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# The Armenian Catholicoi recognize the Indians'orthodoxy

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In this short study, we will examine several official texts of the Armenian Apostolic Church dealing with the orthodoxy of the Indian Church. First of all, it should be pointed out that Armenians living in the Sassanian kingdom were very attentive, from the 5th century onwards, to the question of the Nestorian heresy and diophysism[1]. Therefore, it is excluded that the Catholicoi of this Church had the slightest tolerance towards Nestorianism.
We will approach this ecclesial relationship by examining on the one hand the proximity of the Armenian and Indian Churches in the context of the legacy of the Apostles Bartholomew and Thomas. On the other hand, we will examine Armenian evidence of Indian orthodoxy.

# I- Bartholomew and Thomas, fellow missionaries

## *The Silk Roads*

The historical relationships between Armenia and the Indian sub-continent go back a long way, dating back to the Achaemenid period at the latest. In fact, the King of kings, Darius I (521-486 BC) reorganized and developed what was called the Royal Road. This road was built and maintained in order to serve as a link between the main cities of the empire and facilitate a free circulation of people and goods. It went from Susa to Sardis and covered 1677 miles[2]. It crossed the Euphrates River at the level of Southern Armenia, and three stations had been established in that country: Ad Aros Tomisa, Kharpet and Amida (fig. 1). In the first century AD, the Greek geographer Strabo indicated that the road went on from Sardis all the way to India[3], thus being an important communication channel between both countries, which was part of a larger network called the Silk Roads.

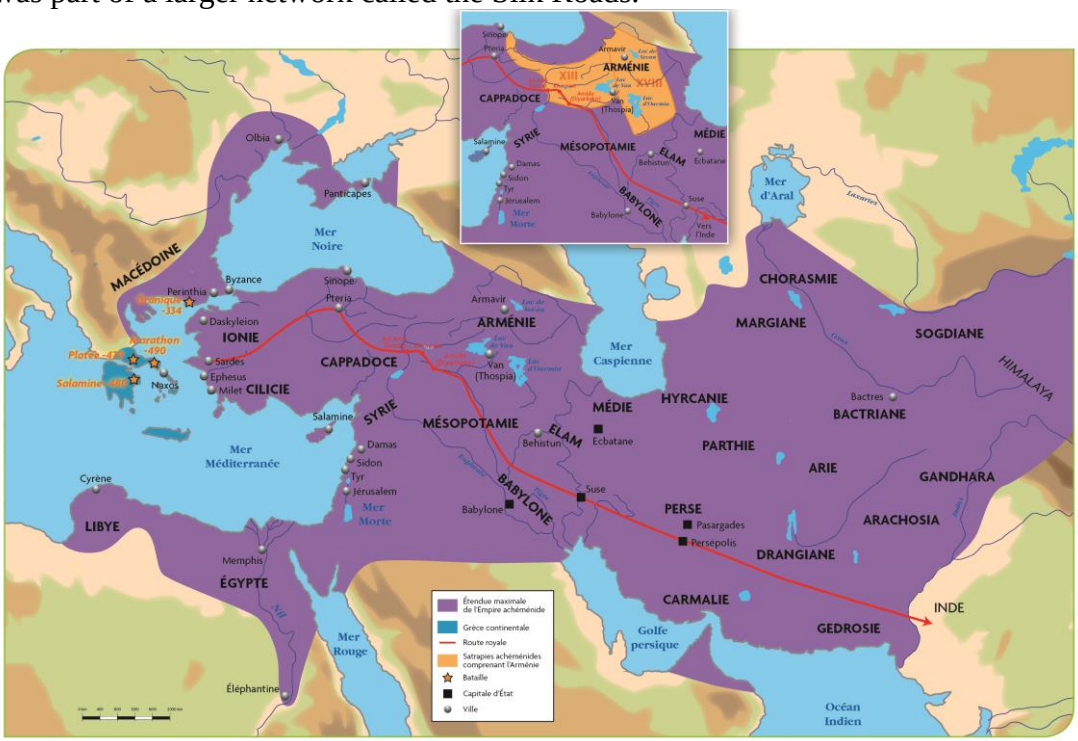


*Fig. 1: the Achaemenid empire, under the reign Darius I (521-486 BC)*[4]

