CHAPTER 11
Written Transmission

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While English uses the same word for both a manuscript of the Qurʾān (a Qurʾān) and the revelation (the Qurʾān), Arabic distinguishes between the two; a copy of the Qurʾān is commonly known as a mushaf.1 Far from being fortuitous, this precise distinction demonstrates the simultaneous existence of two realities: transmission in written form and transmission in spoken form. Islam strongly emphasizes the oral nature of the Qurʾān and the particular importance of this feature should not be overlooked (Graham 1987). The role of the written word cannot, however, be ignored. Calligraphy is traditionally held in high esteem, particularly in relation to the Qurʾān, and the mushafs hold a special place in Muslim piety; indeed, the Muslim tradition of writing down the Qurʾān largely reflects a suspicion that oral transmissions may not be entirely accurate. Furthermore, as will become evident, the development of the Qurʾān in manuscript form during the first four centuries of Islam focused upon progressively perfecting the notation, indicating without a doubt that this was of great importance to the community.

The Qurʾān is the most copied text in the Islamic world. Until printing began to play a part in the distribution of texts in the nineteenth century, transcriptions were completed by hand. There are, therefore, a considerable number of manuscripts of the Qurʾān in existence across the world, most of which are very late in date. Which period do the earliest copies date from? Copies of the Qurʾān, linked to prominent figures from the beginnings of Islam, have been identified: several have notably been associated with the caliph ʿUthmān (who ruled from 23–35/644–55). These attributions appear in a colophon,2 a note, or even a tradition. In the city of Istanbul alone, there are no fewer
than six copies of the Qurʾān, all more or less complete, which fall into this category. However, historians are not convinced by any of these manuscripts (al-Munajjid 1972), some of which show signs of being very poor forgeries. Recently, some of them have been published in facsimile and the editor, Tayyar Altıkulaç, was able to demonstrate that they exhibited textual features which did not conform with the information about the mushaf of ʿUthmān transmitted by the Muslim tradition. It is, therefore, impossible to use them to better our understanding of the written transmission of the Qurʾān. The earliest copies which can be dated or which have been dated using reliable evidence are known to originate from the second quarter of the third/ninth century. What is known about the preceding era? Do any sections of Qurʾān manuscripts remain from the first two centuries after the hijra?

The First Qurʾān Manuscripts

According to the classical Muslim tradition, written transcriptions of the Qurʾān began in the 20s/640s, upon the instruction of the caliph Abū Bakr and then ʿUthmān, to guarantee the survival and integrity of the Qurʾān. In fact, copies have been preserved which date from the second half of the first/seventh century; none of these copies is complete and, in many cases, only fragments remain. Identification of these documents was not based on direct dating in the form of a colophon, however. Instead, a range of clues from different sources were applied, such as codicology (the study of the materials used and the history of the manuscript codex), palaeography (the study of ancient writing), and philology. In recent years, a series of carbon-14 datings have been made and, although the results are always to be interpreted in conjunction with the other clues, they strengthen the chronology of the early copies. In terms of codicology, parchment has been used to write on in the vast majority of cases, with a few fragments being copied onto papyrus, as documented by Grohmann (1958). However, the limited scope of the latter makes it impossible to determine whether they are the remains of codices which once contained the entire text of the Qurʾān or whether they are extracts, copied out perhaps by pupils or to be carried as an amulet. It is useful to note that paper was not produced in the Islamic world until after 132/750, with the earliest paper transcriptions of the Qurʾān dating from the fourth/tenth century.

These early manuscripts are normally written in vertical format, their size ranging from large quarto to small octavo, but a few oblong copies which could be attributed to the second half of the first/seventh century have been found. The early mushafs have almost no outer margins, the script almost reaching the edges of the page. In terms of palaeography, writing is of the Arabic ḥijāzī-type script, which was succinctly defined by an Arabic author from the fourth/tenth century (Ibn al-Nadīm 1970). The script shares striking similarities with that used in letters and documents written in Arabic dating from the first/seventh century. However, the script does vary considerably between manuscripts and in cases where two copyists have collaborated on a mushaf, their individual styles can easily be identified. This is notably the case with the Codex
Parisino-petropolitanus transcribed by five different hands. These differences are due to a lack of script standardization, something which did not happen until sometime later during the Umayyad dynasty (after 65/685). Finally, in terms of philology, the orthography of these early copies is very distinctive: it is defective in the sense that certain long vowels recorded in Classical Arabic do not feature systematically in its “consonant skeleton” or *rasm*: thus the verb *qāla* (“He said”), which is now spelt *qāf* + *alif* + *lām*, appears as *qāf* + *lām*, like the second person singular imperative form of the same verb, *qul* (“Say!”). Conversely, some words like *shayʾ* or *āyat* may contain an “additional” letter in comparison with the current orthography. There is some hesitancy in the notation of the *hamza*. As is the case for the script, the Codex Parisino-petropolitanus shows that there may be slight differences in the orthography associated with each copyist. Two additional comments are relevant to these observations. First, the use of diacritics, which are used with varying frequency by the copyists of the *hijāzī*-style manuscripts: did they make this choice themselves or were they following orders from their patrons? The purpose of the decision itself is also unclear. Was it to leave open the possibility of reading the text in different ways, thus perhaps having the potential to suit greater numbers of Muslim users/readers? Second, there was no system in place at this time for recording short vowels. The various deficiencies noted in the *hijāzī*-style manuscripts mean that it was not, in fact, possible to adequately preserve the integrity of the Qurʾān through writing as the caliph ‘Uthmān intended when, according to the tradition, he decided to document the revelation.

