For Muslims, the Qur’an is not only a much-recited sacred text; it is ‘the reciting’ (al-qur’an). Specifically, it is God’s ‘reciting’, his verbatim speech, his eternal, uncreated word. As such, it has been the medium par excellence of divine–human encounter for Muslims of all times, places and persuasions. It mediates the presence of God, just as it does his will and blessing. The revelations to Muhammad were from the outset intended to be rehearsed and recited – first by the Prophet who received them, then by his followers. They were given as an audible text, not as ‘a writing on parchment’ (Q 6:7). The Qur’an has always been primarily recited, oral scripture and secondarily inscribed, written scripture, and thus its spiritual and aesthetic reception as the most beautiful of all texts has been linked with its orality. Tradition ascribes to the Prophet the dictum: ‘You can return to God nothing better than that which came from him, namely the recitation (al-Qur’an).’ Accordingly, every generation of Muslims has scrupulously memorised, recited and transmitted the Qur’an as scripture, psalter, prayerbook and liturgical text all in one. How Qur’an recitation has been cultivated and used and what its corresponding aesthetic impact on and among Muslims has been are the central themes of what follows.

**PART ONE: RECITATION OF THE QUR’AN**

**Recitation as a formal discipline**

The intrinsically oral/aural character of the Qur’an is evident in its own use of a verbal-noun form, qur’ân, ‘reciting, recitation, lection’ (from the verb qara’a, ‘to read aloud, recite’) to refer to itself as God’s culminating revelation. The term used for Qur’anic recitation generally is qirā’a, which, like qur’ân, is a verbal noun of qara’a. It is used to refer to (1) the reciting aloud of the Qur’an (and hence to the art or science of doing this), and also to (2) a particular ‘reading’ of any Qur’anic word or phrase, i.e., a ‘variant’ reading of any element of the text. This is the sense in which its plural, qirā’āt,
is used, to refer collectively to all the variant ‘readings’ of the Qur’ān. Qira‘a can also be used by extension for (3) a single ‘reading’ of the entire Qur’ānic text according to one of the main traditions of oral transmission. All such traditions are traced to prominent reciters or ‘schools’ of recitation in the first two centuries AH (seventh and eighth centuries CE). Thus one can speak of the qira‘a of Ibn Kathir, of ‘Āṣim, or of ‘the people of Kufa’.4

The formal discipline of reciting/reading (‘ilm al-qira‘a) encompasses both study of the variant readings (qira‘at) of the written codex or mushaf and also the methods and rules of oral recitation (cantillation), or tajwid (‘rendering excellent’ the Qur’ān). Tajwid in turn comprises various traditions of vocal rendering of the recited text. Often referred to as a joint discipline, the ‘ilm al-qira‘at wa-l-tajwid (‘discipline of readings and recitation’) represents the heart of the long Muslim tradition of study, preservation and oral presentation of the Qur’ān. It both relies upon and contributes to scriptural exegesis (tafsir) and various other Islamic linguistic disciplines, from grammar (nahw) and philology (lugha) to rhetoric (balagha) and orthography (rasm). Like these other disciplines, recitative studies have an extensive literary tradition of scholastic complexity. Muslim piety relies on them as the guarantor of the rendering and preserving of God’s word as it ‘came down’ orally to Muḥammad.5

The recitative traditions

The importance of the recited Qur’ān does not obviate the importance of the written Qur’ān, but it reminds us that the written text is always secondary – a support to the orally transmitted text, not a determinant of it. If the traditional account of the codification of the authoritative mushaf under ’Uthmān (r. 23–35/644–56) be accepted, this would have occurred before an Arabic orthography was developed that enabled accurate reading of a text. Therefore, the written mushaf could never have sufficed without an accompanying mnemonic recitative tradition. Hence it is not surprising that Islamic accounts report that when ’Uthmān sent copies of his new Qur’ān text to the cities of the young empire, he also sent knowledgeable reciters who could teach the text orally. Its defective orthography would have allowed for variant readings not only of vowels and inflectional endings, but even of many of the still unpointed consonants themselves. For these reasons, the Qur’ān had to be transmitted primarily as it had originally come: as a recited text. The consonantal text could serve as an aide-memoire but not a stand-alone document.6 To read the bare, unpointed text, one had to know it already by heart, or very nearly so.
The enduring importance of the recitative traditions can be vividly seen in the way leading Muslim scholars prepared the now generally accepted ‘standard’ text of the Qur’an, the ‘Cairo’ or Egyptian official version of 1342/1923–4. In over a decade of collaboration on an authoritative printed edition of the Qur’an, these scholars did not depend upon collation of the earliest Qur’an manuscripts and fragments for the base text. Instead, they relied on their extensive knowledge of the most venerable traditions of variants (qirā‘at) and of the accompanying literature. Even the orthography of their edition was based not on manuscripts but on the traditions of the ‘ilm al-qirā‘at (‘science/discipline of readings’). Although this procedure went against many canons of Western text-critical scholarship, it yielded a text widely recognised, even in non-Muslim scholarship, as the most authoritative version available.

Qirā‘at and qirā‘a

The early Muslims apparently accepted from the outset that there could be various readings of the same divine text, whether because of dialectical differences among the transmission traditions or because even the Prophet was said to have recited the same passage differently at times. Even the Uthmanic reform was not able to eradicate the early qur’anic texts or text traditions of various prophetic Companions that it had excluded from the ‘official’ version – most prominently the codex of the famous Companion Ibn Mas‘ūd, which long continued to be popular in Kūfa and among some Shi‘is. How much more impossible must it have been that a single oral ‘reading’ of even the ‘standard’ written text could have won the day across the already vast Islamic empire. This was especially so because the defective script of the Uthmanic mushaf allowed, as noted above, for considerable variety in recitation of particular words and phrases, even if none of these variations seriously altered the Qur’an’s content.

