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# Byzantine-Rite Christians (Melkites) in Central Asia in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages

## Abstract

The presence of Christians in Central Asia in the Late Antiquity late antique and medieval periods represents a forgotten episode in the history of Christianity. It is perhaps surprising to find Christians of the Byzantine-rite contributing to this history given their remoteness from the patriarchates of the Eastern Mediterranean. The patriarch of Antioch in particular seems to have appointed bishops to Central Asia, although it is not always clear where their sees were located and when they became merely titular appointments. These minority Chalcedonian communities are mentioned in a variety of Greek and Arabic sources and survived in this distant region in spite of changes in the ethnic and religious hegemony. Recent archaeological discoveries have endorsed the textual references to their settlement, but many questions relating to their identity still remain unanswered.

## Introduction

From the fifth century onwards the Christian communities in the Eastern Mediterranean began to disintegrate into sectarian churches, each claiming to be representative of the true apostolic and 'orthodox' tradition. After the Council of Chalcedon in 451 the main separation was between the Chalcedonians and the anti-Chalcedonians with each faction employing various sobriquets against the other. The settlement and subsequent history of Byzantine-rite communities outside Byzantine territory, first under the

Sasanians and then under the Arabs, offers an interesting study in demographic relocation. They represent a minority Byzantine presence in a non-Christian and non-Greek-speaking environment remote from the ecclesiastical centres of the Eastern Mediterranean. This paper will examine the evidence for so-called 'Melkite' or Byzantine-rite Christians in Central Asia in the late antique and medieval periods (Dauviller 1953, 1983; Nasrallah 1975; Fiey 1977). Before turning to this evidence, however, we need to discuss some of the titles and definitions relating to the divisions within the Eastern Christian communities.

## Definitions

The question of nomenclature in relation to the history of the Christian communities in the Middle East and Central Asia is a complicated one (Griffith 2008). For example, after the condemnation of Nestorius (died c.451) at the Council of Ephesus in 431 those who were said to be his followers were known soon after as 'Nestorians' (Millar 2006: 159). The title was then subsequently foisted upon the Syriac-speaking Church of the East which had declared its independence in Sasanian Persia before 431 (Baum & Winkler 2003: 19–21). In other words, the condemnation of Nestorius at Ephesus was not the catalyst for establishing a 'Nestorian' Church. Nestorius himself never founded a church of his own and would have been horrified by the suggestion that he had. The so-called 'Nestorian' Church was a political and theological construct that never existed outside the imagination of those involved in the Christological controversies of the fifth century. We have not only to separate Nestorius the person from 'Nestorianism' the theological formulation, but we have also to separate 'Nestorianism' from the Church of the East (Brock 1996: 23–35; Seleznyov 2010).

After the Council of Chalcedon in 451 the Christian communities were divided into those who supported the dogmatic formula of the Council and those who opposed it, with the term 'Monophysite' not being found for the anti-Chalcedonians before the late sixth century (Frend 1972).<sup>1</sup> An early use of this term is attested in the letters of Pope Gregory the Great (540–604), known to the Byzantines as Gregory the Dialogist (Gregory the Great, Migne, *Patrologia Latina* 70, Book XII, Epistle XVI: *Ad Eulogium Alexandrinum Patriarcham*; Book XI, Epistle LXII: *Ad Quiricus*). As Gregory spent six years in Constantinople and was engaged in the theological debates of his time, he presumably picked up this label during his stay in the Queen of Cities. It was of

course a term of opprobrium, so it tells us more about what those targeted by it were supposed to believe, rather than what they actually believed (Winkler 1997). A particular group of 'Monophysites' was known as the *Acephaloi* or 'headless ones', rather than being called after the name of a heresiarch, as in the case of Arius and Nestorius.

