
‘Sogdian Christianity’: Evidence from architecture and material culture



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This article aims to discuss the question of the inculturation of Syriac Christianity in Central Asia, based on archaeological examples including architectural evidence from a particular ethnocultural area: Sogdiana. It questions to what extent the Eastern Syriac Church has become rooted in local culture, thus enabling Christian communities to express their faith in both material and artistic ways. This article is divided into two sections which present a comprehensive study of the medieval sources relevant to the spread and establishment of Christianity in the Central Asian landmass by considering and analyzing existing tangible evidence. In doing so, it provides assessment of comparable evidence, which demonstrates both the “extended” and an “immediate” context in which Eastern Syriac Christianity was accepted, adapted and transformed into a localised expression of Christian faith.

Keywords: Sogdiana; Christianity; Central Asia; Syriac.

Introduction

The significant presence and influence of Christianity in Sogdiana is attested to by both material culture products—coins, architecture, objects of devotion like censers and pendant crosses—and the texts.¹ This article discusses two categories of material evidence:

1. Architectural evidence which includes the recently excavated church ruin in the Urgut region, 30 km south of Samarqand. This is referred as the “Urgut church”, relating to the location of the excavation.

¹For the analysis of the textual evidence see Ashurov. “Sogdian Christian texts: socio-cultural observations” In: *Archiv Orientalni: Journal of African and Asian Studies* 83.1 (2015), pp. 53–70; “Sogdian Christian text: manifestation of ‘Sogdian Christianity’” In: *Manuscripta Orientalia: International Journal for Oriental Manuscript Research* 21 no. 1 (2015), pp. 3–17; «Согдийские Христианские тексты: комплексный Кодикологический обзор» Паёми донишгоҳи миллии Тоҷикистон (бахши илмҳои филологӣ) 2016 4/7, стр. 21–26; «Текст и рукопись: о преемственности и сохранении сирийской литературы в согдийских христианских текстах». Ученые записки. Худжандского государственного университета им. Академика Б. Гафурова», серии гуманитарно-общественных наук, 1/2017. стр. 137–143. For examination of the archaeological evidence in the context of the Central Asian Christian archaeology see Ashurov, “Inculturation matérielle de l’Église d’Orient en Asie Centrale: témoignages archéologiques” In P. G. Borbone & P. Marsone (éds.), *Le christianisme syriaque en Asie Centrale et en Chine (Études syriaques 12)*, Paris, 2015, pp. 161–183. For the examination of the numismatic evidence see Ashurov, “Coins convey a message: numismatic evidence for ‘Sogdian Christianity’” In *Central Asiatic Journal* (forthcoming).

2. Small material culture objects comprising a wide spectrum of items with personal or communal devotional characteristics, such as pendant crosses and incense burners or other general objects like lanterns or ceramic tiles on which crosses are inscribed.

In the absence of historical texts on the advance of Christianity into Sogdiana, this material evidence is extremely valuable, since it represents a direct, local Sogdian image of Christianity as an inherently integrated religion. In other words, this material evidence is evidence of the fact that Christianity in Sogdiana was an established and visible presence for several centuries. Accordingly, a comment can be offered on whether Christianity remained an imported religion or whether it had a genuine local expression that was represented in local material culture.

Medieval attestations of “Christian architecture” in Sogdiana and the current archaeological situation

Several medieval sources inform us of “Christian architecture” in Sogdiana, that is to say, the existence and functioning of either a church or monastery building. In particular, there are two main medieval historical attestations about Christian architecture in Sogdiana.

The first is the *Šūrat al-ʿArḍ* by Abu al-Qasim Ibn Hawqal, a 10th century Arab geographer, who reports:

Al-Sāwdār is a mountain to the south of Samarkand ... On Sāwdār [there is] a monastery of the Christians where they gather and have their cells. I found many Iraqī Christians there who migrated to the place because of its suitability, solitary location and healthiness. It has inalienable properties (*waqīf*), and many Christians retreat to it; this place towers over the major part of Sogd and is known as Wazkird.²

In 1894 Barthold made the first attempt to locate the above-mentioned “monastery of Christians”.³ He suggested that Sāwdār, as mentioned by Ibn Hawqal, was possibly a mountain range directly south of Samarqand surrounding the towns of Qara-teppa and Urgut, in the modern-day Urgut region. Some years later, Vasily Viatkin identified the Wazkird as the town called Wizd that is recorded in the *waqf* documents.⁴ He proposed that the Wizd might be the contemporary town of Qinghir, which was also located in the Urgut region.

Although the precise location of the monastery was not identified for a long time, it was commonly accepted that it was somewhere in the Urgut region. The “Urgut church” was finally located and unearthed between 2004 and 2007 (details are given below).

²English translation reproduced after A. Savchenko, “Urgut Revisited”, *Aram*, 8 (1996), p. 333. A French translation of this passage is cited in J. H. Kramers and G. Wiet, *Configuration de la Terre (Kitāb Šūrat al-ard)* (Paris, 1964), p. 478. A. Savchenko and M. Dickens, “Prester John’s Realm: New Light on Christianity Between Merv and Turfan”, in *The Christian Heritage of Iraq: Collected Papers from the Christianity of Iraq I-V Seminar Days*, (ed.) E. C. D. Hunter (Piscataway, 2009) pp. 126–127, provide a slightly different translation of this passage. A similar reference to Sāwdār is found in Ibn Hawqal’s younger contemporary, al-Istakhri, who relied on the former for this information.

³V. Barthold, “Otchjot o komadirovke v Srednyu Aziyu”, *Trudy*, 4, 1966, p. 110.

⁴Savchenko, “Urgut Revisited”, p. 334.

The second mention of Christian architecture in Sogdiana is to be found in *The history of Bukhara* (943 CE) by Abu Bakr Narshakhi, a native of Bukhara, who wrote in early 10th century:

When you enter the city proper, the quarter to the left is called the “quarter of the rogues”. Before this time a Christian church was there, but now it is a mosque of the Banī Hanzala.⁵

In contrast to Ibn Hawqal’s testimony, Narshakhi’s report has not yet been confirmed by archaeological evidence. No church building has been excavated in Bukhara to date, although other material evidence is available, such as coins.⁶

Judging from the topographic position of the church described in the text, it was located in the southwestern part of the Bukhara citadel; that is to say, outside the “core” of the city proper, which was surrounded by the citadel.⁷ This led Naymark to opine that “it was definitely not the main temple of the city”, which implies that it was probably a small chapel or parish.⁸ On the other hand, Narshakhi’s observation that this church was converted into a mosque for one of the four main Arab tribes participating in campaigns—the Banī Hanzala—might suggest otherwise. It is likely that the area in which the church was located played a significant role in the overall economy or social life of the city, and this may have prompted the decision to convert it into a mosque.⁹ Furthermore, one may also posit that the presence of a church in that part of Bukhara suggests that there was a sizeable Christian community there. This implies that the conversion of the church into a mosque was strategic: that it was intended to attract a large group of people (who may have been from various social strata, for example artisans, architects and so on) to the new religion of the city.

Equally, the fact that Narshakhi has included this information in his history also suggests that in its time the church in Bukhara was an important institution. As a native of the region, he may have heard of this church first-hand or might even have seen it himself (albeit when it was no longer a church but a mosque). Accordingly, its inclusion should be regarded as signifying the importance of the church, at least for the area outside the city’s citadel if not for the entire Bukharan oasis. This is suggested by the fact that Narshakhi was selective about the data he included in his work. Thus, he mentioned the church converted into a mosque in the Semirechye,¹⁰ but remained silent about the Urgut church, which was functioning in his time but only mentioned by Ibn Hawqal some three decades later. However, for historiographical purposes, Narshakhi’s record is a significant testimony as it allows us to pinpoint areas which possibly had dense Christian communities in Sogdiana and beyond.

⁵R. Frye (translation), *The History of Bukhara* [*Tarikhī Bukhoro* by Narshakhi] (Cambridge, MA, 1954; new edition: Princeton, NJ, 2007), p. 53.

⁶However, in light of the ongoing archaeological excavation at the oasis of Bukhara it is probable that the archaeological evidence for this site will emerge at some point in the future. This situation is similar to that in Mesopotamia and elsewhere in the Middle East where examples of ecclesiastical architecture were discovered gradually as excavations by various institutions were undertaken.

⁷I. Umniakov, “K voprosu istoricheskoi topografii srednevekovoi Bukhary”, in *Sbornik Turkestanskogo vostochnogo instituta v chest’ A. E. Shmidt’a* (Tashkent, 1923), p. 149; [4] A. Belenitskiy, I. Bentovich and O. Bol’shakov, *Srednevekovij gorod Sredney Azii* (Leningrad, 1973), p. 238.

⁸A. Naymark, “Sogdiana, its Christians and Byzantium: A Study of Artistic and Cultural Connections in Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages”, PhD thesis, Indiana University, 2001, pp. 293.

⁹Frye, *The History of Bukhara*, pp. 54–55; on p. 58 he mentions of the following Arab tribes: Banī Hanzala, Banī Asad, Banī Sa’d and Banī Quraish.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 87, p. 150.

Archaeological situation¹¹

In Sogdiana, the only definite Christian architecture excavated to date is the Urgut church.¹² The paucity of Christian architecture contrasts with the overwhelming bulk of religious architecture representing Buddhist and Zoroastrian structures.¹³

However, this trend is not limited to Sogdiana, but is pertinent to the whole Central Asian region, where only six identifiably Christian edifices, including the Urgut church, have been excavated. These are the “Oval house” monastery,¹⁴ the Kharoba-Koshuk church,¹⁵ the Aq-Beshim “building IV”¹⁶ and “building VIII”¹⁷, and the Termez church.¹⁸

¹¹V. Gaibov and G. Koshelenko, “Khristianskie arkhelogicheskie pamyatniki na Vostoke (pervoe tysyacheletie n.e)”, *Khristianskij Vostok*, 4 (2006), pp. 136–177, provide a comprehensive survey of the archaeological evidence relevant to the question of the history of Christianity in Persia, Central Asia and Chinese Turkestan.

¹²There has been one other architectural site discovered in the Urgut region that has been interpreted as a Christian church, which is known as “Koshtepa 1”. For a ground plan and discussion, see M. M. Iskhakov, Sh. S. Tashkhodzhaev and T. K. Khodzhajov, “Raskopki Koshtepa”, *IMK*, XIII (1977), pp. 88–97 (reproduced in Maria Adelaide Lala Commeno, “Nestorianism in Central Asia During the First Millennium: Archaeological Evidence”, *Journal of the Assyrian Academic Society*, 11, 1 (1997), pp. 34–45). Some authors base their interpretation on the ground plan, which resembles Byzantine church plans; however, they do not provide any specific parallels. Further, on interpreting the function of this site they rely on the semantics of a depiction found on the rim of a *khum* (large ceramic vessel shred found *in situ*). The image displays two male figures both in elaborate clothing: one is depicted standing, holding a book in one hand and a cross in the other; the second is shown kneeling down and seems to be wearing a crown. It is believed that this depicts a baptismal ceremony. This evidence, however, cannot be located. Despite the fact that this site has been identified and accepted as Christian in much of the literature, I would question whether or not this is, in fact, a church. First of all, one shard showing a Christian scene is not compelling evidence that the building had a Christian ritual use—a larger assemblage of items with a Christian provenance is needed to confirm this attribution. Second, taken together with Christian architecture’s unusual floor plan and the lack of other architectural and material evidence pointing to Christian ritual use, I am inclined to think that this was not a church.

¹³In present scholarship, the best comparative studies on the history of Central Asian architecture are: S. Khmel'nitskiĭ, *Mezhdū Arabami i Turkami. Arkhitektura Srednej Azii 9–10 vv.* (Berlin, Riga, 1992); S. Khmel'nitskiĭ, *Mezhdū Samanidami i Mongolami. Arkhitektura Srednej Azii 11–13 vv.* (Berlin, Riga, 1996); and S. Khmel'nitskiĭ, *Mezhdū Kushanami i Arabami. Arkhitektura Srednej Azii 5–8 vv.*: revised and enlarged edition of S. Chemelnizkiĭ, *Zwischen Kuschanen und Arabern: die Architektur Mittelasiens im V.-VIII.Jh.: ein Rückblick in die Kulturgeschichte der Sowjetunion* (Berlin, 2000). These works systematically address the historical development of various architectural patterns in extant evidence from Central Asia. The author’s classification of sites takes into account all kinds of architectural remains, such as houses, castles, forts, palaces, and public and memorial buildings. In particular, his study of “cult” architecture, including places of worship, shrines and burials, is most relevant as it includes discussions of Christian architecture in Central Asia (based on remains found in Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan). A concise discussion, including comprehensive relevant bibliographic references, on the genesis of the Sogdian indigenous religions and on Zoroastrian architecture, using the example of Panjikent temples, is found in V. Shkoda, *Pendzhikentskie khramy i problem religii Sogda (5–8 vv.)* (St Petersburg, 2009), pp. 60–68. Naymark, “Sogdiana, its Christians and Byzantium”, pp. 299–308, discusses the Christian architecture of Central Asia as well as known architecture in Sogdiana.

¹⁴G. Ja. Dresvjanskaya, “Ovalnyj khram' khristianskoj obshini v Merve”, in *TYU TAKE 15* (Turkmenistan, 1974), pp. 155–181.

¹⁵G. A. Pugačenkova, “Kharoba-Koshuk”, *IAN TSSR*, 4 (1954).

¹⁶L. Kyzlasov, “Arheologičeskie issledovanija na gorodišče Ak-Bešim v 1953–1954 gg”, in *Trudy kirgizskoj arheologo-etnograficheskoj ekspedicii 2* (Moskva, 1959), pp. 55–227. The term used in Russian excavation reports is “объект—object”. Since it refers to architecture here, it is designated “building”. G. Semenov, “Istorija arheologičeskogo izučeniija Ak-Beshima”, in *Sūyāb. Aq-Beshim, Arkheologičeskogo ekspeditsiya gosudarstvennogo Ermitazha*, (St Petersburg, 2002) pp. 4–10, provides a comprehensive survey of the history of research in Aq-Beshim.

¹⁷G. Semenov and K. Tashbaeva, “Raskopki v Aq-Beshime v 1996 gody”, in *Sūyāb. Aq-Beshim, Arkheologičeskogo ekspeditsiya gosudarstvennogo Ermitazha* (St Petersburg, 1997) pp. 48–51; G. Semenov, “Raskopki 1996–1998 g.”, in *Sūyāb. Aq-Beshim, Arkheologičeskogo ekspeditsiya gosudarstvennogo Ermitazha* (St Petersburg, 2002) pp. 11–115. The term used in Russian excavation reports is “объект—object”. Since it refers to architecture here, it is designated “building”.

¹⁸L. Albaum, “Khristianskij khram v starom Termeze”, in *Iz istorii drevnykh kul'tov Srednei Azii: Khristianstvo*, (ed.) L. Zhukova (Tashkent, 1994) pp. 34–41.

Nevertheless, as Sergei Khmel'nitskiĭ remarked, "the Christian architecture of pre-Islamic Central Asia falls behind the Buddhist one, in quantity of conserved and researched monumental remains, but not in historical and cultural significance".¹⁹ [5] Thus, the scarcity of known Christian (ecclesiastical and monastic) architectural remains does not imply that the Church of the East (which, until the arrival of the Latin-speaking missionaries in Central Asia in the 13th century, was the main expression of Christianity) had only established a few institutions. The surviving examples of Christian architecture are thus significant testimony to the existence of an architectural tradition within the Church of the East in Sogdiana, which was still extant in the 13th century.

In his travelogue, *Oriente Poliano*, Marco Polo made particular mention of a church in the city of Samarqand commemorating the conversion of Chagatai and dedicated to John the Baptist.²⁰ James Ryan has recently cast doubt on Polo's account, stating that "the report that the Eljigidei Khan (1327–1330 CE) built a church at Samarkand, dedicated to St John Baptist, raises questions; a suspiciously similar report was made concerning Chaghatay, who supposedly constructed a church of the same name at "Summachra"."²¹ However, the significance of Polo's account, over and above its historical accuracy, is that in the 13th century in Sogdiana there existed an unambiguously recognisable Christian structure.

