

Arabic Scripts and External Factors Kufic and Naskhī Scripts: A Case Study

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Abstract: *The evolution of Islamic formal script is relatively well understood in chronological and geographical terms. Scholars of paleography have identified script styles associated with particular periods (or dynasties) and regions. Others have considered the stylistic affinities between formal writing in books (especially the Qur'an), portable objects, and monumental inscriptions. There is, however, less agreement about what meanings might be attributed to specific scripts (for example, kufic and naskhī) and what external factors (political, religious, social, cultural) might have stimulated the emergence of new scripts and the abandonment of others. This article evaluates the scholarly approaches to this issue, which is one of the most important issues in Islamic calligraphy. It concentrates on the reasons behind the switch from Kufic to cursive naskhī script as a case study.*

Keywords: *Cursive, Kufic, Script.*

Introduction

The Arabic language is a key part of the culture and the national identity of the Arabs. It is also central to the religious identity of Muslims who look at it as a sacred language, the language of the Qur'an, the holy book that God has ensured to save it from loss, distortion and change; He says: "Indeed, it is We who sent down the Qur'an and indeed, We will be its guardian"⁽¹⁾. Thus, understanding the Arabic language is essential and necessary to understand the Islamic religious and political discourse.

From the time of the revelation of the Qur'an in the beginning of the first/seventh century, the written word has occupied a prominent place in Islamic traditions, which greatly emphasized upon the writing of Holy Qur'an and the aesthetic qualities of the letter forms. The study of early Arabic calligraphy in Europe started in 1194/1780, since then, a succession of authors have tried to classify early Qur'ans by script. A

considerable progress has been made through past years with regard to the evolution of the so-called Kufic script in Qur'an manuscripts and hence the general evolution of the script was well established, thanks especially to the works of B. Moritz, N. Abbott, and A. Grohmann⁽²⁾. But it should be noted that numerous difficulties still remain for the scholar and art historian, especially in dealing with the first six centuries of Islam.

This paper investigates the history and development of Arabic calligraphy and its some meanings that might be attributed to specific scripts and varieties, to the external factors (political, religious, social, cultural) that might have stimulated the emergence of new scripts and the abandonment of others. Rather than focusing principally on the description and taxonomy of calligraphic samples, we will focus on presenting this subject in its cultural and historical context in order to succeed in producing a coherent and well-argued account of the developmental phases of Qur'anic

