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Matching the Three Fragments of the Chinese Manichaean *Diagram of the Universe*

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The study of Manichaean art has been enjoying a revival since 2006 following the discovery of a remarkable corpus of Chinese Manichaean paintings that were preserved in Japan (see **Plate VI, Fig. 7**).⁽¹⁾ Although their research is ongoing, the recognition of them as Manichaean paintings produced in southern China sometime between the 12th/13th and 14th/15th centuries is positively confirmed today due to the scholarship of Professor Yutaka Yoshida. Their identification is far from self evident, for they employ a visual language analogous to that of contemporaneous Chinese Buddhist art. The decoding of their Manichaean visual language is hindered by the fact that Manichaeism is relatively little studied among the historical religions of China, and also because until now no Manichaean paintings (only a painted statue of Mani) were known from China. Prof. Yoshida's unparalleled familiarity with Middle Iranian Manichaean literature allowed him to identify (or directly contribute to the identification of) the Manichaean visual catechism of these paintings.⁽²⁾ It is fair to note that Prof. Yoshida's scholarship revived Manichaean art studies in general and the study of southern Chinese Manichaean art in particular. Prof. Yoshida's publications have allowed us to see that these paintings feature an

(1) Izumi 2006; Yoshida, 2009, 2010, 2012, and 2014; Ebert 2009; Leidy 2010, 87-127; Kósa 2013, 2014; and Gulácsi 2008, 2009. More publications are forthcoming.

(2) For a brief survey of the major Manichaean cosmogonical and cosmological texts, see Sundermann 2001a: 13-15. Yoshida cites in particular the Sogdian text M178 f. II and the Middle Persian fragments of Mani's *Šābuhragān* (as identified by Manfred Hutter 1992), especially M 98 and M 99.

iconography and not just a painting style that was adapted to the contemporaneous Chinese artistic vernacular, in order to communicate distinctly Manichaean subjects in a fully Sinicized visual language required by their culturally and ethnically Chinese beholders.

Among these Chinese Manichaean paintings, the depiction of the universe is preserved in three parts. Prof. Yoshida introduced them to modern scholarship at the Seventh International Congress of Manichaean Studies, held in Dublin in 2009.⁽³⁾ These three partial depictions of the cosmos, however, belong together not only in their shared subject matter.⁽⁴⁾ Quite remarkably, I argue that they constitute three matching fragments of one extraordinary painting. The goal of this paper is to demonstrate how these three fragments relate to one another physically (**Plate II, Fig. 1**).⁽⁵⁾ With the aid of modern imaging technology, it is possible to show digitally the evidence for the relatedness of these three independent parts — the *cosmology fragment* (137.1 cm × 56.6 cm), the *large paradise fragment* (17.0 × 37.4 cm), and the *small paradise fragment* (17.2 × 22.5 cm) — which together may be titled as the *Chinese Manichaean Diagram of the Universe*.

(3) Yoshida explains that A. Donohashi of Kobe University had been shown the painting along with others by its anonymous owner some years earlier, and brought it to Yoshida's attention (via Furukawa) in 2008 because of its stylistic and iconographic similarities to painting from the collection of the Yamato Art Museum, whose identification as Manichaean by Yoshida had been widely reported in the Japanese press. Although publication of the proceedings of the Dublin conference have been delayed, Yoshida's initial identification and analysis of the *cosmology fragment* was published in Japanese (2010, 3-34). Many of the identifications discussed below were made already by Yoshida in this publication.

(4) Gulácsi and BeDuhn 2015, forthcoming.

(5) The digital imaging work for project was financed by College of Arts and Letter of Northern Arizona University. A generous grant allowed me to cover the expenses associated with the digital work and the illustrations of this article — produced at the Bilby Research Center (Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff). I would like to take this opportunity to thank the staff of the Idea Lab of the Bilby Research Center, Ryan Belnap and Dan Boone, for contributing their technical expertise to this project.

