over the forms observed in earlier cursive: the angularity of NS has been relinquished, yet the letter shapes are rendered with minute precision and mastery. The script gives the overall impression of a harmonious combination of approximately straight lines (alif and the like) and curved strokes of regular shape and size (waaw and ra‘ being close to a quarter-circle, while final mim and tsur consist of a large curve that is slightly inclined in relation to the line). At the same time, the body of the compact letters, the top of the tall ones and the bottom of the lower strokes each seem to correspond to a regular vertical level, which suggests that the older interline system of Kufic was not completely abandoned, but rather brought down to its simplest expression (Figure 76). The tall letters can faintly slant and bend, and the calligrapher allows himself the freedom to depart from the strict geometry of the New Style. Rather than the literal transposition of the new codification to cursive, the Qur’an of Ibn al-Bawwab manifests its simplification and subtle adaptation to the natural flow of the hand.

The manuscript is related to earlier Qur’anic calligraphy by several of its aspects. The layout is based on a regular grid of fifteen lines per page which also serves to position sura headings; a stable ratio of text box height to width seems to prevail. Many features of the decoration are closely reminiscent of Kufic, for instance the interlaced framing motifs, marginal rosettes, palmettes and roundels; and even, in places, the double square with circle (Figure 79). So is the geometrical structure of the full-page illuminations, which are themselves mostly akin to earlier examples (Figure 77). Some other motifs are not attested in the earlier record, such as the verse markers in the form of a drop (Figure 75), or the complex illumination of some pages, based on interlacing octagons. Another notable innovation is the introduction of a monumental cursive script for decorative purposes, as in the sura titles of the opening page.

Even these features, however, do not represent a break from earlier Qur’anic calligraphy, but rather an elaboration upon existing devices, marked by its naturalistic tendencies. Thus the rosettes are usually built upon a central circle surrounded by a repeat motif, as in earlier Qur’ans (Figure 79): the main change is in the vegetal form sometimes taken by this ornament (for example, in the lower-right
corner of Figure 75). Monumentalized, gilded cursive is essentially the adaptation of its Kufic equivalent, and it appears in the same positions: as an ornament for the illumination or for sura titles. The Qur’an of Ibn al-Bawwāb, in the end, represents a major novelty mainly in terms of its cursive script. Its other features, notably the geometry of the page and decoration, are more or less closely related to earlier Qur’anic calligraphy.

Similar remarks can, in fact, be extended to cursive Qur’anic calligraphy of the eleventh century. The lines remained parallel, equidistant and laid out in a regular number within manuscripts. Text box proportions may still have been used. At the level of decoration, the basic motifs inherited from Kufic (rosettes, illumination patterns, golden or coloured sura titles framed in a rectangle extending into marginal palmettes) continued to be employed, whilst undergoing a natural evolution in form, comparable in its pace to that of previous centuries. The New Style remained largely in use for sura titles and other decorative devices (Figure 78); it is even marginally present in the Qur’an of Ibn al-Bawwāb (see the rosettes in Figure 75).
The degree of scribal continuity between Kufic and proportioned cursive is therefore stronger than has generally been recognized. In fact, by comparison with the New Style, the step that was made is small, but important: the elevation of cursive, through its supple codification along the lines initiated with NS, to the rank of Qur’anic calligraphy. Rather than a revolution, it appears as a groundbreaking evolution. The overall pattern is, surprisingly, recalled by Ibn Khallikan (d. 1282) in his biography of Ibn al-Bawwab:

It was Abu ‘Ali ibn Muqla who first took the present system from the writing employed by the people of Kufa and brought it out under its present form. He had therefore the merit of priority, and it may be added that his handwriting was very elegant; but to Ibn al-Bawwab pertains the honour of rendering the character more regular and simple, and of clothing it in grace and beauty.\textsuperscript{55}

The process described echoes the material record: the system used in Kufic was transferred to secular book hands, gradually giving rise to a new paradigm of proportioned calligraphy which reached its full maturity at the time of Ibn al-Bawwab (d. 1022 or 1031). However, one point made here remains problematic: Ibn Khallikan is the first writer known to have ascribed the invention of the ‘proportioned script’ to Ibn Muqla, and this over three centuries after the latter’s death.

