The Kufic Script

Al Khat Al Kufi, the ‘Kufic’ script, was named after the town of Kufa, in Southern Iraq, which attained intellectual pre-eminence during the first decades of Islam and became later the northern political capital of the Caliph Ali (661), the Holy Prophet’s cousin, son in law and the fourth of the Rightly Guided Caliphs. The script with its pronounced stiff angular characteristics was in use in several forms in Makka and Medina well before the founding of Islamic Kufa, but it was formalised in and popularised from that town and its name became associated with it to this day. The script gained early importance in Islam as it was used in the first hand written copies of the Holy Qur’an, and perhaps it is appropriate for it to be associated with Kufa the northern capital of the Caliph Ali, who was amongst the first scribes to commit the Holy Qur’an in writing and a master calligrapher in his own right.

The early Kufic scripts were simple and austere in character reflecting the harsh moral and physical environments in which they grew, but the styles began to develop decorative forms from as early as the 8th century. By the 11th century, the Kufic script attained an ornamental peak under the Seljuk Sultans who held control of the Islamic east during the later period of the Abbasid caliphate.

It is interesting to note that the Kufic script, unlike the other cursive styles of Arabic, was not subject to strict geometric rules, though it did have order, an order that kept it in conformity with the general aesthetics of the specific style in which it was written. This relative freedom in the style gave the calligrapher a freer hand in the manipulation of letter forms, allowing him to produce ornamental designs and decorative monumentality in the work. Foliate and floral motifs began to appear first within the script and these developed later into the manipulation of some of the free ends of the letters into geometric, plaited, knotted and interwoven designs which enlivened the style and gave it a patently decorative flavour suitable for use on a variety of media and products and on architectural monuments.

These developments were fully utilised by Islamic artists and artisans and Kufic calligraphy, in addition to the writing of the Holy Qur’an, began to appear on every form of surface such as on stone, brick, wood or plaster on architectural features, and on pottery, ceramics, glass textiles, rock crystal and ivory, and also on jewellery and gold. Arabic calligraphy, through the use of the Kufic ornamental script, became one of the most important design themes in Islamic art, a great tradition which survives to this day.
Eastern Kufic Script

The terms Eastern, Mashriqi, and Western, Maghribi, Kufic are often used in the context of defining the Kufic styles. Eastern or Mashriqi Kufic is generally the phrase coined to describe the early scripts developed in parts of the Islamic East, particularly Arabia, Iraq and Iran and the later developments that followed from these areas. The term also included the Kufic styles of Fatimid Egypt. Western or Maghribi Kufic is generally used to describe the styles that developed along certain aesthetic lines in the Islamic districts west of Egypt including North Africa and Andalusion.

The Eastern Kufic remained as the primary script for the writing of the Holy Qur'an well into the 11th century when it was overtaken by other forms of the cursive Naskhi script. It has been used since that time however, in its various forms, for Surah (chapter) headings and other ornamental and decorative elements, but rarely as body text. The eastern Kufic developed a variety of styles ranging from the rigid compact scripts of the early Qur'ans through the refined extended Masbhi style and later foliated scripts, leading to the beautiful Qurmatian style made famous in Iraq and Iran. This style acquired splendid vertical flourishes and dynamic sublinear diagonals and is well represented in the Beit Al Qur'an collection.

• Surat Al Anbaab, 29, part of verse 51, verses 52,53,54 A part of verse 35. An extremely rare Holy Quranic manuscript on blue parchment written in Qurmatian during the 3/10th C. Though this manuscript was written in Tunisia, North Africa, and was most probably commissioned by a Fatimid ruler. A style of script is characterized by Kufic. Eastern Kufic. The calligraphy is executed in bold gilt text and the verse 'Ayu' stops are marked with silver roulettes. The Eastern Kufic script remained popular amongst the Fatimid rulers of Egypt and Tunisia and was developed during their reign to incorporate complex geometric, floral and foliated designs.
Surah Al-Momin, 70, part of verse 4 to verse 17. A Holy Quranic manuscript on paper written in the classic Quraishian style of Eastern Kufic. This exceptional 118th-12th c. manuscript was probably written in Iraq or Iran. It illustrates the splendid and bold developments of the Eastern Kufic script in the eastern provinces of the Islamic world.
Western Kufic Script

