

# Beyond the Cairo Edition: On the Study of Early Quranic Codices

NICOLAI SINAI  
OXFORD UNIVERSITY

This essay reviews two recent volumes containing editions of important early quranic codices. One of these is the so-called Sanaa Palimpsest, whose lower text at present remains our only known material witness to a recension of the quranic text that is different from the canonical one; the other is the *Codex Amrensis*. The essay devotes particular attention to the question of the textual relationship between the Quran's standard text and that documented by the lower layer of the Sanaa Palimpsest, and to Asma Hilali's claim that the Sanaa Palimpsest never constituted a full quranic codex but only "a collection of disparate leaves."

As is commonly known, the vast majority of modern printings of the Arabic text of the Quran are descended from the edition published in Cairo in 1924 under the auspices of al-Azhar, which has effectively come to function as the Quran's standard edition across the entire spectrum of uses, from religious to academic.<sup>1</sup> Adhering to the so-called 'Uthmānic *rasm*, or consonantal skeleton, which is dotted and vocalized according to the reading attributed to the eighth-century scholar 'Āṣim (as transmitted by his student Ḥafṣ) and subdivided according to the Kufan tradition of verse demarcation, the text and orthography of this edition are not based on one prominent manuscript witness or on a collation of such witnesses, but instead synthesize multiple aspects of the formidable tradition of medieval Quran scholarship pertaining to the vocalization, recitational segmentation, and orthography of the quranic text. The approach taken by the creators of the 1924 edition is obviously rooted in the fact that the Quran, as the scripture of Islam, is as much an oral and aural phenomenon as a written one.<sup>2</sup> In keeping with this, quranic manuscripts from the early Islamic centuries tend to have comparatively few diacritical points distinguishing homographic consonants (such as medial *b*, *t*, *th*, *n*, and *y*) and to lack vowel signs, requiring their readers to rely on significant prior knowledge of the text. This knowledge would initially have been acquired and passed on orally before being eventually codified.<sup>3</sup>

There is thus a peculiar disjuncture between the version of the quranic text that remains the basis of academic work, on the one hand, and the physical evidence for the Quran's

This is a review article of *The Sanaa Palimpsest: The Transmission of the Qur'an in the First Centuries AH*. By ASMA HILALI. Qur'anic Studies Series, vol. 17. New York: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2017. Pp. xviii + 271. \$75, £50; and, briefly, of *Codex Amrensis* 1. By ÉLÉONORE CELLARD, with the assistance of Sabrina Cimiotti. Documenta Coranica, vol. 1. Leiden: BRILL, 2018. Pp. xii + 319. \$149, €129.

*Author's note:* I am grateful to Alba Fedeli and Yasin Dutton for commenting on a draft version of this piece. They should not, of course, be held liable for any of its content.

1. See M. W. Albin, "Printing of the Qur'ān," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, ed. J. D. McAuliffe, 6 vols. (Leiden: BRILL, 2001–2006), 4: 264–76, at 272.

2. The classic point of reference here is W. A. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1987).

3. On early vocalization systems in quranic manuscripts, see A. George, "Coloured Dots and the Question of Regional Origins in Early Qur'ans," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 17.1 (2015): 1–44, and 17.2 (2015): 75–102.

written transmission, particularly its early transmission, on the other. This disjuncture is sustained by the near-total dominance of the above-mentioned standard recension of the Quran's consonantal skeleton, the so-called 'Uthmānic text: a student of the Quran who takes the trouble to check early codices will generally encounter a more or less undotted and unvocalized version of the same consonantal skeleton that underlies her modern print copy, often with some orthographic variation (e.g., whether or not medial *ā* is spelled plene, i.e., with *alif*) and minor textual discrepancies such as the presence or absence of particles like *wa-* ("and").<sup>4</sup> This supremacy of the Quran's canonical *rasm*, which must have arisen early, is apt to douse some of the interest that scholars who are not card-carrying codicologists, palaeographers, or art historians will take in manuscripts of the Quran. By contrast, the Islamic literature on the different readings (*qirā'āt*) of the canonical *rasm* and on textual variants allegedly contained in the alternative recensions of the Quran produced by companions of Muḥammad often preserves much more interesting textual variants.<sup>5</sup> One is nonetheless bound to feel uneasy about the relatively peripheral role that the written transmission of the Quran has played in the modern academic study of the Quran until well into the second half of the twentieth century, despite the trailblazing work of scholars such as Gotthelf Bergsträsser (d. 1933) or, half a century later, François Déroche.<sup>6</sup>

The two volumes reviewed here, both of which contain editions of important early quranic manuscripts, demonstrate that interest in the quranic manuscript record has undergone a veritable surge during the last two decades. One reason for this development has surely been the controversy that has raged since the late 1970s about the Quran's likely date of origin. Should we accept the traditional dating of the canonical recension of the Quran to at least the mid-seventh century or instead contemplate, as John Wansbrough famously did, a much later emergence?<sup>7</sup> Early physical testimonies of the Quran, whether in the form of manuscripts or of inscriptions (e.g., inside the Dome of the Rock), evidently have much to contribute to this debate, although absolute date ranges based on radiocarbon analysis have become available only relatively recently and are not always straightforward to interpret, due to their probabilistic nature and occasional anomalies.<sup>8</sup> To be sure, one may well hold that the gamut of viable hypotheses about the date of the Quran has now shrunk to the seventh century,<sup>9</sup> thereby defusing some of the issue's long-standing contentiousness. But

4. See, for instance, F. Déroche, *La transmission écrite du Coran dans les débuts de l'islam: Le codex Parisino-petropolitainus* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 51–108.

5. See the assessment in K. E. Small, *Textual Criticism and Qur'ān Manuscripts* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011), 124. For variants transmitted by Islamic sources, see, for instance, 'A. al-Khaṭīb, *Mu'jam al-qirā'āt*, 11 vols. (Damascus: Dār Sa'd al-Dīn, 2002); A. Jeffery, *Materials for the History of the Text of the Qur'ān: The Old Codices* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1937).

6. Th. Nöldeke, G. Bergsträsser, and O. Pretzl, *Geschichte des Qorāns*, 2nd ed., vol. 3: *Die Geschichte des Qorāntexts* (Leipzig: Dieterich'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1938); F. Déroche, *Les manuscrits du Coran: Aux origines de la calligraphie coranique* (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 1983).

7. For an overview of the question, see N. Sinai, "When Did the Consonantal Skeleton of the Quran Reach Closure?," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 77 (2014): 273–92, 509–21.

8. For a brief overview of important radiocarbon datings of early quranic manuscripts with further references, see N. Sinai, "The Qur'ān," in *Routledge Handbook on Early Islam*, ed. H. Berg (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2017), 9–24, at 18–19. See now also the comments in Y. Dutton, "Two 'Hijāzī' Fragments of the Qur'an and Their Variants, or: When Did the *Shawādh* Become *Shādh*h?," *Journal of Islamic Manuscripts* 8 (2017): 1–56, at 44–46.

9. For an argument in favor of the traditional timeline of the Quran's emergence, see Sinai, "When Did the Consonantal Skeleton?"; for recent attempts to situate the genesis of some parts of the quranic corpus in the decades following the death of Muḥammad, see S. J. Shoemaker, "Christmas in the Qur'ān: The Qur'ānic Account of Jesus' Nativity and Palestinian Local Tradition," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 28 (2003): 11–39; T. Tesei, "The

even beyond the question of the Quran's date, early quranic manuscripts have emerged as indispensable sources for understanding the progressive standardization of the quranic text and its function and use in early Islam.

