

Some Aspects of Turco-Mongol Christianity in the Light of Literary and Epigraphic Syriac Sources[§]

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The presence of Christians in Bactria, in present-day Northern Afghanistan, is documented already in the third century by one of the most ancient works in Syriac literature, the *Book of the Laws of the Countries*.¹ Further expansion of Syriac Christianity in Central Asia and China² was largely due to the initiative of the Church of the East – that is, the Christian Church of the territories once comprised in the Parthian and Sassanian empire and, later, in the Arab-Muslim one, rather inaccurately called “Nestorian.”³

Our purpose in the present paper is to bring to light some of the features of Turco-Mongol Christianity on the basis of primary sources, both literary (in Syriac and Arabic, composed in the “motherland” of the Church of the East – present-day Iraq and Iran), and epigraphic (in Syriac and Turkic, a product of Christian Turco-Mongol communities). Moreover, for first-hand information, we shall refer to the biographic work known as the *Story of Mar Yahballaha and of Rabban Sauma*, where the account of two Önggüt monks has been preserved, although

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¹ Syriac text with English translation in H.J.W. Drijvers, *The Book of the Laws of the Countries. Dialogue on Fate of Bardaisan of Edessa*, (Assen 1965): 46-47.

² More precisely in the large territories between the Oxus river (Amu Darya) and the Aral Lake to the West, the Chinese coast to the East, the Himalayan chain to the South, and Southern Siberia to the North.

³ Inaccurately because the name “Nestorian” was adopted especially by the opponents of the Church of the East some time after its definitive rejection – towards the end of 5th century – of the deliberations of the Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon. In recent times, it was proposed to discontinue the use of this definition, not only out of present-day ecumenical concerns, but also on objective historical grounds, as the Church of the East (in Syriac ‘*edṭā d-madnhā*, in Arabic *kanisat al-mašriq*) owes its origins neither to Nestorius nor to his theology – indeed, it is much more ancient; and its ‘Nestorian’ elements are rather the product of a common Antiochene christology. See S.P. Brock, *The ‘Nestorian’ Church: a lamentable misnomer*, “Bull. of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester” 78 (1996): 23-36; R. Le Coz, *Histoire de l’Eglise d’Orient. Chrétiens d’Irak, d’Iran et de Turquie*, (Paris 1995), 12-13. However, as the name ‘Nestorian’ has deep roots already in ancient times – “nestorini” was the name for Eastern Christians in Medieval Europe, as Marco Polo himself testifies – it is neither easy nor always practical to do entirely away with it.

somewhat filtered, by a Syriac author who later put it to writing.

Texts written in Syriac and Arabic⁴ which contain information about Turco-Mongol Christianity belong to different literary genres: historiography, letters and canonical texts.⁵ To the latter category belong synodal records,⁶ abounding in information on the administrative situation of the so-called “external provinces” of the Church of the East.⁷ From them, information on its hierarchy, dioceses and seats in Central Asia may be extracted; but for our present aim, historical and epistolary sources are more eloquent, as they contain more articulate information.⁸ Among them figure prominently the letters of Catholicos Timothy I (780-823), whose energetic guidance of the Church of the East encouraged its diffusion with such satisfactory results that he could affirm that liturgy and prayers were the same for all Christians:

In all regions of Babylonia, Persia and Athor [Assyria] and in all regions of the East, even among Indians, Chinese, Tibetans and Turks, and in all lands subject to the Patriarchal seat... that is, in regions different and

⁴ From the 7th-8th century Arabic not only replaces Syriac as the spoken language of Mesopotamian Christians – thus confining the use of the latter to liturgical and learned milieus – but it is also used, along with Syriac, as a literary language.

⁵ Reference works and essays on the spread of Christianity in Asia are numerous, and only a few may be mentioned here: J. Dauvillier, *Les provinces chaldéennes “de l’extérieur” au Moyen Age*, in *Mélanges Cavallera*, (Toulouse 1948), 261-316 (repr. in Id., *Histoire et institutions des Églises orientales au Moyen Age*, (London 1983); Id., *L’expansion de l’Église syrienne en Asie centrale et en Extrême-Orient*, “L’Orient syrien” 1 (1956) 76-87; E.C.D. Hunter, *The conversion of the Kerait to Christianity in A.D. 1007*, “Zentral-asiatische Studien” 22 (1989/91): 142-163; Ead., *The Church of the East in Central Asia*, “Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester” 78 (1996): 129-142; M.A. Lala Comneno, *Cristianesimo nestoriano in Asia Centrale nel primo millennio: testimonianze archeologiche*, “Orientalia Christiana Periodica” 61 (1995): 495-535 (= *Nestorianism in Central Asia during the First Millennium. Archaeological Evidence*, JAAS 11 (1997): 20-53); R. Le Coz, *Histoire de l’Église d’Orient. Chrétiens d’Irak, d’Iran et de Turquie*, (Paris 1995); A. Mingana, *The Early Spread of Christianity in Central Asia and the Far East: A New Document*, (Manchester 1925); F. Nau, *L’expansion nestorienne en Asie*, “Annales du musée Guimet. Bibliothèque de vulgarisation” 40 (1914): 193-383; N. Sims-Williams, *Christianity III. In Central Asia and Chinese Turkestan*, in *Encyclopaedia Iranica V*, (Costa Mesa, Ca. 1992), 530-534; E. Tisserant, *L’église nestorienne*, in *Recueil cardinal E. Tisserant I*, (Louvain 1955).

