The Marginal Commentary

One of the many aspects which mark this manuscript out from other Qur’ānic is the presence in the margins of a full commentary, written in a neat Mamlūk waslī script in red, blue and brown, and clearly original to the manuscript. It consists of three different types of Qur’ānic commentary: taṣfīr (exegesis), qirā‘āt (manner of reading and recitation of the Qur’ān), and i‘rāb (grammatical vovelling or desinential inflection), written in distinct and carefully arranged blocks of space in the margins. The arrangement of the blocks of text starts in the upper margin nearest the spine and always begins with the taṣfīr, written in red or blue. Next, moving along the margin towards the outer edge, comes the qirā‘āt. Thirdly comes the i‘rāb. The amount of space needed for the taṣfīr, qirā‘āt and i‘rāb areas depends on the amount of each type of commentary that exists for that particular page of Qur’ānic text. On some pages there are only a few lines and the individual sections are small, whereas on others there are many lines for each type of commentary, sometimes completely filling the margin. Although the taṣfīr is always at the top of the page, exactly where the other commentary type starts depends partly on how much margin space has been used up, and partly on exactly where on the page the word or phrase being discussed lies. If, for instance, there is relatively little taṣfīr and i‘rāb on a particular page, and those sections have therefore finished high up in the outer margin near the top corner, there may then be a large gap for most of the outer margin, the i‘rāb being placed at the lower corner, or even along the lower margin if the Qur’ānic words or phrases being discussed are low down on the page.

There is a formal system of arranging blocks of commentary text that is governed by a series of diagonal lines radiating out from the spine of any given double page. The innermost text block in the upper margin (always taṣfīr) is written horizontally. Half way along the upper margin the orientation changes to diagonal. This continues until a quarter of the way down the outer margin, where the orientation changes to vertical. At a point three quarters of the way down the outer margin the orientation reverts to diagonal, but this time the opposite diagonal to the upper area. Finally, half way in towards the spine along the lower margin the orientation returns to horizontal. The scribe has marked out the angles and blocks of text space in advance of writing the commentary by impressing guide rules into the surface of the paper using a sharp instrument. These can be clearly seen on most pages of the manuscript, especially when viewed with raking light, radiating out in parallel lines from the spine. This was absolutely in keeping with the type of preparations which scribes would have undertaken before beginning the main task of copying, and was not unique to Mamlūk scriptoria. Similar guide-rules, mainly for the actual Qur’ānic text, can be seen on manuscripts from the central Islamic lands and Islamic Spain from the 9th/10th century onwards. Indeed, the famous ‘Blue Qur’ān’ in gold
Kūfic script has just such guide rules.¹⁹

The colour of the script of the commentary changes with the type of commentary rather than with the orientation of the text block, although these often occur at the same point. So when any taṣfīr section ends and the qirāʾāt starts, the ink will change colour. The small headings for each type of commentary are written in gold, and the text of the commentaries is punctuated by small gold rosettes that divide the different topics within each commentary. In most places the scribe of the marginal commentary has left space for the illuminator to place his fifth and tenth verse markers and other marginal illuminated devices. On one occasion, however, the scribe appears to have written the commentary for the beginning of Sīra Layl (f. 16v) without leaving space for the marginal palmette of the sīra heading. In this case the illuminator has executed as much of the palmette as possible, but has carefully drawn round the script of the commentary (see illustration M).

There are two full pages (ff. 29v, 30r) of commentary text in the same naskh hand at the end of the manuscript (see illustration N). These constitute a discussion of the numbering of verses in the Qur’ān according to the variations expressed by the different schools of Qur’ānic authority.²⁰ The heading in gold at the beginning of these two pages translates as follows:

‘The chapter of the account of the differences (of opinion) of the people of the cities on the number of verses of the sīra’s’.

There follows a brief listing of some of the authorities who are being cited (e.g. ‘And from among the people of al-Kūfa, from the companions of Allāh’s servant Abū Tālib (may God be pleased with him) ... [were] Abū ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Salmān and ‘Amr ibn...’ etc.), and then the discussion itself.

