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Traces of Syro-Persian Christians in Ancient Ceylon

LI TANG

The Island of Sri Lanka lies in the India Ocean to the south of India but separated from India by the Gulf of Mannar and the Palk Strait (see map overleaf). Because of its strategic geographic location, Sri Lanka once served as the point of intersection on the maritime Silk Route that went across the Indian Ocean. Being itself rich in precious stones, pearls, spices and other natural resources, the island's economy was based on trade.

Throughout its history, Sri Lanka has borne many names. Known to the ancient Greeks and Romans as Taprobane, to the Arabs and Persians as Serendib and the Chinese as the 'Land of Lion' (獅子國), Sri Lanka was an island frequented by seafaring traders. The name Ceylon, which is known to the West, is derived from the Sanskrit Sinhala-dvipa. Sinha means 'Lion', which is connected to the Sinhalese settlement on the island, which, according to Sinhalese legends, happened around 543 BC when the traditional first King Vijaya (r. 543–505 BC) arrived with 700 of followers on the island after being expelled from East India.¹

There are traces of Syro-Persian ('Nestorian') Christians on the Island in the 6th century. However, written sources on the existence of early Christian settlements on the island are not at all plentiful. There are a couple of archaeological discoveries in the former capital Anuradhapura and seaport areas around it. The following pages will discuss those evidences from two sides: archaeological and literary sources.

1. Archaeological discoveries

1.1 The 'Nestorian Cross'

According to various reports, there should be two 'Nestorian' crosses unearthed in Anuradhapura. However, so far only one is seen in the museum of Anuradapura (see Pl. 1). The most important evidence of East Syrian ('Nestorian') presence in Ceylon is the 'Nestorian Cross' engraved on a stone pillar which was discovered in the early 20th century by Edward R. Ayrton (1882–1914), the then commissioner of

For a brief ancient history of Sri Lanka, see H.W. Codrington, *A Short History of Ceylon*, London: Macmillan, 1926 [Reprint Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1970].

archaeology in 1913 at the ancient citadel of Anuradhapura, the one-time capital of the first established Sinhalese Kingdom (377 BC to 1017 AD).

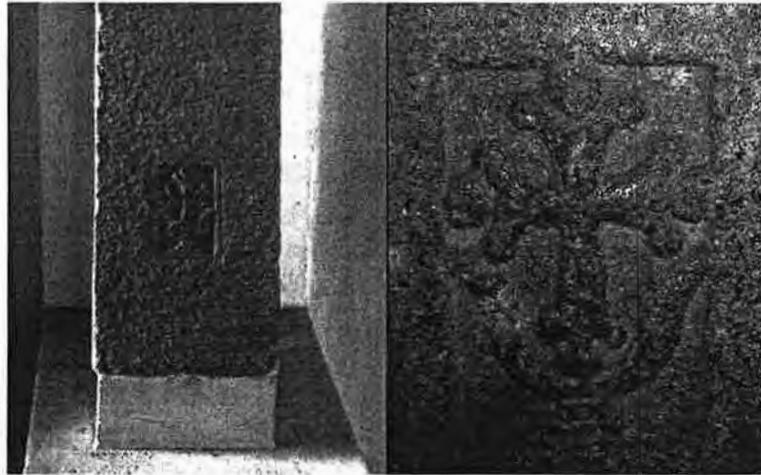


Plate 1: The 'Nestorian Cross' from Anuradhapura, ca. 6th-10th century.
(Photo by author, 2010.)

The 'Nestorian Cross' of Ceylon is engraved on a stone pillar in sunk-relief. The pillar is most probably a part of a building, whether it was a church or a residential place. Similar pillars can also be seen in the churchyard of St. Mary's Orthodox Church in Kottayam, Kerala / India (Pl. 2). This may suggest a similar building material or structure.

As one can see from the close-up view of the 'Nestorian Cross', this is a budded cross with each arm having three buds, which may symbolize faith, hope and love. The motif is similar to those found in India.

There should be another 'Nestorian Cross' unearthed in Sigiriya some years ago which gives space for speculation whether King Kaspaya (5th cent.) and some Lanka kings had any contact with Persian Christians in Ceylon. However, we have not seen its picture so far.² Of course, at this stage, this is only a speculation.

However, the unearthed 'Nestorian Cross' can certainly serve as a piece of vivid, as well as solid, archaeological evidence of the so-called Nestorian Christian presence in ancient Anuradhapura.

2 The Story of Sigiri was deciphered by S. Paranavithana in his book *Sigiri Graffiti*, London: Oxford University Press, 1956.



