

Socotra: The Mysterious Island of the Assyrian Church of the East

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The Nestorian Christians of Socotra

Socotra is an island off of the coast of east Africa that is governed by Yemen. For centuries all the inhabitants of the islands of Socotra belonged the Ancient Assyrian Church of the East, which was known as the Nestorian Church. The Ancient Catholic and Apostolic Church of the East was a missionary church that founded Christian communities in Mongolia, China, and India while Western Europe was sleeping through its 'Dark Ages'. The Assyrian Church of the East thrived for centuries in these lands yet most of its churches were eradicated by Islamic warriors, leaving only the churches of India and a community in the original Assyrian homeland of the region of modern Iraq and Iran. One of the longest lasting churches established by Assyrian missionaries, that eventually also fell victim to the Muslim Jihad, was the Nestorian Church of the Island of Socotra which endured for over a thousand years.

The Assyrian Church of the East and the Island of Socotra

While Western Christendom was slumbering through the Dark Ages in Europe, the Assyrian Christians of the Ancient Church of the East in Mesopotamia were dutifully carrying out Jesus Christ's Great Commission to carry his message of hope and love to the distant corners of the world.¹ With a fervent zeal Assyrian missionaries spread the Christian gospel to India, China, Mongolia, and Socotra, an isolated island in the midst of the Indian Ocean.²

The Assyrians speak Syriac, a living form of the Aramaic language spoken by Jesus of Nazareth.³ Their ancestral homeland is northern Iraq and western Iran. The Assyrian Church of the East was founded directly by the Hebrew Christians of Jerusalem and by the evangelists who were from among Christ's twelve apostles and seventy disciples. According to ancient traditions Thomas and Thaddeus were the first to preach among the Assyrians. Since Jesus, his disciples and the Assyrians were Aramaic speakers; Christianity came directly to the Assyrians through its original Semitic source and wasn't filtered through Greek, Roman or any other pagan culture. The Assyrian church's primitive Christian origins can be seen in references in the Doctrine of Addai and the Hebrew Christian origin of the Peshitta version of the Old Testament.⁴ Of the Assyrian Church fathers who were wholly Semitic there are Aphpharat and Ephraim. Later Syriac church fathers were profoundly influenced by the Greek thinking. Sebastian Brock notes in "An Introduction to Syriac Studies":

The earliest major [Syriac] authors...are virtually untouched by Greek culture and they offer us an essentially Semitic form of Christianity, quite different in many respects from the Christianity of the Greek and Latin speaking world of the Mediterranean littoral. From the fifth century onwards the Syriac speaking churches underwent a rapid hellenization with the result that no subsequent writers entirely escaped the influence of Greek culture in some form or another. This specifically Semitic aspect of the earliest Syriac literature has been curiously neglected, despite its potential interest for the study of primitive Christianity as a whole.⁵

The Assyrian Christians of the Church of the East came to be called Nestorian after Nestorius, a Patriarch of Constantinople from 428 until 432, whose Christological doctrine and method of Biblical interpretation was accepted by the Assyrians in that they mirrored those of their own ancient traditions. Nestorian Christians are not and never were heretics. The Assyrian Church of the East holds fast to the tenants of the Nicene Creed, and affirms the core doctrines of the Virgin Birth, the Holy Trinity, the Deity of Christ (meaning that Christ is God the Son as well as being the eternal Son of God), the literal and physical resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead as well as the other basic doctrines held by all Christians whether they be Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox or Protestant.⁶

Assyrians were active in world trade centered along the Silk Road (the Silk Road is the name of the caravan routes frequented by merchants who traded between Europe, China and India). Assyrian merchants and missionaries planted churches in Central Asia, China and India. The Assyrian Church of the East is one of the most dynamic missionary churches in all of Christian history. Ian Gilman and Hans-Joachim give the founding of the church in Socotra as an example of the global expansiveness of the Church of the East. In Christians in Asia Before 1500 they state that:

A further example of Nestorian expansion is provided by the church on the island of Socotra, which dates from the 6th century and was to continue its life down until destruction by the Muslims after the period which concerns us here [1500]. The traveler Cosmas Indicopleustes found Christians there in the 6th century and we have records of consecrations of bishops for the island under the Patriarch Enush in 880 and Sabr-ishu III (d. AD 1072). Marco Polo (d. 1324) reported a bishop there who owed allegiance not to the pope in Rome but to a Patriarch at Baghdad, and the Bishop of Socotra was present at the consecration of Yaballah III as Patriarch in AD 1282.⁷

Socotra serves as an example of the zeal and rigid determination of the Assyrian Christians to take the gospel of Jesus Christ even to the most desolate and inaccessible regions on earth.

