

An untold story—How all central Asia once teemed with Christians

The first Western missionaries were shocked to find the Mongol capital alive with Christianity, the fruit of fervid evangelism by the Church of the East

For European Christians in the mid-thirteenth century, the immense expanse of Asia was one vast and menacing unknown. Out of Asia, it was true, came beautiful silks, delightful spices and much wealth. But out of Asia also came the ferocious and pitiless hordes of Mongol tribesmen who had so recently pillaged and slaughtered their way through southern Russia and eastern Europe. Nor were the Mongols the first such invaders. Many others had preceded them, so that Asia seemed to Western Christendom a source of unrelenting, murderous barbarism. Into this foreboding peril, in the year 1245, Pope Innocent IV sent an envoy. His mission: to reach and seek the conversion of the fearsome Mongol khan.

His choice for the job must have seemed as unlikely as the timing. John of Plano Carpini was no swordsman or diplomat—merely a pudgy Franciscan friar. But as an early disciple of Francis of Assisi, John had helped to found Francis's new mendicant order; he was no faint-hearted. With one equally intrepid companion, Friar Benedict the Pole, he journeyed for nine excruciatingly uncomfortable months across the great Eurasian plain to the lower reaches of the Volga river—where one day they were suddenly and alarmingly snatched up by Mongol horsemen and delivered to the camp of Batu Khan, grandson of the

The barefoot emissaries of Pope Innocent IV, John Carpini and his companion Benedict, pause in their grueling journey across the Asian steppes. Despite advanced age and the dangers of starvation, Mongol attackers and physical deprivations, these zealous Franciscans persevered to reach the court of the great Khan, there to discover Chinese Christianity long established.

1. “We started out most tearfully, not knowing whether we were going to life or death,” wrote the weary Friar John of Plano Carpini when the Mongol chieftain Batu told him he must journey onward to the distant court of the Great Khan himself. Already Friar John and his companion had been nine months on the road, and were “so feeble that we could hardly ride; during the whole of that Lent, our only food had been millet with salt and water ... nor had we anything else to drink but snow melted in the kettle.”

No doubt a welcome sight to medieval Silk Road travelers journeying through the Kyrgyzstan mountains, this caravanserai, one of the few remaining ones, is located in the Torugart Pass near the Chinese border. Built completely of stone, the tenth century Tash Rabat caravanserai offered a comfortable night's stay, boasting a large central hall, thirty individual rooms, a place for animals to lodge and eating facilities. Local legend suggests that the inn may at one time have been a Nestorian monastery.

storiéd Genghis, and recently the scourge of Europe at the head of the infamous Golden Horde. Alas, Batu refused to accept their message from Pope Innocent. He insisted they take it to his cousin Kuyuk, the Khakan (Great Khan) of all the Mongols, at his court at Karakorum—five more harrowing months away.¹

Struggling on, the two Franciscans were finally able to discharge their commission, but not before experiencing a severe shock. Here they were, in deepest Asia, at this supposedly heathen court—and the place was crawling with Christians! The Great Khan's personal secretaries were Christian; so were his advisers and administrators; so were his physicians. In a chapel near the royal tent, regular Christian worship was reverently and very audibly proceeding. And as John would further recount in his *History of the Mongols*, Christian courtiers insisted that Kuyuk himself was about to embrace the faith.

The westerners realized with disdain that these people were Persian heretics, whose disaffected Church of the East—rejecting every plea from Rome and Byzantium—had insisted more than eight centuries earlier upon following the heretical teacher Nestorius. Friar John disapprovingly noted that some of their liturgical practices differed from Western ones, and seemingly some of their beliefs, also. But they were recognizably Christian, and of their mission activities in central Asia, no news whatsoever had hitherto seeped through to Europe.

Indeed, what the two friars saw at the Mongol capital was only a fragment of these activities. Between the fifth and the fifteenth centuries, missionaries from the Persian Empire had traveled the trade routes of Asia to plant the cross from Arabia east to the Pacific Ocean, and from the Indian Subcontinent north to Siberia, converting kings, chieftains and sometimes whole tribes, and establishing thousands of churches. They had conducted, in fact, the most far-ranging evangelistic endeavor in the history of Christianity up to that time.

Not until the twentieth century would Western Christians begin to suspect the true scope of this Church of the East. How could they? After the fifth century, Mesopotamian Christendom was almost completely cut off from the West, for reasons political as well as theological. Within another several hundred years, most of Asia's flourishing Christian

communities would be wiped out, and such evidence as remained of their existence would long be overlooked or misinterpreted. Furthermore, to compound the distress of the few surviving remnants, through the second millennium they would be dismissed by Europeans, despite their vigorous denials, as hopelessly heretical.

The great missionary Church of the East originated in the first century. Among the crowd in Jerusalem that experienced the momentous descent of the Holy Spirit, says the New Testament, were Jews from Persian Parthia, Medea, Elam and Mesopotamia (Acts 2:9). In town to celebrate Passover, most of them would have known about the Crucifixion of Jesus. Some might even have seen him after his Resurrection. Some could have experienced directly the infilling of the Holy Spirit, descending upon the disciples as a mighty wind and tongues of fire. Three thousand reportedly experienced it through Peter's inspired sermon (Acts 2:41).

These people, according to Christian tradition, hastened home to carry the momentous news of the crucified and risen Messiah to fellow Jews throughout Persia. Soon afterward, the apostle Thomas, before going on to preach in India, is believed to have sent a disciple named Thaddeus (Addai in Syriac) to preach in Osrhoene, a small and embattled state perilously squeezed between the Byzantine and Persian Empires. Thence the new faith spread to the kingdom of Adiabene and its capital, Arbela (modern Arbil in Iraq), three hundred miles to the east. (See earlier volume, *A Pinch of Incense*.) Here Jewish Christians became particularly numerous, and soon they reached out to their gentile neighbors.

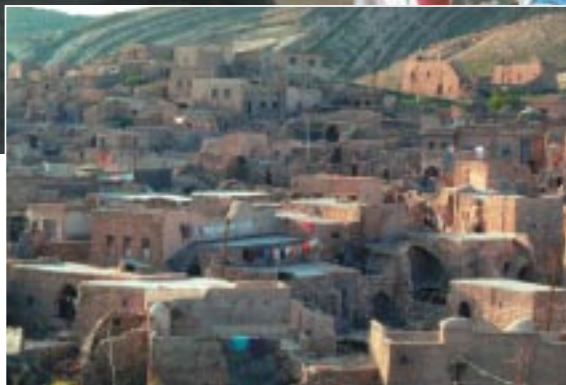
Tradition credits Addai and two of his converts, Aggai and Mari, with the launching of missionary work throughout Arabia, Persia, Armenia, and east to the Indian border.² Historian John Stewart (*Nestorian Missionary Enterprise: The Story of a Church on Fire*) quotes a sixth-century claim that in the time of Bishop Abd Mshikha-Zkha of Arbela, between A.D. 190 and 225, there were some twenty-five episcopal sees between the mountains of Kurdistan and the Persian Gulf (listing by name seventeen of the incumbents). A respected school of theology was established at Edessa, capital of Osrhoene.

Conditions then were propitious for Christianity in Persia and adjacent regions. Zoroastrianism predominated, but the Parthian warrior dynasty that had ruled Persia since about 140 B.C. took little interest in matters religious. Such harassment as occurred was local, instigated by jealous Zoroastrian priests rather than by royal command. Furthermore, despite intermittent warfare between Rome and Persia, Eastern and Western Christians were not yet cut off from each other, allowing regular communication between cities like Edessa (usually Roman-occupied) and Nisibis (some hundred and fifty miles away, in territory usually Persian).