In the end, Muslims interpreted this variety of possible readings as a blessing, not a curse for the community, and all accepted readings were deemed to have come ultimately from Muhammad himself. The consensus eventually allowed for the ‘preference’ of a capable scholar-reader in choosing to recite the text according to one qirā‘a from among the various ones generally recognised – such recognition eventually being based formally upon adherence to (1) linguistic correctness, (2) the accepted Uthmanic text and (3) a sound tradition of transmission from the earliest authorities. Muslims based this acceptance of divergent oral readings on the enigmatic statement ascribed to Muhammad, that ‘the Qur’an was sent down according to seven aḥruf’ (lit.: ‘letters’; usually taken as ‘dialects’ or ‘modes’).
As the traditional accounts of the preparation of the ‘Uthmânic codex have it, both recitation, qira‘à, and the individual qira‘ât, or variant readings, were important from early on because of the concern with accurate preservation of the revelations and exclusion of interpolated readings after Muhammad’s death. Although treatises are ascribed to experts on qira‘à in the first two Islamic centuries, the crystallisation of qira‘à as a more formal science probably occurred only in the third/ninth century.\(^{12}\)

Whatever its origin, this process culminated in the efforts of Abu Bakr b. Mujahid (d. 324/936) of Baghdad to systematise rules for proper recitation.\(^{13}\) He is credited with winning recognition (albeit not without contestation\(^{14}\)) for seven different ‘traditions’ (riwâyât; pl. of riwâya) of ‘readings’ as valid modes of transmitting the Qur’ân. Later scholars added three, or even seven, further ‘authentic’ traditions. Accordingly, seven, ten or fourteen traditions of accepted ‘readings’ are cited in the Muslim literature, and even these have sub-traditions. Thus the variant riwâyât that the expert must master are numerous, even though they represent relatively minor actual textual variations and do not threaten the general meaning of the sacred text.\(^{15}\)

The art of tajwîd

Within the general science of recitation, the study of the qira‘ât is, as indicated, inextricable from the science or art of tajwîd, the recitative cantillation of the Qur’ân.\(^{16}\) For Muslims, tajwîd is the attempt to preserve the living word of God in the full beauty with which it was given to and transmitted by the Prophet. Chanting the Qur’ân is potentially an actualisation of the revelatory act itself, and thus how the Qur’ân is vocally rendered not only matters, but matters ultimately. It is no wonder, therefore, that among Muslims, Qur’ân cantillation has its own forms that set it forever apart from all other recitation and all musical forms.

The traditional authority for tajwîd (literally, ‘making beautiful’ the sacred text, and hence its artful cantillation) is from the Qur’ân itself, namely its exhortation (Q 73:4) to ‘chant the recitation in measured, clear chant’ (warattî l-qur’âna tartîlân).\(^{17}\) Although the word tartîl refers traditionally to carefully enunciated, measured chanting, the verse is widely interpreted as referring more broadly to tajwîd as cantillation according to formal rules.

As the general art of recitation, ilm al-tajwîd encompasses many traditions and modes of recitation. The basic mode is the murattal, or measured, less melodic cantillation (sometimes called tartîl, as noted above; both words are from the Arabic root, r-t-l). As the style of reciting normally used in the ritual prayer (salât), personal devotion and education, it has been the primary form of reciting in general use.\(^{18}\) At its most ‘ornamented’ (mujawwad – from
Recitation and aesthetic reception

Recitation and aesthetic reception

Recitation includes more melodically modulated and musically cadenced forms of cantillation that are closer to singing. Such forms are specifically referred to as ‘recitation with melodies’ (qirā‘a bi-l-alḥān), and in some places, such as Cairo today, these are by far the most popular recitative modes. Sometimes, however, tajwīd is even used specifically for such melodically embellished recitative modes, in which vocal quality and musical ability figure more prominently than they do in the murattal form of chant.

Within the range of recognised recitative styles, opinions differ as to what constitutes acceptable modes of chanting. Some feel that only the melodic mujawwad styles render the beauty of the sacred text; others think these slide dangerously close to secular music and hence prefer the less embellished murattal form. None would deny, however, that all forms of Qur’ānic chanting involve attributes beyond the fundamentals of tartīl or murattal chanting: accurate memorisation, knowledgeable technique, careful comprehension and sensitive interpretation of the whole text. Qur’ān recitation is finally a devotional, spiritual act before it is a technical, artistic performance.

The chanting of the Qur’ān is viewed as a vocal form sui generis: its modes and possibilities come from the divine text itself, not from its reciters. In more musical forms of tajwīd the beauty of a good voice is joined ideally with technical accuracy to produce melodically sophisticated cantillation. Nevertheless, as we shall see in Part Two of this chapter, below, Muslim tradition refuses to describe any Qur’ān recitation as ‘music’ or as analogous to secular singing. Rather, the Qur’ān is ‘inimitable’ (muʿjīz), and this miraculous quality inheres not simply in its literal written wording, but also its vocal rendering. By observable criteria and established tradition, it is in its oral recitation that the Qur’ān is most clearly experienced as divine. The ontological distinction between Qur’ānic recitation and all other recitation reflects the strong Muslim sense of the holiness of this text of texts.

