Introduction

A Short (Pre)history for the Codex

This is an edition of the surviving remnants from a papyrus codex, a fine and substantial production that was manufactured in Egypt and written with Coptic text ca. 400 CE. It was found by accident or informal excavation in the late 1920s, reported to be from ruins in the vicinity of Medinet Madi in the Fayyum, and sold on the antiquities market by Maurice Nahman to Carl Schmidt in 1931.[1] The pages that survive are now held primarily in Berlin with the inventory number P.15998,[2] together with a small number preserved in the National Museum in Warsaw that were recovered in Poland when transported from Germany in the aftermath of the Second World War. The greater part of the original book is lost or destroyed, and the project to edit its remains has been both lengthy and problematic. However, the contents of the work are unique and of great interest to a number of fields of research. All these matters will be explained in more detail through this introduction.

Neither the size nor the precise contents of the codex as first constructed and written can be known, as it has never been read in anything like its complete form in modern times. However, it is surmised to have held a substantial collection of letters ascribed to Mani, the declared "Apostle of Jesus Christ", as preserved and revered by members of the Manichaean churches in Egypt.[3] These collected letters were one of the scriptures of the religion and this codex (or, henceforth, *Epistles*) has the appearance of having been a 'canonical' version. Such a term should be treated with caution and will be discussed further below, but the hypothesis is that this version had a goal both of 'completeness' and of authoritative listing through its use of titles and subdivisions.[4] This would make it a unique survival from the ancient world, and even in its much degraded condition this edition contains the greatest quantity and variety of material from these texts now known to scholarship.

Mani or Manichaios (ca. 216-277 CE) was an Aramaic speaker who lived primarily in early Sasanian Mesopotamia. He was renowned as a healer, visionary, sage and religious authority. He wrote and depicted his teachings in books. He founded churches (ἐκκλησία) and sent out missions, so that his disciples established what is now termed the religion of Manichaeism that lasted for over a millenium. It spread widely into the Mediterranean world of the Roman Empire (already during the lifetime of the apostle) and eastwards across the trade routes of Eurasia to a final flourishing in south China. In a succinct summary of Mani's life the principal events and stages are as follows: his birth in the final years of the Parthian or Arsacid era; childhood and youth within a closed religious community designated 'baptists' during the reign of the first Sasanian King of Kings Ardashir I (224-242 CE.); public life

[1] See Schmidt and Polotsky 1933 (pp. 23-26 on the *Epistles* codex); also the summary comments by Robinson 2013: xiv, 1-2, 31, 41, 248-249.
[2] Ie. Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin); TM/LDAB 108139.
[3] On the history of the community in Egypt see Gardner 2020b.
[4] The present author is preparing a substantial study of all the available evidence regarding Mani's letters; listed in what follows as Gardner, *Mani's Letters* (forthcoming).

corresponding to the reign of Shapur I (240-272 CE); his final years, imprisonment and death under Bahram I.

Mani's letters will have been primarily written during the course and in service of his public career. Even if one cannot precisely date individual compositions, one can imagine a broad progression from the early and difficult first years of mission (240s), through success and maturity (250s and 260s), to intimations of the end and final difficulties (start of the 270s). He is known to have travelled widely across the Sasanian Empire, from the Caucasus in the north to Persia and Mesene at the head of the gulf, even by sea to north-west India; but he had a base for much of his public life (250s–260s) in the urban area around Ctesiphon known as "the cities". This provides the basic context for the letters as preserved in this edition, which are taken to have been authentic works by Mani whilst allowing for the possibility of scribal expansion and potential pseudepigraphical development within the early community of believers.

