



## NESTORIAN CHRISTIANS IN FRONTIER HISTORY

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### Abstract

Nestorianism is the Christian doctrine that Jesus existed as two characters, the man and the divine or Son of God. Nestorios, the patriarch of Constantinople taught that thesis in the churches, but the synod of Ephesus in 431 declared it as a heretical teaching and exiled Nestorius and his followers from the Byzantine Empire. They established a new church and began to preach the new doctrine along the Silk Road. Gradually reached Central Asia and China, where the emperors supported them and gave privileges, moreover contributed to build churches there. Several relics can be found in China. From Central Asia they arrived in the Mongolian steppe, where lots of small kingdoms – Kereits, Naimans, Onguts, etc- existed. The new faith spread there quickly, thanks to miracles or missionaries with advanced astronomical and medical knowledge. Not only Syrians, but local Christians, e.g. Uighurs or Sogdians preached Christianity around Jungar Basin. For the first time they used Syrian as an ecclesial script, then introduced Uighur scripts, which was widely accepted writing system in the eastern part of the Silk Road. In my present study, based on early records, I have summarized the history of the peoples of Nestorian religion, referring to the Christian roots. Although these kingdoms were defeated by Genghis Khan in the beginning of the 13th century, but their cultural heritage survived them, the Mongolian Empire accepted the Uighur script as official writing system for chancellery and some princess from those kingdoms became queens of Mongols and supported Christians and contributed that kind of Christianity survived for a long time in Inner Asia.

### Keywords

Nestorian Christianity; mongols; kereits; onguts; olan sume; Silk Road; Yellow route



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## ХРИСТИАНЕ-НЕСТОРИАНЦЫ ВО ФРОНТИРНОЙ ИСТОРИИ

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### Аннотация

Несторианство – это христианское учение о том, что Иисус существовал как два персонажа: человек и Сын Божий. Несторий, патриарх Константинопольский, проповедовал этот тезис в церкви, пока Ефесский синод в 431 году не назвал это ересью и не выслал Нестора и его последователей из Византийской империи. Они основали новую церковь и начали проповедовать новое учение вдоль Шелкового пути. Постепенно несторианство достигло Средней Азии и Китая, где императоры поддерживали их, предоставляя различные привилегии, и даже помогали строительству там церквей. В результате Китае можно найти несколько реликвий, связанных с несторианской церковью. Из Средней Азии последователи Нестория прибыли в Монгольскую степь, где существовало множество небольших царств – керейты, найманы, онгуты и т.д.

Новая вера быстро распространилась там благодаря чудесам и миссионерам, обладавшим передовыми астрономическими и медицинскими знаниями. Не только сирийцы, но и местные христиане, например, уйгуры или согдийцы, проповедовали христианство в районе Джунгарского бассейна. Первоначально в качестве церковной использовалась сирийская письменность, затем ввели уйгурскую письменность, которая была широко распространена в восточной части Шелкового пути. В своем настоящем исследовании, основанном на ранних источниках, автор подводит итоги истории народов, исповедовавших несторианство, делая акцент на их христианские корни. Хотя позднее, в начале XIII в. царства эти были разгромлены Чингиз-ханом, культурное наследие этих народов сохранилось. Монгольская империя приняла уйгурское письмо в качестве официальной системы письма для делопроизводства, а некоторые принцессы из этих народов, ставшие царицами монголов, продолжали поддерживать христиан, что способствовало сохранению несторианства во Внутренней Азии в течение длительного периода времени

### Ключевые слова

Несторианское христианство; монголы; керейты; онгуты; Олан-Суме; Шёлковый путь; Желтый путь



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## INTRODUCTION

The Nestorian teaching is the ancient Christian system of beliefs that was declared heretic by the Christian Synod on the Ephesian Council in 431. The foundation of the Nestorian religion is linked to Nestorios, former Patriarch of Constantinople, who in his preaching proclaimed the dual nature of Jesus, but denied the divinity of Mary. After the Council in 431, the patriarch and his followers were persecuted in the entire East Roman Empire, so Nestorian believers fled to the East and founded communities in towns along the Silk Road. Finally they settled down along the frontier zone of the Silk Road and spread ancient knowledge of science to the Mongolian people.

