



# THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE SYNOD OF DIAMPER

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**Abstract:** *The present paper explores the history and impact of the Synod of Diamper through different historical perspectives. It begins by acknowledging criticisms of the Synod, which started soon after its inception, viewing Alexis of Menezes as an outsider who imposed changes on the St. Thomas Christians of India. However, it suggests that a balanced examination reveals Alexis of Menezes actually reaffirmed the authentic Christian identity for these communities. The article surveys historical writings about the Synod, highlighting the perspectives of both Latin authors and Protestant/Anglican writers. Early Latin authors like Fray Antonio of Gouvea portrayed Menezes positively, while later authors such as Michael Geddes and Mathurin Veyssi re de La Croze criticised the Synod and Portuguese missionary methods. Protestant and Anglican writers further questioned the validity of the Synod, viewing it as an imposition rather than a genuine reform. In the 20th century, debates continued with authors like Jonas Thaliath arguing against the Synod's validity, while others like Gregorio Magno Ant o defended it. The article also discusses the Synod's lasting influence, including subsequent synods and its recognition in church history. Overall, the historiography of the Synod of Diamper reflects varying perspectives over time, from early support to later critiques, shaping understandings of Christianity's development in India.*

**Keywords:** Historiography, Diamper, Synod, Christianity

**Received :** 30 March 2025

**Revised :** 29 April 2025

**Accepted :** 10 June 2025

**Published :** 30 June 2025

## **TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:**

Augustine, T., & Saji, K.S. (2025). The Historiography of the Synod of Diamper. *Journal of History, Art and Archaeology*, 5: 1, pp. 53-58. <https://doi.org/10.47509/JHAA.2025.v05i01.06>

## **Introduction**

Over the last century, numerous authors, both Indian and foreign, have emerged, most of whom criticised the Synod of Diamper. This criticism has been present since the Synod's inception, with many believing that it stripped the St. Thomas Christians of their 'true identity'

and viewed Alexis of Menezes as an intruder. However, through genuine research and an impartial approach, it is possible to see another side of the story: Alexis of Menezes OSA (Sibi: 2018: 28) actually reaffirmed the ‘real identity’ of Christianity for the St. Thomas Christians of India through the Synod.

The personal interests of authors are evident in their writings about the Synod. Although many have written about Christianity in India, only a few conducted thorough research on the Synod. Other authors often relied on these principal researchers, repeating the same ideas. These principal authors approached the Synod from a particular perspective; their sincerity is evident at times, but their conclusions should not be seen as definitive. Many aspects still need further study. Here, we will outline the main arguments of selected authors chronologically and identify the viewpoints they studied or neglected.

### **Historiography until the 19th Century**

Compared to the 20th century, there are fewer writings on the Synod from the 16th to 19th centuries. During the implementation of the Synod’s decrees by the Portuguese missionaries, Dutch ships arrived, and following the *Coonan Cross Oath*<sup>1</sup>, control shifted to these new Western powers. This period saw the emergence of the first historians of Indian Christianity, most of who were Anglicans and Protestants. These historians criticised the Church and the Synod of Diamper. We will initially focus on Latin authors and later on Anglican and Protestant writers, examining the evolution of their opinions over the centuries.

### **Latin Writers**

Until the 20th century, there were not many comprehensive studies on the history of Christianity in India by Latin authors. The Portuguese were focused on their missionary activities, reporting briefly to authorities. We have some reports from Portuguese missionaries

about the Malabar Christians, but few writings specifically on the Synod of Diamper. The arrival of the Dutch changed the situation in Malabar, shifting the Portuguese focus to maintaining their position rather than writing about it. Below, we will discuss some letters and main works by Latin writers.

### **Various Letters**

The Synod gained fame in Western churches after the publication of “Jornada” by Fray Antonio of Gouvea OSA in 1606. A series of letters from Portuguese Jesuit missionaries, published last century, provide various immediate reactions to the Synod<sup>3</sup>. Initially, the Jesuit fathers and the archdeacon who attended the Synod had a positive impression. Monsignor Giuseppe Beltrami published a letter (Sibi: 2018: 66) from Archdeacon George of the Cross to Pope Clement VIII, praising the Synod’s acceptance.

