

Syriac in Central and East Asia
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The Greeks initiated the spread of the alphabet westwards around the Mediterranean and ultimately all over Europe. On the other hand, the Aramaic became the written language of the Assyrian Empire in the mid-9th century BC and a lingua franca that later was adopted and spread by the Achaemenid Persian Empire. When all was said and done, the Aramaic language and alphabet reached regions from the Mediterranean to China Seas, and influenced languages as diverse as Mongolian, Sogdian, Uyghur, and Gāndhārī. The Greek and Aramaic alphabets appeared in a famous bilingual rock inscription near Kandahar, Afghanistan, carved for the Indian king Ashoka in 260 BC, half a century after Alexander appeared there. King Ashoka is considered as the great early patron of Buddhism, who distributed the Buddha's relics in commemorative monuments across his Indian empire.

This Aramaic alphabet, later known as Syriac with the birth of Christianity in Edessa (Assyrian Urhay), remained in use in Central Asia and Siberia until the 13th or 14th century, as attested by the Syriac inscriptions on gravestones in southern Siberia some in the Turkic dialect.¹ Mark Dickens has been involved in cataloguing of approximately 500 Syriac manuscripts discovered in Turfan, Xinjiang Province, China in the early 20th century and now preserved in the Turfan Collection in Berlin. This is part of a larger project to catalogue some 1100 manuscripts in Syriac, *Christian Sogdian and Christian Old Turkic from Turfan*. Dickens 2008 PhD dissertation, *Turkāyē: Turkic Peoples in Syriac Literature prior to the Seljūks*, explored how the Turkic peoples of Central Asia before the Seljūk invasion of the Middle East in the 11th century were presented and perceived in published Syriac literature.² However, we know of the presence of Old Syriac inscriptions that belong to the second half of the second and first half of the third century. They are to be found on stone and in mosaic, and in both categories many are funerary in character.³ In fact, we understand that the earliest Syriac inscription dates from about AD 50. During the early medieval period, foreign communities that settled in the Chinese-speaking regions that are now China often brought their languages and their Syriac (Aramaic) derived alphabets with them.

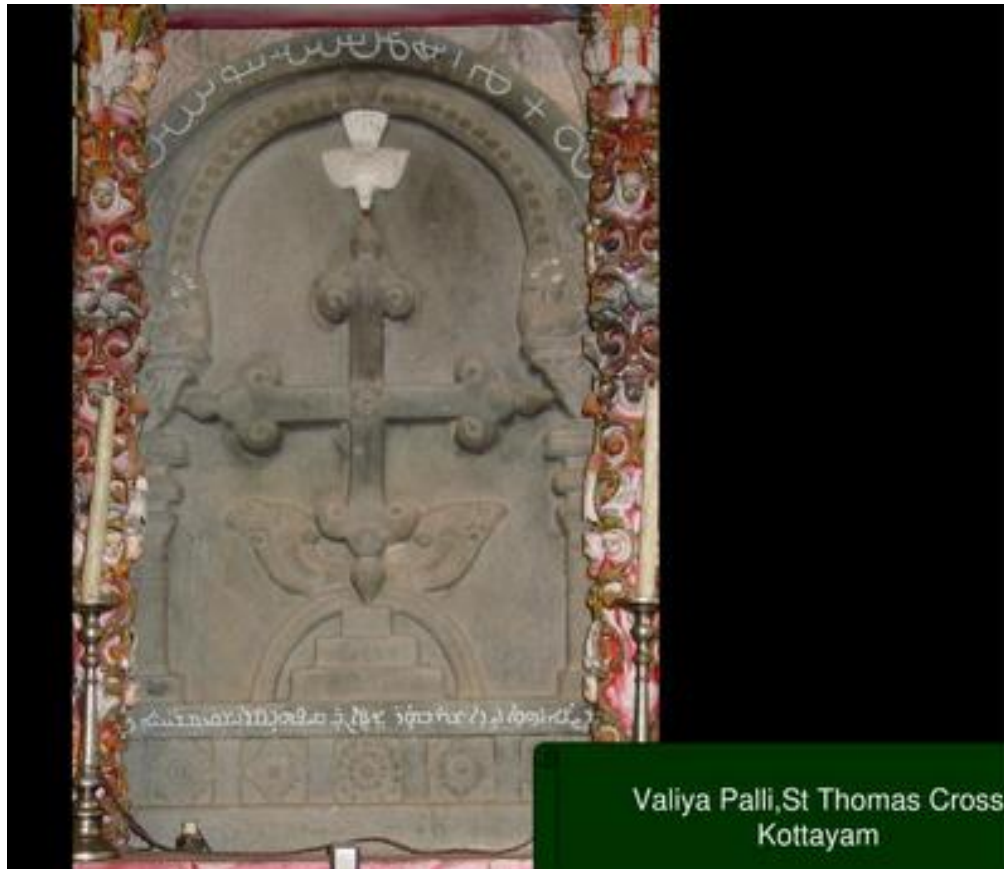
While tradition places Syriac Christianity in India in the 1st century of the Christian Era; however, solid references come from the 6th century. We have an attestation of the existence of a Christian community through the testimony of Cosmas Indicopleustēs, who mentions the existence of a bishopric in Malabar, which was originally under the rule of the Metropolitan of Persia, before it got its own Metropolitan around 650 AD under the patriarch Ishoyahb III. Marco Polo in the 13th century also attested to the links between Malabar Christians and the Church of the East in Baghdad. When the region entered the horizon of Latin Christianity, with the arrival of Vasco da Gama in Calicut on May 18, 1498, Portuguese missionaries found a

