

Nestorianism in Central Asia during the First Millennium: Archaeological Evidence*

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At the outset, let us explain what we mean by Central Asia. Obviously, we are referring to the central part of the Continent (Fig. 1), but geographical boundaries are not so easily defined. To the North, Central Asia is bordered by Siberia and Mongolia; to the East by China; to the South-East by Tibet; and to the South-West, towards Iran, there does not exist any discernible or established border. The Western boundary is even vaguer, with the Caspian Sea constituting the only incontrovertible border. As for the rest, the Asian plains follow the Eastern European ones without any barrier¹ (Fig. 2). The steppe and the desert form a great part of the Central Asian territory and are a more convenient point of reference than the topography. The presence of Nomad and non-migratory populations mingling together further complicates the difficulty for establishing precincts and borders. In terms of present-day States, the heart of Asia covers five Republics of the ex-Soviet Union (moving from west to east, these are Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kirghizistan and Kazakhstan) as well as the Autonomous Province of Xinjiang, in the People's Republic of China. While some areas are geographically peripheral, they are decidedly not marginal from the historic point of view. Here, we are referring to a portion of Iran (Khorasan), Afghanistan and Pakistan (Gandhara). As for Mongolia, it is considered by some to constitute an integral part of Central Asia.

This vast region is the true cross-roads of two continents, a nexus of East-West trade since ancient times, and a melting-pot for numerous races which have superimposed themselves over two millenia. It has been an extremely fertile land for every type of religious belief, and here all the pre-eminent missionary religions -- Buddhism, Christianity, Manichaeism and Islamism - have flourished.

But the research and study of the archaeological evidence of Nestorianism in the first millennium, turns out to be particularly difficult due to a number of reasons.

The first impediment to archaeological research in all Central Asia is due to the extreme climatic conditions. Environmental elements have given vent to their fury on the archaeological and architectural remains, so much so that the

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¹ For a geographical definition of Central Asia see Sinor (1990), pp. 1-40.

only building material was (and, to a large extent, still is to-day) the mud brick, destined to become dust in a very short space of time. Fortunately, wall paintings inside caves and rocky structures, fabrics and rolls of manuscripts have survived in large quantities.

The Nestorian artistic and architectural remains in Central Asia, more generically pre-Islamic, constitute a patrimony without heirship. The Uighurs of Xinjiang, in fact are not heirs, completely Islamized for centuries and definitely detached from those far-away and temporary roots; nor can the Chinese be heirs, as they tend to relate everything to their own culture, attributing every type of evidence, even that which is most clearly Central-Asian² to an extraordinarily long-lived Tang dynasty (when it is not Han). Even the varied populations, mainly Turkish-speaking, who live in Western Turkestan and who have been Islamized well over a millennium, are not heirs.

This patrimony without heirs has also endured in spite of damage and all manner of violence. That which has been defined by the Westerners lacks historic meaning in the oriental populations generally speaking -- Buddhism, Moslem in particular. This has created a "forma mentis" according to which a monument is not of value because it is ancient, but is of value because it is sacred (sacred for the religion of the inhabitants of that period), of value if it can be used in some way or other. Because of this a great number of religious structures considered unserviceable have been abandoned, leading quickly to their deterioration, often irreversible. To these concerns, we must also add a spreading tendency of vandalism, noticed as early as the first scientific expeditions of Grünwedel and von Le Coq.

The substantial division of Central Asia into two countries historically hostile to each other, Russia and China, has produced and in part still produces to-day, a further notable difficulty for studies that interest the entire area. Nearly all texts dealing with Central Asia limit themselves in reality to speaking of the ex-Soviet part or of the Chinese part, for obvious reasons of accessibility to the sources and to the material. This substantial political contrast and the ensuing difficult accessibility of the territory has long made scientific research in the field in Central Asia (especially as regards Eastern Turkestan) the privilege of non-specialists who have often used the archaeological expeditions as relatively-true cover for other undertakings³. Moreover, none of these expeditions has had as its

² An obvious proof of the disinterestedness of the Chinese authorities in the traces of Christianity in Xinjiang is already found in the Museum of the Autonomous Region of Uighurs at Urumqi, chief town of the region itself: in the show-case where two big stones engraved with Nestorian cross and traces of inscriptions are exposed, the brief indication in Chinese does not bear a word of this, limiting itself to showing other objects.

³ P. Hopkirk, *Foreign Devils on the Silk Road: the Search of the Lost Cities and Treasures of Chinese Central Asia*, London 1980; Id., *The Great Game: on Secret Service in High Asia*, London 1990; J.A. Dabbs, *History of the Discovery and Exploration of Chinese Turkestan*, The Hague 1963.

aim, not even secondary, the specific research of traces of Christianity in that area.

Nestorianism in Central Asia has always been of minor interest in Europe. Specific studies on the subject are really few, consisting mostly of brief references to Christianity in works which deal with prevailing Buddhism⁴. Those who have dealt with the subject have concentrated their research on later periods, from the Mongol period forward, or they have focused on themes purely philological, given the relative abundance of manuscripts found in Eastern Turkestan mainly by Stein and by Pelliot⁵. However, in this field, the study of Christian texts is marginal in comparison with that of the Buddhist texts, perhaps due in part to their relative scarcity⁶.

Finally, one must note the extreme fragmentation of the documentation; it is dispersed in many countries, and it appears in many languages, not always well known, or in publications with very limited circulation and unknown to most outside a circle of orientalists. The dispersion of documentary materials has been caused not only by the division of the region into various states, but it is also due to the differing nationalities of the scientific expeditions which have taken significant material back to their respective countries, where it is preserved in their museums and libraries. This has also led to the publication of this material in a haphazard variety of languages. Such dispersion, generally characterized by inferior holding facilities and poor study centers, constitutes an almost insurmountable obstacle for those who wish to have a synoptic vision of the condition of the studies. Following a series of study tours and on-the-spot visits carried out in 1991, in 1992 and in the following year, in some of the areas relating to the Central-Asian Christian testimonies, both in the already Soviet and in the Chinese zones, I was requested to collect the dispersed documentation.

⁴ Amongst the few who have dealt with Christianity in that zone, from a historical point of view, is G. Messina (1947), who traces a brief outline of the "Present-day tracks of ancient Christianity", only quoting, however, Medieval cemeteries (12th-14th centuries), and literary texts, and which represent the painting of Qocho, but without comments (Chapter 'Apostolato in Asia', pp. 88-93, Table II).

⁵ It was actually the latter who had renewed his offer of writing his principal work on the history of Nestorianism in Central Asia and work which was interrupted by his premature death, as Hambis recalls in his inaugural lesson of the Lectureship of History and Civilization of Central Asia at the Collège de France, dated 7th December 1965.

⁶ The texts found in the Oasis of Turfan (Xinjiang) are still in the critical process of being edited, by the scholars of the Academy of Sciences, Berlin; N. Sims William is taking care of the Christian manuscripts in the Sogdian language. Other Christian texts, in Chinese, have been found in Dunhuang, in Gansu, in a zone by now completely Chinese, at the oriental end of the Silk Road, where Stein is said to have found some traces of Nestorian Christianity: see Hambis (1963), col. 906.

BRIEF HISTORICAL LINES

To trace, or rather, to try and trace a systematic and documented history of Nestorianism in Central Asia, is a task yet to be accomplished. Considering the relative abundance of historical data, of evident signs in many texts, of references in the most diverse sources, there is a relative scarcity of archaeological comparisons; but future systematic excavations should be helpful. The history of this area is particularly difficult to disentangle; its complexity is due to many factors: the vastness of the territory, quite distant from any important center of political and religious power; the superimposition of races, often nomadic, which have left in many cases only indirect testimony of their vicissitudes; the alternate and anyhow always partial predominance of the huge empires; the ceaseless variation of the boundaries; the almost continuous state of conflict and the scarcity of reliable local documentation.

The history of this region and its sources, from Iran to China, allows us, however, to explain and interpret facts otherwise not very clear or seemingly lacking in an internal logic. The military operations themselves, the alternate alliances, the wars between the Roman (later Byzantine) and Sassanian empires, between Sassanians and Turks, Byzantines and Turks, seem understandable only in a broader vision of the history of all the populations which have defined the changeable and most various ethnic conformation of Central Asia.

On the surface, the religious politics of the three empires (Roman, Sassanian and Chinese) would seem irrelevant. Yet on closer examination, this is intrinsically connected to the history and motivations of the Central Asian populations, which in turn determined sudden military campaigns or substantial displacements of troops from one front to another. These displacements have in many cases led to defeats, to hasty agreements and to relative changes in religious politics. As this relates to Nestorianism, it affected the local development of the community and at times it obliged sudden diaspora. The not-always apparent, but nevertheless substantial, link between politics and religion determines otherwise unexplained favors, such as the support given by the Sassanians to the Nestorians obviously rooted in anti-Byzantine motivation. Even the personal vicissitudes of the sovereigns play a role, as in the case of the Sassanian Kavadh (498) who was helped by the Eftalite Turks, majority of them were Christians.

Economic history is another important element to consider, particularly in Central Asia, where a continuing flow of transcontinental trade established a bridge to the Western world as far back as the Roman era⁷. Trade determined the economic and social structure, and also life itself in a great part of the Central Asian towns. The power acquired by the rich mercantile class, suitable to the *desiderata* of the local monarchs, was *sub rosa* for the most part, hence not well documented in the usual sources. The importance of this class is reflected in the

⁷ Lin Meicun, "Roman Merchants in China in 100 A.D.", in *Social Sciences in China*, XIII, 3 (September 1992), pp. 13-25. Abridged and translated from *Zhongguo shehui kexue*, 1991, No. 4.

choice of religions. Particularly interesting is the case of the Sogdians, of Iranian stock, very gifted, the *élite* of traders, who determined linguistic and religious language choices in a huge area (Sogdian was in fact the *lingua franca* of all Central Asia). After having been for centuries the great propagators of Buddhism in Central Asia, many of the Sogdians converted to Manichaeism, of which they became missionaries, and, in smaller numbers, they converted to Nestorianism⁸.

