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Untangling Historiography and Myth: Saint Thomas in India

ABSTRACT: This essay examines how the Indian historian Romila Thapar (b. 1931) used scholarly writings by the British-Indian ecclesiastical historian and titular Catholic bishop Adolph Edwin Medlycott (1838–1918) in her treatment of the legend of Saint Thomas, a first-century apostle traditionally credited with traveling to and spreading Christianity in India. Applying a historiographical approach, it analyzes Medlycott's and Thapar's interpretations of the extant sources, as well as their motivations, and provides an alternative, more realistic explanation, namely, that Saint Thomas's journey to India is likely a myth perpetuated by Christians from West Asia who brought it—alongside their faith—to the subcontinent.

KEYWORDS: historiography; premodern history; India; Christianity; Saint Thomas the Apostle; Adolph Edwin Medlycott; Romila Thapar; apostolic apocrypha; Acts of Thomas; legend transmission

Introduction

In 1966, five years after the release of her acclaimed monograph on *Aśoka and the Decline of the Mauryas*, the Indian historian Romila Thapar (b. 1931) published her first popular survey, *A History of India*.¹ While the latter was well received as an introductory text for the general public,² Thapar's treatment of the Saint Thomas legend overstates its historical plausibility. By examining the critiques of Thapar's principal source for the apostle's impact on India, namely, a 1905 book titled *India and the Apostle Thomas: An Inquiry, with a Critical Analysis of the Acta Thomae*, by the British-Indian ecclesiastical historian and titular Catholic bishop Adolph Edwin Medlycott (1838–1918),³ and by considering the nature of the *Acts of Thomas*, a third-century apocryphal text,⁴ it becomes clear that the Saint Thomas legend should not be treated as a factual account but, rather, as a work of historical fiction, as a potential consequence of human migration, and as political propaganda.

While Thapar exercises a certain degree of caution by stating that “it [is] being held by tradition that St. Thomas travelled from Israel to the court of Gondophares,” and that “the

¹ Romila Thapar, *A History of India*, vol. 1 (Penguin Books, 1966). For her earlier work, see Romila Thapar, *Aśoka and the Decline of the Mauryas* (Oxford University Press, 1961); and Luciano Petech, review of *Aśoka and the Decline of the Mauryas*, by Romila Thapar, *Rivista degli studi orientali* 37, no. 1/2 (June 1962): 154–155.

² See, for example, C. Collin Davies, review of *A History of India*, vol. 1, by Romila Thapar, *The English Historical Review* 83, no. 327 (1968): 388; and John W. Spellman, review of *A History of India*, vol. 1, by Romila Thapar, *Journal of Asian History* 2, no. 2 (1968): 161–162.

³ A[dolph]. E[dwin]. Medlycott, *India and the Apostle Thomas: An Inquiry, with a Critical Analysis of the Acta Thomae* (David Nutt, 1905). For the critiques of Medlycott's book used in this essay, see M[ontague]. R[hodes]. James, review of *India and the Apostle Thomas*, by A. E. Medlycott, *The Journal of Theological Studies* 7, no. 28 (July 1906): 635–636; and J[ames]. Kennedy, review of *India and the Apostle Thomas*, by A. E. Medlycott, *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* (October 1906): 1020–1029.

⁴ For recent scholarship on this text, see *New Trends in the Research on the Apocryphal Acts of Thomas*, ed. Israel Muñoz Gallarte and Lautaro Roig Lanzillotta, *Studies on Early Christian Apocrypha* 20 (Peeters, 2024). See also Jonathan Henry, “Acts of Thomas,” *e-Clavis: Christian Apocrypha*, [online](#).

coming of Christianity is associated with the *legend* of St. Thomas,⁵ a position fully in line with the scholarly consensus, she then asserts that “the story of the second mission appears to be more credible.”⁶ Saint Thomas’s second mission allegedly occurred around 52 AD, when he is said to have traveled near Madras (i.e., Mylapore, a neighborhood in today’s southeastern Indian city of Chennai) where he would be martyred in 72 AD for his proselytizing. Thapar is correct in that it is conceivable that one of Jesus’s disciples could have traveled to India. According to the British numismatist and archaeologist Adrian David Hugh Bivar, the Greek philosopher Apollonius of Tyana crossed the River Indus sometime between 39 AD and 47 AD to possibly counter Christian evangelists who had made their way to India.⁷ However, a notion that something could have occurred does not justify a claim that it did, in fact, occur. Meanwhile, the American New Testament scholar Clare K. Rothschild emphasizes that “the reports about Thomas in India are legendary and fictitious.”⁸

