This folio comes from a manuscript of which a section is in the Bastan Museum, Teheran. The script is another example of the mature ‘Abbasid Kufic also employed on the present cat. 7, 9 and 11. In this case the script would equate to Déroche’s style D.4, with occasional instances, particularly in the lam-alif combination, of D.5.1

The artistic and aesthetic intentions of the scribe of this folio (and the scribes of the other folios of this calligraphic style) are evident in several aspects. As in cat. 7 and 11, there is a total absence of letter-pointing, an indication of the scribe’s intention to produce a script the defining character of which was artistic rather than functional. The absence of letter-pointing allows the austere, skeletal beauty of the Kufic script to be exhibited to its greatest effect, and it may indicate that the primary function of the ‘Qur’an was not, in this case, to be read through by scholars and students as a working copy of the text, but to be admired as an object of sacred beauty; it was perhaps commissioned by a prince or wealthy dignitary. That is not to say that it might not have been intended to be housed in a mosque. The donation of a three-line Kufic Qur’an in a similar script, also devoid of letter-pointing, to a mosque in Tyre by Amâjar, the ‘Abbasid governor of Damascus, in 755-56 CE is proof that aesthetically rather than functionally motivated manuscripts were valued in the mosque setting.

In the present case the scribe enhanced the calligraphic power of the script by the extreme use of horizontal stretching of letters (mushq). In the fourth line of the verse the scribe has stretched the word dharâmu (I knew, I supposed) for the whole length of the line, a distance of just over 2 cm.2

1 Iran Bastan Museum, Teheran, no. 4289. For an illustration see Lings 1976, no. 5.
ولا تُهِبُها فَحَمْلٌ
فِي كُلِّ لُحْمٍ لَا فَسَدٍ
لَمَّا كَانَ فَسَدًا
إِنَّ لَكَ نَكَا
فَلَهُمْ مَا فَرِجَتُكَ
9 Illuminated Qur'an leaf in Kufic script

Near East or North Africa
Late 9th century
Sura 28 (Al-Qais), vv. 85-86

Folio from an Arabic manuscript on parchment written in Kufic script in brown ink with five lines per page. The letter-pointing, formed by placing the nib-end down once on the page, is applied in the same brown ink as the text and is original. The vocalization is applied with red, green, blue and yellow dots. The fifth verse division is marked within the text area by a letter Ia (representing the numerical value 5 in the abjad system) in gold, and in the margin by a large illuminated medallion with a stylized restraining foliate design in gold and green containing the word faham in gold Kufic script. Other folios from the same manuscript show single verse divisions marked with small gold rosettes.

FOLIO 22.5 x 31.9 cm
TEXT AREA: 12 x 20 cm

The script on this large parchment Qur'an leaf is close in style to those of cat. 7 and 8 and is another example of the scripts described by Déroche as group D. In this case the script exhibits aspects of styles D.I, D.II, D.III and D.IV, but is generally closest to D.III. These scripts are datable to the second half of the ninth century and the very early tenth century.

Unlike cat. 7 and 8 the script on the present leaf has letter-pointing applied in brown ink, and it appears to be original to the manuscript. This is interesting since most scripts of this type have only occasional instances of letter-pointing, or none at all. It seems that the absence of letter-pointing at this period was related to the strong aesthetic intention of the scribes of these scripts to produce a flowing, rhythmic calligraphy with graphically precise lines uncluttered by the little brown dashes of the letter-pointing, thus maximizing their visual impact. In this case, the letter-pointing makes the script more immediately legible, but its cluttering effect is kept to a minimum by using relatively small, thin and unobtrusive nib-end dashes nestled close to the relevant letters.

Two other Qur'an fragments have very similar scripts and dimensions to the present leaf, and one or other of them may be from the same multi-volume manuscript. One of these is a section including parts of Sura 7 (al-'Araf) in the Iran Bastan Museum, Tehran; the other is a folio with the suza heading of Sura 22 (al-Hajj) in the Museum of Islamic Arts, Qairawan. The Qairawan folio is slightly closer in style to the present one and, significantly, has letter-pointing of a similar type, while the Tehran volume does not.

