



## Objects of the Nestorian cult from Talas and Shu Valleys

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**Keywords:** archaeology, artifact, Taraz, Shu valley, pectoral cross, Nestorianism, early Middle Ages, Karakhanid Khaganate, hillfort

**Түйін сөздер:** археология, артефакт, Тараз, Шу өңірі, крест алқа, несториандық, ерте орта ғасырлар, Қарахан қағанаты, қала

**Ключевые слова:** археология, артефакт, Тараз, Шуская долина, нательный крест, несторианство, раннее средневековье, Караханидский каганат, городище

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**Abstract.** The article for the first time introduces artifacts found on early medieval settlements – Taraz, Aktobe, Kysmyshy, with Christian symbols. The study of Nestorianism in the region has been going on for more than a century, in many ways, interest in the historical past of the region arose due to the massive finds of tombstones with images of crosses and Turkic-Syrian inscriptions. On the threshold of the arrival and consolidation of Islam at the turn of the 9<sup>th</sup>–10<sup>th</sup> centuries, a competitive environment of multiculturalism was created on this segment of the Great Silk Road. Christianity was just one of many world religions to which a part of the urban population related. A wave of Christian migrants arrived in the region in the 13<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> centuries, this time from the East, and can be clearly traced by gravestones from necropolises, much fewer than the number of body crosses – pendants from burials. The topic remains extremely relevant due to a new wave of interest, new finds at the Ilibalyk settlement in the Ile Valley in recent years. While the history of the Nestorian patriarchate, metropolia and large dioceses is well known, then individual artifacts are still revealing the history of Nestorianism of the Shu-Talas interfluvium fragmentally, even for the stage of the relative flourishing of Christian culture in the 8<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> centuries. Artifacts are: ornamented parts of a glazed ceramic lamp, a cross and a relatively large cup-shaped vessel with impressions of equi-pointed crosses complement a fairly solid list of archaeological and accidental finds from the region that bore the legendary name of the country “Argu”.

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Талас пен Шу өңірлерінен табылған  
несториандық культтік заттар

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Предметы несторианского культа  
из Таласской и Шуской долин



**Аннотация.** Алғаш рет жарияланып отырған христиандық символикасы бар артефактілер соңғы жылдары Тараз, Шу өңіріндегі Ақтөбе мен Қысмышы сияқты ерте ортағасырлық қалалардан табылды. Аймақтағы несториандықты зерттеу ғасырдан астам уақытқа созылса да, көп жағдайда өңірдің тарихи өткеніне деген қызығушылық крест бейнелері мен түркі-сирия жазулары бар қабір үсті тастардың жаппай табылуына байланысты туындады. Ұлы Жібек жолының осы бөлігінде исламның IX–X ғғ. шегіне келуі және орнығуы қарсаңында мультимәдениеттіліктің бәсекелі ортасы қалыптасты. Христиандық көптеген әлемдік діндердің бірі болғандықтан, оған қала халқының бір бөлігінің қатысы болды. Аймаққа христиан-мигранттар толқыны XIII–XIV ғғ. шығыстан келе бастады, бұл қорымдардың қабір үсті тастарынан, аз мөлшерде жерлеу орындарынан табылған кресттерден анық байқалады. Тақырып ерекше қызығушылық тудырады, бұл соңғы жылдары Іле алқабындағы Ілебалық қаласынан табылған жаңа заттардың арқасында өзекті болып отыр. Егер несториандық патриархияның, митрополияның және ірі епархиялардың тарихы жақсы белгілі болса, онда біздің аймақтағы несториан тарихы VIII–XI ғғ. христиан мәдениетінің салыстырмалы гүлдену кезеңі үшін де жеке артефакттар бойынша біртіндеп анықталып келеді. Артефакттар: сырлы қыш шырақтың ою-өрнегі, крест алқа және салыстырмалы түрде тең бұрышты крест бедері бар үлкен кубок тәрізді ыдыс ежелгі дәуірден бері байланыс ретінде қызмет етіп келе жатқан, аты аңызға айналған «Арғу» елі аймағының археологиялық және кездейсоқ табылыстарының айтарлықтай тізімін толықтырады.

**Қаржыландыру көзі:** Мақала ҚР ҒЖБМ Ғылым комитетінің 2022–2024 жж. гранттық қаржыландыруы шеңберінде, ЖТН АР14871082 жобасы аясында даярланды.

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**Аннотация.** В статье впервые в научный оборот вводятся артефакты, обнаруженные на раннесредневековых городищах – Тараз, Актөбе, Кысмыши, с христианской символикой. Изучение несторианства в регионе длится уже более века, во многом интерес к историческому прошлому региона возник из-за массовых находок надгробных камней с изображениями крестов и тюрко-сирийских надписей. На пороге прихода и закрепления ислама на рубеже IX–X вв. на этом отрезке Великого Шелкового пути была создана конкурентная среда мультикультурализма. Христианство было лишь одной из многих мировых религий, к которой имела отношение часть городского населения. Волна мигрантов-христиан прибывает в регион в XIII–XIV вв. уже с Востока, что отчетливо прослеживается по надгробным камням с некрополя и значительно меньшему числу нательных крестиков, выявленных в захоронениях. Тема остается крайне актуальной благодаря новой волне интереса, новым находкам на городище Илибалык в Илейской долине в последние годы. Если история несторианской патриархии, митрополии и крупных епархий достаточно хорошо известна, то история несторианства Шу-Таласского междуречья пока открывается фрагментарно по отдельным артефактам даже для этапа относительного расцвета христианской культуры в VIII–XI вв. Артефакты: орнаментированная часть глазурованного керамического светильника, нательный крест и относительно крупный кубковидный сосуд с оттисками равноконечных крестов дополняют достаточно солидный список археологических и случайных находок из региона, носившего легендарное название страны «Арғу».

