

Rome and the Indian Ocean: The Classical World in a Global Context

UNIT 8 BOOKLET – CHRISTIANITY IN THE INDIAN OCEAN SPACE



Martyrdom of St Thomas the Apostle – Peter Paul Rubens, 1693

For this online task you please examine the traditions about the development of Christianity in India (and other parts of the western Indian Ocean). A key question is: does sufficient evidence exist to support the idea of Christian communities in first century CE India? For many Christians in India today, it is an article of faith that one of the Apostles, Thomas “the doubter”, travelled to India. Extracts from Cosmas’ *Christian Topography* are given below, while a translation of some of the *Acts of Thomas* can be found on Moodle. Read these in conjunction some of the modern scholarship indicated below. While doing so, consider the following questions, and please post any thoughts you have on the unit forum:

Questions

1. Does there appear to be any historical veracity to the traditions about St Thomas?
2. Why do you think there are variations in the traditions surrounding St Thomas?
3. What might we make of the importance of the “Persian” Church in India?
4. What factors might have helped spread Christianity across the Indian Ocean space?

Ancient source:

The Acts of Thomas. Trans. by Lambdin et al. (2011). London: Aziloth Books.

Modern Scholarship:

Hegarty, J. M. (2018). “Across the Indian Ocean: Reconsidering Christianity to South Asia in the ninth century”, in J. Lossi and N. Baker-Brian (eds.), *A companion to religion in late antiquity*. Wiley Blackwell, pp. 207-231.

Optional

Moffet, S. H. (1998). *A History of Christianity in Asia Volume I: Beginnings to 1500*. New York: Orbis Books.
– Chapters 2 and 13 on Moodle.

Cosmas Indicopleustes *Christian Topography* 3.42-48 - Trans. by McCrindle, J. W. 1897.

In like manner we see that the Church has never been destroyed, but that its adherents have been greatly multiplied, and that similarly the whole earth has been filled with the doctrine of the Lord Christ, and is still being filled, and that the gospel is preached throughout all the world. This I avouch to be the veritable fact, from what I have seen and heard in the many places which I have visited.

Even in Taprobanê, an island in Further India, where the Indian sea is, there is a Church of Christians, with clergy and a body of believers, but I know not whether there be any Christians in the parts beyond it. In the country called Malê, where the pepper grows, there is also a church, and at another place called Calliana there is moreover a bishop, who is appointed from Persia. In the island, again, called the Island of Dioscoridês, which is situated in the same Indian sea, and where the inhabitants speak Greek, having been originally colonists sent thither by the Ptolemies who succeeded Alexander the Macedonian, there are clergy who receive their ordination in Persia, and are sent on to the island, and there is also a multitude of Christians. I sailed along the coast of this island, but did not land upon it. I met, however, with some of its Greek-speaking people who had come over into Ethiopia. And so likewise among the Bactrians and Huns and Persians, and the rest of the Indians, Persarmenians, and Medes and Elamites, and throughout the whole land of Persia there is no limit to the number of churches with bishops and very large communities of Christian people, as well as many martyrs, and monks also living as hermits.

(11.21, 27-28)

This is a large oceanic island lying in the Indian sea. By the Indians it is called Sielediba, but by the Greeks Taprobanê... The island has also a church of Persian Christians who have settled there, and a Presbyter who is appointed from Persia, and a Deacon and a complete ecclesiastical ritual. But the natives and their kings are heathens