
A NESTORIAN TALE OF MANY CITIES
THE PROBLEM OF THE IDENTIFICATION OF URBAN STRUCTURES
IN ÖNGGÜT TERRITORY DURING THE YUAN DYNASTY
ACCORDING TO CHINESE AND WESTERN SOURCES

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I. Introduction

During the period of the rising of Mongol power, the ethnic group known as Önggüt (Chinese *Wanggu* 汪古) played a very important role. The study of sources, together with archaeological findings, has made possible the reconstruction of several aspects of Önggüt culture and society, one of them being the presence of Nestorian faith.¹

Abbreviations

<i>HNM</i>	Yao Sui 1992.
<i>JS</i>	<i>Jinshi</i> 金史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975).
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Jiu Tangshu</i> 舊唐書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975).
<i>LS</i>	<i>Liaoshi</i> 遼史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974).
<i>QZJ</i>	<i>Qinzhai ji</i> 勤齋集, <i>juan</i> 1, pp. 13 b-14 a.
<i>SYSK</i>	<i>Shanyou shike congbian</i> 山右石刻叢編 2002.
<i>XTS</i>	<i>Xin Tangshu</i> 新唐書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975).
<i>YS</i>	<i>Yuanshi</i> 元史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1976).
<i>YSLB</i>	<i>Yuanshi leibian</i> 元史類編 (ed. <i>yimao</i> 乙卯 year of Qianlong reign [1795]).
<i>YWL</i>	<i>Yuanwen lei</i> 元文類 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1993).

¹ Among the studies written in Western languages, see Ch'en Yüan 1938; Egami Namio 1952; P. Pelliot 1973b, III, pp. 239-288. A more complete bibliographic reference is in P. Mortari Vergara Caffarelli 2004a. See also the bibliography containing studies written in China before 1986 in Gai Shanlin 1991, pp. 422-426. In the begin-

The extraordinary diffusion of Nestorianism in Central and Eastern Asia in this period was of course also a result of the religious tolerance of Mongol chiefs, some of which (as Qubhilay and Hülegü Khan, founders of Yuan and Ilkhan dynasties) were sons of a princess of Nestorian faith. Many Western sources, written by Catholic missionaries and merchants like Marco Polo, stressed the status of Nestorians at the Mongol court from different points of view.²

The presence of a form of Christianity in these remote lands could explain the spread of one of the most singular myths of Middle Age: the legend of Prester John, and of his mysterious oriental kingdom. This is not the right place for describing this story in detail, from the famous description of the Priest in the *Cronicon* by Otto of Freising in the half of 12th century to the letters that seemed to have been written by the Priest to some kings of Europe and to the Pope: suffice to say that many studies retraced a probable Nestorian influence in the making and spreading of the legend.³

This legendary “Christian kingdom of the East” had a real reflection in the phenomenon of the conversion to Nestorianism of Central Asiatic peoples: it is the case of the Kerait (maybe converted to Nestorianism already in 1007), whose leader Toghril has been identified in many studies as the “Prester John” who is beaten and finally murdered by Gengis Khan in a famous description of Marco Polo’s *Milione*.⁴ The relation between Kerait and Önggüt peoples has been already stressed by Western and Chinese studies

ning of this research, this study was very useful for the writer, together with the Academia Sinica database (<http://www.sinica.com>), which was an invaluable instrument to find Önggüt place names in dynastic histories. I want to express here my gratitude to the staff in the Bibliothèque du Collège de France in Paris and the Shanghai Tushuguan for their kindness and help during my research of Chinese sources in May 2002 and October 2003.

² See V. Bertolucci Pizzorusso 1994, for one of the several Italian manuscripts of Marco Polo’s text; about the history of Nestorianism in China, and the bibliography on this subject, see N. Standaert (ed.) 2001; J. Tubach 1999; Zhu Qianzhi 1993.

³ See C.F. Beckingham – B. Hamilton 1996. A recent article has stressed the presence of a “King John” in a Coptic fragment written maybe in the 9th century, and reproducing the same tradition (the holy life of St. Jeremias) contained in an Arabic manuscript dated 1335: see M. van Esbroeck 1998a. This study was signaled to us by the author during the International Conference on Nestorianism held in Salzburg in May, 2003: with regret, I want here to commemorate the sudden and unexpected passing of Professor van Esbroeck in November of the same year.

⁴ V. Bertolucci Pizzorusso 1994, pp. 85-91. On the date of the conversion of the Kerait to Nestorianism, see E.C.D. Hunter 1989–1990, pp. 142-163. See also G.R. Cardona 1994, pp. 699-701. On the archaeological findings related to the presence of Nestorianism in Central Asia, see M.A. Lala Comneno 1995.

on several basis:⁵ we will see how the *Milione* seems to support the same issue, presenting the Önggüt king, “George,” as a descendant of Prester John.

The conversion to Nestorianism of Önggüt people is maybe one of the factors explaining the presence in Önggüt territory of urban structures during the rising and consolidation of Mongol power.⁶ In the following, I will try to shed some more light on the status and identification of Önggüt cities, using Chinese and ancient Western sources, and trying also to solve the problem of some enigmatic topographical identifications.

We can recognize two most important areas in the Önggüt territory: the region east of the Great Bend of the Yellow River, and another northern area, north of the Da Qingshan mountain range. They are tied with the Önggüt leaders’ family line, starting at least from Alaqus Tigin-qori (in Chinese sources *Alawusi tijihuli* 阿刺兀思剔吉忽里), the man who at the dawn of 13th century put the basis of the alliance with the Mongols of Gengis Khan.⁷

⁵ Zhu Qianzhi 1993, pp. 171-175; P. Pelliot 1973b, III, p. 244, note 6, where the author cites also the inscription dedicated to Ārāol, sister of the “King George” of the Önggüt: here the name of the clan of Önggüt kings is given as *Jielie* 揭烈, that is similar to the usual transcription of the name of Kerait, *Qielie* 怯烈. In the edition that I found of this inscription (*Qinwang fei citang ji* 秦王妃詞堂記, in *QZJ*, j. 1, p. 13 b), the name of the clan is given as *Jilu* 吉嚕.

