
AN INSCRIBED ALTARPIECE FROM KOCHI, INDIA



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On January 20, 2009, a wooden altarpiece inscribed and painted in beautiful Indian Neo-Renaissance style was found among the antique shops of Mettanchery in Kochi (**Fig. 1**).

In the upper centre of the altarpiece, a sword-pierced flaming heart is in the middle of a radiant sun which emanates rays in all directions. This appears to be the Heart of the Holy Virgin, about whom it is said: “a sword shall pierce through your own soul also, that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed” (Lk 2:36). Thus, the altar is probably connected to the cult of the Sorrowful Heart of the Holy Virgin. The image is surrounded by rose garlands. Roses are a well-established floral symbol of the Virgin. Underneath is the altar proper, where architectural elements of a virtual building are painted in detail with great skill. Between painted Corinthian capitals, two Renaissance-type winged angels hold in their outer hands one end of a scroll inscribed in Syriac characters. With their inner hands, they hold a radiate crown replete with gem stones and surmounted with a cross. The space below the decorated arch must have contained an image of the Virgin Mary, perpetually crowned by the angels as Regina Mundi. This is confirmed by the inscription (**Fig. 2**), which displays an interesting mixture of Syriac and Malayalam, spiced with a scribal error:

ܐܦܝܫܐ ܕܕܝܘܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܡ: ܡܠܟܝܐ

‘ēbbā: d-dēva-^cammā: ‘appīs[y] ḥ-lāpayn

“Fruit of the Mother of God, intercede for us!”

This is what the inscription says at first reading. It is to be noted that ܕܝܘܬܐ (*dēva-^cammā*) is a Malayalam word inserted into the Syriac text. *Dēva-^cammā* is the Malayalam term for Theotokos or Theomētōr, or Yāldat Alāhā: “Mother of God.” Yet, this interpretation is problematic for the following reason: The “Fruit of the Mother of God” can only be Jesus Christ. However, normally he is not one who needs to intercede for us, he gives his mercy directly. This may not be as unheard of as it sounds at first. In fact, Saint Paul and the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews several times say that Jesus Christ is the one who mediates (μεσιτεύει) for us (1Tim 2:5; Heb 8:6, 9:15).

This term is translated in the Vulgate as “mediator,” so that the idea is precisely the same. However, *προσδευω*, which would properly mean “intercede” is not used in the New Testament in this context, but only concerning the intercession of Saint Paul on behalf of Christ.

All this considered, this reading ܐܒܒܐ (*ēbbā*) should be rejected as a scribal error. If we consider that what the altar represents is, in fact, the sorrowful Heart of the Mother of God (the Heart pierced by a lance), we may come forward with the following hypothesis: Probably we should consider ܐܒܒܐ (*ēbbā*) as an erroneous writing for ܠܒܒܐ (*lēbbā*). In this case we get the following transcription and translation:

ܠܒܒܐ: ܕܕܝܒܐ: ܐܦܦܝܫ: ܗܠܐܦܝܢ

lēbbā: d-dēva-ammā: ‘appīs[y] ḥ-lāpayn

“Heart of the Mother of God, intercede for us!”

If we accept this emendation, the inscription becomes understandable and corresponds to what the decoration of the altar represents. This also permits us to interpret the two angels as holding the crown of the Virgin Mary, whose image must have been placed in the niche. It is to be noted that the same word with the *lamad* not ligatured with the *bet* is also attested in an inscription currently in the Syro-Malabar Church of the Virgin Mary in Kaduthuruthy.¹ It is possible that the painter of the Mettanchery altarpiece copied the same word, but with the C-looking *lamad* of the Kaduthuruthy inscription.

Originally the antiquities shopkeeper claimed that this was a family altar. According to him, the rich Syrian Catholic families used to have such altarpieces at home. However, at a later occasion he admitted that the altarpiece was originally a side-altar in a Syrian Catholic church in the Kuttunadu region, near Alleppey. The altar was dismantled some fifteen years before it was displayed in the shop (that is, around 1994) and, somehow, the shopkeeper acquired it.

