

The importance of writing in the Central Asian Manichaean milieu

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Valkoiselle prinsessalle

In the third century C.E., in Mesopotamia, traditionally a highly syncretistic contact and border area between the two major centers of power of late Antiquity, the Roman Empire (where after the murder of Alexander Severus anarchy ruled between 235 and 284 [accession of Diocletian]) and the Iranian Empire (where the third and last pre-Islamic dynasty of the Sasanians emerged), there appeared a new prophet in an Elchasaite, proto-Mandaean environment. The philosophico-religious system of Mani (216-276) was intensely persecuted by Confucian, Zoroastrian, Islamic and Christian opponents after its rapid spread eastward along the Silk Roads, and in the west, in the Roman Empire.

In a Middle Persian fragment from the Berlin Turfan-collection, the new revealer claiming prophethood for himself states that fundamental issues went wrong in the previous religious systems organized by his predecessors when he indicates that

*01 dyn 'yg mn wcyd 'c 02 'b'ryg'n dyn 'y pyšyng'n 03 [pd] dh xyr fr'y 'wd 04 [wy]hdr 'st yk kw dyn 'y 05 [']hyng'n pd yk šhr 'wd yk 06 'zw'n bwd °° 'yg dyn 'y mn 07 'd kw pd hrw šhr 'wd p[d] 08 wysp 'zw'n pyd'g bw'd ° 09 'wd pd šhr'n dwr''n 10 qyšyh'd °° dwdyg kw dyn 11 'y pyšyn 'ndwm d'š 12 s'r'r'n p'q'n 'ndr 13 bwd hynd °° 'wd c'wn 14 s'r'r'n 'hr'ft hynd 15 'ygyš'n dyn whwryd 'wd 16 pd 'ndrz 'wd qyrdg''n 17 swst bwd hynd °° 'wd pd [...]*¹

«The religion which was chosen by me is more excellent and [be]tter [in] ten points than the other religions of the [fo]rerunners. Firstly, the religions of the [a]ncients were only in one land and in one language. Then (came) my religion so that in every country and i[n] all languages it will become manifest and be taught in far-away countries. Secondly, the former religions as long as the pure leaders² were in it (preserved their authenticity), but when the leaders ascended, then their religion became confused³ and they became slack in precepts and works. And through [...]

This text points immediately to the nucleus of the praxis of the Manichaean religion, namely the vital relationship between religious doctrines and their correct transmission in written form.

It was quite ominous that this religion, which insisted so much on the presence of and care for their writings, was persecuted in such a way that its canonical writings were destroyed to such a degree that until the beginning of this century Manichaeism was known only through the polemical haeresiological writings of its adversaries. The still ongoing discovery of primary material in Central Asia and Egypt not only reveals the doctrines of this vanished Gnostic movement, which displayed a uniquely universal dissemination, but especially the illuminated manuscripts and frescoes of Eastern Turkestan unveil only a few stars of what may well have been a copious artistic galaxy.

The fabulous miniatures on exhibition in the Berlin Museum for Indian Art and the texts of the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences deposited in the Berlin State Library of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation⁴ prove the words of the 10th century Islamic Arabic author, Ibn an-Nadīm,⁵ who wrote in his *Fihrist* (Catalogue of Books): «The inventor of the Manichaean script is Mani, who derived it from Persian and Syriac in the same way that he compiled his religion from the religions of the Magi and the Christians. The letters of this alphabet are more in number than those of the Arabic language and in this scripture the Manichaeans write their gospels and doctrinary books.»

The already mentioned precious documents of Berlin furthermore elucidate a very syncretical statement of the mu'tazilite author Al-Ġāhiz⁶ (Baṣra 160/776–255/868-9) in his *Kitāb al-ḥayawān* «Book of the Animals»: «Ibrāhīm as-Sindī once told me: I wished that the zindīqs were not so keen on spending good money for clean white paper and for the use of glossy black ink; that they should not attach great value to calligraphy, and that they might less urge on the zeal of the calligraphers, because—indeed—no paper that I ever have seen can be compared with the paper of their books, and no calligraphy with that which is used in these.»

