

NESTORIAN CHRISTIANITY IN CENTRAL ASIA

by Mark Dickens¹

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Background

The focus of this article is the history of one branch of Christianity, the Church of the East (also known as the Nestorian Church)², in Central Asia, the heartland of the Turkic world. The scope of the article includes both adjacent areas where Turkic peoples have lived (such as Mongolia) and adjacent non-Turkic peoples who have lived alongside the Turks in Central Asia (primarily various Iranian-speakers).

The early days of Christianity in Asia are subject to much conjecture and speculation. Some believe that the Magi (or wise men) who came to visit the infant Christ (Matthew 2:1-12) were from Persia. In addition, there were Jews from the Persian Empire present in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost (traditionally viewed as the birth of the Christian Church) who may have carried the Christian faith back to their homes (Acts 2:5-11). There are also ancient traditions that the apostles Thomas and Andrew preached to various ancient peoples resident in the Persian Empire, including some who lived in Central Asia, such as the Bactrians, Scythians, and Sogdians.

More definite origins of Christianity in Asia are to be found in the church at Antioch (modern-day Antakya, Turkey), from whence the Apostle Paul went westward to Asia Minor, Greece and eventually Rome (Acts 13:1-4). Many Christians in the area around Antioch spoke either Aramaic, the language of Jesus, or Syriac, which later became the liturgical language of the Church of the East. From Antioch, Syriac-speaking Christians spread to the east via Edessa (modern-day Urfa, Turkey) to Arbela (modern-day Erbil, Iraq) and eventually the whole Persian Empire. An early Syriac document called the *Doctrine of the Apostles*, written no later than 250 AD, even speaks of Christianity spreading to certain tribes southwest of the Caspian Sea (referred to at that time as Gog and Magog) as early as 120-140 AD, as a result of the work of a missionary called Aggai. Although many scholars dismiss this as legend, if this story has any roots in fact, the tribes concerned might have been “Prototurks of Altaic stock.”³

These eastern Christians were often caught in the middle of continuous conflicts between the Roman and Persian Empires. This situation grew more difficult for them after most of the Syriac-speaking areas were absorbed into the Sassanid Persian Empire (which was strongly Zoroastrian in nature) in the third century, followed by the adoption of Christianity as the official religion of Rome, Persia’s archenemy, in the early fourth century. The church in the Persian Empire came to be composed of both Syriac-speakers and native Persians, but it was usually regarded with suspicion by the Zoroastrian rulers.

¹ The author is grateful to Dr. Brent Davis, David Marsh, Allen Pritzlaff, Dr. Mehmet Tezcan, and R. Charles Weller for their feedback that helped to address a number of inaccuracies in an earlier version of this article.

² The full name of the modern church is the Holy Apostolic Catholic Assyrian Church of the East. For simplicity, the terms *Church of the East* or *Nestorian Church* will be used in this article.

³ Gillman & Klimkeit, 209.

By the beginning of the third century, there were Christians in many parts of the Persian Empire, including Media, Parthia, Gilan and Bactria, areas later inhabited by various Turkic tribes. Bardaisan, a Syriac Christian writing around 196 AD, stated their distinctives as follows:

We are Christians by the one name of the Messiah. As regards our customs our brethren abstain from everything that is contrary to their profession.... Parthian Christians do not take two wives.... Our Bactrian sisters do not practice promiscuity with strangers. Persians do not take their daughters to wife. Medes do not desert their dying relations or bury them alive. Christians in Edessa do not kill their wives or sisters who commit fornication but keep them apart and commit them to the judgement of God. Christians in Hatra do not stone thieves.⁴

In 315, the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, capital of the Persian Empire, assumed the title *Catholicos* (and later, *Patriarch*),⁵ thus setting the stage for the later development of the church hierarchy. Seleucia-Ctesiphon became the centre of ecclesiastical authority in the Church of the East, as well as a major sending base for missionaries to the east (especially to India, Central Asia and China).

The Church of the East became independent from the Church in Antioch as a result of synods convened by the Persian shah in 410 and 424 that recognized the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon as the head of all bishops in the Persian empire and a patriarch equal in authority to the patriarchs of Rome, Antioch, Alexandria and Constantinople. This political independence was compounded by the theological differentiation that took place in the late fifth century after the Church of the East became associated with the theology of Nestorius (c. 381-451), the patriarch of Constantinople who was condemned as a heretic at the Council of Ephesus in 431.⁶ As a result of this, it came to be known by others as the Nestorian Church (a term which it does not use to refer to itself) and its theology has been identified with that of Nestorius since that time.

From early in its history, the Church of the East was a strongly missionary church. Although the majority who went out as missionaries were members of various monastic orders, there were also many lay people involved, especially merchants and traders on the Silk Road.⁷ “One of the reasons for the spread of Nestorianism to Central Asia was certainly the fact that Nestorians engaging in missionary activity could live by the work of their hands and were thus not dependent upon monastic settlements along the way.”⁸ These Christians were “a powerful army of devotees who strengthened the Church and fearlessly penetrated the vast Asiatic continent in an attempt at large-scale evangelization.”⁹ As part of their missionary strategy, the Church of the East set up a number of schools in the Persian Empire where monks studied theology, medicine, music and other academic subjects before being sent out

⁴ Quoted in Stewart, 78. Bactria at this time was part of the Kushan Empire.

⁵ *Catholicos* was the title given to the leading bishop in a church outside the Roman Empire.

⁶ For more information on the Nestorian controversy, see Brock, 23-35; Browne, 6-7, 70-74; Gillman & Klimkeit, 13-19; Moffett, 170-180; Zernov, 58-61. The conclusion of many modern scholars is that Nestorius' condemnation as a heretic was unjustified and was motivated more by church politics than by genuine theological concerns.

⁷ “Among the early Christians the Syriac word for merchant, *tgr'*, was often used as a metaphor for those who spread the gospel” (Foltz, 62).

⁸ Gillman & Klimkeit, 222.

⁹ Atiya, 292.

to evangelize.¹⁰ Whenever the Nestorians established a new episcopal see (the seat of a bishop), they also set up a school, a library and a hospital, thus combining educational and medical work with their preaching. Monasteries were eventually established in a number of locations throughout Central Asia, including Merv, Wazkard (near Samarkand), Qurutqa and Bulayiq (both in the Turfan region), and near Lake Issyq-Köl.

Christianity in Pre-Islamic Central Asia

Since the Nestorians, branded as heretics by the Western church, could not go west, they had no choice but to take their message eastward into Asia. They had already established major centres in Merv and Herat, both of which had a bishop by 424 and a metropolitan (archbishop)¹¹ by 544 and 585, respectively.¹² The first major Nestorian missionary thrust into Central Asia took place in 498. When Shah Kavād I (488-531)¹³ was forced to flee from Persia to the land of the White Huns (the Hephthalites) after being deposed, he was accompanied by a Nestorian bishop, along with four priests and two laymen, who successfully evangelized the Huns.¹⁴ Apparently, the bishop had received a vision in which he was commanded to go to them and instruct them about the faith. These clerics were later joined by artisans, physicians and scribes who taught the Huns to write their own language, beginning a legacy of literacy work that the Nestorians carried out in different parts of Central Asia over the succeeding centuries. Some of these missionaries stayed in the area until at least 530 and, by 549, there were enough Christians amongst them that they requested the Patriarch Mar Aba I (540-552)¹⁵ to consecrate a bishop for them, although the *History of Mar Aba* does not mention the town where the bishop resided.¹⁶

After a short time Haphtar [i.e. the Hephthalite] Khudai sent a priest as a messenger to the King of Kings [i.e. Khosrau I, shah of Persia] and the Haphtraye, who were Christians, wrote also a letter to the holy Patriarch [Mar Aba I], requesting him to ordain as bishop to all the kingdom of the Haphtraye the priest who was sent from their country. When the priest saw the King of Kings, and the latter learned the nature of the mission on which he was sent, he was astonished to hear it, and amazed at the

¹⁰ Important schools were located at Nisibis, Seleucia-Ctesiphon (it later moved to Baghdad), Jundishapur and Merv.

