Spatiality and In-Betweenness: Dissemination of Zoroastrianism, Nestorianism, and Manichaeism in Xinjiang during the ancient Silk Roads era (ca. 138 B.C.E – 1300 C.E.)

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Cover photo: Field of ruins at Kocho, 1906. (Source: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum für Asiatische Kunst, museum number: B1000. https://id.smb.museum/object/1856517/ruinenfeld).

Spatiality and In-Betweenness: Dissemination of Zoroastrianism, Nestorianism, and Manichaeism in Xinjiang during the ancient Silk Roads era (ca. 138 B.C.E – 1300 C.E.)

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Preface

Studying archaeology has been an ambition of mine since childhood, and after detours into Chinese Language and Literature and Museum Studies, I ended up on this path in Leiden. However, my fascination with the interregional and intercultural communication implied in material culture has never changed. The study of the ancient Silk Roads is therefore in line with my interests, and this is the final product of the research for my BA thesis of the programme World Archaeology. Throughout my whole studies in the Netherlands, I have received a great deal of kindness, support, and assistance.

First and foremost, my deep appreciation goes out to Dr. Marike van Aerde, my supervisor, who has guided me through the Gobi Desert-like situation of critical opinions and unwavering encouragement. My thanks also to Dr. Alexander Verpoorte, Dr. Arjan Louwen, and Dr. Alexander Geurds at the Faculty of Archaeology for all their great help and kindness to me as an international student.

I wish to thank the Asian Library at Leiden University, whose rich collection has enabled me to use a number of Chinese sources and rare Sinology-related books in my thesis. It is also the place where I spent most of my time when I lived in Leiden.

I would like to profoundly thank several people for their support and willingness to help me and give me opportunities. Lucas and Margriet, Prof. Vladimir Stissi, and Joyce. Also, sincere thanks to my internship supervisor Willemijn and colleague Pao-Yi, for having given time to help with my research at the Research Center for Material Culture and applications.

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Finally, I want to thank my parents for their significant support, faith, and love. I would also like to thank all the relatives who unconditionally helped my parents and me through the darkest time. I am also very grateful to my parents-in-law, Inge and André. And a final thank you to Markus, for being here with me.

Xinwu

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1. Introduction

Whether Xinjiang is considered as an independent culture or a part of Eurasian Steppe culture have been discussed for years. The spatial qualities of the area are essential to this debate. The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (新疆維吾爾自治區) is located in the northwest of China. This geographic intersection of Central Asia has historically been referred to as the heart of the Silk Roads, of which several trade networks in Xinjiang connect Western Eurasia, Central Asia, and Eastern Eurasia (Figure 1). Since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, after many Western expeditions conducted investigations in Xinjiang, scholars from all over the world have studied the archaeological finds of Xinjiang in detail for over a century. It is evident that this is a region where transcultural communications were abundant, as evidenced by the multilingual texts finds, religious architecture, and motifs discovered in archaeological sites.

Figure 1. Geographical location of Xinjiang. A map showing the extent of Eurasia and North-Africa, with China visible on the right (see label), and Xinjiang outlined in blue. (Source: Figure by Xinwu Luo, Google Earth).

1.1 Research questions

In contrast to Buddhism and Islam, there is a lack of academic research on the introduction and spread of some minor religions along the ancient Silk Roads in Xinjiang, such as Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and Nestorianism. Additionally, the previous research is primarily from the perspective of history, archaeology, philology, and art history. As the comprehensive and professional archaeological work has been accomplished regarding the excavation and interpretation in a large-scale lately in the past decade, more primary

resources are available on this subject, as well as the rise of cross-disciplinary research and the development of technological means. A more in-depth research on the archaeological evidence of these minor religions in Xinjiang therefore needs to be conducted.

The main research question of this text is:
'What is the dissemination of the three minor religions in Xinjiang during the ancient Silk Roads era (ca. 138 B.C.E – 1300 C.E.) as supported by currently published archaeological evidence, under the framework of spatiality and in-betweenness?'.
This archaeological analysis is furthermore to answer the sub-questions derived from the main research question regarding the comparison between the three religions and what the spatiality implies for the function of this region.

The three sub-questions, corresponding to the chapter, 2, 3 and 4 in this thesis, are:
- 'What is the historical overview of Xinjiang as an archaeological region, as well as the historical overview of the three religions?'
- 'What is the currently published archaeological evidence of the three religions in Xinjiang?'
- 'How can the concepts of spatiality and in-betweenness be applied to the discussed material, to evaluate the presence of the three minor religions, on a microscopic and macroscopic scale?'

Below, the main methodology and layout of the thesis is described in further detail.

1.2 Methodology and related concepts

The methodology used here is overviewing and analysing a selection of currently published archaeological remains of Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and Nestorianism discovered in Xinjiang[1], then examined and discussed within the framework of spatiality and connectivity. The following aspects will be discussed in this text. From an extensive set of connections between the material and spatial connotations, in terms of their spatial distribution by mapping and visualising their relationships with the ancient Silk Roads trade network from a spatiotemporal aspect, as well as the diverse cultural and religious influences on archaeological evidence distribution and the cultural and social structures and reasons

[1] The archaeological data regarding this study of three religions in the Xinjiang region do not have many published sources available. I have collected most of them and made a selection of them as my case studies in this thesis.

behind them.

The concepts of spatiality and in-betweenness are vital to this research. Firstly, archaeological information, such as materials, practices and settlements, is always intertwined with space and possesses spatial components properties and properties (Gillings et al., 2020, p. 1-3). As Hodder and Orton state (1976, p. 242-243), spatial analysis is a powerful technique for interpreting archaeological activity that is not detected by conventional archaeological methods, but is concealed in spatial patterns. The 'spatiality' in this thesis is therefore concerned with the spatial distribution of archaeological evidence of Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and Nestorianism in Xinjiang, and further with the connectivity processes and relationships between them. Secondly, 'in-betweenness' refers to the entangled relationships between things and the connection between people and things from an archaeological perspective (Hodder, 2012; Basu, 2017, p. 13). Rather than referring to contact between different cultures, it points to the new formulation of conjugation and interaction between these religions and the localisation of Xinjiang.

Han (漢) is an ethnic, political, cultural, and geographical concept that has a wide range of meanings. In terms of terminology, it is important to clarify the definition of 'Han' in different contexts. In this text, 'Han ethnic group' and 'Han Chinese' refer to the people who are ethnically Han; 'Han dynasty' and 'Han imperial court' refer to the imperial authority of China that existed between 202 B.C.E and 220 C.E.; for the cultural influence and political control of the later imperial dynasties of China outside Xinjiang, for example, the Mongolian and Manchurian dynasties, it would be described as 'from the East' or refers to a certain dynasty specifically.

'The Western Regions' (西域), of which Xinjiang is the most important area, is another geographical and cultural concept related to this research area and context. Historically, this term refers to the regions west of the Yumen Guan (玉門關) for the Chinese territory in present-day western Gansu (甘肅) Province in official documents until the early Tang dynasty (around the eighth century)[2] (Rong & Wen, 2015, p. 321-322). The term 'Western Regions' has been a tradition in Chinese academia, referring to the Northwestern China. It is a region where the people are the different ethnic groups from the dominant Han ethnic group

[2] According to Rong and Wen (2015), the conceptual shift of 'Western Regions' has been circumscribed and roughly corresponds to present day Xinjiang during the Tang dynasty.

in China. Since the flourishing and significance of the Silk Roads as well as the expansion of the Han imperial court, the status of the kingdoms in the Western Regions and the controlling from the East have co-existed in a setting of conflicts, suzerainty, communication, and interaction.

As the Western Regions is a broad geographical area and there is also a wealth of archaeological information relating to Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism and Nestorianism found in other regions of China, such as the gravesite of Sogdian elite in Chang'an (長安) (modern Xi'an (西安)) and the popularity of Manichaeism in the south-eastern coastal province of Fujian (福建) (Jiang, 2004, p. 95; Lieu & Kim, 2021, p. 101), this discussion is confined to the archaeological evidence found in Xinjiang. The main reasons for this are, firstly, that the region was the first pass and an essential stopover for Iranian traders, such as the Sogdians and Persians, who migrated eastwards and into the East from the third century onwards (Rong, 2015, p. 229). Secondly, these archaeological materials reveal interregional interaction of different cultures, none of which had yet been heavily localised or Sinicised by the progressive centralisation of the government in the East. They do not have to represent and are not bound by the grand narrative of Han culture and the mainstream cultures.

1.3 Thesis outline

The thesis plan is outlined as follows:

Chapter 1 is an introductive chapter, stating the background, structure, research questions, and methodology and related concepts of this research.

Chapter 2 provides the background on Xinjiang as a region, as well as a brief introduction to Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and Nestorianism. It is devoted to a historical overview of the sources currently published on this subject.

Chapter 3 examines a selection of currently published primary sources of archaeological evidence for three religions as case studies, such as architectural remains, wall paintings, textual finds, and materials, discovered in Xinjiang.

Chapter 4 is an interpretative discussion of the archaeological data that collected in chapter 3, which is the central part of this research. The investigation is based on the visualisation of the data on the map from a spatio-temporal dimension. This chapter intends to conduct

the spatial analysis and to propose the transregional and transcultural communications that are implied in the archaeological evidence of three minor religions and their distribution in Xinjiang, then evaluates the in-betweenness of this region. The discussion also raises two questions for this research topic.

