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Was there a Nestorian mission in Korea?*

Taking into account the existence of Nestorian communities in China during the Tang and Yuan period (7th-10th and 13th-14th cent. respectively) and the at all times close cultural ties between China and Korea we may ask whether there was in Korea, too, a Nestorian mission or even the establishment of long-term communities¹. The Chinese term 景教 which is used to denote Christianity in the Nestorian monument's inscription from Xian, entered the Korean language with the Sino-Korean pronunciation *gyeong gyo*; however, its use is documented only since the early nineteenth century and can be traced back to the becoming known of the aforementioned inscription from Xian in Korea². Nestorian influences upon Ancient Korea have been assumed at various places, which is why Y. B. Kim is talking in a general way of "nestorianischen Kontakten zur Sillazeit [7th-10th cent.]"³. In the following the evidence which is brought forward in

* Korean and Sino-Korean terms have been transcribed according to the rules for transcription issued by the Korean Ministry of Culture on 7 July 2000. In case of personal and place names the common spelling has been retained. The authors are indebted to Prof. S. Gerö, Tübingen, for literary references. Prof. H. D. Kim kindly gave expert advice on the following presentation.

1 The question whether Nestorian or Manichean writings came to Korea as part of the Buddhist canon cannot be treated upon here. The Buddhist library at Haeinsa near Busan (restored by King Ko-jong in 1251 after its destruction by the Mongols in 1236) obviously contains such writings; cf. the review of T. Y. Lee (ed.), 高麗大藏經板保存을 위한 基礎學術研究 [Goryeo daejanggyeongpan bojoneul wihan gichohaksulyeongu] (Basic Studies on the Preservation of the Koryo Tripitaka), Hapchon: The Haeinsa Koryo Tripitaka Institute 1996, in: *Journal of Modern Korean Studies* 6 (1996), p. 130.

2 Cf. S. I. Chung, 高麗文獻교류사 [Godae munmyeong gyoryusa] (History of Ancient Cultural Exchange), Seoul: Sakyejul 2001, p. 597; the document in question dates from the reign of King Hyeon-jong (1835-1849).

3 Y. B. Kim, "Koreanische Missionen I", in: *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* 4, Tübingen 2001, col. 1686; similarly K. S. Kim, "경교" [Gyeonggyo], in: 한국민족문화대백과사전 1 [Hanguk minjok munhwa daebaekgwasa jeon 1] (Encyclopedia of Korean Culture 1), Seoul: 웅진출판 [Ungjin chulpan] 1994, p. 838; M. Kansa [S. I. Chung], 新羅西域交流史 [Silla seoyeok gyoryusa] (The History of Silla-Arabic Cultural Relations), Seoul: Dankook University Press 1994, p. 18. A. C. Moule, *Christians in China before the year 1550*, London: SPCK 1930, p. 72, referred to by Y. S. Kim, 韓國基督教史研究 2 [Hanguk gidokgyosa yeongu 2] (History of the Korean Church 2), Seoul: Christian Literature Company 1971, p. 28 mentions an "extract from a Korean book" telling about the arrival of an envoy from Ta-chin (which means the Roman Orient and Syria in Chinese sources) with religious writings during the reign of emperor Tai-

order to corroborate this claim will be presented and it will be investigated whether or not a Nestorian presence for this or a later time can validly be assumed according to the present state of knowledge. For clarity's sake the evidence will be divided into a) *archeological* and b) *literary evidence*.

a) *Archeological evidence*: The main evidence adduced in the literature in favor of a Nestorian presence during the Silla period consists in several remains from the former capital of Silla, Kyungju, which is located in the south-eastern part of the Korean peninsula, and the nearby Buddhist monastery Pulguksa. The remains include two cross-shaped iron amulets, a statuette taken to be an image of the Virgin Mary and a roughly hewn stone cross. The amulets and sculpture have been found in Kyungju; the metal items show a certain similarity with cross-shaped Mongolian amulets⁴, while the sculpture's design apparently does not have any parallel either in Buddhist or Christian iconography. The stone cross has been discovered by Y.S. Kim in 1955 in Pulguksa where it had been used for magical purposes up until then⁵. Y. T. Oh regards these remains as proof of a Nestorian mission during the Silla period but in recent times the assessments have been clearly more reluctant. S.H. Moffett points out that in case of the stone cross it is not even clear whether the structure is meant to be a depiction of a cross or rather was used as a building element. According to S. I. Chung the remains can neither be dated definitively nor is it possible to assign them on the basis of their iconography. H. D. Kim, too, does not regard them as highly significant⁶.

tsung of the Tang dynasty. However, this remark is most likely dependent upon a Chinese original and thus refers to the Tang court; cf. loc. cit., n. 87.

