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ON AN EARLY QUR'ANIC PALIMPSEST AND ITS
STRATIGRAPHY: CAMBRIDGE OR. 1287

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ALAIN GEORGE
UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH

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A century ago, Agnes Smith Lewis and Alphonse Mingana published a short book about a group of very early Qur’anic leaves. The parchment of these fragments, together with that of others written in Syriac, Greek and Arabic, had been reused in the ninth century to create a new book by Christian Arabic scribes, who thereby unwittingly preserved it for later generations. In the next few minutes, I will introduce these Qur’anic fragments in the context of the whole palimpsest. The stratigraphy of this complex book—its intertwined and juxtaposed layers—can yield something of rare value: scraps of evidence about the context of some of the oldest Qur’anic leaves in existence. The question of variants will also be touched upon, but briefly, as its study is still ongoing.

The story begins in 1914, when Lewis and her twin sister Margaret Dunlop Gibson, both of them recognized experts of early Christianity, convened with Alphonse Mingana at their house in Cambridge around these old parchment leaves. Lewis had acquired the palimpsest from an antiques dealer in Suez in 1895. A first publication focusing on its Syriac parts had appeared in 1902, and Mingana, a specialist of Syriac and Arabic, was called upon to help read the Qur’anic text. He asserted that it contained a long list of variants on the canonical text of the Qur’an, which were presented in the somewhat provocatively titled book *Leaves from Three Ancient Qurans, possibly pre-Othmanic, with a list of their variants* (1914). At the outbreak of the First World War, the leaves had been lent for an exhibition in Leipzig. Their trace was lost until 1936, when they entered the collection of Cambridge University Library, in accordance with Lewis’s will. Partly because of this, and also because of Mingana’s reputation, which had been tarnished by falsified editions of Syriac texts, the manuscript received only a few passing – and mildly skeptical – mentions in the interwar years, and was almost entirely forgotten after the Second World War, especially in the field to which it is most important: Qur’anic studies.

It is only in the last decade that people have started getting interested in Or. 1287 again, with several researchers coming to it independently: Alba Fedeli has been working on a digital edition of the Qur’anic text and has recently identified a matching semi-folio in Birmingham. Chip Coakley has been studying the Syriac leaves as part of his work on a catalogue for Cambridge University Library. My own focus has been on its Arabic scripts, both Qur’anic and Christian, and on the palimpsest as a historical document.

The vast majority of extant leaves in the Hijazi tradition (the modern name for the earliest Qur’anic fragments) were discovered among thousands of other Qur’anic folios in repositories of great historical mosques, such as Damascus, Fustat, and Sanaa. In the palimpsest, this context is reduced to about a hundred leaves, which is small enough to provide the basis for a historical reflection. The manuscript straddles two key eras and milieux, Muslim and Christian, between the seventh and ninth centuries (and more if one takes into account the Biblical and secular Arabic leaves). One key question will be: how did a Christian community living under Abbasid rule come to own very early Qur’anic leaves? We will come back to it, but let me begin with a general overview of the manuscript.

Overview of the palimpsest

The Christian Arabic book is small (12 x 9 cm): the cost of new parchment must have been prohibitive for the community that assembled these leaves in the ninth century, and even the reused material had to be used sparingly. Most of the leaves at their disposal were folded to create four pages out of each leaf; the older parchment was sometimes trimmed in order to fit the new format. The palimpsest contains 64 Syriac folios and semi-folios, 21 Qur'anic folios and three Qur'anic semi-folios, three semi-folios from Muslim administrative texts, one leaf with a Christian Arabic lower text, half a folio from a Greek Bible, and a later replacement folio on paper (all the original folios are on parchment). To this list, one should add half a Qur'anic folio now at the Mingana Collection in Birmingham, acquired from a manuscript dealer from Leiden in 1936; and two semi-folios with lower text from the same Greek bible donated to the Benedictine Abbey of Beuron, in Germany, after the First World War. An Armenian fragment now in the Mingana collection may also have come from the same manuscript, though this remains uncertain.

