(c) ḥā'ī. The Ḥākwān al-Ṣafā’i describe the heads of all five letters as a single shape.

The Ḥākwān, then, are clearly referring to the New Style. But the affinity of this stylistic family, in the geometrical codification of the letters, with proportioned cursive, is also revealed by this comparison. On the other hand, in style and layout, the New Style still largely belongs to the Kufic tradition. It thus represents, in all senses of the word, the transitory stage between traditional Kufic and proportioned cursive.

When they first emerged, the principles of Kufic calligraphy were probably conceived as a literal ‘architecture of the page’: the application of architectural principles to the pen, parchment and scribe’s craft. The underlying aesthetic conceptions, ultimately derived from Antiquity, may have been reduced to a few simple ideas in the Umayyad period. But the craft and intellectual tradition had parallel roots which were almost bound to meet, as each expanded and matured. Such an interaction may conceivably have begun at an early stage, but the earliest written evidence of it dates from the tenth century. By then, we observe, with the Ḥākwān al-Ṣafā’, a process whereby learned circles give philosophical elaboration to calligraphy, while the craft itself informs written descriptions of the script. But this testimony also reflects a period of profound, multi-faceted change.

CHAPTER FOUR

Towards the Codification of Cursive

The tenth century was a time of major transformation for the whole of Arabic writing. From Kufic, there was a gradual move towards a new aesthetic of the letter shapes, marked by its angularity and by the accentuated thinness of the strokes. Its formal features have been defined by Déroche, who called it the ‘New Style’ and divided it into two main categories: NS.I and NS.II (see Appendix). This stylistic family, sometimes designated by other names, such as ‘broken cursive’ or ‘semi-Kufic’, was gradually replaced by the cursive styles which lie at the basis of modern calligraphy. Beyond this general sequence, much remains to be discovered about the relationship between each step and its predecessor. Where can we detect strong elements of continuity, and where are the breaks with the past?

The New Style

Several features of the New Style find antecedents in the Umayyad period. In the copper plaques at the Dome of the Rock (Figure 37), the script is based on the combination of straight lines and circles, but of variable size: the major innovation of the new codification would be to unify them into a single scheme, based on the height of the alif. A direct forerunner of the New Style appears a few decades later in a wall inscription from Antinoë, in Egypt (Figure 67). Its script is typical of NS in all its main features: the S-like shape of independent alif with its widened top and angular lower return; the projection of final alif under the line; the approximately circular shape of final wāw; or the thin sinusoidal tail of final mim. This unexpected resemblance to tenth-century NS brings us to question its date, which was read as 117/735 by Bernhard Moritz.
The text, which largely consists of Qur'anic verses, contains this sentence (line 6): 

 Wu kastaba malik bin kucher [Kathayr?] f... 'Malik ibn Kucher [Kathayr?] wrote in...'.

...rajab sanat sah 'asrara wa mal' a' ('...[the month of] rajab of the year 117')

The whole line is clearly legible in all its parts, except between the end of sah ('seven') and the beginning of wa mal'a ('and a hundred'). In this damaged part, an isolated hā can be made out before 'wa', at the same distance from it as the space between words. The only multiple of ten which, in Arabic, ends with this letter, is 'ashara ('ten'). The faint letter remains that precede it appear to confirm this reading: the initial shape could be the lower stroke of a 'ayn; the final shape seems to be a ṣād; they are joined by a long baseline stroke, which might have belonged to a shin.

The Antinoe text is therefore to be dated 117/735. Indeed, its final kāf exhibits a slanting vertical stroke and asymmetrical base that still denote the legacy of Hijāzī.9 The text used to adorn the walls of
The text, which largely consists of Qur'anic verses, contains this sentence (line 6):

"We hasten malik bin kathir [Kasayyuf] fi..." (Malik bin Kathir [Kasayyuf] wrote in...).

...rajub sawat sa'd 'ashra wa ma'ru'a ('... the month of Rajab of the year 117'.

The whole line is clearly legible in all its parts, except between the end of sa'd ('seven') and the beginning of wa ma'a ('and a hundred'). In this damaged part, an isolated had could be made out before wa, at the same distance from it as the space between words. The only multiple of ten which, in Arabic, ends with this letter, is 'ashra ('ten'). The faint letter remains that precede it appear to confirm this reading: the initial shape could be the lower stroke of a 'ayn; the final shape seems to be a ra; they are joined by a long baseline stroke, which might have belonged to a shin.