⁶ See J.-B. Chabot (Ed.), *Synodicon orientale*, (Paris 1902).

⁷ So the ecclesiastical provinces out of Mesopotamia were called.

⁸ We will not consider here the Letter of (Pseudo) Philoxenus of Mabbug, published by Mingana in 1925, whose authenticity is not certain. S.P. Brock affirms that, on the grounds of codicologic data, it is possibly authentic, but he does not examine its content.

*varied in peoples and languages.*⁹

In another letter, Timothy mentions a peculiar instance of conversion:

*Recently... the king of the Turks, with almost all his dominion, has abandoned the ancient error of being without god and converted to Christianity, by work of the great virtue of Christ, to Whom everything is submitted; he asked us in a letter to appoint a Metropolitan over the entire territory of his reign, which we did, with God's help.*¹⁰

Previous instances of the conversion of a king and part of his people, followed by the request to the Patriarch to appoint a Metropolitan to the head of the new Christian community, are also documented in historical sources. At the time of Patriarch Mar Aba I (6th century), for example, the Hephtalites (also called White Huns, who succeeded the Kushan in Bactria), requested a bishop for their people in 549.¹¹ On another occasion, we are informed by a Syriac anonymous *Chronicle* that in 644 Elias, the Metropolitan of Merv,¹² known for having “converted many people among the Turks and other nations,” converted an entire nomadic population to Christianity by means of a miracle, and then ordained deacons and priests from among the new Christians, whom he had baptized along a nearby flowing river.¹³

As we can see, in these types of sources, information about the character of converted peoples is extremely scanty, especially concerning their specific way of practising Christianity. Timothy believes that, through his conversion, the “king of the Turks” has rejected the “ancient error of being without god” (Syriac *tu'yay 'atigtā d-lā allahā*). His opinion, that the Turks practised a form of “atheism,” recalls what the Armenian historian Kirakos of Ganjak (13th century) writes about the Mongols, saying that they “had no religion or form of worship, but they used continually to mention the name of God. Whether they thanked the Being of God or called someone else God, we do not know nor did they themselves.”¹⁴ This is

⁹ See R.J. Bidawid, *Les lettres du patriarche nestorien Thimotée I*, (Roma 1956), 117.

¹⁰ Bidawid, *Les lettres...* [note 9], 124.

¹¹ See P. Bedjan (ed.), *Histoire de Mar Aba*, in *Histoire de Mar-Jabalaha, de trois autres patriarches, d'un prêtre et de deux laïques, nestoriens*, (Paris 1895), 266-269. A Christian priest arrives at the court of the Persian sovereign, Khusraw I Anushirwan, as an envoy from the Hephtalites, with the request to Mar Aba to order him bishop before his people.

¹² Merv was the starting point of the missionary activity of the Church of the East in Central Asia. The site of the ancient town corresponds to the actual Marv (Turkmenistan).

¹³ I. Guidi (ed.), *Chronica minora* 1, CSCO Vol. 1/2, *Scriptores Syri* 1/2, (Louvain 1955), vol. 1 (text): 34-35, vol. 2 (trans.): 28-29.

¹⁴ Quoted by J.A. Boyle, *Kirakos of Ganjak on the Mongols*, “Central Asiatic Journal” 8

clearly the opinion of observers unfamiliar with the shamanism of steppe peoples. Shamanism was also practised by the people converted by Elias of Merv, whose miracle consisted in halting, by a simple sign of the cross, the storm raised by the “demon-worshipping priests” at the service of the Turkic king – according to the narrative preserved in the Syriac *Chronicle* edited by Guidi.¹⁵

As a potential historical source, the narrative of the conversion wrought by Elias of Merv is limited by its vagueness and its character of miracle-story. But if collective baptism along a river has several parallels, even in Western sources, the immediate appointment of deacons and priests from among the newly converted probably signals a sort of “chronological contraction” on the part of the author, who seems to omit to mention the time Elias spent with that people in order to teach them the basic tenets of Christian faith and liturgy, according to the customary missionary procedure.

This account is actually documented in two records of another instance of conversion concerning Keräits – another Turkic nation. These are the *Ecclesiastic Chronicle* (in Syriac) by Bar Hebraeus (1225-1286) and the *Book of the Tower* (in Arabic; 14th century). Bar Hebraeus writes:¹⁶

At that time 'Abdišo', the Metropolitan of Merv, a town in Khorasan, informed the Catholicos of the following: "The king of the people called Keräit¹⁷ – that is, the Turks who live between the East and the West – lost his way and direction as he found himself caught in a terrible snowstorm while hunting on a great mountain of his land. He was already despairing for his life, when he had the vision of a saint who told him: 'If you believe in Christ, I will lead you out, and you shall not die here'. The king promised he would become a sheep of Christ's fold, and [the saint] guided him and brought him back to a safe way. Having returned to his camp unhurt, [the king] called some Christian traders who lived there and asked them about the [Christian] faith. They told him that [the faith] could not be perfect without baptism. He asked them for a gospel, which he worships every day, and now has sent me a messenger to invite me to go to him in person, or else send a priest to baptize him. He also asks me questions about fasting, explaining: 'My people do not have other nourishment but meat and milk; how, then, could we fast?' And he adds that the number of those who converted to Christianity reaches two hundred thousand."

(1963): 202.

¹⁵ Guidi (ed.), *Chronica minora* [note 13].

¹⁶ Syriac text with Latin translation in J.B. Abbeloos - T.J. Lamy (edd.), *Gregorii Barhebraei Chronicon ecclesiasticum* I-III, (Lovanii 1872-1877): II, 279-282. English translation by the present author.