The term Copt for Egyptian Christians was not used before the Arab invasions in the mid-seventh century. Before this the anti-Chalcedonian Christians in Egypt were known as Theodosians, after the sixth-century patriarch of Alexandria, Theodosius (r.535–37), who was deposed by the emperor Justinian (r. 527–565) for supporting Severus of Antioch in exile in Egypt (Theophanes, *Chronographia*, AM 6033, 6121; Mango & Scott 1997). The term Copt was the name given to the Egyptian people before the Arab invasions and was thereafter applied to the Christian population. It was then adopted specifically by the anti-Chalcedonian Christians of Egypt. Interestingly, the term Jacobite was used by Syriac and Arabic writers for the anti-Chalcedonians in Egypt, as witnessed by al-Bīrūnī (973–1048) in the late tenth century (Sachau, 1879: 282), and Bar Hebraeus (1226–86), the Maphrian of the Jacobite or Syrian Orthodox Church, in the thirteenth century (Budge 1932: 123). Here the term Jacobite derives from the name Jacob Baradaeus (c. 500–78), a sixth-century bishop of Edessa and leader of the anti-Chalcedonians who evangelised in Syria and Mesopotamia (Griffith 2008: 134–36). The term Jacobite was probably used first by Chalcedonians to describe the anti-Chalcedonians in Syria. However, it is of interest to find it being used by westerners for Egyptian Copts as witnessed by Jacques de Vitry in the thirteenth century in his *Historia Orientalis* of 1220 (quoted in Cannuyer 2001: 131).

The term Melkite also came into prominence after the seventh-century Arab invasions, and used for Byzantine-rite Christians of the Middle East. It was initially used as a pejorative by the anti-Chalcedonians for those who adhered to Chalcedon and who remained loyal to the Byzantine patriarchs of Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem. The title Melkite derives from the Syriac '*malkā*', meaning 'king', so the Melkites were the royalists or imperialists (Dick 1994: 9–10). It is unclear exactly when the Melkites began to identify themselves by this name, but members of this church saw themselves as belonging to a transnational community with a presence scattered throughout the Middle East. To begin with they were mostly Greek-speakers from

the urban districts, as opposed to the more rural Syriac-speaking anti-Chalcedonians, but they adopted Syriac and Sogdian as well as Arabic into their Byzantine-rite liturgies. Since 1729 the term has been used almost exclusively for the Arabic-speaking Greek Catholics of the Middle East (Griffith 2008: 139).

The presence of Greek, Syriac and Georgian speakers in Palestinian monasteries is attested by the founder's *typikon* of the Mar Sabas Monastery near Jerusalem, dated to after 1100 but reflecting earlier material (Thomas & Constantinides-Hero 2000: 1311–18). The famous monk of Mar Sabas and father of the church, John of Damascus (c. 670–749) in the eighth century, wrote in Greek but he was probably bilingual in Greek and Syriac. After John of Damascus the Melkite literati began to write in Arabic, producing a corpus of Christian literature still hardly known outside the Arabic-speaking world (Thomas 2007). Among the first of these was a Sabaite monk who became bishop of Harrān in northern Syria, Theodore Abū Qurrah (c. 750–c. 825), whose writings defended the Melkite position against anti-Chalcedonians as well as against Muslims and Jews (Lamoreaux 2001).

## Late Antiquity

Evidence for Christianity among the Huns dwelling north of the Caucasus between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea comes from the sixth-century *Chronicle* of Pseudo-Zachariah Rhetor. The author informs us that two men, John of Resh'aina and Thomas the Tanner from Amida in northern Syria, were taken captive by the Sasanian King Kavadh I (r. 488–96 and r. 498–530) and sold to the Huns among whom they remained for thirty years, but who were subsequently released and returned to tell their story. Following on from this bishop Qardust of Arran in Caucasian Albania together with a number of priests travelled to the land of the Huns where they remained for seven years, baptizing and translating texts into the Hunnic language (Greatrex 2011: 452–54; Thompson 1946; Mingana 1925: 303–4).<sup>2</sup> These events took place in the first half of the sixth century and relate to the presence and missionary work of anti-Chalcedonian Christians among the Huns.

Again we hear of Christians among the Hephthalite Huns in 549 when the Catholicos of the Church of the East at Seleucia-Ctesiphon, Aba I (r. 540–52), dispatched a bishop to the region of the Oxus River in Bactria. This was in response to a request by the Huns to ordain a bishop a priest who had

been sent as an emissary to the Sasanian King Khusro I (r. 531–579) (Mingana 1925: 304-5). The Byzantine historian Theophylact Simocatta records in 591 that among captives taken by Khusro I, and sent to the Byzantine Emperor Maurice (r. 582–602), were Turks who had crosses tattooed on their foreheads. They are reported to have adopted this facial decoration at the suggestion of the Christians among them as a prophylactic to ward off the plague (Whitby & Whity 1986: 13-15).