[1] On this point, see Garsoïan, 1999, p. 135-239.
[2] *Cf.* Herodotus, *Histories*, v. 52-54, viii, 98 and *The Persian Royal Road System*, 1994.
[3] Strabon, *Geography*, XIV, 2, 29, ed. Meineke, III, 1913, p. 930.
[4] After Yevadian 2018, p. 13.

At this point, a reminder may be opportune: the term ‘’Silk Road’’ was in fact a triple network of distinct trade routes (Cf. map). The main roads started from Chang’an (Xi’an), built in the Han’s period (206 BC) up to the end of the Tang period (904 AD, with some interruption periods)[5]. On the Han Chinese territory (206 BC to 220 AD), there was a relay station every nine or twelve miles on all the land routes. On that Silk Road, we can mention the Chinese cities of Dun-Huang, Zhang-Xie or Wu-wei. For a general survey, on this question, see my paper one it.

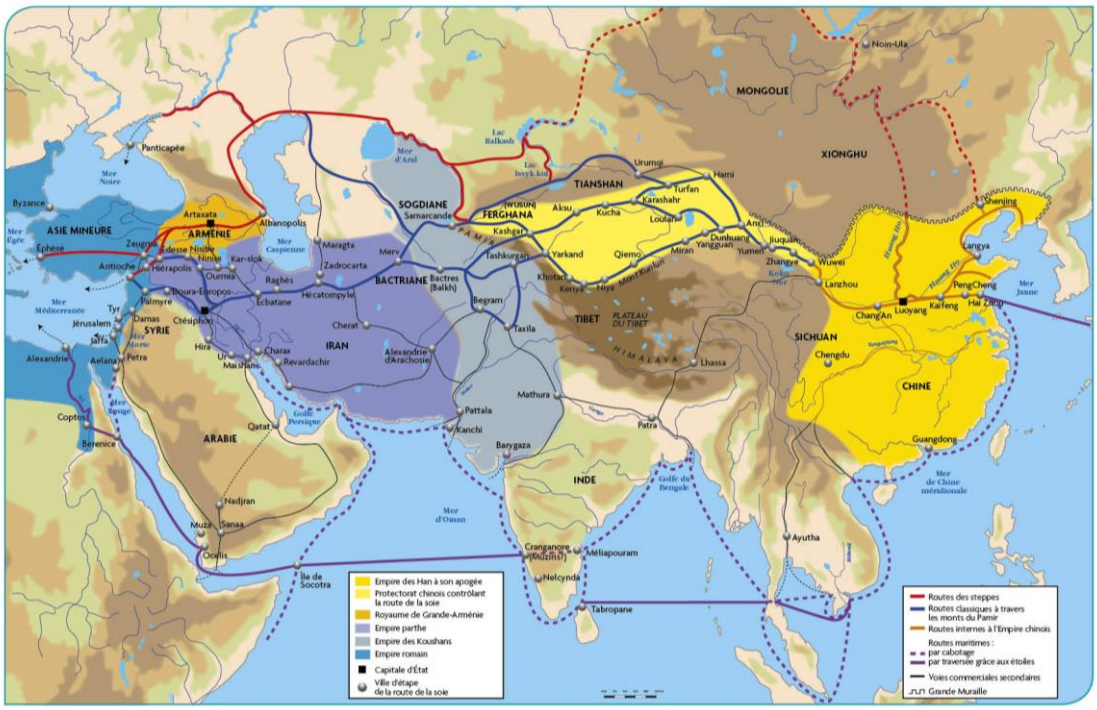


*Fig. 2: The Silk Roads in the middle of the first century*[6]

