PART ONE

THE FIRST CHRISTIANS: UNTIL 1800
CHAPTER ONE

CHRISTIANITY IN PRE-COLONIAL INDONESIA

The South Indian Thomas Christians trace their faith back to the Apostle Thomas and sometimes also to S. Bartholomew. Scholars are divided on this issue. The possibility of relatively easy travelling from Palestine via Egypt to South India in the first century cannot be denied by any serious scholar. The defenders of an apostolic origin base their arguments on the apocryphal *Acts of (Judas) Thomas* (c. 200) and other third or fourth century documents, the living tradition of the Kerala Christians and also on the ancient tradition of S. Thomas’ tomb near Mylapore (Madras).

Some historians do not accept a voyage of one of Jesus’ disciples as far as India, but all acknowledge the presence of Christian communities in southern India at least since the fourth century. In 67 AD there was already a Jewish colony in Cochin. During the fourth century Persian Christians either rein-vigorated the apostolic church, which had declined over the course of time, or they founded migrant communities on India’s coasts. The merchant *Thomas of Cana* and other saintly men are mentioned in old documents as preachers of Christianity in 345. Since these early times the South Indian Christians have been closely connected with the colourful Church of Mesopotamia and Persia. Naturally they followed the teaching, terminology, and Syriac liturgy of the Persians and therefore were regarded as ‘Nestorians’. The connections between the patriarch in Seleukia-Ktesiphon and the ‘bishop of the Indians’ had been quite close as far as the political situation under Muslim government permitted.

*Persian Christians in South-East Asia*

The southern or maritime Silk Road was already in use by merchants and travellers from Persia during Sassanid times, that is before (and certainly during) Umayad rule, beginning in 661. I-ching used a *Posse* (Persian) ship for his voyage from Canton to Palembang in 671. There were several Persian colonies in Canton and in Hainan.

The Persian or ‘Nestorian’ Church calls itself the ‘Church of the East’. Bishops from ‘India’ attended its synods in the years 820 and 893. Metropolitans of India are mentioned in Persian documents in the sixth and in the fourteenth centuries, and even ‘missionary bishops’ to the ‘Isles of the sea’, of Dabbag (Sumatra or Java?), Sin and Macin (China), who certainly got as far as South
India. This means that at least in the beginning of the sixth century Christianity was well established in India.

Cosmas Indicopleustes met churches in Malabar, Sri Lanka and ‘the rest of the Indias’ during his visit in the 520s. In the seventh century a metropolitan of Fars (south Iran) was reprimanded because he neglected his duties to the Indian churches “which extend from the borders of the Persian Empire to the place they call Qalah, which is at a distance of 1200 parasangs [about 4,000 miles]”. This sentence raises two questions: When was the first metropolitan of India appointed, and where was Qalah situated?

The first metropolitan for ‘India’ had probably been appointed by Patriarch Timothy I (728–823). Qalah could mean Galle (Ceylon), but also Kalah in Malaya. After a study of many Arab manuscripts, G.R. Tibbets locates Qalah on the west coast of Malaya, near the islands of Langkawi. From around this place Christians have been reported as early as 650. Others identify Qalah with Klang and/or Kedah, important harbours for exchange of goods between merchants from India, China and the Indonesian archipelago. Already before 850, Kalah (Chinese Ko-lo) was a stop en route to China as mentioned by Ibn Khurdadhbih. Persian merchants are known to have frequented the Sumatran harbours of Palembang and Lambri (now Banda Aceh). A Persian colony on the Malay Peninsula is reported in Chinese sources during the fifth and sixth centuries. In 717 the Ceylonese Vajrabodhi travelled with 35 Persian merchants to Srivijaya. In Sri Lanka too there was a Persian Christian community in the sixth century as reported by Cosmas Indicopleustes.

During these times missionary monks were trained in the Euphrates and Tigris region of Mesopotamia in great numbers to be sent to the East. Some Persian monks sailed together with Christian merchants “to the country of the Indians” during Sassanid times (sixth century). During Patriarch Timothy I’s reign (780–823) “many monks crossed the sea to India and China with only a staff and a script.” On their way to China, they certainly passed the Straits of Malacca. What do we know about Christians in this area?

In all probability the above-mentioned place of Qalah, 1,200 parasangs away from ‘India’, is the Malayan harbour town of Kalah, somewhere around present day Kedah. During the ninth century Kalah became even more important to the Arab seafarers, who together with Persians traded there with Chinese and Malay merchants. Kalah, Lemuri, Fansur, and Nias occur time and again as stops on the way from the Persian Gulf via Sri Lanka to China.

