5 Structural, linguistic and literary features

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THE CODEX OF THE RECEIVED TEXT (*MUṢḤAF*)

The qur'ānic text transmitted to us betrays a peculiar composition, essentially different from that of the Hebrew Bible, which pursues salvation history through a roughly chronological sequence of events, and equally different from the Gospels that narrate the essential stages of the founding history of the Christian faith. The Qur'ān does not present a continuous narrative of the past, but in its early texts conjures the future, the imminent day of judgement, and later on enters into a debate with various interlocutors about the implementation of monotheist scripture in the present.

External subdivisions

In terms of form, the Qur'ān is not a sequentially coherent book, made up of sub-units that build on each other, but rather consists in a collection of 114 independent text units, sūras (*sūra*, pl. *suwar*) with no evident external link to each other. A sūra is marked by a heading giving its name, and by an introductory invocation, the so-called *basmala*: 'in the name of God, the compassionate and merciful' (*bi-smi llāhi l-raḥmāni l-raḥīm*). The term sūra is used in the Qur'ān, though originally referring to undetermined text units, smaller than the eventually fixed sūras. Whereas in some cases the names of the sūras are contested, several sūras being known under more than one name, the introductory formula – that is missing in only one sūra, Q 9 – goes back to the recitation practice of the Prophet's community itself. The sūras vary in length from two-sentence statements to lengthy polythematic communications. They are arranged in the qur'ānic corpus roughly according to their length: the longest sūras are placed first, the shorter ones following in a generally descending order. The vast majority of the sūras are neatly composed texts that may be understood to constitute a literary genre in themselves. Although a large number of sūras appear to have been expanded during the period of their oral transmission, even in their

compounded version they appear to follow particular rules of composition. Only some of the long sūras appear to be haphazard compilations of isolated text passages, their shape due to the redaction process itself.

Sūras are composed of verses (*āya*, pl. *āyāt*), varying in size from one single word to an entire, complex pericope. The term *āya*, which corresponds to Syriac *āthā* and Hebrew *ōth*, meaning a 'visible sign of a transcendental reality', is first used in the Qurʾān to denote markings of divine omnipotence, such as are manifest in nature or in history. In the course of the Qurʾān's communication process, the concept came to designate a miraculous sign apt to prove the truth of the prophetic message, and could thus be eventually identified with a qurʾānic verse. The early short sūras are styled in a kind of rhymed prose, labelled *sajʿ*, known as the medium of the ancient Arabian soothsayers (*kahana*, sing. *kāhin*). *Sajʿ* is a particularly succinct rhythmic diction where single phrases are marked by prose-rhyme, *fāṣila*. This pattern of phonetic correspondence between the verse endings is not only looser than poetic rhyme (*qāfiya*) but also more flexible, thus allowing semantically related verses to be bracketed by a rhyme of their own and clearly distinct verse-groups to be marked off. The highly sophisticated phonetic structures produced by this style have been evaluated by Michael Sells.[1] Though the *sajʿ* style gave way at a later stage of qurʾānic development to a more smoothly flowing prose allowing for complex periods to form a single verse, closed by only a phonetically stereotypical rhyming syllable, the unit of the verse as the smallest compositional entity is an essential element of qurʾānic literary structure. It not only facilitates the act of memorising but constitutes the backbone of qurʾānic recitation (*tartīl*, *tajwīd*), the essential format of self-manifestation for the Muslim scripture. The numbering of qurʾānic verses is a modern phenomenon whereas other technical subdivisions, like the partitioning of the entire text into seven *manāzil* (sing. *manzila*, i.e., station), or into thirty *ajzāʾ* (sing. *juzʾ*, i.e., part) which, in turn, are subdivided into two *aḥzāb* (sing. *ḥizb*, part) – divisions governed by quantitative criteria without concern for the rhetorical and semantic disposition of the sūras – stem from the early post-redactional period and were introduced to facilitate memorising and reciting.

