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RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Review of Manichaean Primary Sources

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Abstract

Manichaean studies have emerged as a significant field that sheds light on various sides of ancient Iran, including its religions, culture, and language. This research aims to provide an overview of Manichaean sources, addressing the following questions: What primary Manichaean sources are available to Iranian studies researchers, and how effective are these sources in the study and understanding of Manichaeism? To this end, primary Manichaean sources, including the Manichaean texts, the works of classical historians in various languages, and archaeological findings, are introduced and evaluated. Beyond providing detailed information on Manichean cosmology and creation myth, these sources can also illuminate the Manichaean rituals, society, and the extent to which Manichaeism influenced and was influenced by local and foreign communities over time and space. In essence, these sources enable scholars to not only examine the evolution of Manichaean ideology but also to adopt a cross-religious perspective to study the linguistics, geographical distribution, lifestyle, and interactions of Manichaeans with diverse societies.

Keywords: Ancient Iran, Religion, Manichaeism, Manichaean Sources

Introduction

Manichaean studies, as a significant branch of ancient Iranian studies, has garnered considerable attention from researchers and scholars of ancient religions and Iranian studies in recent years. Mani's thoughts persisted over an extensive geographical expanse until the 16th

century CE¹, making Manichaean studies a rich source of valuable information across broad geographical areas and extended time periods. The Exploration of Manichaean sources is not confined to religious and linguistic studies but also can illuminate other areas of ancient studies.

Manichaean sources are particularly valuable for the study of pre-Islamic Iranian literature and mysticism as well as their influences on Islamic mysticism. A comprehensive understanding of Manichaean doctrines is essential for investigating the development of Iranian-Islamic mysticism and the impacts of Manichaeism on this mystical tradition. Moreover, Manichaean sources are indispensable in the study of ancient poetry and music. Manichaean works contain numerous valuable poetic texts composed in Middle Persian and Parthian Pahlavi, significantly contributing to our understanding of Sasanian poetry. Additionally, Manichaean writings on music and remaining musical notations offer valuable insights into ancient Iranian music (Zarshenas 2023: 58). Manichaean sources are invaluable in the study and understanding of cultural interactions of various societies, particularly in the Far East. Focusing on Manichaean sources allows scholars to explore the influence and impact of ancient Iranian culture, mythology, and thoughts over an extensive geographical and temporal range. After the Arab invasion of Iran and the fall of the Sasanian Empire, the Manichaeans can be considered the only group that preserved and disseminated ancient Iranian culture and mythology in their works (Esmailpour-Motlagh 2017: 46).

Mani lived through the reigns of the first four Sasanian kings² until his death at the age of 65. As such, his writings and those of his followers provide valuable cultural insights into this period. Moreover, Manichaean texts, known for the impartiality of their authors and their avoidance of personal biases, hold significant value and credibility. Unlike Pahlavi texts, Manichaeans meticulously transcribed their texts, and errors in their manuscripts are rare; negligence and alterations by scribes are seldom observed in Manichaean manuscripts (Tafazzoli 2014: 333).

Given the vast temporal and geographical extending of Manichaeism, Manichean sources can yield valuable information about the social and economic life of native peoples in various regions (Esmailpour-Motlagh 2017: 42). Furthermore, Manichaeans consistently adorned their works with elegant calligraphy and book decoration and illustrations. Manichaean paintings are not limited to book illustrations; their artistic works can be seen in other forms as well. Since Manichaeans incorporated and reflected the local features into their artworks, the study of Manichaean sources and artworks provides valuable insights into the art of the native peoples under the influence of Manichean beliefs (Kalime-Kayt 2005: 56). Moreover, these sources significantly contribute to understanding the influence of ancient art on post-Islamic art.

This study offers a brief overview of Manichaean sources and seeks to answer the following questions: what early Manichaean sources are available to researchers, and how are

¹ From east to the eastern border of China and from west to Mesopotamia, Egypt, Africa, byzantine and Roman Empire

² Ardeshir I. Shahpor I, hormozd, Ardeshir II, Bahram I

these sources useful in Manichaean studies? To this end, we will first review the contemporary Manichaean studies, followed by a brief analysis of early Manichaean sources.

Literature Review and Source Introduction

The earliest Manichaean studies were initiated by scholars of religious studies in the 18th century. The first comprehensive research and dissertation on Manichaeism, titled *Histoire Critique de Manichee et du Manichéisme*, was authored by Huguenot Isaac de Beausobre (1659-1738) in French and published in Amsterdam. This two-volume work examined Mani's religion and his thoughts. In 1831, F.C. Baur (1792-1860) explored the structure and religious roots of Manichaeism in his book *Das Manichäische Religions System*.

A new chapter in ancient Iranian studies opened in 1902 with the discovery of Manichaean fragments in the Turfan Oasis³, and their deciphering in 1904 by Wilhelm Karl Müller (1863-1930). These texts were compiled and published in a three-volume work titled *Mitteliranische Manichaica aus Chinesisch Turkestan I-III* by Henning and Andreas. Walter Bruno Henning (1908-1967), a prominent scholar in ancient Iranian studies, made significant contributions to Manichaean studies. Among his major works is *Manichaean Literature in Middle Persian and Parthian*, which offers a comprehensive study of Manichaean literature, including translations and analyses of texts in Middle Persian and Parthian. Another notable work of his is “The Book of Giants: Texts, Translation and Commentary”, providing an overview of the Manichaean Book of Giants along with translations and analyses of relevant manuscripts. In “Manichaean Hymn-Cycle in Parthian”, Henning presents versions, translations, and cycles of Manichaean hymns in Parthian, aiding scholars in understanding Manichaean religious rites and liturgical literature. His article “Mani’s Last Journey” delves into the final days of Mani’s life and his last travels, utilizing primary Manichaean sources to reconstruct events following Mani's death. Henning’s extensive work, including numerous articles, continues to be invaluable for scholars (Henning 2019).