¹¹ In Eastern Christianity, the term “metropolitan” is used instead of “archbishop.” In general, Nestorian metropolitans had six to twelve bishops under their authority. In addition to knowing Syriac, metropolitans later on had to know Persian and Arabic as well. According to the ninth-century Syriac document *Historia monastica*, the metropolitan was primarily appointed as a “shepherd and teacher to the barbarian nations... to teach and show them the true knowledge of their doctrine... he baptized... built churches and established priests and deacons, and he set apart some of the brethren who were with him to teach them psalms and spiritual praises” [quoted in Hunter (1996), 141]. The same document also refers to the role that the miraculous played in the work of these bishops and archbishops: “They evangelized them and they baptized them, worked miracles and showed prodigies, and the news of their exploits reached the farthest points of the East” [quoted in Gillman & Klimkeit, 219]. For more on the hierarchy of the Church of the East, see Gillman & Klimkeit, 237-241.

¹² Alternate dates for the appointment of a metropolitan for Herat are the patriarchates of Yeshuyab II (628-643) or Saliba Zakha (712-728). Merv was also an important centre for Buddhist and Manichaean missionary activity. For more on the ecclesiastical organization of the Nestorians in Central Asia, see Hunter (1992) and Gillman & Klimkeit, 143-151. For more on the role of Merv, including the Christianization of that great city, see Gillman & Klimkeit, 209-211.

¹³ The dates given for the Persian Shahs are their reigns.

¹⁴ The origin of the Huns is still disputed, though they probably came primarily from Mongol or Turkic stock. In some accounts of this story, they are referred to as Turks.

¹⁵ The dates given for Nestorian patriarchs are for their terms as Catholicos.

¹⁶ Moffett notes “The episcopal seats of some bishops appointed to nomadic tribes were probably only tent chapels mounted on wagons, movable ‘cathedrals,’ as it were” (448).

power of Jesus, and at the fact that even the Christian Haphtraye counted the Patriarch as their head and administrator.¹⁷

Other Huns and Turks were also evangelized during this period prior to the Arab invasion, resulting in a Christian presence amongst the Central Asian Turks that would last until the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries. Christians were so prevalent amongst the Turks at this time that, when the plague broke out, it became the practice to tattoo a cross on the forehead to ward off that dread disease, a fact discovered by the Byzantines when some Turks captured by the Persians were turned over to them in 581. The Syriac document *Chronica Minora* describes how, in the year 644:

Elijah [Elias], Metropolitan of Merv, converted a large number of Turks... when travelling in the countries situated beyond the border line [of the Oxus River, the modern-day Amu Darya] he was met by a king who was going to fight another king. Elijah endeavoured with a long speech to dissuade him from the fight, but the king said to him, "If thou showest to me a sign similar to those shown by the priests of my gods, I shall believe in thy God."... Elijah was then moved by divine power, and he made the sign of the heavenly cross, and rebuked the unreal thing that the rebellious demons had set up [some sort of weather disturbance apparently invoked by the pagan priests], and it forthwith disappeared completely. When the king saw what Saint Elijah did... he was converted with all his army. The saint took them to a stream, baptised all of them, ordained for them priests and deacons, and returned to his country.¹⁸

More evidence of Christianity amongst the early Turks comes from a letter that was probably written in the late eighth century by a Jacobite¹⁹ writer who claims to be Mar Philoxenus, a Jacobite bishop from the early sixth century. The letter speaks of the Turks coming to Seleucia-Ctesiphon to receive a metropolitan from the Nestorian patriarch and comments on various aspects of their religious life:

These Christian Turks eat meat and drink milk.... All their habits are clean, and their beliefs are orthodox and true like our own.... They believe in one glorious nature in the Holy Trinity... and profess that the Divine Word, one of the three Persons of the Holy Trinity, suffered, died, and was crucified, and by His death and His resurrection He saved us.... In their gatherings they translate the above Books [the Old and New Testaments] into their Turkish language.... The border town is called Karagur[am], and the name of its King is Idi-Kut.... They are true believers and God-fearing folk, and they dwell under tents, and have no towns, no villages, and no houses.... These Christian Turks dwell under tents and pavilions, and have from themselves priests, deacons, and monks. They have many places of worship with them in their pavilions, and they ring the bells and read the Books in our Syriac tongue.²⁰

¹⁷ Quoted in Gillman & Klimkeit, 212. The sixth century Alexandrian traveller Cosmas Indicopleustes also mentions monks living amongst the Hephthalites in Bactria.

¹⁸ Quoted in Mingana, 11-12.

¹⁹ The Jacobite Church (also known as the West Syrian Church) is one of the Monophysite churches that separated from Rome after the Council of Chalcedon in 451. During the fifth century, a Monophysite bishop of Edessa, Jacob Bardaeus, reorganized the West Syrian church by appointing priests and bishops. As a result, that church came to be known as the Jacobite church.

²⁰ Quoted in Mingana, 68-71. See Mingana, 49-73 and Stewart, 138-143 for more on this letter.

Some scholars speculate that the use of the term *Idiqut*, the title of Uighur rulers in the eighth and ninth centuries, indicates that these were Uighur Turks.²¹ “Nestorianized Turkish tribes between the Oxus and Lake Balkash were to uphold the Christian faith beyond the time of Islamic dominance in the 7th, 8th and subsequent centuries, retaining it to the 14th century.”²²

The key players in transmitting religion along the Silk Road (whether Christianity, Buddhism, Manichaeism or Islam) were the Sogdians, an ancient Iranian-speaking group of inveterate traders who lived in Transoxiana (or Transoxania), the ancient Greek name for the region that lay beyond the Oxus River, roughly equivalent to modern Uzbekistan.²³ “Although Syriac was the liturgical language of the Nestorian Church, the language in which Nestorian Christianity was disseminated across Asia was principally Sogdian.”²⁴ The Iranian word for Christians (*tarsakan*)²⁵ was even transmitted via Sogdian into the Central Asian oral tradition, where it is preserved in the Kyrgyz epic *Manas* as *tarsa*, a reference to Nestorian Christians in Central Asia.

Most of the extant Sogdian Christian documents, including creeds, hymns, psalms, prayers, lectionaries and commentaries, have come from a Nestorian monastery in Bulayīq, near Turfan in Eastern Turkestan (dating from the ninth and tenth centuries),²⁶ showing that “Sogdians in that area were active in translating Syrian Christian texts into their language.”²⁷ A fascinating example of the far-reaching influence of these Sogdian Christians is found on a rock at Tankse (or Drangste) in Ladakh (West Tibet), where inscriptions in Sogdian and Tibetan, accompanied by three Nestorian crosses, speak of a man from Samarkand on his way to see the ruler of Tibet in Lhasa.²⁸

In addition to Herat and Merv, major Christian centres emerged in Bukhara and Samarkand. Amongst other artifacts that have been discovered in Central Asia, many coins with crosses on them have been recovered from around Bukhara, mostly dating from the late seventh or early eighth centuries. In fact, more coins with Christian symbols have been found near Bukhara than anywhere else in Central Asia, prompting one scholar to suggest “Christianity was the religion of the ruling dynasty or even state religion in the principality where this coinage was issued.”²⁹

Bukhara probably had a Nestorian bishop before the Arab conquest and Samarkand definitely did: “Samarkand was, notably from its inception, attributed with a status senior to a bishopric.”³⁰ Several dates for the appointment of the first bishop in Samarkand are given, including the patriarchates of Ahai (410-415), Shila (505-523), Yeshuyab II (628-643) and

²¹ Mingana 70, Gillman & Klimkeit, 220-221.

