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Ibn Muqla and the Qur'ānic Manuscripts in Oblong Format

Valery V. POLOSIN

The problem of the oblong format which was chosen for this paper is, in a way, the result of the relatively recent reclassification of the different types of Kufic by F. Déroche¹ and of resulting revision in the dating of corresponding manuscripts. This revision dates the manuscripts in question to the Early Abbasid period and no earlier. Consequently the redated Qur'āns—all in oblong format and in Kufic script—are now sandwiched between another two groups of Qur'ānic manuscripts, both in vertical format and in scripts other than Kufic.

Thanks to this redating, an alternation of formats was noticed. Scholarly interest was excited by the fact that in the Early Abbasid period the ancient Qur'ānic codices formerly in vertical format began to be executed in horizontal or oblong format.² This innovation continued to be employed until at least the 10th century A.D. Then the vertical format returned, and manuscripts assumed the original form.

Without going into detailed analyses of the different attempts to explain this phenomenon,³ I would like only to quote some words from a work published in 1980: “Precisely why the horizontal format came to dominate, why this peculiar method was employed, and furthermore, what its origins were, are all matters that have never been properly explained.”⁴

Much has since been done to describe and examine corresponding manuscript material, but no sufficient reason for both metamorphoses has been found till now, and no definite opinion has been expressed. In what follows, this phenomenon is considered from a new angle.

¹ DÉROCHE François (1983), *Les manuscrits du Coran. Aux origines de la calligraphie coranique*, (*Catalogue des manuscrits arabes. Deuxième partie: Manuscrits musulmans. t. I/1*), Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, p. 50-51.

² *Ibid.*, p. 50.

³ ETTINGHAUSEN Richard (1962), *Arab Painting*, Skira, Geneva, p. 167-168; LINGS Martin and SAFADI Yasin H. (1976), *The Qur'an: Catalogue of an Exhibition at the British Library*, The British Library, London, p. 17; JAMES David (1980), *Qur'āns and Bindings from the Chester Beatty Library. A Facsimile Exhibition*, World of Islam Festival Trust, London, p. 13; REZVAN Efim A. (2000), *Koran i ego tolkovanii (tekstii, perevodii, kommentarii)*, Saint Petersburg, p. 51-53 (= *The Qur'ān and its exegesis*).

⁴ JAMES, *Qur'āns*, p. 13.

I

The Vienna manuscript Cod. mixt. 814, fol. XI b⁵ is taken here as typical of the manuscripts in question. The five-line text on the published page of that manuscript⁶ shows simultaneously both the trained scribe's hand and his primitive—almost childish—manner of writing (ill. 1).⁷

This specimen's features are common to all the manuscripts under consideration, which until quite recently were dated from the first century after the Hijra to the fourth century after the Hijra. The method of writing is characterised, first of all, by the unusual division of words between two successive lines. The scribe failed to start the page with a whole word. Instead, he began it with the individual letter “*bā*” which is nothing else but the terminal letter of the word “*al-‘adhāb*,” the rest of which was written on the previous page of the manuscript.

However, this was not the scribe's oversight, since he did so again and again on the same page, practically in every text-line. Thus, he also failed to place the whole word “*al-nār*” on the first line, the word “*yu‘raḏūna*” in the second line and the word “*ghuduwwan*” in the third line. In each case he divided the words between two successive lines. We know of no reason for such a practice, but it was typical in the manuscripts in oblong format.⁸ We merely accept this as an ancient rudimentary manner of writing.

Another feature of the earliest manner of writing—putting extra spaces between words and letters—is also typical of the manuscripts in oblong format. It is because of such spacing that there are only nine words on the entire page, including the conjunction “*wāw*.” Nine out of about seventy-eight thousand words in the whole of the Qur’ān! The density of our scribe's text is extremely low. In the entire manuscript

⁵ DUDA Dorothea (1992), *Islamische Handschriften II. Teil 1. Die Handschriften in arabischer Sprache*. Textband. Verlag der österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Vienna, p. 193. D. Duda dates the manuscript from the second half of the 9th century A.D.

⁶ Ibid., Tafelband, ill. 15.

