On the Rise and Meaning of Islamic Calligraphy

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The emergence of Arabic calligraphy was a key event in the history of Islamic civilisation. Until the Qur’anic revelation, the Arabs had had a predominantly oral culture, with poetry as its main artistic expression. Within decades of the rise of Islam, a new empire emerged which placed script at the heart of its identity, creating an art profoundly distinct from the age old iconographies of Byzantium and Sassanian Iran, yet able to stand on a par with them. The principles that guided the emergence of Arabic calligraphy – geometry and proportion – were an intellectual legacy of the classical era, but one which was assimilated and deeply transformed in the Umayyad period. Having been established in this period, the angular scripts commonly known as ‘Kufic’ flourished for about two centuries, until their demise by the modern styles of writing still in use today.

Before Islam, the cultural sphere of the Arabs extended far to the north of the Arabian Peninsula, into the desert areas between Syria and Iraq. In the peninsula itself, most of the population lived a nomadic life based on tribal allegiances, although there were also cities of modest size, such as Makkah and Yathrib (later known as Madinah). Poetry was highly valued as the foremost art form and the cement of Arab identity. Writing, on the other hand, was only occasionally used for votive or proclamatory inscriptions carved onto rocks in the desert, and also possibly for correspondence on such portable documents as papyri. When they did write in those early days, the Arabs did so in a variety of scripts associated with the local language of prestige: for example, South Arabian in some extant inscriptions at Qaryat al-Faw, between the Yemen and the Hijaz; Dadanitic in Dedan; and, at the northern frontier of the peninsula, Nabataean.

Nabataean is the written form of the Aramaic dialect of Petra. The oldest documented instance of this script being used to write Old Arabic, the ancestor of Qur’anic Arabic, occurs in an inscription written on a stone slab at Namara, in southern Syria, in 328 A.D. in the name of ‘Imru’ al-Qays, king of all the Arabs.” By the 6th century, this strain of the Nabataean script had considerably developed and appears to have supplanted all scripts in the north of the Arabian Peninsula. This process gave rise to what we know as the ‘Arabic’ script – strictly speaking, a late offshoot of Nabataean. In the century that preceded Islam, the desert areas to the north of the Hijaz were controlled by two rival dynasties: in the West, the Ghassanids, who were allies of Byzantium; and in the East, the Lakhmids, who acted as proxies of the Sassanian Empire in its dealings with the Arabs. The letter shapes which had developed on the basis of the Nabataean script were given an unforeseen calligraphic character in this period under the influence of Syriac – a major liturgical language which, like Nabataean, was an Aramaic dialect, this time originating in Edessa (modern Urfa), in the north of Greater Syria (bilad al-sham) – two major aspects of this transformation – the ligatures that join the letters at the base and the slant of the tall letters to the right – are attested in 6th century inscriptions. We can infer from context that a third feature, the use of diacritical marks to differentiate letters with the same shape, may well have sprung from the same source in the same period, although its earliest documented instances date to the early years of the Muslim Hijra.

The revelation of the Qur'an profoundly transformed the relationship of the Arabs to the written language. At first, according to Muslim tradition, the revelation was recited by the Prophet to his companions, who memorised it and transmitted it to others. But with the death of Muhammad and the gradual disappearance of the first generation of Muslims came the risk of losing parts of the sacred text and of eventually corrupting its content. This prompted the urgent task of collecting the Qur'an, which began under the impulse of Abu Bakr and 'Umar, before 'Uthman issued an official recension of the text which he sent to the amirs, the major capitals of the empire. The earliest documents that can be used to document this process are stone inscriptions and administrative texts written on papyri; the former often express a pious thought of the engraver, as in the pre-Islamic period, though several also have a historical content. The earliest dated papyri were written in Egypt in 22 A.H. / 643 A.D. (figure 1); the earliest inscription was recently discovered in the region of Hegra (Mada'in Salih) and dates to 24/645.

The oldest manuscripts of the Qur'an – called ‘Hijazi’ in modern scholarship, even though many of them were probably not made in the Hijaz – are key witnesses to the genesis of Arabic calligraphy. Their date has been a subject of controversy in modern scholarship, but thanks to the discovery of new documents from the first decades of Islam and to our better understanding of the transformation of Arabic script under the Umayyads, it is becoming increasingly clear that the vast majority of these Qur’ans were written in the first century of Islam. The study of these manuscripts reveals a process whereby scribes faced with the urgent challenge of creating books – a complex process involving several technical choices, from the treatment of parchment to the preparation of ink, ruling and quires – borrowed existing techniques from a variety of age-old manuscript traditions of the Middle East, such as Greek, Syriac and Coptic.

