An Important Eighth-Century decorated Qur'an Leaf

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AN EARLY DECORATED QUR'AN LEAF IN KUFIC SCRIPT ON
YELLOW, LATE UMAYYAD / EARLY ABBASID CALIPHATE,
PROBABLY DAMASCUS, MID-EIGHTH CENTURY

TEXT: SURAT AL-FATIHAH (1) PART OF VERSES 1-5 SURAT AL-
Baqara (2:1-5)

Arabic manuscript on vellum, it has to the page written in elongated
kufic script in brown ink, two horizontal strokes and red dots indicating
vocalization added later. Clusters of 4 to 5 strokes indicating verse
markers, sura title written in kufic script in red ink above decorated band,
inner border, richly decorated with six bands incorporating geometric
and vegetal motifs in green, brown, yellow and some blue, feeling gold,
palmettes extending into outer border, that of the inner border now lost,
double rosettes extending into cornerspace.

FOLIO: 21 BY 11.6CM.

£50,000 - 70,000

Flux 05/07/2000

Decorated opening pages or frontispieces from Qur'an manuscripts of
the 8th century are extremely rare. This decorated leaf is one of only a few
to appear on the open market in the last fifty years. Although numerous
leaves from the dispersed Qur'an fragments which this leaf originates are to
be found in museums, libraries and private collections (see below), apart from
a handful of leaves with decorated bands between suas, this is probably
the only known fully decorated leaf to have appeared on the market. Not only is
this leaf of tremendous religious significance as a relic written just over a
century after the Prophet Muhammad's death, but also an important
landmark in the evolution of Arabic as a written language, the Arabic
script and early Islamic manuscript decoration.

THE SCRIPT

According to Deroche the leaves originating from this Qur'an belong to
category F.I. He describes the script as an independent script, although
some of its letter forms may be compared with those of other styles,
especially the style which resembles those in category D. The vertical shift
is relatively externalized but the lower return sometimes recalls that of D.I
but it is sometimes flattened. Moreover, the script is characterized by a strong
degree of horizontal stretching (mawdih), and the final ruq is very rounded
and almost a semicircle, whereas the form of the yun is interesting at the
beginning of the word, it has a wide rounded opening, while a short "s" is
set on top of a thin shaft in the medial form. The calligrapher often
finished some letters (final ruq, ya, waq) with an arrangement of the stroke

Fraser observes that the sura titles of this Qur'an, written in red kufic script
and squeezed in above or below the decorated panels were probably
written by the same original scribe since the red lettering is exactly the same
as the brown script of the main text. He concludes that this points to an
earlier date of production than in later kufic Qur'ans of the ninth and tenth
century when sura headings were more often designed with the sura title as
the main feature (Fraser and Kwakwovski 2000, p. 21).

Sheila Blair in her monumental tome on Islamic Calligraphy states that
"there is, as yet, no absolute method for dating any Koran manuscript
before the ninth century CE. No manuscript contains an authentic
calligrapher with a date. No manuscript contains an authentic signature of a
known calligrapher. Some manuscripts are said to have been in the hand
of 'Umar, the second caliph, or 'Ali bin Abi Talib, the fourth, but 'Abd Allah al-
Munsif said these claims to be unfounded. The most secure type of
temporal evidence for dating these manuscripts is a notice of 'ajza'a
endorsement (wasifiyah) or other similar note recording a birth, attendance,
or other event, and the earliest of these dates is the ninth century. Several
writers have compiled lists of those dated manuscripts, the best is that by
Deroche" (Blair 2006, p. 102). However, Deroche concludes in his study of
manuscript F.I. to which this leaf belongs: "Munsi's a constant feature of this style,
which seems to be present only in material from Damascus. None of the
manuscripts in fragments in this group are dated, although there are
similarities with a milestone in Tabqa dated AH 1160/AD 776-7. We can therefore
venture a dating to the second century A.H. for this style"
THE DECORATION

The decoration of this Qur'an leaf has all the characteristics of early Islamic manuscript production and can be considered among the earliest surviving manuscript decoration alongside those carpet pages in al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, the Grand Mosque in Sana'a and the Khedivial Library in Cairo. A striking feature is the restriction of the use of colours to browns, yellow, green, and some blue and red. There is a noticeable absence of the use of gold which indicates that this manuscript must have been produced before gold became fashionable in the late eighth century onwards. Another reason for not using gold would have been that at the time of producing this manuscript priority would have been given to the faithful copying of the text over aesthetic considerations.

