

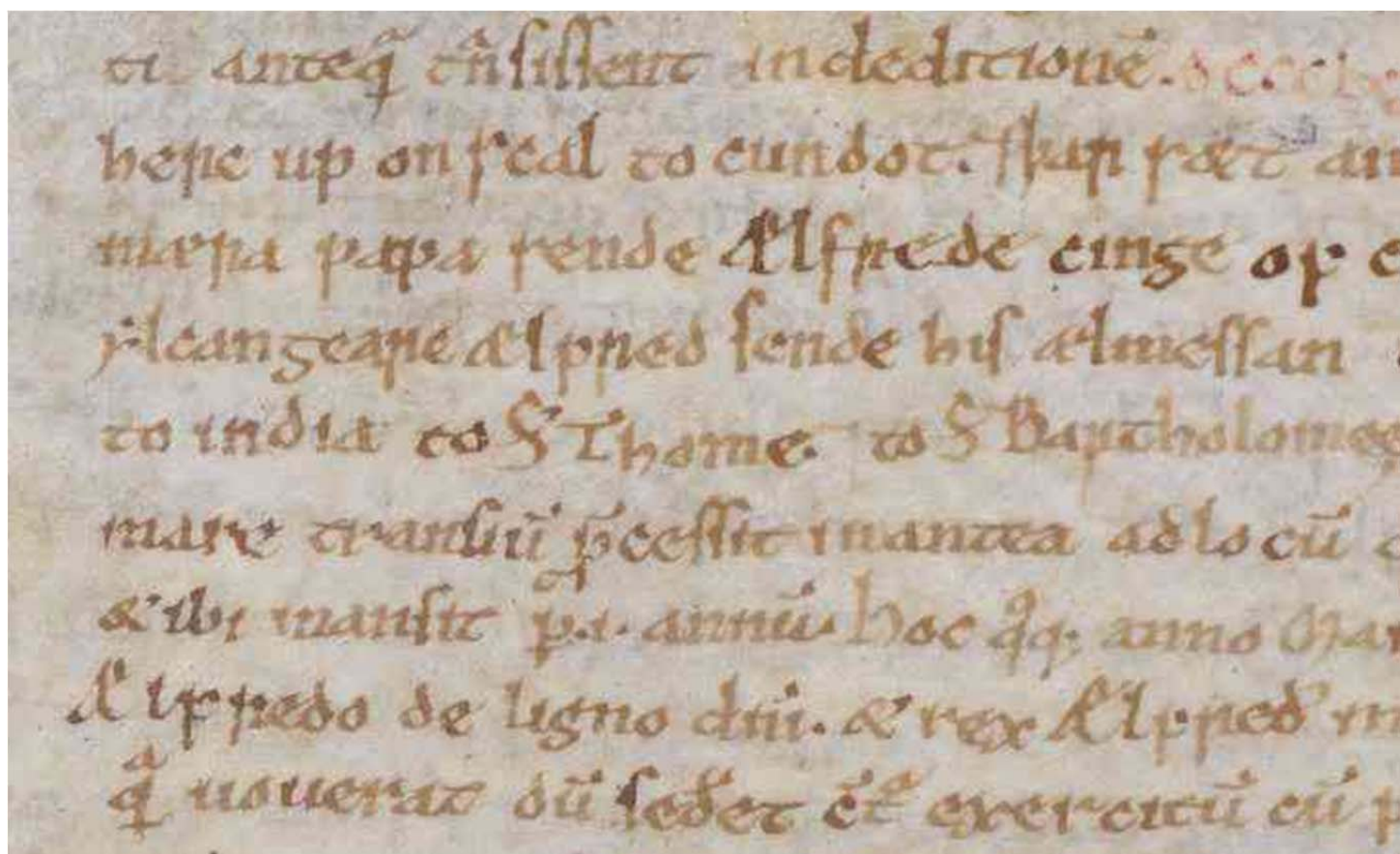
Did England's King Alfred the Great send two envoys to Christian shrines in India in 9th century?