\textbf{The role of Ibn Muqla}

Abu ‘Ali ibn Muqla (886-940) was the vizir of the Abbasid caliphs al-Muqtadir, al-Qahir and al-Radi for six years between 928 and 936.\textsuperscript{54} The beauty of his writing and that of his brother Abu ‘Abdallah (892-949) were noted by several authors in the tenth century. One of their contemporaries, Ibn ‘Abd Rabih (860-940) mentioned the vizir among other penmen who worked at the service of different caliphs, adding that ‘his calligraphy is characterized by excellence.’ According to Ibn Taghri Birdi (d. 1170), al-Suli (d. 946) also said he had not seen a vizir who was a better penman than Abu ‘Ali since the days of al-Qasim ibn ‘Ubaydallah (d. 904). In the 980s, al-Nadim, who had seen manuscripts in their hands, praised the beauty of both brothers’ handwriting, putting more emphasis on Abu ‘Abdallah.\textsuperscript{55}

While it seems beyond doubt that the two brothers were accomplished penmen, there is no indication, here, that they were responsible for a reform of the script, as noted many years ago by Nabil Abbots.\textsuperscript{56} A further early source has come into print since her work on the subject: the Risala fi ‘ilm al-kitaba by Abu ‘Amr al-Tawhidi (c. 922 or 932-1023).\textsuperscript{57} More than a technical treatise, it is a collection of aphorisms and anecdotes on calligraphy. At the beginning of the epistle, Tawhidi asserts that contemporary styles were handed down in an uninterrupted chain of transmitters from the companions of the Prophet ‘unto Ibn Muqla, [Ya’qub] and others who modified them according to their own judgement.\textsuperscript{58} Ibn Muqla appears, like in earlier texts, as one in a long line of calligraphers, and as particularly prominent in his own age. Tawhidi also cites one sentence by ‘the accurate expert’ (al-mudaqqiq al-fidhl), Ibn Muqla, about the reed.\textsuperscript{59} However, we cannot be certain that even these fairly common remarks were indeed his, since similar aphorisms appear under other names in this treatise and in others.\textsuperscript{60}

The epistle continues with a discussion of the way to write individual letters. As noted by Franz Rosenthal, it is not clear from the text itself whether this section should also be attributed to Ibn Muqla.\textsuperscript{61} In either case, it does not deal with geometry but rather with the loops within letters and the connections between them. Only in relation to shd, kuf, tv and similar letters does it mention the need to preserve their ‘proportionality and equality’ (al-tawsiyab wa’t-tasawwur).\textsuperscript{62}

An aphorism further down the line might come closer to the point. During a conversation between the author and another khit, Abu ‘Abdallah ibn al-Zanj, in Azerbaidjan, the latter praised the superior skill of their colleagues in Iraq, and so Tawhidi asked his opinion about the handwriting of Ibn Muqla. He received this response:

He is a Prophet in the field of handwriting. It was poured upon his hand, even as it was revealed to the bees to make their honey-cells hexagonal.\textsuperscript{63}

The reference to the bees, which is Qur’anic,\textsuperscript{64} may contain an allusion to the geometrical character of his writing, or it could simply refer to his natural predispositions. Tawhidi’s more open references to the geometry of the script, on the other hand, do not involve Ibn Muqla.\textsuperscript{65}

The author also records words heard from a certain Ibn al-Zuhri, who
he says had been in contact with Ibn Muqla, Ibn al-Zanjì and the Banū Thawāba. These prescriptions are, again, mainly about the connections between letters, with only the following remark at the end:

The decisive factor is the ability to keep the end of the lines straight, to make even the beginnings of the letters, to preserve order and arrangement (al-tawājī), to avoid precipitation, to show forcefulness while letting oneself go and to let one’s hand go while using a forcefully compact writing.45

These comments, directly recorded from a reputed acquaintance of Ibn Muqla, refer only to the most elementary aspects of layout, without going much further than, say, Ibn Durastawāy a century earlier.46 On the whole, Tawḥīdī, like his contemporaries, perceived Ibn Muqla as an outstanding calligrapher of his age. He gives two separate references which, even if we put them together, may or may not imply that the vizir played a role in the geometrical codification of the script.

