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A SHORT HISTORY  
OF  
IRAPUZHAI or ARUVITHURAI  
CHURCH.

By  
REV. THOMAS ARAYATHINAL, M. O. L.

PRINTED AT THE S.F.S. PRESS, (DEEPIKA) KOTTAYAM.

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Published by The St. Thomas Mission League, Aruvithurai,

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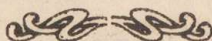
## FOREWORD.

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I had written a short history of the Irappuzhai (Aruvithurai) Church in 1950 at the request of Che. M. Rethina Swami M.A. Bar-at-Law who Published it in the New Leader Madras (Oct. 8, 15, 22—1950). The Present brochure is a revised reprint of the same Occasioned by the august visit of His Eminence EUGENE CARDINAL TISSERANT to the Apostolic Church of Aruvithurai.

Aruvithurai, }  
2nd Dec. 1953. }

Author.



# A SHORT HISTORY OF IRAPUZHAI OR ARUVITHURAI CHURCH.

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The church of Irappuzhai or Irappeli belonging to the Syro-Malabar Rite in the diocese of Palai, is situated on the left bank of the River Meenachil, in the vicinity of the Western Slopes of the Ranges of Mountains, the Western Ghats, in the Travancore-Cochin State of the Indian Union, in the southern division of that Part of India which was formerly called Malabar and of which was formed the Chera (Kerala) kingdom of the Dravidians. A beacon of Nineteen-Century-old Christian faith, the church stands on a Picturesque Spot, about 25 miles due east to Kottayam, the biggest town in the central part of the state. Journeying about 17 miles from Kottayam One reaches Palai, which, having a Catholic majority, holds a singular position among the towns and cities in India for religio-Political activities. A three mile journey from Palai takes him to Bharananganam, where the Pilgrims, irrespective of caste and creed flock from far and near praying for favours at the tomb of the saintly 'Sr. Alphonsa' a Syrian Clarist nun, the Process for whose beatification is already started. Proceeding with the journey for about four miles he arrives at Erattupetta,\* the Irappuzhai of old. Though a christian community flourished there, since Apostolic times, at present Mohammadans form the majority of the town. The church appears in the town as a Christian Island in a Mohammadan sea;

\* "Petta" is an epithet added to names of towns with Muslim majority in Tamil countries and in Malabar.

the surrounding places to a radius of about one mile are mostly occupied by the followers of Islam with several mosques and schools for Koranic studies.

It is near the church that the two main tributaries of the River Meenachil converge. The land around the confluence of these tributaries is so richly favoured by nature as to make comparison with "the Fertile Crescent", adjoining the confluence of the Euphrates and the Tigris. This fertile tract of land, having facility of conveyance by land and water, grew in importance in course of time as a centre of commerce. Towards the beginning of Christian Era 'Irapeli' was a village mostly inhabited by that sect of Hindus known as Vellala Chetty, whose chief occupation was trade. They carried on trade and commercial relations with distant as well as neighbouring places. Their caravan routes to the Tamil countries beyond the Western Ghats may be traced even to the present day. The celebrity of Irappuzhai as a centre of trade lasted till the eighteenth century A. D. when the caravan trade began to decline by the opening of a harbour at Alleppey on the Western coast near the Northern boundary of Travancore. Ruins of two Hindu temples, which belonged to the Chetty caste are left near the site of the church. One of the temples was converted into a mosque in later times (18th or 19th century) when the chetties were brought under the yoke of Islam. About four furlongs down the river may be traced remnants of a ruined royal residence.

As it is traditionally believed St. Thomas, the Apostle of India, who preached the Christian faith in the important and populous villages of Malabar at the dawn of Christianity (50—72) visited also Irappeli, where he baptised a few of the prominent people and initiated a place of worship for them. Even to the present day there are some who claim their descent from the one, who is said to have had offered site for erecting a Cross to the Apostle. It is generally reported that St. Thomas founded Seven Churches in Malabar, as found in the

ballad called Margam Kali Song composed in the 18th century (1732).—Cranganore (Kodungallore), Kottakkayal Kokamangalam, Niranam, Quilon, Chayal and Paloor.\* It is quite plain that Irapuzhai or Irapeli (\*) is not included in this celebrated list of St. Thomas' churches. The chief authority for this is the ballad called Ramban Song, which deals with the life and mission of St. Thomas. It is attributed to a Priest, Thomas Ramban of Niranam, who, it is said, lived towards the end of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth. Critics do not agree about the date of its composition. According to Fr. Hosten S J. "it is a wonderful document", which "gives us glimpses of a tradition handed down from apostolic times. [\*] The author says that it is a reproduction of the ballad composed and sung by his great-grand-ancestor, who is believed to have been baptised and ordained priest by the Apostle. Even though the testimony of the author as to its origin may be true, critics may reasonably argue that the ballad must have undergone some changes and modifications when it was reproduced. For instance, the language and style of the poem have little trace of antiquity. The dates 50 A. D. for the landing of the Apostle at Cranganore, 51 A. D. for his first return to Malabar from his first journey to Mailapur and China and 72 A. D. for his death must be later interpolations; for as it is generally held, the reckoning of year and date according to the Christian Era was not in vogue among the Malabar Christians before the 16th century. Even admitting the song as a criterion of history, an observant student may be led to suppose that St. Thomas might have had established more than seven churches, rather places of worship, in Malabar. According to the song, he erected crosses in the above mentioned seven

