The earliest Qur’an manuscripts were produced in the mid-to-late seventh century AD (first century hijrah), although it is difficult to be precise about their date, due to the fact that ancient copies from this period have not survived intact and exist only in fragments. The importance of these fragments cannot be underestimated as they provide the only available evidence for the early development of the written recording of the Qur’an text.

The mu’ll Qur’an
The largest fragment of consecutive text is from the so-called mu’ll Qur’an which dates from the eighth century and, as far as can be ascertained, was produced in the Hijaz region of the Arabian Peninsula, the area which includes the holy cities of Mecca and Medina (fig. 3). The word mu’ll itself means ‘sloping’ and refers to the sloping style of the script. This is one of a number of early Arabic scripts collectively named ‘Hijazi’ after the region in which they were developed. The mu’ll Qur’an contains over two-thirds of the Qur’an text, making it an almost complete codex and one of the oldest Qur’ans in existence.

The mu’ll Qur’an is penned on parchment, the generic term for writing material prepared from the skins of sheep, goats and calves. This material was
popular for Qur’anic codices of this period because of its flexible yet durable qualities. Papyrus, though mostly used in Egypt and in plentiful supply, was not generally used for Qur’ans. It was usually preferred for legal and commercial documents which were written in a scroll format. Muslims adopted the codex for their holy book, presumably because it was portable and more manageable, and possibly because they were influenced by the Coptic Gospels which were also in this format. The codex — muha in Arabic, which in current usage can refer to any volume of the Qur’an — was originally a collection of sheets of parchment placed between two boards. Each double sheet was folded into two leaves, which were assembled into gatherings, then sewn together and bound as quires into a book or codex. The text is always presented on the page in a single-column block, not in columns, as is often found in the codices of other cultures within the region, the Hebrew Bible and the Greek New Testament, for example. Unlike the Qur’an, these sacred writings were originally in scroll format, the form which later influenced the multi-column layout of their manuscript pages.

The main characteristic of muhal script is its pronounced slant to the right. It can also be recognized by the distinctive traits of some of its letters; in particular dāl and jī’ (the first and last letters of the Arabic alphabet). The dāl does not curl at the bottom, it is rigid; on the other hand, the jī’, occurring at the end of a word, turns and extends backwards, frequently underlining the preceding...
ing words. This early style of script is also notable for its lack of diacritical marks, that is, the spelling symbols which distinguish between letters of similar shape. In the ma‘l Qur’an and other ancient fragments there are no vowel signs or other aids to pronunciation. In early Qur’ans the method for numbering verses is not fully developed. In the earliest fragments, such as the ma‘l, the end of each verse is indicated by six small dashes in two stacks of three. A later development in the verse numbering of this Qur’an was the addition of red circles surrounded by red dots to mark the end of every ten verses (fig. 5, top line). Likewise, chapter headings were also added later in a different script and colour from the rest of the text. This is clearly evident because early Qur’ans usually distinguished between the end and beginning of chapters by leaving between them a recognizable space which could be filled in with a horizontal illuminated band (fig. 6). When chapter headings were later introduced, the wording stated the name of the chapter, the number of verses and whether the particular chapter was revealed in Mecca or Medina.

Kufic Qur’ans and the beginnings of illumination
The physical shape of the earliest Qur’an codices was vertical in format, as exemplified by the ma‘l Qur’an. But, as demonstrated in early Qur’ans of the ninth and tenth centuries written in kufic script, choice of script can be seen to have had a major influence on the shape of the volume, which was now produced in a horizontal format (fig. 7). With its very short vertical and elongated horizontal strokes, the kufic style is certainly suited to the oblong format of Qur’ans produced in the Near East. This format is thought to have been originally inspired by the shape of unrolled papyrus scrolls, also possibly by the oblong wood and stone panels inscribed with Qur’anic quotations on the walls of mosques. The earliest examples of Qur’anic inscriptions in kufic script, dating from 692, appear on the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem.

This strikingly angular script takes its name from the town of al-Kufah in southern Iraq, which was one of the earliest centres of Islamic learning and from where the script is believed to have been developed. Qur’ans in kufic script are organized in blocks, with the words of text often split between the end of one line and the beginning of another. Signs were introduced into the text as an aid to pronunciation. Representing an older system based on a method developed by the seventh-century founder of Arabic grammar, Abu al-Aswad al-
Du'ali, red dots were added to indicate vowels, with green dots to indicate the glottal stop (hamza). In the eighth century, a system of short black diagonal strokes was further introduced to avoid confusion between similar-shaped letters. Credit for this system is attributed to al-Hallaj ibn Yusuf, a governor of the Islamic East during the Umayyad caliphate (661–750), who instructed pupils of Abu al-Awad al-Du'ali to solve the problem.