⁶ But it is necessary to remember the presence of some ancestors of Önggüt tribes in the south of today’s Gansu province during Jin dynasty period: see *ibid.*, p. 173. For some Chinese ancient sources on this tradition, and in particular on the ancestor called “Duke Ma” (*Ma gong* 馬公), see the text of the stela inscription called *Libu shangshu Ma gong shendao bei* 禮部尚書馬公神道碑, in *YWL*, pp. 881b-883b. Also to be considered is the legend of the origin of Önggüts from the family line of Li Keyong, for which see next note.

⁷ On Alaqus, see *YS*, pp. 2923-2924; Gai Shanlin 1991, pp. 25-27. P. Pelliot 1973b, III, gives different versions about the historical events of Alaqus life: the date of his death could be 1207 or 1211. According to tradition, the origin of the Önggüts is to be found in the Shatuo 沙陀 ethnic group, arrived in the 5th–6th century from the region of Selenga River, south of Lake Baikal. See Gai Shanlin 1991, pp. 3-4. It seems that the research about the ancestors of Önggüt tribes has to consider the Turkish group of the Uigurs (*Huihe* 回紇), that in 840 controlled the Ordos region. P. Pelliot 1973b, III, pp. 244-245, note 1, stressed how in some Chinese sources (for example *YS*, pp. 2923; *YSLB*, *juan* 29, p. 15 a) Önggüts first mythic ancestor is called *Buguo* 卜國, “évidemment ce même khan Būgū que nous connaissons au début de l’histoire plus ou moins légendaire des Ougurs.” On the different versions of this legend, of which the more developed one seems to be Juvaini’s, see J.P. Roux 1984a, pp. 195-197. The miraculous birth of Buguo happens in the same ancestral area of the Turks Shatuo, between Tula and Selenga rivers; the connection with the

II. The Southern Area

In the first area we cited, the most important urban center was Fengzhou 豐州. It was situated on the northern bank of the Dahei River 大黑河,⁸ some 20 km east of today's Hohhot, capital of Inner Mongolia. The city was a very vital place, as attested in a poem composed by the famous architect and geomancer Liu Bingzhong 劉秉忠 (1216–1274):

In the bright sky, high are temples' pagodas; the light of the dawn falls
on the city's higher buildings. A crowd of trucks and horses rises unending
dust, the whip strikes and winds up while I'm crossing Fengzhou.⁹

According to archaeological findings of recent years, in Yuan period Fengzhou was not only an important urban site, but probably a capital, connected as it was with Önggüt rulers. It was the case of Alaqai (Chinese Alahai 阿刺海), third daughter of Genghis Khan, married successively to three or four Önggüt chiefs.¹⁰ In 1221, when the troops of the Mongol general Muqali passed by the region during an expedition against the Tangut, the princess envoyed an official called *Xilijisi* 習里吉思, apparently a transcription of the Syriac name “Sergios,” to “pay homage” to Muqali at a site called “Tian-de.”¹¹

Uigurs is manifested also in the tradition about the origin of the more important Önggüt family line, traced back to Li Keyong 李克用 (856–908), who was *jiedushi* 節度使 in the end of Tang period, and father of the founder of Hou Tang dynasty (923–936). See in particular the damaged inscription *Bailin si yingtang Jinwang bei* 柏林寺影堂晉王碑, in *SYSK*, *juan* 39, pp. 5a-8a. Gai Shanlin 1991, pp. 5-6, consider this tradition to have no historical basis. On Uigurs during the Five Dynasties, see J.R. Hamilton 1955 [1988].

⁸ In Yuan period the river was called *Jinhe* 金河, “Golden River.”

⁹ “Crossing Fengzhou” (*Guo Fengzhou shi* 過豐州詩), in *Cangchun wenji* 藏春文集, cited in Gai Shanlin 1991, pp. 103-104. Liu Bingzhong was one of the most famous counsellors of Qubhlay Khan: he was an expert of Daoist and Buddhist doctrines, architect and geomancer, and he seems to have been responsible for the plan of the Mongol capital Dadu 大都. See Chan Hok-lam 1967; *id.* 1992. On the tradition connecting Liu Bingzhong to the building of Dadu, see *YS*, pp. 3687-3695. On the role of Liu Bingzhong in the construction of the northern summer capital of Shangdu 上都, see *YS*, p. 60, p. 1350, p. 3693.

¹⁰ Four, according to Gai Shanlin 1991, pp. 43-45; three, according to P. Pelliot 1973b, III, pp. 263-267.

¹¹ *Yuan mingchen shilie* 元名臣事略, cited in Gai Shanlin 1991, p. 44. The name of the official is a Chinese translation of the Syriac *Sargis*, *srgys* in Syriac script. This name appears already in the famous Xi'an Nestorian stelae: see P. Pelliot 1984, Index of names, *passim*, where several *Sargis* are listed with different Chinese transcriptions. The name seems to be present just once in the 600 Syriac-Turkish funer-

The biography of Muqali in the *Yuanshi* gives a confirmation of this event, describing how the Mongol general made a stop at Qingzhong 青冢 to receive the princess homage.¹² Qingzhong, the “Azure Tumulus,” has been identified with a funerary site at the southern outskirts of today’s Hohhot, just southwest of Yuan period Fengzhou, which can be identified as the residence of Alaqai, in 1221 widow of the Önggüt chief Zhenguo 鎮國.¹³ From these sources the correspondence between Fengzhou and the place-name “Tiande” also appears, a point on which I will return.