Chapter 5 is the conclusive part, to answer the main research question and brings together the analysis of the spatial distribution of all the archaeological evidence of Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and Nestorianism in Xinjiang and provides a picture of its in-betweenness as a syncretism.

2. Historical Overview

Although the term 'Silk Road (die Seidenstrassen)' was coined in the nineteenth century[3], steppe routes had connected the eastern Europe to the north Asian steppes by the second millennium B.C.E., and over the following centuries these routes spread across the Eurasian steppe. China officially joined this network in 138 B.C.E., when Emperor Wu (武) of the Western Han (西漢) dynasty (206 B.C.E. – 25 C.E.) appointed Zhang Qian (張騫)[4] as an envoy to the western regions to seek an alliance with the Yuezhi (月氏) against the Xiongnu as well as to initiate further communication, both commercial and cultural. Since then, the trade network has linked transcontinental regions and facilitated cross-cultural exchange for centuries.

These exchanges brought with them the introduction and dissemination of Zoroastrianism, Nestorianism, and Manichaeism. In Chinese history books of the Tang (唐) dynasty (618 – 907), these three religions are often mentioned as the 'Three *Yi* Religions' (三夷教), during which time they flourished in China. The word *yi* (夷) has been used since the Han (漢) dynasty (206 B.C.E. – 220 C.E.) to refer to non-Han ethnic groups, the 'Three *Yi* Religions' hence implies that these religions are not indigenous to China. Apart from that, they are grouped together because they are minor and have less impact than other religions in China, such as the indigenous religion Taoism, the rise of Buddhism after its introduction, which has had an authoritative influence on Chinese culture, and later Islam, which has a large following in China.

This chapter provides an overview of Xinjiang as an archaeological region, as well as an introduction to each religion, including the time and background of its spread and relationship with the realms in Xinjiang, and the history of research on these religions from an archaeological perspective.

2.1 Archaeological context of Xinjiang

This section contributes to the historical overview of archaeological research that has been conducted in Xinjiang in the past. Regarding the regional setting, such as the topographical

[3] The term is traditionally attributed to Ferdinand von Richthofen in 1877, although there have been recent arguments that it was coined earlier by other German scholars (Mertens, 2019).
[4] The Asian names in this text is structured according to their own system as family name first, then given name.

features and geographical distribution of Xinjiang, this will be discussed in Chapter 4 when the spatial analysis takes place.

The point at which Zhang Qian went to the western regions is also a time when, according to the traditional chronological classification of Xinjiang archaeology, it is the prehistoric period of Xinjiang. Marcella Festa's two articles (2017a; 2017b) on prehistoric archaeological research in Xinjiang provide a retrospective view of the research on this subject, as well as the relevant research conducted by scholars outside China since the late 1990s. In Li's doctoral dissertation (2022), the author establishes a new general chronological sequence of Xinjiang prehistory, including the Palaeolithic Age (240,000 – 4,000 B.P.), Bronze Age (2500 – 1000 B.C.E.), and Iron Age (1000 B.C.E. – 100 C.E.), and collects currently published prehistoric material in Xinjiang.

In 60 B.C.E., the imperial administration Protectorate of the Western Regions was instituted, since then the Western Regions have been under the jurisdiction of the authorities from the East. In modern Chinese scholarship, archaeological research in Xinjiang is often conducted within the framework and narrative of the history of the dynasties from the East, emphasising the relationship between the control from the East and the regional kingdoms in Xinjiang. Therefore, the documentation and sources provided by Western scholars offer a different perspective.

The earliest modern explorations of the Xinjiang region began in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, mainly by Germany, Russia, Great Britain and Japan, with explorers from all over the world contributing a wealth of archaeological, historical and geographical information. Chinese scholars first participated in the Sino-Swedish Expedition to the northwest between 1927 and 1935. The archaeologist Huang Wenbi (黃文弼, 1893 – 1966) was the first Chinese scholar to independently investigate the Xinjiang between 1930s and 1950s, publishing a rich documentation of archaeological fieldwork (Huang, 1983).

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, several systematic archaeological activities have been carried out under the government auspices, led by the Xinjiang Institute of Cultural Relics & Archaeology (新疆文物考古研究所) (Chen & Zhang, 1999). With the rise of professional archaeological surveys and excavations and the application of new techniques, new materials of Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism and Nestorianism have been found in Xinjiang since the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The study of these three minor religions, as well as the connection and function of this region, has been actively discussed, and more international collaboration with scholars, academic institutions and museums worldwide has been undertaken.

2.2 Religions in focus in Xinjiang

In the following sub-chapters the 'Three Yi Religions' are described, along with their historical context and their importance in Xinjiang. For each religion, some archaeological evidence is discussed, as well as the earliest academic sources discussing each religion.

2.2.1 Zoroastrianism

Zoroastrianism is an Iranian religion that was founded traditionally attributed to Zoroaster[5]. The dualistic cosmology of good and evil is the doctrine, which profoundly influenced the theology of Manichaeanism (Stausberg et al., 2015; Lin, 1996, p. 54). In China, Zoroastrianism known as *xianjiao* (祆教), *huoxianjiao* (火祆教), or *baihuojiao* (拜火教) in Chinese sources, among which *xian* (祆) means the non-indigenous gods, others indicate it is a 'Religion of Fire Worship', referring the cult of fire of this religion.

The Chinese historian Chen Yuan (陈垣, 1880 – 1971) 's 'The Introduction of Zoroastrianism to China' (1923) is the first systematic academic study on the subject. He analysed the historical background of Zoroastrianism and its spread in China, and compared the similarities and differences between Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism and Nestorianism. Most scholars agree that the introduction and transmission of Zoroastrianism in China is closely linked to the migration routes and settlement patterns of the Sogdians in Central Asia, although the exact date of its introduction into China is unknown. The popular view of when Zoroastrianism was introduced into China is that of Chinese scholar Rong Xinjiang (1995 & 2000), who claims that it was brought by the Sogdians as early as the early fourth century through texts found in Dunhuang (敦煌) and Turfan (Tulufan, 吐魯番).

In addition to the studies of Zoroastrianism by historians from textual sources, there are also scholars who have studied this subject from archaeological evidence. For example, some scholars argue that Zoroastrianism was introduced into the Xinjiang region as early as the

[5] The date of birth and death of Zoroaster is controversal, he probably lived between the tenth and sixth centuries B.C.E.

fourth century, referring to a bronze altar-like object in a Zoroastrian artistic style and consistent with the fire cult unearthed at the Alagou (阿拉溝) burial sites in the Tarim Basin (Jiang, 2004, p. 11). Archaeologist Lin Meicun (1996 & 2006) lists and analyses archaeological evidence relating to Zoroastrianism found in the western regions. Art historian Jiang Boqin's book *A History of Chinese Zoroastrian Art* published in 2004 provides a comprehensive introduction and analysis of Zoroastrian elements in archaeological materials throughout China, as well as a comparative study of materials from the iconographic approach.

In addition to being exposed to Greek and Kushan influences, Zoroastrian cultural practices in China, such as ritual and funerary customs, have been affected by and adapted to various cultures along the Silk Roads and differ in many ways from the early Zoroastrianism.

2.2.2 Nestorianism

Nestorianism is a Christian theological term related to the Christian theologian Nestorius of Antioch (ca. 386 – 450), who advocated a view that the incarnation of the divine, who has both humanity and divinity, as well as the nature of the Virgin Mary, was a person (Cross & Livingstone, 1997, p. 1139). The views of Nestorius and his followers were considered heresy in both Chalcedonian Christianity and Oriental Orthodoxy, resulting in the condemnation of them, which eventually led to their relocation and the spread of Nestorianism to the East (Meyendorff, 1989).

Affiliation and integration with local Christian communities during the mobility of the followers of Nestorianism developed different views and doctrines along with its dissemination. Therefore, the terminology referring to Nestorianism, such as 'Nestorianism', '*jingjiao* (景教)', '*yelikewen* (也里可溫)', 'Nestorian Church', 'Church of the East', and 'Assyrian Church of the East', and its use in the different regions and sources where Nestorianism was introduced has caused discussion[6]. In the context of this thesis, the terms '*jingjiao*' and '*yelikewen*' will be discussed.

Jingjiao is the term often found in the sources of Chinese scholars in this study, especially when discussing Nestorianism during the Tang dynasty. The earliest written source for

[6] Detailed research on terminology and its use and the development of Nestorianism has been carried out by scholars Halbertsma (2008), Niu (2022), and Zhou (2022).

jingjiao is in the most notable Nestorian artefact in China, the Jingjiao Stele (大秦景教流行中國碑), erected in 781 with bilingual inscriptions in Chinese and Syriac during the Tang dynasty and rediscovered in Chang'an in 1625 during the Ming dynasty (1368 – 1644). It proves that Nestorianism was introduced to China at the latest in 635, and also provides sufficient primary information on the introduction and flourishing of Nestorianism in China at that time (Zhu, 1993).

'*Jing*' in Chinese means luminous, vast and manifest, hence '*jingjiao*' stands for 'Luminous Religion'. In 845, Emperor Wuzong (武宗) of Tang initiated a religious persecution of Buddhism, the 'Three *Yi* Religions' also suffered the persecution, thus Jingjiao declined (Zhou, 2022, p. 8).

