CHAPTER SIX

Cairo and the Beginning of the Classic Tradition

We are fortunate in that several important groups of Qur’ans dating from before 1320 survive. As we have seen, they come from Egypt and the Il-Khwānid areas of Iraq and Iran, and they are especially valuable because of the extensive information they give us about places of production, patrons, their periods of work and the relationships between craftsmen. Later in the fourteenth century, however, documentary information, especially for Mamluk Qur’ans, becomes much sparser. Between 1330 and 1345 only four Qur’ans give Cairo as their place of origin, although there are other manuscripts which on various grounds can be attributed either to Cairo or to Syria. Not one Qur’an survives bearing the name of its illuminator between 1313 and the era of the Mamluk Sultan Shāh Būn (1363-76). The position in Iran is better, for here several Qur’ans give the name of calligrapher, and illuminator, the place of production and other important facts.

In this chapter we survey the period covering the second half of the reign of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad together with his short-lived successors down to the year 1366. It is an exceptionally difficult and obscure time, in which we are totally dependent upon a small number of inadequately documented Qur’ans.

The End of the Sandal Tradition

One of these Qur’ans, in the National Library, Cairo, was first published about a hundred years ago (Cat.17). It is an important manuscript because it provides an accurate landmark in the history of Mamluk Qur’an production. Although there is a very full colophon and an interesting appendix, no patron’s name is given, and we know nothing of the circumstances of commissioning. The colophon reads: “This blessed Qur’an was completed by the grace of God and His aid. May God’s blessing be on our lord Muḥammad and his house and companions by the slave in need of God’s mercy, exalted be He, Ahmād ibn Muḥammad ibn Kamāl ibn Yahyā al-ʿAṣfārī al-Muṭṭalābīb, in the city of Cairo the victorious, may God protect it, in the blessed month of Shāh Būn 734 [April 1334]. May God have mercy on its scribe, its reader and all Muslims, O Lord of the worlds.”

This manuscript is one of the very few Mamluk Qur’ans which give the name of the city in which it was produced, and it is first to mention Cairo. Nothing is known about the calligrapher, except that he produced a number of manuscripts in Cairo in the third decade of the fourteenth century. His nisbah, al-Muṭṭalābīb, may be translated as “the doctor”, “amateur physician”, or even “packer”. If the manuscript stood in isolation it would still be important because of the completeness of the colophon. But it can be associated with other four manuscripts, including three Qur’ans, all by the same scrib
visible in the work of ʿAbd al-Muṭaṣabbib, but no such influence is detectable in these opening pages.

The final illuminated pages are more interesting for their links with other manuscripts. According to the 1969 Cairo Millenary Catalogue, "the foliate filling of the central square would seem to be inspired by the ʿOlijaytū Qurʾān" (Cat.43), and the composition is reproduced beside Juzʿ 23 of that manuscript, which shows the closest resemblance with the 1313 Qurʾān. But this resemblance is quite superficial, probably coincidental, and certainly not the product of the same principles. On the other hand, an identical composition is used in the 1282 Yaʿqūb Qurʾān (Cat.36) which we have suggested was illuminated in Cairo by a member of the Šandal group. Furthermore, the Qurʾān Ayat used in the panels above and below are those found in the Šandal and Aydughdū Qurʾān, such as Fussūlāt (XLI, 41–2).

This manuscript (Cat.17) bears no illuminator's signature, nor does the calligrapher claim any responsibility for the illumination. Yet all of the manuscripts copied by ʿAbd al-Muṭaṣabbib are illuminated in the same distinctive post-Šandal style. At the beginning of the century it was common for illuminators to refer to themselves in the colophon; however, in later years this was not done. With manuscripts such as Cat.17, either two people were involved, but only the calligrapher signed the manuscript as he was considered the more important, or the calligrapher and illuminator were the same man, and it was felt unnecessary to refer to his work on the illumination. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, we feel justified in saying that ʿAbd al-Muṭaṣabbib was the illuminator of all the manuscripts signed by him, because the style is identical in each.

A Qurʾān in the National Library, Cairo (Cat.16), is also by ʿAbd al-Muṭaṣabbib. The initial pages of this manuscript are missing, but the final ones are similar to the illuminated pages of Cat.17. Instead of having a star-polygon occupying most of the space, the central area, has a small star motif surrounded by four octagons with adjoining five-pointed stars. Examples of this composition can be found in Mamlūk, Iranian and Anatolian illuminations.

