PRESENTING THE MANUSCRIPT

A. Fedeli

MINGANA AND THE MANUSCRIPT OF MRS. AGNES SMITH LEWIS, ONE CENTURY LATER

Leaves from Three Ancient Qur’ans, Possibly Pre-Uthmanic

While Cambridge University Press was printing one of many articles about Oriental studies — Horse Guards were manoeuvring in front of Buckingham Palace and Uhlans were parading through the streets of Berlin — who could even have the slightest suspicion that when the article was published, once again through the air of Europe the words of the Poet would be heard:

Dil furling un tunno e un son di tube
E un incalcar di cavalli accorventi
Scopriti su gli elmi s’emorboni.

The article I am writing about is “Leaves from Three ancient Qur’ans, Possibly Pre-Uthmanic, with a List of Their Variants”, edited by Alphonse Mingana and Agnes Lewis Smith [1]. In this article, in a preface by Agnes Lewis and an introduction by Alphonse Mingana, the authors were giving news about a palimpsest, whose scriptio inferior, containing part of the Qur’anic text, was written with three principal kinds of script: Qur’an A, Qur’an B and Qur’an C.

Mingana reported a list of the various readings, omissions and interpolations he found in comparison with the established textus receptus of the Qur’an and the full transcription of the Qur’anic text of the scriptio inferior of Qur’an C.

From al-Mawsil (Mosul) to Birmingham

It is necessary a flashback. In his youthful years, Mingana had wrecked his career and lost his reputation in scientific studies.

Born [5] of Chaldean parents in Iraq, he studied in a seminary in Mosul, from 1891 to 1902, following in the footsteps of his father. After eight years of teaching, he had to leave the seminary in 1910. The following period is totally obscure and, after having broken off relations with his Church, he left Mosul on January 1913. After travelling two months in Persia and the Ottoman Empire, on 17 March 1913 Alphonse Mingana left Iraq and a friend of his had given him a single address, that of Rendel Harris [6] in Birmingham. He arrived at the end of the month and he was the manuscript, with the parallel textus receptus, together with these pictures of the manuscript.

Some years later, in 1937, Arthur Jeffery in his work [2] collecting the variant readings of the Qur’anic text, wrote that there was not any direct manuscript evidence of these variants. His “Materials” are only quotations, a reconstruction derived from the literature on the readings. The evidence of the manuscript belonging at that time to Agnes Lewis, seems to have been completely snubbed, except a small note:

“It was at first thought that Dr. Mingana’s find in the palimpsest leaves published by him in 1914, ‘Leaves from three Ancient Qur’ans Possibly Pre-Uthmanic, with a List of Their Variants’, might provide us with fragments of one of these early Codices. Closer examination, however, has shown that neither they nor the curious variants found by him in Syria in a MS of BanuBih [3], have any relation to the text of these Old Codices with which we are here concerned’” [4].

While the scholar complained about the absence of evidence of variant readings, at the same time he seems to be biased towards the palimpsest of Mrs. Lewis. Why the variants that Mingana compared and noticed are “curious”?

[1] This manuscript is available at the Oriental Institute Library, University of Chicago.


the 44 leaves that contained an Arabic under script. The story goes on with the words of Mrs. Lewis:

"As he turned its pages I was suddenly startled by the question, 'What are you doing with sic in the Qur'ān?'" Because they are rare,' I replied, 'and I can show you where I got them.'" [10]

Mingana could see the manuscript, the famous "Leaves from a 13th-century Qur'ān" and afterward published his study. The preface of Mrs. Lewis is dated May 14th, the introduction of Mingana as well, about one year of the original manuscript in Great Britain. How could he have to answer the Orientalist scholars to this new study about the finding of variant readings of the Qur'ānic text in a palimpsest?

One must go further back to the situation before the English period of Mingana, before publishing his study about the palimpsest:

In 1905 Mingana published the works of Narsai [11] in Syriac, whose purpose was to be a reading book for Chaldean priests. In the Latin preface Mingana included an account of the discovery of the manuscript by Haghi Baba. Jean-Baptiste Chabot translated this part in French with a commentary, observing a few contradiction in the text itself. The reply of Mingana against Chabot and his notes about the authenticity of the text was terrible and virile [12]. Two years later, in 1907, Addai Scher published the edition of the same manuscript in his whole work. Another supposed forgery by the Mingana asthma suspicion on his whole work.

Supposed another forgery caused general scandal among the scholars: the manuscript containing the Chronicles of Arbele, of 8th century [13]. Mingana taught to the priest Abraham Shawkana of Alkho to make the velum older [14] by putting it in the oven.

These were the two serious and weighty episodes before 1914 and after, in which the manuscript was not a book of Qurrani.