Because of its geographical location, Central Asia was the inevitable route for every single or *en masse* displacement, and this has led to a remarkably copious documentation. As concerns our subject, the chronicles of the Chinese pilgrims of Buddhist faith made for Northern India concerning the sites sacred to the founder of their religion, should be quoted. Particularly noteworthy are the detailed travel diaries of Xuanzang, written and published at the behest of Emperor Taizong; this figure criss-crossed Central Asia around the year 630. Having left Gansu in 629 he follows, on the way out (629-630) the Northern route (Turfan, Karashar, Kucha, Aksu, Tokmak, Talas, Tashkent, Samarkand) and returns in 644 by the Southern route (Pamir, Kashgar, Yarkand, Khotan, the Shan shan and Dunhuang)⁹. A pious pilgrim, he deplores the abandonment of Buddhist convents, which he finds desolate, particularly in Samarkand; in contrast, he describes the institutions of the Zoroastrians and Manichaeans as prosperous.

The relatively well-documented development of Christianity in the Sassanian Empire¹⁰ turns out to be indispensable in order to understand the expansion and propagation of this religion in Central Asia. One must keep in mind that Merv was an Episcopal seat since the year 424; Herat would later have a like status, though not as important. Merv, one of the centers for propagating Christianity, would remain a cultural force until the arrival of the Mongols¹¹.

More distant regions, and not entirely Nestorian, also had a role in the evangelization of Central Asia. In fact, in the third decennium of the 6th century, a Nestorian Bishop of Arran (the Armenian *Aluank*, in present-day Azerbaijan)

⁸ Nestorian crosses with Sogdian inscriptions which actually refer to a trader, dating back to the year 841, are found at Tankse in Ladakh: F.W. Müller, "Eine sogdische Inschrift in Ladakh", in *Sitzungsberichte der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Phil-hist. Klasse*, 1925, pp. 371-373; E. Benveniste, "Notes sogdiennes, II, L'inscription sogdienne de Ladakh", in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies*, IX, 3 (1938), pp. 502-505.

⁹ E. Chavannes, *Documents sur les Tou-kieu (Turcs) occidentaux*, St. Petersburg 1903, p. 196. See also S. Beal, *The Life of Hiuen-Tsiang*, Delhi 1973.

¹⁰ See Labourt (1904) and Widengren (1984).

¹¹ A. Yu. Yakubovskii- C.E. Bosworth, s.v. "Marw al-Shahidjan", in *Encyclopédie de l'Islam* 2, VI, Leiden-Paris 1991, pp. 603-606, on p. 605 relate, quoting al-Tabari, the news of the burial of Yazdigird III at Pa-yi Baban, and of the existence of a Christian Monastery (of Masarjan) to the North of Sultan Kala.

together with some fellow bishops organized a missionary expedition to the Turkish tribes of Central Asia¹².

The Chinese dynastic annals of Liang Shu and the accounts of two Chinese Buddhist pilgrims, Song Yun and Huisheng, who were present in that area in the year 520¹³, also seem to point to the propagation of Christianity by the Eftalites.

Nestorianism was greatly diffused with Timothy I (778-823) who, invested by the Abbasid Caliph al-Mahdi with jurisdiction over all Christians in the Muslim world, got involved in an ambitious project of proselytism in the Turkish steppe, Mongolia and Tibet¹⁴. It is also reported, that "a Turkish king", shortly after 780, asked Timothy I for an Archbishop who was then sent; the seat of the Archbishopric was on the banks of the Syr Darya, to the west of Karabalgasun¹⁵. In the same period the *élite* of the important city of Kashgar, in Eastern Turkestan at the western end of the Silk Route, would become Christian,

¹²The same episode is also related by Tisserant (1931), col 207. See also E.A. Thompson, "Christian Missionaries among the Huns", in *Hermathena*, LVII (1946), pp. 73-79; K. Czegledy, "Pseudo-Zacharias Rhetor on the Nomads", in L. Ligeti (ed.), *Studia Turcica*, Budapest 1971, pp. 133-148. About this episode one must give some explanations: the source, the appendix to the Syriac Chronicle of the Pseudo-Zaccaria Rhetor, dating back to the year 555, mentions this expedition, destined more than for missionary aims supporting Christian slaves, and formed by Armenian Bishop Qardushat and by six other religious people, to the Huns, where the group remained seven years, baptizing many people and translating part of the scriptures. The problem arises when one tries to identify the zone in which these, not better defined as Uns, were lodged in that era. The term Huns is used from the most different sources in an inexact accepted meaning. The coincidence of Hsiung-Nu of the Chinese historians, hypothesized for the first time by the French orientalist Deguignes, by now two centuries ago, subsequently complicates the problem. According to some, in this case it would deal with the Huns-Sabirians (who gave Siberia its name) establishing themselves to the North of the Caucasus towards the years 461-465. But although authors amongst the most trustworthy, such as Tisserant, speak of Cisoxiana, even if also in a dubious way, one cannot exclude that the mission has, during the course of the seven years, also visited more oriental zones, inhabited by populations similar to the Huns.

¹³ Liang Dynasty 502-557. Sinor (1990), p. 300; E. Chavannes, "Voyage de Song Yun dans l'Udyana et le Gandhara", in *Bulletin de l'Ecole française d'Extrême Orient*, III (1903), pp. 379-441. See also P. Cannata, *Profilo storico del primo impero turco (metà VI-metà VII secolo)*, Rome 1981, p. 24. Other notices are reported in the *Histoire nestorienne inédite (Chronique de Séert)*, translation by A. Scher, in *Patrologia Orientalis*, IV (1908), V (1910), VII (1914), XIII (1919): Chronicle considered rather trustworthy, written in Arabic in the 11th century, which narrates, from more ancient sources, the history of the Oriental Church from the years 250 to 422 and from 484 to 650.

¹⁴ Central Asia then was a base for the further expansion towards the East: J. Labourt, *De Timotheo I, Nestorianorum patriarcha et Christianorum orientalium condicione sub Chaliphis abbasidid (728-823)*, Paris 1904, p. 45.

¹⁵ Dauvillier (1948), p. 285.

the first prince being christened with the name Sherkianos¹⁶, even as Nestorian monks functioned successfully in Tang China¹⁷.

The Uighurs, another nation of Turkish race (reigning 744-840) pursued Manichaeism as the State religion during most of their hegemony (i.e., from 763 on). But a consistent Nestorian minority coexisted. Succeeding Mou-yu kaghan, Tun bagha (deceased in 789) was married to a daughter of the Chinese Emperor; he had converted to Manichaeism during his stay in China and now imposed it on his people, but in fact he may have favored Christianity, which was once the religion of an entire faction of the Court¹⁸. Nestorianism was subsequently propagated amongst the Uighurs, after the end of their reign.

The Arabic conquest saw a precocious, partial, and initially not very deep Islamization. As occupation increased a stronger Islamism took hold (by the end of the 10th century in Transoxiana). But accounts by Muslim authors attest to the persistence of the earlier cults, primarily Zoroastrianism and Christianity¹⁹.

When, during the Spring of 893, Isma'il bin Ahmad the Samanid conquers the city of Talas, capital of the Turks Qarluq, beyond Syr Darya, one still finds "a big church which has been converted to a Mosque" ²⁰.

Traces of Christianity also survive at Bukhara as to a certain period. Narshaki, the historian of the Samanid dynasty (819-1005), the last of Iranian origin who ruled in Central Asia, describes an area of the Capital: "[E]ntering in the town across the Market Road of the Drunkards (*Ru-i Rindan*) was on the right....behind there was the Christian Church, which was later transformed into a Mosque of the Banu Hanzala tribe"²¹ One can presume that the name given to the road was due to the vicinity of the Church: in fact the Christians, whose religion did not enjoin teetotaling, were probably accused of being drunkards.

¹⁶ By the Greek Sergianos: Tisserant (1931), p. 208; see also E. Blochet, "La conquête des Etats nestoriens de l'Asie centrale par les Shiites. Les influences chrétienne et bouddhique dans le dogme islamique", in *Revue de l'Orient chrétien*, XXV (1925-26), [pp. 3-131], p. 24. Still in the year 1155 Aksu, town of the southern route of the Silk Road (present-day Xinjiang, P.R. of China), was governed by a Christian prince (*ibid.*, p. 25).

¹⁷ The well-known stele of Xi'anfu (known also as Si ngan fu) of the year 781, with Chinese text of 1900 characters, with 50 words in Syriac and with an index of 70 Syriac names in Chinese transcription, also narrates the introduction of Nestorianism in that town (present-day Xi'an) in the year 635, and its propagation by missionaries coming from Bactria. See Chavannes (1897), p.53; Pelliot (1984).

¹⁸ Sinor (1990), p. 333.

¹⁹ Barthold (1977), p. 94, 224, 255.

²⁰ Barthold (1977), p. 224, "...converted the chief church of the town into a mosque", taken from his article "Otchet o poezdke v Srednjuju Aziju" (Report on a travel in Central Asia), in *Zapiski Imperatorskoj Akademij Nauk po Istorij-filologij*, I, 4, p. 15, which reports notices taken from the historian Narshaki and from the Arab al-Tabari. It is to be noted that at Talas, known also as Taraz, there remain traces of a church, which will be spoken of further on.

²¹ Barthold (1977), p. 106.

In connection with such an accurate sign regarding the location on the walls of a Church, one must recall the very particular tripartite sub-division of Iranian influence in the Central Asian towns, more especially in Western Turkestan. Three distinct districts greeted a population rigidly divided into social categories: *arg*, a kind of citadel, generally eccentric, situated on a natural summit and protected by walls, was the seat of power; *shahristan*, the district of nobles, stretched out at the feet of the citadel on the inside of an enclosure; *rabad*, without a wall, stretched out in the shape of a green suburb, with its shops, workshops and its houses of reduced size. Such tripartition continued for a long time, well past the arrival of Islam, and it continues to characterise the urbanisation of the region. The Christian churches were situated in the *rabad* or outside the town as the archaeological traces and sources testify.

While still at the beginning of the 11th century, one must keep in mind the important conversion *en masse* of the Keraites, a tribe of Western Mongolia, located to the south-east of Lake Baikal. These would not only remain Christian for centuries, but they would also introduce Nestorianism to the Mongolian *élite*, thus creating something of a living bridge between the two periods of maximum expansion of this religion in the Middle and Far East²².