The recitative sciences in Muslim piety and practice

From the foregoing, we can see that, alongside exegesis (tafsīr), knowledge of both tajwīd and the qirā‘at has sustained the Qur’ān as living scripture. To understand the Qur’ān’s place in Muslim societies, we must attend both to these traditional disciplines and to the living tradition of Qur’ān recitation as it is found in contemporary centres such as Cairo. The work of Muslim textual scholars has never been isolated in the academy in the way modern biblical studies sometimes have been in the West. The study of
Recitation in worship (ṣalāt)

The Qur’an is the one essential of Muslim ritual and devotional life. Unlike Jewish or Christian scriptures, the Qur’an must be memorised and recited in the original to fulfil even the minimum requirements of worship. No ṣalāt is valid without recitation of at least the Fātiḥa, or ‘Opening’ (Q 1), and it is expected that one or more shorter sūras or verses will also be recited. The functional distinction for purposes of valid worship between the Qur’an and all other religious texts, even the hadīth, is striking. And unlike the Hindu Vedas, the qur’anic text belongs to all the faithful, whatever their social status or education, even those who know no Arabic. The theological doctrine of ‘inimitability’ (iʿjāz; see Part Two of this chapter, below) notwithstanding, it is the practical, ritual function of the Arabic Qur’an as recited word in worship that distinguishes it from all other texts: recitation of the Qur’an is what one student of Muslim piety has called ‘the very heart of the prayer-rite’. It is also quite common to precede or to follow the ṣalāt ritual proper with substantial recitation from the Qur’an, just as most Muslim celebrations and commemorations (e.g., funerals) involve recitation of shorter or longer qur’anic passages. Qur’an recitation in general is a preferred form of religious devotion at any time – in many ways an extension of the ṣalāt into the other parts of the day for its practitioners.
The sacrality of recitation

As already noted, the acceptance of the Qur’an as God’s word in the form of ‘an Arabic recitation’ (qur’an an ‘arabiyyan) has deterred Muslims from translating it from the original Arabic. Conversely, it has spurred even Muslims who know no Arabic to memorise shorter or longer passages as they are able, not only for salat, but also to internalise the very speech of God. A nineteenth-century French traveller reports that an elderly Malay Muslim teacher, who could not read Arabic, said that he recited the Arabic Qur’an for his Malay pupils because: ‘the sons of the Prophet ought to have this word in their memory so that they can repeat it often. These words are endowed with a special virtue . . . In translating we might alter the meaning, and that would be a sacrilege.’ Here the inherent sacrality of the original Arabic sounds – and their meaning as well, even if that meaning is not understood literally, word-for-word – is eloquently affirmed. The sense of the holiness, or baraka (‘blessing’), of the sounded holy text seems to penetrate into every corner of the Islamic world. In most Muslim contexts, the sounded strains of God’s word are held to be powerful – especially so when sounded with full voice – and are therefore widely disseminated, in local mosques and by radio, television and tape or disk players daily and, still more prominently, on special occasions. To dismiss the quotidian ubiquity of the Qur’an as superstition, merely ‘background noise’, or only a taken-for-granted habit, is to miss the perceived power and genuine spiritual function of such recitation quite apart from the understanding of every word of the Arabic text.

In education

Qur’an recitation is the backbone of Muslim education. There is an enduring Muslim conviction that Muslims need to be able, as early as possible, to recite from the Qur’an in its original form. Memorising the Qur’an has always been basic to child-rearing in Muslim societies, and there are few sounds more constant, from Morocco to Indonesia, than the singsong chant of children as they recite sacred scripture in the neighbourhood Qur’an school (kuttâb or maktab). Centuries ago, Ibn Khaldûn (d. 784/1382) remarked that ‘teaching the Qur’an to children is one of the signs of [the] religion (sha’â’ir al-dîn) that Muslims profess and practise in all their cities’. Even though many children do not stay in school the five or more years needed to memorise the whole Qur’an or to become literate in Arabic, learning at least some part of the divine word by heart is the single most common early experience shared by most Muslims.
More significantly, the universality of some kind of childhood ‘rote’
learning of the Qur’an – principally by boys, but also girls – has provided a
common Islamic cultural heritage as well as religious training. Familiarity
with the Qur’anic text and its values, as well as appreciation for its melodic
recitation, have been not only signs of Muslim faith, but shared threads
of ‘islamisation’ in the diverse fabric of Islamic societies, across barriers of
language, colour and custom, as well as time and place. ‘The Muslim does
not put a child in a Qur’an school simply to teach him, but rather also to
form him according to the immutable tradition that was that of his own
parents and that of theirs.’\textsuperscript{32} In other words, this schooling is ‘a mechanism
of total formation’ of the person.\textsuperscript{33} In Islamic societies, ‘a firm discipline in
the course of learning the Quran is culturally regarded as an integral part of
socialisation . . . the discipline of Quranic memorisation is an integral part
of learning to be human and Muslim.’\textsuperscript{34}

Memorisation and recitation of the Qur’an have traditionally been mat-
ters of great pride and status in Muslim communities. One of the most
cherished honorifics a Muslim can earn is that of ḥāfīz (fem. ḥāfīza), ‘one
who preserves, has by heart’ (the entire scripture). Sometimes the ḥāfīz is
even addressed as shaykh, ‘master’. Traditionally, such mastery of the Qur’an
has been a prerequisite for becoming a scholar (‘ālim; pl. ‘ulamā’) in any of
the religious sciences (it is obviously required for serious study of tajwīd).
Of those children who stay long enough in school, some manage this by age
ten or twelve, a few earlier. Even many who never control the entire text
can quote and recite substantially from it, if they have studied in the kuttāb
and beyond. It is not unusual for a ‘layperson’ in a secular profession and
without advanced religious education to be a ḥāfīz/ḥāfīza.\textsuperscript{35}

At higher levels of education, the writing and speech of scholarship
is traditionally based in large degree on the vocabulary, phraseology and
diction of the Arabic scripture. One need not have extensive contact with
an ‘ālim to note how echoes of the memorised, recited Qur’an cadence the
scholar’s thinking, writing and speaking. The ‘ālim has to be able to quote
and recite the Qur’an at will even to begin to hold his own among col-
leagues. Muslim scholarship reflects the acceptance of the Prophet’s adage
that ‘knowledge shall not perish so long as the Qur’an is recited’.\textsuperscript{36}

\textbf{In communal life}

Qur’an recitation occupies a public place in Muslim societies and forms
a significant part of the auditory ‘background’ of everyday life. Its virtual
omnipresence has intensified in recent decades through radio, television
and other electronic media. The oral world of traditionalists in particular
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is still saturated with the sound of the Qur’an – in worship, conversation and devotional practice. They have taken to heart the hadith that says, ‘the most excellent form of devotion (‘ibadah) among my people is reciting the Qur’an’.37

