

GOKTURK 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 Gök Türk

In general, the Gök Türk seem to have followed their ancestral spiritual beliefs. These included the worship of several deities, among them the sky god *Tengri*, to whom sacrifices of horses and sheep were offered during the fifth month of the year; a goddess associated with the household and fertility, *Umay*; and a god of the road, or possibly fate, *Yol Tengri*. In addition to these major divinities, there were rituals related to cults of fire, earth and water, sacred forests and sacred mountains, as well as elements of ancestor worship and indications of belief in totemic animals, particularly the wolf. Another link between this world and the spirit world was the shaman, who journeyed to the spirit world in a trance in order to cure illness or foretell the future.

However, it is clear that as the Gök Türk state grew and came into greater contact with other peoples they were influenced by other religious systems. One clear example of this is the Gök Türk *kaghan* Taghpar (or Taspar, r. 572-581) who became a Buddhist and sponsored the building of temples and translation of Buddhist scriptures. Although none of the following kaghans followed Taghpar's example, Buddhism, as well as Zoroastrianism, Christianity and Manichaeism to much lesser degrees, were tolerated in the Gök Türk lands. Despite this tolerant attitude, during the time of the Second Gök Türk Empire, Tonyuqaq warned the Gök Türk to neither build Buddhist or Taoist temples, nor adopt these creeds, since they threatened the Gök Türk's military strength which was derived from their nomadic lifestyle.

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 Manichaean 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. Why were the Gök Türk concerned about the adoption of foreign religions by their people?