30 Qur'an in bihari script

India
About 1500

Arabic manuscript on paper, 665 folios. Thirteen lines of bihari script in gold, black and blue. Commentary in small black and red naskh, written diagonally in outer margin. Ruled in red, blue and gold. Individual verses marked in text with small gold rosettes pointed in blue. Tenth verse divisions marked in margins with large gold roundels with the letter ‘ain in white in centre within gold and coloured concentric circles. Larger divisions (kur, ruk, raf) marked in margins with gold or red roundels within large coloured teardrop devices. Sura headings in gold naskh or white riq`a within gold cartouches set within a band of coloured panels. Opening folio (f. 1r) illuminated with lozenge-shaped medallion within a panel bordered by red and blue illuminated teardrop devices. Text of opening, central and closing bifolia (ff. 1v-2r, 31v-32r, 65v-66r) set within panels of pink cross-hatching with gold and coloured borders. Later red leather binding with gilt decoration.

Folio 30 x 21.5 cm

Only a small number of Islamic manuscripts have survived from the pre-Mughal period in India in anything other than fragmentary form. Unfavourable climatic conditions and political instability probably account for the widespread destruction of manuscripts from this period. The present large Qur'an is a rare example of an intact manuscript and a superb illustration of the vibrancy of the pre-Mughal tradition of Qur'an production.

A number of features in the illumination indicate North India's political and cultural ties with Iran. The floral sprays that enliven the grounds of many of the illuminated details and the pink cross-hatching that surrounds the text on the illuminated double-pages are common features of fifteenth-century Timurid and Turkoman Qur'ans.1 Indian Qur'ans of the period can easily be distinguished, however, by the idiosyncratic version of naskh script they employ, frequently referred to as bihari. This term of obscure origin is unlikely to refer to the Bihar region of India, where no tradition of manuscript copying and few great mosques or madrasas existed.2 The tradition of copying Qur'ans in bihari script appears to have been short-lived, coinciding with the period between the collapse of the Delhi sultanate in the last years of the fourteenth century and the consolidation of Mughal power in the middle of the sixteenth.3

This Qur'an incorporates many of the most colourful and unusual features associated with bihari Qur'ans. The Qur'anic text has been copied in three different colours, with every two lines of black script inserted between alternating single lines of gold or blue script. Also typically bihari is the Persian commentary that zigzags around the space between the margins.

1 For an introduction to Timurid and Türkoman styles of Qur'an production, see James 1992b, pp. 14-15.
3 James 1992b, p. 104.
Ottoman manuscript illumination was highly eclectic in the first half of the sixteenth century, reflecting the presence in the Ottoman Empire of artists from all over the Islamic world. The illumination in this Qur’an shows the strong influence of Eastern Iranian traditions, an attested feature of a group of Ottoman manuscripts dating from c. 1520-50. This influence is particularly visible in the frontispiece, where the illuminated panels with black borders above and below the text and the gold hasps projecting into the margins from the centre of the smooth border are reminiscent of early sixteenth-century Herati and Bukharan work.

Certain features, however, particularly the scrolls of black lotus flowers in the gold cartouches of the frontispiece, the pink shaded areas of the sura headings, and the combination of red and pale green throughout the illumination, are associated with Ottoman manuscripts of the period. This attribution is supported by Arabic notes pertaining to the sale of the manuscript in an Ottoman raq'a hand on f. 1r. An unusual feature of the illumination is the row of orange and green star-shaped quatrefoils running inside the border of the frontispiece, in place of the more usual split palmettes. This feature, in the same green and gold combination, is found in the details of some late Timurid Herati work.

