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HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF THE QUR'ĀNIC TEXT – FROM 'UṮMĀN TO IBN MUĞĀHID AND BEYOND

ABSTRACT: The paper is an attempt to sum up efforts being made in the field of Quranic Studies to come up with a critical edition of the text of the Quran – the holy book of Islam – basing on oldest, extant Quranic manuscripts and secondary literature, and this in order to enable text criticism based on source texts. The quest for authographic / interpretative text-forms of the Qur'anic revelations is an attempt to reach back as far as possible into the earliest history of Islam. The reconstruction of a critical text of the Qur'an, i.e. a (single or multiple) original version(s) of the text from which all subsequent manuscript versions and readings stem, is an ongoing quest for scholars of Quranic studies, in the Western and Eastern hemisphere. And that is because merely the process of studying the manuscripts delivers us unique insight into Quranic history – historical insight, dogmatic insight and literary insight.

KEYWORDS: Quran, Quranic Studies, Islamic History, early Islam, Qur'ānic History, Recitation Styles, Ibn Mujahid, text criticism

Tracing the development of Arabic orthography on the pages of Qur'ānic manuscripts and in source materials pertaining and referring to the Qur'ān is one of the tools allowing for indirect insight into the historical evolution of Islamic dogmatics centered around the Qur'ān. The goal is, inter alia, to work out a critical edition of the Qur'ān as close to its autographic form as possible. And while the number of oldest manuscripts is severely deficient, and the more numerous (but late) sources of Islamic tradition are uncertain, the collation and analysis of available sources, accounts and information leads tentatively to the thesis that the development of the Qur'ānic script was largely dictated by dogmatic and jurisprudential reasons – the need to clarify the interpretation of the Qur'ānic content. Over the years, the text was edited and redacted for multiple purposes, including worship, interpretation and teaching of doctrine, as well as to enhance related recitation values, and for jurisdiction.

In 1947, in his *Introduction au Coran*, Régis Blachère (1900–1973) complained about the scarcity of source materials necessary to prepare a critical edition of the Qur'ān, expressing hope for an international scholarly project in this regard (Blachère, p. 196). The emergence of such was however delayed by the enigmatic disappearance of the so called Bergsträsser archive (and then, by its even more enigmatic retrieval several dozen years later in Germany). Currently, several such projects are carried out in parallel on different scales (with the German *Corpus Coranicum* remaining the largest one), including Qur'ān manuscripts databases, however, collation of text variants alone, despite the support of modern technology, can last for decades.

The inability to elaborate a critical edition of the Qur'ānic text does not mean that research in this regard has been abandoned or is doomed to failure from the start. The lack of a sufficient number of manuscript sources from the critical period (first three centuries of *hijra*) poses no less challenge than the quantitative verification of secondary

religious literature which is rich in numerous non-canonical variants of the Qur'ānic text. The discipline of Qur'ānic studies functions with the awareness of these basic obstacles, which also determines the selection of academic methods and analysis of research results.

Therefore, scholars' eyes are often directed to the orthography of Qur'ānic Arabic as a possible key to unveil the mystery of the sources of Qur'ānic dogmatics. What could have been the form and manifestation of the original autographic text of the Qur'ān? One should be aware that it evolved at desert edges of the civilized world, in an environment dominated by oral communication, with the culture of Arabic writing being only born in parallel to it. This does not mean, of course, that the writing culture as such was completely foreign to Arabs, because in the 7th century CE not all of them were nomads and not all of them lived on the Arabian Peninsula. Numerous tribes and individuals were already at that time interwoven with the settled population of the Middle East, including even urban milieus (e.g. of Syro-Palestine), and scattered widely outside the Arabian Peninsula – in the Byzantine and Sassanid limes, as well as internally within provinces of both empires (e.g. in Bet Arabāyē, Hatra etc.). To write down the Arabic language (or, rather, its local dialects), the Syro-Palestinian and Mesopotamian Arabs were using other alphabets, as evidenced by testimonies written in the Arabic language by using cognate Semitic alphabets, i.e. Old Arabic rock inscriptions or garshuni texts. At some stage, however, a new epoch-making religious message was to be recorded for the first time in written Arabic form.