²² Gillman & Klimkeit, 207. See also related remarks in the same source, 217, 220, 222, 226.

²³ This area was later called *Mawara'an-nahr* (meaning “beyond the river”) by the Arabs.

²⁴ Foltz, 68.

²⁵ Meaning “those who fear God” (Asmussen, 13).

²⁶ See Asmussen, 13-20 and Gillman & Klimkeit, 252-254 for more on Sogdian Christian texts, including a Sogdian creed in the latter source (252-253).

²⁷ Gillman & Klimkeit, 212.

²⁸ The inscription possibly dates from 825. See Gillman & Klimkeit, 223-224 for a picture and more details.

²⁹ Naymark, 12. Naymark speculates that the coins actually came from Wardana, one of four independent political entities in the area of Bukhara and that a Christian ruler of Wardana came to power in Bukhara just prior to the Arab invasion. The coins in question are such that only a king or a city could have minted them.

³⁰ Hunter (1992), 366-367. There were also, at various later times, Jacobites, Melkites (Syriac Christians of the Greek rite) and Armenian Christians in Samarkand. For more on these other Christian groups in Central Asia, see Gillman & Klimkeit, 239, 241-242.

Saliba-Zakha (712-728).³¹ Whichever one is true, there were certainly Christians in Samarkand from at least the fifth century on. During this time prior to the Arab invasion, “Christianity had become, next to Zoroastrianism, the second most powerful religious force in the [Persian] empire.”³² Even the favourite wife of the great Shah Khosrau I (531-579) was a devout Christian, as was the favourite wife of his grandson, Khosrau II (590-628). In addition, the personal physician to the Shah during this time was usually a Nestorian Christian.

Christianity under Islamic Rule

The rise of Islam in the early seventh century brought about major changes in the Church of the East. Whereas Christians had experienced considerable persecution under the Persian Empire, the Arabs looked on them somewhat more favourably.³³ Like all other minorities in the new empire, they were required to pay the *jizya*, a poll tax levied in exchange for the privilege of maintaining their religion. They were also prohibited from building new churches and displaying the cross in public. As a result of these and other restrictions, some Christians converted to Islam.

The Nestorians in particular were favoured above other Christians in the Caliphate, a fact noted by Al-Biruni of Khiva as late as the eleventh century, who spoke of them as “the most civilized of the Christian communities under the caliph.”³⁴ This was in large part because they had a high regard for education and soon acquired a reputation with the Arabs for being excellent accountants, architects, astrologers, bankers, doctors, merchants, philosophers, scientists, scribes and teachers. In fact, prior to the ninth century, nearly all the learned scholars in the Caliphate were Nestorian Christians.³⁵ As a result, they came to hold positions of great power at the Arab court. After the ‘Abbasid Dynasty moved the Caliphate to Baghdad in 762, the Nestorian patriarch also moved from Seleucia-Ctesiphon to the new Islamic capital in 775. The headquarters of the church was now situated in the very centre of power of the expanding Muslim Empire.

During this, the Golden Age of the Church of the East, the Nestorians excelled in scholarship and gained great favour at the court of the Caliph. When the Arabs captured Jundishapur (southwestern Iran) in 636, they allowed the Nestorians to continue to operate their medical school there and, through these Christian scholars, received their knowledge of Greek medicine and philosophy. This later made possible the flowering of Muslim culture under the ‘Abbasids, when the school was moved to Baghdad, the seat of the Caliph, from whence classical knowledge was later passed on to Europe. In addition, like the Persian shahs before them, most of the ‘Abbasid caliphs had personal physicians who were Nestorians.

As a result of Muslim restrictions on Christian evangelization in the Arab Caliphate, the Nestorians were once again forced to look east to find places where they could take the message of Christ. By the time of Timothy I (779-820), the Nestorian patriarch already oversaw a greater geographic area (and probably more people) than any pope before the Age of Exploration. Nineteen metropolitans and 85 bishops represented the church in most of

³¹ As noted below, these dates are also given by some authorities for the appointment of a metropolitan in Samarkand.

³² Moffett, 231.

³³ This may be in part due to favourable statements in the Qur’an regarding Christians (e.g. Sura 5:85; 9:113), as well as the existence of a covenant that had reputedly been made between Muhammad and the Nestorian patriarch Yeshuyab II (628-643) and confirmed by the Caliph ‘Umar I (634-644).

³⁴ Gillman & Klimkeit, 138.

³⁵ For more information on Nestorian scholars and doctors at the Caliph’s court, see Atiya, 270-271 and Moffett, 354-355.

Asia. Timothy, in writing about “all the provinces under the jurisdiction of this patriarchal see,” spoke of “the Indians, the Chinese, the Tibetans, [and] the Turks.”³⁶ In the words of one historian, “few churches can claim for themselves the Nestorian evangelizing fire that swept all over the continent of Asia in the earlier Middle Ages.”³⁷

The church that had been present in Central Asia since before the advent of Islam continued to flourish there. Already, by the time of the Arab invasion, there were at least two archbishops located beyond the Oxus River (although the exact locations are not known, suggestions include Samarkand, Bukhara, Kashgar, or possibly a “portable” archbishopric that travelled with the nomadic Central Asian Turks), as well as more than twenty bishops. Under the patriarch Yeshuyab II (628-643), metropolitans were created for India and China. As elsewhere, Christians from Central Asia also played a role in the success of the Nestorians in China, such as Yazdbozid, a married monk from Balkh who was also a general in the Chinese army with a reputation for serving the poor and healing the sick.

The Nestorians experienced considerable success in Central Asia, especially amongst members of various nomadic Turkic tribes. Some converted to Islam from animism in the wake of the Muslim invasions that began in the eighth century and the subsequent work of Muslim missionaries, both traders and Sufi mystics, but many others became Christians as a result of the efforts of Nestorian missionaries and merchants. According to one scholar, “the Muslims had begun making raids into Transoxiana as early as AD 705, but their power was not consolidated there until well on into the ninth century, and until then Islam as a religion was not a serious rival to Christianity amongst the Turks.”³⁸ However, the Arab invasion did bring significant changes for some Turkic Christians. Thus we read of Turkish Qarluqs living in Taraz (now in Kazakstan) whose church was turned into a mosque as a result of the Muslim invasion of 893. Despite this, there are records of Christians in the area of Tashkent and Otrar into the tenth century.

Since Samarkand was accorded higher status than other bishoprics from its inception, it is not exactly clear when the city received its first metropolitan. Different authorities give different dates, although it was certainly in existence by the patriarchate of Theodosius (852-858) and probably by the time of Saliba-Zakha (712-728).³⁹ Various historical documents, both Christian and Muslim, give evidence of the continuing status of Christianity in Samarkand from the time of the Arab invasion up to the establishment of Mongol power in the area.⁴⁰ Bukhara was also elevated to a metropolitan see city by the eighth century.⁴¹

The Catholicos Timothy I wrote in 781 of consecrating a metropolitan for the Turks, probably indicating an archbishop who travelled with the nomadic Turks: “The king of the Turks, with nearly all (the inhabitants of) his country, has left his ancient idolatry, and has become

³⁶ Quoted in Stewart, 90.

³⁷ Atiya, 287.

³⁸ Browne, 95.