The *hijāzī*-style manuscripts nevertheless confirm that transmission of the Qurʾān in writing began at an early stage. Various trends in that transmission have also been identified. Muslims initially chose the *codex*, a type of book which became the predominant format of the day, all but replacing the scroll or *volumen* of classical antiquity, which remained in very restricted use, as, for example, in copies of the Torah. A slightly later text, a polemical Christian piece against Islam, does, however, indicate that scrolls were used by the first Muslims following the Jewish example (al-Kindī 1885).

Scrolls were subsequently used from time to time, but based upon a very different set of principles from the classic *volumen*; this will be discussed later in this chapter. Traditions mention various materials upon which texts were written (scraps of leather, palm leaf stalks, animal scapula bones, etc.), none of which remained in use for very long, having been replaced by the codex.

Manuscripts were copied out in long lines, not columns, from the start, a decision which proved to be a determining factor in the subsequent development of the Arabic-Muslim manuscript tradition (see facsimiles published in Déroche and Noja 1998, 2001). The spaces between words cannot be differentiated from the spaces that occur within words, where the word contains one or more letters which are not linked to the following letter, as with *dāl*, which does not join to the following letter when used within a word; this may be an indication that the writing was influenced by the *scriptio continua* style used during antiquity. This influence may also explain why copyists would often divide a word comprising two or more segments (four, for example, in *darajāt*: *da* + *ra* + *jā* + *t*) upon reaching the end of the line, a practice which was later strictly forbidden.
With the exception of the Sanaa Palimpsest, a unique witness of a Qur’anic text stemming from another handwritten transmission, the text found in the early copies broadly conforms with the canonical rasim. Actually, as the short vowels are not recorded and the use of diacritical marks is very limited, only rasim variants and specific divisions of verses can be observed. As for the former, it should be noted that the manuscripts do not always conform with a single set of variants ascribed by the tradition to one of the maṣāḥif al-ansār (regionally variant texts), but they may combine them. In addition to those canonical variants, others can be found in the manuscripts: it is difficult to decide whether they are scribal mistakes or unrecorded variants.

The ends of the verses are very consistently indicated by ink strokes which are grouped together in various arrangements; markers to indicate the conclusion of five or ten verses, where they occur in the manuscripts at all, have been added in later. The study of copies like the Codex Parisino-petropolitanus or London BL Or. 2165 shows that the verse divisions do not coincide with those recorded for the regional schools (Spitaler 1935). It may be that in some cases divisions reflecting an earlier stage of the text were kept during this first phase of the handwritten transmission, providing glimpses into a possible editorial process. The status of the basmala is disputed: in the Codex Parisino-petropolitanus, some of the copyists put a verse ending mark after it, others did not.

The sūras are separated from one another by blank spaces which are a whole line long in some of the more meticulously transcribed copies; the titles of the sūras which are sometimes included have been added later. In the case of a few muṣḥafs, the title area was decorated with ink, sometimes in shades of red, but this seems to correspond to a slightly later phase. Some manuscripts leave a whole line for the introductory basmala, but this practice was not unanimously adopted. The tradition of dividing the text into sections of equal length does not seem to have been adopted during this period when copies of the Qur’ān were transcribed using the ʿ mamma script; in the London BL Or. 2165 manuscript, markers for such divisions of the text were inserted later and are thus found between the lines (Déroche and Noja 2001). Since the beginning and end of the manuscripts were exposed to continual wear and tear and repetitive handling, the pages have often disappeared at these points. We therefore know next to nothing about “title pages” since only one such initial page has been found to date and this is merely a fragment, the recto of which is blank.

Experimentation During the First Centuries

Some of the features which characterized the Qur’ān manuscripts of the first/seventh century have stood the test of time, but the majority were subject to significant change over the following three to four centuries, their pace being especially quick during the Umayyad period. In fact, far from retaining the solutions demonstrated by the earliest copies, a desire to perfect the codex form quickly emerged among the Muslim community. This is reflected partly by the greater degree of accuracy adopted in transcriptions of the text: techniques essential to attaining ʿUthmān’s alleged
objectives were gradually introduced. The initial scriptio defectiva script was replaced by scriptio plena – a development which may possibly be documented in one account that tells of an Umayyad governor adding two thousand ḥurufs (probably meaning “letters”) to the Qurʾān (Jeffery 1937). The first vocalization system then emerged, probably around the end of the first/seventh century and was based on the use of red dots (Déroche 2014); gradually hamza and orthoepic indicators (sukūn, shadda) were marked down, albeit irregularly. The system as we know it today seems to have been introduced towards the end of the third/ninth century.

