CHAPTER SIX

The Proliferation of Round Scripts

In the late eleventh, twelfth, and early thirteenth centuries, round scripts came to dominate the calligraphic scene, as copyists strove to transform their regular hands into graceful and imposing scripts suitable for larger codices containing important texts, including the Koran. Some copyists in the eastern Islamic lands continued to use the broken cursive supposedly canonized by Ibn Maqqa, but the script became increasingly stylized until it was gradually relegated to headings and incidentals. Secretaries and copyists there also played with other round scripts. Like the majuscule and minuscule scripts used in the West, these round scripts eventually came to be grouped in sized pairs later canonized as the Six Pens – tawqit and its smaller counterpart riqa', thuluth, naskh, and muhaqqaq (rayyhan). Contemporary copyists in the Maghrib, who eschewed the adoption of paper and communal use parchment, created their own distinctive style of round script, which also came in larger and smaller sizes. The development of regional varieties of round scripts is clearly related to the historical situation, in which distinct cultural centers arose at Baghdad, Nishapur, Cairo, Córdoba, and elsewhere. Since these scripts had not yet reached their canonical forms, scholars sometimes categorize the same specimens under different names, and one of the aims of this chapter is to delineate significant features of individual examples.

The stylization of broken cursive

Broken cursive had a long and varied shelf life. In these centuries it was used not only for Arabic but also for Persian. The first surviving manuscript in new Persian – a copy of al-Harawi's pharmacological work entitled Kitab al-Anbiya' (Book of the Prophets) [Figure 6.1] – is described in 447/1055–6 by the poet Ali ibn Ahmad Asadi al-Tusi, copied in a rough broken cursive, with a larger and more polished version used as display script in the opening two lines with the Persian invocation to God. The text script is characterized by strokes of varying thickness, left-facing serifs, diagonal tails, and a spur on the initial alif; the display script is a more stylized version. In it, the vertical strokes of the four alifs in the first line are drawn out to contrast with the horizontal bars of gaf in the second line, which is so
his distinctive script until the early thirteenth century. The most striking examples [Figure 6.2] are multi-volume codices that measure 35 \(\times\) 20 cm or less. The folios are thus vertical format and medium sized, but each page appears larger, for it has only four or five lines of script written firmly in black ink, with red vocalization, gold circular pointing, and blue for other signs. The large size of the script and the low number of lines per page means that many pages were required for the full text, typically bound as a thirty-volume set. Each volume contains some 75 folios, making a total of 2,350 in the complete manuscript. The format [but not the size] thus foreshadows the magnificent Koran manuscripts made for the Ilkhanids at the beginning of the fourteenth century [Figure 7.2].

The relatively high cost of these multi-part Koran manuscripts in broken cursive is conveyed by their spaciousness. The lines are widely spaced, the letters attenuated. The bodies of the letters have shrunk in proportion to the rigidly vertical ascenders, which can be as much as twenty-five times the width of the penstroke or eight or nine times as tall as the body of low letters like medial kaf. Such extreme stylization shows a script that is slowly ossifying.

The wide spacing and attenuated strokes of this broken cursive left ample room for other decoration. In one, slightly larger \([33 \times 26 \text{ cm}]\) manuscript, the space between the lines was filled by an interlinear Persian commentary in naskh. In other cases, the letters were set within contour panels and the ground filled with ornamental scrolls. This was typical for opening and closing pages in the individual

To judge from surviving manuscripts, broken cursive became particularly popular for Koran codices, which were penned regularly in elongated that the last four letters of \textit{bakhshayish} [the Compassionate] occupy the whole line. To enliven the long and thick horizontal stroke, al-Tusi added a thinner line below with small bumps like little wheels on a railroad car, the same mannerist trait already used by 'Ali ibn Shadhan almost a century earlier in Iran [Figure 5.3a] and in the Nurse’s Koran copied a generation earlier at the other end of the Islamic lands. Al-Tusi clearly enjoyed making flourishes and patterns in this stylized script. He extended the upper stroke of \\textit{gaf} in line two so that it swoops to the top left of the page and balances the swooping stroke on the right which indicates the three dots of \\textit{shin} in \textit{bakhshayanda} [the Merciful]. This stylization of the Persian invocation to God became standard.\textsuperscript{6}

This manuscript exemplifies the type of medium-sized, multi-volume copy of the Koran penned in broken cursive that was popular in eastern Iran in the eleventh, twelfth and possibly the early thirteenth centuries. The lines are widely spaced, and the headings, such as this one marking the beginning of part \([50^a] 10\), are richly illuminated in gold.
sections, but in one of the most elaborate of these manuscripts— a dispersed copy often dubbed the Qarmathian Koran—the four lines of text on each page are surrounded with scrolling arabesques (Figure 6.3a). In this manuscript the reserve decoration has become as important as the calligraphy it surrounds.