## *The preaching of thee apostles Bartholomew and Thomas*

The existence of the three silk roads helps to better understand the obvious apostolic dispersal to the Eastern world. The second chapter of the *Acts of Andrew* offers, according to our analysis[7], the most complete version of the the sharins out of the world amons the apostles:

> ‘’They stood up and drew lots to know who was going to ‘spread the word’ and where they would go and preach to which population. Peter’s lot was the coastal area, James’ and John’s were the eastern area, Philip’s lot fell on the cities of Samaria and Asia, Bartholomew’s was Albanopolis, Matthew got Parthia and the Murmenide city, Thomas's lot was the Greater Armenia and India, Lebbeus and Thaddeus were assigned Beronicide, Simon the Canaanite was assigned the Barbarian countries and, after each of them had got his lot drawn, Andrew got Bythinia, Lacedomonian and Achaia[8].”

[5] Boulnois, 2001, p. 48-49.
[6] After Yevadian 2018, p. 19.
[7] Yevadian, 2007, p. 142-147.
[8] *Acta Andrae*, cap. 2, ed.-tr. Prieur, 1989, p. 685.

To the apostle Thomas was assigned Parthia - which also included Armenia after 66 AD - and Asia. He was sent to the East together with Bartholomew. The two apostles had to part when they realized that the Kushans had blocked the central road. Thomas went southwards and headed for the sea road, in order to go to India and then to China. As for Bartholomew, he tried to avoid the Kushans by going northwards. He probably went across Armenia, since his evangelical activity there was reported in sources from the entire Christian world. He was probably put to death in *Albanopolis*, a city of the Southern Caucasian Mountains[9]. The place was one of the last stages before he was to go around Southern Caucasus, in the coastal plain of the Caspian region. That is where he must have suffered martyrdom while he was considering going further on the Steppe Road.

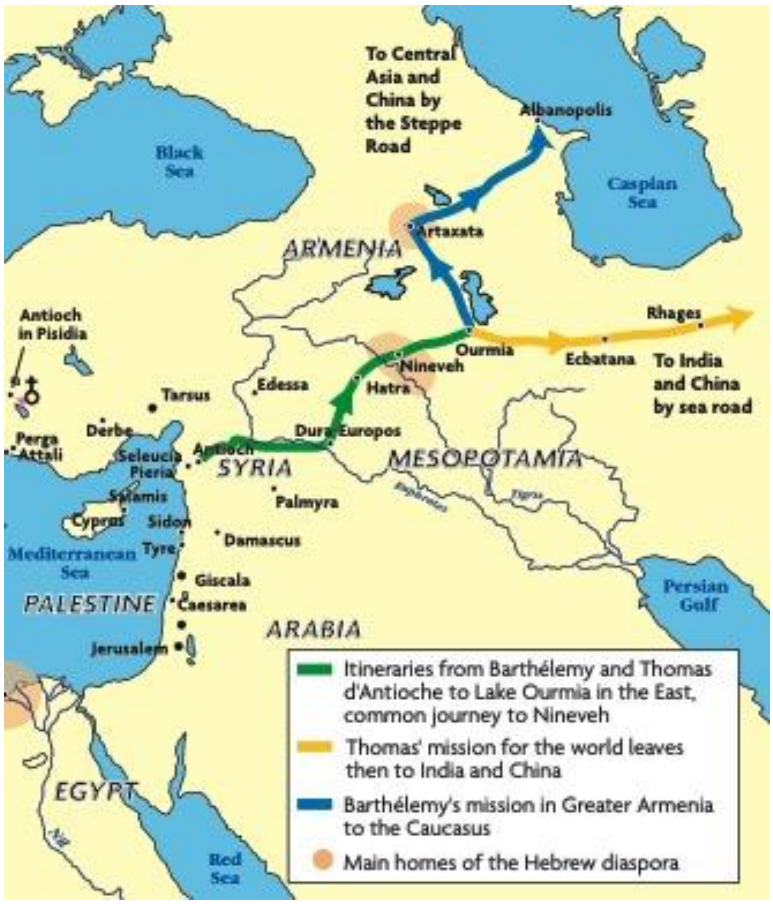


*Fig. 3: The probable itinerary of the apostles Thomas and Bartholomew*[10]

