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The Bilingual Manuscript with the *Irk Bitig*: London, British Library, Or.8212/161

Abstract: This tenth-century manuscript from Dunhuang is celebrated for the Old Turkic divination text known as *Irk Bitig*, the Book of Omens. However, the same manuscript also contains two Chinese Buddhist hymns added to the beginning and the end of the Old Turkic text. Close examination of the manuscript in all its aspects sheds new light on the close interaction of texts, languages and religions in the Silk Road environment.

1 Former research and conservation

The Stein collection of Chinese and Central Asian manuscripts at the British Library in London contains a small booklet (pressmark Or.8212/161) written in Old Turkic using the so-called Runic script. The booklet was acquired by M. Aurel Stein (1862–1943) in the early twentieth century, along with tens of thousands of other manuscripts found in a walled-up cave near the town of Dunhuang in what is now north-western China. Following their acquisition, the manuscripts were shipped to London and deposited at the British Museum, from where they were eventually transferred to the British Library. The manuscript discussed in this paper is known under the title *Irk Bitig* (alternatively spelled *Irq Bitig* or *Ïrq Bitig*): that is, *Book of Omens*. Its colophon dates the manuscript to the Year of the Tiger, which is a cyclical date that repeats every twelve years, but in this case probably refers to 930 CE. It is the only Old Turkic text written in the Runic script that survives as a complete book, and is also the longest one. The *Irk Bitig* is a divination text, and modern scholarship is of the opinion that it probably represents a native Turkic composition, rather than a translation from another language.[1] The colophon indicates that it may have been produced in a Manichaean monastery.[2]

The Old Turkic text comprises about 100 pages, but there are also 15 pages before and after it with content in Chinese. The Chinese pages contain two Buddhist texts with no apparent connection to the divination text. Although the

1 Thomsen 1912, 194; Erdal 1997, 66.
2 Hamilton 1975; Zieme 2010, 256.

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manuscript has generated considerable scholarly interest, almost all studies focused on the Old Turkic text, which is indeed exceptional in many respects. In contrast with this, scholarship has either ignored or merely mentioned the Chinese content, without trying to account for its presence in the manuscript.[3] There is no question about the significance of the divination text for the study of early Turkic culture, as it has important implications for language, script, culture, literature, society and religion. Nonetheless, there is a noticeable imbalance in taking almost no notice of 15 pages of writing in the same manuscript.

The manuscript is in the form of a small codex, which consists of 29 bifolia folded in half to produce 58 folia or 116 pages. The individual folia are 13.1 cm tall and 8 cm wide, so that the book is roughly the size of a modern passport. While at the British Museum, modern conservators bound it in a dark-red hard cover, thereby largely obscuring the original form of the manuscript. Moreover, they strengthened the inside edge of the folia with thick conservation paper and today this effectively prohibits us from seeing the physical structure of the booklet. Fortunately, the Danish linguist Vilhelm Thomsen (1842–1927), the person credited with the decipherment of the Runic script, described the structure of the manuscript as it was prior to conservation.[4] Stein had sent the manuscript to Denmark and thus Thomsen was able to examine it in person at one of the public libraries. Thomsen understandably focused his attention on the linguistic particularities of the Old Turkic text, although he also provided a brief description of the manuscript's physical form, noting that the sheets were 'not stitched together, but glued together at the back, one by one'. He also noted that the book, at that time still in excellent condition, had no binding of any sort and the folded sheets were only glued together at the spine.[5] Almost a decade later, Stein's detailed report also records that the bifolia were pasted, rather than sewn, together at the back.[6] Indeed, this type of glued codex, in which single bifolia are glued together along the outer edge of their fold, represents one of the two major types of Chinese codices from Dunhuang.[7]

Both Thomsen and Stein published photographs of the manuscript, and these reveal that the corners of the folia used to be rounded, whereas today they are sharp.[8] In other words, the margins were cropped while at the British

3 A notable exception is Rybatzki and Hu 2015; for specific arguments, see below.

4 Thomsen 1912, 190–214.

5 Thomsen 1912, 190.

6 Stein 1921, vol. 2, 924–925.

7 The other is the sewn type, in which folded bifolia form quires, several of which may be sewn together into a booklet; see Galambos 2020, 32–36.

