CULT-IMAGES AND RELIGIOUS ETHNOLOGY: THE EUROPEAN EXPLORATION OF MEDIEVAL ASIA AND THE DISCOVERY OF NEW ICONIC RELIGIONS

by Michele Bacci

The geographic knowledge of Central and Far Eastern Asia was impressively widened, during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, by a great number of literary reports that described the customs, religions, and cultural habits of several previously ignored peoples. Since Ramusio’s times, scholars dealing with the history of European explorations have often taken into account such phenomena as a preliminary step to the expansion of Western civilization throughout the rest of the world during the modern era. Much less attention has been paid to the actual contingencies such early explorers experienced during their journeys and the cultural patterns they made use of in their first contacts with the unknown populations living in those distant countries.

An abridged, preliminary Italian version of this article was published as “L’Asia e la geografia delle immagini” in J. Vlietstra and M. Civai, eds., Sindrome d’Oriente (Milan 2003) 31–51 (with English and Chinese translations at 99–112 and 131–144).

How did they actually react to such incredible encounters? They had to interpret—according to the parameters of their own culture—peoples, religions, and often very ancient and complex traditions which they could know only in a superficial way, but which deserved special attention since they were present in the most important political entity of that period, i.e., the empire of Genghis Khan (1167–1227), the Mongolian chief who had conquered most of the Asiatic continent and menaced the powers of the Middle East and Europe itself.

The Mongolian meteor undoubtedly not only served to further communication and exchange between the different Asiatic cultures, but also to favor the knowledge of inner Asia on the part of the West. The political and economic contingencies made tradesmen, diplomats, and religious men depart for the Far East, where they encountered places, peoples, languages, and customs that had previously been unknown to them, or known only through legendary descriptions. Men such as the Armenian constable Smpad and the king of Cilicia Het’um I, the Franciscans Giovanni da Pian del Carpine and William of Rubruk, and later the Venetian merchant Marco Polo, followed in the fourteenth century by other friars such as John of Montecorvino, Odoric of Pordenone, and Giovanni de’ Marignolli, ventured on enterprises that appear heroic to our eyes, considering the indescribable difficulties faced during the journey, the deprivations and exertions they had to resist, and the dangers they exposed themselves to in unexplored territories. Seen as a whole, this direct confrontation with a different world and the opening toward unknown horizons was of capital importance to the European culture, and produced many scientific, artistic, and technological results.

These authors were inspired by different motivations and consequently showed greater appreciation, in their descriptions of the peoples they met, of the aspects of the cultures they observed that seemed to coincide most with their respective specific interests and purposes. They all tended, however, to effectuate an ethnographic “taxonomy,” so to speak, underscoring certain constant characteristics of religious customs, and, in particular, comparing holy images and the way they were used in liturgical rites and in devotional practices. This article will investigate the role played by cultural categories such as image, icon, cult-object, and image-worship in the way early explorers of Asia interpreted and judged the peoples and religious communities they met during their journeys.

**Idolatry vs. Tartar Religion**

In Marco Polo’s *Milione*, the term *ydres*, i.e., idols, indicated both the objects of the idolatrous cult and the populations engaging in that kind of practice, and was used as a qualifying adjective to indicate all those who were neither Christians, Muslims, or “Tartars” (i.e., animists). The expression was applied indiscriminately to Buddhists, Hindus, and Taoists, whose peculiarities were rarely recognized; attention was inevitably focused on exterior manifestations, and the incalculable number of statues that crowded the temples, shrines, and private tabernacles of China, India, and Central Asia was the aspect that most seized the imagination of foreign observers. But the negative connotation of the term, traditionally used when referring to Greek and Roman “pagan” images, was not necessarily evident in Polo’s work and in the stories of other travelers: while the ancient *topos* that defined an idol as a seat of a negative
presence, or as the dwelling of a demon, was occasionally repeated, the authors tended
to describe it as a privileged object of worship of a foreign religion, that nevertheless
proved to have some unsuspected affinities with the uses and practices of the Christian
faith.2

The most disruptive sensation of alterity, mixed with strong disgust, was perceptible
in the description of the religious practices of the Tartars, which were immediately
recognized as very different from the Chinese and Indian cults. In truth, the Mongols
also used images, although very rudimentary, but Marco Polo preferred not to describe
them with the term “idol,” instead identifying them as “gods.” The difference laid in
the fact that the latter were not characterized as objects of worship, intended to remain
permanently in a temple and simulate the presence of holy personalities, but rather as
ephemeral ritualistic instruments that were used in the shamanistic ceremonies and in
other practices that smacked of magic. Indeed, they had little of the charismatic aura
one usually associates with holy effigies: they looked rather like small rag dolls, made
in felt or silk by the village women according to a special procedure that also featured
the sacrifice of a sheep, depending on the contingent necessities: in 1247 Giovanni da
Pian del Carpine observed, for instance, that they were prepared especially when a
child suffered a bad fall, in order to improve his health.

Every yurt comprising the Mongolian camp was decorated by similar small statues:
one, to which a teat that was also made in felt was attached, was placed near the en-
trance and was believed to be capable of protecting the herds (perhaps because it rep-
resented the god of the grass, Itügen), while another, placed right in front of the for-
mer, was believed to protect horses; another, called “the brother of the lord” was
placed in such a way as to cover the head of the master when he was seated on the bed
in the middle of the tent, and another was hung in a similar position above the wife,
that is to say on the side reserved for women (to the right of those who entered). Every
women, in her turn, used to fix a series of other similar simulacra, that were said to be
beneficial to servants, to the head of the bed. At mealtime, according to custom, each
of them, beginning with the one hung above the head of the master, was anointed with
grease from the meat and with broth, that was in turn also offered at the four cardinal
points outside the tent.

Along with these effigies there were others, specifically used in divinatory rites
preceding battles; they were usually kept in a special tent near the headquarters. In the
Mongolian language these images were called ongot and they cannot have been very
different from the felt dolls resembling humans or animals that, among numerous Alt-
aic and Siberian populations, still represent a fundamental element of the repertoire of
the shaman and serve the purpose of evoking those spirits whom he communicates
with when he enters a trance. These objects, in fact, remained ephemeral and their
only value lay in their instrumental role in the ecstatic and ritualistic practices of the
diviners. The first germ, among a nomadic population, of a true cult of images may
perhaps be identified in the veneration bestowed on the ongon of Genghis Khan that,

2 Olschki (note 1 above) 250.
some time after the death of the great conqueror, became an indispensable rule for every Tartar soldier, on pain of death.3

This system of beliefs was naturally congenial to the life style of these tribes in eternal movement, who had neither the need nor the opportunity to endow their own territory with symbolic significance through sacred buildings and images, as it was by nature too vast and changing. Nor did the power of the Khan call for stable places of representation, until it became so vast as to suggest the identification of a “center” in which, on occasion, it was possible to flaunt the extraordinary magnificence of the ruler of almost all of Asia. It was Ogodai (1229–1241), Genghis’s first successor, who decided to build a town on the right bank of the river Orkhon—Karakorum—that was conceived as a true ritual space, used at certain special annual ceremonies during which the sovereign abandoned his camp and adapted himself to a stationary life for some days. Curiously, the residence resembled a building of worship: William of Rubruk, who visited it in 1254, was reminded of a basilica-shaped church, with a central nave spaced by rows of columns and two naves and a raised apse area where the sovereign was seated, representing the true subject of veneration for the chiefs of the subject tribes.4 The most solemn meeting consisted of the distribution of a beverage made from fermented mare milk, the so-called qūnīz, according to a usage that is still present among certain Siberian populations; for this rite, in which a leather sac is usually used, Möngke Khan (1251–1259) commissioned from a Parisian goldsmith captured in Hungary, Master Guillaume Boucher, an extraordinary Gothic fountain in silver, crowned by an angel playing a tuba, that was installed near the entrance gate to the palace room.5

Outside the walls of the royal palace a settlement developed; it soon became a center of traffic and trade, as well as the true capital of the empire, where the ambassadors of every region of Asia arrived, to be followed by the representatives of the different regions, who lost no time in erecting their own places of worship. The town had Buddhist and Taoist temples, at least two Mosques, and a church of Christian rite. As one may easily infer, the stake was enormous: each of these doctrinal systems, expressions of millennial civilizations, would undoubtedly gain hegemony over all the others if it were to succeed in converting the person who was, at that moment, the real ruler of the world. However, if the great Mongolian Khan was really to adhere to one or the other, he would have to find it convenient in some way, something that was quite unlikely as long as he continued following a strictly nomadic lifestyle. On the other hand, Genghis had recommended that one should respect every credo without practicing any particular one, and it is certain that for a long time his successors maintained their animistic


beliefs. Yet during the thirteenth century a fierce struggle took place around their yurt, involving Tibetan lamas, Taoist ministers, Muslim imams, Nestorian priests, Catholic missionaries, and Armenian monks.

Initially unwilling to consider any hypothesis of conversion, the Khan allowed the representatives of different confessions to present their arguments, seeking to maintain a certain equidistance but observing each of them with great circumspection. The various representatives strove to make the best impression, availing themselves of the most efficient means of persuasion available to them; the Mongolian sovereigns were particularly appreciative towards those who succeeded in astonishing them with magic, acts of trance, or fascinating ritual dances, whereas they showed very little interest in argumentation on theology or morals. On several occasions Friar William of Rubruk sought to expose the fundamental principles of the correct Christian doctrine to Mönkhe, without obtaining any results worth mentioning; quite mockingly, the great Khan even forced Friar William, along with the East Syrian Christian communities of Karakorum, to compete with the local representatives of Islam and Chinese Buddhism in a public debate, which reinforced the conviction that shamans still proved to be the most useful religious men to the Mongolian people.\(^6\) The friar obtained some success only when he showed his interlocutors the illuminated books he had brought with him from Paris; they wanted to inspect the books at length and were very impressed by the colored figures and their golden backgrounds, asking what they meant and, in one case, eventually seizing the books with few scruples.\(^7\)

This might have been the right way to gain the favor of the rulers of the world; it was necessary to astonish those peoples with marvelous images, confuse their ideas and, through the universal message of art, ensnare them in the trap of aesthetic fascination, as one had for that matter done with other pagan populations, for instance, the Russians, who according to the legend had resolved to embrace the Byzantine version of Christianity after having been fascinated by the beauty of the icons and mosaics of Constantinople.\(^8\) To some extent the religions that possessed their own iconography and recognized the ritualized cult of figurative objects as a function of primary importance in religious practice had a head start; but this characteristic, in thirteenth-century Asia, was certainly not a unique prerogative of Christianity.

