CHAPTER 11
Written Transmission
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While English uses the same word for both a manuscript of the Qur’ān (a Qur’ān) and the revelation (the Qur’ān), Arabic distinguishes between the two: a copy of the Qur’ān is commonly known as a mushaf. Far from being fortuitous, this precise distinction demonstrates the simultaneous existence of two realities: transmission in written form and transmission in spoken form. Islam strongly emphasizes the oral nature of the Qur’ān and the particular importance of this feature should not be overlooked (Graham 1987). The role of the written word cannot, however, be ignored. Calligraphy is traditionally held in high esteem, particularly in relation to the Qur’ān, and the mushaf holds a special place in Muslim piety; indeed, the Muslim tradition of writing down the Qur’ān largely reflects a suspicion that oral transmissions may not be entirely accurate. Furthermore, as will become evident, the development of the Qur’ān in manuscript form during the first four centuries of Islam focused upon progressively perfecting the notation, indicating without a doubt that this was of great importance to the community.

The Qur’ān is the most copied text in the Islamic world. Until printing began to play a part in the distribution of texts in the nineteenth century, transcriptions were completed by hand. There are, therefore, a considerable number of manuscripts of the Qur’ān in existence across the world, most of which are very late in date. Which period do the earliest copies date from? Copies of the Qur’ān, linked to prominent figures from the beginnings of Islam, have been identified; several have notably been associated with the caliph ‘Uthmān (who ruled from 23/644-55). These attributions appear either in a colophon, note, or even a tradition. In the city of Istanbul alone, there are no fewer than six copies of the Qur’ān, all more or less complete, which fall into this category. However, historians are not convinced by any of these manuscripts (al-Muṣāfiṭ 1972), some of which show signs of being very poor forgeries. It is, therefore, impossible to use them to better our understanding of the written transmission of the Qur’ān. The earliest copies which can be dated or which have been dated using reliable evidence are known to originate from the second quarter of the third/ninth century.

What is known about the preceding era? Do any sections of Qur’ān manuscripts remain from the first two centuries after the hijra?

The First Qur’ān Manuscripts

According to the classical Muslim tradition, written transcriptions of the Qur’ān began in the 206/60s, upon the instruction of the caliph Abū Bakr and then ‘Uthmān, to guarantee the survival and integrity of the Qur’ān. In fact, copies have been preserved which date from the second half of the first/seventh century; none of these copies is complete and, in many cases, only fragments remain. Identification of these documents was not based on direct dating in the form of a colophon, however. Instead, a range of clues from different sources were applied, such as codicology (the study of the materials used and the history of the manuscript codex), palaeography (the study of ancient writing) and philology (the study of language through text analysis). In terms of codicology, parchment has been used to write on in the vast majority of cases, with a few fragments being copied onto papyrus, as documented by A. Giedon (1958). However, the limited scope of the latter makes it impossible to determine whether they are the remains of codices which once contained the entire text of the Qur’ān or whether they are extracts, copied out perhaps by pupils or to be carried as an amulet. It is useful to note that paper was not produced in the Islamic world until after 132/750, with the earliest paper transcriptions of the Qur’ān dating from the fourth/tenth century.

These early manuscripts are normally written in vertical format. In terms of palaeography, writing is of the Arabic hijāʿī type script, which was succinctly defined by an Arabic author from the fourth/tenth century (Ibn al-Nadīm 1970). The script shares striking similarities with that used in letters and documents written in Arabic dating from the first/seventh century. However, the script does vary considerably between manuscripts and in cases where two copyists have collaborated on a mushaf, their individual styles can easily be identified. These differences are due to a lack of script standardization, something which did not happen until some time later during the Umayyad dynasty (after 65/685). Finally, in terms of philology, the orthography of these early copies is very distinctive: it is defective in the sense that certain long vowels recorded in classical Arabic do not feature systematically in its “consonant skeleton” or rasm: thus the verb qallā (“He said”), which is now spelt qaff + alif + lam, appears as qaff + lam, like the second person singular imperative form of the same verb. qal (“Say!”). Two additional comments are relevant to this observation. The first is in regard to the use of diacritics, which are used with varying frequency by the copyists; it is not clear whether they made this choice themselves or they were following orders from their patrons. The purpose of the decision itself is also unclear. Was it to leave open the possibility of reading the text in different ways, thus perhaps having the potential to suit greater numbers of Muslim users/readers? Second, there was no system in place at this time for recording short vowels. The various deficiencies noted in the hijāʿī-style manuscripts mean that it was not, in fact, possible to adequately preserve the integrity of the Qur’ān through writing as the caliph
‘Uthmān intended when, according to the tradition, he decided to document the revelation.

The hijāzī-style manuscripts nevertheless confirm that transmission of the Qur’ān in writing began at an early stage. Various trends in that transmission have also been identified. Muslims initially chose the cursive, a type of book which became the predominant format of the day, all before the scroll or volumen of Classical Antiquity, which remained in very restricted use as, for example, in copies of the Torah. A slightly later text, a polemical Christian piece against Islam, does, however, indicate that scrolls were used by the first Muslims following the Jewish example (al-Kindī 1858). Scrolls were subsequently used from time to time, but based upon a very different set of principles from the classic volumen: this will be discussed later in this chapter. Traditions mention various materials upon which texts were written (scraps of leather, palm leaf stalks, animal scapula bones, etc.), none of which remained in use for very long, having been replaced by the codex.

