Tjalling H. F. Halbertsma. *Early Christian Remains of Inner Mongolia: Discovery, Reconstruction, and Appropriation*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008, xxx + 356 pp; hardcover. $185.00.

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Recent conferences have signaled a vigorous revival of research into the history and archaeology of Christianity in Central Asia and China. In June of 2009, scholars from around the world will gather in Salzburg, Austria for the third international conference on the Church of the East in China and Central Asia.[1] This promising international dialogue follows closely on the heels of several monographs and essay collections investigating the processes of acculturation and syncretism that accompanied Christian expansion into China, most intensively during the Tang (618–907) and Yuan (1271–1368) dynasties.[2] Collectively, this new research is documenting a Christian presence in Asia that was more populous, diverse, and enduring than has traditionally been assumed.[3] Yet, the emerging picture is far from complete, with large gaps and ambiguities in the historical record. Much of the evidence—literary, documentary, and artistic—is fragmentary and difficult to interpret

[1] For the conference announcement, see *Hugoye* 11, no. 2 (Summer, 2008). The papers from the first Salzburg conference (2003) have been published as *Jingjiao: The Church of the East in China and Central Asia*, ed. Roman Malek with Peter Hofrichter (Sankt Augustin: Institut Monumenta Serica, 2006). The papers from the second Salzburg conference (2006) are scheduled to appear later this year (2009).

[2] For a useful overview, see Gunnar Mikkelsen's critique of Li Tang's *A Study of the History of Nestorian Christianity in China and Its Literature in Chinese: Together with a New English Translation of the Dunwuang Nestorian Documents* (Frankfurt am Rhein: Peter Land AG, 2004), in *China Review International* 14, no. 1 (Spring, 2007): 232–35. See also Roman Malek, ed., *The Chinese Face of Jesus Christ: Volume I* (Sankt Augustin: Institut Monumenta Serica and China-Zentrum, 2002), especially 159–79 (Y. Raguin on Syrian monks in Tang China), 180–218 (S. Eskildsen on theological terminology in Chinese Nestorian texts), and 259–83 (H. Klimkeit on the symbolism of the cross in syncretistic contexts).

[3] The results are also reflected in recent syntheses. See esp. Christoph Baumer, *The Church of the East: An Illustrated History of Assyrian Christianity* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 160–223.

(or even to translate); and continued international collaboration is essential given the large number of languages and national jurisdictions involved. More urgent still, population growth, modernization, and the growth of the antiquities trade in both China and Central Asia have imperiled many archaeological sites.

T. Halbertsma's *Early Christian Remains of Inner Mongolia: Discovery, Reconstruction, and Appropriation*, provides a model of the type of research that is now needed. Inner Mongolia is an officially autonomous region of what is today north-central China along the southern edge of the Gobi desert. It is an enormous land, encompassing some 1,200,000 square kilometers, or nearly twice the size of Texas. Halbertsma's study focuses on a relatively small slice of this vast region: a territory of roughly 60,000 square kilometers in eastern Inner Mongolia, between the region's capital, Hohhot, and the modern Chinese-Mongolian border. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries C.E., this was the land of the Öngüt, a Turkic people closely allied with the Mongols. Halbertsma's book offers a meticulous and multi-faceted account of the Christian heritage of the Öngüt before, during, and after the Mongol Empire of Genghis Khan (r. 1206–27).

Part I (of the book's four parts) explains how Christianity reached the land of the Öngüt during the "second wave" of Christian expansion along the Silk Road beginning in the tenth century. After a brief discussion of the Chinese terminology for Christians,[4] Halbertsma introduces the small cluster of European and Syriac literary sources that remain vital for all historians of Christianity in the Mongol world. These texts include the acute observations of the Franciscan William of Rubruck, who arrived in the Mongol capital of Karakorum in 1253, and the reports of the Franciscan papal envoy, John of Montecorvino, the first archbishop of Peking (1308–28). In his letters back to Rome,

[4] In Chinese documents of the Yuan period, Christians are most often referred to as the *yelikewen* or the *diexie*. The first term is a transcription of the Turkic term *erke'ün*, whose origin remains unclear, while the second (*diexie*) is "possibly a Chinese transcription of the Persian word *tarsâ*," meaning a God-fearer. Halbertsma, 10. Both terms are distinct from the principal names assigned to Christianity during the Tang dynasty, when Christianity was called the "Persian teaching" (*Bosi-jiao*) and later the "luminous religion of the Daqin" (*Daqin jingjiao*), a phrase indicating the religion's origin in Syria. For the Tang-era terminology, see T. H. Barrett, "Buddhism, Taoism and the eighth-century Chinese term for Christianity: a response to recent work by A. Forte and others," *Bulletin of SOAS* 65, no. 3 (2002): 555–60.

