

# CHRISTIANITY IN CEYLON.

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## CHAPTER I.

### THE MIDDLE AGES AND THE PORTUGUESE PERIOD.

THE earliest notice of the existence of Christianity in Ceylon is that of Cosmas Indopleustes, an Egyptian merchant, and afterwards a monk, who published his ‘Christian Topography’ in the reign of Justinian, in order to vindicate the cosmography of the Old Testament from what he believed to be the heresies of “the Ptolemaic system.”<sup>1</sup> Cosmas, who was

<sup>1</sup> The *Χριστιανικὴ Τοπογραφία* of Cosmas Indopleustes, or Indicopleustes, has been edited by Montfaucon, and will be found in his *Collectio Nova Patrum*, vol. ii., Par. 1706. The portion relative to Ceylon and the plants and animals of India was printed by Thevenot, with a French translation, in his *Relations de divers Voyages curieux*, vol. i. There are some legends to the effect that Christianity had been preached in Ceylon by St. Thomas and St. Bartholomew; but there is no reasonable ground for believing that India was ever visited by an apostle, although the tradition is supported by St. Jerome and Chrysostom, by Athanasius and Eusebius, and it was so firmly believed in the early ages of the Church that Alfred the Great sent Swithelm or Sigehelm, the Bishop of Sherburn, on an embassy to India to visit the shrine of St. Thomas. (Palgrave’s *Anglo-Saxons*, p. 185; Sharon Turner’s *History of the Anglo-Saxons*,

himself a Nestorian, tells that in Taprobane<sup>1</sup> there existed a community of believers, with an episcopal form of discipline, priests, deacons, and a liturgy. This slender statement has afforded material for enlarged speculation as to the doctrines, the extent, and duration of an early Church in Ceylon. It has been assumed as proof of the conversion of the Singhalese prior to the fifth and sixth centuries; and the author of the 'History of Christianity in India' propounds it as more than probable that the Church so implanted survived till the arrival of the Portuguese in 1505, when "their buildings no doubt shared the fate of the temples of Buddha, which they (the Portuguese) pulled down, and with the materials erected churches of their own religion on all parts of the coast."<sup>2</sup>

But a reference to the original authority disposes at once of these eager conjectures.<sup>3</sup> Cosmas ex-vol. ii. p. 148.) There is a still more curious tradition to the effect that Ceylon had been visited, and the Christian faith introduced, by the Eunuch of Candace, whose conversion by Philip is recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. (Hough's History of Christianity in India, vol. i. pp. 30, 32, 42; Baldæus, p. 280.)

<sup>1</sup> The ancient Greek name of Ceylon.

<sup>2</sup> Hough's History of Christianity in India, vol. iii. b. vii., ch. 2, p. 74. The assertion is given on the authority of Cordiner (Description of Ceylon, vol. i. p. 154), but it is entirely conjectural, and at variance with the testimony of every traveller in Ceylon during the middle ages.

<sup>3</sup> Δύο δὲ βασιλεῖς εἰσὶν ἐν τῇ νήσῳ, ἐναντίοι ἀλλήλων. ὁ εἷς ἔχων τὸν δάκινθον, καὶ ὁ ἕτερος τὸ μέρος τὸ ἄλλο, ἐν ᾧ ἔστι τὸ ἐμπόριον καὶ ὁ λιμὴν . . . ἔχει δὲ ἡ αὐτὴ νῆσος καὶ ἐκκλησίαν

pressly declares that the members of the church in Ceylon were *Persians*, and merely sojourners—a portion, no doubt, of that concourse of merchants and travellers who then resorted to the northern parts of the island as the great depôt and emporium of Eastern trade<sup>1</sup>—but that the natives and their kings were of a different religion. As to doctrine, the probability is that they were of the same faith and form of ecclesiastical government as the Syrian churches in the southern promontory of India, which were founded in the third or fourth century by Christians from the Persian Gulf, whose successors to the present time have preserved a form of Christianity, however corrupted, and maintained an uninterrupted connexion with the original Church; first through the See of Seleucia, and since through the Patriarch of Antioch. But with the decline of Oriental commerce, and the diminished resort of merchants from Arabia and Persia, the travellers and adventurers who formed the members of the first Christian body in Ceylon ceased to frequent the shores of Manaar; and Christianity,

