

When did the consonantal skeleton of the Quran reach closure? Part II¹

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Abstract

The Islamic tradition credits the promulgation of a uniform consonantal skeleton (*rasm*) of the Quran to the third caliph ‘Uthmān (r. 644–656). However, in recent years various scholars have espoused a conjectural dating of the Quran’s codification to the time of ‘Abd al-Malik, or have at least taken the view that the Islamic scripture was open to significant revision up until *c.* 700 CE. The second instalment of this two-part article surveys arguments against this hypothesis. It concludes that as long as no Quranic passages with a distinct stylistic and terminological profile have been compellingly placed in a late seventh-century context, the traditional dating of the standard *rasm* (excepting certain orthographical features) to 650 or earlier ought to be our default view.

Keywords: Quran, *Rasm*, Codification, Transmission, ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān, Al-Ḥajjāj ibn Yūsuf

Evidence in favour of a mid-seventh-century closure of the Quran

I now turn to arguments that can be adduced in support of the proposition that the Quran’s standard *rasm* reached closure by *c.* 650. The results of Sadeghi and Bergmann’s radio carbon dating of the Ṣan‘ā’ palimpsest are certainly relevant here but, as pointed out above, they do not as such preclude the possibility that the full standard *rasm* of the Quran might only have emerged in the second half of the seventh century. Furthermore, the radio carbon dating of Quranic manuscripts is still in its infancy and has been known to produce anomalies,² so additional, albeit less straightforwardly scientific, considerations are certainly not superfluous.

Unanimous ascription of the standard *rasm* to ‘Uthmān

The emergent canon model entails that traditions about ‘Uthmān’s promulgation of a standardized consonantal skeleton of the Quran can only have started to circulate after the assumed closure of the standard *rasm*, i.e. after 700.³ Yet the

- 1 I am extremely grateful to Robert Hoyland, Alan Jones, Christopher Melchert, Behnam Sadeghi and the two anonymous readers for numerous corrections, objections and suggestions.
- 2 See Nicolai Sinai, “When did the consonantal skeleton of the Quran reach closure? Part I”, notes 21 and 22.
- 3 See Alfred-Louis de Prémare, *Aux origines du Coran: questions d’hier, approches d’aujourd’hui* (Paris: Téraèdre, 2004), 98.

authoritative consonantal skeleton of the Quran is unanimously traced back to ‘Uthmān, not just by the Sunni tradition but also by other Islamic groups such as the Khārijites and the Shiites. Any attempt to reconcile these two things is faced with a double challenge. First, is it historically credible to suppose that a pan-Islamic consensus about the canonical version of the Quranic text could have formed at a time when the Islamic community had already spread across large swathes of territory from Spain to Iran and had split into several mutually hostile groups? It appears unlikely that a caliph like ‘Abd al-Malik could have coerced his various adversaries, some of whom did not hesitate to take up arms, to adopt his version of scripture plus its attribution to ‘Uthmān. A defender of the emergent canon model might respond by suggesting that most Muslims were so swiftly won over to the newly arrived Marwanid canon that even dissident groups like the proto-Shiites could not escape the pull exerted by the majority text and the legend of origins that went with it. I would concede that such a picture, although perhaps surprising,⁴ is not downright impossible, especially if one accepts that the primary medium in which the Quran was present to early Muslims would have been the recitation of brief passages from memory and for ritual purposes, rather than a systematic and frequent consultation of complete manuscripts.

Yet even if the challenge of painting a credible historical picture for the spread of the standard *rasm* is met (and the preceding remarks only intimate a possible starting point), a second query looms: how is it that the literary tradition displays no palpable vestiges of the true origin of the standard *rasm*? If the final redaction of the Quran had only taken place around 700 or later, rather than under ‘Uthmān, should we not expect some echo of this to survive at least in Shii or Khārijī sources, which are not beholden to the mainstream Sunni view of early Islamic history?⁵ The argument is one from silence, to be sure, and it hinges on the crucial premise that the Islamic literary tradition can be trusted to preserve the full range of people’s views, at least about major public events, that was extant at the beginning of the eighth century.⁶ Is such confidence justified? After all, the fact that the Exodus and the Israelite conquest of Canaan would have been highly significant public events has not prevented Biblical scholars from raising very weighty doubts that they ever occurred. Given the diversity of political and doctrinal viewpoints expressed in early Islamic literature, one may reasonably insist that the Islamic historical tradition is of a different kind from the ancient Israelite one: it does not

- 4 Why didn’t the Shiites adopt one of the other existing recensions, such as that of Ibn Mas’ūd, as their canonical text in order to demarcate themselves from the proto-Sunni majority? Why didn’t they replace the ‘Uthmānic legend of origins with one that put ‘Alī centre-stage?
- 5 See Fred Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1998), 26–8, who points out the impossibility of effective empire-wide censorship. Sadeghi emphasizes that the dissemination of a Marwanid text of the Quran would have been a public event that a large number of contemporaries must have known and talked about (Behnam Sadeghi and Uwe Bergmann, “The codex of a companion of the Prophet and the Qur’ān of the Prophet”, *Arabica* 57, 2010, 343–436, at 364–6, on the basis of a remark in Hossein Modarressi, “Early debates on the integrity of the Qur’ān: a brief survey”, *Studia Islamica* 77, 1993, 5–39, at 13–4).
- 6 My use of the term “public event” here is inspired by Sadeghi (see previous note).

necessarily give the impression of having gone through some bottleneck in the first half of the eighth century that was sufficiently narrow to explain the obliteration of virtually all traces of how the canonical *rasm* of the Quran really originated and spread. Nevertheless, the assumption that the Islamic literary tradition does record the entire spectrum of opinions about major public events that was extant in, say, 710, when people would presumably still have been aware that the so-called 'Uthmānic text was a recent arrival, certainly remains debatable.⁷ Generally speaking, the higher the salvation-historical significance of an event, the less it seems impossible that the majority view of that event could have completely drowned out contrary perspectives.