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\* Margam Kali Song strophe IX Verses 7—8. The date of its origin has not yet been determined nor its authenticity.

(\*) Pronounced as lai-Zh i.

[\*] Song of Thomas Ramban P. 183 Cochin 1930.

places during the first seven years of his Apostolate (52—59) in Malabar. Then he went to Tamil countries beyond the Ghats and Mailapur, where he preached for about three years. Returning to Malabar, as the song testifies he spent another seven years (62-69) visiting the places where he had previously founded Christian communities and places of worship. It is quite unlikely that the Apostle, who, according to the song, within a year (Dec: 50—Dec: 51) after landing at Cranganore on the Malabar coast visited Mailapur on the Coromandal coast and reached as far as China preaching the Gospel of Christ, did remain inactive for seven years merely visiting the former stations without attempting at further extending the faith by making more conversions and founding more places of worship. It is found in the song itself that the Apostle on one of his journeys to the Tamil Countries preached at Malayattoor, where now exists an ancient christian community and a church belonging to the Arch-Diocese of Ernakulam. But the Malayattoor church is not included in the generally accepted list of the churches founded by the Apostle. Like wise there should have been also other places where the Apostle made converts and established places of worship by erecting Crosses. Current traditions about some churches like Tiruvancode in South Travancore and Aruvithura (Irapuzhai) in North Travancore give way to this supposition.

In the present article dealing with the church of Irappuzhai let us see how this supposition is a reality with regard to it. The local tradition is that St. Thomas founded seven churches and a half in Malabar and that the church of Irappuzhai is the half church.\* The following arguments are adduced in support of this view:—

(1) It is the strong tradition in the locality that St. Thomas founded the church of Irappuzhai on his way to or from a place called Chayal or Nilakal, where he

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\* There is also such a tradition about the ancient church of Tiruvancode now possessed by the Syrian Jacobites.

established one of the historically celebrated seven churches (Para 10 Representation to Mgr. Zalesky, 17th June 1900); and tradition is a fundamental factor in the development and formation of history.

(2) The Church of Irapuzhai offers no trace for having had its origin or separation from another church. Every church in Malabar except those established by the Apostle has traditions or documents which show their origin or separation from some other church.

(3) Bishop Thomas IV., alias Arch Deacon Thomas IV, in a letter addressed to Prof: Mar Carolus Schaaf of ~~Heyden~~ in 1721, \* 1 Bishop Mar Gabriel who wrote between 1717 and 1723. "In the handwriting of the Syrian Priest Mathew, the wretched, the Poor, and the miserable", \* 2 and the Syrian Priest Mathew who wrote in 1725 \* 3 include in their list also Irapeli (Irapuzhai) as one of the Churches established by the Apostle. Their lists are different from that of the

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\* 1 The names of the Seven Churches built by St. Thomas are: Mailapore, Coringalore (Kodungloor), Prakar (Paroor or Kottakayil, Irapelli (Irapuzhai), Kokamangalam, Niranam and Tiruvancore (Tiruvancode)- (cited from EMS Bibl Publ. Amsterdam. I. F.) Excepting Mailapore only six in Malabar.

\* 2 Five Churches only are included in this list: Paravur, Irapeli, Kokamangalam, Niranam, Tiruvancode (Tiruvancore), (Visscher's Letters from Malabar No. 16; G. H. Mill Abraham a Travancorean Priest who wrote in 1821 supports this list of Mar Gabriel (Codex Oxford) Payne Smith catal. Syr. Bibl Bodl. Page 263)

\* 3 Anno 52 Domini Nostri Jesu Christi Dnus Thomas in Indiam venit et ad Mailapuram appulit Hic evangelium multos nuntiavit quos discipulos fecit et baplizavit in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti. Deinde Profectus est et in Malabarem Perrexit ubi Moljokaren pervenit. Etiam hujus regionis incolis predicavit, ibique altare Domino exivit, cui duos presbyteros addidit. Exinde Kutakayel adiit, ecclesiam condidit, quod item fecit in Irapeli et Gukamangalam et Niranam et Tirubakot (Land Anec. Sy. I P. 123 lugd. Battav 1862)

