Chistoph Baumer. *The Church of the East: An Illustrated History of Assyrian Christianity*. London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2006, xi + 328 pp; hardcover. $49.50.

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With its large format and dozens of stunning color images, it would be easy to mistake *The Church of the East: An Illustrated History of Assyrian Christianity* as a mere "coffee table book." That label, however, would seriously underrate the book's merits and importance. For at a time when many people still conceive of Christianity as a religion of Europe and the Americas, Christoph Baumer has written a superb survey of a Christian community that once extended across large areas of Mesopotamia, Iran, the Persian Gulf, southern India, Central Asia, and China. Other recent monographs have surveyed parts of the Church of the East's history for a general audience, but none with the fullness and precision of this monograph, a translation of the original German version published in 2005.[1]

Baumer frames his work as an officially endorsed history of the Church of the East. A letter of appreciation and blessing from his Grace Mar Dinka IV, the Catholicos Patriarch of the Church of the East, opens the book, and the patriarch also appears with the author on the book's dust jacket. Fortunately, the author's sensitivity to the Church's modern image rarely overrides the rigor of his historical analysis. On the controversial issue of the Church's name, for instance, he notes that even the problematic label "Nestorian" is "not without honor" in the Church's own theology and literature (8). "Assyrian," the name favored in the modern Diaspora and used in the book's title, is equally awkward when used to describe a Christian community that stretched so far beyond northern Mesopotamia.

The book's first four chapters explore the genesis and early development of the Church of the East in Mesopotamia, western Iran, and India. Baumer cautiously reviews the tales of the Church's apostolic origins, variously attributed to the journeys of St. Thomas, Mar Addai, Mar Aggai, and Mar Mari. Few of these stories are attested before the sixth century, and one can easily be

[1] *Frühes Christentum zwischen Euphrat und Jangtse: eine Zeitreise entlang der Seidenstrasse zur Kirche des Ostens* (Stuttgart: Urachhaus, 2005).

skeptical about their historicity. The *Acts of St. Thomas* are much earlier, composed perhaps in Edessa ca. 200 CE, but its memorable vignettes of Thomas's mission in the land of "King Gondophares" reveal little familiarity with actual Indian place names and customs. Here, as often in the book, Baumer wisely sets to one side the murky issue of origins to focus on the indisputable evidence for the Church's growth by the end of late antiquity. The stone crosses with Middle Persian inscriptions erected on the Malabar Coast between the sixth and ninth centuries complement, for example, the testimony of the mid-sixth century Alexandrian merchant Cosmas Indicopleustes, who knew that the region's clergy were appointed "from Persia."

Chapters 5–6 explore the development of the Church of the East in its core territories of the Sasanian Empire (224–642). Baumer's summary of the Church's political history nicely captures the increasingly intimate yet perilous bonds that linked Christians to the Sasanian throne. East-Syrian chroniclers preserve numerous stories about the fierce competition for influence between Christian and non-Christian parties at court. By the reign of Khusro II (r. 590–628), Christians had risen to the highest levels of the court, but their power was fractured by the bitter struggle between East-Syrian (Nestorian) and West-Syrian (Miaphysite or Jacobite) factions. Non-specialists may find Baumer's account of these struggles overly dense with names and details, but his meticulous notes will usefully guide determined readers to the appropriate bibliography. His overview of the Church's spirituality includes valuable introductions to the topics of East-Syrian monasticism, mysticism, and the organization and symbolism of East-Syrian churches. Here, as elsewhere, Baumer enriches his account with numerous illustrations of archaeological finds, such as the desolate ruined churches of northern Iraq and the Tur Abdin region of southern Turkey.

Chapters 7–10 survey the history of the Church of the East under Islamic rule and the Church's extraordinary expansion across Asia between the seventh and thirteenth centuries. Although many readers will have encountered bits and pieces of this story elsewhere, no previous book puts the pieces together so well. The evidence comes in an astonishing variety of forms: a Syriac chronicler's report about the bishop of Merv's humiliation of the Turkish shamans (169), Sogdian Christian inscriptions from the

borders of Tibet (175), Chinese Christian texts from Dunhuang (187), and cross-amulets from Inner Mongolia (196), to name a few examples. Contextualization of individual finds remains challenging, since the relevant literary sources are frustratingly thin. But the overall picture is clear: Nestorian Christians developed a significant and abiding presence in pockets all along the Silk Road, building churches and establishing monasteries in which they copied, translated, and composed an impressive range of Christian literature.

Christianity also gained many adherents among the nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples of the northern steppe. Baumer estimates that one-third or more of the Turco-Mongolian tribes living between Lake Balkash (eastern Kazakhstan) and Manuchuria (northeastern China) were Nestorian Christians by the beginning of the thirteenth century (198). This may be a generous estimate, but there is ample documentation for the importance of Nestorians at the early Mongol courts—a situation that both surprised and appalled the Franciscan visitor William of Rubruck in 1254. Christianity was especially well rooted among the Mongol queens (*khatuns*), such as Sorqaqtani, daughter of the Kerait chieftain Toghril Khan and wife of Genghis Khan's son, Tolui. Many readers may be surprised to learn that the woman who gave birth to both Kublai Khan, founder of the Yuan dynasty of China, and Hulagu, founder of the Ilkhanid dynasty of Iran, was a fervent Nestorian Christian. This could also be the area of Nestorian history most likely to yield new evidence as a result of growing archaeological research (and agricultural expansion) in Mongolia, western China, and Central Asia.[2]

The book's final chapters (10–12) examine the sobering history of the Church of the East since the age of European expansion. In India, the "Thomas Christians" of the Malabar and Coromandel coasts initially welcomed the arrival of the Portuguese as potential allies against their Muslim neighbors. Relations soured as the Portuguese clergy began to inveigh against the "heretical" traditions of the region's Christian community, which numbered around 30,000 families (ca. 150–200,000 people) in the early sixteenth

[2] Baumer has helped raise funds to support such archaeological research through the Society for the Exploration of Eurasia (www.exploration-eurasia.com).

century (236). At the notorious Council of Diamper in 1599, the clergy of Goa made bonfires from piles of local Syriac manuscripts. As Baumer laments: "thus the only branch of the Church of the East to escape Tamerlane's frenzy of destruction was annihilated by Europeans" (239). In demographic terms, however, the indigenous Christians of South India have triumphed: the seven and a half million "Thomas Christians" in Kerala today eclipse the population of all other branches of the Church combined (245).

Dialogue with the Catholic Church also reshaped the East-Syrian community of Iraq, which survived Tamerlane's massacres (or to be more precise, some survived) by retreating to the highlands of northern Mesopotamia. The defection of the Nestorian bishop of Cyprus to Rome in 1445 marks the beginning of the prolonged ecclesiastical struggle that eventually led to the formation of the modern Assyrian and Chaldean Churches. Baumer conscientiously reviews the stages of this convoluted process through which "the hierarchical line of the ancient Nestorian Church of the East has become Catholic, while the hierarchical line that was once united with Rome has returned to the East-Syrian creed" (251). His account of this "period of trials and tribulations" includes thought-provoking remarks on the impact of Protestant missionaries from England and America, the introduction of the printing press, and the genocide of 1915–1918—all topics worthy of further study. The "Renaissance" of Assyrian Christian culture in the Diaspora today offers an unsettling contrast to the continuing decline of the indigenous Christian communities of Iran, Iraq, and southeastern Turkey.

In brief, this book is a major achievement, an insightful and meticulously researched survey of more than 2000 years of Christian history. The general public and scholars alike will benefit from its breadth and erudition.