This book rises to the challenge of a grand theme—how did the early Muslims develop a fitting script and presentation for the word of God? George presents, in his expository prose, bold but convincing answers to the any questions posed by this scattered and fragmentary material, especially on matters of date and provenance. His unerring sense of the bigger picture complements his mastery of detail and of earlier scholarship. This promises to be a classic.

Professor Robert Hillenbrand, University of Edinburgh and British Academy

Charting the rise and demise of the angular scripts used in the first centuries of Islam, this is an exciting new contribution to the fields of early Islamic studies and art history.

Professor Sheila Blair, Boston College and Virginia Commonwealth University Qatar
The birth of Qur’anic calligraphy was a major event in the early history of Islam. In a few decades, it raised the Arabs and their language from the remote fringes of the civilised world to its very heart.

Alain George brings together manuscripts, material culture and texts to reveal the evolution of Arabic calligraphy from its pre-Islamic conception through the emergence of the modern styles of writing still in use today.

*The Rise of Islamic Calligraphy* explores the resonance of the Ancient notion of proportion in Arabic script and breaks new ground in our understanding of a crucially important body of material: the earliest manuscripts of the Qur’an.

Alain George highlights the historical context of early Arabic calligraphy and its relationship to the emerging civilisation of Islam, showing how a craft based on pen, parchment and ink came to convey the divine character of the Qur’anic text.

Beautifully illustrated, this is an essential reference work for students and connoisseurs of calligraphy alike.
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Alain George

THE RISE OF ISLAMIC CALLIGRAPHY

SAQI
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The research behind this book was conducted over a period of several years in different places and was aided, along the way, by numerous colleagues and friends. It all started on an autumn day, when I first came across an old page of Qur’anic calligraphy at the Ashmolean Museum, in Oxford. A few weeks earlier, a fortuitous visit to a lecture on Islamic art had led me to engage in this fascinating field of study. The interest that burgeoned in those days proved to be a lasting one; I owe much of it to Julian Raby, his enthusiasm, dedication and inspiring teaching.

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Author's Note

Auctions
All references are to London auction rooms, unless otherwise stated.

Dates
Unless otherwise stated, dates are given in the Gregorian calendar, or in the form Hijri/Gregorian. When the Hijri year overlaps two Gregorian years, the later Gregorian date appears in the notation (unless more specific information about the month is available). Thus AD 77, which started in April 696 and ended in March 697, is recorded as 77/697.

Dimensions
Manuscript dimensions are given in the format height x width cm, unless otherwise stated.

Image references
Essential information about each image is given in the captions; detailed references can also be found in the sources list at the end of the book.

Transliteration
The transliteration system used here is that of the International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES), with minor adjustments. Where a spelling has gained common acceptance in English, it has been preferred to its transliterated equivalent, e.g. 'Qur'ân' for 'Qurān', 'Kairoûan' for 'Qayrawân'.
Introduction

Calligraphy is among the oldest and most revered arts in Islam. Having emerged during the new faith’s first century, it grew and flourished at the apogee of its civilization. Then, in the course of time, the early tradition of Qur’anic calligraphy was replaced by the cursive styles still in use today. As people found the old scripts more difficult to
read, their parchment leaves were deposited in the dark corners of mosques, there to be slowly forgotten. Some of these mosques survived until the modern period, when these pages of black script and gleaming colour returned to the light.

By then, however, the living tradition behind the manuscripts had long ago died out. The main witnesses of the masterly calligraphy of the first centuries of Islam lay in thousands of parchment leaves scattered around the world, usually detached from their parent volumes. Each one of these pages is considered, today, as a work of art, and the published corpus is growing year by year. But they stand silent in front of the modern observer, concealing a story yet to be told. The present book explores the rise, growth and eventual demise of this art form.

Since it began two centuries ago, the study of these manuscripts has been hampered by several of its inherent problems. As most early Qur’anic codices were unbound over the centuries, only a handful of documents survive to tell us about their production period — in fact, not a single one until the third century of Islam. These documents are usually legal deeds (Ar. waqiyya) endowing them to a religious institution; rather than a reliable date, they can only give us the latest time a manuscript may have been completed, its terminus ante quem.3

Contextual information of any kind is scarce. One might have hoped to turn to Arabic textual sources dealing with related subjects for further insights — but they are few and not entirely reliable.

