THE ROUTLEDGE COMPANION TO THE QUR'AN

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

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THE QUR'AN AND MATERIAL CULTURE

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The Oral and the Written

One of the most detailed literary sources for the formative history of the Qur'an as a physical book is the *Kitāb al-maṣāḥif* (*The Book of Qur'an Codices*) by the Baghdadi traditionist Ibn Abī Dāwūd al-Sijistānī (d. 316/929). The title takes its name from the word *muṣḥaf*, which is a "codex" of the Qur'an. Notably, this post-Qur'anic term is absent from the lexicon of the Prophet, at least as indexed in the canonical Sunni hadith collections. The word *muṣḥaf* rather reflects the later collection and subsequent canonization and codification of the Qur'an as a book. The history of codification marks an important development of the Qur'anic text, as it transformed from the direct oral character of the revelation communicated by the Prophet Muhammad to the early community into the form of a physical text. This process, well underway during the course of the first century of the Islamic Era, is born out in the codicological evidence of surviving manuscripts and in the literary corpus that documents the early rise of Qur'anic book culture.

According to Muslim tradition, while there were earlier efforts at standardization, the Qur'anic text only came to take a canonical form, at least in terms of the consonantal ductus (*rasm*) of the text, during the reign of the third caliph, ʿUthmān ibn ʿAffān (r. 23–35/644–56), who initiated an effort to codify the Qur'an as a state sanctioned text. Copies from this master text were then sent to the major urban centers of the early Muslim community. Despite this process of standardization, non-ʿUthmānic codices, as well as nonstandard forms of the Qur'an are known to have survived. Furthermore, the move toward canonization only fixed the consonantal form of the text; it left open notable variants in vocalization. While some of these divergences consisted merely of natural lexical variations inherent in the oral transmission of any text, there survive accounts, particularly among proto-Shiʿi factions, of significant distortions in theological meaning.

Ibn Abī Dāwūd's collection eschews these charges of "alteration" (*taḥrīf*). Rather his work forms part of a series of early treatises documenting textual variance preserved in codices. Such treatises are identified with early Qur'an reciters and with the major metropolitan centers of the Muslim polity in the Hijaz, Iraq, and the Levant. These divergences, known as *qirāʾāt* (plural of *qirāʾa*, "recitation"), are ultimately the product of the oral transmission of the Qur'an in the form of a liturgical text that was embodied through physical practices of memorization and recitation that were passed on over generations. Yet, as a genre, these works on codicological variance, also referred to as *ikhtilāf al-maṣāḥif* ("divergences among codices"), reflect both the oral and written character of Qur'anic

DOI: 10.4324/9781315885360-37

transmission. Associated with major Qur'an reciters of the early ʿAbbāsid Era, this body of writing points to the concomitant written dissemination and standardization of the Qur'anic text.

The early prosopographical materials on the lives of prominent Qur'an reciters document a dual process of oral and textual transmission. Take, for instance, the case of Sulaymān ibn Mihrān al-Aʿmash (d. 147/764), an eminent jurist from the Iraqi garrison city of Kufa. A celebrated reciter, al-Aʿmash had a prominent pedigree: he studied under teachers who in turn traced their mastery of the text to Ibn Masʿūd (d. 32/652–653), a Companion of the Prophet renowned for his recitation of the Qur'an. Importantly, Ibn Masʿūd's recitation was known to diverge from the standardized ʿUthmānic recension; so too Ibn Masʿūd was remembered for having produced a physical codex of the text. Although the oral preservation of the Qur'an was often valorized, throughout this process of transmission, written texts were readily at hand. For his part, al-Aʿmash held teaching sessions during which students presented their "copies" of the Qur'an (*maṣāḥif*) for correction and collation, a common practice for the period. Under his tutelage students would dutifully copy his reading or vocalization of the Qur'anic *rasm*, that is, the unvocalized consonantal ductus of the text, which al-Aʿmash would recite before them by memory *viva voce*. Such codices were likely not published in the traditional sense of finished manuscripts designed as authoritative records of the text. Rather, such materials likely served as memory aids for students in the process of internalizing the Qur'anic corpus. Based on his embodied mastery of the text, al-Aʿmash was known by the honorific *al-muṣḥaf* ("the codex"), as his fidelity to the Qur'an was like that of the written word. This literary account, which can be matched with surviving Qur'anic codices from the period, points to the sophisticated system that had developed during the course of the first two centuries of the Islamic Era for vocalizing the text with the use of colored dots. This notional system was also deployed as a way to account for variant readings in the text itself.

