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Review of Kaplony, A.; Marx, M. (2019) Qur'ān quotations preserved on Papyrus documents, 7th-10th Centuries: and the problem of carbon dating early Qur'āns

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Andreas Kaplony and Michael Marx (eds.), *Qurʾān Quotations Preserved on Papyrus Documents, 7th–10th Centuries. And The Problem of Carbon Dating Early Qurʾāns*. Leiden: Brill, 2019. Pp. xvi + 247, illus. ISBN 978-90-04-35891-1. Also published as E-book. €119

The volume under review is the second output in print of the French-German *Coranica* project, the aim of which is “to explore material evidence for the early history of the Qurʾān” (1).¹ How *Coranica* fits into past and current scholarship is elaborated on by Michael Marx in the introductory chapter. The book’s two central topics are set out in its title. The first part, containing three studies, uses papyri to examine the role that the Qurʾān played in the daily life of Arabic speakers in medieval Egypt—the Qurʾān’s *Sitz im Leben* (vii). The final two chapters of the book focus on how radiocarbon (¹⁴C) dating can further our understanding of the history of the Qurʾānic text. While seemingly unrelated, Michael Marx gamely maps out how these two subjects are connected in the introduction. He argues that Arabic papyri contribute to the study of the early history of the Qurʾān through their textual *and* material evidence: Qurʾānic manuscripts, as well as citations in letters, legal documents, amulets, and other texts on papyrus, can be used to study textual variants and developments in the text of the Qurʾān. Dated papyri, as well as palm sticks from Yemen with ancient South Arabian writings and Coptic, Arabic, Syriac, and Georgian manuscripts, have all been used to supplement the results of the ¹⁴C findings of Qurʾānic manuscripts. Eva Grob’s chapter offers an accessible and complete overview of the possibilities and pitfalls of the ¹⁴C method for the dating of medieval manuscripts. Michael Marx and Tobias Jocham next make the plea for the combined application of palaeography, decoration, and ¹⁴C dating to establish the date of Qurʾānic manuscripts, which together with their discussion of mismatches between ¹⁴C and colophon dates (197–198; 206) forms an important warning against relying exclusively on one or the other method.

The other contributions provide examples of Qurʾānic quotes in different papyrological and manuscript sources firstly to explain their distribution and form, and secondly compare them with the so-called King Fuʾād Qurʾān edition printed in Cairo in 1924. To facilitate this, the text is accompanied by a large number of color reproductions of papyri and manuscripts, multiple tables listing Qurʾānic quotations and comparing the orthography of the documents with that of the Cairo edition, and color-coded editions indicating degrees of legibility, variations of the spelling of the Cairo edition (with references to that

1 The other volume published, *Codex Amrensis* 1 by Eléonore Celard, and the several that are in the making all concern editions of early Qurʾānic manuscripts.

edition in the margins for quick referencing), and corrections, over-writings, additions, and erasures of the manuscripts' first layer of ink (5), following the exemplary standard of the project's publication series *Documenta Coranica*. This book also taps into digital humanities projects, most notably the ongoing gathering of document editions in the searchable Arabic Papyrology Database (www.apd.gwi.uni-muenchen.de/apd/requisits3a.jsp). The searching for phrases or even single words in large numbers of texts which underlie the studies in this volume would simply not have been possible without this resource.

Adding papyrological material, mostly originating from outside the urban centers and containing so-called documentary texts, letters, legal deeds, lists, and notes—the products of daily and often mundane economic, legal, religious, and social interactions—is important for two reasons. First, it shows how the enormously rich but still largely underused resource of papyri can be applied to historical research. Secondly, it helps us to understand how “high” culture—the literate, literary, educated world represented in manuscripts, closely related to and informed by theological, legal, and courtly debates—manifests itself in daily life. The editors are to be congratulated for bringing these two disciplinary strands together.