**ICONODULY BEFORE, BEHIND, AND WITHIN ISLAM**

From a religious point of view the vast region of the Eurasian continent inhabited by settled populations could be roughly subdivided, at the time of Rubruk and Marco Polo, in three areas of influence: the “idolaters” in the Far East; the “worshippers of Muhammad” between Afghanistan and the Near East; and the Christians in the Mediterranean, in Europe, and in northern Russia. As to holy representation, according to

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the opinion (or prejudice) of a Western observer, these three worlds behaved in fundamentally different ways: the first used it wrongly, as their devotion was aimed at material objects that they mistook for divinities and that were actually merely demonic beings; the second challenged their very lawfulness and preferred to say their common prayers inside bare buildings, violently attacking every form of divine representation; the third was supposed to be the only one to utilize it correctly, or in other words as a means to express personal devotion to the personality represented rather than the simulacrum as such.

This gross scheme reveals an interesting fact, namely, that the “anti-iconic” Islam was somehow sandwiched between two worlds that both resorted to holy images in the most important manifestations of their religious experience. Muslim authors recognized this affinity, more or less explicitly, but they always showed greater aversion towards Buddhist and Hindu idols, that in their eyes represented the most evident expression of the superstition of pagan peoples who practiced polytheism and did not belong to the “peoples of the Book” (i.e., Jews, Christians, and Muslims). Since the ninth century, the Arab merchants who reached the ports of India and China reported that these people assiduously worshipped statues (called 


sors to be handed down to future generations? Apparently some Muslims thought that something of the kind had been kept among those peoples who engaged in painting. The great traveler Ibn Battūta, in the fourteenth century, believed he recognized the portrait of the Caliph martyr ‘Alī in a fresco in a church in Kerč, in the Crimea, which probably really depicted the prophet Elias, while a story about a portrait of Muhammad, painted on paper, had already circulated for some centuries; it was the property of the emperor of China. It was told that a certain Ibn Wahb, of the Iraqi tribe of the Koraichites and thus descendants of the Prophet himself, had the honor of being received at court and there the Son of Heaven asked him: “Would you recognize your father if you were to see him?” The Arab replied: “How could I see him now that he is with Allah, the Mighty and Powerful?” An attendant then brought a box containing some painted pages that were shown him, and he immediately understood who was being represented by means of iconographic attributes: he recognized Noah by the ark, Moses by his stick, and Jesus because he was seated on the donkey surrounded by the apostles. When he was then faced with a man seated on the back of a camel, with his companions around him, in Arab footwear and with toothpicks hanging from his belt, he began to cry profusely and exclaimed: “Here is our Prophet, our lord and my cousin—may peace be with him!”

While fantastic, this story witnesses the authority attributed to the Chinese emperor by the Muslim world and, at the same time, the prestige enjoyed by the painting tradition of those countries. After the portrait of Muhammad, Ibn Wahb observed with interest other figures depicting “the prophets of China and India,” some standing, others “making a sign with their right hands, uniting the thumb and the forefinger, as if they wanted to attest to some truth with that gesture.” In fact, in accordance with Hindu and Buddhist tradition, they did so to indicate the “accomplishment of the absolute” (chin mudrā) or “the appeasement of the weak” (vitarka mudrā), defining themselves as “masters.” This tale reflects a certain sensation of cultural relativism, perhaps the result of some syncretic experiences typical of medieval Asia (which we will examine below); but it above all reveals that representation—especially in the form of painted portraits—was perceived as a very efficient means of transmitting knowledge.

Above all, this text does not, as it may seem to, clearly contradict the damnation of the “idols,” the bidāda, referred to above. Throughout the history of Islamic thought, cult-objects (both iconic and aniconic) were firmly rejected precisely because, as they were reputed to be powerful and compelling to the believers’ eyes, they were a challenge to the worship of God. Even if no explicit condemnation of image-making was

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15 Mas‘ūdī, Muruj, ed. Meynard-Courteille 1.130.
16 E. Dale Saunders, Mudrā. A Study of Symbolic Gestures in Japanese Buddhist Sculpture (Princeton 1985) 66–75. The text may hint at something like an iconographic manual or model-book, such as those which were used by Chinese and Central Asian mural painters already in the Tang period (7th–8th c.), as is revealed by the findings in Tun-Huang: cf. S. E. Fraser, Performing the Visual. The Practice of Buddhist Wall Painting in China and Central Asia, 618–960 (Stanford 2004).
expressed by the Koran, some interpreters, such as those known as “traditionalists” (e.g., al-Bokhārī, one of the redactors of the hadith-collections forming the Sunna), suspected that the artist’s creative act was nothing else than a blasphemous parody of God’s shaping of man: He, after having taken dry clay from a heap of black mixed mud, transformed it into a clot of blood and then into a soft mass that he modeled “making it take on harmonious forms” and finally inspiring the spirit (Koran 15.26; 23.12–14; 32.7–9).\(^{17}\) According to such rigorous trends in early Islamic thought, on the Day of the Last Judgment artists (described implicitly as sculptors or modelers) would be requested to destroy their works, before being damned.\(^{18}\)

According to a well-established Islamic tradition, best illustrated by Masʿūdi in the ninth century, idolatry, i.e., image-worship, was the most primitive form of religion in the history of humanity, replaced by astrology and divination in the times of the ancient Indians and Egyptians. Buddha was accused of being the man who had restored the cult of images, which was to be strongly condemned by every good Muslim believer; if India and China had persevered with bidada worship, in the Middle East idolatrous temples had been replaced by Christian and Islamic shrines.\(^{19}\) Although Muslims disapproved even of the worship of two-dimensional images, they associated idolatry more directly with Buddhist statues than with Byzantine icons, which were highly appreciated both as works valuable on aesthetic grounds and as historical documents of the exterior appearance of deceased persons. Nonetheless, the damnation of Far Eastern idols did not prevent the admiration of Chinese painting; the aesthetic mastery of painters in the kingdom of the “Son of Heaven” became something proverbial in medieval Arab and Persian literature.\(^{20}\)

It is a known fact that a suspicious attitude toward statues and a preference for painting represented a leitmotif in the Eastern Christian doctrinal reflection on images and their religious use. The Orthodox world and the Monophysite churches in the Near East were characterized by a more or less unchallenged prevalence of the model of the holy portrait in the form of a commemorative icon that might, only in rare cases, consist of an object with a surface more or less in relief (as for instance the colossal St. George of Omorphokklissia, in northern Greece, dating from the thirteenth century).\(^{21}\)

To Western Christians at the time of Marco Polo, painted plates represented a distinc-

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tive element of the spirituality of their Eastern brethren, and were considered as evidence for the purpose of establishing the ethnic-religious identity of a people; for instance, the Dominican John of Nakhičevan, bishop of Sultanîyeh in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, came to the conclusion that the Circassians (a Turkic population based north of the Caucasus) belonged to the Byzantine Orthodox church because they “have churches, images and feasts like the Greek.”

The latter, in turn, essentially disdained the diffusion, in Italy and to an even greater extent in northern Europe, of three-dimensional statues; indeed, they tended to describe the schismatic West as a prey to a corrupted form of Christianity, at times disrupted by iconophobic tendencies, and at times by pagan reminiscences. An anti-Latin pamphlet that circulated in the eleventh century accused the Roman Church of failing to respect the icons of the saints and of preferring images in relief only of the crucified Christ, while between the end of the twelfth century and the beginning of the thirteenth the Cypriote hermit Neophytus described as “idols” the sculptures that decorated the buildings of worship erected on his island by the Crusaders arriving from France.

The Muslim world certainly did not fail to observe this difference in attitudes towards Christian images. The presence of the Crusaders in the Holy Land had resulted in the arrival and installation, in the Near East, of reliefs and statues in stone and other materials; as the Mamelukes progressively recaptured Palestine, these were systematically destroyed, as opposed to the icons in use among the Melkite, Jacobite, and Coptic communities that only suffered sporadic attacks. It is significant to note that when a city was recaptured by the Egyptian army, the most eminent symbolic act marking the reinstatement of Islam consisted of the conversion of the main church into a Mosque, achieved by crushing the statue of Christ and the Virgin and replacing it with a miḥram, i.e., the niche located in the wall (qibla) which defined the direction of Mecca.

To compensate the emotional impact of these events the Crusaders elaborated the legend, amply diffused in Europe, of the indestructible portrait of Ramleh, that by the grace of God had remained unscathed under the blows of the scalpels and axes of the sultan’s soldiers.

The use of three-dimensional sculptures, which elicited disapproval among the Byzantines, disgust among the Jews, and horror among Muslims, contributed to diffuse the vision of Christians as an idolatrous people. Friar Giovanni de’ Marignolli, who knew the peoples and the religions of Asia well, showed he was aware of all this when he wrote: “The Jews, the Tartars, and the Saracens consider us to be idolaters. So do not only the Pagans, but also certain Christians who, while they worship painted images, loathe specters, figures, and horrible sculptures such as those that are located in many churches. This is evident from Saint Adalbert’s sepulcher in Prague.”