The Antioch text is therefore to be dated 117/735. Indeed, its final kaf exhibits a slanting vertical stroke and asymmetrical base that still denote the legacy of Hijazi. The text used to adorn the walls of
a house in Antinoë (Nile Valley) and above it are decorative friezes that are also reminiscent of Late Antique painting. It is not inscribed, but written in ink: its author, Malik ibn Kathir (or Kuthair), must have been a calligrapher used to working on papyrus or parchment. Surprisingly, this suggests that NS had already been established, perhaps as a chancery script, by the late Umayyad period. This idea is confirmed by a permit issued in 112/731 which, although less finished in style, has comparable scribal features.6

In the following century and a half, secular book hands greatly expanded their stylistic range. In the surviving items, several key ingredients of the New Style can frequently be detected, but their execution remains loose. Thus in a document written in 182/799 by a masūlī (client) of the Abbasid caliph Harūn al-Rashīd (r. 786-809), several letters end in a markedly round shape, but this does not approximate to a circle.7 The same is true of a copy of the Ghārib

al-hadith dated 866, where the letters tend to follow more precise definitions, but not in geometrical terms (Figure 68). In this text, vocalization is indicated by small signs inspired by Arabic letter shapes—a convention which became increasingly widespread from the tenth century onwards. This, together with the complete notation of diacritics and the use of paper, makes the manuscript a precursor of tendencies that would gain momentum in the following decades.8

The earliest attested use of a comparable script for the Qur’ān occurs in the so-called ‘Khayqīnī Qur’ān’ (Figure 70). According to a note in Persian, the manuscript was corrected in 292/905 by Ahmad ibn Abī al-Qāsim al-Khayqīnī, so it must have been written shortly before that date, probably in Iran. Its calligraphy, which is markedly distinct from Kufic, can be compared with book hands of the same period, for example an undated Arabic Bible from Sinai (Figure 69).9 But some fundamental differences distinguish even these visually

68. Manuscript of Ibn Sallāh’s Ghārib al-hadith (252/866, 28.2 x 17.5 cm).

69. Arabic Bible held at the monastery of Saint Catherine, Mount Sinai (nineth/tenth century, 26.5 x 18.3 cm).
akin items. Unlike its Christian counterpart, the Khayqani Qur'an is
devoid of ruling and has a stable number of carefully laid out lines
per page. In the Sinai Bible, the independent alif and rounded
letter endings vary significantly in size and even shape. By contrast,
the Qur'an manuscript seems to be undergirded by a more formal
geometry of the letters.

In order to substantiate this impression, we have superimposed, in
Figure 70, an identical alif line (orange) on various tall letters, and
the corresponding circle (yellow) on rounded endings (both elements
are shown together in the first line of text). The results are conclusive:
the height of the alif is, overall, regular, while the final wa, nun, sin
and ya tend towards the strict form of the same semicircle, with a
diameter approximating the height of the alif. This suggests that
a codification of the script on the basis of the alif and circle had
happened by 905. The vocalization and diacritics are also complete,
using the conventions already encountered in the Gharib al-hadith
of 866. The text box layout is comparable to that of earlier Qur'ans.

Table 4. Dated tenth-century manuscripts in the New Style.
with the difference that the idea of interlines is completely absent. In the sura title, we witness an uneasy attempt to imitate style D, which suggests that the scribe was not trained in Kufic.¹³

At least twelve NS manuscripts, half of them Qur’anic, have been dated to various parts of the tenth century (Table 4). Until 937 (the ‘Shanbak Qur’an’), these remain broadly akin in style to earlier secular documents; but from the 950s onwards, the articulation of the strokes acquires the geometrical stylization that is typical of later NS. This new aesthetic of the script can thus be observed in a genealogical treatise possibly copied by al-Najayami, an Iraqi scribe who died in 954,¹⁴ and in an autograph manuscript of the Musaviyy, a mystical treatise by al-Nifari, written in 966 (Figure 73).¹⁵ Thereafter, it becomes a permanent feature of dated manuscripts. The mature form of the New Style may thus have begun to spread between the 930s and early 950s.

