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Backgammon and cosmology at the Sasanian court

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Abstract
The Middle Persian text *The Explanation of Chess and the Invention of Backgammon* (WČ) is dated to the reign of Xusrō I. It describes a contest between the Persian and Indian kings represented by their leading wise men. The famous sage Wuzurgmihr defeats his Indian counterpart at chess and invents the game of backgammon, the board being given cosmological significance with the turning of the counters and roll of the die corresponding to fate. This article presents a new textual source where many of the same themes are evident: the courtly context, the competition between rival sages from Persia and India, the interpretation in terms of cosmology and fate. However, this new source is from the fourth century CE or earlier and the personages involved are different, raising vital questions about the history of the topic and its development in Persian and other late antique literatures.
Keywords: Sasanian, Manichaeism, Coptic, Backgammon, Middle Persian literature

The early history of board games and their role in classical courtly culture has been a topic of sustained scholarly interest. This article will present a previously unknown and unexpected textual source that makes a substantial contribution to the question due to its date, context, and implications for ongoing research. Attention will be drawn to the difficult question of the evolution of literary traditions in early Sasanian Iran in order to demonstrate the discovery of a unique and major new source for the relevant disciplines. To survey the full range of texts, art, or material culture[1] from late antiquity relevant to the topic of backgammon, or the complex issue of the development of this and various related board games, the reader should consult the standard studies cited in the references.

It is necessary to start with a brief summary of the Middle Persian text *The Explanation of Chess and the Invention of Backgammon* (Wizārišn ī Čatrang ud Nihišn ī Nēw-Ardaxšīr), commonly dated to the sixth century CE and the

1 The most striking representation is the painting from Panjikant, to be dated *c*. 740 CE (or earlier): see G.L. Semenov, "Das Brettspiel in Mittelasien und im Iran", in *Studien zur sogdischen Kultur an der Seidenstraße* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1996, 11–24 and 127–32, at 17, following Belenizki); note review by U. Schädler in *Board Game Studies* 5, 2002, 126–9 (at 127), who prefers pre-720 CE.

reign of Ḵosrow (Xusrō) I.[2] This work describes a kind of contest between the Persian and the Indian kings who are represented by their leading wise men. The famous sage Wuzurgmihr not only defeats his Indian counterpart at chess but he invents the game of backgammon, the board being given cosmological significance and the turning of the counters according to the roll of the die corresponding to the nature of fate. This is the culminating passage:[3]

> (Wuzurgmihr speaking) I will make the arrangements of the (game of) backgammon on the board like the Lord Ohrmazd, when He created the creatures of the material world.
>
> The turning and revolution of the pieces by the die is like people in the material world, their bond connected to the spiritual world, through the 7 and 12 (planets and constellations) they all have their being and move on, and when it is as if they hit against one another and collect, it is like people in the material world, one hits another (person).
>
> And when by the turning of this die all are collected, it is in the likeness of the people who all passed out from the material world (died), and when they set them up again, it is in the likeness of the people who during the (time of) resurrection, all will come to life again.

Let us consider the most important features of this account. First, the play of the game is compared to human fate, which by divine ordinance is governed by the planets and the stars. The taking away of pieces from the board and their return from outside the arena, and presumably the patterns of placement and vagaries of conjunction on the board, are understood as a reflection of our birth, death, and resurrection. This cosmological speculation was occasioned at least in part by numerology, i.e. twelve fields of play, like the months and the stars, on each side; thirty counters like the days and nights; the duality and contrast between the black and white pieces in opposition. Further, every backgammon player will be familiar with the experience of a sudden reversal of fortune; everything is set up and going right for you, then the tables are turned and disaster falls in an instant.

2 See T. Daryaee, "Mind, body, and the cosmos: chess and backgammon in Ancient Persia", *Iranian Studies* 35, 2002, 281–312, where references to further literature on the topic are to be found, together with discussions, editions and translations of the text (abbreviated as WČ and similar) and related material. Daryaee's research has been reproduced in slightly different formats (such as http://www.cais-soas.com/CAIS/Sport/chess_backgammon.htm); and most recently as T. Daryaee, *On the Explanation of Chess and Backgammon* (Ancient Iran Series, Vol. 2), UCI Jordan Centre for Persian Studies, 2016. Quotations are taken from the latest version with its slightly revised English translation and some expanded material. Daryaee's conclusions should be compared to those of A. Panaino, for a convenient summary of which see his "*Wizārišn ī čatrang ud nihišn ī nēw-ardaxšīr*", *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, online edition, 2017, available at http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/wizarisn-catrang-nihisn-ardaxir (accessed 4 October 2017). A more detailed treatment with substantial commentary in A. Panaino, *La novella degli Scacchi e della Tavola Reale* (Milan: Mimesis, 1999; text, notes and Italian translation at 63–77; English translation in an appendix at 249–51 with summary of the book at 245–7).