It is therefore worthwhile to present and flesh out a train of thought briefly sketched by Gregor Schoeler, which in my view considerably strengthens the unanimity argument.⁸ Schoeler observes that 'Uthmān's enforcement of a standardized consonantal skeleton of the Quran comes across as deeply controversial in our sources. For instance, al-Ṭabarī and al-Balādhurī have him defend himself against the charge of having reduced the Quran to a single book (viz., a single recension)⁹ or even of having "burnt the book of God" (viz., rival recensions thereof),¹⁰ and Sayf ibn 'Umar transmits a speech by 'Alī defending 'Uthmān against the invective "burner of the codices" (*ḥarrāq al-maṣāḥif*).¹¹ The Khārijite tradition, too, condemns him for the burning of Quranic codices.¹² Schoeler concedes that statements vindicating 'Uthmān's measures are likely to be apologetic fabrications. But the very fact that people took the trouble to fabricate them would presuppose that the accusation which they are designed to dispel – namely, that 'Uthmān had "burnt the book of God" – was very

- 7 For example, how far into the early eighth century can we confidently trace back the Shii assumption that the standard *rasm* was promulgated by 'Uthmān? It is not obvious that ninth-century authors like al-Sayyārī and others are simply relating what early eighth-century Shiites believed about the origin of the standard text (see Etan Kohlberg and Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, *Revelation and Falsification: The Kitāb al-qir'āt of Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Sayyārī*, Leiden: Brill, 2009, 25–6).
- 8 See Gregor Schoeler, "The codification of the Qur'an: a comment on the hypotheses of Burton and Wansbrough", in Neuwirth *et al.* (eds), *The Qur'ān in Context* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 779–94, at 787–8; cf. similarly Kohlberg and Amir-Moezzi, *Revelation and Falsification*, 22, n. 108.
- 9 Al-Ṭabarī, *Annales*, ed. M. J. de Goeje *et al.* (Leiden: Brill, 1871–1901) series 1, vol. 6, 2952: "The Quran used to consist in different books (*kāna l-qur'ānu kutuban*), but you have abandoned them all except one". 'Uthmān reacts by pleading that "the Quran is one and comes from One [viz., God]".
- 10 Al-Balādhurī, *Ansāb al-ashraf*, vol. 4.1, edited by Iḥsān 'Abbās (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1979), 552. 'Uthmān vindicates his decision to standardize the Quranic text by recalling how people used to differ in their readings and would say to one another, "My Quran is better than yours!" The burning of the rival codices as such is justified by 'Uthmān's wish that "there should only remain what was written under the eyes of the Messenger of God and was firmly established in the leaves that were with 'Ā'isha".
- 11 Sayf ibn 'Umar, *Kitāb al-rida wa-l-futūḥ wa-Kitāb al-jamal wa-masīr 'Ā'isha wa-'Alī*, ed. Qāsim al-Sāmarrā'ī (Leiden: Smitskamp Oriental Antiquarium, 1995), 51–2. 'Alī's apology emphasizes that 'Uthmān had burnt the codices in the presence of all the other Companions, who had previously endorsed his plan to "gather the people around a single codex".
- 12 Patricia Crone and Fritz Zimmermann, *The Epistle of Sālim ibn Dhakwān* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 189–90, n. 7.

much in the air. In other words, we are dealing with a genuine controversy: it is highly unlikely that the hypothetical originators of the legend describing ‘Uthmān’s promulgation of a standard text of the Quran would at the same time also have circulated accounts defending ‘Uthmān’s actions against accusations – and rather harsh ones at that – which had not yet been voiced.¹³ But if we are dealing with a genuine controversy about ‘Uthmān’s standardization, the latter has a very good claim to being a historical fact rather than an Umayyad fantasy.

As so often, different stories could be constructed around the literary data. For instance, assuming that the belief in ‘Uthmān’s promulgation of the canonical *rasm* only emerged in the second half of the seventh century or later, the above traditions might be the fallout of common curiosity: at some point, everybody had come to believe that ‘Uthmān had standardized the Quran, and it was also known that he had been unpopular towards the end of his reign (he had been murdered, after all). Against this background, people may have speculated with which particular wrongs his enemies could have reproached him, and may have surmised that having “burnt the book of God” would surely have featured on the list. Umayyad loyalists might then have reacted with traditions designed to clear ‘Uthmān of the charge. Or perhaps, after the legend of ‘Uthmān’s standardization had been successfully launched, people might have increasingly realized that there was something inherently problematic about the burning of rival codices (as these were, after all, copies of the Quran), which then inspired the addition of an appropriate passage to ‘Uthmān’s apology. However, in the absence of concrete textual support such storylines seem unnecessarily convoluted. What is by far the easiest explanation is surely to suppose that ‘Uthmān did indeed officially endorse a recension of the Quran and destroy competing copies, and that this measure caused him to be vilified in certain quarters as the “burner of the codices”.