3. Ibid., pp. 36-37.
4. In the top line of the verso, below the word mubārak (v. 85), one of the brown ink letter-points of the letter qa' is partially covered by the red dot of the vocalization; this means that the letter-point must have been applied before the vocalization dot.
5. See the discussion in cat. 7 above.
Large Qur’an leaf in gold Kufic script on blue parchment

Itrajija, Sicily or Maghreb
About 850-950 CE
Sura 2 (Al-Baqara), vv. 261-67

Folio from an Arabic manuscript written in gold Kufic script on blue-dyed parchment with fifteen lines per page. There are only three instances of original letter-pointing of short diagonal gold dashes and no vocalization. The single verse divisions are marked with small silver florets (now oxidized to black). The fifth verse marker (verse 265 in this case) would have been marked with an illuminated roundel; there remains only a faint trace of it now on the lower right corner of the verse. There is also a faint trace of a large illuminated roundel in the upper left margin of the rec. This would have been a hifāj marker, presumably with a silver roundel (there are traces of the oxidized silver with the word hifāj written in gold Kufic within the central space (there are traces of gold Kufic letters).

folio 25 x 37 cm
text area 19 x 28 cm

This leaf is from a manuscript of the Qur’an commonly known as the Blue Qur’an. When complete it must have been one of the most expensive and luxurious manuscripts produced in the whole medieval Islamic world. The exact origins of the manuscript are not known, but the two most recent theories have suggested Fatimid Itrajija in the tenth century and Umayyad Spain in the same period.

Whichever of these is closer to the truth, a western Islamic production is strongly suggested by the use of the abjad letter sād to mark the sixtieth verses. The sād is only used to indicate the number sixty in the western abjad system. The eastern version uses the letter sīn for sixty.

The earliest theory regarding the manuscript’s origin, proposed by E.R. Martin in 1923, was that the dark colour of the dyed vellum was a symbol of mourning, and that the manuscript had been commissioned by the ‘Abbasid Caliph al-Ma’mun (r. 813-33 CE) for the tomb of this father Harun al-Rashid in Mashhad. This suggestion is now generally discounted; but Martin may well have been correct in one aspect of his theory—that the dyeing of the vellum a deep blue colour was not simply for luxurious decorative effect, but that it carried a message. Other examples of dyed vellum, although very rare, are known to exist from the first few centuries of Islam. The few other extant examples are mostly saffron-yellow. There may be a connection to the late Sassanian and ‘Abbasid practice, reported by al-Baladhuri in the ninth century, of presenting state tax accounts on saffron-dyed vellum.

The use of blue-dyed vellum seems to have been much rarer in the Islamic world, although a 1294 inventory of the Great Mosque of Qayrawan lists possibly two separate Qur’an manuscripts on blue-dyed vellum; one is supposed to be the manuscript from which the present leaf originates, the second had only five lines to the page. However, indigo and murex had been used to produce dark blue or purple dyes since antiquity, when they were associated with royalty and power, especially in the Roman and Greek worlds. Purple was the colour associated with Roman emperors, and the Byzantine emperors and other European rulers inherited the tradition. In the context of Christian manuscript production, purple-dyed vellum was reserved for exceptional royal commissions and was undoubtedly imbued with imperial symbolism. Furthermore it seems to have been reserved for the writing of biblical subject-matter. Of the few extant examples that remain of these Christian manuscripts, six dating from the sixth century CE and two from the late eighth century all use silver ink on purple-dyed vellum with occasional lines in gold script. Of these eight manuscripts, two were produced in Italy, two in Aachen, and, significantly, four in the Levant, probably in Syria or Palestine.

The period 700-1000 CE was one of intense religious and political rivalry in the Mediterranean and Middle East, with the new and powerful Byzantine empire (both Umayyads and ‘Abbasids) vying with the Byzantine empire for ascendency, and regional kingdoms such as the Umayyads in Spain and the Fatimids in North Africa adding further religious and political competition. It is plausible that the production of this copy of the Qur’an was intended as a politico-religious statement by the Muslim patron towards his Christian counterparts. The use of art or architecture for politico-religious propaganda by the Muslim dynasties at this period is well-known, and several specific aspects of the Blue Qur’an can be seen as intentional one-upmanship over the Christian equivalents. When a work of art or architecture was designed for propaganda certain principles were followed: the manuscript, object or building had to be similar enough to the rival example to be obviously comparable, but subtly different and, importantly, better/bigger/grander/
taller/more expensive etc, so as to appear superior. In the case of the Blue Qur’an we have exactly these design principles. First in the choice of text – the purple-dyed Christian manuscripts were reserved exclusively for biblical texts, and this work bears the text of the Qur’an, which Muslims considered inherently superior. Secondly in the colour of the vellum – the dark blue of the Qur’an vellum provides an even greater visual contrast with the gold and silver lettering, and therefore a stronger aesthetic impact. Thirdly, in the ink – in the Christian examples the majority of the text was written in silver ink with gold ink reserved for occasional lines or headings. In the Blue Qur’an it is the other way round: the main text is in gold ink throughout, with silver used for sura headings and other text markers. The overall effect on looking at the manuscript is of gold on blue, and, while silver was a precious substance, gold was universally considered the more precious and expensive of the two. Fourthly, in the size of the manuscript – even taking into account the trimming of the edges of all these manuscripts over the centuries, the Blue Qur’an is substantially larger than any of the purple-dyed Christian examples. The largest of these is the Vienna Genesis, at 33.3 x 27 cm, while the leaves of the Blue Qur’an measure between 28 x 38 cm and 31 x 41 cm. This size comparison is not affected by the different formats of the Islamic and Christian manuscripts – horizontal for the Islamic and vertical for the Christian. Indeed this change in format could be seen as another of the subtly different features of the Qur’an manuscript. As well as constituting a straightforward glorification of the holy text of the Qur’an, the Blue Qur’an can be seen as a statement to Christian rulers of Europe and Byzantium of religious, artistic and political superiority, a piece of medieval superpower propaganda.

