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An Israel of the Seven Rivers:

Sogdians and Turks Reimagining

a Christian Past and Future in Early Medieval Zhetysu

by
Britton O'Daly

Victor H. Mair, Editor
Sino-Platonic Papers
Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations
University of Pennsylvania
Philadelphia, PA 19104-6305 USA
vmair@sas.upenn.edu
www.sino-platonic.org

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An Israel of the Seven Rivers:
Sogdians and Turks Reimagining a Christian Past and Future in Early Medieval Zhetysu

Britton O'Daly

Yale University

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ABSTRACT

The conversion of the Karluk Turks by the Church of the East in the eighth century marked an important moment of self-determination for Christians living in early medieval Central Asia: never before had Christianity enjoyed the official backing of such a significant power in the region as the Karluks, who established their kingdom in Zhetysu, the "Land of the Seven Rivers" beneath Lake Balkhash. The Karluks most likely converted to Christianity about fifteen years after they conquered Zhetysu from the Türgesh Khaganate,[1] bridging the identity of the new Karluk state to a religion that had rarely, if ever, been formally associated with the rulers who controlled Central Asia. How, then, did the Christian Karluks of Zhetysu imagine Christianity within the context of their kingdom? Two decorated silver plates of a Sogdian style that are traceable to eighth-century Zhetysu present a fascinating narrative of the ways the Christians living amidst Lake Balkhash utilized their religion as a legitimizing force for the newly established Karluk state. One of the plates depicts King David of the Old Testament playing music in his royal court; the other depicts the siege of Jericho from the Book of Joshua. These biblical scenes underscore the ways the multi-ethnic community of Christians living within Zhetysu under Karluk rule envisioned their leaders as living out some of the most victorious moments celebrated in Christian scripture, specifically by analogizing those moments to the already-accomplished and — sometimes — anticipated geo-political triumphs of the Karluks in eighth-to-tenth-century Central Asia.

Keywords: Church of the East, Zhetysu, Karluk Turks, Sogdians, Toreutics, Paten, Fur Road.

1 Mark Dickens, "Patriarch Timothy I and the Metropolitan of the Turks," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 20, no. 2 (2010): 121.

INTRODUCTION: STUMBLING INTO A SHAMAN'S CHRISTIAN SILVER

In 1985, Russian ethnographer Arkady Baulo encountered a silver plate at an indigenous Siberian worship site near the Russian village of Nildino (Figure 1). Upon examination, he saw that the Nildino Plate was identical to another plate previously discovered near the remote Russian village of Anikova in 1909 (Figure 2).[2] Both the Nildino and Anikova plates portrayed the violent siege of a city with distinctive Central Asian characteristics. Then, in 1999, Baulo encountered a silver plate bearing the likeness of a Persian shah at another holy sanctuary in Siberia, near the Malaya Ob River (Figure 3).[3] Upon examination, Baulo ascertained that the Malaya Ob Plate probably depicted an Old Testament figure: King David. Baulo's analysis considered the earlier work of the archaeologist Boris Marshak, who argued that the design of the Anikova Plate — and thus that of the Nildino Plate as well — portrayed the siege of Jericho, a pivotal event of the Old Testament.[4] Accordingly, the Nildino and the Malaya Ob Plates, both drawing upon biblical characters and events in their designs, probably originated in an eighth-century context in a region of modern-day Kazakhstan named Zhetysu that hosted a community of Christians belonging to the Church of the East[5] in the early middle ages.[6]

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2 Arkady Baulo, "Connection between Time and Cultures (Silver plate from Verkhnee Nildino)," *Archaeology, Ethnology & Anthropology of Eurasia* 19, no. 3 (2004): 127.

3 Arkady Baulo, "Silver Plate from the Malaya Ob," *Archaeology, Ethnology & Anthropology of Eurasia*, no. 4 (2000): 143–153, https://www.yamalarchaeology.ru/index.php/texts/etnograph/248-baulo-a-2000-silver-plate-from-the-malaya-ob.

4 Boris Marshak, *History of Oriental Toreutics of the 3rd–13th Centuries and Problems of Cultural Continuity* (St. Petersburg: Academy of Culture's Research, 2017), 333–335.

5 The Church of the East began life in 410 as the church of the Sassanid Empire, following the East Syriac Rite of Christianity. The Christians of the Church of the East have sometime been described by scholars as "Nestorian Christians" because of the church's connections to the theological beliefs of Nestorius, a fifth century archbishop of Constantinople condemned at the Council of Ephesus for labelling the Virgin Mary as the "Bearer of Christ" instead of the "Bearer of God." The "Nestorian Church," though, is an imperfect way to describe a church that Nestorius in no way founded, and thus "Church of the East" will be used instead.

6 Christoph Baumer, *The Church of the East: An Illustrated History of Assyrian Christianity* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 166, 174.

Figure 1a. *The Nildino Plate*, eighth century. Cast silver plate with engravings and gilding, 24 centimeters in diameter and about 3 centimeters high. Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, Novosibirsk, Russia. Photo and drawing courtesy of Arkady Baulo.

Figure 1b. Drawing of the Nildino Plate (Courtesy of Arkady Baulo).

Figure 2. *The Anikova Plate*, ninth to tenth century; cast, engraved, and gilded silver plate; diameter of 23.7 centimeters. The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

Figure 3a. *The Malaya Ob Plate*, eighth century, cast silver plate with gilded background and engraved decorations, 24 centimeters in diameter and 3 centimeters in height. Photo and drawing courtesy of Arkady Baulo.

Figure 3b. Drawing of Malaya Ob Plate (Courtesy of Arkady Baulo).

Turkic peoples, both indirectly and directly, helped bring Christianity to Zhetysu after the Göktürk Khaganate took over the region in the sixth century.[7] Following that conquest, the Sogdians, an Iranian people historically known for their commercial influence throughout the Silk Road networks,

7 Vasily Bartold, *Four Studies on the History of Central Asia, Vol. I: A Short History of Turkestan, and a History of the Semirechye*, trans. Vladimir Minorsky and Tatiana Minorsky (Leiden: E.G. Brill, 1956), 166.

colonized the area under the encouragement of Turkic rulers eager for economic development.[8] Syriac Christians would have numbered among these initial Sogdian colonists, and religious persecutions in the Sassanid Empire also drove Christians into Zhetysu, where the ruling Turks offered greater religious tolerance.[9] The region experienced a significant religious-political development when the Karluk Turks conquered Zhetysu in 766 and then, most likely, converted to Syriac Christianity in the late eighth century.[10] Almost unique in their status as a Christian state in medieval Central Asia, the Christian Turks and Sogdians of Zhetysu stood at a precarious crossroads among the intertwined interests of their neighbors. The two silver plates documented by Baulo likely made their way into Russia and Siberia via the "fur road," by which Silk Road traders exchanged Central Asian wares for valuable Northern goods.[11]

Prior to 1999, scholars had found two other Syriac Christian silver plates in Russia — both in the province of Perm, along the western edge of Siberia — that also probably had traveled northwards from Zhetysu. The first such plate was discovered by archaeologists in 1898 near the village of Grigorovskoye; the Grigorovskoye Plate, dated to the ninth or tenth centuries, showcased episodes from the Passion of Christ (Figure 4). The second plate with an origin in Christian Zhetysu to be discovered in Russia was the Anikova Plate. Notably, Marshak argued that the Anikova Plate originated from the same Christian workshop in Zhetysu as the Grigorovskoye Plate.[12] Marshak also theorized that the Anikova plate had been cast from a mold created by an identical plate made in Zhetysu during the eighth century. He based this assessment off of the fact that, although ninth-to-tenth century-era armor and weapon details

8 Stephan Baristiz, *Central Asia and the Silk Road: Economic Rise and Decline over Several Millennia* (Basel: Springer, 2017), 56.

9 Baristiz, *The Silk Road*, 57.

10 Dickens, "Metropolitan of the Turks," 121.

11 Richard Frye, "Introduction: Central Asia and the Nomads," in *History of Humanity: From the Seventh Century B.C. to the Seventh Century A.D.*, ed. Sigfried de Laet and Joachim Herrmann (Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1996), 441.

12 Boris Marshak, *Silberschätze des Orients*, trans. Lisa Schirmer (Leipzig: E.A. Seemann Verla, 1986), 322. For an English discussion of Marshak's argument: Vera Zalesskaya, "The Nestorian Discos in the Light of Apocryphal Texts and Artefact," in *Wonderful Things: Byzantium Through its Art*, ed. Antony Eastmond and Liz James (Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2013), 156–157. Also see Marshak's "Schale (*Diskos*)" in A. Effenberger ed. *Silbergefässe aus der Staatlichen Ermitage Leningrad* (Berlin, 1978), 127–131.

had been engraved into the Anikova Plate, the plate's central depiction of the city of Jericho resembled a typical eighth-century Sogdian castle, implying that the Anikova Plate had been a reproduction of an eighth-century object.[13] The discovery of the Nildino Plate effectively confirmed Marshak's hypothesis: Baulo notes that the Nildino plate is more pronounced in its details than the Anikova Plate, indicating that the Nildino Plate was the original object used for a mold to cast the Anikova Plate.[14] Thus, these four silver plates discovered across the expanse of Russia between 1898 and 1999 can be traced back to Zhetysu, which had regional silver mines.[15]

13 Judith Lerner, "Anikova Plate," *The Sogdians: Influencers on the Silk Roads*, Smithsonian Institution, https://sogdians.si.edu/anikova-plate/.

14 Baulo, "Silver Plate from Verkhnee Nildino," 134.

15 Baumer, *The Church of the East*, 174.

Figure 4. *The Grigorovskoye Plate*, ninth to tenth centuries; hammered silver plate, decorated with repoussé and chasing techniques, and gilded; diameter of 23 centimeters. The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg. From *Byzantium: 330–1453*, ed. Robin Cormack and Maria Vassilaki (London: Royal Academy Publications, 2008), 451.