In addition to its significance for the history of early variants, Ibn Abī Dāwūd's collection also provides valuable insight into the broader anxieties related to the historical emergence of the Qur'an as a physical text. These tensions took the form of juridical debates over the lawful use of the sacred text as it came to intersect with a broader nexus of objects and bodies in the physical world, subject to transaction, exchange, and possession, as well as contamination, violation, and decay. These juridical debates found voice in earlier legal opinions, as reflected in the respective *muṣannaf* collections of the traditionists ʿAbd al-Razzāq (d. 211/826) and Ibn Abī Shayba (d. 235/849), as well as in the *Faḍāʾil al-Qurʾān* (*Virtues of the Qur'an*) by Abū ʿUbayd al-Qāsim ibn Sallām (d. 224/838). While earlier materials address, in some fashion, the legal debates over the proper handling, use, and production of Qur'anic codices, Ibn Abī Dāwūd's work is entirely dedicated to the full anatomy of the physical form of the text. His study collates in a single collection an array of juridical opinions on the legal and ritual status of the Qur'an as a material object.

The Changing Form of the Physical Qur'an

Ibn Abī Dāwūd prefaces these legal questions with a history of textual formation drawn from accounts documenting the codification of the Qur'an as a physical book, the formation of the ʿUthmānic codex, and the textual divergences between the written copies of the codices ascribed to various early Companions of the Prophet and the successive generation of Qur'an reciters. The issues of text formation, in turn, accompany a range of juridical questions and probe such matters as taking payment for copying codices; employing non-Muslims to copy the text; the lawfulness of buying, selling, bequeathing, and pawning codices; the legal status of handling the codex in various states of ritual impurity; the proper form of writing the text and vocalizing it; the use of diacritical marks for vocalization; the appropriate surfaces and sizes for writing the Qur'an; the importance of distinguishing the Qur'an calligraphically from other forms of writing; the lawfulness of gilding, decorating, and perfuming codices; the use of verse markings, sura headings, and marginal

medallions for demarcating groups of verses; the practice of reading from the Qur'an and checking it against other codices; debates over placing codices in the *miḥrāb* (i.e., the "niche" marking the direction of prayer within a mosque), traveling with codices into the territory of infidels, or placing codices on the ground; leading prayer by reciting from a codex; and the proper disposal of old codices.

Much of the material in Ibn Abī Dāwūd's collection reflects the formation of a juridical discourse for treating the Qur'an as an object of veneration. Yet many of the debates also preserve notably archaic attitudes toward the preservation and dissemination of the Qur'an in its physical form and as such they serve as important indices for the historical evolution and transformation of the nature and purpose of the Qur'an as a material object. Foremost, these archaisms are characterized by a palpable juridical resistance to any form of embellishment as a means of either beautifying the text or facilitating its use, such as the insertion of diacritics, orthographic developments designed to remove ambiguities, various types of verse markers in the body of the text and its margins, and the addition of sura headings. Some jurists also censored the inscriptional use of the Qur'an in mosques, particularly within the space of the *miḥrāb*, the appearance of Qur'anic material on coins, and the practice of reading from codices while reciting the Qur'an. Such attitudes are scattered throughout the early juridical corpus and are not, by any measure, unique to a specific legal school or region. They reflect a set of anxieties that date to the first century of the Islamic Era concerning the nature and purpose of the physical text of the Qur'an. Above all, these attitudes privilege the oral character of the Qur'an as the consummate and fully legitimate expression of revelation, while they largely relegate the written word to the status of an *aide-mémoire*.