On the way to Inner Asia, they lingered in the famous metropolis, Samarkand, which due to their proselitic activity became a Nestorian bishopric in the 6th century. One missionary, Olopen, reached China and presented Nestorian teaching at the Tang court in 636 AD<sup>1</sup>. The Chinese Emperor allowed Olopen to preach in China and to build churches and monasteries all over the Empire. Some of those cloisters were constructed with the financial aid of the court. One such sacred place, used by Nestorians in the 8th century, is situated near Xi'an, the ancient capital of China. The name of the church there preserved the Nestorian character: Da Qin Su, which refers to Syrians or Nestorians. Inside the tower some Christian reliefs remained in good condition, which proves used to be a church of the Nestorians (Saeki, 1937, pp. 354-389)<sup>2</sup>.

The Christian faith reached the Inner Asian Steppe inhabited by late Huns and Turkic tribes. Some of them settled down to the north of the Yellow River, reached through Jungaria the Altay Mountains, and entered some small kingdoms. Missions to this important region became significant after 845, when a decree of the Chinese emperor prohibited all foreign religions in his empire, so Nestorians had to flee northwards. They enjoyed considerable freedom there, which allowed them to preach their teaching. The Nestorians arrived among the Mongolian tribes from at least two directions: the first was the so-called „Yellow Route”, which led through the Da Qin Mountain to the Gobi; the second was the Mongolian Silk Road, which led through the Altay Mountains and reached the western part of present-day Mongolia<sup>3</sup>. Before the 13th century there was no united khanate in the territory of the former Mongolian Empire, but small khans

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<sup>1</sup> According to the decree of Emperor Tai Zong the first mission in China was founded in Chang-an. The decree states that Olopen presented dogmas of his religion and Emperor found it right, therefore Olopen was granted a permission to preach “good teachings” in China. P. Y. Saeki, *The Nestorian Documents and Relics in China* (1937, p. 453)

<sup>2</sup> I also visited this place on July 2000, where I realised that ancient name is in usage even now.

<sup>3</sup> Some scholars think the name of the mountain or Da Qin is connected with Nestorians. Uchiraltu's information.

ruled over territories. Some of them the Nestorians successfully converted to their faith.

Numerous accounts and records of Western European travellers from the 13th and 14th centuries recorded the role of the Nestorians in the Great Mongolian Empire, where they reached the peak of their influence<sup>1</sup>. For a long time, the history of Christian conversion amongst the Inner-Asian horsemen were not an important area of researchers. However, the number of publications in this regard has increased in recent years (Halbertsma, 2009) (Osawa & Hidemi, 2015), but we still have scattered information of role of the ancient Nestorian Christianity prior to the Mongolian Empire. Western scholars found some Nestorian relics during their fieldwork. Chinese archaeologists collected lots of items in the former kingdom of Onguts - they have been taken to a museum and displayed in permanent exhibitions<sup>2</sup>. Numerous crosses – the so called Ordos bronze crosses - have been found from the Ordos, mainly from ancient city of Tongwancheng, and even a section of the wall that is connected with ancient Christians was excavated by local researchers<sup>3</sup>. In Altai mountains Mongolian archaeologists discovered a Syriac inscription, that could be connected to the Naiman Kingdom. All these can be considered strong evidence of the existence of the Nestorian Christian faith in the region.

In the centuries prior to the formation of the Mongolian Empire in 1206, the vast wilderness from Lake Baikal to the Great Wall of China was ruled by several khans. In 744-745 the Turkic empire was occupied by the Uyghurs, who were then conquered by the Kyrgyzes in 840 and then in the middle of the 10th century the pre-Mongolian Khitans took possession of today's Mongolia, certain parts of Inner Mongolia and Manchuria. Ch. Dalai, a Mongolian academic – based on Chinese sources – believed that the Hamag Mongols (from whom Genghis Khan originated) by the beginning of the 11th century had already subdued Khitans at conquered the eastern parts of Mongolia. In my present study, based on early records, I have summarized the history of the peoples of Nestorian religion with Christian roots.