Another urban site in this area was Dongsheng zhou 東勝州, today identified with a site near to the ancient city of Tuotuo or Toxto, 85 km southwest of modern Hohhot.¹⁴ The name “Dongsheng” (*zhou* 州 being the Chinese term for “district”) is very ancient. According to the *History of the Liao Dynasty*, in Sui dynasty period there was a place called Shengzhou 勝州; its name was Dongsheng zhou during the Tang, in 631. But the city was on the *south* of the Yellow River: only in 916, as the source says, “there were armies’ invasions [...] and the people of Shengzhou moved east of the River; since then the District was issued.”¹⁵ It seems then that Önggüt Dongsheng zhou, whose dimensions in Yuan period made the city smaller than Fengzhou, was the heir of a Liao period urban settlement.¹⁶

ary inscriptions from Semireche (I wish to express here my gratitude to Pier Giorgio Borbone for this information). It is common between 13th century Nestorians: Marco Polo, during his visit to the city of “Cinghiau” (Zhenjiang, in the Yangtze delta), says that its lord is a “Marsachis,” arrived from Samarcanda: he is responsible for the construction of several Nestorian churches. The name is obviously the transcription of *Mar Sargis* (Mar being a honorific title): see V. Bertolucci Pizzorusso 1994, p. 216; G.R. Cardona 1994, p. 664. Another *Mar Sargis* (in Chinese sources transcribed as Ma 馬 *Xilijisi*), living during the Jin dynasty (1127–1234), is recorded in J. Dauvillier 1948 [1983], p. 299. Muqali, since 1217 general of Genghis Khan, was the chief of the Mongol army when in 1220 Tangut reign of Xi Xia decided to break the truce, creating an alliance with the Jürčens. Muqali was ordered to go to the western border, near to Xi Xia territory. There he passed away in 1223, for natural reasons, during the war campaign against Tanguts: his sudden death seems to be one of the reasons why Genghis Khan decided to launch one last, more powerful war expedition against Xi Xia, with the final result of wiping out almost all traces of Tangut state and civilisation. See L. Kwanten 1979, pp. 87-92.

¹² *YS*, p. 2934.

¹³ Gai Shanlin 1991, p. 43; P. Pelliot 1973b, III, p. 267.

¹⁴ About Dongsheng zhou, and the relics excavated there by Chinese archaeologists, see Gai Shanlin 1991, pp. 107-109.

¹⁵ *LS*, p. 514.

¹⁶ According to the geographic section of the *Jinshi*, in the 12th century, 3,531 families lived in Dongsheng zhou. See *JS*, p. 569.

Chapter 58 of the *Yuanshi* introduces another important element. It says that the name Dongsheng zhou was in the ancient period connected to the easternmost part of the so-called “Three Cities returned to Allegiance” (*San shouxiang cheng* 三受降城): these were three fortified settlements built in 708 by military governor Zhang Renyuan 張仁願, to prevent Turks incursions from the north.¹⁷

Moreover, chapter 63 of same dynastic source speaks of “Fengzhou, Western City returned to Allegiance,” in describing the course eastward of the bend of the Yellow River, through “Central and Eastern Cities returned to Allegiance,” situated in the “ancient Commandery of Tiande,” in the “territory of the Tatars.”¹⁸ By the way, we know that the Önggüts were called “White Tatars” (*bai dada*): in written sources, the name “Önggüt” appears for the first time only in *Yuandao bishi*, written in 1240.¹⁹

¹⁷ *YS*, p. 1376: “Dongsheng zhou. In Tang period it was Shengzhou; afterwards, it changed its name, becoming Yulin Prefecture (*Yulin jun* 榆林郡), and then became another time Shengzhou. Zhang Renyuan built the Three Cities returned to Allegiance (*shouxiang cheng*); at the south of the Eastern City, there was a little elms grove (*yulin* 榆林). Later, from the Eastern City that was on the edge of the River people went [in another place], and Suiyuan Fengnan, that is today’s Dongsheng zhou, was established.” Chapter 37 of *Xin Tangshu*, written in 11th century, remember this event: the decision of moving the site in the first year of *Baoli* era (that is, 825) is attributed to military governor (*jiedushi*) Zhang Weiqing 張惟清. See *XTS*, p. 976. Chapter 17 of *Jiu Tangshu* contains another data: the change of place is justified with the collapsing of the river bank. See *JTS*, p. 517. From these sources, it seems clear that already in 9th century there was a populated site in what in Yuan period was Dongsheng zhou area; but the very name “Dongsheng” was originally applied to a place on the other side of Yellow River. The Three Cities returned to Allegiance were three fortified sites, builded in spring 708 by Zhang Renyuan, with the intention of blocking Turkish incursions from the north; see *JTS*, p. 2982 (biography of Zhang Renyuan); *XTS*, p. 4152. The date of the edification of the three “Cities” is reported in *JTS*, p. 146. The character *xiang* 降, “to return to allegiance,” means also “to submit to,” “to surrender”: it has also other meanings (like “to descend”), but in this case it is pronounced *jiang*.

¹⁸ *YS*, p. 1566. A passage in *XTS*, p. 1777, seems to stress not an identity between Fengzhou and the Western City returned to Allegiance, but a kind of contiguity. See also *XTS*, p. 1024 and p. 5177; *JTS*, p. 384 and pp. 4073-4074. Anyway, these two places were in Tiande Commandery. The status of Fengzhou as an urban site being part of Tiande is recorded in all dynastic histories, from Tang to Jin period: for Liao era, see *LS*, p. 508, where it is stressed that, during Hou Tang dynasty (923-936), the very place of Fengzhou was called “Tiande Commandery.” For Jin period, see *JS*, p. 568.

¹⁹ Gai Shanlin 1991, pp. 2-3, where the author remembers how the Önggüt chief Aibuqa, whose historical traces are recorded in Chinese sources from 1252 to 1277, is clearly described in some Chinese sources as a “White Tatar.”

In conclusion, it is clear that all these place names – Fengzhou, Dongsheng zhou, and the name “Tiande” – appear as displaced after the Tang period, that is to say, applied to more eastern territories. The difference, in the case of Fengzhou, amounts to more than 3° of longitude.

As to the name of “Tiande” 天德, it must be remembered that Tiande Commandery (*Tiande jun* 天德軍) was founded in 754, near to what today is Wuliangshuai basin.²⁰ In 840, the area was under the control of the Uigurs, whose cultural and maybe ethnic contiguity with the Önggüt has been already stressed, being rooted also in mythological legends about clan founders. But dynastic sources, in describing this placename and its history, seem to not realize the confusion between Tang period Fengzhou and the “new,” far more eastern Fengzhou, tying anyway the city with the name “Tiande.”²¹

This eastern shift is confirmed by a note of the *Yuanshi* on Yunnei zhou 雲內州, another important Önggüt settlement, placed on Dahei River between Dongsheng zhou and Fengzhou.²² The note says that, during the Tang, Yunnei zhou belonged to Tiande Commandery, that is to say, “it was in the region of the Central City returned to Allegiance.”²³ The picture

²⁰ For the geographic position of Tiande, see Tan Qixiang 1989, vol. V, pp. 40-41. On the time of the establishment of the commandery, see *JTS*, p. 227. But in a passage of *Xin Tangshu*, the *duhufu* 督虎符 administration of Anbei 安北 region is said to have had the control of the Central City returned to Allegiance in the year 714, of Fengzhou and Dongsheng zhou area in 722, and finally of Tiande Commandery in 724. See *XTS*, p. 976.