The compositional sequence of the qurʾānic sūras does not follow any logical, let alone theological, guideline and betrays both a conservative and a theologically disinterested attitude on the part of the redactors. It suggests that the redaction was carried out without extensive planning, perhaps in a hurry, at a stage of development prior to the emergence of the elaborate conceptions of prophetology that underlie the *sīra*, the biography of the Prophet that was fixed about a century and a half after his death. The fixation

of the qur'ānic text must also have occurred before the great conquests, since a unification of various textual traditions dispersed over the ever-extending territories would have been difficult to implement. The traditional scenario of the ʿUthmānic redaction, the hypothesis that the texts of the Prophet's recitations were collected some twenty-five years after his death by the third caliph ʿUthmān to form the corpus we have before us, is thus not implausible, though impossible to prove positively.

Codification and its impact

The Arabic script used for the earliest codification only incompletely rendered the phonetic shape of the text. What was later to become a consonantal system combined with the obligatory notation of long vowels was, in the seventh century, yet an ambiguous representation of the phonetics of Arabic words. A number of consonants were rendered by a single homograph that only later was differentiated, through points placed above or below the letter form, into specific graphemes. Long vowels were not presented unambiguously and short ones were not yet marked by the strokes that later came into use. The earliest written codification of the qur'ānic texts could not, therefore, serve as more than a mnemonic-technical support for a continuing tradition of oral recitation. Despite the preliminary format of the first redaction, however, with the consonantal fixation of the text and with its arrangement as a sequence of sūras, a fixed text had been established.

At the same time, a decisive course had been set with regard to the literary character of the Qur'ān. The combined codification of loosely composed texts consisting of diverse, often conceptually isolated communications – characteristic of the Medinan 'long sūras' – together with the complex polythematic structures of the mnemonic and technically sophisticated short and middle-sized Meccan sūras, resulted in a very heterogeneous ensemble. This textual diversity certainly had a hermeneutical impact on the perception of the text. The individual texts became disconnected from their earlier communicational context during the period of the emergence of the community and this changed them from inter-depending prophetic communications into isolated sections of a book. Neatly composed sūras also lost much of their significance as literary texts once they were juxtaposed in the same codex with other units also labelled 'sūras', but whose constituent passages had not been formulated to create a coherent literary structure. The loosely composed sūras thus invalidated the structural claim conveyed by the neatly composed ones. The genre 'sūra' that had been established during the activity of the Prophet became blurred in the consciousness of

the later community. It is not surprising then, that the sūra as a unit played only a minimal role in Muslim reading of the Qurʾān, and did not attract attention as a literary phenomenon in classical Muslim qurʾānic scholarship but had to be rediscovered in modern times.

THE PRE-CANONICAL QURʾĀN

Controversial issues

The presentation of qurʾānic developments in this chapter presupposes the reliability of the basic data of traditional accounts about the emergence of the Qurʾān, assuming the transmitted qurʾānic text to be the genuine collection of the communications of the Prophet as pronounced during his activities at Mecca (about 610–22 CE), and again at Medina (1/622 until his death in 11/632). It is true that the earlier consensus of scholarly opinion on the origins of Islam has, since the publication of John Wansbrough's *Quranic studies*[2] and Patricia Crone and Michael Cook's *Hagarism*,[3] been shattered, and that various attempts at a new reconstruction of those origins have been put forward. As a whole, however, the theories of the so-called sceptic or revisionist scholars who, arguing historically, make a radical break with the transmitted picture of Islamic origins, shifting them in both time and place from the seventh to the eighth or ninth century and from the Arabian peninsula to the Fertile Crescent, have by now been discarded, though many of their critical observations remain challenging and still call for investigation. New findings of qurʾānic text fragments, moreover, can be adduced to affirm rather than call into question the traditional picture of the Qurʾān as an early fixed text composed of the sūras we have. Nor have scholars trying to deconstruct that image through linguistic arguments succeeded in seriously discrediting the genuineness of the Qurʾān as we know it. These include the work of Christoph Luxenberg,[4] who views the Qurʾān as an originally Syriac–Arabic melange later adapted to the rules of classical Arabic, and Günter Lüling,[5] who reads the Qurʾān as a collection of hymns composed in a Christian Arabic dialect and later revised to fit the grammatical rules newly established in the eighth and ninth centuries. Whereas Lüling's reference to the earlier hypothesis by Karl Vollers,[6] who had identified the original language of the Qurʾān as broadly dialectal, points to a yet unresolved problem, Luxenberg's assumption of a Syriac–Arabic linguistic melange as the original language of the Qurʾān lacks a methodologically sound basis. The alternative visions about the genesis of the Qurʾān presented by Wansbrough, Crone and Cook, Lüling and Luxenberg are not only mutually exclusive, but rely on textual observations that are