³⁹ Some ecclesiastic records place it as early as the patriarchates of Ahai (410-415), Shila (505-523), or Yeshuyab II (628-643), all of which are also given as dates for the first bishop. These correspond, respectively, to periods when the Sassanids, the Hephthalites, and the Western Turks ruled over Samarkand. Later dates would put it in the time of Arab rule.

⁴⁰ See Colless, 53 for more details. The documents include Ibn Hawqal’s tenth-century description of Wazkard, a Nestorian Christian village near Samarkand, a tenth-century letter from the metropolitan of Samarkand to the patriarch regarding the arrival of the Seljuq Turks in the area, and a thirteenth-century letter from an Armenian traveller describing the situation of Samarkand Christians under the Chaghatayid khans.

⁴¹ By comparison, the first mosque in Bukhara (later to become one of the holiest cities in the Muslim world) was not built until 712, the second one not until 771.

Christian, and he has requested us in his letters to create a Metropolitan for his country; and this we have done.”⁴² Mari ibn Suleiman, a Nestorian chronicler of the twelfth century, gives even more information on the king concerned: “Henceforth, Timothy led into faith the *Khaqan*, the king of the Turks and other nations.”⁴³ “The seniority of his title suggests that a supreme monarch, and his people, had undergone conversion.”⁴⁴ This was the second large-scale conversion of a Turkic king and his subjects, the first being the event of 644 mentioned above, although the king in the first account was not as highly ranked as this *khaqan*.⁴⁵ It is possible that the Turks mentioned in both these accounts were those known to history as the Oghuz, although others suggest that the ruler in the 781 account was the Uighur king Alp Qutlugh Bilga Qaghan. Some scholars speculate that this was the same as the metropolitanate established in Samarkand. Others suggest Otrar or Kashgar.⁴⁶

Prior to the conversion of the Seljuq Turks to Islam, it is possible that there were Christians amongst them; “The first Seljuks may have been Nestorian Christians. Their earliest leader, Seljuk, is said by tradition to have had two sons bearing Christian names, Mika’il (Michael) and Musa (Moses), and a grandson, Dawud (David).”⁴⁷ One of the most celebrated mass movements into the church (reportedly as many as 200,000 at once) occurred amongst the Keraites,⁴⁸ a Mongol-Turkic nomadic group living on the shores of Lake Baikal in western Mongolia, whose conversion in 1007-1008 was recorded in a letter written by Metropolitan Abdyeshu of Merv in the following year. According to the Syriac *Ecclesiastical Chronicle*:

The king of the people called Keraites... was hunting in one of the high mountains of his country, he was overcome by a violent snow-storm, and wandered hopelessly out of the way. When he lost all hope of salvation, a saint appeared to him in vision and said to him, “If you believe in Christ, I will lead you to the right direction, and you will not die here.” When he [the king] promised him that he would become a lamb in the Christian sheepfold, he [the saint] directed him and led him to salvation; and when he reached his tents in safety, he summoned the Christian merchants who were there, and discussed with them the question of faith, and they answered him that this could not be accomplished except through baptism.⁴⁹

Since only one priest and one deacon were sent to baptize the Keraites, it is questionable whether they received any instruction upon being baptized, but they were still known as a Christian tribe three centuries later, even amongst Muslim historians.⁵⁰ Mari ibn Suleiman

⁴² Quoted in Mingana, 12.

⁴³ Quoted in Hunter (1996), 137.

⁴⁴ Hunter (unpublished manuscript, quoted in Gillman & Klimkeit, 218).

⁴⁵ According to a contemporary writer, the information regarding the conversion of the king was carried back to the Nestorian patriarch by “some merchants and secretaries of the kings, who had penetrated as far as there for the sake of commerce and of affairs of State” (quoted in Foltz, 70).

⁴⁶ See Hunter (1996), 135, 137. “The dates for a bishopric/metropolitanate at Kashgar are not clear. But this probably was during the eighth century under the patriarchate of Timothy I” (personal correspondence from Dr. Erica Hunter).

⁴⁷ Moffett, 385. Other sources give the name of Seljuq’s third son as Israel. Since all of these names have their origin in the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament) and Christians also used Old Testament names, this could indicate either a Jewish or a Christian influence before the Seljuqs converted to Islam when they moved to Bukhara in the late tenth century. In 1055, they captured Baghdad, established the Seljuq Sultanate, and became the official protectors of the Caliphate.

⁴⁸ Said by some to be ancestors of the modern-day Kalmuks, although the modern-day Kazaks also claim to be descended from them.

⁴⁹ Quoted in Gillman & Klimkeit, 227. For more on the story, see Mingana, 15-17 and Stewart, 143-144.

⁵⁰ Hunter suggests that the group described in this account may in fact have been a Turkic group from further south, possibly another group of the Oghuz. See Hunter (1989/1991), 153-162.

describes one aspect of the conversion that highlights the importance of the horse in steppe culture of the time:

The king had set up a pavilion to take the place of an altar, in which was a cross and a Gospel, and named it after Mar Sergius,⁵¹ and he tethered a mare there and he takes her milk and lays it on the Gospel and the cross, and recites over it the prayers which he has learned, and makes the sign of the cross over it, and he and his people after him take a draught of it.⁵²

Other tribes which converted in part or in whole between the tenth and twelfth centuries included the Onguts, the Uighurs, the Naimans,⁵³ the Merkites,⁵⁴ the Uriyan-gakit⁵⁵ and the Kangli, all of which later formed an integral part of Chingiz Khan's Turkic-Mongol confederation.⁵⁶

The Uighurs had originally adopted Manichaeism as their state religion around 762, while they lived on the Siberian steppe.⁵⁷ Conversions to Christianity probably started under the Nestorians of the T'ang dynasty. When they were defeated by the Kyrgyz and their empire collapsed in 840, they fled south-west to the Tarim Basin (in Eastern Turkestan), where they adopted both Buddhism and Christianity before eventually converting to Islam in the mid-tenth century. "In the linguistic usage of Syrians of Mesopotamia, 'Christians' and 'Uighurs' were synonymous."⁵⁸ The Tarim Basin principalities of Kashgar, Aksu and Khotan had large numbers of Christians in them in the eighth century and by 1180, Kashgar had enough Christians to be designated as a metropolitan see city, with ecclesiastical authority over Yarkand, Urumchi, Tokmak and the Yeti Su area (Russian *Semirechye*).⁵⁹ There is also evidence of at least two Christian kings who ruled in this area, one in the Kashgar oasis in the early eighth century and a second in the Khotan oasis in the twelfth century, the latter during the period that the Qara-Khitai ruled over the area.⁶⁰ During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (the height of Chaghatayid power in Central Asia), both Almaliq (modern-day Kulja in the Ili Valley) and Navekath (near Lake Issyq-Köl) also received metropolitan status.

The legacy of these Nestorian missionaries is still preserved in the scripts that they introduced to the area, all based on the Syriac alphabet, including the Sogdian, Uighur, Manchurian and

⁵¹ Mari ibn Suleiman's account of this event in *The Book of the Tower* makes it clear that this was the Christian saint who appeared to the king when he was lost. This saint is almost certainly to be identified with St. Sergius, a popular horse-riding soldier-saint honored throughout both the Roman and Byzantine Empires, as well as amongst the pre-Islamic Arabs, who was martyred in Rusafa, Iran in the early fourth century. See also Hunter's comment (1989/1991), 155.

⁵² Quoted in Hunter (1989/1991), 154.

⁵³ Claimed as ancestors by the modern-day Uzbeks, Kazaks & Kyrgyz.

⁵⁴ Said by some to be ancestors of the modern-day Buriyats.

⁵⁵ A Nestorian document dating from 1298 indicates that, at that time, this tribe had a Christian queen, called Arangul, the sister of George (probably the Prince George mentioned below).