Ramban Song and the Margam Kali song. The divergence in these lists written at different places by different persons may lead us to infer that the Churches established by St. Thomas were not definitely known even to the high dignitaries (of the Jacobite party) in the Church of Malabar in the first quarter of the 18th century; that either the Ramban Song and the Margam Kali Song were not then widely known or they were not given credit to; that there were more than Seven Churches or places of worship founded by the Apostle in Malabar; that the traditions about those Churches were different at different places; that the names of Churches mentioned in the Ramban Song and Margam Kali Song are according to the local tradition of their authors as well as those mentioned in the above cited letters are according to the local traditions of the respective authors; and that the tradition about the Apostolic institution of the Church of Irapeli was prevalent in the first quarter of the 18th Century. So it remains yet to know how historians or traditions could assert that St Thomas founded only seven or Seven and a half Churches in Malabar

The Irapeli Church is generally known as Aruvithurai Church (the reason for this change of name shall be shown in a subsequent para). The modern historians were therefore inclined to consider Irapeli as Idappally or Edappally, a Church founded towards the end of the 6th Century (about 75 miles N. W. to Irapeli) and dedicated to St George. It is a wonder how they could imagine to have a Church dedicated in the first Century to a Saint of the 4th Century. Further, it is at present known for certain that there is not such a tradition at Edappally as to claim the origin of that Church from the Apostle. Nor is there any evidence to prove its Apostolic origin. Those who take Irapeli for Edappally hold that the 'R' of Irapeli in the above documents stands for the 'd' of Edappally. The Syrian and Portugese ways of transcribing Malayalam words using 'r' for 'd' or 't' and thus writing 'Coringalore' for 'Kodungallore', 'Repolim' for Edappally etc.,

might have led them to make such an inference. But it must be noticed that the Syrians or the Portuguese did never change the malaylam 'r' in to any other letter, or in other words that they always transcribed the 'r' malayalam with the 'r' of the Syriac and European languages. Is it not then reasonable to suppose, when there exists a real Irapeli that the 'r' of Irapeli mentioned by the Arch-Deacon Thomas IV, Bishop Mar Gabriel and Priest Mathew is of the original and genuine Irapeli and not a substitute for the 'd' of Edappally. (1) Further Fra. Paulinus a San Bartolomeo, who was touring in Malabar in the late seventies of the 18th century is a witness to the fact that the 'd' of Edappally was not always changed into 'r' in transliteration. (2)

(1) The diacritic signs given in the Landes Edition of the Syriac Text of Priest Mathew's letter gives correct orthography and correct reading of the name. The doubling of 'p' is denoted by a dot under it after the Garsonic manner of writing. The first 'e' is pronounced long by virtue of 'a' immediately following 'l' has no sign of doubling Lamed followed by yod may be read as 'li' or 'lai', The Syriac 'l' stands for Malayalam 'zha'. The correct reading of the word is thus made Irapeli = Irappeli for Irapeli Irapelai = Irapuzhai (Land Anecdota Syriac Vol. 1 Page 23 Text, Trans p. 123)

(2) In the English translation of Fra Paulinus writings we have "there were monasteries also of the like at Edapalli, Angamali..." (A voyage to the East Indies 1776 to 1789, London, MDCCC, P.124 cited in Deepika Jan: 24, 1953 by Dr. P. J. Thomas)

## THE NAME OF THE CHURCH.

The formerly known name Irapuzhai and the Present Popular name Aruvithurai were etymologically formed designating more or less the same sense. There are found variants of Irapeli as Irapuzhai Irattupuzhai and Irattida. The designation "Irapeli" etymologically means two-tributary river. (\*) It has been said previously that the Church is situated near the confluence of the two main tributaries of the Meenachil River. The designation "Irapeli Church" may signify logically and etymologically, "Two tributary-river Church". The Church is found named Irapuzhai or Irattupuzhai in the Church records up to 1901 regularly, and from 1901 onwards occasionally, though it came to be known generally as Aruvithurai several centuries ago. A few existing epitaphs, written in old Malayalam script (Nanam-monam or Vatteluthu) and ranging over a period of Seven centuries (10th-17th) designate the church as Irattida, which etymologically means Two-river-space or Two-river-place or Two-river parish. Even to the present day the ancient name Irapuzhai is publically announced from the main altar of the church by the officiating priest once a year, when the names of the newly elected office bearers of the confraternity feast of Our Lady of Carmel are officially proclaimed.