²¹ After my speech on this topic at the Salzburg Conference on Nestorianism, I found an article where the shift of the name Fengzhou is stressed: see Li Yiyou 1988, p. 150. The author says that Fengzhou was founded in Liao period: archaeological work has proved that among the Liao remains there is nothing that could connect this site with Tang period Fengzhou. The root of the misunderstanding has to be searched in the geographical section of the *Yuanshi*. In Liao period, Tiande was still the name of the city and of the surrounding region, at the border with the Tangut empire of Xi Xia. At the beginning of Jin dynasty, all the area went under the control of Xi Xia; while Dongsheng zhou was soon recovered, the remaining territory was still under Tangut power in 1200. For a geographic vision of this period, see Tan Qixiang 1989, vol. VI, pp. 10-11 and pp. 36-37 (two historical maps of the territories Liao and Xi Xia in the year 1111), and p. 51 (map on the western part of Jin empire in the year 1189).

²² To see the position of Yunnei zhou between Fengzhou and Dongsheng zhou, see the map in *ibid.*, vol. VII, pp. 7-8.

²³ *YS*, p. 1376. From the Central City returned to Allegiance begun the carriageway that led to the “Uigur territory,” 80 *li* to the north-east (that is the Önggüt northern area in Yuan period): see *XTS*, p. 1148. In Tang dynastic histories, there is an element that could explain the origin of the name Yunnei zhou (“District Inside the

seems complete: the three Önggüt urban settlements, Dongsheng zhou, Yunnei zhou, and Fengzhou, were the specular image (in the real sense of the word, being an inverse topographical image of the original situation) of three sites placed in the “western region of the Tatars.”²⁴ This is how and why the name “Tiande” survived in Mongol period: it was adopted also as a sign of cultural continuity, connecting geographical areas that were different, but probably inhabited in successive periods by the same people.

This “survivance” can partially explain the perplexity about Marco Polo’s *Milione* passages speaking of a place called “Tenduc.” The term is cited a first time in the tale about the clash between Genghis Khan and the already cited mysterious “Prester John,” identified in this case with Toghril, the so-called “Ung Khan,” chief of the Keraites converted to Nestorianism.²⁵

Clouds”). In *JTS*, p. 2982, it is said: “Northern regions commanderies had once the [Yellow] River as a border with the Tujue. On the river’s northern edge, there was a shrine (*ci* 祠) to the God who Shakes the Clouds (*fuyun shen* 拂雲神). Before descending to the south for plundering, Tujue went there to sacrifice and to ask good results. Then they took the horses, prepared the army, and crossed the river. Thus, [... Zhang] Renyuan [...] built the Three Cities returned to Allegiance to the north of the river in a line, to arrest their incursions to the south [...]. They were finished in sixty days. The [site of the] Shrine of the God who Shakes the Clouds was [transformed in] the Central City: to go to the Western and Eastern City, there was a distance of more than 400 *li* for each of them [...].” In *XTS*, p. 4152, we find a similar description. For this holy place of the Tatars, identified with a site just to the south of today’s city of Baotou, see Liu Huanzhen 1994, pp. 443-445. The author gives also the dimensions of the walls remains of Tang period “Central City returned to Allegiance”: 880 metres from east to west, and 800 metres from north to south. Just to the south of the northern wall, Liu has identified a tumulus, roughly shaped like a reversed Chinese character *tu* 冢, and measuring 98 x 60 meters: this should be what still survives of the ancient shrine.

²⁴ While for the more ancient, western urban centers (all on the Yellow River), the order is: Fengzhou – Yunnei zhou – Dongsheng zhou, the more recent sites (all on the Dahei River) were, from southwest to northeast: Dongsheng zhou – Yunnei zhou – Fengzhou.

²⁵ The legend and the figure of Prester John have been connected often with the figure of Yelü Dashi 耶律大石, king of the Qarakitai from 1124 to 1143. This identification is based on the victory obtained in 1141 by Karakitai armies against Seljuq Turks at Qatwan, east of Samarkand. This event could be the historical background for the first mention of Prester John, in the *Historia de duabus civitatibus*, written by the bishop Otto of Freising. Some elements seem to provide evidence that the legend is more ancient; see C.F. Beckingham – B. Hamilton 1996, and also M. van Esbroeck 1988a. On the theory of the identification of Prester John with Toghril (also called “Ung Khan”), and the very complex problem of the attributions, also present in Western relations of the time (like those of Marco Polo, Wilhelm of Rubruck and Odoric of Pordenone), see D. Morgan 1996, pp. 159-170.

The clash happens “in a fine plain named Tenduc, which is near to Prester John territory”;²⁶ in a second passage of the *Milione*, we read of “Tenduc province,” as a region placed east of “Egrigaia,” a name identified with the territory of the ancient capital of the Tangut state, in modern Ningxia province:

The people of Tenduc province descend from Prester John; the main city is Tenduc. The king of this province is a heir of Prester John; he is still Prester John, and his name is George [...]. And you must know that this province was the main territory of Prester John, when he was the lord of the Tartars [...]. And this is the place that we call Gorgo and Magogo, but they call it Nug and Mungoli [...]. The owners of the place are Christians, but there are also idolaters and worshippers of Mahomet. They are the whitest men in the country, and the sagest and the most inclined to commerce.²⁷

The term “Nug” is written “Ung” in the French version of the *Milione*, a clear reference to the Önggüts.²⁸ According to this passage, the name “Ten-

