CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

SYRIAC CHRISTIANITY IN CENTRAL ASIA

Mark Dickens

This chapter discusses the textual and archaeological evidence for Syriac Christianity in Central Asia from the pre-Islamic period to the Timurid era (late second–fifteenth centuries; for more on this general topic, see Malek and Hofrichter 2006; Winkler and Tang 2009; Tang and Winkler 2013). Scholarly consensus on what constitutes Central Asia is not uniform. It is understood here to be the area bounded by the Hindu Kush, Pamir, Karakorum, and Kunlun mountain ranges to the south, the Gansu Corridor to the east, and the Caspian Sea to the west. Central Asia does not have a clearly defined northern boundary, but gradually merges with the steppe, taiga, and tundra of Russia. Thus, it comprises the modern-day territories of northern Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Xinjiang, and Inner Mongolia (the latter two in China), with many scholars also including Mongolia and the Russian steppe north of Kazakhstan.

Historically speaking, Central Asia has formed a vast cultural area between Iran, India, China, and Russia, inhabited mainly by speakers of Indo-European, Turkic, or Mongolic languages. The region includes some of the tallest mountains, harshest deserts, and lowest depressions on earth. Over the centuries, rivers like the classical Oxus (Amu Darya) and Jaxartes (Syr Darya) have fed various lakes and inland seas and provided extensive irrigation for the few places where agriculture is possible. In the deserts and on the steppes dominating Central Asia, however, the economy has typically been based on pastoral nomadism and transcontinental commerce along the trade network now called the Silk Road.

THE EARLY EXPANSION OF SYRIAC CHRISTIANITY INTO KHORASAN AND BACTRIA

As noted elsewhere in this volume, the Church of the East was established in Persia during the Parthian Empire (247 BCE–224 CE) and played a significant role in Persian society under the subsequent Sasanian Empire (224–651 CE). It was thus from Persia that Syriac Christianity spread eastward into Central Asia and then China. However, despite its predominance, the Church of the East was not the only church involved in Central Asia. At various times, the Melkites (Dauvillier 1953;

Parry 2012), Syrian Orthodox (Dauvillier 1956), and Armenians (Dauvillier 1974) were also present. Additionally, alongside Syriac as its primary liturgical language, the Church of the East also employed local languages (e.g. Middle Persian, Sogdian, New Persian, and Old Uyghur) in Central Asia, as extant Christian texts and inscriptions attest. Central Asian Christians were rarely native Syriac speakers or writers, but the language and script nonetheless played a crucial role in their religious life.

The *Book of the Laws of Countries* (written in the late second century by a pupil of the philosopher Bardaiṣan) gives us the earliest reference to Christians in Central Asia, namely the inhabitants of 'Beth Qashan' (Drijvers 1965: 60/61),[1] indicating the Kushan Empire (ca. 30–ca. 225). Kushan territory included northern India, Bactria (northern Afghanistan), and parts of Sogdiana (Uzbekistan and Tajikistan), but Eusebius's Greek *Praeparatio evangelica* (early fourth cent.) specifically translates the Syriac ethnonym in Bardaiṣan as 'Bactrians' (Gifford 1903: 302). Eḷishe Vardapet (d. 475) also mentions Christians 'reaching even the land of the Kushans' during the reign of either Shāpur II (r. 310–379) or Shāpur III (r. 383–388), long after the end of Kushan rule (Thomson 1982: 111).

The Syriac *Doctrine of the Apostles* (ca. 250) states that many countries in the East 'received the hand of the priesthood of the apostles' from Aggai, even as far as 'the land of Gog and Magog' (Cureton and Wright 1864: 34–5/34), a claim repeated in the Christian Arabic *Kitāb al-Majdal*, 'Book of the Tower' (Gismondi 1899: 3/2). This latter work is frequently referred to under the name(s) of ʿAmr ibn Mattā, Mārī ibn Sulaymān, and/or Ṣalībā ibn Yuḥannā, and was probably originally written in the eleventh century and then subsequently continued in the fourteenth (Holmberg 1993; Landron 1994: 99–108). No location is given, but Gog and Magog are typically associated in Syriac literature with nomads living on the northern steppe.

More historically grounded references are found in the *Synodicon Orientale* (late eighth cent.), which contains the synodical records of the Church of the East. These inform us of bishops of Merv and Herat (from Iranian Khorasan, now in Turkmenistan and Afghanistan, respectively) at the Synod of Dadišoʿ (424) and a metropolitan of Merv at the Synod of Yusuf (554) (Chabot 1902: 43/285, 109/366). Both the *Fiqh an-Naṣrānīya* of Ibn aṭ-Ṭayyib (d. 1043) and the *Nomocanon* of ʿAbdishoʿ bar Berikha (1290) mention a metropolitan or bishop of Merv during the time of catholicos Isaac I (r. 399–410) (Hoenerbach and Spies 1957a: 121; Hoenerbach and Spies 1957b: 123; Mai 1838: 304/141). This is unrecorded in the *Synodicon Orientale*'s record of the Synods of Isaac (410) or Yahbāllahā I (420); however, since half of the bishops at these two synods did not indicate their see cities, it is possible that Merv was represented at one or both of them (Chabot 1902: 35–6/274–5, 42/283–4).

Due to its strategic location on the eastern flank of the Persian Empire, Merv was an extremely important city for the Persians (and subsequently for the Muslims). It was also a key staging post for missions sent out by the Church of the East into Central Asia. According to a legend extant in Syriac, Sogdian, and Christian Arabic texts, Christianity was established in Merv by Barshabbā (Chabot 1896: §36; Scher 1910: 141–6; Gismondi 1899: 26–7/23; Sims-Williams 1988 [1989]; Brock 1995), probably reflecting the bishop of the same name from Merv present at the Synod of 424.

Later metropolitans of Merv occasionally caused trouble for the catholicos-patriarch, including David of Merv, who consecrated one of two rival patriarchs during a time of schism in the Church of the East in 524 (Scher 1911: 57; Gismondi 1896–1897:

38/22–3) and Joseph of Merv, who challenged the leadership of patriarch Timothy I (r. 780–823) before eventually converting to Islam (Budge 1893a: 198; 1893b: 385; Gismondi 1899: 72/63; Wilmshurst 2016: 361–3/360–2). Merv and Herat continued for centuries to play vital roles in the growth and expansion of the Church of the East, as documented by Fiey (1973: 75–87, 89–92). Surprisingly, only a few Christian artefacts have been found in and around Merv (Lala Comneno 1997: 31). A large building excavated there called Kharoba Koshuk (11th–12th cent.?) has been interpreted as a Christian church, but this is disputed by some (Lala Comneno 1997: 28–30; Herrmann 1999: 103–5, 180–1, 223–4; Borbone 2013: 452–3).

We lack information on Christianity in Bactria between the end of the Kushan Empire (ca. 225) and the sixth century, when several sources give evidence of Christian activity beyond the eastern borders of the Sasanian Empire, specifically in the territory of the Hephthalites (or 'White Huns'), who ruled north and south of the Amu Darya (ca. 467–561). Cosmas Indicopleustes's *Christian Topography* (547–549) describes Christian communities and clergy amongst the 'Bactrians and Huns' (McCrindle 1897: 119–20). The *Biography of Mar Aba* (after 552) describes how the Hephthalite ruler sent a Hephthalite Christian priest to Khosrow I Anushirvān ca. 550, requesting that patriarch Mar Aba I (r. 540–552) ordain him as a bishop for 'the whole kingdom of the Hephthalites' (Bedjan 1895: 266–9; Braun 1915a: 217–18; Mingana 1925: 304–5; Peeters 1946: 108; Pigulevskaya 1963: 335). The Christian Arabic *Chronicle of Seert* (between 864 and 1020) recounts the same story, referring to the Hephthalites merely as 'the barbarians' (Scher 1911: 78). This evangelistic activity amongst the Hephthalites should not be confused (as in Mingana 1925: 302–4) with a separate Armenian mission to the Caucasian Huns described in the *Chronicle of Pseudo-Zachariah Rhetor* (Greatrex et al. 2011: 452–4).

The Hephthalite bishop's see was doubtless in Badisi (Badghis, an important Hephthalite centre in NW Afghanistan), mentioned at the Synod of Ishoʿyahb I (585), which also furnishes the first reference to a metropolitan of Herat. By this time, however, the see of Badghis was no longer under Hephthalite control; they had been crushed by the resurgent Sasanian Empire and the nascent First Türk Empire (552–659) between 556 and 561, their territory partitioned between those two imperial powers. Indeed, these are the last records of any bishops or metropolitans from Central Asia participating in synods of the Church of the East (Chabot 1902: 165/423). However, the *Kitāb al-Majdal* does mention metropolitans being consecrated for Herat under the patriarch Joshua bar Nun (r. 823–828) and for both Herat and Merv under Mari II bar Tobi (r. 987–999) (Gismondi 1896–1897: 66/38, 94–5/55), not to mention references to metropolitans for both cities in later sources discussed below.

SYRIAC CHRISTIANITY SPREADS TO SOGDIAN AND TURKIC TERRITORY

Dating the spread of Christianity from Khorasan and Bactria northward to Samarqand (Uzbekistan) is more complicated, due to disagreement amongst sources regarding its addition to the episcopal hierarchy. The relevant sources only mention a metropolitan of Samarqand, never a bishop. Perhaps, due to its importance, it received a metropolitan from the start, as was the case with the Turks under Timothy I, discussed below. There is no mention of Samarqand's metropolitan ever attending

any synods of the Church of the East, probably due to the city's distance from Seleucia-Ctesiphon. However, the metropolitan of Samarqand was present at the election of patriarch Yahbāllahā III (r. 1281–1317; see below) (Bedjan 1895: 37; Montgomery 1927: 46; Budge 1928: 156). Due to their remoteness from the ecclesiastical centre, 'exterior' metropolitans (including Merv, Herat, and Samarqand) were permitted to consecrate bishops without personally conferring with the patriarch or even having other metropolitans present at the consecration, as we learn from Ibn aṭ-Ṭayyib (Hoenerbach and Spies 1957a: 124; Hoenerbach and Spies 1957b: 126) and the Syriac *Liber Patrum* (late 13th–early 14th cent.) (Vosté 1940b: 24–5).

Regarding Samarqand's elevation to the metropolitanate, ʿAbdishoʿ bar Berikha's *Nomocanon* reports unnamed authorities claiming that a metropolitan was appointed for the city during the patriarchate of either Ahai (r. 410–414) or Shila (r. 503–523) (Mai 1838: 304/141). However, these dates are far too early, since they predate the appointment of a metropolitan for Merv. Slightly more helpful is Ibn aṭ-Ṭayyib's statement that metropolitans were appointed for Ḥolwān (western Iran), Herat, Samarqand, India, and China during the patriarchate of Ishoʿyahb (Hoenerbach and Spies 1957a: 121; Hoenerbach and Spies 1957b: 123; Sachau 1919: 23–5). However, based on other sources, the author has clearly conflated at least two (and maybe all three) patriarchs named Ishoʿyahb.

The *Synodicon Orientale* confirms that Ishoʿyahb I (r. 582–596) established Herat's metropolitan, while ʿAbdishoʿ's *Nomocanon* credits Ishoʿyahb II (r. 628–646) with giving Ḥolwān a metropolitan (Mai 1838: 304/141). Lacking information about India's elevation to the episcopate, we must consider instead China's status. The Chinese-Syriac Xi'an 'Nestorian' Stele (781; see below) describes how Aluoben received a title equivalent to Syriac *Mar* (generally used only by bishops, metropolitans, and patriarchs) during the reign of Gaozong (r. 650–683), concurrent with the patriarchate of Ishoʿyahb III (r. 650–658); thus, an earlier date for a Chinese metropolitan is unlikely (Pelliot and Dauvillier 1984: 26–7, 45). Unfortunately, this sheds no light on the Samarqand metropolitanate.