3 WČ 29–31, trans. Daryaee 2016: 23–24.

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Second, there is the context in terms of competition between sages and the setting at the Persian court. Wuzurgmihr (elsewhere Bozorgmehr, about whom there developed a considerable literature in Persian and Arabic),[4] is the vizier of King Ḵosrow. The King of the Indians sends a set of chess and a challenge to explain the logic of that game or to submit to him by way of tribute and tax. The means by which the challenge can be tested is the explanation given by Wurzurgmihr and played out in a set of games between himself and the corresponding wise minister of the Indian king, Taxtrītos (or Tātarītos). The chess challenge successfully overcome, Wurzurgmihr acts for Ḵosrow in reply through what is presented as his own invention of backgammon, although notably he must remark that the game is named for the first Sasanian king as *nēw-Ardaxšir*.[5] This putative etymology, "Ardaxšir the valiant" (vel sim.), is thus supplied for its common name in Persian, i.e. *nard* or *nardasīr* interpreted as contractions of the former; the same then passed on into Arabic and other literatures.[6] Wurzurgmihr in turn travels to India where his victory as the wisest of the wise turns the tables and leads to tribute paid to Ērānšahr. The obvious points to bear in mind are the courtly context, the rivalry between India and Persia, the implied attribution back to the time of King Ardaxšir in the third century from the actual context of King Ḵosrow in the sixth, and the achievement of victory through wisdom.[7]

Let us turn to the new text that has been discovered. It was identified during the ongoing collaborative project by Iain Gardner, Jason BeDuhn, and Paul Dilley to edit a large (*c*. 500 page) Coptic Manichaean codex on papyrus housed at the Chester Beatty Library and entitled *The Chapters of the Wisdom of My Lord Mani*.[8] The codex is in a very poor state, but it contains unique and early material of remarkable interest and this has justified endeavours to publish

4 Summary by Djalal Khaleghi Motlagh, "Bozorgmehr-e Boḵtagān", *Encyclopaedia Iranica* IV/4, 1989, 427–9; available online at http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/bozorgmehr-e-boktagan (accessed 12 December 2017). See especially A. Christensen, "La légende du sage Buzurǰmihr", *Acta Orientalia* VIII, 1930, 81–128; for the *andarz* or wisdom tradition in Arabic, S. Shaked, "The sayings of Wuzurgmihr", in H. Ben-Shammai, S. Shaked and S. Stroumsa (eds), *Exchange and Transmission across Cultural Boundaries* (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 2013), 216–75; for detailed discussion of the literary traditions behind the WČ and the derivation of the names, F. de Blois, *Burzōy's Voyage to India and the Origin of the Book of Kalīlah wa Dimnah* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1990, especially pp. 18–21 and 48–50); further on the etymology of the various names A. Panaino, *La novella degli Scacchi e della Tavola Reale*, 101–4; on the identities, literary traditions and biographies, pp. 105–23.

5 WČ 19.

6 Notable is the reference in the Babylonian Talmud, Ketubot 61b, often cited as the earliest occurrence. Panaino suggests that the term *nibard* ("battle" or "combat") may have been compounded with the game's later name, see *La novella degli Scacchi e della Tavola Reale*, 188–9.

7 See especially WČ 37.

8 This is Codex C, sometimes termed the Dublin *Kephalaia* codex or 2Ke, in contrast to the better known Berlin codex or 1Ke (these are two successive volumes of a single literary production). For background see I. Gardner, "An introduction to the Chester Beatty *Kephalaia* Codex", in I. Gardner, J. BeDuhn and P. Dilley, *Mani at the Court of the Persian Kings* (Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies, Vol. 87. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015, 1–12).

all that can be recovered. This particular passage occurs within the lengthy but crucial chapter 337, and it is necessary to explain the context so that the relevance of the passage becomes apparent.

