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Empire, Christianity, and Writing

Dias Mario Antony

[ABSTRACT: This paper examines how European writings from the late fifteenth to the early seventeenth centuries constructed and represented the St. Thomas Christians of Malabar within the intertwined frameworks of empire, religion, and knowledge production. Beginning with the early Portuguese voyages to India, these texts—ranging from travel narratives and administrative reports to catechisms and epic poetry—translated the unfamiliar cultures and faith practices of the East into idioms legible to European audiences. The study traces how initial narratives of discovery, which anticipated Christian allies in the East, gradually gave way to imperial historiographies and missionary texts that sought to discipline and assimilate local Christianities into the Catholic fold. By analysing key works such as *The Journal of the First Voyage of Vasco da Gama*, Tomé Pires's *Suma Oriental*, João de Barros's *Décadas da India*, and Antonio de Gouvea's *Jornada de Arcebispo*, this paper reveals how representations of the 'Christian other' evolved alongside the Portuguese Empire's commercial, political, and theological ambitions. It argues that these writings not only reflected but actively shaped European perceptions of the Orient and its Christians, laying the epistemic foundations of later colonial and orientalist discourses.
KEYWORDS: Portuguese Empire, St. Thomas Christians, Travel Writing, Missionary Texts, Early Modern Europe; Orientalism, Knowledge Production and Colonial Discourse, Reformation and Counter-Reformation]

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Introduction

The Europeans, particularly the Portuguese, wrote about the communities that they encountered on their voyages in the late fifteenth, sixteenth, and early seventeenth centuries. These writings described the cultures and geographies they encountered and translated them into an idiom suited to a predominantly European audience. From 1498 onward, over the next 150 years, these texts took various forms and genres in response to the ambitions and realities of the Portuguese Empire in the Indian subcontinent. This paper will explore the context in which these varied European texts emerged and represented the Christian, the 'Christian other', and the 'heathen other'.

Most of the European writings on the Indian subcontinent in the wake of Vasco da Gama's arrival on the Malabar Coast are replete with references to the existence of Christians in the region. The authors of these texts do not betray any surprise at encountering these communities. In fact, from the twelfth century onwards, popular stories circulating in Europe talked about Prester John, a patriarch and king who ruled over a large and powerful Christian nation lost amidst the Muslims and pagans in the Orient (Bar-Ilan, 1995). In their attempts to find 'god, glory, and gold', the St. Thomas Christians of Malabar appear in early European sources of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries as potential allies. This is embodied in the travel writings that predominate the textual landscape of the period.

The second half of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries witnessed a remarkable change in the manner in which St. Thomas Christians of Malabar are represented in the Portuguese sources of the time. The St. Thomas Christians of Malabar emerge as heretics and deviants who had to be disciplined into Catholic norms of conformity. New genres of writing, such as grand histories and epics extolling the Empire, and Catechism textbooks, emerge during this time. Even existing genres, such as travel writings, undergo a metamorphosis. These emergent and transformed types of writing were forged out of the fortunes of the Portuguese Empire in the East and moulded by the forces of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation unfolding in Europe at the time.

The Paradigm of Discovery: The Ocean, the Christians, and the Monsters

The early European writings of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries follow the paradigm of discovery. They discuss in detail the European encounter with the East, especially the pioneering voyages undertaken by the Portuguese. The *Journal of the First Voyage of Vasco da Gama* (Ravenstein, 2010), *Calcoen: A Dutch Narrative of the Second Voyage of Vasco da Gama to Calicut* (Berjeau, 1874), *and The Travels of Ludovico di Varthema* (Varthema, 1863), all form a part of this corpus of texts. These three texts, written in Portuguese, Dutch, and Italian, all follow the paradigm of discovery. The excitement and sense of adventure that charged these journeys and voyages is palpable in all three texts. These texts attempted, and to some extent succeeded, in documenting and transporting back to Europe details of the cultures and geographies that the Europeans encountered in the East. The East was translated and understood through a process of finding similarities and dissimilarities with Europe. Hopes of finding Christians who shared the same beliefs and

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ambitions of a universal Christian brotherhood run rife in these writings. This is best illustrated in the *Journal of the First Voyage of Vasco da Gama*.

The Journal of the First Voyage of Vasco da Gama is the only known copy of a journal written on board the ship during Gama's first voyage to India. The manuscript was first published in 1834, after it was discovered at the Convent of Holy Cross in Coimbra by Alexandre Herculano, an eminent Portuguese Historian of the period (Ames, 2009). The authorship of the journal is a matter of dispute among Historians. Most historians attribute the authorship to either Álvaro Velho or João de Sá, both sailors who accompanied Gama on his first voyage. Despite the uncertainty surrounding the document's authorship, it provides valuable information about the first voyage and the motivations and mentalities of the people behind the venture. The contents of the journal are also corroborated by information contained in the contemporary letters of King Manuel and Girolamo Sernigi[1] immediately following the first voyage of Vasco da Gama. The journal provides a very vivid account of the long and treacherous voyage to India. It is replete with information about the geographies, cultures, diseases, and navigational challenges that the voyagers encounter on their quest to find the sea route to the East. The journal provides us with glimpses into the personality of Vasco da Gama, devoid of any deification of Gama or the events that unfolded during the Voyage. The text captures both the exceptional and the mundane aspects of Gama's accomplishments, without hyperbole and embellishment. Most importantly, meticulous attention is paid to recording the presence or absence of Christians in the lands that they encountered.

