

The Marking of Poetry: A Rare Vocalization System from an Early Qurʾān Manuscript in Chicago, Paris, and Doha

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Introduction

In 1939, Nabia Abbott published her groundbreaking book on Arabic paleography, *The Rise of the North Arabic Script*. In its preface, she admitted that it was not her intention to produce such an extensive work—at least not at that time—and that her original goal was simply to catalog the Qurʾān manuscripts at the University of Chicago’s Oriental Institute. She explained:

Since these manuscripts cover a wide period of time and present a variety of scripts, it soon became apparent that this undertaking could not be satisfactorily accomplished without the aid of special scientific equipment: a knowledge of both the historical

development of the North Arabic script and the progress of Qurʾānic writing, especially in the early centuries of Islam. Investigation, however, soon revealed the fact that such knowledge is not available in any complete and up-to-date form.¹

The field of Arabic paleography has advanced considerably in the last eighty years,² but it remains indebted to Abbott’s work in creating some of that first “special scientific equipment.” However, there is one type of equipment that Abbott did not have in 1939: digital photography. As a result, the quality of the manuscript images at the end of *Rise* is frustratingly poor by modern standards, and many of their details have gone unnoticed.

This paper provides updated digital images of four fragments from the Oriental Institute Museum (OIM) that appeared in Abbott’s *Rise of the North Arabic Script*, and calls attention to features of their paleography and vocalization which are not apparent from her original black-and-white plates.³ In doing so, it demonstrates that these four fragments all belong to the same

* I am indebted to the registration staff at the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago for permitting me to photograph and reproduce the OIM fragments discussed below. I am equally indebted to the multimedia team at the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha for providing images of the MIA fragments, and for their permission to reproduce them here. These institutions retain copyright ownership of their respective images. I would also like to thank François Déroche for sharing his expertise on this particular Qurʾān manuscript, and Magdalen Connolly for her keen observations and advice on an earlier draft of this paper. This work was supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation [OPP1144]. [Ed.: Note also Éléonore Cellard’s article on a related topic in this issue of *JNES* entitled “The Ṣanʿāʾ palimpsest: Materializing the Codices.”]

¹ Nabia Abbott, *Rise of the North Arabic Script* (1939), ix.

² For a critique of Abbott’s early methodology, see Déroche et al., *Islamic Codicology*, 212–15.

³ Abbott actually had to draw on the original plates at the end of *Rise of the North Arabic Script* (1939), plates xvi–xix, in order to make some of the vowel signs visible.

copy of the Qurʾān, which is also the same Qurʾān as nineteen leaves in Paris' Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BNF) and two leaves in Doha's Museum of Islamic Art (MIA). All twenty-five folios of this Qurʾān contain a unique vocalization system that represents /a/ and /u/ with miniature red forms of *alif* and *wāw*. This system of "letter-form"⁴ vocalization signs is unattested in other Qurʾān manuscripts and corresponds with a type of vocalization which medieval sources describe as *shakl al-shiʿr*: "the marking of poetry." The subsequent discussion analyzes the features of this *shakl al-shiʿr* system and contextualizes it within the history of both this Qurʾān manuscript and the history of Arabic writing as a whole.

The OIM-BNF-MIA Qurʾān

The commonalities in size, script, and vocalization of the OIM,⁵ BNF,⁶ and MIA⁷ folios suggest that they all belonged to the same codex. They contain the following *sūras*, divided across ten groups of leaves (see Table 1). Although there are substantial gaps, the OIM fragments bookend the BNF and MIA material, including one case (section I) in which an MIA folio immediately follows a BNF folio. Each folio was once part of a bifolium, and the MIA folios have stubs. The following sections describe the common features of all the folios.

The OIM Folios

The four fragments which concern us here are Abbott's Nos. 10–13, known as OIM A6963, A6962, A6961, and A6993, respectively. They are from parchment folios, but their edges are badly torn, which makes it difficult to determine their original size. Based on the script style, Abbott dated them to the late eighth or ninth century, identifying the former pair (OIM A6963 and OIM A6962; Nos. 10 and 11) as successive folios from one copy of the Qurʾān, and the latter pair (OIM A6961 and OIM A6993; Nos. 12 and 13) as successive folios from another.⁸

She measured OIM A6963 at 25.8 × 23 cm, but estimated that the leaf was originally about 35 × 26 cm with eighteen lines of text. The next leaf, OIM A6962, has at least part of all eighteen lines. OIM A6961 and

OIM A6993 are much more badly torn than the former pair, but remnants of at least seventeen lines are visible on OIM A6961. Abbott pointed out that the length of the lines is the same across all four fragments, and for the latter pair, she went so far as to say that "comparison of the manuscript with the printed text would allow here too eighteen lines to the page, which like-wise must have measured originally about 35 × 26 cm."⁹ Yet despite acknowledging this potential for the four leaves to have had the same original size and writing area, she was reluctant to say that they were from the same codex, concluding:

The script of [No. 12] and of No. 13, belonging to the same copy of the Qurʾān, differs from that of Nos. 10–11 only in that it is a little larger and provides more space between the letters. Except for this and a little difference in the verse division marks, these four numbers might easily belong to the same copy of the Qurʾān.¹⁰

Both pairs of fragments fit neatly into an A.I script style as defined by François Déroche.¹¹ Their differences are slight, and can be explained by two different scribes working together on the same manuscript.¹² With only these small samples, Abbott likely did not have enough information to make a more precise statement on the relationship between these fragments, but comparison with the BNF and MIA leaves shows that all four do belong to the same codex. Moreover, they were indeed written by two different hands.

The BNF Folios

The nineteen parchment folios of BNF Arabe 330f¹³ make up seven discontinuous sections of the Qurʾān.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 66–67.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹¹ Déroche places this style in the second half of the eighth century, essentially in agreement with Abbott's chronology, but he also acknowledges the difficulty of dating manuscripts with A-type script styles, saying, "very few examples survive . . . no external evidence has been discovered for dating them": Déroche, *Abbasid Tradition* (1992), 35.

¹² For further discussion of scribal collaboration, see Déroche et al., *Islamic Codicology* (2015), 198–99.

¹³ BNF Arabe 330 is a modern bound book compiled from seven different manuscripts. Of interest here is the sixth manuscript, BNF Arabe 330f, comprising folios 31 to 49 from that book. Images of BNF Arabe 330 are publicly accessible from the BNF online Gallica archive: <https://archivesetmanuscrits.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cc386217> (accessed 4 October 2020). The images of BNF Arabe 330f used below are reproduced in accordance with the Bibliothèque Nationale de France's non-commercial fair use policy.

⁴ Revell, "Diacritical Dots": 180–81.

⁵ MS Chicago, Oriental Institute Museum, OIM A6962, A6963, A6961, and A6993.

⁶ MS Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, BNF Arabe 330f: folios 31–49.

⁷ MS Doha, Museum of Islamic Art, MIA.2013.27.1 and MIA.2013.27.2.

⁸ Abbott, *Rise of the North Arabic Script* (1939), 64–67.

Table 1—The ten sections of leaves of the OIM-BNF-MIA Qurʾān.