St. Thomas on Socotra

Saint Thomas is held by tradition to be the founder of the churches in Assyria, Chaldea, Babylonia, India and Socotra. On his way to India Thomas was shipwrecked on the isle of Socotra and he used the wreckage of the ship to build a church. According to the ancient account of the missionary endeavors of Saint Thomas entitled The Acts of Thomas he did visit a mysterious island while in route to India and performed miraculous feats there.⁸ The Socotran Christians were called Thomas Christians and belonged to the Assyrian "Nestorian" Church of the East. (The Syriac Christians of India also call themselves Thomas Christians.) St. Francis Xavier notes that the people of Socotra, with whom he visited during a sojourn on their island, "... are devotees of the Apostle St. Thomas and claim to be descendants of the Christians he converted in that part of the world."⁹ Several archeologists, anthropologists and historians working on the Island of Socotra have noted the ministry of St. Thomas among the Socotrans. G. W. B. Huntingford notes that

The inhabitants seem always to have been a mixed people. Some of them at one period were Christians, converted it was said by St. Thomas in AD 52 while on his way to India. Abu Zaid Hassan, an Arab geographer of the 10th century, said that in his time most of the inhabitants of Socotra were Christian... but by the beginning of the 16th century Christianity had almost disappeared. leaving little trace but stone crosses at which Alvares said the people worshipped...However, a group of people was found here by St. Francis Xavier in 1542, claiming to be descended from the converts made by St. Thomas...¹⁰

Travelers Accounts of the Assyrian Christian community of Socotra

Socotra is a land of myths and legends. The Phoenicians believed Socotra to be the abode of the Phoenix, a mythical bird believed by the ancients to fly from Socotra to Heliopolis in Egypt once every 500 years to rejuvenate itself in a sacred flame. Herodotus, Pliny the Elder and Diodorus of Sicily mention Socotra in regards to this legend. The description of Socotra by Diodorus of Sicily however, does contain authentic details about the island.¹¹ Later Arabs believed the island to be the dwelling place of the *rukh*, or roc, the mythological gigantic bird that has a prominent place in the voyages of Sinbad the Sailor.¹² The Pharaohs of Egypt also sent expeditions to Socotra to acquire Myrrh which was then as costly as gold.¹³

In ancient times Indians traveled to Socotra. They gave the island its name which is Sanskrit for "Island abode of Bliss". According to Shipbuilding and Navigation in Ancient India

In those days India had colonies, in Cambodia (Kumbuja in Sanskrit) in Sumatra, in Borneo, Socotra (Sukhadhara) and even in Japan. Indian traders had established settlements in Southern China, in the Malayan peninsula, in Arabia, in Egypt, in Persia, etc. Through the Persians and Arabs, India had cultivated trade relations with the Roman Empire.¹⁴

These trade relations enabled St. Thomas to evangelize Socotra and India.

Alexander the Great is believed to have conquered the island of Socotra in order to have the aloe for his army. A Greek presence continued up past the time Socotra was converted to Christianity. Socotra is rich in myrrh and aloes. Ancient peoples recognized medicinal value of aloe. Aloe and Myrrh were even used to anoint the body of Jesus the Christ upon his removal from the cross. Socotra continues to supply the world with aloe as it did in ancient times.¹⁵

The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea is an ancient Greek mariners manual from around the year 60 AD. This book shows that Greek sailors knew the island and it is thus entirely possible that Thomas could have made his journey there. The missionary endeavor of St. Thomas to Socotra and India is believed to have taken place in 52 AD. The author of The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea describes Socotra by saying,

There is an island...it is called Dioscorida [meaning Socotra], and it is very large but desert and marshy...the inhabitants are few and they live on the coast towards the north, which from this side faces the continent. There are foreigners, a mixture of Arabs, and Indians, and Greeks, who have emigrated to carry on trade there.¹⁶

An important early Christian leader who was himself most likely a Socotran was Theophilus. Unfortunately he was also a heretic. He is also known as Theophilus the Arian and Theophilus the Indian. (Until the voyage of Columbus the Indies from the European viewpoint included East Africa and the islands in the Indian Ocean as well as India proper.) Theophilus was an adherent of Arianism, a heresy that was widespread through the church for centuries. Arius, the originator of this pernicious fallacy, denied the Holy Trinity and the Deity of Christ. Samuel Hugh Moffett describes the ministry of Theophilus and his missionary journeys that took place in 354AD. He states

Theophilus "the Indian" a native of the islands in the Arabian or Indian Ocean ...was held in Rome as a hostage, converted to Christianity, and was sent by emperor Constantinius on an embassy that included visit to Arabia, to his homeland in the islands, and to "other parts of India."¹⁷

Cosmas the Indian Voyager, called Indicopleustes, was a Nestorian Christian from Alexandria in Egypt. He was a merchant and traveled widely. He wrote a twelve volume work recounting his travels entitled Tropographis Indica Christiania , which translated is A Christian Topography of the Whole World. He wrote this work in 536 AD recollecting his journeys he made throughout the Indian Ocean, in Ethiopia and the coasts of India in 522 AD. He describes the Assyrian Church firmly established and growing throughout the world saying;

We found the church...very widely diffused, and the whole world filled with the doctrine of Christ, which is being day by day propagated, and the gospel preached over the whole earth. This I have seen with my own eyes in many places and have heard narrated by others. I, as a witness of the truth can relate...¹⁸

Cosmas goes on to mention the Assyrian churches in Sri Lanka and Kerela, India. He then continues, "...and in the place called Kalliana (Quilan) there is a bishop usually ordained in Persia, as well as in the isle of Dioscoris (Socotra) in the same Indian Sea...You will find priests ordained in Persia sent there, there are also a number of Christians."¹⁹ So by the early 500s we have an account by a member of the Assyrian Church establishing the fact that by that time 'Nestorian' Christianity had been firmly established on the Island of Socotra.