How, in these circumstances, can one make sense of the manuscripts? Different approaches have been attempted at different times. As they have already been traced by François Déroche,2 I will only restate, here, some essential points, whilst outlining the parallel growth of collections. In 1789, Jacob Georg Christian Adler published a small group of leaves in a script he called ‘Kufic’, after Arabic sources. Like Antoine-Isaac Silvestre de Sacy shortly after him, he
adopted an approach based on texts, which made its first decisive contribution when Silvestre de Sacy rediscovered the passage where al-Nadim, a tenth-century bookseller from Baghdad, describes the *abf* of the ‘Meccan’ and ‘Medinan’ styles. As time passed, more leaves, mostly purchased by travellers to the Middle East, gradually entered European collections, opening the way for increasingly refined palaeographical analyses. In 1833, the manuscripts of Asselin de Cherville, former French consul in Egypt, were acquired by the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (then known as the Bibliothèque Impériale). By working on this rich and diverse material, mainly found in the mosque of ‘Amr ibn al-‘Ās (Fustat), Michele Amari moved away from the impression of scriptural unity that had dominated previous scholarship. From Fustat also came leaves bought before 1811 by Ulrich Jasper Seezen for the Herzogliche Bibliothek zu Gotha, in Germany; and the personal collection of Jean-Joseph Marcel, a member of Napoleon’s Egyptian campaign, acquired in 1804 by the Imperial Library of Saint Petersburg (today’s National Library of Russia).

In 1887, the catalogue of the Königliche Bibliothek zu Berlin by Wilhelm Ahwardt produced detailed letter analyses which confirmed the scriptural diversity of Kufic. In the following years, Josef von Karabacek introduced a methodology based on the study of individual letter shapes, rather than the overall appearance of the script, and emphasized the potential importance of the *abf* as a palaeographic element. A few decades later, as part of the monumental *Geschichte des Qura‘a*, Bergstrasser and Pretzl remarked on the limitations of diacritical and vocalization marks as chronological markers. More importantly, they noticed that some key letters strongly varied between styles. By the turn of the twentieth century, the foundations of an approach based on letter analyses had been laid out, although the structure itself had yet to be built.

More manuscripts continued to surface in the following decades. In 1893, a fire ravaged the Umayyad mosque of Damascus, leading to the transfer of over 200,000 early Islamic folios and fragments to Istanbul by the Ottoman authorities. Twelve years later, in 1905, Bernhard Moritz published some important fragments from Egypt, notably at the Khediva Library in Cairo. Finally, during French rule in Tunisia, an important set of early bindings was discovered at the Great Mosque of Kairouan, which also housed, in its medieval library, a large number of early Qur’anic leaves.

By 1939, both the number of manuscripts and published Arabic texts available for study had considerably increased. In that year, Nabia Abbott published *The Rise of the North Arabic Script*, in which she sought to retrace the evolution and classification of scripts as understood in contemporary eyes. She gathered a wide range of textual sources about the birth and early growth of Arabic calligraphy and sought to build a history on these premises. But these texts, written at least two to four centuries after the events, were not without inherent problems, such as their undue brevity, the contradictions between their different accounts and the large part played by myth. As a result, the conclusions Abbott reached remained unclear in places, inconsistent in others and generally built on weak foundations. Her attempt thus appears, with hindsight, to have indicated the limits of an approach primarily based on texts. Yet she had also set the terms of an essential question: how was calligraphy perceived by those who wrote it?

Some three decades later, two spectacular finds were made at the Great Mosque of Sanaa, in the Yemen. In 1965, abundant rains led to
the accidental discovery of a depository of early Qur’anic fragments, long ago forgotten in a small chamber at the north-west end of the building. The room where they lay scattered was replete with insects, rodents, pigeons and snakes. The heavily worn leaves were gathered in large bags and placed in the custody of the Asqaf, the direction of religious endowments; but according to Qadi ‘Isa’i`il al-Akwa’, then head of the Yemeni Department of Antiquities, this first find was sold by an unscrupulous keeper and dispersed to collections worldwide. In 1972, as the west wall was about to collapse, more leaves were discovered by workers in a second room between the mosque’s ceiling and roof. Although some were again lost in the aftermath of these events, most were eventually safeguarded. From 1980 onwards, German and Austrian experts undertook their restoration