Several early palimpsests from this period also point to the practice of writing the Qur'an on parchment only to wash off the ink to rewrite the text once again. Such practices of erasure continue today, most notably in the context of traditional Islamic education in West Africa where writing tablets are used to internalize and memorize the Qur'an through the repeated process of writing and erasing the sacred text. Apart from fragmentary evidence documenting the use of papyrus, the earliest Qur'ans were written on parchment, the preferred writing surface for Qur'anic codices.

The early codicological and inscriptional evidence from the period complements many of the juridical debates over the status of the written text of the Qur'an. This takes the form of the earliest fragments and codices in the so-called *ḥijāzī* script from the first/seventh century; this script exhibits significant archaisms in orthography. Much of this material lacks a consistent use of diacritical markers and vocalization, as well as verse and sura divisions, though such textual practices of marking up the Qur'an emerged at a very early period. Similarly, the juridical debates track the use of Qur'anic material on coins, which date to the monetary reforms of the Umayyad caliph ʿAbd al-Malik (r. 65–86/685–705), who first introduced purely epigraphic coinage in 77/695–696. The coins feature a variation of *Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ* (Q 112).

Over the succeeding generations, many of these juridical concerns largely dissipated, particularly those related to the public presentation of the Qur'an as a supreme manifestation of calligraphic beauty, both in the production of Qur'anic codices and in the inscriptional articulation of sacred space as expressed in architectural terms. However, what ensues from these archaic disputes is a juridical focus on the relationship between the Qur'anic codex and the larger body of regulations governing ritual purity. Jurists drew on Qur'anic verses and an array of sayings ascribed to the Prophet and early Companions to affirm that only those in a state of "[ritual] purity" (*ṭahāra*, a legal state of the body obtained by performing the major ablution, or *ghusl*) should touch or handle the physical Qur'an. This position also has implications for the oral recitation of the Qur'an, which, according to many early jurists, required a lower threshold – that of the minor ablution (*wuḍūʾ*). This nexus of meaning and practice has often been foregrounded on the covers of codices with the inscription of the Qur'anic verse referencing a celestial scripture "which only the pure touch" (Q 56:78–79).

Over the course of the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries, the literary and codicological records also document significant changes in Qur'anic orthography, calligraphy, and the divisions of

the text added for ease of navigation. By the end of this period, an entirely new diacritical system for the text also had emerged and formed the direct basis for the standard diacritics used for orthographically vocalizing Arabic today. These developments took place against the backdrop of significant historical changes that included several interlinking elements: the introduction of paper, the rise of a class of trained secretaries and scribes, the theological debates concerning the very nature of the Qur'an as the word of God, and the shifting social and ethnic composition of the Muslim polity as it expanded across North Africa and Iberia and deep into Iraq, Iran, Central Asia, and South Asia. It is also possible to view these developments in Qur'anic book culture as part of a greater shift toward legibility, particularly as the relationships governing the transmission of the text from teacher to student began to shift. Here caution must be used, however, as the monumental expressions of these new styles in their book form still required a visual mastery of complex calligraphic systems. That said, the full and complete vocalization of the Qur'an in symbolic and practical terms meant that the calligraphic form of the Qur'anic text could speak for itself, as it were, without the aid of a master who governed its proper oral vocalization and transmission.

In addition to numerous orthographic and calligraphic developments, Qur'anic codices came to exhibit a range of forms from the micrographic to the monumental. The variation of size has served a variety of purposes from talismanic prophylactics to be worn on the body, to display copies that could be carried in ceremonial processions or during military incursions. It also became common practice to divide the Qur'anic text into a group of 30 large fascicules for public use in a variety of settings from mosques to funerary complexes. The 30-part division of these monumental codices was designed, above all, for the nightly recitations (*tarāwīḥ*) of the entire Qur'an over Ramadan, the sacred month of fasting. While the codex emerged as the dominant form for transmitting books in Late Antiquity, scrolls served in a limited capacity as a writing surface for the Qur'an. Only a handful of fragments of such scrolls survive from the early period. It is noteworthy that jurists expressed a particular disdain for the scroll as a medium for scripture, as it paralleled the form used by Jews for conveying the Torah. That said, there are both literary accounts and surviving examples of miniature scrolls with Qur'anic verses and suras that were inserted into reeds or metal cases and fastened to the body for talismanic protection, which again highlights the manifold vehicles used for expressing and containing the Qur'an.