[9] The question of Barthelemy's itinerary should be considered if the current reassessment of *Acts of Thomas* was confirmed. In any case, for the sources, Yevadian 2007, p. 111-174.

[10] After Yevadian 2018, p. 19.

## II- The Armenian Catholicos Sahak III Dsoroporetsi recognizes the Indians'orthodoxy

Now we must come to a very important document. The foundation of a Christian Church in Armenia, under the leadership of a Catholicos, Saint Gregory the Illuminator, at the end of the 3rd Century, is now a well-known matter[11]. After Saint Gregory the Illuminator, the Catholicos of Vagharshapat - a city later called Etchmiadzin - was, and still is, despite the vagaries of history, the supreme guide of the Armenian Apostolic Church. The Catholicos was the leader of the bishops whom he consecrated, and he also was the supreme legal recourse and the guardian of the Doctrine. The symbol of the unity of all the members of that Church was the consecration of the Holy Chrism, the *myron*, by the Catholicos, who would do it at regular intervals in the presence of the bishops. Being the guardian of the Doctrine, he would send bishops to the oecumenical councils and bring together national Councils[12]. It is on this basis that the Armenian Catholicos became a reference in the East.

The Catholicos we are interested in now is Sahak Dzoraporesti (Սահակ Ձորոփորեցի). He was the Bishop of Rotakk' before he was elected Catholicos in 667[13]. His Pontificate took place at an essential moment of the Middle-East history, when the Armenian warlords had to repel the Khazars' invasion during the 7th year of his pontificate (685) and had also to fight the Muslim invaders.
During the year 691, Caliph Abd al-Malig's armies conquered Armenia militarily. As he was a sharp political leader, the Caliph designated Sembat VI Bagratuni - a man who was not favourable to the Byzantine Greeks - as the crown prince (691-711) responsible for the management of that difficult transitory period and for the integration of the Armenian plateau into the Muslim world[14]. In 695, Sembat VI Bagratuni tried to rebel but the Muslim general Mohamed Ibn Merwan made him a prisoner, together with the Catholicos Sahak III, and sent them both to Damascus as prisoners. After a while, Sembat VI Bagratuni went back to Armenia, but Sahak III was confined in Syria[15]. He probably stayed there until he died (703), but continued to play a spiritual and a political role in the negotiation of the Armenian integration into the Islamic empire.
His theological thought was known through those of his works that came to us. He is the author of liturgical hymns (*charagans*), which are still being used in the Armenian Church, and also of a homily that has been saved[16]. Council acts were written under his pontificate and probably drafted under his direction[17].
His main theological work – the one we are most concerned with, as it directly serves our purpose – is a speech by Sabak III, or an *Explanation of the unanimous theology of the holy spiritual fathers, in accordance with the tradition the apostles of Christ's Church have established, with the Armenians' theology of the true orthodox tradition, pronounced against*

[11] On it, see Yevadian 2007 and 2008.
[12] For exemple, the Council of Nicea, in 325AD, sources quoted in Yevadian, 2008, p. 176-189
[13] Yovhannes Drasxanakertci, trad. Boisson-Chenorhokian, 2003, chap. XX, p. 153.
[14] *Ibidem*, p. 154-155.
[15] *Idem*, p. 155-156.
[16] *ACA* V, 2005, p. 1287-1292.
[17] The so-called posthumous canons are published in *ACA*, V, 2005, p. 1293-1300 and about Théodosiopolis'canons see Sahak III, tr. van Esbroeck, 1995, p. 439-444.