The Maghribi, Western Kufic, scripts have their roots in the Kufic styles of the East but from the 10th century onward these scripts began to acquire particular characteristics in North Africa, excepting Egypt, and in Islamic Spain. The early developments of the Maghribi scripts started in Qairawan, that most august of Islamic towns, established by the Arabs in 670 and maintained prominence as a centre of power, religion and culture between the 9th and the 12th centuries, first under the Aghlabids and later the Fatimids. These were dynasties that separated from the central Abbasid rule in Baghdad during the period. Certain distinguishing characteristics began to appear on the standard Kufic scripts of the East such as the rounding of the angles and the bold subterminal flourishes of certain letters in graceful curves and semi-circles. The Maghribi, Western, scripts acquired certain elegance, grace and lightness and branched into a variety of styles. Most important amongst these are the Andalusi script with its compact characters, delicate letters and finesse of line.

Several regional developments of the Maghribi Kufic began to appear, some with cursive characteristics while others remained bold and compact in nature such as the Sudani script which is used to this day, particularly in the writing of the Holy Qur’an in North West Africa. By the beginning of the 17th century the many individual styles of the Maghribi scripts began to share aesthetic details producing the present day Maghribi style which is predominantly in use in North African countries for the writing of the Holy Qur’an and in normal correspondence.

An 18th C. Kufic Script from North Africa. The text is written in highly refined Western, Maghribi Kufic.

Syrat Al-Fatih 7, part of verse 130 A verses 121, 122 and part of verse 123. A 12th C. Holy Qur’an manuscript on parchment from Andalusia, Islamic Spain. The manuscript illustrates the elegance of the Western Kufic script. Of interest is the decorative gift devices marking the 'Aya' verse endings.
Serat Al Baqara, 6, part of verse 59 & part of verse 60. A 9th C. Holy Quranic manuscript from North Africa written in the Kufic script. The style of the script is very much similar to Eastern Kufic and does not display the squiggly curved flourishes which are a distinguishing characteristic of the Western Kufic script. The tall format of the text is extremely rare in the writing of Holy Quranic manuscripts of this period.

Serat Al Shura, 42, part of verse 47 & part of verse 48. This exceptional Holy Quranic manuscript on parchment was written in North Africa, probably in the famous town of Garmisht during the 9th C. The text is in Western Kufic, showing the decorative tendencies of the style during the period. Note the decorative annotation within the text marked by red and blue dots.
A Naskh manuscript from Andalusia, Islamic Spain, most probably written in Granada in 1300. The lavish illumination and the delicate Andalusi Kufic script show the immense beauty of Arabic calligraphy and the refinement it achieved in the writing of the Holy Qur'an. Note the illumination of Surat Al-Fatihah heading and the decorative devices on the margins.

Splendidly illuminated flysheet from the same manuscript on the left.
The Naskh Scripts

The Naskh scripts had developed along different lines than those of Kufic. Like Kufic however, these cursive scripts were derived from the pre-Islamic and early Islamic scripts of Hijaz and were influenced directly by the developments and refinements that perfected the Kufic script. These styles initially lacked elegance and discipline and were used for secular purposes rather than in the writing of the Holy Qur'an. The Naskh scripts were easier to write at speed than Kufic due to their cursive nature and they had the added advantage of taking more readily to the evolution and developments that followed relating to vocalisation and diacritical annotations of the Arabic texts.

The varied and fast developments of the Naskh scripts in the early days of Islam gave way to a slower but surer pace during the Omayyad period in Damascus. The existing early styles were formalised and new styles invented for use for the expanding official business. Little work survives from that period to describe with certainty the detailed stylistic developments of these early scripts. It is certain however that these developments had established the basis for future styles and led to the formulation of the Naskh script and its rules during the Abbasid period.

These key developments led later, according to accepted traditions, to the six classical styles (Al Iqra' Al-Sittah) of the cursive Naskh script. Na'li: from which all present day printing types are derived, Thuluth, a more cursive outgrowth of Na'li, Muhra: a bold script with sweeping diagonal flourishes, Rak'ah: a more ornate version of Thuluth, Ray: the cursive style commonly used today for handwriting in almost all of the Arab world, and Tawq: a derivative of Thuluth with the letters sometimes joined together, all of which are represented in the Beit Al Qur'an Collection some examples of which are set out here in this book.