In that most communal of all Muslim religious observances, the Ramadan fast, the nights are filled with public Qur’an recitation. Muslim interpretation has traditionally found in Q 97 a reference to the night in which the Qur’an was first revealed: ‘Truly, we sent it down on the Night of Power (laylat al-qadr) . . .’ (Q 97:1). Traditions identify this night as one of the odd-numbered nights (most often the 27th) of the last third of Ramadan, which is consequently deemed especially auspicious for recitation. The recitation of one of the Qur’an’s thirty ‘parts’ on each night of Ramadan is also widely practised.38 However handled, the recitation of the divine word is the most salient public activity of this special month, and Muslims have delighted in finding different ways of making a complete recitation, or khatma, of the Qur’an during Ramadan.39

Another popular form of public tilawa is the group chanting of both formal dhikr sessions of Sufi brotherhoods and popular dhikr sessions at particular mosques, especially tomb-mosques. Dhikr, the ‘remembrance’ of God in litanies of devotion, involves the chanting of formulas and texts either drawn from the Qur’an or steeped in its language.40 A contrast to such group chanting is found in the maqra, or ‘recitation session’, wherein the Qur’an is recited by individual practitioners of tajwîd. Cairo is especially well known for its varied forms of this kind of event, many of which are associated with particular mosques and take place regularly. One of the most prestigious occurs weekly at the Imam Shafi’i tomb-mosque, but there are many smaller, local-mosque or private sessions as well.41 Still another kind of maqra is the nadwa, or ‘gathering’, a listening session held often in private homes and attended by cognoscenti of the recitative art.42 In a nadwa the musical aspects of recitation often receive special attention, although it is never easy to distinguish the aesthetic from the religious in Qur’an reciting, as we shall see in Part Two of this chapter, below. The few studies available point up the degree to which recitation is at once art form, popular entertainment and performing contest, as well as pious observance.

In private life

The active role among Muslims of the recited Qur’an is still more pervasive than the preceding conveys. From birth to death, virtually every action a Muslim makes, let alone every solemn event in his or her life, is potentially an occasion for qur’anic recitation, whether of entire passages or simply
discrete phrases that have passed into everyday usage. Most frequent is the simple *basmala*, ‘In the name of God, the merciful, the compassionate’, which precedes countless daily acts such as drinking or eating, just as it precedes all but one sūra of the Qur’ān. Alternatively, it may be the ubiquitous *ma sha’ Allāh* (‘whatever God wills!’) of Q 18:39 and *al-hamdu lillāh* (‘praise be to God!’) of Q 1:2, which punctuate Muslim speech even among non-Arabic speakers, as do Qur’ānic expressions invoking God’s mercy (*rahmān*) or forgiveness (*istighfār*). Also frequently heard is the affirmation of God’s omnipotence in Q 2:156, ‘Truly we are God’s and unto him we return.’

The best example of longer Qur’ānic texts recited in daily life is surely the Fātiha, Q 1, which every Muslim knows by heart and which is recited not only in ṣalāt but on virtually every formal occasion, be it the signing of a wedding contract, closing of an agreement or prayer at a tomb. There is also the powerful Q 112, Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ (‘Unity’ or ‘Purity’), which enters into most ṣalāt performances and countless litanies of praise; or the final two sūras, Q 113 and 114 (*al-mu’awwidadhātān*), which ‘deliver from evil’ and hence serve as talismanic recitations; or the prayer for forgiveness in the final verses of Q 2, ‘The Cow’ (Sūrat al-Baqara), known as ‘the seals of the Baqara’ and often recited before going to sleep; or the powerful strains of Q 36, Sūrat Yā Sin, recited at burials, on the approach of death and on the ‘Night of Quittance’ (*laylat al-barā’a*, a kind of Muslim All Souls’ Night).

These are but a few of many possible examples, as anyone is aware who knows how popular the ‘Throne Verse’ (Q 2:255) and Sūrat al-Nūr (‘Light’, Q 24) are.

What al-Ghazālī said of the Qur’ān still holds today: ‘Much repetition cannot make it seem old and worn to those who recite it.’ The powerful presence of the rhythmic cadence of Qur’ānic recitation is everywhere evident in traditional and much of modern Muslim society: ‘the book lives on among its people, stuff of their daily lives, taking for them the place of a sacrament. For them these are not mere letters or mere words. They are the twigs of the burning bush, aflame with God.’

### Part Two: Aesthetic Reception of the Qur’ān

#### The Qur’ān on its own aesthetic reception

The first suggestions about the Qur’ān’s aesthetic reception occur in the text itself, e.g., in Q 39:23: ‘God has sent down the most beautiful word (*ahṣan al-hadith*); a scripture consistent in its repetition, at which the skins of those who fear their lord crawl (*taqsha’irru*); but then their skins and their
hearts are softened for the remembrance of God.’ It is worth taking a closer look at the last three lines, especially the verb *taqsha’irru*, ‘crawl’ (of skin), ‘become raw’. Here the effect claimed for Qur’anic recitation is specified as giving the hearer goosebumps (literally what *taqsha’irru julad* denotes) – before it softens or calms body and soul, thereby preparing him to remember God. This expresses clearly the idea that religious perception of the Qur’an is the aesthetic experience of a discourse described as the most beautiful (*ahsan al-hadith*) and communicated in a flesh-tingling auditory experience. Yet this text declares that the final aim of this act of communication is not mere satisfaction, or the ‘disinterested pleasure’ (*interesselose Wohlgefallen*) that Kant mentions in his treatment of aesthetics, but a cathartic process that prepares one ‘for remembering God’ (*il¯a dhikri ll¯ahi*).