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## 1 Introduction (Akymbek Ye., Zheleznyakov V.)

The history of medieval Eastern Christianity in Central Asia, its reconstruction based on individual finds – objects of worship and everyday life with Christian symbols and cult monuments from Central Asia, East Turkestan, is given considerable attention by representatives of the international scientific community. New sources significantly detail the possibilities for reconstructing the history of Nestorianism: chronology, periodization. The history of Eastern Christianity remained completely unknown to the scientific world until 1625, when a grandiose stele of black marble with a small image of an equilateral cross on a bas-relief with complex symbols around was excavated during land works in Xi'an. The monument dates back to



781. The inscription contains detailed information from the moment of the arrival of Monk Alopen with a mission to the Heavenly Empire, a description of the main acts of the church over 150 years of further preaching [Keevak 2008: 5]. This was the first sensational find associated with Eastern Christianity.

The history of Christianity is largely reconstructed from historical sources. Among many researchers, Alphonse Mingana, a native of Iraq, stands out, a Catholic who collected [acquired] manuscripts in the Middle East. He collected more than 900 Syriac and Arabic manuscripts [Mingana 1925]. The serial material was given by the excavations of monuments, necropolises located in Inner Mongolia, in the country of “Onguds”. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, artifacts came from there to private collections and museums: stone tombstone steles, body pendants with mixed Christian-pagan symbols [Tjalling 2008: 111–157]. To date, available information has been collected and studied on the monuments of Olon Sume, Ulan Baising, Boro Baising, Mukhor Suburgan, Derriseng Hutug and others [Tjalling 2008: 133–157]. The typology of all monuments was made as follows: Turkic rock (kurgan) burials with Nestorian steles, graves with Nestorian steles, Nestorian horizontal gravestones, gravestone sculptures on Nestorian monuments, stones with Nestorian symbols, burials in coffins, burials with columns [Tjalling 2008: 159–216]. Thus, the Onguds were able to create a local, predominantly Nestorian culture, which existed for a little more than a century before its inclusion in the empire by Genghis Khan, as well as the active preaching of Catholicism. It is obvious that direct links between the Christians of Shu and Ile and the Onguds of the period of the 12<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> centuries were established [Железняков 2019].

The fact of the triple rule of Yelü Dashi (the Khitan emperor, the Mongolian Gurkhan, and the Turkic Khan) [Пиков 1989: 55–56] imposed significant features on cultural policy in Central Asia. These and less significant historical factors make up a significant relevance to the research of medieval Christianity, constituting a religious factor in history. The significant similarity of Christianity in Eastern and Central Asia, which is increasingly being established, is determined by the fact of its long existence within the framework of a single state of the Western Liao. One of the most famous patriarchs of the Church of the East, an ethnic Uighur, Mar Yahbalakha III, was the character of many historical studies [Borbone 2020]. He was the patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East from 1281 to 1317, the history of his ministry was full of many events, including missionary travels from the Near to the Far East. In this regard, the culture of Nestorianism of Talas-Ile before the 12<sup>th</sup> century and Nestorianism within the Kara-Khitai state of the 12<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> centuries and the subsequent stage within the Mongol Empire is very difficult to distinguish. The syncretic symbolism of Christians from the Shu Valley or the country of the “Onguds” testifies to the long stay of Christianity in their tradition, the adaptation of teaching, and in particular symbolism. That is, the ties can be traced both within the framework of a single state, through church ties, and through the migrations of peoples that included Christians.

The segment of the way along the Talas and Shu valleys was of strategic importance from the 7<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> centuries. The historical period, when the Shu River was a tributary of the Syrdarya River was important for the region, fell in the early Middle Ages [Зуев 1995: 43]. The Christianity of Talas and Shu experienced significant waves of upheavals, one of which took place in the second half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century and was associated with a prolonged outflow of Muslims from the Shash-Taraz region after the victory first over the Chinese corps in 751, and then the Karluks managed to press out the Arabs [Капеев 2000: 212–213]. Thus, the process of Islamization, led by the Arabs, was «put on hold» until the 840s in Southern Kazakhstan and until the turn of the 9<sup>th</sup>–10<sup>th</sup> centuries in the Taraz region [Асадов 2011: 214]. Archaeologists who conducted excavations on monuments of urban culture of the 8<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> centuries note significant traces of destruction and even the cessation of life on a significant number of monuments of urban culture during this period [Смагулов 2004].