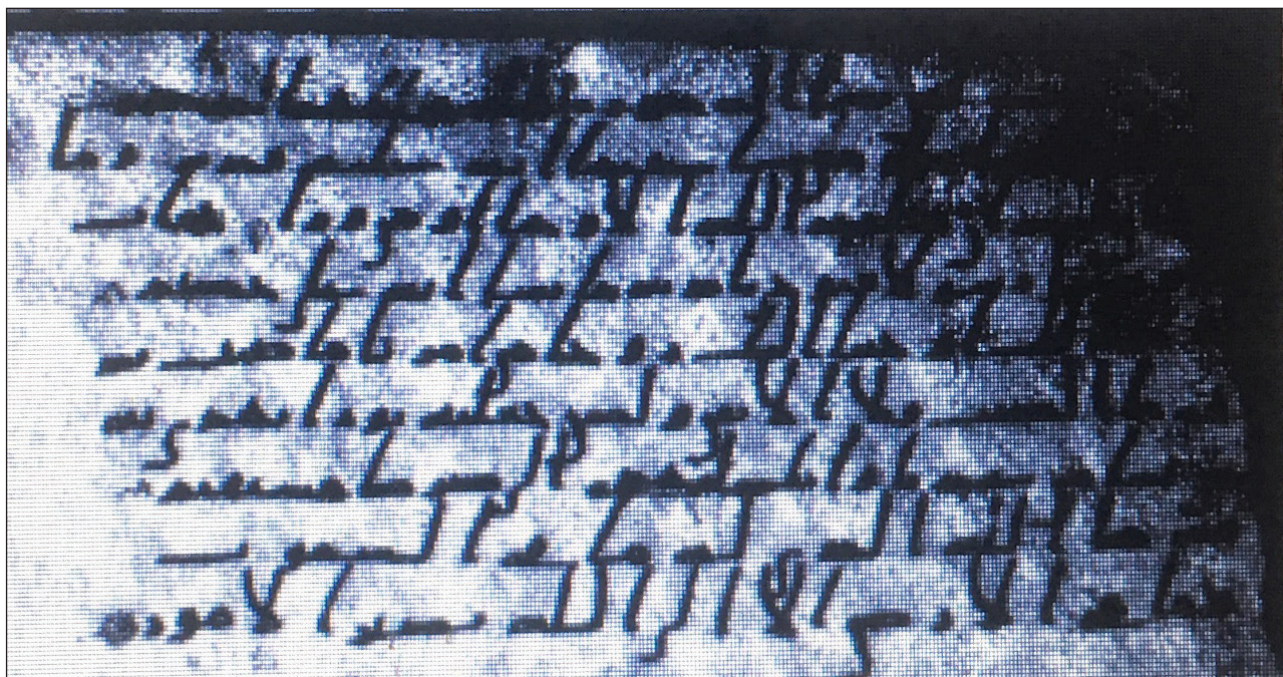


Fig. 1a: Example of an early Qur'an written in the Hijazi script.
(The National Archive Museum in Yemen, Al-A'zami, Fig 7.1).

calligraphy, and how Arabic came to be used as a written language from its beginnings up to the fifth/eleventh century.

The earliest Arabic scripts were as follows: the Meccan (*makkī*) and after that the Medinan (*madanī*) then the Basran (*basrī*), and then the Kufan (*kufī*). The earliest Qur'an manuscripts associated with the early stages of the emergence of Islam were probably produced somewhere around the mid to late first/seventh century. The typical early Qur'an was not written in words and phrases. It was written in groups of connected letters separated by spaces. The letters and connecting lines were written with fairly broad and uniform strokes. There was considerable flexibility in drawing the connecting lines and the letter bodies. Words were freely divided between lines, without respect for natural breaks in sense or pronunciation. The side margins were uneven where there was no any trace of rulings and the proportion, particularly on the left. The scribe most often wrote "freehand," relying upon his

eye to assemble his text on the page. Ancient copies from these periods have not survived, and exist only in fragmentary form. We have remaining fragments, only a few of which are dated or bear a colophon with a name. However, they provide the only available evidence for the early development of the written texts⁽³⁾.

The physical shape of these earliest manuscripts was vertical in format, without vowel markings (*naqt*) and used a minimum of diacritics (*i'jām*). Many of these early manuscripts were transcribed on parchment (the skins of sheep, goats and calves) due to its flexible and durable qualities. The parchments were assembled into gatherings, then sewn together and bound as quires into a book. The largest known fragment of consecutive Qur'anic text belongs to the second/eighth century and transcribed in the *ma'il* script, a distinctively inclined style of writing traditionally associated with the Hijazi cities of Mecca and Medina⁽⁴⁾. (Fig 1. A).

During the second/eighth century, the



**Fig. 1b: Page from the “Blue Qur’an” written in Kufic script.
(Collection of Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan).**

process of transformation from parchment to paper had begun whereby the Chinese paper was widely used at that time. By the fourth/tenth century, the process of paper manufacturing had become widespread in the Islamic world⁽⁵⁾This development significantly contributed to the expansion of literacy as well as a sophisticated system of writing by Ibn Muqla and Ibn al-Bawwab as will be seen shortly.

At any rate, while the Hijazi Qur’an manuscripts are modelled on earlier, the Kufic Qur’ans show a new artistic tradition, which is entirely distinct from its forebears and appears to have been consciously designed to give the sacred text a visual expression commensurate with its elevated status. This kind of script takes its name from the town of Kufa, where it was believed to have been developed. The prime characteristic of Kufic manuscripts is a system of geometric expansion that often appears to

govern all elements, from the thickness of the stroke to the spacing of the letters and the size of the page. The codification of the Kufic style must have happened between 64/684 and 72/692, which places it into the time of the Caliph ‘Abd al-Malik, the same Umayyad ruler who reformed the coinage of the empire, introduced Arabic as the language of administration, and built the Dome of the Rock, a sanctuary adorned with mosaic inscriptions cast in Kufic⁽⁶⁾.

