

THE CHURCH OF THE EAST IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Several intrepid Franciscan friars traversed Central Asia in the thirteenth century where they encountered various Christian communities. The observations of Jean de Plan Carpin and William of Rubruck can be supplemented by the writings of the great Venetian traveller and trader Marco Polo (1265–1323) who confirmed the presence of Syriac-speaking churches deep in the Mongol lands.¹ Similarly, in a contemporaneous account, the Armenian Antony (Hayton) noted that in the territories of Sogdiana, an erstwhile Manichean stronghold, much of the Uighur nobility adhered to Christian beliefs.² Comments such as these, albeit sporadic, draw attention to the dissemination of Christianity in regions which were both distant and diverse, as well as documenting its spread amongst various communities, both Iranian and Altaic. These writings form an invaluable complement to the information that is contained within Syriac writings, the richest primary sources on the Church of the East.

The Value of Syriac Sources

From the fifth century, various branches of the Syriac-speaking church, East Syrian, West Syrian and Melkite had penetrated

★ Place-names mentioned in this article can be found on the map at the beginning of the volume.

¹ For English translations of Carpin and Rubruck, see *The mission to Asia: narratives and letters of the Franciscan missionaries in Mongolia and China in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries*, ed. C. Dawson (London: Sheed and Ward, 1955), which is supplemented by the critical discussion in *Recherches sur les Chrétiens d'Asie Centrale et d'Extrême-Orient*, ed. P. Pelliot (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1973). For an English translation of Marco Polo's travelogue, see *Marco Polo, description of the world*, eds A.C. Moule and P. Pelliot (London: Routledge, 1938).

² 'The historie of Ayton, or Anthonie the Armenian, of Asia and specially touching the Tartars' in S. Purchas, *Hakluytus posthumus or Purchas his pilgrims* (Glasgow: MacLehose, 1896), xi. 309–64. See esp. 310 (cited by A. von le Coq, 'Kurze Einführung in die uigurische Schriftkunde', *Mitteilungen des Seminars für orientalischen Sprachen an der Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität zu Berlin. Westasiatische Studien*, 22 (1919), 95) discussing the kingdom of Tarsa: 'and there are yet found many great and noble among the Tartarians of that Race, which hold firmly the Faith of Christ' The author extends her thanks to Prof. Dr Aloïs van Tongerloo (Katholieke Universiteit, Leuven) for alerting her to the work of von le Coq.

Central Asia, as had the Greek-speaking church of Byzantium.³ However, the efforts of the Church of the East were by far the most vigorous and the most successful, and for almost a millennium its dioceses stretched far beyond the borders of the Sasanian and later Islamic empires, embracing a miscellany of linguistic and ethnic groups whose common denominator was their affiliation to Seleucia-Ctesiphon. The eastern expansion of the Church of the East made inroads amongst both the urban Iranian communities which were settled in Khurasan, Transoxiana and Turkestan, as well as amongst the successive waves of Altaic tribes which began to infiltrate these regions from the sixth century. Only a scant amount of information written in vernacular languages from 'within' the indigenous communities of Central Asia has survived, in part because of the dominance of Syriac which, as the sole liturgical and literary vehicle of the Church of the East, assumed a standing akin to Latin in medieval Europe.

Syriac writings provide rare insights into the polyglot communities of Central Asia which were absorbed into the fold of the Church of the East. Bertold Spuler has lamented their lack of specific details: 'Diese verstreuten Nachrichten genügen freilich nicht, um uns ein genaues Bild über die Grösse der Gemeinden, ihren Aufbau, ihre hierarchische Gliederung und Einzelheiten ihren sozialen Struktur zu machen'.⁴ Notwithstanding such shortcomings, the synodical reports, patriarchal correspondence, historical chronicles and narratives which were written in Syriac supply much information about the implementation of the Church of the East's policies amongst its dioceses in Central Asia. Whilst primarily reflecting the focus and interests of the patriarchate which was based at Seleucia-Ctesiphon and later Baghdad, these materials also pass indirect comment on the major demographic and linguistic changes which altered the face of Central Asia, and with which they were contemporary. From their macroscopic scope, the Syriac writings allow an overall picture to be assembled of the organization and growth of the Church of the East in its far-flung realms.

Surveying the Metropolitanates of Central Asia

The vast domains of the Church of the East, which stretched as far as China between the seventh and fourteenth centuries, were administered by metropolitans who were appointed by the patriarch. The incumbents of the 'metropolitanates of the exterior territories' were not required, unlike their Mesopotamian counterparts, to attend patriarchal

³ N. Sims-Williams, 'Christianity III. In Central Asia and Chinese Turkestan', *Encyclopædia Iranica*, vol. 5 (Costa Mesa, California: Mazda, 1992), 531 for the missions of the Melkite and Syrian Orthodox churches.

