

THE SYRIAC *BOOK OF THE LAWS OF THE COUNTRIES*, EUSEBIUS’
PREPARATION FOR THE GOSPEL, AND THE *CLEMENTINE RECOGNITIONS*:
EARLY WITNESSES FOR CHRISTIANITY IN CENTRAL ASIA?*

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Abstract: In a key passage of the Syriac *Book of the Laws of the Countries*, Christians are described as residing among the Medes, Persians, Parthians, and Kushans. This statement has sometimes encouraged scholars to accept that Christianity had penetrated the Iranian plateau and central Asia by the early third century CE. But this testimony does not necessarily reflect the actual state of contemporary Christianity in such regions. Instead, it is based on a text that had been circulating in the eastern Mediterranean and upper Mesopotamia during the late second and early third centuries CE. This text, now lost, had ascribed the evangelization of such regions to the apostle Thomas.

Key words: *Book of the Laws of the Countries*, Eusebius, *Clementine Recognitions*, the apostle Thomas, central Asia, the Parthian empire, Christianity.

According to a certain passage from the Syriac *Book of the Laws of the Countries*, otherwise known as *On Fate*, contemporary Christians resided in the Iranian plateau and central Asia.¹ Since the Syriac *Book* (as it is hereafter called) is intimately associated with the school of Bardaisan and is generally deemed to have been composed in its surviving form c. 225 CE,² scholars have sometimes treated the passage as testimony for the movement of Christianity to these regions by the early third century. But whether the

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¹ *The Book of the Laws of the Countries*, in Drijvers 1964, 60 and Ramelli 2009a, 196–198.

² Ramelli (2009a, 18–32 and 2009b, 54–60) treats date and the relationship to the text described by Eusebius (as *on Fate*) and attributed to Bardaisan by him. Eusebius’ citations are represented by *Preparation for the Gospel (Praeparatio Evangelica)* 6.9.32–6.10 in Mras 1982/1983 and *HE* 4.30 in Schwartz/Mommsen 1999.

text is referring to the actual state of Christianity is in fact unclear, and the sources for the *Book's* information have yet to be thoroughly explored.

This article accordingly examines the nature of the source material informing how the key passage of the Syriac *Book* represents the state of Christianity in central Asia. As it maintains, the key passage does not reflect actual knowledge that Edessenes or Upper Mesopotamians possessed regarding Christian communities that dwelled in the region. Instead, it is based on the fiction of a text that had been circulating in the eastern Mediterranean and upper Mesopotamia during the late second and early third centuries CE: the lost Parthian *Acts of Thomas*. While eclipsed by the surviving *Acts of Thomas*, which celebrated the putative ministry of Judas Thomas in India,³ the tradition regarding Judas Thomas' evangelization of Parthia clearly preceded it, and it generated the belief among contemporary Christians that coreligionists inhabited the Iranian plateau and central Asia. As a result, the Syriac *Book* has little value as a source for Christianity in central Asia; its treatment relies on the fictive *Acts of Thomas* in Parthia.

The Testimony of the *Book of the Laws of the Countries*

According to a passage from the Syriac *Book*, as well as the Greek variation notably transmitted by Eusebius about a century later, Christians dwelled in Media, Persia, Parthia proper, and the Kushan empire. By the time of the *Book's* composition, the Kushan empire had spanned central Asia and north India, and writers of Greek often defined its inhabitants as "Bactrians." The Syriac *Book* in fact notes that "Kushans" and "Bactrians" were different names for the same basic people.⁴ The Syriac text and the Greek variation provided by Eusebius for the relevant passage read as follows:

(*Book of the Laws*): Those (our Christian brothers) who are in Parthia do not take two wives. Those who are in Judea are not circumcised. Our sisters among the *Gelaye*⁵ and among the Kushans do not couple with foreigners. Those who are in Persia do not marry their daughters. Those who are in Media do not flee their dead, bury them while living, or give them as food for dogs. Those who are in Edessa do not kill their wives or sisters who have committed adultery.⁶

(Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel*): The Christians in Parthia do not engage in polygamy, while happening to be Parthian. Those in Media do not throw corpses to dogs. Those in Persia, while being Persian, do not marry their daughters. Among Bactrians and Gelians, they do not kill their spouses.⁷

As narrated immediately above, the key passage from the Syriac *Book* asserts that Christians lived in the Iranian plateau and central Asia by the time that the *Book* was composed (c. 225 CE). The variation of Eusebius entirely replicates this perspective,

³ In Wright 1871 and Bonnet 1903, 99–291. For translation and extended commentary, see Klijn 2003.