The fillers of this composition are almost identical to those in the slightly later Cat.17. The entire decoration of the central motif is the same as that of the final compositions of that manuscript. Almost all of the features in Cat.16 are paralleled in Cat.17. If we examine the compositions of this painter we can see that he follows the same formulae time and time again. He is very fond of the technique of linking up fillers to form a secondary pattern under the main trellis, for example. The illuminated pages of text in each manuscript follow the same method of presentation, except that the marginal hasp in the earlier manuscript consists of a circle bearing a palmette inside a larger semi-circle. Sūrah headings are identical with those in Cat.17. This design is quite common, appearing in several Iranian, Iraqi and later fifteenth-century Mamlūk Qurʾāns. Its first appearance in the fourteenth century is in the Anonymous Baghdad Qurʾān (Cat.39).

Cat.18 is an unsigned Juzʿ from a thirty-part Qurʾān, in the same style as the earlier two Qurʾāns by ʿAbd al-Muṭaṣabbib. The opening illumination of the Juzʿ inserts an octagon into another pattern with which it has no relation, which is something not seen...
since the Qur'ān illuminated by Muḥammad ibn al-Mubādir. The surrounding geometrical work and accompanying fillers, however, bear the unmistakable mark of Aḥmad al-Muṭaṭābbib. The opening pages of text are written over a ground of scrolls surrounded by a plain gold border, in a manner reminiscent of the opening pages of the Baybars Qur'ān (Cat.1). Khamshah and ‘asharāh signs are used in the margin of this manuscript. Both resemble closely others found in the work of Sandal. The ‘asharāh is identical, and the khamsah almost so, for here the kufic inscription is replaced by a blossom.

Aḥmad al-Muṭaṭābbib

Aḥmad al-Muṭaṭābbib was a purely Mamluk painter. Despite suggestions to the contrary, little or no influence from the Ḥamādān Qur’ān appears in his work. The final pages of Cat.17 have been cited as evidence, but this is not convincing, particularly since the design of this illuminated area is identical with the frontispiece of a Yāṭīr Qur’ān which was almost certainly illuminated in Cairo. Aḥmad al-Muṭaṭābbib’s work has numerous links with manuscripts illuminated by Sandal and Aydūghdī, and we can presume that he was trained in the 1320s when manuscripts produced by the Sandal group were available. Their work was clearly the model for much of the later painter’s efforts. However, there is a coarseness in the work of Aḥmad al-Muṭaṭābbib, and an indication that inferior pigment was used, for the blue has faded in many instances, something that never happened with the manuscripts of Sandal and Aydūghdī. There is also an increase in the size of the Qur’ān. Several of Aḥmad al-Muṭaṭābbib manuscripts are almost twice the size of most Qur’āns made in the first two decades of the fourteenth century.

Although we cannot be absolutely certain that he was the illuminator of the manuscripts that bear his name as scribe, it would seem likely. If this were the case, he was probably more interested in calligraphy than in illumination, even though he was not an outstanding practitioner of calligraphy. In fact, much of his effort in Cat.17 went into the elaboration of the reading notation, a system that he proudly explains in a long appendix. What we see in his work is the tail-end of a once exquisite tradition. This coincides with the appearance of a much larger type of Qur’ān, for which the style of Sandal and Aydūghdī, despite their work on the Baybars Qur’ān (Cat.1) had not been designed. There are several other manuscripts which on stylistic grounds we can associate with Aḥmad al-Muṭaṭābbib. The most important are a complete single-volume Qur’ān dated 1341 (Cat.21), and a complete single-volume Qur’ān dated 1345–46 (Cat.22). Each of these manuscripts represents a different aspect of the post-Sandal style. Cat.21 is a fine large Qur’ān with thirteen lines per page of magnificent Mamluk naskh. It is signed by the calligrapher Aḥmad ibn Abī ʿIrāhīm ibn Muḥammad al-Qurashi al-Kāṭib al-Damāshqī, and dated March 1341. The colophon tells us all we know about the manuscripts’ history. The name of the calligrapher indicates some connection with Syria, and both this manuscript and that of Sandal, the Ayyāḥād of Syrian ancestry, employ exactly the same form of script. We shall return to this shortly when dealing with another Qur’ān in a golden naskh which has links with Damascus. Another possible link with Syria occurs on the opening pages of text, where al-Fāṭihah and the beginning of al-Baqarah are written in the same way as any other sūrah in the manuscript. We may recall that Cat.8, dated 1314 and illuminated by ‘Abdallāh al-Halabī, does the same.