The only source Thapar cites for her assertion is A. E. Medlycott’s *India and the Apostle Thomas*, published 61 years prior to her own popular survey. The issue with Medlycott’s study is that it proposes to use the aforementioned *Acts of Thomas* as a historical source, and scholars reviewing Medlycott’s work within a year of its original publication—and thus well before Thapar wrote her *History of India*—had already been quite critical of his approach.⁹ Thus, while Thapar’s use of terms like “tradition” and “legend” should inspire confidence, her claim—based on Medlycott’s dubious findings—that the story of Saint Thomas’s second mission “appears to be more credible” raises concerns. This essay first explores Thapar’s source (Medlycott); it then considers the nature of the *Acts of Thomas*, archaeological evidence in India, and literary sources; and it concludes with an assessment of Thapar’s motivations. It argues that Saint Thomas’s journey to India is likely a myth perpetuated by Christians from West Asia who brought it—alongside their faith—to the subcontinent.

1. Scholarly Critiques of A. E. Medlycott’s Work

It is reasonable to assume that Thapar could have had access to scholarly reviews of Medlycott’s study while she was writing her *History of India*. In 1906, Montague Rhodes James (1862–1936), an eminent English medievalist, and James Kennedy (1842–1920), a historian of India and honorary treasurer of the Royal Asiatic Society, had both published their assessments of Medlycott’s work in *The Journal of Theological Studies* and *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, respectively.¹⁰ While James acknowledges that “this book [...] has interested me more than a little,” and Kennedy states that he is “thankful to him [i.e., Medlycott] for the fulness of his materials,” Kennedy cautions that he is “seldom convinced by the Bishop’s [i.e., Medlycott’s] arguments, and James’s overall verdict

⁵ Thapar, *History of India*, 96, 134. In these quotes, the emphasis on *legend* and *tradition* has been added for effect.

⁶ Thapar, *History of India*, 96, 134.

⁷ See A[drian]. D[avid]. H[ugh]. Bivar, “Gondophares and the Indo-Parthians,” in *The Age of the Parthians*, ed. Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis and Sarah Stewart (I. B. Tauris, 2007), 26.

⁸ Clare K. Rothschild, e-mail message to author, February 11, 2025.

⁹ See James, review, 635–636; and Kennedy, review, 1020–1029.

¹⁰ James, review, 635–636; and Kennedy, review, 1020–1029.

is unequivocal: "I cannot, in conclusion, accept this book as a successful critical study either of the Acts of Thomas or of the Indian tradition."¹¹

More recent scholarship has also highlighted issues in Medlycott's work that Thapar probably should have recognized. For example, Medlycott states that the ahistorical and non-Indian or non-Hindu names in the *Acts of Thomas* "should be summarily dismissed as fictitious" because "the mention of a woman's name—in the presence of foreigners more especially—never occurs."¹² However, as the American scholar of religion James Frank McGrath points out, this does not always hold true; for example, in the *Ramayana*, a famous Hindu epic poem, "Sita is not simply called 'Rama's wife.'"¹³ As McGrath explains, the one exception to these non-Indian and non-Hindu names is that of Gondophares (r. 19/21–46/50 AD), the founder of the Indo-Parthian kingdom, but this is probably due to the fact that Gondophares's rule was known beyond India.¹⁴ This suggests that the *Acts of Thomas* do not constitute a historical recounting of events but, rather, a fiction based upon a body of knowledge about India available in Syria or Upper Mesopotamia (i.e., today's southeastern Türkiye, northeastern Syria, and northwestern Iraq) at the time of the work's original composition. Given her expertise, Thapar probably should have recognized Medlycott's analysis of names as incorrect, which should have led her to question his overall analysis.

