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Eurasian Nomads and the Sedentary World

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TRUE TO THEIR WAYS: WHY THE QARA KHITAI DID NOT CONVERT TO ISLAM

Michal Biran

The Qara Khitai period is one of the least known in the history of Central Asia. It is also one of the most fascinating periods, and not only because it preceded the Mongol era. The rule of sinicized nomads over a mostly Muslim sedentary population created a unique multi-cultural environment, which enables one to get "a view from the edge" of both Chinese and Muslim civilizations and to assess their relative function for Inner Asian nomads.¹

This paper focuses on one aspect of the relationship between nomadic conquerors, as were the Qara Khitai, and their sedentary subjects, that of religious and cultural transformation, and more specifically, conversion to Islam. In the case of the Qara Khitai, however, what one has to explain is not why such a conversion took place, but why it never did. Other nomads who conquered Muslim lands either converted to Islam before the conquest, as had, for example, the Qarakhanids and the Seljuqs or, even if they conquered Muslim lands as "infidels," after some decades in a mostly Muslim territory they eventually embraced Islam. The notable example here is that of the Mongols in Iran, South Russia and Central Asia. The Qara Khitai, however, never converted.

I would like to suggest that the main reason for the non-islamization of the Qara Khitai was their Chinese or Liao tradition, which provided them with the same functions that Islam provided for other nomads. But first, a short introduction about the Qara Khitai is required.

In 1124, when the Khitan Liao dynasty, which had ruled in Manchuria, Mongolia and parts of north China for more than 200 years

¹ This paper is based on sections of my dissertation entitled "China, Nomads and Islam: The Qara Khitai (Western Liao) dynasty 1124–1218," which was submitted to the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 2000. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the 7th ESCAS conference at Vienna in September 2000, and at the Institute of Advanced Study Historical Colloquium at Princeton NJ in March 2002. I thank Patricia Crone and Yuri Pines for their comments on earlier drafts, and Reuven Amitai for the title.

(907–1125), was overthrown by another wave of Manchurian invaders, the Jurchens, one Khitan prince, Yelü Dashi, chose not to submit to the new rulers. Instead, he led his few adherents westward, hoping to return subsequently to restore the Liao in its former domains. After spending six years at Kedun, Liao's western-most garrison post in Mongolia, aware of both his inability to challenge the Jurchen Jin dynasty and of the relative weakness of the Central Asian kingdoms, Dashi decided to continue further westward. In little more than a decade he succeeded in setting up a new empire in Central Asia that was known there as the Qara Khitai (the Black Khitans) and in China as the Xi Liao (Western Liao). Dashi and his successors bore the Inner Asian title Gürkhan (universal khan) but were also designated as Chinese emperors and gave Chinese reign titles. The Western Liao is the only Central Asian dynasty that is considered a legitimate Chinese dynasty by traditional Chinese historiography. The dynasty existed for nearly 90 years, and was finally vanquished by the Mongols in 1218.²

After concluding their conquests in 1142 the Qara Khitai ruled over nearly the whole of Central Asia, from the Oxus to the Altai Mountains, and until 1175 even further eastward into the territory of the Naiman and the Yenisei Qirghiz. The southern territories of the Qara Khitai included Balxh (south of the Oxus), Khotan and Hami, and in the north it extended to Lake Balkash and until 1175 also to the further northern territories of the Qangli. This vast empire, roughly equivalent to most of modern Xinjiang, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and south Kazakhstan, more-or-less equaled the extent of the territory of the Jin or the Song in China.

Internally, the Qara Khitai empire was divided between the central territory, under the direct rule of the Qara Khitai, which was organized around their capital, Balāsaghūn, in the Chu valley of modern north Kyrgyzstan, and the territories of the subject kingdoms and tribes: the eastern Qarakhanids around Kashgar and Khotan; the Western Qarakhanids in Transoxania, the Gaochang Uighurs, and Khwārazm, a more outer vassal than the other kingdoms. It also included the realm of the subject tribes: the Qarluq principality of Qayaliq and

² For the political history of the Qara Khitai see Biran, "China, Nomads and Islam," pp. 36–176; see also Ji Zong'an, *Xi Liao shi lun: Yelü Dashi yanjiu* (Urumchi, 1996); Wei Liangtao, *Xi Liao shi gao*, (Beijing, 1991); Wei Liangtao, *Xi Liao shi yanjiu* (Ningxia, 1987); G.G. Plikov, *Zapadnye Kidani* (Novosibirsk, 1989); WF, pp. 619–74; W. Barthold, *Turkestan down to the Mongol Invasion* (4th edn., London, 1968), pp. 323–80.

Almalıq (perhaps in the process of turning from tribe to state), and, at least till 1175, the territories of the Naiman and the Qangli.

The population of this vast empire was multi-ethnic and heterogeneous. Apart from the Khitans, who were a small minority in their empire, it was mainly composed of Turks (including Uighurs), Iranians, Mongols and a few Han Chinese.³ Most of the population was sedentary, though most of the Khitans, the Mongols and some Turkic tribes were nomads. In terms of religion, while the empire included flourishing Buddhist, Nestorian and even Jewish communities, most of its population, including a notable part of the people at the Qara Khitai central territory, were Muslims.⁴

Yet despite the important posts that Muslims held in the central and local administration of the Qara Khitai, their role in the empire's armies and trade, the marriage relations between the Qara Khitai and Muslim rulers, and the tolerant attitude of the Western Liao towards Islam (about which see below), throughout their rule the Qara Khitai did not embrace Islam. For explaining this phenomenon, one has first to understand why other nomadic people did convert to Islam.

Before discussing the complex subject of motives of Islamization or conversion in general, I would like to present a medieval Muslim view on this subject, which is also related to the eastern Islamic world's relations with the fringes of China on the eve of the Qara Khitai's accession.

The book of treasures and luxury articles (*Kutāb al-dhakhā'ir wa'l-tuhaf*) by Ibn Zubayr, written c. 1070 in Egypt, includes a report about an alleged embassy from the emperor⁵ of China to the Samanid *amir* Naṣr b. Aḥmad that arrived in Bukhara in 939. Encouraged by an Iranian turncoat who became his vizier, the "emperor of China"

³ For the Han Chinese in Western Liao's realm see Biran, "China, Nomads and Islam," p. 190, n. 23; cf. Wei Liangtao, *Xi Liao shi yanjiu*, pp. 181–83.

⁴ For a description of the different religious communities see Biran, "China, Nomads and Islam," pp. 350–56.