At the current stage of the study of Christianity in the region, it is the new artifacts that are becoming important, they complement the symbolism, the chronology of famous monuments. Artifacts identified on new monuments, expand the geography of the spread of Christian churches. A researcher of the archaeology of medieval Taraz T. Senigova discovered several Christian artifacts, although not all of them were published [Железняков 2022]. Thus, a fragment of the icon, discovered by her during excavations, was dated to the 4<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> centuries according to the stratigraphy of the cultural layer [Сенигова 1968b: 55]. Significant finds include a cross from the necropolis of Kostobe of 7<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> centuries [Байпаков, Терновая 2018: 12], as well as earlier finds, for example, a jug with a Syrian inscription: «Peter and Gabriel», read and published by A. Borisov [Борисов 1948]. These are the most striking, iconic finds. The enumeration of the finds can be found in the publications of K. Baipakov and G. Ternovaya [Байпаков, Терновая 2018], B. Zheleznyakov [Железняков 2003a]. Recent studies of the necropolis of the Planbalyk settlement under the leadership of K. Baipakov, where stones were found installed on the graves of Christians (tombstones), already under the modern surface of the soil [Байпаков и др. 2015], testify to the constant flow of new material with iconography of crosses and Turkic-Syrian epigraphy.

## **2 Research methods and materials**

### **2.1 Research methodology** (*Akymbek Ye., Zheleznyakov B.*)

While writing the article, all the traditional methods of archaeological and historical research were used. Some of the materials were obtained from excavations, the other part are from random finds, for the interpretation of which analytical methods were used. The historical and cultural interpretation of medieval artifacts with religious symbols and cult objects is well developed. Over the years of research, multiple material has been accumulated on Christian artifacts, for example, kayraks. There is a clear shortage of material in certain categories, for example, body crosses, in particular, from the Kazakh part of the Shu Valley. The stage of studying such artifacts, without regard to the duration of the study, can still be considered as the initial one, at which it is necessary to accumulate empirical, factual material, and it is what actually happens. Artifacts with mixed symbols present certain difficulties. One of the main such “mixed” symbols was the cross. It was used in the early Middle Ages by Christians and Manichaeans, and was common among carriers of traditional views: Mazda worshippers and sun worshippers. To one degree or another, it is clearly traced among the bearers of the Turkic tradition. With all the similarity of the symbolism images, the customers of the products took care of the unambiguity of the symbol depicted by their contemporaries. With all the complexity of interpretation, initially defined by Manichaean or Christian subjects, almost never changed their attribution.

### **2.2 Characteristics of the material** (*Akymbek Ye., Zheleznyakov B.*)

This study was conducted on the basis of the interpretation of artifacts – sources on Christianity with appropriate symbols found at three ancient settlements: Taraz, Aktobe and Kysmyshy in the Shu Valley (fig. 1), obtained by archaeologists and discoverers in recent years. Finds: a cross, an ornament on chirag, a belt ornamented with impressions of crosses on a ceramic cup belong to single and therefore unique finds. Gravestones from two Christian necropolises have been known since 1885. Since then, there has been a scrupulous accumulation of information on the entire spiritual culture of the region. To date, at least five Nestorian cemeteries and more than a dozen single finds of kayraks from Taraz to Issyk-Kul, Almalyk and Kayalyk are known [Байпаков, Железняков 2022: 209–214]. Unfortunately, unambiguous evidence of the presence of Christian religious buildings in the region of Southern and South-Eastern Kazakhstan has not yet been found. Therefore, it is these finds related to the Christian cult that are of particular relevance for the region.



Fig. 1. Map of Kazakhstan with designations of monuments of medieval urban culture, from where the published finds originate: 1 – Aktobe; 2 – Kysmyshy. The map was prepared by M. Antonov  
1-сур. Жарияланып отырған заттар табылған ортағасырлық қалалық мәдениет ескерткіштері белгіленген Қазақстанның картасы: 1 – Ақтөбе; 2 – Қысмышы. Картаны дайындаған М.А. Антонов

Рис. 1. Карта Казахстана с обозначениями памятников средневековой городской культуры, откуда происходят публикуемые находки: 1 – Актөбе; 2 – Кысмышы. Карту подготовил М.А. Антонов

The first published find is a relief image of a cross on an ornamented fragment (the front part of the handle) of a glazed lamp-chirag<sup>11</sup> («heel») from Taraz (fig. 2). Many researchers wrote about the significant diversity of religions and cults in the early Middle Ages in Taraz, in particular about Christianity A. Bernshtam [Бернштам 1941], T. Senigova [Сенигова 1972: 114–122]. Regarding the finds related to Manichaeism, there were also a number of researchers, but it is worth noting that a very small number of finds has not been increasing for a long time [Лурье 2018]. Perhaps in second place after Zoroastrianism, in research on religious topics, attention was paid to Christian finds. Information from historical sources that the structures in which the Nestorian church of Taraz and other cities of the region were located were rebuilt into mosques have good reasons. Obviously, this situation was quite common in the early medieval cities of Southern Kazakhstan with other variants. The publication by B. Zheleznyakov on the findings of the Christian cult from the First Mosque of Taraz [Железняков 2022] complements the picture associated with Nestorianism in the Talas Valley on the eve of the arrival of Islam, changes in many areas with the arrival of Islam. Finds with Christian symbols from the lower layers of the mosque date back to the 9<sup>th</sup> century [Железняков 2022].

<sup>11</sup> Chirag is an oil lamp with a small container for oil in the form of a jug, cup on a pallet.