8 Thomsen 1912, 190, Plate II; Stein 1921, vol. 4, Plate CLX.

Museum (Figs 1–2). This is also noticeable at the top margin of page 57B where Stein's manuscript number is missing its top half. As expected, the cropping altered the dimensions, as Thomsen recorded the height of pages at 13.6 cm, whereas today they are only 13.1 cm.

In addition, conservators ironed out and restored the lower corners of the pages, shaping the heavily worn folia into regular rectangles and thereby largely eliminating signs of use. The old images further reveal that the bifolia used to be glued securely together, whereas in their current form the inside edges of the folia stand apart and are reinforced with modern paper (Figs 3–4). Presumably, these changes were made in an effort to conform to prevailing conservation standards rather than out of immediate necessity, as early descriptions stress the good condition of the manuscript.[9]

Apart from the disciplinary and linguistic divide between Turkic and Chinese studies, the main reason for disregarding the Chinese part of the manuscript was, paradoxically, the uniqueness and overall significance of the Old Turkic text. Marcel Erdal calls it 'the most noteworthy direct testimony of Turkic lore and culture in the first millennium'.[10] Demonstrating the singular focus of modern scholarship on the Runic text, Thomsen, the first scholar to work on the manuscript, numbered the pages from where the divination text began, disregarding the previous nine pages with Chinese writing altogether. Thus what he called pages 1–2 (Fig. 1) are in reality pages 10–11.

2 The Old Turkic text

As a text, the *Irk Bitig* consists of 65 entries describing the possible combinations resulting from three throws with a four-sided die. In reality, the number of possible combinations is 64 but the text has a small number of duplicate and missing possibilities.[11] The entries are preceded by triple sets of circles signifying the permutations of the die throws. The circles are drawn in the same black ink as the main text but are also coloured in with red. Similar red colour, or perhaps a little lighter, was used for retouching punctuation marks throughout

9 The same fate happened to some other Old Turkic codices in the British Library (e.g. Or.8212/109), the edges of which were cropped and the spine reinforced with conservation paper.

10 Erdal 1997, 64.

11 According to Rybatzki 2010, 89, three combinations occur twice, one occurs three times, and three possible combinations are missing altogether.

the book, as well as for writing the colophon. The first entry in the text begins with three sets of two circles, representing the combination 2-2-2; the second entry has three times four circles for 4-4-4, and so on. These combinations are then interpreted, concluding in each case with a pronouncement as to whether they constitute a good or bad omen. For example, entries Nos 53–54 offer, in Talat Tekin's translation, the following explanations:[12]

○○ ○○○ ○○

53. A grey cloud passed; it rained over people. A black cloud passed; it rained over everything. The crop ripened; the fresh grass sprouted. It was good for animals and men, it says. Know thus: [The omen] is good.

○ ○○○ ○

54. The slave's words are a request to his master; the raven's words are a prayer to Heaven. Heaven above heard it; men below understood it, it says. Know thus: [The omen] is good.

There seems to be little logical connection between the separate entries, although certain themes are noticeably common. Thus there are quite a few entries that involve animals (e.g. eagle, deer, bear, horse, raven), meteorological phenomena and agricultural themes. Some of these are thought to be related specifically to Turkic culture, which is one of the main arguments for seeing the *Irk Bitig* as a native Turkic work. Thomsen, for example, thought that some of the details were so closely connected with the way of life of the Turks that it was implausible that they were translated from another language.[13]

The prediction at the end is naturally the most important part of the divination, the very reason for throwing the die. It is notable that there are about twice as many good prognoses in the book as bad ones. Attempts to link this system with Chinese divinatory practices, and especially the tradition of the *Book of Changes*, have not been successful. Early on, scholars drew attention to parallels with some Tibetan divination manuals equally based on a three-dice system.[14] Among the texts brought in connection with this form of divination is London, British Library, IOL Tib J 740, a manuscript found inside the same library cave as the *Irk Bitig*.[15] This is a long scroll with a Chinese version of the *Golden Light Sutra* on the recto, and two seemingly unrelated Tibetan texts on the verso. The first of the Tibetan texts is a divination manual, whereas the