A passage in the 'Anglo-Saxon Chronicle' has long been the subject of intrigue. Could it have been true? And what does it tell us about Christianity in India?



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One of the more intriguing references to early medieval contacts between Britain and the wider world is found in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, which mentions a late ninth-century AD embassy to India that was supposedly sent by King Alfred the Great. The following post offers a quick discussion of the evidence for this voyage before going on to consider its potential context and feasibility.



The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle entry for 883 AD in MS F, which refers to Alfred sending alms to the shrines of St Thomas in India and St Bartholomew (Image: British Library, Cotton MS Domitian A VIII, f. 55v).

According to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for AD 883, King [Alfred of Wessex](#) sent two men, [Sigehelm](#) and [Æthelstan](#), overseas with alms to carry both to Rome and to the shrines of “St Thomas in *India/Indea* and to St Bartholomew”, fulfilling a promise made when he besieged a Viking raiding-army at London (MSS D, E & F; also mentioned with additional details by William of Malmesbury and John of Worcester, see below).

883: Sigehelm and Athelstan took to Rome – and also to St Thomas in India and to St Bartholomew – the alms which King Alfred had vowed to send there when they

besieged the raiding-army in London; and there, by the grace of God, they were very successful in obtaining their prayers in accordance with those vows.

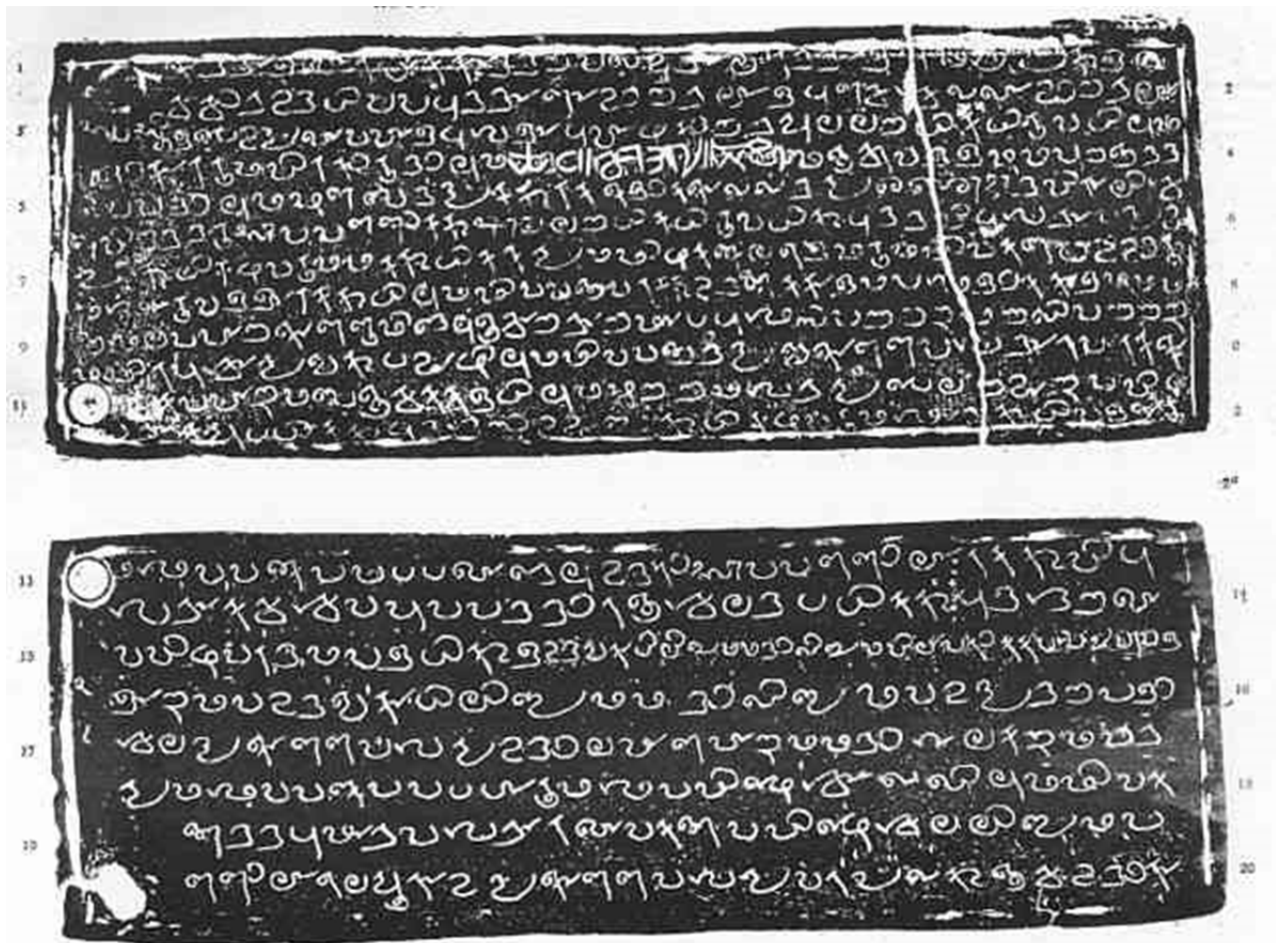
