

# *Repercussions from the Far East: A Comparison of the Catholic and Nestorian Presence in China*

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The city of Yangzhou is located along the lower course of the Yangzi River, about seventy kilometers from Nanjing. Under the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), Yangzhou was a wealthy trading town along the imperial canal, which connected the capital city of Beijing in the north with the fertile southern Chinese Empire. Along the banks of the canal, in the east of the city, lies the grave of Muhammad Puhadin. The Muslim scholar, who came to China as a preacher of his faith, is considered to be a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad. Puhadin died in Yangzhou, where he is also buried, in 1275. His grave is part of a small cemetery containing twenty-five graves, sculpted according to Arabian archetypes, in which both Chinese Muslims and Arabian merchants were laid to rest. As a missionary, Puhadin was likely to have been involved in the construction of the Crane Mosque, which has undergone several modifications in recent years. However, it still bears witness to the Muslim presence in thirteenth-century Yangzhou.<sup>1</sup>

Islam was not the only foreign religion to leave its mark on the city. Some years ago, stone monuments were discovered in the urban area of Yangzhou,<sup>2</sup> which shed significant light on the spread of Christianity during Yuan rule in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. In 1981, farmers unearthed a Nestorian gravestone measuring thirty by twenty-five centimeters (fig. 1),<sup>3</sup> which bears

1 On Muslims in thirteenth-century China, and especially in its southeastern coastal areas, see Hajji Yusuf Chang, “Chinese Muslim Mobility in Sung-Liao-Chin Period,” in *Islam in China: Key Papers*, ed. Michael Dillon (Folkestone: Global Oriental, 2009), 1:159–160. On Muslims in Yangzhou and Muslim migration to Yuan China, see Fan Ke, “Maritime Muslims and Hui Identity: A South Fujian Case,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 21, no. 2 (2001): 309–332, and reprinted in Dillon, *Islam in China*, 242 (Yangzhou) and *passim*. On the mosque, see Nancy Shatzman Steinhardt, “China’s Earliest Mosques,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 67, no. 3 (2008): 330–361, here 343.

2 On problems and proceedings of archeological research on medieval religions in twentieth-century China, see Samuel N. C. Lieu, “Medieval Manichaean and Nestorian Remains in the Zayton (Quanzhou) of Marco Polo,” in *New Light on Manichaeism: Papers from the Sixth International Congress on Manichaeism Organized by the International Association of Manichaean Studies*, ed. Jason D. BeDuhn (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 183–193.

3 On the discovery and excavation of the gravestone, see Shimin Geng, “Reexamination of the Nestorian Inscription from Yangzhou,” in *Jingjiao: The Church of the East in China and Central Asia*, ed. Roman Malek and Peter Hofrichter (Nettetal: Steyler, 2006), 253.

an illustration of a cross flanked by angels and two inscriptions—a Chinese text and a Turkish text in Syriac script.<sup>4</sup> The motif of the “Cross-on-Lotus” symbol is widespread in Nestorian art throughout Asia.<sup>5</sup> Although the texts differ in detail, they contain the same basic information. The slightly lengthier Turkish version—here partly supplemented by the Chinese text—reads in translation:

In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. In 1628 according to the counting of the Emperor Alexander, in the year of the snake, in the third month, on the ninth day [20th of May 1317], the wife of the Xindu from Dadu [Beijing], the woman Elizabeth, at the age of 33 accomplished the order of God. Her vitality and her body have settled down in this tomb. Her soul may find home and destination in paradise accompanied by the everlastingly pure women Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel. May she be commemorated for ever. Amen, yes and Amen!<sup>6</sup>



*Fig. 1: Nestorian gravestone of Elisabeth, wife of the Xindu from Dadu, 1317, Yangzhou (found in 1981). 29.8 x 25.8 x 4 cm. Yangzhou Museum. [Geng, Klimkeit, Laut, Grabinschrift, plate 1.]*

4 Shimin Geng, Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, and Jens Peter Laut, “Eine neue nestorianische Grabinschrift aus China,” *Ural-altaische Jahrbücher*, N. F. 14 (1996): 164–175; Geng, “Reexamination.”

5 Arthur C. Moule, “The Use of the Cross among the Nestorians in China,” *T’oung Pao* 28 (1931): 78–86; Ian Gillman and Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia before 1500* (Richmond: Curzon, 1999), 231.

6 Geng, “Reexamination,” 254. A German translation is provided by Geng et al., “Grabinschrift,” 170.

Monuments like these yield important evidence to support the argument that Nestorian Christianity was established in Central and Eastern Asia.<sup>7</sup> However, Nestorianism was not the only Christian denomination active in Yangzhou in the medieval period. One generation before the discovery of the Nestorian monument, in 1951, members of the Chinese People's Liberation Army uncovered a tombstone that had been used for the city's fortification.<sup>8</sup> An image of the Virgin Mary and Child is carved in the upper panel of the gravestone (fig. 2).<sup>9</sup> Beneath this, there are sequences from the passion of the holy martyr Catherine of Alexandria. On the left, Catherine is kneeling in prayer while the wheels of torture are miraculously destroyed. According to the *Legenda Aurea*, the popular thirteenth-century collection of saints' lives, the angel who destroyed the wheels of torture employed such tremendous force that 4,000 heathens were killed—two of them can be seen on the tombstone's relief. On the right, Catherine's decapitation by sword is shown. Slightly above this, in a third scene, a pair of angels, clearly reminiscent of the above mentioned Nestorian gravestone, lower the martyr's body into a tomb, presumably a reference to the martyr's tomb on Mt. Sinai. Beneath this, a man on his knees is holding a naked infant in his arms. The infant most probably symbolizes the immortal soul of the deceased, now returned to its Creator.<sup>10</sup> The lower half of the gravestone, enclosed by a floral tendril ornament, bears a Latin inscription in which uncial letters are written in Gothic style. It reads in translation:

In the name of the Lord Amen. Here lies  
Catherine, daughter of the late Sir  
Domenico de Vilioni, who died  
in the year of the Lord 1343 in the month of June.<sup>11</sup>

7 P. Yoshiro Saeki, *The Nestorian Documents and Relics in China* (Tokyo: Maruzen, 1951); Max Deeg, "Towards a New Translation of the Chinese Nestorian Documents from the Tang Dynasty," in Malek and Hofrichter, *Jingjiao*, 115–131; Tjalling H. F. Halbertsma, *Early Christian Remains of Inner Mongolia* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), *passim*. On the characteristics and iconography of the Nestorian grave materials, see *ibid.*, 159–217.

8 On the discovery of the tombstone, see Francis A. Rouleau, "The Yangchow Latin Tombstone as a Landmark of Medieval Christianity in China," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 17, nos. 3–4 (1954): 348–351.

9 Rouleau, "Yangchow Latin Tombstone," 351–352. On the role of Mary in Nestorianism, see Richard M. Price, "Marian Piety and the Nestorian Controversy," in *The Church and Mary*, ed. Robert N. Swanson (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2006).

10 On the iconography, see Rouleau, "Yangchow Latin Tombstone," 355–356.

11 The original Latin inscription is printed in Rouleau, "Yangchow Latin Tombstone," 353: *In nomine Dñi amen hic jacet / Katerina filia qondam Domini / Dñici de Vilionis que obiit in / anno Domini Milleximo CCC / XXXX II de mense Junii.*



**Fig. 2:** Gravestone of Catherine Vilioni, daughter of Domenico de Vilioni, 1342, Yangzhou (found in 1951). Negative reproduction of the original rubbing made in 1952. [Rouleau, “Yangchow Latin Tombstone,” Plate II.]

Shortly after the discovery of Catherine’s gravestone in 1951, another headstone was uncovered, with a brief inscription reporting the death of Catherine’s brother Antonio in 1344.<sup>12</sup> Catherine and Antonio may well have belonged to the Genoese Vilioni (Yilioni/Ilioni) family. In 1348, a certain Domenico Ilioni was mentioned in connection with a merchant called Jacopo de Oliverio, who is reported to have lived for several years in the “kingdom of China” and quintupled his wealth during his stay.<sup>13</sup>

12 Franz Xaver Peintinger, “In Nomine Domini: Ein christlicher Grabstein in Yangzhou (1344),” in *The Chinese Face of Jesus Christ*, ed. Roman Malek (Nettetal: Steyler, 2002), 1:285–289.