12 Translation from Tekin 1993, 23. The sequence numbers are a modern addition.

13 Thomsen 1912, 194.

14 Francke 1924, 11–12; Thomas 1957, 113–115; Hamilton 1975, 9–10; Erdal 1997, 65–58.

15 Thomas 1957, 140–141.

second is a series of questions and answers on legal matters.[16] Although the Chinese sutra on the recto of this manuscript has not been linked to the Tibetan texts on the verso, it shows an apparent parallel with the *Irk Bitig* manuscript in having a non-Chinese divination manual alongside a Chinese Buddhist text. Another parallel is that the Tibetan divination text has 62 combinations and the *Irk Bitig* has 65, evidently both intended to describe the 64 possible permutations.

A different Tibetan manuscript with a divination text is London, British Library, IOL Tib J 739, a codex of 15 × 12.5 cm. F. W. Thomas noted that it was comparable in form and size to the Turkic manuscript (i.e. 13.6 × 8 cm), and that the horizontal lines of text were similarly written in a portrait orientation. He also pointed out that the little circles above each paragraph were coloured in with red ink, as in the *Irk Bitig*. In addition, the introduction to the Tibetan manuscript began and ended with several lines written in red ink, which was comparable to the red colophon of the *Irk Bitig*.[17] Although the *Irk Bitig* is an exceptional text in Old Turkic literature, there are quite a few divination texts preserved in Tibetan, so much so that Thomas talked about a 'relative abundance' of such manuscripts which he rightly saw as evidence of their popularity.[18]

3 The Chinese content

In contrast with the unquestionable significance of the *Irk Bitig*, the Chinese content of the same manuscript has generated little excitement in scholarship. The beginning of the book has nine full pages in Chinese, plus a line or so on the page where the Old Turkic text begins. Except for the last line, the Chinese text stays clear of the Turkic text, demonstrating not only that it was written later but also that whoever wrote it tried to avoid writing over the divination text. The end of the book contains six full pages of Chinese text, preceded by a one-line title on a separate page. The first page of the Chinese text, as well as the title on the previous one, are on pages that are partially inscribed with Turkic text, although there is little actual overlap (Fig. 5). The Turkic colophon, however, appears on the following two pages, which are fully covered with

16 Dotson 2007, especially 17–30; Dotson 2015, 280–283.

17 Thomas 1957, 141–142; see also Dotson 2019a.

18 Thomas 1957, 140; on Tibetan divination texts in general, see Dotson 2019b.

Chinese characters.[19] In some places the red ink of the colophon seems to cover the black ink of the Chinese text, suggesting that it may have been written over the Chinese characters.[20] This observation, however, only holds true for the colophon, and the divination manual itself is likely to have been written before the two Chinese texts.

The Chinese content is written in a decidedly inferior hand with numerous mistakes and a writing style consistent with the tenth-century date. Both texts are in the same hand and were probably copied around the same time. The second text at the end of the book is entitled 'Hymn on the Boat for the Children of the Buddha' 佛子船讚 (hereafter: 'Hymn on the Boat'). The first text at the beginning has no title but it is a text that survives elsewhere as a text attributed to the Buddhist master Fazhao 法照 (d. 838), the fourth patriarch of the Pure Land school.[21] Some of these texts survive among the Dunhuang manuscripts, demonstrating the popularity of Fazhao's teachings in this region. Although the text bears no title in our manuscript, it appears elsewhere with the title 'Hymn on the Bliss of the True Dharma' 正法樂讚 (hereafter: 'Hymn on the Bliss').[22] It consists of heptasyllabic lines, every second of which carries a rhyme.

Since the text is known from other sources, we can immediately see that the version in our manuscript is incomplete. Apart from omitting the recurring words sung by the chorus, the manuscript is also missing the first four lines (i.e. 28 characters). This suggests that the booklet may have had an additional bifolium at the beginning. Yet it is also possible that there was no beginning, especially since the last part of the text, equivalent to nearly three full pages, is also missing. It is impossible to tell whether the discrepancy is indeed due to omission, or we are dealing with a shorter version of the text.

