



## **Pahlavi Text and Imagery Context of the “Persian Cross” in South- India: Part I**

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One should be grateful to the [www.nasrani.net](http://www.nasrani.net) for presenting solid documentation on the 10 or 11 specimens of an ancient lapidary type of flowery crosses found in Chennai (Tamil Nadu), Agasaim (Goa), Kadamattam, Muttuchira, Kothanalloor, Kottayam [2], Alangad (all in Kerala), Anuradhapura [2] (Sri Lanka) and probably also Taxila (Pakistan). Locally, they are known as “Mâr Tomâ Slîbâ” (Saint Thomas Cross), because of their association with the apostle Thomas. Some of them are inscribed with a Persian language text in Pahlavi script. The web-site gives a long list of scholars who proposed to unravel its meaning. This paper offers an alternative elucidation of the Pahlavi text. The web-site contains also valuable insights on “Symbolism in the St Thomas Cross”. Further observations are called for, with inculturated considerations and theological implications. This will be our concern in the

second part of this paper, which deals with the imagery context.<sup>1</sup>

Scholarly opinion seems to converge in dating the Persian cross-inscriptions to above the lower time-limit of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, on the basis of carbon dating of the sculptured granite slab, the matured type of Pahlavi characters, and the elaborate pattern of the cross relief. Yet, the script does not appear to be fully-fledged “Psalter Pahlavi” of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, whereas it keeps archaizing forms of the “Early-cursive Pahlavi” of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, which was to develop into plain “Book Pahlavi”. The cross-script is in between, with lingering usage of Aramaeograms (see below) and conventional consonantal letter-forms, which may not fully represent the actual Persian pronunciation. In any case, broadly speaking, the language is Western Middle Persian, which prevailed during the whole period of the Sasanian Empire (224-651 C.E.). The language remained basically the same from the time it was used officially by the Persian “king of kings” Shapur I, the Great (241-272), who extended his rule over northern Mesopotamia, Syria, Armenia and Bactria / Afghanistan (as claimed in the inscription of Ka’aba-ī-Zardušt). In the process, Jewish-Christians among others faced deportation and resettlement. At first, freedom was given to the syncretist prophet Mani; but during the reign of Vahram I (273-276) the Zoroastrian chief-priest Karter/Kerdir had Mani arrested. Subsequently, the attitude hardened towards Manicheans and other believers, including “Nasoreans”. The persecution climaxed under Shapur II (309-379), with the martyrdom of Mar Shimun in 339. The main reason being that Christianity

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is first presented at the Meeting of the *Catholic Biblical Association of India*, Bangalore, Oct 2014; and sponsored by *Sri Sunil Elias*, Renaissance Tech., Bangalore, member of the Knanaya Christian Community.

was considered to side with the East Roman Empire, which had intruded into north-western border-areas of Sasanian rule.

But, even then, when crosses were being erected, why should the contemporary inscription not have been made in Syriac script?

Therefore, the 4<sup>th</sup> century would be the most likely period for Christians in Persian domain, including in disputed areas of eastern Syria, to seek livelihood elsewhere, especially in trade centres where fellow-Christians might already be engaged. Thus, some families could have migrated to south India (traditionally under the leadership of “Knai Thoma” or Thomas Cana the Merchant in 345). No doubt, they venerated their typical “Persian Cross”. Hymnic expressions tend to be conservative, so that the formula of the cross-inscription under review (although ascribed to the lower limit of the 6<sup>th</sup> century) could originate from that difficult period. To explain its importation one has not to wait for more peaceful times when Sasanian rulers became again tolerant towards religious minorities, in particular towards the East Syrian or Chaldean Church centered in the bishopric of Ctesiphon, which was now independent from the Western Church. This prompted south Indian “Thomas Christians” to establish hierarchical links with the Persian Church. But, even then, when crosses were being erected, why should the contemporary inscription not have been made in Syriac script (as found on some crosses) – unless devotionally or intentionally some

