Al Mishaf Al Shafeef begins with the opening Sura: 'Surat Al Fatihah', sometimes called 'Un Al Khurab' which contains seven verses that serve as the introduction to the Holy Qur'an. It is often innately embellished and illuminated with decorative borders in written and printed Qur'ans. The verses begin by the Basmalah:

Bismillah Al Rahman Al Rahim
In the name of God the Merciful the Compassionate

which precedes every Sura in the Holy Qur'an except one. This is followed by the six verses:

Praise be to God, Lord of the Worlds;
The Merciful, the Compassionate;
Master of the Day of Judgment;
They only do we worship, and they alone we ask for help.
Guide us to the straight path, The path of those whom Thou hast favoured;
not the path of those who earn Thy anger nor those who go astray.

'Surah Al Fatihah' is followed by the 2nd Sura, 'Surah Al Baqara' (The Heifer), which is the longest chapter in the Mishaf Al Shafeef consisting of some 282 Ayahs, verses. The shortest Suras in the Qur'an towards the end are Sura 103, 'Surah Al Asr' (Time through the Ages), Sura 108 'Surah Al Kauthar' (Abundance) and Sura 110 'Surah Al Nash' (Victory), each containing three Ayahs. The last Sura in the Mishaf Al Shafeef is: 'Surah Al Nisa' (Mankind) consisting of six Ayahs.

God Almighty addressed the Prophet Mohammed on the hill at Muna, near Makka, on his last pilgrimage just prior to his death in the year 10 Hijra, 632 with the 66th Ayah of 'Surah Al Maida' (The Table Spread):

This day have I perfected your religion for you,
Completed my favour upon you,
And have chosen for you Islam as your religion,
signaling the completeness of the revelation.
- Surat Al Fath & the beginning of Surat Al Baqara (the second and the longest chapter in the Holy Qur'an). An extensively illuminated Miskaf from the Qajar period, Iran, dated 1811.

The Language of the Holy Qur’an

The divine message was revealed in Arabic making the language an integral part of its structure. The text, therefore, cannot be translated in any other form or language. Indeed, the Qur’an’s miraculous essence is best described by the word Qur’an in Arabic which defines precisely the inimitability of the Holy text. This makes it incumbent on all Muslims, no matter what their native tongue is, to learn Arabic so as to be able to read the Holy Book and perform Salat, the daily prayers. There are of course translations of the meaning of the Holy Words in many of the living languages, but these are regarded as mere interpretation of the Holy Words and in no fashion can they be described as the Holy Qur’an or part of it.

In many areas of the Muslim world where Arabic is not the first language, the Holy Qur’an is either written or printed with interlinear interpretation of the Arabic text in the local language to assist the reader in the location and full comprehension of the Ayas in the text. However, these attempts do not convey the power and beauty of the Holy Words due to the extraordinarily concise and allusive nature of the language in which they were revealed. Understanding the Holy Qur’an is a matter of faith to all Muslims and the reading of the Holy Words is a spiritual act in its own right, an act of prayer which enriches the lives and gives peace and tranquility to all who partake in it.
The Recitation of the Holy Qur’an

The early oral traditions by which the Holy Qur’an was transmitted continued to thrive throughout the Islamic era and the public and private recitation of the Holy Qur’an remain to this day as one of the principal means of prayer and communication of the Holy Words. This can be seen and heard in all mosques at prayer times and more elaborately and splendidly during religious festivals, meetings and occasions, particularly during the month of Ramadan. Many religious institutions throughout the Islamic world, including Beit Al Qur’an, celebrate the month of fasting by instigating programmes for the recitation of the Holy Qur’an.

The traditional means of recitation of the Qur’anic verses were carefully preserved in an elaborate science which prescribed seven approved readings ‘Al Qira’at Al Sahih’ canonized by the scholar Ibn Mujahid in 933. Of these, two remain most common today: those according to the readings of Hafs and Naari. These readings are used to control the correct pronunciation and recitation of the Holy Words in the different parts of the Islamic world.
The Beit Al Qur'an Collection

From China to Al-Andalus, in Kufic, Nashk or in many of the other forms of magnificent Arabic calligraphy on parchment, paper or other variety of media, across the ages from the earliest Islamic era to the present day, the Beit Al Qur'an Collection of Quranic manuscripts stand as one of the most comprehensive under one roof. It offers visitors of this great institution a remarkable view of the great bond which exists between all Muslims and the Holy Qur'an and the great passion, artistry and skill in which calligraphers, scribes and illuminators from all parts of the Islamic world executed their work.