As for the 'Hymn on the Boat' following the *Irk Bitig* (see Fig. 5), this particular copy is the sole surviving exemplar. Similar to the 'Hymn on the Bliss' at the beginning of the booklet, it consists of pairs of heptasyllabic lines, although the rhyme pattern seems to break down after a while. The verses occupy six full pages beginning after the last full page of Turkic text. The traces of glue visible along the leftmost edge of the last bifolium indicate that the manuscript used to

19 The last two lines of the Turkic text before the colophon are also written on a page that is otherwise entirely in Chinese.

20 Rybatzki and Hu (2015, 150) have reached the opposite conclusion, observing that 'the Turkic colophon in red lies clearly beneath the Chinese characters in black'. Perhaps a scientific analysis will be able to settle the issue conclusively.

21 Rybatzki and Hu 2015, 159–161. This study also contains a full transcription of both Chinese texts.

22 T1984, 47 (references are to the Taishō edition of the Buddhist Canon).

have at least one additional bifolium, which became detached and is now lost. Therefore, the text may have been longer, or there were additional texts following it. Once again, there are numerous textual variants (some clearly errors), including both phonetic and graphic ones. The hymn opens with the following words:

> The Ocean of Suffering is boundless; the other shore is far;
> The River of Desire stretches as far as the eyes can see; it is hard to ford it;
> The sentient beings arriving here are immediately carried away by the current;
> It is only because their minds remain in delusion that they do not awaken.

It seems hardly a coincidence that the first four words of the hymn, 'the Ocean of Suffering is boundless' 苦海無涯, occur in Fazhao's hymns known from elsewhere. Although in later periods this phrase was also used by other authors, it was rare prior to the tenth century, which points to an affiliation with Fazhao's teachings. Similarly, the phrase 'the Five Defilements of the Human World' 閻浮五濁 in the 'Hymn on the Boat' appears in several hymns attributed to Fazhao. Indeed, a series of textual correspondences corroborate the connection between the 'Hymn on the Boat' and the writings of Fazhao. Significantly, the very title of the 'Hymn on the Boat' has direct resonances with Fazhao's teachings, which commonly rely on the boat metaphor to signify the means of reaching 'the other shore':

> Only the great Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī,
> Currently in this land at Mount Wutai,
> Pities the sentient beings submerged in the Ocean of Suffering,
> And makes them ride the Dharma Boat across the waves of everlasting aeons.[23]

In these lines the Ocean of Suffering is juxtaposed with the boat that takes sentient beings across. A similar pairing of these two concepts, both central to Fazhao's teachings, appear in yet another hymn:

> Right away, chant the name of the Buddha, do not hesitate!
> If you want to cross the Ocean of Suffering, you need a boat;
> Invoke his name and establish what is right, thereby generating bliss,
> And forever sever the human world's stream of births and deaths.[24]

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23 'Hymn of the Six Roots' 六根讚, T1983. 47.

24 'New Hymns on the Western Direction' 西方新讚. This text survives in a scroll from Dunhuang (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Pelliot chinois 2963), dated to 951. That the date is close in time to that of the *Irk Bitig* manuscript is evidence of the popularity of

Once again, the boat is a soteriological metaphor that signifies the means by which people can find the way out of the cycle of births and deaths. The boat for the children of the Buddha in the title of the 'Hymn on the Boat' references the same metaphor, commonly used in Fazhao's teachings. In fact, the very end of the text mentions a preceptor who carries his disciples across the ocean to salvation on a Dharma Boat:

> The ocean of births and deaths is deep and there is no path to tread on,
> But our Master rides the Dharma Boat for us.
> Broad is his compassionate heart, he is saving us all,
> Our master's wisdom drives the boat forward.

In view of the rich matrix of intertextual references connecting the 'Hymn on the Boat' in the *Irk Bitig* manuscript with Fazhao's attested hymns, the master invoked here must be Fazhao himself. This also reveals that the 'Hymn on the Boat' was probably composed by someone who belonged to his school and regarded him as a master. Since the manuscript dates to at least a century-and-a-half later than the time of Fazhao, it is possible that the hymn in the manuscript is a copy of a text produced a few generations earlier. But it could just as well have been composed by someone from Fazhao's school during the first half of the tenth century, perhaps even locally. It is evident, however, that the hymn could not have been written by Fazhao himself, as it praises someone like Fazhao, calling him a teacher. In any case, it is clear that the hymn belongs to the Pure Land school of Fazhao and therefore should be added to the corpus of available texts associated with that sect.