The association of the Ibn Muqla brothers with the proportioned script only explicitly appeared three centuries later, with Ibn Khallák, and became common knowledge thereafter, as documented by Abbott.47 The earliest textual fragments on calligraphy attributed to Ibn Muqla are possibly those found in al-Qałqlashāndi (c. 1355-1418).48 Interestingly, as in later manuscripts of treatises ascribed to the same author,49 these passages only state the number of strokes in each letter, and their successive shapes: horizontal (muṣūtih), vertical (muṣūtih), curved (muqawwas), bent [to the right] (muṣātih), slanting [to the left] (muṣūshā).50 These excessively vague descriptions vary significantly between the various surviving versions.51 Nowhere is the thickness of the pen mentioned; only for two letter shapes do we find a mention of the alif and circle, as well as a very basic reference to proportion (which is itself of uncertain reading):

Rā' consists of a curved stroke, corresponding to one quarter of the perimeter of the circle which has the alif as its diameter in a proportion determined by thought (fi nisba muṣūshā fī al-fā'). Nūn consists of a curved stroke corresponding to half a circle in a proportion determined by thought.52

Qałqlashāndi (and, in our age, Ahmad Maher Rayef) had to complement these impractical guidelines with further comments, primarily by the Iḫwān al-Ṣafā', in order to produce an informative description of the script.53 The attribution of this apparently archaic treatise to the tenth century is plausible, and many of Qałqlashāndi’s quotations of other extant works are authentic. On the other hand, its subject matter remains far below a codification based on geometry, proportion and the thickness of the pen. Furthermore, one cannot be certain that this or another Risāla was indeed written by Ibn Muqla. The silence of contemporary sources, especially the Fihrist, on anything related to a treatise by either brother is conspicuous: if it did exist and was so influential as to change the whole of contemporary calligraphy, why was it never mentioned by them, even in passing? Why did Nadīm extensively cite a treatise by Ibn Thawāba (a famous kāṭib also mentioned by Tawḥīdī), but not Ibn Muqla?54 Why did the only possible allusion linking him to geometry arise in an informal conversation between two scribes, briefly inserted in the middle of a long epistle?

This silence raises the possibility of a conflation: an anonymous treatise, which had circulated among scribes in the tenth century, later became attributed to Ibn Muqla, in the same way that manuscripts of this period came to carry his name. That it may initially have been confidential is suggested by the fact that the Iḫwān al-Ṣafā’ presented their scribal rules as the knowledge of ‘people of the craft’ reported by a ‘muḥarrir hådīqā’.55 This would have been unnecessary if established manuals had existed.

In fact, we have already observed that the essence of the 'proportioned script' had already been established by 905. At that time, Abū 'Ali ibn Muqla would have been only about nineteen years old, and his brother Abū 'Abdallāh, thirteen. This leaves us with two possibilities: either they contributed to the stylistic refinement of the New Style; or they played no fundamental role in the transformation of script. In any case, neither Ibn Muqla brother was responsible for the codification of the letters on the basis of the alif and circle. Were it not for the influence of much later authors, this idea would not even have entered the minds of modern scholars. It seems that, having been singled out by their contemporaries as great penmen of the age, they gradually came to have their name associated with the underlying scribal evolution.
Calligraphy and the breakdown of the empire

The tenth century was a period of political fragmentation and social change in the Islamic world. In the West, the Fatimids, a dynasty that claimed descent from Isma’il, son of the imam Ja’far, established their rule over North Africa in 909, before conquering Egypt in 969. The Fatimids, who sought to challenge Abbasid supremacy and propagate the Isma’ilite creed, soon declared themselves as caliphs (a third claim to the same title was, in turn, laid by the Umayyads of Spain in 929). One might wonder whether this state of affairs had any resonance in the realm of calligraphy. In his work on the Sunni revival and its impact on the arts, Yasser Tabbaa has thus argued that the rise of the New Style was related to the official endorsement of the Seven readings of Ibn Mujahid by Ibn Muqta; while in the next generation, the emergence of cursive calligraphy was part of the reassertion of Sunni orthodoxy by the Abbasids, notably the caliph al-Qadir; the Fatimids, in turn, would have adopted a distinct approach to calligraphy, marked by a rejection of contemporary trends. Before turning to this historical background, a few words ought to be said about a longstanding issue which became exacerbated in that period: the variant readings of the Qur’an.