An Italian Jesuit, Giovanni Maria Campori (Nedungat: 2001:295-298) initially thanked God for the Synod’s success. However, in a later letter (Thaliath: 1958: 134) he criticised some of Menezes’ changes to the Synod’s decrees and called for a new Synod in Angamaly. Archbishop Menezes, unaware of these complaints, expressed his satisfaction (Antao: 1952: 162-165) in letters to Fabio Biondi, mentioning the need to approve the Synod’s decrees. Jesuit Father Stephen of Britto also praised Menezes in a letter to his Prior General (Sibi: 2018: 78).

Contrastingly, letters by Francisco Ros (Thaliath: 1954: 138-139) raised issues. Published by J. Thaliath, these letters argued that the Synod’s decrees were not officially approved by the Pope, thus invalid (Thaliath: 1954: 138-139) Ros, who supported Menezes initially, later criticised the Synod’s changes. Despite these internal confessions, the publication of “Jornada” three years later overshadowed these letters, and the Synod’s decrees were never sent for papal approval.

### **Fray Antonio of Gouvea**

Fray Antonio of Gouvea (1574-1628) (Sibi: 2018: 59) supported the Synod in his work “Jornada,” describing Menezes’ actions in Malabar. He portrayed Menezes as a hero who saved the St. Thomas Christians from Nestorianism. Gouvea included papal briefs supporting Menezes but omitted the brief “Divinam Dei” of 1601, which came after the Synod. He emphasised the people’s positive reactions as proof of the Synod’s approval rather than seeking canonical consent.

“Jornada” became a primary source for studying the Synod, though later authors like J. Thaliath and others criticised its one-sided view. They noted contradictions between Gouvea’s narrative and the reality in Malabar (Thaliath: 1954: X-XI). Despite its limitations, “Jornada” remains a significant work, though not entirely reliable for every detail.

### **Juan Facundo Raulín**

Juan Facundo Raulín (1694-1757) (Sibi: 2018: 60) was an Augustinian from Spain who published “Historia Ecclesiae Malabaricae cum Diamperitana Synodo...” in 1745. He aimed to publish the Synod’s decrees in Latin (Sibi: 2018: 60) and was the first to claim that Pope Clement VIII approved the Synod, although without strong evidence. Raulín also sought to counter criticisms of the Catholic mission in India.

### **Paulinus of St. Bartholomew**

Paulinus of St. Bartholomew (1748-1806), a Croatian Carmelite missionary, detailed the Synod of Diamper in his 1795 work “India Orientalis Christiana.” He provided important details but did not go beyond what Gouvea and Raulín had stated. Paulinus focused on highlighting the missionary achievements of the Synod’s protagonists rather than criticizing other authors.

Thus, the historiography of the Synod of Diamper has evolved, with early Latin authors

supporting the Synod and later critics questioning its validity and impact. The works of Gouvea, Raulín, and Paulinus provide valuable insights, though they reflect their authors’ biases and limitations. Further research is needed to fully understand the Synod’s complexities and its effects on the St. Thomas Christians.

### **Protestant and Anglican Writers**

The decline of Portuguese power began before the Coonan Cross Oath. However, with the arrival of the Dutch, many Protestant and Anglican writers presented their views on Christianity in India. They included details about Portuguese missions in India and compared them with their own church activities. For them, the actions of the Portuguese church in India did not align with the loving teachings of Jesus. Some authors dedicated chapters in their works to analyze the Synod. Below, we will discuss the main authors and their arguments.

### **Michael Geddes**

Michael Geddes (1650-1713), a Scottish historian, translated the decrees into English and titled his work “*The History of the Church of Malabar... Giving an account of the persecutions and violent methods of the Roman Prelates to reduce them to the Subjection of the Church of Rome*” in 1694. The title itself shows his attack on the Catholic Church, especially the Portuguese missions in Malabar. Though Geddes used Gouvea as a source, he critically viewed the Jornada with an Anglican perspective. There is no evidence that Geddes visited India, but his time in Portugal helped him write about this history. His work mainly repeats Gouvea’s accounts but with a focus on criticizing the Catholic Church. Geddes aimed to show the differences between the churches, suggesting that the Portuguese actions in Malabar were meant to control the Christians there. He indirectly implies that the Synod might be invalid without explicitly stating it.

### **Mathurin Veyssière de La Croze**

Mathurin Veyssière de La Croze (1661-1739), a French Benedictine who converted to Protestantism, was the first historian to write about Christianity in India from a Protestant perspective. His book, “*Histoire du Christianisme des Indes*,” (Sibi: 2018: 62) was published in 1724. La Croze used Gouvea as a source and criticised the Portuguese mission methods. He pointed out that the missionaries of the Synod struggled to implement its decisions due to cultural and language barriers, highlighting the inconsistency between the Portuguese missionaries and the natives (Sibi: 2018: 62).