²⁶ V. Bertolucci Pizzorusso 1994, pp. 88-89.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 105-106. Here, “Prester John” appears clearly as a title or a function more than a specific person. The line (curiously, or maybe cautiously, ignored by the researchers) about the inhabitants of Tenduc as “the whitest men in the country” (“i più bianchi uomini del paese”), is puzzling. Without any intention to give a solution, it is, nevertheless, useful to remember the presence of Indo-European populations in Central Asia until at least the 8th-9th century. According to V. Mair 1996, p. 21, when they moved to the Tarim Basin region in the half of 8th century, Uigurs absorbed “meaningful elements” of the Indo-European peoples of the so called “Tocharian kingdoms.” This consideration is all the more interesting, if we consider the traditional ancestral relationship existing between Uigurs and Önggüt. But, in the Latin version (the “Manuscript Z”) of *Milione*, the passage is different: the word “whitest” is substituted by “most handsome” (Latin *pulchriores*). This text also gives another information about the people of King George: they are “a race of men [...] originated from two races, that are the idolaters of Tenduc and the Mahomettans.” Finally, here the same King George is considered as the fourth descendant of Prester John. Maybe this “race” are the Argun, a Kirgiz tribe arrived in this region from Western Turkestan. See A. Barbieri 1998, pp. 102-103.

²⁸ Kerait leader Toghril received the title of “Ong-khan” from the Jurchen. “Ong” is probably the Mongol “on,” that is, the Chinese *wang* 王. See G.R. Cardona 1994, pp. 639-641 and pp. 738-739, also on the several geographical localization of apocalyptic peoples of “Gog” and “Magog.” On the passage of a French manuscript of the *Milione* (“En Ung estoient les Gog”), see V. Bertolucci Pizzorusso, “Nota al testo e Apparato critico,” in *id.* 1994, p. 422. See also P. Pelliot 1973b, III, p. 262, note 3; D. Morgan 1996, p. 163. The name of the Önggüt could be derivated from this title: in Gai Shanlin 1991, pp. 1-3, there is an exposition of the different theories on the origin of the name. The most popular is maybe the theory about the derivation of the term from the Mongol **öngü*, “wall”: there could be a relation with the defense of

duc” was applied both to the province and to its capital. Paul Pelliot has definitely proved the identity between “Tenduc” and Chinese “Tiande,” on the basis of pronunciation of Middle Chinese; but he did not consider much the geographical shift shown by the term.²⁹ He identified Polo’s “Tenduc” with Dongsheng zhou; today, on the basis of a careful examination of sources, we can say that Fengzhou is a more suitable candidate for Polo’s epoch “Tenduc.”³⁰ But we still don’t know how to place the “Tenduc” where the clash between Genghis Khan and “Prester John” happened: was Polo deceived by the eastern shift of the name, and if so, the term could have been applied to the original, western Tenduc, just north of the Yellow River bend? The passage of the *Milione* speaking of Tenduc province as the “main territory of Prester John” seems to support this hypothesis.³¹

the borders, a task played by Önggüt when they were allied with the Jin. For a refutation of the theory, see P. Pelliot 1973b, III, p. 262, note 3. Gai Shanlin presents another hypothesis: the Chinese term *wanggu* could derive from *wenggun* 瓮衮 (corresponding to an original *Ōng ön*), a name which in shamanic tradition designated the wooden or felt simulacra of the gods. The author remembers how the term *wenggun* was used in Mongol language to name a mountain in the central part of Daqing shan range. This mountain was called *Baidao ling* 百道嶺, *Shenshan* 神山, or *Wugong ba* 吳公坝 in Northern Wei period (386–535). In this last case, *wugong* is for Gai a Chinese rendering of *Ōng ön*.

²⁹ P. Pelliot 1973b, III, pp. 259-260. For the author we have in this case just “un exemple, entre plusieurs, de noms chinois qui, passés anciennement dans la nomenclature géographique des populations non chinoises de la Haute Asie, s’y sont maintenus, avec leur prononciation ancienne, même quand la prononciation de ces noms avait évolué dans la Chine propre ou que ces noms eux-mêmes y étaient tout à fait oubliés.” From our precedent observations, it appears clear now how the geographical name “Tiande” was well spread in the area controlled by the Önggüt, at least from the end of 13th century, *et pour cause* [...]. See also G.R. Cardona 1994, pp. 738-739.

³⁰ We do agree with the conclusions of Gai Shanlin 1991, pp. 104-105. The author does not mention the shift from west to east of the name Fengzhou.

³¹ The root of the problem is of course the identification of a real historical background for this legendary battle, which could alone bring to the identification of this Prester John. It is necessary to remember that in *Milione* the title of “Prester John” is clearly a function, not applied just to a single person: the same Önggüt king George “still is Prester John” (“ancora si è Preste Gianni”): V. Bertolucci Pizzorusso 1994, p. 105. Modern research has often identified this Prester John with the Kerait leader Toghril, although the reason for the battle, as is narrated by Polo (Genghis Khan’s request of marrying the daughter of Prester John: see *ibid.*, pp. 86-88), is seemingly without historical correspondences. Genghis Khan married, indeed, not the daughter, but the niece of Toghril; in addition, he was allied with Toghril, not subordinated to him; finally, when this alliance was broken, Toghril was not killed during a battle, as Polo’s Prester John, but for a misunderstanding by the Naiman, in whose territory he

Also interesting is, of course, Polo's description of "King George," heir of Prester John. But for this aspect we must now consider the northern area of Önggüt culture.

III. The Northern Area

This area belongs to a region historically tied with the presence of the so-called "White Tatars," as attested already by a passage in the *History of the Liao Dynasty*.³² One important urban settlement was Jingzhou 淨州: during the Jin dynasty, about 6000 families peopled the city, a chain in the defense line build by Jurchen against northern nomadic incursions.³³ It must be remembered that in this period Önggüt clans were one of the most vital elements in this system, that felt down when Önggüt leader Alaqus Tigin-qori entered in alliance with Genghis Khan in 1204.³⁴

Yuan period Jingzhou was on the site of today's village of Chengbuzi, 25 km northwest of Wulanhua County, on the Xar Moron River.³⁵ In Yuan sources, Jingzhou is often cited together with Shajing 沙井 (砂井).³⁶ Known in Jin dynasty as Shacheng, the city was about 40 km northeast of Jingzhou, at the border with the nomads' world.