The famous Venetian traveler Marco Polo (1254-1324) accuses the Socotrans of having the supernatural ability to control the weather and to cause shipwrecks. He wrote of Socotra saying:

The inhabitants [of Socotra] are baptized Christians and have an archbishop...I should explain that the archbishop of Socotra has nothing to do with the Pope at Rome, but is subject to an archbishop who lives at Baghdad [meaning the Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East]. The archbishop of Baghdad sends out the archbishop of this island; and he also sends out many others to different parts of the world, just as the Pope does...I give you my word that the Christians of this island are the most expert enchanters in the world. It is true that the archbishop does not approve of these enchantments and rebukes them for the practice. But this has no effect, because they say that their forefathers did these things of old and they are resolved to go on doing them. And the archbishop cannot override their resolve.²⁰

Arab accounts also describe witchcraft and sorcery as being prevalent among the Socotrans.

Afonso the Great, (also known as Afonso de Albuquerque) who lived from 1453 until 1515, was a Portuguese admiral and founder of the Portuguese Empire in the East. He captured Socotra from the Muslims and established Portuguese rule over the island. The memory of the Portuguese lives on among the Socotrans who have many legends about their Portuguese era. The language of Portugal also influenced the vocabulary of the Socotran language. The Portuguese saw themselves as liberators of the Christian Socotrans from Islamic persecution. The Socotrans came to look upon the Portuguese as foreign oppressors so much that they came to prefer Arab rule to Portuguese rule, especially after the Portuguese attempted to force them to adopt European Roman Catholic practices. An early Portuguese report on the island of Socotra was provided for Dom Manuel I, King of Portugal in 1505 by Diego Fernandes Pereira. Near the same time Martin Fernandez de Figuera of Salamanca wrote of the Socotran Christians with whom he dwelt for four months. Nicolau de Orta Rebelo noted that all the Socotran men were named Thomas and all of the women were named Mary. In 1527 Martin Alfonso de Melo remarked that there were many Christians on Socotra.²¹ In 1541 Portuguese Admiral Dom Joao de Castro stated that, "the Socotrans revere the Gospel. They say that they were introduced to it by the blessed apostle St. Thomas through whom they proclaim our religion. There are many churches all over the island, each crowned with the cross of the Most High."²²

Saint Francis Xavier (1506-1552) is one of the most important early Roman Catholic missionaries to the Far East. In regards to Socotra and it's Christians he said

The natives esteem themselves to be Christians and are very proud of it. They can neither read or write, possess no books nor other sources of information, and are very ignorant. But they have churches, crosses, and ritual lamps, and in each of village there is a caciz, who corresponds to a priest among us. Having no bells, they summon the people to services with wooden clappers, such as we have during Lent.²³

Other travelers contradict the statement of St. Francis and noted that the Socotrans did possess books written in Syriac characters. St. Francis and other Catholic travelers probably exaggerated the level of ignorance of the Socotrans. This is probably an exaggeration due to the contempt with which the Catholics until very recently have held members of the Assyrian Church who they viewed as 'vile and pestilent Nestorian heretics'. It should be borne in mind that Francis Xavier himself recommended that the Holy Office of the Inquisition should be activated in India to deal with the Assyrian Christians there.

An example of the hatred of the Roman Catholic towards the Assyrian Christians is their forced conversion of members of the Church of the East in India and in Socotra. Francis M. Rogers notes in The Quest for Eastern Christians that

In the mid-1500s an adaptation of a letter from King Joao III to Pope Paul III was published in both Italian and French editions. It summarizes the conversions affected under Portuguese auspices from Socotra to Moluccas, reports military reverses in Ethiopia, and mentions St. Francis Xavier. It speaks of the

"conversion" of the St. Thomas Christians in a manner suggesting the same classification as Saracens [Muslims] and pagans.²⁴

Arabs also wrote important accounts of the Nestorian Christians of the Isle of Socotra. In 1488-1489 Ibn Magdid commented that Socotra was a Christian island ruled over by a woman. Al-Masudi, the famous Arabic geographer, wrote an account of the island. He died in 956 AD. Al-Hamdani, another Arabic geographer, wrote of Socotra and its Christians. He mentions monks being on the island. Al-Hammadi died in 945 AD.²⁵ Yaqut writing in the thirteenth century described the inhabitants as "Christian Arabs".

Yaqut al-Hammadi also notes that some of the Nestorian Christians of Socotra were

Greeks and says,

The Masih, son of Maryam [Jesus Christ] appeared -- peace be upon him -- and the Greeks who stayed there [on the Isle of Socotra] adopted Christianity and remain Christians until the present time. Allah knows that there is no other place in the Universe except Socotra Island where there would live a population of Greeks which would retain its lineage without having anybody else mix with it.²⁶

Ibn Battutah (1304-1369), the famous Arabian traveler, also traveled by the Island of Socotra.²⁷ Later England attempted to dominate Socotra because of its strategic location. In 1886 Socotra became a British Protectorate. During de-colonization Socotra was given to Yemen. In Socotra, the Island of Dreams Ibrahim Al-Ashwami and Abdul Wali Al-Muthabi state that Socotra's "strategic importance...rises from the fact that its location is in the mid-center of all Arab and African coasts, related to Asia and Africa continents."²⁸

The Land That Time Forgot

Socotra is also called Asqo'tra, Sou'qatra and Soqotra. Other spellings include Suqutra and Socotora. The names derives from the Sanskrit word Sukhadara or Dripa Sukhadara which means 'Island abode of Bliss' The Ancient Greeks called it Dioskourdiou or Discordia. Socotra is also called the Isle of Mists and the Island of the Dragon's Blood Tree. The Socotra Archipelago consists of Socotra and three outlying islands, Abd al-Kuri, Samha and Darsa. Socotra is the home of rare liquid products frankincense, black obillinum and Dragons Blood. It exports aloes and herbal remedies. Socotra is the largest island in the Arab World. The deep waters of the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean surround the island yet the waters immediately around the island are shallow and infested with sharks and pirates.