Therefore, this may be considered to support the proposal that there was a continuous tradition of Christian architecture in the region of Sogdiana, distinct from that of other faiths. Furthermore, the fact that Samarqand was one of the provinces of the Church of the East also suggests the possible existence of various further Christian architectural structures in the region, which remain undiscovered. According to the archaeological observations report by Yuri Buryakov et al., conducted in the course of construction projects near Registan Square in Samarqand in 1968, a mosaic with an equatorial cross pattern was uncovered on the excavation floor, about 6–7 metres deep. In the same report, it is said that some metallic (bronze) pendants in the shape of equilateral crosses were recovered; however, no physical evidence of these artefacts exists today.²² Considering the material evidence collected during the excavation in Registan Square, which largely belongs to the Timurid Era (14th–15th centuries), the church remains noted in the report could have been those of the Church of St John the Baptist recorded by Polo or his possible informant Mar Sergius.

¹⁹Khmel'nitskiĭ, *Mezhdū Kushanami i Arabami*, p. 241. He found it problematic that, on the one hand, the literary sources tell of the continuous presence of Christianity from as early as the 3rd century, but that, on the other hand, archaeology has not yielded much material evidence, especially architectural.

²⁰R. Latham, *The Travels of Marco Polo* (London, 1981), pp. 61–62.

²¹J. Ryan, "Preaching Christianity Along the Silk Road: Missionary Outposts in the Tartar "Middle Kingdom" in the Fourteenth Century", *Journal of Early Modern History*, 2 (1998), p. 366.

²²E. Buryakova and Yu. Buryakov, "Novye arkhelogicheskie materialy k stratigrafii srednevekovogo Samarqanda (po raskopkam ploshadi Registana v 1969–1971)", in *Afrasiab vypusk. 2* (Tashkent, 1972), pp. 174–223. During my field work in Uzbekistan, I met with Yuri Buryakov, who was the lead archaeologist, and surveyed the materials uncovered during the project at the Samarqand Museum's warehouse at Afrasiab, but could not find these items in the collection. According to Buryakov, the photographs that were taken have been lost and no other material proof exists, so all we have is his testimony as an eyewitness.

The Urgut church

The Urgut church is located about 30 km from Samarqand in Sufiyon Mahala, in the area also known as Sulaimonteppa (Hill of Solomon). Preliminary investigation of the site was carried out between 1995 and 1999 by members of the East Sogdian Archaeological Expedition. A systematic excavation of the site was then undertaken between 2004 and 2007 by the expedition in cooperation with the Samarqand Institute of Archaeology. The excavation team was led by Alexei Savchenko.

To date, no specific comprehensive hard-copy publication about this site has been made available.²³ The only available material includes brief reports from each excavation season, published on the webpage of the Society for Exploration of Eurasia.²⁴ Additionally, five short articles have been published, three of which deal primarily with background literature and the issue of the localisation of the site based on Ibn Hawqal's reference.²⁵

Physical format and ground plan

The Urgut church building was rectangular, with two naves oriented in an easterly direction with a deviation of 3° to the north.²⁶ The walls of the structure were made of different sorts of baked bricks typical of the Samanid and Qarakhanid period.²⁷

The naves were separated by a raised platform (*bema*) in the centre, measuring 9.30 × 3.35 metres. The skeletal (contour) wall of the *bema* was built from fired bricks of 30 × 15 × 5 centimetres and was filled with tightly compacted loess.²⁸

The main entrance, with an arched doorway, was situated in the western wall with a “rectangular narthex paved with altering rows of long and cross-laid fired bricks”, which led directly into the northern nave.²⁹ The main entrance, according to the results of the 2006 excavation, “had been filled with rubble, which probably indicates a squatter occupational period of the complex”.³⁰ The floor of this nave was paved in two layers of ceramic tiles (30 × 20 × 2.5 cm).

²³I have been informed by Mark Dickens that archaeological material from Urgut, including epigraphic evidence, will appear in the *Journal of Semitic Studies* in due course.

²⁴For relevant reports concerning the excavation of this site, see http://www.exploration-eurasia.com/Eur-Asia/inhalt_english/projekt_2.htm, [accessed 28 March 2018].

²⁵On the historical background of this monument, including a wide range of bibliographical references and images from excavations, see Savchenko, “Urgut Revisited”, pp. 333–354; Savchenko, “Po sledam arabskykh geografov”, pp. 333–338; A. Savchenko, “Po povodu hristianskogo selenija Urgut”, *Zapiski vostoč nogo otdelenija rossijskogo arheologiičeskogo obščestva*, 2, 37 (2006), pp. 551–555; Savchenko and Dickens, “Prester John's Realm”, pp. 121–135; A. Savchenko, “Östliche Urkirche in Usbekistan”, *Antike Welt*, 2, 10 (2010), pp. 74–82.

²⁶Savchenko, “Po sledam arabskykh geografov”, p. 335.

²⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 336–337. The available archaeological reports do not explicitly explain whether this variation of fired bricks used in construction of the church (Samanid (819–999 CE) and Qarakhanid era (999–1211 CE)) implies that the building was constructed in different phases or whether it was subsequently repaired. However, considering that the edifice was not very big, I am inclined to the explanation of subsequent repairs, which is logical based on the supposition that the church was continually functioning.

²⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 336–337.

²⁹Savchenko and Dickens, “Prester John's Realm”, p. 128.

³⁰A. Savchenko, “Excavations in Urgut: June–July 2006 Progress Report”: http://www.exploration-eurasia.com/EurAsia/inhalt_english/projekt_2.htm#2006, [accessed 30 March 2018].

The southern nave was connected and accessed from the northern nave by a narrow corridor, accessed immediately from the entrance.³¹ Like the northern aisle, it also extended along the east-west axis and was framed by a mud brick wall approximately 1.5-metres thick and faced with several rows of fired brick from the inside. It had two doorways on the southern wall, one of which was intentionally filled with rubble and brick pieces.

The floor in the southern nave was paved by fired bricks of $23 \times 23 \times 5$ cm.³² In both naves, cubical altars built of fired bricks were located at the chancel in the east end. Steps (stone steps in the northern nave and fired brick steps in the southern nave) marked the entrance of the chancel, accessed through a low narrow passage in the Church of the East liturgical-architectural tradition called a *šqāqōnā*.³³ The layout of the chancel in the northern nave was cross-shaped. To the south, it was flanked by another room, which possibly functioned as a *diaconicon* (a room used by deacons to prepare the Eucharist elements or where the baptism font was situated). Due to the poor state of preservation, the exact layout of this chamber cannot be reconstructed. However, its function as part of the liturgical furnishing of the church can be discerned from the difference in the formation of the paving and the bricks discovered between the northern and southern chancels in the east end of the church.

At the east end of the southern nave, the floor elevates to form several steps leading outside the main eastern wall, beyond which are the remains of another building. Judging from the gypsum plastering of the paved floor, it appears to have been integral to the church proper. Present in the centre of the building is a rectangular base (altar?) built of fired brick. At the rear end, the wall had a round-shaped niche furnished with a ceramic plaque. Its furnishings, rectangular base and niche are thought to “suggest its use as an oratorium [that was] external to the main nave”.³⁴

The Urgut church complex also had a separate kitchen and dining hall, both located to the north. The dining hall had the “same proportions and the altar-like structure of the eastern end” but lacked the liturgical furnishings present in the northern and southern naves.³⁵ A wine cellar was located in the west, adjunct to the southern nave’s external wall and possibly a tower.³⁶

³¹Savchenko and M. Dickens, “Prester John’s Realm”, pp. 128–130, made an assumption that the northern nave was probably the main chapel, because it had an entrance on the western wall of the church. However, given the fact that the southern nave was longer and wider in size, I wonder if this assumption can be qualified in some other manner. In addition, the northern nave had two doorways, although the dating of the closing of these doorways is not known. Considering this fact in relation to the size of the nave, it may be that the northern nave was the main hall and thus required two entrances/exits.

³²Savchenko, “Po sledam arabskykh geografov”, pp. 336–337.

³³Discussion of this liturgical architectural element of the East Syriac church is found in E. Loosley, *The Architecture and Liturgy of the Bema in Fourth-to-sixth-century Syrian Churches* (Leiden, 2012), p. 9. She describes it as “the sacred pathway”, similar to the *solea* known in Greek-speaking areas of Syria. “Whilst the *solea* appears to have fulfilled a practical function in linking the sanctuary to the *ambon*, the *bet-šqāqone* appears to have had a more mystical dimension as the bridge between the heavenly and the earthly Jerusalem. This phenomenon of the *bet-šqāqone* seems to have been exclusively linked to Mesopotamia and we cannot immediately extend this concept to the *bemata* of Syria or Tur ‘Abdin”.

³⁴A. Savchenko, “Excavations in Urgut: August–October 2005 Progress Report”: http://www.exploration-eurasia.com/EurAsia/inhalt_english/projekt_2.htm, [accessed 30 March 2018].

³⁵A. Savchenko, “Excavations in Urgut: June–July 2007 Progress Report”: http://www.exploration-eurasia.com/EurAsia/inhalt_english/projekt_2.htm#2007, [accessed 30 March 2018].

³⁶Savchenko, “Östliche Urkirche in Usbekistan”, pp. 77–79. However, Savchenko does not discuss the basis of his view about the existence of a tower in the Urgut church. The ground plan provided and the foundations of the church do not suggest it included a tower.

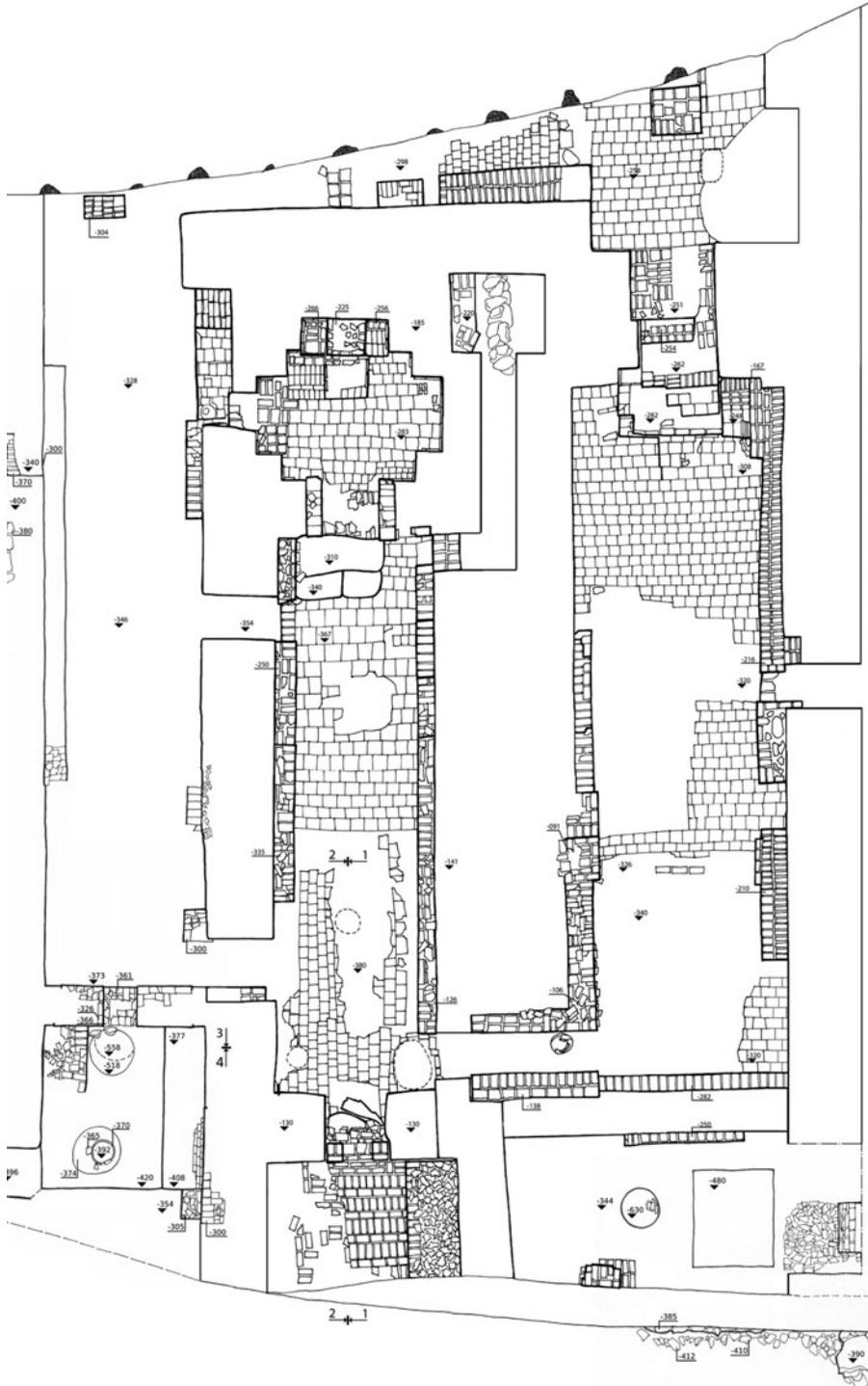


Fig. 1. The ground plan of the Urgut church. © Savchenko, 2010.

In his description of the architectural elements of the Urgut church, Savchenko asserts that the platform in the middle served “as a base for a church tower”.³⁷ However, it is unlikely that the church included a tower, particularly in the view of Savchenko’s previous identification of this platform in 2005 as a *bema*.³⁸

The overall layout of the complex can be conveniently described as two aisles separated by a raised platform in the centre ... The top of the platform could be reached through the aperture in its western wall, which must have been followed by a mud brick or loess stairway, not preserved. I believe that the most plausible interpretation of this platform is as a *bēma*, which played an important role in the liturgical setting of the Eastern Syrian churches and was situated in the centre of the nave (although the exact position varies).³⁹

Construction material and furnishings

The Urgut church was built from fired and mud bricks of varying shapes and size (30 × 15 × 5 cm, 23 × 23 × 5 cm, 30 × 30 × 5 cm, and 27 × 8 × 5 cm). However, from the reports, it is not possible to determine if the different-size bricks indicate the different wall sections for which they were used—skeletal wall, internal wall, on the foundation level, or on the upper level—or different phases of construction—repair or sections that were added later.⁴⁰ In the archaeological reports, only the brick size used for the construction of the *bema* has been clearly specified (30 × 15 × 5 cm).⁴¹

Ceramic tiles (30 × 20 × 2.5 cm) and fired bricks were used for the pavement in the interior. Most tiles still intact in the building are those that were used on the floor. A tile fragment engraved with the symbol of the cross, which was found during the excavation, was probably used to decorate the wall. The “fragments of decorative plaster and remains of emerald-green, carmine, ochre, white and cobalt stucco” found among rubble, which might have fallen from a wall, indicate that some sections of the interior walls also had coloured ornaments.⁴²

The internal walls were furnished with niches, probably to hold lanterns and other liturgical objects.⁴³ The walls were approximately 3 metres high and 1.5 metres thick.⁴⁴

³⁷Savchenko and Dickens, “Prester John’s Realm”, p. 128.

³⁸A *bema* is a raised platform usually set in the centre of the *haykla* (nave) facing east; however, current archaeological examples display different positionings of the *bema*. From a liturgical perspective, the *bema* is an important component in the structure of the ecclesiastical architecture of Church of the East and is used for performing liturgical celebrations. A more recent comprehensive study of the *bema*, based on surveying archaeological evidence from North Syria and Tur ‘Abdin, including a thorough examination of primary sources, is found in E. Loosley, *The Architecture and Liturgy of the Bema in Fourth-to-sixth-century Syrian Churches* (Kaslik, Liban, 2003).

³⁹Savchenko, “Excavations in Urgut: August–October 2005 Progress Report”.

⁴⁰Savchenko, “Po sledam arabskykh geografov”, pp. 336–337.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, p. 337.

⁴²A. Savchenko, “Excavations 2004: Brief Report: http://www.exploration-eurasia.com/EurAsia/inhalt_english/projekt_2.htm, [accessed 30 March 2018]”.