Plate 2: St. Mary's Orthodox Church in Kottayam, India. (Photo by author, 2010.)



Plate 3: Font unearthed in Mannar, 5th century.
(Photo by author, 2010.)

1.2 A baptismal font?

A second, but debatable archaeological evidence is a font found near Mannar in the northwestern part of Sri Lanka. The font which seems to have been used for religious rituals is now kept in the museum of Vanuniya to the north of Anuradhapura (Pl. 3). The museum explanation note says that it is a doorstep vessel used to collect water for washing your feet. It is normally seen close to a stupa or a statue and kept in front of any religious buildings. It is carved out of stone, which will be coming in different designs or shapes.

Many reports hold belief that this is a baptismal font placed inside a church. However, there is a lack of historical sources and solid archaeological reports on this. Meanwhile, there is no symbol on the font, nor other written sources, which can firmly indicate a Christian origin.

2. Literary sources

2.1 Cosmas Indicopleustes: 'Christian Topography'

The most quoted source of Persian Christians in Ceylon is found in Cosmas Indicopleustes' *Topographia Christiana* (Χριστιανική Τοπογραφία) originally written in Greek about 550 AD. Cosmas was an Alexandrian merchant of Egyptian origin who navigated in the Mediterranean, the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. He was most probably a 'Nestorian merchant'³ who later became a monk.⁴ Although his book vindicates the cosmography of the Old Testament, book 11 and 12 deal with geographical information, which some believed were added to it later. Cosmas said that the information he described comes partly from his personal observation and partly from accurate inquiries, which he made when in the neighborhood of different places.⁵ Chapter 11 describes the island Taprobane:⁶

3 Cosmas said himself that he was a pupil of Patricius, Theodore of Mopsuestia and Diodorus of Tarsus, and a friend of Thomas of Edessa. All of these were, of course, 'Nestorians'.

4 B. Altaner and A. Stuiber, *Patrologie. Leben, Schriften und Lehre der Kirchenväter*, Freiburg: Herder, 1966, p. 517. Cf. T. Hainthaler, 'Cosmas Indicopleustes', in A. Grillmeier, *Jesus der Christus im Glauben der Kirche*, vol. II/4, Freiburg: Herder, 1990, p. 150-165.

5 J.W. McCrindle (trans.), *The Christian Topography of Cosmos Indicopleustes, the Egyptian Monk*, London: Hakluyt Society, p. 371.

6 *Ibid.*, 365-367.

The island also has a church of Persian Christians who have settled there, a presbyter who is appointed from Persia, a Deacon and a complete ecclesiastical ritual.⁷ But the natives and their kings are heathens.⁸ In this island they have many temples, and one, which stands on an eminence, there is a hyacinth as large as a great pine-cone, fiery red, and when seen flashing from a distance, especially if the sun's rays are playing round it, a matchless sight. The island being, as it is, in a central position, is much frequented by ships from all parts of India and from Persia and Ethiopia, and it likewise sends out many of its own. And from the remote countries. I mean Tzimita [i.e. China] and other places, it receives silk, aloes, cloves, sandalwood and other products, and these again are passed on to marts on this side, such as Male, where pepper grows, and to Calliana which exports copper and sesame-logs, and cloth for making dresses, for it also is a great place of business. And to Sindu also where musk and castor is procured and rostaychys, and to Persia and the Homerite country, and to Adule. And the island receives imports from all these marts which we have mentioned and passes them on to the remoter ports, while at the same time, exporting its own produce in both directions.

In this passage what is clear is that first, the Christians on the island whom Cosmas referred to came from Persia and their presbyters were also appointed from their mother church in Persia. In this case, it would clearly indicate that this would be the Church of the East (so-called Nestorian) in Persia. Secondly, these Persian Christians were merchants. Thirdly, the Christian community at this time was small, for they had only a presbyter and a deacon.

Cosmas did not mention the name of the city where the Persian Christians resided. However, one would assume that most foreign merchants would reside in the main cities where commercial and administrative activities took place. Considering the period of the report, that is in the middle of the 6th century and Anuradhapura

7 For a Greek version of this passage, see E.O. Winstedt, *The Christian Topography of Cosmas Indicopleustes*, Cambridge: University Press, 1909, p. 322: ἔχει δὲ ἡ αὐτὴ νῆσος καὶ Ἐκκλησίαν τῶν ἐπιδημούντων Περσῶν Χριστιανῶν, καὶ πρεσβύτερον ἀπὸ Περσίδος χειροτονούμενον, καὶ διάκονον, καὶ πᾶσαν τὴν ἐκκλησιαστικὴν λειτουργίαν.