The political and artistic sophistication and financial expense of the production of the Blue Qur’an could only have been contemplated and achieved by a ruler of considerable power and wealth. If we allow that the use of the western abjad system on this manuscript does indeed indicate a geographical origin in Ifriqiya or the Maghrib, which were the dynasties or rulers with the wealth and religious and political ambitions in relation to Christian rivals to have commissioned such a manuscript? Certainly the Umayyad dynasty of Spain had the wealth, the sophistication and a strong interest in books, science and learning.11 They also had powerful Christian neighbours to the north with whom they were in constant competition.

Stanley links the manuscript to Spain on the grounds of the use in it a grid of guidelines on each page, a technique not known in Islamic manuscripts outside Spain, and of the visual reference to the monumental gold lettering on blue ground to be found in the Great Mosque of Cordoba.14

The Fatimid dynasty of North Africa and Egypt also had the wealth and sophistication (again, the interest in science and the scholarship and bibliophily of Fatimid rulers are well attested), and they also had strong contacts and competition with Byzantium and Christian dynasties on the northern side of the Mediterranean over a long period. The Fatimids are favoured by Bloom as the most likely patrons.15

There are two other dynasties which might conceivably have commissioned such a manuscript. Geographically sandwiched between these two Caliphates were two smaller dynasties, the Aghlabids of Ifriqiya and Sicily, and later the Kalbids of Sicily. The Aghlabids were a vassal state of the ‘Abbassids of Baghdad, although enjoying a great degree of autonomy, and the Kalbids were a governor sub-dynasty of the Fatimids. While neither the Aghlabids nor the Kalbids had the power or longevity of the Spanish Umayyads or the Fatimids themselves, they were both in constant military and political competition with the Christian rulers of Sicily and South Italy – both the Aghlabids and the Kalbids at different times held portions of Calabria and Puglia – and the wealth and cultural sophistication of Ifriqiya and Sicily during the rule of these dynasties was very great indeed. Sicily, and particularly Palermo, was a major marketplace and crossroads for the whole central Mediterranean region, and the interaction of Islamic traditions and ideas with Christian ones was widespread.

The cross-fertilization of artistic and cultural techniques and styles in Sicily and southern Italy is seen to a great extent in metalwork, ivories, textiles and architecture of the period, and in this context a specific and intriguing link to the Christian manuscripts on purple-dyed vellum presents itself. The Rossano Gospels (Codex Purpureus Rossanensis), made by a Byzantine royal scribe in the mid-sixth century probably in Syria or Palestine, has been housed in Rossano, a town on the instep of Italy in the province of Calabria for over a millennium (see fig. 4, p. 48).

It is thought to have been brought there sometime during the seventh or eighth century CE, when it entered the Cathedral library. Parts of Calabria and Puglia, including the town of Rossano, were captured and held by both the Aghlabids and the Kalbids for considerable lengths of time between 839 and 982 CE. Is it possible that one of the Muslim princes, generals or religious leaders who were
present in Calabria during this period might actually have seen the Rossano Gospels? If so, they might have described the manuscript to their overlords in Ifriqiyya (either Aghlabid or Fatimid), who might then have commissioned the Blue Qur’an as a response to this revered and glorious Christian book of the Gospels. Is it possible that the fact that the Rossano Gospels originated in the Levant, formerly under Christian rule, now under Muslim rule, might have added to politico-religious symbolism of the commission, almost rubbing salt in the Christian wound? It is a tantalizing possibility. If it were the case, the place of production of the Blue Qur’an would have been either Sicily or Ifriqiyya, most probably Qayrawan. Sicily at this period was quite sophisticated enough, and the copying there in 982-83 CE of a splendid copy of the Qur’an in a variant Eastern Kufic script on white vellum is proof that a scriptorium existed, at least in the late tenth century.6 Equally, Qayrawan was a well-established centre of scholarship and literature with a known scriptorium. The present-day location of manuscripts is never a sure sign that they were originally produced in the same locality, but in this case a manuscript of the significance of the Blue Qur’an produced in Sicily or Tunisia could quite easily have found its way to the Great Mosque of Qayrawan during the medieval period and have appeared in their 1294 inventory. Both Bloom and Stanley believe the Blue Qur’an to be one of the manuscripts mentioned in the 1294 inventory of the Great Mosque of Qayrawan,7 and our present Ifriqiyya/Sicily theory would fit in with this rare piece of early documentary evidence.