⁴ B. Spuler, 'Die nestorianische Kirche', in *Religionsgeschichte des Orients in der Zeit der Weltreligionen* (Erste Abteilung), viii: 2 (1961), 140.

elections or synod meetings.⁵ Instead letters of allegiance, reports and tribute every six years replaced the four-yearly visit to the patriarch that was otherwise mandatory.⁶ If the metropolitans of these distant realms were isolated from decision-making at Seleucia-Ctesiphon, they exercised considerable authority over their far-flung sees. In 554, at the Synod of Joseph, metropolitans were granted the right to create bishoprics,⁷ this being extended in the ninth century by Patriarch Timothy I (727/28–823)⁸ to the consecration of new bishops, without recourse to patriarchal approval as had previously been required.⁹ These wide-ranging powers highlight the role of the metropolitans which, in the opinion of Dauvillier, was primarily missionary.¹⁰

This paper investigates the metropolitanates of the Church of the East in Central Asia, using Syriac primary sources supplemented by medieval Arabic writings and the observations of the European travellers. The discussion focuses on the cities in the western regions of Central Asia: Khurasan, Transoxiana and Turkestan, which became the seats of metropolitans. Maintaining that the metropolitanates primarily functioned as bases for proselytism, we examine the criteria governing their selection. In doing so, we simultaneously highlight the relationship which existed between the patriarchate in Mesopotamia and these metropolitanates which were not only were without the realms of the Sasanian and Islamic powers, but were also linguistically differentiated from Syriac-speaking Christianity. Furthermore we consider how the creation of these metropolitanates reflected the changing face of Central Asia, where the successive waves of westward-moving nomads ushered in the ascendancy of Turkic languages over the autochthonous Iranian culture.

Khurasan: Merv and Herat

The *Synodicon Orientale*, listing the synods that were held in Mesopotamia between 410 and 790,¹¹ records that three of the four cities of Khurasan, viz, Nišapur (Abrašahr), Merv and Herat, were represented as bishoprics by 424, when the Church of the East declared itself autocephalous and independent of the Byzantine

⁵ E. Sachau, 'Zur Ausbreitung des Christentums in Asien', *Abhandlungen der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaft*, 1919, 14–17, for details of the six primary Mesopotamian metropolitanates which were inaugurated in 410.

⁶ See J. Dauvillier, 'Les provinces Chaldéennes "de l'Extérieur" au Moyen Age' in *Mélanges offerts au R.P. Ferdinand Cavallera à l'occasion de la quarantième année de son professorat à l'Institut Catholique* (Toulouse: Bibliothèque de l'Institut Catholique, 1948), 265–6.

⁷ Dauvillier, 'Les provinces', 265 and citing in n. 13 *Synodicon Orientale*, ed. J.B. Chabot (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1902), 105–6 (Syr.), 363 (trans.).

⁸ A. di Lella, *The Hebrew text of Sirach* (London: Mouton, 1966), 82 n. 5 gives a succinct summary of the scholarly debate over the dates of Timothy's birth and death.

⁹ *Recherches*, ed. Pelliot, 6.

¹⁰ Dauvillier, 'Les provinces', 266.

¹¹ Cf. J.-M. Fiey, *Jalons pour une histoire de l'église en Iraq* (CSCO 310 (Subsidia 36), 1970), 77–80.

pentarchy.¹² A century later, at the Synod of Mar Aba, convened in 544, Merv had become a metropolitanate, ranking seventh in seniority after Bet Lapat, Nisibis, Perat d-Mayšan (Basra), Arbil (Erbil), Karka d-Bet Selok (Kirkuk) and Rev Ardašir.¹³ When this actually took place is unknown, but the tenth-century Arabic *Chronicle of Seert* mentions a metropolitan of Merv, by the name of David, who was instrumental in the consecration of the usurper Patriarch Elisha in 524.¹⁴ A variety of reasons undoubtedly contributed to Merv's elevation, for the city was the administrative seat of the Sasanian province of Margiana, being strategically located on the north-east frontier of the Sasanian Empire.¹⁵ Merv was also well served by a network of communications, being on the Silk Route, whilst other highways went to Herat and Balkh in Bactria, and from it the great Khurasan trunk road went west to Seleucia-Ctesiphon.¹⁶

The singular factor which recommended Merv as a metropolitanate was its proximity to the Turkic tribes which were progressively moving westwards, infiltrating the steppes of *l'Iran extérieure*.¹⁷ Such was the threat of these nomadic groups that, in the opinion of Wilhelm Barthold, the city's prominence arose since 'it became the chief aim of the rulers of Khurasan ... to defend the line of the Amu Darya', or Oxus river.¹⁸ Merv was well disposed to serve as a garrison base for the Sasanians because of its fortifications, to which the Greek historian Strabo made reference.¹⁹ They were still mentioned in the sole surviving description of the Sasanian city, in an anonymous chronicle that was written in Syriac c. 680.

Merv is a river, and both the city and region were called after its name. They say

¹² G. Le Strange, *Lands of the eastern caliphate: Mesopotamia, Persia and Central Asia from the Moslem conquest to the time of Timur* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1905), 8, for the four cities of Khurasan (Balkh, Nišapur (Abrašahr), Merv and Herat) in Arabic geographical works.

¹³ *Synodicon*, 366.

¹⁴ J.-M. Fiey, 'Chrétientés syriaques du Ḥorāsān et du Ségestān', *Le Muséon*, 86 (1973), 80, interpreting the *Chronicle of Seert*. Cf. *Histoire Nestorienne (Chronique de Séert)*, II: 1, ed. A. Scher (PO 7, 1911), 149.