and classification. This collection of about 15,000 fragments from some 950 manuscripts is now housed at the Dār al-Makhtūṭāt al-Yamaniyya in Sanaa. A new phase of extensive research was inaugurated in 1983, with the publication of François Déroche’s Les manuscrits du Coran: Aux origines de la calligraphie coranique. Building on his own criticism of earlier authors, Déroche engaged in a detailed classification of scripts on the basis of the material record. “Two centuries of palaeographical research based on the study of textual data,” he noted earlier, “seem to have led to a dead end.” With the exception of ‘Hijazi’, he remarked that textual approaches had not resulted in a single convincing script identification (as will soon become apparent, ‘Hijazi’ may be as much of a historical misnomer as ‘Kufic’; but in what follows, we will continue to use both terms for practical reasons). From these observations, Déroche decided to proceed with a letter by letter analysis of the key features of early Qur’anic manuscripts, starting with the material at the Bibliothèque Nationale. This comparative method led him to establish six major ‘Kufic’ styles (labelled A, B, C, D, E, F), each of them in turn divided into subgroups (e.g. B.II, D.Va). The total number of styles identified by him reached seventeen, some widespread, others represented by only a few fragments. There is good reason to hope that, as a result of this line of work, the major periods and variants of early Qur’anic calligraphy will eventually be understood.

In any case, from a largely indistinct mass, the Kufic material had been divided into intelligible scriptural groups. In the 1990s, some scholars criticized Déroche for isolating the manuscripts from their historical background, mainly because of his wariness of textual sources. Their criticism has, in our opinion, ignored one essential point: if properly understood, Déroche’s classification can represent the basis from which to retrace the ties between these two realms. The following pages will, I hope, be one illustration of this potential.

The present work began with the study of one Qur’anic double folio held at Oxford. The manuscript to which it belonged, the ‘Qur’ān of Amājir’, soon appeared to be based, in its script and layout, on principles of geometry and proportion. This initial finding led to the analysis of over 1,000 early Qur’anic pages along the same lines, which largely confirmed my initial observations. By following this
thread and deepening its background, new elements began to emerge about the birth of Qur’anic calligraphy, its meaning and development until the advent of the ‘proportioned script’ in the tenth century. The approach adopted in this book is primarily based on the material record, with palaeography and codicology as its cornerstones. I have also attempted not to neglect the information provided by textual sources which, despite their well-known shortcomings, have often proved to mirror closely – and even illuminate – empirical findings. But the story of Arabic calligraphy must start with the origins, in the period that preceded the rise of Islam. It is to that period that I now turn.

CHAPTER ONE

Looking for the Origins

At the time of the Qur’anic revelation, the Arabs already had at their disposal a set of well-formed, if primitive, letter shapes. This alphabet had come out of a process which represents the background of the earliest Qur’anic calligraphy. By virtue of its geographical position between Syria, Persia, Egypt and Ethiopia, the Arabian peninsula had been crossed by trade routes for centuries before Islam. In the Hijaz, most of the population lived a pastoral life centred on nomadic tribes, which spoke a multiplicity of related dialects. The main urban centres were oasis towns of modest size, such as Mecca, Medina (then known as Yathrib), Dedan or Hegra. The desert areas to the north were also part of the Arabs’ cultural sphere. In the sixth century, they were controlled by two Arab dynasties: the Ghassanids and Lakhmids. The Ghassanids were Byzantine ‘phylarchs’, or tribal rulers of a vassal state, based at Jabyla, in the Golan; the Lakhmids, who had their capital at Hira, were allies of the Sassanians. These two client states acted as proxies in the rivalry between the two empires and in the latter’s dealings with the Arabs. It is in this broad context that the script which existed at the rise of Islam came into shape.

The Arabic script before Islam

The pre-Islamic languages and scripts of Arabia can be divided into two main families: Ancient North Arabian (e.g. Taymanic, Dadanian and Dumartic) and Ancient South Arabian (Sabaic, Madhahbic and Himyariic; among others). Linguistically, Old Arabic, the ancestor of Qur’anic Arabic, was closely related to Ancient North Arabian. Until around the late fifth century, it was written in the script associated with the local language of prestige: South Arabian at Qaryat al-Faw; Dadanian in Dedan; Nabataean at Hegra; and so on. By the fourth century, however, the native Ancient North Arabian scripts seem to
have disappeared in north-west Arabia, and to have been replaced
by Nabataean (the written form of the Aramaic dialect of Petra).  

The earliest dated Old Arabic inscription in Nabataean script is
the epitaph of Imru’ al-Qays, ‘king of all the Arabs’, written in 328 at
Namara (Syria), it closely echoes contemporary Nabataean inscriptions.
But by the sixth century, the strain of Nabataean used to write Arabic
had departed considerably from this model (Figure 6). The shape of
the letters had become close to what we know as ‘Arabic’. 

