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THE BLUE KORAN:
AN EARLY FATIMID KUFIC MANUSCRIPT
FROM THE MAGHRIB

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Dispersed pages from an apparently unique kufic Koran written in gold on vellum dyed deep blue with indigo are here reassembled and studied as a group. The script is identified as Déroche D IV, occasionally pointed but never voweled. The traditional attribution of the blue pages to 3rd/9th-century Iran is reviewed and revised to mid-4th/10th-century North Africa for paleographical and historical reasons. Paleographically, the manuscript uses the Maghribi *abjad* system for numbering the verses, indicating that it could not have been produced in the eastern Islamic lands. Historical analysis suggests that it was produced for the Fatimid caliphs, who ruled North Africa directly from Qayrawan during the first half of the 4th/10th century, and was probably inspired by a Byzantine imperial manuscript written in gold on purple-dyed vellum that the Fatimids received as a gift.

Des pages dispersées d'un Koran coufique apparemment unique, écrit en caractères dorés sur du parchemin teint en bleu foncé avec de l'indigo, sont ici remises ensemble et étudiées en tant que groupe. L'écriture, définie comme Déroche D IV, est occasionnellement pointée mais jamais vocalisée. L'attribution traditionnelle de ces pages à l'Iran, au III^e/IX^e s., est réexaminée et changée, pour des raisons paléographiques et historiques, pour l'Afrique du Nord vers le milieu du IV^e/X^e s. Paléographiquement, le manuscrit emploie pour la numérotation des versets la version maghrébine du système de l'*abjad*, indiquant qu'il n'a pu être produit dans la partie orientale du monde islamique. L'analyse historique suggère qu'il fut réalisé pour les califes fatimides qui gouvernèrent l'Afrique du Nord directement depuis Kairouan durant la première moitié du IV^e/X^e s., et qu'il s'inspirait probablement d'un manuscrit impérial byzantin, copié en lettres d'or sur du parchemin teint en pourpre, que les Fatimides avaient reçu en cadeau.

For many years, pages from an apparently unique kufic Koran manuscript written in gold on vellum dyed deep blue with indigo have appeared on the art market and entered major public and private collections of Islamic art around the world¹ (Pl. XIII A). Due to trimming, the pages vary in size between 27.6 by 35 cm. and 31 by 41 cm., but all share common characteristics. The written surface is always the same, each page having been ruled with a rectangular grid measuring 18.8 by 28.2 cm. allowing fifteen lines about 1.4 cm. per page². Of the eighteen leaves currently known, all but six contain text from the second, third, and fourth chapters of the Koran; however the pages in Tunis and these recently on the London market contain text from later chapters (*chart 1*).

The script is characterized by thick horizontal and vertical strokes with few diagonals and curves. The text was first written in an opaque gold ink, each letter or joined group of letters was subsequently outlined in black. The average *alif* stands 1.2 cm. tall, approximately four times the width of the penstroke. In the initial form, its hook is relatively flat. While the initial *'ayn* is composed of a barb on a horizontal base, the medial and final forms are composed of a vertical right stroke and an oblique left stroke forming a fairly closed angle, with

a crescent tail on the final form. The initial and final forms of the *mīm* rest on the baseline as does the tail of the final form, while the medial form descends slightly below; the body of the *nūn* is vertical; and the initial *hā'* is approximately 3/4 of a circle resting against a vertical shaft (*figure 1*). Although the letters of the Arabic alphabet vary in width, some have been deliberately extended for esthetic effect (*mashq*). The script belongs generally to the D group proposed by François Déroche, and specifically to group D IV³. Manuscript Arabe 336 in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, is in same script and carries a waqf deed of 329/940-41, although it is not known when or where this manuscript was produced⁴.