Under the Sassanids who conquered Persia in A.D. 224, its Jewish and Christian minorities could still live in peace, so long as they behaved with discretion.³ In the early fourth century, however, the situation changed. The Sassanids were Zoroastrians, claiming descent from the ancient Medes and Persians, whose great ambition was to fully restore the worship of Ahura Mazda, god of light, and with it the glorious empire of Cyrus the Great. So they built

2. A fourth-century document called *The Doctrine of Addai* describes how Addai, disciple of the apostle Thomas, healed and converted King Abgar of Edessa, and baptized many of his subjects. Among the first was the royal robe-maker, Aggai, and another future missionary named Mari. Tradition remembers Mari as being, like Thomas, a doubter and pessimist who reported back that the people east of Edessa were worthless heathen and the project hopeless. Urged to keep going, however, he did so—again like Thomas—and reluctantly persevered to final and abundant success.

3. Third-century Sassanid shahs were chiefly concerned with eliminating Manichaeism, a syncretistic religion then spreading wildly. Its founder, a young aristocrat named Mani, was killed along with many of his followers in vicious persecutions, and Christians too were often included.



new fire temples, and centralized Zoroastrian worship as their state religion. Its priests—called *mobeds* or magi—became exceedingly powerful, and adherence to the national faith became proof of patriotism.

Moreover, about then Christianity became the favored religion of the Roman Empire, automatically

rendering Persian Christians suspect of treasonous intentions. In 339, Shah Shapur II started a brutal forty-year campaign against this “religion of Caesar.” Memorialized in church annals as “the Great Persecution,” it began by double-taxing Christians to finance war against Rome. The Christian *catholicos* (patriarch), Shimun bar Sabbai, refused to help collect it, protesting that his people were too poor—which in that era they likely were. Shimun and a hundred of his priests were therefore arrested, but Shapur reportedly was uneasy about this proceeding. He offered to let them all go free if only Shimun would worship the sun—even just once.⁴ No, the *catholicos* sorrowfully replied, he could not do that because, he said, “The sun went into mourning when its creator died.”

So the executions began—with the *catholicos* last to die. In the midst of the killing, according to legend, a sympathetic palace official named Pusaik discerned that one victim, a friend of his named Hanania, seemed to be faltering in his resolve. “Do not fear, Hanania,” he called out. “Shut your eyes that you may open them on the light of Christ!” Guards immediately dragged Pusaik before Shapur, where Pusaik declared that he envied the martyrs their punishment, for he too was a worshiper of Jesus Christ. His work and status at



court, he said, counted as nothing by comparison. For this wretch, roared the furious Shapur, mere beheading was too mild. “Tear his tongue out by the roots!” he shouted, “so that men may fear me because of him!”

Sixteen thousand believers were recorded by name as dying in the Great Persecution, wrote the Greek ecclesiastical historian Sozomen, along with countless unnamed others, for a total of perhaps two hundred thousand. The royal mandate allowed any minor official to unleash a local massacre, which enabled Zoroastrian priests or vindictive neighbors to vent any grievance. For years, it is said, such outbreaks were endemic throughout the Persian provinces, particularly in Adiabene and among the numerous Christians of outlying territories.

Nuns and monks reportedly were favorite targets, because celibacy offended Zoroastrian belief. Their tormentors frequently offered to spare them without even making them renounce Christ, if only they would agree to marry. Few did. One target was the deaconess Tarbo, sister of *Catholicos* Shimun, who was accused of using sorcery to inflict vengeful illness upon the Persian empress. Tarbo, with another sister and their servant, was condemned by the chief *Mobed* to be cut in pieces—a favored method of execution. Then the ailing empress (to complete her cure) was carried on a litter among their bleeding body parts.

Even so, it was claimed, relatively few Christians faltered under torture. Of one group of three hundred, for example, just twenty-five reportedly chose to deny their Lord and save their lives. The reported behavior of some few individuals, however, was deplorable. For example, one degenerate priest, Paul, is said to have abjured his faith to save his wealth, which merely frustrated his persecutor, Narses Namaspur, a notoriously greedy official who coveted precisely that wealth. Narses therefore ordered Paul to behead five consecrated women, thinking he would surely condemn himself by refusing, but the wretched priest did not shrink even

Tenacious survivors for two centuries in Iraq, Christians now comprise three percent of the population and are concentrated in Baghdad and the north near Mosul (the ancient city of Nineveh). This shopkeeper in Arbil (top, facing page), would be a descendant of first-century Christians evangelized by Addai, follower of the apostle Thomas. The Christian village of Al Qosh (bottom, facing page), on the Nineveh plain, looks much as it must have centuries ago. Syriac, an Aramaic language, is still used liturgically in places like St. Matthew monastery (above, left). Sixteen hundred years old and strategically located on Mount Maqloub, it was damaged by bombing during the American invasion of Iraq. Iraq’s most famous Christian, Tariq Aziz (above, right), was formerly Deputy Prime Minister to Saddam Hussein. His role as advisor and diplomat echoed the traditional services performed by educated Christians in the Muslim empire.

4. The shah-of-shahs Shapur II ordered the Christian patriarch Shimun to make obeisance to the sun (“even just once”) as a test of loyalty to the Persian throne. Zoroastrianism centers upon temples where Ahura Mazda is worshiped as sacred fire, but as god of light and goodness, Ahura Mazda is also associated with the sun, the major source of light. Similarly, rather than bury their dead in the dark earth, Zoroastrians allow sunlight and the birds of the air to deal with their dead. (They still do, as on the Towers of Silence in Bombay.)

from this. He killed the horrified women, though in the end it did him no good. Narses put him to the sword regardless, and confiscated his riches.

At times, though, Persian shahs looked kindly upon their Christian subjects, who prudently responded by trying to disassociate themselves from the Roman Empire. In 410, at the Council of Seleucia, they declared their church independent of Rome, and of almost every other patriarchate outside the Persian realm. (The only remaining connection to Western Christendom was a friendly and unofficial one through the patriarchate of Antioch.) In return, Shah Yazdegerd I issued an edict of toleration for his Christian subjects, recognizing them as a *melet*, a distinct people (as the Jews already were) under the monarchy.

The Persian catholicos, now established in the capital city, Seleucia-Ctesiphon on the Tigris River, claimed jurisdiction over most of Asia outside the Roman Empire. And then came the event that would conclusively separate the Eastern Church from all the rest, pinning firmly upon it the enduring and controversial name “Nestorian.” The patriarch Nestorius of Constantinople, accused of

The patriarch Nestorius, accused of disputing Christ's divinity, was ousted as a heretic. Western condemnation remained in full force until the past century when doubts arose.

denying complete unity between the fully divine and fully human natures of Christ, was excommunicated as a heretic by the Third Ecumenical Council, which met in Ephesus in 431. Nestorius's books were condemned, and he was banished to Egypt, where he died some twenty years later. (See earlier volume, *Darkness Descends*, chapter 6.)

Persian Christians, increasingly alienated, accused their Western brethren of misrepresentation and theological hairsplitting. They had been represented at the Council of Nicea, and had endorsed the doctrine so meticulously formulated there. But they were not present at Ephesus, and they vehemently refused to acquiesce in its condemnation of Nestorius, whose teaching, they contended, had been distorted. They continued to hold him in high regard, and to revere his mentor, Theodore of Mopsuestia, as their major theologian.

