

THE HISTORY OF THE TURKIC-MANICHAEAN SCRIPT

R.A. Alimukhamedov,

Acting Professor, Department of Languages-1,
Oriental University, Doctor of Philological Sciences

Abstract The Turkic-Manichaean script (Turkic-Manichean writing) holds an important place in the religious-spiritual and cultural life of ancient Turkic peoples. It was mainly used in the 6th–10th centuries by Turkic communities that propagated the teachings of Manichaeism. Developed on the basis of the Manichaean alphabet, it was adapted to the phonetic structure of the Turkic language under the influence of Sogdian and Aramaic scripts. Texts written in this script (hymns, prayers, religious-philosophical works) are often bilingual (Tocharian+Turkic, Iranian+Turkic) and have been preserved in manuscripts discovered in the Turfan (Eastern Turkestan) region. In the Turkic-Manichaean environment, manuscript book production (pothi style, use of paper and palm leaves) was highly developed, and literacy levels were elevated. This script played a significant role in the development of ancient Turkic literature and culture, and it also influenced the later formation of the Uyghur script. The article briefly covers the origins of the Turkic-Manichaean script, its areas of application, the characteristics of the texts, and its historical significance.

Keywords: Turkic-Manichaean script, Manichaean alphabet, ancient Turkic scripts, bilingual texts, hymns, Turfan manuscripts, Manichaeism, Sogdian influence, Uyghur script, ancient Turkic literature, book art, religious-philosophical texts.

According to scholars, Mani ibn Fattak (216–276), the founder of Manichaeism, invented his own script based on the Aramaic-Syriac writing system to spread his teachings. This script provided a much clearer representation of the phonetic-phonological structure of Middle Persian compared to the contemporary Pahlavi script.[1]

Researchers offer various opinions on the origins of the Manichaean script. Opponents of Manichaeism claim it was a mysterious script invented by Mani himself. However, this view is incorrect. Some hypotheses suggest that it derived from a cursive form of Aramaic, resembling the Palmyrene script, a descendant of Estrangela. Others argue that since Mani was a skilled artist, he perfected his own script.[2]

The Manichaean script emerged on the basis of one of the Palmyrene variants of Aramaic writing.[3]

The Manichaean script was used exclusively for copying Manichaean religious works. These texts were written in ancient Iranian languages (Pahlavi, Parthian, Sogdian; some sources also mention Middle Persian, Bactrian, and early New Persian)[4] as well as in Turkic. Manichaean-script manuscripts were mostly copied in the 8th–9th centuries.[5]

In the early 20th century, numerous Manichaean texts in this script were discovered in Turfan, written in three Iranian languages: Middle Persian, Parthian, and Sogdian.[6] Manichaean works found in Eastern Turkestan are classified as Middle Persian sources.[7]

Initially, the Manichaean script was known only within a narrow circle of Manichaean monks. Later, members of the Manichaean community (the “hearers” or nigoshaks) also learned it.

The number of letter signs in the Manichaean script is given by some as 29,[8] by others as around 23–27,[9] and in some sources as 30.[10] The lack of a precise number of signs (unlike modern Uzbek Cyrillic or Latin alphabets) can be explained by the fact that the script was originally created for another language, and when applied to Turkic texts, certain signs reflecting features of Iranian languages were used.



Like other scripts in the Aramaic family, the Manichaean script is written from right to left.[11] Although it does not have three forms for each letter like Arabic, some letters are joined together in texts. For example, the alif letter connects with the following <n> and <r> letters. Some researchers also note the tendency of certain signs to resemble one another.[12]

Two styles of writing are distinguished in the Manichaean script. The first and most common is the classical style, in which each letter is written clearly and separately. Such texts are easy to read. Most surviving texts are in this style. The second style is cursive, in which letters are slanted to the left. Such texts are found only in a few fragments (M50, M51).

One distinctive feature of the Manichaean script is that it is a purely phonetic script, free of ideograms, unlike Pahlavi.

The script includes signs for both vowels and consonants. Additionally, there are letter signs reflecting specific features of Iranian languages.

Representation of vowels. In Turkic sources, three letters of the Manichaean alphabet — alif, vāv, and yā — are used to represent vowels. Alif denotes [a]–[ä], yā denotes [i (~e)]–[ī], and vāv denotes [ü]–[u]–[ö]–[o].

The script distinguishes front and back vowels. For example, initial thin unrounded [ä-] is represented by one sign (*ärsär* — XL.68), while initial broad unrounded [a-] uses two signs (*ačitīm(i)z* — XL.57). In word-medial and final positions, thin and broad [a]–[ä] are represented by one sign (*y(ä)mä* — XL.18, *otqa* — XL.70). Vowels are not always written in medial position but are read in context (*t(ä)ḡri* — XL.72, *y(a)ruq* — XL.15).

Initial thin and broad unrounded [i-]–[ī-] are represented by alif and yā or hamza and yā (*ikinti* — XL.34, *iḡaçqa* — XL.60). Medial and final positions use yā (*bišinč* — XL.37, *ämti* — XL.61, *qırq* — XL.55, *y(a)ruḡi* — XL.47). In some medial positions, it is omitted but read (*ärks(i)z(i)n* — XL.24, *bašl(i)ḡ* — XL.54).