Socotra is an extremely isolated island due to the monsoon winds that make it impossible to reach for half of the year. Due to its isolation unique plant life lives there, life-forms survive there that became extinct elsewhere in the world tens of thousands of years ago. The best article on the island of Socotra is Soqotras Misty Future written by Diccon Alexander and Anthony Miller and published in the July 1995 edition of New Scientist. This article is available on the Internet on the Royal Botanic Garden of Edinburgh Soqotra page. This site features an awesome virtual reality tour of the island through several panoramic photographs that gives a 360-degree

view in which you can zoom in and out of with close-ups.²⁹ Dr. Robert Mill of the Royal Botanic Garden in Edinburgh Scotland wrote me and said, "The small Indian Ocean island of Socotra contains one of the richest and best preserved dry tropical floras in the world, over one third of the plant species and endemic and it is internationally recognized as a centre of exceptional biodiversity."³⁰ The United Nations declared in Soqotra: Proceedings of the First International Symposium on Soqotra Island: Present and Future, "The Island of Socotra is undoubtedly a most precious natural asset. It has been nominated as a 'World Heritage Site' and as a 'Man and Biosphere Reserve'. It has a rich and unique biodiversity that is unrivalled in the Indian Ocean and in the Arabian Region".³¹

Socotra is often compared to the Galapagos, the South American island whose unique wild life provoked Charles Darwin to invent the theory of evolution. The World Wildlife Federation declared, "The Socotran Archipelago has such a unique assemblage of animal and plant species that it has been described as an Arabian Eden. The islands are known for their plant diversity, including the dragon's blood tree and a variety of succulents...While currently relatively pristine, the ecoregion has had long history of human occupation and over 50 endemic plants are listed on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. The Socotran Archipelago remains vulnerable to increased human activity and tourist and industrial development."³² Strange animals have also been found on Socotra.

The Socotra Kurst Project has reported the recent discovery of more unusual life forms discovered by speleologists, including that of long tailed bats.³³ Socotra's plants, which are living relics of the prehistoric world, are often described as 'most bizarre' as 'weird vegetation' and 'grotesque'. There are also many examples of gigantism in these relics of ancient flora. The most important odd plants are the Dragon's Blood Tree, also known as the 'inside out umbrella tree', and the grotesque bottle shaped Adenium tree. Socotra was a forgotten island until Quenton Cronk's botanic expedition in 1985. Diccon Alexander noted that, "Off the Horn of Africa lies the forgotten island of Socotra, for centuries home to some of the worlds most bizarre plants...Relics of ancient species are so abundant that the island looks like most people's idea of a prehistoric world"³⁴ or a strange other-worldly landscape created by a more imaginative writer of science fiction. He further states that, "Until at least 10 million years ago Socotra was part of the African mainland and before that a part of the African-Arabian tectonic plate. Today the ancestors of plants from these ancient landscapes and still be found growing on the island."³⁵

The island is approximately 72 miles long and 22 miles across from north to south, and it lies over 500 miles south-east of Aden and about 300 miles from Mukalla, port of the Hadramawt. The island of Socotra lies in the Indian Ocean near the ancient sea routes from the Red Sea to India and East Africa. Travelers and scholars have long considered it to have great archeological potential. Socotra has also been a source of interests to linguists; in addition there is a wealth of material for specialists in the fields of botany and ornithology.³⁶

Flora of the Arabian Peninsula and Socotra Volume I by A. G. Miller and T. A. Cope relates that;

The Socotra archipelago consists of four islands-Socotra, 'abd al Kuri, Semhah and Darsa-situated in the northern part of the Indian Ocean due east of Somalia... the climate of Socotra is influenced by both SW and NE monsoons. The SW monsoon blows from April until October bringing hot, dry winds which are

generally desiccating but bring a little orographic rain to the mountains. Most precipitation occurs from November to March; during this period the SW winds are replaced by much lighter rains from the NE... Rainfall is very sporadic and in some years the coastal areas receive none. Average measurements for the plain are around 150 mm and the mountains probably receive around 500 mm. Most rain falls in winter. The mountains are frequently shrouded in clouds and heavy dews are common.³⁷

Topographically the island can be divided into 3 main zones; the coastal plains, the limestone plateau and the Haggier Mountains.

According to AYTTA (The Association of Yemen Tourism and Travel Agencies) the best period to visit the island is from 15 October until 15 May. The winds sweep some parts of the island in the remaining period of the year.³⁸ According to Island of the Dragon's Blood

It was a rugged country, with an overall limestone plateau averaging 1,500 feet in height, through which projected a central mountain range, the Haggier Massif, reaching nearly 5,000 feet. These mountains constituted one of the oldest land structures in the world and had been an ark of refuge for many strange and primitive forms of plants and lower animal life, found nowhere else. Frankincense, myrrh, dragon's blood, cucumber and pomegranate trees grew there, ...People lived on this island and they were of two sorts: on the coast were a mixed lot of Arabs and Africans; in the mountains lived the true Sokotri, who were aboriginals isolated on the island "from time immemorial", living in caves, talking a unique language that nobody knew, subsisting on dates and milk.³⁹

