

UIGHUR RELIGION

Overview The Gök Türk and Uighur states were characterized by religious diversity and played an important role in the history and development of religions in central Eurasia. In addition, the discovery of numerous religious texts in Old Turkic and artwork with religious subject matter has contributed greatly to modern scholars' understanding of the history, development, beliefs and practices of Central Asian religions in general and Buddhism and Manichaeism in particular.

Religion among the Uighur

In the early years of the Uighur Empire it is likely that, as in many other matters, the people continued to follow the traditional religion that had predominated among the Gök Türk. However, when the Uighur agreed in 756 to help the Tang dynasty in the An Lu Shan rebellion (755-763), they inadvertently set in motion a series of events that would result in major religious changes. Following the second capture of the city of Lo-yang in 762, the Uighur ruler Böğü Kaghan spent several months in the city, and became acquainted with the beliefs of its large Sogdian Manichaean community. Böğü Kaghan returned to his capital Ordu Balik with four members of this community, and shortly afterwards the question of whether the Uighur state should accept Manichaeism was the subject of an intense debate. Over the strong opposition of some officials, the kaghan decided in favor of adopting Manichaeism, making the Uighur Empire the only major state to do so. The extent to which Manichaeism was accepted by the Uighur is unclear, but it does appear that at the very least the Uighur elite converted to Manichaeism.

The true reasons for Böğü Kaghan's conversion to Manichaeism are unknown, however, there are a number of possible explanations. One is that Böğü Kaghan was genuinely convinced of the truth of Manichaean teachings, and impressed by its rituals, art, and disciplined lifestyle. Alternatively, his decision may have been influenced by more practical considerations. Accepting Manichaeism may have been a way to distance itself from Tang China, or any other major power. In addition, the conversion to Manichaeism brought the Uighur closer to the wealthy, individual Sogdians and their culture. Whatever the reasons, following Böğü Kaghan's decision the Uighur lands became an important center for Manichaeans throughout Central Asia.

Internally, the decision to adopt Manichaeism as the Uighur's official religion was not universally popular. Despite the kaghan's conversion and support, Manichaeans were sometimes attacked and killed in Uighur territory, and the increasing Sogdian influence and interference in Uighur affairs that followed the conversion were sources of discontent among some Uighur nobles. However, in the coming years Manichaeism became more firmly established at least among the urban Uighur elites. The Arabic account of Tamim ibn Bahr's journey to the Uighur around 821 he mentioned the presence of both Zoroastrians and Manichaeans in the empire, but noted that the Manichaeans were the majority in "the king's city".

Following the destruction of the Uighur Empire in 840, the surviving Uighur scattered and eventually established a new state in Qocho around 866. Initially, many of these Uighur were still Manichaean, but other religions soon began to make inroads among the Uighur. Some of the Uighur converted to Nestorian Christianity, as demonstrated by the discovery of frescoes with Christian themes and fragments of Nestorian Christian writings in Uighur Turkish at several sites in Turfan.

However, Buddhism would soon become the predominant religion of the Uighur Kingdom of Qocho. The Uighur in Qocho would sponsor the building of temples and cave shrines that were richly decorated with frescos depicting religious scenes as well as the donors. In addition, numerous Buddhist works were translated from Chinese or the Kuchean language into Uighur. The majority of these from the Mahayana school of Buddhism, but some are works from the Hinayana school. Later, in the Mongol period some Buddhist works would be translated from Tibetan into Uighur.

The religions practiced in Qocho show some unique features that indicate a degree of cultural borrowing. In some Uighur Buddhist texts, the Hindu deities Indra and Brahma are referred to by the Zoroastrian/Manichaeian names Hormuzd and Azrua. Similarly, a Manichaeian religious calendar written in Sogdian contains both Chinese and Uighur elements.

Summary

The religious beliefs of Gök Türk and the Uighur show a fascinating mix of traditional, indigenous beliefs and adaptations of foreign religious traditions. The Uighur adoption of Manichaeism was not only a unique event in world history, but also led to the preservation of most of the Manichaeian art and writings that we have today. Later, when Buddhism became the predominant religion, the Uighur left a rich legacy of sophisticated art and religious literature in their own language.

Readings

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Discussion Questions

1. What were the possible reasons for the Uighur Empire to convert to Manichaeism? What were the effects on their state and society? Historically, why was their conversion to Manichaeism important?
2. What is the significance of the efforts to translate numerous Buddhist works into Uighur?