

The Comparative Textual Criticism of Religious Scriptures

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Textual Criticism of the Quran

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The Quran (القرآن *al-qurʿān*) is the primary scripture of Islam, believed by its adherents to be the word of God as related by the angel Gabriel to the prophet Muhammad over a period of about twenty-three years and delivered as an oral recitation during his prophetic career. The written text that we have today is taken to be the verbatim record of the prophet's revelations put into writing some time after his death in 632 CE. Despite many centuries of intense scholarly research into the Quran, modern textual criticism is still in its infancy. This is in part due to the stability of the Quran since its canonization, and the study into ancient manuscripts only really picking up in recent decades. With the advent of the massive digitization of these resources and easy accessibility, recent years have seen a flurry of new publications that examine both the textual history of its written and recited form.

1 The Uthmanic *rasm*

Islamic narrative sources tell us that during the lifetime of the prophet Muhammad (ca. 570–632 CE), no standard written version of what was considered to be his divine revelation was created. It was only about two decades after his death that a standard text was commissioned by the third Islamic caliph ʿUthmān (r. 644–656 CE). He is believed to have ordered Zayd b. Thābit (d. 660 CE) to lead a commission to create several master copies and distribute them across the nascent Islamic empire.¹ While there are different reports as to the number of master copies, the lowest number, four, is the most likely to be correct, as we will see below. Three of the four copies were dispatched to Syria (either Damascus or Homs),² Basra (Iraq), and Kufa (Iraq), and one stayed at Medina (Arabia), then the seat of caliphal power.

From this point onwards, those throughout the Islamic empire who had memorized and recited the Quran, and may have had their own personal copies, were expected to adhere to this new standard text. This text would have

1 Nöldeke, et al., *The History of the Qurʿān*, 251ff.

2 Sidky argues that Homs was more likely than Damascus, although Damascus ends up becoming more important and as a result more representative of the text type. Sidky, "Regionality of the Quranic Codices," 171–174.

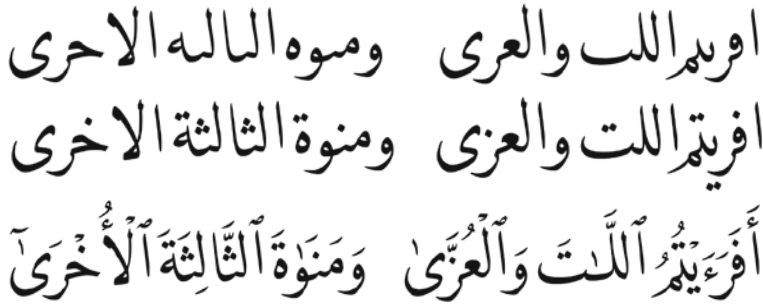


FIGURE 4 Three layers of the quranic text: 1. the *rasm*; 2. consonantal dotting; 3. vocalization

lacked signs to indicate vowels and would have frequently lacked the consonantal dotting required to distinguish the twenty-eight letters of the Arabic alphabet. Many letters are not distinguished clearly without these dots, e.g., *bā'*, *tā'* and *thā'* are all spelled with the same letter shape ب, and can only be distinguished through a system of dots: ب for *bā'*, ت for *tā'* and ث for *thā'*. This bare consonantal skeleton is typically known as the *rasm*, “tracing.” Indeed, our earliest manuscripts lack ways to express vowel signs completely, and have very sparse consonantal dotting – more or less in line with what the tradition reports.

1.1 *Manuscript Evidence for Early Canonization*

In the seventies, a revisionist school in Islamic studies that was led by John Wansbrough, Michael Cook, and Patricia Crone started to cast doubt on this account of early canonization. On the basis of literary arguments, Wansbrough famously argued that the Quran only reached its final form in the ninth century.³

This highly revisionist approach was not informed by the manuscript record, for the most part because the text-critical study of manuscripts was underdeveloped at the time. The earliest manuscripts of the Quran are invariably undated, but with the advent of radiocarbon dating it has become possible to challenge this late canonization on the basis of material evidence. We now have a good number of manuscripts that have been confidently radiocarbon dated to the seventh century CE.⁴

³ Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*.

⁴ Most famously the early dating of the fragment colloquially known as the Birmingham fragment (Cadbury Research Library, Birmingham, Mingana Arabic 1572a) made quite a splash in the media when its radiocarbon dating was published to be between 568 CE and 645 CE – the earliest end of that range would mean the text could potentially predate the prophet

Of course, early fragments of the Quran are not necessarily evidence for an early canonization of the text. However, as interest in these early fragments grew, it was noticed quite quickly that the text that we find in these fragments is word-for-word identical to the text as we have it today. This already speaks in favor of an early canonization of the text,⁵ but this becomes even more obvious when we examine the orthography. In the early Arabic orthography of the Quran, there are several words that can be written in a variety of ways, for example *niʿmat allāh*, “the grace of God” can be spelled variably with a final *tāʾ* or a final *hāʾ* of the first word (respectively *نعمت الله* and *نعمه الله*). On examining early manuscripts we see that such idiosyncratic spellings occur with utmost consistency across early manuscripts; thus, the phrase *نعمت الله* in Q 5:11 is spelled consistently across all early manuscripts whereas Q 5:20 is spelled *نعمه الله* consistently across all manuscripts.⁶ This consistent correspondence across manuscripts does not just occur in this single location, but we find a consistent correspondence for all twenty-three cases of this phrase. Moreover, many other phrases could be examined and show the same pattern.⁷

The precision of reproduction of the archetypal orthography is such that comparing any two pages of two early quranic manuscripts usually yields only one or two differences. In the vast majority of the cases of disagreement between manuscripts, this comes down to the spelling of the word-internal long vowel *ā*, which may be variously spelled with an *ʾalif* used as a *mater lectionis*, or without this *ʾalif*.