There are nonetheless two things that bear emphasizing. First, the fact that ‘Uthmān propagated a standardized version of the Quran does not as such require that the Quranic standard *rasm* did not undergo any reshaping afterwards. Second, and more importantly, prudence requires us to suspend judgement on everything that goes beyond the rather limited factual core identified above: whether ‘Uthmān’s measures were an attempt to suppress quarrels about the correct reading of the Quran, whether it was Ḥudhayfā who brought the matter to his attention, and whether the recension endorsed by him was a faithful transcript of leaves that were in the possession of Ḥaḥḥa and had been compiled during the reign of Abū Bakr cannot be reliably ascertained. For all we know, the full narrative about the promulgation of the ‘Uthmānic text could be teeming with later expansions, accretions and embellishments. This possibility is augmented by the fact that al-Zuhrī, the common link of the traditions about ‘Uthmān’s standardization initiative, may legitimately be suspected

13 A comparable text, the Hellenistic Jewish *Letter of Aristeas*, which describes the legendary genesis of the Greek translation of the Torah, certainly does not waste time on inventing possible objections to the enterprise of rendering the Torah into Greek, only in order then to deliver an emphatic rebuff to such objections.

of having been susceptible to the exigencies of Umayyad “state expediency” (Goldziher).¹⁴

Text-critical arguments

As pointed out in Part I, Sadeghi has underscored that the fact that the lower writing of *Ṣan‘ā’ 1* was erased in order to make room for the standard version of the Quran does not require that the text-type attested by the lower layer (C-1) predates the standard *rasm*. He then presents evidence suggesting that the common prototype from which the two recensions are descended is actually preserved more faithfully by the canonical *rasm* than by C-1. His most impressive argument to this effect consists of a detailed study of the major non-orthographic *rasm* variants contained in the lower text of nine pages of *Ṣan‘ā’ 1*.¹⁵ According to Sadeghi, these are generally more likely to have arisen from the canonical *rasm*, or from a prototype that corresponded to it more closely than to C-1, than vice versa. This assessment turns on the assumption that copyists of early Quranic manuscripts, who Sadeghi argues were working from dictation, would have been more likely to drop brief textual segments than to add them, unless an addition can be accounted for as originating from an inadvertent assimilation of the verse in question to a similar or neighbouring one.¹⁶ Thus, when confronted with two variant readings, XY and X, for a given verse, and excluding the existence of parallel or nearby verses displaying the wording XY, Sadeghi would *ceteris paribus* deem a development XY > X to be somewhat more likely than one leading from X to XY (and call XY an “irreducible plus”).¹⁷ This assumption is based on the fact that omissions may be attributed to straightforward scribal mistakes, whereas additions not caused by accidental assimilation are more likely to have been deliberate;¹⁸ and while Sadeghi does not rule out that conscious expansions may have occurred, he does posit that simple errors would have been more frequent. Against this background, Sadeghi has found that of the fourteen major pluses displayed by the standard *rasm* in comparison with C-1 at least three are irreducible.¹⁹ By contrast, none of the nine major pluses displayed by

14 See Michael Lecker, “Biographical notes on Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī”, *Journal of Semitic Studies* 41, 1996, 21–63.

15 Sadeghi and Bergmann, “Codex”, 399–405 and appendix 2 (422–3). The four-and-a-half folios analysed by Sadeghi contain Q 2:191–223, 5:41–54, 15:54–72, 63, 62, 89, and 90:1–6.

16 *Ibid.*, 387–8.

17 The qualification “*ceteris paribus*” is intended to convey that Sadeghi would presumably accept a textual evolution leading from X to XY if the latter variant supports a legal or theological claim that is explicitly debated in the literary sources. The above principle contradicts the classic text-critical rule of *brevior lectio potior*, which has, however, come under criticism in Biblical scholarship as well (see Sadeghi, “Codex”, 387, n. 84).

18 For example, a development from *min ṣiyāmin aw ṣadaqatin aw nusukin* (standard text) to *min ṣiyāmin aw nusukin* (C-1) in Q 2:196 would be explicable as an accidental omission, whereas the reverse development *min ṣiyāmin aw nusukin* > *min ṣiyāmin aw ṣadaqatin aw nusukin* would be best explained as a deliberate expansion of the text designed to sanction almsgiving as a way of compensating for premature shaving during the pilgrimage.