The Coptic Manichaean *Kephalaia* corpus, to which this codex belongs, evolved with the addition of substantial blocks of material adapted to the controlling format of the genre.[9] That format requires the reduction of material to short chapters (i.e. Greek *Kephalaia*) that always begin with chapter number, header and a formulaic passage in which Mani himself, usually termed apostle or enlightener, is portrayed in a setting such as the community of his disciples, the royal palace, or a city temple. A question is presented, for instance by one of the catechumens or a noble, and utilized as the occasion for the teaching presented as a verbatim recording of Mani's speech, often in dialogue with his interlocutor. It is evident that the raw blocks of material were drawn from a variety of oral sources and perhaps prior literatures as well; but the constraints of the *Kephalaia* genre are largely artificial, the teachings have been heavily reworked, and their value as a direct record of Mani's own words is extremely limited. Nevertheless, it is possible to discern the development of Manichaean traditions about a vast range of topics, and one can attempt to recover something of the prior sources utilized. Further, the incidental details of toponyms, persons and ranks, festivals, and so on, transport the reader directly through the medium of a Coptic source circulated in late antique Egypt to the world of the early Sasanian empire. It is crucial to emphasize this. The settings are not fanciful although the direct historicity of the events is open to much interrogation. Here is to be found real information about the cities, government, social order, religious practices and the interaction of peoples at that time; albeit presented in a highly stylized and prejudicial fashion.

Number 337 is one of the longer and more disparate chapters in the work stretching from within codex page 390 to 400. However, given that the imposition of the kephalaiac structure is largely artificial it is more helpful to position it as belonging to a larger block of material that begins in chapter 327 (p. 364) and continues through number 340 (to p. 415). The narrative arc of these 50-plus pages of text tells a coherent story: when a wise man named Goundesh[10] is introduced, famous for his debates and victories in challenges against other philosophers at the palace of King Shapur, a meeting with the apostle Mani leads to the expected contest. The initial topic is the nature of good and evil; this is followed by a series of other questions, parables, and puzzles. In all of these Mani is triumphant, Goundesh learns wisdom and humility and comes to recognize his opponent as the greater sage without equal in the world; indeed, to recognize him as his master, the apostle of truth. Eventually Goundesh's own previous teacher, a certain Masoukeos, hearing of this conversion is angered, and himself comes to Shapur's palace to confront his pupil. It is whilst the two are together and joined by Mani that the event discussed below takes place; but first let us follow the narrative to its conclusion. Masoukeos challenges Mani with a

9 See further I. Gardner, "*Kephalaia*", *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, online edition, 2018, available at http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/kephalaia (accessed 11 April 2018).

10 See further J. BeDuhn, "Parallels between Coptic and Iranian *Kephalaia*: Goundesh and the King of Touran", in *Mani at the Court of the Persian Kings*, 52–74 (especially 66–72).

question about the nature of the universe and the souls that enter in to it. Inevitably he too is defeated and recognizes that the apostle's wisdom surpasses all the wisdom in the world. In chapter 338 the series of contests between sages culminates with the introduction of another wise man from the east (i.e. India), greater than both Goundesh and Masoukeos. This is Iodasphes (the name clearly derives from *bodhisattva* as in the medieval romance of Barlaam and Ioasaph),[11] who appears before Shapur and praises him as the greatest of kings and lord of a multitude of countries. There is no other kingdom equal to his kingdom. Yet, King Shapur lacks one thing: there is no one in his kingdom able to defeat Iodasphes in debate. At this point a member of the court named Kardel son of Artaban states that there is indeed one person in the realm who could debate and triumph over Iodasphes, that is the righteous Mani. The two sages debate the question of the eternity of the universe in the presence of Kardel and Goundesh until the apostle is successful. Iodasphes makes obeisance to him and recognizes him as Buddha. The cycle of stories is then brought to a conclusion with King Shapur himself giving Mani authority in his kingdom, the lengthy final testimony of Goundesh, and even the recognition of the apostle as father and master by the aristocrat Kardel, son of Artaban.

