

PROJECT REPORT

“As the Mountains Surround Jerusalem”: Two Syriac Inscriptions at Ulaan Tolgoi (Doloon Nuur) in Western Mongolia

Takashi Osawa, Osaka University

Guunii Lkhundev, Institute of Archaeology, Mongolian Academy of Sciences

Shigeo Saito, Osaka University

Hidemi Takahashi, The University of Tokyo

It was reported by the Mongolian archaeologist and historian Dovdoin Bayar in 1990 that at Ulaan Tolgoi in Khovd Province in the far west of Mongolia there was an inscription in what appeared to be Chinese but could be Khitan, as well as two inscriptions in what was believed to be Uyghur, at least one of which was accompanied by a cross, suggesting that it was a Christian inscription.¹ In August 2014, Osawa, Lkhundev and Saito had the opportunity to visit the site and to document the inscriptions in the

¹ Д. Баяр, “Баруун Монголд шинээр илэрсэн эртний бичгийн дурсгалууд” [Newly Discovered Ancient Written Monuments from Western Mongolia] (*Шинжлэх Ухаан Амьдрал* 1990/6): 37–40. See also [Довдойн Баяр], “Долоон нуурын Улаан толгойн бичээс” [The Inscriptions at Ulaan Tolgoi in Doloon Nuur], in *Монгол нутаг дахь түүх, соёлын үл хөдлөх өвийн хадгалалт хамгаалалт* [Conservation and Protection of Cultural Relics in the Regions of Mongolia], ed. Монгол Улсын ШУА-ийн Археологийн хүрээлэн et al. (Ulaanbaatar: Монголын Хүмүүнлэгийн Ухааны Академи, 2006): 202–203. Photographs of the inscriptions are also given on two pages on the website of the Khovd provincial government, “Ховд аймгийн нутаг дахь археологийн дурсгалууд” [Archaeological Monuments in Khovd Province], n.d. (see item “Долоон нуурын Улаан толгойн бичээс”), and Бичсэн Ц. Цолмонбаатар, “Ховд аймгийн Мөнххайрхан сум” [Mönkhkhayrkhan District of Khovd Province], 11th March 2013 (see under “Эртний түүх соёлын дурсгал” [Ancient Historical and Cultural Monument]), retrieved 1st November 2014 from <http://www.khovd.gov.mn>.

course of a joint expedition of the Institute of Archaeology of the Mongolian Academy of Sciences and Osaka University. Osawa, realising, as a small number of others had done earlier,² that the two supposedly Uyghur inscriptions were not in Uyghur but most likely in Syriac, contacted Takahashi upon his return to Japan; the latter was able to confirm that the inscriptions were indeed in Syriac, both in script and language. These two inscriptions are, to our knowledge, the first ever Syriac inscriptions to be discovered within the territory of the present-day state of Mongolia. We present here a brief, preliminary report on these inscriptions.³

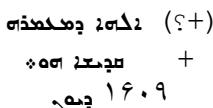
Ulaan Tolgoi (Mongolian “red head” or “red peak”), referred to as Ulaan Tolgoi of Doloon Nuur (“seven lakes”) by Bayar to distinguish it from other homonymous sites in Mongolia, is situated approximately 20 km to the west of the administrative centre of Mönkhkhayrkhan District, and just to the north of Mt. Mönkhkhayrkhan (4,362 m), the second highest peak in Mongolia. The site lies in a plateau below the main ridge of the Mongolian Altai Range, and along one of the routes traversing that ridge to connect Mönkhkhayrkhan District with Bulgan District (Bayan-Ölgii Province) to the west, whence there is a route that follows the Bulgan River into what is now the northern part of Xinjiang Autonomous Region. Rising above a confluence of two rivers to an altitude of over 2,700 m, the “red peak” is crowned with an outcrop of reddish brown granite rocks stretching over a distance of approximately 800 m from north to south.

² See Christopher P. Atwood, *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire* (New York: Facts On File, 2004): 108 (s.v. “Christianity in the Mongol Empire”), 397 (s.v. “Naiman”). One of the inscriptions is mentioned as being in Syriac also on the Khovd provincial government website, “Ховд аймгийн нутаг дахь археологийн дурсгалууд” (as n. 1 above).