<sup>1</sup> Wilhelmus Rubruc, Plano Carpini, etc many envoys and travellers reported the significant role of Nestorians at the Mongolian court.

<sup>2</sup> We can find them in some museums in Inner Mongolian Autonomous Province. The biggest museum is Inner Mongolian Provincial Museum, which is located in Hohhot.

<sup>3</sup> Erkhsechen's information. He is the leader of White Temple in Uushin county, Ordos, Chia.



## THE KEREITS

The Kereits founded an important state in the 12th century on the territory of today's Mongolia. Their original residence was probably at the upper tract of the Yenisei River and the Kem River. Then from there in about the middle of the 9th century they migrated to the South and extended their supremacy over the territory from the river Selenge to the upper tract of the river Tola (Berezin, 1946, p. 60). Allegedly, at the beginning of the 11th century they set up twenty tumens (tumen means 10.000 men). The principality was formed as an alliance of five leading tribes, led by the Togorin tribe. Their Khan was called Gür Khan, which means Supreme Khan. In the later Mongolian, Persian, and Arabic sources the names of some Kereit rulers were preserved: according to Rashid-ad-Din, the first significant ruler was Buyuruk Marcus, who killed the Khitay regent and took control of the tribes living there. The center of the khanate was Orta-Balgasun, located in the center of the old nomadic empires around the Orkhon River, but their territory stretched to the eastern rim of the Gobi.

In 1949 Russian archaeologists led by Kiselyev conducted an excavation in Karakorum, the former Mongolian capital. The archaeologists while excavating a part of the palace of Ogodei Khan found also some buildings from the 11th-12th century. Based on the analysis of the excavated items the Russian archaeologist claimed that before the Mongols there was a palace of Tooril Khan at this place (Perlee, 1961, p. 73). The Mongolian archaeologist H. Perlee assumed that the headquarters of the Kereit khan was in the place of the former Uyghur city or possibly near it (1961, p. 74). The chronicler of the Mongolian Ilkhans has also recorded that Christian missionaries appeared in the center of the old Kereit tribe alliance, and their mission was so successful that the Khan's court was converted to Christianity (Berezin, 1946, p. 61). The names of the leaders reflect a Christian influence: the name of one khan was Marcus. After his death, one Sarig was elected the Khan, and then Khurchakhus reigned, who was the son of Marcus and the son-in-law of Sarig Khan. The name Khurchakhus is given as Kuryacus by Rasid-ad-Din, derived evidently from Kūriakus.

From the middle of the 12th century the unity of the Kereits was broken because a battle for the throne broke out between the descendants of Buyruk Khan. Peace was restored after the introduction of the sequence to the throne by Kurchakus. After the death of the Khan, there was again controversy as to whom the supremacy should belong. The rightful heir, Tooril Khan, was forced to go into hiding because his brother had pushed

him off the throne and wanted to kill him. The expelled Khan could only retrieve his throne with the help of an allied Mongolian Khamag tribe led by Jesugej Bator who was the father of Genghis Khan. Regarding the conversion of the Kereits, there was a medieval Syrian reference to it. The chronicle of Bar Hebraeus describes the reasons why the Christian faith was picked up by the Inner-Turk Prince Kereyth and his people. The source describes the miraculous conversion of the prince: “At the time, the metropolitan of Merv town of Khorasan Abhd-Iso sent a delegate to John the Second saying: „When Kereyth, the king of the Inner-Turk country, who lives in the northeast in the high mountains of his country, came to a snow-covered place and lost his way, he was wandering around restlessly. When he gave up all hope, a saint appeared and said: if you believe in Christ, I will lead you out of here, and you will not die”. When the king returned to his quarters, he summoned the Christian traders from nearby and asked them about their beliefs. They said to him that one can only become a Christian through baptism. The king accepted from them the Holy Scripture. Now he has sent me to you with the request to send him a priest who would baptize him.” (Budge, 1928, p. 35).