During the Abbasid period in ninth and tenth centuries, Qur’ans were written in Kufic script and were being produced within a horizontal format, which was suitable for the short and elongated parallel strokes of this script. Also, by the fourth/tenth century (as mentioned above) paper was gradually replacing parchment as the preferred medium of transcription, especially in the Islamic East⁽⁷⁾. (Fig. 1.B).

There was a general conclusion that Kufic

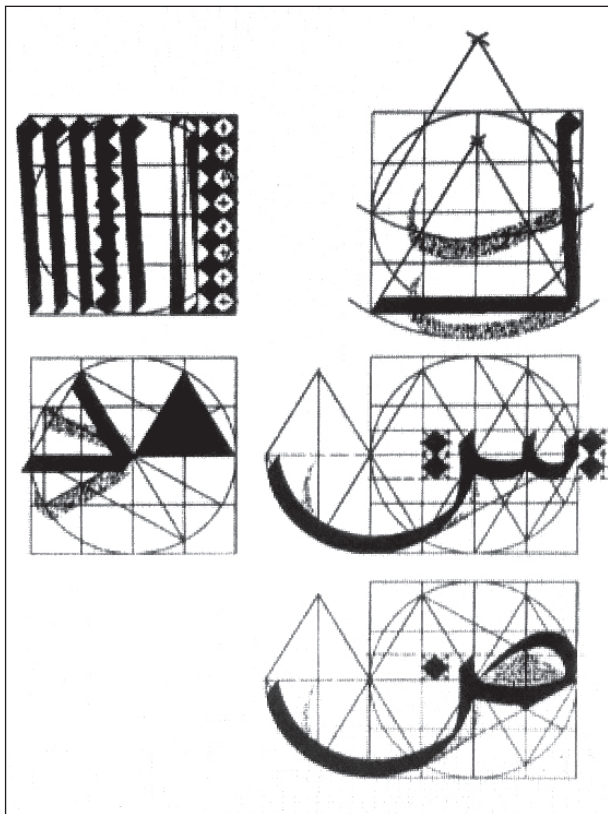


Fig. 2a: Reconstruction of the method of Ibn Muqla. (Tabbaa, Fig 3).

script became increasingly difficult to read for laymen, and hence became useful for decorative or magical purposes. Thus, during the fourth/tenth century, there was an urgently need for a new system that concentrates on secular writing. Thus, the cursive *naskhī* script, which was proportionate in style, was increasingly being used on paper materials. The cursive script was mostly used in documents of a commercial and administrative nature due to its legibility. This script was developed by the efforts of both Ibn Muqla (d. 328/940) and especially Ibn al-Bawwab (d. 413/1022) and became the most popular styles for transcribing Arabic manuscripts⁽⁸⁾.

Ibn Muqla introduced a new method of writing based on the principles of geometric design (*handasat al-hurūf*), known as *al-khatt al-mansūb* (proportioned script). Applying the

nib of the qalam (reed pen) to the written surface to form a square or rhombic dot, he reckoned the number of dots used to form a straight-line *alif*, the first letter of the Arabic alphabet, and then calculated all other letters in relation to the *alif*⁽⁹⁾. (Fig 2. A).

Some opinions minimize the importance of the role of the Abbasid wazir Ibn Muqla in inventing any new scripts or especially what the so-called the proportioned script. They point out that this kind of system was written when Ibn Muqla was still a child. Furthermore, neither Ibn al-Nadim, nor any other early source, make mention of a treatise on calligraphy authored by Ibn Muqla. In addition, the earliest surviving source that mentions Ibn Muqla as the originator of the proportioned script was written three centuries after his death. Therefore, Ibn Muqla known as *ṣāhib al-khatt al-mansūb* (master of the proportioned script) was not the inventor of any new scripts but there was a later fine calligrapher who invented a script style which had in reality developed gradually over a longer period of time. On the whole, the system of proportion was intended for the large variety of scribal scripts and was not limited only to Qur'anic Kufic, which was not in the fourth/tenth century affected by the rules of proportion⁽¹⁰⁾.