¹⁵ W. Barthold, *An historical geography of Iran* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 41, gives a succinct summary of settlement patterns in the city and oasis of Merv. For recent excavations at Merv, by a joint English-Turkmenistani expedition, see the reports by G. Herrman, V.M. Masson and K. Kurbansakhatov in *Iran*, 31 (1993), 39–62 and 32 (1994), 53–75.

¹⁶ Le Strange, *Lands*, 9–10.

¹⁷ C.E. Bosworth, *The medieval history of Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia* (London: Variorum, 1977), [1].

¹⁸ W. Barthold, *Turkestan down to the Mongol invasion*, second edition (London: Oxford University Press, 1928), 77.

¹⁹ Strabo XI: 10: 'Margiana is similar to this country, although its plain is surrounded by deserts. Admiring its fertility, Antiochus Soter enclosed a circuit of fifteen hundred stadia with a wall and founded a city Antiocheia.' See *The geography of Strabo*, trans. H.L. Jones, 8 vols (London: Heinemann, 1969), v. 278–9. S. Sherwin-White and A. Kuhrt, *From Samarkand to Sardis. A new approach to the Seleucid Empire* (London: Duckworth, 1993), 82, claim that Strabo's description goes back to Demodanes. See L. Robert, 'Plin VI, 49, Démodanes de Milet et la reine Apamée', *Bulletin du correspondance Hellenique*, 108 (1984), 467–72.

Despite its bulwarks, ‘only in rare periods of strong government was it possible to shield the oasis from the raids of nomads’, but paradoxically these incursions established Merv as a base for missionary enterprises conducted by the Church of the East.²¹

Whilst the priests and deacons were drawn from the local population, as Dauvillier has maintained, the higher orders remained strictly Chaldean or Persian.²⁷ The close links which were forged with the patriarchate at Seleucia-Ctesiphon are evident in the

²¹ Barthold, *Historical geography*, 43.

²³ *Chronica minora*, 34 (Syr.), 29 (trans.): ܕܠܗܘܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܢ ܕܥܝܪܐ ܕܚܝܬܐ ܕܩܝܣܪܐ.

would clearly mark the region of the metropolitan's travels as being western Turkestan.

²⁴ *Chronica minora*, 35 (SVT.), 29 (trans.). See also Dauvillier, 'Les provinces', 281.

²⁵ For further details see Erica C.D. Hunter, 'The conversion of the Kerait to Christianity in A.D. 1007', *Zentralasiatische Studien*, 22 (1989-91), 160.

²⁶ *Chronica minora*, 35 (SYR.), 29 (trans.).

²⁷ Dauvillier, 'Les provinces', 271.

consecration of a Hephthalite bishop in 549, which is recounted by the *History of Mar Aba*. The delegation of Christian Huns who travelled to the Sasanian capital to present the candidate²⁸ rendered obeisance both to the King of Kings and to the patriarch of the Church of the East whom they 'deemed as head and judge'.²⁹ Sasanian monarchs frequently exercised their prerogative in patriarchal elections, but the royal approval of the episcopal candidate may have additionally offered potential support for the Hephthalites against the Turkic tribes penetrating the region as well as bolstering the Church of the East in the face of Byzantine missionaries who were also proselytizing in these eastern regions.³⁰

The *History of Mar Aba* sketches the emergence of a fully fledged bishopric, but simultaneously intimates that Christian communities had been established amongst the Hephthalites or White Huns for some time.³¹ How the Church of the East took root amongst them is not divulged, whether it had been through encounter with clergy from Merv or *via* contacts with proselytizing traders, but the process probably followed a sequence similar to that in the anonymous chronicle where after a mass baptism the minor orders of clergy were ordained. The *History of Mar Aba* does not reveal the location of the Hephthalite see, but it may have been the bishopric of Badghis-Qadištan that was represented at the 585 Synod of Išō'yahb.³² The creation of this new bishopric may have also led to the elevation of Herat as a metropolitanate at this synod.³³ The city was traditionally associated with the regions of Pušang, Badghis and Qadištan in which the Hunnic tribes had settled, and as an entrepôt on routes to western Khurasan, Central Asia and India would have been conveniently placed to administer the new dioceses.³⁴

²⁸ *Histoire de Mar-Jabhalaha, de trois autres patriarches, d'un prêtre et de deux laïques*, ed. P. Bedjan (Paris: Drugulin, 1895), 266–9; specifically, 'And that Hephthalite priest was consecrated a bishop, by the holy bishop, for the Hephthalites'.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 267. Any of several monarchs may have been the subject of this episode. Chronologically Chosrau I (531–78) would be appropriate, but the story may have truncated a sequence of events, so that the delegation to Seleucia-Ctesiphon was received by Qawad (488–531). The latter king might be preferred, in view of his personal association with the Hephthalites.

³⁰ See *The Chronicle of Joshua the Stylite*, ed. W. Wright (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1882), 7–15, for relations between the Huns and the Sasanian rulers, particularly Qawad. See A.D.H. Bivar, 'Hayātīb', in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, vol. 3 (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 303–4 for an overview of Hephthalite history, customs and language; also R. Frye, *History of ancient Iran* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1983), 346–51, for further details of Hephthalite history.