The only way to account for such a precise reproduction of these orthographic idiosyncrasies is if the manuscripts were copied from a written exemplar with the utmost precision from the very start of the tradition. And therefore, all manuscripts that follow the Uthmanic text type (which are all manuscripts except one known so far), must descend from a single written archetype.⁸ By now a good number of manuscripts have been dated through radiocarbon analysis to the second half of the seventh century CE, and therefore the traditional canonization by the decree of the third caliph Uthman around

Muhammad's career (cf. Fedeli, “Early Qurʾānic Manuscripts”). For a discussion on the dating of mss through radiocarbon dating, see also Marx and Jochem, “Radiocarbon (¹⁴C) Dating.”

5 Sinai, “When Did the Consonantal Skeleton of the Quran Reach Closure? Part I”; idem, “When Did the Consonantal Skeleton of the Quran Reach Closure? Part II.”

6 This distinction is, for example, found in Ms Qāf 47; British Library Or. 2165; Codex Parisino-Petropolitanus; Staatsbibliothek, Berlin, Wetzstein II 1913; Cadbury Research Library, Birmingham, Mingana Islamic Arabic 1572b.

7 Van Putten, “The Grace of God.”

8 Ibid., 279.

the 650s CE is consistent with the material evidence. There are still researchers who believe the canonization was later, most notably around the time of the Umayyad caliph ‘Abd al-Malik (r. 685–705 CE),⁹ but very few take into account that the ¹⁴C dating makes this later dating for the canonization not very satisfying.¹⁰ Certainly, a date even later than that is indefensible in light of the material evidence.

1.2 *Lack of a “Masorah”*

Despite the highly precise copying tradition of the quranic text in the first centuries of Islam, there is no evidence of specific tools to ensure this high precision in copying, such as the “Masorah” that we see in the text of the Hebrew bible.¹¹ Quranic manuscripts are famously devoid of marginal notes of any kind, and thus also of notes of the type that may give indications of the copying practices. The earliest manuscripts written in the so-called *Hijāzī* script, in fact, lack margins altogether, quite consistently using the full width and height of the parchment for writing the Quran.¹² In the later Kufic script margins are very large, but still these margins are almost exclusively used for ornamentation of *sūrah* headers and, on occasion, to mark subdivisions in the text. Otherwise, margins are kept empty, leading to a striking and visually attractive layout but also a rather ostentatious waste of parchment.

In later centuries, scholars started to produce companion works to the Quran that detail the precise orthographic idiosyncrasies of the Uthmanic text. Such works are known as *rasm* literature, and several important early ones are Ibn Abī Dāwūd’s (d. 929) *Kitāb al-Maṣāḥif*¹³ and al-Dānī’s (d. 1052–1053) *al-Muqni‘ fī Rasm al-Maṣāḥif*.¹⁴ These works relate many subtle details of the Uthmanic text type, but were authored after the Uthmanic *rasm* had already undergone some evolution. Thus we find regular features in early manuscripts that accurately recur between different copies but which are not accurately described in these works. If there ever were such works around the time of canonization, knowledge of them has been lost and they have not come down to us.

9 As suggested by De Prémare, “‘Abd al-Malik.”

10 For a recent discussion that discusses and calls into question the reliability of the ¹⁴C dating, see Shoemaker, *Creating the Qur’an*. I remain unconvinced that attributing the standardization to ‘Abd al-Malik serves as a better explanation of the palaeographical and art-historical arguments brought forth by Déroche, *Qur’ans of the Umayyads*, which clearly draws a notable distinction between pre-Umayyad and Umayyad codices.