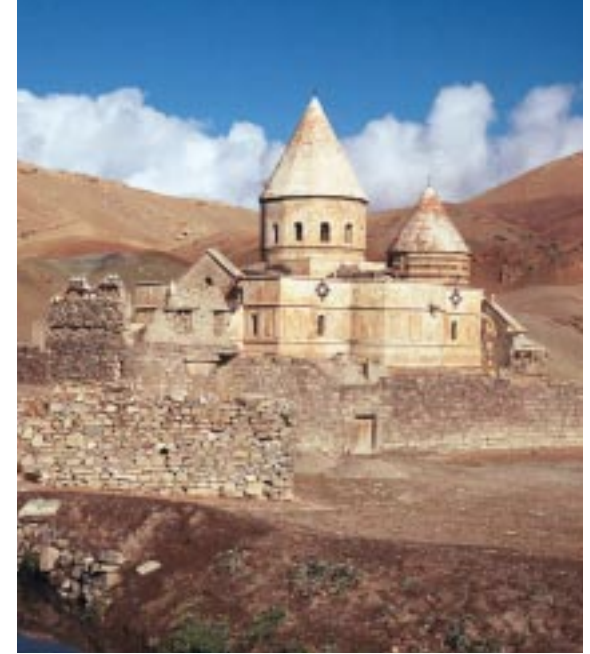
The effect of Nestorianism on the theology of the Church of the East has been debated ever since. His followers certainly dominated it, and were greatly reinforced by refugees from anti-Nestorian heresy-hunters in the Roman Empire⁵. In any case, Western condemnation would remain in full force until the twentieth century, when some scholars would develop serious doubts. “Whether Nestorius himself ever expressed his belief in the crude way he is supposed to have done, and for which he was condemned, is a matter of dispute,” concludes historian Laurence E. Browne in *The Eclipse of Christianity in Asia*, “for it is abundantly clear that the Nestorian Church (i.e., the Church of the East) never held the doctrine in that extreme form, and as time went on, its doctrine approximated more and more to what was known as orthodoxy in the West.”

Meanwhile, although Yazdegerd I largely honored his commitment of 410, dreadful persecutions followed his death ten years later, possibly because so many highborn Zoroastrians were becoming Christian. Bahram V (421–439), his son and successor, conducted a brutal two-year campaign featuring exquisite refinements of cruelty, some of which were detailed in contemporary accounts. Flaying (by stripping the skin from the hands or back, or peeling the face from forehead to chin), was a favorite, along with binding people hand and foot and throwing them into pits to starve to death (or possibly to be slowly devoured by rats).

After a three-decade respite, the killings began again under Bahram's son Yazdegerd II (439–457). He is said to have dispatched 153,000 Christians in a single city, Kirkuk in present-day Iraq, by crucifixion, stoning or beheading. This number may be exaggerated, suggests Anglican missionary and historian W. A. Wigram (*Introduction to the History of the Assyrian Church*), but local tradition insists that on the hill of the executions, the gravel was permanently stained red. Also cherished in the East is the story of Tamasgerd, the royal officer in charge of the slaughter, who was so impressed by the courage and faith of the martyrs that at length he insisted upon joining them. Thus Tamasgerd was “baptized in his own blood,” and a church bearing his name was later built there.

The accession of Chosroes I (the Great) in 531 inaugurated forty-eight prosperous and relatively peaceful years for Persian Christians. His favorite wife (possibly a Byzantine captive) is said to have been a believer, as was his physician. He employed many more Christians as administrators, and greatly admired their patriarch, Aba. The jealous Zoroastrian magi, however, charged that Aba was an apostate from the state religion, was leading others similarly astray, and was criticizing marriage between close relatives (a Persian custom). All three were capital offenses, and all the charges were true. Aba was indeed a former Zoroastrian, and an evangelical, and determined to cleanse his church of Zoroastrian habits. Chosroes, unable to persuade him to temporize, saved him from death by imprisoning and then exiling him.⁶

Ormizd IV, the otherwise undistinguished son of Chosroes the Great, also eschewed persecution, declaring that his throne stood on four bases: Zoroastrians, Magians (a Zoroastrian variant), Jews and Christians. His son

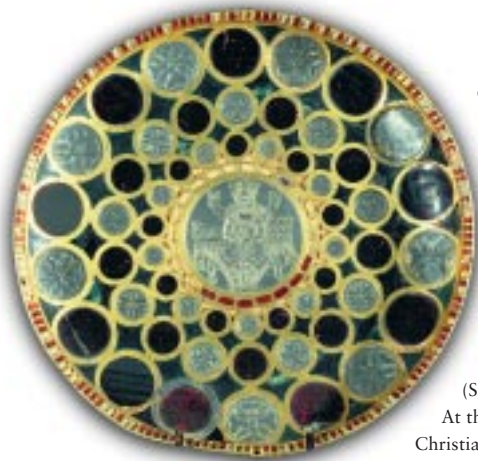


Imposing evidence of a once thriving Christian population near Maku, Iran, this Armenian church is named for St. Thaddeus, who evangelized and was martyred in this area. Also known as the Black Church (Ghara Kelisa), it now has a service only once a year on the saint's feast day, drawing Armenians from all over Iran. The original church, built early in the Christian era, has been superseded by this seventeenth century structure, incorporating tenth and thirteenth century ruins.

⁶ Although conversion from Zoroastrianism to Christianity was a capital offense, it was usually (but not always) commuted to prison or exile. Proselytizing was also illegal, an impossible rule for an evangelical faith. Patriarch Aba in the mid-sixth century had to rule the church from exile, or from prison, for seven years. The monk George of Mount Isla, accused under Chosroes II of apostasy, was first jailed and then executed.

⁵ Nestorian Christians were not the only refugees flooding into Persia in the fifth century. Equally endangered by the failure of the Council of Ephesus, and later of Chalcedon, to solve the conflicts besetting the church were the Monophysites, whose belief about the human-divine union within the nature of Christ was opposite to the alleged heresy of the Nestorians.

Organized by the indefatigable bishop Jacob Baradaeus, Monophysites became numerous throughout Egypt and Syria (see earlier volume, *The Sword of Islam*). In the sixth century many fled to Persia, causing bitter power struggles with the Nestorians and resulting in two separate churches.



Chosroes II actually began as a Christian sympathizer. This made him seriously unpopular with his Zoroastrian aristocracy, but Aubrey R. Vine (*The Nestorian Churches*) notes that in 603, the patriarch Sabaryeshu I accompanied the Persian army against Byzantium, to pray for its success. Chosroes II made gifts to both the Nestorian and Monophysite factions, and both appear to have become involved in the fervid politics of his reign. Things changed, however, when the Persians began to lose to the Byzantine emperor Heraclius. (See earlier volume, *The Sword of Islam*, chapter 5).

At that point, Chosroes turned viciously against his Christian subjects, seemingly motivated by desperate need for money to support his army. By now, many Christians were well-to-do bureaucrats, teachers, lawyers, doctors, merchants and craftsmen. A notable victim this time, for example, was one Yasdin, silversmith to the shah. Yasdin was killed, all his goods confiscated, and his wife brutally tortured, in case she knew of hidden treasure. But the Sassanid epoch was about to end. Chosroes was deposed and killed in 628, and little more than two decades later the weakened realm of Persia would fall to a whirlwind from the deserts of Arabia, Islam.

Helping to preserve some order in this turbulent time was one of the great leaders of the Eastern Church, Patriarch Yeshuyab II, who at one point was able to arrange a peace treaty with Heraclius. More remarkable still, he also convinced this theologically inclined emperor that the Church of the East was indeed orthodox in belief. While Yeshuyab was in Constantinople, Heraclius allowed him to receive communion in the Byzantine Liturgy. This caused a bishop back home to loudly accuse his patriarch of heresy, insisting that he had been bribed to compromise the true faith. “A blow from a friend is worth more than a kiss from an enemy,” Yeshuyab gently but firmly responded, and produced a detailed account of all his doings in Constantinople.