Needless to say, this passage has been the subject of considerable interest. Some have suggested that “India seems an unlikely destination for two English thanes” and argued that we might thus see *India/Indea* as a mistranscription of Judea, based on variant forms in MSS B & C. However, whilst possible, this is by no means a necessary assumption, and a reading of Sigehelm and Æthelstan’s intended goal as indeed being India remains commonly accepted. Certainly, a final destination for Alfred’s two emissaries at shrines in India, rather than Judea, would fit well with contemporary Anglo-Saxon knowledge of the two saints mentioned in the Chronicle’s account. As the ninth-century *Old English Martyrology* attests, both St Thomas and St Bartholomew were said to have been martyred in India in tales that were current in King Alfred’s time; likewise, *Cynewulf*’s arguably ninth-century Old English poem *The Fates of the Apostles* explicitly links these two saints with India, and so too do the works of *Aldhelm*, d. 709, whom King Alfred notably considered England’s finest poet. Furthermore, it may well be that, rather than India being an “unlikely destination for two English thanes”, its remoteness from early medieval England was, in fact, the very point of Alfred’s gift: that, in return for success against a Viking raiding-army that had occupied London, King Alfred had deliberately pledged to send alms to the very furthest-known reaches of Christendom, to the land that was conceived of as mirroring Britain’s position on the very far edge of the known world.



A Late Anglo-Saxon map of the world, orientated with east at the top; Britain and India are situated at opposite sides of the world and both at its very margins, Britain on the far bottom edge of the map and India at the far top. Image credit: British Library, Cotton MS Tiberius BV, f. 58v.

If two emissaries of an Anglo-Saxon king carrying alms for the shrines of St Thomas and St Bartholomew were indeed sent to India in the 880s, then this would naturally raise a number of additional questions, namely what, exactly, were Sigehelm and Æthelstan travelling to visit? How might they have travelled there and what was the context for such a visit? And who actually were these two travellers?