13 Rouleau, “Yangchow Latin Tombstone,” 360–3; Roberto S. Lopez, *Su e giù per la storia di Genova* (Genoa: Università di Genova, Istituto di paleografia e storia medievale, 1975), 184.

The grave monuments are clear evidence of the religious diversity which existed in the decades around 1300, both in Yangzhou and in China overall.<sup>14</sup> Alongside Confucianism and Taoism, and the by then well-established Chinese variant of Buddhism, adherents of many other doctrines and denominations lived in China and enjoyed the freedom to practice their respective faiths without interference from the authorities. Amongst them were Manicheans, Zoroastrians, Jews, Jacobean, Armenian, Georgian, and Greek Orthodox Christians, as well as people who followed shamanic ideas and rituals.<sup>15</sup>

When Roman-Catholic missionaries, merchants, and envoys set foot on Chinese soil for the first time, the Nestorians had already been living and working in the Middle Kingdom for many centuries. Nevertheless, no Christian denomination outlived the medieval epoch in China. After Zhu Yuanzhang successfully ascended to the throne in 1368 and replaced the Mongol rule with the native Chinese Ming Dynasty, the new imperial administration expelled not only the Mongols from the country, but also many others of non-Chinese descent, in order to return to a “pure” and more harmonious Chinese society.<sup>16</sup> While ethnic minorities survived the purge, the Christian faith did not. This was not only an effect of the new policies under the Ming Dynasty: The situation of Christian communities all over Central and East Asia had already been weakened by the spread of the plague a few decades prior to the shift of power in China.<sup>17</sup>

Despite its demise in the late Middle Ages, the Christian presence in the Far East had lasting consequences for the monks’ and traders’ societies of origin. While Catholics resided only briefly in the medieval Chinese empire—about one hundred years—and attracted few converts, the impact on Western Europe

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14 On the diversity of Christian communities in Central Asia and China during the time of the Mongols, see Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians*, 249.

15 On Christianity in medieval Central Asia and China prior to 1500, see Arthur C. Moule, *Christians in China Before the Year 1550* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1930); Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians*, 205–306; Nicolas Standaert, ed., *Handbook of Christianity in China*, vol. I, 635–1800 (Leiden: Brill, 2001). On Christians in Yuan China, see Samuel H. Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, vol. 1, *Beginnings to 1500* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998). On the Mongolian stance towards religion, see Christopher A. Atwood, “Validation by Holiness or Sovereignty: Religious Toleration as Political Theology in the Mongol World Empire of the Thirteenth Century,” *International History Review* 26, no. 2 (2004).

16 On the early Ming legislative program of enhancing social control, see Edward L. Farmer, *Zhu Yuanzhang and Early Ming Legislation: The Reordering of Chinese Society Following the Era of Mongol Rule* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 105–113.

17 See Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians*, 234–235. On possible vestiges of the Christian past still extant in the fifteenth century and beyond, see Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians*, 305. On doubts about the authenticity of the “Nestorian Stele” excavated in 1625, see David E. Mungello, *Curious Land: Jesuit Accommodation and the Origins of Sinology* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1985), 164–172.

appears to have been particularly significant. Studying the impact of missionary texts on the missionaries' home countries is an approach already tested by current scholarship.<sup>18</sup> For the Nestorian church, whose missionaries' sojourn in the Far East was notably longer and more effective regarding the number of converted individuals and entire peoples, the impact at home was of lesser importance. To be more precise, Nestorian missionaries had considerable success in the Far East but a rather limited impact at home in Mesopotamia.<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, the Nestorian legacy comprised numerous gravestones in remote areas of the Chinese periphery. In contrast, the Catholics were unable to win many Turkish, Mongolian, and Chinese souls while in China. Their legacy in terms of popular travelogues, however, exerted a wide-ranging influence on European society in the late medieval and early modern period, and showed its influence when the Jesuits, drawing on a 'missionary discourse' and missionary techniques based on the experience of medieval missionaries, replaced the medieval Franciscans as missionaries in the Far East.<sup>20</sup>

Both missionary influence on the Far East and the repercussions of these activities in the home countries in the West differed considerably in the two cases in question. In order to unfold the similarities and differences of Nestorian monks' and Franciscan friars' missionary work, the reverberations in their respective home countries will be compared, first by investigating the two Christian groups and their presence in the Far East individually, and then by comparing the two and by looking at the repercussions in their respective regions of origin.

### **The Nestorians and the "Church of the East"**

Christianity had been developing beyond the Euphrates since the second century. Christian identity beyond the Eastern border of the Roman Empire slowly gained an awareness of independence and autonomy exemplified by

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18 For example, see Ulrike Strasser, "A Case of Empire Envy? German Jesuits Meet an Asian Mystic in Spanish America," *Journal of Global History* 2, no. 1 (2007).

19 While the dichotomy of success and failure no longer dominates the scholarship on Christian conversion, I use the terms here to accentuate the divergent legacies of Nestorians and Franciscans in the East and in the West. Regarding the "complexities of conveying and consuming religious teachings across cultural borders," see Charles H. Parker, "Converting Souls across Cultural Borders: Dutch Calvinism and Early Modern Missionary Enterprises," *Journal of Global History*, 8, 1, 2013, 51.

20 Peter R. D'Agostino, "Orthodoxy or Decorum? Missionary Discourse, Religious Representations, and Historical Knowledge," *Church History* 72, no. 4 (2003): 709; Liam Brockey, *Journey to the East: The Jesuit Mission to China, 1579-1724* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 7. This is true even though Matteo Ricci's knowledge of Christendom in China prior to the Jesuits' arrival was very limited. See the scant remarks in his description of China: Matteo Ricci, *Descrizione della Cina* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2011), 126-127.

a specific Christological position, one that differed from that of the Greek Orthodox Church.<sup>21</sup> In the seventh century, the “Apostolic Church of the East,” or “East Syrian Church,” had a firm ecclesiastical structure, was institutionally and dogmatically independent of the West, and had its own Catholicos-Patriarch, who originally resided in the Persian capital of Seleukia-Ktesiphon, and, as of the eighth century, in Baghdad.<sup>22</sup> Within the Roman Empire, the Eastern Church was rigorously attacked<sup>23</sup> and disdainfully termed the “Nestorian Church.”<sup>24</sup> This name was dismissive and incorrect, since the doctrinal position of the East Syrian Church was defined by the Christology of the two natures and two hypostases and by the formal adoption of the exegesis of Theodore of Mopsuestia (350–428 CE). It was not developed by Nestorius (386–451 CE), but was the result of a long process that occurred several centuries after his death.<sup>25</sup> Hence, “Nestorianism” is a foreign appellation,<sup>26</sup> shaped and used by Christians within the Roman Empire and, indeed, so widespread that it is also used here for practical reasons.

Even though the Nestorian Church was never a state church and always remained a religious minority living under non-Christian rule, Syrian and Persian traders, as well as priests and monks, soon carried the Nestorian

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21 On the lengthy process of introducing Christological innovations to the East Syrian Church, see Gerrit J. Reinink, “Tradition and the Formation of the Nestorian Identity in Sixth- to Seventh-Century Iraq,” *Church History and Religious Culture* 89, no. 1–3 (2009): 217–218. On the parallel formation of Nestorian liturgy, see Bayard H. Jones, “The History of Nestorian Liturgies,” *Anglican Theological Review* 46 (1964): 160–165.

22 Wilhelm Baum and Dietmar W. Winkler, *Die Apostolische Kirche des Ostens: Geschichte der sogenannten Nestorianer* (Klagenfurt: Kitab, 2000), 13–42. On Nestorian Christology as a response to Justinian’s religious policy and the decisions of the Fifth Ecumenical Council of 553 CE, see Reinink, “Tradition,” 248–249.

23 Susan Wessel, *Cyril of Alexandria and the Nestorian Controversy: The Making of a Saint and of a Heretic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

24 On the formation and spread of the religious tenets via treatises and letters accompanied by collections of further texts and documents, intended both to represent the orthodoxy of one’s own teaching and expose the errors of one’s opponents, see Rowan A. Greer, “The Use of Scripture in the Nestorian Controversy,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 20, no. 4 (1967): 413–422; Thomas Graumann, “The Distribution of Texts and Communication-Networks in the Nestorian Controversy,” in *Comunicazione e ricezione del documento cristiano in epoca tardoantica: XXXII Incontro di Studiosi dell’Antichità Cristiana, Roma, 8–10 maggio 2003* (Rome: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, 2004), 237–238.