The Socotra Tribesmen

Socotrans speak a Semitic language distinct from Arabic. It is called Soqotri. The Enchanted Island: Socotra Reveals Its Secrets it is mentioned that,

The traditions of the Socotran natives differ from those of other Yemenis in that they are influenced by all of the nearby major regions: the Arabian Peninsula, the Horn of Africa and India. The Socotran people have their own language, which is a holdover from the ancient Himyaritic language. They share this language or variations of it with the people of Al-Mahara in Yemen and Dhofar in Oman.⁴⁰

The Socotrans are impoverished and isolated. The population of Socotra is estimated to be between 20,000 and 80,000. Many of the mountain dwellers are troglodytes, living in caves. The coastal people are fishermen and pearl divers and are of African origin. They live in shacks made from palm leaves and tree limbs. Arab nomads dwell in the wadis. The Bedouin are shepherds and subsistence farmers.⁴¹ There is racial diversity on the island. White Arabs live in the mountains and some Negroes live on the coast. Tribal culture there is so strong that the people cannot even chop down a tree without consulting the tribal counsel. Socotra is isolated and inaccessible. Its people manage to eke out a wretched and poverty-stricken existence. Socotrans are largely cut off from the rest of the world for five months of the year. Indian Ocean monsoon storms whip up

violent seas making it impossible for the island to be resupplied by sea. (Socotra is usually reached by *Dhow*, an Arab sailing boat, from the coast of Yemen).⁴² The winds also make it dangerous to be reached by plane or helicopter.

The Assyrian Christians of Socotra

What were the practices of the Socotran members of the Church of the East? They recited the Syriac liturgy and memorized it even though they didn't understand the language. According to Douglas Botting

On this outpost of the Arab world a race of people impervious to the great tide of Islam, who had retained some remnants of the Christian faith for nearly a thousand years after the birth of Mohamet. But such remnants had been strangely corrupted. As one Portuguese ship's writer had noted in the sixteenth century: "The Socotrans call themselves Christians but lack instruction and baptism, so that they have nothing but the name of Christians..." At this time the Socotrans still revered the cross, placing it on altars and hanging it round their necks. Every village had a minister who repeated prayers antiphonically in a forgotten tongue [probably Edessan Syriac], scattering incense. Words like "Alleluia" often occurred and instead of ringing bells they shook wooden rattles. A century later a Carmelite friar, P. Vincenzo, observed the last vestiges of Christianity on Socotra. The people, though they still professed Christianity, had no real knowledge and practiced a strange jumble of rites-they sacrificed to the moon, abominated wine and pork, circumcised, regarded the Cross with ignorant reverence and carried it before them in processions. They assembled in their low, dark, dirty churches three times a day and three time a night. They burned incense, and anointed their altars with butter. Placing a Cross and candle on top of them. Witchcraft was practiced, and the people often committed suicide in old age. Each family had a cave in which it buried its dead. They were all strictly monogamous.⁴³

The continued rejection of the Islamic practice of polygamy is probably the only Christian custom preserved by the Socotrans.⁴⁴

Are there old books and are archeological remains pertaining to the Assyrian Church in Socotra? There are remains of churches and shrines and there are several inscriptions bearing the cross. Christian burial was practiced by the Socotrans. In Socotra: island of Tranquility the discovery of Christian tombs is described in the following manner.

Caves in the limestone rocks have been filled with human bones from which the flesh had previously decayed. These caves were then walled up and left as charnel houses, after the fashion still observed in the Eastern Christian Church. Among the bones they found carved wooden objects that looked as if they had originally served as crosses to mark the tombs...⁴⁵

Most Christian remains have been destroyed by Muslem extremists. Several books deal with archeological excavations that have been undertaken on the island.

Douglas Botting in Island of the Dragon's Blood

We found traces of this past Christianity on the island. Not in the beliefs of the people but in the enigmatic stone remains dotted all over the island...There was nothing about these buildings which indicated that they were specifically Christian but they were much larger and more elaborate than the houses of the present-day Bedouin, and it seemed reasonable that they were the work of a more energetic and technically advanced people-in fact, the Christian ancestors of the came-dwellers of today...Here they sat chanting in choir alternately the uncomprehended language [Syriac], repeating three times a day the strange warped vestiges of the faith their ancestors had been taught by Thomas.⁴⁶

Islamic fanaticism brought to the people of Socotra, as it has in many other places, a great decline. Many structures bearing Christian symbolism have been defaced. Ruins that have been confirmed to be the remains of churches have been excavated by archeologists. Several inscriptions of crosses have been preserved. D. Brian Doe in Socotra: An Archeological Reconnaissance in 1967 reports excavations of churches and notes that

My aim was to visit Kalleesa, a name which here indicates a strong link (*ekklesia*, Greek) with a Christian Church, in this case presumably a very early one. However, if Kalleesa was a village, the name could have also been vested in the district. One might wonder is the families in this area represent the descendents of those people...who, under the guidance of St. Thomas are thought to have built the first Church in Socotra...⁴⁷

Researchers have tried to search out ancient Syriac manuscripts on Socotra. In Socotra: Island of Tranquility Brian Doe describes his failed attempt.