Further confusing the situation, the *Nomocanon* of ʿAbdishoʿ bar Berikha claims that metropolitans were established for Herat, Samarqand, and China during the patriarchate of Ṣalībā-Zakhā (r. 714–728) (Mai 1838: 304/141). If so, perhaps they had to be re-established after a vacancy in the patriarchate (700–714), as Young (1974: 47) suggests. Whichever Ishoʿyahb established the metropolitan of Samarqand, it was during a turbulent time in Central Asian history, with the Eastern and Western Turkic Qaghanates, the Chinese and Sasanian empires, and the Arab Caliphate all competing for power in the region. Since Samarqand and the other Sogdian city-states were under constant pressure from the invading Arabs, a political dimension to the appointment of a metropolitan for Samarqand is likely, as was probably the case with the Hephthalites and the Turks (Dickens 2010: 130–1).

Other sources describe Christian activity which may have been connected with the appointment of Samarqand's metropolitan during this period. Thus, Theophylact Simocatta (late 620s) mentions Turks captured by the Persians in 591 (during the patriarchate of Ishoʿyahb I) who, on the advice of Christians, had had crosses tattooed on their foreheads while still young (presumably several decades earlier) in order to ward off the plague (Whitby and Whitby 1986: 146–7). However, it is unclear whether these Christians were Persians, Sogdians, Hephthalites, or others,

and tattooed crosses are not synonymous with conversion. Where these Turks had grown up is also not clear, but it could easily have been Sogdiana, after the aforementioned defeat of the Hephthalites, when Turks increasingly moved into the area.

Equally significantly, the mission of Aluoben, dispatched by patriarch Ishoʿyahb II to China and recorded on the Xi'an Stele, must have passed through Central Asia before it arrived in Chang'an (Xi'an) in 635. In addition to those who came from Persia with Aluoben, the envoys may have included Central Asians, particularly if the mission accompanied an embassy from Samarqand that arrived in China that year (Pelliot and Forte 1996: 359–61). However, the non-Syriac names on the Xi'an Stele are all Middle Persian, not Sogdian (Hunter 2009); in contrast, the Luoyang pillar (814/15) describes a Christian community which is obviously Sogdian in origin (Tang 2009a).

The Syriac *Khuzistan Chronicle* (ca. 660–680) reports the conversion and baptism of a minor Turkic ruler and his army ca. 644 (they may have been Hephthalites, now absorbed into the First Türk Empire and often called Turks in the sources). This feat was accomplished during the patriarchate of Ishoʿyahb II by Eliya, Metropolitan of Merv, in the context of a display of weather magic by Turkic priests accompanying the warriors. It took place near either the Amu Darya or the Murghab River (near Merv), as a result of which Eliya 'made disciples of many people from the Turks and from other peoples' (Guidi 1903a: 34–5; 1903b: 28–9; Mingana 1925: 305–6; Hunter 1989/1991: 157–60). The event took place between the Chinese defeat of the Eastern Türk Qaghanate (630) and the Western Türk Qaghanate (659), a time of intense instability in both Iran and Central Asia, due to the Arab invasion and collapse of the Sasanian Empire. However, it was clearly also a time of expansion for the Church of the East. Thus, political turmoil and missionary zeal provided the context for this conversion event. As the Muslim historian al-Ṭabarī (ca. 920) notes, Eliya was also responsible for giving a proper burial to the last Sasanian shah, Yazdegerd III (r. 632–651) (Humphreys 1990: 89) and, according to the *Chronicle of Seert*, for composing a now-lost *Ecclesiastical History* (Assemani 1721–28: III, 1, 148; Scher 1919: 193).

Finally, Ishoʿyahb III refers in his Letter XXI (651) to 'more than twenty bishops and two metropolitans in the East' (Duval 1904: 280; 1905: 202; Fiey 1970: 40–1), unfortunately without specifying which metropolitans are meant. Did he consider Merv and Herat (already in existence since the sixth century) to be 'in the East'? If not, was he referring to two of the three metropolitans further east appointed by 'Ishoʿyahb' according to Ibn aṭ-Ṭayyib, possibly China and Samarqand, as Young (1974: 47, 91–2) suggests? This time just prior to the Arab invasion also witnessed the arrival of the Syrian Orthodox hierarchy in Central Asia, with the appointment of a bishop of Herat under the first maphrian Marutha of Tagrit (r. 628–649) (Wilmshurst 2016: 347/346; Scher 1919: 225). Thus, by the advent of Islam, Syriac Christianity was well established not only south of the Amu Darya, in Khorasan and Bactria, but also north of the river, amongst Iranian and Turkic speakers in Sogdiana and adjacent areas.

CENTRAL ASIAN SYRIAC CHRISTIANITY UNDER EARLY MUSLIM RULE

The Arab Conquest of the Persian Empire lasted barely two decades until the death of Yazdegerd III (651), but it took much longer to bring Central Asia north of the Amu Darya under control; final victory came only after the Battle of Talas (751). Even

after political control was established, the process of Islamisation continued well into the ninth century. The military conquest of Central Asia took place largely under the Umayyad Caliphate (661–750), during which the Arabs faced competition in Central Asia from the Chinese Tang dynasty (618–907), the Second Türk Empire (682–742), and even the Tibetan Empire (618–842). Several references to Christianity in Central Asia which can be dated to the Umayyad period suggest elements of conflict between the invading Muslims and Christians living there.

Narshakhī's *History of Bukhara* (943/44) mentions a Christian church converted into a mosque (a common occurrence in areas conquered by Muslims) after Arab forces under Qutayba ibn Muslim captured Bukhara in 709 (Frye 1954: 53). Also of interest is Al-Ṭabarī's reference to the Sogdian ruler Dewāshtich (Dīwāshinī) being crucified in 722 'on a (Christian) burial place' between Bukhara and Samarqand (Powers 1989: 178). More problematic is the *Tezkere* of Imam Muḥammad Ghazalī (d. 739), which describes a prince of Kashgar named Sherkianos fighting against the Muslims in the eighth century (Grenard 1898: 15–25; Blochet 1925–1926: 24–36). Grenard's translation of 'Cher Kianos' is not accompanied by the original Turkic text; Blochet suggests it represents Sergianos, but the text does not identify him as a Christian.

More concrete and lacking indications of religious conflict are various archaeological finds from this time period. An ostracon found in Panjikent (Tajikistan, late seventh/early eighth centuries) with portions of Psa. 1–2 written on it in Syriac has errors indicating the scribe spoke Sogdian (Paykova 1979). A processional cross inscribed in Pahlavi script mentions the Church of Herat and a date (507 or 517), possibly referring to the Bactrian era calendar beginning in 232 CE (thus, 739 or 749 CE) (Gignoux 2001). Also dating from the seventh/eighth centuries are Christian burial sites (including ossuaries with crosses) found at Mizdaxkan (Khwarezm), Afrasiyab (the ancient site of Samarqand), Aq-Beshim (Kyrgyzstan), and Panjikent (Grenet 1984: 146–7, 160, 185–6, 265, 329).

A large number of coins with crosses on them (7th–8th cent.) from Samarqand, Bukhara, Tashkent, and other locations in Sogdiana suggest that these cities had Christian rulers before and during the Arab invasion (Semenov 1996: 60–1; Naymark 2001: 178–295; Ashurov 2015: 174–8). Finally, several silver plates of Central Asian (perhaps Sogdian) provenance with biblical scenes dating from the seventh–tenth centuries have been found in the Ural region (Klimkeit 1993: 480–2; Semenov 1996: 66–7; Klein 2000: 107–8, 368–9; Baulo 2000, 2004). By contrast, a jar inscribed in Syriac found in the Surkhandarya Region of Uzbekistan (undated) is likely a magic bowl mentioning Ishtar and Lilith, reminding us that Central Asian Christianity was influenced by earlier religious ideas (Gignoux 1996).

The Umayyads were overthrown in 750 by the ʿAbbasids (750–1258), who then defeated the Chinese at the Battle of Talas (751), thus securing control of Central Asia west of the Tian Shan Mountains and south of the nomadic steppe until the late ninth century, after which various Persian and Turkic dynasties arose (discussed below). There are several key references to Christianity in Central Asia during the period of ʿAbbasid hegemony. The aforementioned Xi'an Stele (781) was erected by 'Mar Yazdbozid, priest and chor-bishop of Khumdān (Xi'an)', whose father had been a priest from 'Balkh, a city of Tokharistan', another name for Bactria (Pelliot and Dauvillier 1984: 35–8, 47, 55–7, 64–5, 72–4; Lieu 2009: 235–6; Deeg 2013).

Coincidentally, this stele was erected at the beginning of the patriarchate of Timothy I (r. 780–823), who promoted the missionary expansion of the Church of the East. In his Letter XLI (782/83), he mentions the conversion of an unidentified 'king of the Turks with his whole territory', who had subsequently asked the patriarch to 'appoint a Metropolitan for the territory of his kingdom' (Bidawid 1956: 46/124; Labourt 1904: 43; Mingana 1925: 306; Gismondi 1899: 73/64). In Timothy's Letter XLVII (792/93), he mentions having consecrated 'a metropolitan for the Turks' and intending to do the same for the Tibetans (it is unknown whether this happened) (Braun 1901: 308–11; Labourt 1904: 43; Mingana 1925: 306; Dauvillier 1948: 291–6; Uray 1983).

These Turks were probably the Qarluqs, living on the steppe north of Tashkent. Several Muslim historians describe how their capital Talas (Taraz, Kazakhstan) was captured in 893 by the Sāmānids (based in Bukhara), after which the church there was converted into a cathedral mosque; various Christian artefacts discovered in Talas/Taraz support the idea of a Christian presence there (Frye 1954: 86–7; Dickens 2010: 127–9). Al-Muqaddasī (985) observes that the mosque in Mīrkī (160 km east of Talas/Taraz) 'was formerly a church' (Collins 1994: 246; le Strange 1905: 487), suggesting that converting churches into mosques was a common occurrence after the Sāmānid defeat of the Qarluqs.

References in Thomas of Marga's *Book of Governors* (840) to Timothy dispatching missionaries to 'countries of the barbarians who were remote from all understanding and a decent manner of life' (Budge 1893a: 252, 1893b: 467–8) have been understood by some as a reference to Central Asia (Mingana 1925: 306–8), but this is unclear in the text. Descriptions of 'other barbarians who live beyond them . . . ends of the East . . . countries beyond Gīlān and Dailōm' (on the southern shore of the Caspian Sea) are too vague to associate with any particular region. More certain are several important references to Christianity in Merv and Khwarezm at this time. Ishoʿdenaḥ of Baṣrā's *Book of Chastity* (849/50) mentions several monasteries near Herat or Merv and a Palestinian monastery founded by a native of Merv during the eighth/ninth centuries (Chabot 1896: §14, 36, 37, 87; Gismondi 1896–1897: 61/35). Ishoʿdad of Merv (fl. ca. 850), bishop of Ḥdatta in northern Iraq, was a seminal biblical exegete in the Church of the East (Gismondi 1896–1897: 72/42). A list of metropolitans in the Church of the East prepared by Eliya Jawharī, metropolitan of Damascus (after 903), includes Herat, Merv, and Samarqand (Assemani 1721–28: II, 458–60), but not the metropolitan of the Turks established by Timothy I, probably because Eliya wrote after the aforementioned Muslim capture of the Qarluq Turk capital, when the metropolitanate was probably abolished by the victorious Sāmānids.