With the second rise of the Christianity in China during the Yuan (元) dynasty (1271 – 1368), the term '*yelikewen*' was coined. It was officially used to refer to Christians in China (Chen, 1917, p. 1-6). '*Yelikewen*' probably adopted from the Greek word 'Arkhon' (Pelliot, 1959, p. 49), meaning ruler, and then translated into Chinese as *yelikewen* through the intermediary of other Central Asian languages such as Persian, Armenian, and Uyghur languages (Zhou, 2022, p. 5). After the collapse of the Yuan dynasty and the succession of the Ming dynasty, Nestorianism waned in China due to the lack of converts.

In my study, I use the terms 'Nestorianism' and 'Nestorian' to generalise all the variations of during the evolution of the original Nestorianism, because firstly, in both historical Chinese texts and the modern Chinese academic literature, these two words are widely used; secondly, in the Chinese-to-English scholarly translations, most researchers choose to use 'Nestorianism' to refer to some content of '*jingjiao*', '*yelikewen*' or 'Church of the East'. Consequently, these two words could serve my thesis most effectively and be the consistent factor of the references.

The published research on this study before the twentieth century is mainly on the history, theology and its introduction and spread in China. The earliest academic sources on the subject done by the Chinese scholar are Chen's (1917 & 1999) research on *yelikewen* and the Sinicised people who came from Central Asia and the Western Regions. Due to the paucity of other Nestorian material available at the time, much research has focused on the Jingjiao Stele. Scholars outside China, for example, Comneno (1997) focuses on the related archaeological evidence found in Central Asia. French sinologist Pelliot (1914) has done

extensive research on this subject, grounded in research on the history of Central Asia in general, because of the primary sources collected during the expeditions a century ago.

As more archaeological information has come to light alongside archaeological surveys and excavations, the traits of Nestorianism have been found in Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, the Central Plains and the south-eastern coastal area of China. Further research based on the archaeological evidence has been published (Li, 2004). However, beside the archaeological reports, academic research on Nestorianism in Xinjiang based on archaeological evidence is scarce.

There are three papers that provide an introduction and history of the Nestorianism in Central Asia, the Western Regions and China, and review a selection of archaeological information. The first is Li Chao's 'On Nestorianism Christianity of ancient Western Region' (2012), which explores the routes of dissemination and acceptance of Nestorianism in the Western Regions. Additionally, Zhou's doctoral dissertation (2022) studies the origin of Nestorianism and its spread in part of Central Asia and in China during the Yuan dynasty. Zhou investigates Nestorian iconology by examining the relevant archaeological material, yet it is from an art historical perspective that Zhou comprehensively presents and analyses the historical sources in accordance with the materials and the spread of Nestorianism amongst different regions and ethnic groups. Another paper is Niu Ruji's 'The spread of the Church of the East in Central Asia and the Kocho region in the light of archaeological evidence' (2022), which provides archaeological information on Nestorian materials such as tombstones and multilingual manuscripts discovered in Xinjiang.

2.2.3 Manichaeism

Manichaeism originated from the teachings of Mani (216 – 274/277), who adopted some of the tenets of Zoroastrianism, Christianity and Buddhism, and formed his own innovations in Mesopotamia around the middle of the third century (Gulácsi, 2016, p. 1; Wang, 2012). It had spread west to North Africa and east along the Silk Roads in Central Asia between the third and tenth centuries, while in some regions, such as the Mediterranean region, it was treated as a heresy and persecuted (Gulácsi, 2016; Wang, 2012). The introduction of Manichaeism in Xinjiang as early as the sixth and seventh centuries was documented in the historical records of the Tang dynasty during the seventh century. Manichaeism in Tang China was then called *Monijiao* (摩尼教) or *mingjiao* (明教), which means 'Religion of Mani' and 'Religion of

Light' (Wang, 1981; Gulácsi, 2016, p. 1, 133). Due to the persecution of foreign religions during the late Tang dynasty, as one of the 'Three *Yi* Religions', converts of Manichaeism in Tang China had to flee to places far away from the authority, such as the western regions and the south-eastern coastal regions.

Prior to the discovery of Kocho at the beginning of the twentieth century, the research for this study focused mainly on the citation of Manichaeism in historical writings; there were few primary sources on Manichaeism that could speak for themselves. Kocho Ruins is an archaeological site that revealed about five thousand manuscript fragments and about a hundred and twenty fragments of other types of artefacts, which proves that Kocho was a Manichaean centre in the east Central Asia from the primary sources (Gulácsi, 2016, p. 137).

The general study of Manichaeism as a religion has been mainly done by western scholars, for instance, Zsuzsanna Gulácsi (2016). The first academic publication on Manichaeism by a Chinese scholar is Wang Jianchuan's book (1981), which systematically presents the history and development of Manichaeism, its spread and introduction along Central Asia, as well as an overview of the historical and previous research at that time. Other Chinese scholars such as Lin Wushu (1987), Yang Fuxue, Niu (1987), and Wang Yuanyuan (2012) specialise in the '*Three Yi Religions*' and contribute greatly to this study.

For the study of Manichaeism in Xinjiang, Zsuzsanna Gulácsi has published a wealth of research on this topic, especially from an artistic perspective based on archaeological materials, amongst which *Mani's Pictures* (2016) is a comprehensive scholarly publication that has written extensively on Uyghur Manichaeism and the relationships between the realms in Xinjiang and the authorities from the East, in particular the counting and sorting of objects, as well as the comparative studies of Manichaean collections worldwide. The Asian Art Museum in Berlin, as the institution with the largest collection of Manichaean artefacts, and the Berlin Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities have long been instrumental in the research for this study. In the last two decades, there is little new archaeological evidence of Manichaeism uncovered in Xinjiang, meanwhile the Manichaean features in southeastern China have attracted a lot of attention to the academia, causing the demand for comparative studies of Manichaean primary sources in different regions in China to increase, which has brought new thoughts and aspects to this study.

Highlighting the research base of archaeological evidence of Zoroastrianism, Nestorianism, and Manichaeism within China from a spatio-temporal dimension will uncover the process of the dissemination and influence from the non-indigenous religions in China (see chapter 4). Xinjiang as a region in-between the East and the West along the Silk Roads, the archaeological finds can be expected to show interaction, and a great variety, as will be explored in the next chapter. This evidence and its distribution in this region could suggest more information supporting the spatiality and in-betweenness in this study.

3. Currently Published Archaeological Evidence

Archaeological evidence relating to Zoroastrianism, Nestorianism and Manichaeism in Xinjiang is scant, consisting mainly of ruins, cave sites, paintings, manuscripts, coins and funerary objects. This chapter reviews a selection of currently published relevant sources concerning each of these religions. Figure 2 and Table 1 provide an overview of all case studies sites in this thesis.

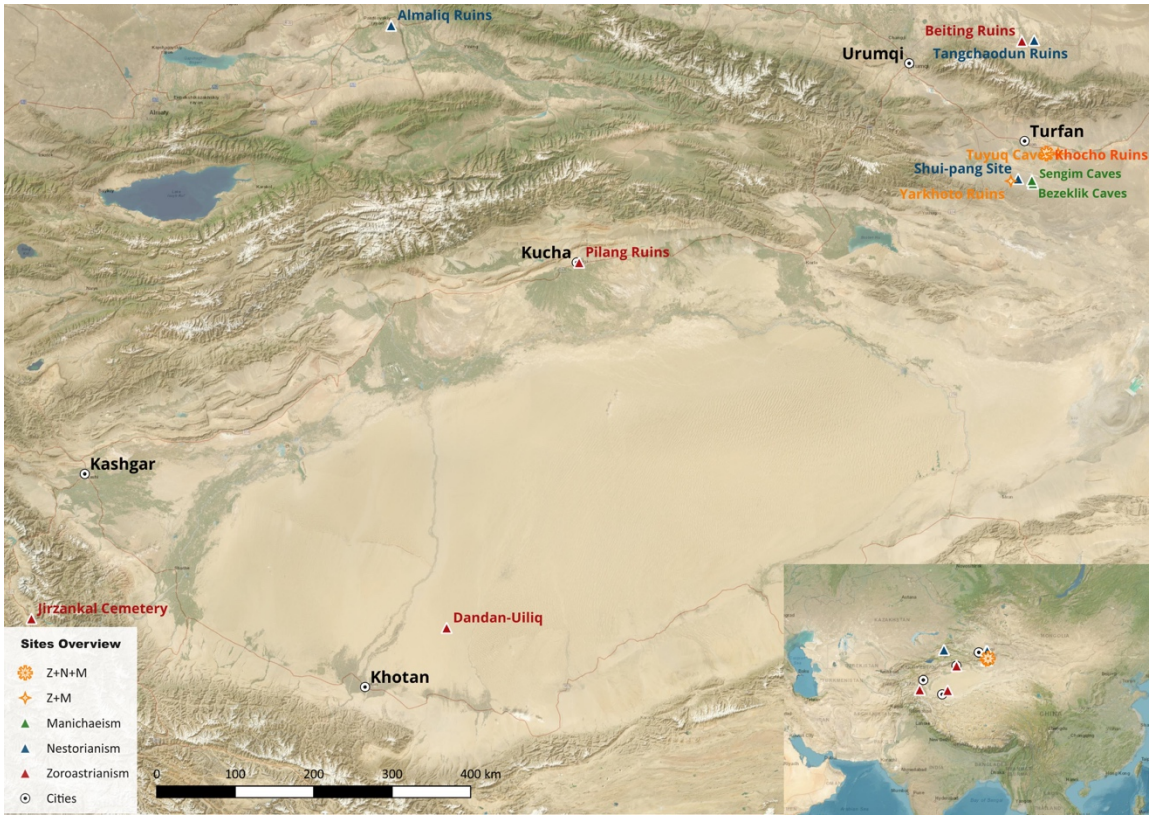

Figure 2. Sites Overview. An overview of all the sites with selected archaeological evidence in Xinjiang. Names in black are cities, added as points for orientation, names in red (Zoroastrianism), blue (Nestorianism) or green (Manichaeism) are sites where only that type of evidence has been found, yellow are sites where evidence for both Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism have been found, and finally, Kocho (here Khocho) Ruins in orange is the one site where all three have been found. (Source: Figure by Xinwu Luo, map produced with QGIS).

