



CHRISTIANITY III. IN CENTRAL ASIA AND CHINESE TURKESTAN

CHRISTIANITY

iii. In Central Asia And Chinese Turkestan

The main early centers of Syriac-speaking Christians were Edessa (modern Urfa in southeastern Turkey) and Arbela (in northern Iraq). By the end of the 3rd century the Syrian church was strongly established also in the western Persian empire, where it was sometimes harshly persecuted during the following centuries under Sasanian rule. In the 5th century the church in Persia made itself formally independent of the patriarchate of Antioch (see i, above). In 451 the Council of Chalcedon was called to settle a controversy concerning the relationship between the divine and human natures in the person of Jesus Christ. The formula by which the Council attempted to resolve this issue amounted to a rejection both of the Monophysite view, that the two natures were fused into one, and of the view attributed to Nestorius, who had been deposed as bishop of Constantinople for supposedly asserting the separability of Christ's human and divine natures. Thereafter the history of the Syrian church was the history of three separate churches, one adhering to the orthodoxy of the Chalcedonian formula, the others upholding the two diametrically opposed points of view that the council had rejected. Nestorian



christology was officially adopted by the church in Persia at a series of synods during the 480s, which finalized its separation from western Christendom.

The following survey will be principally focused on the Nestorian church of Persia, the “Church of the East,” which was responsible for the most significant and enduring missionary work in Transoxania and beyond. As a preliminary, it is convenient to summarize what is known of the eastern outposts of the other two branches of the Syrian church, the Melkites and the monophysite Jacobites, both of which had their main centers farther west and therefore played a less important role in the evangelization of Central Asia. Of the non-Syrian churches there is even less to be said. The 8th-9th century *Notitia Episcopatum*, which lists bishoprics of the Orthodox church under the authority of the patriarch of Constantinople, includes a bishopric of K̄vārazm (Gk. *Khoulēs*; de Boor, p. 531); much later, Georgian contingents in the Mongol army were accompanied by Orthodox clergy (Dauvillier, 1953, p. 82; on Armenian Christians in Central Asia see Dauvillier apud Pelliot, 1973, pp. 143-45). No attempt will be made here to cover the later Roman Catholic and Protestant missions (of which an early instance was Pope John XXII’s appointment of a Roman Catholic bishop of Samarkand in 1329; see Pelliot, 1973, p. 118).

Jacobites. During the second quarter of the 7th century Jacobite bishoprics were created in Sīstān and Herat as a result of the settlement in those regions of a number of Jacobites deported from Edessa (Bar Hebraeus, III, cols. 125-28). The detailed lists of bishops given by Michael the Syrian (Chabot, 1899-1901) indicate that a third Jacobite bishopric of Farāh was in existence by the early 9th century and that the bishoprics of Herat and Farāh survived until the 11th, that of Sīstān until at least the end of the 12th century (Fiey, pp. 96-102). Although the episcopal lists show that there were no Jacobite bishoprics farther east than Herat, according to some manuscripts of Marco Polo, Jacobites were to be found both at Yarkand (ed. Yule and Cordier, p. 187) and at Ghingintalas in northeastern Turkestan (tr. Moule and Pelliot, p. 156) in the 13th century.

Melkites. The branch of the Syrian church that acknowledged the authority of the patriarch of Antioch and followed the Greek-speaking church in accepting the Chalcedonian formula had a presence in Transoxania at least from 762. In that year, when the caliph al-Manṣūr founded Baghdad, the Melkites of Ctesiphon were transferred to Šāš (Tashkent), together with their catholicos, who was known thereafter as “catholicos of Rōmagyris” (Ar. *Rūmajerd*) and



later, by the end of the 10th century, as “catholicos of Khorasan” (Zayat, pp. 20-23; Dauvillier, 1953, pp. 63-64). The new title has been taken to indicate another change of residence, perhaps to Marv, but it is more likely that Khorasan was understood in the more general sense of “the east,” in contradistinction to the area of jurisdiction of the catholicate in Baghdad, which had been revived in the 960s. Marv was, however, the seat of a Melkite metropolitan, according to Bīrūnī (*Āṭār al-bāqīa*, p. 289; tr. Sachau, p. 283). Bīrūnī also preserved the calendar of the festivals of the Melkites of K̄vārazm, who were apparently well established in his time (*Āṭār al-bāqīa*, pp. 288-302; tr. Sachau, pp. 282-98). The Armenian Dominican Heṭ‘um, writing in 1307, mentioned the presence in K̄vārazm of Sogdians obedient to the patriarch of Antioch but using their own language, rather than Greek, in the liturgy (Pelliot, 1973, p. 117). If this statement is to be credited, which has been doubted (Spuler, pp. 154-55), the reference might be to a group of Melkites who had migrated from Šāš (Tashkent) to K̄vārazm. The title “catholicos of Rōmagyris” is last attested in 1365, by which time it had become merely an honorary title borne by the catholicos of Georgia (Dauvillier, 1953, pp. 69-70).

