

## CULT-IMAGES AND RELIGIOUS ETHNOLOGY: THE EUROPEAN EXPLORATION OF MEDIEVAL ASIA AND THE DISCOVERY OF NEW ICONIC RELIGIONS

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The geographic knowledge of Central and Far Eastern Asia was impressively widened, during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, by a great number of literary reports that described the customs, religions, and cultural habits of several previously ignored peoples. Since Ramusio's times, scholars dealing with the history of European explorations have often taken into account such phenomena as a preliminary step to the expansion of Western civilization throughout the rest of the world during the modern era.<sup>1</sup> Much less attention has been paid to the actual contingencies such early explorers experienced during their journeys and the cultural patterns they made use of in their first contacts with the unknown populations living in those distant countries.

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<sup>1</sup> On Western travelers to Central Asia and China see esp. A. De Gubernatis, *Storia dei viaggiatori italiani nelle Indie Orientali* (Livorno 1875); H. Yule, *Cathay and the Way Thither, Being a Collection of Mediaeval Notices of China*, ed. H. Cordier (London 1914–1916); L. Olschki, *Marco Polo's Precursors* (Baltimore 1943); Ch. Dawson, *The Mongol Mission: Narratives and Letters of the Franciscan Missionaries in Mongolia and China of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (New York 1955); L. Olschki, *L'Asia di Marco Polo. Introduzione alla lettura e allo studio del Milione* (Florence 1957); C.W. Troll, "Die Chinamission im Mittelalter," *Franziskanische Studien* 48 (1966) 109–150, and 49 (1967) 22–79; P. Ratchnevsky, "Über dem mongolischen Kult am Hofe der Groß-Khans in China," L. Ligeti, ed., *Mongolian Studies* (Amsterdam 1970) 417–433; J. Richard, "Les missionnaires latins de l'Inde du XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle," *Studi veneziani* 12 (1970) 231–242; I. de Rachewiltz, *Papal Envoys to the Great Khans* (Stanford 1971); idem, *Priester John and Europe's Discovery of Asia* (Canberra 1972); P. Pelliot, *Recherches sur les chrétiens d'Asie Centrale et d'Extrême Orient* (Paris 1973); G. Hamann, "Die wissenschaftsgeschichtliche Bedeutung der Gesandtschaftsreisen mittelalterlicher Mönche an die Höfe Inner- und Ostasiens," W. Baum, ed., *Kirche und Staat in Idee und Geschichte des Abendlandes. Festschrift zum 70. Geburtstag von Ferdinand Maass* (Vienna-Munich 1973) 120–142; J. Richard, *La papauté et les missions d'Orient au Moyen Âge (XIII<sup>e</sup>–XV<sup>e</sup> siècles)* (Rome 1977); L. Petech, "I Francescani nell'Asia Centrale e Orientale nel XIII e XIV secolo," *Espansione del Francescanesimo tra Occidente e Oriente nel secolo XIII. Atti del VI convegno internazionale (Assisi, 12–14 ottobre 1978)* (Assisi 1979) 213–240; A. Zorzi, ed., *Venezia e l'Oriente* (Milan 1981); G. Melis, ed., *Odorico da Pordenone e la Cina* (Pordenone 1984); L. de Hartog, *Europese reiziger naar de grote Khan. De reizen van de franciscaner moniken en de familie Polo naar de opvolgers van Djenghis Khan 1245–1368* (Baarn 1985); C. Verlinden and E. Schmidt, eds., *Dokumente zur Geschichte der europäischen Expansion, I: Die mittelalterliche Ursprünge der europäischen Expansion* (Munich 1986); J. Sanchez Herrero, "Precedentes franciscanos del descubrimiento en America. Los viajes de los franciscanos a Extremo Oriente y China," *Archivo ibero-americano* 46.2 (1986) 15–75; F.E. Reichert, *Begegnungen mit China. Die Entdeckung Ostasiens im Mittelalter* (Sigmaringen 1992); quotations are made after the Italian translation *Incontri con la Cina. La scoperta dell'Asia orientale nel Medioevo* (Milan 1997); C.-C. Kappler-R. Kappler, "Actualité du premier ethnographe français en Asie: Guillaume de Rubrouck," *Columbeis* 5 (1993) 111–119; J. Gil, *De Rubruc a Colón*, ibid. 415–432; M. Guéret-Laferté, *Sur les routes de l'empire mongol. Ordre et rhétorique des relations de voyage au XIII<sup>e</sup> et XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris 1994); G. Ganzer, ed., *La Cina e la via della seta nel viaggio di Odorico da Pordenone* (Bologna 2001).

How did they actually react to such incredible encounters? They had to interpret—according to the parameters of their own culture—peoples, religions, and often very ancient and complex traditions which they could know only in a superficial way, but which deserved special attention since they were present in the most important political entity of that period, i.e., the empire of Genghis Khan (1167–1227), the Mongolian chief who had conquered most of the Asiatic continent and menaced the powers of the Middle East and Europe itself.

The Mongolian meteor undoubtedly not only served to further communication and exchange between the different Asiatic cultures, but also to favor the knowledge of inner Asia on the part of the West. The political and economic contingencies made tradesmen, diplomats, and religious men depart for the Far East, where they encountered places, peoples, languages, and customs that had previously been unknown to them, or known only through legendary descriptions. Men such as the Armenian constable Smpad and the king of Cilicia Het'um I, the Franciscans Giovanni da Pian del Carpine and William of Rubruk, and later the Venetian merchant Marco Polo, followed in the fourteenth century by other friars such as John of Montecorvino, Odoric of Pordenone, and Giovanni de' Marignolli, ventured on enterprises that appear heroic to our eyes, considering the indescribable difficulties faced during the journey, the deprivations and exertions they had to resist, and the dangers they exposed themselves to in unexplored territories. Seen as a whole, this direct confrontation with a different world and the opening toward unknown horizons was of capital importance to the European culture, and produced many scientific, artistic, and technological results.

These authors were inspired by different motivations and consequently showed greater appreciation, in their descriptions of the peoples they met, of the aspects of the cultures they observed that seemed to coincide most with their respective specific interests and purposes. They all tended, however, to effectuate an ethnographic “taxonomy,” so to speak, underscoring certain constant characteristics of religious customs, and, in particular, comparing holy images and the way they were used in liturgical rites and in devotional practices. This article will investigate the role played by cultural categories such as image, icon, cult-object, and image-worship in the way early explorers of Asia interpreted and judged the peoples and religious communities they met during their journeys.

#### IDLATRY VS. TARTAR RELIGION

In Marco Polo's *Milione*, the term *ydres*, i.e., idols, indicated both the objects of the idolatrous cult and the populations engaging in that kind of practice, and was used as a qualifying adjective to indicate all those who were neither Christians, Muslims, or “Tartars” (i.e., animists). The expression was applied indiscriminately to Buddhists, Hindus, and Taoists, whose peculiarities were rarely recognized; attention was inevitably focused on exterior manifestations, and the incalculable number of statues that crowded the temples, shrines, and private tabernacles of China, India, and Central Asia was the aspect that most seized the imagination of foreign observers. But the negative connotation of the term, traditionally used when referring to Greek and Roman “pagan” images, was not necessarily evident in Polo's work and in the stories of other travelers: while the ancient *topos* that defined an idol as a seat of a negative

presence, or as the dwelling of a demon, was occasionally repeated, the authors tended to describe it as a privileged object of worship of a foreign religion, that nevertheless proved to have some unsuspected affinities with the uses and practices of the Christian faith.<sup>2</sup>

The most disruptive sensation of alterity, mixed with strong disgust, was perceptible in the description of the religious practices of the Tartars, which were immediately recognized as very different from the Chinese and Indian cults. In truth, the Mongols also used images, although very rudimentary, but Marco Polo preferred not to describe them with the term "idol," instead identifying them as "gods." The difference laid in the fact that the latter were not characterized as objects of worship, intended to remain permanently in a temple and simulate the presence of holy personalities, but rather as ephemeral ritualistic instruments that were used in the shamanistic ceremonies and in other practices that smacked of magic. Indeed, they had little of the charismatic aura one usually associates with holy effigies: they looked rather like small rag dolls, made in felt or silk by the village women according to a special procedure that also featured the sacrifice of a sheep, depending on the contingent necessities: in 1247 Giovanni da Pian del Carpine observed, for instance, that they were prepared especially when a child suffered a bad fall, in order to improve his health.

Every yurt comprising the Mongolian camp was decorated by similar small statues: one, to which a teat that was also made in felt was attached, was placed near the entrance and was believed to be capable of protecting the herds (perhaps because it represented the god of the grass, Itügen), while another, placed right in front of the former, was believed to protect horses; another, called "the brother of the lord" was placed in such a way as to cover the head of the master when he was seated on the bed in the middle of the tent, and another was hung in a similar position above the wife, that is to say on the side reserved for women (to the right of those who entered). Every woman, in her turn, used to fix a series of other similar simulacra, that were said to be beneficial to servants, to the head of the bed. At mealtime, according to custom, each of them, beginning with the one hung above the head of the master, was anointed with grease from the meat and with broth, that was in turn also offered at the four cardinal points outside the tent.

Along with these effigies there were others, specifically used in divinatory rites preceding battles; they were usually kept in a special tent near the headquarters. In the Mongolian language these images were called *ongot* and they cannot have been very different from the felt dolls resembling humans or animals that, among numerous Altaic and Siberian populations, still represent a fundamental element of the repertoire of the shaman and serve the purpose of evoking those spirits whom he communicates with when he enters a trance. These objects, in fact, remained ephemeral and their only value lay in their instrumental role in the ecstatic and ritualistic practices of the diviners. The first germ, among a nomadic population, of a true cult of images may perhaps be identified in the veneration bestowed on the *ongon* of Genghis Khan that,

<sup>2</sup> Olschki (note 1 above) 250.

some time after the death of the great conqueror, became an indispensable rule for every Tartar soldier, on pain of death.<sup>3</sup>

This system of beliefs was naturally congenial to the life style of these tribes in eternal movement, who had neither the need nor the opportunity to endow their own territory with symbolic significance through sacred buildings and images, as it was by nature too vast and changing. Nor did the power of the Khan call for stable places of representation, until it became so vast as to suggest the identification of a “center” in which, on occasion, it was possible to flaunt the extraordinary magnificence of the ruler of almost all of Asia. It was Ogodai (1229–1241), Genghis’s first successor, who decided to build a town on the right bank of the river Orkhon—Karakorum—that was conceived as a true ritual space, used at certain special annual ceremonies during which the sovereign abandoned his camp and adapted himself to a stationary life for some days. Curiously, the residence resembled a building of worship: William of Rubruk, who visited it in 1254, was reminded of a basilica-shaped church, with a central nave spaced by rows of columns and two naves and a raised apse area where the sovereign was seated, representing the true subject of veneration for the chiefs of the subject tribes.<sup>4</sup> The most solemn meeting consisted of the distribution of a beverage made from fermented mare milk, the so-called *qūmiz*, according to a usage that is still present among certain Siberian populations; for this rite, in which a leather sac is usually used, Möngke Khan (1251–1259) commissioned from a Parisian goldsmith captured in Hungary, Master Guillaume Boucher, an extraordinary Gothic fountain in silver, crowned by an angel playing a tuba, that was installed near the entrance gate to the palace room.<sup>5</sup>

Outside the walls of the royal palace a settlement developed; it soon became a center of traffic and trade, as well as the true capital of the empire, where the ambassadors of every region of Asia arrived, to be followed by the representatives of the different regions, who lost no time in erecting their own places of worship. The town had Buddhist and Taoist temples, at least two Mosques, and a church of Christian rite. As one may easily infer, the stake was enormous: each of these doctrinal systems, expressions of millennial civilizations, would undoubtedly gain hegemony over all the others if it were to succeed in converting the person who was, at that moment, the real ruler of the world. However, if the great Mongolian Khan was really to adhere to one or the other, he would have to find it convenient in some way, something that was quite unlikely as long as he continued following a strictly nomadic lifestyle. On the other hand, Genghis had recommended that one should respect every credo without practicing any particular one, and it is certain that for a long time his successors maintained their animistic

<sup>3</sup> Giovanni da Pian del Carpine, *Ystoria Mongalorum* III.2–3, ed. P. van den Wyngaert, *Sinica franciscana, I: Itinera et relationes fratrum minorum saeculi XIII et XIV* (Quaracchi 1929) 36–37 (hereafter *SF*); William of Rubruk, *Itinerarium* ii.7–8, *SF* 174–175. Basic references in J.-P. Roux, *La religion des Turcs et des Mongols* (Paris 1984); about the involvement of animal-like and anthropomorphic dolls in the Siberian, Altaic, and Buryat shamans’ costumes, see M. Eliade, *Shamanism. Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (Princeton 1972) 148–153, and K. E. Müller, *Schamanismus. Heiler—Geister—Rituale* (Munich 1997).

<sup>4</sup> William of Rubruk, *Itinerarium* xxx.4, *SF* 277. Cf. E. D. Phillips, *The Mongols* (London 1969) 94–103.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* xxx.2–3, *SF* 276–277. Cfr. L. Olschki, *Guillaume Boucher. A French Artist at the Court of the Khans* (New York 1969) 65–66.

beliefs. Yet during the thirteenth century a fierce struggle took place around their yurt, involving Tibetan lamas, Taoist ministers, Muslim imams, Nestorian priests, Catholic missionaries, and Armenian monks.

Initially unwilling to consider any hypothesis of conversion, the Khan allowed the representatives of different confessions to present their arguments, seeking to maintain a certain equidistance but observing each of them with great circumspection. The various representatives strove to make the best impression, availing themselves of the most efficient means of persuasion available to them; the Mongolian sovereigns were particularly appreciative towards those who succeeded in astonishing them with magic, acts of trance, or fascinating ritual dances, whereas they showed very little interest in argumentation on theology or morals. On several occasions Friar William of Rubruk sought to expose the fundamental principles of the correct Christian doctrine to Möngke, without obtaining any results worth mentioning; quite mockingly, the great Khan even forced Friar William, along with the East Syrian Christian communities of Karakorum, to compete with the local representatives of Islam and Chinese Buddhism in a public debate, which reinforced the conviction that shamans still proved to be the most useful religious men to the Mongolian people.<sup>6</sup> The friar obtained some success only when he showed his interlocutors the illuminated books he had brought with him from Paris; they wanted to inspect the books at length and were very impressed by the colored figures and their golden backgrounds, asking what they meant and, in one case, eventually seizing the books with few scruples.<sup>7</sup>

This might have been the right way to gain the favor of the rulers of the world; it was necessary to astonish those peoples with marvelous images, confuse their ideas and, through the universal message of art, ensnare them in the trap of aesthetic fascination, as one had for that matter done with other pagan populations, for instance, the Russians, who according to the legend had resolved to embrace the Byzantine version of Christianity after having been fascinated by the beauty of the icons and mosaics of Constantinople.<sup>8</sup> To some extent the religions that possessed their own iconography and recognized the ritualized cult of figurative objects as a function of primary importance in religious practice had a head start; but this characteristic, in thirteenth-century Asia, was certainly not a unique prerogative of Christianity.