In addition, the author states that the brilliance displayed by the Manichaeans can be compared with the splendour of the Christian churches. Indeed, the most important element in the Manichaean cult was the celebration of the βῆμα to which we will return *infra*.

In an undisputable way Manichaean writing must be linked with the famous miniatures, a conclusion which was already obvious in the eyes of 11th century Persian writers like Abū 'l-Ma'ālī Muḥammad ibn 'Ubayd 'Allāh⁷, who mentions in his *Bayān al-adyān*, «Explanation of Religions» (written in Ghazna, 1092 C.E.): «This man, Mani, was a master in the art of painting. He laid claim to prophethood and his legitimation was his skill in writing and in painting. It was said that he could draw on a piece of white silk a character in that fine a way that it was possible to decompose

that piece of silk fabric, thread by thread, without making visible that character. He composed a book with different paintings which is called *Aržang-é Mānī*, and which is kept in the royal treasure of Ghazna.»

An extremely relevant fact which is mentioned in Abū 'l-Ma'ālī's text is that the *Ārdahang* was still preserved in the 11th century in the royal library of Maḥmud of Ghazna. The *Ārdahang*, cf. Middle Persian = Parthian '(')*rdhng* [*Ārdahang*], is a book of illustrations guiding through Mani's doctrinary texts, which sometimes indeed presented a rather darkened translucency and could be characterized by an ostensibly abstruse nature. Its existence is confirmed by further documents from both east and west where it is called εἰκὼν. A parallel with the frescoes displayed in the European Christian churches of the Middle Ages in order to illustrate the preachings must not be forgotten in this context, nor the possibilities to incorporate esoteric doctrines even in a seemingly Christian context, as e.g. the (Christianized) Hermetic tradition of the Early Renaissance, expressed in the mosaic of the cathedral of Siena... Moreover, the text stresses Mani's competence as a master in the art of giving form/art, as a painter (*ustād dar šinā'at-é šūrat-garī*).

Although the Syriac writer Ephrem, in his polemical hymns against the heresies, is quite negative about this fact, he deserves to be quoted here: «this artist—o, how stupidly acted the artist! Perhaps he was only an apprentice, who possessed no artistic practices...», a statement which must be confronted with basic Islamic sources on the other hand, like Firdōsī's *Šāhnāme*, the Epic of Kings, which is more positive (587–589 ed. Mohl): *Beyāmad yekī mard-é gūyā z-Čīn, ke cūn-é ū mošawwar nabīnad zamīn. Bedān čarbdastī rasīde ba-kām, Yekī pormaneš mard Mānī be-nām. Ba-šūratgarī goft payğambar-am z-dīn-āwarān-é ġehān bartar-am.* «An eloquent man came from China, who was such a painter, that his equal the world never will see. By his artistic skills he could perform everything according to his wish, this was a highly-talented man, Mani by name. He said: "I was confirmed by my art as a prophet; I am the greatest of the founders of religions of the world"». Thus wrote Firdōsī (940/1–1020),⁸ the point of convergence of a centuries-old legacy of historiography and a fundamental source for a new millenium of Irano-Islamic traditional historical writings.

In the light of this evidence it must not surprise that scribes and painters played a prominent role in the Manichaean church and in its missionary activities. According to the Middle Persian text M444,⁹ three basic constituents are equally important in the view of missionary purposes: 'y'b nbyg nbyšt 'y'b ng'r ng'rd 'y'b xrwh xwndn [ayāb nibēg nibišt ayāb nigār nigārd ayāb xrōh xwandan], thus enumerating these three pillars as

(1) to write a text, (2) to paint a picture/painting, and (3) to call/invoke a call, i.e. to preach, referring to the three functions of (1) writers or calligraphers (Middle Persian = Parthian *nbyg* [nibēg] = ‘writing, book’), (2) painters of books, book-illuminators (Middle Persian *nbyg’n ng’r* [nibēgān nigār]; Middle Persian *ng’rgr* [nigārgar]), and (3) preachers (Middle Persian *xrwh(x)w’n* [xrōh(x)wān] vs. Parthian *xrwsḡ* [xrōsag], ‘one who calls’).¹⁰