During the period when ʿAbbasid authority in Central Asia was declining, ʿAbdishoʿ bar Berikha's *Nomocanon* describes how patriarch Theodosius (r. 853–858) mentioned Merv, Herat, and Samarqand in the context of reforming the 'exterior metropolitans', thenceforth requiring them only to send a written report to the patriarch once every six years (rather than making regular personal visits), due to their great distance from the ecclesiastical centre (Mai 1838: 308/146). This devolution of ecclesiastical authority mirrored the political independence increasingly evident in parts of the ʿAbbasid Caliphate further from the centre, particularly Central Asia. A quite different persepective on Central Asian Christianity is found in the *Book of Religion and Empire* (ca. 855), by Ibn Rabban Al-Ṭabarī (a Muslim writer whose

Christian father came from Merv): 'Outside these countries [those of the Greeks, Franks, "tent-dwelling Turanians" and Armenians] what Christians are to be found in the country of the Turks except a small and despicable quantity of Nestorians scattered among the nations?' (Mingana 1922: 156–7). From the same period comes a Sogdian inscription dated to 841/42 from Ladakh (N. Pakistan) accompanied by a cross; the former was probably inscribed by a Buddhist, the latter by a Christian travelling between Central Asia and India or Tibet, likely on a trade or diplomatic mission (Sims-Williams 1993). Crosses inscribed on boulders have also been found to the NW in Gilgit (N. Pakistan), possibly left by Christian traders travelling on the same route (Klimkeit 1979: 103).

The early ʿAbbasid period gives us more information on the different churches present in Central Asia, beginning with the Syrian Orthodox. Timothy I was obviously concerned about affairs in Herat, urging in his Letter XXV (799/804) that a young logician be made metropolitan of the city, in order to do battle with the Syrian Orthodox 'Severians' there (Braun 1915b: 141–2; Braun 1915c: 96). A different Central Asian connection may be indicated by the name of the Syrian Orthodox maphrian Yoḥannan of Beth Kionaya (r. 759–785) (Wilmshurst 2016: 357/356). Does it reflect an ethnic connection with the Chionites (from Pahl. *Xyōn/Hyōn*), 'a tribe of probable Iranian origin that was prominent in Bactria and Transoxania [territory north of the Oxus] in late antiquity' (Felix 1991: 485)?

This era brought another Church to Central Asia, as a result of the capture of some Melkite (Syriac-speaking Greek Orthodox) Christians transported to Shāsh (Tashkent) by Caliph al-Manṣur in 762 (Parry 2012: 96–8). The polymath al-Birunī (ca. 1000) – who spent much of his life in Central Asia, whether his native Khwarezm, Bukhara, or the Ghaznavid court – specifically mentions the festivals of both 'Nestorian' and 'Melkite' Christians in Khwarezm and informs us of a Melkite metropolitan in Merv during his time (Sachau 1879: 282–313; Griveau 1915: 291–312). Al-Birunī was unable to explain the calendar of the 'Jacobites', having never met anyone who 'knew their dogmas' (Sachau 1879: 312).

The Khwarezmian court in Konye-Urgench (Turkmenistan) in al-Birunī's time was home to two famous Central Asian scholars, the Muslim Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna) (d. 1037) and the Christian Abū Sahl al-Masīḥī (d. after 1002), the author of several works, most notably 'The Book of the Hundred on Medicine', and allegedly Ibn Sīnā's teacher (Bedjan 1890: 195; Budge 1932: 176; Karmi 1978). Christian artefacts from Khwarezm include the aforementioned Christian ossuaries from Mizdaxkan and several slabs (gravestones?) with crosses preserved in Konye-Urgench (Lala Comneno 1997: 33). In the context of discussing a passage from William of Rubruck (ca. 1255), Pelliot (1973: 117–8) argues convincingly that references to 'people called Koltink' [Soldains], possessing their own language and using Greek letters and the Greek rite . . . [who] obey the patriarch of Antioch' but live in 'the kingdom of Khwarazmia', mentioned in *The Flower of Histories of the East* by Hetʿum (1307), must refer to the remnants of the aforementioned Melkites, with 'Soldains' a variant of 'Sogdians' (Bedrosian 2004: §4).

Thus, as ʿAbbasid power eroded in Central Asia, three branches of Syriac Christianity could be found throughout the region, including Khorasan, Bactria, Khwarezm, Sogdiana, and Qarluq territory north of Sogdiana. Whether Christianity had penetrated into the Tarim Basin (Xinjiang province, China) by this time is uncertain.

The probable adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the Qarluqs was a significant (but short-lived) development, paralleling the adoption of Judaism by the Turkic Khazars, Manichaeism by the Turkic Uyghurs, and Buddhism by the Tibetans at roughly the same time.

CENTRAL ASIAN SYRIAC CHRISTIANITY UNDER NON-ARAB POLITIES

As noted already, Arab authority in Central Asia was eventually replaced by Persian and Turkic states, essentially independent but owing token loyalty to the caliph in Baghdad: the Persian Sāmānid Dynasty in Mawaraʾn-nahr (the Arabic term for Transoxania) (875–999), the Turkic Qarakhanid Dynasty in Eastern (and later Western) Turkistan (ca. 943–1212), and the Turkic Ghaznavid Dynasty in Afghanistan and northern India (962–1163). Beyond the *Dar al-Islam*, the Uyghur Kingdom of Qocho in Turfan (ca. 860–1284) emerged from the overthrown Uyghur Empire in Mongolia (744–840). In both Uyghur states, Manichaeism was the main religion, eventually displaced in Turfan by Buddhism. Various sources confirm the continuing vitality of Christianity in Mawaraʾn-nahr during this period. Ibn al-Faqīh (ca. 902) includes the doors on the church of Samarqand in a list of the most impressive sites on earth (Massé 1973: 297). Ibn Ḥawqal (988) mentions three Christian sites in Central Asia: (1) a church just north of Herat, also mentioned by Ḥamd Allāh Mustawfī (after 1335) (le Strange 1919: 150); (2) a monastery in Sogdiana, recently excavated near Urgut, 40 km SE of Samarqand; and (3) a village near the city of Shāsh (Tashkent) (Kramers and Wiet 1964: 424, 478, 485; Ouseley 1800: 218, 257, 265).

Based on archaeological finds, including a bronze censor with biblical scenes found long before the Urgut monastery was excavated (Zalesskaja 1971; Lala Comneno 1997: 35), the monastery was probably established in the seventh century and inhabited up to the thirteenth (Savchenko and Dickens 2009; Savchenko 2010). Dozens of Syriac inscriptions (Figures 31.1–4) left on nearby cliffs (including Syriac, Arabic, Persian, and Turkic names) suggest that many Christians visited the vicinity and held vigil there (Dickens 2017 provides the text of all legible inscriptions). Summarising conditions in the region of al-Mashriq – defined as 'the territories of the Sāmānids' – al-Muqaddasī comments that 'many Jews are here, few Christians, some Magians' (Collins 1994: 7, 284), but the general reference does not precisely locate these Christians. In contrast, al-Nadīm's *Fihrist* (ca. 988/89) mentions Sogdiana as 'an abode of the Turks' whose people are 'dualists [Zoroastrians] and Christians' (Dodge 1970: 33), likely describing an earlier situation, since the region had been largely Islamised by his time.

Several archaeological sites in former Sogdian territory (all now in Uzbekistan) containing cross-shaped elements (many of them underground edifices) have also been proposed as Christian sites. This is unclear in some cases (especially where identifiable Christian artefacts were not found), but seems possible in others. These suggested sites have been grouped into those supposedly serving as churches, monasteries, or other places of communal worship and those located in private homes, used for family worship. The communal structures (7th–9th cent.) include Korxona, SE of Tashkent; Qosh-tepa, near Qarshi, SW of Samarqand; Kojar-tepa, also near Qarshi; and Samarqand, where baked bricks laid in the form of a cross were found in an underground

Figure 31.1 Inscriptions from Urgut, showing two occurrences of the name Sargis

Figure 31.2 Inscription and cross from Urgut

Figure 31.3 Inscriptions with crosses from Urgut

Figure 31.4 Persian inscription in Syriac script from Urgut

structure near the Registan square. The private structures (6th–10th cent.) include Kultepa, also near Qarshi; Afrasiyab (Samarqand), where a portable oven stamped with the image of a cross and medical paraphernalia were discovered in an underground structure; and O'zgan III-Shahristan, Ferghana Valley (Raimqulov 1999, 2000).

More certain is the Christian provenance of various crosses of gold, silver, bronze, copper, nephrite, and bone, dating from the seventh to the fourteenth centuries,

found throughout territories where Sogdians were prevalent before and after the Arab Conquest (Sogdiana, Ferghana, and Semirechye). Many of them are pectoral crosses, often discovered in burial sites. These include crosses from (1) Tajikistan (Dashti-Urdakon, near Panjikent); (2) Uzbekistan (Afrasiyab, Samarqand; Durmen, near Samarqand; Qashqadarya; Kanka, near Tashkent; Quva, Ferghana Valley); (3) Kyrgyzstan (Krasnaya Rechka, Burana, Aq-Beshim, Toru Aygyr); and (4) Kazakhstan (Kostobe, near Taraz; Talgar). Many of these crosses were locally made, as evidenced by the discovery of casting moulds in Merv and Rabinjan, between Bukhara and Samarqand (Rott 2006; Savchenko and Dickens 2009: 131–2, 297, 299; Savchenko 2010: 77).

There is abundant evidence of the presence of Christians around the Tarim Basin at this time, much of it related to the Uyghur Kingdom in Turfan. Gardīzī (ca. 1050) describes Christians, 'Dualists' (probably Manichaeans), and Buddhists in the realm of the Toquz Oghuz (as the Uyghurs were often called) and notes two Christian churches in Khotan, on the southern perimeter of the Tarim Basin (Martinez 1982: 134, 141). The prevalence of Christians in the Uyghur Kingdom is also affirmed by the anonymous author of the *Ḥudūd al-ʿĀlam* (982), who mentions five Sogdian 'villages of Bek-Tegin' in the Toquz Oghuz realm in which lived Christians, Zoroastrians, and others (Minorsky 1970: 95, 274). A much later writer, John of Plano Carpini, in his *History of the Mongols* (after 1247), inflates the role of Christianity amongst the Uyghurs when he writes 'These people, who are Christians of the Nestorian sect, he [Chinggis Khan] defeated in battle, and the Mongols took their alphabet' (Dawson 1955: 20–1). Similarly, the *Tartar Relation* (1247), a transcript of Carpini's initial report of his mission, mentions 'the country called Uighur, whose inhabitants were Christians of the Nestorian sect' (Skelton et al. 1965: 58).