25 Dietmar W. Winkler, *Ostsyrisches Christentum: Untersuchungen zu Christologie, Ekklesiologie und zu den ökumenischen Beziehungen der Assyrischen Kirche des Ostens* (Münster: Lit, 2003); Reinink, “Tradition,” 225.

26 Sebastian P. Brock, “The ‘Nestorian’ Church: A Lamentable Misnomer,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 78, no. 3 (1996) 23–35.

message to the East.<sup>27</sup> By the end of the third century, the message had already reached the Southwest-Indian Malabar Coast. There, traveling monks quickly became the pillar of South Indian Christianity and the starting point of further missionary activity,<sup>28</sup> mostly along the Silk Road towards Central and Eastern Asia. The faith won numerous followers, particularly among the Turkish and Sogdian populations along the Central Asian caravan routes.<sup>29</sup> As a result, communities expanded in commercial urban centers, such as Samarkand, and church structures were established in these places as well.<sup>30</sup> In 635, the Nestorian monk Alopen, whose name is known only in its Chinese form, arrived in the Chinese capital city of Xian.<sup>31</sup> He was warmly received by the emperor and spent his remaining years carrying out missionary work within the then-blooming Tang empire.<sup>32</sup> As the first missionary of the East Syrian Church to be known by name in China, he and his successful work over the following decades are described in a famous inscription discovered in the seventeenth century. The so-called “Nestorian Stele” was carved in the year 781.<sup>33</sup> It states:

27 Wolfgang Hage, “Der Weg nach Asien: Die ostsyrische Missionskirche,” in *Kirchengeschichte als Missionsgeschichte*, ed. Knut Schäferdiek, vol. 2, bk. 1, *Die Kirche des früheren Mittelalters* (München: Kaiser, 1978); Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians*, 208–209.; Yves Raguin, “China’s First Evangelization by the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Century Eastern Syrian Monks,” in Malek, *The Chinese Face of Jesus Christ*, 1:159–161.

28 On early Christians in India and the presence of the East Syrian Church there, see Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians*, 155–165; A. Mathias Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India*, vol. 1, *From the Beginning up to the Middle of the Sixteenth Century* (Bangalore: Church History Association of India, 1984), 78.

29 Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians*, 206–7. and 212–215.

30 Jean Dauvillier, “Les provinces Chaldéennes ‘de l’extérieur’ au moyen age,” in *Mélanges offerts au R. P. Ferdinand Cavallera, doyen de la faculté de théologie de Toulouse, à l’occasion de la quarantième année de son professorat à l’Institut Catholique*, ed. Jean Dauvillier (Toulouse: Bibliothèque de l’Institut Catholique, 1948), 283–287; Erica C. D. Hunter, “The Church of the East in Central Asia,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 78, no. 3 (1996); Jean Maurice Fiey, *Pour un Oriens Christianus Novus: Répertoire des diocèses syriaques orientaux et occidentaux* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1993), 128. This work contains a complete and commented list of the East Syrian Church’s dioceses in the West and East.

31 Dauvillier, “Les provinces Chaldéennes,” 296–297; C. Y. Hsü, “Nestorianism and the Nestorian Monument in China,” *Asian Culture Quarterly* 14, no. 1 (1986): 46; Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians*, 221–222 and 269–270.

32 On the major religions in eighth-century Tang China, see Peter N. Gregory and Patricia Buckley Ebrey, “The Religious and Historical Landscape,” in *Religion and Society in T’ang and Sung China*, ed. Patricia Buckley Ebrey and Peter N. Gregory (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1993), 18–35.

33 Moule, *Christians in China*, 27–52; Saeki, *Nestorian Documents*, 11–112; Hsü, “Nestorianism,” 46–65 (about the discovery and its interpretation throughout the centuries); Xu Longfei, *Die nestorianische Stele in Xi’an: Begegnung von Christentum und chinesischer Kultur* (Bonn: Borengässer, 2004); Raguin, “China’s First Evangelization,” 164–167; Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians*, 271–275.



In the time of the accomplished Emperor Taitsung [...] among the enlightened and holy men who arrived was the most-virtuous Olopun from the country of Syria. [...] In the year AD 635 he arrived at Chang-an. [...] The sacred books were translated in the imperial library, the sovereign investigated the subject in his private apartments. When becoming deeply impressed with the rectitude and truth of the religion, he gave special orders for its dissemination.<sup>34</sup>

Under the emperor's protection, the Nestorian community grew in China and spread to both Tibet and the oasis towns of the Tarim Basin in the east of the empire. At the beginning of the eighth century, the commercial city of Kashgar at the western edge of the basin was governed by a Christian sovereign.<sup>35</sup> There was also a large Nestorian community in Dunhuang, another commercial city along the Silk Road, whose theological writings and mural paintings have been partially preserved.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, in the middle of the ninth century, all religions stemming from the West lost imperial favor. In an edict released by Emperor Wuzong in the year 845, monks and nuns were forced to return to lay life. The Nestorian Church, which had developed in China mainly as a community of monks, was strongly affected by the new imperial policy. By the second half of the tenth century, the East Syrian Church's mission in China, which had begun so auspiciously, had come to an end for the time being.<sup>37</sup>

In contrast, the spread of Christianity continued among the Turkish in Central Asia. By the turn of the eighth century, the Nestorian Catholicos Mar Timothy I (727/8–823 CE) had set the stage for a missionary renewal in the East.<sup>38</sup> He sent out monks trained as missionaries and achieved great success on the plains of Central Asia. In 781, Timothy gave a written account of a Turkish

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34 Paul Carus, *The Nestorian Monument: An Ancient Record of Christianity in China* (Chicago: The Open Court Publishing Company, 1909), 13.

35 For Nestorians in Kashgar and in territories subjected to the Qara Khitai, see Michal Biran, *The Empire of the Qara Khitai in Eurasian History between China and the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 178–179.

36 Moule, *Christians in China*, 52–64; Saeki, *Nestorian Documents*, 416–418; Li Tang, *A Study on the History of Nestorian Christianity in China and its Literature in Chinese: Together with a New English Translation of the Dunhuang Nestorian Documents* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2004). On Nestorian inscriptions found in Dunhuang, see Hsü, "Nestorianism," 67–69.

37 Dauvillier, "Les provinces Chaldéennes," 298; Moffett, *Christianity*, 302–313; Raguin, "China's First Evangelization," 170–171.; Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians*, 282–285.

38 Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians*, 218.

Khan who had converted to Christianity along with almost all of his subjects.<sup>39</sup> This was only the beginning, however, of a fruitful expansion of the East Syrian Church amongst Turkish tribes. At the onset of the eleventh century, the Mongolian people of the Kerait tribe, who had settled to the south of Lake Baikal, collectively joined the Christian faith.<sup>40</sup> The Nestorians also gained numerous followers among the Uyghur people, who lived primarily in and around Turfan on the northern edge of the Tarim Basin. These Turkish and Mongolian people brought Nestorianism back to China.<sup>41</sup>

When the unified Mongols successfully took their military campaigns to the West under the leadership of Genghis Khan, numerous Nestorian communities were displaced and destroyed. Once the Mongolian leadership was on solid ground and peace had returned, their empire stretched from the Chinese Sea to the Euphrates and the new rulers soon became protectors and sponsors of Nestorian Christianity.<sup>42</sup> There had already been some Nestorians among the Mongols at the beginning of the conquests. The commercial links between the Near East and China that were then secured under the protection of a single political entity facilitated relations between the Catholicos-Patriarch in Baghdad and the numerous communities in the Far East. Soon, a Nestorian Church structure headed by metropolitans and bishops was consolidated anew along the Silk Road.<sup>43</sup> In East Asia, there was a metropolitan see within the northern bow of the Yellow River, which was part of the territory of the partially Christianized Öngüt people.<sup>44</sup> The Nestorians once again secured a foothold in the Chinese heartland—in numerous cities along the Yellow River, in the southeastern

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39 Ibid., 217–218.

40 Dauvillier, “Les provinces Chaldéennes,” 308–309; Erica C. D. Hunter, “The Conversion of the Kerait to Christianity in AD 1007,” *Zentralasiatische Studien* 22 (1989/90): 140–63; Moffett, *Christianity*, 400–402; Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians*, 226–230 and 287.

