

## The Qu'oranic Manuscripts in European Libraries The manuscript of Birmingham as model

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### Abstract :

This article studies the Birmingham Qur'an manuscript as one of the earliest surviving material witnesses to the Qur'anic text and assesses its importance for the history of the muṣḥaf. It situates the manuscript within the larger corpus of early Qur'anic codices preserved in Western libraries and museums, and it describes its physical and textual features, including its parchment leaves, early Ḥijāzī script, and the passages it preserves from Sūrat al-Kahf, Sūrat Maryam, and Sūrat Ṭā Hā. The article pays particular attention to the issue of dating by distinguishing between radiocarbon analysis of the parchment and palaeographic analysis of the script. While radiocarbon testing places the parchment between 568 and 645 CE, some scholars date the writing itself to a slightly later period. The author argues, however, that both sets of evidence confirm the manuscript's great

antiquity. The article also critiques revisionist approaches that question the stability of the Qur'anic text and treat it as the product of later editorial development. Against such views, it maintains that the Birmingham manuscript substantially matches the standard Qur'anic text, apart from minor differences in verse division, graphic notation, and layout, and therefore supports the early preservation and stability of the Qur'an.

**Keywords:** Birmingham Qur'an ; Qur'an ; European Libraries; Orientalists.

**Introduction :** Despite the importance of manuscripts in various fields of knowledge, especially historical writing, given their wealth of information and knowledge and their role as sources of varying degrees, this, in our view, does not entirely apply to Qur'anic manuscripts. The presence of Qur'anic manuscripts in European

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museums and libraries has led Orientalists and European researchers (Bani Amer, 2004, pp. 11-40.), particularly those interested in theology and Western thought, to subject the Qur'an to the latest critical theories, aiming to cast doubt on Islam and undermine its foundations, since the Qur'an is the primary source of legislation for Muslims throughout history. This is driven by ignorance (or disregard) on the part of some regarding the mechanisms by which the Qur'an has been transmitted across generations, or by their anti-Islamic ideologies (religious or political) in the case of others, or by both.

Our research problem revolves around the importance of the Qur'anic manuscript as a source that transmits the Qur'an and preserves its original form as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, and the extent to which the criticisms directed at the Qur'an through the Birmingham manuscript are valid.

## **2- Introducing the Birmingham manuscript of the Qur'an:**

Western countries, in their university libraries and prestigious museums, keep a large number of Arabic manuscripts, including manuscripts of the Holy Qur'an, such as the Paris manuscript, known as Parisino-petropolitanus, which is found in the French National Library (bnf) (Arabe 328 a-b-c), and another in Britain, in the British Museum Library in London (Or. 2165, 1a- 14b, 15a –

113b, 114a- 121b.), while the Russian National Library, which contains the two manuscripts known as the St. Petersburg manuscript and the Marcel 18 manuscript (National Library of Russia. (s. d.). Fragments of manuscri); as well as in the Vatican Library (Vaticani Arabi 1605), and the Birmingham manuscript that is the subject of our research (Mingana Islamic Arabic 1572a). (Named after the Chaldean-Iraqi priest Hormizd Mingana, better known as Alphonse Mingana (1878-1937), born near Mosul, he was an Orientalist, theologian, and collector of ancient manuscripts during the 19th and 20th centuries. He studied theology and worked as a professor of languages and manuscripts at several universities in the United Kingdom, including Manchester and Birmingham. His collection, now housed in the Birmingham Museum, is known as the "Mingana Collection).

A few years ago (July 22, 2015), the BBC broadcast news that the University of Birmingham in Britain had found the oldest manuscript of the Holy Quran. This was then picked up and published by other Western and Arab media outlets. The Italian researcher, Alba Fedeli (Originally from Italy, she is currently a professor and researcher at the Center for Religious Studies at Central European University Budapest, Hungary), had found this manuscript while examining a collection of Middle Eastern manuscripts as part of her doctoral work at the University of Birmingham, Britain. Recognizing the importance of this manuscript, she nominated it for radiocarbon dating (carbon-14). Her

research led to the discovery of a set of 16 Quranic pages, belonging to the two Birmingham manuscripts, located in the National Library of France, which means that the two sets were part of a single Quran. (Coughlan, S. (2015, July 22)).