Religion	No.	Archaeological Evidence	Site/Location	Time Period
Zoroastrianism	1	Jirzankale Cemetery	Jirzankale	ca. 4400 – 4600 BCE
	2	Wooden panel with paintings	Dandan-Uiliq	7th - 8th centuries
	3	Sassanian coins	Khocho Ruins Astana Cemetery Yarkhoto Ruins	310 - 651 CE
	4	Ossuaries	Pilang Ruins Tuyuq Caves Beiting Ruins	5th - 10th centuries
Nestorianism	1	A Nestorian Monastery Ruin	Khocho Ruins	7th - 8th centuries
	2	A Nestorian Monastery Site	Tangchaodun Ruins	9th - 14th centuries
	3	A Nestorian Monastery Site	Shui-pang Site	9th - 14th centuries
	4	Nestorian Tombstones	Almaliq Ruins	13th - 14th centuries
Manichaeism	1	Two Manichaean Monasteries	Khocho Ruins	8th - 11th centuries
	2	Cave Sites and manuscripts	Bezeklik Caves Tuyuq Caves Sengim Caves Yarkhoto Ruins	8th - 11th centuries

Table 1. Sites Overview. An overview of all the sites with selected archaeological evidence in Xinjiang with the site location and time period. (Source: Table by Xinwu Luo).

3.1 Case studies for Zoroastrianism

Despite the fact that the Zoroastrian archaeological evidence found in Xinjiang is limited, it has strong Zoroastrian characteristics related to their religious practices. Notably, the Sassanian coins indicate the fire worship of Zoroastrianism and the communication between the Sassanian Empire and the Xinjiang region, and the different types of ossauries discovered show the inheritance of the Zoroastrian burial customs in Central Asia.

3.1.1 Jirzankale Cemetery[7]

According to the carbon-14 data, this site dates to around 4400 – 4600 B.C.E., and its location is at coordinates 37°52′14″N, 75°13′34″E. Jirzankale Site is located at the Pamir Plateau in western Xinjiang. The Xinjiang team of Institute of Archaeology of the Chinese Academy of Social Science (中國社會科學院考古研究所新疆工作隊) conducted excavations in 2013 and 2014.

[7] There are debates among Chinese scholars about whether this is a Zoroastrian site (Zhang, 2019). I argue that the archaeological evidence that researchers have collected at the Jirzankale site and compared with other related information known about Zoroastrianism so far, is not sufficient to reach the conclusion that this is a Zoroastrian site. However, given that the material currently published on this subject in Xinjiang is limited, this evidence is listed here.

Archaeologists have found archaeological features, objects and human remains that they believe have the strong characteristics of fire and heaven worship, leading they claim that Jirzankale Site is a Zoroastrian site (Wu, 2013 & 2018; Liu, 2015). However, some scholars (Zhang, 2019) argue that the cult of fire and heaven is a more widespread practice present in various cultures, and the remains and artefacts excavated have not been found at any other currently known Zoroastrian site. It is thus not certain that this site is a Zoroastrian site.

3.1.2 Wooden panel with paintings, Dandan-Uiliq

Starting with the basic information, the panels date between the seventh and eight centuries, and their location is at coordinates 37°46′28″N, 81°4′23″E. During his expedition to Xinjiang, the archaeologist Aurel Stein (1862 – 1943) excavated wooden panels with paintings at Dandan-Uiliq, of which object D.X.3 is the most disputed. This panel was affixed to the wall *in situ*, and upon excavation was found to be painted on both sides, which Stein initially identified as Buddhist figures and dated to the eighth century though he acknowledged its Persian element, as their overall style and the location was in the famous Buddhist kingdom of Khotan (Stein, 1907, p. 274).

It was not until 1992 that scholar Markus Mode published 'Sogdian gods in exile: Some iconographic evidence from Khotan in the light of recently excavated material from Sogdiana', in which he argues (1992, p. 183), through an extensive and detailed comparative iconographic study, that the figures on the wooden panel are the Sogdian deities with Ōhmazd, Nanā, and Weshparkar (Figure 3). Since the panel was painted on both sides, and Stein did not specify which side was attached to the wall, it is impossible to know whether the Zoroastrian or Buddhist deities were facing the audience[8]. Hence, Rong (2001, p. 314) suggests that the panels were created in the eighth century by the Sogdians in Khotan and the Khotanese who converted to Zoroastrianism under the circumstances of the cultural exchange. Jiang (2014, p. 199) speculates that since the Buddhist images on the wooden panels are stylistically earlier than the eighth century (Figure 4), these Zoroastrian-style

[8] Two similar finds were found in the same temple during the excavation lead by swidish archaeologists Christoph Baumer in 1989 (Baumer, 1999). Unlike the panel discussed here, they were painted on one side, so it was clear which side was shown to the public. However, one has the Zoroastrian style, and one the Buddhist style, so these seem to indicate that both styles were shown to the public (Rong, 2015, p. 320-326; Whitfield & Sims-Williams, 2004, p. 159). These can be relevant to the panel described here, by analogy.

figures were probably painted on the back of earlier Buddhist votive panel by Zoroastrian devotees in the Khotan region between the seventh and eighth centuries.

Figure 3. Wooden panel D.X.3 from Dandan-Uiliq. The side with figures that scholars argue are the Zorastrian-style deities. (Source: Brirish Museum, museum number: 1907,1111.72, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A_1907-1111-72).

Figure 4. Wooden panel D.X.3 from Dandan-Uiliq. The side with Buddhist figures. (Source: Brirish Museum, museum number: 1907,1111.72, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A_1907-1111-72).

In the past two decades, with the increasing number of new archaeological discoveries at Dandan-Uiliq, scholars have begun to lean towards the view that these are the local deities of Khotan, as Baumer (1999), Rong (2001 & 2015), Chen (2015), and Compareti (2020) infer. It is reasonable that scholars have found Buddhist, Hindu, and Zoroastrian elements in this votive panel, which fits Khotan's geographical location on the Silk Roads, as it does other sites in Xinjiang. On these sites, diverse cultures encountered each other, and the inhabitants created a syncretism that combined different styles that changed further through localisation (Rong, 2015, p. 327).

3.1.3 Sassanian coins, Turfan region

Starting with the basic information, the coins date between 310 and 651 C.E., and their location is varied. Over the past centuries, hundreds of Sassanian silver coins have been discovered in the Turfan region of Xinjiang, mainly in three ancient sites: Kocho (Gaochang (高昌)) Ruins, Astana cemetery, and Yarkhoto Ruins (Jiaohe (交河)). The earliest of these coins were minted during the reign of Shapur II (310 – 379) and the latest during the reign of the last Sassanian king, Yazdegerd III (632 – 651).

In most cases, the obverse of each coin shows a bust of the king, while the reverse shows an altar of the Zoroastrian religion, which was back then the state religion of the Sassanian Empire (224 – 651) in Persia, with a sacred fire and a priest on either side of the altar (Xia, 1957, p. 51) (Figure 5). This Zoroastrian style resembles the coinage of the Kushan Empire (ca. 30 – 375) in Northern India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, suggesting the spread and impact of Zoroastrianism along the Silk Roads. Sasanian coins were a common currency during the reign of the Qu (麴氏) clans of the Kingdom of Kocho (502 – 640) until they were outlawed in the late reign of Emperor Gaozong (高宗) (reign: 649 – 683) of Tang and replaced by the Kaiyuan Tongbao (開元通寶)[9] coin (Whitfield & Sims-Williams, 2004, p. 26-27).

[9] Kaiyuan Tongbao was named after the era of Gaozong, and the term for the currency.

Figure 5. Titled 'Sassanian silver coins found in the Turfan region in 1955'. A selection of Sassanian silver coins during the reign of Shapur II (310 – 379) and Shapur III (383 – 388). (Source: Xia, 1957, p. 61).

These coins have mainly been excavated from tombs and cellars, or accidentally found by local people during agricultural activities. The spread of the coin finds suggests that there were close trade connections between the Sassanian Empire and the Kocho in Turfan during the fourth century and seventh century. Although there is no direct link between the use of these coins, specifically as currency and burial objects in their original region of use, and religious practice in the Turfan region, the inhabitants of the Turfan region must have been aware of Zoroastrianism by then.