There is not the opportunity here to detail all the fascinating elements of this cycle and the various literary connections and echoes. The historicity of events such as Shapur's supposed recognition of Mani is not the issue. Here is found the theme of contest between sages and the use of traditional tales, some of which can be paralleled in known sources,[12] but especially noting the cosmological content of the major debates; and also the context at the Sasanian court culminating with the visit of the wise Iodasphes from India. And one final point to emphasize: these are not simply stock themes and stories. The best example of a specific social and cultural setting to the narrative is the role of Kardel son of Artaban. Whilst the various sages other than Mani are unknown to history, this courtier is listed in the great inscription of Shapur I at Naqš-e Rostam, where he appears as Kirdīr the son of Ardavān in sixty-first place among the dignitaries of the king's reign.[13] This Coptic source is a translation of a text that took shape amongst the Manichaean communities of the early Sasanian empire at a very real point and place in history. This vital question of dating will be addressed at the end of the paper.

11 See the discussion in I. Gardner, "The final ten chapters", in *Mani at the Court of the Persian Kings*, 75–97 (especially 81–4). On the problematic issue of the mutation of the initial syllable, previously supposed a corruption in the Arabic script (but which argument is now untenable due to the revised early dating demonstrated by this new source), thanks are due to the anonymous reviewer who points to the widespread influence across theophoric names in late antiquity from the initial element of that of the biblical deity.

12 The introduction of didactic animal fables into the debates between Mani and Goundesh (notable also elsewhere in the codex), demonstrable counterparts to those in classic sources such as *Kalīla wa Demna*, is further evidence that the standard chronologies of Persian literature will need substantial revision.

13 Details in Gardner, "The final ten chapters", 84–7.

The episode of interest here is poorly preserved, but a sensitive and careful reading will draw out the essential points. To quote:[14]

> Then another time it happened, the two were with one another, Goundesh and Masoukeos. Goundesh sent for the Apostle, (saying): "See, Masoukeos is here with me. If it pleases you, arise and come to this place and debate with him. You can cause him to break off from his boastfulness and pride … and when he has understood and believed that all glory is … there because of you, as I boast, …".
> Then the Apostle arose. He went … that is in him. When he went, he (found them with) one another at the gaming-table (τάβλα).[15] He greeted them (and Masoukeos) received his greeting. They besought (teaching) from the Apostle …
> (The Apostle speaks): "… ten thousand (?) worlds … the wisdom of God: In what way is this world established? Or, in what manner was it formed? Or, … in what way? … and the …as they change, as they alter[16] … people who are killed and they come out from this world, to where have they gone? Or these that are come, moreover, born of them, (from where) do they come and appear?
> I am thinking that … and I find you (pl.) playing with[17] these things that are (foolish?), that are (not?) alive. Indeed, these things come into your (pl.) possession while you (pl.) are sitting down! When I play with these little counters (or dice?),[18] there is no knowledge in the matter. I (find no) fortune in the thing you (pl.) have done …".

Mani critiques a conventional understanding of the play of the game in terms of the vagaries of cosmological fate. True knowledge of the universe, of the birth and death of persons, depends upon the wisdom given by God; and the entire theme of this codex is that it is Mani's role to reveal it. The movement of the counters is a dead thing in which there is no truth. Note that a relationship between fate, cosmology, and the backgammon game is the starting point of Mani's teaching: it is the accepted cultural norm that lies behind the entire vignette. His teaching reflects the basic features of backgammon games: the experience of reversal of fortune, of leaving the field of play and of returning

14 2Ke 396, 6–397, 2 (translation adapted to improve comprehension). For the Coptic text see I. Gardner, J. BeDuhn and P. Dilley, *The Chapters of the Wisdom of My Lord Mani. Part III: Pages 343–442 (Chapters 321–347)*, (Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies, Vol. 92. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2018).

15 "Gaming table (τάβλα)": the use of this word combined with the interpretation of the play of the game in terms of fate and cosmology, indicates a form of backgammon.

16 "Change (ϣιвє) … alter (пωнє)": i.e. the vicissitudes of life and death; cf. ⲛ̄ⲁⲧϣιвє ⲛ̄ⲁⲧпωнє ("without change, without alteration") as qualities of God and the realm of light in 1Ke 178.21 and 2Ps 155.20.

17 "Play with (ⲥⲱвє ϩⲛ̄)": see W.E. Crum, *A Coptic Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), 321a.