⁵ The text has *malik al-ṣīn*, i.e. the king of China, which usually refers to a subordinate ruler and not to the emperor himself. (For the devaluation of the title *malik* in Islamic literature and its meaning as the subject of a supreme ruler see A. Ayalon, "Malik," *EJ2*, vi, p. 261.) However, in this book Ibn Zubayr uses the term *malik al-ṣīn* as referring to the Chinese emperor, e.g., while quoting al-Mas'ūdī's report on the letter and gifts sent from China to the Sassanian monarch Khusrāw, he substitutes al-Mas'ūdī's *Fağlīfūr* by the term *malik al-ṣīn* (Ibn Zubayr, *Kutāb al-dhakhā'ir wa'l-tuhaf*, ed. M. Ḥamidallāh [Kuwait, 1959], p. 3; see also p. 9). I therefore follow Bosworth's translation (see next note for reference).

sent a mission of four senior scholars and forty cavalymen, demanding that Naṣr publicly acknowledge Chinese suzerainty and pay tribute for twenty seven years. If refused, he threatened that both Naṣr and his overlord, the 'Abbāsīd Caliph, would be attacked. Learning about the embassy and its mission from the governor of his eastern-most province of Farghāna, Naṣr ordered him to treat the mission hospitably, and began to make preparations. He ordered his governors to gather their troops, volunteers and military slaves, in Bukhara. There he summoned goldsmiths to make him a new crown as well as gold and silver scepters, and ordered the houses of Bukhara to be decked out in various colors. Gilded weapons and armor were collected throughout the country, and the *amīr*'s treasury supplied volunteers with mounts, weapons and banners. When the ambassadors arrived, the city of Bukhara was adorned from one end to the other with brocade, silk and precious fabrics. The ambassadors paraded along a road lined with ranks of cavalry and infantry with gilded cuirasses and helmets. Entering the city, they viewed lines of generals, each leading a thousand military slaves wearing satin brocade robes and caps of sable fur, the first ten of each group holding gold swords, belts and gilded maces. Then they passed between two lines of shaykhs wearing black robes with silver belts. Upon entering the *amīr*'s court, they found him sitting on his ceremonial throne, wearing a quilted coverlet of pheasant plumes embroidered with gold thread, adorned with jewels, wearing his new crown, and even surrounded by tamed lions. After this overawing reception, the emissaries were led to an official residence for ambassadors. Only forty days later did the *amīr* give them an audience, proudly rejecting their demands. He then sent them back to their ruler, but not before stressing that with all his might and wealth he was only one of the Caliph's servants. The narrator's final comment on this story is that "all this was the reason why the emperor of China became a Muslim."⁶ As is well known, the emperor of China did not become a Muslim, nor, probably, was he involved in this mission. Yet what is important for our purposes is not the historical background of this anecdote,⁷ but the motives for Islamization mentioned in the episode and their relevance for the Qara Khitai.

The first motive apparent in this story is the Muslim show of extraordinary military and political power. Yet the Qara Khitai won their fame in the Muslim world and beyond in 1141, by crushing the until-then-undefeatable Sultan Sanjar, by far the most powerful Muslim leader of his time.⁸ During most of their reign the Qara Khitai continued to enjoy military superiority over their Muslim neighbors, thereby minimizing the attraction of Islamization. Furthermore, if the Qara Khitai had to choose between either China or the Muslim world for shaping their identity, the military power of the Jin, which the Qara Khitai were unable to vanquish, must have been more impressive than the fragmented Muslim world of the mid-to-late twelfth century. In this period the 'Abbāsīd caliphate, the declining Seljuqs, the rising Khwārazm Shāhs (accompanied by many minor rulers) contested the leadership of the Muslim world.⁹ It was much more fragmented than China at this stage.

The role of political power in determining the orientation of nomadic acculturation is indeed apparent in the last years of the Qara Khitai. When the dynasty collapsed and Islamization was the means to retain a leading position in Muslim Khwārazm, several noble Khitans were quick to adopt the new faith, the most famous among them was Baraq Hājib, who subsequently founded the Muslim Qara Khitai dynasty of Kirmān, in south Persia, which existed until the early fourteenth century (1222/3–1306).¹⁰

The second motive apparent in the episode is the desire to participate in the affluence of Islamic civilization, which the Sāmānīd *amīr* was so anxious to demonstrate. The lure of civilization was certainly

⁷ The conversion might reflect that of the Qarakhanids in the later decades of the tenth century, while the embassy is probably identical to that of "the King of China Qalīn b. Shākīr" to the same Sāmānīd *amīr*, recorded in other sources and identified as originating in the Yellow Uighurs. Bosworth, "Embassy," p. 8, and see Abū Dulaf's description of that Chinese embassy as cited in Yāqūt, *Muḥjam al-buldān* (Beirut, 1955–8), iii, pp. 440ff.

⁸ See Biran, "China, Nomads and Islam," pp. 84–95.

⁹ For Jin military organization see, e.g., H. Franke, "The Chin," in *CHC*, vol. 6: *Alien Regimes and Border States 907–1368*, eds. D. Twitchett and H. Franke (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 263–67; Wang Cengyu, *Jin chao jun zhi* (Hebei, 1996), *passim*.

¹⁰ For the fall of the Qara Khitai see Biran, "China, Nomads and Islam," pp. 121–76. For Baraq Hājib and the Kirmānīd dynasty, see *ibid.*, pp. 178–81.

⁶ Ibn Zubayr, pp. 139–50; C.E. Bosworth, "An Alleged Embassy from the Emperor of China to the Amir Naṣr b. Ahmad: a Contribution to Sāmānīd Military History," in *Yad-name-ye irānī-ye Minorsky* [sic], eds. I. Afshar and M. Minovi (Tehran, 1969), pp. 1–7.

attractive to the Inner Asian tribes.¹¹ Yet, being closely acquainted with the not-less-impressive civilization of China, the lure of Muslim wealth and splendor was of lesser significance for the Qara Khitai.

Beyond the motives apparent in this episode, anthropologists and historians have explained the conversion of Inner Asian nomads as closely related to the process of state formation. When advanced tribal unions were in the process of transforming themselves into a polity, a new religion could function as a unifying force, a means of ideological distancing, and a sign of independence, all of which aided the process of state formation.¹² In the case of conversion to Islam, DeWeese and Khazanov have stressed the role of the new religion in giving the Islamized group a more cohesive communal identity, differentiating between us, Muslims, and them, infidels. This new identity was often consolidated by means of war (*jihād*) against a common non-Muslim enemy, often a former rival faction.¹³ Thus, when Saljūq embraced Islam, one of his first actions was to turn against his former overlord, an infidel, and the first action of Satuq Bughra Khan, the first Muslim Qarakhanid ruler, was to gain a legal opinion (*fatwā*) that allowed him to kill his infidel father. He performed this act without delay, thereby eliminating the most severe threat to his leadership.¹⁴

In the case of the Qara Khitai, however, those functions were fulfilled by their Chinese-Liao tradition. Though not religious in its character, this tradition gave them, as the Western Liao, a separate and cohesive identity that distinguished them from their subjects.

