THE QUR'AN AND POWER IN RUSSIA: I - MANUSCRIPT

Archival materials indicate that the Qur’an was included in the personal libraries of such Russian Tsars as Ivan the Terrible (1530–1584), Peter the Great (1672–1725), and Catherine II (1727–1796). The fate of publications, translations, and rare manuscripts of the Qur’an was also bound up with the personal decisions of the supreme rulers of Russia. As in the East the Sacred Text have been widely used by the local powers for the purposes of both inner and foreign politics. The history of most important Qur’anic manuscripts can only prove this statement [1].

Recently there has been increased interest in the ancient manuscripts of the Qur’an and a particularly interesting part of them — the group of manuscripts called “the Qur’ans of ‘Uthman”. This topic was actively discussed in Cairo during unprecedented meetings between European and Egyptian specialists organized by Professor Sergio Noya Noseda in 2006 and 2007. It was reflected in a recently published article by Professor Noya [2]. An article on “the Qur’ans of ‘Uthman” circulated in Arabic Spain and Northern Africa is being prepared by Professor David James [3].

The manuscripts in question are among the most ancient. They are seriously damaged, and frequently damaged no less than those which were regularly removed from circulation in the 2nd and 3rd centuries AH. In most cases, these copies made their way to special repositories in large mosques where they slowly decayed. They could also be “buried” with a special ritual [4]. However, the manuscripts we are discussing now were preserved. Why? Firstly, at the turn of the 9th and 10th centuries AD, evidently those Qur’anic copies were preserved which corresponded to the jum’ah canon adopted for that time [5], and secondly, they began to be seen as a symbol of supreme power equal to the kharita of the Prophet, and there is numerous evidence of this. Dr. David James has found a reference to the Qur’anic manuscript attributed to ‘Uthman which shows that it was in Cordova around 870. All other references to it date from after 1150. While working on the “history” of it — how and why it came to Cordova — he found reference to another “Qur’an of ‘Uthman” which belonged to Ibn al-Ahmarr, the founder of the Kingdom of Granada and which he gave as a present to the Almohad sultan. The Cordova manuscript was lost when the ship carrying it from Tunis to Morocco sank in the 14th century.

In 1243, the EgyptianutmahBaybars sent the kham of the Golden Horde Berke a letter of “accession to citizenship and subjugation” [6]. Soon the Egyptian ambassadors brought presents to the Horde: clothes of honour, a throne inerected with ebony, ivory and silver and the “Qur’an of ‘Uthman”. The book was bound in red satin embroidered with gold and placed in a case of dark red leather padded with silk. Additionally, a stand (lawh) for the Qur’an was sent, which like the throne was encrusted with ebony, ivory and silver [7]. It is not difficult to notice that insignia were sent from Egypt to the Horde [8]. Surprisingly enough, in sources connected with the Golden Horde we do not find another line about this unique relic and symbol of power. Today, however, it is obvious that the history of this manuscript did not end with the demise of the Golden Horde. The facts show that this copy continued to have the status of a symbol of power for several centuries to follow. Its history is linked with the name of Timur, and subsequently with the names of “religious masters” — famous šijah cheliks. But all this will be discussed in its turn.

For several years I was studying two Qur’anic MSS, which were veneered by the Muslims of Central Asia as “Qur’ans of ‘Uthman” [9]. The analysis of the historical sources shows that both MSS were preserved as the most valuable sacred relics and were transmitted inside the structure of šijah brotherhoods.

The history of the first one, so-called “Samargand šijah Qur’an” had been studied in detail, but only since early 15th century. Nobody ever has written a line on the history of the MS before this date. It is well known that for decades it was one of the most important relics belonging to the Naqshbandiya Brotherhood. Existing traditions insist that its appearance in Mā warāʾal-nahr is connected with the name of Khāji ‘Ahrār (1404–1490) one of the most prominent religious and political leaders of the region of Timurid times. He was incontestable authority. He brought up Timurid princes, was in friendly correspondence with such famous poets as Nawai’ and Jami’. Khāji ‘Ahrār was an influential political figure and one of the richest persons of his time. The rise of Naqshbandiya influence both in Mā warāʾal-nahr and beyond its frontiers as well as

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Naqibbandiyya active political and economical activities are connected with the name of this person [10]. According to the local legendary tradition the MS once belonged to "Caliph of Rûm", Mu'izz of Kha'ja Ahrar received it as a payment for miraculous healing of the Caliph. Some even believe that the lines of Kha'ja Ahrar's baraka he possessed. The MS was brought to Kha'ja Ahrar, kept firstly in Tabrîz and then in Samarqand.