too selective to be compatible with the comprehensive qur'ānic textual evidence that can be drawn only from a systematically microstructural reading.

Orality, scripturality

In spite of the etymology of its earliest self-designation as *qur'ān*, which is a loanword from Syriac *qeryānā*, meaning a lectionary, recital or pericope to be recited in liturgical services, far too often the Qur'ān is implicitly treated as a written literary work, imagined to have been authored by Muḥammad. This approach is apparent in frequent criticisms that blame the text for not fulfilling particular literary standards. Since the quest for an '*Ur*-text' has long been prevalent in historical-critical studies, qur'ānic speech has usually been investigated according to the criteria of written compositions unrelated to oral performance. This view has met with criticism in more recent scholarship, which has demanded that the quest for original meaning be replaced by a consideration of the Qur'ān's socio-cultural context as a necessary prelude to its interpretation. Some scholars have criticised the neglect of the ritual-recitational dimensions of the Qur'ān, others have stressed 'the abiding and intrinsic orality of the Qur'ān as a scriptural book of revelation and authority'.[7] Oral composition such as has been claimed for ancient Arabic poetry by Michael Zwettler and James Monroe on the basis of the thesis presented by Milman Parry[8] and followed by Albert Bates Lord,[9] although not immediately applicable to the case of the Qur'ān, still needs debate. According to Parry and Lord, 'oral poetry' is characterised by being composed (and recomposed) during performance, a procedure which is supported by a thesaurus of formulaic phrases. Though such a performance practice may apply to many early sūras, it can hardly be assumed for the bulk of the qur'ānic corpus. Some early sūras that were already composed without written assistance attest to an origin in nocturnal vigils, rather than in public performances. Later sūras, comprised of multipartite verses with little poetic shaping and thus devoid of effective mnemonic technical devices, strongly suggest an almost immediate fixation in writing, or may even have been written compositions to begin with.

To investigate the full scope of this development one has, however, to go beyond the mere technical aspects. It is true that the distinction between two decisive periods for the genesis of the Qur'ān – a purely oral phase, where the message refers to itself as '*qur'ān*' and a later phase where '*kitāb*' becomes the term of reference for new texts whose length and structure presuppose the use of writing as a mnemonic-technical device – has been accepted in historical-critical scholarship on the Qur'ān. Yet, this double modality of

the qur'ānic text has not been explored for the implications that it poses to notions about the development of the Qur'ān as moving from oral recitals to the manifest status of a holy scripture, a development that has to be viewed as a process of gradual canonisation. One has to keep in mind, however, that the qur'ānic terms '*qur'ān*' and '*kitāb*' denote very different concepts. The first points to a communal event that is in progress and that involves a number of *dramatis personae* – a speaker reciting a message received from an 'absent' commissioner that he is charged to communicate to a plurality of listeners. It thus stresses a horizontal human interaction. This dynamic, thanks to the striking phenomenon of qur'ānic self-referentiality, is mirrored clearly in the early sūras themselves, which have preserved lively scenarios of the reception of the qur'ānic revelation.[10]