The Nildino and Malaya Ob plates offer a robust opportunity for a visual analysis that takes into account both the pre-existing scholarship surrounding their earlier uncovered counterparts and

ongoing academic insights into the political and social dynamics of Syriac Christianity in medieval Central Asia. Indeed, the imagery of these two silver plates presents a compelling example of the ways in which the Christians of Zhetysu imagined themselves in relation to their contemporary world and religious heritage. Both plates infuse contemporary iconography from Zhetysu into scenes from the Old Testament that resonated with the political realities of the Karluks' early medieval Christian kingdom. This is evidenced by visual cues tied to Sogdian conceptions of kingship and divine power as well as the military experience of Zhetysu's Turkic rulers, all of which are intermingled with biblical themes in the Malaya Ob and Nildino plates. Together, these factors testify to the ambitions and self-fashioned legitimacy of the Christian society that commissioned these plates.

A JOURNEY OF TWO PLATES

Baulo and his colleague Izamail Gemuev discovered the Nildino Plate, which depicts the siege of Jericho, in July 1985, near a Siberian village named Verknhee Nildino. The early-twentieth-century Russian archaeologist Valerii Chernetsov had, in 1938, recorded a story from the Mansi, an indigenous Siberian people, that claimed that a silver plate had, at some point, been caught in a fishing net in the region and then moved to a sanctuary for religious ceremonies.[16] Following up on Chernetsov's story, Baulo and Gemuev navigated a hazardous portion of the Northern Sos'va River to reach the suspected site of the plate, a small shed mounted on two tree trunks (Figure 5).[17] Inside the shed, Gemuev and Baulo found the plate nestled within an embroidered bag wrapped inside another bag.[18] Inside the bags, they found the Nildino Plate, depicting the siege of Jericho, wrapped in kerchiefs.[19] A local guide informed Baulo

16 Baulo, "Silver plate from Verkhnee Nildino," 129.

17 Arkady Baulo, "The Legendary Nildin Dish," *Science First Hand* 22, no. 1 (2009), https://scfh.ru/en/papers/the-legendary-nildin-dish/.

18 Baulo, "Legendary Nildin Dish."

19 Baulo, "Legendary Nildin Dish."

that during past rituals at the site, the meat of a freshly slaughtered horse would be placed on the plate as a divine offering.[20]

Figure 5. *Sacred Shed* from Arkady Baulo, "Connection between Time and Cultures (Silver Plate from Verkhnee Nildino)," *Archaeology, Ethnology & Anthropology of Eurasia* 19, no. 3 (2004): 127–136.

Chernetsova described other silver plates that he, based on interviews with Siberian locals, believed were located at other holy sites: he mentions one "silver plate with images of seven people" located near a village, Yany-paul, also near the Northern Sos'va River. Baulo likewise reports that a villager near Yany-paul told him in 1997 about a "time-darkened silver plate with four horsemen

20 Baulo, "Legendary Nildin Dish."

depicted on it," but the plate has yet to be located.[21] Continuing his search for other silver plates in the 1990s, this time in the lower region of the Malaya Ob River, Baulo located another Siberian sanctuary site that contained the Malaya Ob Plate, which was wrapped in a red scarf. A local caretaker told Baulo that the plate was used to serve pieces of sacrificial bread to village elders or guests.[22] Whereas the Museum of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography in Siberia purchased the Nildino Plate in the same year of its discovery,[23] the Malaya Ob plate remains in use at the holy sanctuary near Yany-paul.[24]

That use of these plates in Siberian worship practices is remarkably similar to how Christians would have used plates like this to serve the Eucharist during religious services, as discussed by Vera Zalesskaya in her discussion of the Grigorovskoye Plate.[25] Indeed, both the Nildino and Malaya Ob Plates were used by Siberian communities to serve divine, sacrificial meals of meat or bread, and these plates were similarly used by their Christian makers to serve the sacrificial flesh of Christ, transubstantiated as bread, to believers. With limited information, it is impossible to plumb whether these plates, as they passed through generations of Siberian life, were accompanied by legends related to their original use by the foreigners who brought them to Siberia. The coincidence, nonetheless, is remarkable.

CHRISTIANS IN THE LAND OF THE SEVEN RIVERS

The Christians who lived in the vicinity of Lake Balkhash in the early medieval period belonged to a world of turmoil: borders were ever-changing, new powers were constantly on the rise, and Christianity itself, though certainly prolific in some capacities across the routes of the Silk Road, was hardly ever secure in its existence. No lasting Christian state ever emerged in Central Asia during the Middle Ages and, ultimately, Islam largely supplanted other religions in the region such as Syriac Christianity,

21 Arkady Baulo, "Biblical Czars of the Khanty Sanctuary," *Science First Hand* 24, no. 3 (2009), https://scfh.ru/en/papers/biblical-czars-of-the-khanty-sanctuary/.

22 Baulo, "Silver Plate from the Malaya Ob."

23 Baulo, "Legendary Nildin Dish."

24 Arkady Baulo, email to author, April 10, 2020.

25 Zalesskaya, "The Nestorian Discos," 155.

Buddhism, Manichaeism, and Zoroastrianism. The strategically prized land around Lake Balkhash — transcribed as "Zhetysu" from Turkic languages, meaning "Land of the Seven Rivers" or the *Semiryechye* in Russian — was no exception.[26] The archaeological remains of Christian gravestones from the region indicate that an active Syriac Christian community lived in Zhetysu from at least the seventh century, when Turkic rulers encouraged Sogdians to settle the area, until the fourteenth century, when the Mongol Empire ruled Zhetysu.[27]

The Göktürk Khaganate was in part succeeded by the Western Turkic Khaganate, which based its capital in Zhetysu and lasted through the latter half of the sixth century and first half of the seventh century.[28] Decades after a Tang dynasty army under Gao Zong annexed the Western Turkic Khaganate in 657, another group of Turks who had been vassals of the Western Turkic Khaganate, the Türgesh, seized control of Zhetysu in 703.[29] The Türgesh founded their own Khaganate, but the Karluks, another Turkish people who were migrating westwards — retreating from a conflict with the Uyghurs in what is now modern-day Xinjiang, China — defeated the Türgesh in 766, gaining control over Zhetysu.[30] Based on the writings of Patriarch Timothy I of the Church of the East and the ninth-century author Narshakhi, the Karluks probably converted to Syriac Christianity between 780 and 783.[31] Ultimately, under the pressure of successful military incursion from the Sunni Samanid Empire in the ninth and tenth centuries, the Karluks, who likely formed into the Kara-Khanid Khaganate in 934, began adopting Islam, a process cemented by the conversion of their ruler, Satuq Bughra Khan, in 955.[32]

For about 165 years, the Karluks ruled over their own Christian kingdom in Zhetysu. It was out

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26 Bartold, *History of the Semirechye*, 73.

27 Mark Dickens, "Syriac Christianity in Central Asia" in *The Syriac World*, ed. Daniel King (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2018), 612.

28 Stanford Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 3.

29 Wang Zhenping, *Tang China in Multi-Polar Asia: A History of Diplomacy and War* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013), 158.

30 Dickens, "Metropolitan of the Turks," 124.

31 Dickens, "Metropolitan of the Turks," 121.

32 Dickens, "Metropolitan of the Turks," 128.

of this setting that the Malaya Ob and Nildino Plates emerged. These plates possess a distinctive Sassanian-like style, influenced by the Iranian identity of the Sogdians who had experience crafting such ornate metal objects and probably worked as the craftsmen behind these particular plates. It is important to consider that, although someone ultimately chose to send these plates to Siberia as trade goods, they may have been originally intended for local use in Zhetysu as a diplomatic gift, domestic ornament, or sacred paten. Ultimately, the practical purpose of these objects for presenting the Eucharist may have made them ideal as explanatory tools for Christian missionaries travelling with traders into Siberia.

THE MALAYA OB PLATE: TWO BIBLICAL KINGS

The Malaya Ob Plate, twenty-four centimeters in diameter and three centimeters in height, would have been engraved through the use of repoussé and chasing techniques on a plate cast of silver.[33] The plate, which weighs one kilogram, also has a gilded background and an embossed rim.[34] Visually, the design showcases King David sitting atop an intricate throne. Two large simurghs — mythical winged beasts which figure prominently in Persian art — rest beneath his feet. David wears a winged crown, common among depictions of shahs in Sassanid art (Figure 6). And this representation of King David certainly recalls the image of a traditional Sassanid ruler. For instance, a sixth-century cup made for the Sassanian ruler Chosroes I portrays the king as seated bow-legged, just like David. Unlike King David, though, Chosroes I holds a sword sheathed between his knees (Figure 6).[35] Iranian or Sassanid art frequently depicts kings as sitting on their thrones holding a sword or, alternatively, engaged in a hunt on horseback (Figure 7).

33 Baulo, "Silver Plate from the Malaya Ob."

34 Baulo, "Silver Plate from the Malaya Ob."

35 All the same, when the Cup of Chosroes was given to Charlemagne by the Caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd, it was added to the treasury of Saint-Denis and relabeled as the "Cup of Solomon." And so, as an interesting analogy, the Christians of Zhetysu were not the only medieval Christians to refashion the imagery of Persian kingship into that of biblical kings.

Figure 6. *Cup of Chosroes*, sixth century, Sassanid, gold and enamel. Cabinet des Médailles, Paris. From *Les Perses Sassanides: Fastes d'un empire oublié* (Paris: Paris Musees, 2006), 96–97.