Also dating from this period is the crucially important corpus of approximately 1,100 Christian textual fragments in Syriac, Sogdian, New Persian, and Uyghur Turkic found at Turfan in the early twentieth century, usually dated to between the ninth and the thirteenth/fourteenth centuries (Sims-Williams 2012; Hunter and Dickens 2014; Zieme 2015), plus a smaller number of Christian texts from Dunhuang (Sims-Williams and Hamilton 1990: 51–76; Klein and Tubach 1994; Duan 2001; Yakup 2002) and Qara Qoto/Kharakhoto (Pigoulewsky 1935–1936; Zieme 2006; Zieme 2013), both east of Turfan (Figures 31.5–14). The European expeditions which collected these manuscripts also found a few Christian artefacts, including the remains of a church building in Qocho, Turfan, with several wall paintings (Figure 31.15) (Bussagli 1978: 111–4; Parry 1996: 161–2; Lala Comneno 1997: 45–7; Borbone 2013: 458–60) dated to the seventh/eighth centuries (Yaldiz et al. 2000: 224), and a silk painting from Dunhuang (Figure 31.16) of a figure commonly interpreted as a Christian saint rendered in the style of a Buddhist bodhisattva (Whitfield 1982: 322; Parry 1996: 150–1, 159–60). However, it is possible that the latter may in fact be a Manichaean image of Jesus (an important figure in Manichaeism), given similarities (namely, a cross on the chest) with a Manichaean painting of Jesus from Fujian, China, recently re-identified at Seiunji Temple (Kofu, Japan), especially since the Dunhuang silk painting was found in the same cave as the Chinese Manichaean Hymnscroll, which includes three Manichaean hymns to Jesus (Gulacsi 2009, especially 96, n. 12,

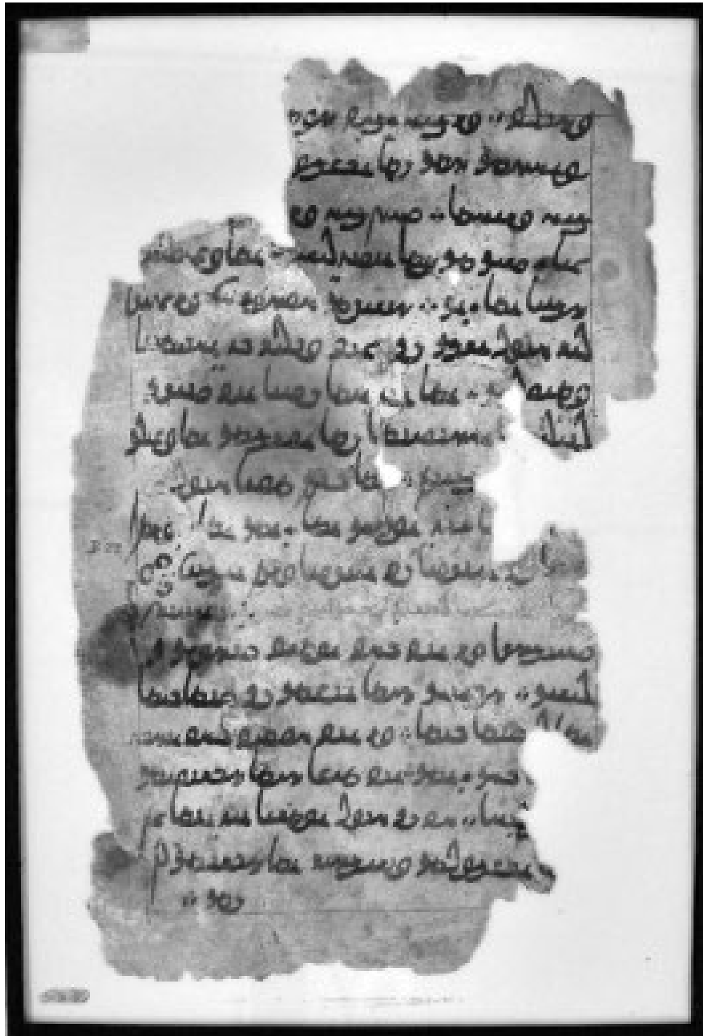

Figure 31.5 Sogdian translation of Nicene Creed from Turfan, with Syriac rubric (MIK III 59)[2]

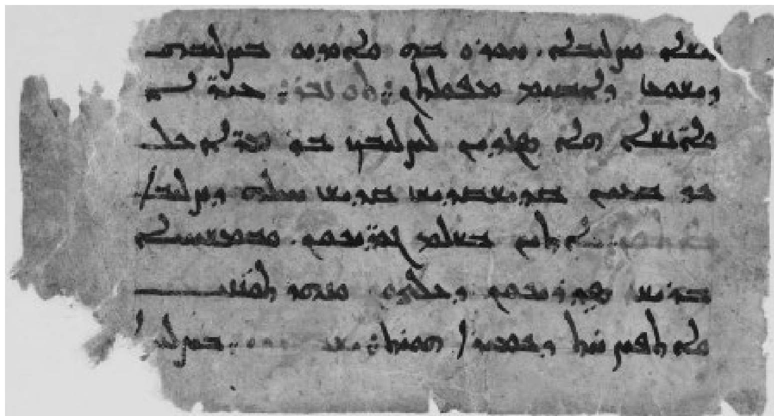

Figure 31.6 Syriac liturgical text from Turfan (MIK III 111)

Figure 31.7 Bilingual Syriac-Sogdian lectionary from Turfan (n212)

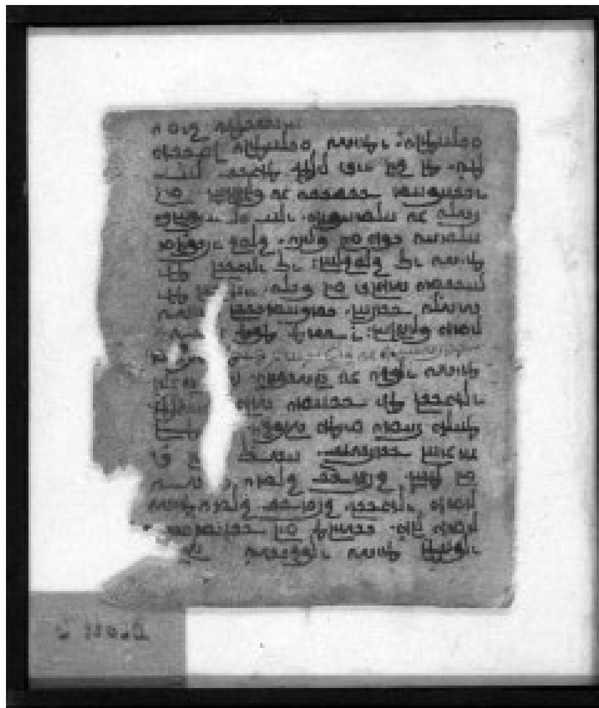

Figure 31.8 Middle Persian psalter from Turfan (ps06)

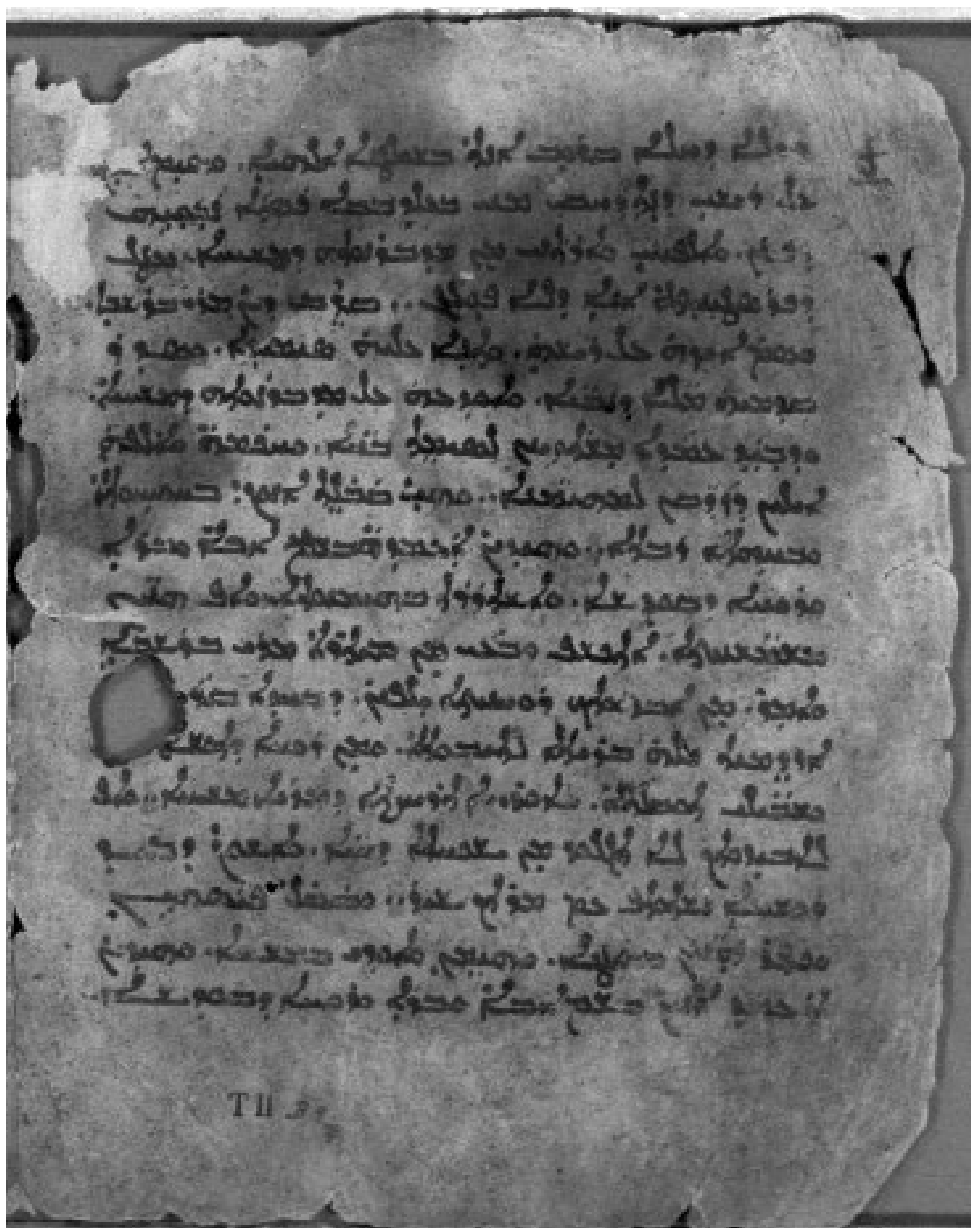

Figure 31.9 Syriac Legend of Mar Barshabba from Turfan (SyrHT045)

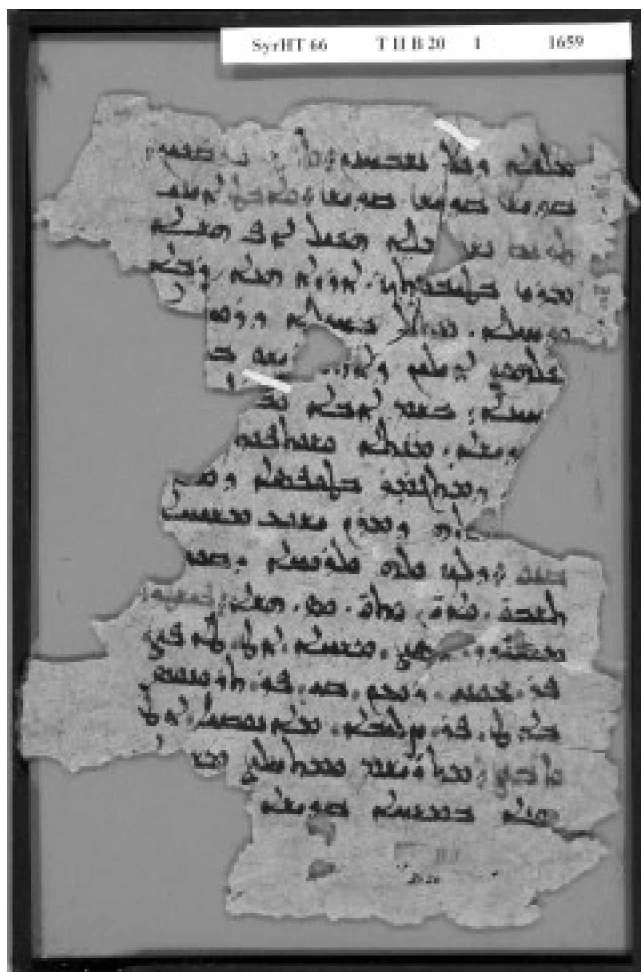

Figure 31.10 Syriac baptismal service, with instructions to the priest in Sogdian from Turfan (SyrHT066)