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

Archeological remains are few, but diverse, and they include sacred buildings, tombs, mural paintings, different objects, and inscriptions. These can be considered according to site, starting from the most Western, that is to say from the zones subject to a really precocious evangelization which is destined to extend, during the course of a few centuries, up to and beyond the borders of the Chinese Empire. Such categorization allows, on the one hand, for the correspondent sub-division to be more or less maintained in the historical regions — Khorezm (ancient Chorasmia), Sogdia (or also Transoxiana), Semirech'e (Land of the seven rivers) and Eastern Turkestan. On the other hand, the following coincide more or less with the borders of the present-day states in the area — Turkmenistan (Khorezm), Uzbekistan and Tajikistan (Sogdia), Kirghizistan and Kazakhstan (Semirech'e) respectively, all Republics of ex-USSR, People's Republic of China, Autonomous Region of Uighurs of Xinjiang (Eastern Turkestan) (Figs. 1 & 2).

KHOREZM

Merv, Xaroba koshuk

²² Abdishu, Metropolis of Merv, writes to the Nestorian Patriarch, saying that there had been *en masse* conversions among the Keraites: Tisserant (1931), col. 209. Bartol'd (1964), p. 265, note 2, refers to the historian Rashid al-Din.

The town of Merv, principal center of Khorasan, had a fortified citadel as far back as the 1st millennium B.C. (Erk Kala). Gjur kala was added to the south between the 3rd and 9th centuries, an urban type extension also fortified. Sultan Kala (9th-10th, 11th-12th centuries) and Shaxrijar Ark (11th century) were added to the west, along with lesser agglomerates, all of these inside a spacious walled enclosure. Known by the name of Antiochia Margiana and conquered by the Arabs in the year 651, it would become the second largest city (second only to Baghdad) in the entire Caliphate. The stretch of ruins in the various areas of its complex urban structure remains impressive to this day, even as the scarcity of clearly decipherable archaeological and architectural remains is striking (Fig.3)²³.

The building, named Xaroba Koshuk by the Soviet archaeologists, to whom we owe the excavation and its publication²⁴, is at 15 kilometres to the north of Merv, along the ancient road, next to a fortified hill known as Due chakyn, where there remain traces of an installation of the 6th-7th centuries. Said to originate in the 5th-6th centuries, as a church, it was used until the 11th-12th centuries (Figs. 4, 5, 6 & 7). The building facing southeast, with only one nave, built with mud bricks, of definite rectangular shape, approximately 51 metres long and 13 metres wide, had roofing of barrel vault (not preserved). The nave was divided into six spans of different lengths, with apse to the southeast, preceded by a room probably domed at one time. Two rectangular rooms were excavated in the thickness of the walls on the sides of the apse. Later, at an unascertained date, a kind of walled lining was added over it, on the outside of the perimetric walls²⁵.

The proportions of the building appear unusual, if compared with churches of the same period in Armenia or in Mesopotamia. The structure at Merv was approximately 1/3 longer in relation to the Armenian churches of the same era, of the longitudinal type with vault and only one nave which, however, never present a structure of six spans, but rather of four spans and in rare cases of five spans, more often of three. Armenian churches, all in blocks of stone, do not have that kind of square room placed before the apse, nor the two secondary

²³ The remains of the dead city extend in the proximity of the modern Bairam Ali, a little to the East of the chief provincial town of Mary (which keeps the ancient toponymy), in the present-day Republic of Turkmenistan (ex-USSR).

²⁴ Pugachenkova (1954); Pugachenkova (1958), pp. 126-130, plan p. 128; Pugachenkova (1967), pp. 86-87, plan p.87; Dresvjanskaja (1968 b), p. 2; Piljavskij (1974), p. 53, which specifies "temple of the Christian sect of the Manichaeans"; Gubaev (1987), pp. 90-92; Gubaev (1989), p. 182.

²⁵ The thickness of the internal circumferential walls is approximately 90 cm., of the external walls (that is to say of the lining) approximately 70 cm., that of the internal walls varies from about 1 m. to 2 m.; the eastern wall instead attains a total thickness of 4m. The approximate length of the spans is as follows: the first span (from the West) 6.90 m.; the second 3.30 m.; the third 8.00 m.; the fourth 3.40 m.; the fifth 3.20 m.; the sixth 11.40 m. The almost square room of the apse measures about 4.70x5.00 m. The depth of the niche of the apse is about 2.30 m. The building is orientated to about 600 to the South-East.

rooms²⁶. Even the parallelisms with elongated plan of some one-naved churches of Mesopotamia²⁷ do not seem so tight. Instead, the plans of the precincts on the long sides of the same churches²⁸ appear more similar to the building at Merv even if they lack the apsed room.

Not everyone considers the building a church. First of all, according to Soviet reports there is no trace of Christianity on the site, neither in the same epoch, nor at a later time. By contrast, in the Church at Ak Beshim tombs and objects definitely Christian have been brought back to light. Second, it would seem that the plan itself has been reconstructed and designated by Pugachenkova on the basis of an excavation probably incomplete and relating only to the surface²⁹.

Finally, it must also be added that the locality itself at a short distance (15 kilometres approximately) to the north of Merv raises another point. It seems unlikely that this was a suburb, given the distance involved. Forty kilometres was the usual distance from one stop to the next. Fifteen kilometers, therefore, made up nearly half of the route. Also, with buildings of huge proportion, one wonders what important center could find itself so near to town?

Notwithstanding this difficulty, the type of apse it features makes some scholars partial to the second hypothesis according to which it must have been a church³⁰.

²⁶ P. Cuneo *et alii*, *Architettura armena dal IV al XIX secolo*, Rome 1988, pp. 710, 711, 272-273. S. Gevorg (St. George) of Sverdlov, in the region of Step'anavan (Republic of Armenia, ex-USSR), makes up a rare example of a 6th century church with only one nave and five similar spans, and with two rooms at the sides of the apse, but only 22 metres in length. Other churches of this type (Lernakert, Jarjaris, S. Astvacacin of Sahnazar, all in the Republic of Armenia) all between 18 and 22 metres in length, dating back to the 5th century: *ibid.*, pp 243, 255, 267.

²⁷ Kefr Zeh (to-day Altintas) church of Mar Azizael; Arnas (to-day Baglarbai), church of Mar Kyriakos; Midyat, Mar Philoxenus; Hah, church of Mar Sovo, all in the zone of Tur'Abdin (to-day Turkey, region of Mardin, on the border with Syria), already refuge of Nestorians (see U. Monneret de Villard, *Le chiese della Mesopotamia*, Rome 1940, figs. 37, 38, 39, 41) had five spans more or less the same, except Arnas with four spans, but without a square precinct. That of Hah, the largest, measures 27.30x11.10 m. The churches mostly dating back, in their original structure, to the period preceding the Arab invasion, have been the object of restoration and of continuous reconstruction, due also to the survival, up till to-day, of Christian communities, in territories by now completely islamized.

²⁸ The already-quoted churches of Arnas, of Midyat and of Hah have lateral rooms rather smaller in size however, and still more elongated, also taking their function into consideration.

²⁹ The excavation appears hardly perceptible, the interior is half filled up. The Soviet system of excavation of the 50's did not exclude that, no sooner had the land been "scratched", without having arrived at the base of the walls, the plan was drawn, then interpreted and standardized (impossible to say whether with many or few changes); such a plan could turn out to be partially unreliable and, however, not possible to verify any more considering that the excavation has been covered up again to preserve the extremely perishable mud bricks from being attacked by atmospheric elements.

³⁰ Koshelenko, Pugachenkova and Grenet uphold the hypothesis of the actual church because of the specificity of the apsed zone. I am indebted to Professor Grenet himself for this information.

Merv, "Oval House"

The so-called "Oval House" (Oval'nyj dom) dates back to the 5th century and it is considered a Christian convent by Soviet archaeologists. It was temporarily uncovered in 1953, in the north-eastern area of Gjur Kala (Fortress of the Unfaithful) at Merv³¹ (Figs. 8 & 9). The plan of the complex appears singular and there is nothing comparable in the architecture of the Middle East; it is more akin to the structures of Buddhist convents of Gandhara³². It consists of a series of flanked rooms, of strongly rectangular plan, arranged around a huge courtyard of slightly trapezoidal shape; something of a corridor separates the short side, opposite the only entrance, from the courtyard itself³³.

The location of the so-called "Oval House" inside the walls of the *shahristan*, excludes the possibility that it is a Christian building, due to the fact that believers practicing a lesser religion were virtually forbidden to build in that part of town³⁴.

Other evidence at Merv and in the Khorezm

During the excavation campaign at Merv in the summer of 1993, a mould for crosses was unearthed, a rare archaeological find notwithstanding the propagation of local Christianity³⁵.

³¹ Pugachenkova (1967) pp. 87-88, plan p. 88; in the French translation (partial) of the Russian text the convent is indicated as a "big monastery of the Melkites", p. 211. Nikitin also (1984) p. 123, speaks of a convent of "orthodox Melkites Christians", relating to Dresvjanskaja (1968a), p. 12. See also Dresvjanskaja (1974); Gubaev (1989), p. 182. The excavations were covered up again, as is always the case when it concerns a building in mud bricks and therefore in my investigation on the site in May 1993 I only saw a hillock of elongated shape, situated South-East of the Erk Kala fortress, in turn now more similar to the interior of a small volcano than to an urban structure.

³² The Gandharian typology has experienced notable propagation as far as Burma, but, above all, in Central Asia. A prototype, approachable in some way to the plan of the "Oval House", can be found in the Buddhist monastery of Takht-i Bahi (close to Mardan in N.W.F.P., to-day Pakistan), about 2nd-4th centuries; B. Rowland, *The Art and Architecture of India, Buddhist, Hindu, Jaina*, Harmondsworth 1967, plan p. 86; K. Khan Mumtaz, *Architecture in Pakistan*, Singapore 1985, plan on p. 24. Similar plans are found in Buddhist convents in the nomad centres alongside the Silk Road, in Eastern Turkestan (Maillard [1983], fig. 41), in operation until the end of the 12th century.

³³ The complex is about fifty metres long and less than forty metres wide. The central courtyard is approximately 32 to 34 metres long, and approximately 17 to 23 metres wide; the cells are from 5.50 to 6.70 metres long, and approximately 2.60 to 2.80 metres wide. The thickness of the external walls varies from approximately 3.5 to 5.6 metres.

³⁴ This opinion is shared by Koshelenko and above all by Grenet, who informed me of it verbally in July 1993.