41 Igor de Rachewiltz, “The Turks in China under the Mongols: A Preliminary Investigation of Turco-Mongol Relations in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Century,” in *China among Equals: The Middle Kingdom and its Neighbors, 10<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> centuries*, ed. Morris Rossabi (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

42 Hsü, “Nestorianism,” 66; Jean Maurice Fiey, *Chrétiens syriaques sous le Mongols: Il-Khanat de Perse, XIIIe–XIVe siècles*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium (Louvain: Secrétariat du Corpus SCO, 1987), 2–6; Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians*, 285–287.

43 On the church’s structure, see Dauvillier, “Les provinces Chaldéennes,” 263.

44 Ibid., 303–304; Halbertsma, *Early Christian Remains*, 35–48. On the Nestorian tradition in Inner Mongolia, see *ibid.* 73–74 and 135–158. On another sepulchral inscription of presumably Öngüt provenience, see James Hamilton and Ru-Ji Niu, “Deux inscriptions funéraires Turques Nestoriennes de la Chine orientale,” *Journal Asiatique* 282, no. 1 (1994): 147–155.

Chinese coastal area up to Zayton (Quanzhou),<sup>45</sup> and along the lower course of the Yangzi River.<sup>46</sup> In this region, a Nestorian from Samarkand named Mar Sargis founded seven cloisters during the first few decades of the fourteenth century.<sup>47</sup>

The East Syrian Church did not forfeit its reputation as a religion of and for outsiders, even though its adherents in the thirteenth century were not only Syrians and Persians, but also Turks and Mongols. Some of them held important offices at the court of the Great Khan, and as a result, Nestorianism came to be held in high esteem by the ruling elite.<sup>48</sup> For instance, the prominent Christian Chinkai, who hailed from the newly converted Kerait people, served several Khans as a consultant and chancellor. Nestorian Christianity also had a lasting influence on the Mongolian rulers themselves. This was mostly due to the wives and concubines selected by the Khans from the Central Asian populations, where Christianity was firmly entrenched.<sup>49</sup> The most prominent woman who converted to Christianity was the Kerait-born princess Sorghaghtani (ca. 1192–1252), daughter-in-law of Genghis (1162–1252) and mother of Mongke (1209–1259) and Kublai Khan (1215–1294).<sup>50</sup> Another member of the small but distinguished Turkish-Mongolian elite of Christian faith was Xindu from Beijing, the husband of Elizabeth, whose gravestone was previously mentioned.<sup>51</sup> This noble functionary of Turkish or Mongolian origin held high offices at the court of the Emperor Buyantu, who ruled the empire between 1311 and 1320.<sup>52</sup>

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45 Qin Zhang Yang, “Nestorian Churches and their Followers along the Southern China Coast in the Yuan,” in *Andrea da Perugia: Atti del Convegno, Perugia, 19 settembre 1992*, ed. Carlo Santini (Rome: Il Calamo, 1994), 105–128; Moule, *Christians in China*, 78–85; Bizhen Xie, “The History of Quanzhou Nestorianism,” in Malek and Hofrichter, *Jingjiao*, 257–277; Hamilton and Niu, “Deux inscriptions,” 155–163; Samuel N. C. Lieu, “Nestorian Remains from Zaitun (Quanzhou), South China,” in Malek and Hofrichter, *Jingjiao*, 277–291; Lieu, “Medieval Manichaeism,” 190–199; Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians*, 293–298.

46 Dauvillier, “Les provinces Chaldéennes,” 300–301.

47 Moule, *Christians in China*, 145–165; Louis Ligeti, “Les sept monastères Nestoriens de Mar Sargis,” *Acta Orientalia Hungarica* 26, no. 2–3 (1972): 169–178; Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians*, 296.

48 *Ibid.*, 287–290; Halbertsma, *Early Christian Remains*, 48–57.

49 James D. Ryan, “Christian Wives of the Mongol Khans: Tartar Queens and Missionary Expectations in Asia,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 8, no. 3 (1998): 411–421.

50 Moffett, *Christianity*, 443–444; Li Tang, “Sorkaktani Beki: A Prominent Nestorian Woman at the Mongol Court,” in Malek and Hofrichter, *Jingjiao*, 349–355.

51 On the identification of Xindu, see Geng, “Reexamination,” 253–254.

52 Herbert Franke, “Eine qarluq-türkische Familie im Dienste der mongolischen Großkhane,” in *Scholia: Beiträge zur Turkologie und Zentralasienkunde. Annemarie von Gabain zum 80. Geburtstag*, ed. Klaus Röhrborn and Horst Wilfrid Brands (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1981), 64–79.

Yet the Nestorians in central and eastern Asia always remained a negligible religious minority. The clergy consisted mainly of Syrians and Iranians, even more than one hundred years after their arrival in China.<sup>53</sup> They had only a tenuous connection to the mother church in Mesopotamia and to their ecclesiastical head, the Catholicos in Baghdad.<sup>54</sup> Therefore, Nestorian life and theology in the Far East were strongly shaped by the social and religious environment of the area.<sup>55</sup> Numerous Christianized Turks and Mongols retained their shamanic beliefs, dominated by ancestral spirits and demons, while at the same time confessing the Christian faith, lured by its promise of salvation after death.<sup>56</sup> Due to its status as a minority faith in exile, Nestorian Christianity relinquished its claim to exclusivity and purity. Furthermore, given its co-existence with a variety of religions, Nestorian Christianity had daily contact with non-Christian beliefs and practices. The consequence of this was not only dialogue but also cross-religious interaction and borrowing.<sup>57</sup> The Syrian Church, for instance, picked up notions from Mahayana Buddhism, which was widespread in China and is the most popular branch of Buddhism in East Asia up to this day. Drawing on the metaphorical language inherent in Mahayana Buddhism, Jesus rows the “boat of mercy to the sky” and his crucifixion is described as “hanging up the luminous sun in the sky.” This integrates two central tenets of Mahayana Buddhism into the Nestorian belief system.<sup>58</sup> The Nestorian visual universe adopted many elements of contemporary Central and East Asian artistic production as well,<sup>59</sup> exemplified by iconographic scenes on gravestones showing stylistic influences from various peoples, cultures,

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53 Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians*, 239 and 294–295.

54 *Ibid.*, 237–238.

55 Halbertsma, *Early Christian Remains*: 245.

56 On cultural hybridity as a tool to understand cross-cultural missionary activity, see Parker, “Converting Souls,” 51–52. On the mutual interchange and acculturation of religions in medieval China, see Christine Mollier, *Buddhism and Taoism Face to Face: Scripture, Ritual, and Iconographic Exchange in Medieval China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2008).

57 Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians*, 258–262.

58 Gerhard Rosenkranz, *Die älteste Christenheit in China in den Quellschriften der Nestorianer-Texte der Tang-Dynastie* (Berlin: Ostasien-Mission, 1939), 7 and *passim*.

59 Ken Parry, “Images of the Church of the East: The Evidence from Central Asia and China,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 78, no. 3 (1996): 143–162; Ken Parry, “An Unusual Artifact from South China,” *Journal of the Asian Arts Society of Australia Review* 15, no. 2 (2006): 12–13. On tombstones and amulets “combining the symbol of the cross with Buddhist and shamanistic emblems like that of the lotus and the swastika,” see Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians*, 230.

and beliefs.<sup>60</sup> Thus, its success among the Central Asian peoples changed Nestorian Christianity into another form of locally acculturated Christianity. In the end, the Nestorian efforts had no lasting success, since the struggle for religious dominance was won by other groups by the mid-fourteenth century: Neo-Confucian teachings in many parts of China, Islam among the Central Asian Turkish peoples, and Lamaist Buddhism among the Mongols.