Other features link the manuscript with the work of Aḥmad al-Muṭaṭābbib and lead back through him to Sandal. The fine opening pages of illumination follow the style of Cat.17, except that the rendering of the work here is of a higher calibre. The design of the central square panel is not known to us elsewhere, but it does follow the principle that we see in the 1332 Qur’ān of al-Muṭaṭābbib (Cat.16), where a central motif is surrounded by four others, in this case star-polygons around a hexagon. The fillers in the geometric trellis include motifs painted in the “smudge” technique employed so extensively by al-Muṭaṭābbib. Many of the features this manuscript has in common with Cat.16 and 17 are seen first in the work of Sandal; however, many others appear for the first time, such as the cartouches on the final pages of text, which consist of two circles joined by an oval. This
marks the first step in a development which reached its most elaborate stage in the 1370s. Marginal ornaments, although essentially of the old Şandal type, are surrounded by multiple palmettes, and mark the beginnings of a new style.

The 1345-46 manuscript (Cat.22) dates from only five years later, but it represents the last stage of the Şandal tradition as transmitted through Ahmed al-Mutaţabbib. It is the work of a mediocre painter, but one whose lack of talent is made up for by great enthusiasm and a certain amount of inventiveness. Many disparate elements are combined, and extra pages of illumination are introduced. In this Qur’ân decorative detail is further debased and there is much greater use of gold, so that the overall impression is one of sumptuousness without finesse. The calligrapher and possibly the illustrator was Asbiîhî ibn Turîy al-Sayyî [min] ‘Arghûn Shah asadâr al-Malîkî. His master, ‘Arghûn Shah was appointed governor of Safad in Palestine two years later, so that this Qur’ân must have been produced when he was still in Egypt. The Qur’ân should therefore be attributed to Cairo rather than to Syria.

The Beginning of the Classic Tradition

The Iran-Bastan Qur’ân

By the 1340s the Şandal tradition had undergone both transformation and decline. Almost simultaneously, one sees the emergence of the "classic" tradition of Qur’ân calligraphy and illumination which was to blossom under Sultan Sha’bân (1361-76). One manuscript in particular seems to herald, in its superb quality, if not in size, the great Qur’âns of the 1360s and early 1370s. It is today in the Iran-Bastan Museum (Cat.20), and on the two occasions that it has been exhibited it has been incorrectly ascribed to Iran.9 The manuscript was bequeathed to the Safavid shrine at Ardabil in 1539 by Bahram Mirza, a son of Shah Isma’il, and there is a full waqfyyah on the colophon pages of this effect. The manuscript has a fine Safavid binding which says it was made for the library of Shah Isma’il. The magnificent inscription which gives this information refers, of course, to the binding alone. On the final page, below the colophon, is the ex-libris of Sultan Qayt-Bay (1469-95). The manuscript therefore came to Iran from Egypt during or after the reign of Qayt-Bay. However, as Qayt-Bay died five years before Isma’il came to the throne, it is likely that the Qur’ân was sent by his successor Sultan Qânsuh, who is known to have exchanged presents with the Safavid monarch.10 We know nothing of the manuscript’s provenance prior to the reign of Qayt-Bay, but it was copied in the year 1338-39, towards the end of the rule of al-Nâṣir Muhammed, by a scribe whose name is given as Ahmâd ibn al-Muṣînî.11 Although the colophon occurs in a circular medallion on the final page, as we find in some İli-Khâns manuscripts, the illumination and script show the manuscript to be of Mamlûk, not Iranian, origin. Unusually for a Qur’ân, there are twelve lines per page.

Bayûnî calls the script "rayhân-mutâqâr", or "medium rayhân".12 However, the manuscript has little in common with any of the varieties of rayhân, and resembles very closely the high-quality Mamlûk naskh that we have seen in the work of Shâdhî ibn Muhammed and Ahmed al-Dinâshîq.

Several features make this an important manuscript art-historically, and it is therefore regrettable that present circumstances have made it difficult to acquire good quality photographs. First, apart from a Qur’ân in al-Azhar library, this manuscript contains the earliest Mamlûk example of full chinoiserie decoration.13 Secondly, it is the first example of the single star-polygon composition with web or mesh interior which became so popular in the Sha’bân period. Thirdly, it is the earliest known example of a gold-chinoiserie-on-gold border in a Mamlûk Qur’ân; and, fourthly, it is the earliest example of fully-developed stripwork combined with coloured squares in a Mamlûk Qur’ân. Lastly, besides these decorative innovations it marks the appearance of a new type of decorative kufic.