According to A. I. Khaz'în, great Russian 19th century authority in the Central Asian history and MSS tradition, it belonged to the MSS treasuries brought to the region by Timur. After the acquisition of the MSS by Russians in 1869 Khaz'în had the possibility to show it to local connoisseur, certain Yalâ'î Kha'ja. According to the latter the sacred copy was the only remainder of the book texts collapsed by Timur in Samarqand. It was the best embellishment and brought by Timur himself [11].

In April of 1391 in the battle at the river Kundurqan Khvârî defeated the army of the Golden Horde. His warriors ransacked the whole Low Volga region and Surîy-Bîtu, capital of the Golden Horde and obtained fantastic loot [12]. We have every reason to believe that Timur brought to Samarqand the sacred copy once delivered to the Golden Horde from Egypt. It embodied the power of Mamûl sultans of Bahîrî dynasty, that of Golden Horde rulers and Timurids who passed it to Naqîbîndîyya brotherhood. The MS played an important role in the rise of authority of Naqîbîndîyya led by Khwâ'îja Ahrar.

As for the second MS its history was revealed only recently (fig. 1). Starting from the end of the 15th and beginning of the 16th century it belonged to the "Ishâ'îyya" brotherhood. In the times we are speaking about previously unlimited Timurid power was growing weaker and weaker. On the contrary the position of Muhammad Shâyyâbî Kûshî (d. 1510) consolidated one day after another. Shâyyâbî Kûshî prepared the conquest of Mâ warî al-nahr and was in search of the ally which could be composed with Khwâ'îja Ahrar and the brotherhood the latter was dominating. It is hardly a coincidence that Shâyyâbî Kûshî, on seizing Samarqand in 1500, confiscate the vast fortune of Khwâ'îja Ahrar's family and destroyed his sons. At that time, the "Ishâ'îyya" brotherhood and its "shâ'îyya" quickly gained influence economic and economic power. Among their "murtîs" were many representatives of the Turkic clan nobility and "Ishâ'îyya" played an active role in political events. It was then that they began constructing the costly mosques and mausoleums. The fall of the Shâyyâbîs reduced the influence of the "Ishâ'îyya" to ail, once again affirming the tie between them.

Russian specialist in Central Asian history A. A. Semenov described in detail this interesting period in the history of Central Asia and analysed the most important sources connected with it. A. A. Semenov writes about the fierce struggle between the "shâ'î" brotherhoods characteristic of Mâ warî al-nahr at the time [13].

But we are going back to the turn of the Eighteenth — sixteenth centuries. The "Ishâ'îyya" retreated farther from Samarqand, the realm of Khwâ'îja Ahrar, and closer to Afganistan, with which they already had ties. The alliance with the Shâhîdîs was probably formed at that time. Shâyyâbî Kûshî was personally familiar with these places, visited them several times, and was building a palace in Qazvîn.

In 1513, the "Uzbeks" who had by then occupied northern Khurasân and Balkh were compelled to "cleanse" the areas they had conquered. Sulṭân Ubed Allâh resettled the residents of Marv to Bakûtîr, and Shâyyâbî Kûshî resettled the residents of Balkh, Shâbûrgan and Andizkhan, a region in northern Afganistan inhabited by Arabs, to his domain on the other side of the Amû-Darî. Documents show that the migrants needed a patron in their new location; moreover, the concept of "shâ'îyya" (payment for care) existed.

In the traditional tale of how the mosque was built in Kafta-Langar, place where Arabs had arrived, told to me by its timâr ‘Abd al-Jabîr b. Rîhîlîm it is constantly stressed that the mosque was constructed collectively, with each of the neighboring tribes responsible for some "aspect" of the construction: preparing or delivering construction materials, providing livestock and cooking food for the builders, etc. The mosque, which they began to build only a few years after their move, was intended to unite Muslims regardless of their ethnic origins, and also to integrate the migrants into local society.