It is noticeable that the naskh script here, although in the same hand as the marginal commentary, is much neater, and the scribe has intentionally lengthened some of the ligatures to make the text fill the entire space.

The text of these two pages is punctuated by the same type of small gold rosette used in the marginal commentary, and resides within a frame of plaited rope-work, with central illuminated roundels extending outwards into the margins on each page.
The presence of this commentary raises the question of the intended function of the Qur’an. On the whole, copies of the Qur’an with commentaries written in them were used for teaching and were not particularly glamorous or expensive productions. Grand copies of the Qur’an such as this one, on the other hand, were very rarely provided with commentaries at the time of production, although some had commentaries added in later decades or centuries. But here there can be no doubt that the commentary formed an intrinsic part of the manuscript as its application clearly preceded that of the illumination. Could the Qur’an have been commissioned by a wealthy and powerful scholar for his own use, or perhaps for a renowned scholar by his wealthy patron, or even by a wealthy patron for a madrasa or other teaching establishment?
The Date & Origin of the Manuscript

When David James attributed the two detached folios from the Qurʾān in the Geneva ‘Islamic Calligraphy’ exhibition to Damascus c. 1345-50, he was using as evidence a waqf inscription in the first volume. The inscription records the donation of the Qurʾān to a religious endowment by a man variously named as Ibrahim Ḥanāfī, Muḥammad ibn al-Ṣafī Manṣūrī,30 or Ibrahim ibn Muḥammad ibn Ibrahim ibn al-Ṣafī Manṣūrī.31 The first two of these refer to a man who was briefly Mamlūk governor of Damascus in 1350, and James surmised that it must have been this person who made the donation.32 On the basis of this attribution James suggested that the manuscript had been produced in Syria around 1345-50. Tim Stanley’s more recent dating of the Qurʾān, however, rejected the significance of the waqf inscription for dating the manuscript. This was based on his identification of the name of the donor in the waqf inscription as the governor’s great-grandson, who lived presumably some 50-100 years later.33 Concluding that the ownership and waqf donation could have no bearing on the date of production, Stanley dated the manuscript to the second quarter of the 14th century on stylistic grounds. While admitting the lack of strong evidence, Stanley retained Damascus rather than Cairo as the most likely place of origin.

In the present volume we are fortunate in having thirty folios on which to base our evidence. Furthermore, these folios are lavishly illuminated as they belong to the final jāʾil of the Qurʾān, which contains the shortest šurūt and therefore a large number of illuminated šurūt headings. It also contains two fully illuminated finispieces that afford us a considerable amount of additional stylistic evidence.

In attempting to ascertain the date and place of production of this manuscript it is possible to employ four specific stylistic features as useful diagnostic tools.

It is preferable to start with the use of the distinctive floral motif within the illumination, described earlier as a ‘shaded globule’ or ‘petal’ (see illustration 115), as it offers the widest parameters for dating the manuscript. This feature occurs quite frequently on Mamlūk Qurʾāns from both Cairo and Damascus from 1304-1346 (see fig.1).34

Thereafter its exact form changes to a more naturalistically drawn floral form of a lotus type.35

The next diagnostic feature is the naskh script used for the marginal commentary and, more importantly, for the final two pages of descriptive commentary at the end of the present manuscript (ff. 29r, 30r, see illustration N). It is closely comparable to the type of naskh typically used for the main text of Mamlūk Qurʾāns of the first quarter of the 14th century,36 and specifically to that of a single volume Qurʾān
The fourth and most precise diagnostic feature is the geometric style of the illumination, specifically the emphatic use of circles to produce the underlying framework. As has been described above, almost every aspect of the illumination is either dependent on or related to the circle; even where other geometric forms are present, such as the triangle or the hexagons and octagons of the finispieces, they are secondary to the circle. The circle is a major feature of Mamlık illumination in general until the early 1340s (see figs. 3 and 4), but there are particular features of the present manuscript which relate closely to the illumination of two manuscripts of the early 14th century, both executed in Cairo by Muḥammad ibn Muḥābidīr. The first is a Qurʾān copied in seven parts for the Mamlık vizier Rūkūn al-Dīn Baybars al-Jashnagīr (later Sultan al-Malik al-Muzaffar Baybars II, r. 1309-10), dated 1304-6, and now in the British Library. The second is a Qurʾān made probably around 1306-10 for an unknown patron, copied by the scribe Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Anṣārī al-Khaṣrājī, and now in the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin.

