

## Wolfson College Research Fellows' Seminar

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## The Monks of Kublai Khan From Beijing to Baghdad and Beyond

Gareth Hughes

19:30 Tuesday 19<sup>th</sup> May 2009

Haldane Room, Wolfson College

**I**N THE SECOND HALF OF THE 13<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY, two Christian monks of the Öngüt tribe of Inner Mongolia set out from Beijing to make pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The Beijing from which they began their journey was known to them as Khanbaliq, the capital of Kublai Khan, Mongol Great Khan (1260–94), grandson of Genghis Khan, founder of the Yuan dynasty of China and suzerain of territory spread as far as Turkey in the west.

Near contemporaries of Marco Polo, yet reversed, the story of Šaumā and Marqos, preserved in Syriac, takes us from Beijing, through the steppe of their tribal homeland in Inner Mongolia, along the Silk Road, winding around deserts and through mountain passes, and into the Central Asian 'Stans, Iran and Iraq.

Šaumā and Marqos were monks of the Church of the East, governed by its Catholicos-Patriarch in Baghdad. Their Christianity was a truly Asian one, untouched by European 'Christendom'. A church that had followers in India, South-East and Central Asia, China, Siberia, Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq. A church that is dubbed 'Nestorian', an ancient heresy, by the European churches of Rome and Constantinople. Although the majority of Öngüt were Christian, others practised Buddhism, Manichæism or Shamanism.

Politics, of both church and state, prevented the monks from achieving their goal of Jerusalem. Marqos was elected Catholicos-Patriarch of the East, head of the church, while Šaumā was sent as ambassador of Arğun Khan (Ilkhan 1284–91) to Europe, travelling to Constantinople, Naples, Rome, Paris and finally meeting Edward I of England in Bordeaux.