³¹ *Histoire*, ed. Bedjan, 267. 'The Christian Hephthalites wrote to him ... that the blessed one might consecrate that priest who had been sent there to the King of Kings, a bishop'.

³² See E.C.D. Hunter, 'Syriac Christianity in Central Asia', *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte*, 44 (1992), 364; F. Nau, 'L'expansion nestorienne en Asie', *Annales du Musée Guimet*, 40 (1913), 245 and Sims-Williams, 'Christianity III', 532.

³³ *Synodicon*, 423.

³⁴ See J. Marquart, *Erānšahr nach der Geographie des Ps. Moses Xorenac'i* (Abhandlungen der königlichen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen. Phil.-hist. Klasse. Neue Folge III: 2; Berlin, 1901), 77–8. C.E. Bosworth, 'Bādghis', *Encyclopedia Iranica* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1989), iii. 370, identifies the bishop of Badghis-Qadištan as suffragan to the metropolitan of Herat. Fiey, 'Chrétientés', 90, makes no such connection, simply noting that '[l']importance de la colonie dut augmenter rapidement'.

Transoxiana: Samarkand

The waxing of the Turkic tribes in Transoxiana in the sixth century has been given as 'a reason for creating or recreating a metropolitanate in Samarkand'.³⁵ Certainly it had achieved this status by the incumbency of Patriarch Theodosius (852–58) who exempted the city, along with other 'métropoles de l'extérieur', from attendance at synods.³⁶ Samarkand would have been a natural base for proselytism amongst the Iranian communities settled in the region, as well as amongst the westward moving nomadic groups whose Turkic languages became the lingua franca in the place of Sogdian. It is this linguistic transition that undoubtedly led to Samarkand being interchanged with the Turks in the two listings of metropolitanates which were compiled by the early fourteenth-century historian 'Abdišo' bar Berika; the earlier citing Samarkand in tenth place, whereas the later, dated to 1316, only naming the Bet Türkaye in eleventh position.³⁷ However, the compilations of 'Amr ibn Mattai and Šliba ibn Yuḥannan still differentiated between the metropolitanates of the Turks and Samarkand.³⁸

Syriac sources do not comment on the missionary enterprises which were undertaken from Samarkand, but testimony of the city's activities comes from Drangste in Ladakh where, on the main route from Bactria to Lhasa, three East Syrian crosses and inscriptions written in a miscellany of languages were engraved on a rock.³⁹ A single Sogdian word may be interpreted as 'Jesus',⁴⁰ whilst a longer inscription, also written in Sogdian, reads 'in the year 210 ... came Noš-farn from Samarkand as emissary to the Khan of Tibet'.⁴¹ The crosses and the inscriptions may be unrelated, with the former having been carved simply to protect travellers on their arduous journeys.⁴² Alternatively, the crosses, which appear to be in vessels,

³⁵ B. Colless, 'The Nestorian province of Samarqand', *Abr Nahrain*, 24 (1986), 52.

³⁶ Nau, 'L'expansion', 269. Other sees which were also exempt were Ray, Herat, Merv, India and China. For the various dates attributed to the creation of the metropolitanate, see Hunter, 'Syriac Christianity', 366 and Colless, 'Samarqand', 51–2.

³⁷ Sachau, 'Ausbreitung', 21.

³⁸ For a tabulation of their listings see Hunter, 'Conversion', 159 n. 72.

³⁹ Colless, 'Samarqand', 52. The most recent photograph of the crosses and inscriptions has been published by G. Gropp, *Archäologische Funde aus Khotan, Chinesisch-Ostturkestan* (Bremen: Friedrich Röver, 1974), 367. G. Uray, 'Tibet's connections with Nestorianism and Manicheism in the 8th–10th centuries', in *Contributions to Tibetan language and culture*, ed. E. Steinkellner (Vienna: Wiener Studien zur Tibetologie und Buddhismuskunde 10, 1983), 405–7, discusses critically the iconography of the crosses. The author thanks Mr Alex Studholme for sending her this article.

⁴⁰ Dauvillier, 'Les provinces', 294, queried by Uray, 'Tibet's connections', 406.

⁴¹ H.-J. Klimkeit, 'Das Kreuzessymbol in der zentralasiatischen Religionsbewegung', *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte*, 31 (1979), 104 n. 13, gives a German translation of the inscription.

⁴² Uray, 'Tibet's connections', 407, probes the relationship between the crosses and the two inscriptions. Klimkeit, 'Das Kreuzessymbol', 103–4 explores the apotropaic function of the crosses.

might be light symbols,⁴³ and a Manichean interpretation might also be attached to the name Jesus. If the crosses and inscriptions are Christian, Noš-farn may have been travelling to conduct business on behalf of the metropolitan of Samarkand between 24 April 825 and 12 April 826, the period to which the inscription is plausibly dated.⁴⁴

The metropolitan of Samarkand may have helped consolidate the Church of the East in Tibet where it had already made inroads by the end of the seventh century. Writing to Sergius, metropolitan of Elam 794–98, Patriarch Timothy I (727/8–823) stated, ‘we are preparing to anoint another [metropolitan] for the Bet Tuptaye’.⁴⁵ Such information, suggesting the prior establishment of a church, is confirmed in earlier correspondence, dated to 782–83, which Timothy addressed to the monks of Mar Maron. Discussing the controversial wording of the Trisagion in his letter XLI, Timothy listed the Tibetans together with the Turks, amongst the polyglot dioceses of the Church of the East which recited ‘*qui crucifixus es pro nobis*’.⁴⁶ It is regrettable that the patriarch does not divulge further details about the teachings to which these distant communities adhered, or whether he did eventually consecrate a metropolitan for the Bet Tuptaye, or any other matter that would throw light on the origins of this diocese.