Another error occurs in Medlycott's attempt to extract historical truth from the Gnostic¹⁵ legend in the *Acts of Thomas*. Medlycott claims that there is an original version that only later underwent Gnostic reinterpretation. Referencing a work by the German Coptologist Carl Schmidt (1868–1938), he states that, "[f]ortunately, a great German scholar, who has made a special study of Gnostic writings and is considered a great authority on the subject, von Carl Schmidt [...], has arrived at the conclusion that of the Acts of Peter, Paul, John, Thomas, and Andrew [...] all are [composed] by more or less orthodox Catholics; certainly none are of Gnostic origin."¹⁶ If Medlycott's understanding of Carl Schmidt's argument were accurate, a historical account would have to be considered as mixed into the Gnostic fiction. However, as Montague Rhodes James notes in his review, "Dr. Schmidt, I think, would be surprised and amused at the manner in which his theories are interpreted by the Bishop [i.e., Medlycott]."¹⁷ James then proceeds to mention Medlycott's misuse of translations, his dismissal of counterclaims on insufficient grounds, and his use of evidence that, in actuality, counters his

¹¹ James, review, 636; and Kennedy, review, 1029.

¹² Medlycott, *India and the Apostle Thomas*, 283.

¹³ J[ames]. F[rank]. McGrath, "History and Fiction in the *Acts of Thomas*: The State of the Question," *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 17, no. 4 (2008): 297–311.

¹⁴ McGrath, "History and Fiction," 300.

¹⁵ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. Andrew Louth, 4th ed. (Oxford University Press, 2022), defines "Gnosticism" as a "word of modern coinage (by Henry Moore in the 17th cent[ury].), used to denote a variety of beliefs and practices, especially those propounded in the first cent[uries] of Christian history by teachers such as Basilides and Valentinus, and opposed by others, principally Irenaeus of Lyon, in the struggle to define Christian orthodoxy, although the word is often used to refer to pre-Christian religious trends as well as esoteric teaching throughout the following cent[uries]. The term derives from the G[ree]k word for 'knowledge' (γνῶσις)."

¹⁶ Medlycott, *India and the Apostle Thomas*, 291–292.

¹⁷ James, review, 635.

own claims, emphasizing that “[t]he assumption of later Church writers that Gnostics had tampered with originally orthodox writings runs directly counter to everything that can be gathered from the documents themselves, and is simply a falsification of history”¹⁸ James’s review constitutes a significant challenge to the authority of Medlycott’s work and should be considered when evaluating historical works like Thapar’s *History of India* and its reliance on Medlycott’s findings.

James Kennedy’s 1906 review is less scathing, but it, too, provides a critical assessment of Medlycott’s methodology. When the latter’s *India and the Apostle Thomas* was published, scholars generally held that “Christianity did not cross the Euphrates until the middle of the second century,” a position that, according to Kennedy, Medlycott “does not discuss,” likely assuming that it “would be sufficiently refuted if the Indian Apostolate of St. Thomas is proved.”¹⁹ Furthermore, Kennedy indicates that Medlycott does not meaningfully consider the date and composition of the *Acts of Thomas*; rather, without evidence, he goes against the general consensus of the work’s origins. Kennedy quotes the English theologian Francis Crawford Burkitt (1864–1935), an expert on the subject, who had argued “[t]hat the stories in the Acts of Thomas have little or no historical basis is indeed almost self-evident.”²⁰ Medlycott, however, argues that there is a “historical substratum”²¹ in the work, and that the events and locations are simply confused.

Kennedy also highlights Medlycott’s attempt to demonstrate historical accuracy by means of analogy, namely, by referring to the Acts of Paul and Thekla, which had once been considered fictitious but had meanwhile been proven to contain historical evidence.²² Yet, as Kennedy explains, the “rehabilitation” of the Acts of Paul and Thekla is based on their use of historical names, a feature that the *Acts of Thomas* lack, apart from the case of Gondophares, which, ironically, Medlycott believes to be misattributed. This means that Medlycott’s interpretation of the *Acts of Thomas* lacks the historical elements he is trying to use by comparing them to the Acts of Paul and Thekla. Medlycott also attempts to portray customs mentioned in the *Acts of Thomas* as uniquely Indian, specifically South Indian; this includes carts drawn by cattle, the use of a palanquin²³ or *pālākī*, bathing before eating, holding royal court first thing in the morning, the use of a “garb of grief,” and the Hindu custom of prostrating oneself before the Brahmins, which supposedly led them to do the same so quickly to Saint Thomas.²⁴ However, as Kennedy observes, “none of them [i.e., these customs] appear peculiar to Southern India.”²⁵

¹⁸ James, review, 636.

