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# TEXTS AND MANUSCRIPTS: DESCRIPTION AND RESEARCH

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## MINGANA FOLIOS: WHEN AND WHY

In the previous issue of *Manuscripta Orientalia* we were pleased to publish Dr. Alba Fedeli's article, entitled "Mingana and the manuscript of Mrs. Agnes Smith Lewis, one century later" [1]. It was devoted to the re-examination and re-evaluation of the data obtained nearly hundred years ago as a result of a thorough study of a palimpsest, whose *scriptio inferior*, containing part of the Qur'ānic text, was written with three principal kinds of script [2]. List of the various readings, omissions and interpolations found in comparison with the established *textus receptus* seems to be

still very important for the study of the early history of the Qur'ānic text.

The Arabic Christian texts (selections from the Fathers, St. Athanasius, St. Chrysostom, etc.) date from the *end of 9th—beginning of the 10th century*. While thinking about the palimpsest in question one can easily ask: how could it happen that on the territory controlled by the Muslim authorities, somebody could destroy the holy text of the Muslim scripture with the goal of re-using the parchment and writing texts of Christian origin on it?

### What is a palimpsest?

This was a period of growing disappointment in the state and in "official Islam". The uprisings of the ninth—tenth centuries challenged the power of the caliphate: "the truth has appeared to the world, the *mahdī* has risen, the power of the 'Abbāsids, the jurists, the readers of the Qur'ān and the preachers of the tradition is coming to an end..."

The empire seethed. In 930, the Qarmatians spirited away the black stone of the Ka'ba, in 939 the "concealment" (*ghayba*) of the Shi'ite *imām* began, the message of the Ismā'īlī *du'ā* attracted thousands of followers, Ismā'īlī exegetes interpreted the hidden (*bāṭin*) meaning of the Qur'ān, and the dawn of the New Persian literary language, into which the Qur'ān was translated, began. Finally, in 945 the Shi'ite Buwayhids seized Baghdād. The power of the caliph was abruptly diminished.

The study of extant Qur'ānic manuscripts shows that *the tenth century was marked by fundamental changes in the history of the Qur'ānic text*. In addition to the appearance of Ibn Mujāhid's work, it was then that new forms of Qur'ānic script began to spread; they were distinguished by greater decorative embellishment in comparison to their predecessors. Primary among them were "Eastern *kūfī*" (the oldest dated copy is from AD 972) and cursive *naskhī* (the oldest dated copy is from AD 1001) [3].

In the ninth century, the centre of scholarly activity shifted from al-Baṣra and al-Kūfa to Baghdād, capital of the caliphate. The business of translation thrived there,

famous philosophers, exegetes and lawyers worked there, a grammatical school which brought together elements of previous systems arose there, the eminent grammarians al-Mubarrad (d. 900) and his pupil al-Sarrāj (d. 928) created there their famous works. And there, the beginning of the tenth century was marked by several attempts to achieve a new level of unification in the Qur'ānic text. Three works entitled *Kitāb al-Maṣāḥif* were dedicated to the problem of *al-qirā'āt*. Their authors were Ibn Abī Dāwūd (d. 928) [4], Ibn Anbārī (d. 938/9) and Ibn Aṣḥta al-Iṣfahānī (d. 970/1). The main role, however, would fall to Ibn Mujāhid (859—935), a pupil of Ibn Abī Dāwūd. A noted authority on the Qur'ānic sciences, who as the people believed, read the Qur'ān even in his grave, worked in Baghdād and enjoyed the successive protection of two extremely influential grand *wazīrs*, Ibn Muqla (famous reformer of the Arabic calligraphy) and Ibn 'Īsā, whose power and influence can be likened to the power of a regent to the caliph.

Ibn Mujāhid's work bore the title *Al-Qirā'āt al-sab'a* ("The Seven Readings"), pretended to near official status and established a system of permissible Qur'ānic "readings". The system proposed in the work relied on the consonantal basis of the "Uthmānic version" and limited the number of systems of variant vowellings of the text to seven; these belonged, correspondingly, to seven authorities *of the eighth century*. All of them were ac-