⁴ *The Book of the Laws of the Countries*, in Drijvers 1964, 46 and Ramelli 2009a, 182.

⁵ In Syriac *gelaye* is sometimes rendered 'elaye. The single manuscript of the *Book of the Laws of the Countries*, in Drijvers 1964, 44 and 60 and Ramelli 2009a, 180 and 198, with n. 179, accordingly features both forms. See also the single Syriac manuscript of the surviving *Acts of Thomas* containing the *Hymn of the Pearl*, line 6 in Poirier 1981, 330–236 and Ferreira 2002, 39–65.

⁶ *The Book of the Laws of the Countries*, in Drijvers 1964, 60; Ramelli 2009a, 196–198.

⁷ Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* 6.10.46: Mras 1982/1983. Also see *FGrH/BNJ* 710, Fr. 3.

even if it omits certain material and associates with the Kushans and *Gelaye* the characteristics that the *Book* attributes to Edessenes (the killing of wives, as opposed to promiscuity with foreigners). As a result, scholars have sometimes assumed that Christian communities populated the regions in which the passage situates Christian brethren: Parthia, Fars/Persis, Media, the territory inhabited by the *Gelaye* of the Caspian sea coast, and the Kushan empire of central Asia and north India.⁸ The implication of such an interpretation is that the writer of the *Book* had actual knowledge of Christians living in such regions and that some meaningful contact between Christians in Iran and central Asia and those residing in Edessa existed. This view receives ostensible support from the Syriac *Book's* accurate description of laws at the Mesopotamian city of Hatra.⁹

But this viewpoint poses problems, and as this section argues, it is most probable that the *Book's* testimony was based on a fictive literary tradition. This tradition was encapsulated by a text, now lost, that narrated how the apostle Judas Thomas had evangelized Parthia. This text was eventually eclipsed by the surviving work known as the *Acts of Thomas*, which narrates how Judas Thomas had evangelized India. During the third century, the Indian *Acts* circulated in both Greek and Syriac versions within the eastern Roman empire and Sasanian Persia, but a prior version of the *Acts* that described Judas Thomas' evangelization of Parthia was receiving the attention of eastern Roman readers decades and perhaps even generations earlier, certainly by the early third century. Moreover, Judas Thomas' alleged missionary activity in "Parthia" apparently referred to his itinerary in the Parthian empire, not merely to the region of north Iran known as Parthia in antiquity.

The third-century circulation of Thomas' Parthian *Acts* is certain. Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* indicates that the theologian Origen (who died c. 255 CE) had referred to a narrative in which the apostle Thomas evangelized Parthia. Origen had done so in his commentary on Genesis, which he had begun c. 225.¹⁰ In Eusebius' rendering, the apostle is described simply as Thomas and not as Judas Thomas, as Greek authors commonly depicted him. As Eusebius' citation of Origen states, it was according to tradition (*paradosis*) that Thomas had engaged in such activity.¹¹ Origen could have been referring to an oral tradition here, but it is more reasonable to surmise that Origen was indexing a recent written tradition that had been ascribed a putatively oral origin and whose author was anonymous. This is because the earliest cited oral traditions regarding Judas Thomas or Thomas, which were recorded in writing by patristic authors in the late second century, indicate that he had not suffered martyrdom or evangelized any remote region at all.¹² The *Acts of the Apostles* and *The Gospel of Thomas* similarly bear no mention of Judas

⁸ Jullien/Jullien 2002, 128–136; Baum/Winkler 2003, 7–8; Baumer 2006, 19; Nedungatt 2008, 111–112.

⁹ *The Book of the Laws of the Countries*, in Drijvers 1964, 46 and 60 and Ramelli 2009a, 182 and 196–198. Kaizer 2006 treats Hatra's laws and the *Book's* depiction of them.