Figure 7. *King Shapur II on a Lion Hunt*, between 310 and 320 A.D., Sassanid; forged silver decorated with gilding, chasing, and repoussé techniques; 22.9 centimeters in diameter. State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

The Malaya Ob Plate disposes of the sword to instead emphasize a relationship between music and the monarch. The king is prominently playing a lyre in court, and indeed, King David is shown throughout the Old Testament to be a talented player of the lyre. It should be noted that the Lyre's

vertical playstyle is quite distinct from the lute, which is played horizontally and often appears in Sogdian art involving musicians.[36] And while the vertical lyre is not as common in Sogdian art, the instrument did become common in depictions of King David within the art of Abrahamic religions.[37]

The presence of the lyre implies that King David, who is depicted with his mouth open as if performing a song, could be singing verses attributed to him from the Book of Psalms — some of which may elaborate on the meaning of the plate's iconography, as Baulo argued.[38] Notably, the Book of Psalms frequently invokes the presence of animals in order to characterize the struggle of the Israelites, and the Malaya Ob Plate features a number of wild, domestic, and mythical animals surrounding King David. Moving counter-clockwise from the rabbit at the lower right corner of the plate, the animals include: an elephant, a griffon, a horse, a dog-like creature, a bighorn sheep; one bulkier creature resembling a mastiff, lion, or even a wolf; an antlered red deer, a furry dog, a markhor, a lion; another bighorn sheep or goat-like creature; a simurgh, a mountain goat, a smaller canine animal, a camel, another simurgh, a bull, a lion with a distinct mane, an elk, and two pond birds.

Many of these animals that surround King David are specifically mentioned in the Book of Psalms, underscoring potential biblical references made by the plate. Psalm 17, the "Prayer of Rescue from Persecutors," establishes the analogy between wild animals and the opponents of Israel. Its third section illuminates the significance of the more beastly, dangerous creatures included on the periphery of the Malaya Ob Plate:

> My ravenous enemies press upon me; they close their hearts, they fill their mouths with proud roaring / Their steps even now encircle me; they watch closely, keeping low to the

36 Ingrid Furniss, "Retracing the Sounds of Sogdiana," *The Sogdians: Influencers on the Silk Roads,* Smithsonian Institution, https://sogdians.si.edu/sidebars/retracing-the-sounds-of-sogdiana-sogdian-music-and-musical-instruments-in-central-asia-and-china/.

37 James Russel, "The Lyre of King David and the Greeks," *Judaica Petropolitana* 8, (2017). https://dash.harvard.edu/bitstream/handle/1/37143010/The_Lyre_of_King_David_and_the_Greeks.pdf?sequence=1.

38 Baulo, "Silver Plate from the Malaya Ob."

> ground / Like lions eager for prey, like a young lion lurking in ambush / Rise, O Lord, confront and cast them down. (Ps. 17:9–13)

Psalm 22, the "Prayer of the Innocent Person," likewise describes the enemies of the psalmist by stating that "many bulls surround me; fierce bulls of Bashan encircle me / They open their mouths against me, lions that rend and roar" (Ps. 22: 13–14). Of course, the image of encircling lions and bulls lends itself to the Malaya Ob Plate's depiction of an actual bull and lion present on the bottom left edge of the plate. The psalm continues to depict the enemies of Israel as wild animals, including dogs, which likewise appear on the plate: "Dogs surround me; a pack of evildoers closes in on me" (Ps. 22: 17).

If the plate is alluding to the psalms in its imagery, it also strikes a note of reassurance: King David's music comes with the promise of the Lord's help against the enemies of the kingdom. For instance, Psalm 58 describes how the Lord will defeat the beast-like enemies of Israel in vivid detail: "O God, smash the teeth in their mouths; break the fang of these lions, Lord!" (Ps. 58: 7). And while Psalm 59 illustrates the enemies of Israel as "growling like dogs, prowling the city," (Ps. 59: 7), Psalm 74 solicits the Lord for help: "Do not surrender to wild animals those who praise you" (Ps. 74: 19). Visually, the Malaya Ob Plate indicates that Israel has not been lost to the wilderness: the pious king resides in a world where the animals, untamed and domestic alike, have been kept at bay, pacified in a cosmic order around him. The foliage-inspired decorations on the plate — from the flowers sprouting at the bottom of the plate to the ring of sprouting leaves that circles around the animals — also supplement nature's role within the scene.

There is also perhaps a message here to the contemporary viewer of this object in Zhetysu facing threats from powerful and threatening outside forces like the Samanids, who bordered Zhetysu and ruled over Persia: live up to the legacy of King David in order to repel the dangerous enemies facing into your own kingdom. Psalm 78 even laments how the Lord's believers can be led astray by the potential chaos of the wilderness represented in this plate: "How often they rebelled against God in the wilderness" (Ps. 78: 40). This line also evokes the self-inflicted woes of the Israelites in the Book of Judges, which follows the triumphs of the Israelites in the Book of Joshua — the crowning moment of which was the Siege of Jericho, depicted in the Nildino Plate. And just as the Malaya Ob's plate proffers a warning about the threat of the external world to its audience, the Nildino Plate offers what can be read as a subtle

intention for the Christians of Zhetysu to avoid the mistakes made by the Israelites in the Book of Judges, which will be discussed later.

Two particular animals in the Malaya Ob Plate might be further connected to a specific portion of the Book of Psalms: the two water fowl, innocently standing over the pond located at the bottom of the plate. Two verses from Psalm 124 read "Blessed is the Lord, who did not leave us to be torn by their teeth / We escape with our lives like a bird from the fowler's snare" (Ps. 124: 6–7). Though there are no allusions to human hunters in the plate, the threat of being "torn by their teeth" is certainly present in the lions on the perimeter of the plate. The two birds at the base of the plate, flapping their wings as if they are about to take flight, can be read as a heartening embodiment of Psalm 124, whereby God allows his followers to escape the "teeth" of their enemies like birds taking flight from predators.

In all of these ways, the Book of Psalms offers an explanation of the water fowl and the many dangerous and aggressive animals on the plate, such as the canine creatures, the bull, and the lions. However, the presence of less threatening, herbivorous creatures such as the rabbit, deer, and bighorn sheep on the plate are not as neatly explained by the Book of Psalms' rhetoric about the danger of the wilderness. The presence of these animals, however, could be a reference to a passage from the Book of Isaiah that describes a coming messianic era of global peace: "The wolf shall be a guest of the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, The calf and the young lion shall browse together" (Is. 11:6). The peaceful co-existence of both predators and prey who take docile poses around King David can certainly be taken as testament to King David's semi-messianic, divine authority on earth because he can bring natural enemies — predator and prey, lion and sheep — into harmony. Going further, if the presence of both predator and prey animals in the Malaya Ob Plate indicates a reference to the global harmony of the messianic era — and, analogously, the harmony of Christian rule in Zhetysu as well — then Chernetsov's noting of another plate in Siberia with "four horsemen depicted on it"[39] may very well have been a rendition of the four horsemen of the apocalypse. Prophesied by the New Testament's Book of Revelation as being the vanguard of the Christian end times (Rev. 6: 1–8), these horsemen would also herald the messianic age. The notion of tamed animals operating as a function of King David's holiness, manifested in his music, is not unique to this plate. King David is depicted as a

39 Baulo, "Silver Plate from the Malaya Ob."

musician surrounded by animals in some other early medieval art; for instance, a damaged mosaic from an early-sixth-century synagogue in Gaza shows King David playing his lyre near a giraffe, elephant, and the trunk of an elephant — in addition to, presumably, other no longer visible animals (Figure 8). Such images have been considered as extensions of the widespread Graeco-Roman "Orpheus mosaics,"[40] which depict the Greek hero playing his lyre, surrounded by animals (Figure 9).

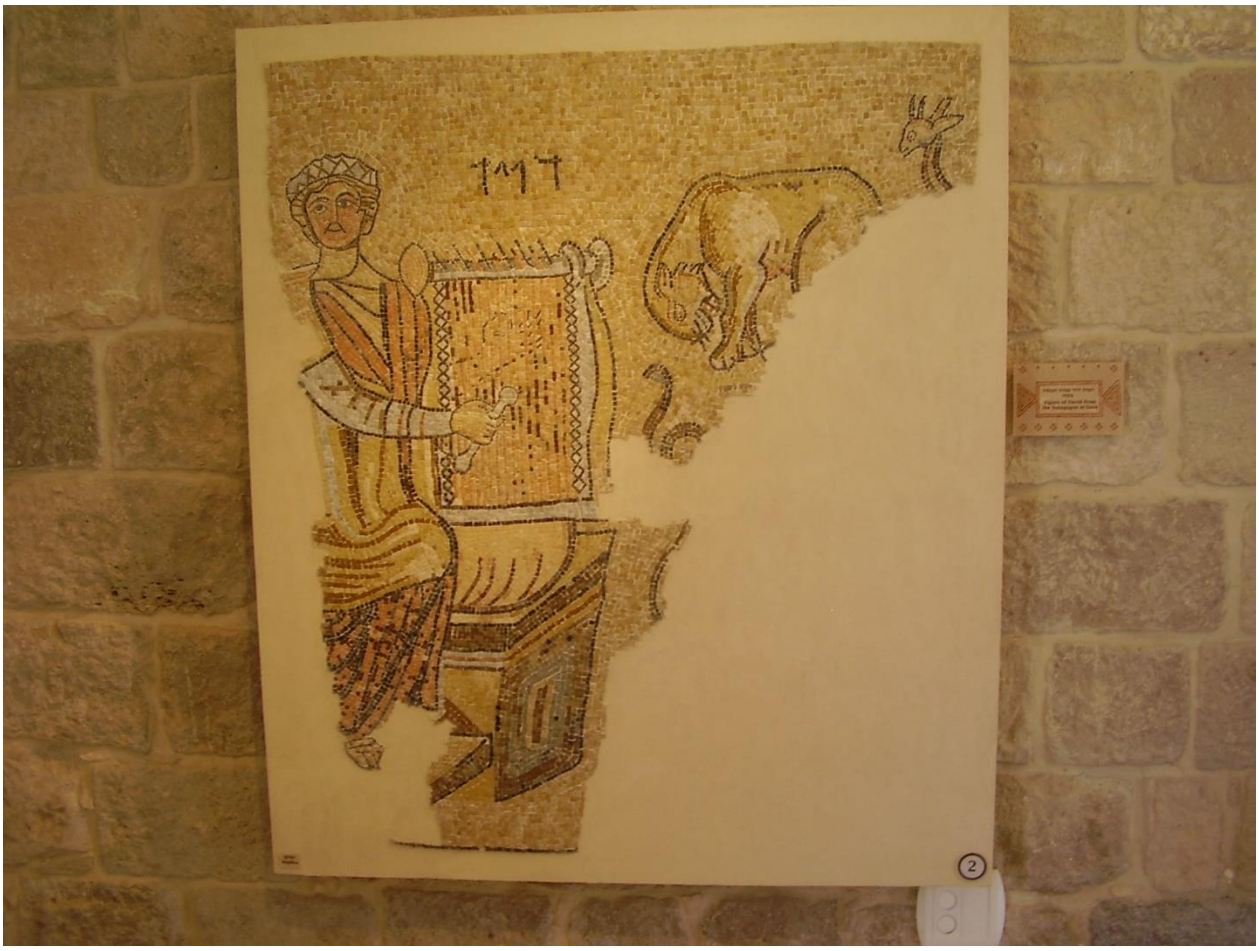

Figure 8. *Mosaic of King David*, early sixth century, 3 meters high and 1.9 meters wide. Gaza Synagogue, Gaza. Photo from Avishai Teicher via the PikiWiki - Israel free image collection project.

