

**An important 'New Style' Qur'an section
Middle East
c. 900-905 (before May/June AH 292/905 CE)**



Illuminated Arabic manuscript on parchment, 38 folios, text written in New Style/Eastern Kufic script with 8 lines per page. The letter-pointing (i'jam) is in brown ink and the vocalization is marked with red dots and brown dashes. Single verses are marked with small gold rosettes, fifth verses are marked within the text with small gold motifs in the form of the letter "ha", and tenth verse divisions are marked within text with small gold roundel and in the margins with larger gold circular petalled devices containing the exact verse count in gold with interstices painted with red or green pigment. In a medieval binding of brown leather with blind tooling and stamping.

Folio 12 x 8.7 cm

Text

Surat al-Fatiha (I), v. 7 to Surat al-Baqara (II), v. 138 (constituting Juz' 1 lacking first and last folios Surat al-Fatiha vv. 1-6, and Surat al-Baqara, vv.138-141)

Provenance

Private collection, Germany

This small manuscript is of prime importance in the early history of Qur'anic calligraphy. Along with the other surviving volumes of this thirty-volume Qur'an, it represents the earliest surviving use of New Style/Eastern Kufic script in the Qur'anic context and demonstrates a number of important features of the transitional aspects of Qur'an manuscript production in the tenth century.¹ Although the surviving volumes do not contain a colophon recording the date of production, several contain an inscription in Persian stating that the text was checked by a certain Ahmad bin Abi'l-Qasim al-Khayqani in the months of Rajab and Sha'ban AH 292 (May-June 905 CE). These inscriptions are highly significant for several reasons.

¹ S. Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy*, Edinburgh, 2006, fig. 5.2, p. 148

Firstly, they provide a *terminus post quem* establishing that the manuscript must have been produced at the latest by May-June 292/905. If the checking of the text occurred contemporaneously with the production (which it often did) then, the manuscript's production can be dated to those same months. However, it is also possible that the text was checked later, meaning that the manuscripts could have been copied up to a few years earlier. However, it is unlikely that the checking would have occurred substantially later, allowing us to date the production confidently to 900-905 CE. This is some seventy years before the next earliest dated Qur'an copied in New Style/Eastern Kufic script, written on paper in 361/972 by Shadhan al-Razi al-Bayyi, probably in Iran (see S. Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy*, Edinburgh, 2006, fig. 5.3, p. 152), and eighty years before the next earliest, the Palermo Qur'an of 372/982 made in Sicily (see F. Déroche, *The Abbasid Tradition*, London, 1992, no. 83, pp. 146-51; S. Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy*, Edinburgh, 2006, fig 5.4, p. 153). A Qur'an in the Egyptian National Library has a colophon written in New Style/Eastern Kufic dated 262/875, but the main Qur'anic text is still written in the standard Kufic script (see B. Moritz, *Arabic Palaeography*, 1905, pl. 41).

Secondly, the checking inscription is written in Persian, indicating that the manuscript may have been produced in Iran rather than further west in the Arab lands. This is also interesting as it confirms that new Style/Eastern Kufic, which evolved from an Abbasid chancery or book hand, was used for Qur'ans earlier in the east than the central and western Islamic lands.

Thirdly, the manuscript is written on parchment. This was the traditional material for Qur'an manuscripts up to this time, and all the copies of the Holy Text written in standard Kufic script were written on parchment. However, the Qur'an copied by Shadhan al-Razi al-Bayyi in 361/972 was written on paper, as was a Qur'an in New Style/Eastern Kufic made at Isfahan in 383/993 (see F. Déroche, *The Abbasid Tradition*, London, 1992, no. 83, pp. 154-5). And yet the Palermo Qur'an of 372/982 was copied on parchment. Thus the introduction of paper in the Qur'anic context must have occurred first in the eastern lands sometime between c. 900 CE (represented by the production of the present manuscript) and 972 CE (represented by the Shadhan al-Razi al-Bayyi copy).