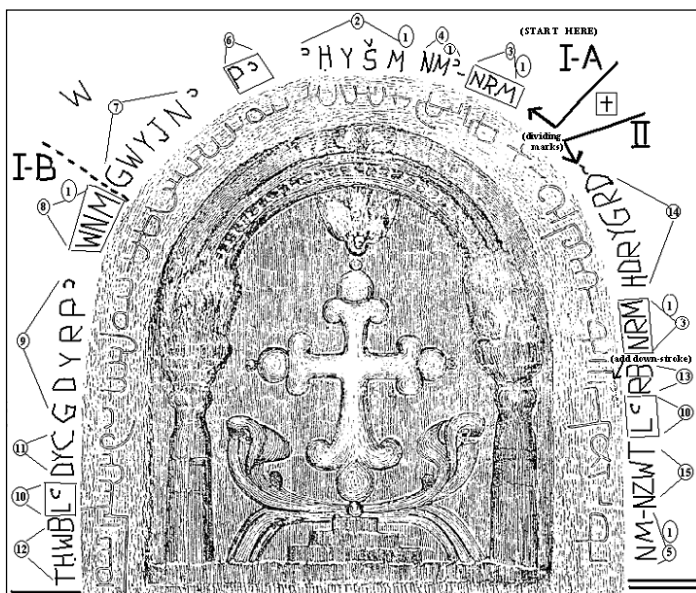
earlier Persian language model was replicated, for which naturally current Pahlavi script had to be used?

The cross-inscription is of particular interest to the Christian “Knanaya” community, which keeps its own identity among Syro-Malabar Churches of Kerala, because of its traditional link with the Persian immigrants – who belonged to the former Nazarenes of greater Syria and originated from the earliest Aramaic-speaking disciples, one of them named Simon the Cananaean (Mk 3:18), a zealous “zealot” (Lk 6:15 - qannâ in Hebrew, cf Nb 25:13) among the apostles. But when the author of this article visited St Mary’s Church of the Knanaya community in Kottayam, where one of the two ancient stone reliefs of the cross has a clear Pahlavi inscription, nobody could tell its exact interpretation, although many had attempted to make some hypothetical translation. In front of such manifest archaeological testimony of at least fifteen centuries of Christian discipleship on Indian soil, one cannot but be moved with intense devotion and admiration. The author pledged to attempt a different reading of the defying script, for which it was more convenient to work on a similar Pahlavi cross-inscription found at St Thomas Mount, Chennai. The method was simple: after marking the most identifiable letters, try to ascertain the indefinite ones, thereby proceeding step-by-step from the well known to the less recognizable and thence to the conjectural. It was some kind of discovery, which generated enthusiasm.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Mr Sunil Elias of the Knanaya community in Bangalore (sunil@renaissanceind.com) kindly offered to sponsor its promulgation.

## A. Decipherment of the Pahlavi Cross-Inscription at St Thomas' Mount, Chennai



The latest reading of the Pahlavi inscription on the so-called Persian Cross at St Thomas Mount, Chennai, by Gerd Gropp is not very appealing, because the translation would be a prayer for the donor / inscriber and it would be quite inappropriate for someone to have his/her name inscribed in such big letters on an object of public veneration. In 1970 G. Gropp published his first attempt at translating the text as follows :

*“Our Lord Messiah may show mercy on Gabriel, the son of Chaharbokht (literally meaning having four sons), the grandson of Durzad (literally meaning born in distant land), who made this (cross)”.*

In 1997 G. Gropp offered a revised translation (hopefully after having consulted the interpretation by P. Gignoux, 1995):

*“Our Lord Messiah may show mercy over Gabriel, son of Chaharbokht. Long life may be for him who made this (cross)”.*

Out of devotion to this old symbol of faith and as a corollary to his Hindi translation of the Holy Gathas of Lord Zarathushtra (with Devanagari transliteration of the ancient Gathic original, written in Avestan Pahlavi, together with its Vedic equivalent, published by Bhuvan Vani Trust, Lucknow, 2014) and on the basis of experience gained from his palaeographic-epigraphic research on the bilingual Aramaic and Greek inscriptions of Aśoka (PhD, Allahabad, 2002), the author proposes an altogether new reading, rendered freely as follows:

***“My Lord is the Messiah and Life-giver,  
who be praised for ever because of salvation!  
Indeed, the Lord suffered crucifixion to redeem  
us.”***