On the other hand letters, epistles, written documents on sublunar or spiritual matters play a crucial role. In a Parthian letter, M 5815 II, from an ἄρχηγος written perhaps to Mar Ammō, a very prominent member of the earliest days of the Manichaean church, the author states:¹¹ 194 °° *'wm wnwḥ mry m'ny* 195 *pwḥr fry'ng 'w tw wsyd* 196 *kyrd* °° *'wd pd frhyft 'w [tw]* 197 *'syd* °° *twyc 'wḥ pdgyrw'* 198 *cw'gwn wxybyḥ pwḥr 'wd* 199 *nxšg frhynj'ḥ pd dbyryft* 200 *'wd pd xrd* °° «And, lo, a beloved son of my Lord Mani, I have sent to you; and in love he comes to [you]. Also receive him in such a manner as your own son, and instruct him well in scribemanship and wisdom.» Its author urges to instruct the pupil equally in scribemanship (*ud naxšag frahenjah pad dibīrīft*) and in wisdom (*ud pad xrad*).

About the same Mar Ammō, a Sogdian text explicitly states that «he knew the Parthian language, *pxl'w'n'k 'zβ'kh* [paxlawānē əzβāk], the art of writing, *δp'yry'kh* [dipīryākh], and made contacts with important people». ¹² (This art of writing is not an undisputed matter in Altaic linguistics either...) A few lines further on, the text is unfortunately mutilated, but the proposed restoration can be acknowledged: «And he also sent afterwards yet other scribes and miniaturists with copies of the scriptures.»

Hymns played a central role in the liturgical life of the Manichaean communities, and it must not go unmentioned, that the primary documentation of Turfan includes testimonia of abecedarian hymns as well.

The importance of the ecclesiastical use of letters, epistulae, is elevated to a higher religious level in a Parthian threnody, M 6, a *parinirvāṇa* hymn on the death of Mar Zaku: *nbys'm frwrdg 'w š'h rwšn qyrbkr*¹³ [nibēsam frawardag ō šāh rōšn kirbakkar] «Come ye! let us write a letter to the benevolent king of light!», i.e. the Father of Greatness,¹⁴ namely, in order to obtain the remission of sins.

The Manichaean Sogdian term for letter *prwrty* [frawarti],¹⁵ cf. Parthian *frwrdg* [frawardag] and Buddhist Sogdian *prw'rt*, (cf. *tāgzinč* and *chüan*) is attested as a loan-word, *v-lf(a)rw(a)rti*, in Manichaean Uighur, too. Thus, in TM 298 recto:¹⁶ 03 *t(a)qī ymä m(a)γist(a)kan*

*fr(a)w(a)rti ič[intä]*⁰⁴ *inčä tipü y(a)rliqayur* «And further: by means of the Presbyter he deigned to speak i[n] the letter as follows (...)», in TM 294 (U 300), recto:¹⁷ ⁰⁸ *fr(a)w(a)rti ič[intä]*⁰⁹ *inčä tip y(a)rliqayur* «I[n] the letter he deigned to speak as follows (...)», and in T II D 406a-9 (U 309), verso:¹⁷ ⁰⁶⁻⁰⁷ *v(a)w(a)rtiγ baš[t]an ad(a)qāga-tāgi saqi[niγ]lar köḡülkäriḡlar* «[F]rom the beginning to the end: reflect deeply on the letter!».

The importance of the ecclesiastical function of scribe in a missionary context is stressed again by a Parthian text,¹⁸ which states that when the Apostle (= Mani) was in Weh-Ardahšîr, he sent off [Pattikios], the Teacher ('*mwcg*),¹⁹ Addā, the Bishop ('*spsg*), and [M]ani, the scribe (*dbyr*), to Rom ([*f]rwm*), and Addā founded many monasteries (*m'nyst'n*) and wrote light scriptures (*nbyḡ'n rwšn*).