But the most interesting urban site of this area brings us back to the problem of difficult historical-geographical identifications. Several studies have already described the discovery, made at the end of the 1920s by Huang Wenbi, member of Sven Hedin exploration team, of Olon Süme (Chinese Alunsumu 阿倫蘇木). The remains of this urban settlement are situated near to the northern bank of Aibugha-in River (Chinese Aibugai 艾不蓋), in ancient period called Dark Stream (Heishui 黑水, not to be confused with Heihe 黑河, the Dark River on which are Fengzhou, Yunnei zhou, and Dongsheng zhou).³⁷

had found refuge. See D. Morgan 1996, pp. 162-163; G.R. Cardona 1994, pp. 698-703.

³² *LS*, p. 355. In this passage, in the year 1122 Yelü Dashi "crossed the Dark Stream" (*guo Heishui*), that is, today's Aibugha-in River, to arrive in the territory of the White Tatars.

³³ See *JS*, p. 566.

³⁴ On the defensive task of Alaqus' people, allied with the Jin, see *YS*, p. 2923.

³⁵ Gai Shanlin, *Yinshan Wanggu*, *op. cit.*, pp. 113-114. On the Xar Moron River are the two ancient urban sites called Damiao e Xilahada; the last should be for Gai Shanlin what remains of Yuan period Jingzhou: see *ibid.*, pp. 115-118.

³⁶ See for example *YS*, p. 66, p. 575, p. 2515.

³⁷ On Olon Süme (in Mongol, Olon Sümäyin-tor, "ruins of many temples"), see Huang Wenbi 1930; O. Lattimore 1934; Ch'en Yüan 1938; Egami Namio 1952; Gai Shanlin

What still remains doubtful is the status of this city in Önggüt territory. Olon Süme was certainly an important center, from a political and also religious point of view: many Nestorian remains have been identified, and near to the site there is also a Nestorian cemetery, with tombs and stelae with inscriptions in Syriac, the official language of Nestorian faith.³⁸

Chinese scholar Gai Shanlin thinks that Olon Süme is *the* capital of the Önggüts.³⁹ His opinion is based mainly on the famous stelae inscription, composed by a scholar from Jingzhou, found on the Olon Süme site. Already cited by Huang Wenbi and studied in 1939 by the Japanese scholar Namio Egami, the stelae inscription presents a genealogy of Önggüt kings, and also some hints that central administration in the first years of 14th century was at Olon Süme.⁴⁰

1991, pp. 96-103; Li Yiyou 1988, pp. 148-149; P. Mortari Vergara Caffarelli 1995; *id.* 2004a. Professor Gai Shanlin has conducted since the 1970s several archaeological researchs on this site; recently, in the years 2000–2002 a research project, under the direction of Prof. Paola Mortari Vergara Caffarelli, has been established by the University of Genua, Italy, in collaboration with the Inner Mongolia Institute of Archaeology and Cultural Relics (*Nei Menggu wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo* 內蒙古文物考古研究所). To this day, a simple survey of the place has confirmed its importance and the necessity to start a real archaeological campaign.

³⁸ See in particular the article by T. Halbertsma in the present volume and T. Halbertsma 2005. An interesting phenomenon is the transformation of Nestorian buildings into Lamaist temples: see Gai Shanlin 1991, p. 97. The first contact of Nestorianism (present in Central Asia from the 6th century) with the Önggüt is maybe dating from 11th–12th century: see J. Dauvillier 1948 [1983], pp. 301-305; P.M.V. Caffarelli 1995. On the “Eastern Church,” and its activity in Central and Eastern Asia, see the studies cited in note 2, and also P.G. Borbone 2000, pp. 34-49 and the final bibliography; P. Pelliot 1914a. The presence of Nestorianism in the area of Olon Süme is attested by numerous relics: several sarcophagi with the symbol of the Nestorian cross of *parusia* and metal crosses. See P. Pelliot 1931–1932a, pp. 1-3; J. Dauvillier 1956a [1983], pp. 11-17; Gai Shanlin 1991, pp. 270-302, and pp. 313-339 (illustrations); Zhu Qianzhi 1993, pp. 171-175. Numerous are the studies devoted in China to Christianity, often called in Yuan sources with the term *Yelikewen* 也里可溫, notwithstanding the confessional differences: see the bibliography in N. Standaert (ed.) 2001. For one seminal study centered on Yuan period, see Chen Yuan 1917 [1980].

³⁹ Gai Shanlin 1991, pp. 96-103.

⁴⁰ *Wangfu defeng tang beiji* 王府得風堂碑記, in *ibid.*, pp. 420-421. Önggüt kings are called “Prince of Zhao” (*Zhaowang* 趙王). The text, written in November 1347, commemorates the building of a hall in 1308: this event was a way to honour a Chinese counsellor of the Prince of Zhao. The author of the inscription describes himself as a man from Jingzhou: this fact often led researchers to the erroneous identification of Olon Süme with Jingzhou. This error appears also in N. Standaert (ed.) 2001, p. 53.

For others, Fengzhou is a more suitable candidate as Önggüt capital. In our opinion, they all could be right. If we think of Marco Polo's considerations on Tenduc as the "main residence" of Önggüt leader, together with the association in Mongol period of Tiande with Fengzhou, it is hard not to conclude that the Önggüt southern area had in Fengzhou a political center. But we know well how states and dynasties founded by nomadic peoples – as the Kitans, the Jurchen, the Mongols – were characterised by more than one political center.⁴¹

But Olon Süme was without doubt politically important. Besides the inscription we cited, we can remember here a text composed in 1310 by the scholar Yao Sui for a minister of the "Shu Prince," one of the honorific titles of Önggüt chiefs. The passage says: "The passed away parent of Shu Prince [...] had Gaotang as granted territory; he was an hereditary king, and his ancestral residence was Jing'an 靜安 (靖安), north of Dark Stream."⁴²

In 1310, "Prince of Shu" was the man called Shu'an 術安 or Zhu'an 注安 (主安) by Chinese sources.⁴³ His "passed away parent," called "Prince of Gaotang" (Gao Tang *wang* 高唐王), was in Chinese sources called Kuolijisi 闊里吉思, that is, the "King George" described as Önggüt king by Marco Polo, and as Nestorian king converted to Catholicism by the Franciscan missionary Giovanni da Montecorvino in a letter composed in 1305.⁴⁴ The

⁴¹ O. Lattimore 1934, proposed already the theory of two capitals: one, in the north, was Olon Süme, identified with the place name *Kawshang* (on which see the text *infra*); the other, in the south, was the "Tenduc" of Western sources.

