

IMAGES IN THE CHURCH OF THE EAST: THE EVIDENCE FROM CENTRAL ASIA AND CHINA

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Although there is both literary and archaeological evidence for the presence of images in the Church of the East, the primary concern of this paper is with the second kind of evidence. As far as we are aware, no one has yet tried to assemble and analyse all the available evidence relating to this topic. Unfortunately space does not permit us to undertake a comprehensive survey of everything that has so far been discovered. It is our intention, therefore, to concentrate on a selection of the material, mainly from Central Asia and China, and to look at the context in which it has been found. As we shall see, much of the evidence is problematic, and raises questions which cannot easily be answered from the evidence itself. We begin with an examination of the background and then give a more detailed description of the illustrations.

Background and Context

Jean Dauvillier has demonstrated conclusively that the Church of the East was not averse to the use of images.¹ It was often said in the nineteenth century that Christians of this church were opposed to images of any kind. Western involvement with the church tended to reinforce this idea, which was in turn endorsed by East Syrian Christians themselves.² This aversion to images was sometimes

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

¹ J. Dauvillier, 'Quelques témoignages littéraires et archéologiques sur la présence et sur le culte des images dans l'ancienne église chaldéenne', *L'Orient Syrien*, 1 (1956), 297–304, repr. in his *Histoire et institutions des églises orientales au Moyen Age* (London: Variorum, 1983), IX. See also the discussion by J. Leroy, 'L'attitude des églises de langue syriaque à l'égard des représentations sacrées', in his *Les manuscrits syriaques à peintures* (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1964), i. 37–46, and more recently I.-H. Dalmais, 'Un "Aniconisme Nestorien"? Une légende et son interprétation', *Nicée II, 787–1987. Douze siècles d'images religieuses*, eds F. Boespflug and N. Lossky (Paris, 1989), 63–72. Even contemporary authors perpetuate the myth that the Church of the East was averse to images: see A.S. Atiya, *A history of Eastern Christianity*, new edn (New York: Kraus Reprint, 1991), 297. A collection of references to images by East Syrian writers was assembled in 1933 by L.E. Browne, *The eclipse of Christianity in Asia* (Cambridge: University Press, 1933), 74–80.

² G.P. Badger, *The Nestorians and their rituals*, vol. 2 (London: John Masters, 1852), 132, 414; further examples in J.F. Coakley, *The Church of the East and the Church of England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), index, 'images'.

explained by reference to Islam and its domination of Christian communities in the Near East. East Syrian Christians had survived as a minority group and it was natural to conclude that the Islamic ethos had affected their attitude towards images. There was much to be said for this interpretation, especially from a Protestant point of view, as it made the Church of the East appear to be free of image veneration. Even when images were seen in Syrian churches Protestant missionaries viewed them as an innovation due to the influence of Rome.³ But later discoveries were to make this explanation appear less than satisfactory. The new evidence showed that East Syrian Christians had in fact made use of images in the course of their history, particularly when they established themselves in the remote areas of Central Asia and China.⁴

It is fair to say that the cult of the image was never as strong in the Syrian churches as it was in the Byzantine church. However, that does not mean Syrian Christians were iconoclasts, as has sometimes been suggested.⁵ Certainly they were accused of being such by Byzantine iconophiles when they were looking for someone to blame for the emergence of iconoclasm in their own church in the eighth and ninth centuries. But as there is no historical evidence to support this accusation, it must be dismissed as an example of Byzantine polemic. The Syrian churches were accused of being iconoclastic because iconophiles claimed that the icon of Christ could be justified only on the basis of Chalcedonian christology.⁶ Generally, however, Syrian Christians did tend to flavour an iconography that was more often symbolic and decorative than figural. The use of the plain cross with foliate extensions is a good example of this preference for symbolic image-making. Again this preference has been put down to the presence of Islam, but in fact the evidence indicates that their choice of a more symbolic style was in use well before the rise of Islam in the seventh century.

Recent research would seem to suggest that the non-figural tradition within Byzantine and Syrian Christianity was an important source of inspiration in early Islam. Umayyad architectural decoration is said to incorporate various elements found in the Christian cultures of the Near East.⁷ This seems to be true not only

³ O.H. Parry, *The ancient Syrian church in Mesopotamia* (London: Syrian Patriarchate Education Society, 1892), 34.

⁴ For East Syrian discoveries see, for example, A. von le Coq, *Buried treasures of Chinese Turkestan* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1928); A. Stein, *On ancient Central-Asian tracks* (London: Macmillan, 1933).

⁵ Clearly refuted by S. Brock, 'Iconoclasm and monophysites', *Iconoclasm*, eds A. Bryer and J. Herrin (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 1977), 53–7.

⁶ Theodore the Studite, *Antirrheticus* 3, PG. 99, 401A.

⁷ T. Allen, 'Aniconism and figural representation in Islamic art', *Five essays on Islamic art* (California: Solipsist Press, 1988), 17–37.

for religious monuments such as the Dome of the Rock at Jerusalem and the Great Mosque at Damascus, but also for buildings such as bath-houses and palaces.⁸ There was a wide range of non-figural motifs present throughout the region, which the Arabs could draw on, some of them of pre-Christian origin. Many of these were taken up and given fresh meaning in the context of the new religion of Islam. Most of the elements of the so-called *arabesque* can be traced to prototypes in the late antique environment of the Eastern Mediterranean.⁹ Although we are stressing the Christian contribution here, we are also aware that there is a Sasanian element to take into account when assessing early Islamic decoration.¹⁰

We find ornamental plant motifs used as decorative features in churches reappearing with greater prominence in early Islamic art. They are brought centre stage, as it were, and given a new focus of attention. Such motifs as the acanthus, the palm, the vine, and the honeysuckle tended to lose their specific botanical identity in the process of being stylized. The designs found in the floor mosaics of churches from Syria, Palestine and Jordan provide evidence of a Christian fondness for abstract decoration.¹¹ Even the Islamic development of Kufic calligraphy may have been inspired by the presence of *estrangela* inscriptions in churches.¹² Early Islam was in a position to utilize a wide range of motifs and designs in its areas of conquest. It is not tenable, therefore, to argue that Islam, in its artistic expression at least, represents a radical break in the community of the cultural history of the Near East.

A distinctive, but by no means unique, feature of the art of the Church of the East is the use of the leaved-cross (fig. 1). The description of the plain cross with flared arms, with two large leaves rising either side of the base, is often associated with East Syrian Christianity. It has even been called the 'Nestorian' or 'Persian' cross, but this is a misnomer. It occurs in fact in most of the Christian cultures of the Near East and the Caucasus and is not unknown in the Byzantine tradition.¹³ It is from Armenia especially that the finest examples of this type of cross have survived. In Armenia the tradition of the *khatchkar*, a finely carved

⁸ T. Allen, 'The Arabesque, the bevelled style, and the mirage of an early Islamic art', *Five essays on Islamic art*, 1–15.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁰ R. Ettinghausen, *Arab painting* (New York: Rizzoli, 1977), 19–40.

¹¹ Illustrations in M. Piccirillo, *The mosaics of Jordan: Roman, Byzantine, Islamic* (London: Sotheby's, 1993), *passim*.

¹² A. Millard, 'Writing in Jordan: from cuneiform to Arabic', *The art of Jordan: treasures from an ancient land*, ed. P. Bienkowski (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1991), 148–9.

