L'annuaire du Collège de France

Cours et travaux

118 | 2020

Annuaire du Collège de France 2017-2018

Mani's *Book of Pictures*: A late Antique Mesopotamian pictorial roll and its 1000-year history

Zsuzsanna Gulacsi

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/annuaire-cdf/16383>

DOI: 10.4000/annuaire-cdf.16383

ISBN: 978-2-7226-0572-5

ISSN: 2109-9227

Publisher

Collège de France

Printed version

Date of publication: 30 December 2020

Number of pages: 698-699

ISBN: 978-2-7226-0516-9

ISSN: 0069-5580

Electronic reference

Zsuzsanna Gulacsi, "Mani's *Book of Pictures*: A late Antique Mesopotamian pictorial roll and its 1000-year history", *L'annuaire du Collège de France* [Online], 118 | 2020, Online since 01 April 2021, connection on 22 August 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/annuaire-cdf/16383> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/annuaire-cdf.16383>

All rights reserved

MANI'S *BOOK OF PICTURES*: A LATE ANTIQUE MESOPOTAMIAN PICTORIAL ROLL AND ITS 1000-YEAR HISTORY

Zsuzsanna GULACSI

Professeure à la Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff (États-Unis)

Mots-clés : Mésopotamie, Mani, livre

Conférence prononcée le 25 octobre 2017 (invitation sur proposition du Pr Frantz Grenet), disponible en audio et vidéo sur le site internet du Collège de France : <https://www.college-de-france.fr/site/frantz-grenet/guestlecturer-2017-2018.htm>.

The founder of the Manichaean religion, Mani (active 240-274/77 CE), is the earliest Iranian historical figure noted in Iranian sources as a painter. Based on his *Book of Pictures* (the “*Ardang*” as it became known after its Parthian name), “Mani, the painter” became a standard reference in the artistic world of Central and West Asia by the 15th century—a fascination that coincided with a growing admiration of artists as individuals across Iran at that time. Mani, however, was also known across the Iranian cultural region as a pre-Islamic prophet, whose teachings were deemed false. Apart from Manichaean sources, the earliest Iranian record of Mani’s life is given by Ferdowsī in his *Shahnameh* (ca. 977 CE), which does mention that Mani, the false prophet was an “image maker,” without discussing his pictures. In contrast, the earliest Iranian language Manichaean sources convey that on his missionary trips Mani and his highest-ranking elects routinely employed two types of books: a book with texts (the *Gospel*); and a book with images (the *Book of Pictures*). These sources also suggest that Mani’s religion consciously involved not only written resources, but also a pictorial resource—an important distinction that remains characteristic of Manichaeism throughout its history.

The equal status of canonical art and canonical text is absolutely unique among the world religions. Unlike any other religion, Manichaeism had canonical images, not just canonical books. The *Book of Pictures* was a part of their canon together with the volumes of Mani’s writings. This dual emphasis was fundamental to Mani. He included it in a ten-point list about the superiority of his church (*Kephalaion 151*). In it, Mani proudly claims that, unlike his predecessors, he communicated his teachings in writing and in painting. In this way, Mani fostered a thorough religious culture, in which his wisdom, his visions, and his insights would be conveyed and recorded in two equally significant ways—in a written form in his books and in an artistic form in his pictures.

Although as to be expected Mani’s writings survive only in later editions and translations, an actual physical memento of his literacy is vividly documented through Mani’s seal stone (INT. 1384 BIS) preserved today in the Département des Monnaies, Médailles et Antiques of the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris (see *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, 24 [2010/2014], pp. 161-185). In addition to the

bust portrait of Mani and two elects, it features the four-word Syriac phrase, *M'ny šlyh' d-yyšw' mšyh'*, i.e., 'Mani, apostle (lit. messenger) of Jesus Christ (lit. messiah),' an epithet of Mani well attested in early Manichaean literature as Mani's self-designation in the starting formula of his epistles, surviving in Coptic, Latin, and Greek translations.

Mani's pictorial book is attested from all phases of Manichaean history, starting from mid-third century southern Mesopotamia from where Mani's teachings quickly spread within the Roman and Sasanian Empires already during Mani's life. Along the trade routes of Central Asia, they reached the realm of the Turkic-speaking Uygurs (whose ruling elite adopted them) and also the capital cities of China during the Tang Dynasty. From there, during the mid-ninth century persecutions, they were spread to the south, where Manichaeism existed until the fifteenth or maybe as late as the early seventeenth century. From within this ca. 1400-year history, the last evidence of a Manichaean community having a *Book of Pictures* is from southern China, where in the port city of Wenzhou, in the year 1120 CE, a government official inventoried the possessions of a fully Sinicized Manichaean temple, listing the titles of six silk paintings and thirteen books, including the *Tuching* 'the *Book of Pictures*.' The only other Chinese record of the *Book of Pictures* known today dates from 731 CE and is found in a document that gives a full description of the Manichaean religion to the Chinese court while requesting permission to spread Mani's teaching in the capital cities of the Tang. A richer body of evidence about the *Book of Pictures*—including four fragmentary physical remains of its Uygur-era editions in the Asian Art Museum in Berlin—survives from West and Central Asia.

This lecture builds on the foundation of my recent book, *Mani's Pictures: The Didactic Images of the Manichaeans from Sasanian Mesopotamia to Uygur Central Asia and Tang-Ming China* (Brill, 2015), employing its findings as a starting point of new research. The focus of this lecture is on the Mesopotamian roots of Manichaean book culture with special attention to its attested formats. I argue that the solely pictorial books of the Manichaeans—various editions of the one book with images authored by Mani—were part of their Mesopotamian-rooted book culture. Just as the text-books, the picture-book of the Manichaeans possessed codicological characteristics that developed during the earliest era of their history in Mesopotamia and Western Iran.

In order to support this claim, the first part of the lecture explores textual sources from late antiquity, dating from between the mid-third and late fifth centuries, about how, where, and why Mani's *Book of Pictures* was used. The second part surveys the physical remains of the *Book of Pictures* from the Uygur era. These remains, I suggest, maintain Syro-Mesopotamian characteristics. And finally, the last part of this lecture looks at comparative examples of art used for religious teaching evidenced from late antique and early medieval Mesopotamia, the Mediterranean region, and greater West Asia. I argue that thinking about art as a practical tool of documenting and teaching religion will be especially relevant for understanding why "visual libraries" develop in late ancient Mesopotamia. Mani's declaration of the importance of these two ways of communication survives in the historical record. Contemporary with Mani, other religious authorities also contemplated the value of art as demonstrated by the Jewish murals of the synagogue and the Christian wall paintings of the church at Dura-Europos. Together with Mani's portable *Book of Pictures*, they document the high status of didactic art among the religions of third-century Mesopotamia, which the Manichaeans preserved throughout their history.