⁴² HNM, pp. 56 b-57 a. The title of "Prince of Shu" (*Shuwang* 餽王: P. Pelliot 1973b, III, p. 263, note 4, read the character *Shu* as *Yu*), seems to have been given for the first time to Negüdei (Chinese *Niegutai* 聶古台), son of Alaqai and Zhenguo: he was the Önggüt king before the couple Aibuqa-Kunbuqa. See Gai Shanlin 1991, pp. 29-30, p. 40.

⁴³ On *Shu'an/Zhu'an*, and the related sources, see *ibid.*, pp. 32-34. On the passage of power in 1309 between *Shuhunan* 術忽難, brother of George, and this personage, see P. Pelliot, 1973b, III, pp. 275-277.

⁴⁴ On George (Chinese *Kuolijisi*), see *ibid.*, pp. 273-274, also for the Persians sources; Gai Shanlin 1991, pp. 31-32. His biography is in *YS*, pp. 2925-2926. Another famous source on him is the inscription composed by Yan Fu 閻復, *Fuma Gao Tang chongxian wangbei* 駙馬高唐忠獻王碑, in *YWL*, *juan* 23, pp. 281a-284a. The title of Prince of Gaotang (Gaotang *wang*) was conferred to George in 1294; the posthumous title of Prince of Zhao in 1305. The name *Kuolijisi* is present in several Yuan sources, but not all do refer to this personage: see I. de Rachewiltz – M. Wang 1988, vol. II, p. 1104. On George as king (who "is still Prester John") of Tenduc, see V. Bertolucci Pizzorusso 1994, p. 105, and G.R. Cardona 1994, pp. 637-638. The Franciscan John of Montecorvino left Italy in 1289 for his mission to the Orient, on the order of Pope Nicholas IV. In one of his few letters that we have today, dated

same *Zhu'an* corresponds to the “Giovanni” (Latin Johannes), son of King George, remembered by the Franciscain, who stress also that this name was given to the baby in his honor.⁴⁵

We don't have to describe in detail this aspect of the contacts between East and West: it is enough to remember that the travel to the east of Giovanni da Montecorvino followed in 1288 the arrival of an Önggüt messenger at the Roman threshold, Bar (or Rabban) Sauma, who with another man called Markos (from 1281 choosen as new Nestorian *catholikos* with the name of Mar Yahballaha III) had left the Orient about in 1275.⁴⁶ It is certainly not casual that the first stop made by the Franciscan priest, before arriving in the Mongol capital Dadu, was in Önggüt territory, where he seems to have converted King George to Catholicism, to the point that the king himself celebrated Mass with him in a church specifically builded.⁴⁷ One of the remains of the site of Olon Süme is probably what still survive of this

8 January 1305, he describes the conversion to Catholicism of “King George,” once believing in Nestorianism. This king “was of the line of that big king, called Prester John of India” (“era del lignaggio di quel grande re che fu chiamato Prete Gianni dell'India”). The conversion, happened “the first year I went there” (“nel primo anno in cui io giunsi,” maybe in 1293), led to the building of the first Catholic church in Eastern Asia, that was called “Roman Church.” There, according to the letter, the same Önggüt king, who had obtained the minor orders, celebrated the Mass with the Franciscan. See A. van der Wyngaert 1929, pp. 348-349. Here George seems to have realized the temporal and sacerdotal function, attributed to the legendary Prester John, who was “rex et sacerdos.” This quality has been related by some historians with the power conflict between Roman Catholic Church and the Empire, particularly evident in the middle of 13th century: in this historical frame, also the relationship with the figures of “Magi Kings” could have a meaning. See B. Hamilton 1996, pp. 171-185. But the double aspect of a king's power is already present in the Bible: here, it is an attribute of Melchizedek, “King of Salem”(Genesis 18:20). The passage in which Abraham gives to Melchizedek one tenth of everything he has is reflected in the *Milione*, where it is affirmed that, when the Tartars “were in the north [...], they were subordinated to a sir, who was in our language Prester John [...]. Tartars gave to him one tenth of the cattle” (“[...] gli Tartari dimoravano in tramontana [...], faceano reddita a uno signore, che vale a dire in francesco Prete Gianni [...]. Li Tartari li davano d'ogni dieci bestie l'una”). See V. Bertolucci Pizzorusso 1994, p. 85. The figure of Melchizedek, on which Christian *sacerdos* is based (see Psalm 110:4), in Saint Paul loses his semi-historical character: he is “similar to the Son of God,” being “without father, without mother, without genealogy; his life does not have a beginning nor an end” (Hebrews VII:1-3).

⁴⁵ P. Pelliot 1973b, III, p. 282; A. van der Wyngaert 1929, p. 350.

⁴⁶ See P.G. Borbone 2000.

⁴⁷ See above, note 44.

“Roman Church.”⁴⁸ We know from the same letter of Giovanni da Montecorvino that, after the death of King George in winter 1298–1299, his people seem to have returned to Nestorian faith.⁴⁹

Jing’an was only one of the names used to describe the city on the Dark Stream. The *Yuanshi* says that “in the ninth year of *Dade* period [that is 1305] the New City on Dark Stream became Jing’an County.”⁵⁰ In 1318, Jing’an received the new name of Dening 德寧.⁵¹ But the problem of the status of ancient Olon Süme seems to be hidden in this name, “New City,” tied to the fascinating personage of “King George.”