Patriarch Yeshuyab also strengthened Nestorian missionary outreach to the Turkish nomads of central Asia, established India as a separate metropolitanate (see sidebar page 188), and is believed to have authorized the first mission to China. Nestorian evangelists had long been busy in Asia and India, and Arabia as well. The faith followed trade routes, and devout traders themselves often acted as missionaries. The major route into southern Arabia, for instance, led from Hira in western Iraq to the city of Najran in the Yemen. By the time of the Muslim invasion, Hira was almost entirely Christian, writes De Lacy O’Leary (*Arabia Before Muhammad*), and according to the Muslim historian Ibn Hisham, the church at Najran was founded by a Syrian trader called Haymiyun. (See *The Sword of Islam*, chapter 1.)

The recurrent persecutions of Christians in Persia meanwhile caused many

to flee to the empire’s fringes. Far from discouraging them in their beliefs, however, adversity inspired them to greater zeal, and following the traders and settlers came monks from the Persian monasteries and the theological schools of Edessa, Nisibis and Seleucia-Ctesiphon. There were also dramatic happenstances. At the close of the fifth century, for instance, the son of Shah Peroz, Kavad, was passed over in favor of his uncle. Kavad sought refuge with the White Huns, denizens of the central Asian steppes beyond the Oxus River, and in his entourage were two Christian laymen, a bishop and four priests. Kavad later won back his throne (with assistance from Hun warriors), but the Christians remained many years with the tribe—baptizing and teaching them, inventing an alphabet for them, and even persuading them to plant some vegetables and grain.

Mission outreach to far eastern Asia could also travel with these tough nomad raiders, as they fought each other for dominance of the continent. While Rome and Persia repelled or absorbed waves of westward-bound barbarians, the ancient empire of China was similarly harried. Even the famous Great Wall, begun in the third century B.C., was only partially effective. Nomad attackers still managed to infiltrate or smash their way into the fabled Chinese Empire, and sometimes were assimilated and absorbed, in the same way as were barbarian tribes in Rome’s frontier provinces.

Persia also had trade connections with China from the fifth century. One important Christian trader, Sergis, is recorded as having settled his household in 578 in Lint’ao, along the Old Silk Road some three hundred miles west of its eastern terminus in central China, Chang’an (later called Sian-fu, and later still Xian). Sinologist and linguist P. Y. Saeki of Waseda University, Tokyo, notes that Chinese books dating from the mid-fifth century cite as places of interest the cities of Merv in Turkmenistan, and Gilan, now in eastern Iran. Both were important Christian centers.

There is also evidence of major mission work within China itself from at least the seventh century, though the most startling would not be discovered until 1623. This was when workmen, digging a foundation at Sian-fu, uncovered the remarkable, and remarkably controversial, Nestorian Monument—a massive black granite slab ten feet high, over three feet wide and about a foot thick. Set up in the courtyard of a nearby Buddhist temple, it was revealed as featuring a cross rising from a lotus blossom. Beneath this, an inscription in Chinese characters declared it to be “A Monument Commemorating the Propagation of the Ta-ch’in Luminous Religion in the Middle Kingdom.”

The date on the memorial translates as 781, when Ch’ang-an was the capital of the T’ang emperors. Elegantly chiseled script describes how a missionary named A-lo-pen came there in the year 635, a



Proof of early Chinese Christianity, the Nestorian Monument, ten feet high and mounted on a carved tortoise, now resides in the Forest of Steles Museum, Xian. The T’ang dynasty stele was erected in 781, then buried in 845 at a time of persecution, and finally unearthed in the seventeenth century. The text, in Chinese and Syriac, relates the arrival of Christianity in China and indicates a widespread and well-ordered church.



Four characters from the Nestorian monument describe Christianity as “Ta-ch’in luminous religion,” Ta-ch’in being the Chinese expression for the West, or the Roman Empire. Therefore, Christianity is the religion of light that came from the West.

century and a half earlier, from the kingdom of Ta-ch’in (Syria). It recounts the accomplishments of A-lo-pen, his associates and his successors in the following hundred and fifty years. The monument was donated, the inscription notes, by a priest and general named Yazedbouzid, the son of a Nestorian missionary from Balxh, Tahouristan, who is credited with many works of piety, as well as honorable service in the armies of three emperors.⁷

The elaborate inscription contains 1,756 Chinese ideographs and seventy Syriac words. It includes long lists of names (in both languages) of people involved in the mission. But first, it eloquently describes the “Luminous Religion” of its title—the worship of “the unoriginated Lord of the Universe, the mysterious unbegotten Triune Lord,” and tells how one Person of this Trinity, the Messiah, came to earth as a man. He brought Life to light mankind and abolished death, and through the Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, he opened to mankind the True and Unchanging Way.

“His ministers carry the Cross with them as a Sign,” the inscription continues. They travel wherever the sun shines, and try to re-unite those that are lost ... proclaiming the Glad Tidings (“joyful sounds”) of Love and Charity ... Once in seven days they have a bloodless sacrifice (“a sacrifice without the animal”), and thus “cleansing their hearts they regain purity.”

This mysterious “Way,” it continues, would not have spread so widely without the “Sage,” and the Sage would not have been so great without the Way. The Sage almost without doubt is Emperor T’ai-tung, second ruler of the T’ang dynasty (627–649). “And behold,” explains the inscription, “there was a highly virtuous man named A-lo-pen,” who decided to bring the Sutras (scriptures) of the True Way to China, through many difficulties and perils. The emperor dispatched a guard of honor to conduct him to the palace, where he worked in the imperial library while translating twelve Sutras, so that the monarch could judge their merits for himself. Finally, “being deeply convinced of the correctness and truth” of the Way, T’ai-tung issued in 638 an imperial rescript to this effect:

“The Way had not at all times and in all places the selfsame human body. Heaven caused a suitable religion to be instituted for every region and clime so that each one of the races of mankind might be saved. Bishop A-lo-pen of the Kingdom of Ta-ch’in, bringing with him the Sutras and Images, has come from afar...Having carefully examined the scope of his teaching we find it to be mysteriously spiritual and of silent operation...Observing its principal and most essential points, we reached the conclusion that they cover all that is most important in life...This Teaching is helpful to all creatures and beneficial to all men. So let it have free course throughout the Empire.”

T’ai-tung’s successors, according to the monument, also observed and supported the Way, sponsoring throughout the land the building of monasteries and temples in which their portraits and the imperial ensigns were prominently featured. At times there was trouble, when the Buddhists raised their voices against the Luminous Religion, or “some inferior Taoist scholars ridiculed and derided it.” But the faith was sustained by valiant priests and bishops, who

strengthened and reformed it, engaging in the work of conversion (“transforming influence”). This history section concludes with a prayer:

“How vast and extensive is the True Way
Yet how minute and mysterious it is.
Making a great effort to name it,
We declared it to be “Three-in-One.”
O Lord, nothing is impossible for thee!
Help thy servants that they may preach!
Hereby we raise this noble monument,
And we praise thee for thy great blessings upon us!”

The author of the inscription identifies himself in Chinese as Ching-Ching (or King-tsing), a Ta-ch’in priest, and in Syriac as “Adam, Priest and Chorepiscopus and Papas of China.” A man of this name, incidentally, is also mentioned in both Chinese Buddhist and Christian manuscripts of the era as a prolific translator.

By the time the Nestorian Monument came to light in 1623, a thousand years after the arrival of A-lo-pen in Chang’an, Europe knew more about the Far East. The Venetian traders Nicolo Maffeo and Marco Polo had traveled extensively there, and Marco’s published accounts had been a fourteenth-century sensation. However, though the Jesuit order began work in China during the 1580s, neither these missionaries nor their superiors back home seem to have been aware of the vast Christian presence that previously existed there. Westerners understandably greeted news of the monument with deepest suspicion. An obvious Jesuit forgery, scoffed the European intelligentsia (including the skeptical philosopher Voltaire), and Western scholars would remain similarly dismissive right through the nineteenth century.⁸

By the early twentieth, however, persuasive corroboration was turning up, very disconcerting to the skeptics. Christian manuscripts in both Syriac and Chinese were discovered in Buddhist temples and other caches along the Silk Road, preserved in some instances because the Buddhists had used the back of the manuscripts for their own records. Saeki published his first detailed study of the accumulated data in 1937, then was stymied by what he called “the protracted years of wicked wars,” while his own country fought first China and then much of the rest of the world. However, when a friend sent him two newly found manuscripts in 1943—a Syrian hymn in adoration of the Transfiguration of the Lord, dated 720, and a Nestorian Sutra (scripture) on the Origin of Origins, dated 717—he set to work again. The future of Christian missions in the Far East, he declared, “can only be lighted by the lamp of the past.”

