Introduction

Calligraphy has never been challenged as the supreme art of the Islamic world, reflecting the centrality of the Qur'anic revelation to Islamic faith and culture. In Islam, the Qur'an is held to be God's eternal and uncreated word, giving Arabic a special status as the language of God's actual revelation. The earliest surviving fragments of Qur'an are in the form of monumental vellum leaves, the awesome physical presence of which is a witness to the reverence in which the Qur'anic revelation was held. These were written in thin slanting scripts collectively called 'Hijazi', which clearly relate to the script used on pre-Islamic stone inscriptions from the sixth century. While the earliest group of Hijazi leaves lack orthographic systems for vocalization and distinguishing consonants of the same shape, with the expansion of Islam such systems, using coloured dots and diacritical strokes, were soon established.

The establishment of the 'Abbasid Caliphate (750-1258 CE), with its capital at the newly founded city of Baghdad from 762 onwards, marked a new stage in the cultural and economic integration of the Mediterranean and Asia. Among the new cultural forms that emerged in the cosmopolitan early 'Abbasid period were illuminated Qur'ans in horizontal format, written in angular scripts frequently called 'Kufic', after the city of Kufa in Iraq where the style is said to have originated. The crisp elegance of many of these scripts and the luxurious sophistication of illumination in the first centuries of the 'Abbasid period have contributed to the notion that this was a 'classical' age in Qur'an production. The diffusion of Kufic styles throughout the Near East and Mediterranean is visual testimony to the extraordinary exchange of ideas and goods that took place under the 'Abbasid dynasty, which stretched at its height from the Atlantic to the borders of China.

The pre-eminence of Kufic scripts was challenged in the eleventh century by various cursive scripts, which probably developed in the chanceries where there was a need for more legible scripts that could be written with greater speed. Particular importance is attached in the Islamic tradition to the colourful figure of Ibn Muqla, a vizier of the first half of the tenth century whose political intrigues eventually led to his imprisonment and the removal of his tongue. Ibn Muqla was also a celebrated calligrapher and is credited with the elaboration of a system for standardizing various scripts based on the proportions of the rhombic dot formed by the nib of the calligrapher's reed pen. The renowned calligrapher Ibn al-Bawwab, who lived in Baghdad at the beginning of the eleventh century, is said to have refined Ibn Muqla's system further, laying the foundation for the tradition of the six 'proportioned' cursive scripts, which was carried by successive generations to the Central and Eastern Islamic lands.
The rise of these scripts was also accompanied by changes in writing technology. According to tradition, paper was first introduced to the Islamic world by Chinese prisoners taken in the Battle of Talas (modern-day Kyrgyzstan) fought between Arab and Chinese armies in 751 CE. Though the bureaucracy was quick to adopt this cheaper and more practical medium, vellum remained the standard in Qur’an production until the eleventh century, when both paper and the vertical portrait format favoured by the bureaucracy began to be used for Qur’ans as well. In North Africa and Spain the use of vellum for Qur’ans outlived the practice elsewhere in the Islamic world, surviving until the late fourteenth century.

New heights in calligraphy and illumination were reached under Mongol (Ilkhanid) rule in Iran and the Near East (1256-1353), which, despite the initial devastation caused by the Mongol invasions, was a period of artistic brilliance and innovation. Some of the most celebrated copies of the Qur’an ever made were produced by such calligraphers as Yaquut al-Must’asim and his outstanding pupil Ahmad ibn al-Suhrawardi. At the same time the Mamluk rulers of Egypt were also commissioning lavishly illustrated copies of the Qur’an, the size and splendour of which were equal to the architectural splendour of the Mamluk mosques and madrasas (theological schools).

