

Imagining the Divine: Exploring Art in Religions of Late Antiquity across Eurasia

Edited by Jaś Elsner and Rachel Wood

The British
Museum

The Empires of Faith research project was generously funded by the Leverhulme Trust

LEVERHULME
TRUST

Publishers

The British Museum
Great Russell Street
London WC1B 3DG

Series editor

Sarah Faulks

*Imagining the Divine:
Exploring Art in Religions of Late Antiquity across Eurasia*

Edited by Jaś Elsner and Rachel Wood

ISBN 978 0861592340

ISSN 1747 3640

© 2021 The Trustees of the British Museum

Text by British Museum contributors © 2021 The Trustees
of the British Museum. All other text © 2021 individual
contributors as listed on p. iii

Front cover: Plaque featuring a *senmurw* (*simorgh*), 7th or 8th
century CE, stucco, h. 16.9cm, w. 19.3cm. Chal Tarkhan,
Iran. British Museum, London, 1973.0725.1

Pg. iv: Funerary stele inscribed in Coptic for 'Little Mary',
8th century CE, limestone, h. 134cm, w. 48.8cm. Egypt.
British Museum, London, 1903.0615

Printed and bound in the UK by 4edge Ltd, Hockley

Papers used by the British Museum are recyclable products
made from wood grown in well-managed forests and other
controlled sources. The manufacturing processes conform to
the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

All British Museum images illustrated in this book are
© 2021 The Trustees of the British Museum

Further information about the Museum and its collection
can be found at britishmuseum.org

Contents

Introduction	1
<i>Jaś Elsner and Rachel Wood</i>	
1. The Materiality of the Divine: Aniconism, Iconoclasm and Iconography	5
<i>Salvatore Settis, with a response from Maria Lidova</i>	
2. Bodies, Bases and Borders: Framing the Divine in Greco-Roman Antiquity	19
<i>Verity Platt, with a response from Dominic Dalglish</i>	
3. Comparing Material Texts	40
<i>Katherine Cross</i>	
Kufa and Kells: The Illuminated Word as Sign and Presence in the Seventh–Ninth Centuries	
<i>Benjamin C. Tilghman and Umberto Bongianino</i>	
4. The Jewish Image of God in Late Antiquity	66
<i>Martin Goodman, with a response from Hindy Najman and Jaś Elsner</i>	
5. Empire and Faith: The Heterotopian Space of the Franks Casket	82
<i>Catherine E. Karkov, with a response from Katherine Cross</i>	
6. Buddhapada: The Enlightened Being and the Limits of Representation at Amarāvati	95
<i>Jaś Elsner, with a response from Alice Casalini</i>	
7. From Serapis to Christ to the Caliph: Faces as a Re-appropriation of the Past	116
<i>Ivan Foletti and Katharina Meinecke, with a response from Nadia Ali</i>	
8. Uses of Decorated Silver Plate in Imperial Rome and Sasanian Iran	136
<i>Richard Hobbs, with a response from Rachel Wood</i>	
9. Material Religion in Comparative Perspective: How Different is BCE from CE?	155
<i>Christoph Uehlinger, with a response from Stefanie Lenk</i>	
Contributors	176
Index	178

Chapter 3

Comparing Material Texts: Introduction to U. Bongianino and B.C. Tilghman, ‘Kufa and Kells: The Illuminated Word as Sign and Presence in the Seventh–Ninth Centuries’

Katherine Cross

The visitor walking through the *Imagining the Divine* exhibition began by facing large-scale, anthropomorphic stone sculptures – Roman gods, seated statues of the Buddha – and ended, in the final room, contemplating illuminated parchment. The organisation of the exhibition by religious tradition and by chronology placed early Islamic codices next to Christian art from the Insular world. There was stone here, too, but sophistication, creativity and investment in religious visual production had found a new outlet over the course of the 1st millennium, and the last word for exhibition visitors certainly lay with just that – the written word.

This series of juxtapositions gave rise to Umberto Bongianino and Benjamin Tilghman’s comparison. In the final gallery of the exhibition, in the display of Islamic and Christian holy books from the 6th to 11th centuries, we saw visual echoes between these distinct traditions. Parchment glittered with gold; entire pages were filled with densely worked designs. In our curatorial meetings, the *Empires of Faith* team discussed placing the Rawlinson Gospels next to a leaf from the Gold Qur’ān in a single case, to highlight those parallel elements. Yet, somehow, viewed side by side, the similarity seemed less convincing. Suddenly the basic differences stood out: the horizontal and vertical formats, the highlighted letters in the Insular Gospel book compared to the even use of colouring on the Quranic script, and even the differing states of conservation testifying to divergent histories of collecting and display.

We were not the first to suggest similarity. As Bongianino and Tilghman indicate, the unique Blue Qur’ān and the purple pages of deluxe Christian codices like the Royal Bible or the Stockholm Codex Aureus may perhaps have had common ancestors in Roman and Byzantine imperial productions.¹ Common ancestors have also acted as explanation for the prominence of decorative designs in Insular Gospels and Kufic Qur’āns. Scholars have searched for the origins of ‘carpet pages’ found in Insular Gospel books, from the repeating patterns of the Book of Durrow to the designs developed around a central cross motif in the St Chad Gospels. Some have suggested that Roman mosaic pavements provided the inspiration for such pages; the same kind of source may have contributed to the full-page geometric decoration in Islamic manuscripts.² While the term ‘carpet pages’ may have been intended to refer to such pavements, the dominant allusion rapidly became the ‘Oriental’ rug, segueing into a perception of similarity or connection. Intimations of ‘Eastern’ influence on Insular manuscript art frequently refer to apparent Coptic models, identified by comparative method and through possible connections with Eastern Christian communities as the means of transmission.³

Bongianino and Tilghman’s rigorous form of comparison holds a different kind of explanatory power. Theirs is a rare case in that it privileges neither case study, but treats them on equal terms: they neither mine Islamic traditions for possible influences on western Europe, nor hold up the early medieval Christian tradition as a norm or benchmark. Such an equal comparison is (usually) only possible through collaboration between experts in different fields. They seek not to identify connections, but to pinpoint similarity and

difference with more precision, thus focusing our eyes on specificities. This process of ‘estrangement’, as they name it, can provide a means of removing assumptions and generalisations, while building up a more complex and densely layered picture of developments in the second half of the 1st millennium. We do indeed see a flowering of manuscript art and commitment to the written word across the wider Mediterranean world, but there are no simple explanations here. Moreover, the distinctions between Christian and Islamic doctrinal positions and material productions bring us back to the idea of connection with a fresh perspective: we can imagine dialogue, response and reaction, rather than disembodied transmission.

The comparison here views Islamic and Insular manuscript art as intimately bound up with religious doctrine and its interpretations. It all comes back to representation: how members of different religious communities attempted to represent the divine, and their anxieties in doing so. The written word was not subject to the same struggles as were images in the 1st millennium, but its aesthetic qualities did provoke overlapping concerns – issues of interpretation and mediation, of representation and revelation. Viewed from this perspective, Pope Gregory the Great’s statements in letters of 599 and 600, that pictures are the books of the unlearned, do not render images quite so innocuous.⁴

This chapter, then, demonstrates the distinct contribution of art-historical comparison to our understanding of 1st-millennium religion. Yet it also gestures towards the possibilities of viewing the same comparative cases through a different disciplinary lens, and bringing in more strictly historical variables. As a historian reading their piece, I was prompted to think about the material and social contexts of the production of these manuscripts. An Insular Gospel book was the product of a monastic scriptorium, and it can reveal further networks of ecclesiastical contact: the painter of the St Chad Gospels (c. 725–50) seems to have known the Lindisfarne Gospels (c. 700), for instance, and an 8th-century stone fragment from Aberlady (East Lothian) repeats the same design of interlaced birds that appears on its cross-carpet page.⁵ More than this, however, they are products of institutions, not individual scribes and artists. The names we know, such as that of Eadfrith, the scribe of the Lindisfarne Gospels, present themselves as points of connection and of historical reference, but we must not forget that these individuals acted within their communities. After all, we know to associate Eadfrith with the Lindisfarne Gospels from the colophon added by a 10th-century priest, Aldred. Aldred listed the names not merely of the scribe but also of the bookbinder and the jeweller who covered it (all members of the community), and stated that the book was written ‘for God and for St Cuthbert and – jointly – for all the saints whose relics are in the island’.⁶ Besides the colophon, Aldred’s own addition to the Gospels was an interlinear English translation, some three centuries after the book was first produced.

When we have information about the production of Quranic manuscripts, or *maṣāḥif* (sing. *muṣḥaf*), it is generally in the formal, original inscription naming the calligrapher and/or the donor-patron, although these almost never

survive in pre-10th-century manuscripts. The ‘Nurse’s Qur’ān’, a fragmentary manuscript of the 11th century, is particularly interesting in this respect, since it not only mentions the calligrapher, ‘Ali b. ‘Aḥmad, but also the female donor, Fatima, a nursemaid in the court of the governors of North Africa, and a woman named Durra, a court secretary who may have supervised the production of the codex.⁷ Such references become more common from the 11th century, but the use of paid scribes, and of non-Muslim scribes in the early period, seems to have been controversial.⁸ Bongianino suggests that, more usually, the production of Quranic manuscripts of the 8th and 9th centuries may have been centred on ‘dedicated scriptoria’ (p. 51) under rulers and governors. Where the money and materials for Insular Bibles came from is often unclear – sometimes from a wealthy commissioner, perhaps, but frequently from the communities themselves and their estates; on the other hand, it is the scribal contexts of Quranic production for which we have little to guide us. We are certainly dealing with broadly comparable investments of wealth, resources, time and skill, but further consideration of who made those investments would, no doubt, distinguish the nature of the value ascribed to these books in different societies.

Colophons are relatively unusual (although their appearance in Insular manuscripts suggests another possible Eastern Christian influence),⁹ but inscriptions record more about the lives of these books than their creation. The St Chad Gospels and a mid-8th-century Canterbury Gospel book, now known as the Stockholm Codex Aureus, bear witness to their own plundering and later purchase or ransom. The purchaser of the St Chad Gospels exchanged them for ‘his best horse’,¹⁰ while the ealdorman Ælfred and his wife, Werburg, redeemed the Codex Aureus from vikings with ‘pure gold’. These exchanges indicate that Christians and pagan vikings alike recognised lavish holy books as economic assets, which could be bought and sold. In the Islamic world, the controversy over paid scribes is but one facet of the discomfort over treating *maṣāḥif* in such a mercenary fashion, with some scholars prohibiting the buying and selling of Quranic manuscripts, and others protesting the use of Quranic text on coinage – the greater issue being one of ritual purity.¹¹ Legal notices recording the endowment of Qur’āns to mosques reflect the accepted attitude.

This is not to say that the special status of Gospel books did not guide their fates. Ælfred and Werburg claimed to have redeemed and donated the Codex Aureus to Christ Church, Canterbury, ‘because we did not wish these holy books to remain longer in heathen possession’.¹² More often, as also in the St Chad Gospels, marginal additions in luxury Bibles recorded land grants or manumissions – economic information seemingly unrelated to the holy text. Yet, even then, it must have been the status of the book as preserved and respected by the community and by God that attracted such records. Oaths, legal transactions and donations all gained a sense (and perhaps, a greater reality) of permanence by their proximity to holy scripture. It is my impression that such notes are much less frequent in early Quranic manuscripts. Occasionally, calligraphers added

marginal notes giving details of the book's endowment (see **Pl. 3.8**), and in a few instances readers have recorded births.¹³ It would be worthwhile investigating the occurrence of marginalia and the different information recorded in the two traditions. The permanence of holy books might be envisaged as unchanging and eternal, apart from the material world; or it might be accumulative, gathering adherents and associations throughout the life of the manuscript.

Colophons and marginalia point also to the role of political patronage and investment in religious texts and books. The uniformity of Islamic holy books, Bongianino and Tilghman suggest, lies with imperial power and centralisation; Christian manuscripts, in contrast, were each time 'an opportunity to cast the Gospels in a new and different form' (p. 53). This is an important insight, but it is also worth pausing to recognise that Christian rulers did not have the administrative structure to enforce such uniformity even if they desired to. Charlemagne (r. 768–814) – or, rather, Alcuin, his leading scholar and later abbot of Tours – made some efforts in that direction: the single-volume Bibles created at Tours are perhaps the closest that early medieval western Europe had to imperially sponsored mass production of holy books. Several of the Tours Bibles were produced for export to other monasteries, cathedrals or lay owners, but there is no evidence for a programmatic dissemination equivalent to that of the Umayyad governor al-Hajjāj (694–714), or of the Abbasid caliph al-Mahdī (775–85), who sent Qur'āns to the empire's capital cities for public recital.¹⁴ The Carolingians placed emphasis on legibility and a correctly emended biblical text, rather than on complete uniformity.¹⁵ The Tours Bibles did not become a universally authoritative model, nor was their production matched by any stifling of diversity, in contrast to caliphal attempts at either destroying or canonising variant texts of the Qur'ān.¹⁶ For producers of early medieval Bibles, imperial authority was more often something to be invoked than obeyed. The Codex Amiatinus, for instance, produced for the Pope before 716 and modelled, partly, on Italian exemplars, was intended to tie the remote monastic community of Wearmouth-Jarrow to Rome: Rome as the seat of St Peter, but also as the imperial centre.¹⁷

Finally, the comparison brings us to a deeper understanding of social developments and concepts, most notably in the relationship between the spoken and written word. Scholars of the 1st millennium are by now familiar with the idea that orality and literacy co-occurred and intersected – that these were not separate systems, nor should we imagine a progression from orality to literacy.¹⁸ In considering side by side early Islamic and early medieval Western Christian relationships with the holy word, the importance of this understanding is reinforced. Here we have two separate examples of the interaction between oral and literate cultures demonstrating this principle in divergent ways. As Bongianino and Tilghman so elegantly put it: 'If the Qur'ān originated as an oral text that was written down at one point, the New Testament was a written text regularly performed orally' (p. 52). The functioning of the written word in society immediately alters culture, administration and memory, creating a semi-literate society,

however few can actually read it.¹⁹ But how that written text was imagined in relation to the spoken word is also of immense significance. When layered with religious meaning, incorporating issues of divine inspiration or revelation, and the complexities of language or possibilities of translation, then questions of belief *about* words must be as central to our investigations as is their practical function.

This last area is where art historians and historians can most profitably combine their energies in further investigation. Beyond the bounds of the central scripture and the pages of holy books, how did the written word act in society – and what did people believe about it? These questions open up the possibilities of a much broader comparison that investigates the functioning of the religious word as an object of study equivalent to the image in terms of materialising the divine. Other religious traditions can illuminate our understanding: the Dunhuang manuscript of the Heart Sutra (see **Pl. 1.4**), also displayed in the *Imagining the Divine* exhibition, provides further grounds for interrogating beliefs about translation, reading, image and speech.²⁰ This is an image created from words, that can only be read by the initiated and that claims to be a translation even while only being possible in the script in which it is now written: the Chinese characters, which must be read beginning from the centre, form the shape of a stupa, each character taking up equal space. We must also consider our manuscripts alongside those objects that have long been the preserve of the epigraphist or archaeologist. These holy texts, even when written, have never been confined to the manuscript page. As one materialisation of scripture among many – monumental inscriptions, amuletic tags, legends on coins and reliquaries – how do books convey their special meanings and definitive status?