Chalcedonian Christian communities began to be established in Persia as a result of the Sasanian conquests of Byzantine territory in the Eastern Mediterranean in the mid-sixth century. Khusro I captured Antioch in 540 and deported most of the Christian population to Persia, settling the deportees in a purpose-built town modelled on Antioch, south of the capital of Seleucia-Ctesiphon. This is discussed by Procopius in his *Persian Wars*. He writes (Procopius, *The Wars*, 2.9.14; 14.1-4):

*Now Chosroes built a city in Assyria in a place one day's journey distant from the city of Ctesiphon, and he named it the Antioch of Chosroes and settled there all the captives from Antioch, constructing for them a bath and a hippodrome and providing that they should have free enjoyment of their other luxuries besides. Indeed he brought with him charioteers and musicians both from Antioch and from the other Roman cities. Besides this, he always provisioned these citizens of Antioch at public expense more carefully than in the fashion of captives, and he required that they be called king's subjects ...*

Unlike Persian captives who were often sold into slavery by the Byzantines the Sasanians made use of Byzantine captives for purposes of colonisation (Rotman 2009: 33–35; Lieu 1986: 475–505; Morony 2004: 161–79). The town was known as *Rūmaghān* or 'city of the Romans' as well as Better Antioch.<sup>3</sup> It seems to have had a resident Catholicos, and according to the Syrian Orthodox historian John of Ephesus, a population of around 30,000 by the late sixth century (Brooks 1935–6: 239). A Sasanian seal in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris with an inscription in Pahlavi is said by Phillipe Gignoux (1978) to read 'Great Catholicos [of the] region of Hulvān and Balāsagān', and this has been interpreted by Jean-Maurice Fiey (1995) to refer to the existence of a Melkite Catholicos of Central Asia by the seventh century.<sup>4</sup> However, Hulvān and Balāsagān were western provinces and Richard Frye is of the opinion that the meaning of the inscription cannot be deciphered (Frye 1977: 31, pl. 1.3).

Among the deportees from Antioch at this time a large proportion would have been Chalcedonians (Greatrex 2003). However, during the Sasanian occupation of Byzantine territory in the Eastern Mediterranean under Khusro II (r. 591–628) from 614 to 628, the anti-Chalcedonian population was in the ascendancy. In fact the Sasanians showed tolerance towards the anti-Chalcedonians who in turn saw the Sasanians more as liberators than oppressors, while the Chalcedonians were seen by the Sasanians as Byzantine collaborators. We should bear in mind that the Christian wife of Khusro II, Shirin, belonged to the Church of the East at one time and to the Syrian Orthodox Church at another (Baum 2005). According to the Syrian Orthodox historian, Dionysius of Tell-Mahrē, writing in the ninth century, the Sasanians expelled the Chalcedonian bishops from Mesopotamia and Syria. He writes (Palmer 1993: 125–26):

*When Chosroes conquered Mesopotamia and expelled the Romans from it, he ordered at the same time the Chalcedonian bishops to be expelled from their churches and those churches to be given to the Jacobites, for they had possessed them since the time of Maurice, but for the last ten years they had been ousted from them as a result of the persecution by Domitian of Melitene. So the (liturgical) commemoration of the Synod of Chalcedon was utterly abolished east of the Euphrates. Chosroes sent for bishops from the east and installed them in the cities ...*

Not surprisingly there seems to have been an exchange of sectarian loyalties during the Sasanian occupation of former Byzantine territory. The profile of the Church of the East in the Eastern Mediterranean also increased as a result of the occupation despite being without a Catholicos for twenty years because of political infighting (Wilmshurst 2011: 64–5). This is confirmed by the Byzantine chronicler Theophanes who tells us that when the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius (r. 610–41) retook the city of Edessa he restored to the Chalcedonians the cathedral the Nestorians had held since Khusro's time (Theophanes, *Chronicle*, AM 6120). Heraclius' reconquest of Sasanian occupied territory brought him into contact with Persian Christian families who had migrated there (Kaegi 2003: 181). These Christians were in a double bind, however, because having taken up residency under the Sasanians they now found themselves stranded under the Byzantines.