⁷ The text reads: [... *al-‘adhā*] //bi **al-nāru yu‘raḏūna ‘alayhā ghuduwwan wa ‘ashiyyan/ wa yawma taqūmul/ (Qur’ān XL, 48/45 - 49/46).*

⁸ This phenomenon is mentioned from time to time, but I have failed so far to find an explanation of its origin: “The words do not stand out as such and are frequently divided at the end of the line” (ABBOTT Nabia (1939), *The Rise of the North Arabic Script and its Kur’ānic Development, with a Full Description of the Kur’ān Manuscripts in the Oriental Institute*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, p. 60, n° 1); this was said about the manuscript dated from the first to second century after the Hijra and written in Makkan script. See also ibid. p. 63, n° 7 (a MS dated 2nd-3rd century A.H.); p. 65, n° 10 (MS dated 2nd century A.H.); p. 67, n° 15 (MS dated 2nd-3rd century A.H.). “Il est tout à fait courant, dans les corans anciens, que le découpage des mots ne respecte pas la règle actuelle qui interdit en arabe de couper les mots : deux des trois *alif* aux larges retours superposés à la fin des premières lignes représentent la première lettre de l’article” (GUESDON Marie-Geneviève and VERNAY-NOURI Annie [eds.] [2001], *L’Art du livre arabe. Du manuscrit au livre d’artiste*, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, p. 39, n° 16).

the text must have used up to about 900 folios. That number of folios corresponds to approximately 61 square meters of expensive parchment in all. What might such a manuscript have cost?⁹

These features are well-known to specialists. I quote one example from Nabia Abbott's *Catalogue of the Qur'āns*: "Single and group letters are separated by as much as 1 cm. The words do not stand out as such and are frequently divided at the end of the line."¹⁰ This describes a manuscript which she dated to the first century after the Hijra.

These characteristics have commonly been accepted merely as signs of archaic writing and no longer attract attention.

II

There is, however, something unexpected in this strange and seemingly undeveloped writing. Let us look at ill. 2, which presents the same page of the manuscript. This time the text shows another kind of peculiarity—alternate red and black letters arranged diagonally. This additional arrangement of the text, like a visual rhyme,¹¹ undoubtedly enriches the look of the page. As far as I know, it has never been listed among the features of the manuscripts in oblong format.¹² But such an arrangement is also typical of the texts in the manuscripts under consideration. What is its origin, then?

One other peculiarity has never been mentioned in the descriptions of the oblong format manuscripts. It can be shown graphically as well (ill. 3).

III

As one can see, it is the same text again, this time divided into five sections by six vertical lines. All of them are set at regular intervals. Two of the lines are merely vertical rules at either side of the text. But what are the other four? I would like to direct

⁹ It is next to impossible that such expenditure of writing material when copying Kufic Qur'āns could have been supported over three or four centuries. On economy in paper (and all the more in parchment) see ABBOTT, *Rise*, p. 13-14.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 60, n° 1.

¹¹ For example: love – move; bough – though.

¹² However, M.-G. Guesdon's observations on the MS Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Arabe 341, fol. 135a are perhaps similar to mine: "La composition de cette page est particulièrement travaillée: les groupes de lettres semblent former deux triangles rectangles, de surface inégale, entre lesquels se trouve une bande comprenant le décor de séparation des versets» (GUESDON and VERNAY-NOURI, *Art du livre*, p. 38, n° 15). But this is a single reaction to the diagonal arrangement in the Kufic writing that I know.

attention to the fact that they were not drawn on the original manuscript. These lines help us to see that the individual fractions of the text appear to be arranged along these virtual verticals, as if the scribe also saw them himself while writing. What might this mean?

Where the fractions are contiguous with those verticals, at either end of the text-lines, in the first instance there are four hits at the beginnings of the lines and five hits at their ends (nine hits out of a possible ten). Following from right to left we have four out of five for the second vertical, three out of five for both the third and fourth vertical, and two out of five for the fifth. The points of contact are too numerous to be considered accidental.

What are these verticals?

I expect that the answer can be found in the next illustration (ill. 4), which is the last in the series. It is nearly the same as ill. 3, with some additions to show in detail the layout of the ruled area in the manuscript.

IV

The ruled area for the text is a rectangle, outlined in ill. 4 in yellow. This rectangle is a key figure in the design and, accordingly, the main subject of my presentation. Its characteristics should be examined in detail.

The ruled area presents a rectangle set horizontally, its sides in a ratio of three to five.¹³ We need no measurements to confirm this ratio; it is confirmed graphically by the fact that the ruled rectangle is divided into five equal sections. “Five” corresponds to the length of the area.¹⁴ Three sections at either end of the area form a square which clearly demonstrates its height—namely three units (or sections) of the same size. That both are exactly square is shown by the circles inscribed in each of them. Thus the ruled area keeps to the ratio of three to five with a high degree of precision.

It is only from this mathematical description that we can see how the text-line may be divided into equal sections according to the ratio of the height to the width of the ruled area. It is this that our scribe was exploiting in the specimen under

¹³ There may be a different ratio in other manuscripts (see n. 12). However the graphic method remains in force.