The rigid angularity and heightened contrast between thick and thin strokes typical of broken cursive are particularly striking in the Qarmathian Koran. The four lines are set on a rigid horizontal baseline. Connecting letters are not raised as they are in modern printed texts. Note, for example, the word abadan, the second word in the first line (Figure 6.3a), in which the ha' is set at the same height as the following dal. The ha’ is marked below by a small ha’ below to distinguish it from homographs such as jin. This tradition of marking unpointed [mushafa] letters derives from the scribal tradition [Figure 5.1] and shows that broken cursive is a stylization of the typical secretarial hand. The letters in the word adhere rigidly to the baseline, which provides the contrast to the vertical ascenders that march across the page. The grid is punctuated by diagonals in the form of the large descending tails of final nun, same, ya’ (Figure 6.3b), and ya’. They look somewhat like hockey sticks, as thin diagonal downstrokes juxtapose thick triangular terminals. The distinct contrast between thin stroke and thick terminal creates a feeling of tension, as though a thread-like string was supporting a heavy weight.

The occasional curved stroke jumps out from the rectilinear grid, as with the bold pincer-like lam-adh in the word al-arm in line two (Figure 6.3b) or in the wiggly terminal nun in the syllable -inj squeezed above the end of line four. Unlike early kufic Koran manuscripts, in which the copyist broke lines in the middle of a word, in these copies breaking between words has become standard, and the copyist had to squish the final letters of the last two words above the bottom two lines. Despite the stylization of the script, readability was important in Koran manuscripts transcribed in broken cursive. This change heralds a shift in the manner of using the text, in which readers were expected to read in words, rather than recite from memory.

The rich illumination on these Koran manuscripts in broken cursive often includes extensive gold. In addition to the markings used in their smaller cousins, these manuscripts have elaborate sura headings, with rectangular panels of gold and blue surrounded by gold braid and roundels in the margin. Some pages have gold braid around the text, with similar marginal roundels. The marginal decoration also includes squares or boxes shaped like classical tabula ansatae with additional information such as the place where the sura was revealed or the number of verses in it. Decorating both sides of each folio in the Qarmathian Koran with contour panels filled with scrolls—a total of 4,500 decorated pages— was an extraordinarily time-consuming enterprise, yet in some cases the colophon tells us that the decoration was executed by the copyist himself.  

Because of its striking visual appearance, broken cursive was particularly suitable as a display script. Already used for titles, headings, and special effects in the tenth and eleventh centuries, it continued to be used this way in later manuscripts penned in other round scripts, particularly naskh, but became increasingly stylized, almost beyond legibility. This is shown by the large [17 x 29 cm] and finely illustrated copy of pseudo-Galen’s pharmacology entitled Kitab al-Diyaq (Book of Antidotes) (Figure 6.4) that was transcribed and illustrated by Muhammad ibn Abi’t-Fath ‘Abd al-Wahid ibn Abi’l-Hasan ibn Abi’l-Abbas Ahmad in Rabl 1 395/January 1199 for his nephew.
the imam Abu'l-Fath Mahmud ibn Jamal al-Din. To judge from the style of the illustrations, the manuscript was probably made in northern Iraq, where the copyist belonged to a prominent Shi’ite family, as indicated by his lengthy genealogy. He was justly proud of his work here, for he not only signed his name in the colophon, but also included it on one of the many introductory pages in broken cursive.

In this pharmacological manuscript, Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahid set off the round text script (seen here in the small line penned in red one-third of the way down the page) with many headings in an extremely stylized broken cursive. His broken cursive is particularly attenuated: the ‘alif, which bends to the right at the bottom (Figure 6.4a), measures some twenty-six times the width of the penstroke or almost nine times the height of the low letters. The broad flat verticals contrast abruptly with the hair-thin curving tails of descending letters like wa‘w and ra‘. To break up the empty fields above the low bodies of the letters, the copyist often inserted a U-shaped motif at regular intervals, as in the lower band of broken cursive above the miniature. Sometimes he stacked up these U-shapes or losenges to form the upper strokes of plaited lam-‘alif (Figure 6.4b) or simply to decorate low letters like final ha`. He then filled the ground between the uprights with a gold scrolling arabesque that seems to float like a cloud above the low line of script penned in dark black, bright red, and ultramarine blue. Color is thus added to heighten the formal impact.

Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahid played with broken cursive in other ways as well. In a few cases, he adapted the format, setting the words in broken cursive on the diagonal and stretching out the connectors or bodies of low letters to form a pattern. In this page, for example, the diagonal words in boxes in the middle line form a chain of black hills set between red trees formed by elongated verticals in the intervening boxes. In several pages at the end of the text, Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahid set the diagonal words in four boxes to form diamond shapes. These diagonally set words are the model for later Persian copyists who penned verses on the diagonal to stretch out the text so that the space for an illustration fell at a particular and appropriate place in the text (Figure 7.10).

In other cases, Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahid elaborated a single letter. On this page showing the physician Aflahur as preparing an antidote for a copy of pseudo-Calen’s pharmacology Kitab al-Diyaq, transcribed and painted by Muhammad ibn Abu'l-Fath ‘Abd al-Wahid ibn Abu’l-Hasan ibn Abu’l-Abbas Ahmad in Rabii’1 1595/January 1199, probably in northern Iraq, the copyist, who also painted the illustrations in this manuscript, transcribed the text in a fine round script, to be identified as naskh, which contrasts with the particularly elongated and stylized broken cursive he used for titles and headings. His script is as inventive as his paintings, with added flourishes and decoration to stretch out the text.
in a more usual round hand in the margins. Broken cursive is here a script that has past its prime. The waning popularity of broken cursive in Iran and adjacent regions can be seen by juxtaposing the pharmacological manuscript in Paris to another copy of the same text transcribed a half century later, probably in Mosul for the atabeg Rad。” Al-Din Lu’ta’ (r. 1234–59), who portrayed in the frontispiece. Both manuscripts are transcribed in naskh, but the headings in broken cursive in the Paris manuscript are replaced by headings in thuluth in the Vienna copy. From the thirteenth century onwards, broken cursive was used primarily as a display script in manuscripts transcribed in Iran and its environs. Headings in broken cursive occur, for example, in a Persian copy of the bestiary, Manafi’s Hayawan, copied at Maragha in the 690s/1290s, and in a related copy that has been dispersed. Used sporadically until the sixteenth century in Koran manuscripts for headings, marginal ornaments, and the odd section of text, the script became increasingly mannered and stiff, a graphic puzzle intended to recall scripture and revive the past.

Other round scripts

In this period copyists continued to grapple with the problem that had confronted their predecessors in the previous centuries: how to transform their regular round hands into calligraphic scripts suitable for religious texts and wealthy patrons. Some copyists tried to add the angles typical of broken cursive to the typical round hand used for copying in order to create a more monumental style. Such an approach can be seen [Figure 6.5] in a book on the physical and moral characteristics of the Prophet, Kitab khaliq al-nabi wa’l-khaylah, transcribed at Ghazna by Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn Abi Rabi’ al-warraq [the copyist or bookseller]. The ex-libris on the first page names the Ghaznavid amir ‘Abd al-Rashid, who ruled from 1049 to 1053, and the manuscript is therefore datable c. 1050. Each medium-sized page has nine or ten lines of distinctive small black script, with a larger gold one used for display purposes such as headings and the last line of the colophon.

Abu Bakr Muhammad’s hand is notable for its angles. As in Ibn al-Bawab’s Koran codex [Figure 5.8], the words here do not sit flat on the baseline, but slope downwards from right to left, but this hand is jerkier and more angular. Final ya’ has an sharp angle, a joint that calls to mind the angular strokes in broken cursive. Ali’ has a thick top and a hook or serif that extends to the left in initial position and to the right in final position, another detail characteristic of broken cursive. The tails on final nun, ya’, and other letters are often extended so that they encircle the following letter, syllable, or even word, but the stroke varies in thickness, as in broken cursive. Looped letters are sometimes blind. As Stern surmised, the copyist probably tried to transform his regular book hand into a calligraphic script suitable for a luxury manuscript made for the ruler.