According to Muslim tradition, after the official recension of the Qur’an was promulgated by ‘Uthman, several codices with divergent texts, notably that of Ibn Mas’ud (d. 653), remained in existence, despite the caliph’s order to have them destroyed. The variants they contained concerned the skeleton of the text and may, in places, have had an incidence on meaning. In the early decades of Islam, only the consonants, long vowels and, to some extent, the diacritics could be included in the written form of Arabic. The text of the Qur’an, as attested in Hijazi manuscripts, thus left a number of essential orthographic signs, such as the short vowels (barakātī, diārīt), doubling of consonants (shadda) and glottal stop (hamza), unrecorded.

In the Umayyad period, the short vowels began to be noted in some manuscripts, using a system based on red dots placed under, below or on the line. This layer of notation, however, did not have the same definitive and official status as the skeleton of the text, the ‘Uthmanic rasm. Variants relating to this and other orthographic features thus developed in the eighth century, and became attached to the names of different readers. Though they were not of much significance to the meaning of the text, they did considerably matter for recitation. One reading, that of Ḥaḍā (d. 796) after his teacher ‘Āṣim (d. 745), eventually prevailed in the Cairo edition of 1923, the standard version of the Qur’an today. But in the ninth century, many more also existed and several were sometimes recorded side by side in manuscripts. Pre-‘Uthmanic variants also remained in circulation, despite attempts by the authorities to suppress them.

At the close of that period, Ibn Mujahid (d. 936), a religious scholar, established a list of seven canonical readings which, being based on the ‘Uthmanic rasm, also followed certain criteria of authoritative transmission and correct grammar. At his instigation, two Qur’anic reciters were brought to trial in 934 and 935. The first, Ibn Miqsam, had advocated the recitation of any grammatically correct reading, as long as it followed the ‘Uthmanic rasm. The second, Ibn Shannabūd (or Shambūd, Shanabūd), had gone even further by reading and teaching the pre-‘Uthmanic recensions of Ibn Mas’ud, Ubayy ibn Ka’b and others. As vizir of the Abbasids, Ibn Muqta was present at the latter trial and Ibn Shannabūd was flogged after refusing to recant before him.

These events have sometimes been interpreted as an official endorsement of Ibn Mujahid’s readings by Abbasid authorities. But as shown by Christopher Melchert, their ideological rationale is less transparent than may appear. Beside the fact that personal rivalries were at stake in the trials, the Seven readings are never mentioned in their accounts: the heart of the matter rather seems to have lain in the repression of some particularly disputable practices. Significantly, several authors after Ibn Mujahid were able to compile lists of up to ten readings (and sometimes even fourteen) without stirring up controversy: this would not have been easily acceptable, had the Seven become an official canon. Thus even though Ibn Muqta was involved in several anti-Shi‘ite actions, his role in the long process leading to the establishment of a standard Qur’anic text should not be overplayed.

When we look at the manuscript record, it seems just as difficult to associate the New Style with an assertion of Sunni orthodoxy. The essence of the ‘proportioned script’ had come into existence before the breakdown of the Abbasid empire. While some manuscripts
in the New Style and the early stages of cursive were made for or written by Sunnis, others had Shi'ite patrons or scribes. For example, the Muqaddab fi al-nabw copied by Muhallih in 959 (Figure 74) was commissioned by one Abu al-Husayn Muhammad ibn al-Husayn al-'Alawi; although the man is unknown, his name clearly suggests a Shi'ite persuasion. The broad social ramifications of NS also run against the idea of a given ideological inclination: among dated examples alone, its use is attested for mystical writings, legal, grammatical, scientific and historical treatises as well as Bibles.