Three dated Arabic inscriptions from this period have been
preserved. The one from Jabal Usays (AD 529) is a simple graffito.
The other two, found at Zabid (AD 512) and Harran (AD 568), were
respectively carved on the lintel of a church and of a martyrium, so
they might be the work of specialized artisans. The analysis of their
style reveals some interesting features. The script is organized around
three axes: the ligatures are horizontal, the tall letters have a marked
slant to the right, while some of the shorter letters lean towards the
left. Whereas in classical Nabataean the letters had been joined at
the top, the ligatures now lie at the base. This trait can already be
detected in late Nabataean inscriptions (and some earlier papyri);6
but at Zabid and Harran, it acquires a new character: the ligatures –
and in fact, the lines in their entirety – are almost perfectly straight.
The threefold organization of the strokes gives the script a basic visual
unity that was lacking in late Nabataean: it only finds a clear parallel,
before Islam, in Syriac, where the letters are also joined by straight
ligatures at the base. The underlying transformation was not as much
about the letter forms, which were essentially derived from Nabataean
at an earlier date, as the calligraphic character of the script.

Despite the small number of our documents, it is possible to develop
a reflection about their background. A line of thought developed by
Christian Robin and Robert Hoyland has the merit of matching the
material record with its historical context. The Arabs of Syria, as they
noted, had begun to convert to Christianity at a relatively early date.
One biographer of Simeon Stylites, a saint who lived in the region of
Aleppo (c. 389-459), could thus write: ‘It was impossible to count the
Arabs, their kings and nobles who came and acknowledged Jesus ... and
erected churches beneath their tents.’ In previous centuries, the rise
of the Coptic, Christian Palestinian Aramaic, Ethiopian and Armenian
scripts had been linked to the diffusion of Christianity among local
populations. The transformation of the late Nabataean script used by the Arabs may have been related to similar motives.8

The early sixth century witnessed a consistent effort on the part of the Monophysite, Syriac-speaking Church authorities of northern Syria (Mabbug, Edessa and to a lesser extent Antioch) to spread Christianity among the Arabs.9 Several events recorded in texts reflect this reality. Ruṣafa, on the Roman frontier with the empire of Iran, had grown into an important Arab pilgrimage site centred on the cult of Saint Sergius. A basilica dedicated to the saint was built there shortly before 431 by Alexander, bishop of Mabbug. Between 512 and 519, Jacob, bishop of Saruq (near Mabbug), composed a hymn to Sergius, which was probably read at Ruṣafa. Severus, patriarch of Antioch, is also recorded to have pronounced a homily to the saint in the region of Aleppo in 514. The inscription from Zabad belongs to the same historical context: it is dated 512 and originally adorned the front of another church of Saint Sergius, also in northern Syria (see map).10 Two of the persons named in it are called Sergius, as if to remind us of the saint’s status among the Arabs.

The Usays and Harrân texts were discovered further south, in the Ghassanid sphere of influence. Despite their political allegiance to Byzantium, the Ghassanids adhered to the Monophysite creed around 510. Their foremost king, al-Ḥarīth ibn Jahala (r. 529–69), even went as far as pleading the Monophysite cause during his visit to the emperor Justinian in 563.11 The author of the Usays graffiti was sent to that area by al-Ḥarīth himself.12 The patron of the Harrân martyrium, Sharahil ibn Zālim, is designated as ‘phylarch’ in the Greek part of the inscription: he was therefore another Arab ally of Byzantium, although his exact relation to the Ghassanids remains unclear.13

The Ghassanids and their Lakhmid rivals had espoused, in this period, the high culture of their respective patrons, notably in the arts (Figure 7). They also valued Arabic as a language of prestige and a cornerstone of their identity.14 Their buffer states must have required some degree of administration to function, which could have provided another impetus for the spread of the primitive Arabic script.15 The portrait of one historical figure resonates with this background: the pre-Islamic poet ‘Adi ibn Zayd, son of the former regent of Hiira, who served as secretary of the Sasanian emperor Khusrū Anushirvān (r. 531–79). ‘Adi was an Arab Christian, as asserted by Muslim writers and confirmed by some of his verse that has been preserved.16 He and his line are reported to have been translators and interpreters of the Shah in his dealings with the Arabs; and the sources repeatedly refer, in passing, to correspondence written by them in Arabic.17 Whatever the truth of these assertions, from a historical point of view, it is plausible that Arabic administrative documents resembling the earliest Islamic papyri (Figure 8) began to be written in a Ghassanid or Lakhmid context, although no physical evidence of their existence has been discovered.