Whereas scripts and decorative devices were shared by Ilkhanid and Mamluk Qur’ans, a separate calligraphic tradition developed in North Africa and Spain. The earliest surviving Qur’an from this part of the world is the famous Nurse Quran. Completed c. 1020, the Nurse Quran was written in huge letters on large vertical vellum sheets in a distinctive variant of Kufic, sometimes called ‘Western’ Kufic. This tradition seems to have died out, and by the twelfth century Qur’ans were written in a distinctive hand usually referred to as ‘Maghrībi’, characterized by the deep curve of the letters below the line. Here Qur’an production tended to be conservative, continuing to use vellum long after it had fallen out of use in the rest of the Islamic world, and usually following a standard pattern. This consisted of a square format, brightly coloured vowel markers and marginal devices, and often lavish gold illumination marked by the use of thick strapwork borders and geometric patterns. However, North African and Spanish Qur’ans were also written on paper. There were several centres of high-quality paper manufacture in Spain, the most famous of which was in Jativa, renowned for its paper of pinkish hue and for being the first paper-mill in Europe. It was from such Spanish paper-mills, conquered by the Christians during the thirteenth century, that the art of paper-making spread into the Latin West.

Major changes in calligraphic styles took place in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, under the direction of the cultivated Timurid and Safavid rulers of Iran. This period saw the ascendency of the nastaliq script, which probably emerged in the chanceries attached to the Timurid courts, but soon became the script par excellence of Persian and Turkish poetry. The assembling of albums of individual calligraphic specimens, usually of Persian poetry, marked another change in taste of the period. These proved so popular that the individual sheet of poetry (qira’), prized for its calligraphic beauty, became an independent art form. The Timurids
were the descendants of Timur Leng or Tamerlane (d. 1405), the Central Asian leader who established a vast empire in Iran, Iraq and Central Asia at the end of the fourteenth century, and campaigned as far as Anatolia and the Duchy of Moscow. His descendants established highly cultured courts in cities such as Shiraz, Herat and Samarkand, and patronized many of the new cultural forms that dominated artistic life in the following centuries.

The major Islamic empires that ruled the Islamic world after the collapse of the Timurids, such as the Safavids in Iran, the Ottomans in Anatolia, the Balkans, Syria and Egypt, and the Timurids' descendants in India, the Mughal dynasty, drew heavily on the Timurid achievement. In addition to calligraphicalbums and individual poems in nast'aliq, copies of the Qur'an illuminated in styles inspired by Timurid precedents were popular in all three empires. During the sixteenth century naskh became the favourite, though not exclusive, script for copying the Qur'an. The Ottoman Empire in particular was renowned for its naskh calligraphers, the most celebrated of whom was Sheyh Hamdullah, the tutor of the future Sultan Bayezid II (r. 1481-1512) and alleged pioneer of the Ottoman naskh style. The art of calligraphy was so esteemed in the Ottoman and Safavid empires during the sixteenth century that several biographical dictionaries of famous calligraphers were compiled, such as Mustafa 'Ali's Menakib-i Hünerveran and the
"Tālā-yi Sam" by the Safavid prince Sam Mirza.

The interest in calligraphers' lives and the popularity of individual calligraphic specimens from the Timurid period onwards was concomitant with a new historicizing tendency and collecting impulse. Alongside famous illustrated manuscripts, albums containing specimens by famous calligraphers were frequently included in the highly prized gifts presented by Safavid envoys to the Ottoman courts in Istanbul and Edirne. Calligraphic pages by famous Iranian artists were also sought after in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Mughal India, where they were often remounted, decorated, and incorporated into albums of calligraphy and painting. Two of the most celebrated of such albums, commissioned by the Emperors Jahangir and Shah Jahan, in addition to Iranism, Deccani, contemporary and earlier Mughal drawings and paintings, contained numerous calligraphy leaves, almost exclusively by the famous Herati calligrapher Mir ‘Ali (d. 1528). Assembling muraqqa’ albums was one of the courtly pursuits taken up by local rulers in India, particularly in the eighteenth century, when the collapse of Mughal power made way for the flourishing of commerce and the arts outside the main imperial centres.