The actual presence and sometimes hopes of Christian communities in the strange lands the Europeans encountered inspired confidence and hope among the early voyagers. The world of the Europeans was neatly divided between the Christians, 'the moors', and the 'heathens'. Religion emerges in these narratives as a determinant of whether a particular people were to be trusted or not. The journal carries a perennial hope of finding Christians and a persistent distrust of Muslims. For instance, the entries made about Mozambique say that

> there were many cities along the coast, and also an island, one half of the population of which consisted of Moors and the other half of Christians, who were at war with each other. This island was said to be very wealthy. We were told, moreover, that Prester John resided not far from this place; that he held many cities along the coast, and that the inhabitants of those cities were great merchants and owned big ships. The residence of Prester John was said to be far in the interior, and could be reached only on the back of camels. These Moors had also brought hither two Christian captives from India. This information, and many other things which we heard, rendered us so happy that we cried with joy, and prayed God to grant us health, so that we might behold what we so much desired. (Ravenstein, 2010, p. 24)

Similarly, when they reach the city of Malindi, located along the coast of the Indian Ocean in modern-day Kenya, the author makes an interesting observation. He writes that

> We found here four vessels belonging to India Christians. When they came for the first time one board Paulo da Gama's ship, the captain-

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> major being there at the time, they were shown an altar-piece representing Our Lady at the foot of the cross, with Jesus Christ in her arms and the apostles around her. When the Indians saw this picture, they prostrated themselves, and as long as we were there, they came to say their prayers in front of it, bringing offerings of cloves, pepper, and other things.... They told us that they ate no beef.... On the day on which the captain-major went up to the town in the boats, these Christian Indians fired off many bombards from their vessels, and when they saw him pass, they raised their hands and shouted lustily *Christ! Christ!* (Ravenstein, 2010, pp. 44–45)

The probability of the Indians being Christians is highly unlikely. It is more likely that the images and pictures were seen as outlandish representations of their own deities and idols. Even if these were Christians, the probability of them uttering the word 'Christ' is highly unlikely, given that indigenous Christians are more likely to have used vernacular terms like *Karthavu, Daivam,* or *Thampuran*. Even Syriac terms, such as *Isho*, and Greek terms such as *Yeshua*, could have been familiar.

The stories of the kingdom of Prester John and hopes of finding Christian allies in the East were deeply etched in the minds of the voyagers. When Vasco da Gama landed in Calicut on Sunday, 20 May 1498, he was met by two people from Tunis who spoke Castilian. They asked him the purpose of his visit. Gama, without any hesitation, promptly replied that he had come in search of "Christians and Spices" (Ravenstein, 2010, p. 48). The author of the *Journal of the First Voyage* gives a very confident account of the 'Christians' they encountered in Calicut.

> The city of Calecut is inhabited by Christians. They are of a tawny complexion. Some of them have big beards and long hair, whilst others clip their hair short of shave the head, merely allowing a tuft to remain on the crown as sign that they are Christians. They also wear moustaches. They pierce the ears and wear much gold in them. They go naked down to the waist, covering their lower extremities with very fine cotton stuffs. But it is only the most respectable who do this, for the other manage as best they are able. (Ravenstein, 2010, p. 49)

It was interesting to note how the author immediately associated the mark of respectability with being Christian. It would only be a matter of time before the Portuguese realised that they had mistaken the Hindus of Calicut for Christians. The news of having found the lost Christians of the East was clearly conveyed back to Portugal, evidenced by a letter that was written by King Manuel to the Cardinal Protector that described the majority of the people of Calicut as Christians (Ravenstein, 2010, p. 114). The presence of Christian communities is also mentioned in a contemporary letter written by Girolamo Sernigi to a gentleman in Florence (Ravenstein, 2010, pp. 125–126). The journal also gives a fascinating description of what the author and his fellow voyagers believed to be a church.

> When we arrived [at Calecut] they took us to a large church, and this is what we saw: The body of the church is as large as a monastery, all built of hewn stone and covered with tiles. At the main entrance rises

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> a pillar of bronze as high as a mast, on the top of which was perched a bird, apparently a cock. In addition to this, there was another pillar as high as a man, and very stout. In the centre of the body of the church rose a chapel, all built of hewn stone, with a bronze door sufficient wide for a man to pass, and stone steps leading up to it. Within this sanctuary stood a small image which they said represented Our Lady. Along the walls, by the main entrance, hung seven small bells. In this church the captain-major said his prayers, and we with him. (Ravenstein, 2010, pp. 52–54)

The author then goes on to say that only certain servants of the church who wore some threads passing over the left shoulder and under the right arm, in the same manner that deacons wore their stoles, were allowed inside the 'chapel'. Clearly, the Gama and his crew had mistaken a temple for a church and the sanctum sanctorum for a chapel. Fernão Lopes de Castanheda, in his *History of the Discovery and Conquest of India,* recounts this incident from the first voyage from a different point of view. He says that John de Salla, one of Gama's crew members, who expressed doubts when he quipped that "if this be ye diuel, I worship god [sic]" (Castanheda and Lichefield, 1582, pp. 41–42). Gama dismissively laughed at the comment of his crew member, but by the time Castanheda published his account in 1551, the Portuguese had long realised one of their first mistakes in India. These realisations came through tireless explorations, labelling, and categorisations. Often, vocabularies had to be invented to describe what they encountered in the East.