1 For the cosmopolitan nature of Ottoman manuscript production in the period, see Ait 1985, pp. 39-56.
2 ibid, p. 35.
3 For a classic example of late Timurid Herati illumination of this type, see the illuminated frontispiece to a copy of the Divan of Sultan Husayn Mirza in the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts, Istanbul, inv. no. 1906, illustrated in Lenetz and Lowry 1989, no. 148, pp. 268-69, 319. Very similar and contemporary to the frontispiece of the present manuscript is the illumination in a Herati or Bukharan Qur’an in the Khalili Collection, inv. no. QUR114, illustrated in James 1992a, no. 33, pp. 134-25.
4 See, for example, a leaf from the same copy of the Divan of Sultan Husayn Mirza, now in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Nasli M. Heeramaeck Collection, inv. no. M.75.5.399, illustrated in Lenetz and Lowry 1989, no. 149, pp. 370-359.
Verses from Sadi'i's Gulistan

Eastern Persia
Dated 950 AH / 1543-44 CE
Signed by Sultan Muhammad Khanan
Sadi, Gulistan, Chapter 2, Story 41

Six lines of Persian in black nasta‘īq script against a gold cloud-band on cream paper, central panel illuminated with blue and black tendrils containing a floral scroll with interstices filled with gold, margins filled with eight illuminated cartouches containing Persian verses, signed "Faqir al-Mudhrib Sultan Muhammad Khanan, Year 950" in bottom right corner of central panel.
Folio 23.8 x 16.3 cm
Text area 21.8 x 14 cm

This calligraphic panel bears the signature of Sultan Muhammad Khanan, one of the most talented pupils of the calligrapher Sultan ‘Ali Mashhadi and a member of the circle of the leading luminary of the Herat court, ‘Ali Shir Nava‘i. The accomplished nasta‘īq, as well as the typically Herat illumination marked by bold turquoise and black, are entirely consistent with the style and quality associated with this artist. According to Bayani, it was in executing qira‘as, individual album leaves like the present composition, that he excelled.3

His contemporaries gave Sultan Muhammad the epithet khândan, or ‘laughing’, on account of his carefree and light-hearted nature, which ‘Ali Shir reported to be verging on madness. Sultan Muhammad passed his entire life in Herat, continuing to reside there during the turbulence that followed the death of the Timurid Sultan Husayn Bayqara in 1506 as the city passed back and forth between the Safavids and their Uzbek rivals. Though there is disagreement amongst the sources concerning the date of Sultan Muhammad’s death, a signed qira‘a dated 957 AH/1550 CE in Istanbul provides us with a terminus post quem.2

The cultured city of Herat pioneered the compilation of calligraphic albums in the first half of the fifteenth century. While the earliest albums collated both old and recent specimens taken from other manuscripts, by the end of the century artists such as Muhammad Khanan were producing decorative leaves (qira‘as) specifically intended for such compilations. The verses of this qira‘a are taken from Sadi’s Gulistan (The Rose Garden), one of the most frequently copied and quoted works from the Persian literary canon. Completed in 1258, the Gulistan contains didactic verse stories interspersed with poetry, containing advice for kings, lovers and mystics.

2 Ibid., pp. 668-71.
3 Roxburgh 2005, p. 11.
The ‘Prayer of ‘Ukkasha’

Ottoman Empire
Early 16th century

Arabic manuscript on cream paper, sixty-one folios. Ff. 31v-51r: two lines of large thuluth, one above other, below central text block of five lines of naskh script in black ink, vocalization in black and red, followed by two pages in black naskh. Ff. 51r-52r: three lines of large muhaqqaq in black ink. Text contains (ff. 31v-37v) Sūras 36 (Ya Sin), 171v-19v) 48 (Al-Fatih), (ff. 19v-21r) 58 (Al-Wāḥi‘a), (ff. 21v-23v) 59 (Al-Mu‘alla‘), (ff. 33v-37v) 57 (Al-Malah), (ff. 37v-40r) 78 (Al-Naba’); (ff. 40v-50r) prayers for each day of the week (ff. 40v-51r) Shāra’ (Explanation) of the Prayer of ‘Ukkasha; (ff. 51r-60v) in: Prayer of ‘Ukkasha, followed by (51v) a page of notes in Ottoman Turkish. Qur’anic and poetic verses marked with gold rosaces pointed in red and blue. Illuminated sura and chapter headings on ff. 37, 171, 21, 33, 59, 48, 58, 40v, 49v, 49v, 47v and ff. 47v, 48v, 50r, and illuminated endpiece on ff. 60r. Occasional repairs and water staining. Brown morocco binding, probably eighteenth-century, filleted in gold, paper doublures decorated with green and brown stars.

