

## Thomas at Taxila in the Twilight of the Raj<sup>1</sup>



In 1935 when the famed Thomas Cross of Taxila was given over to the British Deputy Commissioner of Rawalpindi, the Hon. Cuthbert King (1889-1981), ICS, whose wife, Elsie Vivienne King (d. 1960<sup>2</sup>), later entrusted it to the Fifth Bishop of Lahore, the Rt. Rev. George Dunsworth Barne (1879-1954), George V (1865-1936) had been King of England and Emperor of India since 1910.

Notwithstanding the horrendous sacrifices the First World War had extracted from his subjects and the frequent political turmoil engaged in by his subjects on their diverse ways to self-determination, George V still looked out upon an empire on which the sun never set. In little more than a decade after his death the grandeur of the empire that George had inherited from his grandmother, Queen Victoria (1819-1901), was to vanish forever as one by one the 'jewels' dropped out of the crown and declared themselves to be independent states.

Though historical records offer only meager bits of information on Cuthbert and Elsie King, what they do tell us is intriguing. Between the lines of the

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<sup>1</sup> For his comments and reflections on and improvements suggested for this article I am grateful to the Most Reverend Lord Bishop Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury *annis Domini* 2002-2012.

<sup>2</sup> According to the Kenya Gazette of 18<sup>th</sup> April 1961, p. 471, Elsie Vivienne King died at Snow Hill Bus Station, St. Helier, Island of Jersey, England on 8<sup>th</sup> July 1960. Regrettably, I could find no information on the date and place of birth of Elsie Vivienne King. In contemporary records Elsie Vivienne King is simply referred to as "Mrs. Cuthbert King" or "Mrs. C. King" (see photo caption above) as was customary in those times. The pictures of Cuthbert and Elsie King shown in this article have been copied from *Who's Who in Northern India 1942*, p. 23.

grey Xerox-copies of ICS duty sheets bound together with string<sup>3</sup> we see a young British officer emerge out of the hot wind-blown dust of the Peshawar Mall in May with riding crop in hand and pass through the doors of the Officer's Mess, treading the path on which the young Winston Churchill (1874-1965) had gone before him. From 1917 to 1918 Cuthbert King served as a Wing Officer in the North Waziristan Militia. From 1919 to 1920 he was on special duty as His Britannic Majesty's Consul-General and Agent to the Indian Government in Khorassan [sic]. After various postings in Attock<sup>4</sup>, Multan, Sialkot, Gujrat, and Miranshah, Cuthbert King served as Deputy Commissioner of Rawalpindi between 1934 and 1938 and later (1942) as Commissioner of Multan. He returned as Deputy Commissioner of Rawalpindi from 1944 until his retirement in 1947. After retirement from the Indian Civil Service Cuthbert King was ordained as a priest in the Church of England.<sup>5</sup>

In the Rawalpindi newspapers in the years 1934 to 1938 there are short articles with sadly blurred photos of the Commissioner Sāhib and his Memsāhib, Elsie, visiting schools and hospitals, speaking at meetings of civic organizations, or throwing in the ball to begin the first *chukker* of the polo season. For her role as dutiful and ever gracious Commissioner Memsāhib and, more importantly, for helping to establish maternity hospitals across the Northwest of the Indian subcontinent from Simla to Attock<sup>6</sup>, Elsie Vivienne King was twice awarded the Order of the Kaiser-i-Hind ('Emperor of India'; K.I.H.): Second Class by King George V in 1929 and First Class by King Edward VIII (1894-1972) on 19<sup>th</sup> June 1936. No doubt this was a high point in the careers and married lives of Elsie and Cuthbert King.

Also without doubt the abdication of Edward VIII as king and as head of the Church of England on 10<sup>th</sup> December 1936 to marry the American divorcée Wallis Simpson (1896-1986) tore at the moral fabric of many

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<sup>3</sup> I am grateful to Mr. Dorian Leveque of the India Office Library of the British Museum (London) for kindly providing me with unique historical records of Cuthbert King's service in the Indian Civil Service (ICS) and of his death in London in 1981.