None of the pages shows any evidence of ever having been voweled, either at or after the time they were copied. Close examination reveals occasional but inconsistent examples of pointing with short diagonal strokes to differentiate similar shapes. Thus one gold stroke of Beatty 1 verso lines 6 and 8 indicates a *nūn*; two gold strokes on Fogg recto line 4 indicate the *tā'*. *Shīn* is indicated by three strokes on S.A. Khan verso 12 and recto 14, but two lines above on line 12 the same letter is unmarked. This inconsistency is difficult to reconcile with the obvious care with which the manuscript was copied. It is unlikely the pages were originally fully pointed and

1. Leaves are in the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin; the collection of Sadruddin Aga Khan, Geneva; two other private collections in Geneva (one illustrated in Musée d'art et d'histoire, *Islam et art figuratif* [Geneva, 1984], no. 1); the Harvard University Art Museums, Cambridge, Mass.; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; the Institut de Monde Arabe, Paris; private collections in London and in Saudi Arabia; in addition, a number of pages have passed recently through the art market: e.g., *Sotheby's* (London) 15 October 1984, lot 220 and *Sotheby's* (Geneva) 25 June 1985, lot 11. The most recent publication is Toby Falk, ed. *Treasures of Islam* (Geneva, 1985), p. 36.

2. The dimensions were measured on the leaf in the Harvard University Art Museums. The vertical dimension measures the distance between the baselines of the top and bottom lines. Accordingly, the actual written surface is slightly larger. The grid is clearly apparent in the Sadruddin Aga Khan leaf, reproduced in Anthony Welch and Stuart Cary Welch, *Arts of the Islamic Book: The Collection of Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan* (Ithaca and London, 1982), pp. 20-22.

3. François Déroche, *Les Manuscrits du Koran, aux origines de la calligraphie coranique* [Bibliothèque Nationale, Département des Manuscrits, Catalogue des Manuscrits Arabes, Deuxième partie: Manuscrits Musulmans, Tome I, i] (Paris, 1983), pp. 41 and 43.

4. Déroche, *Manuscrits*, p. 51, notes that the manuscript could be substantially earlier, but prefers a date closer to that of the waqf.

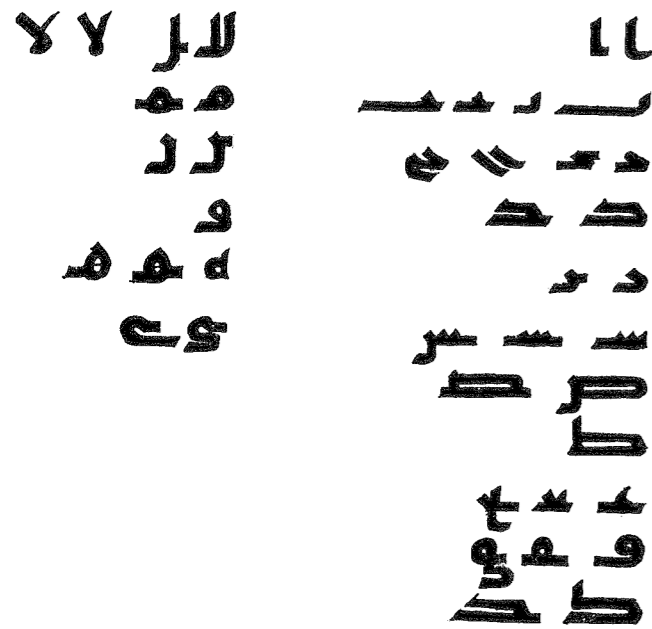


Figure 1

the remaining few marks are all that remained when the rest flaked off, for examination of one folio under ultraviolet light failed to show any other residues of the binder used to apply gold for diacritical marks which might now have flaked off. Instead, one may hypothesize that the scribe knew the use of diacritical points, but for some reason chose not to use them systematically.

Silver marks were used consistently to punctuate the text. Where they have not flaked off, they have tarnished to a dull dark gray. Red (and green) marks are visible on some of them, but their purpose is unclear⁵. Each verse ends with a round mark - perhaps a rosette, but the degradation of the silver makes it difficult to tell — placed either within the text or in the outer margin. Every fifth verse terminates with a *hā*, the *abjad* (alphabetic) numeral five. Tens are similarly marked by *abjad*, as is clearly visible on Beatty folio 1 b line 2, where the letter *ṣād* indicates the end of the sixtieth verse⁶.