The second concept focuses on the hierarchical quality of a transcendent message presupposing a vertical relationship between a divine 'author' and his 'readers'. Thus, as Nicolai Sinai phrased it, whereas *al-kitāb* designates a heavenly medium of storage, *qur'ān* points to an earthly medium of display.[11] A distinctive relation between the divine and the prophetic speaker is, in the early phase, not yet elaborated. It is only with the '*kitāb*-phase' that it becomes a distinct sender–receiver relation. In itself, the notion of a *kitāb* clearly implies a strong claim to canonicity. Indeed, it was realised as such by the early community who first understood *kitāb* to be a transcendent scripture that both was manifested in the texts held sacred by the adherents of the older religions (who used to 'read' these in their services) and was being communicated to them in subsequent messages. These messages took the form of narrative pericopes conveying biblical stories and occupying the centre of the more complex liturgical recitals communicated by the Prophet as '*qur'ān*'. During the Meccan periods, therefore, *kitāb* was not yet identified with the qur'ānic message as a whole but only with the qur'ānic narratives familiar from biblical and apocryphical lore. The community only later conceived *kitāb* to cover their own growing corpus of divine communications, although during the lifetime of the Prophet they obviously did not expect a written corpus of these revelations to materialise. What was *qur'ān*, recital, in the beginning developed into *kitāb*, a virtual scripture, in the end, both concepts eventually merging. In turn, the qur'ānic *kitāb* preserves much of its *qur'ān*-ness, since throughout the process of revelation the anticipated presence of listeners is sustained. Among these listeners, the believers, i.e., the community, even step into the text, not only as protagonists in new scenarios of salvation history but also as conscious voices in an ongoing debate. Thus the entirely vertical relationship between the sender and the recipients, which prevails with the absence

of the Prophet and the closure of the corpus, is not really pertinent to the preceding, pre-redactional stages.

To reclaim the pre-redactional Qur'ān, it is essential to understand that the Qur'ān is not meant to be a book to study but a text to recite. Kristina Nelson, who researched the recitation of the Qur'ān, has stressed that the transmission of the Qur'ān and its social existence are essentially oral. 'Qur'ānic rhythm and assonance alone confirm that it is meant to be heard . . . The significance of the revelation is carried as much by the sound as by its semantic information.'[12] This observation has important implications. If the Qur'ān was meant to be recited, its actualisation as oral performance should be evident in the composition of the text itself. Where can we trace the intrinsic orality of the Qur'ān?

As was mentioned above, the early – and densely structured – parts of the Qur'ān reflect an ancient Arabic linguistic pattern, termed *saj'*, a prose style marked by very short and concise sentences with frequently changing patterns of particularly clear-cut, often expressive rhymes. In the later sūras once this style has given way to a more loosely structured prose, with verses often exceeding one complete sentence, the rhyme end takes the form of a simple *–ūn-* or *–īn-* pattern. In most cases this is achieved through a morpheme denoting masculine plural. One wonders how this rather mechanically achieved and inconspicuous ending could suffice to fulfil the listeners' anticipation of an end marker for the long verse. Upon closer investigation, however, it is apparent that the rhyme as such is no longer charged with this function, but there is now another device to mark the end. An entire, syntactically stereotypical, rhymed phrase concludes the verse. It is tempting to call this a cadenza in analogy to the final part of speech units in Gregorian chant which, through their particular sound pattern, arouse the expectation of an ending. In the Qur'ān what is repeated is not only the identical musical sound, but a linguistic pattern as well – a widely stereotypical phrasing. The musical sound pattern enhances the message encoded in the qur'ānic cadenza-phrase that, in turn, may introduce a meta-discourse. Many cadenza-phrases are semantically distinguished from their context and add a moral comment to it, such as 'verily, you were sinning' (*innaki kunti min al-khāṭi'īn*, Q 12:29). They thus transcend the main – narrative or argumentative – flow of the sūra, introducing a spiritual dimension, i.e., divine approval or disapproval. They may also refer to one of God's attributes, like 'God is powerful over everything' (*wa-kāna llāhu ʿalā kulli shay'in qadīrā*, Q 33:27), which in the later stages of qur'ānic development have become parameters of ideal human behaviour. These meta-narrative insertions into the narrative or argumentative fabric would, in a written text

meant for silent reading, appear rather disruptive, delaying the information process. They add essentially, however, to the impact of the oral recitation. The Qur'ān thus consciously styles itself as a text evolving on different, yet closely intertwined levels of discourse and mediation. Although it is true that not all multipartite verses bear such formulaic endings, cadenzas may be considered characteristic of the later Meccan and all the Medinan qur'ānic texts. The resounding cadenza, thus, replaces the earlier expressive rhyme pattern, marking a new and irreversible development in the emergence of the text and of the new faith.

