WANDERINGS IN THE DESERT
Edward Henry Palmer (1840-83)

I am writing from the place itself where the murder was committed. It is a wild romantic spot, with precipices shelving down into the Sudeh Wady. When we first came... we could find nothing, but some men who went up the wady several miles in front of us came down the gully and found a bone, and then the others were found. Some of the party at least were killed or wounded before being thrown down the precipice, as there is much blood on the rocks above.

(Letter from C. Warren)

It was an assignment that was to prove fatal. In June 1882, Gladstone's government decided that an invasion of Egypt was the only way to destroy the threat to British interests represented by the Arab nationalist movement. A Cambridge man was asked to take part in a secret mission to find out the attitude of the Arab tribes in Sinai to such an attack and to attempt to detach them from their allegiance to 'Urabi Pasha, the nationalist leader. He was also to use his considerable influence with the Bedouin, backed by money, to secure the immunity of the Suez Canal from Arab attack. Who was he and how had he achieved such knowledge and influence?

Born in 1840, E.H. Palmer was a native of Cambridge. In 1860 his considerable language skills gained him a place at St John's College, where a teacher of Hindustani inspired him to study oriental languages. He made rapid progress, especially in Urdu, Persian and Arabic, and still found time as a student to use his language skills to catalogue the Persian, Arabic and Turkish manuscripts in the University Library and also those in King's and Trinity Colleges.

A fellowship at St John's enabled him to pursue his studies further and to travel. In 1867 he joined an expedition to survey the region of Sinai for the Palestine Exploration Society. Palmer's primary task was investigating the historical evidence for the Exodus story and attempting to trace the route by which the ancient Israelites had crossed the Sinai Peninsula. On a later expedition he spent eleven months walking the 600 miles from Sinai to Jerusalem, searching for inscriptions. The desert of the Exodus (1871) chronicled his wanderings and endeavoured to record the impressions which a sojourn among the scenes of the Exodus has left upon my own mind and thus... promote a more intelligent study of this most interesting portion of the sacred narrative.

Returning to Cambridge, Palmer was eventually appointed to the Lord Almoner's Chair in Arabic. He wrote a Persian dictionary, an Arabic grammar, translations of poetry and, probably the best known of his works, a translation of the Qur'an. However, even Cambridge College life can pall and Palmer abandoned his academic work to move to London to write on wider topics. It was then he was charged with Gladstone's mission. Setting out with two army officers to meet Bedouin leaders and to arrange terms of allegiance, he was led into an ambush by the guide and taken prisoner. He was shot the next day. A search party found his remains, and those of his companions, and they were brought home for burial. The mission and its grisly end later attracted widespread sympathy - and controversy - both in Britain and Egypt. Though not among the greatest of scholars in the field, Palmer was certainly one of the most romantic figures to be found among British oriental scholars.

Palmer's manuscript collection was bought from Palmer's companion and executor, C. F. Tyndall-Beale in 1878. They are all fragments of the Qur'an, usually incomplete, and often only a few pages in length, but they demonstrate a coherence of style and are among the earliest examples of Qur'an texts in the library's manuscript collections.
A WEALTH OF RELIGIOUS TEXTS

The very first Arabic manuscript ever to enter the Library's collections was a copy of the Qur'an. It was the personal copy of William Bedwell, the Cambridge Arabist and lexicographer. He donated his own Qur'an at the urging of Abraham Whelock, the University Librarian, even before the Erpenius collection came to the Library, such was Whelock's enthusiasm to develop collections in Arabic and Middle Eastern languages.

Words and writing have always had immense importance within Islamic civilization and the most significant words are the holy text of the Qur'an. Although it is an unchanging text written always in Arabic and intended for reading aloud, there are many differing styles in terms of format, historical development and cultural diversity. A very rich heritage of manuscript copies of the Qur'an survives, along with commentaries written by a long tradition of religious thinkers. Examples of prayer books and talsimans have also survived. A small selection from the impressive collection in the Library demonstrates how the Qur'an, in terms of the style of calligraphy and decoration, evolved throughout the centuries and in different geographical regions and cultures.

HJAZI SCRIPT
The earliest Qur'an manuscripts were written in the 7th and 8th centuries. One very early Qur'an text written on a single large sheet of parchment and folded in half, illustrates a primitive form of the script known as ḥijazi script that originated in the Arabian Peninsula around Mecca and Medina. It is characterized by very tall sloping letters that denote the consonants in the text only; there are few of the dots and other markings indicating pronunciation, or pauses in the reading, and little use of colours.

KUFIIC SCRIPT
The kufic Qur'ans, named because the distinctive text style is thought to have originated around Kufa in southern Iraq, date from the 9th and 10th centuries. They are written on parchment and distinguished by lettering with very short vertical and elongated horizontal strokes and a system of vowel markings that differentiate among the groups of letters otherwise identical in the script. Vowels are indicated by red or green dots and gold roundels mark the ends of the verses. The page is usually greater in width than in length.