In 2015, the archaeologist Ye. Akymbek at the excavation, laid in the central part of the settlement of Taraz, conducted by the Turan archaeological expedition under the leadership of M. Eleuov, discovered a fragment of a ceramic, glazed chirag-lamp, handle or “heel”, that is, the part of it on which ornamentation is usually applied.

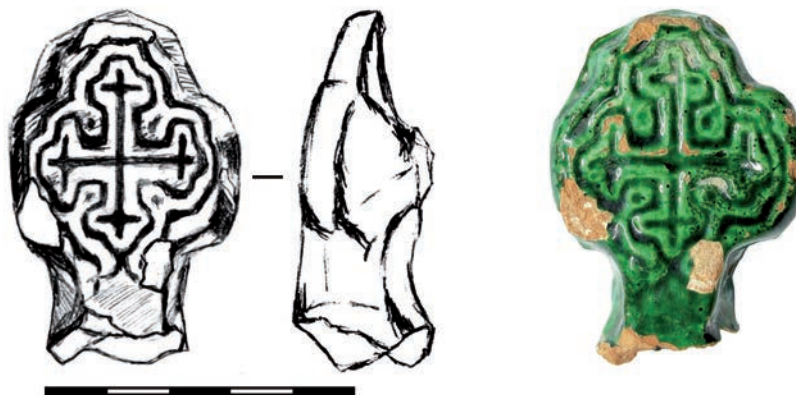


Fig. 2. Drawing and photo of the ornamented “heel” of the lamp with a relief image of the cross.  
The settlement of Taraz, 10<sup>th</sup> – early 11<sup>th</sup> century

2-сур. Кресттің бедерлі бейнесі бар шырақтың өрнекті «тұтқа үстінің» сызбасы мен фотосуреті.  
Тараз қаласы, X–XI ғ. басы

Рис. 2. Прорисовка и фото орнаментированной «пятки» светильника с рельефным изображением креста.  
Городище Тараз, X – начало XI в.

On the ornamented surface of the «heel» of this chirag intended for application, a shallow relief was applied with thin straight lines, a slightly elongated vertically (almost) «equi-pointed» cross. Its «elongation» is determined by taking into account the configuration of the proportions of this part of the ceramic product. The cross occupies a central position on the front surface of the chirag handle, the dimensions of the crossbars are 2.7×2.2 cm. On each of the ends of the cross there is a «crossed» ending, the dimensions of the crossbars: 7–8 mm. The relief image of the cross, dimensions: 3.3×2.9 cm, is drawn in a cross-shaped elevation. There is no reason to talk about the possibility of a Manichaean affiliation of this cross, primarily because when Islam penetrated, cults associated with «idolatry» disappeared first. Thus, we can confidently speak about such symbolism of the cross among Nestorians in the early Islamic period.

**Equi-pointed cross made of bronze, Aktobe settlement** (fig. 4). The cross is equi-pointed bronze with an upper loop, measuring 3×2.6 cm, the thickness in relief is 0.4 cm, the width of the blades is about 0.4 cm, solid, well preserved. The place of the crosshair is slightly emphasized by a relief elevation. The relatively narrow size of the cross, apparently, is not the reason for the lack of symbolism and is most likely due to belonging to the Nestorians. The relatively small size and weight of the product, apparently, indicate that this product is made by local craftsmen, as well as the loop (through hole – from right to left) refer to body crosses or cross-shaped pendants. The fact that in the burials of Christians of the Shu and now the Ile valleys there is a very small number of crosses in Christian graves, including under tombs marked with the sign of the cross, most likely suggests that the crosses were “inherited” or were an optional attribute. It was an accidental find (a certain fisherman named Mikhail, a resident of Almaty) made in 2018 on the surface of the cultural layer on shahristan, east of the citadel (fig. 5). Further, the find was handed over to the researcher of the monument, archaeologist Ye. Akymbek.