#### ICONODULY BEFORE, BEHIND, AND WITHIN ISLAM

From a religious point of view the vast region of the Eurasian continent inhabited by settled populations could be roughly subdivided, at the time of Rubruk and Marco Polo, in three areas of influence: the “idolaters” in the Far East; the “worshippers of Muhammad” between Afghanistan and the Near East; and the Christians in the Mediterranean, in Europe, and in northern Russia. As to holy representation, according to

<sup>6</sup> William of Rubruk, *Itinerarium* xxxiii, *SF* 289–297.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* xvi.6–7, *SF* 202–203; xxix.20, *SF* 259. Cf., most recently, A. Derbes and A. Neff, “Italy, the Mendicant Orders, and the Byzantine Sphere,” H.C. Evans, ed., *Byzantium. Faith and Power (1261–1557)* exhibition catalogue, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, March–July 2004 (New York 2004) 449–461, esp. 451–452, on the use of illuminated books as tools of conversion on the part of friars involved in proselytising campaigns.

<sup>8</sup> As told by the monk Nestor’ of the Cave Monastery in Kiev (12th c.) in his *Povest’ vremennyh let*, ed. I. P. Sbriziolo, *Racconto dei tempi passati. Cronaca russa del secolo XII* (Turin 1971) 63.

the opinion (or prejudice) of a Western observer, these three worlds behaved in fundamentally different ways: the first used it wrongly, as their devotion was aimed at material objects that they mistook for divinities and that were actually merely demonic beings; the second challenged their very lawfulness and preferred to say their common prayers inside bare buildings, violently attacking every form of divine representation; the third was supposed to be the only one to utilize it correctly, or in other words as a means to express personal devotion to the personality represented rather than the simulacrum as such.

This gross scheme reveals an interesting fact, namely, that the “anti-iconic” Islam was somehow sandwiched between two worlds that both resorted to holy images in the most important manifestations of their religious experience. Muslim authors recognized this affinity, more or less explicitly, but they always showed greater aversion towards Buddhist and Hindu idols, that in their eyes represented the most evident expression of the superstition of pagan peoples who practiced polytheism and did not belong to the “peoples of the Book” (i.e., Jews, Christians, and Muslims). Since the ninth century, the Arab merchants who reached the ports of India and China reported that these people assiduously worshipped statues (called *budd*, plural *bidada*, i.e., Buddha), and that their ministers were able to speak with these statues and obtain replies; these statues attracted pilgrims from considerable distances, were honored with sacrifices and offers, and were involved in sinful practices, like the custom of letting people believe that they were able to speak.<sup>9</sup>

On the contrary, with respect to the Christian images at that time used in the Greek, Melkite, Coptic, Western Syrian (or “Jacobite”), and Nestorian communities who lived in its territory, Islam manifested fascination, sometimes to a surprising extent. The aesthetic quality of the icons was, in particular, so highly appreciated that it become a *topos* in traditional Arab poetry,<sup>10</sup> and gradually in certain environments (especially in Shiite Persia and in the Seljuk territories of Anatolia) some began to entertain the idea that particularly venerable personalities, among those remembered by the Koran and by tradition, could be commemorated by their true-to-life portraits.<sup>11</sup>

According to a tradition first recorded in the *History of Mecca* by al-Azrakī (ca. 859), Muhammad was to have personally saved from destruction a fresco depicting the Madonna with Child; it was displayed on a pillar placed at the entrance of the Ka’ba of Mecca, and some pilgrims claimed they had seen it with their own eyes.<sup>12</sup> However, if the Prophet had granted Maryam, the mother of Īsa, such a privilege, couldn’t one think that he would have allowed also his own portrait and those of his blessed succes-

<sup>9</sup> The most ancient information is provided by the relation attributed to the merchant Sulaymān in 237 H./851 A.D., ed. J. Sauvaget, *Ahbār as-Sīn wa l-Hind. Relation de la Chine et de l’Inde* (Paris 1948) chaps. lxxv and lxx, p. 25. Cf. also the entry “Budd” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden 1960–) 1.1283–1284.

<sup>10</sup> On Islamic appreciation and misappreciation of icons see J. Nasrallah, “La peinture monumentale des Patriarcats Melkites,” *Icones melkites. Exposition organisée par le Musée Nicolas Sursock du 16 mai au 15 juin 1969* (Beirut 1969) 67–84.

<sup>11</sup> See M. V. Fontana, *Iconografia dell’Ahl al-Bayt. Immagini di arte persiana dal XII al XX secolo* (Naples 1994) 8–10.

<sup>12</sup> al-Azrakī, *Ahbār Makka*, ed. R. al-Salih Mamhas (Mecca 1385 H./1964) 1.165. Cfr. J. Wensinck-T. Fahd, “Sūra,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam* 9.925–928; A. S. Melikian-Chirvani, “L’Islam, le Verbe et l’Image,” *Nicée II 787–1987. Douze siècles d’images religieuses*, ed. F. Bœspflug and N. Lossky (Paris 1987) 89–117, at 92–93.

sors to be handed down to future generations? Apparently some Muslims thought that something of the kind had been kept among those peoples who engaged in painting.

The great traveler Ibn Battūta, in the fourteenth century, believed he recognized the portrait of the Caliph martyr ‘Alī’ in a fresco in a church in Kerč, in the Crimea, which probably really depicted the prophet Elias,<sup>13</sup> while a story about a portrait of Muhammad, painted on paper, had already circulated for some centuries; it was the property of the emperor of China. It was told that a certain Ibn Wahb, of the Iraqi tribe of the Koraichites and thus descendants of the Prophet himself, had the honor of being received at court and there the Son of Heaven asked him: “Would you recognize your father if you were to see him?” The Arab replied: “How could I see him now that he is with Allah, the Mighty and Powerful?” An attendant then brought a box containing some painted pages that were shown him, and he immediately understood who was being represented by means of iconographic attributes: he recognized Noah by the ark, Moses by his stick, and Jesus because he was seated on the donkey surrounded by the apostles. When he was then faced with a man seated on the back of a camel, with his companions around him, in Arab footwear and with toothpicks hanging from his belt, he began to cry profusely and exclaimed: “Here is our Prophet, our lord and my cousin—may peace be with him!”<sup>14</sup>

While fantastic, this story witnesses the authority attributed to the Chinese emperor by the Muslim world and, at the same time, the prestige enjoyed by the painting tradition of those countries. After the portrait of Muhammad, Ibn Wahb observed with interest other figures depicting “the prophets of China and India,” some standing, others “making a sign with their right hands, uniting the thumb and the forefinger, as if they wanted to attest to some truth with that gesture.”<sup>15</sup> In fact, in accordance with Hindu and Buddhist tradition, they did so to indicate the “accomplishment of the absolute” (*chin mudrā*) or “the appeasement of the weak” (*vitarka mudrā*), defining themselves as “masters.”<sup>16</sup> This tale reflects a certain sensation of cultural relativism, perhaps the result of some syncretic experiences typical of medieval Asia (which we will examine below); but it above all reveals that representation—especially in the form of painted portraits—was perceived as a very efficient means of transmitting knowledge.

Above all, this text does not, as it may seem to, clearly contradict the damnation of the “idols,” the *bidada*, referred to above. Throughout the history of Islamic thought, cult-objects (both iconic and aniconic) were firmly rejected precisely because, as they were reputed to be powerful and compelling to the believers’ eyes, they were a challenge to the worship of God. Even if no explicit condemnation of image-making was

<sup>13</sup> H. A. R. Gibb, ed., *The Travels of Ibn Battūta A.D. 1325–1354* (New Delhi 1999) 2.469.

<sup>14</sup> al-Mas‘ūdi [d. 961], *Muruj al-dahab*, ed. C. Barbier de Meynard-P. de Courteille (updated by Ch. Pellat), *Les prairies d’or (Murudj ad-dahab)* (Paris 1962) 1.128–131. Mas‘ūdi’s source is Abū Zayd of Siraf’s *Book on China and India*, ed. J.-T. Reinaud, *Relations politiques et commerciales de l’empire romain avec l’Asie Centrale (l’Hyrcanie, l’Inde, la Bactriane et la China) pendant les cinq premiers siècles de l’ère chrétienne* (Paris 1863) 77–85.

<sup>15</sup> Mas‘ūdi, *Muruj*, ed. Meynard-Courteille 1.130.

<sup>16</sup> E. Dale Saunders, *Mudrā. A Study of Symbolic Gestures in Japanese Buddhist Sculpture* (Princeton 1985) 66–75. The text may hint at something like an iconographic manual or model-book, such as those which were used by Chinese and Central Asian mural painters already in the Tang period (7th–8th c.), as is revealed by the findings in Tun-Huang: cf. S. E. Fraser, *Performing the Visual. The Practice of Buddhist Wall Painting in China and Central Asia, 618–960* (Stanford 2004).

expressed by the Koran, some interpreters, such as those known as “traditionalists” (e.g., al-Bokhārī, one of the redactors of the *hadith*-collections forming the *Sunna*), suspected that the artist’s creative act was nothing else than a blasphemous parody of God’s shaping of man: He, after having taken dry clay from a heap of black mixed mud, transformed it into a clot of blood and then into a soft mass that he modeled “making it take on harmonious forms” and finally inspiring the spirit (Koran 15.26; 23.12–14; 32.7–9).<sup>17</sup> According to such rigorous trends in early Islamic thought, on the Day of the Last Judgment artists (described implicitly as sculptors or modelers) would be requested to destroy their works, before being damned.<sup>18</sup>

According to a well-established Islamic tradition, best illustrated by Mas‘ūdi in the ninth century, idolatry, i.e., image-worship, was the most primitive form of religion in the history of humanity, replaced by astrology and divination in the times of the ancient Indians and Egyptians. Buddha was accused of being the man who had restored the cult of images, which was to be strongly condemned by every good Muslim believer; if India and China had persevered with *bidada* worship, in the Middle East idolatrous temples had been replaced by Christian and Islamic shrines.<sup>19</sup> Although Muslims disapproved even of the worship of two-dimensional images, they associated idolatry more directly with Buddhist statues than with Byzantine icons, which were highly appreciated both as works valuable on aesthetic grounds and as historical documents of the exterior appearance of deceased persons. Nonetheless, the damnation of Far Eastern idols did not prevent the admiration of Chinese painting; the aesthetic mastery of painters in the kingdom of the “Son of Heaven” became something proverbial in medieval Arab and Persian literature.<sup>20</sup>

It is a known fact that a suspicious attitude toward statues and a preference for painting represented a leitmotif in the Eastern Christian doctrinal reflection on images and their religious use. The Orthodox world and the Monophysite churches in the Near East were characterized by a more or less unchallenged prevalence of the model of the holy portrait in the form of a commemorative icon that might, only in rare cases, consist of an object with a surface more or less in relief (as for instance the colossal St. George of Omorphokklissia, in northern Greece, dating from the thirteenth century).<sup>21</sup> To Western Christians at the time of Marco Polo, painted plates represented a distinc-

<sup>17</sup> Standard remarks about Islam’s attitudes towards images are provided by O. Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art* (New Haven and London 1973) 75–103, 222–223; and S. H. Griffith, “Images, Islam, and Christian Icons: A Moment in the Christian/Muslim Encounter in Early Islamic Times,” *La Syrie de Byzance à l’Islam VI<sup>e</sup>-VII<sup>e</sup> siècles*, ed. P. Canivet and J.-P. Rey Coquais (Damascus 1992) 121–138, as well as Melikian-Chirvani (n. 12 above), who emphasizes that, under many respects, the idea of Islamic aniconism is a modern historiographical myth, fostered by such authors as T. Arnold, *Painting in Islam. A Study of the Place of Pictorial Arts in Muslim Culture* (New York 1965) 6–9.

<sup>18</sup> Such an idea is first recorded by the Christian writer Theodore Abū Qurrah; cf. S. H. Griffith, “Theodore Abū Qurrah’s Arabic Tract on the Christian Practice of Venerating Images,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 105 (1985) 53–73.

<sup>19</sup> Mas‘ūdi, *Muruj*, ed. Meynard-Courteille (n. 14 above) 2.523–548.

<sup>20</sup> Abū Zayd, ed. Re naud (n. 14 above) 75; Mas‘ūdi, *Muruj*, ed. Meynard-Courteille 1.131.