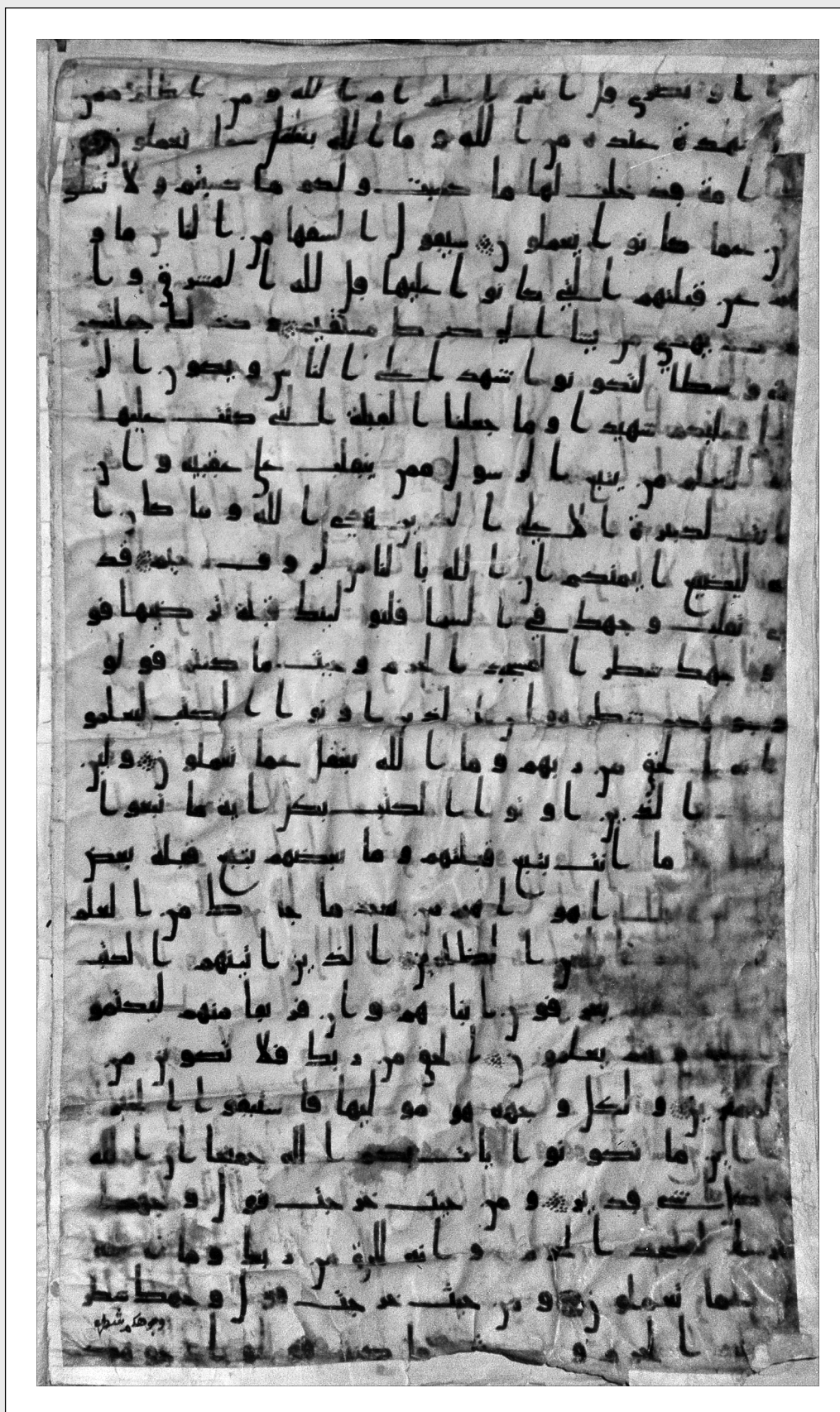
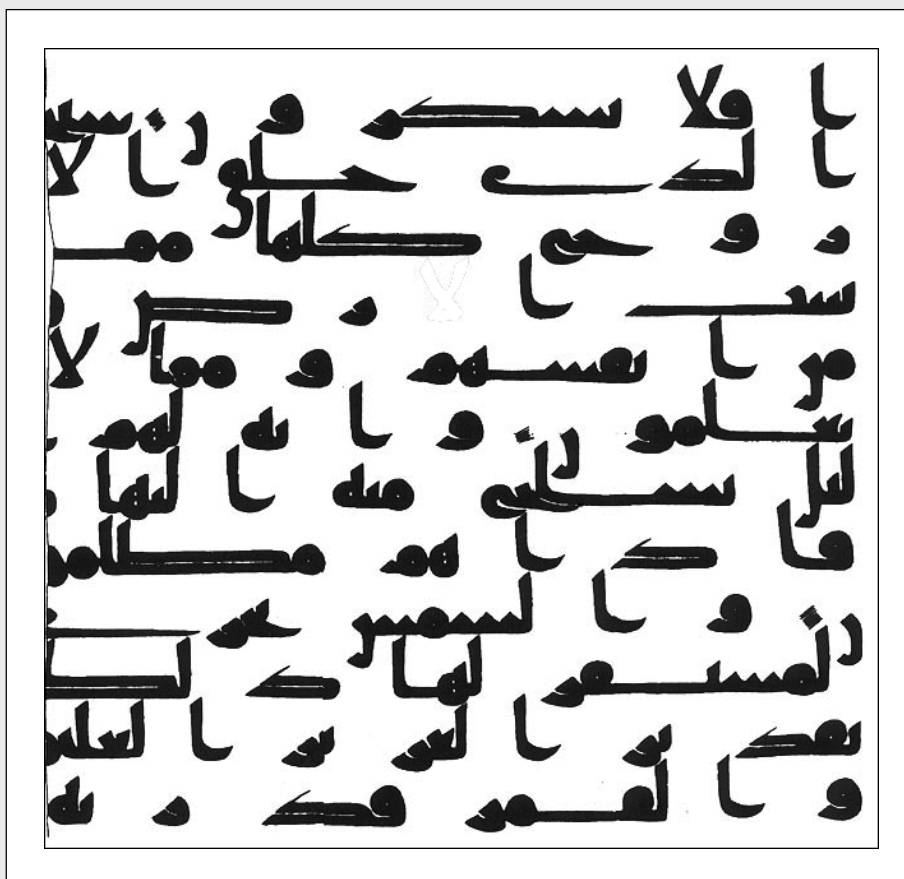