Considerable effort went into the appearance of a mushaf. The script itself was subject to a process of ensuring uniformity, perhaps inspired by the efforts of the Umayyad officials: the caliphs of this period initiated reforms in the administration of the empire with the aim of establishing the Arabic language and script as official forms of communication. In the case of the script, this required considerable care to be taken over handwriting, perhaps influencing those who were assigned the task of transcribing the text of the revelation. The notion of Qurʾānic scripts, that is, specific styles adopted in copies of the Qurʾān, undoubtedly emerged during this period; the Fihrist by Ibn al-Nadīm shows that, by the fourth/tenth century, the notion of a Qurʾān script was standard (Ibn al-Nadīm 1970). The first composed script to appear in a significant number of manuscripts by various copyists, OI, dates from the end of the first/seventh century and is essentially an elaborate form of the early ḥijāzī script, retaining the same slender appearance; the script is written mainly on vertical format codices. Its size is very constant in spite of the variety of the dimensions of the copies and it is usually associated with wider margins. All this suggests that some teaching and control was introduced at that moment which may be considered as the starting point of the Islamic calligraphic tradition (Déroche 2014). Perhaps under the influence of this development, scripts retaining a more genuine ḥijāzī aspect, but following some sort of model, also appear to have spread among copyists working perhaps for more traditional circles; margins are however present as in the more calligraphic copies.

A further development of this period was the inclusion of decoration in the Qurʾān codex. The most impressive example is a copy of the Qurʾān discovered in Sanaa in the Yemen. A further development of this period was the inclusion of decoration in the Qurʾān codex, roughly coinciding with the introduction of OI. The most impressive example is a slightly later folio copy of the Qurʾān discovered in Sanaa (Dār al-Makḥūṭāt 20-33.1), with an initial double-spread page depicting two buildings, assumed to be mosques (von Bothmer 1987). The manuscript is thought to date from the reign of al-Walid I on the basis of a C-14 dating between 657 and 690 corrected by the art-historical analysis of the illumination (von Bothmer, Ohlig, and Puin 1999). Other fragments from the Umayyad period reveal that the illuminators who worked on these manuscripts were familiar with Christian iconography and with the iconography of the type most spectacularly displayed at the Dome of the Rock. Other, less skillful attempts may reflect the approach adopted in milieux which were further away from the court or more conservative. Living beings are absent from these illuminations, which instead feature geometric designs and vegetation-based imagery alongside occasional architectural images. The decoration mainly occurs where there is a break in the text, either
within the block of writing itself or at the edge. The latter category also includes full-page decorations placed at the start and sometimes also at the end of a volume, as well as decorative borders at the beginning and end of the text, and even throughout the entire manuscript.

The Qurʾān codex underwent significant alteration during the second/eighth century, the vertical format being superseded by the oblong format. The reasons behind this modification have not been recorded in any existing documentation and thus several hypotheses have been proposed: two of these theories are very similar and are not necessarily mutually exclusive: according to the first, the decision indicates a desire to clearly distinguish the Qurʾān from the Christian codex and from the Jewish Torah scrolls. The second theory considers this modification to relate to the initial writing down of the hadīth and the resultant desire to distinguish the Book of God from all other texts. It is also possible that a particular type of binding would have been developed around this time or shortly after: this would have been a closable case, serving both to protect the Qurʾān codex and to provide a means of identifying the document within. Together with the materials it contained, this case would have provided the mushaf with a strong visual identity.

It may be that the search for bigger mushafs, illustrated by the Sanaa copy DaM 20-33.1, led to the development of scripts featuring thicker strokes. They are traditionally known as “Kufic” scripts and more recently as “early ʿAbbāsid scripts” (Déroche 1983, 1992), but as the earliest examples can now be attributed to the Umayyad period this denomination should be used in a more precise way. As a whole, these scripts are defined by their thick lettering, as mentioned above, with emphasis being placed on the baseline; the copyists used pronounced horizontal strokes to create a balanced layout, punctuated by shorter vertical strokes and identical spacing between groups of letters. These traits developed over the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries. On the basis of the classifications proposed, it is possible for the paleographer to identify the rules of working practice in operation for certain groups of copies (Déroche 1989). The complexity of the most remarkable of these scripts, primarily associated with parchment manuscripts of oblong format, demonstrates the various levels of execution in existence, ranging from copies written in calligraphy to more clumsy attempts at imitating these skillful copies.

One consequence of this graphic work was that copyists were able to alter the volume occupied by the text: in fact, the number of pages included in a transcription of the Qurʾān could be markedly augmented, if the copyist so desired, by significantly increasing the dimensions of the characters whilst still maintaining a suitable appearance. Umayyad folio copies like Sanaa DaM 20-33.1 were superseded by plano mushafs probably produced under the patronage of the ʿAbbāsid caliph al-Mahdī. With twelve lines to the page, they could contain between six hundred and a thousand folios, each made from a whole animal skin. Preference then switched to producing series of seven to thirty parts, forming an overall volume of considerable size; the first series was produced during this period, as confirmed by Malik b. Anas’ condemnation of this innovation (Fierro 1992). Given how quickly the number of such series increased during the third/ninth century, it would seem that they were produced to meet
requirements. Each part was relatively close to the average size of contemporary copies, which probably facilitated manufacture. The fact that the parts were produced as series also meant that they had to be kept together in specific cases, a practice which was to remain popular throughout the Muslim world.