Some scholars have ascribed a remarkable peculiarity

to the manuscript: “[a]lthough the Arabic script moves from right to left, the pages of this Qur’an — unlike almost all others — were turned from left to right, the left — hand page preceding the right⁷.” The Beatty pages and a bifolio in a London private collection, however, contradict this improbable assertion, for adjacent text pages read correctly from right to left.

Until the mid-1970’s, the manuscript was said to have been commissioned by the Abbasid caliph al-Ma’mūn in the eastern Islamic world in the early third/ninth century as a gift for the tomb of his father, Harun al-Rashid, at Mashhad. This attribution was supported by Christies’ report in 1977 of “some other leaves clearly from the same Qur’ān manuscript, loose, within a fine sixteenth-century dark brown tooled morocco binding from Persia, obviously made for a section of the same Qur’ān... According to documentary evidence, it has been stated that the Qur’ān was sent by the Abbasid Caliph al-Ma’mūn (813-833) to the Great Mosque at Mashhad”⁸. However, the “documentary evidence” was nothing else than the unsupported assertion by F. R. Martin, the great collector and diplomat, who acquired the leaves in Constantinople shortly before 1912 when he published *The Miniature Painting and Painters of Persia, India and Turkey*⁹. In it he asserted that the manuscript had been commissioned by the caliph al-Ma’mūn for the tomb of his father, Harun al-Rashid, at Mashhad, because blue was the color of mourning in Islam and was therefore appropriate for this funerary donation. T. W. Arnold and Adolf Grohmann not only accepted Martin’s attribution but embellished it¹⁰, and modern scholars, dealers and connoisseurs continued to repeat it.

However, during the great 1976 Festival of Islam in London, a new attribution for the manuscript was proposed. The exhibition of Korans at the British Library included a page from a “nearly complete” blue Koran manuscript from the National Institute of Art and Archaeology in Tunis. Martin Lings and Yasin Safadi, the authors of the exhibition catalogue, attributed the manuscript to the early 4th/10th century in Qayrawan¹¹. Yet at another show across the Thames, the Hayward Gallery simultaneously exhibited a double page apparently from the same manuscript in Tunis, but attributed it to “Mesopotamia, 9th century”¹². No wonder

Christie’s could not untangle the web of attributions concluding, “From this evidence, it would suggest an early Persian provenance, but the illumination would appear to be of eastern [read ‘western’] Islamic influence. We are reminded that Kairouan in the ninth century was an important centre for Quranic learning and manuscript production, the caliph al-Ma’mūn well known for his patronage of the arts and the court at Baghdad for the dominance and influence of its Persian viziers and courtiers”¹³. The author tried to reconcile two irreconcilable opinions: “If the manuscript was ordered by al-Ma’mūn, it must have been produced in North Africa, whence it never left or to which it was later returned”¹⁴.

As early as 1956, the Tunisian scholar Ibrāhīm Shabbūh noticed that the manuscript matched the description of the very first item in the inventory of manuscripts contained in the library of the Great Mosque of Qayrawan in 693/1293, a Koran in seven large sections contained in an aloeswood case decorated with copper inlaid with gold. Each section was bound in tooled leather and wrapped in silk. Every page of dark vellum had five lines of gold kufic writing. The chapter and verse markers as well as the marginal numbers were done in silver¹⁵. One only had to emend the inventory entry to read “fifteen” lines instead of “five” — as easy a slip in Arabic as it is in English — to recognize the pages under consideration.