*the diophysite Nestorians, given by the saint doctor and great interpreter Sahak, the Catholicos of Armenia*[18].

The Speech, which is in fact a genuine theological treaty, has been kept in the *Book of Letters*, գիրք թղթոց, a collection of ninety-eight official letters the Armenian Church sent to prelates of the Christian world. We shall note that the first part of the collection was compiled, probably in the 7th Century, whereas the letters edited in the second part were written later, during the Cilician period (11th and 12th Centuries). The only complete manuscript, copied in the Armenian Cilicia in 1298-1299, is now being kept in the Bzommar convent, at number 431. It has been re-edited three times since it was discovered[19]. We have also examined the text on the basis of defending its authenticity as well as its having been attributed to the Catholicos Sahak III, even though such an important text was used later as a model for several texts of the same kind[20].

## *Text Analysis*

Here is now a more precise presentation of the *Speech* he wrote about 691[21]. The text has been studied and translated into French by Michel van Esbroeck, who sees in it "a manifest of the religious thought of the Armenian Church" of the period. The Belgian Armenologist rightly detected the ''Manifesto of the Armenian Faith[22]'' the text stood for. It is long and dense, and begins with a historical introduction stating that there was a special link between Armenia and the Greek culture, which permitted a transmission of faith without risking a suspicion of heresy (1-5). The Trinitarian faith is founded on the teachings of Gregory the Illuminator as they appear in the central part of Agathangelos' history (6-10). Then, Sahak III tackled the Incarnation issue in its various aspects, referring to an important patristic file (11-15) and its characteristics: Natures (16-21), Divine Names (22-24), energy (25-27) and will (28-29), Jesus who is sitting on God's right and will be until the Judgement Day (30-38). After that positive approach, the same themes are taken again to show the groundlessness of the adverse theses, the unique Nature of Christ (39-44), the unique will (45-46), the unique activity (47-48), the incorruptible flesh (49-51), the life-giving Cross (53-58) and the passible and the impassible (59-65). Then, concerning a possible addition of the Trisagion, he develops the historical issue of the Armenian Church as a communion (66-70). The next part is again dedicated to reducing the adverse theses (71-83). The end of the text is dedicated to the Eucharistic question of unleavened bread and of pure grape wine (84-89). The way the text is constructed is quite complex, with an alternation of an affirmation of the Armenian

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[18] « Բացայայտութիւն համաձայն աստուածաբանութեան հոգելից Հայր ցն սր բոց ըստ առաքելասահման աւանդ իցն եկեղեցւոյ Քր իստոսի, հանդ եր ձ հաւատաբանութեամբն ճշմար իտ ուղղափառ դ աւանութեան Հայաստանեայց, ասացեալ սր բոյ վար դ ապետին Սահակայ հայոց կաթուղիկոսի եւ մեծի թար գմանչի ընդ դ էմ եր կաբնակաց նեստոր ականացն : », *ACA*, IX, 2008, p. 373.

[19] *Book of Letters*, ed. Izmireantz, 1901 ; ed. Połarean (Bogharian), 1994 and Melikset-Bek, 1961 ; Van Esbroeck, Sahak III, trad. van Esbroeck, 1995.

About the discussion on the attribution ot this text M^gr^ Norayr 1993 ; Dorfmann-Lazarev, 2004, van Esbroeck, 2003 ; Garsoïan, 2012, p. 86-87 and 135.

About the patristics quotations : Ter-Minassiants, 1904 ; Hermann, 1913 ; Akinian, 1949 ; Outtier, 1977 ; Van Esbroeck, 1994.

[20] Yevadian, 2013, p.157-159.

[21] *Book of Letters*, ed. Izmireantz J., Tiflis, 1901, p. 234-240 ; Sahak III, tr. van Esbroeck, 1995, p. 367-354 and ACA, IX, 2008, p. 373-423.