3.1.4 Ossuaries

Starting with the basic information, these ossuaries date between the fifth and tenth centuries, and their location is varied. An ossuary is a burial object of Zoroastrian funerary practice, in which bones are collected after sky burials since the early Sogdians, who had Zoroastrian beliefs in Persia (or ancient Iran) (Jiang, 2004, p. 185; Lin, 2015, p. 52). A total of five ossuaries have been found in Xinjiang: two excavated between 1958 and 1959 at Pilang (皮朗) Ruins in Kucha (dating from the fifth to sixth century), two excavated in 1986 at Tuyuq (Tuyugou, 吐峪溝), dating to the Northern Dynasties (386 – 581), and one excavated at Beiting (北庭) Ruins in Jimsar, dating to the Tang dynasty (Liu, 1986; Kageyama, 1997; Jiang, 2004; Lin, 2015; Chen, 2018; Han & Wang, 2023).

Figure 6. The ossuary found at Pilang Ruins in 1958. An oval shape ossuary (lid is missing) with motif, dating from the fifth to sixth century. (Source: Lin, 2015, p.53).

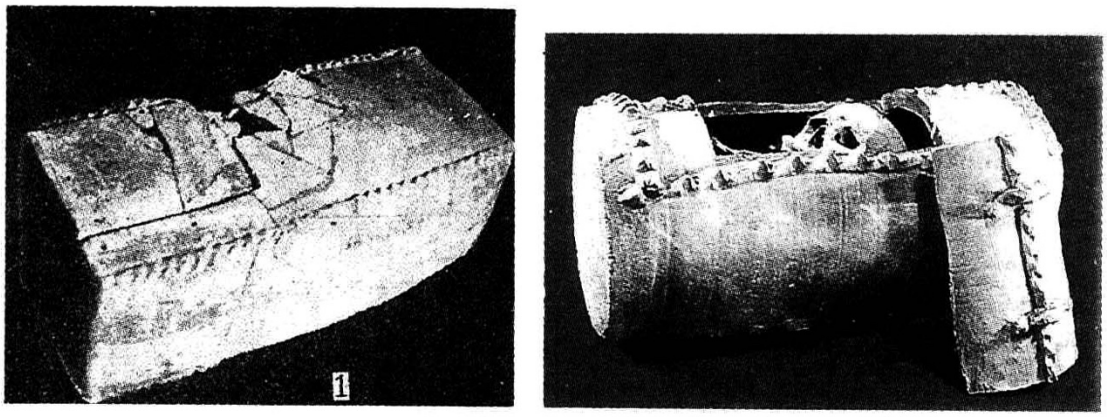

Figure 7. Two ossuaries found at Tuyuq in 1986. One is retangular and one is cylindrical, dating to the Northern Dynasties. (Source: Kageyama, 1997, p. 88).

Figure 8. The ossuary found at Beiting Ruins. An oval ossaury with vaulted lid and an illusatration of different shapes of ossauries discovered, on display during the exhibition 'Fusion colours: Special exhibition on the civilasitions of the Silk Road', at the Arthur M. Sackler Museum of Art and Archaeology At Peking University in 2019. (Source: the social media account of the Arthur M. Sackler Museum of Art and Archaeology At Peking University).

Scholars around the world have made extensive studies of the ossuaries excavated in Central Asia. For the five objects excavated in Xinjiang, Chinese scholars Lin (1996; 2015) and Jiang (2004, p. 185-194) have made detailed overviews from the perspectives of archaeology and art history. The Japanese scholar Kageyama Etsuko (影山悦子) (1997) was the first to systematically analyse the ossuaries from Xinjiang. More recently, two scholars, Han and Wang (2023), have provided a taxonomic summary of ossuaries found within China and a comparative iconographic study with ossuaries excavated in Central Asia.

As a result of archaeological and art historical research, the types and motifs of these ossuaries were identified in similar objects excavated in ancient regions where the Sogdians used to settle of Central Asia. In comparison with the burial objects discovered in Sogdian cemeteries, dating back to Northern and Southern Dynasties (南北朝) (420 – 589) and Tang dynasty in the east of the western regions, such as the Northern Qi (北齊) dynasty (550 – 577) sarcophagus in Anyang (安陽), and the Tomb of An Jia found in Xi'an (Jiang, 2004, p. 33-57; Han & Wang, 2023), it is clear that Zoroastrian burial practices were affected by Han Chinese culture in terms of burial customs and the forms of burial objects. As such, the ossuaries in Xinjiang demonstrate that the Sogdians and followers from other ethnic groups in Xinjiang still revered the traditional Zoroastrian burial practice.

3.2 Case studies for Nestorianism

Apart from the Jingjiao Stele, the surviving archaeological Nestorian materials in China, outside of Xinjiang, include the Old Testament Psalter and other manuscripts in Syriac, found from Cave B53 in the Mogao (莫高) Caves in Dunhuang between 1988 and 1995, the Nestorian Stone Sutra Pillar dating between the Sui (隋) and Tang dynasties, found in Luoyang (洛陽) in 2006, as well as banners with Nestorian inscriptions and gravesites found at four sites in Inner Mongolia (Zhou, 2020, p. 38, 115). There are four Nestorian sites in Xinjiang: a Nestorian monastery ruin on the eastern outskirts of the Kocho Ruins, the Nestorian monastery site at Shui-pang, the Nestorian monastery site at the Tangchaodun (唐朝墩) Ruins in Qitai (奇台), and the Nestorian tombstones found at the Almaliq (阿力麻里) Ruins, Huocheng (霍城), as well as Nestorianism-related texts discovered from some cave sites.

3.2.1 The Nestorian monastery ruin outside of Kocho Ruins

Starting with the basic information, this monastery ruin dates between the seventh and eighth centuries, and it is located outside of the Kocho Ruins (also see 4.2.2, Figure 23). During the German Turfan Expeditions (1902 – 1914), von Le Coq and Grünwedel found a Nestorian monastery outside of the eastern wall of the Kocho ruins (Grünwedel, 1906; Le Coq, 1913). Three characteristic fragments of wall paintings with Nestorian images were discovered, one of which was only sketched by Grünwedel (1913, p. 7; Parry, 1996) and the other two, 'the Celebration of Palm Sunday' (Figure 9) and 'the Small Standing Figure' (Figure 10) are collected at the Asian Art Museum, National Museums in Berlin[10].

In 'the Celebration of Palm Sunday', each figure holds a branch, and scholars (Saeki, 1937, p. 418) have speculated that it could be a scene of Palm Sunday. The fragment sketched by Grünwedel (Figure 11) depicts a figure holding a wand, and riding a donkey or horse, his wand and headdress both decorated with crosses. On the left side of the scene is a female figure in a typical Tang dynasty costume, much smaller in scale than the horseman on the right. (Saeki, 1937, p. 408, 418; Parry, 1996, p. 159).

[10] Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum für Asiatische Kunst.

Figure 9. 'The Celebration of Palm Sunday'. One of the wall painting fragments with Nestorian images found by Grünwedel. (Source: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum für Asiatische Kunst, museum number: III 6911. https://id.smb.museum/object/782008/die-feier-des-palmsonntag).

Figure 10. 'The Small Standing Figure'. One of the wall painting fragments with Nestorian images found by Grünwedel. (Source: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum für Asiatische Kunst, museum number: III 6912. https://id.smb.museum/object/981772/kleine-stehende-figur).

Figure 11. The fragment sketched by Grünwedel, depicting a figure holding a wand, and riding a donkey or horse, his wand and headdress both decorated with crosses. These are very clear characteristics of Nestorianism. (Source: Grünwedel, 1913, p. 7).

3.2.2 The Nestorian monastery site at Tangchaodun Ruins

Starting with the basic information, this monastery dates between the ninth and fourteenth centuries, and it is located in Qitai County in northeastern Xinjiang, at the coordinates 44°01′44.3″N, 89°35′21.3″E. The ancient city site of Tangchaodun was once a strategic

military and political administration and transportation hub along the eastern section of the northern route of the Silk Roads. Since 2018 the archaeological excavation of Tangchaodun Ruins has been carried out for four years and finished in 2022, in collaboration with Renmin University of China (中國人民大學) and the Xinjiang Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology (Ren & Yu, 2020; Tang, 2022; Ren & Wei, 2022 & 2023).

In the northern part of the Tangchaodun Ruins, a large building was excavated. Archaeologists have confirmed that the site was initially built in the early eighth century during the Tang dynasty, and the main part was constructed around the tenth century according to the architectural elements excavated and the C14 dating (Ren & Wei, 2022, p. 112). Furthermore, the study of the architecture and stratigraphy revealed that the main building of the monastery was used from the Uyghur Kingdom of Kocho (866 – 1250?) to the Yuan dynasty, and was abandoned in the fourteenth century. The archaeological materials found include fragments of wall paintings, pottery, metal artefacts, glass, jade and architectural components such as pieces of pillars, bricks and tiles (Figure 12 – Figure 14). A few fragments of wall paintings were painted with crosses, and some bricks depicted the same Old Uyghur inscriptions, transcribed as 'Yelikewin', confirming that this was a Christian site during the Yuan dynasty (Ren & Wen, p. 112).

Figure 12. Left: the plan of the excavation site at Tangchaodun Ruins; Right: F9-10 in the plan. (Source: Ren & Wei, 2022, p. 107-108).