Manuscripts were copied out in long lines not columns from the start, a decision which proved to be a determining factor in the subsequent development of the Arabic-Muslim manuscript tradition (see facsimiles published in Déroche and Noja 1998; 2001). The spaces between words cannot be differentiated from the spaces which occur within words, where the word contains one or more letters which are not linked to the following letter, as with dāl which does not join to the following letter when used within a word; this may be an indication that the writing was influenced by the scriptio continua style used during antiquity. This influence may also explain why copyists would often divide a word comprising two or more segments (four, for example, in darajat: da + nū + ji̯ + l) upon reaching the end of the line, a practice which was later strictly forbidden. The end of a verse is indicated consistently by ink strokes which are grouped together in various arrangements; markers to indicate the conclusion of five or ten verses, where they occur in the manuscripts at all, have been added in later. The siwās are separated from one another by blank spaces which are a whole line long in some of the more meticulously transcribed copies; the titles of the siwās which are sometimes included have been added later. In the case of a few muqāṣṣat, the title area was decorated with ink, sometimes in shades of red. Some manuscripts leave a whole line for the introductory basma, but this practice was not unanimously adopted. The tradition of dividing the text into sections of equal length does not seem to have been adopted during this period when copies of the Qur’ān were transcribed using the hijāzī script; in the London BL Or. 2165 manuscript, markers for such divisions of the text were inserted later and are thus found between the lines (Déroche and Noja 2001). Since the beginning and end of the manuscripts were exposed to continual wear and tear and repetitive handling, the pages have often disappeared at these points. We therefore know next to nothing about “title pages” since only one such initial page has been found to date and this is merely a fragment, the recto of which is blank.

Experimentation During the First Centuries

Some of the features which characterized the Qur’ān manuscripts of the first/seventh century have stood the test of time, but the majority were subject to significant change over the following three to four centuries. In fact, far from retaining the solutions demonstrated by the earliest copies, a desire to perfect the codex form quickly emerged among the Muslim community. This is reflected partly by the greater degree of accuracy adopted in transcriptions of the text: techniques essential to attaining ‘Uthmān’s alleged objectives were gradually introduced. The initial scriptio delectiva script was replaced by scriptio plena— a development which may possibly be documented in one account which tells of an Umayyad governor adding two thousand hār (probably meaning “letters”) to the Qur’ān (Jeffery 1937). The first vocalization system then emerged, probably around the end of the Umayyad period and was based on the use of red dots; gradually hamza and orthoepic indicators (ṣūkh, shadda) were marked down, albeit irregularly. The system as we know it today seems to have been introduced towards the end of the third/ninth century.

Considerable effort went into the appearance of a muqāṣṣat. The script itself was subject to a process of ensuring uniformity, perhaps inspired by the efforts of the Umayyad officials: the caliphate of this period initiated reforms in the administration of the empire with the aim of establishing the Arabic language and script as official forms of communication. In the case of the script, this required considerable care to be taken over handwriting, perhaps influencing those who were assigned the task of transcribing the text of the revelation. The notion of Qur’ānic scripts, that is, specific styles adopted in copies of the Qur’ān, undoubtedly emerged during this period: the Firḥist by Ibn al-Nadim shows that, by the fourth/tenth century, the notion of a Qur’ānic script was standard (Ibn al-Nadim 1970). The first script to appear in a significant number of manuscripts dates from the Umayyad period and is essentially an elaborate form of the early hijāzī script, retaining the same slender appearance; the script is written on a vertically formatted page (Déroche 2002).

A further development of this period was the inclusion of decoration in the Qur’ān codex. The most impressive example is a copy of the Qur’ān discovered in Samma in the Yemen (Dar al-Mohja’ji’at 20–33.1), with an initial double-spread page depicting two buildings, assumed to be mosques (von Bothmer 1987). Other fragments from the Umayyad period reveal that the illuminators who worked on these manuscripts were familiar with Christian iconography and with the iconography of the type most spectacularly displayed at the Dome of the Rock. Other, less skillful attempts may reflect the approach adopted in those areas which were further away from the government center. Living beings are absent from these illuminations, which instead feature geometric designs and vegetation-based imagery alongside occasional architectural images. The decoration mainly occurs where there is a break in the text, either within the block of writing itself or at the edge. The latter category also includes full-page decorations placed at the start and sometimes also at the end of a volume, as well as decorative borders at the beginning and end of the text.

Scripts soon began to feature thicker strokes; they are traditionally known as “Kufic” scripts but are perhaps more accurately described by the term “early Abbasid scripts” (Déroche 1983; 1992). On the basis of the classifications proposed, it is possible for the palaeographer to identify the rules of working practice in operation for certain groups of copies (Déroche 1989). The complexity of the most remarkable of these scripts demonstrates the various levels of execution in existence, ranging from copies written in calligraphy to more clumsy attempts at imitating these skillful
copies. The scripts were primarily associated with parchment manuscripts of a specific format.

The Qur'an codex underwent significant alteration around the start of the second/eighth century; the original vertical format was replaced by an oblong format. The reasons behind this modification have not been recorded in any existing documentation and thus several hypotheses have emerged: two of these theories are very similar and are not necessarily mutually exclusive. According to the first, the decision indicates a desire to clearly distinguish the Qur'an from the Christian codex and from the Jewish Torah scrolls. The second theory considers this modification to relate to the initial writing down of the hadith and the resultant desire to distinguish the book of God from all other texts. It is also possible that a particular type of binding would have been developed around this time or shortly after; this would have been a plausible case, serving both to protect the Qur'an codex as well as to provide a means of identifying the document within (Déroche 2000). This was the common case of a set of material means which would have provided the muqaf with a strong visual identity.

It is difficult to determine the exact point in time at which the early 'Abbāsid scripts developed. The first definitive indications of a date do not feature in copies of the Qur'an until the third/ninth century, with the exception of the pious forgeries discussed above. Establishing a date for the earliest copies is thus dependent upon palaeographic studies, dating the decorations or, in rare cases, upon scientific methods such as Carbon-14 dating. Using this technique, the Sanaa Qur'an mentioned above is thought to date from between 657 and 690 (von Bothmer et al. 1999); the script which appears in this umayyad manuscript already demonstrates certain traits which subsequently developed over the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries. As a whole, these scripts are defined by their thick lettering, as mentioned above, with emphasis being placed on the baseline; the copyists used pronounced horizontal strokes to create a balanced layout, punctuated by shorter vertical strokes and identical spacing between groups of letters.