From the end of the third/ninth century, a new development began to take place: a script very different in appearance from the early ‘Abbāsid scripts began to appear in copies of the Qurʾān. This “new style,” despite many variations in its appearance, is defined by breaks and angular forms and by extreme contrasts between the thick and thin strokes (Déroche 1983, 1992). The script was initially used in administrative and legal documents; it replaced earlier scripts, yet there is no satisfactory explanation for its apparent success. It is possible that it was easier to read than the early ‘Abbāsid scripts, which differ greatly from current writing practice. Economic factors may also have played a part: one cannot fail to acknowledge the relatively simultaneous occurrence of both the “new style” being introduced and the use of paper spreading throughout the Muslim world; the decrease in the price of books triggered by the introduction of this new material seems to have led to an increase in demand. As a result, it would probably have been essential to raise productivity levels. Earlier scripts would therefore have been abandoned either because they took too long to produce or because increasing numbers of copyists (who likely had not mastered these particular scripts or who could not produce them to an acceptable level) would have been required to transcribe the Qurʾān; they would therefore have chosen simpler styles for these copies. During this same era, the vertical format gradually re-established itself as standard in these mushafs; this was perhaps another consequence of paper being introduced. The “new style” was the last script to spread throughout the Muslim world before the introduction of printing; it remained in use until the seventh/thirteenth century, at which point it was restricted to titles only.

Around the middle of the fourth/tenth century, one final development led to scripts similar to those used in everyday life being adopted in the Qurʾān. The strong visual identity assigned to the mushaf by previous generations was reduced. Instead, the overall presentation remained constant for several centuries, with the notable exception of the decorations, which changed in style over time.

**Written Copies of the Qurʾān from the Fifth/Eleventh Century Onwards**

The text of the Qurʾān was copied out both in parts in order to form a collection of extracts, and in its entirety; in the majority of cases these copies take the form of a codex written in vertical format, but copies have also been made for specific purposes, usually for use as a talisman, and are produced in scroll form (rotulus type), shirts, etc. The codices comprise either one complete volume or a series of parts, ranging from two to sixty sections. These divisions into parts are based on the number of letters which form the entire text as a result of an initiative that dates back to the Umayyad period and was allegedly ordered by al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf (d. 95/714); the number found then was divided
by two, three, four, and so on, and the end of the nearest verse is taken to be the way-
point which was at the half, third, or quarter (and so on) point.

The modern reader opening a manuscript of the Qurʾān cannot fail to be struck by
the lack of a title at the beginning of the volume, especially given that titles have fea-
tured at the beginning of works, even taking up a full page on occasion, since the very
start of the non-Qurʾān-related Arabic manuscript tradition. The mushaf is thus an
exception to the rule. Many strategies have therefore been adopted to compensate for
the absence of a title. As discussed above, developing a strong, instantly recognizable
visual identity was one of the first steps taken to compensate for this deficiency. In the
most meticulously transcribed copies, illuminations were used for this purpose. The
original decorations had no writing (anepigraph); later, pious expressions or a list of
the sections which comprise the Qurʾān (sūras, verses, letters, etc.) were included. At
the end of the fourth/tenth century, quotations from the Qurʾān were introduced: the
citations chosen contain the word “Qurʾān” or another such direct reference to the text.
Verses 77–80 of sūra 56 were undoubtedly the most frequently used in this context,
but other sections were also used, such as Q 17:88, 41:41–2, and 85:21–2. The size of
the decoration affected the artist’s decision regarding the length of the quotation: the
illumination marking the start of a volume and relating to the citation can form one
page, a double-page spread, a border surrounding the incipit (the first words of a text),
or a separate prelude to the incipit.

The double page which contains the incipit is characterized by a very particular text
layout. In copies of the Qurʾān comprising one volume, sūra 1 or sūra 1 and the first
verses of sūra 2 are arranged in a particular way; the carefully produced copies include
an illumination at this point which takes the form of a border and contains one or sev-
eral of these quotations from the Qurʾān. Each sūra is preceded by its title, which may be
followed by the number of verses it contains and its place in the revelation; it is much
less common for an indication of its position in the chronology of the revelation to
appear (that is, whether it is a Meccan or a Medinan chapter). The sūras are identified by
title, not by number; the titles can vary from manuscript to manuscript. The basmala
which is featured at the beginning of each sūra (with the exception of sūra 9) appears on
its own on the first line. Verses are usually separated from one another by a marker or
small decoration; it is rare for their number in the sequence to appear. Larger illumina-
tions, placed either at the end of the verse concerned or in the marginal area, with the
corresponding decoration, mark groups of five or ten verses; the number, if included, is
written either all in letters or using the numerical value of the letters of the alphabet
(abjad); in the more modest copies, the words “five” (khams) and “ten” (ʿashr) are written
in the margin. The numbering of each of these elements is placed at its end.