8 Gr. *allophuloi*. J.E. Tennent, *Christianity in Ceylon. Its introduction and progress under the Portuguese, the Dutch, the British, and American missions. With an historical sketch of the Brahmanical and Buddhist superstitions*, London: Murray, 1850 renders it as 'The natives and their kings were of a different religion', p. 3.

was the capital – if taking the unearthed Nestorian cross into consideration – it can be assumed that foreign merchants would reside in the main city of the island.

Whether these Persian Christians came to Taprobane via India or directly from the Persian Empire, it is left to speculation. However, the passage from Cosmos does provide some information on the ships that navigated in the Indian Ocean. Merchants from Persia seemed to travel by Persian ships.

2.2 A Chinese Buddhist source

A reference to Persian merchants is found in the travelogue of the Buddhist monk Faxian 法顯 (337–422), who travelled along the overland Silk Road from China to India, Sri Lanka, and Nepal in search of Buddhist Scriptures. On his way back, he took the maritime Silk Route from Sri Lanka via Sumatra, then over the South China Sea and back to China. His travelogue *Foguo ji* 佛國記, written in 416 AD and commonly known as *Records of Buddhistic Kingdoms*, provides rich information on the geography, transportation, culture, customs, products, society and religion of over 30 countries he visited. His travelogue is one of the most comprehensive works in ancient China on Central Asia, South and Southeast Asia.

Faxian spent two years from 410–411 AD in Ceylon or what he called ‘The Land of the Lion 獅子國’.⁹ Faxian embarked on a big merchant ship in winter 410 from Moli Guo 摩利國 (today’s Tamlook in West Bangol) in the beginning of the winter monsoon season. The ship traveled southwest for 14 days and nights and arrived in Ceylon. According to Faxian’s record,¹⁰

The land of lion has an area around 10 square *li* [traditional Chinese unit of distance, 1 *li* = 0.5 km] where precious gems and mani pearls [mani: precious stone which was carried to the north and east of India by Hindu traders and Buddhist missionaries and pilgrims; it is ‘moni’ in Chinese, understood as ‘pearl’, rather than jewels in general] (or beads) were produced. The king sent guards to protect this place and demands 3 out 10 of these peals which the collectors can find. The country had originally no human inhabitants. Only ghosts (spirits) and dragons dwelt there. Merchants from various countries traded there [...]

9 Shijiguo 獅子國 is translated according to the meaning of Sinhala, whereas in another Chinese record by the Buddhist pilgrim Xuanzang, Ceylon is called Sengkaluo, 僧迦羅國, which is a phonetic translation of Sinhala.

10 See a digital version of Faxian’s *Foguoji* in Chinese online, <http://www.guoxue123.com/shibu/0301/0000/003.htm> (accessed on 24 May 2014).

Faxian described the king's city as having a huge Dagoba in the north and a Bodhi tree. Inside the Dagoba, the Buddha's tooth was kept. This description matches the layout of the city of Anuradhapura. The most important sentence that follows his description is:

其城中多居士长者萨薄商人。屋宇严丽，巷陌平整。四衢道头皆作说法堂，月八日、十四日、十五日，铺施高座，道俗四众皆集听法

Inside this city, there are many Vaishyas,¹¹ elder Sabo merchants whose houses are stately and beautiful and their streets and passages are orderly. At the end of four streets, there are [Buddhist] preaching halls. On the 8th, 14th and 15th days of the month, high seats are put. All the people, monks or lay people all gathered here to listen to the teaching of the law.¹²

The first sentence in the above mentioned source is subject to interpretation. Since Faxian's text is written in ancient times it is without punctuation. I deliberately leave this sentence unpunctuated because different ways of punctuating may result in different interpretations. For instance, there are two ways to separate a group of nouns in this sentence 居士长者萨薄商人: either 居士, 长者萨薄, 商人 or 居士, 长者, 萨薄商人. The former way of punctuating put 'elder Sabao' together. The most important words in this passage are 'elder Sabao'.

The origin of the Chinese word Sabao 萨薄 or Sabao 萨保 has been debated among scholars for quite a long time. There are mainly three origins proposed by scholars: Sanskrit, Persian/Sogdian and Syriac. 'Sabao' is a foreign loan word in Chinese. Scholars normally agree that this word is rooted in the Sanskrit *sārthavāha* meaning the head of the caravan team. Since the Sogdians from East Persia were active Silk Road merchants in the first millennium and the Sogdian language is of Indo-Iranian origin, so Sabao in Chinese sources mainly referred to a person of Sogdian origin. Originally, that is during Faxian's time around 5th century, it mainly referred to the leader of a guild or a group of merchants, which was a secular

11 Jushi 居士, Sanskrit: Gṛhapati. The translation according to its meaning is 'jiazhu 家主', i.e. 'the master of the house'. The word has two dimensions of meanings: 1) Originally, it refers to the rich Vaishyas merchants who belong to the third class of in the Caste system. 2) Later, a Buddhist term designating those who have acquired certain disciplines and most of them were Vaishyas. In the content of Faxian's description, it is more likely that it refers to rich Vaishyas merchants.