At as late a period as when the Portuguese visited Socotra they found on it books, written in the Chaldean character [the East Syrian Syriac script]. I hoped consequently to be able to procure some manuscripts or books that might serve to throw light on the history of the island; but in answer to repeated inquiries regarding such, I was assured that some, which they acknowledge to have possessed they left in their houses when they fled into the hills, and that the Wahhabees, during their visit, destroyed or carried them off. The former is most probable, as these sectaries, in the genuine spirit of Omar's precepts, value only one book.⁴⁸

The Demise of the Church of the East on Socotra

According to Bethany world Prayer Center

The Socotrans remained faithful to their [Christian] beliefs as late as 1542, when St. Francis [Xavier] visited them on his way to India. Sadly, by 1680, Christianity was virtually extinct, due to oppression by the Arabs and the neglect of the Nestorian patriarchs to support the mission on the island.⁴⁹

The patriarchs are not entirely to blame due to the crisis and persecution they were facing at the time they were unable to support the mission. The Socotrans continued devotion to their Christian identity while they had neither ecclesiastical leaders nor religious education is to be admired. Despite the isolation and loss of contact with its mother church, the Socotrans remained committed to their Christian identity. It took an armed attack by Muslim fanatics from Arabia to deal the deathblow to the Nestorian Church on Socotra.

According to Vitaly V. Naumkin in The Island of the Phoenix: An Ethnographic Study of the People of Socotra.

In the Mid-17th century there were still traces of Christianity on Socotra, according to Vincenzo, a Carmelite monk and Samuel Purchas...In 1800 the Wahhibis landed on Socotra, destroying the cemetery and the churches in the coastal area around Hadiba and establishing control over the Muslim ritual by the inhabitants.⁵⁰

Douglas Botting in Island of the Dragon's Blood states that, "The Bedouin [of Socotra] are well aware that their ancestors were Christian. There is no indication of Christian practices at the present day."⁵¹

The non-Arab Semitic island of Socotra is now ruled over by the Arabs of Yemen. In historical overviews of the island the disingenuous Yemenis omit any reference to the existence of Christianity on the island. Typically the Arabs not only discount the Socotrans' former tenacious Christian faith but also their current distinct ethnic identity. The language is misleadingly described as "Arabian", (it may be 'Arabian' but it is not directly related to Arabic). Yemen Exploration Tours states that, "The inhabitants of the mountains...are nomads and descendants of an old South Arabian tribe speaking still the old Arabian dialect Soqotri related to the Mahri dialect."⁵² These languages are not dialects of Arabic as implied but distinct Semitic languages. The Island is described as the largest island in the Arab world; it would be more accurate to describe it as the largest non-Arabic island in the Arab world. Assyrians, Berbers and Kurds receive similar treatment in other parts of the Arab world. These ethnic minorities suffer their culture denigrated, their historical and cultural contributions ignored and their very existence denied. The cultures of the indigenous peoples are under serious threat in these lands. Also Christian artifacts that are discovered may be vandalized by Muslim fanatics. We should remember the fate of pre-Islamic antiquities in Afghanistan under the Taliban. This is why we must document our history so we can at least preserve records of it before Islamic extremists attempt to erase the memories. The Assyrians should begin a museum that documents the achievements of the Church of the East to serve this purpose.

Conclusion

Currently Yemen is very welcoming to all scientists interested in doing field work on Socotra and may also welcome an Assyrian expedition, but the expedition if it ever sets off should be discreet and thorough in its documentation.⁵³ The prospects of finding additional remains are slim. Botting states

In 1800 the fanatical and puritanical south Arabian tribe, the Wahabees, attacked Socotra, destroyed tombs, churches, and graveyards on the coast around Hadibo, and terrified the Bedouin into formally accepting the Mohammedan faith.⁵⁴

After his expedition in 1880 Professor Balfour declared

What has been done by this expedition is but a fragment of what is there to be accomplished...It happens that on this island within but three weeks' journey from England, there dwells a people whose origin is lost in myth, and of whose speech the true relations are undetermined, who according to received reports, having obtained some degree of civilization and embraced Christianity have gone back from their advance position to the lower state in which we now find them and thus present to us a feature of great interest to the history of mankind. There is now on Socotra alone a wealth of material for explanation and investigation, which would amply reward the work of another expedition.⁵⁵

Though technological advances have reduced travel time drastically, his words hold true today, much work remains to be done on Socotra. Recently environmentalists, spelunkers, biologist, biochemists, algologists, ichthyologists, ethnologists, botanists, ornithologists, philologists and speleologists have descended on Socotra for various scientific pursuits. Assyrians should also support research to find and preserve relics from the past of the Church of the East.

Special Thanks

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Endnotes

¹ Matthew 28:19 "Go ye therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit , teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded thee." See also Mark 16:15-18 and Acts of the Apostles 1:8. Scripture taken from The Holy Bible: 21st Century King James Version (KJV21) Copyright 1994 Duel Enterprises, Inc. Gary , SD 57237, and used by permission.

² Concerning the missionary accomplishments of the Assyrian Church see Marin Palmer The Jesus Sutras: Rediscovering the Lost Scrolls of Taoist Christianity (Ballantine Wellspring, New York 2001) This is a good collection of Assyrian Christian texts discovered in China and Central Asia. It is useful but I take offense at Mr. Palmer calling the holy Church of the East "Taoist Christian". Mr. Palmer attempts to take a radical departure from

orthodoxy based on his misinterpretations of these texts. I will explore the 'Jesus Sutras' and the Assyrian Church in China and its contributions in an upcoming paper.