The discovery at the Nestorian site of [Bulayīq](#) in Xin-jiang (Sinkiang) of a bilingual Psalm fragment in Greek and Sogdian (see [bible v. sogdian translations of the bible](#)) and of a form letter in Syriac apparently addressed to a Byzantine dignitary (Maróth) suggests contact with Melkite or Orthodox Christians in the west, rather than a significant Melkite presence in eastern Turkestan. A cross of the Mongol period with a Greek inscription bought at Khotan was of Chinese manufacture (Pelliot, 1914, p. 644; Dauvillier, 1953, p. 71).

Nestorians. The head of the Nestorian church was the catholicos, whose residence was at first Ctesiphon, later Baghdad. The metropolitans were chosen directly by the catholicos, generally from the clergy of his own circle. The metropolitan of one of the “exterior” provinces, once having journeyed to his distant diocese, might never return, being excused attendance at synods and empowered to consecrate his own suffragan bishops (see Spuler, p. 137). Nestorian priests were normally married, but celibacy was obligatory for the bishops, who were therefore usually chosen from among the monks.

As no narrative history of the advance of the Nestorian church into Central Asia and Chinese Turkestan survives, the evidence must be pieced together from many separate sources, both archeological and literary. Olaf Hansen’s theory that the Christian Sogdian manuscript C3 (now in the Akademie der



Wissenschaften in Berlin) contains part of a Central Asian church history has had to be abandoned since Werner Sundermann showed that the text in question belongs to the life of John of Deylam and deals with events in western Persia. The best modern surveys are those by J. Dauvillier (1948), which contains much valuable detail, including references to the primary sources, and Bertold Spuler (pp. 136-42 and 153-58). Alphonse Mingana provided a convenient though uncritical collection and translation of most of the relevant passages from Syriac and Christian Arabic texts.

The principal starting point for Christian missions to Central Asia and beyond was probably Marv, as is suggested by its location; by the more or less fanciful stories in Syriac and Arabic sources of the conversion of Turkish peoples by metropolitans of Marv (Mingana, pp. 305-06 and 308-11); and by the veneration of *Baršabbā*, the semilegendary evangelizer and first bishop of Marv, by the Christians of *Ḳvārazm* (where his commemoration was included in the Melkite liturgical calendar), Semirech'e (where the name *Baršabbā* is attested on a tombstone; Chwolson, 1890, p. 133), and *Bulayīq* (where the only surviving Syriac and Sogdian manuscripts of his life were found). From the evidence of the legend of *Baršabbā*, Christianity was introduced to Marv in the latter part of the 4th century; synodical subscription lists and other reliable historical sources indicate that the bishopric of Marv, as well as bishoprics of *Abaršahr*, *Ṭūs*, *Herat*, and *Sīstān*, had all been established by 424 at the latest (Chabot, 1902, pp. 665-85; Fiey, pp. 75-94). A "hostelry" at *Gyaur Kala* (old Marv) has been identified as a Christian building from crosses drawn on the walls (see *Dresvyanskaya*). Nestorian bishoprics were established in *Herat* and *Sīstān* by the early 5th century (see above), and in the middle of the following century, the patriarch *Ābā I* created a bishop for the *Hephthalites* (*Bedjan*, pp. 266-69; Mingana, pp. 304-05), probably the same as the bishopric of *Bādḡīs*, which is mentioned in a synod list for 585 (Fiey, pp. 93-94). Christianity had already reached northwestern *Ḳvārazm* by the end of the 7th century, as is attested by the ossuaries decorated with Nestorian crosses found at *Mizdakhkan* (Grenet, pp. 146-47, 202 n. 25, pl. XXXV). In the mid-13th century the Franciscan envoy *William of Rubruck* wrote (in the past tense) of the Nestorians of *Ḳvārazm*, reporting that they had previously employed the native language of the region for liturgical and literary purposes (Pelliot, 1973, pp. 113-17).