This reading can be substantiated by analyzing carefully the available Pahlavi text. The following observations are made in numeral sequence, marked alongside the inscribed arch above the Holy Cross. The inscription is to be read first, while being in front of the text, from top down to the left (in two sections I-A and I-B); and then, in the second part (II) after the dividing mark “+ ~ “, facing the text from the right, down to the bottom):

1. The easiest and clearest Pahlavi letter is “mēm” (M), which occurs 6 times, as indicated.
2. The word which all previous translations have identified is the title or name Messiah, spelt as “M Š Y H “”, which occurs often in Manichaean Pahlavi in

its determined Aramaic form “Mašîḥâ”, the Anointed One.

3. The very first word is read by most translators as “Mâran”, our Lord, reflecting the outcry “Maran-atha” of 1 Cor 16:21. But it is rather a typical “Aramaeo-gram”, namely an Aramaic word written in Pahlavi letters which has become fossilized and serves as a substitute for a Middle Persian term. It is therefore pronounced in Middle Persian. Accordingly, the Aramaic noun “ M R ‘ “ (originally pronounced “mârê”, lord), if recognized as an Aramaic logo-gram in Pahlavi letters, is to be pronounced in Persian as “ḥwadây” (meaning “lord”). Yet, throughout Pahlavi writings, it appears in different forms either as “MR “, “ M’R”, “MRY “, “M’RY”, . . . or even “ MR’ ḤY “ (in late Psalter Pahlavi)”. Still, whatever its spelling, it is pronounced “ḥwadây”. Only, when inseparably linked to a Semitic proper name, it may be a designation pronounced “Mâr”, e.g. “Mâr Yišo” (Lord Jesus). Admittedly in our text, if used as a logo-gram, the form “MRN” is uncommon— although one is never sure about the shape of the letter nûn “ N “, because a single vertical stroke could also be rêš “ R “ or wâw “ W “, and in the logograms even ‘ayin “ ‘ “, and sometimes it is simply a word-divider. Normally, the letters “MRN” would suggest a Parthian / Middle Persian word for “maran” (death) – which here does not seem to be the case. Nevertheless, we can consider “M R N “ to be an unusual Aramaeogram, as long as we pronounce it “ḥwadây” and translate it as “Lord” (and not “our Lord”). Already in the Aramaic inscription of Aśoka, inscribed many

centuries earlier, the Aramaic letters “ M R ‘ N “ were used for king Aśoka and although pronounced in Aramaic as “mârênâ” they may not be translated with the literal meaning “our lord”. This is how the indologist G.Ito argues: “In Imperial Aramaic *mârênâ* ‘our lord’ was commonly employed when subjects or people called the governor or satrap, whereas in Aśokan inscriptions the word has lost its original meaning, prevalent only in the meaning of ‘lord’.” In the second part of our text on the right side of the “Mâr Tomâ Slîbâ”, we can discover the same letters “ M R N “ right in the middle of the inscription. Supposedly, they should be read again as the same Aramaeogram for “lord”.

4. But, in the first occurrence, the fixed form “MRN” has some letters attached to it. They point to a genitive (possessive) pronominal suffix “ - ‘ M N ”, which according to Middle Iranian grammar indicates the first person singular “iman”, translated as “my”. The plural suffix “our” should have been written as “imâ”. Hence, when our earlier translators translate either “my Lord” (C. Winckworth) or “our Lord” (G. Gropp), the former is more likely correct. In the second occurrence of “ M R N “ (in part II) there is no suffix attached to it.
5. A similar suffix “ - M N ” occurs in the last word of the second part (II). But there it is an accusative (direct object) pronominal suffix after a verbal form (see below, Nr 15), which grammatically is “-am” for the first person singular “me”, whereas “-man” is used for the plural “us”. Hence, in this case the latter is more likely.
6. Another Aramaeogram is the Aramaic conjunctive “ ‘ P “ (‘aph) , meaning “also, and”. It is an often-used



alternative for the one-letter Aramaeogram “ W - “ (w<sup>e</sup>-), well-known in Aramaic and Hebrew for the frequent conjunctive “and”; but it is too short and easily mixed up with other words. Here, “ ‘ P “ stands out clearly as a separate word after the title or name “ M Š Y H ‘ “, the Anointed One.



