The Public Defense of the Doctoral Dissertation of

Radu Mustaţă

on

The Malabar Sermonary: The Syriac Legacy of Francisco Ros SJ (1559-1624) in South India

will be held on

Thursday, 13 October 2022, at 11:00 am

Examination Committee

Chair: Matthias Riedl, CEU, Department of History

Members: István Perczel, CEU, Department of Medieval Studies (supervisor)

Volker Menze, CEU, Department of Medieval Studies (supervisor)

Carsten Wilke, CEU, Department of Medieval Studies

External Readers: Ines G. Županov, Centre d'Études de l'Inde et de l'Asie du Sud, EHESS, Paris

David G. K. Taylor, Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, University of Oxford

The doctoral dissertation is available for inspection on the CEU e-learning site.
Should you wish to access it contact Csilla Dobos (dobos@ceu.edu)
Dissertation abstract

My doctoral thesis entitled: “The Malabar Sermonary: The Syriac Legacy of Francisco Ros SJ (1559-1624) in South India” studies the production of so far unexplored Catholic literature in Syriac that emerged among the Malabar Christians from South India in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The history of Christianity in Malabar, South India, before the coming of the Portuguese at the end of the fifteenth century is little known; the evidence concerning the past is scarce, and the historiography relies heavily on oral traditions. The Malabar Christians, known as “Saint Thomas Christians”, who at least since medieval times were under the jurisdiction of the Church of the East (the so-called ‘Nestorian’ Church of Persia) are better documented from the Portuguese period (1498–1663), when they emerge in the documents as a strongly Syriacised Christian community. Together with Portuguese, Latin, and Malayalam sources, the Syriac material has a paramount share in reconstructing the history of these Christians in their interaction with the Portuguese colonizers and the Catholic missionaries. Furthermore, Syriac sources are essential for a historical analysis of the cross-cultural encounters between (1) the Indian Christians from Malabar, (2) their Syriac bishops coming from Iraq to Malabar, (3) the Portuguese colonizers and Catholic missionaries present there.

In this context, my doctoral thesis studies the transformation of the Syriac heritage of the Malabar Christians during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, from a canon of ‘Nestorian’ Syriac texts belonging to the literary heritage of the Church of the East from Iraq to a new canon of Catholic texts in Syriac for an Indian audience, displaying a synthesis of Western and Eastern literary and cultural elements. The main agents behind this transformation of the Syriac literary canon in Malabar were European Catholic missionaries, who also involved their Indian disciples in this literary enterprise as non-Western agents of knowledge production. Moreover, the European missionaries active in Malabar were in competition with the Syriac clergy coming from the Middle East to South India in order to take over the leadership of the Indian Christians. As a result of this contact, the Middle Eastern prelates started to imitate literary genres specific to the scholastic European culture, but alien to the Syriac tradition so as to polemicize with their Catholic rivals.

The Catholic texts produced in Syriac in Malabar are either original creations based on both Latin sources from Europe and Syriac sources from the Middle East, or they are translations/adaptations from Latin into Syriac. Since these Syriac texts rely heavily on both the European printed book culture from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (especially
books published in the Iberian Peninsula) and on the Syriac manuscript culture from Iraq, they are important for documenting the transfer of theological and humanistic knowledge from both Europe and the Middle East to the Malabar Coast. Thus, these Syriac texts produced or translated by the Catholic missionaries in Malabar in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and their subsequent reception history reflect the intellectual, textual and religious entanglements of the community of the Malabar Christians, placing these in a global perspective.

The period that I am investigating is around the time of the Synod of Diamper (1599), a turning point in the ecclesiastical history of Malabar. The synod marked the Portuguese attempt to impose Tridentine Catholicism on the Malabar Christians and ordered to correct their Syriac books according to Catholic orthodoxy or to burn them as heretical. As a result of the synod, the Malabar Christians received a European Archbishop, the Catalan Jesuit Francisco Ros (1601-1628), who was also the most prominent Syriacist missionary engaged in the production of Syriac literary texts in Malabar. Ros learned Syriac initially as an autodidact and subsequently acquired an encyclopedic knowledge of East Syriac literature circulating from Iraq to Malabar, by reading and purging of “heresies” the Syriac manuscripts of the South Indian Christian community. In addition to correcting East Syriac texts, he also wrote in Syriac original creations for his flock. In a few decades after their production, the Syriac compositions written by Ros and his disciples became part of the Syriac literary canon from Malabar; for this reason, both Catholic and non-Catholic Indian scribes from Malabar continued to copy these texts up to the nineteenth century.

In 1653, the Malabar Christians revolted against their Jesuit Archbishops and the Portuguese. Subsequently, a part of the revolted Christians returned to the fold of the Catholic Church after receiving an indigenous bishop, while another part of them gradually re-oriented towards the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch (a ‘Miaphysite’ West Syriac Church), with which the Malabar Christians did not have a previous connection. Even after turning towards the Syriac Orthodox tradition, the West Syriac group from Malabar continued to use and adapt Syriac texts stemming from Francisco Ros. Subsequently, when Syriac Orthodox missionaries from the Middle East came to Malabar to take over the spiritual leadership of the West Syriac Indian group, they also started to imitate European literary genres embedded in Syro-Catholic compositions authored by Francisco Ros and his disciples, as a way of polemizing with their Catholic rivals.