⁵⁶ It should be remembered that, even at this time, the distinction between Turks and Mongols was not always clear, since there were so many cultural, linguistic and even physiological similarities between those who belonged to the many Turkic-Mongol tribes. For more on the history of Christianity amongst the Turkic-Mongol tribes, see Stewart, 143-156.

⁵⁷ For more on Manichaeism amongst the Uighurs, see Foltz, 80-83.

⁵⁸ Gillman & Klimkeit, 234.

⁵⁹ Hunter suggests that Kashgar was designated a metropolitanate from its inception (i.e. without being made a bishopric first) [Hunter (1992), 368]. As noted above, some scholars think that the first appointment of a metropolitan happened during the eighth century, possibly the metropolitan of the Turks referred to by Timothy I in his letter of 781.

⁶⁰ Gillman & Klimkeit, 222, 229.

Mongolian scripts.⁶¹ Although there are fewer extant Christian Uighur manuscripts than Sogdian ones, a number of the former have been discovered at Bulayīq, including one which speaks of Jesus as *msikha tangri* (the Messiah God), *ilig khan msikha* (the great king Messiah), and *tangri oghli* (God's Son).⁶² A number of texts in Syriac, Sogdian and Turkish from Tunhuang, including an early Nestorian Easter liturgy, also speak of a Christian presence there during the ninth and tenth centuries. Further east, in Kara Khoto, another Turkish Christian textual fragment speaks of the passion of Christ and symbols of this in Old Testament stories.

There are also examples of Christian art from a number of locations in Central Asia, notably a Nestorian church in Qocho, capital of the Uighur kingdom in the Turfan area. In particular, a wall painting describing a Palm Sunday celebration depicts a mixture of Syriac, Mongol and Turkic features on the faces of the participants.⁶³ Another Christian image on a silk wall-hanging from Tunhuang displays definite Buddhist influence in the artistic style: "It is not clear whether we are looking at a Christianized bodhisattva or a Buddhicized messiah."⁶⁴ Even Muslim literature was at times inspired by the Christians, as evidenced by a poem on the death of the Virgin Mary that was composed by Suleiman of Bakirghan around 1200.⁶⁵

Other evidence of a strong Christian presence in Central Asia both before and after the Arab invasion includes Syriac inscriptions on an ostrakon (potsherd) from Penjikent, Tajikistan (7th-8th century) and a clay vessel from Jambulin, Kazakstan (5th-6th century), an eighth-century church excavated in the village of Aq-Beshim, Kyrgyzstan and Syriac Christian rock inscriptions discovered near Urgut, Uzbekistan.⁶⁶ These latter inscriptions may be connected to a Christian monastery in nearby Wazkard that the Muslim scholar Ibn Hawqal visited in the tenth-century, where he met Mesopotamian Christians who had come there for both spiritual and health purposes. A number of examples of Sogdian Christian silver vessel and woven cloth work from the eighth to tenth centuries depicting such biblical themes as Abraham's "sacrifice" of his son, Joshua's capture of Jericho and the death and resurrection of Christ have also been discovered.⁶⁷

Archaeologists have found Christian tombstones in several Central Asian locations. More than 630 of them, dating from 858 to 1342, have been unearthed in two ancient cemeteries located at Tokmak near Lake Issyq-Köl (close to modern-day Bishkek) which bear witness to the faith of a truly cosmopolitan Christian population made up of Syrians, Persians, Indians, Mongols, Siberians, Manchurians, Chinese and Turks, with the latter in the majority. In addition to laypeople, there are also many scholars, preachers, priests and other clerics buried there. Most of the inscriptions are in Syriac, though some are in the Turkic script that was used at that time.⁶⁸ Some sample inscriptions: "This is the grave of Pasak -- The aim of life is Jesus, our redeemer"; "In the year 1584 (AD 1273). This is the grave of the church visitor

⁶¹ The Uighur script, no longer in use, was the basis for the development of the Manchurian and Mongolian scripts, which are still used today. For more on the development of these scripts, see Stewart, 333-337.

⁶² See Asmussen, 20-23 and Gillman & Klimkeit, 254-256 for more on Uighur and other Turkic Christian texts.

⁶³ See Bussagli, 111-114 and Parry, 161-162 for reproductions of the wall paintings and discussion of their meaning.

⁶⁴ Parry, 151. Parry also mentions the report by an Armenian official of an image of Christ and the Magi in a church in Samarkand in 1248 (147).

⁶⁵ Mingana, 48.

⁶⁶ For more information, see Gillman & Klimkeit, 213-214.

⁶⁷ See Gillman & Klimkeit, 214-216 for pictures and more details of these and other artifacts.

⁶⁸ The cemeteries were discovered in 1885 by Russian explorers. For details of the tombstone inscriptions, see Atiya, 261, Mingana, 39-42 and Stewart, 197-213.

Pag-Mangku, the humble believer”; “In the year 1650 (AD 1339) the hare year. This is the grave of Kutluk (Qutluğ). He died of plague with his wife Mangu-Kelka (Mängü Kalqa).”⁶⁹

Nestorian tombstones have also been discovered in Almaliq (mostly in Syrian, but some in Turkish), Navekath (in both Syrian and Turkish) and in the area of Inner Mongolia where the Ongut Turks used to live (written in Turkish in the Syriac script). The Navekath inscriptions in Turkish are in the Qarluq-Chagatai dialect and include those of several khans and queens, although not all were necessarily Christians.⁷⁰ The Ongut area has also yielded a large number of amulets, probably used by Turks and Mongols, that incorporate the symbol of the cross, reminiscent of the tattoos used by early Turks. “The magical power ascribed to the cross would have enabled the incorporation of this sign into the religious symbolism employed to ward off worldly dangers and enhance the positive powers in a life constantly endangered by incalculable outward events.”⁷¹

As one author says, “by the dawn of the Mongol period Christianity was certainly the most visible of the major religions amongst the steppe people. What Christianity meant to them, however, is another question... the essential test of a Christian was baptism; apart from that initiatory ritual, there is little information available regarding how Christianity amongst the nomads was practiced.”⁷²

Christianity under Mongol Rule

The Crusades brought the Christians of Europe into direct contact with the Muslims for two centuries, beginning in 1097. When the Muslim commander Saladin captured Jerusalem in 1187, the crusaders began to realize that they would need outside assistance to retake the Holy Land. Rumours began to reach Europe of a powerful Christian priest-king, called Prester John, who was said to rule a vast domain in the East.⁷³ The rulers of Europe began to put their hope in this mysterious king, wondering if he would be the one to come to their aid. In reality, Prester John never existed. There was indeed a new empire arising in the East, but it was not Christian and its arrival in Europe brought death and destruction, not military assistance for Europe against the Muslims in the Middle East.

The new empire was that of Chingiz Khan (1167-1227).⁷⁴ Born Temüchin, the son of a small chieftain and originally under the tutelage of Toghril Wang Khan, a Christian ruler of the Kerait tribe, he rose to become the khan of all the Mongols in 1206.⁷⁵ In quick succession, he conquered Tibet, Manchuria, Turkestan, eastern Persia and Afghanistan.⁷⁶ After his death,

⁶⁹ Stewart, 204-213. Dates were reckoned according to the Seleucid calendar used in Persia (which began with the inauguration of Seleucid rule in Syria and Palestine in 312/311 BC).

⁷⁰ The most notable inscription belongs to the wife of the Chaghatayid Khan Jenkshi (Gillman & Klimkeit, 232).

⁷¹ Gillman & Klimkeit, 230.

⁷² Foltz, 70-71.

⁷³ The original story of Prester John seems to have been based on a distorted report of the defeat of the Seljuq Sultan Sanjar in 1141 by the Qara-Khitai, a largely Buddhist empire based in northern China which had a few Christian rulers. For more information on the legend of Prester John, see Beckingham and Silverberg.