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26 “Iudei tamen, Tartari et Sarraceni iudicant nos pessimos ydolatras, et non solum gentiles, sed eciam christiani quidam; nam licet illi christiani venerentur picturas, abhominantur tamen larvas, facies et
Western customs on the subject of holy representation were essentially frowned upon by all the adjoining peoples, and only found points of affinity with the distant and mysterious populations of India and China, where it was known that many statues were worshipped, even monster-like figures such as those found in Gothic sculpture. When news began to circulate in the thirteenth century of the existence of remote regions of Asia whose sacred landscapes were dominated by portraits in the round in wood and stone, it is not unlikely that someone thought it might be worthwhile to contact those people.

**IMAGE-WORSHIP AMONG EASTERN ASIATIC CHRISTIANS**

The unexpressed hope of the Western world was that the unknown region located beyond the anti-iconic Islam was the home of a Christian population, guided by a powerful sovereign capable of forming an alliance with his European brothers to destroy the Muslim powers. Ancient legends corroborated the belief that baptized people could be living on the far edges of the earth, supposedly the descendants of the communities converted by the apostle Thomas or by the Wise Men. The idea of an imminent triumph of the Cross in the entire Eurasian continent was nurtured by the myth of the so-called Prester John (a legendary ruler-priest who was believed to reign on the far edges of the world), by the anti-Muslim politics of Genghis Khan and his successors, and, above all, by the presence of ancient Christian communities of Eastern Syrian rite in Central Asia. The latter were usually known in Europe as “Nestorians,” since it was commonplace to view them as the followers of the christological doctrine of Theodore of Mopsuestia and Nestorius, the patriarch of Constantinople who was sentenced by the Council of Ephesus in 431 for having asserted that two unconnected natures had coexisted in Christ and that Mary had only generated the human component of the Savior. The “schismatic” church that became the interpreter of his lessons (although rejecting the term “Nestorian” and calling itself “Church of the East” or “Assyrian Church”28) had been established beyond the borders of the Roman Empire, more specifically in Mesopotamia, where it had spread in scattered points throughout the East: Iran, southern India, Turkestan, and China. It had followers among the Ephthalite Huns, the Uighurs—a Turkic population that had settled in the region between the Taklimakan and the Zungaria and that in the ninth century formed a very influential empire—and also some Mongolian tribes, such as the Önguts. The Christians knew
about the Nestorians of Iraq, who had their own ecclesiastical representation in Jeru-
usalem with an altar inside the Holy Sepulcher, but before the thirteenth century they
knew little or nothing about their own brethren—as they were, even if they were usu-
ally considered to be “extreme heretics”—who lived in the Asiatic East.29

In the course of six or seven centuries these Christians had succeeded in establish-
ing a consolidated presence within the religious mosaic of those regions. During their
expansion they had elaborated a special system of beliefs, to some extent remaining
true to the rites and customs of their country of origin—northern Syria—and in part
adopting elements characteristic of the cultures they had settled among and with which
they lived. At the same time they had elaborated places of worship, ritual objects, and
iconographic subjects that we only know through literary testimonials and scant ar-
chaeological findings. We know for certain that they owned churches (excavations of
Merv, Termez, Haroba-Košuk, Ordukent, Ak-Bešim, etc.) and monasteries (Issyk-
Kul’, Kara-Kuyun, Taš-Rabat)30 and that they decorated them with fabrics, colored
plaster, and frescoes that depicted scenes from the gospel and ceremonial images, as
we can tell from the fragments of an Entrance into Jerusalem and a representation of
Palm Sunday found in the rock church of Kočo in Chinese Turkestan.31 The Armenian


evident; see Klein 271–272 and passim.

constable Smpad, who visited a Nestorian building in a town of the kingdom of the Tanguts (the present-day Kansu) in 1248, observed a representation of the Wise Men offering their gifts to Christ. Moreover, a fresco displaying the benefactress Sorghaqtani, the Nestorian mother of the Great Khans Möngke and Kubilai (1259–1294), was recorded as preserved within a church of the same region by a fourteenth century Chinese source the Yüan-shih. The sacred iconography was also used to embellish sepulchral monuments and liturgical furnishings, as demonstrated respectively by some tomb slabs unearthed in Central Asia, Manchuria, Sinkiang, and Southern China; a historiated thurible found in Urgut by Samarkhand; and two patens now preserved in the Hermitage of St. Petersburg, one displaying scenes from the Passion and Resurrection of Christ (fig. 1), and the other with a representation of the siege of Jericho mentioned in the book of Joshua (6.1–27). Although the latter two were unearthed in the governorate of Perm in the Russian region of the Urals, scholars agree that they were most probably made in the ninth or tenth century in the area of Semireč’e of present-day Kyrgyzstan, and more specifically in the Talas Valley, where several silver mines were located.

The use of sacred portraits is equally well testified. The famous stele of Sin-gan-fu, dated 635, attests that the first Nestorian missionaries who arrived in China from Iran had brought with them books and images, and that the emperor T’ai-tsung had allowed them to build a church in his capital, requesting, however, to be portrayed on one of the walls of the annexed coenobium. One of his successors, Hsiuan-Tsung, wanted to honor the Christian community in a similar manner, asking one of his generals in 742 to have painted “the portraits of five saints that were placed inside the monastery,” to whom he presented a homage of a hundred precious fabrics. It is believed that these may have been paintings on silk, like the one found in the early twentieth century in the oasis of Tun-Huang (fig. 2); in the Middle Ages this was the principal center of the

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33 Dauvillier (n. 31 above) 301.

34 Saeki (n. 30 above) 434–443; Hristiane na vostoke (n. 31 above) 198–199, nos. 266–268.

35 Klein (n. 30 above) 229. This thurible might have been made in Palestine or Syria in the 8th or 9th c.


37 Dauvillier (n. 31 above) 208; Pelliot (n. 1 above) 157–158; Parry (n. 31 above) 152–153.
kingdom of the Tanguts, largely inhabited by Turkic populations of Nestorian faith. Even if it was quite illegible due to its badly deteriorated state, it was possible to prove that this was a Christian figure, due to the presence of three crosses (on the top of the walking stick held in one hand, around the neck, and on the head covering): this figure, who was looking slightly to the left, had his head surrounded by a large halo of a Buddhist type, was clad in solemn attire, and had the fingers of his right hand arranged in the gesture of the **vitarka mudrā**. It is highly probable that this is an iconic representation of Christ, as the attribution of the scepter, that also appears in the fresco with the Entrance into Jerusalem of the rock-cut church of Qočo, seems to indicate.

One may suppose that images of this kind were involved in some kind of worship or ritualized devotional practice. In this regard we know, thanks to William of Rubruk, that when the Nestorians entered their churches, after having prostrated themselves on the ground, they touched with their right hands all the holy representations; then they kissed the same hand and gave it to the persons surrounding them, who in turn kissed it. These customs were part of these Christians’ tendency to attribute great symbolic value to tactile perception, something also evident in the case of Holy Communion: the bread—considered to be mixed with some of the flour that had served to prepare the bread of Last Supper—was given to the faithful with the care of a true relic; after accepting it in their palms, those receiving the communion had to touch their foreheads with it, to transmit its saving grace to body and soul.

The use of painted fabrics as icons very probably reflects the influence of Buddhist religious practice, specifically that of the Lamas; it is comparable, in technique and category, to the model of the Tibetan **tangka**, a holy portrait painted on cotton, characterized by the fact that it can be rolled up to facilitate transport. Considering that this religion had met with widespread acceptance among partly nomadic populations like the Uighurs or completely nomadic ones like the Önguts, this cannot have been an insignificant detail. In its expansion along the caravan routes of the Gobi desert and the Mongolian plains, the Nestorian Church had been able to adapt itself to different living conditions, using tents assembled on carriages as places of worship, resorting to portable altars in leather, and preferring light liturgical paraphernalia. It is therefore clear that in a similar context painted fabrics must have played a very important role, and it is significant to note that they were also adopted in the rites of the Manichean

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38 Saeki (n. 30 above) 416–417, 418; Parry (n. 31 above) 159–160.
39 “Et dum sic expectarent in ipsa aurora ecclesie, prima uxor, nomine Catota Caten—Caten idem est quod domina, Catota [Khatūn] proprium nomen—ingressa est capellam cum aliis dominabus pluribus et cum filio suo primogenito, nomine Baltu, et aliis parvulis suis; et prostraverunt se in terram dando frontes more nestorinorum, et post hoc tetergent omnes ymagines manu dextra, osculando semper manum post tactum; et post hoc dederunt dextras omnibus circumstantibus in ecclesia. Hie est enim mos nestorinorum ingredientium ecclesiam.” William of Rubruk, **Itinerarium** xxx.19, SF 258–259.
communities living in the same area. On the contrary, this is no evidence that three-dimensional images were allowed in the churches built of masonry, where it was also possible to install heavy objects: a small statue of Christ on the donkey, found in 1922 on the banks of the river Salar near Taškent in Uzbekistan, is too small in size to suggest it was used in worship, but the fact that it was found inside a tomb undoubtedly indicates that it was associated with personal piety and funeral practices.