⁴³Savchenko and Dickens, “Prester John’s Realm”, p. 129. Although the author here refers to “a great many oil-lamps typical of the area [that] were found during the excavations throughout the site”, the material culture objects referred to in the reports include one sample of a half-preserved stone lantern and one well-preserved ceramic lantern typical of the 13th century.

⁴⁴Savchenko, “Excavations 2004”. The excavation report mentions the thickness of the outer wall of the southern nave only. Here this measurement is applied to the entire outer wall, assuming uniformity in construction. However, it is possible that the wall dividing the “northern” nave and the refectory was of a different thickness, as it



Fig. 2. (Colour online) The church with the platform (*bema*) in the centre, seen from the east. Image reproduced after Savchenko, 2004, 'Excavations 2004: Brief Report' online resource.



Fig. 3. (Colour online) Hypothetical 3D model of the Urgut church, based on the ground plan given in Savchenko, 2010, p. 78.

Commenting on the layout of the wall, Savchenko states that, “despite being very neatly erected, [they] deviate from the magnetic axis by 15°. This [aberration might be] explained by the simple fact that, in the absence of a compass, the builders’ only reference points were those of sunrise and sunset”.⁴⁵

Access and doorways

Although the church had one main entrance (indicated by its arched layout and narthex), based on descriptions of the doorways and the functionality of some of the adjunct chambers, the church could have been accessible from four sides:

- From the south: through the southern nave, indicated by two doorways, one of which was discovered at the time of excavation to have been sealed off by rubble.
- From the west: via the narthex leading into the northern nave.
- From the kitchen: the refectory was connected by two doorways visible in the main northern wall. How the kitchen was accessed is not described. However, it was probably had entrances on both western sides, aligned with the main church entrance, as well as on the east end. It is impossible to imagine that firewood or other products used in the kitchen would have been carried in through the main nave.

Although the state of the preservation of the wall does not allow for the reconstruction of any windows in the church, it is possible that the church had some sort of fenestration. The main light source was probably from oil lanterns that were kept in the niches within the church.

Architectural parallels

Discussing the architectural layout of the Urgut church complex, Savchenko said that “the main problem presented by the ground plan is that of the prototypes”.⁴⁶ However, the major architectural feature of the Urgut church—the cross-shaped chancel terminating at the nave—has parallels in the church architecture of both Central Asia, exemplified by the church complexes discovered at Aq-Beshim,⁴⁷ and of churches of the Tur Abdin region and Hira.⁴⁸ In Savchenko’s opinion, “the closest architectural parallel seems to be found in Church 7 in Hakkari”.⁴⁹ This impression was based, however, on the visual features of the

was an inner, not an outer, wall. Again, however, if the refectory happened to be later addition to the church building and was not covered by the church roof, then it could be that this dividing wall was an outer wall and had the same dimensions. But without the availability of proper measurements, it is hard to decide.

⁴⁵Savchenko, “Excavations in Urgut: August–October 2005 Progress Report”.

⁴⁶Savchenko, “Excavations in Urgut: June–July 2006 Progress Report”.

⁴⁷For a history of the archaeological research at Aq-Beshim and results of the most recent excavations, including relevant bibliographic references, see Semenov, “Raskopki 1996–1998 g.”, pp. 4–114.

⁴⁸A relevant bibliography and ground plans of the churches is found in Savchenko, “Excavations in Urgut: June–July 2006 Progress Report”.

⁴⁹*Ibid.* This church (church 7) was identified as Mar Awraha by C. Dauphin, “Rediscovery of the Nestorian Churches of the Hakkari (South Eastern Turkey)”, *Eastern Churches Review*, VIII (1976), pp. 56–67. Savchenko, “По sledam arabskykh geografov”, p. 337, also includes Sir Bani Yas in his list of the “prototypes”. “Исходя из планировки помещения, строительных техник и материалов, ближайшими параллелями являются христианские монастыри того же времени на острове Сир Бани Йас у побережья Абу Даби”.



Fig. 4. Collapsed arches of the main entrance viewed from the inside of the church. Reproduced after Savchenko, 2005.

ground plans of these two churches and no further comprehensive comparative examination between them was undertaken.⁵⁰

Date

Archaeological examination has revealed that the Urgut church underwent several phases of occupation, and that its decline was gradual and took place over a long period.⁵¹ Based on numismatic evidence, specifically a bronze coin of Turghar (type B) dated to the first quarter of the 8th century as well as the C-14 dating of organic materials and ceramics, the church

⁵⁰The excavation reports, including existing publications, do not provide detailed synchronic examination of the structure with its so-called prototypes. Only as visual examples of the ground plan are given. Further, the place of this edifice within the framework of the development of the architecture of the Church of the East is not also taken into account.

⁵¹The various phases of the occupation of the church, however, are not satisfactorily explained. The only evidence of these in the reports is that certain doorways were filled with rubble. However, an architectural analysis might be another possible way to examine this, by, for example, analysing the use of different shapes or sizes of bricks, which differ from the original brickwork and could well indicate repair works or an additional building phase.

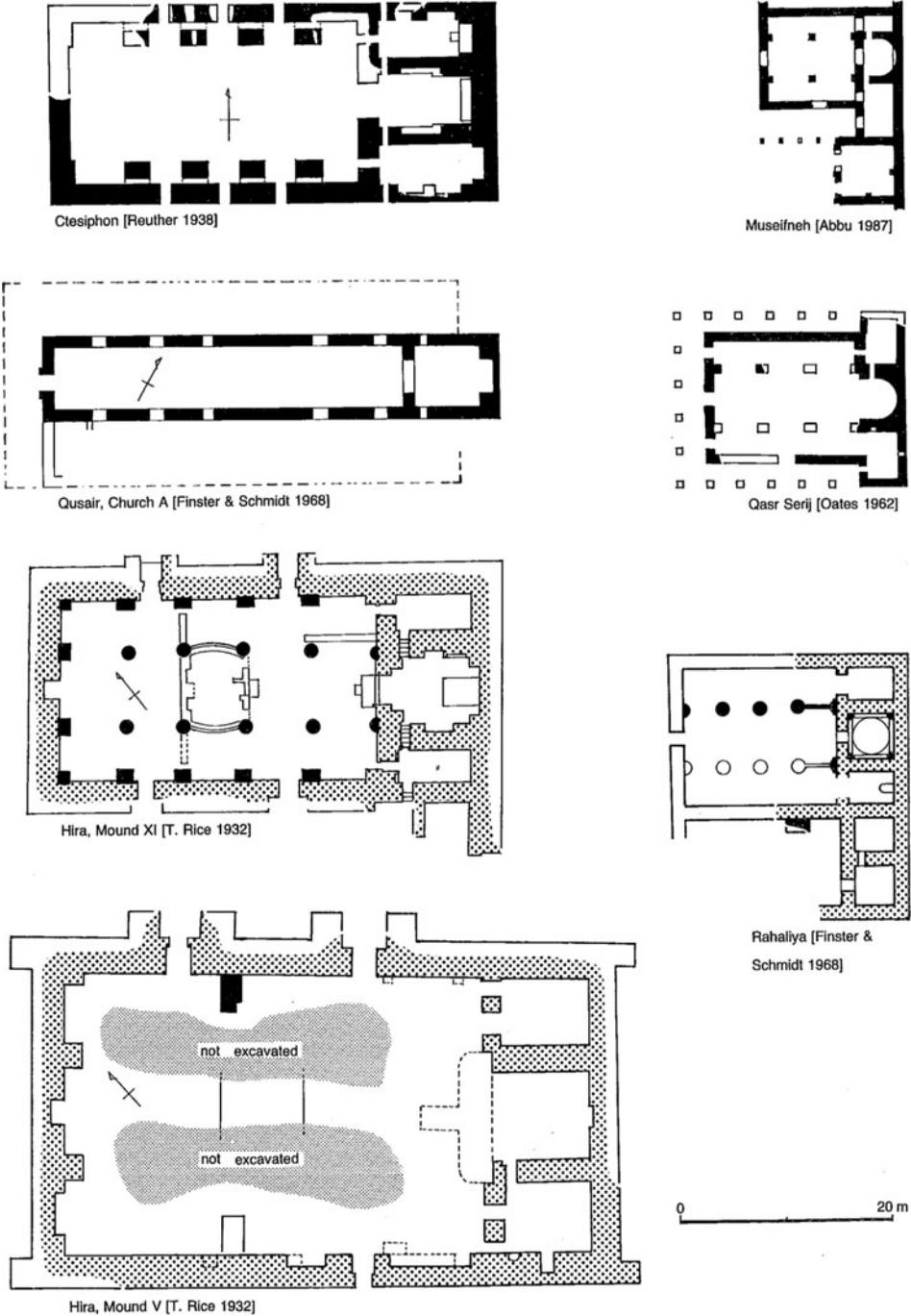


Fig. 5. Early churches from Iraq. Reproduced after Okada, 1991, p. 75.

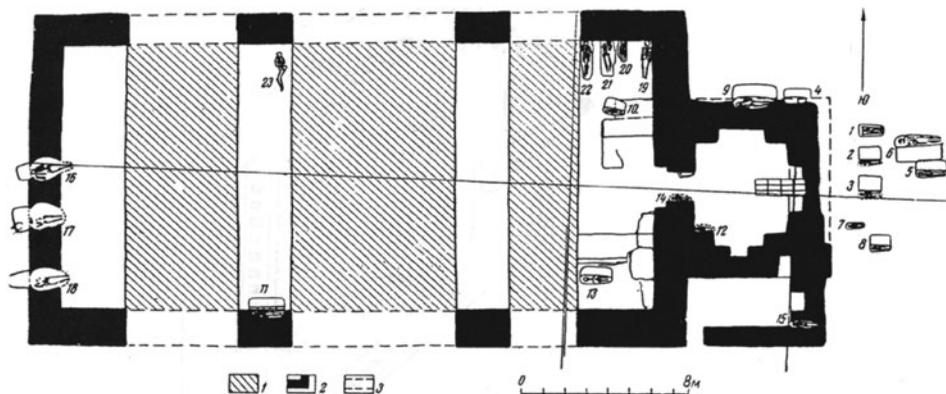


Fig. 6. Aq-Beshim “building IV”. The image also shows the burials that were discovered. Reproduced from Kyzlasov, 1954, p. 223.

functioned between the 7th and 13th centuries.⁵² Collateral evidence that may point to the date of the Urgut church is the Syriac inscription incised on a rock at nearby Qizil-qiya which records “August of the year 1206 [of Alexander]”, that is August 895.⁵³

The Urgut church: architectural contexts

The architectural typology of the Urgut church, including its liturgical architectural elements, is comparable to existing examples of Christian architecture known both in Mesopotamia and Central Asia.⁵⁴ Specifically, it displays similarities with East Syrian church architecture. As such, the first aspect of its architectural reality is that it represents the architectural style of a specific ecclesiastical tradition, namely the Church of the East, which for many centuries was the dominant expression of Christianity east of the Euphrates and beyond, in Central Asia and China.

Consequently, although it is the only evidence from Sogdiana, typologically it is part of a larger group of architectural corpora. On the basis of its architectural features, the Urgut church can be placed both in its immediate regional context, that is Sogdiana/Central Asia, as well as in the wider and more geographically extensive context of the Church of the East. The majority of the architectural evidence of the Church of the East known today has been found in Mesopotamia proper, that is east of the Euphrates at Ctesiphon and in the western flank of Hira, as well as down the Gulf and further afield in the eastern

⁵²Savchenko, “Excavations in Urgut: June–July 2006: Progress Report”. However, Turghar’s reign was not in the first quarter of the 8th century, as suggested by Savchenko. As established by O. Smirnova, *Svodnyii katalog Sogdijjskikh monet (bronz)* (Moscow, 1981), pp. 44–45, the Turghar type 2 coins were issued in “40-м годам VIII в., последние—к 755 г”, that is circa 740–755 CE. Accordingly, the Urgut Church functioned from the 8th to 13th centuries.

⁵³M. Tardieu, “Un site chrétien dans la Sogdiane des Sâmânides”, *Le Monde de la Bible*, 119 (1999), p. 42.

⁵⁴A relevant bibliography and ground plans of the churches is found in Savchenko, “Excavations in Urgut: June–July 2006 Progress Report”.

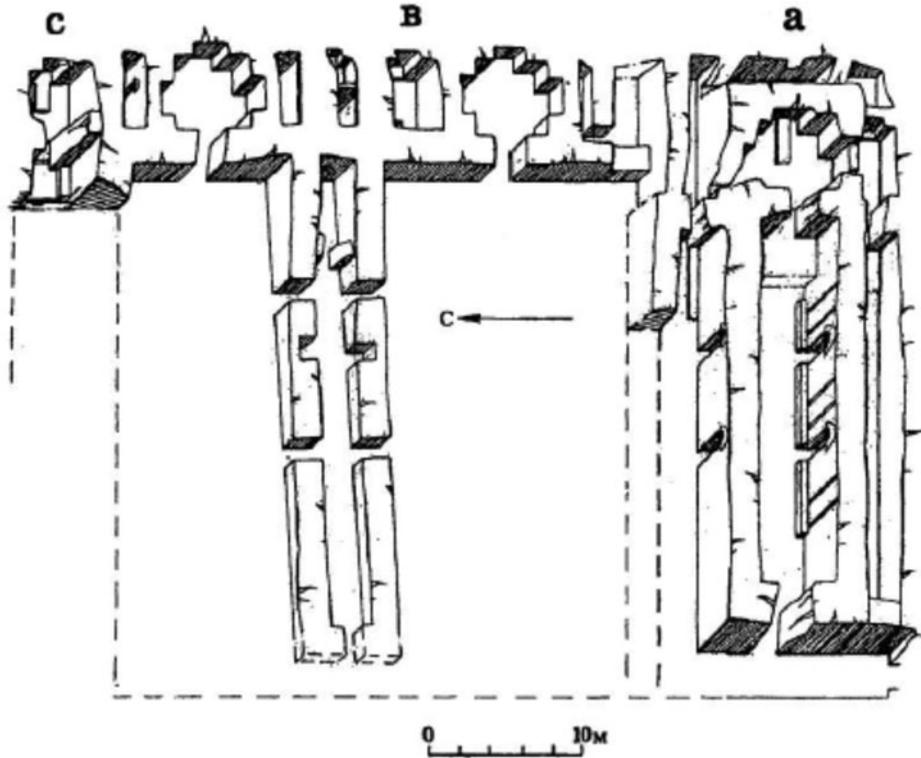


Fig. 7. Aq-Beshim “building VIII”. Reproduced from Semenov, 1999, p. 52.

extremities of the Sassanid Empire, at the Marv oasis, and in the Semirechye region en route to China.⁵⁵

Some examples of Church of the East architecture

The patriarchal church located in Seleucia that served as a “headquarters” for the Church of the East was excavated on the western side of the Ctesiphon, a twin city of Seleucia.⁵⁶ Oscar Reuther describes the church as having had a rectangular plan (27.18 x 15.06 metres), built of fired brick and a “[single] nave roofed with a barrel-vault supported on pillared walls”.⁵⁷ Its

⁵⁵For a comprehensive survey of the Christian architecture of Mesopotamia and its related architectural models in Central Asia, including a relevant bibliography, see E. C. D. Hunter and C. Horn, “Christianity in the Late Antique Near East”, in *A Companion to the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East* (Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World), (ed.) D. Potts (Oxford, 2012), pp. 1094–1112.

⁵⁶Excavations were carried out at the mound of Qasr bint al-Qadi by the German Oriental Society in 1928–29. As pointed out in Jean-Maurice Fiey, *Assyrie chrétienne contribution à l'étude de l'histoire et de la géographie ecclésiastiques et monastiques du nord de l'Irak* (Beirut, 1964), p. 3, the excavations in the twin cities of Seleucia and Ctesiphon were carried out between 1927 and 1932 by German and American teams. The reports and examinations of these excavations are found in O. Reuther, “The German Excavations at Ctesiphon”, *Antiquity*, 3 (1929), pp. 434–451, and E. Meyer, “Seleukia und Ktesiphon”, *Mitteilungen der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft zu Berlin*, 67 (1929), pp. 1–26. Fiey, *Assyrie chrétienne*, p. 18, poses the question of whether the Qasr bint al-Qadi was the “great” patriarchal church of Seleucia or not. So far this question remains open.