Similar remarks apply to the subsequent growth of cursive. In the lifetime of Ibn al-Bawwab, Baghdad lived under the rule of a Shi'ite dynasty, the Buwayhids. The ideological orientation of the polity was a subject of deep dissension between the Buwayhid emirs, whose power was based upon Shi'ite allegiances but who also sought to rally the Sunnites, and the Abbasid caliph al-Qadir (r. 991–1031). Al-Qadir appears to have followed the political line of the Buwayhids until the year 1000, when his intention to re-establish Sunni orthodoxy began to surface. In 1006, following agitations in Baghdad, he convened a commission of Sunni scholars to condemn the recursion of Ibn Mas'ud, which was favoured among Shi'ites. His profession of faith, the Risala al-qal'iriya, explicitly defined Sunni orthodoxy for the first time, establishing the Abbasid caliphs as its leaders against all other religious currents. This work written by the theologian al-Baqillani (d. 1013) was first read at the Buwayhid palace in 1018 and further elaborated in 1029. The Qur'an of Ibn al-Bawwab — and its script — predate all these developments. What is more, they represent the fruition of a process that was already under way decades earlier, in 959, and probably began in secular calligraphy.

According to his biographers, Ibn al-Bawwab was buried near the tomb of Ahmad ibn al-Hanbal, so must he have been a Sunnite. But Yaqut (1179–1229) also tells us that he worked for the Buwayhid emir Bahâ' at-Dawla in Shiraz and became an intimate of the dynast's vizir Fakhr al-Mulk when the latter assumed the governorship of Baghdad, in 1010. Our meagre biographical information suggests that if, in his lifetime, Ibn al-Bawwab ever leaned towards either side, it was probably that of the Buwayhids. In his surviving Qur'an manuscript, 'Ali ibn Abu Talib is also called amir al-mu'minin ('commander of the faithful') in the opening illumination, while the colophon invokes the 'Pure Family' of the Prophet, as if to confirm a Shi'ite inclination.

There is equally little to suggest that the Abbasids' main rivals, the Fatimids, sought to distinguish themselves from the mainstream in calligraphy. This is, first of all, evident from texts. According to the early Fatimid historian al-Musabbibi (d. 1029), a collection of calligraphy in the 'proportioned script' belonged to the Dâr al-Ilm, the dynasty's major library in Cairo, which was opened by the caliph al-Hâkim in 1005. Rashid ibn al-Zubayr (d. 1168) also records that among the objects plundered from the treasury of the Fatimid caliph al-Mustansir between 1067 and 1069 were volumes 'written in gold [script] outlined with lapis-lazuli' by Ibn Muqla and Ibn al-Bawwab, together with pens sharpened by their hands. In his account of the same events, al-Maqrizi (1367–1411) mentions, alongside these pens, 2,400 bound volumes of the Qur'an 'in proportioned script of the greatest beauty, embellished with gold, silver and other colours'. Citing Ibn al-Tawarr (1130–1220), he goes on to say that numerous Qur'ans 'written by Ibn Muqla and his peers, such as Ibn al-Bawwab and others' belonged to the dynasty's book treasury (hikâyat al-kutub). These sources suggest that the Fatimids had no aversion for the 'proportioned script' and that they held the work of Ibn Muqla and Ibn al-Bawwab in high esteem, for they collected not only manuscripts attributed to them, but also their pens.

In the material record, documentation remains of the Fatimid period are extremely rare, yet some pieces of evidence do survive. Three extant manuscripts are known to have belonged to Fatimid treasuries between the late eleventh and mid-twelfth centuries: they all display high standards of calligraphy in the New Style and proportioned cursive. Closer in date to our period of interest is the so-called 'Subayhîd Qur'an', written in lavish gold cursive in 1026 (Figure 80). Its opening pages mention the caliph al-Mustansir and dedicate the manuscript to the 'support of the caliphate' 'Ali ibn Muhammad al-Subayhî (d. 1066 or 1080). The latter was the founder of an Isma'ili dynasty which acknowledged the Fatimids and ruled much of the Yemen between about 1047 and 1138. A copy of the letter in which al-Mustansir grants him this title is preserved: it is dated 1064, so the illuminations must have been added to the manuscript between that year and 'Ali's death. Stylistically, the geometrical treatment of their
ground, scrolls with palmettes and gold titles on blue all recall the Qur'an of Ibn al-Bawwāb.80