It can be inferred from the Qur’an that, during the first years of his calling, the Prophet regularly went to the Ka‘ba to recite the revelations. Around him gathered the (initially few) believers, who would prostrate themselves or cry during the recitation, as well as a growing number of spectators (often including Muhammad’s adversaries). While his opponents from the outset scorned the new harbinger of salvation, they seem to have reacted to his growing audience with increasing insecurity and hostility. They could not accept his claim to be endowed with divine authority, so they tried to discredit him as a common soothsayer, magician, madman and, specifically, poet, as the Qur’an itself clearly shows.

Although in later suras the response to the accusation that Muhammad is a poet is rather stereotypical, the amount of detail, especially in early passages, indicates that this allegation must have been seen as a real threat. Had there been nothing in his performance to evoke this comparison, his opponents would have sought other ways of undermining his claim to prophethood. They could have accused him of being a liar, a thief or a charlatan, ‘but they said: . . . he just composes poetry, he is a poet’ (Q 21:5). Up to this point, the description given by the later records concurs with the scenario of Muhammad’s recitations as presented in the Qur’an.

The Qur’an’s aesthetic reception in Islamic literature

Going beyond the information in the Qur’an, one can see how this scenario was embellished in collective memory and how the story of the Qur’an’s reception – only hinted at in the text itself – was perceived as the story of the impact of an aesthetic miracle. In the Muslim community’s cultural memory, the attraction that the Qur’an exerts, and which
is confirmed in the text itself in several phrases, was poetically interpreted and described with loving attention to every detail and facet. Extra-Qur’anic sources place a much higher emphasis than the text itself on the fact that the revelation was not just convincing in its content but to a high degree in its aesthetics. In the course of the first several centuries after the emigration from Mecca to Medina (hijra), a history was constructed in which the Qur’an’s stylistic form was a fundamental element of the salvation history (Heilsgeschichte) and its metaphysical quality perceived as a historical fact. The relevant sources for this construction were the biographies and hadith works, treatises and commentaries on the Qur’an and Muḥammad’s miraculous character, as well as books on prophethood (nubuwwa). In subsequent eras, much of the writings on Muḥammad and his life – be they composed in a devotional vein or written with a more scientific intent – have only supported the earlier texts. All offer examples of the overwhelming effects of reciting the Qur’an.

With time, the significance of the Qur’an’s aesthetic impact was increasingly emphasised. Modern authors such as Muḥammad Abū Zahra (d. 1974), Ṣadiq al-Raﬁʿi (d. 1937), (the early) Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966), Rashid Riḍā (d. 1935) or Mahmūd Rāmiyar have regarded the literary supremacy of the text as at least as crucial as the actions and speeches of Muḥammad for the triumphant advance of Islam – an emphasis not found in the Qur’an, nor even in the early tradition. Although the Qur’an hints at its own aesthetic reception, it still leaves the role of its literary quality in Muḥammad’s mission unexplored. In the books on the Prophet’s biography (sīra), the attraction supposedly emanating from qur’anic recitation is explained in greater detail. But the subtext of the Meccan-period reports is that the Prophet met mostly with rejection, the best-known consequence of which was the hijra. Except for a few followers – mostly from the lower strata of society (qalīlan min al-mustad’afīn), Meccans refused to acknowledge Muḥammad’s message.55 During this phase, the irresistibility of the recited Qur’an described above was the exception rather than the norm.

In retrospect, however, this changed: the miraculous power of the qur’anic recitation came to the fore. In later days, the Arab-Muslim community found in its own sources the record of the aesthetic power of the Qur’an, and in the course of its reception history this power became increasingly important for its self-understanding – examples are not only to be found through comparison of qur’anic passages and later commentaries and biographical classifications. In the course of time, extra-qur’anic traditions about individual instances of recitation that confirm the irresistibility of the Qur’an were increasingly embellished.
The aesthetic power of the Qur’an in Muslim salvation history

Two premises are fundamental for the early history of the Qur’an’s reception as preserved in the cultural memory of the Muslim community: first, the notion that the pre-Islamic Arabs formed a cultural community distinguished essentially by its cultivation of language and poetry, and, second, the tremendous and irresistible fascination said to be elicited among hearers by recitation of the Qur’an. These two premises underlie all reports about individual instances of reception and together yield particular topoi that recur in these reports: the opponents who publicly denounce the Prophet, yet secretly yearn to listen to the Qur’an; the villains who cannot defend themselves against the power emanating from the Qur’an other than by attacking anyone who recites it; the poets who cannot succeed in meeting the Qur’anic challenge with poetry of equal literary perfection and secretly hang around the Ka’ba when the Prophet recites the Qur’an; and the Prophet’s supporters who outdo each other in their love for Qur’an recitation. In addition, there are anecdotes about the artistry of individual reciters and, of course, the Prophet, who is credited with the most beautiful of all voices yet who never misses an opportunity to listen to a skilful recitation. There are also testimonies to the curiosity that brings people from all over the Arabian peninsula and even from distant lands to Mecca or Medina to listen to the Qur’an; and, simultaneously, the frantic attempts of the Quraysh to discourage locals and foreigners alike from doing just that.

Another central topos of the early history of reception is the consternation caused by the language of the Qur’an because it does not correspond to any known genre of metrical language, yet is extraordinarily, if inexplicably, attractive. Early Muslim sources mention repeatedly that the people of Mecca consulted poets and other literary masters for advice on how technically to categorise Muhammad’s recitations. These ‘experts’ most often replied – both astonished and fascinated – that the Qur’an was neither poetry nor rhyming prose, thus establishing the boundaries for evaluating the Qur’an as literature. The famous poet Walid b. al-Mughira remarked, ‘I know many qaṣidas and rajaz verses, and am even familiar with the poems of the jinn. But, by God, his recitation is like none of them.’ He echoes here a common point of view among Muhammad’s contemporaries as remembered by later generations. Yet while sources consistently insist that poets and orators were aware of the stylistic difference of the Qur’an from the poetry and oratory with which they were familiar, they concede that simple people found it hard to distinguish clearly between poetry and revelation. Tradition tells how the poet and Companion ‘Abdallāh b. Rawāḥa was surprised and challenged by his wife as he was leaving a concubine’s chambers.
She had long harboured the suspicion that he was having a clandestine affair, and knowing that ‘Abdallāh had sworn never to recite the Qur’ān unless he was ritually pure (which he would not have been after an act of adultery), she asks him to recite from the Qur’ān. The poet immediately recited three verses of a poem that sounded so much like the Qur’ān that his wife exonerated him, ‘thinking it was a Qur’ān’ (ḥasibat hadha qur’ānan).

