

MAGHRIBĪ KORAN MANUSCRIPTS OF THE  
SEVENTEENTH TO THE EIGHTEENTH  
CENTURIES

NABIA ABBOTT

a) Complete Koran, 398 loose single and double folios, 18.2×24 cm., 14–16 lines to the page.

The manuscript was brought for study to the Oriental Institute in the summer of 1935 by Dr. and Mrs. N. Paul Hudson, now of Ohio State University, who had acquired it by purchase at Lagos, Southern Nigeria, in 1928. The manuscript is not dated, but the script is late and the paper with its watermarks points to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The paper is of a fine quality, thin, rag paper, cream colored, with practically every folio bearing parts of the watermark. The watermark is of special interest, as it is the only one we know of that has Arabic writing<sup>1</sup>—the phrase *yā nasīb* (O fortune! or O destiny!)—in addition to Latin letters, in this case the name Beniamino Arbib, and a complicated figure design (Pl. Ib). This last shows a charging horse and rider with flying robes and with a gun (?) raised high, the whole facing to the left and inclosed in a circle. Within the circle are also two eight-pointed stars, one to the right and one to the left of the figure. I am unable to identify the name or the figure specifically, but the horse and rider as a basic device for watermarks was used to indicate a type (viz., a cavalier, a courier, or a specific historic personality; e.g., Charles II of Spain) frequently in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>2</sup> Folios 230–33 are on a different

<sup>1</sup> Since the writing of this manuscript another instance of an Arabic watermark has come to light, to which my attention was kindly drawn by Mrs. Ruth S. Mackensen. It is to be seen on machine-made paper used for a lithograph copy of al-Wansharisi's *Kitāb al-Furūk fi Talkhīs ma fi al-Madhhab*, now in the Elbert Gary Law Library of Northwestern University and published, according to information supplied Dean Wigmore at the time of purchase, at Fas in 1924 (the book contains neither date nor place of publication). The watermark consists of the following names in succession, written out in a straight line and in a fair Maghribī hand, المهرى الحلوا واخيه ودابير بن سوسا ن. The Jews early took a hand in the paper trade, which they continued to enjoy as the Jewish names in both these instances further confirm.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Marmol, *Dictionnaire des filigranes* (Paris, 1900), p. 129, and illustrations on pp. 16–21.

PLATE I



$a = \text{Folio I}$



$b = \text{Watermark}$

paper, inferior and darker, bearing for a watermark the name *Andreo Gabriel* in Latin italics. Two separate folios not belonging to the manuscript, but also Koranic and of the same format and similar script, are on slightly coarser paper. One of these bears evidence of a watermark of three large crescents placed beside one another horizontally—a device which Briquet<sup>3</sup> tells us was current in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, being known in Venice under the name of *trelune* and manufactured especially for the Levant.

A sort of a scribal signature appears in six marginal notes and at the end of the manuscript in continuation with the text. From these the name seems to be Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad ibn Mikā'il, ibn Faṭimah. In one the letters *ta-sin* follow the second Muḥammad, and in two instances a non-Arabic phrase follows the first Muḥammad, seemingly describing him as a craftsman, one who draws or paints, since the word *yaṣawara* is clearly legible. On folio 199 the signature is on the design preceding the surah. These signatures are in the same type of script as used for the text; this is contrary to the usual practice which gives signatures in a very cursive hand, frequently so distorted and abbreviated as to make them well-nigh illegible. Professor Sprengling suggests the very likely possibility that the present manuscript was copied by some unknown scribe from a copy of the Koran made by the above-named Muḥammad, who left his signature, which signature was in turn copied by the copyist of the present manuscript. If we accept this hypothesis, we must extend it to apply to the place of origin also, for in two of these signatures (fols. 244, 267) the manuscript is said to be written in the city of Ḳāriyan or Ḳāriyat. Though the last letter is nearer *nūn* or even a final *yā*, I am unable to find a city by that name. On the other hand, there seem to be many Ḳarīt or Ḳarit, mostly in compound names, the term itself meaning a hill or mountain. However, al-Bakrī<sup>4</sup> mentions a Ḳāriyat (قاريّة) as a small hill-city with many springs near Tunis, and I am inclined to believe that this is the place meant in the notation and that here was written the copy from which the present manuscript was directly made, possibly by someone in the southern Sudan, from where, it is easy to see, it found its way into Nigeria and to Lagos, where it was acquired by the Hudsons. The

<sup>3</sup> *Les Filigranes* (Paris, 1907), II, 314–15, Nos. 5374–75.

<sup>4</sup> *Description de l'Afrique septentrionale*, ed. De Slane (Alger, 1911), p. 61.

main reason for this belief is to be found in the script and in the decorative scheme of the present manuscript, which may be summed up thus: In diacritical usage the manuscript follows the Fāsī script; in character formation it is closer to the Sudanese script; in decorative devices the manuscript is void of the artistic elements found in Moroccan and Algerian Korans and shows in its primitiveness sufficient similarity to the so-called art of Central and West Africa.<sup>5</sup>

*Script.*—The script of the present manuscript, like that of all late Maghribī Korans, is a combination of the old angular Kufic and of modern cursive forms. The general appearance is coarse and heavy, being in this respect like the widespread Sudanese variety of the Maghribī script. Some of the letter forms, especially *ain*, *kāf*, *hā*, and *yā*, go back to the earliest Kufic usage. There is also a marked evidence of the writing's being done with a straight line as a base, though, as will be seen from the reproduction, this has not been consistently carried out. The writing is evenly done with a few exceptions, e.g., folios 128 and 162, where the horizontal strokes are unusually extended, and folio 159 where some of the lines are much slanted. With a few exceptions the manuscript is written with heavy black ink. Diacritical points are fully used except for following the Fāsī practice of consistently omitting the dots for final *fā*, *kāf*, *nūn*, and *yā*. Like the general Maghribī practice, *fā* has one dot below and *kāf* one above. When one mark alone is needed, this is given as a dot; where two are needed, they are given as two vertical strokes; where three are needed, these appear sometimes as three dots and sometimes as two strokes topped with a dot. The text is fully voweled in red; the *hamzah* and the *waṣlah* are indicated by a yellow and a green dot, respectively, though the latter appears only in the first two folios.