<sup>21</sup> N. K. Moutsopoulos, “Το ξύλινο ανάγλυφο του Αγίου Γεωργίου στον ομόνομο ναό της Ομορφοκκλησιάς και ορισμένες άλλες ξυλόγλυπτες εικόνες της περιοχής,” *Κληρονομία* 22 (1990) 33–80. On Syrian Jacobite views of painted icons (*surto*) as opposed to idol-like three-dimensional statues (*salma*) cf. L. Doumato, “Patriarch Michael the Great: Iconoclast or Art Patron,” *Cahiers archéologiques* 49 (2001) 29–38, esp. 30–31.



tive element of the spirituality of their Eastern brethren, and were considered as evidence for the purpose of establishing the ethnic-religious identity of a people; for instance, the Dominican John of Nakhichevan, bishop of Sultaniyeh in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, came to the conclusion that the Circassians (a Turkic population based north of the Caucasus) belonged to the Byzantine Orthodox church because they “have churches, images and feasts like the Greek.”<sup>22</sup> The latter, in turn, essentially disdained the diffusion, in Italy and to an even greater extent in northern Europe, of three-dimensional statues; indeed, they tended to describe the schismatic West as a prey to a corrupted form of Christianity, at times disrupted by iconophobic tendencies, and at times by pagan reminiscences. An anti-Latin pamphlet that circulated in the eleventh century accused the Roman Church of failing to respect the icons of the saints and of preferring images in relief only of the crucified Christ, while between the end of the twelfth century and the beginning of the thirteenth the Cypriote hermit Neophytus described as “idols” the sculptures that decorated the buildings of worship erected on his island by the Crusaders arriving from France.<sup>23</sup>

The Muslim world certainly did not fail to observe this difference in attitudes towards Christian images. The presence of the Crusaders in the Holy Land had resulted in the arrival and installation, in the Near East, of reliefs and statues in stone and other materials; as the Mamelukes progressively recaptured Palestine, these were systematically destroyed, as opposed to the icons in use among the Melkite, Jacobite, and Coptic communities that only suffered sporadic attacks. It is significant to note that when a city was recaptured by the Egyptian army, the most eminent symbolic act marking the reinstatement of Islam consisted of the conversion of the main church into a Mosque, achieved by crushing the statue of Christ and the Virgin and replacing it with a *mih-rab*, i.e., the niche located in the wall (*qibla*) which defined the direction of Mecca.<sup>24</sup> To compensate the emotional impact of these events the Crusaders elaborated the legend, amply diffused in Europe, of the indestructible portrait of Ramleh, that by the grace of God had remained unscathed under the blows of the scalpels and axes of the sultan’s soldiers.<sup>25</sup>

The use of three-dimensional sculptures, which elicited disapproval among the Byzantines, disgust among the Jews, and horror among Muslims, contributed to diffuse the vision of Christians as an idolatrous people. Friar Giovanni de’ Marignolli, who knew the peoples and the religions of Asia well, showed he was aware of all this when he wrote: “The Jews, the Tartars, and the Saracens consider us to be idolaters. So do not only the Pagans, but also certain Christians who, while they worship painted images, loathe specters, figures, and horrible sculptures such as those that are located in many churches. This is evident from Saint Adalbert’s sepulcher in Prague.”<sup>26</sup> The

<sup>22</sup> “Habent ecclesias et ymagines et festivitates ut Greci.” John of Nakhichevan, *Libellus de notitia orbis*, ed. A. Kern in *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum* 8 (1938) 82–123, esp. 110.

<sup>23</sup> On these texts cf. M. Bacci, “Le rôle des images dans les polémiques religieuses entre l’église grecque et l’église latine (XI<sup>e</sup>–XIII<sup>e</sup> siècles),” *Revue belge de philologie et d’histoire* 81.4 (2003) 95–121.

<sup>24</sup> C. Hillenbrand, *The Crusades. Islamic Perspectives* (Edinburgh 1999) 285–291 and 308.

<sup>25</sup> V. Bétérous, *Les collections de miracles de la Vierge en gallo- et ibéro-roman au XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Dayton 1983–1984) 192.

<sup>26</sup> “Iudei tamen, Tartari et Sarraceni iudicant nos pessimos ydolatras, et non solum gentiles, sed etiam christiani quidam; nam licet illi christiani venerentur picturas, abhominantur tamen larvas, facies et

Western customs on the subject of holy representation were essentially frowned upon by all the adjoining peoples, and only found points of affinity with the distant and mysterious populations of India and China, where it was known that many statues were worshipped, even monster-like figures such as those found in Gothic sculpture. When news began to circulate in the thirteenth century of the existence of remote regions of Asia whose sacred landscapes were dominated by portraits in the round in wood and stone, it is not unlikely that someone thought it might be worthwhile to contact those people.

#### IMAGE-WORSHIP AMONG EASTERN ASIATIC CHRISTIANS

The unexpressed hope of the Western world was that the unknown region located beyond the anti-iconic Islam was the home of a Christian population, guided by a powerful sovereign capable of forming an alliance with his European brothers to destroy the Muslim powers. Ancient legends corroborated the belief that baptized people could be living on the far edges of the earth, supposedly the descendants of the communities converted by the apostle Thomas or by the Wise Men. The idea of an imminent triumph of the Cross in the entire Eurasian continent was nurtured by the myth of the so-called Prester John (a legendary ruler-priest who was believed to reign on the far edges of the world),<sup>27</sup> by the anti-Muslim politics of Genghis Khan and his successors, and, above all, by the presence of ancient Christian communities of Eastern Syrian rite in Central Asia. The latter were usually known in Europe as “Nestorians,” since it was commonplace to view them as the followers of the christological doctrine of Theodore of Mopsuestia and Nestorius, the patriarch of Constantinople who was sentenced by the Council of Ephesus in 431 for having asserted that two unconnected natures had coexisted in Christ and that Mary had only generated the human component of the Savior. The “schismatic” church that became the interpreter of his lessons (although rejecting the term “Nestorian” and calling itself “Church of the East” or “Assyrian Church”<sup>28</sup>) had been established beyond the borders of the Roman Empire, more specifically in Mesopotamia, where it had spread in scattered points throughout the East: Iran, southern India, Turkestan, and China. It had followers among the Ephtalite Huns, the Uighurs—a Turkic population that had settled in the region between the Taklimakan and the Zungaria and that in the ninth century formed a very influential empire—and also some Mongolian tribes, such as the Önguts. The Christians knew

horrendas sculpturas, sicut sunt in multis ecclesiis. Patet in sepulchro sancti Adalberti in Praga.” Giovanni de’ Marignolli, *Cronica Boemorum*, ed. J. Emler, *Fontes rerum Bohemicarum* (Prague 1882) 3.512a. Saint Adalbert’s sepulcher in Saint Vitus, Prague, which is also known from further 14th-c. sources, is not extant; according to Milena Bartlová it could be a 9th-10th c. work set into a Gothic tabernacle. See eadem in *Svatý Vojtech. Tisíc let svatovojtešské tradice v Čechách*, exhibition catalogue (Prague 1997) 27–31. Cf. also A.-D. von den Brincken, “Die universalgeschichtlichen Vorstellungen des Johann von Marignola OFM. Der einzige mittelalterliche Weltchronist mit Fernostkenntnis,” *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte* 49 (1967) 297–339, esp. 336.

<sup>27</sup> Among the most relevant studies, see U. Knefelkamp, *Die Suche nach dem Reich des Priesterkönigs Johannes. Dargestellt anhand von Reiseberichten und anderen ethnographischen Quellen des 12. bis 17. Jahrhunderts* (Gelsenkirchen 1986); and W. Baum, *Die Verwandlungen des Mythos vom Reich des Priesterkönigs Johannes* (Klagenfurt 1999).

<sup>28</sup> See S. P. Brock, “The ‘Nestorian’ Church: A Lamentable Misnomer,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 78 (1996) 23–36.

about the Nestorians of Iraq, who had their own ecclesiastical representation in Jerusalem with an altar inside the Holy Sepulcher, but before the thirteenth century they knew little or nothing about their own brethren—as they were, even if they were usually considered to be “extreme heretics”—who lived in the Asiatic East.<sup>29</sup>

In the course of six or seven centuries these Christians had succeeded in establishing a consolidated presence within the religious mosaic of those regions. During their expansion they had elaborated a special system of beliefs, to some extent remaining true to the rites and customs of their country of origin—northern Syria—and in part adopting elements characteristic of the cultures they had settled among and with which they lived. At the same time they had elaborated places of worship, ritual objects, and iconographic subjects that we only know through literary testimonials and scant archaeological findings. We know for certain that they owned churches (excavations of Merv, Termez, Haroba-Košuk, Ordukent, Ak-Bešim, etc.) and monasteries (Issyk-Kul', Kara-Kuyun, Taş-Rabat)<sup>30</sup> and that they decorated them with fabrics, colored plaster, and frescoes that depicted scenes from the gospel and ceremonial images, as we can tell from the fragments of an Entrance into Jerusalem and a representation of Palm Sunday found in the rock church of Qočo in Chinese Turkestan.<sup>31</sup> The Armenian

<sup>29</sup> About the Nestorians' expansion throughout Asia, see A. C. Moule, *Christians in China before the Year 1550* (London 1930); G. Messina, *Cristianesimo, Buddismo, Manicheismo nell'Asia antica* (Rome 1947); N. V. Pigulievskaja, *Kul'tura sirijcev v srednie veka* (Moscow 1979); A. B. Nikitin, “Hristianstvo v tsentral'noj Azii (drevnost' i srednevekov'e),” *Vostochnyj Turkestan i Srednaja Azija*, ed. B. A. Litvinskij (Moscow 1982) 121–137; H.-J. Klimkeit, *Die Begegnung von Christentum, Gnosis und Buddhismus an der Seidenstraße* (Opladen 1986); *Syriac Christianity in the East* (Kottayam 1988); E. C. Hunter, *Syriac Christianity in Central Asia, Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 44 (1992) 362–368; S. H. Moffet, *A History of Christianity in Asia. I: Beginnings to 1500* (San Francisco 1992); E. C. D. Hunter, “The Church of the East in Central Asia,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 78 (1996) 129–142; I. Gillman and H.-J. Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia Before 1500* (Ann Arbor 1999). Most relevant to Nestorianism in 13th-c. Asia is the *History of Mar Yaballaha and Rabban Sauma*, a text written ca. 1317 describing the journey from Beijing to Mesopotamia of two Nestorian monks from Mongol-ruled China; one of the monks, Rabban Sauma, traveled to Byzantium, Italy, and France in 1287 as an envoy of the Il-Khan of Persia Arghun. The more accurate translation is the recent Italian one, edited with a rich commentary by P. G. Borbone, *Storia di Mar Yaballaha e di Rabban Sauma. Un orientale in Occidente ai tempi di Marco Polo* (Turin 2000).

<sup>30</sup> M. A. Lala Comneno, “Cristianesimo nestoriano in Asia Centrale nel primo millennio: testimonianze archeologiche,” *Orientalia christiana periodica* 61 (1995) 495–535; eadem, “Archeologia cristiana in Asia Centrale: nuove possibilità,” *Symposium syriacum VII. Uppsala University, Department of Asian and African Languages 11–14 August 1996*, ed. R. Lavenant (Rome 1998) 705–716. Most of the extant evidence is collected in Y. Saeki, *The Nestorian Documents and Relics in China* (Tokyo 1937). On archaeological findings in the Former Soviet Union see the reports in the collective book *Iz istorii drevnih kul'tov Srednej Azii: Hristianstvo* (Taškent 1994); as well as W. Klein, *Das nestorianische Christentum an den Handelswegen durch Kirgizstan bis zum 14. Jahrhundert* (Turnhout 2000); see also the overview by L. A. Beljaev, *Hristianskie drevnosti* (Moscow 1998) 226–229. The Issyk-Kul' site might have been indeed an Armenian monastery, while the identification of the Taş-Rabat building as a religious foundation is not self-evident; see Klein 271–272 and passim.

<sup>31</sup> On the frescoes in Qočo, see M. Bussagli, *Central Asian Painting from Afghanistan to Sinkiang* (Geneva 1979) 111–114; J. P. O'Neill, ed., *Along the Ancient Silk Routes. Central Asian Art from the West Berlin State Museums* (New York 1982) 158, entry no. 95. In general about the use of images among the Nestorians, cf. G. S. Assemani, *Bibliotheca Orientalis Clementino-Vaticana* (Rome 1719–1728) 3.2.349–344; J. Dauvillier, “Quelques témoignages littéraires et archéologiques sur la présence et sur le culte des images dans l'ancienne Église chaldéenne,” *L'Orient syrien* 1 (1956) 297–304; and V. N. Zalesskaya, “Hristiane na vostoke,” *Hristiane na vostoke. Iskusstvo Melkitov i inoslavnih hristian*, ed. M. Piotrovsky (St Petersburg 1998) 12–21 (18–20); K. Parry, “Images in the Church of the East: The Evidence from Central Asia and China,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 78 (1996) 143–162, esp. 150–151 and 161–162 on the Palm Sunday in Qočo.

constable Smpad, who visited a Nestorian building in a town of the kingdom of the Tanguts (the present-day Kansu) in 1248, observed a representation of the Wise Men offering their gifts to Christ.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, a fresco displaying the benefactress Sorghaqtani, the Nestorian mother of the Great Khans Möngke and Kubilai (1259–1294), was recorded as preserved within a church of the same region by a fourteenth century Chinese source the *Yüan-shih*.<sup>33</sup> The sacred iconography was also used to embellish sepulchral monuments and liturgical furnishings, as demonstrated respectively by some tomb slabs unearthed in Central Asia, Manchuria, Sinkiang, and Southern China,<sup>34</sup> a historiated thurible found in Urgut by Samarkhand,<sup>35</sup> and two patens now preserved in the Hermitage of St. Petersburg, one displaying scenes from the Passion and Resurrection of Christ (fig. 1), and the other with a representation of the siege of Jericho mentioned in the book of Joshua (6.1–27). Although the latter two were unearthed in the governate of Perm in the Russian region of the Urals, scholars agree that they were most probably made in the ninth or tenth century in the area of Semireč'e of present-day Kyrgyzstan, and more specifically in the Talas Valley, where several silver mines were located.<sup>36</sup>

The use of sacred portraits is equally well testified. The famous stele of Sin-gan-fu, dated 635, attests that the first Nestorian missionaries who arrived in China from Iran had brought with them books and images, and that the emperor T'ai-tsung had allowed them to build a church in his capital, requesting, however, to be portrayed on one of the walls of the annexed coenobium. One of his successors, Hsuan-Tsung, wanted to honor the Christian community in a similar manner, asking one of his generals in 742 to have painted "the portraits of five saints that were placed inside the monastery," to whom he presented a homage of a hundred precious fabrics.<sup>37</sup> It is believed that these may have been paintings on silk, like the one found in the early twentieth century in the oasis of Tun-Huang (fig. 2); in the Middle Ages this was the principal center of the

<sup>32</sup> "Infra quinque annos, ut dictum Cham iuniorum Tartari inthronizarent, vix in unum locum congregari poterunt. Quidam enim eorum erant in India, alii vero in terra de Catha, alii in Russia, et alii in terra de Chascar, et de Tangath. Haec est terra, de qua tres reges in Bethlehem venerunt Christum adorare, et Christiani sunt homines illius terrae. Ego siquidem fui in Ecclesiis eorum, et vidi Iesum Christum depictum; tres quoque reges, unum aurum, alium thus, et alium myrrham offerentes. Per illos itaque tres reges habuerunt illi fidem Christi, ac per illos Cham et omnes sui modo facti sunt Christiani. Unde et ante portas suas habent Ecclesias, pulsant campanas, ac percutiunt tabulas: ita quod euntes ad dominum suum Cham, primo quidem oportet ire ad Ecclesiam, et salutare Dominum Iesum Christum, postea vero ire salutare Cham. Invenimus etiam multos Christianos effusos per terram Orientis, et multas Ecclesias pulchras, altas, et antiquas, quae vastatae fuerunt a Tartaris." Smpad Sparapet, *Letter from Samarkhand dated February 2, 1248*, ed. Assemani (n. 31 above) 3.2.503, and Eng. trans. Yule (n. 1 above) 1.262–263. The text is known from the Latin trans. included in Vincent de Beauvais's *Speculum Historiale* xxi.92. The cult of the Magi among the Christians of Central and Far East Asia is witnessed by both archaeological and literary sources; cf. W. Hage, "Kulturelle Kontakte des ostsyrischen Christentums in Zentralasien," *III<sup>o</sup> Symposium syriacum 1980. Les contacts du monde syriaque avec les autres cultures (Goslar 7–11 Septembre 1980)*, ed. R. Lavenant (Rome 1983) 143–159, esp. 153.