The preliminary work of realizing that the *Diagram of the Universe* is associated with the *small paradise fragment* and the *large paradise fragment* already began in 2010 in the course of their Manichaean identification and initial publication.⁽⁶⁾ At that time, the *small paradise fragment* and the *large paradise fragment* were understood to belong together, but with the temple on the right and a partially surviving triangular pond on the left. A reverse arrangement (with the temple in the center and the two ponds at the two sides) was argued subsequently, suggesting that these fragments represented the upper section cut from a full depiction of the cosmos used for teaching with images.⁽⁷⁾ In all later discussions, they became regarded as a part of one painting (rearranged with the temple and the deity in its center), which was a now-lost depiction of the Manichaean cosmos. Numerous contextual and visual clues, however, require us to go further and consider the two paradise fragments together with the *cosmology fragment*, not only as thematically, but also physically matching parts of a fully preserved magnificent depiction of the Manichaean cosmos.

Numerous artistic clues indicate that the two *paradise fragments* and the *cosmology fragment* belonged to a single work of art. A good place to start noticing some of these clues is the upper section of the *cosmology fragment*, this area contains both implied lines and actual lines that allude to a realm above, which is no longer physically part of the painting. An implied line signaling this is connected to Mani. In many parts of the painting, Mani is depicted witnessing the workings of the

(6) The *small paradise fragment* ("Realm of Light B"), the *large paradise fragment* ("Realm of Light A"), and the *cosmology fragment* ("Cosmogony Painting") were first discussed by Yoshida at the Seventh International Congress of Manichaean Studies (Dublin, 2009) and subsequently published by him and Shoichi Furukawa (2010, color pls. 6, 5, and 1, respectively).

(7) Kósa notes that "it might also turn out that these two Realm of Light fragments belonged to a painting that was similar to the C[osmology] P[ainting] (an idea put forward by Zs. Gulácsi in Nara, June 6, 2011, private communication)" (2010-2011, 26). In contrast, Yoshida points out that the correct joining of the two paradise fragments was already suggested to him by one of the curator of the Yamato Bunkakan Museum, Dr. Nakabe (Yoshida 2010, 31, note 64).

universe one component at a time. As to be expected, here, too, Mani is shown standing next to something important to observe. At this location, however, Mani is *not* looking at the centrally positioned deity and its entourage. It seems that he has already finished viewing them and moved on to another task, which requires him to look up. The depiction of this other task puts Mani in the role of a “transitory figure,” used by the artist to link one section of the composition to another. In this case, Mani’s head is positioned looking up. His gaze urges the viewer to follow this direction to a realm above him. In addition to this implied line, the artist uses two actual lines for this task. They are drawn as tapering “cloud trails,” leading upward from two of the three clouds that hover in front of Mani. A divine messenger is seated on each. Their clouds are drawn with trails that indicate movement from above, conveying effectively that these two figures have just descended from a realm further up. The cloud trails, however, are abruptly cut at the current top edge of the fragment, suggesting that the realm to which they are supposed to lead the viewer is no longer part of the *cosmology fragment*. The continuation of each cloud trail is visible in the paradise fragments as will be demonstrated in detail below.

The overall characteristics of these fragments, including their materials and techniques, also signal a common origin. A color repertoire is shared throughout, demonstrating the dominance of mineral-based paints in green, white, red, dark blue, and red- brown hues. Gilding is frequent. The scales, proportions, and the style of execution of the anthropomorphic beings (human, divine, and demonic), the architectural structures, as well as the occasional trees and landscape all compare favorably among the three fragments. Such shared features already demonstrate a common period and workshop style.

