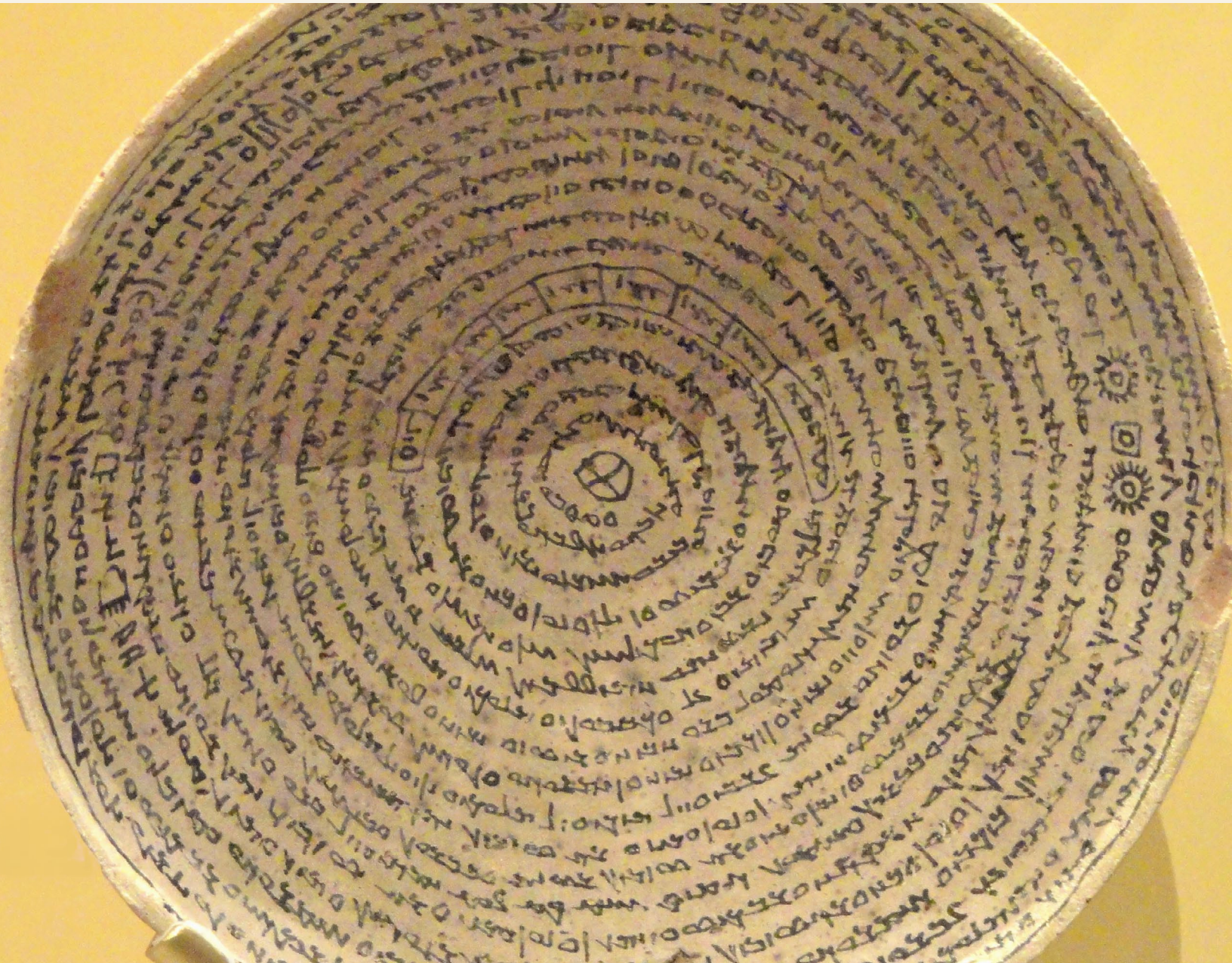




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For more than sixty years, we have offered a wide range of innovative, high-quality educational and cultural programs, along with social (and culinary) events where participants share their knowledge and enthusiasm. SAA's popular Arts of Asia Lecture Series, open to all, is the core of the museum's docent-training curriculum. We sponsor foreign and domestic travel, visits to private art dealers and collections, in-depth study groups, special lectures by leading scholars, literature courses and symposia. Some of our programming supports specific exhibitions.

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Mandaeans: An Ancient Religion of West Asia

by Mitra Ara, PhD



Figure 1-1: Saint John Baptizing in the River Jordan, by Nicolas Poussin, French, 1594-665. Public domain for education, courtesy of Getty Museum.

The name “Mandaeans” may not be as familiar to readers as other ethnic or religious groups in the Near East (West Asia), such as the Mesopotamians or Persians. Unveiling Mandaean tradition, an enigmatic ancient gnostic religious group that has survived for millennia on the fringe of societies in obscurities, can be challenging for the

researcher as well as the reader. Nonetheless, it is possible to shed some light on their miraculous survival and known practices. Mandaeism is an important and fascinating living religion recognized as a branch of Gnosticism, possessing the largest volume of gnostic literature. Among the most ancient of the world’s religions, they



Figure 1-2: Map of Iran-Iraq borders where Mandaeen communities are settled near the rivers in southeastern Iraq and Iran. Wilson Center, article “Iran’s Role in Iraq” by Garrett Nada <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/part-1-irans-role-iraq>.

have preserved their tradition through periods of prosperity, exile, and persecution.¹ The Mandaeans have lived a relatively isolated existence for thousands of years, residing in Mesopotamia at the convergence of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in Iraq and the Karun river in Iran, a region known today as Shatt-al-Arab (Figure 1-2). Currently this area is included in the southern region of Iraq and the southwestern sector of Iran.² This part of West Asia has undergone enormous turmoil over the last four decades, prompting many Mandaeans to emigrate, settling for the most part in Australia, Netherlands, Sweden, Germany, other parts of Europe, and in North America.

Today, the research into the origin of Mandaean religion further supports the belief that Palestine, the Jordan valley, was the original site of the Mandaeans, who followed John the Baptist. From there, they rapidly migrated into southern Mesopotamia. There has never been a precise census of the number of Mandaeans globally. Estimates generally range around 100,000–700,000.³ Mandaeans are now emigrating from Iran, Iraq, and war-torn Syria in greater numbers,

since the situation has worsened for them in their traditional homelands. Yet, those homelands are the areas where Mandaean culture and religion are most zealously preserved. As a result, continued emigration threatens the survival of their unique beliefs and customs.

For centuries Mandaeans have appeared, disappeared, and reappeared in historical records. They first became known in the West in the 13th century through an Italian Dominican monk, who traveled at length in Palestine, Armenia, Turkey, Persia, and Mesopotamia, but his reports were not printed until much later. Portuguese Catholic missionaries from the 17th century referred to the Mandaeans as “disciples of John the Baptist,” and this statement remained in the European literature until the 19th century when the title “John-Christians” was also used. This is an inaccurate label, since the Mandaeans do not describe themselves as Christians. They do, however, regard John the Baptist to be only one of their prophets or priests; they are thus occasionally called “John the Baptist’s followers.” John the Baptist is part of a lineage that they trace



Figure 1-3: Water represents purity and renewal for Mandaeans. Woman is baptized by a priest in the Nepean river in Penrith, New South Wales, Australia. Courtesy of ABC News, Brendan Esposito.

back to Adam, Abel, Seth, Enosh, Noah, Shem, and Aram. Mandaeans recognize the latter three prophets as their direct ancestors. Unlike other Abrahamic believers, the Mandaeans do not recognize Abraham, Moses, Jesus, or Muhammed as true prophets. They are opposed to Abraham because of his practice of circumcision.