Even if the Rossano Gospels manuscript was not specifically the inspiration for the Blue Qur’an, another of the six Syrian Byzantine purple-dyed codices known could have been by a Muslim ruler or reported to him by emissaries or ambassadors during the ninth or tenth centuries. Although the Rossano Gospels had apparently
arrived in South Italy by the eighth century, most of the other purple-dyed royal manuscripts seem to have remained within the Byzantine Empire during the medieval period. Whatever the origins of the Blue Qur’an, it is undoubtedly one of the most important and spectacular manuscripts produced in the Islamic world in the early medieval period, and it will no doubt continue to intrigue and vex scholars well into the future.

1 Letter-pointing is used on his leaf only to differentiate between the ی and the ی, and not for any assistance of the stylus. The three instances of letter-pointing are on the second and thirteenth lines of the verse.

2 The majority of the manuscript is divided between the National Library and the Museum of Islamic Art, both in Tunis. That some of it was dispersed at least by the nineteenth century is attested by the fact that F.R. Martin acquired a group of leaves (said to have come from Iraq) in Istanbul in 1912. Single leaves or fragments are now in the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin; and several private collections.


5 The sixteenth verse of Sura 3 appears on a leaf from this manuscript in the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, Ms.1455; see James 1985, no. 9, p. 22. The sixteenth verse of Sura 3 appears on a leaf in the Khalili Collection; inv. no. KFQ13; see Déroche 1992, no. 43, p. 94.

6 For instance, a Qur’an fragment in Kufic script on saffron-coloured vellum in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; for an illustration of a leaf from the same manuscript see Déroche 1992, no. 11, p. 58.


9 Wahter and Wolf 2001, p. 79.

10 Wahter and Wolf 2001, p. 58.


12 For example, the diameter of the dome of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, built by the Caliph ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwan in 681-92 CE, is very slightly larger than that of the nearby Church of the Holy Sepulchre, and of the Pantheon in Rome, two of the most significant domed structures of the ancient and Christian worlds. This led to the fact that the Dome of the Rock was built on the site of the Temple of Solomon and, during Christ’s ministry, of Herod’s Third Temple, which was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE, and the religio-political symbolism is clear.

13 The Umayyad-sponsored academies of Cordoba, employing Muslim, Christian and Jewish scholars, are well-known, as are the accounts of the great library of Cordoba, said to contain more manuscripts than any other library in Europe at the time.


16 This manuscript is now in the Nuruosmaniye Library, Istanbul, Ms. 23. A fragment is in the Khalili Collection, London; see Déroche 1992, no. 81, pp. 146-151.


18 For instance, the Vienna Genesis arrived first in Venice in the fourteenth century and then moved to Vienna, and the Codex Sinopensis was in Stiopoe, a town on the Black Sea, until 1899.
11 Qur'an section in Kufic script

Near East or North Africa
9th century
Sura 17 (Al-Ibra'), vv. 1-20, 29-111; Sura 18 (Al-Kahf)

Arabic manuscript on vellum, sixty-five folios. Six lines of elongated brown Kufic script to the page, vocalization in red. Fifth verse divisions marked in text with a gold harram in verse divisions, with a gold rosette pointed in green and red. Two sura headings in gold Kufic script outlined in black with illuminated palmettes extending into the outer margins. Modern green morocco binding with matching slipcase.

FOLIO 10.2 x 15.3 cm
TEXT AREA 7.5 x 11 cm

Small multi-volume Qur'ans in horizontal format with only a few lines of script to each page were popular in the ninth and tenth centuries. This juz' would have formed the fifteenth of a set of thirty, with a juz' for each day of the month. The verso of the final folio of the manuscript (f. 65v) contains a Safavid library inscription dated to 23 Ramadan 1014 AH/1 February 1606 CE, which is evidence of the mobility of such manuscripts in the pre-modern period.