Reading the contributions stimulates a variety of ideas about the potential of this method. I will concentrate in the remainder of this review on such possibilities for further research, drawing upon the results set forth in the individual chapters for illustration. All contributions make it clear that proper Qur'ānic quotes are actually extremely rare in quotidian writings. They occur in a mere nine of 780 papyrus letters (44 [erroneously mentioning eight] and 65) and in a handful of documents with “ethical implications” all from the ninth century or later (88), and only in a total of 20 amulets of an albeit small corpus of edited amulets containing text (112). These latter by no means constitute the full scope of amulets, which doubtlessly included many objects without text at all. It is probably safe to conclude with Potthast that the lack of Qur'ānic quotes means that “the Qur'ān did not play an important role in the matters of daily life with which the letters were concerned,” but not, as he suggests as well, that it reflects an unfamiliarity with or lack of access to the text of the Qur'ān (65–66). Sonego's reversed conclusion that an increase in Qur'ānic quotes in legal documents suggests a greater familiarity with and daily-life presence of the Qur'ān (108) is on safer ground, although one needs to examine the relation between the language of legal deeds and daily practice. In other words what does the language inserted by scribes and jurists say about the everyday speech and religious knowledge of those obtaining, owning, and asking for the documents? Sonego also argues that the dearth of Qur'ānic quotes in legal deeds reflects the absence of applicable legal rules in the Qur'ān (95).

This is contradicted by the very concrete, albeit incomplete, instructions on inheritance in Q2:180–182, an oversight possibly explained by the absence of inheritance deeds in Sonogo's corpus. All these explanations display a mechanistic interpretation. Potthast also raises the option of "personal preferences" which points to a more active and conscious process (65–66; 77). See also below for amulets.

The contributors rightly question to what extent stock phrases such as "God willing" (*in shā'a allāh*) should be considered Qur'ānic quotations (44, 88). This takes the discussion into broader questions concerning the degree to which these writings contain religious markers, amongst which, but only marginally so, are quotes from the Qur'ān. Indeed, it is in identifying such markers in the papyrus documents and understanding what they *mean* that most opportunities lie. Further historical study would first require a better rationalization of the source base and what it represents. The decision not to include similar contemporary documents written on materials other than papyrus, but also originating in Egypt—paper letters (3), parchment Qur'ānic fragments (9) and parchment and paper amulets (112)—is a curious one, especially since parchment legal documents and letters written on leather outside Egypt *are* included. An awareness of such materials would presumably have prevented the remark that the papyrus Qur'ānic fragments "seem to be exceptions to the rule that the material shape of the first Qur'āns followed the model of codex culture of Late Antiquity, which clearly gave preference to parchment" (13). The large volume of (parts of) papyrus Bible and New Testament codices in Aramaic, Hebrew, Greek, and Coptic that have been found in Egypt and, to a lesser extent, Palestine suggests otherwise (e.g. Frederic G. Kenyon and A. Chester Beatty, *The Chester Beatty Biblical Papyri: Descriptions and texts of twelve manuscripts on papyrus of the Greek Bible*, London: Emery Walker, 1933–1958). The practice seems indeed to have been wholly acceptable in areas such as Egypt and Palestine, where papyrus was the dominant writing surface.

Another point to consider is what purpose a comparison of Qur'ānic quotes as encountered in the papyri with the so-called Cairo printed edition serves. In the last chapter Marx and Jocham point out that the Cairo edition did not incorporate evidence from manuscripts. This is a fundamental issue, as the oldest of these, contemporary to the papyri, show a degree of orthographic variation that is no longer present in the Cairo print edition, but which is encountered also in the papyri. Some contributors are aware of this (Potthast on p. 65, Marx and Jocham on p. 188), but Bsees calls orthographic variations between papyri and the Cairo edition "mistakes" (122).

Above all, the material presented in this volume raises questions about what linguistic elements were considered religious markers, how they were used and

what they reflect. In other words: how do the wordings of the letters relate to social relations and concerns? All authors advance explanations. Potthast, for example, presents a model whereby Arabic letters were from the ninth century onwards mostly “monotheistic” as opposed to “Islamic” in the preceding period as a result of more Christian and Jewish Egyptians writing letters in Arabic. As evidence he points to the disappearance of the invocation *salām ‘alayka fa-innī aḥmadu ilayka allāh alladhī lā ilāh illā huwa*, which although strictly monotheistic would, he argues, have been considered Islamic through its association with the *shahādah* (“I witness that there is no god but God,” *ashhadu allā ilāh illā allāh*). He would have found support for his thesis in the presence of the “peace be upon you” part of the formula only (in other words without the *shahāda* echo), in a handful of Coptic and Greek seventh- and eighth-century letters.² Simultaneously, religiously exclusive expressions such as the *taṣliya* (the invocation of God’s blessings upon the Prophet Muḥammad) in the case of Muslim letters, as well as specific Christian and Jewish invocations, were introduced in ninth-century Arabic letters (71–72). Most Arabic letters from that moment are, however, confessionally neutral, although they contain much religious language. But the most important observation is that by far the largest part of the entire epistolary corpus under examination—pre-Islamic Greek and Coptic, Arabic and Judaeo-Arabic papyri, younger paper documents and letters preserved in literary texts—cannot be categorized along confessional lines through their use of religious language. Of course, this does not mean that “scribes did not want to expose their religious affiliation” (73), as there are plenty of letters that do exactly this—e.g. references to religious festivals, rituals, customs, or names and *nisbas*. Similarly, whether only a small number of Egyptians “was really interested in religion and religious difference” (75) because they did not use linguistic religious markers in their letters is difficult to maintain, as we know that religious differences (in law, fiscal categories, etc.) mattered a lot.