This exhibition at the Museum für Islamische Kunst, Berlin, represents over a thousand years of Islamic calligraphy, covering an area from Morocco in the West to Khoqand on the borders of China in the East and the Deccan in the South. Pride of place has been given to the Qur’an as the most continuously copied text in the Islamic world and therefore as one of the best prisms through which to view changes in calligraphy and manuscript production. The exhibition also aims to convey something of the huge diversity of literary traditions in the Islamic world and the way in which these interacted with a love of the visual to produce constantly changing and frequently surprising results.

2. For the life and achievements of Ibn Muqla, see Ela, art. ‘Ibn Muqla’.
3. For an account of the establishment of the tradition of the canon of six scripts, see Soucek 1979, pp. 20-26.
4. For a discussion of this legend in the context of the history of the introduction of paper to the Islamic lands, see Rother 2004, pp. 41-45.
5. Ibid., pp. 47-50.
6. For the history of paper in North Africa and Spain, see ibid., pp. 83-89.
7. For the emergence of nasta’liq and related chancery scripts, see Soucek 1979, pp. 18-22.
12. These are the so-called 'Berlin' and 'Kevorkian' Albums, in the Staatsbibliothek, Berlin, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, respectively. See Beach 1978, pp. 43-46.

Cat. 35
Monumental Qur’an made for an Ottoman patron (detail)
1 Palimpsest Qur’ān leaf in Hijazi script

Western Arabia or Syria
1st century AH / 7th century CE

The main, dark brown script of the present leaf consists of nine verses from Sūra 2 (Al-Baqā’ī); recto, from the word al-Zakat in verse 277 to the words illa-an in verse 282; verso, from the word niyār in verse 282 to the words maa-yawn in verse 286. The earlier pale brown script consists of another part of Sūra 2 (Al-Baqā’ī). Although faint and partly obscured by the darker script, it is possible to read the consonantal outline of the earlier script and thus pinpoint the relevant passage from the Qur’ān: recto, from the last two words of verse 206 to the second use of the word ḥiṣā in verse 217; verso, from the word kahir in verse 217 to the words ḥurūthun islaam in verse 223.

Palimpsest folio from an Arabic manuscript with twenty-four lines (recto) and twenty lines (verso) written in dark brown Hijazi script on parchment. Letter pointing (‘šam) is used only occasionally and consists of short angled dashes. There are no vowel marks and only one decorated roundel, marking a verse division on coloured in green, red and brown. The subscript is also in Hijazi script in brown ink.

FOLIO 36.5 x 28.2 cm

The David Collection, Copenhagen, inv. no. 86/2003

This vellum leaf is one of the earliest surviving fragments of the Qur’ān. Datable to the first century AH (mid- to late seventh century CE), it may have formed part of one of the ‘Uthmanic codices, the earliest canonical copies of the Qur’ān. Not only is this folio of tremendous religious significance as a relic of the earliest period of Islam and of the textual transmission of the Qur’ān, but it is also an important milestone in the development of Arabic as a written language and the evolution of Arabic scripts.

The Qur’ān leaf is a palimpsest consisting of a dark brown script superimposed on an earlier paler brown script. Both the upper text and the earlier one are from the Qur’ān and both read from the top of the same side of the leaf. Soon after the first text was written on this leaf the parchment must have been scraped clean and the second script written over the top, in a related, but generally thinner and more slanted script. At the time of the writing of the second text the earlier script would have been wholly erased, but the acidic properties of the ink (probably a form of iron gall ink, which was the most common type of ink in the medieval world) had indelibly etched the letter forms on to the parchment and a shadow of the earlier script reappeared over time, leading to the current effect of one script superimposed on another. This is a known characteristic of western and oriental palimpsests. The present leaf is of the same size and format as the other original folios from this codex, three of which survive, one in Sana’a, Yemen (Dar al-Makhtutat),1 and two in private collections.2

Little evidence remains of pre-Islamic Arabic script. Inscriptions on tombstones in the late Nabatean and early Arabic scripts dating from the third to sixth centuries CE give us the first clues about the development of the modern script. In chronological order these are: a tombstone from Umm al-Jimal, dating to c. 250 CE; three graffiti on the temple of Ramm in Sinai dating to c. 300 CE; the tomb of the pre-Islamic poet Imru’l-Qays at Namarah, dated 328 CE; graffiti at Zabad dated 512 CE; an inscription on the church of Hid at al-Hira of about 560 CE; an inscription on a rock at Harran dated 568 CE.3