The name Mandaean can be traced back to the ancient Aramaic *manda*, which means knowledge, equivalent to the ancient Greek word *gnosis*. In Arabic, the Mandaeans are referred to as “Sabians/Subbas,” according to references in the Koran (Qur’an: Islam Holy Book). Their mention in the Qur’an has allowed the Mandaeans to be tolerated in Islamic lands. The Arabic word that refers to them stems from the Aramaic *seba*, which means to immerse in water or baptize.⁴ Baptism, a solemn sacramental submerging in flowing water in the presence of a priest, is one of the most notable rites of the Mandaean religion (Figure 1-3).

Other representative facets of the Mandaean faith can be found in voluminous texts recording

mythologies and religious beliefs that convey a sharply dualistic worldview. These texts are written in a language called *Mandaic*, part of the eastern Aramaic language and writing system. Few Mandaeans outside the priesthood still speak that language today. There are limited numbers who remain conversant in Neo-Mandaic, a modern survival of that ancient tongue. See Figure 1-4. To perform their rituals and ceremonies, Mandaeans gather at religious centers called *mandi* (houses of knowledge/*manda*) as well as at cultural centers, particularly in diaspora communities. The emblem of the Mandaean faith is the *darfash*, a cross of olive wood half covered with a piece of white silk cloth, and seven branches of myrtle. The *darfash* is displayed at churches (Mandaean Houses) at every ritual, ceremony, and baptismal sites; in homes; and as ornamental objects, which they may wear. See Figure 1-5. The white color in church decorations or in clothing worn during baptism and certain ceremonies traditionally symbolizes faith, purity, and the light of the soul. See Figure 1-6. The hierarchy of the Mandaean priesthood consists of three levels: disciples,

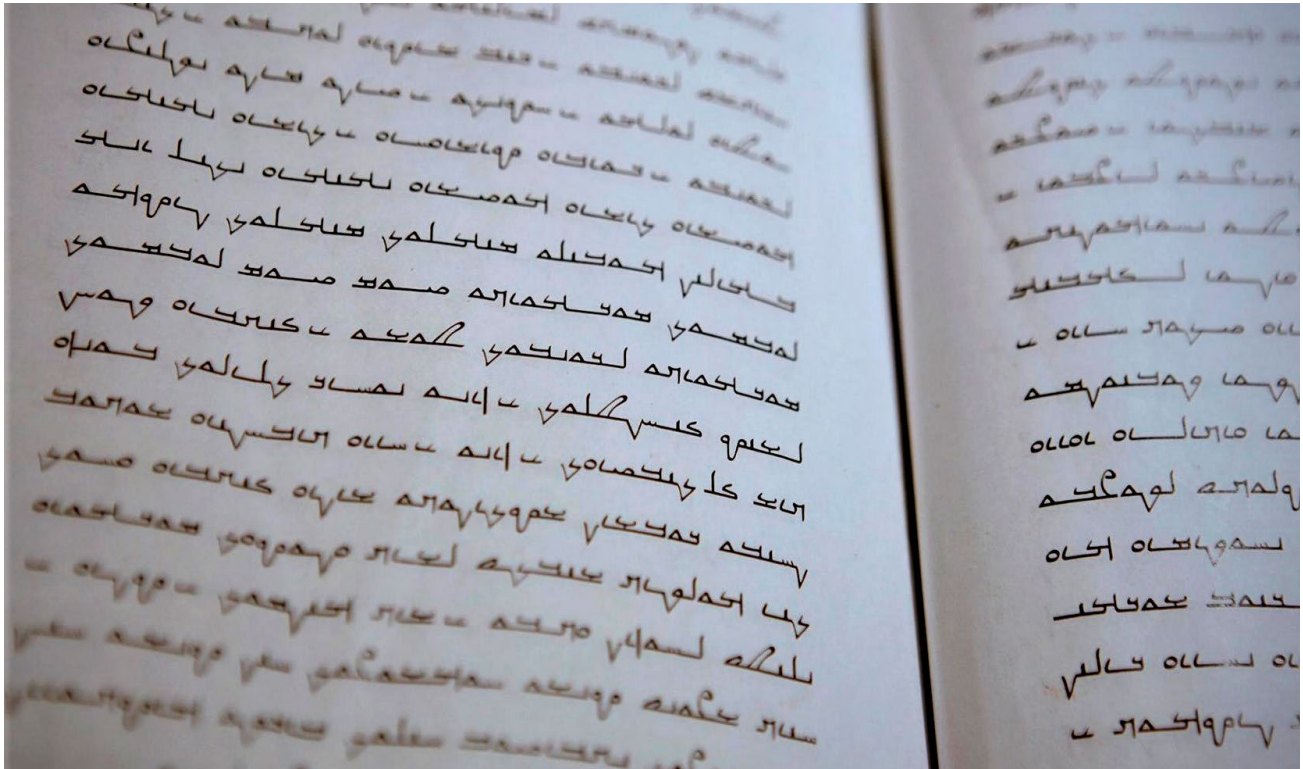


Figure 1-4: Aramaic writing. Courtesy of the State Library of New South Wales, Australia, Oral History and Sound Collection.



Figure 1-5: *Darfash*-cross, the symbol of Mandaicism. Courtesy of the State Library of New South Wales, Australia, Oral History and Sound Collection.



Figure 1-6: The Mandaean church in New South Wales, Australia, displaying the altar with the sacred text, and the darfash-cross in white color. Courtesy of the State Library of New South Wales, Australia, Oral History and Sound Collection.

treasurers, and the people's leader. This last post, at the head of the priesthood, has remained unfilled for several years. The highest Mandaean spiritual office held at present is called the *ganzibra* (treasurer), a title dating back to Aramaic scripture from ancient Persia and connected to *ginza* "treasury/treasure." Thus, priests are the "treasurers."⁵

History

The origins and beginnings of the Mandaeans remain obscure, owing to the limited number of historical accounts or records that refer to them. References to the Mandaeans first appear in Mesopotamian treatises on magic that date to the 3rd and 4th centuries of the Common Era. These accounts refer to Mandaic myths and legends. The consensus among scholars is that Mandaeism was originally influenced by Jewish-Baptist traditions, and as well as Near Eastern religious texts and customs, including Christianity and

Gnosticism, and especially Iranian (Persian) religious movements such as Zoroastrianism, Manicheanism, Mazdakism, and others.⁶

The ancient Iranian influence on Mandaean spiritual beliefs is evident in several spheres. The types of words used in Mandaean religious practices, the myths and scriptural texts, the rites, and the calendar all owe something to Iranian traditions. Living at such close quarters, the Mandaeans were no doubt exposed to Iranian spiritual traditions, particularly Zoroastrianism. They may also have been subjects of the Iranian Parthian (or Arsacid) empire, which lasted from 3rd BCE to 3rd century CE, and the subsequent Sasanian empire, for which Zoroastrianism was the official state religion until 7th century CE.