Leonoro Sonego offers an interesting example of how religious phrases functioned in documents to verify debt acknowledgements, receipts, and orders for payment. These documents fulfilled an obvious role of providing evidence through a record in writing, but they were mainly written up as small notes lacking the formal characteristics of legal deeds, such as witness statements.

2 See for example in the Coptic-Greek letter published by Lajos Berkes in Anne Boud’hors, Alain Delattre et al. “Un nouveau départ pour les archives de Papas. Papyrus coptes et grecs de la jar d’Edfou” *Bulletin de l’Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale* 117 (2017): 87–124, 90–93. These scholars see this phrase as being connected directly to the Arabic *salām ‘alayka* contra Richter who considers it a pre-Islamic formula (quoted on p. 75).

Religious phrases such as *kafā bi-llāh shahīdan* (“God suffices as my witness,” an abbreviated version of Q 4:66) or *ḥasbunā allāh* (“God suffices for us,” or a variant thereof), as Sonogo convincingly argues, seem to have taken the place of the names and signatures of witnesses in these notes (92–94).

Ursula Bsees approaches papyrus amulets in a laudably holistic manner, pointing to the importance of physical features, such as dirt, adhesives, traces of other materials, folds, and the kind of papyrus (re-used or “new”), to understand the circulation and use of these objects (115, 121–122). Her analysis of Qur’ānic quotes in amulets leads to interesting observations: for example, how words that do not make sense in their written form are completely comprehensible when read out loud, thus pointing to a scribe who clearly knew the Qur’ānic text by heart and wrote the verses down phonetically (127).

Amulets function as healing and protective devices due to the efficacy ascribed to them by their users, taking into account conditions surrounding the amulets’ production (materials employed, rituals executed, reputation of the responsible shaykh). In this sense the materials used for the amulets can tell us about the purpose for which they were composed and the audience for which they were intended. The efficacy is, however, not based on the “preciousness” of the materials used or the degree to which amulets were readable, since this cannot have been a criterion in itself in the production and use of amulets. This does not mean that amulets did not also function as economic commodities.³ In other words Bsees’ suggestion that amulets on re-used pieces of papyrus were produced in an environment deprived of “clean” papyrus for an audience that could not afford amulets on new papyrus is not convincing (122). Similarly, her explanation of the reasons behind different representations of Qur’ānic text on the amulets, arguing from the point of view of the reader or observer (133–134), is unpersuasive. Amulets containing mainly text were produced, Bsees argues, for a literate clientele, while amulets containing predominantly visual elements, e.g. magical symbols, were intended for illiterate customers. Such a reconstruction, however, misunderstands how amulets “work,” as described above. It also assumes that those making use of the amulets would have *read* them, which is hard to accept. Although the text on amulets might be read—for example in the ritual activating them—amulets and the writing on them did not function as other kinds of quotidian documents did, and many would never be opened again, let alone read after they had been acquired.

3 I base myself here on Marcella Garcia Probert’s Leiden University PhD thesis, *From healing and protective remedies to the Tawfiq Canaan Collection of Palestinian Amulets. Exploring the life and agency of amulets in 20th century Palestine*.

A lot more needs to be understood about the relationship between what and how people wrote things. For example, epistolary rhetoric and etiquette is obviously a huge field, covering both medieval Arabic sources (including when and how to quote Qurʾān) and contemporary studies. Incorporating insights from this domain into the study under review would yield deeper insights into *why* Qurʾānic quotes and other expressions appear in the letters. This volume has taken us the first important step on that road by showing the many important and fascinating venues that can be pursued by examining the papyrological material in a systematic way for a certain genre of texts.

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