³⁵ I owe this information to Professor B.I. Marshak. It concerns unpublished material, which will be studied by A.B. Nikitin.

One has reports of Christian tombs, in a necropolis to the West of Merv, used from the 3rd to the 6th centuries³⁶.

Earthenware shapes of the 5th to the 7th centuries with Christian motifs have been found at Ak tepe³⁷ (Fig. 10), south-east of Merv. They deal with objects of Sassanian context.

Small slabs and medallions were found at Goek tepe³⁸, defined as early Christian by the archaeologist to whom we owe their excavation and publication³⁹.

Possibly the most interesting and better documented recovery is that of a Mizdaxkan⁴⁰ necropolis, in the region of Khorezm where, inside a *naus*, some ossuaries with painted crosses were found⁴¹.

According to al-Tabari, the Arab historian of the 9th century⁴², the term *naus* identifies non-Islamic structures (Zoroastrian and Christian) in the vast oasis of Merv. According to other hypotheses, it appears to deal with a type of funeral building with vaulted roofing set apart for bishops; in an analogous structure it would seem that the unhappy Yazdgird III, the last Sassanian Emperor, deceased in Merv in the year 651⁴³, was buried, by the Nestorian bishop of the town. It was actually at Merv that a *naus*, from a plan resembling that of the so-called "Oval House", was excavated and published by the Soviets at the Western extremity of the town, beyond the walls, inside a cemetery in use until the 7th century⁴⁴. One must immediately add that the *naus* of Merv are not

³⁶ Dresvjanskaja (1966), pp. 49-50; Dresvjanskaja (1968a), pp. 5, 23.

³⁷ The so-called Castle of Ak tepe, not far from Artyk, object of excavation already since the 1960's, has supplied numerous seals, Sassanian type gems, with various subjects, and also Sassanian coins. One of these seals bears the representation defined by the archaeologist as "Daniel in the Lions' den": Gubaev (1971), p.47. A seal bears a cross with arms of equal length, inside a circle: Gubaev (1977), fig. 6.

³⁸ Locality at about 50 kilometres North-West of Ashkhabad, in present-day Turkmenistan.

³⁹ Masson (1956).

⁴⁰ Archaeological site at a short distance from Xodzhejili, South-West of Nukus, in Karakalpaskaja, present-day Uzbekistan.

⁴¹ See further on.

⁴² Pugachenkova (1958), p. 126 note 1.

⁴³ For the tomb, still not found, see *Materialy po istorii Turkmen i Turkmenistan* (Documents on the history of Turkmens and Turkmenistan), Moskva-Leningrad 1938, t. 1, p. 97.

⁴⁴ Pugachenkova (1967), pp. 88-89, plan p. 89; S.A. Ershov, "Nekotorye itogi arxeologicheskogo isuchenija nekropolja s ossuarnymi v rajone goroda Bajram-Ali" (Some results of the archaeological research of the necropolis with ossuaries in the region of the town of Bairam Ali), *THAE Trudy Instituta istorii, arxeologii i etnografii Akademii Nauk Turkmenskoj SSR*, V, 1959, pp 160-204. Generically dated back to the 2nd-6th centuries, perhaps ascribed to three different periods, is a structure of almost square plan, approximately 40 metres per side, with a series of 24 small precincts in the interior, backed on to the circumferential walls, not communicating with each other, but open only towards a sort of big central precinct. The precincts have a width of

considered Christian buildings by Grenet⁴⁵. This term is now used to define generically buildings set aside for receiving ossuaries.

The Mizdaxkan *naus*⁴⁶ (Fig. 11), dated between the end of the 7th century and the first half of the next century, presents a structure of rather plain construction, really different to the one we have just cited at Merv. It deals with a building partially or completely underground, in mud bricks, of rectangular shape, with an entrance having a corridor which extends to the outside with two brief parallel walls, and probably covered with a barrel-vault⁴⁷.

Inside, 82 ossuaries were discovered in three layers, arranged differently, in no apparent order. These objects⁴⁸, not very large, in the shape of a small case, mostly in earthenware, variedly decorated, were generally used by the followers of the Zoroastrian faith⁴⁹. There were some that were rather elaborate in their design in relief, engraved or painted, and others of architectural shape⁵⁰. The eight ossuaries which interest us⁵¹ (Fig. 12), make up the upper layer in the interior of the *naus*, and dominate the two lower levels thereby flattening them. It concerns models in plaster, rather plain in their decoration as in their shape, of the type with pyramidal roof, dating back to the 7th century, which present on the long sides, at the center, a Latin cross, sometimes between two stars or other plain decorative motifs, or with flowing ribbons in the lower part⁵².

These ossuaries, situated inside a *naus*, together with others, lends credence to the hypothesis that Christians also used this type of building for their

about 2.40-2.80 metres; a length of about 6.50-7.00 metres. The central courtyard measures about 15.60x15.90 metres. The thickness of the external walls is about 4 metres; that of the internal walls about 1.40-1.60 metres. Symmetry is lacking in the arrangement of the precincts, only the oriental side and the Western side seem to correspond.

⁴⁵ Grenet (1984), pp. 194-196. In other cases, however, they should have been used by Christians: see further on.

⁴⁶ Grenet (1984), p. 146, plan XIX.

⁴⁷ The measurements are 7.2x4 m.; the entrance protrudes more than a metre from the body of the structure, whilst the thickness of the walls attain approximately 80 cms.

⁴⁸ C. Lo Muzio, "Gli ossuari", in *Oxus.Tesori dell'Asia Centrale. Catalogo della mostra*, Rome 1993, pp. 127-129, with a brief bibliography on the subject.

⁴⁹ The presence of crosses turns out to be rather rare. See further on the models of Pendzhikent (Tajikistan), Rudaki Museum, and of Afrasiab, today in the Museum of the Hermitage of St. St. Petersburg, Grenet also speaks of analogous examples at the Museum of History at Samarkand.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

⁵¹ Jagodin, Xodzhajnov (1970), pp. 146-150; Grenet (1984), p. 146 and Plan XXXV, where seven of the eight ossuaries have been brought back. They measure about 50 cms. in width and more than 70 cms. in height.

⁵² The motive of the flowing ribbons, generally symmetrical, is rather diffused in Sassanian artistic production and of Sassanian influence. Model No. 5 brought back by Grenet, also presents traces of an inscription.

burials⁵³. In some ossuaries of more ancient type, in ceramic, these also coming from Mizdaxkan, the figurative decoration (stylised flowers and quadrupeds) would have been, according to Grenet's interpretation, partially erased to allow for re-use by the local Christians⁵⁴.

Four fragmented slabs of stone, with coarsely engraved crosses, are preserved in the museum in the interior of Tash Medrese of Kunja Urgench⁵⁵ (Figs. 13 & 14). The only one that appears whole bears two crosses with the tips emphasized by a short rectilinear engraving, but has no traces of an inscription. The biggest, classified under No. 34, greatly mutilated, bears a brief inscription in Arabic characters below the usual cross: Shahnazar ibn Baxshi Gulashay 'Umar⁵⁶. On the slab vaguely triangular, under a cross very similar to the former one, one reads, again in Arabic characters: Muhammad Murad ibn Aqmadi ibn Muhammad⁵⁷. On the smaller slab, of yellowish colour, over the cross the word "liqodrat" is engraved (for the power, in Arabic). The type of writing, deprived of any kind of element which could furnish useful tips for a date, does not allow one to go back to an era before the 13th-14th centuries. The name Aqmad, and also its possible variants, reveals itself as being Turkish without doubt. With the evidence of persisting Christianity in the area, one could assume re-employment of more antique slabs for funerary use of a Christian community of Turkish race.

SOGDIA

Afrasiab

Today, Afrasiab, the pre-Mongolian Samarkand, is a huge archaeological area, with only a small portion covered by Timurid buildings (the monumental necropolis of Shah-i Zinde). For centuries, Afrasiab has been an important center of the nomad trade, the seat of an episcopate between the 5th and the 7th centuries⁵⁸,

⁵³ As however Grenet (1984), p. 265 also says.

⁵⁴ Grenet (1984), p. 146, ill. XXXIII, where, on the other hand, one notes how the quadruped is missing on one side, and also the absence of any Christian symbol whatsoever.

⁵⁵ Kunja Urgench is found in the more Northern zone of present-day Turkmenistan, in Cisoiana, at a short distance from the left bank of Amu darya. These slabs, not very big, noticed by me in a showcase, during an investigation on the site in that zone in May 1991, are exhibited without indication of kind. It is quite probable that they are of local origin.

⁵⁶ Michele Bernardini, whom I thank very warmly, read this inscription.

⁵⁷ The word Aqmadi could also be read as Aqsami or Aqsaschi.

⁵⁸ Bartol'd (1964), p. 290, who in turn quotes Abu al-Faraj.

then the seat of a Nestorian metropolitan. Marco Polo speaks of a legendary church dedicated there to St. John the Baptist⁵⁹.

The site has been the subject of systematic excavations since the end of the last century, and these have yielded the following: A small bronze cross including an upper ring enabling it to be worn around the neck, with extremely neat endings of circular shape and traces of decorations on the surface (circles)⁶⁰ (Fig. 15); an earthenware ossuary with at least three crosses deeply engraved⁶¹ (Fig. 16); and Sogdian coins with a cross⁶².

Urgut

At Koshtepa, in the territory of Urgut⁶³, on an archaeological site between the village of Akmachit and of Utamas, an excavated building was identified as a church⁶⁴. The structure, which occupies the summit of a moderate hill⁶⁵, presents an unusual plan (Fig. 17). It consists of a rectangular building, dictated by the topography of the site, with the interior divided into three different rooms, one of which is circular⁶⁶. The right-hand room (orienting the building to the North) presents a type of seat-base on three sides and, on the eastern side, a very small fire-place showing traces of prolonged use. A fragmentary seal with a scene interpreted by the Soviet archaeologists as being

⁵⁹ M. Polo, *Milione*, Critical edition by V. Bertolucci Pizzorusso, Milan (1985), p. 69. See also B.E. Colless, "The Nestorian Province of Samarkand", in *Abr-Nahrain*, XXIV (1986), pp. 51-57.

⁶⁰ Accidental discovery of 1946: Terenozhkin (1950), photo 72,2.