From all this reliable data it can be stated that Persian and Arab seafarers and merchants sailed to India, visited and lived in different harbours on the West Malayan coast, with some of them sailing further on to China. Persians are known to have used the southern or maritime Silk Road at least since the fourth century. Arab or Tashih traders in the Malayan waters are mentioned as early as 750 and then in greater numbers travelled to China. Quite a number
of them settled in South China harbours and some at intermediate stops. Five hundred Persian families lived during the fourth century in Tun-sun in the Malayan Peninsula. Christians preferred to travel with Persians and on their ships. Among them even some monks sailed to South-East Asia. Nestorians in the church documents speak about itinerant bishops in India and the lands beyond. This background is the setting for the question whether there have been Christian communities on Indonesian soil before the arrival of the Portuguese in these waters (1511).

**Christians in Baros, North Sumatra, and some other places in the Malay Archipelago**

A historian and geographer, who lived in Egypt during the twelfth century, collected all available information about churches and convents in Africa and Asia. He was of Armenian origin and called Shaikh Abu Salih al Armini. He visited India twice. His book *Tadhakur fihi Akhbar min al-Kana‘is wa’l Adyar min Nawahin Misri wal aqtha’aha* was written in the twelfth century in the Coptic tradition. A manuscript was purchased in Egypt in the seventeenth century by Vansleb and preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. This manuscript was translated and edited by B.T.A. Evetts in 1895 in Oxford.1 Abu Salih used the books of Abu Jafar al-Tabari (died 923) and of Al Shabushti (died 988) on the same subject, but he also collected new information wherever possible.

The chapter on India (pp. 296–300) speaks about the Apostle Thomas as its first missionary, about the Christians in the city of Quilon on the coast of Travancore (South India), and its churches. Then he continues:

> Fahsur: Here there are several churches; and all the Christians here are Nestorians; and that is the condition of things here. It is from this place that camphor comes; and this commodity (is a gum which) oozes from the trees. In this town there is one church named after our Lady, the Pure Virgin Mary.

Immediately afterwards Salih talks about Sana in Yemen. This short notice of Abu Salih needs some clarification, for example on Fahsur. A. Butler, who added the notes to Evetts translation, says it should be written *Mansur(ah)*, a country in north-west India, “…famous among the Arabs for its camphor.” Better known for its camphor and frequented by merchants from the Malabar Coast of India is Fansur or Pansur, near Baros on the west coast of northern Sumatra. As with the place, the period of this Christian community cannot be determined exactly. But all information about Persian merchants in South-East

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1 Evetts (ed.) 1895, reprint 1969.
Asia, and the Christians among them, points to a period between the ninth and the eleventh century.

Except for the short notice given by Abu Salih, there is no further information on the Christians at Famsur/Baros. It may be interesting to know that Ebedjesus of Nisibis (1291–1319) mentioned Dabbagh as the district of a bishop. Dabbagh during this period was a common name for Sumatra or Java. In Malacca the Portuguese discovered the foundation of a Chaldean church, after their arrival in 1511. In 1503 three travelling bishops were appointed by Elias V, one among them for Zabagh (Dabbagh), the other two for Sin and Masin (China).

At the court of Queen Tribhuwana (1329–1250) of Majapahit and in Palembang Father J. de Marignolli OFM on his way home from Beijing (1347) met some, possibly local, Christians. Recent local research uncovered an old place name near Baros, Janji Mariah, which could mean ‘Promise of Mary’ or just a ‘solemn’ promise. Recent excavations have shown close connections between Baros, India and the Persian Gulf existing from the ninth to the eleventh century.²

Some Indonesian writers took the conclusion that the first Christians had arrived in the seventh century and established a community in Northern Sumatra. As we have seen above this opinion can not be based on solid facts for the seventh until the ninth centuries.³

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(for a more elaborate bibliography see Heuken 2002)

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³ In the first chapter of the five volume history of Catholicism in Indonesia, published in Indonesian in the early 1970s, the Jesuit Jan Bakker wrote the chapter on the pre-colonial period. Bakker identified in the text of Abu Salih al-Armini Famsur with the place Famsur or modern Baros in Sumatra and took for granted that the various churches of that place were a sign of a Christian community, already in existence in the middle of the seventh century or about 650 CE. This latter fact was an amplification of the reference to Christians in Kalah, in a letter by Iso'yabh III, Nestorian Metropolitan of Erbil and Mosul. (Muskens 1972-I:27–36; cf. R. Duval 1905:182).
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