*τῶν ἐπιδημούντων Περσῶν Χριστιανῶν· καὶ πρεσβύτερον ἀπὸ Περσίδος χεῖροτονούμενον καὶ διάκονον καὶ πᾶσαν τὴν ἐκκλησιαστικὴν λειτουργίαν.—οἱ δὲ ἐγχώριοι καὶ οἱ βασιλεῖς ἀλλόφυλοι εἰσιν.—Cosmas Indopleustes: Thevenot, Relations, &c. &c., vol. i.; Ibid., l. xi.; Montfaucon, Coll. Patr., v. ii. p. 336.*

<sup>1</sup> ἕξ ὅλης δὲ τῆς Ἰνδικῆς καὶ Περσίδος καὶ Ἀιθιοπίας δέχεται ἡ νῆσος πλοῖα πολλὰ, μέση τις οὔσα, ὁμοίως καὶ ἐκπέμπει.—*Cosmas Ind., l. xi.; Montf., vol. ii. p. 337.*

never firmly rooted, gradually decayed and disappeared.

Between the sixth century and the arrival of the Portuguese in the sixteenth, we have but few accounts of the internal condition of the island, and no mention whatsoever of a Christian community.

The "two Mahomedans," Ibn Vahab and Abou Zeyd, whose narratives have been translated by Renaudot,<sup>1</sup> and more recently and completely by Rein- aud, describe Ceylon in the ninth century,<sup>2</sup> and record the division of the island between two kings, as mentioned by Cosmas, one of whom was, of course, the Rajah of Jaffna. The authors are altogether silent as to the existence of any form of Christianity, although Abou Zeyd states that "the king who then reigned permitted the free exercise of every religion; and the island contained a multitude of Jews as well as of many other sects, even Tanouis or Manichees." As to the faith of the sovereign and the mass of the people, they say that "the king makes laws which are the fundamentals of the religion and government of the country; and here are doctors and assemblies of learned men, like those of the Hadithis of Arabia. The Indians repair to these assemblies, and write

<sup>1</sup> See note A, at the end of the chapter.

<sup>2</sup> See Pinkerton's *Collection of Voyages*, vol. vii.: *The Travels of Two Mahomedans through India and China in the Ninth Century*. Translated from the Arabic by the Abbé Renaudot: p. 183, 217.

down what they hear of the lives of their prophets and the various expositions of their laws.”<sup>1</sup>

Four centuries later, Marco Polo, the Venetian traveller, made his way to Ceylon about the year 1290 A.D.; he declares that “the inhabitants were idolaters;”<sup>2</sup> and it is scarcely credible, had a

<sup>1</sup> “Le royaume de Serendyb a une loi et des docteurs, qui s’assemblent de temps en temps, comme se réunissent chez nous les personnes qui recueillent les traditions du Prophète. Les Indiens se rendent auprès des docteurs, et écrivent, sous leur dictée, la vie de leurs prophètes et les préceptes de leur loi. . . . On trouve dans l’île de Serendyb une communauté de Juifs qui est nombreuse. Il y a également des personnes des autres religions, notamment des Dualistes (les Manichéens). Le roi de Serendyb laisse chaque communauté professer son culte.”—Transl. par Reinaud, vol. i. p. 128. (See Note B, end of this chapter.)