For the fearless Western travelers of the thirteenth century who ventured to the remote regions of Asia, the language of the Christian iconography provided an extraordinary means to rapidly recognize the presence of their fellow worshippers, to determine in qualitative terms their greater or lesser orthodoxy, or to verify whether they could possibly belong to the people of the mythical Prester John. When he arrived in the mobile town of the Great Khan, Friar William of Rubruk was touched by the sight of a tent crowned by a small cross; when he entered it, the first thing that struck him was an altar covered by a fabric embroidered in gold on which a pearled contour outlined the figures of the Savior, the Virgin Mary, Saint John the Baptist, and two angels, probably arranged to form the Byzantine scheme of the Deisis. The work belonged to an Armenian monk (or someone who claimed to be one) who said he had visited the Mongolian court after God had appeared to him no less than three times in his hermitage in the Holy Land, ordering him to convert the ruler of that people to Christianity. He may have brought that historiated fabric with him from Cilicia or Palestine to use it in his work of evangelization, or he may have received it from the selfsame Möngke, who may have obtained it as a gift from the king of Armenia, his tributary, or from the Greek emperor of Nicea. The Khan’s appreciation of fabrics was widely known: in 1248 Louis IX of France himself, as the historian Joinville tells, had ordered the preparation in Cyprus, for purposes of sending it as a homage to Güyük, a sumptuous “chapel” with an illustration of the entire history of the Salvation, from the Annunciation to Pentecost. This homage, which we know was greatly appreciated, may have been identical to the yurt-church in which the Nestorians celebrated their services at the time of Rubruk’s visit.

\[42\] H.-J. Klimkeit, Manichaean Art and Calligraphy (Leiden 1982) 43–47. Mani himself was reputed to have painted images on silk, as witnessed by Abū l-Ma'allī and Bayānū l-Adyan; see O. Klíma, Manis Zeit und Leben (Prague 1962) 332.

\[43\] Beljaev (n. 30 above) 228, 252 n. 140. G. I. Bogomolov, “O hrismianstve v Čača,” Iz istorii drevnih kul’tov (n. 30 above) 71–78, esp. 72–74, indicates the 8th or 9th c. as a possible date for this small statue.

\[44\] Et cum revertemur, vidi ante extremitatem curie versus Orientem, longe a curia quantum posset balista iacere duabus vicibus, domum super quam erat crucicula. Tunc gavisus sum, supponens quod ibi esset aliquid christianitatis, ingressus sum confidenter et inveni altare paratum valde pulchre. Erant enim in panno aureo brosdate sive bistrate ymagi Salvatoris et beate Virginis et Iohannis Baptiste et duorum angelorum, lineamenti corporis et vestimentorum distinctis margaritis, et crux magna argentea habens gemmas in angulis et in medio sui, et alia phileria multa, et lucerna cum oleo ardens ante altare, habens octo lumina; et sedebat ibi unus monachus armenus, nigellus, macilentus, indutus abla cilicina asperrima usque ad medias tibias, habens desuper pallium nigrum de seta furratum, vario ligatus ferro sub cilicio.” William of Rubruk, Itinerarium xxviii.5–6, SF 245–246.

Friar William had no difficulty in recognizing the subjects of the altar cloth placed in the tent of the Armenian monk because it belonged to an iconographic tradition he was already familiar with. On the contrary, when he found himself in front of works produced in Central Asia, he experienced a sensation of bewilderment. He was in the first place struck by the fact that the precious golden crosses owned by those Christian communities lacked the image of the crucified Christ and had no other ornament than gems arranged along the arms and at their intersection, in a manner he interpreted as a reflection of their heretical doctrine; he thought that the Nestorians did not represent the Passion because they rejected it from a dogmatic point of view, to the point of feeling ashamed of it and blushing every time the subject was raised. The friar could verify this assumption personally when Guillaume Boucher made a cross for him in the French Gothic style: dismayed by the presence of the dead body of Christ, realized in relief, the priests of Karakorum hastened to conceal it. But this unusual reaction was due to the fact that in the tradition of Central Asian Christianity it was not the torture instrument of the Savior that was represented, but rather the cross of the Parousia, triumphal symbol of victory and Resurrection from the dead. This is why it may be seen in one of the medallions of the paten of Semireč’e, inside the empty sepulcher (fig. 1).

Iconographic interpretation was a decisive element for Marco Polo when he resolved to identify a strange sect that had its place of worship in the city of Fu Chou, on the coast of Southern China, and that no one succeeded in classifying because it had no three-dimensional idols, did not worship Muhammad, and did not even venerate fire (i.e., they weren’t Zoroastrian). After having frequented the devotees for some time he succeeded, along with the priest, in translating one of their holy scriptures, realizing that it was a Psalter; but only when he recognized the figures of the three apostles in their temple was he convinced that he had encountered a community of Christians.

However, this identification was completely wrong, as was later revealed by the people themselves. Because Polo had been told that the images, that were not statues

46 “Circa mediam quadragesimam venit filius magistri Willelmi afferens pulchram crucem argenteam fabricatam more gallicano, habens ymaginem Christi argenteam affixam desuper—quam videntes monachi et sacerdotes amoverunt eam.” William of Rubruk, Itinerarium xxix, SF 275–276. In the 19th c., a traveler claimed to have seen this crucifix in a Buddhist temple in Erdeni Tso; cf. Olschki (n. 5 above) 38. As to the Nestorians’ embarrassment about crucifixes, see also Rubruk, Itinerarium xv.7, SF 203: “Ipsi Nestoriani et Hermeni nunquam faciunt super cruces suas figuram Christi, unde videntur male sentire de passione, vel erubescunt eam.”

47 See n. 36 above.

but paintings, represented those who had taught their religion to the ancestors of that small community, he deduced that it had to be three of the seventy disciples sent to announce the message of God in many different areas of the world. It is most likely that he had seen a representation of Mani or some other prominent figure of the Manichean pantheon, flanked by two of the chosen (or “illuminated”), as one can observe in paintings on silk found at Qočo.\(^49\) The Manicheans were widespread in medieval Asia and, especially in China, tended to underscore certain consonances between their faith and the Nestorian practices in order to escape the hostility of the Buddhist clergy.\(^50\) Moreover, their affinity with Christianity was partly a consequence of the syncretic nature of Mani’s doctrine: identification of the silken hangings would have been more immediate if the temple of Fu Chou had hosted images of the Christological triad (Jesus-Light, Jesus-Messiah, Jesus-Sufferer), where the cross was also present.\(^51\) A temple originally held by such a religious community has been identified by Chinese and Japanese researchers in the nearby city of Ch’üan Chou (the Zayton described by Polo), in the sanctuary located on the hill of Shu-piao-shan. A relief plate is still conserved there; it was originally intended for public worship and does not represent the Buddha, as the local population believes, but Mani himself, seated in the lotus position inside a large radiating sphere.\(^52\)

On other occasions Western observers failed to obtain sufficiently clear information from the images they encountered to enable them to determine whether they belonged to Christian cults or to “idolatrous” ones. This uncertainty is to a large extent a postulate of the singularity of a religious environment that had already for many centuries been characterized, as the self-same vicissitude of the Manicheans witnessed, by frequent phenomena of ritual and iconographic hybridation. This is particularly evident in the description made by Friar William of the places of worship visited in the city of Kajlak (Qayalïk), in the present-day Kazakhstan, a center of the ancient empire of the Uighurs, where Buddhist, Nestorian, and Manichean communities had coexisted for a long time.\(^53\) Although contact between these beliefs inevitably resulted in a contamination of the respective rituals, it caused the different beliefs to distinguish themselves from each other by inventing exclusive gestures, images, and symbols. To the Franciscan’s eyes, it therefore came as a surprise that the Nestorians prayed with their hands raised upwards, rather than united on the breast, but he was likely to have forgiven this had he learned they did so to avoid imitating the idolaters, who on the contrary were positioned in prayer almost like the Western Christians, on their knees with their foreheads pressed between the palms of the hands.

\(^49\) Klimkeit (n. 42 above) 44.
\(^51\) Such is the iconography of an 8th/9th c. silk found in Qočo; cf. Klimkeit (n. 42 above) 43 and fig. 40.
\(^53\) William of Rubruk xxiv, *SF* 227.
What proved to be most striking to him, and also to travelers in the next century, was the fact that the Buddhists resembled the Westerners much more than the Christians of Asia. For example, their ministers shaved like the French, and did not wear long beards like the Greek popes, the Jewish rabbis, or the Muslim imams. It was also striking that the monks, who observed an unchallengeable code of moral conduct in their great abbeys, frequently resorted to bells quite similar to the European ones. Western visitors could only infer that it was probably as a reaction to this that all Eastern Christians, with the exception of the Russians, preferred to use a long wooden plank, or *símandron*, which they beat on with a hammer.

The immediately apparent similarity, however, was the use of images and the figurative decoration of the temples, even if it might be embarrassing to declare openly that Christian statues and Buddhist idols resembled one another. When he reached Kajlak, after his very long and arduous journey across the “Steppe of hunger,” Friar William heard for the first time about the idolaters and immediately wanted to visit one of their temples to verify “their stupidity” *de visu*. By a strange coincidence, the first person he met there was a man who had a cross painted on the palm of his hand, a sign that made him believe he had entered a Nestorian church, even if, taking a quick look inside, he could not see any other confirmation of this. “How can it be,” he then asked, “that you don’t have the cross and the image of Christ here?” And the man, who resembled a Christian because he spoke just like a Christian, replied that there was no need for it. The Franciscan became more convinced that he had met a representative of a community of brethren who, due to the geographic conditions they lived in, lacked solid doctrinal preparation. He entered the building and, from what he saw, realized that his deduction was correct: “In fact, I there saw, behind a box that they used as altar and on which they had placed lamps and offerings, an image that

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56 “In predicta civitate Calaec habebant ipsi [i.e., the Uighurs] tres ydolatrias, quarum duas intravi ut viderem stultitas eorum. In prima inveni quedam qua habebat cruciculum de atramento super numan suum, unde credidi quod esset christianus, quia ad omnia que querebam ab eo respondebat ut christianus. Unde quevisi ab eo: ‘Quare ergo non habes hic crucem et ymaginem Ihesu Christi?’ Et ipse respondit: ‘Non habemus consuetudinem.’ Unde ego credidi quod essent christiani, sed ex defectu doctrine omitterent.” William of Rubruk xxiv, *SF* 227.
had wings like a Saint Michael and other images that, in the manner of bishops, held their hands as if in the act of blessing."\(^{57}\)

