

59.

## Gilt Copper Nestorian Plaque

## 景教金銅額

Height: 16.5 cm. (6 1/2 in.)

Width: 14.5 cm. (5 3/4 in.)

Tang dynasty

唐

8th-9th century

The lightweight, thinly hammered plaque consists of a cross, the focal point of the object, with arms of equal length, each of narrow isocoles-triangular shape, the apices meeting at the central cross-section where a small cross of similar shape is incised. A multi-petalled opened lotus blossom supports the cross above a flared base, the base decorated in three tiers, the top with circles containing crosses, the middle with plain circles, and the bottom with peacock feathers above a thin tab. Pairs of outcroppings are present at the ends of three arms of the cross. Descending *apsara* flank the cross, each supporting the lotus with both hands, their long pleated robes upswept, cinched at the waists with sashes that ascend to connect with the cross, each head encircled by an additional sash. The celestial figures' hair is combed back off their oval faces, their wide-opened eyes under detailed brows trained on the viewer, their long strong noses above pursed lips. Some gilding remains as patches on the dark-brown metal surface.

The early history of Nestorianism in China, believed to herald the introduction of Christianity to China, is literally written in stone (fig. 1-2).<sup>1</sup> A twelve-foot tall limestone monument, the Nestorian Stele, was produced in typical Chinese stele style. Supported on a large stone tortoise, the title is prominently carved in large characters: *Daqin jingjiao liuxing Zongguo bei*, "Stele to Propagate the Luminous Religion [Nestorianism] from Daqin [the Roman Empire] in China" (fig. 3). The stele was erected in A.D.781. The account provided in the inscription that was written in Chinese with a gloss in Syriac outlines the recognition of the foreign faith by a tolerant emperor, Tang Taizong, in A.D.635, the establishment of settlements and communities of Nestorian devotees in China, the essential role played by a revered missionary, the bishop Alopen from Persia, in effecting these events; and makes mention not only of religious texts brought to China by Alopen and his party but also, importantly here, that Nestorian religious images were brought along as well.

The stele was lost for some eight-hundred years, between the mid 9th century when it was buried during a period of religious persecution, and the 17th century when it was rediscovered by Jesuits in China.

Above the name, not visible to the naked eye when standing in front of the stone in the Forest of

Stele in Xi'an where it is now preserved, is an image of a Nestorian cross (fig. 4). The arms are typically of equal length and are adorned at the end of each with circular tabs: each of the horizontal arms have three; on the upper vertical arm are two, and one at the bottom, representing together the nine orders within the church. At the top between the two tabs a tri-pronged crown represents the Holy Trinity.

It was typical for an alien religion seeking foothold in China to align itself, at least symbolically and visually, with well-established faiths or traditions there. For example, the small cross on the stele springs from a lotus blossom, the Buddhist symbol of purity. A fungus head emanates from each side and is flanked by floral and leafy branches, the fungus representing the sacred fungus of Daoist immortality. Elaborate contortionist dragons, commanding symbols of divinity, omnipotence, and transformation, flank the actual panel with the nine-character name. Their rear claws are raised above the panel to hoist a flaming pearl, the pearl with widespread meaning to the Chinese from purity and wisdom to good luck and wealth, and often associated with dragons.

The Buddhist *apsara* embracing the cross along with the Buddhist lotus support are therefore not surprising to see on the present Nestorian plaque. Interestingly, a pillar was discovered in Luoyang in

Henan province with an inscription confirming the account presented on the Nestorian Stele, and dated to A.D.829. Furthermore, according to Ken Perry in his contribution to the 2006 exhibition catalogue of Christian art at the Asian Civilizations Museum in Singapore. the pillar has “additional imagery not previously seen in Christian art of the Tang period. Although it is unclear when and where the motif developed, the iconography of two flying figures flanking the cross on a lotus is highly significant. Before the discovery of the pillar, this feature was known only from the Yuan period....”<sup>2</sup> The present plaque, then, takes on great importance with the body of early Christian imagery in China.