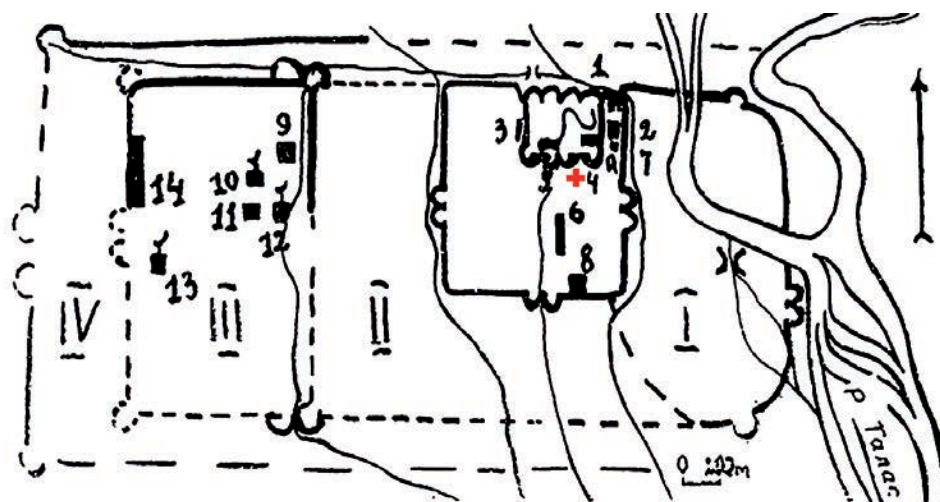


Fig. 3. The plan of the settlement of Taraz with an indication of the position of the excavations laid on its territory, after – Senigova 1972: 25, fig. 1: I–IV – rabads by numbers; 1 – excavation, baths; 2 – excavation 2, stratigraphic; 3–4 – excavations 3 and 4; 4a – excavation 4a; 5 – excavation 5; 6 – excavation 6; 7 – citadel, excavation 1; 8 – shahristan, excavation 1; 9 – rabad III, caravansary, excavation 3; 10 – rabad III, church, excavation 4; 11 – rabad III, feudal lord’s house, excavation II; 12 – Davud Bek Mausoleum, 13<sup>th</sup> century; 13 – Karakhan Mausoleum, 11<sup>th</sup> century; 14 – residential complex of citizens, excavation I. The red cross indicates the location of the find

3-сур. Аумағында салынған қазбалардың орындары көрсетілген Тараз қаласының жоспары ([Сенигова 1972: 25, 1-сур.] бойынша): I–IV – рабадтар (саны бойынша); 1 – қазба, монша; 2 – 2-қазба, стратиграфиялық; 3–4 – 3 және 4-қазба жұмыстары; 4a – 4a-қазба; 5 – 5-қазба; 6 – 6-қазба; 7 – цитадель, 1-қазба; 8 – шахристан, 1-қазба; 9 – рабад III, керуен-сарай, 3-қазба; 10 – рабад III, шіркеу, 4-қазба; 11 – рабад III, феодал үйі, II-қазба; 12 – Дәуітбек кесенесі, XIII ғ.; 13 – Қарахан кесенесі, XI ғ.; 14 – қала тұрғындарының тұрғын үй кешені, I-қазба. Қызыл крестпен зат табылған жер көрсетілген

Рис. 3. План городища Тараз с указанием положения заложённых на его территории раскопов (по: [Сенигова 1972: 25, рис. 1]): I–IV – рабады (по номерам); 1 – раскоп, баня; 2 – раскоп 2, стратиграфический; 3–4 – раскопы 3 и 4; 4a – раскоп 4a; 5 – раскоп 5; 6 – раскоп 6; 7 – цитадель, раскоп 1; 8 – шахристан, раскоп 1; 9 – рабад III, караван-сарай, раскоп 3; 10 – рабад III, церковь, раскоп 4; 11 – рабад III, дом феодала, раскоп II; 12 – мавзолей Давуд-бека, XIII в.; 13 – мавзолей Карахана, XI в.; 14 – жилой комплекс горожан, раскоп I. Красным крестиком указано место находки

This is far from the first finding of a cross or an image of a cross on this monument located in the lower part of the Shu Valley [Железняков 2003б: 45]. There are images of equi-pointed crosses on the bricks of a winery from Aktobe [Байпаков 1994: 101]. The history of medieval Christianity in the mountainous part of the Shu Valley was described in detail already in the early 2000s by V. Kolchenko [Кольченко 2002].

The third find is a ceramic cup-shaped two-handed vessel from the settlement of Kysmyshy, with stamps of crosses on the side surface (fig. 6). In 2015, at the settlement, located on the busy early medieval highway of the Great Silk Road, near the right bank of the Shu River, there was an accidental discovery of a ceramic vessel, in the form of a truncated cone with two vertical handles, decorated with relief grooves smoothly diverging upwards (fig. 7). When examining the breakage of the cultural layers of the silo pit (1.5 m below the level of the modern soil surface), dug on the monument several decades ago, Ye. Akymbek



found this cup-shaped vessel, with a volume of over one and a half liters, perfect shapes and an ornamented belt on the body, decorated with relief round stamps with an equi-pointed cross in the center of the impression. The handles are attached under the mouth and in the lower part of the body. Knops are made on top of the handles. Vessel dimensions: the diameter of the bottom is 12.6 cm, 22.6 cm is height, the diameter of the vessel along the mouth is 20.5 cm. The bottom is flat. On the ornamental belt 2.5 cm wide, highlighted by a drawn double line at the top and bottom, the signs of an equilateral cross are stamped. The relief stamp is round in shape, was left undulating (smoothly rising and falling) with dimensions of 0.7–0.8 cm, inside this belt. The possible dating of the accidental find is 8<sup>th</sup>–10<sup>th</sup> centuries. Most likely, this symbolism was associated with Nestorian Christianity. It is known that there were several Manichean monasteries between Talas and East Turkestan. A huge layer of literature is devoted to this, which, however, is not yet closely linked with a small number of archaeological evidence from Taraz [Лурье 2018]. L. Kyzlasov found a drawn image of the cross on the funeral jug of Ak-Beshim [Кызласов 2006а] and connected it with Manichaeism, without denying the presence of Christians in the city, partially examining the Nestorian church on this monument [Кызласов 2006б: 322–329]. But there are disproportionately more Christian finds, and most importantly monuments, in the Shu Valley [Кольченко 2018]. It is possible that future studies will clarify the features of the images of the equi-pointed cross in the form of their symbols by representatives of different cultures. This requires serious research, because there was no unity among the Christian movements. More finds with different symbols are also needed.