What is described here is the psychological mechanism with which a Western religious man sought to orient himself—on the basis of the baggage of iconographic conventions provided by his own culture—so as to decipher the meaning of an aggregate of figurative objects, which he perceived were endowed with sacred value on the basis of exterior elements such as position inside the building, the visual hierarchical arrangement governing the relationship between single statues, the type of illumination, the presence of ex-votos, and certain compositional and formal characteristics such as the directness or intensity of the glance. These portraits were characteristic elements of a figurative code, that of the Tantric currents of Buddhism as practiced in the Himalayan region, where the crucial nature, in the collective and private experience, of the divine was as evident as it was in the case of Christian images: in both cases the community of believers was invited to recognize, without hesitation, the identity of personalities represented, on the basis of clues corresponding to characteristic attributes and bodily attitudes. And so the wings immediately reminded Friar William of the prince of the archangels, while to a Buddhist worshipper this was one of many winged deities, such as the Tibetan Heruka. On the other hand, the chin mudrā or the “gesture of the absence of fear” (abhaya mudrā, i.e., with the palm raised) displayed by the various emanations of Buddha and by the arhats might easily remind him of a hand raised in benediction, while the high triple-pointed crown the Bodhisattva Maitreya or Avalokiteśvara usually wore in images might easily be mistaken for a miter or a tiara (see fig. 3).\(^{58}\)

ACHEIROPOIETIC AND ARCHETYPAL IMAGES IN CHRISTIANITY AND BUDDHISM

The episode recounted by the Franciscan traveler, that took place in 1254, is somehow touching because it coincides historically with the first direct contact, albeit ephemeral, between the two great “iconic” civilizations of the Eurasian continent, an encounter that was as disconcerting as it was superficial, but was sufficient to suggest that those two worlds were, at the same time, very distant and surprisingly similar. Neither Friar William nor Marco Polo could imagine that there had been a very long period, from the death of Buddha around 480 B.C. to the first century A.D., in which Buddhism had, just like primitive Christianity, rejected the cult of images.\(^{59}\) In the

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57 “Videbam enim ibi post quandam cistam, que erat eis loco altaris, super quam ponunt lucernas et oblationes, quandam ymaginem habentem alas quasi sancti Michaelis, et alias quasi Episcoporum tenentes digitos siet ad benedicendum.” Ibid. K. M. Bajkalov, “Hristianstvo Kazahstana v srednie veka,” Iz istorii drevnih kul’tov (n. 30 above) 96–100, takes for granted that the building described by Rubruk was actually a Nestorian church (contrary to Rubruk’s own remarks).

58 The standard work for Tibetan iconography is that by M.-Th. Mallman, Introduction à l’iconographie du tantrisme bouddhique (Paris 1975); on abhaya mudrā, see Dale Saunders (n. 16 above) 55–65.

thirteenth and fourteenth centuries the most striking aspect of this exotic religion was the incalculable number of statues that crowded its temples; to the Armenian king Het’um, in 1254, the presence of enormous idols referred to as Šakmonya (from “Śākyamuni,” Buddha’s worldly name) and “Madri” (i.e., the Bodhisattva Maitreya) was a Tibetan characteristic. These portraits drew attention due to their customary gilding, and were certainly impressive when gathered in groups at a single point in the building of worship; at Zaytun Odoric of Pordenone claimed to have seen no less than 11,000 in one place. An observation that continuously recurred in the texts of the different authors concerns the presence of a principal simulacrum that was recognized by its colossal dimensions, thus bringing to mind St. Christopher, the giant saint par excellence in Western tradition, who was often painted or sculpted on the outside of churches so as to be visible from very afar. (In fact, it was said he protected those who had devotedly invoked him from being caught by death in sin, for a period of twenty-four hours.)

The colossal apparition, that was a specific attribute of the Buddha in those regions, often became a conspicuous part of the landscape, often characterizing mountain passes and heights with its presence, to the point of being visible even from two days’ distance, as a Nestorian priest coming from Cathay told Friar William. Some were sculpted in the rocky walls, as at Bāmiyān or Yün-Kang; others were erected on pilgrimage places, for instance, in a famous temple of Ceylon, on the mountain known to Arabian seafarers as “Adam’s Summit,” where Śākyamuni was portrayed in reclining position, just about to enter nirvana. Present-day Sri Lanka was known as the most important Buddhist center of Southern Asia thanks to the antiquity of its temples and the precious relics they held (Buddha’s tooth, the impression of his foot, his right col-

Sharma, Early Phase of Buddhist Icons at Mathura, ibid. 87–96. The parallelism between Christian and Buddhist early art has often been emphasized by scholars: see A. Grünwedel, Buddhist Art in India, rev. ed. J. Burgess (Santiago de Compostela and London 1965) 67–68.

60 “In this country there are many idolaters, who worship an extremely huge earthen image, whose name is Šakmonya. They say he is a God since three thousand forty years, and that he will rule the world for still thirty-five touman (a touman is the same as one thousand years); afterwards, he will be deprived of his divinity. There is also another God whose name is Madri; in his honour they have made an earthen statue of unbelievable size within a beautiful temple.” The Journey of Het’um, trans. Klaproth (n. 54 above) 289. See also J. A. Boyle, “The Journey of Het’um I, King of Little Armenia, to the Court of the Great Khan Möngke,” Central Asiatic Journal 9 (1964) 175–189, repr. in idem, The Mongol World Empire, 1206–1370 (London 1977).

61 “In hac multa sunt monasteria religiosorum, qui ydola universaliter adorant. In uno autem istorum monasteriorum ego fuī, in quo erant bene tria millia religiosorum, qui ydola universaliter adorant, habendum unde millia ydola, et unum illorum ydolorum, qui minus alius esse videbatur, erat bene ita magnum sicut esset S. Christoforus. Illa autem hora qua illis diis dant ad comedendum, ivi ad videndum. Et isto modo comedere sibi dant: omnia que illis offerunt comedenda eis calidissima porrigiturta, ita quod fumus illorum ascendat ad ydola, que ipsi pro comestione istorum ydolorum esse dicunt; alid autem totum pro se habent et manducant. Et sic isto modo dicunt se bene pascere deos suos.” Odoric of Pordenone xxI, SF 460–461.

larbone, the begging cup\textsuperscript{63}). Its fame fascinated Marco Polo; it was probably on this island that he outlined the historical figure he called “Sergamoni Borcan,” a man who, while ignoring the Gospel, had followed its dictates so strictly that “he would have been a great saint with God if he had been a baptized Christian.” It is significant to note that in his exegesis Polo did not describe him as the founder of an idolatrous religion, preferring to exalt him as a person animated by a sincerely devoted intention. The origin of the corrupted rites is, on the contrary, retraced to the father of Śākyamuni, who had been a rich and powerful king in the area and who, on being told of his son’s death, had ordered the preparation of a commemorative statue in gold and gems, made as a likeness, obliging his subjects to honor him as a god. This idol, the first one ever realized, then gave rise to all the others.\textsuperscript{64}

The passage is particularly interesting because it conveys the idea of an archetypal and authentic portrait, a “true icon” of the Tathāgata, that really belongs to the Buddhist tradition, especially in its Chinese versions.\textsuperscript{65} Quite a few sources dating from the period between the fourth and the seventh centuries, in fact, attributed the initiative of the execution of such a portrait, at times painted and at times sculpted in the round, to a king of ancient India. According to tradition it was Prasēnajit, king of Kosala, who, during Buddha’s ascendance to the Trayavastī, had made a sandalwood statue with the head in bone to be installed in the Temple of Jētavana at Śrāvastī. When he had returned to earth, the image had miraculously turned towards Buddha, who said to it: “Please return to your place. After my nirvana you will be the model from which my followers will obtain their images.”\textsuperscript{66} But the legend that was to enjoy the greatest popularity featured another king, a contemporary of Śākyamuni, Udāyana of Kausāmbī: according to one version it was a painting on fabric, to another a gilded statue that, on Buddha’s return, had glided towards him, making him promise that anyone who, in the future centuries, would venerate it with flags, flowers, and incense would immediately receive the gift of contemplating his face (cf. fig. 4). According to another version, the artist in charge of executing the work was transported directly to the heavens so he could observe attentively “the distinctive aspects of the body of Buddha” and reproduce them exactly in the sacred image.\textsuperscript{67}


\textsuperscript{65} P. C. Almond, “The Medieval West and Buddhism,” \textit{The Eastern Buddhist}, n.s. 19 (1986) 85–101, esp. 96–97, maintains, on the contrary, that the idea of archetypal images has no parallels in Buddhist tradition, “but it does reinforce the importance which Buddhist statuary assumed in the minds of many Medieval travellers to Asia.” Nonetheless, he claims that it may be a consequence of the contact with Mahayana schools, and of the idea of Kashmir as the place of origin of Buddhism. In the following discussion we will point out that archetypal portraits of the Enlightened are often recorded in medieval Chinese sources. It is important to stress that the term “Borcan” added to Sergamoni (i.e., Śākyamuni) was known to Marco Polo from the Mongolian language (where it sounded like borkhān); it designated both a divinity and its image and representation (ibid. 95).