The Birmingham Qur'an manuscript originates from the Mingana Collection, which comprised thousands of manuscripts (over 3,000) written in more than 20 Eastern languages, such as Syriac, Aramaic, and Arabic. The Birmingham manuscript is thus part of this collection. It consists of two sheets of parchment written on both sides in an old Hijazi script, with 23 to 24 lines per page. Its text contains verses from Surahs Al-Kahf, Maryam, and Ta-Ha.

The scribe wrote (Document 3) verses from Surah Al-Kahf: from verse 17 to the end of verse 22 and the first word of verse 23, which is (ولا قولن). The rest of the verses appear on the back of the parchment (Document 4), from verse 23 to verse 31, beginning with (لشاي اني فعل ذلك غداً (23)). The scribe did not complete the verse on the same page. See Documents 3 and 4.

Document (1) contains the last verses of Surah Maryam, from verse 91 to verse 98, which is the last verse of the Surah, and from the first verse of Surah Ta-Ha to the beginning of verse (13) (And I have chosen you). The rest appears on the other side (Document (2)), beginning with (So listen to what is revealed (13)) to the first word of verse (40) (When you walk). See Figures (1) and (2).

Dr. Muhammad Issa Wali, a specialist and expert in Persian and Turkish manuscripts at the British Library, described the script in which the manuscript was written as clear, beautiful, and legible, expressing his astonishment at what was discovered. He believes that the document dates back to the time of the three Rightly Guided Caliphs, which makes it one of the oldest copies of the Qur'an in the world. There is no doubt that this discovery will gladden the hearts of Muslims around the world.

## **2- Criticisms leveled against the manuscript:**

The development of scientific research methods and tools has led to the development of how manuscripts are dealt with, including the emergence of theories of criticism such as the theory of higher criticism (It arose from the rationalist movement that swept through European cultural circles during and after the 18th century, and as a consequence of the idealist philosophy advocated by Immanuel Kant, who called for reliance on ethics rather than dogma (religion) (Geisler, 1986.). Moody). This theory critiques sacred texts, as it does not recognize divine revelation, subjecting them to scrutiny like any other ancient human text. The German scholar G. G. Eichern (1752-1827) was the first to coin the term "higher criticism," as these critiques led to the rejection of the Old and New Testaments and the characterization of the God of the Old Testament as a transgressor. Later, Hermann Samuel Reimarus and Lessing developed a counterpoint to lower criticism, which

acknowledges the existence of divine revelation), and the deconstruction theory. The former works to subject the texts of old manuscripts to criticism, without regard for their sanctity. The Torah and the Gospels were subjected to this approach, and attempts were made to present the Quranic text in a similar manner. Proponents of this view believe that the Quranic text is open to criticism and critique, thereby invalidating the Muslim belief that the Quran is divinely revealed, thus making it a human work. The second approach (deconstruction), however, is more recent, representing a break with metaphysics, a departure from its authority, and a rejection of belief in the unseen. This critique was associated with the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), and subsequently spread in French thought, with the term deconstruction first appearing with Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) (Bouaoud, 2010, p. 39).

Two examples can be given of Westernizers who criticized the Qur'anic text. The first: According to the modernist approach in literary criticism (deconstruction), Muhammad Arkoun called for a free and unconditional study of the Qur'anic text ((Bouaoud, 2010, p. 39). According to this approach, the status of the religious, sacred, and revelation factors must be re-examined in light of the modern theory of knowledge (Bouaoud, 2010, p. 41). We find Arkoun insisting on the oral nature of the Holy Qur'an because it was not written down or recorded until later (Bouaoud, 2010, p. 92). Arkoun also believes that many deletions, selections, and manipulations occurred in the text, from the stage of transferring

the oral discourse to the stage of official textual recording (Bouaoud, 2010, p. 93).

