Chapter Ten

Arabic Paleography and Orthography in the Qur'ān

The lapse of years and ripening of young nations can cause dramatic changes in spelling conventions, retaining certain peculiarities from the past while others evolve or become obsolete. Back in 1965 while I was working towards my PhD at Cambridge, I came across a young British student who was studying Arabic to be an Orientalist by profession. He complained about the absurdity of Arabic orthography and how difficult it was to master, insisting that the Arabs ought to switch to Latin script – as was the case in modern day Turkey – which made more ‘sense’. I countered him with the absurdity of the a sound in father, fat, fate, shape; and u in put, but; not to mention right and write, and the past and present tenses of read. A plethora of examples were burning holes in my pockets from my sheer frustrations while learning English as a third language. He argued that these irregularities were owing to individual words and their historical development, but he seemed to overlook that if English had the unquestionable right to these peculiarities then it was only fair that the same be afforded to Arabic.

Below I have provided the verbatim title of a randomly chosen (and typically verbose) English treatise from the 17th century c.e., to illustrate the orthographic changes that have taken place in under four centuries.

The Boy of Bilton: or, A True Discovery of the late notorious Impostures of certaine Romish Priests in their pretended Exorcisme, or expulsion of the Divell out of a young boy, named William Perry, sonne of Thomas Perry of Bilton, in the country of Stafford, Yoman. Upon which occasion, heretofore is permitted A briefe Theological Discourse, by way of Caution, for the more easie discerning of such Romish spirits; and judging of their false pretences, both in this and the like Practices.1

1 Peter Milward, Religious Controversies of the Jacobean Age (A Survey of Printed Sourc-es), The Scolar Press, London, 1978, p. 197. This is the actual title of a book published in 1622 c.e. I have italicized the words that are spelled differently from our current standard. Notice that ‘judging’ is written with an ‘i’ instead of ‘j’. Interestingly, the letter ‘j’ came into existence only recently (c. 16th or 17th century), after the invention of the printing press. (See “How Was Jesus Spelled?”, Biblical Archaeology Review, May/June 2000, vol. 36, no. 3, p. 66.)
The spelling may seem inept by our current criteria, but it is in complete accordance with the established standards of 17th century England. This shift in spelling or ‘spelling reform’, as it is fashionably known, is the rule for almost all languages and not the exception. The English language is sorted into Old English, Middle English, Early Modern English and Modern English, now further split into the American and British spelling systems. For example ‘cwen’, an Old English word, changed to ‘queue’ in Middle English and later became ‘queen’.

The German language has experienced several spelling reforms, the latest one in 1996. The new orthography is only obligatory in schools, outside of which everyone can write as before as there is no law ruling orthography. In its 1948 reform the Danish language abandoned the diphthong Aa/aa in favor of the Swedish letter Åå, and in 1980 it recognized ‘W’ as a distinct letter whereas before it was considered a variation of ‘V’. All words were re-alphabetized accordingly. And only in 2008 did the letter ‘W’ enter the Swedish alphabet.

Another interesting fact is that standardized spellings are a modern phenomenon. Variant spellings of a single word were not uncommon in the not so distant past. Until 1901 the German language was devoid of a unified set of spelling rules. The same holds true for English. Figure 10.1 is the opening of St. John’s Gospel from the 1526 William Tyndale translation of the Bible. Even on this lone page we spot variances: the word

that is spelled in two alternate ways, ‘that’ and ‘that’; with is spelled ‘with’ and ‘wyth’; and of is given as both ‘of’ and ‘off’.

Figure 10.1: The opening of St. John’s Gospel in the 1526 W. Tyndale English Bible. Note that the word that is spelled as ‘that’ (fifth line from top) and ‘that’ (seventh line from top); the word with is spelled as ‘with’ (sixth line from top) and ‘wyth’ (eighth line from top); and the word of is spelled ‘off’ (seventh line from top) and ‘of’ (thirteenth line from top). Courtesy of British Library.

In some languages certain characters enjoy dual functions; the letters i and u were used as both vowels and consonants in Latin, with the consonantal i being pronounced as ‘i’ in yer. The letter b was pronounced ‘p’ if followed by s (e.g. absultu = apostuli), otherwise it was akin to the English ‘b’. In German, the letter b is pronounced either as ‘b’ in ball (when initial) or as ‘p’ in sap (when being last in a word or syllable), while d is pronounced either as ‘d’ or ‘t’. The letter g can elicit six different sounds according to the local dialect.

The same phenomenon exists in Arabic. Some tribes pronounced the word قبّل (qabbal) as قبّل (qabbal), and بحر (bahr) as بحر (bahr), etc., and this was the

7  ibid, p. 2.
root cause of many of the known variants in recitation. Similarly, the letters ی، ھ، ی of the Arabic alphabet also have the dual function of consonant and vowel, as in Latin. The question of how early Arab writers and copyists used these three letters requires special attention. Their methods, though puzzling to us now, were straightforward enough to them.

From this introduction let us delve into the system of Arabic orthography during the early centuries of Islam.

1. Writing Styles During the Time of the Prophet

In Madinah the Prophet had an enormous number of scribes originating from various tribes and localities, accustomed to different dialects and spelling conventions. For example, Yahyā says that he witnessed a letter dictated by the Prophet to Khalid b. Sā'd b. al-'Āṣ which contained a few peculiarities: یک (kām) was written كن (kawma), and ھن (battā) was spelled حن.8 Another document, handed by the Prophet to Razzā bin Anas as-Sulami, also spelled كن as حن.9 The use of double ی (yī), which has long since been contracted into a single ی, is evident in ی وه (ي و ه) and ی و (as shown without skeletal dots) in the Prophet's letters.10 A document from the third century A.H. draws a couple of letters in multiple ways.11 There is no shortage of evidence regarding the variance in writing styles during the early days of Islam.