¹⁰ Eusebius, *HE* 3.1.1–3; Schwartz/Mommsen 1999. Myers 2010, 27–52 provides key discussion regarding the composition of the Indian *Acts* and its potential relationship with previous traditions, including the Parthian *Acts* (47–48). Nedungatt 2008: 177–222 compiles ancient attestations for Thomas' Parthian and Indian ministry. For dating of the commentary on Genesis, see McGuckin 2004a: 12.

¹¹ Eusebius, *HE* 3.1.1–3, with the Latin translation of Rufinus, *HE* 3.1: Schwartz/Mommsen 1999. Likewise, Socrates, *HE* 1.19, in Hansen 1995. For discussion of Eusebius' citation of Origen, see Nedungatt 2008, 182–186.

¹² Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 4.9.71.3–4, citing Heracleon, in Stählin/Früchtel 2011.

Thomas' martyrdom or evangelization of faraway lands.¹³ It seems, then, that the written account of the Parthian *Acts* reflects a later second-century fiction influenced by the belief that the apostles had apportioned the known world for evangelization and had then suffered martyrdom.¹⁴ Thomas' Parthian itinerary and martyrdom, even if ascribed to an older, anonymous oral tradition (*paradosis*), were accordingly the product of a textual agenda that can be traced to c. 175–200 CE. Since it is cited by both the Syriac *Book* and Origen and constituted the antecedent to the surviving Syriac and Greek *Acts of Thomas*, the Parthian *Acts* apparently circulated in the eastern Mediterranean and upper Mesopotamia during the late second and early third century, in both Greek and Syriac forms.

The premise that the testimony of the Syriac *Book* and Eusebius' variation are ultimately derived from the Parthian *Acts of Thomas* is supported by a vital article of evidence dating to the early fourth century. The *Clementine Recognitions*, which survives in Rufinus' Latin translation, contains yet another variation of the key passage from the Syriac *Book*.¹⁵ While its narrator purports to be the voice of the first-century figure Clement, it explicitly associates the putatively contemporary preaching of the apostle Thomas with the state of Christianity in Parthian territory. The relevant passage states:

Finally, most among the Parthians (*apud Parthos*) are no longer scattered into numerous marriages, just as Thomas, who is proclaiming the gospel among them, has written to us (*sicut nobis Thomas, qui apud illos evangelium praedicat, scripsit*). Most among the Medes do not throw corpses to dogs. The Persians do not take pleasure in wedlock with mothers or impure marriage with daughters. Susian women do not conduct permitted adultery.¹⁶

To be certain, this statement from the *Clementine Recognitions* is derived either from the key passage of the Syriac *Book* or an overlapping source tradition, even if its author misconstrued the Kushans as the Susians.¹⁷ It is unclear how the reference to the promiscuity of "Kushan" women was transformed into a characterization of licentious "Susian" women, but the similar lexical appearances of the terms in a Syriac or Greek antecedent to the passage that Rufinus translated may have prompted it. Whatever the precise relationship between the versions of the key passage from the Syriac *Book* and the *Recognitions* might be, it is evident that the author(s) who composed the variation from the *Recognitions* assumed that its reference to Christians in the Iranian plateau and central Asia was inspired by the tradition of Judas Thomas' Parthian travels, as narrated by the lost Parthian *Acts*. The passage from the *Recognitions* thereby explicitly linked Thomas to "Parthia" (whether it was referring to the Parthian empire or Parthia proper) and, by extension, to Media, Fars/Persis, and the Kushan empire. Even though the *Recognitions* was composed in its surviving form in the early fourth century, the

¹³ The relationship among the various early Christian texts that feature Judas Thomas is still uncertain. Drijvers 1991, 324–325 and van Rompay 2008, 369–370 explore the scholarly tradition. Sellw 2001, 11–35 and Piovanelli 2010, 443–462 critique the premise of a "Thomasine" Christianity that can be formulated on the basis of these texts. Most 2005 explores the various permutations of the Thomas figure in early Christian literature.