Based on the founder's rigid doctrinary models, deeply rooted in millenary (Irano-)Mesopotamian speculations, there certainly existed—from the arcanic point of view—(an) esoteric Manichaean fraction(s) which highly appreciated the dogmatic *and* practical use of numerical symbolism, which can be demonstrated in text corpora belonging to/or documents like the Coptic *Kephalaia*, or the Irano-Uighur-Chinese *Tractate*. On the other hand, as this kind of numerical material is prominently present in the Eastern and Western sources which were recited not only by the more educated elects, but by the auditors too, e.g. in the psalms or hymns, one can suspect that there was a practical purpose as well. The aim was to learn the quite difficult dogmatic series by heart.²⁰

In any case, the basic Manichaean element are the pentads, which must be mentioned in two aspects here. Firstly, in the so-called «Fragment Pelliot», the last section of the 8th century Chinese Manichaean *Compendium*, a regulation is attested for a fivefold arrangement of rooms in the monastic compounds:²¹ (1) one room for the scriptures and images; (2) *id.* for fasting and preaching; (3) *id.* for worship and confession; (4) *id.* for religious instruction; (5) *id.* for sick monks. It is obvious that four of the five rooms are connected with scriptures, and the explicit mention of «images» in the first room (the place where the *Book of Images* was kept, cf. supra the *Ārdahang*) proves the first-ranking position of the artistic representation of the Religion of Light. Moreover, it is not impossible that Chao Hua-shan of the Archaeological Department of Peking University, who has been carrying out archaeological surveys in the Turfan area during more than a decade, discovered in Sängim a cave-temple complex built on five terraces in which five halls might be

preserved and may be connected with the statement mentioned in the *Compendium*.

Secondly, the above-mentioned βήμα²² (containing five steps). Again the famous miniatures belonging to the Berlin Turfan collection attract our attention here, especially MIK III 4979 a.b, which was published on several occasions, containing a Middle Persian text in Manichaean script, Sogdian captions and Uighur names. On its verso one can observe humble Manichaean auditors who attend a ceremony (in which food plays an important role, which is confirmed by the texts) conducted by elects within the framework of the ceremony of the βήμα. This annual liturgical apotheosis consisted of three basic components: recitation of words and hymnodic singing, the consumption of the cultic meal, and the adoration of the *image* of Mani which was placed on the empty throne as the seat (i.e. the immaterial presence) of the prophet, who dwells in the paradise of light (and whose words syntheticizing his redeeming message remain in *this* world, i.e. the βήμα as *λογοθήκη,²³ i.e. Manichaean Sogdian j'yδ'n = Manichaean Uighur čaidan). The open book as well as the presence of books stress the importance of the written corpus and its equivalent, the depicted logia. Again the citation of al-Ġāhiz comes to mind here: not only the real presence of the books and (its) illuminations, their pregnant symbolism, but also their luxurious elaboration and venerability are focusing points in these aspects. Writing and illuminating books were not only appreciated as purely artistic efforts but also formed the nucleus of a redemptive act of merit, *punya*.²⁴

Notes

- 1 M 5794 (T II D 126 I recto) published by F. C. ANDREAS & W. B. HENNING, *Mitteliranische Manichaica aus Chinesisch-Turkestan* II (SPAW 1933), p. 295 = repr. W. B. HENNING, *Selected papers* I (Acta Iranica 14), Leiden etc. 1977, p. [192], cf. M. BOYCE, *A reader in Manichaean Middle Persian and Parthian* (Acta Iranica 9), Leiden etc. 1975, pp. 29–30.
- 2 On the characteristic «purity» see A. VAN TONGERLOO, *Light, more Light*, in A. VAN TONGERLOO & S. GIVERSEN, *Manichaica Selecta. Studies presented to Professor Julien Ries on the occasion of his seventieth birthday* (Manichaean Studies I), Lovanii 1991, pp. 371–378, esp. p. 372. Whatever the scholarly discussions on the etymology of the Medieval Cathars may put forward as ultimate veritas, as a (certainly predominantly Christian) Neo-Gnostic current the Cathari (Amici Dei-Bogomils) must be linked with the concept of ethical purity (casti) and with the problem of the corruption and purity of the doctrines and scriptures they examined.
- 3 Cf. Augustine, *Contra Adimantum* III.2 (= 133): «Numquid etiam Evangelium