Nevertheless, as mentioned above, the Qur'ān came to being in a culture dominated by the spoken word and oral supra-tribal literary conventions. Perhaps this is why its manuscripts from the oldest Islamic period have not survived to this day, as they might have not been considered as important as the parallel oral transmission. Daniel Madigan suggests that the purposefulness of writing down the Qur'ānic message was guided by the need to perpetuate the oral tradition of Muhammadan revelations which was exposed to fading away. In the first decades (or even over a century) of Islam, the written tradition could still have been of quite limited significance, as only a small part of the Qur'ānic text was necessary for worship or contained practical guidelines on how to lead a typically Muslim lifestyle.[1] Since the time of writing down the revealed enunciations, the oral tradition has not ceased to exist or to evolve, but, as a consequence, began gradually to recede to the background and subjugate itself in its development to the written tradition. At each subsequent stage of Arabic script reforms, the oral tradition was building on the written one, adhering to it more and more closely and slowly disappearing. While during the first two Islamic centuries the written tradition was gaining on precision and losing on flexibility, the oral tradition was parallelly stabilizing and merging with the written one. At the end, by the time questions arose about the precision of the Qur'ānic corpus, only the unpointed consonantal text (*rasm*) could be the guarantor of the once so important oral tradition. Dozens of readings of the Qur'ān (attested rudimentarily in the secondary Muslim literature), which emerged in the first three Islamic centuries, however minor they might be, are a proof that the written and oral traditions of the Qur'ānic revelation must have coexisted side by side over a very long time in a feedback loop. The decline of this natural process came when the written corpus of the Qur'ān achieved

[1] More on this: Madigan, pp. 35, 43, 51–52. Cf. in this regard also the intertwining relationship / authoritativeness between oral and written tradition of the Jewish Torah: See Weingreen, pp. 54–67.

its irrefutable hegemony, although even after that time (in the 10th century C.E. and later) more peripheral readings and text variants still arose.

When in the first half of the 10th century CE Ibn Muǧāhid (859/860–936) decided arbitrarily to limit the number of canonical readings from several dozen to seven only, in order to complete this task he did no longer resort to the oral tradition. He did neither combine his choice of seven readings with hadiths[2] referring to the seven so-called modes of recitation *aḥruf* (*al-aḥruf as-sab'a*).[3] According to these popular hadiths, the angel Gabriel recited the Qur'ān to the prophet Muhammad in seven ways. Three hundred years after the revelations, Ibn Muǧāhid sought to render pragmatism rather than identify traces of oral tradition, because original oral tradition could not reach so far into the past without losing on precision and independence, nor was it sufficient fully to correct the scattered scribal mistakes or more in-depth changes.[4] The traditionalist Ibn Muǧāhid named his seven canonical readings with eponyms of 8th–century reciters.[5] In the 10th century, the autographic version (single or multiple) of the Qur'ānic text has long 'vanished' amongst a growing multitude of its own derivative variants. But because the existence of such a recension was also necessary for purposes of – inter alia – legal practice (halakhic function), it seems that Ibn Muǧāhid had chosen those readings that at that time had the most chances of gaining reverence and semblance of authenticity. Otto Pretzl (1893–1941), when commenting on Gotthelf Bergsträsser's (1986–1933) initial belief and later disappointment in the continuity of the oral tradition (for the sake of his planned critical edition of the Qur'ān), put it in the following way:

> First of all, it has become substantially clearer that the books on the unified canonical readings are not the deposition of surviving oral traditions, but, conversely, the oral tradition of later times is very much dependent on the intermittent written tradition. (…) It is extremely hinting that it was exactly Ibn Muǧāhid (…) who in order to solve the question at issue at the time, argued with quotations from literary sources and did not refer to an oral tradition. If such a tradition was known to anyone, then it must be to him, the founder of the unified canonical readings (Pretzl, pp. 8–9).[6]

Or, as Efim Rezvan described, the first four centuries of hijra were marked by a constant struggle to preserve Muhammad's autograph, and ended with a compromise

[2] of which the most frequently quoted is that from Al-Buḫārī's collection, informing that Gabriel went through an annual check of the contents of the Qur'ān with Muhammad, in different recitation modes (2002).

[3] We do not know exactly what this term might have originally meant: As-Suyūtī (XIV–XV century CE) lists 35 possible interpretations, from linguistic to esoteric (2005). See also: Burton, pp. 194–196.

[4] Ibn Muǧāhid does not mention the selection criteria that guided him to choose his preferable readings, Nasser, pp. 52–61. Nasser believes that Ibn Muǧāhid's intention was not to limit the number of readings to seven exactly, but it happened this way naturally. It can be mentioned that in the 9th century CE, a common belief among Muslims was that there were five main copies of the Qur'ān (the so-called *maṣāḥif al-amṣār*) which were kept in five leading cities of the caliphate – Mecca, Medina, Basra, Kufa and Damascus.

[5] Ibn Muǧāhid's traditionalistic approach left its imprint not only on rejecting the non-canonical *qirā'āt* but – what's more important – on rejecting them as text entireties and on canonising each of the seven *qirā'a* as a text entirety – not as selected text variants one by one. From that time on, *šāḏḏ* means not an incorrect text variant but a variant from outside the canon. Ibn Muǧāhid supplemented his *Kitāb as-Sab'a* with *Aš-Šawāḏḏ fī al-Qirā'āt* (Nöldeke et al., pp. 149–155).

[6] Quote translated into English by the author of this article.

between the exact text impossible to reconstruct even from the oldest written version available at the time, and the generalized variant allowing some flexibility and enjoying the acceptance of the umma (Rezvan, p. 8).

Perhaps at this point, as a digression, it is worth noting that, contrary to the commonly prevailing belief today, in the first centuries of Islam it was precisely this flexibility, distancing and criticism that characterized Muslim scholars when referring to the first writing achievements of the Arabs, including all the imperfections of the written form of revelation. The virtuous doyen of Arab social sciences ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān ibn Ḫaldūn (1332–1406) criticized the first attempts of his religious compatriots in the field of writing by saying:

> Arabic writing at the beginning of Islam was, therefore, not of the best quality nor of the greatest accuracy and excellence. It was not (even) of medium quality, because the Arabs possessed the savage desert attitude and were not familiar with crafts. One may compare what happened to the orthography of the Qur’an on account of this situation. The men around Muhammad wrote the Qur’an in their own script, which was not of a firmly established, good quality. Most of the letters were in contradiction to the orthography required by persons versed in the craft of writing. The Qur’anic script of (the men around Muhammad) was then imitated by the men of the second generation, because of the blessing inherent in the use of an orthography that had been used by the men around Muhammad, who were the best human beings after (Muhammad himself) and who had received his revelation from the book and word of God (Ibn Ḫaldūn, chapter 5, subchapter 29).[7]

Similarly critical of the defective quality of the Qur’ānic text were numerous Muslim scholars and commentators, including philological insightful remarks preserved by Aṭ-Ṭabarī, Az-Zamaḫšarī, Ibn Kaṯīr or As-Suyūṭī, pointing to multiple linguistic irregularities within the Qur‘ān and suggesting emendations to problematic passages. Inconsistencies of grammatical rules, syntactical inaccuracies, ambiguities, apparently incompatible statements, disruptions and abnormalities of composition, style and form, problems of textual division, all this provided the foundations of multiple hypotheses postulating, among other things, that the Qur‘ān’s first recension was put together still in a mnemonic form, as a transcript or memory aid (e.g. Madigan, p. 52).[8] Perhaps the multitude of readings in the first Islamic centuries stems precisely from the imperfections of the Qur’ānic textual structure: where the revelation text was defective or ambiguous, accompanied by the lack of independent support from the oral tradition as years have passed, subsequent generations of reciters used their own language intuition to come

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[7] Ibn Ḫaldūn also bluntly calls idiots those who ahistorically believe that the prophet’s companions mastered the Arabic spelling.