¹⁷ According to Hunter the identification of this Turkic people as Keräit, made by Bar Hebraeus, is highly questionable: see *The conversion of the Kerait* [note 5].

The Catholicos wrote then to the Metropolitan in these terms:

let two persons, a priest and a deacon, be sent, and with them the furnishings for an altar. Let them go and baptize all those who believe, and teach them the customs of the Christians. During Lent [they shall prescribe] abstinence from meat, allowing them to drink milk only if – as they say – no food permitted during fast is available in their country.

In the *Book of the Tower* we read:¹⁸

Letters from 'Abdišo', the Metropolitan of Merv, arrived [...as mentioned before,] stating that a king of the Turks had accepted the Christian faith, followed by two hundred thousand from among his subjects. The reason was that one day, while hunting, he had lost his way and did not know his direction anymore. He then saw a man who offered to save him from that difficult situation. When asked about his name, he answered: "I am Mar Sargis," and ordered him to become a Christian. Then he told him to close his eyes and, as soon as he had opened them again, he found himself back on the right course. Astounded by this extraordinary event, he inquired about the Christian religion, about prayer and the Book of the Law. He learned [the prayers beginning with the words] Our Father who art in Heaven, To you, Lord of the universe, and Holy God. The Metropolitan added that the king had written him a letter of invitation, and informed him that those Turks used to live on meat and milk only. The king himself had arranged a table to serve as an altar, upon which he had put a cross and the Gospel, dedicating it to Mar Sargis. He had then tied a mare [nearby], whose milk he used to put in a cup between the cross and the Gospel, [to be used instead of wine for Holy Sacrament.] After reciting upon the latter the prayers his memory served, he used to make a sign of the cross on the cup and take a sip from it, and after him all the others of his people. The Metropolitan asked what to do about the bread of the Holy Sacrament, since they had no wheat. The Patriarch instructed him to make an effort to find some wheat and some wine, at least for the solemnity of Easter. Further, he forbade them the consumption of meat at the time of fasting, but allowed them to drink sweet milk instead of sour milk.

Each of the two versions features aspects and details which, if considered synoptically, contribute to a better understanding of both texts. In this case, too, the introduction of Christianity is prompted by a miracle. The king who experiences it attempts to approach the Christian faith directly, and several sources for information are available to him: Christian traders – presumably foreigners, and

¹⁸ Arabic text and Latin translation in I.S. Assemani, *Bibliotheca Orientalis Clementino-Vaticana* III, 2. *De Syris Nestorianis*, (Romae 1728), 484-485. English translation by the present author.

probably Iranians (or Sogdians) – living amongst his people, or regularly visiting the country. From them he receives information, books and teachings, the basic prayers, and a warning about the need to be baptized.

It should be noted that the kind of teaching sought and received is clearly not of a theological character but, rather, a practical one. The sovereign inquires especially about prayer and the “Book of the Law,” (Arabic *kitāb al-šari‘a*) and the difficulty he expresses to the Metropolitan is of a ritual kind – how to observe fast, in accordance with the availability of food and the customs of the Keräits. It should also be noted that the task of the two missionaries sent by the Metropolitan is that of teaching the “customs” (Syriac *‘yādē*), not explicitly the doctrine, of the Christians.

This story provides the only piece of information in Syriac sources specific to a certain Turco-Mongol people in their practice of Christianity: their diet did not allow for the application of the considerably strict rules of the Church of the East concerning ritual fast.¹⁹ For this reason, the Patriarch introduces a dispensation, allowing them to drink non-fermented milk during the periods of abstinence.

What we observed about the prominence of ritual in the instruction following conversion should be tempered by the remark that the doctrinal element was certainly not absent from the Christian practice of Turco-Mongol peoples. Evidence of this is found in a particularly significant epigraphic source. On the rocky slopes of a site in present-day Uzbekistan, to the east of Samarkand, called Kötirbulak (a short way south from Urgut), several graffiti left by pilgrims may be seen.²⁰ One of them reads:

<i>yyt’ kwrwz mn</i>	Itä Küröz, from
<i>’štrqth mpšqn’</i>	Ušturqatah, exegete
<i>b’b šnt’rw</i>	in [the month of] Ab, year 1206 [of the Greeks]
	(= August 895) ²¹

The visitor who left this trace of his passing was thus an “exegete,” *i.e.* a teacher in a school devoted to the explanation of the Holy Scriptures;²² and, as his

¹⁹ Ricoldo of Montecroce, a Dominican friar who sojourned in Mesopotamia in the second half of 13th century, expresses admiration for the strict observance of ritual fast by Eastern Christians: “They really practise a great abstinence; they pray a lot and fast a lot. Their religious men, bishops, archbishops and patriarchs do not eat meat at all nor condiments containing meat, not even in case of mortal illness. In their habits and dresses, religious men like their bishops and chiefs show great poverty, austerity, honesty and humility. During Lent, all Nestorians and Jacobites, both religious and laymen, would never eat fish, nor drink wine” (Ricold de Monte Croce, *Pérégrination en Terre Sainte et au Proche Orient*, éd. par R. Kappler, (Paris 1997), 148-150).

²⁰ Lala Comneno, *Cristianesimo nestoriano...* [note 5]: 514.

²¹ Published by M. Tardieu, *Le monde de la Bible* 1999: 42.

