

Book Reviews

Qur'an Manuscripts: Calligraphy, Illumination and Design. By Colin F. Baker. London: British Library, 2007. Pp. 122. £20.00.

This fine volume offers an important survey of a selection of Qur'anic manuscripts which date from the early, classical and late medieval periods of the Islamic tradition and are drawn from the unique collection of the British Library. It is aimed at readers with an interest in the development of the Qur'anic manuscript tradition and Islamic art in general. Featuring a vivid array of illustrated examples of manuscripts which are introduced through an informed commentary, the book will clearly serve readers with an interest in the aesthetics of calligraphy, illumination and design in Islamic art. The book's author, Colin Baker, works as Head of the British Library's Near and Middle Eastern Collections, and is considered to be an authority on Arabic and Islamic manuscripts: his previous works include *Arabic and Judaeo-Arabic Manuscripts in the Cambridge Genizah Collection* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), which was co-authored with Geoffery Khan. He has also compiled the *Subject-Guide to the Arabic Manuscripts in the British Library* (London: British Library, 2001) and contributed to the British Library's innovatory CD-Rom, *Turning the Pages: Sultan Baybars' Qur'an* (London: British Library, 2002). His expertise and insights are appositely brought to bear in this excellent work.

The main text is divided into four chapters, and the first of these covers Qur'an manuscripts associated with the early stages of Islam's emergence. Baker makes the point that the earliest Qur'an manuscripts were probably produced somewhere around the mid to late first/seventh century and that although ancient copies from these periods have not survived intact and exist only in fragmentary form, they significantly 'provide the only available evidence for the early development of the written recording of the Qur'an text'.¹ Among the first plates included in this chapter is a page from an ancient copy of the Qur'an which is said to date from the second/eighth century and contains over two-thirds of the complete text. It is the largest known fragment of consecutive Qur'anic text transcribed in the famous *mā'il* script (slanting to the right), a distinctively inclined style of writing conventionally associated with the Hījāzī cities of Mecca and Medina.² Notwithstanding the fact that the physical shape of the earliest codices was vertical in format, they were without vowel markings (*naql*) and used a minimum of diacritics (*i'jām*).³ The incipient nature of the script led scholars to refer to it as a *scriptio defectiva*. Many of these early codices were transcribed on parchment (the skins of sheep, goats and calves) due to its flexible and durable qualities. Baker remarks that the early Qur'ans or codices (*maṣāḥif*) were therefore originally 'a collection of sheets of parchment placed between two boards.

Each double sheet was folded into two leaves, which were assembled into gatherings, then sewn together and bound as quires into a book or codex'. Attention is then turned towards Qur'ans of the third/ninth and fourth/tenth centuries, with Baker making the point that they were written in Kufic (ʿAbbāsīd) script and were now being produced within a horizontal format which suited the short and elongated parallel strokes of this script. Baker notes that the strikingly angular Kufic script takes its name from the town of Kufa, where it was believed to have been developed, although questions have been raised by scholars such as Nabia Abbott and François Déroche regarding the import of this Kufic label, due to the fact that it tends to disguise the varied range of styles which the script actually encompassed. Baker follows the traditional accounts of the development of the Arabic script in which symbolic importance is attached to the enterprise of the Basran figure Abū'l-Aswad al-Duʿālī (d. 69/688), who is identified in the classical biographical literature as the pioneering architect of Arabic grammar, and who is reported to have devised a model of vowel notation for Qur'anic codices in which strategically placed coloured dots were employed to denote vocalic values (pp. 19–20).⁴ A copy of a manuscript written on parchment in the Kufic script which displays this system of vowel markings is featured (pp. 20 ff). Baker suggests that 'these early Kufic Qur'ans already exhibit the beginnings of those elements of illumination and decoration that were eminently brought to perfection in later Qur'ans, giving the written word a heightened power and resonance' (p. 20). The point he stresses is that due to Islam's proscribing representational art, the imaginative focus on the decoration and ornamentation of the physical word acquired greater symbolic significance. The suggestion is that the decoration of pages had a functional purpose: chapter headings, ends of ayas, verse counts, sections and individual ayas where the believer reciting the text was expected to prostrate were all highlighted. Accordingly, illumination was creatively applied through the structural divisions of the sacred text. Baker has included two further samples of Kufic manuscripts which date from the third/ninth and fourth/tenth centuries and these confirm the wonderfully exquisite variations in style and format achieved under this generic label; they also feature ornamental letters in gold and medallions which were used to mark off batches of ayas (pp. 22–3).