Notes

- 1 Brown 2011: 24; Netzer 2011: 239; Bloom 2015: 196–218. D'Ottone Rambach 2017 suggests a direct Christian precursor from 9th-century Spain.
- 2 Kendrick 1938: 98–9; Elsner, Lenk *et al.* 2017: 154.
- 3 Brown 2003: 312–21 (where she also suggests the use of prayer mats in Western Christian communities); Brown 2011: 34.
- 4 Chazelle 1990.
- 5 Brown 2003: 380–1, 400; Henderson 1987: 124.
- 6 Lindisfarne Gospels (London, British Library, Cotton MS Nero D.iv), f. 259r; Brown 2003: 102–4.
- 7 Déroche 2017; Elsner, Lenk *et al.* 2017: 105–6.
- 8 Blair 2008: 81; George 2017: 125.
- 9 Brown 2011: 29. On colophons, see Gameson 2001.
- 10 Henderson 1987: 126.
- 11 Zadeh 2009: 454–5.
- 12 Dodwell 1982: 9.
- 13 George 2017: 121.
- 14 George 2017: 118; and below, p. 51.
- 15 Ganz 1994; McKitterick 1994.
- 16 Flood 2012: 265.
- 17 Bray and Story 2018: 126–7.
- 18 Innes 1998: 3–5.
- 19 Goody 1977; Finnegan 1988; Thornton 1988.
- 20 Elsner, Lenk *et al.* 2017: 80–1.

Bibliography

- Blair, S.S. 2008. 'Transcribing God's word: Qur'an codices in context', *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 10, 71–97.
- Bloom, J.M. 2015. 'The Blue Koran revisited', *Journal of Islamic Manuscripts* 6, 196–218.
- Bray, C. and Story, J. 2018. *Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms: Art, Word, War*, London.
- Brown, M. 2003. *The Lindisfarne Gospels: Society, Spirituality and the Scribe*, London.
- 2011. 'The eastwardness of things: relationships between the Christian cultures of the Middle East and the Insular world', in M.T. Hussey and J.D. Niles (eds), *The Genesis of Books: Studies in the Scribal Culture of Medieval England in Honour of A.N. Doane*, Turnhout, 17–49.
- Chazelle, C. 1990. 'Pictures, books, and the illiterate: Pope Gregory I's letters to Serenus of Marseilles', *Word & Image* 6, 138–53.
- Déroche, F. 2017. 'Le prince et la nourrice', *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 19, 18–33.
- Dodwell, C.R. 1982. *Anglo-Saxon Art: A New Perspective*, Manchester.
- D'Ottone Rambach, A. 2017. 'The Blue Koran: a contribution to the debate on its possible origin and date', *Journal of Islamic Manuscripts* 8, 127–43.
- Elsner, J., Lenk, S. et al. 2017. *Imagining the Divine: Art and the Rise of World Religions*, Oxford.
- Finnegan, R. 1988. *Literacy and Orality: Studies in the Technology of Communication*, Oxford and New York.
- Flood, F.B. 2012. 'The Qur'an', in H. Evans (ed.), *Byzantium and Islam: Age of Transition*, New York, 265–9.
- Gameson, R. 2001. *The Scribe Speaks? Colophons in Early English Manuscripts*, H.M. Chadwick Memorial Lecture 12, Cambridge.
- Ganz, D. 1994. 'Mass production of early medieval manuscripts: the Carolingian Bibles from Tours', in R. Gameson (ed.), *The Early Medieval Bible: Its Production, Decoration and Use*, Cambridge, 53–62.
- George, A. 2017. 'The Qur'an, calligraphy, and the early civilization of Islam', in F.B. Flood and G. Necipoğlu (eds), *A Companion to Islamic Art and Architecture, Vol. I: From the Prophet to the Mongols*, Hoboken and Oxford, 109–29.
- Goody, J. 1977. *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*, Cambridge.
- Henderson, G. 1987. *From Durrow to Kells: The Insular Gospel-Books, 650–800*, London.
- Innes, M. 1998. 'Memory, orality and literacy in an early medieval society', *Past & Present* 158, 3–36.
- Kendrick, T. 1938. *Anglo-Saxon Art to AD 900*, London, 98–9.
- McKitterick, R. 1994. 'Carolingian Bible production: the Tours anomaly', in R. Gameson (ed.), *The Early Medieval Bible: Its Production, Decoration and Use*, Cambridge, 63–77.
- Netzer, N. 2011. 'The design and decoration of Insular Gospel-books and other liturgical manuscripts, c. 600–c. 900', in R. Gameson (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain, Vol. I: c.400–1100*, Cambridge, 225–43.
- Thornton, D.E. 1988. 'Orality, literacy, and genealogy in early medieval Ireland and Wales', in H. Pryce (ed.), *Literacy in Medieval Celtic Societies*, Cambridge, 83–98.
- Zadeh, T. 2009. 'Touching and ingesting: early debates over the material Qur'an', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 129, 443–66.

Kufa and Kells: The Illuminated Word as Sign and Presence in the Seventh–Ninth Centuries

Umberto Bongianino and
Benjamin C. Tilghman

The notion of sacred word occupies a key place in both Christian and Muslim theologies, with the Bible – particularly the Gospels – and the Qur’ān acting as a fundamental link between the faithful and the divine. As suggested by literary and material evidence, and often asserted in modern discourses, the content of both scriptures could and did assume, in particular contexts, visual and iconic connotations that transcended its textual meaning through a process of aestheticisation: word eliding into image.¹ In this essay, however, we will attempt to sharpen our sense of the aesthetics of holy writ in early Islam and early medieval Christianity by challenging the very utility of denoting calligraphic forms as ‘image’, emphasising instead the importance of locating the meanings of calligraphy within specific codicological and doctrinal contexts.

Undeniably, the material and visual care shown to holy writ in both revealed religions reflects a shared emphasis on the theological importance and numinous qualities of their respective scriptures. It is therefore hardly surprising to see broad visual similarities between early Gospel books and manuscripts of the Qur’ān. The *Imagining the Divine* exhibition at the Ashmolean Museum featured, among many instances of sacred writing, two deluxe codices from the 9th century that share a number of common characteristics, despite their profound differences in content and creation: the Royal Bible of Canterbury (**Pl. 3.1**) and the Blue Qur’ān of Kairouan (**Pl. 3.2**).² Both manuscripts use precious metals and vibrant pigments on parchment folios coloured in rich, dark hues to create a striking visual effect: the beholder is immediately impressed with the understanding that the text here presented is of a supremely important sort.

These similarities can be extended to the way in which such opulent codices were used and consumed within their communities. For example, early medieval Gospel books, often covered in highly decorated bindings featuring precious metals and gemstones, were carried through churches and served as a point of visual focus during ritual.³ Although Quranic manuscripts never played a prescribed liturgical role during canonical prayers, medieval Arabic sources abound with references to their relic-like nature and the symbolic importance of their position in ceremonial settings.⁴

Even today, both religions make use of lavishly decorated books in a way that goes far beyond the simple act of reading them, thus emphasising their numinous nature as receptacles of revelation and simulacra of the divine. This is especially evident in the case of manuscripts that are particularly old, large, precious or otherwise extravagantly made, the more so when associated with saintly figures. In Islam, a special veneration is accorded to those Qur’āns said to have belonged to the third caliph, ‘Uthmān b. ‘Affān (r. 644–56), or to those allegedly copied by the fourth caliph ‘Alī b. Abī Tālib (r. 656–61), traditionally revered as the first master of calligraphy, especially in Iran.⁵ Similarly, the St Augustine Gospels, traditionally understood to have been brought to England by its eponymous missionary and first Archbishop of Canterbury, are still used today in the ceremony of enthronement for a new primate of the Church of England.⁶

It is evident, then, that there are many lines along which a comparative approach can bring forth telling parallels between these two traditions, especially when considering the way in which sacred books were commissioned, produced and displayed.⁷ One might even go so far as to argue that, despite superficial differences such as language, script and ornamental repertoire, Christianity and Islam are fundamentally united in their way of treating holy writ visually and materially. In this essay, however, we aim to investigate the historical and ideological differences that underlie these superficial similarities. We believe that a comparative approach to these two manuscript traditions is instructive, not so much for the commonalities it reveals, but for the distinctions that it throws into sharper relief.

In the following pages, we will explore two intertwined problems that epitomise the different conception of sacred books developed by Latin Christianity and Sunni Islam between the 7th and 9th centuries. The first problem relates to the materiality of the codex, and to the different doctrinal, ritual and symbolic functions it performed. The second problem concerns calligraphy and illumination, and the way in which these two media were semiotically charged (or discharged) so as to best express the nature of the revealed text they were chosen to adorn. In tackling these questions, we will exclusively focus on deluxe Gospel books, which commonly found use in liturgical settings, and on mosque codices, by which we mean Quranic manuscripts intended for public ritual use.

Switching viewpoints on Qur'āns and Gospel books

The discipline of comparative art history, as we see it, can bear fruit in two different ways: by revealing what is familiar in objects that are unfamiliar, and by renewing scholarly interest in artefacts that have become subject to habitual seeing. As an exercise in this latter process of estrangement, we have deemed it useful to imagine how a western medieval cleric would have reacted to the aesthetics and materiality of an early Quranic codex and, conversely, how a Muslim religious scholar would have perceived a Christian illuminated manuscript, setting aside their possible aversion to the books' doctrinal content. The resulting considerations



Plate 3.1 Royal Bible, early 9th century, f. 43r, gold, silver and pigment on dyed parchment, h. 47cm. British Library, London, Royal MS 1 E VI. Image © British Library Board

have helped us develop a sharper edge to the traditional treatment of the subject, allowing a fresh look at some well-known material.

If we take as an example a folio from the famous Gold Qur'ān (Pl. 3.3), several unfamiliar features would immediately attract the attention of a medieval Christian beholder.⁸ There is, first and foremost, the format: wider than it is tall, the horizontal orientation of the page is a marked departure from the habitual shape of the Christian

Plate 3.2 Bifolio from the Blue Qur'ān, 9th century, gold and silver ink on dyed parchment, h. 28.9cm. The Sarikhani Collection, I.MS.1024. Image © The Sarikhani Collection



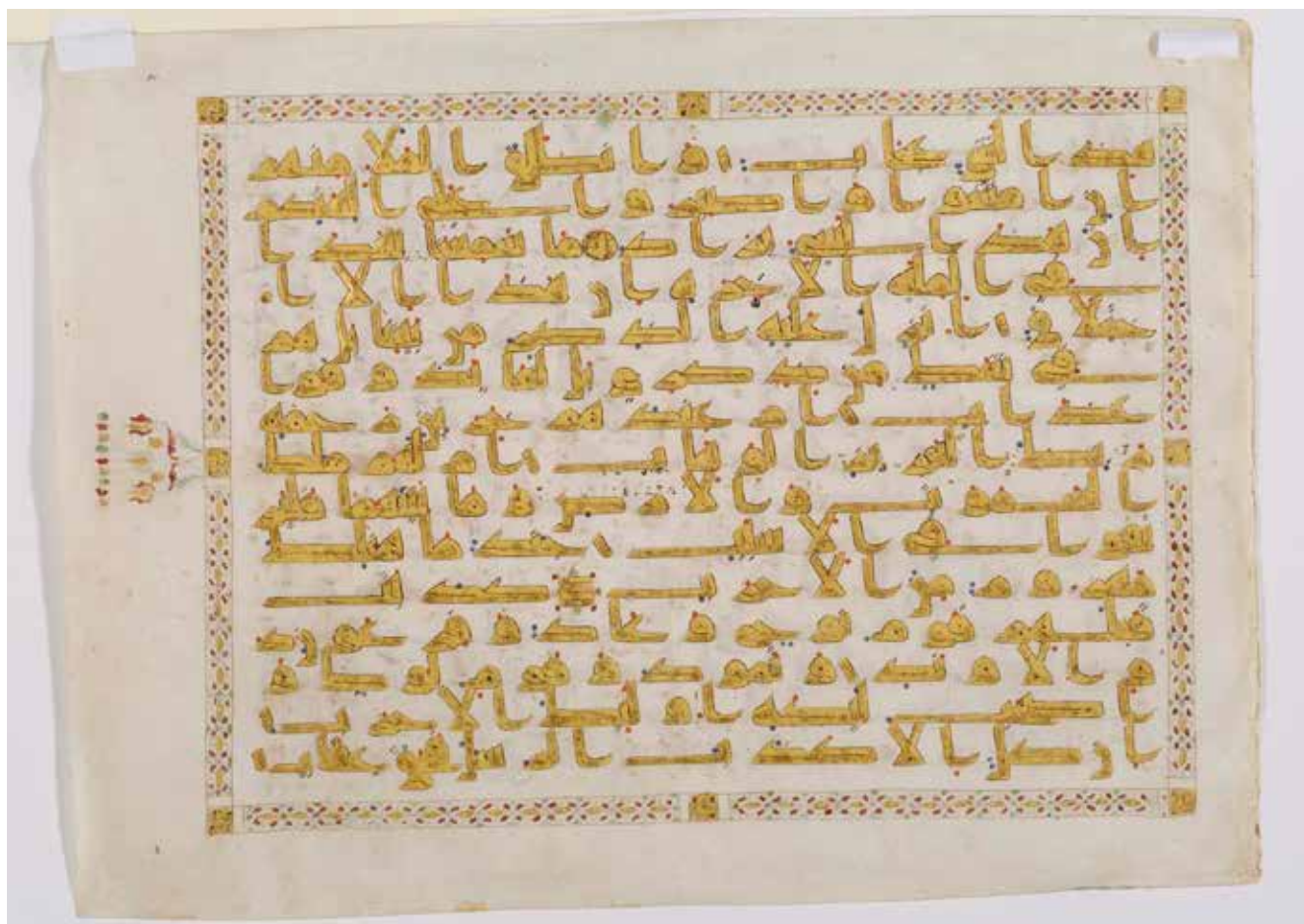
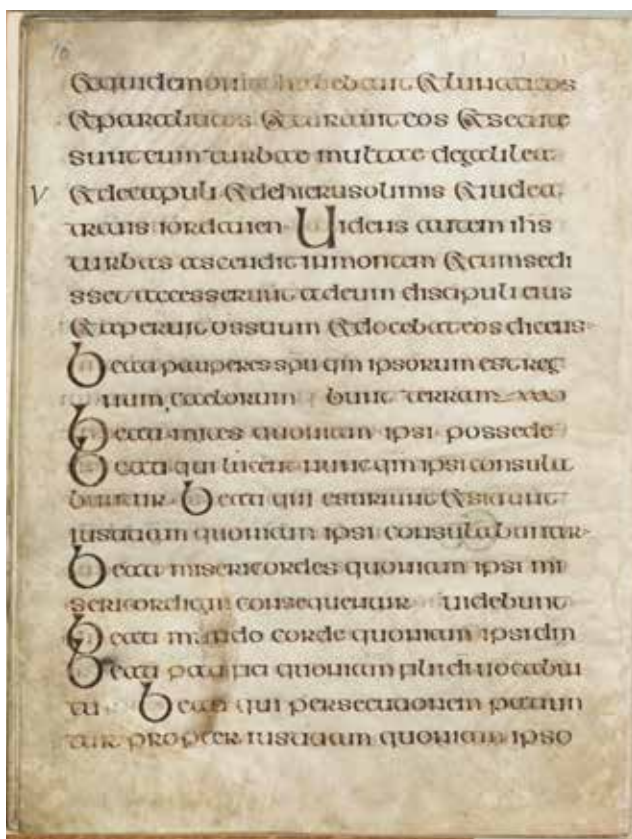