2. Studies on the Orthography of 'Uthmān's Mushaf

Nurwān's Mushaf, with some of the more detailed ones analyzing all instances of spelling anomalies. Among the chapters in al-Mus'af, for example, one bears the heading, "Examination of Mushaf spellings where [vowels are] dropped or listed. [Subheading] Examination of words where alif is dropped for abbreviation". Ad-Dānī quotes Nūr bin Abī Nu'aym (c. 70-167 A.H.), the original author, to produce a list of the verses where alif is pronounced but not written:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sūra/Verse</th>
<th>The spelling used in 'Uthmān's Mushaf</th>
<th>Actual pronunciation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2:9</td>
<td>یکودون (یکودون)</td>
<td>یکودون (یکودون)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:51</td>
<td>یکودونن (یکودونن)</td>
<td>یکودونن (یکودونن)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20:80</td>
<td>یکودونک (یکودونک)</td>
<td>یکودونک (یکودونک)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These three instances I chose arbitrarily, otherwise the examples in his book occupy the length of twenty pages. Additionally, alif in 'Uthmān’s Mushaf is universally removed from سون and السون (a total of 190 occurrences), except in verse 41:12 where it is spelled سون السون. Randomly perusing the present-day Mushaf printed by the King Fahd Complex in Madinah, I have verified this one instance of anomalous spelling, and so far have found nothing in my cursory searches to contradict Nūr’s tabulated results.12 The two remaining vowels along with the bamaṣ (ء) also display a dynamic tendency for change, one which is not limited to ‘Uthmān’s Mushaf. Of the Companions who penned their own private copies many incorporated additional peculiarities based, perhaps, on regional differences in spelling. Here are two examples:

(a) ‘Abdāl-Fattāḥ ash-Shālibi discovered an old Qur'ānic manuscript in which the scribe used two different spellings of یل (یل and یل) on the same page.13

(b) In the Raza Library Collection, Rampur, India, there is a Mushaf written in Ka'īf script attributed to ‘Am bin Abī Talib. The word یل is again spelled as یل, and یل is spelled as یل. I have provided a sample page below.14

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8 For details see Ibn Abī Dāwūd, al-Mus'af, p. 104.
9 ibid., p. 105.
10 Qur'ān 51:47.
12 See the discussion on the Gharib al-Hadīb manuscript in pp. 163 - 65.
13 Ad-Dānī, al-Mus'af, pp. 20-27. The printed edition lists the wrong word for verse 2:9, which has been corrected in the table.
14 The copy I used, which is well known throughout the world, is without doubt one of the most accurate printings of the Mushaf and for this the complex deserves our due congratulations and gratitude.
15 Ash-Shālibi, Rasa al-Mushaf, pp. 72-73. In a similar case, the Mushaf of 'Aṣāma (d. after 60 A.H./679 C.E.), brought to light by Ibrahim an-Nakha'i (d. 96 A.H.), spelled the letter alif 'both in the traditional form and in the form of the letter ی - meaning that certain words with alif 'had two interchangeable forms (e.g. یل and یل). I also came across another Mushaf folio from the first century A.H. where in the same word, the same word had been written in two different ways.
16 For another sample page of the same Mushaf, see Dr. W.H. Siddiqi and A.S. I-lahat, Hindi-Urdu Catalogue of the exhibition held on the occasion of the celebration of the 50th Anniversary of India's Independence and 300 years of Rampur Raza Library, 2000, Page No. 1.
Malik bin Dinair reports that 'Ikrima recited verse 17:107 as fat'ad (فَتَأَدَ), though it is written fis (فَسِّ). Malik reconciled this by saying that it was the same as reading gaf (جَفِّ) when the word is spelled gaf (جَفِّ), which is a common abbreviation in the Ḥejazi Muṣḥaf. Given that reading and recitation were based on an oral learning tradition, such shorthand did not threaten to corrupt the holy text. If a teacher recited 'gaf (جَفِّ) read as qaf, the alif at the end being silent due to a grammatical rule and the student scribed it as 'gaf (جَفِّ) (following his own conventions) but read it back correctly as 'gaf (جَفِّ), then the anomalous vowel spelling bore no ill consequences.

Ibn Abi Dāwūd narrates the following incident:


Ibn Abi Dāwūd, al-Maṣāḥif, p. 105 (the printed text has been corrected). Texts and students were bound to teach, learn, and read orally according to the āṣār (which emanated directly from the Prophet) and within the boundaries of the 'Uṣmānī Muṣḥaf’s consonantal text. Malik bin Dinair’s reading was both true to the consonantal text and to the hadiths on which he based his recitation.

ъ See Ibn Abi Dāwūd, al-Maṣāḥif, p. 105 (the printed text has been corrected). Texts and students were bound to teach, learn, and read orally according to the āṣār (which emanated directly from the Prophet) and within the boundaries of the 'Uṣmānī Muṣḥaf’s consonantal text. Malik bin Dinair’s reading was both true to the consonantal text and to the hadiths on which he based his recitation.


ъ See Ibn Abi Dāwūd, al-Maṣāḥif, p. 117. The printed text has been corrected.

ъ The chain of witnesses who were involved in transmitting the event; see Chapter 13 for a detailed discussion of the āṣār system and the ranking of narrators.
The very beginning of Sura al-Baqara alone provides these four instances. The custom for most printed Mushafas now is to adhere faithfully to the Uthmani spelling system; the word ʿaḍī (malāḥ) for instance is written ʿaḍī (malāḥ) following the Uthmani orthography, though a tiny ʿalif is placed after the mim to clarify the pronunciation for the contemporary reader. Similarly a few verses still spell ẓā as ẓā,21 indicating that this abbreviation was valid in Uthman’s time and that he allowed the inclusion of both.