It is unlikely that a close ally of the Fatimids, himself a convinced Isma'ili, would have endorsed this Qur'an and associated it to their authority, had there existed an ideological bias against cursive scripts. This idea is confirmed by extant Fatimid caliphal decrees, which are all in high-quality cursive, including the earliest preserved one, written in 1024 in the name of al-Zahir (Figure 81).81

The Palermo Qur'an, a fine example of the New Style, was completed in 983, a time when Sicily belonged to the periphery of the Fatimid empire (Figure 71). By then, however, the island seems to have been moving away from Fatimid orthodoxy: Ibn Hawqal, a supporter of the dynasty who visited Palermo in 362/973, had already found it corrupt as to religion.82 One of the manuscript's marginal medallions contains the phrase: 'the Qur'an is the word of God and it was not created.'83 This apparently anodine statement harks back to one of the most virulent theological debates of the ninth century, the createdness of the Qur'an, which continued to divide Muslim communities in the tenth century.84

The vast majority of North African and Sicilian Sunnis were, in that period, followers of Sahnūn (d. 855), who had been tried in Kairouan for his belief in the uncreated nature of the Qur'an.85

The Fatimids, on the other hand, did not uphold the dogma of the uncreated Qur'an, like most Shi'ites. The Palermo manuscript may thus represent the production of a Sicilian community, probably of Mālikī obedience, seeking to assert Sunni orthodoxy.86 But in the light of what has gone before, I would be reluctant to claim that its script carried any ideological connotation.

Another famous manuscript, the 'Blue Qur'an', could have been brought into this discussion, having been ascribed to the early Fatimid period by Jonathan Bloom;87 but it may in fact be considerably earlier than has recently been assumed (this complex question, being mainly related to Kufic script and decoration, will be developed in a separate publication).

Economy, orthography and legibility

While the relationship between political motives and the scribal evolutions of the tenth century remains elusive, several other trends were clearly at play in the manuscript record. One of them is the improvement of orthography.88 A first testimony of this development is the Gharib al-hadith of 866, with its modern vocalization signs and nearly complete diacritics (Figure 68). In the same period, some Qur'ans in styles D.I and D.III were also moving towards full notation of the diacritics and vocalization by means of the typical dashes and red dots of Kufic. This trend became general in D.V and was pursued after the advent of the New Style.89

In mature Kufic, different combinations of green, blue and yellow dots were sometimes added to record further orthographic signs, as well as variants between Qur'anic readings. The underlying conventions differed between manuscripts.90 This type of notation was, again, taken over and developed in NS, where it became more common than in Kufic. In the Palermo Qur'an, for example, red dots indicate the

80. The Sahlīshī Qur'an. The text was written in 417/1026 and the opening illuminations added between 1064 and 1082.
81. Detail of a decree by the Fatimid caliph al-Mustansir Billah granting privileges to Coptic monks (Egypt, 435/1042, width 52 cm).
vocalization alongside yellow dots for hamza, blue dots for alif of liaison, the modern notation of shadda and a variety of signs in thin red ink for additional orthographic purposes. Interestingly, the scheme used in this Sicilian manuscript closely resonates with the description made by al-Dani (982-1053), our main source on this subject, of a Qur’an written and vocalized in 227/842 by Ḥakam ibn Ḳimrā, whom he calls ‘the vocalizer of the people of al-Andalus.’ Similar observations about regional practices abound in the same treatise: their confrontation with actual manuscripts may have the potential to yield insights into the question of geographical origins.

The combination of old and modern orthographic signs exemplified by the Palermo Qur’an was another widespread trait of the New Style, where the modern notation of shadda, hamza and sukūn is commonly found alongside more traditional vocalization signs; this, again, finds parallels in Kufic style D.V. An altogether different innovation contributed to the same logic of completeness: the addition, at the beginning of manuscripts, of tables giving detailed verse counts. While they may have initially emerged in Kufic, they only become clearly attested with the New Style.