Other copyists in the eastern Islamic lands used different methods to transform their regular scripts into Koranic ones, as shown by a codex transcribed by ‘Uthman ibn Muhammad in 505/1111–12 at Bost, now in Afghanistan. The 125 pages contain the fifth section of a seven-part Koran. Each page has seven lines of text in black ink. The first and last pages [Figure 6.6] are particularly elaborate, with gold margins enclosing cloud panels of scrolling arabesques, the same type of background used in the Qarmathian Koran [Figure 6.3], probably done in the same milieu.

Though small [30 X 13 cm], the Koran manuscript made at Bost is elaborately decorated in gold. The fine illumination is the work of Ali ibn ‘Abd al-Rahman, whose name is recorded in kufic in the small box in the center of the gold band above the colophon. His somewhat awkward signature (he had to squish the last word of his father’s name in the line above) shows the growing importance of this type of specialist. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries the same
and François Déroche even identified the text script in the Bust Koran as tawqi, making it the only known copy of the Koran transcribed in this script.

The connection of the text script in the Bust Koran to secretarial tawqi is clear when we compare it to contemporary documents from the Mediterranean lands. Since‘Abbasid times, secretaries had used riqa and its larger counterpart tawqi, but the first series of documents that has survived was issued in the eleventh and twelfth centuries by the Fatimid chancery, most of them preserved in the monastery of St Catherine at Mt Sinai. On all of these Fatimid decrees, the text is written in a small rounded hand, juxtaposed in two cases to the authenticating signature written in a larger version of the same connected script. A good example is a long (353 × 25 cm) scroll containing a decree dated 310/1126 in which the Fatimid caliph al-Hafiz orders the amir Muwali al-Dawla, military governor of al-Tur, to extend his protection to the monks, and especially the bishop, of Mt Sinai (Figure 6.7).

The vizier’s signature, al-hamdu li’llahi ‘ala ala’hi [Praise to God for His gifts], is written in large characters between the second and third lines of the decree. As with signatures today, the vizier’s is personal so as to be distinctive; the upper strokes of alif, lam, and ta’ marbuta have been extended so that they all end at a similar height. These strong verticals are countered by the slashing stroke of initial ‘ayn. Other combinations like alif, lam, and alif are run together such that except for the formulaic nature of the phrase, they would be unrecognizable.

In preserved in its entirety, the 38-line document gives a good idea of the contents of a typical decree. The text opens with a brief statement, the top line. The first part of the decree proper, known as the averga in European diplomatic terms, contains general principles of government that motivated the particular order covered in the decree. In this decree, lines 2–5 give general considerations about God having entrusted the caliph with the government of all his subjects, Muslims and protected people alike. This preliminary matter is followed by the body of the decree, divided into two parts. The first (lines 6–13), corresponding to the expositio or narratio in European diplomatic, explains the circumstances that motivated the issuance of the document. The second part (lines 13–27) contains the actual order (dispositio). At the end are final injunctions (lines 28–35) and the date, closing eulogies, and the formula ‘God is sufficient for us, how fortunate is the deputy’ (hasabani allah wa w‘im al-wakil), lines 36–8.

Other than the signature, the text is written in a round hand similar to the one used on the other nine documents in the series. Smaller than the script used for the signature, the text script can be identified as riqa. The name derives from the verb raqa’a, meaning to patch, repair, or piece together. The noun rag’a [pl. raqa‘ or riqa] designates a patch or piece of cloth with which a garment or the like is patched. Also used for a small sheet of paper or note, the term came
to mean petition. In Fatimid times, it was used for petitions addressed to the chancery, as opposed to the widely spaced edicts or decrees issued by the chancery. These petitions were usually written on a single sheet of paper, sufficient for the fifteen or so lines that comprise the typical document. 25

Riqa’, like its larger counterpart tawqqi’, was already used in ‘Abbasid times. The tenth-century chronicler Ibn al-Nadim mentions riqa’ as derived from khatij al-thuluth al-kabir and used for signing edicts and similar things, 26 and both the large and small scripts on the Fatimid decrees share similarities with thuluth. As in thuluth, alf in riqa’ bends to the bottom left, and descenders end with a small upwards hook. In the riqa’ tawqqi’ pair, however, this bend or hook can be continued upwards and join to the next letter, as in the ra’ that joins to ha’ in the word al-rahan in the basmalah (Figure 6.7a) or in the alf that is joined to the mim of amir, the fifth word in line two. Final ha’, written like a squiggle that is open at the bottom, is also similar to the shape found in thuluth.
intact, and its large size, fine state of preservation, and complete
documentation make it a useful benchmark in showing the development
of Koranic script in courtly codices.