⁷⁴ Commonly rendered Genghiz Khan in the West, the name means “Universal Ruler.” The dates given for Chingiz Khan are for his life. The dates given for the other Mongol khans are for their reigns.

⁷⁵ For a good background to Chingiz Khan’s rise to power, see Jackson, 9-11. Toghril Wang Khan may also have been the historical figure on which the legend of Prester John was based.

⁷⁶ His conquests destroyed cities like Samarkand, Bukhara, Khwarezm, Merv, Balkh, Herat and Nishapur, all important Nestorian centres. For an overview of the destruction unleashed by the Mongols in Nestorian areas, see Stewart, 256-264. An interesting footnote is the fact that the Nestorian metropolitan of Samarkand, in a letter to the Patriarch, informed the Caliph that the Mongol armies had advanced as far as Kashgar in 1260, indicating generally good relations between Christians and Muslims even at this point in time.

Mongol troops invaded Russia and Eastern Europe between 1236 and 1241, wreaking havoc wherever they went.

As they had done under the Persians and then Arabs, Nestorians also served the Mongols as governmental ministers, craftsmen, scribes, doctors and even governors.⁷⁷ There were Nestorian Christians, many of them from Turkic tribes, amongst the Mongol royal family, including various princesses from the Kerait tribe who had been given in marriage to members of Chingiz Khan's family. The most famous of these, Sorkaktani, became the mother of three of Chingiz Khan's most prominent grandsons: Möngke (Mangu), the fourth Great Khan (1251-1259), Kublai Khan (1260-1294), the founder of the Mongol Yuan dynasty in China, and Hulagu (1256-1265), the founder of the Il-khanid dynasty in Persia. Both Muslim and Christian historians speak highly of her: "If I were to see among the race of women another woman like this, I should say that the race of women was far superior to that of men"; "Among the Tartars this lady is... more powerful than anyone else except [Batu, the khan of the Golden Horde]"; "She was extremely intelligent and able and towered above all the women in the world."⁷⁸

The Mongols were by and large tolerant of all religions. In addition to Christians, there were also Buddhists, Muslims and practitioners of traditional Mongol shamanism at court. Several of the khans were sympathetic to Christianity, including Güyük, the third Great Khan (1246-1248) and Sartaq, the son of Batu, the first khan of the Golden Horde. Several Mongol princes were baptized as infants and two of Kublai Khan's brothers were Christians, but Kublai himself never converted,⁷⁹ although he was very tolerant of Christianity and, on the first visit of the Polos in 1265, even invited the Pope to send one hundred missionaries to teach him and his people about Christianity, a request that was ignored by the pontiff. The degree to which these expressions of interest were genuine is questionable. It seems that the paramount concern was ensuring divine favour and maintaining religious harmony in the realm through regularly consulting the representatives of different religions at the court.

After Kublai Khan founded the Yuan dynasty in 1260, his court became home to a number of artisans, doctors and key advisors who were Nestorian Christians. As before, Christians from Central Asia were active in the service of the new ruler. A Nestorian named Mar Sergius was governor of the city of Chinkiang (between Nanking and Shanghai) from 1278 to 1281. His grandfather had been from Samarkand and had apparently healed one of Chingiz Khan's sons through a combination of prayer and medicine. In all, there may have been as many as 30,000 Christians in China at this time, but most of them were non-Chinese, such as the Ongut Turks, who (as Marco Polo reports) lived in the province of "Tenduc" and were ruled by "a king of the lineage of Prester John, who is a Christian and a priest and also bears the title 'Prester John'. His personal name is George" (his Turkic name was Körgüz Küregen).⁸⁰ This George was indeed a historical figure, although he was not, of course, related to the mythical

⁷⁷ Khan Güyük's chief minister was a Christian named Qadaq, while the chancellor in charge of finances and domestic affairs at Khan Möngke's court was one Bulghai, a Nestorian who was probably from the Kerait tribe.

⁷⁸ Quotes from Moffett, 410, 418. Sorkaktani died in 1252, but she was given the title of "empress" in 1310 in a ceremony that included a Nestorian mass.

⁷⁹ Kublai's ultimate choice not to convert to Christianity may have been influenced by his four year civil war with his brother Arik-buka (1260-1264), who was supported by the Nestorians, and the later rebellion of Nayan (1287), a baptized Nestorian who challenged Kublai's rule and went into battle with the cross displayed on his standard. See Browne, 152-154 and Latham, 119-120 for more on why Kublai did not become a Christian.

⁸⁰ Latham, 105-106. His father had married one of Kublai's daughters and he himself married one of the Khan's granddaughters.

Prester John. He was, however, “a distinguished general, a highly literate aristocrat... and a devout Christian.”⁸¹

During the heyday of the Mongol Empire, there were Nestorians in all four of the khanates into which Chingiz Khan’s empire had been divided after his death: the Empire of the Great Khan in Mongolia and China proper, the Chaghatayid Khanate in Central Asia, the Golden Horde on the northern steppe and the Il-khanate in Iran. These latter three relate more specifically to Central Asia and so shall be treated more in-depth.⁸²

In the wake of the Mongol conquests, a number of travellers, mostly from Europe, visited Central Asia, China, and India, bringing back news of Christians in those lands. Various medieval travellers attest to the presence of Nestorian Christians in Central Asia. The Franciscan monk William of Rubruck, dispatched on a diplomatic mission to the Mongol court of Khan Möngke in the mid-thirteenth century, arrived in the capital Khanbaliq (modern-day Beijing) in 1253. Along the way, he encountered many Nestorians, including those in Central Asia.

Travelling through Khwarezm, he observed that the country “used to be called Organum [i.e. Urgench] and used to have its own language and script, but now it has all been seized by the Turcomans. Also the Nestorians of those parts used to perform their services and write books in that script and language.”⁸³ Of the Uighurs, he said, “All their cities contain Nestorians and Saracens intermingled... I encountered a man who had on his hand a little cross in black ink [i.e. a tattoo], which led me to believe he was a Christian, since he answered like a Christian all the questions I put to him.”⁸⁴ At one point, Rubruck speaks of entering a church in a settlement that was entirely Nestorian near the town of Qayalik and breaking into a chant “as we had not seen a church for a long time.”⁸⁵ Rubruck also comments on how the Uighur script, based on the Syriac alphabet of the Nestorians, was adopted by the Mongols.

Marco Polo, who arrived in Khanbaliq in 1275, met Nestorians in many different places on his journeys, including Central Asia. Polo describes the building of a great church dedicated to John the Baptist in Samarkand that was erected to celebrate the conversion of the Chaghatayid khan to Christianity. Some manuscripts describe this church as round, with a central column, prompting one scholar to suggest, “it was modelled on the tent of the Altaic nomads.” The same scholar speculates that the aforementioned Mar Sergius from Samarkand who served under Kublai Khan was the source of Polo’s story of this church, which also occurs in a Chinese history book that describes Samarkand as “a country where the Christian religion is practised.”⁸⁶ Polo also mentions Nestorian Christians in Kashgar, Yarkand, Kara Khoja (in “Uighuristan” - this may be modern-day Urumchi) and Chingintalas (possibly modern-day Barkul),⁸⁷ all in Eastern Turkestan, as well as the city of Sa-chau in the province of Tangut (modern-day Gansu province in China), “whose inhabitants are all idolaters, except that there are some Turks who are Nestorian Christians and also some Saracens.”⁸⁸ There

⁸¹ Moffett, 451. As noted below, when the Franciscans arrived in the late thirteenth century, George converted to Catholicism, a major coup for the Latin missionaries.