¹³ See, for example, the leaved-crosses in A. Bank, *Byzantine art in the collections of Soviet museums* (Leningrad: Aurora, 1977), 185, 203.

stone cross used as a memorial or boundary stone, often incorporates the leaf motif along with elaborate geometrical designs (fig. 2). These stone crosses have an ancient history in Armenia and were sometimes carved out of the living rock.¹⁴ The evidence seems to point to Mesopotamia as the likely source of origin of this type of cross, where a variety of influences were at work.¹⁵

Examples of the leaved-cross have been found at various sites in Iraq and the Arabian Gulf area. The recent excavations by the Japanese at Ain Sha'ia in Iraq have brought to light further examples of the type discovered at Hira by Talbot Rice in the 1930s.¹⁶ These stucco crosses have been dated to the sixth to the eighth centuries and show variations on the standard design. They may be compared with a more elaborate example found recently at Al-Qusur on the island of Failaka, dated to the sixth century.¹⁷ The Al-Qusur cross itself stands comparison with a cross from the church on the island of Kharg, also dated to the sixth century (fig. 1, e and g). These finds demonstrate that the leaved-cross was in common use throughout the region, and a debased version of it turns up on a Zoroastrian ossuary of the sixth or seventh century from Sogdiana (fig. 3).

The evidence from these sites does suggest that the leaved-cross design was favoured more than others by East Syrian Christians. This does not mean, however, that the leaved-cross was exclusive to them or that a conscious decision was made to adopt it as a sectarian cognizance. We say this in spite of the fact that the leaved-cross appears in the East Syrian tradition of South India.¹⁸ There are crosses with expanding and bifurcated arms terminating in one or three pearls on Christian seals of the Sasanian period.¹⁹ This type of cross, with or without the leaf motif, appears not only on the seals, but in the stucco crosses mentioned above, and among the material remains from Christian centres in the Far East (fig. 4). In some respects this type of cross is more representative of the Church of the East than the leaved-cross. It is shown being worn by

¹⁴ L. Azarian, *Armenian khatchkars* (Etchmiadzin: Holy See, 1978).

¹⁵ D. Talbot Rice, 'The leaved-cross', *Byzantinoslavica*, 11 (1932), 72-81.

¹⁶ Y. Okada, 'Reconsideration of plaque-type crosses from Ain Sha'ia near Najaf', *al-Rafidan*, 11 (1990), 103-12; D. Talbot Rice, 'The Oxford excavations at Hira', *Antiquity*, 6 (1932), 276-91.

¹⁷ V. Bernard and J.-F. Salles, 'Discovery of a Christian church at Al-Qusur, Failaka (Kuwait)', *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies*, 21 (1991), fig. 2. A report in the *Guardian*, 14 June 1994, mentions the discovery of three carved crosses at a seventh-century Christian site on the island of Sir Bani Yas in the United Arab Emirates.

¹⁸ See the crosses from South India shown in S.G. Pothan, *The Syrian Christians of Kerala* (Bombay: Asia House, 1963), 28.

¹⁹ J.A. Lerner, *Christian seals of the Sasanian period* (Leiden: Netherlands Historical and Archaeological Institute of Istanbul, 1977), pl. I.

Christian figures in paintings from Qoço and Tun-huang, and it appears also in Manichean art.²⁰

In China we find the cross on a lotus flower or bunch of flowers or a cloud design as a distinctive symbol of the Church of the East. The lotus flower was undoubtedly a borrowing from Buddhist iconography. We find the cross flanked on either side by a flying angel or *apsaras*, a heavenly being of the Buddhist tradition, on headstones from Ch'üan-chou in South China, mainly from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (fig. 5). Again the cross accompanied by two angels is well attested in the Christian cultures of the Near East.²¹ By the sixth century, we hear of Christians among the Turkic tribes of Central Asia using crosses for apotropaic purposes, and a later report refers to a similar practice among the Mongols.²² The absence of the crucifix was taken by William of Rubruck in the thirteenth century to imply that East Syrian Christians were in some doubt about the passion of Christ.²³ It is of interest that several collections of small bronze amulets, some incorporating the swastika, have been found in Mongolia and China. The prevalence of the cross on these amulets suggests that they were made for Christians.²⁴ They have an attachment for fixing to a garment or for hanging round the neck (fig. 6).

As far as figural representation is concerned, most of the art historical evidence is from Eastern Turkestan.²⁵ Unfortunately there are no surviving images that can be identified as Christian from the Mongol period in Central Asia and China, but there are several references to such images. Writing in 1248 from Samarkand an Armenian official records visiting a local church and seeing an image of Christ and the Magi.²⁶ Western European travellers to the

²⁰ H.-J. Klimkeit, 'Das Kreuzsymbol in der zentralasiatischen Religionsbegegnung', *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte*, 31 (1979), 99–115.

²¹ See the sixth-century relief in the tympanum of the south door of the church of the Holy Cross at Jvari: R. Mepisashvili and V. Tsintsadze, *The arts of ancient Georgia* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979), 80.

²² A. Mingana, 'The early spread of Christianity in Central Asia and the Far East: a new document', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 9 (1925), 305.

²³ *The journey of William of Rubruck to the eastern parts of the world 1253–55*, trans. W.W. Rockhill (Liechtenstein: Kraus Reprint, 1967), 104, 191. It is the cross, not the crucifix, that is venerated according to Isaac of Nineveh (7th c.); see J. van der Ploeg, 'Un traité nestorien du culte de la croix', *Le Muséon*, 56 (1943), 115–27.

²⁴ The most extensive study of these amulets is by L. Hambis, 'Notes sur quelques sceaux-amulettes nestoriens en bronze', *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-orient*, 44 (1954), 483–525.

²⁵ For possible East Syrian finds at Seleucia-Ctesiphon, see M. Mundell, 'Monophysite church decoration', *Iconoclasm*, 59–74. A painted figure on a ninth-century glass jar from Samarra may be a bishop; see D.S. Rice, 'Deacon or drink: some paintings from Samara re-examined', *Arabica*, 5 (1958), 15–33.

²⁶ *Chronicle of the Constable Smpad*: see W. Barthold, *Turkestan down to the Mongol invasion*, fourth edition (London: Luzac, 1977), 485.

Mongol court make similar observations on the presence of images in Syrian churches.²⁷ John of Cora, Latin bishop of Sultaniyya in Persia, writing about 1330 of the East Syrians in Khan-baliq (Beijing) says that they had 'very beautiful and orderly churches with crosses and images in honour of God and of the saints'.²⁸ The figural evidence from Eastern Turkestan so far discovered is dated to the period between the seventh and ninth centuries. There are in fact few Christian artefacts from the Far East belonging to the period between the expulsion of the Christians, along with followers of other foreign religions, from T'ang China in 845, and their re-emergence among the Mongols in the thirteenth century.

The use of figural imagery in wall paintings, silk hangings and manuscript illuminations by different religious communities in Central Asia, shows the value they attached to the role of images in their respective traditions.²⁹ The evidence provides additional information about the hybrid nature of the religious cultures of the area in the early medieval period. Central Asia at this time was an important region for the dissemination not only of Christianity, but of Buddhism, Manicheism, Zoroastrianism and Islam. It is in the art of those religions which espoused the use of figural imagery, such as Buddhism, Manicheism and Christianity, that the inter-faith influence is most apparent. The fact that there was no state religion in Central Asia in this period meant that different religious communities could flourish alongside each other.

Trading centres on both sides of the Pamirs helped to stimulate the Eastward transmission of these religions into China. There were many fertile exchanges between East and West at this time in such places as Samarkand, Kashgar and Turfan. This can be seen, for example, in the appearance of Western decorative elements in Chinese porcelain, and in the architecture of Chinese Buddhist caves.³⁰ The presence in Rome and Byzantium of Chinese silks and ceramics shows the commercial importance of the overland trade routes for both East and West.³¹ Already by the late eighth century, the Japanese had started collecting objects of a Western origin which had travelled along

²⁷ Mingana, 'The early spread of Christianity', 316.

²⁸ *Book of the estate of the Great Kaan*: see A.C. Moule, *Christians in China before the year 1550* (London: SPCK, 1930), 251.

²⁹ See, for example, E. Esin, *Antecedents and development of Buddhist and Manichean Turkish art in Eastern Turkestan and Kansu*. Handbook of Turkish Culture, supplement to Vol. II (Istanbul: 1967); H.-J. Klimkeit, *Manichaean art and calligraphy*. Iconography of Religions XX (Leiden: Brill, 1982).