It has been said in a foregoing paragraph that "Irapeli" had a vigorous trade with the Tamil countries lying beyond the Western Ghats. The Tamil traders, according to their vernacular idiom dubbed the place Aruvithurai (water-fall-town) (1) as there was a big

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(\*) Ir= two; Ar=Stream or tributary; peli=pelai or pezhai-Tamil= puzhai, Malayalam= river (big) According to the nature of change of consonants in compound words "Ir + ar + peli" becomes Irappeli or Irattpelel—pronounced Irattupuzhai. In the same way. "Ir + ar + ida=Irattida.

(1) Arivi=Spring; Water fall; Thurai=Town; harbour  
Hence Aruvithurai=Waterfall Town or water fall harbour.

water fall close to the town and near the joining place of the two tributaries. So the Aruvithurai church for the Tamilians meant to be the church of Water-fall-town. As the place flourished as an inland harbour for caravan trade people from far and near kept frequent contact with the Tamilians who were having commercial undertakings in the place. The Tamilian contact influenced the people to adopt the Tamil Name Aruvithurai for Irapeli. This name Aruvithurai became widely used, and in course of time the ancient name Irapeli or Irapuzhai was replaced by it. The exotic name Aruvithurai is found in the church records only since 1901. Would that the Old historic name of the church was restored!

From what has been said hitherto we arrive at the conclusion that the present Aruvithurai church was known as:—1) Irattida till the 16th or 17th century A.D. as found in the epitaphs, 2) (ii) Irapeli or Irapuzhai in the 18th century as mentioned in the letters of the Arch Deacon Thomas IV, Bishop Mar Gabriel and Priest Mathew; iii) Irattupuzhai in the 19th century as the church records testify; iv) Aruvithurai in church records since 1901. We are, therefore, led to conclude that the Irapeli church mentioned by the Arch Deacon Thomas IV, Mar Gabriel and priest Mathew as one of the churches founded by St. Thomas must be identified as the Present Aruvithura church. As Arivi and Aruvi in the vernacular have the same meaning—stream or waterfall—the church began to be called also Aruvithurai in recent years. The appellations Arithra, Arithara and Arithura in vogue at present are the abbreviated forms of the more ancient name “Arivithura”.

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(2) Five of them discovered by the late Rev. Fr. Thomas Valiaveetil and two by the present writer.

## THE CHURCH.

History tells us that in the first two centuries of the Christian Era the Christians were used to gather in private houses for prayer and liturgy and that the churches as places of worship were begun to be built only towards the end of the 2nd or the beginning of the 3rd century in the east as well as in the west. (Raes *Introductio in Liturgiam Orientalem*. Romae 1947 pages 16, 19 & 31). Hence it is not reasonable to think of the existence of a church as place of worship or of common prayer at Irapeli or anywhere else in Malabar before that period. Christians of Malabar might have had in those pristine days gathered round across or in private houses for common prayer and worship invoking the protection and guidance of the Virgin Mother as the Apostles did

As tradition has it, the first edifice of the church at Irapeli was of granite stone after the manner of Hindu temples. It was rebuilt once or twice before the 16th century as it is reported. A stone arch, a typical Roman arch, of the maindoor of a once—dismantled edifice was dug out from the premises of the present church when the Late Rev. Fr. Hosten S. J. on his archeological survey visited this place in 1924. The arch is made of three pieces of stones, polished on two sides (front and curve). At the front top is carved a cross with a three-step base (1ft. 2" high). It is partly worn out. The old arch is now kept fixed to the basement of the newly constructed church. This arch might probably be of a later edifice of the church that was replaced in the 16th century for it is very unlikely to have had a Roman Arch for the first temple—like church built about the close of the second or the beginning of the 3rd century A.D. It has been lately established that the Romans learned much of architecture from the Syrians and that the arched vaults and Bell—tower were first constructed in Rome as designed by Syrian Architects. As Rome was quite prodigal in making such Arches and other western nations learnt such architecture from Rome

the syrian Arch came to be known as Roman arch in the same way as in writing numbers the "Indian figures got the name Arabic figures" from the Arabs who learnt them from India and difused them in European countries (De Lacy O'Leary, O p.l. Page 21-22 cited by Dom Theodore Wesseling, E.C.Q. London Vol. IV P. 226-1941; Philip K. Hitti History of the Arabs Page 380. MacMillian 1937). It is therefore quite probable that the Syrians of Malabar in ancient times built their churches with Roman Arches through the influence of Syrian culture with which they came into contact even from the very beginning of Christianity in Malabar, and especially, since the arrival of a host of Syrian emigrants in the 4th century under the leadership of Thomas of cana, the merchant. Hence the Roman arches found in ancient churches of Malabar including Irapeli may rightly be called Syrian arches.

