MAGHRIBI 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 only one we know of that has Arabic writing—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 enclosed 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. Folios 230–33 are on a different

1 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 Talkhis maṣāʾir al-Maḥāhab, now in the Elbert Cary 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 Maghribi hand. المهرالخلوا واحده وناضر بين سوسن.

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.

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\(^3\) 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 Mīkā’il, ibn Fāṭimah. In one the letters _ṭa-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 _yasawara_ 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 Kāriyan or Kāriyat. 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 Kārī or Kārit, mostly in compound names, the term itself meaning a hill or mountain. However, al-Bakrī\(^4\) mentions a Kāriyat (قَارِيَة) 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


The 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 Fāṣī 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.\(^5\)

*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 ʾayn, kāf, há, 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 Fāṣī 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

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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-hazb divisions
except the thirty-eighth, which is overlooked (fol. 243). Each hazb
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-āhzāb⁶ are
indicated by a group of circles and the word "seven" written among
them. Ten of the eleven sajdahs accepted by the Malikite school⁷ 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 Sūf
sects of North Africa. The text is carefully copied with but few cor-
rections (fols. 4, 7, etc.) and equally few insertions of an omitted
phrase in the margins (fols. 254, 70). The loose folios are held be-
tween 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

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 188b–89b of manuscript (a).

d) Maghrībī 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 وَفِي الْآخِرَةِ حَسْنَةٌ and فِي دُنْيَا حَسْنَةٍ 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 Maghrībī but does not admit of any subdivision classification among the main Maghrībī scripts.

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