Despite the paucity of sources about this dynasty, and the fact that nearly none of them was written by members of the dynasty itself, literary and archaeological evidence reveals that throughout its reign the Western Liao retained several Chinese features, such as reign titles and temple names for its emperors,¹⁵ and Chinese honorary

¹¹ P.B. Golden, "The Karakhanids and Early Islam," in *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*, ed. D. Sinor (Cambridge, 1990), p. 353.

¹² P.B. Golden, "Religion among the Qipchaqs of Medieval Eurasia," *CAJ*, 42 (1998), p. 237; A.M. Khazanov, "The Spread of World Religions in Medieval Nomadic Societies of the Eurasian Steppes," in *Nomadic Diplomacy, Destruction and Religion from the Pacific to the Adriatic*, eds. M. Gervers and W. Schlepp (Toronto, 1994), p. 16.

¹³ D. DeWeese, *Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde* (University Park, PA, 1993), pp. 17–27; Khazanov, "World Religions," p. 25.

¹⁴ Golden, "Karakhanids," pp. 357, 362; Ibn al-Fīṭṭāq, *al-Fakhr fī al-ādāb al-sultāniyya wa'l-dawal al-islāmiyya* (Paris, 1895), p. 393.

¹⁵ *LS*, 30/357–8; Liu You, *Ben shi ji*, in Wang Guowei, *Wang Guowei yi shu* (Shanghai, 1983), xiii, p. 5692.

and administrative titles for its nobility and officials.¹⁶ In the central territory of the Qara Khitai, administrative measures such as the census or taxation of households rather than individuals are apparent,¹⁷ and local rulers who submitted to the Qara Khitai received seals and tablets of authority, and had to acknowledge the supremacy of the Western Liao in certain rites.¹⁸ The Chinese language was used on the Chinese-type coins of the dynasty.¹⁹ Throughout its reign the Western Liao retained a unique Khitan dress that distinguished it from its Muslim subjects,²⁰ and at least in the case of the Western Liao emperor, this dress was made exclusively of Chinese silk.²¹

In the manner of the northern Chinese tradition, however, these symbols of "Chineseness" were by no means exclusive: The Western Liao emperor also bore the Inner Asian title *Gürkhan*, and Khitan, Turkic and Arabo-Persian titles coexisted with the Chinese ones. Moreover, Khitan, Uighur and Persian were used together with Chinese in writing. Yet, the symbols sufficed to assure the Qara Khitai rulers the designation of "Chinese" both in the Muslim world and in Yuan China, where the *Liao shi* was written. It therefore gave them an identity distinct from that of their subjects, nomads and sedentary alike.

Part of this identity was the enduring aspiration to restore the original Liao in its former domain. Soon after his first achievements in Central Asia, after his coronation at Emil in 1131/2 and the conquest of Balāsaghun in 1134, Yelü Dashi, probably motivated by his home-sick Khitan subjects, organized an allegedly grand campaign against the Jin. The campaign, which Dashi prudently did not lead in person, was a great fiasco, a fact that convinced the Qara Khitai to devote their energies to Central Asia. But although most of the Qara Khitai military activity was directed westwards, they did not

¹⁶ *LS*, 30/357–8; Yelü Chucai, *Zhan yan ju shi wenji* (Rpt., Shanghai, 1983), p. 109. Some Chinese titles are recorded also in the Muslim literature e.g. *Fīmā* (= *fama*, imperial son in law) or *Shaugam* (= *shaogam*, junior supervisor); WF, pp. 665–66.

¹⁷ *LS*, 30/357; Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil fī al-tārīkh* (Beirut, 1966), xi, p. 84.

¹⁸ Ibn al-Athīr, xi, p. 84; Tuo Tuo, *Jin shi* (Rpt., Beijing, 1975), 121/2637–8; 'Alā' al-Dīn 'Aṭā-Malik Juwaynī, *Tārīkh-i jahān-gushā*, ed. M.M. Qazwīnī (London, 1912–1937), ii, pp. 18, 75; translation in J.A. Boyle, *The History of the World Conqueror* (Manchester, 1958), i, pp. 290, 342; Tattawī et al., *Tārīkh-i alfi*, MS. India Office 3291, iii, fol. 198.

¹⁹ Wei Yuewang, "Liao qian tu lu," *China Numismatics*, 4 (1984), p. 69; WF, p. 673.

²⁰ Juwaynī, i, p. 49; ii, p. 84; tr. Boyle, i, pp. 65, 352.

²¹ Ibn al-Athīr, xi, p. 86.

neglect their connection with the East. They proudly refused to acknowledge Jin's sovereignty in 1146, and there is evidence of their continued interest in the Jin borders in their dispatch of scouts, spies, or even small scale military forces in 1136, 1156, 1177, and perhaps also in 1185–6 and in 1188–1190.²² The vision of restoring the "Great Liao" clearly pulled the Qara Khitai eastward, away from the Muslim lands, and defined their common enemy, the Jurchen Jin dynasty, in ethnic rather than in religious terms.

Moreover, the Liao imperial framework included certain means of centralization, notably the elevated position of the Gürkhan/emperor and the nomination of successors, which facilitated the establishment and consolidation of the Qara Khitai empire.²³ Islam, therefore, was not needed for those functions. In their central territory, the Qara Khitai practiced an Inner Asian type of government, characterized by a personal relationship between the ruler and his officials, the importance of the ruler's personal retinue, the dominance of military positions and the overlapping of civil and military duties. Yet most officials of this administration bore Chinese titles, and the symbols of rulership and vassalage (e.g. reign titles; tables of authority; tribute; rites acknowledging the supremacy of the Western Liao) were Chinese. Moreover, the considerable autonomy given by the Qara Khitai to their subject kingdoms and tribes, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, spared them the need to create a systematic unified administration throughout their empire.²⁴ Islam, therefore, was not needed for this function either.