- 4 Cf. the illustrations in P. Y. Saeki, *The Nestorian Documents and Relics in China*, Tokyo: Maruzen 1951, ill. 10ss. (pp. 423s.) and K. Parry, "Images in the Church of the East: The Evidence from Central Asia and China", in: *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 78 (1996), ill. 6a (between pp. 160 and 161). There is a clear similarity in shape and size to a cross found in Manchuria. This cross is dated towards the end of the 13th cent. and seen to be related to a relative of Qubilai Khan, Nai-yen, who was a Nestorian Christian; cf. Saeki, *Documents*, pp. 441s. with ill. 25; Moule, *Christians*, pp. 134s. with n. 11 and the map in W. Klein, *Das nestorianische Christentum an den Handelswegen durch Kyrgyztan bis zum 14. Jahrhundert* (= Silk Road Studies 3), Turnhout: Brepols 2000, p. 439. The size of the Manchurian cross is 4×4 cm; that of the Korean crosses 5,8×5,6 and 2,4×3,2 cm; cf. Saeki, *Documents*, pp. 441s. and S. I. Chung, *Ancient*, p. 593. NB: Marco Polo mentions among the dominions of Nai-yen >Cauly<; cf. H. Yule (Trans.), *The Book of Ser Marco Polo the Venetian Concerning the Kingdoms and Marvels of the East* 1, London: Murray ³1903, p. 343 and Y. S. Kim, *History*, pp. 28s. This term is identified with Korea by H. Cordier, who, however, supposes it to mean a region within the northern half of the Korean peninsula since Korea herself was in a state of vassalage to the Mongols; cf. Yule, *Book*, p. 343 n. 2.
- 5 Cf. Y. S. Kim, *History*, p. 27; S. H. Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia 1: Beginnings to 1500*, San Francisco: Harper 1992, p. 462 n. 86. NB: According to S. I. Chung, *Ancient*, p. 593 and H. D. Kim, 동방기독교와 동서문명 [Dongbang gidokgyowa dongseo munmyeong] (Eastern Christianity and east-western culture), Seoul: 까치글방 [Kkachi geulbang] 2002, p. 239 the cross was found in 1965.
- 6 Y. T. Oh, 韓國基督教史 1: 韓國景教史 [Hanguk gidokgyosa 1: Hanguk gyeongyosa] (History of Christianity in Korea 1: History of Nestorianism in Korea), Seoul, 惠宣文化社 [Hyeseon

The findings from An-shan in southern Manchuria are most probably not Korean. These remains consist of several clay-crosses which were discovered in 1927 inside a tomb that on the basis of coins can be dated in the time between 998 and 1006. The site in question was situated upon Korean territory three hundred years earlier, but in the year 1000 had already been occupied by Manchurian tribes⁷.

While, therefore, the An-shan findings cannot be taken as evidence for a Nestorian presence in Korea, in case of the items from Kyungju and Pulguksa a Christian origin at least cannot be excluded⁸.

b) *Literary evidence*: The aforementioned Y.T. Oh is of opinion that the ancient Korean history works *Samguk Yusa* and *Samguk Sagi* (beginning of 12th and 13th cent. respectively) show traces of Christian influence⁹. In this connection he at first recognizes theistic elements in Mahayana Buddhism during the Silla period, the origins of which he tries to trace back by analyzing reports given about the studies of famous Korean monks in Tang China. The influences he assumes Nestorian Christianity to have had upon Buddhism of the Silla period are: Christian colors used in Buddhism, the theistic idea of a personal transcendent God, angels, answered prayers and miracles, repentance of sins, afterlife and the idea of hell, mission, Christian elements in Buddhist worship, biblical

munhwasa] 1973, pp. 1. 3. 242-290; Moffett, *History*, p.462 n.86; S.I. Chung, *Ancient*, p.593; H.D. Kim, *Eastern*, p.239. The presentation in J.C. England, "The Earliest Christian Communities in Southeast and Northeast Asia: An Outline of the Evidence Available in Seven Countries Before A.D. 1500", in: *Missiology* 19 (1991) pp.208s. and id., *The Hidden History of Christianity in Asia: The Churches of the East Before the Year 1500*, Delhi/Hong Kong: ISPCK 1998, p.104 follows that of Oh. T.V. Philip, *East of the Euphrates*, Delhi: ISPCK 1998, pp.161s. depends on the remarks of Moffett.

7 Cf. Saeki, *Documents*, pp.440s. with ill. 24; Moffett, *History*, p.461; S.I. Chung, *Ancient*, p.597. Philip, *Euphrates*, p.161 follows the presentation of Moffett. The crosses are similar in shape to the cross from Pulguksa; they are, however, made out of clay, not stone.

