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# MANICHAEISM IN TRANSOXIANA: EVIDENCE FROM WRITTEN AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOURCES

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**Abstract.** Manichaeism was one of the world religions of the Middle Ages, originating in Sasanian Iran and later spreading widely across Europe and Asia. Written sources indicate that when Manichaeans were outlawed in Iran at the end of the 3rd century, many of them fled to Central Asia — specifically to Transoxiana. Due to the syncretic nature of this religion, tracing the spread of its material complex remains challenging. This article explores the history of the Manichaeans in Transoxiana based on written records and archaeological evidence. Particular attention is paid to an overview of archaeological sites and artifacts that researchers associate with the Manichaean community.

**Keywords:** Transoxiana, early middle ages, Manichaeism, material culture, syncretism, burials, art monuments.

**Research results.** Manichaeism originated in Iran during the formative period of the Sasanian Empire. At that time, besides Mazdeism, various Christian sects, Judaism, and local cults existed within the Iranian Empire. Such ethnocultural pluralism directly influenced the formation of Manichaeism. Its founder, Mani, who came from a noble Parthian family, studied the foundations of Mazdeism, Christianity, and Buddhism in his youth and created his syncretic doctrine based on them. Being admitted to the court, Mani made a profound impression on Shapur I, who permitted him to preach freely throughout the empire. As a result, Mani's doctrine soon spread across Iran, Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Central Asia. However, the syncretism of Manichaeism and its extensive use of Zoroastrian and Christian elements contributed to the fact that Christian and Zoroastrian clergy viewed it as a dangerous heresy. Under Shapur's successor, Bahram I (273–276 AD), Mani was taken into custody and died in prison (or was executed) [7].

Mani utilized narratives from other religions, adapting them to his own doctrine. He presented Buddha, Zoroaster, and Jesus as his predecessors. The foundation of his religion consisted of a dualistic concept borrowed from Mazdean Zurvanism—the idea of the struggle between good and evil. From Christianity, he adopted ideas concerning social equality and retribution, which appealed to the lower strata of the population. From Buddhism, Mani borrowed the system of dividing the community into "monks" (the elect) and laypeople [7; 23].

During his lifetime, Mani instructed his disciple, Mar Ammo, an educated man who knew the Parthian language and script (Pahlavi), to spread the doctrine to the East, into Central Asia. According to sources, Mar Ammo first arrived in Abarshahr (Nishapur), then in Merv, and from there in Kushanshahr, establishing Manichaean communities everywhere. After Mani's death, as reported by Al-Nadim (10th c.), persecutions against his followers began in Iran, leading to a mass exodus of Manichaeans into Transoxiana [7; 2; 26]. This period, the 4th–6th centuries, is poorly documented by sources due to the unstable internal situation caused by the migration of nomadic tribes (the Kidarites, Chionites, and Hephthalites) into Transoxiana and the formation of new state entities there. With the incorporation of these territories into the Turkic Khaganate (in the 770s AD), a period of economic and cultural prosperity began. By this time, Manichaeism had spread to many

regions of Central Asia. It is presumed that the residence of the supreme head of the Manichaeans was located in Tokharistan before moving to Samarkand. By the 7th century, Sogdian had become the official language of the Eastern Manichaean Church. According to sources, the most numerous and influential Manichaean communities were in Samarkand [26; 24].

From Transoxiana, Manichaeism penetrated into Eastern Turkestan and spread as far as China. The primary vectors of Manichaeism were Sogdian merchants who had adopted the faith. For instance, the Sogdian merchant who led the Turkic diplomatic missions to Iran and Byzantium in 568 AD bore the name Maniakh—literally, "Brother of Mani" [4; 7; 26].

Chinese chronicles report the arrival at the imperial court in Chang'an in 694 AD of a Manichaean preacher "from the Persian state, named Fudodan." It is presumed that this is not a personal name, but rather a Chinese transcription of the Sogdian-Manichaean term aftadān—"one of the seventy," i.e., the title of a Manichaean bishop. Cefu Yuangui mentions an embassy from various countries that arrived in 719 AD; the ambassador from Chahanna (Chaghaniyan) is referred to as the "Great Mozhuo (Mushe)." This was how prominent figures of the Manichaean Church were addressed in Tang-era China (derived from the Sogdian mōžak—"teacher") [16; 17].