¹⁹ Kennedy, review, 1021–1022.

²⁰ Quoted in Kennedy, review, 1022.

²¹ Kennedy, review, 1023.

²² Kennedy, review, 1023.

²³ The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, [online](#), defines “palanquin” as “a conveyance formerly used especially in eastern Asia usually for one person that consists of an enclosed litter borne on the shoulders of usually four or six people by means of poles.”

²⁴ Medlycott, *India and the Apostle Thomas*, 277–281.

²⁵ Kennedy, review, 1023.

In his review, Kennedy provides his own alternative explanation for the rise of the Saint Thomas legend, namely, that it developed locally in connection with a shrine to the apostle that had existed in Mylapore since the sixth century. As the legend of the apostle's mission to India was "universally accepted" by the fourth century, alongside the notion that the apostle's martyrdom had occurred somewhere other than Mylapore, Kennedy theorizes that endeavoring monks created the Saint Thomas legend's martyrdom at Mylapore to lend credibility to their church and to create a direct lineage to one of the apostles. As Kennedy puts it, "the discovery of the site [at Mylapore], far from awakening the jealousy of the Malabar Christians [on the subcontinent's opposite western shore], would ensure their enthusiastic assent."²⁶ Thus, while Kennedy's review of Medlycott's work is not as harsh as James's, it is nonetheless critical; it provides plausible alternatives to Medlycott's conclusions; and it suggests that cause and effect are being confused when one argues that the *Acts of Thomas* were written first and became the basis for oral tradition later. When dealing with centuries or even millennia of a region's history, no one can master all the relevant sources and their critical reception, which is why any author writing a popular survey routinely relies on the scholarship of others. However, Thapar's principal reliance on Medlycott's work with regard to the Saint Thomas legend illustrates that this practice can lead to distortions, which could have been avoided had Thapar engaged with James's and Kennedy's reviews.

2. The Nature of the "Acts of Thomas"

The *Acts of Thomas* should be treated like other premodern works of fiction that incorporate elements of common knowledge from their time of origin to enhance their credibility. In that, they operate similarly to the Infancy Gospels, which filled narrative gaps in the life of Jesus. As the American New Testament scholar Bart D. Ehrman explains, early Christians created such stories "to answer the question" of Jesus's childhood by inventing episodes not found in the canonical texts.²⁷ Just as the Infancy Gospels address the silence surrounding Jesus's early years, the *Acts of Thomas* seek to answer the question of where the Apostle Thomas went and what became of him after he disappeared from the canonical narrative. According to McGrath, these Acts also function as a genre, essentially as "what we today would call 'historical fiction.'"²⁸ This is not to say that they have no historical foundation; much like today's historical fiction, they incorporate actual past events, characters, and phenomena. Like their modern colleagues, premodern authors often used things they knew or texts they had access to. In our case, some of the apostle's letters that the author of the *Acts of Thomas* might have used as sources may have been destroyed during the flood of Edessa in 201 AD. The profound lack of information what Thomas may have done after the events of the canonical Gospels and the first chapter of the New Testament Book of Acts leaves potential authors with a grand opportunity to use their imagination. What compounds the issue is that

²⁶ Kennedy, review, 1028–1029.

²⁷ Bart D. Ehrman, *A Brief Introduction to the New Testament*, 5th ed. (Oxford University Press, 2021), 64. The earliest known Infancy Gospel is the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, not to be confused with the Acts of Thomas. For recent scholarship on this text, see *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, ed. David Cielontko, Tobias Nicklas, and Jan N. Bremmer, *Studies on Early Christian Apocrypha* 23 (Peeters, 2025).

²⁸ McGrath, "History and Fiction," 306.

"India" had a broader meaning in the ancient world: in some translations of the *Acts of Thomas*, the apostle traveled to Parthia (i.e., today's northeastern Iran), but this is further complicated by the existence of Parthian kings in India.