11 Tov, *Textual Criticism*, 72–76.

12 Déroche, *Qur’ans of the Umayyads*, 66.

13 Ibn Abī Dāwūd, *Kitāb al-Maṣāḥif*.

14 Al-Dānī *al-Muqni‘*.

1.3 *Stemmatics of the Uthmanic Text Type*

The Islamic tradition tells us that, when the Quran was first canonized, at least four master copies were made and distributed across the Islamic empire. The medieval *rasm* literature records differences between these regional codices, primarily reporting about the Syrian, Medinan, Basran, and Kufan exemplars. Occasionally they report differences for a Meccan exemplar as well. The differences that are reported tend to be tiny differences in the consonantal skeleton that mostly appear to be the result of minor scribal errors. Already in 1860, Nöldeke¹⁵ compared these regional variants as they were reported in the *rasm* literature and noticed a pattern – the regional variants formed a stemma. In 2004 this observation was picked up again and argued in more detail by Michael Cook:¹⁶ Cook tallied 16 unique textual variants where the Syrian exemplar departed from the exemplars of Medina, Basra, and Kufa (e.g., Syria has انجيكم [Q 7:171] and Medina, Basra, and Kufa have انجينكم). He found 13 variants where Syria and Medina share the same form as opposed to Basra and Kufa (e.g., Q 2:132, ووصى in Syrian and Medina as opposed to ووصى in Kufa and Basra). Finally, Kufa has 6 variants where it departs from the examples of the other regions (e.g., Q 6:63, انجيننا in Kufa as opposed to انجيننا in Medina, Syria, and Basra). This distribution clearly forms an uncontaminated stemma, which shows that these four codices and their regional variants must reflect the transmission from a single archetype. The four possible stemmata that can be constructed from this data are shown in Fig. 5.

As Cook argues, the fact that these reports form an uncontaminated stemma is a clear indication that we are dealing with a genuine transmission from an archetype. However, as these stemmata are entirely reconstructed from literary evidence, they will not necessarily reflect what we find in quranic manuscripts. However, as early manuscripts become increasingly available to researchers, it has become clear that quranic manuscripts indeed invariably descend from one of these four regional variants. Thus Dutton already showed that the Codex Parisino-Petropolitanus and British Library, London, Or. 2165 have the regional variants that correspond with the Syrian regional codex.¹⁷ Van Putten identified several other manuscripts as belonging to other regional codices.¹⁸ Most importantly, in a recent article Sidky¹⁹ undertook a comprehensive stemmatic study through phylogenetic modeling based on 30 different

15 Nöldeke et al., *History of the Qurʾān*, 396–399.

16 Cook “Stemma.”

17 Dutton, “An Early Muṣḥaf”; idem, “Some Notes.”

18 Van Putten, “Hišām’s ’Ibrāhām,” 247–249.

19 Sidky, “On the Regionality of the Quranic Codices.”

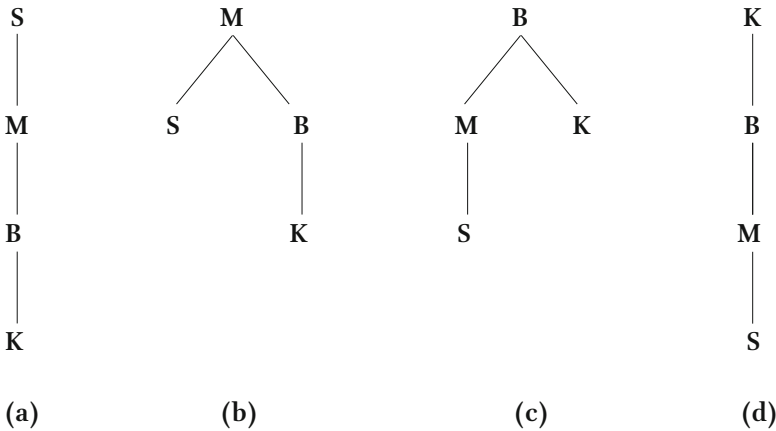


FIGURE 5 Four possible stemmata based on regional variants from a single archetype of the Quran (S= Syria, M = Medina, B = Basra, and K = Kufa)

early manuscripts, independent of the reports in the *rasm* sources. This massive analysis likewise showed that manuscripts show strong agreement in their regional variants with one region over any others, and the resulting stemmatic network ends up being consistent with the stemma that was derived from the data in literary sources.

From this data we can confidently conclude that at the time that the Uthmanic text was canonized, four master copies were made, which then were distributed to four important regions of the Islamic empire. In those places, those four master copies continued to be copied with extreme precision for centuries.

2 The Multiform Oral Traditions

While the Uthmanic text type is strongly controlled in its written transmission, this does not mean that there is no variation present in its transmission. As we mentioned, the early quranic manuscripts were written in a highly defective script, which did not completely unambiguously reflect the text. A number of different prominent reciters, primarily in the 8th CE, started to transmit their own reading tradition (*qirā'ah* pl. *qirā'āt*). By the tenth century, the scholar Ibn Mujāhid (d. 936) described seven of the reading traditions of these reciters, which, after his time, came to be thought of as canonical.²⁰ He selected a

²⁰ Ibn Mujāhid, *Kitāb al-Sab'ah*. For a discussion on this canonization project, see Nasser, *The Transmission of the Variant Readings*, and Nasser, *The Second Canonization of the Qur'ān*.

reader for each prominent region of the Islamic empire, except for Kufa, from which he chose three. Ibn Muġāhid recorded these readings through different numbers of transmissions (*riwāyah* pl. *riwāyāt*), attributed likewise to prominent teachers. Transmitters were usually, but not always, direct students of the reciter of the eponymous reading tradition. It was only some time later, most prominently by the work of the Andalusian al-Dānī (d. 1052–3), that the multiple transmissions were schematically canonized. Today two transmitters per eponymous reader are considered canonical.²¹