The script in this section is closest to the script called D.1 by François Déroche, and is found on a number of Qur'an sections and leaves, mostly dating from the ninth century.¹ The final bifolium contains only four lines of script on each page, leaving a space around the text block which was probably meant to be filled with illuminated panels. The style of illumination throughout the manuscript is strikingly simple, with discreet gold devices marking fifth and tenth verses and only red dots for the vocalization. The sura headings are also charmingly simple, with the name of the sura and verse count in barely differentiated gold script, from the last letter of which a gold palmette stretches into the margin.

¹ For a discussion of D.1 see Déroche 1992, pp. 35-37. For leaves and sections from Qur'ans of a similar age script and format, see the folio from the 'Amaliyy Qur'an in the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts, Istanbul, discussed and illustrated in Ernæusen et al. 2001, p. 74 and fig. 118. See also two leaves in the Khalili Collection, inv. nos. KFQ84, KFQ84, discussed and illustrated in Déroche 1992, nos. 19, 22, pp. 67, 70.
Qur’ān bifolium in Kufic script

Near East or North Africa
Late 8th century
Sūra 10 (Ya’qūb), vv. 101-09, Sūra 11 (Hud), sura heading and vv. 1-4

Bifolium from an Arabic manuscript written in Kufic script in brown ink on parchment. There is no letter-pointing. Vocalization is applied using red, yellow and blue dots and further symbols in red and blue (see below). The single verse divisions are marked with a small triangular cluster of three dots — red, yellow and blue. The fifth verse divisions are marked with a stylized letter ẖās (representing the number 5 in the abjad system) in gold. There is no tenth verse present on this bifolium. The sura heading for Sūra 11 (Hud) is written in gold and silver Kufic script outlined in dark brown ink with a gold stylized palmette extending into the margin. The word ḫād is written vertically next to the palm of the palmist in black ink.

FOLIO 17.5 × 26 cm
TEXT AREA 9.5 × 16.6 cm

The script of this bifolium is closest to styles D.II and D.III of Deroche’s system of categorization. This script is associated with the second half of the ninth century and the early tenth century. It is interesting to note that the scripts of cat. 7, 8 and 9 also belong to styles D.I, D.II and D.III, but the aesthetic impact and artistic qualities of those folios are more obvious than those of the present piece. The present bifolium is neat and essentially functional, while cat. 7, 8 and 9 are inspiring and majestic works of art, spacious, elegant and aesthetically striking. This shows how significant were the wealth and artistic objectives of the patron, the skill of the scribe and the amount of time and resources available, and how adaptable was the Kufic script.

There are several other interesting aspects of this Qur’ān bifolium. The vocalization has been augmented by a further series of reading marks consisting of dashes, circumflexes and other symbols, as follows: shadda (tashdiq) is marked with a red circumflex or inverted circumflex; a similar
symbol in blue seems to mark a šāhīn, but only on an initial waw or ya and not in every case; a miniature alif in red marks a long medial alif; a long red or blue horizontal dash marks wasl. The presence of this system of reading aids, which seem to be original, as they are applied with the same pigments as the coloured dot vocalization, indicates a functional context for this Qurʾān. The most likely candidate would have been the Imam of a mosque or other prayer leader, or perhaps a Qurʾān scholar or teacher in a madrasa.

The general style of the Qurʾān would also support this proposition: the manuscript is relatively modest in size and has a script that is legible and neat, but is not an artistic tour de force, and the illuminated sūra heading is, again, neat and attractive, but not overly elaborate or glamorous.

However, the sūra heading does have one distinctive feature. The words of the sūra title and number of verses are written in alternating gold and silver ink. This is possibly unique to this manuscript. In addition, in the centre of the marginal palmette is a motif like a pine cone, which is also in silver.

On the third line of folio 1r the scribe has made a mistake in the text, but must have realised more or less immediately, as he has erased the relevant letters by scraping or picking the ink off the parchment and has written in the correct letters so that the scraped parchment is partly covered and partly exposed.

1 Déroche 1992, pp. 37, 44-45.
2 Viewing under magnification at x40 shows the pigments to be of the same type. For instance, the blue of the circumflexes and wasl dashes is the same as that of the blue vocalization dots, the blue dot of the verse division markers, the blue surround of the sūra heading palmette and the blue dot in the centre of the palmette.
3 No other instances are known to the author.
Large Qur’an leaf in Kufic script

Ifrīqiyya, Egypt or Western Syria
10th century
Sūra 20 (Bakra) vv. 73-86

Folio from an Arabic manuscript written in Kufic script on parchment in brown ink with seven lines per page. There is some original letter-pointing, applied in thin dashes in the same brown ink as the text, and some later letter-pointing, applied in a paler brown ink and in a coarser hand. The vocalization consists of red and green dots. There are also occasional tashdīd and sūnhūn symbols of Khalīl b. Ahmad’s system which are original to the folio and written in a neat hand in the same brown ink as the text. Single verse divisions are marked with triangular clusters of six gold dots. The fifth verse division is marked with a large stylized letter hu in gold Kufic script. Tenth verse divisions are marked with large illuminated rosettes decorated in gold and green and containing the exact verse count in gold Kufic script.