One consequence of this graphic work with the script was that copyists were able to alter the volume of the text. In fact, the number of pages included in a transcription of the Qur'an could be markedly increased, if the copyist so desired, by significantly increasing the dimensions of the characters while still maintaining a suitable appearance. Copies with approximately six hundred leaves began to appear, each leaf made from a whole animal skin. One group of large mughafs from the second/eighth century, written in this same script and often containing twelve lines per page, documents this solution; their dimensions classify them alongside the largest parchment manuscripts, marking the beginning of a trend in large-format transcriptions of the Qur'an, initially indicated by the Sanaa Qur'an. Preference then switched to producing series of seven to thirty parts, forming an overall volume of considerable size; the first series was produced during this period, as confirmed by Malik b. Anas's condemnation of this innovation (Fierro 1992). Given how quickly the number of such series increased during the third/ninth century, it would seem that they were produced to meet requirements. Each part was relatively close to the average size of contemporary copies, which probably facilitated manufacture. The fact that the parts were produced as series also meant that they had to be kept together in specific cases, a practice which was to remain popular throughout the Muslim world.

From the end of the third/ninth century, a new development began to take place: a script very different in appearance from the early 'Abbāsid scripts began to appear in copies of the Qur'an. This "new style," despite many variations in its appearance, is defined by breaks and angular forms and by extreme contrasts between the thick and thin strokes (Déroche 1983; 1992). The script was initially used in administrative and legal documents; it replaced earlier scripts, yet there is no satisfactory explanation for its apparent success. It is possible that it was easier to read than the early 'Abbāsid scripts which differ greatly from current writing practice. Economic factors may also have played a part: one cannot fail to acknowledge the relatively simultaneous occurrence of both the "new style" being introduced and the use of paper spreading throughout the Muslim world; the decrease in the price of books triggered by the introduction of this new material seems to have led to an increase in demand. As a result, it would probably have been essential to raise productivity levels. Earlier scripts would therefore have been abandoned either because they took too long to produce or because increasing numbers of copyists (who likely had not mastered these particular scripts or who could not produce them in an acceptable level) would have been required to transcribe the Qur'an; they would therefore have chosen simpler styles for these copies. During this same era, the vertical format gradually re-established itself as standard in the mughfas; this was perhaps another consequence of paper being introduced. The "new style" was the last script to spread throughout the Muslim world before the introduction of printing; it remained in use until the seventh/thirteenth century, at which point it was restricted to titles only.

Around the middle of the fourth/tenth century, one final development led to scripts similar to those used in everyday life being adopted in the Qur'an. The strong visual identity assigned to the mughaf by previous generations was reduced. Instead, the overall presentation remained constant for several centuries, with the notable exception of the decorations, which changed in style over time.

Written Copies of the Qur'an from the Fifth/Eleventh Century Onwards

The text of the Qur'an was copied out both in parts in order to form a collection of extracts, and in its entirety; in the majority of cases, these copies take the form of a codex written in vertical format but copies have also been made for specific purposes, usually for use as a talisman and are produced in scroll form (rotulands type), shirts, etc.

The codices either comprise one complete volume or a series of parts, ranging from two to sixty sections. These divisions into parts are based on the number of letters which form the entire text as a result of an initiative which dates back to the Umayyad period and was allegedly ordered by al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf (d. 95/714): the number found then was divided by two, three, four, and so on, and the end of the nearest verse is taken to be the waypoint which was at the half, third, or quarter (and so on) point.

The modern reader opening a manuscript of the Qur'an cannot fail to be struck by the lack of a title at the beginning of the volume, especially given that titles have featured at the beginning of works, even taking up a full page on occasion, since the very
start of the non-Qur’ān related Arabic manuscript tradition. The mushaf is thus an exception to the rule. Many strategists have therefore been adopted to compensate for the absence of a title. As discussed above, developing a strong, instantly recognizable visual identity was one of the first steps taken to compensate for this deficiency. In the most meticulously transcribed copies, illuminations were used for this purpose. The original decorations had no writing (atelepgraph); later, pages expressed or a list of the sections which comprise the Qur’ān (sūras, verses, letters, etc.) were included. At the end of the fourth/tenth century, quotations from the Qur’ān were introduced; the citations chosen contain the word “Qur’ān” or another such direct reference to the text. Verses 77–80 of sūra 56 were undoubtedly the most frequently used in this context, but other sections were also used, such as Q 17:88, 41:41–2, and 85:21–2. The size of the decoration affected the artist’s decision regarding the length of the quotation: the illumination marking the start of a volume and relating to the citation can form one page, a double page spread, a border surrounding the incipit (the first words of a text) or a separate prelude to the incipit.

The double page which contains the incipit is characterized by a very particular text layout. In copies of the Qur’ān comprising one volume, sūra 1 or sūra 1 and the first verses of sūra 2, are arranged in a particular way: the carefully produced copies include an illumination at this point which takes the form of a border and contains one or several of these quotations from the Qur’ān. Each sūra is preceded by its title which may be formed by the number of verses it contains and its place in the revelation; it is much less common for an indication of its position in the chronology of the revelation to appear (that is, whether it is a Meccan or a Medinan chapter). The sūras are identified by title, not by number; the titles can vary from manuscript to manuscript. The kusul, which is featured at the beginning of each sūra (with the exception of sūra 9) appears on its own on the first line. Verses are usually separated from one another by a marker or small decoration; it is rare for their number in the sequence to appear. Larger illuminations, placed either at the end of the verse concerned or in the marginal area, with the corresponding decoration, mark groups of five or ten verses; the number, if included, is written either in letters or using the numerical value of the letters of the alphabet (abjad); in the more modest copies, the words “five” (khamsa) and “ten” (asb) are written in the margin. The numbering of each of these elements is placed at its end.