The categorisation of the East created by the Portuguese was not without prejudices or precedents. The familiar was put under the banner of the 'civilised' and the unfamiliar was labelled as 'barbaric'. These ideas were nothing new. It had its beginnings in European classical ideas that described the East in terms of monsters, magicians, and marvels. Dorothy Fiqueira tells us that these writings examined civilisation or the lack thereof in both the personal and the public sphere. In the personal sphere, brutishness was seen as manifesting in extravagant sexual practices. In the public sphere, civilisation was defined by who constituted the nobility in the land. More importantly, in most of these accounts, the presence of civilisation was marked by the presence of Christians (Fiqueira, 2004, pp. 77–78). Such writings are not without precedent. The juxtaposition between the civilised native Christians and the uncivilised native heathen can also be seen in the writings of the Italian Niccolò de' Conti, who visited India a few decades before the arrival of the Portuguese. Niccolò de' Conti's account is one of the most detailed accounts of the areas around the Indian Ocean before the Portuguese-led expeditions of the late fifteenth century. It profoundly influenced the European imagination of the East. Niccolò de' Conti described the Christians of India as gentle, wise, accomplished, and virtuous. In stark contrast, the non-Christians were described as those who indulged in mortifications of the flesh, self-sacrifice, and deviant sexual behaviours. Indians were described as biologically and morally monstrous (Fiqueira, 2004, p. 79). The 'Indian Other' was defined through the double optic of the Christian and the monster, the civilised and the barbarian (Fiqueira, 2004, p. 80). The classical narratives described the literal monsters that were said to inhabit the East, but as travellers could not produce any specimens, these literal monsters had, by the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, evolved into figurative monsters—the racially degenerate, the sexually aberrant, and the spiritually perverse.

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This sort of dehumanisation is also visible in the violence that is recounted in the Dutch narrative about the second voyage of Vasco da Gama. Like the journal of Vasco da Gama's first voyage, this too is an anonymous text. However, the places mentioned in the text and the timing of the arrival of the expedition, as mentioned in the text, make it, definitively, a part of Gama's second voyage to India, authored by someone who accompanied him on this expedition. The text is filled with detailed descriptions of the gruesome violence and bloodshed unleashed by the Portuguese on the non-Christians. The text does not show any signs of sympathy or remorse, but a sense of domination and dehumanisation of the 'moors' and the 'heathens' prevail through the narrative. So, what about writings by Europeans who were not part of the Portuguese colonial project? How were Christians and non-Christians represented in them?

Ludovico di Varthema's account is very useful for understanding this. Varthema was an Italian aristocrat, traveller, and diarist. His book, originally titled *Itinerario de Ludouico de Varthema Bolognese*[2], was published in 1510 in Rome. The book gives a detailed account of his journeys across the Eastern world between 1503 and 1508. Varthema passed through Cannanore, Calicut, and Cacolon in Malabar.[3] What makes Varthema's account interesting is that he is not visiting Malabar as part of the Portuguese project. In fact, Varthema skipped past Cochin, where the Portuguese had their strongest presence at the time and sailed via the backwaters as far as Cacolon. It is in Cacolon that Varthema meets the St. Thomas Christians of the region.

> In this city, we found some Christians of those of Saint Thomas, some of whom are merchants, and believe in Christ, as we do. These say that every three years a priest comes there to baptize them, and that he comes from Babylon. These Christians keep Lent longer than we do; but they keep Easter like ourselves, and they all observe the same solemnities that we do. But they say mass like the Greeks. The names of whom are four, that is to say, John, James, Matthew, and Thomas. (Varthema et al., 1863, p. 180)

Despite correctly identifying the Christians of Malabar and not being associated with the Portuguese, his method of writing about the communities he encountered is not much different from the other European writers of the time. Understandings of Oriental Christianity are mediated through European notions of Christianity. Varthema, too, like his Portuguese counterparts, labels the 'heathens' of India, especially the women, as licentious. For instance, he dedicates an entire chapter in his book to describing how the 'heathens' exchange their wives (Varthema et al., 1863, p. 145). It would therefore not be wrong to say that Varthema, like his Portuguese contemporaries, had prejudices rooted in the classical binary of the civilised Christian and the barbarian other.

Writing an Empire: Creating Knowledge, Histories, and Legends

As the lands of the East became more familiar, the paradigm of discovery was replaced by a new paradigm that engaged with collecting, documenting, and classifying the East. These projects were mainly undertaken by royal officials who travelled to India in the early

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sixteenth century. Among these officials, two names are particularly important for us—Tomé Pires and Duarte Barbosa. Pires wrote a landmark work which focused on Asian trade titled *Suma Oriental que trata do Mar Roxo até aos Chins*.[4] He wrote the work while he was in Malacca and India between 1512 and 1515. Pires was a person who was involved in making and selling medicinal drugs for the Portuguese princes before he came to India. At the court of King Manuel I, Pires had access to some of the best humanist education available during the time. Therefore, it is not surprising that he mentions Italian and classical authors in the beginning of his book. João de Barros, writing a few years later, would describe Pires as a "man of letters" with "curiosity and spirit" in addition to being talented and experienced in commerce (Xavier and Zupanov, 205, pp. 32–33). Pires left Portugal in 1511 and was stationed in Cannanore, where he was in charge of various medicinal drugs, their acquisition and transport to Portugal. Given the nature of his responsibilities in the Malabar, he pays close attention to the natural history and geography of the region. Within this framework of geography, he offered a panoramic view of the world in which he lived. He discussed the rulers of the land, their territorial boundaries, the cities and their inhabitants, the customs of the people and their economy. Pires writes from the perspective of an official who is trying to gather information relevant to the colonial project that was centred around trade and commerce. It is therefore interesting to see how the Christians of Malabar are represented in the writings of Pires:

> There are fifteen thousand Christians in this province of Malabar, dating back to the time of St. Thomas the Apostle. Two thousand of these are men of repute, noblemen, merchants, estimable people, and the others are craftsmen, poor people. They are privileged and are allowed to touch the Nayars. These Christians live in the district from Chetwayi (*Chetua*) to Quilon (*Coulam*). (Pires and Cortesão, 1944, p. 73)

Pires is quick to point out that Christians belong to the 'higher castes' and are noblemen, merchants, and craftsmen. The 'lower castes', on the other hand, are depicted in his writings as racially and morally inferior. The non-Christian 'other' also appears in his writings as lacking moral certitude. He describes the Nayar women as "licentious" and devoid of virtue, who collect multiple sexual partners, do not sew or work, but only eat and amuse themselves (Pires and Cortesão, 1944, p. 71). Although he may have internalised the caste hierarchies of the time, the association of the 'pagan', the 'infidel', or the 'heathen' with the racially degenerate, sexually degenerate, and the spiritually perverse continued.

Another contemporary account is the *Livro de Duarte Barbosa* or also known as the *Book of Duarte Barbosa*. The work was written in 1515 in Portugal. It is one of the best examples of Portuguese travel writing. We know from a letter that Barbosa wrote to King Manuel I of Portugal in 1513 that he was the scrivener appointed in Cannanore. Barbosa was also well-versed in the local language. In fact, in 1514, Afonso de Albuquerque attempted to use Barbosa's knowledge of the local dialect to try to convert the King of Kochi. Like the account of Pires, Barbosa's writing is from a time when the Portuguese had established themselves on the Malabar coast. Like Pires, Barbosa is also descriptive about the human and physical geography of the places where the Portuguese were present. He is careful to provide details that may be of interest to Portuguese commercial interests in the region. Interestingly,

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Barbosa finds it important to stress the authenticity of his account by stating what he has presented is first-hand information collected from conversations with the locals and from personal experience and observation. Joan-Pau Rubiès (2000) calls it the "protocol of description" (p. 121).

The texts that were produced by Pires and Barbosa were, in part, a response to the political and administrative needs of the Portuguese in India. These texts are considered among the earliest modern European geographies of Asia. The works of both Pires and Barbosa initially circulated in manuscript form in the courts of Lisbon, where they would have been read by both humanists and crown officials. The *Suma Oriental* has also made it into the accounts of other writers of the period. For instance, it was translated into Italian and included in Giovanni Battista Ramusio's printed collection called *Of Navigations and Travels,* which was published in the year 1550. Thus, the text written by officials in India lived a second life through translations into other European languages. The role played by these texts in the creation of the Portuguese colonial knowledge, which aided the building and sustenance of a commercial empire that stretched from Europe to Japan, cannot be discounted. The emergence of the Portuguese seaborne empire eventually led to the emergence of a new set of sources more concerned with the articulation of Portuguese political power and sovereignty in the region. Chief among these sources were histories of the Portuguese empire.

One of the earliest such works is the *Lendas da India*[5] by Gaspar Correa. It was published several centuries after Correa wrote it in the 16th century, in four volumes, between 1858 and 1866. Not much is known about Gaspar Correa or his background. Our information is limited to the fact that he travelled to India in 1514 and served as secretary to Afonso de Albuquerque. He would return to his home country of Portugal in 1529 for a brief time before returning to India. His writing draws heavily on the accounts of previous visitors to India. Nonetheless, his account is a valuable source that provides us with a glimpse into the thirty-five years he spent in India, working in close quarters with the highest Portuguese authorities. His *Lendas da India* traces the history of the Portuguese in India from 1497 to 1549. As secretary to Albuquerque, large volumes of privileged information passed through his hands. He places great importance on the commercial motives of the Portuguese in the East. Most importantly, Correa's account shows a tendency towards documenting the history of the Portuguese empire in India, building a narrative that deifies the pioneers who found the sea route to India, and lauding the achievements of the Portuguese empire in India. This turn towards writing grand histories of the Portuguese maritime empire should be seen as an attempt to articulate and re-enact Portuguese power in the region.

Angela Barreto Xavier and Ines Zupanov talk about how these grand narratives became a location for European desires and fantasies. Memories of Alexander's unfulfilled conquest of India were alive in European memories. Therefore, the 'discovery' and 'establishment' of a Portuguese maritime empire in India gave the Portuguese confidence to project and perceive themselves as the successors of the classical Graeco-Roman empire, the harbingers of a new 'golden age' in Europe. Afonso de Albuquerque and João de Castro's exploits were represented as achievements that surpassed even those of Alexander the Great and Augustus (Xavier and Zupanov, 2015, p. 7) Vasco da Gama emerged as a deified figure. Correa, for instance, is full of praise for those before him who played a significant role in the establishment and growth of the Portuguese colonial empire. These narratives were also intended to drive home the

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glory and might of the Portuguese empire to the audiences back in Europe. Such histories of the empire acquired maturity with the *Historia do Descubrimento e Conquista da India Pelos Portugueses*[6] of Lopes de Castanheda's published in 1551 and the multi-volume *Décadas da Asia*[7] by João de Barros and Diogo de Couto (1552–1636). Like Correa, these authors, too, were active participants in the ventures of the Portuguese colonial state.