¹⁴ In *Acts of the Apostles* 1:8, the Holy Spirit bids the apostles to be witnesses of their faith throughout the earth and to its uttermost ends. The various apocryphal acts depict apostles who continue with this theme: Klauck 2008, 1–14; Spittler 2013, 353–375.

¹⁵ Jones 2012 provides treatment of this work.

¹⁶ *Clementine Recognitions* 9.29.1–2: Rehm/Streker 2011.

¹⁷ Jones 2012, 3–5, 8, 21–22, and 68–71 treats the *Clementine Recognitions* and the Syriac *Book*.

narrator, purporting himself to be the first-century figure Clement, even claimed that Thomas had corresponded with him about his contemporary exploits. Other statements to this effect should be treated in a similar light. When Arnobius of Sicca (writing c. 305) likewise situated Christians, among other places, in the land of the Persians, Medians, and the Parthians, his mental geography was in this instance most probably shaped by a tradition that had its origin in the Parthian *Acts*.¹⁸

Literary Traces of the Lost Parthian *Acts of Thomas*

As emphasized in the previous section, the key passage from the Syriac *Book* does not present reliable evidence for where Christianity had actually traveled by c. 225 CE. It is in fact derived from fictive information imparted by the Parthian *Acts*, which described the various peoples of the Parthian empire that Judas Thomas had putatively evangelized.¹⁹ But the key passage has value because it provides some indication of what the lost Parthian *Acts* contained. When it describes the regions of the Iranian plateau and central Asia that allegedly housed contemporary Christian populations, it gives some meager indication of the regions that Judas Thomas evangelized in the Parthian *Acts*.

The skeletal outline for the itinerary of Judas Thomas in the Parthian *Acts* that can be reconstructed from the key passage of the Syriac *Book* is amplified further by sources that describe the Parthian itinerary of the apostle. For instance, early medieval lists of apostolic itineraries that clearly derived from traditions originating in late antiquity recount his Parthian travels. References to these appear in the Latin works of Isidore of Seville, and they exist in early medieval Greek texts attributed spuriously to earlier patristic authors, along with an insertion into a later Greek translation of Jerome's *Illustrious Men*. While their specifics vary to a certain degree, these texts reflect in generic outline a relatively common engagement with earlier traditions for the itineraries of various apostles. These collections of itineraries were circulating in aggregate before the sixth century and perhaps as early as the fourth, but the itineraries for certain apostles are based on traditions that originated even earlier. For Thomas in particular, the texts convey an itinerary that most reasonably had its ultimate origin in the Parthian *Acts*.²⁰ While they contain some minor variations, the texts generally state that Thomas had preached to the Parthians, Medes, Persians, Karmanians, Hyrcanians, Bactrians, and either Magians or Margians. He then died and was interred at an Indian site called Kalamene, Kalame, Calamina or similar permutations thereof in Greek or Latin.²¹

¹⁸ Arnobius, *Ad nat.* 2.12; Reifferscheid 1875; Simmons 1995, 47–94 treats date.

¹⁹ Koshelenko/Bader/Gaibov 1995, 55–70 nonetheless endow the Parthian *Acts* with a certain measure of historical validity, as do Ellerbrock/Winkelmann 2012, 273–274 (by conflating the missionary field of the Parthian and Indian *Acts*).

²⁰ For recent synthesis and assessment, see Dolbeau 2005, 455–480 (on 462–463), also Leloir 1992, 2: 713–716. Isidore of Seville, *De ortu et obitu patrum* 73, in Gómez 1985, claims that Thomas preached to the Parthians and Medes Persians, Hyrcanians, and Bactrians before dying in “Calaminica, a city of India.” On Jerome/ps. Sophronius, see von Gebhardt 1896, vii–x and 2–13 (esp. 7–8); Dolbeau 1994, 97; Tubach 2002, 105–110.