District	Reader	Transmitters	
Medina	Nāfi‘ (d. 785)	Warsh (d. 812)	Qālūn (d. 835)
Mecca	Ibn Kathīr (d. 738)	al-Bazzī (d. 864)	Qunbul (d. 904)
Damascus	Ibn ‘Āmir (d. 736)	Hišām (d. 859)	Ibn Dhakwān (d. 856)
Basra	Abū ‘Amr (d. 770)	al-Dūrī (d. 860)	al-Sūsī (d. 874)
Kufa	‘Āsim (d. 745)	Ḥafṣ (d. 796)	Shu‘bah (d. 809)
Kufa	Ḥamzah (d. 773)	Khalaf (d. 844)	Khallād (d. 835)
Kufa	Al-Kisā‘ī (d. 804)	al-Dūrī (d. 860)	al-Layth (d. 854)

Although these seven came to be universally accepted as canonical, scholars continued to collect and describe the reading traditions of other reciters. Several centuries later, three more readings came to be accepted as canonical after their description by Ibn al-Jazarī (d. 751/1350), who likewise described those three with two transmissions for each one.²²

District	Reader	Transmitters	
Medina	Abū Ja‘far (d. 747)	Ibn Wardān (d. 776)	Ibn Jammāz (d. 786)
Basra	Ya‘qūb (d. 820)	Ruways (d. 852)	Rawḥ (d. 849)
Kufa	Khalaf (d. 844)	Ishāq (d. 899)	Idrīs (d. 905)

²¹ Nasser, “The Two-*Rāwī* Canon.”

²² Ibn al-Jazarī, *Nashr*.

Besides these ten there were certainly many other reading traditions, and manuscripts from the time of the eponymous readers contain vocalizations that allow us to analyse the reading traditions they reflect. Very frequently they reflect different readings from the ones that are canonized in the canon of seven or ten. As of yet, very little research has been oriented toward mapping out the reading traditions as they appear in vocalized manuscripts, and they may yet teach us much more about the early practices of reciting the Quran.²³

All of these reading traditions have in common that they follow the Uthmanic *rasm* essentially to the letter, and thus their differences are primarily the result of different interpretations of the same written form.²⁴ As Kufa, Basra, Medina, and Damascus had different regional *rasms*, as discussed in the previous section, these readers also necessarily followed their respective regional *rasms*.

The reading traditions are traditionally described according to two categories: the general principles (*ʿuṣūl*, sg. *ʿuṣl*, lit., “root; origin”) and the specific variants (*farṣ al-ḥurūf*, lit., “the furnishing of the letters”). The general principles are mostly grammatical or phonological differences that apply throughout the Quran. For example, Ibn Kathīr and Abū Jaʿfar regularly have a long version of the plural pronouns *ʿantumū*, “you” and *humū*, “they,” whereas all other readers use the short versions of these pronouns: *ʿantum* and *hum*.²⁵ Likewise, Ḥamzah, al-Kisāʾī and Khalaf regularly make a distinction between the word-final vowels *ā* and *ē*, which in most other reading traditions have been merged completely.²⁶ Such general principles are pervasive, and one is hard pressed to find even a single verse where not at least one general principle has an effect on how the verse is recited between the different readers. The table below illustrates a single verse (Q 26:39) as it is recited in five different reading traditions, each of which pronounces the verse differently due to differences in their general principles. None of these differences affect the meaning of the verse; they only have an impact on the specific pronunciation in recitation.

23 For some initial observations on such vocalised mss and what they may tell us, see Dutton, “Red Dots, Part I,” “Red Dots, Part II,” Cellard, “La Transmission Manuscrite”; van Putten, “Arabe 334a”; van Putten and Sidky, “Pronominal Variation”; Ince, “Arabe 330b.”

24 On rare deviations from the *rasm* by canonical readers, see van Putten, “When the Readers Break the Rules.”

25 In fact, in the transmission of Nāfiʿ long pronouns are also an option. Qālūn allows either option whereas Warsh stipulates a complex conditioning requiring the long pronunciation in one context and a short one in the other. Ibn al Jazarī, *Nashr*, 2: 868–872.

26 Ibid., 3: 1611–1627.

<i>Rasm</i>	وقيل للناس هل انتم مجتمعون
‘Āṣim	<i>wa-qīla li-n-nāsi hal ‘antum mujtami‘ūna</i>
al-Kisā’ī	<i>wa-qūla li-n-nāsi hal ‘antum mujtami‘ūna</i>
‘Abū ‘Amr	<i>wa-qīla li-n-nēsi hal ‘antum mujtami‘ūna</i>
Warsh from Nāfi‘	<i>wa-qīla li-n-nāsi halantum mujtami‘ūna</i>
‘Abū Ja‘far	<i>wa-qīla li-n-nāsi hal ‘antumū mujtami‘ūna</i>
	“And it was said to the people: ‘will you be gathering?’”