### **James Hough**

James Hough’s work, (Sibi: 2018: 63) published in five volumes with the first two in 1839, is considered a significant history of Christianity in India. Like La Croze, Hough criticised the Portuguese missionary methods and defended the Malabar Christians. His detailed descriptions of Indian Christian traditions and culture led him to conclude negatively about the Synod, seeing it as an effort to establish Papal supremacy and criticizing Menezes’ actions as errors (Hough: 1839: 133).

### **John William Kaye and Thomas Whitehouse**

John William Kaye (1814-1876) (Sibi: 2018: 64) in his work “Christianity in India: A Historical Narrative,” published in 1859, viewed the Synod as an act of oppression by Menezes. Thomas Whitehouse shared similar views, attributing the problems to the arrival of St. Francis Xavier. Both authors regarded the Church’s actions as illegal and unacceptable.

### **Historiography in the 20th Century**

In the 20th century, several authors studied the Synod in detail. Many examined it from a canonical perspective, questioning its validity,

while others focused on the culture of Indian Christians during the Portuguese era. We will look at key authors who directly studied the Synod, dividing them into those who defended its validity and those who did not.

### **Defenders of the Invalidity of the Synod**

Authors like Placid J. Podipara, Mathias Mundadan, Eugene Tisserant, Andrews Thazhath, and Paul Pallath, often drawing from Jonas Thaliath, supported the view that the Synod was invalid. Thaliath’s historical-canonical investigation in his book “The Synod of Diamper” (1958) argued for its invalidity by comparing different versions of the decrees and criticizing Menezes’ actions and authority.

### **Giuseppe Beltrami**

Giuseppe Beltrami (1889-1973) (Sibi: 2018: 66) in “La Chiesa Caldeanese colodell’Unione” (1933) argued that the Synod was not approved by the Pope, viewing it as a simple narration rather than formal approval (Sibi: 2018: 66).

### **Jonas Thaliath**

Jonas Thaliath<sup>3</sup> (1919-1981), was a professor and later bishop, who argued in his book “The Synod of Diamper” (1958) (Thaliath: 1958: 22) that the Synod was invalid due to the Portuguese missionaries’ lack of understanding of local culture and languages. He also argued that Menezes did not have the authority to convoke the Synod and that the Pope did not explicitly approve the decrees.

### **Other Authors**

Many other authors like Édouard René Hambye, who translated Eugene Tisserant’s work into English, also supported the invalidity of the Synod. Placid J. Podipara, Andrews Thazhath, and Paul Pallath similarly argued against its validity, stating that the brief from Pope Clement VIII did not constitute formal approval (Pallath: 2001: 225).

## **Defenders of the Validity of the Synod**

In the early 20th century, fewer Latin authors defended the Synod, but some, like Gregorio Magno Antáo, did so from a canonical perspective.

### **Gregorio Magno Antáo**

Gregorio Magno Antáo, in his dissertation (1938), defended the Synod's validity by arguing that Menezes had the authority as the Primate of India (Sibi: 2018: 78) and that the Pope implicitly approved the Synod through his actions and brief (Sibi: 2018: 78).

### **Carlos Alonso Vañes<sup>4</sup>**

Carlos Alonso Vañes, (Sibi: 2018: 78) in his biography of Menezes (1992), argued that Menezes saved the Malabar Christians from Nestorianism and supported the validity of the Synod based on what happened afterward.

### **K. J. John Ochanthuruth**

K. J. John Ochanthuruth, in "The Road to Diamper" (1999), argued that the Synod was valid and explained the changes in Ros's stance as a result of rivalry among religious orders. He criticised Thaliath's arguments and supported the reliability of the translated decrees available in the Vatican archive.

## **Influence of the Synod in Later Years**

After the Synod of Diamper, Ros conducted another Synod in Angamaly in 1603. This suggests that Ros valued Angamaly more than Diamper. However, he likely only changed some practical aspects to gain support from Malabar Christian authorities. Although the decrees of the Angamaly Synod are not available, the main content of both Synods must be similar because the Council of Trent was the basis of the Church's faith and practices at that time. So, why do we still remember the Synod of Diamper, even after it was overruled by the Synod of Angamaly? The following points may answer this question.