Modern publishers, by basing their copies on the original Uthmani orthography, have provided us with a rich reference point for the spelling conventions of Islam’s first century. And it is indeed the best option for every publisher, given the benefits of mass printing and the (roughly) standardized nature of modern education. The reluctance to deviate from Uthman’s orthography is nothing new however. Imam Malik (d. 179 A.H.) was solicited over twelve centuries ago for his legal opinion (khutba) on whether one should copy the Mushaf afresh by utilizing the latest spelling conventions; he resisted the idea, appraising it only for school children. Elsewhere ad-Dani (d. 444 A.H.) maintained that all scholars of Malik’s time to his unanimously shared this same conviction.22

Imam Malik was approached about certain vowels in the Mushaf which are silent; he dismissed the idea of eliminating them. Abu ‘Amr (ad-Dani) comments, “This refers to the extraneous and silent waaw and alif, such as waaw in ... ʿalif in ... and also the yaa in ... This indicates that Imam Malik was critical of any institutionalized updating; while scribes may have chosen to incorporate different conventions in their

22 ad-Dani, al-Maqati, p. 19. Some scholars have suggested that the Mushaf be written in accordance with their period’s prevailing conventions. One such scholar is Izz bin Abda-Salim (al-Zarzahi, Burhan, p. 157). Others include Ibn Khaldun, who favors change [Shalabi, Ramal al-Mushaf, p. 119]; Hifni Naf‘, who is against any change [ibid, p. 118]; the Ashar’s fatwa council, which decided to uphold the early orthographic system [ibid, p. 118]; and the Saudi committee of major ulama, who also decided in 1979 to preserve the old system. A similar consensus was reached by the World Muslim League [al-Faisal, ed., al-Bad‘, Introduction, p. 41].

own copies, in his mind such conventions were never to receive precedence or sanction over Uthman’s orthography.

ii. Irregularities of Alif in the Suna’ Fragments and their Orthographic Impact

Irregularities in the Uthmani Mushaf involving ʿalif are not limited to it being dropped; a further aspect of this irregularity is that the ʿalif can instead be written as a yaa’ without dots (i.e. on a ‘seat’), or as a laam. The latter is seldom encountered but in such words as مَلاِم and زِكَرُو. The former is quite common however, in fact looking into a single page of the printed Mushaf we hit upon the following examples: [آلاكم ولَكِمْ فَلِكُمْ حَمِيمَة] 24 In each case the standard character shape of ʿalif is replaced by a ‘seat’ (booklet), such as that found for yaa’ but without dots.25 As the oral transmission of the Qur’an dictates which of these seats is an alif the pronunciation is never in doubt.

G.R. Puin, finding that a few Suna’ fragments use this peculiarity in places where most known manuscripts have instead dropped the alif for brevity, claims that he has uncovered an ancient orthographic layer unknown to Arab scholars of the Qur’an. He cites only one example: لَا إِلَاءَ إِلَى　اللَّهِ إِلَيْهِ الْخَلْقُ.26 The conventional spelling for this verse is لَا إِلَاءَ إِلَى　اللَّهِ إِلَيْهِ الْخَلْقُ. In other words the usual spelling for لَا إِلَاءَ إِلَى is amended by adding an extra seat for the dropped ʿalif, alif. From this one instance Puin makes a far-reaching extrapolation, that at some phase of the Qur’an’s development the Arabs failed to realize that a yaa’ should render nothing but an alif. This phenomenon, he concludes, can be applied to the Qur’anic text as necessary to clear up ‘dark’ passages which, as far as he is concerned, have not been adequately explained by traditional commentators.27 This can also be used to move the text closer to, as he feels, Judeo-Christian reality. By swapping the yaa’ for an alif he dispenses with shaytān (شيطان) and Ibrahim (إبراهيم).

24 Quran 3:150-53. In the printed Mushaf each of these contains a small ʿalif to aid pronunciation, and there are no dots associated with yaa’ (although I have included them here as my software will not let me do otherwise).
25 Modern Arabic still utilizes this irregularity, albeit only when ʿalif is the final letter in a word (such as مَرْحَبَة and عَلَى مَهْمُوَش), whereas in the Uthmani convention ʿalif may also be in the middle for this phenomenon to occur. For purposes of this discussion I have ignored the shape of the alif at the end of a word, as it is a simplified subset of the second category.
27 Quran 40:5.
obtaining instead Ṣa‘ān and Abraham which he finds much more biblical and to his liking. To him this is proof that the Arabs were not conversant with their own orthography.29

A seat however may represent not only ʾalif but several other letters besides ʾ, ʿ, ʾ and ʿ. The earliest Muslims, reading from dotless Muḥāfs, were able to decipher which of these possibilities applied to each seat based on the Qur’ān’s oral transmission, including whether a seat was simply an irregular ʾalif.30 The thousands of instances of this irregularity which have found their way into our printed Muḥāfs, prove that Muslims were always conscious of this phenomenon, though at the same time whether a seat represents an irregular ʾalif or another character has always depended on oral transmission and not, as Püin does, on a person’s own whim.31 His is an irrational approach. Taking a well recognized orthographic rule, however irregular but backed by oral tradition, and corrupting it to justify wholesale word alterations for doctrinal reasons of moving the Qur’ān closer to the Bible, is totally unscientific and hollow.

If the representation of vowels in Ṣa‘ā’i or elsewhere is more irregular than ‘Uthmān’s official Muḥāf, what impact can this have on our understanding of the holy text? I have pointed out above that whatever orthography a scribe uses for penning the Qur’ān is unimportant, so long as he is able to correctly decipher the text afterwards. If in Yemen ʾay was a customary means of writing ʾay, or if other localities exhibited other slightly different orthographic practices than the ʿUthmān standard, that would not constitute tampering, so long as the consonantal text remained fixed and the pronunciation was in keeping with the authorized transmission chains.