²² See J.-B. Chabot, *L’école de Nisibe. Son histoire, ses statuts*, “Journal Asiatique” IX, 8

name reveals, he was a Turk. Syriac literature has preserved an extensive exegetic work, called *Gannat bussāmē* (Garden of Delight), ascribed to an anonymous “Turkic exegete.”²³ We may thus infer that, even if very little has come down to us in written sources, there was some teaching activity and a related literary production within Turco-Mongol Christianity.²⁴

Let us now consider the *Story of Mar Yahballaha and Rabban Sauma* (= *Story*, datable to ca. 1318).²⁵ What helps us to infer that its two protagonists are Önggüt Turks is, above all, the indication of the birthplace of the elder one, Sauma, *i.e.* the town of Košang,²⁶ whose identification with the Tenduc of Marco Polo and the Cozan of Odoric of Pordenone is certain,²⁷ and most probably to be identified with the site of Olon Süme (Inner Mongolia).²⁸ In Syriac sources, the two protagonists

(1896) : 43-93.

²³ Partly published by G.J. Reinink (ed.), *Gannat Bussame* I. *Die Adventssonntage*, CSCO 501/502, S. Syri 211 (text) / 212 (translation), (Lovanii 1988).

²⁴ Christian literature from Central Asia is documented only by fragmentary findings of manuscripts in Syriac as well as in Iranian languages, such as Sogdian (see e.g. E. Benveniste, *Sur un fragment d'un psautier syro-persan*, “Journal Asiatique” 230 [1938]: 458-462 and N. Sims-Williams, *Christianity IV. Christian Literature in Middle Iranian Languages*, in *Encyclopaedia Iranica* V, (Costa Mesa, CA 1992), 534-535.

²⁵ Translated into English by J.A. Montgomery, *The History of Yaballaha III, Nestorian Patriarch, and of his Vicar, Bar Sauma*, (New York 1927 rep. New York 1966) (partial translation) and E.A.W. Budge, *The Monks of Kublai Khan, Emperor of China*, (London 1928) with complete translation. The *Story* begins with the protagonists' birth and ends with Mar Yahballaha's death (Rabban Sauma dies towards the middle of the narrative). It may be summarized as follows: in far-off China, two scions of distinguished Christian families, Sauma and Markos, decide to become hermits and, later, plan to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Once arrived in Mesopotamia after a troubled journey across the whole of Asia, they realize they cannot go any further and resume their monastic life in local monasteries. After the death of the *Catholicos*, the patriarch of the Eastern Church, Markos is appointed to succeed him with the name of Yahballaha III. Sauma is then chosen by Khan Arghun as his ambassador to Europe. With the rise and fall of different sovereigns, the Church experiences hardships and sudden improvements, recorded faithfully year by year by the *Story*, and culminating in the siege of the citadel of Arbil, related in all its details, up to the slaughter of the Christian inhabitants. The narrative ends with Mar Yahballaha's death.

²⁶ *Kawšang* according to the vocalisation of the manuscript of the *Story*; but the closed pronunciation of the diphthong is to be preferred already for the 13th-14th century.

²⁷ Marco Polo, *Milione*, Tuscan version, chap. 73; Odorico di Pordenone, *Memoriale toscano. Viaggio in India e Cina (1318-1330)*, ed. L. Monaco, (Alessandria 1990), 136-137.

²⁸ The distance between the city of Košang and Khanbaliq, according to the *Story*, was more than 15 walking days; according to John of Montecorvino the Önggüts' capital was 20 walking days away from the one of the Great Khan. See P. Pelliot [oeuvres posthumes de –], *Recherches sur les chrétiens d'Asie centrale et d'Extrême Orient*, I.

(together or separately) are identified as “Turks,”²⁹ a rather general appellation that does not contradict the more specific one of Önggüt, since the latter were indeed a Turkic population, although mongolized and to a large extent culturally Sinicized, as is shown by epigraphic data and by Chinese sources.³⁰ The Önggüt’s Christian faith – well documented by epigraphs from the site of Olon Süme as well as literary sources – is already testified in the *Secret History of the Mongols* (§ 190). The name of the messenger sent to Chingiz khan by their chief is reportedly *Yuqunan*, the Mongol rendering of Syriac *Yoḥannan* (John).

Even if the anonymous author who before 1318 completed the *Story of Mar Yahballaha and Rabban Sauma* made a number of revisions – selecting, omitting or stressing details in accordance with his own interests and aims – the narrative is based, especially in its first part, on the protagonists’ direct witness account and it offers significant information. The passages more relevant to our point shall be mentioned here, in the order in which they appear in the narrative.³¹

Rabban Sauma’s childhood

There was a certain Believer, a freeman, who feared God [...], whose

*En marge de Jean du Plan Carpin, II. Guillaume de Rubrouck, III. Mār Ya(h)hballāhā, Rabban Šaumā et les princes Öngüt chrétiens, (Paris 1973), 252-254. About Olon Süme see O. Lattimore, A ruined Nestorian City in inner Mongolia, “The Geographical Journal” 84 (1934) : 481-497; D. Martin, Preliminary Report on Nestorian Remains north of Kuei-Hua, Suiyüan, “Monumenta Serica” 3 (1937-1938) : 232-256; N. Egami, Olon-süme et la découverte de l’église catholique romaine de Jean de Montecorvino, “Journal Asiatique” 240 (1952) : 155-167; K. Enoki, The Nestorian Christianity in China in Mediaeval Time According to Recent Historical and Archaeological Researches, in *Atti del Convegno Internazionale sul tema: l’Oriente cristiano nella storia della civiltà*, (Roma 1964): 45-83.*