Plate 3.3 Folio from the Gold Qur'ān, 9th century, ink, gold and watercolour on parchment, h. 27.4cm. The Sarikhani Collection, I.MS.1020. Image © The Sarikhani Collection

Plate 3.4 St Chad (or Lichfield) Gospels, p. 16, h. 31.7cm. Lichfield Cathedral Library, MS 01. Image © Chapter of Lichfield Cathedral, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0



codex. In the Christian tradition, the upright rectangular format is not a simple accidental feature but had become, by the early Middle Ages, an iconographic motif that immediately conveyed the idea of 'bookness' in pictorial communication, as will be discussed later in this essay. The format is also important for reasons beyond the familiarity of shape, as it changes the way that the beholder relates to the codex phenomenologically. The horizontal parchment leaves are more flexible and unconstrained than upright folios stitched along the long side. As a result, the kinetic experience of turning the pages is amplified as they swing dramatically through the space of the reader. But perhaps the most striking aspect of the orientation is aesthetic. The elongated Kufic letters of the Arabic match the oblong format of the book, creating a pleasing resonance which even the non-Muslim viewer would be able to appreciate. The impression is that of an intentional congruence between script and format, in contrast with the calligraphy of early Gospel books, which often works dynamically against the upright format of the page. In fact, while Christian scribes frequently used vertical ascenders and descenders, they also employed dynamic diagonals and compressed letters along the horizontal axis, treating the frame as a kind of foil against which to play the forms of calligraphy.⁹

A prominent feature which would not escape our Christian cleric is the way in which the Gold Qur'ān is supremely concerned with creating a page that is pleasing as a unified whole. This concern is also apparent, to a certain extent, in deluxe Gospel books: consider, for instance, how

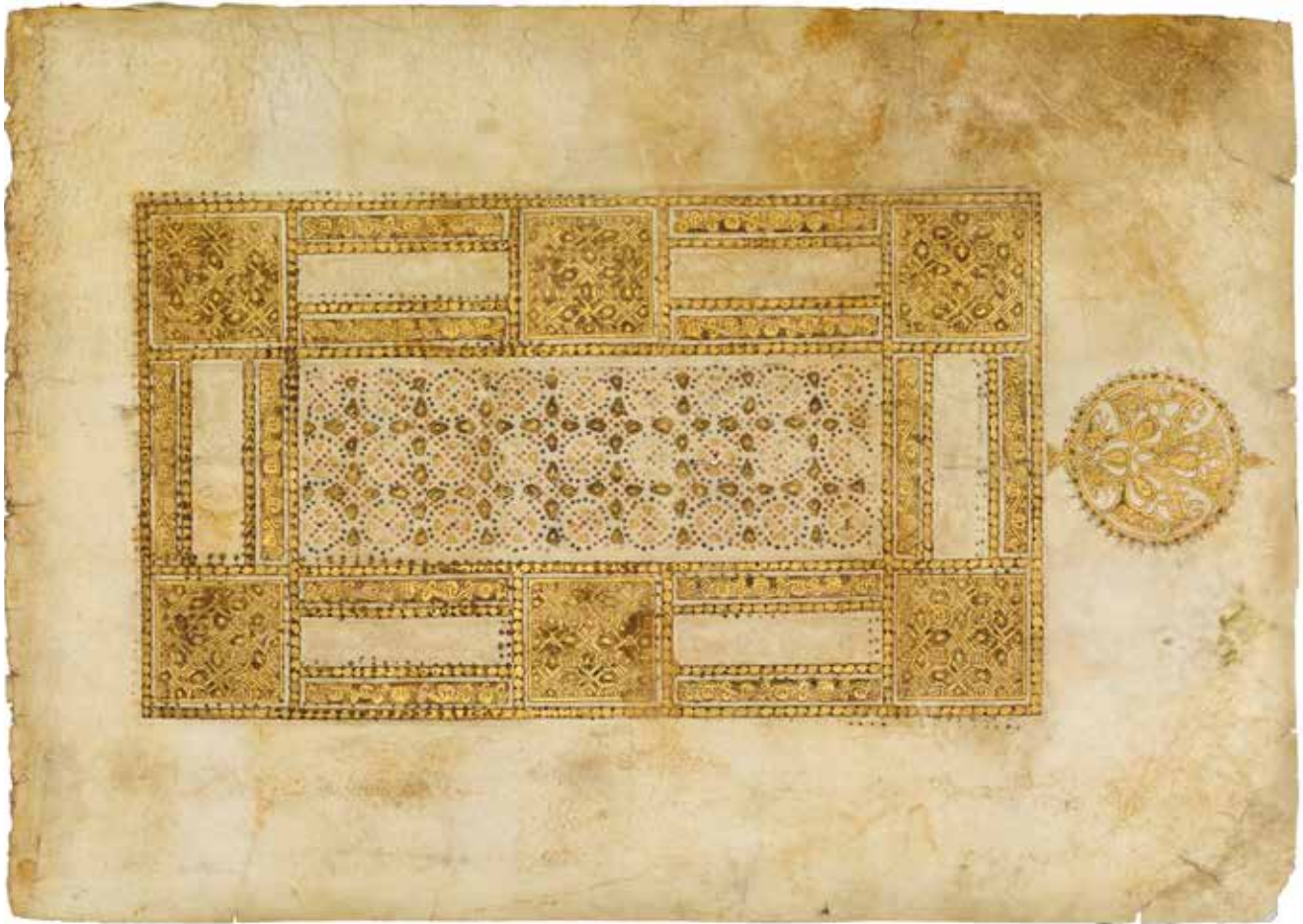


Plate 3.5 Frontispiece from a Qur'ān, 9th century, ink, gold and watercolour on parchment, h. 23cm. The Sarikhani Collection, I.MS.1026. Image © The Sarikhani Collection

the scribe of the St Chad Gospels attempted to meet the ruling on both the left *and* the right sides of text pages, occasionally truncating words, breaking them across two lines or, on one occasion, decoratively elongating a letter M (Pl. 3.4).¹⁰ The Gold Qur'ān, however, outstrips its Christian contemporary in consistency and harmony: the variegated nature of Christian writing and the particular forms that make up its alphabet(s) cannot match Arabic for producing a unified calligraphic composition. While geometric forms were a common feature of major decorative pages in Christian manuscripts, Quranic codices were suffused with a geometric sensibility on every folio – in ornament but also, and perhaps principally, in script. To a medieval scribe accustomed to the constant shape-shifting of letter forms in contemporary Christian manuscripts, this level of consistency and geometric rigour would indeed be astonishing.

Finally, something about the illumination of the Gold Qur'ān would arguably perplex the Christian beholder. The manuscript is, clearly, a deluxe codex, with its golden script recalling the most luxurious Gospel books of the time. However, the framing border on each page does not call attention to itself as the borders of luxurious Christian manuscripts do. It is scaled to less than the width of a line of text, and thus is rather unassuming within the page as a whole. Both the border and the foliated vignette in the left margin appear understated in their design, despite the use of gold and coloured pigments. The decoration thus falls somewhere between the relative simplicity of regular text

pages in Christian manuscripts – even the most opulent ones – and the complexity and invention of major initial pages.

The Gold Qur'ān and other Qur'āns from the same period opened with full-page illuminated frontispieces that would have most likely reminded our Christian viewer of the carpet pages of Insular Gospel books (Pls 3.5, 3.7). However, if the harmonious geometric design of these compositions would have felt familiar, the use of gold as the primary medium engenders a very different effect from the variegated pigments of Insular carpet pages, perhaps emphasising magnificence over complexity. Our Christian viewer would have looked in vain for any of the zoomorphic shapes that enliven most, if not all, of the Insular carpet pages, and would also have noted the lack of any other major decorative elements, save perhaps the finispiece at the end. Overall, the decorative programme of early Quranic manuscripts would likely have struck the eye of a medieval Christian as somewhat betwixt and between: too visually meagre for a deluxe codex, but much too lavish for a workaday book.

Now, in a similar way, let us imagine the possible reaction of a 9th-century Muslim scholar confronted with a manuscript such as the St Chad Gospels (Pls 3.4, 3.6–7). Contrary to his Christian counterpart, he would be acquainted with the book's format, since most Qur'āns of the first Islamic century shared the same vertical orientation (the transition to the horizontal format was only completed at the beginning of the 9th century). Polychrome



Plate 3.6 St Chad (or Lichfield) Gospels, p. 218, h. 31.7cm. Lichfield Cathedral Library, MS 01. Image © Chapter of Lichfield Cathedral, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

illumination would also be a familiar concept, in terms of both ornate calligraphy and full-page drawn decoration and frontispieces, which he would easily understand as a way of beautifying and enhancing the codex. However, other features of the St Chad Gospels would undoubtedly puzzle him, and perhaps disturb him.

First of all, our Muslim scholar would probably feel a sense of unease about the presence of figural representations in a religious manuscript (**Pls 3.6–3.7**): since the beginning of Islam, figural art has consistently been avoided in religious contexts, as is well known. He would be troubled, and perhaps even offended, by the more superficial iconographic messages of the illumination (such as the cross), while the complex symbolism of other motifs would simply fall beyond his comprehension (for example, the birds and quadrupeds, perhaps representing pelicans or peacocks and lions respectively, with their Christological connotations). He would doubtless marvel at the bewildering variations of calligraphic styles in a single codex, and at the malleability of the different scripts and letter shapes employed by the scribe. This feature would perhaps make him wonder whether the text was not written in a number of different languages, or

whether the manuscript did not include a series of disparate and unrelated texts, perhaps copied at different times. While the qualitative aspects of penmanship displayed in the St Chad Gospels would surely be acknowledged, the iconographic treatment and symbolic charge of different scripts and alphabets (Greek letters, runes, zoomorphic initials, etc.) would certainly be lost on him.

Also surprising to our Muslim scholar would be the scribe's attempts to highlight particular passages or sentences in the text (such as in **Pl. 3.4**, for the Beatitudes) at the expense of the visual balance and harmony of the written page. Whereas in the Islamic tradition every single letter of the Qur'ān is equally sacred and deserves the same calligraphic treatment, the way in which this and other Gospel books were copied eloquently conveys the structure of the text and often also the ways in which the text was read and interpreted. It would be hard for him to understand why the first letters of verses are calligraphically elaborated, or why certain verses are treated differently from the surrounding text. Moreover, in the full-text pages of the St Chad Gospels, the scribe seems to have accepted the visual noise of a jagged right margin caused by the desire to make



Plate 3.7 St Chad (or Lichfield) Gospels, p. 220, h. 31.7cm. Lichfield Cathedral Library, MS 01. Image © Chapter of Lichfield Cathedral, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

the end of each line coincide with the end of a word or, at least, with a syllable break. This results in written pages that, despite the aforementioned attempts to create visual unity, would still strike our Muslim beholder as untidy, asymmetric, perhaps even unsuited to represent the numinous nature of the Revelation.

If we were to draw an interim conclusion from these observations, we could certainly say that, despite the similar techniques and approaches to the illuminated Word adopted in these two traditions, scribal practice also diverged in important ways. In the case of Insular Gospel books, for instance, scripts and letter forms are constantly combined with iconographic motifs, shaped and reshaped by an extremely elaborate system of symbolic references acting on multiple interpretive levels. In the case of early Quranic codices, the text is treated in a much more sober way – certainly not in the choice of pigments and calligraphic forms, but in the geometric, uniform, almost hypnotic character of every single page, and in the rejection of textual hierarchies and symbolic references. While both scribes were thinking carefully about the text they copied and how it would be received by the beholder, we can provisionally

conclude that the amanuensis of the St Chad Gospels was primarily thinking textually, while the calligrapher of the Gold Qurʾān was mainly concerned with the visual qualities of his work. In the following discussion, we will explore how the divergent aesthetic features of Gospel books and Quranic codices reflected important doctrinal distinctions between the very nature of the two revealed texts.

Casting holy writ in script and codex

In order to better understand these doctrinal differences, we must broaden our perspective to consider some of the cultural forces at work in both the British Isles and the Arabian Peninsula during the 7th century.

Looking first at the British Isles, we find that many early Gospel books, such as the St Chad Gospels, are marked by strongly individualised styles that often reflect their local and regional artistic traditions. Such an insistence on regional identity accords with a European political and cultural geography that was marked by division and fluidity in the early medieval period.

It is important also to remember that the codex arrived in the early medieval British Isles as an iconic object. We know

that missionaries believed that the visual appeal of sacred books aided in their evangelisation of peoples who were largely illiterate.¹¹ And the iconic Gospels also just so happened to land in a region where text was commonly employed in ways that emphasised its sense of presence. The two primary non-Latin writing systems, runes and ogham, were rarely – if ever – used in literary contexts in the British Isles in the early Middle Ages. Rather, they served primarily as epigraphic scripts, serving often to invoke ancestors or absent patrons. Holy writ was therefore received into a culture that already understood writing as something to be seen and felt as much as read, and this provided fertile ground for the elaboration of new calligraphic forms.

The development of Insular Gospel books has often been cast as a process of assimilation whereby the ‘foreign’ forms of late antique Mediterranean Christianity were shaped to reflect regional traditions and tastes.¹² But we should be mindful to recognise how self-conscious these changes were. The Codex Amiatinus – which looks astonishingly like a late antique book – bears a dedicatory inscription emphasising that it was made at the edge of the world, and a distinct sense of the distance separating the British Isles from the rest of the known world was a common feature of early medieval discourses.¹³

Insular consciousness of being at the periphery is one of the driving forces shaping the scripts of this region. Insular Christian scribes were particularly aware of local paganism and of Roman authority, and they wanted to translate both into something that was distinctly of their place. Thus, the image of Matthew in the Lindisfarne Gospels famously derives from the same source as the image of the scribe Ezra in the Codex Amiatinus (see **Pl. 3.9**), and casts it in a markedly graphic style, with an inscription that transcribes the Greek word ‘AGIOS’ in Roman letters rendered in runic forms.¹⁴ These differences are the products of two distinct sacred agendas: the Codex Amiatinus was designed as a gift to the Pope, while the Lindisfarne Gospels served the ecclesiastical needs of its Northumbrian monastic community.¹⁵ When we look at the decoration of an early medieval Gospel book, then, one of the first questions we must ask ourselves is how its decoration marks – or effaces – its particular geographic, temporal and cultural origins. Even though the Gospel text might have been seen as timeless and universal, the specific visual and material form of any given copy would have associated it with a particular place.

When considering the coeval Islamic world, scholars have often remarked on the diverse cultural history and scribal traditions of the regions conquered in just a few decades by the Umayyad armies, from the Iberian Peninsula in the west, to Transoxiana and the Indus Valley in the east. Despite this incredible geographic and cultural diversity, the codification of an ‘official’ (or perhaps ‘orthodox’) mode of treating holy writ seems to have taken place not only in a very short period of time – between the end of the 7th and the beginning of the 8th century – but also within a relatively limited geographic span – roughly between Arabia and Greater Syria, in the so-called central Islamic lands. This means that there is little need to bring into the discussion the peripheries of the caliphate (which were crucial in many other respects) if our aim is to investigate the aesthetics and

doctrinal framework of early Quranic manuscripts. In the Islamic calligraphic tradition of the first centuries, the ‘centre’ stretches out to reach the extreme peripheries, in an attempt to impose a single style and format for transcribing and disseminating the Qur’ān throughout the Islamic world. This successful quest for uniformity demonstrates the existence of a widespread and carefully devised doctrine that hinged upon the semiotic power of lavish Quranic codices. Incidentally, that uniformity also renders it virtually impossible to attribute such manuscripts to particular scriptoria, cities or even regions with absolute certainty.¹⁶ This contrasts sharply with the Latin Christian world, where attempts to harmonise the styles of the periphery with those of the centre (usually Rome) can always be associated with distinct political and religious programmes on the part of makers and patrons.¹⁷ Claims of universality, somewhat paradoxically, were very often locally motivated.