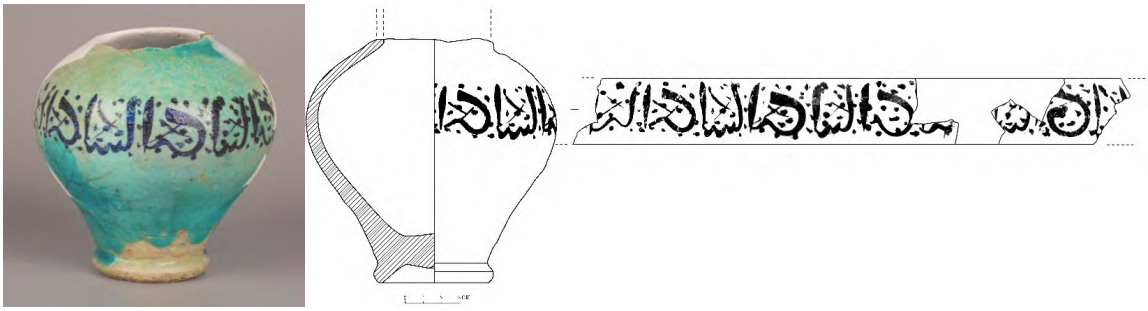

Figure 13. A pottery with Classical Syriac inscriptions. Archaeologistes ranscribed this inscriptions, including words mean ' God', 'life', and 'we', assuming it is for the religious practice use. (Source: Ren & Wei, 2023, p.136)

Figure 14. "Yelikewen" in Uyghur found on a pillar of the ruins. This inscription shows the trace of Nestorianism at Tangchaodun Ruins. (Source: Ren & Wei, 2022, p. 110).

It is noteworthy that a Roman-style bath has been discovered, dating back to the Yuan Dynasty (Ren and Yu, 2020, p. 54). This bath was found together with a Buddhist temple, and a Nestorian monastery on the site of Tangchaodun Ruins, reflecting the diverse cultures that once had an impact in this inclusive region.

3.2.3 The Nestorian monastery site, Shui-pang

In the early twentieth century, German and Russian expeditions visited the area around Shui-pang[11] in Turfan region, at the coordinates 42°59'23.76″N, 89°12'55.39″E. They found more than 1,000 documents in Syriac, Sogdian, Pahlavi and Old Uyghur languages, mainly Nestorianism-related documents, which led them to deduce that the site was a Christian site between the ninth and fourteenth centuries (von Le Coq, 1913). In 2021, Sun Yat-sen University (中山大學) cooperated with the Xinjiang Institute of Cultural Relics &

[11] The site name Shui-pang is translated from Uyghur, in some sources it is referred to as Xi-pang.

Archaeology and Turpania Academia (新疆吐魯番學研究院), launching a three-year professional archaeological excavation project (Liu et al., 2022, p. 74).

According to the 2021 archaeological report (Liu et al., 2022, p. 76-79; Figure 15 & Figure 16), the excavation team excavated fragments of texts in a variety of languages, including Chinese, as well as other objects such as fragments of wall paintings, pottery, wood and textiles. The team has also uncovered the entire layout of the site, enabling a clearer comparison of the Shui-pang site with other Nestorian monasteries that have been discovered in Central Asia (Liu et al., 2022, p. 79). Archaeologists argue that this site might be built during the Uyghur Kingdom of Kocho and later abandoned and reused in the Qing (清) dynasty (1644 – 1912) (Liu et al., 2022, p. 80).

The Shui-pang Nestorian Monastery Site and the Tangchaodun Ruins are two comparatively well-preserved ruins that show the layout of Nestorian monasteries in China. They provide archaeological information for further research into the dissemination of Nestorianism and its integration with indigenous culture in Xinjiang.

Figure 15. The excavation area at Shui-pang. It shows the plan of the Nestorian monastery, the codes on the map indicate the presumed function of the room. (Source: Liu et al., 2022, p. 76).

Figure 16. Objects found at Shui-pang. The finds include a manuscript in Classical Syriac, a fragment of wall painting, and a remnant wood cross. (Source: Liu et al., 2021, p.79).

3.2.4 Nestorian tombstones, Almaliq Ruins

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, eight Nestorian tombstones with Syriac inscriptions, dating to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries have been unearthed in the ancient city of Almaliq (阿力麻里) in Huocheng (霍城) County, Xinjiang, at the coordinates 44°16'11"N, 80°29'14"E (Niu, 2007; Li & Niu, 2009; Figure 17). Nestorian tombstones whose owners were from Almaliq have also been found in Zhetysu, Kazakhstan.

Figure 17. A selection of Nestorian tombstones found at Almaliq Ruins. Crosses, lotus flowers, and Syriac inscriptions are inscribed, which are characteristic Nestorian motifs. (Source: Niu, 2007, p. 75-79).

The tombstones are inscribed with crosses and lotus flowers and Syriac inscriptions. The scholar Niu (2007) has transcribed and translated the Syriac text on these tombstones, which provides basic information about the tomb owners and their dates of birth and death. Most of the Nestorian tombstones found in Semirechye (modern-day Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan), as well as in Central and West Asia, are overall decorated with jewels and other motifs. Remarkably, the Nestorian tombstones at Almaliq mostly contain the lotus flower and lotus platform patterns, which illustrate Buddhist implications, as this is often used in Buddhism to place the lotus seat of the bodhisattva (Wang, 2014, p. 83). This suggests that Nestorianism was affected by Buddhism within Xinjiang to the extent that Nestorian burial customs were subsequently modified during the thirteenth and fourteenth century.

3.3 Case studies for Manichaeism

Apart from the two Manichaean monasteries[12] discovered at Kocho Ruins, other Manichaean archaeological evidence in Xinjiang consists mainly of caves and religious manuscripts and wall paintings from within the caves, with some texts found sporadically at other sites in Turfan region, for example, at Yarkhoto Ruins. The main sites with Manichaean caves are Bezeklik (柏孜克里克), Tuyuq and Sengim (*shengjinkou* (勝金口)).

The Manichaean archaeological evidence found in Xinjiang in this thesis focuses on Kocho Ruins for the following reasons. First is the geographical location of Kocho, which is located in the Turfan region, the significant area in the northern route of the Silk Roads in Xinjiang; second, Shamanism was once prevalent in the Kocho Kingdom (866 – the fourteenth century), but Manichaeism was quickly adopted as the state religion of the realm of Kocho during the eighth and ninth centuries (Yang & Niu, 1987, p. 88; Wang, 2012, p. 71; Gulácsi, 2016, p. 1;). The status of Manichaeism as the state religion is linked to the fate of the Kocho Kingdom, the influence of Tang rule is one of the reasons that Manichaeism was replaced by Chinese Buddhism and all the Manichaean caves were transformed into the Buddhist caves. It

[12] The term for a Manichaean monastery is *manistan* (Gulácsi, 2016, p. 1). To be consistent with most sources, 'monastery' is used for a *manistan* in this thesis.

is thus a splendid case study to investigate the cultural influence from the East on the local kingdoms of the western regions and the transition under the influence.

3.3.1 Ruin K and Ruin Alpha, Kocho Ruins

Site K was described in Grünwedel's documentation as 'Great Monastery K', and was also recorded by Le Coq and Stein (Figure 18). Here, Manichaean manuscripts, Manichaean monastery banners (Figures 19 & Figure 2), and architectural structural elements had been discovered (Dreyer & Konczak-Nagel, 2016), dating between 610(?) and 1024. Dreyer and Konczak-Nagel (2016) conducted extensive comparative studies of the archives of Site K in the documentations written by different explorers, recounting the history of the discovery of this extensive complex site and the details of how the objects were found, as well as comparing them *in situ* in the past and present. This literature provides a wealth of primary sources for the documentation of surveys and excavations carried out during the early expeditions, especially the *in situ* situation of objects, which provides valuable archaeological information. In combination with high resolution images, the authors puzzle together a relatively complete image of Site K. Nevertheless, it focuses more on the architectural aspect based on the relevant artefacts.

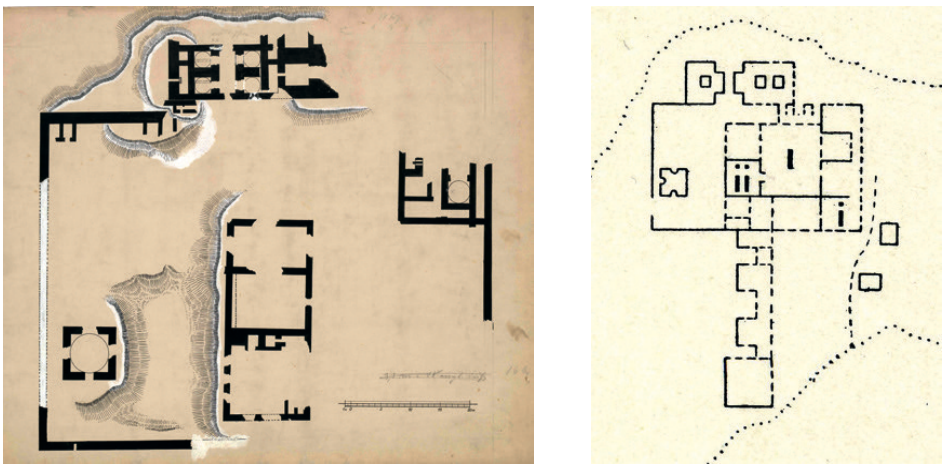

Figure 18. Left: Map of Ruin K (TA 6497) drew by Le Coq. Right: An extract of Ruin K (Kao I) taken from Stein's general map of Kocho Ruins. These two plans illustrate the layout of Ruin K and provide a reference for the study of the Manichaean monastery. (Source: Dreyer & Konczak-Nagel, 2016, p. 91).

