Islamic calligraphy

Y.H. Safadi

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Islamic calligraphy

YASIN HAMID SAFADI

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His Excellency
Muhammad Mahdi al-Tajir

Title page: Two angels recording the good and bad deeds of men, from 'Aṣīb al-Makhluqāt ("The Wonders of Creation") of al-Qarānī, a manuscript copied and illuminated at Wasit in Iraq in 1280. According to Muslim tradition, angels are God's scribes, messengers and servants.

Grateful appreciation must be expressed to Miss Sheila Rockett in acknowledgment of her most generous help, especially in the bibliographical searches and the preparation of the index.

PICTURE RESEARCH: Georgina Bucknall MA

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Origins of the Arabic script

Islamic calligraphy

In contrast to other nations such as the ancient Egyptians, the Babylonians and the Chinese, whose complex writing systems date back thousands of years, the Arabs were latecomers indeed. Although Arabic is only second to the Roman alphabet in terms of widespread use even today, the Arabic script was developed at a much later date.

The reason for this late development was that the Arabs were mainly a nomadic people and mistrustful of the written word. They relied to a very great extent on oral tradition for the retention of information and for communication. In pre-Islamic times, and especially in the sixth century, which was the heroic age of literature for the Arabs, poetry was perhaps the thing dearest to their hearts and the only means of literary expression, yet they relied almost exclusively on oral tradition for the perpetuation of their poems. According to Arab literary traditions, only the seven odes called al-Mu`allaqat, which were considered absolute masterpieces, were committed to writing and especially honoured by being inscribed in golden letters and hung on the walls of the Kā`bah at Mecca. Even after the advent of Islam in the early seventh century, the Qur`ān was at first mainly transmitted among the Muslims, not through the written word but by oral tradition. Nevertheless, once they recognized the necessity to commit their language to writing, they surpassed the world in the art of beautifying their script. They produced in a relatively short time an astonishing calligraphic development, transforming the Arabic script into an artistic medium that best reflected their genius and attracted their best artistic talents.

Arabic belongs to the group of Semitic alphabetical scripts in which mainly the consonants are represented. Although in the past there have been many contentious views about the origins of the Arabic script and its relation to those in the Semitic group, all serious scholars agree today that the North Arabic script, which eventually prevailed and became the Arabic of the Qur`ān, relates most substantially and directly to the Nabataean script, which was itself derived from the Aramaic script. Not only were the Nabataeans in close proximity to the other Arab tribes, but they had sustained commercial and cultural links with them. The Nabataeans, who were semi-nomadic Arabs, inhabited an area extending from Sinai and North Arabia to southern Syria, and established a kingdom centred around the main cities of Hadrāt, Petra and Buqrā, which endured from 100 BC until it was destroyed by the Romans in about AD 105. Their language and script, as expected, outlived the destruction of their kingdom, and their script, especially, continued to have a profound impact upon the early development of Arabic writing. It is fortunate that the Nabataeans left us numerous inscriptions scattered in the area they inhabited. Particularly interesting from the point of view of this study are the inscriptions of Umm al-Jimal, dating from about AD 250, the Namārah inscription of the famous pre-Islamic poet Imru`l-Qays, of AD 328, which represents an advanced transitional stage towards the development of the Arabic script, the Zabab inscription of AD 512 and the inscription of Umm al-Jimal, dating from the sixth century, confirms the derivation of the Arabic script from the Nabataean, and points to the evolution of distinct Arabic forms.
According to Arabic sources, these distinct forms constituted the so-called North Arabic script, which was first established in north-eastern Arabia and flourished particularly in the fifth century among the Arabian tribes who inhabited Hijāz and Asbāb. From there it spread to the late fifth to early sixth century to Hijāz in western Arabia. Bishr ibn 'Abd al-Malik is reputed to have introduced it into Mecca with the aid of his friend and father-in-law Harb ibn Umayyah. It is Harb, however, who is credited with having popularized its use among the aristocracy of Quraysh, the tribe of the Prophet Muhammad. Among those who learnt writing from Bishr and Harb, and became competent scribes, were 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, 'Uthmān ibn Affān, 'Ali ibn Abī Talib, Taḥlaḥ ibn 'Abd Allāh, Abū Ubaydah ibn al-Jarrah and Mu‘āwiyah ibn Abī Sufyān, all of whom were destined to play leading roles in the early development of Islam. The first three noted later became al-Khulāfā’ al-Rashīdūn, the so-called Righteous or Orthodox Caliphs, and Mu‘āwiyyah became the founder of the Umayyad dynasty which ruled the first great Muslim empire.