Figure 31.11 Graffiti in Syriac and Uyghur on blank side of folio from Syriac Hudra from Turfan (SyrHT124)

Figure 31.12 Bilingual Syriac-Persian psalter from Turfan (SyrHT153)

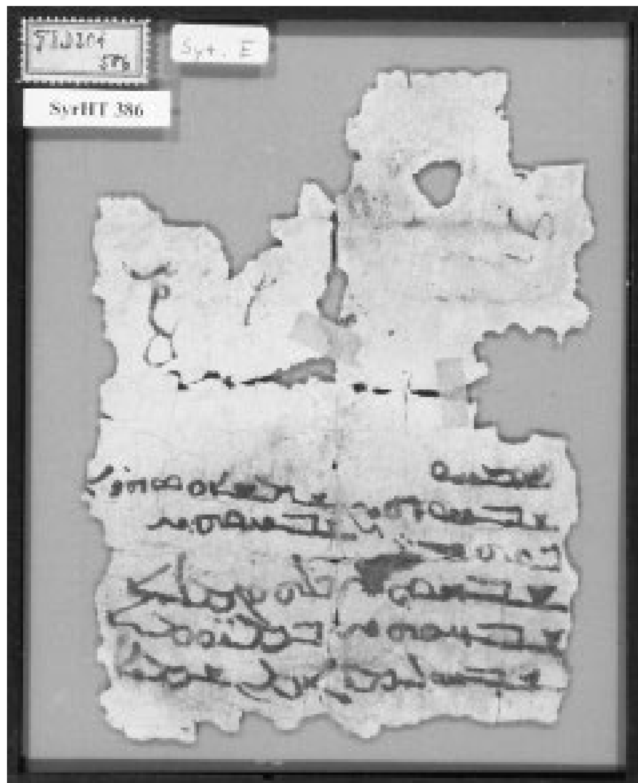

Figure 31.13 Psalm 148:1–3, with verses written in reverse order from Turfan (SyrHT386)

Figure 31.14 Christian wedding blessing, Uyghur in Syriac script, from Turfan (u7264)

Figure 31.15 Wall painting from a ruined church building in Qocho, Turfan, probably showing a Christian priest and three female worshippers (now located in the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Berlin)

Figure 31.16 Silk painting from Dunhuang of a possible Christian figure wearing a pectoral cross and a crown/headdress with a cross

Source: © The British Library Board

98, n. 17, 106; Yoshida and Furukawa 2015: 141–7, 183–95). The origins of Christianity in Turfan, Dunhuang, and Qara Qoto are unclear. Possibly the Chinese imperial edict of 845 forcing Buddhist, Zoroastrian, and Christian monasteries in China to close and monastics to return to secular life was a catalyst for some Christians, especially those accustomed to monastic life, to move to the multicultural and religiously diverse Uyghur state in Turfan.

In addition to the Uyghurs, there are several references to Christian Turks during this period. An unknown biblical interpreter who composed the Syriac *Gannat Bussāmē* ('Garden of Delights', ca. 900), a commentary on the lectionary readings of the Church of the East, is called 'the Interpreter of the Turks' in ʿAbdishoʿ bar Berikha's *Catalogue of Syriac Writers* (ca. 1318) (Assemani 1721–28: III, 1, 188; Badger 1852: 374; Scher 1906: 28–9). It is unclear whether he taught Christianity to the Turks or was a Turk himself. The author of the *Gannat Bussāmē* cites several biblical expositors with connections to Merv, including Theodore of Merv (ca. 540), Eliya of Merv (ca. 660), and Ishoʿdad of Merv (ca. 850), reminding us of the important role which that city played in the spiritual life of the Church of the East (Chabot 1906: 491–5; Assemani 1721–28: III, 1, 147–8; Badger 1852: 371; Reinink 1988: xxix–xxx, xxxvii–xxxix, xlii–xliii). Finally, could there be a connection with the Sogdians in the name of Timothy, known as Sogdi, metropolitan of the Syrian Orthodox monastery of Mar Mattai from shortly after 1074/75 until sometime after 1111/12 (Wilmshurst 2016: 409/408)?

A major event in the history of Turkic Christianity is recorded in the *Kitāb al-Majdal* and Bar Hebraeus's Syriac *Chronicon Ecclesiasticum* (1286), namely a report from metropolitan ʿAbdishoʿ of Merv about the conversion of 200,000 Turks to Christianity in 1007/08 (Assemani 1721–28: III, 2, 484–5; Gismondi 1899: 112–3/99–100; Wilmshurst 2016: 399/398; Mingana 1925: 308–9). Bar Hebraeus calls them Keraits, but this likely reflects a later situation in the Mongol Empire when the Keraits were well-known as Christians (Hunter 1989/1991); it has been argued that the Turks in question were probably the Öngüt, mentioned below (Atwood 2014). Writing in his *Kitāb al-Majālis*, 'Book of Sessions', approximately when this conversion event occurred, Eliya, Metropolitan of Nisibis (r. 1008–1023) mentions the Turks, Romans, Franks, Bulgars, Copts, Nubians, Armenians, Syrians, Persians, and Chinese amongst the nations that had 'entered the religion of Christianity . . . because of the divine miracle that led them to it' (Assemani 1721–28: III, 1, 270–1; Cheikho 1922: 267; Landron 1994: 159). It is unclear which 'Turks' Eliya meant, but perhaps it was those referred to by the *Kitāb al-Majdal* and Bar Hebraeus. Baumer (2006: 212) suggests that the ruins of a cruciform complex (11th–12th cent.) at Sum Huh Burd in Dundgov aimag (Middle Gobi province), Mongolia, might be 'a Christian-Nestorian shrine . . . here in the area of the Christian Kerait'.

In summary, Syriac Christianity continued to thrive under the Iranian and Turkic-speaking dynasties that succeeded the ʿAbbasids in Central Asia, not only in Khorasan and Sogdiana, but significantly also in the Tarim Basin to the east and amongst various Turkic groups living to the north, including either the Keraits or the Öngüt. As in previous periods, Merv and Samarqand continued to play important roles in the geographic expansion and spiritual vitality of the Church of the East.

SYRIAC CHRISTIANITY SPREADS FURTHER NORTH AND EAST UNDER THE SELJÜKS

When the Seljük Turks defeated their rivals the Ghaznavids (1040) and then captured Baghdad (1055) to become the official protectors of Islam, they ushered in a new era when Muslim Turks ruled the Middle East. In Central Asia, political power was shared between the Great Seljük Empire (1037–1194) and the rival Qarakhanid dynasty, later to be joined by the Khwarezmshah Empire (1077–1220) and the Qarakhitai Khanate (1124–1218). Despite these groups competing for territory in Central Asia and thoughout the Middle East, prelates of the Church of the East in Central Asia still had a role to play in keeping the political centre informed of happenings on the periphery of the Caliphate, as when Bar Hebraeus's *Chronicon Syriacum* (1286) mentions a letter about invading hordes from the east written by 'the Nestorian Metropolitan of Samarqand' in 1046/47 which was read out to the Caliph in Baghdad (Bedjan 1890: 228–9; Budge 1932: 204–5).

There are several enigmatic references to Christianity amongst the Turkic Qipchaqs (or Cumans), living on the northern steppe during this period and the succeeding Mongol era. However, we must first dispel the idea in some literature that the Seljüks were originally Christian, by virtue of the dynasty's founder, Seljük, having two sons named Mikaʾil (Michael) and Musa (Moses) and a grandson named Dawud (David) (Bedjan 1890: 218; Budge 1932: 196; Barthold 1901, 42–3). It is far more likely that they took these names when Seljük served the Jewish Khazar ruler. The Oghuz Turks, from whom the Seljüks separated, are called Christians by the Persian writer Qazwīnī (d. 1283/84), but their faith 'seems to reflect the incorporation of oral traditions about Christianity into Turkic shamanistic practices' (Dickens 2010: 125–6).

Concerning the Qipchaqs, Marvazī (1120) describes the Qūn (one of the tribes in the Qipchaq confederation) as 'Nestorian Christians' (Minorsky 1942: 29–30, 95–100; Pritsak 1982: 328–31), and Michael the Syrian (1195) briefly discusses Christianity amongst the Cuman, noting that 'their customs are confused', perhaps a reference to their 'Nestorian' background (Chabot 1899–1910, Vol. III: 155; Vol. IV: 570–1). The Christianisation of the Qipchaqs was likely the result of missionary efforts by the Church of the East based in Merv, Samarqand, or somewhere else in Central Asia, but we lack information on any ecclesiastical hierarchy established amongst them. Later on, there was a Catholic mission to the Qipchaqs living north of the Black Sea, as indicated by the famous *Codex Cumanicus*, divided into two sections: the 'Interpreter's Book' (1293–1295) and the 'Missionaries' Book' (ca. 1330–1340) (Bang 1914; Ligeti 1981; Golden 1992).

Passing through the area in 1332/3, the traveller Ibn Baṭṭuṭa hired waggons from Christian Qipchaqs north of the Black Sea and mentioned Qipchaqs amongst the Christian residents of Sarai, the capital of the Qipchaq Khanate (Golden Horde) (Gibb 1929: 142, 166). A similar story occurs in the largely invented *Book of Knowledge of all Kingdoms* (14th cent.), where the anonymous author recounts how he 'entered the Sea of Sara in a boat of Christian Komans' and mentions 'the kingdom of Sant Estopoli [Sevastopol], which belongs to Koman Christians' (Marino 1999: 87, 97). Presumably these Christians were part of the same community that the

Catholic missionaries were working with; it seems that their 'Nestorian' roots had prepared them for proselytisation by other branches of Christianity, a phenomenon also seen in Mongol China. For more on Christianity amongst the Qipchaqs, see Golden (1998: 217–22).

There are also references from the mid-twelfth century to Christianity on the rim of the Tarim Basin. The semi-legendary *Tezkere* of Maḥmud Karam Kabulī (fl. ca. 1155) portrays Muslim conflict with a Christian governor of Aqsu and a Christian king of Khotan in the twelfth century (Grenard 1898: 44–6). As noted above, separating historical elements from these hagiographical legends is challenging. More tangible evidence for Christianity in Khotan, possibly from the Mongol era, comes from a bronze cross inscribed in Chinese. It has been read as 'Supreme altar of the Cross', a reading questioned by some (Devéria 1896: 435–7; Pelliot 1914: 644; Dauvillier 1953: 71). The shorter version of the *Kitāb al-Majdal* (early 14th cent.) mentions a metropolitan of Kashgar during the patriarchate of Bar Ṣawmā (r. 1134–1136) and two consecutive metropolitans consecrated for the same city under patriarch Eliya III (r. 1176–1190) (Gismondi 1896–1897: 105/61, 111/64). Unfortunately, no other bishops or metropolitans are mentioned in Kashgar outside the twelfth century (Fiey 1993: 101–2), apart from the city's placement in the list of metropolitans from the *Kitāb al-Majdal*, discussed below.

Very similar to the aforementioned *Tezkere* are legends arising after the death of Khoja Ahmad Yassavī (founder of an important Sufi *tariqah*, d. 1166), which record conflict between Muslims and Christians (including rulers and whole towns) during the Muslim conquest of Central Asia. According to these accounts, important urban centres with Christian populations and/or rulers once included Ferghana, Uzgand (Uzgen), Osh and Shāsh (Tashkent) in or near the Ferghana Valley, and Kashgar and Aqsu in the Tarim Basin. However, the stories are very difficult to date and the legendary aspects of these hagiographies need to be considered when attempting to recover any historical facts (DeWeese 1990). In contrast, al-Shahrastānī's *Book of Religions and Sects* (1127/28) mentions only Zoroastrians and Mazdakites in Sogdiana (Gimaret and Monnot 1986: 665–6, 673).