18 "Counter (ϫⲗⲟⲟⲗє)": lit. "pebble", "pip" or "stone", cf. 1Ke 70, 19, trans. I. Gardner, *The Kephalaia of the Teacher* (Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies, Vol. 37. Leiden, New York and Cologne: E.J. Brill, 1995, 72); but here as the counters in the game, or perhaps otherwise the dice.

to it, i.e. counters are withdrawn from the board and then returned to it, just as people "pass away" or enter the world anew.

The Coptic codex utilizes the loanword *tabla*. The standard lexical reference to the term in Greek to mean a gaming-table and as an early form of modern backgammon is the epigram recorded by Agathias in the sixth century and describing details of the Emperor Zeno's game of the same in the fifth.[19] Usage of the term in Greek to mean at least some form of dice-board can be tracked back to Apollonius writing about the Montanist heresy in Phrygia, the original lost but quoted by Eusebius in his *Church History* as railing against supposed prophets who play at "tables";[20] but it derives from the Latin *tabula*, and there is an entire area of study devoted to the history of this family of games.[21] Cognates are used in modern languages and many variations of play can be found in contemporary societies and cultures such as *tavla* in Turkey. What is apparent is that the Coptic translator of the *Kephalaia* codex found the word suitable for rendering whatever the original word was in the text brought by the Manichaean community to Roman Egypt. It does not help us to understand the exact form of the game supposedly played by Goundesh and Masoukeos at the palace of Shapur I, nor issues such as whether Persian *nard* was originally derived from India as (e.g.) Daryaee supposes, or from the Roman empire following (e.g.) Panaino.[22]

The matter of crucial interest is that the complex of literary references and themes previously known and associated with the sage Wuzurgmihr at the court of Ḵosrow I is now evidenced with regard to Mani at the palace of Shapur I. This is the third rather than the sixth century; and, furthermore, the newly-recovered episode opens wide not only the chronology and historical circumstances but the cultural and religious resonances of the narrative. Whilst the historicity of Wuzurgmihr has long been a matter of debate, he is an important figure in Iranian *andarz* literature and the Sasanian heritage transmitted into the medieval and Arabic worlds.

19 See R.G. Austin, "Zeno's game of τάβλη (A.P. ix. 482)", *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 54, 1934, 202–6; cf. H.G. Liddell and R. Scott, *Greek–English Lexicon. With a Revised Supplement 1996* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996): 1752a s.v. τάβλα.; G.W.H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961): 1370b; E.A. Sophocles, *Greek Lexicon of the Roman and Byzantine Periods* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1900, 1067a).

20 Eusebius of Caesarea, *H.E.* V, 18, 11. Apollonius states that he was writing 40 years after Montanus began to prophesy, thus perhaps late second century CE or shortly afterwards.

21 For a start see U. Schädler, "XII Scripta, Alea, Tabula – new evidence for the Roman history of 'backgammon'", in A.J. de Voogt (ed.), *New Approaches to Board Games Research*, International Institute for Asian Studies (Working Papers Series 3. Leiden, 1995, 73–98. Schädler argues strongly that in late antiquity *tabula*/*tabla* was used for board games) played with dice, and was not a specific name in itself (at pp. 82–3).

22 A. Panaino, *La novella degli Scacchi e della Tavola Reale*, ch. VII. T. Daryaee, "Mind, body, and the cosmos", pp. 285 ff., argues that these games spread from the east in the sixth century together with the literary tradition represented by the *Pañcatantra*. One should note carefully that these folk tales are well-attested in the Manichaean tradition (e.g. W.B. Henning, "Sogdian tales", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies* XI, 1943–46, 465–87), and now also in the Goundesh cycle of the Chester Beatty codex where this story of the backgammon game is found. The same issues of dating discussed below will necessarily be relevant to those instances as well; Daryaee's chronology is not tenable.