A legend mentioned in the literature is that Mandaeans fled Palestine following the Roman destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in the year seventy of the Common Era. According to this account, the Mandaeans then settled in the Persian Arsacid empire.⁷ Mention is also made



of their inhabiting Persian territory during the centuries that followed, and they continued to live in Persia when the Sassanian empire fell during the Arab conquest in the 7th century CE, as well as in the following centuries under Islamic rule.

Although the Mandaean faith was clearly affected by Zoroastrian and Iranian practices over the centuries, the Mandaeans have remained a distinctive people with their own beliefs and culture. The core of Mandaean identity is shared history, practices and customs, rather than just a common religious dogma. There is no equivalent of the catechism for Mandaeanism. While Mandaean scriptural writings are extensive, and they span such matters as the fate of the world, access to the divine, and the immortality of the soul, few Mandaeans outside of the priesthood study these precepts. The dualism of the Zoroastrian religion is manifested more in the rites of the Mandaeans than in their mythology or scripture.

Literature

The writings of the Mandaeans are used for spiritual rites and are composed of various texts, such as hymns, prayers, liturgies, commentaries, mythological or scriptural treatises, scrolls with illustrations, legends, and magical formulae.⁸ Tracing the precise period when these texts were written, edited, or compiled is difficult, since the authors of these texts and their lifespans are unknown. The primary Mandaean spiritual text is the *Ginza* “Treasure” or *Ginza Rba* “Great Treasure/Book” (Figure 1-7). This book is divided into two sections, the Right Ginza, which is more extensive, and the shorter Left Ginza. The Right Ginza focuses primarily on cosmology, theology, and spiritual precepts. The Left Ginza, also known as the Book of Souls, is composed in verse. Its topic is the apotheosis of the soul and its ties to the realm of light.

The Mandaeans have other significant scriptures that are used in performing religious practices. These include the Book of John, also referred to as the Book of Kings, which includes more than

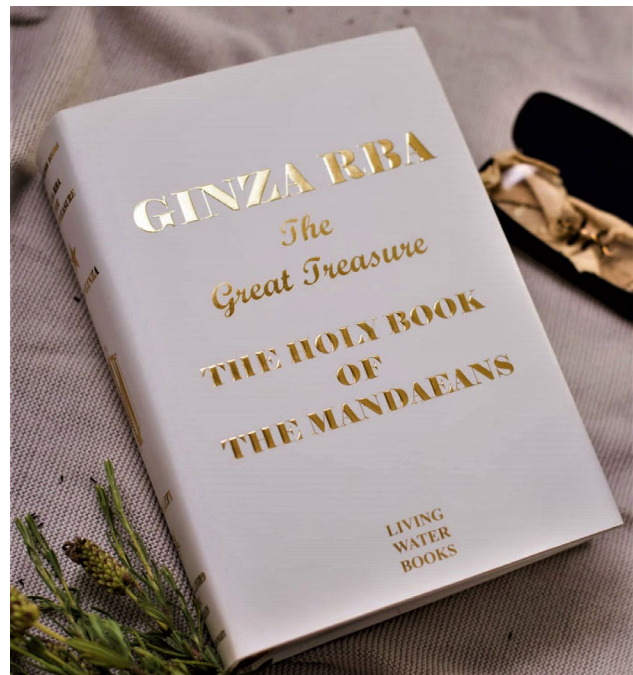


Figure 1-7: The first full English translation of the Ginza was made by author Carlos Gelbert, *The Great Treasure* Living Water Books, Sydney, Australia.

one theme. The work primarily relates John the Baptist’s sermons, the discourses of Shem, and the appearance of Enosh in Jerusalem, along with other topics. Other scriptural texts include commentaries on rituals, used for the most part by Mandaean ordained priests. In addition, some Mandaean texts are written on scrolls (divans/books) and artistically illustrated. They describe matrimonial rites, the ceremony for the ordination of priests, ceremony for the ritual purification of a priest who has been sullied, and mystical interpretations of spiritual observances. These scrolls are sometimes adorned with drawings, such as *Divan Abatur* (the Book of Abatur) which describes the soul’s “ascent” through the planetary spheres, the heavenly purgatories of the planets, and the zodiacal signs (Figure 1-8). In the hierarchy of Light, from the First, the Second is born, from the Second, the Third (*Abatur*), and the Fourth (*Ptahil*). Another scroll, the *Divan of the Rivers*, presents the Mandaean worldview. The only historical text is the *Divan of the Great Revelation*. Priests use the Book of the Zodiac, the Book of the Stars, and the Book of the Moon as manuals for astrology, demonology, pharmacopoeia, deciding esoteric names for the adherents, and more.⁹



Figure 1-8: An 18th century Scroll of Abathur, the second of three emanations of the Mandaean Great Living God, in the Bodleian Library, Oxford. Courtesy of Wikimedia public domain.

The Mandaean Canonical Prayerbook contains instructions for religious rituals, prayers, and hymns. The opening sections feature the liturgy used for both baptisms and funerary rites, called “ascent of the soul.” These sections are still very much in use today by Mandaean priests. The most ancient of the Mandaean treatises on magic were inscribed on bowls and on lead tablets. These writings have been dated as having been written down in the third or fourth century of the Common Era. Their origin may date back to oral religious traditions that might be hundreds of years older, with roots in Syria and Palestine and later brought to Mesopotamia. See [Figure 1-9](#).

Doctrine

Researchers studying the origins and development of Mandaean traditions face serious obstacles. Scholars are of several minds when it comes to analyzing the roots of Mandaean religious beliefs. Still, it is possible to sketch an outline of the principle characteristics of Mandaean myths and religious beliefs. Anyone seeking a definitive set of Mandaean spiritual beliefs will soon realize that this is not a simple search. For example, Mandaean cosmology includes several different versions of their creation story. This is undoubtedly due to the various cultures and religions that have affected Mandaean society and theology, and to the way that their spiritual practices and beliefs have developed in the course of their history.¹⁰

Mandaean doctrines are filled with metaphoric, symbolic language, and personified abstract qualities. The material and spiritual worlds and all the beings, including the creators, are the manifestation of a supreme formless Entity. Like all other known gnostic visions of the creation based on the dualistic principles, Mandaism accepts that even divinity is divided into the primordial positive divine principle, the Light, as opposed to the later manifestation of the negative principle, the Dark, the material. The cosmos is created by one of the creators, the archetypical Man, who produces it in likeness to his own image. The soul is described as a captive in exile from her/his original source,