In view of the above, from the point of view of the *Irk Bitig* manuscript, we can establish that the two Chinese texts at the beginning and the end of the book are closely linked, not only on account of having been written by the same hand but also in terms of their content and sectarian affiliation. They are both hymns associated with Fazhao's school of Pure Land Buddhism. But how and why did they end up in a manuscript that contained an Old Turkic divination text? To look for a connection between the Chinese and Turkic content, we need to examine the physical form of the manuscript. As mentioned above, the book consists of paper bifolia folded individually and glued together along their folded edge. Prior to its modern conservation, it had no binding whatsoever. Volker Rybatzki and Hu Hong were the first to note the incremental folio numbers

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Fazhao's teachings in the region during the tenth century (the second half of the title is mistakenly transcribed as 'miscellaneous hymns' 雜讚 in T2827, 85).

written in Chinese at the base of the outer edge of each bifolium.[25] As each folded bifolium represents four pages in the manuscript, the numbers appear on every fourth page but are, on account of their size and position, inconspicuous. Fig. 4 shows the number 7 (*qi* 七) at the base of the right-side folio, roughly around the centre of the image. As can be seen from Stein's old photograph from before conservation (Fig. 3), the number was originally hidden because it was in a place that was glued to the adjacent bifolium. These numerals most likely constituted technical notation that ensured that the person assembling the codex glued the bifolia together in the correct order.[26] A remarkable feature of the folio numbers is that they appear only on bifolia which contain the Old Turkic text and not on ones with Chinese content. They start from the first page of the Old Turkic text and continue until its last one. In this manner they go up only until 26, even though the book in its current form consists of 29 bifolia. Consequently, when the manuscript was first assembled, it probably only had the 26 bifolia containing the Old Turkic text without any Chinese writing except the hidden folio numbers. The two extra bifolia at the beginning and additional ones (of which only one is extant) at the back were added subsequently, and these, together with the unused pages of the original 26 bifolia, provided the space for copying the two Chinese texts.

It is possible that the extra bifolia were added to the book at the time when the core 26 bifolia were glued together, even if this had not been the plan when initially copying the Old Turkic text.[27] That the Chinese bifolia do not seem to differ physically from the other ones is an argument in favour of this. Another possibility is that they were added to the manuscript significantly later, years or decades after it had been assembled. Perhaps a new user added extra bifolia specifically to copy the Chinese Buddhist hymns. In either case, it seems unlikely that the Chinese and Turkic content is entirely unrelated. It is clear, for example, that the person adding the Chinese hymns to the booklet did not intend to recycle the paper with the Turkic text, as he or she largely wrote on the newly added pages. Also, if the Turkic divination manual was irrelevant for this person, it would have made more sense to leave it out altogether and glue the

25 Technically, these are bifolium numbers that appear on every second folio.

26 Rybatzki and Hu (2015, 154–155) argue that Thomsen was wrong when claiming that the manuscript had no pagination, but the numbers were indeed invisible when Thomsen examined the book. They were revealed only when the British Museum conservators disassembled the manuscript.

27 Rybatzki and Hu (2015, 154–155) believe that the extra bifolia were glued onto the original book as a protective cover. An argument against this theory is that none of the other roughly contemporary codices from Dunhuang have protective covers consisting of several pages.

bifolia with the Chinese hymns into a separate booklet, rather than keeping 100 pages of unwanted, perhaps even unintelligible, text in the middle. Instead, the structure of the manuscript and the distribution of texts in it show that the Chinese bifolia were added to the beginning and end of the divination text deliberately, intending to have all these texts together in a single booklet. Its compact size and the codex form itself suggest that the manuscript was carried on the body, perhaps in order to allow the texts in both languages to be consulted with relative frequency in different locations. Naturally, they did not necessarily have to have been used on the same occasion, and it is possible that the only connection between them is that they were used by the same person. Nonetheless, this is quite different from there being no connection between the texts.