It is unlikely that by the end of the 6th century CE the Arabic script had yet formed into a homogenous style. Oral tradition was the predominant means of promulgating poetry and folklore and there were regional and tribal variations in the spoken language of Arabia.4 However, it is certain that the practice of writing was well known among the merchants of Mecca, Medina and other Arabian trading towns at the time of the Prophet’s mission. Tradition has it that the script known as jazm, which was predominant among the tribes of the north-east Arabian peninsula and al-Hira and al-Anbar (towns on the Arabian borders of the Sasanian empire in the Mesopotamian basin) spread to the Hijaz in the late fifth and early sixth centuries, and was popularized a century later among the Quraysh (the leading tribe of Mecca and the tribe of the Prophet himself) by Harb b. ‘Umayyah.5 Furthermore, there are several references in the Qur’ān to the use of written records both in the religious context and in daily life (eg. verse 282 of Sūra Al-Baqā’ī).

Arabic script at this stage was referred to as a scriptio defectiva as opposed to the scriptio plena of modern Arabic.6 During the period of the Prophet’s mission and the following decades the system of applying the diacritical and orthographic markings had not been standardized. According to traditional accounts, the use of a
comprehensive system of diacritical marks on consonants in the form of dots or vertical dashes (known as letter-pointing or ‘jum’ was devised by al-Hajjaj b. Yusuf, who died in 714 CE. This was an important development as it meant that consonants of identical form could be distinguished from one another. The other great aid to the development of an easily readable script was the invention of coloured dots to indicate vowels. This invention has been attributed to Abu'l-Aswad al-Du'a'i, who died in 688 CE. However, it has been argued that the development of the scriptio defectiva into the scriptio plena could not have happened suddenly, as is implied by the accounts of the inventions of al-Hajjaj and Abu'l-Aswad. At the date of the writing of the 'Uthmanic codices a comprehensive system of orthographic aids had probably not yet come into being. It is thought that rudimentary markings were used to differentiate between identical consonantal forms in early Arabic scripts, but usually only in essential cases, where there was a real possibility of consonantal confusion, not regularly. This supposition is borne out by the evidence of the scripts on the present Qur'an leaf.

The upper script of the present folio is generally rounded, but shows occasional instances of angularity. The script does not ‘lean back’ like the later ma‘āl scripts, nor are the horizontals of the letters extended, as in rashid. The script can be compared with cursive graffiti at Mount Saba’, near Medina, dated 625 CE. Certain characteristics of the present script are worth mentioning. The terminal ya often hangs limply below the line, but on other occasions folds back under the line. The terminal alif maqṣura also folds back slightly under the line. The tail of the terminal qa‘a hangs limply below the line. These characteristics are retained in later, more formal scripts such as Kufic and ma‘āl, but in the later instances they have begun to take on definite and intentional angular decorative qualities which are not present here. The intentional angularity begins quite early, as seen in the tails of the terminal ya on an important early section of the Qur’an in the British Library. Here the initial alif already has a short horizontal tail at the base. It has been pointed out that this was a distinguishing characteristic of early Meccan and Medinan scripts and it can be seen clearly on a rock-cut inscription of the dedication of a dam built by the Caliph Mu`awiyyah in 677 CE.

The characteristics of the earlier, pale brown script on the present leaf are generally more slanting, and a thinner nib has been used, giving narrower vertical strokes and a slightly more ‘spidery’ character. The pale brown script can
again be compared with some of the graffiti at Mount Sala’ and with the inscription dedicating Mu’awiyah’s dam of 677 CE. For example, the medial ‘ayn is formed by two separate, opposing curved forms which are not joined across the top, as they are in later scripts. This is a feature which goes back to pre-Islamic tombstone inscriptions and can also be clearly seen again in the dedication of Mu’awiyah’s dam of 677 CE. It is noticeable that both scripts lack a linear discipline, i.e. the horizontal lines of the scripts are uneven and there is no strict line-base for the letters or words.