¹⁴ Cf. M.-G. Guesdon’s notices about two Kufic Qur’ān manuscripts of oblong format: “La largeur de la surface d’écriture est proche de deux fois celle de la hauteur” (GUESDON and VERNAY-NOURI, *Art du livre*, p. 38, n° 15), and “La surface d’écriture est proche du double carré” (ibid., p. 39, n° 16). For a set of proportions for the written area see DÉROCHE François *et al.* (2000), *Manuel de codicologie des manuscrits en écriture arabe*, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, p. 180-182, where some nominal values, I believe, need correction.

consideration. When writing, he was harmonizing letters and words with the length of those sections. On the background of the ruled area, graduated according to the ratio of three to five, the connection of the text fractions with the graduations is especially clear. The letter “*bā*,” for example, occupies three sections; the letters “*rā*” and “*wāw*” occupy half a section each; separate fragments of the words occupy one (*taqū-mu*), one and a half (‘*alay-hā*; ‘*ashiyyan*), two (*ghudu-wwan*) and three (*yu‘ra-ḍū-na*) sections.

To facilitate the execution of this writing and to make it more flexible within each text-line and more attractive on the page as a whole, the scribe separated the letters, groups of letters and words with equal spaces, using blanks to balance his arrangement and maintain the vertical alignment of words or individual letters. Such a mathematical system of writing was hardly possible in the first centuries of Islam. What once seemed to us to be defects of an ancient and primitive manner of writing (dividing words, and adding spaces between letters and words) now perhaps emerges as a perfectly rational system which first managed to govern Arabic writing using mathematical principles.¹⁵

When one looks for an inventor of this proportioned writing, Ibn Muqla’s name comes naturally to mind. It is very likely that the newly discovered system is that of Ibn Muqla, which was long considered lost.¹⁶ This attribution is further supported by both Ibn Khallikān and Ibn al-Nadīm. From the former we know that Ibn Muqla’s innovation was based on the Kufic script.¹⁷ According to Ibn al-Nadīm, word—and letter—spacing were uniquely practised by Ibn Muqla and his relatives:

قال محمد ابن اسحق:

وممن كتب بالمداد من الوزراء والكتّاب: أبو أحمد العباس بن الحسن وأبو الحسن علي بن عيسى وأبو علي محمد بن علي [المشهور بأ] بن مقلة [...] وممن كتب بالحبر أخوه أبو عبد الله الحسن بن علي [...] وهذان رجلان لم ير مثلهما في الماضي الى وقتنا هذا. وعلى خطّ ابيهم مقلة كتب [...] وقد كتب في زمانهما جماعة وبعدهما من اهلها واولادهما فلم يقاربوهما. وانما يتدرّ للواحد منهم¹⁸

¹⁵ F. Déroche alludes to this motivation when saying: “The change of format was not accidental, but it was not linked to the nature of the material used or to any technical change. Aesthetic considerations may have been a factor, and it has been suggested that the introduction of the new format was a response to the more horizontal emphasis of the so-called Kufic scripts in which these oblong Qur’āns were written” (DÉROCHE François [1992], *The Abbasid Tradition. Qur’ans of the 8th to the 10th Centuries AD*, [The Nasser D. Khalili Collection of Islamic Art, 1] Azimuth Editions, London, p. 17-18).

¹⁶ DÉROCHE François (1987-89), “Les manuscrits arabes datés du III^e/IX^e siècle,” *Revue des études islamiques* 55/57, p. 365.

¹⁷ IBN KHALLIKĀN Abu ‘Abbās Aḥmad (1839), *Ibn Challikani Vitae illustrium virorum*, ed. WÜSTENFELD Ferdinandus, 13 Fasc. in 2 vol., Deuelrich, Gottingen, fasc. 7, n° 708; fasc. 5, n° 468; *id.* (1843-68), *Wafayāt al-A’yān. Ibn Khallikan’s Biographical Dictionary*, tr. Bⁿ MAC GUCKIN DE SLANE William, 4 vol., printed for the Oriental translation fund of Great Britain and Ireland, Paris, vol. II, p. 282; vol. III, p. 270.

¹⁸ Thus in the MS Dublin, Chester Beatty Library, n° 3315, fol. 6a l. G. Flügel read here *بيذر الواحد* instead of

الحرف بعد الحرف والكلمة بعد الكلمة وانما الكمال كان لأبي علي وأبي عبد الله. فممن كتب
من اولادهما: ابو محمد عبد الله وابو الحسن بن ابي علي وابو احمد سليمان بن ابي الحسن وابو
الحسين بن ابي علي. ورأيت مصحفاً بخطّ جدّهم مقلّة.¹⁹

The sentence in bold means undoubtedly that in the scriptures of “every one²⁰ of them, letters and words were well spaced.”²¹ This statement by Ibn al-Nadīm (d. 380/990), ignored up to now, appears to be sufficient ground for the hypothesis that the unusual manner of writing described above is that of Ibn Muqla and his relatives and followers.