In addition to the miraculous conversion, there are two important pieces of information in the source. One of them is that the Kereits belonged to the metropolitan church administration of Merv. The other one is that Christian Nestorian merchants were already working in the Kereit court back in the 10th century. According to Rashid-ad-Din, Christianity was not only the religion of the court, but the majority of the people hold Christian beliefs. In the “Secret History of the Mongols” written in the middle of the 13th century, in relation to Ong Khan – who wanted to join them- there is a geographical term called „dersüt” that refers to Christians, Tarsia is named as a land of Christians in Central Asia.

The Kereits were defeated by Genghis Khan in 1202, and the Kereit people were scattered among the Mongolian tribes. Genghis Khan though married his sons to the daughters of the ruling clan, who not only kept their Christian beliefs, but their offsprings, prospective khans and generals were also taught by Christian teachers. In this way, the Nestorians preserved their influence in the emerging world realm. Tooril Khan's daughter was first married to the Merkit Toktoa-beki, and after the defeat of the Merkits, the woman came into the hands of Genghis Khan, who married her to his grandson Kublai. The other daughter of Ong Khan, Dokuz Khatun, was married to Tolui, then the woman was given to his son Hülegü. He was the one who saved the lives of Christians in the battle of Baghdad.



The brother of Ong Khan had four daughters: Ibagi beki was given to Genghis Khan, Begtumis to Fūjin Jochi, Sorkaktani Beki to Tolui and the fourth daughter was married to Donguts Khan. Among them Beki Sorkaktani played a prominent role in Mongolian history. She became Tolui's chief wife and gave birth to three great Mongolian Khaans of the 13th century. Her influence was very great within the empire and the court and she was a supporter of the Nestorians. Under her protection the Nestorians not only led the state secretariat, but they were chosen as teachers of the later Great Khans. Mongolians deeply respect Sorkhaktani Beki. They have a Mongolian tent inside Genghis' symbolic mausoleum in Ordos, where women come and pray for fertility and children. She was given a name of respect, „Eshi Khatun” or Great Queen, who helps her people<sup>1</sup>. According to Professor Uchiraltu, some Nestorian churches remained in the Mongolian Steppe, where the religion was practiced. The Mongolian professor mentioned some ruins of an ancient Christian sanctuary in Shilin Gol province, Shuluun Tsagan District to where Mongolians came and prayed to the famous queen.<sup>2</sup>

Nestorian doctors operated among the Kereits just like they did in other countries. “The Secret History of the Mongols” preserved an interesting story about this. Ong Khan had no children for a long time, so he asked the doctors for help. Presumably, Nestorian physicians helped the Khan's wife to have children. The chronicle remembers: "Achin-Sirun said: Khan, Khan leave me! You wanted a boy, who has not yet come: with a charm, a magic spell, chanting abuy-babuy and a prayer let's implore for him." (Rachewiltz, 2015, p. 174). The phrase „abuy-babuy” in this quote is not known in Mongolian language, nor in the language of the surrounding Uyghurs. For this reason researchers believe that it was probably a Syrian spell that was so widespread amongst the Kereits that even a Mongolian chronicler recorded it.

## THE NAIMANS

On the territory of today's Mongolia there was another major kingdom called Naiman, whose territory lay near the Altai Mountains. According to Rashid-ad-Din, they populated the wilderness: some lived in the mountains, while others lived on the plains. According to the Persian author, their kingdom was between the Altai Mountains and Karakorum. In the east, the

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<sup>1</sup> Nachug's information, He is the director of Ejen Khoroo Chingis khan's Museum, Ordos. He guided us on 21 August, 2011. Ejen Khoroo, Ordos, China

<sup>2</sup> He is a linguist of the Inner Mongolian Universtiy, Hohhot. We took a trip to Ordos along with Chagdarsuren, film producer. When we visited Sorkhakhtani beli's yurt in Ejen Khoroo, Uchiraltu shared this valuable information. 21 August, 2011.