Each regular page in the 215-page Hamadan Koran contains sev-
eventeen lines of small round script penned in black ink. Letters are
seriffless, as in naskh, but bowls are rounded and closed and some
letters are blunt, as in rayhani. The script is most notable for the gen-
erous spaces between words, a feature that distinguishes the script
that the Mamluk chronicler al-Tayyibi later called mantkur (scat-
tered).34 Every line of text in the Hamadan Koran [Figure 6.9a]
is accompanied by a line of Arabic commentary, written on the slant
in red in a smaller round script with larger open bowls typical of
tuskh. Size, color, and script distinguish text from commentary and
also from headings, which are written in yet other scripts and colors.

Figure 6.8 Double page containing Sura 22:3–10 from a Koran manuscript with eleven lines per page transcribed by Mas’ud ibn Muhammad, the secretary from Isfahan (al-kutub al-isfahani) and finished in 555/1160. This manuscript is penned in an upright script with hard or hooks on the alif, reduced sublinear strokes, and sharp tips to the strokes. It is closest to muhaqqaq, the script that became standard for the largest and finest Koran manuscripts produced under the Mamluks.

Figure 6.9 Opening double pages containing Sura 3–24 from a single-volume Koran manuscript with seventeen lines per page copied and illuminated by Mahmud ibn al-Husayn, the secretary from Kirman (al-
kutub al-kirmani) at Hamadan at the end of Jumada 1 559/April 1164. This intact Koran manuscript is particularly valuable for its documentation. The colophon gives the name of the scribe-illuminator, the date, and the place of transcription. The copyist was a secretary, probably in the Saljuq chancery, and this large manuscript exemplifies the many round scripts used in western Iran in the twelfth century.

Figure 6.9b
The letter alif, which measures five times the dot used for punctuation, is straight, typically without serif at the top right or bent foot at the bottom left. In final position it is vertical, but independent alif is pitched some 20° to the left. Bold diagonal strokes set at a 30° angle mark fatha and tanwin, and a strong downstroke like a dagger marks kashida, a stroke adopted from the larger, more rounded display scripts that Ibn al-Bawwab had used for headings. Connected mim has a similar downstroke for its tail and a body written not as an open loop but as tangent down and upstrokes that produce a heavy wavy line. Unconnected letters are occasionally elided, as in dal and final ha'. Despite its small size (each page is about the same area of those in the Koran manuscripts in broken cursive [Figures 6.1 and 6.3]) and one-quarter the area of the large manuscripts made at Isfahan and Hamadan (Figures 6.8 and 6.9), the text is clear, an essential asset for manuscripts designed for instruction in a madrasa. This type of bold and readable naskh was used for many other fine manuscripts produced in the area at this time, showing the gradual codification of a regional style.

Toward a codification of round scripts

The manuscripts illustrated in the previous section show how copyists working during these centuries tried several different methods to monumentalize round scripts and canonize them in distinct styles. Texts on calligraphy tell the same story. The first surviving account describing how these round scripts were based on a system of thumb dots formed by pressing the reed pen on paper was put together at this time by the Persian historian Najm al-Din Abu Bakr Muhammad or Mahmud) Ravandi. Born in Ravand near Kashan, he spent the decade 1174–84 studying Hanafi jurisprudence (fiqh) and learning calligraphy from his uncle Taj al-Din Ahmad. It must have been a comprehensive course, for Ravandi claims to have mastered seventy scripts and also learned the arts of bookbinding and gilding (fardhat).

A connoisseur of the arts of the book, Ravandi composed a treatise on the principles of calligraphy. The work is now lost, but the author included a chapter of it in his history of the Saljuqs, Rahat al-saltan wa ayat al-surr, a work he presented to the Saljuq sultan of Rum, Chiyath al-Din Kaykhusraw, at Konya in 1207. The only surviving copy of Ravandi’s history is a unique manuscript transcribed in a careful naskh by the scribe al-Hajj Ilyas ibn ‘Abdallah al-Hafiz and finished at the beginning of Ramadan 635/12 April 1338. A previous owner of the manuscript added the epithet al-Quyavi [from Konya] at the end of the scribe’s name, suggesting that the manuscript may have been copied there, perhaps from the original. The ten-page chapter on calligraphy comes at the end of the historical text, among such sundry subjects as shooting with arrows, horse racing, chess, and betting (technically, the method of calculating the results of contests between rivals).