Without question, these documents sometimes sound a little strange in the ears of modern Christians. Some earlier ones, for example, perhaps translated before the missionaries had a firm grasp of Chinese, occasionally refer to God as “Buddha.” They also exhibit a disconcerting tendency to emperor-worship, along with traces of Confucian, Taoist or Buddhist imagery in general. But they are indubitably Christian nonetheless.

Among the oldest is the *Jesus Messiah Sutra*, possibly written by Bishop A-lo-pen himself, which describes how a star “as big as a cartwheel” blazed above the

7. The name of the exemplary priest-cum-army officer who financed the Nestorian Monument, Yazedbouzid, has been translated into Chinese as I-ssu. Linguist P. Y. Saeki also suggests that Bishop A-lo-pen, who headed the original Christian mission in 635, may have actually been named Abraham back home in Persia. China’s frontier regions presented an extremely eclectic language mix, harboring as they did a grand diversity of foreigners: Persians, Mongols, Turks, Indians and more.

8. Many European scholars doubted the very existence of the Nestorian Monument, especially after the two-ton slab seemed to vanish in 1907. It turned out that a Danish scholar, Dr. Frits Holm, had offered to buy it for shipment to Europe or America, and indignant Chinese authorities had removed it for greater security to the Pei-lin (Forest of Monuments) in another part of Sian-fu. “I might as well have tried to lift the Rosetta Stone out of the British Museum,” Holm commented later, “as to carry away the Ching-Chiao-pei from Sian.” But he had meanwhile commissioned local craftsmen to make a replica, which he certified correct in every detail, and which he shipped to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City.

city of *Wu-li-shih-lien* (Jerusalem) when *I-shu Mi-shih-bo* (Jesus Messiah) was born there. After his “immersion for washing” by *Yao-ku-hun* (John), the Messiah healed people, some slowly and some at once, and taught the “Right Way.” But at length men who “excelled in wickedness” plotted against I-shu Mi-shih-ho, and forced “the Great King *P’i-lo-tu-ssu*” to condemn him to death. “Thus in charity the Messiah gave up his body ... to be sacrificed for all mankind.” The document includes moral precepts that parallel familiar biblical texts, but with a difference. Example: “If you happen to see another person laboring very hard, you should assist him by giving him your own power of labor, together with a drink of pure milk.”

Those first one hundred and fifty years of Christian mission activity in China were not so trouble-free as the monument’s upbeat summary implies.

Christianity was competing there with a battery of relatively sophisticated religions: Confucianism and Taoism, both native to China; Buddhism, which probably arrived several hundred years earlier; Zoroastrianism; and the ubiquitous Manichaeism. Emperor T’ai-Tsung welcomed them all, distributing favors among the major contenders. Having financed Buddhist and Taoist temples in Chang’an, he funded China’s first Christian church there in 638. Many more would follow.

The next reign brought more dramatic difficulties in the form of a truly evil empress, the wicked Wu Hou. This woman, reputedly a great beauty, was added to T’ai-Tsung’s harem as a child of twelve, and upon his death consigned to a Buddhist monastery. But somehow, Chinese tradition says, she managed to catch the eye of the new emperor, Kao-tsung, when he visited her monastery in 656, and

Christian monks from Persia, reaching Chang’an (now Xian), the Chinese capital, in 635, are welcomed by imperial officials sent to conduct them into the city. The famous Nestorian Monument, discovered in the seventeenth century, describes how the Chinese emperor, probably T’ai-Tsung, set their leader, A-lo-pen, to translating scripture, then sponsored preaching of the faith and establishment of monasteries throughout his realm.





The hottest, most inhospitable place in China, the Turfan Basin, proved to be the ideal climate to preserve ancient manuscripts and wall paintings, such as this one. The ruined walls of a church near Khocho (or Chotscho) revealed this fresco from the ninth century depicting Palm Sunday. A priest or deacon is holding either an incense box or a chalice while three worshippers hold branches. Head gear identifies the two men as Uighurs, but the woman is clearly Chinese.

9. While Persia's Christian missionaries were first establishing themselves in the Chinese capital in the mid-seventh century, Persia's last Sassanian shah, Yazdegerd III, was fleeing into central Asia before his country's Muslim conquerors. He was killed, but his son found refuge at the T'ang court in Chang'an. The Persian crown prince never regained his country. He died in China, as did his son after him.

to "bewitch" him into making her his concubine. Although such a liaison was universally regarded as deeply sinful, the irresistible Wu Hou completely dominated Kao-Tsung. Determined to supplant his queen, she went so far as to kill her own baby and frame her rival for the murder.

Her ploy worked. The queen was executed (her hands and feet were chopped off and she bled to death), and Hou took her place. After the death of the emperor in 683, this extraordinary woman is said to have deposed her own two sons, started her own dynasty, installed Buddhism as the state religion, and then

taken a Buddhist lover. This was, of course,

another flagrant moral violation. No matter. The Buddhists declared her to be the Maitreya Buddha ("Buddha of the Future"). By then, Wu-Hou was encouraging anti-Christian mobs to trash churches, which they did with enthusiasm.

Even so, Christians in China managed to hold on. The same was true in their distant homeland, where shortly after their departure, Muslim armies had defeated the Persian shah and captured his capital.⁹ Although these new rulers of Persia brutally suppressed Zoroastrianism, they were treating Christians fairly well, probably regarding them as less threatening than the state religion, and as useful administrators.

There is scant reference to the Chinese missions in Persian church records at this time, but the Arabs soon began eyeing Asia, including China. They reportedly sent their first embassy to the T'ang court in 713 via the maritime trade route, and more Christian missionaries went with it. Historian Samuel Hugh Moffett in his magnificent account of the church in the East, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, suggests that experienced Nestorian clergy were used as consultants and interpreters. Thus China is thought to have become a Nestorian metropolitanate in the early eighth century, and Chinese documents note that a Bishop Chi-lich reached Chang'an with another Arab embassy in 732. (This name also appears on the Nestorian Monument.) Confrontation of two kinds was coming closer, however—a military clash between China and Islam, and a religious clash between Christianity and Islam. The Muslims were destined to win both.

By mid-century, the emperor of China, no longer able to ignore the Arab threat to Tibet and other territories neighboring his own, took action against

them. In 751, however, he was decisively defeated at Talas in present-day Kirghistan—a fateful battle that arguably initiated the ultimate Muslim conquest of central Asia. And as the T'ang Empire disintegrated, Christianity seemingly was about to go into total eclipse there.

Many factors doubtless contributed. The largely Christian Uighur confederacy, an important ally of China, which at this stage controlled the Silk Road, decided to make Manichaeism their official religion, probably because it was a vaguer and more comfortable faith. Islam, first arriving in China with a Muslim army on loan from the caliph at Baghdad, became another strong competitor on its crowded religious scene. Buddhism, the imperial preference, remained strong. The indigenous Confucianists and Taoists continued to harbor deep resentment against all the "foreign" faiths.

Emperor Wu-tsung expelled the foreign missionaries, who had been greatly resented by both the Confucianists and Taoists. Mention of Christianity then faded from the records.