[22] Sahak III, tr. van Esbroeck, 1995, p. 347.

Church's faith and a criticism of the positions of the opposing side, the conclusion affirming the Eucharistic position of that Church[23].
The document, therefore, has a real intrinsic value and a great significance.

[23] Sahak III, tr. van Esbroeck, 1995, p. 347-348.

## *The orthodoxy of the Indian Church*

The most important point for us is the § 67 from the *Speech.* In that passage, which appears in the last third of the text, after he has shared his thoughts about theology, Sahak III uses an argument that is neither scriptural, nor theological, nor patristic, but is rather linked to the communion of his See with the rest of the Christian world:

> ‘’ Իսկ եթէ Յոյնք ոչ ընդունին զպատմութիւնն Սոկրատեայ եւ զաւանդութիւն երանելոյն Յովհաննու, յայտնապէս վարդապետացն իւրեանց լինին անարգիչք, որպէս եւ հրեայք՝ մարգարէիցն: Բայց թէ զայս ոչ ընդունին ցուցցեն յաստուածեղէն գրոց, թէ ո՞ի սրբոց հարցն ասաց, Սուրբ Աստուած առանց՝ խաչեցարի, եւ յորո՞ւմ գիրս գրեալ է: Ապա թէ ոչ կարեն ցուցանել, ուրեմն ճշմարիտ է պատմութիւնն Սոկրատեայ: Վասն որոյ եւ մեք ընդ սուրբ, եւ ընդ Իգնատիոսի եւ ընդ Ոսկեբերանին Յովհաննու խոստովանեալ եմք եւ ասեմք ի սկզբանէ մինչեւ ցայսաւր, ″ Սուրբ Աստուած հզաւր եւ անմահ, որ խաչեցար վասն մեր, ողորմեա՛ մեզ:″ եւ ոչ միայն մեք, այլ եւ Եգիպտացիք, եւ Ափրիկեցիք, եւ արեւմտեան Հնդիկք, եւ Եվթովպացիք, եւ Հռովմեայեցիք, եւ Սպանիացիք, եւ մեծ ազգն Փռանգաց, եւ արեւելեան Հնդիկք, եւ Ճենաստանեայք, եւ Ասորիք, եւ ազգ մի ի Հոնաց աշխարհին, եւ Աղուանք, եւ մեք հայաստանեայքս: Այս ազգք երկոտասան միաբան ամենեքեան ասեմք. ″Սուրբ Աստուած հզաւր եւ անմահ, որ խաչեցար վասն մեր, ողորմեա մեզ :
>
> Now, if the Greeks don’t accept Socrates’ speech and the tradition coming from John Chrysostom, it means that they clearly deny their own doctors, just as the Jews deny their prophets. But the fact they don't accept is shown in their theological books: "Which one of the Holy Fathers said: 'Holy God, without the *‘Ye who wert crucified for us’*, and in which one of the books has this been written? If they are unable to show it, then Socrates' history at least is quite true. That is the reason why, together with the saints, with Ignatius and John Chrysostom, we have confessed and said, from the origin to this very day: Holy God, Thou that art strong and immortal, Thou that wast crucified, have mercy on us!
>
> **And not only us, but also the Egyptians, the Africans, the West Indians, the Ethiopians, the Romans, the Spanish, the vast nation of the Franks, of the East- Indians, the Chinese, the Assyrians, and those from a nation of the Huns country, the peoples of the Caucasus and we, the Armenians.**
>
> We who are from twelve different nations say all in unison: Holy strong and immortal God, Thou that wast crucified for us, have mercy on us[24]!’’