A series of additional markers are also featured in the margin. The prostrations which
must occur when reading/reciting the text are indicated by the word sajda, which appears
either on its own or as part of a decoration. Segments of the text are also indicated in the
margin: thirtieths (juzʾ), sixtieths (ḥizb), and also, on occasion, further subdivisions of
these sections into quarters and halves. Some of the more meticulous copies contain
borders in the form of illuminations to mark these points in the text; usually there is just
one, at the halfway point, but sometimes there are thirty, one for each juzʾ.
The text itself is normally written all in the same ink for both the consonant skeleton (rasm) and vocalization system; only in the Muslim West was the early system of using color to mark the short vowels, hamzas, sukūns, and shadda retained. Despite objections from jurists, gilded ink was used, sometimes throughout the text, sometimes for certain words, most notably “Allāh”; different colors of ink appear in some copies according to the specific page layout. Where the mushafṣ contain translations written between the lines for the benefit of non-Arabic-speaking Muslims, these take the form of smaller and distinct characters, often written in red ink. In some copies, symbols above the text clarify the rules of recitation, indicating in particular where pauses must and must not occur. From this period onwards, the between-word space was larger than the space which separated individual, non-joining letters within a word; splitting a word at the end of a line was no longer acceptable.

In the eastern part of the Islamic world, the styles of writing employed were primarily the naskhī, muḥaqqaq, rayhānī, and on rarer occasions the thuluth script, to use traditional terminology. The latter three scripts are of medium and large stature, while the first – which was in very widespread use – is small, though still larger than the ġhubūr script, employed in miniature copies. In practice, there are evident stylistic variations which relate to different periods and locations; our knowledge of this is, however, largely empirical. There exist a great many copies written in calligraphy, most of which use the same script from start to finish. During the tenth/sixteenth and eleventh/seventeenth centuries, copyists sometimes chose to employ two or even three styles of different height with two or three lines in taller script (muḥaqqaq or thuluth) separated from the others by blocks of naskhī script; the latter were transcribed in black ink, the others in color or gold. There are also regional particularities: this will be discussed in greater detail below.

Some manuscripts also contain additional appended texts, invocations (duʿāʾ) to be recited after reading the Qur’ān, tables for predicting the future with the aid of the text, tracts relating to the Qur’ān, etc. Individuals would sometimes note down particular family events (births and deaths) or larger-scale events in their copies.

The bindings of the Qur’ān are the same as those of other manuscripts, having a book jacket and jacket flaps (except in Central Asia). The outside of the jacket flap often bears an inscription of verse 79 of sura 56 (“None but the pure may touch”), thus enabling the manuscript to be identified as a mushaf. Special tracts state that copies of the Qur’ān must be treated with particular respect; they must be placed above all other books which are stored flat in accordance with Eastern tradition. It is also recommended that the mushaf be kept in a protective cover. Many coverings of this type remain; the leather covers of sub-Saharan Africa are particularly important in that they prevent the leaves of the manuscript from dispersing.

Up until the fourth/tenth century, regional characteristics do not seem to have strongly influenced the Qur’ān manuscript tradition, aside, of course, from the variant readings. The situation changed with the introduction of so-called “cursive” scripts in copies of the revelation. In the Western part of the Muslim world (North Africa and Spain), the maghribī script gradually established itself as the norm from the end of the fourth/tenth century and remained so until the arrival of the computer age. Parchment
continued to be used in the production of these manuscripts, which were typically square in format. Colors (red, green, yellow, and blue) were also employed over a long period to indicate vocalization and orthoepic markers. In sub-Saharan Africa, a variant form of maghribi developed: as mentioned above, these copies of the Qurʾān sometimes comprised a pile of separate sheets which had to be kept together with their binding in a special protective pouch.

Elsewhere, differences between the various scripts were less clearly defined. There were many variants of the classic styles from the central area of the Muslim world, as demonstrated by copies of the Qurʾān made in China (Bayani, Contadini, and Stanley 1999). More distinct is the bihārī script, which was used solely in the north of India between the seventh/thirteenth and tenth/sixteenth centuries. Musḥafs written in the nastāʿīq script are comparatively rare since this style, so characteristic of the Persian world, does not have Qurʾān-script status. The illuminations often bear the mark of the region where they were completed.

The Qurʾān Manuscripts in Muslim Societies

The alleged etymological similarities between the words “Qurʾān” and the Syriac qery-ana (liturgical reading) could lead one to conclude that the book of the Qurʾān was intended for liturgical purposes; however, this was not the case and manuscripts of the Qurʾān played no part in the religious practice established by Muhammad who, let us not forget, died before the text was recorded in writing, according to Muslim tradition. This is not to say that the Qurʾān is never associated with devout practices. Indeed, the energy which went into multiplying copies of the book and the considerable effort invested in some of the more lavish and impressive copies indicate that the musḥaf did play a part in Muslim societies. On the other hand, developments in notation during the first centuries undoubtedly influenced the emergence of the variant readings. Unfortunately, very little is known about these different issues and studies into the matter are only just beginning.

It is important to emphasize that manuscripts of the Qurʾān are held in great esteem; this also applies to the printed versions. The basic interpretation of the verse of sūra 56 mentioned above is that the musḥaf may only be touched by those in a state of purity. This applies to Muslims only and prohibits non-Muslims from touching a copy of the Qurʾān. When a copy deteriorated to such an extent that it could no longer be used, Muslim law proposed various methods of protecting such copies from desecration (Sadan 1986); deposits of old manuscripts discovered in various locations across the Muslim world represent one solution to this problem. Worn pages could also be transformed into cardboard for use as a cover in binding another copy of the Qurʾān.