TWO EARLY QURANIC MANUSCRIPTS:  
THE SANAA PALIMPSEST AND THE *CODEX AMRENSIS*

The most significant manuscript for the early transmission history of the quranic text is arguably the famed "Sanaa Palimpsest," which forms the topic of Asma Hilali's monograph. A palimpsest is a manuscript whose original writing has been overwritten by another text, normally after the initial content has been deliberately erased or scraped off. Careful study, aided by modern technology, often permits deciphering at least some of the remnants of the original text, generally referred to as the palimpsest's lower writing or *scriptio inferior*. In the case of the Sanaa Palimpsest, we are faced with the unusual case of a palimpsest whose lower and upper writing are both quranic,<sup>10</sup> although they encompass different parts of the Islamic scripture. More than thirty folios of the manuscript are kept at Sanaa's Dār al-Makḥṭūṭāt under the handle 01-27.1; a similar number of palimpsest leaves preserved in the Maktaba Sharqiyya, plus four stray folios that have surfaced in Europe and North America, have hypothetically been assigned to the same codex,<sup>11</sup> even if Hilali expresses scepticism about the former assignment (p. 29 n. 110) and is at least agnostic about the latter (pp. 32–33). The palimpsest's significance rests, first, on the probable dating of its parchment to the first half of the seventh century CE, making it one of the earliest copies of substantial portions of the Quran that is presently known.<sup>12</sup> Even more crucially, its lower text remains our only known material witness to a recension of the quranic *rasm* that is different from the canonical one.<sup>13</sup>

Two detailed studies of the different types of textual divergences that can be observed in the palimpsest's lower layer when compared with the standard *rasm* were published in 2010.<sup>14</sup> Divergences include the transposition of brief segments of texts, the substitution of phrases or words by others that are more or less synonymous, the employment of different grammatical forms of the same word, as well as the addition or omission of words and phrases; there is even one case in which the lower layer of the palimpsest would appear to

Romans Will Win!' Q 30:2–7 in Light of 7th C. Political Eschatology," *Der Islam* 95 (2018): 1–29. Cf. also N. Sinai, *The Qur'an: A Historical-Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2017), 48, 52–54, 57 n. 50.

10. On the rarity of palimpsests in the Islamic manuscript tradition in general, and of quranic palimpsests in particular, see F. Déroche, *Qur'ans of the Umayyads: A First Overview* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

11. On the thirty-seven additional leaves, see Déroche, *Qur'ans of the Umayyads*, 48; Hilali, *Sanaa Palimpsest*, 15–16; on the four stray folios, see the overview in Table 3 of B. Sadeghi and M. Goudarzi, "Šan'ā' 1 and the Origins of the Qur'ān," *Der Islam* 87 (2012): 1–129, at 37–39.

12. For the results of a radiocarbon examination of one folio that is likely to have belonged to the Sanaa Palimpsest, see B. Sadeghi and U. Bergmann, "The Codex of a Companion of the Prophet and the Qur'ān of the Prophet," *Arabica* 57 (2010): 343–436. Déroche has advocated a slightly later dating of the Sanaa Palimpsest; see Déroche, *Qur'ans of the Umayyads*, 54: "The presence of sura titles and of decorative devices between the suras point to a later date in the first/seventh century, since those elements were not found originally in copies like the *Codex Parisino-petropolitanus*, but were added later."

13. This is duly emphasized in Sadeghi and Bergmann, "Codex of a Companion," 344.

14. Sadeghi and Bergmann, "Codex of a Companion"; E. Puin, "Ein früherer Koranpalimpsest aus Šan'ā' (DAM 01-27.1). Teil III: Ein nicht-ʿuṣmānischer Koran," in *Die Entstehung einer Weltreligion I: Von der koranischen Bewegung zum Frühislam*, ed. M. Groß and K.-H. Ohlig (Berlin: Hans Schiler, 2010), 233–305.

miss an entire verse (Q 9:85), although this could simply be a scribal mistake.<sup>15</sup> With the exception of this latter instance, the order of verses within suras, as far as the extant parts of Dār al-Makhṭūṭāt 01-27.1 allow us to tell, is identical to that of the standard recension. At the same time, the limited number of leaves containing the end of one sura and the beginning of another one document a different sura ordering than the canonical *rasm*.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the Sanaa Palimpsest would appear to provide us with an exciting glimpse at a moment in time at which the hegemony of the Quran's standard *rasm* had not yet become fully established. This, it must be said, is in line with the general drift of the Islamic tradition, which reports that during the first decades after Muḥammad's death a variety of quranic recensions were in circulation. Although none of the exact "companion codices" described by Islamic sources have yet been discovered in manuscript, the general types of textual variants ascribed to them correspond to the types of variants found in the lower layer of the Sanaa Palimpsest.<sup>17</sup> The latter thus lends credence to the idea that there was originally more than one recension of the Quran and that the Islamic literary sources preserve a broadly accurate view of the scale and character of textual variance between these different versions of the Arabic scripture.

Hilali's book examines and edits the lower text of a total of 9.5 folios (= 19 pages) belonging to the Sanaa Palimpsest, omitting the lower layer of a further 18.5 folios to which she says she has either not had access or which have proven too damaged or illegible (see the overview on pp. 34–35). This part of Hilali's book thus overlaps with Sadeghi and Goudarzi's 2012 edition of the lower text of the surviving remnants of thirty-one folios of Dār al-Makhṭūṭāt 01-27.1 (parts of which, including two entire pages, they were unable to decipher) and of the four isolated folios already mentioned.<sup>18</sup> In addition, Hilali provides an edition of the lower text of half a folio not included in the Sadeghi and Goudarzi edition (20a by her numbering) and of the upper text of twenty-seven folios. Her edition is accompanied by frequently copious notes, especially for the lower text, and preceded by a ninety-page introductory study.

As Hilali notes, her edition of the palimpsest's lower text is based on three different sets of images, including a set of processed images in which the upper text has been manually masked (p. 4). Given the tremendous difficulty in reconstructing the lower text and also its original folio sequence, it is perhaps not entirely surprising that Hilali's readings often differ from those of Sadeghi and Goudarzi.<sup>19</sup> Most importantly, in almost all cases in which Sadeghi and Goudarzi read the lower layer of the folios that are re-edited by Hilali as attesting textual variants aligning with those transmitted in the *qirāʾāt* literature, Hilali's edition tends to have blanks and to comment that she cannot "find any vestiges of the authors' reconstruction" or the like (pp. 98, 100, 106, 108, 110, and 116).<sup>20</sup> As a matter of fact, the contrast

15. Puin, "Früher Koranpalimpsest," 258–301; Sadeghi and Goudarzi, "Ṣanʿāʾ 1," 61, with n. 203 (fol. 20b ll. 12–13).

16. See Sadeghi and Goudarzi, "Ṣanʿāʾ 1," 25.

17. See Sadeghi and Bergmann, "Codex of a Companion," 360, observing that the palimpsest's variants "are similar *in nature* to those reported of Companion codices" (italics in the original).

18. Sadeghi and Goudarzi, "Ṣanʿāʾ 1."

19. Hilali, *Sanaa Palimpsest*, 34 remarks that the content of folio 19 "is interpreted in different ways in this volume and Sadeghi and Goudarzi's edition." In this case, however, the divergence is not as radical as it might at first seem, for Hilali's folio 19 would in fact appear to be identical with folio 18 of the Sadeghi and Goudarzi edition, given the identity of the lower and upper text as determined in both editions.

20. See also the case of Q 19:19 (fol. 23b Hilali = fol. 22b Sadeghi/Goudarzi, l. 15), where Hilali interprets the lower text as reading *li-ahaba*, in line with the *rasm* of the standard text (Hilali, *Sanaa Palimpsest*, 133), whereas Sadeghi and Goudarzi have *li-nahaba*, conforming to a reading attributed to Abū ʿAmr (Sadeghi and Goudarzi, "Ṣanʿāʾ 1," 64, 117; see also n. 24 below). At Q 19:26 (fol. 23b Hilali = fol. 22b Sadeghi/Goudarzi, l. 24), Sadeghi

between the amount of the lower writing that Sadeghi and Goudarzi, on the one hand, and Hilali, on the other, have been able to make out can be extremely striking, as exemplified by a comparison of their treatment of fol. 10a: while Hilali has only a few words scattered in between extensive lacunae, Sadeghi and Goudarzi recover a substantial amount of text.<sup>21</sup> The discrepancy between the two editions is actually so systematic that one is tempted to suspect some other cause than merely the considerable degree of subjectivity inherent in the deciphering of an erased manuscript. Puzzlingly, however, both editions are said to be based on the same set of images of Dār al-Makhṭūṭāt 01-27.1, produced in 2007 under the direction of Sergio Noja Nosedá and Christian Robin (and made available in both cases by the latter; see Hilali, p. xvii). In comparison with Puin's work, too, Hilali's edition has a certain propensity to profess illegibility, and there are cases in which Puin and Sadeghi/Goudarzi agree against Hilali (although there is also disagreement between Puin and Sadeghi/Goudarzi).<sup>22</sup> Any comprehensive attempt at adjudicating these editorial disagreements is evidently beyond the scope of this essay, although two sets of images of the Sanaa Palimpsest—including one that uses ultraviolet light, thereby allowing for easier reading of the lower layer—are now available for downloading.<sup>23</sup> cursory consultation of the ultraviolet images has on three occasions confirmed Sadeghi/Goudarzi's readings against those of Hilali.<sup>24</sup>

