CHAPTER EIGHT

THE EVOLUTION OF READING AIDS WITHIN THE MUSHAF

Here we briefly explore some of the visual aids and aesthetic improvements that scribes incorporated into Mushafs, before embarking on the more complex topics of Arabic paleography and the dotting system in the next chapter.

1. Süra Separators

While initial copies of 'Uthmān’s Mushaf lacked sura separators (قوائم السور), the beginning of each sura was readily discernible from the phrase: رضي الله الرحمن الرحيم, usually preceded by a small clearance. This we can see in the example below.

![Figure 8.1: A Mushaf from the first century A.H. in Ḥijāzī script. Source: Maqāleh Ṣan‘ā’, plate 4.](image)

The numerous unofficial copies penned concurrently with 'Uthmān’s Mushaf provide us with our first glimpse of sura separators, through the introduction of a simple ornament. Naturally the phrase رضي الله الرحمن الرحيم is still there. Mālik bin Abī ‘Āmir’s Mushaf is one such example.¹

¹ For further details, see pp. 170 - 72.
2. Ayah Separators

‘Uthmān’s Muḥafṣ was also devoid of ayah separators, as we can see from the two figures below; both are taken from the celebrated Muḥafṣ of

Tashkent (also known as of Samarqand) which is popularly attributed to ‘Uthmān.\(^2\)

Before long ayah separators trickled in. No fixed style was observed, each scribe freely devising his own. The three examples I present are all taken from Muḥafṣ in the Ḥejāzī script (first century a.H.). In the first sample the ayahs are separated by two columns of three dots each; in the second, a row of four dots; in the third, a triangular arrangement.

\(^2\) For a detailed discussion of this Muḥafṣ and others known as ‘Muḥafṣ of ‘Uthmān’ see pp. 172 - 82.
Additional refinements were subsequently devised, in the form of special markers for every fifth and/or tenth āyah.
Another noteworthy Mushaf, this one penned by the master calligrapher Ibn al-Bawwāb and dated 391 A.H./1000 C.E., is preserved at the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin. It too features special markers for every fifth and tenth āyah. Within the latter are inscribed the words خَرَّ المَعْرُوف الْكُلُّ لَأَرْبَعٍ... i.e. ten, twenty, thirty etc.

Figure 8.11: The famous Mushaf of Ibn al-Bawwāb, dated 391 A.H. Inside the large golden circular device is written 'Arba‘ān' ('forty').

3. Conclusion

In the previous chapter we noted al-Ḥajjāj’s meticulous quest for the whereabouts of every third, fourth, and seventh portion of the Qur’ān. Shortly afterwards, perhaps at the close of the first century A.H., the Mushaf was divided into seven parts known as manāzīl (مَنَازِیٰل). This was intended to assist those who sought to finish the entire Mushaf in a week’s time. The third century A.H. witnessed additional symbols, dividing the Book into thirty parts (٣٠: جُعْل) for the reader who desired a full month. These divisions were the practical outgrowth of al-Ḥajjāj’s curiosity and have served, ever since, as a useful tool for all who wish to pace themselves.

Intricate borders, the use of gold ink, and many other developments were adopted according to each scribe’s tastes and abilities. But these were purely aesthetic, unlike the sūra and āyah separators which were genuine reading aids as well, and so we will not discuss them here. There were other reading aids besides, in the form of dots and diacritical marks, and these had an immensely profound impact on the learning of the Qur’ān for non-native speakers throughout the Muslim realms. These aids, and the Orientalist controversies surrounding them, are the focus of our next chapter.