Among the specific variants, their function can vary quite wildly. Some of these can affect the meaning of the verse, while in other cases we seem to simply be dealing with different word formations with essentially the same meaning, or representing dialectal variations of one another. The list below gives an overview of some of the typical variants one encounters:

- Dialectal variants of the same word: *al-quḍs*, *al-quḍus*, “holiness” (Q 2:87).²⁷
- Different noun formation, same meaning: *khaṭa’an*, *khiṭā’an*, *khiṭ’an*, “a sin” (Q 17:31)²⁸
- Different nouns with different meanings: *mālik*, “possessor,” *malik*, “king” (Q 1:4).²⁹
- Singular or plural noun: *wa-kitābihī*, “and his scripture,” *wa-kutubihī*, “and his scriptures” (Q 66:12).³⁰
- Active or passive verb: *nazzala*, “he has sent down,” *nuzzila*, “it has been sent down” (Q 4:140).³¹
- Different verb stem: *qatalū*, “they killed,” *qattalū*, “they massacred” (Q 6:140).³²

Examples where the canonical readers present differences in reading that have a large impact on how the verse is usually understood are quite rare; a typical example that is cited is Q 19:19, where readers seem to express disagreement over whether it is God or his angelic messenger that is to give Mary her son: *qāla ‘innamā ‘ana rasūlu rabbiki li-‘ahaba/li-yahaba laki ḡulāman zakīyyā*, “he said: ‘I am only a messenger of your Lord so that I/he grants you a pure son.’”³³ Another well-known example is Q 5:6, where the difference of a single case

27 Ibid., 4: 2178

28 Ibid., 4: 2427f.

29 Ibid., 2: 866.

30 Ibid., 4: 2692.

31 Ibid., 4: 2274.

32 Ibid., 4: 2307.

33 Ibid., 4: 2456.

vowel seems to prescribe two different practices of ablutions – a distinction that now marks the difference in ablutions between Sunni and Shii muslims – thus in the two transmissions of ‘Āṣim we find both options: *yā-‘ayyuhā lladīna ‘āmanū ‘idā qumtum ‘ilā ṣ-ṣalāti fa-ḡsilū wujuhakum wa-‘aydiyakum ‘ilā l-marāfiqi wa-mṣahū bi-ru‘ūsikum wa-‘arjulakum/‘arjulikum ‘ilā l-ka‘bayn* “O you who believe! When you rise up for prayer, wash your faces, and your hands up to your elbows and then whip your head and wash/wipe your feet up to the ankles.”³⁴

The transmission of the quranic reading traditions continues to be a living practice among Muslims today. Only a few readings have reached broad popularity, most notably that of Ḥafṣ transmitting from ‘Āṣim, which is by far the most widespread reading tradition in the Muslim world today. In North Africa, however, the tradition of Warsh transmitting from Nāfi‘ is dominant, while Qālūn, likewise from the transmission of Nāfi‘, is adhered to as well, especially in Tunisia and Libya. In Sudan al-Dūrī, transmitting from Abū ‘Amr remains in popular use. The other readers however, continue to be learned and recited by experts in a living tradition. While the teaching of these reading traditions these days relies on written works, the oral transmission is still considered an essential part of its acquisition. People who get certified are expected to have taken an in-person recitation exam, and the readings are traced back through chains of transmission, usually to the great writers of the canonizing works like Ibn al-Jazarī and Ibn Mujāhid, then all the way back to the eponymous readers whose reading traditions they transmit.

The canonical eponymous readers, in turn, trace back their reading through the teachers they received instruction from, all the way back to the prophet Muhammad. Today, these readings are, in principle, verbatim reproductions of how the canonical readers recited (although, of course, some disagreement has arisen over time between transmitters and sub-transmissions). However, it does not seem to be the case that verbatim reproduction from what one’s teacher said was necessarily always the goal. This much is clear from Khalaf as canonical reader, whose reading is distinct from that of Ḥamzah, for whom he is also one of the two canonical transmitters. Today, disagreements between any two transmitters from a single reader are often piously explained by suggesting that the teacher simply taught both options, but there is very little to suggest that this is what typically happened and is the process by which every single reading variant should be explained.

34 Ibid., 4: 2277.

3 The Ṣan‘ā’ Palimpsest and Companion Codices

The vast majority of the hundreds of quranic manuscripts that we have access to today all show the same highly standardized Uthmanic text type. However, there are other text types, on the one hand those found in the lower text of the Ṣan‘ā’ Palimpsest (also known DAM 01-27.1 or Ṣan‘ā’ 1), and on the other hand, companion codices reported in the literary sources. As the companion codices are relevant to the evaluation of the Ṣan‘ā’ Palimpsest, it is useful to consider these first.

Throughout the early literary works of exegesis one repeatedly finds references to either the “recitation, reading” (*qirā‘ah*, or *ḥarf*³⁵) of companions of the prophet, or their “codex” or “codices” (*muṣḥaf* pl. *maṣāḥif*). Companions (*ṣaḥābah*) are the generation of muslims that knew the prophet personally. When such reports occur, they often focus specifically on cases where these companions differed with the standard Uthmanic text. Such codices appear to have actually existed. We have reports in our literary sources where the authors self-report to have seen a reading in the codex of a companion. While there are reports that suggest that ‘Uthmān ordered all such codices to be destroyed at the time of his canonization, it is obvious that at least copies of codices of some companions (especially the one of Ibn Mas‘ūd) survived in some form into the second Islamic century, as the Kufan grammarian and exegete al-Farrā’ (d. 207/822), for example, self-reports to have seen certain things in the codices of Ibn Mas‘ūd. Such reports on occasion even comment on the specific orthographic idiosyncrasies, leaving little doubt that he in fact had access to a non-Uthmanic codex of some kind.³⁶