Another major motive which drove Inner Asian peoples to adopt Islam was their desire to win legitimacy among their Muslim subjects and neighbors and to legitimize their conquests.²⁵ But the Qara Khitai were able to gain legitimacy in the Muslim world without being Muslims themselves. The Qara Khitai conquest resulted in the subjection of the whole of Islamic Central Asia, including important religious centers like Bukhara and Samarkand, to non-Muslim rule for the first time since the rise of Islam. Yet the relations between the Qara Khitai rulers and their Muslim subjects were mainly harmonious, and in retrospect Muslim sources even described the Qara

Khitai as a mighty wall or dam that defended Islam from its eastern enemies.²⁶ Thus, in the same period in which Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn mobilized tens of thousands of Muslims in the name of the *jihād* in Syria and Palestine, in Central Asia the "infidel" Qara Khitai were portrayed as defenders of Islam.

How did the Qara Khitai gain legitimacy despite their unbelief? Since the subject of legitimation is important, and also closely connected to the Qara Khitai policies towards their sedentary subjects, I will discuss it at some length below. Again, their ability to gain legitimation had much to do with their Chinese and nomadic background.

First, the Chinese tradition retained by the Qara Khitai contributed to their legitimation even among their Muslim subjects: In Muslim Central Asia, China, though vaguely known, was closely connected with notions of grandeur and prestige. It was conceived as a mysterious, well-populated kingdom, in the eastern fringes of the world, whose emperor was one of the five great kings of the world (together with the rulers of India, Byzantium, the Arabs and the Turks). The Chinese were known as idol worshippers, but had a reputation of tolerance towards other religions and of justice in general. The Muslims recognized the peculiarity of the Chinese script, and admired Chinese artisanship.²⁷ Moreover, one of the most prestigious titles among the Qarakhanid dynasty, to whose realm the Western Liao succeeded, was the title Tamghaj Khan (Turkic: The Khan of China),²⁸ and the memory of former Chinese sovereignty was still alive even in the Western Liao westernmost province, Transoxania.²⁹ No doubt the legitimating factor of those Chinese trappings contributed to the preservation of these aspects of Liao culture in the Qara Khitai empire, despite the fact that it was far from China proper and included only a few ethnic Chinese.³⁰

But aside from being Chinese emperors, the Qara Khitai were also Gürkhanes, the allegedly universal rulers of the nomads. Identified by Muslim sources not only as Chinese but also as another kind of

²⁶ See Biran, "China, Nomads and Islam," ch. 6; M. Biran, "Like a Mighty Wall: The Armies of the Qara Khitai," *JSAI*, 25 (2001), pp. 44–91.

²⁷ A. Miquel, "L'Inde et la Chine vues du côté de l'Islam," in *As Others See Us*, eds. B. Lewis *et al.* (New York, 1985), pp. 284–301.

²⁸ Biran, "China, Nomads and Islam," ch. 4, pp. 196–99.

²⁹ Sharaf al-Zamān Marwazī, *Tabāʾiʿ al-hayawān* (Sharaf al-Zamān Tāhī Marwazī on China, Turks and India), ed. and tr. V. Minorsky (London, 1942), pp. 6 (text), 18 (tr.).

³⁰ See, in general, Biran, "China, Nomads and Islam," ch. 4.

²² See Biran, "China, Nomads and Islam," pp. 36–184.

²³ See Biran, "China, Nomads and Islam," pp. 248–50.

²⁴ See Biran, "China, Nomads and Islam," Ch. 4.

²⁵ Khazanov, "World Religions," p. 21.

Turks, the Qara Khitai indeed had much in common with Central Asian nomads and formerly nomadic Turks, and with the partly turkicized sedentary population in their realm.³¹ First of all, they shared the coexistence of nomad and sedentary populations in the same state, a typical situation in both Liao China and Central Asia.³² Moreover, the Qara Khitai shared with the Central Asian Turks social values, such as the important role of warfare in everyday life; the high position of women; and the high position of merchants.³³ They shared certain aspects of political culture, such as the importance of marriage alliances, the policy of holding subjects' hostages, and the practice of hunting as a royal sport as well as certain features of military organization.³⁴ Despite their different geographical, ethnic and religious background, they were not complete strangers to the Central Asian scene.

The common nomadic background, however, could have benefited any dynasty of nomadic origin which arrived in Central Asia, and not specifically the Qara Khitai. Yet, originating in Manchuria, a region in which nomadic and sedentary population coexisted, and coming into Central Asia after more than two hundred years of ruling in north China, with its multiple rural and urban population, the Qara Khitai were no strangers to "the rules of the cities." They had much a stronger awareness of the relationship between the welfare of their sedentary subjects and the stability and flourishing of their empire than other contemporary nomads, notably the Mongols. This awareness, manifested in a relatively non-destructive conquest and in reasonable financial demands (at least until the last decades of the dynasty), together with their ability to control the nomads in

³¹ For the turkicization of the Central Asian sedentary population at this stage, see P.B. Golden, *An Introduction to the History of the Turkic People* (Wiesbaden, 1992), pp. 228–29.

³² See the famous example of the Western Qarakhanid ruler Shams al-Mulk (1068–80), who continued to lead a nomadic existence, erecting his tents in the neighborhood of his capital, Bukhara, only in winter. Like the Qara Khitai, he did not let his nomadic preferences disrupt his caring for the interests of his sedentary subjects. His accompanying troops, for example, were kept under strict discipline, and he ordered the soldiers to keep to their tents lest they disturb the city population. 'Awfi, *Jamā'at al-hikāyat*, in V.V. Barthold, *Turkestan v epokhu 'mongol'skogo nashestiia* (St. Petersburg, 1900), i (texts), p. 85; Barthold, *Turkestan*, p. 315; O. Karav, *Istoriia Karakhanidskogo kaganata* (Frunze, 1983), p. 204; WF, p. 663.

³³ See Biran, "China, Nomads and Islam," ch. 5.

³⁴ For details see Biran, "China, Nomads and Islam," ch. 5.

their realm for most of their reign period, resulted in relative political stability and economic prosperity. This certainly contributed to the acceptance of the Qara Khitai as legitimate rulers in Central Asia.

Another major factor that allowed the Qara Khitai to gain legitimacy was the broad religious tolerance they gave their subjects. The Qara Khitai conquest did not originate in religious zeal, nor did the Qara Khitai have anything against Islam. They retained the Inner Asian policy of religious tolerance. Originating in the concept that each religion is an effective means of communication between the divinity and men, this policy certainly fitted a situation in which the conquerors were a small minority in a multi-religious empire.³⁵ The Qara Khitai therefore assured their subjects freedom of worship, and many references attest to the uninterrupted continuation of Muslim religious life under the Qara Khitai, both in the central territory and in the subject kingdoms.³⁶

For Islam, however, religious freedom means not only the freedom of worship but also the right to exercise authority.³⁷ One of the main criteria for differentiating the abode of Islam from the abode of war was that the government would be in Muslim hands: Muslim rulers would have the power to enforce their rule, and the judges would be able to enforce Muslim law.³⁸ While remaining overlords, the Qara Khitai enabled the Muslims in their subject kingdoms to enjoy far greater authority than contemporary and later non-Muslim conquerors.