During the fourth/tenth century, Ibn al-Bawwab's reputation grew rapidly and became the most illustrious Arab calligrapher. Through written sources, we know that his essential contribution to calligraphy was the introduction of an artistic and decorative element into the purely mechanical system of proportions known as *al-khatt al-mansūb* introduced some seventy years earlier by Ibn Muqla. He is considered as an innovator in the field of illumination. He actually perfected the style of Ibn Muqla and improved it by making the script clearer, more cursive, and more elegant but did not invent

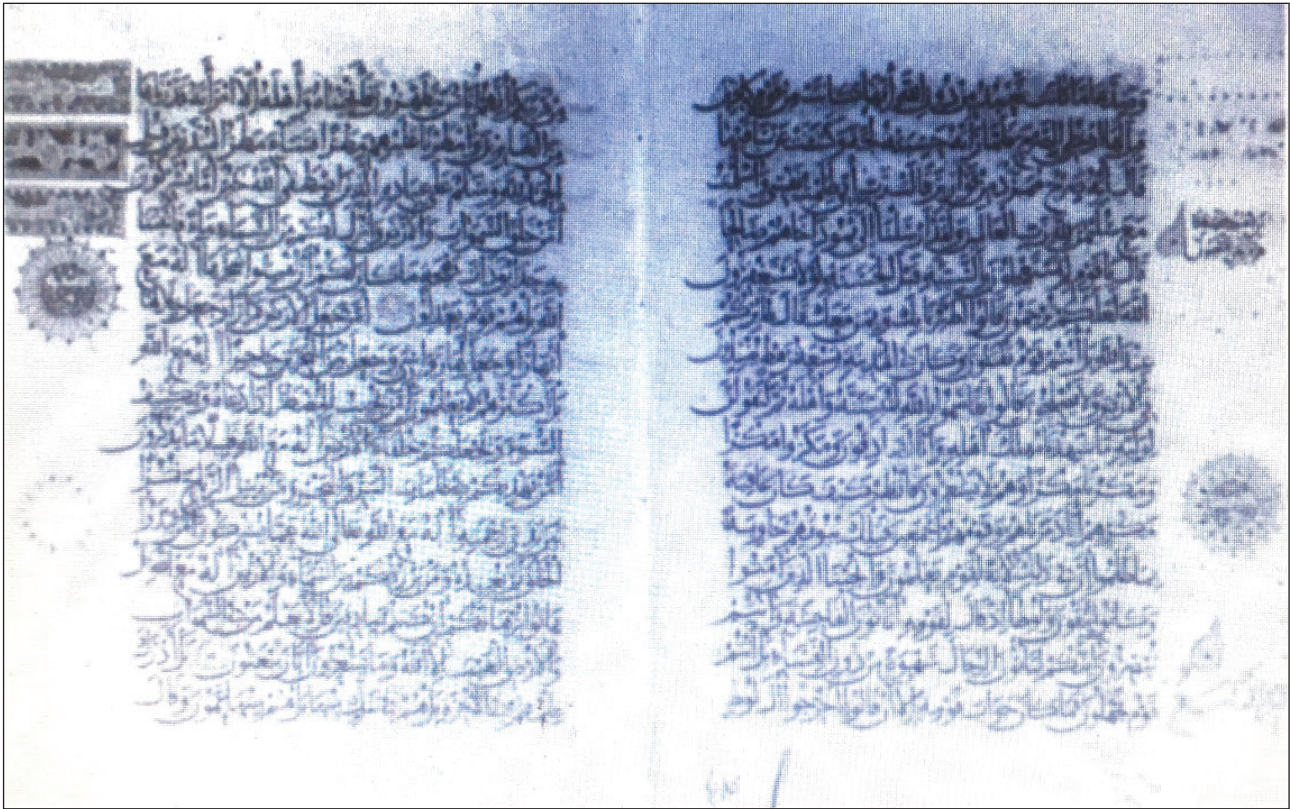


Fig. 2b: Qur'an of *Ibn al-Bawwab* written in *naskhī* script. (Dublin, The Chester Beatty Library, 1431, f. 241a and 241b, Tabbaa, Fig 22).

new scripts as is sometimes pretended⁽¹¹⁾. (Fig. 2. B).

The Switch from Kufic to Cursive Naskhī Script

The switch from Kufic to cursive *naskhī* script in Qur'anic manuscripts and monuments was, indeed, one of the most important issues in Islamic calligraphy. This transformation occurred first in Qur'an manuscripts in the center of Islamic world Baghdad during the fourth/tenth century, and after about one century occurred in monumental inscriptions. Such a significant change inevitably provokes demand for further information and explanations although it was not given the attention it deserved by specialists⁽¹²⁾.