⁸² Il-khan is Mongolian for “subordinate khan,” since these rulers still swore allegiance to the Great Khan in Mongolia (and later China).

⁸³ Quoted in Dawson, 137.

⁸⁴ Jackson, 150.

⁸⁵ Jackson, 165.

⁸⁶ Quoted in Colless, 54.

⁸⁷ One manuscript specifically adds that the Nestorians in this city were Turks. There were also Jacobite bishops in Yarkand and Barkul by this time.

⁸⁸ Latham, 85.

were also Christians in the Tarim Basin city of Kumul (Chinese *Hami*), whose bishop attended the consecration of the Patriarch Denha I in 1266.

Passing through Central Asia in 1332 on his way from Anatolia to India, the great Muslim traveller Ibn Battuta arrived in the Crimea at the time when it was part of the domain of Khan Uzbek of the Golden Horde (known at that time as the Qipchaq Khanate). Although the horde had converted to Islam under Khan Uzbek in 1313, Ibn Battuta comments that “one of the merchants in our company hired some waggons from the Qipchaqs who inhabit this desert, and who are Christians.”⁸⁹

It was in the Mongol Il-khanate, located in the heartland of the old Caliphate, that the Nestorians achieved perhaps the most favour, albeit short-lived. When Hulagu, Chingiz Khan’s grandson and the first of the Il-khans, captured Baghdad in 1258 (thus bringing the Muslim ‘Abbasid dynasty to an end), he spared the Christians, since he claimed to be a Christian himself. Although this is questionable, his mother, Sorkaktani, and his chief wife, Doquz Khatun, were indeed devout Nestorians. The latter was responsible for the presence of a church in the royal camp of the Il-khans. The Christian doctors and scribes who had functioned in the Arab court in Baghdad continued on in service to the Il-khans. However, not all the Christians living in Persia had fared so well. The entire populations of both Merv and Nishapur (Christian and Muslim) were virtually exterminated by the Mongols en route to conquering Baghdad. Once the former Caliphate was firmly under the control of the Il-khans, Christianity became the favoured religion for a short time.

In the wake of their brutal conquests, the Mongols proved to be extremely capable rulers who were very tolerant of other religions. Indeed, the animism and shamanism that they had practiced for centuries was gradually overlaid and absorbed by the dominant religions of the areas they conquered. In China proper, under Kublai Khan, Buddhism was adopted, while the other three Mongol khanates eventually converted to Islam: the Il-khans under Ghazan (1295-1304), the Golden Horde under Uzbek (1313-1342), and the Chaghatayid Khanate under Tarmashirin (1326-1334). Prior to their conversion to Islam, however, although the dominant religion in Persia was still Islam, the Il-khans considered Christianity a definite option for some time, especially in light of the presence of Christians in high places.⁹⁰ The general of the Mongol armies, Kitbuqa, who captured Aleppo and Damascus in 1260, was a Nestorian from the Naiman or Kerait tribe and Hulagu’s son, Abaqa (1265-1282), had two Christian wives. Both he and his son, Arghun (1284-1291) had Christian legends on their coins that read as follows: “In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, One God.”

As the Mongols became more established in Persia, efforts were made to make diplomatic contact with the West. Indeed, Arghun sent a mission to Europe involving two Nestorian monks from China, Rabban Sauma⁹¹ (1230?-1293) and his disciple, Markos (1244-1317). Although *The History of Yaballaha III*, which chronicles their journey, does not specify their

⁸⁹ Gibb, 142. These Turks, who are claimed as ancestors by the modern-day Uzbeks, were also known as Cumans and some of them had been converted to Catholicism by Dominican friars in the early thirteenth century. Later on in the thirteenth century, Franciscan missionaries compiled the Codex Cumanicus, a collection of religious texts, linguistic data and folkloric materials. Before finally converting to Islam, other Qipchaks followed Armenian, Georgian or Greek Orthodoxy and possibly even Nestorian or Russian Orthodox Christianity, although many also remained essentially shamanistic.

⁹⁰ The Muslim historian Rashid al-Din attests to the favour that was shown to the Christians: “To please his princess [Dokuz Khatun] Hulegu heaped favors upon [the Christians] and gave them every token of his regard so that new churches were continually being built and at the gate of dokuz-khatun’s *ordu* [tent] there was always a chapel where bells were rung” (quoted in Moffett, 426).

⁹¹ *Rabban* is Syriac for “monk.” His father may have been an advisor to Kublai Khan.

ethnicity, they were probably either Ongut Turks or Uighurs.⁹² The two had embarked on a pilgrimage from Khanbaliq to Jerusalem and the Holy Land in order to visit the many holy shrines that housed relics of the saints. Upon their arrival in 1279 in Azerbaijan, where the patriarch was at the time, they learned that the road to Jerusalem was not safe, so they stayed in the Mongol realm and the Catholicos, Denha I, made Markos metropolitan of China.

Two years later, the Catholicos died and Markos was elected as the Nestorian patriarch, adopting the title Yaballaha III (1281-1317).⁹³ Although Yaballaha could not speak Syriac, it was a politically wise move to entrust the patriarchate to a Mongol-Turk at a time when the Mongols ruled over most of the lands where Nestorians lived.⁹⁴ In 1287, Yaballaha and the Il-khan Arghun jointly dispatched Rabban Sauma, now a bishop, to the pope and the rulers of Europe, in an effort to seek support for the Mongol campaign to recapture Jerusalem from the Muslims.

Rabban Sauma visited Byzantium, Rome, Genoa, Paris and Bordeaux, where he spoke with European rulers and church officials and viewed churches, shrines and relics. When questioned by the cardinals in Rome as to whether the Nestorian patriarch recognized the authority of the pope, he replied, “Never has any man from the Pope come to us Eastern Christians. The Holy Apostles taught our fathers the true faith and so we hold it intact to this day.”⁹⁵ The Il-khan was so pleased with the mission that he had his son baptized and promised to be baptized himself when the Mongols captured Jerusalem. Two more embassies were dispatched by the Mongols, one led by a high-ranking officer in the army who had converted to Christianity. However, Europe never followed up on its expressed intentions of cooperating with the Mongols and the opportunity was soon lost. Arghun died in 1291.

At the time, the Nestorian Church still looked strong, with 25 metropolitans and between 200 and 250 bishops in far-flung locations around Asia, including India, Central Asia and China. Various Nestorian metropolitanates that had been in existence for a long time, such as Merv, Samarkand, Kashgar and Turkestan (located near the Jaxartes River, the modern-day Syr Darya), thrived again. Other new ones had been created after the Mongol conquest, including one for the Turkish Kalach in the upper Oxus area, one in Almaliq and another in Navekath. Nestorians could be found in the outermost parts of Asia, from Siberia in the north to India in the south, from Persia in the west to China in the east. The patriarch in Baghdad still governed an area that was much larger than that overseen by the Pope. However, the end was near and it was to come swiftly and ultimately with great violence.

Although several factors contributed to the eventual conversion of the Il-khans to Islam, a major influence was the Mongol view that victory on the battlefield was the supreme evidence of divine favour. After the Muslims defeated the Mongols (led by the Christian general Kitbuqa) at ‘Ain Jalut in 1260 and in Syria in 1280, followed by the capture of Akka (Acre), the last Crusader fortress, in 1291, the Il-khans decided to throw in their lot with the

⁹² For an annotated English translation of the Syriac text of their journey and the subsequent mission of Rabban Sauma, see Montgomery. Another translation can be found in Budge.

⁹³ Amongst other dignitaries, the metropolitan of Samarkand was present at his consecration.