Muslim freedom to exercise authority under the Qara Khitai was obvious first of all in that most Muslim (and other) subject rulers retained their kingdoms intact. They were subject to financial and military obligations, but they usually maintained their titles and their armies. No permanent Qara Khitai army was stationed in the conquered states, and the commissioners that the Qara Khitai sent to their Muslim subject kingdoms were always Muslims by deliberate

³⁵ Minhāj al-Dīn Juzjānī, *Tabaqāt-i nāsiri*, ed. 'Abd al-Hayy Ḥabībī (Kabul, 1963–64), ii, p. 95; in general see J.P. Roux, "La tolérance religieuse dans les empires Turco-Mongols," *RHR*, 203 (1986), pp. 131–68.

³⁶ Biran, "China, Nomads and Islam," pp. 359–61.

³⁷ B. Lewis, "Legal and Historical Reflections on the Position of Muslim Populations under Non-Muslim rule," *Journal, Institute of Muslim Minorities' Affairs*, 13 (1992), p. 10.

³⁸ M.Kh. Haykal, *al-Jihād wa'l-qiāl fī al-siyāsa al-shar'īya* (Beirut, 1993), i, p. 669; M. Khadduri, *War and Peace in the Law of Islam* (Baltimore, 1955), p. 155; K. Abou el Fadl, "Islamic Law and Muslim Minorities," *Islamic Law and Society*, 1 (1994), p. 161.

choice.³⁹ In the same fashion they nominated a Buddhist monk to serve as their commissioner in the mostly Buddhist Gaochang.⁴⁰

Moreover, as noted earlier, the Qara Khitai customarily did not use the Muslim symbols of submission, namely they usually did not require the subject rulers to mention their name in the Friday sermon (*khutba*) at the mosque, or on the vassal's coins (*ṣikka*).⁴¹ Instead they gave their vassals a silver tablet of authority to hang on their palace. But this was not taken as a sign of submission in the Muslim world, and perhaps even enhanced the subject rulers' prestige. Therefore, there were hardly any external signs of the rulers' submission to the Qara Khitai. Looking at the pompous titles that the Qarakhanid rulers bore under the Qara Khitai, one could hardly guess they were not independent rulers.⁴²

The only authority besides that of the Qarakhanids themselves mentioned in the Qarakhanid inscriptions and books is that of the 'Abbāsīd Caliph: The Qarakhanid rulers of Transoxania⁴³ and Farghāna⁴⁴ are described as his assistants (*nā'irs*), and the *ṣadr*, the religious-administrative ruler, of Bukhara, who worked in close cooperation with the Gürkhan, is defined as "the backbone of the Caliphate" (*ẓahr al-khilāfa*).⁴⁵ Those references to the Caliphate, though probably without practical meaning, imply that the sense of being under Islamic

³⁹ Muhammad b. Muḥammad 'Imād al-Dīn al-Iṣḥānī, *Tārīkh dawlat al-saljūq* (Cairo, 1900), p. 255; al-Faḥ b. 'Alī al-Bundārī, *ẓubdat al-nusra wa-nukhbat al-ṭuṣa*, ed. M.T. Houtsma in *Recueil de textes relatifs à l'histoire des Seljoucides* (Leiden, 1886), i, p. 278; see Biran, "China, Nomads and Islam," pp. 250–52 for further examples.

⁴⁰ YS, 124/3049; Ouyang Xuan, *Guizhai wenji*, *Sibu congkan* ed., 11/5a.

⁴¹ See Biran, "China, Nomads and Islam," pp. 248–50 for those terms, as well as for the rare examples of inscribing the Gürkhan's name on Qarakhanid coins.

⁴² Sultan 'Uthmān (1200–1213), the last of the Western Qarakhanids, who paid tribute to the Gürkhan and begged in vain to marry the latter's daughter, was called on his coins *sultān al-salāṭin*, the Sultan of the Sultans (B.D. Kocneev, *Karakhanidskie monety* [Moscow, 1993], p. 32). In an 1152 inscription on the Uzgand mausoleum, the local Qarakhanid ruler is called the just and greatest Khaqan (*al-khāqān al-'ādil al-ā'ẓam*) (A.Iu. Iakubovskii, "Dva nadpisi na severnom mavzolee 1152g v Uzgende," *Epigraphika Vostočka*, 1 [1947], p. 29); and al-Kātib al-Samarqandī, who in 1160 dedicated his *Sinḍbād nāmah* to the Western Qarakhanid ruler Ma'ūd b. Ḥasan, praised his patron as "the greatest and just Khaqan," adding a string of titles such as "the most noble Sultan," "the crown of the kings of the Turks," "the aider of Islam and of the Muslims" and "God's shadow on earth." Al-Kātib al-Samarqandī, *Sinḍbād nāmah* (Isfahan, 1948), pp. 8ff.

⁴³ *Sinḍbād nāmah*, pp. 8, 431.

⁴⁴ Iakubovskii, p. 29.

⁴⁵ Muhammad Narshakhī, *Tārīkh-i bukhārā*, ed. Ch. Schefer (Paris, 1892), p. 3; R.N. Frye (tr.), *History of Bukhara* (Cambridge MA, 1954), p. 4.

sovereignty was retained in Transoxania and Farghāna even under the Qara Khitai. It is impossible to know whether the Qara Khitai were simply unaware of such titles or consciously chose to ignore them.

Another manifestation of the strength of Islam under the Qara Khitai was the undamaged authority of the Muslim scholars, the 'ulamā'.⁴⁶ Their religious activity was unharmed, and at least in Transoxania religious offices (*mufti*, chief preacher, judge, *shaykh al-Islām*) continued to be manned.⁴⁷ The 'ulamā' also retained their political authority and social prestige. This is especially evident by the fate of the Burhān family from Bukhara. The Burhānid were the leaders of Bukhara's Ḥanafī school and the persons in charge of its administration since the early 12th century. They retained their authority also under the Qara Khitai, and eventually the Gürkhan even made them his sole representatives in Bukhara, where they were responsible for collecting the taxes.⁴⁸ This enhanced their economic and social position even further.⁴⁹ The respect in which these and other scholars were held by the Qara Khitai also increased their prestige elsewhere in the Muslim world. Interestingly, there is no mention of criticism of scholars who enjoyed the "infidels'" favors.⁵⁰

Another way in which Islam was able to display its authority was by monumental building.⁵¹ Unlike other contemporary conquerors, the Qara Khitai did not seem ever to have damaged Muslim sanctuaries.⁵² They did not turn mosques into churches, like the Franks,

⁴⁶ Juzjānī, ii, p. 95.