With regard to their intended destination, the usual – and most credible – interpretation of alms being sent to India by King Alfred is that they were being sent to shrines located in southern India. The existence there of an early and notable [Syriac Christian](#) community, known usually as [Thomas Christians](#) after their claimed founder [St Thomas the Apostle](#), is [well-established](#). Although the exact circumstances of this community's origins are much debated, there is little doubt that stories of St Thomas's claimed missionary activity in India were circulating in the Mediterranean world by the third and fourth centuries AD, nor that there was indeed a permanent Christian community established in southern India by at least Late Antiquity. So, for example, the [Chronicle of Se'ert](#) is believed to offer plausible testimony for fifth-century Christians in India, referring to a bishop of Rev-Ardashir at coastal [Persis](#) (Fars, Iran) sending materials for use among Christians in India in c. AD 470, and [Isho'dad of Merv](#) mentions that "Daniel the Presbyter, the Indian", assisted Mar Koumi in preparing a Syriac translation of a Greek text for Bishop Mari of Rev-Ardashir, something that must have taken place in the early to mid-fifth century. Likewise, two letters of [Isho'yabh III](#), bishop of [Seleucia-Ctesiphon](#) and Patriarch of the Church of the East from 649 to 659, refer to the [metropolitan](#) of Fars administering Indian episcopal sees then, and India received its [own metropolitan bishop](#) in the seventh century by his hand and then again – possibly after a period in which it was once more under the authority of Fars – in the eighth century.



A copper plate grant of AD 849 from Kollam, southern India, providing documentary evidence of the privileges and influence that the Saint Thomas Christians of the church at Kollam enjoyed in early Malabar; the document contains signatures of the witnesses in Pahlavi, Kufic and Hebrew scripts. For a colour image of these plates and further details, see the De Monfort University/British Museum project on the copper plates. Image Credit: Chaliyan/Wikimedia Commons [Licensed under CC BY Public Domain]

As to a knowledge of this Indian Christian community, with its Persian connections, in the Mediterranean region and Europe, various pieces of evidence from the fifth century and after are suggestive of an awareness of Christians in India that extended beyond the circulating accounts of the *Acts of the Apostle Thomas*. For example, the anonymous author usually known as [Gelasius of Cyzicus](#), writing around AD 475 in Bithynia (modern Turkey), was certainly aware that Indian Christians were linked with the Persian church. Furthermore, by circa AD 500 the tradition had begun to circulate in Greek, Latin and Syriac sources that St Thomas had died at *Kalamene/Calamina* in India (Cholamandalam), something that is thought to reflect

knowledge of the establishment of a tomb/shrine associated with St Thomas on the [Coromandel coast](#) in south India by this point at latest, presumably the site at [Mylapore](#) where Thomas Christians venerated his tomb in subsequent periods (it is perhaps worth noting that this site is indeed mentioned in the ninth-century *Old English Martyrology* account of St Thomas, referred to above). Other sources take us even further. Perhaps most famously, the Byzantine author known as [Cosmas Indicopleustes](#) – probably writing in Alexandria, Egypt, in the sixth century – demonstrates a notable degree of knowledge of India and Sri Lanka, making a number of references to Christians in India and Sri Lanka:

Even in the Island of Taprobane [Sri Lanka] in Inner India, where also the Indian sea is, there is a church of Christians, clergy and believers... The same is true in the place called Male [[Malabar](#), India], where the pepper grows, and the place called Kaliana, and there is a bishop appointed from Persia...

[Sri Lanka] has a church of Persian Christians who are resident in that country, and a priest sent from Persia, and a deacon, and all that is required for conducting the worship of the church.

Even more intriguingly, [Gregory of Tours](#) – writing at Tours, France, towards the end of the sixth century – not only recounts a number of significant details regarding the shrine of St Thomas in India in his account of the saint, but also specifies the source of his knowledge of the shrine and church there as someone who had actually visited it, a point of considerable significance in the present context. The account in question is found in Gregory's *Glory of the Martyrs*, chapter 31, finished c. AD 590, and runs as follows:

The tomb of the apostle Thomas... [I]n that region of India where he had first been buried there are a monastery and a church that is spectacularly large and carefully decorated and constructed. In this church God revealed a great miracle. A lamp was placed there in front of the spot where he had been buried. Once lit, by divine command it burned without ceasing, day and night: no one offered the assistance of oil or a new wick.