Section	Leaves	Verses in Qurʾān	Hand
A	OIM A6963; OIM A6962 (Abbott Nos. 10–11)	2:278 – 3:7	1
B	BNF Arabe 330f, F31–34	4:78 – 4:109	1
C	BNF Arabe 330f, F35–37	4:131 – 4:160	1
D	BNF Arabe 330f, F38	4:176 – 5:4	1
E	BNF Arabe 330f, F39–44	9:54 – 9:120	1 & 2
F	BNF Arabe 330f, F45–46	12:87 – 12:110	2
G	MIA.2013.27.1	18:82 – 18:96	3
H	BNF Arabe 330f, F47–48	33:35 – 33:51	2
I	BNF Arabe 330f, F49; MIA.2013.27.2	34:19 – 34:41	2
J	OIM A6993; OIM A6961 (Abbott Nos. 12–13)	42:16 – 42:36	2

Like the OIM fragments, it has eighteen lines, and its script is the A.I type.¹⁴ In *Les manuscrits du Coran*, Déroche mentions that these leaves contain letter-form vowel signs similar to those in the OIM material. He suggests to compare BNF Arabe 330f to Abbott’s Nos. 10 and 11, but he does not argue that they are from the same manuscript, nor does he mention Abbott’s Nos. 12 and 13 at all.¹⁵ It is difficult to determine a firmer connection between these folios based on the grainy plates in *Rise of the North Arabic Script* alone. In any case, the BNF leaves are generally better preserved than Abbott’s fragments, so Déroche accurately determines their original size. He measures the intact leaves at 37 × 28 cm,¹⁶ not far off from Abbott’s estimate of “about 35 × 26 cm.”

The MIA Folios¹⁷

In 2013, the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha catalogued two parchment Qurʾān folios now known as MIA.2013.27.1 and MIA.2013.27.2. These leaves have been partially digitized as part of the Qurʾān Gateway project,¹⁸ which has made it apparent that they also belong with the OIM and BNF material. Both leaves are classified as B.II script style in the Qurʾān Gateway database,¹⁹ but this designation is a mistake. Like the

OIM and BNF leaves, they are A.I type, although MIA.2013.27.1 also has some *ḥijāzī* features, as will be shown below.

Scribal Hands

Three main hands worked on the extant portions of this manuscript (see again Table 1). The first (Hand 1) wrote sections A through D, as well as the first page of section E (BNF Arabe 330f F39r). The second (Hand 2) wrote the rest of sections E, F, and H through J. The third hand (Hand 3) wrote only a single extant folio (MIA.2013.27.1), which makes up all of section G.

In general, the first hand is consistent in the forms of its letters, while the second shows more frequent variations. Three features differentiate these two hands at a glance. First, when writing consecutive *lāms*, the first hand uses nearly parallel strokes that are usually close together (Figs. 1a–c):

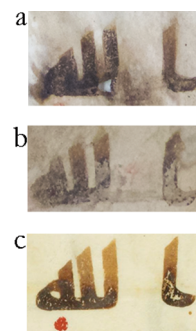


Figure 1a–c—OIM A6963v, line 8; OIM A6962r, line 5; and BNF Arabe 330f F32r, line 7.

By contrast, the second hand widely spaces *lāms*, writing them at divergent angles (Figs. 2a–c):

¹⁴ Déroche, *Manuscrits musulmans* (1983), 36–37, 65.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, I, 1:22, 65, plate VIII.

¹⁶ Folios 40–44 are torn near the bottom, and only 13–14 lines remain.

¹⁷ Images of these folios have been kindly provided by the Museum of Islamic Art, Doha, with photography credit to Mohamed Faris.

¹⁸ Changes #1827–31, *Qurʾān Gateway*, <https://info.quranguateway.org/about/> (accessed 30 November 2020).

¹⁹ For MIA.2013.27.1, see https://web.quranguateway.org/manuscripts/manuscripts_browse_search.php?R=19&SORT=&INSTITUTION_NAME=Museum+of+Islamic+Art; for MIA.2013.27.2, see https://web.quranguateway.org/manuscripts/manuscripts_browse_search.php?R=20&SORT=&INSTITUTION_NAME=Museum+of+Islamic+Art (both pages accessed 26 November 2020).

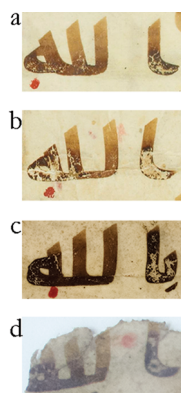


Figure 2a–d—BNF Arabe 330f F45r, line 3, F48r line 15; MIA.2013.2r, line 9; OIM A6993v, line 1.

Second, the first hand angles the arm of initial *‘ayn* slightly upwards (Figs. 3a–d)



Figure 3a–d—OIM A6962v, line 10; BNF Arabe 330f F31r, line 15, F38v, line 16, F39r, line 11.

The second hand sometimes manages to match the initial *‘ayn* of the first, but usually folds the arm further down, closer to the baseline (Figs. 4a–d):

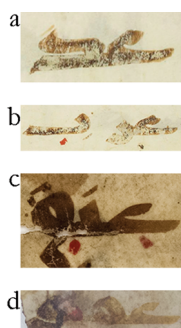


Figure 4a–d—BNF Arabe 330f F39v, line 11, F42r, line 6; MIA.2013.27.2r, line 12; OIM A6961r, line 7.

Third, the first hand has only a small serif at the top of *dāl/dhāl* (Figs. 5a–c):

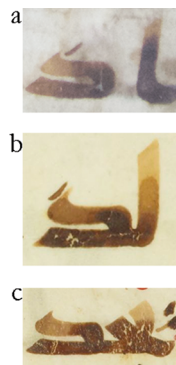


Figure 5a–c—OIM A6963r, line 11; BNF Arabe 330f F37v, line 11, F39r, line 7.

The second hand often makes the serif much more pronounced (Figs. 6a–e):

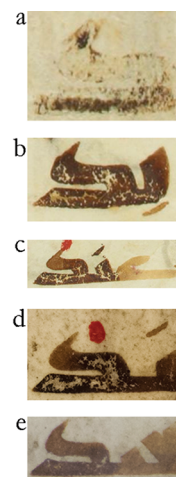


Figure 6a–e—BNF Arabe 330f F39v, line 17, F43r, line 12, F49v, line 17; MIA.2013.27.2r, line 10; OIM A6961r, line 11.

The third hand appears in only one folio, but the two largest lacunae are on either side of it, so it is possible that this hand wrote additional folios that are no longer extant. While similar to the A.I style of the first two hands, it also shows influences of an earlier *hijāzī* style, with taller ascenders that have a stronger tendency to lean rightwards. The main difference is in *alif*, which vacillates between the A.I style with a nearly vertical shaft and medium-sized lower return, and a *hijāzī* style with an oblique shaft that extends rightward past a shortened return (Fig. 7):²⁰

²⁰ See Déroche, *Les manuscrits du Coran* (1983), 35–37; George, *Rise of Islamic Calligraphy* (2010), 148–49.



Figure 7—Qurʾān 18:83–86. MIA.2013.27.2, lines 8–10.