The Charisma of the Written Word

A wide body of practices and beliefs emerged that promote the charismatic power of the physical Qur'an. The ancient associations between scripture and divine presence, knowledge, and potency form the larger backdrop to the early configurations of the Qur'an as a material site of charismatic and transformative power. The literary record of the first two centuries of the Islamic Era details the early talismanic use of Qur'anic writing as a means of harnessing divine protection and presence. Numerous accounts ascribed to the Prophet, the Companions, and the early jurists highlight sundry examples of Qur'anic theurgy – that is, the deployment of the Qur'an for its divine powers – in both oral and written forms. From the earliest period, the Qur'an has intersected with the vast field of bibliomancy and the occult deployment of scripture as a means of channeling both divine power and cognition. The talismanic use of amulets (e.g., *tawʿīdh*, *ʿazīma*, *ṭilasm*, etc.) fashioned from a variety of materials to be worn on the body, transcends historical periods and geographic regions and is not unique to any one particular stratum deployed by both the elite and the masses. Such inscriptional uses of the Qur'an draw on a range of materials, often imbued with symbolic potency, from precious stones, metals, parchment, and animal bones, to entire swaths of fabric used to fashion talismanic clothing.

Such calligraphic expressions of the Qur'an were often accompanied by a host of other prayers, formulations, and symbolic writing that commonly took the form of indecipherable cyphers and

numerological magic squares. Also fairly ubiquitous to this material is the hexagram of the Solomonic seal. In the framework of Islamic cosmography, the identification of Solomon with esoteric knowledge is rooted in the Qur'anic accounts of Solomon's occult knowledge and his power over demons and jinn (Q 21:81–82, 38:36–38). This picture, in turn, builds on earlier associations in Late Antiquity that link Solomon with occult learning. The dazzling powers associated with Solomon anchor the entire discursive complex of occult knowledge drawn from prophetic tradition. The use of the Qur'an as a vehicle to harness the power of the unseen has also served as a means of granting authority and legitimacy to diverse occult practices. Historically, the variegated material practices of Qur'anic theurgy occupied a rather normative place in the fabric of Islamic piety and devotion. These practices range from "divination" (*istikhāra*) by seeking "omens" (*fa'l*) in the Qur'anic text, to imbibing and ingesting the Qur'an for its charismatic and curative powers.

The theological backdrop to such Qur'anic practices is noteworthy. The doctrine of the eternal Qur'an as it was crystalized in the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries advanced the physical power of the revelation in ontological terms as the *ipsissima verba dei* ("the very words of God"), made manifest both in its oral and written forms. Even the Ash'arī and Māturīdī theological reformulations on the eternality of the Qur'an retained the notion of a numinous and mysterious power to the physical articulation of the Qur'an as a charismatic reflection of eternal, divine speech within the finite stratum of material existence, as expressed, for instance, in the acts of reciting and writing. Yet the extent to which such complex theological formulations governed cultic praxis is unclear. This is particularly so given the evidence of the rise of Qur'anic theurgy prior to the full theological articulation and systematization of the eternality of the Qur'an as a doctrinal point of dogma. Similarly, moving forward, even many theologians who objected to the eternality of the Qur'an on so-called rationalist grounds came to affirm the prophylactic and charismatic power of the Qur'an as divine writ.