he had been buried. Once lit, by divine command it burned without ceasing, day and night: no one offered the assistance of oil or a new wick. No wind blew it out, no

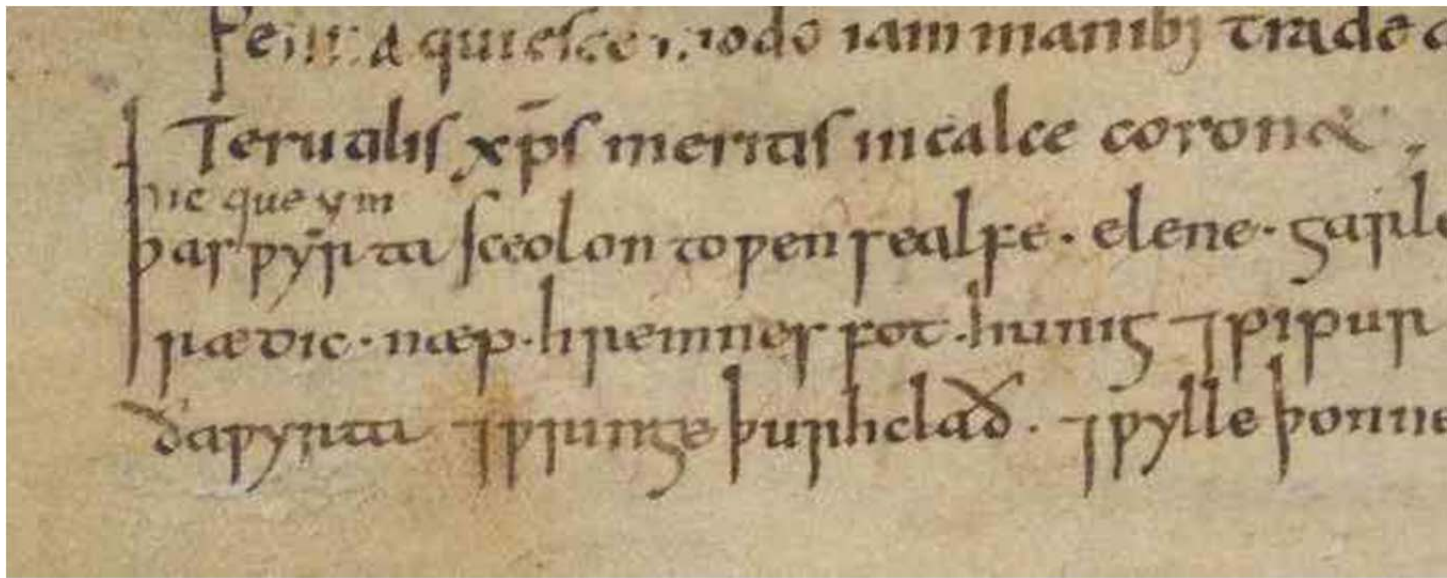
accident extinguished it, and its brightness did not diminish. The lamp continues to burn because of the power of the apostle that is unfamiliar to men but is nevertheless associated with divine power. Theodorus, who visited the spot, told this to me.

All told, it thus seems clear that there was indeed an early Christian community in southern India that was associated with St Thomas, as per the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, and which had a shrine and church – “spectacularly large and carefully decorated and constructed” – that visitors carrying alms from north-western Europe might journey to during the early medieval period. If the destination itself is therefore not implausible, what then of the second query outlined above, namely the context of such a visit and how two ninth-century Anglo-Saxons might have travelled to India?