We must make a step back first. We know that the father of George was an Aibuqa, who seems have governed the Önggüt territory together with his brother Kunbuqa.⁵² According to the famous Syriac chronicle relating the voyage of Rabban Sauma and Markos, the two holy men met Aibuqa and Kunbuqa, princes of the city called “Kawshang.”⁵³

The identification of Kawshang is still today a topic of heated discussions. It is evidently the same with “Cosan” or “Tozan,” the city in the “Country of Prester John” according to the chronicle written by Odorico da Pordenone, another Franciscan missionary who passed through this city about 1328.⁵⁴

From Kawshang the two Önggüt travelers came to the country of Tangut, that is today’s Ningxia. But this is not the solution of the problem. Kawshang could be Olon Süme, or Fengzhou, or even Dongsheng, as in the theory of Pelliot, grounded on a supposed wrong transcription from Syriac.⁵⁵ The meeting of Rabban Sauma and Markos with the two rulers

⁴⁸ See Olon Süme map in Gai Shanlin 1991, p. 144; P.M.V. Caffarelli 2004a, for more data about this site.

⁴⁹ A. van der Wyngaert 1929, p. 350.

⁵⁰ *YS*, p. 464.

⁵¹ *YS*, p. 582.

⁵² On the brothers Aibuqa and Kunbuqa, see Gai Shanlin 1991, pp. 30-31; P. Pelliot 1973b, III, p. 268e f., mostly analyzes Aibuqa and his descendance.

⁵³ P.G. Borbone 2000, pp. 60-62, pp. 156-157.

⁵⁴ A. van der Wyngaert 1929, p. 483: “De isto Catayo recedens et veniens versus ponentem seu occidentem [...], veni versus terram Prestiçane [...]. Eius civitas principalis Cosan vocatur, que tamen ipsa Vincencia melior civitas diceretur quam illa civitas Cosan [...]” From this passage Cosan seems to have been smaller than 13th century’s Italian town of Vicenza.

⁵⁵ P. Pelliot 1973b, III, pp. 251-252. The French author, pointing to the lesson “Tozan” present in some versions of Odorico’s chronicle, defended an identity Kawshang = Dongsheng = Tenduc, that today not so much probable seems. Gai Shanlin 1991, p. 31, says that the meeting between Önggüt leader Aibuqa and the two monks

happened in 1273 or 1274;⁵⁶ the passage of Marco Polo about George, described as son of Aibuqa in Chinese sources, is of posterior time.

In the Syriac chronicle, the time span to cover the distance between Kawshang and Khanbaliq (Peking) is fifteen days.⁵⁷ In his letter about King George, Giovanni da Montecorvino stressed that the capital of George's kingdom was at twenty days of distance from Mongol capital.⁵⁸ George died in the winter of 1298–1299, during a military campaign;⁵⁹ we know that his “ancestral residence” was the city called Jing'an in 1310; from the *Milione* we know that, probably in the first years of the 1380s, George was already king of the Önggüts.⁶⁰ The name of “New City,” an urban settlement on Dark Stream that was modified to Jing'an in 1305, appears in the *Yuanshi* in two passages related to years 1283 and 1289.⁶¹ From these maybe confused data we can draw some conclusions:

- Judging from the temporal concordance, the birth of the “New City” seems to be connected with the figure of King George.
- The same site is described in 1310 as the “ancestral residence” of King George.
- The same site is evidently connected with Önggüt kings at least from 1308, when according to the stela inscription a pavillion was erected to pay homage to a Chinese official of Önggüt kings.
- Considering the temporal contiguity between the “New City” and King George, the presence in Olon Süme of the remains of Catholic church

did happen in Dongsheng, dating the event in 1278, without giving proofs for this thesis.

⁵⁶ We do agree with the observations made by P.G. Borbone 2000, p. 264.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 58 (“a very hard voyage of fifteen days”).

⁵⁸ A. van der Wyngaert 1929, p. 349.

⁵⁹ *YS*, p. 2926, and other sources (see P. Pelliot 1973b, III, p. 261, note 3), present the death of King George in the winter season of the second year of *Dade* era, that is, between the end of 1298 and the beginning of 1299. In the letter written by John of Montecorvino, composed on January 8th, 1305, the passage saying that George “ante VI annos migravit ad Dominum” does not solve the problem. See A. van der Wyngaert 1929, p. 348.

⁶⁰ On the moment of the passage of power from Aibuqa (and Kunbuqa) to George, the end of the 1370s appears as the most probable period. For Gai Shanlin 1991, p. 31, Aibuqa historical traces are found up to 1277 (but, paradoxically, the author elsewhere says that the meeting between the king and the couple Markos – Rabban Sauma happened in 1278).

⁶¹ *YS*, p. 253, p. 314; Gai Shanlin 1991, p. 102, cites another source in which the “New City” appears with Jingzhou and Shajing.

built by Giovanni da Montecorvino in the “capital of King George” about 1293 seems proved.

- Olon Süme, that is, the “New City,” seems thus undoubtedly to have been one of the Önggüt capitals from the time of King George.
- The identity of Olon Süme and Kawshang remains doubtful, considering the difference of time necessary for the voyage from Beijing in the Syriac chronicle and in the letter of Giovanni da Montecorvino. We must also stress that, according to Odorico da Pordenone, “Cosan” was “in the country of Prester John”: now, in Marco Polo’s *Milione* the political seat of George’s kingdom (once country of Prester John) is “Tenduc,” which could not be identified with any site in the Önggüt northern region during Mongol period.

Kawshang/Cosan could, thus, be identified with the southern political center of the Önggüts in Mongol period, while the northern capital was Olon Süme, the “New City” in the epoch of the building of Giovanni da Montecorvino’s church, a new urban settlement, without doubt also an important Nestorian center, maybe the result of a new *penchant* for the northern country of his ancestors from a cultivated ruler like king George.⁶²

In conclusion, a deepened research on the field seems the only way to solve the enigma of Önggüt cities, and to better understand the role played by the Önggüt ethnic group in the diffusion of Nestorianism in Far East.

⁶² George was well aware of the tradition of Chinese classics; he was also an expert of cosmological doctrines, like the knowledge of *yin* and *yang*, calendrical science, and numerology. According to the *Yuanshi*, he ordered the construction of a “Ten Thousand Books Hall” (*wanjuan tang* 萬卷堂), and he loved to discuss such matters with cultured men. See *YS*, p. 2925. This figure without doubt deserves more attention: With Professor Borbone I plan to prepare a study based on the informations on King George collected from Chinese, Persian, and Syriac sources.