A series of additional markers are also featured in the margin. The prologues which must occur when reading the text are indicated by the word sajdah which appears either on its own or as part of a decoration. Segments of the text are also indicated in the margin: thirtieths (mṣ), sixtieths (ḥīd) and also, on occasion, further subdivisions of these sections into quarters and halves. Some of the more meticulous copies contain borders in the form of illuminations to mark these points in the text; usually there is just one, at the halfway point, but sometimes there are thirty, one for each ġā’

The text itself is normally written in the same ink for both the consonant skeleton (naskh) and vocalization system; only in the Muslim West was the early system of using colour to mark the short vowels, hāmza, sukūn and shadda retained. Despite objections from jurists, gilded ink was used, sometimes throughout the text, sometimes for certain words, most notably “Allah”: different colors of ink appear in some copies according to the specific page layout. Where the mushafs contain translations written between the lines for the benefit of non-Arabic-speaking Muslims, these take the form of smaller and distinct characters, often written in red ink. In some copies, symbols above the text clarify the rules of recitation, indicating in particular where pauses must and must not occur. From this period onwards, the between-word space was larger than the space which separated individual, non-joining letters within a word; splitting a word at the end of a line was no longer acceptable.

The styles of writing employed were primarily the naskhī, muḥaqqaq, nasiḥī and on rarer occasions the thuluth script, to use traditional terminology. The latter three scripts are of medium and large stature, while the first—which was in very widespread use—is small, though still larger than the ghubar script, employed in miniature copies. In practice, there are evident stylistic variations which relate to different periods and locations: our knowledge of this is, however, largely empirical. There exist a great many copies written in calligraphy, most of which use the same script from start to finish. During the tenth/sixteenth and eleventh/seventeenth centuries, copists sometimes chose to employ two or even three styles of different height with two or three lines in taller script (muḥaqqaq or thuluth) separated from the others by blocks of naskhī script; the latter were transcribed in black ink, the others in colour. There are also regional particularities: this will be discussed in greater detail below.

Some manuscripts also contain additional appended texts, invocations (dhu’ū’), to be recited after reading the Qur’ān, tables for predicting the future with the aid of the text, tracts relating to the Qur’ān, etc. Individuals would sometimes note down particular family events (births and deaths) or larger-scale events in their copies.

The bindings of the Qur’ān are the same as that of other manuscripts, having a book jacket and jacket flaps (except in Central Asia). The outside of the jacket flap often bears an inscription of verse 79 of sūra 56 ("None but the pure may touch"), thus enabling the manuscript to be identified as a mushaf. Special tracts state that copies of the Qur’ān must be treated with particular respect; they must be placed above all other books which are stored flat in accordance with Eastern tradition. It is also recommended that the mushaf be kept in a protective cover. Many coverings of this type remain; the leather covers of sub-Saharan Africa are particularly important in that they prevent the leaves of the manuscript from dispersing.

Up until the fourth/tenth century, regional characteristics do not seem to have strongly influenced the Qur’ān manuscript tradition, aside, of course, from the variant readings. The situation changed with the introduction of so-called “cursive” scripts in copies of the revelation. In the Western part of the Muslim world (North Africa and Spain), the maghribi script gradually established itself as the norm from the end of the fourth/tenth century and remained so until the arrival of the computer age. Furtherment continued to be used in the production of these manuscripts which were typically square in format. Colors (red, green, yellow, and blue) were also employed over a long period to indicate vocalization and orthographic markers. In sub-Saharan Africa, a variant form of maghribi developed; as mentioned above, these copies of the Qur’ān sometimes comprised a pile of separate sheets which had to be kept together with their binding in a special protective pouch.

Elsewhere, differences between the various scripts were less clearly defined. There were many variants of the classic styles from the central area of the Muslim world, as
demonstrated by copies of the Qur’ān made in China (Baynun et al. 1999). More
distinct is the ḫāʾīrī script which was used solely in the north of India between the
seventh/thirteenth and tenth/sixteenth centuries. Mughalīs written in the nastaʿlīq
script are comparatively rare since this style, so characteristic of the Persian world, does
not have Qur’ān-script status. The illuminations often bear the mark of the region
where they were completed.

The Qur’ān Manuscripts in Muslim Societies

The alleged etymological similarities between the words “Qur’ān” and the Syriac qeṣṣyān (liturgical reading) could lead one to conclude that the book of the Qur’ān was
intended for liturgical purposes; however, this was not the case and manuscripts of the
Qur’ān played no part in the religious practice established by Muhammad who, let us
not forget, died before the text was recorded in writing, according to Muslim tradition.
This is not to say that the Qur’ān is never associated with devout practices. Indeed, the
energy which went into multiplying copies of the book and the considerable effort
invested in some of the more lavish and impressive copies indicate that the mughalī
did play a part in Muslim societies. On the other hand, developments in notation during
the first centuries undoubtedly influenced the emergence of the variant readings.
Unfortunately, very little is known about these different issues and studies into the
matter are only just beginning.

It is important to emphasize that manuscripts of the Qur’ān are held in great
esteem: this also applies to the printed versions. The basic interpretation of the verse of
surah 56 mentioned above is that the mughalī may only be touched by those in a state
of purity. This applies to Muslims only and prohibits non-Muslims from touching a
copy of the Qur’ān. When a copy deteriorated to such an extent that it could no
longer be used, Muslim law proposed various methods of protecting such copies from
desecration (Sudan 1986); deposits of old manuscripts discovered in various
locations across the Muslim world represent one solution to this problem. Worn pages
could also be transformed into cardboard for use as a cover in binding another copy of
the Qur’ān.