19 See Sadeghi and Bergmann, “Codex”, 401. The three variants in question are as follows (words in the standard text that are absent from C-1 are underlined): Q 2:196, second

C-1 in comparison with the standard *rasm* are irreducible, meaning that if the standard *rasm* is assumed to be primary, the wording of C-1 could have arisen from the standard text by means of widespread accidents of transmission, rather than as a result of less frequent kinds of alteration. This, according to Sadeghi, creates a certain presumption that the wording of the standard *rasm* is older than that of the lower layer of the palimpsest.²⁰

Sadeghi's study, a full appraisal of which is beyond the scope of this article, certainly marks a major advance: for the first time, sophisticated methods of textual criticism have been applied to the Quran, thus opening up promising avenues for future research, irrespective of whether an analysis of the remainder of the palimpsest's lower writing will bear out the trend detected by Sadeghi.²¹ His tentative conclusion that the wording of the standard *rasm* seems to be older than that of C-1 also coheres well with the conclusion of the preceding section. Nevertheless, a few issues that deserve further discussion may be flagged up. Above all, it is important to state how much more probable an evolution $XY > X$ has to be than its reverse in order to make us confident that the fact that manuscript A exhibits a given surplus of "irreducible pluses" over manuscript B really indicates that A is older. One must also note, as do Sadeghi and Goudarzi, that different parts of a manuscript could belong to different textual families whose value would have to be assessed separately²² (a Biblical case in point being the Codex Alexandrinus). Finally, even if a default presumption in favour of the standard *rasm* being better than that of the lower layer of *Ṣan'ā' 1* were established, this obviously does not exclude (and is not taken to exclude by Sadeghi) that particular passages could have undergone subsequent revision and expansion, although this possibility is likely to shrink further – or be confirmed – as the remainder of *Ṣan'ā' 1*'s lower writing is published.

variant (*min ṣiyāmin aw sadaqatin aw nusukin*); 2:217, first variant (*qul qitāluṅ fihī kabīrun wa-ṣaddun 'an sabīli llāhi wa-kufrun bihi wa-l-masjidi l-ḥarāmi wa-ikhrāju ahlihi minhu akbaru 'inda llāhi*); 2:222 (standard text: *fa-tazilū l-nisā'a fī l-mahīdi wa-lā taqrabūhunna*, C-1: *fa-lā taqrabū l-nisā'a fī mahīdihinna*). Two more pertinent variants occur at 5:42 (*fa-in jā'uka fa-ḥkum baynahum*) and 63:1, but Sadeghi concedes that these two should perhaps be disregarded.

- 20 Sadeghi also provides a stemmatic analysis of the standard *rasm*, C-1, and the *rasm* variants ascribed to Ibn Mas'ūd. His point of departure lies in the observation that in cases of disagreement, the standard text tends to be in the majority, either siding with C-1 against Ibn Mas'ūd, or with Ibn Mas'ūd against C-1 (Sadeghi and Bergmann, "Codex", 394; Sadeghi notes that the same observation would apply had he utilized the *rasm* variants ascribed to Ubayy instead of Ibn Mas'ūd, see *ibid.*, 399, n. 109). Proceeding on this basis, Sadeghi ends up favouring either (i) a stemma in which all three recensions are direct descendants from a common prototype, with the standard text as the most reliable transcript of this common source; or (ii) a stemma in which the standard *rasm* is a hybrid text following the majority readings of a number of pre-existing Companion codices.
- 21 The need for further study is emphasized in Sadeghi and Bergmann, "Codex", 347 and 404.
- 22 See Behnam Sadeghi and Mohsen Goudarzi, "Ṣan'ā' 1 and the origins of the Qur'ān", *Der Islam* 87, 2012, 1–129 at 22. Note that the three major omissions of C-1 which most obviously constitute "irreducible pluses" of the standard *rasm* occur in relatively close proximity (2:196.217.222).

Internal features of the Quran (i): lack of fit with post-650 Islamic history

While the preceding sections have focused on extra-Quranic literary sources and on manuscript evidence, the strength of the emergent canon model can also be probed by examining internal characteristics of the standard *rasm* itself. Such an inquiry proceeds counterfactually, i.e. it involves the thought experiment of trying to hypothesize what kind of document we might have expected the presumed editors of the Quran to have produced if they had been active until around 700, and then checking the result against the kind of text with which we are in fact confronted.

Perhaps the most popular argument of this kind is Fred Donner's observation that in the Quran "we find not a single reference to events, personalities, groups or issues that clearly belong to periods after the time of Muḥammad – 'Abbāsids, Umayyads, Zubayrids, 'Alids, the dispute over free will, the dispute over tax revenues and conversion, tribal rivalries, conquests etc".²³ Shoemaker has attempted to parry this line of reasoning by contending that the Quran's lack of allusions to later Islamic history "may simply reflect the fact that the Quran is generally not a predictive text".²⁴ As a result, the early Muslims who potentially continued to shape the Quranic corpus after Muḥammad's death may not have been tempted to insert into it vaticinations of later events, and the absence of such foretellings does not prove that no posthumous editing occurred. Indeed, given the general scarcity of names and dates in the Quran, it is far from obvious that we would be entitled to expect an explicit mention of, say, the counter-caliph 'Abdallāh ibn al-Zubayr. On the other hand, the question at stake is not so much whether the Quran contains or does not contain anachronisms in the strict sense but whether we can detect in it concerns that are best understood as those of editors active in the second half of the seventh century rather than those of the Meccan and Medinan *Urgemeinde*. If the Quranic *rasm* did not reach closure until c. 700, it does seem odd that it should nowhere engage with the major developments that defined Islamic history between 630 and 700, in particular the unprecedented speed with which an alliance of "barbarian"