While such companion codices eventually fell out of use in recitation and prayer, they continued to be considered authoritative sources in exegesis and even legal debates.³⁷ Thus, the famous exegete and historian al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) gives his preference for the reading *‘ilyāsīn* (Q 37:130), a distorted version of the name of the prophet *‘ilyās* “Elijah” (found earlier in the same *sūrah*, Q 37:123) over the alternative reading *‘āli yāsīn* “the family of Yāsīn” because the companion Ibn Mas‘ūd is said to have had the non-Uthmanic

35 This is an old term for “recitation/reading” which refers back to a saying of the prophet that claims that the Quran was revealed in *sab‘at ‘aḥruf*, “seven *ḥarfs*.” The exact meaning of this is unclear, but it is clear that early muslims took it as a license for oral variation to be possible in recitations of the Quran, and thus the word came to also get the meaning “the specific reading of so-and-so.” For a discussion of this term and the famous saying of the prophet about the “seven *ḥarfs*,” see Dutton “Orality.”

36 E.g., al-Farrā’, *Ma‘ānī*, 2: 135.

37 Harvey “The Legal Epistemology of Qur’anic Variants.”

alternative name of a prophet *ʿidrīs* at Q 37:123 and the deformed form *ʿidrāsīn* at Q 37:130.³⁸

One of the most important sources for our knowledge of the companion codices comes from the *Kitāb al-Maṣāḥif*, “the book of codices,” by Ibn ʿAbī Dāwūd (d. 316/928),³⁹ who lists these in great detail. These findings have been schematically collected by Arthur Jeffery.⁴⁰ Differences reported for such codices range from tiny linguistic variants in pronunciation, to differences in wording, and sometimes some major expansion or reshuffling of the verse. The table below illustrates some examples taken from Jeffery’s work.

	Standard text	Ibn Masʿūd’s text
Q 2:85	وان ياتوكم اسرى تفدوهم “And if they come to you as captives, you ransom them”	وان يوخذوا تفدوهم “And if they are captured, you ransom them”
Q 2:72	واذ قتلتم نفسا فادرتم فيها “And when a person is killed and you dispute (<i>fa-ddāraʿtum</i>) over who (the killer was)”	واذ قتلتم نفسا فتدرتم فيها “And when a person is killed and you dispute (<i>fa-tadāraʿtum</i>) over who (the killer was)”
Q 3:43	يُرمي اقنتي لربك واسجدى واركعى مع الركعين “O Mary, be devout to your lord and prostrate yourself and bow down with those that bow down”	يُرمي اقنتي لربك واسجدى مع السجدين “[...] bow down, and prostrate yourself with those that prostrate.”
Q 18:16	واذا اعتزلتموهم ما يعبدون الا الله “When you withdraw from them and that which they worship but God”	واذا اعتزلتموهم ما يعبدون من دون الله “When you withdraw from them and that which they worship other than God”
Q 65:6	اسكنوهم من حيث سكتكم من وجدكم “And house them where you house yourselves according to your means”	اسكنوهم من حيث سكتكم وانفقوهم من وجدكم “And house them where you house yourselves and provide for them according to your means”

38 Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 19: 621.

39 Ibn Abī Dāwūd, *Kitāb al-Maṣāḥif*.

40 Jeffery, *Materials*.

The reports of these variants are fairly extensive, but still only concern a tiny portion of the text. As no copies of these specific companion codices have come down to us, it is difficult to judge to what extent the reports that we have are a complete reflection of the differences between the text of these companions and the standard text, or whether it only makes up a small portion of the differences between companion codices and the Uthmanic text.

For a long time we were entirely reliant on reports of these literary sources for gaining insight into different text types besides the one of Uthman. However, in the seventies several sacks filled with quranic manuscripts were uncovered, hidden in a false ceiling in the great mosque of Sanaa, Yemen. Besides thousands of folios of manuscripts that belong to the standard text, one of these manuscripts (now catalogued as DAM 01-27.1) turned out to be of exceptional interest. The text contains the standard Uthmanic text, but it is a palimpsest – a rarity among quranic manuscripts⁴¹ – the lower text was also Quran, but unlike the upper text, it is clearly of a different text type containing hundreds of deviations from the standard text.

As time has progressed, many more fragments of this manuscript have been found. A large portion turned out to be present in the eastern library of the Sanaa mosque, and a number of folios appeared on the auction market. By the most recent count, there are now 80 folios known to belong to this manuscript.⁴²

The monumental find of this text subsequently led to a large number of publications concerned with it.⁴³ Not only did the text have many deviations from the standard text, also its *sūrahs* (chapters) followed a different order than the standard text. As noted most explicitly by Behnam Sadeghi,⁴⁴ the lower text of the Sanaa Palimpsest contains many features that are highly reminiscent of the reports of the companion codices, which are likewise said

41 There are two other known palimpsests. First is the Mingana-Lewis Palimpsest, wherein two ancient quranic mss were repurposed and overwritten with Christian texts (both Christian Arabic and Syriac), digitized and available online (<https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/collections/minganalewis/1>). For a recent discussion of this palimpsest, see Fedeli, “The Digitization Project of the Qurānic Palimpsest.” The other is the Coptic palimpsest, a quranic text whose lower text contains a Coptic Bible, see Cellard and Louis, *From Coptic to Arabic*.