Therefore, the obvious question in this case is what were the cultural and political

requirements that led to these meaningful calligraphy forms?

There are some explanations for the triumph of cursive scripts. Reasons include: the implications in respect of the distribution of space occupied by the script and its features of illumination; Kufic had become a seemingly archaic script employed only for ornamental purposes, especially by the middle of the fifth/eleventh century; new writing technologies; the rise of the secretarial class; and religious sectarianism. Also, we should not forget the influence of a growing class of copyists and the professionalization of book trade during the early middle Islamic period⁽¹³⁾. However, perhaps the most controversial cultural reasons in this significant change are the impacts of religious and political discord on the development of certain scripts as will be seen

below.

During the lifetime of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), the Qur'an was not collected in book form. During the caliphate of Abu Bakr (r. 11-13/632-634), many *huffaz* (those who had learnt the Holy Quran by heart) died in the battle of Yamama. Therefore, 'Umar Ibn al-Khattab (r. 13-23/634-644) became concerned at the heavy loss of casualties, fearing that a large part of the Qur'an could be lost if the rate of martyrdom increased. He expressed these fears to the Caliph Abu Bakr and asked him to compile the Qur'an into a permanent book form. In fact, it was felt that it was necessary that the Holy Quran should be compiled in a book form for the guidance of the people. Abu Bakr agreed to the suggestion and called upon Zaid Ibn Thabit (one of the revelation scribes) to collect and compile the Qur'an into one volume. After having carefully compared and cross-checked each ayah, a compilation was prepared, and it was called *Mashaf*. Abu Bakr became its official custodian, passing on to 'Umar Ibn al-Khattab during his caliphate. After his death the Qur'anic volume was passed into the custody of his daughter Hafsa⁽¹⁴⁾.

In the time of the Caliph 'Uthman Ibn 'Affan (r. 23-35/644-656), the Islamic empire increased and many different nations and tribes who did not speak and understand Arabic incorporated. Because difference in reciting the Qur'an and pronunciation began to occur, the companion Hudaiifah Ibn al-Yaman heard the differences in the recitation of the Qur'an by the inhabitants in Sham and related these concerns to 'Uthman who expressed a deep apprehension at this new development that was likely to be a cause of split among the people. Therefore, 'Uthman took action and asked Hafsa for the original volume of the Qur'an promising to return it to her once copies were made. 'Uthman appointed a Committee, and among the members of the

committee was Zaid Ibn Thabit. This Committee was commissioned to prepare an authorized text. 'Uthman checked the compilation himself and finally approved it. Copies of this edition were prepared and supplied to all parts of the dominions. All previous copies in use in the various parts of the Muslim dominions were collected and burnt⁽¹⁵⁾.

There is a claim that the companion Ibn Mas'ud did not agree to destroy his version, which differed from the Uthmanic recension and was later taken over by the Shi'ite Fatimids. As time went on, this difference became more obvious by the end of the fourth/tenth century due to the use of different scripts. This led Ahmad Ibn Mujahid, one of the jurists in the time of Abbasid Caliph al-Muqtadir (r. 317-320/929-932), to write Qur'anic codices based on the seven canonical readings. Ibn Muqla adopted Ibn Mujahid's views, and both were against one of the variant *qurrā'* (readers) named Ibn Shanabiudh who adopted Ibn Mas'ud's version. However, after flogging him, he eventually abandoned from his previous positions and adopted the Uthmanic recension⁽¹⁶⁾.

Ibn Muqla began to create the new script that led to the switch from Kufic to cursive *naskhī* script in Qur'anic manuscripts. According to one of the studies that the act of Ibn Muqla under the patronage of al-Muqtadir was for political purposes as follows:

The Abbasids faced many challenges by various Shi'ite persuasions who repeatedly attempted to exercise independent authority from the Abbasids. Indeed, Shi'ite threat weakened the central power of the Abbasid state. At the end of the second/eighth century, the Abbasids found they could no longer keep their huge polity. By the tenth century, the situation had changed further. The Qarmatians came close to raiding Baghdad several times

and occupied Basra and Kufa during the reign of al-Muqtadir. In 333/945, the Buyids entered Iraq, controlled the Abbasid caliphate, and made the Abbasid Caliph their vassal. Furthermore, the Fatimid dynasty had advanced to Egypt in 358/969, establishing their capital in Cairo⁽¹⁷⁾.

