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## QUR'AN MANUSCRIPTS PREPARED FOR RULERS: AN EXAMPLE OF THE LITERARY TRADITION OF CENTRAL ASIA

**Abstract.** *This article examines manuscripts of the Holy Qur'an specially prepared for the rulers and courtiers of Central Asia. Using the example of unique manuscripts of the Timurid, Shaybanid, Kokand Khanate, and Mangit periods, it analyzes the role of the Holy Qur'an in the life of state rulers, the development of the art of manuscript book-making, and the traditions of palace librarianship. In particular, it considers the codicological features, the types of script, the decorative styles, and the seals with which the copies of the Qur'an presented to Amir Timur, Ibrahim Sultan, Khudayar Khan, and Amir Haydar were stamped. The article also addresses the preservation of these manuscripts in museums and libraries around the world and their comparative study. The results of the research show that a high-level school of the art of book-making developed in Central Asia and that manuscripts of the Holy Qur'an developed under state patronage.*

**Keywords:** *Holy Qur'an, manuscript, the art of the book, calligraphy, the Timurids, Ibrahim Sultan, Amir Timur, Khudayar Khan, endowment (waqf) seal, codicology, Central Asia, palace library.*

### INTRODUCTION

Central Asia has long been considered one of the principal centers of Islamic culture and literature. Lofty traditions were formed thanks to the calligraphers of the region, especially in the field of copying, illuminating, and designing manuscripts of the Holy Qur'an. In Muslim society, the sacred book was valued not only as a religious resource but also as a symbol of political power and cultural influence. For this reason,

copies of the Holy Qur'an specially prepared for rulers acquired special significance (Blair, 2006).

In the Muslim East, the attitude of rulers toward the Holy Qur'an was manifested in various forms. Some rulers personally read the sacred book, while others sponsored its copying and illumination. This situation is especially evident in the period of Timurid rule. Palace libraries were created in such cities as Samarkand, Herat, and Shiraz, where renowned calligraphers, illuminators (mudhahhibs), and binders (sahhafs) worked (Pope, 1938).

The aim of the article is to investigate the manuscripts of the Holy Qur'an prepared for the rulers of Central Asia, to analyze their codicological features, and to shed light on the place of these copies in palace culture and literary traditions.

## MAIN PART

### **Qur'an manuscripts prepared for rulers in the time of Amir Timur**

The tradition of state Qur'an manuscripts in Central Asia reached a new level in the period of Timurid rule. According to the sources, the noble Amir Timur memorized the Qur'an from his youth and read it regularly (Sharafiddin Ali Yazdi, 1997). This testifies to his special attitude toward the sacred book.

In his work "Gulistan-i hunar," Qazi Ahmad Munshi reports that Amir Timur was presented with a copy of the Qur'an transcribed by the skilled calligrapher Umar Aqta (Qazi Ahmad Munshi, 1973). Some pages of this manuscript are currently kept in the Metropolitan Museum in the USA. According to codicological analysis, this copy was made in Samarkand between 1400 and 1405 (James, 1980).

The manuscript is notable for its enormous dimensions. Its measurements are 222 × 155 cm, with seven lines of text on each page. The text is written in the "jalil muhaqqaq" style. Copying the Holy Qur'an in such large letters required of the calligrapher not only high mastery but also physical precision and technical preparation. Judging by the features of the script, it may be said that the tip of the pen was approximately one centimeter wide.

In the period of Timurid rule, the art of calligraphy was formed not only as a religious need but also as a cultural manifestation of state power. According to some researchers, this enormous manuscript was one of the symbolic works demonstrating the political power of the Timurid state (Blair, 2006).

The sources also mention that Mirza Ulugbek prepared a special tablet for this Qur'an. This testifies that the Timurid princes too paid great attention to preserving and decorating sacred books.

### **Ibrahim Sultan and the calligraphy school at the Timurid court**

Among the Timurid princes, Ibrahim Sultan ibn Shahrukh (1394–1435) stands out for his love of calligraphy. He was not only a patron of learning but also one of the most outstanding calligraphers of his time (Robinson, 1994).

In the “Zafarnama,” Ibrahim Sultan is described as follows: “If Ibn Muqlah were to return to life, he would thrust the shavings of his pen into his own eyes” (Sharafiddin Ali Yazdi, 1997). This description shows how highly his calligraphic skills were valued.