³⁰ J. Rawson, *Chinese ornament: the lotus and the dragon* (London: British Museum Publications, 1984), *passim*.

³¹ Illustrations in *Silk roads-China ships: an exhibition of East-West trade*, ed. J.E. Colmer (Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum, 1983).

these routes.³² It was along these routes that Syrian Christians travelled to Ch'ang-an (Xian), the ancient capital of the T'ang (618–907) dynasty in China, and where the famous monument to the Syrian Christian community was erected in 781, during the reign of Emperor Te-Tsung (780–804). The stone monument itself celebrates the arrival of an East Syrian mission to the capital in 635.

The material remains of the Church of the East in Central Asia and China consist mainly of funerary artefacts, wall paintings, silk hangings, bronze amulets and church ruins.³³ But how certain can we be that this material belonged to East Syrian Christians? Where there is documented evidence for the presence of such Christians at a particular site, then we can be fairly sure that the remains may have some connection with them. However, the picture is complicated in Central Asia by the presence of more than one Christian tradition. In addition to East Syrians, there were communities of Armenians, West Syrians, and Melkites in many of the oasis towns of Central Asia.³⁴ That there were friendly relations between Melkites and East Syrians, for example, is attested by Sogdian documents unearthed at Bulayiq, near Turfan.³⁵ Such information makes it difficult to be sure who might have influenced whom in respect of images.

The situation is further complicated by the presence of other faiths besides Christianity. For example, the use of the nimbus and aureole in the figurative iconography of Central Asia is shared by more than one religion. These symbols of enlightenment and divinity are found in Buddhist, Manichean and Christian art. An early example of these symbols in combination is found on the famous gold stater of Kanishka I, the Kushan king, which was issued circa CE 100–23. On the reverse of this coin is a standing image of the Buddha in a frontal position with his head outlined by a nimbus and his body by an aureole. The title 'Boddo' in Bactrian is inscribed in the field together with a dynastic symbol.³⁶ This is

³² See R. Hayashi, *The silk road and the Shoso-in* (New York and Tokyo: Weatherhill-Heibonsha, 1975); E.H. Schafer, *The golden peaches of Samarkand: a study of T'ang exotics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963).

³³ We are not aware, from the evidence we have studied, that the *bema* in the nave has been found in church ruins in Central Asia and China. See R. Taft, 'Some notes on the Bema in the East and West Syrian traditions', *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, 34 (1968), 326–59; 'On the use of the Bema in the East-Syrian liturgy', *Eastern Churches Review*, 3 (1970), 30–9.

³⁴ See the various studies of these communities by Dauvillier collected in his *Histoire et institutions des églises orientales au Moyen Age*.

³⁵ N. Sims-Williams, 'Sogdian and Turkish Christians in the Turfan and Tun-Huang manuscripts', *Turfan and Tun-Huang: the texts. Encounter of civilizations on the silk route*, ed. A. Cadonna, *Orientalia Venetiana IV* (Firenze: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 1992), 43–61.

³⁶ Illustration in *The crossroads of Asia: transformation in image and symbol in the art of ancient Afghanistan and Pakistan*, eds E. Errington and J. Cribb (Cambridge: Ancient India and Iran Trust, 1992), 199.

the prototype for the more elaborate nimbus and flaming aureole that surrounds the image of the Buddha in the iconography of Central Asia.

A similar combination can be seen in the Byzantine image of the Transfiguration at St Catherine's monastery at Sinai. This sixth-century mosaic in the apse of the monastery church shows a standing figure of Christ with a nimbus and a mandorla outlining the whole figure.³⁷ The mandorla consists of concentric bands ranging from dark blue at the centre to light blue at the edges. The blue of the Byzantine mandorla has precise theological implications,³⁸ just as the flaming aureole of the Buddha can be traced to events in his life.³⁹ Later the flaming nimbus finds its way into Persian manuscript illuminations of the fifteenth century, perhaps through Central Asian influence.⁴⁰

Mario Bussagli has suggested that the different doctrinal positions of Buddhism and Christianity can be detected in their iconographic traditions in Central Asia. He contrasts what he calls 'the supra-historical message of Buddhism' with 'the historicity of Nestorian Christianity', and believes this distinction in doctrine gives rise to differences in style and representation of space.⁴¹ Although there may be some truth in this observation, it is difficult to see how this doctrinal difference is articulated in the iconographic evidence available. The Christian material is far too meagre to draw any definite conclusions in respect of style. We would say, however, that the Christian figures do seem to reflect the general tendency towards realism in the art of the T'ang period.⁴²

This trend can be seen, for example, in the portraits of Westerners paying homage to the Buddha at Bāzūklik, near Turfan, as well as in the Christian images from Qočo and the bodhisattvas from Tun-huang. The change in style seems to have come in with the establishment of Uighur culture in the seventh century in Turfan and Kansu.⁴³ However, the Christian images from Qočo appear to inhabit a different *milieu* from the Christian figure found at Tun-huang (figs 7b, 8). The Buddhist influence in this figure is

³⁷ K. Weitzmann, 'The mosaic in St Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai', *Studies in the arts of Sinai* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 5–18.

³⁸ The blue light of the sapphire is associated with the divine presence by Evagrius Ponticus, *Praktikos*, PG 40, 1244A.

³⁹ The miracle at Śrāvastī was one such event: see M. Cummings, *The lives of the Buddha in the art and literature of Asia* (Michigan: University of Michigan, 1982), 185–91. The light symbolism of the aureole is discussed by G. Azarpay, *Sogdian painting: the pictorial epic in oriental art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 112–15.

⁴⁰ B. Gray, *Persian painting* (London: Macmillan, 1977), 105–6.

⁴¹ Bussagli, *Central Asian painting* (London: Macmillan, 1978), 114.

⁴² See W. Watson, *Realistic style in the art of Han and T'ang China* (Hull: University of Hull, 1975).

⁴³ Esin, *Antecedents and development of Buddhist and Manichean Turkish art*, 49–51.

plainly visible, but this is not the case with the figures from Qoço (figs 9, 7a). This difference may reflect the fact that Buddhist influence appears stronger in the Christian texts from Tun-huang than in the Christian texts from Turfan.⁴⁴

But how sure can we be that these images belonged to East Syrian Christians? The silk hanging of a Christian figure from the 'Caves of the Thousand Buddhas' at Tun-huang is a case in point (fig. 8). The meaning of this image must be seen in relation to the Chinese Christian texts found at Tun-huang, such as the *Gloria in excelsis Deo* and the *Sutra which aims at mysterious rest and joy*, attributed to Alopên and Ching-ching respectively, two names found on the stone inscription from Ch'ang-an.⁴⁵ But can the textual evidence help us to establish a context for the image? For it is not clear whether we are looking at a Christianized bodhisattva or a Buddhicized messiah. We are dealing with an image that gives no clear indication of its religious allegiance. The presence of crosses in what is largely an example of Buddhist iconography does not tell us much about who might have been responsible for it. We seem to see in this image a strong reflection of the religious syncretism prevalent in the texts.

One literary legacy of this syncretism in Central Asia was the appearance in the West of the tale of *Barlaam and Ioasaph*. The story is an apology on behalf of the ascetic life and was ascribed to John of Damascus in the Byzantine tradition.⁴⁶ But in fact the story is based on the life of the Buddha, and the name of its protagonist, Ioasaph, seems to be a Christianized form of bodhisattva, probably from the Arabic Budasaf. The story appears to have started life among the Manicheans of Central Asia and to have been translated into several languages before being translated into Greek. The identity of the Greek translator is still something of a mystery, in spite of the case made for the Georgian Euthymius the Athonite (c. 955–1028).⁴⁷ Manichean fragments of the legend in Sogdian and Uighur dated to the eighth and ninth centuries were found at Turfan by von le Coq.⁴⁸

There is evidence of at least one attempt at literary collaboration

⁴⁴ W. Hage, 'The Christian community in the oasis of Turfan', in his *Syriac Christianity in the East* (Kottayam: SEERI, 1988), 42–54.