⁴⁷ 'Abd al-Karīm b. Muhammad al-Sam'ānī, *Kutāb al-ansāb*, ed. 'A. al-Bārūdī (Beirut, 1988), ii, pp. 429, 483; iii, pp. 198–99; 'Abd al-Karīm b. Muḥammad al-Sam'ānī, *al-Taḥbīr fī al-mujam al-kabīr*, ed. M.N. Sālim (Baghdad, 1975), ii, pp. 225–26, 235–36, 261–62; 'Abd al-Qādir b. Muḥammad al-Qurashī, *al-Jawāhir al-Mudhiyya fī tabaqāt al-hanafiyya*, ed. 'A.M. al-Ḥilwī (Cairo, 1993), ii, p. 314.

⁴⁸ For details see Biran, "China, Nomads and Islam," pp. 229–48.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*; Muḥammad Nasawī, *Ṣirat al-sultān jalāl al-dīn mankūbirtī*, ed. H.A. Hamdī (Cairo, 1953), p. 68. Another manifestation of the political stand of the Burhānids is that when the Khwārazm Shāh conquered Transoxania in 1209–10 he treated the *ṣadr*s just like other local rulers, i.e., exiled them to Khwārazm. (Nasawī, pp. 68, 94). For the continued appreciation of Burhānid scholarship see, e.g., al-Tamīmī al-Dārī, *al-Tabaqāt al-sunniyya* (Cairo, 1970), i, p. 439; al-Qurashī, *al-Jawāhir al-Mudhiyya*, ii, p. 259; al-Sam'ānī, *Kutāb al-ansāb*, iii, pp. 198–9; V.N. Nāsūtis and V.D. Goriacheva, "Epigraphicheskie pamiatniki Safid-Bulana XII–XIV vv.," *Epigraphika Vostočka*, 22 (1984), p. 66.

⁵⁰ 'Abdallāh b. 'Umar Balkhī, *Fadā'il-i Balkh*, ed. 'A. Habībī (Tehran, 1972), p. 372; Muḥammad b. 'Alī Rāwandī, *Rāhat al-sudūr wa-āyat al-surūr*, ed. M. Iqbāl (London, 1921), p. 18.

⁵¹ Lewis, "Legal and Historical Reflections," p. 10.

⁵² Cf. al-Kātib al-Samarqandī, *A'wāḍ al-siyāsa fī aghṣād al-n'āsa*, MS Leiden Cod.

nor did they turn mosques into stables, as Chinggis Khan did in Bukhara. The Qara Khitai also allowed their subjects to erect new religious buildings, including an enormous monument such as the minaret of Vabkent in the Bukhara oasis. Initiated by the Burhānid *ṣadr* in 1196/7 and completed in 1198/9, this minaret is almost 39 meters high with a bottom diameter of 6.2 meters and is beautifully designed.⁵³ Under the Qara Khitai the Burhānid *ṣadrs* also built mosques in Bukhara;⁵⁴ the Friday mosque (*jāmi'*) in Samarqand was restored;⁵⁵ and lofty mausoleums for the Qarakhanid rulers in Samarqand and Uzgand were built.⁵⁶

A telling proof of the freedom and authority given to Islam by the Qara Khitai is that contemporary visitors and travelers completely ignored them. Benjamin of Tudela and al-Gharnāṭī, both of them twelfth century travelers who visited Transoxania or at least Iran, do not mention the Qara Khitai at all in their references to Central Asia.⁵⁷ Even more revealing is al-Sam'ānī's evidence. Al-Sam'ānī stayed in Transoxania in 1153/4–1156/7, a period for which there is rare hard proof, that of coins, for the region's submission to the Qara Khitai.⁵⁸ Yet in his description of the cities which were subject to the Qara Khitai (e.g., Bukhara, Balāsāghūn, Talas, Kashgar, Khotan), al-Sam'ānī never mentions that they were under non-Muslim

rule, but only enumerates the Muslim scholars who originated there.⁵⁹ In sharp contrast to that, however, when writing about Jerusalem and also about smaller places in Syria and Palestine, such as Antioch, Nablus or Banyās, the first thing he stresses is that they were under the infidel Franks at that time.⁶⁰

The examples adduced so far refer mostly to Transoxania and Farghāna, about which the information is relatively ample. However, even in the Qara Khitai central territory, where the former Muslim ruler of Balāsāghūn was degraded and relocated following the Qara Khitai conquest,⁶¹ and where their presence was stronger than in Transoxania, talented Muslims could reach high, authoritative posts. The vizier of the last Gürkhan, for example, was a Muslim merchant called Maḥmūd Tāi;⁶² and the Gürkhan's court doctor was the Muslim judge (*qāḍī*) Shams al-Dīn Maṣṣūr b. Maḥmūd al-Uzgandī.⁶³ Unlike the Qarakhanids, who ruined and profaned Turkic and Buddhist religious sanctuaries, the Qara Khitai left the imposing minaret of Balāsāghūn intact, thereby preserving a symbol of Islamic authority.⁶⁴

The broad religious tolerance and political autonomy the Qara Khitai gave their subjects, combined with a relatively benign conquest and initially reasonable financial demands, all gave the Qara Khitai a firm reputation as just rulers.⁶⁵ This reputation was not only helpful in attracting their subjects' support, but also had religious meaning, since it could have legitimized Qara Khitai rule even if they did not embrace Islam. In medieval Muslim political theory, justice was the basic foundation of righteous government.⁶⁶ One of the literary means

⁵⁹ See, e.g., *Kitāb al-ansāb*, i, pp. 293 (Bukhara), 424 (Balasaghun); ii, pp. 324–25 (Khotan); iv, pp. 55–56 (Taraz); v, pp. 17–18 (Kashgar). Even in connection with Qatwān, al-Sam'ānī only said that there was a great battle of the Muslims there, without mentioning against whom (*ibid.*, iv, p. 525).

⁶⁰ *Kitāb al-ansāb*, i, pp. 220, 273; v, pp. 363ff.

⁶¹ See Biran, "China, Nomads and Islam," pp. 70–83, 229–48.

⁶² Juwaynī, ii, p. 89; tr. i, p. 357.

⁶³ Muḥammad 'Awfi, *Lubāb al-albāb*, ed. Sa'īd Nafīsī (Tehran, 1954), pp. 165–66.