Castanheda's father was a royal officer who was a judge in Goa. Castanheda accompanied his father to India and the Moluccas in 1528. He spent around ten years in these two places, during which he collected as much information as he could about the 'discovery' and conquest of India by the Portuguese. When he returned to Portugal after his stint in the East, he had collected enough written and oral source materials for writing a history of the empire. Some of these sources also included previous accounts of the Portuguese in India, including that of Duarte Barbosa, which he relied on for the early histories of the empire in India. Castanheda's work is among the most extensive accounts of the Portuguese empire in India, perhaps only second to Barros' and Couto's *Décadas da Asia*. The case of João de Barros is really interesting. Barros wrote the first four decades of the *Décadas da Asia,* but had never visited Asia in his entire lifetime. He based his work on accounts, texts, and images that arrived from India. This was possible because, as a royal administrative officer in the Casa da India[8], Barros had access to the archives and firsthand official information coming from the East. He even had access to interpreters to handle information in the diverse languages of the East. Diogo de Couto picked up from where Barros left.

Unlike Barros, who never visited India, Couto lived close to fifty years in India, and this gave him an opportunity to write a first-hand account of what he witnessed and experienced in India. He, too, had access to a lot of information to work with. He was the chief keeper of records at the Torre de Tombo da India, the main official archive of the Portuguese empire in India at the time. Xavier and Zupanov have argued that the *Décadas da India* is at the juncture of classicisation and orientalisation and that it could perhaps be considered the first truly orientalist book (Xavier and Zupanov, 2015, p. 20). Contrary to this position, Joan-Pau Rubiès (2000) argues that it is a 'proto-orientalist' work. Nevertheless, it can be said with a fair amount of certainty that the works of Correa, Castanheda, Barros, and Couto crystallised the *topoi* regarding India in Europe. The internal structure and content of the works of these authors would be appropriated and used extensively by later European writers. For instance, the internal categorisation of these texts was along the lines of geography, polity, and culture. Xavier and Zupanov (2015) have also noted that this method of structuring the texts became a blueprint for other European texts. It also allowed for inter-textual 'borrowing' and plagiarism, and depicted the Asians as mostly objects of Portuguese and European actions.

There is a transformation that one can observe from the time that Castanheda writes to the time of Barros. For the former, the history of the Portuguese empire begins with João II's decision to find a sea route from Europe to India. For Barros, the scheme is grander; for him, the conquest of Asia is a continuation of earlier struggles and an extension of the *Reconquista*.[9] The authors writing these histories of the empire were an eclectic mix of people, including nobles, men of letters, and those from humbler backgrounds; some belonged to religious orders, and others were laymen. Writing for the empire would not be complete without talking about the creation of legends for the empire. Voluminous grand narratives of the empire were soon found to be insufficient and inefficient to carry the weight of the

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empire. This shift from the dry prose of history to the verbose form of poetry is epitomised in Luis Vaz de Camões' *Os Lusíadas* published in the year 1572.

Os Lusíadas celebrates the discovery of the maritime route from Europe to India by Vasco da Gama. Fashioned along the lines of the Greek classics, it renders a fantastical representation of the Portuguese Voyages. The poem is considered to be the national epic of Portugal. The position given to the poem was similar to that which was accorded to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in ancient Greece and the *Aeneid* for the ancient Romans. Camões, like Barros, harped on the greatness of the Portuguese empire and its connection with the classical past. For instance, the Portuguese genealogy was traced back to the tribe of Lusos, a tribe that inhabited Iberia in Roman times, but who were also considered to be the true heirs of the Greeks and Romans. Xavier and Zupanov (2015) also tell us that India became a place of universal desire where the virtues of the Portuguese would be clearly revealed. The epic by Camões sheds light on the mentalities that governed the Portuguese colonial project and how the Orient became a space where classical imaginings and fantasies of Europe could be re-enacted and reproduced.

Within the first five decades of the coming of the Portuguese to the coast of Malabar, various paradigms were adopted in European and, especially, Portuguese writings on the Orient. Pires, Barbosa, Correa, Castanheda, Barros, Couto, and Camões are all writing for the empire, but following different genres and paradigms. The differences in genre and paradigm were dictated by the fortunes and necessities of the Portuguese colonial state. All the authors wrote from a position of power and created the knowledge, the histories, and the legends that were necessary to carry the weight of the Portuguese empire.

Translating Christianity from the Orient

At the time that Barros and Camões were creating the grand narratives of the Portuguese empire, a new genre of writing created by the missionaries started emerging. These writings emerged as a result of the universalising tendencies of Portuguese Catholicism and an attempt to translate them for the Christians of India, both those converted to Christianity by the Portuguese and the native St. Thomas Christians. Catholic missionaries from the sixteenth century realised that translating Christian religious texts into the local idiom was the only way to convert and fortify the faith of the new converts. It was one thing to make the local Christians memorise Latin prayers and teach them to respond to liturgical gestures, but proper conversion would mean teaching them to think and feel like real Christians. For this, the missionaries themselves had to learn the local idioms first, including the local language. This mission was primarily undertaken by missionaries belonging to the Society of Jesus, more popularly called the Jesuits. This was also one manner in which the Jesuits differentiated themselves from other congregations, such as the Franciscans, who established themselves much earlier in India. The Jesuits learned the languages spoken by the Christians in India and took some of the early steps towards Orientalist practice in India, according to Xavier and Zupanov (2015).