Over the years, the primary focus of researchers has been on reading and translating Manichaean texts found into various languages, a task yet unfinished with many texts still untranslated. Nevertheless, a significant number of these texts are available to scholars, including those by Mary Boyce (1920-2006). Boyce, renowned for her work in Zoroastrian studies, has also made notable contributions to Manichaean studies. Her works often explore the intersections of Manichaeism with other religions, providing valuable perspectives for scholars. Noteworthy among her works is *A Reader in Manichaean Middle Persian and Parthian*, which transcribes and analyzes a substantial portion of Manichaean manuscripts in Parthian and Middle Persian. This collection provides crucial sources for the study of Manichean language, literature, and doctrines (Boyce 1975). Another significant work is *The Manichaean Hymn-Cycles in Parthian*, which includes retranscriptions and corrections of Manichaean manuscripts along with a review of Manichaean mythology (Boyce 1954). Although Boyce’s books *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* and *History of Zoroastrianism* do not directly focus on Manichaeism, they provide insights into the religious

³ A 69,759 km² are in the east of the autonomous region of Xinjiang china

and cultural milieu of Sasanian Iran, including the interactions and conflicts between Manichaean and Zoroastrian beliefs (Boyce 1975). Boyce's works are recognized for their depth and precision, offering scholars a thorough understanding of the religious landscape of ancient Iran during the emergence of Manichaeism.

Werner Sundermann (1935-2012) is a prominent scholar in the field of Iranian and Manichaean studies. His works primarily focus on the texts, history, and cultural contexts of Manichaeism. Sundermann's research has significantly contributed to understanding Manichaean literature, language, rituals, and religious practices. Among his notable works is *Der Sermon vom Licht-Nous: Eine Lehrschrift des östlichen Manichäismus*, in which he addresses Manichaean sermons, providing translations, interpretations, and analyses of these texts, thereby illuminating Manichaean religious concepts and teachings (Sundermann 1992). In another book, *Manichaean Homilies*, Sundermann translates and interprets additional Manichaean writings, focusing on their structure, themes, and doctrines. This helps scholars gain valuable insights into the religious rituals and daily life of the Manichaean community. His work *Alttürkische Handschriften, Teil 13: Manichäische Texte* centers on Manichaean texts in Old Turkish Uighur, where he examines manuscripts and provides translations and analyses that contribute to understanding the cultural interactions between the Manichaeans and Turkic-speaking peoples. Sundermann also published *Early Manichaean Turfan Texts in Early Publications (1904-1934)*, where he studied and reviewed the earliest manuscripts discovered in the Turfan region based on the latest research up to that time (Sundermann 1996). In *Studien zur kirchengeschichtlichen Literatur der Manichäer*, he investigates the historical literature of the Manichaean church, analyzing the expansion and organizational structure of the Manichaean Church, including its ecclesiastical hierarchy (Sundermann 1995).

In the field of Manichaean studies in East Asia, Samuel Lieu⁴'s contributions are noteworthy. He has significantly aided in tracing and understanding Eastern Manichaeism. Lieu's works cover various aspects of Manichaeism, including its history, doctrines, interactions with different cultures and religions, and texts. One of his key works is *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire and Medieval China*, which examines the spread of Manichaeism from its origins in Iran to the Roman Empire and then to China, particularly during the medieval period. This book explores the religious, cultural, and political interactions between Manichaean communities and other societies (Lieu 1984). His other work, *Manichaeism: In Central Asia and China*, co-authored with other writers, discusses the spread and impact of Manichaean beliefs in Central Asia and China, including how these beliefs adapted to various cultures to ensure their survival (Lieu 1998). In *The Religion of Light: An Introduction to the History and Doctrines of Manichaeism*, Lieu provides an introduction to Manichaean beliefs, rituals, and historical development, outlining the dualistic worldview, cosmology, and ethical teachings of Manichaeism (Lieu 1979). Lieu's work *From Constantine to Julian: Pagan and Byzantine Views, Sources, History* also references Manichaeism, focusing on the interactions between early Manichaeans and Christianity, and the challenges Manichaeans faced under the Roman Empire (Lieu 1996). Utilizing primary sources, including

⁴ Samuel N.C. Lieu, 1950

Manichaean texts, Lieu's interdisciplinary approach in the history of religious studies and philology has made valuable contributions to Manichaean studies.