The portrayal of Mani as a letter-writer was established at an early stage in ancient sources and forms a core element in any understanding of the man and his mission. For example, the sending of letters was depicted as a characteristic feature of his method in *The Acts of Archelaus* (ca. 330s CE),[5] a polemical parody that had widespread influence across the Byzantine and Islamicate worlds and did much to shape the popular image of Mani amongst his opponents. Works of the apostle's authorship were well-known to Augustine and his circle (late fourth through early fifth century), and the future bishop recounts how *The Letter on the Foundation* was read aloud whilst he himself was a catechumen among the Manichaeans.[6] A list of seventy-six letter titles was recorded by Ibn al-Nadim in his account of the religion and its scriptures (late tenth century) as they were known to him in medieval Baghdad. This important information will be discussed further below in order to attempt a provisional understanding of the contents and structure of P.15998, the *Epistles* codex. From such sources, and other references amongst the genuine community literature now available, it has become possible to establish some understanding of the collection, transmission and central role this corpus played over the centuries when Manichaeism was a living tradition. A standard model of Mani's distinctive style is apparent: The presentation of himself as "Apostle of Jesus Christ"; the bestowal of grace and peace upon his recipients; the assertion of a unique ethic and teaching from a claim to divinely-given authority. Further, the impress of his teaching, example and epistolary style can be identified in those personal letters written by believers in diverse times and places, but notably in the documents preserved from fourth century Egypt.[7] The edition and publication here of the most extensive body of material yet recovered will enable research to advance to the next level.

Whilst it is evident that individual letters by Mani were translated and circulated across the ancient world, the impetus to collect them must have begun at an early stage. The Manichaean scriptures are known to have been composed in Syriac. Their distinctive script has its closest parallel in cursive Palmyrene; but more broadly the productions convey an impression close to Estrangela manuscripts and may well have been influenced by Christian

[5] See Gardner 2007b.
[6] Augustine, *c. ep. fund.* 5.
[7] See the provisional study by Gardner 2013 with further references; the topic will be developed further in Gardner, *Mani's Letters* (forthcoming).

scribal practice.[8] Thus the linguistic vehicle utilised of Syriac language and script can be described as imported into Babylonia, Mani's own homeland, from the north-west (Palmyra and Osrhoene). Whether these characteristics were a matter of deliberate choice (perhaps for purposes of widespread dissemination),[9] or if they obscure an earlier stage of composition by Mani himself in a more southern Mesopotamian dialect of Aramaic, remains open to debate.

To turn now to the Coptic *Epistles* codex: It should not be supposed either the first translation into that language nor necessarily an exact replica of a collection that once existed in Syriac. It appears to have been recovered together with six other books that make up what is sometimes called the Medinet Madi library.[10] They all contained Manichaean content, were written in a distinct dialect of Coptic known as Lycopolitan (specifically L4, otherwise termed Subachmimic in older sources), and were purchased in a related series of transactions to be divided now primarily between Berlin and the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin. All the codices were constructed at a similar date, written on papyrus and seem to have had wooden covers. However, these evident similarities do not necessitate a single place or context for production. There are a number of distinct scribal hands, variations in paratextual practices and even differences in orthography and lexicon of interest to specialists. It is probable that the codices were written over the course of a number of decades, perhaps at different locations, and gathered together by their eventual owner to be deposited for an unknown cause or purpose. The date for their manufacture can be given as ca. 400 CE, but this is to be understood as indicating only a range of probability.[11]

The works contained in these codices were translated from Syriac,[12] either directly or through Greek;[13] but this process would have occurred in stages and at multiple locations. It is likely that a significant amount of collation and codification of the literature took place in Egypt and was not simply inherited from the parent communities in the east. This is apparent from a number of the Medinet Madi volumes. For example, two of the codices are used for literature termed *Kephalaia*,[14] reaching a total here of 347 chapters. Analysis demonstrates that this massive work has been built up from a series of distinct blocks of textual material, separate 'books' focussed on various topics and themes and betraying diverse cultural

[8] These comments utilise the extensive study by Pedersen and Larsen 2013. For technical analysis of the script see Part III by Larsen, with review of previous literature; conclusions stated at pp. 145, 148, 164.

[9] Thus, e.g. Widengren 1965: 75-76; cf. Pedersen and Larsen 2013: 125-126 (Larsen) and 188-191 (Pedersen). It is notable that M260, the only Turfan fragment to contain an Aramaic text (see Durkin-Meisterernst 2007), might provide evidence of a potential earlier stage in Mani's use of Aramaic prior to the supposed adoption of Syriac. Another instance of known Edessene influence on Mani is his knowledge of Bardaisan, whose teachings were addressed directly in the apostle's *Book of Mysteries*.

