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Evidence Relating to the Christian Missions in the Trans-Urals and Northwestern Siberia (8th to 16th Centuries)

This study addresses the possible activity of early Christian missions among the Vogul (Mansi) of the Urals, Trans-Urals, and northwestern Siberia between the 8th–16th centuries. Three stages in their history are described. The first (700–1000 AD) was marked by the import of Central Asian silver dishes (patens) reproducing Biblical themes and Christian symbols. Specimens from Grigorovskoye, Anikovskoye, and from Malaya Ob were cast in the Nestorian communities of Semirechye. The imported paten-dishes gave rise to the tradition of offering food to deities on metal dishes. The second stage (1200–1400 AD) began when silver plaques depicting the famous iconographic subject (“The Miracle of the Martyr Demetrius of Thessaloniki Defeating King Kaloyan of Bulgaria”) were imported to the region. The third stage (15th and 16th centuries) correlates with the Russian expansion to Siberia and attempts to Christianize the local peoples. Symbols such as tin plaques were distributed to be worn by them. Apparently, most plaques represent the Biblical King David, and were manufactured by Russians in the late 1400s to early 1500s. In the 16th century, plaques with the figure of St. George appeared in Siberia. The analysis of items showing Biblical and hagiographical characters and analysis of their distribution in northwestern Siberia suggests that Christian missions were unable to oust paganism from the region. Russian religious items were used in rituals of the native peoples mostly if they represented horsemen, because these seemed to allude to the son of the Ob Ugric supreme deity Mir-Susne-Khum, also depicted as a horseman.

Keywords: *Christianity, mission, silver, Urals, Siberia, Khanty, Mansi.*

Introduction

As is known, before the arrival of the Russian people to the Urals and Western Siberia, the local population was pagan. The earliest information about the baptism of several princely families mentions the late 16th–17th centuries; the baptism mainly involved the ruling circles of the town of Koda (principality) (Novitsky, 1941: 73; Bakhrushin, 1935: 60; Perevalova, 2004: 62–64). Further Christianization of the Ostyaks and Voguls was associated with the decree of Peter the Great, relating to

the baptism of foreigners and active missionary activities of Philotheus Leschinsky, carried out in 1706–1727 (Sulotsky, 1915: 30–49; Perevalova, 2004: 65–70).

This article suggests that Christian missions left their traces in the Urals and northwestern Siberia even earlier—in the 8th–16th centuries. These traces primarily involve metal items (bowls, dishes, medallions, and plaques) with the representations of Old Testament scenes and figures of Christian saints and martyrs. The territorial scope of this article is determined by the history of the Mansi settlement. Today, they mostly live in the Khanty-Mansi

Autonomous Okrug–Yugra and the Sverdlovsk Region. Mansi place-names make it possible to establish the area formerly inhabited by them: until the 14th century, the ancestors of the Mansi (the Voguls) lived much further to the west—in the Cis-Urals and the Middle Urals (Narody..., 2005: 199, 211–217).

Silver bowls of the 6th–10th centuries depicting Old Testament scenes and Christian symbols

Five such bowls found in the Urals and the northwestern Siberia are currently known.

The paten-dish “Angels flanking the Cross” (diameter 18.6 cm) was purchased before 1868 in Berezovo (presently, an urban-type settlement in the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug–Yugra) (Khvolson, Pokrovsky, Smirnov, 1899: 7, fig. 3; Smirnov, 1909: cat. 37); it is kept in the State Hermitage Museum. Y.I. Smirnov believed that the dish was cast by the Syrian Christians in the 6th century in Mesopotamia or Persia, or, in a broader sense, within the Sassanid State (Khvolson, Pokrovsky, Smirnov, 1899: 8). Representation of the Cross flanked by two angels on the dish constitutes the composition “Adoration of the Cross” or “Glory to the Cross”, reproducing another Cross made from precious materials and located in a special place called the “Angelic Victorious Place” in the Jerusalem Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The composition “Adoration of the Cross” was popular among the Nestorian Syrians who lived in Mesopotamia (Sokrovishcha..., 1996: 70).

A **silver paten-dish** (diameter 23 cm) with scenes from the Gospels was found in 1897 near the village of Grigorovskoye in the Solikamsky Uyezd of the Perm Governorate; it is kept in the State Hermitage Museum and was first described in 1899 with comments by Y.I. Smirnov, D.A. Khvolson, and N.V. Pokrovsky, who described it as a Nestorian dish made by the Christians in Iran (Khvolson, Pokrovsky, Smirnov, 1899: 1–45). Today, it is believed that the dish was cast in Semirechye in the 9th–10th centuries (Darkevich, Marshak, 1974: 215).

