



THE DATING OF THE 'UTHMANIC CODICES: AN ANALYSIS OF THE SOURCES AND OF THE HYPOTHESES ADVANCED IN SCHOLARSHIP

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Abstract. *The article examines the question of when the earliest written copies of the Qur'an prepared by the order and under the supervision of 'Uthman b. 'Affan were produced, and analyses the hypotheses that have been advanced on this question in Eastern and Western scholarship. It is shown that the sources contain no explicit statement of the years in which these codices were written, and that the views current in the literature therefore rest for the most part on scholarly conjecture. Three principal datings are distinguished and compared: the end of 24 and the beginning of 25 AH; approximately 30 AH; and a range extending from 25 to 33 AH. The three-stage reconstruction recently proposed by 'Umar Hamdan is examined separately, together with its implications for the number of copies produced. The article concludes that the copying and dispatch of the 'Uthmanic codices began at the earliest in 25 AH and was completed at the latest in 33 AH, and that codices whose date of writing does not fall within this period cannot be ascribed to 'Uthman b. 'Affan. Attention is drawn to the circumstance that manuscripts copied in conformity with the 'Uthmanic orthography may themselves have come to be called «'Uthmanic codices».*

Keywords: *'Uthmanic codices, mushaf, Suhuf of Abu Bakr, codification of the Qur'an, rasm 'Uthmani, Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, Ibn Khaldun, 'Umar Hamdan, Qur'anic manuscripts, Tashkent mushaf.*

INTRODUCTION

The debates concerning the earliest written copies of the Holy Qur'an, prepared by the order and under the supervision of 'Uthman b. 'Affan, remain current to the present day and continue to occupy a central place among the scholarly questions studied by Eastern and Western specialists alike (Hamdan, 2006). Because reliable information on the subject is scarce, and because what information exists contains disputed points, the majority of researchers refrain from drawing categorical conclusions and confine



themselves to comparing the hypotheses that have been advanced and to analysing their respective merits and shortcomings (Blachère, 1959).

The principal reason for this caution is that the sources contain no precise statement of the years in which these codices were committed to writing (al-Bukhari, 2008:no. 4987; Abu 'Ubayd, 1995). From this it follows, as a matter of logic, that the opinions expressed about the appearance of the 'Uthmanic codices rest in most cases upon scholarly conjecture. A deeper analysis of the available data will therefore assist in resolving the scholarly task of proving or refuting the hypotheses that have been put forward up to the present day.

The aim of the present article is accordingly to establish, on the basis of the primary sources and of the modern literature, the chronological limits within which the copying and dispatch of the 'Uthmanic codices may be placed, and to assess the reconstructions that have been proposed for the stages of that undertaking.

MAIN PART

It should be emphasised at the outset that the foundation of the 'Uthmanic codices was laid in the age of revelation itself, since the first to have the text of the Qur'an written down in full and arranged was the Messenger of God himself (al-Bukhari, 2008:no. 4986). The first bound copy of the Qur'anic text, which entered history under the name of the «Suhuf of Abu Bakr», served as the primary source of the codex ascribed to 'Uthman. This fact is recorded in the relevant primary sources, and in particular in the hadith literature (al-Bukhari, 2008:no. 4986; Abu 'Ubayd, 1995).

The hadiths are indeed the most important source for the history of the codices ascribed to 'Uthman. The best known and most reliable of the reports concerning the collection of the text of the codex and its commitment to writing are recorded in the works of Imam Abu 'Ubayd and Imam al-Bukhari (Abu 'Ubayd, 1995; al-Bukhari, 2008:no. 4987), while the chronology of the caliphate within which these events are to be placed is supplied by the historical tradition (al-Tabari, 1982:IV).

Three views are found in the sources as to the historical period in which the production of the 'Uthmanic codices falls. According to the first, the codices began to be copied at the end of the year 24 and the beginning of the year 25 AH, that is, in 645 CE. Hafiz Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani (d. 852/1449) also supported this opinion, and the majority of modern researchers have arrived at the same conclusion (Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, 1959:IX).



According to the second view, the 'Uthmanic codices were produced around the year 30 AH, that is, about 650 CE. The historian Ibn al-Athir (d. 630/1233) and the scholar Ibn Khaldun (d. 808/1406) likewise endorsed this opinion, and the researcher Blachère has confirmed it as well (Ibn al-Athir, 1987:III; Ibn Khaldun, 2004; Blachère, 1959).

According to the third view, the writing of the codex was carried out at the earliest in the year 25/645 and at the latest in the year 33/653. Madame Hind Shalabi has advanced this opinion (Shalabi, 1966). Of these conclusions, the first is the more widely supported among researchers, while the third is accepted as a compilation of the various conjectures.