The complete seven - volume manuscript must then have been in Qayrawan in the late 7th/13th century before it was subsequently dispersed. While most of it apparently remained in Qayrawan, the first of the seven volumes, which would have ended about Koran 4:55 and included most of the pages now in Western collections, must have been removed and eventually dispersed

among discerning connoisseurs. The “sixteenth-century ‘Persian’ tooled leather binding” reported to exist may actually be Turkish, suggesting that the first volume passed into Ottoman hands. After Martin bought the manuscript in Constantinople, some of the pages must have gone to Persia, because the upper left recto of the leaf in the Harvard University Art Museums is marked with a customs stamp indicating that the page passed through Persian customs in 1902¹⁶.

Nevertheless, the manuscript’s place of production remains unresolved, since no scholar has yet produced criteria for its localization. For example, Martin Lings and Yasin Safadi apparently used provenance to attribute the manuscripts displayed in London, for of the 21 “early Kufic” manuscripts there, 17 came from Tunisian collections. Of these, 16 were ascribed to Qayrawan, while only one was ascribed to Iraq¹⁷. However, manuscripts moved freely in medieval Islamic world, as did calligraphers and styles of calligraphy, so provenance is not an accurate indication of the place of production¹⁸.

A previously unnoticed feature apparently confirms the North African origin of the Blue Koran. The letter used to mark verse 60 on Beatty folio 1v is *ṣād*, which represents 60 only according to Maghribi system of *abjad*. In the more common system used elsewhere in the Islamic world, 60 is represented by *ṣīn*. The two systems are similar for the numbers between one and 50; however 60, 90 (W: *dād*/E: *ṣād*), 300 (*ṣīn/shīn*); 800 (*dād*), 900 (*ghayn/za*), and 1000 (*shīn/ghayn*) differ¹⁹. All but the first two are irrelevant since they are not used in Koranic numbering. The divergence of numbering systems in the Eastern and Western Islamic lands is confirmed by contemporary scientific instruments²⁰. However, the date of divergence between the Eastern and Western *abjad*

13. Christies Nov. 9, 1977, lot 66.

14. Anthony Welch, *Calligraphy in the Arts of the Islamic World* (New York, 1979), p. 49 n. 3.

15. Ibrahim Shabbūh, “Sijil qadīm li-maktaba jāmi‘al-qayrawān”, *Revue de l’institut des manuscrits arabes* 2 (1956): 345. David James was apparently the first European scholar to connect the Tunisian and Beatty pages: *Korans and Bindings from the Chester Beatty Library* (London, 1980), p. 22.

16. Although it is not noted, the stamp is clearly visible in the color reproduction of the page in Anthony Welch, *Calligraphy in the Arts of the Muslim World* (New York, 1979), pp. 15, 48-49. The stamp reads:

murāja’a va taftish shud sana 1320

“Reviewed and passed in the year 1320/1902”.

As the language of the stamp is Persian, the manuscript passed through Iranian customs; the stamp was designed with the date 13-, leaving the tens and digits to be inserted later by hand in ink. According to the lunar hijra calendar, 1320 corresponds to 1902-3. The solar hijra calendar was not officially introduced in Iran until 1925. I have seen a similar customs stamp on a leaf in the Pozzi collection at the Musée d’art et d’histoire, Geneva.

17. Martin Lings and Yasin Hamid Safadi, *The Qur’an* (London, 1976).

18. See, for example the case of ‘Alī b. Hilāl (Ibn al-Bawwāb) who lived mainly at Baghdad, but who, according to his own statement, was, for some time, in charge of the library of the Buwayhid Bahā’ al-Dawla in Shiraz. D. S. Rice, *The Unique Ibn al-Bawwāb Manuscript in the Chester Beatty Library* (Dublin, 1955), p. 5.

19. W. Wright, *A Grammar of the Arabic Language*, 3rd ed., (Cambridge, 1971) 1:28 § 32 and *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., s.v. “Abjad”.

20. An Iraqi astrolabe made by Ahmad b. Khalaf in the fourth/tenth century now in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris and an Andalusian one in the Germanisches Museum, Nuremberg, dated 472/1079, illustrate the differences. Cf. Dominique and Janine Sourdrel, *La Civilisation de l’Islam classique* (Paris, 1968), figs. 203 and 205.