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3. The Nuqat (Dotting) Scheme in Early Muḥāfs

From orthography we now switch our focus to paleography.32 Just as in the previous chapter we placed Arabic paleography in a historical perspective, so now we place it in the context of the Qur’ān and examine its development. Much of this discussion will revolve around nuqat (ša’s: dots), which in the early days of Islam embodied a dual meaning:

1. Skeletal dots:

These are dots placed either over or under a letter to differentiate it from others sharing the same skeleton, such as bā (b), kāf (k) and jīm (j). Known as nuqat al-fā’āl (pā’al ša’), this system was familiar to Arabs prior to Islam or, at the latest, in Islam’s youth—preceding ‘Uthmān’s Muḥāf as we shall soon demonstrate.

2. Diacritical marks:

Known in Arabic as nunūz (nun主动 i.e. dammā, fathā, kāfūn) or nuqat al-fā’āl (pā’al ša’).33 These can take the form of dots or more conventional markings, and were invented by Abū al-Aswad ad-Du‘ālī (c. 10 B.H. - 69 a.H./661 - 688 c.e.).34

We will cover both schemes at length.

i. Early Arabic Writings and Skeletal Dots

The rasūl al-khātā (lit: the drawing of the script) in the ‘Uthmān Muḥāf does not contain dots to differentiate such characters as bā (b), tā (t), and so on. Neither does it possess diacritical marks such as fāthā, ʿaḥā and kāfūn. There is a good deal of evidence that the concept of skeletal dots was not new to the Arabs, being familiar even prior to Islam. Whatever the philosophy may have been with regards to their exclusion from the earliest Muḥāfs,35 I will introduce several examples to prove that early Arabic paleography did recognize dots associated with particular characters. Again, the examples below are not meant to be exhaustive as

31 As a reminder: orthography refers to spelling conventions, while paleography (in this context) deals with a language’s script, with the shape of its letters and the placement of dots etc.
32 These are meant to represent short vowel sounds. Yet another name is al-burāba (bā’al bā’). In Urdu they are known as zān, zabān, pātī etc.
33 As a reminder: orthography refers to spelling conventions, while paleography (in this context) deals with a language’s script, with the shape of its letters and the placement of dots etc.
34 Abū al-Aswad ad-Du‘ālī, p. 6. A renowned author, ad-Du‘ālī wrote his treatise on grammar (and invented ša’dah) probably around 20 a.H./640 c.e.
35 See pp. 103 - 04, for a discussion on the motive. Whether it caused divergences in the readings of the Qur’ān is the subject of Chapter 12.
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this is not the focus of this book, however they do serve the purpose of our argument.36

1. The Raqīsh tombstone, the second oldest dated pre-Islamic Arabic inscription (Figure 9.4), c. 267 C.E., contains dots on the letters dhāl (ذ), mīn (م) and shin (ش).

2. A pre-Islamic Arabic inscription at Jabal Ramm (Figure 9.6), c. fourth century C.E. It contains skeletal dots on the letters nūn (ن), jīm (ج) and zā (ザ). An inscription, most probably pre-Islamic, at Sukakā (northern Arabia), written in a curious script.

Figure 10.3: An inscription found at Sukakā. Source: Winnet and Reed, Ancient Records from North Arabia, Figure 8. Reprinted with the publisher’s kind permission.

The inscription (supposedly a combination of Nabataean and Arabic characters)37 contains dots associated with the Arabic letters nūn (ن), kāf (ك) and sā (س).

4. A bilingual document on papyrus, dated 22 a.h.,38 part of the Einherger Rainer Papyrus Collection at Österreichische Nationalbibliothek in Vienna. Discovered in Egypt in 1877, the papyrus exhibits both the Islamic date (month of Jumādā al-Ulā from the year 22 [A.H.]) and

Figure 10.4: A dated bilingual document from Egypt. Source: Austrian National Library, Rainer Papyrus Collection, P. Vindob G 39726. Reprinted with their kind permission.

5. A parchment fragment on papyrus, also dated 22 a.h.,39 preserved at Staatbibliothek, Berlin. Dots can be seen on the characters nūn (ن) and fā (ف).

Figure 10.5: The final line reads, “month of Jumādā al-Ulā from the year 22[A.H.] and written by Ibn Ḥudayfah.”

This document hail from the reign of Caliph 'Umar bin al-Khattāb. The following Arabic characters have dots: nūn (ن), kāf (ك), jīm (ج), dhāl (ذ), shin (ش) and zā (ザ).

5. A parchment fragment on papyrus, also dated 22 a.h.,39 preserved at Staatbibliothek, Berlin. Dots can be seen on the characters nūn (ن) and fā (ف).

Figure 10.6: Another dated Arabic parchment along with the transcription (line by line). Source: State Library of Berlin, P. Berol 15002. Reprinted with their kind permission.

36 Many new inscriptions are routinely coming to light. Readers may consult islamica01awtonom.org for many more examples.

37 F.V. Winnett and W.L. Reed, Ancient Records from North Arabia, University of Toronto Press, 1970, p. 11.

38 M. Hamidullah, Six Originaux des Lettres Diplomatiques du Prophète de l’Islam, pp. 44-45; S. al-Munagdīl, Études De Paléographie Arabe, Dūr al-Kirb al-Jadal, Beirut, 1972, pp. 102-3; see also A. Jones, “The dating of a script and the dating of an era: the strange neglect of PERF 558”, Islamic Culture, vol. 72, 1998, pp. 99-183. The Arabic part of the document reads (translation): “[1] In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful. This is what has been taken by ‘Abdallāh [2] Son of Jābir, and his companions-in-arms, of slaughter sheep at Hērōta. We have taken [3] from a representative of Theodorakhos, second son of Apsa Kyros, and from a substitute of Christophoros, eldest son of Apsa Kyros, fifty sheep as of slaughter sheep [4] and fifteen other sheep. He gave them, for slaughter, for the crew of his vessels, as well as his cavalry and his breast plated infantry in [5] the month of Jumādā the first in the year twenty-two and written by Ibn Ḥudayfah”. Numbers inside square brackets correspond to the inscription line number.