Developments in the East Syrian Church's homeland went in a similar direction. Soon after the dogmatic and structural establishment of the Nestorian church, its growth was stopped by Islamic expansion. Yet the circumstances changed significantly in the Nestorians' favor again in the middle of the thirteenth century. In the wake of the conquest of Baghdad by the Mongols in 1258, the Christians were not only spared, but the Catholicos even received one of the former caliph's palaces as a residence. The first Ilkhan Hülagü (1218–1265) had a Christian mother, the above-mentioned Sorghaghtani, as well as a wife of the same faith. The Syrian chronicler Barhebraeus (1226–1286) referred to the Ilkhans as staunch Christians who had surrounded themselves with Christian advisers and had maintained good diplomatic contacts with the Christian Armenians, Georgians, and Europeans, while considering the Muslims to be rebels.<sup>61</sup> The Syrian Nestorians were aware that their destiny depended on the goodwill of the Mongolian Ilkhanate. That was one reason why they appointed the monk Rabban Marcos (1245–1317) in 1281—despite his mediocre knowledge of Syrian, the Nestorian liturgical language—as their new Catholicos-Patriarch. Marcos was the son of a Nestorian cleric of the Öngüt people. With his teacher, Rabban Bar Sauma (1220–1294), a cleric of Uyghur origin who had been raised in Beijing's Christian environment, Marcus had left China and was on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem.<sup>62</sup>

Due to turmoil in Syria, both Turkish and Chinese pilgrims remained at the court of the Catholicos in Baghdad, who had assigned Marcos the metropolitan dignity of China but died a few months later. After his promotion to the see of Catholicos, Marcus selected the name Mar Jahballaha III. With him at their head, the leading Nestorian circles in Iraq hoped to preserve the favor of the Mongols, and at first, their hope appeared well-founded. Jahballaha III founded

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60 Wasilios Klein, "Christliche Reliefgrabsteine des 14. Jahrhunderts von der Seidenstraße: Ergänzungen zu einer alttürkischen und zwei syrischen Inschriften," in *VI Symposium Syriacum*, ed. René Lavenant (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Orientale, 1994), 439–442; Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians*, 230–231; Halbertsma, *Early Christian Remains*, 216–217 and 244.

61 On Hülagü's attitude towards Christianity, see Fiey, *Chrétiens*, 18–32.

62 Fiey, *Chrétiens*, 38; Morris Rossabi, *Voyager from Xanadu: Rabban Sauma and the First Journey from China to the West* (Tokyo, New York and London: Kodansha, 1992).

new cloisters and churches, and the Ilkhan sent Bar Sauma to Rome, Paris, and Bordeaux as an ambassador, in order to meet the pope and the king of France.<sup>63</sup> For the first time, the East Syrian Church gained immediate contact with the ecclesiastical and secular authorities of Latin Christianity. Nevertheless, the Nestorians' diplomatic intervention did not enable the Ilkhan to attain his political goal of forging a military alliance against the Muslim Mamluks.<sup>64</sup>

Relations between the Muslim majority and the Christian minority deteriorated noticeably over the course of time. When the incumbent Ilkhan Ghazan (1271–1304), who had been baptized as a child and educated as a Christian, converted to Islam shortly before the turn of the fourteenth century, the Christians' situation started to become precarious.<sup>65</sup> Churches were destroyed and discriminating regulations for clothes were introduced. When Jabhallaha died in 1317—the year in which Elizabeth's gravestone was crafted in Yangzhou—Christians had already become a degraded and oppressed minority. During the fourteenth century, Nestorian communities suffered from arbitrary taxes and temporary bans, introduced with the intent to stop them from practicing their religion. Many Nestorians buckled under the pressure and converted. Missions in Baghdad and Southern Mesopotamia had to be abandoned entirely.<sup>66</sup> With his devastating campaigns around 1400, the Muslim Mongol Timur Lenk accelerated the decline of the Nestorians. They were able to survive only in the impassable highlands of Northern Iraq, around Mosul and Kirkuk.

### **Catholics on their way to the Far East**

The history of Catholicism in Central Asia and China began much later than that of Nestorianism and can be regarded as a response to the Mongolian thrust towards Europe.<sup>67</sup> Mongolian armies had scarcely left Western Europe in 1241 when Christian missionaries started traveling to the Far East. Their goal was twofold: to avert further onslaughts on Christendom and to convert

63 Moule, *Christians in China*, 94–127; Jean Richard, “La mission en Europe de Rabban Çauma et l'union des églises,” in *Orient et Occident au Moyen Âge*, ed. Jean Richard (London: Variorum Reprints, 1976), 162–167; Pier Borbone, *Storia di Mar Yahballaha e di Rabban Sauma: Un orientale in Occidente ai tempi di Marco Polo* (Turin: Zamorani, 2000).

64 Fiey, *Chrétiens*, 31 and 47–51; Frédéric Luisetto, *Arméniens et autres chrétiens d'Orient sous la domination mongole* (Paris: Geuthner, 2007), 101–116.

65 Fiey, *Chrétiens*, 66–73; Luisetto, *Arméniens*, 38–50.

66 On the Christians' fate in fourteenth-century Iraq, see Fiey, *Chrétiens*, 74–84.

67 For a survey of the Franciscan missions to the Mongols, see Moffett, *Christianity*, 406–14; Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians*, 242–251 and 298–305.

the invaders to the “true faith,” thereby winning military allies in the fight against the Muslims in the Holy Land and the Near East. By order of the pope, the Franciscan monk John of Plano Carpini was the first to take the road to Mongolia.<sup>68</sup> Across Bohemia and Silesia, through the territory of the “Golden Horde” in Ukraine and South Russia, following a northern route of the Silk Road, the missionary finally reached the Mongolians’ ancestral homeland in 1246. After months of waiting, John finally received an audience with the newly elected Khagan (Great Khan). Presumably, he used this opportunity to deliver a letter from the pope. In this document, Pope Innocent IV asked the Khagan to refrain from fighting the Christians. But in his reply, the Khagan called upon the pope and Europe’s secular rulers to accept his universal leadership.<sup>69</sup>

After his return, the Italian monk was the first Western European to provide insight into the countries and people of eastern Asia to his compatriots in a travel report.<sup>70</sup> Yet it was after this journey that the heyday of the Catholic missionaries in Medieval Asia began with the Mongolian conquest of Baghdad in 1258. The fall of the caliph’s seat opened up a wider scope of action to the Christians in the Mongolian Empire, which, around 1260, stretched from Mesopotamia to the China Sea. In contrast to the Muslim policy, Mongolian governance was characterized by religious tolerance and indifference.<sup>71</sup> The first person to take advantage of this was the Fleming William of Rubruck, who traveled on behalf of the pope and the French king to the Khagan in 1252. In Karakorum, Mongke Khan granted him an audience but had no interest in converting to Christianity or in supporting Western Christendom, neither in the fight against Islam nor in the attempt to re-conquer the Holy Land.<sup>72</sup>

Nevertheless, Catholic friars and missionaries did not abandon their plans. Following an invitation from Kublai Khan, the Franciscan John of Montecorvino from southern Italy traveled to Beijing shortly before 1300.<sup>73</sup> For his trip, he chose to sail from Persia to India and on to China. After

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68 On John of Plano Carpini, see Joseph P. Byrne, “Giovanni di Piano Carpini (c. 1180–1252),” in *Key Figures in Medieval Europe: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Richard C. Emmerson and Sandra Clayton-Emmerson (New York: Routledge, 2006), 259.

69 Moffett, *Christianity*, 407–408.

70 Erik Hildinger, trans. and ed., *The Story of the Mongols whom We Call the Tartars. Friar Giovanni di Plano Carpini’s Account of his Embassy to the Court of the Mongol Khan* (Boston: Branden, 1996).

71 On religious toleration as a means of Mongolian politics, see Atwood, “Validation.”

72 Moffett, *Christianity*, 409–414.

73 On John of Montecorvino in China, see Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians*, 300–303.

arriving in the Chinese capital, John began founding Catholic churches. He built churches, workshops, and lodgings for newly baptized Christians, preached in Chinese and translated the Psalms and the New Testament into Uyghur, the language used by the Mongols. In his letters to Rome, John proudly reported that he had converted several thousand Moors and Nestorian Christians to Catholicism. In 1307, Pope Clemens V promoted the missionary to archbishop of Beijing and charged him with establishing a church organization. Seven Franciscan bishops were sent by the pope to inaugurate John and to give him support. The first archbishop of China conferred upon the new arrivals the administration of the diocese of Quanzhou, which he had founded in southern China.<sup>74</sup>

In the 1320s, Odoric of Pordenone also went to China.<sup>75</sup> Odoric had spent many years with other Franciscans in the Mongolian Khanate of Gypjak in southern Russia, starting around 1300. Later, he had worked as a missionary in Constantinople, Trabzon (Asia Minor), and Tabriz. In 1322, he set out for the Far East to join John of Montecorvino in China. Odoric traveled by ship from Ormus to Guangzhou, then over land through China to the capital. Finally, in 1325, he reached Khanbaliq (Beijing), where he supported Archbishop John of Montecorvino for three years. Odoric returned to Europe when John died in 1328.