³ Assyrians speak Neo-Aramaic today which is sometimes called Syriac yet distinct from Classical Syriac of Edessa. According to S. G. Pothan in *The Syrian Christians "Aramaic was the language of Jesus Christ and his apostles. Syriac is a dialect of Aramaic and became the language of the mother church of Persia."* S. G. Pothan *The Syrian Christians of Kerala* (Asia Publishing Company, New York 1963) p. 36 For more information about the Syriac Christian heritage see: W. Stewart McCullough *A Short History of Syriac Christianity to the Rise of Islam* (Scholars Press, Chico, CA 1982) and also Sebastian P. Brock and David G. K. Taylor *The Hidden Pearl: The Syrian Orthodox Church and its Ancient Aramaic Heritage* Volume I: the Ancient Aramaic Heritage Volume II: The Heirs of the Ancient Aramaic Heritage Volume III At the Turn of the Third Millennium , the Syrian Orthodox Witness (Trans World film, Italia, 2001) accompanied with 3 videotapes.

⁴ For the issues concerning the origin of the Assyrian Church and of the Peshitta Bible see Han J.W. Drijvers "Facts and Problems in Early Syriac Speaking Christianity" *East of Antioch: Studies in Early Syriac Christianity* (Variorum Reprints, London 1984) p. 157-175 M. P. Weitzman *The Syriac Version of the Old Testament: An Introduction* (Cambridge University Press) George Howard trans. *The Teaching of Addai* (Scholars Press, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1981).

⁵ Sebastian Brock "Introduction to Syriac Studies" J. H. Eaton, Ed. *Horizons in Semitic Studies: Articles For the Student* (University of Birmingham 1980) p.4-5.

⁶ The Roman Catholic pope cleared the Assyrian Church of the heresy libel in "Common Christological Declaration Between the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East" in November 11, 1994 presented in *The Messenger: The Official Publication of the Holy Apostolic Assyrian Church of the East* Issue Number 11 March 31, 1995. However, the theology of the Assyrian Church was declared orthodox by the western church several times in the past. According to Samuel Hugh Moffett this occurred during the times of Acacius (485-496 AD), Mar Aba (early 6th century), Yeshuyab (early 7th century) and during Rabban Sauma the Mongol's delegation to Europe in 1275. It should also be noted that Nestorius declared the Tome of Pope Leo as an expression of his own position. Samuel Hugh Moffett *A History of Christianity in Asia* Volume I: Beginnings to 1500 (Harper San Francisco 1992) p. 196,219,256 & 434.

⁷ Ian Gillman and Hans-Joachim Klimkeit *Christians in Asia before 1500* (University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, Michigan 1999) p.81.

⁸ According to The Acts of Thomas, after embarking by ship to India Thomas' boat stops at Andrapolis, presumably an island in route. J. K. Elliot The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in English Translation (Clarendon Press, Oxford 1993) p. 488-454.

⁹ S. G. Pothan The Syrian Christians of Kerala (Asia Publishing Company, New York 1963) p.29.

¹⁰ G. W. B. Huntingford ed. Trans. The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea (The Hakluyt Society, London, 1980) p.103.

¹¹ Vialy V. Naumkin Island of the Phoenix: An Ethnographic Study of the People of Socotra (Ithaca Press 1993) p. 24-27.

¹² Tim Severin "In the Wake of Sinbad" National Geographic July 1982 p.2-40.

¹³ Charles K. Moser "The Isle of Frankincense" National Geographic March 1918 p. 267-278.

¹⁴ Shipbuilding and Navigation in Ancient India <http://india.coolatlanta.com/GreatPages/sudheer/ship.html>.

¹⁵ History of Aloe Vera http://www.aloeveraproducts.com/history_aloe_vera.html.

¹⁶ Brian Doe Socotra: Island of Tranquillity (Immel Publishing Limited, London, 1992) p.9.

- ¹⁷ Samuel Hugh Moffett A History of Christianity in Asia (Harper San Francisco 1992) p.267.
- ¹⁸ S. G. Pothan The Syrian Christians of Kerala (Asia Publishing Company, New York 1963) p.27.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ²⁰ Ronald Latham Trans. The Travels of Marco Polo (Penguin books, London, 1958) p. 296-298.
- ²¹ Vialy V. Naumkin Island of the Pheonix: An Ethnographic Study of the People of Socotra (Ithaca Press 1993) p.43-29.
- ²² Vialy V. Naumkin Island of the Pheonix: An Ethnographic Study of the People of Socotra (Ithaca Press 1993) p.43.
- ²³ S. G. Pothan The Syrian Christians of Kerala (Asia Publishing Company, New York 1963) p.29.
- ²⁴ Francis M. Rogers The Quest for Eastern Christians: Travels and Rumor in the Age of Discovery (University of Minnesota, University of Minnesota Press, 1962) p.169.
- ²⁵ Brian Doe Socotra: Island of Tranquillity (Immel Publishing Limited, 1992) p.136-144.
- ²⁶ Brian Doe Socotra: Island of Tranquillity (Immel Publishing Limited) 1992) p. 137.
- ²⁷ Thomas J. Abercrombie "Ibn Battuta: Prince of Travelers" National Geographic December 1991 P. 5-49.
- ²⁸ Ibrahim Al-Ashmawi & Abdul Wali Al-Muthadi "Socotra: Island of Dreams" Tiaz Magazine No. 796. March 19,1998 <http://yemeninfo.gov.ye/ENGLISH/CULTURE/islandofdreams.html> Concerning the British presence on Socotra, John Farrar served in the British Royal Air Force and Army Expedition on the island during 1964-1965 and has created a wonderful website dedicated to Socotra and its people at www.soqotra.com.
- ²⁹ Diccon Alexander and Anthony Miller "Socotra's Misty Future" New Scientist Vol. 147 No. 1988 29 July 1995 p. 32-35 <http://www.rbge.org.uk/arabia.html> Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh The Flora of the Arabian Peninsula and Socotra <http://www.rbge.org.uk/arabia.html>.
- ³⁰ Personal correspondence of the author dated 2/23/1996.
- ³¹ From book description. Soqotra: Proceedings of the First International Symposium on Soqotra Island: Present and Future (United Nations, New York 1998).
- ³² Socotra Island xeric shrublands (AT1318)
<http://www.worldwildlife.org/wildworld/profiles/terrestrial/at.at/at1318full.html>.
- ³³ Socotran Karst Project: Flemish Caving Expeditions
http://home2.planetinternet.be/Ido26187/Eng_aim.html For other interesting creatures see Simon Aspinall International Research on Socotran Cormorants <http://arabianwilklife.com/vo2.3/corres.html>.
- ³⁴ Diccon Alexander and Anthony Miller "Socotra's Misty Future" New Scientist Vol. 147 No. 1988 29 July 1995 p. 32.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*
- ³⁶ Brian Doe Socotra: Island of Tranquillity (Immel Publishing Limited, London, 1992) p.5.