⁶¹ Belenickij (1969), photo 78, now at the Hermitage Museum of St. Petersburg. On this ossuarie the same circles that decorate the bronze cross (Pacos [1960], p. 60). Grenet (1984), p. 160, quotes other ossuaries now at the Hermitage Museum of St. Petersburg and at the Historical Museum of Tashkent which have crosses applied or engraved on the long sides. According to some scholars the cross, especially when it is very schematic, does not always constitute as such a determining factor when attributing the object on which it appears to a Christian world; such a motive would have had a purely decorative value. One can note, however, that as concerns the ossuaries just mentioned the cross appears inserted on purpose, may be added afterwards, outside any precise decorative scheme whatsoever. However, even if it turns out to be rather probable to attribute the same funerary practices of the Zoroastrians (Grenet [1984], p. 275), to the Nestorians of Central Asia, the question still remains open.

⁶² Rtveladze *et alii* (1974), p. 135, number 786.

⁶³ In the province of Samarkand, approximately 40 kms. South-East of the chief town.

⁶⁴ Isxakov *et alii*, (1977), pp. 84-97. The relative archaeological campaign goes back to 1973.

⁶⁵ A second hill is found at a distance of 50 metres; the toponymy means "two hills". The building is identified with No. 1.

⁶⁶ Isxakov *et alii* (1977), plan 1, p. 93. The measurements are approximately 12x19 metres, and the diameter of the circular precinct approximately 8 metres. The authors generically approach this plan to that of Byzantine churches, without, however, giving any examples.

that of a christening was found in the interior⁶⁷. The presence of a fire-place has made one think of a building connected in some way or other with the cult of fire, though it is possible that the same structure was used for separate purposes by Zoroastrians and by Christians. The structure built in mud blocks, like all those in the area, seems to date back to the 7th and 8th centuries⁶⁸. Both the subject of the fragments found *in situ*, and the absence of any sign of domestic life leads one to believe this was a place of worship used by the local Christians⁶⁹.

A bronze thurible with six scenes from the Gospel and inscription in Syriac has also been found in the zone of Urgut, dating back to the 8th-9th centuries⁷⁰ (Fig. 18). Zalesskaja is inclined to identify it as of Syriac origin, and he approximates the iconography to that of the *ampullae* of Monza. The decoration turns out rather well differentiated: geometric in two bands (strips) in the upper part, engraved and in flat relief, as also in the base, while the more important decoration, more prominent, with figures that come out in relief from the background, is reserved for the central zone. The scenes (Annunciation, Visitation, Nativity, Baptism, Crucifixion, the Pious Women at the Tomb) succeed each other without any explanation of continuity in an apparent *horror vacui* making recognition almost impossible, except for the Crucifixion, which appears more obvious.

Barthold states that in the same area, fragmentary inscriptions in Syriac and engraved crosses⁷¹ have been found. Numerous inscriptions with various Nestorian crosses have recently been photographed and transcribed on a rock at Jami Bazaar, between Urgut and Samarkand⁷². Again according to Barthold,

⁶⁷ The seal engraved is described as such: two male figures are represented, with elaborate clothing, the one standing supports a book in one hand and in the other, a cross, raised, the one kneeling down seems to have a crown, Isxakov *et alii* (1977), pp. 93-94.

⁶⁸ Due to the presence of two Sogdian-type coins of that era.

⁶⁹ Grenet also favours an interpretation of such meaning.

⁷⁰ Found in 1916, brought into the antique market of 1918, is now preserved at the Hermitage Museum of St. St. Petersburg, inventory number SA 12758: Zalesskaja (1971); Zalesskaja (1972). One can compare it to a similar and coeval thurible, also at the Hermitage Museum, inventory number 123, with five different scenes drawn from the Gospel: *Iskusstvo Vizantii v sobranijax SSSR, Iskusstvo epoxi ikonoborcestva, Iskusstvo IX-XII vekov* (Byzantium Art in the USSR collections, Art from the Iconoclastic era, 9th-12th century Art), 1977, p. 16, photo 442.

⁷¹ Barthold (1977), p. 94, note 2. The Russian orientalist defines them Christian "graffiti" and specifies that they were rediscovered north-west of Urgut, in the village of Sufijan.

⁷² During a recognition of August 1994, Professor Grenet, to whom I owe this information, traced back and photographed these inscriptions for the first time, which would be those that Barthold had already indicated; M. Tardieu and N. Sins William are taking care of the translation. It deals with about 25 inscriptions of very small characters, many of which are preceded by a cross; it seems like a list of names, probably those of pilgrims who had visited the site, locally considered an equivalent of Mount Sinai, and a traditionally sacred place, and pilgrimage for the Muslims until

who bases himself on Arabic historical texts belonging to the first centuries of the conquest, this was the region having the highest density of Christian population⁷³.

Although at a good distance from there, one should also note a complex formed by dozens of small rooms carved in the rock, a short distance from Ajvadh, on the right-hand bank of Amu darya⁷⁴. This complex was identified by its discoverer as a Christian-Nestorian convent and it is dated to the 6th-7th centuries. A cross engraved in the ceiling of room 18 of the Second Complex, identified as Nestorian, tends to support this opinion, even though there is no precise archaeological reference whatsoever, no coeval object has been found, nor is there a cemetery.

Pendzhikent

The town of Pendzhikent was founded by the fugitives of Afrasiab when the latter was in Arabic hands. Systematic excavations over several decades have revealed an interesting example of a prosperous Sogdian town of the 7th-8th centuries⁷⁵.

On a fragment of vase, two extracts from Psalm 1 and Psalm 2 were found, in Syriac, of which the term *ante quem* proves to be, without any doubt,

the 17th century, also because of the presence of a tree and a spring having apparent healing powers.

⁷³ Barthold (1977), p. 94 quotes, without giving exact references, two Arab authors of the 10th century, al-Istakhri (*Viae regnorum descriptio ditionis moslemicae, Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum* by M.J. de Goeje, Leiden 1870, I) and Ibn Hauqal (*Opus geographicum, Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum*, by J.H. Kramers, Leiden 1938-39, II). See also "The Oriental Geography of Ibn Hauqal an Arabian Traveller of the Tenth Century", London 1800, translation by W. Ouseley, p. 257. In Ibn Hauqal, noted also as traveller and geographer of Baghdad, from where he leaves in 943, author of *Kitab almasalik wa 'l-mamalik* (Book of roads and reigns), see also F. Gabrieli, *Viaggi e viaggiatori arabi*, Firenze 1975, pp. 59-66. Particularly as regards his genuineness, it is worthwhile quoting the great Italian orientalist U. Monneret de Villard, in whose article: "La tessitura palermitana presso i Normanni e i suoi rapporti con l'arte bizantina", in *Miscellanea Giovanni Mercati, III (Studi e testi 123)*, Città del Vaticano 1946, p. 464, nominates Ibn Hauqal and coeval Muqaddasi defining them "both very accurate writers, who have handed down the most precise information on all the countries of the Islamic world...".

⁷⁴ It concerns a discovery of 1967, in a remote region of Southern Tagikistan in the province of Shaartuz, very near the border with Afghanistan, see Chmelnizkij (1989), pp.172-174, with photo and plan, where a drawing (118) also presents a relief with cross.

⁷⁵ The spacious archaeological site (over 14 hectares), object of systematic excavations on the part of specialists from the Hermitage Museum of St. St. Petersburg, next to which arises a modern town, is in the more eastern area of the Republic of Tajikistan (ex-USSR), in the province of Leninabad. As on the other archaeological sites, the remains of the buildings, given the extremely perishable material, are reduced to mural fragments, and only in the case of some templar buildings a sort of reconstruction has been attempted.

the second half of the 8th century, when the town was captured by the Arabs⁷⁶. It deals with an extract probably written by a Sogdian, from dictation, and with spelling errors.

At the Rudaki Museum of the modern town, one can see a funerary urn in smooth earthenware⁷⁷. As its sole decoration, it features a series of carved crosses under its edge (Fig. 19). It is not clear, however, whether in fact these are crosses or simply a decorative motif shaped almost as a loophole⁷⁸.

In the cemetery of Dasht-i Urdakon, at a kilometer Southeast of Pendzhikent, in the tomb of a young girl evidently Christian, a bronze cross to be worn around the neck has been discovered⁷⁹.

Some Sogdian coins with crosses⁸⁰ must also be mentioned, as well as the fragment of a jug with carved cross⁸¹.

⁷⁶ Pajkova (1976), p. 34, Pajkova (1979). The *ostrakon*, painted on a perfectly clean surface, formed from 18 lines, relates the beginning of Psalm 1 "Blessed the man who does not follow the examples of the impious, does not tarry along the path of sinners..." and that of Psalm 2: "Why do the nations plot, why do the peoples conspire in vain?...". The fragment was found on the first floor of a dwelling, called by the Soviet archaeologists Number XXIV. It is dated back to the first half of the 8th century.

⁷⁷ Less than one metre in length, about forty centimetres wide and less than 50 centimetres high, it turns out not to be very perceptible, given its disposition in a glass-case without any illumination whatsoever. I was not able to have the glass-case opened in order to have a more complete vision of the object. On ossuaries coming from the same region and dated between the second half of the 7th century and half of the following century see: Grenet (1984), pp. 160-163.

⁷⁸ For comparisons in the shape of the loopholes in pre-Islamic buildings, C. Silvi Antonini Colucci (1973), p. 287. These ossuaries, typical of the Zoroastrianism, are rather diffused, generally of more reduced size, with decoration also being elaborated (the rather well-known one of the Historical Museum of Samarkand); examples with decoration in the shape of a cross are not lacking, however, like the already-quoted ossuaries of Mizdaxkan. See also Bussagli (1963), p. 45: "Plusieurs sarcophages locaux présentent aussi d'autres reflets du monde chrétien occidental ... La diffusion du nestorianisme en Sogdiane fut, en effet, si large et marqua si profondément le pays que des phénomènes de ce genre peuvent très bien s'expliquer historiquement".