The consequence was that no scholar [15] believed in the words that Mingana wrote in his introduction to "Leaves from Three Ancient Qur'āns". How could it be possible to hold to be real the readings variants "found" in the Qur'ānic text by Mingana? The suspicion of textual manipulation for his own benefits, omissions and interpolations, was dreadful and the following step was that nobody believed in the manuscript and in the Qur'ānic text of the scriptio inferior.

The Story of the Manuscript

The manuscript bought by Mrs. Agnes Smith Lewis from the Arabic antiquary in Suez, during her third journey in Egypt in 1895, is a palimpsest. The manuscript contained 162 folios [16], bound in 22 quires, in the first of them (the bristoli folios 114, 11, 14, 15), it was inserted the following 15 quires. In the scriptio superior Mrs. Lewis could read a few homilies of early Christian Fathers, written in Arabic, while the material recyled by the scribe came from different manuscripts [17].

When Mrs. Lewis realised that the scriptio inferior was hiding various texts, among which a Syriac writing, in which she was specialised, she took the old manuscript to pieces by cutting out the cord which held its several quires together and smoothed out the pages, with natural reluctance — she admitted — and bit by bit she unbound the book.

The Arabic quires [18] are:

Qur'ān IV: fol. 13–20 of the Arabic writing. The quire is the equivalent of present-day pages set within strong paper rolls. The under writing has been identified by Mingana as Qur'ān B. It contains the portion of the Qur'ān text 13:18–43; 14:1–18; 15:85–99; 16:1–41/39.


Qur'ān XIV: fol. 95–102 of the Arabic writing. The quire is the equivalent of present-day pages 56–59. The under writing has been identified as Qur'ān B. Its content is 16:117/116–128, 17:1–57/55.

Qur'ān XV: does not contain the original leaves being the present page 34–35.

One odd feuillet: fol. 103, between the two quires XIV and XV, equivalent to current page 60. The other half of the biffelleaux, i.e. of the original Qur'ān leaf is missing. The scriptio inferior has been identified as Qur'ān C. It contains 7:158–168/169, originally ensuing page 33.


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Part of quire XXI: the two middle bifolleaux (folios 149–152) of the quaternion (folios 147–154). The biffelleaux is the equivalent of present-day page pages 89–90. The under writing has been identified as Qur'ān A, containing 40:78–85, 41:1–20/21 and 44:38–59, 45:1–20/21.


The leaves of the Qur'ānic text which had been erased and recycled, were re-written perpendicularly to the older script, and assembled in new quires of a smaller size: they were folded in half and some of them were cut out (e.g. biffelleaux 152–154). The Qur'ānic leaves had not been reused in the Arabic Christian homilies in the same order as the original. For example the two new pages numbered as 32 and 61 on paper, in origin were in sequence one following the other, containing 9:38–35 and 9:35–59. Afterwards, when they were recycled for the Arabic Christian homilies, they got the place of

The Forgotten Manuscript

Most scholars did not trust the authenticity of the palimpsest named after Mingana and suspected that the text and the list of variants could be a forgery and a manipulation, like Mingana had probably already done in the years of his youth.

The last quire of the manuscript was written by Mingana, becoming the text itself and the manuscript — the palimpsest — with all its traces of an old Qur'ānic text, was formed.

Recently in his book about the history of the Qur'ānic text, in the chapter dedicated to "Mingana’s Attempted Distortion of the Qur’ān", Al-A’lamī wrote:

"Prof. Rev. Mingana, held by some as ‘a great scholar of Arabic’, has in fact a shabby group of the subject at best" [24].

I have to suppose that the criticism towards Mingana is not supported by direct observation of the manuscript.

Last spring I made a trip to Cambriedge where I was kindly allowed to study the manuscript. Even after a first examination it was possible to see that sometimes the critiques to the reading of Mingana were found.

Mingana lists the Qur’ānic variants and number 12 of the second group is lā yahūd il-ḥumān (instead of the standard text lā yahūd il-ḥumān (9:37; MS 60a, 1.8, p. 32a). The notes of Al-A’lamī are:

"It is no secret that early scripts occasionally dropped vowels (ı, ı̂, ā,  ā) in their copies, and here the writer dispensed with the final vowel in yahūdī because it is silent. Once again Mingana takes advantage, this time through an audaciously ludicrous transposition. He separates the alf from il-ḥumān and places it after lā yahūdī, creating a new unsympathetic gloss that is benevolent of all meaning. This is analogically to taking the phrase ‘tigers hunting’ and converting it to ‘tiger shunting’" [25].