Perhaps the most striking motif related to the aesthetic reception of the Qur’ān in early Islamic history is that of spontaneous conversion upon hearing the recitation: one or more unbelievers who are hostile to the Prophet, or do not know him, hear the Qur’ān being recited and instantly become Muslims, citing the beauty of the verses. The peculiarity of such tales of conversion – always uniformly structured and frequently found in later centuries in Islam as well – becomes especially clear when one looks for similar reports in other religions. For example, while there are instances of conversions to Christianity resulting from an aesthetic response to its scripture, reports about this do not represent a significant part of the corpus of Christians’ testimonies about the spread of their faith; they do not form a topos of salvation literature. This is not to imply that religious practice in Christianity, or other traditions, could be imagined without the aesthetic fascination of particular spaces, rituals, texts, sounds, songs, pictures, or even colours, acts, fragrances and gestures; or that Protestantism could have spread so tremendously fast in German-language areas without the literary power of Martin Luther’s translation of the Bible. Yet in the perception that Christian and especially Protestant communities have of their own past, the aesthetic of scripture plays a subordinate role, however relevant it may be for religious practice.

The theory of the Qur’ān’s inimitability (i‘jāz)

In Muslim self-conceptions, the aesthetic fascination elicited by the Qur’ān recurs as a basic constituent of faith. It is this theological reflection and understanding about the importance of the aesthetic dimension of scripture that is characteristic of Muslim faith, rather than the experience of beauty itself that occurs in the reception of the sacred text (something, as noted above, that can be found in other traditions). Only in Islam did the rationalisation of this aesthetic experience culminate in a distinct theological doctrine of scriptural poetics, the notion of i‘jāz, or inimitability, based on the superiority and unique, sui generis power of the Qur’anic discourse.

For a Christian, the reasoning behind i‘jāz is peculiar: I hear in the Qur’ān the word of God because its language is too perfect to have been composed by a human being. While one can find similar ideas about the perfection
Recitation and aesthetic reception of scriptural word in the veneration in Buddhist tradition of sutras, most vividly the Lotus Sutra, as sublime expressions of the Buddha-word (buddhavacana), or in the concept in Brahmanic tradition of Veda as the eternal sound (sabda) of truth, such notions are still quite differently developed doctrines from that of i'jaz and have little of the latter’s aesthetic emphasis.

Functionally, the i'jaz concept serves as an aesthetic proof of God. In Western civilisation, virtually no equivalent exists in the religious sphere. The nearest we get is perhaps our subjective response to certain works of, say, Bach or Mozart, to which audiences often refer as ‘divine’ in their beauty. Muḥammad is known not to have healed the sick nor to have walked on water; his single miraculous ‘proof’ of his status as a prophet was the Qurʾān itself. An oft-cited ḥadīth says: ‘There is no prophet but signs were given to him so that people would believe in him. I have been given nothing but the words that God has revealed to me, and I hope to have the greatest following on the day of resurrection.’

It is only because people are incapable of imitating a prophet’s signs that they recognise his divine calling. In this general prophetology, the fact that Muḥammad’s adversaries were incapable of producing speeches of a comparable literary quality is taken to be Muḥammad’s miracle of ‘accreditation’ – quite in accordance with the Hebrew Bible’s line of reasoning. To cite al-Baqqillānī again: ‘When the native speakers of this language saw that all of them were incapable of challenging, finding fault with, or imitating the Qurʾān, they found themselves in the same situation as those who had seen the white hand or the staff changing into a snake, which revealed their lies.’

Had Muḥammad’s adversaries been able to meet the challenge (tahaddi) as mentioned in the qurʾānic text, al-Baqqillānī argues, their triumph would have been secure. They would have been spared all that followed – the quarrels and wars, migration and captivity, the total loss of power, esteem and wealth. For had they really been able to surpass the Qurʾān stylistically, Muḥammad’s claims would have been invalidated. But even though they tried as hard as they could; even though they lacked neither time nor ambition; even though they were masters of eloquence – they remained...
silent and silent they remain unto this day.\textsuperscript{65} That the adversaries remain silent until today is taken to be the proof of the Qur’an’s literary composition being a miracle transcending human capabilities and invalidating each and every attempt at denigrating or belittling it. Indeed, the precise meaning of \textit{i`jaz} is not ‘inimitability’, but ‘invalidation’ or ‘prevention’ of any attempt at a challenge. Part of the line of reasoning that establishes the Qur’an as a miracle is that the Arabs accepted the Qur’an as a divine creation because of its (Arabic) stylistic perfection; it had to be the Arabs who acknowledged this literary miracle, for they were the most poetically and linguistically sophisticated of peoples, the people who above all treasured and mastered the art of eloquence, and who could be convinced only by a literary miracle.