Soon after its establishment in Mecca, writing spread to the nearby town of Medina, where the tribes of Aws, Khazraj and Thaqīf took up the art of writing with an enthusiasm which rivalled that of Mecca. One of the scribes of Medina, Zayd ibn Thabit, attained great eminence, in that not only did he become the Prophet’s most famous secretary, but he was entrusted with the task of collating and writing the first codex of the Qur’an during the caliphate of ‘Uthmān (644–56).

The earliest reference to Arabic script proper is with the name Jazm. This was most probably a further development of the Nabataean-derived forms of letters. Certain modifications were influenced by the Estrangelo type of Syrian script, which was much used, especially in Hijāz and Asbāb in the late fifth or early sixth century. The Jazm’s stiff and angular characteristics and the equal proportions of its letters no doubt influenced the development of the famous Kufic script, which followed some time later, and in which these same qualities predominate. The Jazm script continued to develop and gradually emerged as the script of all the Arabs, until, with the advent of Islam, it assumed the status of the sacred script which God had especially chosen to transmit His divine message to all men.

Early calligraphic developments

It must be emphasized that the Qur’an has always played a central role in the development of Arabic script. The need to record the Qur’an precisely compelled the Arabs to reform their script and to beautify it so that it became worthy of the divine revelation. According to Islamic teachings, the Qur’an was transmitted to the Prophet Muhammad in the Arabic tongue through the intermediary of the Archangel Gabriel, and it therefore has the status of divine scripture. The Prophet heard the first of these revelations in the cave of Hijāz, near Mecca, with a voice commanding him: “Recite in the name of thy Lord who created all things. He created man from a clot of blood. Recite! For thy Lord is most Beneficent. He has taught the use of the pen. He has taught man that which he knew not.” (Qur’an, XXVI, 1–3). He continued to receive the revelation and to deliver it until his death in 632, after which the revelation stopped and was mainly transmitted from believer to believer orally by the Ḥajjāz (those who memorize the Qur’an and can repeat it by heart). In 633, however, a number of these Ḥajjāz were killed in the battles that followed the death of the Prophet. This greatly alarmed the Muslim community, and especially ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, who was a close companion of Muhammad and destined to be his second successor.

‘Umar urged the first Caliph Abu Bakr to commit the Qur’an to writing. The Prophet’s secretary, Zayd ibn Thabit, was ordered to compile and collate the revelation into a book, which was later codified by the third Caliph ‘Uthmān in 651. This canonized redaction was later copied into four or five identical editions and sent to the main Muslim regions to be used as standard codices from which henceforward all Qur’an copies were to be produced, first in the scripts of Mecca and Medina, which were merely local variants of the Jazm script, then in the scripts of Kufah, and later in most of the various Arabic scripts that were developed in the Muslim world.

Several calligraphic variants were developed from the Jazm script, each being called by a name relating to its locality, such as the Ḍambār of Asbāb, the Ḥarith of Hijāz, the Maqṣūr of Mecca and the Mu‘ādān of Medina. But these different names did not imply that the variants had developed very distinctive characteristics; on the contrary, the available evidence points to the existence of only three main styles, which correspond to those known at Medina as Maqṣūrāt (rounded), Maḥāliṣ (triangular) and Ṭmj (twins, i.e. composed of both the triangular and the rounded). Of these three, only two styles were maintained, each with distinct features; one was cursive and easy to write, called Muqāwara, and the other, called Muhṣiq, was angular and consisted of thick straight strokes forming rectilinear characters. These two main features guided the development of the early Meccan-Medinan scripts, and led to the formation of a few styles, the most important of which were Mā‘ūl (slanting), Muṣq (extended) and Naṣḥ (inscriptional). It is interesting to note that these three styles were current in Hijāz when Kufic script was being developed in Kufah, and endured until after the major reform of the Arabic scripts which was carried out in that city. The Muṣq and the Naṣḥ continued to be used after considerable improvements, whereas the Mā‘ūl was discontinued, being replaced by the monumental and hieratic Kufic. There are a few extant examples of these early writings on parchment, and also in graffiti-type inscriptions on the rock walls of the mount of Sala’ near Medina. Early papyri from the period of the Orthodox Caliphs have also come down to us, and most of these are written in the cursive type of script.
Kufic scripts

