



UNIVERSITÀ DI PISA



DIPARTIMENTO DI CIVILTÀ E FORME DEL SAPERE  
INSEGNAMENTO DI LINGUA E LETTERATURA SIRIACA

# Crosses on the Heavenly Mountains: The Nestorians of the Tian Shan and their Cemeteries

An Interdisciplinary Seminar

## Participants:

- Boris Zheleznyakov (National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Institute of Archaeology, Almaty)
- Valery Kolchenko (National Academy of Sciences of Kyrgyz Republic, Institute of History, Archaeology, and Ethnography, Bishek)
- Philip Slavin (University of Stirling)
- Peter Zieme (Turfanforschung, Berlin)
- Pier Giorgio Borbone (Università di Pisa)

Chair:

Chiara Barbati (Università di Pisa)

Tuesday, 24 October 2023

Via dei Mille, 19, Conference Room 3 (third floor)

9:00-13:30

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Between 1885 and 1892, the discovery and ensued excavations of two Christian cemeteries in the region then called "Seven Rivers" (Zheti-su in Turkic, Semirechye in Russian; now Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan) provided material evidence for the "Nestorian" Christian communities, mentioned by famous travellers as Marco Polo and William of Rubrouk. More than six hundred tombstone epitaphs, written in Syriac and Turkic, provide names, ecclesiastical and professional qualifications, gender and age indications. More recently, in 2014, the discovery and ongoing excavations of a necropolis near Uch-Aral, Eastern Kazakhstan, identified as the site of the old city of Ilibaliq, and the discovery in 2022 and ongoing excavations of a monastic Nestorian cemetery near Urgut (Uzbekistan) opened new perspectives for the research on Inner Asian Christianity.

The seminar will focus on the evidence provided by nineteenth-century excavations and subsequent discoveries and studies relating mainly to the cemeteries of Kara-Jigach and Burana, in the Tian Shan region. Archaeologists active in field research in the territory (Boris Zheleznyakov, Valery Kolchenko), philologists (Peter Zieme, Pier Giorgio Borbone) and a historian (Philip Slavin) will present and discuss the evidence, aiming at a description of the social, demographic structure of the Nestorian communities and their history, as well as their place in the history of the Black Death pandemic, in a multi-lingual and multi-religious environment, suggesting answers to the question of their origin, life, and disappearance.

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