⁵⁷Reuther, “The German Excavations at Ctesiphon”, p. 449.

sanctuary was flanked by *pastophoria* (*prosthesis* and *diaconicon*).⁵⁸ These two were accessed via narrow doorways cut out of the western edge of these rooms. A special feature of the sanctuary chamber was that it had rectangular niches that were cut out of the north and south walls. The liturgical furnishing of the church did not include *bema*.⁵⁹

In addition, architectural examination revealed that this church was built on top of, possibly, the ruins of a smaller church, which had a narrower nave than the “upper” structure and thick, rounded pillars resting on square bases along the sidewalls.⁶⁰ The date of the monument (7th century) is confirmed by an ostracon bearing an inscription that was unearthed from a deposit under the church floor.⁶¹

Hira, southwest of Ctesiphon, on the western flank of Mesopotamia, bordering the great desert that stretched to Arabia and Syria, has yielded a significant amount of Christian architecture. This shows that it was an important locus of Christianity, as was recognised by later Muslim authors. At Hira, two church buildings (known as “Mound V” and “Mound XI”) were excavated which, based on their architectural features and mural paintings, were dated to between the 6th and 7th centuries.⁶²

“Hira-Mound XI” is a three-nave church built from mud bricks. The naves were divided by four pairs of detached columns. There was a barrier extending north–south across all three naves which, at the second pair of columns, divided the western two-fifths of the naves from the eastern nave. There are three rooms at the east end of the church: the sanctuary and the *pastophoria* which flanked it. The *pastophoria* were accessed via narrow doorways cut out of the western edge of these rooms.

The *bema* was positioned east of this barrier in the space occupying the central nave towards the east end. The *bema* walls in the north and south curved outwards and contained benches.⁶³

“Hira-Mound V”, though not well preserved, bears many similar architectural features to “Hira-Mound XI”, such as the presence of *bema* and *pastophoria*. However, as is evident from

⁵⁸According to the description of church architecture provided in the *Apostolic Constitutions* (2.57.1) “*pastophoria*” refers to two rooms, one on either side of the apse. Among other purposes, they were used to store the unused portion of the Eucharist (8.13). However, archaeological scholarship has designated one of these two chambers flanking the sanctuary or apse as a “*prosthesis*” (on the north side of the sanctuary), thought to be used for the preparation of the Eucharist; and the other (on the south side), a “*diaconicon*”. In Syrian Christian architecture these two architectural elements probably evolved from the late 4th century, assuming a distinctive form in the 5th century. Thus the *prosthesis* and *diaconicon* are typologically a characteristic of the architecture of eastern churches. However, as J. Descouedres, *Die Pastophorien im syro-byzantinischen Osten* (Wiesbaden, 1983), pp. 130–132, has shown, the special rite of preparation of the Eucharist—called *prosthesis* (in the Byzantine East tradition)—did not exist until the last part of the 11th century. The Eucharist before then was prepared at the entrance of the church or even outside it in a room known as the *sevophilacion*. In the existing early medieval literary sources the *diaconicon* was not assigned a function. Accordingly, *pastophoria* is perhaps a better term for the two chambers that are often found in Syrian Christian architecture. More discussion on these particular architectural elements is found in T. Hopfner, “Pastophoroi”, in *Real-encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, Vol. 18 (Stuttgart, 1949), pp. 2107–2109.

⁵⁹Reuther, “The German Excavations at Ctesiphon”, p. 449.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 449, Fig. 2.

⁶¹E. C. D. Hunter, “A Syriac Ostracon from Ctesiphon”, *al-Rafidan*, 18 (1997), pp. 361–367; the discussion about dating found on p. 366.

⁶²T. Rice, “Hira”, *JRCAS*, 19 (1932), pp. 254–268; T. Rice, “The Oxford Excavations at Hira, 1931”, *Antiquity*, 6 (1932), pp. 276–291; T. Rice, “The Oxford Excavations at Hira”, *Ars Islamica*, 1 (1934), pp. 51–73. For a comparative study of the architectural features of these churches, see Y. Okada, “Early Christian Architecture in the Iraqi South-Western Desert”, *al-Rafidan*, 12 (1991), pp. 71–83, and Y. Okada, “Ain Sha’ia and the Early Gulf Churches: An Architectural Analogy”, *al-Rafidan*, 13 (1992), pp. 87–93.

⁶³Rice, “The Oxford Excavations at Hira, 1931”, p. 280.

the excavated section, it was a one-nave church, although it is possible that columns existed in the sections that were excavated, which would mean that it had possibly two or three naves. Both church buildings at Hira were built with a southeasterly orientation. Excavation reports supply many fine examples of the plaster plaque crosses, which were used for the interior decoration of both churches.⁶⁴ However, it is not clear from the reports to which church specific pieces belonged.⁶⁵

The island of Kharg, which lies approximately 25 miles offshore from Bushire in the Persian Gulf opposite Bahrain, yielded the remains of a three-nave church constructed of dressed stone and probably roofed by a three-barrel vault.⁶⁶ The interior walls were decorated in stucco with stylistic features resembling Sassanid ornamentation.⁶⁷ The monastery, which forms an outer wall of the church, comprised about 60 cells, each with three small chambers. Several small ruins were also associated with the church and monastic dwellings. Roman Ghirshman considers them to have been the accommodation of married clergy.⁶⁸ However, it is also possible that these buildings, which were not far away, were used by pilgrims and visitors to the island. The church and monastic community of Kharg is believed to have come into existence from the 3rd century and continued until the 8th century.⁶⁹

The excavations at the site of Ain Sha'ia in southwestern Iraq unearthed a church and monastic complex.⁷⁰ The monastery was located in a fortified complex and the church was three-nave (measuring approximately 14 by 22 metres) decorated with stucco and murals, and with a brick-paved courtyard.⁷¹ The naves are divided by solid partition walls and there are three access points along their length. The east end has three rooms: a rectangular sanctuary flanked by *pastophoria*. The liturgical furnishing of the church did not include a *bema*.

Other edifices related to the Ain Sha'ia monastery are the so-called Dukakin caves. These caves are dug into marlstone stratum at the height of 40–45 metres in the cliff and are located to the west of the monastery. “They have twenty entrances on the north side and

⁶⁴Rice, “The Oxford Excavations at Hira, 1931”, pp. 283–284. A useful comparative study of the crosses from the Gulf churches is D. Potts, “Nestorian Crosses from Jabal Berri”, *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy*, 5 (1994), pp. 61–65, which also provides bibliographical references to other relevant works.

⁶⁵A more recent discussion of Hira and its Christian heritage is found in E. C. D. Hunter, “The Christian Matrix of al-Hira”, in *Chrétiens en terre d'Iran: Controverses des Chrétiens dans l'Iran Sassanide (Studia Iranica, 36)*, (ed.) Ch. Jullien (Leuven, 2008), pp. 41–56.

⁶⁶J. Bowman, “The Sasanian Church in the Kharg Island”, in *Commémoration Cyrus. Hommage universel, Acta Iranica 1* (Tehran and Liège, 1974) pp. 217–220; J. Bowman, “Christian Monastery on the Island of Kharg”, *Australian Journal of Biblical Archaeology*, 2/3 (1975), pp. 49–64; R. Ghirshman, *The Island of Kharg* (Tehran, 1971), pp. 11–14, 17–22; E. Haerincq, “Quelques monuments funéraires de l'Île de Kharg”, *Iranica Antiqua*, 11 (1975), pp. 159–166.

⁶⁷Ghirshman, *The Island of Kharg*, pp. 13–14.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁶⁹Bowman, “Christian Monastery on the Island of Kharg”, pp. 49–64. Ghirshman, *The Island of Kharg*, pp. 11–14, considers the monument to be from the middle or late 5th century. The dating of many of the known Christian sites in the Gulf and Mesopotamian region has been debated recently, primarily as the result of ceramic studies. Many of these monastic complexes are now thought to date to the 8th or 9th centuries, which is two or three centuries later than previously suggested (6th or 7th centuries). This shift in dating, however, as R. Carter, “Christianity in the Gulf During the First Centuries of Islam”, *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy*, 19 (2008), p. 103, indicates, does not “reflect the introduction of Christianity but simply a change in the quantity or disposition of resources, evident as a burst of building activity”.

⁷⁰H. Fujii et al. (eds), “Excavations at Ain Sha'ia Ruins and Dukakin Caves”, *Al-Rafidan*, 10 (1989), pp. 27–88.

⁷¹Okada, “Early Christian Architecture”, pp. 71–83. The church outline is given in Fig. 1 and details on measurements are found on pp. 73–74.

twenty-one on the south, and some caves are linked together without any intermission inside".⁷² In his descriptions of the site, in particular Cave 1, Ken Matsumoto notes that the floor at the entrance was laid with fired-brick and marlstone chips, and inside, it was coated with chaff-mixed mud. "The living space is in the dimensions of 1.8 metres wide, 6.5 metres deep and 1.9 metres high with an annex of 1.0 metres wide, 2.2 metres deep and 1.9 metres high".⁷³ The relationship of these caves with Ain Sha'ia was determined as a result of both their geographical location and the material finds (though these are few in number). As demonstrated by chisel traces observed in Cave 2, the Dukakin caves were dug artificially. "The inside part of the cave is smooth in ceiling but its floor surface is up-and-down in a zigzag way, viewed from a plan, while utilising lots of cracks which run freely on the marlstone of the cliff component".⁷⁴ The Ain Sha'ia monastery, including the Dukakin cave community, ceased to function in the 9th century.⁷⁵

Significant items of material culture discovered in the Ain Sha'ia complex include pieces of 12 plaque crosses and inscriptions.⁷⁶ All the crosses are typologically similar to those observed at Hira and in other churches in the Gulf and Mesopotamia. Some plaques include floral and geometrical motifs, while in others, the cross is positioned beneath an arch.⁷⁷ The excavation reports state that none of the crosses was found within the church nave(s) or in the sanctuary; however, it is unclear from the report whether most of the plaque crosses were discovered *in situ*.⁷⁸ At any rate, the presence of decorative elements is invaluable for understanding the interior decor of Church of the East churches. And, of course, these provide evidence for comparative study with other churches.

Two monastic complexes comprising a church and monastic settlement structures have been uncovered on the islands of Marwah and Sir Banī Yās, located approximately 100 km and 170 km to the west of the city of Abu Dhabi, respectively.⁷⁹ Both the church buildings of Marwah and Sir Banī Yās have identical dimensions and layout, notably a deep chancel, a relatively short nave, and a partition wall in the south chambers, which, as shown in Sir Banī Yās, served as a foundation for the tower.⁸⁰ The material culture objects collected

⁷²H. Shibata, "Topography", in Fuji et al. (ed.), "Excavations at Ain Sha'ia Ruins", pp. 33–34.

⁷³K. Matsumoto, "Dukakin caves", in *ibid.*, p. 84.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁷⁵Okada, "Early Christian Architecture", p. 74.

⁷⁶A discussion of the cross plaques from Ain Sha'ia is found Y. Okada, "Reconsideration of Plaque-type Crosses from Ain Sha'ia near Najaf", *al-Rāfidān*, 11 (1990), pp. 103–112, especially p. 105. For an examination of the inscriptions found at Ain Sha'ia, see E. C. D. Hunter, "Report and Catalogue of Inscribed Fragments: Ain Sha'ia and Dukakin Caves Near Najaf, Iraq", *Al-Rāfidān*, 10 (1989), pp. 89–108.

⁷⁷Okada, "Reconsideration of Plaque-type Crosses", p. 104.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, p. 109. On p. 104, the author describes cross nos. 8 and 10 being found from "upper filling".

⁷⁹A survey of the archaeological expedition and its preliminary findings and their interpretation is found in G. King, D. Dunlop, J. Elders, A. Stephenson and C. Tonghini, "A Report on the Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey (1993–4)", *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies*, 25 (1995), pp. 63–74; G. King, "A Nestorian Monastic Settlement on the Island of Sir Bani Yas, Abu Dhabi: A Preliminary Report", *Bulletin of SOAS*, 60, 2 (1997), pp. 221–235.

⁸⁰J. Elders, "The Lost Churches of the Arabian Gulf: Recent Discoveries on the Islands of Sir Bani Yas and Marawah, Abu Dhabi Emirate, United Arab Emirates", *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies*, 31 (2001), pp. 47–58, pp. 54–55, Fig. 5. The identification of the building in Marwah as a church is tentative, however, as only the southeastern corner was excavated. Nevertheless, as shown by the excavated section, the layout and size of the building is nearly identical to the corresponding sections of the church at Sir Banī Yās, in particular, the division of the *pastophoria* into two small chambers by a north–south wall.

from the site, including the C-14 testing, have shown that these sites were occupied and functioning from the 6th to mid-7th centuries.⁸¹

There is a known church and monastery complex on a site on the island of Al-Qusur of Failaka, Kuwait.⁸² The church measures 36 by 19 metres and several other smaller constructions were observed in its environs. The church, in many aspects, is similar to that of Ain Sha'ia: three-nave, built from mud brick, its naves divided by solid partitions, with three access points along the wall dividing the naves. The rectangular sanctuary is located in the east-end of the church and is flanked by the *pastophoria*, which has an interesting feature in that each of its chambers contained niches on the north, south, and east walls. In the eastern niche of the *pastophoria* in the northern nave, four grooves in the plaster floor were observed. They are thought to indicate the presence of a table or altar.⁸³

A narthex was located on the west side and two burial niches were discovered in the southern nave within the partition wall. According to the excavation report, the church at Al-Qusur was built in the early 7th century and was diminished in the late 8th or early 9th century.⁸⁴ Two monumental plaque plaster crosses were discovered at this church; the first plaque was found in the southern nave and depicts a cross surrounded by a geometrical and floral frame.⁸⁵ The shape of the cross and its floral-geometric frame design is comparable to those found in other Christian sites in Mesopotamia and in the Gulf region, such as Kharg and Ain Sha'ia.

Other specimens of Church of the East architecture are known from the Gulf coast of Saudi Arabia, at Jubail⁸⁶ and Jebel Berri.⁸⁷ In many respects these churches are similar to those of Ain Sha'ia and Al-Qusur. The churches have comparable dimensions, layout, internal décor (with stucco), and chronology of occupation.⁸⁸ In addition, the church building at Jubail also included a *bema*.⁸⁹ The physical structure of the Jubail church comprised a walled open courtyard (approximately 15,020 m²) and three rooms located at the far east

⁸¹Elders, "The Lost Churches of the Arabian Gulf", p. 49, p. 56. In particular Elders has identified three development phases for the Sir Banī Yās complex: "1) the beginning of construction of the church; 2-a) the "provisional" church with its unfinished north aisle and rough floors; 2-b) the finished church with narthex; and 3) post-monastic occupation" (p. 49). More recently, Carter, "Christianity in the Gulf", pp. 71–208, has provided a more refined approach to the dating and chronology issues of these sites. In particular, based on the study of the ceramics of these sites, he concluded that 1) the monastic settlements discovered at both Sir Banī Yās and Kharg could have been constructed no earlier than the late 7th century; 2) both of these monasteries flourished between the late 7th century and the middle of the 8th century; and 3) while the Sir Banī Yās monastery was abandoned at some point in the middle of the 8th century, the monastic site at Kharg apparently lasted until the 9th century.

⁸²A detailed report on the excavation is found in V. Bernard, O. Callot and J. F. Salles, "L'église d'al-Qousour Failaka, État de Koweït", *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy*, (1991), pp. 145–181. A shorter account of the excavation, with an overview of the material culture finds and a plan of the edifices, is V. Bernard and J. F. Salles, "Discovery of a Christian Church at al-Qusur, Failaka (Kuwait)", *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies*, 21 (1991), pp. 7–21; the church plan can be seen in Fig. 1.

⁸³Bernard and Salles, "Discovery of a Christian Church", pp. 9–10.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, p. 12. The entire complex has seen several phases of occupation and at certain points was used for other purposes. The dates were primarily established from the pottery collected from the site.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 9–10, Fig. 2.