The Umayyad period marked a profound transformation of the Muslim polity. From a loose confederation of tribes bound together by the charisma of its leaders, it moved towards a centralised state apparatus ruled by a strong administration which could directly control its territories and levy tax on a regular basis, rather than to receive ad-hoc tribute. This strengthening of the state was accompanied by the first major public statements of the new faith in the visual sphere. The earliest witness of this process is the Dome of the Rock, built in 70/692 on Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Upon entering the building, the eye meets mosaic inscriptions from the reign of 'Abd al-Malik (685-705) that reveal a dramatically altered type of Arabic script: a new sense of regularity and harmony is immediately apparent, all of the main letter shapes having been brought down to simple
the third (5:4), fourth (4:3), fifth (3:5) and octave (2:1) which are at the basis of consonance in sound.

In this perspective, the well-proportioned object will have a profound harmonising influence on the soul, in the same way that music is able to touch us through the sense of hearing. This view of the universe as a cosmic, and therefore a sense perception was deeply ingrained in Ancient thought and it came to represent one of the cornerstones of classical architecture, as notably attested in the Ten Books on Architecture by Vitruvius (1st century B.C.).

The same principles were still at the basis of the craft in late antiquity, when churches and basilicas came to replace temples and public baths as the main public buildings of cities. The Dome of the Rock was a direct heir to this Late Antique architectural tradition; it seems, in turn, that the late 7th century witnessed an astonishing creative moment that led to the transposition of the same principles to the craft of the scribe working with pen and parchment. Soon, the discussions of these principles initiated in the Classical era found a continuation in the earliest Arabic scientific writings, starting towards the end of the 2nd century A.H. (8th century A.D.).

The reformed script was spread to a wide variety of media in a period which spans the reigns of 'Abd al-Malik and his son al-Walid, the builder of the Great Mosque of Damascus. Coinage is a good example of this process. Although by their tiny size, coins stand in the sharpest possible contrast to inscriptions, they were a very effective way for a central administration to propagate public statements, as they could reach all strata of society and distant geographical confines. In the Byzantine and Sassanian realms, coins had been adorned with potent religious and imperial imagery for centuries before Islam. For a few years, 'Abd al-Malik attempted to create a competing iconography along the same lines. But in 778/9, these experiments were abandoned; all figural imagery was removed and replaced by Qur'anic verses in Arabic script (as in the coin of figure 3, which belongs to the Al-Sabah Collection). A few years later, the feared Umayyad governor of Iraq and the East, al-Hajjaj, perfected the script on the coins issued at his mint of Wasit according to the geometrical principles devised a decade earlier at the Dome of the Rock. In the same period, the Umayyads also used it on milestones placed on major roads of Syria and Palestine, again in a gesture of symbolic appropriation of their territory.

The codified version of the Arabic script was thus spread from the monumental to the minute in a process of transformation that was nothing short of revolutionary. Naturally, Qur'anic manuscripts were also part of this process, as attested by several recently discovered examples which all share a large size and architectural decorations that closely resonate with Umayyad monuments (figure 4). The cornerstones of what later came to be known as the 'Kufic' tradition had been laid, in an integrated aesthetic whereby the inscriptions on the walls of mosques were reflected in the calligraphy of monumental Qur'ans and whereby the architectural decoration of buildings found a carving image in the illumination of manuscripts.

Having thus been established under Umayyad patronage, the 'Kufic' tradition continued to grow and diversify for a period of almost two centuries. Seventeen different styles of Kufic calligraphy have been identified by modern scholars; the extremely precise definition of each letter shape calls to mind the workings of a modern typeface. Hundreds of thousands of Qur'anic folios in this tradition survive, and these present fundamental witnesses of the classical period of Islamic civilisation, the Abbasid 8th and 9th centuries. In the 10th century, this angular aesthetic of the script started to converge with the more cursive scripts that had hitherto been separately used for secular handwriting. This process culminated with the rise of an accomplished form of cursive script based on a simplified set of geometrical and proportional rules. The most significant witness of this new phase is the Qur'an completed in 1000 A.D. in Baghdad by Ibrāhīm al-Bawwab, perhaps the most famous calligrapher in the Islamic tradition (figure 5). Here, the principles that had governed earlier calligraphy have been reformulated to allow a more natural flow of the hand, swifter writing and economy. A new epoch was dawning, but one with roots plunging deep into a past in which the Qur'anic page became a meaningful reflection of the harmonious order of the universe.
About the journal

Hadeeth ad-Dar is a publication of the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah. Every year, the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah organises a series of lectures known as the Cultural Season. Hadeeth ad-Dar was created to share these lectures with academic and cultural institutions and Friends of the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah around the world. Cultural Season 16 got underway in October 2010 and, as with previous years, is presenting scholars in a wide variety of fields related to arts and culture in the Islamic world.

The Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah (DAI) is a government cultural organisation based on a Kuwaiti private art collection. Since its inception in 1983, DAI has grown from a single focus organisation created to manage the loan of the prestigious al-Sabah Collection of art from the Islamic world to the State of Kuwait to become an internationally recognised cultural organisation.

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BuGARAN BANK
L.N.S. 320 HS
Dish carved from nephrite jade
(light greyish green with white blotches)
Height 20 mm; diameter 176 mm
India, probably Delhi;
2nd - 3rd quarter 17th century AD
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