

NEH Summer Seminar: Central Asia in World History

Final project
Sam Thomas
University School
Hunting Valley, OH
<sthomas@us.edu>

In this project, students will be asked to use a variety of primary sources to answer a central historical question: Were the Nestorians truly Christian?

The Nestorians were a heretical sect of Christianity that made its way to east Asia in the second half of the first millennium. Much of Nestorian history is obscure, but when European monks arrived in Asia in the thirteenth century they found practitioners who claimed to be Christian, although it is clear that they had incorporated elements of other religions (particularly Buddhism) into their beliefs and practice.

In order to complete this exercise, students will wrestle with a number of questions, large and small:

- How should they use evidence that is scattered across centuries and thousands of miles?
- How reliable is a given source, when it is written by someone from outside the culture he is observing?
- How can archeological artifacts be 'read'?
- What does it mean to be a Christian, and by extension, what does it mean to follow any given faith?

There are a lot of documents here, and you can pull them some of the texts out as you see fit. If you'd like an electronic copy of this packet, feel free to send me an email.

Document A: *Berkshire Encyclopedia of China*

Christianity was introduced to China during the Tang dynasty (618-907) and became widely known as “Jingjiao” (Luminous Teaching) during the Tianqi period (1625-1627) of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) after the discovery of a luminous stele (a stone pillar used for commemorative purposes). Modern scholars identify this form of Christianity as Nestorianism, one of the churches of the East led by Nestorius (386-451). Nestorius was banished in 431 for his heretical views regarding Jesus as both a man and a divine son.

Persecution for heresy forced the Nestorians toward Central and East Asia, including China...The most important historical sources have been the Nestorian Stele, five Nestorian manuscripts written in Chinese, and numerous tomb inscriptions found in Inner Mongolia and Quanzhou.

According to these sources, Nestorianism was introduced in China by Alopen in 635. At that time, acting under an imperial edict, the Nestorians first translated their scriptures into Chinese and established a church at Chang’an. After that, many Nestorians came to China either by land from Central Asia or by sea from Persia (Iran). The Nestorian stele was erected in 781, a time of relative prosperity for Chinese Nestorianism.

However, after 845 the Nestorians virtually disappeared in Chinese sources, having suffered political persecution. They fled from central China and settled in peripheral regions, especially Samarquand and Turfan. Tomb inscriptions show that Nestorianism experienced a modest revival in several regions during the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368) especially in Inner Mongolia. [The Yuan dynasty was founded by Kublai Khan, a grandson of Genghis Khan.]



Document B: Map

Document C: Nestorian Stele

In the early 17th Century near the city of Chang'an, Christian missionaries discovered a stone stele (monument) explaining Christian doctrine and the early history of the Chinese church. The stele has been dated to 781.

Thus, one of the Trinity the Messiah of the Christians, concealing his true divinity came into the world as a man. Angels declared his coming, and the Virgin gave birth to the Holy one in **Da Qin**.^{*} Seeing the splendor of a bright star indicating this auspicious moment, the Persians brought their tribute to the Holy One.

Having fulfilled the traditional laws set by twenty-four early saints, He made a great plan for families and states. He set up a new doctrine of the pure and silent spirit of the Trinity, using the right faith to cultivate morality...

In the country of Da Qin there was a great priest whose name was Raban. He carried the true scriptures and suffered extreme hardship to make his way to China and he reached the city of Chang'an in [645]...The Emperor came to a deep understanding of the true teachings of Christianity and gave an order that it should be taught in the realm. He issued an edict saying:

“There can be more than one name for the Way along which the sacred path runs; there can also be different ways to express sacredness. The Archbishop Raban traveled a great distance from Da Qin in order to present the scripture and images of the saints to my court. After learning from its doctrine, I feel the religion is beautiful, mystic, and peaceful. Its basic doctrine provides the essential teachings and there are no redundant words and all are pure truth. It is helpful to all the people and therefore should be spread to all the lands under the heaven.”