⁸⁶J. Langfeldt, "Recently Discovered Early Christian Monuments in North-eastern Arabia", *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy*, 5 (1994), pp. 32–60.

⁸⁷Potts, "Nestorian Crosses from Jabal Berri", pp. 61–65.

⁸⁸Discussions of individual features are found in the above-mentioned works. A comparative architectural examination of these sites is in Okada, "Ain Sha'ia and the Early Gulf Churches", pp. 87–93.

⁸⁹Detailed discussion and assessment is found in Langfeldt, "Recently Discovered Early Christian Monuments", pp. 33–60.

end, of which the middle room “contains [the] distinctive feature[of] a sanctuary with a raised platform, bema [βῶμος], along the east wall”.⁹⁰

The remains of two churches were discovered at the site of Qusur in southwestern Iraq, where one edifice is better preserved than the other.⁹¹ The church was originally a three-nave church, with the naves partitioned by a solid wall. It had a square sanctuary with a domed roof located in the east end. The church was constructed with stone foundations and mud brick, and its walls were coated in plaster. It measured approximately 20 by 40 metres.⁹² Judging by the remains of the doorways on the north and south walls of the sanctuary, it was flanked by *pastophoria*. No decorative elements were preserved. The church is dated to the late 6th or early 7th century.⁹³

Another church in southwestern Iraq was excavated at the site of Rahiliya. Like the Qusur church, it was constructed of stone and mud bricks. This three-nave church was divided by five sets of pillars measuring 15 by 23 metres. The pillars in both the west end and east end were attached to the far-west and far-east walls dividing the nave and sanctuary, respectively. The church building also included subsidiary rooms located to the south of the church proper.⁹⁴ The square sanctuary, flanked by *pastophoria*, was accessed from the central nave. The church was dated, on the basis of an examination of the ceramics assembled from the site, broadly to the late Sassanian period.⁹⁵

In the exterior eastern provinces of the Sassanid empire, Church of the East architecture is represented by the Kharoba-Koshuk church, located north of Marv on the road leading to Chorasmia.⁹⁶ According to Galina Pugačenkova, the church at Kharoba-Koshuk was probably built in the 5th–6th centuries and functioned until the 11th–12th centuries.⁹⁷ The building was built from mud bricks and had a definite rectangular shape (51 metres long and 13 metres wide). It consisted of one nave, divided into six spans of different lengths. The apse was located in the southeast, and was preceded by a room, which probably had a domed roof.⁹⁸

In Semirechye, Church of the East architecture is exemplified by two unique church complexes excavated at the site of Aq-Beshim.⁹⁹ The second church complex excavated

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁹¹ B. Finster and J. Schmidt, *Sasanidische and frühislamische Ruinen im Iraq* (Berlin, 1976).

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 42, Fig. 13. The authors have suggested that the subsidiary rooms functioned as a martyrium, hermitage, or both.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁹⁶ Kharoba-Koshuk is located 15 kilometres to the north of Marv, along the ancient road, next to a fortified hill known as Due Chakyn. For a study of this monument, see Pugačenkova, “Kharoba-Koshuk”. Recently, Pusching has offered a new date of the 11th–12th century for this monument on the basis of a study of ceramics and bricks. See G. Pusching, “Kharoba Koshuk: An Early Church”, in *Monuments of Merv: Traditional Buildings of the Karakum*, (ed.) G. Hermann (London, 1999), pp. 80–81. However, as Naymark, “Sogdiana, its Christians and Byzantium”, p. 299, has demonstrated, this suggested later date is not convincing, especially in light of surface numismatic evidence (coins of Hormizd II (579–590 CE)).

⁹⁷ G. A. Pugačenkova, “Puti razvitija arhitektury Južnogo Turkmenistana v pory rabovladienija i feodalizma”, *TYU TAKE*, 6 (1958), pp. 126–130.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

⁹⁹ Kyzlasov, “Arheologičeskie issledovanija na gorodišče Ak-Bešim”, pp. 155–227/ Semenov, “Istorija arheologičeskogo izučenija Ak-Beshima”, pp. 4–10, provides a comprehensive survey of the history of research in Aq-Beshim. Semenov and Tashbaeva, “Raskopki v Aq-Beshime v 1996 gody”, pp. 48–51. Semenov, “Raskopki

there (“building VIII”) was built in the southeastern corner of the city within the city walls and consisted of three, possibly four, sections. Each section was in turn divided into long rooms (hallways) of 25 metres, stretching from east to west. The “long halls” in the east end were adjoined by smaller square structures (5 by 5 metres) furnished with niches (altars?). Along the eastern facade of the building there were a number of additional rooms located between the rooms with altars. Judging from its size, Aq-Beshim “building VIII” was built in three stages, but with little chronological difference. The squared cross-shaped rooms were covered by a dome and the hallways were arched. This is similar to the features of Aq-Beshim “building IV”.¹⁰⁰

Origins and regional characteristics of Church of the East architecture

The majority of the examples described above are believed to originate from either the model of existing large halls, such as royal halls or palaces, which were built in the *ivan* style—a house with three chambers opening out into a hall or courtyard—or from the model of Jewish and Babylonian temples, as exemplified by the church buildings unearthed at Hira. This architectural model is distinguished by the square chamber in the eastern end that was accessed via a narrow passage.¹⁰¹ This chamber at the eastern end was a separate section within the church proper; it was linked to the western part, where laity and worshippers stood.¹⁰²

In Central Asian Christian architecture, as noted by Veronika Voronina, especially with regard to the church at Kharoba-Koshuk and building IV at Aq-Beshim, the main distinguishing feature was the walled open yard. Voronina points out particularly that: “unlike the long churches of Ctesiphon; churches in Central Asia represent a special type where the nave is replaced with an open yard”.¹⁰³ In her opinion, this feature is a local characteristic of church architecture which developed in the Central Asian region.

Contrary to Voronina’s opinion, discussing the architectural peculiarities of the church buildings in Central Asia, specifically at Kharoba-Koshuk, Khmel’nitskiĭ agrees with Pugačenkova that the church at Kharoba-Koshuk was built on the model of the “long churches” of Ctesiphon. According to Khmel’nitskiĭ, “even closer architectural analogies

1996–1998 g.”, pp. 11–115, is a detailed archaeological study of the second church complex unearthed at Aq-Beshim.

¹⁰⁰Semenov and Tashbaeva, “Raskopki v Aq-Beshime v 1996 godu”, pp. 48–51.

¹⁰¹H. Āyatollāhi, *The Book of Iran. The History of Iranian Art* (Tehran, 2003), pp. 96–98, has argued that the *ivan* was the original feature of eastern Iranian architecture, spread under the Parthians and later developed under the Sassanids in Western Iran. It then became a distinguishing architectural feature of Persian architecture. Okada, “Early Christian Architecture”, p. 81, pointed out that “for Syrian churches there is a hypothetical view that firstly appeared a kind of house church with courtyard, as exemplified by the renowned remains disclosed at Dura Europos, and subsequently a primitive single-aisle chapel entered from the portico and the longer side as is seen in the case with Qirk Bizze. These two, however, seem to have developed from different styles of local house from the outset, even though the dates of two are far apart”.

¹⁰²Rice, “The Oxford Excavations at Hira, 1931”, pp. 276–291; a discussion on the similarity between Babylonian temple structure and the church at Hira is found on pp. 279–280. Most recently, M. Thierry, “Monuments chrétiens inédits de Haute-Mésopotamie”, *Syria*, 70, 1–2 (1993), pp. 179–204, in his description of the church remains in “Upper Mesopotamia”, refers to this architectural type (the square chamber at the east end accessed by a narrow passage) as being of the *cella* type of church architecture.

¹⁰³V. Voronina, “Doislmaskie kultovye sooruzhenija Srednei Azii”, *SA*, 2 (1960), p. 54. The architectural feature of having a “nave replace by an open yard” is attested to in Kharoba-Koshuk and in both building IV and building VIII at Aq-Beshim.

[to Kharoba-Koshuk] are represented by the churches in South Syria”.¹⁰⁴ As for the Aq-Beshim “building IV”, he is of the opinion that only the square chamber with an altar, located in the eastern end of the structure, can be designated as the church proper; the open courtyard was “an extensive threshold—in Western terminology, an atrium or narthex”.¹⁰⁵ He concludes that:

the church-chapel, its squared plan with axial niches and vaulted dome, belongs to the ancient and indigenous architectural methods of Central Asia; a method which later was translated into monumental forms of Islamic sacred and civil buildings.¹⁰⁶

Leonid Kyzlasov, commenting on the architectural format of Aq-Beshim “building IV” (which he excavated himself), opined that it “represents cultural syncretism, which is reflected in the combined architectural methods of the Syria (cross-shaped plan covered by dome) and Central Asia (an open court yard with porticos along the perimeter)”.¹⁰⁷ Thus, contrary to Khmel’nitskiĭ’s view which attributes the “entire” architectural model of Aq-Beshim (squared cross-shaped plan with dome and open courtyard) to the Central Asian architectural tradition, Kyzlasov describes only the open courtyard as being in the Central Asian architectural style that was specifically adopted in construction of church buildings.¹⁰⁸ Kyzlasov’s interpretation (similar to that of Voronina) is that the open courtyard at Aq-Beshim building IV functioned as an open-roofed nave. The same feature is observed in the Aq-Beshim “building VIII”, excavated in 1996–1997.¹⁰⁹

Regarding the distinctiveness and regional characteristics of Church of the East architecture, the above-mentioned views on the characteristics of its architecture can be summarised in Yasuyoshi Okada’s words about the church architectures known in Iraq that:

the churches in Iraq, especially in the southern region, though not so many, represent the notable architectural phenomenon in the time around the Muslim conquest, that various factors and elements, both native alien, skilfully composed not in one way a new category of architecture, neither Sasanian nor Islamic.¹¹⁰

The Urgut church in the context of Church of the East architecture

The preceding section presents 14 up-to-date, documented examples of Church of the East architecture from Mesopotamia, the Persian Gulf region, and Central Asia. Of course, this is a small number of specimens from which to draw conclusive suggestions. However, by

¹⁰⁴Khmel’nitskiĭ, *Mezhdū Kushanami i Arabami. Arkhitektura Srednej Azii 5–8 vv.*, p. 243. In particular, the ground plan of the church at Kharoba-Koshuk demonstrates great similarity with the Church of the East architecture of the Rahiliya, located 110 km southwest of Baghdad and Qusair, near Kerbala. These churches (one at Rahiliya and two at Qusair) have unique long naves in excess of 30 metres). For further details, see Finster and Schmidt, *Sasanidische and frühislamische Ruinen*. For an architectural cross-examination of the churches in north and south Iraq, see Okada, “Early Christian Architecture”, pp. 71–83.

¹⁰⁵Khmel’nitskiĭ, *Mezhdū Kushanami i Arabami. Arkhitektura Srednej Azii 5–8 vv.*, p. 245.

¹⁰⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷Kyzlasov, “Arheologičeskie issledovanija na gorodišče Ak-Bešim v 1953–1954 gg”, p. 238.

¹⁰⁸*Ibid.*, p. 233.

¹⁰⁹Semenov, 2002b.

¹¹⁰Okada, “Early Christian Architecture”, pp. 71–83.

considering their shared architectural characteristics, it is possible to make some observations about their relationship and significance.

In relation to the churches described above, the Urgut church shares four main features:

1. General architectural outline/model: the layout of the Urgut church is rectangular, with two naves, divided by a *bema* in the middle.¹¹¹ The doorways are located along the length of the walls.

A unique feature in the layout of the Urgut church, which is distinct from the other examples mentioned here, is its separate kitchen and dining hall, both located to the north of the building. According to Savchenko, the dining hall had the “same proportions [as the naves] and the altar-like structure in the eastern end” but lacks other liturgical furnishings that were present in the northern and southern naves.¹¹² This dining hall was separated by a solid wall and was accessed from the sanctuary (by one doorway) and the northern nave (by two doorways) and possibly from the *oratorium*, located behind the sanctuary. There was also a door from the kitchen that opened into this dining hall. If the outline of this particular section is turned by 180 degrees, then the Urgut church looks like a three-nave church where the sanctuary is flanked by *pastophoria*. The main nave is divided into two aisles by the *bema* and the other nave is separated by the solid wall. This feature (i.e. separation of the naves by a solid wall) is present in several of the churches mentioned earlier, such as Ain Sha’ia. The presence of the kitchen at the western end suggests that the Eucharist bread may have been baked there, in which case this room did not serve as a general kitchen, but as a *prothesis* (a liturgical chamber). The presence of the doorways also indicates that this refectory was possibly a nave, since it was also accessed from the sanctuary.

2. Construction materials: in the churches discussed, the building materials generally vary by region. However, the majority of the churches are built from mud and fired bricks, as was the Urgut church.
3. Liturgical architectural features: namely a sanctuary located at the east end, flanked by *pastophoria*. To the north of the sanctuary there was one room that probably served as a *diakonicon*. In its immediate Central Asian context, the Urgut church is unique in that it included a *bema*, absent in the other churches, including those at Aq-Beshim and Kharoba-Koshuk.
4. Interior decor: in contrast with the Mesopotamian and Gulf churches, no monumental elements of decor, such as cross plaques or other ornamented detail, have been found at the Urgut church. However, the ceramic tile found in the nave in the niche in the eastern wall suggests that at least parts of the church were decorated. Furthermore, the presence of fragments of coloured stucco also indicates that the walls were decorated with some sort of mural. In this connection, it is noteworthy that a cross plaque (a tile

¹¹¹It is worth mentioning that cases of *bema* acting as a barrier between or partition of the naves is observed mostly in the churches of north Syria, such as a small church at Qirq Bizeh, located near Qalb Lozeh. Another example where the *bema* is so large that it forms a barrier across the front (eastern) half of the nave is that of the church in Resafa. For further details, see Loosley, *The Architecture and Liturgy of the Bema*, pp. 42–45, 53.

¹¹²Savchenko, “Excavations in Urgut: June–July 2007 Progress Report”.

bearing an impression of the cross) is known from Marv. Although the exact archaeological context of this evidence is obscure, its use in the decor of churches is certain.¹¹³

The Urgut church: monastic or parochial

The Urgut church has, to date, been believed to be a monastic church or even a monastery. The concluding remark of the archaeological reports on the Urgut church reads:

after careful considerations, it has been decided by the project leader, Dr. Alexei Savchenko, and the Society for the Exploration of EurAsia to conclude the fieldwork at Urgut since the project's objective, set in early 2004, has been fully achieved with the discovery and excavation of the Christian church and monastery belonging to the Church of the East mentioned by the 10th century geographer and historian Ibn Hawqal.¹¹⁴

However, this conclusion needs to be reconsidered.

The designation of the excavated edifice as a “Christian church and monastery” is based on Ibn Hawqal's description, particularly his use of the words *عمر* [*umra*] and *قلايات* [*qillāyāt*]. Savchenko translated the first word, *umra*, as “monastery”, and in the footnote he described it as a “calque from the Syriac *ܩܠܝܬܐ* instead of the Arabic [دير]”.¹¹⁵ The word *qillāyāt*, translated as “cell” in both Syriac (*ܩܠܝܬܐ*) and Arabic, denotes the sense “small in size” (i.e. an alcove, a recess, a recessed portion of a room, or a monk's cell).¹¹⁶ Thus, Savchenko translates the passage as follows: “On Sāwdār [there is] a monastery of the Christians where they gather and have their cells”.¹¹⁷ However, judging by its ground plan, the excavated Urgut church can be firmly designated a church (i.e. a gathering place), which is signified by the word *مجمع* [*majm'a*] in Ibn Hawqal's passage.¹¹⁸

In Arabic, *majm'a* could mean gathering in a place (i.e. church building or monastery) or in the sense of a gathering of people (i.e. assembly). In Ibn Hawqal's passage, the word *majm'a* relates to the word *umra*; thus, it can be understood that the author uses the word *umra* in the sense of building, qualified by *majm'a*, implying “assembly place” (i.e. church building). Accordingly, Ibn Hawqal perhaps uses the word *umra* with its Arabic semantics (i.e. building), and therefore, it may not have the Syriac connotation of “monastery”. In addition, within the excavated area, no traces of additional structures that may have been used for habitation (i.e. cells (*qillāyāt*)) have been found to support the designation of the Urgut church as a monastery or a church located in a monastic setting.