- ³⁷ A. G. Miller and T. A. Cope Flora of the Arabian Peninsula and Socotra Volume I (Edinburg University Press in association with Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, 1996) p.7,11.
- ³⁸ AYTTA <http://www.aytta.org/soqotra.html>.
- ³⁹ Douglas Botting Island of the Dragon's Blood (Hodder and Stoughton, London 1958) p.22-23.
- ⁴⁰ The Enchanted Island: Socotra Reveals Its Secrets <http://www.yementimes.com/97/iss42/lastpage.html>.
- ⁴¹ Yemen Exploration tours: Socotra <http://www.al-bab.com/yet/socotra.html>.
- ⁴² Marion Kaplan "Twilight of the Arab Dhow" National Geographic September 1974 p. 330-351.
- ⁴³ Douglas Botting Island of the Dragon's Blood (Hodder and Stoughton, London 1958) p. 215.
- ⁴⁴ M. A. AL-Dailami "Socotra: the Forgotten Diamond of Yemen" World Magazine No. 609 12 Feb 1998 <http://www.yemeninfo.gov.ye/ENGLISH/CULTURE/socotra.html>.
- ⁴⁵ Brian Doe Socotra: Island of Tranquillity (Immel Publishing Limited, London, 1992) p.33.
- ⁴⁶ Douglas Botting Island of the Dragon's Blood (Hodder and Stoughton, London 1958) p. 216.
- ⁴⁷ D. Brian Doe Socotra: An Archeological Reconnaissance in 1967 (Field Research Projects, Miami, Florida 1970) p.91.
- ⁴⁸ Brian Doe Socotra: Island of Tranquillity (Immel Publishing Limited, London, 1992) p.214.
- ⁴⁹ "The Socotran of Yemen" http://www.bethany.com/profiles/p_code3/891.html.
- ⁵⁰ Vialy V. Naumkin Island of the Phoenix: An Ethnographic Study of the People of Socotra (Ithaca Press 1993) Samuel Purchas in 1625 wrote Purchas, His Pilgrims, a collection of travel narratives. In it he mentions William Rubrucks travels among the Nestorians in Mongolia as well as the accounts of the Nestorians of Socotra..
- ⁵¹ Douglas Botting Island of the Dragon's Blood (Hodder and Stoughton, London 1958) p. 214.
- ⁵² Yemen Exploration Tours <http://www.al-bab.com/yet/soqotra.html> Also in a recent article on Socotra Saleh Abdulbaqi seems incredulous towards the possibility that Christianity was ever known on the island and cynically makes a true statement, "This issue still requires more studies". The condescending attitude towards non-Arabs also appears in his comment, "Despite the spread of education in the island, Socotri unique language is still most used by its inhabitants." Using a non-Arabic language such as Soqotri or Assyrian must mean one is uneducated! This shows that in some Arab countries 'education' is used as a tool of cultural genocide. Saleh Abdulhaqi "Socotra: The Island of Wonders" Yemen Times 5 November 2001, Vol. XI <http://www.yeenimes.com/1.is45.culture.html>.
- ⁵³ Yemen does have many ancient ruins, unique architecture, and a past of glorious civilizations, such as that of the Biblical Queen of Sheba. The Yemenites are a proud and hospitable people who are eager to share their fascinating heritage with the rest of the world. On the other hand there are serious terrorist threats in Yemen and practically the entire population is addicted to a drug called *qat*. A bulk of the population spends most of the day procuring large quantities of *qat* which they chew until they reach the drug-induced stupor. Nevertheless, a visit to Yemen would be a rewarding experience to a cautious and intrepid traveler.
- ⁵⁴ Douglas Botting Island of the Dragon's Blood (Hodder and Stoughton, London 1958)p.125 Unfortunately the Wahibis are still around and are particularly active in Saudi Arabia. They are behind many of the acts of religious terror carried out in the name of Islam in many parts of the world today from the Philippines to the United States.
- ⁵⁵ Douglas Botting Island of the Dragon's Blood (Hodder and Stoughton, London 1958) p.23.