Illustration of pepper trees, accompanying the text of Cosmas Indicopleustes's sixth-century Christian Topography in Codex Sinaiticus graecus 1186, fol. 202v, eleventh century, probably from Cappadocia, now at St. Katherine's monastery, Sinai; the text associated with it is translated as follows in Faller 2011: 'This is a picture of the tree which produces pepper. Each separate stem being very weak and limp twines itself, like the slender tendrils of the vine, around some lofty tree which bears no fruit. And every cluster of the fruit is protected by a double leaf. It is of a deep green colour like that of rue.' Faller suggests that both the image and text are 'so detailed and accurate that personal inspection and experience are almost a certainty'. Image credit: Faller 2011, used under the CC BY 3.0 licence specified by the Journal of Transcultural

studies



An Old English recipe for a salve against cysts, which contains a number of ingredients including radish, turnip and pepper from India, from BL Cotton MS Domitian A. i, f.55v. Image credit: British Library, via For the Wynn.

With regard to this wider context, the early medieval journey of Theodorus to St Thomas's church in India, probably located at *Kalamene/Calamina* ([Mylapore](#)), and then back to western Europe – where he could inform the Bishop of Tours, Gregory, of the magnificent monastery and church that he found there – coincides with a period in which there is [significant material evidence](#) for contact between the Mediterranean and Europe on the one hand and the Indian Ocean world on the other. However, there is no reason to think that subsequent centuries saw the severing of routes between India and the Mediterranean/Europe. Certainly, pepper from India continued to be used in north-western Europe into the mid-seventh century and beyond, and in impressive quantities: for example, the mid-seventh-century Merovingian king [Chlothar III](#) granted an annual rent of 30 pounds of pepper (grown in India) to a single monastery at Corbie in northern France, along with sizeable amounts of other spices including cinnamon (from Sri Lanka) and cloves (from Indonesia), and this grant was reconfirmed by Chilperic II in 716. Likewise, in England [Bede](#)'s few personal possessions included pepper when he died in AD 735, and [Aldhelm](#) at the end of the seventh century composed a riddle to which the answer was pepper, indicating that he expected his audience to be familiar with this spice:

I am black on the outside, covered with wrinkled skin, yet inside I have a glistening core. I season the delicacies of the kitchen: the feasts of kings and extravagant dishes and likewise sauces and stews. But you will find me of no value unless my inwards are crushed for their shining contents.

Indeed, in the probably late ninth-century [Bald's Leechbook](#), written for Anglo-Saxon physicians in King Alfred's reign, Indian pepper frequently occurs and is, it should be noted, mentioned more times than many native ingredients, being prescribed in more than thirty recipes in the first book alone. Perhaps most famously of all, however, several trade routes leading from western Europe to India and beyond were, in fact, documented during the mid-ninth century in [Ibn Khordadbeh](#)'s account of the [Jewish Radhanite merchants](#) found in his [Book of Roads and Kingdoms](#):

These merchants speak Arabic, Persian, Roman (i.e. Greek and Latin), the Frank, Spanish, and Slav languages. They journey from West to East, from East to West, partly on land, partly by sea. They transport from the West eunuchs, female slaves, boys, brocade, castor, marten, and other furs, and swords. They take ship from Firanja (France), on the Western Sea, and make for Farama (Pelusium, Egypt). There they load their goods on camel-back and go by land to al-Kolzom (Suez), a distance of twenty-five farsakhs (parasangs). They embark in the East Sea (Red Sea) and sail from al-Kolzom to al-Jar (port of Medina) and Jeddah (port of Mecca), then they go to Sind, India, and China. On their return from China they carry back musk, aloes, camphor, cinnamon, and other products of the Eastern countries to al-Kolzom and bring them back to Farama, where they again embark on the Western Sea. Some make sail for Constantinople to sell their goods to the Romans; others go to the palace of the King of the Franks to place their goods. Sometimes these Jew merchants, when embarking from the land of the Franks, on the Western Sea, make for Antioch (at the mouth of the Orontes); thence by land to al-Jabia (? al-Hanaya on the bank of the Euphrates), where they arrive after three days' march. There they embark on the Euphrates and reach Baghdad, whence they sail down the Tigris, to al-Obolla. From al-Obolla they sail for Oman, Sind, Hind, and China... These different journeys can also be made by land. The merchants that start from Spain or France go to Sus al-Aksa (Morocco) and then to Tangier, whence they walk to Afrikia (Kairouan) and the capital of Egypt. Thence they go to ar-Ramla, visit Damascus, al-Kufa, Baghdad, and al-Basra (Bassora), cross Ahwaz, Fars, Kirman, Sind, Hind, and arrive in China.