Unfortunately, the small amount of material here is limiting. Without evidence from more folios, we cannot rule out the possibility that this folio is not a third hand, and instead is a particularly inconsistent section written by the second hand.

Besides the main scribal hands, at least one later hand restored faded sections of the *rasm* with black carbon ink. Most words have undergone some amount of this repair work. In some cases, the restorer only retraced parts of letters, and it is often possible to see the contrast where the original strokes end and those of the restoration begin.²¹ In other cases, the restorer overwrote extensive passages, including some entire pages.²² The carbon ink had a less permanent quality than the original ink, which presumably is a metal-gallic compound.²³ As such, while the original ink did fade considerably, the later ink is often completely rubbed off, leaving only the outline of words behind (Fig. 8):

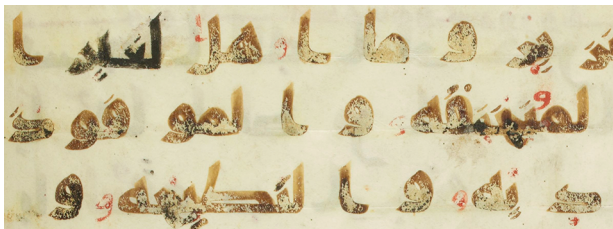


Figure 8—Later carbon ink overwritten on the original metal-gallic ink. BNF Arabe 330f F38v, lines 2–4.

Further evidence of later modification comes in the latter sections of the manuscript (H, I, and J), where a later hand has inserted *alif* to amend defective spellings of medial /ā/. The first instance of this phenomenon is in Qurʾān 33:35, where someone inserted *alif*s into

seven words with medial /ā/.²⁴ I suspect that the reader was frustrated by the numerous defective spellings in this verse, and became convinced that it was acceptable to amend the *rasm* from that point onwards. These inserted *alif*s do not match the script style of the rest of the text, but some are similar to the miniature *alif* letter-form vocalization signs found throughout the manuscript. The same insertion occurs in Qurʾān 33:49 and 33:50, with the words *sarāḥ*²⁵, *azwājaka*, and *azwājibimu*, then again with *al-samāwāt* in Qurʾān 34:22 and 34:24.²⁶ It also appears in *andād*²⁷ in Qurʾān 34:33. On the same leaf, for a defective spelling of *qāla* in Qurʾān 34:32, someone erased the sublinear hook of the *lām* so that it resembles an *alif*, then inserted an additional *lām* to create the appearance of a *plene* spelling.²⁷ Finally, in Qurʾān 42:17 and Qurʾān 42:33, a later hand amended the defective spellings of *al-mizāna* and *rawākida* (Figs. 9a–b).²⁸

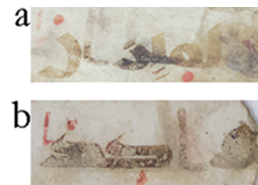


Figure 9a–b—Note the similarity between the full inserted *alif*s and the miniature *alif* vocalization signs. OIM A6993r, line 4; OIM A6961v, line 10.

The variations in the styles of the inserted *alif*s suggest that this later hand was not trained in calligraphy. Furthermore, while the *plene* spelling of medial /ā/ is common in medieval personal-use Qurʾāns, it is less common in model codices.²⁹ As such, these *alif*s suggest that an unprofessional hand—probably an owner of the codex—modified it after professional scribes produced it. This owner may have been the same person who restored the *rasm* with carbon ink.

²⁴ BNF Arabe 330f F47r, lines: 10, *al-ṣābirāt*; 12, *al-muṣaddiqāt* and *al-ṣāʾimīn*; 13, *al-ṣāʾimāt* and *al-ḥāfiẓīn*; 14, *al-dhākīrīn*; and 15, *al-dhākīrāt*.

²⁵ Another instance of this “correction” to *sarāḥ*²⁵ appears in BNF Arabe 330f F48r, line 14.

²⁶ BNF Arabe 330f F49r, lines 11 and 18.

²⁷ Change #1830 and 1831, *Qurʾān Gateway*, <https://info.qurangateway.org/> (accessed 29 September 2019). MIA.2013.27.2r, lines 3 and 10.

²⁸ OIM A6993r, line 4 and OIM A6961v, line 10.

²⁹ Khan, “Standardisation and Variation” (1990): 57; George, *Rise of Islamic Calligraphy* (2010), 31–32.

²¹ This phenomenon is clearest on BNF Arabe 330f F38r.

²² For example, see BNF Arabe 330f F31r, F36v, F39v, F40r, F41v, F43v, F46r, F47r, F49r; and MIA.2013.27.2v.

²³ Déroche et al., *Islamic Codicology* (2015), 113–14.

Ornamentation and Division

All twenty-five leaves regularly separate verses with three to five oblique strokes. There are also ornamental dividers for groups of ten verses throughout the text, some of which are superimposed on the oblique dividing strokes.³⁰ There are four types of dividers that vary across the ten groups of folios (except in section D, which has none).³¹ First, dark brown or black concentric rings, connected by small strokes, appear in sections B, C, E, and G (Figs. 10a–g):



Figure 10a–g—BNF Arabe 330f F31r, F32v, F34r, F35r, F45r, F46r; and MIA.2013.27.1v. Note the use of *qāf* as an abjad numeral to mark groups of 100 verses.

Second, dark green diamonds, with circled or dotted corners, occur in section E. They include one instance of a stylized trapezoid (Figs. 11a–d)



Figure 11a–d—BNF Arabe 330f F39v, F40v, F42r, and F43v.

Third, lighter green, bubbly rosettes appear in sections H, I, and J, spanning the BNF, MIA, and OIM folios (Figs. 12a–g):

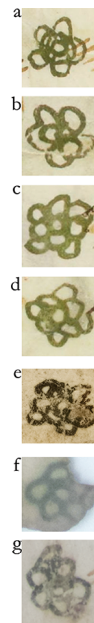


Figure 12a–g—BNF Arabe 330f F48r, F48v, F49r, F49v; MIA.2013.27.2v; OIM A6993v, and OIM A6961v.

Finally, section A contains only one divider. It is more intricate than the others, probably because it marks the 280th verse of *al-Baqara* and is the last ten-verse division in that chapter. It is another green rosette, this time with many more “petals,” and it includes a central red dot with a circular red outline (Fig. 13):

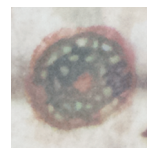


Figure 13—OIM A6963r.

The different styles of ten-verse dividers do not correlate to the sections of the main scribal hands, suggesting that the original scribes themselves did not add them. The regular appearance of verse dividers superimposed on the earlier layer of verse-dividing slashes reinforces this conclusion. Instead, someone else ornamented this Qur’ān after the *rasm* was complete, and the variation in the styles of the dividers suggests that this ornamentor did not have strict guidelines for their work. At the same time, the groups of dividers crosscut the OIM, BNF, and MIA leaves, indicating that they

³⁰ For example, OIM A6963r; BNF Arabe 330f F32v and F48r.

³¹ See Déroche, *Les manuscrits du Coran* (1983), 29–31, 65. Déroche classifies the dividers in BNF Arabe 330f as his I.A.I and A.B.I decoration types.

were ornamented together, and providing further evidence that they all belong to the same Qurʾān.