42 Cellard, “Šan‘ā’ Palimpsest,” 6.

43 The bibliography of Cellard, “Šan‘ā’ Palimpsest,” gives a good overview of the many relevant publications. Here I will only mention several important works: Puin, “Koranpalimpsest,” Sadeghi and Bergmann, “The Codex of a Companion,” Sadeghi and Goudarzi, “Šan‘ā’ 1,” and Hilali, *The Sanaa Palimpsest*.

44 Sadeghi and Bergmann, “The Codex of a Companion,” and Sadeghi and Goudarzi, “Šan‘ā’ 1.”

to have had a different *sūrah* order, and as we showed above, different wording here and there. Several of the variants found in this lower text correspond perfectly to some of the variants that are reported for some of the companion codices. Besides this, we find many more variants that do not have a direct parallel in the literary reports, but are typologically very similar to the variants found in the reports of the companion codices. The overview below illustrates some parallels between forms found in the Sanaa Palimpsest and the reports of the companion codices.⁴⁵

Location	Uthmanic text	Sanaa	Companion codex
Q 33:51	ويرضين بما آتيتهن “They may be pleased with what you have given them”	يرضين بما آوتين “They may be please with what they had been given”	يرضين بما آوتين Ibn Mas‘ūd: “They may be please with what they had been given”
Q 20:31–2	اشدد به ازرى // واشركه فى امرى “Confirm my strength with him, and let him share my task”	واشـر [...] فى امرى // وشـ [...] به ازرى “Let him share my, and confirm my strength with him”	واشركه فى امرى // واشدد به ازرى 'Ubayy b. Ka'b “Let him share my, and confirm my strength with him”
Q 5:45	وكتبنا عليهم “And we prescribed for them”	و[.]تبناعلى بنى اسريل “And we prescribed for the sons of Israel”	وانزل الله على بنى اسريل 'Ubayy b. Ka'b “And God revealed to the sons of Israel”

4 Print Editions and the Lack of a Critical Edition

Despite centuries of intense scholarly research into the Quran, there exists no critical edition of the text. Instead, most researchers in the field rely on the Cairo Edition from 1924,⁴⁶ a widespread print version of the quranic text, in the reading of 'Āṣim in the transmission of Ḥafṣ. The Cairo Edition used the Amiriyya metal typeface, but today, most printed Qurans are handwritten

45 Examples are taken from the overview of Sadeghi and Goudarzi, “Ṣan‘ā' 1,” 115–122.

46 *Al-Qur'ān al-karīm*, Cairo, 1924. For further detail, see <https://corpuscoranicum.de/en/print>.

page-by-page by a calligrapher and reproduced as a high resolution print. Despite this analogue approach to printed Qurans, many of them are to a large extent derivative from the Cairo Edition, reproducing many of the typographic innovations that it uses to reproduce the details of the quranic recitation of Ḥaḥṣ. Moreover, they tend to also follow quite closely the consonantal text adopted by the Cairo Edition.

The orthography used in these print texts is highly conservative, as they try to reproduce the original Uthmanic *rasm*. However, they are not based on ancient manuscript material, but instead are based on the medieval *rasm* literature that we have discussed above, which describes the idiosyncrasies of the Uthmanic *rasm* from the perspective of standard Classical Arabic orthography. The Cairo Edition of the Quran, for example, is explicitly based on the *rasm* works of Abū ‘Amr al-Dānī⁴⁷ and his student ‘Abū Dāwūd Sulaymān b. Najāh,⁴⁸ giving preference to the latter whenever they disagree. As a result, the orthography of the Cairo Edition is archaizing and, in many ways, looks much more archaic than contemporary manuscripts of the Quran, which more often than not would follow a completely Classical Arabic orthography. Due to this conservative orthography, the modern text editions are often fairly accurate representations of the orthography that we find in seventh century quranic manuscripts.

As these *rasm* works diligently document reports of the spelling of the Uthmanic text, the print editions can in some ways be seen as the result of medieval text criticism, although the end result lacks the critical apparatus that one might wish to have. Despite the conservatism achieved in the print editions, they do not always accurately reflect what we typically find in early manuscripts. This is especially the case for the use of letter *ʿalif*, which is used to write the *ā* significantly more often in modern print editions than is typical for early manuscripts. But there are also several other innovative orthographic practices compared to early manuscripts. For example, the nominative pronoun *dū* is consistently spelled *دُو* in modern print editions, while in early manuscripts it is consistently followed by an *ʿalif*, *دُوا*.

In recent years more and more scholarly editions of manuscripts are starting to be published. Most prolific and prominent in this endeavour is Tayyar Altıkulaç, who has published editions of many different ancient manuscripts – primarily focusing on relatively complete copies.⁴⁹ These are amply footnoted,

47 al-Dānī, *Al-Muqniʿ*.

