



The Mingana 1572a Qur'ān Fragments
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The Mingana Folios in Their Historical Context **(Notes in the Margins of Newspaper Publications)**

In memoriam of Prof Sergio Noja Nosedá (1931—2008), great friend and scholar, founder and the Head of the Editorial Committee of the international research and publication project “Early Qur’āns. The Era of the Prophet, the Right Guided Caliphs and the Umayyades”, one of the last romantic in the Oriental studies.

On July 22 the BBC published an article on its website entitled ““Oldest’ Koran Fragments found in Birmingham University”. In the current political situation the carbon dating results of the so called “Mingana folios” caused great public interest. The world’s major media outlets devoted hundreds of articles to the event. As happened to many of my colleagues, I received dozens of e-mail and SMS messages on the topic sent by my friends non-specialists all over the world. They reported me about the sensational story how “hidden sheets which are totally new to the researchers” were found. They congratulated me with “the discovery of the ancient entire Qur’ān”, and asked me whether or not it was true that the pages found “would authenticate the current text of the Qur’ān as coming directly from the transcript of the preaching of the Prophet” and “prove the legitimacy of Islam and the authenticity of the Islamic tradition”.

In reality the early dating of “Mingana folios” and several other ancient Qur’ānic MSS caused discussions among the specialists, and an answer acceptable to all has not been found yet. I believe that the specialists in the field must use the current situation in order to present to the broad public the results of their research connected with a fantastically interesting history of the Book, the Qur’ān, which in many respects has changed the world.

The Qur’ān is a text which occupies the central place in a religious-philosophical system which has for many centuries played an important role in human history. Centuries have passed since the appearance of the very first Qur’ānic copies. Since then mankind has endured a multitude of ideological shifts and cultural revolutions, mass political and religious movements following one after the other, philosophical conceptions and schools becoming popular only to be forgotten as cultural orientations and priorities have changed. In one fashion or another, the history of manuscripts, as well as editions and translations of the Qur’ānic text, found its expression in major events, shaking the world. From the moment of its appearance, the Qur’ān was studied, interpreted and used primarily in the context of competing political-ideological and confessional interests.

The oldest manuscripts of the Qur’ān are present *in several historical contexts*. In my short lecture I would like to speak about only four of them, which seem to me the most important from both a scholarly point of view and then a broad public one. In both cases sharp discussions sometimes arise, comparable to ones like what we have seen recently in the press with the Birmingham Qur’ān pages.

The first and probably most important historical context I would like to call “**The Prophet and His Qur’ān**”. This was the time of the creation of the earliest Qur’ānic copies. The Birmingham manuscript appears to be the part of the standard Qur’ān, the result of a comparatively long corresponding tradition of development. It is dated in between 568—645 AD. We can add here the radiocarbon dating of the famous Ṣan‘ā’ palimpsest: 75.1 percent chance of dating before 646 AD (laboratory in Arizona); 543—643 AD and even 433—599 AD (of

two other fragments of the same MS from a laboratory in Lyon). Analysis of three samples of the manuscript parchment of the Qurʾān fragment from the University of Tübingen Library concluded that it was more than 95 percent likely to have originated in the period 649—675 AD. The very early dating of all these fragments — before the reign of ʿUthmān — casts doubt on both the Islamic tradition as well as the scholarly theory of the history of the Qurʾānic text’s fixation. The Birmingham fragments show several textual variants as well as verse numbering differences. Recently Dr Brubaker found in ten early Qurʾāns over 800 “corrections”, proving that these variations and corrections continued to be made and used for another 200 years.

The Bibliothèque nationale de France holds a further 16 pages of one and the same Qurʾānic manuscript with the Birmingham folios (BnF Arabe 328c). The manuscript was once buried with other discarded Qurʾānic folios in the “grave” for the decrepit Qurʾāns, which became obsolete through the decades. The area belonged to the Mosque of ʿAmr b. al-ʿĀṣ in Fuṣṭāṭ, Egypt. During the Napoleonic expedition to Egypt in 1798/99, French printer, engineer and gifted linguist Jean-Joseph Marcel (1776—1856) acquired rich collection of the old Qurʾāns found in the “grave”. Another collection with the same provenance was bought by Jean-Louis Asselin de Cherville (1772—1822), the French vice-consul in Cairo some years later. Cherville's collection was sold to the Bibliothèque nationale, the portion of Jean-Joseph Marcel — to the Russian government and in 1864 became part of the collection of the Public Imperial Library (now National Library of Russia) in Saint-Petersburg. That means that we can expect the findings of the other folios of the Birmingham-Paris manuscript. For example the folios BnF Arabe 328 (a–f) of the Bibliothèque nationale and Marcel 19 of the National Library of Russia belong to one and the same manuscript described in 2009 in details by Prof François Déroche¹.

More over, at the beginning MS Mingana Islamic Arabic 1572 was composed of nine folios coming from two different manuscripts (two folios + seven folios). Not long ago after publication of Dr Alba Fedeli article in “*Manuscripta Orientalia*”², two groups have been separated: 1572a (two folios which became famous because of the dating and the BBC) and 1572b (seven folios with completely different layout: quality of parchment, margins, rulings, decoration, number of lines, using of red dots, etc). It is important that seven folios of 1572b together with Russian National Library Marcel 17 (ff. 1—17) and Museum of Islamic Art in Doha MIA 67 (four folios) composed previously one and the same manuscript (identical layout and sequence of the text).