Interestingly, the rise of Islamic calligraphy shares some commonalities with the Insular Christian milieu. Based on archaeological and epigraphic evidence, Arabic writing in late antique Arabia and Syria mainly served commemorative purposes similar to those of ogham and runic inscriptions in the British Isles.¹⁸ Just like those Insular alphabets, pre-Islamic Arabic scripts were only loosely codified, and were regionally varied, aesthetically modest and not ornamented in any way. However, while ogham and runes may have possessed magical connotations and a certain sacred quality, which would be occasionally transferred into Christian manuscripts and inscribed liturgical objects, pre-Islamic Arabic epigraphy was a purely utilitarian medium, the expression of ‘a vernacular employed by non-literate peoples and by those who, for whatever reason, preferred to write in other languages’,¹⁹ especially Greek and Syriac.

It is essentially with the codification of the Qur’ān and the rise of Islam that inscribed tombstones, commemorative texts, milestones, coinage and so forth acquired a special geometric configuration, stylistic uniformity and iconic aura driven by the extensive inclusion of Quranic formulae and excerpts. In brief, it was to visually express the numinous character of the Revelation that Arabic acquired its first calligraphic and geometric codification, with the birth of Kufic script. This happened ‘at the turn of the 8th century, in the context of the state-building programmes of the [Umayyad] caliphs ‘Abd al-Malik and al-Walīd’, when the new script ‘spread to different media, and was consistently displayed as a vehicle of the public image of the new religion and state’.²⁰ However, while Alain George and other scholars have argued for the influence of state-sponsored epigraphy (such as the mosaic inscriptions of the Dome of the Rock) on the scripts developed by Quranic calligraphers, it seems more likely that this aesthetic revolution was primarily driven by the transformations that were occurring in the Quranic manuscripts of the period. In fact, if angular Kufic became the only accepted mode of conveying the Qur’ān in all media for the following three centuries, this norm was arguably first established in the codices, which were the Qur’ān’s primary mode of transmission, and not in monumental epigraphy, which served other purposes, and ultimately depended on the preparatory drawings of Quranic calligraphers.

As opposed to the British Isles, where the arrival of Christian manuscripts completely revolutionised the local notion and perception of holy writ, the rich scribal traditions of late antique Arabia, Egypt, Syria and Iraq exerted a strong influence on the rise of Islam as a scriptural religion. Syriac, Greek, Aramaic and Coptic codices circulated among Christian communities of different denominations, and the early Muslims were perfectly aware of their material aspect and liturgical importance. Christian manuscripts in Middle Persian are also attested in north-west Arabia and Mesopotamia in the 7th century, as well as Hebrew scrolls from Egypt, Palestine and Babylonia, written on both papyrus and parchment. The model followed by the earliest Quranic copyists must have been that of Christian parchment codices, especially Greek and Syriac, and some Islamic sources mention Christian calligraphers hired by Muslims to transcribe the Qurʾān.²¹

The problems posed by the writing down of the Qurʾān, however, went far beyond the choice of scribal models. All Islamic traditions stress that the Qurʾān is an oral revelation: sacred utterances resulting from Muḥammad's mystical visions, etched on the hearts of his companions, who memorised them and handed them down through recitation. But oral transmission soon proved difficult within a rapidly expanding empire, and the first caliphs were faced with the problem of how to make sure that the Qurʾān was preserved and transmitted correctly. They could no longer rely on Muḥammad's companions, who were dying out, or their pupils, who had begun to break down into factions and come up with a number of textual variants. The Qurʾān had to be codified in written form as quickly as possible, a task that was undertaken by a group of scholars by order of the third caliph, ʿUthmān b. ʿAffān, at least according to later Muslim sources.

Up until the last quarter of the 7th century, what can be seen in the material features of Quranic manuscripts is the result of sensible, utilitarian choices. From this early period, all that survives are around 600 sparse folios and fragments written in the so-called 'Ḥijāzī style' (from Ḥijāz, the region of Arabia where Mecca and Medina are located), on parchment leaves of vertical format, with very rare use of margins, ruling or decoration. As observed by François Déroche, these scripts are unassuming and highly individual, and do not attempt to convey any visual message: in short, there seems to be very little visual ideology in these early fragments.²² All this would change dramatically with the codification of Kufic scripts, and the introduction of geometric principles and extensive illumination in the imperial codices produced under ʿAbd al-Malik (r. 685–705) and al-Walīd (r. 705–15), some of which were sent to the mosques of the main cities of the caliphate – Damascus, Mecca, Medina, Kufa, Basra, Fustat and also possibly Sanaa and Kairouan – in the early 700s.²³ This process reached its peak under the Abbasid caliph al-Mahdī (r. 775–85), when a new series of monumental codices was again sent to the main mosques of the caliphate,²⁴ and continued in the 9th century, with the proliferation of multi-volume horizontal codices, some of which were entirely written in gold.

These manuscripts, arguably produced in dedicated scriptoria and commissioned by rulers and governors to be endowed to important congregational mosques, were lavish

artefacts: unwieldy, extremely voluminous and created with the intention of boosting their materiality as sacred objects at the expense of their textuality as books. Furthermore, they were penned in highly stylised, uneconomic, barely legible scripts exempted from standard orthographic rules, which vigorously demand to be appreciated for their extralinguistic, pictorial features. A number of scholars have persuasively argued that these manuscripts were principally meant as a mnemonic aid for professional reciters who had already memorised the text of the Qurʾān.²⁵ However, the same scholars have rarely concerned themselves with the possible reasons why such recitational props had to be this large, lavish and elaborate. The economic implications of these aesthetic choices – the use of hundreds of parchment folios, gold, precious pigments and so forth – are especially worth considering: endowing such artefacts meant immobilising a considerable amount of capital into a fixed asset, for the exclusive benefit of a single mosque and its clerics (**Pl. 3.8**).²⁶ Because these assets had little practical use and were categorically inalienable (that is, they could not be sold for money, even in times of dire need), the symbolic and ideological motives behind these endowments – and behind the material features of the manuscripts themselves – must have been particularly compelling.

When considered alongside the sustained engagement with the transcendent oral nature of the Revelation in the history of the Qurʾān, the early history of the Christian Bible is marked by a high degree of textuality. Although the teachings of Christianity must have been largely transmitted orally as the religion spread, the core of the faith was clearly understood to lie in the written accounts that recounted the story of Jesus and his early disciples, and it is telling that the early Christian community, generally with few resources and occasionally under official persecution, made a concerted effort to publish and disseminate those written accounts.²⁷ Also telling is the clear preference in the New Testament for textual sources: epistles rather than sermons, histories rather than songs. Jerome's Vulgate translation constantly reaffirms this textuality, especially in the Gospels. Mark and Luke both include short prefaces which clearly designate the text as a written source, and it is certainly not a coincidence that the Gospels as a whole commence with the word 'book' (Mt 1:1: *Liber generationis Iesu Christi*; 'The book of the generations of Jesus Christ'), and conclude with a particular emphasis on the writing of books (Jn 21:25: *quae si scribantur per singula, nec ipsum arbitror mundum capere posse eos, qui scribendi sunt, libros*; 'which, if they were written every one, the world itself, I think, would not be able to contain the books that should be written').

Throughout the early Middle Ages, manuscript production similarly emphasised this textuality. A full account of that tradition is outside the scope of this essay, but two examples should suffice to illustrate this phenomenon.²⁸ In 331, the Roman emperor Constantine sent a letter to Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea, in Palestine, directing him to 'order fifty volumes with ornamental leather bindings, easily legible and convenient for portable use, to be copied by skilled calligraphers well trained in the art, copies that is of Divine Scriptures, the provision and use of which you well know to be necessary for reading in



Plate 3.8 Bifolio from a Qur'ān endowed to the Great Mosque of Damascus in 911, ink, gold and watercolour on parchment, h. 23cm. The Morgan Library and Museum, MS M.712, ff. 19v–20r. Image © The Morgan Library & Museum

church'.²⁹ The term 'divine scriptures' might not refer specifically to full Bibles, since pandects were very rare at this time. It is possible that Constantine asked for Gospel books or lectionaries, which would be more appropriate 'for reading in church'.

The passage above clearly reveals Constantine's concerns with the books' material and visual form, concerns that were both practical (legibility and convenience) and aesthetic (the ornamented bindings). But the fact that he put this request to Eusebius of Caesarea, who at this time was in Palestine, or perhaps Antioch, and thus a less convenient source, is telling. Though Eusebius is now largely remembered as the first historian of the Church and Constantine's court biographer, at the time he was better known for his work as a textual critic, having produced editions of the Septuagint and the Gospels, which he divided into subsections that prefigured modern chapters and verses and would be used throughout the Middle Ages. These subsections were then listed as a series of concordances that became a fixture in the prefatory material for early medieval Gospel books. Such canon tables are an emphatically textual form designed to aid the kind of cross-referenced reading that is deeply embedded in the nature of written communication.³⁰ So, even as Constantine's request emphasises the oral performance of scripture, it still affirms its essential

textuality. If the Qur'ān originated as an oral text that was written down at one point, the New Testament was a written text regularly performed orally.

Many centuries after Constantine, we can observe the textuality of the Christian Bible emphasised in the Codex Amiatinus, especially in the miniature representing Ezra (Pl. 3.9). Though the emphatically Roman style of the painting has already been noted, it is the iconography and the accompanying *titulus* that is most illuminating in this context. Behind the man is a large bookcase brimming with volumes, and another book and writing utensils are scattered about the floor. An inscription at the top of the page identifies him:

When the sacred codices were burned by the enemy horde,
Ezra, glowing with God, repaired this work³¹

The text refers to the passage in IV Esdras, an extra-biblical text that circulated in early medieval Europe, where the Jewish scribe Ezra is commanded by God to gather around him a team of scribes to restore the scriptures that had been destroyed during the Babylonian captivity. Fittingly, the intricate headpiece and breastplate that he wears mark him as a Jewish high priest, at least according to contemporary iconography, but his garment is the habit of a Benedictine monk. Ezra, the ancient protector and restorer of scripture,



is thus likened to the monks working in the scriptorium at Wearmouth-Jarrow in England where the Codex Amiatinus was produced. Coming near the end of several centuries of tumult following the dissolution of the Roman empire, Abbot Ceolfrith and his monks seem to be setting themselves up as 'latter-day Ezras', sharing with Rome the scriptures that they have protected and restored. In fact, it has been proposed that the inscription and miniature so closely reflect the scholarship of Bede, then a resident of Wearmouth-Jarrow, that he may have been directly involved in their creation, perhaps even wielding the pen and brush.³²

As a frontispiece to the volume, the portrait of Ezra the scribe surrounded by books marks the Codex Amiatinus as a work of bibliography: the text may be that of the Bible, but this particular edition of it is deeply concerned with bookmaking. Just a few pages after the portrait of Ezra is a succession of diagrams showing different ways of grouping the books of the Bible according to Saints Augustine, Jerome and Epiphanius, and then a further diagram showing the books of Pentateuch.³³ The Codex Amiatinus emphasises the bookly nature of Christianity in another way: it was apparently modelled in part on the now-lost Codex Grandior of the Roman scholar Cassiodorus (c. 485–c. 585), who commissioned the book as part of a larger Bible-production programme for the library of the Vivarium, his monastery in southern Italy.³⁴ The depiction of Ezra, in fact, seems likely to be based on one of Cassiodorus from the

Codex Grandior, a suspicion supported by faint impressions on the page that indicate it was traced from another source.³⁵

The text of the Gospels, and of the Christian Bible more broadly, was thus conceived throughout the early Middle Ages as a resolutely bookish form. It is not for nothing that the Evangelists are often pictured as scribes writing in bound codices, even though medieval scribes much preferred to work on loose, unbound sheets. The format of the codex was intrinsic to the origin and meaning of the Gospels. At the same time, every new Gospel book afforded an opportunity to cast the Gospels in a new and different form. That early medieval Christians did so with great regularity – even enthusiasm – indicates that they were not just comfortable with visual difference, but might have seen it as appropriate, or even necessary. As in the Islamic tradition, deluxe Gospel books were often commissioned and gifted as impressive acts of piety and munificence, but the tradition of seeing the form of biblical codices as highly mutable favoured a greater stylistic diversity, allowing patrons and scribes to carefully tailor a manuscript to address the spiritual, political and ideological needs of a particular moment.

Sign and presence in the Bible and the Qur'ān

Christianity and Islam emphasised the experience of holy writ as an encounter with the divine on the one hand, and as a complex message to be contemplated and interpreted on

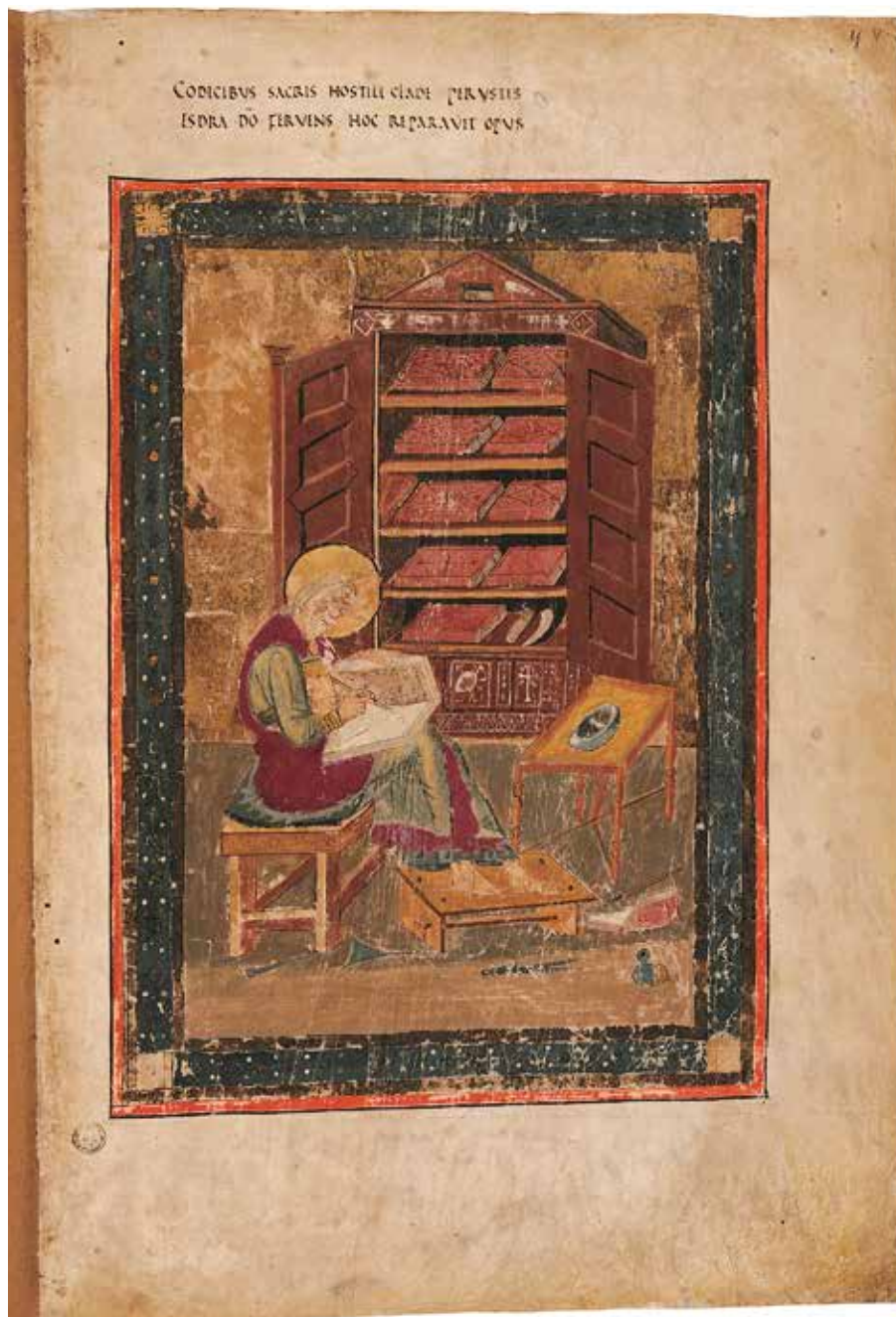


Plate 3.9 Codex Amiatinus, early 8th century, fol. Vr, ink and pigment on parchment, h. 50cm. Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Ms. Amiatino 1. Image: by permission of the Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali

the other. But the relative balance between affective and intellectual responses to scripture within each religion was significantly different. Early Islam tended to privilege the transcendent experience of scripture, while Christian doctrine emphasised close readings and complex exegesis of the text. The Qur'ān was largely believed to be the uncreated manifestation of God and His Word (*kalām Allāh*), but the teachings of prophets and evangelists in the Bible were understood as mortal communications that led to salvation through their study.³⁶ Since the texts in the Bible needed to be decoded to be understood, early medieval Christianity was deeply invested in the concepts of 'sign' and 'symbol'.³⁷

