

St. Thomas the Apostle (of India)

Written by W.J.Pais

Little is recorded of St. Thomas the Apostle, nevertheless thanks to the [fourth Gospel](#) his [personality](#)

is clearer to us than that of some others of the

[Twelve](#)

. His name occurs in all the lists of the

[Synoptists](#)

(

[Matthew 10:3](#)

;

[Mark 3:18](#)

;

[Luke 6](#)

, cf.

[Acts 1:13](#)

), but in

[St. John](#)

he plays a distinctive part. First, when

[Jesus](#)

announced His intention of returning to

[Judea](#)

to visit Lazarus, "Thomas" who is called Didymus [the twin], said to his fellow disciples: "Let us also go, that we may die with him" (

[John 11:16](#)

). Again it was St. Thomas who during the discourse before the

[Last Supper](#)

raised an objection: "Thomas saith to him: Lord, we

[know](#)

not whither thou goest; and how can we

[know](#)

the way?" (

[John 14:5](#)

). But more especially St. Thomas is remembered for his incredulity when the other Apostles announced

[Christ's Resurrection](#)

to him: "Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe" (

[John 20:25](#)

); but eight days later he made his act of

[faith](#)

, drawing down the rebuke of

[Jesus](#)

: "Because thou hast seen me, Thomas, thou hast believed; blessed are they that have not seen, and have believed" (

[John 20:29](#)

).

This exhausts all our certain [knowledge](#) regarding the Apostle but his name is the starting point of a considerable [apocryphal](#) literature, and there are also certain historical data which suggest that some of this [apocryphal](#)

material may contain germs of [truth](#)

. The principal document concerning him is the ["Acta Thomae"](#)

, preserved to us with some variations both in Greek and in Syriac, and bearing unmistakeable signs of its

[Gnostic](#)

origin. It may indeed be the work of

[Bardesanes](#)

himself. The story in many of its particulars is utterly extravagant, but it is the early [date](#)

, being assigned by Harnack (Chronologie, ii, 172) to the beginning of the third century, before A.D. 220. If the place of its origin is really

[Edessa](#)

, as Harnack and others for sound reasons supposed (ibid., p. 176), this would lend considerable probability to the statement, explicitly made in "Acta" (Bonnet, cap. 170, p. 286), that the

[relics](#)

of Apostle Thomas, which we

[know](#)

to have been

[venerated](#)

at

[Edessa](#)

, had really come from the East. The extravagance of the legend may be judged from the fact that in more than one place (cap. 31, p. 148) it represents Thomas (Judas Thomas, as he is called here and elsewhere in Syriac tradition) as the twin brother of

[Jesus](#)

. The Thomas in Syriac is equivalent to *didymos*

in Greek, and means twin. Rendel Harris who exaggerates very much the cult of the Dioscuri, wishes to regard this as a transformation of a

[pagan](#)

worship of

[Edessa](#)

but the point is at best problematical. The story itself runs briefly as follows: At the division of the Apostles,

[India](#)

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fell to the lot of Thomas, but he declared his inability to go, whereupon his Master

[Jesus](#)

appeared in a

[supernatural](#)

way to Abban, the envoy of Gundafor, an Indian king, and sold Thomas to him to be his slave and serve Gundafor as a carpenter. Then Abban and Thomas sailed away until they came to Andrapolis, where they landed and attended the marriage feast of the ruler's daughter. Strange occurrences followed and

[Christ](#)

under the appearance of Thomas exhorted the bride to remain a Virgin. Coming to

[India](#)

Thomas undertook to build a palace for Gundafor, but spend the money entrusted to him on the poor. Gundafor

[imprisoned](#)

him; but the Apostle escaped

[miraculously](#)

and Gundafor was converted. Going about the country to preach, Thomas met with strange adventures from dragons and wild asses. Then he came to the city of King Misdai (Syriac Mazdai), where he converted Tertia the wife of Misdai and Vazan his son. After this he was condemned to death, led out of city to a hill, and pierced through with spears by four soldiers.

He was

[buried](#)

in the

[tomb](#)

of the ancient kings but his remains were afterwards removed to the West.