Among contemporary researchers, 'Umar Hamdan - a specialist in the Qur'anic sciences at the Centre for Islamic Theology of the University of Tübingen in Germany, a lecturer in exegesis and in the sciences of the Qur'an, and the director of the Centre for Islamic Jurisprudence attached to that university - presents a new hypothesis concerning the history of the 'Uthmanic codices and their number in his article «The project of the 'Uthmanic codices: a new approach to its history and to the determination of the number of its copies». According to him, the copying and distribution of the 'Uthmanic codices was carried out in three stages and lasted approximately eight or nine years (Hamdan, 2006).

The first stage falls within the years 25-30 AH and is regarded as the principal and most important period. In the course of it the first copy was prepared from the Suhuf of Abu Bakr and, in the opinion of the majority, was reckoned the personal codex of 'Uthman (may God be pleased with him). Subsequently three further copies were made from it and sent to Basra, Kufa and Syria (Hamdan, 2006).

In the second stage three further copies of the codex were prepared and dispatched to Mecca, Bahrain and Yemen. The third stage covers the years 33-34 AH, in the course of which codices were sent to Homs, Tiberias and Tarsus. According to a further report, a separate codex was also sent to Egypt. In the last two stages specialists were likewise appointed to give instruction from the codices (Hamdan, 2006).

Although Dr 'Umar Hamdan has expressed many valuable observations in this study, he presents a considerable number of his conclusions not in a categorical form but as conjecture. His interpretation of the project of the codices as divided into three stages has also not yet been accepted by the scholarly community (Hamdan, 2006; Blachère, 1959).



It should be stated separately that the sources set out, in the main, the characteristics of six copies: those of Mecca, Medina, Basra, Kufa and Syria, together with the personal codex of 'Uthman (Abu 'Ubayd, 1995; al-Tabari, 1982:IV). Concerning the codices of Bahrain, Yemen and others, no definite information is met with. For this reason the scholars have not reached a unanimous opinion as to whether these in fact existed. At the same time, the absence of such an opinion cannot serve as a ground for denying that these codices existed. It may be that they were copied from the earlier codices and, having no distinguishing features of their own, were for that reason left undescribed (Hamdan, 2006).

It may be concluded that the work of copying the 'Uthmanic codices and sending them to the various lands began at the earliest in the year 25 AH and was brought to completion at the latest in the year 33 AH (Shalabi, 1966; Hamdan, 2006). Consequently, codices whose date of writing does not correspond to this period cannot be ascribed to 'Uthman b. 'Affan.

It is also appropriate to observe here that, at the time when the 'Uthmanic codices were being distributed to the various lands, other codices were likewise in the hands of the people. When the owners of such codices, by the order of the caliph, destroyed their own copies, took a transcript from the 'Uthmanic codex and reproduced the spelling of the words in precisely that form, it is not beyond possibility that these new codices too were called «'Uthmanic codices» in the sense of being «in conformity with the orthography of the 'Uthmanic codex» (Abu 'Ubayd, 1995; al-Bukhari, 2008:no. 4987).

CONCLUSION

The continuation of the investigations devoted to the emergence of the 'Uthmanic codices - an event of world-historical significance and of the highest importance in the history of Islam - and the placing of the data and conclusions contained in them upon a scholarly foundation are of the utmost importance for societies that strive to preserve a Muslim identity of their own. The refutation, by means of a scholarly grounding of the historical reality in this field, of the dubious assertions disseminated by certain ill-informed persons is among the important tasks confronting researchers (Hamdan, 2006; Blachère, 1959).

The analysis carried out above permits the following conclusions. First, the sources contain no explicit indication of the years in which the 'Uthmanic codices were written,



and the datings proposed in the literature are therefore conjectural in character. Second, of the three views current in scholarship, the dating to the end of 24 and the beginning of 25 AH enjoys the widest support (Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalani, 1959:IX), while the dating to about 30 AH rests upon the historical tradition (Ibn al-Athir, 1987:III; Ibn Khaldun, 2004) and the range from 25 to 33 AH represents a synthesis of the two (Shalabi, 1966). Third, the three-stage reconstruction advanced by ‘Umar Hamdan is valuable but has not yet been accepted by the scholarly community (Hamdan, 2006). Fourth, the chronological limits within which the undertaking may be placed are the years 25 and 33 AH, and this conclusion supplies a criterion for assessing the ascription of surviving manuscripts to ‘Uthman.

The circumstance that one of the codices ascribed to ‘Uthman (may God be pleased with him) is preserved in Tashkent renders the investigations in this field a matter of still greater urgency for the scholars of Uzbekistan. A promising direction for further research would be the comparison of the orthography and the codicological features of the Tashkent codex with those of the other surviving copies, with a view to establishing its place within the chronological framework set out above.

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