Conversely, it seems that early Islam was relatively less concerned with questions of signification in writing, and more tied to a notion of divine immanence. At the risk of oversimplifying the issue, it can be argued that the Qur'ān was not conceived of in hermeneutic terms by the majority of

its recipients, but rather as pure and clear Revelation, as implied in the verses 'And We have sent down on thee the Book that makes all clear' (16:89) and 'a book whose verses are explained in detail, a Qur'ān in Arabic for a people who know' (41:3). In the only Quranic passage acknowledging the existence of 'verses that are ambiguous', these are explicitly presented as lying beyond human comprehension – 'Nobody knows their true interpretation, save God' – and condemned are those who 'pursue what is ambiguous, seeking discord by pursuing its interpretation' (3:7). As opposed to early Christianity, in which exegesis became a core part of the religious discourse, the task of extrapolating the meaning of difficult narrative and normative passages in the Qur'ān (*tafsīr*) was undertaken by a relatively small cohort of professional exegetes, mostly concerned with the grammatical and semantic aspects of particular words or expressions.³⁸ As a result, it seems that the faithful's prevailing approach to the Quranic text, especially in the

first centuries of Islam, would have been based less on interpretation and more on surrender, in accordance with the original meaning of the word 'Islam'.

One can distinctly perceive a reflection of this doctrinal principle in the aesthetics of Kufic calligraphy. The solemn uniformity and strict geometric configuration of these scripts evoke an all-embracing feeling of numinousness which is deliberately disengaged from the meaning of the text. The purpose is never to give semiotic emphasis to particular letters, words or passages, but to present the Word of God as an indivisible and homogeneous continuum. It is indeed tempting to regard codices of the Qur'ān as being more about the experience of the revealed text than about its actual meaning. This may also explain why some iconographic experiments in Umayyad illumination, clearly derived from contemporary Christian practices, were soon abandoned by Quranic scribes: through their symbolism, they emphasised the sign over the presence. Although lacking representations of living beings, realistic depictions of mosques and paradisiac gardens such as those found in the Sanaa Umayyad codex may still have seemed incompatible with the doctrine of Quranic immanence, and were therefore replaced by entirely abstract geometric compositions and stylised vegetal motifs in later manuscripts.³⁹ The absence of iconographic symbolism from the work of the Quranic calligraphers and illuminators of the Umayyad and early Abbasid periods seems to support our antithetical characterisation of the Muslim and Christian scriptural traditions. These artists – who must also have been religious scholars – do not seem to have ever been interested in depicting, or even alluding to, some of the Qur'ān's most striking images, from the divine glass lamp blazing in the niche of the Verse of Light (24:35), to God's throne in the Throne Verse (2:25), to the many vivid descriptions of heaven and hell. Similarly, they never tried to give material form to the symbolic interpretation of the letters of the Arabic alphabet advanced by some contemporary authors, from the Sufi exegete al-Tustarī (d. 896) to the Shiite al-Qummī (d. 911), to the famous philosopher Avicenna (980–1037).⁴⁰

Unlike the Christian Bible, the Islamic Revelation did not derive its sacredness from it being a kaleidoscope of allegories and symbols,⁴¹ but rather from two other aspects that are absent from the Christian scriptural tradition and that epitomise the dual nature (oral and written) of the Qur'ān. The first aspect relates to the Qur'ān's linguistic perfection and miraculous literary qualities, according to the doctrine of *i'jāz* or 'inimitability' of the sacred book.⁴² Experiencing the Qur'ān meant (and often still means) marvelling at its beautiful and poignant expressions, rhythm and sounds, especially when chanted by a professional reciter; such oral performances are traditionally believed to induce ecstasy, weeping, fainting and even the immediate conversion of the listeners.⁴³

The second aspect, developed as a consequence of the Qur'ān's written codification, concerns the intrinsic sacredness of Quranic manuscripts as the physical manifestation of the divine, and as the materialisation of the Qur'ān's celestial matrix, referred to in the Qur'ān itself as *umm al-Kitāb* ('mother of the Book', in 13:39 and 43:4) and

lawḥ mahfūz ('guarded tablet', in 85:22). This theological concept naturally resulted in Quranic codices being treated and revered as sacred objects, endowed with charismatic and talismanic qualities. From very early on, they were touched only by people in a state of purity, reverentially stored and displayed, ritually kissed, employed for divinatory purposes, brought in procession, paraded on the battlefields and so forth.⁴⁴ It is therefore possible to interpret the rise of Quranic calligraphy and illumination as a means to express this second aspect, and to provide a suitable visual counterpart to the oral performance and acoustic experience of the Qur'ān.

In order to visually express the extraordinary nature of the Qur'ān, Umayyad and early Abbasid calligraphers made use of powerfully immediate and sensuous signifiers, whose rationale is not to be found in the erudite works of exegesis and philosophy of the period. This semiotic strategy did not just rely on the large size and solemnity of Kufic scripts; crucial elements were also the chromatic contrast between the parchment and ink, the frequent use of chrysography, the perfect proportions of the page layout based on the golden ratio, and the exceptional horizontal format that aimed to set the Qur'ān apart from all other Islamic and non-Islamic books (including those of the Christians and the Jews). Had these copyists continued to attach a specific symbolism to, say, letters of the Arabic alphabet, colour schemes, geometric shapes and the like, they would have irremediably fallen behind the other religions of late antiquity with their well-established iconographies and manuscript traditions. Instead, they understood the necessity to reject iconography as an interpretive method, changed the rules of the game and succeeded in creating a powerful and original paradigm for presenting the Qur'ān in its material form.

If the Quranic tradition is marked by an unease about iconography, in early medieval Gospel books we see an ecstatic embrace of it. Let us consider, for instance, the Gospels of Medard of Soissons, produced in the milieu of the court of Charlemagne around the year 800.⁴⁵ Each Gospel in the manuscript is prefaced by a full-page representation of its respective evangelist facing a calligraphic treatment of the Gospel's first words. At the beginning of Luke on ff. 123v–124r (**Pl. 3.10a–b**), we find the Evangelist busy at his writing desk, inspired by the Holy Spirit acting through his symbol, the Ox, above him, while across the gutter we see the beginning of Luke 1:1: *Quoniam quidem multi conati sunt in ordinare narrationem ...* ('Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a narration ...'). Viewed together, the adduced images present not a contrast between alphabetic sign and iconic image, but a clear understanding of the reciprocity and resonance between them. Notice that Luke and his symbol both hold books with writing in them: the Ox's codex repeats the verse on the opposite page, while Luke's features a verse (6:36) from later in his Gospel. The image of written words on the left-hand page is mirrored by the presentation of writing as an image itself on the right. Besides the striking visuality of the large golden initials, both the Q and the O act as frames for representational images. The enthroned Christ in the Q particularly serves to reinforce an identification of holy writ with the eternal Word



Plate 3.10 Gospels of Medard of Soissons, before 814, ff. 123v–124r, gold, pigment and ink on parchment, h. 36.5cm. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des Manuscrits, Latin 8850. Image © BnF, reprinted with permission of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France

itself. Formal devices further connect word and image in this opening: the framing of the pages is nearly identical, and the lines of text at the bottom on the right illusionistically advance into the beholder's space just as Luke's foot does on the left, implying a physical presence beyond the visual for both. Further underscoring the visual impact and material presence of writing in the book are the framing devices, often with illusionistic ornamental patterns, that surround the body text of the Gospels. Such semiotic fluidity, in which iconic signs evoke the verbal and words encompass images, can be found in many manuscripts of this time, both in the British Isles and on the Continent. That fluidity is only one of several in early medieval manuscript illumination, where centre and frame, figure and ground, abstract forms and representational images combine to create a complex and sometimes even unstable visual ecosystem.⁴⁶ In early medieval Gospel books, we often see artist-scribes exploring ways to stretch and mutate visual forms so that signs multiply across the page.

In fact, one of the dominant concerns of many Gospel books is their own nature as a book and as a bearer of signs. This is particularly true in the Book of Kells, which was made in either Scotland or Ireland in the early 9th century.⁴⁷ Books appear with unusual frequency throughout the Book of Kells, appearing in places where we might expect them, such as in the hands of the Evangelists and Christ, and in places unexpected but logical, as with the two figures – possibly deacons – holding books on the initial page to Matthew, thus calling attention to the word *Liber* which

begins the Gospels.⁴⁸ The *breves causae* for Matthew (f. 8r), a short summary of the events in the Gospel, features a figure sitting amid the words with a book on his knee and another beside him, seeming to illustrate the reading of the Gospel text that the beholder is about to undertake. While figures carrying books are a stock image in early medieval art, they are far more widespread in the Book of Kells than in any of its contemporaries. Particularly notable are the several images of angels carrying books. While angels are often depicted holding crosses, christograms (chi-rho symbols), cloths of honour and especially the edges of nimbuses, they are rarely shown in early medieval art carrying books.⁴⁹ As messengers, the most common means by which angels communicate is orally: they tell and show, but seldom deliver written missives in the form of books.

It is hard to say with certainty what underlies this unusual iconography. The primary association between angels and books at this time seems to be with the *liber vitae* that records a soul's virtues and sins.⁵⁰ This is unlikely the case in the Book of Kells, however, since judgement does not seem to be a major theme of the decoration as a whole.⁵¹ Most likely, the book-bearing angels serve to emphasise the nature of the Gospels as a divinely given text. An emphasis on divine transmission would be consistent with the iconographic emphasis on the symbols of the Evangelists, particularly the winged man of Matthew, who appear carrying books throughout the manuscript.⁵² In addition, the book-bearing angels in the Book of Kells might also serve as sacramental signs. Carol Farr notes that the three angels bearing *flabella*



Plate 3.11 Book of Kells, c. 800, f. 130r, ink and pigment on parchment, h. 33cm. Dublin, Trinity College Library, MS 58. Image: courtesy of the Board of Trinity College, Dublin

(liturgical fans) and the fourth holding an *aspergillum* (a kind of liturgical sprinkler) mark off the Virgin and Child on folio 8r as occupying a ritual space, with the Virgin perhaps even representing a metaphorical altar for the body of Christ.⁵³ As a whole, there is a clear programme in the Book fostering resonances with the liturgical understanding of the Gospel text.⁵⁴ Images throughout the manuscript of angels carrying books, then, would serve to emphasise the sacramental nature of this particular manuscript, evoking at the same time the idea of the text as divinely given.

The more one notices the many codices in the Book of Kells, the more one observes oblong, upright rectangles as a general form appearing throughout the book. Consider the initial page for the Gospel of Luke (f. 188r), where the centre of the Q can also be read as a representation of a book. The diamond, or lozenge, at the centre of the Luke figure recalls a common motif found on the covers of books in the Book of Kells, as held by the Evangelist John – and this appears in other manuscripts, such as the earlier Codex Amiatinus. A book-shaped design also appears as a minor motif on the initial page for the Gospel of Mark (Pl. 3.11). The rectangular panel at the upper right, immediately below the man grappling with the beast, contains the T and I of the word *Initium* (Pl. 3.12), with the upright T in black with yellow interlace, and the yellow I crossing it horizontally. The cruciform structure of the composition, in conjunction with the adduced beasts on either side of the stem of the T, might serve to recall contemporary treasure bindings such as the lower cover of the Lindau Gospels, which was probably made in Austria in the late 8th century.⁵⁵



Plate 3.12 Book of Kells, c. 800, f. 130r, detail, ink and pigment on parchment, h. 33cm. Dublin, Trinity College Library, MS 58. Image: courtesy of the Board of Trinity College, Dublin

Here we come to a point familiar to scholars of the Book of Kells: motifs, once noticed, seem to proliferate worrisomely. Suddenly, upright rectangles pop up in new places in the manuscript, such as on folio 183r, where we find them included in a passage of display lettering, and next to the seated figure on folio 8r. The motif also appears in the form of several letter Ds that appear throughout the manuscript (Pl. 3.13). These Ds depart from the more common form of the Insular half-uncial D with a rounded bowl and upright or fallen ascender. Interestingly, six of the eight times that the rectangular D is used as an initial occur in conjugations of the word *dico* – to say, talk or declare.⁵⁶ Heather Pulliam has demonstrated that the minor initials in the Book of Kells often hold broad affinities with certain themes: for example, many of the passages in which Christ confronts the Pharisees are marked off by letters formed by human figures whose legs and tongues are tangled together.⁵⁷ Perhaps these book-shaped Ds serve to remind the beholder of the lineage of the text, from the mouth of Jesus to the book before them, thus securing the chain of signs that connects them with the divine. Seen this way, the two exceptions are telling: one is on folio 8r, directly adjacent to the figure sitting with books that we just observed; the other, on folio 101v, occurs in the word *ideo* in a passage where Jesus promises to send people who will also speak the word of God: prophets, wise men and scribes (Mt 23:34).