¹ Accessed 3/16/2025. Mark Dickens and Aleksandra Avtushkova. Two Syriac Gravestones in the Novosibirsk Museum. https://www.academia.edu/53019321/Two_Syriac_Gravestones_in_the_Novosibirsk_Museum

² Mark Dickens. Accessed 3/17/2025. <https://ualberta.academia.edu/MarkDickens>

³ Accessed 3/18/2025. Sebastian Brock. Edessene Syriac inscriptions in late antique Syria. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/from-hellenism-to-islam/edessene-syriac-inscriptions-in-late-antique-syria/026AE7BB21F9080C12C0CE449746ABB1>

Christian population well integrated in the local society and that was part of what they called “Nestorian Church”.⁴



Courtesy Fr. Jacob Thekkeparambil. Syriac Inscriptions in Kerala, India.

<https://archive.org/details/syriacinscriptionsinkerala/page/n5/mode/2up>

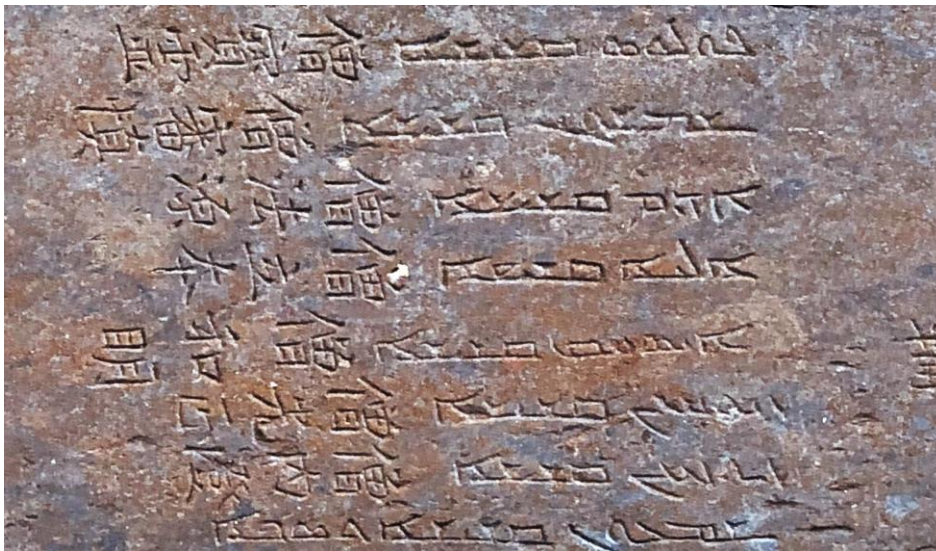
The Sogdians dominated Silk Road trade between the medieval Chinese states and Sogdian homelands (modern Uzbekistan and Tajikistan) in Central Asia. Sogdians living in Chinese cities in the 6th century of the Christian Era were commemorated upon their deaths with epitaphs inscribed in their own Iranian language using the alphabet. The Syriac (Aramaic) alphabet took the long eastward journey from Mesopotamia through the Silk Road where it played a role in the spread of Christianity in the Mongolian and Chinese empires. Christian members of the Church of the East brought their language and alphabet with them when they established a community in the Tang dynasty’s capital city, Chang’an (Xian). Their most famous monument is a stone inscription erected in AD 781 with both Chinese and Syriac inscriptions.⁵