Montecorvino even claims to have converted to Catholicism "the good King George" of the Öngüt in the late 1290s (25). Prior to this flirtation with Catholicism, King George and other Öngüt elites were already active patrons of the Church of the East, the East-Syrian or "Nestorian" church that had gained many adherents among neighboring Turco-Mongolian tribes, such as the Keraits and Naiman.[5] The gradual Christianization of the Öngüt must also be seen against the backdrop of their political history. As clients of northern China's Jin dynasty (1115–1234), the Öngüt were assigned a segment of the Chinese-nomadic frontier north of the Daqing Mountains and Huang River in eastern Inner Mongolia (35). With the rise of Genghis Khan, they wisely shifted their allegiance away from the Jin, eventually gaining a privileged position as Mongol allies, a bond consolidated through regular intermarriage between ruling families.[6] The political and cultural power of the Öngüt reached its apex under King George (d. 1298), who built "at his home" a massive library, where he "daily discussed with scholars the classics and history, philosophy, astrology, and mathematics."[7] While the Chinese author of this praise may have exaggerated King George's erudition, his remarks underscore the willingness of the Öngüt royal house to adopt cultural traditions that were alien to the nomadic ways of their ancestors. This trend toward sedentarization has crucial ramifications for understanding the material remains that still dot their former kingdom.

Halbertsma presents in part II a systematic review of the "discovery and documentation of Nestorian remains in Inner Mongolia" (72), providing a valuable précis of every archaeological expedition to the region between the mid-nineteenth century and today. Already in the 1880s, Belgian missionaries based in Hohhot

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[5] According to the thirteenth-century chronicler Barhebraeus, the Keraits, whose territory bordered that of the Öngüt on the north, were converted to Christianity en masse in 1007 C.E. But the historicity of this story, as Erica Hunter has stressed, is dubious. See E. C. D. Hunter, "The Conversion of the Kerait to Christianity in AD 1007," *Zentralasiastische Studien* 22 (1989/1990): 158–76; Halbertsma, 30. No literary account of the conversion of the Öngüt has survived.

[6] According to the *Yuanshi* (the official Chinese history of the Mongols), this Mongol-Öngüt alliance was established in 1204, when the Öngüts double-crossed the Naiman, who had requested their assistance in fighting the Mongols. Halbertsma, 36.

[7] The description is part of a long funerary inscription written in King George's honor by a Chinese administrator named Yan Fu and preserved in a later literary compilation of the Yuan dynasty (the *Yuan Wenlei*).

began to discover and publish Christian tombstones from the region. Other international researchers soon followed, including the American Owen Lattimore, who published in 1934 the first detailed description of the extensive ruins at Olon Sume, ca. 130 km northwest of Hohhot, which he recognized as the remains of a "Nestorian city." It was not, however, until the 1950s that the Japanese scholar Egami Namio correctly identified the finds at Olon Sume as the capital of the Öngüt.[8] Halbertsma's review of Inner Mongolian archaeology serves a dual purpose. As a case study in regional archaeology, it explains the methods and motives of the various international researchers who were attracted to the region. This reconstruction also allows him to plot the location and/or movements of the region's Christian artifacts, including, for example, items described by Egami but missing since the mid-1940s.

Between 1949 and the 1990s, the Öngüt sites in Inner Mongolia became "the exclusive domain for Chinese researchers and archaeologists" (111). While excavation techniques remained "crude" for much of this period, Chinese fieldwork in the 1970s succeeded in identifying and recording several new Nestorian graveyards in the Hohhot district. Research methods have greatly sharpened since the 1990s, as local governments have increasingly collaborated with Chinese museums and research institutes on rescue projects aimed at sites already disturbed by looters. Halbertsma concludes his survey with a description of his own fieldwork in the Hohhot district, which began in 2001 "from a journalist's perspective" (125), but developed into a wide-ranging archaeological reconnaissance. By the end of their field research in the summer of 2005, Halbertsma and his assistant, Erhelt Dashdoorov, had recorded "over forty gravestones or fragments of gravestones, a trilingual stele, and contextual materials" from nearly two dozen sites, local villages, and museum storerooms (127).[9]

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[8] Namio Egami, "Olon-Sume et la découverte de l'église catholique romaine de Jean de Montecorvino," *Journal Asiatique* 240, no. 2 (1952): 155–67; idem, *The Mongol Empire and Christendom* (Tokyo: Sanpauro, 2000). Halbertsma, 90–102, describes the long ark of Egami's research on the Öngüt, including his return to Olon Sume in 1990, nearly sixty years after his original field research.