5. These marks are visible on the Fogg verso and the Sadruddin Aga Khan page, as described when it was sold at Christie’s, “Khurasan”, November 9, 1977, 10:30 AM, lot 66.

6. A. J. Arberry, *The Koran Illuminated* (Dublin, 1967), no. 4.

7. Anthony Welch and Stuart Cary Welch, *Arts of the Islamic Book: The Collection of Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan* (Ithaca and London, 1982), pp. 20-22. The authors derive this “reverse” pagination from Lings and Safadi, *op. cit.*, p. 25, no. 11, “In its normal position in this Qur’ān, the left-hand folio precedes that on the right”.

8. Christie’s (London), *Khurasan* November 9, 1977, lot 66.

9. (London, 1912), pp. 106, 141 n. 83.

10. T. W. Arnold and Adolf Grohmann, *The Islamic Book* (Paris, 1929), p. 20.

11. Martin Lings and Yasin Hamid Safadi, *The Qur’an* (London, 1976), p. 25, no. 11.

12. Arts Council of Great Britain, *The Arts of Islam* (London, 1976), p. 316, no. 498.

systems has yet to be determined²¹. As our knowledge of early Korans and dated scientific instruments increases, we should be able to date these differences more precisely.

Having established the place of the manuscript's production, historical analysis confirms a date in the middle of the fourth/tenth century, not one a century earlier, as once believed. Although the manuscript could have been produced somewhat earlier, during the Aghlabid period, the art of Qayrawan during the third/ninth century can be termed "Sub-Abbasid" as it closely imitates models produced at the Abbasid court in Baghdad or Samarra²². Had the Aghlabids ordered the Blue Koran, one would have to imagine that it was inspired by some Abbasid model. Allowing time for the transmission of ideas from Mesopotamia, one could hardly imagine the manuscript being produced before the end of the century. But the Aghlabids were brought to a sudden end by the arrival of the Fatimids, and the first decades after the rise of Fatimid power were characterized by political turmoil not conducive to the production of a luxury manuscript. However, the middle of the tenth century saw a revival of the production of luxury arts in North Africa under the patronage of the Fatimid rulers al-Mansūr and al-Mu'izz li-Dīn Allah²³. Unfortunately, few examples other than an ivory casket in Madrid can be produced to illustrate this development. However textual references, such as one preserved by the Mamluk historian, al-Maqrīzī, describes an image of the world ordered by al-Mu'izz woven of blue *tustari qurqubi* silk which cost 22,000 dinars to ma-

ke. The climates of the earth, its mountains, seas, cities, rivers and roads were all portrayed and were identified by inscriptions in gold, silver on silk²⁴. The Blue Koran fits in nicely with these luxury goods produced at the Fatimid court.

Korans written gold or on colored grounds are known elsewhere, but Korans written in gold on a blue ground are apparently unique to the Fatimids²⁵. Elsewhere, I have argued that the blue and gold scheme was a deliberate imitation of Byzantine imperial manuscripts, which were customarily written in gold on parchment dyed purple with murex²⁶. Byzantine embassies arrived in North Africa in the 340's/950's, bringing luxurious gifts in an attempt to prevent a renewed Fatimid campaign against Byzantine-held Calabria. The Byzantines are known to have sent letters written in gold on purple to the Umayyads of Spain and to the Abbasids; it is probable that they also sent them to the Fatimids²⁷. We know that the Fatimids had other copies of the Koran written in gold on blue. In 403/1013, 1,298 Koran manuscripts, many written in gold, were taken in bound volumes and chests from the Fatimid palace to the Mosque of Amr²⁸. Sixty years later, 2,400 Korans in (*rab'a*), many written in gold and silver, were found in the treasury of books when hungry troops looted the Fatimid palace. Bound volumes (*khitmat*) of the Koran written in gold on blue were among them²⁹. Thus, although all the pages published to date apparently come from a single manuscript in Qayrawan, the Qayrawan manuscript was not unique in Fatimid times but the only that survived to our day.