40 Jas Elsner, "Double Identity: Orpheus as David, Orpheus as Christ?" *The Biblical Archaeology Review* 35, no. 2 (2009): 34.

Figure 9. *Orpheus Taming Wild Animals*, 194 A.D., Eastern Roman Empire near Edessa, marble and mosaic, 1.64 meters by 1.52 meters. Formerly of the Dallas Museum of Art, now in possession of the Turkish government. Photo from the Dallas Museum of Art.

Thus, King David appears here as both a king of the Persian world, as epitomized by his Sassanian crown, and a divine king immersed in the imagery of the Old Testament. The designers of the Malaya Ob Plate even created a vertical ascension of winged imagery to emphasize the hierarchy of King David's authority: the birds at the bottom of the plate compose their wings into the air in a manner evocative of David's winged crown; above the birds, the more authoritative simurghs flaunt their own

wings, again evoking the crown. Finally, rising above even the majestic wings of the simurghs, the viewer beholds the crown of King David itself — realized in a grand escalation that begins with waterfowl.

Additional meaning can be drawn from other figures depicted on the plate. While the woman to the right of King David can be identified as King David's wife Bathsheba, the young man to the left of the bearded monarch can be identified as Prince Solomon.[41] Accordingly, Baulo argues for this plate's connection to Psalm 72, which outlines King David's wish for Solomon to rule over a vast territory: "May he rule from sea to sea, and from the river[42] to the ends of the earth" (Ps. 72: 8). Indeed, the Christian Karluks may have seen a powerful metaphor for the ambitions of their own new kingdom in this prayer for an empire reaching beyond the Euphrates to the "ends of the Earth." The visuals and iconography of the plate further explore the succession dynamics between King David and Solomon, adding to the relevance of Psalm 72: like David, Solomon also wears a winged crown, but his wings are shorter and less ornate than his father's, implying that his time for rule is yet to come.[43] Additionally, Solomon faces King David and raises his left hand in a two-fingered gesture[44] that looks like an adjusted form of the two-fingered gesture of the Christ Pantocrator, the earliest known image of which dates to the mid-sixth century at St. Catherine's monastery at Sinai, in modern-day Egypt (Figure 10).[45] This popularized image of Christ had probably made its way to the Church of the East in Central Asia by the eighth century. Still, the left-handedness of Solomon's gesture breaks from the right-handed finger gestures generally seen in depictions of Christ Pantocrator.

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41 Baulo, "Silver Plate from the Malaya Ob."

42 This is in reference to the Euphrates River.

43 Baulo, "Silver Plate from the Malaya Ob."

44 In the Nildino Plate, a soldier similarly holds up his left-hand to point with two fingers, though Marshak says that this gesture is a reference to Buddhist, not Christian, iconography.

45 Manolis Chatzidakis and Gerry Walters, "An Encaustic Icon of Christ at Sinai," *The Art Bulletin* 49, no. 3 (1967): 197–208. Accessed April 13, 2020. doi:10.2307/3048469.

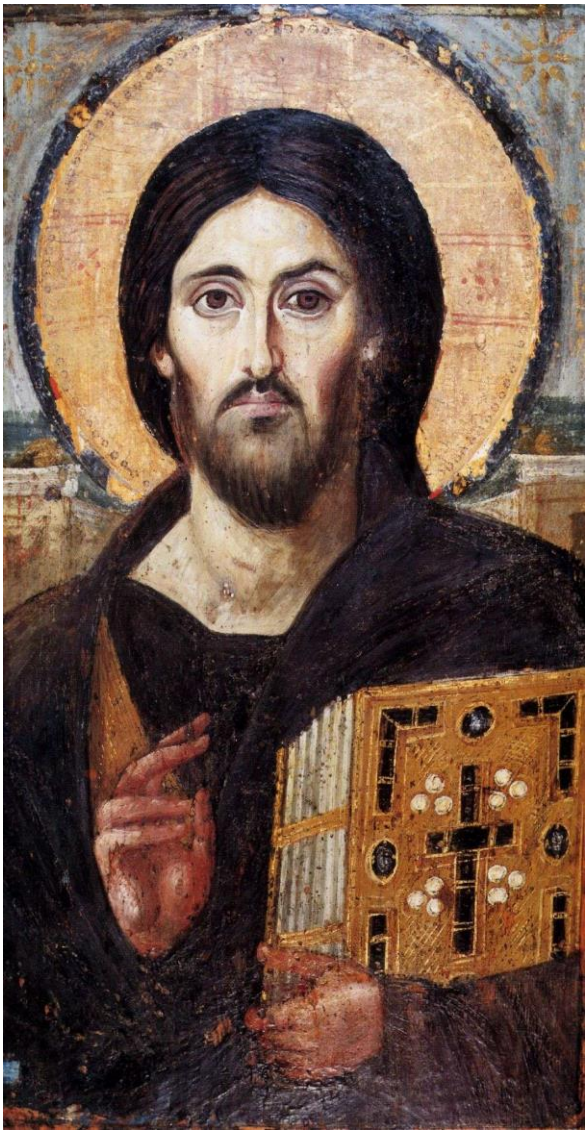

Figure 10. *Christ Pantocrator*, sixth century, East Roman Empire, 84 centimeters tall and 45.5 centimeters wide, hot wax painting. St. Catherine's Monastery at Sinai, South Sinai Governorate. Public Domain.

THE NILDINO PLATE: INVADING CANAAN

The dimensions of the Nildino Plate are extremely similar to the Malaya Ob Plate. The Nildino Plate, which depicts the siege of Jericho, is twenty-four centimeters in diameter and three centimeters in

height, and it weighs 1.1 kilograms.[46] An artisan would have, as with the Malaya Ob Plate, crafted the Nildino Plate in the eighth century by applying repoussé and chasing techniques to a cast silver plate, after which parts of the plate would have been embossed and gilded. The ninth-to-tenth-century Anikova Plate, a copy of the eighth-century Nildino Plate, is not as sharp in its imagery as the Nildino Plate. This indicates, as Marshak originally hypothesized, that the Nildino Plate was the original plate used as a mold to cast the Anikova Plate in the ninth or tenth century.[47] After using that mold, the artist behind the Anikova Plate engraved armor and weapon details onto the Anikova Plate typical of ninth and tenth century Zhetysu.[48] The artist who manufactured the Nildino Plate, likewise, crafted this plate with details reflective of eighth century styles.

Marshak believed that the depiction of Jericho on the Nildino Plate recreated the style of Sogdian castles from the eighth century, corresponding to the Nildino Plate's eighth-century origin.[49] The depiction of a siege scene at the murals of Panjikent, for instance, displays an architectural style similar to the Nildino Plate's portrayal of Jericho (Figure 11).[50] Similarities can also be seen, for instance, between this castle and V. A. Nil'sen's visual reconstruction of the eighth-century Sogdian Varakhsha palace: like this plate's depiction of Jericho, Nil'sen's estimation of the palace includes a sloped, brick wall, pillars, and a row of geometric parapets (Figure 12). Some of the styles of the Sogdian castle used as a model for the Nildino Plate go back even further than the eighth century: a sixth-to-seventh century flamed brick discovered in an archaeological excavation of Suyab, the historical capital of Zhetysu, greatly resembles that of the geometric parapets seen in the Nildino Plate; Leonid Kyslasov writes that this flamed brick style was probably used in a tower that resembled the castle visible on the Anikova Plate and thus the Nildino Plate as well.[51] Given the Nildino Plate's Christian iconography, its biblical

46 Baulo, "Silver Plate from Verkhnee Nildino," 127.

47 Lerner, "Anikova Plate."

48 Lerner, "Anikova Plate."

49 Marshak, *History of Oriental Toreutics*, 333–335.

50 Boris Marshak, *Legends, Tales and Fables in the Art of Sogdiana* (New York: Bibliotheca Persica Press, 2002), 153, fig. 104. Sincere thanks to Judith Lerner for pointing out this comparison.

51 Leonid Kyzlasov, *The Urban Civilization of Northern and Innermost Asia: Historical and Archaeological Research* (Bucharest:

design may very well have been inspired by the Karluks' conquest of Zhetysu and subsequent conversion to Christianity in the eighth century. The reproduction of the Nildino Plate's design on the Anikova Plate during either the ninth or tenth centuries additionally indicates that members of Zhetysu's Christian community continued to view the design as relevant to their political and religious situation.

Brăila, 2010), 366.