[8] Madigan writes in this context that the idea behind such a transcript (or transcripts), even with its flaws or omissions, was to restore the integrity of the oral tradition. See also: Donner, p. 41. In contrast to hypotheses of Western scholars, the current (i.e. from 5th century AH onwards) common theological Muslim view is that the oral tradition preserved the full text from the time of revelation till the moment of writing down the Abū Bakr’s (unofficial) / ‘Uṯmānic (official) recension (first and final recension and the same time), the written skeletal form serving only as a temporary mnemonic device for memorization of the text (the ‘Uṯmān’s codex being thus an image of the heavenly archetype) (Rippin 2006, p. 35).

up with interpretations suiting themselves. It is also difficult to claim that the prophet used a recitation version one day, and another one on the next day (Bellamy, p. 2). Ultimately, however, the Islamic culture embraced the anachronistic belief that the entire text of the Qur'ān came to being in one the same and unchanging form. It seems that this belief is an element of a reading back (or rather: creating back) a large part of the earliest Islamic history, just as assigning roles in this process to certain personalities from the 7th century. Ignác Goldziher (1850–1921) believed that the Qur'ānic variants arose simply out of the defectiveness of the *rasm* (i.e. the consonant skeleton) of the 'Uṯmānic recension that became a leaven of dozens of derivative versions, usually intentional (and often conditioned theologically) (Goldziher, pp. 4–20).

Recognizing the defectiveness of the Qur'ānic Arabic, one can all the more assume as the religious tradition of Islam wants it that the first (standardized) edition of the Qur'ān might have been completed at an early stage, when the Arabic writing was still 'graciously' malleable: defective, poorly developed and unsystematic. Possibly still in the 1st century AH, and not necessarily all at once, but more as an ongoing process. This was believed, among others, by K. Small (1959–2019) who suggested that the first written codex of the revealed enunciations could have seen daylight in mid- or second half of the 1st century AH, i.e. between 653 [the 'Uṯmānic recension] and 705 [Al-Ḥağğāğ's recension] (Small, pp. 165, 180).[9] Otherwise, it is difficult to logically explain the huge number of Qur'ānic text variants attested in hadiths and secondary Muslim literature. Moreover, also the number of orthographic, morphologic, syntactical, stylistic, rhetorical and other peculiarities of the Qur'ānic language suggests that it might have been written down quickly in a rather sketchy form, although already pre-standardised. This would mean the existence of a strong central religious / political power capable of imposing such a recension on the whole umma. Moreover, Arab authorities must have had equally strong reasons for pushing through such an extensive project. Starting from the 7th century CE, the Qur'ānic text was being subjected to a standardization attempts (at the beginning very chaotic), a more or less successful one, and later in the 8–9th century to a process alike the Hebrew Bible in the Masoretic period (9–8th centuries BC, and beyond). It seems quite obvious that in the very beginning of Islam, there was no Masoretic tradition, because the written Arabic language was nascent itself.[10] Every new element in the centuries-long process of Arabic spelling reforms was a source of new