Scholars also discussed the way in which the copies of the Qurʾān containing mistakes should be handled. Many instances of corrections in manuscripts suggest that some people were reading them carefully.

According to the tradition, the history of the Qurʾān manuscripts began in earnest with the decision of the caliph ʿUthmān to send four or seven copies of the text, produced
on his command, to the major cities in his empire. The significance of dispatching these mussafās during the manuscript period is difficult to determine due to a lack of figures. A similar scheme promoted by al-Hajjāj b. Yūsuf is said to have taken place under the reign of the Umayyad caliph ʿAbd al-Malik. Later, the ʿAbbāsid caliph al-Mahdī sent huge copies of the Qurʾān to major cities of his empire. Since it would have been too costly for most Muslims to purchase a manuscript, copies of the Qurʾān were held in mortmain or waqf in order to make them accessible to as many people as possible. Copies have been preserved from the third/ninth century which contain a deed recording such a gift made by a devout believer to a mosque or oratory; these copies frequently took the form of a series of thirty juzʾ. More is known about the history of these copies intended for public use than about the mussafās which belonged to individuals. Later documents only, from the twelfth/eighteenth and thirteenth/nineteenth centuries, have established that the Qurʾān was the only book possessed by most households (Anastassiadou 1999). Even then, this information relates primarily to urban areas; it is not known whether Muslims living in rural areas had access to copies of the text of the revelation during this same period. The price of the books seems to have fallen significantly as soon as paper became widely established in around the fourth/tenth century, though it is not possible to quantify this change; more is known about a second development – the spread of printing – which occurred during the second half of the nineteenth century and enabled more people to acquire a copy of the Qurʾān.

A great many pocket-sized copies of the Qurʾān have been preserved, dating from the eleventh/seventeenth century. The Ottoman world provides the best example of this development. A standard format was developed which linked the material composition of the manuscript with the structure of the text. Each juzʾ comprised a quire of ten leaves so that these copies all had three hundred leaves in total (usually a bit more, in fact); the text of each juzʾ was divided into twenty fixed sections, each corresponding to one copied page with fifteen lines per page, starting with the beginning of a verse and finishing with the end of a verse (Stanley 2004; Witkam 2002). As a result, it is theoretically possible to swap two pages bearing the same pagination from two different mussafās, produced in accordance with these rules, without omitting or duplicating any of the text. Subsequent elaboration of the text enabled the presentation to be used for specific purposes: to highlight a certain element of the text, to demonstrate the sacrality of the Qurʾān, or even to suggest a deeper significance. The most striking examples are revealed by a group of manuscripts in which copyists have stretched out or compressed the script within the closed unit of each page in order to move words or groups of words so that they appear on the same line and in the same relative position as on the page opposite, where similar techniques have been applied; these words are written in red to highlight the textual symmetry, the most impressive examples of which appear in sūra 26 where whole passages resemble one another in this way (Déroche 2000; Stanley 2004).

Were these standardized copies intended to facilitate learning the Qurʾān by heart (Stanley 2004)? While this cannot be ruled out completely, what we know of the methods used would seem to suggest otherwise. The extensive standardization process demonstrated by these mussafās and the impressive productivity of the Ottoman copyists
indicate that the aim of these manuscripts was to respond to a very widespread demand within society, while at the same time taking into account the limited resources of potential purchasers; the influence of printing or at least what the Muslim copyists knew about printing may also have played a part in this development.

Reading the text is an act of piety and the development of the waqf for the mushaf, as we have seen, provided the literate with the opportunity to read the Qurʾān in mosques or in other religious buildings. According to an early source, al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf arranged readings of the copy he had sent to Medina on Thursdays and Fridays. From the sixth/twelfth century onwards, rituals emerged which involved reading the Qurʾān aloud, requiring the use of copies of the Qurʾān in thirty volumes. Income from a waqf enabled the readers and any staff associated with this ritual to be paid; several examples have been identified in preserved manuscripts and in the waqf acts themselves dating most notably from the Mamluk period (James 1988). These readings sometimes took place at a burial site to benefit the deceased; at other times, they were dedicated to believers within a mosque or even to passers-by in neighboring streets. Readings were also held under more modest conditions. Sessions were organized during the month of Ramadān; copies of the Qurʾān from the Maghreb region contain special markers in the margin for this purpose, dividing the text into twenty-nine sections to match the number of days in the month.

Readings were sometimes focused upon particular extracts. During the seventh/fourteenth century, Ibn Baṭṭūta (d. 770/1368–9 or 779/1377; 1992) assisted at a gathering held daily in Tabriz in the courtyard of the mosque. During this gathering, which was following the ʿaṣr12 prayer, sūras 36, 48, and 78 were read. There can be no doubt that the development of this practice explains the emergence of copies featuring just these sūras, as well as certain others from the end of the Qurʾān. These thin volumes also enabled the less affluent to obtain a partial copy of the scripture at a lower cost. These copies seem to belong to a category of manuscripts intended for private use in the same way as those copies bearing either a juzʿ or a ḥizb on each double page (i.e., the verso of one leaf and recto of the following); a very small script is used. This latter type of mushaf seems to have been highly successful in the Iranian world and in India; extracts, on the other hand, may have been more popular in Turkish-speaking areas, but they were also found in India, in the Malay world, and among Morisco communities of the Iberian Peninsula.