The patriarchal correspondence indicates that there was a lapse of time between the initial conversion of the Tibetans and the ordination of senior clergy. This appears to have been standard, signalling a period of organization, since it can also be seen in the Hephthalites’ request for a bishop in the sixth century. Similarly, the correspondence of Timothy, discussing the Turkic tribes, exposes a considerable hiatus between their conversion and the consecration of a metropolitanate.⁴⁷ In his aforementioned letter to the monks of Mar Maron, the patriarch

⁴³ Cf. *Theodorus bar Koni: Liber Scholiorum*, ed. A. Scher (CSCO 55 (Syr. II, 65), 1910), i. 315:21–22: ‘He made the sun, moon and the light which remained from the ships’. The clause, ‘which remained from the ships’ was originally read as the phrase ‘more than a thousand’ by H. Pognon, *Inscriptions mandaites des coupes de Khouabir* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1898), 189. For further discussion about the light-vessels, see F. Cumont, *Recherches sur le Manichaeisme. I: La cosmogonie Manichéenne d’après Théodore bar Khôni* (Brussels: Lamertin, 1908), 29 n. 4.

⁴⁴ Dauvillier, ‘Les provinces’, 294. In his summary discussion on the dating, Uray, ‘Tibet’s connections’, 406 proposes that it is calculated according to the Hijra.

⁴⁵ For the patriarchal correspondence, see O. Braun, ‘Ein Brief des Katholikos Timotheos I’, *Oriens Christianus*, 1 (1901), 308–9, and also R. Bidawid, *Les lettres du Patriarche Nestorien Timothée I* (Studi e Testi 187; Rome, 1956), 37, 85; J. Labourt, *De Timotheo I. Nestorianorum Patriarcha* (Paris: 1904), 45–6. Uray, ‘Tibet’s connections’, 404, confirms the equation of the ethnic term ‘Bet Tuptaye’ with the Tibetans, but draws attention to the expanse of their empire, beyond the realms of present-day Tibet. P. 421 n. 120 supplies a succinct summary of scholarly opinion about ‘Bet Tuptaye’, including other occurrences of this term in Syriac literature. These are also given by Dauvillier (‘Les provinces’, 292 n. 135).

⁴⁶ *Les lettres*, ed. Bidawid, 36 (Syr.), 117 (Latin trans.).

⁴⁷ Uray, ‘Tibet’s connections’, 403 and n. 15, discussing the lapse of time, proposes that two metropolitans were involved. However, the conversion which Timothy records marks the first stage of establishing a community and a metropolitan would have been appointed only at a later date.

revealed that 'the King of the Turks with more or less all (the people of) his dominion relinquished their ancient godless error, for he was converted to Christianity'.⁴⁸ In the later communication (Letter XLVII) to the Metropolitan of Elam, Timothy announced, 'in these days the Spirit anointed a metropolitan for the Bet Ṭurkaye'.⁴⁹ This conversion of the head of the Turkic tribes appears also to have been chronicled in the twelfth century by Mari ibn Suleiman who wrote in his *Kitab 'ul Mijdal*, 'Henceforth, Timothy led into faith the *Khaqan*, the king of the Turks and other nations'.⁵⁰

Timothy's usage of the generic term Bet Ṭurkaye, distinguishes a group that were not Syriac or Iranian speakers, but provides no further clues about their identity. Paul Pelliot's location of the metropolitanate in Western Turkestan, at Otrar on the Syr Darya river,⁵¹ in territories that were settled after 600 by the Ghuzz or Oghuz,⁵² has been supported by Dauvillier who has claimed that 'le métropolitaine des Turcs ne semble pas avoir eu de siège fixe et était attaché à un peuple qui nomadisait dans l'Asie centrale et qui s'est rassemblé ensuite en grande partie dans la Soghdiane, devenue le Turkestan'.⁵³ François Nau has interpreted alternatively the patriarchal announcement to signal the creation of the metropolitanate of Kashgar in Eastern Turkestan.⁵⁴ When the city first achieved this status is unknown, but two consecutive appointments made by Patriarch Elias III (1176–90) indicate that Kashgar was already a metropolitanate by the twelfth century.⁵⁵ In the later medieval lists of 'Amr ibn Mattai and Šliba ibn Yuhannan, the city was cited in a dual title with Nawâkath.⁵⁶

⁴⁸ The letter (no. XLI) of Patriarch Timothy I to the monks of Mar Maron has been published by another patriarch, Mar Raphael Bidawid, of the Chaldean church, who was consecrated at Baghdad on 26 May 1989. See *Les lettres*, 46 (Syr.), 124 (trans.).

⁴⁹ Braun, 'Ein Brief', 308. See also Labourt, *De Timotheo I*, 46 and Hunter, 'Conversion', 157 n. 66.