¹¹³V. Pilipko, “Plitka potverdivshaya predaniya”, *Pamjatniki Turkmenistana*, 1,5 (1968), p. 25.

¹¹⁴Savchenko, “Excavations in Urgut: June–July 2007 Progress Report”.

¹¹⁵Savchenko, “Urgut Revisited”, p. 337. The Syriac word *ܩܠܝܬܐ* stems from the root *ܩܠܝܬܐ* meaning “living in the sense of dwelling, inhabiting” and could signify either an abstract or objective meaning (e.g. a space occupied by a monastery, inhabited by monks, or a monastic life, a lifestyle followed by monks): J. Payne Smith, *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary, Founded Upon the Thesaurus of R. Payne Smith* (Oxford, 1903), p. 405. The word in Arabic means “a land or house inhabited, peopled, well peopled, well stocked with people and the like, in flourishing state, in a state the contrary of desolate or waste or ruined” as well as “a structure; an edifice; or perhaps the act of building”: E. Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*. (London, 1863), pp. 2155–2156.

¹¹⁶The dictionary entry for this word includes its application as the designation of the Patriarch's residence.

¹¹⁷Savchenko, “Urgut Revisited”, p. 333. Compare the Arabic text de Goeje 1927, p. 372, “*Wa bi'l-sawdār 'umra li'l-naṣārī fihī majm'a lahum. Wa lahum fihī qillāyāt*”.

¹¹⁸Savchenko, “Urgut Revisited”, p. 333, where *مجمع* is translated as “they gather”.



Fig. 8. (Colour online) Fragment of ceramic tile with the impression of the cross. Reproduced after Savchenko.

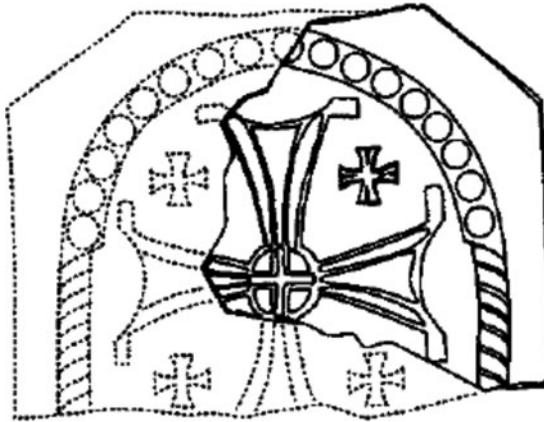


Fig. 9. Cross plaque from Marv. Reproduced after Pilipko, 1968.

One could justify the absence of cells in the excavated edifice by suggesting that Ibn Hawqal was either referring to another complex that comprised a separate place of assembly (church) or habitations (cells), or perhaps to a few caves located in a mountain nearby the excavated church.

The first option—that Ibn Hawqal was describing a different monument—is very unlikely. As Savchenko himself points out “neither the available data nor common sense allow that in the Urgut area (i.e. the Shawdar mountains in the south of Samarkand) there once were two Christian monasteries, one described by the Arab geographers, and the other unnoticed”.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹Savchenko, “Excavations in Urgut: August–October 2005 Progress Report”, p. 555.

The second option, namely that by *qillāyāt* Ibn Hawqal meant the nearby caves, equally does not find corroborative material justification. The so-called “monastic” caves of Urgut were brought to the attention of scholars in 1920 when a collection of Syriac inscriptions was observed on the mountain wall at Urgut.¹²⁰ They are located at about a 20–30 minute walk from the Urgut church and not all of them are easily accessible.¹²¹ According to Mark Dickens’ recent survey:

Cave 1 is accessed by a narrow opening in the rock face and provides just enough room to stand up in and cave 2 is actually a small grotto which could provide one person with a very cramped place to shelter from the elements. Cave 3, the highest, is inaccessible without climbing ropes for all but the most seasoned rock-climbers.¹²²

Previous surveys, including that of Dickens, have not comprehensively documented these caves, in terms of providing exact measurements of their height, depth, or internal structure. However, it appears that these caves were not monastic in that they were not a monastic habitat. At most, they could be described as overhangs or small holes, approximately 4–5 feet wide in the opening and 2–3 feet deep. They possibly resulted from two large rocks falling together or a rock falling off, and are very narrow. Dickens confirmed that, judging by their overall shape and size, they could, at most, accommodate one or two people at a time.¹²³ Thus, they could only be useful for temporary shelter and there is no evidence to show that they were used by monks as a dwelling. However, these caves may well have been used as a place for short stops.

In the passage under discussion, Ibn Hawqal also mentions the word *وقوف* [*wuqūf*].¹²⁴ Savchenko has translated this as “inalienable properties” (i.e. “endowment lands”).¹²⁵ The word *wuqūf* (as a verbal noun) means to pause, stop walking, or stand up (i.e. stop). Considering the context in which Ibn Hawqal uses this word, namely as a description of the natural conditions of Urgut (solitude, a healthy climate), it is possible to assert that *wuqūf* means a stopping place, a place used for retreat and stoppage, as opposed to its being the plural of *uqaf* (endowment land). Thus, perhaps by the word *wuqūf*, Ibn Hawqal is referring to these caves, which monks used for holding vigils or travellers used to pause from their journey.

Furthermore, the possibility that these caves were used for short stays or stoppage is supported by the content of the inscriptions found in these caves, in particular, on several

¹²⁰Savchenko, “Urgut Revisited”, p. 334, says that these inscriptions were observed in 1920 by a group of students from Turkestan Oriental Institute, who made a wax offprint of some of them. These inscriptions were then reported by V. Barthold, “Očhjet o komadirovke v Srednuyu Aziyu”, *Trudy*, 4, 1966, pp. 258–259 (who visited Central Asia between 1916 and 1920), which resulted in the misperception that Barthold had discovered the inscriptions. In a subsequent visit to the site in 1938 two samples were sawn off and given to the Samarkand Museum. In 1981, the site was surveyed by both archaeologists and Syriac language experts, resulting in a short publication by E. Meshcherskaya and A. Paykova, “Siro-tyrkskie naska’nyie nadpisi is Urguta”, in *Kul’turnie vzaimosvjaj narodov Sredeny Azii i Kavkaza s okružhajushim mirom v drevnosti i srednevekovye (tezisy dokladov)* (Moscow, 1981), pp. 109–110.

¹²¹A discussion of these caves is found in Savchenko, “Urgut Revisited”, pp. 333–354; Savchenko, “Po sledam arabskykh geografov”, pp. 333–338; Savchenko, “Po povodu hristianskogo selenija Urgut”, pp. 551–555; Savchenko and Dickens, “Prester John’s Realm”, pp. 121–302; Savchenko, “Östliche Urkirche in Usbekistan”, pp. 74–82.

¹²²Dickens, forthcoming.

¹²³Mark Dickens, personal communication (email dated 28 December 2011).

¹²⁴For the Arabic text see de Goeje 1927, p. 372.

¹²⁵Savchenko, “Urgut Revisited”, p. 333.

occasions, the word “vigil” in connection with a personal name: ܒܪܫܒܒܐ “Baršabbā kept vigil/stayed the night”.¹²⁶ The Syriac word for vigil is ܠܝܠܐ, which stems from the verbal root ܠܐ meaning “to pass the night, remain all night”.¹²⁷ This could support the theory that these caves were used for overnight stays at most.

The inscriptions found in the Urgut caves comprise very short phrases and personal names (a total of 51), followed by the sign of the cross. In addition to the inscriptions noted in 1920, a recent survey by Dickens has identified further:

the inscriptions can be divided into five locations: Cave 1, Cave 2, Cave 3, the lower cliff face and the upper cliff face, where a small inscription-covered grotto is located. There are also two inscriptions that were sawed off the cliff by A. Y. Kaplunov of the Museum of History, Culture and Art in 1936 and taken back to the Museum, where they reside to this day”.¹²⁸

Both the caves’ proximity to the church and the content of the inscriptions found there indicate that Christians living in the region, as well as those who emigrated there from Iraq, as shown by Ibn Hawqal, were familiar with them. Although available evidence supports traces of human activity in them, no other types of material evidence have been found to support the idea that they were used as monastic habitations. No traces of food, fire, or intentional adjustment of space has been found. It may be argued that they were possibly used as temporary vigil stations or spaces of retreat, on the basis of the content and size of the inscriptions, which are often short and mention words such as vigil and prayer.

A further point to be made is that the designation of the Urgut church as a “Christian church and monastery” does not find support in comparisons with parallel examples of the monastic complexes of the Church of the East, about which Ibn Hawqal may well have been informed. Three particular sites that were either founded or flourishing contemporaneously with the Urgut church are:

1. The monastery at Kharg Island, excavated in 1960, represents a rare example of the capacious cenobitic institutions of its period. It consisted of 70 cells, built around a courtyard, and a church. Furthermore, satellite settlements were discovered in its vicinity, which also belonged to and were used by either the Christian community living on the monastic site or elsewhere on the island.¹²⁹ The communal gathering place of this monastic community was probably a church which was richly decorated with stucco reliefs analogous to those known from churches in Sir Banī Yās and Jubail.

¹²⁶Dickens, forthcoming. The inscription in the upper cliff of Cave 3. Another inscription from the same cave has “Vigil with Yuhannan”.

¹²⁷Smith, *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary*, p. 40.

¹²⁸Dickens, forthcoming. The images of these inscriptions can be seen in in Savchenko, “Urgut Revisited”, p. 335, Fig. 1.

¹²⁹R. Ghirshman, *The Island of Kharg. An Iranian Oil Operating Companies Publication* (Tehran, 1960). A recent detailed examination of the site is found in in M.-J. Steve, *L’île de Kharg. Une page de l’histoire du Golfe Persique et du monachisme oriental (Civilisations du Proche-Orient. Série I. Archéologie et environnement, Vol. 1)* (Neuchâtel, 2003). He bases his study on an assessment of the pottery and, as a result, suggests a new date for both the site in Kharg and other monastic sites in the Gulf. Carter, “Christianity in the Gulf”, pp. 71–108, also includes a useful survey of the Gulf churches, including a discussion on dating the known edifices.

2. The monastery at Sīr Banī Yās is located to the south, off the coast of the modern United Arab Emirates.¹³⁰ The size of this site is more modest than the coenobium discovered at Kharg (eight cells were excavated, and there might have been just 30 to 40 cells in total). However, its design—in terms of the arrangement of cells and satellite settlements around the church building—is similar to the overall plan of the monastery at Kharg.¹³¹
3. The monastery at Ain Sha'ia, which provides the most direct parallel, was located in a fortified complex, which included a three-aisled church.¹³² The so-called Dukakin caves, discussed earlier, appear to have been intentionally dug and modified into dwellings by monks. Traces of habitation of these caves by a monastic community include epigraphic finds.¹³³ Based on their design (the size of the rooms, the passages connecting the caves, and their plastered interior), these caves are believed to have been in use (functioning either as dwellings or for other purposes) long before their adaptation by a Christian community at Ain Sha'ia.

The above examples show that most of the monastic complexes of the Church of the East had a similar layout: a church building for gathering, a monastic settlement for cenobitics, and caves for solitary monks. Placing the Urgut church within this extended framework of the monastic and ecclesiastical architecture of the Church of the East brings up stark structural anomalies, in that it does not have all the architectural elements of a monastic complex.

It is possible to identify the caves located near the Urgut church as the habitat of anchorite monks—given that these solitary monks did not have any possessions and lived in extremely harsh conditions—and thus to see the caves as part of a monastic complex in Urgut. However, this really needs to be supported by more compelling evidence, similar to that recovered in the Dukakin Caves at the Ain Sha'ia monastic complex.

Another piece of evidence pointing to the parochial nature of the Urgut church is the liturgical architectural feature of the *bema*. Emma Loosley's recent study of architecture of the *bema*, focusing on the churches of northwestern Syria, has established that in Syria the *bema* was not used in monastic churches.¹³⁴

The excavations of churches built in the Church of the East tradition which were part of monastic complexes, such as Sīr Banī Yās, the churches on Kharg island, and at Ain Sha'ia, did not reveal the presence of *bema* either.¹³⁵ Among the currently known Church of the East church buildings, the *bema* has been found only in the three-nave church (designated Church XI) excavated at Hira. The naves in the church were divided by four pairs of detached columns. There was a barrier extending north-south across all three naves, which, at the second pair of columns from the west, divided the western two-fifths of the

¹³⁰King, "A Nestorian Monastic Settlement", pp. 221–225; Elders, "The Lost Churches of the Arabian Gulf", pp. 47–57.

¹³¹King, "A Nestorian Monastic Settlement"; information of the cells at pp. 224–225. The church building at Sīr Banī Yās was also decorated with stucco reliefs representing Christian imagery (vegetal and crosses).

¹³²Y. Okada and H. Numoto, "Fortified Building-site F", in Fuji et al. (eds), *Excavations at Ain Sha'ia Ruins*, pp. 35–61; Okada, "Early Christian Architecture in the Iraqi South-Western Desert", pp. 71–83.

¹³³Matsumoto, "Dukakin Caves", pp. 81–88.

¹³⁴Loosley, *The Architecture and Liturgy of the Bema*, pp. 43–44.

¹³⁵A discussion of the *bema* in the East Syriac church tradition in relation to both liturgical texts and archaeological material is found in M. Cassis, "The Bema in the East Syriac Church in Light of New Archaeological Evidence", *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies*, 5, 2 (July 2002), pp. 195–211.

naves from the eastern nave. The *bema* was positioned east of this barrier in the space occupying the central nave towards the eastern end. The *bema* walls in the north and south curved outwards and contained benches.¹³⁶ The only other church building of the Church of the East tradition in which the *bema* has been found is the church discovered at Jubail, on the Persian Gulf coast of Saudi Arabia.¹³⁷

Extant evidence may be understood to suggest that in the Church of the East tradition the *bema* was used only in congregational churches: in community churches, the reading of scriptures and the sermon required a *bema*. Accordingly, one possible conclusion is that the Urgut church was an ordinary parish church serving a sizeable community in the Urgut region of Sogdiana. There may have been coenobitic monks among the populace who used the solitary environment for retreats or vigils; however, there is no compelling evidence to support the designation of the Urgut church as a monastic church.

Furthermore, Loosely points out that among Syrian churches, only one *bemata* church per village is known, and that these churches were used for holding communal services.¹³⁸ Following this assertion, the Urgut church can be identified as a community church. Of course, this does not imply that there were no monks among the Christian community living at Urgut nor that the monastic tradition was not known in Sogdiana. The argument here is concerned only with the hermeneutic context of the Urgut church, and is more suggestive than conclusive. The possibility must be considered that there was a monastery similar to that of Ain Sha'ia, which has not survived or been excavated to date. Thus the position taken here will be reviewed if such evidence surfaces.

Urgut church: a symbol of patronage

The fundamental link of the architectural evidence with its sociocultural and economic environment is made through the themes of patronage and dialogue. Both are represented in church architecture by architectural form and typology (whether domestic architectural form or official public-political form) and construction quality (construction material, size, the environmental setting).

As Richard Krautheimer observes, in the Roman Empire the layout of church architecture, which had an architectural vocabulary of the highest public order, emerged after Constantine's conversion and therefore signified an imperial patronage.¹³⁹ Consequently, in the Roman Empire and in those regions that were influenced by Greco-Roman culture (e.g. northern Syria, Alexandria), churches were built following the architecture of the basilica.¹⁴⁰ Outside the Roman Empire, it was the *ivan* architecture, used for both official and domestic buildings, that provided inspiration. This is borne out by the Church of the East architecture found in Mesopotamia proper: East of the Euphrates at Ctesiphon and in the western flank

¹³⁶Rice, "The Oxford Excavations at Hira, 1931", p. 280.

¹³⁷A detailed discussion and assessment is found in Langfeldt, "Recently Discovered Early Christian Monuments", pp. 33–60.

¹³⁸Loosely, *The Architecture and Liturgy of the Bema*, pp. 43–44.