23 Donner, *Narratives*, 49. Shoemaker briefly discusses Q 30:2–4, which according to a minority reading predicts the Islamic victory over the Byzantines ("The Romans have vanquished / in the near part of the land, but after their vanquishing, they shall be vanquished / in a few years"), which would make it an anachronism. However, the majority reading ("The Romans have been vanquished . . . they shall vanquish") is surely preferable: it is easier to imagine that some Muslims were tempted to turn a verse that had originally alluded to the Byzantine–Sasanid war ending in 628 into a miraculous prediction of the Islamic victory over the Byzantines than to see why a triumphant prediction of the Islamic conquests, which later Muslims clearly perceived as confirming Muḥammad's claim to prophethood, should have been transformed, by the majority of Quranic readers, into a reference to an obscure pre-Islamic war. Bell's objection to the majority reading that it is "difficult to explain Muhammed's favourable interest in the political fortunes of the Byzantine Empire" (quoted in Stephen J. Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet: The End of Muhammad's Life and the Beginnings of Islam*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012, 154) misses part of the passage's point, namely, that "the decision is with God, in the past and in the future" (thus Q 30:4). The "political fortunes of the Byzantine Empire" are thus adduced as an illustration of God's universal control of history.

24 Shoemaker, *Death*, 153.

tribes from the fringes of the Byzantine and Sasanian empires established themselves as the masters of an immense territory, and the bitter disputes and civil wars that soon wreaked havoc on the unity of the conquerors.

Shoemaker also demurs that following Donner's logic, "one could similarly make the argument that the Christian Gospel according to John, which does not assign any predictions to Jesus beyond his own lifespan (or a few days thereafter), must accurately reflect his life and teaching and date to sometime before 60 CE",²⁵ whereas the majority of scholars would of course date the text three or four decades later. Yet even the Gospel of John occasionally gives away the time of its composition. For example, the story of Jesus' healing of a man who had been blind from birth concludes with the statement that "the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue" (John 9:22). As Bart Ehrman comments, "we know that there was no official policy against accepting Jesus (or anyone else) as messiah during his lifetime. On the other hand, some Jewish synagogues evidently did begin to exclude members who believed in Jesus' messiahship toward the end of the first century. So the story . . . reflects the experience of the later community that stood behind the Fourth Gospel".²⁶ Hence, the argument that if the Quran had been an open text until the second half of the seventh century then, like other ancient writings, it somehow ought to reflect the historical context from which it supposedly emerged (albeit not necessarily by virtue of explicit name-dropping) still stands. As long as scholars have not managed to demonstrate that certain Quranic passages – and preferably, passages with a distinct stylistic and terminological profile! – are only intelligible, or best intelligible, when placed in a post-conquest context, a dating of the standard *rasm* to before 650 seems heuristically preferable.

If one shifts the burden of proof, however, it is not evident that the Quran's lack of palpable fit with post-prophetic Islamic history, while excluding a major later reshaping of the text, also rules out minor additions and modifications: there is nothing "out of period" about the story of Jesus and the woman taken in adultery (John 7:53–8:11), often considered to be a later addition to the Gospel of John due to its absence in early New Testament manuscripts. Of course the argument from unanimity discussed in the previous section raises grave questions as to how any changes that are assumed to have been made to the Quranic *rasm* as late as 'Abd al-Malik could have been consensually adopted by dissident groups such as the proto-Shiites. In order to strengthen further the position that the standard *rasm* of the Quran had largely stabilized by the middle of the seventh century the next two sections will examine two further internal characteristics of the Quranic corpus. (It must be emphasized that the

25 Shoemaker, *Death*, 153.

26 Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 5th ed. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 193–4. See also John 16:2, where Jesus anachronistically predicts that "they shall put you out of the synagogues". Although the Gospel of John does not refer to the destruction of the Temple as unequivocally as, for example, Matthew 24:1–2, John 11:48 and 2:13–22 can be construed as presupposing the event.

conclusion of early stabilization does not pertain to orthographic matters, such as the spelling of long *ā*, which continued to evolve for much longer.²⁷⁾

Internal features of the Quran (ii): absence of narrative framing

The Quranic texts clearly presuppose an individual messenger figure,²⁸ yet are notoriously unforthcoming with specific details about him. This is why Islamic exegesis has found the technique of biographical contextualization to be such an indispensable hermeneutic tool: isolated Quranic segments are clarified by inserting them into a narrative – often one that seems to have been tailor-made for its exegetical function – describing a particular situation from the life of Muḥammad.²⁹ Nonetheless, in spite of their supreme interpretative utility, no such contextualizing narratives have seeped into the actual text of the Quran,³⁰ again suggesting an early date of closure.