The earliest example of chinoiserie in Mamlûk art is found on the korsi, or Qur’ân container, of al-Nâṣir Muhammed, dated 1327-28.14 This coincides roughly with the appearance of the Hamadân Qur’ân in Cairo (Cat.45). But chinoiserie elements in that manuscript are by no means as prominent as one is often led to believe. For example, although lotuses occur in Juz’ 19 and 20, peony blossoms do not appear at all.15 In the Iran-Bastan Qur’ân, by contrast, one finds gold or blue, white and green lotus blossoms and, in some of the medallions, at the end of the sîra headings, there are fine multi-petaled peonies.

The first Mamlûk examples of the geometric frontispiece in the form of a star-polygon occur in the Qur’ân of Baybars al-Jâshîmîr (Cat.1). These are all the work of Şandal, and are quite loose in composition and execution.16 There is a lack of strict geometry at their centre. The multi-pointed stars at their centres are always filled with free-flowing arabesque scrolls, composed to fill the requisite space according to the whim of the painter and not according to the "logic" of the total pattern. Furthermore, there are several different types of fillers and grounds. These features occur in both the work of Şandal’s pupil, Aydüghî, and that of Ahmed al-Mutaţabbib. In only one earlier Mamlûk Qur’ân do geometric elements penetrate right to the nucleus of the trellis, the manuscript dated 1314 (Cat.8), which probably has some connection with Syria. In Öljayû’s Hamadân Qur’ân (Cat.45) we find the nuclei of compositions formed by conjoined palmettes which mesh at the centre to form a tight web.17

Gold decoration on a earlier gold ground seems to have been a short-lived phenomenon, although there are examples in earlier kufic Qur’ân. In the Iran-Bastan manuscript this takes the form of a band of semi-naturalistic chinoiserie running round the main composition. The best known example of this is the 1336 manuscript in Cairo (Cat.24), perhaps commissioned by Sultan Hasan, but there is another Qur’ân in Cairo dating from about 1360 (Cat.30), which uses the same detail on the frontispiece.18

Stripwork is perhaps the one most constant feature of Mamlûk Qur’ân illumination. It is not of a uniform type, though we can trace certain patterns over several manuscripts.
Mamlûk strapwork is always highly complex, though with one solitary exception it never includes coloured squares before 1339. The exception is in the Baybars Qur’ân (Cat.1), where some of the work of Muḥammad ibn Muḥādīr exhibits this feature. In the opening and closing pages of text in the Iran-Bastan Qur’ân, orange squares are inserted into the bands of strapwork.

Two varieties of kufic, in white and gold, are used in Cat.20. These are distinguishable by the shape of the ā and for the white kufic lacks the projecting spike that the gold kufic employs. In addition to this, the white kufic is narrower and more slender, and only the gold kufic has diacritics. In both types the final strokes of ā and nān, etc., are exaggerated to swell at the tip. Kufic from the earlier part of the century is heavy, bold and generally free from distortion. The inscriptions in this script are always individualistic, and no two artists produce them in exactly the same way. Thus they provide a convenient method of identifying artists. In the period of Sultan Shāh ’īn, kufic inscriptions became extremely idiosyncratic, often almost “baroque”, with the tips of letters swollen into bulbous projections. The inscriptions in the Iran-Bastan manuscript show the beginnings of this distortion and form a half-way stage between the two types. Gold kufic is always written over white scrolls and white over gold in the Iran-Bastan Qur’ân.

There are several other ways in which the Iran-Bastan manuscript anticipates later developments. All the pages are surrounded by a border which consists of a rule-and-dash pattern with a gold line on each side. The same border surrounds all the sūrah headings. The traditional colour scheme of Mamlûk Qur’âns before this date is expanded to include green and black on a large scale. In the Baybars Qur’ân (Cat.1) green is used only once, in the fifth part, illuminated by Sandal, but green also appears in Cat.8. The Iran-Bastan Qur’ân, however, is the first manuscript known to use green consistently in the illuminated areas. ‘Aṣṣurah symbols in the margin of the Iran-Bastan manuscript have borders of fine hair-line strokes. This is a relatively common technique in the East, but rarely found in manuscripts of unquestionably Mamlûk provenance at this time. One example of its use occurs in a Qur’ân in the Chester Beatty Library (Cat.16), whose colophon says that it was completed in Tripoli in 1323. The same Qur’ân has blue “fingers” around the ‘unsurah symbols, which also appear in the Iran-Bastan Qur’ân.