The compositions of the “Ascension”, “Myrrh-bearing Women at the Tomb”, and the “Crucifixion” are represented on the front side of the dish in three interlacing medallions; the compositions of “Daniel in the Lion’s Den”, the “Denial of Peter”, and the “Guards at the Tomb of the Lord” were depicted in free spaces, and the Cross was engraved in the center of the dish. The inscriptions on the dish are made in Syriac. Smirnov suggested that the Grigorovskoye dish, like the dish with the angels flanking the Cross, was used for some ecclesiastical purposes, possibly for the particles of the Holy Gifts under the guise of bread, which means

that functionally these dishes were patens (Khvolson, Pokrovsky, Smirnov, 1899: 32–34).

The **Anikovskoye dish** (diameter 23.5–23.9 cm) from the collection of the State Hermitage Museum was found in 1909 near the village of Bolshe-Anikovskaya in the Cherdynsky Uyezd of the Perm Governorate (Darkevich, 1976: 28–29) (Fig. 1, *a*). The image of a fortress surrounded by ten riders on both sides is depicted in the center of the front side. The figures of three warriors are shown in the upper part of the building; the heads of four more people can be seen in watchtowers. The figures of seven musicians with raised up trumpets and a man holding a box on his shoulders are represented in the middle of the composition. A woman with raised arms is shown in the window above the entrance to the fortress.

B.I. Marshak convincingly argued that the front side of the dish represents events from the Book of Joshua, modified in the Central Asian environment. In his opinion, the sequence of these events is shown from the bottom up. The siege of Jericho is represented below with Rahab the Harlot depicted in a window set in the city wall; above this, the Ark of the Covenant is carried out accompanied by seven priests with “seven trumpets of rams’ horns”; even higher, the capture of the Canaan city and Joshua who stopped the moon and sun (Marshak, 1971: 11). Marshak believed that the dish was cast in the 9th–10th centuries in Semirechye according to a cast from an original of the 8th century (Ibid.). His version was supported by V.P. Darkevich (1976: 28–29).

The **Nildino dish** (diameter 23–24 cm), the twin of the Anikovskoye dish, is dated to the 8th–early 9th century, and belongs to the production of artisans’ workshops from Central Asia (Fig. 1, *b*). It was discovered in 1985 at the Mansi sacred site in the basin of the Severnaya Sosva River (Berezovsky District, Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug–Yugra). The local population revered this silver dish for the representation of the deities of their pantheon, including Polum-Torum—the “Pelym god” and his son (Gemuev, 1988). The legend of finding this dish during fishing, which was recorded by V.N. Chernetsov in the 1930s, said that “seven dishes, all of which were the same” were found among the fish after fishing with a net, and that “the rest of the dishes were taken to other places...” (Istochniki..., 1987: 265).

Silver dish with the image of the Biblical kings (diameter 24 cm), which was made in the 8th–9th centuries in Central Asia, was discovered at the Khanty sacred place in the Malaya Ob Basin (Berezovsky District, Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug–Yugra). It played an important role in religious rituals of the Northern Khanty: during the ceremony, pieces of sacrificial bread which could be taken by the elders or orphan guests who were present, were placed onto it



Fig. 1. The Anikovskoye (a) and Nildino (b) silver dishes.



Fig. 2. Dish representing the Biblical Kings David and Solomon used during a sacrificial ceremony.

(Baulo, 2000: 143) (Fig. 2). A scene associated with the legendary rulers of the Kingdom of Israel and Judea is represented on the front side of the dish: David, enthroned, is holding a musical instrument in his hands; Solomon is to his right, and Bathsheba, David's wife and Solomon's mother, is to his left.

Thus, by now, five silver dishes of the 6th–10th centuries depicting Old Testament scenes and Christian symbols have been found in the Urals and northwestern Siberia; the Mansi legend recorded by

Chernetsov mentions six other dishes. Four of the dishes cast in the 8th–10th centuries in craftsmanship centers of Central Asia are united by episodes of the Old Testament represented on them, and therefore these items can be considered testimonies of the early period of Christianity in that region. The dish-paten “Angels flanking the Cross”, which had belonged to Christian Syrians, is earlier (6th century), and its place of production is to the south and east of Semirechye—in Mesopotamia or Persia. In fact, we can speak about a certain route from east to west,

by which precious items with Christian symbols were transported: Syria – Mesopotamia – Iran – Central Asia – the Urals – Trans-Urals.