\textsuperscript{67} The earliest sources of the Udāyana legend are thoroughly discussed by M. L. Carter, \textit{The Mystery of the Udāyana Buddha} (Neaples 1990) (Annali dell‘Istituto universitario orientale, Supplement 64). The main statue of the Seiryōji Temple in Kyoto, dated 988 A.D., is reputed to be a copy of King Udāyana’s archetypal image (fig. 4).
These tales purported to link the iconographic tradition, by then consolidated and amply diffused in a considerable part of Asia, with the primitive history and the countries of origin of that religious belief; from this point of view the strength of the analogies between Buddhism and Christianity is surprising. Both religions, in fact, after having been formed as internal evolutions of much more ancient cultures (Hinduism and Hebraism) had seen the presence of their communities decline gradually in their respective “holy places” (Northern India and Palestine), while they became more and more successful in foreign territories, converting huge populations to the new faith. During this progressive expansion they had modified their originally iconophobic attitude, or better, the preference given to symbolic or allegorical representations instead of icon-like portraits, especially of the principal holy personalities. Little by little both religions came to recognize the utility of images based on their great persuasive efficiency and their ability to transmit a new religious message in a clear and synthetic manner, as well as serving as tools that allowed people efficaciously to worship holy personages.68

The figurative objects thus eventually became indispensable elements of devotional practices, of liturgical rites and of religious life in general; and the moment came when it became necessary to reflect, also from a doctrinal point of view, on their appropriateness and legitimacy: in fact, how could one allow their use if there was no mention of them in the words of Buddha or Christ? The problem was solved by favoring the diffusion of legends that retraced the iconographic codes shared by everyone to a series of ideal prototypes established in the same period as the worldly existence of the founders of the two religions, made by or on the initiative of eye-witnesses to their appearance. Parallels can be drawn between the medieval legend of Saint Luke, the evangelist painter who handed down to future generations a portrait “from life” of Christ and the Virgin, and the figures of Prasēnajit and Udāyana; the fact that the latter were described as donors rather than as artists may be understood as an interesting difference of perspective.69

The two kings undoubtedly acted, first and foremost, as exemplary figures of devoted men and, by virtue of their role as representatives of cities and peoples, as first beneficiaries of the portraits of Buddha. Other kings appeared in as many legends, in which the conversion of a group is represented, metonymically, by the obtainment of a sacred image. A Chinese text from the fifth century, for instance, tells how the Emperor Ming (58–75 A.D.) was visited in his dreams by a divine man, golden in color and with a solar halo around his head; on being informed that he was a divinity from the West, the emperor sent a delegation to India that returned with some sacred texts and a painting displaying Śākyamuni, made for the king Udāyana of Kauśāmbī.70 An-

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70 A. C. Soper, Literary Evidence for Early Buddhist Art in China (Ascona 1959) (“Artibus Asiae”)
other sovereign, Bimbisāra of Magadha, wanted to render homage to his ally Udrayana of Roruka by giving him a portrait of Buddha; to enable his court painters to make it as excellent as possible, he asked Buddha himself to pose for them. When they found themselves facing Buddha, the artists were unable to stand the intensity of his gaze and could not depict him until he himself projected his shadow on the canvas, enabling them to fill the contours with color. He wrote King Udrayana, asking him to receive his image with all the honors due to a sovereign.71

These stories bring to mind some ancient Christian legends that, in a similar manner, feature kings and “authentic” portraits associated with the theme of the conversion, but avail themselves of a mythical motif which is completely absent in the Far East: namely, the fact that the king is sick. The emperor Constantine, according to the Actus Silvestri, was affected by leprosy when he had a vision of the saints Peter and Paul, and when he recognized them in the icon shown him by the pope he was convinced of the need to accept the rite of baptism, that in its turn resulted in his healing.72 Also Tiberius was seriously ill when, according to the Acta Pilati, Saint Veronica healed him by means of the holy cloth on which the face of Christ was impressed; and so was King Abgar V of Edessa, who regained health due to the holy mandylion sent him by the Savior in person. Both the Veronica and the mandylion were very special types of images, acheiropoietoi, or in other words “not made by human hands,” an expression which was used both to indicate the figurative objects that were supposed to have been made automatically, by divine intervention in the terrestrial dimension, and those that were supposedly made by physical contact with the body of a holy personality.73

The first category was also frequently witnessed in Buddhist contexts. The Chinese pilgrim Hsüen Tsiang, who visited India between 629 and 645, asserted that he had observed in Bodhgāya, where Śākyamuni achieved Enlightenment, a curious tradition concerning a religious image that represented Śākyamuni in a manner that was extraordinarily similar to how he must have been during that extraordinary circumstance. It was said that the best artists of the country had been contacted, but that no one had felt worthy of carrying out such demanding work, with the exception of a Brahmin who asked to be locked up for six months inside the vihāra (or sanctuary) along with a little scented earth and a lamp. They complied with the requests of the Brahmin, but after only four months the ministers decided to open the doors; inside there were no traces of that man, but they saw an extraordinary image representing the Buddha majestically seated in the lotus position, with his right hand raised in the gesture of the abhaya mudrā and the other pointed downwards, a loving expression on his face and his distinctive marks in the right places (in particular the āurnā, a white curl in the center of the forehead, and the usnīṣa, a protuberance on his head). Everyone proclaimed it was a miracle and not long afterwards a wise man received the vision of the

71 Carter (n. 67 above) 40–41.
72 Actus Silvestri, ed. B. Mombritius, Sanctuarium seu Vitae sanctorum (Paris 1910) 2.512.
73 For a discussion and thorough interpretation of the Byzantine and Latin sources concerning the Mandyion and the Veronica in their association to emperors cf. G. Wolf, Schleier und Spiegel. Traditionen des Christusbildes und die Bildkonzepte der Renaissance (Munich 2002) 22–34, 49–51
Brahmin who had done the work, who revealed that he was none other than the Bodhisattva Maitreya. Fearing that no artist would be able to accomplish the work correctly from an iconographic point of view, he had taken care of it himself, representing the Buddha in the precise position he had assumed at the moment of Enlightenment.74

This tale can, at least in part, be compared to the history of the acheiropoietos of Lydda, an image of the Virgin that supposedly appeared miraculously inside a church that had remained inaccessible for forty days, for the purpose of declaring the local Christian community’s ownership of the building. Sculpted in a slab of porphyry, this holy portrait suffered an act of iconoclasm by the pagan emperor Julian the Apostate; but the sculptors he had sent to destroy it immediately realized that their scalpels, by divine virtue, were not even able to scratch the surface.75 In the context of the legend of the Bodhgāya Buddha the role of the destroyer was played by King Śaśānka, the one who had cut down the tree of the Enlightenment, who ordered the replacement of the holy portrait with a figure of Śiva; however, the person entrusted with the task was a pious person who devised the stratagem of concealing the statue behind a wall of bricks, leaving a lamp inside. When the king died the wall was broken down; to the general amazement, it turned out that the lamp had remained lit all the time.76

While the parallels between these two stories should certainly not be exaggerated, it cannot be doubted that both acheiropoietic images were characterized by a common element, i.e., their connection to holy buildings placed in important pilgrimage centers, which their presence further legitimated. Cultural objects like these were similar to sacred impressions, and acquired a special status because the worshippers recognized their singular characteristics. Hsüen Tsiang, on visiting Benares, was, for instance, convinced that he had recognized the outline of the Buddha in a pillar covered by a light and polished stone, and saluted this discovery as an event worthy of notice, considering that this took place in a foreign center, i.e., one of the most eminent Hindu places of worship77.

On the contrary, the motive of the image made by contact with the very body of a sacred personality is uniquely Christian, as it assumes a specifically sacramental significance that only makes sense in relation to the doctrine of the Sacrifice on the cross and the Redemption. In the case of Buddha, on the contrary, any emphasis on a physical relation with him would be an absurdity; in fact, his body is just one of his many magnificent and unsustainable manifestations, and the artist can at most capture its shadow or reflection in water or the spiritual energy that issues from it in the form of a ray of light. The very idea of the sacred portrait as corporeal reproduction is particularly problematic as, according to the doctrinal system known as the Trikāya, the bodies of the Buddha are three: the “body of truth” that corresponds to ultimate reality un-

74 Hsüen Tsiang, Ta-t'ang-si-yu-ki, trans. Beal (n. 66 above) 2.118–122.
76 Hsüen Tsiang, Ta-t'ang-si-yu-ki, trans. Beal (n. 66 above) 2.121.
77 Ibid. 2.45. We should bear in mind that in the 7th c., Buddhism would almost completely disappear from India, and that Buddhist and Vishnuist as well as Shivaist cult-images shared almost the same iconographical features: cf. P. Pal, The Ideal Image. The Gupta Sculptural Tradition and Its Influence (New York 1978) 37.
derstood as perfect wisdom and completion of individual purposes; the “blessed body”
or the relative reality expressed in the energy of the compassion; and the “body of
eemanation” that is his circumscribed and visually perceptible form. A complex Ti-
betan tradition tells that, by the will of Tathāgata in person, not long before his en-
trance into Nirvana, the greatest divinities of the world created a representation of his
three “states”: Brahma made a shrine (stūpa) that corresponded to the body of truth
and was intended for the female divinities known as the dakini; Vishnu sent the god-
ess of the sea (Nāga) a statue made only of gems, that reproduced the blessed body
with its material; while Indra resorted to celestial gems and colored glass to depict his
“created” person. The divine artist Viśvakarman transformed the latter into images,
two of Siddharta as a child (at eight and twelve years), and a third as a young prince at
twenty-one.78

On the other hand, every iconographically correct image of Buddha, consecrated in
accordance with the rite, might according to the Tantric doctrine be considered a par-
ticular manifestation of his “body of emanation.” The one referred to as “supreme”
was the prerogative of Śākyamuni and other Enlightened of the past and the future,
while the “incarnational” one was assumed by the compassion of those men who live
in the intermediate epochs; they at times took the form of celestial entities, and at
times of human beings. Among the latter the most famous is without doubt, in our
days, the Dalai Lama. The holy images, which were presented as the “artistic” mani-
festation of the body of emanation, were to be considered much more than mere utili-
tarian objects; in fact, they were thought to participate in the essence of the Buddha,
to be the result of a contemplative process on the part of the artist and to serve to visual-
ize the beauty and variety of the enlightened reality.79 The divine works of Viśvakar-
man thus represented models, par excellence, for the sculptor’s activity, principally
understood as a form of mental reassembly of things rather than as a material creative
act.