So in 843, foreign missionaries were expelled. The emperor Wu-tsung, a Taoist, ordered the destruction of thousands of Buddhist temples and monasteries. Manichaean books and property were confiscated, and their images burned. Some three thousand Christian, Manichaean and Zoroastrian monks and nuns were commanded to return forthwith to secular life (and specifically ordered to start paying taxes). All non-natives among them were ordered to depart the country forthwith, and thus "cease to confuse Chinese national customs and manners."

The T'ang dynasty and the ninth century ended together. When Guangzhou (Canton) fell to a rebel chief in 878, a reported 120,000 Muslims, Christians and Jews were massacred. After that, Christianity is no longer mentioned in Chinese records. An Arab report dating from the late tenth century is quoted by Bar Hebraeus (1226–1286), Jacobite Primate of the East and an enormously prolific and accomplished scholar. This report, Bar Hebraeus writes, described an encounter in Baghdad with a monk recently returned from China, who said that he and five others had been sent to investigate the situation there, and had found nary a trace of Christian churches or Christian people.

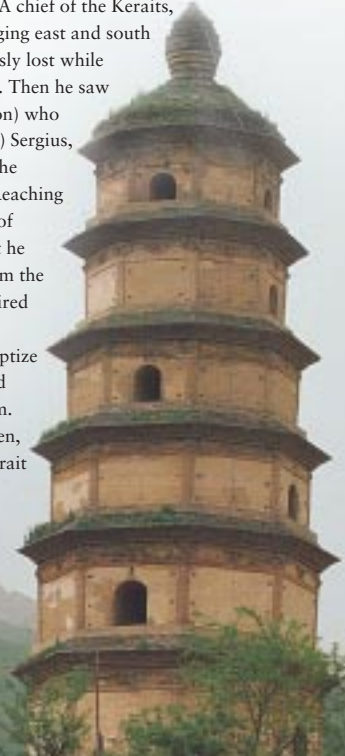
This may not have been entirely true, even at such a low point. It was certainly not the case on the Asian Steppes, where a strong Christian presence up to the thirteenth century is attested by archaeological remains found in Mongolia and Manchuria. In southern Siberia, in the area near Lake Issyk-Kul later inhabited by the Kirghiz people, two graveyards were discovered in the late nineteenth century.¹⁰ Both abounded in thirteenth-century Christian grave-markers for people who include priests, teachers, scholars and even one high official. They bear crosses with inscriptions in Syriac (and sometimes Turkish) indicating many origins: Banus the Uighur, Tatta the Mongol, and Shah Malik, son of George of Tus. A typical epitaph reads: "This is the grave of Pasak—The aim of life is Jesus our Redeemer."

10. Lake Issyk-Kul in southern Siberia is a salt lake, forty miles wide and one hundred twenty miles long, fifty-three hundred feet above sea level, surrounded by mountains. Fed by hot springs, it seldom freezes. In this area were found two extensive thirteenth-century Nestorian cemeteries. "This is the grave of the priest and general Zuma," says an epitaph dated 1272, "a blessed old man.... May our Lord unite his spirit with the spirits of the fathers and saints in eternity."

After all, merchants and monks alike had been zealously preaching the faith throughout Asia from the fourth century onward. Historian Stewart cites evidence of Christians among the Turks in the fifth century, and they not infrequently served as advisers or physicians to the chieftains. The eighth-century Nestorian patriarch Timothy, who sent scores of monks into central Asia to teach, baptize and build churches, wrote to a colleague in 781 about a nomad chief who had led his entire tribe into the faith, and was requesting a bishop to instruct them further.

Another such example is cited by the chronicler Joseph Simonius Assemani, about two hundred years later. A chief of the Keraites, a Turko-Mongol tribe then ranging east and south of Lake Baikal, became hopelessly lost while hunting alone in the mountains. Then he saw a man (or perhaps it was a vision) who identified himself as Mar (Saint) Sergius, and offered to guide him out if he would believe in Jesus Christ. Reaching home safely, the chief inquired of some Christian merchants what he must do. They expounded to him the Christian gospel, which so inspired him that he asked the nearest metropolitan to instruct and baptize him, and two hundred thousand Kerait tribesmen along with him. However true this may have been, Stewart comments, both the Kerait territory, with its capital

A rare Christian monument in China, this seventh century pagoda (right) was examined in 1998 by British scholar Martin Palmer and discovered to have Christian origins. The east-west orientation and the Christian themes represented on the interior bas-relief sculptures positively identify it as Christian. Neglect and earthquakes have damaged the building and its underground passages; restoration work has since been done on the exterior of the building. Palmer suggests that the pagoda was once the library of an adjoining monastery. The stone cross (below), dated 1382 and featuring Chinese and Christian symbols intertwined, is found near Yan Shan at the ruins of the ancient Monastery of the Cross.



Karakorum, and the neighboring Chinese province of Kansu, were reputed to be Christian strongholds before the twelfth century.

About this time, not coincidentally, tales began to filter through to Europe that a fabulously powerful Christian priest-king named Prester (Presbyter) John was ruling a country in deepest Asia. Prester John, who has never ceased to engage Western imaginations, is mentioned by several medieval chroniclers. He was also said to have written to the Byzantine emperor Manuel Comnenus (1143–1180) a letter which began, “John, priest by the power and virtue of God and our Lord Jesus Christ, Lord of Lords, to the sovereign of Constantinople,” and went on to inquire “whether you have, like us, the true faith.” Prester John informed the emperor that he himself was a zealous and merciful Christian, and overlord to sixty-two lesser kings. His riches were beyond counting, and his domains stretched to “farther India, where reposes the body of St. Thomas the Apostle.”

Several Asian chieftains have been proposed as a historical Prester John, with no clear winner. Prince George of the Onguts is a strong candidate, though an equally likely choice would be Toghrlul Wang-Khan of the Keraites. In any event, writes Moffett, Toghrlul and his people were about to play a significant (if dubious) role in history by lending their support to the young chieftain of a Mongol sub-clan, Temugin by name. With their initial help, Temugin shortly managed to exert control over most of his numerous Mongol neighbors, including the Keraites, and in 1206, he had himself proclaimed Great Khan of the Mongol peoples, under a new name: Genghis.

For the next two decades, Genghis Khan spread death and destruction across two continents. He seized the Silk Road from the Tibetans. He conquered Manchuria, burning Canbaluc (Beijing). With his fourth son, Tolui, he attacked and bloodily defeated two Muslim-held Persian border states. In 1220, the chroniclers credit Tolui with butchering seven hundred thousand people—of both sexes and all ages—in the city of Merv. His Mongols spared no one, the Muslim historian Ibn al-Athir wrote in horror: “They killed women, men and children, they ripped open the bodies of the pregnant and slaughtered the unborn.” Genghis’s last campaign took him through Afghanistan to the banks of the Indus River.

Genghis maintained his shamanistic religion lifelong,¹¹ but for political

The Uighurs, Muslims since the tenth century, are native to parts of China as well as Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, all countries along the Silk Road. As well as possessing highly developed skills in art, music and medicine, the ancient Uighur people were also widely literate. Their written language and knowledge of printing contributed to the propagation of religious ideas of many faiths: Buddhist, Manichean and Christian.

11. Genghis Khan remained a pagan all his life, but monotheistic influences helped shape his written law. All must believe in one God, Genghis declared, and priests of all kinds were not to be taxed. One of his edicts recommended abstinence from alcohol—or, if that proved impossible, getting drunk no more than three times a month.



The stuff of legends, Prester John squares off against Genghis Khan in this fourteenth century manuscript illustration in From the Travels of Marco Polo held by the British Library. John was purportedly a priest and ruler of a fabulously wealthy and idyllic Christian state, somewhere in Asia. No doubt intended to enhance his hero status, this illustration depicts him running through Genghis Khan with his sword. A decapitated head lying on the ground adds a grisly detail.