It is known that the Nestorian movement to the east began after the deposition of Nestorius at the Third Ecumenical Council in 431. His views were met with support in East Syria and influenced the Persian Christian Church. Christianity penetrated Persia quite early in the beginning of the 4th century. Several Persian bishops took part in the Council of Nicaea in 325. After 431, when the Nestorian doctrine was anathematized, most of its followers fled to Persia, where their numbers and influence gradually increased (Khvolson, Pokrovsky, Smirnov, 1899: 3). In 499, Nestorianism was proclaimed the official doctrine of the Persian Christians. The Nestorian communities of Iran enjoyed the patronage of the Sassanian kings, and later of the Arab rulers (Darkevich, 1976: 100, 103).

By the early 6th century, a Christian Nestorian community headed by a bishop was also present in Samarkand (Belenitsky, 1954: 37). In the history of Semirechye, the period from the late 8th until the first half of the 10th century witnessed the success of Christianity. At the turn of the 8th and 9th centuries, Nestorian clergy succeeded in Christianizing the king of the Qarluqs who reigned in this region, and in organizing a diocese (Darkevich, Marshak, 1974: 219). In Khwarazm, Christian colonies existed in the 7th–8th centuries (Srednyaya Aziya..., 1999: 26, 46).

In the 6th–10th centuries, pilgrims would bring Syrian and Palestinian amulets, as well as larger items, from their trips to the Holy Land, and later these gifts ended up in the Nestorian monasteries of Central Asia and in the hands of the Persian Christians (Khvolson, Pokrovsky, Smirnov, 1899: 12; Darkevich, Marshak, 1974: 214). Syrian missionaries reached Central Asia and Eastern Turkistan, where they preached their doctrines (Darkevich, 1976: 100).

Starting in the 6th–7th centuries, merchants from Sogdia and Khwarazm began to make their way to the north, including the Upper Kama River region. They were mainly interested in walrus tusks, hunting birds (falcons), and furs. At the turn of the 7th–8th centuries, the Ob region started to become involved in trade with the south through the Kama River region (Sokrovishcha..., 1996: 6–9).

It can be assumed that Christian missionaries, carrying silver dishes with Biblical themes, also moved along with merchants with trade caravans to the north. It is difficult to judge how successful these missions were, but some formal ritual activities could have become rooted in the foreign ethnic environment. In fact, the silver dish at the Khanty sanctuary fulfilled the functional purpose of the paten—the sacrificial bread was placed on it.

Silver plaques with representation of a rider defeating a warrior

In recent years, several silver round plaques united by a common military subject have been discovered in the Urals and northwestern Siberia. The most common type of these items is a plaque made of thin silver plate with a diameter of 7.4 cm; its bent edges fasten a copper wire, which acts as a frame. A rider is depicted in the center: the horse is in profile view; the man is full face. He is holding a bridle in his left hand and a spear in his right hand. A warrior with a saber in his right hand is lying under the horse.

Two such plaques were found in the 1970s by the residents of the village of Shuryshkary in Shuryshkarsky District of the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug, at the archaeological site of Belaya Gora. One plaque entered the funds of the Museum of Nature and Man (Khanty-Mansiysk) (Komova, Pristupa, 2012: 128–129) (Fig. 3); another one (distinguished by the presence of a loop for hanging) entered the funds of the Shemanovsky Museum and Exhibition Complex (Salekhard) (Fedorova, 2005: 20). Several more similar plaques are known, which were mainly found during unauthorized excavations (Rudenko, 2015: 96, ill. 184). A larger item (diameter 12.5 cm) with a similar subject from a private collection originates from an unknown archaeological site near the village of Urol (Cherdynsky District, Perm Region). This is a fairly thick round plaque consisting of several layers of silver and having a bronze loop for hanging (Fig. 4).

A similar subject (a rider striking a warrior lying on the ground with a spear) is present in the iconography known as “The Miracle of St. Demetrius of Thessaloniki”. A text



Fig. 3. Small silver plaque with the representation of a rider defeating a warrior.



Fig. 4. Silver plaque with the representation of a rider defeating a warrior.

of the second half of the 13th century tells about Tsar Ivan Kaloyan, the ruler of Bulgaria. In 1207, he besieged the city of Thessaloniki, but suddenly died or was killed; after that, the siege of the city ended. According to the legend, the Great Martyr Demetrius came to the tent of Kaloyan at night and pierced him with a spear in his heart (Ivanova et al., 2007: 155–170). Representations of this miracle started to appear in the second half of the 13th century. They show the Great Martyr Demetrius in military attire on a horse, holding a spear in his hand, with which he is killing the Tsar Kaloyan, who has fallen to the ground. In Old Russian art, this iconography can be found in scenes on hagiographical icons since the late 15th century, but in that version, Demetrius strikes with a spear Kaloyan who is riding a white horse (Ibid.).