The Iran-Bastan manuscript marks a definite break with the past, heralding some of the developments of later decades. Unfortunately we have no indication where it was written, or for whom. There is, however, a roughly contemporary manuscript which is fully documented. This is not a Qur’ân but a copy of the Four Gospels dated 1340.

Fig. 93 (Cat. 18). Left-hand frontispiece, folio 2r, Cairo, 1332–6.

This is the only surviving volume of the earliest known thirty-part Mamlûk Qur’ân (Juz’ 37). It is in the hand of Ahmad ibn Kamal al-Muṣṭaṣṭabbih, who was active in the 1330s. Much of the decorative detail harks back to the work of Sandal and his associates, but is less skilfully executed. The upper and lower panels contain Sūrah XXVI, al-Shu‘ārā‘ (The Poets), and 152–6.
Left
Fig. 94 (Cat. 18). Text-page, folio 24r. Sūrah LIv, al-Qurān (The Moon), ʿayāhs 34–35; Sūrah LVI, al-Rahmān (The Compassionate), ʿayāhs 1–4.
All Qur’āns by Ahmad ibn Kamīl al-Mutāṣabbib are in muhaqqaq. In this manuscript the scribe uses a rare six-line division of the text: almost every other Qur’ān from this century divides the text in odd numbers of lines. The exception is the Qur’ān of Baybars (Fig. 24). The text is enlivened by the use of coloured orthography. Much of the decorative detail can be traced back to Mamlūk illumination in the early years of the 14th century.

Above
Fig. 95 (Cat. 21). Left-hand frontispiece, folio 2r, probably Damascus, 1341.
The design of the central panel in this frontispiece is not known from any other Qur’ān but it follows the same principles as an almost contemporary Cairo manuscript dated 1332 (Cat. 16) of four identical motifs—star polygons—surrounding a different one—here a hexagon. The fillers within the geometric naskh are decorated in the same “smudge” technique followed by the Cairo painter. Despite this, the manuscript was probably illustrated in Damascus. The quality of illumination is certainly much better than contemporary Cairo work.

Overleaf
Fig. 96 (Cat. 21). Text-pages, folios 215v–216r. Sūrah LXIX, Al-Ḥāṣā (Sure Reality), ʿayāhs 20–52; Sūrah LXX, Al-Ma‘ārūf, ʿayāhs 1–30.
A fine gold naskh outlined in black with the “eyes” of the letters filled in with the same colour. It is identical to the script used by the calligrapher of Cat. 6, dated 1313, though rather more polished. On the opening page the first two sūras are written one above the other; a feature which we have noticed in Qur’āns of probable Syrian provenance. Elaborate marginal medallions, indicating each fifth and tenth verse, form an impressive border on each side.
Fig. 97 (Cat. 21). Colophon, folio 214r.

The colophon, dated 741/1341, is in the same script as the Qur’anic text and written over a ground of arabesque scrolls. The inscriptions above and below are in white ‘arabīt over scrolls with an archaic “tear-drop” motif. The shapes of the cartouches, with their semi-circular ends, are typical of those used several decades later for fāṭihah headings in Cairo.

Fig. 98 (Cat. 20). Frontispiece, folio 2r, probably Damascus, 1338–9.

This important manuscript reproduces in miniature the type of frontispiece that we associate with Cairo several decades later, in the time of Sultan Shu’bān (1353–76). In both style and technique it differs significantly from contemporary Cairo work. Although little-known, it was formerly believed to be Persian, largely because of the inscribed Safavid binding and endowment notice of a sixteenth-century Iranian prince, Bahārī-Mirzā. It should more correctly be attributed to Mamlūk Syria, almost certainly Damascus.

Fig. 99 (Cat. 20). Illuminated page of text, folio 3r, Surah 1, at-Fīnjāh.