⁹⁴ According to the Syriac *History of Yaballaha III*, Abaqa greeted the news of Yaballaha’s election with these words: “Worthy of admiration is this purity of motive and conscience, and God is with those who seek Him and do His will. This man and his companion have come from the East to go to Jerusalem. This [the election] has happened to them by the will of God. We too serve the will of God and the prayers of the Christians. He shall stand as their head and sit upon the throne” (Montgomery, 45). Yaballaha III’s term of office as patriarch went on to span 36 years, during which time eight Mongol khans ruled over the Il-khanate.

⁹⁵ Quoted in Zernov, 125-126. For the full text of Rabban Sauma’s dialogue with the Roman cardinals, see Montgomery, 57-58.

followers of Muhammad, rather than the Christians. The final conversion to Islam occurred during the reign of Ghazan (1295-1304), an event that foreshadowed the impending demise of the Church of the East in Persia. Over the next several decades, persecution increased, churches were closed, destroyed or converted into mosques, bishoprics became vacant, priests were killed, the Patriarch Yaballaha III was imprisoned and tortured, and the Christian population continued to dwindle, as a result of both massacres and conversion to Islam. In 1318, the last recorded synod of the Church of the East in Persia met to consecrate Timothy II as patriarch.

However, Nestorian Christianity still survived for a while longer in Central Asia. As late as 1340, there was still a Nestorian training college for “Tatars” (the common term for Turkic-Mongols) operating in Merv. At the same time, Catholic missionaries had begun to arrive in Persia, Central Asia and China. The Franciscan monk John of Montecorvino reached Khanbaliq in 1294 and shortly after converted the Ongut Prince George (Körgüz Küregen) and his subjects to Catholicism.⁹⁶ Montecorvino was appointed the Catholic archbishop of Khanbaliq in 1307 and is reported to have baptized 10,000 Tatars (Mongols).⁹⁷

In 1326, a Dominican, Thomas of Mancasol, apparently received permission from the Chaghatayid khan Ilchigidai (1326) to build a church in Samarkand. This church was to be dedicated to John the Baptist, as had been the case with the church alluded to by Marco Polo, who had visited the area 50 years earlier and whose *Travels* had been written 25 years before Thomas reached Central Asia. When Thomas returned to the pope in 1329, he was consecrated as the Catholic bishop of Samarkand, but in the end, the church was never built. Meanwhile, the Franciscans had established a bishopric in the Chaghatayid capital of Almaliq in 1320. This was elevated to an episcopate, the seat of an archbishop, in 1334, but four years later, at the death of the last Chaghatayid khan Jenkshi (1334-1338), a Muslim who permitted the Catholics to baptize and teach his son, the Christians in the city were all massacred, including the Franciscans.⁹⁸

Neither the Nestorians nor the Catholics ever truly gained a foothold in Chinese soil, so that when the Mongol dynasty fell to the Ming dynasty in 1368 and foreign religions were once again persecuted, Christianity again died out in China. There are records of Ongut Christians converting to Taoism and Confucianism. However, apparently there were still some Nestorians near “Cathay” as late as 1440, according to Nicolo Conti, who travelled throughout India. As one scholar concludes, “It would seem as if some tribe of the Kerait or the Uighurs had maintained their Christianity till near the middle of the fifteenth century.”⁹⁹ Meanwhile, in Persia, the last Il-khan died in 1335 and his realm was plunged into anarchy. Similar situations occurred as the direct descendants of Chingiz Khan ran out in the Chaghatayid Khanate and the Golden Horde in 1338 and 1357, respectively. The situation was ripe for the next conqueror to sweep in from the East: Timur (1336-1405), known in the West as Tamerlane. For the Nestorians, the writing was on the wall.

⁹⁶ After George’s death, the Onguts converted back to Nestorianism.

⁹⁷ For more on Catholic missions in Central Asia, see Gillman & Klimkeit, 243-251. In the same source, 256-257, there is information on the Codex Cumanicus, a collection of Christian texts translated from Latin and German into a Middle Turkic dialect by Catholic monks for the Turkish Cumans of Crimea in the fourteenth century.

⁹⁸ However, John of Marignolli, the last Catholic bishop of Khanbaliq who actually resided in the city, passed through Almaliq on his way to China around 1340 and was able to build a church, baptize and preach.

⁹⁹ Browne, 173.

Scholars disagree regarding the role that the Mongol-Turk Timur played in the demise of the Nestorian Church in Central Asia. Timur dreamed of an empire that would surpass that of Chingiz Khan, ruled from his capital of Samarkand and, in his campaigns of conquest, hundreds of thousands of Christians, Muslims, Hindus and pagans were indiscriminately slaughtered as his troops burned whole cities and left pyramids of skulls as a testimony to their military prowess.¹⁰⁰ As a result, some scholars point to him as the primary reason that the Nestorian Church died out everywhere except in parts of northern Persia and India (where remnants of the church exist to this day).¹⁰¹ Certainly, “a major reason for the demise of Christianity was the spread of an intolerant Islam, which initially had exercised tolerance over against Christians as a people having a holy book.”¹⁰²

Others point to factors such as the plague that swept through at least the Yeti Su area around 1338-1339, probably wiping out much of the Christian community there, and the economic advantages of conversion to Islam for those involved in trade, since the Silk Road trade by this time was almost entirely in the hands of Muslims. In defense of Timur are the comments of John II, the Catholic archbishop of Sultaniyah, Iran who wrote that he “does not harm Christians—especially Latins—and receives them well; merchants in particular are allowed to go about their business and worship as if they were in Christendom.”¹⁰³ At any rate, whether or not Timur’s intention was to destroy the church, “the Timurids created a political situation that made it increasingly difficult for Christian communities to survive.”¹⁰⁴

Even after Timur had consolidated his rule in Transoxiana and established Samarkand as his capital, there were still Nestorians in the city, as evidenced by a Nestorian lectionary in Paris that was apparently written in Samarkand in 1374.¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, Ruy Gonzalez de Clavijo, the Spanish ambassador to Timur’s court, mentions Nestorian, Jacobite, Armenian and Greek Christians in Samarkand in 1404. It appears, however, that subsequent persecution during the rule of Timur’s grandson Ulugh Beg (1409-1449) resulted in this remnant being completely wiped out.¹⁰⁶

It was a mortal wound from which the Church of the East in Central Asia would never recover. Unfortunately, the tumultuous atmosphere of the time provided little opportunity for writing historical accounts, so virtually nothing is known of what happened to the church during its final days. At the same time, many earlier documents of the church were destroyed in the carnage. Whereas Central Asia had been a veritable religious melting-pot prior to the Mongols, it had become by the time of Timur almost exclusively the domain of Islam. We will probably never know the exact reasons for the extinction of Nestorian Christianity in Central Asia, but “perhaps we should marvel at the ‘success’ of Christianity in Asia, which thrived for over a thousand years despite the factors just indicated, rather than bemoan its ultimate ‘failure.’”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁰ At Isfahan, for example, they left 70,000 skulls, at Baghdad, 90,000. An Arab historian of the time, ibn Arabshah, questions how “Muslim” Timur truly was.

¹⁰¹ See Gillman & Klimkeit, 142, 234-237, Moffett, 483-487 and Stewart, 274-281.

¹⁰² Gillman & Klimkeit, 234.

¹⁰³ Quoted in Foltz, 136.

¹⁰⁴ Gillman & Klimkeit, 208. For more discussion of the factors in the church’s decline, see 151-152 in the same source.

¹⁰⁵ Mingana, 43.

¹⁰⁶ The Nestorian influence is possibly preserved in numerous allusions to Christ (*Masih*) in the writings of Alisher Navoi (1441-1501), the first writer to use Chagatai (the ancestor of modern Uzbek) as a literary language.

¹⁰⁷ Foltz, 138-139.

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