Leaf of an early copy of the Qur'an written in ḥijazi script on parchment. (Add.1125)

This Qur'an manuscript consists of a number of leaves on parchment with large and very beautiful kufic script. The text is decorated with a number of golden circles marking the ends of chapters. Written in Kufa, this is the oldest dated Qur'an manuscript in the UK. (Add.1116)

Left: One of the finest examples in the collection is this Qur'an in Indo-Persian court style presented to the Library in 1806 by the Directors of the East India Company. It was from the Library of Tipu Sultan. The volume has several magnificent opening pages that are lavishly decorated. It dates from the 16th or early 17th century. (No.175)
EASTERN KUFIC
A variant of the kufic style can be found in Qur’ans produced slightly later around the 10th century, and from further east in Iran. These have a script with taller upright strokes and smaller strokes sloping to the left, and the page itself is longer.

NASIRI SCRIPT
From around the 10th century, the art of papermaking filtered into the Middle East from Central Asia, and Qur’ans started to be written not on parchment but on paper. These early texts were penned in a very dense, curvilinear script called naskhi, a very legible style of script that became very widely used in Arabic manuscripts.

MAGHRIBI SCRIPT
In North Africa and Iberian Spain the Qur’anic text was copied on parchment until later centuries and a local script, called maghribi, developed. The lettering has deeper and more rounded curves, and is decorated with a wider range of colours including blues and greens. The colours appear both in the body of the text as well as in the vowels.

MAMLUK QUR’ANS
From the 14th century onwards, during the rule of the Mamluks and later dynasties, there was a growth in highly ornamented Qur’ans with more developed calligraphy and richly illuminated pages. In particular, the多彩的 pages, the double-page spread at the beginning of the volume, are filled with beautiful geometric patterns and lettering in gold and other colours within a rectangular framework.

ILLUMINATED QUR’ANS
From around the 11th century there was a move towards more elaborate decoration of the script when richly decorated Qur’anic texts were produced for noble or royal patrons who wished to endow a mosque with a fine copy. Many such Qur’ans contain exquisite examples of calligraphy, illumination and binding. The art of richly illuminated Qur’anic texts spread throughout the Islamic world and there are many impressive Ottoman examples. Another finely illuminated example from the collection is a smaller, but very decorative Qur’an from the 16th century with seals of four Mughal emperors, the earliest one dated 1703.

MINIATURE QUR’ANS
With a distinctive style and decoration – not to mention their tiny size – miniature Qur’ans are too small to be easily read but are meant to be used as talismans or good-luck charms, sometimes kept in specially made boxes. These Qur’ans come in many shapes and the text is a miniature form of naskhi script called ghulbi, or有时, as the calligraphy is so fine.

AFRICAN QUR’ANS
An interesting local variant in Qur’anic style, from West Africa or Africa south of the Sahara, is that produced in loose-leaf format on paper in black ink with red and yellow ornamentation. The pages were stored between covers of rough hide and then stored in a saddlebag or satchel to take on journeys.

An example of an unbound prayer book, with text in black, red and yellow, and its carrying satchel. This style originates from the region of Saharan Africa. (Add.2251)

An illuminated Qur’an, characterized by a number of richly decorated opening pages, lavishly decorated with gold leaf. It was written by a scribe in Iran in 1840 for a princely ruler. (Add.576)

Finely decorated opening pages of a Qur’an manuscript showing many characteristics of the Mamluk style but with a commentary in Persian. (Add.338)
LAYERS ON LAYERS

The twin daughters of an Arranshire solicitor, Dr Agnes Smith Lewis and Dr Margaret Dunlop Gibson, had a taste for adventure and an intellectual curiosity that endured throughout their lives. When their father died they received a considerable legacy and in 1866, at the age of just 23, the two Victorian ladies visited Greece and Egypt. They then devoted themselves to the study of Greek, Syriac, Arabic and Hebrew, and became accomplished scholars.

Years later, in 1890, widowhood set the sisters off on their travels again, this time to St Catherine’s Monastery at Mt Sinai, where their abilities in reading the manuscripts impressed the librarian. They also made an outstanding discovery of a version of the Old Syriac Gospels, dated to the 5th century. More expeditions to the Middle East followed, and even greater discoveries were made. In 1896, they found some leaves of a Hebrew manuscript that they had purchased in the Middle East to Dr Solomon Schechter, Reader in Talmudic and Rabbinic Literature at Cambridge. His efforts to find the source of these precious manuscripts led him to Old Cairo, to the synagogue of Ben Ezra, and the discovery of the renowned Genizah collection.

Although Agnes Smith Lewis is renowned as being instrumental in the discovery of the Library’s famous collection of Genizah fragments, less well known is her foresight in purchasing other unique manuscripts. One such purchase, in 1895, was of a palimpsest written on parchment that contained some leaves of an ancient Qur’ān text. The leaves of parchment, containing several layers of texts on the same page, had in the past been scraped clean of text with a pumice stone and reused. As parchment was such a scarce resource, some pages have up to five texts.

The text on the top level, which can easily be read, is a set of homilies written in Arabic by early Christian fathers and is believed to date from the end of the 9th century or the beginning of the 10th century. The parchment had passed to Christian monks and the preceding text overwritten, the leaves folded double and then clipped to a smaller size to fit the more recent text in the 9th century. Some of the texts underneath are in Syriac and some in Arabic of the Septuagint version of the Bible in Greek.