The late 9th and the beginning of the 10th centuries saw some dramatic developments which formalised Arabic calligraphy into the elegant art it now is. These key developments were the result of work undertaken by Abu Ali Muhammad Ibn Al-Muqaddas (d.980). Ibn Al-Muqaddas is the acknowledged inventor of the Naskh script as we know it today. He was a universal man by present day standards, a consummate artist and an accomplished mathematician with thorough knowledge of geometry. He was a master calligrapher who studied the classic art at the hands of the most famous innovator in calligraphy of his time, Al-Mu'addal Al-Mukarrir. In addition to his artistic skills, he was an efficient administrator holding the highest rank of office, a Wazir, Chief Minister, for three Abbasid Caliphs between 909 and 940, at a most turbulent time of the Abbasid Caliphate. Unfortunately the rise of political intrigue which characterised these times lead to his imprisonment, torture and death. His true reward however lies in the beauty and magnificence of the Arabic scripts in all their masterful forms. Ibn Al-Muqaddas more than anybody else was responsible for the normalisation of these beautiful cursive scripts into the six grand classical styles (Al Iqra' Al-Sittah) as we know them today.
Ibn Al-Muqallad invented a mathematically proportioned well-balanced system for the writing of the Naskh script. The system was based on the length of the letter Alif, the first letter in the Arabic alphabet, a standard rhomboid dot and a standard circle. The drawing of the rest of the alphabet was then executed on a proportional system based on these three basic measures. The result was an elegant system of proportion and geometry governing the drawing of all the six traditional styles of the Naskh script, a system which was used and refined by all the master calligraphers that followed Ibn Al-Muqallad to this day.

Arabic calligraphy went through a period of consolidation and refinement at the hand of great calligraphers who followed the traditions of Ibn Al-Muqallad. One of these was the Abbasid artist from Baghdad, Abu Hassan Ali ibn Hilal, better known as Ibn Al-Bawwab (d.1022) who added grace and beauty to Ibn Al-Muqallad’s systems and whose work in the six classic cursive styles was of great influence and importance. Yaqub Al-Mosta’ain (d.1298) was another master calligrapher from Baghdad whose work attained unsurpassed perfection and beauty. The seminal work by these two calligraphers helped to elevate the cursive Naskh scripts to great heights and ensured that they took over from Kufic as the primary styles in the writing of the Holy Qur’an from the 12th century onward and establishing great traditions in the art of Arabic calligraphy which survive to this day.
The Calligraphic Traditions

The cataclysmic Mongol invasions of the Islamic East which culminated in the destruction of Baghdad in 1258 had serious disruptive effects on the religious and cultural lives of the Muslim peoples of the conquered areas. However, the eventual triumph of Islam over barbarism and the conversion of the Mongol invaders to the Islamic faith led to relatively settled times in which the calligraphic achievements of former generations continued to prosper. There was under the enlightened Il-Khanid rulers, the direct descendant of the early Mongols, great support and patronage for the arts of calligraphy and illumination. Many influential calligraphers of the period produced splendid works particularly in the writing of Holy Qur’ans, continuing the great traditions established just earlier, by the celebrated calligrapher Yaqut al-Musta’imi and those who followed him. Many of these great works survive to this day, of which a large number are monumental illuminated Holy Qur’ans in the Thuluth and Naskhi scripts.

The Il-Khanid’s reign over Islam’s eastern domains was soon to be followed by the Timurids who were great supporters of the arts and particularly the arts of bookmaking and calligraphy. The dynasty was founded by Timur the Lame, Tamerlane, (d.1405), who despite his reputation for destruction and carnage, was a great supporter of the arts and especially the art of calligraphy. The patronage of calligraphy and bookmaking reached a zenith under Timur’s son Shah Rukh who ruled from his capital Herat between (1405-1447). These traditions and patronage were continued by Shah Rukh’s descendants. Beautiful Holy Qur’ans were written and illuminated during this golden age of calligraphy establishing trends that influenced the art to this day. The Timurid style of writing of the Holy Qur’ans aimed at achieving a balance between calligraphy and illumination. The grandeur and monumentality of the splendid scripts, particularly that of Rikabi, were set against delicate and softly drawn backgrounds of florid ornamentation and illumination. In addition, the Timurids popularised the use of different sizes and styles of scripts on the same page in the writing of Holy Qur’ans and established traditions of writing monumentally large Qur’ans in the Rikabi, Naskhi and other Naskhi scripts. As a result of these great works, the Timurid school of calligraphy and illumination stands today as one of the most accomplished. Brilliant examples of Timurid calligraphy can be seen in the Bait Al Qur’an collection.

