoples was jumbled together.

⁵² Bounois (2004: 229).

⁵³ Wolters (1967: 69).

⁵⁴ Colless (1969: 41).

⁵⁵ Whitehouse (1973: 48).

⁵⁶ Chanda (2007: 84).

A humorous anecdote related to these mixed motives comes from 1592 when Western colonialism was in full swing. As noted earlier, coffee was an important product that the Arabs had marketed and sold. The story goes that Pope Clement VII took a sip of coffee and exclaimed ‘Why, this Satan’s drink is so delicious that it would be a pity to let the infidels have exclusive use of it. We shall cheat Satan by baptizing it.’⁵⁷ Not only was coffee ‘baptized’ in coming years, but taken over as a major trading item by Western powers in the following century.

In writing about Western colonialism and trade in Asia or anywhere else globally, the European context itself must be considered. Portugal was the first Western colonial power to interact with Asian Christianity in the Indian context. The Portuguese view of Indian Christians was likely affected by the fact that the Portuguese arrival in Southern India roughly coincided with the Counter-Reformation in Europe. The zeal of the Counter-Reformation to purify the Church from heretical influences may have carried over to how the Portuguese viewed a form of Christianity in Malabar foreign to them.

The above reality was additionally complicated by the trade motivations of the Portuguese. As they saw Christians involved in the lucrative pepper trade, did that result in a desire to not only purify the faith but also control the business? A primary source of only a few decades later, written by Archbishop Gouvea in 1603, highlights this complexity of motivations: ‘Were the motives purely religious, as they were always pictured, or was the religious zeal of the (Portuguese) missionaries increasingly utilized by the interested parties for implementing their mercantilist designs to control the spice-producing community of St. Thomas Christians?’⁵⁸

The mixture of motives between spreading the gospel and spreading commerce under the flag of empire would remain a continued challenge after 1500. The Portuguese clash in the early sixteenth century with existing Christians on the Malabar coast would be repeated again in history, with continued consequences for how business and mission is carried out even today.

Conclusion

Combining merchant activities with the spreading of Christian faith was common to the first fifteen hundred years of the Church in Asia, with more stories needing to be told. It was never easy as the travel involved whether by land or sea was prohibitive in length and potential hardship, and then as now motives could easily be mixed. A sincere desire to see the message of the Christian gospel spread could subtly change to one of greed and personal gain. This is still true today.

What stands out is the lack of separation between merchant activities and the sharing of faith in mission. At times, like in early accounts of Apostle Thomas and Habbanes, teams went out together. At other times the merchant was the missionary, or the missionary the merchant. The primary missionaries of the first fifteen hundred years of Christianity in Asia were monks. Sent from mission-minded monasteries in Mesopotamia and Persia as well as from places further to the East, these monks seemed comfortable with trading in pearls, spices, silk, and more.

⁵⁷ :84

⁵⁸ Gouvea (1603: xxviii), note by editor Pius Malekandethil. (2003)

Where did they receive their training, not only to share faith in diverse cross-cultural contexts, but also in mercantile activities? Unfortunately, there isn't clear evidence for any specific training in the monastic context related to these areas. They did have monastic missionaries returning to the monasteries from farther afield in Asia, with many stories to tell. Did they also impart basic training in business practices for the Silk Roads or the Maritime Route? We simply do not know.

Much changed as the Portuguese advance began at the end of the fifteenth century, but the sharing of faith in mission and the involvement in business and profits would not. What happened when mission and business were combined with empire and military power is a story more frequently told in history. The later story needs to be told in the context of this earlier one, a very different period with a very different context for the Church in Asia.

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