[10] The most comprehensive survey regarding the acquisition of the codices and their conservation is Robinson 2013. This collates and quotes from a large number of earlier accounts both published and archival, although the information contained is sometimes confusing and even contradictory. The sections on the *Epistles* (notably chapter 12) should be treated with caution. All purported details about the original find-site and event must be regarded with a degree of scepticism.

[11] This is evident from all features such as palaeography, dialect, codex construction, the known history of the community in Egypt, etc. The date-span (say, 380-430 CE) has been confirmed by radiocarbon analysis, see BeDuhn and Hodgins 2017.

[12] Some minor textual units were composed in Coptic, such as doxologies to psalms in commemoration of Egyptian members of the community; but more extensive expansion or composition can not be excluded.

[13] The question has been much debated, but probably does not have a singular answer. For instance, certain names can appear in both a Hellenised and an unmediated form within the codices (thus both Zaradēs and Zaradrousht). Evidence recovered regarding the Manichaean community in ancient Kellis demonstrates utilisation of Syriac in a Coptic environment, notably the bilingual glossaries T. Kellis II Syr./Copt. 1 and 2.

[14] See the discussion by Gardner 2018 with further references.

backgrounds. These have been added to the core sequentially, the redaction process and assimilation to the demands of the genre being only partially achieved. It is probable that at least some of this on-going process took place in Egypt itself as parallel text-units can be demonstrated in alternative formats from other regions. Similarly, the *Psalm Book* codex reveals a practice of codification in action, with the creation of its index and a number of taxonomic regimes, but again not completed. Other versions of some of the psalms included there were recovered from Ismant el-Kharab in the 1990s, demonstrating independent circulation and a variety of formats a generation or two earlier (ca. 360 CE) than the Medinet Madi collection.

Archaeological excavations at that same site (i.e. ancient Kellis) also uncovered pages from a collection of Mani's letters in Coptic: P. Kellis VI Copt. 53. This was a small-scale (15.3 x 12 cms.) papyrus codex and notably lacking the paratextual details such as running headers and indented titles that will be demonstrated in the *Epistles*.[15] Although these differences should in part be ascribed to matters of usage and social context (i.e. this copy was found in a domestic setting and evidently used by pious catechumens within a localised environment), it may have predated the manufacture of P.15998 by half a century or so. Whilst there is no overlap in the contents of the two works as they are preserved, this is almost certainly an accident of survival as both are heavily destroyed. The Kellis example was a much more limited production, but is especially valuable as it seems to have contained core works such as *The Letter on the Ten Words*. The same texts must have been included in the *Epistles*, but what survives of that greater volume appears to have been from a subsequent section of the collection as will be explained below.

This prehistory, although necessarily in part hypothetical, can be summarised. Mani spoke a form of east Aramaic, which one imagines would have been native to the region of Babylonia.[16] The early Manichaean tradition employed Syriac for the transmission of his writings, although whether this was by deliberate choice of the apostle or a secondary development is unclear. He himself is said to have authored his books; but, especially with regard to the sending of letters, one can expect utilisation of scribes at least in part. Indeed, in one source he is portrayed seated with scribes in front of him writing letters to different places.[17] Whilst this was no doubt an idealised portrait of the apostle at work, it may have become difficult to maintain the boundaries of genuine compositions and there are indications of fabricated letters with both pious and polemical purpose. At the close of one letter in the *Epistles* Mani asks his recipients to "pray for my son Koustaios who is copying this letter".[18] This was one of his closest disciples, author of a powerful work for the end-times known as *The Sermon on the Great War* written during persecution after his master's martyrdom.[19] At the start of *The Third Letter to Sisinnios* Koustaios is again stated to be with apostle,[20] notably the only such named person in the pages preserved from this codex. In principle, one must allow for the possibility that even genuine letters were 'composed' and first circulated in a

[15] In advance of Gardner, *Mani's Letters* (forthcoming), see again Gardner 2013 especially pp. 293-295. Remnants of another small-scale collection of Mani's letters were also identified in Middle Persian by Sundermann 2009.