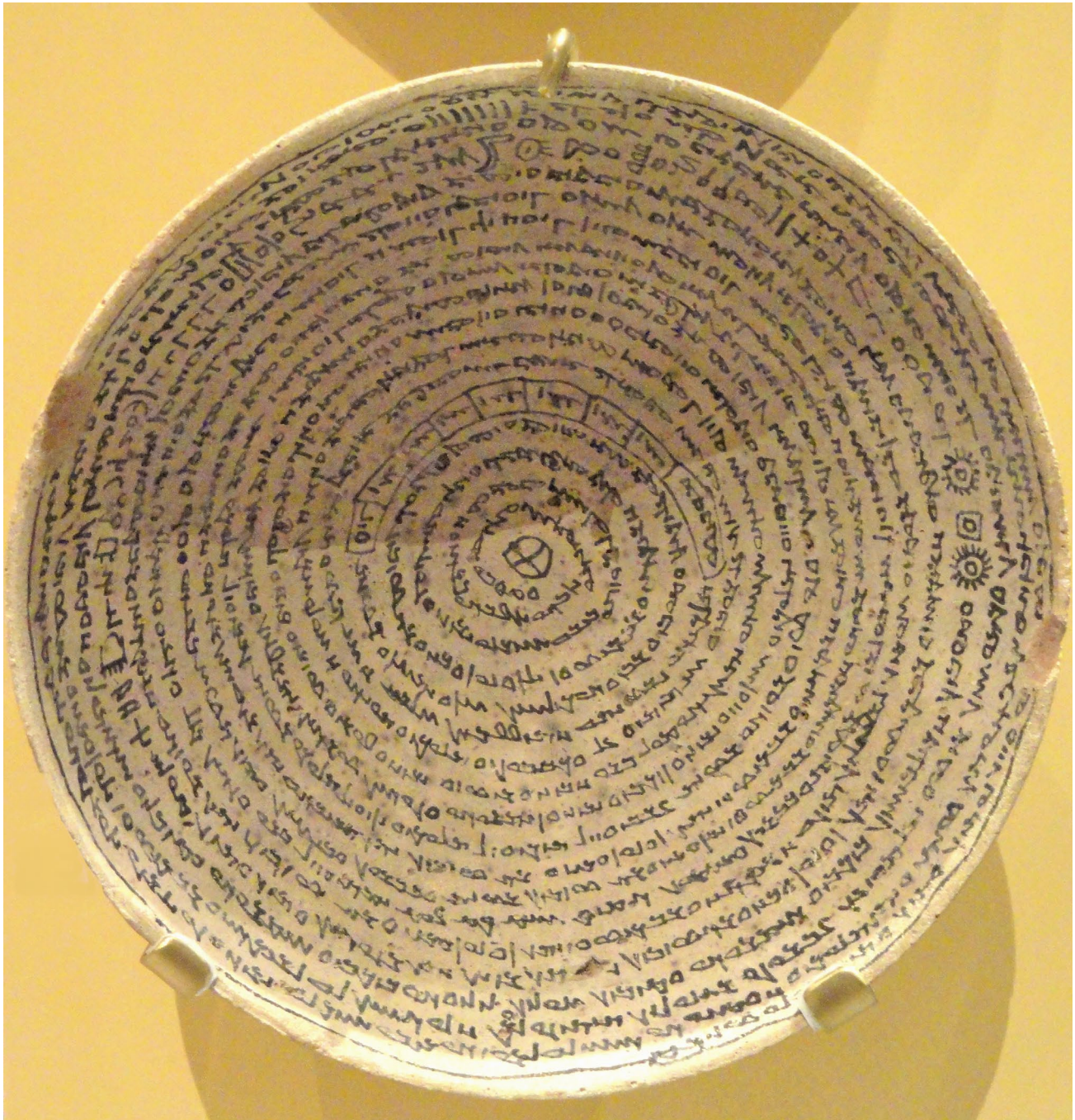


Figure 1-9 and Cover: Mandaean Incantation Bowl, Iraq, 200-600 CE. Courtesy of The Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto. In Mandaic language and script, the inscription was meant to ward off evil entities from a family.



that of the supreme Entity. Yet, living in the body is viewed as a form of descent even though it is not considered uncongenial or punishing. One's birth, fate, death, and place of afterlife are influenced by the planets and stars. Sacraments are designed to purify the soul and to ensure the ascent from the material world into a spiritual body for a new pure existence in the world of light. There is no expectation of any future savior; however, there are savior spirits assisting the souls of the dead on their journey to the world of light. According to the Mandaeans, the entire history of human existence is linear rather than cyclical and divided into four stages from Adam to the end of the world. We are now in the fourth stage that will end by a destruction from the air.¹¹

Dualism is one of the primary concepts in Mandaean scripture. In this, the Mandaeans show similarities to Iranian spiritual traditions, including Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and Mazdakism. Traditionally, Mandaean dualism describes a conflict between the realm of life and light, and the realm of darkness. The opposites are said to have arisen independent of one another. The past, present, and future of the world are conceived of as a struggle between these two forces, much as in Zoroastrianism.

Mandaeism's many-layered scriptures include sections that resemble Zoroastrian texts in dividing the world into the pure and the impure, as well as into good and evil beings. The qualities of the pure and the impure are related to the twelve zodiac signs or connected to falling from the realm of light. Similarly, dualism plays a key role in Mandaean cosmology, as creation is divided between a World of Light and a World of Darkness. A supreme being presides over the World of Light. This deity is called by a variety of names: Life, Lord of Greatness, Great Mind, and King of Light.

The flowing "alive," vital water that is ritually pure contrasts with still, dark water. As mentioned, Mandaean scriptures include a King of Light, Lord of Greatness, a concept that derives from ancient Iranian and Persian beliefs. Mandaean dualism also includes a corresponding antagonist to the King of Light, called the King of Darkness.

The King of Light possesses five qualities: luminousness, pleasant aroma, a beautiful voice, eloquence, and physical beauty. These five attributes are reminiscent of the five characteristics of Ahura Mazda, the Zoroastrian chief deity.

In Mandaic tradition, the supreme being is accompanied by a limitless number of other beings of light, occupied with the performance of rites and proclaiming the greatness of the Life. Mandaean scriptures trace the origin of the World of Light to the First Life itself, with subsequent creations descending from it in emanations that are termed Second, Third, and Fourth Life. At the other end of the dualism, the Lord of Darkness rules over the World of Darkness, which emerged from chaotic dark waters. A gigantic male dragon or monster called Ur and a female spirit called Ruha are the most powerful creatures belonging to the World of Darkness. They, in turn, begat other demonic creatures, the angels, and the Seven (probably the number of planets known to the ancients), as well as the Twelve (based on the zodiac signs).

The opposition of life and death, light and darkness, and good and evil spur the demiurge Ptahil to create the world. In this endeavor, Ptahil is aided by the dark powers, primarily Ruha and the Seven and the Twelve. During this cosmic creation, the first man, Adam, is born from the World of Light. The essence of light in Adam is called "the inner Adam" and it represents the soul in humans, which must be protected from the assaults of dark evil by heavenly beings of light. Unlike the story in the Hebrew Bible, in the Mandaean genesis, the creation of Eve, Adam's mate, is its own act of creation from a cloud of heavenly light.

The primary aim of the Mandaean religion is to save souls. Important agents in this process are the messengers, redeemers, or helpers put into the world by the Life to announce to the congregants that they must answer the call to save their own souls for their salvation. Most important of the messengers of light is the Knowledge of Life. Accompanying him are three descendants of Adam, Abel, Seth, and Enosh. The encounter of the Mandaeans with Christianity resulted in the Mandaean legend that a messenger of theirs came



Figure 1-10: The three plunges in the water a part of Mandaean baptism, in Australia. Courtesy of ABC RN, Siobhan Hegarty.

to Jerusalem to reveal that Jesus was not the true messiah. According to the Mandaean version of the story, John the Baptist then acted as an authentic Mandaean priest. From a Mandaean perspective, John the Baptist did not initiate their religion, but he does stand among their leading prophets.