<sup>33</sup> Dauvillier (n. 31 above) 301.

<sup>34</sup> Saeki (n. 30 above) 434–443; *Hristiane na vostoke* (n. 31 above) 198–199, nos. 266–268.

<sup>35</sup> Klein (n. 30 above) 229. This thurible might have been made in Palestine or Syria in the 8th or 9th c.

<sup>36</sup> V. Darkevič-B. I. Maršak, "O tak nazivaemom sirijskom bljude iz Permskoj oblasti," *Sovetskaja arheologija* 2 (1974) 213–222; B. I. Maršak, *Sielberschätze des Orients* (Leipzig 1986) 320–324; G. L. Semënov, *Studien zur sogdischen Kultur an der Seidenstraße* (Wiesbaden 1996) 66–67; *Hristiane na vostoke* (n. 31 above) 194–195, nos. 261–262; Klein (n. 30 above) 107–108.

<sup>37</sup> Dauvillier (n. 31 above) 208; Pelliot (n. 1 above) 157–158; Parry (n. 31 above) 152–153.

kingdom of the Tanguts, largely inhabited by Turkic populations of Nestorian faith. Even if it was quite illegible due to its badly deteriorated state, it was possible to prove that this was a Christian figure, due to the presence of three crosses (on the top of the walking stick held in one hand, around the neck, and on the head covering): this figure, who was looking slightly to the left, had his head surrounded by a large halo of a Buddhist type, was clad in solemn attire, and had the fingers of his right hand arranged in the gesture of the *vitarka mudrā*. It is highly probable that this is an iconic representation of Christ, as the attribution of the scepter, that also appears in the fresco with the Entrance into Jerusalem of the rock-cut church of Qočo, seems to indicate.<sup>38</sup>

One may suppose that images of this kind were involved in some kind of worship or ritualized devotional practice. In this regard we know, thanks to William of Rubruk, that when the Nestorians entered their churches, after having prostrated themselves on the ground, they touched with their right hands all the holy representations; then they kissed the same hand and gave it to the persons surrounding them, who in turn kissed it.<sup>39</sup> These customs were part of these Christians' tendency to attribute great symbolic value to tactile perception, something also evident in the case of Holy Communion: the bread—considered to be mixed with some of the flour that had served to prepare the bread of Last Supper—was given to the faithful with the care of a true relic; after accepting it in their palms, those receiving the communion had to touch their foreheads with it, to transmit its saving grace to body and soul.<sup>40</sup>

The use of painted fabrics as icons very probably reflects the influence of Buddhist religious practice, specifically that of the Lamas; it is comparable, in technique and category, to the model of the Tibetan *tangka*, a holy portrait painted on cotton, characterized by the fact that it can be rolled up to facilitate transport.<sup>41</sup> Considering that this religion had met with widespread acceptance among partly nomadic populations like the Uighurs or completely nomadic ones like the Önguts, this cannot have been an insignificant detail. In its expansion along the caravan routes of the Gobi desert and the Mongolian plains, the Nestorian Church had been able to adapt itself to different living conditions, using tents assembled on carriages as places of worship, resorting to portable altars in leather, and preferring light liturgical paraphernalia. It is therefore clear that in a similar context painted fabrics must have played a very important role, and it is significant to note that they were also adopted in the rites of the Manichean

<sup>38</sup> Saeki (n. 30 above) 416–417, 418; Parry (n. 31 above) 159–160.

<sup>39</sup> “Et dum sic expectarent in ipsa aurora ecclesie, prima uxor, nomine Catota Caten—Caten idem est quod domina, Catota [Khatūn] proprium nomen—ingressa est capellam cum aliis dominabus pluribus et cum filio suo primogenito, nomine Baltu, et aliis parvulis suis; et prostraverunt se in terram dando frontes more nestorinorum, et post hoc tetigerunt omnes ymagines manu dextra, osculando semper manum post tactum; et post hoc dederunt dextras omnibus circumstantibus in ecclesia. Hic est enim mos nestorinorum ingredientium ecclesiam.” William of Rubruk, *Itinerarium* xxx.19, *SF* 258–259.

<sup>40</sup> J. Dauvillier, “Guillaume de Rubrouck et les communautés chaldéennes d’Asie Centrale au Moyen Âge,” *L’Orient syrien* 2 (1957) 223–242, esp. 229. In general about William of Rubruk’s understanding of Nestorianism, cf. A.-D. von den Brincken, “Eine christliche Weltchronik von Qara Qorum. Wilhelm von Rubruck O.F.M. und der Nestorianismus,” *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte* 53 (1971) 1–19.

<sup>41</sup> D. Jackson and J.A. Jackson, *Tibetan Thangka Painting: Methods and Materials* (London 1984); G. Béguin, “Techniques of Tibetan Painting and Sculpture,” *Wisdom and Compassion. The Sacred Art of Tibet*, Exhibition catalogue, ed. M. M. Rhie and R. F. Thurman (San Francisco and New York 1991) 385–388, esp. 386.

communities living in the same area.<sup>42</sup> On the contrary, this is no evidence that three-dimensional images were allowed in the churches built of masonry, where it was also possible to install heavy objects: a small statue of Christ on the donkey, found in 1922 on the banks of the river Salar near Taškent in Uzbekistan, is too small in size to suggest it was used in worship, but the fact that it was found inside a tomb undoubtedly indicates that it was associated with personal piety and funeral practices.<sup>43</sup>

For the fearless Western travelers of the thirteenth century who ventured to the remote regions of Asia, the language of the Christian iconography provided an extraordinary means to rapidly recognize the presence of their fellow worshippers, to determine in qualitative terms their greater or lesser orthodoxy, or to verify whether they could possibly belong to the people of the mythical Prester John. When he arrived in the mobile town of the Great Khan, Friar William of Rubruk was touched by the sight of a tent crowned by a small cross; when he entered it, the first thing that struck him was an altar covered by a fabric embroidered in gold on which a pearled contour outlined the figures of the Savior, the Virgin Mary, Saint John the Baptist, and two angels, probably arranged to form the Byzantine scheme of the *Deisis*.<sup>44</sup> The work belonged to an Armenian monk (or someone who claimed to be one) who said he had visited the Mongolian court after God had appeared to him no less than three times in his hermitage in the Holy Land, ordering him to convert the ruler of that people to Christianity. He may have brought that historiated fabric with him from Cilicia or Palestine to use it in his work of evangelization, or he may have received it from the self-same Möngke, who may have obtained it as a gift from the king of Armenia, his tributary, or from the Greek emperor of Nicea. The Khan's appreciation of fabrics was widely known: in 1248 Louis IX of France himself, as the historian Joinville tells, had ordered the preparation in Cyprus, for purposes of sending it as a homage to Güyük, a sumptuous "chapel" with an illustration of the entire history of the Salvation, from the Annunciation to Pentecost. This homage, which we know was greatly appreciated, may have been identical to the yurt-church in which the Nestorians celebrated their services at the time of Rubruk's visit.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>42</sup> H.-J. Klimkeit, *Manichaean Art and Calligraphy* (Leiden 1982) 43–47. Mani himself was reputed to have painted images on silk, as witnessed by Abū l-Ma'alī and Bayānu l-Adyan; see O. Klíma, *Manis Zeit und Leben* (Prague 1962) 332.

<sup>43</sup> Beljaev (n. 30 above) 228, 252 n. 140. G. I. Bogomolov, "O hristianstve v Čače," *Iz istorii drevnih kul'tov* (n. 30 above) 71–78, esp. 72–74, indicates the 8th or 9th c. as a possible date for this small statue.

<sup>44</sup> "Et cum reverteremur, vidi ante extremitatem curie versus Orientem, longe a curia quantum posset balista iacere duabus vicibus, domum super quam erat crucicula. Tunc gavisus sum, supponens quod ibi esset aliquid christianitatis, ingressus sum confidenter et inveni altare paratum valde pulchre. Erant enim in panno aureo brosdade sive bistrate ymago Salvatoris et beate Virginis et Iohannis Baptiste et duorum angelorum, lineamentis corporis et vestimentorum distinctis margaritis, et crux magna argentea habens gemmas in angulis et in medio sui, et alia philateria multa, et lucerna cum oleo ardens ante altare, habens octo lumina; et sedebat ibi unus monachus armenus, nigellus, macilentus, indutus alba cilicina asperrima usque ad medias tibias, habens desuper pallium nigrum de seta furratum, vario ligatus ferro sub cilicio." William of Rubruk, *Itinerarium* xxviii.5–6, *SF* 245–246.

<sup>45</sup> J. de Joinville, *Histoire de Saint Louis* xxix and xciii, ed. A. Pauphilet, *Historiens et chroniqueurs du Moyen Âge* (Paris 1952) 253 and 311. A letter sent to Louis IX by the Il-Khan Hülegü in 1262 indicates that the "chapel" had been appreciated by the Great Khan: P. Meyvaert, "An Unknown Letter of Hulagu, Il-Khan of Persia, to King Louis IX of France," *Viator* 11 (1980) 245–260, esp. 257 and n. 77. Cf. M. Bacci, "Tra Pisa e Cipro: la committenza artistica di Giovanni Conti (†1332)," *Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa*, 4th ser., 5 (2000) 343–386, esp. 372–373.

## EXPERIENCING HYBRID IMAGES

Friar William had no difficulty in recognizing the subjects of the altar cloth placed in the tent of the Armenian monk because it belonged to an iconographic tradition he was already familiar with. On the contrary, when he found himself in front of works produced in Central Asia, he experienced a sensation of bewilderment. He was in the first place struck by the fact that the precious golden crosses owned by those Christian communities lacked the image of the crucified Christ and had no other ornament than gems arranged along the arms and at their intersection, in a manner he interpreted as a reflection of their heretical doctrine; he thought that the Nestorians did not represent the Passion because they rejected it from a dogmatic point of view, to the point of feeling ashamed of it and blushing every time the subject was raised. The friar could verify this assumption personally when Guillaume Boucher made a cross for him in the French Gothic style: dismayed by the presence of the dead body of Christ, realized in relief, the priests of Karakorum hastened to conceal it.<sup>46</sup> But this unusual reaction was due to the fact that in the tradition of Central Asian Christianity it was not the torture instrument of the Savior that was represented, but rather the cross of the *Parousia*, triumphal symbol of victory and Resurrection from the dead. This is why it may be seen in one of the medallions of the paten of Semireč'e, inside the empty sepulcher (fig. 1).<sup>47</sup>

Iconographic interpretation was a decisive element for Marco Polo when he resolved to identify a strange sect that had its place of worship in the city of Fu Chou, on the coast of Southern China, and that no one succeeded in classifying because it had no three-dimensional idols, did not worship Muhammad, and did not even venerate fire (i.e., they weren't Zoroastrian). After having frequented the devotees for some time he succeeded, along with the priest, in translating one of their holy scriptures, realizing that it was a *Psalter*; but only when he recognized the figures of the three apostles in their temple was he convinced that he had encountered a community of Christians.<sup>48</sup>

However, this identification was completely wrong, as was later revealed by the people themselves. Because Polo had been told that the images, that were not statues

<sup>46</sup> "Circa mediam quadragesimam venit filius magistri Willelmi afferens pulchram crucem argenteam fabricatam more gallicano, habens ymaginem Christi argenteam affixam desuper—quam videntes monachi et sacerdotes amoverunt eam." William of Rubruk, *Itinerarium* xxix, *SF* 275–276. In the 19th c., a traveler claimed to have seen this crucifix in a Buddhist temple in Erdeni Tso; cf. Olschki (n. 5 above) 38. As to the Nestorians' embarrassment about crucifixes, see also Rubruk, *Itinerarium* xv.7, *SF* 203: "Ipsi Nestoriani et Hermeni nunquam faciunt super cruces suas figuram Christi, unde videntur male sentire de passione, vel erubescunt eam."

<sup>47</sup> See n. 36 above.

<sup>48</sup> "Habebant itaque in quodam eorum templo, depictas, ymagines tres, qui tres apostoli fuerant ex septuaginta qui per mundum iverant praedicando, et illos dicebant antecessores suos in illa lege antiquitus informasse et quod iam per anos septingentos apud eos erat fides illa servata. Sed multo tempore sine doctrina fuerant, quare principalia ignorabant. 'Tamen istud tenemus a predecessoribus nostris, videlicet quod, secundum libros nostros, celebramus et reverentiam facimus istis tribus, scilicet apostolis.'" Marco Polo, *Milione*, Latin version of the Toledo manuscript, lxxxix, *Marco Polo. Il Milione. Redazione latina del manoscritto Z*, ed. A. Barbieri (Parma 1998) 240. Cf. L. Olschki, "Manichaeism, Buddhism and Christianity in Marco Polo's China," *Asiatische Studien* 5 (1951) 1–21; S. N. C. Lieu, "Nestorians and Manichaeans on the South China Coast," *Vigiliae Christianae* 34 (1980) 71–88; Bussagli, "La grande Asia di Marco Polo," Zorzi (n. 1 above) 173–226, esp. 207.

but paintings, represented those who had taught their religion to the ancestors of that small community, he deduced that it had to be three of the seventy disciples sent to announce the message of God in many different areas of the world. It is most likely that he had seen a representation of Mani or some other prominent figure of the Manichean pantheon, flanked by two of the *chosen* (or “illuminated”), as one can observe in paintings on silk found at Qočo.<sup>49</sup> The Manicheans were widespread in medieval Asia and, especially in China, tended to underscore certain consonances between their faith and the Nestorian practices in order to escape the hostility of the Buddhist clergy.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, their affinity with Christianity was partly a consequence of the syncretic nature of Mani’s doctrine: identification of the silken hangings would have been more immediate if the temple of Fu Chou had hosted images of the Christological triad (Jesus-Light, Jesus-Messiah, Jesus-Sufferer), where the cross was also present.<sup>51</sup> A temple originally held by such a religious community has been identified by Chinese and Japanese researchers in the nearby city of Ch’üan Chou (the Zayton described by Polo), in the sanctuary located on the hill of Shu-piao-shan. A relief plate is still conserved there; it was originally intended for public worship and does not represent the Buddha, as the local population believes, but Mani himself, seated in the lotus position inside a large radiating sphere.<sup>52</sup>

On other occasions Western observers failed to obtain sufficiently clear information from the images they encountered to enable them to determine whether they belonged to Christian cults or to “idolatrous” ones. This uncertainty is to a large extent a postulate of the singularity of a religious environment that had already for many centuries been characterized, as the self-same vicissitude of the Manicheans witnessed, by frequent phenomena of ritual and iconographic hybridation. This is particularly evident in the description made by Friar William of the places of worship visited in the city of Kjalak (Qayalík), in the present-day Kazakhstan, a center of the ancient empire of the Uighurs, where Buddhist, Nestorian, and Manichean communities had coexisted for a long time.<sup>53</sup> Although contact between these beliefs inevitably resulted in a contamination of the respective rituals, it caused the different beliefs to distinguish themselves from each other by inventing exclusive gestures, images, and symbols. To the Franciscan’s eyes, it therefore came as a surprise that the Nestorians prayed with their hands raised upwards, rather than united on the breast, but he was likely to have forgiven this had he learned they did so to avoid imitating the idolaters, who on the contrary were positioned in prayer almost like the Western Christians, on their knees with their foreheads pressed between the palms of the hands.