In the fourth/tenth century eastern Kufic Qur'ans were once again being produced in vertical format. Baker explains that this was due in part to the distinctive stylistic features of the eastern Kufic script, a style characterised by 'long upright strokes and short strokes inclining to the right'. A fine example of the so-called Qarmathian style of Eastern Kufic, dated to the fifth/eleventh or sixth/twelfth centuries, displaying an aya from *Sūrat al-Nūr* (Q. 24:29), is featured and it beautifully combines the earlier system of *naqṭ* said to have been devised by Abū'l-Aswad with the system of vowel signs introduced by the Basran grammarian and lexicographer al-Khalīl ibn Aḥmad (d. 175/791).⁵ Among the further colour plates included in this section is one

depicting an ornamental chapter heading written in gold *thuluth* script and used to introduce *Sūrat Hūd*. This is reproduced alongside an elegant plate depicting Q. 37:20–143 from a Qur'an which is dated to 427/1036 and is densely transcribed in the early *nashkī* script; this text also includes, in the margin, a stunning array of palmettes which were meticulously placed to indicate batches of five ayas.

Baker explains that by the fourth/tenth century paper was gradually replacing parchment as the preferred medium of transcription, especially in the Islamic East as opposed to North Africa and Spain (p. 23), and that the introduction of the *nashkī* cursive script, which was proportionate in style, was increasingly being used on paper materials. Reference is made to the fact that the *nashkī* cursive script was mostly used in documents of a commercial and administrative nature; its being cursive rendered it both practicable and clear but, as Baker points out, it was developed further by the efforts of both Ibn Muqla (d. 328/940) and especially Ibn al-Bawwāb (d. 413/1022), becoming the 'most popular styles for transcribing Arabic manuscripts due to its legibility' (p. 26). Ibn Muqla is reported to have been the first to systematise and geometrically define the *muḥaqqaq* script.⁶ Baker sees this change and indeed contrast as being significant for a number of reasons: firstly, there were implications in respect of the distribution of space occupied by the script and its features of illumination; and secondly, Kufic had become a seemingly archaic script employed only for ornamental purposes, especially by the middle of the fifth/eleventh century. As far as the Islamic West was concerned, Baker confirms that Qur'ans from North Africa and Spain differed markedly from those of the Islamic East: the West was still producing Qur'ans on parchment until up to the period of the eighth/fourteenth century (p. 28). A seventh/thirteenth century illustrative plate from Granada produced on parchment is featured to illustrate this contrast: its chapter heading is written in Western Kufic script while the text is in the Maghribī style, displaying a distinctively more rounded and curved script which sweepingly extended below the lines, a script Baker suggests has its origins in a western Kufic model. It is also stated that the script or format of a Qur'an did not determine the number of volumes it was produced in; some were completed in multi-volume sets while others in a single tome.

Baker does comment that from the late fourth/tenth century onwards developments in the use of scripts were matched by notable strides made in the use of illumination, decoration and ornamentation. This was particularly evidenced by the addition of a single or double frontispiece (carpet pages), which operated as a type of portal to the sacred Qur'anic texts and provided its illuminator with the opportunity of displaying artistic flair and skills (pp. 30–1). Full page illuminations were often placed at the end of volumes, creating what Baker terms to be a functional and decorative balance. Their design features included arabesques (interwoven flowing patterns of floral motifs), palmettes and even inscriptions from the Qur'an. Regarding Qur'an

manuscripts, Baker draws attention to the enhanced embellishment of the incipit pages and symbolic parts of the text, including the smaller chapters towards the end. Superb examples of illumination featuring these aesthetic developments are provided, including an ornate frontispiece of a fourth/tenth century Qur'an, which is said to have been of possible Egyptian origin, comprising arabesque decoration (pp. 32–3); an Iraqi or Persian illuminated frontispiece of an fifth/eleventh century Qur'an with geometrical patterns (pp. 34–5); decorative end pages from a tenth/sixteenth Moroccan Qur'an (pp. 36–7); and finally, the carpet pages designed by the famous Muḥammad ibn Mudabbir and taken from the first volume of the Mamlūk Sultan Baybars' seven-volume Qur'an, aptly named after Rukn al-Dīn Baybars al-Jāshnagīr who commissioned it (pp. 38–9).⁷