However, archaeological evidence for Manichaeism in Central Asia is extremely scarce. The reason lies in the flexibility and syncretism of the Manichaean doctrine: it adapted to other beliefs by adopting their symbolism. Archaeologists treat findings attributed to Manichaeans with great caution, basing their conclusions on the unconventional nature of the artifacts or the presence of elements that find explanation within the Manichaean tradition. For instance, researchers cautiously associate a number of ossuaries featuring astral and floral symbolism—characteristic of Manichaean art—with the Manichaeans. The Early Medieval cemetery of Bittepa was discovered in the foothills of the Babatag range, on the left bank of the Surkhandarya River. Inside the cave crypts hewn into the steep bank, skeletons were found lying in a supine, extended position. A distinctive feature of these burials was the absence of food vessels in the grave goods, which is uncharacteristic for Early Medieval Chaghaniyan. E.V. Rtveladze linked these burials to the Manichaeans, who believed that the soul does not require food on its journey to the afterlife. The necropolis was located 4 km from the settlement of Budrach, the capital of Chaghaniyan, on the opposite side of the river. Typically, necropolises were situated close to settlements. The remote location of this necropolis is most likely due to the fact that it belonged to a separate religious community—the Manichaean one [21; 22].

In the Bittepa necropolis, a round wooden pyxis was discovered containing a phalanx of a human finger. Such reliquaries are characteristic of Christians. However, the Manichaeans adopted Christian symbolism, and the pyxis from Bittepa could well have belonged to a Manichaean. A miniature bronze amulet was also found there in the form of a one-handled pitcher with a "tree of life" growing out of it, shaped like a cross. This motif was common to both Christianity and Manichaeism [21; 23].

Indirect evidence of the popularity of Manichaeism in Chaghaniyan in the 7th century is an inscription beneath one of the scenes in the Afrasiab murals. It states that the Chaghaniyan dapirpat ("head of the scribes") accompanying the embassy was familiar with the customs of Samarkand and would not attempt to propagate his faith there. It is suggested that this refers to Manichaeism [3; 20].

In the Sariasiyo district of Surkhandarya, a small vessel was found covered with Syriac inscriptions of a magical, incantatory nature. The Syriac script was used by both Christians and Manichaeans, but it was the latter who, according to contemporaries, were particularly proficient in magic and astrology [23].

Manichaean texts discovered in Eastern Turkestan confirm the existence of their temples and monasteries. According to these texts, these structures were simple in their design. The Manichaeans opposed idolatry, and there were no sculptures in their temples. Deities and saints were depicted in paintings on wooden panels, fabrics, and walls. According to Muslim historians, the Manichaeans dedicated their temples to the seven planets. Al-Masudi (10th c.) reports that for the Manichaeans, the Temple of the World Order was circular in shape, the Temple of Saturn was hexagonal, the Temple of Jupiter was triangular, the Temple of Mars was rectangular, the Temple of the Sun was square, and the Temple of the Moon was octagonal [4]. In Central Asia, researchers cautiously associate a number of cult structures with original layouts to Manichaeism. These include a monolithic structure discovered in the Fergana Valley during the construction of the Karkidon Reservoir, which features a four-petaled rosette floor plan [9]; two structures with similar layouts in southeastern Kazakhstan—Choltobe and Kyzyl-Kainar-tobe [18; 19]; and the Setalak 1 cult complex (4th–5th centuries) on the western outskirts of the Bukhara oasis, with an unusual lotus-flower floor plan. In the context of Manichaean doctrine, this holds astral significance. At Setalak, the layout and the absence of statues suggest a link between the sanctuary and the Manichaeans, although no wall paintings are present here. The presence of a large open area suggests the holding of mass prayers to celestial bodies, involving the lighting of fire, as indicated by ash pits and traces of large bonfires [25].