The model for that list was obviously the people’s table on Pentecost Day, in the *Apostles’ Acts* (II, 8-11), but this updating of it deserves some comments. The Caucasian Albania (the Ałuank‘), constituted a Church very similar to the Armenian Church throughout the Middle-Ages and until the Touranian tribes’ invasion and the decimation of the population. Similarly, the Assyrians maintained close links with the Armenian Church. For exemple, the Catholicos Nerses II consecrated a bishop designated for their church, in 555, and then again, in 723, another Catholicos, Yovhannes Ōjnec‘i (John of Odzoun), invited some Syrian bishops to one of the main Armenian councils of the 8th Century, the Manazkert Council[25]. Their presence at the Council shows that their communion was still consistent a generation after Sahak III's *Speech.* The mention of the Huns' country probably refers to the consequences of the bishop Macarius' predication. On two occasions, this Armenian prelate with his group of priests, devoted himself to evangelizing the White Huns, as reported in the contemporary text that follows, about the years 550:

> ‘’After twice seven years came another bishop named Macarius, who was Armenian too. He behaved rightly and came voluntarily, and some priests came along with him. He (Macarius)

[24] Sahak III, *Speech*, § 67, ACA, IX, 2008, p. 411-412 and tr. van Esbroeck, 1995, § 67 p. 411-412.

[25] Asołik, ed. Malxassianc‘, 1885, p. 102-103 ; tr. Dulaurier, 1883, p. 131-132 *cf.* Yevadian, 2008, p. 226-227 for an overview.

built a church of bricks, planted trees, sowed various sorts of vegetables, performed miracles and christened a lot of people. Seeing there was something new, the chiefs there wondered, they were very pleased with these men and revered them, each one of the chiefs inviting them in his own region to see his people, and pleading for him to teach them. And see! They are still there[26].''

The Copts and the Ethiopians (Egyptians, the Western Indians, African Ethiopians), well before that period, already maintained close links with the Armenians, precisely in Jerusalem, where the Armenian patriarch was in charge of the Oriental Orthodox (non-Chalcedonian) Christians. In 1459, at the time when the Ottomans organized the Holy Land, the Syrians and the Copts and those who depended on them were linked to the Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople. Therefore, the Indians and the Ethiopians were also subjected to that patriarch, which explains why Jacome Abuna was sent to India[27].

As for the relationships with the Latin world peoples (the Spanish, the Franks and the Romans), the fact is not really surprising. Let's remember that, in 649, an Armenian monastery was attested in Rome[28]. It must have been very active, because its prior attended a council of the Roman Church. And in 642 also, an Armenian Prince, Artabasdos, was exiled to Spain by a Byzantine emperor who may have been Heraclius. He was probably not the only one to be thus sent to the Visigoths kingdom, and he married a royal princess there. They had a son who became king of the Visigoths (680-687)[29]. A part of his Court may have returned to the East when the Emperor died. Finally, the fact that a few years before, in 591, the bishop Symeon, who fled Persia and servitude, ended his life at the Court of the Merovingian kings, shows clearly that the links between both nations really existed[30].

Now, what about the Eastern nations? We have underlined the great importance of the Christian Chinese being mentioned, for it allows us to affirm that after it was established by the apostle Thomas[31], that Church developed and maintained some ties with the other Christian Churches. Moreover, its being explicitly mentioned in a Christological text bears witness to our point of view concerning the orthodoxy of that Church. After a stele carved in 781 was discovered in Si-n'gan-fou, near Xi'an, the historians were inclined to think that the Chinese Christians, if they ever existed, were all 'Nestorians'. Yet, the Catholicos Sahak III's testimony makes us temper that position.

