

Sub-project B05

The Use of Qur'anic Manuscripts within Islamic-Arabic Culture, in Particular Miniature Qur'ans and Qur'ans in Scroll Form

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Description of the project

The examination of the layout of transcriptions of religious Islamic-Arabic texts in the first phase of sub-project B05 provided clear evidence that the appearance of such manuscripts was primarily determined by their practical use. In the continuation phase, the focus will be on the practical function of two types of Qur'an manuscripts, the external appearance of which demonstrates that they were not primarily intended for reading or reciting purposes: small and miniature Qur'ans and those in the form of scrolls.

Research will consider which specific ways of using these manuscripts determined their appearance when this departed from standard forms of utilitarian Qur'ans. Primary consideration will be given to the protective, benedictive and healing functions played by Qur'ans. The project will be based both on the evidence that can be drawn from the manuscripts themselves and on information provided in Islamic-Arabic literature.

Aims of the project

The project primarily aims to answer the following questions, divided according to the respective types of manuscript:

1. Miniature Qur'ans:

- Are they legible, and is it possible to navigate through them (surah by surah or passage by passage)?
- Which (additional) differences in layout are distinguishable when compared to conventional formats apart from the later octagonal format?
- Is it possible to reach any conclusions about an additional function as 'pocket-book' Qur'ans when compared with other small-format manuscripts featuring religious or secular content?



Small, but still legible: a miniature Qur'an dating from the 10th or 11th century, height 9.2 cm, paper. State Library, Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz (Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation), Petermann I 325 (Ahlwardt 303).



2. Qur'an scrolls:

- What function do scrolls play in Islamic-Arabic manuscript culture, and how should Qur'an scrolls be interpreted in view of this?
- How should one describe, classify and explain the layout of Qur'an scrolls? Besides the rotulus kind, there are other more complex variants such as those employing micrographic templates and lettering (fig. 2). An analysis of the layout permits conclusions to be drawn about the intended purpose of a given manuscript; legibility was evidently of no importance in the case of very small script or extremely long lines running parallel to the length of the manuscript.



Only the recessed parts are legible: passage from a Qur'an scroll, length 845 cm, 18th/19th century. The recessed lines form a decorative, lozenge-shaped pattern and also delineate various names, here those of Muhammad and Ali. Bavarian State Library, Munich, Cod. arab. 2558

Miniature Qur'ans and Qur'an scrolls in Arabic manuscript culture

Transcriptions of the Qur'an existed from the earliest period of Arabic manuscript culture and thus of Islamic literature as a whole. From the earliest times, they exhibited certain peculiarities, employing specific formats (transverse, scroll form, and, later on, octagonal) as well as ornamentation and scripts. There is documentary evidence of miniature Qur'ans from a very early date, as is shown in fig. 1. Such forms persist even today in printed form, often as reprints of handwritten exemplars. Qur'an scrolls (fig. 2), on the other hand, increasingly fell out of use as codices grew more popular. The later octagonal Qur'ans represent a particularly striking variant of small-format Qur'ans (fig. 3) and were often stored in metal capsules for protective purposes. Since they were frequently affixed to the standards carried by Muslim army units, they are known as 'banner Qur'ans'.

Lucky charms for warriors: a 'banner Qur'an', 7.5 cm in diameter, dating from 1577, possibly from Iran. Bavarian State Library, Munich, Cod. arab. 2620