The establishment of the two new Muslim cities of Baṣra and Kūfah, in the second decade of the Islamic era, gave rise to two groups of highly motivated and competing scholars who displayed intense interest in the Arabic language and its scripts. The Ḥijrāh script was acknowledged to have been the leading script in that region, and it is not surprising that Kūfah was chiefly instrumental in bringing about the reform of the somewhat ungainly Meccan-Medinan script, for Kūfah was heir both to the population and to the culture of Ḥijrāh. Although it must be assumed that the reforms were applied both to the rectilinear and curvilinear types of script, Kūfah became famous for reforming the first by making it conform to the discipline and some of the characteristics of the Syriac Estrangelo script. As a result, a new script was created, which had specific proportional measurements and a pronounced angularity and squareness, with short vertical strokes and extended horizontal lines. It became known as al-Khatṭ al-Kūfī (Kufic script), and not only superseded all the other earlier random attempts at improvement, but had the most profound effect upon the whole future development of Arabic calligraphy.

Inasmuch as the Meccan-Medinan scripts were very closely related, so were the Basra-Kufic scripts. The general opinion is that, after a short formative period, all the four scripts acquired a fundamental similarity, with only a few minor individual features, the most important of which was the moderately slanting strokes which were used in the scripts of Mecca and Medina, and which gave rise in the seventh century to the short-lived script called Mālīl. It can be seen that Mālīl has no orthographical or vocal marks, and no punctuation marks such as chapter headings or verse counts or section indicators, and no illumination, all of which conforms to the known features of script of an early date.

The Mashq script also developed individual characteristics and became slightly more cursive, with a low vertical profile and horizontally extended strokes. The extent of the horizontal elongations was varied from line to line, even from word to word, in order to provide a balanced dispersal of the script mass on the page. Much was left to the discretion and taste of the individual calligrapher, provided that he observed certain basic rules such as not permitting horizontal prolongations of words consisting of three letters or less, or of words beginning a line, whilst extending words consisting of more than three letters. Furthermore, extended lines were normally followed by unextended ones, etc. In fact, the rules of the Mashq script grew so complex that it is not possible to describe them here in any great detail. Indeed, because of this complexity some of its rules were not observed, and were later much simplified. These simplifications, with some improvements, helped the script to survive much longer than the Mālīl.

The Kufic script, which reached perfection in the second half of the eighth century, attained a pre-eminence which endured for more than three hundred years, and became by common consent the sole hieratic script for copying the Qur’ān. Because the Kufic script had a relatively low vertical profile, with almost no strokes below the main line of writing, but with extended horizontal strokes, it came to be written on surfaces of which the height was considerably less than the width. This feature was deliberately developed to give it a certain momentum, in order to compensate for its static quality. Indeed, all the Kufic Qur’āns which have come down to us have an oblong format. Even when the Kufic script, the use of which was not restricted to the copying of the Qur’ān, was employed epigraphically in Arabic inscriptions, or as an ornamental script, it was invariably written on oblong or extended rectangular panels.

It is significant that, until the beginning of the ninth century, Kufic Qur’āns received little illumination, but once this initial reluctance was overcome, various ornamental devices were evolved, many of which served necessary functions. Notable among these were the ‘Uyunah (title pages), Sūrah (chapter)

headings, verse divisions, verse counts, section indicators and colophons. These ornaments were at first used throughout the Muslim empire, and it is interesting to note that the more conservative Islamic West continued to use them with little modification until at least the end of the sixteenth century, whereas in the Islamic East they were substantially developed and modified after the tenth century, when distinct illuminative forms were especially designed for use with the Eastern Kufic script.

The early austere Kufic reflected the harsh cultural and social environment in which it grew, but when the times began to ripen into splendour and magnificence, Kufic mirrored this by developing purely ornamental forms.

Ornamental Kufic became an important element in Islamic art as early as 5–6, 8–9, the eighth century for Quranic headings, numismatic inscriptions and major 11, 16–27 commemorative writings. The simple elegance of the early ornamental Kufic found in the inscriptions at Kairouan and elsewhere is in contrast with the sumptuous richness of the epigraphy of the Fatimid, Seljuk and Ghaznavi periods. Muslim artists in Egypt and Syria under the Fatimid caliphs (909–1171) made extensive use of ornamental Kufic, most effectively on metal, glass, and textiles. In purely epigraphic terms, however, ornamental Kufic reached its peak in the eleventh century under the Seljuk sultans who held power during the latter part of the Abbasid caliphate.