Even greater points of similarities, however, are indicative of an artistic unity confirming that these three fragments were designed and painted together as one work of art, as demonstrated, for example, in the depictions of Mani and a row of colorful tiles (**Plate III, Fig. 2**). In all three fragments, some Mani’s figures are shown from full profile with chin lifted observing something above. In these

depictions, the silhouette of Mani's face against the green halo, his facial features, the shape of his ear, the black lines that indicate the folds of his garment, and the angles of the red border that hems his outer cloak all attest being painted by one hand. An equally convincing unity is also displayed by the row of colorful tiles across the three fragments. In the two paradise fragments, some tiles are preserved in perfect condition along the left and right sides of the original composition, allowing us to observe that their base colors were decorated with delicate designs in contrasting lines (red lines on the white tiles, gold lines on the green tiles, white lines on the blue tiles, and what appears to be orange lines on the red tiles and possibly red lines on the gold tiles). At the upper edge of the *cosmology fragment*, an identical row of these tiles is preserved, halved.

An equally significant sign for the matching of these fragments is found in the fact that their pictorial contents complete one another in relation to Manichaean cosmological doctrine. If one starts from a comprehensive model of the cosmos based on Manichaean texts, it becomes clear that the *cosmology fragment* and two *paradise fragments* have a necessary complementarity, and only together provide a complete representation of the Manichaean universe.⁽⁸⁾ Thus, even if the *paradise fragments* and the *cosmology fragment* did not physically match, based on their complementary content, they must be considered together for religious studies research.⁽⁹⁾

Yet, the artistic characteristics shared by these three fragments go beyond indicating merely a thematic cohesion. Quite remarkably, they suggest that the *cosmology fragment* and the two *paradise fragments* derived from a single work of art. In order to unify the large surface of the painting, relate its over 500 figures to each other, and move the viewer's attention from one section to the other, various pictorial devices were built into the original composition. They are retained throughout both *paradise fragments* and within the upper part of the *cosmology*

(8) Kósa puzzled over why the upper corners of the *cosmology fragment* show four structures (rather than five), whereas the detached *paradise fragments* show five structures (2013, 64).

(9) For more on this question, see BeDuhn's discussion in Gulácsi and BeDuhn 2015, forthcoming.

fragment, in each case alluding to a realm below and above, respectively, that are no longer physically part of the fragments in their current condition. They are summarized in the following points:

1.) Repeated figures of Mani that were painted by one artist are shared by the three fragments (**Plate III, Fig. 2a-c**: Mani figures).⁽¹⁰⁾ They are shown from full profile with the chin lifted observing something above. In these, the execution of numerous details — the face’s silhouette against the green halo, the facial features, the shape of the ear, the black lines that indicate the folds of the garment, and the angles of the red border that hems the outer cloak — all attest being painted by one hand.

2.) Sections from the originally continuous row of colorful tiles that framed the green floor of Realm of Light are preserved in each fragment (**Plate III, Fig. 2a-c**: row of colorful tiles).⁽¹¹⁾ Along the outer sides of the *paradise fragments*, some tiles are still intact preserving their base colors, the surface of which was decorated with delicate designs in contrasting lines (red lines on the white tiles, gold lines on the green tiles, white lines on the blue tiles, and what appears to be orange lines on the red tiles and possibly red lines on the gold tiles). The upper edge of the *cosmology fragment* contains an identical row of these tiles, halved along the cut edge.

⁽¹⁰⁾ Furukawa noted the similar execution of the Mani figures on these three fragments (2010, 40).

⁽¹¹⁾ Although Kósa observes that, “the alternative Realm of Light depiction . . . features a basically green land bordered by lozenge-shaped tiles with unique motifs on them” (2014, forthcoming [4]), and in a note on this observation, comments that, “the remnants of a similar row of tiles can be discerned at the very top of the C[osmology] P[ainting]” (forthcoming [4], note 4); he does not detect that the tiles are not just similar, but identical, painted by the same hand and belonged to one painting. Furukawa (2010, 36–42) also makes a similar observation among noting numerous other clues that tie the three fragments together.