²¹ Greek texts are in Schermann 1907, 111, 155–156, and 166, along with the Latin *Breviarium apostolorum* (207–212); the Latin for the ps. Epiphanius and ps. Dorotheus passages are found in Dolbeau 1986,

In regards to such apostolic itineraries, the following clarifications should be noted. First, they are characterized by some variation regarding whether they depict Thomas as having evangelized “Margians” or “Magians.” The rendering of “Magians” probably reflects a distortion of “Margians” produced by the late antique tradition that Judas Thomas had converted the Magi of Persia. According to this narrative, which is attested in the eighth-century *Zuqnin Chronicle* and an anonymous sermon that survives in Latin but was probably written in Greek, Thomas was responsible for converting the same Persian Magi who had visited Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew and had settled in “Shir” (arguably a reference to China). Apparently originating as a third-century CE pseudopigraphon told from the perspective of the Magi, this narrative was redacted in the late third or fourth century to include the activity of Judas Thomas, as narrated by his character.²² Such a tradition may have influenced the apostolic lists that presented Thomas as evangelizing the Magi instead of Margiana.

Second, an issue is raised by the Indian site in which the apostolic itineraries often depict Thomas’ relics as having been interred. The site that these itineraries describe as Kalamene, Kalame, Calamina or a similar variation has hitherto been unknown. It is not mentioned in the surviving text of the Indian *Acts of Thomas*, in which Judas Thomas dies in an anonymous location.²³ A recent argument maintains that it represents how Greek- and Latin-speaking Romans of late antiquity rendered a Tamil (or otherwise south Asian) term for the Coromandel coast of India, where Thomas’ relic cult was at some point established and maintained by Christians located in south India.²⁴ Whatever this site may have been, the link between Thomas and “Kalamene” was certainly not part of Thomas’ Parthian *Acts*. It should be stressed that the traditions of Thomas’ Parthian travels (among the Parthians, Medes, Persians, Karmanians, Hyrcanians, Bactrians, and Margians) and of his Indian travels (with his death at Kalamene) appear to have circulated separately in different apostolic itineraries during late antiquity before being merged c. 600.²⁵ It is most reasonable to infer that the itineraries had acquired their information

299–314 (text on 308–309) and Dolbeau 1990, 50–70 (68–70 for text). Likewise, a manuscript dating to 874 CE in van Esbroeck 1994: 141 and 188–189 and a tenth-century manuscript from Mt. Sinai: Lewis 1896: 7 contain Syriac references. Barhebraeus, *Ecclesiastical Chronicle* 1: 33–34 and 3: 4–11, in Abbeloos/Lamy 1872/1877, refers to both the Parthian and Indian traditions. Leloir 1992, 2: 740–742 and 755 contains the Armenian texts that refer to the Parthian or Indian travels of Thomas. For further comments and bibliography, see Jullien/Jullien 2002, 80–81. For recent synthesis and assessment, see Dolbeau 2005, 455–480 (esp. 462–463).

²² Landau 2010, 18–26 treats the complex genealogy of the pseudopigraphon, with Landau 2008, 22–136 containing a critical edition and translation. The *Chronicle of Pseudo-Dionysius* (also known as *Zuqnin*) 1: 86–90, in Chabot 1927/1949, contains the episode, with Landau 2010, 82–86 (English) and 2008: 67–71 (Syriac). The relevant lines from the *Incomplete Work on Matthew* 2.2.2 are in PG 56, col. 637–638 in Migne 1857/1866.

²³ Wright 1871, 1: šl’ provides the Syriac text; the *Acts of Thomas* 168, in Bonnet 1903, provides the Greek.

²⁴ Nedungatt 2010, 181–199 and 2008, 151–173. Also, Tubach 2002, 106–107.

²⁵ The fifth-century Latin *De ortu et obitu prophetarum et apostolorum* and an early “Greco-Syrian” list from roughly the same time associate Thomas with India and Calamina, but not Parthia. See Dolbeau 1994, 91–107 (esp. 101–102 and 106); Schermann 1907: 172, with Dolbeau 2005, 468, who provides corrections. The general Parthian and Indian itineraries are merged in the testimony of Isidore of Seville, *De ortu et obitu patrum* 73 and 80, in Gómez 1985. Likewise, much later, Barhebraeus, *Ecclesiastical Chronicle* 1: 33–34

regarding the Parthian travels of Thomas from an ultimate point of origin in the material of Judas Thomas' Parthian *Acts*, even if citing it by proxy. All told, the references to Thomas' Parthian activity and his Indian travels, while eventually merged in the apostolic itineraries, had their origins in two distinct traditions, and these traditions ultimately can be traced to two different texts (the lost Parthian *Acts of Thomas* and the surviving Indian *Acts of Thomas*).