THE ELEMENTS AT STAKE IN THE STRUCTURING OF THE SŪRA

Eschatological prophecies

The Qur'ān has developed diverse motifs and structures not known from earlier Arabic literature.[13] Among the most prominent are eschatological prophecies in early Meccan sūras, where they most frequently occur in the beginning. They are often introduced by oath clusters conjuring apocalyptic scenarios (e.g., Q 100:1–5). Contrary to biblical oath formulas, these do not function as invocations of a supra-natural authority external to the text. As Nicolai Sinai has stressed, the claim to validity of 'the early sūras . . . is not anchored in something beyond the text. One might speak of a poetic, rather than a theological truth-claim' of the early texts.[14] The sūras may equally be introduced by clusters of *idhā* ('when . . .')-phrases (Q 81:1–13), predicting the apocalyptic events of the last day. Both types of clusters create a pronouncedly rhythmical beginning to the sūra. In some cases the *idhā*-phrases are not confined to natural and cosmic phenomena but depict the preparations for the final judgement, such as the blowing of the trumpet, the positioning of the throne, the opening of the account books, etc. They are followed by a 'then . . .'-phrase, focusing on the behaviour of people in the apocalyptic setting and their separation into the groups of the blessed and the condemned. The ensuing descriptions of the hereafter are strictly divided into two contrasting parts. Introduced by phrases like *fa-ammā/. . . wa-amma* ('as to those who . . . they will', Q 101:6–9) or *wujūhun . . . wujūhun* ('faces will that day look . . . and other faces will look', Q 80:38–42), they juxtapose the situation of the believers in the garden of paradise with that of the disbelievers or evildoers suffering in the tribulations of the fire of hell. It is noteworthy that both depictions are particularly rich in imagery and together form a double image, consisting of either an equal number of verses, or of two verse-groups displaying a proportional relation to each

other. As such, they remind us of the juxtaposed pictorial representations of both forms of the hereafter depicted in Christian iconography, thus suggesting the designation of 'diptycha'. Not infrequently, diptycha comprise recollections of the representative behaviours of the inmates of the two abodes during their worldly life, serving to justify their eschatological fate. These flashbacks are sometimes interspersed with direct speech; some of them merge into a catalogue of virtues to be emulated or vices to be avoided.

Signs

Signs implied in nature

Several descriptions of the 'biosphere', of copious vegetation, fauna, an agreeable habitat for humans, the natural resources at their disposal and the like, are incorporated into paraenetic appeals to recognise divine providence and accept divine omnipotence, since all these benefits are signs (*āyāt*) bearing a coded message. Properly understood they will evoke gratitude and submission to the divine will. The perception of nature, which in pre-Islamic poetry appears as alien and threatening, and as challenging the poet's heroic defiance of its hardships, has, by middle Meccan times, transmuted into the image of a meaningfully organised habitat ensuring human welfare and arousing an awareness of belonging. Although extensive *āyāt* passages reminiscent of the appraisals of divine creation to be found in the Psalms do not occur before the middle Meccan times, they are previewed by earlier enumerations of divine munificence, such as in Q 76:6–16 and others. In comparison to ancient Arabic poetry, *āyāt* passages clearly express an essential change in attitude towards nature and they soon become qurʾānic stock inventory, cf. Q 15:16–25 and 25:45–50. Although signs do occur in polemical contexts like Q 21:30–3, hymnal *āyāt* predominate.

Closely related to the hymnal *āyāt* is the hymn as such. Verses praising God's benevolence, omnipotence and his deeds in history occur predominantly in introductory sections like Q 87:1–5. They are also found distributed within the sūras like the early Q 53:43–9, and the later Q 32:4–9. Loosely related to the hymn in a structural sense, but serving a different purpose – namely to present a moral example for the community – is the catalogue of virtues which already appears in early sūras and is frequent in later texts (Q 23:57–61); its counterpart is the catalogue of vices which can be traced through the entire corpus (Q 68:8–16).