Zsuzsanna Gulácsi (1966) is one of the scholars who has focused on the study of Manichaeism, particularly in the fields of art, semiotics, and cultural interactions of Manichaean communities. Her works examine various aspects of Manichaean religious art, manuscripts, and cultural exchanges. Notable among her works is *Manichaean Art in Berlin Collection, which analyzes Manichaean art in the Berlin collection* with an approach focusing on semiotics and stylistics, offering insights into the religious and cultural significance of visual representations in Manichaean art (Gulácsi 2001). In another book on Manichaean art titled *Mediaeval Manichaean Book Art: A Codicological Study of Iranian and Turkic Illuminated Book Fragments from 8th-11th Century Central Asia*, she analyzes the artistic and cultural exchanges reflected in Manichaean manuscripts discovered in the East (Gulácsi 2005). In *Mani's Picture*, Gulácsi explores Manichaean visual and textual sources, examining the development of Manichaean art and its interactions with other cultural and artistic traditions (Gulácsi 2015). Gulácsi's works are based on primary Manichaean sources and employ an interdisciplinary approach in art history, religious studies, and cultural-historical studies, aiming to achieve a better understanding of the visual and cultural dimensions of Manichaeism.

Iain Gardner is another scholar who has published valuable research on Manichaeism. His focus is mainly on Manichaean texts and religious literature, translating, analyzing, and interpreting Manichaean manuscripts to understand their religious beliefs. Among his significant works is *The Kephalaia of the Teacher: The Edited Coptic Manichaean Texts in Translation with Commentary*, which translates the Kephalaia, a collection of teachings attributed to Mani, and provides a detailed analysis of the theological and philosophical aspects of Manichaeism (Gardner 2020). Additionally, Gardner has collaborated with Samuel Lieu on the collection *The Manichaean Texts from the Roman Empire*, which includes translations and analyses of Manichaean texts and manuscripts found within the Roman Empire, offering valuable information on the presence and cultural interactions of Manichaeism in the Western territories (Gardner & Lieu 2004). In *Coptic Documentary Texts from Kellis: P.Kellis VII*, Gardner focuses on Coptic documentary texts discovered in the ancient village of Kellis in Egypt, providing valuable insights into the daily life, administrative practices, and religious activities of the Manichaean community in this region (Gardner 2014). In *The Founder of Manichaeism: Rethinking the Life of Mani*, Gardner critically examines the life of Mani and the formation of Manichaean beliefs, using primary sources to explore the historical contexts of Manichaeism and the figure of Mani himself (Gardner 2020). Gardner's proficiency in Coptic and his examination of Coptic religious texts and manuscripts have enabled him to publish valuable works in the field of Manichaean cultural and intellectual studies. His translations and interpretations have greatly aided scholars seeking to understand the complex details of Manichaean thought, literature, and community life.

Manichaean studies have also been significant to other scholars and Iranologists. Notable figures include Geo Widengren (1907-1996) and Michel Tardieu, who have authored books on Manichaean religion and Mani's thought. An important linguistic resource that has been

instrumental in translating Manichaean manuscripts is Desmond Durkin's *Dictionary of Manichaean Texts*. Other scholars like Peter Asmussen (1928-2002), Nicholas Sims-Williams (1949), and Joachim Klimkeit (1939-1999) have also made valuable contributions to Manichaean studies, though detailing their works would be beyond the scope of this discussion. Among Iranian scholars, Seyyed Hassan Taghizadeh (1878-1970) is recognized as a pioneer in Manichaean studies in Iran. His writings are significant for their comprehensive consideration of both Western and Persian-Arabic sources, compiled in his book *Mani and His Religion* (Taghizadeh 1956). Another notable work in Persian is *Mani and the Manichaeans texts* by Iraj Vamghi (1932-2000), which includes translations of two of Boyce's books featuring Manichaean epics in Parthian, alongside an examination of Mani's philosophy and Manichaean beliefs (Vameghi 1998).

A prominent scholar publishing in both Persian and English is Abolghassem Esmailpour-Motlagh (1954). His significant work, *The Creation Myth in Manichaeism*, explores Manichaean mythology and includes translations of Manichaean manuscripts on creation (Esmailpour-Motlagh 2017). In collaboration with Mehrdad Bahar, he also authored *Manichaean Literature*, which includes translations and analyses of Parthian and Middle Persian manuscripts, providing insights into the social structure and religious rituals of the Manichaeans (Esmailpour-Motlagh and Bahar 2014). Esmailpour-Motlagh's *Manichean Gnosis and Creation Myth* examine Manichaean religious thought and cosmology using primary Manichaean sources (Esmailpour-Motlagh 2005).

Mohammad Shokri Fumshi (1971) has also published notable works in Manichaean studies. His comprehensive bibliography, *Bibliography of Manichaean Studies*, compiles books, articles, theses, and classical and contemporary research on Manichaean studies, serving as a valuable reference (Shokri Fumshi 2023). Another important work is *Manichaean Angels*, which, based on primary sources, lists, and examines the roles of Manichaean celestial beings (Shokri Fumshi 2025). His *Guide to Turfan Manuscripts* provides an essential manual for reading and analyzing Manichaean manuscripts from the Turfan region (Shokri Fumshi 2017).

Manichaean Sources

Manichaean sources are diverse and abundant. They include the writings of Mani himself, the writings of his followers, the accounts of classical historians, and archaeological findings related to the Manichaeans.

The primary Manichaean sources consist of manuscripts written over various periods in several languages, including Middle Persian, Parthian, Sogdian, Classical Chinese, Old Uyghur, Coptic, and even Arabic, using different scripts. While most of these manuscripts are written in the Manichaean script, there are also manuscripts in Chinese, Khotanese, Coptic, and Syriac scripts. Some original Manichaean writings, initially written in Parthian or Middle Persian, are no longer available, but their Coptic and Chinese translations are accessible today (Esmailpour-Motlagh & Bahar 2014: 36).

