

Early Signs of Christianity in Indonesia

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Abstract

There is a common opinion that Christianity first was brought to Indonesia by the Portuguese traders in the 16th century. After Jesus' Ascension, Christianity expanded from Jerusalem in all directions – in Roman Empire and outside of it. During the apostolic age, Christianity began to establish itself throughout the Mediterranean. According to *travancore manual*, Thomas of Cana, a Mesopotamian merchant and missionary, introduced Christianity to India in 345 AD. In the midst of the 7th century there were Christians in Pancur, now Kota Barus, Sumatra. There were an archbishop and two bishops in the 8th century in the Sriwijaya empire. From Sumatra, Christians expanded to the central and east Java. Like other religions – Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam – Christianity came to Indonesia from India.

Key words: Christian, early, history, religion, expansion

There is a common opinion that Christianity first was brought to Indonesia by the Portuguese traders in the 16th century. However, old documents tell us another story. Like other religions – Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam – Christianity came to Indonesia from India.

Expansion of Christianity to the East

After Jesus' Ascension, Christianity expanded from Jerusalem in all directions – in Roman Empire and outside of it. According to the acts of the *apostles*--the fourth book in the New Testament--there were Persians, Parthians and Medes among the very first new Christian converts at Pentecost, since then there has been a continuous presence of Christians in Persia/Iran.

During the apostolic age, Christianity began to establish itself throughout the Mediterranean. However, a quite different Christian culture developed on the eastern borders of the roman empire and in Persia. Syriac Christianity owed much to preexistent Jewish communities and the Aramaic language. This language was most probably spoken by Jesus, and, in various modern forms is still spoken by some Christians in Iraq today. They developed their own rite, known as the Syrian or Assyrian rite or also as Chaldean church.

Early Christian communities straddling the Roman -Persian border were in the midst of civil strife. In 313, when Constantine I proclaimed Christianity to be a tolerated religion in the roman empire, the Sassanid rulers of Persia adopted a policy of persecution against Christians, including the double-tax of Shapur II in the 340s. Christians were feared as a subversive and possibly disloyal minority. In the early 5th century official persecution increased once more. These persecutions caused emigrations of Christians along with others to India (Moffette, 1992; Bradley, 2008; Jenkins, 2008).

Christianity in India

Thomas the apostle is credited by tradition for founding the Indian church in 52 A.D. According to the 3rd century text acts of Thomas, originally written in Syriac, when the apostles were in Jerusalem and divided the world among them, it was decided that saint Thomas would go to India. Saint Thomas then arrived in north west India, and baptized king Gondophares and his brother, thereby heralding the beginning of Christianity in India. However, historians generally describe acts of Thomas as a romantic work, rather than historical account, whose characters were

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influenced by Indo-Parthian Kingdom that existed in north-western India (Neil, 2004).

The chronicle of Seert describes an evangelical mission to India by bishop David of Basra around the year 300 (Baum & Winkler, 2003); this metropolitan reportedly made many conversions (Missik, 2000), and it has been speculated that his mission took in areas of southern India (Neil, 2004). According to Travancore manual, Thomas of Cana, a Mesopotamian merchant and missionary, introduced Christianity to India in 345 AD (manuscript volume dated 1604 AD kept in British Museum). He brought 400 Christians from Baghdad, Nineveh, and Jerusalem to Kodungallur. He and his companion Bishop Joseph of Edessa sought refuge from King Cheraman Perumal from persecution of Christians by the Persian king Shapur II. The colony of Syrian Christians, thus established at Kodungallur, became the first recorded Christian community in South India (Latourette, 1940-1949). A number of historians conclude that Thomas of Cana was confused with the 1st century apostle Thomas by India's Syrian Christians sometime after his death and became their Apostle Thomas in India (Gibbon, 1957; Elst, 1992; Vedantham, 1987; Sharan, 1995).

Although, the exact origins of Christianity in India remain unclear, it is generally agreed that Christianity in India is almost as old as Christianity itself and spread in India even before it spread in many, predominantly Christian, nations of Europe.

Originally Christian centers were built in Malabar and Trivandrum on the Indian southern coast. From there they spread to other parts of India, and also overseas. The rite brought from Persia adapted to the Indian situation is known as the Syro-Malabar rite, existing until now in India.

Expansion to Indonesia

The main source about early Christians in Indonesia is the book of Shaykh Abu Salih al-Armini's--who lived in Egypt and was active in 1150-1171 AD. The book, "*tadhakkur fiha akhbar min al-kana'is wa'l-adyar w'al iqtha'aihu*" (Bakker, 1974), is like an encyclopaedia containing information about 707 Christian churches and 181 monasteries in Egypt, Nubia, Abessinia, western Africa, Spain, Arab, India and Indonesia. It contains not only descriptions but also pictures of many of the described places.

There is a problem how far are Abu Salih's information reliable. Many archaeological excavations, done in Egypt in 1963-1964, confirm Abu Salih's informations (Kraus, 1968).

An earlier source, a letter of the bishop Ishoyab from 650 AD, refers about the diocese in Kedah and Malacca, and Christians in islands south of Malacca--the south-east Asian Archipelago. It was the beginning of the Sriwijaya empire (7th – 14th century). The Chinese called it Sanfotsi or San Fo Qi. In Sanskrit and Pali, it was referred to as Yavadesh and Javadeh respectively. The Arabs called it *zabag* and the Khmer called it Melayu (Munoz, 2006).

From all these sources we can conclude that in the midst of the 7th century there were Christians in Pancur, now Kota Barus, Sumatra. In the 8th century in the Sriwijaya empire were an archbishop and two bishops but it is unclear where they did reside. Probably the places were Kalah, Malacca and Palembang. It is unclear how big the Christian community in Sumatra was. However there were many churches in this area which indicates that there was a quite big number of Christians in this area. Names of some churches until now are known in the oral tradition of the people. From Sumatra, Christians expanded to the central and east Java. Portuguese reported that there was a Christian community in the archipelago before the expansion of Islam (Bakker, 1974).

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