12 This sentence refers to the Buddhist tradition that people gather on the 8th, 14th and 15th of the month to listen to the sermon.

title. Later during the Tang Dynasty when many Sogdians in China were believers of Zoroastrianism, then very often a Sabo was a leader of this community of Zoroastrian believers. However, what is unique about the Sogdians was that among this people, there were Zoroastrians, Manicheans and Nestorian Christians. Since Faxian did not describe particularly what religion these Sabo merchants in Ceylon had, the only certain conclusion that can be drawn is that they were of Persian origin.

Having said that, one should not rule out the possibility that these Sabo merchants were East Syriac ('Nestorian') Christians. Gabriel Devéria believed that the title Sabo has a Syriac origin. He held that the word 'Sabo/Sabao' in Chinese is a phonetic translation of the Syriac word 'Sabo ܣܒܘܐ', 'the elder' corresponding to the Greek word for presbyter. This view was supported by Paul Pelliot.¹³ There is one piece of evidence of the usage of Sabo written in Syriac in a Chinese source, i.e. the inscription of the famous Chinese Nestorian Stele of Xi'anfu. In the Syriac part of the inscription, where names of clergy were written in both Chinese and Syriac, there is one registered person called: 'Simeon, qashisha w-sabo' ('Simon, priest and elder'). This Simeon has no Chinese name on the inscription.

3. Trade-induced migration of Syro-Persian communities in ancient Ceylon

Literary and archaeological evidences demonstrate that Persian Christians on the island of Ceylon were merchants and traders with high status. From the unearthed 'Nestorian' cross as well as the land of origin of these Christians, which early travelers described, one can be almost certain that these Persian Christians belonged to the Church of the East ('Nestorian') or East Syriac Church.

3.1 Syro-Persian Christians in Ceylon as merchants

The coming of Syro-Persian Christians to Ceylon was trade-related. Ceylon lies in a central position in the Indian Ocean. With its numerous bays and anchorages for ships, the island served in ancient and medieval times as a center of transit trade. Ceylon, being rich in gems, pearls, ivory, cinnamon etc., attracted foreign merchants such as Persians, Arabs and Indians. Meanwhile, Ceylon imported horses from Persia. The most attractive goods from Ceylon were pearls and precious stones, which could be refined for jewelry by artisans back in the Middle East – a traditional profession of many Syriac Christians. In the port of Manthai, pottery of

13 M.G. Devéria, 'Musulmans et Manichéens chinois', *Journal Asiatique*, n.s. 10 (1897), p. 445-484, here 445. Cf. P. Pelliot, 'Le Sa-pau', *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-orient*, 3/4 (1903), p. 665-671, here 671.

black polished wares with orange coloured clay, originally from Persia, were excavated, also, pottery pieces of huge jars of Middle Eastern origin used for transporting goods were also found.¹⁴

Ceylon had trade activities with the Romans. Roman coins of 4th–8th centuries were discovered on the island. Traders from Egypt, subject to the Roman Empire, visited the country. Small Roman copper coins of the 4th century at one time formed the bulk of the currency. They were found in large quantities not only in almost every port but even in Sigiriya.¹⁵ The earliest map of Ceylon which we possess is that of Ptolemy in the first century AD in which the port Mahattitha/Mantotoa and two royal cities Anurogrammon/Anuradhapura were marked. Trade in Ceylon was connected to that in India. Prior to the 13th century, Mahattitha (great port, or Mantota) opposite Mannar on the northwestern coast was the main port linking Sri Lanka to India and the Persian Gulf. Being located as the mouth of the Malvatu River,¹⁶ Mahattitha port had easy access to the capital Anuradhapura, which lies on the bank of the same river.