Manichaean manuscripts are dispersed across various museums and libraries worldwide, many of which remain untranslated and unpublished. Most of these manuscripts were discovered through archaeological excavations in Central Asia and Western China. Given that

these excavations were conducted by archaeologists from various countries over different periods, the manuscripts are dispersed across countries like Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and Russia. Each manuscript is identified by a specific siglum. After the discovery of Manichaean manuscripts, especially in Turfan, each fragment was named with an abbreviation, sometimes accompanied by a number, such as siglum MIK III is used for manuscripts kept in the Museum of Asian Art in Berlin or the siglum S denotes those housed in Russian collections (Shokri Fumshi 2017).

The largest collections of Manichaean manuscripts are preserved in Germany, renowned for their diversity and significance. One of the most famous collections is the Berlin Turfan Collection, which includes numerous manuscripts in Middle Persian, Parthian, and Sogdian, obtained from German excavations in Turfan during the 20th century. This collection primarily consists of fragments of sacred books, hymns, and religious texts. Another notable German collection is housed in the Museum of Asian Art, known for its numerous illustrations. In addition to Manichaean manuscripts, the museum also holds wall paintings and other cultural artifacts from archaeological excavations (Shokri Fumshi 2017: 118).

The British Library holds another valuable collection, mainly consisting of manuscripts from Central Asia, especially those uncovered in excavations led by Sir Aurel Stein (1862-1948). Notably, many of these manuscripts have been digitized and made available to researchers (Gulácsi, 2008). The National Library of France⁵ also houses several manuscripts transferred from the Dunhuang Caves⁶, most of which have been digitized (Gulácsi 2013). The Institute of Oriental Manuscripts at the Russian Academy of Sciences contains a collection of Manichaean texts discovered during excavations led by Sergey Oldenburg (1863-1934) and Pyotr Kozlov (1863-1935) in the East. Some of these manuscripts are also available in digitized form. Many of the Manichaean manuscripts in Russia start with the siglum S and L (Chunakova 2018).

In the Freer Gallery of Art at the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, DC, manuscripts provided by Charles Lang Freer (1854-1919) are preserved, with a significant number also digitized (www.si.edu). The Penn Museum at the University of Pennsylvania holds a prominent collection of Manichaean manuscripts from the Kortkov Collection, some of which are available online (www.penn.museum). The Turfan Museum in China preserved Manuscripts discovered in the Turfan Oasis; this museum is situated near the site of the Manichaean findings in Xinjiang. Besides Manichaean manuscripts, the museum holds archaeological and cultural artifacts related to the Manichaeans. Portions of these manuscripts are also on display at the National Museum and Library in Beijing (Gulácsi 2013).

The Chester Beatty Library contains parts of Coptic manuscripts, particularly the Coptic Kephalaia collection, with many digitized for public access (Wearing 2008). Some Manichaean manuscripts from the Otani Collection are preserved at Ryukoku University Library near

⁵ The bibliotheque National de France

⁶The mogao caves or thousand Buddha Grottoes located in 25 km of the center of Dunhuang

Kyoto, discovered in Central Asia by a Japanese expedition led by Prince Otani Kozui (1876-1948) during the explorations from 1902-1914 (Shokri Fumshi 2018: 118).

Manichaean manuscripts can be categorized into two groups: the first includes texts directly attributed to Mani himself. These texts not only provide valuable insights into Mani's beliefs and thoughts but also offer information about the cultural and historical conditions of his time. Seven books are attributed to Mani: *The Living Gospel*, *Treasure of the Living*, *Epistles*, *Rāzān* (Mysteries), *Giants*, *Letters*, and the *Psalms*. The second group comprises works by Mani's followers and successors, including diverse texts such as the *Book of Enoch*, *Shepherd of Hermas*, *Manichaean Parables*, *Letters*, *Interpretation of John*, *Cosmology*, *Menogmad Enlightenment*, *Summary of Mani's Teachings*, and Manichaean poetry (Esmailpour-Motlagh & Bahar 2014: 38).

The content of these writings is varied, primarily consisting of sacred and religious texts, offering significant insights into the Manichaeans' fundamental beliefs, the principles of Mani's religion, and the rituals and social classes of the Manichaean community. A key theme in Manichaean texts and manuscripts is Manichaean cosmology and mythology. Most manuscripts detail the creation of the world and humankind, the formation of the universe, and the confrontation between the dual principles of Good and Evil (Esmailpour-Motlagh 2017: 118-119).

Beyond the doctrines of Manichaeism, Manichaean manuscripts also include letters addressed to Mani's successors and descriptions of their assigned missions. An example is a letter from a prominent religious figure, likely Mar Sisin, to Mar Ammo (Esmailpour-Motlagh & Bahar 2014: 279). Furthermore, topics related to amulets and medicine are found among Manichaean manuscripts. Given the meticulous recording of information, these texts provide valuable knowledge about the historical context and conditions in Manichaean-era Iran. For example, one manuscript details the exact date and time of Mani's death (Boyce 1975: 47). These sources are crucial for understanding linguistic changes, literary and scientific terminology among the Manichaeans, and the social structure and cultural background of the Manichaean community. Besides, these sources reveal significant cultural exchanges between native societies and Manichaean communities.

