Manichaeism was a typical trans-regional and trans-cultural religious movement. The Manichaean religion was founded in Iran by the Prophet Mani in the third century A.D., later spreading West to Western Asia, the Mediterranean coast and Europe. It also continued to extend eastward into Eastern Asia, Xinjiang, China’s Central plains, the Northern deserts, and the Southeast Chinese coast. In the East and the West, the Manichaean religion was an ascendant world religion that survived into the 15th century.

Manichaean art is religious in nature. Mani himself, as the Oriental traditions asserts, was an accomplished artist who utilised his artistic talent in decorating his canonical works. He dispatched scribes and illuminators along with his missionaries to strengthen evangelism.

Manichaean manuscripts have come to us in codex, scroll, and pustaka formats. The materials that survived the test of time were paper and parchment. The ink used on the manuscripts was chemically prepared from a special mixture, to which Arabic gum was added to give it a cohesive form.

In the late 19th-early 20th centuries, archaeologists began to discover the treasures of the Manichean literature in the Sogdian, Middle Persian, Parthian, Uygur, and Chinese languages. Many of the uncovered possessions are preserved in different libraries and museums in London, St. Petersburg, Berlin, New Delhi and so on.

The only currently known corpus of the Manichean art derives from East Central Asia where, in the region of the Turfan oasis under the patronage of the Uygur Turks, Manichaean illuminated books were produced between the mid 8th and early 11th centuries.

The remains of the Manichaean manuscripts in Turfan indicate the existence of three kinds of books: text-books, illuminated text-books, and picture-books.¹ There is a well-defined practice of exclusively

illustrative books in the Manichaean tradition, reaching back as far as the time of Mani.


The titles of chapters are descriptive, providing guidance to specific topics with relative simplicity. An important part of the book examines the remains, describing the author’s methods of choosing fragments and dating them while discerning the skills of their creators and themes, and the contextual connection between illustration and text.

The third chapter of the book provides a close look at the codicological characteristics of the material. A codicological method for the study of the Manichaean illuminated books has been principally applicable, since it allows a researcher to define previously unknown characteristics of the Manichaean page arrangement and contextual unity.

Medieval Manichaean book art is designed to provide a basic understanding of a specific group of illuminated fragments created during almost the 300-year-long Turfan epoch of Manichaean activities.

Zsuzsanna Gulacsi’s study of the painting styles preserved in the remains of the Turfan Manuscripts has exposed a variety of significant information, particularly on the local development of this manuscript culture.

A codicological study of the page arrangement proves that the sideway illustrations were employed in all the currently known Manichaean illuminated books. In addition, a close study of the contextual cohesion of text and image also proves that the sideway paintings are not ‘illustrations’ of the texts. They depict general scenes from the life of the Manichaean community, relating only loosely to the page content, while fully fitting the context of the books they adorn.

images of the texts in Manichean script are available online at http://www.bбав.de/forschung/turfanforschung/dta/index.html.