Fig. 4. Bronze equi-pointed cross, with a loop for hanging.  
An accidental find, the settlement  
of Aktobe (Stepninskoe). 8<sup>th</sup>–10<sup>th</sup> centuries

4-сур. Ілуге арналған тесігі бар ұштары бірдей қола крест.  
Кездейсоқ табылған,  
Ақтөбе (Степнинское) қаласы. VIII–X ғғ.

Рис. 4. Бронзовый равноконечный нательный крест,  
с петелькой для подвешивания.  
Случайная находка, городище Актобе (Степнинское). VIII–X вв.

### **3 Results and discussion** (*Zheleznyakov B., Akymbek Ye.*)

Three more finds from the Shu-Talas region have been added to the well-known range of archaeological sources on medieval Christianity. The main findings of Nestorians and possibly Jacobites were given in the bibliographic part of the introduction to this article. The range of sources in the region has recently been expanded due to Christian finds at the First Mosque of Taraz [Железняков 2022], as well as through the publication of materials from the Ile Valley and material on Kayalyk from Zhetysu [Байпаков, Железняков 2022]. Taking into account the very significant results of the archaeological study of the Ilibalyk settlement conducted by K. Baipakov and D. Voyakin [Байпаков и др. 2018а: 318–320], it becomes clear that in recent years significant progress has been planned in the study of Christian antiquities of Southeastern Kazakhstan – the legendary country of Argu, which, along with the Manichaean culture, confirmed almost exclusively by the materials of historical sources, was also filled with Christian culture, which is confirmed by archaeological sources. The most massive finds are still tombstones – kayraks with the image of a cross, inscriptions or without them. The fact that recently a significant number of objects have been introduced into the number of sources, such as crosses, ornaments on a chirag, a pendant, objects, as it is assumed, of



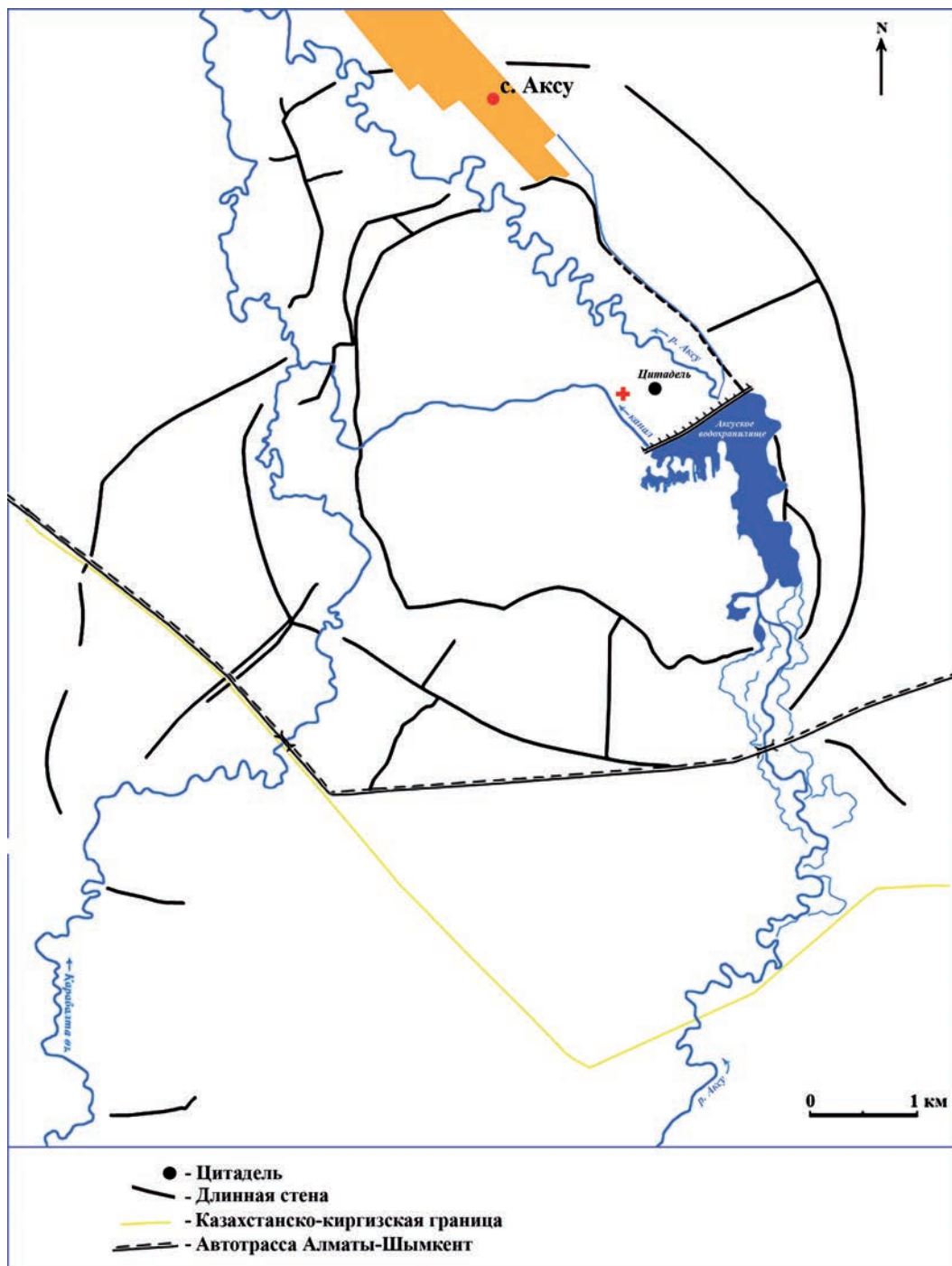


Fig. 5. Plan of the Aktoobe settlement, indicating the location of the bronze cross, after – Klesner et al. 2021: 2, fig. 3