It is worth considering the function of comparable apocrypha in the early Christian Church. Clare K. Rothschild argues that they were used as a "kind of proto-episcopal political propaganda."²⁹ Thus, they could bestow legitimacy and bolster power. While further textual investigation might be needed, the *Acts of Thomas* seem to reflect the "contrived unity and strength through uniformity" that Rothschild posits.³⁰ In this case, their purpose is clear: first, to lend legitimacy to the Persian Church by declaring it to be founded by an apostle; second, to explain the Persian Church's connection to the emerging Indian Church; and third, to elevate the former's tradition over the latter's.³¹ The sparse information about Saint Thomas's activities at the time made him a suitable apostle to be used by the Persian Church, to be transmitted to the emerging Indian Church, and to be transformed into the latter's own legitimizing force. As Rothschild points out, "[t]oo often, interpretations of early Christian apocrypha proceed as if the texts were composed in a political vacuum."³² Thus, while it is useful to categorize the *Acts of Thomas* as part of the historical fiction genre, it is essential to understand their author's intentions, namely, to highlight the role of the Persian Church. While somewhat speculative, this provides a strong alternative to merely viewing the *Acts of Thomas* as a work with historical truths that need to be separated from its fictional elements.

3. Archaeological Evidence in India and Literary Sources

According to the British Anglican bishop and ecclesiastical historian Stephen Charles Neill (1900–1984), "[a] number of scholars, among whom are to be mentioned with respect Bishop A. E. Medlycott [...] have built up on slender foundations what can only be called Thomas romances, such as reflect the vividness of their imaginations rather than the prudence of rigid historical critics."³³ Unlike Medlycott's work, Neill's posthumously published monograph, *A History of Christianity in India: The Beginnings to AD 1707*, sheds light on the historical evidence for the arrival of Christianity on the subcontinent. Neill maintains that it is not uncommon for historical events and characters to be woven into a story that, in itself, lacks historical credibility.³⁴ An explanation of how the author of the *Acts of Thomas*, who probably resided in Edessa (i.e., today's Şanlıurfa in southeastern Türkiye) or elsewhere in Upper Mesopotamia, might have learned the name of Gondophares is that the Kushans' invasion India led to the collapse of Gondophares's Indo-Parthian kingdom and caused considerable displacement. Those who migrated to Edessa would have known the name of Gondophares,

²⁹ Clare K. Rothschild, "Dynasty and the Christian Apocrypha," *Early Christianity* 14, no. 2 (2023): 171.

³⁰ Rothschild, "Dynasty," 171.

³¹ While Parthia and the Persian world were two separate entities, they encompassed much of the same geographical region. This would explain why the Persian Church, located in Parthia, would be considered a foundation of the Apostle Thomas, especially if he went to Parthia rather than India as we know it today.

³² Rothschild, "Dynasty," 174.

³³ Stephen Neill, *A History of Christianity in India: The Beginnings to AD 1707* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), 28.

³⁴ Neill, *History*, 28.

as well as some Indian customs, thereby furnishing the author of the *Acts of Thomas* with a realistic, yet exotic setting for the Saint Thomas legend.

While there may have been Christian enclaves in both northwestern India and along the subcontinent's southwestern Malabar Coast early on, especially in trading communities, there is no historical evidence that they did indeed exist. Meanwhile, as Neill points out, "from the middle of the third century there was a strong tradition in Edessa linking India with the apostle Thomas."³⁵ While the oral tradition of the Saint Thomas legend in India is consistent on several points, it is nonetheless conceivable that the legend was carried by Christians as they migrated and settled in India, where the *Acts of Thomas* and local oral traditions would have merged eventually. The legend of Saint Thomas's martyrdom in Mylapore does not appear in the historical record as being locally believed in India until later, for example, when Marco Polo corroborated it in 1293.³⁶

It is true that the Portuguese, in 1523, while renovating a chapel near the supposed location of Saint Thomas's martyrdom in Mylapore, found bones in what could be described as an apostle's tomb,³⁷ and it could be argued that this is the tomb of Saint Thomas. Still, it remains contested: there is no way to ascertain what religion the person, whose bones the Portuguese discovered, had once belonged to, and despite the oral tradition, the body was buried in north-south direction, which is the Muslim custom. Some Muslim locals even venerated the tomb as a resting place of one of their holy men. Suppose it was originally a Hindu holy man who, through the merging of oral traditions, morphed into a different character to match the locals' "new" faith: in that case, there is no definitive answer one way or the other. In 1547, the Portuguese found a granite cross at the supposed site of Saint Thomas's martyrdom. They initially had the artifact's inscription translated by a Brahman and happily accepted his rendition at the time. Later on, the inscription was revisited, and its currently accepted translation reads as follows: "My Lord Christ, have mercy upon Afras, son of Chaharbukht the Syrian, who cut this."³⁸ This seems to prove the existence of a local Christian community at some point prior, probably composed of Syrian migrants, which could mean that the *Acts of Thomas* migrated there with Christians from Upper Mesopotamia, where the text had originally been composed.