By convoking the new Synod in Angamaly, Ros might have been seeking a legal way to implement the decisions of the Council of Trent. Thazhath believes it was the only solution for the chaos created by Diamper. Later, after the Coonan Cross oath, Propaganda Fide intervened in the religious matters of Malabar Christians, creating tension with the Portuguese Padroado. Despite this, both authorities, actively and passively, followed the content of the Synod of Diamper (Thazhath: 1985: 23).

The suppression of the Jesuits in 1773 also affected India, and Propaganda Fide took control. After the Padroado regained power in Malabar in 1857, administrator P. Francis of Jesus, in 1876, required those returning from the Melusian schism to recognise the Apostolic Vicar and take an oath according to the Synod of Diamper. During the Jesuit suppression, Christians were under Portuguese administrators, who used the Synod of Diamper as a basis for their pastoral activities, according to Thazhath.

Propaganda Fide members also consulted the Synod of Diamper. Bernardine Baccinelli of S. Teresa O.C.D. is a notable example, using it to solve canonical problems. Although later synods did not directly mention Diamper, Leonardo of Saint Louis' statutes assumed it had addressed all relevant matters. Thaliath noted that the Synod of Diamper was not mentioned in the Oriental Code or the Acts of the First Plenary Council of India, suggesting it was forgotten. However, Negungatt points out that the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches, promulgated by Pope John Paul II in 1990, cited the Synod of Diamper 53 times. Thus, the Synod remains important in Kerala's history and the Church of India.

## **Conclusion**

The above discussion provides a brief overview of authors' arguments and ideas about the Synod. Until the 19th century, authors viewed the Synod from a "missionary perspective," often without

authentic investigation. There were few Latin writers, especially Indians, on this subject during that period. While Gouvea viewed the Synod as a missionary success, others defended their interests. The Jesuit Fathers' controversial letters remain a mystery, causing more confusion today than in their time.

Protestant and Anglican writers had a different view of the Synod and the Church, often attacking it in their writings but showing little interest in the situation in Malabar or Nestorianism. This indicates personal interests behind their writings. Additionally, there was a significant lack of native historians and writings. Oral traditions mainly focus on the origins of Christians rather than the Synod event.

In the 20th century, the focus shifted to the origins of each church, making the Synod of Diamper a necessary topic when discussing the hierarchy of Indian churches. The main question then was the validity of the Synod. Studies from this period often took a partial approach, focusing on Canon law, culture, and rites. Thaliath's arguments on the invalidity of the Synod are convincing but he approached it from a canonical perspective, ignoring other aspects of the Synod.

Authors like Antão, Alonso Vaies, and K. J. John defended the Synod's validity, offering a different perspective. Future studies should explore reports and letters from that time, considering views from Padroado, Propaganda Fide, and Theology. The Synod of Diamper can be seen as the "Trent of the East"<sup>5</sup> (Sibi: 2018: 111) due to its influence by the Council of Trent, and future studies could focus on its reformation efforts, including separation from Hinduism and Judaism, social reforms, religious reformation, missionary work, and European enculturation. (Sibi: 2018: 111-116).

The Synod's content shows the reforms made by Portuguese missionaries among Malabar Christians, providing a broader vision of Christianity, especially in mission, human

dignity, and religious beliefs. The Synod's decrees revitalized and renewed the lives and beliefs of Malabar Christians, showing the true identity of Christianity.

## Notes

1. "It was a public swearing in protest mode by members of the Nazrani Christians of the Malabar region in India, that they would not submit to the Jesuits and Latin Catholic hierarchy, nor accept Portuguese dominance (Padroado) in ecclesiastical and secular life."
2. "Many authors used only the letters published by Jesuit Fathers. But we must not forget that there were also other religious congregations existed at that time. Writing letters to the Religious Superiors to inform the situation were common at that time. There are many unexplored sources, yet to be studied."
3. Thaliath mentions here about the report of Roz, published in 1928. Roz, F. *De Erroribus Nestorianorum qui in hac India orientali versantur*. Vol. XI.-1. no. 40. Ed. I.1928: Hausherr. Roma.
4. "... but Father Laerzio and the Jesuits did not believe it was appropriate to present the text of the Synod in Portuguese, so a Latin translation was begun, which would be presented to the Pope in due course."
5. "This term is translation of the Spanish word 'Trento de Oriente', which is used in the dissertation to relate the connection of the Diamper with the Council of Trent."

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