Classical Sources

In Manichaean studies, valuable classical sources are available in various languages, including Middle Persian Zoroastrian, Syriac, Greek, Latin, Arabic, and Persian.

-Middle Persian Zoroastrian Texts

Among Middle Persian Zoroastrian texts are polemics, condemning Manichaeism and its beliefs, reflecting the thoughts and perspectives of Zoroastrian priests during the Sasanian period. Examples include *Gōmānīg-Wizār*, *the Treatise of Abāliš*, and sections of the *Dēnkard* (de Menasce 1945: 35). For instance, Chapter 16 of *Gōmānīg-Wizār* provides an explanation of Manichean beliefs, aiming to clarify and counter the Manichaean worldview that contrasts with Zoroastrianism (see *Gōmānīg-Wizār*, Hedayat 1943).

- Syriac Sources

The first writer to discuss Mani's heresy in the 4th century in Syriac was Ephrem the Syrian (died 373), a Christian priest. He criticized Mani among others like Marcion of Sinope (85-160) and Bardaisan (154-222), describing Mani as a master painter who promoted idolatry, and presenting Manichaeism as a deviant belief conflicting with the monotheistic teachings of Christianity (Ephraem Syrus 1912). Theodore Bar Koni⁷'s writings also contain quotations from Mani and the Manichaeans, portraying Mani as a threat to Christian faith (bar Kōnī, 1912). Another significant Syriac source is Michael Syrus (1126-1126), the leader of the Church of Antioch, who mentions Mani as a prophet and situates his emergence during the reign of Emperor Aurelian (212-275 AD) (Michael Syrus 1899-1910).

- Greek and Latin Sources

Greek texts discuss Manichaeism and the Manichaeans with strong and often prejudiced language, frequently describing Mani as mentally unstable or "mad" (Esmailpour-Motlagh & Bahar 2017: 45). In the 4th century, Greek authors like Alexander Lycopolis⁸ wrote about Manichaeism, particularly focusing on dualism, creation, and cosmology. The *Acta Archelai* is notable, as some scholars believe the author was contemporary with Mani and that debates between them are recorded in the text. Mani is depicted as a deceitful figure, with the author attempting to disprove Mani's claims using religious and philosophical arguments (Esmailpour-Motlagh & Bahar 2017: 97). Other Greek authors from the 4th century who mentioned the Manichaeans include Cyril of Jerusalem (313-386), Serapion of Thmuis (300-360), Titus of Bostra (died 378), Epiphanius of Salamis (310-403), and Simplicius (480-540) (Shokri Fumshi 2018: 29, 21, 23, 18).

Among Latin sources, Augustine⁹'s writings are invaluable for understanding Manichaean thought. Having been a Manichaean himself in North Africa for nine years before converting to Christianity, Augustine wrote twelve treatises in Latin refuting Manichaean beliefs, providing researchers with crucial insights into Manichaean doctrines (Augustine, 1981).

-Arabic Sources

Arabic sources on Manichaeism, though sometimes biased, offer valuable information about Manichaean teachings. Key Arabic works include those by Ibn al-Nadim (died 995), Al-Biruni (973-1048), and Al-Shahrastani (1086-1153). Ibn al-Nadim's *al-Fihrist* draws from Middle Persian Manichaean texts, detailing Mani's teachings, and cosmology (Ibn al-Nadim, 2017). Al-Biruni mentions Mani and excerpts from the *Treasure of the Living* in his works *al-Āthār al-Bāqīya* and *Tahqīq Mā li-l-Hind* (Al-Biruni 1984). Al-Shahrastani's *al-Milal wa-l-Niḥal* includes a detailed account of Manichean dualism and the struggle between good and evil, light and darkness, closely aligning with Manichaean texts (Al-Shahrastani 1985).

⁷ Probably lived during the reign of Timothy (780-823), Patriarch of the church of the east

⁸ Late 3rd and early 4th century AD

⁹ Augustine of Hippo, 354-430

In addition, Al-Tabari¹⁰'s *History of Prophets and Kings* references Mani's life, describing his activities during the reign of Hormizd I and the persecution of Manichaeans under Bahram I (Al-Tabari 1983). Other Arabic authors who mentioned Manichaeism include Al-Jahiz (776-868), Ibn Qutaybah (828-889), Al-Yaqubi (died 897), Ibn al-Batriq (730-815), Al-Masudi (896-956), Abu'l-Faraj al-Isfahani (897-967), Al-Maqadisi (died 991), Abu Mansur al-Baghdadi (980-1037), Abu'l-Ala al-Ma'arri (973-1057), Ibn Hazm (994-1064), Ibn al-Jawzi (died 1201), and Ibn al-Athir (1160-1233) (Esmailpour-Motlagh & Bahar 2017: 43).

-Persian Sources

Persian authors also provide sources with information on Manichaeans. For instance, the *Shahnameh* references Mani as a painter (Ferdowsi 2008). Gardizi¹¹'s *Zayn al-Akhhbār* is notable for mentioning Mani and the Manichaeans, including their travels to the East and presence at the Uyghur court, offering more detailed information compared to other Persian texts like *Tarikh-e Bal'ami* and the *Shahnameh* (Gardizi 1948).