Fig. 1



*Fig. 2*



*Fig. 3*

knowledge as equally lawful; the use of other variants (*al-ikhṭiyār*), however, was forbidden.

It is important to note that after the appearance of Ibn Mujāhid's work, which rejected the use of variants from the copies of Ubayy b. Ka'b and Ibn Mas'ūd in interpretation, the implementation of this point of view began to take place with the aid of court decisions (the "cases" of Ibn Miqṣam in 934 and Ibn Shannabūdh in 935). The latter (d. 939) was whipped at the order of *wazīr* Ibn Muqla and forced to renounce the six variants in the reading of the Qur'ān in the following words:

"I had read texts differing from the text going back to 'Uṭhmān and approved by companions of the Prophet. I see clearly now that they were wrong. I atone my mistake and renounce my opinion, for the text of 'Uṭhmān is the right text which no one should reject or call into question" [5].

Such persistence in the struggle against "non-canonical" readings can be explained by the fact that the use or invention of textual or orthographic variants of the Qur'ānic text was inextricably linked with the development of Muslim exegesis and, finally, with ideological conflicts within Arab-Muslim society.

In 1007—8, an incident involving the *muṣḥaf* of Ibn Mas'ūd, which once again raised the question of the 'Uṭhmānic version of the Qur'ān, led to unrest in Baghdād and clashes between Sunnis and Shi'ites.

On the night of Sha'bān 14—15, 398/April 24—25, 1008, a certain Shi'ite in Kerbelā publicly denounced the "person who burned the *muṣḥaf*", meaning by this, as is quite evident, the caliph 'Uṭhmān, whom the Shi'ites rebuke for supplanting the *imām* 'Alī, persecuting 'Abdallāh b. Mas'ūd, and ordering the destruction by fire of Qur'ānic texts which differed from his own. The caliph ordered the arrest and execution of the heretic. The ensuing unrest was halted only after the caliph and the Buwayhid *amīr* intervened at the request of prominent individuals in Baghdād. A special commission appointed by the caliph came to the conclusion that the version of Ibn Mas'ūd represents an unacceptable distortion of the Qur'ānic text [6].

Let us return to the beginning of our article. The Arabic Christian texts of the palimpsest date back to the *end of 9th—beginning of the 10th century*. This was the period when older "variant readings copies" were being actively removed from circulation. This was a period of political instability marked by uprisings, unsteadiness and

It is really important to note that earliest "full" MSS of the Qur'ān which reach us are dated by the end of the 8th century. For example: both "'Uṭhmānic Qur'āns" [7] from Katta-Langar/St. Petersburg and Tāshkent can serve as a fine example of the standardisation of the text that the community had achieved *by the end of the eighth century* (figs. 1—3). Both manuscripts are documents which mark the end of the period of the Qur'ān's written-oral existence. This period, which began in the lifetime of Muḥammad with the recording of his first sermons and ended in the tenth century, was marked by a constant struggle, conducted at first by the Prophet himself, and later by the community, to preserve the exact text rather than a generalized variant [8].

Knowing the difficulties that had to be overcome, one must concede that an enormous project was completed in the 100—150 years that passed after the death of the Prophet. For this reason, it seems that the discovery of significant manuscript fragments from the turn of the eighth—ninth centuries cannot be overestimated. The new standard — a compromise in between "the exact text" and a "generalized variant" — appeared.

It was this new standard that became the base of the 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 unacceptable number of variant readings were being actively removed from circulation. In most cases, they made their way to special repositories in large mosques where they slowly decayed. They could also be "buried" with a special ritual [9].