Towards the beginning of the 16th century a church built of mortar and lime-stone and roofed with small clay tiles rose up on the spot under the direction of Priest Mathew of Kallarackal belonging to the Parish. A blending of Syrian and Gothic styles in its structure, the church was built facing to the west according to the Chaldean liturgical directions. This 16th century church was demolished (1951) preserving the Sanctuary with its Vaulting within the right-transept of the newly built Cruciform Church to enshrine the miraculous statue of St. George, its second patron. The nave in front of the old sanctuary is converted into an Athenian Porch to serve as Pavilion for the statue of St. George when his feast is yearly solemnised. It is a pity that the Syrians of Malabar long accustomed to such rebuilding and refashioning of centuries-old Churches, monuments of architecture and religious culture of old, are not convinced of the irreparable loss caused by such Vandalism. (1)

(1) "Excepting a facade of Gothic style the 16th century church is typically Syro-Chaldean in its structure. At the eastern end of the Church there is a vaulted sanctuary, (Madhbeha) over

The foundation stone laid by Dr. James Kalacherry, the late Bishop of Changanacherry and blessed by Dr. Sebastian Vayalil, the first Bishop of Palai, a cruciform magnificent church in Gothic style, liturgically facing to the west has been completed in 1952 as a fitting Symbol of the devotion to St. George, the great martyr. Built in granite stone, it is 170 ft. long, 50 ft. broad (at the transept 100 ft.) 52 ft. high with a bell-tower in front 120 ft. high, crowned with a 15 ft. statue of Christ the King. In the central niche of the facade is placed a big statue of St. George, the second patron of the church, and below it a statue of the Assumption of the Blessed virgin, to whom the church was first dedicated.

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which is raised a square tower. The wall facing the nave (haikal) is cut open into a big Roman arch. In proportion to this arch the sanctuary is vaulted at about 15 ft. from the floor. Above the Vaulting there are cells to keep the treasures of the Church. Over against these cells under the roof of the tower which is about 50 ft. high, two big bells are hung. The sanctuary is raised half a foot above the level of the nave. Ascending three <sup>7</sup> inch high steps the Priest reaches the dais and the wooden altar built against the eastern wall. In the back side, above the level of the altar there are three steps for placing candle sticks. There is no place found specially set apart for keeping the tabernacle which is of a later introduction. Behind the altar at the centre of the eastern wall a niche is cut out for the enthronement of the statue of St. George. A big curtain which, folded during Liturgy and other public services, is hung from the arch. At the eastern end of the nave on either side at the corner formed by the sanctuary wall which is cut apart by a big Roman arch, is built a side altar each, according to the rubrics of the Chaldean liturgy. At the solemn liturgy called Raza, the lesson from the old Testament or apocalypse is to be read out at the side altar on the left (south) and the Epistle at the side altar on the right (north). The nave is divided into two parts across by railings leaving a way at the middle. The eastern section up to the sanctuary is set apart for males and the western up to the rails for females. Generally, women get into the church and go out by the main door in the front and men by the doors on either side. Either attending the liturgy or praying the whole congregation kneel down on the floor. The pulpit is built close to the wall on the epistle side at the southern end of the railings in the male section. In the Church-yard there stands against the main door of the (old) church a stone cross 25 ft. high." (The New Leader Madras Oct. 22, 1950 contributed by the same)

## DEDICATION:-

The church of Irapeli having Apostolic origin, was first dedicated to the Virgin Mother, assumed into heaven. The 16th century church recently demolished, though dedicated to St. George, bore demonstrative evidence of its first dedication to the Blessed Virgin, by having her assumption statue in the central niches at the top and Madonna below of the facade which is the position proper to the statue of the Patron Saint of the church, as unfailingly seen in the Syrian Catholic churches in Malabar. It was in consideration of this first dedication that the first stone for the newly constructed church was laid on the 18th of Sept: (1942) the feast of the Nativity of the Virgin Mother.

The church of Nilackal or Chayal, unanimously admitted by the historians as one of those churches founded by St. Thomas, and situated about 50 miles south east to Irapeli was destroyed (by Fakir Poligar and his Perumpattam—Great army?) in the 14th century. Then several families, some of whose posterity including the present writer continue to be Parishioners of Irapeli church even to the present day, migrated to Irapeli, where they could join their brethren in faith. They carried with them, it is related, a statue of St. George a veritable type of Oriental (Persian?) sculpture. Unlike the traditional likeness of the Saint as an armoured cavalier of 20 or 21, the statue represents a middle aged soldier, seated on a horse, thrusting his lance to the mouth of a dragon. The statue's lively appearance is an imposing feature. This very miraculous statue has been preserved here for the last six centuries without any change even of retouching by an artist. The present generation proud of its possession keeps it as an invaluable treasure. This antique statue dating back to the 13th century (or earlier) may certainly checkmate the contending historians who assert that there were no statues of saints in the Syrian churches of Malabar, prior to the coming of the Portuguese in the 15th century (cfr: note page 244. Catholic eastern