The evidence for Christianity in Sogdia has been conveniently summarized by B. E. Colless. Unfortunately the date when the Nestorian metropolitan see of



Samarkand was founded is uncertain, being attributed in the Arabic and Syriac sources to various periods from the early 5th to the early 8th century; it is clear, however, that the Nestorians were already well established in Transoxania by the time that the Melkites were transported to Tashkent in 762. Nestorian Christianity seems to have been flourishing in the area of Samarkand in both the 10th and the 13th centuries, according to descriptions by Eṣṭakrī (p. 321), Ebn Ḥawqal (p. 498; tr. Kramers, II, p. 478), and Marco Polo (ed. Yule and Cordier, pp. 183, 186 n.); it was finally exterminated through persecution in the 15th century. Among the Christian remains found in Sogdia are a series of Syriac graffiti in a gorge near Urgut, 35 km from Samarkand, and an ostrakon excavated at Panjīkand (Pyandzhikent) containing the first two Psalms in Syriac as a scribal exercise (see Paykova). A cross on the reverse of coins attributed to a ruler of Osrūšana (6th or early 7th century) has also been given a Christian interpretation (see Smirnova, p. 334). A number of ossuaries bearing Christian symbols have been excavated at Samarkand; these can be dated not later than the 7th century (Grenet, p. 160).

No Christian Sogdian texts have been discovered in Sogdiana, but the 9th century Sogdian inscription of Ladakh (west of Tibet) has been supposed to be the work of a Christian from Samarkand who had been sent as an emissary to the ruler of Tibet (see Henning, “Mitteliranisch,” p. 54). The occurrence of Syriac words in a Sogdian inscription from Kirghizia (Livshits, p. 80) shows that the Sogdians who colonized Semirech’e (the area between Lake Balkhash and the Issyk-Kul) included Christians. An 8th-century Nestorian church and burial site have been excavated at Ak-Beshim near Tokmak (Grenet, pp. 185-86). The long survival of Christianity in the region is attested by William of Rubruck’s account of Christians in the area south of Lake Balkhash in the mid-13th century (Pelliot, 1973, pp. 136-40) and by the numerous Nestorian tombstones with Syriac and Turkish inscriptions from cemeteries near Tokmak and Pishpek (modern Frunze), more than 500 of which were published by D. Chwolson (1890, 1897). Many of the latter bear dates concentrated between the beginning of the 13th and the middle of the 14th century, a period when the area seems to have been under the authority of a “metropolitan of Kashgar and Nawēkath” (Pelliot, 1973, p. 7).

The metropolitan see of Kashgar is known to have existed already in the late 12th century (Mingana, pp. 324-25), and Marco Polo referred to Nestorians both in Kashgar and in Yarkand (ed. Yule and Cordier, pp. 182, 187). A supposed reference to Christianity in a Khotanese text has been shown by R. E.



Emmerick to be illusory. A Christian cemetery has, however, been found in Khotan, and, according to Gardīzī (ed. Ḥabībī, p. 270; cf. Dauvillier, 1948, p. 287), in the mid-5th/11th century there were two Christian churches there, one inside the city of Khotan and one outside the city. According to a statement in the *Tadkera* of Maḥmūd-Karam Kābolī (a source of dubious historical value, though this detail has apparently been accepted as authentic by Spuler, p. 157), Khotan was governed by a Christian ruler in the middle of the 12th century (Blochet, pp. 25-27).

A significant expansion and consolidation of the Nestorian church took place under Patriarch Timothy I (780-823), who sent many missionaries to the east and consecrated metropolitan bishops for the Turks and for Tibet (Mingana, pp. 306-08). The very limited information available concerning Christianity in Tibet has been fully discussed by G. Uray. The “metropolitan of the Turks,” who may have been a missionary bishop for the nomadic Turkish tribes and perhaps had no fixed seat, was mentioned as late as the 14th century.

A metropolitan see of Almalyk (Almālīg) was mentioned in the late 13th and 14th centuries and a bishopric of Ha-mi (Qomul) in 1264-65. Of much greater significance as a source of information on Christianity in northern Xin-jiang are the archeological and literary remains discovered in the Turfan oasis at the beginning of the present century, when a Christian church with well-preserved frescos was excavated at Qočo (von Le Coq, p. 7), and a whole library of Christian literature in various languages, chiefly Sogdian and Syriac, was discovered at Shui-pang near Bulayīq; a few additional Christian texts in Syriac, Sogdian, and New Persian were found at Toyoq, Qočo, and Astana (see also [bible iv. middle persian translations of the bible](#); iv, below; cf. Hage, 1987, on the significance of the use of Syriac beside the various local vernaculars). Most of these manuscripts are thought to belong to the 9th and 10th centuries. Christian texts in Turkish, the latest of which may belong to the Mongol period, have been found at Bulayīq, at the nearby site of Qurutqa, and at Qočo (Zieme). From this substantial body of material a clear impression of the extent and nature of Christianity in the Turfan oasis can be obtained; as W. Hage has pointed out (1987), the Christian population there appears to have resisted faithfully any impulse toward doctrinal compromise with competing religions like Buddhism and Manicheism.