A few centuries after the leaves were erased, the original iron gall ink became visible again to the naked eye through a chemical reaction with the parchment, but then only as a faint trace of the original, which is also largely covered by the upper layer of text. Ultraviolet light can slightly increase the visibility of the ink, but even with the aid of technology, reading the lower text is no straightforward task. Nevertheless, in the Qur'anic leaves, a distinction is immediately apparent between 17 small Qur'anic fragments (18 if one counts the semi-folio at Birmingham), and seven fragments coming from a larger Qur'an. I will proceed to each of these groups before moving on to the palimpsest as a whole.



Figure 1. One of the "large Qur'anic leaves," with Qur'anic lower text and Christian Arabic upper text. Cambridge, Cambridge University Library, Or. 1287, fol. 89v. Copyright: Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

The small Qur'anic leaves

The most unusual feature of these leaves is their small size, which roughly corresponds to that of the Christian Arabic manuscript (max. 19 x 12 cm). Most known Hijazi fragments are markedly larger, and the few examples that are of a comparable dimensions are horizontal, whereas here they are vertical. In terms of layout, these leaves have large margins: 3-4 cm on either side vertically, and 2-3 cm horizontally, which makes the blank area of the page nearly equal to the written area, whereas most other Hijazi fragments have very limited margins. Basic codicological observations can be made. The verse markers consist of six ovoid dots forming a triangle. Many pages carry traces of line-by-line rulings traced with a dry point. Three transitions from one *surah* to the next survive: in all of them, the scribe simply jumped two blank lines, and no traces of decoration can be discerned. The combination of this particular ruling technique with the absence of decoration is also known from other very early Qur'ans, and it can be traced back to the Greek scribal tradition and its scribal derivatives, Coptic and Christian Palestinian Aramaic.

Mingana thought that the small leaves came from two Qur'ans or perhaps three; but this observation was merely based on the general appearance of the script, whereas it is now possible to carry out more detailed analyses. The consistency of the above codicological features suggests that they might have come from a single manuscript. There is a certain degree of variability in letter shapes across the leaves, but this is not uncommon in Hijazi scripts, which are more akin to individual handwriting than to calligraphy proper. Thus these fragments could reflect the work of either a single hand with its innate variability, or of several scribes working together on the same manuscript; the latter phenomenon is well attested in Hijazi Qur'ans, as notably shown by François Déroche in his recent study of the so-called Codex Parisino-Petropolitanus, written by five scribes. Significant elements of overlap in letter shapes across the folios give a certain consistency to the script, which lends some support to the idea of a single scribe; but this idea remains hypothetical.

The script is close, but not identical, to that of one hand (hand "A") in the Parisino-Petropolitanus. The date proposed by Déroche for the latter manuscript, based on palaeography and orthography, falls between the last decades of the seventh century and the beginning of the eighth century. It may not be far off the mark for the small Cambridge folios; but it is not possible, in the current state of our knowledge, to pin this down very precisely.

Finally, I was able to check four of the numerous variants read in these leaves by Mingana. I was able to confirm none of them: one was illegible and in the other three, the text followed the standard recension of the Qur'an.

The large Qur'anic leaves

These seven leaves, once removed from the Christian Arabic book and unfolded, measure up to 25 x 19 cm. They have been extensively trimmed at the margins, sometimes cutting through lines of text, and would originally have been several centimeters larger in both height and width. There is little doubt, this time, that they all come from the same manuscript, given especially the consistency of their letter forms. The fragment is most remarkable for its script, starting with the shape of *alif*, the cornerstone of early Qur'anic palaeography. The main particularity of Hijazi scripts is the slant of the tall letters to the right, which is always variable within a given Qur'an, but hardly ever reaches above 25 degrees in relation to the vertical axis. In the Cambridge leaves, this value commonly reaches 45 degrees or more, which gives an unusually slanted appearance to the letter. Only two manuscripts with a comparable feature spring to mind: a Hijazi Qur'an from the Sanaa collection, again written by several hands; and the lower text of a palimpsest also discovered in Sanaa. According to a radiocarbon dating, there is a 99.2% probability that the latter was written before 676.