It is true that Shoemaker would date the emergence of narratives about Muḥammad that incorporate Quranic quotations to after 700.³¹ In my view, however, it has by now become reasonably certain that already towards the end of the seventh century narratives about Muḥammad containing Quranic elements were in circulation. An episode that has been particularly thoroughly scrutinized is the story about Muḥammad's first revelation on Mount Ḥirā', significant parts of which, including a Quranic quotation, Andreas Görke and Gregor Schoeler have been able to trace back to the Medinese traditionist 'Urwa ibn al-Zubayr (d. 93/711–12 or 94/712–13).³² Another biographical

27 See n. 37 in Part I of this article.

28 While the Quranic “Thou” might occasionally be understood as addressing a generic believer like the Biblical commandment “Thou shalt not kill!” (Andrew Rippin, “Muḥammad in the Qur’ān: reading scripture in the 21st century”, in Harald Motzki (ed.), *The Biography of Muḥammad: The Issue of the Sources*, Leiden: Brill, 2000, 298–309), such a construal is hardly tenable for the entire corpus.

29 See Andrew Rippin, “The Function of *asbāb al-nuzūl* in Qur’anic exegesis”, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 51, 1988, 1–20.

30 See Daniel Madigan, “Reflections on some current directions in Qur’anic studies”, *Muslim World* 85, 1995, 345–62, at 353–4.

31 Stephen J. Shoemaker, “In search of ‘Urwa’s *Sīra*: some methodological issues in the quest for ‘authenticity’ in the life of Muḥammad”, *Der Islam* 85, 2011, 257–344, at 310–12.

32 See Gregor Schoeler, *The Biography of Muḥammad: Nature and Authenticity*, trans. Uwe Vagelpohl, ed. James E. Montgomery (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 38–79; Andreas Görke and Gregor Schoeler, *Die ältesten Berichte über das Leben Muḥammads: Das Korpus ‘Urwa ibn az-Zubair* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 2008), 22–37. For a response to Shoemaker’s criticism see Andreas Görke, Harald Motzki and Gregor Schoeler, “First-century sources for the life of Muḥammad? A debate”, *Der Islam* 87, 2012, 2–59. Görke and Schoeler, in their study of the *sīra* traditions ascribed to ‘Urwa, contend that the ‘Urwan origin of the report about Muḥammad’s first revelation transmitted on the authority of al-Zuhrī < ‘Urwa < ‘Ā’isha (consisting, *inter alia*, of Muḥammad’s encounter with Gabriel, the revelation of Q 96:1–5, and the accreditation of Muḥammad’s prophetic status by Waraqa ibn Nawfal), is at least partly confirmed by three brief reports transmitted on the authority of Hishām ibn ‘Urwa < ‘Urwa. These latter parallel some of the motifs of al-Zuhrī’s report and even employ some of the same keywords and phrases, although their diction frequently diverges. Arguably, then, the traditions ascribed to Hishām constitute precisely the “evidence of independent transmission from ‘Urwa that bypassed al-Zuhrī” which Shoemaker demands (“In search”, 306). As

episode integrating Quranic quotations is the well-known story of the ‘Ā’isha scandal, which Görke and Schoeler likewise ascribe to ‘Urwa.³³

The situation, then, is as follows: the early Islamic reception of the Quran displays a trend towards the biographical narrativization of Quranic material; and by 700, suitable narrative material about Muḥammad containing scriptural quotations had come into existence, while Muḥammad had also become an important political symbol (in 685–6, an Iranian governor of ‘Abdallāh ibn al-Zubayr minted the first existing coins mentioning Muḥammad,³⁴ and from 691–2 on ‘Abd al-Malik’s coinage as well as the inscriptions of the Dome of the Rock invoke Muḥammad as a foundational religious figure³⁵). How, then, do we explain the fact that the Islamic tradition so scrupulously managed to keep apart the utterances of its prophet and the exegetical narratives with which these utterances were so much more readily understandable? As comparative evidence from the Hebrew Bible demonstrates, collections of prophetic *logia* seem to display a natural tendency to attract legends about the life and times of the respective prophet.³⁶ It is therefore indicative of an early stabilization of the Quran that such legendary accretions could apparently no longer be incorporated into the Islamic scripture and needed to be outsourced to a separate body of literature. For example, neither the Quran nor the material in the early chapters of the book of Isaiah suggest that the prophet in question was a miracle worker; in the case of Isaiah, however, it is Isaiah 38 that turns him into one, whereas in the case of Muḥammad this happens in the *ḥadīth*.³⁷

From all of this one takes away the consistent impression that the text of the Islamic scripture must have set rather early. One might object that the Quran’s hypothetical Marwanid redactors could have shied away from incorporating full-blown biographical narratives because they did not wish to alter the general character of the text as a collection of prophetic utterances. But the Quran lacks even the most editorially minimalist techniques of biographical contextualization, such as the insertion of superscriptions tying specific scriptural passages to certain events in Muḥammad’s life (see Isaiah 1:1, Jeremiah 1:1–3, and the various Psalmic superscriptions associating the following text with the life of

Görke and Schoeler emphasize, the Hishām ibn ‘Urwa fragments must have belonged to a larger whole and presuppose other elements of the long al-Zuhrī account. Note that the third Hishām report concludes with a reference to the revelation of Q 93.