Regarding diacritical and orthographic markings, the dark brown script has no marks to indicate short vowels at all. There are some diacritical marks to differentiate between consonants of the same form, but they are not used on all the letters that would require them in modern Arabic. It is probable that the letter-points that are present are original to the script and were applied at the time of writing, since the width of the strokes of the dashes matches exactly the width of the vertical strokes of the script in general, and the ink matches, too. The marks take the form of angled dashes formed by placing the nib down once on the page. Thus the shape of the dashes indicates accurately the shape of the nib used. The pale brown script is essentially a consonantal skeleton, with no marks to indicate short vowels and only one letter, the ṣa, bearing a mark to differentiate it from others of the same basic form.

1 See Kuwait 1985, no. 4, p. 59, where the leaf is dated to the first half of the first century AH (621-70 CE).
2 See Sotheby’s, 22 October 1993, lot 31; and Bonhams, 11 October 2000, lot 12.
3 Abbott 1939, pl. 1; Safadi 1978, p. 6.
4 Elb. articles on “Arabiyya”, “Khatt”, “Kitabat”.
7 Ibid.
9 For a photograph of these graffiti see Safadi 1978, p. 15.
10 Or. 21655; see Lings and Safadi 1976, no. 10, p. 20; Safadi 1978, p. 8.
12 Safadi 1978, p. 15.
13 Ibid.
2 Monumental Qur’an leaf in early Kufic script

Near East, perhaps Umayyad Syria
About 700 CE
Sura 11 (Isa), vv. 73-95

Folio from a large Arabic manuscript on parchment with twenty-five lines of Kufic script per page written in brown ink. The letter-pointing is original and consists of diagonal dashes of the same brown ink as the main text. There is no vocalization. The single verse divisions are marked with short diagonal clusters of angled dashes applied in the same brown ink as the main text. The tenth verse divisions are marked with square devices with narrow knotted border bands and an internal floral motif.

**Folio** 48 x 54 cm
**Text area** 47 x 47 cm

This exceptional Qur’an leaf is notable for its unusually large size, for its square format and for the early style of script, which is close to calligraphy and epigraphy associated with the Umayyad dynasty. Of all early Qur’ans in Kufic scripts on parchment only four others are of comparable or larger dimensions. These four are also of a generally square format. The script of the present folio has characteristics that are less developed than any of these four, and is therefore possibly the earliest of these monumental manuscripts.

The folio was housed for around a hundred years in the library of the Hartford Seminary, Hartford, Connecticut, to which it had been brought by Duncan Black Macdonald (1863-1945), the eminent scholar of Islam, fellow of the University of Glasgow and Professor of Semitic Languages at the Hartford Seminary. The Duncan Black Macdonald Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations at the Hartford Seminary is named in his honour. During his several study trips to the Middle East, Macdonald collected a variety of Arabic manuscripts, some Islamic and some Christian, including the present folio. It was de-accessioned by the Hartford Seminary in 2004.

The script of the present folio seems to be a transitional type between Hijazi and fully formed Kufic. Calligraphically it is generally quite neat and well disciplined both in terms of the parallelism of the vertical letters and in the horizontality of each line of script. The script shows individual characteristics of both Hijazi and Kufic styles. The Hijazi aspects are that the script slants slightly to the right, occasionally the tail of the terminal qaf hangs down limply below the line, the initial ‘ayn/yah is low to the line and lacks the rounded curve of Kufic forms, and the verticals of the lam/dal combination converge slightly. These features are very close to Déroche’s Hijazi tv script, see most clearly on a fragment in the Bibliothèque nationale and on two fragmentary folios in the Khalili Collection (Table 1).4

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<th>TABLE 1: Hijazi letter forms</th>
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<td>Script</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terminal qaf</td>
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<td>Initial ‘ayn/yah</td>
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<td>Lam/dal combination</td>
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