Convenient general access to all extant photographs of the palimpsest is thus indispensable for judging the adequacy of any editorial reconstruction of its lower layer. This draws attention to the core virtue of the second volume under consideration here, Éléonore Cellard's edition of a (likely) eighth-century quranic manuscript in *ḥijāzī* script and an unusual oblong format that is dubbed *Codex Amrensis* and is currently dispersed between the National Library of Russia in Saint Petersburg (Marcel 9) and the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (Arabe 326a), supplemented by further leaves auctioned in Rennes in 2011 and another one now kept at the Nasser D. Khalili Collection of Islamic Art in London. Cellard's volume, the first in a welcome new series entitled *Documenta Coranica*, presents her transliteration of the manuscript's Arabic text on facing pages with high-quality images of the respective manuscript pages, in line-by-line alignment. This supremely transparent synoptic format builds on the facsimile editions of MS Bibliothèque Nationale Arabe 328a and MS British Library Or. 2165 by Déroche and Noja Nosedá.<sup>25</sup> As the challenge in documenting the Quran's early manuscript record is often one of recording an absence rather than a presence of information, Cellard, like Hilali, uses undotted Arabic letters where the manuscript lacks diacritics. In cases where the manuscript disagrees with the Cairo edition, the latter is supplied in the margin for comparison; a sophisticated color-coded scheme draws attention to such diver-

---

and Goudarzi discern *ṣawman wa-ṣumtan*, corresponding to a reading attributed to Anas b. Mālik, in lieu of the standard text's *ṣawman* (Sadeghi and Goudarzi, "Ṣan'ā' 1," 65), whereas Hilali simply has a lacuna (*Sanaa Palimpsest*, 133). As Hilali remarks in *Sanaa Palimpsest*, 79–80, Sadeghi and Goudarzi also detect some verse markers whose presence she cannot confirm.

21. Cf. Hilali, *Sanaa Palimpsest*, 113; Sadeghi and Goudarzi, "Ṣan'ā' 1," 89.

22. See below, nn. 37 and 40, as well as Sadeghi and Goudarzi, "Ṣan'ā' 1," 64.

23. See <https://www.islamic-awareness.org/quran/text/mss/soth.html> (scroll down to after n. 60; accessed December 17, 2018; hereafter "website"). I am grateful to Behnam Sadeghi for pointing me to this website.

24. At Q 19:19, the lower layer as documented by the website's file "23B 33.6 uv.tif" supports the reading *li-nahaba* against Hilali's *li-ahaba*. See also nn. 37 and 40 below.

25. F. Déroche and S. Noja Nosedá (eds.), *Le manuscrit arabe 328 (a) de la Bibliothèque nationale de France* (Lesa: Fondazione Ferni Noja Nosedá, 1998); eidem (eds.), *Le manuscrit Or. 2165 (f. 1 à 61) de la British Library* (Lesa: Fondazione Ferni Noja Nosedá, 2001).

gences as well as to erasures and corrections.<sup>26</sup> With the *Codex Amrensis* we are squarely on the familiar territory of the ‘Uthmānic *rasm*, although like other *ḥijāzī* manuscripts it shows a range of orthographic variants from the consonantal skeleton of the Cairo edition, which are duly taxonomized by Cellard (pp. 13–14). Moreover, the manuscript’s verse divisions do not exclusively align with any one of the various counting systems distinguished by the Islamic tradition (pp. 12–13), and the variant readings (*qirāʾāt*) of the standard text that are suggested by the manuscript’s infrequent consonantal diacritics also exhibit a certain degree of eclecticism by the standards of later Islamic scholarship (pp. 11–12). At least with regard to verse division, this resembles the evidence of other early codices,<sup>27</sup> including the upper layer of the Sanaa Palimpsest,<sup>28</sup> and thereby corroborates the conjecture that the integral systems of segmenting the standard *rasm* into verses that are described in later sources are a retrospective attempt at imposing order on what was originally “a much more fluid and variable situation.”<sup>29</sup>

The transparency and convenience of *Documenta Coranica*’s synoptic edition-cum-facsimile undoubtedly set a new standard of presentation for publishing individual quranic codices, and one eagerly awaits the future volume of the series that is to be dedicated to Dār al-Makhṭūʿāt 01-27.1. It remains to be seen, however, to what extent the format pioneered by Cellard’s volume will need to be adjusted for the Sanaa Palimpsest, given that we are dealing not with one but with three different sets of images. Accordingly, it may well be that a digital format—perhaps along the lines of Alba Fedeli’s edition of another palimpsest with a quranic *scriptio inferior*, the Mingana-Lewis Palimpsest—will more easily lend itself to the peculiar challenges of editing “stratigraphic” documents like palimpsests.<sup>30</sup>

#### TOWARD A TEXT-CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF THE SANAA PALIMPSEST

The almost total dominance of one particular recension of the Quran’s consonantal skeleton across the Quran’s manuscript record has meant that scholars of quranic manuscripts have rarely needed to engage in sophisticated text-critical considerations of the sort that are a staple of biblical scholarship. Our increasing acquaintance with the lower layer of the Sanaa Palimpsest during the last decade or so means that this situation has now changed. Confronted with the considerable number of additions, omissions, substitutions, and transpo-

26. This color scheme is unfortunately not explained in the volume itself, but a key can be found online at [https://brill.com/fileasset/downloads\\_products/DocCorMan\\_Amr1\\_d6\\_klein.pdf](https://brill.com/fileasset/downloads_products/DocCorMan_Amr1_d6_klein.pdf) (accessed September 22, 2018).

27. Déroche, *La transmission écrite*, 79–102; Small, *Textual Criticism*, 89–94. A more clear-cut case is MS Birmingham University Library Mingana Islamic Arabic 1572b, in which the Syrian verse division is dominant; see Dutton, “Two ‘Hijāzī’ Fragments,” 19–20.

28. See the detailed overview of verse divisions in Hilali, *Sanaa Palimpsest*, 79–82.

29. Thus Small, *Textual Criticism*, 92–93. On the *qirāʾāt* attested by MS Bibliothèque Nationale Arabe 328a (belonging to the so-called *Codex Parisino-Petropolitanus*), see Y. Dutton, “An Early Muṣḥaf According to the Reading of Ibn ‘Āmir,” *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 3.1 (2001): 71–89; Déroche, *La transmission écrite*, 102–5; on those attested by MS British Library Or. 2165, see I. Rabb, “Non-Canonical Readings of the Qur’an: Recognition and Authenticity (The Ḥimṣī Reading),” *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 8.2 (2006): 84–127; on those attested by MS Birmingham University Library Mingana Islamic Arabic 1572a and 1572b (the former of which was recently carbon-dated, with a probability of more than ninety-five percent, to between 568 and 645), see Dutton, “Two ‘Hijāzī’ Fragments,” esp. Table 6 (on pp. 28–29).