Above all, the diverse practices of wearing and ingesting the Qur'an point to a desire to draw close the corporeal power of the divine word, both on and inside the body. In this sphere of embodied praxis, the internalization of the Qur'an as a corporal intersection with the divine is potently expressed in the diverse ways of consuming Qur'anic scripture. These take various forms, such as writing verses of the Qur'an on paper and dissolving the paper in water, which is in turn ingested. Writing surfaces can be employed for similar ends by drinking the water used to wash off Qur'anic verses written on a tablet or a blackboard. The classical sources generally refer to this as "erasure" (*maḥw*), a ubiquitous practice documented in numerous contexts across diverse regions and historical periods. Often Qur'anic consumption could also take the form of eating sweets or other foods marked with Qur'anic verses. The use of so-called magic bowls usually engraved with Qur'anic material and an array of other occult inscriptions is also well attested. Numerous manuals document the unique and efficacious "powers" (*khawāṣṣ*) of the Qur'an and elaborate directions for the preparation of such bowls; this often involved the inscription of particular Qur'anic verses in saffron that are then washed off and imbibed. Similarly, the selection of verses, expressions, and suras is tied to the specific ends that any given performance seeks to actuate in the confluence of Qur'anic meaning and its deployment, say, as an agent for therapeutic or apotropaic power. These practices also extend into the realm of oral performance, where verses of the Qur'an are recited while slightly projecting saliva from the mouth by "blowing" (*nafth*) over water (preferably from the well of Zamzam in Mecca), which is then ingested. Such forms of corporeal internalization have notable parallels with diverse strands of Christian devotion toward the Eucharist, in the ingestion of the body and blood of Christ during Holy Mass. The theological parallels are quite striking in the transubstantiative manifestation of sacred matter that is consumed. Yet Qur'anic consumption has never been communal or sacramental, nor has it been governed by a priestly class responsible for its presentation and distribution. To be sure, there are numerous indications that the religious elite deployed the Qur'an for its otherworldly power as a means of articulating their own authority. Yet Qur'anic theurgy was by no

means limited to clerics or saints. Rather it formed part of a broad tapestry that animated material existence with the miraculous power of divine speech made manifest.

Similar observations can be made about the inscriptional use of the Qur'an in the architectural creation of sacred space. The appearance of the Qur'an as a calligraphic sign in sites such as mosques, tombs, and palaces communicates sacrality in both the visible and invisible planes. As with the explicitly theurgical use of the Qur'an, the selection of verses can be sophisticated and dynamic expressions of the confluence of meaning, form, and function; this is clear from the choice of specific Qur'anic material and its placement in particular spaces to interface with the use, purpose, and/or symbolism of a given architectural element. Yet, despite the often intentional interplay between the semantic sphere and its spatial placement, the problem of legibility draws into question the intended purpose of the calligraphic sign. Quite often monumental calligraphic bands that expand high above and wrap around domes, roofs, walls, vaulting arches, prayer niches, columns, porticos, and minarets are only fully legible with careful and patient study and sometimes only with artificial lighting and optical aids such as binoculars. Indeed, there are numerous examples in architectural buildings of calligraphic material that is largely hidden from sight altogether. As with the talismanic use of the Qur'an on the body, the question of visual absence in architectural terms points to the efficacious power of the written word to encode space within a fabric of divine presence that extends in all directions across the realms of both the seen and unseen, in the visible and invisible folds of sacred space.

Access and the Reproducible Sign

The material sign of the Qur'an is shaped by a set of visual and ritual cues that are designed to affirm the sacred nature of the text as divine scripture. In terms of book art, this came to include all the major visual and material elements of the production of codices. The process of beautification required the specialization of highly skilled calligraphers and bookmakers with a variety of skills necessary for the production of books from gilding and binding, to all aspects in between. Despite the wishes of some early jurists, Qur'anic codices emerged as material expressions of consummate artistry, often with the ornate use of gold and the sophisticated interplay between color palettes, in both the selection of ink and the writing surfaces used. As precious commodities, codices were often luxury objects of adoration, privilege, and wealth, which circulated in the court, the madrasa, and beyond.