³ We would like to thank Dr. George Kiraz, the editor of *Hugoye*, for accepting this report for publication at short notice, and Prof. Pier Giorgio Borbone (Pisa) and Dr. David Taylor (Oxford) for their comments which were of great value in considering the contents and the context of the inscriptions.

The three inscriptions are found towards the southern end of this chain of rocks. The text of the Chinese inscription, occupying an area 120 cm by 72 cm and consisting probably of six columns, is now barely legible, but it is still possible to make out the date of the inscription, “the eighteenth day of the sixth month of the second year of the Dade (大德) era” (corresponding to 28th July 1298 by modern reckoning), along with the name of the person responsible for it, “Wang Wen(lip)” (王文[立?]). At the beginning of the inscription are three characters giving the title of a prince, which can be read as 高唐王 (“Prince of Gaotang”).⁴ A little below this is the character 征 (“military expedition”), suggesting that the inscription is somehow related to a military campaign led by the prince (see Figures 1 and 2).

The first Syriac inscription, on the same piece of rock as the Chinese inscription, begins at a point approximately 30 cm to the right of the right-hand end of the Chinese inscription. The inscription is written vertically, and the first two lines of the inscription measure approximately 72 cm and 78 cm in length. The last line, 30 cm in length, ends at a point 48 cm above the ground. Offset a little to the right above the middle line of the inscription is a cross measuring 16 cm by 8 cm. There seem also to be traces of what may have been another cross at the same height a little to the right of the centre line of the first line. The inscription, written in what may be categorised as East Syrian script, appears to read as follows (see Figure 3).



 ئەمەن دەنەن ئەنەن (؟+)
 +
 ١٦٠٩

“God whose dwelling place is holy. 1609 of the Greeks.”

⁴ Besides the character 王, the bottom part of the character 高 is still quite clearly visible, as is the outer part (广) of the character 唐.

The words used are reminiscent of the phrase “God in his holy dwelling place” (*alābā b-ma’mreh qaddišā*) of Psalm 68.5.⁵ Since the way the words are spaced indicates that what we read above as *dalat* at the beginning of the second word was omitted at first and was inserted later into the available space between *alābā* and *ma’mreh*, we need also consider the possibility that the letter is intended, in fact, to be a compressed *bēt*, which would give us a sentence corresponding more closely to the wording of the psalm, “God is in his holy dwelling place” (*alabā b-ma’mreh qaddišā /b/ w.*).

If one is correct in reading the characters preceding the letters *DYWN* ("of the Greeks") in the third line of the inscription as Perso-Arabic numerals ١٦٠٩, this will give us a date matching that of the Chinese inscription (1609 A.Gr. = 1297/8 A.D.).

The second Syriac inscription is located approximately 11 m to the south and downhill from the other two inscriptions, towards the bottom left corner of a side of a 5.30 metre-high triangular boulder standing free from the piles of rocks nearby. The expedition team was told by an elderly local inhabitant that he remembered there being another inscription in Chinese to the right of the Syriac inscription in his childhood, but no trace of such an inscription could be found in the heavily eroded remainder of the rock face during the visit in 2014. The text of the Syriac inscription is written vertically within a square area 120 cm by 120 cm, whose surface has been rubbed off and appears whiter than the surrounding rock face.

⁵ The notion of God as one “whose dwelling is holy”, although the word used for “dwelling” and the syntactical structure are different from those in the sentence here, occurs in a prayer used in the East Syrian tradition in the morning service (*saprā*) for Sundays and feast days: “O the compassionate one, whose name is holy, whose dwelling is holy, and the place of whose presence is holy, ...” (*hannānā d-qaddiš ūmeh, w-qaddiš mašryeh, w-qaddiš atrā da-škinteh, ...*). Paul Bedjan (ed.), *Breviarium chaldaicum*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1886–87): I.38; Tōmā Darmō (ed.), *Ktābā da-qdām wa-d-bātar wa-d-hudrā wa-d-kashkol wa-d-gaz̄zā w-qalā d-‘udrāne ‘am ktābā d-mazmūrē*, 3 vols. (Trichur: Maṭba‘tā d-Mār Narsai malpānā, 1960–62): I.125 (م); Arthur John Maclean (trans.), *East Syrian Daily Offices* (London: Rivington, Percival & Co., 1894): 171.