Both the letter—and word—spacing and the proportioned writing are exactly what we see in our specimen, as well as in other manuscripts in oblong format. Perhaps by looking at these Qur’ānic manuscripts we may be able to identify Ibn Muqla’s manner of writing and even his own handwriting.

يُنْدَرُ لِلوَاحِدِ (see below n. 22).

¹⁹ IBN AL-NADĪM Muḥammad ibn Ishāq (1871-2), *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, ed. FLÜGEL Gustav, nach dessen Tode besorgt von J. Roediger und A. Müller, 2 vol., Vogel, Leipzig, vol. I, p. 9, l. 15-26. Cf. DODGE Bayard (tr.) (1970), *The Fihrist of al-Nadim. A Tenth-Century Survey of Muslim culture*, 2 vol., Columbia University Press, New York and London, vol. I, p. 17-18.

²⁰ الواحد منهم = jeder von ihnen; see: WEHR Hans (ed.) (1956), *Arabisches Wörterbuch für die Schriftsprache der Gegenwart*, 2 vol., 2nd ed., Harrasowitz, Leipzig, p. 937.

²¹ ندر = se détacher; se défaire; être seul et isolé; être rare; see KAZIMIRSKI Albert DE BIBERSTEIN (1860), *Dictionnaire arabe-français contenant toutes les racines de la langue arabe*, 2 vol., Maisonneuve, Paris, vol. II, p. 1226. Related to this point is A. Müller’s commentary to this sentence: “بندر ist hier vom Hinstreuen auf das Papier gebraucht d.h. einzeln, wie Saatkörner (wie in hebräischen), nicht mit einander verbunden (wie in der syrischen und arabischen Schrift) einen Buchstaben nach dem andern, ein Wort nach dem andern auf das Papier oder jedweden andern Schreibestoff hinzeichnen” (see IBN AL-NADĪM, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, vol. II, p. 5, n. 8 to p. 9).