Just two of the twenty-five leaves contain the beginning of a *sūra*: OIM A6962v (section A) and BNF Arabe 330f F38r (section D). Both start with a header, written in red ink by a later hand, giving the title and number of verses of that *sūra*. The original scribes did not intentionally leave space for these headers. This type of heading is a common feature in early Qurʾāns,³² and it is an additional similarity between the OIM and BNF folios (Figs. 14–15):



Figure 14—Heading for *sūra* 3 (*al-Imrān*). OIM A6962v, line 2.



Figure 15—Heading for *sūra* 5 (*al-Māʿida*). BNF Arabe 330f F38r, line 2.

Below its header, OIM A6962 also has an ornamental band (Fig. 16), which Abbott described in this way:

The motif here is a simple one, consisting of green X's with four red dots around their centers, alternating with green lozenges containing red and green dots and accompanied by four red semicircles apiece, one projecting from each side. Green scrolls connect these successive elements.

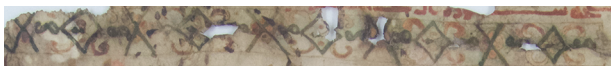


Figure 16—OIM A6962v, line 1.

This band's colors are consistent with the ornamentation of the other folios. In contrast to the ruled lines of the main text, the upper and lower edges of this band are not straight, and the ink has bled through the parchment. These details indicate that the original scribes did not add the band, and it is likely the work of someone who was not professionally trained in ornamenting codices.

Diacritics

All twenty-five leaves contain thin slashes as diacritic marks on consonants. There are also dots and thicker strokes, added later in darker black ink along with the restoration of the *rasm*. These heavier marks sometimes

overlap the earlier slashes and even the red vowel dots. See, for example, Figure 17, from the BNF material:



Figure 17—Qurʾān 4:83. Heavy strokes overlap the red dots, especially in the third line. BNF Arabe 330f F31v, lines 3–5.

The same phenomenon occurs in the OIM and MIA leaves (Figs. 18–19):



Figure 18—Qurʾān 2:279–80. A thick diacritic stroke overlaps the red dot above the *nūn* in *fa-nazirat*^m. Also compare the original thin strokes on the *yāʾ* with the later heavier strokes of the *sin* in *maysarat*^m. OIM A6963r, lines 5–6.



Figure 19—Qurʾān 18:86–87. Heavy diacritic strokes overlap the vowel dot on the *yāʾ* of *fihimū* at the beginning of the second line. Note also how the *mīm* of *zalama* has been repaired in dark ink, and now overlaps the letter-form *alif* vowel sign at the end of the line. MIA.2013.27.1r, lines 14–15.

The original light diacritic strokes include the early practice of marking *fāʾ* with a single sublinear stroke and *qāf* with a single supralinear stroke.³³ By contrast, the heavier marks use a single supralinear stroke or dot for *fāʾ* and a pair of supralinear strokes or dots for *qāf*.³⁴ Both diacritic practices often occur together, so some *qāfs* have a light supralinear stroke along with a pair of heavier strokes or dots, while some *fāʾs* have a

³³ Abbott, *Rise of the North Arabic Script* (1939), 65; Déroche, *Les manuscrits du Coran* (1983), 65. A later hand also seems to have marked *sin* with three sublinear strokes or dots. For the evolution of consonantal diacritic dots, see Revell, “Diacritical Dots” (1975); Déroche et al., *Islamic Codicology* (2015), 220–21; and Witkam, “The Neglect Neglected” (2015).

³⁴ For example, OIM A6963r, lines 8 and 9.

³² Déroche et al., *Islamic Codicology* (2015), 115–16.

sublinear stroke and a heavier supralinear stroke or dot (Fig. 20):³⁵

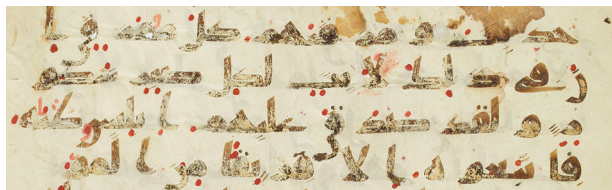


Figure 20—Qurʾān 34:19–20, *qāf* with a single supralinear stroke amended with two dots. The *fāʾ* at the beginning of the last line has also been amended by a single supralinear dot, but its original sublinear stroke remains. BNF Arabe 330f F49r, lines 2–5.

These inconsistencies show that diacritic marks were added to the manuscript more than once, including by people who had different ways of distinguishing *fāʾ* from *qāf*. It is highly likely that multiple people owned this Qurʾān, and each one added new diacritic marks to suit their needs as orthographic standards changed over time. This alteration follows the general trajectory of diacritic conventions for *qāf* and *fāʾ*, as eighth-century writers usually used a supralinear dot for *qāf* and a sublinear dot for *fāʾ*, while the use of two dots for *qāf* and a dot above for *fāʾ* appears from the ninth century onwards.³⁶ While it is not clear exactly how much later the heavier marks were added, this manuscript straddles the transition period between these two diacritic conventions.

There are no diacritic signs for *sukūn*, *waṣl*, *tashdīd*, or *takhfīf*, but a red dot may indicate *hamza*.³⁷ A red semicircle, placed either above (with /a/ and /u/) or below (with /i/) a letter, also represents *hamza*.³⁸ Based on a comparison of ink shades, these semicircles were added at the same time as the letter-form vocalization

³⁵ Déroche et al. (*Islamic Codicology* [2015], 220–24; esp. 221 n. 67) cite both BNF Arabe 330f and the OIM fragments as examples of this old diacritical practice for distinguishing *fāʾ* and *qāf*, but they do not mention them in their discussion of the vowel points.

³⁶ Gruendler, “Arabic Script,” (2001), 140. Note that *maghrebī* writers retained the older convention even after the double dot for *qāf* became standard elsewhere.

³⁷ Abbott, *Rise of the North Arabic Script* (1939), 40, 67. See George, “Coloured Dots” (2015): 14–15.

³⁸ Abbott suggested that this semicircle also represents *shadda* once, on *yudārra* (“he is harmed”) in Qurʾān 2:282 (OIM A6963v, line 12). I have not found such usage in the rest of this Qurʾān, but it is attested in other manuscripts. See Abbott, *Rise of the North Arabic Script* (1939), 65; and Mark Muchlhaeusler, “Additional Reading Marks” (2016).

signs. They sometimes reinforce red dots that were already present (Figs. 21–22):



Figure 21—Qurʾān 4:91–92, with the *hamzas* in *muʾmin* marked with both a red dot and a red semicircle. BNF Arabe 330f F32v, lines 7–9.



Figure 22—*Malāʾikatihū* (Qurʾān 2:285), with sublinear semicircle indicating *hamza*. OIM A6962r, line 9.

Recitation Tradition

Abbott pointed out that OIM A6963 and OIM A6962 (section A) extend the vocalization of the pronominal suffixes *-kum* and *-hum* to *-kumū* and *-humū*.³⁹ This phenomenon occurs regularly in OIM A6993 (section I) and throughout the BNF and MIA folios (Figs. 23–25).



Figure 23—*Rabbihim* from Qurʾān 42:22, extended to [*ra*]bbihimū (OIM A6993v, line 9).