5-сур. Қола крест табылған орын көрсетілген Ақтөбе қаласының жоспары ([Klesner et al. 2021: 2, fig. 3] бойынша)

Рис. 5. План городища Актөбе с указанием места находки бронзового креста (по: [Klesner et al. 2021: 2, fig. 3])



Fig. 6. A ceramic cup-shaped two-handed vessel with stamps in the form of a repeating stamped image of an equi-pointed cross on an ornamental belt on the body. The settlement of Kysmyshy. 8<sup>th</sup>–10<sup>th</sup> centuries  
6-сур. Қабырғасында сәндік белдеу бойымен ұштары тең крест айнала бастырылған мәртабандары бар екі тұтқалы кубок тәрізді қыш ыдыс. Қысмышы қаласы. VIII–X ғғ.

Рис. 6. Сосуд керамический, кубковидный, двуручный со штампами в виде повторяющегося оттиснутого изображения равноконечного крестика по орнаментальному поясу на тулове. Городище Кысмыши. VIII–X вв.

the decoration of a church converted into a mosque in 893, as known from sources [Железняков 2022], testifies to the well-defined successes of medieval archaeological science, which is built on the foundation of previous researchers.

The symbols applied on chirags is a sufficiently researched topic. The famous article by T. Senigova «Lighting devices ... of Taraz» contains 25 most interesting drawings of such ornamented «heels» of similar oil lamps – chirags [Сенигова 1968а: 218–220]. They mostly contain floral ornaments, there are images of scenes of torment, heraldically arranged birds opposite each other and separated by a tree, under bunches of grapes and, of course, solar motifs. There was also a significant part of the unornamented chirags, since the canons of Islam were introduced immutably [Сенигова 1968а: 214–218].

In this sense, we have an iconic fragment produced by order of a Christian. On the other hand, the preservation of pre-Islamic content in the ornament on household items, especially related to fire, heating, lighting, cooking and consumption of food and, in particular, related to the Karakhanid period is expected [Железняков 2008]. The traditional ornament developed despite the huge influence of world religions, even the spread of Islam, did not fully stop this process. However,

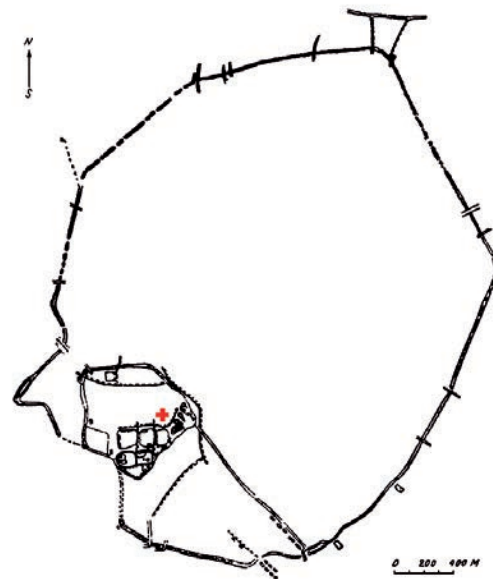


Fig. 7. The plan of the settlement of Kysmyshy indicating the location of the vessel-cup with impressions of the equi-pointed cross, after – Bernshtam (ed.) 1950: Table III, 3

7-сур. Ұштары тең крест бедерлемелері бар кубок-ыдыстың табылған орны көрсетілген Қысмышы қаласының жоспары ([Труды САЭ 1950: III-кесте, 3] бойынша)

Рис. 7. План городища Кысмыши с указанием места находки сосуда-кубка с оттисками равноконечного креста (по: [Труды САЭ 1950: табл. III, 3])



Christianity was not the main factor in this process. Most researchers agree that the pre-Islamic tradition continued to determine the structure of the worldview of pre-Islamic Central Asia in the pre-Muslim period [Шкода 2009: 122–125]. The relief ornament, like the entire chirag fragment, is densely covered with monochrome green glaze. The Christian identity of the customer of this product is clearly marked by the image of the cross. According to its form, it is difficult to say unequivocally that the customer was a Nestorian, possibly a Melkite (orthodox Christian), who were massively resettled from Seleucus–Ctesiphon in 762 to Chach and Taraz [Parry 2012: 104].

Based on the presence of glaze, its color, the product can be dated to the 10<sup>th</sup> century, up to the middle of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The beginning of the Islamic period is confidently dated to 893, marked by the capture of Taraz by the Samanid Ismail ibn Ahmed [Сенигова 1972: 14, 210]. The punitive campaigns of the Samanids against the Turks were staged in the early 900s [Асадов 2011: 218–220]. It is obvious that this was a time when Muslim culture coexisted with individual religions established in the region, primarily with Christianity. Jacobson emphasized the importance that repoussage had on the products, which preceded ceramic products covered with monochrome glaze for underglaze ornamentation [Якобсон 1978: 149]. Or, the lamp was brought by Christians from the southwest, from countries where the spread of Middle Eastern culture with all technical achievements, including the production of glazed ceramics in the 11<sup>th</sup> century has already taken place. [Якобсон 1978: 150]. In such a case, this product may refer to the 9<sup>th</sup> century. V. Kolchenko believes that the free confession of Christianity and Buddhism in the Shu Valley was a normal phenomenon until the 13<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> centuries. [Кольченко 2018: 76]. Christians buried their relatives in the Ile Valley until the 70s of the 14<sup>th</sup> century [Коковцов, 1905: 200].