Evangelio dicunt esse contrarium? Quod si dicunt hoc capitulum falsum esse, et a corruptoribus Scripturarum esse additum» referring to the Manichaean theories about scriptural interpolations and the inauthentic text traditions (cf. *ibid.*: quid, si alius dicat illud esse immissum et falsum, quod ipsi proferunt dicente Domino...), ed.: R. JOLIVET & M. JOURJON, *Six traités anti-manichéens* (Bibliothèque augustinienne. Œuvres de saint Augustin 17), 1961, p. 226. In the Central Asian primary documents this basic Manichaean notion of «confusion» is linked with *samudra*, cf. A. VON LE COQ, *Türkische Manichaica aus Chotscho III* (APAW 1922 No.2), p. 9 No. 4 = TM 298 recto line 17 (*uluγ taluy samutrī*, borrowed from Sogdian *smwtr*, [provided with with its nominative -y]). It should be mentioned that the term is not unknown in Christian Sogdian either: [*tbr*]ws *swm(tr)* [*z*](*m*)*py* «the [sh]ore of the lake [Tiberi]as», see F. W. K. MÜLLER, *Soghdische Texte I* (APAW 1912), p. 77. The great sea of suffering and pain is well-known in Buddhism, e.g. in the Buddhist Sogdian *Vimalakīrtinirdeśasūtra* [ed. D. N. MACKENZIE, *The Buddhist Sogdian texts of the British Library* (Acta Iranica 10) Leiden etc. 1976, I p. 22 line 19]: 'wy wtyγ sr'yβt'm mzy'x sm'wtryh (where *mzy'x sm'wtryh* renders *mahāsamudra*), as well as in Manichaean Uighur, e.g. line 51 of the Great Mani-Hymn: [äm]gäklig *taluytīn kächürtüqüz*.

- 4 Within the framework of the *Corpus Fontium Manichaeorum* (CFM), Zs. Gulácsi is currently preparing as first volume of the *Series Archaeologica et Iconographica* a catalogue of the Manichaean artistic testimonia preserved in Berlin (*Mediaeval Manichaean Art in Berlin Collections*).
- 5 See *E.I.*² III (1971), pp. 919a–920b and B. DODGE, *The Fihrist of al-Nadim. A tenth-century survey of Muslim culture I-II* (Records of Civilization. Sources and Studies 83), New York 1970, although G. FLÜGEL, *Mani, seine Lehre und seine Schriften. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Manichäismus. Aus dem Fihrist des Abū'l-Faradsch Muḥammed ben Iṣḥāq al-Warrâk, bekannt unter dem Namen Ibn Abī Ja'kūb an-Nadīm, im Text neben Übersetzung, Commentar und Index zum ersten Mal herausgegeben*, Leipzig 1862 (repr. Osnabrück 1969) as well as his edition (2 vols., Leipzig 1871–72) remain classics, as well as the ed. of R. TAĞADDOD, Tehrān 1343/1965 and A. AFŠAR-É ŠIRĀZĪ & S. Ğ. TAQĪ-ZĀDEH, *Mānī wa dīn-e u*, Tehrān 1335/1956.
- 6 See *E.I.*² II (1965), pp. 395a–398a and Ch. PELLAT, *Le témoignage d'al-Jāḥiẓ sur les Manichéens*, in C. E. BOSWORTH et al. (eds.), *The Islamic World. from classical to modern times. Essays in honor of Bernard Lewis*, Princeton 1989, pp. 269–279. The role of Manichaean music will be dealt with in a forthcoming contribution.
- 7 See *E.I.*² I (1960), pp. 334a–335a.
- 8 See *E.I.*² II (1965), pp. 939b–942b.
- 9 Partially published by W. B. HENNING, *Das Verbum des Mittelpersischen der Turfanfragmente*, in *ZII* 9 (1933), p. 251 = repr. W. B. HENNING, *Selected papers I* (Acta Iranica 14), Leiden etc. 1977, p. [158], see M. BOYCE, *A catalogue*

of the Iranian manuscripts in Manichaean script in the German Turfan collection (DAW Institut für Orientforschung. Veröffentlichung 45), Berlin 1960, p. 29.