Sacraments

One distinctive feature of the Mandaeans is the incorporation of Gnostic beliefs into their religious rites. Knowledge of the faith is only part of the path to a soul's salvation. Another important part is ceremonial observances. Mandaean communities have been centered around their ritual sites for hundreds of years. These sites used to include a small hut, constructed from mud, on the bank of a river or by a pool or "Jordan" that contained flowing water. These holy places were always built in proximity to canals or rivers. Alternatively,

Mandaean rites were performed on riverbanks or by the creeks located near city dwellings.

The two most ancient Mandaean rituals are "baptism" and "ascent" (funerary rites). On Sundays (the day of life in Gnostic traditions), members of the community are baptized in flowing water. In addition to this full baptism ceremony, there are also two other water rites which can be completed without priests, but not on Sunday.¹²

Baptism consists of two distinct parts. The initial segment is the actual baptism, where the participants wear the sacred white attire characteristic of Mandaean rituals, symbolizing purity and light of the soul. It is customary for the baptized to chant in their ancient Eastern Aramaic dialect following baptism. There are several stages of the baptism, the first three also involving the number three: three dunks in the water, three signs made on the forehead with water, and three swallows of water. [See Figure 1-10](#). Each baptized



individual is crowned with a wreath of myrtle, and the priest performing the ritual lays hands on the celebrant. Those rites comprise the first part of the baptism. The second segment takes place near to what is considered a manifestation of the Jordan River. This segment includes anointing the celebrant with sesame oil, taking communion with bread and water, and “sealing” the newly baptized individual against the incursion of evil spirits. At the end of each part, the priest gives the neophyte a ritual handshake.

The significance of the baptism is two-fold. The ritual cleanses the neophyte of his or her sins and transgressions. The ceremony has an additional meaning, because Mandaeans believe that all flowing (and thus living) waters are “Jordans” that connect with and have their origin in the higher realm of Life, the world of light.¹³ The Mandaean baptismal ceremony undoubtedly can be traced back to Jewish religious rites before the Christian era.

In addition to baptism, the Mandaeans have two other rituals involving water. These can be performed without a priest present, and they are not required to take place on a Sunday. The Mandaeans’ other main ritual is a sort of mass for the dead. This ceremony is called “ascent.” The Mandaeans perform this ritual when one of their own dies. The purpose is to help raise his or her soul up to the realm of Light and Life. The ceremony involves ritual purifications using flowing water, anointing the deceased with oil, and crowning the departed with a myrtle wreath.

The primary segment of the ritual begins three days after death. The Mandaeans believe that this is when the soul separates from the body and starts its forty-five-day ascent through perilous celestial watchhouses, a sort of purgatory. Following these trials, the soul is said to arrive at the home of Life. The ceremony consists of reciting passages from the Left Ginza and offering ceremonial meals to the soul in its ascent. These feed the soul symbolically, assisting it in its rebirth and in the formation of its spiritual body. These are only some of the Mandaeans’ rituals. Their practices include a variety of rites marking an individual’s death, as

well as meals that commemorate a community member’s death.

Present position

The Mandaeans who currently live in Iraq and Iran are subject to several pressures and face persecution from the Muslim majority. This is particularly true in Khuzestan Province in Iran. Mandaeans in Iran are prohibited from fully participating in civil life by laws commonly used to discriminate against religious and ethnic groups, such as Mandaeans, who are not formally accepted. Mandaeans still live in Jordan, in better circumstances.

In the Islamic Republic of Iran, Mandaeans are effectively excluded from selling food and groceries, since those who practice a faith other than Islam must post a sign identifying their religion at their place of business. They are also barred from working in the public sector. Additionally, very few Mandaeans can enroll in postsecondary education. After the Islamic Revolution, Mandaeans who were working in education and health were dismissed from their jobs. They are often subjected to rigorous ideological screening, the principal prerequisite for which is devotion to the tenets of Islam. The Iranian government monitors events at Mandaean religious centers. Despite a decree forbidding community centers to groups that do not have official recognition, the Mandaeans have managed to continue meeting in their centers.

The ongoing war in Iraq has also taken a heavy toll on the Mandaeans. Community members have been kidnapped, mutilated, and killed. There have also been reports of attacks on women who refuse to veil themselves. To circumvent persecution, numerous Mandaeans have changed their names to avoid being identified as belonging to their group. It is often easy to identify Mandaeans, however, because in some towns there are Mandaean neighborhoods that have existed for generations. (See Figure 1-11.) In addition, Mandaeans often wear distinctive garments; or they have names, jobs, or behaviors that identify them as members of that group.



Figure 1-11: The ancient city of Shushtar, Khuzestan province, Iran. Courtesy of Financial Tribune. The city hosts the largest number of Mandaeans. Its historical hydraulic system from 3rd century CE is a complex irrigation system and is registered on UNESCO's list of World Heritage Sites.

As a result, Mandaeans are sometimes forced to become Muslim. This is particularly true for women. Some Mandaean families have pulled their children out of school because of harassment. In Iran, the Mandaean cemetery has been partly demolished by governmental authorities. Mandaeans are becoming increasingly isolated as their traditional connections with Muslim friends, and businesses have suffered from the pressures on their community. It is not surprising in this context that more and more Mandaeans are leaving their traditional homelands, and that their communities in Iran and Iraq are facing extinction.¹⁴ The Mandaean diaspora has now spread to many countries. When Mandaeans seek asylum, however, they often encounter difficulties, since their religion and culture are not widely known and are often not recognized outside their traditional homelands.

Dr. Mitra Ara is a professor and founding director of Persian and Iranian studies, and faculty member in Middle East studies at San Francisco State University where she teaches numerous subjects on ancient and contemporary Iranian and Persian cultures and religions. She received her Ph.D. in (West) Asian Studies from the University of California, Berkeley. Her research includes ancient Indo-Iranian religions and mythologies, and cosmology and eschatology in world religions. She is the author of various articles and books.

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Trans-Mission: Sino-Mexican Art in Alta California

by Mariachiara Gasparini PhD

The route traced by the Manila Galleons from the Philippines to Mexico between 1565 and 1815 opened the path to a “second Silk Road” that connected the old and the new world. By trading cultures, languages, and arts, the Spaniards (as well as the Portuguese) created a way for modern globalization as had never been seen before. In the footsteps of Marco Polo and Christian missionaries who, between the 13th and 14th centuries, crossed the Mongol Empire and began to intermingle arts, cultures, and religions more extensively, merchants and missionaries of the modern period extended their trading to the Americas, and started a new form of art that in its European version was categorized as *Chinoiserie* (in Chinese style or generally in Asian style). Like the golden cloths of the Mongols, imported and copied in Italy, influenced later medieval painting in Tuscany, modern Chinese tapestry and embroidery and Indian calico fabrics (also called *chintz*) were imported to the Americas and reproduced with local material. The Chinese underglaze blue porcelain, which connected the world in a recognizable style, was also used as a model for blue-resist fabrics that became especially popular in the Americas.¹ Once again, as it had occurred along the ancient Silk Road before, textile and porcelain were used to communicate power and social status among different cultures.