churches by Donald Attwater Ed. 2nd 1937) Further, "Mr. Brehier has shown that the substitution of the Crucifix for the Cross was due to Syrian influences" (Dom Thodore Wesseling E.C. Q London Vol:IV P 226-1941). Then it is no wonder that the Syrians of Malabar who had ecclesiastical and commercial relations with the Syrians of Mesopotamia and Syria were keeping statues of Our Lord and saints in their churches before they had any contact with the Portuguese. St. George is a great benefactor who seldom disappoints those who seek his help. Ever since the advent of the statue, the people began to have unflinching faith in the saint and he has been particularly beneficial in bestowing favours on his clients. Because of the numerous favours obtained through the intercession of the Saint, the 16th century church was dedicated to him and his statue was placed in the central niche above the main altar. And in this way St. Mary's church Irapeli became known as St. Georges' Church Irapeli (later Aruvithurai). The people of the country without distinction of caste and creed have great faith in the Saint and they all confidently seek his help in all their needs. Out of their great veneration and affection towards the saint they call him by the popular affectionate term, "Valyachan" (grand uncle or grand pappa). The number of his clients is ever on the increase. They show their gratitude by visiting the church with liberal offerings in kind and coins as well as articles made of gold and silver.

Friday which is believed to be the day on which the saint suffered Martyrdom, is observed as a special day of devotion. So, the votive Masses in honour of the Saint is generally turned "Friday Mass". On the feast day of St. George, celebrated on the 24th of April the offerings of the devotees amount to a large sum of money; and for the last occasion (1953) it rose to Rs. Thirty Three Thousand (approximately £ 2500).

According to the Gregorian Calendar (which is in use since the 17th century) the feast of St. George

falls on the 23rd of April. It is according to the tradition of the Syrian church that was prevalent at Irapeli prior to the 17th century that the feast is still celebrated on April 24. The Chaldean Missal edited in 1767 at Rome (vide E. C. Q. Vol: II. P. 206 London 1937) and the Chaldean Breviary edited by the Sacred Oriental Congregation in 1938 (Vol: II part I page 551) bear testimony to this tradition of the Syrians. The author of the Acts of St. George has recorded that "Blessed George, servant of Christ was crowned with Martyrdom at the ninth hour on Friday the 24th April" (ct of Martyrs and saints Vol: I page 300 Bedjan Paris 1890). One of the greatest Syrian Writers, James of Serugh (d. ca. 521 A. D.) writes in his poem on St. George:— "Rejoicing he (St. George) bent his neck before the sword; pleasantly he stretched himself as a lamb, and the sword crowned his head. And contemplating over his course the triumphant Martyr left the world on the 24th of April as it is written". (Opera Jacobi Serugensis, Ed. Bedjan Vol: V page 766 Paris 1910).

Rev: J. W. Reeks in his brochure "St. George and England" says, "Tradition asserts that the Martyrdom of St. George took place on Good Friday which in that year fell on the 23rd April \* (Reeks P. 23. C. T. S. London 1948).

\* Thus there is one day's difference between the Western and eastern reckoning about the date of Martyrdom of St. George. It should be noted here that the 23rd April after-noon according to the Western reckoning coincides with the 24th April after-noon according to the eastern reckoning. For the early Syrian Christians the day began with mid-day after Jewish manner while it begins with mid-night for the westerns. And hence 24th April according to the eastern (Jewish xtian) reckoning began with 23rd April Mid-day according to the popular Western way of reckoning. Most probably therefore the Martyrdom of St. George must have taken place in the after-noon of that (Western 23rd or Eastern 24th of April) as testified by the author of the Acts of St. George, "ninth hour" coinciding with 3 p. m.

## A HYPOTHESIS.

It is clear from what has been said above, that the church of Irapeli or Aruvithurai, rebuilt in the 16th century was dedicated to St. George and hence it came to be known generally as St. Georges' church Aruviturai. The change in dedication gave way for different hypothetical inferences in later times about the date of its establishment. Mgr. Charles Lovigne the first Vicar Apostolic of Kottayam (later changanacherry) admitted in his calendar for 1893 that the Aruvithurai church was the Mother Church of all the Churches in these parts of the country and that it was founded prior to the 6th century (Representation to Mgr. Zalesky 1900). Fr. Bernard, the Author of "St. Thomas Christians" and other historians have traced its establishment back to the 4th century. And so Aruvithurai church was introduced in later calendars as founded in the 4th century and dedicated to St. George, the great Martyr. Really, they could not imagine the existence of a church dedicated to St. George before the 4th century (303?) as it was in the beginning of that century that the St. suffered Martyrdom at or near Lydda (Diosopolis) in Palestine under Diocletian's persecution. Though it is related that not long after his Martyrdom, Churches or shrines were built in his honour at Lydda over his tomb (C—325) and in Constantinople (c. 330) by Constantine the Great and in Syria (Edhra C. 346 and Shaka c. 367) Thessalonica, Mesopotamia, Egypt and Rome, in the 4th century it does not seem probable that in those remote days when possibilities of communication were very scant, such a saint had been known in so distant a place as Malabar and that a church was there dedicated to him. Moreover, it was only in 494 that the Great Martyr, George, was officially proclaimed as a saint by Pope Gelasius I. One cannot therefore, agree with the opinion of those who hold that the church of Irapeli was founded in the 4th century with St. George as its patron. It was shown before by various arguments that the church was in existence previous to the 4th century and that it has had

its origin at the hands of St. Thomas, the Apostle of India.