[9] Halbertsma signals the depth of his gratitude for Dashdoorov's collaboration in the book's dedication and acknowledgments. Dashdoorov's local contacts and ability to speak English, Chinese, and Mongolian, were clearly essential for the success of their fieldwork.

Halbertsma turns in part III to the material evidence, introducing by site and then typology all of the major Christian artifacts with known provenance from eastern Inner Mongolia. First, he tackles the thorny issue of the historical identification of Olon Sume, the region's most impressive pre-Ming site, an urban encampment with dried-brick walls enclosing a rectangle measuring ca. 960 by 575 meters with three or four city gates. Egami had identified Olon Sume as the Öngüt royal capital Koshang, where the father of the future East-Syrian patriarch Yabhallaha III (1281–1317) served as the archdeacon, and where King George had built his "Hall of a myriad volumes" described in Yan Fan's epitaph. Egami also argued that the ruined Church still visible at Olon Sume is none other than the Catholic Church described by John of Montecorvino (139). Halbertsma does not dismiss this identification, but views it as "problematic" and hints at the need for a full architectural study.[10] He proposes instead that the Öngüt royal family had two capitals (a suggestion made already by Lattimore) and that the ruins at Olon Sume represent only the summer capital. The city of Koshang, where the future patriarch Yabhallaha III grew up, must have been located on the southern side of the Daqing Mountains, closer to the Mongol capital Khanbaliq (modern Beijing).[11] Whether Koshang can also be identified with the city of "Tenduc," which Marco Polo names as the base of King George, remains uncertain.

Other evidence for the settlement of the Öngüt in the Hohhot region consists mainly of graves and horizontal tombstones, the latter undated, but apparently from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The most striking tombstones are decorated in both low and high relief with "crosses, lotuses, flowers, vines, clouds, birds, wave-patterns and other elaborate abstract designs" often framed in squares, circles, or lantern windows (192).[12] Many include short

[10] Egami suggests that the floral designs on the church's blue decorative tiles, as well as other features, indicate the Church's European design. Halbertsma's critique (143–44) remains cautious and non-committal on this crucial topic, since he has not yet been able to consult the publications of the Italian archaeologists, who conducted a systematic survey at Olon-Sume between 2000 and 2002 (122).

[11] Halbertsma (154) emphasizes that two other researchers have also reached this same conclusion by other routes: the Italian historian Maurizio Paolillo and the Chinese archaeologist Gai Shanlin. The latter has proposed to identify Tuoketuo, a site east of Hohhot, as Koshang.

[12] The book's color plates show twenty-five of these tombstones from various angles. For individual tombstones, with dimensions, black

Turkic inscriptions in Syriac script listing the name and title of the deceased according to a formula very similar to that used on the roughly contemporary East-Syrian tombstones found in Semericye (Kyrgyzstan). The Christians commemorated in these inscriptions often bear names and titles already attested from Nestorian graveyards in both Semericye and Quanzhou (the medieval port of Zaytun in southern China).[13] The epigraphy of these tombstones, which will be published in full elsewhere, also matches well with literary descriptions of Christianity in the Mongol empire. The frequent use of the title "priest" (*kashisha beg* in Uighur) on the Inner Mongolian tombstones, for example, recalls William of Rubruck's observation that "all the male children, even those in the cradle, are ordained as priests" (228). Despite their use of the Syriac script, it appears that few Öngüt could write the Syriac language. A bilingual stele from Olon Sume invokes the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in Syriac, but switches to Uighur for the rest of the inscription (206). As Halbertsma concludes, such liturgical borrowings suggest, "that the Nestorian Christians of Inner Mongolia were acquainted with the basic invocations of the Church of the East, but did not master the Syriac language sufficiently to write personal and thus varied epitaphs in this language" (226).

In addition to the gravestones and stele mentioned above, Halbertsma presents a small number of other artifacts associated with the Christian sites of Inner Mongolia. The damaged tomb sculptures found at Olon Sume and two other Nestorian graveyards include statues in traditional Chinese style of military figures, lions, sheep, and turtle bases. The detailed Chinese inscription found amidst the sculpture at one site, Wangmuliang, describes the dead man's service as " administrator of the *yelikewen*" (201). It is probable, but not certain, that some of the administrators honored by these traditional Chinese tombs were themselves Christians. A stone coffin now on display at a site called Bailingmaio is decorated with images of Chinese-style furniture typical of Song and Jin-dynasty tombs; an "unusually inconspicuous" small cross in low relief is the only clear indication

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and white photographs, and rubbings, see Halbertsma, "Some field notes and images of stone material from graves of the Church of the East in Inner Mongolia, China (with additional rubbings of seven stones by Wei Jian)," *Monumenta Serica* 53 (2005): 113–244, with corrections and additions at Halbertsma, 329–30.