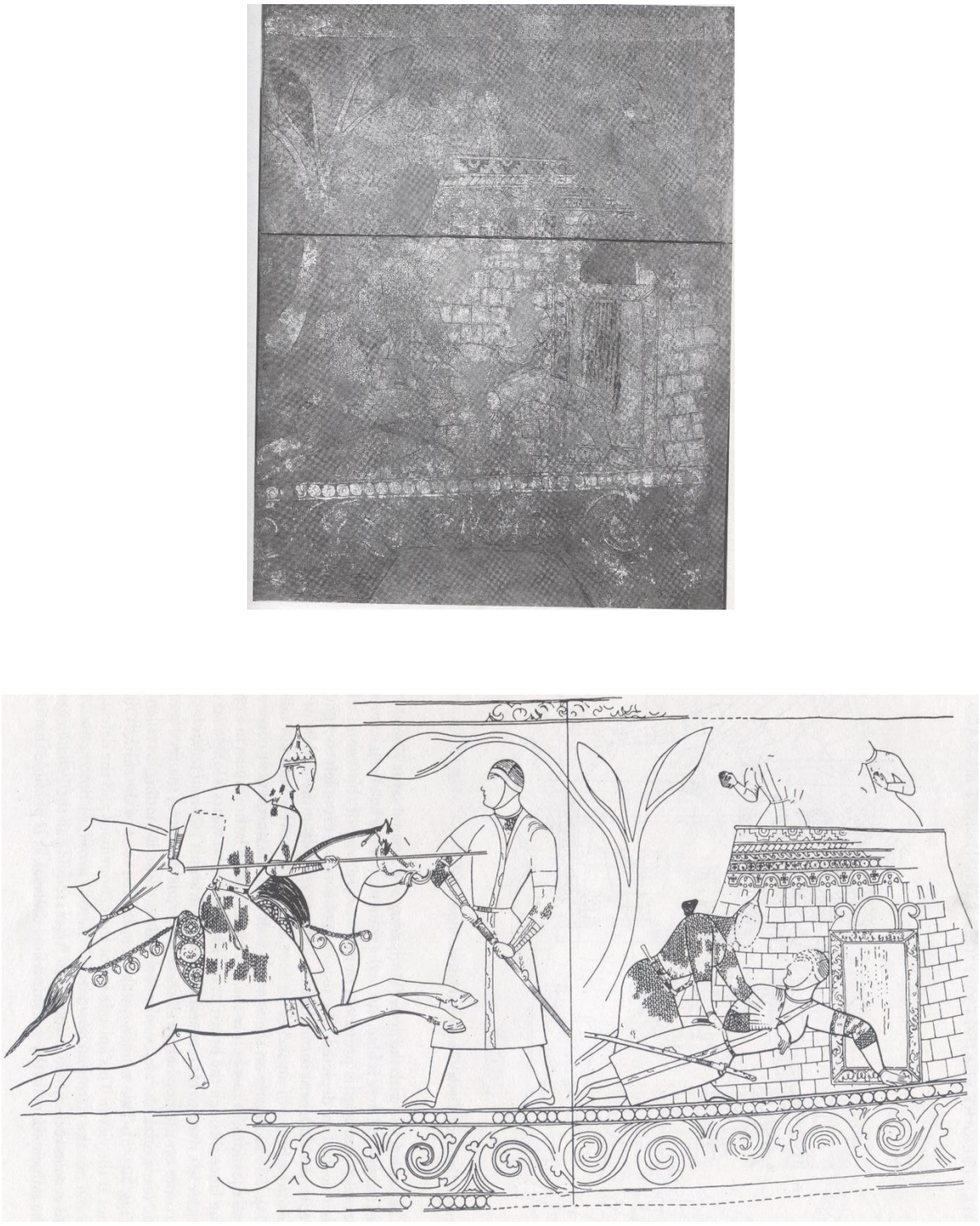

Figure 11. Siege Scene from Panjikent Sector XXI/Room 1. From Boris Marshak, *Legends, Tales and Fables in the Art of Sogdiana* (New York: Bibliotecha Persica Press, 2002), 153.

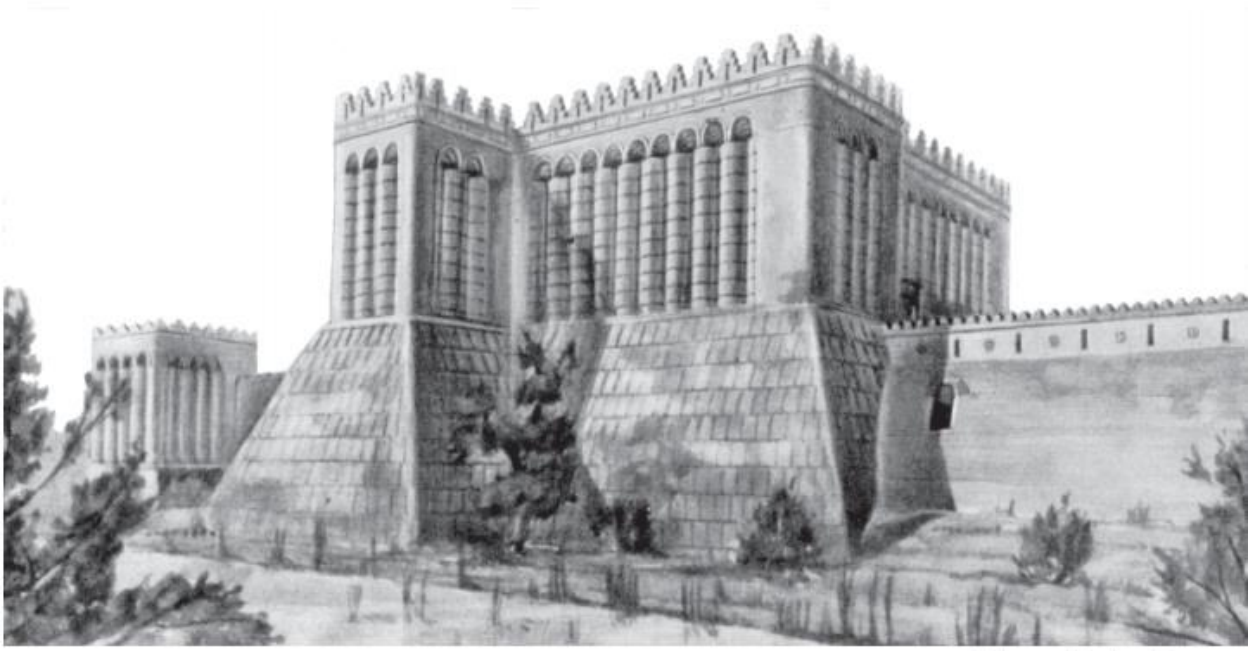

Figure 12. V. A. Nil'sen's reconstruction of the Varakhsha Palace. From Aleksandr Naymark, "*Returning to Varakghsha*," *The Silk Road Newsletter* (December 2003). http://www.silkroadfoundation.org/newsletter/december/varakhsha.htm

The argument for the Nildino Plate's biblical inspiration can be made by comparing the narrative elements of the Nildino Plate's design to the Book of Joshua's description of the siege of Jericho, the first battle undertaken by the Israelites in their conquest of Canaan. Horsemen are shown riding around the city in the Nildino Plate, just as the Lord instructs Joshua to "have all the soldiers circle the city" (Jos. 6:3). The chronology of the battle continues upwards from the gates of Jericho to Rahab, a prostitute who aids two of Joshua's spies in their reconnaissance of the city (Jos. 2:1–21) and can be seen making an open-armed exclamatory gesture above the entrance to the city, presumably a call for help. The Israelites, in keeping with God's instruction to destroy nearly everything associated with their enemies, kill every man, woman, child, and livestock animal in Jericho (Jos. 6:21). Rahab is spared, however, because she helps the Israelites and her presence operates as a reminder of God's mercy for the righteous (Jos. 6: 25). Above Rahab, the citizens of Jericho sit idly by in four balconies as they watch the Israelites march around the city; one woman, in the city's lower right balcony, casually rests her chin on a hand as if unaware of the impending slaughter.

The climax of the siege, however, transpires at the mid-level of Jericho's castle: the procession

of the Ark of the Covenant. Before the siege, God informs Joshua that "seven priests carrying ram's horns ahead of the ark" should march around Jericho until the city's walls collapse (Jos. 6: 6). The Nildino Plate, following the text, does have seven men wearing priest-like robes — in contrast to the heavy armor of the soldiers — blowing on ram horns as a seventh priest carries a decorated chest that is probably the Ark of the Covenant. Above the Ark of the Covenant, the invaders can be seen raising their standard over the city as they go about purging the residents of Jericho; two corpses are seen slumped over the highest wall of the city: gone is the mercy offered to Rahab. The violent scene at the top of the city affirms the power of the Lord's favored army — a notion that was, perhaps, comforting for the Christians in Zhetysu who faced external pressure from powerful neighbors like the Uyghurs and the Samanids.

Although the Old Testament makes no mention of warriors on horseback at the battle of Jericho, they appear on the Nildino Plate. This depiction of mounted horsemen makes sense given the importance of horse-based combat in the steppes of Central Asia and the centrality of horse-riding culture among Turkic peoples like the Karluks.[52] One particular detail, however, makes clear that at least some horsemen in the scene belong to a particular Central Asian military tradition: two horsemen on the left side of the plate hold tugs, which were poles decorated with tassels of horse hair that were carried by Turkish and Mongolian cavalrymen in the middle ages and even became prominent among the Ottoman Turks.[53]

The depiction of horse armor in the Nildino Plate also indicates Turkic associations. Though Sassanid cavalry did put dramatic armor on their horses, which would have been known to Zhetysu craftsmen through their familiarity with visual depictions of such cavalry in older Iranian metalwork, the Sogdians, as Marshak notes, categorically avoided outfitting their horses with armor.[54] Indeed, the horses of the eighth century cavalry figures that can be seen in the Sogdian murals at Panjikent are unarmored (Figure 13). But despite the fact that Sogdian craftsmen in Zhetysu probably made this plate,

52 Emel Esin, "The Horse in Turkic Art," *Central Asiatic Journal* 10, no. 3 (1965): 167–169. Accessed April 13, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/41926732.