<sup>4</sup> It was as Deputy Commissioner of Attock that Cuthbert King first investigated the petroglyphs of animals and human beings at Darwaza, a village on the right bank of the Indus some three miles downstream from the bridge at Attock in January 1931. His interest in these rock-art carvings on gray basalt increased over the years of his posting at Rawalpindi from 1934 to 1938 and culminated in a contribution to *Man. A Monthly Record of Anthropological Science*, published by the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (vol. XL) May 1940, pp. 65-68. Cuthbert King's amateur photographs are now our only source of knowledge for these significant examples of the rock-art of the upper Indus near Attock, the boulders on which they were etched having since been buried under many meters of mud or broken by head-on collisions with countless other boulders thrashed downstream by the Indus when in spate in the summer months.

<sup>5</sup> *The Times of London*, 14<sup>th</sup> July 1981, p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> *Who's Who in Northern India 1942*, p. 23.

British families serving in the small, elite Indian Civil Service, who were, for the most part, church-going Christians of the Church of England. A visit to the garrison churches at Rawalpindi and Murree with their polished brass plates set in the walls by officers, soldiers, and administrators of the Raj to mourn lost family members and loved ones can give one a good sense of the piety of many British families in the time of the Raj. Though the empire rallied behind King George VI (1895-1952) to defeat Nazi Germany and Japan in World War II, it was now clear that the Raj would last only until the end of the war.

Cuthbert King was not only an officer and a gentleman; he was also a pious Anglican Christian. Thus, when the political and moral certainties of the Raj began to crumble before him he turned to his faith in Christ and his apostles. *Thomas at Taxila. A Drama in Three Acts* with its some five hundred lines is longer than the average 384 lines of an English mystery or miracle play. But the intention of its author is clearly the same: to visualize an *arche* of the Christian faith, that which underlies all reality and appearances.

In his childhood and youth in England Cuthbert King certainly came to know of the religious dramas once performed in Chester, Coventry, Wakefield, and York and their power to place believers in a mystical religious experience of the *arche* of faith. As a graduate of Oxford University he had certainly read and, possibly, even seen a performance of the medieval mystery play *Everyman* at York in 1909.<sup>7</sup>

As the strong faith of Punjabi Christians in the visit of the Apostle Thomas to Taxila circa 52 A.D. was well known to the pious Commissioner Sāhib<sup>8</sup>, he chose to write and leave behind a modern miracle play with the

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<sup>7</sup> Cuthbert King was a student at Oxford University in the time of the famed Anglo-American antiquarian Lucy Toulmin Smith's (1838-1911) tenure as librarian of Oxford's Harris Manchester College. Lucy Toulmin Smith was arguably the chief initiator of the revival of mystery plays in modern times (Toulmin Smith, Lucy (1885). *York Plays: the Plays performed by the Crafts or Mysteries of York on the Day of Corpus Christi in the 14th, 15th, and 16th Centuries*. Oxford: At the Clarendon Press). ICS records show that Cuthbert King joined the ICS as an "M.A. Oxon." on 20th October 1913 at the age of twenty-four, which means that he was at Oxford in the closing years of Lucy Toulmin Smith's life and probably took part in the obsequies at Oxford mourning Lucy Toulmin Smith's passing. Combined with the fact that Cuthbert King *actually wrote a modern mystery play* the evidence becomes overwhelming that he did indeed gain more than passing knowledge of mystery plays at Oxford and, perhaps, even attended the first revival of *Everyman* at York in 1909 on Lucy Toulmin Smith's recommendation, though I agree this final assertion is and will remain conjectural.

<sup>8</sup> The now retired Pope Benedict XVI strengthened belief in the visit of the Apostle Thomas to Taxila in 52 A.D. by reference to it in his weekly catechisms at the Vatican on 27<sup>th</sup> September 2016. At the same time Pope Benedict's remarks unleashed anger and disbelief

Apostle Thomas as its central figure of devotion. As in the miracle plays of medieval England the language is simple and the stage directions are clear and easy to understand, thus overcoming most language problems. Moreover, the pious story of the visit of the Apostle Thomas to Taxila is well known among the Christians of the Punjab, thus making it easier to understand the content of the scene performed on the stage.