After the capture of Seleucia-Ctesiphon by the Arabs in 637 the town of Better Antioch founded by Khosro I was known in Arabic as '*al-Rūmiyya*',

meaning ‘city of the Romans or Greeks’ (Kaldellis 2007; Parry 2009).<sup>5</sup> The town was abandoned in the mid-eighth century with the construction of the new Abbāsīd capital of Baghdad and the district razed during the civil war that saw al-Ma’mūn (r. 813–33) become caliph (Lunde & Stone 1989: 156). In fact in 762 the Arab caliph al-Manṣūr (r. 754–75) transferred the entire community to the province of Chach in Transoxania together with their Catholicos, who was addressed thereafter as the ‘Catholicos of Romagyris’, but who by the end of the tenth century had changed his title to ‘Catholicos of Khorasan’. The Greek title ‘Romagyris’ (Ρωμογύρεως) may derive from the Middle Persian ‘*Roumagird*’ meaning ‘town or colony of Romans’ (Klein 1999). In medieval Baghdad there was a Christian quarter, known in Arabic as *dār-ar-Rūm*, ‘the house of the Greeks’, where Melkite, Church of the East, and Syrian Orthodox communities resided.

The Arab conquest of Central Asia was secured when the Arabs defeated a Chinese army at the Battle of Talas in 751. The relocation of Christians by al-Manṣūr to the province of Chach in 762 would have placed them at the furthest reaches of the Abbāsīd caliphate.<sup>6</sup> The province of Chach was situated on the eastern bank of the Syr Darya (Jaxartes) and is listed in the inscription of Shapur I (r. 242–72) at Naqsh-i Rostam (Bosworth 1990). The city known today as Tashkent, meaning ‘city of stone’, retains a dissimilated form of the name Chach. Recent excavations at Qarshovul-tepe south west of Tashkent have unearthed evidence of a possible Christian settlement (Savchenko & Sheyko 2010). However, an alternative suggestion is that the Catholicos of Romagyris was located at Nishapur in Khorasan, the title deriving from the Christian quarter of that city. The title is mentioned by the patriarch of Antioch, Peter III (r. 1028–51), in his correspondence along with that of Irenoupolis (Ἐιρηνοῦπόλεως), the See of a second catholicos (Charon 2000: 265–66). This title is a Greek translation from the Arabic meaning ‘city of peace’, which was an epithet given to the city of Baghdad.

In the Arabic *Vita* of the Melkite patriarch of Antioch, Christophoros (r. 960–67), written by the *protospatharios* Ibrahim ibn Yuhanna, an account is given of the transportation by al-Manṣūr of the Christian community to Chach (Zayat 1952: 11–38, 333–66):

*When the Muslims constructed the ‘City of Peace’ (Madinat as-Salām), that is Baghdad, they decided to move the Christian community. They were transported to a far off land in Persia called Chach and their Catholicos was exiled with them.*

*These émigrés were known as the 'colony of Romans' which was a suitable name for them.*

Later with the settlement of more Melkites in Baghdad a dispute arose between the two communities over who was entitled to claim the Catholicos. Those in Chach argued they had more right to him because he had gone with them to Central Asia, whereas those in Baghdad claimed him because formerly he resided at Seleucia-Ctesiphon which was in their district (Zayat 1952: 23–25). It seems it was as a result of this dispute that the Melkites eventually ended up with two Catholicoi. However, the Catholicos of the Church of the East, Abraham III (r. 905–936), objected to the Melkites using the title of Catholicos because of their alleged disloyalty to the caliphate. The consecration of the Melkite Catholicos for Baghdad was disrupted by members of the Church of the East which led the Abbāsīd authorities to impose a fine on the Melkite metropolitan, obliging him to sign in 912 a pledge preventing the Melkite community from having a Catholicos in Baghdad (Fiey 1995: 387–89; Wilmshurst 2011: 193).