Above the inscription is a cross with a vertical line 30 cm in length and a horizontal line probably of about the same length. The last line of the inscription is now lost (except for the top part of a diagonal stroke that is still visible), along with some letters at the bottom (on the left if the text is read horizontally). The Syriac script used is of a mixed type, with the rounded *rē's* of the East Syrian type, but with one clearly visible Estrangela-style *alap* in the third line (see Figures 4 and 5).

(نَجْدَةٌ مَجْدَدٌ
مَحْسُونٌ
مَذْكُونٌ مَذْكُونٌ
(مَحْمَدٌ)
(مَجْدَدٌ مَجْدَدٌ)

The text is that of Psalm 125.2: “Jerusalem, the mountains surround her; <and> the Lord surrounds his people, [henceforth and for evermore].” The legible part of the inscription exhibits one deviation from the standard Peshitta text, namely the omission of the *waw* before the word *māryā* in the third line.⁶

The two new Syriac inscriptions reported here constitute an important addition to the known relics of Syriac Christianity from Inner Asia, especially as rare examples of non-funerary inscriptions in Syriac script from the region, for which the only other instances known are the rock inscriptions on the cliffs above the site of the Christian monastery at Urgut in Uzbekistan and the Syro-Turkic writing in the “White Pagoda” near Hohhot in Inner Mongolia.⁷

⁶ The same variant is reported for one pre-1200 manuscript used in the Peshitta Institute edition of the Psalms (The Peshitta Institute, *The Old Testament in Syriac according to the Peshitta Version*, part II, fasc. 3, The Book of Psalms [Leiden: Brill, 1980]: 153; 12t8, = Sinai, Syr. 260, 1186 A.D.).

⁷ On the site at Urgut, see Alexei Savchenko, “Urgut,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (online edition, 2008), with the literature cited there; also Pier Giorgio Borbone, “Les églises d’Asie centrale et de Chine : état de la question à partir des textes et des découvertes archéologiques : essai de synthèse,” in *Les églises en monde syriaque*, ed. F. Briquel Chatonnet (Paris: Geuthner, 2013): 441–465, here 454–457; and the forthcoming

The first Syriac inscription, bearing what is most probably the same date as the Chinese inscription next to it, is likely to have been left by someone accompanying the same military expedition in the summer of 1298. The appearance of the title “Prince of Gaotang” at the beginning of the Chinese inscription is particularly significant, since this is the title granted to the Christian Ongut prince George (Kuolijisi 闢里吉思, d. 1298/99) by the Yuan emperor Chenzong (Temür Öljeitü, reigned 1294–1307), and it was in the latter part of 1298 that Prince George was captured while campaigning in the “Northwest” for his sovereign against the Ögedeyid Qaidu and the Chaghataiyid Du'a.⁸ Ulaan Tolgoi, as has been stated, is located on

monograph on the inscriptions there by Mark Dickens and Alexei Savchenko. On the inscriptions in the “White Pagoda,” see Pier Giorgio Borbone, “More on the Priest Särgis in the White Pagoda: The Syro-Turkic Inscriptions of the White Pagoda, Hohhot,” in *From the Oxus River to the Chinese Shores: Studies on East Syriac Christianity in China and Central Asia*, ed. Li Tang and Dietmar W. Winkler (Vienna: LIT, 2013): 51–65, together with the earlier articles cited there.