53 Esin, "The Horse in Turkic Art," 198.

54 Boris Marshak, "Sogdian Tactics as Mirrored in the Panjikent Murals," in *Arms and Armour as Indicators of Cultural Transfer: The Steppes and the Ancient World from Hellenistic Times to the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Markus Mode and Jürgen Tubach (Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Recihert Verlag, 2006), 98.

the horse in the top left corner of the Nildino Plate wears full-body plate armor. The horse in the bottom left-hand corner of the Nildino Plate also wears armor. Patryk Skupniewicz, studying the corresponding bottom-left horseman in the Anikova Plate, notes that the armor seen on this figure's horse is depicted in a structurally "strange" way,[55] supplementing a view that the Sogdian craftsman who designed this plate was not accustomed to horse armor — but the craftsman perhaps went out of his way to depict the armor for the sake of a non-Sogdian audience like the Karluk Turks. Turks, unlike Sogdians, did equip their cavalry with horse armor. Indeed, some of the first innovations in horse armor during the medieval period came from Turks in Central and Inner Asia such as the Uyghurs, who associated with the Karluks before they migrated to Zhetysu.[56] Indeed, petroglyph fragments from the East Turkic Khaganate, the eastern counterpart of the Western Khaganate that preceded the Karluks in their rule over Zhetysu, showcase lancers riding horses wearing plate armor (Figure 14) similar to that of the horse in the bottom right of the Nildino Plate. Taking all of this into consideration, the Sogdian artisan who made the Nildino Plate was likely catering his depictions of the Israelites to an image of Karluk Turk warriors showing horse armor and tugs.

55 Patryk Skupniewicz, "Sasanian Horse Armor," *Historia i Świata*, no. 3 (2014): 43.

56 David Nicolle, "Horse Armour in the Medieval Islamic Middle East," *Arabian Humanities* 8 (2017). https://doi.org/10.4000/cy.3293

Figure 13. *Episodefrom the Rustam Frieze*. Circa 740 A.D., Sogdian murals from Panjikent, Tajikistan, wall-painting on plaster. The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg. Photo from Julie Bellemare and Judith Lerner, "The Rustam Cycle," Freer Sackler Gallery of Art, accessed October 6, 2020, https://sogdians.si.edu/rustam-cycle/.

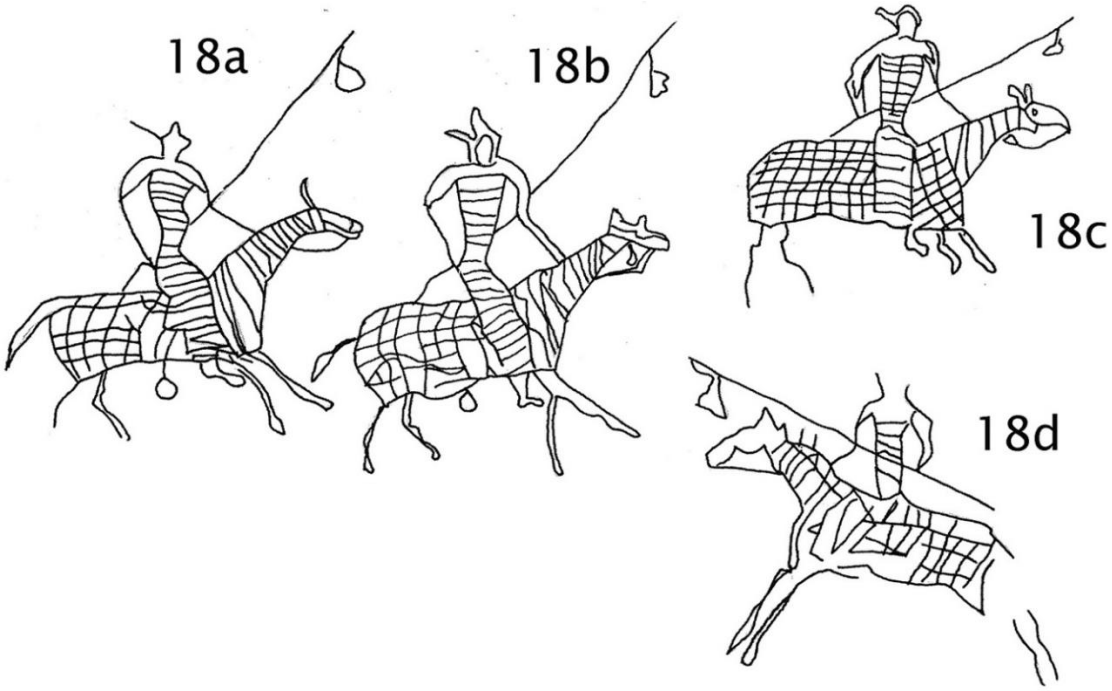

Figure 14. *Petroglyphs*, sixth-seventh centuries A.D., East Turkic Khaganate. From David Nicolle, "Horse Armour in the Medieval Islamic Middle East," *Arabian Humanities* 8 (2017). https://doi.org/10.4000/cy.3293

The Nildino Plate clearly utilizes a visual vocabulary familiar to Zhetysu in order to convey an Old Testament theme: Turkish warriors are acting out a pivotal battle of the Old Testament, even though the siege of Jericho took place thousands of miles from Zhetysu, in Canaan. This scene can be considered as a celebration of the Karluk Turks' newfound Christian heritage and a bold statement about the Karluks' military prowess being akin to that of Joshua's army. In this way, the Nildino plate likens the Karluks' subjugation of Zhetysu to Joshua's subjugation of Canaan.

It must be pointed out, though, that it remains unclear whether all of the horsemen in the Nildino Plate are meant to represent Turkic warriors. Given the multi-ethnic audience of the plate in Zhetysu and the cultural alliance between Christian Karluks and Sogdians in the area, it is certainly possible that some of the horsemen could be Sogdians. What's more, the rider in the top right corner of the Nildino Plate is carrying an axe — a Sogdian emblem of royalty[57] — and wears a helmet distinct in style from the more conical helmets worn by the other mounted figures. These pointed helmets were common in both Turkish-[58] and Sogdian-inhabited lands, as can be recognized, for instance, in the Sogdian murals at Panjikent, Tajikistan that depict a similar helmet type.[59] Yet the helmet of the rider in the upper right of the plate is unique. Rather, this head apparel does not look like a helmet at all and more closely resembles a crown with wings and a central topknot. It is noteworthy that this crown-like helmet resembles King David's and Solomon's headdresses in the Malaya Ob Plate, thus invoking the Sassanid type of crown that imbues King David with a worldly legitimacy.

The kingly status of the figure in the upper right of the Nildino Plate suggests that he is Joshua, leading the Israelites in their siege of the city. This is further confirmed by the figure's gesture towards the sun and sky standing above the city of Jericho, just as Joshua successfully prays to the Lord to stop the sun and the moon during a subsequent battle against the Canaanites at Gibeon (Jos. 10: 12–13).

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57 Michael Shenkar, "The Epic of "Farāmarz" in the Panjikent Paintings," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, New Series, 24 (2010): 73, 79, 83. Accessed April 13, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/43896120.

58 Adam Lech, "The Kizil Caves as *an terminus post quem* of the Central and Western Asiatic Pear-shape Spangenhelm Type Helmets: The David Collection Helmet and Its Place in the evolution of Multisegmented Dome Helmets," *Historia i Świata*, no. 7 (2018): 141–142.

59 Julie Bellemare and Judith Lerner, "The Rustam Cycle," Freer Sackler Gallery of Art, accessed October 6, 2020, https://sogdians.si.edu/rustam-cycle/

Whether Joshua is meant to be read as a Sogdian because of this Iranian-style headdress is unclear. If the patron of this work sought primarily to compliment a Karluk Turk audience, then the Sogdian and Sassanid royal tropes assigned to Joshua could have been meant to emphasize how the rulers of Zhetysu did not just wield authority over the Turkic world but also over the Iranian-Sogdian world and its legacies as well. And if this plate was commissioned for a Sogdian audience, then the Iranian-Sogdian crown of Joshua might be a coy way for a Sogdian patron or craftsmen of the work to assert the presence, influence, and importance of the Sogdian, Iranian culture within the Karluk state.

The Old Testament may not be the only ancient source referenced by the Nildino Plate. Baulo notes that the battle scene at the top of Jericho bears a close resemblance to a depiction of the seizure of a fort on a fragment of the Balawat Gate,[60] a ninth century B.C.E. decorated bronze band of a wooden gate from the Kingdom of Assyria (Figure 15). Baulo argues that the artist behind the Nildino Plate must, therefore, have been aware of the visual traditions of Assyria.[61] And if the artist was indeed aware of the imagery of the Balawat Gate, then it can be argued that the artist's invocation of such a specific image was a conscious attempt to advance the prestige of the Karluks' army — insofar as its horsemen are depicted on the plate — by connecting the Karluks' military exploits to the epic historical past of the Assyrian Empire. Moreover, it is significant that the Church of the East, to which the Christians of Zhetysu belonged, was led by a Patriarch based in Seleucia-Ctesiphon and, after 755, the city of Baghdad. The Church of the East thus had a strong connection to Mesopotamia, where the Assyrian Empire once ruled. And so it is possible that the Nildino Plate's reference to a famous scene in Assyrian Art is meant to signify the Zhetysu Christians' connection to Mesopotamia, where the leader of their church resided.

60 Baulo, "Silver Plate from Verkhnee Nildino," 135.

61 Baulo, "Silver Plate from Verkhnee Nildino," 135.

Figure 15. *Fragment of the Balawat Gate: Fort Seizure*, Assyrian, ninth century B.C.E., bronze. From Arkady Baulo, "Connection between Time and Cultures (Silver plate from Verkhnee Nildino)," *Archaeology, Ethnology & Anthropology of Eurasia* 19, no. 3 (2004): 127–136.