The earliest evidence for Christians in India derives from literary sources. According to the *Ecclesiastical History* of Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260/265–339), the Christian theologian Pantaenus traveled to India around 179 AD.³⁹ It appears that Pantaenus's presence had been requested in India due to his prestige and knowledge, and Neill posits that he journeyed specifically to southern India. Most notably, Eusebius's account states that the Christians in India claimed it had been the apostle Bartholomew, not Thomas, through

³⁵ Neill, *History*, 28–29.

³⁶ Marco Polo, *The Description of the World*, trans. and annot. A[rthur]. C[hristopher]. Moule and Paul Pelliot, vol. 1 (George Routledge & Sons Limited, 1938), 388–400.

³⁷ Neill, *History*, 34–36.

³⁸ Neill, *History*, 47–48.

³⁹ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, trans. Kirsopp Lake, vol. 1 (G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1926), 465.

whom they had come to know Christ. This means that while there appear to have been Christian communities in southern India in 179 AD, they were unfamiliar with the Saint Thomas legend, and the *Acts of Thomas* were probably composed later in the third century.⁴⁰

Early literary sources also support a connection between the Christian communities in India and the Persian Church, which is meaningful because the Persian Church subscribed to the tradition that it had been founded by Saint Thomas. Thus, when asserting that they, too, had been founded by Saint Thomas, Christian communities in India were following a broader, pre-established tradition. Neill supplies perhaps the best explanation of how the *Acts of Thomas* reached India, arguing that emigrants from Upper Mesopotamian regions brought the text to India when they were fleeing from persecution; having “found that the local Christians were ignorant of this tradition, they would have imparted it to them and so shared with them the conviction of apostolic origin.”⁴¹ Again, this seems to be fully supported by literary sources, and outside of the *Acts of Thomas* themselves, the first acknowledgment of the legend’s perpetuation comes in 883 AD, when the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* mention that King Alfred sent alms to “St. Thomas of India,” meaning to the shrine in Malabar where the apostle was believed to have been martyred.⁴²

4. Romila Thapar’s Motivations and Nationalist Rhetoric

When considering Saint Thomas’s impact on India, why did Romila Thapar rely principally upon Medlycott’s work? One possibility is that Christianity played a comparatively insignificant role in early India, unlike what we now call Hinduism and the mosaic of traditions it came from, as well as Buddhism, and later Islam. Most early Christians were probably migrants and not viewed as sufficiently “Indian” to receive particular attention in a work like Thapar’s *History of India* that was supposed to cover the broad swath of Indian history from its very beginnings to the advent of the Mughal empire (1526). Even as recent as the decades between 1951 and 2011, India retained only a rather low Christian population of approximately two to three percent.⁴³

Additionally, Thapar’s rather superficial treatment is not singular. Her principal source for Saint Thomas’s impact on India, Medlycott, had done the same, and he was—at the time he published *India and the Apostle Thomas*—not just a titular Catholic bishop of Tricomia (a now suppressed diocese in Palaestina Prima) but, more importantly, the former Vicar Apostolic of Thrichur in southeastern India. Although one might expect a high-ranking member of the Catholic clergy who had spent most of his career on the subcontinent to possess considerable expertise on the history of Indian Christianity, Medlycott’s interpretation of the historical dimensions of the *Acts of Thomas* was nevertheless misguided. Recounting the Saint Thomas legend, Bivar only supplies numismatic evidence for Gondophares’s reign, which would have been the appropriate time period, and states that “we have little precise

⁴⁰ Neill, *History*, 40.

⁴¹ Neill, *History*, 43.

⁴² Neill, *History*, 44–45; *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, trans. and ed. Michael Swanton (Phoenix Press, 2000), 79. It is noteworthy that, according to this text, King Alfred sent alms to both Saint Thomas and Saint Bartholomew.