A. Jacobson emphasized the importance that repoussage, which preceded ceramic products covered with monochrome glaze, applied to underglaze relief ornamentation, had on the products [Якобсон 1978: 149]. B. Marshak wrote unequivocally about the influence of (Sogdian) toreutics on (Sogdian) ceramic production, but not vice versa [Маршак 2017: 85]. However, this was not typical for all periods of the history of Sogd, there were long periods when the potters did not focus on the toreuts. The connections of ceramics with synchronous toreutics are especially strengthened starting from the 7<sup>th</sup> century [Маршак 2017: 116]. The lamp with the image of a cross on an ornamented heel, found on shahristan, next to the citadel, chronologically follows the bronze objects from the First Mosque of, for example, Taraz, found on rabad, among which the details of the lamps of the 9<sup>th</sup> century stand out [Железняков 2022]. Accordingly, bronze lamps of the 9<sup>th</sup> (8<sup>th</sup>?) century are replaced by ceramic ones under green glaze of the 10<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> centuries. This is one of the late finds with a Christian affiliation from a very wide range, partially given in the publication.

The bronze cross from the Aktobe settlement is unique, first of all, in terms of preservation. Analogs (stamped on kayraks) are extremely rare. Together with other finds of Christian and Buddhist worship, a series is formed that expands the understanding of the spiritual culture revealed in the Kyrgyzstan part of the valley. The most detailed summary of the crosses is given in the publication of S. Slutsky [Слудский 1889: табл. III, IV, V], where among the 90 most different types of crosses (depicted on the kayraks of the Shu Valley), simple equi-pointed crosses are found only four or five times. The typology of the crosses inscribed on the kayraks of the Shu and Ile valleys requires a separate study.

The ceramic vessel stands out primarily for its cup shape: perhaps it was a communal vessel of Christians. Ornamental belts containing impressions of crosses are relatively common. From Yakalyg (a city with this name in the Shu Valley is compared with the settlement of Kysmyshy) comes a famous Sogdian inscription that reads: «Bishop Shirfarn» [Лившиц 1981: 80]. K. Vaipakov also wrote about this comparison of the city and the monument, as well as about the Christian interpretation of the inscription [Байпаков 1994]. It is also necessary to mention the Sogdian inscription from Taraz, carved on the wall of the khum: «Presbyter Il-Tag». Both the terms «bishop» and «presbyter» could have been used in Christian and Manichean contexts [Лившиц 1981: 80]. Perhaps this is one of the additional proofs of the existence of a community in this city also of Christians or Manichaeans. The equi-pointed cross was a symbol of both



teachings, common in the territory of South-Eastern Kazakhstan. However, in the neighborhood, on the settlements of the Shu Valley, there are disproportionately more Christian finds, as well as religious objects [Кольченко 2002; 2018]. Questions about unambiguous belonging to Nestorianism or Manichaeism by the image of a stamped cross icon on a ceramic vessel are still far from being resolved ambiguously. The cross in both teachings was clearly a kind of symbol-decoration, without delving into its meaning as an instrument of execution and the dogma of redemption on the cross.

#### **4 Conclusions** (*Akymbek Ye., Zheleznyakov B.*)

The article analyzes new data on medieval Christianity in the Talas and Shu region. A very brief (accessible) historiography on the problem is given. The total number of publications on Christianity in a relatively narrow region has long exceeded a hundred. Many of them re-analyze long-known subjects. Random finds and archaeological artifacts from archaeological excavations date back to the broad chronological period of the early and developed Middle Ages (6<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> centuries). Separate early finds, for example, a fragment of the “icon from Taraz” require clarification, based on the accumulated data by analogy. Later finds are tombstones with images of crosses and Syro-Turkic epitaphs from the Shu and Ile valleys, dating back to the 40s and 70s of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, respectively. Thus, the activity of the Church of the East in the region has been noted according to archaeological sources for at least 800 years. However, it was not a single monolithic period with a significant proportion of the Christian local population. The individual findings will help to distinguish the stages of Christianity and confession.

The published artifacts originating from archaeological excavations from the Shu-Talas region confirm the long-established and firmly rooted ideas about medieval Christianity among a certain part of the population. This was caused by stable ties on the trade route, migrations of Christians, and preaching. Two published finds belong to the period of the 8<sup>th</sup>–10<sup>th</sup> centuries, when an influx of Christians was noted in the region. The third find, a “heel” from a ceramic chirag with green glaze from Taraz, refers to the period of parallel existence of Islam and Christianity, celebrated in the 10<sup>th</sup> – first half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. All these finds are a significant addition to the well-known finds related to the Christian cult, which researchers have written about, starting with N. Pantusov and V. Bartold. Christian finds have already been noted on all three monuments before, however, new ones complement them.

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