Finally, there are enigmatic references in the twelfth century to one or possibly two Syrian Orthodox bishops named Bar Turkaya, 'Son of the/a Turk'. Michael the Syrian and Bar Hebraeus's *Chronicon Ecclesiasticum* both mention the patriarch Yoḥannan X bar Mawdyono (r. 1129–1137) appointing a 'Bar Turkaya' as bishop of Mabbug (Chabot 1899–1910, Vol. III: 238–9; Vol. IV: 615–6; Wilmshurst 2016: 169/168) and/or bishop of Tel Bashir (Chabot 1899–1910, Vol. III: 298–9; Vol. IV: 649–50; cf. Vol. III: 478, n. 4; Wilmshurst 2016: 181/180). It is unclear whether the name of the bishop(s) in question indicated Turkic ethnicity, but this is certainly a possibility, since the dioceses mentioned were in territory ruled by the Seljüks (if so, this might imply mixed parentage or conversion from Islam to Christianity). Thus, Syriac Christianity by this period had become established well beyond the initial ecclesiastical bases of Merv and Samarqand, as indicated by the references to metropolitan bishops in Kashgar and Christianity amongst the Qipchaq-Cumans on the northern steppe.

THE FINAL STAGE OF SYRIAC CHRISTIANITY UNDER THE MONGOLS AND TIMURIDS

Mongol power in Central Asia was consolidated by their defeat of the Qarakhitai (1218) and Khwarezmshah (1220) empires. After the death of Chinggis Khan (1227), the unified Mongol Empire he had forged evolved into four separate states: the Il-khanate in Persia (1256–1335), the Chaghatayid Khanate in Central Asia (1242–1347), the Qipchaq Khanate (Golden Horde) on the northern steppe (1256–1360), and the Yuan dynasty in Mongolia and China (1260–1368). Under Chinggis Khan and his immediate successors – Ögedei Khan (r. 1229–1241), Güyüg Khan (r. 1246–1248), Möngke Khan (r. 1251–1259), and Qubilai Khan (r. 1260–1294) – there was an intentional policy of religious tolerance, as Juvaynī (1259) indicates (Boyle 1958: 26); for a more nuanced evaluation of Mongol religious policy, see Jackson 2005. However, beginning in 1295 and continuing up to the mid-fourteenth century, the rulers of the Il-khanate, the Qipchaq Khanate, and the Chaghatayid Khanate gradually converted to Islam, along with the majority of their Turko-Mongolian troops. Christianity continued to exist in all three domains after the rulers' adoption of Islam, but it did so in a weakened position, eventually disappearing in Central Asia under the Timurid dynasty (1369/70–1506).

Before that disappearance, however, there are numerous references to Christianity during the Mongol era, thanks to the many extant primary sources in Arabic, Armenian, Chinese, mediaeval Latin or Italian, Persian, and Syriac. There is evidence of Christianity flourishing amongst several Turkic groups during this period. The ruling elites of the Christianised Kerait/Kereyid (Atwood 2004: 295–7) and Öngüt/Önggüd Turks (Atwood 2004: 424–5; Borbone 2005; Baumer 2006: 201–5; Borbone 2008a) developed marriage alliances with the Mongol nobility. Christian rulers of the Kerait before the Mongol Empire include Marghuz (Marcus) Buyruq Khan (r. 1125–1140), his son Quryaqus (Cyriacus) Buyruq Khan (r. 1140), and most importantly his grandson Toghrul Wang Khan (r. 1150–1203), initially Chinggis Khan's mentor and later his rival, whom Chinggis defeated; Toghrul was later associated by Marco Polo (after 1296) with the legend of Prester John (Boyle 1958: 35–8; Bedjan 1890: 409–10; Budge 1932: 352–3; Moule and Pelliot 1938: 63–8; Togan 1998: 65–103, 170–3). *The Secret History of the Mongols* (1228?) describes how Toghrul and his associates had 'made magic strips and uttered the prayer *Abui babui*' when 'pleading for a son who was yet to come [be born]'; could the prayer name (accompanied by obviously shamanistic practices) represent the Syriac title of the Lord's Prayer, *Abun dbashmayo* (de Rachewiltz 2004: 94)?

Despite hopeful reports from Western envoys and the general policy of religious tolerance in Mongol territory, few Mongol rulers genuinely adopted Christianity; Sartaq, ruler of the Golden Horde (r. 1256–1257) is a notable exception. Juvaynī, Kirakos Gandzakets'i (1266/67), Vardan Arewelts'i (1267), and Bar Hebraeus all affirm Sartaq's faith (Boyle 1958: 268; Bedrosian 1986: §55, §58; Bedrosian 2007, §90; Bedjan 1890: 465; Budge 1932: 398). Less convincingly, Bar Hebraeus calls Güyüg Khan 'a true Christian' (Bedjan 1890: 481; Budge 1932: 411), while Het'um

claims that Möngke Khan and Qubilai Khan converted or promised to do so (Bedrosian 2004: §19, §23–24), but there is no evidence to support these claims. William of Rubruck is generally sceptical of any stories that rulers had converted or been baptised (Jackson 1990: 114–22, 172, 187–8).

Even more naïve is the claim by Guillaume de Nangis (ca. 1285–1300) that the Il-khan Ghazan Khan (r. 1295–1304), a devout Muslim, had converted shortly before ascending to the throne, especially since this is followed in 1303 by Ghazan's promise to convert in exchange for a Christian invasion of the Middle East (Guizot 1825: 236, 247). In contrast, after Chinggis Khan consolidated his power, numerous Christian Kerait princesses married into his family, notably a niece and granddaughter of Toghrul Wang Khan: Sorqaqtani Begi (d. 1252, mother of Möngke Khan, Qubilai Khan, and Hülegü Khan) and Doquz Khatun (d. 1265, wife of Hülegü, the conqueror of Baghdad) (Bedjan 1890: 465, 488, 491, 521; Budge 1932: 398, 417, 419, 444; Boyle 1958: 550–3; Bedrosian 2007, §90, §97; Atwood 2004: 511–2, 541–2; Tang 2006; Borbone 2009).

Writing about the Il-khanate, Armenian historians in particular make much of Hülegü (r. 1256–1265) and Doquz Khatun's favouritism towards Christians. Stephen Orbelian (1299) compares them to Constantine and Helen, an equation perhaps confirmed by an image in an illustrated Syriac gospel (Brosset 1864: 234–5; Fiey 1975), while Vardan Arewelts'i recounts a conversation with 'the benevolent and mild-mannered' Hülegü (who was a Buddhist) on spiritual matters (Bedrosian 2007, §96). The favour shown to Christians continued under Abaqa Khan (r. 1265–1282) and Arghun Khan (r. 1284–1291), as indicated by coins they issued with Arabic legends reading 'In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, One God' (Drouin 1896: 514, 521; Blochet 1906: 59). Pope Nicholas IV (r. 1288–1292) wrote letters to Christian wives of both khans (Ryan 1998: 417–8). The *History of Mar Yahbāllahā* (see below) notes that Arghun had his son baptised in 1281 (Bedjan 1895: 88; Montgomery 1927: 74; Budge 1928: 199). This was Kharbanda, the son of the Christian queen Urug Khatun. Baptised as Nicholas, he later converted to Islam and, ruling as Sultan Öljeitü (r. 1304–1316), strengthened the policy of Islamisation begun under his brother Ghazan Khan (r. 1295–1304) (Bedjan 1895: 147–9; Budge 1928: 255–7; Atwood 2004: 108, 199, 234–5, 598).

Bar Hebraeus even speaks favourably of Sultan Ahmed (r. 1282–1284), the first Muslim Il-khan, and notes that Ahmed's mother Qutui Khatun commanded the Christians in 1279 to renew their custom of blessing the waters at Epiphany (Bedjan 1890: 539–40, 548; Budge 1932: 460, 467). Although this does not clarify her religious persuasions, she was apparently responsible for Yahbāllahā III being released from prison later on (Bedjan 1895: 43; Montgomery 1927: 49; Budge 1928: 161). Nevertheless, the status of Christians was gradually eroded by internecine fighting between the descendants of Hülegü and the conversion of the ruling Il-khanid house to Islam, beginning under Ghazan Khan. Even Baidu Khan (r. 1295), the last khan to show favour to Christians, presented himself as both a Christian and a Muslim, as Bar Hebraeus's continuator notes (Bedjan 1890: 593–4; Budge 1932: 505).

A significant Christian ruler in the Mongol heartland was 'King George' (Syr. Giwargis, Turk. Körgüz, Chin. Kuolijisi) of the Öngüt (r. 1294–1298), converted to Catholicism by John of Montecorvino (writing in 1305–1306). Various European writers identify him as a descendent of Prester John or even equate him with that

mythical Christian ruler (Moule and Pelliot 1938: 181–3; Dawson 1955: 225–6; Boyle 1971: 326–8; Paolillo 2009; Marsone 2013; Tang 2013). A Syriac gospel book, likely intended for George's sister Sara and written in gold ink on blue paper, is preserved in the Vatican Library (Borbone 2006a; Baumer 2006: 203). Chinese and Syriac inscriptions almost certainly left by George in 1298 have been discovered at Ulaan Tolgoi in Mongolia (Osawa and Takahashi 2015).

There were several prominent Christians who served under the Grand Khans or the Il-khans. The Uyghur Chinqai (d. 1252), Naiman Qadaq (d. 1251), and Kerait Bulghai (d. 1264) were chief scribes, judges, and court administrators, while the Naiman Kitbuqa/Ked-Buqa (d. 1260) was a military commander under Hülegü (Boyle 1958: 259, 572, 605; Boyle 1971: 184, 188; Jackson 1990: 173, 192; Bedrosian 2007, §92; Atwood 2004: 103, 295, 666; Buell 1994). The case is less clear with Eljigidei (d. 1251), chief military commander in the Middle East under Güyüg Khan, who dispatched a letter to Louis IX of France in 1248 proposing an alliance between the Mongols and the Christians against the Muslims, as recorded by Vincent of Beauvais (1253), Matthew Paris (1273), Guillaume de Nangis, and others (Howorth 1876: 77–8; Giles 1854: 419–20; Lespinasse 1877: 86–9).

The letter, delivered by David and Mark, two Christians from Mosul, describes the Mongol intention as 'the benefit of Christianity' and urges equal treatment of all Christian sects. The envoys told Louis that Eljigidei was a Christian, along with Güyüg Khan, his mother, his sons, and other nobles (Lespinasse 1877: 97) but, as Pelliot (1931: 150–75) notes, assessing the authenticity of the letter is difficult, and some of the Christian envoys' supplementary information is erroneous or fabricated. Indeed, Möngke Khan later denounced David as a liar (Jackson 1990: 249). A letter written earlier in 1248 in the typical Mongol fashion (with threats and demands) to Pope Innocent IV (r. 1243–1254) from Eljigidei's predecessor Baiju (d. 1260), was delivered by Aybeg (Turk. 'moon-prince', Rásonyi and Baski 2007: 12–14) and Sargis, whose Turkic and Syriac names perhaps indicate a Christian community in Baiju's camp similar to that discussed below connected with the Semirechye gravestones (D'Ohsson 1834: 229–30; Pelliot 1931: 128–9).