In *Bayān al-Adyān*, Abu'l-Ma'ālī includes valuable information about Manichaean rites and practices, such as their fasting and prayers (Abu'l-Ma'ālī 2011). Another Persian source is Asadi Tusi's *Lughāt-i Furs*, where Manichaeans are referred to as "Nughshā" or "Nughshāk". The *Hudūd al-'Ālam* also provides indirect information about the inhabitants of Manichaean regions in China and their monasteries (Asadi Tusi 1957).

Archaeological Findings

Among the valuable yet often overlooked resources in Manichaean studies are Archaeological findings. Given the absence of significant archaeological findings related to Mani and the Manichaeans within the current political boundaries of Iran¹², researchers have shown less interest in these crucial sources. Most substantial archaeological findings concerning Manichaeans have been found in Central Asia and East Asia, particularly in the Turfan region and Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous region of China.

Beyond Manichaean manuscripts, other archaeological findings that can serve as valuable resources for Manichaean studies typically include architectural remains, wall paintings, miniatures and book illustrations, painted screens, embroideries, wooden artifacts, as well as sculpture and pottery. The most compelling archaeological evidence of Manichaeism to have captured researchers' attention thus far is Manichaean paintings (fig.1) These paintings provide invaluable insight about Manichaean cosmology, the art and craftsmanship involved in pigment production, and cultural interactions with local communities. Manichaean paintings are generally executed on canvases made of paper or silk, often depicting religious themes such as Manichaean cosmology, religious rites, ceremonies, and other devotional activities (Pakbaz 2009: 46).

¹⁰ Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari, died 923

¹¹ Abu said abd-al-hayy ibn Zakhak ibn Mahmud Gardizi, died 1061

¹² In 2009, a fragment of a Manichean manuscript was discovered in Shiraz, but it was destroyed due to damage. For further study, please refer to the article "The Great Hymn of Wisdom: The First Manichean Manuscript Fragment Unearthed in Iran" by Mohammad Shokri Fomshi.



Figure 1. A piece of Manichean illustration illustrating Manicheans (Kalime-Kayt 2005: 159). Manichaean buildings are often intertwined with Buddhist structures, leading to them being identified as Buddhist temples. Over time, with further research, scholars have been able to distinguish some Manichaean structures from Buddhist ones, particularly in the Turfan region. The Majority of Manichaean sites can be found in cities such as Khocho, Yar-Khoto, the slopes of the Toyoq and Murtuk Mountains, Bezeklik, the Sangim Valley, and one in Fujian in southeast China (fig.2).



Figure 2. Thousand Buddha Caves at Bezeklik (<http://www.china-silkroad-travel.com>). From these structures, evidence such as wall paintings, Manichaean manuscripts, paintings on silk and banners, as well as watercolor illustrations has been recovered. most of our knowledge of Manichaean murals is based on descriptions by Albert Grünwedel (1856-1935) and Albert von Le Coq (1860-1930), as many murals have faded, been damaged, or suffered severe fragmentation over time due to natural and human factors (Kalime-Kayt 2005: 78). A large number of Manichaean murals discovered in Khocho and Bezeklik in the northwestern part of the Chinese oasis feature prominent Manichaean religious figures, Manichaean deities, Buddhist symbols, the Tree of Life, gift bearers, and Uyghur figures, including women (fig.3).



Figure 3. Manichaean Mural at Bezeklik (Kalime-Kayt 2005: 88). Other significant Manichaean archaeological artifacts include wooden boxes for storing manuscripts and notes (fig.4), embroidered textiles depicting common people and non-elite Manichaeans (fig.5), as well as statues and pottery (Esmailpour-Motlagh & Bahar 2017).

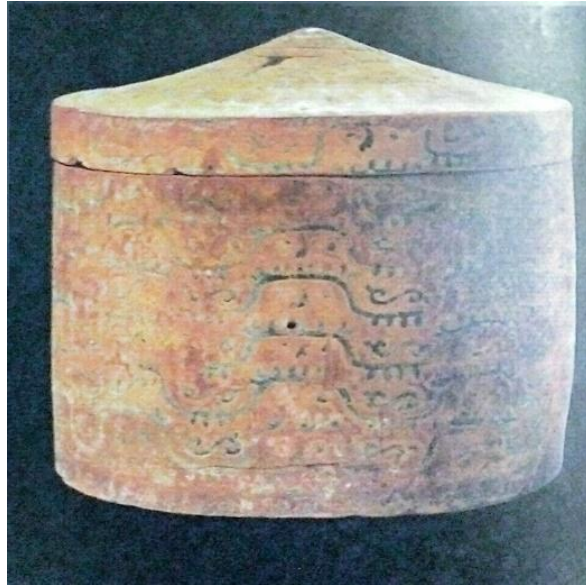


Figure 4. A Manichean wooden box with designs (Esmailpour-Motlagh & Bahar 2017:219).



Figure 4. A piece of Manichaean embroidery portraying a Manichean Lady (Esmailpour-Motlagh & Bahar 2017:245).

Discussion

The writings of Mani and his followers are invaluable primary sources for understanding Manichaeism, providing extensive information about the religion, teachings, and rituals of the Manichaeans. The most significant of these are the sacred texts of Manichaeans, including the Psalms, Kephalaia, and other Manichaean books, which form the foundation of Manichaean beliefs. Through these writings, one can discern important aspects such as their dualistic religious beliefs and the cosmic battle between the forces of light and darkness. Manichaean texts offer detailed descriptions of the structure and fate of the universe, the complex interactions between light and darkness, and the ways in which humans can achieve salvation and liberation from darkness.