## The Middle Ages

In the twelfth century an archimandrite and deacon of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, Nilos Doxapatrios, tells us that the patriarch of Antioch (Parthey 1967: 271):

*... had under his jurisdiction all of Asia and the East, including India, and even now he dispatches, after arranging it, a Catholicos with the title of Romagyris; in Persia also, which comprises Babylonia, now called Baghdad, the patriarch sends a Catholicos with the title of Catholicos of Irenoupolis.*

The inclusion of India by Doxapatrios does not appear to be accurate because there is no evidence as far as we are aware of Melkites in India in this period. However, the mention of a Catholicos of Romagyris and Catholicos of Irenoupolis in the twelfth century is important confirmation of the situation. Yet there appears to be a gap in the record from this period through to 1364 when the title Romagyris became attached to that of the Catholicos of Georgia, indicating that it was a Melkite catholicate, as the Georgians were Byzantine Orthodox, but it is not clear whether by this time it was merely a titular appointment (Richard 2004: 578).<sup>7</sup>



The presence of Melkites in the region of Tashkent in Central Asia is attested then from the eighth century, and according to the Muslim scholar, al-Bīrūnī, writing at the end of the tenth century, there appears to have been a Melkite metropolitan at Merv (Sachau 1879: 289). There is little evidence for Melkites further east, however, in spite of a bilingual Psalm fragment in Greek and Sogdian (see below) found in the ruins of a monastery at Bulayīq near Turfan in Chinese Central Asia (Xinjiang) (Sheldon 2008). The only evidence for Byzantine-rite Christians in China is the mention of a contingent of Alan guards at the Mongol court (Moule 1930: 260–64), but this does not exclude the possibility of there being others owing allegiance to this church whose presence is thus far unknown.

In 1253 the Franciscan William of Rubruck met Alans in Central Asia, whom he described as: 'Christians of the Greek rite who use the Greek alphabet and have Greek priests, and yet are not schismatic like the Greeks but honour every Christian without respect of persons' (Jackson 1990: 102). The king of the Alans in the Caucasus is said to have become Byzantine Orthodox in the early tenth century, but relations with Constantinople appear to have soured soon after (Alemany 2000: 187, 239). There is also evidence for Byzantine Orthodox Christians among the Cumans (Qipchāq) and Tatars at Sudaq in the Crimea in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (Vásáry 1988; Golden 1998).

During the *pax Mongolica* when Tabriz was the capital of the Il-khanate in Persia it was visited by many western travellers, who report the presence of Armenians, Greeks, and Syrians. The Byzantine wife of Il-khan Abaqa (r. 1265–82) in the late thirteenth century, Maria Despina Khatun, the illegitimate daughter of Emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos (r. 1259–82), is known to have sent for iconographers from Constantinople to decorate a Greek church in Tabriz, and one of the painters was asked to decorate a church built by the Maphrian of the Syrian Orthodox Church, Bar Hebraeus (Budge 1932: xxvii). Maria was a patroness of the convent of the Theotokos in the Phanar district of Constantinople which was subsequently known as St Mary of the Mongols. Even after the devastations wrought by Tamerlane (1336–1405) in the second half of the fourteenth century, we still hear of Syrian Orthodox, Armenian and Melkite Christian communities in Samarkand (Markham 1859: 171). Thus we can trace the presence of Melkite communities in Central Asia through to the beginning of the fifteenth century.

## Manuscript discoveries

Interestingly no Christian Sogdian texts have been found in Sogdiana itself. Some of those found at Bulayiq near Turfan in Xinjiang may have come from Sogdiana, while others may have been translated or copied at Turfan. The presence of Christians so far east was a result of the Silk Road trade, with Sogdian being the lingua franca of the merchants and the Sogdians the dominant traders (Vaissière 2005). The Armenian Het um wrote in 1307 that there were Christians called Sogdians (Soldains) in Chorasnia (area south of the Aral Sea) who had their own language, celebrated the liturgy like the Greeks, and owed obedience to the Patriarch of Antioch (Dauvillier 1953: 67–68). This is confirmed by al-Bīrūnī a native of Chorasnia, who lists the feasts of the Melkite calendar as well as those of the Church of the East, and who says he would have included the Syrian Orthodox as well had he known Christians of this community (Sachau 1879: 312). The existence of these Melkites may be evidence that Sogdian had earlier been used liturgically by them in Sogdiana (Sims-Williams 1992). This suggestion gains support from the ninth-century *Life of Constantine the Philosopher*, where Sogdian is included in a list of Christian languages. The Constantine of this *Life* is better known by his monastic name Cyril, who along with his brother Methodius, is credited with developing the first Slavonic alphabet and evangelising in Moravia (Kantor 1983: 71).