FOLIO 33 × 46.2 cm
TEXT AREA 18.3 × 34 cm

This large and extremely fine folio comes from a Qur’an written in a script notable for its elegance and has interesting letter-forms and calligraphic style. Several pertinent features of the script link it to two other manuscripts of similar format and style. Indeed, the general style of the scripts and the more unusual idiosyncrasies are so close as to suggest that all three originated in the same place and period, or even in the same scriptorium. The three manuscripts are:

a) the present seven-line example, of which several folios and fragments are in the National Library, Tunis, and the

Museum of Islamic Arts, Qairawan; b) a five-line Qur’an of which a fragment of fifty-three folios is in the Bibliothèque nationale, Paris, and a small number of single folios are dispersed (see fig. 5); c) a three-line Qur’an of which many leaves are dispersed, including a single folio featured here (cat. 14). The different scale of each folio makes comparison difficult at first glance, but the similarity between the scripts can be seen in close-up details of single lines of script.

The pertinent aspects of the script which these three manuscripts share and which render them distinct from other examples include the oversized and emphatically...
TABLE 5. Comparison of letter forms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ms Type</th>
<th>7-line</th>
<th>5-line</th>
<th>3-line</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Terminal nun</td>
<td><img src="image1.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image2.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image3.png" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terminal min</td>
<td><img src="image4.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image5.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image6.png" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

in the width of the strokes of certain letters and ligatures. For example, the starting point of the terminal nun has the nib held at an angle to produce the maximum width of stroke, perpendicular to the direction of the stroke. The nib is then angled gently towards the direction of the stroke so that by the half-way point of the letter the width of the stroke is much narrower. The angle of the nib is then turned perpendicular again as it nears the end of the letter, so that the end of the stroke is again the maximum possible width. The terminal nun is thus effectively symmetrical about its mid-point. The scribe has exploited the natural effect of a chisel-shaped nib as it s drawn round a curve, and has accentuated this to create a definite calligraphic motif.
Another example of the use of the angled nib can be seen on the terminal mim (see illustration above), where the solid circle of the head of the mim changes to a thin, almost invisible downstroke for the tail. This feature in itself is notable, since most Kufic scripts have the tail of the terminal mim as a short, almost stubby feature laid horizontally along the line of script. However, the terminal mim with a tail that drops below the line is a common feature of so-called Eastern Kufic scripts, which are known to have come into use for Qur’anic manuscripts in both eastern and western Islamic lands during the tenth century.3

The fact that all of these distinctive calligraphic characteristics are shared by these three manuscripts, as well as a general similarity in the calligraphic style and the format of the folios (the text area of each type is approximately twice as wide as it is high)4 implies that these three manuscripts might be related in origin. It is possible that this was the ‘house style’ of a certain scriptorium at a certain time, or perhaps the favoured calligraphic style of a royal patron or dynasty – a court style. It may even be the distinctive style of an individual calligrapher. We shall never know, since these three manuscripts survive only in fragments dispersed widely in the Islamic world and the West, and none provides a colophon or any early documentary evidence. However, fragments in which this script appears are to be found in Damascus, Cairo and Qayrawan,5 but no pre-modern collections east of Damascus nor west of Qayrawan possess any examples. This, coupled with the calligraphically related Damascene waqf inscription of 911 and fact that our script is still essentially a Kufic type but exhibits intermittent aspects characteristic of so-called Eastern Kufic (e.g. the terminal mim, the occasionally forward-slanting vertical of the ‘aa and terminal kaf, and a few instances of inward-curving lam-alif combinations not present on this folio but visible on other published examples) might place the origin of all three manuscripts somewhere from Ifriqiyya to Syria in the first half of the tenth century.

Examination of other published folios from the same Qur’anic book shows that the wording of the sura titles was unusual. The folio exhibited in London in 1976 bears the sura title for Sura 21 (al-Anbiya).4 However, the wording does not state “Sura al-Anbiya”, as was normal for the tenth century, nor even “Al-Anbiya”; as was occasionally used, but describes it as follows:

“Fatihat surat alisi tddikaru fiha al-anbiya m‘at wa idha-ashar ayat – the beginning of the sura in which are mentioned the Prophets, one hundred and eleven verses”

By contrast, the folio exhibited in Paris in 1982 has a more usual wording for the sura title of Sura 23 (al-Muminin),6 although without the word sura.