In that phase of development, the alif and circle remained at the basis of some manuscripts, such as the Palermo Qur’an (Figure 71). In others, like the Isfahan Qur’an, the same stylistic features were reinterpreted, giving rise to a sharper, more angular calligraphy (Figure 72).¹⁶ This division roughly equates with that between styles NS.III (which tends to be more circular) and NS.I (which is marked by its angularity). The ties with Kufic were particularly strong in
NS.I, which shares several letter forms with style D.Vb: the lower return of aʾlif, the upper curve of tāʾ/ḥāṣ and the shape of some kām–aʾlif.17 In some NS.I manuscripts, the body of the letters and height of the aʾlif also correspond to regular vertical levels: there, the old interline system of Kufic may have been maintained and adapted to the increasing thinness of the strokes, perhaps by reducing the grid to its most essential elements.18

Both NS.I and NS.III inherited from Kufic the notation of their diacritics, which consist of dashes, whereas dots would again prevail in cursive; and of their vocalization, marked by coloured dots that were, at times, combined with some of the modern signs attested in the Gharib al-bidṣīh of 866.19 Sura titles in D.I are common in both NS.I and NS.III: their accomplished execution stands in sharp contrast to the hesitant style observed in the Khayyānī Qurʾan (Figure 70).20 The decoration and illumination of mature NS were also largely based on Kufic models. They continued to naturally evolve throughout the tenth century, with a tendency towards sharper forms, as in the script.

The vertical format became predominant, although several late tenth-century manuscripts, such as the Palermo and Isfahān Qurʾans, are still horizontal. The page and text box continued to be laid out according to the Kufic rule, but with less exacting precision than before.21 The size of Qurʾānic manuscripts was also expanded to a wider range than in Kufic, from very small to very large, and more options became available for the composition of quires.22 Another innovation was the introduction of paper, which gradually replaced parchment as a writing material. Paper, a Chinese invention, was first produced in Baghdad during the reign of Harūn al-Rashīd (786–809), according to texts.23 In the following decades, its use begins to be attested for secular books (Figure 68). By the tenth century, the mastery of the technology by Muslim craftsmen allowed them to produce a creamy paper of superb quality which must have been deemed suitable to receive the Qurʾānic text.

Fundamentally, the mature form of NS thus reflected the convergence of everyday secular scripts with traditional Kufic calligraphy, from which the cornerstones of geometry, proportion and the thickness of the pen were notably inherited. Despite strong elements of continuity, the underlying process opened a hitherto deeply structured tradition to new norms and influences. This change, in turn, was to have lasting consequences.
The growth of cursive

In the second half of the tenth century, cursive began to evolve along the lines initiated by the New Style. Until 959, there is no evidence, among dated cursive documents, of the influence of the new codification. That year, a copy of the Muqaddah fi al-nahw, a grammatical treatise by Abū Sa‘īd al-Sirāfī (d. 979), was completed by Mūhālih ibn Ahmad al-Baghdādi (Figure 74). According to an autograph note on the opening page, the text was then corrected by the author himself.

The letters, including alif and rounded finals, vary in size, yet they are more closely codified than in earlier cursive. The influence of the New Style can be felt in several of their shapes; note, for example, the light sinuosity of independent alif; the angularity of the head of wāw; and of some final wāw and yā’s; or the curved upper stroke of dā‘. This manuscript marks the beginning of an important trend:

the appropriation by cursive hands of the principles first defined in NS. No such perfected cursive calligraphy occurs again, in the published record, until the year 1000. In several cursive manuscripts dated between 969 and 993, the letters do begin to tend towards the straight line and circle, yet there is no stylization of the strokes along geometrical lines. The layout, in all cases, is regular but still relatively loose in terms of justification and adherence to the baselines.

The mechanism of diffusion of the new script form remains to be fully understood. In what context did it first emerge? How fast was its spread? We can only note, for now, that even the few dated manuscripts mentioned above cover, between them, a wide range of subjects, from grammar and hadith to mathematics, astronomy and the Christian scriptures. This broad social setting makes the matter all the more difficult to elucidate.

The earliest surviving Qur‘ān in a cursive style was written around the year 1000 by Abū al-‘Āsib ‘Alī ibn Hišām, known as Ibn al-Bawwāb (Figure 75). Its features mark a decisive advancement...