DECLARING CHRISTIAN KINGSHIP AND CONQUEST

Taken independently, the Malaya Ob and Nildino Plates each carry related messages about the status of Christian royalty and power in the multi-ethnic world of early medieval Zhetysu. The Malaya Ob Plate's depiction of King David bridges Old Testament values of kingship with the Iranian iconography of an early medieval present, such as the simurgh or winged crown. This allowed contemporary viewers of the plate to consider their own local, recently converted, and Turkic Christian lords as heirs to the lineage of both Iranian shahs like Chosroes I and Old Testament kings like King David — as well as the most famous descendant of the Davidic line, Jesus Christ. The Nildino Plate, on the other hand, inserts far more Turkic cultural tropes into its reconstruction of an Old Testament scene, portraying the besiegers of Jericho as a band of Turkish cavalry who are, in all likelihood, representations of the Karluk Turks who conquered Zhetysu.

The connection between the Karluk Turks and Joshua's army of Israelites is especially potent.

Not only do the invaders of Jericho visually resemble the Karluks, but the political circumstances of the Karluks' invasion of Zhetysu bear an uncanny political resemblance to that of the Israelites in the Book of Joshua, who have fled servitude in Egypt to migrate and conquer their way through foreign lands to form a new kingdom for their people. After relations violently broke down between the Karluks and Uyghurs within a tribal federation headed by the Uyghurs ruling the Mongol steppe, the Karluks were forced to move westwards; at this point, they defeated the Türgesh Khaganate in Zhetysu, and a political federation comprised of the invading Karluk tribes took control over the region.[62] The Türgesh had, like the Western Khaganate before them, established their capital in the vicinity of the Turkic-Sogdian city of Suyab, settled by Sogdian merchants between the fifth and sixth centuries.[63] The city is named for the Suyab River — one of the rivers that gave Zhetysu its "Land of the Seven Rivers" title. The Karluk Turks besieged and captured this city as part of their conquest of the Türgesh in 766, and turned Suyab into a new capital for the Karluks.[64] Their new kingdom stretched from Lake Balkhash in the north to Lake Issyk-Kul, in modern-day Kyrgyzstan; from East to West, the state reached from the Dzhungar Mountains to the middle portion of the Syr Darya River — an expanse of land that took about thirty days to travel across at the time.[65]

Suyab, having been founded and influenced by Sogdians throughout the early medieval period, likely resembled the Nildino Plate's portrayal of Jericho as a Sogdian-styled city and fortress. As noted previously, a sixth-to-seventh-century brick recovered from an archaeological dig at Suyab — that is, a kind of brick that could have been a part of the Suyab's architecture when it was conquered by the Karluks in the eighth century — resembles the parapets of Jericho visualized on the Nildino Plate. Accordingly, the depiction of Israelites besieging Jericho in the Nildino Plate can be taken as a reimagining of the Karluks besieging Suyab in 766. The plate's image of Jericho resembles stylistically the image of Suyab, but, more importantly its subject, the capture of Suyab, was probably the most

62 Didar Kassymova, Zhanat Kundakbayeva, and Ustina Markus, *Historical Dictionary of Kazakhstan* (Scarecrow Press: Plymouth, 2012), 137–138.

63 Zhenping, *Tang China in Multi-Polar Asia*, 158.

64 Kassymova, Kundakbayeva, and Markus, *Kazakhstan*, 137.

65 Kassymova, Kundakbayeva, and Markus, *Kazakhstan*, 138.

climactic moment for the Karluks in their conquest of Zhetysu — parallel to the way in which the capture of Jericho was arguably the most crucial moment for the Israelites in their conquest of Canaan.

When the Karluks converted to Christianity in the early 780s, elevating the Bible's importance in their freshly conquered kingdom, the retroactive analogy between the Karluks and the Israelites would have become a compelling one. When the Karluks migrated away from their Uyghur overlords in east Central Asia and conquered Zhetysu, they were, in a sense, unwittingly acting out the narrative of the Israelites. Just as the Karluks fled Uyghur-controlled lands in East Asia, Joshua and his Israelites begin their journey by fleeing Egypt as, effectively, a migratory tribe seeking out a better living situation. All of this would have made a conscious analogy between the siege of Suyab and the siege of Jericho depicted in the Nildino Plate more compelling for a Christian craftsperson or patron living in early medieval Zhetysu. There was, after all, an active Christian community in Zhetysu for at least a century prior to the Karluks' conquest.[66] As such, the Christians already living in Zhetysu prior to Karluk rule in the eighth century might have even viewed the Karluks, following their conversion, as akin to biblical liberators instituting a new, divinely-ordained Christian rule within Zhetysu — thus adding to the impetus for Christian, Sogdian craftspeople to celebrate the Karluks' conquest with such biblically-inspired objects as the Nildino and Malaya Ob plates.

Considering that these plates likely trace back to the same silver workshop in Zhetysu as Marshak proposed for the Anikova and Grigorovskoye plates, it is worth considering the thematic similarities in how these plates both conceptualize and legitimize the contemporary world of Zhetysu through the ancient past of Christianity. The Malaya Ob and Nildino plates, for instance, correspondingly utilize the iconography of their contemporary world to legitimize prototypical Iranian and Turkic rulers as biblical kings: the Malaya Ob Plate imagines a Persian-influenced ruler as a successful King David, and the Nildino Plate reconfigures the conquests of the Karluks as an extension of Joshua's conquests in the Old Testament. The plates also both emphasize the future in a strikingly positive, optimistic fashion. The Nildino Plate culminates in a reference to a future event to come after the siege of Jericho: Joshua, seen on horseback with a royal Sogdian axe and crown in the top-right of the plate, gestures with his palm to the sky, where the sun and moon stand still — a nod to how the

66 Dickens, "Syriac Christianity in Central Asia," 612.

Israelites will soon enough also capture the Canaanite city of Gibeon by freezing the heavens in place. This gesture, relegated to the periphery of the plate, is by no means the central act of the plate's scene. But by alluding to what will come next for the Israelites, the act of Joshua's prayer crucially conveys to the viewer that the Siege of Jericho is just one of many miraculous victories to come for the Lord's chosen people.

The Malaya Ob Plate, on the other hand, utilizes the figure of Solomon to emblemize an uplifting Christian future to come. In this plate's scene, not only is the Kingdom of Israel blessed by the leadership of King David, but his subjects can be assured by the presence of his successor, the celebrated King Solomon, that the lineage of great kings will continue. Like Joshua in the Nildino Plate, Solomon has his hand raised in a gesture. But unlike Joshua, who raises an open palm to the sky for his prayer, Solomon only has his index and middle finger raised. This gesture is a familiar one within Sogdiana. Seventh-century ossuary fragments from a Sogdian settlement at Biya Naiman contain an identically composed figure, second from the right, standing beneath an arcade that resembles the pillars and arches of Malaya Ob's court scene (Figure 16). This Biya Naiman figure, like Solomon, bends his right arm to place his right hand on his hip; and, importantly, he has raised his left hand to point upwards with his index and middle finger, just like Solomon. Marshak referred to the pointing hand as a "blessing gesture" and interpreted this ossuary figure as either Saoshyant, a messianic savior figure in Zoroastrianism who brings salvation to the world, or Airyaman, a divine healer.[67] Granted the thematic significance of Christ as both a savior and a healer, both of Marshak's interpretations bolster the connection between Solomon's gesture and the essential characteristics of Christ. And, at a basic level, the use of this gesture in the Biya-Naiman ossuary makes clear that Solomon's gesture, within Sogdian culture, signals a special, divine power — in the case of the Malaya Oh Plate, the gesture is an apparent allusion to the glorious, future coming of Christ.

67 Boris Marshak, "On the Iconography of Ossuaries from Biya-Naiman," *Silk Road Art and Archaeology* 4 (1995–1996): 306, 313.

Figure 16. Top photo: *Fragments from Biya-Naiman Ossuary*. Seventh century, Uzbekistan, baked clay. State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg. Photo from the National Museum, New Delhi. Bottom photo: Reconstruction of the Biya-Naiman Ossuary by B. N. Kastal'sky. From Boris Marshak, "On the Iconography of Ossuaries from Biya-Naiman," *Silk Road Art and Archaeology* 4 (1995–1996): 306, 313.

Likewise, Baulo notes that Solomon's gesture was a typical way of signaling that a figure was a prophet in the early medieval church.[68] In particular, Baulo cites the Russian church historian Yevgeny Golubinsky as stating that this hand gesture made by Solomon — a pointed index and middle finger, with the pinkie finger and ring finger bent under the thumb — was initially practiced by Graeco-Roman rhetoricians before becoming popular among early Christian depictions of prophets in the act of prophesying.[69] The connection between the art of public speaking and the work of a prophet, who speaks the word of God to the masses, is certainly a natural one given the Gospels' emphasis on Christ's ability to deliver compelling speeches and parables to crowds of people in Israel. A clear example of this connection beyond the Malaya Ob Plate is a second-century Christian mural in Rome that shows Christ employing the *ad locutio* gesture, whereby he raises his right hand for his address to his disciples (Figure 17). Taking all of this into account, Solomon's oratory gesture can be viewed as evidence that Solomon's gesture is meant to denote him as a man with the ability to speak like a prophet — like Christ.

68 Baulo, "Silver Plate from the Malaya Ob."

69 Yevgeny Golubinsky, *K nashey polemike so staroobriadtsami* (Moscow: Imperial Moscow University, 1905): 182.

Figure 17. *Last Supper*, second century, fresco. Catacombs of Domitilla, Rome, from the Web Gallery of Art

The plate may also be envisioning Solomon as a Christ-like figure in other ways. Solomon's hand gesture can also, as previously noted, be read as a form of the Christ Pantocrator's hand gesture. Such allusions to Christ, the central figure of the New Testament and descendant of both King David and King Solomon, provide the Malaya Ob Plate's Old Testament scene with a conscious acknowledgement of a great, Christian triumph to come — that is to say, the arrival of the messiah on Earth. Beyond this, it is worth noting for comparison that angels in the Passion scenes of the Grigorovskoye Plate, made in ninth- or tenth-century Zhetysu, also make pointing gestures with their hands, though they only use their index fingers (Figure 18). Whatever the case, the pointing gesture, even with connections to non-Christian works like the Biya-Naiman ossuary, clearly came to carry its own significance among the Christians of Zhetysu.