The history of Qur’ānic manuscripts begins in earnest with the decision of the caliph
ʿUthmān to send the copies of the text, produced on his command, to the large urban
centers in his empire. The significance of the overall circulation of mughalīs during the
manuscript period is difficult to determine due to a lack of precise numbers. Since it
would have been too costly for most Muslims to purchase a manuscript, copies of the
Qur’ān were held in mortmain or waqf in order to make them accessible to as many
people as possible. Copies have been preserved from the third/ninth century which
contain a deed recording such a gift made by a devout believer to a mosque or oratory;
these copies frequently took the form of a series of thirty juz’. More is known about the
history of these copies intended for public use than about the mughalīs which belonged
to individuals. Later documents only, from the twelfth/eighteenth and thirteenth/nineteen-
teenth centuries, have established that the Qur’ān was the only book possessed by most
households (Anastassiadou 1999). Even then, this information relates primarily to
urban areas; it is not known whether Muslims living in rural areas had access to copies
of the text of the revelation during this same period. The price of the books seems to
have fallen significantly as soon as paper became widely established in around the
fourth/tenth century; though it is not possible to quantify this change, more is known
about a second development – the spread of printing – which occurred during the
second half of the nineteenth century and enabled more people to acquire a copy of
the Qur’ān.

A great many pocket-sized copies of the Qur’ān have been preserved, dating from
the eleventh/seventeenth century. The Ottoman world provides the best example of this
development. A standard format was developed which linked the material composition of
the manuscript with the structure of the text. Each juz’ comprised a quire of ten
leaves so that these copies all had three hundred leaves in total (usually a bit more, in
fact): the text of each juz’ was divided into twenty fixed sections each corresponding to
one copied page with fifteen lines per page, starting with the beginning of a verse and
finishing with the end of a verse (Stanley 2003; Witkam 2002). As a result, it is theo-
retically possible to swap two pages bearing the same pagination from two different
mughalīs, produced in accordance with these rules, without omitting or duplicating any
of the text. Subsequent elaboration of the text enabled the presentation to be used for
specific purposes: to highlight a certain element of the text, to demonstrate the sacrality
of the Qur’ān or even to suggest a deeper significance. The most striking examples are
revealed by a group of manuscripts in which copyists have stretched out or com-
pressed the script within the closed unit of each page in order to move words or groups
of words so that they appear on the same line and in the same relative position as on
the page opposite, where similar techniques have been applied; these words are written
in red to highlight the textual symmetry, the most impressive examples of which appear in
surah 26 where whole passages resemble one another in this way (Derecohe 2000; Stanley 2003).

Were these standardized copies intended to facilitate learning the Qur’ān by heart
(Stanley 2003)? While this cannot be ruled out completely, what we know of the
methods used would seem to suggest otherwise. The extensive standardization process
demonstrated by these mughalīs and the impressive productivity of the Ottoman copy-
ists indicate that the aim of these manuscripts was to respond to a very widespread
demand within society, while at the same time taking into account the limited resources
of potential purchasers; the influence of printing or at least what the Muslim copyists
knew about printing may also have played a part in this development.

Reading the text is an act of piety and the development of the waqf for the mughalīs,
as we have seen, provided the literate with the opportunity to read the Qur’ān in
mosques or in other religious buildings. From the sixth/twelfth century onwards,
rhythms emerged which involved reading the Qur’ān aloud, requiring the use of copies
of the Qur’ān in thirty volumes. Income from a waqf enabled the readers and any staff
associated with this ritual to be paid; several examples have been identified in preserved
manuscripts and in the waqf acts themselves dating most notably from the Mamlik
period (James 1988). These readings sometimes took place at a burial site to benefit the
deceased; at other times, they were dedicated to believers within a mosque or even to
passers-by in neighboring streets. Readings were also held under more modest
conditions. Sessions were organized during the month of Ramadan; copies of the Qur'an from the Maghreb region contain special markers in the margin for this purpose, dividing the text into twenty-nine sections to match the number of days in the month.

Readings were sometimes focused upon particular extracts. During the seventh/fourteenth century, Ibn Battūta (d. 777/1377) assisted at a gathering held daily in Tahirī in the courtyard of the mosque. During this gathering, which was following the ‘asr prayer, sūras 16, 48, and 78 were read. There can be no doubt that the development of this practice explains the emergence of copies featuring just these sūras, as well as certain others from the end of the Qur’an. These thin volumes also enabled the less affluent to obtain a partial copy of the scripture at a lower cost. These copies seem to belong to a category of manuscripts intended for private use in the same way as those copies bearing either a juz’ or a hizb on each double page (i.e., the verso of one leaf and recto of the following); a very small script is used. This latter type of masḥaf seems to have been highly successful in the Iranian world and in India; extracts, on the other hand, may have been more popular in Turkish-speaking areas.

For non-Arabic-speaking Muslims, certain copies contained a translation written in smaller characters between the lines of the Arabic text, following the order of the Arabic word-for-word. Others provided a commentary (tafsīr) written in the margin, sometimes in the form of a translation. It is, of course, essential to distinguish those copies in which the elements in question are later additions from those where the copyist intended them to be inserted. The earliest examples in Persian date from the sixth/seventh century, while those in Turkish postdate them by almost two centuries. In more recent times, the twelfth/thirteenth and fourteenth/nineteenth centuries, such copies seem to have increased in number.

Copies associated with the memory of some of the great figures of early Islam hold a special place in the evocation of piety which developed around the masḥaf. From the fifth/sixth century onwards, sources identify a “Qur’an of ‘Uthmān” or a “Qur’an of ‘Ali” at specific sites and describe the practices which surrounded them (Mouton 1993). The presumed absolute authenticity of these copies as well as their burāka explains why reading from these copies carried particular value, with believers seeking to establish physical contact with the manuscript; copies were sometimes protected by a cover or stored in a cabinet. In Cordoba where several leaves from such a copy were stored for a time, an elaborate ritual developed involving processions and candles; the relic was then transferred to Marrakech where it was protected with a silver-plated binding and stored in a special piece of furniture (Desmus Lamara 1938).