Source: Liu, Xinru. *The Silk Roads: A Brief History with Documents*. The Bedford Series in History and Culture. Boston: Bedford/St.Martins, 2012.

^{*} Da Qin is the Chinese term for the Roman Empire, though it also applied to the Byzantines.

Document D: Jesus-Messiah-Sutra

This document is the oldest of four Nestorian 'gospels' discovered in 1908. It was probably written around 635.

The Lord of Heaven incessantly going around all over the world, is constantly present everywhere.

The person of the Lord of Heaven is in brightness, joyous and peaceful, and swells in Heaven in comfort.

All the Buddhas wander here and there by virtue of this very wind, while in this world. There is no place where the wind does not reach.

Man, therefore, in extremity, will always do honor to the name of Buddha.

The Lord of Heaven, however, gives man mind and wisdom not a little.

Therefore, whoever wants to return for the charity-favor of Buddha should have a clear understanding of his own sins and wicked deeds.

If he does, he will obtain heaven, even though he may not be well versed in the teaching.

....

The Lord of Heaven therefore made **“the Cool Wind”** enter a virgin named **Mo-yen**.[†]

Hereupon, the Cool Wind entered the body of Mo-Yen in accordance with the instruction of the Lord of Heaven. Suddenly Mo-yen became pregnant. After her conception, Mo-yen gave birth to a son named I-Shu, whose father was the Cool Wind.

And when I-shu was born, all the people of the world saw bright signs in heaven and on earth.

When the Messiah got as many as the twelve disciples he proceeded to endure suffering.

[I-shu is betrayed to a great king called Pi-lo-tu-ssu (Pilate) and sentenced to death.]

They bound Him upon the tree between two highwaymen, one being on the right and the other on the left. It was at dawn that they bound Him upon the tree but by the time the sun came toward the west there was black darkness on every side and the earth quaked and the mountains were rent, and all the gates of the graves were opened and the men got life

[The document ends shortly after without any discussion of I-shu's ultimate fate.]

Source: Saeki, P.Y. “The Hsu-T'ing Mi-Shi-So Sutra Or, Jesus-Messiah-Sutra.” *Journal of the North China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 63 (1932): 31–45.

[†] “Cool Wind” refers to the Holy Spirit; Mo-Yen is Mary.

Document E: William of Rubruck (I)

A Flemish Franciscan monk, William of Rubruck (Willem van Ruysbroeck, ca. 1210-ca. 1270) wrote the most detailed and valuable of the early Western accounts of the Mongols. William had participated in the crusade of King Louis IX of France to Palestine and there heard about the Mongols. In 1253 he set out through the lands of the western part of their empire (what we know as the Golden Horde)--that is starting out through the southern steppes of what is now Ukraine and Russia.

His journey lasted the better part of three years. William had the distinction of being the first European to visit the Mongol capital of Karakorum on the Orhon River and return to write about it. He provides a unique description of the Khan's palace there and abundant detail about the individuals of various ethnicities and religions whom he encountered. Understandably, he was particularly interested in the Nestorian Christians. His describes generally with great precision Mongol traditional culture, many features of which have survived amongst the herders one may observe today in inner Asia.

There are Nestorians in fifteen cities of Cathay and they have a bishopric there in the city called **Segin**,[‡] but beyond that they are pure pagans. The pagan priests these people all wear wide **saffron-colored cowls**.[§] There are also among them certain hermits who live in forests and mountains and who are wonderful by their lives and austerity.

The Nestorians there know nothing. They say their offices, and have sacred books in Syriac, a language of which they are ignorant, so they chant like those monks among us who do not know grammar, and they are absolutely depraved. In the first place they are usurers and drunkards, and some of them who live with the Tartars have several wives like them. When they enter a church, they wash their lower parts like Saracens; they eat meat on Friday, and have their feasts on that day in Saracen fashion.