<sup>2</sup> Travels of Marco Polo, a Venetian, in the Thirteenth Century. Translated by W. Marsden. 4to. London, 1818. Like other travellers of that period, Marco Polo dwells on the wealth and fertility of Ceylon, its rice and sesamum; its milk, flesh, and wine from the trees (toddy). “There is here the best sappan wood that can anywhere be met with. The island produces rubies more beautiful and valuable than are found in any other part of the world; and likewise sapphires, topazes, amethysts, garnets, and many other precious and costly stones. The King is reputed to have the grandest ruby that was ever seen, a span in length, the thickness of a man’s arm, brilliant beyond description, and without a single flaw. It has the appearance of a glowing fire, and its worth cannot be estimated in money. The Grand Khan Kublai sent ambassadors to this monarch to offer for it the value of a city, but he would not part with it for all the treasures of the world, as it was a jewel handed down by his ancestors on the throne.” The people of Ceylon, he adds, “are by no means of a military habit, but abject and timid, and when there is occasion to employ soldiers they procure them

Christian Church—however small—been then in existence, that he, a Christian himself, would have omitted all mention of so interesting a fact.

Ibn Batuta, the adventurous Moor who traversed almost all the countries of Asia in the fourteenth century, and visited Ceylon about 1324 A.D.,<sup>1</sup> is equally silent in relation to Christianity; although he is particular in describing the Emperor as an infidel, and records the proceedings of the Brahmans and Buddhists, and the pilgrimage to the sacred footmark on the summit of Adam's Peak.

Thus, notwithstanding the remarkable preservation of Christianity in India throughout this gloomy period amongst the Syrian churches on the Coromandel coast, and its permanent adoption by the Tamils and other tribes of the peninsula, its light appears to have been but transiently kindled and to have speedily become extinguished on the opposite coast of Ceylon. If it ever included in its communion any of the native inhabitants of the islands, they must have relapsed into idolatry shortly after the departure of its original founders. The Tamil sovereigns of Ceylon, however tolerant the dynasty may have been in the fifth and ninth centuries, ex-

from other countries in the vicinity of the Mahomedans." The stone referred to by Marco, if it existed at all, was most probably a carbuncle.

<sup>1</sup> The Travels of Ibn Batuta. Translated by Professor Lee. Published by the Oriental Translation Committee. Lond. 1829.

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hibited themselves at a later period as persecutors of Christianity; but the more immediate cause of its disappearance from Ceylon was in all probability the rising influence of Mahometanism, and the arrival of its followers from Persia and Arabia,<sup>1</sup> whose descendants to the present day abound on the sea-board of the island, and are known by the popular designation of “Moors.”<sup>2</sup> On the arrival of the Portuguese, A.D. 1505, and their conquest of the maritime provinces, the doctrines of Brahma and Buddhu were the prevailing religions respectively of the Tamils to the north and of the Singhalese throughout the rest of the island.

Information is scanty as to the nature of the means adopted by the Portuguese for the introduction and establishment of the Roman Catholic religion in Ceylon.<sup>3</sup> There is no proof that compul-

<sup>1</sup> According to Hamza of Ispahan, the Persians under Cosroes Nouschirevan, one of the Sassanide dynasty, made the conquest of Ceylon in the early part of the sixth century: “inter maximas victorias a Kesra Anuschirvano reportatas sunt expugnationes urbium *Serandib*, Constantinopoleos et provinciarum Arabiæ felicis.” (*Hamzæ Ispahan. Annalium*, lib. i. chap. iv. vol. ii. p. 43. Leipzig, 1848.) And Reinaud has published in the ‘*Journal Asiatique*’ for February, 1845, p. 156, a passage from Beladori, in which he alludes to the establishment of a Musulman colony in Ceylon towards the end of the seventh century.

<sup>2</sup> For an account of the Moormen of Ceylon, see note C, end of the chapter.

<sup>3</sup> The records of their government have entirely disappeared; they were taken to Goa on the conquest of the island by the

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sion was resorted to by them for the extension of their own faith, or violence employed for the extinction of the national superstitions; and the probability is that the priests and missionaries of the Portuguese were contented to pursue in Ceylon the same line of policy and adopt the same expedients for conversion which had already been found successful by their fellow-labourers on the opposite continent of India.

