

THE NESTORIANS IN CHINA.

ACCORDING TO THE LATE S. WELLS WILLIAMS.

[S. Wells Williams, late professor of the Chinese Language and Literature at Yale College, in his valuable work *The Middle Kingdom*, Vol. II, Chapter XIX, speaks of the Christian missions in China, and since the book is not very accessible to our readers we collect here those portions which refer to the Nestorians in China. Bracketed passages are a condensation. The other paragraphs are direct quotations from *The Middle Kingdom*.—Ed.]

THE time of the arrival of the Nestorians in China cannot be specified certainly, but there are grounds for placing it as early as A. D. 505: Ebedjesus Sobiensis remarks that "the Catholicos Salibazacha created the metropolitan sees of Sina and Samarcand, though some say they were constituted by Achæus and Silas." Silas was patriarch of the Nestorians from A. D. 505 to 520; and Achæus was archbishop at Seleucia in 415. The metropolitan bishop of Sina is also mentioned in a list of those subject to this patriarch, published by Amro, and it is placed in the list after that of India, according to the priority of foundation.

The only record yet found in China itself of the labors of the Nestorians is the celebrated monument which was discovered at Sí-ngan fu in Shensí, in 1625; and though the discussion regarding its authenticity has been rather warm between the Jesuits and their opponents, the weight of evidence, both internal and external, leaves no doubt regarding its verity. It has been found quite recently to be in good preservation, and rubbings taken from it are nearly perfect. The Syriac characters composing the signatures of Olopun and his associates have made it an object of much interest to the natives; these, as well as the singular cross on its top, have doubtless contributed to its preservation. It was set up in 1859 by a Chinese who had so much regard for it as to rebuild it in the brick wall

where it had once stood outside of the city.¹ The stone seems to be a coarse marble.

It has been often translated since the first attempt by Boime, published with the original by Kircher in Holland. In 1845 Dr. E. C. Bridgman published Kircher's Latin translation with the French version of Dalquié, and another of his own, which brought it more into notice. The style is very terse, and the exact meaning not easily perceived even by learned natives. As Dr. Bridgman says, "Were a hundred Chinese students employed on the document they would probably each give a different view of the meaning in some parts of the inscription." This is apparent when four or five of them are compared. The last one, by A. Wylie, of the London Mission at Shanghai, goes over the whole subject with a fulness and care which leaves little to be desired.²

Timothy, a patriarch, sent Subchal-Jesus in 780, who labored in Tartary and China for many years, and lost his life on his return, when his place was supplied by Davidis, who was consecrated metropolitan. In the year 845 an edict of Wu-tsung commanded the priests that belonged to the sect that came from Ta Tsin, amounting to no less than three thousand persons, to retire to private life. The two Arabian travelers in the ninth century report that many Christians perished in the siege of Canfu. Marco Polo's frequent allusions lead us to conclude that the Nestorians were both numerous and respected.

He mentions the existence of a church at Hangchau, and two at Chinkiang, built by the prefect Marsarchis, who was himself a member of that church, and alludes to their residence in most of the towns and countries of Central Asia.

The existence of a Christian prince called Prester John, in Central Asia, is spoken of by Marco Polo and Montecorvino. The exact position of his dominions, and the extent of his influence in favor of that faith, have been examined by Col. Yule and M. Pauthier in their editions of the Venetian, and the glamor which once surrounded him has been found to have arisen mostly from hearsay reports, and from confounding different persons under one name.

¹This statement appears to be a mistake as pointed out by Mr. Frits V. Holm. See p. 24.

²Visdelou in *Bibliothèque Oriental*, Vol. IV. Kircher's *China Illustrata*, Part I, Antwerp, 1667. *Chinese Repository*, XIV, pp. 201-220. Huc, *Christianity in China*, I, pp. 49-58. Wylie, *North China Herald*, 1855, reprinted in *Journal of Am. Oriental Soc.*, Vol. V, p. 277. Archimandrite Palladius published a Russian version. Williamson, *Journeys in North China*, I, p. 382. *Le Catholicisme en Chine au VIIIe Siècle de notre ère avec une nouvelle traduction de l'inscription de Sy-nganfou*, par P. D. de Thiersant, Paris, 1877.

When the conquests of Genghis Khan and his descendants threw all Asia into commotion, this Prester John, ruler of the Kara Kitai Tartars in northern China, fell before him, A. D. 1203. The Nestorians suffered much, but maintained a precarious footing in China during the time of the Yuen dynasty, having been cut off from all help and intercourse with the mother church since the rise of the Moslems. They had ceased long before this period to maintain the purity of the faith, however, and had apparently done nothing to teach and diffuse the Bible, which the tablet intimates was in part or in whole translated by Olopun, under the Emperor's auspices.

At the present time no works composed by their priests, or remains of any churches belonging to them or buildings erected by them, are known to exist in the Empire, though perhaps some books may yet be found. The buildings erected by the Nestorians for churches and dwellings were, of course, no better built than other Chinese edifices, and would not long remain when deserted; while, to account still further for the absence of books, the Buddhists and other opposers may have sought out and destroyed such as existed, which even if carefully kept would not last many generations. The notices of the tablet in Chinese authors, which Mr. Wylie has brought together, prove that those writers had confounded the *King kiao* with Zoroastrianism and Manicheism, and such a confusion is not surprising. The records of futurity alone will disclose to us the names and labors of the devoted disciples and teachers of true Christianity in the Nestorian church, who lived and died for the gospel among the Chinese.

[Williams further states that during the thirteenth century Roman Catholic missionaries came to China and the history of their zealous and successful work can be learned from their own writings, especially their *Lettres Edifiantes* and *Annales de la foi* as well as in the works of Huc and Marshall in later times. Corvino, a Roman Catholic missionary, arrived in India in 1291 and thence proceeded in 1292 with a caravan to China where he was kindly received by Kublai Khan. He came in contact with the native Chinese Christians, but they were by no means pleased at his arrival. The Nestorians opposed his progress for eleven years and hampered him in his work whenever they could, but he built churches and baptized nearly 6000 persons in spite of their opposition.

Little or nothing is known concerning the further history of the Nestorians. The Roman Catholics made some progress, and the last Mongol Emperor Shun Ti sent a European by the name of André as ambassador to the Pope with a letter from the Alain

Christians asking for a bishop to take Corvino's place. Pope Benedict XII responded by sending four nuntios.]

It would seem that during the sway of the Mongol princes these missionaries carried on their work chiefly among their tribes. It is, if such was the case, less surprising, therefore, that we hear nothing of them and their converts after the Chinese troops had expelled Kublai's weak descendants from the country in 1368, since they would naturally follow them into Central Asia. After the final establishment of the Ming dynasty almost nothing is known concerning either them or the Nestorians, and it is probable that during the wanderings of the defeated Mongols the adherents of both sects gradually lapsed into ignorance and thence easily into Moham-medanism and Buddhism. There is no reasonable doubt, however, that during the three centuries ending with the accession of Hungwu the greater part of Central Asia and Northern China was the scene of many flourishing Christian communities.