[16] A number of early traditions explicitly link the apostle to Babylonia, probably utilising the old name for its connotations of antiquity and Aramaic heritage; see e.g. BeDuhn 1995: 421-422.

[17] Kephalaion 333; i.e *The Chapters of the Wisdom of My Lord Mani* at *2Ke.* 381.9-11.

[18] *Ep.* 65.11-12.

[19] *Homs.* 7.8-42.8

[20] *Ep.* 165.11-12.

variety of languages, noting that Mani is elsewhere said to have written one work in Middle Persian to be presented to the King of Kings Shapur I (i.e. the *Shabuhragan*).[21]

No version of the letters survives in Syriac, although it is possible that small fragments exist[22] or snippets of his wording are retained in accounts of the religion by opponents such as Ephrem Syrus. Individual letters circulated within the Manichaean communities and beyond, for example Julian of Eclanum in Palestine received a copy of a *Letter to Menoch* that had been obtained in Constantinople ca. 420 CE at the instigation of bishop Florus; this presumably in Greek.[23] The processes of collecting, codifying and translating the letters, provisional to their status as one of the scriptures of the religion, would necessarily have been gradual and varied according to time and place. Probably it was never fully achieved, and any notion of a 'canonical' version must be regarded as conditional. The *Epistles* codex, subject of this present edition, will represent one relatively developed and later stage along such trajectories. The smaller Kellis codex evidences that some letters by Mani, probably already in part organised and collated, had been translated into Coptic by the mid fourth-century. The process may have begun nearer to 300 CE. The precise contents of the P.15998 codex when assembled a century later (no specific date or location for its manufacture can be determined) must have reflected this local textual tradition and the history of the Manichaean churches in Egypt. Nevertheless, one can imagine broad commonalities in the preservation of the apostle's letters shared across the wider community of believers as they travelled and worshipped together through the cultures of late antiquity.

Contents

The hypothesis is that P.15998 would have been of similar size to the other Medinet Madi codices. Although it has been noted that the seven productions demonstrate certain significant differences that are important to detailed analysis, in broad terms they must be classed together when compared to other ancient books due to shared features of date, Coptic dialect, style of manufacture, Manichaean content and so forth. None of them survive complete and bound in their original state, and there are good reasons to suppose that they had already begun to be broken up during trading and transfers before their final sale and transportation to Europe. No reliable records survive of the condition at the point of discovery. However, conservation and editing over the decades since purchase has enabled a reasonably complete reconstruction of some of the better preserved examples, notably the Berlin *Kephalaia* codex P.15996 (22 seniones to a total of 528 pages) and the Dublin *Kephalaia* codex (31 quaterniones to a total of 496 pages). The *Psalm Book* and the *Synaxeis* (both seniones) were similarly

[21] On the issue of Mani's biography and its historicity see Gardner 2020a, especially chapter 3 regarding his public career and asserted audiences at court.

[22] A potential candidate is Oxyrhynchus Ms. Syr. D.14, a piece that is certainly Manichaean and has a quotation from 2Cor. 5:21 on fragment 1. On fragments 2 and 3 there is found language not dissimilar to that in Mani's *Letters*, e.g. "like a person afflicted, wronged, and persecuted" and "there was afflicted every righteous man in [the world from] Adam even until the Saviour". Cf. *Ep.* 106.6-11. This question will be discussed further in Gardner, *Mani's Letters* (forthcoming). The texts are available in e.g. Pedersen and Larsen 2013: 106-111, commentary pp. 233-235.