Figure 24—*Lakum* from Qurʾān 34:30, extended to *lakumū* (BNF Arabe 330f F49v, line 12).



Figure 25—*ʾAlaykum* from Qurʾān 18:83, extended to *ʾalaykumū* (MIA.2013.27.1r, line 8).

Additionally, all of the leaves consistently indicate a lack of vowel harmony on words that end with the

³⁹ Abbott, *Rise of the North Arabic Script* (1939), 65. See Abū ʿAmr al-Dānī, *Kitāb Al-Taysīr Fī al-Qirāʾāt al-Sabʿ* (1930), 19; Abū ʿAmr al-Dānī, *Al-Muḥkam Fī Naṭq al-Maṣāḥif*, (1960), 4b. Al-Dānī ascribes this practice to the canonical readings of Mecca and Medina. See also, George, “Coloured Dots” (2015): 11; Yasin Dutton, “Red Dots, Green Dots, Yellow Dots and Blue” (1999): 116, 121–22.

masculine singular pronominal suffix,⁴⁰ for example: *kutubihū wa-rusulihū* instead of *kutubihī wa-rusulihī* (Qurʾān 2:285; OIM A6962r, line 9), *fiḥū ikhtilāf^{an}* instead of *fiḥi-khtilāf^{an}* (Qurʾān 4:82; BNF Arabe 330f F31r, lines 16–17), and *ʿalayhu* instead of *ʿalayhi* (Qurʾān 18:81, MIA.2013.27.1r, line 6).⁴¹ The manuscript contains a few other variations,⁴² including an apparently regular shift of the /ay/ diphthong to /ī/,⁴³ or at least the regular appearance of a red dot below *yāʾ* in positions where an /ay/ diphthong would be expected. This marking may be a representation of *imāla* affecting the *fatha* of these diphthongs, approximating a pronunciation closer to /e/. This feature appears to be systematic, but I have not examined every instance, and it is beyond the scope of this paper to analyze it more fully within the traditions of *qiraʾāt*. Suffice it to say that the consistent appearance of these variants across the OIM, BNF, and MIA material is further evidence that they all belong to the same copy of the Qurʾān.

Vocalization

All of the leaves are frequently, if not fully, vocalized, using a combination of red dots and miniature red letter-form signs in the shape of *alif* and *wāw*. The red dots follow the standard arrangement, with a supralinear dot for /a/, a sublinear dot for /i/, and an intralinear dot for /u/. This last dot is sometimes superimposed on the *rasm*, especially for internal vowels. Two dots indicate *tanwīn*, usually in the same position as their non-nūnated counterparts. In general, the dots are a more uniform shade of red than the letter-form signs, and they have not faded as much. By contrast, the letter-form signs have multiple lighter red or red-orange hues. These differences indicate the use of various thinner red ink solutions in the application of the letter-form signs (Fig. 26).⁴⁴



Figure 26—Qurʾān 2:282. Note the different shades of the dots and letter-form signs. OIM A6963v, lines 4–6.

As for the signs themselves, a miniature *alif*, usually placed above a letter, represents /a/. Similarly, miniature *wāw* represents /u/. This latter sign can appear above a letter, but it often occurs intralinearly on the left when there is enough space to avoid overlapping the *rasm*. It may also appear superimposed on a red dot, such that the dot fills the miniature *wāw*'s open counter. Conspicuously, there is no evidence of a miniature *yāʾ* sign to mark /i/. The letter-form signs never contradict the red dots, and most appear to “reinforce”⁴⁵ dots that were already present. Only a few occur without any accompanying dots, and they never occur with *tanwīn*, but otherwise they can indicate internal vowels, final vowels, and *iʿrābī* case vowels.

It is difficult to determine precise numbers for the occurrences of each vowel dot and letter-form sign, as many have faded or rubbed off, but it is possible to make some estimations. The following ratios are broadly consistent across the entire manuscript. Of the vowels that are marked,⁴⁶ 80–90% have a red dot alone. Miniature letter-form signs occur with 10–20% of marked vowels. 85–90% of miniature letter-form signs occur reinforcing a red dot. Only 1–3% of marked vowels have a letter-form sign alone. The letter-form sign for /u/ appears roughly twice as often as the sign for /a/. It does not seem that there was a systematic motivation for the vocalizer who added these signs, which occur in almost every orthographic and grammatical context, although they are practically absent on long vowels. They are also clearly not the same as another medieval orthographic practice that involved the insertion of full red *alifs* to amend defective spellings of medial /ā/.⁴⁷ Indeed, these letter-form signs do not change the *rasm* at all. Instead, they represent vowels in exactly the same way as the red dots, and they do not inherently indicate vowel length. The only discernible clue to this vocalizer's motivations is the occurrence of the miniature *wāw* sign

⁴⁰ On this phenomenon, see Éléonore Cellard, “La vocalisation des manuscrits coraniques” (2015); Marijn Van Putten, “Arabe 334a” (2019).

⁴¹ This phenomenon also occurs with the dual pronominal suffix, which appears as *fiḥumā* in BNF Arabe 330f F49r, line 13.

⁴² Other differences include a representation of *imāla* in *jāʾa* (he came/brought) with a red dot below (as if *jīʾa*) (BNF Arabe 330f F46v, lines 3 and 18); and a change of *nazzala* and *anzala* to *nuzila* and *unzila* in Qurʾān 4:136 (BNF Arabe 330f F35v, lines 5–6).

⁴³ For example, BNF Arabe 330f F31v, lines 4 and 5; F32r, lines 14 and 17; F32v, line 6; F33r, lines 1 and 8; F34r, line 16; F46v, line 2; and MIA.2013.1r, line 8.

⁴⁴ Abbott, *Rise of the North Arabic Script* (1939), 65.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Excluding *tanwīn*.

⁴⁷ George, “Coloured Dots” (2015): 11; Khan, “Standardisation and Variation” (1990): 57.

approximately twice as often as the *alif* sign. This tendency runs counter to the red dots in the text, which mark /a/ much more often than /u/ or /i/, largely due to the more frequent occurrence of /a/ in Arabic phonology. Most likely, the letter-form vocalizer recognized /a/ as a sort of “default” vowel and needed more orthoepic reminders for the comparatively infrequent /u/.

The examples presented in Figures 27 through 43 (following page) represent different contexts in which the signs appear. Here we see short medial vowels (Figs. 27–30), long vowels (Fig. 31⁴⁸), and final vowels (both *iʿrābī*, Figs. 32–35, and non-*iʿrābī*, Figs. 36–37). There is also significant variation in the shapes of the miniature *alifs* and *wāws*. The *alif* signs fluctuate in their height, curve, and the length of their right-hand hooks (Figs. 38–40). Meanwhile, the *wāw* signs reflect different degrees of angular tails and open counters. The openness of the counter is often determined by whether or not the sign is superimposed on a red dot (Figs. 41–43).