To conclude this treatise a few words on the achievements of Irapeli under the light of Christian faith she received at the hands of the Apostle are indispensable. It should be admitted that this parish could not achieve a progress, social or cultural, equal to its revered antiquity. While other churches such as Palai, which has been recently raised as Cathedral and Bharananganam, which has become widely renowned through the radiance of sanctity of Sr Alphonsa whose mortal remains are ~~en~~-tomb<sup>e</sup>d there, and others separated from it in later times have gone ahead of it, founding Philanthropic, educational and religious institutions, Irapeli owned none of the kind till very recently when a High school and a Convent were started about the time of its 20th centenary, and one may wonder to see how the parishners did, till the present times remain content with a church for their spiritual needs after the manner of the Orthodox adherents of old Hindu temples, who cared for nothing in common besides their temple. But the fidelity to the faith, Irapeli has kept throughout the past is remarkable. It holds a conspicuous position among the few churches in Malabar, noted for their unswerving fidelity to the Catholic faith through long ages when the church of Malabar was left almost a prey to furious onslaughts of non-Christian elements and subversive encroachments of schismatic hordes. Such a singular prerogative of the church was appreciated by His Holiness Pope Leo XII of Happy Memory by granting a plenary indulgence to all those who duly visit it on the 24th of April, the feast of St. George (Ap. Brief. February 20, 1827).

Completed in 1952, the year of the 19th centenary observance of the arrival of St. Thomas in India, the present gigantic and magnificent church of Irappuzhai or Aruvithurai dedicated to the Virgin Mother assumed into heaven, and to St. George, the Great Martyr, stands as an imposing monument of the nineteenth centenary of its foundation by the Apostle.

**L. D. S.**

ST. GEORGE  
Aruvithura.



The miraculous statue of St. GEORGE, Aruvithurai.



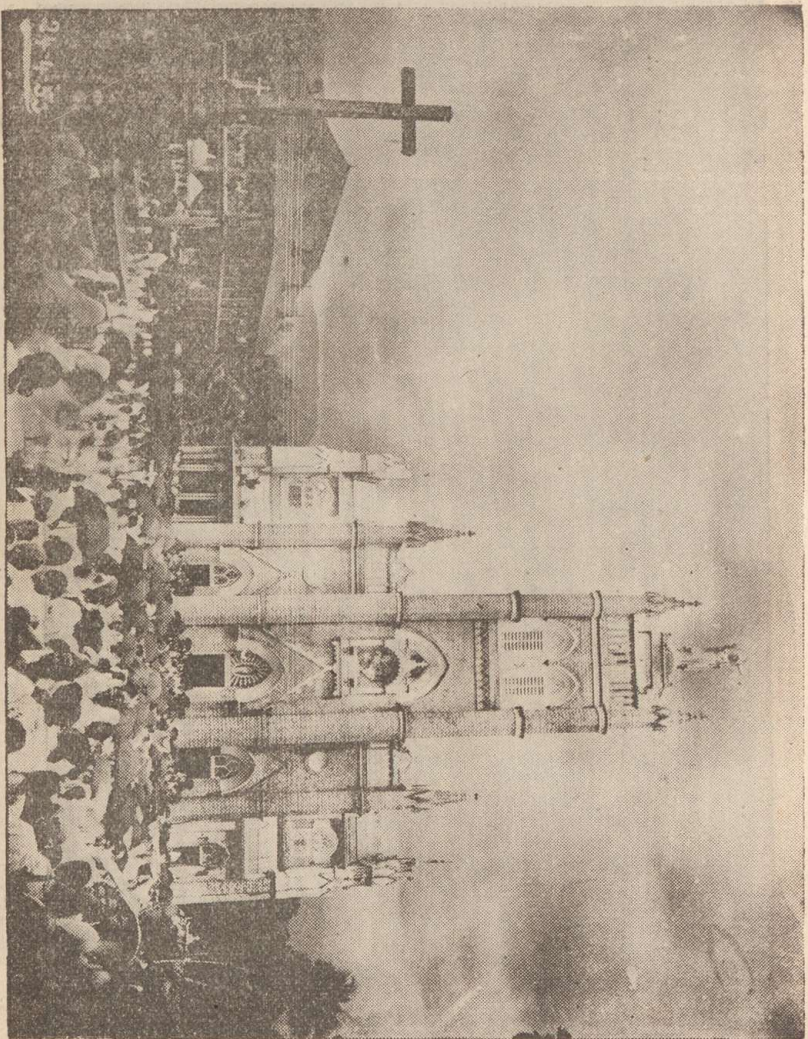
The 16th CENTURY CHURCH.