⁵⁰ See Maris, *Amri et Slibae de patriarchis Nestorianorum commentaria*, ed. H. Gismondi (Rome: C. de Luigi, 1896–9), 73 (Arab.), 64 (trans.).

⁵¹ Dauvillier, 'Les provinces', 285 reporting Pelliot, but providing no reference.

⁵² For discussion of the Ghuzz territories, Hunter, 'Conversion', 159.

⁵³ Dauvillier, 'Les provinces', 285.

⁵⁴ Nau, 'L'expansion', 248.

⁵⁵ Dauvillier, 'Les provinces', 287 and Sachau, 'Ausbreitung', 22.

⁵⁶ Sachau, 'Ausbreitung', 22. Much discussion has surrounded the location of Nawâkath. M.G. Deveria, 'Notes d'épigraphie Mongole-Chinoise', *Journal Asiatique*, ix. 8 (1896), 424, proposed that the second element in this dual title referred to Yanghi-Yisar, an identification which raised objections because of its proximity (two hours to the north) to Kashgar. See C.E. Bonin, 'Note sur les anciennes chrétientés nestoriennes de l'Asie centrale', *Journal Asiatique*, ix. 15 (1900), 586, and Dauvillier, 'Les provinces', 287–91 for a comprehensive discussion of the second term. Pelliot (*Recherches*, 7) locates 'Navēkaθ, ville soghdienne située sans doute près de l'Issya-köl'. Deveria's argument may gain support from the listing of Merv and nearby Nišapur as a joint metropolitanate in 1316 by 'Abdišo' bar Berika. Although an ancient bishopric, Nišapur was never a metropolitanate, but its reputation may have bolstered the declining fortunes of Merv. Conversely, Merv may have been retained in the title on account of its renown, if the seat moved to Nišapur. Kashgar is not included in the two lists of metropolitanates of 'Abdišo', a fact which may suggest that it had been subsumed by Nawâkath.

Turkestan: Kashgar

Sogdian merchants travelling east from Samarkand may have introduced Christianity into eastern Turkestan, but it was probably during the dynamic incumbency of Timothy I, which was marked by a vigorous policy of expansion, that the Church of the East was consolidated in the region. Kashgar, an important trade entrepôt, may have been selected as a convenient base of administration, over and above nearby cities such as Yarkand, because of its strategic location, since it marked the point where the route to China bifurcated.⁵⁷ The city's jurisdiction extended over various Christian sites which dotted the rims of the inhospitable Tarim basin; on the southern boundary, archaeological evidence supplemented by references in Muslim writings, intimates a presence at Khotan that is unknown from Syriac sources.⁵⁸ On the northern reaches of the Tarim basin, the oasis of Turfan was dotted with Christian sites, the most important being Bulayiq where a monastery of the Church of the East, together with its library, was discovered by the 1905 expedition which was led by Albert von le Coq.⁵⁹ Alongside the Syriac and Sogdian manuscripts which were found *in situ* were Christian Turkic texts dating from the ninth and tenth centuries.⁶⁰

The Turfan collection points to the waxing of Turkic languages, at the expense of Sogdian, and this was a pattern that was reproduced elsewhere. At Tokmek and Pishpek in the region of Semireche'e, between Lake Balkash and Issy-kol, cemeteries with hundreds of headstones written in Turco-Syriac indicate the settlement of considerable Christian Turkic communities from as early as the ninth century until the fourteenth century.⁶¹ When Marco Polo, in a contemporary statement, noted that there were

⁵⁷ W. Hage, 'Asien, Christliche Kirchen in', *Theologisches Realencyklopädie*, vol. 4 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1979), 179.

⁵⁸ E. Tisserant, 'Nestorienne (L'église)', *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*, vol. 11 (Paris: Letouzey, 1931), cols 208–9.

⁵⁹ See W. Hage, 'Das Christentum in der Turfan-Oase', in *Synkretismus in der Religionen Zentralasiens* eds W. Heissig and H.-J. Klimkeit (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1987), 46–57.

⁶⁰ N. Sims-Williams, 'Christianity IV. Christian literature in Middle Iranian languages', *Encyclopedia Iranica*, vol. 5 (1992), 534–5, for a survey of the Christian texts written in Sogdian and Middle Iranian from Bulayiq and other sites in the Turfan oasis. For Christian Old Turkic texts, see A. von le Coq, 'Ein christliches und ein manichäisches Manuskriptfragment in türkischer Sprache aus Turfan (Chinesisch-Turkestan)', *Sitzungsberichte der preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin, Phil.-hist. Klasse*, 68 (1909), 1202–18; N. Pigulevskaya, 'Fragments syriaques et syro-turcs de Hara-Hoto et de Tourfan', *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien*, 30 (1938), 3–46; P. Zieme, 'Zu den nestorianisch-türkischen Turfantexten', *Sprache, Geschichte und Kultur der altasiatischen Völker. Protokollband der XII. Tagung der PLAC 1969 in Berlin*, eds G. Hazai and P. Zieme (Berlin, 1974), 661–8 and plates 51–5. These references to the Christian Old Turkic texts were kindly supplied by Prof. van Tongerloo.