⁴⁵ P.Y. Saeki, *The Nestorian monument in China* (London: SPCK, 1916), 160–80; M. Palmer, 'The Chinese Nestorian stories of Christianity', in his *Living Christianity* (Dorset: Element, 1993), 95–133.

⁴⁶ D.M. Lang, *The wisdom of Balahvar: a Christian legend of the Buddha* (London: George Allen, 1957).

⁴⁷ A. Kazhdan, 'Where, when and by whom was the Greek Barlaam and Ioasaph not written', *Zu Alexander D. Gr. Festschrift G. Wirth zum 60. Geburtstag*, vol. 2 (Amsterdam: Hakkert, 1988), 1187–1207.

⁴⁸ Lang, *Wisdom of Balahvar*, 24–9.

between a Christian and a Buddhist under the T'ang. It involved an Indian Buddhist called Prajna (Wisdom), and a Syrian Christian called Ching-ching, a name associated, as we have seen, with the Ch'ang-an monument. Prajna is said to have arrived in Ch'ang-an in 782, and to have translated with Ching-ching, the priest of the Syrian monastery (*Ta-Ch'in-ssü*), the *Satparamita Sutra* from a Uighur text. Unfortunately their translation was considered unsatisfactory by Emperor Te-Tsung (780–804), as Prajna did not know the Uighur language and Ching-ching did not know Sanskrit.⁴⁹

According to the Chinese source for this event, the emperor requested that in future Ching-ching should keep to preaching the teachings of the messiah, while Prajna should propagate the sutras of the Buddha. This was because the Buddhist temple and the Ta-Ch'in monastery differed in their religious beliefs and practices.⁵⁰ Yet the Christians had already felt the need to keep their religious identity separate from the Zoroastrians by requesting that they be known as Ta-Ch'in rather than Persians. The presence of such Persian religions as Zoroastrianism and Manicheism in Ch'ang-an must have caused confusion to the Chinese. Before 745 the epithet 'Persian' is used in Chinese records to describe the Christian establishments of the T'ang period, but after that date, as in the case of the Ch'ang-an monument of 781, the title 'Ta-Ch'in' is used.⁵¹

The inscription on the Ch'ang-an monument reflects this multi-religious atmosphere with its references to Taoist and Buddhist ideas.⁵² It also raises questions concerning the presentation and perception of Christianity in T'ang China. For example, the standard English translation of the inscription refers to Christianity as 'the luminous religion', and the messiah is called the 'luminous Lord of the universe'. But in what sense was Christianity in China a 'religion of light,' any more than, say, Buddhism or Manicheism? The title 'luminous religion' is undoubtedly an honorific title without any doctrinal implications. More recent translations of the inscription give 'illustrious' and 'brilliant' for 'luminous'.⁵³ The Chinese character for 'luminous' is *ching*, which reappears in the name Ching-ching.

⁴⁹ This episode is mentioned in a list of Buddhist books for the Ch'eng-yüan period (785–804), and was first given prominence by Prof. J. Takakusu, the Japanese Buddhist scholar, in the journal *T'oung Pao* in 1896; see Saeki, *Nestorian monument*, 71.

⁵⁰ Saeki, *Nestorian monument*, 71–5. The title 'Ta-Ch'in' has been interpreted to mean the Roman Empire or Syria.

⁵¹ The title was granted in 745 by the emperor Hsüan-Tsung (712–755), see Saeki, *Nestorian monument*, 213; F.S. Drake, 'Nestorian monasteries of the T'ang dynasty', *Monumenta Serica*, II (1936–37), 293–340, esp. 315.

⁵² Palmer, 'Chinese Nestorian stories', 109–14.

⁵³ C.Y. Hsü, 'Nestorianism and the Nestorian monument in China', *Asian Culture Quarterly*, 14 (1986), 41–81; Palmer, 'Chinese Nestorian stories', 111. My thanks go to Martin Palmer who read the Chinese characters for me and who is working on a new translation of the Ch'ang-an inscription. The stele itself is in the Shaanxi Provincial Museum in Xian.

The inscription also refers to an imperial edict issued in 638 which reads: 'Bishop Alopên of the Kingdom of Ta-Ch'in, bringing with him the sutras and images, has come from afar and presented them at our capital'.⁵⁴ The reference to words and images in this context is intriguing, but is it a true reflection of East Syrian missionary practice? Undoubtedly the use of 'sutras and images' would have been known from both Buddhist and Manichean missionary enterprises. Can we take this reference as it stands, or is it merely a conventional expression which should be seen in relation to the presence of other Western religions in the capital at the time?

If the date of 635 for the arrival of Alopên is to be trusted then it is an early witness to the use of images in the Church of the East. The date endorses the seventh-century testimony of Abraham bar Lipéh, who writes in his *Exposition of the liturgy* that it is forbidden to consecrate the mysteries without the presence of the image of Christ in the sanctuary. For him the image of Christ is a liturgical imperative, together with the cross and the gospel book.⁵⁵

What does all this tell us about the attitude of the Church of the East to images in the period of its greatest expansion? On the one hand, the material remains confirm the literary evidence that East Syrian Christians decorated their churches with images and crosses. On the other hand, it is apparent to the historian of these remains, that the context in which many of them have been found does not provide sufficient evidence to be certain of a positive attribution. There are too many gaps in our knowledge at present to be confident of asserting that all the remains we have discussed belonged to East Syrian Christians.

The impression gained from the material remains from Eastern Turkestan and China is that the Christians responsible for them were fighting to hold their own. The references to Taoist and Buddhist concepts in the Ch'ang-an inscription, and in the Chinese Christian texts from Tun-huang, show a community eager to make its faith accessible to Chinese-speakers. Unfortunately their eagerness put them in danger of losing their identity, as is apparent in the iconography of the Christian figure from Tun-huang (fig. 8), and in the headstones from Ch'üan-chou (fig. 5). In retrospect the odds were against them, and it can only be a matter of regret that so few images have survived from this period in the history of the Church of the East.

⁵⁴ Saeki, *Nestorian monument*, 166.

⁵⁵ *Anonymi auctoris expositio officiorum Ecclesiae, Georgio Arbelensi vulgo adscripta*, II. *Accedit Abrahae bar Lipheh interpretatio officiorum*, ed. R.H. Connolly (CSCO 76 (Syr. 32), 1915), 161. For references to images of saints, see E. Delly, 'Le culte des saintes images dans l'église syrienne orientale', *L'Orient Syrien*, 1 (1956), 291-6.

IMAGES IN THE CHURCH OF THE EAST

ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1

Examples of Leaved-Crosses, 6th–8th centuries.

References:

V. Bernard and J.-F. Salles, 'Discovery of a Christian church at Al-Qusur, Failaka (Kuwait)', *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies*, 21 (1991), fig. 2.

Y. Okada, 'Reconsideration of plaque-type crosses from Ain Sha'ia near Najaf', *al-Rafidan*, 11 (1990), fig. 2.

R. Ghirshman, *The Island of Kharg* (Tehran: 1960), pl. 14.

J. Dauvillier, 'Les croix triomphales dans l'ancienne Église chaldéenne', in his *Histoire et institutions des Églises orientales au Moyen Age* (London: Variorum, 1983), X, fig. 7.

D. Talbot Rice, 'The Oxford excavations at Hira', *Antiquity*, 6 (1932), figs 4a, b, c.

These examples of leaved-crosses show some of the variations on this type of cross in the Christian Near East. The leaved-cross probably developed from the Tree of Life symbol of the early church. The cross combined with the Tree of Life first appears in Christian art in the fourth century. In the examples from Hira in Iraq (a, d) the leaf motif retains some verisimilitude, as does the example from the Armenian church of the Holy Cross (915–21) at Aghtamar on Lake Van in Eastern Turkey (c). However, the leaf motif on the cross from Ain Sha'ia in Iraq (b) is more schematic in intention, and this is reflected in the cross from Al-Qusur in Kuwait (g). The cross from Kharg Island in Iran (e) has a stepped pedestal, a double arm in the lower quadrant, and arms terminating in pearls, similar to the cross from Al-Qusur (g). The cross from Kottayam in South India (f) has flowering ends to the arms supported by a leaf design. The leaved-cross is also found in Syriac manuscript illuminations (see Leroy, *Les manuscrits syriaques à peintures*, vol. 2, pl. 5).