The most important Christian documents discovered so far in Central Asia come from Xinjiang, with the evidence for Christianity in the Central Asian Republics of the former Soviet Union being largely epigraphic and archaeological (Savchenko & Dickens 2009). The German Turfan expeditions between 1904 and 1907 brought back manuscript fragments in Sogdian from the ruined monastery at Bulayiq near Turfan mentioned above. The vast majority of the fragments belong to the Church of the East, many included in the Christian Sogdian Manuscript C2 (Sims-Williams 1985), consisting of homilies, commentaries, canons, martyrdoms, legends and monastic discourses. One fragment is from the *Antirrheticus* of Evagrius of Pontus (c. 345–99), another is from the *Nicene Creed*, and there are extracts from the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. Some fragments remain unidentified because the Syriac originals from which they were translated may no longer be extant. Other fragments include Syriac liturgical books with rubrics in Sogdian, psalters in Syriac, and texts in Uighur and Middle Persian. The appearance of

Middle Persian loanwords in Sogdian is noticeable including the term *tarsāk* for Christian, that is, 'one who fears (God)' (Pines 1968).

Of particular interest are two Sogdian fragments containing parts of Psalm 32 in the numbering of the LXX with the opening words of the psalm of one fragment written in Greek. It is dated to the eighth or ninth century and Nicholas Sims-Williams has suggested that it may indicate a Melkite presence in the Turfan oasis, either that or it is a product of the Melkite community in Sogdiana, perhaps from Chach (Sims-Williams 2004: 623–31; 2011: 461–66). There are also fragments of a draft letter in Syriac from Bulayīq that appear to be addressed to a Byzantine dignitary. The letter has been dated to the tenth century and follows the stylistic conventions of Byzantine epistolography of the period (Maróth 1985; Sundermann 1994). It is noticeable that the Persian title 'king of kings' is used in the Syriac as an equivalent of the Byzantine imperial title 'autocrator'. The reign of the Emperor Heraclius and his recovery of Byzantine territory from Khosro II in 628 is usually associated with the change of title from 'autocrator' to 'basileus' in Byzantium (Zuckerman 2010).

### Al-Bīrūnī

We have had occasion to mention the Muslim polymath al-Bīrūnī because he is an important witness to the presence of Melkites in Central Asia in the tenth and eleventh centuries. He is considered the father of *Religionswissenschaft* or comparative religion, because in his *Chronology of Ancient Nations* he discusses Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism, and Christianity as well as Islam (Kamaruzaman 2003). His approach to the study of the Christian sects is more anthropological and less polemical than that of his contemporary Abd al-Jabbār in his *Critique of Christian Origins* (Reynolds & Samir 2010). When al-Bīrūnī comes to Christianity he has first-hand knowledge of the Melkite and Church of the East communities, but not of the Syrian Orthodox because as he says: 'We have not succeeded in finding anyone who belonged to their sect or knew their principles'. His *Chronology* is the work of a young scholar of 27 who later went to India where he studied Sanskrit and wrote his famous description of India (Sachua 1910).

In his discussion of the calendar and feasts of the Melkite Christians, in which the months are listed under their Syriac names, he provides unique information about the community in his homeland of Khorasan. As the whole section on the Melkite calendar is worthy of a study in itself we can only pick

out a few things here. For example, he mentions the fact that the Melkites know only of six ecumenical councils (Sachau 1879: 291), a situation which is confirmed by other sources (Griffith 1993). The seventh ecumenical council of 787 was not ratified as ecumenical until the time of Photios (r. 858–67 & r. 877–86), the patriarch of Constantinople in the ninth century. He confirms its ecumenicity in his *Encyclical Letter to the Bishops of the East of 866* in which he writes: ‘A report has come to us that some churches under your apostolic throne number ecumenical councils up to the sixth but do not know the seventh’ (Pelikan & Hotchkiss 2003: 307). There had been a controversy over the status of the seventh council (Parry 1996: 133–34), but under Photios the issue was resolved in favour of its ecumenicity and this needed to be conveyed to the patriarchs of Antioch, Alexandria and Jerusalem. Clearly for the Melkites of Central Asia under Islam this information was still not known to them at the time of al-Bīrūnī, indicating their isolation from their Byzantine co-religionists.