⁴ Accessed 3/17/2025. Francoise B. Chatonnet. SYRIAC MANUSCRIPTS IN INDIA, SYRIAC MANUSCRIPTS FROM INDIA. https://www.academia.edu/1843167/Syriac_Manuscripts_in_India_Syriac_Manuscripts_from_India

⁵ Accessed 3/16/2025 <https://www.penn.museum/sites/expedition/the-alphabet/>



Above, photo of the Nestorian Monument in Xian, China. Below, photo of Syriac inscription on the replica of the monument erected on Mt. Koya, Japan. Both photos taken by the author of this article.



The Turkic-speaking Uyghurs adopted and modified the Syriac alphabet and it was Uyghur scribes that brought literacy to the Mongol empire of Genghis Khan and his successors. In 1208 Genghis Khan defeated the Turkic tribes known as the Naimans who lived in Central Asia, and captured one of the Uyghur scribes and eventually adapted the old Uyghur alphabet to write old Mongolian.

The Uyghurs, also spelled Uighurs, are a Turkic ethnic and cultural group that originated from Central and East Asia. The Uyghurs are concentrated in the Uyghurs Xinjiang autonomous region in Northwest China. The Uyghurs did convert to Christianity around the 7th and 8th centuries with the missionary efforts of the Church of the East. However, they slowly began to convert to Islam in the 10th Century and many of them became Muslims by the 16th century.

While most of the Uyghurs still exist in China's Xinjiang province; however, Uyghurs today could be found in other Turkic countries such as Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkiye and other Asian countries.

The old Uyghur alphabet was used as the Uyghur's Turkic language from the 8th or 9th century which is influenced by the Syriac alphabet of the Church of the East because of the said church missionary work. This continued until around the 18th century. This language was spoken in Turpan and Gansu in northwestern China, and it is considered as the ancestor of the modern Uyghur language. Interestingly, the old Uyghur alphabet that was developed from the Syriac (Aramaic) alphabet is written from left to right and in vertical columns unlike Syriac, which is written from right to left in horizontal lines.



Above, examples of modified Syriac, old Uyghur, inscription on various temples in Beijing, China. Photos taken by the author of this article.

The Church of the East (later Assyrian Church of the East), erroneously labeled as the Nestorian Church, played a major role in the spread of the Syriac alphabet in Central Asian countries as the church spread from Cyprus in the Mediterranean to China. It is for this reason that Assyrians feel a connection to the Turkic people of Central Asia and the Mongolians who adopted the Assyrians' alphabet.

Dr. Stephen Andrew Missick states, around the year 1000 AD the Mongol tribe of the Keriats became Christians. The tribe numbered over 200,000 men. The story of their conversion was recorded by the Jacobite Bar-Hebraeus and by the ecclesiastical chronicler of the Assyrian Church and can be found in "The Eclipse of Christianity in Asia by Laurence E. Brown". The chieftain of the Keriats became lost in the wilderness during a hunt and despaired for his life. Suddenly an apparition appeared before him. The supernatural being identified himself as Saint Sergius and promised to show him the way home if he would place his faith in Jesus. Miraculously the chieftain found himself back in his camp. Immediately he sent for some Assyrian merchants he knew of and when they arrived he submitted to Christ and requested

religious instruction. This incident shows that Assyrian merchants and traders participated in spreading Christianity as they bought and sold along the Silk Road.⁶

Dr. Nicholas Al-Jeloo details how wide spread Syriac alphabet and this church were during certain periods of the Mongols. He states, Rabban Sauma (1220-1294) and his disciple Marcus (later Mar Yahballaha III (1245-1317) hold prominent place in the medieval history of the Church of the East. Both belonged to the Turkic Önggüd tribe, which is part of the Mongol caste under China's Yuan dynasty (1271-1368) and sometime after 1275 they made their journey west from their monastery near the capital at Khanbaliq (present day Beijing) to conduct a pilgrimage to the Church of the East holy places in Mesopotamia and eventually Jerusalem in 1280; however, they were prevented from completing their spiritual journey due to conflict between the Mamluks and Mongols in Syria, so they retired to a monastery near Erbil.