In Damascus, a “Qur’an of ‘Uthmān” was held in the Middle Ages, important figures were entitled to read the manuscript and to contribute to the funds raised for the weaving of the veil which covered it. Copies of the Qur’an were also integrated into strategies devised to demonstrate power. One such example is the ‘Abbasid court ceremonial where, on special occasions, the caliph would appear seated on his throne with a copy of the Qur’an, wearing a cloak and carrying a baton which are both said to have belonged to Muḥammad. The large parchment copies of the Qur’an mentioned above, which were also made during this period, were very expensive to produce and costs could only be met by important figures. In the third/ninth century, three Turkish offi-

cers serving the ‘Abbasid caliphs donated three such copies of the Qur’an comprising thirty juz’. These copies were intended to be seen even before being read; they reflected the central character of the revelation as well as the gesture made by the donors and their position within the community. This tradition of producing large copies of the Qur’an continued through the ages. The development of paper manufacturing techniques enabled even larger copies to be created, since parchment copies were restricted to the size of the animal skin used. Two examples reveal that the format of the manuscripts was considered important by the princes: the largest Qur’an offered to the al-Aṣqā mosque in Jerusalem was a gift from the Mamluk sultan Barsbay (ruled 825/1422 to 841/1438); according to another tale, Timur scorned a miniature masḥaf made for him by one calligrapher but subsequently walked to the door of his palace to accept willingly another copy produced by the same artist which was so large it had to be transported by cart (Huart 1908). Just as the etiquette of the chancellery dictated that the sovereigns’ letters be written in large format, so the copies of the Qur’an they commissioned had to reflect the special requirements of their rank. Manuscripts of the Qur’an were also readily given as presents by one sovereign to another, although they were not necessarily of such large proportions.

Copies which can be described as scholarly editions have also been identified; their more modest appearance suggests that they had no ceremonial function. They provide the reader with a text containing markers which refer to the variant readings (qurān): this information is not normally included since any given masḥaf is limited, in principle, to following one reading. These “erudite” copies also often contained short tracts on the technical aspects, such as the different ways of dividing the Qur’ānic text and the relative chronological positioning of the sūras within the text of the revelation (Bobzin 1995; Bayani et al. 1999). Such information would only have been of interest to specialists in the field, whether they were engaged in teaching or learning.

From Printed Editions to the Qur’ān Online

Printed copies of the Qur’an originated in the West where printing with movable type was introduced towards the middle of the fifteenth century. The first attempt at printing this Arabic text took place in Venice around 1537 or 1538. The Pagnini Press printed a copy of the Qur’an which was probably intended for sale in the East but contained so many errors that the print run was destroyed; only one copy has been preserved (Nuoro 1987). This episode occurred shortly before the first translation of the Qur’an was published in Basel in 1543; this was a copy of an old translation completed by Robert of Ketton (Bobzin 1995). The end of the seventeenth century saw the emergence of two editions of the Qur’an, in addition to several works containing extracts of various lengths (Bobzin 2002); the edition produced by the pastor Abraham Hinckelmann in Hamburg in 1694 contained only the Arabic text, while that published by Italian priest Ludovico Maracci in Padua in 1698 was accompanied by a translation and detailed commentary. These various editions demonstrate the development of Arabic studies in Europe. However, they were not suitable for a Muslim readership as they did not adhere to the specific rules governing the orthography of the Qur’an and did not follow any one of the variant readings in a coherent manner.
In 1787 in Saint Petersburg, the first Qur'an to be printed by a Muslim, Mollâ
Osmâ'îl Ismâ'îlî, was published, intended for fellow Muslims. It preceded the first Kazan
editions (from 1803) by several years, which themselves pre-dated editions published
in the East from the first half of the nineteenth century: Tehran (from 1244/1828),
Shiraz (1830), Calcutta (1831), Scarampore (1833), Tabriz (1248/1833), and so
forth. These editions were lithographs, a process which entailed distinctive traits of
Qur'anic manuscripts to be retained which the earlier letterpress copies from the West
had disregarded. When letterpress editions are produced in Muslim countries, they will
only be accepted if additional efforts are made within this long-standing tradition of
written transmission to respect the traditional layout of the text, including even its
catchwords.12 In the first half of the nineteenth century, Gustav Flügel published an
edition of the Qur'an in 1834 in Leipzig; this became an important date in the history
of Arabic-Islamic studies in Europe. Despite its faults (dividing up the verses and
failing to follow any one set of variant readings), this edition nevertheless provided a
large number of readers with access to a reliable text; Western scientific studies referred
to its verse numbering for a long time thereafter. Some years later, Flügel published a
concordance of the Qur'an which was an invaluable contribution to Islamic
studies.

The most significant event remains, however, the publication of an edition of the
Qur'an in Cairo in 1342/1924 which was the result of a long preparation process by
scholars from al-Azhar; these scholars focused upon one variant reading, that of Hâfiz
'în' A'shim (Bergsträsser 1930). The text was based on the oral aspect of transmission,
possibly aided by technical texts on recitation, the variant readings (qi'â'în), and so
forth. Early manuscripts of the Qur'an were not taken into account, but then few
experts at this time were aware of the existence of the hijâizî style. This edition gained
widespread popularity across the Muslim world and gradually replaced the Flügel
edition among academic researchers. In fact, this one reading eventually began to
dominate over all other ones, with the result that this text can be considered something
of a vulgate, without ever having been officially sanctioned except by the šâkilîs
of al-Azhar in Cairo.

The possibilities offered by analogue disks and tapes have been exploited for making
recordings of traditional recitations. In Cairo at the beginning of the 1960s, the
supreme authority of al-Azhar made a recording of the entire text; there can be no
doubt that this initiative influenced the Islamic world. Indeed, it may well have prepared
the way for information technologies and computer-based techniques. As these tech-
niques spread, the Qur'an discovered a new medium and new possibilities which
traditional methods of transmission had failed to offer. The text became available on
CD-ROM: such storage capacity enables access to a translation, commentary, or recita-
tion along with the passage being displayed on the screen in Arabic. It is also possible
to conduct research into the recorded texts. Similarly, this method has been used to
provide access to the text of the earliest copies of the Qur'an in order to facilitate
research into the history of the text (Déroche and Noja 1998, 2001).