These early kufic Qur'ans already exhibit the beginnings of those elements of illumination and decoration that were so eminently brought to perfection in later Qur'ans, giving the written word a heightened power and resonance. Since Islam does not approve of the representation of the human or animal form in religious contexts, Islamic art finds its ultimate spiritual expression in sacred calligraphy, the writing down of a holy text in a beautifully ornamented script. There can be no doubt that the Qur'an has played a pivotal role in the development of this art form. While beautifying the Qur'an manuscript can be considered as an act of religious devotion, the decorations on its pages have the additional function of facilitating reading. Hence, Qur'an illumination follows the structural division of the text, highlighting within the body of the text or in the margins, chapter headings, ends of verses, verse counts to mark the end of a fifth and tenth verse, the beginning of sections, and the fourteen points at which the believer should prostrate during the recitation of the Qur'an. In manuscripts from other cultures the opening pages, the headings of chapters and sections, and the initial letters are often illustrated. Since, however, there are no capital letters in Arabic script and illustration is forbidden, Qur'an illumination emphasizes key words and headings. These are generally illuminated in gold or other colours, or written in a different script from the rest of the text, and sometimes even with a combination of all three. Where illumination is
present in early Qur’ans, as in the kufic, its role is clearly discernible. For example, the end of a fifth verse is marked by a gold ornamental letter ha’, the letter ha’ having the value of five in the Arabic alphabetic system (fig. 8). In this system, known as abjad, each letter of the Arabic alphabet has been allotted a numerical value. Similarly, the end of a tenth verse is noted by a large rounded gold, in which the number of the verse is inscribed in words (fig. 9); trefoils are used to form a pyramid of gold circles to mark the end of the other verses.

Eastern kufic

From the tenth century Qur’ans are once again being produced in a vertical format, thus underlining the relationship between the physical shape of the volume and the script of the manuscript. The return to the vertical was largely necessitated by choice of script, due particularly to the appearance of eastern kufic, first developed by the Persians, the letters of which are characterized by long upright strokes and short strokes inclining to the left. Specific styles were evolved within eastern kufic, such as Qarnati (figs. 10, 11). The name of this style is possibly derived from the Arabic verb qarna’ in an expression which suggests that the script is finer and that the letters are closer together. Further developments in the notation of vowel signs were introduced into Qur’an manuscripts: the older system of red dots associated with Abu al-Aswad al-Da’ali was combined with the vowel signs – still in use today – developed by the eighth-century grammarian and philologist, al-Khalil ibn Ahmad.

Early naskhi and paper

While parchment was the favoured material for early Qur’ans, paper gradually began to be chosen as the preferred medium. A popular tradition has it that the art of papermaking came to Samarqand in Central Asia in the eighth century, having been extracted from Chinese prisoners captured during the Islamic invasion of Central Asia. Papermaking soon spread throughout the Middle East, paper mills being established in major centres in Iraq, Persia, Yemen, Egypt, and Syria. The cities of Samarqand, Baghdad, Cairo and Damascus became renowned for paper produced to an exceptionally high quality. Although one might expect a sacred text to be written on costly parchment rather than paper, by the tenth century Qur’an manuscripts in the eastern part of the Islamic empire as distinct from the Islamic West (North Africa and Spain) were written only on paper, as were other Arabic manuscripts.
An 11th- or 12th-century Qur'an, from Iraq or Persia, written on paper in the Qura'anic style of eastern Islamic script. The older system of red dots indicating vowels is combined with black vowel signs still in use today (c. 857 E., ff. 210v-211).
Some of the earliest Qur’ans written on paper were penned in a cursive script, proportional in style, known as naskhi (fig. 13). While eastern kufi was used for copying the Qur’an text, the introduction of naskhi in the Islamic East from around the late tenth century may have also contributed to the re-adoption of the vertical format. Though kufi and an early type of naskhi were both concurrently in use between the eighth and tenth centuries, the latter was employed only in documents of an administrative and commercial nature and not for the sacred text. More fully developed in the tenth century by the Abbasid vizier and calligrapher Ibn Maqlab (886–940), and later perfected by Ibn al-Bawwab (d. 1022), the master calligrapher who continued his tradition, naskhi became one of the most popular styles for transcribing Arabic manuscripts due to its legibility.

The impact of early naskhi can be easily appreciated from its appearance upon the Qur’an page. A striking feature of the layout in such a Qur’an is the distribution of the space occupied by the script and the illumination, both being packed densely together within the text area, with marginal ornaments almost touching the area of the text in a way that is reminiscent of an overlapping chain. By the middle of the eleventh century, the relationship between naskhi and kufi can be seen to be one of contrast between text and ornament. Kufi was now an archaic script used only for ornamental purposes to inscribe the text within the illumination. Hence, in an eleventh-century Qur’an written in
early naskhi script, the larger overlapping roundels marking the end of a tenth verse have their relevant verse number spelt out in kufi.