8 E. A. Gordon, "Some Recent Discoveries in Korean Temples and their Relationship to Eastern Christianity", in: *Transactions of the Korea Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 5 (1914), pp.1-39 is of opinion that Christianity came to Korea as early as in the 5th cent. This opinion is based upon the alleged use of motifs from the Bible and primitive Christian literature in the art of Korean Mahayana-Buddhism. Gordon fails, however, to show direct literary and iconographic dependencies, which is why these allegations have to be considered unproven. The same presumably holds true for the "cave-church" mentioned in J.G. Holdcroft, *Into All the World*, Philadelphia: Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions 1972, pp.80s., quoted by England, in: *Missiology* 19 (1991), p.209. Holdcroft's work was not available to the present authors. S.I. Chung, *Ancient*, pp.594s. points out that the alleged Christian or rather western influence upon Buddhist art of the Silla period does not necessarily have to be due to Nestorianism since there is a broad Hellenistic substratum which entered Buddhist art through the Gandhara style.

9 Oh, *History*, p.242-290. England, in: *Missiology* 19 (1991), p.208 and id., *History*, pp.102ss. repeats Oh's assumptions; cf. also S.I. Chung, *Ancient*, pp.595ss. For a characterization of the said history works cf. K. Pratt/R. Rutt, "Samguk Yusa", in: iid., *Korea: A Historical and Cultural Dictionary*, Richmond: Curzon Press 1999, pp.400s. and iid., "Samguk Sagi", in: loc. cit., p.400. An English translation of the former is available in T.H. Ha/G.K. Mintz (trs.), *Samguk-yusa. Legends and Histories of the Three Kingdoms of Ancient Korea*, Seoul: Yonsei University Press 1972.

motifs in Buddhist legends. However, in the aforementioned works there are no explicit references whatsoever to the presence of Nestorian Christians in Korea during the Silla period. The alleged similarities in content are hard to verify and given the existence of theistic elements in Buddhism at that time these must not necessarily result from Christian influence. S.I. Chung points out that even though there are direct borrowings in Buddhism from Christianity this is not a proof of Nestorian missionary activities¹⁰.

Apart from this doubtful evidence there is a real hint at the presence of a Nestorian Christian in Korea during the Koryo period (10th-14th cent.). It is contained in the Chinese history work 元史 (*Yuan-shi*; in Sino-Korean pronunciation *won sa*) which was compiled in 1369/70 by Chinese scholars and comprises the time from Genghis Khan to the downfall of the Yuan dynasty in 1368¹¹. In ch. 134 this book contains the biography of a Mongolian official by the name of *Giwargis* who worked for 征東行省 (in Sino-Korean pronunciation *jeong dong haeng seong*), an intermediary agency between the Yuan administration and the Koryo government, and in this position in 1300 tried to abolish hereditary slavery in Korea. As H.D. Kim remarks this could have been motivated as well by an interest of the Yuan dynasty in weakening Koryo economy but in regard of this official's clearly Christian name it can be assumed that as a Christian he generally rejected slavery. However, his efforts were rather unsuccessful since he stayed only for a short time in Korea¹².

The literary evidence for the presence of Nestorians in Korea is therefore limited to the note about an individual's stay during the Mongol period¹³.

As a result the following can be ascertained: In regard of the findings from Kyungju and Pulguksa a Christian origin cannot be excluded. However, the

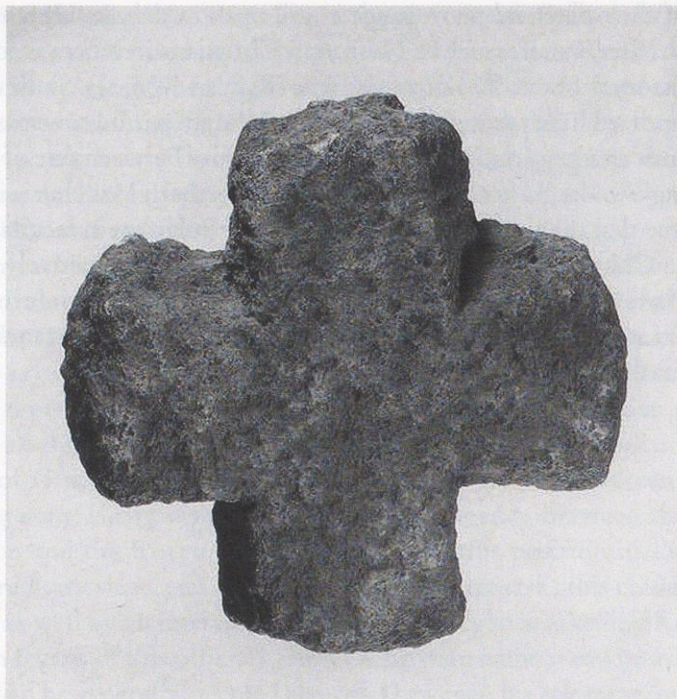
10 Cf. S.I. Chung, *Ancient*, pp.595-599.

