Modern palimpsests. The case of the counterfeit Kufic fragments

On March 29, 2012, I received a message from a Mr. Faisal Reza, whom I did not know, with the subject line ‘enquiry on kufic manuscripts’. Mr. Reza wrote to me:

‘Dear Prof Witkam,
I am Faisal and an amateur antique collector based in Norway. I have your contact details from http://www.islamicmanuscripts.info/ when I was trying search on information regarding kufic script.
I really appreciate if you can help me to quickly assess this type of manuscript offered by this seller and I would like to know in which period these manuscripts were likely produced.
Many thanks for your attention.
Best regards
Faisal Reza’

Ever since 2007, when I started my website on Islamic manuscripts, I have been receiving both serious and less serious messages concerning Islamic manuscripts, both from scholars of standing and ordinary truth-seekers. I answer all incoming messages to the best of my knowledge. So the next day I wrote to Mr. Reza that maybe he should first acquire some basic knowledge about the things he collects, and that I personally would never even consider to purchase any of the two leaves offered for sale. Later I gave Mr. Reza a suggestion for further reading, and that was the correspondence between Mr. Reza and myself at the time. I now know that he eventually refrained from purchasing the Kufic fragments, but for aesthetic reasons only.1 In the meantime he had acquired a beautiful fragment, for the image of which he referred me to a gallery of his collection on the internet. That the eBay pieces of 2012 were modern counterfeits had not played a role in his decision, and he may not even have been aware of it.

My Islamic manuscripts site has the purpose to increase knowledge, not monetary value. I do not use my expertise to give investment advices, and therefore I usually remain at a distance. I could have closed the matter at that, but my curiosity made me once more click on the first link Mr. Reza had sent me. The eBay article description read:

‘Old Arabic Manuscript Koran Leaf in Kufic Script on Vellum. A very nice old vellum leaf of a manuscript Koran. Size: 19 × 24.5 cm. It is written in Kufic script, one of the earliest scripts in Arabic, 10 lines to a page. The leaf begins in the middle of Verse 96, Chapter 2 and ends at the middle of Verse 102 of the same chapter. The text is without dots as is the case in almost all early Korans. The red dots, here, represent the diacritical marks, such as vowels, hamzas, etc. Minor smudges, otherwise in excellent condition. A truly handsome piece. (See Martin Lings, the Quranic Art of Calligraphy and Illumination.) [Code:KJo02]’

Bidding was possible till April 2, 2012, and the starting bid was US$ 425. Of course, the vendor, a certain Mr. M. Balwan,2 had added an image of the fragment (fig. 1). Looking at it I was puzzled for a short moment, as the image did not fit into any of my experiences with Kufic fragments of the Qur´ān. Within seconds it occurred to me that these pieces were falsifications, clumsy ones even, but I felt I would need more articulate proof of that, rather than to jump to conclusions on the basis of a single hunch or a first impression. eBay’s customer guarantees only go as far as that the description of the object sold must exactly fit the object itself. In the description above no date or age are mentioned and for the rest the description is plain and factual. The only misleading element is the word ‘Kufic’, but that term has now, in modern scholarship, been abandoned, so its use is free. That the fragment in question is a ‘truly handsome piece’ is a matter of taste, and in matters of taste, there can be no disputes. The reference to Martin Ling’s work is suggestive and misleading.

I also wished to know more about my correspondent, and that was not difficult. A short search online makes clear that Mr. Reza is an Indonesian national, who works for Statoil ASA, an international energy company present in more than thirty countries around the world.3 In his first message to me he already had intimated that he lived in Norway and that he was a collector. He has several interesting albums on the internet in which he shows images of objects in his collections.4 To judge from

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1 From November 2013 onward I have had several more exchanges with Mr. Reza while preparing the present article.

2 He is still active with Kufic fragments. He has been an eBay member since 1998, as his profile (<http://www.ebay.com/usr/mbalwan>) mentions, with a customer satisfaction rate of 99%. He seems to be established in Belmont, Massachusetts, USA. Apart from Kufic fragments he sells also genuine items (<http://www.ebay.com/sch/mbalwan/m.html?_nkw=&_armrs=1&_ipg=&_from=) (accessed on June 14, 2014). I have not been in contact with him.