⁶⁴ For the Balāsāghūn (Burana) minaret see, e.g., Goriacheva, *Ansambli*, pp. 29ff.

⁶⁵ Jūzjānī, ii, p. 96; Juwaynī, ii, p. 90 and tr. i, p. 358; Nizāmī 'Arūḍī, *Chahār maqāla*, (ed. M. Qazwīnī and M. Mu'īn. Tehran, 1954), p. 22; tr. E.G. Browne (Gibb Memorial Series, XI, no. 2. London, 1921), p. 24; al-Dhahabī, *Ta'rikh al-Islām* (ed. B. A. Ma'rūf. Beirut, 1988), xii, p. 330.

⁶⁶ A.K.S. Lambton, "Justice in the Medieval Persian Theory of Kingship," *Studia Islamica*, 17 (1962), pp. 92, 119. See also the emphasis on justice in the titles and panegyrics of the Western Qarakhanids under the Qara Khitai and before them,

904 Warn, fol. 214a and Rashīd al-Dīn Waṭwāt, *Nāmāhā-i nastīd al-dīn uqūwāt*, ed. Q. Tawfīkianī (Tehran, 1959), p. 19 on the Oghuz invasion of Khurasan in 1153 in which they destroyed mosques, pulpits, *madrasas* and Islamic sanctuaries and harmed Muslim dignitaries; Juwaynī, i, pp. 80–81; tr. Boyle, i, pp. 103–4 for Chinggis Khan's turning Bukhara's *jāmi'* into a stable; B.Z. Kedar, "The Subjected Muslims of the Frankish Levant," in *Muslims under Latin Rule*, ed. J.M. Powell, (Princeton, 1990), pp. 161–62, for the Crusaders turning mosques into churches.

⁵³ L.Iu. Man'kovskaia and T. Pulatov, *Bukhara: Muzej pod otkrytym nebotom* (Tashkent, 1991), p. 83; B. O'Kane, "The Minaret of Vabkent," in *The Art of the Seljuqs in Iran and Anatolia*, ed. Robert Hillenbrand (Costa Mesa, 1994), p. 46–58.

⁵⁴ Mu'īn al-Fuḡarā', *Ta'rikh-i Mullāzādah*, (Tehran, 1960), p. 46.

⁵⁵ Iu.F. Burīakov and Sh.S. Tashkhodzhaev, "Istoricheskaia topografiia Samarkanda XI-nachala XIII vv.," *Afrosiyab*, 4 (1975), p. 12; Iu. F. Burīakov et al., "Sobornia mechet' Samarkanda v XI-nachale XIII vv.," *Afrosiyab*, 4 (1975), p. 98. A more comprehensive restoration took place under the Khwārazm Shāh Muḥammad after he had turned Samarqand into his capital in 1213.

⁵⁶ V.D. Goriacheva, *Srednekovye gorodskie tenty i arkhitekturnye ansambli Kirgizi (Burana, Uzen, Safid-Bulan)* (Frunze, 1983), pp. 88ff.; G.A. Pugachenkova and E.V. Rveladze, "Afrosiyab," *Elr*, i, pp. 577–78.

⁵⁷ *WF*, p. 667 for Benjamin; Abū Hamīd al-Gharnāṭī, *Tuhfat al-albāb*, ed. G. Ferrand. J4, 207 (1925), pp. 86–91, 145–47, 202.

⁵⁸ Kochnev, p. 31.

to stress the importance of justice for the Muslim government was the maxim "Kingship remains with the unbelievers but not with injustice," known also in a variant, "a just infidel is preferable to an unjust Muslim ruler." The maxim was often quoted in Muslim *adab* works and from the eleventh century onward even attributed to the Prophet.⁶⁷ Originally, the maxim did not have legal meaning, yet it acquired one when non-Muslim rulers proliferated. This is clear, for example, from Hüleğü Khan's use of this maxim: after Hüleğü conquered Baghdad and extinguished the 'Abbāsīd Caliphate in 1258, he asked the local *'ulamā'* for a legal opinion on the question who is preferable, an infidel ruler who is righteous or a Muslim ruler who is unjust. After some hesitation, Ibn Tā'ūs, a leading Shi'ite scholar, signed the *fatwā*, confirming the preference of a just infidel over an unjust Muslim, and he was followed by the other scholars.⁶⁸ The maxim that legitimated Hüleğü's rule at Baghdad was most probably known in the Qara Khitai realm,⁶⁹ and was much more applicable to them than to Hüleğü, thus it is quite possible that it was used to justify their rule as well,⁷⁰ if the need ever arose (e.g., in the central territory). Due to the Qara Khitai's loose notion of sovereignty and their tolerant attitude towards Islam, however, it was easier to ignore their presence altogether instead of coping with the legal and reli-

e.g. *Sindbād nāmāh*, p. 8; 'Awfī, *Lubāb*, pp. 147–49; Jakubowski, p. 29; Yusuf Khass Hajib, *Wisdom of Royal Glory* (*Kutadgū bilig*), ed. and tr. R. Dankoff (Chicago, 1983), pp. 64–69.

⁶⁷ Lewis, p. 4; Lambton, "Justice," p. 104; J. Sadan, "Community and Extra-Community as a Legal and Literary Problem," *Israel Oriental Studies*, 10 (1980), pp. 102–15. The most common Arabic form is *al-mulk yabqā ma'a al-kufr wa-la yabqā ma'a al-zulm*.

⁶⁸ Ibn al-Ṭīqāqā, p. 21; cited in Sadan, pp. 114–15.

⁶⁹ It appears, for example, in the *Tadhkira* of Ibn Khamdūn (d. 1169), who wrote in Khwārazm, as well as in other twelfth-thirteenth century compositions; Sadan, p. 109.

⁷⁰ This suggestion, however, is purely theoretical. In the few legal works originating in the Qara Khitai empire I was able to check (e.g. *al-Hidāya*; *Fatāwā qāḍī khān*), there is no reference to the Qara Khitai rule at all. This, however, characterizes the twelfth century's legal literature even in places where the conquerors were more strongly felt, e.g., under the Franks (E. Sivan, *L'Islam et le Croisé* [Paris, 1968], pp. 191–2). Abou el Fadl, who studied the problem of Muslims under non-Muslim rule, explained that the extent of this problem became significant only from the twelfth century onward, and it took several centuries before the law schools fully developed and systematized their responses (Abou el Fadl, "Islamic Law and Muslim Minorities," pp. 150, 153). The most extensive discussion of this issue in the twelfth century took place in Spain after the *reconquista*, mainly in the Maliki school. See Abou el Fadl, pp. 151–57.

gious meaning of the subjugation of Islamic territories to infidel rule.