⁶¹ For the Turco-Syriac inscriptions from the cemeteries at Tokmek and nearby Pishpek see D. Chwolson, 'Syrische Grabinschriften aus Semirjetschie', in *Mémoires de l'Académie Impériale des Sciences de Saint-Petersbourg*, ser. VIII, 34 no. 4 (1886), 37 no. 8 (1890); also Nau, 'L'expansion', 301–83, for illustrations.

'some Turks who are Nestorian Christians' near Kashgar, he clearly identified this city and its environs with Turkic-speaking peoples.⁶² The metropolitanate of Kashgar included under its jurisdiction the bishoprics of Yarkand, Urumch (and presumably the Turfan communities) as well as Tokmek, regions that had all been infiltrated by the westward-moving Turks.⁶³ Following their settlement, the metropolitanate of the Bet Türkaye, which perhaps was originally 'of no fixed address' in Eastern Turkestan, may have become intrinsically associated with Kashgar.

Kashgar, *en route* to China, was also well located to minister conversions amongst the eastern Turco-Mongol tribes: the Naiman, the Merkit, the Ongut and the Kerait.⁶⁴ Syriac sources provide little comment on how the Church of the East proselytized in these far-flung regions, with most information about their communities deriving from the reports of the Franciscan friars. Although Gregory Bar Hebraeus narrated the conversion of the Kerait in 1007 in his two historiographies, *Chronicon Ecclesiasticum* and *Chronicon Syriacum*,⁶⁵ he appears to have interpolated the ethnic term Kerait, for a description of a similar mass conversion in 1007, by the twelfth-century historian, Mari ibn Suleiman, only relates to an unidentified monarch and his subjects.⁶⁶ The integral role which Bar Hebraeus allocates to the metropolitan of Merv suggests that the conversion took place in Transoxiana, probably amongst the Oghuz, rather than in the distant realms of the Kerait in Mongolia, where the incumbent at Kashgar might have been more conveniently located to perform such duties.⁶⁷

The narratives of Gregory Bar Hebraeus and Mari ibn Suleiman differ in many details, but may have derived from the correspondence of the metropolitan of Merv to Patriarch John VI. Certainly, the *Chronicon Ecclesiasticum* immediately draws attention to the metropolitan's importance: 'Abdišo', the metropolitan of Merv, one of the cities of Khurasan, sent and informed the catholicos about the conversion of the king of the Kerait, whom he qualified as 'an inner Turkic nation in the north-east'.⁶⁸ Whilst the 'metropolitans of the exterior' enjoyed widespread powers when proselytizing, Bar Hebraeus draws attention to the ultimate authority of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, since the patriarchal response deemed that 'two persons, a priest and a deacon, together with the

⁶² Marco Polo, eds Moule and Pelliot, 143.

⁶³ Bonin, 'Note', 587.

⁶⁴ Dauvillier, 'Les provinces', 308–9 for a succinct summary.

⁶⁵ *Gregorii Bar Hebraei chronicon ecclesiasticum*, eds J.B. Abbeloos and T.J. Lamy (Louvain: Peeters, 1872–77), vol. 3, cols. 279–82 and *Gregorii Bar Hebraei chronicon Syriacum*, ed. P. Bedjan (Paris: Dragulin, 1890), 204.

⁶⁶ Maris, *Amri et Slibae*, 112–13 (Arab.), 99–100 (trans.).

⁶⁷ See Hunter, 'Conversion', 159–60 for further discussion on this issue.

⁶⁸ *Chronicon ecclesiasticum*, col. 279.

altar vessels' be sent to the newly converted king.⁶⁹ This accurate portrayal of the relationship between the 'metropolitans of the exterior' and patriarchs suggests that Bar Hebraeus, despite being a Syrian Orthodox, had a first-hand knowledge of the procedures governing the inauguration of new dioceses for the Church of the East.

Metropolitans as Missionaries

As the vigorous expansion of Manicheism in Central Asia has been linked with trade, so merchants also appear to have fostered the initial spread of the Church of the East.⁷⁰ The incident just cited from Bar Hebraeus highlights the close connection between commerce and the missionary activities of the metropolitans.⁷¹ Following his mystical experience, the king questioned Christian traders who were in the vicinity of his campsite about their faith, and motivated by their answer that 'it could only be fulfilled through baptism' and their presentation of a Gospel to him, did obeisance to it daily. The news of the king's conversion was transmitted by the traders to the metropolitan of Merv who replied that he would come or send a deputy priest to baptize, in what appears to have been the first stage of establishing a diocese. In this type of situation, it is not surprising that strategic cities, on the network of trade-routes criss-crossing Iran and Central Asia and ultimately leading to China, were selected to become the seats of the metropolitans 'of the exterior territories'.

The survival of the Church of the East in Central Asia has been attributed by Wolfgang Hage to three factors: a common belief, the central jurisdiction of the patriarchate in Baghdad and the use of Syriac.⁷² These were united in the lynchpin figure, the 'metropolitan of the exterior', whose role was highlighted by the ninth-century *Historia monastica* of Thomas of Marga.⁷³ The preparation of the candidate, Mar Šubḥal-Išo' included 'instruction in the Syriac language and learning, and also in the Arabic and Persian tongues', pointing to Syriac as the liturgical and doctrinal lingua franca of the Church of the East, as has been supported by the manuscript discoveries at Bulayīq.