²⁹ In the *Story* the monks are called “Eastern Turks” (Syriac *ṭurkāyē madnḥayē*); Mar Yahballaha is called a “Turk” (*ṭurkāyā*) in the colophon of manuscript Vatican Syriac 22, copied in India during his patriarchate; the panegyric written in his honour during his patriarchate says that he comes from “the land of the Turks” (*men atrā ṭurkāyē*: see J.M. Vosté, *Memra en l’honneur de Iahballaha III*, “Le Muséon” 42 (1929): 168-176). The *Book of the Tower* affirms that he was “a Turk, from the land of Catai” – a rather precise localisation (Northern China). Bar Hebraeus defines the two monks as “Uyghurs, that is, Turks.” In Eastern sources, they are never called Mongols; even the allusion to Yahballaha’s familiarity with the language and the costumes of Mongol rulers does not imply his ethnic identification with them. Only in the West, in Rome – were he was sent as ambassador by the Mongol ruler of Persia in 1287-88 – Sauma was defined “tartarus orientalis.”

³⁰ See Pelliot, *Recherches...* [note 27]: 252-254.; also Gai Shanlin, *Yinshan Wanggu* [The Öngüd of the Yin Mountain], (Hohhot 1992), (in Chinese).

³¹ Quotations are from the English translation by Montgomery [note 25]. The episodes reported here may be dated approximately between 1225 (the probable date for Sauma’s birth) and 1273.

name was Sheban the administrator. He dwelt in the city Khanbaliq, the royal city of the Country of the East. He was legally united to a wife named Qyamta [...] and she bore him a son. Then they called him Sauma. [...] And when they had brought him up in a commendable rearing to the age that was fit for teaching, they committed him to a suitable teacher, and they schooled him zealously in the Doctrines of the Church. And they betrothed him. And he was qualified for the order of Priesthood, and he was numbered among the Clergy, and he became Verger [i.e. keeper] in the church of the aforesaid city [...] until he was twenty years old. [The narrative goes on telling about the willingness of Sauma to enter the monastic life, and the opposition of his parents, and their subsequent compliance with his wishes.] Then [...] he assumed the garb of monkhood, and he was shorn by the holy and devout Father, Mar Giwargis the Metropolitan.

The childhood of Rabban Markos

(then Patriarch with the name of Yahballaha)

There was in the city of Koshang in the Country of the East a faithful and righteous man, pure and spotless, who served God in His Church faithfully and behaved himself in His laws with distinction, by name Bainiel, an Archdeacon. And he had four sons, the youngest of whom was called Markos. This one was instructed in the Doctrines of the Church beyond all his brothers.

Meeting with the Christians of Khanbaliq

[With the firm intention of setting out on their pilgrimage to Jerusalem – see note 25 – Sauma and Markos] entered into that city [Khanbaliq] so as to get companions for the journey and furnish themselves with provisions. The Christians there at once recognized them and learned their purpose and gathered to them, so as to turn them from their purpose, saying: “Perhaps you know not how great is the distance of the country you are going to, or how misleading is the perplexity of the roads, beyond your reckoning, so that you cannot arrive there. Remain here and strive in the life to which you have been called. For it is said that ‘the Kingdom of Heaven is within you’ (Luke 17:21).”

Meeting with the Christians of Košang and with their rulers

And they came to the city of Koshang. And when the citizens and the parents of Rabban Markos had heard that these two monks had arrived, they went joyfully out to meet them and received them with joy and cheer, and with great honour did they bring them into the church. And they asked them: “How is it you have come?”, for they thought they were going to remain with them, and that Rabban Markos had done this because of the proximity of his family. [...] Now the news came to the lords of the city,

who were sons-in-law of the Khan King of Kings, namely, Kunbuqa and Aibuqa. And upon the news they sent messengers and brought the two monks to the Camp.³² And they received them with pleasure, and the light of love for them was kindled within them. When they learned that “they are leaving us,” they began to say to them: “Why do you leave our region and go to the West? For we are very anxious to draw monks and fathers from the West to this region. How can you let yourselves go away?” Rabban Sauma answered: “We have let the world go, and so far as we are with men we do not rest. And so it is right for us to flee away for the love of the Christ, who gave Himself to death for our redemption. Whatever is in the world we have cast behind, although your love for us urges us not to go, and your kindness constrains us, and your alms are abundantly shed upon us, and it is even agreeable to us to dwell with you. We recall the Lord’s word: ‘What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul, and what will a man give in exchange for his soul?’ (Matthew 16:26). Although we desire the separation, yet wherever we are, in proportion to our weakness, we shall remember your kingdom with prayers night and day.”

When they saw that argument with them was useless and that they would not yield to persuasion, they distributed to them gifts, equipment, gold and silver and garments. But they [the monks] said: “We need nothing. For what can we do with possessions, and how can we burden ourselves with this great load?” Then the Kings answered: “Then you are not acquainted with the length of the road and the expense it demands. But we know, and we advise you not to go empty-handed. You are not able to reach your destination without funds. And so accept these gifts from us as loans, and if cause poverty calls, spend them, and if you arrive in safety, distribute them to the monasteries and convents of the monks there and the fathers, so that we may have fellowship with our fathers of the West. For it is said: ‘Your abundance for their want’ (2 Cor. 8:14).” Then these monks, when they saw that they gave with a pure heart, took what the Kings gave. And they parted from one another sorrowfully, and weeping mixed with joy followed them.