3.) Associated with the Mani figure at the upper part of the *cosmology fragment*, an implied line also connects the three fragments. In many parts of the painting, Mani is depicted witnessing the workings of the universe one component at a time. As to be expected, in the upper part of the *cosmology fragment*, Mani is shown standing next to something important to observe. At this location, however, Mani is *not* looking at the centrally positioned deity and its entourage. It seems that he has already finished viewing them and moved on to another task, which requires him to look up. The depiction of this other task puts Mani in the pictorial role of a transitory figure, used by the artist to link one section of the composition to another. In this case, Mani's head is positioned looking up. His gaze urges the viewer to follow this direction to a realm above him.

4.) The artist uses two actual lines for the same task. They are drawn as tapering cloud-trails, leading upward from two of the three clouds that hover in front of Mani. A divine messenger is seated on each. Their clouds are drawn with trails that indicate movement from above, conveying effectively that these two figures have just descended from a realm further up. The cloud-trails, however, are abruptly cut at the current top edge of the fragment, suggesting that the realm to which they are supposed to lead the viewer is no longer part of the *cosmology fragment*. The continuation of each cloud-trail is visible in the paradise fragments as will be demonstrated in detail below.

5.) The overall pictorial character of these fragments further support the above-noted clues of common origin. A uniform color repertoire is shared throughout, demonstrating the dominance of mineral-based paints in green, white, red, dark blue, and red-brown hues. Gilding is frequent. The scales, proportions, and the style of execution of the anthropomorphic beings (human, divine, and demonic), the architectural structures, as well as the occasional trees and landscape all compare favorably among the three fragments. Such shared features already demonstrate a common period and workshop style.

Noticing these shared elements urges us from a visual perspective to disregard the cuts that separate these fragments in their current condition and, instead, begin to see them as parts of one painting.

Their state of preservation presents the greatest obstacle in recognizing that these three fragments physically match. On the one hand, each fragment has lost some its content through cropping by a different amount along each of its four sides, which makes it hard to see how they connect to one another. For example, the *cosmology fragment* no longer retains its uppermost subscene. It was also cropped vertically at its two sides. On the right, at the height of the tenth firmament of the sky, only half of a deity is retained seated on a lotus base atop a tall column that reached all the way down to the bottom of the painting. Full versions of deities in analogous roles and iconography can be seen on both sides of the fragment, at the two sides of the first firmament and the outer atmosphere, respectively. Due to a wider cropping along the left side, the deity on the left of the tenth firmament is no longer retained. On the other hand, certain portions of the fragments show signs of restoration.⁽¹²⁾ This is especially prominent on the two *paradise fragments*. Based on a study of the layers of paint in-person and through high-resolution digital images, it seems that prior to their restoration, areas of the original painting to which they belonged were highly damaged, and possibly already broken into separate pieces (perhaps due to folding). To save the surviving sections, a new silk support had to be introduced beneath the salvaged segments. This new silk was painted to fit the saved original content in small sections, especially around the cut edges. While successfully securing the original content, this restoration also stretched the original spacing to the right of the group of figures centered on the vertical axis of the original by ca. 3 cm. This added extra width upsets the symmetry of the original composition and disguises the original relationship of the fragments.

⁽¹²⁾ On the basis of a close examination of the fragments, Furukawa drew the conclusion that they were restored and over-painted by later (possibly modern) hands (2010, 36a, 38b).

Digital imaging technology allows us to see beyond the physical impacts of decay and subsequent restoration that, while essential in securing the preservation of these three fragments, today present a hardship in seeing how they originally belonged together. By following a step-by-step process of virtual matching, we are able to demonstrate on the computer screen (and in print) how the *cosmology* and two *paradise fragments* were part of a single painting.

