

UIGHUR LITERATURE

While there are a few examples of the use of the Old Turkic script which from the time of the Uighur Empire, such as the Tariat (or Terkhin) inscriptions on a stela erected during the reign of Bayanchur khan (r. 747-759), the vast majority of surviving Uighur writings date from the time of the Uighur Kingdom of Qocho and are written in the Old Uighur script, developed from the Sogdian alphabet (which itself was ultimately derived from the Aramaic script). This Old Uighur alphabet only appeared after the Uighur migrated into the Turfan region in the mid-9th century.

Although numerous secular documents that reveal much about daily life in the Uighur Kingdom of Qocho have been discovered, the surviving literary works are overwhelmingly religious in nature – some are Nestorian Christian works, others are Manichaean texts, but the vast majority are Buddhist in nature, reflecting the religious affiliations of the kingdom's people. As the Uighur converted to Buddhism in increasing numbers, numerous Buddhist scriptures and Buddhist-related texts were translated into Uighur. The majority of these translations were made from Chinese texts, but other works originally written in Sogdian, Tocharian and even Tibetan were also translated, graphically demonstrating the variety of cultural influences present in the Uighur Kingdom of Qocho.

The translated Buddhist texts provide a vivid picture of the trends and developments in Buddhism in both the Uighur Kingdom of Qocho, and Central Asia in general. The majority of the surviving Uighur Buddhist texts are from the Mahayana tradition, and there are Uighur translations of the Chinese versions of almost all of the most important Mahayana texts of the period such as *The Lotus Sutra*, *The Garland Sutra*, and *The Golden Light Sutra*. In addition to these works from the Mahayana school, a few Uighur translations of Theravada works have been found as well as a number of tantric works translated from Tibetan and Chinese during the Mongol period. One significant translation from Chinese into Uighur was not a religious text per se, but the biography of Xuanzang, a Chinese Buddhist monk who traveled to India (629-645) to obtain Sanskrit Buddhist texts. The translation of this comprehensive biography not only provides a wealth of information about Buddhism in this period, but also information on the geography and politics of the regions Xuanzang traveled through, as well as information on the Chinese and Turkic languages of the time. The quality of the Uighur translation by Singu Šäli (also Singqu Sali or Šingqo Šäli Tutung) indicates a high level of knowledge of not only his native Uighur, but a mastery of both Chinese and Sanskrit.

Readings

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Discussion Questions

1. What is the importance of the Manichaean manuscripts preserved in Old Uighur?

2. How do the Buddhist texts translated into Old Uighur help in understanding the history and development of Buddhism in Central Asia? From which languages were these works translated?