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Abstracts

The Origin of Manichaean Jesus Iconography

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While in modern scholarship Manichaeism is recognized as an independent missionary world religion with a unique cosmology, eschatology, and ritual system, certain elements of Manichaean teaching do overlap with those of other religions, including the worship of the prophet Jesus. Already for Mani in mid 3rd-century southern Mesopotamia, Jesus was of great importance, whose crucifixion provided the basis for the metaphor of the “Cross of Light,” symbolizing the suffering of Light among the forces of Darkness on earth. Narratives on Jesus’ life, as well as hymns and prayers to him, are documented by Manichaean textual sources from 4th-century Egypt to 13th-century southern China. Further evidence of his continued devotional importance is found in a small group of Manichaean visual sources – devotional and didactic images of Jesus. One of them is a textile painting from 8th/10th-century East Central Asia with a visual language too archaic for its time and place.

Through a comparative art historical study of the latter image, this paper explores the late ancient West Asian roots of the Manichaean depictions of enthroned deities, with special attention to Jesus. It points out that such depictions follow specific iconographic and compositional characteristics shared with Sasanid and Kushan royal as well as religious imagery, predating Roman analogies by as much as 200 years. Based on this evidence, this paper explores a new way to think about the origins of Jesus iconography by emphasizing the possible contribution of Manichaeism.