The book-shaped T-I on the Mark page can be read as confirming the presence of programmatic concerns for the mediated and material nature of the holy text.⁵⁸ The puzzling, quasi-monogrammatic nature of the design itself – not to mention the page as a whole – served to call attention to the nature of the biblical text as a complex



Plate 3.13 Book of Kells, c. 800, details of (l. to r.), ff. 8r, 50v and 114v, ink and pigment on parchment, h. 33cm. Dublin, Trinity College Library, MS 58. Image: courtesy of the Board of Trinity College, Dublin

system of signs.⁵⁹ But the T-I figure is particularly thick with significance, for it can be seen not only as a book but also as a cross, and within the divine semiotic of Christianity, the cross held a special place as a sign which was at once unique and paradigmatic.⁶⁰ In the most general sense, every cross stood as a representation – or at least an evocation – of the cross upon which Christ was crucified. But at very early stages in Christian visual culture, the cross also came to be used and understood as a linguistic sign. The staurogram (tau-rho symbol), for example, serves alongside the christogram as an aniconic representation of Christ in early and medieval Christian visual culture.⁶¹

The cross became a form where word and image swelled into each other as concomitant representations of the divine. But the cross is clearly also more than a sign for medieval Christians: it is sometimes described as the fundamental structure of the cosmos, and it is constantly used as a gesture of blessing and protection. That is to say that the cross – like the codex – was understood not solely as a sign that pointed in the direction of past people and events, but also as an immediately present form with agency and sacred power. The T-I figure on the Mark initial, in its form, makes particular reference to the cross as a specific material object. The crossing of the T, in forming a second, upper bar for the cross, evokes the True Cross, which had been excavated by the empress Helena, Constantine's mother, and was displayed with gold and jewelled revetments in Jerusalem.⁶² The True Cross as a simplified form with a shorter bar added at the top was familiar in the early Middle Ages, especially on Byzantine coinage.

Thus, the T-I evokes immaterial sign and material object in many ways: it is letters, it is a jewelled book binding, it is a cross and it is the True Cross. Interestingly, the form of the True Cross is itself also concerned with the nature of the written sign. The shorter second bar specifically represents the *titulus crucis*, the wooden panel appended to the cross under Pilate's orders which identifies Christ as 'Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews' in Latin, Greek and Hebrew. Early medieval theologians such as Isidore of Seville saw in the *titulus crucis* a divine recognition of the translation of sacred truth across languages, which is to say that it highlights the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign.⁶³ It is also an instance of the disjunction of literal meaning and contextual sense. To Pilate, the sign was a mocking declaration highlighting the crime of sedition for which Christ was punished, but medieval commentators read the

sign as ironically confirming and proclaiming the truth that Christ's persecutors failed to acknowledge.⁶⁴

The simple combination of the T-I, then, can be read as a dense set of allusions not only to events described in the Gospels, but to the very existence of the Gospels themselves, both as a text and as a codex, and further as a reminder of the Christian practice of spiritual interpretation. Moreover, it appears within a textual passage that is itself self-referential through its proclamation of the beginning of the Gospel (*initium evangelii ihu xri*), with special attention drawn visually to Christ's identity with the Gospel through the framing of the XRI at the bottom. Writing, book, artefact and divine being are collapsed together, even as the difficulty of parsing them emphasises the impossible distance of God.

The origin and nature of the *muṣḥaf*: contemplating the writ in early Islam

The aniconic and anti-iconographic nature of Islamic calligraphy makes it impossible to approach early Quranic codices from the same perspective and through the same methodologies developed by specialists of medieval Christian manuscripts. This can create problems for modern scholars of Islamic art, a discipline that has largely developed along the same lines of enquiry as European art history. Bedrock art-historical concepts such as iconography, symbolism, artistic intent and the use of stylistic analysis for localisation are all nearly useless when considering early Qur'āns. However, this does not mean that art historians cannot contribute fruitfully to the debate surrounding the early history of the Qur'ān, or that the material evidence in our possession does not pose a number of important aesthetic questions. In fact, Islam managed to rapidly establish around the sacred book a complex doctrine that also involved the codification of its material and visual aspects, successfully propagated throughout the empire over the course of three generations, in contrast with the prolonged development and heterogeneity of the Christian scriptural tradition.

As we have seen, the pivotal moment for the canonisation of the Qur'ān in its written form was the second half of the 7th century, a period that stretched between the collation and recension ordered by the third caliph, 'Uthmān b. 'Affān, and the orthographic reform undertaken by the governor of Iraq al-Ḥajjāj (d. 714) in the years 703–5, under the aegis of the Umayyad caliph 'Abd al-Malik.⁶⁵ This

period witnessed the development of an entirely new concept that stood in contradistinction to the oral connotation of the word ‘Qur’ān’ (literally meaning ‘recitation’) and to the abstract notion of *kitāb* (a generic term meaning ‘book’ or ‘scripture’, which is how the Qur’ān mainly refers to itself). This concept was signified by an appositely coined Arabic word: *muṣḥaf* (plural: *maṣāḥif*), a neologism that is not found in the Qur’ān, literally meaning ‘a collection of bound leaves/pages’, which from its earliest appearance acquired the almost exclusive meaning of ‘Quranic codex’.⁶⁶ What is particularly interesting for our argument, is that the *muṣḥaf* became – in the literature as well as in practice – almost like an ‘alter ego’ of the Qur’ān itself, to the point that both terms began to attract pious epithets in common usage, still very much alive today: *al-Qur’ān al-karīm* (‘the noble Qur’ān’), and *al-muṣḥaf al-sharīf* (‘the honoured *muṣḥaf*’). This phenomenon is indicative of the dualism intrinsic to the sacred book of Islam: while the term Qur’ān signifies the oral, intangible text uttered by Quranic reciters and the faithful during their prayer, the word *muṣḥaf* describes its physical manifestation, equally sacred, but for different doctrinal reasons.

The intrinsic contradiction between oral and written – and between textual and iconic – is palpable in the monumental Quranic manuscripts of the late Umayyad and early Abbasid period, which were penned by specialised calligraphers according to aesthetic canons that emphasised the abstract and pictorial qualities of the text. This aestheticisation came at the expense of its legibility, but the text in those manuscripts was, somewhat surprisingly, accurately vocalised using a complex system of polychrome dots (the so-called system of Abū al-Aswad al-Du‘ālī) aimed at facilitating the recitation, which often also contemplated alternative readings.⁶⁷ This clearly indicates that these codices functioned as much more than simple books: they were repositories of the Revelation, meant to be handled and used by a select few from among the religious authorities, namely those who could decipher this notation system. The act of deciphering the *muṣḥaf*, however, did not require the interpretation of signs and symbols as in the Christian manuscript tradition. Instead, the aim was to breathe life into the shell of the Qur’ān’s written text, its hallowed consonantal skeleton (*rasm*), thus transforming it into sound, and bringing it back to its original oral state. According to the early jurist and traditionist Mālik b. Anas (711–94), the institution of this doctrinal principle and ritual practice dates from the years of al-Ḥajjāj: ‘The recitation of the Qur’ān from the *muṣḥaf* in the mosque was not performed by the early Muslims. The first to introduce it was al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf.’⁶⁸

Without the performance of a Quranic reciter, the written text of these early Qur’āns would have remained dormant, frozen in its relic-like state, with the Kufic calligraphy conveying in the most eloquent way this sense of arcane fixity. It is indeed tempting to interpret the aesthetic qualities of Umayyad and ancient Abbasid scripts – in particular, their geometric and proportional principles, the *scriptio continua* (lack of separation between words) and the frequent breaking of words between lines – as a way to signify and enhance the non-verbal aspects of the Qur’ān,

and involve the beholder in an act of spiritual contemplation of the Revelation in its pictorial form. More than 40 years ago, Martin Lings wrote that:

one of the great purposes of Qur’ān calligraphy is to provide a visual sacrament. It is a widespread practice in Islam to gaze intently at Quranic inscriptions so as to extract a blessing from them, or in other words so that through the windows of sight the soul may be penetrated by the Divine radiance of the ‘signs of God’, as the verses are called.⁶⁹

Statements such as this have been generally criticised as reflecting later sensibilities, popular devotion and non-mainstream practices, especially those established in Sufi circles from the 12th century onwards.⁷⁰ According to the vast majority of scholars, it would be anachronistic to imagine that this contemplative approach already existed under the Umayyads and early Abbasids. The visual clues provided by the manuscripts themselves have been largely ignored, and the only accepted discourses around the history of the Qur’ān continue to be based exclusively on its textual nature, linguistic functions and oral performances.⁷¹

However, a small but extremely interesting body of prophetic traditions demonstrates that the notion of contemplating the Qur’ān can be traced back to the first centuries of Islam, that it was relatively widespread among the Muslim community and that it became directly associated with sayings of Muḥammad himself. For instance, the famous traditionist and historian Abū al-Shaykh al-Iṣbahānī (887–979) included in his *Aḏama* the following *ḥadīth*:

It has been related to us by Aḥmad b. ‘Umar, on the authority of ‘Abd Allāh b. Muḥammad b. ‘Ubayd ..., on the authority of Abū Sa‘īd al-Khudrī – may God be pleased with him – that the Messenger of God – peace be upon Him – said: ‘Give your eyes their share of worship.’ They asked: ‘O Messenger of God, what is their share of worship?’ He replied: ‘Looking in the *muṣḥaf*, contemplating it and recognising its marvellous nature.’⁷²

The choice of verbal nouns (*al-naẓar*: ‘gazing’; *al-tafakkur*: ‘concentrating’; *al-i‘tibār*: ‘pondering’) makes it extremely clear that, as far as this *ḥadīth* is concerned, the act of reading or reciting the Qur’ān is not under discussion. What the faithful are encouraged to do instead is to behold the *muṣḥaf* and reverentially meditate on its portentous nature, a task that was arguably facilitated by the mesmerising and awe-inspiring quality of Kufic calligraphy (Pl. 3.14).

In another *ḥadīth* attributed to Muḥammad, the act of gazing intently at a Quranic manuscript (*al-naẓar fī al-muṣḥaf*) is presented as an act of worship in itself, conceptually distinct from the practice of Quranic recitation (*tilāwa*, *qirā’a*):

It has been related to us by al-Ḥarīrī, on the authority of al-‘Usharī, on the authority of al-Dāraqutnī ..., on the authority of Abū Hurayra, that the Messenger of God – peace be upon Him – said: ‘[There are] five [forms] of worship: eating small quantities of food is [an act of] worship; sitting in the mosques is [an act of] worship; looking in the direction of the Ka‘ba is [an act of] worship; looking in the *muṣḥaf* without reciting [the Qur’ān] is [an act of] worship; looking at the face of a learned man is [an act of] worship.’⁷³

According to a long-established and widely accepted exegetic tradition, the viscosity of the Qur’ān – that is, what



Plate 3.14 Folio from a Qur'ān, mid-9th century, ink, gold and watercolour on parchment, h. 21.5cm. The British Library, MS Or.1397, f. 17v. Image © The British Library

is perceived by the eyes – is as significant as its textuality, which the faithful experience through the ears. The *muṣḥaf* makes it possible for these two aspects to converge and manifest themselves at the same time, as explained by several medieval theologians, including al-Nawawī (1234–77), on the authority of earlier scholars and the consensus of the *salaf* (the companions of the Prophet and their immediate successors):

Recitation from the *muṣḥaf* is better than recitation by heart, because looking in the *muṣḥaf* is a required [form of] worship: the act of reciting is thus combined with the act of gazing. Thus spoke Ḥusayn the judge from among our contemporaries, as well as Abū Ḥamid al-Ghazālī and all of our forefathers.⁷⁴

The spiritual merits that the *muṣḥaf* can earn the faithful through its material and visual qualities had already been remarked by early traditionists such as al-Ṭabarānī (873–971), in their commentary on the prophetic *ḥadīth*: 'Recitation without the *muṣḥaf* is worth a thousand, but recitation from the *muṣḥaf* is worth many times more.'⁷⁵ To make the sacredness and miraculous beauty of the Qur'ān manifest to the eye, the Islamic tradition seems to have encouraged the use of calligraphy from the very beginning, and a careful scrutiny of the *ḥadīth* literature could contribute considerably to our understanding of Umayyad and ancient Abbasid scripts and their aesthetics. For instance, the *Muṣannaḥ* of Ibn Abī Shayba (776–849) transmits the following saying attributed to 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, the son-in-law of the Prophet and fourth caliph:

It has been related to us by 'Abd al-Malik b. Shaddād al-Azdī, on the authority of 'Ubayd Allāh b. Sulaymān al-'Abdī, that

Abū Ḥukayma al-'Abdī said: 'I was copying Quranic manuscripts in Kufa, and 'Alī passed while I was at work, and he told me: "Make your reed pen splendid!" So I sharpened its nib, and then I wrote, and he said: "Just like that! Make luminous what God has made luminous!"'⁷⁶

Other sayings and anecdotes included in Ibn Abī Shayba's *Muṣannaḥ* stipulate that the *muṣḥaf* should always be copied in a large format and majestic script, and that the word *muṣḥaf* itself should never be used in its diminutive form (*muṣayḥif*).⁷⁷ These passages seem to confirm the hypothesis formulated by François Déroche that the notion itself of 'Quranic calligraphy' may have originated as an ideological move: the production and diffusion of monumental codices penned according to precise aesthetic norms would have posed a direct visual challenge to the splendour of Christian and Jewish manuscripts.⁷⁸ Similarly, the treatise on the merits of the Qur'ān by Ibn Sallām (770–838) condemns the practice of 'transcribing the Qur'ān hastily (*mashqan*)',⁷⁹ and transmits the following *ḥadīth* associated with the second caliph 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb:

It has been related to us by 'Abd al-Ghafār b. Dāwūd al-Harrānī, on the authority of Ibn Lahī'a, on the authority of Abū al-Aswad, that 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb found a *muṣḥaf* that a man had written with a small reed pen, and asked him 'What is this?' The man replied: 'This is the whole of the Qur'ān.' 'Umar disapproved of that and beat him. Then he said: 'Make the Book of God large!' [Abū al-Aswad] also reports that 'Umar would rejoice when he saw a *muṣḥaf* of large format.⁸⁰

Evident from these early sources is what Zadeh calls the 'emergent sanctification of the physical codex' of the

Qur'ān: the traditionists' insistence that the aspect of the *muṣḥaf*, its size and its script should be enhanced can indeed be interpreted as a strategy to engage the faithful in acts of contemplative worship.⁸¹ It is therefore likely that other aesthetic choices condemned by the same sources as an intrusion of worldly luxury in the religious sphere – from the use of chrysography to polychrome illumination and decorated bindings – were also motivated by doctrinal discourses and concerns about the necessity to express in material form the exceptionality of the Qur'ān. A thorough investigation into these discourses and concerns would perhaps allow specialists in early Quranic manuscripts to better explain the palaeographic and codicological features of the material they study.

'Writing anxiety' in early Islam and Christianity: theory versus practice

The Muslim and Christian traditions undoubtedly share a rich history of thinking about the nature of holy texts as written forms but, as we have seen, the terms of this thinking were very different in their emphasis. Medieval Latin Christendom, while certainly eager to produce books that were materially and visually impressive, remained firmly anchored to a textual framework of scriptural interpretation, and invested considerable energy in thinking about the semiotic value of images, ornament and scripts. This was in marked contrast to the discourses around the visibility of the *muṣḥaf*, which developed independently from, and often in contrast with, the textuality of the Qur'ān. What the two vibrant calligraphic traditions share, however, is a central irony: they both flourished in spite of a widespread anxiety about the nature of the written sign, and about the potential risks inherent in its aestheticisation, particularly evident in the Latin and Arabic sources of the late antique and early medieval period. This anxiety over writing, we believe, constituted an important factor in the development of an 'iconology of the Word' in both traditions.