[9] The Umayyad ruler of Iraq Al-Ḥağğāğ ibn Yūsuf (661–714) was to be, according to selective accounts of the Muslim tradition, one of the persons who collected and destroyed divergent Qur'ānic readings and replaced them with a unified (but not yet the final) codex elaborated according to his own concept. Only a few non-canonical Qur'ānic manuscripts attributed to Ali's followers were to escape the destruction. This story is reported in a hadith contained in the canonical collection of Abū Dāwūd. In addition, its author reports that Al-Ḥağğāğ has changed eleven letters in the Qur'ānic text. Muslim alims, however, consider this hadith generally to be weak (due to the dubious chain of its tradents). Al-Ḥağğāğ is also remembered by the Islamic tradition for modifying the Arabic script. And as far as the modification of Qur'ānic spelling is concerned, there are also many other accounts on this matter. For example, Ibn Abī Dāwūd As-Siğistānī (who was, by the way, the son of the above mentioned hadith collector Abū Dāwūd and one of the teachers of Ibn Muğāhid) mentions in his *Kitāb al-Maṣāḥif* a tradition according to which the Umayyad governor of Iraqi provinces 'Ubayd Allāh ibn Ziyād added 2000 alifs to the Qur'ānic text. More on this also in: Jeffery.

[10] The state of Arabic script in 'Uṯmān's period was generally thought to have been incapable of rendering even an unambiguous consonantal text, apart from matters of vocalization. Extensively on the evolutionary stage of written Arabic during the formative period of Islam (Abbott).

textual versions, however marginal they were. And, stepping out of the mere scope of orthography, it can be seen that, while the content of the surahs themselves (in terms of *rasm*) was established relatively early (during the 1st century AH), their number and order were still variable throughout the Umayyad and probably also the Abbasid era. It is not uncommon to find old Qur'āns lacking multiple surahs, especially the shorter ones. In the examples (ḥiǧāzī style) given by S. Noja-Noseda, manuscripts do not contain surahs 77–114, 71–76, and also selectively surahs between 45 and 70 (Noja Noseda, pp. 3–37, as quoted by: Small, p. 187, f. n. 45). This does not mean that they did not originally exist, but for some reason were not included in the written form of these manuscripts.[11]

While verifying and eliminating the non-normative readings (whose number reached fifty in the 10th century CE), Ibn Muǧāhid was guided by criteria of which – as it seems – priority was given to the compliance with the Arabic *rasm* of the *ne varietur* text – the codex of 'Uṯmān. Alongside such readings, in the 10th century, there could have also probably existed rudimentarily a number of undestroyed non-canonical codices attributed to the prophet's companions (ʿAbd Allāh ibn Masʿūd, Ubayy ibn Kaʿb called *sayyid al-qurrā'*, ʿAbd Allāh ibn ʿAbbās called *tarǧumān al-Qur'ān* etc.), and other versions with a different consonant structure (of which variants are present abundantly in the secondary Muslim literature).[12] In the 1930s, A. Jeffery (1892–1959) collected such testimonies from the extra-Qur'ānic literature, apparently coming from 15 companion codices (primary codices), 13 second-hand codices (secondary codices), and other numerous and anonymous recensions (unnamed codices) (Jeffery, pp. v–vi (table of contents), 2 (f.n. 3), 30). Jeffery also pointed to mentions of an allegedly lost source from 5th century AH (*Al-Kāmil fī al-Qirā'āt* by Abū al-Qāsim al-Huḏalī) containing another 40 readings. However, as paradoxically as it may seem, he did not find these variants in manuscripts, but in the Qur'ān-centered Muslim literature of the Middle Ages, usually of the late Abbasid period. Jeffery writes that „This in the absence of any direct manuscript evidence gives us our sole witness to the types of text which 'Uthmān's standard text superseded." (Jeffery, pp. 14–15).

There exist numerous literary testimonies that non-canonical readings (of Ibn Masʿūd and Ubayy ibn Kaʿb) existed at least until the 4th century AH / 11th century CE (Small, p. 167). Al-Kindī, a Christian official at the court of the Abbasid caliph Al-Ma'mūn, mentions readings of Ibn Masʿūd and Ubayy ibn Kaʿb in 830 CE. His testimony as a Christian takes on significance as he was outside the circle of Muslim school disputes.