In light of all this, it seems clear that Sigehelm and Æthelstan's claimed late ninth-century journey from England to "St Thomas in India" was not only credible in terms of its proposed destination, as noted above, but also the availability of routes for getting there, to judge both from the continued availability of imports from India (and beyond) in north-western Europe and Ibn Khordadbeh's testimony as to routes accessible in the ninth century for travelling from West to East and back again (note, a northern trade-route that brought a small number of Indian coins and at least one statuette of the Buddha to eighth- to tenth-century northern Europe and England [also existed](#), but is perhaps less relevant to the present inquiry, not least because King

Alfred is said to have sent Sigehelm and Æthelstan with alms for Rome as well as India).



Map of Eurasia and North Africa, c. AD 870, showing trade routes of the Radhanite Jewish merchants (blue) and other major routes (purple) blue; cities with sizable Jewish communities are shown in brown. Image credit: Briangotts/Wikimedia Commons [Licensed under CC BY 3.0]

Finally, as to the question of the identity of these two Anglo-Saxon royal emissaries, several candidates have been proposed. [William of Malmesbury](#), writing in England in the early twelfth century, identified Sigehelm as a bishop of Sherborne in both his *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum* and his *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, and claims that the gems Sigehelm brought back from India could still be seen at Sherborne in William's day:

He [Ealhstan, bishop of Sherborne] was followed as bishop by Heahmind, Æthelheah, Wulfsige, Asser and Sigehelm. Both the last two are known to have been bishops in the time of king Alfred, who was the fourth son of Æthelwulf... Sigehelm was sent overseas on almonry duties for the king, even getting as far as to St Thomas's in India. Something which could cause wonder for people of this generation is that his journey deep into India was a marvellously prosperous one, as he brought back exotic precious stones, in which the land abounds, and some of them can still be seen in precious objects in the church.

Being devoted to almsgiving, he [King Alfred] confirmed the privileges of churches as laid down by his father, and sent many gifts overseas to Rome and to St Thomas in India. For this purpose he dispatched an envoy, Sigehelm bishop of Sherborne, who made his way to India with great success, an astonishing feat even today, and brought with him on his return gems of exotic splendour and the liquid perfumes of which the soil there is productive...

This identification of Sigehelm is also briefly alluded to by [John of Worcester](#) in the early twelfth-century *Chronicon ex Chronicis*, in which he states that the “bishop of Sherborne”, Swithelm [*sic*], “carried King Alfred’s alms to St Thomas in India, and returned thence in safety”. Needless to say, the claim that Sigehelm returned from India bringing with him “exotic precious stones” that “can still be seen in precious objects in the church” suggests that William was basing his account on local traditions at [Sherborne](#). Nonetheless, his identification has been subject to some scepticism on account of the fact that William omits the names of three bishops of Sherborne who come between Asser and Sigehelm in the preserved episcopal lists, and that Sigehelm signs charters as bishop from AD 925 to 932, not in Alfred’s reign, 871–99. Whether these discrepancies are fatal to William’s identification is open to debate, however. The mistaken attribution of Sigehelm’s episcopacy to [Alfred’s reign](#) and the omission of three intervening bishops in the *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum* may simply reflect an attempt by William and/or his source to reconcile a local Sherborne tradition that Sigehelm, bishop of Sherborne, was Alfred’s envoy to India – and that he returned with riches subsequently used to endow the church at Sherborne with, and which could still be pointed out in the early twelfth century – with the dates of King Alfred, working from a false assumption that Sigehelm must have been bishop when he was sent overseas. In this light, it is worth pointing out that Sigehelm could conceivably have both travelled to India in 883 *and* attested charters from 925–32 if his pilgrimage carrying alms to India for King Alfred took place in his relative youth and he had become the Bishop of Sherborne in his relative old age.