The text of the Qur’ān, copied by Ahmad ibn ‘Al-Muhāmmadi, is in a fine gold Mamlūk nāṣīḥī cursive resembling that used by Ahmad ibn Aḥī ‘Arshārfūrān al-Dimashqī, Fig. 96, and Shāhīd ibn Muḥammad, Fig. 32. The chinoiserie lotus flowers in the medallions, the mixture of sinuous and voluted letters in the four inscriptions and the use of square inlays in the gold strapwork all pre-date their use in Cairo manuscripts by ten years or more.
Although paintings were added to it in later years, the original decoration is complete and almost entirely Islamic in conception. Coptic manuscripts have their own tradition, stretching back to the beginnings of Christianity in Egypt. However, Coptic artists used Islamic decoration, and this can often be used to fill gaps in our knowledge of Islamic manuscript illumination, for there are no Qur‘āns from the first fifty years of Mamlūk rule in Egypt, and were it not for the existence of Coptic Christian material, we should have little idea of what Mamlūk Qur‘ān decoration looked like before 1300.25

Almost exactly the same type of white kufic is employed in the Coptic manuscript as in the Iran-Bastan manuscript. Similar gold strapwork with intervening squares is used, and, perhaps most important of all, the same gold-on-gold decoration. It is true that the blossoms are not chinoiserie lotuses, but the method is the same. What the page, and indeed the entire manuscript, has most in common with the Iran-Bastan Qur‘ān is not so much its detail as the precise, highly accomplished execution, very unlike the rather casual technique of Ahmad al-Mutātabib.26

According to the certificate of commissioning the Gospels were made for a Coptic cleric in Damascus during the primacy of Anbā Būṭrus, Metropolitan of the Copts in Jerusalem and Syria, in 1340. It was written and collated, ṭuḥa‘a ‘alā‘al-a‘jil, by a scribe whose name is given as Jirjis Abīl-Fadl ibn Lutfīllāh.27 This would suggest Damascus as the place of origin for the Iran-Bastan manuscript, for its workmanship and that of the 1340 Gospels are infinitely superior to that of manuscripts which we know to have been made in Cairo in the third decade of the fourteenth century. Both have important decorative details in common, and there are several other manuscripts from Syria, notably Cat.10, containing elements that appear in the Iran-Bastan Qur‘ān but not in Egyptian work of this time. Some of the details in the Iran-Bastan manuscript, such as the coloured squares inserted into strapwork, had already been present in Iraq work for several decades, as in Cat.42, and it is reasonable for such features to have appeared in Syria before being used in the illumination of Cairene Qur‘āns.

The complexity of Mamlūk Qur‘ān production may be further illustrated by two manuscripts which appear in Cairo between 1345 and 1356: the Qur‘ān of Muḥārak Shāh al-Suyūt (Cat.67), and that of Muḥārak–Shāh ibn ‘Abdallāh (Cat.72).

Fig. 100 (Cat. 72). The Qur‘ān of Sirghītīnsh al-Nāṣirī, f. 15, illuminated text-page, folio 14v, probably Baghdad circa 1320–30. Sūrah XVII, Bānī Isrā‘īl (The Children of Israel), 1491. A magnificent thirty-part Qur‘ān in superb muḥaqqaq, almost identical to the hand of Ahmad ibn al-Suhrawardi, Figs. 46–7. Despite the evidence of his mastery, we know nothing about Muḥārak Shāh ibn ‘Abdallāh beyond the fact that he appears to have been active in Baghdad or Tabrīz circa 1300–30. This manuscript, like the Hamadān Qur‘ān of Olyurū, was brought, from Iraq or Iran and became the property of Sirghītīnsh, a Mamlūk amir. In 1356 he endowed it to his newly-built madrasah in Cairo.
The Qur’ans of Mubarak Shah al-Suyuti

The Suyuti manuscript is of medium size, 37 x 25 cm, and consists of 255 folios of superb black nisahin, fifteen lines to the page (Cat. 67). Despite the large number of lines on each page, they are in no way cramped. On the contrary, every page has a perfect balance and symmetry reminiscent of the hand of Ahmad ibn al-Suhrawardi. There is a large colophon, presented in a rather unusual way for a Mamluk manuscript, for it is written inside a square framed by a gold strapwork border with blue squares after the fashion of several of the Yaqut Qur’ans. The inscription reads: “The copying of the Noble Qur’an was completed at the hands of the feeble slave, in need of the pardon of God and His forgiveness, Mubarak Shah al-Suyuti, in the first month of Ramaḍan the blessed 744 [January 1345], in Cairo the victorious, praising God, exalted be He, for His abundant bounty and granting of excellent well-being, praying for the Prophet and his Pure House...” 26