In Christendom, the brilliantly ornamented and calligraphed manuscripts of the early medieval period ran in direct contradiction to the pronouncements of theological authorities with respect to writing. Jerome disdained the use of luxury parchment and fancy ornamentation in Bibles; Gregory the Great declared it foolish to wonder at the hand of a scribe without attending to the meaning of the words he wrote; Augustine, Bede and many others similarly dismissed the visual nature of writing as inconsequential.⁸² All that mattered to these theologians was the meaning to be found through the study of the holy text. Script reforms, such as the development of Caroline minuscule, along with the revival of square capitals among Carolingian scribes, seem to have been aimed, at least in part, at resolving this contradiction between theory and practice by reducing the visual distractions of script.⁸³ One could even argue that the entire history of Christian palaeography can be represented as a series of swings back and forth between scripts that are 'invisible' (or 'transparent') and scripts that approach illegibility. Meanwhile, some Church leaders attempted to rationalise the utility of ornate writing, as when Boniface, an Anglo-Saxon missionary active in Germany in the 8th century, requested books with gold lettering to appeal to the

'carnal tastes' of his recent converts, although he was careful to emphasise that it was the meaning of the words that was most important to him.⁸⁴

In early Islam one finds a very similar situation, with countless religious scholars ranting against the use of gold, colours and calligraphic scripts for writing down the Revelation.⁸⁵ It seems that these features were frowned upon for three main reasons: they were perceived as impiously earthly and immorally ostentatious; they were dismissed as imitating the custom of the infidels; and they were considered a distraction to readers and thus a hindrance to prayer. Mālik b. Anas, for instance, disapproved of the practice of decorating the pages of the *muṣḥaf* with patterns (*khawātim*) or illumination in gold (*tadhhib*) because that would disturb the reader's reflection (*tadabbur*).⁸⁶ Several traditions ascribed to the companions of the Prophet insist on the prohibition of writing the Qur'ān in gold, embellishing it or marking the beginning of suras with decorated headings.⁸⁷ Moreover, Muḥammad himself is reported to have said: 'If you decorate your mosques and embellish your Quranic manuscripts, ruin will be upon you.'⁸⁸ And yet, as we have seen, many early Quranic codices are extremely lavish, boastful and ideologically charged artefacts, almost defiant in their disobedience to the principles of austerity preached by the more conservative jurists and traditionists.

In the Muslim context, the anxiety about writing down the Word of God has an additional dimension, namely the preference expressed in doctrinal discourses for the experience of the oral revelation over its written form. Even today, reading from a copy of the Qur'ān is not normally permitted when performing the canonical prayer. Such discourses seem to have developed in direct contrast with those traditions praising the intrinsic merits of the *muṣḥaf* and, since they have become somewhat prevalent in the modern period, they are much more familiar to both practising Muslims and scholars of Islam.⁸⁹ Even so, unease about the theological status of the written Qur'ān can be traced back to the 8th century, which may partly explain why Umayyad and early Abbasid mosque codices were made as inaccessible as possible, both physically and symbolically: written in arcane scripts, closed up in cases and cabinets, stored away and exhibited only on special occasions as miraculous signifiers of God's presence among the faithful, as well as tokens of the piety and patronage of the ruling elites. Unlike the Latin script reforms in coeval Europe, the rise of Islamic calligraphy and the development of Kufic resulted in Quranic scripts becoming more and more removed from the utilitarian writing styles employed in other contexts. This anxiety seems to have been overcome only in the 11th century, with the appearance of Quranic codices written in cursive scripts derived from standard bookhands, and vocalised in the same way as all other 'normal' books, according to the system of al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad al-Farāhīdī.⁹⁰

The deep investment in the early Christian idea of the 'sign' might have offered a way to reconcile the apparent anxiety about fancy writing and the obvious desire for it among medieval Christians. Signs were identified as a necessary impediment between the self and God that

mediated the capacity for mortals to glimpse the ineffable nature of the divine. The relative comfort that Christians had with translation – which is particularly striking when considered next to the rather strong aversion to it in Islam and Judaism – is rooted in a conception of language as a human construct. Even if both translation and writing were understood as introducing another layer of difficulty in parsing the meanings of signs, they were still acceptable because they served as effective, if ultimately flawed, means of approaching the divine. This is why we often see, as we did above in the Book of Kells, Christian scribes playing with semiosis as a phenomenon, stretching and twisting their letters into different shapes and representational forms. In the Christian tradition, early medieval calligraphy was complex precisely to make the point that scripture needed to be carefully read *and* interpreted as part of the same act, and that reading *meant* interpreting. It is even possible to speculate that, in some contexts, clarity in a script might have been seen as improperly implying that the text was equally easy to understand. Perhaps this would partly explain the habitual abandonment of the regular attempts at script reform throughout the Middle Ages.

In the Islamic tradition, it was the necessity to visually convey the notion of divine immanence that made the *mushaf*, and all the other modes of displaying Quranic texts, a non-negotiable component of doctrine, culture and statecraft from the time of 'Abd al-Malik onwards. The materiality of the *mushaf* served symbolic purposes and induced affective reactions that were simply beyond the reach of oral recitation, for all its spiritual power and moving beauty. Compared to medieval Christianity, it is perhaps more difficult to see in classical Islam a reconciliation between theories of scriptural austerity and the practice of illuminating the sacred book, since the most intransigent religious scholars would not only oppose luxury and decoration in religious art but also question the very idea of giving the Qur'ān a material form. Nevertheless, with the exception of a very few episodes in Islamic history, the veneration for the *mushaf* as the supreme signifier of God's presence has always prevailed.

Conclusion

If we had inherited no physical artefacts from the early Middle Ages and could work only with written sources divorced from their manuscript contexts, we would never guess that Christianity or Islam could give rise to artistic traditions as rich and complex as they are. This is particularly true of the two traditions of holy writ, in which the aestheticisation of scripture enriched the faithful's understanding of their own religious belief, albeit in completely different ways. It would be madness to try to make the available visual and material evidence fit the textual testimony, which generally understates the importance of religious material culture. The codicological evidence points to an appreciation for visual and material elaboration of the transcendent realities expressed in holy writ, and art historians are well equipped to articulate how that evidence helps to understand these religions more deeply.

Visual analyses of religious artefacts, however, are meaningless when they do not take into consideration the

historical development of the doctrinal discourses that informed the aesthetics of such artefacts. In the course of the conversations that shaped this essay, we increasingly came to feel that, when submitted to close scrutiny, the many apparent parallels between deluxe Qur'āns and Gospel books are somewhat illusory, especially when viewed in light of the discrepancies between Christian and Muslim belief and practices. What a *mushaf* was to an early Muslim and what a Gospel book was to an early medieval Christian were markedly different things. Our original charge for the *Imagining the Divine* conference was to address the issue of 'word as image', and to explore the iconic nature of holy writ. However, while such terms – 'image', 'iconic' – are perfectly useful when thinking about Christian books, they introduce a paradigmatic bias to our appreciation of Islamic calligraphy, and of Islamic art in general. This problem will subsist for so long as the art-historical study of Quranic manuscripts continues to draw on categories and methodologies borrowed from Christian manuscript studies. While it is likely that a desire to distinguish Islam from other religions of late antiquity prompted a pointed rejection of iconography in religious art, we feel that it is far too limiting to think of Islamic calligraphy as the surrogate of, or even as an alternative to, Christian images. Rather, the arts of the *mushaf* need to be understood in their own right as an attempt to convey the unique and even contradictory qualities of the Qur'ān, in much the same way that the decoration of Gospel books responded to the particular conceptions of the Bible developed in medieval Christendom. What these traditions ultimately share, then, is not so much a visual language as a common problem: the impossibility of condensing divine understanding in material form.

Notes

- 1 On the subject of 'word as image' in late antique and early medieval Christian art, see especially Nordenfalk 1970; Kendrick 1999; and Hamburger 2014. On the aesthetics and 'visuality' of early Quranic calligraphy and inscriptions, see especially Dodd 1969; Lings 1976; Dodd and Khairallah 1981: vol. 1, *passim*; Schick 2010; George 2010: 55–114; and Milwright 2016: 172–213.
- 2 Elsner, Lenk *et al.* 2017: 154–5, no. 139, and 175–8, no. 158.
- 3 Ó Carragáin 1994.
- 4 Bennison 2007; Blair 2008; George 2010: 86; Déroche 2014: 142.
- 5 Al-Munajjid 1972: 50–73; Déroche 2004: 33–4; Bennison 2007.
- 6 Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, Lib. MS. 286.
- 7 See the interesting parallels drawn between the Qur'ān of Amājūr and the Codex Amiatinus in Blair 2008: 76–7, and between the Blue Qur'ān and the Bible of Cava in D'Ottone 2017.
- 8 On the Gold Qur'ān, see Lings 1976: 18, pls 3–4; Déroche 1992: 90–1, no. 41; Elsner, Lenk *et al.* 2017: 79, no. 58. The manuscript, in two volumes, is kept in the Süleymaniye Library, Istanbul (mss. Nuruosmaniye 26–27), with the exception of a few folios in the Sarikhani Collection, the Khalili Collection and the Schøyen Collection.
- 9 Schapiro 2005.
- 10 For more on the St Chad Gospels, see Henderson 1987: 122–9 and Endres 2012; on the visual localisation of manuscripts, see M. Brown 2003: 227–30.
- 11 M. Brown 2012: 49.

- 12 M. Brown 2003.
- 13 Chazelle 2003; Tilghman 2011b.
- 14 For this and other examples, see M. Brown 2003; Tilghman 2011a.
- 15 Gameson 2013: 66–72.
- 16 Blair 2006: 101–40.
- 17 Neuman de Vegvar 2003; Hawkes 2007.
- 18 Hoyland 1997; George 2010: 21–31.
- 19 Hoyland 2007: 233–4.
- 20 George 2010: 92–3.
- 21 George 2010: 52–3.
- 22 Déroche 2004: 18–19.
- 23 Déroche 2014: 75–133.
- 24 Déroche 2018: 158–60.
- 25 See, for instance, Blair 2008: 72 and Flood 2012: 268.
- 26 Déroche 2007: 30–1.
- 27 Gamble 1995.
- 28 Irvine 1994 provides a rich discussion.
- 29 Eusebius 1999: 166.
- 30 Ong and Hartley 2013: 121–3.
- 31 Translated in Chazelle 2003: 149.
- 32 Meyvaert 2005.
- 33 Farr 1999; Kessler 2005.
- 34 Meyvaert 1996.
- 35 Meyvaert 2005: 1115.
- 36 The Islamic doctrine of the Qurʾān has also been defined as ‘inlibration’ by western scholars, because of its comparability with the Christian dogma of the incarnation: see Wolfson 1976: 244ff. For a history of the early Islamic debate on the createdness of the Qurʾān, see Martin 2001.
- 37 The authoritative text on the importance of signs to medieval Christians is Augustine’s *De doctrina Christiana*: see Augustine 1958.
- 38 Gilliot 2002.
- 39 For the frontispieces of the Sana’a Umayyad Qurʾān, see Bothmer 1987; Grabar 1992: 155ff; George 2010: 79–86.
- 40 Welch 1979: 25–6; Schimmel 1984: 90–114.
- 41 Behrens-Abouseif 1999: 13–14: ‘Because the orthodox interpretation of the Koran leaves little room for allegory, Sunni Muslim culture did not develop a symbolic repertoire, neither did it need a clergy to solve mysteries or interpret allegories.’
- 42 Martin 2002.
- 43 Kermani 2015, 14–24.
- 44 Zadeh 2008: 53, 63; Zadeh 2009. As remarked by Annemarie Schimmel, it is often possible to describe such practices as acts of bibliolatry: see Schimmel 1994: 159.
- 45 Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des Manuscrits, Latin 8850, digital reproduction available at <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8452550p> (accessed 8 May 2020).
- 46 Schapiro 2005.
- 47 Dublin, Trinity College Library, MS 58, digital reproduction available at: <https://digitalcollections.tcd.ie/concern/works/hm5otr726?locale=en> (accessed 2 July 2020).
- 48 Farr 1997: 155.
- 49 Werner 1994; Pulliam 2006: 105.
- 50 Sowerby 2016: 55, 130–1.
- 51 Dimock 1867: 124.
- 52 For the iconographic complexity of Matthew’s symbol, see O’Reilly 1998.
- 53 Farr 2007: 121–2.
- 54 Lewis 1980; O’Reilly 1993; Farr 1997.
- 55 New York, Morgan Library & Museum, M.1.
- 56 See f. 8r, ‘in bethlehem iudeae magi’ (*Breves causae*); f. 50v, ‘Dico autem vobis’ (Mt 8:11); f. 101v, ‘Ideo ecce ego mitto ad vos prophetas, et sapientes, et scribas’ (Mt 23:34); f. 114v, ‘Dicit illis Jesus’ (Mt 26:31); f. 120v, ‘Dicit illi Jesus: Tu dicis’ (Mt 27:11); f. 227v, ‘Dicebat autem ad omnes’ (Lk 9:23); f. 251v, ‘Dixitque ei filius’ (Lk 15:21).
- 57 Pulliam 2006: 151–3.
- 58 For an alternative but not necessarily contradictory interpretation of this figure, see O’Mahoney 2017, in which the beasts flanking the T-I cross are read specifically as eagles and thus as signs of the resurrection, through reference to the *Physiologus*.
- 59 Tilghman 2011a.
- 60 Kitzinger 2013.
- 61 Traube 1907; Hurtado 1998; Hurtado 2006.
- 62 On interest in the True Cross in medieval Ireland, see Warner 1990.
- 63 Isidore of Seville 1957/2006, 9.1.3.
- 64 Ferda 2014.
- 65 On the reform project of al-Ḥajjāj, see Hamdan 2010.
- 66 Burton 1993.
- 67 Dutton 1999, Dutton 2000.
- 68 Hamdan 2010: 825.
- 69 Lings 1976: 16.
- 70 See, for instance, Kermani 2015: 163–4, who dismisses all acts of veneration towards the *muṣḥaf* as expressions of popular ‘fetishism’ and ‘reification’.
- 71 Wild 1996; McAuliffe 2006; Reynolds 2007; Neuwirth, Sinai and Marx 2010; Déroche, Robin and Zink 2015; Kermani 2015.
- 72 Al-Isbahānī 1998: vol. 1, 225–6, no. 12–12 (*‘Al-naẓar fī al-muṣḥaf, al-tafakkur fī-hi, wa-l-i‘tibār ‘inda ‘ajā’ ibi-hi’*).
- 73 Ibn al-Jawzī 1983: vol. 11, 828–9, no. 1386 (*‘Al-naẓar fī al-muṣḥaf min ghayr an yaqra’*).
- 74 Al-Nawawī 1996: 100.
- 75 Al-Suyūṭī 2008: 229.
- 76 Ibn Abī Shayba 2006: vol. v, 503, no. 8643.
- 77 Ibn Abī Shayba 2006: vol. v, 502–4.
- 78 Déroche 2007: 27.
- 79 Ibn Sallām 1995: vol. 11, 237–8, no. 916.
- 80 Ibn Sallām 1995: vol. 11, 236, no. 912.
- 81 Zadeh 2009: 466.
- 82 C. Brown 2011: 262–3; Tilghman 2011a: 294.
- 83 Ganz 1987: 31; Bischoff 1990: 112.
- 84 Boniface 1940.
- 85 For a recent discussion and reappraisal of these sources see Flood 2018.
- 86 Jahdani 2006: 275.
- 87 Asfaruddin 2002: 8–9; George 2010: 90–1.
- 88 Ibn Abī Shayba 2006: vol. 111, 85, no. 3166.
- 89 Asfaruddin 2002: 18–20.
- 90 Blair 2006: 160–78; George 2010: 115–46.