Careful examination of the layout of the decoration recalls the patterns in mosaic decoration of Umayyad mosques such as the Great Mosque of Damascus and the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. The intricate vegetal, floral and geometric decoration incorporated in the borders around the borders can be found in mosaics decorating Umayyad desert palaces such as Khirbat al-Mafjar. Most of these patterns are derived from Hellenistic-Roman and Sassanian prototypes through Byzantine architectural decoration and Sasanian and Coptic manuscript illumination. Marilyn Jenkins, in her study of Umayyad ornament, places the centres for the production of similar early Islamic manuscripts in Greater Syria (Jenkins 1985, pp. 19-20). Moreover, the interlaced border motif bears a striking resemblance to a second half of a Qur'an written in kufic in the al-Haram al-Shairi Islamic Museum, Jerusalem (Salomat 2001, no. 3, pp. 47-55).

Three leaves with sura headings were sold in these rooms on 20 November 1996, lot 255, and 29 April 1998, lot 2, Christiâ’s, London, 15 October 1994, lot 47.

For a list of leaves sold at auction rooms see (Jamas 1992, p. 20), Sotheby’s catalogues 29 April 1998, lot 2 and 24 October 2001, lot 2.

For comparison with a similar Qur’ān fragment including a decorated carpet page and sura headings from the same period see Christiâ’s, London, 18 October 1994, lot 17.

For further reading see (Dâ‘inouch 1992, pp. 43, 46-47), (Bâ‘ir 2006, pp. 101-140) and (Trumper and Kwiatkowski 2006, pp. 28-29).
A LARGE QUR'AN BIFOLIUM IN KUFIC SCRIPT ON VELLUM, NEAR EAST OR NORTH AFRICA, 9TH CENTURY

Text: Surat al-Baqara (2), vv. 183-186/194-196
Arabic manuscript on paper, 2 leaves, 7 lines to the page written in elegant and elongated kufic script in brown ink with vocal points in red, green and yellow, single verse divisions marked with a triangular cluster of six dots in gold, fifth verse divisions marked with pear-shaped markers in red and gold, wide outer margins indicating that the leaves have not been trimmed
FOLDED: 25.2 BY 36 CM
TEXT AREA: 14.5 BY 25 CM

The bifolium is a superb example of Abbasid luxury Qur'an production at its most stylised in the late 9th century. It is perhaps possible to define this style of script as the mature "Abbasid Kufic." The style is characterised by a well-executed, elegant script with strong horizontal stretching (masa'ib) of letters and figures, and vertical letter forms which provide a visual balance to the horizontal stretching but are not yet in themselves a focus of emphasis.

The script of this bifolium is close to that of the so-called Amajur Qur'an, a manuscript written in kufic script that was donated as a waqf endowment to a mosque in Tyre, Lebanon, in A.D. 876-7 by Amajur, the Abbasid governor of Damascus. Although the waqf date gives us a terminus a quo rather than an exact date of production, this date is considered to be a good indication of the approximate production period of kufic scripts of this mature style termed in category D by Francois Déroche (Déroche 1992, pp. 36-37 and 44-45).

For a photograph of the Amajur Qur'an, see (Ettinghausen et al. 2001, fig. 118, p. 75). For a detailed description of this script, which Déroche describes as style D1, see (Déroche 1992, pp. 43-45).

A bifolium from the same Qur'an was exhibited at the Museum für Islamische Kunst, Berlin in 2006, see (Fraser and Kwiatkowski, 2006, no. 7).
Other leaves from the Qur'an are in the Fogg Museum, Boston; The Freer Gallery, Washington; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; The Toledo Museum of Art, Princeton University Art Museum and The Musée des Arts Islamiques de Karouan (Carthage, no. 321).

Other leaves from the same Qur'an or similar leaves were sold in these rooms on 28th April 1998, lots 67, 15th October 1998 lots 2 and 7, 29th April 1998, lots 5 and 6; 18th April 2001 lots 6 and 4; 7th April 2005, lot 10; Bernard Quaritch catalogue 1956, no. 1; Christie's 26th April 1998, lots 14 and 15th April 2006, lots 1 and 2 from the Reifstahl Estate.