[23] The question of the authenticity and status of the document is another issue; see Stein 1998, also Harrison and BeDuhn 2001.

massive papyrus books. Thus one can suppose that P.15998 would also have been in the order of 500 pages in length (250 leaves of papyrus).[24]

The edition published here contains text from 40 separate pages (20 leaves) plus transcription of some lines from one other that no longer survives. This total can not be definitively exact because some of the leaves have not been fully separated and conserved, so that at certain points one views text from different page levels within the same glass. Further, the records indicate that other leaves and an unconserved book-block once existed but have now been lost or destroyed. The codicology will be discussed in detail in a later section. However, a crude calculation can be made that approximately 10% of the structure of the original codex now survives in some fashion; but that, since many of the pages are in very poor condition and none is complete, only about 5% of the original text copied into the codex can be recovered. Although approximated, this figure is an important reminder of what is lost (95%) and what can be expected from the edition.

As regards the number of letters that the book originally contained, it is assumed to have been full of such compositions with no other texts included. Again, a rough calculation shows that each letter averages at about 6-7 pages. Whilst one is aware that the lengths of such documents will have varied greatly, this does indicate a total in the range of seventy discrete letters or more. There are many problems with this exercise and the need for qualification is obvious, but it is a means to provide a context for trying to imagine the contents of an extraordinary volume as it was when first manufactured.

The single most valuable information to assist with this is the list recorded by Ibn al-Nadim in his *Fihrist* (late tenth century CE, Arabic, Baghdad).[25] He provides what he says are the titles of the letters of Mani and of community leaders after him, to a total of seventy-six in two batches (fifty-two and then the remainder). The distinction between the groups is not explained and various possibilities occur to the reader. For example, are those in first set those written by Mani and the remainder by other persons? Or did Ibn al-Nadim copy titles from one major source available to him and then add separately others he knew about? The reason is unknown, but there is evidence to suggest that the listing is not entirely random.

In preparation for the analysis one must consider the format for titles. These can contain both the addressee and the topic, i.e. "The letter to (person/s or place/s): On (topic/s)". To this might be added a distinguishing number. A suitable example is that of the best preserved title and opening sequence found in P.15998, thus *The Seventh Letter to Ctesiphon: That of the Vigils*.[26] In the proem is found also: "To Sethel … and Timotheos, Abezachias and Simeon …", also "… Ctesiphon, Choche and Seleucia".[27] It is apparent that the title for this letter could in principle be given in a variety of ways, for example as: *The Ctesiphon Letter on the Vigils*;

[24] Rolf Ibscher estimated that the unconserved book-blocks of P.15997 and P.15998, subsequent to his father's work, would have contained between them ca. 500 leaves or 1000 pages of text; see Ibscher 1954: 5 (cited from typescript in Robinson 2013: 86). For Hugo Ibscher's initial assessment of the codices from 1932, suggesting that all the volumes were of approximately the same size as the Berlin *Kephalaia*, see his text in Robinson 2013: 76-77.

[25] A number of editions and translations are available, notably Flügel 1862: 105-105 and nn. 326-384 (text 73.11-76.6); Kessler 1889: 213-239; Klíma 1962: 420-429; English translations in Dodge 1970: 799-801; Gardner and Lieu 2004: 165-166; Reeves 2011: 115-119. The translation and understanding of the letter titles given here is according to Gardner, *Mani's Letters* (forthcoming) and does not accord exactly with any of the above.

[26] *Ep.* 77.8-9 ([ⲧ]ⲙ̣ⲁ̣ⲥⲁⲱⲃⲉ ⲛ̄ⲉⲡⲓⲥⲧⲟⲗⲏ ⲛ̄ⲕⲧⲓⲥⲓⲫⲱⲛ· ⲧⲁⲛ̄ⲡⲁⲛⲛⲩ̈ⲭⲓⲥⲙⲟⲥ·). Note that the listing of the 'topic' was probably traditional, based on a distinctive phrase or term found in the body of the letter. In many of the examples available the rationale is not entirely obvious.

[27] *Ep.* 77.12-13,18.

The Seventh Letter to the Churches; *The Letter on Prayer*; *The Letter to Sethel*; *The Letter to al-Mada'in* (i.e. "the cities") etc.

Further, in terms of identifying letters by their titles it is necessary to consider the vagaries of translation into very diverse languages, and a problematic manuscript tradition that is evident for the listing in the *Fihrist* where many readings are difficult and some remain incomprehensible. Nevertheless, despite these issues, a number of titles given by Ibn al-Nadim can be recognised in other sources and it is illuminating to survey the spread of these against his listing.

