



## BĒMA

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**BĒMA**, the chief festival of the Manicheans.

*The name.* The Greek word *bēma* meant “platform,” “stage,” or “judge’s seat.” A raised throne called the *bēma* was of great importance in the Manichean festival, so much so that the name was also given to the festival itself. As a Manichean term, the word is attested in Greek (*bēma*), Latin (*bema*, also tribunal), and Coptic (*bema*, also *manhmest* “seat”). In eastern Manicheism the translation *gāh* “throne” or *gāhrōšn* “throne of light” was preferred and most often appears in Middle Persian and Parthian texts (see W. B. Henning, *Ein manichäisches Bet- und Beichtbuch*, APAW, 1936, Berlin, 1937, p. 110), with Mid. Pers. *nišēm* (*nšym*) “seat” as an occasional alternative (ibid., p. 10). In Turkish Manichean texts the equivalent of *bema* appears to be *čaidan* or the like (ibid., p. 9), written *c’y’n*, *c’y’d’n*, *j’yδ’n* in Manichean script (communication from F. Zieme). F. W. K. Müller’s opinion (“Uigurica II,” APAW, 1910, p. 93) that the word is derived from Chinese *zhāitán* (Matthews, nos. 115, 6059) “place (or hall) for fasting” has been generally accepted, but E. Chavannes’s derivation from Chinese *zhāitáng* (nos. 115, 6107; *T’oung Pao* 12, 1911, p. 97) was revived by J. Hamilton (*Turcica* 7, 1975, pp. 14f.). This hypothesis is problematic because it assumes a very early, pre-Tang borrowing. But more important is the question why a Chinese term should have been borrowed to designate the chief festival of the Manicheans of Central Asia. Those of Sogdia must have known the term *gāh* because they used the adjective *gāhīk* (Henning, op. cit., p. 9), though they also used *čaidan* or the like written *j’d’n* in Manichean script (Henning, *JRAS*, 1945, p. 155) and *c’yδ’n* in Sogdian script (A. N. Ragoza,



*Sogdiškie fragmenty tsentral'no-aziatskogo sobraniya*, Moscow, 1980, fragment 120, line 6; see N. Sims-Williams, *BSOAS* 44, 1981, p. 236).

In Parthian Manichean terminology, which of all the eastern forms is closest to the Aramaic, the word *bēma* is retained as *bēm*, written *b'ym*, the spelling with ' being probably a device to distinguish it from *\*bym* "fear" (E. Waldschmidt and W. Lenz, *Die Stellung Jesu im Manichäismus*, Berlin, 1926, p. 10; another citation in an unpublished manuscript, M 30 /R/ii/5/). This is important as evidence of the original usage, because it shows that *bēma* or the like was not (as might appear) a translation of a pre-existing word in Mani's native Aramaic made by western Manicheans, but was a loan word in Aramaic used by the Manicheans from the start (Aramaic *bym*, Syriac *bym*, *bym*, *b'm'*), no doubt in imitation of its use in the Pauline epistles (II Corinthians 5:10, Romans 14:10; see C. R. C. Allberry, *A Manichaean Psalm-Book*, Stuttgart, 1938, pp. 7, 22ff.).

*The festival.* Information on the conduct of the *bēma* festival comes mainly from Augustine (*Contra epistulam fundamenti*, in J. Zycha, ed., *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*, Prague, Vienna, and Leipzig, 1891, pp. 202.3-203.4), who, though only a layman, wrote as an eyewitness. Also extant are a number of Manichean *bēma* hymns (see below); what appears to be a fragmentary description in Sogdian of a *bēma* formulary (Henning, *Bet und Beichtbuch*, text c, pp. 45f., cf. p. 10); and a book illustration from Turfan that probably depicts a *bēma* ceremony (the usual interpretation, first proposed by A. von Le Coq, *Die buddhistische Spätantike in Mittelasien* II, Berlin, 1923, fig. 8b, a and pp. 53ff.). From these and some other sources the following picture can be pieced together.

The *bēma* festival was held on the last day of a Manichean fasting month and marked the end of the fast. In the Babylonian lunar calendar it fell on the 7th day of Ādār (Henning, *JRAS*, 1945, p. 148), i.e., in the last days of February or in March. Although Augustine (*Contra Faustum*, in Zycha, ed., op. cit., 25.6.1, p. 494.17-20) mentions only March as the month of the festival, certain indications in the Coptic Psalm-Book (p. 14, lines 18 and 25) led C. R. C. Allberry to conclude that the *bēma* ceremonies lasted four days in all (*Psalm-Book*, p. xx n. 6). If so, the 27th, 28th, and 29th days of the fasting month would have been included in the festival.

The whole community of the elect and the laymen gathered together, and the principal ceremonies were a general confession said by the hearers and the



elect, an absolution for all sins committed in the past year, and a quasi-sacramental meal in which the elect partook. Between or before these rites, vigil-keeping, hymn-singing, and recitation of canonical texts (such as Mani's *Seal Letter*) were customary, and no doubt there were also sermons, catechism classes, and telling of parables.