Following the trend started by the British and the Dutch in the East with the establishment, respectively, of the East India Company (EIC) in 1600, and the *Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (VOC), better known as Dutch East Indian Company, in 1602, the Spaniards played a new role in the very far West, shifting geographic and



Figure 2-1: Plate with monogram of the Dutch East India Company (VOC). Porcelain with underglaze blue decoration (in imitation of the type produced in China). Japan, 1660–1690. Asian Art Museum, San Francisco (B60P974)

cultural boundaries (Figure 2-1). The main body of their trade was moved to the Americas, and their legs stretched to Asia. The *Aspecto simbolico del mundo Hispanico* (Symbolic Aspect of the Hispanic World) reflects the world as the Spaniards imagined it (Figure 2-2). This is an allegorical image of the Spanish Empire as Hispania vertically depicted. When turned horizontally it is a map of the world with the Americas at the center.² China, that had always claimed to be the “Middle Kingdom” and that in the 17th century

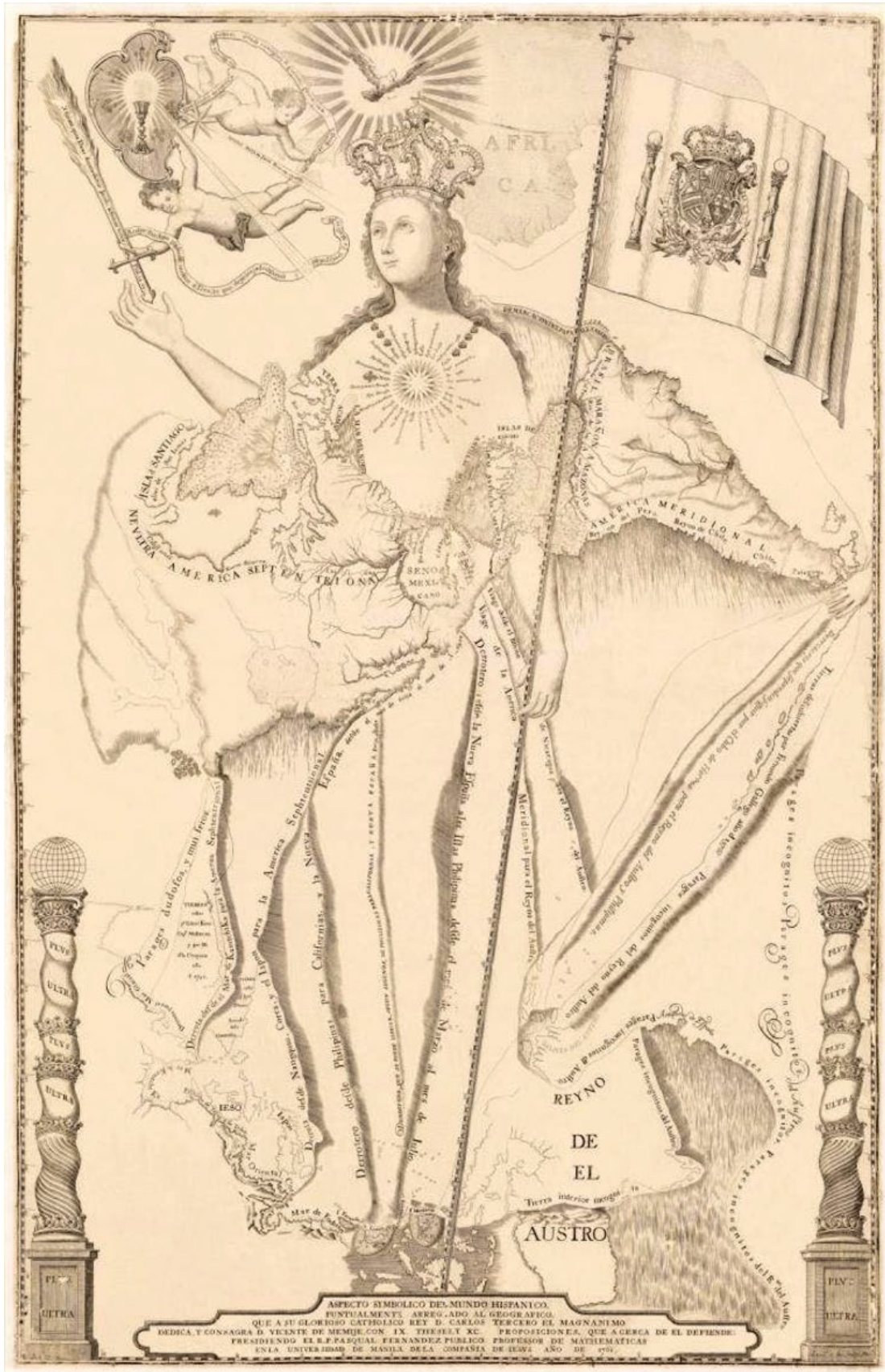


Figure 2-2: Vicente de Memije (preparer) (active 1761) and Laureano Atlas (engraver) (active 1671). *Aspecto simbólico del mundo hispánico*. Engraving, Manila, 1761. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Laureano_atlas-aspecto_simbolico_del_mundo_hispanico.png



Figure 2-3: Matteo Ricci's (1552–1610) map (*Kunyu Wangguo Quantu*). Printing in brownish ink on six mulberry paper panels. Beijing 1602 (a copy available in the James Bell Library, university of Minnesota, <http://bell.lib.umn.edu/RicciMap1.html> or in the catalogue China at the Center by the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco).

was still placed at the center on the first map of the modern world by the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), now, had to make space for the New World and to begin a new artistic production to satisfy the needs of Western colonization and imagination in the Americas (Figure. 2-3).³

The role of the Church in the making of globalization is often underestimated. The phenomenon of chinoiserie that had begun in Europe around the 17th century is linked to depictions of China, and portraits of elegant Chinese officials and court ladies brought back or produced by Christian Missionaries. The original features of these characters who were meant to be emulated by noble and aristocratic Europeans in the 18th century had ultimately become "Orientalized" and had lost authenticity. By this time, China refused any equal trading with the West, which pushed the Europeans to reimagine the East through baroque and exotic expressions of art that presented China as decadent and effeminate.⁴

While European luxury items such as woolen textiles and wares did not appeal Chinese taste, silver was readily exchanged for Chinese porcelain and silk and other Asian items in Europe and the Americas. Just as centuries before Chinese

silk had drained the precious metals reserves of the Roman Empire, in the 17th century, Chinese items drained the European silver reserves, which were mostly filled by the Spanish colonies in Peru and Mexico.⁵ Trading with China was conducted via the large colony of Chinese merchants in Manila, or through the ports of Canton and Macao (controlled by the Portuguese), which provided the West with depictions of southern landscapes, featuring palm trees, rice paddies, and water, in porcelains and textiles created for the export market, adapted to European designs.

Along with luxury material from the East, the New World imported slaves who once arrived in Mexico were categorized according to their general provenance and employed as domestic servants or in textile mills.⁶ This same terminology was also applied to contemporary "casta paintings," which portray people of mixed race in the colonial Americas (Figure 2-4).⁷ The term "Chino" was generally employed to categorize all the individuals coming from Asia and "Negro" for those coming from Africa. "Indio" referred to the indigenous people of the Americas who had a distinctive civic status under the Spaniards. The term "Chino-Indio" was specifically used to categorize free Filipino sailors on the Manila Galleons. In the



Figure 2-4: Miguel Cabrera (1695-1768). *De negro y de India, China cambuja*. Oil on canvas.



Figure 2-5: Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara (Guanyin). Dehua ware. China, 1700–1800. Asian Art Museum, San Francisco (B60P1374).