30. Fedeli’s edition is available digitally at <https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/collections/minganalewis/1> (accessed September 20, 2018). See also A. Fedeli, “The Digitization Project of the Qur’anic Palimpsest, MS Cambridge University Library Or. 1287, and the Verification of the Mingana-Lewis Edition: Where is *Salām*?,” *Journal of Islamic Manuscripts* 2 (2011): 100–17, as well as Fedeli’s discussion of the digital publication of “stratigraphic records” in the following blog post: <https://iqsaaweb.wordpress.com/2013/03/18/qmmc/> (accessed September 20, 2018).

sitions of words and even brief phrases that are found in the palimpsest when compared with the standard *rasm*, is it feasible to ascertain which wording is more likely to be original? And can we offer a general account of the relationship between the two recensions and perhaps even a theory of their historical filiation?<sup>31</sup> The first real attempt to make methodologically sound headway in confronting these questions was a 2010 study by Behnam Sadeghi, which examined the variants he found in the four stray folios that he assigned (persuasively, in my view) to Dār al-Makhṭūṭāt 01-27.1. Sadeghi tentatively contended that the text type attested by the lower layer of the Sanaa Palimpsest can be understood to be derivative from the standard recension or some prototype of it, i.e., from a version of the quranic text that was closer to the standard recension than to the lower writing of the palimpsest.<sup>32</sup> One of the arguments he adduced in support of this conclusion was the observation that in all cases in which he found the *scriptio inferior* of the palimpsest to exhibit a significant textual plus—i.e., additional words or phrases compared to the standard *rasm*—the wording of the palimpsest is plausibly viewed as having emerged from the standard *rasm* by means of “auto-contamination,” namely, a scribe’s unwitting assimilation of the verse in question to phraseological parallels in its immediate context or elsewhere in the Quran. As regards the textual pluses exhibited by the standard *rasm* against the Sanaa Palimpsest, on the other hand, Sadeghi noted that at least some of these cannot be explained as a result of assimilation, due to a lack of suitable parallels. He therefore maintained that in these cases too it was most likely that the wording of the standard recension had evolved, this time via inadvertent scribal omission rather than inadvertent assimilation, into the wording attested by the palimpsest, rather than vice versa.<sup>33</sup> Sadeghi’s assessment, one must add, hinges on his stated assumption that cases of “unconscious error” such as accidental omission and assimilation were far more widespread in the Quran’s transmission than deliberate scribal additions serving some theological, legal, political, or other purpose.<sup>34</sup>

Since Sadeghi’s 2010 treatment was only based on a relatively small portion of the Sanaa Palimpsest’s *scriptio inferior*, extending his analysis to a wider sample of variants constitutes a patent and urgent desideratum. To be sure, pursuing this line of inquiry is not something Hilali has set out to do (p. 65): “The variations in the lower text are not perceived here from the perspective of scribe’s mistakes and the putative ‘original’ text is not the concern of this work.” However, even if one fully acknowledges that the quranic urtext may well be characterized by an irreducible degree of textual multiformity,<sup>35</sup> honing our understanding of the textual relationship that obtains between the standard recension and that evinced by the lower layer of the palimpsest remains a vitally important task: after all, the palimpsest is of such singular interest compared to other quranic manuscripts precisely because of its nonstandard lower text; and one would not want to conclude prematurely that all recensions were created equal or that *in dubio pro vulgata*. Hilali’s book in fact provides a useful preliminary point of departure for future attempts to continue Sadeghi’s work, as she supplies a detailed

31. Sadeghi, “Codex of a Companion,” 384 (italics in original): “The fundamental question, therefore, remains wide open: what is the relationship between the *text types* of ‘Uthmān and C-1 [= Sadeghi’s siglum for the recension evinced by the lower writing of the Sanaa Palimpsest]? Is it possible to determine if one is older than the other?”

32. Sadehi and Bergmann, “Codex of a Companion,” 383–413.

33. Sadehi and Bergmann, “Codex of a Companion,” 399–402. For general comments on the emergence of variants by means of assimilation or “auto-contamination,” see Sadehi and Bergmann, “Codex of a Companion,” 388.

34. Sadehi and Bergmann, “Codex of a Companion,” 403–4. The term “unconscious error” occurs in a quotation from Peter Kyle McCarter on p. 404.

35. Sinai, *Qur’an*, 34, based on Y. Dutton, “Orality, Literacy and the ‘Seven Aḥruf’ Ḥadīth,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 23 (2012), 1–49, at 34–35.

catalogue of textual differences between the palimpsest and the Quran's standard recension (pp. 46–62), followed by a taxonomy and some brief general comments (pp. 62–65).<sup>36</sup> Her discussion of the variants themselves, incidentally, is accompanied by graphic reconstructions of the respective portions of the lower text, which give a first-hand impression of just how trying it is to decode the latter.

According to Hilali's general characterization, "[m]ost of the variations in the lower text include more lengthy text than the corresponding passages in the Cairo edition" (p. 65). At least significant portions of the Sanaa recension do indeed display a tangible tendency toward textual pluses vis-à-vis the standard text, as can be further verified and quantified by a quick classificatory exercise taking into account both the variants catalogued in Hilali's Appendix II (pp. 248–50) and additional ones that are discussed by Puin (often taken from folios not edited by Hilali).<sup>37</sup> Hilali's appendix obviously presupposes her edition, which may turn out to require correction and supplementation. Nonetheless, the corpus of variants just circumscribed—which covers a substantial portion of the palimpsest, though not all of it<sup>38</sup>—may at least offer us a tentative glimpse of general trends. In fact, it emerges that the lower layer of the palimpsest exhibits ca. eighteen pluses of one word or more, while the standard text has only around six such pluses.<sup>39</sup> This confirms Hilali's general sense that the lower layer tends to have a more expansive text.

36. The way in which Hilali presents these variants can be misleading. Thus, the second variant for Q 9:13 that is described in Hilali, *Sanaa Palimpsest*, 49 (fol. 5b l. 15) makes it appear as if we are dealing with a plus, i.e., a case in which the lower writing of the palimpsest has an additional phrase. However, as a look at Appendix II (*Sanaa Palimpsest*, 248) makes clear, we are in fact dealing with a case of transposition: whereas the standard recension has *nakathū aymānahum wa-hammū bi-ikhrāji l-rasūli wa-hum bada'ūkum awwala marratin*, the lower layer of the palimpsest, as edited by Hilali (*Sanaa Palimpsest*, 105 ll. 14–16), places *wa-hum bada'ūkum awwala marratin* prior to *wa-hammū bi-ikhrāji l-rasūli*. Hilali herself accordingly classifies this variant as a case of "displacement" (*Sanaa Palimpsest*, 64). As for the taxonomy itself, it can likewise give rise to questions. For instance, the variant for Q 9:80 (fol. 21a l. 24; see Hilali, *Sanaa Palimpsest*, 59, 249) must surely count as a plus of the standard text, so should appear in Hilali's third category ("words and entire expressions which are not present in the lower text but which do appear in the Cairo edition"); and one of the two variants for Q 9:18 (fol. 6a l. 5; see Hilali, *Sanaa Palimpsest*, 51, 249), which interchanges the standard text's *jāhada fī sabīli llāhi* with *wa-aqāma l-ṣalāta wa-ātā l-zakāta*, should probably count as a case of substitution (albeit one that results in a more extensive wording) and therefore ought to be assigned to Hilali's first category, if I understand the logic of her taxonomy correctly.

37. Namely, in Puin, "Früher Koranpalimpsest," 262–75. As remarked above, there are disagreements between Puin and Hilali's reading of the text and these can sometimes affect the tally. Take, for instance, the segment *lā tattakhidhū ābā'akum wa-ikhwānakum awliyā'a* ("Do not take your fathers and your brothers as friends") at Q 9:23 of the standard text. Corresponding to this, Hilali considers the palimpsest to have the wording *lā tattakhidhū lā ābā'akum wa-lā ikhwānakum awliyā'a* ("Do not take either your fathers or your brothers as friends"; Hilali, *Sanaa Palimpsest*, 52, 249), whereas Puin's reconstructed wording is *lā tattakhidhū ābā'akum wa-lā abnā'akum wa-lā ikhwānakum awliyā'a* ("Do not take your father or your sons or your brothers as friends"; Puin, "Früher Koranpalimpsest," 274). Between these two alternatives, only Puin's reading, which incorporates "sons" in between the standard text's reference to "fathers" and "brothers," would make this variant a proper plus of the palimpsest. Sadeghi and Goudarzi's edition is compatible with Puin's reading here (Sadeghi and Goudarzi, "San'ā 1," 56, fol. 6a ll. 14–15); consultation of the website's file "6A 16.102.uv.tif" persuades me to agree with Sadeghi/Goudarzi and Puin. I have therefore counted this as a plus on the part of the palimpsest. For another instance in which Puin and Sadeghi/Goudarzi agree against Hilali, see n. 40 below.

38. Apart from the general question of the correctness of Hilali's readings and the possibility of further variants contained in those portions of the lower layer that are deemed illegible by her but edited by Sadeghi and Goudarzi, it should be borne in mind that neither Puin nor Hilali have examined the four stray folios analyzed by Sadeghi. See also the following footnote.