The Internet offers the same possibilities, with websites fulfilling the same function.
The text can be consulted along with a translation or commentary; Internet users can
even choose between different recitations. These developments have triggered
discussion among Muslims consulting these Internet resources; the immateriality of
the various different electronic versions may well lie in with the concerns over purity
expressed in verse 79 of sûra 56, yet Q 96:4 ("God instructs man by means of the
pen") raises questions over the position of this new medium in relation to the
revolution.

Translated by Melanie Hersey.

Notes

1 Text, generally found at the end of a manuscript, in which the copyist records details of his
identity and his work: his name, the date, the location, his sponsor, etc. are all details which
the copyist may (or may not) choose to include. Fake colophons may be added to an existing
manuscript or may accompany a copy, causing it to be considered a forgery.

2 These are the manuscripts from Istanbul, Topkapı Sarayi HS 194, A 1, BH 1 and YY 749
(formerly 4567), and the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Art, MS 457 and 553.

3 Singular form: code; type of book made from sheets folded in half and assembled in one
or several quires which are then stitched along the length of the fold.

4 Literally: "from Hijân," a region to the North West of the Arabian Peninsula where the towns
of Mecca and Medîna are situated.

5 These marks are placed in varying quantities above or below certain letters to identify homographs; an unmarked set of characters within a word can have five, even six different meanings. This ambiguity is eradicated if the copyist has taken care to mark down all diacritics correctly.

6 Roll on which a text is written in columns of the same width, perpendicular to the direction
of rolling.

7 Letters of the text were written next to each other, with no significant spaces left between
words.

8 Also known as Eastern or Persian Kufî, Naskhi Kufî, or broken cursive.

9 A scroll on which the text is written in lines, parallel to the direction of rolling. On some
scrolls of the Qur'an, the text is arranged so as to resemble various forms or figures.

10 Script specific to the Muslim West or Maghreb region.

11 One of the five daily prayers which takes place in the middle of the afternoon.

12 In a manuscript, the first word written on the recto of one leaf is repeated at the bottom of
the verso of the preceding leaf; this process helps to keep pages of the manuscript in the
correct order.

Further reading

University Press, London [The Nasser D. Khalili collection of Islamic art 1].
For many scholars the connections between Muhammad and the Qur’ān are so obvious and intimate that they need no examination. For Muslims, the passages of the Qur’ān were revealed at specific times and places, and though they are understood to be “eternal,” they were relevant to the situation of Muhammad and his community in Mecca and Medina. Furthermore, Muhammad, as God’s chosen messenger, best understood the Qur’ān and best exemplified its teachings. Therefore, the context of the Qur’ān is the life of Muhammad. Even for many secular scholars,1 because they claim that the biography of Muhammad was produced much later, the Qur’ān serves as the sole trustworthy source for gleaning details of Muhammad’s biography. All the important and critical moments in Muhammad’s life are addressed or alluded to within the Qur’ān. Consequently, to understand Muhammad you must understand the Qur’ān and vice versa. While the trust in the extant sources varies, Muslim and most secular scholars, it will be seen, largely agree on the intimate nature of the relationship between Muhammad and the Qur’ān.

This intimacy is seemingly supported by a wealth of material. The Qur’ān addresses itself directly to the “messenger,” at times even using the name “Muhammad.” The biography of Muhammad, the sīra, not only provides a context for many revelations, but also describes the process of revelation—particularly for the first revelation. Naturally, the sāma’ of the prophet, the conduct or example of Muhammad, also contains many hadiths (reports) in which Muhammad references the Qur’ān. As well, there is a genre of hadiths known as the asbāb al-nuzūl that purport to provide the exact circumstances under which specific revelations came to Muhammad. Furthermore, some hadiths also contain Muhammad’s own exegesis of the Qur’ān (tafṣīr). Thus, to raise doubts about Muhammad’s relationship with the Qur’ān is considered absurd by many scholars, Muslim and non-Muslim alike.

While this chapter will not dispute that the figure of Muhammad and the text of the Qur’ān are intimately connected, it will suggest that the nature of that connection is much more complex than either the traditional Muslim view (that sees Muhammad as
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Preface

Andrew Rippin

The publication of a volume devoted to the Qur’an in the “companion” genre marks the end of a genre of the text of Muslim scripture within the canon of world literature in a manner particularly appropriate to the twenty-first century. This companion has been specifically designed to guide the reader who may have little exposure to the Qur’an beyond a curiosity evoked by the popular media. It aims to provide such a person with a starting point of a general orientation and take him or her to a well-advanced state of understanding regarding the complexities of the text and its associated traditions. However, a “companion” volume such as this is also an opportunity for scholars to extend the boundaries of what might be deemed to be the “accepted” approaches to the text of the Qur’an because such a volume provides, it is to be hoped, the material which will inspire future generations of scholars who first encounter the Qur’an in the classroom and for whom new avenues of exploration provide the excitement of research and discovery.

Organization

This companion has been organized in order to facilitate its usefulness for the groups of readers who may wish to embark on a deeper understanding of the Qur’an in its historical context and as an object of scholarly study. Part I functions as an introduction to the text but its three chapters are oriented in different, yet complementary ways. All readers, but especially those who are coming to the Qur’an with little foreknowledge of the text and/or the scholarly study of it, will find these chapters the place to start. “Introducing” the Qur’an (chapter 1) means orienting the reader to the basic facts, themselves coming from a variety of perspectives both internal and external to the text. “Discovering” the Qur’an (chapter 2) speaks to the experience of a student and considers how one might integrate the Qur’an within a framework of religious studies. “Contextualizing” the Qur’an (chapter 3) orients the reader to a Muslim scholarly perspective, putting the emphasis on the historical context in which the facts about the Qur’an are to be understood. Each chapter thus adds a level of complexity to the task of approaching the Qur’an, although each chapter recognizes certain common elements which pose a challenge to the reader, especially the question of the choice of “lens” through which one should read the text.