Published: 24.5 x 15 cm

The eclectic illumination of this manuscript is characteristic of early sixteenth-century Ottoman manuscript production. The opening illumination (f. 37r), bearing the title of Sūra 36 (Ya Sin), is reminiscent of Shirazi and central Iranian work of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century; the sura title in red riq’s is contained in a gold cartouche with scalloped edges set in a panel of deep blue with gold cornicepieces. The panel is surmounted by a fleshy gold headpiece with a lobed border from which blue fānias project into the upper margin. The remaining illumination, however, has a more archaic feel, drawing on a decorative repertoire established as early as the late fourteenth century and made popular in the second half of the fifteenth. Though features of this style continued to be used in western Iran in the late fifteenth century, it is only in Ottoman manuscripts that this style is combined with later Timurid and Turkman traditions, giving early Ottoman manuscripts their famously experimental feel. The headings in the second, more archaic, style in the manuscript all consist of the sura or chapter headings in red riq’s; set in a gold panel with lobed edges ending in a point; the surrounding panels, ruled in gold or orange, are filled with the gold floral sprays on the deep blue ground so characteristic of this style.

Other typically Ottoman features of the manuscript include the highly burnished, near-white paper, marked with small flecks. In places, a creamier, smoother paper has been used to provide a deliberate contrast, a feature found in other Ottoman manuscripts of the same period.

A variety of formats and scripts is also employed throughout the manuscript. The first section of the prayer book is taken up with a selection of Qur’anic verses, which are written in five lines of neat naskh between two lines, one above, another below, of large muhaqqaq script. This practice of copying Qur’ans in different scripts stretches as far back as the eleventh century, but only became widespread in the Timurid period. During the course of the fifteenth century the practice became almost standard, the most common combination of scripts being muhaqqaq and naskh. The final section of the manuscript, containing a prayer, is written in three lines of elegant and measured muhaqqaq. This was a format used for Qur’ans in the fourteenth century that had dropped out of favour by the time this manuscript was copied. The intention here was perhaps to indicate the special status of the prayers but to differentiate them from the Qur’anic verses that precede them.

The prayer in question is entitled ‘The Prayer of ‘Ukkasha’. According to the Ottoman Turkish shāra’, or explanation, that precedes the prayer, the Angel Gabriel informed Muhammad that ‘Ukkasha’s piety was greater than that of any of his contemporaries. On asking ‘Ukkasha for an explanation for this, Muhammad received the answer that a simple prayer recited in the morning and evenings was ‘Ukkasha’s only act of worship. The Prophet then stated that whoever recited the same prayer would have his sins cleansed and his obedience appreciated in the eyes of God.

The inclusion of such prayers in such highly polished manuscripts as the present one is an indication of the degree to which ‘popular’ religious traditions were found at all levels of Ottoman society.
Qur’ān illuminated in Herati style

Herat
Ramadan AH 965 / June-July 1558 CE
Copied by Muhammad b. Mirak

Arabic manuscript on cream paper, 360 folios. Ten lines of black naskh script between three lines of large gold muhaqqaq. Vocalization in black, recitation marks in red. Surah titles in white tawqīf gold cartouches set in illuminated panels. Individual verses marked with gold rosettes pointed in blue and orange. Fifth and tenth verse divisions marked with marginal medallions containing word ‘al hamma or ‘as-har respectively in white Eastern Kufic on blue or gold ground, contained in concentric blue, green or orange and gold rings. Panels dividing text ruled in gold, entire text block ruled in blue, red, green and gold. Text of opening bifolium enclosed by illuminated panels above and below, framed by large illuminated border with large gold harps projecting into the outer margins. Occasional illuminated devices in space between ruled text block and frame (eg. f. 7iv). Final folio (f. 39v) contains colophon in ta’liq script giving date of completion as Ramadan 965 (June-July 1558 CE) and the name of the scribe as Muhammad b. Mirak. Modern dark brown morocco binding.