The Melkite calendar of al-Bīrūnī begins with the Syriac month Tishrīn I, which is October, not September as in the Byzantine calendar. It seems that the Melkites along with the Syriac-speaking Christian communities began their liturgical year in October, clearly on the basis of their use of the Seleucid Era which began on 1 October 312 BCE. Al-Bīrūnī’s calendar includes a Feast of Roses which is not attested elsewhere, and a discussion about baptism which seems not to be a triple or full immersion (Sachau 1879: 288–89). In relation to the Feast of Roses he lists it twice in the Melkite calendar, first he records it as May 3 and then as May 15 (Sachau 1879: 292, 295).

For May 3 he says: ‘*The Feast of Roses* according to the ancient rite, as it is celebrated in Khwarizm. On this day they bring Juri-roses to the churches, the reason of which is this, that Mary presented on this day the first roses to Elizabeth, the mother of John [the Baptist].’ And for the May 15 he says: ‘*Feast of Roses* according to the new rite, (postponed to this date) because on the 4th [3rd?] the roses are still very scarce. On the same date it is celebrated in Khurasan, not on the original date’. The two dates for the festival, for the old and new rite, take place in Khwarizm and Khorasan respectively.<sup>8</sup> The Melkite Feast of Roses may be connected with the ancient Roman *Rhodophoria* and/or *Rosalia* festivals both of which took place during May and which were associated with the Isis cult. An epithet of Isis applied to the Mother of God in the Byzantine Church was ‘the unfading rose’ (Witt 1997: 273).

## Conclusion

The rediscovery of early Christianity in Central Asia started at the beginning of the twentieth century with the Silk Road expeditions of European explorers such as Aurel Stein, Albert von Le Coq, and Paul Pelliot (Foltz 1999). Most of the evidence discovered relates to the Church of the East and its settlements in the region as well as those further East in China during the Tang (618–907) and Yuan dynasties (1272–1368) (Malek 2006). Although the evidence for Melkite Christians in Central Asia is not as extensive as that for the Church of the East it needs to be included in the picture. We have looked at some of that evidence and seen that it represents communities established through deportation and colonization residing in remote areas cut off from their patrimony in the Eastern Mediterranean. Future archaeological discoveries may provide additional evidence for Melkites in Central Asia, but until then questions pertaining to their ethnic and linguistic identity remain somewhat conjectural.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Frend (1972) states that the term 'is only apt as a description of the anti-Chalcedonians after the establishment of a separate Monophysite hierarchy in the second half of Justinian's reign'.

<sup>2</sup> Note that Mingana (1925) conflates discussion about the Huns in the sources he cites.

<sup>3</sup> On the location of the town, see Fiey, J.-M. (1967), 'Topography of Al-Mada'in (Seleucia-Ctesiphon Area)', *Sumer* 23, pp. 3-38.

<sup>4</sup> Also discussed by Klein (1999: 248-9).

<sup>5</sup> Those whom we identify today as Byzantines called themselves 'Romans' hence the term 'Rum' used by the Arabs. The term 'Hellene' was not used by the Byzantines until much later., see Kaldellis, A. (2007), *Hellenism in Byzantium: The Transformation of Greek Identity and the Reception of the Classical Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Parry, K. (2009), 'What to Jettison Before you Go Sailing (to Byzantium)', *Phronema* 24, pp. 19-33.

<sup>6</sup> On the location of Chach, see Barthold, W. (1968), *Turkestan Down to the Mongol Invasion*. London: Luzac, pp. 169-75; and map 16 in Abazov, R. (2008), *The Palgrave Concise Historical Atlas of Central Asia*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>7</sup> Richard, J. (2004), 'The Christian Churches of the East and the Course of History,' *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, vol.4, c. 1024-c. 1198, part I, Luscombe, D. E. & Riley-Smith, J., (eds), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 578. It is of interest that in 1958-9 the Greek patriarch of Alexandria established the diocese of Irenoupolis (*Dar-es-Salaam*) with jurisdiction over Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, see Parry, K. et al (eds), (1999), *The Blackwell Dictionary of Eastern Christianity*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> For the ancient geographical location of these two areas see Abazov, *Palgrave Concise Historical Atlas of Central Asia*.