⁸ See Pierre Marsone, “Two Portraits for One Man: George, King of the Önggüt,” in *From the Oxus River to the Chinese Shores: Studies on East Syriac Christianity in China and Central Asia*, ed. Li Tang and Dietmar W. Winkler (Vienna: LIT, 2013): 225–235, here 229–230, 235 (with the Chinese text and English translation of the relevant passage of *Yuan shi* [History of Yuan], vol. 118); cf. Maurizio Paolillo, “In Search of King George,” in *Hidden Treasures and Intercultural Encounters: Studies on East Syriac Christianity in China and Central Asia*, ed. Dietmar W. Winkler and Li Tang (Vienna: LIT, 2009): 241–255, here 248; Christopher P. Atwood, “Historiography and Transformation of Ethnic Identity in Mongolia: the Öng’üt Case” (*Asian Ethnicity* 15/4 [2014]): 514–534, here 525. On the title “Gaotang Wang” appearing in Syriac (*g’wt’ng w’ng*) in the colophon of the chrysographed Gospel manuscript of 1298 A.D., MS. Vatican, Syr. 622 (fol. 173v, l. 16), see H. Pognon, *Inscriptions sémitiques de la Syrie, de la Mésopotamie et de la région de Mossoul* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1907): 137, with n. 3; and Pier Giorgio Borbone, “I Vangeli per la principessa Sara. Un manoscritto siriaco crisografato, gli Öngüt cristiani e il Principe Giorgio” (*Egitto e Vicino Oriente* 26 [2003]): 63–82, here 64 and 69; cf. id., “Some Aspects of Turco-Mongol Christianity in the Light of Literary and Epigraphic Syriac Sources” (*Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies* 19 [2005]): 5–20, here 18; Peter Zieme, “Notes on a Bilingual Prayer Book from

one of the passes that can be used, in the height of summer at least, to cross the Altai Mountains, which at the end of the thirteenth century formed the northwestern boundary of the area under the rule of the Yuan Dynasty. The mention of the “Prince of Gaotang” in the Chinese inscription makes it almost certain, therefore, that the Chinese inscription itself and at least the first Syriac inscription are to be associated in some way with the passage of either the whole or part of the prince’s army across the pass in the course of his military activities in the area.

The second Syriac inscription, which stands in a more prominent position than the other two inscriptions but itself bears no date, may or may not be contemporary with them. The use of a different style of writing from that of the first Syriac inscription, with an admixture of Estrangela forms, may mean that it was inscribed on another occasion, but it is equally possible that it was inscribed by a different person on the same occasion, or even that the same person wrote this inscription in a more solemn Estrangela style as befitting its more ceremonial function in a prominent position. The choice of the psalm text in this inscription is particularly apt for the location, surrounded as it is by lofty and beautiful mountains. The text may be interpreted as comparing the site where it stands to Jerusalem and either asking or thanking God for his protection of the people gathered there. Both the psalm from which this verse is taken and the psalm with which the first Syriac inscription may be associated are psalms that would lend themselves well to use in prayers for divine protection and victory in a military context, so that both these inscriptions may have been intended to serve as expressions of prayer for military success, or of thanksgiving for a military victory.

Another possible interpretation is to see the inscriptions as marking the place as a sacred site. Ulaan Tolgoi is situated in the close vicinity of Mt. Mönkhkhayrkhan (“[mountain] of eternal blessing”), which is considered to be a holy mountain by the local

Bulayik,” in *Hidden Treasures and Intercultural Encounters*, ed. Dietmar W. Winkler and Li Tang (Vienna: LIT, 2009):167–180, here 168 n. 8.

population, and the unique topography of the site itself with its outcrop of red rocks is one that would have invited it to be used as a sacred site in the widespread cult of holy mountains among the Turkic and Mongolic peoples. The text of the second Syriac inscription, as has been said, may be interpreted as comparing the site to Jerusalem, while the words of the first Syriac inscription, too, could be interpreted in this light as an invocation for God's presence and perhaps as a formula recording the consecration of the site. As was noted by Bayar, Ulaan Tolgoi is situated in the heartland of the territory once occupied by the Naiman, a tribe that is known to have counted Christians among its members.⁹ If any of those Christians remained in the area at the end of the thirteenth century, it is conceivable that Ulaan Tolgoi, despite its difficulty of access, was a cultic site for those local Christians.