“Al-Muminin m‘a wa tis ‘a-asir ayat – the Believers, one hundred and nineteen verses”

This indicates that the exact wording of the titles of the suras was not absolutely fixed during the first few centuries of the Islamic era, even as late as the tenth century.7

1 Ruchi 52; see Lings and Safadi 1976, no. 24; Paris 1982, no. 358, pp. 274-5.
2 Ms. Arabie 334; see Déroche 1983, no. 179, pl. XX; Paris 2007, no. 31, p. 63; Paris 1987, no. 9, p. 3; Berlin 1960, no. 35, p. 34; Sotheby’s, 23 April 1974, lot 9, 8 July 1980, lot 157, 29 April 1998, lot 10 and 11 (here fig. 5), 12 October 200, lots 30 and 31.
3 Other folios from this manuscript are in the Al-Sabah Collection, Dar al-Ashar al-Islamiyya, Kuwait; see New York 1993, fig. 1, p. 117; the Tareq Rajab Museum, Kuwait; see Singapore 1997, p. 35; the Khalili Collection, London, see Déroche 1992, no. 38; and other private collections.
4 Déroche 1993, pp. 44-45.
5 A fully formed, but slightly cursive version of Eastern Kufic script is used on a Qur’anic copied at Palermo in 372 AH/982-83 CE (see Déroche 1992, no. 81, p. 146), and individual elements are likely to have been borrowed earlier from non-Qur’anic manuscripts, for which Eastern Kufic script had been employed in titles and main texts since the ninth century.
6 To be exact, the quotient of width to height of the text areas is as follows: seven-line Qur’an = 1.85; five-line Qur’an = 2.1; three-line Qur’an = 2.2.
7 Déroche 1993, p. 42.
8 Lings and Safadi 1976, no. 24, pp. 29-30; Lings 1976, no. 9.
14 Illuminated Qur’an leaf in Kufic script

Urqayya, Egypt or Western Syria
10th century
Sura 56 (Al-A‘râf), vv. 19-24

Folio from an Arabic manuscript in Kufic script in brown ink on parchment with three lines of script per page. The letter-pointing is original and is applied in the same brown ink as the script. The vocalization consists of red, blue, green and yellow dots. The single verse divisions are marked with triangular arrangements of gold dots, the fifth verse divisions are marked with gold roundels outlined in blue and yellow containing the word khaams in reserve, and the tenth verse divisions are marked with large gold roundels of radiating foliate design outlined in blue and yellow, containing the exact verse count in reserve.

FOLIO 23.8 × 33.1 cm
TEXT AREA 10 × 22 cm

The script on this Qur’an leaf is one of the most distinctive and elegant of all Kufic scripts. The wide spacing of the lines and the fact that there are only three lines per page means that the whole Qur’an must have run to many hundreds of folios, employing an enormous amount of
parchment in the process.2 This, and the fine quality of the script and illumination, point to a commission of great luxury and expense. The script relates very closely to only two other known Qur'anic manuscripts, one example of which is cat.13, where further discussion of the calligraphic style and origins can be found.

There are several features of cat. 14, in terms both of the calligraphy and of the illumination, worth examining in greater detail. There are two letter forms which the scribe has emphasised for calligraphic effect: 1) the strong verticals of the alif and lam, the lam/alif combination and the vertical parts of letters such as the ta, za and kaf; 2) the rounded sweeping curves of the terminal nun. These are the dominant features and are visually striking. They are the first thing one notices on looking at the page. To create such a strong visual emphasis must imply a specific aesthetic intention on the part of the scribe. The other letters appear almost diminutive in comparison, although finely formed. A further aspect of the calligraphic intentions of the scribe are apparent in the wide variations in the angle at which the nib of the qalam has been drawn over the surface, creating strong variations in the width of the strokes of certain letters and ligatures. For example, as in cat. 13, the starting point of the terminal nun has the nib held at an angle to produce the maximum width of stroke (perpendicular to the direction of the stroke). The nib is then angled gently towards the direction of the stroke so that by the half-way point of the letter the width of the stroke is much narrower. The angle of the nib is then turned perpendicular again as it nears the end of the letter, so that the end of the stroke is again the maximum possible width. The terminal nun is thus effectively symmetrical about its mid-point. The scribe has exploited the natural effect of a chisel-shaped nib as it is drawn round a curve, and has accentuated this create a definite calligraphic motif (see detail on page 54).