The connection between the Arabs’ literary mastery and the idea of Qur’anic \textit{i`jaz} was first formulated by al-Jâhiç (d. 255/868–9), well before al-Bâqillâni, and it is his formulation that appears whenever Muslim scholars are concerned with dogmatic arguments. This formulation runs as follows: God gave to each prophet the gift most highly valued by his people. Moses was legitimised as prophet by turning a staff into a snake, thereby surpassing the magic practised at the Pharaoh’s court in Egypt where magic was held in high esteem. Jesus’ miracle was raising people from the dead at a time when healing was highly valued. And Muḥammad was prophet to a people who valued their poets most of all; thus his miracle had to be a literary one.\textsuperscript{66}

\textbf{The Qur’an and literature}

In order to prove that such a book could in no way have come from a human author, ever since the early ninth century Muslim scholars have made tremendous efforts to explore the Qur’an’s formal perfection in every conceivable detail. In fact, Arab literary studies as such owe their very existence to the Qur’an. If the miracle of Islam is the language of revelation, then the language of the Qur’an has to be analysed in literary terms and, to prove its superiority, be compared to other texts, above all poetry. The initial thrust was apologetic, but literary interest soon departed from the theological context. From the tenth and twelfth centuries onward, great works on Arabic poetics were produced, anticipating many of the findings of modern linguistics and literary studies. Arabic rhetoricians discussed the Qur’an and poetry together, refusing to play one off against the other – an interweaving of theology and literary studies hardly conceivable in today’s Arabic-speaking world, in terms of both academic precision and theological legitimacy. A brilliant exponent of this kind of scholarship can be found in the Iranian ‘Abd al-Qâhir al-Jurjâni (d. 471/1078), who consistently focused
on the specific merits of the poetical language as such – be it in the Qurʾan or in poetry. His book, *Dala’il fi ʾi-jaz al-Qurʾan* (‘Evidence of the Qurʾan’s miraculous character’), is not only remarkable for the striking precision and attention to detail which characterises his analysis of particular stylistic phrases; Jurjānī was the first to outline a poetic theory both comprehensive and systematic that is based on *naẓm* (order, system) and on several basic insights in the field of textual linguistics. In his poetic theory, he emphatically rejects the old dualism of form and content, arriving at an almost structuralist theory of language and poetry, the quality of the methodology of which has rarely been reached again in Arab literary studies.67

The Qurʾan has enriched Arabic poetry more than any other Arabic literary genre. Apart from frequent references to Qurʾānic verses or images throughout Arabic or Persian literature, the Qurʾan liberated Arabic poetry from the narrow framework of existing genres and inspired new approaches to language, imagery and the use of motifs. Conventional standards, and the theoretical analysis of language and literature, can both be traced to the hermeneutics of the Qurʾan.68 Just as theologians referred to poetry to analyse the language of the Qurʾan, the reverse also happened – and does still. One example of poets and literary scholars using the Qurʾan to analyse poetry was the movement of so-called ‘modernists’ (*muḥdathūn*) in Arabic poetry, who dominated literary debates in the eighth and ninth centuries. The imagery of the Qurʾan and its stylistic departures from the strict formal rules of poetry inspired ‘modernists’ such as Ibn al-Muʿtazz to introduce new rhetorical devices and to replace traditional norms. In the modernists’ purely literary-aesthetic discussion of poetry, the Qurʾan was the obvious key point of reference because of its poetic quality.69 Even in our times, a poet like Adonis, one of the leading and most controversial figures of contemporary Arabic literature, analyses the Qurʾan as the source of modernity in Arabic poetry. In his theoretical work, Adonis discusses and praises the language of the Qurʾan in detail, its provocative literary and aesthetic power, and its breaking with traditional norms.70

**Qurʾan recitation and music**

Nowhere is the aesthetic dimension of the reception of the Qurʾan more clearly seen than in the difficulties that Muslims have had with the musical aspect of Qurʾan recitation and its powerful effectiveness. While Muslims are usually careful not to call Qurʾānic recitation music (*ghinā*), nor to refer to the reciter (*muqri; qāri*) as singer (*muḥannī*), in order to avoid any identification of the holy text with songs created by human beings, a strong melodic element is not only tolerated by theologians for reasons of popular
appeal, but is even a prerequisite of the ideal recitation as conceptually
determined in countless writings on *tajwīd* and *adab al-tilawa*. Logically
enough, the musical quality of recitation is one of the determining crite-
ria of those institutions that train, test and distinguish reciters. Likewise,
reciters and their audience make use of a terminology that is, in great part,
synonymous with that used for music. An anecdote told by Ibn Ṭabd Rabbīh
from early Islamic times illustrates that the relation of qur’ānic recitation
and music has always been ambivalent: a man is arrested because he is
supposed to have been found singing loudly in a mosque, thereby breaking
the rules of proper conduct. Fortuitously, a noble of Quraysh praying in the
mosque rushes to his aid and explains to the police that the accused was
only reciting the Qur’ān. The misunderstanding thus resolved, the detainee
is released. Once outside again, the noble tells the miscreant: ‘Had you not
sung so well, I would not have protected you.’71

This ambivalence makes itself felt on the side of the recipients as well. To
outside observers, their behaviour often appears to be that of participants at
a musical function, however much that may run contrary to the theological
guidelines for proper reciting. As noted above, in a country like Egypt, qur-
‘ānic recitation by a well-known singer is more than just a religious matter.
It ranks among the society’s important artistic events and is frequented
by Christians and Muslims, secular intellectuals and ordinary believers.
The best reciters participate in live-broadcast international competitions
and are revered throughout the country. Audience response to recitations
hardly differs at times from that of audiences for music: shouts, clapping
and signs of pleasure abound at concerts; star status is attributed to some
reciters by their fans as well as in yellow press and musical magazines;
spectacular appearances and important releases parallel those of pop artists;
and the regular *nadwa* (see above) bring aficionados together to listen to
live recitations and recordings of the Qur’ān and to discuss their respective
musical merits. In all these one finds numerous examples of the Qur’ān being
received in a way that is outside a clearly religious domain, one that in many
ways can only be called aesthetic or artistic.72 The polemics against *qirā’a
bi-l-alh. * (see above) show that already at the caliphs’ courts the Qur’ān
was performed as mere chamber music, even accompanied by dancing.73

Typical is the indignation of Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1200) about those who
‘recite the Qur’ān with melodies and thereby exceed common norms, as
they have made out of it a singing (*ghinā*)’.74

Even if scholarly tradition has not wanted to identify Qur’ān recitation
with musical performance, the aesthetic power of the melodically recited
scripture has been, so far as we can judge, an undeniable fact of Muslim
piety and practice from the earliest days of Islam to the present moment. The recited Qur’ân is and has ever been the epitome of aesthetic as well as spiritual perfection for the faithful.