48 Ibn Najāh, *Mukhtaṣar*.

49 Altıkulaç, *Türk ve İslâm, Topkapı Palace, Al Mashhad al-Husayni, Sanaʿa*, and Altıkulaç et al., *Muṣḥaf-i Sharif*.

providing information about how certain words are described in the medieval *rasm* works, as well as how they appear in other manuscripts that he has edited. The Corpus Coranicum project, based in Berlin, has as its explicit goal the creation of a critical edition of the text but currently focuses on publishing text editions of several very ancient manuscripts. The first of these, *Codex Amrensis 1*, prepared by Éléonore Cellard, has already been published,⁵⁰ as has a work on Quran quotations in papyrus documents, and a papyrus copy of the second *sūrah* of the Quran.⁵¹ Several other ones are currently in preparation in the *Documenta Coranica* series. Early versions of text editions of these manuscripts are also published on the Corpus Coranicum website (<http://www.corpuscoranicum.de>), which has an extensive database of hundreds of fragments, many of which come with transcriptions. The transcriptions reproduce closely what the text says, using a system of coloured signs to indicate deviations in relation to the Cairo Edition of the Quran. This obscures somewhat the extreme similarities between different manuscripts. For example, the case of *ḡū* as mentioned above is marked as having an additional *ʿalif* at the end which is absent in the Cairo Edition, but there is no direct indication that this is, in fact, the regular spelling in other manuscripts. The Corpus Coranicum website database, however, allows for rapid comparison of such spellings across manuscripts.

5 Future Research

Textual criticism of the Quran is a young field, and many important developments are yet to come in the future. In the coming years we have several publications of editions of quranic manuscripts to look forward to in the *Documenta Coranica* series published by Brill.⁵²

An important avenue of future research will be to better understand the history of slightly aberrant quranic manuscripts. In recent years it has become clear that there are several early manuscripts which – by and large – follow the standard Uthmanic text but show deviations from the standard order of the *sūrahs*; this is the case with DAM 01-29.1, which Cellard⁵³ shows preserves an irregular *sūrah* transition Q 80 (*Sūrat ʿAbasa*), followed by Q 75 (*Sūrat*

50 Cellard, *Codex Amrensis 1*.

51 Kaplony and Marx, *Qurʾān Quotations*, and Tillier and Vanthieghem, *Book of the Cow*.

52 The ones that I am aware of that are in the pipeline are editions of the mss from Sanaa DAM 01-25.1, DAM 01-27.1 (i.e., the Sanaa Palimpsest) and DAM 01-29.1, the last of which is being prepared for publication by Michael Marx and myself.

53 Cellard, “Un nouveau témoignage.”

al-Qiyāmah) and then followed by Q 81 (*Sūrat al-Takwīr*). While the section that should have contained Q 75 is not preserved, it stands to reason that there too we would encounter an irregular order. Likewise, recently Karimi-Nia⁵⁴ published an article regarding an essentially complete codex held in Mashhad, Iran, which currently contains the canonical *sūrah* order, but which is clearly the result of an extensive reordering and rewriting of portions of the text to make it so.⁵⁵ He argues that the original *sūrah* order would have resembled that reported for the companion codex Ibn Mas‘ūd. These two documents share several other features unusual features, such as the atypical spelling of the glottal stop (also known as *hamzah*), with the letter ‘*alif*’.⁵⁶ Several other manuscripts from Sanaa display similar irregularities in *sūrah* order. I hope to address the history of this group of manuscripts in a future publication.

Another direction that needs further exploration involves the higher resolution stemmatics and orthographic developments of the text over time. While Sidky⁵⁷ has confirmed the presence of four ancestral copies from which all quranic manuscripts descend, new and more detailed comparisons of the consonantal text of different manuscripts should allow us to get a more detailed insight into subgroups that descend from these ancestral copies. Sidky has already found clear indications that there was a developed subtype of the Basran regional codex, which he has dubbed the “Neo-Basran” group.⁵⁸ In this neo-Basran group we also see clear examples of a spelling reform having taken place. In the future it should be possible to get a much clearer understanding of which of these reforms were transregional and which were local, and when they would have taken place.

Currently, there is a fair amount of interest in the quranic reading traditions as well. In the coming years it is hoped that we will gain a better understanding of the relationship between the *rasm* and the oral tradition, as well as an understanding of the sources on which the canonical reciters based their recitations and the reasons for the deviations. An important part of gaining a better insight into the development of the canonical readings is to get a better understanding of the pre-canonical readings as well. There are hundreds of vocalized manuscripts that reflect many non-canonical and canonical readings. As of yet, this important source for the history of the text has hardly been exploited.

54 Karimi-Nia, “New Document.”

55 A full edition has now been published: Karimi-Nia, *Codex Mashhad*.

56 Cf. van Putten “Hamzah,” 111–114, and Karimi-Nia, “New Document,” 303–305.

57 Sidky, “Regionality of the Quranic Codices.”

58 *Ibid.*, 175–177.

Finally, further study into scribal error is required. The Quran is a highly self-similar text, with a strikingly high amount of complete repetition of verses, or the repetition of highly similar verses. This leads to rather unique challenges where an assimilation of parallels is much more likely to occur than they would, for example, in the biblical books. Developing a better understanding of the types of scribal errors that may occur will allow us to better judge the significance of deviations from the standard text that on occasion do occur.⁵⁹

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