[13] Typical names include, for men, Abraham, Eugene, George, Jonathan, and Stephen, and, for women, Elizabeth, Julia, and Helena. Halbertsma, 194 and 228.

of the occupant's Christianity.[14] Other tombs, found intact and excavated by the Chinese archaeologist Gai Shanlin during the mid-1970s, yielded numerous grave goods, such as "combs, hairpieces, golden earrings and rings, lamps, coins and mirrors and a seashell" (186). Full publication of these tomb contents would be helpful. Meanwhile, new artifacts continue to emerge from other areas of Inner Mongolia as well. As recently as 1983, a Chinese farmer near Chifeng (ca. 350 km NE of Beijing) found a thirteen kg. fired brick inscribed in Syriac and Uighur with an epitaph dated (in the Seleucid system) to the year 1253 C.E.[15]

The book's final section (part IV), shifting from archaeology to ethnography, explores how various groups (foreign, Mongolian, and Han Chinese) have "appropriated" the Nestorian artifacts and sites of the Hohhot region for their own purposes. This process of reuse began already in the Ming era, when at Olon Sume, for example, Buddhist architects lay Nestorian gravestones as foundation blocks for a sixteenth- or seventeenth-century temple inside the city walls.[16] European missionaries interpreted as exclusively Christian the more than one thousand metal amulets with crosses and other symbols recovered from the Ordos region south of the Daqing Mountains, ignoring the ambiguity of the objects' symbolism.[17] But the most revealing contrast is the difference in attitude between local Mongol herdsmen and Han Chinese farmers. Building on the observations of Lattimore and Egami, Halbertsma documents the Mongols' customary aversion to excavating or removing artifacts from the Öngüt sites, which they often associate with strange supernatural guardians or incidents (278–82). The Han Chinese, by contrast, are often relatively new immigrants to the region with "no attachment to the land of Inner Mongolia, and thus neither to its legends or heritage" (255). Not

[14] Halbertsma, 207, n. 243.

[15] Halbertsma, 118–19, with an excellent color photo at fig. 94. For the text and translation, see James Hamilton and Niu Ruji, "Deux inscriptions funéraires turques nestoriennes." *Journal Asiatique* 282, no. 1 (1994): 147–64.

[16] Halbertsma, 251–52, citing three further examples of the reuse of Nestorian gravestones in the region's Buddhist monasteries.

[17] Halbertsma (298) cautiously concludes that the Nestorian stone objects documented in his book and the bronze "Ordos crosses" appear to "originate from different traditions," since only one Nestorian gravestone has been found south of the Daqing Mountains and Halbertsma is not aware of any "Ordos crosses" excavated in Nestorian graves north of the mountains.

surprisingly, many of these local farmers have become vigorous treasure-hunters among the medieval tombs. Many Nestorian sites had already been raided by the time of Lattimore's fieldwork in the 1930s, but the volume and intensity of looting has grown exponentially in recent years. At the Nestorian graveyard at Wangmuliang (due north of Hohhot), Halbertsma encountered in November 2004 more than one hundred illegal excavators (262); at the cemetery near the ruined city of Mukhor Soborghan, he counted in August, 2003 "over three hundred freshly dug holes" (265). These are sobering statistics.

The book concludes with five brief appendices, a fourteen-page bibliography, a well-made index, and 122 half-page color plates. Particularly valuable is the one-page catalogue of sites in the region where Nestorian artifacts have been found: a total of 21 sites, including three graveyards and three former urban settlements. The book's production quality is excellent with very few typographical errors.[18] Although the book's numerous color plates illustrate and amplify its argument, fewer photos could have reduced its price and perhaps increased its circulation.

In sum, Halbertsma has produced an admirable study, eclectic in its methodology, yet consistently meticulous and stimulating. By combining archaeology, history, and ethnography, his book marks a major advance in the documentation and interpretation of the Christian heritage of Inner Mongolia and, by extension, the cultural history of the Mongol empire. As a regional archaeological history, *Early Christian Remains of Inner Mongolia* also illustrates how the preconceptions and research techniques of various scholars have shaped the recovery and interpretation of medieval Christian artifacts. Finally, the book reminds us that this process of interpretation continues today, not only by scholars, but also by Mongol herdsmen and Han Chinese farmers, who live and work every day in the land once inhabited by the Öngüt.

[18] I have found only two: on p. 297 ("were" for "where") and the spelling of the first Italian book title on p. 345. The book's three maps, however, could have been made more useful by the addition of a scale at the bottom of each.