39. Sadeghi's tally of "major pluses" in the lower text of four folios likely to have belonged to the Sanaa Palimpsest and the corresponding portions of the standard text has a very different distribution, with more pluses of the standard recension: the palimpsest has ten, while the standard text has fourteen (Sadeghi and Bergmann, "Codex of a Companion," 401, 422–29). Strikingly, nine of the latter (including the most important cases in which the word-



Before going on to consider the nature of these pluses, it is worth noting that there are also ca. eighteen cases (again adding up Hilali's variants with those described by Puin) in which the palimpsest's lower writing, when compared to the standard text, interchanges, rather than adds or omits, certain words and phrases.<sup>40</sup> For instance, the palimpsest has *bi-ẓulmihim* ("on account of their wrongdoing") instead of the canonical *bi-kufrihim* ("on account of their unbelief") at Q 2:88, *al-muflihīn* ("those who prosper") instead of *al-muhtadīn* ("those who are guided") at Q 9:18, and *al-nār* ("the fire") instead of *jahannam* ("hell") at Q 9:73 (Hilali, pp. 248–49).<sup>41</sup> Now, the question of text-critical priority is often difficult or even impossible to decide in such instances of synonymic or near-synonymic substitution, especially when both alternatives have a roughly similar number of reasonably close parallels elsewhere in the Quran. The phenomenon does, however, shed valuable light on the initial stage of the Quran's transmission history, insofar as it suggests some degree of oral transmission in which transmitters were forced to rely on their memory of the gist of what was being said, rather than being able to check a written original. As Sadeghi has highlighted, the fact that an examination of the lower layer of the palimpsest yields a fair number but not a downright overabundance of such synonymic substitutions is best explained by an admixture of oral and written transmission. One may accordingly follow him in conceiving of the Quran's textual transmission as being ultimately rooted in the transcription of oral proclamations recited at speed, thus accounting for the original transcribers' occasional disagreement about whether a given verse employed, say, *al-nār* or *jahannam*.<sup>42</sup> The fact that Islamic works ascribe similar synonymic substitutions to some of the non-ʿUthmānic codices of the Quran reportedly compiled by certain companions of the Prophet adds further weight to this hypothesis.<sup>43</sup>

---

ing of the standard recension cannot be viewed as having arisen from that of the palimpsest by means of inadvertent assimilation with other verses) are located in a small number of verses, Q 2:196, 2:213, 2:217–18, and 2:221–22. The possibility that the palimpsest's textual transmission of certain portions of Q 2 suffers from an exceptional glitch remains to be ruled out. In terms of the taxonomy that Hilali offers in *Sanaa Palimpsest*, 63–64, pluses in the lower writing of the palimpsest correspond to her category 4 ("words, prepositions, particles and expressions which appear in the lower text but not in the Cairo edition"), while pluses of the standard recension correspond to category 3 ("words and entire expressions which are not present in the lower text but which do appear in the Cairo edition"). See also n. 36.

40. Once again, the precise tally depends on whether one follows Hilali or Puin's reading of certain passages. For instance, Puin holds that the lower writing of the palimpsest originally had *ʿalā āthārihi* instead of *min baʿdihī* at Q 2:87, which was subsequently corrected to *min baʿdihī* (Puin, "Früher Koranpalimpsest," 264). Hilali, by contrast, detects no traces of an original *ʿalā āthārihi* (*Sanaa Palimpsest*, 99 l. 1). Here, too, Sadeghi and Goudarzi agree with Puin (Sadeghi and Goudarzi, "Ṣanʿā 1," 41, fol. 2a l. 1; see also n. 37 above). The website's file "2A 6.149 uv.tif" shows fairly clearly that the lower writing contains the word *ʿalā* at the end of the first line, thus confirming Sadeghi/Goudarzi and Puin against Hilali. I have accordingly included this variant as an instance of substitution in my own provisional tally.

41. Sadeghi, "Codex of a Companion," 429–32 notes eight instances of what he terms "substitutions without phonetic conservation" on the folios studied by him.

42. See the discussion in Sadeghi, "Codex of a Companion," 384–90. It merits highlighting that the question of oral, or partially oral, *transmission* must be distinguished from that of oral vs written *composition*. It is entirely conceivable, for instance, that at least the final redaction of at least some suras—especially of extended and complex compositions like Q 2–5, which betray traces of relatively intricate processes of literary growth and revision—took place in writing but that these texts were subsequently retranscribed from recitation. On the genesis and growth of the suras in question, see Sinai, *Qur'an*, 97–104; N. Sinai, "Processes of Literary Growth and Editorial Expansion in Two Medinan Surahs," in *Islam and Its Past: Jahiliyya, Late Antiquity, and the Qur'an*, ed. C. Bakhos and M. Cook (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2017), 69–119; N. Sinai, "Towards a Redactional History of the Medinan Qur'an: A Case Study of Sūrat al-Nisā' (Q 4) and Sūrat al-Mā'idah (Q 5)," forthcoming in a volume edited by Marianna Klar (Abingdon: Routledge).

43. E.g., the reading *arshidnā* instead of *ihdīnā* (both translatable as "guide us") at Q 1:6 or *mithqāla namlatin*

Returning to the Sanaa Palimpsest's apparent propensity for pluses, Hilali seems inclined to view these as generally secondary to the standard recension: "most of the variations present developments and interpretations of some portions of the passage by means of conjunctions and specific Qur'anic formulae" (p. 65). Although she does not develop systematic criteria by which to judge whether a hypothetical textual development from the standard wording to that of the palimpsest is more likely than vice versa, the remark just quoted implies considerable convergence with Sadeghi's carefully argued hypothesis about the derivative nature of the palimpsest recension. On the other hand, when Hilali speaks of "developments and interpretations," this stands in tension with Sadeghi's warning against placing too much emphasis on deliberate scribal additions as the primary vehicle by which we assume textual development to progress.<sup>44</sup> Hilali would appear to disagree and indeed goes so far as to say that the lower writing's "textual issues"—by which I assume her to mean the textual variants found therein—"mostly constitute glosses" (p. 23). Admittedly, this is not an indefensible description of a case like Q 2:91, for which the standard recension has *nu'mīnu bi-mā unzila 'alaynā* ("We believe in what has been sent down to us"), whereas the lower writing of the Sanaa Palimpsest expands the text with *min kutubin (nu'mīnu bi-mā unzila 'alaynā min kutubin*, "We believe in the scriptures that have been sent down to us"; see Hilali, pp. 46, 248). Yet even if other palimpsest variants can also have a certain explicative aspect, as we shall see forthwith, it remains doubtful to me whether the majority of them are adequately described as glosses. In any case, the principal question that remains is whether the hypothesis that is perfunctorily adumbrated by Hilali and painstakingly argued by Sadeghi—namely, that the lower text of the palimpsest is derivative from the standard recension—is correct. Is there reason to presume that the pattern detected by Sadeghi that pluses in the lower writing of the palimpsest are best viewed as having evolved from the standard text extends beyond the folios analyzed by him? Although this is not the place for a comprehensive study, it may be of interest to examine a few examples.

At Q 9:16, in lieu of the standard recension's reference to "those of you who strive (*alladhīna jāhadū minkum*)," the palimpsest has "those of you who strive on his [= God's] path" (Hilali, p. 50),<sup>45</sup> thus adding the prepositional phrase *fī sabīlihi*, in line with other quranic verses that combine derivatives of the verb *jāhada* with *fī sabīli llāhi* ("in God's path"; e.g., at Q 2:218, 4:95, 5:54 in the standard recension) or even with *fī sabīlihi*, "in his path" (Q 5:35, 9:24).<sup>46</sup> The first thing to note is that the wording of the palimpsest here is indeed functionally explicative with regard to the standard text, insofar as it narrows the general concept of striving down to specifically militant striving, providing a further illustration of what Hilali means when she describes the variants found in the lower layer of the palimpsest as "interpretations." Secondly, a conjectured textual development (i) *alladhīna jāhadū minkum* (standard recension) > *alladhīna jāhadū minkum fī sabīlihi* (palimpsest) seems perfectly plausible; its primary impetus could have been inadvertent assimilation, but the fact that the result was a marginally less ambiguous phraseology may well have been a contributing factor. Nonetheless, it is difficult to dismiss outright the inverse development (ii) *alladhīna jāhadū minkum fī sabīlihi* (palimpsest) > *alladhīna jāhadū minkum* (standard

("an ant's weight") instead of *mīthqāla dharratin* ("a grain's weight") at Q 4:40, both of which were allegedly contained in the codex of Ibn Mas'ūd (Jeffery, *Materials*, 25, 36).