WESTERN VIEWS OF FAR EASTERN IMAGE-WORSHIP AND DEVOTIONAL PRACTICES

Somewhat like Byzantine icons and a little like the cultic statues of the Christian West,
Tantric “idols” were also seen in a positive light because of their eminently didactic
value; the mental experience of Enlightenment, which was first and foremost aesthetic
in nature, could be at least partially evoked by observation of the image by the ordi-
nary faithful who, looking at the innumerable simulacra presented for their devotion,
would perceive the unlimited nature of the manifestations of the Buddha. As we have
already seen, Western travelers were very impressed with the quantity of such objects,
as well as being intrigued by the hierarchic relations by which they thought they were
governed, and the manner in which they were arranged inside the temples. Friar Wil-
liam, in his stroll around Kajlak, remarked that every place of worship, shaped like a
simple room that one entered through an atrium, was characterized by the presence—
behind a piece of furniture that was the equivalent of the altar in Christian churches—

43.
35.
of a “main idol” that was as large as Saint Christopher and thus literally dominated all the portraits below.\footnote{See n. 62 above.}

This description corresponded quite precisely with the standard arrangement of the most ancient temples of Tibet and Khotan, territories from which Mahayana Buddhism had already spread at the time of the Uighurs.\footnote{On the arrangement of Buddhist temples in medieval Central Asia in its connection with Tibet and Khotan, see A. von Gabain, \textit{Einführung in Zentralasienskunde} (Darmstadt 1979) 100. On archaeological evidence about Buddhist sacred buildings in that area, see V. D. Goryacheva-S. R. Peregudova, “Buddhskie pamyatniki Kirgizii,” \textit{Vestnik drevnej istorii} 2 (1996) 167–189.} The interior, rectangular and quite small, was dominated by the \textit{gtso bo}, portraits of the gods to which the building was dedicated, arranged along with the other statues above an area sufficiently detached from the wall to allow the worshippers to walk around it.\footnote{G. Tucci, \textit{Archaeologia Mundi. Tibet} (Geneva 1975) 75–76.} The ritual circling, during which one took care always to keep to the right, was in fact the most diffused form of veneration of sacred objects. This kind of practice was very familiar to Northern European pilgrims, who were accustomed to circulating in the ambulatory in the great Romanesque and Gothic cathedrals to venerate the relics, the holy bodies, and the miraculous statues that were usually installed in the area of the presbytery. Both in Europe and Central Asia these customs were associated with images sculpted in full relief, around which the believers could circumambulate.

Such practices were probably well known to the bishop of Sultaniyeh, John of Cori, one of the first Europeans to provide accurate information on the monasteries and temples of the Himalayan countries in his \textit{Book on the Great Khan’s Empire} (written ca. 1330–1334): “[The Tibetans] are idolaters and worship idols of various kinds. They say that above these idols there are four gods; they sculpt these four gods in full relief in gold and silver. Above these four gods they admit that there is a greater god that dominates all the other gods, small and large.”\footnote{“Ils sont idolaste et aourent plusieurs ydolles, par desseure lesquelles ydolles ilz dient estre iiii dieux, lesquels iiii dieux ilz entaillent dor et dargent tous entiers devant et derrieres et par desseure ces quatre dieux dient ilz estre un plus grant dieu qui par desseur e tous les dieux grans et petitis.” \textit{John of Cori, Livre de l’Estaat du grant Can}, ed. M. Jacquet, \textit{Journal Asiatique} 6 (1830) 59–71, esp. 63.} Once again the condemnation of idolatry, clearly expressed, contrasted with the pleasant discovery of elements of affinity with the cultural usages of the Western world. Three-dimensional images were honored within great abbeys, whose monks observed rigorous chastity, made alms, performed many rites and prayers each day, and rang bells.\footnote{“A paines ny a cite ne ville ou dit empire ou on ne truist une abbaie, et sen y a viii ou dix ou plus en tel cite y a et en chascune abbaie a due moins cc personne s. Ilz sont mout riches et de ces grandes richesses ilz font grans aumones pour Dieu. Ilz vivent tres ordennement et dient leurs eures vii fois le iour et lieuent as matines. Ilz ont cloches de metal faites a maniere de comble, desquelles ilz sonnent leurs heures. Ilz gardent chastete et nulz clers religieux ne se marie.” Ibid. Similar terms are used also by the contemporary writer Friar Jordanus; see H. Yule, \textit{Mirabilia descripta. The Wonders of the East by Friar Jordanus} (New York 1963) 46.} The Buddhist divinities were immediately identified with the statues arranged on the altars of the temples; these struck the imagination because of their great differences in size (according to a system of hierarchical relationship not unlike that ruling medieval iconography) and the different materials in which they were realized. It was striking that the most important were not painted, but covered with gold and silver. The specific allu-
sion in the text quoted above was probably to the so-called “heavenly kings of the four worlds,” placed as guardians of the four directions, or perhaps (with a small error in calculation) the “five transcendent Buddhas” that personified the five wisdoms or primary energies of the universe (Aksobhya, Amitabha, Amoghasiddhi, Ratnasambhava, and Vairochana)85.

During his visit to the temple of Kajlak, Friar William was unable to suppress his desire to somehow establish contact with the monks, whom he saw seated in the atrium intent on reciting the mantra of the compassion of Avalokiteśvara, *Om mani padme hum* (“Hello, O jewel in the lotus”; translated to him, however, as “God, you know”) with the aid of “a cord with a hundred or two hundred knots” that greatly resembled the Western *circulum praecatorium*—what one would today call a “rosary.”86 The Franciscan remained tranquilly convinced that he had entered a church of the Christians of Prester John, and only after his long stay in the Khan’s camp in Karakorum did he learn to distinguish Nestorian places of worship from those of the Buddhist “idolaters” or “Tuinians.” What he was interested in at that point was understanding whether what he believed to be his religious brethren had remained faithful to a correct doctrine or whether, as was highly probable, they had allowed themselves to be corrupted by some heterodox belief. The brief conversation he had with them did not encourage him at all, and one really wonders how it could even have taken place, considering the fact that the interpreter was certainly unable to translate concepts as complex as “God,” “nature,” or “soul” correctly in a language like Mongolian or Uighur.

The question that Friar William actually wanted to ask the Buddhist religious men was whether they believed in a single God, if they considered him to be material or spiritual, and whether he had ever assumed human nature. Without hesitation the Buddhists answered that he was pure spirit and had never taken on a human form; the friar replied, pointing at the large and small idols crowding the temple: “As you believe there he is one and only spiritual, why do you make corporeal images of him, and in such large numbers? And furthermore, as you do not believe he has appeared as a human being, why do you create more anthropomorphous images of him, than images of him as another animal?” The monks explained: “We do not create these images for God, but rather, when some rich man or his child or wife or someone else who is dear to him dies, they have the image of the deceased made and place it here, and we venerate his memory.” “But then,” Friar William burst out, “you do it only to adulate humans!” “Not in the least,” they replied, “rather, it is in their memory.”87
The annoyance of the friar was quite unjustified, if we consider that Western Christian churches, precisely in that moment, were beginning to be full of sepulchral monuments, votive images, and portraits of benefactors who sought to enjoy the spiritual virtues of the holy buildings in a privileged manner. Certainly, the presence of images of deceased persons would be more usual, in the East, in Taoist temples, considering the centrality of the cult of the ancestors in all religious practices of ancient China. And it would appear to adapt itself to the beliefs of the nomadic peoples concerning the spirits and phantasms of the dead members of their own clan. It is likely that the Buddhist communities, arriving from China and from Tibet, which had settled in the lands of central northern Asia, eventually adopted some customs that did not perfectly agree with the official doctrine. This may also be inferred from a passage from Marco Polo’s *Milione* that tells about sacrifices of animals in honor of idols habitually practiced among the Tanguts; the true followers of Buddha usually only offered flowers and incense.

In the eyes of Marco Polo there was no difference between Buddhist and Taoist idols. This can be explained by the fact that the two religions had by then coexisted so closely, for centuries, that they had a lot in common in terms of architecture and sacred furniture. In fact, the days in which the emperor Wu-tsung, between 842 and 845, had launched a severe persecution of Buddhism in favor of Taoism were by then distant; he had in particular attacked books, that had to be burned, and holy images, that had to be buried under the ground. Subsequently the two confessions, given equivalent status as Chinese national religions, had lived together without any particular conflicts. And, with respect to the use of images and iconography, the religion of T’ao has certainly continuously sought to imitate the practices used by the followers of Tathāgata. When visiting the holy pagodas and pavilions of that country, a Western traveler would have found it hard to understand which of the two beliefs they housed; a single element would undoubtedly catch the attention, namely the presence of a large number of images that—apart from the question of whether they represented arhats and Bodhisattvas or the Three Pure, the Emperor of Jade, and the 500 supernatural mandarins—were above all subjects of extraordinary veneration, sometimes capable of accomplishing extraordinary miracles.
Certain Taoist statues undoubtedly made an impression on Marco Polo by their bizarre appearance, especially animal and monstrous forms; for instance he saw that very important divinities, such as Xuan wu, mistress of the seven stations of the North, had a body that was half turtle and half serpent, and he considered this a significant distinctive trait of the iconography of the Far East. In fact, he wrote:

Now you have to understand that the idols of these islands (i.e., Japan) and those of Cathay are made in the same way. And those of these islands, and even of the others who venerate idols, sometimes have heads of oxen, and other times of pigs, and likewise of many types of animals, pigs, rams, and others; and some have a head and four faces and some have four heads and some ten; and the more they have, the more hope and belief do they place in them.91