Signs implied in history: retribution legends

Short narratives – the invasion of Mecca (Q 105), the Thamūd myth (Q 91:11–15), the story of Pharaoh and Moses (Q 79:15–26) – or ensembles

of narratives like that in Q 51 including Abraham and Lot, Moses and Pharaoh, the ʿĀd, the Thamūd, Noah, or evocations of stories (Q 52, 53, 69) occur from the earliest sūras onward. The latter sometimes form lists (Q 89). Longer narratives are introduced by the formula known from *āyāt* in nature, 'have you not seen' (*a-lam tara . . .*), later 'and when . . .' (*wa-idh* (*faʿala*) . . .), i.e., they are assumed to be known to the listeners. It is noteworthy that the longer narratives from early Meccan texts onward are split into equal halves, thus producing proportionate structures (Q 79:15–26; 51:24–37; 68:17–33). Narratives develop into retribution legends or punishment stories, serving to prove that divine justice is at work in history, the unjustly harassed being rewarded with salvation, the transgressors and the unbelievers punished by annihilation. At the same time, legends that are located in the Arabian peninsula may be read as reinterpretations of ancient Arabian poetic representations of deserted space. Sites no longer lie in ruins due to preordained natural processes, but because God is maintaining an equitable balance between human actions and human welfare. Deserted sites thus acquire a meaning, they are carrying a divine message. From Q15 onward, retribution legends no longer focus predominantly on ancient Arabian lore but increasingly include biblical narratives.

A related genre in terms of function, which also serves paraenetic purposes, is the parable, *mathal*, like that about the owners of the blighted garden (Q 68:17–33), the good and corrupt trees (Q 14:24–27), or the unbelieving town (Q 36:13–32). Parables are, however, less frequent than myths and historical narratives.

Narratives of salvation history

In contrast to the meticulous shaping of personages and the sophisticated coding and de-decoding of their motives, which characterise biblical narrative, qurʾānic narrating pursues complex 'para-narrative' aims. Narratives, at least insofar as they are developed and recall plots already known from biblical literature, are presented as excerpts or messages from the 'book' which, in turn, is clearly understood to be a corpus of literature apart from the rest of the known stories currently available through oral tradition. The dignity of these '*kitāb*-generated' narratives certainly has a strong bearing on the style of the stories presented as *kitāb* readings, not only forcing on them a distinct linguistic code to distinguish them from profane narrative, but also imbuing these narratives with the new message of imminent eschatological catastrophe, a message which brings the narrative close to an exhortative appeal or, later, a sermon.

It is exactly these discursive elements, so marginal in biblical narrative, that figure centrally in the qurʾānic narrative: the explicit presentation of the moral or theological implications for the community – often coded in the cadenza-phrases – that can be deduced from the narrated facts or speeches.

The Qurʾān is often accused of lacking a chronological framework for the events of pre-qurʾānic history that it narrates and the narration is frequently criticised as excessively repetitive. While this may hold true for the earliest discourse of the Qurʾān, the situation changes substantially when a new paradigm is adopted, switching the focus from the deserted sites of the real homeland to the realm of the messengers to the People of the Book, whose discourse as intermediaries between God and humankind is much more sophisticated.

Although initially embedded in narrative catalogues that include extra-biblical tradition, stories about major biblical figures like Moses and several patriarchs known from Genesis gradually gain a function of their own. They become the stock inventory of the central section of longer Meccan sūras and only rarely appear in other positions. Sūras from the second Meccan period onward often form a composite that mirrors the enactment of a monotheistic liturgical service where the central position is occupied by the reading of scriptural texts. They are embedded in a more extensive recital, whose initiatory and concluding section may contain liturgical material but also less universal elements such as debates about ephemeral issues facing the community. The ceremonial function of the biblically inspired narrative as a festive presentation of the book is underlined by introductory formulas. At a later stage, when the particular form of revelation communicated to the Muslim community is regarded as a virtual scripture of its own, i.e., when community matters are acknowledged as part of salvation history, whole sūras figure as manifestations of *al-kitāb*.