But leaving legal discussions aside, as long as the Qara Khitai fulfilled the ruler's basic functions, i.e., maintaining order and preventing oppression, and as long as they did not interfere with their subjects' religious practices, they enjoyed the support of their Muslim (and non-Muslims) subjects. Due to these policies, the Muslims sometimes preferred to side with the Qara Khitai against a harsher Muslim ruler.⁷¹ The Khwārazm Shah, who in 1182 raided Bukhara, complained that its allegedly renegade population preferred "the net of unbelief" over his pious forces.⁷² Only in the last years of the Qara Khitai, when they were weakened and their local commissioners manipulated this weakness and oppressed the population, did the political, social and economic protest appear in religious guise, and the *jihādī* terminology came to the fore.⁷³

In sum, the combination of the Qara Khitai's "just" policies, their affinities to the Turkic rulers and the Turkic and Turkicized population and the prestige of China enabled the Qara Khitai to achieve legitimation in the Muslim world even though they remained "infidels." They therefore did not need Islam for gaining legitimacy.

So far the discussion has dealt only with mundane motives, not with spiritual ones, as indeed political, economic and social considerations stood behind most of the medieval Inner Asian conversions.⁷⁴ Yet one should bear in mind that the Qara Khitai came to Central Asia equipped not only with their ethnic-tribal Khitan religion, but also with their own universal religion, Buddhism. The sources do not allow us to assess the importance of Buddhism for the Qara Khitai.⁷⁵ But whatever it meant for them, their adherence to this religion suggests that their spiritual stimulation to adopt Islam was also weaker than that of nomads who had not adapted a universal religion.

In sum: why did the Qara Khitai not embrace Islam? Within their heterogeneous empire in Central Asia, there were no political or

⁷¹ Ibn al-Athīr, xii, pp. 137–38; Bar Hebraeus, *The Chronography of Gregory Abu'l Faraj*... commonly known as *Bar Hebraeus*, tr. E.A.W. Budge (London, 1932), i, pp. 346–47.

⁷² Muḥammad b. Mu'ayyad al-Baghdādī, *Kutāb al-tawassul ilā al-karassul* (Tehran, 1936), pp. 125–27.

⁷³ Ibn al-Athīr, xii, p. 259; Juwaynī, ii, pp. 74, 123 and tr. Boyle, i, p. 341; ii, pp. 393–94; see Biran, "China, Nomads and Islam," ch. 3.

⁷⁴ Khazanov, "World Religions," pp. 11–15; J.H. Bentley, *Old World Encounters* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 7–8; Golden, "Qipchaqs," p. 227.

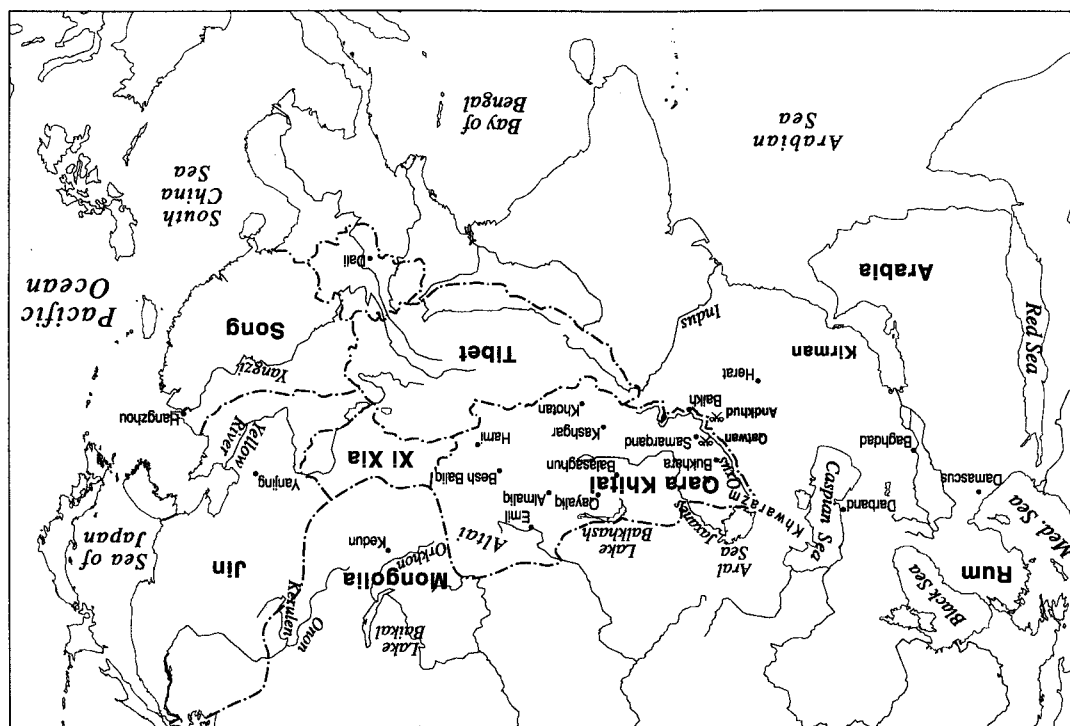
⁷⁵ See the discussion in Biran, "China, Nomads and Islam," pp. 344–48, 352–53.

social pressures that encouraged the Qara Khitai to islamize. Nor was there any specific interest that encouraged them to voluntarily associate themselves with Islam. While a certain amount of acculturation, induced by the frequent contact with the Muslims, was natural, and facilitated by the affinities between the Qara Khitai and the partly Muslim nomadic Turks, the multi-religious character of the empire, the relatively short time of their rule and, above all, their adherence to the Chinese-Liao tradition did not favor acculturation.⁷⁶

Islam did not manage to conquer the Qara Khitai as it did other nomads in Central Asia. This was mostly because the Chinese-Liao tradition adhered to by the Qara Khitai fulfilled the same functions that Islam provided other nomads with, namely, communal identity, means of statehood and legitimation.

⁷⁶ The distinction between the three different mechanisms of conversion (1) through political and social pressures; (2) through voluntary association; and (3) through acculturation is based on Bentley, pp. 5–20, esp. pp. 7–8, although he used the term assimilation whereas I prefer acculturation.

Map 6. Asia, ca. 1142 CE. The Qara Khitai (Western Liao) Empire. After Tan Qixiang, *Zhongguo Lishi ditu ji* (Shanghai, 1982), VI, 42–43 (with changes).



Glossary of Chinese Characters

Fuma	駙馬
Jin	金
Kedun	可敦
Liao	遼
Shaojian	少監
Xi Liao	西遼
Yelü Dashi	耶律大石

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