Figure 2
Armenian *Khatchkar*, 9th century.

References:

L. Azarian, *Armenian khatchkars* (Etchmiadzin: Holy See, 1978), pl. 11.

S. Der Nersessian, *Armenian art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), 192–205.

Stone crosses similar to the one shown here are found throughout Armenia. The cross was venerated from an early period in Christian Armenia, and stone obelisks topped by a cross are found from the fifth to the seventh centuries. From the ninth century stone crosses or *khatchkars* replace the earlier cross-topped obelisks. A parallel with Irish high crosses has been suggested (see H. Richardson and J. Scarry, *An introduction to Irish high crosses* (Dublin: Mercier Press, 1990), 21–2). A regular feature of *khatchkars* is the use of the leaved-cross combined with geometrical and botanical patterns, some of which appear to reflect carpet designs (see V. Gantzhorn, *The Christian oriental carpet* (Köln: Benedikt Taschen, 1991), 99). In addition to their use as boundary markers and gravestones, they were erected to commemorate military victories and the foundation of new churches. They were also inserted into the exterior fabric of church buildings and carved out of the rock face. The emergence of the leaved-cross in Armenia is probably related to the country's close links with Mesopotamia and Syrian Christianity.

Figure 3
Clay Ossuary. Sogdiana, 6th–7th centuries.

Reference:

Cultural contacts between East and West in Antiquity and the Middle Ages from USSR (Tokyo: National Museum of Art, 1985), pl. 86.

This crenellated ossuary shows a scene of three decorated arches mounted on carved columns with a fire altar beneath the central arch. The two Zoroastrian priests beneath the outer arches, one standing and the other kneeling, hold ritual utensils in their hands. They are dressed in long robes tied at the waist with the sacred girdle (*kusti*) and wear the mouth-veil (*padan*) over their

mouths and noses. Flames rise from the fire altar, but from each side of the base of the triple-stepped pedestal rise leaf patterns. This motif is normally seen in association with the symbol of the cross, for it has no meaning whatsoever as far as Zoroastrian ritual is concerned. On the other hand, the two female figures on the triangular lid seem to have leaves attached to the legs and to be holding vegetative(?) emblems of some kind. The sun (rosette) and moon symbols in the apex of the lid appear on Christian seals from the Sasanian period (see Lerner, *Christian seals of the Sasanian period*, pl. I, 3).

Figure 4

Examples of Pearl Crosses, 6th–9th centuries.

References:

Y. Okada, 'Reconsideration of plaque-type crosses from Ain Sha'ia near Najaf', *al-Rafidan*, 11 (1990), figs 1, 7.

H.-J. Klimkeit, *Manichaean art and calligraphy* (Leiden: Brill, 1982), pl. XXII.

J.A. Lerner, *Christian seals of the Sasanian period* (Leiden: 1977), pl. 1.

A. von Gabain, *Das Leben im uigurischen Königreich von Qočo (850–1250)*, vol. 2 (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1973), pl. 81.

D. Talbot Rice, 'The Oxford excavations at Hira', *Antiquity*, 6 (1932), pl. 2.

The cross as a symbol of Christ's victory over death became widespread in the early church, whereas the crucifix as a symbol of *Jesus patibilis* was not so common. The presence of decorated crosses among Syriac-speaking Christians is apparent from the fifth and sixth centuries. Crosses with expanding arms terminating in single pearls have been found at Hira in Iraq (b), and on Christian seals of the Sasanian period (a). A cross from Ain Sha'ia in Iraq (d) has arms terminating in three pearls. The cross on the Ch'ang-an monument in China (c) is of this type, but mounted on a lotus flower and an auspicious cloud design (see the cloud designs of the T'ang period shown in Rawson, *Chinese ornament*, 139). The middle pearl on the top arm of the cross on the Ch'ang-an

monument is surrounded by a flame. A similar motif of three circles with a flame rising from the middle circle appears in a painting from Qočo. This is probably a symbol of the *triratna* or the 'Three Jewels' of Buddhist teaching (Illustrated in von Gabain, *Das Leben im uigurischen Königreich von Qočo*, vol. 2, pl. 17. See also the flaming 'wishing jewel' in the form of a cross from Kizil near Kuca in Klimkeit, *Manichaeen art and calligraphy*, 32, pl. XI). The pearl cross also appears on a Manichean banner from Qočo (f), and on the cross carried by the horseman from the Christian church at Qočo (e). Again, this type of cross can be seen in Syriac manuscript illuminations (Leroy, *Les manuscrits syriaques à peintures*, vol. 2, pls 3–7).

Figure 5

Headstones from Ch'üan-chou, 13th–14th centuries.

References:

J. Foster, 'Crosses from the walls of Zaitun', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1–2 (1954), 1–25.

P.Y. Saeki, *The Nestorian documents and relics in China*, 2nd edn (Tokyo: Maruzen, 1951), ch. 8.

A.C. Moule, *Christianity in China before the year 1550* (London: SPCK, 1930), ch. 3.

Most of these headstones from Ch'üan-chou, the Zaitun of Marco Polo, are from the period of the Yüan (1280–1368) dynasty in China. At least three were discovered, and woodcuts of them published in the seventeenth century, while a further twenty or so have been found in this century. Some of the stones have inscriptions in non-Chinese script, including *estrangela*. (On the decipherment of these inscriptions, see L. Carrington Goodrich, 'Recent discoveries at Zayton,' *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 77 (1957), 161–5; S.N.C. Lieu, 'Nestorians and Manichaeans on the South China coast', *Vigiliae Christianae*, 34 (1980), 71–88). In the first two examples (a, b) the cross is supported on a lotus blossom and a cloud design, recalling the cross on the Ch'ang-an monument shown in Figure 4c. A pearl cross appears in the next example (c), situated on a cloud motif. In the following example (d) the cross sits on a lotus flower, but with a canopy above it and what appear to be flying figures. Two

columns or banners topped by canopies and supported on lotus flowers fill the lower part of the stone, while the outer border is filled with a cloud design. Flying angels or *apsarasas* appear in the next two examples (e, f). The flying figures are particularly striking in the last example (f). They wear ear-rings and pointed hats, and although wingless, they are dressed in flowing robes and trailing ribbons. The lotus flower supporting the cross is carried on a draped cushion or throne-like object. Except for the cross all the iconographic elements in these headstones are Buddhist in inspiration.

Figure 6

Examples of Bronze Amulets, 13th–14th centuries.
1.25 cm to 2.5 cm in diameter.
(Collection in the Fung Ping Shan Museum,
Hong Kong University.)

References:

F.S. Drake, 'Nestorian crosses and Nestorian Christians in China under the Mongols', *Chinese Recorder* (1962), 11–25.

L. Hambis, 'Notes sur quelques sceaux-amulettes nestoriens en bronze', *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-orient*, 44 (1954), 483–525.

A.C. Moule, 'The use of the cross among the Nestorians in China', *T'oung Pao*, 28 (1931), 78–86.