The vertical axis remains an uncompromised reference even in a painting that is cut into pieces. Thus, the first step is the aligning of the two fragments that retain the vertical axis from the original composition — the *large paradise fragment* and the *cosmology fragment* (**Plate III, Fig. 3**). When these two fragments are correctly aligned, their implied line of symmetry can be observed from the upper edge of the *large paradise fragment*, starting from the middle of its temple and running straight down along the frontally projected body of the main deity (flanked by seven figures in three-quarter view on each side) to continue in the *cosmology fragment* through the likewise frontally projected body of another deity (surrounded by six figures in three-quarter view on each side). This axis proceeds vertically across the middle of the rest of the picture plane.

Strong supporting evidence corroborating the above alignment comes from two cloud-trails that were drawn continuously across the lower edge of the *large paradise fragment*, the now missing horizontal cut that separates the fragments today, and the upper edge of the *cosmology fragment* (**Plate IV, Fig. 4**). In their widest extent, these trails culminate in the *cosmology fragment*, in the two upper clouds that hover with their tiny occupants in front of the white-clad figure of Mani. The trails of these clouds gradually taper as they meander upward, leading back to the pedestal of the central deity in the *large paradise fragment*. Both trails have been damaged. The trail of the upper cloud is better preserved, allowing us to observe that it was painted across the surface of the colorful row of tiles seen at the upper edge of the *cosmology fragment* in its current condition. Starting from the lower cloud, the second trail had flaked off and broken into pieces. A portion of it

was re-adhered, but has since shifted from its original path (turned about 90° clockwise). Another portion of this trail, however, is preserved across the row of colorful tiles. While both cloud-trails are still visible on what is left here from the row of colorful tiles, directly above them a horizontal cut was made across the entire width of the original painting while trimming the current edges of the fragments. Although the edge of the green floor in the *large paradise fragment* was repainted (as discussed below), the rest of the two cloud-trails are fully preserved. The fact that parts of these trails survive in both fragments prove they were painted continuously, starting from the two clouds in front of Mani, proceeding across the tiles and the green floor, and leading back all the way to the pedestal of the Father of Greatness in the original painting. Thus, they confirm the alignment based on the vertical axis.

The second step in the matching of these fragments is the reintroduction of the *small paradise fragment* to the already aligned portion of the painting (**Plate V, Fig. 5**). Leveling it with the *large paradise fragment* does not present a problem (**Plate V, Fig. 5a**, also see **Plate VI, Fig. 6a-b**). After turning it 1.12° clockwise the colorful row of tiles that frame the green floor line up with one another on both paradise fragments: next to the temple and on both sides in front of representations of mountains at the left and right margins. As to be expected, aligning the *small paradise fragment* in this way does not change what we know about the overall height of the original painting. Not so with the width.

Finding the original distance of the *small paradise fragment* from the vertical axis is a problem — a three-fold problem. (1) One aspect of this problem concerns the decorative pattern of the green floor and the row of colorful tiles. The thin gold diagonal lines painted across the entire surface of green floor do not continue harmoniously across the cut edge between the two fragments. Above the green floor, the row of colorful tiles at the back, where they meet the temple, is interrupted with a non-tiled area painted white and dark blue. This dark blue matches the color used for indicating the void of cosmic space at various parts of the

original painting, including behind the temple. (2) The second aspect of this problem concerns the introduction of an unutilized area of the floor to the right of the figures surrounding the central deity. In its current condition this part of the composition is less busy compared to its equivalent floor-space on the left side of the vertical axis, which is densely covered with figures, clouds, and cloud-trails. Despite the cut that sliced through this space, no figures are lost from here. Instead, it seems that some extra floor-space was added. (3) The final aspect of the problem derives from the fact that the combined width of the two paradise fragments (37.4 cm + 22.5 cm = 59.9 cm) is wider (3.3 cm) than the current width of the *cosmology fragment* (56.6 cm). The correct alignment confirmed by the vertical axis, puts this extra width entirely onto the right side of the composition, which upsets the symmetry of the composition and thus creates significant problems in matching the two paradise fragments in relation to the *cosmology fragment*.