<sup>49</sup> Klimkeit (n. 42 above) 44.

<sup>50</sup> On Manichaeans in Central and Far Eastern Asia see S. N. C. Lieu, *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire and Medieval China. A Historical Survey* (Manchester 1985); and X. Tremblay, *Pour une histoire de la Sérinde. Le manichéisme parmi les peuples et religions d’Asie Centrale d’après les sources primaires* (Vienna 2001).

<sup>51</sup> Such is the iconography of an 8th/9th c. silk found in Qočo; cf. Klimkeit (n. 42 above) 43 and fig. 40.

<sup>52</sup> K. Enoki, “The Nestorian Christianity in China in Mediaeval Times According to Recent Historical and Archaeological Researches,” *Atti del convegno internazionale sul tema: “L’Oriente cristiano nella storia della civiltà” (Roma-Firenze 1963)* (Rome 1964) 45–80, esp. 64–65 and pl. IV.

<sup>53</sup> William of Rubruk xxiv, *SF* 227.



What proved to be most striking to him, and also to travelers in the next century, was the fact that the Buddhists resembled the Westerners much more than the Christians of Asia. For example, their ministers shaved like the French, and did not wear long beards like the Greek popes, the Jewish rabbis, or the Muslim imams.<sup>54</sup> It was also striking that the monks, who observed an unchallengeable code of moral conduct in their great abbeys, frequently resorted to bells quite similar to the European ones. Western visitors could only infer that it was probably as a reaction to this that all Eastern Christians, with the exception of the Russians, preferred to use a long wooden plank, or *símandron*, which they beat on with a hammer.<sup>55</sup>

The immediately apparent similarity, however, was the use of images and the figurative decoration of the temples, even if it might be embarrassing to declare openly that Christian statues and Buddhist idols resembled one another. When he reached Kajlak, after his very long and arduous journey across the “Steppe of hunger,” Friar William heard for the first time about the idolaters and immediately wanted to visit one of their temples to verify “their stupidity” *de visu*. By a strange coincidence, the first person he met there was a man who had a cross painted on the palm of his hand, a sign that made him believe he had entered a Nestorian church, even if, taking a quick look inside, he could not see any other confirmation of this. “How can it be,” he then asked, “that you don’t have the cross and the image of Christ here?” And the man, who resembled a Christian because he spoke just like a Christian, replied that there was no need for it.<sup>56</sup> The Franciscan became more convinced that he had met a representative of a community of brethren who, due to the geographic conditions they lived in, lacked solid doctrinal preparation. He entered the building and, from what he saw, realized that his deduction was correct: “In fact, I there saw, behind a box that they used as altar and on which they had placed lamps and offerings, an image that

<sup>54</sup> “Item omnes sacerdotes eorum radunt totum capud et barbam, et sunt vestiti de croceo, et servant castitatem ex quo radunt capud, et vivunt pariter C vel ducenti in una congregatione ... Quando ergo ingressus fui predictam ydolatriam, inveni sacerdotes sedentes sub porta exteriori. Quos ut vidi, videbantur michi Franci esse, rasis barbis, thiaras habebant in capitibus tartareas. Istorum Iugurum sacerdotes habent talem habitum: quocumque vadunt semper sunt in tunicis croceis satis strictis accincti desuper, recte sicut Franci, et habent pallium super humerum sinistrum descendens involutum per pectus et dorsum ad latus dextrum, sicut diaconus portans casulam in quadragesima.” William of Rubruk xxv, *SF* 229–232. Analogous remarks were made, in the same year, by the Armenian King Het’um; cf. *The Journey of Het’um*, included in Kirakos of Ganjak’s *History of the Armenians*, published in French trans. by J. Klaproth, “Aperçu des entreprises des Mongols en Géorgie et en Arménie,” *Journal asiatique* 12 (1833) 273–305, esp. 289.

<sup>55</sup> “Item habent campanas magnas sicut nos; ideo credo quod orientales christiani noluerunt habere eas, Ruteni tamen habent et Greci in Gazaria.” William of Rubruk xxiv, *SF* 229. On the use and meaning of bells in Russian tradition cf. E. V. Williams, “Aural Icons of Orthodoxy: The Sonic Typology of Russian Bells,” *Christianity and the Arts in Russia*, ed. W. C. Brefeld-M. M. Velimirović (Cambridge, MA 1991) 3–13; T. B. Saskina, “Kolokola domongol’skoi Rusy po dannym arheologii,” *Pamiatniki kul’tury. Novye otkrytia* (1995) 477–483.

<sup>56</sup> “In predicta civitate Caalac habebant ipsi [i.e., the Uighurs] tres ydolatrias, quarum duas intravi ut viderem stultitias eorum. In prima inveni quemdam qui habebat cruciculam de atramento super manum suam, unde credidi quod esset christianus, quia ad omnia que querebam ab eo respondebat ut christianus. Unde quesivi ab eo: ‘Quare ergo non habetis hic crucem et ymaginem Ihesu Christi?’ Et ipse respondit: ‘Non habemus consuetudinem.’ Unde ego credidi quod essent christiani, sed ex defectu doctrine omitterent.” William of Rubruk xxiv, *SF* 227.

had wings like a Saint Michael and other images that, in the manner of bishops, held their hands as if in the act of blessing.”<sup>57</sup>

What is described here is the psychological mechanism with which a Western religious man sought to orient himself—on the basis of the baggage of iconographic conventions provided by his own culture—so as to decipher the meaning of an aggregate of figurative objects, which he perceived were endowed with sacred value on the basis of exterior elements such as position inside the building, the visual hierarchical arrangement governing the relationship between single statues, the type of illumination, the presence of ex-votos, and certain compositional and formal characteristics such as the directness or intensity of the glance. These portraits were characteristic elements of a figurative code, that of the Tantric currents of Buddhism as practiced in the Himalayan region, where the crucial nature, in the collective and private experience, of the divine was as evident as it was in the case of Christian images: in both cases the community of believers was invited to recognize, without hesitation, the identity of personalities represented, on the basis of clues corresponding to characteristic attributes and bodily attitudes. And so the wings immediately reminded Friar William of the prince of the archangels, while to a Buddhist worshipper this was one of many winged deities, such as the Tibetan Heruka. On the other hand, the *chin mudrā* or the “gesture of the absence of fear” (*abhaya mudrā*, i.e., with the palm raised) displayed by the various emanations of Buddha and by the arhats might easily remind him of a hand raised in benediction, while the high triple-pointed crown the Bodhisattva Maitreya or Avalokiteśvara usually wore in images might easily be mistaken for a miter or a tiara (see fig. 3).<sup>58</sup>

#### ACHEIROPOIETIC AND ARCHETYPAL IMAGES IN CHRISTIANITY AND BUDDHISM

The episode recounted by the Franciscan traveler, that took place in 1254, is somehow touching because it coincides historically with the first direct contact, albeit ephemeral, between the two great “iconic” civilizations of the Eurasian continent, an encounter that was as disconcerting as it was superficial, but was sufficient to suggest that those two worlds were, at the same time, very distant and surprisingly similar. Neither Friar William nor Marco Polo could imagine that there had been a very long period, from the death of Buddha around 480 B.C. to the first century A.D., in which Buddhism had, just like primitive Christianity, rejected the cult of images.<sup>59</sup> In the

<sup>57</sup> “Videbam enim ibi post quamdam cistam, que erat eis loco altaris, super quam ponunt lucernas et oblationes, quamdam ymaginem habentem alas quasi sancti Michaelis, et alias quasi Episcoporum tenentes digitos sicut ad benedicendum.” Ibid. K. M. Bajkalov, “Hristianstvo Kazahstana v srednie veka,” *Iz istorii drevnih kul'tov* (n. 30 above) 96–100, takes for granted that the building described by Rubruk was actually a Nestorian church (contrary to Rubruk’s own remarks).

<sup>58</sup> The standard work for Tibetan iconography is that by M.-Th. Mallman, *Introduction à l'iconographie du tantrisme bouddhique* (Paris 1975); on *abhaya mudrā*, see Dale Saunders (n. 16 above) 55–65.

<sup>59</sup> The earliest anthropomorphic images of the Buddha appear in both Mathurā and Gandhāra sculpture during the 2nd–3rd c. A.D.; cf. J. E. van Lohuizen-De Leeuw, “New Evidence with Regard to the Origin of the Buddha Image,” *South Asian Archaeology 1979* (Berlin 1981) 377–400; M. Bussagli, *L'arte del Gandhāra* (Turin 1984) 185–217; V. Shailendra Kumar, *Art and Iconography of the Buddha Images* (Delhi 1996). See also D. L. Snellgrove, ed., *The Image of the Buddha* (Tokyo 1978); S. Gaulier, R. Jera-Bezard, and M. Maillard, *Buddhism in Afghanistan and Central Asia* (Leiden 1976) 1.5–10; V. V. S. Saibaba, “Probable Origins of Buddha Image as the Object of Devotion and Worship,” *Buddhist Iconography* (New Delhi 1989) 6–18; K. D. Bajpai, “Bodhisattva and Buddha: The Early Iconic Forms,” *ibid.* 60–68; R. C.

thirteenth and fourteenth centuries the most striking aspect of this exotic religion was the incalculable number of statues that crowded its temples; to the Armenian king Het'um, in 1254, the presence of enormous idols referred to as "Šakmonya" (from "Śākyamuni," Buddha's worldly name) and "Madri" (i.e., the Bodhisattva Maitreya) was a Tibetan characteristic.<sup>60</sup> These portraits drew attention due to their customary gilding, and were certainly impressive when gathered in groups at a single point in the building of worship; at Zaytun Odoric of Pordenone claimed to have seen no less than 11,000 in one place.<sup>61</sup> An observation that continuously recurred in the texts of the different authors concerns the presence of a principal simulacrum that was recognized by its colossal dimensions, thus bringing to mind St. Christopher, the giant saint par excellence in Western tradition, who was often painted or sculpted on the outside of churches so as to be visible from very afar. (In fact, it was said he protected those who had devotedly invoked him from being caught by death in sin, for a period of twenty-four hours.)<sup>62</sup>

The colossal apparition, that was a specific attribute of the Buddha in those regions, often became a conspicuous part of the landscape, often characterizing mountain passes and heights with its presence, to the point of being visible even from two days' distance, as a Nestorian priest coming from Cathay told Friar William. Some were sculpted in the rocky walls, as at Bāmiyān or Yün-Kang; others were erected on pilgrimage places, for instance, in a famous temple of Ceylon, on the mountain known to Arabian seafarers as "Adam's Summit," where Śākyamuni was portrayed in reclining position, just about to enter *nirvana*. Present-day Sri Lanka was known as the most important Buddhist center of Southern Asia thanks to the antiquity of its temples and the precious relics they held (Buddha's tooth, the impression of his foot, his right col-

Sharma, *Early Phase of Buddhist Icons at Mathura*, *ibid.* 87–96. The parallelism between Christian and Buddhist early art has often been emphasized by scholars: see A. Grünwedel, *Buddhist Art in India*, rev. ed. J. Burgess (Santiago de Compostela and London 1965) 67–68.

<sup>60</sup> "In this country there are many idolaters, who worship an extremely huge earthen image, whose name is *Šakmonya*. They say he is a God since three thousand forty years, and that he will rule the world for still thirty-five *touman* (a *touman* is the same as one thousand years); afterwards, he will be deprived of his divinity. There is also another God whose name is *Madri*; in his honour they have made an earthen statue of unbelievable size within a beautiful temple." *The Journey of Het'um*, trans. Klaproth (n. 54 above) 289. See also J. A. Boyle, "The Journey of Het'um I, King of Little Armenia, to the Court of the Great Khan Möngke," *Central Asiatic Journal* 9 (1964) 175–189, repr. in *idem*, *The Mongol World Empire, 1206–1370* (London 1977).

<sup>61</sup> "In hac multa sunt monasteria religiosorum, qui ydola universaliter adorant. In uno autem istorum monasteriorum ego fui, in quo erant bene tria millia religiosorum, qui ydola universaliter adorant, habencium undecim millia ydola, et unum illorum ydolorum, qui minus aliis esse videbatur, erat bene ita magnum sicut esset S. Christoforus. Illa autem hora qua illis diis dant ad comedendum, ivi ad videndum. Et isto modo comedere sibi dant: omnia que illis offerunt comedenda eis calidissima porriguntur, ita quod fumus illorum ascendat ad ydola, que ipsi pro comestione istorum ydolorum esse dicunt; aliud autem totum pro se habent et manducant. Et sic isto modo dicunt se bene pascere deos suos." Odoric of Pordenone xxi, *SF* 460–461.