6. A papyrus fragment of an edict, dated by Grohmann to c. 25-30 a.H.,\textsuperscript{40} preserved at Österreichische Nationalbibliothek in Vienna. Dots are visible on the letter ن (n).

7. An inscription at Wādī Saba‘el in the Najrān Area (southwestern Arabia), dated 46 a.H., contains a dot on the letter خ (k).\textsuperscript{41}

8. A bilingual inscription on papyrus, dated 54 a.H., and uncovered during excavations at ‘Ajlūn Ḥafir, in Nefūj close to the Egyptian border. Dots appear on the letters خ (k), ب (b), خ (k), ی (y) and ح (h).

9. Another bilingual papyrus dated by Grohmann to c. 22-54 a.H.,\textsuperscript{43} preserved at the Main Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Dots are associated with the letters ن (n), ی (y) and ز (z).

Figure 10.7: Inscription dated 46 a.H. at Wādī Saba‘el along with the transcription (line by line). A dot appears under the letter خ (k) of the word “Arabian” (last line).

Figure 10.8: A dated bilingual inscription on papyrus from Nefūj along with the transcription (line by line). The last two lines read, “... month of Dhu‘l-Qi‘dah of the year 54 a.H.”\textsuperscript{42}

10. A dam commissioned by Mu‘āwiyah (d. 60 a.H./679 c.e.) to the east of Madinah at Wādī al-Ḥanāq carries an inscription that appends dots to the letter خ (k).\textsuperscript{43}

Figure 10.9: An undated bilingual papyrus, c. 22-54 a.H.

11. Another dam of Mu‘āwiyah, located to the northeast of Tā‘if and bearing an inscription dated 58 a.H.

Figure 10.10: Outline of the inscription (undated) on the dam of Mu‘āwiyah near Madinah along with a line by line transcription.

12. A bilingual inscription on a fragment of papyrus from Samur, dated 60 a.H./679 c.e. to the east of Madinah at Wādī Tā‘if.

Figure 10.11: Inscription dated 58 a.H. on the dam of Mu‘āwiyah near Tā‘if along with transcription (line by line).

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid. Plate II.3.


\textsuperscript{42} A. Grohmann, “Zum Papyrumprotokoll in frührátorischer Zeit.” In Jahrbücher der Österreichischen Byzantinischen Gesellschaft, vol. IX, Graz-Cologne, 1960, pp. 5-9. See also H.J. Bell, “The Arabic Bilingual Engraving”, Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society, vol. 89, no. 3 (Oct. 1945), pp. 538-39. According to Bell, an engraving is in order for the payment of taxes, the delivery of supplies, or the execution of work, addressed to the people of a village and enclosed with the governor’s letter in which the service was ordered. [ibid, p. 531].

\textsuperscript{43} A. Grohmann, Handbuch der Orientalistik. I Arabische Choronenologie, II Arabische Papyrusschriften, op. cit., Plate III.1.

\textsuperscript{44} S. ar-Rāhūd, Dirāsāt li‘l-‘Arab al-‘Alāmiyyah li-Muḥaṭṭah bi-al-Madīnah al-Munawwrah, Riyadh, 1421 (2000), pp. 46-60. The dam has been damaged due to seismic and volcanic activities which the area suffered a long time ago [ibid, pp. 42-43]. The inscription is currently preserved at the National Archeological Museum in Riyadh.
The following characters have dots: ā (أ), bā (ب), nān (ن), thā (ث), kāf (ك), fā (ف) and sā (س).

In view of the above we can conclude that, up until 58 A.H., the following letters had been assigned dots to differentiate them from others bearing the same skeletal shape: nūn (ن), kāf (ك), fīm (ف), dham (ذ), shin (ش), zā (ز), pā (پ), bā (ب), thā (ث), fā (ف) and sā (س). A total of twelve characters. Concentrating on only the first five inscriptions, which predate ‘Umar’s Muṣḥaf, we find that dots were standardized into the same pattern that is in usage today.

Muḥammad bin ‘Ubayd bin Aṣūr al-Gaṣṣānī, Mu‘awiyah’s secretary, states that Mu‘āwiyah asked him to carry out some tariqah (تَرَايْح) on a particular document. Inquiring what was meant by tariqah, he was told, “To give every character its due dots”. Mu‘āwiyah added that he had done the same once for a document he had written on behalf of the Prophet. Al-Gaṣṣānī is not well known in traditionist circles, and this weakens his narrative, but we cannot discount this incident in light of the irreparable facts proving the early use of dots.

ii. The Intention of Diacritical Markings

As mentioned earlier the diacritical marks, known in Arabic as tashkil were invented by Abū al-Aṣwad ad-Du‘alī (d. 69 A.H./688 C.E.). Ibn Abī Mulaikha reports that during ‘Umar’s reign, a Bedouin arrived seeking an instructor to help him learn the Qurān. Someone volunteered, but began


66 One of the inscriptions which was excluded from this list is a graffito next to the dated Kūh inscription from Qā’ al-Mudābil (see Figure 9.13). The graffito reads, “I am Zuhayr, client of the daughter of Shihāb”, and it appended dots to the letters nūn (ن) and zā (ز). Part of the reason for not including it is that UNESCO, which added the original dated inscription to the Memory of the World Register of Documentary Collections, chose to exclude this graffito. So probably it is of later origin, though the name Zuhayr occurs in both writings.