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[11] A distinction has to be made in general between the *Qur'ān* (being God's perfect heavenly tablet', the *kitab* or *kitab Allāh*) and a *muṣḥaf* (plur. *maṣāḥif*; meaning a written recension of the *Qur'ān,* a codex). There are multiple accounts of the Islamic tradition that some *maṣāḥif* did deliberately not include all the surahs. More on this and its implications: Madigan, p. 36.

[12] Before Ibn Muǧāhid, many famous Muslim scholars undertook the task of a critical evaluation of Qur'ānic readings. Muslim authors list more than forty works dedicated to this subject prior to Ibn Muǧāhid, most of them missing. Of the more significant ones, Abū 'Ubayd al-Qāsim ibn Sallām (d. 838) elaborated a book on twenty-five Qur'ānic readings, attributing them to twenty-five reciters. Aḥmad ibn Ǧubayr al-Kūfī al-Muqri' (d. 871) authored two works (mentioning 5 and 8 readings respectively). Aṭ-Ṭabarī (d. 923) wrote a book (also lost) devoted to twenty readings assigned to twenty eponymous reciters. In turn, Az-Zamaḫšarī (d. 1144), rejected some Ibn Muǧāhid's seven canonical readings, and established precedence for the remaining ones. But neither Aṭ-Ṭabarī nor Az-Zamaḫšarī did attribute heavenly provenance to these readings and did not derive their origin from Muhammad himself, but from later reciters and transmitters – with all their selectivity and freedom of textual interpretation (*iǧtihād*) (Nasser, pp. 37–40).

A hundred years later, the unfortunate Ibn Šannabūḏ (c. 935) was forced in court to make public recantation of his use of the non-'Uthmānic recensions, and declared them wrong (Mez, p. 195). Ibn An-Nadīm, in his *Fihrist* (c. 987) mentions the existence of Ibn Masʿūd's and Ubayy ibn Kaʿb's codices, and even that of Ali.[13] In 1007–1008, an incident involving the *muṣḥaf* of Ibn Masʿūd led to unrest in Baghdad and clashes between Sunnis and Shi'ites (Rezvan, p. 8). As we see, although the theoretical possibility of such Qur'ānic readings existing at least until 4th century AH / 11th century is indicated by literary mentions, however, there are no manuscript evidence for these literary accounts and scholarly claims.

The Qur'ānic text resulting from Ibn Muǧāhid's reform could therefore have been a compromise to stave off theological and juridical disputes escalating along with growing number of readings. Ibn Muǧāhid never claimed that his seven readings were autographic and unchanged since ages. He could not claim so, because the Qur'ānic readings he chose were themselves effects of syntheses of variant readings of their numerous predecessors. Ibn Muǧāhid's work was also by no means an effect of collation of texts based on the oldest or best available manuscripts, but it was about finding a pragmatic golden means to satisfy different categories of users. Recent text critical research and analysis of palimpsests and other early Qur'ānic manuscripts indicate that the *rasm* itself as well as the subsequent vocalized Qur'ānic text are the result of intentional text variants and should be considered interpretative text-forms (Small, p. 177).