<sup>62</sup> "Ad latus aquilonare intercludunt unam cameram loco cori. Ibi ergo collocant unam archam longam et latam sicut mensam unam. Et post illam archam contra meridiem collocant principale ydolum, quod ego vidi apud Caracarum ita magnum sicut pingitur beatus Christoforus. Et dixit michi quidam sacerdos Nestorinus qui venerat de Cataia, quod in terra illa est ydolum ita magnum quod potest videri a duabus dietis. Et collocant alia idola in circuitu, omnia pulcherrime deaurata. Super cistam illam, que est quasi mensa una, ponunt lucernas et oblationes." William of Rubruk xxiv, *SF* 229; cf. Odoric of Pordenone xxi, *SF* 460. About the iconography of St. Christopher in the West see most recently M. Exner, "Wandlungen des Christophorus-Bildes im 12. Jahrhundert," *Iconographica* 2 (2003) 11–17.

larbone, the begging cup<sup>63</sup>). Its fame fascinated Marco Polo; it was probably on this island that he outlined the historical figure he called “Sergamoni Borcan,” a man who, while ignoring the Gospel, had followed its dictates so strictly that “he would have been a great saint with God if he had been a baptized Christian.” It is significant to note that in his exegesis Polo did not describe him as the founder of an idolatrous religion, preferring to exalt him as a person animated by a sincerely devoted intention. The origin of the corrupted rites is, on the contrary, retraced to the father of Śākyamuni, who had been a rich and powerful king in the area and who, on being told of his son’s death, had ordered the preparation of a commemorative statue in gold and gems, made as a likeness, obliging his subjects to honor him as a god. This idol, the first one ever realized, then gave rise to all the others.<sup>64</sup>

The passage is particularly interesting because it conveys the idea of an archetypal and authentic portrait, a “true icon” of the Tathāgata, that really belongs to the Buddhist tradition, especially in its Chinese versions.<sup>65</sup> Quite a few sources dating from the period between the fourth and the seventh centuries, in fact, attributed the initiative of the execution of such a portrait, at times painted and at times sculpted in the round, to a king of ancient India. According to tradition it was Prasēnajit, king of Kosala, who, during Buddha’s ascendance to the Trayastrimśa, had made a sandalwood statue with the head in bone to be installed in the Temple of Jētavana at Śrāvastī. When he had returned to earth, the image had miraculously turned towards Buddha, who said to it: “Please return to your place. After my nirvana you will be the model from which my followers will obtain their images.”<sup>66</sup> But the legend that was to enjoy the greatest popularity featured another king, a contemporary of Śākyamuni, Udāyana of Kauśāmbī: according to one version it was a painting on fabric, to another a gilded statue that, on Buddha’s return, had glided towards him, making him promise that anyone who, in the future centuries, would venerate it with flags, flowers, and incense would immediately receive the gift of contemplating his face (cf. fig. 4). According to another version, the artist in charge of executing the work was transported directly to the heavens so he could observe attentively “the distinctive aspects of the body of Buddha” and reproduce them exactly in the sacred image.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Cf. J. Gerson da Cunha, *Memoir on the History of the Tooth-Relic of Ceylon* (London 1875).

<sup>64</sup> Marco Polo, *Il Milione* clxxiv, ed. V. Bertolucci Pizzorosso (Milan 1994) 271–275, esp. 274: “E sappiate che questi fue il primo idolo che fosse fatto, e da costui sono discesi tutti l’idoli.” Cf. Bussagli (n. 48 above) 209–214.

<sup>65</sup> P. C. Almond, “The Medieval West and Buddhism,” *The Eastern Buddhist*, n.s. 19 (1986) 85–101, esp. 96–97, maintains, on the contrary, that the idea of archetypal images has no parallels in Buddhist tradition, “but it does reinforce the importance which Buddhist statuary assumed in the minds of many Medieval travellers to Asia.” Nonetheless, he claims that it may be a consequence of the contact with Mahayana schools, and of the idea of Kashmir as the place of origin of Buddhism. In the following discussion we will point out that archetypal portraits of the Enlightened are often recorded in medieval Chinese sources. It is important to stress that the term “Borcan” added to Sergamoni (i.e., Śākyamuni) was known to Marco Polo from the Mongolian language (where it sounded like *borkhan*); it designated both a divinity and its image and representation (ibid. 95).

<sup>66</sup> Fa-Hian, *Fu-kwō-ki*, trans. S. Beal, *Buddhist Records of the Western World* (Delhi 1994) l.xliv–xlv.

<sup>67</sup> The earliest sources of the Udāyana legend are thoroughly discussed by M. L. Carter, *The Mystery of the Udayana Buddha* (Naples 1990) (*Annali dell’Istituto universitario orientale*, Supplement 64). The main statue of the Seiryōji Temple in Kyoto, dated 988 A.D., is reputed to be a copy of King Udāyana’s archetypal image (fig. 4).

These tales purported to link the iconographic tradition, by then consolidated and amply diffused in a considerable part of Asia, with the primitive history and the countries of origin of that religious belief; from this point of view the strength of the analogies between Buddhism and Christianity is surprising. Both religions, in fact, after having been formed as internal evolutions of much more ancient cultures (Hinduism and Hebraism) had seen the presence of their communities decline gradually in their respective “holy places” (Northern India and Palestine), while they became more and more successful in foreign territories, converting huge populations to the new faith. During this progressive expansion they had modified their originally iconophobic attitude, or better, the preference given to symbolic or allegorical representations instead of icon-like portraits, especially of the principal holy personalities. Little by little both religions came to recognize the utility of images based on their great persuasive efficiency and their ability to transmit a new religious message in a clear and synthetic manner, as well as serving as tools that allowed people efficaciously to worship holy personages.<sup>68</sup>

The figurative objects thus eventually became indispensable elements of devotional practices, of liturgical rites and of religious life in general; and the moment came when it became necessary to reflect, also from a doctrinal point of view, on their appropriateness and legitimacy: in fact, how could one allow their use if there was no mention of them in the words of Buddha or Christ? The problem was solved by favoring the diffusion of legends that retraced the iconographic codes shared by everyone to a series of ideal prototypes established in the same period as the worldly existence of the founders of the two religions, made by or on the initiative of eye-witnesses to their appearance. Parallels can be drawn between the medieval legend of Saint Luke, the evangelist painter who handed down to future generations a portrait “from life” of Christ and the Virgin, and the figures of Prasēnajit and Udāyana; the fact that the latter were described as donors rather than as artists may be understood as an interesting difference of perspective.<sup>69</sup>

The two kings undoubtedly acted, first and foremost, as exemplary figures of devoted men and, by virtue of their role as representatives of cities and peoples, as first beneficiaries of the portraits of Buddha. Other kings appeared in as many legends, in which the conversion of a group is represented, metonymically, by the obtainment of a sacred image. A Chinese text from the fifth century, for instance, tells how the Emperor Ming (58–75 A.D.) was visited in his dreams by a divine man, golden in color and with a solar halo around his head; on being informed that he was a divinity from the West, the emperor sent a delegation to India that returned with some sacred texts and a painting displaying Śākyamuni, made for the king Udāyana of Kauśāmbī.<sup>70</sup> An-

<sup>68</sup> Among the most important studies of the development of “holy portraits” in early Christianity, see H. Belting, *Bild und Kult. Eine Geschichte des Bildes vor dem Zeitalter der Kunst* (Munich 1990); T. M. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods. A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art* (Princeton 1993); F. Tristan, *Les premières images chrétiennes. Du symbole à l'icône: I<sup>e</sup>–VI<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris 1996); on Christ's image, see most recently M. Büchsel, *Die Entstehung des Christusporträts. Bildarchäologie statt Bildhypnose* (Mainz 2003). On the origins of Buddhist iconography see n. 59.

<sup>69</sup> On Saint Luke's legend see M. Bacci, *Il pennello dell'Evangelista. Storia delle immagini sacre attribuite a san Luca* (Pisa 1998).

<sup>70</sup> A. C. Soper, *Literary Evidence for Early Buddhist Art in China* (Ascona 1959) (“Artibus Asiae”

other sovereign, Bimbisāra of Magadha, wanted to render homage to his ally Udrayana of Roruka by giving him a portrait of Buddha; to enable his court painters to make it as excellent as possible, he asked Buddha himself to pose for them. When they found themselves facing Buddha, the artists were unable to stand the intensity of his gaze and could not depict him until he himself projected his shadow on the canvas, enabling them to fill the contours with color. He wrote King Udrayana, asking him to receive his image with all the honors due to a sovereign.<sup>71</sup>

These stories bring to mind some ancient Christian legends that, in a similar manner, feature kings and “authentic” portraits associated with the theme of the conversion, but avail themselves of a mythical motif which is completely absent in the Far East: namely, the fact that the king is sick. The emperor Constantine, according to the *Actus Silvestri*, was affected by leprosy when he had a vision of the saints Peter and Paul, and when he recognized them in the icon shown him by the pope he was convinced of the need to accept the rite of baptism, that in its turn resulted in his healing.<sup>72</sup> Also Tiberius was seriously ill when, according to the *Acta Pilati*, Saint Veronica healed him by means of the holy cloth on which the face of Christ was impressed; and so was King Abgar V of Edessa, who regained health due to the holy *mandylion* sent him by the Savior in person. Both the Veronica and the *mandylion* were very special types of images, *acheiropoietai*, or in other words “not made by human hands,” an expression which was used both to indicate the figurative objects that were supposed to have been made automatically, by divine intervention in the terrestrial dimension, and those that were supposedly made by physical contact with the body of a holy personality.<sup>73</sup>

The first category was also frequently witnessed in Buddhist contexts. The Chinese pilgrim Hsüen Tsiang, who visited India between 629 and 645, asserted that he had observed in Bodhgāyā, where Śākyamuni achieved Enlightenment, a curious tradition concerning a religious image that represented Śākyamuni in a manner that was extraordinarily similar to how he must have been during that extraordinary circumstance. It was said that the best artists of the country had been contacted, but that no one had felt worthy of carrying out such demanding work, with the exception of a Brahmin who asked to be locked up for six months inside the *vihāra* (or sanctuary) along with a little scented earth and a lamp. They complied with the requests of the Brahmin, but after only four months the ministers decided to open the doors; inside there were no traces of that man, but they saw an extraordinary image representing the Buddha majestically seated in the lotus position, with his right hand raised in the gesture of the *abhaya mudrā* and the other pointed downwards, a loving expression on his face and his distinctive marks in the right places (in particular the *ūrṇā*, a white curl in the center of the forehead, and the *uṣṇīṣa*, a protuberance on his head). Everyone proclaimed it was a miracle and not long afterwards a wise man received the vision of the

Supplement 20).

<sup>71</sup> Carter (n. 67 above) 40–41.

<sup>72</sup> *Actus Silvestri*, ed. B. Mombritius, *Sanctuarium seu Vitae sanctorum* (Paris 1910) 2.512.

<sup>73</sup> For a discussion and thorough interpretation of the Byzantine and Latin sources concerning the Mandylion and the Veronica in their association to emperors cf. G. Wolf, *Schleier und Spiegel. Traditionen des Christusbildes und die Bildkonzepte der Renaissance* (Munich 2002) 22–34, 49–51

Brahmin who had done the work, who revealed that he was none other than the Bodhi-sattva Maitreya. Fearing that no artist would be able to accomplish the work correctly from an iconographic point of view, he had taken care of it himself, representing the Buddha in the precise position he had assumed at the moment of Enlightenment.<sup>74</sup>

This tale can, at least in part, be compared to the history of the *acheiropoietos* of Lydda, an image of the Virgin that supposedly appeared miraculously inside a church that had remained inaccessible for forty days, for the purpose of declaring the local Christian community's ownership of the building. Sculpted in a slab of porphyry, this holy portrait suffered an act of iconoclasm by the pagan emperor Julian the Apostate; but the sculptors he had sent to destroy it immediately realized that their scalpels, by divine virtue, were not even able to scratch the surface.<sup>75</sup> In the context of the legend of the Bodhgāyā Buddha the role of the destroyer was played by King Śāśānka, the one who had cut down the tree of the Enlightenment, who ordered the replacement of the holy portrait with a figure of Śiva; however, the person entrusted with the task was a pious person who devised the stratagem of concealing the statue behind a wall of bricks, leaving a lamp inside. When the king died the wall was broken down; to the general amazement, it turned out that the lamp had remained lit all the time.<sup>76</sup>

While the parallels between these two stories should certainly not be exaggerated, it cannot be doubted that both *acheiropoietic* images were characterized by a common element, i.e., their connection to holy buildings placed in important pilgrimage centers, which their presence further legitimated. Cultural objects like these were similar to sacred impressions, and acquired a special status because the worshippers recognized their singular characteristics. Hsüen Tsiang, on visiting Benares, was, for instance, convinced that he had recognized the outline of the Buddha in a pillar covered by a light and polished stone, and saluted this discovery as an event worthy of notice, considering that this took place in a foreign center, i.e., one of the most eminent Hindu places of worship<sup>77</sup>.

On the contrary, the motive of the image made by contact with the very body of a sacred personality is uniquely Christian, as it assumes a specifically sacramental significance that only makes sense in relation to the doctrine of the Sacrifice on the cross and the Redemption. In the case of Buddha, on the contrary, any emphasis on a physical relation with him would be an absurdity; in fact, his body is just one of his many magnificent and unsustainable manifestations, and the artist can at most capture its shadow or reflection in water or the spiritual energy that issues from it in the form of a ray of light. The very idea of the sacred portrait as corporeal reproduction is particularly problematic as, according to the doctrinal system known as the *Trikāya*, the bodies of the Buddha are three: the "body of truth" that corresponds to ultimate reality un-

<sup>74</sup> Hsüen Tsiang, *Ta-t'ang-si-yu-ki*, trans. Beal (n. 66 above) 2.118–122.

<sup>75</sup> E. von Dobschütz, *Christusbilder. Untersuchungen zur christlichen Legende* (Leipzig 1899) 79–83; M. van Esbroeck, "L'histoire de l'église de Lydda dans deux textes géorgiens," *Bedi Kartlisa* 35 (1977) 109–131; Bacci (n. 69 above) 76–77, 132–133.