*Significance.* The *bēma* festival was dedicated both to commemoration of Mani's death, as can be seen from the wording of certain *bēma* hymns (*Psalm-Book*, pp. 14ff.), and to glorification of his personality and saviorship. Augustine's statement (*Contra epistulam fundamenti*, p. 102.11-12) that the *bēma* fell on the anniversary of Mani's execution can only be correct on the assumption that the festival lasted four days, because Mani died on the 4th day of Ādār. Augustine regarded the *bēma* festival as an imitation of Easter because it took place in the same season and had a comparable commemorative character (*Contra epistulam fundamenti*, p. 203.2-3).

Coming at the end of the religious year and of a fasting month, the *bēma* was the day of the general confession (see above). It was believed that Mani himself came to this ceremony and personally gave the absolution. His coming from the world of light was vividly symbolized by splendid adornment of the *bēma* (throne). Being the seat on which the religion's founder Mani came to sit, the throne probably bore his portrait (Greek *eikón*, Mid. Pers. *pahikirb*). Presumably the general confession was immediately followed by the meal of the elect, at which there was a ceremony of freeing the light from fruit brought by the hearers as alms in reparation for their sins of the past year.

It was also believed that the *bēma* (throne) would be Christ's seat on which, after coming down at the end of the world, he would sit to judge mankind.

Certain indications in Coptic psalms that "an annual celebration of gnosis" was held during the *bēma* festival have been found by J. Ries ("La fête de Bēma dans l'église de Mani," *Revue des études augustiniennes* 22, 1976, pp. 226ff., 231ff.).

The attachment of different meanings to the *bēma* festival is likely to have come about gradually. Uncertainty surrounds the question whether it was instituted by Mani himself (see Ries, pp. 224, 229-30), in which case its original purpose could not have been to commemorate his death, or whether it was an innovation adopted in the subsequent period (see J. P. Asmussen, *X<sup>u</sup> āstvānīft. Studies in Manichaeism*, Copenhagen, 1965, p. 227) as an end-of-year festival



consisting mainly of a general confession with eschatological overtones.

The different facets of the festival must have been reflected in its emotional impact and H.-Ch. Puech (*Sur le manichéisme*, Paris, p. 393) is probably correct in thinking that it was at once mournful and joyful.

*Texts relating to the bēma.* Psalms 219-41 of the *Psalm-Book* are Coptic *bēma* hymns. Middle Persian and Parthian *bēma* hymns (*mhr'yg g'h*) are found in the *Bet- und Beichtbuch* published by Henning (pp. 18ff.), among the fragments of manuscripts in Manichean script published by F. W. K. Müller ("Handschriften-Reste in Estrangelo Schrift aus Turfan, Chinesisch-Turkistan," II, *APAW*, Berlin, 1904, pp. 66ff.), and probably also in the so-called *Mahrnâmag* published by Müller. A list of the opening words of eleven Parthian *bēma* hymns (*g'hyg b's'h*) is given in the unpublished manuscript M 73. Some texts headed *g'hyg* in the Parthian manuscript M 3705 and Middle Persian manuscript M 6010 may well be *bēma* hymns.

In addition, several other texts, particularly *parinirvāṇa* hymns and elegies of Mani, may have belonged to the liturgy of the *bēma* festival. Songs about the beauties of nature were evidently acceptable (see *Psalm-Book*, p. 8, lines 14ff.), no doubt as befitting this festival held at the start of spring. It is therefore possible that the remarkable Middle Persian lyric M 554 (*Handschriften-Reste* II, ed. Müller, pp. 68f.; Boyce, *Reader*, p. 173 *dd*), which C. Salemann described as a "spring song," may have been a *bēma* hymn.

Grounds for supposing that the so-called Manichean homilies (*Manichäische Homilien*, ed. H. J. Polotsky, Stuttgart, 1934) were intended for recitation at the *bēma* festival have been put forward by A. Baumstark (*Oriens Christianus* 32, 1935, pp. 260f.). The same arguments apply to the fragments of Parthian hagiographic homilies, in particular those headed *d'rwbdgyftyg wyfr's* "The announcement of the crucifixion" (of Mani) and *prnybr'nyg wyfr's* "The announcement of the *parinirvāṇa*" (of Mani; see W. Sundermann, *Mitteliranische manichäische Texte kirchengeschichtlichen Inhalts*, Berliner Turfantexte 11, Berlin, 1981, pp. 76ff.; idem, "Studien zur kirchengeschichtlichen Literatur der

iranischen Manichäer I," *Altorientalische Forschungen* 13, 1986, pp. 74f.).



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M. Boyce, *A Catalogue of the Iranian Manuscripts in Manichaean Script in the German Turfan Collection*, Berlin, 1960, index, p. 149.

(Werner Sundermann)