For a biography of Rudolph M. Reifstahl (Munich, 9th August 1880 – New York, 11 December 1956) see Edwards 1989, fig. 1, p.26)


£ 30,000-50,000 - £ 37,000-65,000
THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE QUR'AN

Very few leaves from such Qur'an manuscripts have survived, and therefore this leaf is important for the documentation of the early collections of text that were written sometime between the Prophet’s death in 632 AD and the death of the Caliph ‘Uthman in 656 AD. Several copies of the Qur’an in sheet form, some in codes form, were compiled under the supervision of one of the Prophet’s former secretaries, Zayd ibn Thabit. These authoritative codices were then sent out to the main metropolitain centres of Islam at the time. The exact list of cities to have received a copy is not certain. Some reports suggest that four copies were sent out while others suggest as many as seven. It is likely that at least Mecca, Damascus, Basra and Kufa received a copy, while one must have been retained in Madina. The early collections of the text were based on a combination of sources: the memories of the Companions of the Prophet, the sheets in the possession of Hafsa, the daughter of ‘Umar and one of the widows of the Prophet and on the fragments which had been written down during the lifetime of the Prophet by Companions and secretaries, mostly during the Madinan phase of his mission.
THE EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF THE ARABIC SCRIPT

One of the main characteristics of the early Hijazi script is the vertical stretching of the letter, particularly visible in the elongated forms of the alif lam and yaa. This vertical emphasis also extends to shorter letters such as nun and ha. An unusual feature is the extension of the alif majruh and ya backwards under several preceding words. Other distinctive features are the vertical format of the leaf which gradually evolved into the horizontal format in the early part of the Abbasid period (A.D. 750-1258) and the inconsistency in orthography and line spacing as a result of the presence of many scribes working on a single codex and the prioritization of faithfully reproducing the Qur'anic text over aesthetic considerations.

The infrequent use of diacritical and orthographic markings indicate that this leaf was written before a comprehensive system of diacritical marks or consonantalization in the form of dots or vertical dashes was desired by al-Hajj ibn Yusa', who died in A.D. 714. This was an important development as it meant that consonants of identical form could be distinguished from one another. The other great aid to the development of the early readable script was the invention of the coloured dots to indicate vowels. This invention has been attributed to Abu’l-Aswad al-Duli who died in A.D. 688.

The majority of surviving fragments of the earliest Qur’anic manuscripts are divided among major museums, libraries and private collections in the Middle East and the West. There are only around sixty eight published fragments of various vertical format codices (fragments consisting of multiple leaves, bifolia, single leaves and parts of leaves). Fragments are held in the Tokyo Seiyu, Istanbul, British Library and the Khalili Collection, London, the Vatican Library, Rome, The Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, the Russian Academy of Sciences, St. Petersburg and the Khadjali Library, Cairo, while single folios are held in the David Collection, Copenhagen, Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah, Kuwait, Ibn al-Qur‘an, Bahrain and The Oriental Institute, Chicago.

This leaf appears to be identical to a section of 12 leaves in the Chester Beatty Library Dublin (James 1980, 322-14).


TWO QUR'AN LEAVES IN KUFIC SCRIPT ON VELLUM, NORTH AFRICA OR NEAR EAST, 9TH-10TH CENTURY

TEXT: SURAT AL-ZUKHRUF (XXI), vv. 32-33 AND TEXT: SURA YUNUS (Q), vv. 41-60

5 lines per page written in fine, flowing kufic script in brown ink on vellum, letter-spacing consisting of thin diagonal brown ink dashes, vocalisation of red, blue and yellow dots. "sura yunus" leaf contains verse divisions marked with a gold flower.