Arabic resettlers [14] appealed "Ishâ'îyya" for support and the ancient copy of the Qur’ân as well as the other relics brought by them were the "payment for care". Probably among the items they brought there were also such significant items as a "kashîf", a string of yellow rosary beads which allegedly belonged to Muhammad himself; "maw'ir" mawâdir, sacred hairs from the beard of Muhammad; and, finally, a "khâra" or "jânsâ-khâra", which was also supposed to have belonged to Muhammad.

The influence of a brotherhood and its "shâ'îyya" was to a great extent determined by the presence of sacred relics, which were intended to confirm their presence the traditions that accompanied the history of the sîlâs. It was the violence struggle among Timurids and Shâhîdîs. Naqîbîndîyya was the ally of the first, "Ishâ'îyya" — of the second. Both brotherhoods used the relics they had as the banner in this struggle. Ancient Qur'anic MSS became important argument in the political struggle. Their careful preservation guaranteed the result. We think that it was this mechanism that protected several earliest Qur'anic MSS.

I have written frequently of the important role played by "shâ'î" teachings and their adepts in the development and emergence of that multi-faced phenomenon in mankind's cultural history designated in brief by the word "Qur’în". This includes development of principles for the allegorical interpretation of the text. The latter served as the basis of hundreds of works which make up an important element of Islamic religious culture. The specific features of "shâ'î" teachings were directly reflected in how the "word of Allah" was used in religious practice, in the physical appearance of Qur'anic manuscripts and works of Qur'anic-related literature. The world-outlook of "shâ'î" brotherhoods acted as a catalyst for the broad penetration
of fragments of the Qur’anic text into ordinary life as a belief in the magical power of the “Sword of Allah” led to the frequent appearance of dīwān and fragments on weaponry, jewellery, pottery, and fabric. Today we can speak of yet another important element in the system of relations between the Qur’an and Shi‘ism. By this we mean the religious and cultural paradigm connected with the preservation of extremely ancient copies as the sacred relics of šī‘ī brotherhoods. By their very existence, these manuscripts, which preserved the most ancient layer of the Sacred text’s history, were intended to confirm the traditional histories of specific sīliṣan, affirm the authority of their šaykhāt, attract new adepts, and awaken religious enthusiasm in believers. In our view, this explains the phenomenon known as the “Qur’an of ‘Uṯmān”, at least two of them venerated by Central Asian Muslims. Only the study of the other ancient Qur’anic copies which were in use throughout all the centuries of their existence can help us to confirm or to refute the hypothesis.

The history of ‘Īṣāqiyya manuscript spans at least twelve centuries, a remarkable tale bound up with the fates of dynasties and states, cities and people, the fate of Islamic civilization from its emergence in Arabia in the seventh century to the triumph of Islam, which survived and outlasted communism in the Muslim republics of the former USSR [15].

We can see that the “Qur’an of ‘Uṯmān” remained symbols of power over centuries. Undoubtedly, bringing the Samanid relics to St. Petersburg also had symbolic significance. This was confirmed by the relocation to Russia of supreme power over Turkmén. The governor general of Turkmén at the time, von Kaufmann, saw to this personally. It was also planned to send a giant stone stand (kiyaf) to the capital of the empire. The kiyaf stood in the courtyard of the Bāb Khānūm mosque and was once used as a pedestal for another Qur’an symbolizing power that was created by order of Timur.

Fifty copies of the “Samanid ‘Irāf Qur’an” were published in St. Petersburg as a ceremonial present from Russia to the Muslim neighbours of the empire — a present which emphasized the power of the “white emperor” (fig. 2). The handing over of the manuscript to Muslims in 1918 was also a symbolic gesture, and carried out on direct orders from Lenin (fig. 3). This meant the handing over of part of power in exchange for participation in the “revolutionary project”. “Moscow is the new Mecca; it is the Medina of all repressed peoples”, was declared in 1921 by the Scientific Association of Russian Orientalists. In reality, the manuscript only reached Muslims (the Religious Administration of Muslims in Tashkent) after Uzbekistan gained independence [16].