In the centuries-old maze of interdependence of the written and oral traditions intertwining with each other in numerous readings and text variants across vast areas of the caliphate, still long before the times of the Qur'ānic orthography reformer Ibn Muǧāhid, it was impossible to identify this only original autographic version of Muhammadan revelations. It should be emphasized here that it cannot be excluded, or rather, it should be assumed, that there was originally more than one autographic version of the Qur'ān that survived 'Uthmān's standardization. The oral tradition, for centuries bound with and increasingly dependent on the written tradition, was not able to save the original autographic version (or autographic versions if there was more than one) for a long time unchanged. Andrew Rippin (1950–2016) put it this way: "(…) the current text [i.e. the *textus receptus* of the Ḥafṣ ʿan ʿĀṣim reading] is the product of reflection upon a primitive written text and not upon the parallel transmission of an oral text as the Muslim tradition has suggested (Rippin 2006, p. 36)".[14] And in other place Rippin added that evidence of some early manuscripts seems to indicate that "(…) it appears that there was a stage at which the written text of the Qurʾān was analyzed and determined as to its meaning and pronunciation on the basis of a skeleton consonantal text with no reference to a living oral tradition" (Rippin 2001, p. x). At that and every other stage the oral tradition entered in service of the text thus formed, accompanying it until the next change.

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[13] Ibn An-Nadīm writes the following: "I have seen a number of Qur'ānic manuscripts, which the transcribers recorded as manuscripts of Ibn Masʿūd. No two of the Qur'ānic copies were in agreement and most of them were on badly effaced parchment. I also saw a Qur'ānic manuscript transcribed about two hundred years ago which included the opening of the Book" (Dodge, pp. 57–58).

[14] He continues on the same page by saying that "Examples can be provided, on the evidence of the early manuscripts, of instances in which words, because of the way they were written in the primitive script of the time, were likely mispronounced as a result of a misunderstanding of the script and in the absence of a firm oral tradition".

After the selection of seven Qur'ān readings in the 10th century CE, still at least fifty more different reading systems saw daylight (all of them differing insignificantly in terms of the very essence of the Islamic message) (Jeffery, p. 2). Some authors even mention the number eighty in this context (Small, p. 167).[15] Compared to the transmission of New Testament texts, these are not big numbers, because in the case of the New Testament there was no such organized text standardization project, nor a massive action of destruction of non-canonical codices took place. With the Qur'ān, this process was completed within a time span of three centuries. During that time, the Qur'ān's written and oral tradition did not exist separately.

Similarly as in the days of Ibn Muǧāhid, also a thousand years later, the Cairo edition – being the most recent case of (orthographic) reworking the Qur'ānic text – was not based on the best and oldest manuscripts, but on a symbiotic combination of late Qur'ānic manuscripts (the 'Ḥafṣ on the authority of ʿĀṣim of Kūfa' reading of the Ottoman era) with text variants from the secondary Muslim literature. The Cairo version of 1924/25 was commissioned by the Egyptian king Fuad I (ruling in years 1917–1936) to mark his country's aspirations for leadership in the Muslim world after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. As G. Bergsträsser summed up after years of his research on this matter: "Sources for this consonantal text are obviously not handwritten Qur'an manuscripts, but literature about it. It is therefore a reconstruction, the result of rewriting the usual consonantal text in the old style according to the [medieval Qur'ānic] literature" (Bergsträsser 1932, p. 5). And O. Pretzl noted in *Die Geschichte des Qorāntexts* that:

> In fact, the Qur'ān manuscripts themselves have no longer played a role in the Muslim Qur'ān scholarship since the 4th century AH. The knowledge of the orthographic peculiarities of the only relevant 'Uṯmānic recension necessary for the practice of reading the Qur'ān and the production of Qur'ān manuscripts was obtained from secondary sources on the Qur'ān described above (Nöldeke et al., p. 249).[16]

Thus, currently published editions of the holy book of Islam, among which the Ḥafṣ ʿan ʿĀṣim reading (in the so-called Cairo version) is clearly dominant since circa one hundred years, are therefore a fruit of the medieval, Muslim, specifically understood collation of sources (mainly late Qur'ānic manuscripts) and analysis of text variants attested in secondary literature.