32.5 BY 21CM. AND 195 BY 28.6CM.

(2)

PROVENANCE
surat al-zukhruf (al-ahad), vv. 32-33; formerly in the collection of Habb Anas &
sura yunus (Q), vv. 41-60; formerly in the collection of Philip Hisfar

£3,000-5,000 €3,300-6,500

There are very fine examples of the mature stage of Qur'anic manuscript production under the Abbasids and their contemporary dynasties during the ninth and early tenth centuries A.D. The vellum is of fine quality and the script is an extremely elegant, spacious and controlled kufic with great attention paid to the distribution of the text over the page, creating a balance of active and passive space. Other leaves from the Qur'an have been sold in these rooms, 12th October 2000, lot 6 and 15th October 1998, lot 3. They carried gold rosettes for every verse and a stylized letter he accompanied by a large illuminated marginal device to mark the tenth verses. On the basis of the sura headings, and the opening and closing illumination of each section must have been spectacular.

They can be compared closely with a section sold in these rooms 16th October 1999, lot 8, which included the opening and closing illumination of the sura giving us an idea of what other leaves of the present piece might have looked like. Further related leaves and manuscripts are as follows:

Musée des Arts Islamiques, Grenoble (Carthage, no.323); Lings and Satilik, no.10/; Iwan Beeston Museum, Muscat; Tehran (1976, no.35); Nasir D. Khalili Collection, London, KTC065 (Déroche, 1993, no.25, p.76); Sotheby's, London, 4th April 1981, lot 94; Christie's, London, 27th April 1993, lot 26; 15th October 1999, lot 301; and 19th October 1998, lot 57.

QUR'AN LEAF IN KUFIC SCRIPT ON VELLUM, NORTH AFRICA OR NEAR EAST, EARLY ABBASID PERIOD, 9TH CENTURY

TEXT: SURAT AL-ANBIYAA (XXI) VV. 35-38

Arabic manuscript on vellum, 7 lines to the page written in large kufic script in black ink, dotting and vowel points indicated by large green and red dots, one headpiece verse marker in green, yellow and gold, wide outer borders.

40 X 28 BY 37CM.

TEXT AREA: 19 BY 25.5CM.

Another leaf from the same Qur'an is in the Nasir D. Khalili Collection, and according to François Déroche, its latter forms recall the characteristics of the D Group (Déroche 1993, no.69, p.16). Moreover, he concludes that the Khalili leaf might have originated from MS. 322 in the Institute of Oriental Studies in Leningrad (a Musulm 1980, p.37; and Petrosyan et al 1995, no.2, pp.114-115).

Other sections, bifolia and leaves from the same Qur'an were sold in these rooms in 9th April 2008, lot 13; Christie's, London, 15 October 2002, lots 44-52 and 46 April 2008, lot 12; Sam Fogg, Islamic Calligraphy, cat. 2, no.3, pp.14-15.

£4,000-6,000 €5,000-7,500
AN ILLUMINATED VELLUM QUR’AN LEAF IN KUFIC, NEAR EAST, IRAQ OR PERSIA, 9TH CENTURY

TEXT: SURAT AL-TALAQ (LXXV), PART OF VERSE 1
Arabic manuscript on vellum, recto with a fine ornate frontispiece with a central rectangle filled with designs of interlocking ciphers enclosed in gold frames edged with roses of coloured dots, six squares filled with arabesques and geometric motifs in gold and some colour, illuminated palmette extending into outer margin, verso with 4 lines written in bold and stretched kufic script in brown ink, vowels indicated by red dots, some heading and verse count written in kufic script in gold within a panel decorated with arabesques, border of overlapping gold tassels, illuminated palmette extending into outer margin
23 BY 22CM.

This fine vellum Qur’an leaf originates from what is considered to be one of the highest quality illuminated Qur’ans written in Kufic script in the 9th/10th century. Other leaves are in libraries, museums and private collections including the British Museum of Fine Arts, the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, the Paris Museum, Shizu and the Isk-Ilbasan Museum, Tehran (4289). For the latter, see A. Selection of Kufi Manuscripts in the Museum of the Islamic Period, Tehran, 1977/1995-96, London 1977 no.469 and Ling’s The Qur’anic Art of Calligraphy and Illumination, no.5.

Another leaf was exhibited in Ink and Gold: Islamic Calligraphy Museum for Islamische Kunst, Berlin (Fraser and Kiwacki 2006, no.38, p.40).

A Luther Folia with an identical illuminated frontispiece was sold in these rooms on 7th April 2005, lot 2.

£40,000-60,000 €50,000-75,000