67 Al Kharīb al-Bi’haqī, al-Jāmi‘, i, 269.

68 Refer to the chapter on Muslim methodology for greater details (Chapter 13).

committing such a string of mistakes while tutoring that ‘Umar had to stop him, correct him, then order that only those with adequate knowledge of Arabic should teach the Qurān. With such an incident in mind, he requested Abī al-Aṣwad al-Du‘alī to compose a treatise on Arabic grammar.

Ad-Du‘alī took his assignment to heart, producing a treatise within which he devised four diacritical marks that could be posted on the concluding letter of each word. These took the form of colored dots (to differentiate them from skeletal dots, which were black); initially they consisted of a single color (red in the example below), with each dot’s position signifying its specific mark. A lone dot placed after, on, or below the letter constituted a damma, fatha or kasra, respectively. Similarly two dots placed after, on, or below the letter indicated damma tanwēn (double damma), fatha tanwēn or kasra tanwēn, respectively. (This synopsis does little justice to his actual conventions, which were quite elaborate.) During Mu‘āwiyah’s reign (d. 60 A.H./679 C.E.) he accepted a commission to apply this dotting system to a copy of the Muṣḥaf, a task probably completed c. 50 A.H./670 C.E.

Figure 10.12: Example of a Muṣḥaf written in the Kūfic script, bearing ad-Du‘alī’s dotting scheme. Courtesy of the National Archive Museum of Yemen.

69 Ad-Dānī, al-Maṣḥūm, pp. 4-5, footnote 2, quoting Ibn al-Anbūrī, al-Iṣbā‘, pp. 15a-16a. An-Nādirī gives a detailed description of the manuscript of ad-Du‘alī’s treatise on grammar. He discovered it in Ibn Abī Ru‘a’s library, consisting of four folios and copied by the famous grammarian Yahyā bin Yūnus (d. 920 A.H./708 C.E.). It carried the signature of another grammarian, Allām an-Nādirī, and beneath it the signature of an-Nādirī bin Shurmath. [an-Nādirī, al-Fihrist, p. 46.] These signatures established the legitimacy of Abī al-Aṣwad ad-Du‘alī’s original authorship of the treatise.

70 Ad-Dānī, al-Maṣḥūm, pp. 6-7.
This scheme was transmitted from ad-طبع (90 a.h./708 c.e.), Nāṣr bin ʿAjīm al-
Laythī (100 a.h./718 c.e.), and Mā'in bin al-Asi, arriving at Khalīl
bin ʿAbd al-Ṣāliḥi (170 a.h./786 c.e.) who altered this pattern by
replacing the colored dots with shapes that resembled certain characters.53
Centuries lapsed, however, before al-Ṣāliḥi’s scheme finally superseded
the earlier system.

Every center appears to have practiced a slightly different convention
at first. Ibn ʿUsāta reports that the Muḥaf of Ismāʿīl al-Qusṭ, the Imām
of Makka (100–170 a.h./718–786 c.e.), bore a dotting system dissimilar
to the one used by the Iraqīs,54 while al-Dānī notes that the scholars of
ṣanʿa’s followed yet another framework.55 Likewise, the pattern used by
the Madīnīs differed from the Baṣrīs; by the close of the first century
however, the Baṣrī conventions became ubiquitous to the extent that
even the Madīnī scholars adopted them.56 Later developments witnessed
the introduction of multi-colored dots, each diacritical mark being assigned
a unique color.

Figure 10.13: Example of a Muḥaf in the Kufic script. The diacritical
dots are multi-colored (red, green, yellow, and a pale shade of blue).
Note also the āyāb separators and the tenth āyāb marker, as discussed
in Chapter 8. Courtesy of the National Archive Museum of Yemen

iii. Parallel Usage of Two Different Diacritical Marking Schemes
Khalīl bin ʿAbd al-Ṣāliḥi’s diacritical scheme won rapid introduction
into non-Qurʿānic texts, so for the sake of differentiation the script and
diacritical marks reserved for masterly copies of the Qurʾān were deliberately
kept different from those that were common to other books, though slowly
some calligraphers began to use the new diacritical system in the Qurʾān as
well.57 I am fortunate to have a few color pictures of the Qurʾānic fragments
from the Sanʿa Collection, through which the development of such schemes
can be demonstrated.

Figures 10.12 and 10.13 (above) probably date from the second century
a.h., while the next is an example of the Qurʾānic script from the third
century a.h.58

Figure 10.14: Example of Qurʾānic script from the third century a.h. Note again
the multi-colored dots. Courtesy of the National Archive Museum of Yemen

The next figure is an example of non-Qurʾānic script from the same
period; the difference is readily visible in the script and in the schemes
employed for skeletal and diacritical markings. For further examples, see
Figures 10.17 and 10.18.