Beit Al Qur'an holds one of the most extensive collections of Quranic manuscripts in the world, some of which are on display in Al Hayat museum. The visitor will stand in awe and wonder at the beauty and variety of the exhibits which range from powerfully written Holy Quranic pages on parchment to lavishly decorated complete Holy Qur'ans. Some of the manuscripts are unique masterpieces that relate to specific instances of Islamic history or key development in the art of Quranic calligraphy, illumination and printing. The collection is important on a world scale, for rarely in modern times has such a range and variety of specifically Holy Quranic manuscripts and prints been assembled to be made available to scholars and the public to study and appreciate.
The Kiswah

The Kiswah is the black cloth which covers the Holy Ka'aba in Makkah. The cloth is woven in a mixture of black silk and cotton and embroidered with Arabic calligraphy and verses in silver and gold. The Kiswah is changed each year, with the old cloth cut and distributed to the pilgrims from around the Muslim world. The large section of the Kiswah displayed at the Al Qasr Al Umara (one of the central courts) covered the door at the Holy Ka'aba and was made in 1987.

Surat Al Baqara 27, part of verse 27: A further detail of the Kiswah at the Al Qasr Al Umara. Translation of he meaning of the verse: "Truly did God fulfill the vision for His Messenger: Ye shall enter the Sacred Mosque. If God wills with minds secure..."
The Power of the Written Word

The Holy Qur'an, the word of God Almighty was revealed to the Prophet Mohammed S.A.W. in Arabic, in the classical dialect of the Quraish, the Holy Prophet’s tribe in Arabia. The revelation imbued the language with spirituality that gave it singular importance and made it within a short period the lingua franca over vast areas of the known world at that time.

These new responsibilities and key demands on the language accelerated the development of the magnificent Arabic scripts and calligraphy which were called upon to meet the urgent needs of recording accurately the Holy Qur'an as it was revealed. The rise of the Arabic script in its varied forms was an extraordinary phenomenon, particularly when viewed against the purely oral traditions of the early Arabs of central Arabia. It is generally accepted that the Juhfia Arabs, the pre-Islamic people of Arabia, had scorned the written word and despite their celebrated language consciousness and love of poetry and rhyme, they relied mostly on the memory of members of their clan or tribe to pass on to succeeding generations their renowned works. When these oral traditions were occasionally broken, and those Arabs of old actually recorded their works in writing, they did so in rudimentary scripts borrowed in part from other Semitic cultures in the Arabian Peninsula. These traditions were tried
and tested and survived to some extent the test of time, for many of the classical pre-Islamic literary works such as the brilliant poems 'Al Mas'ūdīyat' had reached us from that period almost unscarred, mainly through this celebrated process of memorisation.

It was realised soon after the Holy Prophet's death in 632 that the transmission of the Holy Qur'an could not rely solely on the memories of the Prophet's venerated companions 'Abdullāh. The word of God Almighty had to be passed with unfailing precision in the form it was revealed without change or variation. The Holy Qur'an had to be recorded for posterity with exactitude in hard and tangible format leaving no margins for doubt, amendment, or error. It was this specific need of recording the Holy Qur'an that gave rise to the power of the written word. The Holy Qur'an was written, and written in a form of script worthy of the importance of the sacred message. The necessity to write the Holy Qur'an had established the Art of Arabic Calligraphy as one of the enduring legacies of Islamic civilization, many masterpieces of which can be seen in the Hayat Museum at Beit Al Qur'an.
Kufic to Naskh