In fact, there are several points linking the Chinese and Turkic texts, in addition to appearing on the same physical object. One of these is that the Old Turkic colophon runs over the beginning of the 'Hymn on the Boat' and was probably written after the addition of the bifolium with the Chinese hymn. Another point of connection is that the Chinese folio numbers are written on the bifolia with the Turkic text, which attests to the multilingual nature of contemporary culture. This is also evidenced by the manuscript coming from the Dunhuang library cave, which contained tens of thousands of manuscripts in Chinese and other languages. The bulk of this rich collection, including its multilingual part, probably represented the holdings of the library of a local Buddhist monastery. This type of mixture of languages and genres in the same physical manuscript is far from being unique, and there are many similar examples among manuscripts from Dunhuang and other sites along the Silk Roads.

4 Conclusion

The *Irk Bitig* manuscript is an example of the complex relationship between different parts of a multilingual manuscript. This booklet embodies a series of connections between diverse linguistic, cultural and religious aspects that characterized life along the Silk Roads during the tenth century. The manuscript is written in two different languages and the vertical lines of the Chinese text are in close proximity to the horizontal lines of the Turkic text, at times even overlapping with them. The physical form of the book itself embodies cultural interaction, as the codex form almost certainly comes from the West, even if the majority of the codices found in Dunhuang contain Chinese texts. In terms of religion, the manuscript contains a secular divination text, the colophon of which indicates that it was written in a Manichaean monastery. The two Chinese

hymns, in turn, are explicitly Buddhist in content. Finally, the divination technique in the *Irk Bitig* shows parallels with other cultures and languages across Central Asia, linking the manuscript with a significantly wider cultural sphere than that of the Turks.

The main argument in this brief article is that multilingual manuscripts should be examined in their entirety, including their physical structure, textual arrangement and the correlation between their parts. Similarly, it is worth looking at the broader context and exploring similar texts in neighbouring cultures, including those in other languages. Manuscripts that come down to us as a single scroll or codex are often composite objects assembled over several lifetimes. The initial creation of a manuscript does not end the process of its production, as new owners may continue to copy additional texts and add new folia. An approach that strives to reconstruct the earliest stage of a manuscript's life, its assumed 'original' form, is bound to disregard successive stages which may offer important clues regarding the manuscript's function and the reason for its ultimate survival. In the case of the *Irk Bitig* manuscript, its current form with three texts in two languages had been produced before the book was placed inside the Dunhuang library cave. Even though the Chinese texts were added later, they were deliberately added to a pre-existing booklet with an Old Turkic divination manual. At least from that point onward, the three texts became part of a single manuscript which was carried on its owner's body and was no doubt used from time to time. The connection of both Chinese hymns with the Pure Land school of Fazhao demonstrates the religious affiliation of the booklet's owner, while the Old Turkic divination manual may signify the same owner's linguistic background.

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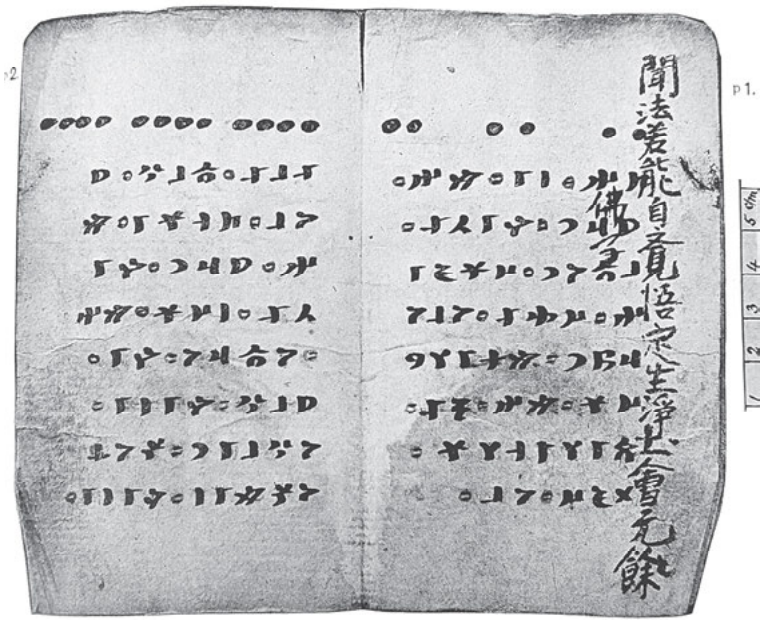

Fig. 1: Photograph from Thomsen 1912, 190, Plate II, showing pp. 10–11 marked as pp. 1–2.