Another example of the use of the angled nib can be seen on the terminal mim, where the solid circle of the head of the mim moves to a thin, almost invisible downstroke for the tail. This feature in itself is notable, since most Kufic scripts have the tail of the terminal mim as a short, almost stubby feature, laid horizontally along the line of script. However, the terminal mim with a tail that drops below the line is a common feature of so-called Eastern Kufic scripts.

The emphasis on the vertical letter forms is in contrast to the general thrust of the page. Although the horizontal stretching of the letters (naskhi) is relatively measured in this case, the shape and proportions of the text area and the folio as a whole are strongly horizontal. The text area is 10 cm high and 22 cm wide, i.e. more than twice as wide as it is tall.

In the context of the illumination, the roundels marking the tenth verse throughout the manuscript – in this case the twentieth verse of Sura 56 (al-Waqi‘ah) – are very large relative to the script and the size of the text area (the roundel on this folio measures 4.8 cm in diameter). They dwarf the majority of the surrounding letters, only the vertical letter-forms and terminal nun offering any visual competition.

It seems that the scribe’s specific aesthetic intention was to create a script of contrasts: the verticals (lam, alif, ta, za, kaf) contrast both with the horizontality of the text area and, in a slightly different way, with the rounded curves of the terminal nun; the angling of the nib creates further graphic contrasts within the actual letter forms; and the visual contrast of the out-sized solidity coloured gold tenth-verse marker with the attenuated dark brown letters and the creamy white of the parchment. The aesthetic success of this is evident, and the artistic effect is almost mannerist.

As with most examples of Kufic script, we have no precise idea of the geographical origin of the folio, nor its date of production, but the presence of Eastern Kufic features in the script and provenance and calligraphic aspects of its sister script on cat. 13 would indicate a date in the first half of the tenth century and a geographical origin between Qayrawan and Damascus.

MF

2 Cat. 14 contains six verses. The number of verses per folio of other published examples varies between 500 and ten (these examples are drawn from the beginning, middle and end of the Qur’an to account for the variations in the length of the verses throughout the Qur’an, in which the Medinan suras, arranged mostly in the first half of the Qur’an, have longer, and the Meccan suras, arranged mostly in the second half of the Qur’an, have shorter verses). Taking an average, therefore, of five verses per folio, we can roughly calculate that the whole text of this copy of the Qur’an would have required 1247 folios of parchment (6236 verses in the Qur’an divided by 5 per folio). This would certainly have meant that it was divided into seven volumes. A seven-volume division would have meant around 178 folios per volume, while a thirty-volume division would have meant around 42 folios per volume.
The present manuscript was certainly a sophisticated and expensive commission. The format is large and the script is monumental, as well as artistically outstanding. With only five lines per page the complete manuscript would have required an enormous amount of parchment, and the number of skilled artists and craftsmen in the scriptorium (the scribe, illuminator(s), ink makers, pigment makers, parchment preparers, binders etc.) required to produce such a manuscript would have been very great. With this in mind the context of the manuscript’s commissioning becomes curious. This manuscript was made for a nurse. Admittedly she was the nurse of a prince-governor of a prosperous emirate and no doubt, as is often the case with bonds formed in infancy, the prince was very fond of his former nurse, but she was, nevertheless, a nurse, not a senior courtier or prince or ruler of another state. The emirate itself was not even a particularly powerful one, being a seat of governments of the Fatimid Caliphate rather than an independent kingdom. What a commission for a nurse! It makes one wonder what degree of luxury, what artistic sophistication, what monumental size and lavishness the Qur’ans ordered by the rulers themselves might have had.

1 See Paris 1962, no. 357, p. 273.
2 Paris 1962, nos. 356, 357; Lings 1976, no. 10; Lings and Safadi 1976, no. 23, p. 31; see also London 2004, no. 6, pp. 56-57. A leaf from the same manuscript is in the David Collection, Copenhagen, inv. no. 252003, illustrated in Déroche 2004, p. 49, fig. 10.
3 Lings and Safadi 1976, no. 23, p. 31; Safadi 1978, p. 23; Lings 1976, no. 10; Lings 2005, nos. 153-54, p. 82.
4 Déroche has re-named these scripts New Style (Déroche 1992, pp. 132-82) owing to the fact that they are not by any means exclusively eastern, nor do they appear necessarily to have developed in the east. Nevertheless, the term Eastern Kufic is still generally understood to describe the distinctive angular scripts of the category, and the term has been retained in this catalogue.
6 Examples are given in the following entry (cat. 16).
7 The Arabic word hadinah refers to a nursemaid or dry-nurse, not a wet-nurse. In this case it seems likely that she was the prince’s nursemaid, perhaps throughout his childhood.