The small codex P. Kellis VI Copt. 53 does not preserve any formal headers, but three letters may be identified corresponding to nos. 4, 5 and 11 in the *Fihrist*. *The Letter on the Foundation* known to Augustine and his circle, which was addressed to Patticius, was probably no. 1 (*The Letter on the Two Principles*) or 7 (*The Great Letter to Fattiq*). Manichaean literature recovered from Central Asia is often very fragmentary, but references to or quotations from a number of Mani's letters can be identified with some certainty. These include: in Middle Persian M733 (nos. 2 and 65), M1221 (no. 3) and M1524 (no. 8); in Sogdian So15502 (nos. 5, 22, 23, 32) and M915 (nos. 8, 24); in Uighur U47 (no 2).[28] What is evident from this brief and partial survey is a preponderance of numbers from the earlier part of the Arabic list, in particular the first ten or so letters, and only one example from the latter part. To that may be added *The Letter to Menoch* obtained by Julian of Eclanum (no. 61 or 62), but there have always been doubts about its authenticity.

A second point is also important. Although they are not immediately very obvious in Ibn al-Nadim's list (depending in part on the translation utilised), rudimentary groupings can be identified. The only explicit numeration occurs with *The First* and *The Second Letter to Minuq*, but one can detect sets of letters to Sisinnios (nos. 22, 24, 26-28),[29] to Gabriab (nos. 14, 15, 18) and to the hearers (nos. 56, 57, 59). Perhaps other sub-groups are obscured by the format of the titles given. Of especial interest are letters to Ctesiphon at nos. 10, 16 and 19, which may also betray a concentration of such compositions at this relatively early stage in the sequence.

In sum, the discussion suggests a basic working hypothesis regarding a rudimentary structure embedded in Manichaean collections of their master's letters. This is not to argue that every such compilation followed exactly the same order, or included all the same texts, but simply that a common pattern had become established and widespread that reflected the priorities of the community across diverse cultural landscapes. At the head of the selection would be placed a set of core, well-known and highly valued letters that approximates to the first ten or so titles in Ibn al-Nadim's list. Second to the above might be letters addressed by Mani from his base in the urban area of Ctesiphon to the churches surrounding him, at the heart of the early mission in its homeland. And then, following and perhaps overlapping with this, would be works sent to the leading and most prominent disciples such as Sisinnios, Pattikios and Gabriab. These sets would then constitute a total of about thirty important texts that were in good part shared and familiar to the majority of committed adherents.

[28] This list only includes the more readily identifiable titles; further discussion in Gardner, *Mani's Letters* (forthcoming).

[29] All are addressed to Sīs (commonly agreed to be Sisinnios) except no. 27 to Sa'yūs. This has generally been supposed a different person, but the sequencing suggests otherwise. One wonders if nos. 23 and 25 were also sent to the same disciple, although he is not named there.

Such a thesis can be mapped on to the list in the *Fihrist*. It accords with the admittedly rather limited evidence from other sources, and notably provides a framework for understanding the preservation of epistolary material in Coptic that now constitutes the largest corpus available to the contemporary scholar. Probably P. Kellis VI Copt. 53 is representative of the very first group and thus of especial value, particularly because nothing appears to remain from that set in the extant portions of P.15998. Instead, these forty pages can be situated at the second to third levels. They fall into the following groups, understood to have been in sequence within the original manuscript: A series of letters written to the churches in Ctesiphon; a small number of letters without title, but at least in part addressed to Pattikios; the letters to Sisinnios.

A brief summary of the contents is provided below. Some of this is necessarily hypothetical, even speculative; but that is necessary in order to make coherent sense of the remnants of a codex that has been so massively destroyed. Note that the page numbers given are intended as indicative of the codicological reconstruction and the relationship between different blocks of material that survive. This will be explained below. They should not be imagined as those of the original manuscript.

The First Letter to Ctesiphon (entirely lost).