The uniform ink shade of the red dots and their general tendency not to fade suggests that they were added to the text as part of a single scribal operation. It is impossible to say if the same scribe(s) who wrote the consonantal text also added the red dots, but whoever added them did so systematically and deliberately with a single solution of red ink. By contrast, the variation in the red shades of the letter-form signs and their higher tendency to fade suggests that a later user added them at several different times, using whatever red ink solutions they had on hand. Most likely, someone acquired this Qurʾān after specialists had already written the *rasm* and applied the initial red dots, and then that person added the letter-form signs in the course of personal use. This use must have involved multiple reading sessions—perhaps split across months, or even years—which further explains why there is so much variation in inks and shapes of the letter-form signs. This situation also explains why the signs are not used systematically for any particular vowel context: the user was not a trained scribe, and simply added a sign whenever they wanted a reminder. For this user, in comparison to the red dots, the letter-form signs must have been more intuitively linked to the phonemes that they indicated, and thus facilitated greater ease of reading.

⁴⁸ This is the only instance I could find in which a miniature letter-form sign clearly marks a long vowel.

The Marking of Poetry

The red-dot vocalization system was the standard for Qurʾān manuscripts from the early eighth until the late tenth or eleventh century.⁴⁹ However, it proved overly cumbersome for non-Qurʾānic writing, so supposedly the grammarian al-Khalil ibn Aḥmad (d. 786/791) invented a new system of vocalization signs using miniature versions of *alif*, *wāw*, and *yāʾ*. According to Abbott, al-Khalil’s system was more convenient than the red dots, so it spread quickly across non-Qurʾānic genres.⁵⁰

Abbott also suggested that al-Khalil’s signs evolved into the modern Arabic vowel signs,⁵¹ and argued that the four OIM fragments support this interpretation, writing: “The appearance of *alif* and *w* [*sic*] thus used confirms the theory that the modern *fatḥah*, *ḍammah*, and (by inference) *kasrah* have their origins in the letters *alif*, *w*, and *y* respectively.”⁵² She based this conclusion on the work of the eleventh-century *tajwīd* scholar Abū ‘Amr al-Dānī (d. 1053),⁵³ who recorded a report about al-Khalil in his *al-Muḥkam fī Naqṭ al-Masāḥif* (*The Rules for Pointing the Codices*):

Abū al-Ḥasan ibn Kaysān said: Muḥammad ibn Yazīd said: The marking which is in books is from the work of al-Khalil, and it is taken from the forms of the letters, so the *ḍamma* is a small-form *wāw*, above the letter in order to not be confused with a written *wāw*. Then the *kasra* is *yāʾ* below the letter, and *fatḥa* is a slanted *alif* above the letter.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ And even later, in some places. See Déroche, “Manuscripts of the Qurʾān” (2003); Déroche et al., *Islamic Codicology* (2015), 222–23.

⁵⁰ Abbott, *Studies in Arabic Literary Papyri*, vol. III (1972), 7–9. See also, Revell, “Diacritical Dots” (1975): 180–81; Talmon, *Arabic Grammar in Its Formative Age* (1997), 41–42; Versteegh, *Arabic Language* (2014), 64.

⁵¹ If this reconstruction is correct, then al-Khalil’s letter-form signs must have morphed into the oblique strokes for *fatḥa* and *kasra* by the mid-ninth century at the latest, as modern vocalization signs are attested in non-Qurʾānic manuscripts from that time onwards. See Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy* (2006), 145–47; Gacek, *Arabic Manuscripts* (2009), 289–90; Abbott, *Arabic Literary Papyri III* (1972), 11.

⁵² Abbott, *Rise of the North Arabic Script* (1939), 65. Abbott, *Arabic Literary Papyri III* (1972), 7–9.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 7, nn. 49 and 50. See also Abbott, *Rise of the North Arabic Script* (1939), 39.

⁵⁴ al-Dānī, *Al-Muḥkam Fī Naqṭ al-Masāḥif* (1960), 4a.

قال أبو الحسن بن كيسان، قال محمد بن يزيد: الشكل الذي في الكتب [من] عمل الخليل. وهو مأخوذ من صور الحروف. فالضمة واو صغيرة الصورة في أعلى الحرف، لنلا تلتبس بالواو المكتوبة. والكسرة ياء تحت الحرف. والفتحة ألف مبطوحة فوق الحرف.



Figure 27—Miniature *alif* marking short medial /a/ (*masanā wa-ablanā*; Qur'an 12:88). BNF Arabe 330f F45r, line 5.



Figure 28—Miniature *wāw* marking short medial /u/ (*man yuṭīʿi*; Qur'an 4:80). BNF Arabe 330f F31r, line 7.



Figure 29—Miniature *alif* marking short medial /a/, reinforcing a red dot (*nafsaka*; Qur'an 4:84). BNF Arabe 330f F31v, line 6.



Figure 30—Miniature *wāw* marking short medial /u/, reinforcing a red dot (*al-mutaṣaddiqina*; Qur'an 12:88). BNF Arabe 330f F45r, line 8.

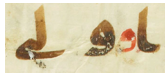


Figure 31—Miniature *wāw* with a full *wāw* marking long medial /ū/, reinforcing a red dot (*ālī*; Qur'an 4:83). BNF Arabe 330f F31v, line 2.



Figure 32—Miniature *alif* marking case vowel /a/, reinforcing a red dot (*al-rasūla*; Qur'an 4:80). BNF Arabe 330f F31r, line 8.



Figure 33—Miniature *alif* marking case vowel /a/ ([*yū*]sufā; with the word split across two folios; Qur'an 12:87). BNF Arabe 330f F45r, line 1.



Figure 34—Miniature *wāw* marking a verbal mood with /u/, reinforcing a red dot (*taqūlu*; Qur'an 4:81). BNF Arabe 330f F31r, line 12.



Figure 35—Miniature *wāw* marking case vowel /u/ (*yūsufu*; Qur'an 12:90). BNF Arabe 330f F45r, line 11.



Figure 36—Miniature *alif* marking non-*irābī* final /a/, reinforcing a red dot (*la-anta*; Qur'an 12:90). BNF Arabe 330f F45r, line 11.

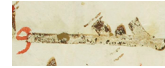


Figure 37—Miniature *wāw* marking final /u/ (*haythu*; Qur'an 4:91). BNF Arabe 330f F32v, line 5.

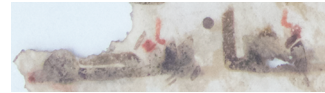


Figure 38—OIM A6963v, line 10.



Figure 39—BNF Arabe 330f F37v, line 9.



Figure 40—MIA.2013.27.1r, lines 10-11.



Figure 41—OIM A6963v, lines 5-6.



Figure 42—BNF Arabe 330f 42r, lines 5-7.



Figure 43—MIA.2013.27.1r, lines 16-17.