Just as the orthography grew more comprehensive, a second tendency was also gaining momentum: economy. Paper, being based on vegetal components, was much less expensive to produce than parchment, which required large amounts of animal skin of a standard format. In the New Style, some lavish manuscripts, such as the Isfahan Qur’an (Figure 72), still had an impressive format with only a few lines per page. But it also became increasingly common to produce small vertical codices (15 x 10 cm or under) with at least ten lines of text. This trend is epitomized by one miniature Qur’an in the Khallili collection which fits some thirty lines of script into pages of only 7.3 by 6 cm (Figure 82). This evolution had already started with the D styles of Kufic. It became systematic in cursive Qur’ans of the eleventh century, which almost all have a small format and over fifteen lines of text. Because of its more flexible scribal rules, proportioned cursive could also be written to the highest standard by a trained scribe at considerably greater speed than Kufic or even NS. These changes all imply a reduced consumption of time, labour and writing material.

The tenth century was finally marked by a drive to enhance legibility. Proportioned cursive and the New Style had the advantage of being closely related to contemporary everyday scripts, which must have contributed to their general accessibility. A further contributing factor, in cursive, was the differentiation of spaces between and within words, whereas in Kufic and NS they had been equal. The diacritical signs used in cursive (thick dots) also have a better contrast than in Kufic and NS (thin dashes). These shortcomings were partly compensated, in Kufic and NS, by the tendency to write in larger scripts: one major achievement of Qur’anic cursive was thus to allow clear calligraphy to be written at a fast pace, on a small scale.

The underlying evolution was a broad, incremental process spread over a long period of time, which mirrored the transformation of society. By the tenth century, Muslims had come to make up the majority of the population in many regions, increasing the demand for both public and personal copies of the Qur’an. The enormous expense incurred to produce a thirty-volume Kufic Qur’an on parchment must, at some point, have become incompatible with the needs of local communities. The adoption of Islam by growing numbers of non-native Arabic speakers probably added a further impetus to the improvement of orthography. The underlying change was reflected in manuscript production, by the move away from a distinct incorporation of Qur’anic scribes towards society at large. It is only in such conditions that, by the tenth century, fairly detailed
instructions on the basic proportional rules of the script could be made public by the Ikhwan al-Ṣafa’. The new approach eventually obliterated the geometrical unity of the Qur’anic page. From being one whole bound together by successive proportional relations, it became divided into two parts: script and layout, each arranged according to its own geometrical principles. This shift of paradigm is reflected by the Ikhwan who, while asserting that calligraphy was a musical art, could not explain the concrete relevance of musical ratios to its practice.

The transformation of Arabic script in the tenth century thus marked, in many ways, the end of an era. In technique, it resulted from a new codification of the letters which was closely adhered to in the New Style, then gradually rendered more supple in cursive. But in this process, continuity with the Kufic past was stronger than appearances would suggest, notably as the founding principles of the old system – geometry, proportion and the thickness of the pen – were carried into the new. The major force behind this development lay in the transformation of Muslim society and the need of wider, less specialized audiences to consult the Qur’an, as well as a growing range of other texts. At the same time, the ethos inherited from Late Antiquity, which had stood at the root of all these developments, was receding into the background, eventually to be completely forgotten until our day.

Appendix

Guidelines to Déroche’s script classification

This classification serves to identify the style of any given early Qur’anic manuscript, and thereby link it to a larger scriptural group. It can be compared, in its workings, to the typeface of modern fonts. In its present state, it remains a work in progress, which will continue to be refined as more manuscripts come under study. There are seven scriptural groups (A to F, NS), each distinguished by a set of basic features. Groups B, C, D and NS are divided into several subgroups (e.g. B.II, D.Vb). For purposes of clarity, the most salient characteristics of each major style are singled out in the following pages. Readers are referred to Déroche’s publications for more comprehensive definitions.


* Modifications have been made below to the original definitions of hā’ and final nūn in C.Ia, a style for which documentation initially available to Déroche was limited.
** In order to simplify notation, those letters sharing the same grapheme have been designated by a single name, e.g. jīm for jīm/hā’/kha, ’yn for ’yn/ghayn, and so on.