⁶⁹ *Chronicon ecclesiasticum*, col. 281.

⁷⁰ For further information see S.N.C. Lieu, *Manichaeism in the later Roman Empire and medieval China*, second edition (Tübingen: Mohr, 1992), 97–106 and G. Widengren, *Mesopotamian elements in Manichaeism (King and Saviour II; Studies in Manichaeism, Mandaean and Syrian-Gnostic religion)* (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitets Arsskr., 1946), 95. See R. Murray, *Symbols of church and kingdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 174–5, for Syriac literature, including the Acts of Judas Thomas where the link between commercial and missionary enterprise is reiterated, not only in real terms, but also on a metaphysical level, with souls being the merchandise instead of luxury goods.

⁷¹ See *Chronicon ecclesiasticum*, col. 279.

⁷² Hage, 'Asien', 179.

⁷³ E.A. Wallis Budge, *The book of governors: the Historia monastica of Thomas, Bishop of Margā A.D. 840*, 2 vols (London: Kegan Paul, 1893). Mar Šubḥal-Išo' was candidate to the provinces of Dailom and Gilan which were southwest of the Caspian Sea. See also *Ibid.*, ii. 220 n. 3 for references in Arabic writers to the two provinces.

That Mar Šubḥal-Išo' hailed from Ḥerta d-Na'man, the erstwhile kingdom of Hira which enjoyed an enormous ecclesiastical prestige,⁷⁴ suggests that metropolitans were appointed from an élite of Mesopotamian clergy, whilst Timothy I's determination 'to anoint him [Mar Šubḥal-Išo'] with holy oil, and to make him hold the pastoral staff', illustrates the requisite patriarchal sanction.⁷⁵

The metropolitans 'of the exterior territories' played an integral role in the expansion of the Church of the East, simultaneously consolidating and maintaining its dioceses in Central Asia. The *Historia monastica* emphasizes that the prime task of the metropolitan was 'shepherd and teacher to the barbarian nations ... into whose country none of the preachers and evangelists had gone',⁷⁶ wherein he was 'to teach and shew them the true knowledge of their doctrine'.⁷⁷ When the *Historia monastica* states: 'he baptized ... built churches and established priests and deacons, and he set apart some of the brethren who were with him to teach them psalms and spiritual praises', these events, although specific to the candidate Mar Šubḥal-Išo', describe the typical activities undertaken by a metropolitan in establishing a community.⁷⁸ At this point the metropolitan would take his leave to continue his missionary work perhaps, as was the case with Mar Šubḥal-Išo', going 'further and further into the country, until [he arrived at] the ends of the East ... among the heathen and Marcionites and the Manicheans'.⁷⁹

Proselytism amongst both the nomadic tribes and the settled communities of Central Asia often took place in an atmosphere of intense competition. By the tenth century, Islam was conducting a vigorous campaign in Khurasan and the western regions of Transoxiana, its rivalry with the Church of the East at Samarkand still being reported by Marco Polo.⁸⁰ Manicheism also held considerable sway in Sogdiana, while Buddhism exerted a strong influence, probably ousting the Church of the East from Tibet in the eighth century. Moreover, there were other Christian denominations with which the Church of the East had to contend; the Syrian

⁷⁴ *Book of governors*, i. 254 (Syr.), ii. 469 (trans.). On p. 469 n. 1 Budge equates Ḥerta d-Na'man with Ḥerta d-Ṭaiyaye, being synonymous names for Hira, whose ecclesiastical renown, which later Islamic writers still recalled, has been confirmed by the archaeological excavations of various monasteries and churches in the region. See D. Talbot-Rice, 'The Oxford excavations at Hira in 1931', *Antiquity*, 6 (1932), 276–91, and an identically titled article in *Ars Islamica*, 1 (1934), 57–73. In the late 1980s the Japanese Archaeological Expedition to Iraq conducted important work at the site of Ain Sha'ia. See H. Fujii, 'Excavations at Ain Sha'ia ruins and Dukakin caves', *Al Rafidan*, x (1989), 27–88. For further discussion of Hira and its monasteries, see E.C.D. Hunter, 'Syriac inscriptions from al Hira', *Oriens Christianus* (forthcoming in 1996).

⁷⁵ *Book of governors*, i. 260 (Syr.), ii. 479 (trans.).

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, i. 261 (Syr.), ii. 480 (trans.).

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, i. 261 (Syr.), ii. 481 (trans.).

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Marco Polo*, eds Moule and Pelliot, 144–5.

Orthodox population of Khurasan became such a threat that Patriarch Timothy I considered it expedient to instal a good rhetorician in the metropolitanate of Herat.⁸¹ In this poly-religious environment of Central Asia, the network of metropolitanates which were created by the Church of the East maintained its vast territories and exerted its influence over a miscellany of peoples for almost a millennium.

⁸¹ *Timothei Patriarchiae I Epistulae*, ed. O. Braun (CSCO 74–5 (Syr. II, 67), 1914–15), 142 (Syr.), 96 (trans.). See also *Lettres*, ed. Bidawid, 27; and Fiey, 'Chrétientés syriaques', 90–1 on corruptions in these letters.