As for Muhammad Al-Masih, he believes in his research that many parts of the Holy Qur'an have been lost since an early time (al-Masih, 2017, pp. 15-27), and he followed the approach of the Orientalists in presenting some verses and describing them as containing grammatical errors (al-Masih, 2017, pp. 29- 30), forgetting that those who discovered the rules of Arabic grammar were originally non-Arabs, and they relied on the Qur'an to the greatest extent and on what the Arabs transmitted of poetry from the pre-Islamic era, and the Arab was disgusted by hearing the melody in the language and instinctively recognised the error before the rules of grammar were established.

Laboratory (physical) tests conducted on this manuscript (radiocarbon dating) confirm that it dates back to a period between 568 and 645 AD (It is worth noting that the period of the Prophet Muhammad's prophethood, peace and blessings be upon him, was between the years 610-632 AD, (It is worth noting that the period of the Prophet Muhammad's prophethood, peace and blessings be upon him, was between the years 610-632 AD), with an accuracy of 95.4%. This period undoubtedly begins two years before the birth of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and ends thirteen years after his death (peace be upon him). However, the French researcher Dr. François Déroche (Orientalist and scholar specializing in

codicology) believes that its writing dates back to the period between 670 and 690 AD, and perhaps shortly thereafter, between 675 and 699 CE. Dr. David Thomas (Professor at the University of Birmingham, specializing in theology; Christianity, Islam, and the relationship between them.), however, believes that the animal whose skin was used as parchment was alive during the time of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) or shortly thereafter (according to tests conducted on the parchment). He continues, saying: "It can be said – with some confidence – that what was written on this piece of paper dates back to less than 20 years at most from the death of the Messenger. It is not unlikely that the writer was a contemporary of the Messenger – may God's prayers and peace be upon him" (al-Masih, 2017, pp. 297- 303).

As for the script (the old Hijazi script) in which the manuscript was written, it confirms its antiquity. Some believe that it dates back to the Umayyad era, and this is based on the type of script and not the leather, since the parchment can be kept for many years before anything is written on it. Its dotted letters were originally dotted, as the letters were not dotted during the time of the Prophet, may God bless him and grant him peace. Later, a decoration was added between the walls in red to separate them, most likely during the era of Hajjaj bin Yusuf al-Thaqafi (al-Masih, 2017, pp. 15- 27).

M. Al-Masih wrote in his description of the Birmingham manuscript: "The 10 parchments that complete the Birmingham Qur'an are in

the National Library in Paris under the number (358c arabe), and the number of lines ranges between 23 and 25 lines, and the number of folios or parchments of this Qur'an that exist is four, and they are as follows: Yunus 10:35, Hud 11:110, Al-Kahf 18:17-31, Maryam 19:91 - Taha 20:40, and Taha 20:99 - Al-Mu'minun 23:27." (Al-Masih, 2017, 298-299).

Here, M. al-Masih stated that the number of lines ranged between 23 and 25. However, after examining documents (1), (2), (3), and (4) (Figure 1), it became clear that the number of lines ranged between 23 and 24 if we consider the line separating Surahs Maryam and Taha to be a single line (Document 1, Figure 1). Furthermore, he stated that the manuscript included verses from Surahs Yunus, Hud, and Al-Mu'minun, but it became apparent that the manuscript actually contained verses from Surahs Al-Kahf, Maryam, and Taha, after examining Figure 1 and comparing it with the Qur'an we have.

- The writing on the parchment does not belong to the same period as the parchment itself. The parchment dates back to the 6th century CE.

- Some specialists in manuscript studies, based on the script, the breaks between verses, the dots on the letters, the number of lines, and other factors, believe that this manuscript dates back to the second half of the first century, while others date it back to the beginning of the second century AH.

- The writing dates to the 9th century CE. This is evidence that the Quran evolved in both form and content to

reach its current form during the Abbasid era.