⁷⁹ Belenickij *et alii* (1977), p. 559; it deals with a necropolis with catacombs dated back to the 8th century. On the other necropolis' of Pendzhikent and on other tombs probably Christians B. Ja. Staviskij, O. G. Bol'shakov, E. A. Monchadskaja, *Pjandzhikenskij nekropol'* (Pjandzhikent necropolis), *MIA, Materialy i issledovanija po arxeologii SSSR*, no. 37, Moskva-Leningrad 1953. The necropolis is made up of small structures with rectangular plan (crypt-*naus*), where the ossuaries were arranged, dating back to the 5th-6th-7th centuries. Either the deposition of bones inside big containers (*chum*), or internement in tombs (maybe with lateral niches and catacombs) took place; part of the latter must be attributed to the Christians living in the town: see E. V. Zejmal (ed.), *Oxus, Tesori dell'Asia centrale. Catalogo della mostra*, Roma 1993, p. 21. See also Grenet (1984), pp. 160-167. A restructure of a *naus* of Pendzhikent, which so far no factor allows us to attribute it to the local Christian community, but which, nevertheless, must be quoted in this context, is found also in *Vseobshaja istorija arhitektury v 12 tomov* (General history of Architecture in 12 volumes), "Arhitektura stran sredizemnomor'ja, Afriki i Azii VI-XIX vv." (Architecture of the Mediterranean, Asian and African countries, 6th-19th centuries), VIII, 1969, p. 190, plate 10.

⁸⁰ Smirnova (1963), pp. 145-147.

It must be added that the subjects of numerous mural paintings, all dating back to the 7th-8th centuries, which the town has restored, still remain in dispute; even Bussagli was unable to define them with certainty⁸². In at least one illustration, Bussagli advanced the hypothesis of a reflection of the Christian world⁸³. This concerns a detailed representation of an impressive building, of various floors, opened at the base by a door, dominated by three crosses and characterized by a surpassed arched motif, inside which one can have a glimpse

⁸¹ Nikitin (1984), p. 125, who does not quote the source.

⁸² Bussagli (1963), p. 47 "Les peintures murales de Pjandzikent... Leur interprétation est souvent douteuse. Des versions contadictaires s'affrontent, selon qu'un sujet est tenu pour manichéen ou bouddhiste, ou encore, qu'il satisfait à une dévotion locale nourrie à la pensée de l'Iran extérieur."

⁸³ Bussagli (1963), p.45 "un rapprochement (avec l'art byzantin ou celui de la Transcaucasie) s'impose à propos d'une représentation de chateau (salle 13, secteur VI): ses éléments architecturaux s'inspirent, sans qu'on puisse en douter un instant, des constructions chétiennes de l'Arménie - le portail d'entrée, par exemple, est très semblable à ceux d'Ani et d'Ereruk.". The painting, now at the Hermitage Museum of St. St. Petersburg, and not reported by Bussagli, was published by A.M. Belenickij et alii, *Skul'ptura i zhivopis drevnego Pendzhikenta* (Sculpture and painting of Ancient Pendzikent), Moskva 1959, tables XI-XVIII; G. A. Pugachenkova, L. I. Rempel', *Ocherki iskusstva Srednej Azii. Drevnosti i srednevekove* (Studies on Central Asian Art, Ancient and Medieval Periods), 1982, photo p. 133, in which the building in question can be partially but clearly seen. The whole painting is reproduced entirely in A.M. Pribytkova, *Pamjatniki arxitektury Srednej Azii* (Monuments of Central Asian Architecture), Moskva 1971, photo no. 4. On the comparison proposed by Bussagli, some observations can be made. First, the Cathedral of Ereruk' (Republic of Armenia) is much more ancient — 5th century, or more probably 6th century — than the buildings of Ani (Eastern Turkey), with which it has nothing in common, therefore linking the two sites appears rather strange. Second, at Ereruk' there is only one Basilica and not a fortress, nor any other traces of civil buildings. Maybe Bussagli wanted to refer only to the portal factor, which according to him, would seem the same, or, however, similar to that of the fortress represented at Pendzhikent. Of the portals of the Basilica, only the Western one, having, on the other hand, a sort of gate on columns which are completely missing at Pendzhikent, can be approximated in shape and proportion to the Central-Asiatic painting, whilst the others are characterized by the upper part having a tympanum. As regards Armenian portals, the sculptural decoration appears more frequent on those of a more mature or late period, than on those of the early periods. Amongst the latter, that of Mren (in the region of Kars, Turkey) is definitely the most similar in shape (surpassed arch, but on a high decorated architrave). The Cathedral, built between the years 629 and 640, as testifies the long inscription on the Western facade, is characterized among the coeval Armenian production because of the abundance and the style of the architectural sculpture, rather similar to that of the Sassanians. Other examples: S. Xac' (St. Cross) of Aparan and the Basilica of Elvard (both in the Republic of Armenia). In the case of an inter-connection between the two buildings (Ereruk' is the fortress represented at Pendzhikent) there would a typological passage from Christian religious architecture of Sub-Caucasian of the 8th century. It is amazing to think that a Christian building could have been taken as model, even though partially, of a defensive structure, in addition to being built in a different material (stone in Armenia, mud brick in Central Asia). Third, Ani, capital since 961, has numerous vestiges, also civil (the walls, Paron Palace), but all dating after the destruction of Pendzikent by the Arabs.

This does not prevent the painting demonstrating that its unknown painter of the 8th century was familiar with Christian buildings, even though one cannot assert with certainty that he obtained inspiration from a church and an Armenian church in particular. The authoress has presented a report on this topic to the 10th Anniversary Conference of AIEA (International Association of Armenian Studies), London, September 1993.

of decorations (a face it would seem) (Figs. 20 & 21). This portal has been compared by Bussagli to those found in Armenian architecture. Above the portal in the painting of Pendzhikent, an architectural decoration in bricks is accurately represented, and also a kind of loop-hole. The loopholes in Central Asian buildings more or less coeval were often of elongated shape, with the upper part vaguely rhomboidal, exactly as the one here represented, or else in the shape of an arrow (as already in the Parthian fortress at Durmali, in the Oasis of Merv, of the 1st century A. D.). Immediately above the arched motif a cross⁸⁴ is represented alternating with a *zigurrat* motif followed by a second and a third cross. Because of the closeness with the loop-hole (or series of loop-holes) it is difficult to imagine that even these in the shape of a cross were functional openings. The upper floor is distinguishable by a rectangular window, partly concealed by an open-work motif and surmounted by an arched motif, and by a semi-circular arch as high as the window. One must note, though the evidence is far from clear, that the façades of Armenian churches of the 6th and 7th centuries were opened by large windows, but arched, in axis above the portal.

The ensemble of the Pendzhikent mural paintings turns out to be that of an extremely syncretic world, maybe more so than many others. Generally, Central Asian paintings and sculptures represent fairly well and absolutely emphasize the ethnic multiplicity of the local society, also a reflection of the missionary tendency of most of the present religions. The unusual architectural background seems inspired towards the same desire of accurate and varied representation which, describes the characters of the scene next to it.

On the basis of the evidence of Nestorianism brought back to light in the whole of Sogdia, a new interpretation of the mural paintings can be put forward, not completely without foundation, according to which the social and economic importance of the followers of this religion during the course of the 7th and the 8th centuries would have had freedom in the choice of the subjects of the paintings themselves⁸⁵.

SEMIRECH'E

⁸⁴ This detail has been ignored by Bussagli.

⁸⁵ The mural paintings of Miran, in Eastern Turkestan, on the Southern track of the Silk Road (Central-Asiatic sector of the National Museum of New Delhi, now being refurbished) dated back by Bussagli to the second half of the 3rd century A. D., with scenes unmistakably Buddhist, but of Western-type style, would reveal, according to Stein, Christian influence: M.A. Stein, *Ruins of Desert Cathay, Personal Narrative of Explorations in Central Asia and Westernmost China*, London 1912, I, p. 457. It seems difficult to find Christian subjects, but some parallelism of stylistic type could be made with early-Christian paintings of the Eastern-Roman world, especially as regards some persons inside festoons: see Bussagli (1963), ill. pp. 24, 25 and p.18 (believers without festoons).

The region of the Seven Rivers, east of Sogdia, corresponds to the southern part of present-day Kazakhstan and to the northern region of present-day Kirghizistan, both Republics of ex-USSR.

Tomb-stones with Syriac inscriptions dated between the years 858 and 1338 were found in the region at the end of the last century⁸⁶.

Pre-Islamic tombs, probably including some Christian ones, have been found at Otrar⁸⁷ where, even in the Islamic era, Christian communities existed.

At Taraz⁸⁸, the presence of Christianity was confirmed by relatively recent excavations⁸⁹ (Fig. 22). We have information of some Christian tombs dating back to the 9th-10th centuries, of the trench type and in crypts of reduced size, made of backed bricks⁹⁰. At Taraz, but also at Saryg (Krasnorechenskoe excavations), fragments of vases with Syriac and Sogdian inscriptions of Christian significance⁹¹ were found in the 7th-8th centuries layers. According to Borisov⁹², the type of writing contained on an inscription bearing the names of Peter and Gabriel is more indicative of Jacobite Christians than of Nestorians.

A church would appear to have existed at Taraz; however, it cannot be dated accurately. It was located in the eastern zone, in *rabad* III inside the

⁸⁶ Chwolson (1890).

⁸⁷ Otrar, oasis along the medium stream of Syr darya, is in the Southern area of the Republic of Kazakhstan (exUSSR), in the region of Kyzylkum, in the province of Chimkent. The archaeological site, object of excavations since the second half of the last century, systematically examined after the second World War by specialists from Leningrad, amongst which A.N. Bernstam, has produced evidence from the 6th century to the 16th century. The town has been an industrious commercial centre, connected with Sogdia, until the Mongol period: see K.A. Akishev, K. M. Bajpakov, L. B. Erzakovich, *Drevnij Otrar, Topografija, stratigrafija, perspektivy* (Ancient Otrar, Topography, Stratigraphy, Prospects), 1972; Klimkeit (1988), p. 86. I owe this information on the tombs of Otrar to Frantz Grenet.

⁸⁸ The scarce traces of ancient Talas, known also as Aulie-Ata, centre of notable importance during many centuries, even after the advent of Islam, are found a little to the East of the present-day Dzhambul, chief regional town of centraleastern Kazakhstan, to the South-West of Lake Balkash.

⁸⁹ T.N. Senigova, *Srednevekovyj Taraz* (Medieval Taraz) 1972, pp. 114-117. Earthenware items have been found, one of which with a cross (fig. 9, p. 61); it cannot be strongly asserted that this was not a decorative motive. In connection with the necropolis of "Bazaar of the flours", dated between the 7th and the 10th centuries, Grenet (1984,) p. 180, reports the finding of a vase used for funerary purpose with a Nestorian-type cross, without further details.