Finally, before the Russian president’s visit to Saudi Arabia (February 2007), a Qur’an was made in Russia on thin gold plates costing “three of millions of rubles”. 14 kg of triple-nine gold was used in the manufacture of the “book” (163 gold pages around 14 cm high and around 10 cm wide) at the Russian Mint. A copy of the manuscript which was once passed around the ‘Īṣāqiyya brotherhood and is now held in Russia was used. Russia is a world power with a Muslim population of many millions, whose relics and traditions are genuinely respected and honoured — this is the meaning of the Golden Qur’an (fig. 4).

Notes
1. The articles “The Qur’an and power in Russia. II: publication” and “The Qur’an and power in Russia. III: translation” will be published in *Manuscripta Orientalia* 1 and 2 (2008).
3. Planned for publication in the *Manuscripta Orientalia* journal.
10. From the fifteenth century on, we see the increasing involvement of ši‘ī brotherhoods in political processes. The descendants of Sa‘īd al-Dīn al-Arkhīlī (d. 1334), founder of the Saffwīya brotherhood which gave rise to powerful religious movements, established control over the main territories of Persia, founded the Saffwī dynasty and proclaimed Twelver Shi‘ism the state religion. Ismā‘īl I, the founder of the dynasty, transferred his power to the Great Deput of the head of the order. Members of the Ni‘mat-Allahiyah order, closely connected with the Saffawīs, headed a number of provinces in the new state. At practically the
same time, the Naqshbandiya order gained control over significant territories in India, Afghanistan and Central Asia. Brotherhoods professing a mixed Shi’a/Sunni doctrine began to play an even greater role on the enormous territory from the Balkans to Persia.

11. B. V. Lumin, Svedratiistö Aasia v doterelütöönomm j sovetöom vastkavendist (Central Asia in Pre-Revolutionary and Soviet Oriental Studies), (Taglikti, 1965), p. 104
14. The descendants of these people live in the South of Uzbekistan. In St. Petersburg in 2004—2005 and in Tampere (Finland) in 2006 the Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera), RAS organized an exhibition on their culture and traditions (for details see exhibition catalogue: Rezvan, Jeynov — “We arrived”, Arabs of Uzbekistan: Images of the Traditional Culture (St. Petersburg, 2004) and web-site of the exhibition at http://web1.kunstkamera.ru/jeynov/index.htm).
15. In 2006, the Museum organized an expedition to the ghulqal of Jeynov, a region with a compact Arab population. Specialists on material culture, ethnography, physical anthropology and Islam took part in the expedition. In 2005, in the St. Petersburg Branch of the Archives of the Russian Academy of Sciences an unpublished monograph by the outstanding ethnographer and specialist in Arabic linguistics Isak Vinitikov (1897—1973) was discovered. The book entitled “The Kazhka-Darya Arabs: Language, Folklore, Ethnography” is currently preparing for publication by the Museum.
16. Details see in: Rezvan, op. cit.
17. In the current political practice the Qur’an has acquired the status of a state symbol (for the swearing-in of the president in a number of states in the CIS and subjects of the Russian Federation for example). Here one can see mostly Western influence but not the “return to the Islamic roots”.

Illustrations

Fig. 1. The “Qur’an” of ‘Uthma’n”, 6:159—7:9. Parchment, 53.5 × 34 cm, hajati script. Arabia or Syria, last quarter of the 8th — beginning of the 9th century AD. SPB, E-20, fol. 13r. Illustration from the book: Rezvan, “The Qur’an of ‘Uthma’n”.

Fig. 2. Abi al-Rashid Bakhromov, Supreme Mufi of Uzbekistan and Chairman of Administration for Muslim Affairs at the same containing Qur’an of ‘Uthma’n. Taglikti, 2001. Photo by the author.

Fig. 3. Lenin’s order on handing over the “Qur’an” of ‘Uthma’n manuscript to Muslims (1918).

Fig. 4. Folio of the “Golden Qur’an” (14 × 10 cm). Copy of the fol. 13r of the “Qur’an” of ‘Uthma’n (see fig. 1) made by WT Company (Moscow).
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