The angelic faces are presented full-frontal with eyes trained directly on the viewer, a peculiarity of Tang-dynasty figure painting (fig. 5). The images seem afloat, buoyed by their flowing sashes, much like the

images of airborne *apsara* filling the skies of Buddhist paintings of paradise, such as those on the walls of the cave temples at Dunhuang in Gansu province (fig. 6). On a stone that is believed to be from a sarcophagus, the supporting figures are enveloped by ethereal scarves associated with *apsara* but their faces and crowns are more closely related to the regal images of *bodhisattva* or Buddhist deities, or even donors in Tang period paintings (fig. 7).

A resurgence of Nestorianism during the Yuan dynasty resulted in the production of tombstones carved with Nestorian crosses, small portable bronze crosses and other religious effects. The present piece, however, is more perfectly aligned with the earlier period of Nestorianism in China, and, as noted, a most important relic from that time.

1. Nestorianism was a Christian heretical sect originating with beliefs attributed to Nestorius, born in present-day Turkey in the later 4th century and appointed bishop of Constantinople. His beliefs centered on the idea that Christ existed as two distinct individuals, the human and the divine, conflicting with the orthodox tenet that Christ was a single, divine individual, and denying, therefore, that Mary was the mother of God.

2. See Ken Parry, “Early Christianity in Central Asia and China,” in Alan Chong, ed., *Christianity in Asia: Sacred Art and Visual Splendour*, Asian Civilizations Museum, Singapore, 2016, p. 28.



Fig. 1: The Nestorian Stele, Tang dynasty, A.D.781, Forest of Stele, Xi'an, Shaanxi province, after [http://english.shaanxi.gov.cn/articleAboutsx/aboutshaanx/historyculture/201401/31445\\_1.html](http://english.shaanxi.gov.cn/articleAboutsx/aboutshaanx/historyculture/201401/31445_1.html) and similar stele illustrating the basic Chinese style, after [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stelenwald\\_von\\_Xi'an](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stelenwald_von_Xi'an)



Fig. 2: Rubbing from the Nestorian Stele showing the upper portion and part of the inscription below, after *Sui Tang wenhua*, Shanghai, 1990, fig. 7, p. 292.

Fig. 3: Large characters giving the title of the Nestorian Stele, after [http://hua.umf.maine.edu/China/Xian/pages/210\\_Xian\\_Forest\\_of\\_Steles.html](http://hua.umf.maine.edu/China/Xian/pages/210_Xian_Forest_of_Steles.html)



Fig. 4: Drawing of title, cross and lotus of the Nestorian stele, after <http://www.pinterest.com/voynichcypher/nestorian/>



Fig. 5: Female court attendants, wall painting, Tang dynasty, early 8th century A.D., from the tomb of the princess Yongtai, Xi'an, Shaanxi province, after *Sui Tang wenhua*, Shanghai, 1990, p. 81 (top, detail).

Fig. 6: Flying angelic musician, wall painting, Tang dynasty, late 8th-early 9th century A.D., Dunhuang, Gansu province, after *Zhongguo meishu quanji*, vol. 15, part I, *Dunhuang bishu*, Shanghai, 1988, pl. 93.

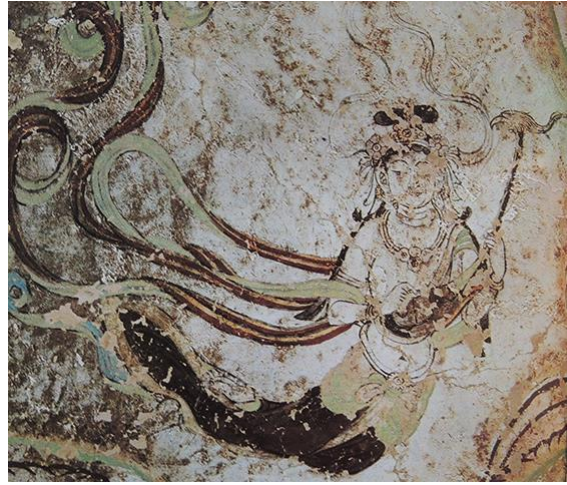


Fig. 7: Nestorian cross and figures, carving in Tang style on a stone sarcophagus, Quanzhou Maritime Museum, Quanzhou, Fujian province, after *Christianity in Asia: Sacred Art and Visual Splendour*, Asian Civilizations Museum, Singapore, 2016, fig. 9, p. 29.