⁹⁰ Rempel' (1957), p. 110.

⁹¹ Bernstam (1941), p. 21; a Syriac inscription of only three words, dated back to the 5th-6th centuries has been published by Borisov (1948), pp. 105-106. One must also mention a relief with Nestorian subject, of small size, found in the region of Semirech'e, of controversial date, which the authoress attributes to the 6th-8th centuries: Senigova (1968); see also Borisov (1948), pp. 107-108. The identification of ancient Saryg with the site known to-day as Krasnorechenskoe gorodishche, fortified town under excavation, has now been called in question: see Grenet (1984), p. 326.

⁹² Borisov (1948), pp. 107-108.

enclosure⁹³ (Fig. 23). Its identification as a Christian building turns out to be highly debatable, particularly because of its relatively central location, inside an extension to the east of the *shahristan*, contiguous to Muslim buildings of the 11th and 13th centuries⁹⁴.

A silver jug of a type defined Greek-Bactrian by Soviet specialists, rediscovered in the North of Kirghizistan, and which Trever attributes to the 2nd-1st centuries B.C.⁹⁵, bears five seals engraved in the shape of a cross which in turn comprise a cross (Fig. 24). Such seals, according to Nikitin⁹⁶, would have been added by the local Nestorian community, who would have used the jug for liturgical purposes.

Ak Beshim, church and tombs

Archaeological remains of extraordinary interest resulted from the excavation of a building, identified in unambiguous way as a church, at Ak Beshim⁹⁷. Such a site has been identified with Balasaghun⁹⁸, the latest capital of the Kara Kitai reign (or Black Kitan) known by Chinese sources as Xi Liao (Western Liao) who dominated the area between the years 1124 and 1211. Of Buddhist religion, they were tolerant with respect to Islam and Nestorianism. In fact, these latter experienced a new period of prosperity under their rule, which continued up to the end of the 14th century, as indicated by some tombs. On the other hand, little is known of the preceding period, characterized by the superimposition of the Turkish race over the pre-existing Iranian race. Apart from traces of urban structures, there remains a big Buddhist temple (76x22m.) with a clay statue of Buddha sitting down (4 metres high), built to the southwest

⁹³ Senigova, *op. cit.*, p. 25 plan of the town where, the church is indicated by number 10. It is not clear whether it should be attributed to the 8th-9th centuries or to the 10th-12th centuries. The excavations have been carried out by the same Senigova in 1962.

⁹⁴ According to Grenet it would not deal with a church, and should however be attributed to a later period; Nikitin in his detailed article of 1984 does not mention it.

⁹⁵ Trever (1940), pp 110-112, fig. 9. Found in 1923 in the territory of the village of Pokrovskij Pishpeksij, in the province of Bishkek, formerly Frunze, the jug was then placed in the State Museum of Kazakhstan at Alma Ata.

⁹⁶ Nikitin (1984), p. 127.

⁹⁷ The site is in the valley of the River Chu, at 8 kilometres to the southwest of the town of Tokmak, at a short distance, towards southeast, from the capital Bishkek (ex-Frunze), in Southern Kirghizistan (ex-USSR). Regarding the fact that it deals with a church, F. Grenet and B.I. Marshak also agree, and they confirmed it to me during a conversation on the subject. According to Marshak, it would deal with the only church found up till now in the whole of Central Asia.

⁹⁸ Some identify the ancient capital in nearby Burana.

of the citadel during the 8th century and devastated in the following century⁹⁹ (Fig. 25).

The church, situated on a hill in the northwestern area of the *rabad*, at a short distance to the west of the *shahristan* wall, was the object of systematic excavations in 1954¹⁰⁰ (Fig. 26). This is a building in *pisé*, of reduced size, of cruciform shape, in front of which is placed a much more spacious and emphatically rectangular precinct, considered by Kyzlasov as a kind of courtyard. On the southern side but open only towards the exterior, is a small rectangular place, with no corresponding room to the north¹⁰¹. Some Christian tombs and other Muslim tombs have been found inside this structure. Scarce traces of plaster and of mural paintings suggest the existence of decorative material completely disappeared by now. The church is dated back to the 8th century¹⁰².

The entire archaeological site, only partially excavated, appears planimetrically approachable to many other Central-Asiatic towns of pre-Islamic era, characterized by a tripartition in *arg* (citadel), *shahristan* (area of the nobles) and *rabad* (area of the traders and craftsmen)¹⁰³. Such a division, ultimately dissolved by the more democratic Islam, allows one to particularize the social importance of the builders of the structures of the single zones, and this is of great interest for the study of archaeological evidence of the lesser religions. The location of the church, 165 metres to the west of the western wall of the *shahristan*, that is to say inside the *rabad*, appears to typify the scarce casuistry of the Christian buildings (or presumed as such) of Central Asia. Christians had to belong to the dynamic traders' class, open to the most varied experience and having contact with people of different origins; their area, therefore, appears the

⁹⁹ Issued by Kyzlasov in the same article of 1959, of which, besides, it constitutes the great part. A second complex dating back to the 12th century also existed.

¹⁰⁰ Kyzlasov (1959), pp. 155-241: on the church and the Christian tombs pp. 230-233, plan No. 56. The church is indicated as "object IV".

¹⁰¹ Measurements of the different parts: room of cruciform plan 5.30x4.80 metres, precinct of rectangular plan 27x12 metres, small room of rectangular plan 4.50x2.25 metres.

¹⁰² Some difference exists regarding the date: according to Litvinski it would be of the 10th century, according to C. Silvi Antonini Colucci it would belong to a level from the 5th-6th centuries (at Ak Beshim three levels from the 5th to the 10th centuries). This data was kindly given to me by the authors during a conversation in May 1993. C. Silvi Antonini Colucci (1973) dated the church back to the 7th-8th centuries. According to Kyzlasov, archaeologist of the MGU (Moskovskij Gosudarstvennij Universitet) and author of the publication, it would, without doubt, go back to the 8th century. In connection with the already-mentioned disinterest of Central Asia in Christian testimonies, one can point out that, on the other hand, A. Mongait, in his well documented *Archaeology in USSR*, Moscow 1959, on p. 298 speaks of the then recent discovery of the Buddhist temple of Ak Beshim, as well as the historical developments of the town, without, however, making any mention whatsoever of the church, this also having been excavated recently.

¹⁰³ A.M. Belenickij, I. B. Bentovich, O. G. Bol'shakov, *Srednevekovoj gorod Srednej Azii* (The medieval Central Asiatic town) 1973, plan 88, 1 at p. 209. To be compared with the preceding plans reported by Kyzlasov (1959), figs. 1 and 3.

most opportune for a church, unthinkable either in the *arg*, seat of power, or in the *shahristan*, stronghold of feudal nobility on ethnic foundations (predominantly Iranian)¹⁰⁴.

The plan of the church, generically associated with the buildings of Asia Minor and of Armenia¹⁰⁵, is thought-provoking for comparison and contrast to that of a Caucasian country. In the Armenian production of the early period, the style of central churches with dome, turns out rich and varied (with protruding apses, external rectangular arms, and secondary rooms)¹⁰⁶, even if no example would seem close to Ak Beshim. Also, the Armenian churches feature a free-standing cross, rather than an inscribed one.; and a rudimentary nave, often corresponding to the western arm¹⁰⁷, which is lacking at Ak Beshim. The oriental apse is always semicircular in plan, and so are most of the lateral apses¹⁰⁸. In Armenian churches the secondary rooms, always two in number, turn out to be accessible from the church itself, because they are closely connected with liturgical functions, but are never used as baptisteries. This at least is hypothesised by Kyzlasov for Ak Beshim¹⁰⁹. The spacious precinct that precedes the church can call to mind, in size and proportion, the *gavit'* (also known as *zhamatun*) of Armenian churches. However, it must be noted that this entrance hall characterizes Armenian churches of medieval era, and does not, instead, appear in the early period¹¹⁰.

¹⁰⁴ The localization of Christian buildings in the *rabad* appears the only possibility; not only, but a presumed church found inside the *shahristan*, would, only because of this, make its individualization as a Christian religious building strongly doubtful. Both Koshelenko and Grenet agree on this.

¹⁰⁵ Kyzlasov (1959), p. 231, traces the prototype to Syriac architecture of the 4th to 6th centuries, quoting amongst others J. Strzygowski, *Kleinasion. Ein neulend der Kunstgeschichte*, Leipzig 1903, chapter IV, pp. 132-157, in which, on the other hand, plans assimilable to those of Ak Beshim are not put forward.

¹⁰⁶ M.A. Lala Conneno, in P. Cuneo *et alii*, *Architettura armena dl IV al XIX secolo*, Rome, 1988, p. 178.

¹⁰⁷ The chapel of S. Sarkis (St. Serge) at Bjni (Hrazdan region, Republic of Armenia, ex-USSR), of the 7th century, however with free cross, which measures 5x5 m., dimensions close to ours, is also one of the few with the northern and southern apses of rectangular plan, Cuneo, *op. cit.*, pp. 158-159.

¹⁰⁸ S. Lazar of Sarnalbyur (Ani region, Republic of Armenia) constitutes a rare example of cruciform church with three rectangular apses, of the 6th century, but of elongated plan and bigger size (11.20x9 m.): Cuneo, *op. cit.*, p. 238. The rectangular north and south apses are found in the Cickanivank Chapel (Spitak region, Republic of Armenia) of the 7th century: Cuneo, *op. cit.*, p. 256; St. Amenap'rkic' (St. Saviour of all people) at Artashavan (Ashtarak region, Republic of Armenia): Cuneo, *op. cit.*, p. 193; S. Gevorg (St. George) of Arjovit (Spitak region, Republic of Armenia), of the 6th to the 7th centuries: Cuneo, *op. cit.*, p. 256; besides some other case, but in churches with naves preceding the apsed area.

¹⁰⁹ Examples are too numerous to quote: however, see Cuneo, *op. cit.*, pp. 711, 719, 726.

¹¹⁰ Cuneo, *op. cit.*, pp. 734-741.

The plan of the church has been compared more recently to that of al-Hira No. XI, in Mesopotamia, as regards the apsed part, which appears similar because of its shape, the presence of lateral rooms (two) and the fact that it is substantially an inscribed cross¹¹¹. In spite of the distance, the model of Mesopotamia appears the most likely.