Kereits were their neighbours, in the west the Kharluks, in the southwest the Uyghurs and in the south the Oyirat people, the Ongut and the Tangut tribes. The first records on the Naimans were written by the Chinese in the 9th century. According to these records the Naimans lived near the Altai Mountains at the time. For a short period of time, they were under the Chinese authority. In the 12th century they formed their own independent principality, and they had alliance relationship with the Uyghurs who lived in the Tarim Basin and with the Jurchin (the future founders of the Chinese-Manchu Jin Dynasty), which dominated Northern China. Many Uyghurs lived among the Naimans. This was perhaps due to the geographical proximity but also due to the proximity of the so-called "Mongolian Silk Road" through which the commercial commodities and intellectual currents travelled from Jungaria to the Mongolian territories, and then into Siberia.

The first khan of the Naimans was called Kūchūlüg. At the beginning of the 12th century Bilge Bögü khan was ruling and after his death, two of his sons, Buyruk and Tayang, inherited the throne, but a war broke out between them and as a result of the war the Naiman alliance fell into two parts. The Naimans were also Nestorian Christians. The influence of the Uyghurs nearby was so strong that they made the Uyghur script the official written language of their chancellery.

The great khan entrusted the Kereit and Naiman literates to manage the Imperial Chancellery of Mongolia. He recognized the importance of using the writing, that's why he introduced Uyghur writing for Mongolians, which had already been successfully applied to the Mongolian language by Naimans before (2015, p. 196).<sup>1</sup> The main evidence for this is the record of "The Secret History of Mongols" composed by the 13<sup>th</sup> century. It mentioned that the writing consisted of the characters of the court seal found at Naiman Tatatonga (p. 196). Other important evidence is a letter of an anonymous Hungarian bishop to a French bishop about the Mongolians. According to this, "... (the Mongols) use the letters of the Uyghurs, because they had had no alphabet before. I asked who taught them that. They answered that pale-faced people, who fast a lot, wore long dresses and did not hurt anybody" (Katona, 1981, p. 289)<sup>2</sup>. It is very possible that these pale-faced teachers were Nestorians.

In the territory of the former Naiman principality, i.e. in the Mönkh Khayrkhan district in the Hovd County in Ulaan Tolgoy, in 1989, Russian and Mongolian archaeologists found a rock inscription engraved with two

<sup>1</sup> According to the record, Tata Tunga, az Uyghur officer, who served in the Naiman Kingdom. It is possible, that Uyghurs themselves introduced their writing to the Naiman Chancellery.

<sup>2</sup> Letter of the Hungarian bishop to Guillaume d' Auvergne Bishop of Paris.





interesting Syrian writings. At the end of one of these engravings year 1409 is written. Judging by what we know of the other Nestorian dating methods in Middle Asia, it is likely that this date is written according to the Seleucida system of year numbering<sup>1</sup>, which would mean year 1098 AD. This inscription is important because it proves that at the end of the 12th century, the Nestorian faith was already a widespread religion amongst the Naimans. One of the two inscriptions is an epitaph and the other is a quotation from the Lord's Supper<sup>2</sup>.

Syrian writings were also found in the caves of Dunhuang, so the mission probably reached the Naimans from the Silk Road. The people who lived near the mountainous region had a writing system and they used seals. The sources on the Naimans are very brief, as they were in hostile relations with Genghis Khan from the very start. "The Secret History of the Mongols" provides only minimal information about them, including the names of two former Naiman residence centres. One of them, Didik-sakal, was probably at the northern border of the Gobi, and the other was a town called Isak at the borders of the Tanguts' territory where the son of Ong Khan stopped during his flight. In the former Naiman territory, in today's Bajan Ölgii County in Mongolia there is a statue of Dayan Bator, which is nothing more than a Turc stone idol wearing a bird-shaped amulet around his neck. It is curious that the face of the statue does not resemble the other statues anthropologically. Historian Yu. Boldbaatar believes that the statue must have been modelled after someone from a distant western country, as the idol has moustache, and does not hold a sacrificial cup in his hands, which was the usual representation of Turkic statues (Boldbaatar, 2003, pp. 103-111). This point of view is backed by Mongolian archaeologist Ser-Odjav, who said in the 1960s that the amulet hanging around the neck of the idol was Nestoria. Another Mongolian archaeologist questions the above allegation, arguing that it symbolizes the ancestor of the Turkic and Mongolian peoples. Other scholars did not agree with these two scholars' point of view.