The Qur'an in the Islamic West
During the reign of the Umayyad caliphs (661–750) who ruled from Damascus, Islam spread west from Egypt to Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco. Expanding also into the Iberian Peninsula, Islam became the dominant power in Spain from 711 until the Christian re-conquest during the second quarter of the thirteenth century. Qur’ans from North Africa and Spain differ significantly from those produced in the Islamic East (fig. 13). One difference can be seen in their use of writing material. While parchment was no longer a material of choice in the Islamic East, the Islamic West continued to produce Qur’ans on parchment until the fourteenth century, no doubt because this region of the Islamic world was late in its introduction to paper manufacture. A regional style of script also developed in the West with its own peculiar characteristics. This script, maghribi, named after the province of Maghreb in North Africa, became the accepted script for copying Qur’ans and other texts in North Africa, and by the twelfth century was also adopted in Andalusian Spain. A number of features differentiate maghribi from other Arabic scripts, particularly in the way the letters jī’ and qaf are written. Its vowel signs are usually printed in red or blue, with the glottal stop also indicated by coloured dots. The characteristics of maghribi clearly show that its origins lie in western kufi, the regional version of kufi developed in Tunisia during the tenth century. This script can be recognized by its more rounded and deeper curves extending below the line, a feature which became a prominent characteristic of maghribi script. The interrelationship between these scripts is highlighted in the pages of a thirteenth-century Qur’an from Spain (fig. 13), which contrasts its ornamental chapter headings, written in gold angular western kufi, with its text in maghribi. The maghribi script
in the main body of the text, with its sweeping curves below the line and the pronounced roundness and lengthening of some of its letters, gives these Qur'an pages the sense of space and movement associated with cursive scripts.

Qur'an formats
It should be noted that the script or format of a Qur'an did not determine the number of its volumes. Irrespective of shape, whether horizontal or vertical, Qur'ans could be in either one volume or in multi-volume sets. Of multi-volume Qur'ans, the thirty-volume set was the more usual; each volume contained a thirtieth of the text (juz'), following the traditional division of the Qur'an text into thirty sections. Thirty-volume sets became popular, because the whole of the Qur'an can be read completely during those months of the Muslim calendar which have thirty days, and especially during the holy month of Ramadan, one volume being recited each day. In addition, Qur'ans were copied in sixty parts, as the text is also traditionally divided into sixty equal sections (juz). Seven-volume sets, each volume containing a seventh (sub') of the text, are also found but are very rare indeed.

Developments in illumination
From around the late tenth century onwards the development of scripts and formats was accompanied in both the Islamic East and West by a gradual movement towards a more elaborate illumination. This may have been due at least in part to satisfy royal or noble patrons who wished to endow a mosque or teaching institution with a Qur'an which would appropriately reflect their power and piety. Decoration and ornamentation became progressively complex, not exclusively within the text itself, but also in other parts of the volume such as the single or double frontispiece. These pages, designed with full-page illuminations, are sometimes referred to as 'carpet' pages since their appearance resembles oriental carpets (figs. 14, 15, 16, 17). Although carpet pages do not fall strictly within the realm of the sacred text, the illuminator was aware of the opportunity not only to display his artistry but also to set the sacred tone of the volume in order to prepare the reader mentally and spiritually for its contents. In architectural terms, opening a Qur'an volume might be compared to entering a sacred building, with the carpet page as the gateway or portal to the holy text itself. Its role is thus similar to that of the courtyard of a mosque, which, acting as a transitional link between the everyday world and the spiritual, helps the believer to achieve an appropriate state of mind and composure before entering the prayer hall. At the end of the volume a full-page illumination is also often found, thereby balancing the frontispiece both functionally and decoratively.

In Qur'ans, whether written in kufi, early naskhi, or maghribi script, a number of design features characterize the full-page illuminations at the beginning or end of their volumes. Among these are the arabesques (interwoven flowing patterns of floral motifs), the geometric patterns highlighted in white ink, and the compartmentalized sections within a rectangular framework. As in decorations for chapter headings, a palmette was sometimes attached to the outermost border of the carpet page. Later, when carpet pages became even more elaborate, quotations from the Qur'an were inscribed on the upper and lower panels within the rectangular framework.

Traditionally certain Qur'an pages were treated more elaborately than others. For example, the opening pages immediately following the frontispiece—the first double page of text—were especially embellished. These opening text pages can be referred to as 'incipit pages'. While this term generally refers to the beginning of a major section of text in western manuscripts, it is particularly appropriate to the description of the decorated opening text pages in Islamic manuscripts, given their nature and design. For Muslims, the significance of this opening is that it contains the whole of the first chapter of the Qur'an, Surat al-alfāṣahā ('The opening chapter'), the particular importance of which is its recitation during the five daily prayers. In multi-volume Qur'ans, the decorated incipit pages carry the opening of the relevant section. Other elaborately illuminated pages are generally found in the centre opening of the volume and also in the final openings containing the shorter chapters which, according to Muslim tradition, were revealed to Muhammad in Mecca.
15. Illuminated frontispiece of an 11th-century Qur'an, Iraq or Persia, with the central geometric pattern highlighted in white. In Add.2119, ff. 20-3.
77 The carpet pages designed by Muhammad ibn Mohadi, from volume one of Sultan Baybars' seven-volume Qur'an, dated 1295-66. The quotation in the panels is one of the most widely used in carpet pages and comes from chapter 5, verses 77-80: "This is indeed a noble Qur'an, in a well-preserved book, which none shall touch but the purifled. It is a revelation from the Lord of the worlds." Al-Hilal 11, pp. 1-2.