53 Among the earliest of those calligraphers are Ibn Muqla (d. 327 a.h.) and Ibn al-
Bawwāb (d. circa 413 a.h.). In fact Ibn al-Bawwāb even shied away from Uthmān’s
orthography. The current trend is to fall back to the early orthography, e.g. the
Muḥaf printed by the King Faisal Complex in Madīnah (see p. 145).55
54 Based on the description in the catalogue: Muḥaf Sanʿa, Dar al-Āshar al-Islām -
yyah (Kuwait National Museum), 19 March – 19 May 1985, Plate no. 53. In this
regard I have some reservations; for example, I believe that Figure 10.12 belongs to
the late first century.
4. Sources of the Skeletal and Diacritical Dotting Systems

Father Yûsûf Sa'id, cited by al-Munaggid as an authority on the history of alphabets, skeletal dotting systems and diacritical marks, contends that the Syriac may have been the first to develop the dotting system.57 The reference here is to skeletal dots, as seen in such characters as ٔ, ٖ, ٗ. His claim does not extend to the usage of diacritical markings. But Dr. 'Izzat Hasen (ed.), in his introduction to al-Muhkam fî Nağîl Mâṣâbîf, takes the extra step and attributes the diacritical system to Syriac influence; as the Syriacs were in the forefront of grammatical and dotting systems, so the Arabs borrowed freely from them.58 For this argument he quotes the Italian Orientalist Guidi, Archbishop Yûsûf Diwîd, İstâ'îl Willinson, and 'Ali 'Abdul-Wâhid al-Wâfî – this last simply repeating previous commentators. Dr. İbrahim Jun'a has expressed the identical view of Arabs borrowing the diacritical system from the Syriac language, where he cites Willinson.59 This is the conclusion of many others, including Rev. Mingana who (never one for sugar-coating his words) remarks,

The first discoverer of the Arabic vowels is unknown to history. The opinions of Arab authors, on this point, are too worthless to be quoted.60

57 S. al-Munaggid, Études de Paleographie Arabe, p. 128. Al-Munaggid shows some reservation about attributing the skeletal dots to Syriac influence.
60 A. Mingana and A.S. Lewis (eds.), Leaven from Three Ancient Quotidian Posibly Pre-

Ascerting that Syriac universities, schools, and monasteries established a system between 450-700 C.E., he says, "[the] foundation of the Arabic vowels is based on the vowels of the Aramaeans. The names given to these vowels is an irrefutable proof of the veracity of this assertion: such like Phath and Phatha".61 According to him, Arabs did not elaborate this system till the latter half of the 8th century C.E.62 through the influence of the Baghdadî school, which was under the direction of Nestorian scholars and where the celebrated Ḥunain had written his treatise on Syriac grammar.63

In the Syriac alphabet only two characters possess skeletal dots: dolath (dal) and rish (ra). By comparison the Arabic alphabet contains a total of sixteen dotted characters: ٌ, ٔ, ٕ, ٖ, ٗ, ٘, ٙ, ٚ, ٛ, ٜ, ٝ, ٞ, ٟ, ١, ٢, ٣. Presuming that the Arabs borrowed their multitudinous dots from the Syriac becomes a difficult proposition; moreover we have clear pre-Islamic evidence of the usage of skeletal dots, hailing from the early 7th century and perhaps from as long ago as the 3rd century C.E.64

Now let us proceed to diacritical markings in Syriac, of which two sets exist. According to Yûsûf Diwîd Iqlimsîs, the Bishop of Damascus,

It is confirmed without doubt that in the life of Jacob of Raha, who died in the beginning of the 8th century C.E. there did not appear any diacritical marking method in Syriac, neither the Greek vowels, nor the dotting system.65

According to Davidson though,66 Jacob of Raha (d. 708 C.E.) invented the first set of markings in the seventh century, while Theophilus invented the second set (Greek vowels) in the eighth. Keeping in mind that the end of the seventh century C.E. corresponds to 81 A.H., and the end of the eighth to 184 A.H., the question becomes: who borrowed from whom? In light of what Davidson mentions the verdict could fall either way, so let us seek an answer by examining the scripts. The figure below illustrates some Syriac vowels.67

61 'Oheimat: with a list of their Variances, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1914, p. xxxi.
62 ibid., p. xxxi.
63 This translates to 130 A.H. and onwards, because 700-799 C.E. = 81-184 A.H.
64 Mingana and Lewis (eds.), op. cit., p. xxxi.
65 Refer back to the Syriac inscription, Chapter 9.
68 ibid.
The signs used by Jacob of Raha bear significant resemblance to the Qur'anic diacritical system. Now recall that the inventor of the Arabic system, Abū al-Awwād ad-Du‘ālī, died in 69 H (688 C.E.), and that he dotted the entire Muṣḥaf during Mu‘āwiya’s reign c. 50 H/670 C.E. Suddenly the issue of who borrowed from whom becomes crystal clear. For six hundred years the Syriacs wrote their Bibles without any diacritical markings, though they boasted a university in Nisibis and several colleges and monasteries, all in operation since 450 C.E. Yet their diacritical marks were not conceived until the late 7th/early 8th century, while ad-Du‘ālī’s dotted Muṣḥaf was finished in the third quarter of the 7th century C.E. Logic clearly dictates that Jacob copied the system from the Muslims. This is if we accept Davidson’s claim; if we accept the verdict of the Bishop of Damascus however, then there is no need for even this argument.

As regards Rev. Mingana’s allegation that the Arabs failed to elaborate this system till the latter half of the eighth century C.E., consider the following:

1. There is a report that Ibn ʿIrān (d. 110 H/728 C.E.) possessed a Muṣḥaf originally dotted by Yadya bin Ya’mar (d. 90 H/710 C.E.).68
2. Khālid al-Ḥadhdhā‘ī used to follow the recitations of Ibn ʿIrān from a dotted Muṣḥaf.69

Both incidents are much earlier than the proposed borrowing scheme. Syriac grammar gained its identity through the efforts of Ḥunain bin Iṣḥāq (194-260 H/810-873 C.E.); contrary to Mingana’s beliefs, Ḥunain’s treatise on Syriac had no influence on Arabic grammar whatsoever

5. Orthographic and Paleographic ‘Irregularities’ in Early Non-Qur’ānic Script

Earlier we discussed how two different diacritical schemes were employed in parallel, one for the Qur’ān and another for all other works. We also noted the difference in the Qur’ānic and non-Qur’ānic scripts, and the scholars’ legal opinion against modernizing the spelling conventions found in ‘Uthmān’s Muṣḥaf. But what about the other books, how did they evolve in response to changes in the paleography and orthography of the Arabic script?