The phenomenon of recurring narratives, retold in slightly variant fashion, has often been dismissed as mere repetitions, i.e., as a deficiency. They deserve, however, to be studied as testimonies of the consecutive stages of the emergence of a community and thus reflective of the process of canonisation. They point to a successively changing narrative pact, to the continuing education of listeners and the development of a moral consensus that is reflected in the texts. In later Meccan and Medinan sūras, when a large number of narratives are assumed to be well known to the listeners, the position acquired by salvation history narratives is occupied by mere evocations and debates about them.

Debates

It has been argued that debate is one of the essential elements of the Qurʾān.[15] This is certainly true for the sūras from the middle Meccan period onward. In early Meccan texts, polemical utterances are more often than not directed against listeners who do not comply with the behavioural norms of the cult. These listeners are reprimanded by the speaker who is explicitly addressing them (Q 53:59ff.). Sometimes curses are uttered, against absent persons (Q 111:1ff.), or against humankind in general (Q 80:17). In other cases menacing words are directed at the ungrateful or pretentious (Q 114:1) and these may merge into a catalogue of vices (Q 107:2–7). Whereas in most of the early cases the adversaries are not granted an opportunity to reply, later sūras present the voices of both sides. Lengthy polemics are addressed to the unbelievers, sometimes in the presence of the accused, more often in their absence. During the middle and later Meccan periods, however, when the community had to struggle against a stubborn opposition, they needed to be trained in dispute. Meccan sūras often begin and end with polemical debates, treating diverse points of dissent. In some cases, the absent adversaries are verbally quoted, while in other cases the simulation of a debate is presented, instructing the addressee and his listeners to react to a given statement by their adversaries with a particular response: 'when they say . . ., respond . . .' (*wa-yaqūlūna . . . fa-qul*, Q 10:20). These instances, classified by Welch as 'say-passages', are to be regarded as virtual debates performed in the absence of one party to the encounter. In other cases, there are *qul*-verses that do not refer to a debate, but serve to introduce prayers or religious mottos. Often polemics respond to the unbelievers' rejection of the Qurʾān, again figuring at the beginning or the end, or in the conclusions to main parts of sūras.

Like polemics, apologetic sections frequently appear as framing parts of a sūra. From early Meccan texts onward they ordinarily serve to affirm the rank of the Qurʾān as a divine revelation, usually constituting the nucleus of concluding sections (Q 74:54–5). In later sūras these concluding affirmations of the revelation tend to merge into exhortations of the Prophet (Q 11:109–23). It is noteworthy that affirmations of the revelation finally become a standard *incipit* of sūras (Q 12:1–3), again often merging into exhortations.

In some cases, sūras are framed by two affirmations of revelation (Q 41:1–5, 41–54). In later developments, such introductory affirmations are reduced to mere evocations of the book. By far the majority of these sūras start with a pathos-arousing evocation of the book, often introduced by a chiffre, i.e., a combination of letters from the Arabic alphabet devoid of

semantic meaning – an underscoring of divine authorship that is still missing in the early sūras. This *incipit* seems to hint at a newly achieved cultic function for the recited text, one which is no longer understood as the direct and immediate communication of a divine message to the community, but as a recital from a sacred scripture that is assumed to be pre-existing and reproduced only through recitation.

Additional elements: Regulations and reports about contemporary events

The form and structure of Medinan sūras have not yet been studied thoroughly. Summary analyses are presented by Theodore Nöldeke and Neal Robinson. Matthias Zahniser has discussed single sūras. A systematic investigation of their building blocks is still lacking. It may, however, be stated that, with a few exceptions, all the Meccan elements are met again in Medinan sūras, although the eschatological sections and the *āyāt* are no longer expressed at length, but rather are summarily evoked. This should not be taken as a decisive shift in theological interest. While new topics which occupy the focus of the community's attention do emerge, the earlier topics remain present, enshrined in the partial corpus of the early sūras that have been committed to memory by the believers and that serve as the textual basis for the emerging ritual prayers.