For non-Arabic-speaking Muslims, certain copies contained a translation written in smaller characters between the lines of the Arabic text, following the order of the Arabic word for word. In the Iberian Peninsula, however, Muslims in the tenth/sixteenth century used translations (in a variant of Spanish) which were very close to a translation in the modern sense. Others provided a commentary (tafsīr) written in the margin, sometimes in the form of a translation. It is, of course, essential to distinguish those copies in which the elements in question are later additions from those where the copyist intended them to be inserted. The earliest examples in Persian date from the sixth/twelfth century, while those in Turkish postdate them by almost two centuries. In more recent times, the twelfth/eighteenth and thirteenth/nineteenth centuries, such copies seem to have increased in number.
Copies associated with the memory of some of the great figures of early Islam hold a special place in the evocation of piety that developed around the musḥaf. From the fifth/eleventh century onwards, sources identify a “Qurʾān of ʿUthmān” or a “Qurʾān of ʿAlī” at specific sites and describe the practices which surrounded them (Mouton 1993). The presumed absolute authenticity of these copies as well as their baraka explains why reading from these copies carried particular value, with believers seeking to establish physical contact with the manuscript; copies were sometimes protected by a cover or stored in a cabinet. In Cordoba where several leaves from such a copy were stored for a time, an elaborate ritual developed involving processions and candles; the relic was then transferred to Marrakech where it was protected with a silver-plated binding and stored in a special piece of furniture.

In Damascus, where a “Qurʾān of ʿUthmān” was held in the Middle Ages, important figures were entitled to read the manuscript and to contribute to the funds raised for the weaving of the veil which covered it. Copies of the Qurʾān were also integrated into strategies devised to demonstrate power. One such example is the ʿAbbāsid court ceremonial where, on special occasions, the caliph would appear seated on his throne with a copy of the Qurʾān, wearing a cloak and carrying a baton which are both said to have belonged to Muḥammad. The large parchment copies of the Qurʾān mentioned above, which were also made during this period, were very expensive to produce and costs could only be met by important figures. In the third/ninth century, three Turkish officers serving the ʿAbbāsid caliphs donated three such copies of the Qurʾān comprising thirty juzʾ. These copies were intended to be seen even before being read; they reflected the central character of the revelation as well as the gesture made by the donators and their position within the community. This tradition of producing large copies of the Qurʾān continued through the ages. The development of paper manufacturing techniques enabled even larger copies to be created, since parchment copies were restricted to the size of the animal skin used. Two examples reveal that the format of the manuscripts was considered important by the princes: the largest Qurʾān offered to al-Aqṣā mosque in Jerusalem was a gift from the Mamluk sultan Barsbây (ruled 825/1422 to 841/1438); according to another tale, Timur scorned a miniature musḥaf made for him by one calligrapher but subsequently walked to the door of his palace to accept willingly another copy produced by the same artist which was so large it had to be transported by cart (Huart 1908). Just as the etiquette of the chancery dictated that the sovereigns’ letters be written in large format, so the copies of the Qurʾān they commissioned had to reflect the special requirements of their rank. Manuscripts of the Qurʾān were also readily given as presents by one sovereign to another, although they were not necessarily of such large proportions.

Copies which can be described as scholarly editions have also been identified; their more modest appearance suggests that they had no ceremonial function. They provide the reader with a text containing markers that refer to the variant readings (qirāʿāt): this information is not normally included since any given musḥaf is limited, in principle, to following one reading. These “erudite” copies also often contained short tracts on the technical aspects, such as the different ways of dividing the Qurʾānic text and the relative chronological positioning of the sūras within the text of the revelation.
(Bobzin 1995; Bayani et al. 1999). Such information would only have been of interest to specialists in the field, whether they were engaged in teaching or learning.

From Printed Editions to the Qurʾān Online

Printed copies of the Qurʾān originated in the West where printing with movable type was introduced towards the middle of the fifteenth century. The first attempt at printing this Arabic text took place in Venice in around 1537 or 1538. The Paganini Press printed a copy of the Qurʾān which was probably intended for sale in the East but contained so many errors that the print run was destroyed; only one copy has been preserved (Nuovo 1987). This episode occurred shortly before the first translation of the Qurʾān was published in Basel in 1543; this was a copy of an old translation completed by Robert of Ketton (Bobzin 1995). The end of the seventeenth century saw the emergence of two editions of the Qurʾān, in addition to several works containing extracts of various lengths (Bobzin 2002); the edition produced by the pastor Abraham Hinckelmann in Hamburg in 1694 contained only the Arabic text, while that published by Italian priest Ludovico Maracci in Padua in 1698 was accompanied by a translation and detailed commentary. These various editions demonstrate the development of Arabic studies in Europe. However, they were not suitable for a Muslim readership as they did not adhere to the specific rules governing the orthography of the Qurʾān and did not follow any one of the variant readings in a coherent manner.