## **THE PEOPLES OF THE GOBI**

The Hongirat kingdom in the eastern part of the Gobi and the western side of the great Khingan Mountain was also a major principality. The researchers believe that the locals were influenced by the Nestorians' faith, which is likely to have been transmitted to them by the Onguts. One of the

<sup>1</sup> The Seleucida timeline begins at 312 BC. Other expression of it "year of Greeks".

<sup>2</sup> Janos Harmatta read the inscription in 2004, but he died before publishing his work. Takashi Osawa published his reading in 2015.

branches of the Hongirates was the Olkonuts who were in war with the clan of Genghis Khan, so it is probable that the Great Khan could have been aware of the Christian teachings at some level. There is an opinion that in the territory of the old Uyghur Empire early Manichean and Christian elements did not disappear without a trace. There are also some such elements in the history of Genghis Khan's predecessors.

The Mongolian historian Sh. Bira points out that according to "The Secret History of the Mongols" the ancestor of the first Mongolian khan Bodonchar, originated from a heavenly ray of light. The legend says that the "ancestress" of the Genghis Khan clan, Alan-Koa, was impregnated by a beam of light, not by a totem animal. The source says the following: "Every night a yellowish-white man came in my yurt through the roof ring, stroking with light my belly and the light beam penetrated into my uterus. When he left, he departed creeping on the ray of the sun and moon, like a golden dog." (Rachewiltz, 2015, p. 21). Bira claims that the origin from the light suggests that among the peoples of the Mongolian plane, after the Uyghur age, some elements of Mani's faith could have survived. The "adoption" of the light phenomenon from the Uyghurs can be also justified on the basis of the legend about Uyghur origin in Juvaini. The source says: "At the place where the two rivers of Karakorum, the Tola and the Selenge intertwine, at a place called Kamlanchu, between two rivers stood two trees... In between the two trees a big hill rose, light came down from the sky and the hill was growing bigger and bigger every day. Seeing this, the Uyghur tribes were captivated and they approached the hill with respect and admiration. ... Every night light was flooding through 30 steps around the hill. It lasted for a period of time, while pregnant women were giving birth. Then a door opened and inside there were five cells visible similar to five separate tents, in each of which sat one child. From each child's mouth a pipe hung, which gave milk." (Boyle, 1958, p. 55). The two legends tell a similar story: the children are not born to human parents and not from totems, but originate directly from light, and the mother, Alan Koa, says: "They are the sons of the Sky." It is not certain if the story referring to the ancient sun cult would be a foreign adoption, but they are possibly related to the cult of the Sky i.e. of Tengri.

The fourth Mongolian-speaking people with Christian faith were the Onguts who lived in the southern part of the Gobi. Most of them probably fled to Ordos, i.e. to the south. They were the descendants of the so-called Sha-Tou Turks who did not return to their homeland in Mongolia even after the reestablishment of the Turkic Empire in the 8th century. There is limited data on their origin. The sources say only that they originally lived near Bei-Ding settlement. According to a 14th century genealogical chart



from Olan Sume they were the descendants of the Sha-Tuo Turk (Saeki, 1937, p. 491)<sup>1</sup>. They came under Uyghur supremacy in 789, and in the next year, the Tibetans occupied their territory. Allegedly, around 6000 families lived in that area. In 808, the Turks asked the Chinese for assistance against the western invaders, and the Chinese settled them in the Ordos. A small part of the Turks appeared in the northern part of present Shanxi province (Egami, 2000, p. 13). This is partly due to the fact that they lived close to the border with China and that some of them led a settled life. On the other hand, the Onguts survived because by the end of 12th century tribal wars their leader joined Genghis Khan and hence received the right to marry from the Khagan family. Unfortunately it wasn't so with the other former Nestorian tribes (Kereit, Naiman). They allied against Genghis Khan and were dismantled amongst the other Mongolian tribes by the victor. Just before the foundation of the Genghis Khan Empire, the Onguts served as border guards for the Jin dynasty of Jurchen, for which they received regular allowances. According to Yuan-shi, the Chinese dynastic yearbook recording the history of the Mongols, the Onguts also known as white Tatars originally lived in the Gansu province, but on the order of a Jin emperor they moved to the Mongolian borderland at the beginning of the 12th century. According to the source, four thousand families lived there, led by Alakushh Tegin. The centre of his winter residence was situated near the settlement called Togtoh by the Yellow River.<sup>2</sup> His summer residence, Olan Sume, was in the middle part of the Gobi, where nine Christian churches were built on the northern branch of the Silk Road, at the caravan road leading to Karakorum.