Fig. 2: The two pages shown in Fig. 1 as they appear today (British Library Or.8212/161). © The British Library Board (Or.8212/161).

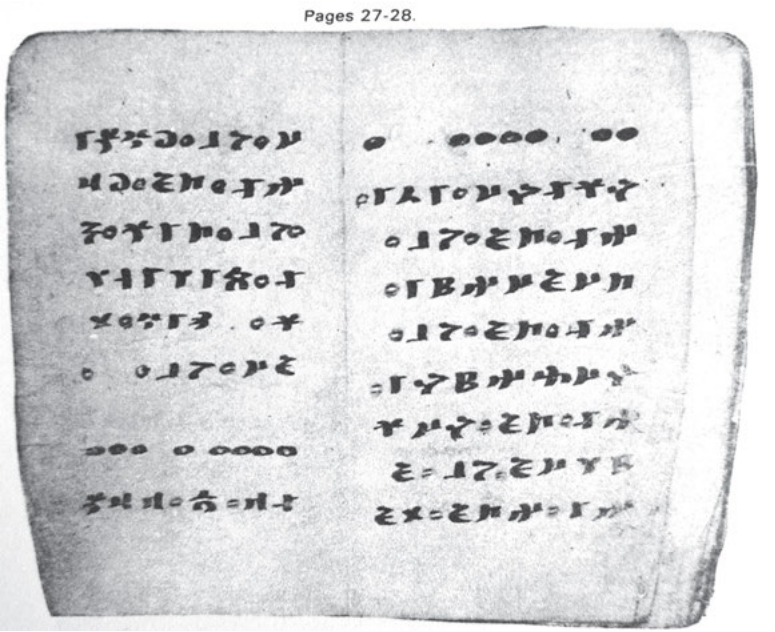

Fig. 3: Photograph from Stein 1921, vol. 4, Plate CLX, showing pp. 36–37 marked as pp. 27–28.

Fig. 4: The two pages shown in Fig. 3 as they appear today (British Library Or.8212/161). © The British Library Board (Or.8212/161).

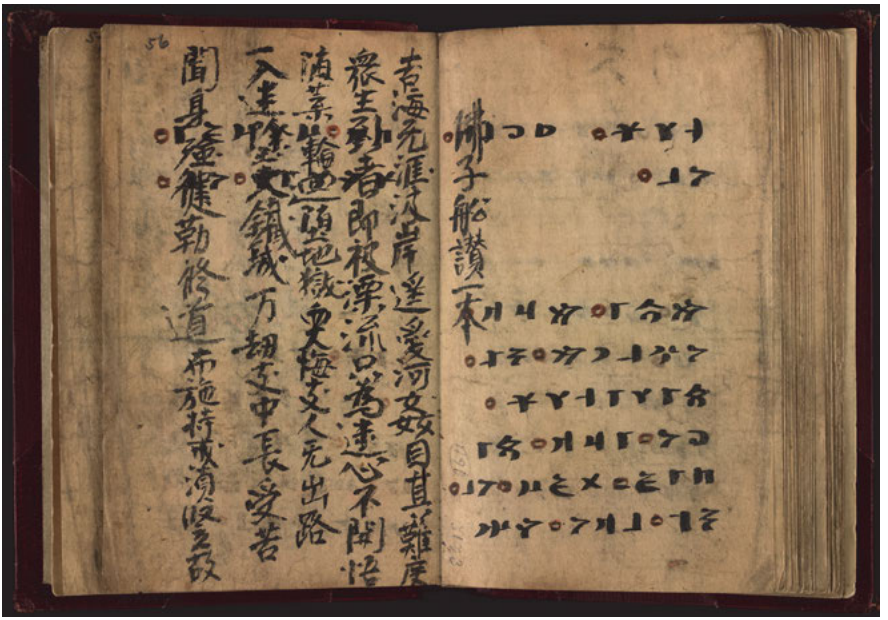

Fig. 5: The end of the Old Turkic text and the beginning of the Chinese 'Hymn on the Boat for the Children of the Buddha' (British Library Or.8212/161). © The British Library Board (Or.8212/161).