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68 Ad-Dānī, al-Naqṣ, p. 129.
71 Sibawayh (d. 180 A.H./796 C.E.): one of the greatest authorities on Arabic grammar, and the author of that famous tome, al-Kitāb. [See Kahhāla, Muṣannaf al-Mu‘āllifin, ii:584.]
72 Kahhāla, op. cit., 1662.
spellings that he encountered in this text, a sample of which I have reproduced below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wāhhab MS</th>
<th>Modern spelling</th>
<th>Wāhhab MS</th>
<th>Modern spelling</th>
<th>Wāhhab MS</th>
<th>Modern spelling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ابها</td>
<td>al-Abba</td>
<td>ابها</td>
<td>al-Abba</td>
<td>رAllocate</td>
<td>Allocate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>جاك</td>
<td>al-Jakah</td>
<td>جاك</td>
<td>al-Jakah</td>
<td>ضائكة</td>
<td>Pika</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>تاها</td>
<td>al-Tahaa</td>
<td>تاها</td>
<td>al-Tahaa</td>
<td>تاق</td>
<td>Qa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>الى</td>
<td>al-Il</td>
<td>الى</td>
<td>al-Il</td>
<td>ثلث</td>
<td>Third</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Among the more interesting oddities are the word ِلاج spelled as ِن (i.e. without the hamza), and ِلاج spelled as ِلاج without any dots.

Figure 10.18: Another example of non-Qur'anic script, dated 252 H.
Source: Leiden University Library, manuscript no. Or. 298, f. 2396
Reproduced with their kind permission.

Figure 10.18 is a sample part page from Abū Ḥabīb’s Gharīb al-Hadīth preserved at Leiden University Library. This manuscript is flooded with ‘irregularities’ in the skeletal dotting system. The letter ِل (l): void of dots (red arrow: lines 1, 2 and 4); with a single dot underneath (green arrow: lines 3 and 4); with two dots above the character (blue arrow: last line). The isolated ١ (‘) void of dots (light blue arrow: line 3); as before but in a different form (violet arrow: last line); with two dots underneath (yellow arrow: line 8).

The interesting point is that all these ‘irregularities’ take place within a single page. Surely a single copyist was involved, but his decision to script these letters in multiple styles suggests that all were equally valid, and reinforces what we discussed earlier regarding the numerous permissible forms given to the three vowels: ِ، ِ، ِ. ‘Irregularity’ itself exists only in our judgment since, if both styles were permissible at the time, we cannot in good conscience label the scribe as inconsistent. Whatever reason we conjure up for the liberal paleography of that era is actually unimportant. Islamic methodology dictates that every student must learn directly from a teacher and is never entitled to study any text on his own; so long as this oral tradition remained, and the teacher was able to decipher the irregularities in his own handwriting, there was no risk of corruption.

Hundreds of excellent references are devoted to the spelling and dotting schemes used in Musḥaf, and for further reading I suggest (1) Kitāb ar-Raṣāq by Abū Ḥarb ad-Dāni (371-444 A.H.), published by Al-Azhār University, Cairo; and (2) Al-Mālikī an-Naqāṣ an-ṣiḥāf by ad-Dāni, edited by Dr. Izzat al-Haṣan, Damascus, 1379/1960.

Interested readers should also consult the introduction to al-Radī fi Rasmi Masāḥif ‘Uthmān (pages 43-54), edited by al-Fuwasānī, where he cites eighty works on this topic. The main purpose of these works is to educate the reader on the ‘Uthmānī conventions, and not to suggest that they were in any way flawed or underdeveloped. We have already observed the discrepancies between 17th century written English and that of modern times, and if we view these changes as an evolutionary process (instead of proclaiming one or the other as defective) then that is surely the attitude we must extend to Arabic.

6. Conclusion

Skeletal dots (known to Arabs prior to Islam) and diacritical marks (a Muslim invention) were both absent from ‘Uthmān’s endeavors to independently compile the Qur’ān. By its consonant-heavy and dotted nature, it was
uniquely shielded from the guiles of anyone attempting to bypass oral scholarship and learn the Qur’an on his own; such a person would be readily detected if he ever dared to recite in public. In his reluctance to incorporate extraneous material into the Mushaf, ‘Uthmân was not alone: Ibn Mas‘ûd was of a similar mind. At a later date Ibrahim an-Nakha‘i (d. 96 A.H.), once noticing a Mushaf with added headings such as “The Beginning of [such-and-such] Sûra”, found it distasteful and ordered that they be erased.76 Yahyâ bin Abi Kathîr (d. 132 A.H.) notes,

Dots were the first thing incorporated by Muslims into the Mushaf, an act which they said brought light to the text [i.e. clarified it]. Subsequently they added dots at the end of each verse to separate it from the next, and after that, information showing the beginning and end of each sûra.77

Recently I came across a harsh comment on Qur’ânic orthography, by an Arab writer insisting that we follow the modern Arabic layout and discard the conventions of those who scripted the ‘Uthmânî Mushaf as the folly of illiterates. I wholly disagree. It is sheer folly, on the part of this person and such giants as Ibn Khaldûn, to forget the inevitable evolution of language over time; do they believe that, after the passing of a few centuries, others would not step forward to denounce their efforts as the work of illiterates? A Book that has resisted any universal alterations for fourteen centuries is living proof that the text within belongs to Allah, Who has appointed Himself as Guardian. The inviolability of the original, immaculately preserved for so long, is not to be suffered the tampering and adjustments meted out to the biblical Scriptures.78

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76 Ad-Dinî, al-Mushkam, p. 16.
78 See Chapters 16 and 18.