According to the shopkeeper, the altarpiece dates to the end of the eighteenth century. This dating cannot be excluded, as devotion to the Sacred Heart of the Virgin existed since the Middle Ages. However, because the universal Roman Catholic devotion to the Sacred Heart of the Holy Virgin was initiated in 1799 by Pope Pius VI, a nineteenth-century date seems more plausible. Yet, a relatively early nineteenth-century date cannot be excluded.²

This altarpiece is unique and beautiful, an exquisite product of Indian Christian Neo-Renaissance art. It contains a unique inscription, which - apparently - displays a mixture of Syriac and Malayalam, with an error in the first word of the Syriac text.³ This mixture is not coincidental: it is based on the age-old custom of the Indo-Syrian Christian community to write Malayalam in a mixed East Syriac-Old Malayalam alphabet, commonly called Garshuni/Karson/Suriyāni Malayalam.⁴ The use of this alphabet, being an extended version of the Syriac script, has permitted an easy transition from Malayalam to Syriac and vice versa. This use of a mixed language is similar to the traditional *Mānipravāla* (‘Jewel and Coral’), a poetic language mixing Malayalam with Sanskrit. Many Indo-Syrian Christian manuscripts witness this mixture of Malayalam-Syriac dialect and culture.



Fig. 1. The Mettanchery Altarpiece



Fig. 2. The Mettanchery Altarpiece Inscription

NOTES

¹ Françoise Briquel Chatonnet, Alain Desreumaux, and Jacob Thekeparampil, *Recueil des inscriptions syriaques, Tome 1: Kerala* (Paris: Académie des inscriptions et belles lettres, 2008), p. 69. The Kaduthuruthy inscription has a comparable inscription: ܠܠܒ ܕܝܫܘܥ ܠܠܒ ܕܝܫܘܥ ܠܠܒ ܕܝܫܘܥ “Heart of Jesus have mercy upon us!” but its highly stylized letters are difficult to identify.

² This is the suggestion of Professor Hubert Kaufhold in a private communication. See the entry on the “Devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary” in the *Catholic Encyclopedia*: (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07168a.htm>).

³ On May 15, 2009, after negotiations with the shopkeeper, the altar was offered for 130,000 INR. Fr Columba Stewart, Director of Hill Museum and Manuscript Library, collected the money in the United States, and the rescued artwork was donated to the Catholic Art Museum, Ernakulam, under the curatorship of Fr. Ignatius Payyappilly, where it can be found today. The photos were made when the altarpiece was still in the antique shop.

⁴ To standardise terminology, I use “Garshuni Malayalam” to indicate that this is a Garshuni-type script to write Malayalam. In Malayalam, the script is called “Suriyāni script” (*Suriyāni eḷuttu*). The etymology is complicated by the fact that Suriyāni does not mean “Syriac”: it was the name of the Christian community of Sassanid Persia, and is a Middle-Persian loanword in Malayalam. The standard expression in English-language Indian local literature is Malayalam Karson. Garshuni/Karson Malayalam is a script based on the 22 letters, vowel signs and the secondary signs of the East Syriac alphabet, to which originally 8 letters were added from an ancient Dravidian alphabet, probably Tekken-Malāyāḷma, to note the Malayalam language. See I. Perczel, “Garshuni Malayalam: A Witness to an Early Stage of Indian Christian Literature”, in *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 17, 2: 263-323. On the versatility of the users of Garshuni Malayalam to switch from Syriac to Malayalam and vice versa as well as about their mixed language – the Suriyāni Malayālam religiolect, see *ibid.* p. 303-304. The Garshuni Malayalam fonts have been designed by Anshuman Pandey and were included as “Syriac Supplement Range: 0860–086F” in the Unicode Standard, version 10.0, on 20 June 2017 (see the latest version at <https://www.unicode.org/charts/PDF/U0860.pdf>).