The rise of Arabic calligraphy was an act of genius realised by the Islamic faith. It was remarkable that within a very short period there developed out of the simple unpolished scripts of central Arabia magnificent forms of calligraphy which stand today as a great and universal artistic achievement. The Arabic scripts, in their early days, just prior to Islam were rudimentary in character, partly derived from the Nabataean scripts of the semi-settled Northern Arabs who inhabited an area extending from Sinai, across Northern Arabia to Southern Syria and who had established in this area a strong trading state between 150 and 105 B.C. Arab references specifically relate the Arabic scripts as we know them today to these roots and particularly to a form directly descended from the 'Northern Arabic Script' developed amongst the tribes of Al Anbar and Hira in Iraq and Jordan, and spread from there to Hijaz and Western Arabia from around the late 5th and early 6th centuries. This script became popular at that time amongst the aristocratic tribes of Hijaz and the important towns of Makkah and Madina. By the beginning of the Islamic era, there existed in these two influential towns a number of generic variations of a stiff angular form of script with equal proportions of letters called 'Juma'. Derivatives of 'Juma' became the source for many of the calligraphic styles that were to follow and these derivatives bore a strong resemblance to the present day Arabic.
scripts. Many of Mazin's early variations became extinct or remained localised, but of its most important and enduring branches were two styles: the first was angular, comprising of thick straight strokes forming rectilinear characters, and the other was rounded, cursive and easy to write. It is these two styles that influenced the evolution of the Arabic scripts at Makkah and Medina in early Islam and established all future trends in the development of Arabic calligraphy and what was to be called later the 'Kufic' and 'Naskh' scripts. Kufic generally is defined as the stiff, angular stretched script used first in the writing of the early Holy Qur'an and Naskh refers to the rounded cursive script used for letters and business and wherever speed rather than elaborate formality was required. 'Kufic' and 'Naskh' are broad generic terms covering the plethora of magnificent styles in Arabic calligraphy, and are not, of course entirely inclusive of all the different styles of scripts, some of which were of key importance in the establishment of classical trends and styles in the noble art of Arabic calligraphy. Some highlights of these scripts and styles are described further, where possible, in the context of the Beit Al Qur'an's collection in this book.
Surat Al Hofa'at 78, part of verses 39-40 showing part of the decorative sura heading of Surat Al Nasa'at 79. A fragment of a Holy Quranic manuscript on paper. The exceptional gold outline script shows the early maturity of the Nashī script as it began to be used in the writing of the Holy Quran in Mawal, Iraq, 11-12th C.

Surat Al Nasa'at 79, part of verse 10 & verses 11, 12, 13 and part of verse 14. A fragment of the same manuscript above.

Surat Al Baq'ad, 13. Right page part of verses 15 & 16, left page part of verses 10 & 11. From the 12th C onwards, the Nashī script took over from the Kufic script as the primary style in the writing of the Holy Quran. This 12th C. Holy Quranic manuscript from Iran illustrates the utility and the clarity of the Nashī script which made it popular in the writing of the Holy Quran and for secular and business purposes.
The early expansion of Islam in Iraq, Syria and Egypt, and the entry to the Islamic faith of the vast populations of these areas, gave urgency to the reform of the Arabic script. This reform became necessary so as to facilitate the learning of the language amongst vast numbers of the new converts. It was also essential to preserve the integrity of the phonetic structure of the Arabic language. The reading of the Holy Qur'an by people whose mother tongue was not Arabic had to be done with finite accuracy so as not to corrupt the meaning of the Holy Words through indifferent pronunciation. Of the first tasks to achieve was the removal from the Arabic script of some of the ambiguities that existed due to the similarities in outline of a number of its consonants and to identify those short vowels in the language that did not appear in the text within the script.

The early reforms were initiated in Kufa by the famous Arab grammatur Abu Al Awwal Al Du'ali (d.688) whose system of diacritical annotation "Tashkil", and other developments implemented later by Al Hujaj Bin Younus Al Thugaf (d.724) and Al Khulil Ibn Ahmad Al Farahidi (d.786), have formed the basis of present day vocalisation methods of the Arabic language. The diacritical and vocalisation techniques adopted resolved the ambiguity of the similarities in some of consonant outlines and the other pronounceable invisible vowels. This was achieved through a rationalised system of dots, strokes and mini vowels which made the texts easy to read and pronounce. In addition to their practical use, the vocalisation techniques introduced a new dynamism to the aesthetics of the Arabic script. The system of annotation can be seen on all the written and printed Holy Qur'ans today and all other texts where accuracy of reading and transcription are required.

Detail of annotation

Surat Al Baq'ara, 6 part of verses 160 & 161. This is a 9th C. Holy Qur'an manuscript on parchment illustrating the power and beauty of the Kufic script. The style of the text, though written in North Africa is similar to the original. Eastern Kufic style. Note the early development of the diacritical annotation in the text (the red dots). These were added to distinguish letters of similar outline.
[Image of Arabic script]

Surat Al Rum 30, part of verses 29 & 30. An 18th C. Holy Quranic manuscript on paper from Indo/Persian provinces of the Islamic world. The bold text is written in the Naskh script with diacritical marks added to control grammar. The annotation illustrated here is based on a system developed in Kufa, Iraq, by Abu Al Awas Al Di‘ali during the second half of the 7th C. and used to this day in the writing of Arabic text.

Surat Al Rum 30, part of verses 18, 19, 20, 21 & 22. A 10th C. Holy Quranic manuscript on parchment from North Africa, most probably Qairawan. Note the gilt decorative devices at verse 'Surah' endings. The text is Western Kufic, and the diacritical annotations comprise black dots for letter differentiation and red dots for grammatical markings. The coloured dot system of annotation had not reached the degree of sophistication illustrated on the next page where mini-vowels and other signs were added to the text.