4 One of these albums is available at https://plus.google.com/116299092146146571973/photos (last visited on June
one of these albums, it becomes clear that Mr. Reza has both a broad interest and an eclectic taste. It also shows that he is sufficiently affluent to acquire collectibles from dealers and from the larger auction houses in Europe and North America. That he shares images of these on the internet is an example that should be followed more often.

The fragments that were offered for sale on eBay in April 2012 are not anymore on display and must have been sold, or withdrawn. That was bound to happen, so at the time I had taken the precaution to download and save these, and a few more, from Mr. Balwan’s site. They are not of a high resolution, but it was sufficient to enable me to solve the problem of the curious Kufic, since underneath the Kufic text of one of the fragments, an image of which I had seen in 2012, another script was vaguely visible: Ethiopian script (fig. 1).

A counterfeiter of Kufic fragments has two main problems: finding authentic looking writing material and writing Kufic script in a credible way. Ethiopian manuscripts, which till recently were written, usually on parchment, often have a double feuille de garde, a separate bifolium on either end of the quires. It is not a flyleaf in the sense that it must connect the text block to the boards, as that is done differently in Ethiopian manuscripts. Usually these bifolia are blank. Sometimes they contain notes that are not necessarily relevant or connected to the text in the volume. Such bifolia are the ideal material from which Kufi fragments, as the ones that were offered for sale in 2012, could be made. Removing such bifolia from an Ethiopian manuscript is not easily discovered and their absence does not make the Ethiopian text incomplete. I searched a bit more in Mr. Balwan’s site, and there I also found an Ethiopian manuscript on parchment of exactly twice the size as the Kufic fragments that he offered for sale. It could have been the source of the parchment supply for the fragments.

Ethiopian manuscripts on parchment of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are abundantly available. The parchment on which they are written often gives them a quasi-antique patina. It is the obvious material to write Kufic script on. With any sort of C-14 test they would immediately be found out, but with the reasonable price asked by Mr. Balwan it is unlikely that a prospective buyer would go to that length of verification. That the textus inferior is younger that the textus superior is only a minor detail which will not disturb the pious collector.

This simple discovery of the way in which these eBay Kufic fragments had been produced at first made me reluctant in further contacting Mr. Reza. At the time I did not know a thing about this correspondent and it was possible that he himself was the counterfeiter and that he was now testing his products against my expertise. The internet is a strange place, and one needs only to be mildly paranoiac to entertain such thoughts. If only the counterfeiter had been more thorough in brushing the text off the parchment, finding out how he had operated would not have been so easy.

As of June 13, 2014, there were three Kufic fragments for sale in Mr. Balwan’s eBay shop. One is evidently by the same maker as the fragment of 2012 (fig. 2). It was sold while I was writing these lines.¹

Fig. 2. The ‘Kufi’ fragment that was for sale from Mr. M. Balwan on eBay till June 13, 2014, then sold for US$ 700. It is in the same hand as the fragment shown in fig. 1. Here as well the Ethiopian textus inferior is clearly visible. Photo M. Balwan, image code: $KGrHqV,IEFJGJ4T bvBSS3h8hRqQ$ 60_57

The text (Qurʾān 23:45-50) reads:

| ارسلنا موسى واحمد هرون | باينا واسطن وبيعن الى قرع | نول قوما عالين قفاينا ان | نكم ما هما فكانوا من | الماليان وفاعليان موسى | الكتاب لعلهم يهتدون وجعلن | دن مريم وامه ايه او | يهتم الى روبو ذات قرار |
|------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| باسنا موسى واحمد هرون | باينا واسطن وبيعن الى قرع | نول قوما عالين قفاينا ان | نكم ما هما فكانوا من | الماليان وفاعليان موسى | الكتاب لعلهم يهتدون وجعلن | دن مريم وامه ايه او | يهتم الى روبو ذات قرار |

At least one variant reading (line 2: wa-mubīn) as compared to the vulgate text was included.

The other two are shown in less clear photographs, but they are apparently produced in a somewhat more credible way with more sophisticated results. There is no shimmering through of other script anymore. One of these new fragments shows traces of a blind ruling for a text in columns, but they do not seem to be palimpsests. The script of the Balwan fragments presently for sale remains lously unconvging. They are written by one or more craftsmen, who probably are all still alive and kicking. If so, they better take some vocational training in Kufic writing, if they wish to continue living by the pen.

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