The presence of a Christian community farther east, at Tun-huang (Dunhuang), in the 8th-10th centuries is attested by a number of documents discovered by Marc Aurel Stein and Paul Pelliot in the Caves of the Thousand



Buddhas (q.v.). The only Sogdian manuscript of recognizably Christian content from Tun-huang is a small fragment of a text of popular character, an oracle book of the type known in the west as *sortes apostolorum*; there are, however, several secular Sogdian documents either written by Christians or that mention Christians, including priests and monks. Syriac names include those of the priest Sargīs (Sergius), the monk David, and Gīwargīs (George), apparently a cleric of high rank; another priest bears the Sogdian name Wanučor and the Syriac title *reš 'edtā*, literally “ecclesiarch,” that is, “bursar, steward” (Sims-Williams and Hamilton, 1990). The substantial evidence for Chinese Christianity at Tun-huang collected by A. C. Moule (pp. 52-64) includes a scroll containing a Chinese translation of the hymn *Gloria in excelsis Deo* together with a long list of other Christian texts that had been translated into Chinese in the late 8th century. The presence of Tibetan-speaking Christians at Tun-huang is less certain; neither the passage in a Tibetan divination text mentioning “the god Jesus Messiah” (in a syncretic, partly Buddhist context) nor the drawings of apparently Christian crosses in two other Tibetan manuscripts (Uray, pp. 412-20) can be taken as evidence for it. Finally, Marco Polo mentioned Turkish Nestorians in the region of Saciou, that is, Shazhou/run-huang (Dauvillier apud Pelliot, 1973, p. 134, where further references by Marco Polo to the presence of Christians in other cities of eastern Turkestan and China are also gathered together). (For the introduction of Christianity into China proper (in 635, according to the Syriac and Chinese inscription of Xi-an (Hsi-an), see Pelliot, 1984; cf. idem, 1973; Moule;

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bar Hebraeus, ed. J. B. Abbeloos and T. J. Lamy as *Gregorii Barhebr'i Chronicon Ecclesiasticum*, 3 vols., Louvain, 1872-77.

P. Bedjan, *Histoire de Mar Jabalaha ...*, Paris, 1908.

E. Blochet, “La conquête des états nestoriens de l'Asie Centrale par les shiïtes,” *Revue de l'Orient chrétien* 25, 1925-26, pp. 3-31.

C. de Boor, “Nachträge zu den Notitiae Episcopatum [II],” *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 12, 1891, pp. 519-34.



J. B. Chabot, "Les évêques jacobites du VIII^e au XIII^e siècle d'après la Chronique de Michelle Syrien," *Revue de l'Orient chrétien* 4, 1899, pp. 444-51, 495-511; 5, 1900, pp. 605-36; 6, 1901, pp. 189-220.

Idem, *Synodicon Orientale ou Recueil de synodes nestoriens*, Notices et extraits des manuscrits de la Bibliothèque Nationale et autres bibliothèques 37, Paris, 1902.

D. Chwolson, *Syrisch-nestorianische Grabinschriften aus Semirjetschie*, Mémoires de l'Académie Impériale des Sciences de St.-Pétersbourg, 7th ser., 37/8, St. Petersburg, 1890.

Idem, *Syrisch-nestorianische Grabinschriften aus Semirjetschie*, St. Petersburg, 1897.

B. E. Colless, "The Nestorian Province of Samarkand," *Abr-Nahrain* 24, 1986, pp. 51-57.

J. Dauvillier, "Les provinces chaldéennes "de l'extérieur" au Moyen Âge," *Mélanges offerts à F. Cavallera*, Toulouse, 1948, pp. 260-316.

Idem, "Byzantins d'Asie centrale et d'Extrême-Orient au Moyen Âge," *Mélanges Martin Jugie, Revue des études byzantines* 11, 1953, pp. 62-87.

Idem, "L'expansion de l'église syrienne en Asie centrale et en Extrême-Orient," *L'Orient syrien* 1, 1956, pp. 76-87.