A fundamental point about Kufic epigraphy is that it was not subjected to specific rules, but gave the artist virtually a free hand in his conception and execution of its ornamental forms. At first the letters were extended into simple foliate and floral ornaments which did not interfere with the basic outlines, but especially from the beginning of the eleventh century, the letters themselves began to be used as ornaments, and this opened the way for the creation of ornamental letter forms. In addition, new geometric elements began to appear in the shape of plaiting, knotting and intertwining of the verticals of certain letters. The free ends of some letters, which at the beginning were simply squared off, began during the eleventh century to acquire ornamental extensions.

The epigraphic development of Kufic into more complex ornamental forms continued until late in the twelfth century, after which time the script lost its main function of expressing thoughts or communicating facts and became primarily decorative. The most important styles were the foliated, the floriated,
Ornamental Kufic with barbed heads and final flourishes, an inscription dated 1084

the pleased, the knotted, the interlaced, the intertwined and the animated, in which the letters take the form of human heads or figures, or animal shapes. As a move in the opposite direction, and in contrast to this richness, the purest angular form of Kufic was manipulated to form intricate geometric patterns which can be seen on minarets and mosques and in maze-like calligraphic patterns.

Ornamental Kufic was applied to every kind of surface, including brick, stone, stucco, tile, wood, metal, glass, ivory, textiles and parchment, and although it is found throughout the Islamic world, the best extant epigraphical specimens are at Aswād in south-eastern Turkey, at Kairouan in Tunisia, at Cairo in Egypt, at Granada in Spain and at Ghazna in Afghanistan.

Eastern Kufic, a style first developed by the Persians in the late tenth century, has certain characteristics that are markedly different from those of standard Kufic. The most striking feature is that the long strokes remain very vertical while the short strokes are inclined or bent to the left, thus giving a dynamic forward movement and inducing certain European scholars to call it 'bent Kufic'. Its use was not always indicated by certain cursive scripts, for its lines are more slender and more graceful than the standard Kufic, and it became progressively lighter and more delicate.

The flourishes of certain letters were extended downward into the sublinear area, a feature which it shared with Western Kufic, discussed later in this study. Having freed itself from the bondage of the static form of standard Kufic, Eastern Kufic went on to develop into a truly elegant style, which continued in use until very recently as an ornamental script for headings in the Qur’an.

One of the most beautiful derivatives of Eastern Kufic was the so-called Qarmatian script, in which the Eastern Kufic characters, which by now had acquired ornamental qualities, were integrated with a richly illuminated ground consisting mainly of floral designs and arabesque. The name of this script has never been satisfactorily explained. Two possible answers may be offered. One is that its name related to al-Qarmat, a rebellious Muslim movement which was founded by ʿAbdān Qarmat in about 875 and later extended to many parts of the Islamic empire, including Khurasan in Eastern Persia, where the Qarmatian script was often used for copying the Qur’an and other important religious works. The Qarmatian movement endured for several centuries, and it may well be that some of its members were responsible for the script’s development. A more likely explanation is purely linguistic: qarmatā is a verb which forms part of an Arabic idiomatic phrase including the word Qarmat (calligraphy), and reading: qarmatā fi l-Qarmat, which means to make the letters finer and to write the ligatures closer together. Close ligatures are indeed a feature of the Qarmatian script as compared with standard Kufic. Although extant specimens of Qarmatian Kufic are relatively rare, they are among the most splendid examples of Arabic calligraphy.

In the tenth century the standard Kufic script that was currently used in North Africa, and particularly in Tunisia and adjacent lands, began to develop certain individual features. This development proved to be of great consequence, as we shall see, because from this Western Kufic, all the various scripts of North and West Africa, and of Andalusia, are descended.

The reform of the Arabic script

The spirit of reform which produced the Kufic script was also directed to the functional use of the letters. It can be seen by studying the Arabic alphabet (p. 142) that there are many different consonants with identical letter outlines which are differentiated only by the use of one or more dots placed above, below or within a specific letter. The use of these dots, which is called Naqṣ or l-faṣil (letter-pointing), was only occasionally to be found in early Arabic scripts. Another feature is that only the consonants and the three long vowels ā, ā and ū are represented by letters. Unrepresented elements of Arabic speech include the short vowels Fathah (a), Dammat (u), Kasrah (i), the various diphthongs, the Hamzah (a glottal stop), the Madkah (vowel prolongation) and the Shaddah (double consonant) and Sakān (vowellness).