Catholic doctrines and sacramental traditions in the form of catechism textbooks were a product of this attempt to translate Catholicism into the local idiom. In these catechism textbooks, European missionaries, especially Portuguese Jesuit missionaries, attempted to

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explain Catholic teachings and beliefs through Indian categories of thought and expression. A letter that Francis Xavier, one of the founders of the Society of Jesus, wrote from Cochin to the Society of Jesus describing his activities on the fisheries coast is quite revealing:

> I and Francis Mancias are now living amongst the Christians of Comorin. They are very numerous and increase largely every day. When I first came, I asked them, if they knew anything about our Lord Jesus Christ. But when I came to the points of faith in details and asked them what they thought of them, and what more they believed now than when they were infidels, they only replied that they were Christians, but that as they are ignorant of Portuguese, they know nothing of the precepts and mysteries of our holy religion. We could not understand one another, as I spoke Castilian and they Malabar; so, I picked out the most intelligent and well-read of them and then sought out with the greatest diligence men who knew both languages. We held meetings for several days, and by our joint efforts and with infinite difficulty we translated the Catechism into Malabar tongue. This I learned by heart and then began to go through all the villages of the coast, calling around me by the sound of a bell as many as I could, children and men. I assembled them twice a day and taught them the Christian doctrine: and thus, in the space of a month, the children had it well by heart. And all the time I kept telling them to go on teaching in their turn whatever they had learnt to their parents, family and neighbours. (Kuriakose, 2017, p. 27)

This project of translating Christianity into the local idiom would be carried forward by another Jesuit by the name of Henrique Henriques. He wrote the short catechism titled *Tampiran Vanakkam*[10], which was published on 20 October 1578 in Coulam (modern-day Kollam). The fact that it was the first printed work in any vernacular language script of India makes the work all the more interesting. It shows how technologies such as printing aided the missionary ventures of the time and resulted in the emergence of new forms of writing that were disseminated widely among the local populations. Anand Amaladass writes about how catechism emerged as a missionary tool in the East during the late sixteenth century, and how it attempts to translate, through local idioms, global universalising forms of Christianity (Amaladass, 2018, p. 170). The *Tampiran Vanakkam* would be immediately followed by the *Kirisithiyaani Vanakkam* in 1579 and a Tamil translation of the *Confessionario*, a confession manual of the Jesuits, in 1580. The Latin works that were translated by Henriques into Tamil were sprinkled with Portuguese words. He did not use classical Tamil but that which was spoken by the people. Amaladass talks about how he created myths centred around the world of the native Tamil Christian. For instance, in his Tamil translation of the *Flos Sanctorum,* a work that was originally in Latin, the religious world is depicted as divided into that of the Muslims, Jews, Christians, and the Tamils. In the following extract from the *Flos Sanctorum* that talks about the birth of Christ, Europe, including Portugal, is decentred, and the Tamils were seen as synonymous with the category of 'heathen':

> At the time of the birth of Jesus Christ as man, except for Jews and Tamils, there were no Muslims. So, when Jesus was born, an angel appeared and made known the news of his birth to the Jewish

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> shepherds and a star appeared to the three Tamil kings. (Amaladass, 2017, pp. 173–174; see also Henriques, 1967, p. 7)

By creating a Christian world that was relatively more familiar to the Tamils, it would remove the stigma attached to a belief system that would otherwise be construed as completely alien. Henrique Henriques would be one of the first in a list that would include other Jesuits like Roberto de Nobili and Joseph Beschi. However, not all missionary writings followed the same paradigm. Some writings, such as *Das Opinioes, Ritos e Cerimonias, de Todos os Gentios da India*[11], written by Agostinho de Azevedo in 1580, adhered to the orientalist paradigm and enticed the European gaze (Xavier and Zupanov, 2015, p. 137). Azevedo starts in the style of the Orientalists by identifying what he refers to as "authentic" books composed in "their Latin", i.e., Sanskrit, as his primary source (Xavier and Zupanov, 2015, p. 136). He consulted the Vedas, Shastras, and the Puranas as part of his project. He supplemented what he found and understood from these texts with ethnographic and anecdotal evidence as well as his own speculations. Pilgrimages to temples, cow worship, immortality of the soul, and practices such as hook-swinging and throwing oneself before the processional chariot did not escape the Orientalist gaze. The writings of Azevedo were the first attempts at describing what would two decades later be called by the sixteenth-century Portuguese writer Gonçalo Fernandes Trancoso as the *maquina do bramanismo* or the machine of Brahmanism. Trancoso used the term to refer to the system of Brahmanical rituals and practices that was associated with the life cycle. There is a proliferation of Portuguese writings that deal with the 'pagan religion' between the 1580s and the 1640s. It has been argued that it was the result of a lack of evangelising success amongst the heathens of India and a "response to the problems of missionary methodology" (Xavier and Zupanov, 2015, p. 139; also see Rubiés, 2000, pp. 315–17).