Given the broad syncretism of the Manichaean doctrine, it is hypothesized that Manichaeans used temples of other denominations for their rituals. For instance, M.M. Diakonov and A.M. Belenitsky initially associated the temples of Panjikent with Manichaeism, based on the abundance of highly artistic murals, astral symbols, and the solar orientation of the entrance [4; 10]. This hypothesis was later deemed untenable. However, researchers note elements of Manichaean art in the temple murals. A scene of a ritual dance, a sacrifice of "fruits," and branches held by the figures may be related to Manichaean ritualism. One fragment of the early painting layer, found in 1949 in the western part of the north wall of Room 10 in Temple I (the southern one), depicted a young man with a small beard, wearing a nimbus around his head and a crown with ashkharvand ribbons. Stylistically, this image differed from other depictions in Panjikent and from the murals of other Early Medieval monuments in Central Asia. P.B. Lurje traces an analogy between this image from Panjikent and a number of depictions from the Turfan oasis, identifying them as a probable representation of Mani [4; 17].

Undoubtedly, in addition to a small number of Buddhists and Christians, Manichaeans also resided in Panjikent. By the 7th century, Panjikent had turned into a seasonal residence for aristocratic families and the service groups associated with them. The concentration of preachers of various religions around the nobility and wealthy merchants was a common phenomenon [4; 17].

Let us note two more cult structures that could have been associated with the Manichaeans. The first is the Koshteppa temple in Urgut; here, a fragment of a vessel was found depicting a baptism scene, which is characteristic of both Christians and Manichaeans. A fire altar discovered in the temple indicates the syncretic nature of the local cult, which is much closer to Manichaeism [5; 11]. The second monument is a temple dating from the late 6th to the early 7th century at the Kanka settlement (Chach / Tashkent oasis). Approximately 40 burnt clay bullae were found there by Yu.F. Buryakov and G.I. Bogomolov. The most numerous series consisted of bullae depicting male busts. One character is of particular interest: he has a straight nose, almond-shaped eyes, and a massive chin; his even hair falls to his neck in long strands; he wears a massive oval ornament on his chest. Above and behind the head is a Sogdian inscription: ’spsk s’nk kw’tynk—"Espasak Sanak Kavatnak" (Bishop Sanak (son of) Kavat) [1; 12]. V.A. Livshits notes that the word

"espasak" in Manichaean texts meant "bishop" and does not occur outside of Manichaean contexts. The name Sanak means "rising," "ascending to the deity" [13]. P. Lurje notes that the image of Sanak differs significantly from the Manichaean "elect" depicted in Turfan; there is no tall headgear or beard, and the profile depiction and the pendant on the chest are also uncharacteristic; however, the image on the bulla finds analogies in other items of Manichaean art from Eastern Turkestan and the Middle East [17].

Based on its design and layout, it is difficult to associate the Kanka temple directly with Manichaean practice. However, the bullae bearing the impression of a Manichaean bishop's seal point to a connection between the main temple of the capital of Chach and a large Manichaean community. The clergy often acted as intermediaries, authenticating contracts or serving as guarantors [15; 12; 13]. Moreover, Al-Nadim (10th c.) reports that Manichaeans were numerous in Samarkand, as well as in Tunket and Ilak (southeast of Chach) [2].

After the Arab conquest, Manichaeism continued to exist in Central Asia and Eastern Turkestan for a long time. Sources report the presence of a Manichaean community in Samarkand in the 10th–11th centuries. Gardizi (11th c.) notes the benevolent attitude toward Manichaeans in the Turfan principality [8]. Manichaeism exerted a noticeable influence on the culture of the peoples of Transoxiana, on Muslim miniature painting, as well as on the spiritual culture and art of the nomads of the Altai, Southern Siberia, Southern Kazakhstan, and Semirechye [7; 23]. This influence persisted for centuries, even after the Manichaean doctrine itself ceased to exist.

**Conclusion.** The study of Manichaeism in Transoxiana demonstrates the difficulty of reconstructing the history of this religion due to its deep syncretism and adaptability. Although written sources (in particular, the accounts of Al-Nadim) confirm the widespread presence of Manichaean communities in the region—from Samarkand and Chaghaniyan to Chach—archaeological evidence remains scarce and often debatable. Nevertheless, the analysis of certain sites, the discovery of cult objects with specific symbolism, and epigraphic data (such as the bullae from Kanka) make it highly probable that Manichaeism was not merely a marginal movement, but an influential ideological force in the Early Medieval society of Central Asia. Further study of this issue requires an interdisciplinary approach, combining a meticulous analysis of artifacts, paleography, and new field archaeology data, which will allow for a more detailed delineation of the range and specifics of the Manichaean presence in this region.

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