Though Cuthbert King relied on the apocryphal *Acta Thomae*<sup>9</sup> of Leucius Charinus (probably compiled in Edessa in the latter half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D.<sup>10</sup>) for the framework of his mystery play, his treatment of the story of Thomas's visit to Taxila clearly reveals the influence of his profession as political officer of His Britannic Majesty, not unlike the linkages of specific themes to craft guilds in medieval mystery plays when the guilds presented scenes appropriate to their trades: the building of the Ark of Noah by the carpenters' guild, the miracle of the five loaves and fishes by the bakers, the visit of the Magi with their offerings of gold, frankincense and myrrh by the goldsmiths.

Thus, we find serious discussions of royal policy in Cuthbert King's *Thomas at Taxila* rather than the bucolic humor of Gondophares' brother Gad dying, ascending to heaven carried by angels, then striking a deal with the angels, and returning to earth in order to dupe his brother Gondophares into selling him or gifting him his palace in heaven as in the story in the *Acta Thomae*. Moreover, Cuthbert King's long professional experience in administering public money finds expression in the introduction of the character Abdagases, son of Gad, who is entrusted with the keys to the royal treasury and charged with prudently controlling the flow of gold to Thomas for the payment of building materials and laborers. The story in the *Acta Thomae* only relates that Gondophares twice gave Thomas the gold he had requested for building the palace as agreed.

We may forgive the one serious anachronism in the book of the play which is spoken by Gad, who rebukes his son Abdagases for placing trust in Thomas and losing Gondophares' offer of succeeding to his empire on his death:

How could you throw away his offer of the empire to humor a mad Fakir?

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among the Thomas Christians of south India who claim that Thomas missionized *only* in present-day south India before his martyrdom at Mylapore (Madras) A.D. 72.

<sup>9</sup> See H.-W. Bartsch, "Thomasakten", in: Kurt Galling, Hans Freiherr von Campenhausen and Erich Dinkler (edd.), *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Bd. 6 (3. Aufl.) Tübingen [J.C.B. Mohr] 1963, p. 865.

<sup>10</sup> For a good source in English on the Apocryphal New Testament see James, Montagu Rhodes, *The Apocryphal New Testament, being the Apocryphal Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Apocalypses. With Other Narratives and Fragments*, Oxford [At the Clarendon Press] 1924; reprinted there in 1926.

It would be twelve centuries from the time of Gondophares before “fakirs”, meaning itinerant Muslim holy men, would be available for humoring in the Northwest of the Indian subcontinent.

On a more serious level, in the time following the abdication of Edward VIII Gad’s rebuke of his son, Abdagases, for throwing away empire for personal feelings for another individual cannot have failed to call up a juxtaposition with King Edward’s own throwing away of his empire for personal feelings.

Though not mentioned *expressis verbis*, the ancient Greek distinction of human feelings of “love” into *philia*, *eros*, and *agape* is operative here. Abdagases’ discarding of the majesty of empire is the correct moral decision in his case because it is an expression of *agape*, the highest form of love, the love of God for man and man for God, whereas it was clearly not *agape* that made it impossible for Edward VIII

...to discharge my duties as king *as I would wish to do*  
without the help and support of the woman I love...<sup>11</sup>

One of the ornaments of high verbal art is the ability to mean that which one does not say. The implied juxtaposition of the decision of Gad with the decision of Edward VIII cannot have been coincidental. It is, indeed, the more powerful for being not articulated but implied.

Strongly suggestive of Cuthbert King’s own experience in His Majesty’s secret service on the Northwest Frontier is the introduction of the character Shivarakshita, a Hindu privy councilor and master of spies, who deftly intimates to the king that Thomas has cheated him and that his nephew, Abdagases, is in collusion with Thomas to depose him. In reality, Abdagases has converted to faith in the “Soter Megas” (‘Great Savior’) of Thomas and now acknowledges Jesus Christ as his own savior and master. Surely, the character Shivarakshita reminded Cuthbert King of the famed “pundits”, the Hindus posing as Buddhist monks who had been trained by the British in espionage and cartography during the ‘Great Game’ in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Cuthbert King had an apparent aversion to the use of a *deus ex machina* to start the sequence of events that leads to the denouement of the story as is the case in the *Acta Thomae*. Instead of Gondophares’ brother Gad being struck down (presumably by the Wrath of God) just as Gondophares is about to begin torturing Thomas and the merchant Abbanes, Gad dies almost prosaically by slipping on a loose stone on the marble floor of the palace, falling and fatally injuring his head.