Since the Catholic literature in Syriac from Malabar has seldom been addressed in secondary literature, I have chosen as a case study for my doctoral research a collection of
seventy-two sermons preserved into five manuscripts dated from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries which I have conventionally called “The Malabar Sermonary”. The core of the collection of sermons are compositions arguably authored by Francisco Ros. Such sermons incorporate both East Syriac and European elements and sources, marking the transition from the East Syriac past to the Syro-Catholic present of the Malabar Christians. After the Synod of Diamper (1599) these sermons have been used as sources for newly composed liturgical poetry to be inserted in the Catholic revision of the East Syriac (i.e., ‘Nestorian’) ritual. This type of Syriac poetry was arguably authored by an Indian disciple of Francisco Ros, Kadavil Chandi Kattanar, who acted as non-Western agent of knowledge production. Later, after the revolt from 1653, the Syriac Orthodox group of Malabar Christians re-edited the Malabar Sermonary for a Syriac Orthodox audience. Moreover, one of the Syriac Orthodox missionaries who came from the Middle East to Malabar and was active among the Indian West Syriac group imitated the scholastic sermon embedded in compositions from the Malabar Sermonary.

Given the complexity of this collection, in my PhD thesis I have chosen to write a microhistory based on the compilation and reception of the Malabar Sermonary, since the history of this collection with its two versions, as well as the imitation of the collection among the Middle Eastern clergy in Malabar, together with the entanglement between the sermonary and the liturgy, mediated by an Indian poet, outlines the ecclesiastical history of the community of Malabar Christians. In order to show the history of the corpus with its two redactions as well as its reception, the thesis consists of three case studies which like connected histories document various stages in the making and the reception history of the corpus. I am providing semi-diplomatic editions and English translations for the texts analyzed in each chapter. I regard the sermonary with its textual tradition as an expression of the local complicated ecclesiastical history at least up to the eighteenth century. By looking to the corpus from this perspective, one gets a glimpse into the fascinating intellectual history of Syriac writing and compilation in South India, and its literary networks with both Europe and the Middle East from the late sixteenth to the eighteenth century.
Curriculum vitae

EDUCATION

2014-present  PhD, Central European University (Budapest), Department of Medieval Studies.

2011-2014  MA (with distinction), History and Medieval Studies, Central European University (Budapest); research topic: The Manuscript Mannanam Syriacus 46 and a Syriac Homily by Francisco Roz in Praise of Saint Thomas; supervised by István Perczel;

2008-2011  BA (valedictorian), Classical Philology, University of Bucharest; BA thesis topic: John Chrysostom, De prophetiarum obscuritate (translation, notes and commentaries).

ACADEMIC APPOINTMENTS

2016-2017  Associate researcher in the project Jews and Christians in the East: Strategies of Interaction between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean (European Research Council grant, PI Alexandra Cuffel, Ruhr-University, Bochum).

GRANTS, AWARDS AND HONORS

2021  Doctoral research fellow at the German Historical Institute (Rome) (January-April).

2020  Visiting student at the Pontificio Istituto Orientale (Rome) through the CEU Doctoral Research Support Grant scheme (September-December). Herzog-Ernst doctoral fellow at the Gotha Research Center of the University of Erfurt (March-April).

2019-2020  Doctoral fellow at the Leibniz Institute of European History (Mainz) (March-February).

2019  Heckman Stipend Recipient at the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library (Collegeville, Minnesota) (February). Academic Achievement Award for Advanced Doctoral Students in the academic year 2018-2019, granted by Central European University (Budapest).

2018  Erasmus + Trainee. The School of Critical Studies, University of Glasgow (July-December).

2016  Academic Achievement Award for First-Year Doctoral Students, granted by Central European University (Budapest).

2015  Gorgias Press Book Grant Winner.
2014-2018  PhD research scholarship granted by Central European University (Budapest).
2012-2013  Accademia Vivarium Novum, Rome (scholarship).
2011-2014  MA research scholarship granted by the Central European University (Budapest).
2004-2008  Prizes at various national competitions of Latin and Ancient Greek; participation in international competitions.

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS AND LECTURES

2022  “Preaching on the Fringe of the Portuguese Empire in Asia: The Case Study of a Catholic Sermonary in Syriac from the Sixteenth-Seventeenth Centuries Malabar”; international workshop: “Preaching in the Liminal Areas of Medieval Western Christianity. Similarities, Connections, Contrasts”, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca (20-21 May).

2021  “From Thomas Stapleton to the Hands of the Syrian Fathers: the Making and Reception of a Syriac Catholic Sermonary in Early Modern Malabar”; virtual lecture at the German Historical Institute (Rome) (14th of April)

“The Malabar Sermonary: a Collection of Catholic Model Sermons in Syriac from South India, in the Sixteenth-Seventeenth Centuries”; Virtual Research Workshop organized by the International Medieval Sermon Studies Society (5th of March)


“Entangled Literary Genres: Jesuit accommodatio and Syriac paideia in Malabar, in the times of the Synod of Diamper (1599)”;


2016  “Praising St. Thomas in Malabar: Syriac Theological Writing and Textual Accommodatio in the Aftermath of the Synod of Diamper (1599)”; XII
LIST OF PUBLICATIONS


