

Why Should Ecumenists Care about
Syriac Christianity
along the Ancient Silk Road?

*Or, How to Get in Touch with Your Inner Emperor
and Still Be a Good Multiculturalist*

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Timeline 1

--in the years 430 and 450 there were two “ecumenical” (i.e. within the oikos [house] in the Roman empire) councils which separated the Roman and eastern (Syriac, Ethiopian, Armenian and Coptic) churches, though they were still all culturally connected and read one another’s texts

--in 410 the Syriac Christians of the Persian Empire held a synod which tied their church deeply to the Persian court, which although officially Zoroastrian, needed the Christians’ political power and connections to the Roman world and to Greek and Roman knowledge and culture.

--in 651 the final Persian (Sasanian) monarch, Yazdegird III, was killed by Arab conquerors, and was buried by a Christian bishop in Central Asia, where the king had fled. These Persian royal and Christian elite ties lasted well into the 8th century, and were aided by the Chinese court, which the Christians were liasons for and appear to have aided the Persian royals in exile through Christians’ connections to Greco-Roman learning and culture, namely medicine.

Timeline 2

--between 750-765 Iran, Central Asia and China were embroiled in connected revolution and upheaval. Christian, Muslim and Manichean fighters were invited into China to help put down the revolution, and this created in-roads in China for these western religions.

--in 762, the Islamic Umayyad Caliphate ended and the Abbasid Caliphate replaced it, moving the center of Islamic power from Damascus to Baghdad. The Syriac Christians were made part of the seat of culture and power that developed in Baghdad, and Christians became translators of Greek philosophical and scientific works, first into Syriac then into Arabic, for the next 200 years. Though this may seem odd, it is in certain respects merely a continuation of the situation in Sasanian Persia.

Timeline 3

--in 630, when, as is known from several Chinese sources, the Christian religion was given a place at the Chinese court (likely because of its connections to Persian power and Greco-Roman learning and science), Christianity was called by the Chinese “the Persian religion” (bo-si jiao). It held this name until 745, when the Abbasids were taking control of Iran and Central Asia and began assuming the mantle of “upholder of ancient Persian royal traditions” and it was clear the Sasanian Persian state could never re-establish itself.



Paul Pelliot On the Scene in Magao Cave 46



The 'Nestorian' Stele

Set in place in 781, as a new Emperor Tang Dezong, had just come to the throne, and adjusted the tax code; the stele stresses the Christians' long service to the Chinese state and their usefulness in the recent rebellion



The Nestorian Monument at Siguanfu (Hsi-an-fu). It was set up in the days of the Nestorian Catholicus and Patriarch, Mar Henan Isho (died A.D. 780) and was unveiled on February 4 following (A.D. 781).

Another Stele from the same grotto

This photo shows the stele's actual size relative to the person standing behind





大秦景
教流行
中國碑

Timothy I (r. 780-823)'s Imperial-but-open Christianity in Ibn Al-Tayyib (11th century) I

“From the letters of Timothy to the believers (ahl) of India (it was stated that) they not first go to the king, in times of the election of a Metropolitan but rather to the Patriarch, who will attend to the ordination. The matter can only then, in the end, go to the king, if he is wise, God-fearing and well versed in the records (al-kitib). In his letter to the leader, the head of the believers in India, (i.e. Timothy) (he said that) he would stop the metropolitan ordaining priest without him (Timothy) and without any bishops; and (Timothy) said that it was necessary that priests name bishops, and for the deacons to ordain priests, and that the higher yield to the lower and be subject to them. This is in contrast to the canons of the church which commanded that the lower completely obey the higher back to the final one at the end, who is in Rome and the deputy of Simon Peter.”

Timothy I (r. 780-823)'s Imperial-but-open Christianity in Ibn Al-Tayyib (11th century) I

“As far as far off lands like China and India are concerned, there was, up to the days of Mar Timothy, difficulty along the roads. So bishops used to assemble together to name their own metropolitans. And because of the difficulty arising and the trouble which came up against these episcopal seats (al-kasra) in the days of Mar Timothy.... (the sentence is completed by a marginal note from Ibn al-Tayyib, stating): Timothy prohibited bishops ordaining metropolitans and forbade even the sending of letters, which had been the custom of the Catholicoi, which were used by the Catholicoi in the ordaining of a metropolitan. The hand-written materials (al-khatta) included letters and permission for the ordination; the bishops placed this upon the back of the ordinand as if it (the letter itself) was the deputy for the hand of the Catholicos. Timothy forbade this and the letters too. It was the case (instead) that the Catholicos would send a staff, and cloaks and he would send some of the bishops or metropolitans. They, this hyparchie, would assemble and name the Metropolitan, by putting on his back the gospel with the letters of the Catholicos.”