Also playing a key role in both Mongolia and Iran was Simeon Rabban-ata, 'a pious, God-loving man of Syrian nationality' [describing his Syriac connections, not ethnicity] who defended the interests of Christians in eastern Iran and Armenia from ca. 1235 on, as Kirakos Gandzakets'i (writing in 1241) relates (Bedrosian 1986: §33; Pelliot 1931: 48–50). Based in Tabriz, he functioned as an intermediary between the Church of the East and the papacy of Innocent IV (Pelliot 1931: 29–42). A complementary account is found in Vincent of Beauvais, who describes Rabban-ata as a former confidante of 'King David' (here, Toghrul Wang Khan) and his 'daughter' (perhaps Sorqaqtani Begi?) who later functioned as a counsellor, confessor, and diviner in the Mongol court before he was sent to Tabriz (Pelliot 1931: 42–7). His title combines Syr. *Rabban*, 'master' and Turk. *ata*, 'father'; if not of Turkic (Kerait?) origin himself, he was obviously used to functioning in a Mongol-Turkic environment. A Chinese funerary inscription describes how he was 'in charge of the affairs of his religion' under Güyüg Khan (Pelliot 1931: 52–3).

Bar Hebraeus mentions several Central Asian Christians who served the Il-khanate in Iran. Samdagu, 'a splendid Mongol Christian youth', led the siege and recapture of Mosul in 1260/61 (Bedjan 1890: 519; Budge 1932: 443), about the same time that 'a

Christian Hun' named Tay Qutlugh (Turkic for 'blessed colt'), presumably a member of the Mongol army, was summoned to arrest and kill the murderers of Dionysius ʿAngur (r. 1252–1261), rival of the Syrian Orthodox patriarch Yoḥannan XII bar Maʿdani (r. 1252–1263) (Wilmshurst 2016: 267/266). Later, Eshimut, a Christian Uyghur ascetic, served the Il-khan Abaqa ca. 1275/76–1284 (Bedjan 1890: 535, 539, 542, 554; Budge 1932: 456, 459–60, 462, 472; Rásonyi and Baski 2007: 270). A Christian connection can also be seen in the story recounted by Juvaynī of the Uyghur Körgüz, governor of Iran and then Khorasan (1235/36–1242/43), who apparently converted from Christianity (given his name) to Buddhism and then Islam (Boyle 1958: 489–507, 534–9; Atwood 2004: 320–1).

There are numerous references to Christians of other ecclesiastical backgrounds in Central Asia during this period, including Syrian Orthodox, Melkites, Armenians, and Latin Christians (the latter ultimately part of a concerted papal effort to convert the Mongols, as well as the 'heretical Nestorians'). William of Rubruck and Marco Polo are particularly good sources of information on the different branches of Christianity in the region under the Mongols, as well as the locations of Turkic Christians in the region. Rubruck describes 'Nestorians' near Qayaliq (about 450 km north of Lake Issyq-Köl) and elsewhere in the territory of the Uyghurs (Jackson 1990: 148–52, 157, 165; Pelliot 1973: 113–23). Polo mentions Christians in Kashgar, Samarqand, Yarkand, Tangut, Qara-khoja in 'Uyghuristan' (Turfan), 'Ghinghintalas' (Barkul = Bars-köl), and 'Tenduc' (Öngüt territory); he describes a miraculous church in Samarqand with a pillar suspended in mid-air, but whether he visited the city himself is questionable (Moule and Pelliot 1938: 143–6, 150–1, 156, 158, 178–9, 181–3; Borbone 2013: 447–9).

The Chinese *Journey to the West of Qiu Changchun* (1228), which records the journey of the Taoist scholar Changchun to see Chinggis Khan in the Hindu Kush in 1221–1223, describes how, when camped to the east of Luntai (Bügür or Bayingol), between Turfan and Aqsu on the northern edge of the Tarim Basin, 'the head of the Tarsā [Chin. *Diexie-tarsā* was a common Persian term for Christians in Central Asia] came to meet us', reminding us that there were still Christian communities in the oasis cities ringing the Tarim Basin in the thirteenth century (Waley 1931: 82; Standaert 2001: 45). Another reference to the *tarsā* during the Mongol era occurs in Hetʿum, who describes the inhabitants of 'the kingdom of Tars' as

> Eo'gur [Uyghurs]. They have always been idolators [sic] and at present still are, excepting the kin of those kings who came, guided by a vision of the Star to Bethlehem in Judea to worship the birth of the Lord. Even now one may find many grandees and nobles among the Tartars who are descended from that line, and who firmly hold the faith of Christ.
>
> (Bedrosian 2004: §2)

Slightly later, Mustawfī includes Tarsiyān and Uighūr' in his list of kingdoms lying outside Iran, again equating Christians and Uyghurs (le Strange 1919: 249).

One of the most important texts from this period is the *History of Mar Yahbāllahā* (after 1317) (Pelliot 1973: 239–88; Borbone 2000), which narrates the travels of the Turkic monks Marqos and Rabban Ṣawmā from Khanbaliq (Beijing), via Marqos's hometown of Koshang – either Olon Sume (Borbone 2015: 138) or 'the

southern political center of the Önggüts' (Paolillo 2006: 373) in Öngüt territory (Bedjan 1895: 14; Montgomery 1927: 33; Budge 1928: 135; Pelliot 1973: 251–5, 259–61), to Baghdad (ca. 1277–1279). Shortly after, Marqos was appointed Metropolitan of 'the flock of Khitai and Öng' (referring to Northern China and Öngüt territory) by Denḥā I (r. 1265–1281) (Bedjan 1895: 28–9; Montgomery 1927: 41; Budge 1928: 148; Dauvillier 1948: 302–4). When Denḥā died, the Öngüt monk was elected Yahbāllahā III, the first and only Turkic patriarch of the Church of the East (r. 1281–1317) (Bedjan 1895: 32–8; Montgomery 1927: 43–6; Budge 1928: 151–6; Wilmshurst 2016: 463/462).

Yahbāllahā's ethnicity was so significant that his identity as a Turk is specifically noted in lists of patriarchs assembled by continuators of the *Book of the Bee* (ca. 1222) and Eliya Jawharī, as well as a *memrā* in honour of Yahbāllahā (1295) (Budge 1886: 135/119; Assemani 1721–28: II, 391–2; Vosté 1929). Rabban Ṣawmā (who may have been Uyghur or Öngüt; see Pelliot 1973: 247–8) was appointed visitor-general by Denḥā I and subsequently sent on a diplomatic mission to Europe (1287–1288) by Yahbāllahā III and Arghun Khan; while in Rome, in response to questioning by the cardinals, he declared, 'Many of our fathers have gone to the lands of the Mongols, Turks and Chinese and have taught them, and today there are many Mongol Christians' (Bedjan 1895: 57; Montgomery 1927: 56; Budge 1928: 174).

The various 'professions of Catholic faith' made by the embattled Yahbāllahā III in letters to the popes Boniface VIII (1302) and Benedict XI (1304) (Chabot 1895: 249–56; Tisserant 1931: 222–3) should be understood in the context of the Church of the East facing increasing hostility and persecution in the Mongol Il-khanid realm. By contrast, the Syro-Turkic patriarchal seal affixed to these letters gives fascinating insight into the cultural climate in which his church functioned under the Mongols (Hamilton 1972). The prevalence of Christianity amongst Turkic peoples at this time is well-expressed in the optimistic introduction to the *History of Mar Yahbāllahā*: 'Today the Turks have bound their necks under the yoke of divine lordship, and they believe and whole-heartedly affirm the word of our Lord' (Bedjan 1895: 2; Budge 1928: 123).

Also of importance for understanding Christianity under the Mongols are texts listing the metropolitans of the Church of the East; however, differences between these lists show how difficult it is to reconstruct the ecclesiastical hierarchy in Central Asia during this period. Thus, the only Central Asian metropolitans recorded in ʿAbdishoʿ bar Berikha's *Order of Ecclesiastical Judgements* (1315/16) are Merv, twinned with Nishapur, the Turks, and Herat, but not Samarqand (Chabot 1902: 618–20; Vosté 1940a, 56–7)! By contrast, the continuator of the *Kitāb al-Majdal* (14th cent.) gives a much more extensive list of metropolitans, including Merv, Herat, Samarqand, Turkistan, Khanbaliq and Al-Faliq, Tangut, Kashgar, and Navekath, but there is no indication of the total number of bishops overseen by these ecclesiastical provinces, beyond the general statement that 'each one of these metropolitans has bishops under him, some twelve, some six', probably more reflective of the situation in Mesopotamia/Iraq than in Central Asia (Gismondi 1896–1897: 126/73; cf. Siouffi 1881: 95).

It is unclear whether the metropolitanate of Turkistan was a restoration of Timothy's earlier metropolitanate of the Turks. If so, it may have included some of the Turkic groups amongst whom Christians flourished under Mongol rule: the aforementioned

Kerait, Öngüt, and Uyghurs, plus the Mongolic-speaking Merkit/Merkid and Turkic-speaking Naiman (Atwood 2004: 347, 397–8). From the latter came Küchlüg, the usurper of the Qarakhitai Empire (r. 1211–1218), who had grown up a Christian (Boyle 1958: 64, 65; Jackson 1990: 23, 122–3; Tang 2009b). Navekath was in the Chu River Valley (Kyrgyzstan), only 400 km north of its twin see city of Kashgar, but the harsh mountainous terrain between the two would have made travel and communication from one to the other very difficult (Dauvillier 1948: 288–91; Klein 2000: 136–9).

The see of Khanbaliq and Al-Faliq has been reinterpreted as Besh-baliq and Almaliq, two important cities along the northern Silk Road in the Chaghatayid Khanate (Sachau 1919: 22; Dauvillier 1948: 305–7). Given the significant number of Christian gravestones found near Almaliq (see below), there was presumably a sizeable Syriac-speaking Christian community there. A Catholic bishopric was established in Almaliq probably in the 1320s; however, seven residents of the Catholic friary at Almaliq, including the bishop, were martyred in 1339, as John of Marignolli (passing through the area in 1354–1355) and Bartholomew of Pisa (d. 1361) both recount (Yule and Cordier 1914: 31–3, 212; Standaert 2001: 75–6). Bartholomew narrates how the 'emperor', meaning the Chaghatayid khan Changshi (r. 1334–1338), was very favourable towards the Franciscan friars, possibly a result of having had a Christian wife, Alma Khatun (Klein 2000: 258–60; Baumer 2006: 210).

Tangut refers to both the Tangut people and their territory (situated in the Chinese provinces of Gansu, Ningxia, Shanxi, and Shaanxi and formerly the Xi Xia or Tangut Empire, 1038–1227). The *History of Mar Yahbāllahā* and the *Kitāb al-Majdal* praise the Tangut Christians for their ardent belief and note the presence of the metropolitan of Tangut at the patriarchal election of Yahbāllahā III; sadly, plotting by the metropolitan subsequently landed the patriarch in prison under Ahmed Khan (Bedjan 1895: 17–18, 33, 40–2; Montgomery 1927: 34–5, 43, 47–8; Budge 1928: 137–8, 152, 159–61; Gismondi 1896–1897: 124/71–2; Siouffi 1881: 92; Dauvillier 1948: 310–11).

Smbat Sparapet's letter from Samarqand (1248–1250) affirms the strength of Christianity in Tangut, noting it as 'the land from which came the Three Kings to Bethlem [sic] to worship the Lord Jesus' (Yule and Cordier 1915: 162; Lespinasse 1877: 92). It may be to the Tangut people that Plano Carpini refers when he describes the 'Kitayans' as having 'an Old and New Testament . . . lives of the Fathers and hermits and buildings made like churches . . . They worship one God, they honour Our Lord Jesus Christ, and they believe in eternal life, but they are not baptised' (Dawson 1955: 21–2), a passage repeated in the *Tartar Relation* (Skelton et al. 1965: 62). However, Pelliot (1973: 36–7) suspects that the original source is describing the typical mixture of Confucianism and Buddhism found in China at the time. Tangut Christianity can probably also be connected with the aforementioned texts from Qara Qoto, an important Tangut city.