Persian vessels were found in active competition with Rome in the distant ports of Ceylon, according to Cosmas Indicopleutes.¹⁷

3.2 Travel routes from Persia to Ceylon

The possible travel routes of these early Christians from Persia to Ceylon could be a combination of both overland and maritime Silk Routes. There is evidence that Sogdians left their footprints along the Silk Road from Persia or Sogdiana in Transoxiana via Karakorum in today's Northern Pakistan to other parts of India. This overland route is sometimes called the 'Buddhist route', on which many Buddhist pilgrims traveled. Many Sogdian inscriptions or rock-carvings were found in northern Pakistan¹⁸ and in Ladakh (formerly part of Tibet, now belonging to the Indian-controlled Kashmir), a 'Nestorian' cross was carved on the rock. From Indian ports in the southern and northwestern regions of the sub-continent, they could take the ship to northern Ceylon.

14 See pictures at <http://www.scribd.com/doc/64450499/Ancient-Trade-Activities-in-Sri-Lanka> (accessed on 24 May 2014).

15 Codrington, *A Short History of Ceylon*, p. 31–32.

16 Known as 'Malvatu Oya' in Sinhala, 'Aruvi Aru' in Tamil. The ancient name is 'Tamirabharani'.

17 Cf. McCrindle, *The Christian Topography of Cosmas Indicopleustes*, 365. See also Cosmas' chapter xi.

18 N. Sims-Williams, 'The Sogdian Merchants in China and India' in A. Cadonna and L. Lanciotti (eds), *Chine e Iran de Alessandro Magno alla dinastia Tang*, Firenze: Olschki, 1996, p. 52–53.

Another trade route started from Mesopotamia through the Persian province of Fars, to Kerman, then further to India. From India one could use the maritime route to Ceylon. Maritime trade relations between Persia and India became regular after Darius conquered India. Trade was carried on by coasting-vessels between the mouths of the Indus and the Persian Gulf.¹⁹ Sailors had long acquainted themselves with the Monsoon seasons in the Indian Ocean. Those bound for India or Ceylon left in July and if they cleared the Red Sea before the first of September they had the monsoon to assist their passage across the ocean.

4. Trade, migration and religion

Both written records and unearthed artifacts, though not yet plentiful, have given evidence of Syro-Persian Christian merchants in Ceylon in the period between the 5th and 6th centuries. The best evidence is the 'Nestorian Cross'. Combining these evidences with the historical context, one can make several remarks, if not conclusive, on the Syro-Christian community in early Ceylon.

First, the earliest extant record of East Iranian or Sogdian merchants in Ceylon was written by the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Faxian in the early 5th century, if the meaning of 'Sabao' is interpreted as being of Persian origin. Chinese scholar Rui Chuanming stated that Sogdians were active caravan traders along the Silk Road in Central Asia, China and India and there should be no surprise if Sogdians in India used the Sanskrit name *sārthavāha* for their caravan leaders.²⁰ These merchants came to Ceylon initially for trade purposes. Due to the long distance between Persia and Ceylon, these merchants began to settle down on the island. Therefore, trade-related migration took place. We know from Faxian's record, at least by the beginning of the 5th century, their trade network between Persia and Ceylon had been firmly secured. Trade must have been very profitable and prosperous for these Persian Christian merchants since they already possessed beautiful houses in a rich residential area in Anuradhapura. Trade in ancient Ceylon was a royal activity which was controlled and supervised by the kings in Ceylon who ensured the safety of traders. Foreign traders had to apply for permission from the Ceylon government in order to trade on the island. These Persian merchants must have built

19 G. Rawlinson, *The Five Great Monarchies of the Ancient Eastern World, or The History, Geography, and Antiquities of Chaldaea, Assyria, Babylon, Media, and Persia*, vol. iii, London: 1879, p. 431, quoted in Hasan's *A History of Persian Navigation*, p.22.

20 Rui, Chuanming 芮传明 'Sabao de zai renshi' '萨宝' 的再认识 [Re-exploring the meaning of 'Sabao']. <http://www.eurasianhistory.com/data/articles/a03/339.html> (accessed on 24 May 2014).

a good and trusting relationship with the royal government in Ceylon, and therefore enjoyed high status.

Secondly, at least by the middle of the 6th century, there had been enough Christians from Persia to form a local ecclesiastical community in the capital Anuradhapura. These Christians belonged to the Church of the East (East Syrian Church) in Persia. As Cosmas recorded, these Christians had a presbyter appointed from Persia as well as a complete ecclesiastical ritual. This means these Persian Christians had settled down on the island of Ceylon.

Thirdly, after the 7th century, there is no literary trace of Persian Christianity in Ceylon. None of the medieval travelers who visited the island mentioned anything about Nestorian Christians there. It seems that Persian Christian communities disappeared from the island after the Islamic conquest of Persia. More conclusive assessment of Persian Christians in Ceylon cannot be completed unless more related archaeological discoveries are found.