There were conflicting attempts, in that period, by the Monophysite and Nestorian Churches (both of which used Syriac for their liturgy) to win over the Lakhmids to Christianity. Although most Lakhmid kings eventually remained pagan, many of their family members did convert and their capital, Hiira, had an important Arab Christian population. From that region, Nestorian missionaries reached the east Arabian coast, where they established two ecclesiastical provinces, Bēt Qatrāye and Bēt Mazānim. Their substantial presence in that region has been confirmed by recent excavations of churches and monasteries.18 Likewise, the missionary efforts of the Monophysites went beyond Syria to reach the peninsula itself. The first two bishops of the oasis town of Najran, between the Yemen and Hijaz, were ordained by Philoxenus, bishop of Mabbug (northern Syria), in the early sixth century.19 The persecution of their community, which revolted against the Jewish king of the Yemen around 525, had a considerable resonance in the Near East. These events were recorded in great detail by Monophysite clergymen of northern Syria, who also composed
hymns to the martyrs. From these accounts, we learn that among the martyrs of Najrān were two priests who had been educated at monasteries in the region of Edessa (again, in northern Syria). This evidence implies that lines of communication existed between these two parts of the world, which must also have crossed the Hijaz. This broad historical context involving the Ghassanids, Lakhmids and Christian missionaries makes it likely that the late Nabataean script used by the Arabs, having been transformed north of the peninsula, was brought back to that region in the century before Islam.

Arabic textual accounts of this process were written at least three centuries after the events. Their reliability suffers from caveats to which we have already alluded. Yet they may not be completely irrelevant to the subject. Leaving aside legendary stories attributed to distant antiquity, typically involving Adam and Ishmael, most sources converge around a single ‘historical’ narrative for the birth of the Arabic script. Thus al-Baladhuri (d. 892) writes:

Three members of [the tribe of] Ṭayy gathered in Raqqā:25 Murūjī ibn Murra, Aslam ibn Sīda, and Ḥamīr ibn Jadr; and they invented the [art of] writing (al-khāṭīb). They modelled the Arabic alphabet upon the Syriac alphabet (ḥāḏ). Some people from Anbār learned it from them, and the people of Ḥira learned it from those of Anbār.26

An Arab Christian called Bishr ibn ‘Abd al-Malik learnt how to write Arabic from the people of Ḥira and, in turn, taught it to people in Mecca. The same story is repeated, with variations in length and wording, by Ibn Durayd (fl. ninth century), Ibn Abī Dawūd (d. 929), Ibn ‘Abd Rabbīh (d. 940), al-Jahshiyārī (d. 942), al-Sūlī (d. 946), al-Nadīm (wrote 987), Ibn Khallikān (d. 1282) and al-Qalqashandi (d. 1418). The sources contradict each other as to its origin: al-Baladhuri attributes it to al-Shaqqī ibn al-Qaṣīmī (d. 767), al-Sūlī to a certain Ibn Ja’da, al-Nadīm and al-Qalqashandi to Ibn ‘Abbās (d. 688), and so on. The variability of the tradition brings to mind an oral tradition. Qalqashandi’s version is developed in this way:

They established linked and independent letters, then they modelled them upon the Syriac alphabet (ḥāḏ); Murūjī created the letter forms (ṣawār), Aslam divided and linked [the letters at the base], and Ḥamīr introduced the diacritics (ḏījam).26

One might have suspected this to be a late elaboration of the anecdote, yet in the tenth century, Nadīm had already given the same statement, almost word for word – but without referring to Syriac. The latter reference, however, is also early, as it occurs in the accounts of Baladhuri and Ibn ‘Abd Rabbīh. In addition to the haziness of its roots and variants, the underlying narrative has legendary overtones, notably in the way each part of the scriptural process becomes personified. At the same time, it asserts that the shape of the letters, their isolation or inclusion in the word’s continuum, and the diacritical marks were modelled upon Syriac. According to the material record, two of these features (the letter shapes and joins) were in fact derived from Nabataean, but given calligraphic consistency under the influence of Syriac. The third, the dots, probably represents a borrowing from Syriac, to which we shall return. Another interesting detail is the mention of Ṭayyī, a tribe which was well known to Syriac writers, who designated the Arabs as ʿṬayyāyē. This paradigm finally points to a plausible context, involving Arab Christians between Hira, Anbār and the Hijaz in the sixth century. While it should not be taken too literally, especially as far as names of persons are concerned, it may contain a historical core.25