In Chapter Two of this book Baker looks at some of the expressions of 'Grand Designs', which combine both illumination and page layout together with the elaborate integration of calligraphy, ornament and arrangement. According to Baker, developments in grand design flourished under the patronage of Mamlūk and Īlkhānid rulers. During the rule of the Timurid, Ottoman, Ṣafavid and Mughal dynasties illumination and calligraphy passed through further stages of refinement and maturity. To illustrate these developments Baker has selected some of the finest Qur'an pages together with examples from non-Qur'anic texts. These include a text page from an eighth/fourteenth century Mamlūk Qur'an produced in the definitive *muḥaqqaq* script (p. 40); endowment documents (p. 42); decorative colophons, including two from Sultan Baybars' Qur'an, dated to 705/1305–6 (pp. 45–6); the carpet pages for volume three of Sultan Baybars' Qur'an together with its incipit pages and further ones written in the *thuluth* script designed by Abū Bakr Ṣandal (pp. 48–55). Baker makes the point that the splendour of the Baybars Qur'an was enhanced due to its 'being written entirely in gold and in *thuluth* script'. He adds that the cursive hand was outlined in black ink and that the vowels were marked in red. Mention is made of the fact that the choice of the *thuluth* script was strange due to its principally being used for ornamental purposes, particularly in chapter headings but not the body of a text. Baker does attach particular significance to layout of the calligraphy in the Baybars Qur'an: it comprised some 1,094 folios spread over seven volumes and each of its pages carried an even number of lines, a feature which created a new precedent; the text layout was also continuous: chapter headings were indicated by a change of colour, with red ink overlaying the gold (p. 47 and p. 56). Baker suggests that the 'individuality in the copying and illumination of Qur'ans' is reflected in other Qur'ans from this period. The thirty-volume Qur'an commissioned by the Īlkhānid ruler Uljaytū (*reg.* 704–16/1304–16) is one such example. There are distinctive contrasts between it and the Baybars Qur'an but this, Baker argues, would seem to reflect indigenous influences. It was written in the gold *muḥaqqaq* script and its vowel markings were in black ink. The point is made that this style of script, unlike the

thuluth of the Baybars Qur'an, allows a subtle bridging of fluidity with rigidity (p. 65). To illustrate the uniqueness of the Uljaytū Qur'an, colour images of its colophon, commissioning certificate and carpet pages, together with pages from the main text are included (pp. 58–64).

Colour plates from a further distinctive Mamlūk Qur'an, which was donated to a mosque in Cairo by Faraj ibn Barqūq (*reg.* 801–15/1399–1412), are also featured (pp. 66–9). Baker contends that the inspiration of the architecture of the mosque also played a part in the way the aesthetic dimensions of the calligraphy and design of these Qur'ans were worked out, although he adds that over successive periods new delicacies and refinements, as exemplified by the inclusion of *shamsa* medallions, prayer pages and carpet pages, new layouts for the texts, and even the function of scripts, replaced the Īlkhānīd style of illumination in Persia and Iraq and that this spread to Turkey (examples of these are provided between pp. 70–81). Baker stresses that the Qur'ans produced in these periods were just as impressive; the range of colour plates he provides, including various examples from Ottoman, Afghan, Indian, Persian and Moroccan manuscripts, certainly confirms this point.

