

It will be convenient at this point to recount the work of the Carmelites at another mission—Basra—with yet another race and religion extraneous to the local ones: the Mandaeans (as they are correctly designated), vulgarly and wrongly called Subba¹ by the Muslim Arabs, i.e. Sabaeans, while romantically, but mistakenly, they have been known to Europeans as 'Christians of S. John Baptist'.

Recent residents in and visitors to Mesopotamia ('Iraq) will know of them at Basra, at 'Amara, in the Muntafiq district, at Suq-ush-Shuyukh, Garimat Bani Sa'id, Chubayieh (after the British occupation a few settled in Baghdad, while they are also at Muhammareh and Ahwaz, in Persian territory) as a handful of expert silversmiths, working in a black enamel² design on silverware of handsome finish. To the earliest Catholic missionaries, i.e. at the beginning of the 1600's this race was by way of an unknown phenomenon: they were misled by and wrongly followed the scent of the appellation 'John', which in the course of time had been magnified into 'John Baptist', and so to 'Christians of S. John Baptist', on the analogy of the 'Christians of S. Thomas' on the Malabar coast. Their observations on the rites and customs and creed and sacred books of the Mandaeans read crudely today. Modern scientific decyphering of their language and sacred writings has advanced down to Mrs. E. S. Drower's learned monographs on Mandaean writings and *Black and White Magic of the Mandaeans*, published in 1934 by the British School of Archaeology in 'Iraq, and *Folklore*, 1933, respectively. Mrs. Drower may be quoted:

"Their religion is not Christian and not Muslim and not Jewish, but a most curious religion of their own, in which Jewish, old Persian, Babylonian, and what appear to be early Christian elements are blended into a *pagan* whole. They have kept themselves free from admixture with other races by severe prohibitions. . . . They have their own language, first cousin to Aramaic and Syriac—their own script. . . . According to the latest census they number only 4,800 souls. They were once numerous. Groups of them are found in the larger cities of 'Iraq, but they are most numerous in the marsh villages of 'Iraq, and there are also communities of them . . . along the banks of the Karun . . ." (i.e. the river which flows from Persia into the Shatt-ul-'Arab).

To the learned and instructed the ideas the Carmelites formed about the Mandaeans, their efforts to find a Christian nexus in the Mandaean rites and to rectify their 'errors' will be tedious reading; but the scientists will probably be surprised to learn of the phase (of some twenty-five years' duration) in the history of this community described briefly below. It is possible, too, that some of the customs and antipathies of the Mandaeans three centuries ago differed from those of today.

The first letter, extant, of Fr. Basil of S. Francis (17.2.1624) which mentions them, informs the Sac. Congregation regarding these 'Christians of S. John', than whom he had not previously met Christians more widely separated (i.e. from Western practice), seeing that they celebrated no sacraments:

"They mix little with me and other Europeans in Basra, because the 'Franks' eat meat of animals killed by Muslims: and above all else these so-called 'Christians of S. John' abominate anything cooked by black slaves, who, they say, are not sons of Adam: they also say that anyone circumcised, whether Muslim or Jew, cannot enter their religion: and that they may not wear anything blue, nor say prayers (turned) towards the West. . . ."

Cardinal Ludovisi, Prefect of Propaganda, had evidently instructed Fr. Basil to give a more

¹ The root word referring to their ceremonial 'washings'.

² According to the 'little Arabic book' mentioned by Saiyid Muhammad Ahmad in his MSS., this black enamel is prepared from 10 parts brass, 8 parts copper, 3 parts silver, 21 parts sulphur. The silver and brass being melted, copper is added, sulphur being gradually mixed and pounded in a mortar, and worked up with water and lime for setting in the design to be executed on the silverware.