Reaching further back in time, the *alifs* of the three dated pre-Islamic Arabic inscriptions are much more upright. Surprisingly, the closest known parallels occur in late Nabataean rock inscriptions, such as the one from Umm Jadhayidh, in the region of Tayma (455-456 A.D.). These inscriptions reflect the transitory stage between classical Nabataean and the script we know as “Arabic,” which is technically a form of late Nabataean.

Similar conclusions emerge for the letter *ra'*. Here, one encounters a range of shapes, from two joined strokes through a circular line to a slightly curved vertical line. The former two shapes are known in Hijazi and in the earliest Islamic papyri, but the latter is only encountered, again, in late Nabataean inscriptions. Even more unusual is the shape of final *qaf*, with its sinusoidal tail that ends in a vertical stroke: there are no known parallels for it in the early Islamic or pre-Islamic record. One issue, however, is that the published corpus of late Nabataean inscriptions has not yielded examples of this letter in its final form so far. There is also a missing link in our documentation: late Nabataean papyri, which may have seen an early development of cursive tendencies such as this shape of *qaf*. Unfortunately, the most recent Nabataean papyri to have been discovered so far date to the second century C.E.

The manuscript is, at any rate, archaic even by the standards of the Hijazi corpus, the oldest manuscripts of the Qur'an. This in itself does not necessarily entail that it predates the rest of this corpus: alone, the lifespan of a scribe opens a window of several decades during which older forms may have been perpetuated. We do not have any clear notions of regional trends in the development of Hijazi, and of the possible conservatism of some milieux in such an age of rapid change as the seventh century. We therefore need to remain cautious in our interpretation; yet one additional feature does lend further credence to the hypothesis of an early date. The only visible *surah* heading of the fragment is composed of brown and orange sinusoidal lines that enclose orange circles. This motif finds broad parallels in the Hijazi tradition, but its placement is more unexpected: it occurs after the *basmala*, rather than before it, as in all other known Qur'ans. This points to a time when the norms governing the material form of the Qur'anic text had not been solidly established. There are, in sum, strong reasons to think that this is one of the earliest Qur'anic fragments in existence.

I was able to control two of the variants read by Mingana in this manuscript. One of them, again, proved to be illegible; but the other is confirmed. In f. 89v, where the accepted text reads “*fa lam yaku yanfa'abum 'iymanabum*” (XL, 85), we have here “*lam yakun nafa'...*” which implies “*fa lam yakun nafa'abum 'iymanabum.*” This sentence is mainly distinguished from the canonical verse by the use of the past tense of the verb *nafa'a*, instead of the present. The presence or absence of the final *nun* in *yakun* is an orthographic feature related to the application of *idgham* (assimilation) to this letter in oral recitation. This is an alteration of the *rasm* not attested in the variants literature, but without an incidence on meaning.

Finally, the following codicological features link this manuscript to the Syriac tradition:

1. The inclusion of a decorative *sūrah* title and its horizontal form
2. The ruling method, using lead, even though the ruling pattern, with line-by-line horizontals, is idiosyncratic (Syriac scribes usually just framed their text within a rectangle). This affinity with Syriac techniques stands in contrast to the situation of the small Qur'anic leaves, which have scribal features related to the Greek, Coptic or CPA tradition—a point to which we will return.