Now it is certainly a remarkable fact that about the year A.D. 46 a king was reigning over that part of [Asia](#) south of Himalayas now represented by Afghanistan, Baluchistan, the Punjab, and Sind, who bore the name Gondophernes or Guduphara. This we [know](#) both from the discovery of

[coins](#)

, some of the Parthian type with Greek legends, others of the Indian types with the legends in an Indian dialect in Kharoshthi characters. Despite sundry minor variations the identity of the name with the Gundafor of the

["Acta Thomae"](#)

is unmistakable and is hardly disputed. Further we have the evidence of the Takht-i-Bahi inscription, which is dated and which the best specialists accept as establishing the King Gunduphara probably began to reign about A.D. 20 and was still reigning in 46. Again there are excellent reasons for

[believing](#)

that Misdai or Mazdai may well be transformation of a

[Hindu](#)

name made on the Iranian soil. In this case it will probably represent a certain King Vasudeva of Mathura, a successor of Kanishka. No

[doubt](#)

it can be urged that the

[Gnostic](#)

romancer who wrote the

["Acta Thomae"](#)

may have adopted a few historical Indian names to lend verisimilitude to his fabrication, but as Mr. Fleet urges in his severely critical paper "the names put forward here in connection with St. Thomas are distinctly not such as have lived in Indian story and tradition" (Journal of R. Asiatic Soc., 1905, p. 235).

On the other hand, though the tradition that St. Thomas preached in "India" was widely spread in both East and West and is to be found in such writers as [Ephraem Syrus](#), [Ambrose](#),

Paulinus,

[Jerome](#)

, and, later

[Gregory of Tours](#)

and others, still it is difficult to discover any adequate support for the long-accepted

[belief](#)

that St. Thomas pushed his missionary journeys as far south as Mylapore, not far from

[Madras](#)

, and there suffered

[martyrdom](#)

. In that region is still to be found a granite

[bas-relief](#)

cross with a Pahlavi (ancient Persian) inscription

[dating](#)

from the seventh century, and the tradition that it was here that St. Thomas laid down his life is locally very strong. Certain it is also that on the Malabar or west coast of southern

[India](#)

a

[body of Christians](#)

still exists using a form of Syriac for its

[liturgical](#)

language. Whether this Church dates from the time of St. Thomas the Apostle (there was a Syro-Chaldean

[bishop](#)

John "from

[India](#)

and

[Persia](#)

" who assisted at the

[Council of Nicea](#)

in 325) or whether the Gospel was first preached there in 345 owing to the Persian

[persecution](#)

under Shapur (or Sapor), or whether the Syrian missionaries who accompanied a certain Thomas Cana penetrated to the Malabar coast about the year 745 seems difficult to determine. We

[know](#)

only that in the sixth century

[Cosmas Indicopleustes](#)

speaks of the existence of

[Christians](#)

at Male (? Malabar) under a

[bishop](#)

who had been

[consecrated](#)

in

[Persia](#)

[King Alfred the Great](#)

is stated in the "Anglo-Saxon Chronicle" to have sent an expedition to establish relations with these

[Christians](#)

of the Far East. On the other hand the reputed

[relics](#)

of St. Thomas were certainly at

[Edessa](#)

in the fourth century, and there they remained until they were translated to Chios in 1258 and towards to Ortona. The improbable suggestion that St. Thomas preached in America (American Eccles. Rev., 1899, pp. 1-18) is based upon a misunderstanding of the text of the Acts of the Apostles (

[1:8](#)

; cf. Berchet "Fonte italiane per la storia della scoperta del Nuovo Mondo", II, 236, and I, 44).

Besides the "[Acta Thomae](#)" of which a different and notably shorter redaction exists in [Ethiopic](#)

and Latin, we have an abbreviated form of a so-called "Gospel of Thomas" originally

[Gnostic](#)

, as we

[know](#)

it now merely a fantastical history of the childhood of

[Jesus](#)

, without any notably

[heretical](#)

colouring. There is also a "Revelatio Thomae", condemned as

[apocryphal](#)

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in the Degree of Pope Gelasius, which has recently been recovered from various sources in a fragmentary condition (see the full text in the *Revue benedictine*, 1911, pp. 359-374).

[Source](#)