The earliest Islamic documents

Whatever the state of Arabic writing may have been in the sixth century, it was radically transformed by the rise of Islam, which created a new political situation and, most of all, new scribal needs. According to Muslim tradition, the Qur’an was at first memorized by the Prophet and his companions. As the revelation progressed, verses began to be noted by way of an aide-mémoire on scattered leaves (ṣubḥ) and other available material, such as flat white stones, camel bones and palm stalks. With Muhammad’s death, in 632, came the risk of losing the sacred text. Al-Bukhārī (d. 870) attributes these words to Zayd ibn Thābit (d. c. 666), the Prophet’s foremost secretary:

After the battle of Yamāma, Abū Bakr sent for me, while ‘Umar ibn Khattāb was with him. Abū Bakr said: ‘Umar came to me and said: ‘Many Qur’ān reciters were killed at Yamāma, and I fear that heavy casualties will be inflicted on Qur’ān reciters in other places and that much of the Qur’an will be lost. I think
that you should collect the Qur’an.” ... So I began to search out the Qur’an and collect it from palm stalks, thin white stones, and the breasts of men until I found the end of Sūrat al-Tauhīd with Abū Khuwayma al-Anṣārī which I did not find with anyone else.  

The first mawādim (‘codices’) are said to have emerged between these days (the battle of Yamāma took place around 633) and ‘Uthmān’s reign (644-56), when an official recension of the Qur’an was issued. While the underlying narrative is in itself plausible, it cannot be taken at face value, as Muslim histories of this fundamental period, written down two to three centuries after the events, have often proved to contain a mythical component. The process therefore needs to be documented by other types of evidence. 

The earliest dated Islamic documents are two papyri written in 22/643. They both share a utilitarian purpose: PERF 558 is a bilingual letter by the military commander (amīr) ‘Abdallāh ibn Jābir acknowledging the receipt of sixty-five sheep from two patriarchs of Ahnās (Gr. Heracleopolis, Egypt) for the maintenance of his troops; P.Berol. 15002 contains the very fragmentary end of a text in which dinār are mentioned alongside the date (Figure 8). In script, they are comparable to the earliest dated Islamic inscription: a large rock carving written by a certain Zuhayr in 24/645 near Ḥegra to commemorate ‘the death of ‘Umar’ – possibly the caliph of the same name, who was assassinated in the last days of the year 23 (Figure 9).

At least eight other papyri and as many inscriptions have been securely ascribed to the first six decades of the Muslim era. Three orthographic improvements distinguish these documents from known sixth-century inscriptions. As they have already been discussed elsewhere, I will only outline them for our present purposes.

The first innovation was the introduction of diacritical signs to distinguish phonemes based on the same letter form. These signs are not attested in pre-Islamic inscriptions, but appear in all the earliest Islamic papyri and two of the earliest inscriptions (Figure 9, Figure 12). Although their use is parsimonious, they follow the same conventions as in later Arabic, which suggests that the underlying orthographic system had already come into being by 643.

A second innovation, the distinct notation of short final bā’ (bā’ marbūta), occurs in all the earliest inscriptions and documents. The new form still coexists with the older one in a short inscription written
by the same Zuhayr as above, presumably also in 645 (Figure 10); and in a tombstone from Egypt dated 31/652 (Figure 11 – compare, for example, the short and elongated forms respectively used for 'rabmat' and 'samat' in this inscription). This implies that the new convention was still being standardized at the time.

The third orthographic improvement regards the long sound 'a' in the middle of words. Before Islam, this had either been omitted or noted with the same sign as medial ʕayd/both/oth/nawm, a potential source of confusion (in the Egyptian tombstone, for example, the first word of line 6, 'kitab', is written 'k-t-b'). The modern convention, using the letter alif, first appears in an inscription from the region of Mecca dated 40/661, the last year of 'Ali ibn Abi Ṭalib's reign as caliph. In the following two decades, it becomes common to witness the old and new forms side by side in the same text.