FOLIO 26 x 17.5 cm

Though very few Qur’āns survive from this turbulent period in the history of the city of Herat, this example is a testament to the continuation of the tradition of copying and illuminating manuscripts of the highest quality. The city’s undisputed heyday came in the late fifteenth century, when under the rule of the cultivated Timurid Sultan Husayn Bayqara it was home to famed artists, poets and calligraphers such as Bihād, Jamī and Sultan ‘Ali Mashhadi. Following the Uzbek invasion of 1506, Herat found itself on the border between the rival Safavid and Shaybani Uzbek empires, and passed frequently between the two powers. As a result, many artists migrated or were forcibly removed to cities such as Safavid Tabrīz or Shaybani Bukhara. It was in the latter city in particular that many of the fifteenth-century Herati traditions of bookmaking, painting and illumination were perpetuated.

Despite this movement of artists and the relegation of Herat to a provincial capital in the sixteenth century, the city never lost its reputation for artistic excellence. Artists such as Sultan Muhammad Khandan and Sultan Muhammad Nur continued the calligraphic tradition established there by their masters, the celebrated Sultan ‘Ali Mashhadi, and the tastes and patronage of Safavid princes such as Bahram Mirza and the future Shah Tahmasp seem to have been shaped significantly by their sojourn as governor of the city.1

The delicate illumination and well-proportioned scripts in this Qur’an attest the continued excellence of manuscript production in the city. The illuminated frontispiece displays many characteristic features of Herati and Bukharan illumination, particularly the strong blacks, reds and turquoise, the smooth-edged border and the panels of blue and gold tendrils on either side of the text block. A colophon on the final folio names the scribe as Muhammad b. Mirak, a name not recorded elsewhere. The patronymic ‘Ibn Mirak’, however, suggests the possibility that the scribe was the son of one of two famous sixteenth-century artists called Mirak. The first was Mirak-i Naqqash, or ‘Mirak the Painter’, a painter, illuminator and calligrapher at the court of Sultan Husayn Bayqara.2 The other was Aqa Mirak, one of the most celebrated painters in the atelier of Shah Tahmasp, who was in Mashhad at the time the Qur’an was copied.3 Revealingly, the colophon refers to Herat as ‘Mashhadabadi’, or the ‘City of Trials’, alluding presumably to the tribulations suffered in the city as a result of the warfare between Safavids and the Shaybanids.

2 For the formative role of Herat in the princes’ artistic education, see Rothbauer 2005, pp. 30, 277; S.C. Welch 1972, p. 53.
3 For the life of Mirak Naqqash, see Soudavar 1992, pp. 110-11.
Mehmed Pasha reached the apex of his career in the reign of the ineffective Selim II (r. 1566-74), during which he was de facto ruler of the Empire. Hasan had accompanied his father on the Szegedvar campaign in Hungary in 1565, during which Mehmed successfully concealed the death of Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent on the day prior to the Ottoman victory.

Copies of the Qur’an, as well as illustrated manuscripts, formed part of the trade that passed over the Ottoman-Safavid border in spite of the hostile relations between the two empires for much of the sixteenth century. That Safavid Qur’ans such as this one were particularly prized in the Ottoman realms is demonstrated by their inclusion among the list of objects brought as gifts by Safavid envoys to the Ottoman court. The most celebrated of these embassies was the one sent by the Safavid Shah Tahmasp, which reached the court of Sultan Elîm II in Edirne in 1586. In addition to the copy of the most famous Safavid copy of the Shahnama, the so-called Shahnama of Shah Tahmasp, the Ottoman Sultan was presented with several copies of the Qur’an.

Interestingly, Hüseyin Pasha’s Qur’an bears striking resemblance to a Qur’an thought to have been among the copies presented to Selim II by Shah Tahmasp’s envoy. Copied by a well-known Iranian scribe in the atelier of Shah Tahmasp, the Qur’an also bears a waqf inscription of Selim II, endowing the manuscript to the Mosque of Edirne. Similar in style and size, Selim II’s copy also shares many specific features with Hüseyin Pasha’s Qur’an, including the illuminated shamsas (star-shaped medallions) on the opening bifolio, the frontispiece illuminated in an ornate Shiraz style, the leather covers with tooled latticework, and the colourful filigree doublure. Taken together, the two Qur’ans provide us with an insight into the luxury tastes of the Ottoman elite of the second half of the sixteenth century.

1 See EB, art. ‘Sokollu Mehmed Pasha’.
2 For an account of this embassy see Dickson and Welch 1981, I, appendix II, pp. 270-71.