To date, three Qur'anic manuscripts associated with the name of Ibrahim Sultan are known. The first copy was made in 1424 and has dimensions of 81.7 × 61.7 cm. The first pages of the manuscript are richly illuminated and contain exquisite Islamic patterns and golden frames. This copy is now kept in the holy-library collection in Mashhad (Mashhad Holy Library Catalogue, 2001).

The second manuscript was copied in Shiraz in 1427 and is now in the Metropolitan Museum. The third copy was copied in 1430 and is in the collection of the Pars Museum in Shiraz (Bavaria State Library Catalogue, 1999).

These manuscripts demonstrate the high level of development of the art of calligraphy at the Timurid court. Their calligraphic styles, page composition, and decorative motifs also reflect the aesthetic views of the Timurid period.

A comparative study of these manuscripts associated with Ibrahim Sultan makes it possible to draw important conclusions about their place of copying, calligraphic style, and subsequent history of dissemination.

### **Qur'an manuscripts of the Shaybanid period**

The tradition of preparing Qur'an manuscripts in palace conditions in Central Asia continued in the Shaybanid period as well. One of these is the Qur'an manuscript kept under No. 2171 in the collection of the Abu Rayhan al-Biruni Institute of Oriental Studies of the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Uzbekistan.

This manuscript was copied at a high artistic level by Muhammad Amin Halvai and consists of 443 leaves (Hamid Sulaymon, 1987). Almost all the pages of the manuscript are illuminated, and some leaves have special illustrations.

Research has shown that the scribe of the manuscript, Muhammad Amin Halvai, was one of the renowned calligraphers who worked at the court of the Shaybanid rulers Ubaydullah Khan and Abd al-Aziz Khan (Nosirov, 2005). It is therefore possible that this manuscript was specially prepared for a ruler or for the palace library. The codicological features of the manuscript – including high-quality paper, gold-leaf decorations, and a richly ornamented binding – indicate that it was not an ordinary religious book but a work executed on an influential commission.

### **Qur’ans copied for rulers in the time of the Kokand Khanate**

The tradition of preparing Qur’anic manuscripts specially for rulers continued in the time of the Kokand Khanate as well. The manuscripts kept under Nos. 722–723 in the collection of the Institute of Oriental Studies were copied by Muhammad Niyaz Khuqandi in 1286/1869 for the Kokand khan Khudayar Khan (Khudayar Khan Orda Museum Catalogue, 2014).

These manuscripts are written in the thuluth (suls) script, and almost all their pages are richly decorated with artistic elements. In particular, the first pages depict tables, circular patterns, and compositions executed with the use of gold leaf.

The presence on the manuscripts of seals belonging to Khudayar Khan indicates that they were prepared by official palace decree. The seals contain such phrases as “Ya Fattah, waqf fi sabil Allah, Sayyid Muhammad Khudayar Khan.”

On another copy of the Qur’an, kept in the museum of the Orda of Khudayar Khan, the khan’s seal is stamped in more than 200 places. This testifies that the manuscript was recognized as a consecrated sacred work.

### **Qur’ans of the Mangit period**

The Qur’anic manuscript KP-778 KD-1011, kept in the Samarkand Museum-Reserve, is one of the most important sources for the Mangit period. The manuscript was copied in the Kufic script in Bukhara in 1224/1809 by order of the Emir of Bukhara, Amir Haydar ibn Shahmurad (Samarkand Museum-Reserve Catalogue, 2010).

On the margins of the manuscript, a seal beginning with the words “Waqf kard in nuskhara...” has been preserved. This indicates that the manuscript was originally prepared by order of the emir and later transferred for religious purposes.

The manuscripts of the Mangit period also preserve the calligraphic traditions characteristic of the previous periods and reflect the local styles of Kufic and thuluth script.

## CONCLUSION

The manuscripts of the Holy Qur'an prepared for the rulers of Central Asia demonstrate the high level of development of the art of calligraphy and of Islamic culture in the region. Rulers such as Amir Timur, Ibrahim Sultan, Khudayar Khan, and Amir Haydar are known for their special attention to the sacred book.

These manuscripts served not only as religious symbols but also as symbols of political and cultural influence. Through them, one can obtain important information about palace schools of calligraphy, calligraphic traditions, and the culture of gift-giving.

In the future, it is possible to identify other copies associated with the rulers of Central Asia through a comprehensive codicological study of the manuscripts of the Holy Qur'an kept in museums and libraries around the world.

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