As a result of the Arab conquest of Syria, Egypt, Iraq, Persia and further afield both in the East and in the West, countless numbers of non-Arabs were converted to Islam. Very quickly, and especially encouraged by the Islamic teaching of equality between all believers, the nationality and culture of the neo-Muslims became less important to them than their affiliation to the Muslim community. Anyone who professed Islam and spoke Arabic was considered an Arab. To meet the great need to learn Arabic, and to ensure the correct pronunciation and interpretation of the Qur’an, certain reforms became imperative.

Aḥūl-I-Aswād al-Du‘ali (d. 688) was the legendary founder of Arabic grammar and is credited with inventing the system of placing large coloured dots to indicate those elements of Arabic speech that are not represented by letters. This system of diacritical marks, which is called Tashkīl (vocalization), became closely associated with the Kufic script and its derivative styles. It was later developed and supplemented by two pupils of Aḥūl-I-Aswād, Naṣr ibn ʿĀṣim (d. 707) and Ṣahl ibn Ya‘mur (d. c. 708).

There still remained the problem of differentiating the consonants which shared identical letter outlines. This, according to Islamic tradition, was solved at the hands of ʿAbdāl al-Baqar ibn Yaṣūf al-Thaqāfī, the powerful and energetic Umayyad viceroy who was in charge of the eastern wing of the Muslim empire (694–714), and who ordered Naṣr and Ṣahl to devise a system similar to that of Aḥūl-I-Aswād. Their system relied on the use of small black dots as differentiating marks, and adopted certain vowel signs from the Syriac. The dots were placed above or below the letter outline, either singly or in groups of two or three.

It is evident, however, that this system of letter-pointing was not an entirely new innovation, since dots were similarly used with some letters in much earlier-dated inscriptions. It must be assumed, therefore, that Naṣr and Yaḥyā elaborated and codified earlier practices. It is also believed that Ḥasan al-Baqārī (d. 729) made some contribution. Baqārī, for his part, had the task of forcing the system’s application against great initial reluctance.

The black dots were sometimes used simultaneously with Aḥūl-I-Aswād’s system of coloured dots, and this tended to cause confusion. Even the
substitution of short diagonal strokes for dots did not satisfactorily solve the problem. A more drastic solution was needed, and one which would enable the scribe to write in a single coloured ink. This solution was provided by the famous Arab grammarians and philologists al-Khallâf ibn Ahmad al-Rauhâni (d. 786). Khallâf’s system retained [Hajjâj]’s system of letter-pointing by dots but replaced Abî I-Aswâd’s system of diacritical dots for vowels with one of eight new diacritical marks (see left, below).

There was reluctance to accept Khallâf’s system in turn, and its application was initially restricted to secular writings; but once its merits were recognized, it rapidly gained wide currency in the East, where it was used in Qur’ân copied in Eastern Kufic script. In the Western wing of the Muslim empire, as we shall see, there was opposition to this new system, and due to conservatism the system of Abî I-Aswâd continued in use there far longer than in the East. It is sometimes used even today for copying the Qur’ân. On rare occasions the systems of Abî I-Aswâd, [Hajjâj] and Khallâf were used simultaneously.

The cursive scripts of that period, which we shall now be examining, with a few exceptions did not use the system of Abî I-Aswâd, which was more suitable for larger scripts, but instead made full use of [Hajjâj]’s system of letter-pointing and Khallâf’s system of diacritical marks.

The systems of [Hajjâj] and Khallâf were soon merged into a single complementary system (left), which, although it was hardly ever used in early Kufic, was used at an early date in Eastern Kufic, and in all the cursive scripts. The consensus of opinion is that it gained ascendency in the early eleventh century. It has survived with little modification, and is universally used today (see Arabic alphabet, p. 142).

It should be added, however, that ever since ‘vocalization’ was introduced there has been one objection to its use which remains valid even to the present day, and this is, in employing it one implies imperfect knowledge on the part of the intended reader. Its use today, therefore, is reserved for important literary works, for religious texts including the Qur’ân, and for teaching purposes.