It is also possible, of course, that the truth is a combination of the two, namely that the site was a holy one for the local people, whether they were Christian or not, and that it was this sacred character of the place that prompted the Christians in the army that passed by it or encamped there to leave behind the inscriptions as prayers for, or in commemoration of, a military victory. Further speculation on such matters, however, will have to be left for the moment for a future occasion, in the light, one hopes, of further research and further investigations at the site. One thing we can be sure of at this point is that someone with sufficient knowledge of Syriac to leave behind such inscriptions as we have – a cleric of the Church of the East, one would imagine, possibly a prelate of that church in the company of a Christian prince – was present on at least one occasion towards the end of the thirteenth century at this site in a part of the world otherwise imagined by Syriacs to be made

⁹ On Christianity among the Naiman, see, for example, Li Tang, *East Syriac Christianity in Mongol-Yuan China* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2011): 29–32.

up of “desolate lands and impassable mountains” inhabited by “the most ferocious Huns.”¹⁰

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Atwood, Christopher P. *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire*. New York: Facts On File, 2004.

Atwood, Christopher P. “Historiography and Transformation of Ethnic Identity in Mongolia: the Öng’üt Case.” *Asian Ethnicity* 15/4 (2014): 514–534.

Bakos, Ján (ed. and trans.). *Le Candélabre des sanctuaires de Grégoire Aboulfaradj dit Barbebraeus*. Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1930–33.

Баяр, Довдойн. “Баруун Монголд шинээр илэрсэн эртний бичгийн дурсгалууд.” *Шинжлэх Ухаан Амьдрал* 1990/6: 37–40. Reprinted in Довдайн Баяр, *Монголын дундад зууны археологийн судалгаа*, vol. 1. Ulaanbaatar: Тэрхчандмань, 2013: 179–182.

[Баяр, Довдайн]. “Долоон нуурын Улаан толгойн бичээс.” In *Монгол нутаг дахь түүх, соёлын ул хөдлөх өвийн хадгалалт хамгаалалт*, ed. Монгол Улсын ШУА-ийн Археологийн хүрээлэн et al. Ulaanbaatar: Монголын Хүмүүнлэгийн Ухааны Академи, 2006: 202–203.

[Bedjan, Paul] (ed.). *Breviarium chaldaicum*, 3 vols. Paris, 1886–87.

Borbone, Pier Giorgio. “I Vangeli per la principessa Sara. Un manoscritto siriaco crisografato, gli Öngüt cristiani e il Principe Giorgio.” *Egitto e Vicino Oriente* 26 (2003): 63–82.

Borbone, Pier Giorgio. “Some Aspects of Turco-Mongol Christianity in the Light of Literary and Epigraphic Syriac Sources.” *Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies* 19 (2005): 5–20.

¹⁰ Bar ‘Ebroyo, *Candelabrum of the Sanctuary*, Base 2, *Le Candélabre des sanctuaires de Grégoire Aboulfaradj dit Barbebraeus*, ed. and trans. J. Bakos (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1930–33): 157, 162; cf. Takahashi, “Observations on Bar ‘Ebroyo’s Marine Geography” (*Hugoye* 6/1 [2003 (2009)]): 77–130, here 104–105, with n. 64.