<sup>76</sup> Hsüen Tsiang, *Ta-t'ang-si-yu-ki*, trans. Beal (n. 66 above) 2.121.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* 2.45. We should bear in mind that in the 7th c., Buddhism would almost completely disappear from India, and that Buddhist and Vishnuist as well as Shivaist cult-images shared almost the same iconographical features: cf. P. Pal, *The Ideal Image. The Gupta Sculptural Tradition and Its Influence* (New York 1978) 37.

derstood as perfect wisdom and completion of individual purposes; the “blessed body” or the relative reality expressed in the energy of the compassion; and the “body of emanation” that is his circumscribed and visually perceptible form. A complex Tibetan tradition tells that, by the will of Tathāgata in person, not long before his entrance into Nirvana, the greatest divinities of the world created a representation of his three “states”: Brahma made a shrine (*stūpa*) that corresponded to the body of truth and was intended for the female divinities known as the *dakinī*; Vishnu sent the goddess of the sea (*Nāga*) a statue made only of gems, that reproduced the blessed body with its material; while Indra resorted to celestial gems and colored glass to depict his “created” person. The divine artist Viśvakarman transformed the latter into images, two of Siddharta as a child (at eight and twelve years), and a third as a young prince at twenty-one.<sup>78</sup>

On the other hand, every iconographically correct image of Buddha, consecrated in accordance with the rite, might according to the Tantric doctrine be considered a particular manifestation of his “body of emanation.” The one referred to as “supreme” was the prerogative of Śākyamuni and other Enlightened of the past and the future, while the “incarnational” one was assumed by the compassion of those men who live in the intermediate epochs; they at times took the form of celestial entities, and at times of human beings. Among the latter the most famous is without doubt, in our days, the Dalai Lama. The holy images, which were presented as the “artistic” manifestation of the body of emanation, were to be considered much more than mere utilitarian objects; in fact, they were thought to participate in the essence of the Buddha, to be the result of a contemplative process on the part of the artist and to serve to visualize the beauty and variety of the enlightened reality.<sup>79</sup> The divine works of Viśvakarman thus represented models, par excellence, for the sculptor’s activity, principally understood as a form of mental reassembly of things rather than as a material creative act.

#### WESTERN VIEWS OF FAR EASTERN IMAGE-WORSHIP AND DEVOTIONAL PRACTICES

Somewhat like Byzantine icons and a little like the cultic statues of the Christian West, Tantric “idols” were also seen in a positive light because of their eminently didactic value; the mental experience of Enlightenment, which was first and foremost aesthetic in nature, could be at least partially evoked by observation of the image by the ordinary faithful who, looking at the innumerable simulacra presented for their devotion, would perceive the unlimited nature of the manifestations of the Buddha. As we have already seen, Western travelers were very impressed with the quantity of such objects, as well as being intrigued by the hierarchic relations by which they thought they were governed, and the manner in which they were arranged inside the temples. Friar William, in his stroll around Kajlak, remarked that every place of worship, shaped like a simple room that one entered through an atrium, was characterized by the presence—behind a piece of furniture that was the equivalent of the altar in Christian churches—

<sup>78</sup> L. S. Dargyab, *Tibetan Religious Art, Part I: Texts* (Wiesbaden 1977) 22–23; cf. Carter (n. 67 above) 43.

<sup>79</sup> R. A. F. Thurman, “Tibet, Its Buddhism, and Its Art,” Rhie and Thurman (n. 41 above) 20–38, esp. 35.



of a “main idol” that was as large as Saint Christopher and thus literally dominated all the portraits below.<sup>80</sup>

This description corresponded quite precisely with the standard arrangement of the most ancient temples of Tibet and Khotan, territories from which Mahayana Buddhism had already spread at the time of the Uighurs.<sup>81</sup> The interior, rectangular and quite small, was dominated by the *gtso bo*, portraits of the gods to which the building was dedicated, arranged along with the other statues above an area sufficiently detached from the wall to allow the worshippers to walk around it.<sup>82</sup> The ritual circling, during which one took care always to keep to the right, was in fact the most diffused form of veneration of sacred objects. This kind of practice was very familiar to Northern European pilgrims, who were accustomed to circulating in the ambulatory in the great Romanesque and Gothic cathedrals to venerate the relics, the holy bodies, and the miraculous statues that were usually installed in the area of the presbytery. Both in Europe and Central Asia these customs were associated with images sculpted in full relief, around which the believers could circumambulate.

Such practices were probably well known to the bishop of Sultaniyeh, John of Cori, one of the first Europeans to provide accurate information on the monasteries and temples of the Himalayan countries in his *Book on the Great Khan's Empire* (written ca. 1330–1334): “[The Tibetans] are idolaters and worship idols of various kinds. They say that above these idols there are four gods; they sculpt these four gods in full relief in gold and silver. Above these four gods they admit that there is a greater god that dominates all the other gods, small and large.”<sup>83</sup> Once again the condemnation of idolatry, clearly expressed, contrasted with the pleasant discovery of elements of affinity with the cultural usages of the Western world. Three-dimensional images were honored within great abbeys, whose monks observed rigorous chastity, made alms, performed many rites and prayers each day, and rang bells.<sup>84</sup> The Buddhist divinities were immediately identified with the statues arranged on the altars of the temples; these struck the imagination because of their great differences in size (according to a system of hierarchical relationship not unlike that ruling medieval iconography) and the different materials in which they were realized. It was striking that the most important were not painted, but covered with gold and silver. The specific allu-

<sup>80</sup> See n. 62 above.

<sup>81</sup> On the arrangement of Buddhist temples in medieval Central Asia in its connection with Tibet and Khotan, see A. von Gabain, *Einführung in Zentralasienkunde* (Darmstadt 1979) 100. On archaeological evidence about Buddhist sacred buildings in that area, see V. D. Goryacheva-S. R. Peregudova, “Buddiiskie pamyatniki Kirgizii,” *Vestnik drevnej istorii* 2 (1996) 167–189.

<sup>82</sup> G. Tucci, *Archaeologia Mundi. Tibet* (Geneva 1975) 75–76.

<sup>83</sup> “Ils sont ydolaste et aourent pluseurs ydolles, par desseure lesquelles ydolles ilz dient estre iiii dieux, lesquels iiii dieux ilz entaillent dor et dargent tous entiers devant et derrieres et par desseure ces quatre dieux dient ilz estre un plus grant dieu qui par desseure tous les dieux grans et petits.” John of Cori, *Livre de l'Estaat du grant Can*, ed. M. Jacquet, *Journal Asiatique* 6 (1830) 59–71, esp. 63.

<sup>84</sup> “A paines ny a cite ne ville ou dit empire ou on ne truiest une abbaie, et sen y a viii ou dix ou plus en tel cite y a et en chascune abbaie a due moins cc personnes. Ilz sont moult riches et de ces grandes richesses ilz font grans aumosnes pour Dieu. Ilz vivent tres ordeneement et dient leurs eures vii fois le iour et liuevent as matines. Ilz ont cloches de metal faittes a maniere de comble, desquelles ilz sonnent leurs heures. Ilz gardent chastete et nulz clers religieux ne se marie.” *Ibid.* Similar terms are used also by the contemporary writer Friar Jordanus; see H. Yule, *Mirabilia descripta. The Wonders of the East by Friar Jordanus* (New York 1963) 46.

sion in the text quoted above was probably to the so-called “heavenly kings of the four worlds,” placed as guardians of the four directions, or perhaps (with a small error in calculation) the “five transcendent Buddhas” that personified the five wisdoms or primary energies of the universe (Akśobhya, Amitabha, Amoghasiddi, Ratnasambhava, and Vairochana)<sup>85</sup>.

During his visit to the temple of Kajlak, Friar William was unable to suppress his desire to somehow establish contact with the monks, whom he saw seated in the atrium intent on reciting the mantra of the compassion of Avalokiteśvara, *Om mani padme hum* (“Hello, O jewel in the lotus”; translated to him, however, as “God, you know”) with the aid of “a cord with a hundred or two hundred knots” that greatly resembled the Western *circulum praecatorium*—what one would today call a “rosary.”<sup>86</sup> The Franciscan remained tranquilly convinced that he had entered a church of the Christians of Prester John, and only after his long stay in the Khan’s camp in Karakorum did he learn to distinguish Nestorian places of worship from those of the Buddhist “idolaters” or “Tuinians.” What he was interested in at that point was understanding whether what he believed to be his religious brethren had remained faithful to a correct doctrine or whether, as was highly probable, they had allowed themselves to be corrupted by some heterodox belief. The brief conversation he had with them did not encourage him at all, and one really wonders how it could even have taken place, considering the fact that the interpreter was certainly unable to translate concepts as complex as “God,” “nature,” or “soul” correctly in a language like Mongolian or Uighur.

The question that Friar William actually wanted to ask the Buddhist religious men was whether they believed in a single God, if they considered him to be material or spiritual, and whether he had ever assumed human nature. Without hesitation the Buddhists answered that he was pure spirit and had never taken on a human form; the friar replied, pointing at the large and small idols crowding the temple: “As you believe there he is one and only spiritual, why do you make corporeal images of him, and in such large numbers? And furthermore, as you do not believe he has appeared as a human being, why do you create more anthropomorphous images of him, than images of him as another animal?” The monks explained: “We do not create these images for God, but rather, when some rich man or his child or wife or someone else who is dear to him dies, they have the image of the deceased made and place it here, and we venerate his memory.” “But then,” Friar William burst out, “you do it only to adulate humans!” “Not in the least,” they replied, “rather, it is in their memory.”<sup>87</sup>

<sup>85</sup> See, for general references, Rhie and Thurman (n. 41 above) 156, 334–335; Snellgrove (n. 59 above) 135; A. Getty, *The Gods of Northern Buddhism. Their History and Iconography* (New York 1988) 28–42; Min Bahadur Shakya, *The Iconography of Nepalese Buddhism* (Kathmandu 1994) 50–53. The passage from John of Cori has been already linked to the doctrine of the Gods of the everyday world by Almond (n. 65 above) 91.

<sup>86</sup> “Habent etiam quocumque vadunt semper in manibus quamdam cestam C vel ducentorum nucleorum sicut nos portamus pater noster, et dicunt semper hec verba: *on man boccam*, hoc est *Deus tu nosti*; secundum quod quidam eorum interpretatus est michi, et totiens expectat remunerationem a Deo quotiens hoc dicendo memoratur Dei.” William of Rubruk xxv.2, *SF* 230.

<sup>87</sup> “Cum ergo sedissem iuxta predictos sacerdotes, postquam ingressus fueram templum et vidissem ydola eorum multa, parva et magna, quesivi ab eis quid ipsi crederent de Deo. Qui responderunt: «Non credimus nisi unum Deum.» Et ego quesivi: ‘Creditis quod ipse sit spiritus vel aliquid corporale?’ Dixerunt:

The annoyance of the friar was quite unjustified, if we consider that Western Christian churches, precisely in that moment, were beginning to be full of sepulchral monuments, votive images, and portraits of benefactors who sought to enjoy the spiritual virtues of the holy buildings in a privileged manner.<sup>88</sup> Certainly, the presence of images of deceased persons would be more usual, in the East, in Taoist temples, considering the centrality of the cult of the ancestors in all religious practices of ancient China. And it would appear to adapt itself to the beliefs of the nomadic peoples concerning the spirits and phantasms of the dead members of their own clan. It is likely that the Buddhist communities, arriving from China and from Tibet, which had settled in the lands of central northern Asia, eventually adopted some customs that did not perfectly agree with the official doctrine. This may also be inferred from a passage from Marco Polo's *Milione* that tells about sacrifices of animals in honor of idols habitually practiced among the Tanguts; the true followers of Buddha usually only offered flowers and incense.<sup>89</sup>

In the eyes of Marco Polo there was no difference between Buddhist and Taoist idols. This can be explained by the fact that the two religions had by then coexisted so closely, for centuries, that they had a lot in common in terms of architecture and sacred furniture. In fact, the days in which the emperor Wu-tsung, between 842 and 845, had launched a severe persecution of Buddhism in favor of Taoism were by then distant; he had in particular attacked books, that had to be burned, and holy images, that had to be buried under the ground.<sup>90</sup> Subsequently the two confessions, given equivalent status as Chinese national religions, had lived together without any particular conflicts. And, with respect to the use of images and iconography, the religion of T'ao has certainly continuously sought to imitate the practices used by the followers of Tathāgata. When visiting the holy pagodas and pavilions of that country, a Western traveler would have found it hard to understand which of the two beliefs they housed; a single element would undoubtedly catch the attention, namely the presence of a large number of images that—apart from the question of whether they represented *arhats* and *Bodhisattvas* or the Three Pure, the Emperor of Jade, and the 500 supernatural mandarins—were above all subjects of extraordinary veneration, sometimes capable of accomplishing extraordinary miracles.

'Credimus quod sit spiritus.' Et ego: 'Creditis quod unquam sumpserit humanam naturam?' Dixerunt: 'Minime.' Tunc ego: 'Ex quo creditis quod non sit nisi unus et spiritus, quare facitis ei ymagines corporales et tot? Insuper ex quo non creditis quod factus est homo, quare facitis ei magis ymagines hominum quam alterius animalis?' Tunc responderunt: 'Nos non figuramus istas ymagines Deo, sed quando aliquis dives moritur ex nostris vel filius vel uxor vel aliquis carus eius, facit fieri ymaginem defuncti et ponit eam hic, et nos veneramus eam ob memoriam eius.' Quibus ego: 'Tunc ergo non facitis nisi propter adulationem hominum.' 'Immo,' dixerunt, 'ad memoriam.'" Rubruk xxv.7, *SF* 231–232.

<sup>88</sup> See M. Bacci, *Investimenti per l'aldilà. Arte e raccomandazione dell'anima nel Medioevo* (Bari and Rome 2003).

<sup>89</sup> Marco Polo, *Il Milione* lvii, ed. Bertolucci Pizzorusso (n. 64 above) 75–78. On the hybridization of practices and ritual traditions among the Uighurs and Tangut, see W. Barthold, *Turkestan Down to the Mongol Invasion* (London 1968) 387–390.

<sup>90</sup> As recorded by the Japanese pilgrim Ennin; cf. E. O. Reischauer, *Ennin's Travels in T'ang China* (New York 1955) 238–239, 347–348. On Wu-tsung's persecution of Buddhist monks, see M. T. Dalby, "Court Politics in T'ang Times," *The Cambridge History of China, Volume 3: Sui and T'ang China, 589–906*, ed. D. Twitchett (London 1979) 561–681 (666–669).