The calligrapher Mubarak Shah al-Suyuti, is recorded as one of the famous pupils of the sitrah, the six pupils of Yaqut, although some authorities state him to have been a pupil of the master himself. Like all the legendary calligraphers of the fourteenth century, he remains a shadowy figure about whom contradictory information is given. However, he is to be distinguished from his namesake Mubarak Shah ibn Qutb, although according to Huart, both were pupils of Yaqut. 22 Huart’s biography of al-Suyuti, based on Mustaṣfa-

zadeh’s Tahsin-yi Khatṭāsin and ‘Ali Efendi’s Manqib-i Hunarvarin, tells us that he: “...was unique in writing nisahin: he was a skillful with the sword as with the pen. He took part in numerous wars. Souyoussi derived his ethnic surname from a village near Nishapir in Khurasan; he lived in Basra... died in 735 [1334-35].” 28

According to Mustaṣfa-zadeh the calligrapher was of Baghdad origin. 23 The modern Iranian writer on calligraphy, Faḍallī, on the other hand, says that he was from Damascus, adding that Yahya al-Jamali al-Suffi was one of his pupils. 29 There is another Qur’an (Cat. 68), written in Cairo which gives the full name of al-Suyuti as Mubarak Shah ibn Ahmad al-Dimashqi al-Suyuti. This is the only instance we have of his name in full, as all the historians refer to him simply as Mubarak Shah al-Suyuti. It confirms the statement of Faḍallī that the calligrapher had some links with Syria, through Damascus ancestry. Whether the nisah “al-Suyuti” is related to his prowess in military matters, or merely refers to the village near Nishapir, is impossible to say. If the latter is correct, then it could imply that his ancestors came from Damascus to Iran, and that he was born in Nishapir. However, usually when two place-names appear in a person’s name, it means that he originated in the first and then moved to the second.

All authorities, ancient and modern, are agreed that Mubarak Shah was famous as a master of nisahin. This manuscript (Cat. 67) is a particularly fine example of that hand, and
one of the best examples from the first half of the fourteenth century. It is a particularly elegant variety of this script. As we have pointed out, rāŷbān was not especially favoured by the Mamlūks, and thus it is unlikely that the calligrapher could have reached this degree of excellence in Cairo, or indeed anywhere in the Mamlūk empire. Mubārak Shāh, we are told by all the authorities, worked in the East, where he could have perfected this hand without difficulty. None of the Muslim historians of calligraphy mention a visit by Mubārak Shāh to Cairo, but he might have gone there. Thus, if the manuscript were a later forgery, or facsimile, it would have been inviting suspicion to mention Cairo in the colophon. Baghdad, Damascus or any Iranian city would have been far more logical. Hence this manuscript is almost certainly an authentic example of the hand of al-Suyūtī.

On the basis of the biographies, and of the two Qur’āns produced in Cairo (Cat. 67 & 68), we would tentatively reconstruct Mubārak Shāh’s career as follows. He was born in Damascus and trained in Baghdad where he became a master of rāŷbān, possibly under the guidance of Yaqūt. He then seems to have spent some time in Iran. If he was the teacher of Yahyā al-Šūfī, he must have been in Tabrīz, or possibly Shirāz, where we know al-Šūfī worked in the 1340s. He is supposed to have had a penchant for military matters, an unlikely characteristic of a calligrapher; nevertheless, there may be some truth in the story, since al-Šūfī, with whom he is linked, was the protégé of the Il-Khanid war-lord Chōpān Solduz who died in 1326. In those days there would have been plenty of opportunity for a man to develop his military talents in the inter-family feuds which erupted as the Il-Khanid empire went into decline. In 1344 we find him in Cairo, to which he must have travelled by way of Damascus.

Of his work we have only the two Qur’āns mentioned above. However, there is also a treatise on calligraphy supposedly by him, which was in a private collection in Tehran at the time Fāḍil wrote his Atâš-i Khāfe. al-Suyūtī was almost certainly not an illuminator, for all the evidence suggests that in the first half of the fourteenth century masters of calligraphy confined themselves to that art alone. Of the four leading masters working in this period, Ibn al-Wahlī, Ibn al-Suhrawardī, Yahyā al-Šūfī and Arghān al-Kāmilī, not one was responsible for illuminating the Qur’ān bearing his name, for in each case the name of an illuminator is given. This explains the enigma of the illumination in Cat. 67. The manuscript is superbly illuminated and is of a quality comparable to the Iran-Bastan Museum (Cat. 26) and Coptic Museum manuscripts. Thus the illuminator is unlikely to have been a Cairo-trained painter, as all the evidence points to a decline in Qur’ān illumination in Cairo from 1330 to 1350. It is more probable that the illuminator was Syrian, for apart from some odd features, such as the absence of any opening pages of illumination, there are elements in the decoration which do not occur in any Mamlūk Qur’ān before the early 1370s. These decorative features can be associated with the painter Ibrāhīm al-Âmîdī, who was a major figure in the field of Qur’ān illumination in Cairo under Sultan Shāhān, and was responsible for the introduction of many new elements from Iraq and the East. He may also have been responsible for the illumination of at least one Qur’ān bearing the name of a member of the sītâh, Mubārak Shāh Ibn Qūṭh (Cat. 59).