*Decoration and text division.*—The verses are marked off with a large yellow dot or a trefoil outline in red; a red circular *hā* marks off the five-verse divisions, and a larger yellow circular device the ten-verse divisions. The surahs are introduced with the title and number of verses given in the same script but are in red ink instead of in the black of the surah text. The Bismillāh requires no special attention except in the first few surahs and one or two other surahs, where it has a whole line given to it and is written in an angular, overlapping style

<sup>5</sup> Cf., for instance, specimens given by H. U. Hall in *Museum Journal* (University of Pennsylvania), XIV (1923), 47–84, 100–134, especially the design in Figs. 2, 5, 6–7, 23, 26–30.

with extended horizontal strokes. Only four surahs—2, 9, 19, and 38 (folios 1, 99, 199, 299)—are introduced with a decorative device—a primitive affair of crudely executed rectilinear design within a square or a rectangle. The colors used are green, yellow, red, brown, and black; the first two are heavy oil paints with a high varnish, the last three are mostly dull inks. Large marginal circular devices of these colors, mostly with rectilinear designs, mark the sixty-*ḥazb* divisions except the thirty-eighth, which is overlooked (fol. 243). Each *ḥazb* is in turn divided into eight parts, and these are indicated by simple multiple straight lines with the letters *bā* for the one-fourth and three-fourths division, *nūn* for the one-half, and *thā* for the one-eighth, three-eighths, five-eighths, and seven-eighths divisions. In a few instances the device for these subdivisions is slightly more elaborate, extending sometimes the full length of the page (fols. 170 and 226).

Three of the sections (fols. 1, 114, and 283), of the divisions of the whole Koran into seven parts known as the *khatam al-āḥzāb*<sup>6</sup> are indicated by a group of circles and the word “seven” written among them. Ten of the eleven *sajdahs* accepted by the Malikite school<sup>7</sup> are indicated by a similar design and the word *sajdah*. The only other marginal notation consists of a word or phrase of the text repeated from one to eleven times, with the added instruction that it is to be so repeated in recitation each time it occurs in the whole Koran. This, I am told by Moslem friends, is the practice among some of the Ṣūfi sects of North Africa. The text is carefully copied with but few corrections (fols. 4, 7, etc.) and equally few insertions of an omitted phrase in the margins (fols. 254, 70). The loose folios are held between two heavy and stiff cardboards, brown on the inside and dark green on the outside, and the whole is then wrapped in a cover of light board covered with reddish-brown leather, stained brown around the edges and pressed in simple design with small overlapping square blocks. The inside of the cover is pasted with brown wrapping paper on which appear the number *B50* and the memo *10 yds. Lot 947, 10 yards*. To the flap which ordinarily rests within the cover is attached a long strip of leather which is wound round the manuscript in its cover, thus bringing the flap on the outside. The jacket or envelope in which the whole is kept or carried consists of heavy red leather with the undressed and undyed side turned out, and brown side strips with

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Sell, *‘Alm-i-Tajwid* (Madras, 1882), p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 6–9.

the rough side turned in. The handle is made of two plaited leather cords. Ornamentation consists of patchwork in brown, green, and white leather, stitched on with leather, and further elaborated with leather stitches arranged to form diamonds.

The following were also submitted by Dr. and Mrs. N. Paul Hudson:

*b)* Single folio of same format and similar script as (*a*); the inks, both the black of the text and the red of the vowels, are lighter. The paper is thin but rough and of a creamy color. The *trelune* or three-crescent watermark—see above (*a*)—appear, though each crescent is cut in half.

*Text.*—Surah 5:65–78, corresponding to the text on parts of folios 79–80 of manuscript (*a*).

*c)* Single folio of same format and similar script as (*a*) and (*b*) but not voweled. Ink and paper the same as (*b*), though no watermark happens to fall in the sheet.

*Text.*—Surah 17: 71–85, corresponding to parts of folios 188*b*–89*b* of manuscript (*a*).

*d)* Maghribī hardwood copying board (used like a child’s hand slate) about 28.5×17 cm., with a top handle of a semicircle over a rhomboid neck with a diamond hollow in its center.

The wooden “slate” shows evidence of previous ink writings which have been washed out; the present text is likewise in washable ink. It consists of the Bismillāh formula, the first surah of the Koran, and the invocation of the blessing on Muḥammad and his family, the same being repeated on both sides of the board. One side has in addition what seems to be an invocation for a blessing both in this and in the world to come; it is for the most part illegible, and so far I have been unable to identify it with a Koranic verse, though the phrases *وفي الآخرة حسنة* and *وفي دنيا حسنة* are clear enough. Spelling mistakes, clumsily repeated words, and illegible ones, such as one may expect from a child practicing copying or penmanship, occur. The text, except the Bismillāh which appears at the top and which is voweled in part on one of the sides, is framed in a crudely drawn double line. The script is decidedly Maghribī but does not admit of any subdivision classification among the main Maghribī scripts.