The bishop rarely visits these parts, hardly once in fifty years. When he does, they have all the male children, even those in the cradle, ordained priests, so nearly all the males among them are priests. Then they marry, which is clearly against the statutes of the Fathers, and they are bigamists, for when the first wife dies these priests take another. They are all simoniacs, for they administer no sacrament without payment.

[‡] Hsi-king, probably modern Beijing

[§] Saffron robes are typically associated with Buddhist monks.

Sources:

<https://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/texts/rubruck.html> and Dawson, Christopher, ed. *The Mongol Mission: Narratives and Letters of the Franciscan Missionaries in Mongolia and China in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries*. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1955.

Document F: William of Rubruck (II)

Then came the grand secretary, who was a Nestorian Christian, and whose advice they nearly always follow, to look at us: and he examined us carefully. Then we were told to go back to our lodgings; and, as we were going back, I saw before the east end of the **ordu**,** the distance of two crossbow shots from it, a dwelling with a little cross over it.

Greatly pleased, and imagining there was something Christian there, I boldly went in, and found an altar right beautifully decked. For there was embroidered on a cloth of gold an image of the Savior, of the Blessed Virgin, of John the Baptist and of two angels, and the lines of the body and of the garments were marked out with pearls, and there was a great silver cross with gems in the angles and the middle, and many, other church ornaments, and an oil lamp having eight lights was burning before the altar; and there was seated there an **Hermenian monk**,†† swarthy and lank, and he was dressed in a tunic of the roughest hair-cloth reaching halfway down to his shins, and over it he had a stole of black silk lined with vair, and under his hair-cloth garment he wore an iron girdle.

As soon as we entered, and even before saluting the monk, we sang on our knees: "*Ave regina coelorum*," and he arose and prayed with us. Then, having saluted him, we sat down beside him, and he had a dish with some fire in it before him. We told him the cause of our coming, and he began encouraging us greatly, telling us to speak boldly, for we were the envoys of God, who is greater than any man.

Source:

https://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/texts/rubruck.html#court_christians

** Camp.

†† Armenain?

Document G: John of Monte Corvino

Like William of Rubruck, John of Monte Corvino (1247-1328) was a Franciscan monk who travelled into east Asia. His journey came some years after William's and his impression of the Nestorians was quite different in some ways.

The Nestorians, who call themselves Christians, but behave in a very unchristian manner, have grown so strong in these parts that they did not allow any Christian of another rite to have any place of worship, however small, nor to preach any doctrine but their own. For these lands have never been reached by any apostle or disciple of the apostles and so the aforesaid Nestorians both directly and by the bribery of others have brought most grievous persecutions upon me, declaring that I was not sent by the Lord Pope, but that I was a spy, a magician, and deceiver of men.

And after some time they produced more false witnesses, saying that another messenger had been sent with a great treasure to the Emperor and that I had murdered him in India and made away with his gifts. And this intrigue lasted about five years, so that I was often brought to judgment, and in danger of a shameful death. But at last, by God's ordering, the Emperor came to know my innocence and the nature of my accusers, by the confession of some of them, and he sent them into exile with their wives and children.

Source: Dawson, Christopher, ed. *The Mongol Mission: Narratives and Letters of the Franciscan Missionaries in Mongolia and China in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries*. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1955.

Document H: Nestorian Grave Markers (13th-14th centuries)



Note the religious symbols seen here:

- The crosses representing Christianity
- The Lotus Flowers (beneath the crosses)
- The lotus is one of the key symbols of Hinduism and Buddhism, representing creation, renewal, and purity.
- The Buddha is often portrayed sitting on (or emerging from) a lotus flower.
- According to the Hindu text *Bhagavad Gita*, “One who performs his duty without attachment, surrendering the results unto the Supreme Lord, is unaffected by sinful action, as the lotus is untouched by water.”
- The two figures in the top stone are dressed in flowing draperies with billowing scarves and trailing ribbons are reminiscent of *Apsaras* or flying attendants in Buddhist iconography.
- The canopy above the cross in the second stone is often found in representations of the Buddha.