According to Jurgis Baltrušaitis, this kind of description have played a fundamental role in the diffusion in the West of fantastic iconographic motives, related to abnormal peoples, demoniac monsters, allegorical figures (such as the “Fortune” with six and twelve arms), and apocalyptic entities (such as the “Prostitute of Babylon,” probably influenced, in certain of its representations, by the figure of the snake-god Nāga).92 Nevertheless, Polo’s observation was essentially correct and formulated in more ironic than negative terms; he also appreciated the useful role played by the “idols” in the religious life of the population and in the definition of the social order, and went so far as to relate them to functions of Western sacred images. In fact, the latter were also involved in a combination of devotional practices (votive offers and disconsolate requests for protection) in a ritual system made up of chants, illuminations, and sprinkling of scented substances in a rigorous calendar of monthly and annual festivities (in fact, “each idol has its own feast, as do our own saints”93). At least once, as the variant contained in a single manuscript of the Devisament du monde recounts, Polo believed that he had benefited from the cultural and magical efficiency attributed to these simulacra; in fact, he invoked one of them, in the city of Tung-p’ing-fu, to find a very precious ring he had misplaced. As a result Polo was able to ascertain that the simulacrum’s fame in this kind of situation was truly justified, as he found the lost object shortly afterwards; however, as he belonged to another culture and religion, he did not feel obliged to thank the simulacrum with some offer or votive homage.94

The above circumstances once again reveal that the difference between an “idol” and a “sacred image” was purely terminological, since it was a consequence of the viewer’s perspective. In fact, it is not mistaken to say that every simulacrum intended

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91 “Or sapiate che gl’idoli di queste isole e quelle del Catai sono tutte d’una maniera. E questi di queste isole, e ancora de l’altre ch’anno idoli, ta’ sono ch’anno capo di bue, e tal di porco, e così di molte fazioni di bestie, di porci, di montoni e altri; e tali anno un capo e iii visi e tali anno iii capi e tali x; e quanti più n’anno, magiore speranza e fede anno il loro.” Marco Polo, Il Milione clvii, ed. Bertolucci Pizzorusso (n. 64 above) 238–239.


93 “E in cotale maniera fanno onore agli idoli lo di della loro festa, chè ciascuno idolo à propria festa, come anno gli nostri santi.” Marco Polo, Il Milione lxxiv, ed. Bertolucci Pizzorusso (n. 64 above) 111–112.

for cults was, at the same time, an idol to all those who failed to recognize its religious significance and operative efficiency, or to those who accepted that it may have an intrinsic virtue, but of a completely negative kind. But while the felt dolls of the Mongolian yurts could at most be compared to the paraphernalia of black magic (and there are testimonials of exorcism practiced against them by the Franciscans operating in the territories of the Golden Horde), in the case of Hindu, Buddhist, and Taoist statues it was not difficult to recognize their value as true “icons” or in other words as figurative objects used to simulate the presence of the divinities. Indeed, some men of culture, not without some astonishment, realized that among many profane simulacra one might also recognize some that were truly genuine and worthy of the greatest veneration on the part of good Christians. Friar Giovanni de’ Marignolli, who visited the city of Hang Chou (which he called Kampsay) in 1342, wrote that in a temple there a statue of the Virgin Mary was venerated with an impressive illumination corresponding to the Chinese New Year; according to the friar, this custom unequivocally proved that the birth of Christ had been foretold by wise men of the East.

This somewhat bizarre idea undoubtedly originated from the fact that, among many images that were incomprehensible to him from an iconographic point of view, he had seen at least one that was familiar in appearance. It must have been the Buddhist goddess Kuan Yin (who was the Chinese version of the male bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara), the personification of Mercy, who was often depicted seated with a child in her arms, more or less as the Madonna with Child is represented in the West (fig. 5). Two centuries later, in 1499, when Vasco de Gama landed at Calicut in India for the first time, he was positive, when visiting a Hindu temple, that he had recognized the same motif in a statue which probably represented the protectress of Children, Haritī; he considered this to be proof of the presence, in that remote Eastern region, of the Christians of Saint Thomas.

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95 Odoric of Pordenone xxxvi, SF 490–491.
96 “Omnes enim philosophi et astrologi Babilonii et Egipcii et Caldei pruneciarunt in coniunccione Mercurii et Saturni puellam nasciturum virgeminem, filium absque viri coytu parituram in terra Israel, cuius ymago in templo de Kampsay solempnissime custoditur, et prima luna mensis primi, scilicet februarii qui primus est apud Kathayos, festum istud cum candelis per totam noctem solempnissime celebratur anni novi ...” Giovanni de’ Marignolli, Cronica Boemorum, excerpt in SF 559. The friar had participated in the “feast of lamps” during the celebrations of the Chinese New Year and had mistaken it for Candlemas. Cf. H. Franke, “Das ‘himmlische Pferd’ des Johann von Margnola,” Archiv für Kulturgeschichte 50 (1968) 33–40, esp. 40; Reichert (n. 1 above) 138 and n. 385. Representations of the Enthroned Kuan Yin, such as that in a 9th-c. painting on ramie from Yarkhoto where the Goddess wears a maphorion-like red veil, could be easily mistaken for Byzantining images of the Mother of God; cf. O’Neill (n. 31 above) 206, entry 147; on Kuan Yin’s iconography, cf. Getty (n. 84 above) 78–84; and L. Lahiri, “Kuan-Shih-Yin, Avalokitesvāra in Chinese Buddhism,” Buddha Iconography (n. 59 above) 142–148; on Haritī’s image, see B. Sahai, Iconography of Minor Hindu and Buddhist Deities (New Delhi 1975) 253–258. The issue was discussed in the early 20th c. by A. Foucher, “La Madone bouddhique,” Monuments Piot 17.2 (1910) 225–275.
In their exploration of the Mongol Empire, Western merchants and missionaries experienced for the first time contact with peoples and cultural traditions which had been almost completely unknown in previous centuries. The widening of the geographic horizons and the intensification of commercial and cultural relations between Europe and the Far East fostered the more or less unexpressed hope for the expansion of Christian faith far beyond the Islamic countries and the supremacy of the Cross over the Asiatic continent. At least in the first years of missionary activity in Mongolia and China, the Roman Church and some Western powers actually believed in the possibility of converting the Great Khan and thus obtaining a significant ally in the fight against the Muslim world.

Some ethnographic details in the description of Central Asian and Far Eastern peoples could be at first glance interpreted as circumstantial evidence in favor of such unexpressed hope. Since most of the Tartars were still characterized by very crude beliefs, more similar to black magic than to a real religion, the missionaries could suppose that it would not have been difficult to obtain their conversion. More important was the fact that most of the inhabitants of those regions had religious habits which proved to look much more like those of Western Europe than those of Islam or even Eastern Christianity. A very important clue was provided by the Buddhist and Taoist use of cult-images as outstanding items within the furnishings of their sacred places: they looked like Western Christian sacred statues, and were worshipped in a similar way. Like their European analogues, they performed gestures whose evocative meaning could be easily recognized, and displayed clothes which emphasized their owners’ status and dignity; lamps and ornaments emphasized their role as material substitutes for the holy figures they were reputed to represent.

This feeling of affinity between Far Eastern practices and Western Christian image-worship relied on at least three important issues. First, the widespread use of three-dimensional statues caught the Westerners’ imaginations; in no other country of the world had they seen so many objects like these, so characteristic of their homelands, and so unusual or even unthinkable in both Byzantium and the iconophobic Islamic world. Second, they were struck by the Buddhist complex and highly developed iconographic code, which used formulas and schemes not unlike those employed in Christian representations of holy personages, to an extent that included the usual representations, attributes, poses, and gestures used to characterize Saint Christopher, the Archangel Michael, or even the Virgin and Child. The hybridization of cult-practices and images among the different religious communities living along the routes of Central Asia—where Christ and Mani were represented as bodhisattvas and Kuan Yin as the Mother of God—gave an added dimension to the European appreciation of Far Eastern imagery.

Finally, as Marco Polo’s remarks implied, the “idolaters” shared the Christian conception of the sacred image as a reproduction of a much older archetype, an authentic portrait of the founder of Buddhism dating back to his lifetime, or made by means of his direct intervention. Such an intuition was not only suggested by the Christian tracts that Polo attributed to the historical figure of Śākyamuni, but also relied on actual Eastern, and mainly Chinese, traditions which described original, true-to-life, and
“acheiropoietic” reproductions—both statues and paintings—of Buddha’s face and body, commissioned by famous kings of ancient India. Such traditions betrayed legendary tracts which, strikingly enough, paralleled ancient Christian stories such as Abgar of Edessa’s mandylion, Saint Luke’s portrait of the Virgin and Child, and many others, and aimed at providing mankind with real historical records of Jesus of Nazareth’s or Buddha’s outward appearance. In this respect, Marco Polo’s intuition proves valid even in present times and might be a point of departure for further investigation on the part of historians of religion and religious mythology. In the context of the present article it has been sufficient to show that such reasoning helped to foster the European observers’ feeling of affinity with Far Eastern believers.

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FIG. 1. *Paten Decorated with Christological Scenes*, 9th–10th century, found in Gregorovskoye, Governorate of Perm, Russia. Saint Petersburg, Ermitage (photo: author).
Fig. 2. Sketch of a painting on silk representing Christ discovered at Tun-Huang, China, in 1908 (after Saeki [n. 30 above] 407).
Fig. 3. Sketch of an image of *Maitreya Bodhisattva*, after a Tibetan 11th-century bronze statue (author).
Fig. 4. Sketch of the image of the Standing Buddha worshipped in the Seiryōji Temple in Kyoto, 988 A.D., reputed to be a copy of King Udayana’s archetype (author).