Certain Taoist statues undoubtedly made an impression on Marco Polo by their bizarre appearance, especially animal and monstrous forms; for instance he saw that very important divinities, such as Xuan wu, mistress of the seven stations of the North, had a body that was half turtle and half serpent, and he considered this a significant distinctive trait of the iconography of the Far East. In fact, he wrote:

Now you have to understand that the idols of these islands (i.e., Japan) and those of Cathay are made in the same way. And those of these islands, and even of the others who venerate idols, sometimes have heads of oxen, and other times of pigs, and likewise of many types of animals, pigs, rams, and others; and some have a head and four faces and some have four heads and some ten; and the more they have, the more hope and belief do they place in them.<sup>91</sup>

According to Jurgis Baltrušaitis, this kind of description have played a fundamental role in the diffusion in the West of fantastic iconographic motives, related to abnormal peoples, demoniac monsters, allegorical figures (such as the “Fortune” with six and twelve arms), and apocalyptic entities (such as the “Prostitute of Babylon,” probably influenced, in certain of its representations, by the figure of the snake-god Nāga).<sup>92</sup> Nevertheless, Polo’s observation was essentially correct and formulated in more ironic than negative terms; he also appreciated the useful role played by the “idols” in the religious life of the population and in the definition of the social order, and went so far as to relate them to functions of Western sacred images. In fact, the latter were also involved in a combination of devotional practices (votive offers and disconsolate requests for protection) in a ritual system made up of chants, illuminations, and sprinkling of scented substances in a rigorous calendar of monthly and annual festivities (in fact, “each idol has its own feast, as do our own saints”<sup>93</sup>). At least once, as the variant contained in a single manuscript of the *Devisament du monde* recounts, Polo believed that he had benefited from the cultural and magical efficiency attributed to these simulacra; in fact, he invoked one of them, in the city of Tung-p’ing-fu, to find a very precious ring he had misplaced. As a result Polo was able to ascertain that the simulacrum’s fame in this kind of situation was truly justified, as he found the lost object shortly afterwards; however, as he belonged to another culture and religion, he did not feel obliged to thank the simulacrum with some offer or votive homage.<sup>94</sup>

The above circumstances once again reveal that the difference between an “idol” and a “sacred image” was purely terminological, since it was a consequence of the viewer’s perspective. In fact, it is not mistaken to say that every simulacrum intended

<sup>91</sup> “Or sapiate che gl’idoli di queste isole e quelle del Catai sono tutte d’una maniera. E questi di queste isole, e ancora de l’altre ch’anno idoli, ta’ sono ch’anno capo di bue, e tal di porco, e così di molte fazioni di bestie, di porci, di montoni e altri; e tali anno un capo e iiii visi e tali anno iiii capi e tali x; e quanti più n’anno, maggiore speranza e fede anno i-loro.” Marco Polo, *Il Milione* clvii, ed. Bertolucci Pizzorusso (n. 64 above) 238–239.

<sup>92</sup> J. Baltrušaitis, *Le Moyen Âge fantastique* (Paris 1993). See also R. Wittkower, “Marvels of the East. A Study in the History of Monsters,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 5 (1942) 159–197; J. B. Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* (Harvard 1981); M. Camille, *The Gothic Idol. Ideology and Image-Making in Medieval Art* (Cambridge, MA 1989) 151–164.

<sup>93</sup> “E in cotale maniera fanno onore agl’idoli lo di della loro festa, ché ciascuno idolo à propria festa, come anno gli nostri santi.” Marco Polo, *Il Milione* lxxiv, ed. Bertolucci Pizzorusso (n. 64 above) 111–112.

<sup>94</sup> *Milione* (Latin) lxxviii, ed. Barbieri (n. 48 above) 173–177. Cf. Olschki (n. 1 above) 293.

for cults was, at the same time, an idol to all those who failed to recognize its religious significance and operative efficiency, or to those who accepted that it may have an intrinsic virtue, but of a completely negative kind. But while the felt dolls of the Mongolian yurts could at most be compared to the paraphernalia of black magic (and there are testimonials of exorcism practiced against them by the Franciscans operating in the territories of the Golden Horde<sup>95</sup>), in the case of Hindu, Buddhist, and Taoist statues it was not difficult to recognize their value as true “icons” or in other words as figurative objects used to simulate the presence of the divinities. Indeed, some men of culture, not without some astonishment, realized that among many profane simulacra one might also recognize some that were truly genuine and worthy of the greatest veneration on the part of good Christians. Friar Giovanni de’ Marignolli, who visited the city of Hang Chou (which he called Kampsay) in 1342, wrote that in a temple there a statue of the Virgin Mary was venerated with an impressive illumination corresponding to the Chinese New Year; according to the friar, this custom unequivocally proved that the birth of Christ had been foretold by wise men of the East.<sup>96</sup>

This somewhat bizarre idea undoubtedly originated from the fact that, among many images that were incomprehensible to him from an iconographic point of view, he had seen at least one that was familiar in appearance. It must have been the Buddhist goddess Kuan Yin (who was the Chinese version of the male bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara), the personification of Mercy, who was often depicted seated with a child in her arms, more or less as the Madonna with Child is represented in the West (fig. 5). Two centuries later, in 1499, when Vasco de Gama landed at Calicut in India for the first time, he was positive, when visiting a Hindu temple, that he had recognized the same motif in a statue which probably represented the protectress of Children, Haritī; he considered this to be proof of the presence, in that remote Eastern region, of the Christians of Saint Thomas.<sup>97</sup>

<sup>95</sup> Odoric of Pordenone xxxvi, *SF* 490–491.

<sup>96</sup> “Omnes enim philosophi et astrologi Babilonii et Egipcei et Caldei prenucciarunt in coniunccione Mercurii et Saturni puellam nascituram virginem, filium absque viri coytu parituram in terra Israel, cuius ymago in templo de Kampsay solempnissime custoditur, et prima luna mensis primi, scilicet februarii qui primus est apud Kathayos, festum istud cum candelis per totam noctem solempnissime celebratur anni novi ...” Giovanni de’ Marignolli, *Cronica Boemorum*, excerpt in *SF* 559. The friar had participated in the “feast of lamps” during the celebrations of the Chinese New Year and had mistaken it for Candlemas. Cf. H. Franke, “Das ‘himmlische Pferd’ des Johann von Marignola,” *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte* 50 (1968) 33–40, esp. 40; Reichert (n. 1 above) 138 and n. 385. Representations of the Enthroned Kuan Yin, such as that in a 9th-c. painting on ramie from Yarkhoto where the Goddess wears a maphorion-like red veil, could be easily mistaken for Byzantinizing images of the Mother of God; cf. O’Neill (n. 31 above) 206, entry 147; on Kuan Yin’s iconography, cf. Getty (n. 84 above) 78–84; and L. Lahiri, “Kuan-Shih-Yin, Avalokiteśvara in Chinese Buddhism,” *Buddhist Iconography* (n. 59 above) 142–148; on Haritī’s image, see B. Sahai, *Iconography of Minor Hindu and Buddhist Deities* (New Delhi 1975) 253–258. The issue was discussed in the early 20th c. by A. Foucher, “La Madone bouddhique,” *Monuments Piot* 17.2 (1910) 225–275.

<sup>97</sup> G. Bouchon, “Le sud-ouest de l’Inde dans l’imaginaire européen au début du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle: du mythe à la réalité,” *Asia Maritima. Image et réalité/ Bilder und Wirklichkeit 1200–1800*, ed. D. Lombard and R. Ptak (Wiesbaden 1994) 3–11; J.-M. García, “Vasco da Gama. Un homme et un voyage entre deux époques,” *Vasco da Gama et l’Inde*, exhibition catalogue, ed. M.-H. Mendes Pinto and J.-M. García (Lisbon and Paris 1998) 19–37, esp. 27–28; J.-P. Rubiés, *Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance. South India Through European Eyes, 1250–1625* (Cambridge, MA 2000) 106–111.

## EPILOGUE

In their exploration of the Mongol Empire, Western merchants and missionaries experienced for the first time contact with peoples and cultural traditions which had been almost completely unknown in previous centuries. The widening of the geographic horizons and the intensification of commercial and cultural relations between Europe and the Far East fostered the more or less unexpressed hope for the expansion of Christian faith far beyond the Islamic countries and the supremacy of the Cross over the Asiatic continent. At least in the first years of missionary activity in Mongolia and China, the Roman Church and some Western powers actually believed in the possibility of converting the Great Khan and thus obtaining a significant ally in the fight against the Muslim world.

Some ethnographic details in the description of Central Asian and Far Eastern peoples could be at first glance interpreted as circumstantial evidence in favor of such unexpressed hope. Since most of the Tartars were still characterized by very crude beliefs, more similar to black magic than to a real religion, the missionaries could suppose that it would not have been difficult to obtain their conversion. More important was the fact that most of the inhabitants of those regions had religious habits which proved to look much more like those of Western Europe than those of Islam or even Eastern Christianity. A very important clue was provided by the Buddhist and Taoist use of cult-images as outstanding items within the furnishings of their sacred places: they looked like Western Christian sacred statues, and were worshipped in a similar way. Like their European analogues, they performed gestures whose evocative meaning could be easily recognized, and displayed clothes which emphasized their owners' status and dignity; lamps and ornaments emphasized their role as material substitutes for the holy figures they were reputed to represent.

This feeling of affinity between Far Eastern practices and Western Christian image-worship relied on at least three important issues. First, the widespread use of three-dimensional statues caught the Westerners' imaginations; in no other country of the world had they seen so many objects like these, so characteristic of their homelands, and so unusual or even unthinkable in both Byzantium and the iconophobic Islamic world. Second, they were struck by the Buddhist complex and highly developed iconographic code, which used formulas and schemes not unlike those employed in Christian representations of holy personages, to an extent that included the usual representations, attributes, poses, and gestures used to characterize Saint Christopher, the Archangel Michael, or even the Virgin and Child. The hybridization of cult-practices and images among the different religious communities living along the routes of Central Asia—where Christ and Mani were represented as bodhisattvas and Kuan Yin as the Mother of God—gave an added dimension to the European appreciation of Far Eastern imagery.

Finally, as Marco Polo's remarks implied, the "idolaters" shared the Christian conception of the sacred image as a reproduction of a much older archetype, an authentic portrait of the founder of Buddhism dating back to his lifetime, or made by means of his direct intervention. Such an intuition was not only suggested by the Christian tracts that Polo attributed to the historical figure of Śākyamuni, but also relied on actual Eastern, and mainly Chinese, traditions which described original, true-to-life, and

“acheiropoietic” reproductions—both statues and paintings—of Buddha’s face and body, commissioned by famous kings of ancient India. Such traditions betrayed legendary tracts which, strikingly enough, paralleled ancient Christian stories such as Abgar of Edessa’s *mandylion*, Saint Luke’s portrait of the Virgin and Child, and many others, and aimed at providing mankind with real historical records of Jesus of Nazareth’s or Buddha’s outward appearance. In this respect, Marco Polo’s intuition proves valid even in present times and might be a point of departure for further investigation on the part of historians of religion and religious mythology. In the context of the present article it has been sufficient to show that such reasoning helped to foster the European observers’ feeling of affinity with Far Eastern believers.

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FIG. 1. *Paten Decorated with Christological Scenes*, 9th–10th century, found in Gregorovskoye, Governatorate of Perm, Russia. Saint Petersburg, Ermitage (photo: author).





FIG. 2. Sketch of a painting on silk representing Christ discovered at Tun-Huang, China, in 1908 (after Saeki [n. 30 above] 407).

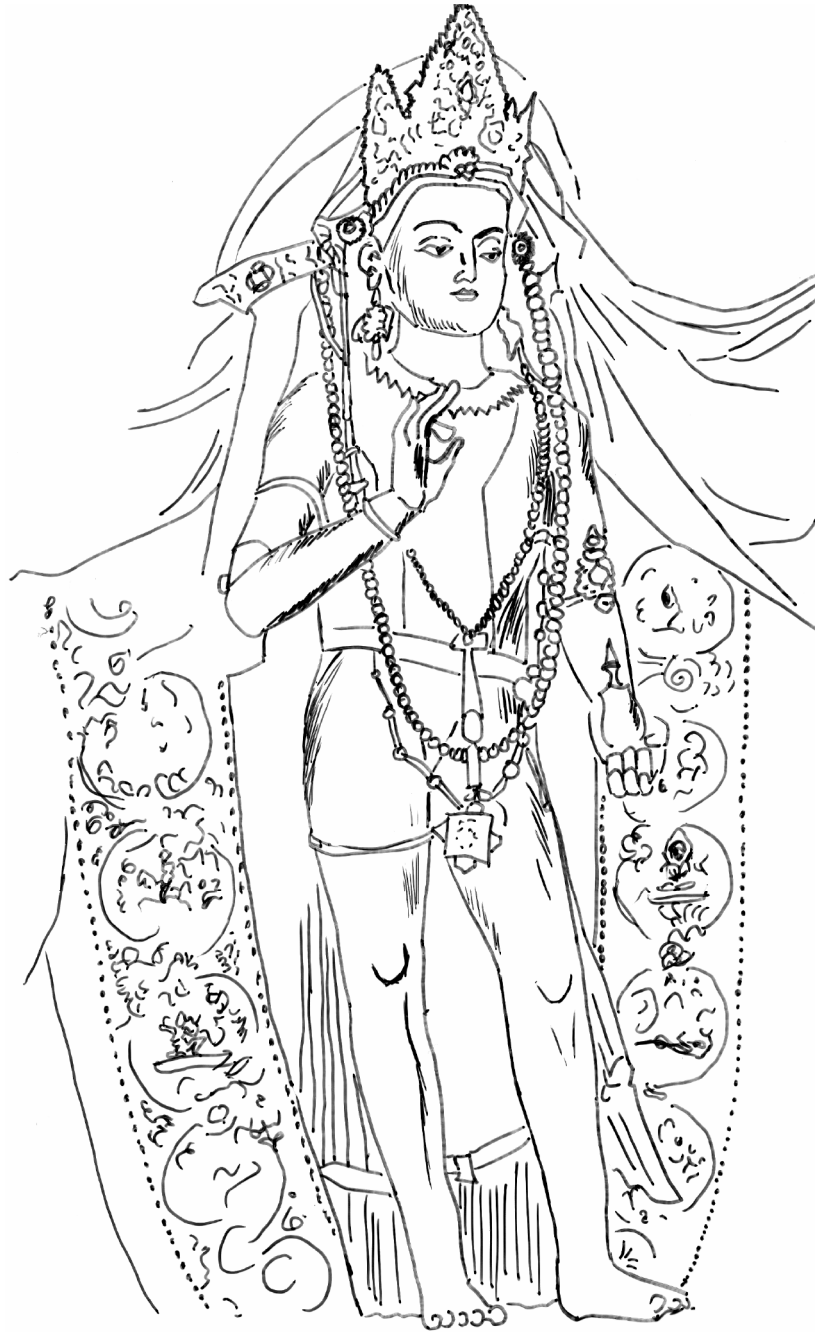


FIG. 3. Sketch of an image of *Maitreya Bodhisattva*, after a Tibetan 11th-century bronze statue (author).



FIG. 4. Sketch of the image of the *Standing Buddha* worshipped in the Seiryōji Temple in Kyoto, 988 A.D., reputed to be a copy of King Udayana's archetype (author).



FIG. 5. *The Goddess Kuanyin*, painting on ramie found in Yarkhoto, 9th century. Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Indische Abteilung (after *Monuments Piot* 17.2 [1910]).