Thus, if we assume that silver plaques with the image of the rider and defeated warrior show simplified iconography of “Demetrius of Thessaloniki defeating Tsar Kaloyan”, the production of plaques should be dated to the 13th–15th centuries, and their Russian origin should be excluded. It is difficult to accurately establish the place of their production.

Russian tin plaques of the late 15th–16th century with Christian subjects

The author of this article has already written about a group of Russian round tin plaques demonstrating the image of King David, which were found on a cape near the village of Many (Berezovsky District of the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug–Yugra). This place correlates with the Iskarsky fortified settlement. “In old times, it

was inhabited both by the Voguls and Zyrians who at first traded here with these Voguls” (Sibir..., 1996: 245). In total, six plaques with a diameter of 4.4 cm were found. They are of three types: with the image of King David who jumped on a lion and is tearing its mouth; with a composition representing King David on the throne, and two men holding goblets in their hands (the feast of King David can be recognized in this composition), and with the images of a double-headed eagle, Star of David, and three birds. Fragments of two similar tin plaques (a feast scene, “King David and the Lion”) were discovered in 2006 in a sacred barn of the Khanty in the Shuryshkarsky District of the Ymalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug. Analysis has made it possible to suggest the Russian origin of these items and the time of their casting as not earlier than the late 15th to early 16th century (Baulo, 2014). This group should also include a tin plaque 5.4 cm in diameter with a loop, recently found in Oktyabrsky District of the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug–Yugra. The rider is depicted on the front side, killing a snake with a spear, and can be correlated with St. George (Fig. 5).

It may be assumed that the tin plaques with the representations of King David and St. George mentioned above were cast in fairly large quantities by Russian artisans, and were intended for delivery to Siberia at the late 15th–16th century in the attempts to convert the Voguls to the Orthodox faith. The loops of the plaques made it possible to wear them around the neck. Plaques with the image of St. George could have been perceived by the Ostyaks and Voguls in a way compatible with their own religious and mythological beliefs, since any image of a man on horseback was associated for them with the sacred image of a popular deity, the son of the supreme god Numi-Torum—the Heavenly Rider Mir-Susne-



Fig. 5. Small plaque with the representation of St. George killing a snake.

Khum. Even at a later time, in the early 19th century, Russian artisans continued to actively use the image of St. George on silver saucers, which were produced in the workshops of Tobolsk at the request of non-Russians (Gemuev, Baulo, 1999: 54–57).

Conclusions

The evidence presented in this article suggests that Christian missions began their work in the Urals and northwestern Siberia at a relatively early period. They might have moved together with the trade caravans of the Sogdian and Khwarazmian merchants, which were discovering northern trade routes beginning in the 7th–8th centuries. In chronological terms, we can distinguish three stages of possible activities on the part of Christian missions.

The first stage (8th–10th centuries) was associated with importing silver dishes with Biblical themes and Christian symbols to the north. These were mainly vessels cast in the Nestorian communities of Semirechye. Imported dish-patens could have contributed to the emergence of the tradition of offering sacrificial food (later, bread) to the deities on metal dishware (silver dishes) among the Siberian peoples.

The second stage (13th–14th centuries) was associated with importing silver plaques of various diameters, the subject of which could have reproduced the well-known legend of Great Martyr Demetrius of Thessaloniki, who killed the Bulgarian Tsar Kaloyan, to the Urals and Trans-Urals. It is difficult to establish the production place of such items, but the suggested hypothesis excludes Russian workshops.

The third stage (late 15th–16th centuries) can be associated with the advancement of the Russian people to Western Siberia and attempts to Christianize the local population. These attempts could have involved distribution of Christian symbols—tin plaques to be worn with subjects associated with King David and St. George.

It is difficult to say to which extent Christian subjects could have entered the local mythology, since it is problematic to date the legends and tales of the Khanty and Mansi which have reached our days. At the very least, traces of Christian subjects are obvious in the northern Mansi folklore recorded in the second half of the 19th century; they concern, for example, legends about the creation of man, the flood from heaven, and the conflict between God and the devil (see, e.g., (Gondatti, 1888: 48–50)).

Possible activities of Christian missions in the Urals and northwestern Siberia in the early stages did not achieve their main goals: the overwhelming part of the imported paraphernalia ended up at sacred places of the

Ob Ugrians, while religious and mythological beliefs continued to bear a pagan character.

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