All these changes appear as responses to the graphic weaknesses of the Arabic script, where several consonants were noted by the same letter form, while many vowels were omitted, with obvious implications for meaning. The first two reforms (the diacritical dots and tat marbūta) were introduced some time before 643, while the third (medial alif) must have emerged not long before the 660s, which has led Robin and Hoyland to think that they all took place during the early years of the caliphate, when the seat of power was still in Medina. The conquests, involving complex logistics, must have necessitated the reliable transmission of orders across long distances. This, along with the need to record the Qur'anic text, could have provided an impetus for reforming the script. Yet in the present state of our knowledge, it remains possible that some of these changes had been initiated before Islam. The diacritical dots, in particular, are essential to the comprehension of any Arabic text not already known by memory or convention. Though they are not attested in pre-Islamic inscriptions, absence of evidence is, in their case, not evidence of absence: thus in the first century after the Hijra, they were completely omitted from most inscriptions, but commonly used in documents. It seems premature, at this stage, to draw a conclusion about this feature.

The earliest manuscripts of the Qur'an

Leaves from primitive manuscripts of the Qur'an have been gradually discovered over the last two centuries, notably as the result of the spectacular finds at the Great Mosque of San'aa. Islamic sources generally refer to primitive Arabic scripts as jazm. The modern term Hijazi (Ar. 'from the Hijaz') is derived from al-Nadim's description of the Meccan and Medinan scripts:

The first Arabic scripts were the Meccan and after that the Medinan, then the Basran, then the Kufan. As regards the Meccan and Medinan, there is in its [sic] alif a bend to the right hand side and an elevation of the vertical strokes (al-qāf); and in its form, there is a slight inclination.
The main distinctive feature of Hijazi is indeed the slant of the tall letters to the right, more or less pronounced according to the manuscript. The orthography is relatively primitive. As in the earliest inscriptions, medial alif is omitted from many nouns—a trait which was partly preserved in later Qur’anic notation. The sound ‘ā’ is sometimes noted, in the middle or at the end of a word, by the undotted letter yī (e.g. َلا for َل, ‘deity’ or ‘god’); or by wāw before tā’ marbūta (e.g. مَضْلُومًا, ‘prayer’). These archaic usages appear alongside the modern one, using the letter alif.\(^{24}\)

Although no colophon or other element of context is known, the corpus can be broadly dated on palaeographical grounds. The script of Hijazi Qur’ans is similar to that of seventh-century Islamic papyri, as documented by Grohmann, Déroche and, before them, Amari.\(^{25}\) To give one example, the shape of the wāw, sād, tā’ marbūta, initial ʿayn and final nūn is almost identical in Arabic 328a (Figure 20) and P. Berol. 15002 (Figure 8, dated 643). An inscription written in 58/678 in the name of the caliph Mu’āwiyah (Figure 12) also bears a striking resemblance to some Hijazi book hands, notably the upper text of a famous Hijazi palimpsest fragment (Figure 13):\(^{40}\) compare, in these two texts, the shape of the independent alif, with its relatively long and flat return; and the oblique upper stroke of dāl, which curves slightly upwards at the top.\(^{47}\)

These elements suggest a date range which is corroborated by other types of evidence. One manuscript, the ‘Sama‘ Qur’an, has been scientifically dated to the late seventh or early eighth century: its more complete orthography, elaborate decoration and confident Kufic script clearly reflect a later phase of evolution than Hijazi, for which it can provide a broad terminus ante quern. Three other Qur’ans with transitory features between Hijazi and Kufic can also be ascribed, from their orthography and illumination, to the early Umayyad period.\(^{49}\) To this list, one can add two inscriptions, respectively dated 700 and 723, one from Mecca (Figure 14) and the other from Qasr al-Mu‘aqqar (Figure 15): their script, which lies between B. I. B. I. B. II, confirms that Hijazi was being superseded by early Kufic styles in the first quarter of the eighth century.\(^{50}\) Put together, these elements converge to place the bulk of the Hijazi corpus in the seventh century.\(^{50}\)

The analysis of Hijazi scripts is much more arduous than for Kufic: being close to individual handwriting, they tend to be highly variable.
across and even within manuscripts. In some cases, there is a complete
dynastic shift between the recto and verso of the same folio, reflecting
a change of script. This variability makes any classification attempt
difficult and the typology offered by Déroche remains, in this case,
tentative. Likewise, there is a lack of overarching norms in the way
leaves were prepared and assembled into books. The lands conquered
by the Muslims were home to a mosaic of peoples with highly developed
scribal traditions: Greek, Syriac, Hebrew, Coptic, Pahlavi, to cite but the
most prominent ones. Their imprint can be felt at various degrees in
Hijazi. Before turning to these correspondences, let us briefly outline
the scribal landscape that prevailed at the eve of Islam.