Titles such as *Conquista Espiritual do Oriente,* meaning 'The Spiritual Conquest of the East', written by Paulo da Trindade in the 1630s, capture these anxieties quite well. Paulo da Trindade, who was a friar of the Franciscan order, stated in the prologue to his work that for some years he desired to write a counter-narrative to the "books written in Italian and printed in Rome" that promoted the idea that "the friars of Saint Francis in India did not care about Christianization" (Xavier and Zupanov, 2015, pp. 174–175). This is reflective not just of missionary anxieties but also of the heterogeneous nature of the missionary landscape that emerges in sixteenth-century India, marked by inter-denominational and inter-congregational conflicts. These anxieties were also perpetuated by the currents of Reformation and Counter-Reformation unfolding in Europe in the sixteenth century, and they were not just reserved for the 'pagans' but also the St. Thomas Christians who did not conform to notions of Catholicism dictated by the Portuguese. This anxiety directed against the native Christians is clearly visible in the *Jornada de Arcebispo*[12] written by an Augustinian friar named Antonio de Gouvea in 1603. It was published three years later from the city of Coimbra in Portugal in 1606.

The *Jornada de Arcebispo* recounts a chain of visits made by Dom Alexis Menezes to the settlements and churches of the St. Thomas Christians of the Malabar in the year 1599. The objective of the visits was to bring the Christian communities of the region under the

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obedience of the Roman Catholic Church. In the prologue to the work, the author claims that the book talks about the

> bringing of Christians who in this Oriental India are called as of St. Thomas, residents of the Mountains of Kingdoms of Malabar, to the obedience of the Holy Roman Church and giving up of the errors in which they lived, embracing the truth of the purity of the Catholic Faith, of which they are kept apart. (Gouvea and Malekandathil, 2003, p. LXXVIII)

The text found wide readership in Europe, which at the time was being pulled apart by the aftershocks of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. Within a span of just three years, the text was translated into French and published in Brussels and Antwerp (de Gouvea, 1609). A Latin version was published as late as the eighteenth century, attesting to the longevity of the circulation of the text (de Gouvea, 1745). The author's background is quite interesting here and sheds light on inter-congregational disputes and ambitions that were at work among the missionaries in the East. The author of the text, Antonio de Gouvea, was a friar who belonged to the religious order of St. Augustine and taught theology at the Augustinian monastery in Goa.[13] Gouvea did not participate in any of the events mentioned in the *Jornada*. Still, he tells us that he was given the duty of gathering 'true information' about the journey of Archbishop Menezes, as the extant accounts in Europe did not provide any information about the 'remarkable events' that happened during the journeys in the *Serra* (Gouvea and Malekandathil, 2003). The emphasis on the 'remarkable events' may have also been an attempt on the part of Gouvea to salvage the reputation of the Augustinians after the embarrassment that they had suffered in Europe because of another Augustinian priest, Martin Luther (de Kloguen, 2005, p. 80). This also reveals the congregational competitions that existed between the various missionary orders. The Jesuits had already marked their presence through the works of people like Henrique Henriques, and the puritanism of the writings of Franciscans like Trindade, and Augustinians like Gouvea, shows an attempt to carve a space for themselves in the missionary landscape of India.

The reflections of the conflicts that emerged in Europe after the Reformation and Counter-Reformation are visible in the non-missionary writers of the period as well. For instance, François Pyrard de Laval, a French navigator who visited India in the first decade of the seventeenth century, was captured and imprisoned by the Portuguese in Cochin, suspecting him to be a Dutchman and Lutheran. Others, such as Pietro Della Valle, an Italian who travelled in the Southern regions of India between 1623 and 1624, talk about the tensions that were fomented in the native Christian communities by the Portuguese. This was also a period when the very survival of the Portuguese empire was being threatened by the rise of other European powers, especially the Dutch and the English. This created a new generation of European writers who followed many of the formulas of Portuguese writers when they talked about the East and Christianity in the East. One name that must be mentioned in this context is Philippus Baldaeus, a Dutch priest, who wrote a work titled *Naauwkeurige beschryvinge van Malabar en Choromandel*.[14] The work was completed in the 1640s and published in the year 1672. When the Dutch finally occupied Malabar in 1661, Baldaeus participated in the event. Baldaeus, in many ways, continued the project that was started by the Portuguese writers, including the Portuguese missionaries of the later period. In fact, he referred

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extensively from the Jesuits' libraries in the East and used categories that the Portuguese deployed to understand the East. Later English writers like Michael Geddes (1694), who wrote *The History of the Church of Malabar*, were critical of the violent methods used by Roman prelates to subjugate the St. Thomas Christians. Despite this criticism, Geddes and others continued to employ the very categories and structures of thought introduced by the Portuguese to understand the Orient.

Thus, we see Christianity came to be translated in various ways in the East. It was an attempt to salvage a proselytising mission that was not living up to expectations, especially in the context of a newfound zeal fuelled by the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation in Europe. The Jesuit missionaries led this project of translating Christianity into the native idiom in India. The relative success of the Jesuit missions seems to have sparked off similar ventures among other missionary orders as well. Texts were also used by friars of various missionary orders, such as the Franciscans and the Augustinians, to increase their clout and standing in Europe, and they took recourse to different kinds of genres to achieve these objectives. While the later-day writings, especially the Protestant writings by the Dutch and English authors, often spoke of the violence of the Catholic regime, at the same time, they followed many of the categories of thought and expression used by the Portuguese to understand and define the East.