Ruin *Alpha* is in a smaller scale than Ruin K, and mainly Manichaean manuscripts and banners were discovered here. However, Ruin *Alpha* was later used as a Buddhist building, as a foundation piece with Uyghur inscription (commemorating the foundation) was found, dating to 1008 C.E. (Gulácsi, 2016, p. 42). It can be supposed that Ruin *Alpha* had alternating functions, originally as a Manichaean building and later as a Buddhist one.

Figure 19. A wall painting fragment recovered at Site K. A možak (bishop) and the Uyghur Manichaean community. (Source: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum für Asiatische Kunst, museum number: III 6918.).

Figure 20. An illuminated leaf from a Manichaean book, in Sogdian script, discovered at Site K, dating to the 9th – 10th centuries). Left: priests with typical Manichaean tall white hats and robes (typical of scribes). Right: verso, a hymn, with floral motifs and three people who could be reciting the hymns. (Source: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum für Asiatische Kunst, museum number: III 6368. https://id.smb.museum/object/815294/manich%C3%A4ische-buchillustration).

4. Visualisation and Discussion

Historically, Xinjiang has always been in a state where people from different ethnic groups have coexisted. The distribution of different settlements and kingdoms is largely determined by the geographical environment, in which they have developed themselves and interacted with each other. In the ancient history of Xinjiang, since the reign of the Xiongnu around the second and first centuries B.C.E., this area has had the presence of Han, Iranian, Turkic, Tibetan, Mongolian, Manchurian, and other ethnic groups, falling in and out of the control of different authorities in the later centuries. It was the scene of several different local regimes coexisting until the Qing imperial court conquered the region and renamed it Xinjiang, meaning ‘new frontier’.

Since the victory of the Han imperial court in the conflicts with the Xiongnu and the later establishment of the Protectorate of the Western Regions in 60 B.C.E., as well as the successive development of the Silk Roads, the local regimes and cultures in Xinjiang have always been in a state of in-between. This state consists of, on the one hand, to have the characteristics of various ethnic groups, and on the other hand, to be affected by the influence of various cultures spreading from the west of the Silk Roads as well as the restraints of the authority affecting the area from the East.

This chapter investigates the archaeological case studies of the three minor religions listed in the previous chapter by visualising the distribution of sites on the map, through the lens of spatiality to discuss the relationships between religions and different ethnic groups, as well as the transregional and transcultural communication implied in the spatio-temporal dynamics in Xinjiang during the ancient Silk Roads era.

4.1 Regional setting

The topography of Xinjiang determines the division of its sub-regions: between the Altai Mountains and the Tianshan Mountains is the northern half, Dzungaria; south of the Tianshan (天山) Mountains and north of the Kunlun (昆仑) Mountains is the Tarim Basin; and the third region, in the eastern part consists of the Turfan and Hami regions. This topographical setting limits transport routes. In addition, due to the arid climate, most of the interior of the basin is the Gobi Desert, and Xinjiang's settlements and trade routes are mostly distributed on the alluvial fan plains at the edge of the basin and in the oases scattered throughout it.

4.2 Discussion

The discussion of the spatiality of archaeological data in this thesis is approached from two perspectives. First is from a transregional scope to examine the relationships between archaeological sites related to three minor religions and the different routes of the Silk Roads in Xinjiang. The second perspective is the regional scope, it studies the relationship between archaeological evidence of different religions that alternately existed at one site through different time periods and the reasons behind the shifts and their impact on the region itself.

4.2.1 Transregional scope: relationships between archaeological sites and the Silk Roads trade network

Figure 21. Map of the Silk Roads. An overview of the distribution of all the sites with selected archaeological evidence and their relationship with the Silk Roads trade network. (Also see Figure 2. Source: Figure by Xinwu Luo, map produced with QGIS).

The Silk Roads in Xinjiang can be categorised into three routes: the northern, southern and eastern routes, corresponding to three sub-regions respectively. The distribution of the sites of the archaeological case studies discussed in the text is consistent with the distribution of settlements and the trade network. Figure 21 shows that in comparison to the southern route, most of the sites are distributed in the northern and eastern regions along the trade routes,

especially in the Turfan region in the east, in the southern region, the currently known Nestorian and Manichaean archaeological evidence have not left traces.

Amaliq Ruins was the capital of the Chagatai Khanate (1226 – 1570/1680), one of the most influential khanates during the Yuan dynasty. It is an important stop on the northern route of the Silk Roads.

Eastern Xinjiang is a concentration of Zoroastrianism, Nestorianism, and Manichaeanism sites: Beiting Ruins, Tangchaodun Ruins, Shui-pang Site, Kocho Ruins, Yarakhoto Ruins, and several cave sites. This distribution is the result of the continuous choice of different rulers to establish their political and administrative centre in Xinjiang. Consequently, as the flourishing of the Silk Roads is interwound with the promotion and control of the courts, it is inevitable that this is a region that was the hub to interact with diverse cultures.

Though the site of Dandan-Uiliq is not located on the main southern route, it is close to the Buddhist kingdom Khotan (56 – 1006). In addition to the great influence from the Buddhism brought along the southern Silk Roads, the discovery of the Nestorian elements in the Buddhist temple at Dandan-Uiliq suggests the diversity of Khotan and the spread of different cultures along the Silk Roads.

4.2.2 Regional scope: sites with alternating religions

From the visualisation of all the sites discussed (Figure 22), there are only three sites where different religions alternated: Kocho Ruins, Tuyuq Caves and Yarkhoto Ruins. Traces of Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism have been found at Tuyuq Caves and Yarkhoto Ruins, Kocho Ruins is special in that archaeological evidence of all three religions have been uncovered. The following is a discussion focusing on these sites.

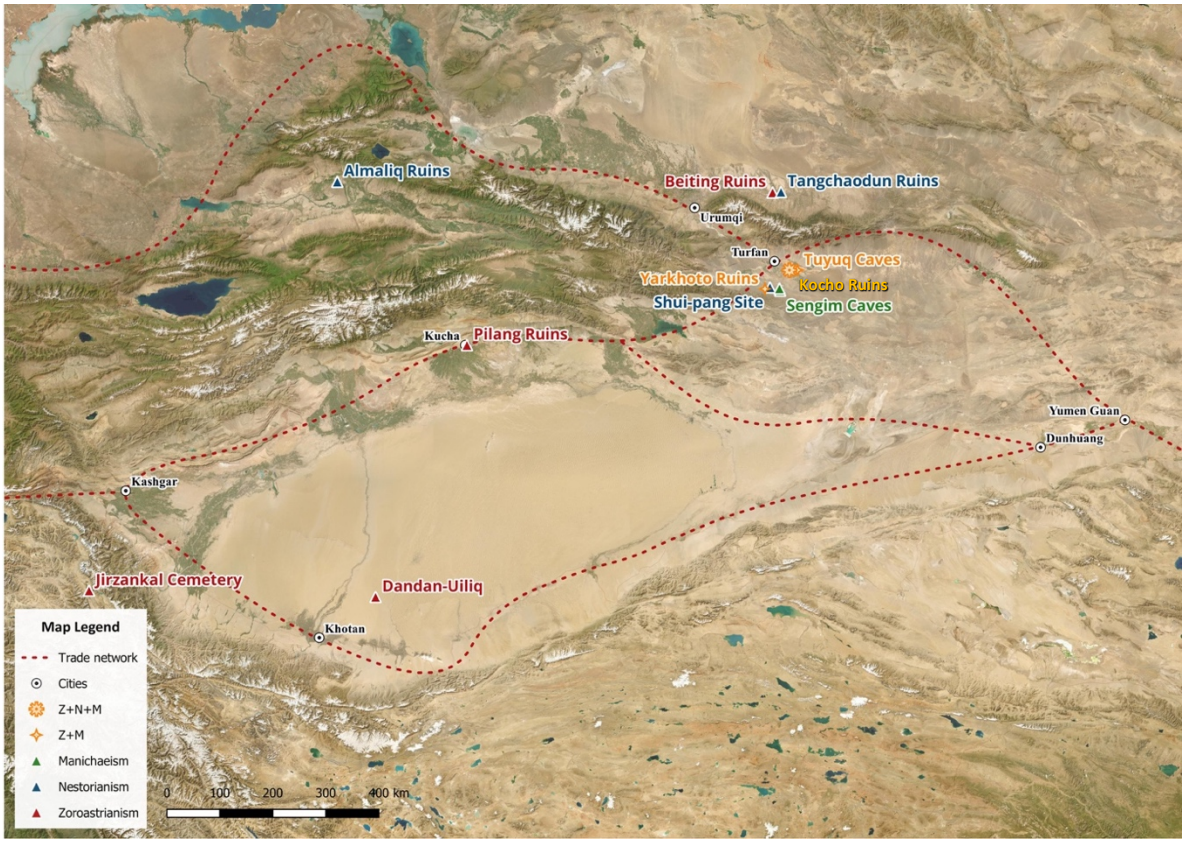

Figure 22. Map of the eastern Silk Roads. Extract of the distribution of all the sites with selected archaeological evidence in Xinjiang and their relationship with the Silk Roads trade network. (Also see Figure 2. Source: Figure by Xinwu Luo, map produced with QGIS).

