

ON THE DATING OF AN “UTHMĀNIC QUR’ĀN” FROM ST. PETERSBURG

After the publication in *Manuscripta Orientalia* of two articles on the oldest Qur’ānic manuscript from the collection of the St. Petersburg Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies [1], a vivid interest in the manuscript was shown both by specialists in Oriental studies and the general public. The editors and author received many questions on various aspects of the research in progress. One of the most frequently asked questions was whether the negatives of the 63 pages, photographed by B. Babajanov in 1983 not long before their confiscation, were restored after the damage they suffered in a fire. The answer is unfortunately negative. But according to what one of the characters in Mikhail Bulgakov’s popular novel “The Master and Margarita” says with heat, ‘Manuscripts do not burn!’, we can also say that there is still hope that the photographs will be restored.

The second question concerns the dating of the manuscript. In May, 2000, thanks to the kindness of Dr. J. van der Plicht (Groningen) and Dr. G. I. Zaytseva (St. Petersburg), a radio-carbon analysis using AMS technology was conducted on parchment fragments taken from the St. Petersburg manuscript of the Qur’ān. A report on the analysis of the parchment fragments received from Groningen is published in the present article (see Appendix, *Diagrams 1—2 and Table 1*). The results were as follows: the manuscript is dated to the period between 775 and 995 A.D. with a likelihood of 95.4%. Palaeographic analysis gave the date of about the final quarter of the eighth century [2], which matches the radio-carbon dating. This dating was also corroborated by F. Déroche [3].

The auction house Christie’s recently commissioned an Oxford laboratory to conduct a radio-carbon analysis of parchment from one of the folios from another manuscript of an “Uthmānic Qur’ān” (today held in the Religious Administration of Muslims in Tashkent). According to the results of this analysis, the fragment is dated to between 595 and 855 A.D. with a likelihood of 95%. Palaeographic dating also indicates the turn of the eighth — ninth centuries [4].

Both manuscripts contain text which differs only slightly from the standard text of the Qur’ān [5]. They are both documents from the period of the Qur’ān’s *written-oral existence*. This period, which began in the lifetime of Muḥammad with the recording of his first sermons and ended in the tenth century, was marked by a constant strug-

gle, conducted at first by the Prophet himself, and later by the community, to preserve the exact text rather than a generalized variant. However, discrepancies inevitably multiplied in the course of time because of the nature of the right-hemisphere memorization mechanisms that determine how oral information is stored [6].

The Prophet’s opponents repeatedly drew attention to inaccuracies in the transmission of previously uttered revelations. The appearance of *āyāt* close in meaning but textually divergent from those uttered earlier [7] provoked disputes and disagreements: “It is He who sent down upon thee the Book, wherein are verses clear (*muḥkamāt*) that are the Essence of the Book, and others ambiguous (*mutashābihāt*). As for those in whose hearts is swerving, they follow the ambiguous part, desiring dissension, and desiring its interpretation (*ta’wīluhu*); and none knows its interpretation (*ta’wīluhu*), save only God. And those firmly rooted in knowledge say, ‘We believe in it; all is from our Lord’...” (3:7) [8]. This *āya* would later give rise to a special theory which divided all *āyāt* into *muḥkam* and *mutashābih*, with a special procedure for interpreting the latter [9].

Both manuscripts can serve as a fine example of the standardisation of the text that the community had achieved by the end of the eighth century. Knowing the difficulties that had to be overcome, one must concede that an enormous project was completed in the 100 — 150 years that passed after the death of the Prophet. For this reason, it seems that the discovery of significant manuscript fragments from the turn of the eighth — ninth centuries cannot be overestimated. This was evidently the important period when older copies that contained a by then unacceptable number of variant readings were being actively removed from circulation. In most cases, they made their way to special repositories in large mosques where they slowly decayed. They could also be “buried” with a special ritual [10]. In our view, the widespread disappearance of early copies took place not under the caliph ‘Uthmān (at that time there were only a few full copies of the Qur’ān), but at the turn of the eighth — ninth centuries. Additionally, copies created at that time with a minimal number of variant readings were preserved by the community for many centuries. Such was the fate of the two “Uthmānic Qur’āns” discussed in the present article.