This description specifies that the system of letter-form vocalization signs is for books (*kutub*), in contrast to Qurʾāns, which al-Dānī usually calls codices (*maṣāḥif*). The designation of *yāʾ* as the shape of *kasra* then seems to allude to an earlier stage of the Arabic vocalization system, prior to its final form, which now represents *kasra* with an oblique stroke. Slightly later, al-Dānī refers to this letter-form system as *shakl al-shiʿr*, “the marking of poetry.” He first relays a quotation from Abū al-Ḥusayn ibn al-Munādī, the author of another book on pointing:

He said: If you want to make the pointing rounded, there is no problem with that. If you want to make some of it rounded, and some of it with *shakl al-shiʿr*, then there is no harm in that, provided that you give the letters which are different their correct requirements. He said: Some scribes do not change the original *rasm* of the codex, but if they come upon a letter for which they know the *naḡṭ* or the *shakl* is not correct, then they put whatever they prefer from the various readings, noting the different colors.⁵⁵ All of this occurs in the codices.⁵⁶

But then al-Dānī adds further commentary, saying:

[It is better] to refrain from the use of *shakl al-shiʿr*—which is the marking that is in books, that al-Khalīl invented—in mosque codices from the first, original, most correct versions, and others besides them; imitating, among the successors, those who began the pointing, and continuing in agreement with the predecessors.⁵⁷

Then later, after explaining how the red dots represent each vowel, he also writes:

⁵⁵ Some versions of the red-dot system represented variant readings and additional orthoepic features with multiple colors of dots. See Dutton, “Red Dots, Green Dots (Part I)” (1999) and “Red Dots, Green Dots (Part II)” (2000).

⁵⁶ al-Dānī, *Al-Muḥkam Fī Naḡṭ al-Maṣāḥif* (1960), 11a.

وإن شئت أن تجعل النقط مدوّراً فلا بأس بذلك. وإن جعلت بعضه مدوّراً، وبعضه بشكل الشعر فغير ضائر، بعد أن تعطي الحروف ذوات الاختلاف حقوقها. قال: وكان بعض الكتّاب لا يغيّر رسم المصحف الأول، وإذا مر بحرف يعلم أن النقط والشكل لا يضبطه كتب ما يريد من القراءات المختلفة تعليقاً بألوان مختلفة. وهذا كله موجود في المصاحف.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

وترك استعمال شكل الشعر، وهو الشكل الذي في الكتب الذي اخترعه الخليل، في المصاحف الجامعة من الأمهات وغيرها أولى وأحق، اقتداءً بمن ابتداءً النقط من التابعين، واتباعاً للأئمة السالفين.

We only make the full vowels with rounded points according to a single form, an agreed shape—and we do not make the *fatha* a reclined *alif*, nor the *kasra* a recurved *yāʾ*, nor the *ḍamma* a small *wāw*—according to the practice of the previous people of Arabic. So, conceal the adoption [of signs] from these three letters, as evidence of that: following, among ourselves, the practice of those among the scholars of the past who began the pointing, in the presence of the companions.⁵⁸

Here al-Dānī provides a clearer picture of what he believes were the original signs of *shakl al-shiʿr*: an inclined *alif*, a small *wāw*, and a *yāʾ mardūda*. In contrast to al-Munādī, he also discourages the use of these signs in publicly-visible copies of the Qurʾān. He emphasizes that abstention from *shakl al-shiʿr* demonstrates continuity with the “people of Arabic” and “scholars of the past” who first utilized vowel pointing. These scholars apparently lived among the companions of Muḥammad, and al-Dānī may be alluding to Abū al-Aswad al-Duʿālī (d. 689), an early grammarian whom both he and other medieval writers credit with the invention of the red-dot vocalization system.⁵⁹

The system of miniature *alif* and *wāw* signs in the OIM-BNF-MIA Qurʾān appears to be the *shakl al-shiʿr* that Ibn Yazīd, al-Munādī, and al-Dānī describe. However, while the system in this Qurʾān is indeed based on the forms of letters, there is no *yāʾ*-shaped sign for *kasra*, and whenever space allows, the miniature *wāw* is placed on the left, rather than above. These details deviate from the medieval descriptions, but Abbott offers a potential explanation: these signs represent a transition period in the history of Arabic vocalization, at a time when some people were experimenting with new systems to replace the red dots in their Qurʾān codices.⁶⁰ Such a transition period would have been during roughly

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 20b.

وإنما جعلنا المشيعات نقطاً مدوّرة على هيئة واحدة، وصورة متفقّة، ولم نجعل الفتحة ألفاً مُضَجَّعَةً، والكسرة ياءً مردودة، والضمّة واواً صُغْرَى، على ذهب إليه سلف أهل العربية، إذ كُنْ مأخوذاتٍ من هذه الحروف الثلاثة دلالةً على ذلك، اقتداءً منا بفعل من ابتداءً النقط من علماء السلف، بحضور الصحابة.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 2b–3a; Abbott, *Arabic Literary Papyri III* (1972), 3–4; Versteegh, *Arabic Grammar and Qurʾanic Exegesis* (1993), 30; George, “Coloured Dots (Part I)” (2015), 5–7.

⁶⁰ Abbott, *Rise of the North Arabic Script* (1939), 65; Abbott, *Arabic Literary Papyri III* (1972), 9. See also Gruendler, “Arabic Script” (2001), 140.

the ninth century,⁶¹ prior to the introduction of the modern vowel signs to Qurʾāns. There was likely some variation in the first applications of *shakl al-shiʿr*, and one variant may have more closely matched Abbott’s inference and al-Dānī’s description of al-Khalīl’s three vowel signs.⁶² Either way, al-Dānī’s report probably reflects a homogenized vision of the *shakl al-shiʿr*, based on his eleventh-century understanding of this ninth-century transition period. By contrast, the vocalizer of the OIM-BNF-MIA Qurʾān used a specific stage or variant of the system, which apparently had no sign for *kasra*.

It must be reiterated that this codex is the only known Qurʾān manuscript in which *shakl al-shiʿr* vocalization appears, and this apparent dearth of sources complicates any attempt to extrapolate broader conclusions.⁶³ We therefore must ask the question: did any system of letter-form vocalization actually exist outside of this codex, or is the story of al-Khalīl and the *shakl al-shiʿr* just a medieval etiological explanation for the modern vocalization signs? It is impossible to know from this manuscript alone. Nevertheless, even if this Qurʾān is wholly anomalous, then it is an anomaly that arose in the context of

a transition period for Qurʾānic vocalization, just before the modern Arabic vowel signs began replacing the red dots.

Conclusion

As far as I am aware, OIM A6963, OIM A6962, OIM A6961, OIM A6993, BNF Arabe 330f, MIA.2013.27.1, and MIA.2013.27.2 are the only Qurʾān folios vocalized with the *shakl al-shiʿr* system of signs (Figs. 44–55, following two pages), and it is now clear that they all belong to the same codex. The paleography of this codex suggests that at least two professional scribes produced its consonantal text in the late eighth or ninth century, and they likely added red-dot vocalization at the same time. Then at least one person (though likely several people) altered the codex throughout its lifetime, modifying it to facilitate their personal use of the text. These modifications included: restoring damaged parts of the *rasm*, inserting *alif*s for medial /ā/, decorating with ten-verse dividers and ornamental bands, adding red *sūra* headings, updating the diacritic system to align with newer standards, recoloring some of the red dots, and applying *shakl al-shiʿr* for *a*- and *u*-vowels. Most likely, these people were owners of the codex, but we have an incomplete picture of who could have accessed this manuscript, where they would have done so, and how that situation could have changed over time. Due to the disparate nature of the extant folios, it may ultimately be impossible to recover such socio-historical context.⁶⁴

The letter-form vowel signs in this Qurʾān are identifiable with *shakl al-shiʿr*, a medieval vocalization system which al-Dānī attributes to al-Khalīl. The addition of *shakl al-shiʿr* to this Qurʾān may have technically contradicted a tradition of exclusively using the red dots for “Qurʾānic” vocalization, but that practice did not stop the later vocalizer. In fact, they were likely among the first people to vocalize a Qurʾān codex with new vowel signs, participating in the early stages of the transition from red dots to modern vocalization in Qurʾān manuscripts.