Many of the these tribe alliances with Christian faith were allied with each other. The Onguts living in Gobi had martial relationship with the Naiman after Tayang Khan had taken a wife from them. The Onguts got wives from the Kereit khan's family. In addition, they built strong relations with the Hongirat tribe who lived in the Gobi. Börte, the wife of Genghis Khan was also from the Hongirat tribe. The Kereits, the Naimans, and even the Onguts were in close contact with the Hun descendant Tangut people living in the Ordos, some of whom were Christians. The Onguts have disregarded the old allied relationship and their khan at the time: Alakushdigit Kuri did not support the Naiman Tayang khan, but offered alliance to the upcoming Genghis Khan (Rachewiltz, 2015, p. 190). In return for this, after the formation of the Great Mongolian Empire in 1206, the Onguts khans were able to marry the princesses of Genghisid, their rulers could continue holding their titles and territories, as regents of the Great Khan.

<sup>1</sup> Yuan-shi or history of the Mongolian dynasty Yuan.

<sup>2</sup> Today Inner Mongolia, China. It is located southward to Hohhot.

According to epitaphs found in and around the Ongut capital Olan Sume, Alakushh Tegin-Kuri succeeded the khan allied with Genghis Khan in the 13th century. He was then succeeded by Bojaohai, and then by his eldest son Aybuka. At the end of the 13th century, a khan called Georgios was referred to as Kōrgüz in contemporary Persian sources ascended the throne. He is actually King George in Marco Polo's book. He was the lord of Onguts territories, the regent of the Great Khan. George was followed by John i.e. Yukunan, who was a child when he came to the throne. He converted to Catholic faith under the influence of Montecorvino. He died at a young age. His cousin A-la-hu-Tu was his successor, he returned to the Nestorian faith. It is known from the sources that his son, Ma-cha-han still had Nestorian faith in 1334.

Out of all the Nestorian peoples, we have the broadest knowledge on the medieval Ongut lifestyle, material and spiritual culture as many artefacts were found by Japanese archaeologists in their capital Olan Sume. The thorough exploration of Olan Sume took place in 1929, when a Chinese scientist Huang Wenbi who had previously collaborated with Sven Hedin in Sweden, found a ruin town in the southern part of Gobi, in today's Ulanxab province near the town of Bailingmiao. Huang believed that he found a walled city from the Yuan period. Four years later American orientalist Owen Lattimore identified the place as a Nestorian centre judging by the scattered gravestones with a cross on their site. The new theory came into existence in 1935, when the Japanese archaeologist Namio Egami performed archaeological excavations on the site and stated that the settlement Olan Sume could have been the former centre of the Onguts principality (Egami, 2000). Halbertsma was also involved in the gathering of Nestorian artifacts. In addition to the old, already known artifacts, he found new ones and described them in his work (Halbertsma, 2009).

The coins found on the premises of the former monastery showed that the settlement had been inhabited since the Tang period (7th-9th century). Archaeological findings also show that the city was inhabited continuously until the time of the Ming dynasty (Egami, 2000). Through excavations, it is also known that Olan Sume was built according to traditional Eastern building principles: it was surrounded by walls and a gate was built for each point of the compass. The wall protecting the city was 970 meters long in the north and 582 meters wide in the west. The length of the walls exceeded two meters. The main gate – in line with the Mongolian tradition – was on the south side. The settlement had double protection: in addition to the external walls, the palace and library of the Ongut rulers were protected with an internal defence ring. The palace was built with the similar



architectural elements as the Yuan-era palace in Shangdu. The Ongut ruler built palaces in Chinese style, and the decoration of the palace consisted of peculiarly mixed elements. The decoration was mainly from the Song-era as well as from decoration elements from the 9th-10th century. The library was to the northwest from the main palace.