It should be noted that the verses written on the manuscript are exactly the same as the Qur'an that we have in our hands, with the difference being the placement of the verse numbers and their order on the pages.

## 2- Criticisms leveled against the manuscript:

Insert here the methods and instruments used in the same format (font, size, line spacing). In this section, the author of the article explains clearly the sampling strategy, the variables and how to measure them, how to collect the data, how the data are summarized (mean, percentage ...), the statistical and measuring tools used in data analysis, hypothesis testing and statistical significance. Sometimes it may be necessary to mention the programmes utilized in the calculation. When employing a method previously used and published in other studies, that method can be referred to in the footnote without being re-described. If there are modifications in the method, these must be explained and justified.

These methods and tools must be presented with precision and clarity without exaggeration so that other researchers can re-examine or verify them. The author can describe the tools and methods used in the form of a scheme, table or diagram for clarification and simplification only in case of complexity. This section can be divided into sub-sections. Its contents vary according to the subject-matter of the paper.

## 3- Results and Discussion:

Insert your results in this section in the same format (font, size, line spacing). A summary of the collected data should be presented in the form of proportions or totals. Then, the data analysis procedure should be explained both using text and illustrative means (the tables and figures referred to in the Appendix) in accordance with the method and instruments presented above. After presenting the results, their contents can be evaluated and interpreted statistically and psychologically in the light of the hypotheses, and they are compared to what others have found in previous studies.

**4- Conclusion:** In conclusion, the Birmingham Qur'an manuscript occupies a central place in contemporary scholarship on the early history of the Qur'anic text. As the article demonstrates, its material, palaeographical, and textual features collectively indicate that it belongs to a very early phase of Qur'anic transmission. Although some debate remains regarding the precise date of the inscription in relation to the parchment, such **اختلاف** does not diminish the manuscript's evidentiary value as an early witness to the written Qur'an. Most significantly, the extant folios display substantial conformity with the standard Qur'anic text, while the observable differences are confined to orthographic, graphic, and layout-related features rather than substantive textual variation. The manuscript, therefore, provides important evidence for the early preservation and

stabilization of the Qur’anic text. At the same time, the study underscores the methodological necessity of distinguishing between radiocarbon dating and palaeographic analysis and of relying on direct manuscript examination when assessing prior scholarly claims. Viewed in this light, the Birmingham manuscript is not merely an antiquarian

artifact, but a document of major historical and philological significance, contributing decisively to current debates on the compilation, transmission, and textual integrity of the Qur’an , but a document of major historical and philological significance, contributing decisively to current debates on the compilation, transmission, and textual integrity of the Qur’an.

**Figure 1: Parchments from the Holy Quran:**



Document (1): Page (1) Front side (Recto)

Document (2): Page (1) Reverse side (Verso)

Figure 2:



Document (3) Page (2) Front side  
(Recto)

Document (4) Page (2) Reverse  
side (Verso)

Source; S.mith. Gay, Birmingham University old Qur'anic fragments (from the Mingana collection); birmingham\_quran 1.pdf.

**A table showing the differences between the patches and the current Qur'an**

Docu ment	Content of the first line	Number of verses	Content of the first line	Content of the last line	Word count	Numb er of letters
1	(ان دعوا للرحمن ولدا (91) وما ينبغي للرحمن	لواد المقدس طوى (12) وانا اخترتك	23	20	156	600
2	فاستمع لما يوحى (13) انني انا الله لا اله الا	محبة مني ولتصنع على عيني (39) اذ تمشي	23	27	169	633

3	الله من يهد الله فهو المهتد ومن يضل	لا تستفت فيهم منهم احدا (22) ولا تقولن	24	9	158	678
4	لشاي اني فاعل ذلك عذا (23) إلا أن يشاء الله	واستبرق متكين فيها	23	9	164	632
The percentage of difference in words and letters compared to the current "Uthman" Quran is: 0%.						

**Source/** Aaped, Sayoud. Halim, Investigation on the Ancient Quran Folios of Birmingham, Folio\_investigation 02.pdf.

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