Bibliography

- Asfaruddin, A. 2002. ‘The excellences of the Qurʾān: textual sacrality and the organization of early Islamic society’, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 122(1), 1–24.
- Augustine 1958. *De doctrina Christiana*, ed. and trans. D. Robertson, New York.
- Behrens-Abouseif, D. 1999. *Beauty in Arabic Culture*, Princeton.
- Bennison, A.K. 2007. ‘The Almohads and the Qurʾān of ‘Uthmān: the legacy of the Umayyads of Cordoba in the twelfth century Maghrib’, *Al-Masāq* 19(2), 131–54.

- Bischoff, B. 1990. *Latin Palaeography: Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, trans D. Ganz and D. Ó Cróinín, Cambridge.
- Blair, S. 2006. *Islamic Calligraphy*, Edinburgh.
- 2008. 'Transcribing God's word: Qur'an codices in context', *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 10(1), 71–97.
- Boniface 1940. 'Letter to Eadburga', trans. E. Emerton, in *The Letters of Saint Boniface*, New York, available at <http://epistolae.ctl.columbia.edu/letter/355.html> (accessed 2 July 2020).
- Bothmer, H.-C. von 1987. 'Architekturbilder im Koran: eine Prachthandschrift den Umayyadenzeit aus dem Yemen', *Pantheon* 45, 4–20.
- Brown, C. 2011. 'Remember the hand: bodies and bookmaking in early medieval Spain', *Word & Image* 27(3), 262–78.
- Brown, M. 2003. *The Lindisfarne Gospels: Society, Spirituality, and the Scribe*, London.
- 2012. 'Images to be read and words to be seen: the iconic role of the early medieval book', *Postscripts* 6(1–3), 39–66.
- Burton, J. 1993. 'Muṣḥaf', in P. Bearman *et al.* (eds), *Encyclopaedia of Islam vol. VII*, 2nd ed., Leiden, 668–70.
- Chazelle, C. 2003. 'Ceolfrid's gift to St Peter: the first quire of the Codex Amiatinus and the evidence of its Roman destination', *Early Medieval Europe* 12 (2), 129–57.
- Déroche, F. 1992. *The Abbasid Tradition: Qur'ans of the 8th to 10th Centuries*, London.
- 2004. *Le livre manuscrit arabe. Préludes à une histoire*, Paris.
- 2007. 'Beauté et efficacité: l'écriture arabe au service de la révélation', in M. Kropp (ed.), *Results of Contemporary Research on the Qur'ān: The Question of a Historio-Critical Text of the Qur'ān*, Beirut, 17–31.
- 2014. *Qur'ans of the Umayyads: A First Overview*, Leiden.
- 2018. 'Of volume and skins: the Qur'anic manuscripts of al-Mahdi', in I. Chabbouh and F. Déroche (eds), *Research Articles and Studies in Honour of Iraj Afshar*, London, 145–72.
- Déroche, F., Robin, C. and Zink, M. (eds) 2015. *Les Origines du Coran, le Coran des origines*, Paris.
- Dimock, J. 1867. *Giraldi Cambrensis Opera*, vol. v, London.
- Dodd, E. 1969. 'The image of the Word: notes on the religious iconography of Islam', *Berytus* 18, 35–79.
- Dodd, E. and Khairallah, S. 1981. *The Image of the Word: A Study of Quranic Verses in Islamic Architecture*, 2 vols, Beirut.
- D'Ottone, A. 2017. 'The Blue Koran: a contribution to the debate on its possible origin and date', *Journal of Islamic Manuscripts* 8, 127–43.
- Dutton, Y. 1999. 'Red dots, green dots, yellow dots and blue: some reflections on the vocalisation of early Qur'anic manuscripts – part I', *Journal of Qur'anic studies* 1(1), 115–40.
- 2000. 'Red dots, green dots, yellow dots and blue: some reflections on the vocalisation of early Qur'anic manuscripts – part II', *Journal of Qur'anic studies* 2(1), 1–24.
- Elias, J. 2012. *Aisha's Cushion: Religious Art, Perception and Practice in Islam*, Cambridge, MA.
- Elsner, J. Lenk, S. *et al.* 2017. *Imagining the Divine: Art and the Rise of World Religions*, Oxford.
- Endres, B. 2012. *Manuscripts of Lichfield Cathedral*, <https://lichfield.ou.edu/> (accessed 16 July 2018).
- Eusebius 1999. *Life of Constantine*, ed. and trans. A. Cameron and S. Hall, Oxford.
- Farr, C. 1997. *The Book of Kells: Its Function and Audience*, Toronto.
- 1999. 'The shape of learning at Wearmouth-Jarrow: the diagram pages in the Codex Amiatinus', in J. Hawkes and S. Mills (eds), *Northumbria's Golden Age*. Stroud, 336–44.
- 2007. 'Bis per chorum hinc et inde: the 'Virgin and Child with Angels' in the Book of Kells', in A. Minnis and J. Roberts (eds), *Text, Image, Interpretation: Studies in Anglo-Saxon Literature and Its Insular Context in Honour of Éamonn Ó Carragáin*, Turnhout, 117–34.
- Ferda, T. 2014. 'Matthew's titulus and Psalm 2's King on Mount Zion', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 133(3), 561–81.
- Flood, F.B. 2012. 'The Qur'an', in H.C. Evans and B. Ratliff (eds), *Byzantium and Islam: Age of Transition*, New Haven and London, 265–73.
- 2018. 'Bodies, books, and buildings economies of ornament in juridical Islam', in D. Ganz and B. Schellewald (eds), *Clothing Sacred Scriptures: Book Art and Book Religion in Christian, Islamic, and Jewish Cultures*, Berlin, 49–68.
- Gamble, H. 1995. *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts*, New Haven.
- Gameson, R. 2013. *From Holy Island to Durham: The Contexts and Meanings of the Lindisfarne Gospels*, London.
- Ganz, D. 1987. 'The preconditions for Caroline Minuscule', *Viator* 18, 23–43.
- George, A. 2010. *The Rise of Islamic Calligraphy*, London.
- 2017. 'The Qur'ān, calligraphy, and the early civilization of Islam', in F.B. Flood and G. Necipoğlu (eds), *A Companion to Islamic Art and Architecture vol. 1*, Hoboken, 109–29.
- Grabar, O. 1992. *The Mediation of Ornament*, Princeton.
- Gilliot, C. 2002. 'Exegesis of the Qur'ān: classical and medieval', in J.D. McAuliffe (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, Leiden, vol. II, 99–123.
- Hamburger, J. 2014. *Script as Image*, Paris and Walpole, MA.
- Hamdan, O. 2010. 'The second maṣāḥif project: a step towards the canonization of the Qur'anic text', in Neuwirth, Sinai and Marx 2010: 795–835.
- Hawkes, J. 2007. 'Anglo-Saxon Romanitas: the transmission and use of early Christian art in Anglo-Saxon England', in P. Horden *et al.* (eds), *Freedom of Movement in the Middle Ages: Proceedings of the 2003 Harlaxton Symposium*, Donnington, 19–36.
- Henderson, G. 1987. *From Durrow to Kells*, London.
- Hoyland, R. 1997. 'The content and context of early Arabic inscriptions', *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 21, 77–102.
- 2007. 'Epigraphy and the emergence of Arab identity', in P. Sijpesteijn *et al.* (eds), *From al-Andalus to Khurasan: Documents from the Medieval Muslim World*, Leiden and Boston, 217–42.
- Hurtado, L. 1998. 'The origin of the nomina sacra: a proposal', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 117, 655–73.
- 2006. 'The staurogram in early Christian manuscripts: the earliest visual reference to the crucified Jesus?', in T. Kraus and T. Nicklas (eds), *New Testament Manuscripts: Their Text and Their World*, Leiden, 207–26.
- Ibn Abī Shayba 2006. *Al-Muṣannaf*, ed. M. 'Awwāma, Beirut.
- Ibn al-Jawzī 1983. *Al-'īlāl al-mutanāhiya fī al-aḥādīth al-wāḥiya*, ed. K. al-Mays, Beirut.
- Ibn Sallām 1995. *Faḍā'il al-Qur'ān wa-mā'ālimu-hu wa-adābu-hu*, ed. A. al-Khayyātī, Mohammedia.
- Al-Iṣḥāhānī 1998. *Kūṭāb al-'aẓama*, ed. R. al-Mubārakfūrī, Riyadh.
- Irvine, M. 1994. *The Making of Textual Culture: 'Gramatica' and Literary Theory, 350–1100*, Cambridge.
- Isidore of Seville 1957/2006. *Etymologiae*, ed. W. Lindsay, Oxford. Trans. S.A. Barney, W.J. Lewis, J.A. Beach and O. Berghof 2006, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, Cambridge.
- Jahdani, A. 2006. 'Du fiqh à la codicologie: quelques opinions de Mālik (m. 179/796) sur le Coran-codex', *Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph* 59, 269–79.

- Kendrick, L. 1999. *Animating the Letter: The Figurative Embodiment of Writing from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance*, Columbus, OH.
- Kermani, N. 2015. *God is Beautiful: The Aesthetic Experience of the Quran*, Cambridge.
- Kessler, H. 2005. 'Images of Christ and communication with God', in *Comunicare e significare nell'alto medioevo. LII Settimana Internazionale di Studio della Fondazione Centro di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo*, Spoleto, 293–328.
- Kitzinger, B. 2013. 'Cross and book: late-Carolingian Breton Gospel illumination and the instrumental cross', PhD dissertation, Harvard University.
- Lewis, S. 1980. 'Sacred calligraphy: the chi rho page in the Book of Kells', *Traditio* 36, 139–59.
- Lings, M. 1976. *The Quranic Art of Calligraphy and Illumination*, London.
- Martin, R. C. 2001. 'Createdness of the Qur'ān', in J.D. McAuliffe (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, Leiden, vol. 1, 467–71.
- 2002. 'Inimitability', in J.D. McAuliffe (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, Leiden, vol. 11, 526–36.
- McAuliffe, J.D. 2006. *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'ān*, Cambridge.
- Meyvaert, P. 1996. 'Bede, Cassiodorus, and the Codex Amiatinus', *Speculum* 71, 827–83.
- 2005. 'The date of Bede's *In Ezram* and his image of Ezra in the Codex Amiatinus', *Speculum* 80, 1087–1133.
- Milwright, M. 2016. *The Dome of the Rock and Its Umayyad Mosaic Inscriptions*, Edinburgh.
- Al-Munajjid, S. 1972. *Dirāsāt fī tārīkh al-khaṭṭ al-'Arabī: Mundhu bidāyati-hi ilā nihāyat al-'aṣr al-Umawī*, Beirut.
- Al-Nawawī 1996. *Al-Tibyān fī ādāb ḥamalat al-Qur'ān*, ed. M. al-Hajjār, Beirut.
- Nelson, R. 2000. 'To say and to see: ekphrasis and vision in Byzantium', in R. Nelson (ed.), *Visuality Before and Beyond the Renaissance*, Cambridge, 143–68.
- Neuman de Vegvar, C. 2003. 'Romanitas and realpolitik in Cogitosus' description of the church of St Brigit, Kildare', in M. Carver (ed.), *The Cross Goes North: Processes of Conversion in Northern Europe, A.D. 300–1300*, York, 153–70.
- Neuwirth, A., Sinai, N. and Marx, M. (eds) 2010. *The Qur'ān in Context*, Leiden and Boston.
- Nordenfalk, C. 1970. *Die spätantiken Zierbuchstaben*, Stockholm.
- Ó Carragáin, É. 1994. "'Traditio evangeliorum" and "sustentatio": the relevance of liturgical ceremonies to the Book of Kells', in F. O'Mahoney (ed.), *The Book of Kells: Proceedings of a Conference at Trinity College Dublin, 6–9 September 1992*, Brookfield, VT, 398–436.
- O'Mahoney, F. 2017. 'God is in the detail: observations on the Book of Kells, folios 8r and 130r', in R. Moss, F. O'Mahoney and J. Maxwell (eds), *An Insular Odyssey: Manuscript Culture in Early Christian Ireland and Beyond*, Dublin, 231–48.
- Ong, W. and Hartley, J. 2013. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, 3rd ed., London.
- O'Reilly, J. 1993. 'The Book of Kells, folio 114r: a mystery revealed yet concealed', in R.M. Spearman and J. Higgit (eds), *The Age of Migrating Ideas: Early Medieval Art in Britain and Ireland*, Dover, NH, 106–14.
- 1998. 'Gospel harmony and the names of Christ', in J. Sharpe and K. van Kampen (eds), *The Bible as Book: The Manuscript Tradition*, New Castle, DE, 73–88.
- Pulliam, H. 2006. *Word and Image in the Book of Kells*, Dublin.
- Reynolds, G.S. 2007. *The Qur'an in Its Historical Context*, New York.
- Saleh, W.A. 2010. 'Word', in J. Elias (ed.), *Key Themes for the Study of Islam*, Oxford, 356–76.
- Schapiro, M. 2005. *The Language of Forms: Lectures on Insular Manuscript Art*, New York.
- Schick, I.C. 2010. 'Text', in J. Elias (ed.), *Key Themes for the Study of Islam*, Oxford, 321–35.
- Schimmel, A. 1984. *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture*, New York and London.
- 1994. *Deciphering the Signs of God*, Edinburgh.
- Sowerby, R. 2016. *Angels in Early Medieval England*, Oxford.
- Al-Suyūṭī 2008. *Al-Iqān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, ed. S. al-Arna'ūt, Beirut.
- Tilghman, B. 2011a. 'The shape of the word: extra-linguistic meaning in Insular display lettering', *Word & Image* 27(3), 292–308.
- 2011b. 'Writing in tongues: mixed scripts and style in Insular art', in C. Hourihane (ed.), *Insular and Anglo-Saxon: Art and Thought in the Early Middle Ages*, University Park, PA, 92–108.
- Traube, L. 1907. *Nomina Sacra. Versuch einer Geschichte der christlichen Kürzung*, Munich.
- Warner, M. 1990. 'The cross-carpet page in the Book of Durrow: The cult of the true cross, Adomnán, and Iona', *Art Bulletin* 72, 174–223.
- Welch, A. 1979. *Calligraphy in the Arts of the Muslim World*, Austin.
- Werckmeister, O.-K. 1967. *Irisch-Northumbrische Buchmalerei des 8. Jahrhunderts und monastische Spiritualität*, Berlin.
- Werner, M. 1994. 'Crucifigi, sepulti, suscitati: remarks on the decoration of the Book of Kells', in F. O'Mahoney (ed.), *The Book of Kells: Proceedings of a Conference at Trinity College Dublin, 6–9 September 1992*, Brookfield, VT, 450–88.
- Wild, S. 1996. *The Qur'an as Text*, Leiden.
- Wolfson, H.A. 1976. *The Philosophy of the Kalam*, Cambridge, MA.
- Zadeh, T. 2008. "'Fire cannot harm it": mediation, temptation and the charismatic power of the Qur'an', *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 10(2), 50–72.
- 2009. 'Touching and ingesting: early debates over the material Qur'an', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 129(3), 443–66.