

Prophet's ancient seal provides insights from antiquity

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When a personal artifact of a religious leader is discovered nearly 1,700 years after its use, the object provides invaluable historical insights. Zsuzsanna Gulacsi, professor of Comparative Cultural Studies, has been studying an ancient crystal seal used by prophet Mani, to provide new interpretations and prepare the seal for further research.

Mani, a Persian born in 216, established Manichaeism, a religion drawing from the era's dominant religions, including Zoroastrianism and

Christianity. Mani stood out among [religious leaders](#) of the time, Gulacsi said, because he wrote his own doctrine, compared to Jesus, Mohammad and the historical Buddha who were not known to read or write. The engraved crystal seal was used to authenticate Mani's writings and correspondence.

According to Gulacsi, Mani believed other religious leaders had their teachings distorted because they could not write themselves. "Their disciples did not have the capacity of a prophet, whose clarity of religious insight was believed to surpass that of ordinary human beings," Gulacsi said.

Gulacsi thinks Mani wore his crystal seal as a pendant, a practice of that time. The prophet's only known surviving artifact is about the size of a quarter; the thin quartz seal was likely once encased in gold to facilitate its use.

The rock crystal is flat on one side and rounded on the other, with a sunken carving on one half creating a positive image on the opposite side. Mani is flanked by two people, possibly disciples, and an inscription reading 'Mani, apostle of Jesus Christ' forms the perimeter. "The drills of the time used wound strings to spin a point to create an even carving," Gulacsi said.

In 274, Mani died in prison after being persecuted for his religious teachings. His belongings were likely passed to his successor, but the fate of the crystal seal is not known until it turned up in Paris in 1896, where it was purchased and housed in the gemstone section of the National Library of France.

Despite its historical significance, Mani's engraved crystal seal had escaped attention until recently. Gulacsi has researched and written about the seal, including an article just published in the *Bulletin of the*

Asia Institute.

Provided by Northern Arizona University

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