7. Consequently, the word following the conjunctive “ ‘ P “ can be expected to be another title of the Lord, who according to the context of the redeeming cross is, indeed, also our Redeemer. Since the subsequent word is presumably a relative pronoun (see below, Nr 8), there is only space for at the most 6 letters. In the “Word-List of Manichaean, Middle Persian and Parthian” (by Mary Boyce, Leiden, 1977 – see also “A List of Middle-Persian and Parthian Words”, by W. Henning, 1954 and the recent “Corpus Fontium Manichaeorum: Dictionary of Manichaean Middle Persian and Parthian”, edited by N. Samuel and others), mainly three terms are listed with the meaning of “Saviour” namely (1) “anjîwag” (literally “life-giver”), (2) “bojâgar” or related terms like “bohtâr” (saviour), and (3) “wišâhag” (literally “releaser”). The second term would be most suitable; but there is no initial letter bêth “ B “ and as we shall discuss below (Nr 12), “boht” , another form of the second term will be used afterwards. Therefore, presently this term can be discarded here to avoid repetition. Besides, the final letter of the word we are looking for, is probably “gîmel”, so that the choice is between the first and the third term, both ending in “-ag”. Yet in the text, the first letter of the word appears rather to be “âleph” and is certainly not “wâw”. Therefore, only the first term “anjîwag”

seems to fit in, if correctly read as “ ‘ N J Y W G “. Moreover, the presentation of budding flowers and flowing water suggest a context of “life-giving”. In Manichaean literature a similar title of “zîndakkar” (life-giver) is attributed to Jesus. In the “Great Parthian Crucifixion Hymn” it is said that “Living (zîwandag) ... he showed salvation”. Another attractive possibility is to read “ ‘ M W Z G “ (ammozâg) , also starting with “âleph” and ending with “gîmel”, meaning a wise Teacher ; but honestly the letter “mêm” is absent and we might be accused of abetting a Gnostic wisdom interpretation.

8. The second half of the first part (I-B) starts with a fixed Aramaeogram “MNW” –written beautifully with joint letters, which however are difficult to decipher. In Biblical Aramaic “man” is used either as interrogative or relative pronoun. Its form “mannû” is attested, as derived from “man-hû” (see the popular etymology of the heavenly manna in Ex 16:15 : “What is this?”). The Aramaeogram serves for the Middle-Persian relative pronoun “kê” (who). Relative pronouns are often used in hymnic style to describe the qualitative reasons for praise.
9. This is confirmed by the next word, to be read as “ ‘ P R Y D G “ (âfrîdag) , an adjective meaning “blessed, praised”. It starts apparently with the same two letters “ ‘ P “, which earlier constituted an Aramaeogram (see Nr 6) ; but here, together with the next letter “rêš”, they are part of a word. It is interesting that F.Burkitt & C.Winckworth had read those three letters correctly as the beginning of an hypothetical name “Afras son of Chaharbukht”. Why make it so complicated?

10. Before proceeding to the following word, we could identify another short Aramaeogram “    L”, preserving the many meanings of Aramaic “‘al “(on, upon, concerning, towards, against... ). It signifies the Middle Iranian preposition “ô” (for, to). The Aramaeogram occurs twice, and as we shall see, both times it introduces the last verbal noun of the first part and the last verbal noun of the second part, so that a nice parallel sentence structure is obtained. But notice how the end of the first part contains crammed letters, as there was not much space left for inscribing the final letters!
11. The adjective “âfrîdag” (praised) (Nr 9) is probably used predicatively and no verb is required. Therefore, the following word of three letters can be best interpreted as an adverb “C Y D “ (cîd), meaning “always, ever”. Gerd Gropp, picking up the clue from F.Burkitt and C.Winckworth, apparently read four letters “ C H ‘ R “ (cahâr), meaning “four” and combined it in a bizarre way with the next word to form the name “son of Chahar-bokht”, while interpreting the latter as “having four sons”!
12. Whatever be the strange interpretation, the second half of the name Chahar-bokht was read correctly as “boht” by our learned predecessors; but they missed the obvious sense, although several words from the same root for “salvation” are listed in the standard Word-List referred to above: namely, “bog” (salvation), “boj-” (to save), “bojâgâr” (saviour), “bohs-” (be saved), “boht” or “bohtag” (saved), “bohtâr” (saviour), “bohtagîh” (salvation), “boz-” (save), “bozegar” (saviour), etc. Hence, we can