Both these Qurʾāns exhibit a scheme of illumination based on overlapping circles as well as a fondness for hexagons and octagons, and in overall design and certain specific features relate closely to the illumination in the two finispieces of the present Qurʾān (see figs. 5, 6, 7). Indeed, when describing the frontispiece of volume 6 of the British Library Baybars Qurʾān, James says ‘The lases of the patterns are repeating six-pointed stars which are connected to, and composed of white lines that are segments of circles’. He states that ‘These central areas [of the illuminated...
pages] are unusual in a number of ways, and they are employed by Muhammad ibn Mulādir alone. He goes on to discuss the 'visible' and 'invisible' hexagons inherent in the design, and the 'tight geometrical patterns'.” This could almost be a description of the second finispiece (f. 39v) of our Qur’an, though in the present case we have smaller internal circles incorporated into the six-pointed star and only ‘hidden’ hexagons, not visible ones (see diagrams K2, K3, K4, K5).

In our manuscript, the illuminator uses a similar system of segments of overlapping circles to produce the eight-pointed star on the first finispiece, (f. 29r) and also incorporates ‘hidden’ octagons (see diagrams J2, J4). Furthermore, the six-pointed star made of segments of larger circles that constitutes the central motif of the illuminated pages of both the British Library and Chester Beatty Qur’āns is identical to the six-pointed star of the second finispiece (f. 39v; see diagram K2) and the internal star feature of the tenth verse markers in the present manuscript (see diagram E).

Another piece of illumination in the Chester Beatty Qur’an, occurring on the finispiece on f. 293v, shows similarities to the present manuscript (see fig. 3). The feature in question consists of two central eight-
pointed stars within an eight-lobed cusped rosette. The geometric bases of the stars are segments of eight large overlapping circles, with a ring of eight smaller circles providing the cusped edge of the rosette. It is related to the design of both of the finispeices of the present manuscript, being almost the exact geometric opposite of the first finispiece on f. 29r. It is based on the same number and system of circles, but arranged at one remove, so that in the present case the segments of the circles used to form the star provide concave curves, while in the Chester Beatty example they form convex ones. In the case of the second finispiece in the present manuscript (f. 30v), the geometric arrangement of circles is exactly the same as in the Chester Beatty finispiece, providing a star-form with convex curved segments. In our manuscript, however, the illuminator has opted for a six-pointed star rather than an eight-pointed star.

Another strong link to Muhammad ibn Mushādir’s work is found in the illumination on the opening pages of text of the Damascus volume of the present Qurʾān. They are illustrated, albeit in rather grainy black and white photographs, in the catalogue of the 1976 London exhibition ‘The Arts of Islam’.

Although the images are not very clear, it is possible to see the basic geometrical design of the four rectangular panels on this
double page. This appears to be closely related to the frontispiece of volume 6 of the British Library Baybars Qurʾān, the finispiece of the Chester Beatty Qurʾān, and to the two finispieces of the present manuscript.