12. The Christian princess Sorkaktani, wife of Genghis Khan's son Tolui, raised all of her sons to be emperors. The eldest, Mongke, was Great Khan of the Mongols. The second, Kublai, became the celebrated emperor of China. Hulagu, was *ilkhān* (emperor) of Persia. The youngest, Arikbuka, ruled in central Asia.

reasons chose several Christian princesses from important tribes in his confederacy as wives for himself and his sons. The influence of these women, adding to that of Christian courtiers, made itself felt as the Mongol Empire spread across Asia. One princess in particular stands out—Sorkaktani, niece of Genghis's original Kerait benefactor Toghrul Wang-Khan, who was married to Tolui. Widowed young, she devoted herself to the upbringing of her four sons. None of them embraced Christianity, but all were in varying degrees sympathetic to it. This was

important, because Sorkaktani managed to see to it that these four grandsons of Genghis took control of his entire empire—despite ferocious competition from myriad other relatives.¹²

In particular, she may deserve credit for a second resurgence of Christianity in China under the rule of her second son, the celebrated Kublai Khan, the magnificence of whose court would so dazzle the Western world. Sorkaktani died in 1252 before Kublai gained full control of his Chinese Empire, but a great-grandson would confer upon her, posthumously, the title of “empress,” at ceremonies that included Nestorian liturgies. Both Muslim and Christian historians heap praise upon Sorkaktani; Bar Hebraeus effusively calling her a sincere and true Christian, comparable to the saintly Helena, mother of Constantine.

Meanwhile, the turbulent and violent Mongol conglomerate imposed order, of a sort, upon Asia. For some hundred and fifty years, roughly 1220 to 1370, it kept open a road to the West—an admittedly tenuous and hazardous one, but a road nevertheless. For the first time, European traders and Christian missionaries from Rome could journey to inner Asia, with John of Plano Carpini and Benedict the Pole (as described above) pioneering one route in 1245.

In their footsteps seven years later came William of Rubruck, another papal envoy, who reached the court of the Great Khan Mongke. William was even more appalled than John at the Mongol Christians. Being Nestorian, they were to him heretics by definition, but he also criticized them for absence of episcopal supervision, deplorable theology, and terrible morals. Among other sins, he charged, the priests were drunks and usurers, dressed like Buddhists, used shamanist divination and charms, and sometimes married several wives.

In his account of Mongke's court, William described a debate in which, at the

request of the khakan himself, he spoke for Western Christianity against the Manichaeans, Muslims, Nestorian Christians and Buddhists who thronged the place. His arguments reduced the Buddhist spokesman to silence, he claimed, so he felt that he won that debate. But he won no souls, he adds with touching candor: “No one said ‘I believe.’” A private discussion with Mongke ended on a similar note, which William attributes to the dissolute life of the local Christian priests. “God gave you the scriptures,” the skeptical khan told him, “and you do not keep them. He gave us shamans; we do what they tell us and we live in peace.”

Be that as it may, the Nestorian church—the Church of the East—had long since established metropolitanates at Ray, near present-day Teheran; Rewardashir on the way to India; Sarbaziyeh farther southeast; Merv on the road to China; in Tibet; and five more along the Old Silk Road—at Herat, Samarkand, Kashgar, Almalk and Navekath, in Uighur territory north of Kashgar. Furthermore, as the first Europeans to travel to China would soon discover, the Nestorian Church was still there, too—having either gone underground after the fall of the T'ang dynasty, or returned later with the Mongol invaders.

Nicolo and Maffeo Polo reached “far Cathay” in 1266, and Nicolo's son Marco subsequently spent many years there. Marco's published reports mention Nestorian Christian communities throughout the empire, and churches in many Chinese cities.¹³ In Kanchou, capital of Kansu province, he writes, there were three large Nestorian churches, one of which may have been the monastery

13. The Polos found at the Pacific port city of Foochow a group they call “secret Christians,” who had a sacred book that Maffeo and Marco identified as a psalter. These people said that the faith had been delivered to them seven hundred years ago “by three apostles of the seventy who had gone preaching throughout the world.” Could these three apostles have been the original evangelists to Persia—Addai, Aggai and Mari—and could these “secret” Christians in Foochow have been the descendants of seventh-century A-lo-pen converts? It is altogether possible.



where Queen Sorkaktani was buried, and in the southeastern provinces of Chekiang and Fukien there were many more Christians.

Kublai Khan developed a preference for Buddhism, the religion of his wife, and humbly studied it under a renowned teacher, but he maintained careful balance among his empire's religions: Buddhists and Taoists, who were jealous of each other; Confucianists, who included most of the native Chinese bureaucracy (which he deeply distrusted, but had to endure); Nestorian Christians, now greatly increasing in numbers; and Muslims, the latest arrivals. It was also essential, for his

Mongol warriors, that Kublai take part in such festivals as the summer ceremony of the White Mare's Milk, to honor the spirits of the earth and the air.

A Nestorian metropolitanate was established at Canbaluc, Kublai's capital, and Christian courtiers were extremely influential. A physician and scientist named Ai-hsueh was put in charge of a government department specifically created to deal with Christian affairs, and later headed the Han-lin Academy, an important scholastic center. In due course, Ai-hsueh's five sons—Elijah, Denha, Issa, George and Luke—also held important administrative positions. Another

In the steps of 'Doubting' Thomas

Evidence mounts that early Christians planted a lasting church in India possibly explaining the quick success of later missions from the West

In the seventh century, when missionaries from Persia were just beginning to translate scripture for the Chinese emperor T'ai-Tsung, tradition holds that Christianity had long since been established in India, where the apostle Thomas first preached it nearly six hundred years earlier (see previous volume, *The Veil Is Torn*). Landing at Cranganore in South India, St. Thomas is believed to have ranged north almost to Afghanistan, an itinerary even more extensive than St. Paul's. But strong tradition is not the only evidence that "doubting Thomas"—and many courageous disciples after him—had effectively spread the faith throughout the Indian Subcontinent. There are artifacts as well, such as stone crosses with Pahlavi inscriptions that date from the Sassanid era.

After the fall of the Persian Empire to Islam in the seventh century, Christians in India were almost entirely cut off, and information about them is sparse. Enough remains, however, to show that they carried on regardless. The records of the Nestorian patriarchate at Baghdad, known as the Church of the East, reveal a tenuous but continuing Indian connection. For example, in the late ninth century, the Punjab city of Gandispur (later Shahabad) in northern India is listed as the seat of a metropolitanate. This presupposes the existence there of between six and twelve episcopal sees.

Nonecclesiastical sources include the geographer Cosmas Indicopleustes (Cosmas the Indian navigator), who in 525 reported substantial Christian communities in the Ganges Valley, Ceylon, Burma, Siam, Cochinchina, and Tonkin. In the thirteenth century, Marco Polo described six great kingdoms in central India. Three were Muslim, he said, and three were Christian monarchies that claimed St. Thomas as patron.¹

On the southeast coast, Mylapur (now part of the

city of Chennai) is the traditional site of the apostle's martyrdom in A.D. 72. Here, too, his efforts and those of his successors apparently bore fruit. Historian John Stewart (*Nestorian Missionary Enterprise: The Story of a Church on Fire*) quotes a fifteenth-century traveler, Nicolo Conti, who calculated that there were then a thousand Christians in Mylapur alone, and many thousands more "scattered all over India, as the Jews are scattered among us." (They were the only people in India, Conti added, who "confine themselves to one solitary mate.")

There are even intriguing indications that Nestorian missionaries traveled into Burma and Thailand, and onward to such Malaysian islands as Java, Sumatra and Borneo. In 1503, for instance, Patriarch Elijah V of the Church of the East appointed a metropolitan for Java. A traveler who accompanied Syrian merchants to Burma in 1506 reported that one local prince there had a thousand Christians in his service.