⁴³ Pew Research Center, “Population Growth and Religious Composition,” September 21, 2021, [online](#).

information about the events of his reign."⁴⁴ Even then, as McGrath points out, one of the three kings or unnamed biblical magi who visited Jesus according to the second chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, might have originally been named Gondophares, and his name might have later been corrupted to Caspar.⁴⁵ In the absence of corroborating evidence, it is more likely that Gondophares was the name of a foreign king known to early Christian authors. Despite this, the legend continues to be perpetuated as history, and it is included in Thapar's *History of India* to provide a simplistic account of Christianity's origins in the region.

There may be more speculative reasons for Thapar's promotion of the Saint Thomas legend. For example, in his 1934 book *Glimpses of World History*, India's future prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964) suggests that Christianity may have reached India before it arrived in Europe, adding that Indians often behave more in line with Christian ideals than "the loud-voiced followers of today, with their imperialism and armaments and wars and worship of wealth."⁴⁶ Nehru's claim can be read as part of a broader Indian nationalist rhetoric, one that positions India as more spiritually advanced or "civilized" than the West, both historically and morally. Thus, promoting an early Christian presence in India could bolster cultural pride and suggest a native connection to a globally prominent religious tradition independent of Western colonial influence.

In the absence of meaningful evidence, there is too much room for hypotheticals. According to Rothschild, many religious scholars lack the language skills to explore the topic in depth;⁴⁷ after all, the *Acts of Thomas* are featured in Arabic, Armenian, Coptic, Ethiopic, Georgian, Greek, Latin, Church Slavic, and Syriac manuscripts.⁴⁸ McGrath mentions other compounding issues: the scholarship on the topic has been bipolar, swinging from one extreme to the other; there is a lack of prior interdisciplinary work on the subject; and, most troubling, especially considering the earlier context of Thapar's work, there has been no "continuous and longstanding history of scholarship" on the subject.⁴⁹ Thus, the reasons why the myth of Saint Thomas is being perpetuated are multifaceted.

Conclusion

Romila Thapar's treatment of the Saint Thomas legend in her 1966 *History of India* demonstrates a major pitfall of uncritically incorporating inaccurate scholarship in one's work, namely, perpetuating myth rather than history, which results in myth-history. By relying on A. E. Medlycott's 1905 *India and the Apostle Thomas* and asserting that the story of the apostle's second mission "appears to be more credible," Thapar continued a faulty narrative

⁴⁴ Bivar, "Gondophares," 31. See also, Neill, *History*, 27, who provides an informative account of Charles Masson (1800–1853), an English deserter of the British East India Company's Bengal Artillery, who found the coins in 1833.

⁴⁵ McGrath, "History and Fiction," 300. The magi's names—Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar, according to Western Christians—do not appear in any surviving sources until the eighth century AD.

⁴⁶ Jawaharlal Nehru, *Glimpses of World History* (Asia Publishing House, 1934), 89.

⁴⁷ Clare K. Rothschild, e-mail message to author, February 11, 2025.

⁴⁸ See Henry, "Acts of Thomas," [online](#).

⁴⁹ McGrath, "History and Fiction," 297–298.

that had already been critiqued by scholars like Montague Rhodes James and James Kennedy decades before the publication of her book. As others have demonstrated, the *Acts of Thomas* should be understood as a work of historical fiction and political propaganda rather than a factual account. More plausible explanations for the spread of Christianity to India involve human migration and trade routes, with the Saint Thomas legend likely brought to the subcontinent by Syrian Christians arriving from Upper Mesopotamia. According to Eusebius of Caesarea's fourth-century *Ecclesiastical History*, the second-century traveler Pantaenus encountered Christians in India who linked their communities' origins to the apostle Bartholomew, not Thomas, further undermining the historical credibility of the latter's legend. Ultimately, the persistent inclusion of the Saint Thomas legend in historical narratives, despite the lack of convincing evidence, serves a rhetorical purpose. Thapar's overstatement of the Saint Thomas legend's plausibility in her *History of India* illustrates how popular surveys can blur the lines between legend and fact. This is the challenge of myth-history: it can be difficult to dislodge a pervasive and appealing narrative, but it is the scholar's responsibility to intercept the latter's adoption into the historical record.

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