One of the features peculiar to the work of Muhammad ibn Mubādir is the extension of the borders to all four edges of illuminated pages. In the present manuscript we find exactly this feature on both finispieces (see figs. 5 and 7). This is in contrast to most Mamlūk Qurʾāns, where the inner edge is left without a decorated border. James notes that this practice, while unique to Muhammad ibn Mubādir in the Mamlūk context, was a feature of contemporary Ikhānīd illumination and suggests the influence of Baghdādī work on the illuminator’s style. A further, though admittedly less diagnostic link with Muhammad ibn Mubādir’s style concerns the apparently unique design motif found in the border bands of the present manuscript, where a scrolling blue and white band of small foliate forms is reserved against a gold field (see illustrations H1 and H2). A related motif can be seen in the border bands of the upper and lower text cartouches of the opening text pages of Muhammad ibn Mubādir’s same Chester Beatty Qurʾān (see fig. 4). In the Chester Beatty manuscript, however, the blue band is not interrupted by any gold scrolling devices as is the case
in our manuscript. Nonetheless, if one imagines either the Chester Beatty example with gold motifs, or our present example without them, a similarity can perhaps be appreciated. The specific features already mentioned, along with the overall complexity and inventiveness of the geometric framework of the illumination, can be seen as strong indications that either Muhammad ibn Mubādir himself, or a brilliant pupil of his, was the illuminator of the present manuscript. James describes Muhammad ibn Mubādir’s style as ‘accomplished, mature, precise...’, and tells us that he had ‘a wide repertoire of compositional structures and details, and was considerably and independently inventive’, using ‘some very unusual, perhaps unique features’.

James also states that many aspects of Muhammad ibn Mubādir’s work ‘are unusual in a number of ways, and they are employed by Muhammad ibn Mubādir alone.’

A final, though far less precisely diagnostic link with Muhammad ibn Mubādir’s work are the similar dimensions of the manuscripts. The present example measures 47 by 33 cm, while the British Library Baybars Qur’ān measures 48 by 32 cm.

Muhammad ibn Mubādir appears to have been trained in Ilkhanid Baghdad and started working in Cairo as early as 1298 CE. He was closely linked to Rukn al-Dīn Baybars from 1299 to 1310, at which point Baybars, having ruled as sultan for only a year, was assassinated. James conjectures that the illuminator must have moved elsewhere to work, since his main source of patronage in Cairo had disappeared, and this is indeed the most likely scenario.
Conclusion

The manuscript displays significant and unusual qualities in every aspect of its design and illumination. Each of the three main parts of the design is meticulously planned with a sense of proportion and spatial harmony: the main text area is in strict proportion to the overall dimensions of the page; the marginal commentary is arranged in spatial relation to the main text area and to the overall dimensions of the page as well as according to its own internal geometric system; and the illumination is a *tour de force*, being simultaneously simple and complex, displaying an inventiveness in its geometric foundations, and striking the eye with its interplay of geometry and vegetal motifs, its balance of abstract and organic features, and sheer quality and richness of execution.

The various indications of the most likely date and place of origin for the Qur'an can be summed up as follows:

a) The use of the shaded globule would give us relatively wide parameters of c. 1304-1346 in either Cairo or Damascus.

b) The use of *muḥaqqiq* script for the main body of the text was certainly established by 1320 in Cairo and is likely to have been in use before that date.

c) The particular style of *naskhi* script used for the commentary provides parameters of c. 1300-1325, comparing closely to a Cairo manuscript of 1306-1315.

d) The style of illumination and its relation to the work of Muhammad ibn Mubādīr would point to Cairo around the years 1298-1310. Of the distinctive stylistic traits within the illumination there is one particular feature which appears to be unique to Muhammad ibn Mubādīr's oeuvre and to the first decade of the 14th century, and that is the extension of the illuminated borders around all four sides of an illuminated page (see Figs. 5, 6, 7).

David James suggested that Muhammad ibn Mubādīr's main patron was Rukn al-Dīn Baybars. Could the present manuscript be another work of Muhammad ibn Mubādīr, made perhaps for the same patron? The manuscript certainly contains all the essential and distinctive characteristics of his style and demonstrates his skills and inventiveness to great effect. Unless another fragment of the manuscript containing a colophon or further information is discovered, we will probably never know the exact origin of the manuscript. On the basis of analysis alone, however, it is certainly very probable that the inventive and technically brilliant illumination was the work of Muhammad ibn Mubādīr and was completed in Cairo around 1298-1310 CE, and it is very possible that the manuscript was produced under the patronage of Baybars, as either vizier or sultān.
References