To face these overwhelming threats, the Abbasid caliph al-Qadir who held the Caliphate for 40 years (381-422/991-1031) strongly attempted to reclaim the Abbasid power and authority, and took the lead in the Sunni struggle against Isma'ili Shi'ism. He led a movement of a Sunnite restoration in which he condemned Mu'tazilism and Rafidism and all allegedly deviant doctrines, in which he considered them as the enemies of Islam in his epistle (*al-Risāla al-Qādirīyya*). Al-Qadir acknowledged the excellence of the Sunnite orthodoxy and denounced the deviant teachings, in particular on the issue of *Kalām* (Words) of God and His attributes. One of the most important issues in this epistle was that Ibn Mas'ud's version, "which was used by the Fatimids, constituted an unacceptable alteration of the Quranic text". Consequently, the political aim of *al-Risāla al-Qādirīyya* was "undermining the religious foundations of the Fatimid and Buyid states and affirming the legitimacy of the Abbasid caliphate". The Abbasids worked hard to face Shi'ite threat using their position as the enforcers of the correct religion. For instance, Ibn Muqla and Ibn al-Bawwab made a significant contribution to the reform of the Qur'anic script and created a new script, "easily legible, and suitable for expressing the clear and explicit nature of the Word of God". "The new script must be seen as a direct reflection of the Qadir creed's insistence on the single and apparent truth in the Qur'an"⁽¹⁸⁾. Therefore, the switch from Kufic to cursive *naskhī* script in Qur'anic manuscripts was for political purposes.

However, one may still wonder, whether

this hypothesis that linked the rise of the cursive script to the re-assertion of Sunni orthodoxy needs serious rethinking. Little evidence that the script carried any ideological connotation. With regard to Ibn Mas'ud's refusal, there is an authentic hadith clearly indicates that the main reason behind Ibn Mas'ud's refusal to burn his version was that Ibn Mas'ud saw himself better than Zaid bin Thabit to collect the Qur'an due to his seniority in Islam, and his refusal was not related to the validity of Uthmanic recension⁽¹⁹⁾. Accordingly, the Uthmanic recension is identical with the collected set of revelations that the Prophet Muhammad had received from God through the Angel Gabriel (*Jibril*). There is no significant difference between the Uthmanic recension and Ibn Mas'ud's version, which was the focus of that hypothesis. 'Uthman did a great service to the cause of Islam through preserving the Holy Quran in its original form free from any corruption. 'Uthman united the Muslim community on an authoritative and standard text for all times.

In fact, the hypothesis of the transformation from Kufic to cursive *naskhī* script remains a matter of debate among scholars. Perhaps the change in the scribal tradition from Kufic to cursive *naskhī* script in Qur'anic manuscripts was primarily presented by practical considerations, such as the introduction of paper and the need to produce larger numbers of Qur'an manuscripts penned in a more legible script, so as to meet the increasing demand occasioned by demographic change.

In closing, the cultural and political context is very rarely explored in paleography. Thus, in order to offer a conscious attempt to improve the legibility of Arabic, we need to rethink in various central topics as the position of the calligrapher and his training, the religious significance of calligraphy in Muslim culture,

the degree of awareness of the religious and political implications of the new calligraphic style, and how the focus on creating readable script can be understood in the context of the ongoing military and ideological conflict.

The field of paleography is among the most developed fields in Islamic studies. Recent discoveries are reviving the question of the development of Arabic as a written language.

This deserves re-examination because we now know so much more about the linguistic situation of Arabia in antiquity and on the eve of Islam as it was apparent in diverse ways in this paper. Once Again, the ongoing studies, certainly will bring more material evidence of the linguistic situation in the early Islamic period. Although most discoveries are very brief and the amount of linguistic material is accordingly small, but one word can make a difference.