- Surat Hud, 11, part of verses 6 & 7. A Holy Quranic manuscript on paper written in the Thuluth script most probably in Egypt/Tunis in the course of the 15th C. The design composition of the page and the bold calligraphy executed against aotted background drawn in soft colours was a theme utilised by Il-Khurid, and later Mamluk, Safavid and Ottoman calligraphers.
Surah Al-Imran, 3, verses 145 to 151. A 16th C. Holy Qur'anic manuscript on paper from Iran. The text is written in the Hilali script with interlinear translation of the meaning of the Holy words in Persian, written in the Nastaliq script. The Hilali and Nastaliq scripts were elegant styles that became popular in the writings of monumental Holy Manuscripts.

Surah Al-Baqara, 2, the first verse to part verse 4. A Holy Qur'anic manuscript from Turkey dated 1713 and written on paper in gilt outline Nastaliq script. The bold use of this type of calligraphy owes its roots to the earlier developments of the style during Ilkhani and Amalaski periods.
The Mamluk Tradition

The Mamluks were Turcoman born men brought by Saladhin (Salah ad-Din Al Ayubi) (d.1193) as his pritorian guards in his campaigns in the defence of the Holy lands against the crusaders during the last quarter of the 12th century. With the demise of the Ayubid state, the Mamluks established dynasties which ruled Egypt, Greater Syria and parts of Arabia between 1250 and 1517. Early in their reign the Mamluk’s stood up to the Mongol invasion in the crucial battle of Ain Jalut in 1260, saving the lands under their control from the destruction and disruption that befall the Islamic world further east. As a result of these successful campaigns there remained a relative sense of continuity in the artistic and cultural life of the areas under their domain, a continuity which benefited greatly from the fact that the Mamluks were great patrons of the arts and the art of calligraphy in particular.

Mamluk sultans commissioned a great number of illuminated Holy Qur’ans executed with great calligraphic skill. The consummate beauty of these works established standards of calligraphy greatly admired to this day. A large number of the Mamluk Holy Qur’anic manuscripts were written with extraordinarily refined and restrained Naskh and Thuluth scripts and these styles became synonymous with that period. Arguably, Arabic calligraphy and the cursive scripts in particular had attained their ultimate perfection in Egypt and Syria in the first hundred years of the Mamluk period and the great success of the calligraphic artists of these times was not restricted to the writing of the Holy Qur’an, but also included designs on a variety of materials such as metals, glass, pottery, textiles, wood, stone and ivory, elevating the classical scripts as art forms in their own right.

By the turn of the 16th century the calligraphic traditions of the Arabic script had been firmly established. This was achieved first through the evolution of the first scripts from their early roots and the development of the Kufic in its various forms. These first developments were followed by the pioneering work of the master calligraphers of the Abbasid period. The principles for the various styles of the Naskh were established and later consolidated into magnificent works, particularly in the writing of the Holy Qur’an.

The true inheritors of these classic calligraphic traditions in the Islamic world were the calligraphers of Iran under the Safavids and those of Turkey under the Ottomans. The master calligraphers of these two periods refined the art of Arabic calligraphy of previous generations and delved so deeply into the perfection of this craft so as to make calligraphy not only an artistic activity but also a reverential and a spiritual act. The celebrated calligraphers of these two areas of the Islamic world worked mainly within the established classical styles. They also innovated variations which rivalled the established original scripts in elegance and refinement.

Surat Al Fatiha, 1 & Surat Al Baqara, 2, the first two chapters of the Holy Qur’an. This Holy Qur’an is from Egypt/Syria written in the Muhaqqaq script in 1425. Note the decorative treatment of the first two chapters which is typical of the Mamluk style. The cursive scripts by this time had reached maturity and were used almost exclusively in the writing of Holy Koran.

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Surat Al-Tobba, 9, part of verse 1. A 14th C. Holy Quranic manuscript on paper from Mamluk Egypt or Syria written in the Muhaggaq script. Surat Al-Tobba is the only chapter in the Holy Quran which starts without the Baasadda. In the name of God the Merciful the Compassionate.