The lack of a distinct *shakl al-shiʿr* sign for /i/ in the OIM-BNF-MIA Qurʾān throws doubt on the idea that the modern *kasra* evolved from a letter-form *yāʾ* sign. Abbott and al-Dānī both assumed that the original system had a miniature sublinear *yāʾ*, but such a sign is absent in the only clear extant example of *shakl al-shiʿr*. Perhaps the user who added this *shakl al-shiʿr* finished marking *a*- and *u*-vowels, but then ran out of time before they could reinforce the *i*-vowels; or perhaps they

⁶¹ In his *Kitāb al-Maṣāḥif*, Ibn Abī Dāwūd (d. 929) transmits a report on vocalization from Abū Ḥātim al-Sijistānī (d. 869), who describes the red-dot vocalization system but makes no mention of *shakl al-shiʿr*. If this report is authentic to the ninth century, then the *shakl al-shiʿr* may not yet have been invented during al-Sijistānī’s lifetime, or he may not have been aware of it. Alternatively, he may have considered it a “non-Qurʾānic” system, and thus did not include it in a report about vocalizing the Qurʾān. See Abī Bakr Ibn Abī Dāwūd, *Kitāb al-Maṣāḥif* (2002), 332–38.

⁶² See Abbott, *Rise of the North Arabic Script* (1939), 39, 65; al-Dānī, *Al-Muḥkam Fī Naḡt al-Maṣāḥif* (1960), 4a, 11a, 20b.

⁶³ Not only are there no other known Qurʾān manuscripts with the *shakl al-shiʿr*, it is not even clear that the system was ever used in non-Qurʾānic manuscripts. Abbott gives examples of several early ninth-century literary texts with what she calls “letter signs,” “small-letter vowels,” or “vowel symbols” (Abbott, *Studies in Arabic Literary Papyri III* [1972], 9, 11), but as far as I can tell, these manuscripts have the modern Arabic vowel signs. See also Abbott, *Studies in Arabic Literary Papyri*, vol. I (1957), document 1, and Abbott, *Studies in Arabic Literary Papyri*, vol. II (1967), documents 2, 6, 12, 13. George notes that “these signs are solely attested in secular documents for the third/ninth century onwards,” but he refers to several manuscripts with the modern signs; George, “Coloured Dots (Part I)” (2015), 13–14 and n. 79. Geoffrey Khan describes sporadic modern signs in the Arabic papyri documents of the Khalili Collection, which likewise lack *shakl al-shiʿr* vocalization (*Arabic Papyri* [1992], 43–44). The Leiden University Library’s manuscript of Abū ‘Ubayd al-Qāsim’s *Gharīb al-Ḥadīth* (Cod. 298 Warner), part of which is dated to 866, has completely modern vowel signs. See Wright, ed., *Facsimiles of Manuscripts* (1875), plate 6; Witkam, “The Neglect Neglected” (2015), 383–84.

⁶⁴ For a discussion on the role of social context in codicological studies, see Akkerman, “Bohra Manuscript Treasury” (2019).



Figure 44—OIM A6963 recto (Abbott No. 10).



Figure 47—OIM A6962 verso (Abbott No. 11).



Figure 45—OIM A6963 verso (Abbott No. 10).



Figure 48—OIM A6993 recto (Abbott No. 12).



Figure 46—OIM A6962 recto (Abbott No. 11).



Figure 49—OIM A6993 verso (Abbott No. 12).



Figure 50—OIM A6961 recto (Abbott No. 13).



Figure 53—MIA.2013.27.1 verso.



Figure 51—OIM A6961 verso (Abbott No. 13).



Figure 54—MIA.2013.27.2 recto.



Figure 52—MIA.2013.27.1 recto.



Figure 55—MIA.2013.27.2 verso.

never learned the full version of the system in the first place. If so, then this two-sign *shakl al-shi'r* might be idiosyncratic to them. In any case, the lack of evidence for *shakl al-shi'r* with three unique signs does not necessarily mean that it did not exist—medieval scholars certainly believed that it did—but it does mean we cannot confidently say that the modern *kasra* sign evolved from the letter *yā'*. Instead, it may be that while modern *fatha* is indeed an oblique stroke evolved from a slanted *shakl al-shi'r alif*, and while modern *damma* is the *shakl al-shi'r wāw* fixed in a supralinear position, modern *kasra* is only an imitation of the *fatha* sign, placed below a letter on analogy with the sublinear position of the red dot for /i/.

Finally, the *shakl al-shi'r* was not the only medieval Middle Eastern vocalization system that used miniature letters. Babylonian (i.e., Iraqi) Hebrew Bible manuscripts are attested from the tenth century with a system of vowel signs based on miniature Hebrew letters. This vowel system probably emerged in the latter half of the ninth century, first using miniature forms of the letters *aleph* (א), *vav* (ו), *yod* (י), and *ayin* (ע) in supralinear positions.⁶⁵ Then, during the tenth century, these signs evolved into more economical shapes that could be written more quickly.⁶⁶ Similarly, West Syriac manuscripts appear from the late ninth or early tenth century that indicate vowels with miniature Greek letters, including *alpha* (Α), *epsilon* (Ε), *eta* (Η), *omicron* (Ο), and *omicron/upsilon* (ΟΥ). These signs supplanted the diacritic dot vowel system in the West Syriac world, and they remain in use today.⁶⁷ None of this is to say that Babylonian or West Syriac vocalizers necessarily modelled their signs after the *shakl al-shi'r* or vice-versa, but none of these systems developed in a vacuum, and scribes of each language may have been aware of developments in the writing systems of the others.

The *shakl al-shi'r* was just one of several methods which early Arabic writers used to record vowels in their language, and it ultimately gave way to more efficient notation methods with more abstract signs. The OIM-BNF-MIA Qur'an is thus a witness to a relatively brief period in the history of Arabic writing, when standard practices for transcribing the language were still in flux. It provides only a small glimpse into the intellectual and social situations that may have led to its creation, and it raises as many questions about *shakl al-shi'r* as it answers.

⁶⁵ Dotan, "Relative Chronology of Hebrew Vocalization" (1981), 92; Dotan, "Masorah" (2007), 630–31.

⁶⁶ Khan, "Vocalization, Babylonian" (2013), 954–55.

⁶⁷ Kiraz, *Turrās Mamllā*, vol. I (2012), 16, 60–61, 79–80; Coakley, "Five Greek Vowel-Signs" (2011).

Most of these questions cannot be adequately addressed without evidence from additional manuscripts that contain this "marking of poetry." Such manuscripts might exist, with their letter-form vowel signs thus far escaping the notice of most scholars, but perhaps they do not. Either way, this Qur'an is remarkable.

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