INTERIOR VIEW OF THE 16th CENTURY CHURCH



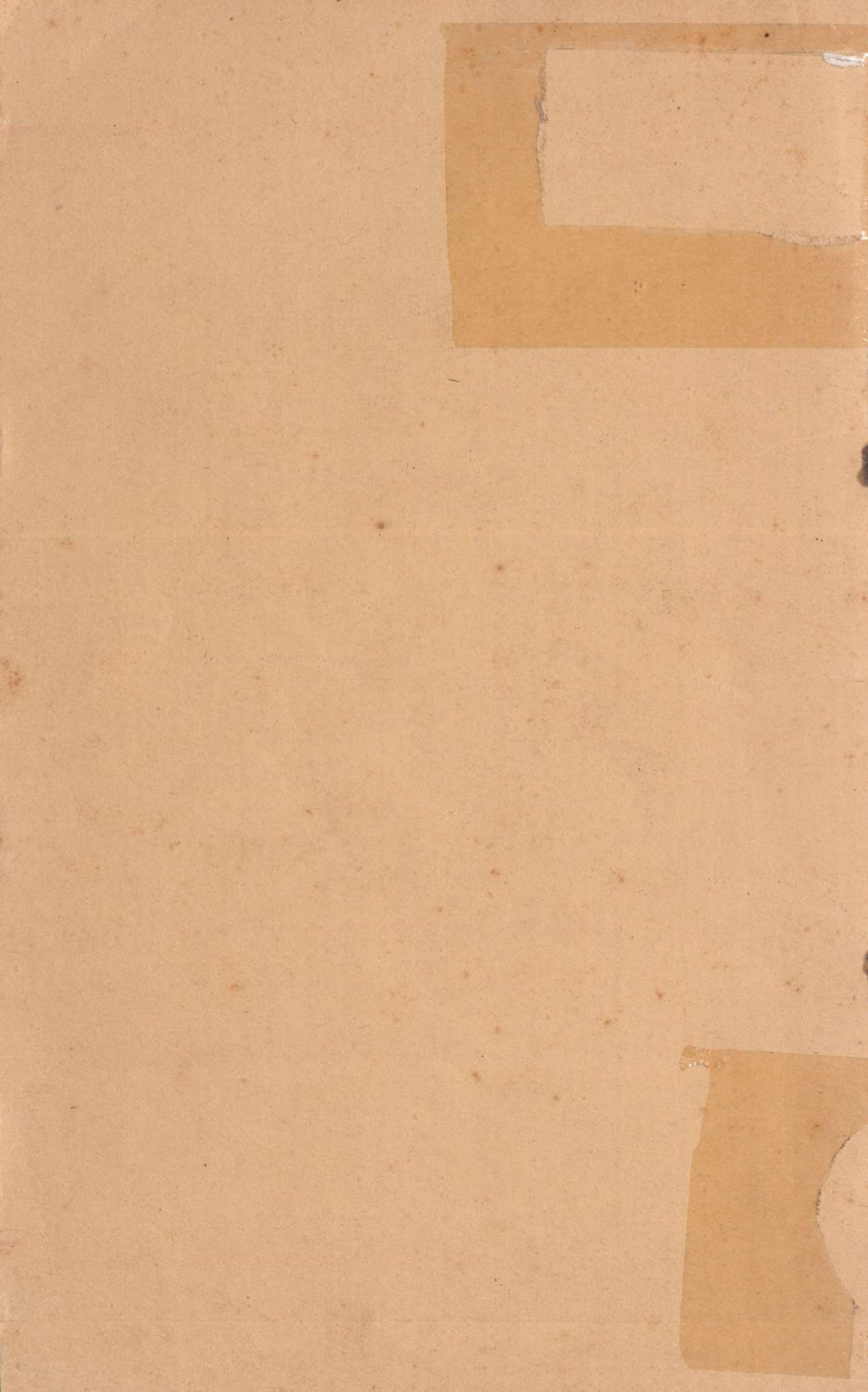
Arch of the main door of the Church demolished in 16th century



The feast of St. George, April 24, 1953 in the New Church.

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A SHORT HISTORY  
OF  
IRAPUZHAI or ARUVITHURAI  
CHURCH.

By  
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