- 33 Görke and Schoeler, *Die ältesten Berichte*, 145–62. Shoemaker has no major reservations here and accepts that ‘Urwa’s version included a reference to the revelation of Q 24:11 (“In search”, 321–6).
- 34 Stefan Heidemann, “The evolving representation of the early Islamic empire and its religion on coin imagery”, in Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai and Michael Marx (eds), *The Qur’ān in Context: Literary and Historical Investigations into the Qur’ānic Milieu* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 149–95, at 167.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 170–4.
- 36 See Joseph Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel*, revised edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press), 100, on the narratives in Isaiah 36–9.
- 37 The divergence in the understanding of Muḥammad that arises between the Quran and the *ḥadīth* is pointed out in Donner, *Narratives*, 50–52.

David).³⁸ The fact that the Quranic corpus as we have it is remarkably uncontaminated not only by fully-fledged *sīra* narratives but also by such minor redactional accretions is most easily accounted for by a mid-seventh-century date for the standard *rasm*'s closure.

Internal features of the Quran (iii): lack of linguistic normalization

A third characteristic of the Quran that suggests fairly rapid stabilization are its various “rough edges”.³⁹ These include, for example, archaic grammatical features that were not brought into line with later usage, such as employment of *an* in the sense of “lest” (e.g. Q 4:176, 16:15).⁴⁰ Arguably the most striking example is provided by a handful of passages that violate basic rules of case agreement in classical Arabic (Q 2:177, 4:162, 5:69 and 20:63).⁴¹ These verses appear to have given umbrage already to early Muslims: it is reported that ‘Uthmān himself, when presented with the copies of the Quran that he had ordered to be produced, found incorrect expressions in them, but gave the command for no changes to be made “because the Arabs will change them with their tongues” (thus advocating a solution along the lines of the masoretic Qre-Ktiv distinction⁴²); and Muḥammad’s wife ‘Ā’isha is said to have commented that such verses are “the work of the

38 The case of the Psalmic superscriptions is briefly taken up in Gabriel S. Reynolds, “Le problème de la chronologie du Coran”, *Arabica* 58, 2011, 477–502, at 500–1, but only in order to emphasize that since most critical Biblical scholars would be unwilling to view these Psalmic headlines as reflections of historical facts, we ought to be equally suspicious of the link that the Islamic tradition establishes between the Quran and the life of Muḥammad. Reynolds thus fails to ask what we can learn from the fact that in the case of the psalms such biographical references were incorporated into the scriptural text itself, whereas in the case of the Quran they were relegated to exegetical secondary literature.

39 The expression is taken from Michael Cook, *The Koran: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 134–5.

40 See William Wright, *A Grammar of the Arabic Language*, third edition, revised by W. Robertson Smith and M. J. de Goeje, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1896), vol. 2, 27.

41 See John Burton, “Linguistic errors in the Qur’ān”, *Journal of Semitic Studies* 33/2, 1988, 181–96. The Ḥafṣ ‘an ‘Āṣim reading of Q 20:63 (in *hādhāni la-sāḥirāni* ...) is of course not, strictly speaking, incorrect, for in *al-mukhaffafa* does not require the accusative (see Wright, *Grammar*, vol. 2, 81D). On the other hand, it is noteworthy that the majority of canonical readers seem to have read *inna hādhāni*, at the price of linguistic correctness (Aḥmad Mukhtār ‘Umar and ‘Abd al-‘Āl Sālim Makram, *Mu’jam al-qirā’āt al-qur’āniyya*, 2nd ed., 8 vols (Kuwait: Dhāt al-Salāsīl, 1988, vol. 4, 89–90). There must consequently have been a strong oral tradition in favour of *inna* instead of *in al-mukhaffafa*; and it seems probable that this was the original wording, as it is surely the *lectio difficilior*. Abū ‘Amr and others read *inna hādhayn la-sāḥirān*, probably by tacitly going against the *rasm*. What is significant in the present context is that this oral tradition in favour of *inna* did not result in an emendation of the *rasm*.

42 See Paul Joüon and Takamitsu Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 2006), 65–6. For a number of examples in which early Quran readers adopted this procedure see Beck, “Der ‘uṭmānische Kodex in der Koranlesung des zweiten Jahrhunderts”, *Orientalia Nova Series* 14, 1945, 355–73, and id., “Die Kodizesvarianten der Amsār”, *Orientalia nova series* 16, 1947, 353–76, at 357–8.

scribes; they wrote it out wrongly”.⁴³ Bergsträsser is surely right that traditions which enjoin Muslims to improve on the Quranic text as they recite it, or openly recognize that God’s word is contaminated by typos, are likely to be early⁴⁴ and may well date to before 700, thus indicating that people did not have to await the advent of Sībawayh to notice the above problems. Yet neither al-Ḥajjāj nor anyone else ever seems to have tried to correct the *rasm* of these verses.

A similar case is Q 3:96, according to which “the first house [of worship] that was founded for humankind is that in *bakka*”. Islamic exegetes generally propose that the expression *bakka* is a variant for *makka*, i.e. Mecca, yet are forced to construct rather intricate derivations of the expression *bakka* in order to make the point. What would have been by far the simplest way of remedying the problem, and presumably one on which all major Islamic confessions should have been able to agree – namely, to change a *bā’* into a *mīm* – was apparently no longer practicable by the time people started paying serious attention to the verse.⁴⁵ In the Hebrew Bible, too, anomalous or obscure expressions and place names have frequently been retained, but there they have often given rise to interpretative glosses inserted into the text,⁴⁶ which are conspicuously absent from the Quran.⁴⁷

The textual shock freezing indicated by examples such as the above is most easily explained as the early Islamic community’s reaction to the death of the charismatic messenger who had been the sole person endowed with the authority to publish and modify divine revelations. In any case, it stands to reason that if al-Ḥajjāj or anybody else had revised the Quranic text around 700, even on a very minor scale, passages such as the above should have been the first to be emended, which would merely have required exchanging single letters and might therefore have occurred almost instinctively.