¹³⁹R. Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture* (Pelican History of Art 24) (Harmondsworth, 1965).

¹⁴⁰A Roman basilica usually functioned as an administrative building for court hearings and public meetings, and featured a rectangular apsidal hall.

of Hira, as well as down the Gulf and further afield in the eastern extremities of the Sassanid Empire, at the Marv oasis, and in the Semirechye region en route to China.

Furthermore, patronage is indicated not only by the form of the architecture but by the very fact of its existence. Christian architecture, like other forms of architecture, is a product of available economic resources being dedicated to either individuals or the state. Thus, in the construction of religious buildings such as a church or monastery, the role of either lay or political patrons, such as local rulers, was significant. As such, church buildings bear witness to those who dedicate resources to their construction.

Although in the existing historiography no direct records concerning the patronage of Christian architecture in Sogdiana have survived, possible parallels can be drawn from examples from Iran proper, Mesopotamia, and Marv. For example, the Sogdian translation of the “Life of Baršabbā” discusses his involvement in building churches and monasteries in Marv and its environs under the patronage of the Persian queen. One could also include the example of the reconstruction and rebuilding (twice) of the Great Church of Seleucia with financial endowments from the state. First “Catholicos Yahwalaba I (415–420) rebuilt it under king Yazdegerd I with money given by Theoddsius II; the second time, catholicos Mar Aba (540–551) enlarged it using the subsidies given by ‘Abd al-Masih of Hira”.¹⁴¹

In a similar manner, one may surmise that the Sogdian church might also have benefited from some sort of patronage. The numismatic evidence shows at least that there were some, albeit unknown, Sogdian rulers who identified with the Christian faith and who might possibly have been patrons of the Sogdian church.

Small material culture objects

This section introduces the material culture objects that were either discovered at archaeological sites such as the Urgut church or acquired in the area of Sogdiana as a whole.

Objects discovered during the excavation of the Urgut church

The reports of the excavation of the Urgut church contain a few samples of material culture objects that were discovered at the site or acquired from local residents in the course of the excavations. The description of the objects is limited, and indicate only the approximate dating of the object and its specification, for example a glazed ceramic oil lantern from the 13th century or a fragment of a plate bearing an impression of the cross.

During the excavation of the Urgut church, objects were also acquired from local residents, such as a ceramic jar featuring an appliqué cross and incised ornamental writing imitating Syriac which was acquired from local residents Kutbiya Rafiyeva and Aziza Haydarova.¹⁴² The jar was reportedly discovered some 60 years ago in a village named Gussoy.¹⁴³ Lacking any archaeological context, it is difficult to determine the application of this

¹⁴¹Fiey, *Assyrie chrétienne*, pp. 17–18.

¹⁴²Savchenko, “Excavations in Urgut: August–October 2005 Progress Report”. According to the report the owners agreed to donate the object to Samarqand Museum.

¹⁴³*Ibid.*,



Fig. 10. (Colour online) Objects found in the 2004 excavation season: a circa 13th century oil lantern and a metallic pendant cross. Reproduced after Savchenko 2004 ‘Excavations 2004: Brief Report’ online resource.



Fig. 11. (Colour online) Objects found in the 2005 excavation season: a fragment of plate with a seal impression of the cross and a fragment of a ceramic plate kept in a niche. Reproduced after Savchenko 2005 ‘Excavations in Urgut: August–October 2005. Progress Report’ on-line resource.

object; that is, whether it was among the liturgical items of the church or had another use.¹⁴⁴ In addition, a pendant bronze cross was also acquired and given to the Samarqand Museum.

¹⁴⁴From the Panjikent excavations there are a group of items of pottery that had crosses applied using red agnobe. On the semantics of the use of the cross on various objects of material culture from Central Asia, see N. Kukhareno and Yu, Mal'tsev, “K simvolike izobrazhenij kresta v Srednei Azii”, in III vsesoyuznyaya konferentsiya vostokovedov “Vzaimodeistvie i vzaimovliyanie kul'tur na Vostoke”, Dushanbe, 16–18 Mai 1988, pp. 26–27, who opined that this practice was introduced by Christians who used the cross for marking their property, as a protective symbol. On the other hand, a glazed plate from 11th-century Khujand is undoubtedly of Christian provenance. It has a stylised Arabic inscription in the shape of the letter tau, read as ‘*Īsā Maryam*—“Jesus and Mary”’. See T. Beljaeva, “Khristianskij pamjatnik iz Khodzhenata”, in *Iz istorii drevnykh kul'tov Srednei Azii*, (ed.) Zhukova, pp. 79–81.

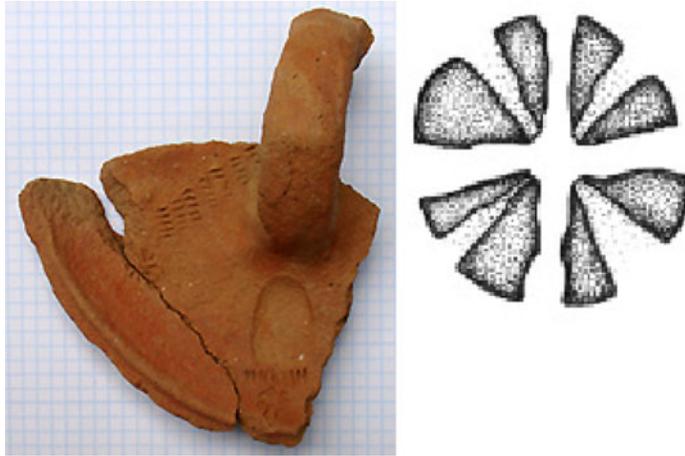


Fig. 12. (Colour online) Object found in the 2006 excavation season: a fragment of a lid of a ceramic vessel, with an offprint of a cross-shaped stamp, thumb-print, and a decorative pattern of several rows of notches. On the right, the enlarged pattern on the ceramic fragment. Reproduced after Savchenko 2006 'Excavations in Urgut: June-July 2006. Progress Report' on-line resource.



Fig. 13. (Colour online) Ceramic jar from Urgut. Reproduced after Savchenko and Dickens, 2009, p. 295.

The cross appears to be equilateral with flared arms; the upper part of the cross, where there was a loop for hanging, is broken.¹⁴⁵ From an iconographic perspective the pendant crosses acquired from Urgut, including the crosses mentioned below, resemble the conventional typology of crosses known in Central Asia.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁵Savchenko, "Excavations in Urgut: August–October 2005 Progress Report".

¹⁴⁶A relevant discussion is found in W. Klein and Ch. Reck, "Ein Kreuz mit sogdischer Inschrift aus Ak-Besim/Kyrgyzstan", *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, 154 (2004), pp. 147–156, where the



Fig. 14. (Colour online) Pendant cross acquired from a private collector by the East Sogdian Archaeological Expedition, now housed in the Samarqand Museum. Image © Savchenko.



Fig. 15. Syrian bronze censer from Urgut. Images reproduced after Zalesskaya, 1972, and Savchenko, 2005.

Objects acquired in Sogdiana

Bronze censer

According to the acquisition records of the State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg,¹⁴⁷ the Syrian bronze censer was bought on 2nd August 1916 from Davud Mirzo Mahdi Yusupov, a merchant from Samarqand, who claimed that the object was found in the same year in the Urgut area. Currently housed at the State Hermitage Museum (CA 12758), it first appeared in work by V. Zalesskaya in 1972 and was reassessed by G. Dresvyanskya in 1995.¹⁴⁸ The

author, in connection with a pendant cross bearing a Sogdian inscription discovered at Aq-Beshim, also examines comparable available evidence.

¹⁴⁷Book 7824, pp. 104–105.

¹⁴⁸V. Zalesskaya, “Sirijskoe brozovoe kadilo iz Urguta”, *CAI*, 1972, pp. 57–60; G. Ja. Dresvyanskya, “Bronzovoe kadylo iz Urguta”, in *Colloque sur l’art de l’Ouzbékistan: Antiquité, Moyen Age, Époque contemporaine. Résumés des communications* (Tashkent, 1995), pp. 57–60.

censer has also been mentioned in other works related to the history of Christianity in Central Asia.¹⁴⁹

The hemispherical-shaped censer is made of bronze using a casting technique. Its body is decorated with six crudely executed New Testament episodes: the Annunciation, the Visitation, the Nativity, the Baptism, the Crucifixion, and the Women at the Tomb. The proportions of the human figures differ and are delineated by metal lines cut deeply into the surface, which appears to be made up of individual spherical surfaces. Their facial features, due to the poor execution, are barely identifiable.

These six episodes are framed by decorative stripes; at the top of the censer are two bands, one of which includes a three-leaf rosette. At the bottom there is also a band consisting of triangles within triangles; the insides of the triangles on the upper line are filled with dotted lines, and those on the lower line with large circles. The border underneath is filled with concentric arches closely adjacent to each other. The censer has conical legs decorated with engraved ornaments made of stylised plant shoots. The base of the censer has an equilateral cross in high relief, which appears to be decorated by large “beads” in each arm. The upper rim of the censer was pierced by three holes through which chains were pulled, and there are three tabs between them.

Referring to several studies on censers of similar design held at the State Hermitage Museum and elsewhere in Europe, Zalesskaya points out that nearly all of them are considered to be of Syrian-Palestinian origin, datable to between the 6th and 7th centuries.¹⁵⁰ On the basis of the close iconographic resemblance of that censer with these, Zalesskaya identifies the censer under discussion as having the same provenance.¹⁵¹

The censer from Urgut, however, also displays distinctive decorative features, such as the division of the episodes by punctures, and triangles within triangles filled with dotted lines, which are unique to a later chronology (7th–9th centuries CE). On the basis of comparison with iconographic features in known typology, Zalesskaya suggested that the Urgut censer belongs typologically to the group of censers that were produced in the 8th–9th centuries and therefore she considers it to be an object imported from Mesopotamia.¹⁵²

Almost three decades after the initial discussion of the Urgut censer, and based on very general observations, particularly regarding the manufacturing technique and its artistic quality, Dresvyanskaya suggests that the censer was not imported, but manufactured *in situ* by local artisans.¹⁵³ She considers that the dense ornamentation of the censer was intended to compensate for the poor quality of the cast.¹⁵⁴ Further, Dresvyanskaya argues that Zalesskaya’s proposed date could be amended to one century earlier. Although the 10th–11th centuries (close to the date suggested by Zalesskaya) saw the ultimate canonisation of the gospel

¹⁴⁹A. Nikitin, “Khristianstvo v Centralnoj Azii (drevnost i srednevekovye)”, in *Vostochniy Turkestan i Srednyaya Aziya: Istoriya, Kultura, Svyazi* (Moscow, 1984), pp. 121–137; G. Bogomolov, Yu. Buryakov, L. Zhukova, A. Muskaeva and G. Shishkina, “Khristianstvo v Srednej Azii”, in *Iz istorii drevnykh kul'tov Srednei Azii*, (ed.) Zhukova, pp. 6–18.

¹⁵⁰Zalesskaya, “Sirjskoe brozovoe kadilo iz Urguta”, pp. 57.

¹⁵¹*Ibid.*,

¹⁵²*Ibid.*, p. 59. With reference to Barthold, the author particularly highlights that this period was the height of missionary activity in the region and coincided with the patriarchate of Timothy I.

¹⁵³Dresvjanskaya, “Bronzovoe kadylo iz Urguta”, p. 60.

¹⁵⁴*Ibid.*, p. 58.

episodes depicted in the censer, censers with such imagery were produced in large quantities from the 6th–7th centuries onwards. However, Dresvyanskaya concludes that despite the possible artistic connections of the censer from Urgut with earlier known prototypes, it was manufactured around the end of 12th or first half of the 13th centuries.¹⁵⁵

Dresvyanskaya's suggestion that the object was manufactured locally, in contrast with Zalesskaya's claim that it was a Mesopotamian import, seems very plausible, especially if one takes into account that Sogdian masters of the early medieval period were renowned for their craftsmanship of silver and bronze articles.¹⁵⁶ However, Dresvyanskaya's suggested dating is not satisfactory, especially when compared with Zalesskaya's thorough assessment. He provided a comparative assessment of many more analogous censers, and a typology evolved within the chronology of the 8th and 9th centuries. Furthermore, if one were to accept the later dating (that is, of the 12th–13th centuries) one would expect that more similar objects would have been found in the region, especially since the religious atmosphere in Sogdiana during the 13th century, under Mongol rule, was relatively relaxed.

St Mina's ampulla

Like the above-mentioned censer, the archaeological context of St Mina's ampulla is unknown. It is currently housed at the State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg (CA 1514). The only background information in the acquisition records show that it was acquired in 1931. According to Boris Staviskiy, who included it in a 1960 publication, it was found at Afrāsiāb in Samarqand prior to 1920.¹⁵⁷

The ceramic ampulla has an oval body, a short cylindrical neck, and two handles. It is 8.6 cm high and 1.8 cm thick. The diameter of the neck is 7 cm and the stamped depiction measures 4 cm in diameter. Its name derives from its main iconographic element: a stamped depiction of Abū Mīnā in a "canonical pose: standing with outstretched arms".¹⁵⁸

Abū Mīnā, or St Mina, is one of a number of martyr-wonderworker saints widely celebrated in both Eastern and Western Christianity.¹⁵⁹ Abū Mīnā's fame among Christian communities in different regions is attested to by the discovery of numerous small clay bottles (ampullae) on which his name and picture are engraved. Abū Mīnā ampullae were probably produced at his monastery, located 45 km southwest of Alexandria in Egypt, the remains of which were excavated in 1905–1907.¹⁶⁰ The ampullae were intended to hold the oil of lamps suspended above the saint's tomb, or holy water of the sanctuary of Abū Mīnā, and were kept by pious pilgrims.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

¹⁵⁶ For a survey of the subject and relevant literature see Marshak, 1971.

¹⁵⁷ B. Staviskiy, "Ampuly sv. Miny iz Samarkanda", *Ksiimk*, 80 (1960), p. 1001.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*,

¹⁵⁹ For primary sources on Abū Mīnā, see E. A. W. Budge, *Texts Relating to Saint Mēna of Egypt and Canons of Nicaea in a Nubian Dialect* (London, British Museum, 1909); F. Jaritz, *Die arabischen Quellen zum Heiligen Menas* (Heidelberg, 1993). A discussion is found in J. Wittt, *Menasampullen* (Wiesbaden, 2000).

¹⁶⁰ C. Kaufmann, *Zur ikonographie der Menas ampullen* (Cairo, 1910).

¹⁶¹ P. Grossman, "The Pilgrimage Center of Abu Mina", in *Pilgrimage and Holy Space in Late Antique Egypt*, (ed.) D. Frankfurter (Leiden, 1998), pp. 281–302, indicates that the shrine was located in an area identified as a large colonnaded square located north of the saint's basilica, which was also a commercial space where people traded various pilgrim artefacts. Archaeological finds of this object at the residential district of Kom-el-Dikka in Alexandria between 1961 and 1981, recorded by Kiss, "Les ampoules de Saint Menas decouvertes a Kôm el-Dikka, 1961–1981", in *Alexandrie 5* (Varsovie, 1989), also demonstrate its popularity among Egyptian Christian



Fig. 16. St Mina's ampulla. Reproduced after Satviskiy, 1960.

Judging by the quantity of surviving samples discovered at various places both in the saint's homeland, Egypt, and in other places in the Middle East (e.g. Palestine, Syria, as well as in Turkey, Italy, France, and Britain), the St Mina's ampullae are probably the most prevalent surviving form of pilgrimage artefacts of the late antique and early medieval period (4th–9th centuries CE).¹⁶²

No exact date for the ampulla has been suggested, although such items were produced in large quantities at the monastery of Abū Mīnā between the 4th and 7th centuries.¹⁶³ Accordingly, this object might have come to Sogdiana at any time within this period or later.