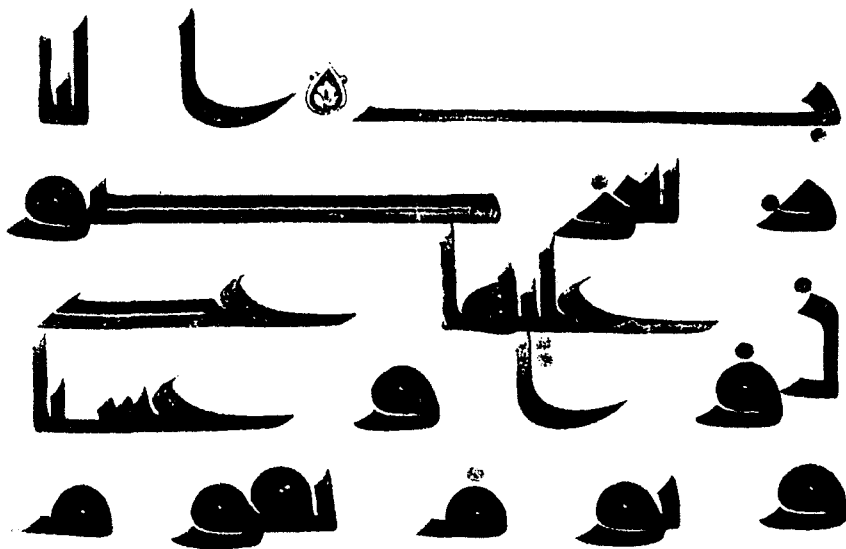
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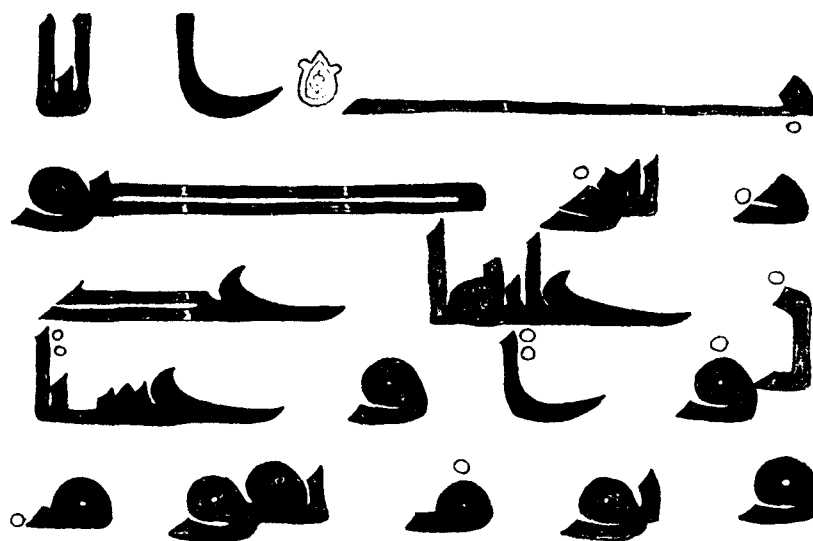
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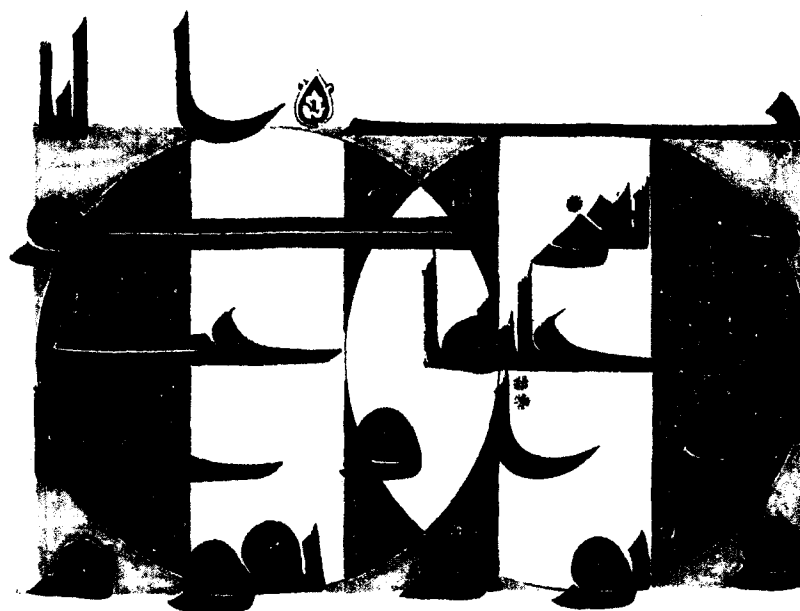
III. 1 MS Vienna, Österreichische Nationbibliothek, Cod. mixt. 814, fol. XI b.



III. 2 MS Vienna, Österreichische Nationbibliothek, Cod. mixt. 814, fol. XI b.



III. 3 MS Vienna, Österreichische Nationabibliothek, Cod. mixt. 814, fol. XI b.



III. 4 MS Vienna, Österreichische Nationabibliothek, Cod. mixt. 814, fol. XI b.

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- Les références bibliographiques doivent être mentionnées de manière complète la première fois et seront abrégées par la suite.

Exemples :

SOLMSEN Friedrich (1960), *Aristotle's System of the Physical World. A Comparison with his Predecessors*, (Cornell Studies in Classical Philology, 33) Cornell University Press, New York.

POUZET Louis (1997-1998), « Évolution, régression et permanence d'un concept dans l'Orient arabo-musulman : la *futuwwa* », *Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph* 55, p. 35-58.

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MS Istanbul, Süleymaniye, Carullah 1279, fol. 63r – 65v.

Abréviations :

SOLMSEN, *Aristotle's System of the Physical World*, p. 100.

POUZET, « La *futuwwa* », p. 38.

SANLAVILLE, « The Deposits of Ras el-Kelb », p. 39.

IBN SĪNĀ, *al-Šifā', al-Qiyās*, éd. ZAYED et MADKOUR, p. 40.

- Tout article doit être accompagné d'une bibliographie classée par ordre alphabétique.
- L'arabe sera translittéré selon l'un des deux systèmes suivants :

' , b, t, ṭ, ḡ, ḥ, ḫ, d, ḏ, r, z, ṣ, ḥ, ṭ, ṣ, ' , ḡ, f, q, k, l, m, n, h, w, y

' , b, t, th, j, ḥ, kh, d, dh, r, z, s, sh, ṣ, ḏ, ṭ, ṣ, ' , gh, f, q, k, l, m, n, h, w, y

Voyelles : a, i, u – ā, ī, ū

Diphthongues : aw, ay

tā marbūta = a ou at à l'état construit

Article = al même après les voyelles et devant les solaires : wa al-kitāb et non wa-l-kitāb; al-naṣr et non an-naṣr

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