Eighteen Christian tombs have been excavated inside and around the building, on the eastern side¹¹². The corpses — all of them europoids — face west, and for the most part they are all without objects; only a bronze cross with chain, earrings in the shape of flat nephrite rings, suspended on a metal wire, and a glass necklace typical of the 7-8th centuries, were found.

A complex of graves, built in mud bricks and dating back to the 7th and 8th centuries, was excavated at 400 metres to the west of the *shahristan*¹¹³ enclosure. This also consists of graves of europoids, having very few objects, among which an earthenware jug, of plain manufacture, decorated with a cross, engraved after it had been baked¹¹⁴(Fig. 27).

EASTERN TURKESTAN

¹¹¹ Al-Hira is found in present-day Iraq, at a short distance from Kufa, in the province of Najaf. This parallelism has been put forward again by Marshak, during the course of a lesson-conference at the University of Rome in 1989. See U. Monneret de Villard, *Le chiese della Mesopotamia*, Rome 1940, plan 31. The great Italian orientalist added that al-Hira "had to be a great city, with intense commercial traffic, so much so that arrival was from the Euphrates and the Canals, as well as vessels from India and China (p. 32). The continuous exchanges of this city with Central Asia have induced the English to publish the excavations at al-Hira, amongst others, in the *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society*, XIX, 1932. Further possible, but not very close, planimetric parallelisms can be established with other Mesopotamian buildings, such as the Abbasid Palace of Ukhaidir, not far from Karbala (Iraq), of the year 780 ca, for the central part, besides the honor courtyard, K.A.C. Creswell, *A short Account of Early Muslim Architecture, Revised and Supplemented by J. Allan*, Cairo 1989, plan 147, already quoted by Monneret (plan 45). But another Islamic Mesopotamian palace, this one however umayyad, Dar al-Imara, Palace of the Government, of Kufa (present-day Iraq) founded in the year 670 ca, but enlarged in Abbasid period, turns out to be matching without doubt; Creswell, *op. cit.* plan No. 2. The recent excavations of the Umayyad palace of Amman (Jordan) have brought to light a similar establishment; Creswell, *op. cit.*, plan 96. It deals, therefore, with a topology of Mesopotamian architecture of the 7th-8th centuries, not an unlikely prototype for devotion buildings of that religion who had one of its propulsion centres between the Tigris and the Euphrates. See also B. Finster, J. Schmidt, "Sasanidische und früislamische Ruinen im Iraq", *Baghdader Mitteilungen*, VIII (1976), (but 1977), where churches (Rahaliya, Qusair church A inside the walls and church B outside the walls) and civil buildings (Damgan, Kish) are also mentioned.

¹¹² Kyzlasov (1959), pp. 232-233, singles out three different types of tombs, all, however, coeval to the church. Five Muslim tombs of later era and placed against the inside of the Northern wall of the so-called courtyard, are in a different direction (heads towards the North, even though Islam orders that: the dead are buried with their face towards Mecca). Grenet (1984), pp. 185-186, considers that these tombs are of a slightly later period.

¹¹³ The so-called object III: Kyzlasov (1959), pp. 230-231.

¹¹⁴ Kyzlasov (1959), p. 231, fig. 55, V; Grenet (1984), pp. 184-185.

The entire vast region, defined as Eastern Turkestan, and part of the present-day Xinjiang (People's Republic of China), experienced a certain development of Nestorianism, leading to a new, most vivacious prosperity under the Mongols, of which, however, up to this day, there exists almost no archaeological trace.

Qocho, Building with paintings having Christian subjects

A building, where paintings having indisputable Christian subjects were found, is situated at Qocho, in Eastern Turkestan. The town of Qocho, known also as Kara Qocho, Kara Koto, as well as Dakianus-Shari, and today known with the Chinese name of Gaochang, is a vast archaeological site, a little to the east of Turfan (Tulupan in Chinese) in the homonymic oasis, on the northern track of the Silk Road, in the present Autonomous Uighur Region of Xinjiang, the most western part of the People's Republic of China¹¹⁵.

The only plan of this town, an inexact one at that, dates to the early part of this century and was prepared by Grünwedel¹¹⁶. Christian buildings identified as such are not indicated on this plan.

The building defined as "Christian" temple of Qocho by von Le Coq, the great explorer of the area, has not yet been studied in depth¹¹⁷ (Fig. 28). Looking at the plan of 1913, it deals with a building of elongated shape, appearing only partially excavated and of which, therefore, one cannot deduce the total measurements. Three rooms can be discerned, on the walls of which a second wall has later been placed¹¹⁸. A fourth room, on the right, seems to function as entrance hall; no trace remains either of the roofing, of the connections between the various precincts, or of the apse¹¹⁹. From the present state, any association whatsoever with Christian buildings seems impossible.

¹¹⁵ The buildings of Gaochang, with the exception of a few *stupa* object of a reconstructive type of restoration, are to-day shapeless and unrecognizable heaps of earth, which wind, sun and frost have now completely remodeled.

¹¹⁶ Grünwedel (1906), reported by Maillard (1983), fig. 9, and also by Klimkeit (1988), ill. 12 on p. 37.

¹¹⁷ Le Coq (1913), plan No. 1, which gives the scale (not indicated by Maillard [1983], fig. 80), but does not indicate the North. The same Maillard, being more interested in the evidence of Buddhist architecture, and whom however, has not visited the region in person, relegates Christian and Manichaean buildings, in an annex of her well-documented volume. During my on site visit, it was impossible for me to ascertain the exact location of the building in question.

¹¹⁸ A wall-with-lining, is also found at Xaroba Koshuk, the church to the North of Merv.

¹¹⁹ The measurements derived from von Le Coq's plan, with a scale of 1:360, would be the following: internal width 7.70 m. circa, external width 11.50 m., thickness of the walls from 2.50 m. to 3.80 m. (including the counter-wall), length of room 1 (the one which looks like the access room, which, however, is 5.20 m. wide) 9.00 m., of room 2: 5.55 m., of room 3: 7.90 m., of room 4: inaccurate. Many of the buildings in Qocho are built using wooden boxes for forming clay of 60-70 cms. height, instead of bricks.

The element by far the most interesting of this apparent church is established by its wall paintings, discovered under the wall lining. The most renowned of these represents a scene unanimously interpreted as Palm Sunday and dated by Bussagli back to the end of the 9th century¹²⁰(Fig. 29). Three believers with oriental features holding a verdant branch, are looking towards a priest, of major size, with Western bodily characteristics, who is supporting a tumbler in the right hand and a thurible (not easily identifiable) in the left hand. The style of the painting has been approximated to that of the School of Khotan, the nomadic center on the southern track of the Silk Road, and also to that of Sogdia.

A second painting (Fig. 30), now lost to us, is known only by means of designs¹²¹. It represents a priest with halo, on horseback, holding in right hand a long lance terminating in a cross. Two standing figures, probably the donors, are in front of him. It turns out to be practically impossible to speculate on the style or the details of this painting.

In spite of the importance of this building and the great amount of evidence on local Christianity, to this day we do not have any knowledge of Christian objects found at Qocho.

Southern track of the Silk Road

On the site of Niya, to the East of Khotan, Stein has brought back to light some wooden reliefs with unusual decorative motifs¹²². (Figs. 31 & 32). Dated back to the 6th-7th centuries, and being used at the time of their discovery, as architraves, they appear perfectly paratactic in composition, approaching provincial Iranian prototypes in the arrangement of the figures and to early-Christian subjects when it comes to the central part, characterized by a vase from which flow out elaborate and luxuriant elements of a plant.

¹²⁰ It measures 59.8x63.5 cm., and is now found in Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Indische Kunstabteilung, I B 6911; Le Coq (1913), ill. 7; Le Coq (1926), Tafel 9; Bussagli (1963), (19782), pp. 111-114, photo on p. 112. The painting which represents the most well known (but maybe also the only known by non-specialists) evidence of Christianity in Central Asia, has been reproduced numerous times, given also its exhibition in a European museum. Deichmann (1983), p. 23, speaks of it attributing it to the first millenium, and on p. 40 "it could, therefore, deal with the only evidence we have of Nestorianism propagated in the Far East".

¹²¹ Le Coq (1913), ill 1; also mentioned by Maillard (1983), ill. 80 b. The figure of the cavalier-priest was 2 m. high ca.

¹²² These reliefs, which come from the so-called Hall III of house No. XXVI, are now found in the National Museum of New Delhi; they measure circa 2.60 m. in length. In front of Faizabad, in the Khotan oasis, the big nomadic center in the Southern track, Stein briefly describes a small rocky structure with a porch placed in front, attributing it, in a dubious manner, to Nestorians or Manichaeans: see Stein, *op. cit.*, 1, p. 264 n. XXVI.III.I and photo 63, IV, table XVIII.

From Miran, where the well-known wall paintings¹²³ have been found, is derived a seal with a name interpreted as Anton, attributable in this case to the local Christian community¹²⁴.

CONCLUSION

Independently from their geographical disposition, one could consider new provinces of Christian archaeology those zones in which Christianity has had consistent propagation, where it has created organizable structures of which there remains incontestable historic, literary and archaeological evidence. The territory would thus be enlarged to the East, connecting the regions not so well known yet of great historic importance (the Christian Socotra, in the Indian Ocean; the island of Failaka, in the Persian Gulf; India itself, just to mention a few examples). The seed sown by the Christianization of the powerful Roman Empire bore fruit in many faraway places, which should be related in the sphere of a unitary study and interdisciplined¹²⁵.

As regards the chronological limits the problem turns out to be just as difficult to define. Can one speak of Christian archaeology for some of the Central Asian evidence of the 7-10th centuries? The number, moderate at present, of discoveries in that zone makes the problem of importance secondary. But if in a not too distant future Western technology and the specific experience of European archaeologists were to be placed at the service of research on the subject in all Central Asia, the results, considering historic premises, should not be lacking.

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¹²³ See note 85.

¹²⁴ Stein, *op. cit.*, I, p. 465. It deals with documents in Tibetan language, which in this case mention the non-Tibetan syllables an-ton.

¹²⁵ Deichmann (1983), p. 23, extends to these lands and their produce the concept of Christian archaeology.

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