Top: <http://usf.usfca.edu/ricci/events/lotusandcross/lotusandcross19.htm>

Bottom: <http://usf.usfca.edu/ricci/events/lotusandcross/lotusandcross25.htm>

Document I: Rabban Sauma in Rome

In 1287-88, a Nestorian monk named Rabban Sauma travelled to Europe, in hope of negotiating an alliance between the Mongols and Christian kings against the Mamluk Dynasty, which held Jerusalem and the rest of the Holy Land. The following excerpt is from his account of meeting leaders of the Catholic Church in Rome.

RABBAN SAWMA said unto [the Cardinals], “Know ye, O our Fathers, that many of our Fathers have gone into the countries of the Mongols, and Turks, and Chinese and have taught them the Gospel, and at the present time there are many Mongols who are Christians. For many of the sons of the Mongol kings and queens have been baptized and confess Christ. And they have established churches in their military camps, and they pay honor to the Christians, and there are among them many who are believers. Now the king [of the Mongols], who is joined in the bond of friendship with the **Catholicus**,^{‡‡} hath the desire to take PALESTINE, and the countries of SYRIA, and he demands from you help in order to take JERUSALEM. He hath chosen me and hath sent me to you because, being a Christian, my word will be believed by you.”

Source: <https://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/texts/sauma.html>

^{‡‡} Leader of the Nestorian Christians.

Guided Questions for Documents A and B (Encyclopedia and Map)

1. What are the key dates/periods in the history of Nestorianism, and what happened on each?
2. What sources have historians used to study Nestorians in China?
3. What are the key locations in the history of Nestorianism in China?
4. Annotate the attached map to include dates and significance of each location.

Guided Questions for Document C (Nestorian Stele)

1. What year was the stele created? In what year did the events the stele describes take place?
2. What elements of Christianity do you see in the document?
3. Can you identify any non-Christian elements in the stele?

Write:

4. Based on the stele, would you consider the Nestorians to be Christian?

Guided Questions for Document D (Jesus-Messiah-Sutra)

1. When was the Nestorian gospel created? (Compare this date to the date of the stele.)
2. What Christian elements do you see in the document?
3. What non-Christian elements do you see in the document?

Write:

4. Based on the stele and the Nestorian gospel, what argument can you make about Nestorian Christianity?

Guided Questions for Document E (Account of William of Rubruck I)

1. When did William visit China? (Compare this date to the dates above.)
2. Which Nestorian practices does William find most objectionable?
3. What non-Christian religious traditions do you see in this document?
4. What religious and non-religious factors do you think shaped Nestorian Christianity?

Write:

5. Does William believe that the Nestorians are Christian? Do you agree? Why?

Guided Questions for Document F (Account of William of Rubruck II)

1. What is William's opinion of the Nestorian dwelling?
2. What does William think of the monk he meets?
3. Does William believe that this Nestorian monk is a Christian? Why?

Argue: Taking both these documents into account, do you think the Nestorians are Christian?

- 4.

Guided Questions for Document G (John of Monte Corvino)

1. When is John's account written? (Compare to William's.)
2. How would you describe John's opinion of the Nestorian monks? Does he consider them Christian?
3. What evidence or examples does John offer in support his claims?
4. Does John consider the Nestorians to be Christian? Do you agree? Why?

Guided Questions for Document H (Nestorian Grave Markers)

1. When were these grave markers created?
2. What Christian elements do you see in them?
3. What non-Christian elements do you see?
4. How can you explain the mixture of religions here?

Write:

5. Do the grave markers indicate that the Nestorians were Christian or non-Christian? Explain your answer.

Guided Questions for Document I (Rabban Sauma in Rome)

1. When is Sauma writing?
2. What argument is Rabban Sauma making about Christianity among the Mongols?
3. How does Sauma's account compare to descriptions written by European visitors to the Mongols?
4. Do you find his argument credible? Why or why not?