The Christian Arabic upper text

Moving forward two centuries, the finished product, the Christian Arabic manuscript, is typical of the monastic production of Palestine, in a broad sense, in the ninth to tenth centuries. Its script is particularly close to that of two dated specimens, both written at Saint Catherine of Sinai: the first in 868 by one Ishaq; and the second in 901 by Tuma al-Fustati (Thomas of Fustat) for a father Musa ibn Hakim, *al-qisis al-adbrabi*, the priest from Adhrah (i.e. Deraa). This monastery is thus the most likely place of assemblage for the palimpsest, although our knowledge of Christian Arabic manuscripts in this period is too limited to be absolutely certain. Monks and their books travelled between monasteries; thus in one recorded instance, a scribe of Baghdadi origin wrote a manuscript at Saint Sabas for one father Ishaq at Saint Catherine's.

The Cambridge upper text, at any rate, is clearly anchored in the Palestinian production of this period, as shown not only by its script but also by several other features: its decoration, including chapter titles and sentence separators; its contents, a typical compilation of sermons, patristic texts and hagiography; and its language, a form of classical Arabic with frequent mistakes and dialectal elements. At the level of scribal technique, the chapter titles and ornaments, together with the rounded letter endings, suggest a definite link with the Syriac tradition. On the other hand, the quires are formed as quaternions (typically four folded double leaves), a usage reminiscent of the Greek scribal tradition; and they are numbered with Greek or Coptic letters.

This mix of influences resonates with the historical reality of Christian communities in Palestine under the Abbasids. As shown by Sidney Griffith, the different currents of Middle Eastern Christianity, including the Monophysites and the Church of the East, crossed paths in Palestine during this period more than ever before. The great Chalcedonian monasteries of Saint Sabas, Saint Chariton, and Saint Catherine were largely cut off from Constantinople under the Abbasids and developed a religious literature in Syriac and Arabic, rather than Greek, in response to their immediate environment. This is directly reflected in the Cambridge manuscript, where one page carries the reverse impression of a Syriac title in metallic ink above the Christian Arabic text: the community that produced it, in other words, was also using Syriac for some of its texts. The same folio contains two successive layers of Syriac text below the Christian Arabic text. This adds up to four layers if one counts the title, which comes as a vivid reminder of the stratigraphic depth of this manuscript.

In the ninth century, Christian Chalcedonians from Palestine are known to have translated works from other Churches. The Christian upper text of the Cambridge manuscript thus contains, among others, texts not only by John Chrysostom, one of the great Church Fathers adopted by Byzantine orthodoxy; but also by Ephrem and one "Jacob" who may well be Jacob of Sarug: in other words, authors read primarily in the Monophysite Church.

Interestingly, Ephrem also features in the Syriac lower text of the palimpsest, and Lewis's edition mentions one "Mar Jacob" among its authors, though further study will be needed to establish whether this is the same Jacob as in the Christian Arabic text. The Syriac parts of the palimpsest come from at least seven different manuscripts, including two New Testaments in the Peshitta version from the fifth or sixth century, as well as hymns copied in the ninth century. This range of dates and texts evokes a small archive: the community that produced the palimpsest may have recycled some of its own disused manuscripts, possibly with elements of continuity at the level of content.

The palimpsest also contains three Greek uncial fragments of the Bible (counting the Beuron folios) that may date to the seventh or eighth century; and three Arabic administrative documents on parchment about a land sale. The script of the latter suggests a date in the ninth

century, and the contents may refer to dinars (gold coins) from the reign of al-Ma'mūn (813-833), although this reading is uncertain. Finally, the lower text contains one Christian Arabic fragment broadly comparable in script to the upper text, but interestingly not identical to it: the style comes closer to that of two manuscripts copied at Saint Sabas in 885, which again points to the possibility that books and leaves circulated between Palestinian monasteries in this period.