Along with such evidence, the testimony of Origen regarding Christianity's presence in Asia corresponds with the citations of the narrative of Thomas' evangelization of Parthia made by the Syriac *Book*, the *Clementine Recognitions*, and the later apostolic itineraries. In a somewhat lacunose passage of his commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, which survives principally in Latin translation and was composed late in his life, Origen apparently claims that Christianity had not yet arrived among (*apud*) the Ethiopians, Seres, and "Ariacin."²⁶ The last term clearly refers to Ariake, the Greek name for a region of India that the *Periplus of the Red Sea* and Claudius Ptolemy locate immediately south and east of the region encapsulating the Indus river valley, specifically the coast of the Gulf of Barygaza and its interior.²⁷ As noted previously, Origen was aware of Thomas' Parthian *Acts* (as stated by Eusebius), and it is most reasonable to conclude that his information regarding Christianity in north India relies on it.²⁸ Apparently accepting the premise that Thomas had traveled to Media, Parthia, Fars/Persis, Margiana, Hyrcania, Karmania, and Bactria, he placed Christians in the various regions of Iran, central Asia, and north India that were in his lifetime part of the Parthian/Sasanian or Kushan empires.²⁹ For him, Christianity had stopped short of the Pamir mountains (which separated Bactria or central Asia and the Seres in Greek thinking) and the territory beyond the Indus river (the threshold of Kushan north India and Ariake).³⁰ By implication it had nonetheless penetrated as far as Bactria, which for Greek authors included both Kushan central Asia and north India.³¹ Origen's testimony provides further indication that the Parthian *Acts* was influencing how Christians in the Mediterranean littoral and upper Mesopotamia conceived of the evangelization of the Iranian plateau, central Asia, and parts of north India under Kushan control.

In composite, the testimony of Origen and the medieval itineraries described above significantly indicate that in the Parthian *Acts* (composed c. 175–200), Judas Thomas evangelized the very regions in which the Syriac *Book* locates the presence of Christian communities. These, namely, were Media, Persis/Fars, Parthia proper, Hyrcania,

and 3: 4–11, in Abbeloos/Lamy 1872–1877, and an Armenian treatment contained in Bayan 1910: 415–417 and 420–421.

²⁶ Origen, *Comm. Matt.* 24.9–14, in Klostermann 2012. For date, see McGuckin 2004b, 30. For discussion, see Nedungatt 2011, 418–420 and 2008, 107–111.

²⁷ *Periplus of the Red Sea* 6 and 41–42, in Casson 1989; Ptolemy, *Geog.* 7.1.6, in Stückelberger/Graßhoff 2006/2009. Nedungatt 2011, 418–420 and 2008, 107–111 emphasizes the importance of Ariake but interprets its significance differently.

²⁸ Eusebius, *HE* 3.1.1–3, in Schwartz/Mommsen 1999.

²⁹ For a different interpretation, see Nedungatt 2011, 418–420 and 2008, 107–111.

³⁰ Ptolemy, *Geog.* 1.11–12 and 6.13–17 in Stückelberger/Graßhoff 2006/2009; de la Vaissière 2009, 527–536.

³¹ Clement, *Strom.* 1.15.71.3–6, in Stählin/Früchtel, describes Buddhists (*Sarmanai* and *Samanaioi*) as inhabiting India and Bactria, and his reference to Bactria seems to include north India.

Karmania, Margiana, and Bactria. In reference to these territories, the Syriac *Book* describes the inhabitants of Media, Persis, Parthia proper, and Bactria/the Kushan empire by name. The Syriac *Book* also mentions Christians among the *Gelaye* of the west Caspian sea littoral; the source for this may have been the Parthian *Acts*, but this is not certain. The Syriac *Book*, however, does not mention the presence of Christians in Hyrcania, Margiana, or Karmania. This can be explained by the premise that the *Book* does not convey a comprehensive list of regions in which Christian communities putatively existed; it instead presents a few illustrative examples for Iran and central Asia (Media, Persis/Fars, Parthia, and the Kushan empire). Finally, Origen's treatment of Christians as inhabiting regions as remote as Ariake in India (but not Ariake itself) suggests that the Parthian *Acts* depicted Thomas as evangelizing the Indus river valley of north India, which the Syriac *Book* too implicitly includes in its reference to the territory of the Kushans.