44. Of course, Hilali's invocation of "Qur'anic formulae" acknowledges that assimilation may have played a key role in the emergence of at least some of the palimpsest's pluses, but her choice of words suggests that she envisages such assimilation as a somewhat more conscious scribal act than Sadeghi.

45. Cf. Sadeghi and Goudarzi, "Ṣan'ā' 1," 55 (fol. 5b l. 22).

46. For a third occurrence of *fī sabīlihi*, this time with *qātala*, "to fight," rather than *jāhada*, see Q 61:4.

recension), given that the Quran also contains occurrences of derivatives of *jāhada* that are not followed by the prepositional complement *fī sabīli llāhi* (e.g., Q 3:142, 8:75, 16:110, and 29:6 of the standard text). These latter parallels, it might be argued, may well have caused a scribe to omit, rather than to add, *fī sabīlihi* at Q 9:16.

The issue is further complicated by the existence, in the standard text, of a near-doublet of the beginning of Q 9:16 (“Or did you [plural] reckon that you would be left alone, when God does not yet know those of you who strive . . .?”) at Q 3:142 (“Or did you [plural] reckon that you would enter the Garden, when God did not yet know those of you who strive . . .?”), without the complement “in his path.” Should we, then, take this near-doublet to strengthen the case for scenario (ii), on the grounds that it would have been primarily assimilation to Q 3:142 that occasioned the standard recension’s omission of *fī sabīlihi* at Q 9:16? In other words, should we espouse a general preference in favor of the variant that disrupts formulaic expectations? Or should we, conversely, take Q 3:142 to strengthen the case for scenario (i), on the grounds that the close correspondence between the two verses in other regards, coupled with the Quran’s demonstrably high formulaic density,<sup>47</sup> make it reasonable to opt for the standard recension’s version of Q 9:16 as the expected wording and therefore as more likely to be original? Applying Sadeghi’s criteria, it would seem, points to scenario (ii), thereby undermining the default view of the palimpsest’s pluses as textually secondary conjectured by him; but I cannot muster much conviction that scenario (i) does not remain a valid possibility.

It is, of course, precisely this kind of impasse, reached after an elaborate consideration of parallels at the phraseological as well as the sentence or verse level, that is apt to inspire despair about the prospects of quranic textual criticism, adding plausibility to Hilali’s decision not to bother too much about “the putative ‘original’ text” (p. 65).<sup>48</sup> Yet given how little has been published on such matters, there is evident scope here for at least one doctoral dissertation that would attempt to formulate plausible criteria of quranic textual criticism and then work through the palimpsest variant by variant. Moreover, another variant that also pivots around complements to the verb *jāhada* illustrates that it is at least occasionally possible to come to a more unequivocal conclusion than in the previous example. At Q 8:74, the standard text speaks of “those who have believed and emigrated and striven on God’s path (*jāhadū fī sabīli llāhi*),” while the lower layer of the Sanaa palimpsest has a reference to those who “have striven with you on God’s path with their possessions and their persons” (*jāhadū ma‘aka fī sabīli llāhi bi-amwālihim wa-anfusihim*; Hilali, p. 47).<sup>49</sup> In this case, the verb *jāhadū* combined with the prepositional phrase *bi-amwālihim wa-anfusihim* occurs in the immediate vicinity, namely, two verses earlier at Q 8:72, where the standard recension has “those who have believed and emigrated and striven with their possessions and their persons on God’s path” (*inna lladhīna āmanū wa-hājarū wa-jāhadū bi-amwālihim wa-anfusihim fī sabīli llāhi*; cf. also Q 49:15). The Sanaa variant is thus plausibly seen as resulting from

47. See A. G. Bannister, *An Oral-Formulaic Study of the Qur’an* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014).

48. To adduce another example from Hilali’s catalogue of variants that gives rise to an ultimately agnostic assessment, consider Q 2:90, where the palimpsest’s lower writing has *baghyan wa-‘adwan* while the standard recension has only *baghyan* (Hilali, *Sanaa Palimpsest*, 46; cf. Sadeghi and Goudarzi, “Šan‘ā’ 1,” 41, fol. 2a l. 11). It might be that the wording of the palimpsest arose by assimilation of Q 2:90 with Q 10:90 (“Pharaoh and his hosts followed them *baghyan wa-‘adwan*, in insolence and transgression”). However, there are five occurrences of *baghyan* alone without subsequent *‘adwan*, of which one, at Q 3:19, occurs in close proximity to the verb *kafara*, like Q 2:90. Prima facie, here too the textual development might have run either way and inadvertent assimilation could conceivably have resulted in an omission rather than an addition.

49. Cf. Sadeghi and Goudarzi, “Šan‘ā’ 1,” 53 (fol. 5a ll. 1–2).

what Sadeghi calls “assimilation of nearby terms,”<sup>50</sup> while there is, of course, once again a certain explicative effect to the palimpsest’s presumptive addition of *bi-amwālihim wa-anfusihim*. Pertinently, the Quran contains a third occurrence of the serial iteration *alladhina āmanū wa-hājarū wa-jāhadū*, namely, at Q 9:20. In this case, however, unlike the previous one, this further parallel does not undermine but rather supports the scenario just developed: since Q 9:20, like Q 8:72, combines *jāhadū* with the double complement *bi-amwālihim wa-anfusihim fī sabīli llāhi*, it would presumably have reinforced the assimilative force exerted on Q 8:74, making a development away from, rather than toward, the formulaically slightly disruptive wording of the standard text the more likely assessment.

#### THE QUESTION OF THE SANAA PALIMPSEST’S ORIGINAL COMPLETENESS

Cellard’s edition, which unites folios now kept at four different locations, illustrates that the study of quranic manuscripts is often faced with the problem of manuscript dispersal and the attendant need to reconstitute codices based on shared codicological and palaeographic criteria of their constituent leaves.<sup>51</sup> Besides the *Codex Amrensis*, there is, for instance, the recently carbon-dated “Birmingham Fragment,” namely, MS Birmingham University Library Mingana Islamic Arabic 1572b, which Alba Fedeli has identified as belonging together with MS Bibliothèque Nationale Arabe 328c.<sup>52</sup> As intimated above, the issue of manuscript dispersal also affects the Sanaa Palimpsest, and it looms large behind one of the main points made in Hilali’s book—her marked doubts as to whether either the lower or the upper writing of the Sanaa Palimpsest ever formed part, or were intended to form part, of a complete quranic codex whose other remnants might still be located and reunited with the basic stock of folios constituted by Dār al-Makḥṭūāt 01-27.1. I find myself in disagreement with Hilali here.

A selection of relevant quotations will help introduce Hilali’s idea. The lower layer of the palimpsest represents “Qur’anic passages written down for the scribe’s personal use” while “the upper text is a fragmentary Qur’an text that bears signs of unfinished work” (p. 4). Both the lower text and the upper one “are probably a collection of disparate leaves” rather than having formed part of “a Qur’an codex in its final shape” (p. 19). The lower text specifically “is probably a scribal exercise” (p. 19); it “contains a few passages from the Qur’an” (p. 44) and it is the result of the activities of a “teaching circle” (pp. 67–70), in which the text was “dictated and interpreted in a way that affected its form and its content” (p. 65). The upper text, too, was a “work in progress” (p. 70), whose scribes and decorators “were experimenting with different styles that might go into a finished work, but in pages that had no intention of being part of one” (p. 75). The decorations of the upper text only have the effect of “giving the manuscript the appearance of a completed book” (p. 75, my italics); “the decoration in the upper text is, perhaps, a tool for giving the leaves the impression that they are part of a book, but still a tool that does not follow a regular pattern” (p. 17).

50. Sadeghi and Bergmann, “Codex of a Companion,” 388.

51. Two recent initiatives aim to reunite scattered codices digitally: the Bodleian Library’s *Digital Muṣḥaf* (<http://digitalmushaf.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/>), initiated by Keith Small and Alasdair Watson, and the project *Paleocoran* (<https://paleocoran.eu/>), supported by the Collège de France and the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities (the lead investigators being François Déroche and Michael Marx). Both were accessed on September 22, 2018.