G. Ya. Dresvyanskaya, "'Oval'nyĭ" dom khristianskoĭ obshchiny v starom Merve," *Trudy Yuzhno-Turkmenistanskoĭ arkheologicheskoi kompleksnoi ěkspeditsii* 15, Ashkhabad, 1974, pp. 155-181.

R. E. Emmerick, "Khotanese *kīrāstānā* "Christian"?" in *Proceedings of the colloquium on pre-Islamic Central Asia*, Paris, November 1988, forthcoming.

J. M. Fiey, "Chrétientés syriaques du Ḥorāsān et du Ségestān," *Le Muséon* 86, 1973, pp. 75-104.

F. Grenet, *Les pratiques funéraires dans l'Asie centrale sédentaire de la conquête grecque à l'islamisation*, Paris, 1984.

W. Hage, "Einheimische Volkssprachen und syrische Kirchensprache in der nestorianischen Asienmission," in G. Wiessner, ed., *Erkenntnisse und*



Meinungen II, Wiesbaden, 1978, pp. 131-60.

Idem, "Das Christentum in der Turfan-Oase," in W. Heissig and H.-J. Klimkeit, eds., *Synkretismus in den Religionen Zentralasiens*, Wiesbaden, 1987, pp. 46-57; rev. tr. in W. Hage, *Syriac Christianity in the East*, Kottayam, Ind., 1988, pp. 42-54.

H. J. Klimkeit, "Das Kreuzessymbol in der Zentralasiatischen Religionsbegegnung," *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 31, 1979, pp. 99-115.

A. von Le Coq, *Chotscho*, Berlin, 1913.

V. A. Livshits, "Sogdiĭtsy v Semirech'e. Lingvisticheskie i ěpigraficheskie svidetel'stva," in *Pis'mennye pamyatniki i problemy istorii kul'tury narodov vostoka, XV godichnaya nauchnaya sessiya LO IV AN SSSR (doklady i soobshcheniya)*, Dekabr' 1979 g. I/2, Moscow, 1981, pp. 76-85.

M. Maróth, "Ein Brief aus Turfan," *Altorientalische Forschungen* 12, 1985, pp. 283-87.

A. Mingana, "The Early Spread of Christianity in Central Asia and the Far East. A New Document," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 9, 1925, pp. 297-371.

A. C. Moule, *Christians in China before the Year 1550*, London, 1930.

A. V. Paykova, "The Syrian Ostrakon from Panjikant," *Le Muséon* 92, 1979, pp. 159-169.

P. Pelliot, "Chrétiens d'Asie centrale et d'Extrême-Orient," *T'oung Pao* 15, 1914, pp. 623-44.

Idem, *Recherches sur les chrétiens d'Asie centrale et d'Extrême-Orient* I, Paris, 1973; II/1, Paris, 1984.

N. Pigoulevsky, "Fragments syriaques et syro-turcs de Hara-Hoto et de Tourfan," *Revue de l'Orient chrétien* 30, 1935-36, pp. 3-46.

Marco Polo, tr. and ed. H. Yule, rev. H. Cordier, 2 vols., 3rd ed., London, 1929; tr. A. C. Moule and P. Pelliot, I, London, 1938.

N. Sims-Williams and J. Hamilton, *Documents turco-sogdiens du IX^e-X^e siècle de*



Touen-houang, Corp. Inscr. Iran. II/III/3, London, 1990.

O. I. Smirnova, *Svodnyĭ katalog sogdiĭskikh monet. Bronza*, Moscow, 1981.

B. Spuler, "Die nestorianische Kirche," in *HO I/VIII*, 2, pp. 120-69.

W. Sundermann, "Ein Bruchstück einer soghdischen Kirchengeschichte aus Zentralasien?" *Acta Antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 24/1, 1976, pp. 95-101.

G. Uray, "Tibet's Connections with Nestorianism and Manicheism in the 8th-10th centuries," in *Contributions on Tibetan Language, History and Culture*, Wiener Studien zur Tibetologie und Buddhismuskunde 10, Vienna, 1983, pp. 399-429.

H. Zayat, "Vie du patriarche melkite d'Antioche Christophore . . .," *Proche-orient chrétien* 2, 1952, pp. 11-38, 333-66.

P. Zieme, "Zu den nestorianisch-türkischen Turfantexten," in G. Hazai and P. Zieme, eds., *Sprache, Geschichte und Kultur der altaischen Völker*, Berlin, 1974, pp. 661-68.