

Qur'ans of the Umayyads: A First Overview

François Déroche

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Qur'an manuscripts have attracted a good deal of attention from scholars, especially in the wake of the spectacular finds in the Great Mosque in Sanaa in 1972. Some might suggest that this attention is superfluous or even reflective of a willful ignoring of the significance of the scripture's oral transmission and a privileging of the written word over the oral. However, careful studies of these manuscripts tell us many things, such as early Muslim attitudes toward the text, that cannot be documented otherwise. In fact, early manuscripts are the only tangible source about the oral tradition itself. We can also see that changes in appearance in early manuscripts provide evidence of the perception and role of such copies and that this went through a significant transformation, especially during the Umayyad period (661-750).

Studies done by knowledgeable scholars do not aim to establish an "original" text or to find fault with the modern version; rather, they aim to focus on such matters as the history of the Arabic script's development and how manuscripts were used. Of course, such early manuscripts also provide evidence of textual variation, the precise dimensions of which have not always been preserved by Muslim tradition. It is worth reiterating, however, that these variations are never of such extent that one can doubt the integrity of the text or its doctrinal or legal contents. Overall, the study of early Qur'an manuscripts is a challenging task, subject to much scholarly speculation and thus difference of opinion, especially due to the absence of colophons on the available texts thought to stem from the Umayyad period. This is generally the result of the lost first and last pages in such manuscripts, for they are the first to become worn and detached and then disappear. Most of those manuscripts available to us today are in a highly fragmented condition.

François Déroche is the world's leading scholar on matters related to Qur'an manuscripts. The vast majority of his writing until now has been in French; his masterful examination of a single early exemplar, *La transmission écrite du Coran dans les débuts de l'islam*, appeared in 2009. Thus many readers to whom his scholarship has not otherwise been accessible will welcome this book written in English and marketed in a relatively inexpensive paperback format. The work originated as a series of four lectures given at the Leiden University Centre for the Study of Islam and Society in 2010. Those lectures were primarily the result of an extensive use of the resources held in Istanbul's Turkish and Islamic Arts Museum.

There are many difficult areas to consider in establishing which manuscripts actually stem from the Umayyad period. Some people may feel that science should be able to provide definitive answers through Carbon-14 dating. However, Déroche emphasizes that there is a need for corroborating data alongside such results, for there are many variables in C14 testing and the data set upon which it is based is quite limited. So, philology and art history are needed to complement C14's rough dating estimates. That is the aim of his work. Through the study of Arabic orthography especially, insights may be gained into how the Qur'an developed in its manuscript form. This starts from the initial assertion, accepted by all scholars today, that what is called the *ḥijāzī* script represents the earliest stage in the written Qur'an's development.

Déroche's first chapter looks at the fascinating history and significance of what he calls the *Codex Parisino-petropolitanus* and is a valuable summary of his previously mentioned French book. Five scribes were involved in writing those segments of the text that are known today, each with somewhat distinctive orthographic practices and varying skill. The differences are quite noticeable in the color plates located at the book's end. Verse divisions are indicated in most instances, indicating that this practice was developed in early times even if it was not consistently implemented (e.g., whether the *basmala* counts as a verse); dots to differentiate letters, however, are less frequently employed, and vowel markings are never provided.

In order to bring out the characteristics of this manuscript's orthography, Déroche concentrates primarily on the writing of a set of words: *'ibād*, *'adhāb*, *qala/qālat/qālū*, *āyāt* (especially when preceded by a preposition), and *shay'*. Any variation among the copyists is noted, indicating, according to the author, that each one of them had a "highly individual approach" (p. 25) in which "they were enhancing the *rasm* according to their own views while transcribing it" (p. 26). The manuscript also shows evidence of later use by the corrections and adjustments made (e.g., in verse endings) to bring the text into alignment with later standards. In other words, this particular copy was held in high esteem over the centuries in order to justify these changes to the textual presentation. Déroche observes that the manuscript provides evidence that Arabic orthography at this time would not have allowed Uthman to accomplish his purported goal of unifying the Qur'anic text as tradition states; however, it does demonstrate that the canonical text as we know it (or at least the pieces evidenced by this transcription) were present during this early period.

Déroche then asks if this particular manuscript is unique in its orthographic practices. Thus the subject of chapter 2 becomes a more general appraisal of Qur'an manuscripts written in the *ḥijāzī* script. The same aspects

mentioned in the previous chapter are examined through a sequence of vertical and oblong format texts written on large and small parchment pages. The Sanaa palimpsest, which has received a good deal of attention previously, is featured. The conclusions here are important: These *hijāzī* manuscripts represent a stage prior to the development of a standardized script for writing the Qur'an, and every copyist appears to have his (or her?) own style of writing for what had been a secular script. A negative observation is also notable: While some manuscripts continue such non-Arabic scribal practices as the *scriptio continua* in which a word is split at the end of a line (whereas elongation of a word is relatively infrequent), no manuscripts with the text written in columns, despite the popularity of the dual-column format in Syriac at the time, have been found. Again Déroche argues that this broader range of manuscripts does not support the sequence of events recorded in the traditional canonization accounts – that the problems of divergent readings would not have been solved given the evidence provided by these manuscripts, thought to have stemmed from a few decades after Uthman.

From these observations Déroche uses chapter 3 to look at some slightly later manuscripts to trace further developments. The presence of ornamentation marks the emergence of this new stage; a transformation in the conception of the Qur'an as a book is evident. Decorative verse dividers and *sūrah* headings distinguish these manuscripts from the plain and functional earlier group. This occurred, he speculates, because of a desire among the elites for a book that had a nicer appearance and was in keeping with Arabic's emergence as the administration's official language. This coincides with the "*muṣḥaf* project" accomplished under al-Hajjaj and mentioned in traditional sources as occurring between 84 and 85 AH, namely, the implementation of standardized diacritical notation. That suggests that a form of institutional teaching and training of scribes had emerged to reflect the Qur'an's full importance and perfection in its visual appearance.

The next stage of manuscripts, discussed in chapter 4, formed a late Umayyad tradition that may have continued on into early Abbasid times. Physically large, the orthography of these books reflects a fuller rendition of Arabic, although one that has its own peculiarities. It is the illumination that particularly draws one's attention. The initial double page of a text found in Sanaa includes the representation of two buildings, often interpreted as mosques. Déroche argues on the grounds of orthography and ornamentation that these manuscripts belong to the beginning of the eighth century (earlier than other scholars have suggested). They show evidence of being carefully planned, perhaps by a state-sponsored workshop toward the end of the Umayyad period

that implemented “officially elaborated guidelines” (p. 127). Déroche also draws special attention to the dividers between *sūrah*s and end-of-line fillers, as well as the use of frames on the page that are characteristic of the group of texts. He sees these as part of a way to present a “closed or protected text” (p. 128) into which nothing can intrude.

This book is a masterful survey of the written Qur’an’s emergence. The inclusion of forty-five pictures of manuscripts is especially welcome, for they truly bring the material to life. One caution: At times the book will prove challenging to read unless one is immersed in the relevant scholarly literature both because of the prolific abbreviations employed (especially for the variations in the script), which require some knowledge of Déroche’s earlier work, and because of the complex scholarly arguments regarding certain points that are sometimes only hinted at. For those concerned with the Qur’an in manuscript form, however, this work is essential and definitely worth the effort.

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