Meeting with the Christians of Tangut

And thence they came to the city of Tangut. And the citizens heard that Rabban Sauma and Rabban Markos were come on their way to Jerusalem. They went forth with ardor to meet them, men and women, youths and striplings, boys and girls. For very ardent was the faith of the people of

³² In the culture of Turco-Mongol nomads, the camp (*ordu*) is the seat of the court, which is moved at the change of each season. Here the seat of the court does not, apparently, coincide with the town.

Tangut and pure their intention. And they honored them with all kinds of gifts, and they received their benedictions. And crowds followed them, weeping and saying: "Our Lord who chose you for the honour of His service, He will be with you. Amen."

The information which may be gathered from these passages concerns, firstly, the presence of organised Christian communities in specific towns or regions: Khanbaliq, today's Peking; Košang (perhaps Olon Süme, certainly an Önggüt town); Tangut (a region we shall mention again). Two successive Metropolitans of Khanbaliq are also mentioned (Mar George and Mar Nestorius, the latter in a passage not quoted here); and in the narration of the birth and childhood of Sauma and Markos recur terms indicating offices of ecclesiastic hierarchy: Sauma is the son of an "administrator" (Syriac *sā'orā*); once part of the clergy³³ he becomes the "verger, or keeper" (Syriac *qanqāyā*) of the church of Khanbaliq, and finally a monk; Markos' father is an "archdeacon" (Syriac *arkedyāqon*). From this we may infer the existence of a normal hierarchical structure, self-sufficient within the limits of its own jurisdiction, for the Christians of Khanbaliq and for those of Košang, evidently justified by the presence of a large community. The technical terms used to indicate offices – *sā'orā*, *qanqāyā* and *arkedyāqon* – recur, along with others, on several of the approximately 600 tombstones discovered at the end of 19th century in the region of "the seven rivers" (*Yeti su* in Turkic, *Semirech'e* in Russian, corresponding to the south-eastern part of former Russian Turkestan, now divided between southern Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan), whose inscriptions in Syriac characters are in a sort of mixed Syro-Turkic language.³⁴

³³ This occurs well before Markos was twenty. According to the canon law of the Church of the East, the minimum age to be ordained a priest is 23, but Rubruck states that the Christian communities dispersed in the vast territories of Inner Asia so seldom received the visit of a bishop that it was customary even for infants still in their cradle to be ordered priests. Such does not seem to have been the case with the Khanbaliq community, but certainly Sauma was ordained while still extremely young.

³⁴ D. Chwolson, *Syrische Grabinschriften aus Semirjetchie*, (St. Petersburg 1886); Id., *Syrisch-nestorianische Grabinschriften aus Semirjetchie*, (St. Petersburg 1890); Id., *Syrisch-nestorianische Inschriften aus Semirjetchie. Neue Folge*, (St. Petersburg, 1897); P.K. Kokovcov, *Neskol'ko novyh nadgrobnih kamnej s hristiansko-sirijskimi napisjami iz Srednej Azii*, "Izvestija Imperatorskoj Akademii Nauk" s. 6, 12 (1907): 427-458; F. Nau, *Les pierres tombales nestoriennes du Musée Guimet*, "Revue de l'Orient chrétien" 12 (1913): 3-35, 325-327; T.W. Thacker, *A Nestorian gravestone from Central Asia in the Gulbenkian Museum Durham University*, "Durham University Journal" 59 (1966/7): 94-107; W. Klein, *Christliche Reliefgrabsteine des 14. Jahrhunderts von der Seidenstrasse*, in R. Lavenant (Ed.), *VI Symposium Syriacum*, (Roma 1994), 419-442;. Several epigraphs, also more recently recovered, are published and translated in W. Klein, *Das nestorianische Christentum an den Handelswegen durch Kyrgyzstan bis zum 14. Jh.*, (Turnhout 2000), 158-176. The language of the inscriptions was studied by Ch. Djumagulov, *Die syrisch-türkischen (nestorianischen)*

Markos, an Önggüt born in Koşang, is said to have been the most skilled amongst his brothers in the “doctrines of the Church”. A lacuna in the archetypal manuscript of the *Story*, which begins immediately after this sentence, probably related an episode testifying to the wisdom of young Markos. Nonetheless, a few years later, on the point of being ordained Patriarch (in 1281), he was to say:

*I am lacking in education and Church doctrine [...]. I am not even acquainted with your Syriac language, which is matter of universal necessity.*³⁵

This could be regarded as a sign of exceeding modesty, but for the indirect witness of Bar Hebraeus:

*Mar Yahballaha, although weak as far as doctrine and competence in the Syriac language, is a person of good nature, deeply God-fearing and showing great affection towards us and our people.*³⁶

It would indeed be no surprise if the schooling received by Önggüt Christians, living at such a great distance from the Mesopotamian homeland of the Church of the East and its centres of learning, would appear insufficient, and even the most accomplished among them seem “lacking in education” in a milieu where Patriarchs were often well-known scholars, exegetes and canonists with several works to their credit. Markos/Yahballaha could certainly write Syriac,³⁷ a language he did not ignore completely, even though he apparently could not use it fluently. The epigraphic documentation in Syriac characters from Olon Süme, although scanty, allows us to suggest that Syriac was actually little known among Önggüt Christians. All the inscriptions are extremely short, and their content, highly stereotyped, can be translated as follows: “This is the tomb of [personal name]” – in Turkic: *bu qabra ...ning ol* (in consonantal Syriac script *pw qbr' ...nyng 'l*).³⁸ The funerary texts we find on the tombstones from the region of