11 Cf. H.D. Kim, *Eastern*, p.239; as a historical source the Yuan-shi is obviously reliable: "... die Umstände seiner Abfassung [haben] dazu geführt, daß viele Unterlagen aus der Yuan-Zeit nur wenig überarbeitet in die endgültige Redaktion aufgenommen wurden, so daß historisch gesehen dem Yuan-shi ein hoher Quellenwert zukommt"; H. Franke, "Yuan-shi", in: *Kindlers Neues Literatur Lexikon* 19, München: Kindler 1992, p.830.

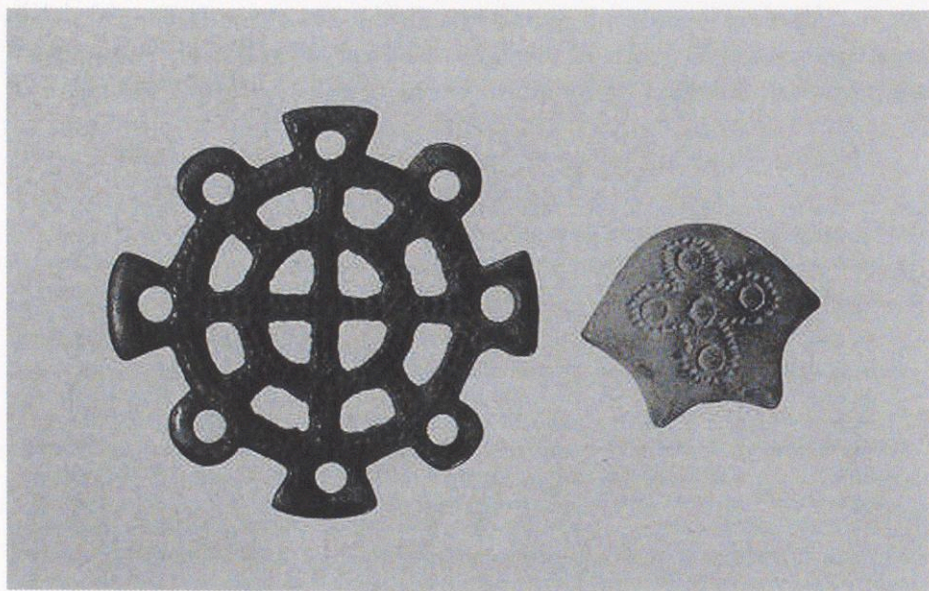
12 Cf. H.D. Kim, *Eastern*, pp.239s.

13 In regard of Islam there is somewhat more source material: The existence of Islamic communities during the Koryo period is proven; cf. W.E. Henthorn, *Korea: The Mongol Invasions*, Leiden: Brill 1963, p.74, quoted by M. Rossabi, "The Muslims in the Early Yüan Dynasty", in: J.D. Langlois, Jr. (ed.), *China under Mongol Rule*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1981, p.274; J.H. Grayson, *Korea. A Religious History*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, p.232. Henthorn's work was not available to the present authors. Apart from that there are many hints at contacts between the Islamic and Silla civilizations; cf. Grayson, *Korea*, p.232 and Kanso [S.I. Chung], *Silla-Arabia*, passim. Korea was known to Arab geographers since the second half of the ninth century under the name of *al-Sila* and Korea's geographical position is recorded on Idrisi's world map from the twelfth century; cf. K.W. Chung/G.F. Hourani, "Arab Geographers on Korea", in: *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 58 (1938), pp.658-661 and Kanso [S.I. Chung], *Silla-Arabia*, p.143.

question of their date and provenance is still open to debate. Up until now the only known literary reference to Nestorian Christians in Korea is found in the Chinese history work 元史 (*Yuan-shi*; Sino-Korean *Won-sa*). Since the episode which is reported here takes place during the Mongol period towards the end of the thirteenth century and in regard of the similarity between one of the crosses from Kyungju and a cross of the same age from northern Manchuria it seems valid to assume that the findings from Kyungju and Pulguksa in fact date from the time of the Chinese Yuan and Korean Koryo dynasty respectively. Nestorian contacts, therefore, can be assumed to have taken place, if not during the Silla period, then at the time of the Koryo dynasty, even though they cannot be called a mission in the strict sense of the term.



Stone Cross from Pulguksa
24,5×24×9 cm



Cross-shaped Iron Amulets from Kyungju
(left): 5,8×5,6 cm (right): 2,4×3,2 cm



(rear view)



Alleged Statue of Virgin Mary from Kyungju
7,2×3,8×2,8 cm