In 1281, Marcus was elected to replace the deceased Patriarch Dinkha I. He led the church for 36 years. In 1287, his master Rabban Sauma was chosen by Il-Khan Arghun (1284-1291) to lead a diplomatic mission to Europe's religious leaders. Sauma visited Constantinople after Italy and France returning to Baghdad the following year. The details of both Rabban Sauma and Mar Yahballaha III lives and travels are preserved in a 14th century text which has been studied extensively.

The old Uighur-Mongolian script, which is being reintroduced at this time as Mongolia's main writing system, was developed directly from Syriac through the, now extinct, Sogdian alphabet. Even with the old Mongolian being written vertically, it still resembles the Syriac language.

Al-Jeloo continues to state, we know today that two wives of Genghis Khan were members of the Church of the East: Ibaqa Beki daughter of Jamukha of the Keraite tribe and Ju'erbiesu of the Naiman tribe and the other Khulan Khatun, of the Merkit tribe. The main wife of his eldest son Ögedei Khan named Törgene who belonged to the Naiman tribe was a member of the Church of the East. Another of his sons, Jochi, was married to Begtutmish, Ibaqa Beki's sister. Their father Jamukha was a son of Keraite leader Cyriacus Buyruk Khan, son of Marcus. As for Genghis Khan's daughters, one of them, Alakhai Bekhi, was married to Önggüd Prince Boyaohe, son of Alaqush, who belonged to the Church of the East. Another daughter Tümelün, married Chigu, son of Anchen of the Khongirad tribe and their daughter, Qutui Khatun, was one of the main wives of Hulegu Khan and a faithful member of the Church of the East.

As for Kublai Khan, he was the son of Genghis Khan's youngest son Tolui Khan and Sorghaghtani Beki, the sister of Ibaqa Beki and Begtutmish. Two of Kublai Khan's stepmothers were also members of the Church of the East. The most important of these was his second cousin Doqуз Khatun, daughter of Uyku/Abaqu, son of Toghril, who was his grandfather Jamukha's brother. After Tolui's death, she married Kublai's brother Hulegu Khan (her stepson), who founded the Il-Khanid dynasty in Persia and Mesopotamia. The other stepmother was Linqgun Khatun, daughter of Kuchlug, another member of the Church of the East who was the last leader of the Naiman tribe and final emperor of Qara-Khitai's Western Liao dynasty. More importantly,

⁶ Stephen Andrew Missick. The Assyrian Church in the Mongolian Empire as Observed by World Travelers in the late 13th and Early 14th Centuries. In JAAS, Vol. XIII, No. 2, 1999.

Kublai Khan's daughter Yuelie (from his wife Chabi) was married to his first cousin Aybuqa, son of Prince Boyaohe and Alakhai Bekhi. In their turn, Yuelie and Aybuqa were the parents of Prince George, who left the Syriac inscription in western Mongolia in 1298, as well as princess Sarah, for whom a Syriac Gospel manuscript (now in the Vatican Library) was copied in gold ink that same year.⁷

This influence of the Church of the East and its Syriac language and alphabet tapered down with the rise of Islam. Syriac was associated with Christianity and as more people of Asia converted to Islam, the use of Syriac diminished. Today, Syriac language and alphabet is used strictly in tiny parts of Iran, northern and central Iraq, southeast Türkiye and in isolated parts of Syria and Lebanon and in limited liturgical capacity in Malabar, India.

⁷ Dr. Nicholas Al-Jeloo. A modern day Assyrian's journey from Iraq to Mongolia. A paper presented at the International Symposium in Mongolia organized by the Mongolian University of Science and Technology's Humanities Department. Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. Sept. 25-28, 2024. In Nineveh Magazine. Vol. 49, No. 4, 2024.