Despite all this, although Western historians do acknowledge a Christian presence in India at least by the fourth century, they have never credited St. Thomas, or subsequent Persian evangelists, as having real impact upon its overwhelmingly Hindu population. In Western eyes, serious evangelization began there only in the sixteenth century, when European missionaries first arrived in force—and immediately reported gratifying numbers of conversions.

Quite aside from any other evidence, of course, this instant harvest might reasonably be considered significant in itself—an indication, that is, that seeds of faith had already been planted and nurtured there. Indian Christians believe that although their ancestors had been martyred over the years by disapproving Hindu rulers, and hammered hard by Muslim invaders, too, many Christian communities



nevertheless still survived in the sixteenth century. Some were forcibly "Latinized" by Portuguese colonizers and Jesuit missionaries, and others later became "Eastern Rite Uniate" churches in communion with Rome. Still others managed to retain or restore their connection to Nestorian and Jacobite Syrian patriarchates, and to maintain their liturgies and scriptures in Syriac or Aramaic.

In the next five hundred years, things would become ever more complex, as other European powers displaced the Portuguese, as Protestant missionaries were added to the religious mix, and as Indian Christians struggled hard for ecclesiastical self-determination.² Today, at least seven distinct groups—two of them Catholic and one Protestant—consider themselves "St. Thomas Christians," under such names as Malankara, Malabar, Assyrian, Mar Thoma and Syrian Orthodox. Disparate though they are, however, they emphasize their common heritage. The saint's reputed tomb in the Roman Catholic Church at Mylapur, for example, is a pilgrim site for Indian Christians of every stripe.

Furthermore, they appear to share a continued dedication to evangelism. Although few in number by comparison with Hindus and Muslims, Christians are India's third largest religious group. The *Encyclopedia Britannica Yearbook (2004)* lists them as 6.03 percent of the total population of 1.065 billion. Be it noted,

Young girls in a Kerala church reflect generations of Christianity in India, many families proudly claiming descent from converts of the Apostle Thomas. Christian missionaries are credited with the high level of literacy in Kerala state.

however, that this amounts to some sixty-three million people (more than the population of Great Britain and twice that of Canada), and the state of Kerala on the southwest coast is twenty-two percent Christian.³

St. Thomas, that renowned pessimist, would surely be pleased—and characteristically surprised that things didn't turn out worse. ■

1. Indian historians believe that the Nestorian Church in India was reinforced by a number of major immigrations of Persian traders, settlers and refugees. One likely was caused by the drastic persecutions of Shapur II in the fourth century, and coincidentally led by another Thomas—Thomas of Cana. A second may have occurred in the eighth century. Still another, early in the ninth, apparently founded the city of Quilon in the southwestern district of Kerala, with royal approval. Inscribed copper plates, some of which still exist, record the arrangements made with local officials.

2. In the late nineteenth century, Pope Leo XIII established in India three archdioceses and eight dioceses, most of them in the southwest. Since the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, Latin has given way to local languages, and a dozen more dioceses have been added.

3. In another interesting statistic, the Indian government in 1990 proclaimed Kerala to be one hundred percent literate. This circumstance was considered so remarkable as to be included in the *Guinness Book of World Records*.



The splendour of Kublai Khan's court is depicted in this lavish nineteenth-century representation by Tranquillo Cremona of Marco Polo before the Great Khans of the Tartars. The journal kept by Marco Polo, a classic of western literature, portrays him as readily learning the Mongolian, Persian, Chinese and Uighur languages and as acting as a diplomat for the khan. Marco's contemporaries, however, questioned whether he actually undertook such a journey and called him "the man of a million lies."

notable court figure was the Ongut chieftain, Prince George, a staunch ally in Kublai's fight for power. Marco Polo thought George might be sixth in direct descent from the legendary Prester John, which seems unlikely. But he was a distinguished monarch, scholar and general, a devout Christian, and he was married to the daughter of Timur, the next emperor of China.

A vivid example of Kublai's policy of sectarian balance occurred after a bitter internal conflict in 1287. A young prince called Nayan, a baptized Nestorian Christian, in alliance with disgruntled Mongol relatives, led an army against the aging emperor under the banner of the cross. Nayan was defeated, captured and killed. But later, according to Polo, when some of Kublai's courtiers taunted the Christians, saying that Nayan's defeat showed that their God was powerless, the emperor decisively silenced them. Nayan was a traitor and his cause unjust, he declared, and therefore the cross of the Christian God did well not to help him. And that Easter, Kublai made a point of having the Gospel book ceremoniously presented to him so he could devoutly kiss it.

Marco Polo, who for a time advised Kublai on Western affairs, and even served three years as a district governor, was likely not so sympathetic. He held the Nestorians in utter contempt. They were the "worst heretics," he wrote, and since their patriarch appointed all sorts of prelates to preach everywhere, it was spreading fast: "Heretics make heretics." Kublai himself would embrace Christianity, Polo believed, if only it were better presented to him, by real Christians.

Other westerners who encountered Nestorian Christians were more favorably impressed, however. Interestingly, while the Polos were investigating Cathay, a

pair of Mongol Christian monks, Mark and Sauma, embarked upon an equally momentous journey westward, leaving Peking about 1275, on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Mark was an Ongut, about thirty years old. Sauma, a Uighur, may have been the son of an archdeacon who is listed as an early adviser to Kublai. These two struggled through war-torn central Asia to Persia, where they marveled at the holy sites—and where the Nestorian patriarch, Denha, unexpectedly consecrated Mark as metropolitan bishop of Cathay and the Onguts.

Patriarch Denha urged Mark to return forthwith to his homeland, which he tried for years to do, but Asia presented an impassable chaos of warring Turk and Mongol factions. Then Patriarch Denha died, and to Mark's stunned astonishment, the Persian bishops insisted on electing him—a man who could not even speak Syriac. But perhaps the bishops thought (no doubt correctly) that just now the Mongol language might be more useful anyhow. So Mark became patriarch of all Asia as Yaballaha III, a post he filled with distinction from 1281 to 1317. He never saw China again, however, and perhaps not Jerusalem either. But his companion Sauma, who also stayed in Persia and became a prominent bishop there, got to travel right through Europe.

For in 1287, Sauma was chosen by the Mongol *ilkhan* (emperor) of Persia to head an embassy to the pope and to two Western monarchs. His mission failed in that it produced no military support for Mongol Persia, but theologically it seems to have been a success. At Rome, Bishop Sauma found that the pope had just died, but friendly and interested cardinals intently quizzed him as to why a Mongol ruler had sent a Christian ecclesiastic as ambassador. Did they perhaps politely refrain from adding "a *heretical* Christian ecclesiastic?" Possibly Sauma felt this was implied, for he took pains to explain how his country had been evangelized by St. Thomas, St. Addai and St. Mari.

Moreover, he told the Latins, "many of our fathers have gone to the lands of the Mongols, the Turks and the Chinese, and have taught them. Today many Mongols are Christians. There are princes and queens who have been baptized and confess Christ.... No one has been sent to us Orientals from the Pope. The holy Apostles aforesaid taught us, and we still hold today what they handed down to us." Then he added, with dignity, "I am come from distant lands not to discuss or teach my belief, but to pay my respects to my lord the Pope and to the relics of the Saints, and to deliver the messages of the King and of the Catholicos. If you please, let us have done with discussion."

Bishop Sauma spoke with brave confidence and serene faith, yet at that point less than one hundred years of flourishing life remained to the great Church of the East. In the coming century, it would suffer almost total annihilation, in large part at the hands of once-Christian Mongols, in that tragic and heroic welter of Christian self-assurance and false assumption known to history as the Crusades—whose story will be told in the next volume. ■