Several hundred of these bronze amulets have been found in the Ordos region of Mongolia and in North China. Their shape varies considerably from cruciform to bird-shaped with geometrical and swastika designs. The double-headed birds in Figure 6b are reminiscent of the Byzantine double-headed eagle, although some of the birds appear to be pigeons or doves, rather than birds of prey. The swastika or fylfot cross on some of the amulets in Figure 6a is found in the pre-Christian West, and the non-Christian East, and is generally associated with the ancient sun-cult. It appears in a Christian context as early as the Roman catacombs, but its appearance on these examples would seem to reflect its use as a symbol of light and good fortune as found in Buddhist art. It is assumed that these amulets were made for Christians during the Yüan (Mongol) dynasty. The cross in Chinese is the 'figure of ten' (*shih tzü*), which is associated with the four cardinal points. On the

Ch'ang-an inscription the cross is called the 'figure of ten', and in the Mongol period, Christian monasteries were referred to as 'figure of ten monasteries' (*shih tzŭ ssŭ*).

Figure 7

(a) Drawing of a Horseman. Wall Painting from the Christian Church at Qočo. Late 9th century.

(b) Reconstruction of a Fragment of a Christian Figure. Tun-huang, 9th century.

References:

A. von Gabain, *Das uigurische Königreich von Chotscho 850–1250* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1961), 12.

P.Y. Saeki, *The Nestorian documents and relics in China*, 408, 418.

Figure 7a is a wall-painting sketched by Albert Grünwedel in 1905 and shows a bearded figure mounted on horseback holding a processional cross with arms terminating in pearls. This cross is similar to the processional cross depicted on a Manichean banner from Qočo shown in Figure 4f. The horseman's nimbate head supports a headdress with a cross set in it and he wears a short upper garment which appears to billow out. The sketch of this figure helps to confirm the Christian ambience of Figure 9a. Figure 7b is a reconstruction by a Japanese artist of Figure 8 below.

Figure 8

Fragment of a Christian Figure. Cave 17, Tun-huang. T'ang Dynasty, 9th century. Ink and colours on silk. 88cm. × 55 cm. (British Museum.)

References:

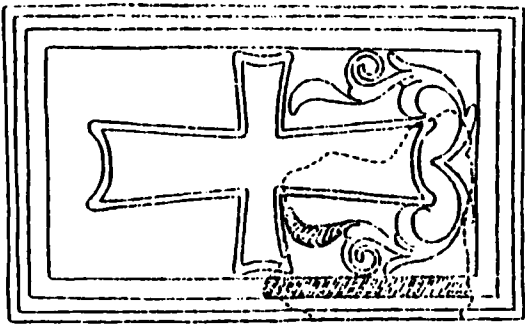
R. Whitfield and A. Farrer, *Caves of the Thousand Buddhas: Chinese art from the silk route* (London: British Museum Publications, 1990), 31–4.

R. Whitfield, *The art of Central Asia: the Stein collection in the British Museum*, vol. 1 (Tokyo: 1982), pl. 25 (detail).

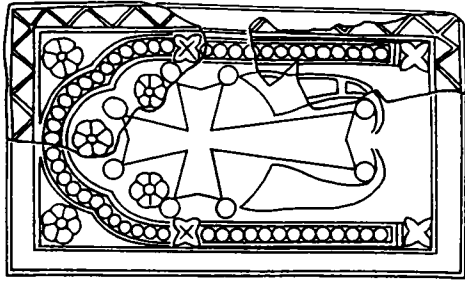
P.Y. Saeki, *The Nestorian documents and relics in China*, frontispiece, 408.

This silk hanging, discovered by Aurel Stein in 1908, shows a standing figure with the right hand held open and the thumb resting on the second finger. The discussing gesture (*vitarka-mundrā*) is known from Buddhist iconography in Central Asia and can be seen, for example, in wall paintings at Tun-huang. Of interest is the collection of hand gestures on a paper roll found at Tun-huang (see Whitfield and Farrer, *Caves of the Thousand Buddhas*, 94–5). At first glance the figure is reminiscent of a bodhisattva, but the Western features of the face, together with the red moustache and wispy beard, begin to hint at a different type of holy person. The Christians mentioned in the Ch'ang-an inscription are said to 'keep the beard' (see Saeki, *Nestorian monument*, 164 n. 30). That the figure is Christian in inspiration is evident from the cross on the lotus flower in the headdress, the cross pattern on the collar, and the pectoral cross. The figure is also holding in the left hand the staff of a processional cross.

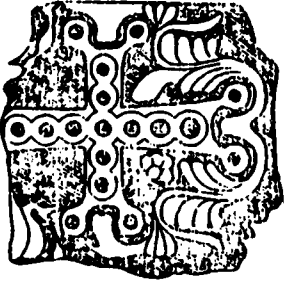
The winged or feathered headdress is known from Kushano-Sasanian art and symbolizes sovereignty (see J.M. Rosenfield, *The dynastic arts of the Kushans* (Berkeley: University of California, 1967), 95). On the other hand, the peppercorn curls at the shoulders remind us of the Buddha images of Gandhāra, although there are other curly-headed types from the T'ang period (see J.G. Mahler, *Westerners among the figurines of the T'ang dynasty* (Rome: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1959), pls XXIII–XXIV). The figure is wearing a silk stole of red over a greenish garment tied at the waist with a piece of silk on the same hue. The short sleeves of this garment end in ruffs and bracelets adorn the wrists, auspicious ornaments in Buddhist culture. The flame-like decoration in the outer circles of the nimbus is found throughout the Buddhist iconography of Central Asia. The background is scattered with small flowers which may serve to enhance the sanctity, and therefore the devotion (*bhakti*), due to the person depicted.



(a)



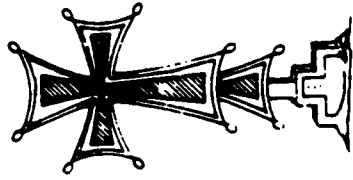
(b)



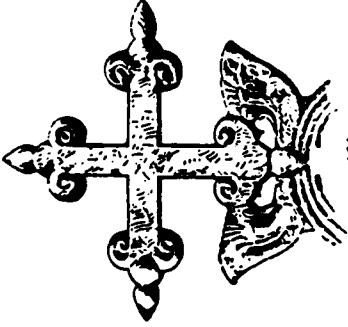
(c)



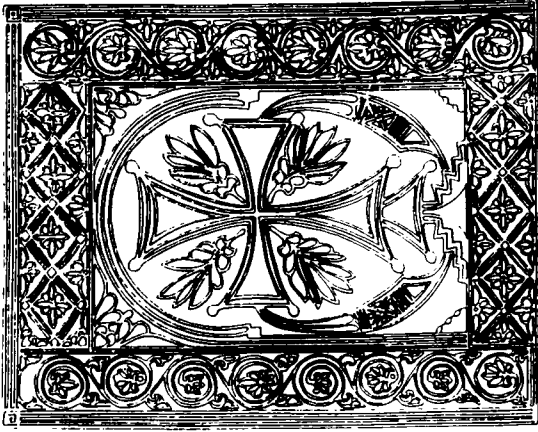
(d)



(e)



(f)



(g)

Figure 1
Examples of Leaved-Crosses, 6th-8th centuries.



Figure 3
Clay Ossuary, Sogdiana, 6th–7th centuries.

