

UIGHUR INNOVATION

Overview In comparison to other world empires and states the First and Second Gök Türk Empires, the Uighur Empire and the Uighur Kingdom of Qocho were all relatively short-lived. Despite this, each of these states had an influence on world history and culture that far exceeded their short existence.

The Uighur Empire was doubtlessly an important state in the events in Inner Asia during its nearly century-long existence. However, the conversion of the Uighur elite to Manichaeism in the mid-8th century would have influence on the region long after the downfall of the empire. By adopting Manichaeism, the Uighur Empire provided this persecuted faith with official support, thus allowing it to spread and gain new adherents. Without Uighur patronage, it is possible that Manichaeism would not have died out in the 14th century, but much earlier. In addition, the Manichaean texts and artwork produced in the Uighur Empire and later discovered in Turpan and Dunhuang have provided much of the first-hand information on Manichaean beliefs and practices.

The Uighur Kingdom of Qocho, despite its more limited territory, was also historically significant in a number of areas. As the Uighur in Qocho became predominantly Buddhist, the translation of Buddhist texts from a number of languages into Uighur began. These translations are not only valuable as early examples of Turkic literature, but they can also be used to determine the content, development and spread of specific Buddhist texts. In addition, they are indicators of the state of and trends in Inner Asian Buddhism in this period.

The vast majority of these works were written using the Old Uyghur alphabet, developed in the 9th century from the Aramaic-based Sogdian alphabet. This script would continue to be used until the 19th century, but more importantly it served as the basis for the Mongolian alphabet, and ultimately the Manchu alphabet as well. Both of these scripts are still in use today.

Uighur art, as attested from surviving frescoes and manuscript illustrations was a unique style that, like much of the medieval art of Inner Asia, blended native elements with artistic influences from China, Iran and India.

Readings

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Discussion Questions

1. In what areas did the influence of the Uighur outlive both the Uighur Empire and the Uighur Kingdom of Qocho?