The Second Letter to Ctesiphon. Pp. from before 49-52. The title, proem and opening are lost, but from the lower part of p. 50 and through p. 51 Mani develops an extended parable about merchants crossing the sea to their kinsfolk in a far country. The interpretation is given on p. 52 together with the concluding instructions and blessings. The letter is addressed to the catechumens and could be the same as no. 19 in Ibn al-Nadim's list: *The Letter to Ctesiphon for the Hearers*.

The Third Letter to Ctesiphon. Pp. 52-58. The title is partially preserved and the letter can be traced from a relatively coherent opening section (pp. 52-53) through some much destroyed pages to its probable conclusion lost on the lower part of p. 58. It is addressed to B-aios (or perhaps e.g. Ab-chaios) and potentially also a second individual. The guiding theme is of 'recompense' at the last day, the promised reward for enduring the trials of the present; for which Mani draws on a number of gospel allusions especially from the Sermon on the Mount.

The Fourth Letter to Ctesiphon. Pp. 58-65. The title and proem are lost, the recipients unknown and the theme difficult to ascertain. However, the letter does contain some of Mani's characteristic teachings about the torture of plant-life (notably p. 61) and the concluding comments preserved on p. 65 are among the best examples of a letter's closure available.

The Fifth Letter to the Churches: ... the matter ... Pp. 65-after 68. This appears to be a 'general epistle', i.e. addressed to the broader community and not to any individual or specific group. The distinction may be reflected in its name, although the composition seems to have been incorporated into the Ctesiphon sequence. Part of the topic title can be read with the word *pragmat(e)ia*, but the precise meaning is frustratingly unclear. A section at the top of p. 66 proclaims Mani's unique authority and revelation, after which the letter is almost entirely destroyed.

The Sixth Letter to Ctesiphon. Pp. from before 75-77. The closing section is well-preserved and of considerable interest, although the topic and recipients are unknown and the title only inferred from the title and number of the letter that follows. On p. 76 Mani cites sayings of the saviour (Jesus) and applies them to himself and his own community. There may be influence evident here from *The Gospel of Thomas*.

The Seventh Letter to Ctesiphon: That of the Vigils. Pp. 75-after 82. The best preserved title and most substantial proem extant, written to Sethel and other named leaders of the churches in Ctesiphon and adjacent cities. This is a fine example of Mani's style, although again not a complete letter. The term *pannychismos* used for the topic title is not found in the extant text, but most probably refers to the apostle's description of his personal practice of prayer (p. 82).

(from an unknown letter on cosmogony). A single leaf placed at pp. 85-86. The problematic position of this remnant within the original codex will be discussed further below, but the content is of interest as it relates to the original war against the darkness at the start of Mani's grand cosmogonic narrative. The only similar passages known from the corpus are in *The Letter on the Foundation* (Latin), although they are not close enough to be claimed as duplicates.

(from an unknown letter on the enlighteners). A single leaf placed at pp. 105-106. An important testimony to Mani's own teaching about the line of apostles, here termed both *phōstēr* and "the fathers of righteousness".

(from an unknown letter to Pattikios). A single leaf placed at pp. 123-124. This appears to be from the end of a composition where Mani has been discussing the transfer of deeds through transmigration. Personal comments to Pattikios, made at the conclusion of the letter, are of especial interest.

The First Letter to Sisinnios (entirely lost, but some indication of the contents is given in the following and connected correspondence).

The Second Letter to Sisinnios. Pp. from before 159-165. This contains pastoral advice and specific detail about the churches in Mesopotamia over which Sisinnios (who succeeded Mani as leader of the universal community) has evidently been placed in charge. Mani instructs him about proper conduct, and especially warns against 'duplicity'. This may be the distinctive term used to identify the letter, supposing it is the same as that found in Ibn al-Nadim's list at no. 22. The Arabic term (lit. "two faces") has caused difficulties to previous translators but finds an almost exact parallel in the Coptic usage. If this is correct it is plausible that *The Short Letter on Guidance* that precedes it at no. 21 could be the same as *The First Letter to Sisinnios* (conjecture only).