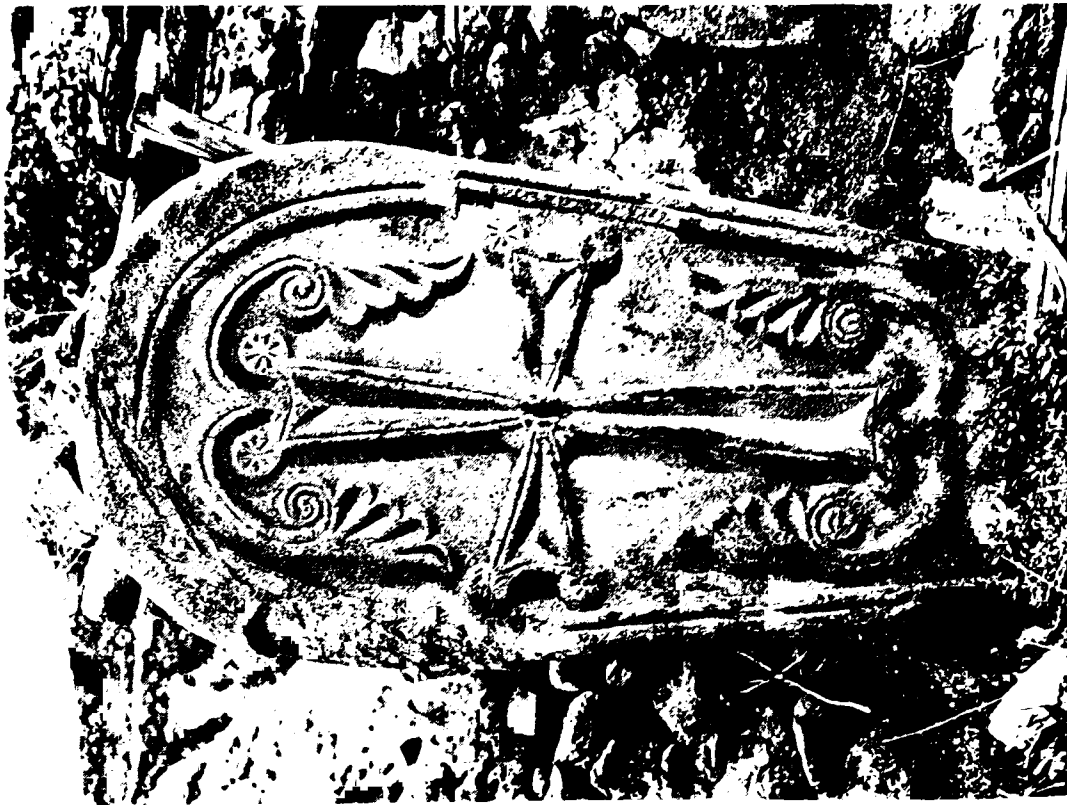
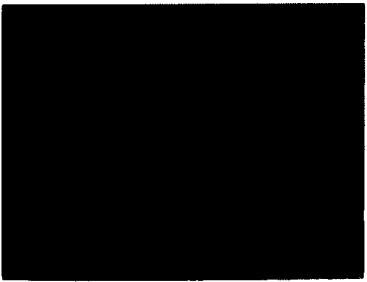
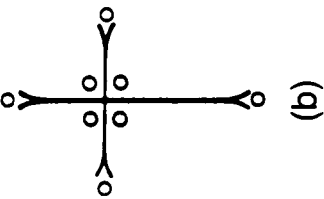


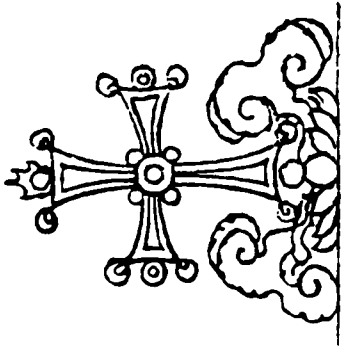
Figure 2
Armenian Khatchkar, 9th century.



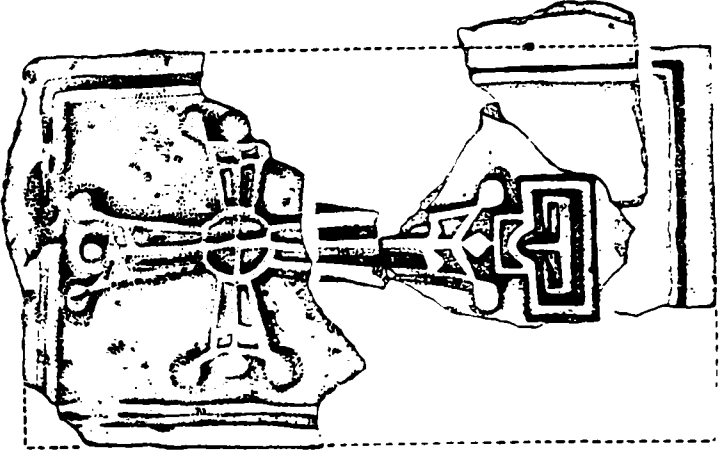
(a)



(b)



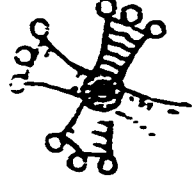
(c)



(d)



(e)



(f)

Figure 4
Examples of Pearl Crosses, 6th–9th centuries.



(a)



(b)



(c)



(d)

Figure 5
Headstones from Ch'üan-chou, 13th–14th centuries.

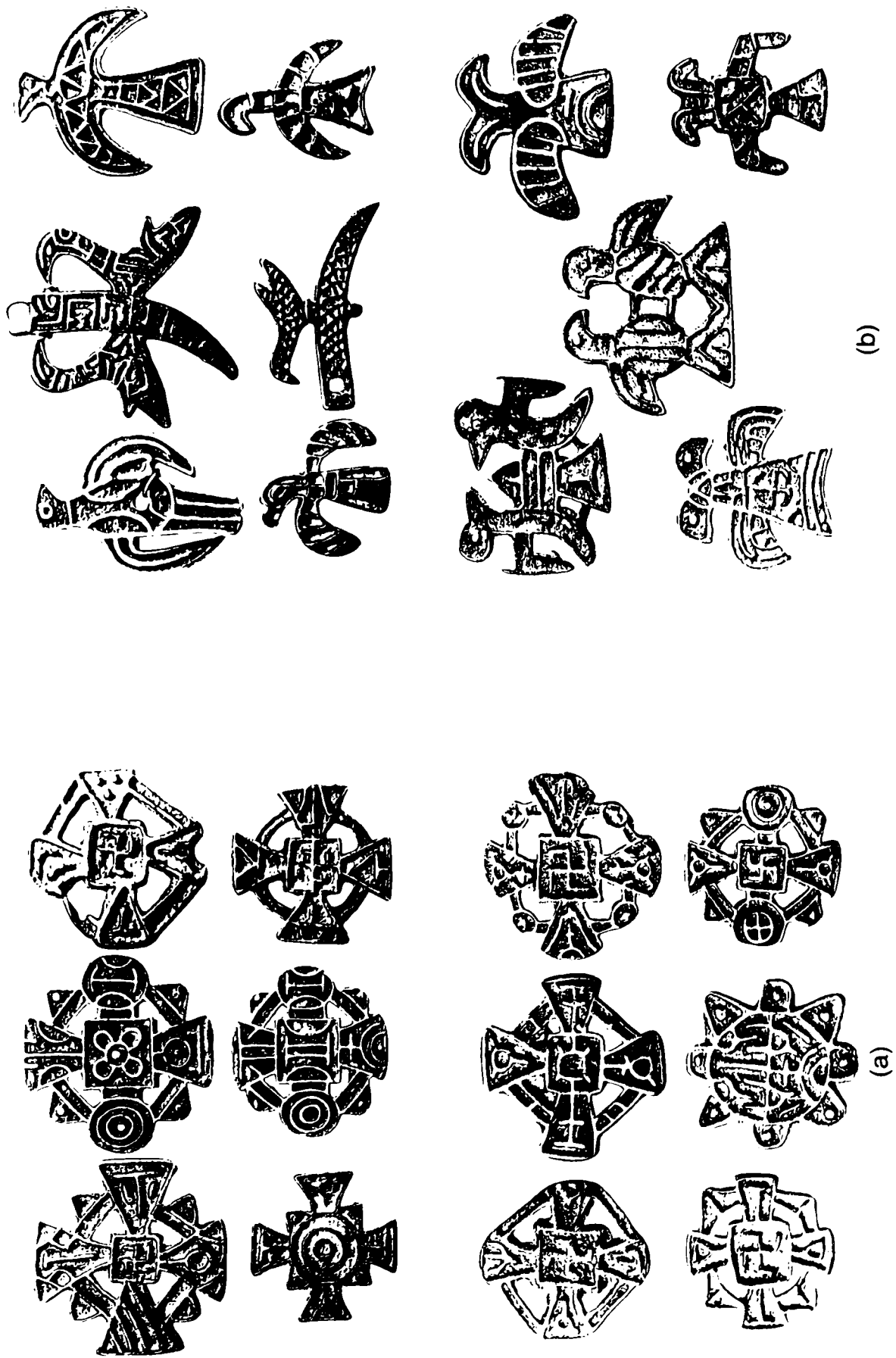


(e)