Figure 18. *Details of Angels Pointing*, from *The Grigorovskoye Plate* (Figure 4).

The presence of Solomon as a Christ-like prince in the Malaya Ob Plate also hints toward the divine Father–Son relationship of the New Testament. Specifically, the Malaya Ob Plate's depiction of three figures could allude to the New Testament through an intuition of the Holy Trinity with King David as the Father, Prince Solomon as the son, and Bathsheba as, perhaps, the Holy Spirit. Alternatively, the Malaya Ob Plate is also evocative of the Holy Family, in which case King David becomes analogous to Mary's husband Joseph, also of King David's lineage; Solomon retains his status as a Jesus-like figure, and Bathsheba is treated as a personification of the Virgin Mary. By doing this, the Malaya Ob Plate is

not only polysemic in its incorporation of iconography utilized in non-Christian Sogdian religious works such as the Biya-Naiman ossuary, but it also presents a polysemic celebration of Christianity, heralding the glory of two storied kings of Israel while still foreshadowing Jesus Christ's arrival on Earth, whereby the son of God inherits of the messianic legacy of King David and Solomon.

FASHIONING A CHRISTIAN AND TURKIC-SOGDIAN FUTURE THROUGH TWO SILVER PLATES

The overriding sentiment is clear: though the Malaya Ob Plate may depict an Old Testament scene, the artist behind this object is consciously looking forward to the New Testament. By doing so, the Malaya Ob foreshadows an uplifting future in the same way the Nildino Plate alludes to the victories that are still to come for the Israelites, namely Joshua conquering Gibeon after freezing the sun and moon in the sky. Why are both plates so concerned with addressing not only the main events of Old Testament storylines but also intimating future triumphs — such as the victory at Gibeon, or the arrival of Christ on Earth? Again taking into account the political realities of the Turkic-Sogdian society of Zhetysu, this optimism can be read as a subtle declaration that the Christians of Zhetysu would be able to build upon the initial success of the Karluks' conquest of the region to maintain a prosperous, long-lasting Christian state within Central Asia.

There is also a more explicit visual connection between the Nildino and Malaya Ob plates. One of the figures in the Nildino Plate shares the same two-finger pointing gesture as Solomon in the court of King David depicted in the Malaya Ob Plate: the horseman in the left center of the Nildino Plate, riding alongside a cavalryman holding up a tug. If the hand gesture of this horseman, like that of Solomon's fingers, alludes to his status as a prophet, then it is unclear who this other horseman is supposed to be. It also becomes curious that Joshua, baring his palms to the sky, does not also share this prophetic, two-fingered gesture. On the second point, Joshua, in this scene, is praying to God to halt the sun and the moon. He is not, in this moment, receiving the word of God as a prophet but doing quite the opposite: sending his own solicitation to the Lord. As such, Joshua's hands are not in the prophetic two-finger gesture. Instead, it can be inferred that Joshua's open-palmed gesture to the heavens signifies that he is in the middle of prayer.

The other rider, who does display the prophetic finger gesture, is placed in a conspicuous spatial relationship with Joshua. Specifically, if the eye follows the line created by this rider's pointing gesture across the battlefield of Jericho, it leads to Joshua's open, outstretched hand in prayer. At one level, this composition cleverly speaks to the prophetic nature of the two-fingered gesture: it literally leads the eye of the viewer to what will happen in the future by emphasizing an event set to transpire after the siege of Jericho — Joshua praying to freeze the sun at Gibeon — as if this rider brandishing the prophetic gesture knows what will happen. At another level, however, the connection between this figure with the prophetic gesture and Joshua implies that this other soldier will be able to take over Joshua's mantle once his leadership has come to an end. Solomon, sporting the two-fingered gesture, is also clearly denoted as the heir to King David's authority in the Malaya Ob Plate scene. If the two-fingered gesture is meant to indicate both a character's prophetic connection to God and his worthiness to take on worldly responsibility — two separate attributes of temporal and divine power that are perhaps numerically reflected in the the two outstretched fingers of the gesture — then it seems like the Nildino Plate is insisting that Joshua has a worthy heir in this other rider pointing to him from across the battlefield.

A wrinkle in this argument is that unlike King David, Joshua had no reputed successor in the Old Testament on par with the prophetic Solomon. Within the Old Testament, Joshua's death marks the end of the Book of Joshua and the beginning of the Book of Judges, which describe a period of time in which the Israelites cyclically spurn the Lord, suffer divine consequences, and then are saved by the "Judges," leaders who arise among the Israelites when the Lord decides to grant them help. Before this cycle begins, the Lord appoints Judah, a minor character in the Book of Judges, to lead the next attack on the Canaanites. It would be difficult to identify Judah with the Nildino Plate's prophetic rider — not only is there no record of his participation in the siege of Jericho, but he plays so small a role in the Old Testament that it would be misleading to label him as Joshua's true successor. And yet, the iconography of the Nildino Plate heavily implies that the prophetic rider is meant to be Joshua's successor: not only is he apparently a prophet, like Joshua — and Solomon as well — but this rider is the only warrior to brandish an axe in the entirety of the battle scene besides Joshua. Given that the axe is a Sogdian emblem of royalty, it does seem credible that this cavalryman is destined for royalty or some other special role.

It may simply be the case then that this other rider is not meant to be any Biblical figure at all, but rather a contemporary political commentary on how the Karluks, though analogous to the Israelites in their conquest of Zhetysu, would improve upon the lackluster fate of the Israelites following their successes under Joshua. The Book of Judges emphasizes through its narratives that the Israelites, without a king, lacked the moral leadership they need to prosper. Indeed, the book ends with a lament that "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in their own sight" (Jdg. 21: 25). So while the Christian Turks and Sogdians of Zhetysu may have wanted to think of themselves as analogous to the Israelites in their defeat of the Türgesh, they probably did not want the analogy to continue into the tumult and crisis experienced by the Lord's followers after the Book of Joshua. Rather, the Christians living in Zhetysu who wanted this plate to represent the success of their society would have preferred the analogy continue right into the next golden age of Israel that follows the era of the Judges: the ascendancy of King David and then his son, King Solomon, to the throne of Israel — ushering in a new era of strong leadership of Israel by prophet kings.

On one hand, this sentiment explains why the commissioners of these plates were so interested in depicting these particular scenes: they showcase the story of the Old Testament when Israel is at its height, not when it fell low. If these plates were meant as gifts to other Christians living within Zhetysu or elsewhere, then the iconography sends a resolute message that the Christian Turks and Sogdians ruling over Zhetysu are continuing the legacy of the Bible's most glorious storylines. In that light, the jarring figure of the rider sporting Solomon's two-fingered gesture makes more sense. The craftsmen behind the Nildino Plate can be understood here as altering the narrative of the Old Testament to better suit the ambitions of the Karluk state. This rider is the heir that Joshua deserved to have in the Old Testament, and he is also the heir that the Karluks would need to ensure the prolonged survival of their kingdom: an heir with the dual gifts of divine wisdom, as implied by his prophetic gesture, and kingly potential, as implied by the royal connotation of his axe.

The makers of this plate were surely aware that Joshua had no such heir riding alongside him at the siege of Jericho, and this plate's telling of the event is hardly identical to the tale told in the Bible. This version of the siege of Jericho has the Karluks playing the part of the Israelites, and the makers of this plate likely wanted to assure their audience that the Karluks were not going to go the way of the Israelites after their successful invasion of a foreign land. Thus, the insertion of a secondary prophetic

and royal figure into the siege of Jericho can be read as optimistic foreshadowing that the future of the Karluks would be in safe hands. This is why the presence of Solomon in the Malaya Ob Plate is crucial as well: this plate is not just meant to convince the viewer of the holy excellence embodied by the leadership and direction of the Karluks' rule, but also to promise that the future — embodied in the wise prince and heir to the throne, Solomon — will also be prosperous.

CONCLUSION: AN ISRAEL OF THE SEVEN RIVERS

A captivating portrait of the political life of Zhetysu's early medieval Christian state is made visible through the lens of the Nildino and Malaya Ob plates. The psalm references of the Malaya Ob Plate, paired with the object's deployment of Persian royal iconography and references to the succession of Solomon, represents an ambitious vision for the future of Christian Zhetysu: the enemies of the state will be held at bay as the kingdom lives up to the legacy of glorious Old Testament kings — as well as the first Karluks who conquered the "Land of the Seven Rivers." And so, the heirs to the Karluks' Christian Kingdom are presented as akin to such holy princes as Solomon and Christ: equipped to carry forth successfully the legacy of their divine lineage. The Nildino Plate's infusion of a Turkic-Sogdian early medieval world into the siege of Jericho deals more directly with the past, announcing that the conquest of Zhetysu under the Turks was akin to Joshua's leading his band of roaming Israelites into a successful invasion of Canaan. But, like the Malaya Ob Plate, the Nildino Plate also alludes to future triumphs to come — both in the vision of Joshua's freezing of the sun and moon, and the subtle indication that the Christians of Zhetysu can avoid the crisis of leadership felt by the Israelites after the Book of Joshua. The distinct message of these plates is that they were not manufactured for the generic purpose of trade along the Fur Road but were destined for a very specific audience, whether that was the Christians of Zhetysu, a community of potential Christian converts in Siberia, or both.

The interpretations that this paper offers are hypothetical and based on the world of beliefs and their visual vocabulary in which Zhetysu existed. A lack of comprehensive documentary evidence related to Christian Zhetysu makes it near impossible to form any ironclad arguments about how these works were understood by their patrons, artists, and audiences. Still, continued archaeological work focused on the religious life of Zhetysu and Central Asia in this time period can only help elaborate on

our modern understanding of these works. Insofar as these two plates may be among the greatest legacies of a Christian Turkic-Sogdian civilization in medieval Zhetysu, their implications for how this unique state drew upon biblical imagery to fashion itself as a neo-Kingdom of Israel in a contemporary world of political uncertainty stand as a rich testament to the connected histories of Eurasia.

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