The so-called pilgrim flask (as a type of ceramic vessel) is not completely foreign to the ceramic culture of Central Asia, including Persia and China. Similar objects, in different designs, forms, and with different functionality, are well known and discussed in art and archaeology scholarship on the region.¹⁶⁴ However, there are no other known finds of

communities. It can be concluded, then, that it was not only part the commerce associated with pilgrims, but also had local consumers. Davis, "Pilgrimage and the Cult of Saint Thecla in Late Antique Egypt", in *Pilgrimage and Holy Space*, (ed.) Frankfurter, pp. 303–339. observes that the local finds of this object indicate that, prior to becoming a long-distance pilgrimage object, the ampulla was a local pilgrimage and religious identity object. Other types of pilgrim flasks are associated with other saints. For example, Anderson, "An Archaeology of Late Antique Pilgrim Flasks", pp.79–93, is a valuable study on pilgrim flasks found in Turkey which are very different from St Mina's in their design and iconography.

¹⁶²A more recent, comprehensive study on the distribution of St Mina's ampullae, including references to relevant research, is found in W. Anderson, "Menas Flasks in the West: Pilgrimage and Trade at the End of Antiquity", *Ancient West and East*, 6 (2007), pp. 221–243.

¹⁶³Staviskiy, "Ampuly sv. Miny iz Samarkanda", p. 102.

¹⁶⁴Although not directly concerned with pilgrim flasks, or with St Mina's flask in particular, R. Finlay, *Pilgrim Art: Cultures of Porcelain in World History* (Berkeley, 2010) is a very useful study. In particular, Finlay points out that "[s]ilk road merchants took pilgrim flasks to Central Asia, where they became conflated with leather saddle flasks since the shapes are much alike. Persian earthenware and metallic flasks entered China in the Tang period, often bearing Hellenistic decoration, including acanthus patterns, dancing girls, and piping boys. Chinese artisans simulated the flask in porcelain, and, embellished with designs from Greece and Persia, they became prestige items as

St Mina's ampullae in Sogdiana or Central Asia. Thus it is difficult to establish a definite context for this ampulla. Given that it has no major monetary value, being simple earthenware of no significant practical use, it is difficult to identify it as a commercial commodity that was bought by merchants.

A special link between the ampulla and Sogdian Christianity is suggested by ascetic Sogdian Christian texts related to the Egyptian church fathers. In this connection, it is possible to suggest that the ampulla was perhaps a holy souvenir that someone brought from Egypt.

Christian crosses from Sogdiana¹⁶⁵

In addition to the metallic pendant cross found at the site of the Urgut church, and the bronze cross acquired from local residents, four more Christian crosses have been found in Sogdiana.

Pendant cross from Afrasiab

A bronze pectoral cross was found in 1946, as a surface find at the site of Afrāsiāb in Samarqand. It is believed to be from the 6th–7th centuries, which Alexei Trenozhkin designated the Tali Barzu V period.¹⁶⁶ In regard to its physical features, the Afrāsiāb cross is similar to the bronze pendant cross acquired in Urgut.

Pendant cross from a burial site at Dashti-Urdakon, Panjikent

A bronze pectoral cross was discovered during the excavation of a burial site at Dashti-Urdakon, which contained burials of different types, including inhumation and burials in ossuaries.¹⁶⁷ The burials are identified as Christian. The cross was discovered in the tomb of a young child. The burial site is securely dated to the 8th century, based on an accompanying small object.

funerary goods in the Song period. In the Yuan and Ming periods, pilgrim flasks were made for export to Southwest Asia, often with Islamic-style floral decoration in the centre. Comparable flasks made in the reigns of the Yongle and Xuande emperors [1402–1435] are decorated on both sides with brocade patterns, floral scrolls, and Southwest Asian geometric patterns" (p. 300). Anderson, "An Archaeology of Late Antique Pilgrim Flasks", pp. 79–93, on the other hand, discusses local types of pilgrim flasks in Turkey and shows that both typologically and ichnographically they can be distinguished as either local or imported.

¹⁶⁵P. Rott, "Christian Crosses from Central Asia", in *Jingjiao: The Church of the East in China and Central Asia*, Collectanea Serica, (eds) R. Malek and P. Hofrichter (Sankt Augustin, 2006), pp. 395–401, provides a useful discussion on Christian crosses found in Central Asia. He concludes that "crosses (of various functions) were found mostly in historical-cultural areas of Central Asia. If Sogdiana, Fergana and Čač are known only for sporadic finds, Semirechye has many more finds. The main part of the considered crosses is pectoral ... Their chronological range in Central Asia is determined presumably by the period from the 7th–14th centuries". Hans Joachim Klimkeit, "Das Kreuzessymbol in der zentralasiatischen Religionsbegegnung. Zum Verhältnis von Christologie und Buddhologie in der zentralasiatischen Kunst", *Zeitschrift für Religions und Geistesgeschichte*, 32 (1979), pp. 99–115; W. Klein and P. Rott, "Einige problematische Funde von der Siedenstrasse", in *Jingjiao*, (eds) Malek and Hofrichter, pp. 403–424, also provide a useful discussion on the symbolism, typology, and functionality of the cross in the material culture of the Central Asian region.

¹⁶⁶A discussion of the periodisation of the different cultural layers of Afrāsiāb and Samarqand, and their correlation with Quanchi and Tali Barzu cultures, is given in A. Trenozhkin, "Sogd i Chach", *Ksiimk*, 33 (1950), pp. 152–169; specifically p. 161, on the definition of the Tali Barzu V period; an image of the cross is found on p. 166, no. 2.

¹⁶⁷A. Belenitskiy, B. Marshak, V. Raspapova and A. Isakov, "Novye raskopki v Pendzhikente", *AO* 1976 (1977), p. 559.



Fig. 17. A drawing of the Afrāsiāb bronze cross. Reproduced after Trenozhkin.

The cross from the burial at Durmanteppe

The Durman burial was excavated in 1986 in the Durmanteppe area in Samarqand, to which it owes its archaeological name.¹⁶⁸ Of the three graves opened by the archaeologists, only one had escaped the hands of ancient tomb robbers. The material culture objects of this grave included a thin gold foil cross that was sewn on the garment of the deceased, who was buried in a wooden coffin of which only the nails survive. Judging by the position of the skeletons, the burials were oriented in a westerly direction.¹⁶⁹ The burial is reported to be from the middle of the 11th century.¹⁷⁰ Other accompanying artefacts from this burial include a sword and sheath.¹⁷¹ It is unlikely that the deceased held an ecclesiastical office, but it is probable that he was Christian who held a political, official post—an emissary perhaps. The cross on his clothing was most likely sewn in as a protective amulet. The involvement of Christians, in particular, members of the Church of the East, in the courtly and political spheres is well documented.

A clay form for moulding crosses

A clay mould used to manufacture crosses was accidentally discovered at the site of Arbinjan-teppa, located about 80 km to the west of Samarqand, on the road leading to Bukhara. This artefact is housed at the Institute of Archaeology in Samarqand.¹⁷² A ceramic mould for

¹⁶⁸G. Shishkina, “Nestorianskoe pogrebenie v Sogde Samarkandskom”, in *Iz istorii drevnykh kul'tov Srednei Azii*, (ed.) Zhukova, pp. 56–63.

¹⁶⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 56–57.

¹⁷⁰*Ibid.*,

¹⁷¹The burial in Durman is part of the larger burial site. In the course of the excavation of the site, a burial of a sacrificial horse was also found, a tradition of the animal husbandry cultures. In some graves, the attendant artefacts included cups and plates, which were used to provide food for the deceased. Accordingly, only one person in these group burial sites may be identified as Christian, and the religious identity of the remaining bodies cannot be confirmed for certain. Shishkina seems to have been incorrect in interpreting the burial as Christian, as the majority of the attendant objects contradict Christian burial practices.

¹⁷²Savchenko and Dickens, “Prester John’s Realm”, p. 297, Fig. 6.



Fig. 18. (Colour online) Golden cross from the Durmantepa burial. Reproduced after Savchenko and Dickens, 2009. p. 297.

making crosses was also discovered at the archaeological excavations at Marv.¹⁷³ The type of metal used for this mould cannot be determined, but the cross would have looked similar to the crosses acquired in Urgut and found in Afrāsiāb. In other words, ichnographically, the mould can be related to the crosses known in the art and archaeology of the Church of the East (i.e. in Mesopotamia, Iran, Central Asia, and China).

Sogdian material culture and Sogdian Christianity

Thomas Schlereth commented that “material culture objects made or modified by humans, consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, reflect the belief patterns of individuals who made, commissioned, purchased, or used them, and by extension, the belief patterns of the larger society of which they are a part”.¹⁷⁴ Applying this premise to the material culture objects described above, it is possible to say that they reflect both the social actions of Sogdian Christians as well as various patterns for the integration of Christianity into the Sogdian milieu.

Integration into landscape

The material culture objects discussed above belonged to a specific group (i.e. to Christians). However, they also functioned within a wider cultural space—that is, they were produced in the workshop and purchased in the market, while the church building stood alongside other

¹⁷³St J. Simpson, “Ceramics and Small Finds from MEK: 1”, *The International Merw Project Preliminary Report on the Second Season*, (eds) G. Herrmann and K. Kurbansakhatov, *Iran*, 32,1 (1994), pp. 67–68. The mould is 1.5 cm and was made “by shaving down the edges of a ceramic jar strap handle and incising one surface to allow the simultaneous casting of two stylistically different pendant crosses. One of these (1 × 1.9 cm.) appears to have a central leaf shape with small, plain equal-length arm crosses (“Greek crosses”) at the terminals. The second was a cross (2.1 × 1.7 cm.) with equal-length, splayed arms, a pair of small blobs on the tip of each arm and a further five blobs on the cross itself”.

¹⁷⁴T. Schlereth, *Material Culture Studies in America* (Nashville, TN, 1982), p. 3.



Fig. 19. (Colour online) Mould for making crosses. Reproduced after Savchenko, 2010.

private houses or on the main road. Although the introduction of this material culture into Sogdian society does not imply a radical shift in the material perception of Christianity, it does show that it was integrated into the public space through architecture, and that the objects related to it were manufactured and sold. Furthermore, it shows that Christianity was part of local religiosity. Christians in Sogdiana were able to own land on which to erect their churches, and to import or manufacture their devotional objects.

Conformity with the international Church of the East

One of the main characteristics of the material culture discussed above is its typological and iconographic commonality with the Christian material culture of the Church of the East tradition in Persia, Mesopotamia, and Central Asia. Aside from being indicative of the “direction” where the artistic inspiration and knowledge came from [11] in the development of this material culture, it also bears witness to an intrinsic relationship between the Christian communities living in Sogdiana and a much wider network of Christian communities.

Conclusion

Prior to its establishment in Sogdiana and elsewhere in the East, Christianity took root in the Mesopotamian borderlands of the Persian Empire, possibly under the Parthian Dynasty (247

BC–224 CE). However, its centralisation and organisational formation as a major religion took place under the Sassanid Dynasty (224–651 CE).¹⁷⁵ The dissemination of Christianity in Persia is connected to, among other things (including trade and bilateral connections), deportations, or forced migrations, carried out under Šāpūr I and Šāpūr II.¹⁷⁶ This means that the church in Persia comprised indigenous Iranian and Syriac as well as Greek-speaking communities that were resettled in various regions of Iran.¹⁷⁷ However, as the officially recognised church of the Sasanian Empire, the Church of the East had to demonstrate conformity with its geopolitical and cultural setting. This was displayed through its socio-political engagement with the Persian monarchy, as well as by its integration into the local social fabric. This is manifested in the material culture via the adoption of local architectural models for building churches as well as the integration of Christian symbols in objects intended for both public and private use, such as seals and coins. Another fundamental display of the integration of Christianity into Persian contexts was the translation of Christian texts, in particular the Bible, into the local language, to which the Pahlavi Psalter bears testimony.¹⁷⁸ The significance of these material expressions is that they show the church to be a locally integrated social institution under the Zoroastrian monarchy.

Likewise, when the Church of the East was planted in Sogdiana, it had to show its conformity with the local socio-cultural and political setting in a tangible way. The material

¹⁷⁵W. Young, *Patriarch, Shah and Caliph; A Study of the Relationship of the Church of the East with the Sassanid Empire and the Early Caliphates up to 820 AD* (Pakistan, 1974), p. 21; Samuel H. Moffett, *A History of the Christianity in Asia. 1, Beginnings to 1500* (San Francisco, 1992), pp. 91–254. The Sassanid Empire, as Young observes, stressed centralisation of power coupled with nationalism and patriotism “and Zoroastrianism, as the state religion, was the symbol of this” (p. 17). However, for the first decade of Sassanid rule, Christianity was neither recognised nor in danger of annihilation, which contributed to its peaceful growth. In addition, no record exists of persecution of the church by the Persian state prior to the time of Šāpūr II (309–379). The nature of the persecutions after this was mainly political—motivated by suspicions about the loyalty of Christians to the Roman Empire, which announced Christianity as its state religion—and religious, stemming from the zeal of the Zoroastrian clergy who desired the widespread triumph of their faith. A detailed discussion of persecution in the Persian Empire is found in Young, *Patriarch, Shah and Caliph*, pp. 21–26; S. Brock, “Christians in the Sasanian Empire: A Case of Divided Loyalties”, *Studies in Church History*, 18 (1982), pp. 1–19. The most recent treatment of the subject as “imagined experience” is found in R. Payne, “The Emergence of Martyrs’ Shrines in Late Antique Iran: Conflict, Consensus and Communal Institutions”, in *An Age of Saints: Power, Conflict and Dissent in Early Medieval Christianity*, (eds) P. Sarris et al. (Leiden, 2011), pp. 89–113.

¹⁷⁶For a discussion of this, see Scher, 1908, pp. 221–222; Jean-Maurice Fiey, “Chrétientés syriaques du Horasan et du Sagestan”, *La Muséon*, LXXXVI, (1973), pp. 75–104; M. Chaumont, *La christianisation de l’empire iranien des origines aux grandes persécutions du IV^e siècle* (CSCO, 499) (Louvain, 1988), p. 158.

¹⁷⁷The significance of these “deported” Christian communities within the Persian Empire, as highlighted by Jean-Maurice Fiey, “Diocèses syriens orientaux du Golfe persique”, *Mémorial Mgr. Gabriel Khouri-Sarkis (1898–1968)* (Louvain, 1969), p. 238, is indicated by the fact that three out of the five bishops of Kūzestān attending the synod of Isaac in 410 CE were from cities settled by the Roman prisoners. Furthermore, the council of Mar Dādīšo in 424 CE consecrated the Rēw-Ardašīr, where Šāpūr I had resettled many of the Roman prisoners, at the metropolitan see of the ecclesiastical province of Fārs: Jean-Baptiste Chabot (ed. and translation), *Synodicon orientale: Synodicon orientale ou recueil de synodes nestoriens* (Paris, Imprimerie Nationale, 1902), p. 681. In addition, the acts of the synod name a bishopric by the name of Šbīrā dē Bōlašparr. Its location is indicated in Jean-Maurice Fiey, “Topography of al-Mada’in”, *Sumer*, 23 (1968), pp. 3–38. I. If the town of Šbīrā was identical to that of Šwīta, as pointed by Jean-Maurice Fiey, *Jalons pour une histoire de l’église en Iraq* (CSCO, 310) (Louvain, 1970), p. 382, then it is also possible that Roman captives were scattered in Gorgān. At any rate, it is clear from toponyms used in the Synodical acts that these bishoprics were established to meet the need of resettled Christian people from the Roman territories. It is even more interesting to consider the effect that these non-Iranian Christian populations may have had on their Iranian neighbours.

¹⁷⁸A more recent study of the Pahlavi Psalter, including relevant bibliography references, is found in D. Durkin-Meisterernst, “The Pahlavi Psalter Fragment in Relation to its Source”, *Studies in the Inner Asian Languages*, XXI (2006), pp. 1–19.

culture—comprising both architectural and small objects—discussed in this article vividly illustrates the integration of Christianity into Sogdian society through a material expression that was both locally produced and imported. As exemplified by Ibn Hawqal's record, these material culture products, especially the architecture, which also became part of popular local memory (i.e. local residents would have referred to the area by its major landmark, such as the church building), have provided a landmark for geographers and historians.

These material culture objects served as a means of visual identity for Christians in the multi-religious milieu of Sogdiana. In other words, Christians were differentiated by their material culture objects: by wearing pendant crosses, Christians displayed their religious belief. <barakatulloashurov@gmail.com>

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