52. See A. Fedeli, “The Provenance of the Manuscript Mingana Islamic Arabic 1572: Dispersed Folios from a Few Qur’anic Qures,” *Manuscripta Orientalia* 17.1 (2011): 45–56 (and also <https://iqsaweb.wordpress.com/2013/03/18/qmme/>, accessed September 22, 2018); Dutton, “Two ‘Hijāzī’ Fragments.”

If Hilali is right, the lower layer of the Sanaa palimpsest in particular is nothing more than a bundle of writing exercises and solitary folios that were never meant to form part of a full copy of the Quran, meaning that the palimpsest would have little to tell us about what a first-century *hijrī* quranic codex might have looked like. Moreover, if she is correct, then the quranic passages attested by the lower writing may not have been meant to represent the text of scripture as it stood or was considered to stand; rather, she would appear to incline toward viewing the *scriptio inferior* as an indistinct blending of the quranic text with miscellaneous interpretive glosses that the palimpsest's scribes may have failed to demarcate from the former merely because they expected the product of their work to be restricted to their own personal use rather than being passed on to other readers.<sup>53</sup> It seems to me that the upshot of all this would be a view of the lower layer of the palimpsest's variant text that resembles the manner in which Ibn al-Jazarī (d. 833/1429), as quoted by al-Suyūfī (d. 911/1505), attempted to explain the emergence of the nonstandard readings (*qirāʾāt shādhḥa*) of the quranic text that are transmitted in Islamic scholarship: some of the Prophet's companions, he says, would "insert exegesis into recitation by way of explanation and clarification (*yudkhillūna l-tafsīra fī l-qirāʾati idāhan wa-bayānan*), because they were endeavoring to ascertain the true meaning of what they received from the Prophet by way of recitation; they were safe from confusion [between the text of scripture and the explanations added to it], but some of them may have written it [the explanations] down together with it [the recitation]."<sup>54</sup>

What is the evidence on which Hilali bases her radical reassessment of the kind of object that is the Sanaa Palimpsest and especially its *scriptio inferior*? At various junctures, she points to the manuscript's "evidence of multiple stages of correction" (p. 19) and the "absence of uniformity among the folios, especially in the techniques for chapter separation and versification in the upper text" (p. 20).<sup>55</sup> She also places considerable emphasis on what she calls a "reading instruction" found at the beginning of the ninth sura, *al-Tawba*. In the Quran's standard recension, this is the only sura that lacks the introductory formula "In the name of God, the merciful and compassionate" (*bi-smi llāhi l-raḥmāni l-raḥīm*), known as the basmala. By contrast, the lower writing of the palimpsest, according to Hilali's reading, does begin with the basmala, yet follows with the instruction, "Do not say 'In the name of God'" (*lā taqul bi-smi llāhi*) before continuing with the opening verse of the sura (pp. 103 = fol. 5a ll. 8–9; see also pp. 39–40).<sup>56</sup> Hilali maintains that such a reading instruction would not be expected on a folio belonging to a complete quranic codex (pp. 19, 20).<sup>57</sup> Finally,

53. See Hilali, *Sanaa Palimpsest*, 39: "The scribe leaves his/her errors which suggests that his/her writing is not intended to be transmitted but to be kept with the purpose of learning from one's mistakes, a practice likely to belong to a teaching context of transmission." At one point, Hilali even claims that the lower text "seems to be written with the intention to be washed" (*Sanaa Palimpsest*, 7).

54. Al-Suyūfī, *al-Itqān fī ʿulūm al-Qurʾān*, 7 vols. (Medina: Majmaʿ al-Malik Fahd li-Ṭibāʿat al-Muṣḥaf al-Sharif, 1426h), 2: 508 (from *nawʿ 22–27: maʿrifat al-mutawātir wa-l-mashhūr . . .*).

55. A detailed treatment of sura dividers and verse markers that includes graphic reconstructions is found in Hilali, *Sanaa Palimpsest*, 40–44.

56. Cf. Puin, "Früher Koranpalimpsest," 272; Sadeghi and Goudarzi, "Ṣanʿāʾ 1," 53. The consonantal skeleton لاھل at the beginning of line 9, which Hilali reads as *lā taqul*, is construed by Puin as the end of the word *al-anfāl*, understood to belong to an end-of-sura notice (*hādhihi khātimatu sūratī l-anfāl*) beginning in line 8, and followed by an abbreviated variant of the basmala (*bi-smi llāhi*). Thus, for Puin there is no instruction to omit the basmala here. Sadeghi and Goudarzi occupy an intermediate position: they agree with Puin that line 8 has an end-of-sura notice running on into line 9, but also agree with Hilali that there is an instruction here not to pronounce the basmala. More specifically, they posit a case of haplography, according to which the scribe erroneously omitted to repeat the consonantal skeleton لاھل.

57. At one point, Hilali speaks of reading instructions in the plural (*Sanaa Palimpsest*, 19), but this seems to be a slip.

there are two cases in which the lower layer contains a word or a letter that was corrected by overwriting without the remnants of the original writing having been erased (pp. 38–39). For instance, on folio 9b (l. 9; Q 33:61), the letter *qāf* was initially written in its final shape and then corrected to its medial shape, but the scribe did not erase the tail end of the original letter. To Hilali, this failure to carry the correction through by eliminating all remaining vestiges of the original writing suggests that the palimpsest's lower layer was "not intended to be transmitted but to be kept with the purpose of learning from one's mistakes" (p. 39).

I do not find any of these arguments indefeasibly compelling. For starters, the fact that both layers of the palimpsest lack uniformity in various respects does not strike me as outrageously anomalous for a quranic codex produced at such an early point in time. Take, for instance, Hilali's observation that the markers for groups of ten, fifty, or a hundred verses in the upper text have different shapes and sometimes appear in the wrong place (p. 75). Why should we assume that the scribes who produced the upper layer would have avoided such inconsistencies and inaccuracies had they been working on a complete copy of the Quran? And why should we view the fact that the upper writing's verse division does not correspond to any one of the standard counting systems catalogued in later Islamic scholarship as supporting Hilali's hypothesis "that the manuscript was produced as fragments" (p. 82)? After all, the same type of eclecticism, by later standards, is also found in the *Codex Parisino-Petropolitanus* and the *Codex Amrensis*.<sup>58</sup> Similarly, what entitles us to assume that the scribe or scribes responsible for the lower writing would have been more careful to erase the remnants of a misplaced final *qāf* had he or they been working on a complete copy of the Quran? There seems to be a real danger here of basing our assessment of what the Sanaa Palimpsest is on anachronistic misconceptions about the standards of scribal and decorative accuracy, consistency, and uniformity that would have been deemed appropriate, in the first Islamic century, to a full quranic codex destined for some form of public use.<sup>59</sup> As for the reading instruction, assuming that Hilali's reading of the text here is correct,<sup>60</sup> I fail to see why it should be necessarily incompatible with the possibility that the lower writing of the palimpsest might once have constituted a full codex of the Quran. The fact that other early codices contain beginning-of-sura and end-of-sura notices added by a later hand certainly demonstrates that even at a somewhat later time a degree of editorial footnoting, as it were, at the beginning and end of suras was considered unproblematic in quranic codices.<sup>61</sup>

58. See above. Of course, these two codices are also reconstructed from dispersed groups of folios, but Hilali does not indicate that she doubts the general undertaking of such codicological reconstitution or the criteria on the basis of which it is normally pursued.

59. I do not rule out that a comparison with other early codices might possibly show that what we find in the palimpsest is radically out of line with other early Qurans, but such a comparative analysis remains to be undertaken.