And what about the Indians? We must insist that the fact is well established in two manuscripts still preserved[32]. It is a precisely dated attestation of the orthodoxy of the Indian Christianity, after it was founded by the apostle Thomas and had developed in connection with the Middle-East and with Egypt, as attested by the papyrus 413 found in Oxyrhynchos. Actually, the fact that the Catholicos Sahak III took the Indian Church into account takes much importance in his speech and it will be a landmark and serve as a model in the future relationships of his Church with the Byzantine Church. The mention proves that the relationships between India and Armenia were reasonably usual for the Catholicos to know that a Christian Church existed there and what its theological orientation was. The *Speech* required, for the Catholicos Sahak III, to be fully aware of being in communion with the Church of the Indian community, which apparently dated back to Thomas's preaching. His approach would then be the one of a Primate of the Church Bartholomew founded, a Primate

[26] *Zachary the Rhetor*, ed. Brooks, 1919, p. 217 of the Syriac text.
[27] Fortescure, 1913, p. 418 and Gulbenkian, 1995, p. 105.
[28] «*Thalassus priest and abbot of the venerable monastery of the Armenians* », Mansi, X, 904, cf. Sansterre, 1983, p. 10.
[29] Settipani, 2006, p. 224-231.
[30] Gregory of Tours, History of Francs, X, 24, = *Libri historiarum X, MGH, SS rer. Merov.* I, 1, ed. Krusch Bruno, p. 515-516 ; Grégoire de Tours, *Histoire des Francs*, tr. Latouche, 1975, p. 302-303.
[31] Perrier, 2011.
[32] ACA, IX, 2008, p. 412.

who would fraternally address the members of the Church his mission companion, Thomas, had founded. This indeed is not a meaningless symbol of communion.

## III- New confirmation of the orthodoxy of the Indian Church by Khatchik I

This position was solid enough and fairly well accepted to be restated and confirmed by another Catholicos, Khatchik I Arsharouni (973-992). In his answer to a letter the Chalcedonian Metropolitan from Melitene sent to him, he justified at length the doctrinal position of his Church and ended his letter by emphasizing the fact that the Armenians, as many other Eastern nations, don't recognize the Council of Chalcedon, thus including once more the Indians within his Communion:

> "ամենայն Հայք, Աղուանք, Լփինք, Կաղփք, Ճիղբք, Ասորեստանեայք՝ որք են Յակոբիկ, ամենայն Եգիմպտոս, Եթիոպա մեծ, Արաբինար, եւ ամենայն աշխարհն Հնդկաց:
> Armenian, Ałuans, Lepnik, Gałpk, Giłpk, Assyrians who are the Jacobites, the whole of Egypt, Great Ethiopia, Arabia, Arabinar and the whole world of India[33]."

We find again the same affirmation, three times, under the pen of Ananias of Narek (10th century) who was the founder of the theological school of Narek, especially known by the name of Gregory of Narek (†1001), the 36th Doctor of the Catholic Church[34].

The last point we would like to emphasize is that we have found no other affirmation being so clearly expressed of the full orthodoxy of the Indian Church (in Kerala and Chennai) corresponding to the patristic or to the medieval period.

## Conclusion

The texts we have gathered in this study are indisputable elements about the communion existing between the Armenian and the Indian Churches. This communion must undoubtedly go back to the common mission of the two apostles Thomas and Bartholomew. Moreover, the role and importance of Armenians in Jerusalem throughout the Middle Ages and Modern times cannot be overlooked.

As a result, in the eyes of several of the most important Armenian Catholics of the Middle Ages, there is no trace of Nestorianism within the Indian Church. This is a key point.

Finally, we can see a parallel evolution of these two Churches, common to many other Eastern Churches that did not recognize the Council of Chalcedon (often because they did not know of it) which evolved towards a moderate monophysism, Cyrillic in fact, which has never been condemned by any Council.

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[33] *Book of Letters*, ed. Połarean, 1994,, p. 321-322.

[34] '' Եթովպիա մեծ եւ փոքր մինչեւ ցծովն Հնդ կաց ի նոյն հաստատեալ հաւատս:'', ACA, X, 2009, § 1075-1077, p. 558, see also § 1093, p. 559 (with the mention of Thomas) ; 1099, p. 560; to complete with Timot'ēos vardapet (10th century), ACA, X, 2009, § 262, p. 919.

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