confidently position the letters “ B W H T “ for “boht”, meaning the grace of being saved so graciously by the Lord, for which he is ever to be praised. The verbal form “boht” could be a past participle “saved”; but Mary Boyce mentions explicitly that the same form could be a “short infinitive”. Hence, it fits marvelously as a verbal noun. Thus ends the first part with a devout profession of faith, which disproves the statement that “there is a high degree of ambiguity in Pahlavi writing”. The inscription was in public view and could be read out easily by Christian immigrants or traders from Sasanian Persia and explained to fellow Nazarenes of the earliest Indian Mâr Tomâ discipleship (relating to the arrival of the apostle Thomas or/and of the merchant Thomas Cana).

13. In order to read the second part, one has to step to the right side and look towards the left. The central word has already been identified as “ M R N “, Lord, which should be the subject of a verb. In some reproductions of the text, there are three vertical strokes  , out of which the first one is the final nûn “ N “ of “ M R N “ whereas the third one could be rêš “ R “. But in other reproductions of the letters one can discern a faint horizontal line at the bottom of the second vertical stroke  , which allows to recognize the letter as bêth “ B “ (similarly in the cross-inscription of St Mary’s Knanaya Church, Kottayam). Thus, the following two-letter word, before the second occurrence of the Aramaeogram “ ‘ L “ , can be understood as the shortest verbal form “ B R “ (bar), which could either be the imperative singular or the third person of the past tense, meaning “(he) carried, bore, endured, suffered”. There are many such short

forms, like “bûd” (he became), “šud” (he was), “bîd” (he saw). Hence, it is not likely to be an Aramaeogram “ B R “, Aramaic “bar” for Persian “puhr”, meaning “son” in Semitic names. Besides, the term used for Jesus is “bag-puhr” (Son of God) or “mard-puhr” (Son of Man).

14. No doubt, what the Lord endured was the suffering of the “crucifixion”. This should be the first word of the second part and it may be suggested by the sign of the cross, engraved as a dividing mark, just next to it. Initially, the word can only be a guess; but it must be the direct object of the verb “bar”, bearing, enduring. It could be a lengthy compound word of seven to nine letters. The Persian noun in the accusative case (direct object) may or may not have “-râ” attached to it, e.g. when “mard” (man) is used as object in the sentence “I see the man” it takes on the form “mard-râ” or may remain “mard”. Hence, the accusative ending is not required for our lengthy word. Which word? The adjective or past participle “crucified” is attested in Mary Boyce’s Word-List and of course also in the Great Crucifixion Hymn as” D ‘ R W B D G “ (dârubdag), meaning”tree-affixed”. “Tree” is found in different forms as “draxt”, “dâr”, or “dâru”. Also in the Greek New Testament “xulon” (tree) may refer to “stauros” (cross), see Acts 5:30, and especially 1 Pe 2:24 (“he himself bore our sins in his body on the cross [literally tree]”). For “crucifixion” (tree-affixion) itself the noun “dârgirdîh” is listed, which is spelt differently (or read differently by different scholars) as “D ‘ R G Y R D Y H” or “D ‘ L K R T Y H”; other forms being “D ‘ R G Y R D Y B “and “D ‘ R W B D G Y P T “. As mentioned

earlier, Pahlavi letters are confusing; different letters share the same sign, letters may merge and take on a different value. Peter Daniels says about Pahlavi: “If one were to give each letter only one value, the words would be completely unrecognizable” (The World’s Writing Systems, 1996). Like the Aramaic logograms, complete words are to be read, not single letters. The meaning arises so-to-say from word-pictures, which create an impression as a whole, whatever be the detailed spelling. Hence, we have probably struck the right word. Earlier translations have read (or guessed) similar words like “crucifixion, tree (dâru), cross, suffering, pain (dard)”. G.Gropp’s translation has hit at least the first letters of the word : “Durzad”, explained as “born in distant (dâr) land” and “long (darg, Sanskrit “dîrgha”) life”.