Geographic and Chronological Clarifications

The premise that the scope of Judas Thomas' activity in the lost Parthian *Acts* extended into Kushan central Asia and north India begs for a certain measure of clarification. After all, the Parthian *Acts* depicted Judas Thomas as evangelizing the first-century territories of the Parthian empire and not of Kushan imperial space, and the Parthian empire is not known to have governed north India directly. Moreover, the precise areas of governance exerted by the Parthian Arsacid dynasty and the Kushans in central Asia during the first and second centuries CE are sometimes difficult to determine with precision. This difficulty is amplified by the fact that relatively autonomous dynasts of apparent Parthian origin, as opposed to the Parthian empire, governed parts of central Asia and north India at various times. Accordingly, a clarification must be made regarding why the relevant passage of the Syriac *Book* seems to rely on the apostle's Parthian itinerary, as depicted in the Parthian *Acts*, in its rendering of Christians as living in contemporary Kushan territory, which included central Asia and north India during the late second century.

During the mid-first century CE, when Judas Thomas or Thomas was allegedly active, the Kushan empire was only in its incipient stages, and the Parthian empire controlled much of the Iranian plateau. But various parts of central Asia and north India were governed by dynasts who, while being of Parthian background, nonetheless exercised various degrees of autonomy from the Parthian empire. Accordingly, the Parthian empire or otherwise the realms of certain Parthian dynasts extended beyond the Iranian plateau and into central Asia, and they controlled places such as Merv (Antioch Margiana), Herat (Areia), and Sistan (Gedrosia/Drangiana).³² Likewise, in north India, a dynasty of "Indo-

³² Merv was in fact often deemed "little/lesser Parthia" by Chinese sources. See *Hou Hanshu* 88 in Leslie/Gardiner 1996, 45; Hill 2009, 23; Hackl/Jacobs/Weber 2010, 3: 498. For Merv and Herat in Parthian space, see Ellerbrock/Winkelmann 2012, 93. Dąbrowa 2012, 175–176 and Pyankov 2012 describe the Parthian presence in central Asia and its relationship with the Kushan empire. Ellerbrock/Winkelmann 2012, 114 comment on the Kushan empire's expansion into central Asia. Frye 1984, 197–204 and Kaim 2012, 154–155 provide useful discussion of (semi-)autonomous Parthian dynasties. The notable treatment of Pliny, *NH* 6.112–13, in Jahn/Mayhoff 1870–1906, extends the *regna Parthorum* into central Asia.

Parthian kings,” governed the region of the Indus valley and a substantial part of central Asia and Sistan.³³

Because such regions were governed either by the Parthian empire or relatively autonomous dynasts of Parthian background during the first century CE, the late second-century Parthian *Acts* apparently treated Judas Thomas' first-century zone of evangelization as consisting of the putatively aggregate “Parthian” regions that had extended east of Iran into central Asia at that time. The text also located the apostle among the “Indo-Parthian” kings of the Indus river region; his encounter with an “Indo-Parthian” king described as Gudnaphar in Syriac and Goundaphores in Greek, as it exists in the surviving Indian *Acts of Thomas*, was probably derived from the Parthian version.³⁴ The notion that the Parthian *Acts*, composed c. 175–200 CE, either imprecisely or simplistically framed the Parthian empire as controlling a significant portion of central Asia and rendered north India as governed by an “Indo-Parthian” king is inherently plausible. In a similar manner, the third-century *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* by Philostratus, itself characterized by severe geographical inaccuracy, depicts first-century Parthian territory as extending to the Hindu Kush. The text then describes an “Indian” king with the Iranian name of “Phraotes,” one commonly held by members of the Parthian Arsacid dynasty, as ruling at Taxila in north India.³⁵