3 Quaritch catalogue 1213, p. 117-119.
5 Article ‘Manaliks’ in EI2.
6 A Qur’an made for Sayf al-Din Saghmish the ‘Abdallah al-Ashrafi in Cairo in 1374 CE was
just such an example, being written in naskh script in eleven lines to the page with a
single page dimension of 105 by 77 cm, see James 1988, cat. 34, p. 233.
7 See James 1988, cats. 13, 15, 16, 17, 19, 22, 23, 24, 28, 29, 36, 31, 32, 33, 34; Sotheby’s,
London, 18th April 1983, lot 9; Sotheby’s, London, 24th April 1986, lot 9; Sotheby’s, London,
15th April 2000, lot 6.
8 E.g., Ms. 704, (Mingana,
no. 42); and a Qur’an made for
Sulaiman Qarib in 1488
measuring 66.7 by 46.7 cm.,
(Sotheby’s, London, 26th April
1982, lot 31).
9 See James 1988, cat. 40, p. 235.
10 Although the edges of the
text have probably been
trimmed over the centuries, the
current width of the margins and
the quite large amount of space
still remaining between the
illuminated marginal devices and
the edge of the page would indicate that very little trimming
has occurred. The current
proportions of the page can
therefore be taken as approximately
the original, and generally
apart from the spatial
proportions are even more precise if we allow
for a very slightly bigger original
page area.
11 This may be a subtle reference
to the Islamic notion of the
hidden, or esoteric (bâ‘â‘m), and
revealed, or exoteric (jâ‘â‘r).
12 Stanley suggested (Quaritch
catalogue 1213, p. 119) that the
commentary was added after the
illumination, but evidence in this
manuscript indicates otherwise.
13 See Stanley, in Quaritch
1213, p. 12.
14 Mecca, Medina, Basra, Kufa etc.
15 London 1976, no. 539.
16 Geneva 1988, no. 10.
17 Khalifa, p. 211; Al-Ush,
Joundi and Zoudi, p. 257.
19 Quaritch 1213, p. 117.
20 See also James 1988, figs. 25,
31, 37, 31, 34, 36, 37, 38, 39.
89, 90, 92, 93, 95, 97, pp. 50-
51, 53, 56-57, 58, 59, 62, 63, 72,
133, 137, 141, 143, 146.
21 See the white lotus buds in
the borders of Qur’ans such as
those illustrated in James 1988,
pp. 189, 190, which are dated
1336 and 1367.
22 James 1988, p. 58, text of
fig. 33.
23 James 1988, p. 38.
24 For instance, the thirty-part
‘Anonymous Baghdad Qur’an’
dated 1302-08 (James 1988,
cat. 39, see also cats. 40, 42), or
a thirty-part Qur’an signed by
Yaqut al-Musawi and dated
1282-3 (see James 1992, no. 11,
pp. 60-67).
26 See also James 1988,
fig. 23, p. 46; fig. 27, p. 52;
fig. 35, p. 60-61; fig. 36, p. 62;
fig. 37, p. 62; fig. 97, p. 146; and
fig. 92, p. 137 (which is
dated 1346).
27 Add. 22406-13; see James
1988, cat. 1.
28 Ms. 1457, see James 1988, cat. 4.
29 See also James 1988, figs. 21, 30.
30 James 1988, p. 42.
31 No. 539, p. 331.
32 James 1988, fig. 21, p. 43, and
in the text of p. 43, where he
says that this feature is ‘of great
interest . . .’.
33 See for instance James 1988,
figs. 49-52, p. 66, also discussion
p. 43.
34 James 1988, p. 104.
35 James 1988, p. 46.
36 James 1988, p. 42.
37 James 1988, pp. 46-47, 104.
38 James 1988, p. 47.
39 See James 1988, p. 46,
where he mentions a Manalik
manuscript dated 1298 (Chester
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probably illuminated by
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Cover
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Back Cover
Detail from I. 7v

Footnote
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