15. Only one word of part II remains to be justified. It has three or four letters, out of which the first letter is certainly “tâw”. The context suggests a set of letters with the meaning of forgiveness, reconciliation as the fruit of the crucifixion, in parallel with the verbal noun “boht” at the end of the first part. Only one word or “word-picture” (as explained above) satisfies our quest, namely “ T W Z “ (toz), which is a verb with the meaning “to expiate, pay for, redeem”. The noun “tozišn” for “expiation” would be too long (unless there is a shorter form, like the three-letter noun “bog” instead of “bozišn” for “salvation”, see Nr 12). The infinitive form is “ T W Z N “ (tozan) with four letters, which is quite possible, although the shape of the final letter is not so certain. But the likelihood of a verbal noun is supported by the subsequent pronominal suffix “ – M N “ (-man), meaning “us”,

see Nr 5. The first person singular, implying that the purpose of the Lord's suffering would be "to redeem me", would be too limited. For, "he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for our sins only but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 Jo 2:2). But F. Burkitt & C. Winckworth interpreted the inscription as a prayer by and for the sculptor "who cut this(cross)" -- reading probably for "cutting" the four-letter verb "T R ' S", also starting with tâw.

#### Final presentation:

(Transcribing Pahlavi words in reverse order; Aramaeograms are framed; pronunciation is in Middle-Persian)

#### Part I-A

<u>MRN</u>	-	'MN	<u>MŠYH</u>	'P	'NJYWG
Hwadây	-	iman	Mašîhâ	û	Anjîwag
My	Lord	(is)	Messiah	and	Life-giver,

#### Part I-B

<u>MNW</u>	'PRYDG	<u>CYD</u>	'L	<u>BWHT</u>
kê	âfrîdag	cîd	ô	boht
who	(be) praised	always	for	saving .

#### Part II

<u>D'RGYRDYH</u>	<u>MRN</u>	<u>BR</u>	'L	<u>TWZN</u>	-MN
Dârgirdîh	Hwadây	bar	ô	tozan	- man
Crucifixion	the Lord	endured	for	redeeming	us

Consequently, the earliest inscription of "Nasranis" in India contains a very meaningful, straightforward message. It is a plain witness to their faith – as presented below in Sanskrit, with introduction followed by a śloka in anuṣṭubha metre of 8 syllables per quarter:

**Šrî-Yamala-dûta-parvate sansthite,  
Sudalita-šradhâlûnâm tîrtha-grihe,  
pratiṣṭhita-puṇya-šûlâ-sthambha-rûpe,  
Pârasî-lipyâ likhitam tat-stavanam :**

On St Thomas Mount, of apostle the Twin, at the pilgrimage-shrine of devout Sudalitas (=Nazarenes) , where the sign of the Holy Cross slab is erected, this homage is written in Persian language-script:

**Ayam Satyâbhiṣikto hi**

**Svâmî mam-aiva Jîva-daḥ |**

*This truly-Anointed indeed is my Lord and Life-giver,*

**vimukti-kârya-hetor yaḥ**

**stuti-yogyas-tu sarvadâ ||**

*because of salvific liberation who is praiseworthy surely forever.*

**Taru-baddho vyathâm bhuktvâ**

**paritrâṇâya no Prabhuḥ |**

*Tree-fixed agony he suffered for our redemption, he the Lord.*

**Iti šûlâ-šilâ-sâkṣyam**

**Sumukund-ânugâminâm ||**

*Such is the cross-rock-testimony of Sumukunda (=Jesus) followers.*

There is perfect similarity between the Pahlavi inscriptions on the “Persian Cross” at St Thomas Mount Church, Chennai and at St Mary’s Knanaya Church, Kottayam. Therefore, an identical reading can be established for the Phalavi cross-inscription at Kottayam, as seen in the following parallel four-line presentation:

- (1) word by word pronunciation in Persian language
- (2) original inscribed text in Pahlavi script
- (3) transcription with framed Aramaeograms
- (4) word by word literal translation



(1) (2) (3) (4)

(4) (3) (2) (1)

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