The date of the new text can be determined with some certainty. The Chester Beatty codex belongs to the so-called Medinet Madi library of Manichaean Coptic codices that first appeared on the Cairo antiquities market in 1929.[23] The date of these works has generally been supposed to be *c.* 400 CE on the basis of palaeography, codicology, dialect, and the content of the texts. The codices contained original writings of Mani himself, such as his *Epistles*, and those of his early disciples and of the church, including homilies, psalms, historical material, and so on. All the works with some very minor additions (such as doxologies composed in Egypt) originate from Sasanian Mesopotamia and were originally composed in eastern Aramaic, but were translated into Lycopolitan Coptic perhaps in part through the medium of Greek. The books are almost entirely unique, in that neither the Aramaic originals nor translations in other languages are extant;[24] the only true exceptions to this being some duplicates of psalms (also in Coptic) recovered by archaeological excavations at Ismant el-Kharab in the early 1990s. These can be securely dated to around the 360s CE and evidence a somewhat earlier stage of the redaction history to that found in the Medinet Madi *Psalm-Book*.[25]

This brief summary obviously contains many details that could be discussed at greater length. Each of the individual texts within the collection has its own history, and the various codices were not necessarily produced at one and the same time before being gathered together into the collection glossed as a "library" and thought to have been deposited at Medinet Madi in the Fayum for unknown reasons. Nevertheless, there is no reason to doubt the broad outline of the commonly accepted view that these works were created by Mani and the early Manichaean community within the bounds of the Sasanian empire during the years of his public mission (*c.* 240–277 CE) or the first generations afterwards; translated into Coptic during the fourth century at the time of the religion's greatest success in Egypt; and that these particular exemplars were deposited during the period of increased persecution in the Roman Empire that followed the accession of Theodosius (i.e. late fourth century through the early fifth). Any attempt to counter this summary would require radical revisions to accepted views about the history of Manichaeism or the development of Coptic literary production (e.g. the codices are written in a specific dialect and contain extensive examples of scribal production and paratextual details). Recent carbon dating of Medinet Madi material has confirmed the long-held

23 The discovery was first announced by C. Schmidt and H.J. Polotsky, *Ein Mani-Fund in Ägypten. Originalschriften des Mani und seiner Schüler* (Berlin: Akademie der Wissenschaften (SPAW, Phil.-Hist. Sonderausgabe), 1933). For a history of the find and the publication of the codices, J.M. Robinson, *The Manichaean Codices of Medinet Madi* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2013).

24 Inevitably the issue is more complex than this summary statement might imply. There are certainly some parallel versions of the same basic material recovered from Central Asia in Middle Iranian languages; for instance the story of Mani and the King of Touran, or details of the apostle's last days and trial before Bahram I. However, in general these are not incorporated into exactly the same literary productions as found in the Medinet Madi library and they evidence distinct textual histories.

25 See I. Gardner, *Kellis Literary Texts I* (= P. Kellis II) (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 1996).

view that the most probable production period for the codices is the half century from the 380s to the 430s CE.[26]

Further, it is possible to be more precise regarding the passage at issue here, the story of Mani, Masoukeos and Goundesh at the gaming table in the palace of King Shapur I. The setting is the 250s–260s CE, the period of the apostle's maturity and public mission. Any historical veracity to the events is highly improbable as the account has clear literary and stylistic patterning, and the obvious motivations to what must be classified as a legendary and hagiographic tale. The *terminus ante quem* for the production of the codex is *c*. 420 CE, prior to which time has to be given for the evident stages of development: the working-up of a cycle of stories regarding Mani and the sages with the incorporation of folklore elements; the attaching of this cycle to the developing *Kephalaia* genre to which they are adapted in format and presentation; the circulation of this material among the Manichaeans of Sasanian Iran and their transport to Egypt; translation into Lycopolitan Coptic and inclusion within a corpus or "library" of works belonging to the community in the Nile valley. With these points in mind, and noting that the inclusion of Kardel son of Artaban and other verifiable elements indicate that the legendary features of the story have not entirely overtaken the historical setting, the proposed date for this material is the first half of the fourth century. Mani died in the 270s and some decades must be allowed for the development of the legendary and folklore aspects of the story such as the setting in the palace of King Shapur, the contests and challenges between the various sages, and so on. At the same time there is a substantial redaction and translation history evident that makes it difficult to suppose that this material originated much later than 350 CE in order to be incorporated into the material remains that have been recovered. Thus the proposed dating is *c*. 300–350 CE, which necessarily implies that the literary motifs at play were already part of Sasanian culture by that date; and that is the crucial discovery with which to conclude.

26 J. BeDuhn and G. Hodgins, "The date of the Manichaean codices from Medinet Madi and its significance", in S.N.C. Lieu (ed.), *Manichaeism East and West* (Analecta Manichaica I, Corpus Fontium Manichaeorum. Turnhout: Brepols, 2017, 10–28).