18th century, however, the term "Chino" began to be also used for individuals of mixed Indian and African origins.⁸

In this context, Asian textiles such as the Indian calico printed cotton, which became known as *indianilla*, began to appear in all types of Mexican paintings, including *casta* paintings, and inspired local embroidery and tapestry. Both religious and laic images, either painted or embroidered, were filled with Asian or Asian-like luxury objects that were often adapted to the needs of the Catholic Church, which had posts in both hemispheres and significantly contributed to the evolution of the Asian style in the Americas. The use of Asian textiles to cover indigenous people during their baptism and ivory sculptures of Madonna adapted from the popular Chinese Dehua porcelain Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara (known in China as Guanyin) were emblematic objects of now-global forms of art seen as "exotic" (Figure 2-5).

By the end of the 17th century, when Chino (and indigenous) slavery was abolished in Mexico, Asian porcelains and textiles had already found their way to the west coast of North America. Following the example of the Jesuits who had previously established fourteen missions in Baja, between 1769 and 1833, Franciscan priests founded twenty-one missions in Alta California. A year before, San Blas at Nayarit in Mexico had become the naval base and supply depot of Alta California, and on January 9, 1769, the first ship with sixty-two persons onboard sailed for San Diego. But it was only a few months later that Father Junípero Serra established Mission San Diego de Alcalá on Presidio Hill.⁹ With the support of the Spanish military presidios, the missions converted indigenous populations and introduced European culture and technology. Rebuilt many times due to earthquakes and floods, still today, the California missions preserve liturgical vestments and items made with European and Asian fabrics, Chinese-style blue and white ceramics, and indigenous potteries of the time (Figures 2-6 and 2-7).

Among the many collections preserved in the missions, the one from Santa Clara, now in



Figure 2-6: Shard of blue and white ceramic in imitation of Chinese underglaze blue porcelain from Puebla. From the Spanish presidio in Santa Barbara, California. Possibly 18th cent. Photo by Mariachiara Gasparini



Figure 2-7: Shard of a canton porcelain ware. From the Spanish presidio in Santa Barbara, California. Possibly 18th cent. Photo by Mariachiara Gasparini

de Saisset Museum on Santa Clara University campus, which also includes the eponymous mission, is one of the better preserved. Mission Santa Clara de Asís was established in 1777 in the “Valley of the Oaks,” land of the native Ohlone tribe, not too far from the bank of the Guadalupe River, by Father José Murguía and Father Tomas de la Peña. According to the 1851 inventory, the mission was relocated in 1779 due to the flood of the “Rio Madre” and then destroyed by an earthquake in 1818. Reconstructed three years later, the mission was reconsecrated by Father Narciso Duran from Mission San Jose.¹⁰ In 1851, the Mission was transferred to the Jesuit Order that established one of the first colleges of high learning in the new State of California. Ten years later, the church was remodeled with an Italian-style façade that was destroyed in a fire in 1926. The present building was rebuilt in the neo-colonial style of the previous mission based on the available photographs (Figure 2-8).¹¹

The liturgical vestments in de Saisset show a variety of styles and materials, some of which might be read in the aforementioned inventory, confirming the transmission of textiles, porcelains, and other items from Asia, which were refinished and used in Mexico for the Church. In the inventory of 1777, the chasubles are divided into “first” and

“second class.” Of the latter, two were decorated with flowers, and one, in particular, was lined with “Canton cloth” also called “China,” and always in white or pale pink. Again, the inventory also lists an alb (a long and narrow white garment) of Chinese linen with lace linen, which was given directly by the King of Spain, Cantonese crepe shawls that were used for the crucifixes, a printed calico curtain that was used for the chair railing and the collateral door of the church, and three porcelain cups that were used for washing hands.¹² The 1782’s inventory lists also a Chinese bronze jar used for wine during the mess, six Chinese plates, and a dozen bowls arrived from Mexico. In 1786, a pallium (a liturgical circular band around the shoulders) of red cloth from China was added to the list of the mission’s items. As explained in the inventory, the “neophytes” (converted natives) were also covered with clothes from Mexico acquired through the profit obtained by selling seeds or other items produced in the local Puebla (town). Although a few more items were added in the following inventories, there is no specific reference to additional Asian material.

The vestments were hidden behind a recessed wall until 2005. Among these, there is a dalmatic made with ikat fabric, which according to the current label came from Beijing but most likely was



Figure 2-8: Mission Santa Clara de Asís, (present façade 19th cent.), California. Photo by Mariachiara Gasparini

produced by Uighur people in Khotan, present-day Xinjiang, and it is similar to the types still produced in Uzbekistan; and a mass set (a chasuble, a long stole, a maniple, a burse, a chalice veil) made in the same fashion, a strawberry-red ground with embroidered floral motifs and a cross (Figure 2-9). While many of the linings are Chinese, the golden trims and tassels used to finish these items seem to be French, Italian, or most likely Spanish (Figure 2-10a). Additionally, there is another chasuble of yellow ground and colorful floral embroidery in a similar style.¹³

Although the exact origin and date of these pieces cannot be confirmed, by looking at other contemporary vestments and textiles from the Americas and Europe, it seems clear that they were specially created in Asia for the export market and also copied or finished in Mexico and Peru. Master embroiderers were among those artisans that had moved from Spain in the 16th century and had established workshops in the New World,

which provided vestments for the priests and the Church until the 18th century, as confirmed by the archives of the cathedral of Mexico City and Puebla.¹⁴ The Codex Sierra, a 16th century-account of Santa Catalina Texaupa, where local people had begun to domesticate and raise silkworms, documents not only the production of sacred vestments but also the trade of local silk with Spanish and Chinese silk items.¹⁵ A century later, Mexico City commissioned Chinese items for the Church, many of which lined with Cantonese silk and trimmed with golden fringes similar to those in Mission Santa Clara in Alta California.

The sacred vestments mentioned above have clear Chinese features that recall the embroidered floral patterns of Qing (1636–1911) female clothing and seem to be lined with the popular “Canton cloth. See Figure 2-11. Cantonese silk is, in fact, one of the most frequently mentioned Asian textiles in inventories or merchant lists of sale of the time, including those of the English East Indian



Figure 2-9: Liturgical vestments (Chinese ikat dalmatic on the left, Chinese embroidered red satin chasuble at the center, and Chinese embroidered red satin. Photo by Mariachiara Gasparini"



Figures 2-10 a and b: (Details above and right) Long stole. Chinese red satin embroidered in silk with golden European tassels. Possibly 18thcent. de Saisset Museum, Santa Clara University, Santa Clara, California (A.15.59.14). Photo by Mariachiara Gasparini



Figure 2-11: Chinese female vest. Silk satin with silk embroidered decorations. Qing dynasty (1644–1911). Asian Art Museum, San Francisco (1988.32.15)

Company, which was trading then with New England in North America.¹⁶ The red chasuble on display in Santa Clara recalls a similar one in the Metropolitan Museum in New York. This, however, includes a double-headed eagle and a crow symbol of the Habsburg monarchy (a popular decorative motif in China) in the center, and two cornucopias at the bottom, a Greco-Roman motif that was later included in Christian figurative art and liturgical vestments. Compare [Figures 2-9](#), and [Figures 2-12a and 2-12b](#).