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<sup>11</sup> British Pathé sound recording of the abdication address of Edward VIII on 11<sup>th</sup> December 1936 (film ID 462.17).

Gondophares, who deeply loves his brother, is smitten with grief. His nephew, Abdagases, now a convert to Christianity, tells the desperate king that Thomas's master, the Soter Megas, can bring the dead back to life if one believes in him. As a final attempt to save his brother's life Gondophares orders that Thomas be brought from the dungeon. In a touching final scene Gondophares places his royal crown at the feet of Thomas and kneels down before him as a humble supplicant.

Thomas humbly entreats Gondophares not to kneel before him and then places his hand on Gad's head and invokes Jesus Christ to bring Gad back to life. Gad returns somewhat confused to this Vale of Tears and is embraced by his brother and his son. Gondophares and Gad entreat the Apostle Thomas to give them the communion of Christ. Thomas does so, but then declines Gondophares' invitation to stay on at Taxila, saying that he must now go on to the place of his martyrdom on a hill in south India near Mylapore. Thomas blesses Gondophares and his house and sets out to fulfill his mission. The curtain falls.

Regrettably, information concerning the performance of *Thomas at Taxila*, either before Partition or after, has not been found.

I became aware of Cuthbert King's *Thomas at Taxila* quite by chance in 2016 when searching a list of antiquarian books offered for sale by an antiquary in Port Saint Lucie, Florida, USA. Having lived as a foreign professor in Rawalpindi not far from the Army Polo Grounds in the years 2007 to 2013, my interest in this antiquarian offer from Port Saint Lucie, Florida, was spontaneous. I immediately ordered the book.

Some two weeks later a booklet of some fifty brittle and yellowing pages published at the Egerton Press in Rawalpindi with no date of publication was delivered to my house in Germany, and my research on this vignette of the final years of the Raj in Rawalpindi, of the ancient kingdom of Taxila, and of the pious traditions of the visit of the Apostle Thomas to Taxila in the first century A.D. began. In addition to this note, I have restored the text of Cuthbert King's *Thomas at Taxila* and hope that one day the play might be performed in Taxila or Rawalpindi.

In his introduction to the restored text of Cuthbert King's *Thomas at Taxila* the now retired Eighth Bishop of Lahore, the Rt. Rev. Dr. Alexander John Malik (episcopate: 1980-2012), wrote in 2016:

The drama is based on the spiritual/moral lesson of the story of St. Thomas building a palace for the king Gondophares in heaven. The drama nowhere tries to dwell on the historicity or credibility or authenticity of the St. Thomas Tradition. Such traditions are difficult to validate by history, though it is not altogether impossible. But for believers evidence from history is not so important. They have faith in their pious traditions. They do not need anything more. The same is true for the "*karamat*" ('miracles') of Hazrat Ganj Baksh

Hajvarī [Šaykh Alī b. 'Uthmān al-Jullābī Hujwīrī (around 400/1009-465/1072)], whose magnificent *mazār* lends its name to Lahore as "*Dātā kī nagarī*", the "City of Data" ("*Dātā*" also means the 'One who Gives'). It is commonly believed by the devotees of Data that during the 1965 war between India and Pakistan Data Ganj Baksh did not let any bomb fall on Lahore as he himself was taking all the bombs thrown by the Indian war planes in his own hands and throwing them into the river Ravi flowing near to Lahore. It is believed that Data Sahib saved Lahore from destruction and devastation by his *karamat*. It is difficult to prove such myth/legends by historical means. But faith in them is deeply ingrained in the psyche of devotees. They do not need any evidence of history. It is there as one of the *karamat* of Data Sahib. Such stories are quite common in all the major religions of the Indian subcontinent as they help believers enter into the fellowship of their saint and eventually into the Presence of the Divine. The saint becomes, in a way, a door or a medium for entering into the Presence of the Divine.

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Tsoukalas, K. (1974). *Independence and reproduction. The societal role of educational mechanisms in Greece (1830-1922)*. Athina: Themelio. [In Greek].

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Bush, G.W. (2004). 'A scholar recants on his "Shakespeare" discovery.' *New York Times*, June 20, 2007.

#### **Theses and dissertations** (no italics)

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Publication by institute, globally known by its acronym, author is publisher, in-text citation (OECD 1997).

OECD. (1997). *Communication Outlook (1997)*, Paris: OECD

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