The reading of Mingana is absolutely wrong, but it is not necessary to criticize "linguistic gymnastics" with more enthusiasm. The Qur’ānic text of Mingana separates the alf from il-ḥumān and places it after lā yahūdī, but the reason is not the Arabic orthography during the early centuries of Islam. Mingana simply did not see the yā’ before al-qāmūs, therefore places the alf of the article of the following word instead of the yā’. In 2005, using an ultraviolet lamp, it is possible to read lā yahūdā il-qāmūs, with no variants.

After a first examination of the variants reported by Mingana, sometimes we can confirm the readings of the scholar, sometimes the transcription is unfounded [28], and sometimes the manuscript is unreadable [27].

The inevitable and easy conclusion is that all the transcription can be suspected to be wrong [28], in the light of the simply means used by Mingana at the beginning of the last century to read the palimpsest. In regard to the variants of the palimpsest, it should be remarked the words written in 1938:

"noch sind einige ihrer Lesungen unlauter unhart. So bedarf die Ausgabe einer Nachprüfung von sachverständiger Seite" [29].

Scholar has never greeted this invitation. It is my intention to re-examine all the text and its transcription [30] and to publish this manuscript itself to tell its story.

Nowadays, in our wasteful society, we have sadly lost the idea of use and recycle, but an object can tell its story by means of the use, waste and reuse it has gone through in its life [31] and we have to listen to its story.
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comprendre le syriaque qu'a coupé de dictionnaire" (Samtš, op. cit., pp. 8--12). Al-Aʿram speaks about blunders, incompetence, incredible dishonesty, inability to read, trick and creativity.


26. Among the not verified variants we can note from the first group:
1. Not verified;
2. Not verified;
3. Not verified;
4. Not read the standard wa-rajim" (7:153) and not the reading of Mimgana;
5. Not verified.

From the second group of variants:
1. Verified;
2. Verified;
3. Verified;
4. Verified;
5. Unreadable;
6. Verified;
7. Unreadable;
8. Unreadable;
9. Verified;
10. We can read the standard ši-lāma (9:36), not the reading of Mimgana;
11. Not verified;
12. We can read the standard reading šā-yahū al-qāʻiṣam (9:37);
13. Verified;
14. Unreadable;
15. Verified;
16. Unreadable;
17. Verified;
18. Verified;
19. Verified;
20. Verified (see on the contrary the critique of Al-Aʿram, op. cit., p. 313, "the same trick is employed here, though with something more sophisticated"). He wrote about tampering and creatively addition of Mimgana;
21. Verified (probably the variant is not šā-‘ala, i. e. the passive voice, but šā-‘ala with the script of long vowel with ya’); see A. Fe dell, "Early Evidence of Variant Reading in Qur’anic Manuscripts", Die zehnten Anfgnge, ed. by K. H. Ohlig and G. R. Pius (Berlin, 2005), pp. 291–316;
22. Unreadable;
23. Unreadable;
24. We can read the standard šā-yahū al-qā‘iṣam (16:93) and not the reading of Mimgana;
25. Not verified;
26. Unreadable;
27. Unreadable;
28. Unreadable;
29. We can read the standard hádi (16:28) and not the reading of Mimgana;
30. Verified.

From the third group of variants, i.e. omission from the personal point of view of Mimgana of the "pre-Ulāmī Text", the reading is verified.

From the fourth group, i.e. interpolations — from the same point of view:
A. Not verified;
B. Not verified;
C. We can read the standard text with hisar" repeated twice (9:36).

I am writing for the digital photographs, hoping to see easily the under writing.

28. For example, while I was checking the variant number 17 (17:1) of the second group (Mimgana, Smith Lewis, op. cit., p. XXXVIII), I could notice the previous word al-āqāṣ with final alif, whereas Mimgana transcribed it al-āqāṣ with alif maqṣūr.


30. We trust that this manuscript will be published in the Series Sources de la transmission manuscrite du texte coranique. The first published volume is "Les manuscrits de style bâyi’ī: 1. Le manuscrit arabe 328(A) de la Bibliothèque nationale de France" (Leba, 1998) and the second one is "Les manuscrits de style bâyi’ī: 2. Le manuscrit Or. 2165 (f. 1 et 6) du Musee d'Art Islamique" (Leba, 2001).

31. In the same way marmalde preservation (see the story of Curzon about the finding of the manuscript in 11th century, containing the Book of Revelation, for covering marmalde preservations and cut off with a knife, L. Decel, op. cit.) or slipped butter (about the discovery of the psalms of the Gospel of St. Mark by Mrs. Agnes Lewis and the slab of butter slipped by the monks on a graubly old fragment of manuscript, see A. Whigham Price, op. cit., pp. 8–9) can reveal great stories about vellums.
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