Powerful patrons, both men and women in the orbit of the ruling elite, sponsored the most refined echelons of Qur'anic book art. The production of splendid codices served as markers of devotion and piety, as well as power and prestige. While historically there existed a range in quality and refinement, as with all manuscripts, Qur'anic codices were valuable objects that required significant capital and intellectual resources to produce and to preserve. The move from parchment to paper starting near the end of the third/ninth century reduced the labor and cost necessary for the production of manuscripts; this transformation in technology occasioned noticeable developments in writerly culture. Yet, even with the rise of paper, the production and circulation of Qur'anic codices remained a circumscribed activity, governed largely by the elite. The prohibitive cost limited the scope of private ownership, although there would have been a range of diverse classes, from merchants and tradesmen to landed gentry, with sufficient capital to possess private copies. Furthermore, the wide availability of Qur'anic manuscripts is well documented in various religious institutions, particularly in mosques, madrasas, and shrine complexes, where codices were often available for public devotion, consultation, and study. It was not uncommon, however, for a Qur'anic codex to be passed down from generation to generation within a patrician household. The practice of inscribing family genealogies and the birth dates of children within such family copies is also attested in the

premodern period. Similarly, the dedication of Qur'anic codices by individuals as pious "endowments" (*waqf*, pl. *awqāf*) to various religious institutions served as meritorious expressions of piety.

Embodied knowledge in the form of recitation and memorization also served as a means of widely disseminating the Qur'an. Similarly, the use of Qur'anic ephemera in the form of short selections of text deployed for talismanic ends is widely attested. In the early medieval period a tradition of block printing selections of the Qur'an also developed to enable the reproduction of Qur'anic amulets. Such heterogeneous material contexts highlight diverse means of approaching and absorbing the physicality of the sacred text.

Despite these earlier forays, Islamic print culture only emerged on a wide scale in the course of the nineteenth century, foremost with the development of lithography and then with the adaptation of movable type. Centuries before the Muslim elite ultimately adopted the practice, European printing houses had published editions of the Qur'an, for polemical purposes, in the original Arabic and in translation. The complex and often countervailing forces shaping the late embrace of print technology across diverse geographical contexts of Islamic piety cannot be reduced to a single set of factors. Importantly, the rise of print also witnessed debates among certain factions of the religious elite about the probity of publishing the Qur'an in particular and religious material in general. Just as the codex emerged in the face of early anxieties about the full textualization of the Qur'an in the first centuries of the Islamic Era, printed copies of the Qur'an ultimately displaced the manuscript forerunners that proceeded movable type.

As with the absorption of earlier technologies of the written word, the history of Qur'anic book art in the age of mechanical reproduction exhibits an enduring continuity with earlier paradigms, both in the format of the codex and in the typographic artistry used to telegraph the sacred word; this artistry in turn builds on established calligraphic precedence. Yet notable changes also accompanied this process, which extended beyond just matters of form. The rise of print has entailed a further expansion in access with the wide dissemination of the Qur'an, across an ever wider readership of Muslims and non-Muslims alike. The various social and epistemic changes that mark the turn to numerous forms of modernity also point to radical ruptures in the structure of religious authority. The development of Qur'anic print culture coincides with a wider body of readers who can access the sacred text largely outside the established frameworks of religious education. These currents form the backdrop for digital transformations of the Qur'anic text in the current age of information technology. On computers, phones, and tablets, the ubiquity of the Qur'an cannot be understated, with programs that wed the oral and the written by overlying the recitations of prominent Qur'an readers with the text as it flows in real time across the digital page.

In certain arenas, changes in reading patterns have also given birth to the rise of literalism as a privileged mode of exegesis. Similarly, in the age of print, the numinous power of the physical word has also undergone significant realignments. Many of these currents find their roots in the course of the Islamic reformist movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which in great measure sought to divest the material world of charismatic power. With this came the widespread censure of the diverse practices of Qur'anic bibliomancy as deviant and superstitious expressions beyond the pale of Islamic normativity, particularly among certain groups of the educated elite. Many premodern practices have been reformulated and reexamined in light of the profound epistemic shifts occasioned in the face of competing modernities. Yet the material power of the Qur'an has continued to endure in various geographical and social spheres as the consummate expression of the divine manifest in the material world.