A significant source of information on Christian communities in Central Asia during the Mongol era is a large corpus of Christian gravestones (about 600), mostly found in the 'Seven Rivers' region (*Semirechye* in Russian, *Yeti Su* in Turkic), in two sites near Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan): Karajigach and Burana (Figure 31.17) (Chwolson 1890; Chwolson 1897; Dickens 2009: 14–17). The majority of the gravestones are inscribed in Syriac or the Middle Turkic dialect spoken in the area, written in the Syriac script. Smaller collections of Christian gravestones come from three other

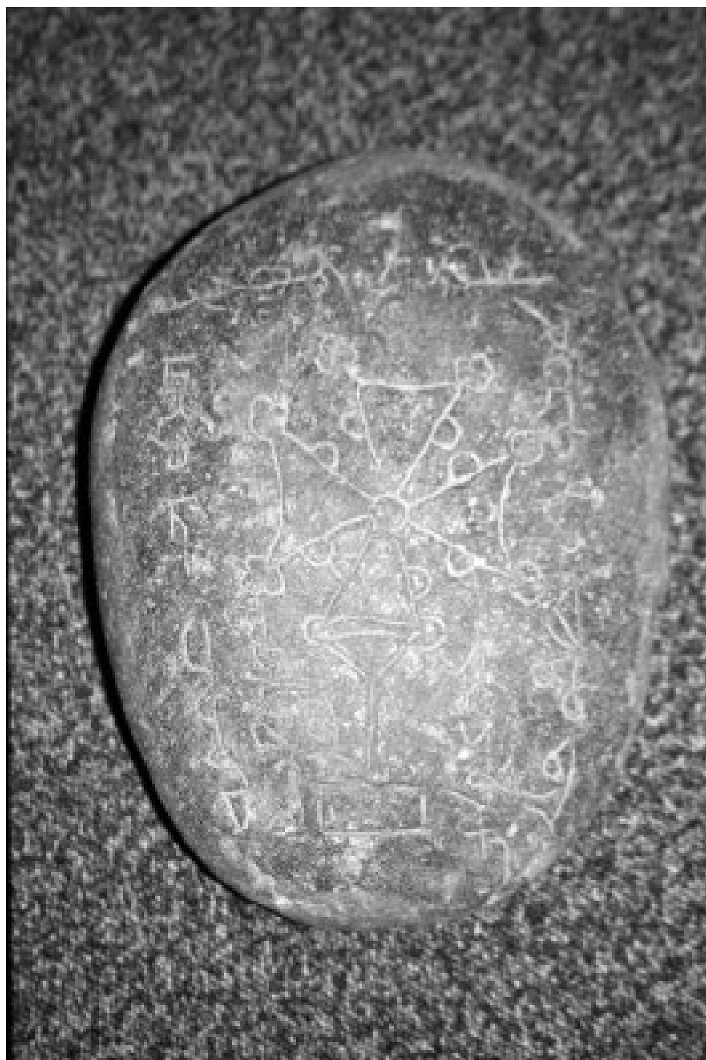

Figure 31.17 Gravestone from Kyrgyzstan

locations now in China: Almaliq, Xinjiang (Kokovtsov 1904–1905 [1906]); the traditional territory of the Öngüt in Inner Mongolia (Halbertsma 2015); and Quanzhou (Zayton) in Fujian province (Lieu et al. 2012). The preponderance of Turkic inscriptions in Syriac or Uyghur script from Quanzhou suggests that the Christian community there was mostly Central Asian in origin.

In addition to gravestones, the Öngüt Christians may have left behind two churches in Olon Sume – one 'Nestorian' and one Catholic (Egami 1952; Borbone 2013: 460–1) – and numerous small bronze objects, many shaped as crosses or doves, from the Ordos region of Inner Mongolia (Hambis 1947–50). Further evidence of Christian activity in Inner Mongolia during this time comes from Turkic 'graffiti' in Syriac script left in the 'White Pagoda' near Hohhot, Inner Mongolia, possibly dating

to 1221 (Borbone 2008b), and a funerary tile from Chifeng, dating to 1253, containing a Turkic text in Uyghur characters and a short Syriac text (Borbone 2006b).

Near the Semirechye gravestone sites, two church buildings have been excavated in Aq-Beshim, both probably from the eighth century (Clauson 1961: 2–3; Hambis 1961; Klein 2004; Borbone 2013: 455–8). In one was found a cross with a Sogdian inscription (10th–11th cent.) (Klein and Reck 2004). Artefacts discovered in nearby Krasnaya Rechka include the rim of a stone jar (late 8th–early 10th cent.) with an inscription in Sogdian script dedicated to *yrwytkyn mlp'ny*, 'Yaruq-tegin the teacher' (Livshits 2006; Lurje 2010: № 1517) and a brick (11th or 12th cent.) inscribed with the words *Giwargis Temurchi*, 'George the Blacksmith' in Syriac script (Borisov 1963). This data suggests that the Christian community which left the gravestones had probably been present there for at least six centuries, living under the rule of the Second Türk Empire, the Türgesh and Qarluq Qaghanates, the Qarakhanid Qaghanate, the Qara-Khitai Khanate, and the Mongol Empire.

The Semirechye stones date between 1200/01 (Chwolson 1897: № 2) and 1344/45 (Chwolson 1890: № 56), roughly corresponding to the time of Mongol rule. Dates on the stones are given using the Seleucid calendar and/or the Sino-Turkic twelve-year animal-cycle (Bazin 1991: 413–29). Most names are Syriac or Turkic, a few are Arabic or Persian; nearly all the deceased must have been Turkic speakers. One popular Turkic male name from the corpus is a word found in Maḥmud al-Kāshgharī's *Dīwān Lughāt at-Turk* (1072): *bachāq* 'Christian fast (*ṣawm an-naṣārā*)' (Dankoff and Kelly 1982: 313; Clauson 1972: 293; Rásonyi and Baski 2007: 93). It is likely that these Christians were descendants of earlier Turks, perhaps the Qarluqs, given their location in the traditional territory of the latter.

Approximately two-thirds of the 300 males represented held positions in the church, whether as priests, church visitors, scholars, archdeacons, chor-bishops, biblical interpreters, teachers, ecclesiastical administrators (e.g. 'head of the church'), exorcists, sacristans, or musicians. However, the only bishop commemorated on a gravestone is an Armenian (Marr 1894). There are also several non-ecclesiastical administrative or military titles, including *tuman begi*, 'chief of 10,000'; *rav ḥaylā*, 'commander or military governor', *amir* and *ispasalar* 'commander-in-chief' (Chwolson 1890: 124–9; Chwolson 1897: 53–4). Thus, this Turkic Christian community was involved not only in church life, but also in the broader society, notably the military.

The gravestones may give us insight into how other Central Asian Christian communities probably declined during the fourteenth century, due primarily to the arrival of the plague between 1337 and 1339 (nearly twenty percent of the Semirechye stones are from this period) and secondarily to conversion to Islam (Chwolson 1890: № 44). Other sources from this period also give indications of the impending demise of Central Asian Christianity. Juzjānī (1260) describes the destruction of a Christian church in Samarqand by local Muslims in 1259 after a young Christian converted to Islam and subsequently died at the hands of a Mongol ruler partial to Christianity (Raverty 1881: 1288–90). Baumer (2006, 169) suggests plausibly that this is the source of the story noted above that Polo relates of the Samarqand church.

For the time being, Central Asian Christians in China fared better. Mar Sargis, whose family was from Samarqand, had a distinguished career in service to the Mongols from 1268 to at least 1295, during which he was able to build seven Christian monasteries (Pelliot 1963: 774–6; Ligeti 1972). The Chinese *Annals (Gazetteer)*

of Zhenjiang of the Zhishun Period (1332), which records information about him, describes Samarqand as 'a land where the *Yelikewen* [Chinese for *ärkägün*, "Christians" (Baumer 2006: 219)] practice their religion' and mentions the same story that Polo does about a church with a suspended pillar; the surname 'An' of one of Sargis's assistant administrators, An Chenheng, signifies the origins of the latter in Bukhara (Moule 1930: 145–50, 156–7). However, as Rashiddudin (1310) recounts, conflict between Christians and Muslims at the court of Qubilai Khan increased during this time (Boyle 1971: 293–5), and when the Ming dynasty replaced the Yuan dynasty (1368), Central Asian Christianity in China had apparently ceased to exist.

By the fifteenth century, only a few sources mention Christians in Central Asia and then only in Samarqand and possibly Turfan. A report by Ruy González de Clavijo, the Castilian ambassador to Timur (1403–1405), mentions Christians captured by Timur who were resident in Samarqand, without specifying their ethnicity or ecclesiastical allegiance (Markham 1859: 171). However, by the time of Timur's grandson, Ulugh Beg, who ruled in Mawaraʾn-nahr (r. 1411–1449), relations between local Christians and Muslims had deteriorated significantly, according to an anecdote in the *History of Tamerlane and His Successors* by T'ovma Metsobets'i (early fifteenth century), which narrates how Ulugh Beg 'ordered all Christians to apostatize or be killed' after 'an impure Syrian Nestorian [priest]' committed an immoral act. As a result of this, some Christians 'chose death, while many lost the faith' (Bedrosian 1987: §19).

Two further sources discuss what appear to be syncretistic remnants of Christianity in the Turkic world. The first is the *Travels of Johann Schiltberger* (after 1427), where the author, a German captive of various Turkic rulers, describes accompanying Edigü (founder of the Noghay Horde) and his protégé Chakri Khan of the Golden Horde on an expedition of conquest to 'Ibissibur' (Sibir, east of the Urals and north of the Kazakh steppe, later the short-lived Siberian Khanate). Schiltberger notes,

> the people in this country believe in Jesus Christ like the three kings who came and brought offerings to Christ at Bethlaem [sic] . . . and they have a picture, which is a representation of our Lord in a manger, as the three holy kings saw him . . . They have this also in their temples, and say their prayers before it.
>
> (Telfer 1879: 35–6)

The second source is the *Tarikh-i Khata'i* (1494/95), a Turkish translation of a Persian report of an embassy to China from the Timurid ruler Shah Rukh in Herat which passed through Turfan in the summer of 1420, observing that 'many of the inhabitants . . . were infidels and they worshipped the cross'. Similarly in Qamul (400 km east of Turfan), in 'a large idol-temple . . . the image of a marvellous cross was set up . . . in front of that cross a copper image . . . was set up' (Bellér-Hann 1995: 159). These presumably represent the gradual absorption of the remnants of Christianity by Buddhism, by this time the dominant religion along the northern rim of the Tarim Basin.

How and when Syriac Christianity finally vanished in Central Asia – after a presence of more than 1,200 years – is unknown, but in addition to the textual and archaeological evidence presented here, echoes of it remained in personal names and stories after Central Asian Christians vanished from the sources. Thus, we hear of an official

named Mar-Hasia (Syr. 'Right Reverend', 1388–1403) and a khan named Mar-Körgis (r. 1455?–1466?) in the Northern Yuan dynasty, established by the remnant of the Chinese Yuan dynasty after their downfall (Atwood 2004: 408). Somewhat later, the Portuguese Jesuit Benedict (Bento de) Goës, who spent a year (1603–1604) in Yarkand before travelling on to China, relates that priests in the Kingdom of Kashgar were called 'Cashishes' (from Syr. *qashīshē*, 'priests') and the ruler of 'Cialis' (probably Qarashahr or Korla, 350 or 390 km SW of Turfan, respectively) admitted that 'his own ancestors [from Kashgar] had been professors of their [Christian] faith' (Yule and Cordier 1916: 223, 233; Wessels 1924: 34–5). Syriac Christianity in Central Asia was gone, but not entirely forgotten.

NOTES

1 Page references separated by a slash indicate the Syriac or Arabic text followed by the translation.

2 All images of the Turfan manuscripts are reproduced courtesy of the Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften.

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