While the small flowers and the delicate leaves on both chasuble are typical of Chinese decorative art, the larger and bold flowers created with an additional grid of cross-stitches seem to replicate the foreign models.¹⁷ Similar motifs appear on European vestments made in brocade, damask,

and lampas, as well as on Indian calicos, which also combined different Asian motifs to satisfy the export market fascinated by the exotic Asian combined-style. See [Figures 2-13a, 2-13b, 2-14](#); and [2-15](#). The palampore (bed cover) with a large tree of life at the center showing these types of flowers, for instance, was one of the most appreciated and requested textiles that originated in China and was introduced to India by the English East Company, and then was re-imitated in Canton in the embroidered form ([Figure 2-15](#) and [Figure 2-16](#)).

Uncut and untailored Qing embroidered imperial robes, as well as robes created for the export, are now preserved in collections worldwide, confirming the Chinese custom to prepare the desired tailoring pattern in advance. See [Figure 2-17](#). A similar process might have been used for the liturgical vestments produced for the Spanish colonies in the Americas. A microscopic analysis of the mass set in Santa Clara has shown traces of the original ink outline used to sketch the design to embroider. See [Figure 2-18](#). This technique was a common practice in China. During the Qing period, the three imperial textile manufactories in Jiangnan (Nanjing, Suzhou, and Hangzhou) would have woven high-quality silks to be sent to Beijing, where some of these were selected to tailor imperial robes. The fabric was sewn together, and the design painted on the surface, then it was stretched between frames and finally embroidered.¹⁸

Although the quality of the silk used for the liturgical vestments is not comparable to the types produced in the three imperial manufactories, it was still appreciated by foreign people who saw it as available luxurious material. In 1753, Canton became the only port in China open to overseas trade, but foreign people could access only limited areas of the city. Therefore, Cantonese artisans finished and embroidered goods near the port to expedite deliveries to meet their requests.¹⁹ The embroidered works were also done or completed in the Philippines, whence they were re-exported. This process of finishing and refinishing conducted in different areas of the world most likely involved the use of golden trims like those of the vestments in Santa Clara, which might have been added in Manila, in



Figures 2-12 a and b: Chasuble. Chinese Silk satin with silk embroidered decorations for the European market (possibly Spanish). Mid-18th cent. Metropolitan Museum (1998.368) [No copyright]



Figures 2-13 a and b: (Details of flowers with grid of cross-stiches) Chalice veil. Chinese red satin embroidered in silk. Possibly 18thcent. de Saisset Museum, Santa Clara University, Santa Clara, California (A.15.59.16). Photo by Mariachiara Gasparini



Figure 2-14: (Detail of flowers) Long stole. Possibly brocaded lampas and “Canton silk” lining Unknown provenance, possibly Europe. Possibly 18th cent. de Saisset Museum, Santa Clara University, Santa Clara, California (A.15.59.5). Photo by Mariachiara Gasparini



Figure 2-15: Palampore (bed cover). Plain cotton, mordant painted and dyed, resist-dyed. India. 18th cent. Metropolitan Museum (1982.66) [No copyright]

Europe (which re-exported Asian items to North America), or directly in Mexico. See [Figure 2-10a](#).

The Sino-Mexican liturgical vestments in Mission Santa Clara de Asís represent a tiny part of a global transfer of people, ideas, and styles that contributed to the development of American culture. The vision of “the other” as exotic created a market for all the things “Oriental” that became a common trend in the 18th century Europe, and that was adopted in the Americas, even by the religious settlements established in Alta California. As in the Baja California Missions, the colorful silks used to conduct mass created a spectacular vision in contrast with the naked bodies of the natives who began to be covered with simple clothes, and also with the habits of the Franciscan and Jesuit Orders. The Jesuits, in particular, celebrated the spiritual conquest of Asia and fostered the interest of the Spaniards in far Eastern culture. The material evidence in Alta California requires further analysis, but the written records as well as visual evidence, confirm that Asian items were present both in religious and laic life and that they were acquired because of the privileged position of the missions.

Dr. Mariachiara Gasparini earned her PhD in Transcultural Studies: Global Art History from Ruprecht-Karls-Universität in Heidelberg. In the Fall of 2020 she assumes a new position as Assistant Professor of Chinese Art and Architectural History at the University of Oregon. Dr. Gasparini is the author of the book, *Transcending Patterns:*



Figure 2-16: Palampore (bed cover). Silk satin embroidered with silk. Canton, China for the European or American market. 1750–1800. Metropolitan Museum (47.63) [No copyright]



Silk Road Cultural and Artistic Interactions through Central Asian Textile Images published November 2019 by the University of Hawaii Press.

Notes

1. Amelia Peck. "Trade Textiles at the Metropolitan Museum: A History," in *Interwoven Globe: The Worldwide Textile Trade, 1500–1800* (Yale University Press, 2013), 3–5.
2. Timothy Brook. "Coming onto the Map," in *Made in the Americas: The New World Discovers Asia* ed. by Dennis Care (MFA Publication, 2015), 15–16.
3. Theodore N. Fosse. "Ricci's World Map: The 1602 *Kunyu Wanguo Quantu*," in Natasha Reichle ed., *China at the Center: Ricci and Verbiest World Maps* (Asian Art Museum San Francisco, 2016), 22.
4. Christopher M. S. Johns. *China and the Church: Chinoiserie in the Global Context* (University of California Press, 2016), 3–8; 113–114.
5. Pliny the Elder (23–79 CE) complained that silk was draining the empire of one hundred million sesterces of gold per year. Mariachiara, Gasparini. *Transcending Patterns: Silk Road Cultural and Artistic Interactions through Central Asian Textile Images* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2019), 21.
6. Tatiana Seijas. *Asian Slaves in Colonial Mexico* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 3.
7. Donna Pierce. "By the Boatload: Receiving and Recreating the Arts of Asia, in *Made in the Americas*, 70.
8. Seijas, 3–7.
9. <https://missionscalifornia.com/timeline>
10. The information provided here were collected at de Saisset Museum, Santa Clara University, between 2015 and 2017.
11. Mission Santa Clara de Asis <https://www.scu.edu/missionchurch/historical-information/>
12. The 1851's inventory was translated from Spanish by Veronica Lococo, Modern Language Department, Santa Clara University, 1980. It also includes previous inventories, a few of which were lost or misplaced.
13. These are only a few of the items in de Saisset Museum that I analyzed.
14. Elena Philipps. "The Iberian Globe: Textile Traditions and Trade in Latin America," in *Interwoven Globe*, 36–37.
15. *Ibid.*, 41–42.
16. Two hundred ninety-seven pieces of Canton cloth are listed in a 1740 broadside for the English East India Company public sale of goods, now in the Winterthur Museum, Wilmington, Delaware.
17. Chinese Palampore, 1700–1850. Metropolitan Museum <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/69860>
18. Yan Yong. "Production Process and Imperial Textile Manufactories," in Ming Wilson ed. *Imperial Chinese Robes from the Forbidden City* (Victoria and Albert Museum, 2010), 100, 111.
19. Shelagh Vainker. *Chinese Silks* (British Museum Press, 2004, 192–193.



Figure 2-17: Uncut partial court robe. Silk embroidered with silk and golden threads. China. 1800–1911. Asian Art Museum, San Francisco (1992.93)



Figure 2-18: Detail of ink under cross-stitches on a chalice veil. Chinese red satin embroidered in silk, possibly 18th century. De Saisset Museum, Santa Clara University, Santa Clara, California (A.15.59.16). Photo by Mariachiara Gasparini



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