The development of the cursive scripts

The development of the cursive scripts

Arabic writing, even at its very beginning in the Hijâjir, may be said to fall into two very broad categories, one the Muqawwar or Mâdânah (curved and round), and the other the Muqâwwar sin Musâhâr (elaborated and straight-lined). The Mü’l or the Masâq or the Kufic scripts relate to the second category, whereas to the first all the cursive scripts belong. It should be emphasized, however, that this general rule does not always apply, for a few calligraphic styles derived their characteristics from both categories, either at the point of their inception or subsequently through a stage of evolution.

Reference has already been made to Tîmîr, which arose out of both categories early in Medina, but was short-lived. The Western Kufic scripts were derived directly from standard Kufic but evolved in the direction of the cursive.

The “curved and round” category dates back at least to the first decade of the Muslim era; its roots certainly reach back to pre-Islamic times, as we may observe from early Arabic specimens such as those found at the mount of Sala (624–5), from the letters of the Prophet and the Orthodox Caliphs and from an inscription dedicating a dam built by Caliph Mu’āwiyah (661–80). It should be noted that the very early cursive scripts generally lacked elegance and discipline and were used mainly for secular purposes, and although these scripts were not derived from Kufic, they were certainly influenced by it, being directly affected by the improvements which produced the perfected Kufic.

The system of diacritical marks and letter-pointing of [Hajjâj] and Khallâf were more readily incorporated into the cursive scripts than into Kufic, and have ever since been an integral part of these scripts.

The early dramatic development of scripts gave way to a slower pace of evolution during the Umayyad period (661–750). Unfortunately, the history of calligraphy in this period cannot be fully documented, because the caliphs of the succeeding Abbasid dynasty (750–1258), which rose upon the ruins of the Umayyads, were disinterested in or destroyed Umayyad records, including most of the calligraphic specimens. They also effectively suppressed historical accounts relating to it, as a result of which our knowledge of the calligraphic development of the latter part of this period is rather fragmentary.

There has been frequent mention in Arabic sources of Qaṣbâh al-Muḥârrîr, said to have been the first of a long line of Umayyad calligraphers, who distinguished himself by directing his great talent to the development and improvement of the secular cursive scripts that were current during his lifetime. Qaṣbâh is credited, in a few Arabic sources, with having invented the four major scripts, Tîmîr, Taqīf, Nîzîf and Thulûḥ; and some attribute to him also the invention of Thulûḥayn. He is also known to have copied Arab histories
and anthologies, and is particularly noted for having adorned the mihrāb of the Prophet’s Mosque in Medina with verses from the Qur’an written in gold Jali script. Another famous calligrapher was Khalil ibn al-Hayya, the official calligrapher of the Umayyad Caliph al-Walid ibn ‘Abd al-Malik (705–15), who was reported to have copied many large Qur’ans in both Tūmār and Jālī. There is a general agreement that all these scripts were initially and primarily evolved as secular scripts to meet the need of the ever-expanding volume of official, commercial, and social correspondence, and for the production of secular manuscripts. There is some contention about the real significance of the names of these early cursive scripts. It is clear, however, that Jālī was very large and monumental and was reserved for use by the most exalted people in society. Tūmār was also large, for it was written with large pens on uncut (tūmār) full sheets or rolls of parchment or paper. There is some consensus of opinion that the Tūmār script was purely rectilinear, whereas Jālī, its near equal in size, was at least a little more curvilinear, with noticeable rounding of most letters.

Tūmār is reputed to have been formulated on the direct instruction of the first Umayyad Caliph Mu’awiyah (661–80), and later became the royal script used by the Umayyad caliphs. There are also some claims, which are not unfounded, that Jālī was developed during the reign of Caliph ‘Abd al-Malik (685–705), who was the first to legislate the compulsory use of the Arabic script for all official and state registers. His son and successor Caliph Walid was perhaps the first great patron of calligraphy, and was mainly responsible for introducing Jālī and Tūmār for royal correspondence and for large Qur’ans. The Nīfī and Thulūth scripts which relate directly to Jālī were mainly used as ordinary secular scripts. Nīfī (half) derives its name from being approximately half the size of Jālī or Tūmār; the width of the Alif (letter a) of Tūmār was taken as a basic unit of measurement, and is supposed to have been equal to about twenty-four horse’s hairs. Similarly, the sizes Thulūth (one third) and Thulūthān (two thirds), indicate the ratio of their size to that of Tūmār.

A rival theory is that the names Nīfī, Thulūth and Thulūthān indicate the ratio of straight strokes to curves of these scripts. According to this theory, for instance, a third of the Thulūth script would consist of straight strokes. It is probable that each of these two theories tells some of the truth.