Tuyuq Caves is a site in an elongated valley that contains evidence of Zoroastrian and Manichaean archaeological. From a broader geographical context, it is located in the cultural and political centre of the Turfan region and in close vicinity to other important sites such as Kocho, Yarkhoto and Bezeklik in this region. Although the discovery of Zoroastrian ossuaries and Manichaean caves and manuscripts does not reveal a direct relationship between these two religions, it suggests that the inhabitants of this region used to have different religious beliefs, or perhaps it was a place where followers of certain religions temporarily resided.

Yarkhoto was an important stop at the crossroads of the northern and eastern routes of the Silk Roads in Xinjiang, it was also once the capital of the Kingdom of Kocho under the reign of Qu clans. The archaeological evidence of the Sassanian coins and Manichaean manuscripts found in the city are the only two find types to suggest the presence of the two religions, though not sufficiently is known about them to prove the interaction between them.

Kocho Ruins is a significant hub with strategic importance located in an oasis along the southern route of the Silk Roads in the Turfan region of eastern Xinjiang. The site existed between the first and fourteenth centuries, and used to be an administrative centre. Numerous

archaeological evidence finds have been discovered here, pointing to the presence of all three minor religions. This includes coins with Zoroastrian motifs, Nestorian and Manichaean monasteries, spanning from the fourth century to the eleventh century.

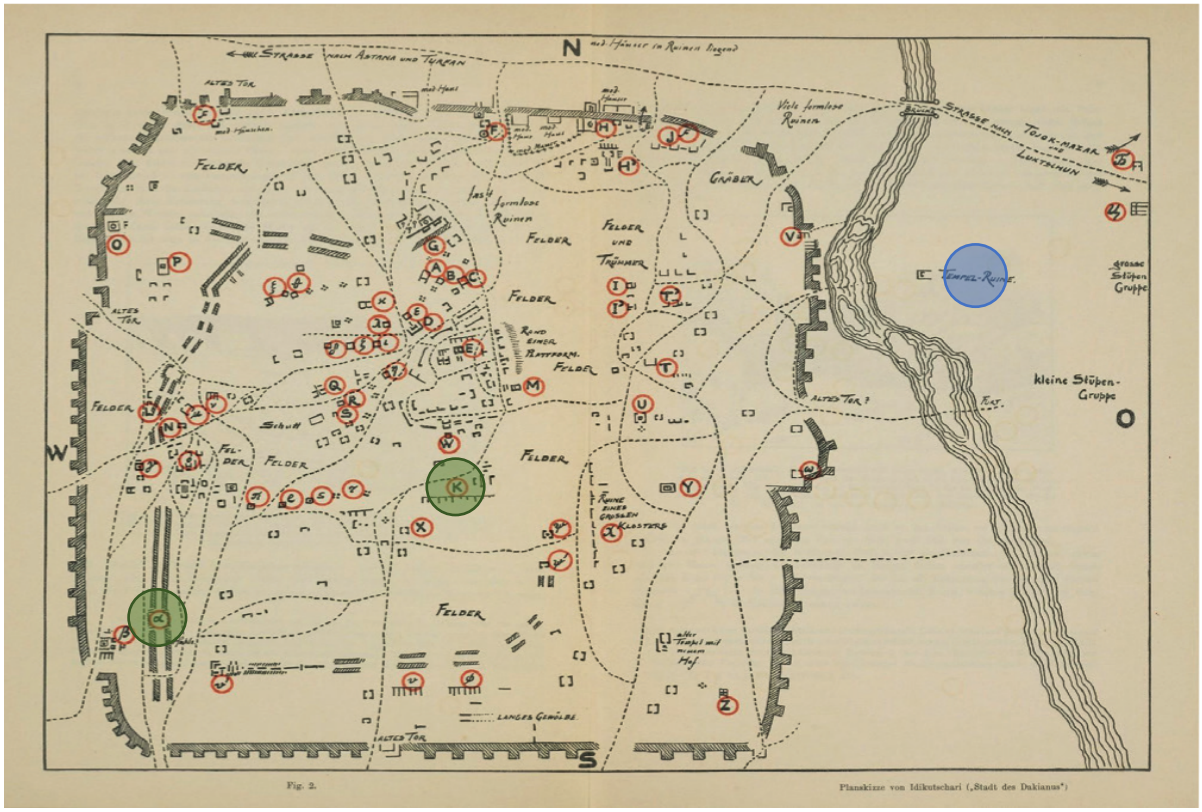

Figure 23. The plan of the ancient city of Kocho. The city plan of Kocho with all the archaeological remains drawn by Albert Grünwedel, with the Nestorian monastery ruin and Manichaean monasteries outlined in blue and green respectively. (Source: Grünwedel, 1906, p. 17, with adaptation).

Grünwedel, von Le Coq, and Stein once investigated Kocho and produced detailed documentation, including the plan of the Kocho city. In accordance with the sketch plan of ancient Kocho published by Grünwedel in 1906 (p. 17; Figure 23), it is clear that the Nestorian monastery ruin is located outside the ancient city of Kocho (blue marking in Figure 23). This indicates that the Nestorianism was not an indigenous religion in Kocho, and the date of this ruin, between the seventh and the eight centuries, corresponds to the time of the introduction of the Nestorianism at the end of the sixth and the beginning of the seventh centuries. The spatial relationship between the Nestorian monastery ruin and the city also suggests that Nestorianism was a minor religion in Kocho region at the time.

Compared to the Nestorian ruin, the location and size of two Manichaean monasteries ruins in Kocho Ruins (green marking in Figure 23) demonstrate a different status in terms of the acceptance of a non-indigenous religion. This occurrence is in line with the fact that

Manichaeanism became the state religion of Kocho Kingdom during the eighth and ninth centuries.

According to the discussion above, all three sites clearly show the presence of several religions in one place geographically but not temporarily. However, only the remains at Kocho Ruins are evidence demonstrating the clear alternation of different religions at one site.

This raises two questions for the future research on the ancient Silk Roads:
First, can the presence of cultural diversity in Xinjiang be seen as the result of complex trade? There is the presence of different religions in the same geographical location at different times, indicating that there is a reason they could not coexist. Does this suggest that the alternation was to accommodate traders of certain faiths who temporarily resided or migrated to Xinjiang?
Second, is tolerance of diversity also a necessity for enabling trade? And what is the influence of the top-down control of the authorities from the east in this region?

5. Conclusion

Xinjiang, this geographical and cultural crossroads between the West and the East, has been witness to the legend of the ancient Silk Roads for more than a thousand years. There is a vast array of traces of different cultures and religions buried here and rediscovered by explorers and archaeologists. Zoroastrianism, Nestorianism and Manichaeism are part of this cultural syncretism. As professional archaeological work continues, more stories will be revealed.

Historically, Xinjiang as an archaeological region has been explored for over a century, and scholars worldwide have conducted in-depth research on the three religions from different perspectives. New archaeological evidence unearthed in the last two decades has also shed light on current research. Through the historical overview on each religion, including the retrospect of related literature sources, the dissemination of the aforementioned three religions during the ancient Silk Roads era clearly demonstrates that they were introduced from the West and spread along the trade network. The spatiality of the archaeological evidence related to the different religions over successive eras shows the in-betweenness that is also implied in the cultural aspect, as it is in line with their geographical location. Through the analysis and visualisation of the currently published related archaeological evidence, the concepts of spatiality and in-betweenness have been applied to demonstrate the presence of three religions and their distribution, as well as their alternate changes in the region.

The spatial pattern of the distribution of the three religions along the Silk Roads in Xinjiang reflects the complexity and diversity of the trade network and the function of this region. For transregional traders who travelled to and settled in Xinjiang with their original faiths, cultural diversity is a demand, for instance, the Sogdian traders brought Zoroastrianism alongside their migration from Central Asia to the East. This interaction stimulated the introduction and localisation of new cultures in the region. However, the alternation of different religions in the same place, due to the need to accommodate various groups of traders, suggests certain underlying reasons that require further research. For the rulers from the East, the ambition of the top-down control over the Western Regions has been performed in an ambiguous way: imperial dynasties would like to keep a certain degree of tolerance for the cultural diversity, while also have concerns about ruling from a canonical government. This also resulted in often switching the official state religions, such as the alternation from Manichaeanism to Buddhism in the Uyghur Kocho Kingdom.

Furthermore, from the case studies, it is clear that there are several categories of material culture of which there are many unknown factors. For the wooden panels found in Dandan-Uiliq and the Manichaean monasteries in Kocho Ruins, this research encountered many mysteries, and there are questions left unresolved that can be the target of further research.

All in all, the region of Xinjiang clearly has many underlying dynamics, and it is not possible to do right to every single one of them within these few pages. Both in the sense of time periods, for example marked by the alternating religions, migrations and building phases, and in the sense of geography, climate and influence from the east, there are many small details and differences that can still be uncovered by those willing to take a closer look at this region.

Abstract

Xinjiang is a region that functions as the heart of the ancient Silk Roads, but it finds itself in a state of in-betweenness. Judging from historical research and archaeological evidence, many outside influences and different peoples have affected Xinjiang from the second century B.C.E. to the thirteenth century C.E., and evidence of the presence of three relatively lesser-known religions appears in a spatial pattern along the different Silk Road routes. This thesis discusses these influences, the three religions, and the concepts of spatiality and in-betweenness, and through this lens, approaches the functioning of this turbulent region in the ancient Silk Roads era.

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