Denkmäler in Kirgisien, “Mitteilungen des Instituts für Orientforschung” 14 (1968): 470-480; Id., *Jazyk siro-tjurkskih (nestorianskih) pamjatnikov Kirgizii*, (Frunze 1971); Id., *Epigrafika Kirgizii* 3, Frunze 1987. See also M. Mansuroğlu, *Die Inschriften von Semirech'e und die Öngüt Türken*, in J. Deny - K. Grønbech - H. Schel - Z. Velidi Togan (ed.), *Philologiae Turcicae fundamenta* I, (Aquis Mattiacis 1959), 108-112. See more recently W. Klein, *Syriac Writings and Turkic Language according to Central Asian Tombstone Inscriptions*, “Hugoye” 5/2 (2002) <http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol5No2/HV5N2Klein.html>.

³⁵ Montgomery, *The History of Yaballaha III* [note 25], 44.

³⁶ Abbeloos-Lamy, *Gregorii Barhebraei Chronicon ecclesiasticum* [note 16]: II, 454.

³⁷ His letter in Arabic to Pope Boniface VIII is accompanied by a salutation written in his own hand in the Syriac language. See the reproduction in L. Bottini, *Due lettere inedite del patriarca mar Yahballaha III (1281-1317)*, “Rivista degli studi orientali” (1992): 239-256.

³⁸ The term *qabrā* “tomb” is Syriac; it is borrowed in the Turkic language. Typically

Semirech'e, on the other hand, are for the most part relatively longer, with the death's date followed by the indication of the name and titles of the dead. Most importantly, they are very often written in the Syriac language. It thus appears that Western Turco-Mongol Christians were more familiar with Syriac, whereas for the Eastern ones the Turkic mother tongue remained dominant even in the religious sphere, despite their adoption of the Syriac script and of the Syriac language in liturgy. This is confirmed by an interesting epigraph published recently, dated 1253 and found between 1983 and 1984 in Inner Mongolia, 350 km to the North-East of Peking.³⁹ It features a cross and a short quotation from Psalm 34 in Syriac characters and language; the text is in memory of the dead, written in Turkic, in the Uyghur alphabet. We have here a clear distinction between liturgical and "everyday" language, emphasized by the choice of different alphabets. Epigraphic sources thus display a different degree in the use of Syriac between the Christianised Turkic peoples living in the Western territories (Semirech'e) and those living in the East (Inner Mongolia).⁴⁰ Significant to the point is also William of Rubruck's testimony, stressing the ignorance of the "Nestorian" clergy he met in Central Asia:

*The Nestorians there know nothing. They say their offices, and have sacred books in Syrian, but they do not know the language, so they chant like those monks among us who do not know grammar [Latin].*⁴¹

However, elsewhere, a remark escapes him, implying that Eastern Christians had other books to base their doctrine upon, and that they were perfectly able to write and read them:

Nestorians had written a whole chronicle from the creation of the world to

Turkic in this sentence are the initial demonstrative pronoun, the genitive suffix added to the proper name and the final verbal form. The Turkic character of the language of these inscriptions was noted for the first time by K. Grønbech, *Turkish Inscriptions from Inner Mongolia*, "Monumenta Serica" 4 (1939-1940): 305-308.

³⁹ See J. Hamilton - Niu Ru-Ji, *Deux inscriptions funéraires turques nestoriennes de la Chine orientale*, "Journal Asiatique" 282 (1994) : 147-164, 147 -155. The epigraph, brush-painted on a brick, was found in a village at a 30 km from Chifeng (Inner Mongolia). The editors ascribe it to the Önggüts (p. 154), claiming that their area of settlement extended in the 13th century from the bend of Yellow River to "well beyond present-day Chifeng" (p. 154).

⁴⁰ The studies by N. Pigulevskaja on manuscript fragments from Turfan and Qara Qoto also show the predominant use of the local Turkic language in the Easternmost regions: N. Pigoulewsky, *Fragments syriaques et siro-turcs de Hara-Hoto et de Tourfan*, "Revue de l'Orient chrétien" III, 10 (39) (1935-1936): 3-46.

⁴¹ The narrative of Rubruck's journey has been translated into English by W.W. Rockhill: *The Journey of William of Rubruck to the Eastern Parts of the World, 1253-55, as Narrated by Himself...*, (London 1900, rep. New Dehli 1998). Quotation here from page 158.

*the Passion of Christ; and passing over the Passion, they had touched on the Ascension and the resurrection of the dead and on the coming to judgement.*⁴²

The doctrinal instruction of Markos/Yahballaha, an Önggüt Christian, was in all likelihood imparted in the local language. This certainly restricted his religious scope, but not necessarily in a drastic way.

From the *Story* it may also be inferred that relationships – or at least the intention thereof – existed between the motherland of the Eastern Church and Önggüt Christians: when Önggüt kings argued with the two monks and tried to persuade them not to leave, they explicitly mentioned their own efforts to “summon monks and fathers from the West.” The statement is confirmed by the colophon of Ms. Vatican Syriac 622:⁴³

This holy book of the four Gospels was finished in the year 1609 of the Greeks [1298], on the 9th of the month of adar (March), the Sunday of the hymn To Admiration [the fourth Sunday of Lent] [...] It was written with great diligence and much effort for the righteous [...] Sara the believer called 'r'w'wl [Araoghul?], famous among the queens, sister of the illustrious among the warriors and hero among the combatants, George, the glorious king of the Christians, also called Gaotang wang,⁴⁴ king of the Önggüt.