Appendix

Diagram 1

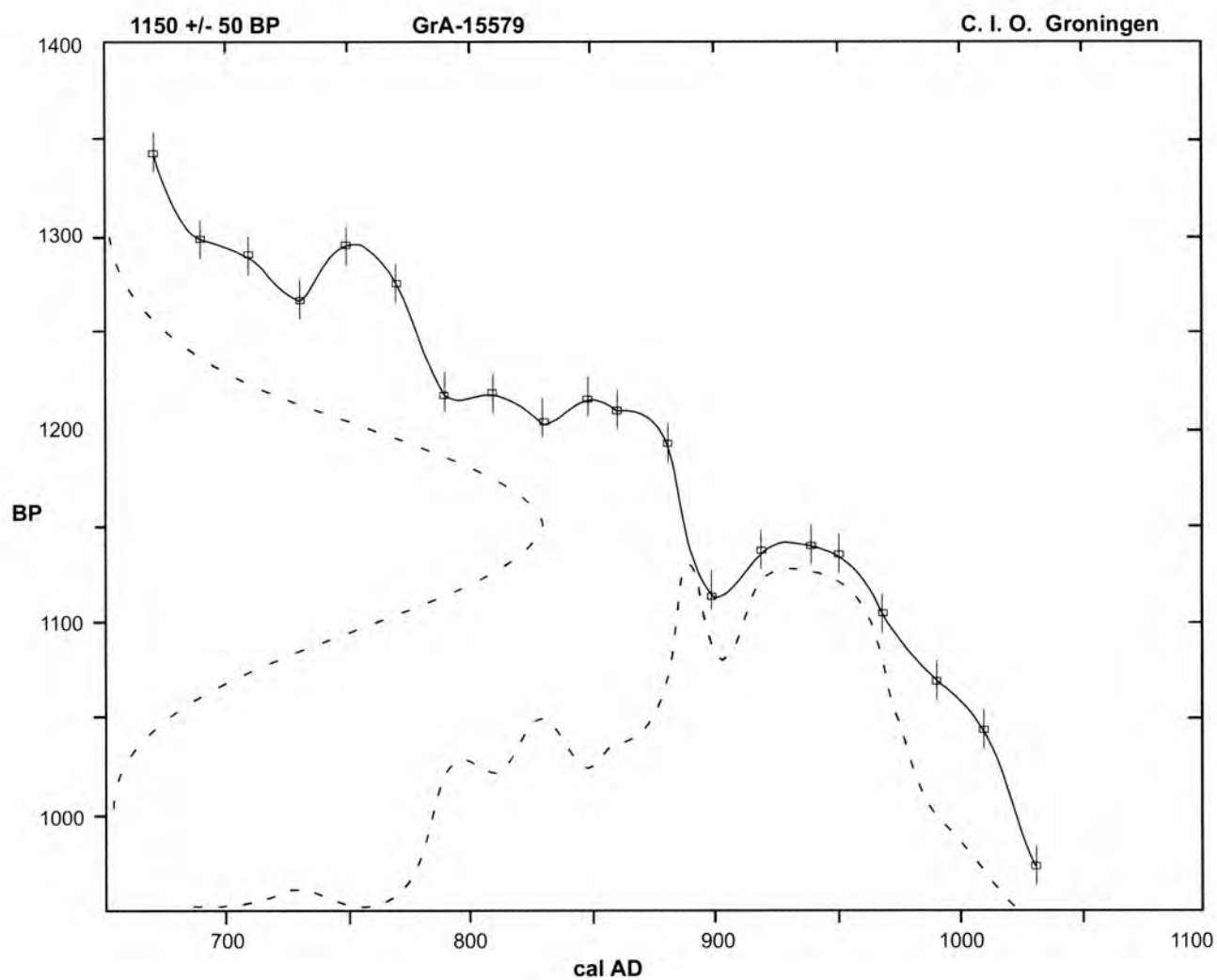


Diagram 2

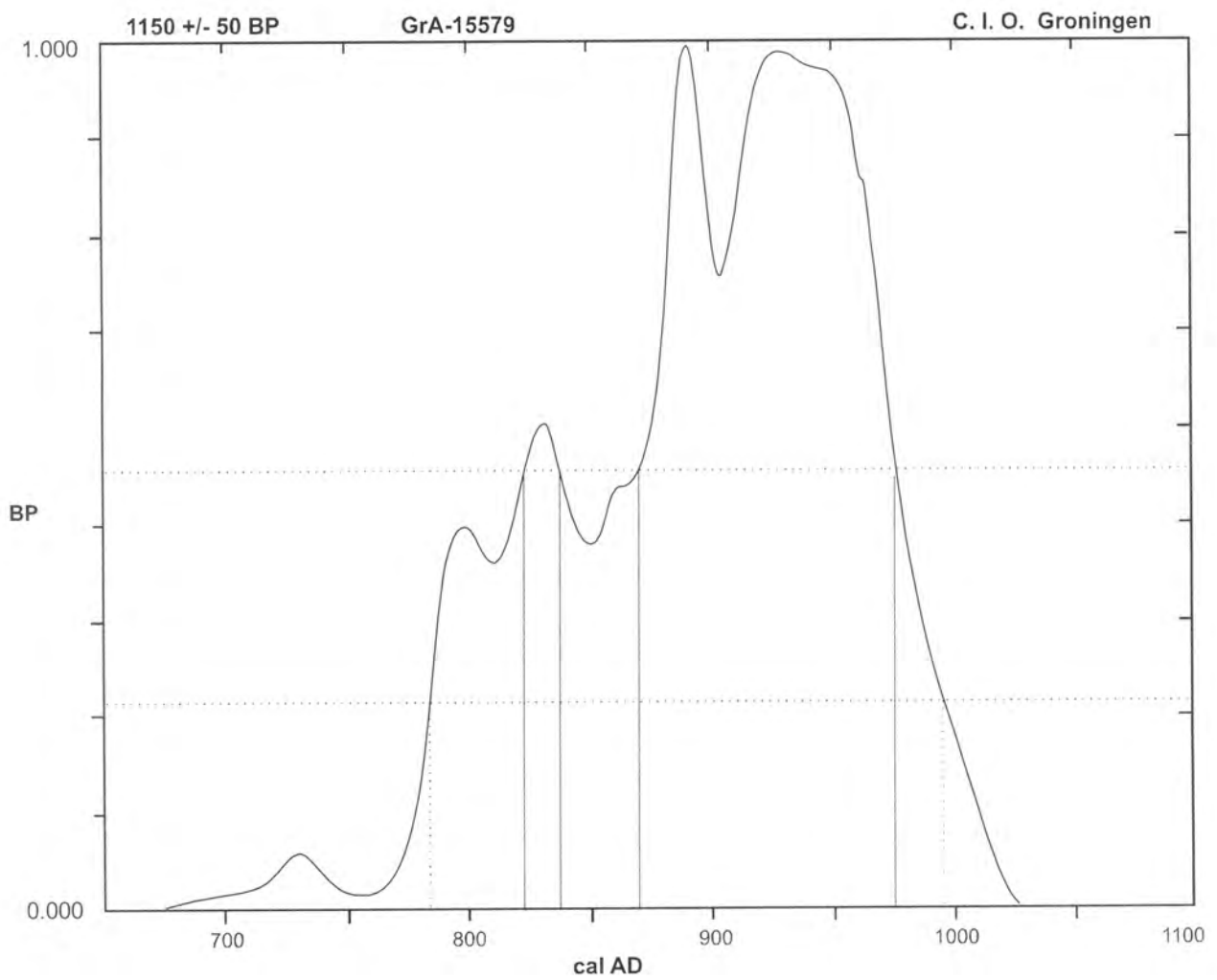


Table 1

The results of the St. Petersburg MS radio-carbon analysis

<p>GrA-15579 Calibration of: 1150 BP +/- 50 The calculations were performed using the following datafiles: Calibration data: c:\cal25\data1\cal40.dta. Spline fit data: c:\cal25\data1\fit40s0.spl, which means: Stuiver et al. — INTCAL98 Integration step size (1/years): 5</p>
<p>Analysis of probability distribution: Seattle / Groningen Method</p> <p>1/2 sigma confidence interval analysis 68.3 % (1 sigma) confidence level yields the following ranges: 781 cal AD ... 791 cal AD 825 cal AD ... 843 cal AD 859 cal AD ... 903 cal AD 915 cal AD ... 977 cal AD</p>
<p>95.4% (2 sigma) confidence level yields the following ranges: 775 cal AD ... 995 cal AD</p>

Notes

1. E. A. Rezvan, "The Qur'ān and its world: VI. Emergence of the Canon: the struggle for uniformity", *Manuscripta Orientalia*, IV/2 (1998), pp. 13–54; *idem*, "Yet another "Uthmānic Qur'ān" (on the history of manuscript E 20 from the St. Petersburg Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies)", *ibid.*, VI/1 (2000), pp. 49–68.
2. *Idem*, "The Qur'ān and its world", p. 26.
3. F. Déroche, "Note sur les fragments coraniques anciens de Katta Langar (Ouzbékistan)", *Patrimoine manuscrit et vie intellectuelle de l'Asie Centrale Islamique. Cahiers d'Asie Centrale*, VII (Tashkent — Aix-en-Provence, 1999), p. 70.
