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Nestorian remains of Inner Mongolia : discovery, reconstruction and appropriation

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CONCLUSION

In this study I have examined the Nestorian presence in Inner Mongolia during the build up of the Mongol rule and the Yuan dynasty. I started by introducing a number of medieval sources, both western and eastern, regarding the Christian presence in the Far East.

The western sources initially detailed of an imaginary Christian king in the Far East popularized as Prester John. Subsequent visits of western envoys, missionaries and merchants, however, did confirm an actual Nestorian presence in the Far East. These sources provide in the first place context to the Nestorian material culture found in Inner Mongolia.

The Nestorian Church of the East first reached China and the Far East under the Tang dynasty but the terms associated with the Tang church are not useful or appropriate for a discussion on Nestorian Christianity under the Mongols. I am aware that the same can be said for the traditional terms 'Nestorian' or 'Nestorianism' but due to the lack of a better term I have chosen to maintain the traditional terminology where 'Church of the East' would be too cumbersome.

I have limited myself to the study of the Nestorian presence in Damaoqi and Siziwangqi, two banners north of the Daqingshan mountains in present Inner Mongolia. During the Mongol period the main Nestorian people in this region were the Öngöt, a people of Turkic origin. One of the rulers, King George, deserves special mention for he is referred to in both eastern and western sources and well known for the building of both Nestorian and Roman Catholic churches.

The Öngöt rulers were closely allied to the Mongol court and their rulers favored Nestorian Christianity over other religions. That said, the steppe peoples were not adverse to practicing a variety of religions at the same time. Although the Nestorian Öngöt lived at considerable distance from the centre of the Church of the East in Baghdad they were theoretically part of a pragmatic church structure that organized church affairs in the Far East. The functioning of this structure was allowed by the Mongol rulers who practiced a pragmatic policy that tolerated all faiths as long as they did not rival the Mongol rule.

The presence of Nestorian Christians in Inner Mongolia was again confirmed by the discovery of a great number of gravestones and settlements along the Shara Muren and Aibagh-in Gol rivers. The discoveries were made from the 1920s onwards when different foreign expeditions explored Inner Mongolia. These early explorers documented a great number of Nestorian remains, including ruins, gravesites and isolated gravestones. As much of this material no longer exists, the early documentation is frequently the only source for the study of this material and the Nestorian culture in Inner Mongolia.

Unlike the early foreign researchers, Chinese archaeologists were able to excavate the Nestorian sites from 1949 onwards. They thus unearthed a large number of extremely valuable Nestorian steles and other objects. At the turn of the twenty-first century foreign researchers, including the present author, regained access to the field. The present author documented both material culture of the Nestorian Öngöt as well as the oral history regarding these remains.

The material culture documented and examined in this study consists of Nestorian remains from Öngöt settlements and gravesites. The Öngöt lived in walled cities along major caravan routes. Inside one of these settlements now known as Olon Sume, remains of a Nestorian church and, possibly, a Roman Catholic cathedral have been found. If the latter is indeed Roman Catholic, the city was at some point most probably ruled by King George. Attempts are also made by the present author to identify Öngöt cities in the field.

The bulk of the Nestorian material described in this study originates from gravesites. Most of these sites have been looted and the documented material frequently lacks any context. It is nevertheless possible to study the Nestorian culture of the Öngöt from these isolated objects.

The Nestorian Christians in Inner Mongolia used a variety of graves including rock-graves, graves with horizontal gravestones, graves with tomb sculptures and graves with pillars. Steles and gravestones frequently depict crosses rising from lotus flowers and symbols taken from a variety of faiths and cultures. A number of these grave monuments and steles depict multiple inscriptions in different languages and scripts. Inscriptions are written in Syriac, Uighur and Chinese languages and scripts. Inscriptions in the Syriac language, the liturgical language of the Church of the East, are few and limited to standard invocations indicating that Syriac was not widely used among the Nestorian Öngöt. No inscriptions in the Mongol language have been found, illustrating the origins of the Öngöt as a Turkic rather than Mongol people.

The iconography and inscriptions are further examined as expressions of four dimensions that help to shed light on the religious, political, geographical and ethnic realities of the Nestorian Öngöt. Also, attempts are made to reveal how the material culture of the Nestorian Öngöt developed over time. Although the number of

objects is too small to come to definite conclusions, the Nestorian material culture seems to have absorbed local influences at the expense of its more traditional characteristics.

Finally, this study examines the appropriation of the Nestorian heritage by different groups of peoples in Inner Mongolia. Among these groups are settlers who re-used the material for building purposes, looters who collected material for the antiques market, herders who appropriated the Öngöt culture in their story telling and ceremonial practices, missionaries who utilized the Nestorian past for evangelical purposes and researchers who documented or collected the material for further study. Appropriation, in other words has caused the disappearance as well as the preservation of the material culture of the Nestorian Öngöt. Although I regret the destructive appropriation of Nestorian heritage, this has not guided the discussion. I have simply attempted to distinguish the different forms of appropriation and to explain their functioning.

It must be pointed out, however, that the material culture of the Öngöt is disappearing at a speed not encountered before and that the documentation and publication of the Öngöt heritage has now become urgent. I have therefore included a great number of plates and appendices in this study which in some instances contain the only documentation available of the Nestorian objects that have been lost.