The fact that the folios were kept for centuries “dans un coffre de fer, qu’il cacha dans un souterrain”³ can partly explain the early radiocarbon dating. The radiocarbon analysis of the parchment gives the date of death of the animal. Thus, today we should explain the gap of at least 50—70 years between stocking of the blank parchment and its use for the copying of the texts of the Qurʾān. I have only one basic explanation. Parchment was an expensive material (the skin of the entire animal was used to produce the big folio). Monastic and state scriptoria, located on the territory of Greater Syria (al-Shām), Antiochia, al-Hīra and Alexandria areas, could store this valuable material (including the donations of the pious laity). These stocks became part of the loot captured by the Arabs in the first years of the conquest. Captured leaves were used for writing the Qurʾān. To test this hypothesis, it is necessary to reread the existing historical sources dedicated to the first years of the Arab conquests.

The study of the extant Qurʾānic MSS shows that the 10th century AD was marked by fundamental changes in the history of the Qurʾānic text, so the second historical context I would like to set the Mingana folios against is called “**The Milestone: 10th Century**”. The earliest comparatively “full” MSS of the Qurʾān which reach us are dated to the end of the 8th century. They mark the end of the period of the Qurʾān’s written-oral existence. It seems that the discovery of a significant number of Qurʾānic fragments from the turn of the 7th — 8th centuries cannot be overestimated. A new textual standard appeared in the 9th—10th centuries that became the basis of a series of works like that of Ibn Mujāhid and that was implemented with the aid of court decisions in the 10th century. This was evidently the important period when older copies that contained by then an unacceptable number of variant readings were being actively removed from circulation. In our view, the widespread disappearance of early copies took place not under the caliph ʿUthmān (at that time there were only a few full copies of the Qurʾān), but at the cusp of the ninth and tenth centuries. By one way or another the Mingana folios were lucky enough to survive.

¹ François Déroche. *La transmission écrite du coran dans les débuts de l’islam. Le codex Parisino-petropolitanus*. Brill (« Texts and Studies on the Qurʾān », 5), Leiden – Boston, 2009.

² Alba Fedeli. “Mingana and the manuscript of Mrs. Agnes Smith Lewis, one century later”, *Manuscripta Orientalia* XI/3 (2005), pp. 3—7.

³ *Histoire de l’Egypte, depuis la conquête des Arabes jusqu’à la domination française*. Paris, 1848, p. 248. See: Déroche. *La transmission*, p. 9, note 12.

The third historical context, which I call “**In European Collections: First Descriptions and Studies**”, is connected with another important turn of destiny. To it we can trace the preservation of nearly all presently existing early Qur’ānic fragments. They survived a second time as they found their way into European collections. “The Birmingham Qur’ān” is one such survival, part of the so called “Mingana Collection” of Middle Eastern manuscripts, comprising over 3,000 documents. This collection is the result of three trips (in 1924, 1925, and 1929) to the Middle East and subsequent purchases in Europe taken by the former Chaldean Catholic Priest Alphonse Mingana, who was sponsored by Dr Edward Cadbury, the Quaker owner of the famous chocolate factory at Bournville. This period was of prime importance in the history of this Sacred Text both in the Muslim East and Europe: the final stage of work on the unification of the Qur’ānic text is connected with the appearance in Cairo in 1919, 1923 and 1928 of a new edition of the text, completed under the protection of the Egyptian king Fu’ād I which was accompanied by efforts to create new and better Qur’ān translations into European languages. Arabic texts of the Qur’ān that are in use to this day can be largely traced to this edition. It is based on the 10th century scholarly tradition instead of consulting the earliest manuscripts. The reappraisals of manuscripts like the Birmingham one give us an opportunity of more accurate tracing of the historical development of the Qur’ānic text, but I would like to stress here that Islamic community will never meet in a positive way any attempt of constructing of the new Qur’ānic text (“critical edition”) based on the results of the oldest manuscripts research. More over, such edition will be understood only as another Western attack against the basic Islamic values.

I believe that every early Qur’ānic text fragment will have its “**Moment of Fame**”. The incredible public response to the news about the new Birmingham folios dating came about because of the coincidence of a number of factors associated with the increasing role of Islam in the world. This moment of fame is the historical context in which the Mingana folios exist today. The four historical contexts I have identified provide a proper historical framework from which to understand these Mingana folios in this current controversial setting because they take us back to a time before the final construction of the current text of the Qur’ān.

Impressed by the frescoes in the churches of Venice, the outstanding Russian poet and Nobel laureate Boris Pasternak noted: “I realised that the Bible, for example, is not so much a book with a fixed text, as it is the record of mankind, and that all eternal things share this quality. The eternal is vitally relevant not when it is required, but when it is receptive to all of the likenesses through which later centuries gaze back at it”⁴. To no lesser degree than the Bible, the Qur’ān, it seems, can also be considered a “record of mankind”. For despite a welter of evaluations and opinions, mankind has never been indifferent to the truths proclaimed therein.

⁴ B. L. Pasternak, “Okhrannaia gramota” (“Safe conduct”), *Vozdushnye puti: proza raznykh let* (Moscow, 1983), p. 252.