Part II addresses the text of the Qur’an on both the structural and the historical level, two dimensions which have always been seen in scholarly study as fully intertwined. Issues of origin and composition lie deeply embedded in all of these concerns because, it is argued, the structure of the text — which is what makes the book a challenge to read — must be accounted for through the process of history. However, the final aim of these attempts at explaining the Qur’an is directed towards a single end, that of coming to an understanding of the text. The internal structure of the Qur’an is the focus of chapter 4. These observations are complemented by an intricate series of observations about the nature of the text and its language, including the patterns of address used in the text (chapter 5), language — especially its use of literary figures — in chapter 6, the relationship between poetry and language as it affects the Qur’an (chapter 7), and the range of the vocabulary of the text that is thought to come from non-Arabic sources in chapter 8. All of these factors — structure, language, and vocabulary — combine and become manifest in the emergence of a text of the scripture within the context of a community of Muslims (chapter 9), creating the text which emerges as sacred through the complex passage of history (chapter 10), which is then transmitted through the generations of Muslims, the focus of chapter 11. All of this happens in a historical context of the early community which is shown to be foundational to the understanding of the text in both the person of Muhammad and his life (chapter 12) as well as that of the early leader 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (chapter 13).

Such details provide an understanding of the text on a linguistic and historical level but the overall nature of its message is fundamentally ignored in such considerations. Part III thus turns to consider some of the major topics which characterize that message. Muslims have, in fact, seen the Qur’an as all-encompassing in its treatment of human existence and an inventory of themes can really only provide examples of ways of analyzing and categorizing the contents of the scripture: there is little substitute for a rigorous study of the text itself if one wishes to gain a clear sense of what it is really about as a whole. However, certain aspects do provide key ideas and provide the opportunity to illustrate methods of approach. Dominating all of the message of the Qur’an is, of course, the figure of Allah, the All-powerful, one God revealed in the Qur’an and not as He is in the biblical tradition (chapter 14), through a process of revelation brought by prophets (chapter 15), an important one of whom within the Muslim context is Moses (chapter 16), although, of course, figures such as Abraham and Jesus play a central role in the Qur’an as well. The message those prophets (including Muhammad in the Qur’an) bring argues for belief in God (chapter 17) among reflective, thinking human beings (chapter 18). However, the prophets also bring a message of how life should be lived in both love (chapter 19) and war (chapter 20).

This text of the Qur’an, as all of the preceding material has made clear, is a complex one that Muslims have always known needed interpretation. This might be said to be the nature of divine revelation which poses the problem of how the infinity and absoluteness of God can be expressed in the limited and ambiguous format of human
language. Such a situation calls for a hermeneutics that is elaborated within the framework of Islam (chapter 21) which can also draw its inspiration from a multitude of sources always filtered through Islamic eyes and needs (chapter 22). Differing approaches to Islam developed in the Muslim world, variations which the Qur’an facilitated through its conduciveness to interpretation: thus Sufis (chapter 23), Rumi (chapter 24), Twelver Shi’ites (chapter 25) and Ismai’ils (chapter 26) all sought strength and support for their ideas in the text of the Qur’an and developed their own principles by which to understand the scripture.

However, the Qur’an has far more significance within Muslim life than as an object functioning as a ground for exegesis. The world of the Qur’an extends much further, becoming the basis of scholastic consideration and development of learning within the context of exegetical elaboration (chapter 27), theology (chapter 28), and jurisprudence (chapter 29). It is a touchstone for every discussion of ethical issues in the modern world (chapter 30) just as it was the basis for literary development in the classical world (chapter 31). Underlying all of that, however, is the status of the Qur’an not so much as a rational launching pad for further thought but as a text of devotion as displayed in the attention to its orality and manifestation in recitation (chapter 32). The application of the Qur’an thus extends through the many aspects of Muslim day-to-day life.

Technical Considerations

A work such as this depends upon a significant number of scholars interested in making their academic work accessible to a broad reading public and a new generation of students. As editor of the volume, I would like to express my appreciation to all of the contributors—a truly international gathering of scholars—for their efforts. There is a delicate balance in a work such as this between documenting and annotating every thought and being mindful of the variety of readers who are the potential audience; thus, the number of references and endnotes has been drastically reduced but not totally eliminated, for it is in such supporting apparatus that there lies one of the sources of research directions for future generations of scholars. As well, it is notable that there clearly continues to be a need to justify many points of discussion with reference to original and secondary sources; it is perhaps indicative of the still-developing nature of Qur’anic studies that it is not possible to assume an agreed-upon core of basic data and interpretation that would simplify much of the documentation in a volume such as this.

In an attempt to eliminate some of the “clutter” that is often associated with academic work, the bibliographical references for each chapter have been consolidated into one overall bibliography at the end of the volume. The exercise of compiling this bibliography has been, for the editor, and for the publisher’s copy-editor as well, a task made all the more complex because of the lack of standard editions of many works of constant reference in the field—an aspect aggravated by the loose control over the reprinting of works by different publishers in many parts of the Arab world who make no reference to the source of the original print and who often times use slightly variant page numbering even in direct reprints of a text; thus, for some items in the bibliography, several prints will be listed because these are the ones available to individual writers and only seldom has it been possible to consolidate different editions. The situation does not exist solely with reprints of Arabic texts in the Arab world, although it certainly affects that area far more extensively; the record of the European publishing project of the Encyclopedia of Islam is equally complex, although the correlations between the multiple versions of that work are at least somewhat more straightforward. For ease of citation, all references to the Encyclopedia of Islam New Edition (= second edition) in this book have been reduced to EL2 (2004) meaning the CD-ROM version which is a direct reproduction of the printed work in English which appeared in twelve volumes (plus supplements) between 1954 and 2004 (and which is now also available in a Web version). The now emerging third edition appears to be planned under English head words, so no correlation with that edition will likely be possible.

References to the Qur’an are cited generally in the format “Q site number: âya number,” numbered according to what is commonly called the Cairo text. Dates are generally cited in the format “Hijri/Gregorian” unless otherwise indicated.