The most remarkable element in this colophon is the explicit mention of the Önggüt people, rendered in Syriac as 'wyngy' = öngāyē: the Syriac termination of the plural, -āyē is here used instead of the Mongol plural suffix *ud/ut* that, joined with the Turkic word *öng*, would normally form the people's name. In Syriac literature there is only one other attestation of the name, and it is in the *Story*, when the Patriarch – Yahballaha's predecessor – ordains him Metropolitan of the diocese of “Katai and Öng” (Syriac *ky w'wng*). “Katay” notoriously indicates Northern China, while “Öng” is the name of the Önggüt people.

In their argument, the two Önggüt Christian kings display (besides practical sense) a certain amount of religious erudition, as they quote a passage by St. Paul to reinforce their point. There is, however, a strong suspicion that such a well-balanced dialogue – the fact that both parts support and close their

⁴² Rockhill, *The Journey* [note 41], 229. Rubruck does not say in which language this chronicle was written.

⁴³ See H. Pognon, *Inscriptions sémitiques de la Syrie, de la Mésopotamie et de la région de Mossoul*, (Paris 1907), 137-138. This unique Syriac chrysographed manuscript – written in gold ink on a dark blue paper – was produced in Mesopotamia for the Önggüt princess Sara. See P.G. Borbone, *I Vangeli per la principessa Sara. Un manoscritto siriano crisografato, gli öngüt cristiani e il principe Giorgio*, “Egitto e Vicino Oriente” 26 (2003): 63-82.

⁴⁴ “King of Gaotang,” a Chinese title given to Prince George in 1294.

argumentation with a Biblical quotation – reflects a stylistic choice made by the Syriac author, rather than the actual dialogue.

Another biblical quotation is ascribed to the Christians of Khanbaliq, as they try to persuade the two monks to give up their plans for a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Their argument is: if the monks have chosen the way of monastic ascetics, and if they are looking for the Kingdom of Heaven, they are not going to reach it through an earthly pilgrimage. Provided that the author was referring faithfully to what the protagonists remembered of their meeting with those Christians, the passage would testify to an attitude contrary to pilgrimage among Turco-Mongol Christians, documented among others by Bar Hebraeus:

[About pilgrimage to Jerusalem.] The first is the opinion of the perfect solitaires and the select Doctors [...] As a certain solitary from the East, who wrote to one of his fellow solitaires, saying: “You wrote to me: ‘I desire to go to Jerusalem.’ <But> I write to you that you are quite in error. For everybody hurries to go to Jerusalem on high. How could you hurry to leave for that on earth? Such a matter is not the desire of a watchful mind. [...] So stay in your cell, I beg you, and strive to abide in your inner self. [...].”⁴⁵

The last of the quoted passages relates the encounter of the two monks, already on their way towards the West, with the Christians of Tangut. Tangut is not a town, but a region, mentioned several times by Marco Polo, who also alludes to the presence there of “nestorini” Christians.⁴⁶ The name of the region is a Mongol plural form of the word *Tang*, indicating nomads of Tibetan descent. The capital city of the Tangut kingdom – which existed from 990 to 1227, at which time it was conquered by the Mongols – corresponds to the archaeological site of Qara Qoto.⁴⁷

We should finally note an omission in the *Story*: as we have seen, in the first stages of their journey the two protagonists met Christians. Subsequently, they are said to reach Khotan and Kashgar (in Chinese Turkestan, presently Xinjiang Autonomous Region), and then Talas (present-day Djambul, in Kazakhstan) – all of these places in which the presence of Christians at that time is documented by other travellers (such as Marco Polo) or in epigraphic findings. The *Story*, however, does not say that Sauma and Markos met fellow Christians there. In our opinion,

⁴⁵ *Ktabā d-’itiqon*, known as *Ethicon*: it is a work by Bar Hebraeus including moral and spiritual teachings for the Christians; quoted here from H. Teule (ed.), *Gregory Bar hebraeus. Ethicon. Mēmrā I*, (Leuven 1993), 121-122 (text), 104-105 (translation). We may find a similar attitude also in Western sources, see F. Cardini, *In Terrasanta. Pellegrini italiani tra Medioevo e prima età moderna*, (Bologna 2002).

⁴⁶ Tuscan version, chap. 57.

⁴⁷ See R.E. Dunnell, *Tanguts and the Tangut State of Ta Hsia*, (Princeton 1983); Id., *Who Are the Tanguts? Remarks on Tangut Ethnogenesis and the Ethnonym Tangut*, “Journal of Asian History” 18,1 (1984): 78-89.

this does not imply that no Christians were there at the time – the omission is rather due to the style of the travel report, which becomes extremely laconic after the description of the monks' departure, from which we have drawn all the quotations.⁴⁸

Unfortunately, the limited space available does not allow for a mention of the potentially numerous references in Western sources, first and foremost by William of Rubruck, the accurate observer of the “Nestorians” in Central Asia in the 13th century. A comparison of the information he brings with the sources thus far presented would allow us to draw a more homogeneous and rather coherent picture.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ On Christianity in this region in the 13th century see W. Klein, *Das nestorianische Christentum an den Handelsweg durch Kyrgyzstan bis zum 14. Jh.*, 2000.

⁴⁹ See J. Dauvillier, *Guillaume de Rubrouck et les communautés chaldéennes d'Asie centrale au Moyen Age*, “*Annuaire de l'école des législations religieuses*” 2 (1951-52) 36-42.