Context

How, then, did some very early Qur'anic leaves come into the hands of a Palestinian monastic community towards the late ninth century? It is worth remembering that, at an early stage in the history of Islam, particular attention was paid to the fate of the Qur'anic text in its written form. The earliest recorded expressions of this concern seem to occur in the *Muṣannaḥ* of 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Ṣan'ānī (ca. 744-827), a compilation of sayings and anecdotes about the Prophet, his companions and their followers. For example, one *khbar* reports that Ṭāwūs [ibn Kaysān] (d. 725) used to burn old papers, even those that contained the *basmala*, whereas Ibrāhīm [al-Nakha'ī, d. ca. 714] was against this practice if the name of God was written on the leaves. These anecdotes are about secular documents, but they attest to a search for norms with regard to the material form of the divine Word at the time of their composition, the late eighth century; it is also probable that they contain some authentic historical material.

No early legal opinions about the fate of Qur'anic leaves have emerged so far, but the stratigraphic depth of the repositories of the great historical mosques, which have all yielded Hijazi and Umayyad Kufic Qur'ans, suggests that norms about their disposal did emerge at a relatively early date. The hundreds of thousands of Qur'anic leaves preserved in these repositories have only yielded less than a dozen palimpsests: in other words, virtually all extant early Qur'ans were written on new parchment, despite its high cost. The contrast could not be greater with Christian manuscripts of the same period, where reuses are extremely common. In fact, apart from the Cambridge palimpsest, only the Sanaa palimpsest mentioned earlier also contains a Qur'anic lower text; with its Christian upper text, the Cambridge manuscript truly represents an extraordinary situation. Countless scenarios may be proposed to explain the unusual: I will limit myself to two of the more plausible hypotheses: (1) The transfer of folios from one community to another through looting or some other use of force; (2) The copy of Qur'anic leaves by Christian scribes in the seventh century.

Despite its territorial stability, the early Islamic empire was agitated by periodical spasms in both its centres and its peripheries. In the ninth century, there was a famine in Jerusalem under the reign of al-Ma'mūn (813-833) and, most relevantly perhaps, a peasant revolt led by Abu Harb al-Mubārqa' under al-Mu'tasim (833-842). During this revolt, the mosques and churches of Jerusalem were looted: it is plausible that an episode such as this saw the plunder and dissemination of an early repository of Qur'anic leaves. Comparable manuscript dispersions are recorded, for Jerusalem, in the different context of the eleventh century. Such a trajectory could explain why the small Qur'anic leaves are related, at the level of technique, to the Greek scribal tradition, as opposed to Syriac for the large leaves: the same scriptorium or milieu of scribes is unlikely to have produced both sets of leaves, even a few decades apart. It could also explain the presence of contracts about land sales that might mention dinars from the reign of al-Ma'mūn.

A second hypothesis is also worth considering: the Qur'anic leaves, or at least some of them, were copied by Christian scribes in the seventh century. Such practices are attested in some very early *akhbar* reported by 'Abd al-Razzaq and others, which mention followers of the Prophet's companions (*tabi'un*) who had the Qur'an copied by Christian scribes in Hira, in southern Iraq, for pay.

The late Nabataean script, of which we have seen examples earlier, was transformed into Arabic proper in the sixth century, most probably in Christian milieux north of the Arabian peninsula, in the settled fringes of the Syrian-Iraqi desert. Hira was one such centre; but Greater Syria, including the desert fringes of Palestine, was another, as notably shown by the extant Arabic inscriptions from this period. Some Qur'anic folios from the palimpsest might have been written in such a context, then discarded—perhaps because of variants, although it is too early to tell— and retained, until the archive was either reemployed, looted, or sold in the ninth century. These different trajectories, as may have become apparent, need not be mutually exclusive, and the reality of the process may well lie somewhere in between them.

The Cambridge palimpsest, at any rate, stands out as an extraordinary witness in the history of the Qur'an, and also of early Islam in a broader sense. Its intertwined layered texts and languages mirror the life, interactions and conflicts of the eastern Mediterranean world between the sixth and the ninth century: a bewildering stratigraphy, in sum, for a palimpsested history.