Eight years later, Toghlan Timur (1320–1370), the last Mongol to sit on the Chinese imperial throne, sent a delegation to Pope Benedict XII (ca. 1285–1342). The envoys were escorted by two Genoese men in Mongolian service. The pope benignly accepted the Khagan's request for a successor for John of Montecorvino, sending John of Marignola and a delegation of 50 to China. In 1342, John reached Beijing with thirty-two companions. However, he did not remain in the Chinese capital, but returned to Europe in 1353. Some years later, the Catholic Church's first attempt to gain a foothold in the Middle Kingdom ended with the Mongols' defeat and withdrawal from China. The Jesuits renewed this mission in the sixteenth century—using techniques the medieval Mendicants had developed, but employing them differently than their contemporary Franciscan and Dominican colleagues.<sup>76</sup>

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74 Jean Richard, "Zayton, un évêché au bout du monde," in *Chemins d'Outre-Mer: Etudes d'histoire sur la Méditerranée médiévale offertes à Michel Balard*, ed. Damien Coulon (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2004), 745–751.

75 Henry Yule, trans., *The Travels of Friar Odoric: Blessed Odoric of Pordenone*, Italian Texts and Studies on Religion and Society (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 1–62 ("Introduction" by Paolo Chiesa).

76 See above footnote 22. On tensions between the orders, see Brockey, *Journey to the East*, 102–104.



Paradoxically, friars and missionaries from Western Europe considered Nestorian Christians as both fellow believers and ruthless competitors.<sup>77</sup> Nevertheless, the two Christian minorities became natural allies, connected by their faith in the biblical revelation and at variance with high-powered religions such as Buddhism or Islam. They supported each other and mutually administered the sacraments if priests of the other denomination were absent. They shared the few available church rooms and celebrated liturgical feasts such as Easter and Pentecost together. Nestorians and Catholics had a common cause, “in honor of the cross,” as William of Rubruck once put it.<sup>78</sup>

Despite this, however, Latin friars seem to have added a competitive and sometimes hostile element to the inter-Christian relationship. The main reason for this was the strict Catholic claim to absoluteness and the often openly displayed disregard for non-Christian religions as well as for other Christian denominations. Once more, William of Rubruck gave a succinct account of this position in his description of the Nestorians and their church in the Mongol Empire:

The Nestorians there are ignorant. They recite their office and have the Holy Scriptures in Syriac, a language they do not know, so that they chant like the monks among us who know no grammar; and for this reason they are completely corrupt. Above all they are usurers and drunkards, and some of them, furthermore, who live among the Tartars, have several wives just as the Tartars have. On entering the church they wash their lower members, in the Saracen manner; they eat meat on Fridays and follow the Saracens in having their feasts on that day. The bishop takes his time about visiting those parts, doing so perhaps hardly once in fifty years. On that occasion they have all the male children, even those in the cradle, ordained as priests. As a result almost all their men are priests. Thereafter they marry, which clearly contravenes the decrees of the Fathers; and they commit bigamy as well, in that when their first wife dies these priests take another. They are all simoniacs, moreover, and administer none of the sacraments without a fee. They are active on behalf of their wives and children, and consequently have an

77 Wolfgang Hage, “Das Nebeneinander christlicher Konfessionen im mittelalterlichen Zentralasien,” in *XVII. Deutscher Orientalistentag*, ed. Wolfgang Voigt, (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1969), 2: 517–525.

78 Anastasius van Wyngaert, ed., “Wilhelmus Rubruquensis, Itinerarium ad partes orientales,” in *Itinera et relationes Fratrum Minorum saeculi XIII et XIV* (Quaracchi-Firenze: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1929), 29, 43. On the relations between different Christian groups, see Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians*, 249–251; Peter Bruns, “Doch wegen der Ehre des Kreuzes standen wir zusammen ... Östliches Christentum im Itinerar des Wilhelm von Rubruk (1253–1255),” *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 113, no. 2 (2002): 145–169.

eye not to spreading the Faith but to making money. The result is that when any of them rear the sons of aristocratic Mongols, even though they instruct them in the Gospels and the Faith, nevertheless by their immorality and their greed they rather alienate them from the Christian religion. For the lives of the Mongols and even of the idolaters are more blameless than their own.<sup>79</sup>

William's characterization of East Asian Nestorianism was grounded in behaviors that were mainly due to the Nestorian Church's social and religious assimilation.<sup>80</sup> Infrequent contact with the mother church in Mesopotamia and only cursory knowledge of Syriac, which was used as a liturgical language in order to affirm the unity of the Church, undoubtedly posed real problems.<sup>81</sup> A married priesthood corresponded not only to Nestorian habits, but also to the practice in many Oriental churches.<sup>82</sup> The remaining points made by Rubruck should probably be considered confessional polemic. Similar intellectual prejudices can be found with other Catholic travelers who met Nestorians on their sojourn in the East. At the threshold of the fourteenth century, this disdainful attitude was strengthened by concrete anti-Nestorian actions, when, for example, John of Montecorvino began to evangelize for the Catholic faith under the Nestorians and referred to his successful conversion work in several letters to the pope. Additionally, John wrote of the prince of the Öngüt's conversion to Catholicism.<sup>83</sup> After the death of this neophyte Khan Georg, the succeeding Öngüt sovereign returned to Nestorianism.<sup>84</sup> Inter-Christian aversions lingered and characterized the last decades of medieval Christianity in Central Asia and China. A rumor about the murder of two Franciscans, slain by Nestorians at an unknown place in Central Asia in the second half of the fourteenth century, reveals the deterioration of the relationship of the two Christian denominations in fourteenth-century Asia.<sup>85</sup>

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79 Peter Jackson, trans. and ed., *The Mission of Friar William of Rubruck: His Journey to the Court of the Great Khan Möngke, 1253–1255* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1990), chap. XXVI, 12, 163–164. On Rubruck's general picture of the Nestorian clergy, see *ibid.*, 46–50 ("Introduction"); Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians*, 248.

80 On Rubruck's stance towards the Nestorians, see Moffett, *Christianity*, 411–412; Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians*, 298–299.

81 Wolfgang Hage, "Einheimische Volkssprachen und syrische Kirchensprache in der nestorianischen Asienmission," in *Erkenntnisse und Meinungen*, vol. 2, ed. Gernot Wießner (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1978), 131–160. On "Nestorian literacy," see Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians*, 251–252.

82 *Ibid.*, 239.

83 Dauvillier, "Les provinces Chaldéennes," 303.

84 Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians*, 293.

85 Hage, "Der Weg nach Asien," 387; Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians*, 251, 299.

### Different missions and divergent repercussions

Nestorians and Catholics traveled to the Far East on different roads. To begin with, the initial conditions were quite distinct. More precisely, the East Syrian Church was a minority church. Even in their region of origin in Mesopotamia, the Nestorians lived in a predominantly Muslim society. Hence, they faced a familiar situation in the expansion towards the East along the Silk Road. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the scattered Nestorian Church lived under the shield of the Mongol empire. Under these circumstances, the desire to be on good terms with the Mongolian elite was understandably strong. In contrast, the mendicant friars were members of a dominant church, which claimed religious and cultural supremacy in the societies within an orbit that encompassed the whole peninsula of Western Europe. Since the beginning of the Crusades, this church's profile had sharpened considerably. The struggle against Muslims and pagans in the Holy Land and at the edges of Europe fostered this process, as did the marginalization of heretics within Christendom.<sup>86</sup> Since the thirteenth century, the mendicant friars played a crucial role in the church's ambitions to lead Christianity, combat its foes, and banish its vices. Convinced of the supremacy of the Roman Catholic church and of their own exceptional duties within it, Dominicans and Franciscans worked as the pope's vanguard in Europe's heartlands and beyond its borders.<sup>87</sup>

The practical missionary work differed as well. The Nestorians were familiar with managing life as a religious minority within societies often hostile to them. Translations of basic texts, such as the Gospel or liturgical hymns from Syriac to Sogdian, Uyghur, and other languages, were a means to achieve this goal.<sup>88</sup> Additionally, the need to adapt to other cultures and religions furthered the openness to syncretism and hybridity that developed in East Asia.<sup>89</sup> This openness towards foreign systems of belief, ceremony, and behavior was a fundamental reason for the success of the mission among the Turkish and Mongolian peoples in Central Asia, who had supported Nestorianism at the court of the Mongolian Khagan. Despite their assimilation, the Nestorians could not curb the triumphant spread of Islam, whether in the Persian Ilkhanate

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86 On the impact of the aggression against outer enemies and Catholic self-conceptions, see the contributions in Michael Frassetto, ed., *Heresy and the Persecuting Society in the Middle Ages: Essays on the Work of R. I. Moore* (Leiden: Brill, 2006).