Aligning the *small paradise fragment* according to its original content and symmetry, analogous to what is preserved to the left of the central figures and temple in the *large paradise fragment*, causes an overlap (ca. 2.5 cm) between the two (**Plate V, Fig. 5b**). The resulting combined width of two *paradise fragments* approximates that of the *cosmology fragment*. The top edge of the *cosmology fragment* is essential for understanding an important visual link between the two upper fragments and how much is missing from the original painting, since this cut edge preserves the lower half from the row of colorful tiles that originally framed the front edge of the green floor of the Realm of Light, just as the *paradise fragments* do the side and back edges. The color sequence of these tiles shows a deliberate order used as visual emphasis for the deities shown immediately below them. This sequence is created by placing one large gold trapezoid tile (twice the width of the regular tiles) along the vertical axis and arranging regular tiles in the shape of parallelograms leaning towards the gold center in a succession of red, green, white, blue, red, and again gold tiles. In the *cosmology fragment*, a combination of three tiles (red, gold, red) is used above the most important motifs. These include the main deity in the center,

the white-clad figure of Mani half way between the central deity and the left edge of the scene, and a group of four deities positioned symmetrically halfway between the central deity and the right edge, as well as over either pair of temples close to the current edges on both sides of the painting. At a green tile just beyond the last red-gold-red sequence (above the temples), this horizontal row of tiles joins in with two diagonal rows of four tiles (framing the ponds) in the *paradise fragments*. The height of the missing half row of tiles amounts to a small cut between the two surviving sections (ca. 0.7 cm) of the original painting. Although not impossible, it is unlikely that more is missing, since no space seems to be lost from the green floor. If so, the two ponds in the Realm of Light were relatively small (framed by 3×4 tiles with one additional tile in each corner, see **Plate V, Fig. 5b**). It is unlikely that the ponds were not fully shown in the original painting. Thus, it seems that a minimum of 3 tiles is missing on the right, and a minimum of almost four tiles is missing on the left (the corner of the fourth is preserved). These estimates are in harmony with the amounts missing from the symmetrically arranged pairs of guardian deities atop vertical columns at the left and right edges of the firmaments subscene in the *cosmology fragment*, half missing on the right at the level of the tenth (top) firmament, and fully missing in the corresponding position on the left. All in all, these observations suggest that the approximate dimensions of the *Diagram of the Universe* (recoverable in light of its three fragments) were about 158 cm in height and about 60 cm in width.

The third and final step of the matching is the digital erasing of the extra space along the overlapping edges of the two *paradise fragments* (**Plate V, Fig. 5c** and **Plate VI, Fig. 6**). This extra space was introduced as repainted blue background and green floor were added in the area to the right side of the temple, on the surface of the new silk that today supports the surviving actual motifs of the painting. Digital technology can eliminate on the computer screen the visibly added and repainted surface, while keeping all original figures intact. This process reveals a layout symmetrical to what is seen to the left of the temple, which was not impacted by

decay and physical restoration. The result of this final step is a composition that is virtually restored to its original 14th-century state — before the *Diagram of the Universe* became damaged, broken into pieces, and subsequently secured by being restored as three physically independent pieces.

The thusly-matched *Diagram of the Universe* fits well with the size and subject repertoire of the other Chinese Manichaean hanging scrolls known today (**Plate VI, Fig. 7**). Although all of these paintings had been slightly trimmed along their edges, their measurements exhibit comparable widths within a less-than-10-cm difference (ranging between 57.5 cm and 67.3 cm) and a relatively close height-to-width ratio (ranging between 2.06:1 and 2.67:1). They include didactic themes, such as the depiction of cosmological, soteriological, and prophetological teachings; in addition to primarily devotional themes, such as iconic images of Jesus and Mani. Most of them have already been at the focus of detailed studies. Further research will have to take on the task of explaining the overall doctrine of the *Diagram of the Universe* in a comprehensive study that centers on this remarkable work of art.⁽¹³⁾

⁽¹³⁾ See Gulácsi and BeDuhn 2015, forthcoming.

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