After 200 CE, however, the presence of the Parthian empire or Parthian dynasts in central Asia had been compromised by the formation and expansion of the Kushan empire. Likewise, the governance of Indo-Parthian kings in north India had long since ended amid the consolidation of Kushan authority in the region. The Parthian empire of the Arsacids at best maintained an insecure grasp over east Iran and Margiana at the time that the Arsacids were overthrown by the Sasanians, and in the decades that followed, Kushan control over central Asia was largely ceded to the Sasanians too.³⁶

As noted previously, the present form of the Syriac *Book* was composed c. 225, and its treatment of various societies in Iran and central Asia apparently was not shaped by the Sasanians' overthrow of the Parthian Arsacids or their subsequent conquests of Kushan territories. Accordingly, the Syriac *Book's* treatment follows the premise that the territory controlled by the Kushans (whom Eusebius, like many Greek-speakers, describes as Bactrians) currently included much of central Asia and the north Indian territories once ruled by Parthian or “Indo-Parthian” rulers.³⁷ In other words, much of

³³ For general synthesis on the Indo-Parthians, see Bopearachchi 1998, 389–406; Puri 1999a, 191–207.

³⁴ Luke 1995/1996, 433–450 and Tubach 2002, 72–98 discuss the figure, whose reign is attested by coins and a Prakrit inscription of north India (Luke 1995/1996, 448–450; Tubach 2002, 80–82). For the Iranian etymology of the name “Gudnaphar,” a misspelled variation of Gundaphar/Vindafarna(h), see Justi 1895, 368–369; Luke 1995/1996, 438–439; Gignoux/Jullien/Jullien 2009, 76. For the king's name as rendered in the Indian *Acts*, see Wright 1871, q'g (Syriac, Gudnaphar) and *Acts of Thomas 2* in Bonnet 1903 (Greek, Goundaphores).

³⁵ Philostr., *VA* 2.20 in Jones 2006 depicts Parthian authority as extending to the Hindu Kush (the “Caucasus” mountains), even if he erroneously claims that Media adjoins it. Philostr., *VA* 2.26 provides the Indian king's name, on which Justi 1895, 101–102; Gignoux 1986, 86; Gignoux/Jullien/Jullien 2009, 72. For geographical inaccuracies, see Jones 2002.

³⁶ For a general survey of the Kushan empire, see Puri 1999b. The first Sasanian monarch Ardashir I therefore had to reintegrate Margiana, Karmania, and Sistan: Puri 1999b, 255; Litvinsky 1999, 476–481.

³⁷ For areas of Kushan control, see Puri 1999b, 254–263.

the “Parthian” territories of central Asia and north India evangelized by the putative first-century figure of Judas Thomas in the Parthian *Acts* had fallen under Kushan sway by the time that the Syriac *Book* was written. If the Parthian *Acts* had treated the first-century Parthian empire or various Parthian dynasts as controlling central Asia and north India, the Syriac *Book* rendered these regions as being under contemporary Kushan control, even as it implicitly sustained the premise, as espoused by the Parthian *Acts*, that Christians to whom Judas Thomas had preached lived there.

Conclusion

In a key passage of the Syriac *Book*, composed c. 225 CE, Christians are described as residing among the Medes, Persians, Parthians, and Kushans, and this statement has sometimes encouraged scholars to accept an early date for Christianity’s penetration of the Iranian plateau and central Asia. But this testimony does not reflect actual knowledge that Edessenes or Upper Mesopotamians possessed regarding Christian communities in the Kushan empire. Instead, it is based on the fiction of a text that had been circulating in the eastern Mediterranean and upper Mesopotamia during the late second and early third centuries CE: the Parthian *Acts of Thomas*, which is now lost. Because the lost *Acts* generated the belief among contemporary Christians that coreligionists inhabited central Asia, the value of the Syriac *Book* as a source for Christianity in central Asia is very limited. Its treatment relies on the fictive *Acts of Thomas* in Parthia.

ABBREVIATIONS

BNJ – *Brill’s New Jacoby*, ed. by I. Worthington, edition online, Leiden 2007–
 FGrH – F. Jacoby *et al.*, *Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker*, Berlin–Leiden
 1928–

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