87 On the Franciscan's attempt to shape medieval society, see Thomas Ertl, *Religion und Disziplin: Selbstdeutung und Weltordnung im frühen deutschen Franziskanertum* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006), 367–388.

88 Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians*, 251–262.

89 On hybridity in missionary work, see Peter Burke, *Cultural Hybridity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 9–11 and 42–44. See also Parker, "Converting Souls," 64–71.

or in Central Asia. The East Syrian Church had been marginalized since the fourteenth century. In contrast, the mendicant missionaries followed a different path. They first traveled to eastern Asia in the thirteenth century and appeared more as frail individuals than as a menacing group. As a consequence, they did not need to concern themselves with the everyday problems of a converted Christian's congregation of Turks and Mongols in the midst of a periodically hostile environment. From this perspective, it was easy to criticize Nestorian syncretism and to perceive their own confession as the only pure and right form of Christianity.

Different experiences in the Far East yielded different results for Nestorians and Catholics at home. Syrians and Persians had been bringing their faith to the East since the third century, and, up until the fourteenth century, the East Syrian Church was the "most successful missionary church in contemporary ecumenical Christendom," with a geographic radius of action that significantly exceeded those of all other Christian denominations.<sup>90</sup> Communication and cohesion between the "Inner Metropolitanates" in the Near East and the "Outer Metropolitanates" in South, Central, and East Asia were difficult but still functioned to a certain extent, bolstered mainly by the common liturgical language and the regular dispatch of prelates by the Catholicos-Patriarch.<sup>91</sup> Yet the limited cultural transfer among the numerous ecclesiastical provinces in the Far East led to relative isolation. Journeys from the East to Mesopotamia, such as Rabban Bar Sauma's pilgrimage with his disciple Marcos, appear to have been rare exceptions. Thus, it is not necessarily surprising that there are few written Nestorian travel accounts. Transmitting worldly knowledge of foreign landscapes, customs, and cultures was never a prominent goal of Nestorians traveling east. The legacy of the Nestorian mission in eastern Asia consists, therefore, of theological texts and many gravestones, such as those in Yangzhou mentioned previously.<sup>92</sup> Most of these Nestorian gravestones can

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90 Hage, "Der Weg nach Asien," 373. On the Nestorian presence as far east as Manchuria and Korea, see Alexander Toepel, "Traces of Nestorianism in Manchuria and Korea," *Oriens Christianus* 89 (2005): 77–85.

91 Klaus Koschorke, „Ob er nun unter den Indern weilt oder unter den Chinesen ... Die ostsyrisch-nestorianische Kirche des Ostens als kontinentales Netzwerk im Asien der Vormoderne," *Jahrbuch für Europäische Überseegeschichte* 9 (2009): 18–24. On the relations of Nestorian Christians in India to the supreme head in Persia, see Mundadan, *History*, 98–102. For the metropolitanates "de l'extérieur" in Central and East Asia and their ecclesiastical status, see Dauvillier, "Les provinces Chaldéennes," 272–316. On the Nestorian church's ecclesiastical structure within the Ilkhanate, see Fiey, *Chrétien*, 6.

92 Raguin, "China's First Evangelization," 161–164 and 167–170. On Nestorian texts and fragments produced for liturgical purposes and preserved in Turfan and other sites in Central Asia and China, see Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians*, 251–256.

still be found in Inner Mongolia,<sup>93</sup> the region where Nestorianism successfully spread among the Mongolian and Turkish peoples. The monuments show the historical existence of Christians in the East—both immigrants from the West and indigenous converts. What they do not exhibit, however, are the broader repercussions of the Nestorian mission in the Far East within the homelands of these missionaries and their religion.



*Fig. 3: Nestorian gravestones, Inner Mongolia. [Halbertsma, *Early Christian Remains*, plate 39.]*

Friars and travelers hailing from Western Europe could not look back to a time-honored tradition of missionary work in Asia. The Far East was not a well-known mission area, but a virgin land. Countries and peoples were visualized according to biblical and antique texts. It was only with the slow integration of new knowledge that people were able to overcome traditional stereotypes and develop new concepts of the East, more in keeping with reality. In contrast to these intellectual alterations in the West, Catholic parishes failed in their early attempts to take firm root in the Mongol empire. Neither John of Montecorvino's quest for a permanent church organization nor a small Italian exile community in Yangzhou could change this. Western Christendom was not affected geographically by the East Asian mission, since an extension of Roman Catholicism was out of reach. However, the journeys of Latin Christians to the East had a strong impact on Western Europe. The legacy of this mission is not evident in the stone monuments in the East, even though

93 On the archeological excavation and documentation of Nestorian and other Christian remains in this area, see Halbertsma, *Early Christian Remains*.

there are still a few gravestones of Franciscan missionaries in China.<sup>94</sup> Rather, it manifests itself through texts from the West. In contrast to the Nestorians, John of Plano Carpini and his followers recorded their expeditions to the exotic Mongol empire in travel reports, which were taken up and studied in Europe with immense enthusiasm. Gillman and Klimkeit noticed the lasting effects of this short term-missionary activity: “The history of the Franciscan friars travelling to Central and East Asia is one that lasted hardly one hundred years. Yet the events of these epoch are important in view of the information those travelers have supplied.”<sup>95</sup>

The urge to record experiences in Asia and to render them accessible to a bigger audience was not limited to the clerical sector. After his return from China in 1271, Marco Polo wrote a travel report, *Deuisament dou monde* (“Description of the World”), better known as *Il Milione*, which made him the best-known European of the Middle Ages. However, this merchant journey, which Marco Polo undertook with his father and brother, is also connected with the Christian mission. In his prologue, Marco Polo reports that his father Niccolò and uncle Maffei had already traveled to the empire of the Mongols in 1260. From Kublai Khan, they received the order to return to the West and deliver a letter to the pope. Regarding the delegation and the contents of this letter, Marco Polo writes:

He [the Khan] sent to the Apostle saying that he must send as many as a hundred wise men of learning in the Christian religion and doctrine, and who should know also the seven arts and be fitted to teach his people and who should know well how to argue and to show plainly to him and to the idolaters and to the other classes of people submitted to his rule that all their religion was erroneous and all the idols which they keep in their houses and worship are devilish things and who should know well how to show clearly by reason that the Christian faith and religion is better than theirs and more true than all the other religions.<sup>96</sup>

However, on their journey to the East in 1271, the three Venetians were accompanied not by one hundred scholars, but only by two Dominicans. In Asia Minor, both friars apparently lost their courage and returned to the West. As a result, the ecclesiastical aspect of the expedition fell into oblivion, although

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94 See Lieu, ‘Medieval Manichaeism,’ 291 (gravestone of Andrea of Perugia in Quanzhou, 1332 CE).

95 Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians*, 243.

96 Marco Polo, *The Description of the World*, trans. and annot. A.C. Moule and Paul Pelliot (London: G. Routledge & Sons, 1938), 79.

Marco Polo mentions the existence of Nestorian churches or Nestorian parishes in many places. He also describes Kublai Khan as a friend and admirer of the Christians. Overall, Marco Polo presented the different faiths of Eastern Asia with an open mind and without strong judgments.<sup>97</sup> Only the Muslims, enemies of the Christians in the West, were described pejoratively.

The *Milione* is a peculiar mixture of a dry economic manual, which lists facts of the economic situation in towns on the route, and an amusing collection of anecdotes, in which legends of different provenances were gathered. The book describes the idealized Kublai Khan and his court, to which a substantial part of the work is dedicated, as out of the ordinary. Marco Polo states that he accomplished diplomatic missions in the empire as a personal representative of the Khan and also held an important political function as vicegerent of the city of Yangzhou in the Mongol empire. It may not be a coincidence that Yangzhou is the city in which a Latin Christian community presumably lived at the beginning of the fourteenth century.