Conclusions

One must admit that the argument at the end of the preceding section is not unassailable. First, can we be sure that there might not have been more passages of the sort presented above that *were* corrected (such as Q 48:24, where we get *makka* instead of *bakka*)? Second, even if it is conceded that most of the Quranic corpus must have been extant before al-Ḥajjāj and that the latter did not correct existing portions of the text, does this rule out the insertion of new material? In

43 Theodor Nöldeke, *Geschichte des Qorāns*, revised by Friedrich Schwally, Gotthelf Bergsträsser and Otto Pretzl, 3 vols (Leipzig: Dieterich’sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1909–38, henceforth *GdQ*), vol. 3, 1–6.

44 *Ibid.*, 4.

45 Patricia Crone, “Two legal problems bearing on the early history of the Qur’ān”, *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 18, 1994, 1–37, at 20, makes a similar observation with respect to other opaque terms which were likewise not changed into more intelligible ones.

46 Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 44–65.

47 August Fischer has argued that Q 101:10–11 constitute a later gloss (“Eine Qorān-Interpolation”, in Carl Bezold (ed.), *Orientalistische Studien Theodor Nöldeke zum siebenzigsten Geburtstag gewidmet* (Gießen: Alfred Töpelmann, 1906), 2 vols, vol. 1, 33–55), but see my comments at <http://www.corpuscoranicum.de/kommentar/index/sure/101/vers/1>, in the section “Literarkritik”.

other words, can we rule out that the Quran might have constituted a literary corpus which was textually stable yet could still be added to? Such objections obviously raise a burden-of-proof dilemma: should we require proponents of the conventional view that the standard *rasm* of the Quran had become fixed by 650 to produce conclusive proof of the absence of later additions, or should we instead require scholars insisting on the possibility of later additions to prove that such additions do in fact exist? I would submit that the latter position is more reasonable: if the only swans we have ever encountered are white ones, it is the proponent of the existence of black swans whom we may legitimately expect to argue his case. Similarly, as long as no Quranic passages with a distinct stylistic and terminological profile have been compellingly placed in a late seventh-century context, the traditional dating of the standard *rasm* (excepting certain orthographical features) to 650 or earlier ought to be our default view.⁴⁸

Assuming a mid-seventh-century dating of the standard *rasm*, can we go back any further? Even if one were fully to underwrite the hypothesis that the standard text of the Quran preserves the common textual prototype of the two more faithfully than C-1, and to ascribe, on a probability of 3:1, a *terminus ante quem* of 646 to Ṣan'ā' 1,⁴⁹ this prototype may only have reached closure in the late 630s. Thus, it seems wise to concede that during the first decade or so after Muḥammad's traditional year of death, the latter's literary legacy may not yet have been fully fixed.⁵⁰

There are nevertheless good reasons to believe that the arrangement of verses in most *sūras* does go back to the lifetime of Muḥammad. Sadeghi and Goudarzi have underscored the general convergence between the variants exhibited by the lower writing of the Ṣan'ā' palimpsest and what the *qirā'āt* literature tells us about the spectrum of variance characterizing the earliest stages of the Quran's transmission.⁵¹ On the basis of the literary sources alone, we may also accept that different recensions disagreed about the inclusion of a handful of short *sūras* (Q 1, 113, 114, as well as *Sūrat al-Khal'* and *Sūrat al-Ḥafd*).⁵² But neither C-1 nor the literary sources reveal any genuine disagreement about the contents of each *sūra*,⁵³ thus lending credence to the view that at least the majority of them were extant by Muḥammad's death. It bears repeating that this does not rule out the possibility that existing texts could to some degree have been expanded, reshaped and updated during the first post-prophetic decade. Ultimately, it is above all the rigorous literary analysis of each individual *sūra* that can determine whether there are reasons for suspecting that it may have undergone early post-prophetic alteration or expansion.

48 As I have underscored in the first part of this paper, the conventional scenario, if it is to be squared with some of the data surveyed in this article, will need to be amended in two respects: first, 'Uthmān's measures, whatever they were, do not seem to have immediately displaced rival recensions; second, during much of the seventh century the Quran may have been used primarily for ritual and devotional recitation, not as a normative source, with parts of the corpus being perhaps rarely recited and transmitted only in writing.

49 Sadeghi and Bergmann, "Codex", 353.

50 Against *ibid.*, 406–10.

51 *Ibid.*, 408; Sadeghi and Goudarzi, "Ṣan'ā' 1", 22–3.

52 See Arthur Jeffery, *Materials for the History of the Text of the Qur'ān: The Old Codices* (Leiden: Brill, 1937), 21–3 and 180–1; *GdQ*, vol. 2, 33–8 and 40–42.

53 See Sadeghi and Goudarzi, "Ṣan'ā' 1", 23.