Chart I:

Pages from the Blue Koran

Text	Location	Illustration
*		
2:57-61	Dublin, CBL	Arberry, no. 4
2:61-65	Dublin, CBL	James, no. 9
*		
2:93-100	Dublin, CBL	James, no. 9
*		
2:148-155	Geneva, S. Aga Khan	Welch and Welch, no. 1
*		
2:190-194	Geneva, Private Coll.	<i>Treasures of Islam</i> , no. 3
*		
2:229-233	Cambridge, Harvard U.	Welch, no. 4
*		
2:261-264	London, Khalili Gall.	<i>Hali</i> 6/2 (1984):80
*		
2:282	Geneva, Private Coll.	<i>Islam/art figuratif</i> , no. 1
*		
3:47-55	Boston, MFA	unpublished
*		
3:91-	Sotheby's, London	15 October 1984, 220
*		
3:181-188	Sotheby's, Geneva	21 June 1985, 11
3		
4:8-12	Paris, IMA	unpublished
*		
18:82-90	Sotheby's, London	16 April 1984, 147
*		
31:33-32:4 joined ¹ to 33:34-36	Tunis, IAA	Lings and Safadi, 11
*	Tunis, IAA	
42:10-16 joined to	London, Private Coll.	unpublished
42:16-23	London, Private Coll.	unpublished

1. The bifolio from the National Library, Tunis (no. 197 Pudbi) exhibited at the Hayward Gallery in London, must belong to the same quire, for "the text is from Sura XXXIII." Cf. *The Arts of Islam*, no. 498.

21. François Déroche has suggested that these divergences may represent a legacy of earlier times, piously kept in the field of Koranic manuscript, just like the more common difference in the punctuation of *fā'* and *gāf* between the Islamic east and west.

22. One need only mention the great wooden minbar, probably assembled from teak panels carved in Mesopotamia and imported to Qayrawan, or the luster tiles which decorate the mihrab surround, which were similarly imported from Mesopotamia.

23. Jonathan M. Bloom, "The Origins of Fatimid Art," *Muqarnas* 3 (1985): 20-38.

24. Al-Maqrīzī, *al-Mawā'iz wa'l-akbār bi-dhikr al-khitat wa'l-athār* (Cairo, 1853) 1:417.

25. Pages from a Koran in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York are written on an orange ground (40.164.1 summarily published by Hannah E. McAllister, "An Acquisition of Leaves from Early Korans", *Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art* 36/8 [August 1941]: 165), a leaf in the Freer Gallery of Art is decorated with blue reserve panels around the letters (Esin Atil, *Art of the Arab World* [Washington, 1975], no. 2) and François Déroche informs me of a Koran in Damascus written with black ink on saffron colored parchment.

26. Jonathan M. Bloom, "An Early Fatimid Blue Koran Manuscript", *Proceedings of the Second International Conference on Greek and Arab Studies* (Delphi, 1985), in press.

27. Arabic sources record that in 326/938, the Byzantine emperor Romanos Lecapenos sent the Abbasid caliph al-Rādī a letter written in gold; the Arabic translation of the Greek text was written in silver. In 334 and 338, the emperor sent similar letters to the Umayyad ruler of Spain, written in gold on parchment dyed "the color of the sky." Cf. Al-Qādī al-Rashīd b. al-Zubayr, *Kitāb al-Dhakhā'ir wa'l-Tuhaf* (Kuwait, 1959), p. 60 § 73 and Ibn 'Idhār al-Marrākashī, *al-Bayān al-Maghrib*, ed. G. S. Colin and E. Lévi-Provençal (Leiden, 1948), pp. 229 and 231.

28. Al-Maqrīzī, *Khitat* (Cairo, 1853) 2:350.

29. Al-Maqrīzī, *Khitat* (Cairo, 1853) 1:408 and al-Qādī al-Rashīd b. al-Zubayr, *al-Dhakhā'ir wa'l-Tuhaf* (Kuwait, 1959), 255 § 383.