The scribal world of Late Antiquity

Greek was, in that period, the language of the upper strata of society
in Syria and Egypt. Its intimate association with Christianity, the
Classical heritage and Byzantium gave it a unique cultural standing.
Alongside Greek, Syriac (the written form of the Aramaic dialect of
Edessa) was a major liturgical idiom, which blossomed from the Nile
to the Euphrates in the sixth and seventh centuries, and even reached
as far afield as China. Learned men from Syria were often versed

in both languages. Syriac was used not only by the Nestorian and
Monophysite Churches, but also for some Manichean and pagan
writings. Towards the time of the Muslim conquest, the Greek and
Syriac arts of the book were producing fine parchment codices, some
of them rich with figurative imagery. The scribal techniques used
in each of these traditions differed and, in turn, their respective
influence radiated beyond their linguistic borders.

In the region of Jerusalem, Greek was thus used side by side with a
local dialect: Christian Palestinian Aramaic (CPA). CPA began to be
written in the fourth or fifth century with an alphabet based on Syriac.
It was associated with the ‘Chalcedonian’ (or ‘Melkite’) Church, which
followed Byzantine liturgy, and most CPA manuscripts are faithful
translations of Greek religious texts. CPA scribal activity reached its
peak towards the time of the conquest, albeit on a much more modest
scale than Greek and Syriac, never extending far beyond Palestine.

In Egypt, another regional alphabet emerged in the second
century: Coptic, with twenty-four letters borrowed from Greek and
seven others from Demotic (the native script ultimately derived from
the hieroglyphs). Coptic literary activity was initiated by biblical translations before extending, in the third to fourth centuries, to gnostic, Manichaean and monastic texts. In manuscript form, the techniques used in both Coptic and CPA were largely derived from Greek, so that all three traditions form one coherent scribal group.

Further south, in Ethiopia, the king of Aksum had converted to Christianity in the fourth century under the influence of two shipwrecked missionaries from Syria. The Bible was translated into Ge'ez (classical Ethiopian) between then and the late sixth century. The country was a powerful actor in regional politics following the massacre of the Christians of Najran, it invaded the Yemen in 525; from there, an incursion into the Hijaz was even attempted around 570. During

the very first years of the Qur’anic revelation, a group of Muslims who had fled from Mecca were granted refuge by the king of Aksum – this event is recorded by Muslim historians as the ‘first hijra.’

Though very little of the Ethiopic manuscript tradition remains prior to the thirteenth century, decorated pages from a Gospel belonging to the monastery of Abba Gārima have recently been carbon-dated to a time range between AD 330 and 650 (Figure 17). This provides a broad framework against which finer analysis remains the task of the historian. On the basis of their style, Jacques Mercier and Marilyn Heldman have recently ascribed this and a closely related set of decorated leaves from the same monastery to the sixth or seventh century. Their sumptuous illumination has strong Near Eastern overtones which might reflect the close ties that existed between Ethiopia and Syria before the rise of Islam. The script and codicology of these exceptional Bibles remain to be fully documented.

In Iran, Pahlavi, the principal form of Middle Persian, was the official language of the Sasanian empire. The Pahlavi scribal tradition is hardly ever mentioned in modern scholarship because of the extreme dearth of surviving material. Astonishingly, in these circumstances, one psalter fragment dating to the seventh century or earlier has been found at Bulayiq, near Turfan (present-day Xinjiang) in the early twentieth century (Figure 18). Its type of script, being unique among preserved fragments, has been labelled ‘Psalter Pahlavi.’ This small manuscript (11.1 x 9.6 cm) follows a division of the Canon attributed to Mar Abba, patriarch of the Nestorian Church between 536 and 552. Its dotting system and red capita titles also denote a Syriac model, and the Syriac invocation shobha (‘praise’) is written in Pahlavi script before some psalms. One or two letters in Estrangelo can even be seen on a few pages, probably as reminders of the points in the liturgy where Syriac verses were to be read. This pervasive influence bears testimony, once again, to the vitality of Nestorian Christianity east of the Euphrates in that period.

Finally, Hebrew was the liturgical language of Jewish communities throughout the Near East. Our principal documents of the Hebrew script before Islam are scrolls found in caves around the Dead Sea, near Qumran; the latest of these were written before the second century AD. Thereafter, our chronology suffers an almost complete gap until the earliest surviving Hebrew parchment codices (ninth/