- 10 The Arabic technical expression *dā'ī* (from *da'ā*, *du'ā'*) in the context of non-orthodox Islamic propaganda (See *E.I.*² II (1965), pp. 99b–100a) furnishes a noteworthy parallel in this context.
- 11 Published by F. C. ANDREAS & W. B. HENNING, *Mitteliranische Manichaica aus Chinesisch-Turkestan* III (SPAW 1934), p. 859 = repr. W. B. HENNING, *Selected papers* I (Acta Iranica 14), Leiden etc. 1977, p. [286].
- 12 Ed.: W. SUNDERMANN, *Mitteliranische manichäische Texte kirchengeschichtlichen Inhalts* (BTT 11), Berlin 1981, p. 39.
- 13 Published by F. C. ANDREAS & W. B. HENNING, *Mitteliranische Manichaica aus Chinesisch-Turkestan* III (SPAW 1934), p. 867 = repr. W. B. HENNING, *Selected papers* I (Acta Iranica 14), Leiden etc. 1977, p. [294].
- 14 Cf. A. VAN TONGERLOO, *The Father of Greatness*, in H. PREISSLER & H. SEIWER, *Gnosisforschung und Religionsgeschichte. Festschrift für Kurt Rudolph zum 65. Geburtstag*, Marburg 1994, pp. 329–342.
- 15 See W. B. HENNING (rec.), *The Sogdian Texts of Paris*, in *BSOAS* 11 (1946), p. 721 = repr. W. B. HENNING, *Selected papers* II (Acta Iranica 15), Leiden etc. 1977, p. [239].
- 16 Ed.: A. VON LE COQ, *Türkische Manichaica aus Chotscho* III (APAW 1922 No.2), p. 9 No. 4.
- 17 Ed.: P. ZIEME, *Manichäisch-türkische Texte* (BTT 5), Berlin 1975, p. 71.
- 18 Ed.: W. SUNDERMANN, *Mitteliranische manichäische Texte kirchengeschichtlichen Inhalts* (BTT 11), Berlin 1981, p. 26.
- 19 On the Manichaean ecclesiastical hierarchy: A. VAN TONGERLOO, *La structure de la communauté manichéenne dans le Turkestan Chinois*, in *CAJ* 26 (1982), pp. 262–288 (which will be updated in my forthcoming *Selected papers* I).
- 20 In a similar way there exist(ed) the ten commandments and the five commandments of the (in the pre-1968 era: Holy) Catholic (and in the same era: Apostolic) Church. Before the Second Vatican Council these had to be learnt in a poetic form, but now these are of course superseded by other extra-canonical writings which seem to be based on researches for and discoveries of (pseudo-archetypal reflections on the politically correct interpretations of the translated) original sources. After «Jesus the Man», there certainly exist some (not exclusively female) feminist theologicians who will publish on «Mani, the Man», the secret of which might be revealed to that kind of scholar the in area of Mount Cardou, although the whereabouts of Mani's wives are unfortunately unknown to the undersigned ...

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- 21 See: A. VAN TONGERLOO, *In a Manichaean Monastery*, in *AOB* 7 (1992 [1993]), pp. 239–248 (part II as well as an update of [I] in my forthcoming *Selected papers II*).
- 22 See A. VAN TONGERLOO, *forthcoming*.
- 23 Not attested according the Greek dictionaries and the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*.
- 24 Postscript. Only after the final redaction of this contribution did the following publications come into my possession: C. ELSAS e.a. (eds.), *Tradition und Translation. Zum Problem der interkulturellen Übersetzbarkeit religiöser Phänomene. Festschrift für Carsten Colpe zum 65. Geburtstag*, Berlin & New York 1994; H.-J. KLIMKEIT, *Der Gebrauch Heiliger Schriften im Manichäismus*, in G. SCHÖLLGEN & C. SCHOLTEN (eds.), *Stimuli*, Münster 1996, pp. 191–199 [and ID., *The use of scripture in Manichaeism*, in M. HEUSER & H.-J. KLIMKEIT, *Studies in Manichaean Literature and Art* (NHS 46), Leiden etc. 1998, pp. 111–122; and Sh. AKINER & N. SIMS-WILLIAMS (eds.), *Languages and scripts of Central Asia*, London: SOAS.