Conclusion

This paper primarily examines how European sources represented the St. Thomas Christians. However, it must be acknowledged that a substantial number of indigenous records in Syriac spoke about both the St. Thomas Christians and the Portuguese. Unfortunately, substantial chunks of these records were burnt by Dom Alexis Menezes after the Synod of Diamper. The Goan provincial councils had given strict instructions to seize sectarian books. Even the merchants who passed through Gao had their books taken away at checkpoints. As early as 1585, the Third Provincial Council of Goa ordered corrections and rewriting of books in Chaldean and Malayalam. After 1599, it took a more radical turn with the public burning of books that were seen as "heretical" (Xavier and Zupanov, 2015, p. 135). More recently, scholars have also pointed out that the idea of a complete destruction of the Syriac indigenous sources is a myth. Istvan Perczel, for instance, has pointed out that a substantial number of Syriac manuscripts have survived, albeit in private collections (Perczel, 2011, pp. 87–104). Some of these sources have the potential to give us narratives that engage with the European accounts that have been examined in this paper. Most of these sources, which are in Syriac or in Garshuni Malayalam[15] lack translations and are therefore beyond the scope of this study.

While surveying the European writings of the late fifteenth, sixteenth, and early seventeenth centuries that talk about the Orient, several conclusions can be drawn. First, the sources available for the study of the encounter between the St. Thomas Christians and the Portuguese are heterogeneous in terms of language, genre and motive. The early accounts drew on classical imaginings of the East as the realm of 'monsters' and 'barbarians'. It also carried the legends that were perpetuated in Europe, such as the story of the kingdom of Prester John. As the empire settled and grew, this paradigm was replaced by one that came to the aid of the Empire—in the form of writings that classified and categorised the East, grand histories of

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the Empire, and epic poems that extolled the virtues of the empire. As the maritime empire built its roots, the Empire of Christ that the missionaries envisioned started producing texts of its own in the form of catechisms and expositions of Catholic doctrine. These writings attempted to translate Christianity through local idioms for the indigenous Christians and the local, through European idioms, for the audiences back home in Europe. Second, these texts constantly responded to the needs of the empire and the developments in Europe while negotiating with the realities of the colony. The best example is texts such as the *Jornada*, which constantly grappled with the doctrinal issues informed by the currents of Reformation and Counter-Reformation in Europe while being enmeshed in and negotiating with the sectarianism of the region. They also provide an interesting vantage point for understanding how the textual productions of that time informed the Western audience's understanding of the East and indigenous Christianity, as well as being constantly shaped by the needs of the colonial and missionary enterprises in the East. Third, these texts provided a structure for later-day European writings on the East, especially through the categories of thought and expression they used to understand and describe the East.

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Notes

[1] Girolamo Sernigi was a Florentine merchant based in Lisbon during the time of the first voyage of Vasco da Gama. Florentine merchants of the time played an important role in financing Portuguese expeditions. He wrote extensively to his relatives and associates in Florence with details of the Portuguese expeditions.
[2] Translated into English as 'Itinerary of Ludouico de Varthema Bolognese'.
[3] Cannanore, Calicut, and Cacolon are now known as Kannur, Kozhikode, and Kayamkulam, respectively.
[4] The title translated from Portuguese into English means 'Summa of the East, from the Red Sea up to the Chinese'.
[5] *Lendas da India,* when translated into English, means 'Legends of India'.
[6] Translated from Portuguese to English, the title of the book means 'History of the Discovery and Conquest of India by the Portuguese'.
[7] Translated from Portuguese to English, the title of the book means 'Decades of Asia'.
[8] The Casa da India, meaning the 'House of India', was the institution that was in charge of organising and administering the maritime trade and commerce happening with India. It was called the House of Mina before 1501. All the vessels coming from India were fitted and prepared by the Casa da India.
[9] It was a term used in the Iberian countries during the medieval period to refer to a series of Christian campaigns to recapture territory that had been taken by the 'Moors' (Muslims) in the 8th century CE.
[10] The work was called *Doctrina Christam en Lingua Malauar Tamul,* in Latin meaning the 'The Teaching of Christ in Malabar Tamil
[11] Translated into English from Portuguese, it means 'The Opinions, Rites, and Ceremonies of All the Gentiles of India'.

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[12] The full title is as follows: *Jornada do Arcebispo de Goa Frey Aleixo de Menezes Primaz da India Orientali, Religioso da Ordem de S. Agostinho. Quando foy as Serras do Malavar, & Lugares em que marâo os antigos Christâos de S. Thome & os tirou de muytos erros & obdeiencia da Santa Igreja Romana, da qual passava de mil annos que estavâo & reduzio à nossa Sancta Fè Catholica, & obediencia da Santa Igreja Romana, da qual passava de mil annosqhe estavâo apartados*. The English translation reads as follows: *The journey of the Archbishop of Goa, Dom Frei Alexis de Menezes, primate of East India, of the Order of St. Augustine. When he went to the Mountains of Malabar and to the places where inhabit the ancient Christians of St. Thomas, he brought them back from many errors and heresies, in which they were found and reduced them to our Holy Catholic Faith and to the Obedience of the Holy Roman Church, from which they had remained separated for a thousand years.*

[13] Dom Alexis Menezes also belonged to the order of St. Augustine. When the Habsburg King of Spain ascended to the throne of Portugal in 1581, the order of St. Augustine began to get preferential treatment in Portugal. This may have been an attempt on the part of the crown to sideline Jesuits who enjoyed the patronage of the previous rulers. The Jesuits were also seen as responsible for keeping Sebastianism, which talked about an immortal King Sebastian, alive in Portuguese colonies, sparking anti-Spanish feelings

[14] Translated from Dutch to English, it means 'An accurate description of Malabar and Coromandel'.

[15] Garshuni Malayalam was a method of writing Malayalam using a slightly modified form of the Syriac script.

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