In the 10th century, Ibn Muǧāhid took advantage of the still quite flexible principles of the Arabic orthography and came up with a form of text that was to meet unified

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[15] Nasser sees that Muslims did not attribute the variant readings of the Qurʾān divine rather than human provenance until around the 5th century AH / 11th century CE. After this time, the belief spread that the Ibn Muǧāhid's seven canonical readings (then expanded to canonical ten and fourteen) were revealed by God to the prophet Muhammad. As a consequence, problematic formal and stylistic faults within the text became to be considered positive rhetorical devices (indicating a rhetorical potential of the Arabic language) rather than evidence of rushed or careless writing (Nasser, p. 77).

[16] Quote translated into English by the author of this article. In 1934, O. Pretzl admitted that his (and, above all, Bergsträsser's) hopes for the possibility to consider the Cairo edition a fundament for the critical edition of the Qur'ānic text (in the Ḥafṣ ʿan ʿĀṣim reading) were all but shattered after careful analysis of the print. He commented on it the as follows: "The Cairo consonant text is a text reconstructed from older sources on the Qur'ānic orthography (the oldest of which seems to be the *Kitāb al-Muqniʿ* by Ad-Dānī). It contains some difficult to explain deviations from oldest sources (…)." (Pretzl, p. 8 (f. n.). Not less critical of the Cairo work was Jeffery (p. ix).

needs of liturgy, doctrine and legislation. In the 20th century, the Egyptian Qur'ānic commission carried out the last spelling update (de-archaization) with an analogous method. And since neither standardization was intended to reproduce the autographic version of the Qur'ān, they both hindered the path to its possible reconstruction in the future.[17] The meaning and history of a text gets 'orthodoxically' corrupted in every editing and copying process, e.g. by selectively adding, skipping or amending words, phrases, fragments, rearranging the content etc., and this is equally true even for minor lexical updates. On the technical side, all 50/80 readings after Ibn Muğāhid are still equally divine/valid, however they are being effectively repelled by the Cairo edition. Attempts were made to reconstruct the remaining readings (recitative versions), but as a result of practical obstacles and political resistance they eventually failed. The Cairo *muṣḥaf*, after the orthographic 'lifting', is one of the 50/80 lawful readings.

Paradoxically, even though in the field of Qur'ānic studies, it is the Cairo version that is commonly recognized as the accepted text deriving from the canonical Madīnan 'Uṯmānic recension (and probably originating from a rather early period, possibly mid- or late 7th century CE), not a single early manuscript identifiable with this recension has yet been found. Helpful in this regard can be further analysis of the manuscript tradition which may have a considerable impact upon our understanding of the early history of the text of the holy Islamic scripture. This quest can be supported by text variants coming from the Qur'ānic literature (just as Bergsträßer, Jeffery and Pretzl wanted it), but due to their large number, the matter gets even more complicated. It is rather not disputed that the 'Uṯmān's codex contained authentic material from the 7th century. What is debatable, however, is in how far its content has been reworked since then, and how it was originally read and understood. It is also difficult to estimate how much autographic material has been lost in the course of subsequent standardization efforts. The reconstruction of the autographic version with such a scant source base as today is completely out of reach of the scholarship. Hopes can possibly be associated with the reproduction of one of the interpretative recensions stemming from 'Uṯmān or Al-Haǧǧāǧ, but this also only sometime in the, say, indeterminate future.

In 1937, Arthur Jeffery, began his opus magnum on the non-canonical variants by saying that "Critical investigation of the text of the Qur'ān is a study which is still in its infancy" (Jeffery, p. 1) (adding that within the fold of Islam it seems never to have attracted much attention, except for some interest in the early days of Islam). And in another place he pitied that "It is an extraordinary thing that we still have no critical text of the Qur'ān for common use" (Jeffery, p. 4). We may conclude this by reiterating after this great scholar that his statement hasn't lost anything of validity till today.

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[17] Just as medieval scribes while copying manuscripts were enacting their changes in order to make texts more clear in their understanding (e.g. the *lectio facilior*), and thus were becoming their interpreters and hindering later recovery of autographic text versions. (Ehrman, pp. 279–280).

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