(f)

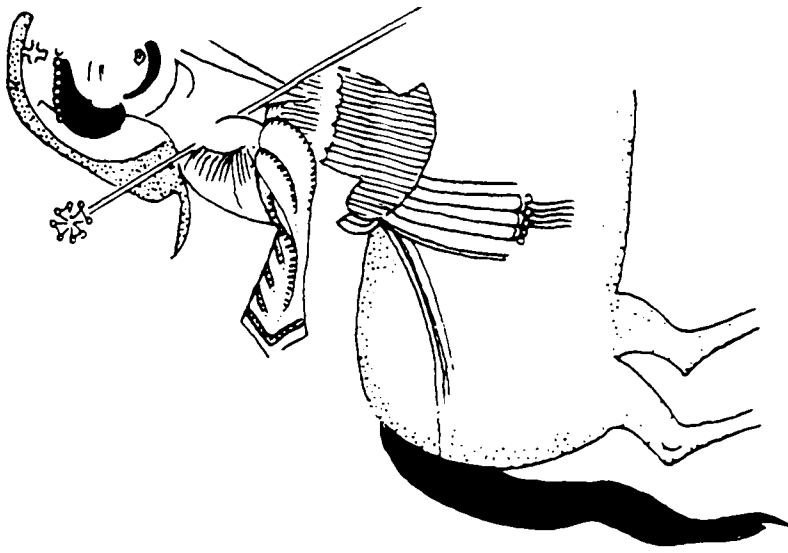
Figure 5
Headstones from Ch'üan-chou, 13th-14th centuries.



(b)

(a)

Figure 6
Examples of Bronze Amulets, 13th–14th centuries.



(a) Drawing of a Horseman. Wall Painting from the Christian Church at Qočo. Late 9th century.

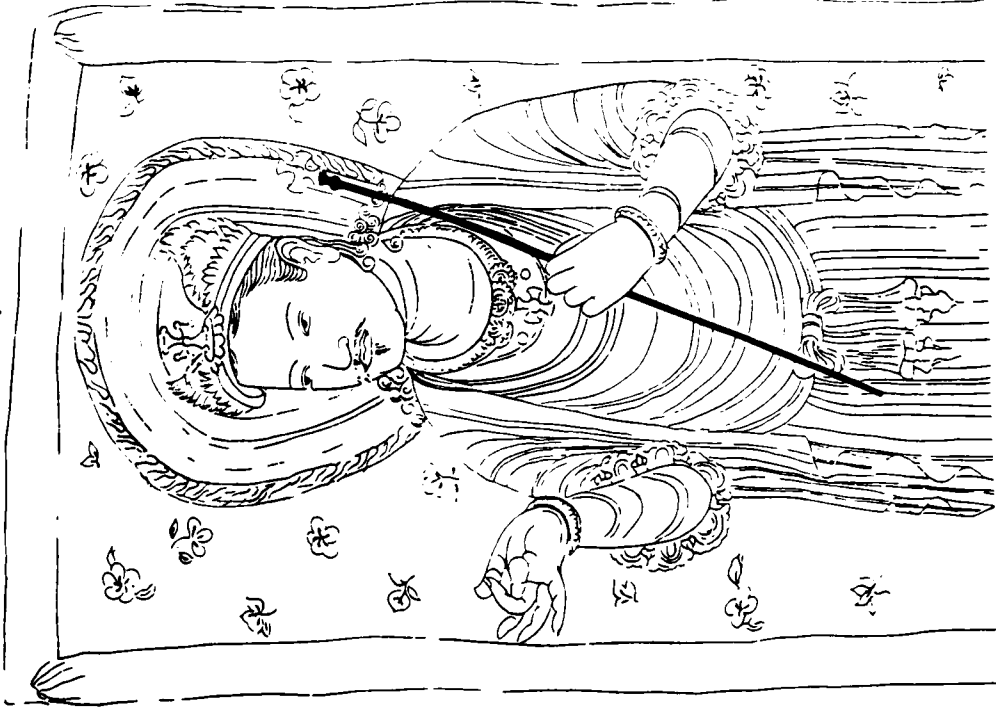


Figure 7

(b) Reconstruction of a Fragment of a Christian Figure. Tun-huang, 9th century.



Figure 8
Fragment of a Christian Figure. Cave 17, Tun-huang. T'ang Dynasty,
9th century.



Figure 9

(a) Palm Sunday (?). Wall painting from the Christian Church at Qočo. Tang Dynasty, late 9th century.



Figure 9

(b) Female Figure. Wall Painting from the Christian Church at Qoço. T'ang Dynasty, late 9th century.

Figure 9

(a) Palm Sunday (?). 60cm × 62cm. (b) Female Figure. 40cm × 21cm. Wall paintings from the Christian church at Qočo. T'ang dynasty, late 9th century. (Staatliche Museen, Berlin.)

References:

Along the ancient silk routes: Central Asian Art from the West Berlin State Museums (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1982), pl. 95.

M. Bussagli, *Central Asian painting* (London: Macmillan 1978), 111–14.

T. Talbot Rice, *Ancient arts of Central Asia* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1965), 202.

P.Y. Saeki, *The Nestorian documents and relics in China*, 417–18.

A. von le Coq, *Buried treasures of Chinese Turkestan* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1928), 78, pl. 9.

It would seem that some kind of religious event is being enacted in Figure 9a. The figure on the left appears to be a deacon holding a small bowl in his right hand, and an incense burner in his left, from which smoke rises. He is dressed in a white vestment with a green collar and trim over which he wears a shorter garment of white with green cuffs. The Ch'ang-an inscription speaks of 'white-robed followers of the illustrious religion' (see Saeki, *Nestorian monument*, 172 n. 86), while the *electi* in Manichean illuminations are robed in white (see *Along the ancient silk routes*, pls 114–15). This garment is not dissimilar to that worn by the Christian figure from Tun-huang in Figure 8. Presumably this garment is a kind of deaconal stole, although there is considerable confusion over the names of East Syrian liturgical vestments (see J.-M. Fiey, 'Les signes distinctifs anciens des prélates syriaques orientaux', *Mélanges Antoine Guillaumont* (Geneva: 1988), 287–98). The three figures approaching from the right, two men and a woman, are carrying what might be palm branches. The Western features of the deacon, thick black hair and aquiline nose, are echoed in the face of the male figure standing nearest to him. These two are distinct from the more indigenous-looking couple to the right.

The three worshippers may be compared with the figures of Uighur princes and princesses holding flowers or branches in the Buddhist cave paintings at Bāzāklik, near Turfan (see Bussagli, *Central Asian painting*, 106–7; Klimkeit, *Manichaeism art and calligraphy*, pl. IX). The two men are wearing similar hats and coats

with wide revers, hung round the shoulders like capes. The long sleeves of the coats hang empty and they hold their branches in one hand from within their coats. The female figure by contrast holds her branch with fingers together in an offering gesture (*añjali-mudrā*). The heads of all three are slightly bowed as if waiting to receive the blessing of the deacon. The coats of the two men can be seen in other artefacts from the T'ang period (see the figures illustrated in Mahler, *The Westerners among the figurines of the T'ang dynasty*, pls XIIa-b). The horse's hoof visible at the top of the scene is part of the fresco of a horse and rider shown in Figure 7a.

Figure 9b is another painting from the Christian church at Qočo showing a female figure with long plaits. Her hands are concealed in the wide sleeves of her outer garment and she wears shoes with turned-up toes. The outer garment is reddish brown in colour over a whitish lower garment which reaches to the floor. This figure is similar in style to the female worshipper in Figure 9a.