In the outer area of the centre, the Christian temples were built in between the two walls. In the northeast part of the city's external defence ring, we find the ruins of a unique building: at the end of the 13th century here stood the Gothic-style Roman Christian church as per the dreams of the missionary Giovanni Montecorvino. Japanese archaeologists explored its floor plan and some of its decorative elements. According to some assumptions, Olan Sume has lost its previous significance due to a fire at the end of the Yuan era. This theory corresponds with the statement of Egami, who assumed that after the late Yuan period there was neither money nor any other finding in the area, which suggests that its inhabitants left the settlement. Local residents did not rebuilt it, but only a Buddhist altar was placed in the place of the ruins in the 16th century. As trade routes moved to the west from there, the region lost its former significance. The memory of old Christianity has faded over the centuries.

The enormous size of the city suggests that it was a significant commercial and religious center, which is no wonder, since the northern branch of the Silk Road was here, which brought foreign goods to the Mongolian countryside. Orientalists called these roads across the Gobi "yellow journey". The passage across Olan Sume went north of today's Hohhot, through the mountain Yin-Shan, which is also known as Da Qin Mountain. The latter name may refer to the Nestorians living there. Along the way, with small detours, a number of Nestorian relics were found, including cemeteries and the remains of urban settlements, whose inhabitants were Christian<sup>1</sup>. In the vicinity of the vast city, several other Nestorian relics were found during the excavation and terrain visits of Desmond Martin. A stone stele with a Syrian inscription and a cross was found in Bichik Yellag. Not far from this site, in the area of Ulan Baising, the remains of an old town were found with some clerks' tombs. In Wangmu, stones similar to the one in Bichik Yellag were found. These are four stones with crosses and Syrian inscription.

The other site, Boro Baising could be the administration centre for Onguts, it lies halfway between Hohhot and Olan Sume. It was one branch of the Silk Road, which connected Ordos to Mongolia and beyond, Siberia. Another site, Munkhor Suburgan, also served as an administrative centre, but it was smaller than Boro Baishing. Although archaeologists found lots

<sup>1</sup> Da qin was the name of Syria or Roman Empire. However, it may another meaning, also.

of graves near Boro Baishing, the later site had only two steles and crosses (Martin, 1937, pp. 234-249).

Elements of the Christian faith also existed among Merkit tribes, who lived in the area of Lake Baikal. According to the sinologist F. W. Mote (1999, p. 407), these people were converted to Christianity under the influence of the Uyghur, who reached the area for trade. Mingana referring to the letter of Philoxenus thinks that from the Turkic era Christian influence was present in the region: the letter recorded that one Christian king could be the leader of the tribes along Lake Baikal (Mingana, 1925). Indeed, that Merkits engaged in good relationship with the Nestorian Kereits, but later their connection stopped, and even Tooril, king of Kereits together with Genghis Khan destroyed the Merkit reign. When their troops shared the booty, they found a noble lady, Döregene, who became the wife of Genghis Khan's third son, so the Christian religion entered the new emerging dynasty (Rachewiltz, 2015, p. 198). Nicholas Poppe found evidence to this when analyzing geographical names near Lake Baikal – some of them referred to Christians in the ancient language. According to his idea River Erkhü and the name of the present Irkutsk were derived from the word Erkeüt, the well-known name for Nestorian Christians in the Mongolian period (Poppe, 1957, p. 305).

Mongolian ethnographer Badamkhatan found that clan "Erkid" of Darhat tribe in Northern Mongolian probably migrated from Buryatia during the 17-18th century, when the Russian troops occupied that area. Locals remember that their ancestors fled there because of the war. Badamkhatan considers it possible to derive their names from the Erküü River, or Ekirit Buryat (Badamhatan, 2002, p. 74) tribe, and also suggests further research to clarify the issue. Mongolian ethnographer Altanzaya presumes that name Erkid is also associated with the term "Erkeüt" which meant "Christians" in ancient Mongolian records (Altanzaya, 2001, p. 5).

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