Despite their divergent priorities, perspectives, and intentions, the travel reports from the layman of Venice and the friars of the mendicant orders were read together. First, the audience consisted of educated men, both in the clerical and monastic as well as in the courtly and civic milieu. This is confirmed by the rapid translation of the *Milione* into Latin, the clerical language of scholars.<sup>98</sup> The narrative potential of the texts was quickly recognized and employed for different purposes. Berthold of Regensburg, for example, spoke in his sermons about the Mongols, on the one hand to admonish his listeners to conjugal loyalty, and on the other hand, to hold his listeners' attention with lurid tales of the destructiveness of the Tatars.<sup>99</sup> Others incorporated the new knowledge of fabulous creatures into their paintings on canvas, parchment, or church walls.<sup>100</sup>

97 Johannes Witte, *Das Buch des Marco Polo als Quelle für die Religionsgeschichte* (Berlin: Hutten-Verlag, 1916); Leonardi Olschky, "Manichaeism, Buddhism and Christianity in Marco Polo's China," *Asiatische Studien* 5, nos. 1–2 (1951): 1–21; Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians*, 290–291; Nathan J. Ristuccia, "Eastern Religions and the West: The Making of an Image," *History of Religions* 53, no. 2 (2013): 170–204.

98 Barbara Wehr, "A propos de la g n se du 'Devisement dou monde' de Marco Polo," in *Le passage de l' crit des langues romanes*, ed. Maria Selig, Barbara Fank, and J rg Hartmann (T bingen: Gunter Narr, 1993), 299–326.

99 Jussi Hanska and Antti Ruotsala, "Berthold von Regensburg, OFM, and the Mongols: Medieval Sermon as a Historical Source," *Archivum franciscanum historicum* 89 (1996): 425–445.

100 On the influence of the missionaries' work on European art, see Arnold Lauren, *Princely Gifts and Papal Treasures: The Franciscan Mission to China and Its Influence on the Art of the West, 1250–1350* (San Francisco: Desiderata Press, 1999).

The writings of John of Plano Carpini, Marco Polo, and other travelers on Central and East Asia offered material for teaching and, undeniably, for entertaining stories. Singular motifs and miraculous histories from the travel reports became regular components of the late-medieval heroic saga, and the original texts and their literary adaptations changed the dominant image of the Asian continent and its people in Europe. The medieval travel writers systematically opened up a previously unknown world in their texts, allowing centuries-old stereotypes, which had sprung from biblical and antique writings, to be overcome or at least to be qualified. The “blank spot” which marked eastern Asia in the mental map of Europeans began to be filled.<sup>101</sup>

Information on natural history in the travel reports was deciphered slowly but steadily for an enlargement of the empirical world. Until the fourteenth century, theologians and historians had primarily been interested in the legends and miraculous stories from Asia that they could use in their own texts and imaginations. Nevertheless, in addition to the description of peoples, religions, and cultures, the travel reports from Eastern Asia contained information about the geography of the newly visited countries. In the thirteenth century, the polymath Roger Bacon had used his friars’ contemporary itineraries to sketch a new picture of the eastern hemisphere. Generally, the authors of substantial encyclopedias of this time based their descriptions of the cosmos and the world on the traditional ancient and early-medieval narratives. However, broader interest in the geography of Asia arose at the turn of the fifteenth century. At this time, the travel reports were no longer understood as histories of miracles, but as important sources of information, enriching people’s geographic impressions of the world.

To be sure, many images and concepts remained blurred or incorrect, and scholars often continued to regard southern China as part of a greater India. Nevertheless, the representation of the “Middle Kingdom” on modern fifteenth-century maps was much more accurate than ever before. The *mappa mundi* of around 1450 by Fra Mauro, a Venetian monk and cartographer, is just one example. Though Fra Mauro used Claudius Ptolemy’s antique map as a basis for his own work, he amended the model by adding newly acquired first-hand knowledge.<sup>102</sup> The public’s perception of East Asia was decisively

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101 Johannes Fried, “Suche nach der Wirklichkeit: Die Mongolen und die europäische Erfahrungswissenschaft im 13. Jahrhundert,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 243 (1986): 287–332.

102 Angelo Cattaneo, “Fra Mauro’s *Cosmographus incomparabilis* and his *Mappamundi*: Documents, Sources, and Protocols for Mapping,” in *La Cartografia europea tra primo Rinascimento e fine dell’Illuminismo*, ed. Diogo Ramado Curto (Florence: Olschki, 2003), 19–48.



reshaped by these travel reports.<sup>103</sup> On the one hand, the “new China” was depicted with almost realistic geographic precision in regard to its towns, coasts, and islands; on the other hand, based on the *Milione* and similar texts, it was conceived as an exceedingly rich country.<sup>104</sup>

The explorers of the fifteenth century were evidently familiar with this new knowledge about the East. The picture drawn in the travelogues from eastern Asia must have been both a temptation and a challenge. Henry the Navigator, who organized and financed the Portuguese exploration of the West African coast in the second quarter of the fifteenth century, likely owned a copy of the *Milione*. At the Portuguese king’s court, a western route to India was first discussed, on the basis of the information provided by Marco Polo, around 1474.<sup>105</sup> Christopher Columbus was staying in Lisbon as well at that time. During protracted negotiations, the Genoese explorer convinced Isabel of Castile and Ferdinand of Aragon, the Catholic Monarchs, to support his plan to set sail for India via the West. In these months, Columbus apparently studied the Latin version of the *Milione* carefully and marked and commented on particularly important sections.<sup>106</sup> These often included references to the wealth of the East, which he most likely wanted to use to impress his financiers.

In the end, the Catholic travelers to the East left a visible mark on history, not by proselytizing in the Far East, but by enhancing the knowledge and attraction of the Far East in their home countries in the West. This was by no means only a medieval phenomenon. A strong “home impact” can also be found in later Jesuit missions fueling “colonial fantasies” and engagement in colonial activities.<sup>107</sup> The travelers added their part to the creation of “useful and reliable knowledge,” which helped their audiences in the West to understand and

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103 William A. R. Richardson, “East and South-East Asia: Cartographers’ Attempts to Reconcile the Maps of Ptolemy and Martellus with Marco Polo’s *Travels* and with Portuguese Charts,” in *Terrae incognitae* 32 (2000): 1–22.

104 Folker Reichert, “Chinas Beitrag zum Weltbild der Europäer: Zur Rezeption der Fernstkenntnisse im 13. und 14. Jahrhundert,” in *Das geographische Weltbild um 1300: Politik im Spannungsfeld von Wissen, Mythos und Fiktion*, ed. Peter Moraw (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1989), 33–57.

105 Ilaria Luzzana Caraci, “Marco Polo e le grandi scoperte geografiche dei secoli XV e XVI,” in *L’impresa di Marco Polo: Cartografia, viaggi, percezione*, ed. Cosimo Palagiano (Rome: Tiellemmedia, 2007), 21–26.

106 Folker Reichert, “Columbus und Marco Polo—Asien in Amerika: Zur Literaturgeschichte der Entdeckungen,” *Zeitschrift für historische Forschung* 15 (1988): 1–61.

107 For an example of the impact of the German Jesuit mission in the eighteenth century, see Strasser, “A Case of Empire Envy?” 39–40. The significance of missionary networks within early-modern processes of globalization is discussed in Luke Clossey, “Merchants, Migrants, Missionaries, and Globalization in the Early Modern Pacific,” *Journal of Global History* 1, no. 1 (2006): 41–58.

ultimately conquer the world.<sup>108</sup> In contrast, the very different starting point of the Nestorians in the Middle East led to a different development of their missionary activities and their impact on their country of origin. Due to their minority status at home, the Nestorians were better prepared for cross-cultural adaptation and assimilation. This increased their missionary success in the East, but could not prevent their increasing marginalization in the West.

This, then, is the variety of consequences to which medieval cross-cultural travel led.<sup>109</sup> The results of these two different missions to the Far East produced very different effects. The Nestorians were successful when it came to the actual conversion of people, but lost their standing to political and natural changes on which they had little influence. The Franciscans had little effect on their new host societies, but they created a legacy on which later undertakings could build. Both missions had the same goal, but the Franciscan mission had effects that were not intended and could not have been foreseen. They renewed European knowledge of and interest in the societies of the Far East, a process that ultimately facilitated the resurgence of Christian missionary activities in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

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108 Patrick O'Brien, "Historical Foundations for a Global Perspective on the Emergence of a Western European Regime for the Discovery, Development, and Diffusion of Useful and Reliable Knowledge," *Journal of Global History* 8, no. 1 (2013): 1–24.

109 On representatives of different faiths as "agents of cross-cultural interaction and transcultural entanglement in the Middle Ages," see Tilmann Lohse, "Pious Men in Foreign Lands: Global-historical Perspectives on the Migrations of Medieval Ascetics, Missionaries, and Pilgrims," *Viator* 44 (2013): 123–136.