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ملخص: تطور الخط الإسلامي عبر تسلسله التاريخي والجغرافي يعد عملية تكاد تكون مفهومة بشكل نسبي، إذ قام علماء الكتابات الإسلامية بتحديد أنماط الخطوط المرتبطة بفترات أو سلالات ومناطق معينة؛ كما أنهم أخذوا بعين الاعتبار جميع الارتباطات الأسلوبية بين الكتابة الرسمية في الكتب -وبخاصة القرآن- والأشياء المنقولة، والنقوش التذكارية. من جانب آخر، هناك اتفاق أقل حول المعاني والتفسيرات التي يمكن أن تعزى إلى خطوط معينة؛ كالخط الكوفي، والخط النسخي، وتحديد العوامل الخارجية (سياسية، أم دينية، أم اجتماعية، أم ثقافية) التي ربما حفزت ظهور خطوط جديدة والتخلي عن أخرى. وعليه، فإن هذا البحث يقوم بتقييم المنهج العلمي لهذه المسألة، وتفنيد بعض الآراء العلمية والأسباب الكامنة وراء التحوّل من استخدام الخط الكوفي إلى الخط النسخي، كحالة دراسة.

Notes

- (1) Qur'an, *Sūra al-Hijr*. Aya no. 9, p. 262; Saheeh International, *The Qur'an English Meanings*. (Jeddah: Abul-Qasim Publishing House, 1997), p. 242.
- (2) For more information, see Moritz, Bernhard, *Arabic Palaeography; a Collection of Arabic Texts from the First Century of the Hidjra Till the Year 1000*. (Leipzig: K.W. Hiersemann, 1905); Abbott, Nabia, *The Rise of the North Arabic Script and its Kur'ānic Development*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939); Grohmann, Adolf, "The Problem of Dating Early Qur'ans". Walter de Gruyter, *Islam: Zeitschrift für Geschichte und Kultur des Islamischen Orients*, 33, 1958, pp. 213- 231.
- (3) Blair, Sheila, *Islamic Calligraphy*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), pp. 105-107; Grohmann, "The Problem of Dating Early Qur'ans", pp. 218-222.
- (4) Diem Werner, "Some Glimpses at the Rise and Early Development of the Arabic Orthography". *Orientalia* 45, 1976, pp. 255–256; François Déroche, *The Abbasid Tradition: Qur'ans of the 8th to 10th Centuries*. (London: Nour Foundation in association with Azimuth Editions and Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 12.
- (5) Tabbaa, Yasser, "The Transformation of Arabic Writing. Part I: Qur'anic Calligraphy", *Ars Orientalis* 21, 1991, p. 141.
- (6) For more information, see Kessler, Christel, "Abd al-Malik's Inscription in the Dome of the Rock. A Reconsideration". *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* no. 1, 1970, pp.2-14.
- (7) Baker, Colin F. *Qur'an Manuscripts: Calligraphy, Illumination, Design*. (London: British Library, 2007), p. 23.
- (8) Baker, *Qur'an Manuscripts*, pp. 23-26.
- (9) Tabbaa, "The Transformation of Arabic Writing", pp. 121-122.
- (10) Tabbaa, "The Transformation of Arabic Writing", p. 122.
- (11) Roxburgh, David. "On the Transmission and Reconstruction of Arabic Calligraphy: Ibn al-Bawwab and History". *Maisonneuve and Larose: Studia Islamica*, 96, 2003, pp. 39-40.
- (12) Yasser Tabbaa suggests "that the main reason for this neglect is methodological, emanating from the specialized approaches and rather inflexible agendas prevailing in epigraphy and paleography". He also mentioned that most studies focused on the recording and translation of inscriptions and distinguishing many calligraphic varieties, rather than focusing on the cultural reasons behind changes in calligraphic form itself. See Tabbaa, "The Transformation of Arabic Writing", pp. 119-120.
- (13) Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy*, p. 177.
- (14) Al-A'zami, Muhammad Mustafa, *The History of the Quranic Text from Revelation to Compilation- A Comparative Study with the Old and New Testaments*. (UK Islamic Academy, Leicester England, 2003), pp. 77-82.
- (15) Al- A'zami, *The History of the Quranic Text*, pp. 87- 96.
- (16) Tabbaa, "The Transformation of Arabic Writing", pp. 141-142.
- (17) Tabbaa, "The Transformation of Arabic Writing", p. 142.
- (18) Tabbaa, "The Transformation of Arabic Writing", pp. 142-143.
- (19) Al-Tirmidhi, Mohammed Ibn 'Isa, *Sunan al-Tirmidhi*. (Dar Ihya al-Turath al-Arabi: Beirut, 1985), Hadith no. 3104, p. 929.

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