Notes
2. Concerning the early meaning and derivation of Qur’an, see W. Graham, ‘The earliest meaning of “Qur’an”’, Die Welt des Islams n.s. 23/24 (1984), 364.
3. The other general term often used in Arabic for recitation of the Qur’ân is tilâwa. While both qir’a and tilâwa can sometimes be interchangeable, the former is the term used for the technical discipline of recitation and in phrases referring to a particular recitative style (e.g., 'ilm al-qir’a and qir’a bi-l-adhân, for both of which see below), while tilâwa is, as K. Nelson notes, ‘always general’ (The art of reciting the Qur'ân (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1985), p. 73; for examples, see pp. 72–7). Cf. L. al-Faruqi, ‘Tartil al-Qur’ân al-karim’, in K. Ahmad and Z. I. Ansari (eds.), Islamic perspectives: Studies in honour of Mawlana Sayyid Abul Ala Mawdudi (Leicester: Islamic Foundation, 1979), pp. 106–7.
6. Al-Sa’ïd, Recited Koran, pp. 19–50. This is not to deny that the early specialists in Qur’ân recitation used the orthography of the ’Uthmânic text in devising or defending variant readings: see, e.g., the comments of G. Bergsträßer on the Qur’ân readings of al-Ḥasan al-BAṣrî (‘Koranlesung des Hasan’, 54).
7. There is some lack of clarity as to whether the Cairo edition was first published in 1337, 1342, 1343 or 1344 (i.e., between 1919 and 1926 CE): 1342/1923–4 seems the most accepted date for the first public printing. See W. Graham, Beyond the written word: Oral aspects of scripture in the history of religion, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 211 n. 2.


17. Cf. Q 25:32. Tartil is hard to translate adequately here; it intensifies the verb rattala, of which it is the verbal noun (masdar) used as a cognate accusative.


19. For a detailed discussion of murattal and mujawwad styles, see ibid., pp. 101–35. Cf. also pp. 14–18, 83–100. Note that the terminology – not only with respect to tajwīd but also tartıl – can vary in meaning from context to context. Cf. also H. H. Touma, *Die Koranrezitation*, *Baessler-Archiv* 48 (n.s. 23) (1975), 87–8; M. Talbi, *La qira`a bi-l-alhan*, *Arabica* 5 (1958), 183–90. For a good practical grasp of the common distinction between tartıl (i.e., *murattal* recitation) as the accurate and measured, but less musically modulated and embellished recitation, and tajwīd (i.e., *mujawwad* recitation) as artistically embellished, highly euphonic cantillation, see Denny’s description of two different recitation sessions in modern Cairo (*Adab*, pp. 149–58). Denny’s exclusive use of the terms tartıl and tajwīd in this article is somewhat at odds with K. Nelson’s description of the usage in the same environment; his article equates tartıl with *murattal* and tajwīd with *mujawwad*, as is often done.

20. Nelson, *Art of reciting*, esp. ch. 4, pp. 52–100; cf. pp. 184–7. As a whole, Nelson’s fine study shows how a variety of skills and disciplines, as well as more intangible qualities of mind and feeling, are involved, both in theory and practice, in tajwīd (see esp. chs. 2–5, 7).


35. F. Denny, ‘Types of Qur’an recitation sessions in contemporary Cairo’ (unpublished paper) includes interesting examples from Cairo.

36. Dārimi, *al-Sunan*, sect. 18, ḥadith 8 of the introduction (*muqaddima*).

37. Cited by al-Ghazālī, *Ihya‘*, vol. I, p. 8. This tradition is also found in the ḥadith (see, e.g., Wensinck, *Concordance*, vol. I, p. 275b).

38. Or on each night of any month: Cf. al-Ghazālī, *Ihya‘*, vol. I, p. 8. The thirtieths (*ajzā‘, pl. of *juz‘*) are not the only divisions of the Qur’an for recitative purposes: see the entire section in al-Ghazālī’s *Ihya‘* (vol. I, p. 8) on recitative divisions of

39. The term *khatma* (lit. ‘sealing’) is used to designate the conclusion of the recitation of the entire Qur’anic text from beginning to end. *Khatmas* are often performed over the whole month, the last ten days or during the single ‘Night of Power’. Cf. Sharif, *Islam in India*, pp. 206–8. For another testimony (from west Africa) to the importance of Ramadân recitation, especially on *laylat al-qadr*, see Santerre, *Pédagogie*, p. 108.


53. A detailed analysis of this scenario may be found in A. Neuwirth, ‘Vom Rezitationstext über die Liturgie zum Kanon: Zu Entstehung und Wiederauflösung


63. Ibid.

64. Initially, the passages that are most often used as documentary evidence for the Qurʾān’s *i̇jāz* (the so-called *taḥaddī* verses, in which God ‘challenges’ the infidels to present a sura that would equal the verses in the Qurʾān) did not refer to the stylistic perfection of the qurʾānic language, but only later were understood as an aesthetic challenge. Cf. M. Radscheit, *Die koranische Herausforderung: Die Tahaddi-Verse im Rahmen der Polemikpassagen des Korans* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 1996).
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73. Talbi, *‘La qirā‘a bi-l-alḥān’*.


Further reading


Bergsträsser, G., *‘Koranlesung in Kairo’* (with a contribution by K. Huber), *Der Islam* 20 (1932), 1–42; 21 (1933), 110–40.


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