Fourthly, the format of the present manuscript displays a similar array of transitional features. Since the early eighth century the standard format for Qur'ans had been a horizontal (or "landscape") format. This format suited the horizontal stretching of the Kufic script. Meanwhile secular manuscripts were written in vertical (or "portrait") format. The present copy is of vertical format, as is the 972 CE Shadhan al-Razi al-Bayyi copy. However, both the Palermo Qur'an of 982 and the Isfahan Qur'an of 993 are written in horizontal format, reverting to the earlier, more traditional shape. Yet within ten years another small Qur'an was copied in Mashhad, on the eastern fringes of the Islamic Empire, using a script very similar to the present example, on paper, and in vertical format (the manuscript bears a *waqf* inscription dated 393/1003, see Sotheby's, London, 30 April 1992, lot 331).

These features are all examples of the fundamental changes that took place in ninth and tenth centuries in the design and production of Qur'an manuscript. These included the codification of chancery and book hands into early New Style/Eastern Kufic and cursive scripts as well as change from horizontal back to vertical page format and the change to the use of paper as the dominant writing material. As pointed out by Sheila Blair, a manuscript of the *Gharib al-Hadith* dated 252/866 used a neat and semi-formal version of the chancery book hand, and the present Qur'anic version, written within three or four decades, is closely related. The decades

following the completion of the present volumes saw the fundamental calligraphic changes represented by the development of formal cursive script under Ibn Muqlah and Ibn al-Bawwab. The diacritical marks are also transitional, with both the red-dot vocalization frequently found on standard Kufic-script Qur'ans as well as the angled dashes and other signs used on later medieval manuscripts.

The illumination is also interesting and presents transitional features. The interspersal markers are small rosettes, a motif used in later medieval Qur'ans, whereas in Qur'an in standard Kufic script they would most frequently have been clusters of gold dots or diagonal lines. However the fifth verse markers and the marginal roundels marking tenth verses are still of a similar type to the standard type used on Qur'ans in Kufic script. The fifth verse markers consist of a stylized version of the letter *ha* in gold (representing the *abjad* letter that equates to the number 5) while the tenth verse markers consist of a roundel in the margin with a lobed edge and a central coloured area containing the verse count (e.g. '*ashra*, '*ashruwn*, *thalathun* etc.). The *sura* headings are marked with the title in gold script – similar to the method for standard Kufic-script manuscripts – but the stylised palmette that extends into the margin is simplified here and is even on occasion split above and below the gold wording of the title (not present here, but e.g. in Juz' 19 in the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, see D. James, *Qur'ans and Bindings from the Chester Beatty Library*, 1980, p.26, no. 12, and on a folio in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 26.161.1).

All the extant bound volumes from this Qur'an are bound in the same stamped and tooled leather covers. They consist of brown leather with a central blind stamped and tooled medallion that resembles a floral motif but is in fact made up of abstract elements of dots and stippled curves. There is also a border band comprising repeating small motifs of baluster form interspersed with short vertical lines. The doublures are also of blind-stamped brown leather with a central roundel of reticulated geometric motifs and a simple border band of repeating small circles.

The small size and format of the present volume and its companions is worth noting, and indicates that this set was not intended for use in a mosque or public context, but more likely in a private setting.

Other extant leaves and bound fragments are as follows:

Chester Beatty Library, Dublin (MS 1417, see A. Arberry, *The Koran illuminated*, Dublin, 1967, nos. 23-26; D. James, *Qur'ans and Bindings from the Chester Beatty Library*, London 1980, no.12, p. 26; S. Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy*, Edinburgh, 2006, fig. 5.2, p. 148; E. Wright, *Islam, Faith, Art, Culture, Manuscripts of the Chester Beatty Library*, London, 2009, figs. 45-6, p. 74.

Freer-Sackler Gallery, Washington D.C. (S1997.92).

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (19.779.1-2).

Library of Congress, Washington D.C. (LC1-85-154.2a-aa, AL20).

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (26.161.1).

Khalili Collection, London (KFQ26, see F. Déroche, *The Abbasid Tradition*, London, 1992, no. 79, pp. 144-5).