Among the Syriac quires, there are 44 leaves of early Arabic script being cursive in the upper script, not quite either kufic or naskhi in style, but which Agnes Lewis realized were from the Qur’ān. She showed the palimpsest to her colleague Rev. Alphonse Mingana, a refugee scholar from Iraq best known for his connection with the manuscript collections at the University of Birmingham, who studied them.

These texts were identified as an early Qur’ān text containing variant words that dated from a time before the rules of Arabic grammar were properly established.

Once the Qur’ān text became fixed in its accepted form, any earlier texts were destroyed. One of the texts, dating possibly from the 8th century, contains three different styles of writing and not all are from the same original manuscript. The results of the findings by Mingana and Lewis were published in their Leaves from three ancient Qur’āns in 1914.

In 1902 Margaret Gibson had placed the manuscript with expert binders attached to the British Museum who conserved the fragile pages by setting the parchment leaves within strong paper frames and covering some of the damaged pages in a fine white gauze. Soon afterwards the manuscript was loaned for display at an international exhibition in Leipzig but it disappeared without trace at the outbreak of the First World War.

The text itself continued to be studied and deciphered by scholars in order to unlock more of its secrets, using Mingana’s transcription as a starting point as the original manuscript remained missing. More recent researchers have questioned the findings made in the early days, especially those of Mingana. His transcription was found to be inaccurate in many ways, partly due to Mingana’s own difficulties with the language, and partly because the manuscript is unreadable at critical points and the text could not be properly deciphered with the equipment available at the time.

The whereabouts of the palimpsest was a mystery for many years but its whereabouts was eventually traced by two Cambridge scholars. Agnes Lewis died in 1926 but in accordance with her wishes set out in her will, in April 1936 it was finally returned by them, to the Library.

Part of a single leaf of parchment magnified to show the layers of text.

The twin sisters. Agnes Lewis is on the left and Margaret Gibson on the right.
A COLLECTION OF MANY PARTS
Rev. George Lewis (d. 1729)

The imposing dark wooden cabinet, decorated with brass handles and plaques and inscribed 'Bibloteca Orientalis', was specially designed by the Rev. George Lewis for his idiosyncratic collection. The whole library has been preserved intact, along with the assortment of curiosities Lewis collected in India. The 76 valuable Arabic and Persian manuscripts, including rare volumes such as Shahnama, the Persian poet, are still shelved in their original order. Now the soft leather bindings of the manuscripts may be dusted with time, but their contents remain luminously beautiful. The coins, weights, inscriptions on copper-plate and two sets of exquisite miniature playing cards, intricately painted on fragile wafers of wood and tortoiseshell, all have their own special place in the cabinet. There is even a long narrow drawer for Lewis's embroidered slippers, a poignant reminder of the man who was both a scholar and a collector.

The cabinet and its precious contents, sent to the Library in 1727, was a gift from the Rev. George Lewis, once a student at Queens' College, then later Chaplain to the East India Company settlement at Fort St George (now Madras) between 1692 and 1714. His time in India coincided with a growing interest in England for copies of original texts from Middle Eastern and Indian countries, both religious and secular. Lewis collected mainly Persian items but there are also some Arabic and other examples of Indian languages. He selected the manuscripts for the diversity of their subject matter—an intriguing assortment of Qur'ans, dictionaries, epics, some Christian texts and texts of local interest, as well as copies of the Timurid water (Hafiz) and a copy of Jami's Yusuf and Zulaykha. There are also histories, such as a volume written in 1690 containing the biography of Shah Ismail I, king of Persia in Safavid times. A contemporary catalogue of the collection, probably by Lewis himself, gives a list of the manuscripts with short descriptions.

This was the most extensive Islamic collection to enter the Library since the Erpenius collection almost a century earlier. Literary texts such as those of Hafiz and Jami had not previously been available to Cambridge scholars, as the earlier manuscript collections had consisted mainly of religious or grammatical works, or travels.

The collection also contains a large volume known as the Lewis scrap-book, with fascinating examples of letters, fragments of manuscripts, and specimens of different types of calligraphy. The greater part consists of letters addressed to Lewis by various correspondents in Persian, Arabic and Turkish representing almost all the styles of calligraphy used in the Islamic world at the time. Some of these are signed and dated and many are highly decorative.

The unusual nature of the collection reflects the character of the man who amassed it. Lewis was a gifted linguist, proficient in Persian, and was appointed to his post in India with special responsibility for the Protestant Portuguese-speaking native population. During the time he spent in Fort St George, Lewis took a keen interest in the education of the local population and was closely involved in the beginnings of the mission press set up with the intention of printing an edition of the Old Testament in Portuguese. The man—like his collection—had 'many parts'.

From a magnificent copy of a Persian translation of Qazwini's Adab al-malik bi-gharajat ir-rumayjul (Wonders of Creation). This precious manuscript, one of the Library's treasures, has beautiful illuminated pages including birds, animals, human figures and angels. It was given to the Library separately by Archdeacon Lewis's son, and is dated 1566. (Add.274)