- Borbone, Pier Giorgio. "Les églises d'Asie centrale et de Chine : état de la question à partir des textes et des découvertes archéologiques : essai de synthèse." In *Les églises en monde syriaque*, ed. F. Briquel Chatonnet. Paris: Geuthner, 2013: 441–465.
- Borbone, Pier Giorgio. "More on the Priest Särgis in the White Pagoda: The Syro-Turkic Inscriptions of the White Pagoda, Hohhot." In *From the Oxus River to the Chinese Shores: Studies on East Syriac Christianity in China and Central Asia*, ed. Li Tang and Dietmar W. Winkler. Vienna: LIT, 2013: 51–65.
- Darmō, Tōmā (ed.). *Kتابا da-qdām wa-d-bātar wa-d-ḥudrā wa-d-kashkōl wa-d-gazza w-qalā d-‘udrānē ‘am ktabā d-mazmūrē*, 3 vols. Trichur: Maṭba‘ tā d-Mār Narsai malpānā, 1960–62.
- Maclean, Arthur John (trans.). *East Syrian Daily Offices*. London: Rivington, Percival & Co., 1894.
- Marsone, Pierre. "Two Portraits for One Man: George, King of the Öngüt." In *From the Oxus River to the Chinese Shores: Studies on East Syriac Christianity in China and Central Asia*, ed. Li Tang and Dietmar W. Winkler. Vienna: LIT, 2013: 225–235.
- Paolillo, Maurizio. "In Search of King George." In *Hidden Treasures and Intercultural Encounters: Studies on East Syriac Christianity in China and Central Asia*, ed. Dietmar W. Winkler and Li Tang. Vienna: LIT, 2009: 241–255.
- Pognon, H[enri]. *Inscription sémitiques de la Syrie, de la Mésopotamie et de la région de Mossoul*. Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1907.
- Savchenko, Alexei. "Urgut." *Encyclopædia Iranica*, online edition. 2008.
- Takahashi, Hidemi. "Observations on Bar 'Ebroyo's Marine Geography." *Hugoye* 6/1 (2003 [2009]): 77–130.
- Tang, Li. *East Syriac Christianity in Mongol-Yuan China*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2011.
- The Peshitta Institute (prepared by D.M. Walter, in collaboration with Adalbert Vogel and R.Y. Ebied). *The Old Testament in Syriac according to the Peshitta Version*, part II, fasc. 3, The Book of Psalms. Leiden: Brill, 1980.

Zieme, Peter. "Notes on a Bilingual Prayer Book from Bulayik." *Hidden Treasures and Intercultural Encounters: Studies on East Syriac Christianity in China and Central Asia*, ed. Dietmar W. Winkler and Li Tang. Vienna: LIT, 2009: 168–180.

[Ховд аймаг]. "Ховд аймгийн нутаг дахь археологийн дурсгалууд." n.d. Retrieved 1st November 2014 from http://www.khovd.gov.mn/home/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=495&Itemid=53.

Цолмонбаатар, Бичсэн Ц. "Ховд аймгийн Мөнххайрхан сум." 11th March 2013. Retrieved 1st November 2014 from http://www.khovd.gov.mn/home/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=502&Itemid=399.

[Page intentionally left blank]

IMAGES

Figure 1: Ulaan Tolgoi, Chinese Inscription (left) and Syriac Inscription 1 (right)



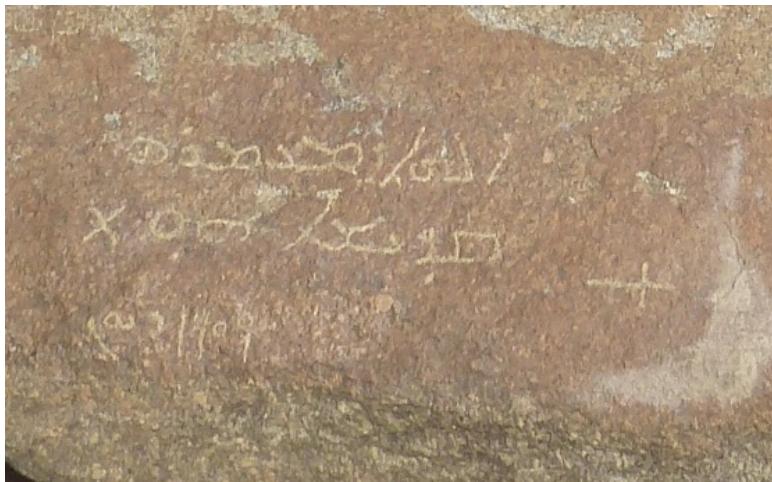
Photographed by Takashi Osawa, 21st August 2014

Figure 2: Ulaan Tolgoi, Beginning of the Chinese Inscription with the Characters “高唐王 … 征”



Photographed by Takashi Osawa, 21st August 2014

Figure 3: Ulaan Tolgoi, Syriac Inscription 1



Photographed by Takashi Osawa, 21st August 2014

Figure 4: Ulaan Tolgoi, Boulder with Syriac Inscription 2



Photographed by Takashi Osawa, 21st August 2014

Figure 5: Ulaan Tolgoi, Syriac Inscription 2



Photographed by Takashi Osawa, 21st August 2014