In Parthian and Middle Persian Manichaean texts, the creation of the world from its inception is described in meticulous details. For instance, manuscripts cataloged as M (M 99+98, M 7980-84T) detail the confinement of Ohrmazd Bagh and the subsequent events, the creation of the material world, and the formation of humans, which form the basis of Manichaean mystical thought. These accounts are so precise that they leave little room for doubt or question (Boyce 1975: 60-76).

Given that Manichaean manuscripts were written in various languages, the geographical and cultural spread of Manichaeism can be inferred from the linguistic, temporal, and geographical diversity of these sources. These manuscripts are also valuable resources for linguistic studies, offering insights into Iranian languages such as Middle Persian, Parthian, Sogdian, and ancient non-Iranian languages like Old Uyghur and Classical Chinese. By examining these manuscripts, scholars can trace linguistic changes and cultural interactions. However, this linguistic diversity poses challenges for studying Manichaean texts.

Since few Parthian texts are available to researchers, Manichaean Parthian manuscripts are valuable for studying the evolution of the Parthian language during the Sassanid period. The scattered nature of these manuscripts across various collections and their linguistic diversity further complicates the task of accessing key concepts within Manichaean manuscript writings. The diversity of languages reflects the extensive geographical and cultural reach of this religion, necessitating careful examination and comparison of similar content across languages to understand better, despite making the research more complex.

Some Manichaean manuscripts in Chinese demonstrate the progress of translation techniques among the Manichaeans, likely translating texts from Parthian or Middle Persian (Esmailpour-Motlagh 2017: 107). Additionally, Manichaean texts vary in structure and content, including philosophical, mythological, and poetic works, reflecting the rich intellectual and cultural heritage of the Manichaeans. This diversity opens the way for interdisciplinary research in interpreting these texts. Content-wise, Manichaean manuscripts predominantly focus on religious teachings, offering comprehensive insights into Manichaean religious principles, rituals, and social hierarchies. However, they do not address scientific knowledge, economic issues, astronomy, or medical practices in which the Manichaeans were particularly skilled. Moreover, Manichaean texts do not respond to critics or opponents, providing little information about the reasons for opposition or the questions raised against them. The relationships between

the Manichaeans and other religions, their challenges, and problems are not discussed in these texts. They often use symbolic and allegorical language, making interpretation challenging at times. For example, in the Manichaean *Psalms*, an allegory describes the First Man's entrapment, referred to as the "treasure":

"Oh, great treasure of the mighty beings of life! Essence of the powerful gods' existence! Oh, great treasure of the living! From what storehouse? He was cast down to the base of his dark mountain, to their abode; they ascended and moved the treasure, the treasure ascended. They set sixty traps in my way, sixty snares! They ensnared my madness in their traps and fire in their mouths! The wretches thought in their hearts that I would fall into their trap and be defeated, but they do not know that my eyes see the traps and my heart knows the snares, I trod on the traps and removed them..." (Alberri 2009: 207).

Another challenge with Manichaean manuscripts is their damage and dispersal. Many of these manuscripts have suffered severe damage over time, such as corrosion or textual gaps, making translation and understanding difficult. Hence, researchers must refer to other sources, such as archaeological findings, classical texts, and contemporary research, to fill these gaps. Classical sources in Zoroastrian, Syriac, Greek, Latin, Arabic, and Persian languages provide crucial information about Manichaeism, especially polemics written against Manichaean thought. These writings offer insights into Manichaean beliefs outside the framework of Manichaeism itself, highlighting the influence and interaction of Manichaeism with other religions and beliefs such as Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam. The strength of these sources lies in their external and sometimes critical perspective on Manichaeism, elucidating its impact on non-Manichaean communities. However, their weakness lies in potential biases and distortions in their descriptions of Manichaean teachings and practices. Augustine harshly criticized the Manichaeans, describing them as cunning heretics who deceived people by exploiting their intellectual weaknesses (Augustine, 2020: 20). As non-Zoroastrian polemicists were mainly church dignitaries and priests, their religious biases and orientations significantly influenced their writings. Consequently, these sources often lack objectivity and are prone to prejudice. From a historical-critique perspective, researchers must analyze the textual context and authors' characteristics, identifying intentional or unintentional errors as well as the author's underlying ideological motivations so they can critically evaluate the text and extract the necessary information while considering the author's perspective and mindset (Rafati 2022: 6). Despite the critical stance of the authors of Greek, Roman, and Arabic texts provide valuable insights into Manichean dualism, social structure, and various Manichaean rituals and doctrines through the lens of their opponents.

Compared to other sources, Arabic and Persian writings exhibit less bias and prejudice. The authors of these works were mostly historians and non-religious contemporaries of the Manichaeans, providing rich details about Manichaean rituals, geographical and cultural dispersion. From these sources, researchers can glean information about the interactions between Manichaeans and ruling authorities, as well as their social status. For example, Ibn al-Nadim's *al-Fihrist* notes the number of Manichaeans in Islamic lands and eastern regions during

his time, stating that initially, 300 Manichaeans lived in Baghdad, but by the time of his writing, their number had dwindled to a handful (Ibn al-Nadim 2020: 37).