Imperial charisma and power sharing in the 8th century Baghdad church

“After long labors borne of his ordination, I commanded him, neither in the royal city, or Basra or Uballat, to remain for even an hour; but without the delay, he was sent to re-direct his way. He said: "I must do this with expenses paid». And I answered him: "many of the monks of China and those who've crossed the seas to India, have only gone with a staff, and scriptures. Take heed of them and follow suit, for they have crossed the sea without a great deal of money." He has forsaken my commandments, and been gone from the house of the royal city now for about two months and has not provided a royal visit. Later he went down to Basra and Huballat, he was convinced that he had been given his throne, and with a modesty that is not his to have. He then came with his staff and miter (Grk. phakilon, i.e. = cloak), as if to enter Sarbaziah

From Timothy's letters

Ascetic Charisma in the 8th century Chinese church

As the Xi'an stele states:

“As a talisman, they hold the cross, whose influence is reflected in every direction, uniting all without distinction. As they strike the wood, the fame of their benevolence is diffused abroad; worshiping toward the east, they hasten on the way to life and glory; they preserve the beard to symbolize their outward actions, they shave the crown to indicate the absence of inward affections; they do not keep slaves, but put noble and mean all on an equal footing; they do not amass wealth, but cast all their property into the common stock; they fast, in order to perfect themselves by self-inspection; they submit to restraints, in order to strengthen themselves by silent watchfulness; seven times a day they have worship and praise for the benefit of the living and the dead; once in seven days (on Sunday) they sacrifice, to cleanse the heart and return to luminescence.”

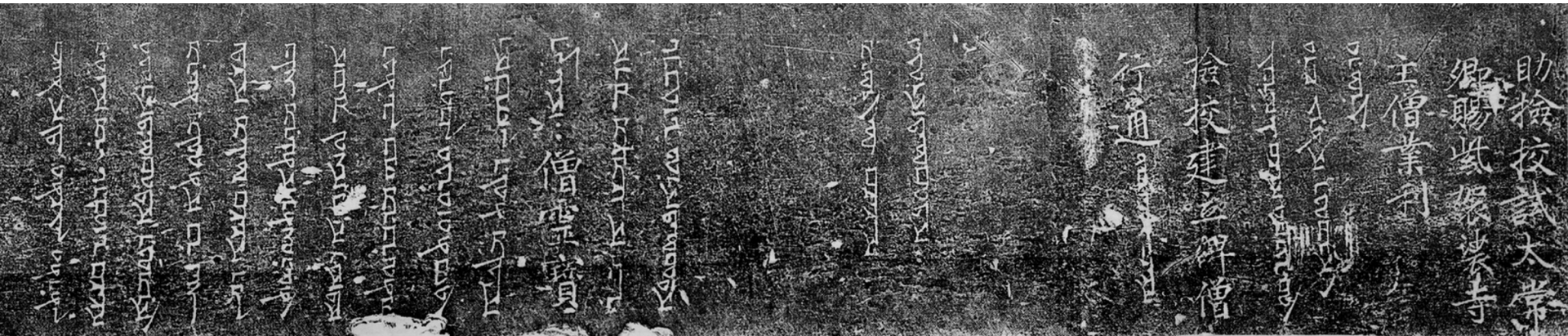
The Top Portion of the Stele

Note the incorporation
of the Buddhist Lotus
flower design



the Bottom Portion of the Xi'an Stele

written in Syriac (Aramaic) language



Syriac portion of the Xi'an stele in translation

"In the year of the Greeks, one thousand and ninety-two, the Lord Jazbōzēdh, Priest and Vicar-episcopal of Kumdan the royal city, son of the enlightened Milis, Priest of Balkh a city of Turkestan, set up this tablet, whereon is inscribed the Divine Leadership (mdabranoutha) of our Redeemer, and the preaching of the apostolic missionaries to the Kings of China."