In our view, the widespread disappearance of early copies took place not under the caliph 'Uṭhmān (at that time there were only a few full copies of the Qur'ān), but at the cusp of the ninth and tenth centuries. The removal from circulation of the venerated old copies was met by resistance, and the process was at least a century long. Finally the *ijma'* approved the "new standard," and copies created at the end of the eighth century with a minimal number of variant readings were preserved by the community for many centuries. Such was the fate of the two "'Uṭhmānic Qur'āns" (from Katta-Langar/St. Petersburg and Tāshkent).

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rippling in the religious sphere and by the rise of the "new teachings". That is why exactly in this period one could easily obtain several Qur'ānic manuscripts of the "old type" and re-use the parchment for writing texts of Christian origin on it.

## Notes

1. A. Fedeli, "Mingana and the manuscript of Mrs. Agnes Smith Lewis, one century later", *Manuscripta Orientalia* XI/3 (2005), pp. 3—7.
2. A. Mingana, A. Smith Lewis, *Leaves from Three Ancient Qur'āns, Possibly Pre-'Uṭhmānic, with a List of Their Variants* (Cambridge, 1914).
3. D. S. Rice, *The Unique Ibn al-Bawwab Manuscript in the Chester Beatty Library* (Dublin, 1955). See also D. James, *The Master Scribes. Qur'āns of the 10th to 14th centuries AD*. The Nasser D. Khalili Collection of Islamic Art (Oxford, 1992), ii, pp. 14—9; E. Whellan, "Writing the word of God: some early Qur'ān manuscripts and their milieu" (Part 1), *Ars Orientalis* XX (1990), p. 122 and pp. 134—5, n. 97.
4. *Materials for the History of the Text of the Qur'ān*, ed. A. Jeffery (Leiden, 1937), pp. 10ff.

5. A. Mez, *The Renaissance of Islam* (London, 1937), p. 195. The theologian al-‘Aṭṭār, who died in 965, defended in one of his interpretations several readings which diverge from the official redact. He did this on the basis of the consonant shapes, asserting that in vowelling, everything, which produces meaning in the classical Arabic language, is permitted. He was reported to the authorities and called before a court of jurists and “readers” to repent. His renunciation was recorded in writing and signed by all present. The tradition holds that, despite these circumstances, he preserved his own variants until his death and even taught them to his pupils (*ibid.*).

6. H. Laust, “La pensée et l'action politiques d'al-Mawardi (364—450/974—1058)”, *Revue des Études Islamiques* I (1968), pp. 65—6.

7. E. Rezvan, *The Qur’ān of ‘Uthmān* (Saint-Petersburg, Katta-Langar, Bukhara, Tashkent) (St. Petersburg, 2004).

8. Discrepancies inevitably multiplied in the course of time because of the nature of the right-hemisphere memorization mechanisms that determine how oral information is stored. For the special characteristics of information storage in early-writing and non-writing societies, see V. V. Ivanov, “Nechët i chët. Assimetriia mozga i dinamika znakovykh sistem” (“Odd and even. The asymmetry of the cerebrum and the dynamics of sign systems”), *Izbrannye trudy po semiotike i istorii kul'tury* (Moscow, 1999), i, pp. 566—70.

9. J. Sadan, “Genizah and genizah-like practices in Islamic and Jewish traditions”, *Bibliotheca Orientalis* XLIII/1—2 (1986), pp. 36—58.

### Illustrations

**Fig. 1.** Verso of the Qur’ānic folio in *ḥijāzī* script. Collection of Qur’ānic fragments. No. 39. Library of Administration for Muslim Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Tashkent. 52.5×34.0 cm. Northern Arabia or Syria, end of the 8th century (the reverse side there is the end of an *āyat* 2:140 (وَجُودَهُم) — 2:144 (وَجُودَهُم)).

**Fig. 2.** Page from a facsimile traced from the ‘Uthmānic Qur’ān manuscript kept in St. Petersburg (now in Tashkent) which was published as a gigantic, full-size foliant, see *Samarkandskiĭ kuficheskiĭ Koran po predaniu pisannii tret’im khalifom Osmanom (644—656)* (Samarqand Kūfic Qur’ān Written According to the Tradition by the Hand of the Third Caliph ‘Uthmān), published through the St. Petersburg Archaeological Institute by V. I. Uspensky and S. I. Pisarev (St. Petersburg, 1905).

**Fig. 3.** Solemn ceremony of assignation of the manuscript of the “‘Uthmānic Qur’ān” to the Muslim community (Tashkent, 1992). It is kept now in the Library of Administration for Muslim Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan as well as the fragments of the Qur’ān in *ḥijāzī* script.