The degree of curvilinearity in these scripts appears consistently to increase with the scaling down of the size of the letters. It is noticeable also that generally the higher or more important the occasion or purpose of writing, the larger the pen, the sheet and the script that were considered suitable for it.

Some Arabic sources list many names of cursive scripts, but these names cannot be taken to indicate a classification structure. The scripts do not in the main constitute distinctly variant styles, and should be considered as alternative names for very closely related styles, or as referring to minor or localized scripts. Discussion of these is outside the scope of this study, which is confined to the major scripts.

In the early decades of the Abbasid period (750–1258), two Syrian calligraphers, al-Dabābik ibn ‘Ajīj and Thulīq ibn Ṭammād, deserve to be especially mentioned. Their fame, however, rests more on their apparently outstanding artistic abilities than on their inventive skills. Thulīq is singled out for his movements in introducing a greater degree of lightness and elegance to the Thulūth and the Thulūthān, and for popularizing their use. His pupil Yūsuf al-Sijjī (d. 825) created two more delicate varieties of these scripts, which came to be known as Khafṣ al-Thulūth and Khafṣ al-Thulūthān. He also modified the Jālī by refining its lines a little and by closing and rounding its open curves, but retained its feature of large-headed letters. This resulted in an elegant and delicate script which soon attracted the attention of Faqī ibn Sahl, the Vizir of the Caliph al-Ma’mūn (813–33). Faqī greatly admired this new script and ordered it to be used for all the official records and registers, naming it ‘Raṣūm al-Ma’mūn’ (ministerial). Ihbār al-Sijjī (d. 815), Yūsuf’s brother, was also an accomplished calligrapher, and he passed on his skills to one of his outstanding pupils, called al-Abyāl (the squint-eyed) al-Mubarrir. Abyāl derived several cursive calligraphic styles from the Khafṣ script, to each of which he assigned a function, such as the writing of prose narratives, anthologies, registers, religious texts, pigeon-post messages, etc. Most of these styles were short-lived, however, and few of which have survived to the present day passed through the meticulous hands of later calligraphers who subjected them to strict calligraphic rules. Six of these styles came to be known as al-Aṣl al-Sittah or Shīk Qalam (the six pens, or calligraphic styles) and are, according to accepted tradition, Thulūth, Naskhī, Muṣāqaq, Rayhānī, Raṣūm and Tawqīj. Despite all its dynamic development up to the late ninth century Arabic calligraphy was now about to enter its most glorious phase. Ābū ‘Alī Muḥammad ibn Muṣliḥ (d. 940) and his brother Ābū ‘Abd Allāh were tutored in the art of calligraphy by Abyāl, and both became accomplished calligraphers in Baghdad at an early age. It was Ābū ‘Alī ibn Muṣliḥ’s genius and his knowledge of geometric science which were responsible for bringing about the most important single development in Arabic calligraphy. Whenever the name of Ibn Muṣliḥ is mentioned in the following pages, therefore, it refers to Ābū ‘Alī Ābū ‘Abd Allāh, the true founder of Arabic cursive calligraphy. He was the Vizir to the three Abbasid caliphs al-Muqtadir (900–32), al-Qāhir (932–4) and al-Rāfī (934–40). He was unfortunate in having been associated with caliphal affairs during their most turbulent times, when oppression, corruption and political intrigue were prevalent. This led first to his torture, and the cutting-off of his right hand and his tongue, and finally to his death at the hands of Caliph al-Rāfī in 940; nevertheless, he seems to have accomplished a task which no other calligrapher before or after was able to equal, and which has earned him a high place in the literary annals of Islam.

It has been established that by the late ninth century more than twenty cursive styles were in common use, many of which lacked the elegance of the perfected Kufic, and all of which were in urgent need of discipline to avoid the inevitable degeneration and proliferation into an endless multiplicity of styles.

Ibn Muṣliḥ, therefore, himself the task of designing a cursive script which would be at the same time beautiful and perfectly proportioned, so that it could effectively compete with the Kufic script. He laid down a comprehensive system of basic calligraphic rules based on the rhombic dot as a unit of measurement. He redesigned the geometric forms of the letters and fixed their relative shape and size using the rhombic dot, the ‘standard’ Alif and the ‘standard’ circle. For this system, the rhombic dot was formed by pressing the pen diagonally on paper so that the length of the dot’s equal sides were the same...