4. Lots 225—225a, sold on 20 October 1992, Qur'ān 22:6–12 and Qur'ān 22:12–17. Lots 29–30, sold on 19 October 1993, Qur'ān 15:62–74 and 4:2–5.
5. See Rezvan, "The Qur'ān and its world", pp. 24–5; A. Jeffery and I. Mendelsohn, "The orthography of the Samarqand Qur'ān codex", *Journal of American Oriental Society*, 3 (1942), pp. 175–94.
6. For the special characteristics of information storage in early-writing and non-writing societies, see V. V. Ivanov, "Nechët i chët. Assimetriia mozga i dinamika znakovykh sistem" ("Odd and even. The asymmetry of the cerebrum and the dynamics of sign systems"), *Izbrannye trudy po semiotike i istorii kul'tury* (Moscow, 1999), i, pp. 566–70.
7. Such a level of variant readings is an inevitable consequence of the non-written existence of the texts, which relies "on the right-hemisphere mechanisms of memorization", see Ivanov, *op. cit.*, p. 568.
8. Translation of A. J. Arberry.
9. J. Wansbrough, *Qur'ānic Studies. Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (Oxford, 1977), index; M. Ayoub, "Study of Imāmī Shi'i tafsīr", in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'ān*, ed. A. Rippin (Oxford, 1988), p. 189.
10. J. Sadan, "Genizah and genizah-like practices in Islamic and Jewish traditions", *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, XLIII/1–2 (1986), pp. 36–58.