On the other hand, if the early tenth-century bishop of Sherborne named Sigehelm was not the Sigehelm sent to India in 883, contrary to what William of Malmesbury appears to have been told and shown of his supposed spoils from his trip at Sherborne, then identifying him is significantly more difficult: he could be the western Kentish [ealdorman](#) killed by the Danes in 902, as some have speculated, but he could equally well be another Sigehelm active in the era, either [recorded](#) or otherwise. As to Sigehelm's companion, Æthelstan, he is even more obscure, and unfortunately no recorded traditions of his identity survive. He may be a Mercian priest and chaplain of this name who was associated with Alfred according to [Asser](#)'s contemporary *Life of Alfred*, but the name is [very common](#) and there are multiple alternative candidates available, including at least two thegns and an ealdorman active in Alfred's reign.

In conclusion, what can be said of King Alfred's apparent embassy to India in the 880s? All told, it seems credible that India was indeed the intended destination for the alms carried by Sigehelm and Æthelstan in 883. Not only is this reading of the text the most commonly supported position and backed by the majority of the manuscripts, but it accords well with the identity of the two saints whose shrines were to be visited according to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, St Thomas and St Bartholomew: these were both explicitly and repeatedly associated with India in material current in Alfred's day. Indeed, India's remoteness from early medieval England could well have been the very point of Alfred's gift, as noted above, and it would moreover fit with what we know of Alfred's own intellectual curiosity about the wider world and its limits, as Oliver Pengelly has recently pointed out. Beyond this, it would seem that such a journey would also have a good context. It is clear that there was indeed a permanent Christian community in India from at least Late Antiquity, if not before, and knowledge of a shrine and church dedicated to St Thomas at Mylapore had spread to the west by *c.* 500; indeed, Gregory of Tours' account of the church and monastery of St Thomas in India indicates that Sigehelm and Æthelstan would have been by no means the first to visit this shrine in the early medieval era. Furthermore, a journey from western Europe to southern India appears plausible in terms of not only its proposed destination, but also the availability of routes for getting there, given the continued availability of imports from India and Ibn Khordadbeh's account of ninth-century trans-continental routeways. Finally, whilst the identity of King Alfred's two emissaries, Sigehelm and Æthelstan, remains uncertain, it can be tentatively suggested that we should be wary of rejecting outright the apparent Sherborne tradition recorded by William of Malmesbury in the early twelfth century that Sigehelm, bishop of Sherborne, was one of those who travelled to India; likewise, it is not impossible that Æthelstan may have been the Mercian priest of that name who appears in Asser's contemporary *Life of Alfred* as Alfred's close confidant.



PERSIAN CROSS IN CHAPEL ON ST THOMAS'S MOUNT.

Seventh or Eighth Century.

The famous stone cross preserved on St Thomas's Mount, Mylapore, Chennai; the cross includes an inscription in Pahlavi ('Our lord Christ, have pity on Sabriso, (son) of Caharboxt, (son) of Suray, who bore (brought?) this (cross).') that is considered to date on palaeographic grounds to around the eighth century AD. The cross was found in the area of India believed to be the location of the Indian tomb/shrine associated with St Thomas that was known in the early medieval west as Kalamene/Calamina, discussed above; as such, if Sigehelm and Æthelstan did indeed travel to India to visit the shrine of St Thomas in the late ninth century, then it is not implausible that they could have looked on this cross during their visit there. Image credit: Rae, G. Milne (George Milne) 1892/University of Michigan/Wikimedia Commons [Licensed under CC BY 4.0]

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