Initial thin rounded [ü-] is represented by alif, vāv, and yā (*üčünč* — XL.35). Medial and final use vāv (*ärür* — XL.42, *k(ä)ntü* — XL.26).

Initial broad rounded [u-] uses alif and vāv (*umatın* — XL.41). Medial and final use vāv (*y(a)ruq* — XL.15, *boşunu* — XL.62).

Initial thin rounded [ö-] uses alif, vāv, and yā (*ölürüp* — XL.146). Medial and final use vāv and yā (*törüg* — XL.74).

Initial broad rounded [o-] uses alif with double vāv (*oot* — XL.37). Medial and final use single vāv (*nomın* — XL.72).

Apparently, these features in the Turkic-Manichaean script arose as a result of adaptation principles similar to those in the Uyghur script when adjusted for Turkic.[13]

Representation of consonants. The script uses 22 letters for consonants: b, z, w, k, q, g, ḡ, h, f, č, l, m, n, s, š, p, r, d, q, k, t, y. The Manichaean alphabet fully represents all Turkic consonants. As noted earlier, being free of ideograms, this script accurately reflects the phonetic-phonological features of the monuments from that period.

The sonorant [ŋ] is represented by the combination of <n> and .

The Turkic-Manichaean script lacks special signs to distinguish palatal and velar consonant variants. In this regard, the Old Turkic (Runic) script is more advanced, as it has pairs of signs for phonetic contrasts.[14]

The plosive [d] is represented by two signs: *sīd(i)m(i)z* (XL.51), *din murua* (XL.307). In 10th–13th century sources, the interdental [δ] appears with a special sign: *äḡgü* (XL.70).

Voiced [b] and voiceless [p] are distinguished: *k(ä)lürüp* (XL.105), *bolup* (XL.118), *boltumuz* (XL.102).

Voiceless [k] and voiced [g], [q] and [ḡ] are differentiated: [k] uses two signs — *yäkkä* (XL.129), *äkinti* (XL.129), *yükünč* (XL.130), *türüg* (XL.128), *böḡtäg* (XL.142).

[q] also uses two signs: *baçaq* (XL.138), *qılınč* (XL.143), *uluḡqa* (XL.86). Sometimes both appear in one word: *tīnl(i)ḡqa* (XL.83 and XL.82).



Voiceless [s] and [š] have separate signs: bošunu (XL.62), suw (XL.83).

The pharyngeal [h], absent in Turkic, appears only in borrowed Iranian words: m(a)nastar hirza (XL.63).

The borrowed [x] is represented by a special sign: burxanlar (XL.133), č(a)xšap(a)t (XL.92). <f> also appears in loanwords: frištilar (XL.224).

The <hamza> sign does not appear alone. It combines with yā to represent thin and broad [i]: ičkü (XL.56), iğaçqa (XL.60).

Vowel harmony in the script. Turkic languages feature vowel harmony (palatal-velar distinction).[15] In the history of Turkic scripts, the Old Turkic Runic script marked palatal-velar contrasts with consonant pairs, while the Uyghur script used special signs.[16]

The Turkic-adapted Manichaean script is no exception. It lacks special signs for palatal-velar distinction. However, those who adapted it to Turkic possessed high philological knowledge, as evidenced by the surviving texts.

In the texts, palatal-velar harmony is reflected in both vowels and consonants.

For vowels, the distinction appears in the use of signs: initial [ä] uses one sign, [a] uses two (exception: arığ — XL.66). Medial and final positions do not distinguish them.

Initial [ü] and [u], [ö] and [o] are sometimes distinguished.[17]

Palatal-velar distinction in consonants mainly occurs in four letters: words with <k> and are palatal, while those with and <ğ> are velar: köñülün (XL.107), tägmäkä (XL.136), qılur-biz (XL.142), ağritimiz (XL.90).

Additionally, harmony is indicated through affixes (derivational and inflectional): yirkä (XL.58), t(ä)ñrikä (XL.151), y(a)ruq (XL.160), bašl(i)ğ (XL.54), nomuğ (XL.132), yılqa (XL.272), tutduq (XL.249).

In general, among the more than ten scripts used by Turkic peoples, the Turkic-adapted Manichaean script stands out for its uniqueness. Most importantly, Turkic peoples successfully adapted this script to their language's phonetic and phonological structure. As a result, many works were created and have survived to the present day.

References:

1. *Ахунджанов Э.А.* История инвормационной культуры Узбекистана. Книга I. Ташкент. 2015.
2. *Дирингер Д.* Алфавит. Москва. 1963.
3. *Древнетюркский словарь.* Ленинград. 1969.
4. *Оранский И.М.* Введение в иранскую филологию. Москва. 1960.
5. *Расторгуева В.С.* Среднеперсидский язык. Москва. 1966.
6. *Содиқов Қ.* Эски туркий битилгар. Тошкент. 2009.
7. *Содиқов Қ.* Эски туркий ёзувлар. Тошкент. 2008.
8. *Ҳакимов М.* Шарқ манбашунослиги луғати. Тошкент. 2013.
9. *Ҳожиев А.* Тилшунослик терминларининг изохли луғати. Тошкент. 2002.
<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/manichean-script>
10. *Sodiqov Q.* Turkiy til tarixi. Toshkent. 2009.