60. See n. 56 above.

61. See, for instance, the ending of *Sūrat al-Anfāl* (8) in MS Staatsbibliothek Wetzstein II 1913 (scan and transliteration available at <https://corpuscoranicum.de/handschriften/index/sure/8/vers/1/handschrift/163>, accessed September 23, 2018) and the beginning of *Sūrat Tā Hā* (20) in MS British Library Or. 2165 (Déroche and Noja Nosedá, *Le manuscrit Or. 2165*, 210–11 = fol. 50b). A defender of Hilali's hypothesis might insist that the difficulty raised by the instruction (found on fol. 5a) not to pronounce the basmala resides in the fact that it effectively retracts the basmala found in the previous line. Would it not be odd for a quranic codex that was intended to be a complete and definitive copy of the text of scripture to engage in this kind of explicit self-correction? However, it seems equally conceivable that what we have on fol. 5a is an attempt at some sort of compromise solution to the controversy about whether to include the basmala at the beginning of *Sūrat al-Tawba* (9): the formula is written, as it would be at the beginning of every other sura, but the reader is instructed not to pronounce it. We would, accordingly, be faced with a phenomenon resembling the *katīb* vs. *qarē* distinction familiar from manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible.

To her credit, Hilali is fully aware that her thesis is bound to be controversial and she addresses some of the objections that might be raised against it. Thus, in response to the worry that it would have been odd to sacrifice a very considerable amount of parchment to mere writing exercises, she maintains that the parchment used seems to have been of a low quality (p. 70).<sup>62</sup> She also ventures the conjecture that perhaps the parchment was meant to be recycled from the beginning, i.e., that the lower writing “was intended to be erased after being written on” (p. 70).<sup>63</sup> Hilali furthermore realizes that her case against the folios of the palimpsest ever having been, or having intended to be, part of a complete codex becomes progressively less likely the greater the amount of continuous quranic text that is attested by them. Hence, she duly acknowledges the arguments that Sadeghi and Goudarzi marshal in support of their identification of four additional folios of the palimpsest (p. 32). However, even though it is obviously hazardous to express a view on the matter without having been able to compare at least photographs of all four folios in question with Dār al-Makḥṭūṭāt 01-27.1, it may be questioned whether Hilali succeeds in rebutting these considerations.<sup>64</sup> There is also the fact that her edition of the lower layer is confined to a much smaller number of folios than the edition by Sadeghi and Goudarzi, leaving out more leaves than she includes (p. 34). While lack of access, damage to the parchment, and illegibility are all understandable reasons for not attempting to edit these folios, it would surely have been imperative to verify at least whether Sadeghi and Goudarzi were right in claiming that the lower writing on these folios does indeed correspond to the approximate quranic passages they discerned. If so, then the amount of quranic text represented by the lower layer would expand significantly, thereby undermining Hilali’s statement that the latter only “contains a few passages from the Qur’an” (p. 44). Hilali’s explicit refusal to assess whether both the four stray folios included in the Sadeghi and Goudarzi edition and the different set of palimpsest leaves that have come to light in Sanaa’s Sharqiyya Library belong together with Dār al-Makḥṭūṭāt 01.-27.1<sup>65</sup> seems

62. The low quality of the parchment of the Sanaa Palimpsest is also highlighted by Déroche, *Qur’ans of the Umayyads*, 49.

63. This is presumably why she says elsewhere that “the lower text seems to be written with the intention to be washed” (*Sanaa Palimpsest*, 7). In fact, the only thing that creates this appearance, as far as I can see, is that the attribution of such a premeditated intention to recycle assists Hilali in fending off the cost-of-parchment objection just rehearsed. We are thus faced with an appearance generated by the requirements of her preferred theory about the kind of object that the Sanaa Palimpsest is.

64. Sadeghi and Goudarzi (“Ṣan‘ā’ 1,” 11 n. 21) adduce the almost identical size, the fact that “the same intricate and colored ten-verse markers appear in the upper codex,” and the fact that the so-called lower modifier from Dār al-Makḥṭūṭāt 01-27.1 also appears to be present on two of the stray folios (Stanford 2007 and David 86/2003). Hilali acknowledges the first consideration but declares it less relevant than it might at first appear due to the damage to many of Dār al-Makḥṭūṭāt 01-27.1’s folios (a trail of reasoning I fail to follow); she also promises that the second and third consideration will be dealt with later (p. 33 n. 8). However, the later sections to which the reader is referred only show that the ten-verse markers are sometimes positioned inconsistently, in a manner that is not compatible with the ordinary verse markers (pp. 78–79). Yet surely the point at stake in this particular context is simply that both Dār al-Makḥṭūṭāt 01-27.1 and the four stray folios edited by Sadeghi and Goudarzi share the same—or very similar—colored ten-verse markers, whether or not they are always inserted consistently. The same applies, mutatis mutandis, to the lower modifier. In any case, since Hilali did not study the four orphaned folios in question, she was not able to assess whether the ten-verse markers and the lower modifier from Dār al-Makḥṭūṭāt 01-27.1 really are shared with some or all of the stray folios, as asserted by Sadeghi and Goudarzi.

65. Hilali, *Sanaa Palimpsest*, 32: “my work does not attempt to verify if the folios added to MS 01.-27.1 by Sadeghi and Goudarzi are in fact part of the same manuscript”; *ibid.*, 33: “I neither confirm nor reject the possibility that this manuscript [i.e., the one found in the Sharqiyya Library and provisionally identified as belonging together with Dār al-Makḥṭūṭāt 01.-27.1] complements the totality of the leaves, as has been alluded to by Déroche” (p. 33). On the latter collection of folios, see n. 11 above.

to skirt questions whose detailed assessment would be an indispensable requirement of her headline thesis.

To my mind, the strongest argument militating in favor of the traditional view that the leaves of Dār al-Makḥṭūṭāt 01.-27.1 originally belonged to a complete quranic codex is their unfailingly sequential arrangement of verses on those folios or parts thereof that can still be deciphered. Moreover, there are a number of folios that include the end of one sura followed by the beginning of the next, in conformity with (some version of) the decreasing length principle of arrangement that also underlies the different sura ordering of the standard recension. Such sura transitions in the lower writing are found on folios 5a and 23a (= fol. 22a Sadeghi/Goudarzi) in Hilali's edition, and there are four more cases in Sadeghi and Goudarzi's edition of the lower writing.<sup>66</sup> Thus, as edited by Sadeghi and Goudarzi, Dār al-Makḥṭūṭāt 01-27.1 includes all of Q 9 (albeit with illegible lacunae) with sections of Q 8 before and Q 19 (*Sūrat Maryam*) afterward.<sup>67</sup> It seems, then, that the lower layer of the palimpsest, whether or not it included the full text of the Quran as presently known, contained a run of entire suras arranged in a way that was commonly applied in quranic codices. Such a sequential succession of verses and suras is not what one would expect of a disparate selection of quranic material copied out as a scribal exercise, but is entirely consonant with the process of producing a complete scriptural codex (*muṣḥaf*). The contention that the lower layer of the palimpsest comprises a far more substantial amount of quranic text than would appear congruent with writing exercises is also supported by the verso pages of folios generally following on from their rectos and by the number of cases in which separate folios follow on from one another.<sup>68</sup> It seems preponderantly likely, hence, that the scribe or scribes who produced both layers of the palimpsest were engaged in the project of copying out an entire Quran. Of course, we cannot prove that this project was ever completed (or, indeed, that the quranic text that was being copied by the palimpsest's scribes consisted of 114 suras that closely correspond to the standard recension). A residual possibility that either layer of the palimpsest remained an unfinished torso must accordingly be conceded, although the positive evidence for this appears to be largely confined to aspects of the upper layer's decoration.<sup>69</sup> Nevertheless, an unfinished codex is not the same as a collection of leaves that were never meant to form part of a full codex but only to be washed and reused.

66. Namely, on fols. 4b, 19b, 26b, 32a according to their numbering (see the overview in Sadeghi and Goudarzi, "Ṣanʿāʾ 1," 37–39). For sura separators in the upper text, see Hilali, *Sanaa Palimpsest*, 75–76.

67. Sadeghi and Goudarzi, "Ṣanʿāʾ 1," 53–63. Of the 4.5 folios concerned, Hilali only edits 1.5.

68. Thus, fol. 6a follows on from 5b and fol. 11a follows on from 10b (Hilali, *Sanaa Palimpsest*, 106, 116). According to Sadeghi and Goudarzi, who edit a greater number of folios, there are further cases of inter-folio continuation (4b and 5a, 21b and 22a, 22b and 23a, 34b and 35a, all identified according to Sadeghi and Goudarzi's numbering).

69. According to Hilali, *Sanaa Palimpsest*, 78, some of the normally colored ten-verse and fifty-verse markers have not been colored in.



Copyright of Journal of the American Oriental Society is the property of American Oriental Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.