The Qur’ān of Mubārak Shāh Ibn ‘Abdallāh

There also exists a large, almost complete, thirty-part Qur’ān, bearing the waqfīyāt of the Amir Šīrīhīm al-Nāṣirī who bequeathed it to his madrasah in 1356 (Cat. 72). When previously exhibited, it was considered Mamlūk work. Each part is written in magnificent muḥāqqaq, five lines to the page, with all vocalization, like the script, in black. It is finely illuminated on the opening pages of text, though there is little additional decoration within the text itself. Sūrah headings are in gold tawqīf without surrounding panels, and the final pages of text in all volumes remain unadorned. The manuscript bears a signature in its final
volume, on the last page. This follows immediately after Sūrat al-Nās, in identical muhaqqaq, and identifies the calligrapher as Muhārak Shāh ibn ‘Abdallāh. According to an album of calligraphy compiled for the Timūrid prince Baysunqur, Muhārak Shāh ibn ‘Abdallāh was one of the sītah. This seems unlikely, since no one else mentions him; however it is quite possible that there was a calligrapher of this name who was a pupil of Yaqūt, though not one of the sītah. The compilers of the album were working within a hundred years of the sītah, and there must have been more information available about the old masters, much of it probably transmitted orally.

There is a striking resemblance between Muhārak Shāh ibn ‘Abdallāh’s calligraphy and that of Ibn al-Suhrawardi in the Anonymous Baghdad Qur’ān (Cat. 39). Both employ exactly the same type of muhaqqaq, verging on thulāt, in thirty-part Qur’āns with a five-line-per-page division. Vocalization is black throughout in both cases, and several a‘zā’ for example juz’ 26, finish in exactly the same way as the final one in Cat. 72, that is, the colophon is written in five lines of large muhaqqaq identical to that of the Qur’ānic text on the page opposite.

Illumination, like the script, is of a high quality. There are no frontispieces and the main areas of decoration are the thirty opening pages of text. There seems to be very little connection between the illumination of many of these opening pages and earlier Mamlūk Qur’ān decoration, but several parallels appear between it and Iranian Qur’āns from the first half of the fourteenth century. The entire layout and decoration of the opening pages to Parts 11, 20 and 28 are identical with that in a single juz’ from a manuscript in the Chester Beatty Library, wrongly ascribed to Yaqūt, but clearly Iranian (Cat. 56). There is also a close resemblance between these pages and the opening pages of several juz’ from another Iranian Qur’ān in the same library, dated 1334 (Cat. 55). In most of the a‘zā’ there appears to be no strapwork, a feature uncharacteristic of Mamlūk Qur’āns but found in Iranian ones. Some other details, such as the use of the wave-diaper patterned grounds and a treble-dot motif over hatched grounds, are commonly found in İl-Khānīd Qur’āns. In the body of the text there is a very distinctive khamshah symbol with a petalled border in dark and light blue. This is found in manuscripts of the 1340s, almost certainly attributable to Baghdad, though this particular colour-combination occurs in the Qur’ān of 1338 made at Marāgheh (Cat. 61). All we know for certain about the history of the manuscript is that it bears the waqfiyyah of the Amir Şirihatmīsh al-Nāširī. This waqfiyyah, which appears to be in all the volumes, reads: “The slave in need of the aid of God, exalted be He, Şirihatmīsh, has bequeathed in perpetuity all of this blessed portion to those occupied with the Noble Wisdom and to those residing in the Ḥanafiyyah Madrasah near the mosque of Ibn Tūlūn, built by the High Abode, that they might benefit by it, using it and copying it night and day. It should not be removed from the above-mentioned madrasah, neither sold nor pawned.”

The waqfiyyah is not dated, but we know that the Amir built the madrasah in 1336, so the manuscript was presumably bequeathed at that time. al-Şafadī, Maqrīzī and Ibn Ḥajar all give accounts of the life of this Amir, who had the distinction of being bought by al-