Archaeological findings constitute another crucial source of information, offering valuable insights into Manichaean religious structure, art, and symbolism. From a historical critique perspective, archaeological evidence and historical artifacts are not confined to merely revealing the historical context and condition of their creation. Each period and field can convey underlying meanings in these artifacts, sometimes making their interpretation multifaceted and complex (Tyson 2015: 269). This approach aligns with post-structuralist archaeology, which can be applied to Manichaean artifacts. These artifacts complement written sources, especially Manichaean texts, revealing their meanings through symbolism, analysis, and interpretation. For example, Manichaean textiles from eastern China artistically depict Manichaean cosmology with detailed precision. These pieces, totaling seven, portray Manichaean cosmology, the realm of light and the realm of darkness: 1- a Resurrection scene (142*59.2 c.m), 2- a scene depicting Christ (153.3*58.7 c.m), 3- a cosmological scene (137.1*56.6 cm.), 4- two fragments related to the realm of light (17*37.4 cm. and 17.2*22.5 cm.), 5- a scene depicting the lives of saints (19.9*57.6 cm), 6- another fragment depicting holy men (32.9*57.4 cm), 7- a scene depicting Mani himself (180.3*67.3 cm) (Yoshida 2009: 86).

By examining the Manichaean architectural and other artifacts, we can gain insight into the artistic, cultural, social, and economic interactions between Manichaeans and various communities throughout history and across vast geographical areas. Manichaean archaeological data plays a significant role in identifying the movement and presence of Manichaeans in ancient societies. They are also invaluable for studying mythology, symbolism in Manichaean art, and understanding their painting techniques, art, and paper-making industry. However, due to the similarities between Manichaean and Buddhist art and the blending of Manichaean artistic elements with Buddhist art and architecture, these artifacts alone cannot provide a complete understanding of Manichaean social structure, rituals, and cosmology. Their limitation lies in their interpretive and meaning-making constraints. Many archaeological findings are difficult to interpret without accompanying written texts, making it challenging to distinguish them from the local symbols and concepts.

Conclusion

The study of Manichaean sources offers a rich portrayal of the religious, historical, and cultural context of one of the most significant religious movements of late antiquity. Manichaean writings, classical texts, and archaeological findings, taken together, provide a multifaceted perspective on Mani's teachings and the spread of his religion across vast regions, from Iran to the Roman Empire, Central Asia, and China. The variety of languages and scripts in which Manichaean texts are preserved, ranging from Middle Persian, Parthian, Sogdian, and Uyghur to Coptic and Chinese, attests to the global reach of this religion and its capability to adapt to different cultural contexts. Despite the scattered nature of these sources, they offer valuable insights into Manichaean religious teachings and doctrine, cosmology, and rituals, as well as interactions with other religious traditions.

Mani's own writings, such as the *Living Gospel* and *Treasures of Life*, form the core of Manichaean theology, complemented by the works of his followers. These texts not only reflect the dualistic worldview at the heart of the religion but also reveal the intellectual exchanges between Manichaeans and earlier religious traditions like Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Buddhism. Moreover, the hostility expressed in classical and Zoroastrian sources towards the Manichaeans, from polemical works to polemic attacks, indicates the religious and political struggles of that era. While these sources are often biased, they are crucial for understanding how Manichaeism was perceived and received in the cultural and religious landscape of late Roman, Sasanian, and early Islamic periods. Authors such as Saint Augustine, who was a Manichaean before converting to Christianity, offer an inside perspective that enriches our understanding of the appeal and eventual decline of this sect.

Archaeological findings illuminate the geographical extent and cultural exchange facilitated by Manichaean missionaries. The discovery of Manichaean texts in Central Asia has been crucial for reconstructing the history and beliefs of this widespread religion, particularly the Turfan manuscripts, which constitute a key find that offer detailed documentation of Manichaean teachings and rituals. These manuscripts, along with other archaeological findings such as wall paintings, textiles, and architecture, reveal the visual and material culture of the Manichaeans, intricately intertwined with their religious practices. Archaeological evidence, from the Dunhuang caves in China to the remains of Manichaean settlements in Turfan, complements literary texts by providing tangible proof of Manichaean artistic and architectural contributions. The amalgamation of Manichaean elements with local cultures, especially in regions like Central Asia, highlights the adaptability and syncretism of this religion.

While Manichaean sources provide extensive information, studying them also presents specific challenges. The scattered nature of the texts and the lack of complete and consistent versions limit scholars in precisely reconstructing Manichaean teachings and history. Additionally, many existing sources, including Zoroastrian and Christian polemics, are heavily biased and present a negative and distorted view of Manichaeism. These perspectives, influenced by religious and political conflicts of their time, often fail to impartially reflect Manichaean teachings and practices. Archaeological findings, although providing concrete evidence of Manichaean culture and art, are limited by their non-narrative nature and the deliberate destruction or natural decay of many artifacts, resulting in incomplete and sometimes ambiguous information. These challenges underscore the need for caution and a critical approach in Manichaean research. While Manichaean sources appear to paint a clear picture of this religion, the inherent biases and limitations prompt scholars to always analyze them critically.

Ultimately, despite the challenges posed by the scattered nature of early sources and the gaps in each of these sources, a careful and comparative study of them significantly enhances our understanding of Manichaean thought, its interactions with other religious traditions, and its legacy. This multifaceted approach not only elucidates the historical development of Monotheism but also contributes to broader discussions on religious pluralism, cultural exchange, and the transmission of ideas across civilizations.

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