In 1787 in Saint Petersburg, the first Qurʾān to be printed by a Muslim, Mulla ʿUthmān Ismāʿīl, was published, intended for fellow Muslims. It preceded the first Kazan editions (from 1803) by several years, which themselves pre-dated editions published in the East from the first half of the nineteenth century: Tehran (from 1244/1828), Shiraz (1830?), Calcutta (1831), Serampore (1833), Tabriz (1248/1833), and so forth. These editions were lithographs, a process that enabled distinctive traits of Qurʾānic manuscripts to be retained which the earlier letterpress copies from the West had disregarded. When letterpress editions are produced in Muslim countries, they will only be accepted if additional efforts are made within this long-standing tradition of written transmission to respect the traditional layout of the text, including even its catchwords. In the first half of the nineteenth century, Gustav Flügel published an edition of the Qurʾān in 1834 in Leipzig; this became an important date in the history of Arabic-Islamic studies in Europe. Despite its faults (dividing up the verses and failing to follow any one set of variant readings), this edition nevertheless provided a large number of readers with access to a reliable text; Western scientific studies referred to its verse numbering for a long time thereafter. Some years later, Flügel published a concordance of the Qurʾān which was an invaluable contribution to Islamic studies.

The most significant event remains, however, the publication of an edition of the Qurʾān in Cairo in 1342/1924 which was the result of a long preparation process by scholars from al-Azhar; these scholars focused upon one variant reading, that of Ḥafs ʿan ʿĀṣim (Bergsträsser 1930). The text was based on the oral aspect of transmission, possibly aided by technical texts on recitation, the variant readings (qirāʾāt), and so forth.
Early manuscripts of the Qurʾān were not taken into account, but then few experts at this time were aware of the existence of the hijārī style. This edition gained widespread popularity across the Muslim world and gradually replaced the Flügel edition among academic researchers. In fact, this one reading eventually began to dominate over all other ones, with the result that this text can be considered something of a vulgate, without ever having been officially sanctioned except by the shaykhs of al-Azhar in Cairo.

The possibilities offered by analogue disks and tapes have been exploited for making recordings of traditional recitations. In Cairo at the beginning of the 1960s, the supreme authority of al-Azhar made a recording of the entire text; there can be no doubt that this initiative influenced the Islamic world. Indeed, it may well have prepared the way for information technologies and computer-based techniques. As these techniques spread, the Qurʾān discovered a new medium and new possibilities which traditional methods of transmission had failed to offer. The text became available on CD-ROM; such storage capacity enables access to a translation, commentary, or recitation along with the passage being displayed on the screen in Arabic. It is also possible to conduct research into the recorded texts. Similarly, this method has been used to provide access to the text of the earliest copies of the Qurʾān in order to facilitate research into the history of the text (Déroche and Noja 1998, 2001).

The Internet offers similar possibilities, with websites fulfilling the same function. The text can be consulted along with a translation or commentary; Internet users can even choose between different recitations. These developments have triggered discussion among Muslims consulting these Internet resources; the immateriality of the various different electronic versions may well tie in with the concerns over purity expressed in verse 79 of suṣra 56, yet Q 96:4 (“God instructs man by means of the pens”) raises questions over the position of this new medium in relation to the revelation.

Notes

1 The plural form in Arabic is maṣāḥif. However, for the sake of simplicity, the plural form musḥaf will be used here.

2 Text, generally found at the end of a manuscript, in which the copyist records details of his identity and his work: his name, the date, the location, his sponsor, etc. are all details which the copyist may (or may not) choose to include. Fake colophons may be added to an existing manuscript or may accompany a copy, causing it to be considered a forgery.

3 These are the manuscripts from Istanbul, Topkapı Sarayı HS 194, A 1, EH 1 and YY 749 (formerly 4567), and the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Art, MSS 457 and 553.

4 Singular form: codex; type of book made from sheets folded in half and assembled in one or several quires which are then stitched along the length of the fold.

5 Literally: “from Ḥiǧāz,” a region to the northwest of the Arabian Peninsula where the towns of Mecca and Medina are situated.

6 These marks are placed in varying quantities above or below certain letters to identify homographs; an unmarked set of characters within a word can have five, even six different meanings. This ambiguity is eradicated if the copyist has taken care to mark down all diacritics correctly.
Roll on which a text is written in columns of the same width, perpendicular to the direction of rolling.

Letters of the text were written next to each other, with no significant spaces left between words.

Also known as Eastern or Persian Kufic, Naskhi Kufic, or broken cursive.

A scroll on which the text is written in lines, parallel to the direction of rolling. On some scrolls of the Qurʾān, the text is arranged so as to resemble various forms or figures.

Script specific to the Muslim West or Maghreb region.

One of the five daily prayers which takes place in the middle of the afternoon.

In a manuscript, the first word written on the recto of one leaf is repeated at the bottom of the verso of the preceding leaf; this process helps to keep pages of the manuscript in the correct order.

Further reading


James, David (1992a) Master Scribes: Qurʾāns from the 11th to the 14th Centuries. Azimuth editions, London [The Nasser D. Khalili collection of Islamic art. 2].

James, David (1992b) After Timur: Qurʾāns of the 15th and 16th Centuries. Azimuth editions, London [The Nasser D. Khalili collection of Islamic art. 3].