Their possessions in either place were detached, their tenure uncertain, and in danger at all times, from the jealousy or hostilities of the neighbouring princes; and from the analogy of the two cases, the presumption is warranted that the Portuguese in Ceylon, under the pressure of similar circumstances, followed the example and instructions of the Viceroy and Archbishop of Goa, and that the amount of assistance from the civil power, on which the Roman Catholic clergy could rely, did not ordinarily extend beyond the personal influence of the Captains-General at Colombo and the favours and partiality exhibited by successive governors to all who were willing to conform to their religion.<sup>1</sup>

Dutch, whence they were removed to Lisbon, and afterwards transferred to Brazil. In their absence there is little or no historical evidence of the system of proselytism pursued by their clergy, or the amount of its success, beyond the imperfect notices of the Dutch historians, and the still existing traditions of the Singhalese themselves.

<sup>1</sup> Hough's *History of Christianity in India*, vol. ii. b. 3, c. 2, p. 349. See Letter of John III. to the Viceroy of Goa in

Those acquainted with the national character of the Singhalese, with their obsequiousness to power, and the pliancy with which they can accommodate themselves to the wishes and opinions of those whom it may be their interest to conciliate, will have no difficulty in comprehending the ease with which the Roman Catholic clergy, under such auspices and with such facilities, succeeded in an incredibly short space of time in effecting multitudinous conversions; and although the peculiar religion of the Hindoos in the northern province necessarily presented obstacles more formidable than those opposed by the genius of Buddhism in the south, the missionaries engaged in the task were not devoid of expedients by which to overcome both. In the instance of the Singhalese the miracle was accomplished with ease; the mountain submissively came over to Mahomet; and in the other and more obstinate one of the Tamils, Mahomet was equally prepared to succeed by making his own approach to the mountain.

In point of time the conversion of the Singhalese

1546, A.D.; Baldæus, c. xxii. p. 646. His Majesty lays down the principle that “Pagans may be brought over to our religion not only by the hopes of eternal salvation, but also by temporal interest and preferment”—and he therefore directs that on professing Christianity they were to be provided with places in the Customs, to be exempted from impressment for the navy, and sustained by the distribution of rice out of the public revenue. Baldæus, *Descrip. Malabar, Coromandel, and Ceylon*; Churchill’s *Collection of Voyages*, vol. iii.

10 ST. FRANCIS XAVIER, THE APOSTLE OF INDIA. CHAP. I.

Buddhists to Christianity preceded by several years the earliest attempt to reclaim the Tamils in Ceylon from the superstition of Brahma. The Portuguese got possession of Colombo in 1505, but it was not till 1548 that they obtained such a footing in the northern province as to enable their missionaries to commence their labours with security amongst the natives of Jaffna. Immediately after constructing the fort of Colombo the adjoining districts were erected into a bishopric,<sup>1</sup> and under the directions of the new prelate Christianity was speedily proclaimed throughout the Singhalese districts, but it was not till A.D. 1544 that it was first preached to the Tamils of the north by “the Apostle of India,” St. Francis Xavier. He was invited from Madura by the Parawas or Fisher caste, who had established themselves around the pearl fishery of Manaar, of whom he baptized from *six to seven hundred*;<sup>2</sup> but almost immediately after

<sup>1</sup> The tomb of Don Juan de Monterio, the first Christian prelate in Ceylon, was discovered in 1836, in effecting the repairs of the Battenburg Bastion.

<sup>2</sup> Hough’s History of Christianity in India, b. ii. c. 3, p. 188. Letters of the Abbé Du Bois, p. 3. There is something remarkable in the circumstance of the Fisher caste being everywhere the earliest and most eager converts to Christianity in India; so much so as to render it questionable whether it be only an accidental coincidence, or the result of some permanent and predisposing cause. The *Parawas* or fishermen of Cape Comorin were the earliest proselytes of St. Francis Xavier, and they have still a pride in alluding to the fact that they were the first, as they have since been the most faithful and abiding of his