In the chapter entitled 'Qur'an Manuscripts and the Spread of Islam' Baker briefly considers how approaches to the transcription and illumination of Qur'an were broached in regions such as Southeast Asia, China and Central Asia. The examples of pages from Chinese Qur'ans, which date from the eleventh/seventeenth century, reveal the remarkable levels of illumination and style achieved in these texts. The script employed in these sample documents is described as a variation of the *muḥaqqaq* style, although Baker speaks of its being influenced by Chinese calligraphy. Further colour plates featuring Qur'ans from the Javanese, Malay and sub-Saharan regions are featured (Malay Qur'ans adopted the *nashkī* script, while sub-Saharan Qur'ans were characteristically influenced by the Maghribī script; both were produced on paper imported from Italy). Miniatures, scrolls, bindings and furniture form the focus of the last chapter in this book. In terms of the miniature Qur'ans, it is noted that they are 'no less distinctive for their decoration than their format'. They came in various shapes and were written in a minute style of *nashkī*, which Baker explains was referred to by the Arabic word for dust, *ghubar*: the style being so fine that it was likened to powder. A number of colour plates of Turkish and Persian miniatures dated from the tenth/sixteenth, eleventh/seventeenth and thirteenth/nineteenth centuries are also shown (pp. 100–3). In respect of bookbinding it is suggested this craft was developed following the conquest of Egypt and that the earliest Islamic examples can be dated to the third/ninth century, revealing Coptic influences: the sewing of the text block in Qur'anic manuscripts reproduced a Coptic technique (p. 106). Baker has included images of the binding of a seventh/thirteenth century Qur'an from Marrakesh featuring blind and gold tooling. This is displayed alongside two images of the binding of an eleventh/seventeenth century Qur'an that

has inscriptions embossed on sunken gold panels (p. 105). The final images in this book are of Qur'an furniture: namely, the wooden chests or cabinets in which these large tomes were stored and the very stands and frames upon which the volumes were placed, allowing the texts to be recited by readers. The stands were invariably made of carved wood and lavishly embellished with a panoply of floral and geometrical designs and decorated with mother of pearl. The front jacket of this book has a stunning copy of the incipit page from part nine of Sultan Faraj ibn Barqūq's thirty-volume Qur'an, while an ornamental marker which features in the same Qur'an is reproduced for the back jacket.

The book is highly recommended: it introduces the Qur'an manuscripts with a concern for both historical context and aesthetic relevance; moreover, in doing so it covers a representative sample of materials. Its modest price is pleasantly surprising given not only the fine quality of its production, but also the vivid array of over 80 colour plates included in the text, especially as a number of these are shown in this book for the very first time. It is evident that with this volume one gets a sense of the impressive levels of intricacy, sophistication and distinctiveness with which the physical presentation of the sacred word, as influenced by the 'non-figurative principles of Islamic art', was inimitably defined.

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NOTES

1 Cf. Sheila Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), pp. 105–6.

2 See Diem Werner, 'Some Glimpses at the Rise and Early Development of the Arabic Orthography', *Orientalia* 45 (1976), pp. 251–61; and the discussion in the introductory part of 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), especially p. 12.

3 *I'jām* being the technical term for the addition of dots or fine strokes to distinguish individual graphemes and characters.

4 This development is recorded in later biographical literature, as the Basran grammarian Mubarrad (d. 285/898), who is purported to have composed a history of eminent Basran linguists, is cited as stating that Abū'l-Aswad was the first figure to supply vowel markings to a codex: see Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-Zubaydī, *Ṭabaqāt al-naḥwiyyīn*, ed. Muḥammad Abū'l-Faḍl Ibrāhīm (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1973), p. 6; cf. Abū 'Amr 'Uthmān ibn Sa'īd, al-Dānī, *al-Muḥkam fī naqṭ al-maṣāḥif*, ed. 'Izzat Ḥasan, 2nd edn (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 1986). Baker also refers to the view that credit for encouraging the introduction of orthographical improvements is attributed to al-Ḥajjāj ibn Yūsuf (d. 95/714). The text incorrectly states Ḥallāj instead of Ḥajjāj (p. 20).

5 Al-Khalīl used a small *wāw* to denote *ḍamma*, a *yā'* for *kasra*, and an *alif* for *fatha*, all of which were derived from their graphic forms. The pioneers of the emerging traditions of