The Third Letter to Sisinnios. Pp. 165-after 168. It is extremely unfortunate that the leaf (pp. 165-166) seen by Polotsky in the 1930s soon after the purchase of P.15998, and which contained the title and start of this letter, has been lost or destroyed. His transcription, preserved in the archives of the Berlin Academy, is only very brief and provisional. The contents now extant on pp. 167-168 are concerned with the psychology of evil, salvation and the nature of the living soul. None of this is easy to identify amongst the topics of letters sent to Sisinnios according to the *Fihrist* listing.

The Editorial Project and the History of Conservation

The genesis of this edition goes back to the early 1990s when Iain Gardner identified remnants of two other papyrus codices containing epistolary material by Mani, translated into Coptic and of fourth century date; i.e. texts that came to be published as P. Kellis VI Copt. 53 (the small collection of letters discussed above) and P. Kellis VI Copt. 54 (a single leaf from another codex). These were recovered by the archaeological excavations at Ismant el-Kharab,

ancient Kellis, and Gardner held editorial responsibility for them. At the same time Wolf-Peter Funk was working on the unpublished Medinet Madi papyri in Berlin, including P.15998. Given the close connections in terms of content, language and date between these various artefacts, it was sensible to combine these efforts. Gardner and Funk agreed to co-publish all of this *Epistles* material in Coptic.

Thus, during 1995, a first complete draft of the text was prepared from pages identified as belonging to P.15998. For some weeks starting in April Gardner had the opportunity to autopsy those leaves available in glass plates in Berlin; and then, in August with Funk in Québec City, photographs were used to survey and combine readings. A concordance for all three manuscripts listed above was compiled and made available to interested scholars. However, it must be admitted frankly that this endeavour was largely put to one side after the first effort whilst Gardner and Funk focussed on other projects, both independently and at times together. The material from Ismant el-Kharab was co-published in 2007 in one of the four P. Kellis volumes for which Gardner had prime responsibility.[30] Some improvements to the Medinet Madi codex draft have on occasion been made over the years. Notably, in 2013 Gardner was able to autopsy the three principal leaves held by the National Museum in Warsaw, and also to obtain much better photographs of the same. For his part, Funk planned to complete his publication of the Berlin *Kephalaia* (P.15996) before turning to the *Epistles* (P.15998) and the *Acts* (P.15997). He was also much occupied with the *Psalm Book* and the *Synaxeis* codices; whilst Gardner has been working extensively on the Dublin *Kephalaia*.

In August 2019 Gardner went again to work with Funk in Québec City. They determined to bring the long-delayed co-edition to a rapid conclusion, with the intention to submit the complete volume to Kohlhammer Verlag as soon as possible. This would have occurred in 2020 if it were not for subsequent developments. On the 1st November 2019 multispectral imaging (MSI) was begun in Berlin of all the extant leaves identified as belonging to this codex. Those in Warsaw were added in December 2021. This project had been initiated by Gardner and was undertaken on his behalf by the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures at the University of Hamburg. Please see the many thanks and acknowledgements expressed in the Preface. The processed files began to be made available from January of 2020.

There is no doubt that MSI has constituted the greatest single advance for the editing of these remains since they were first found and conserved. It is astonishing to see such a substantial increase in the total amount of readable text, which might approximate to an additional fifty per cent beyond the first draft edition of 1995. The understanding of many difficult passages has been improved and corrected. Further, the new readings have overturned the previously-established sequence of pages, and provided a necessary if still partial key to the codicology of P.15998; all of which had been highly problematic. It is fair to say that a general dissatisfaction with what they had been able to achieve before MSI may help to explain the long delay in publication of that first draft by Funk and Gardner. Whilst one can only work with what is extant, the results are now clearer and the benefits to scholarship stronger. A basic theory about this collection of letters, even if necessarily rather general and hypothetical, has begun to emerge and is outlined in this introduction. So, there is at least that profit to this long process.

A second major and distressing development was the death of Wolf-Peter Funk on the 18th February 2021. The co-editors had little opportunity to discuss the developments brought

[30] Gardner 2007a = P. Kellis VI.