Although occasional regulations – mostly about cultic matters – do occur in Meccan sūras, more elaborate regulation concerning not only cultic but also communal affairs figure in the Medinan context. Their binding force is sometimes underlined by a reference to the transcendent source, e.g., 'it is prescribed for you' (*kutiba ʿalaykum*, Q 2:183–7). Medinan regulations do not display any structured composition nor do they form part of neatly composed units. They suggest, rather, later insertions into loosely connected contexts.

A new element that appears in Medinan sūras is what tradition has understood to be allusions to contemporary events experienced or enacted by the community, such as the Battle of Badr (Q 3:123), Uḥud (Q 3:155–74), the expulsion of the Banū Naḍīr (Q 59:2–5), the siege of Khaybar (Q 48:15), the expedition to Tabūk (Q 9:29–35) or the farewell sermon of the Prophet (Q 5:1–3). It is noteworthy that these reports do not display an obvious literary shaping. Nor do they betray any particular pathos. It does not come as a surprise, then, that unlike the situation in Judaism and Christianity, where the individual elements of biblical history have been fused to form a mythical drama of salvation, no such great narrative has arisen from the

Qur'ān itself. A metahistorical blueprint of the genesis of Islam was constructed only later, through the biographical construction of the Prophet (*sīra*).

THE SŪRA AS A GENRE

Types of early Meccan sūras

The spectrum of different themes, and their combinations, is very broad in early Meccan times. Sūra types range from single-part pieces – pure lampoon, *hijā'* (Q 111), pure exhortations through the Prophet (Q 94), pure eschatological discourse (Q 95, 100, 101) – to bipartite ones – oath cluster (Q 92:1–13) and eschatological section (Q 92:14–21) – to the later standardised tripartite sūra: exhortation (Q 74:1–10), polemics (Q 74:11–48) and affirmation of the Qur'ān (Q 74:49–56). Characteristic of this group as a whole is their striking self-referentiality. The sūras reflect a scenario situated locally in a Meccan public place, most probably close to the Ka'ba, as can be gathered from their decidedly articulate references to sacred space and human behaviour therein, as well as to sacred time. The rites at the Ka'ba seem to be the *Sitz im Leben* of many early sūras, the Ka'ba serving not only as the locale for the performance of their recitation, but its rites also marking particular times of the day respected by the community as ritually significant. Since these sūras were memorised without any written support, their distinct proportions were effective as mnemonic-technical devices.

Types of later Meccan sūras

Things change substantially in later Meccan times. We may localise the disjunction with Q 15, where, for the first time, an allusion is made to the existence of a particular form of liturgical service in which scripture functions as the cardinal section. In these sūras, references to the Meccan sanctuary (*ḥaram*) as the central warrant for the social coherence of the community have been replaced by new symbols. Instead of introductory allusions to liturgical times and sacred space, we encounter an evocation of the book, be it clad in an oath (Q 36:2; 37:3; 38:1; 43:2; 44:2; 50:1) or in a deictic affirmation of its presence (Q 2:2; 10:1; 12:1; 13:1, etc.).

Moreover, the message assumes a new scope and spatial extension. Later Meccan sūras have broadened the horizon for the listeners, who are led away from their local surroundings to a distant landscape, the holy land, familiar as the scenery where the history of the community's spiritual forebears had taken place. The introduction of the Jerusalem prayer orientation

(*qibla*), alluded to in Q 17:1, is an unequivocal attestation of this change. In view of the increasing interest in the biblical heritage, it comes as no surprise that the bulk of the middle and late Meccan sūras seem to mirror a monotheistic service, starting with an initial dialogical section (apologetic, polemic, paraenetic) and closing with a related section, most frequently an affirmation of the revelation. These framing sections have been compared to the Christian Orthodox *ecteniae*, i.e., initial and concluding *responsoria* recited by the priest or deacon with the community. The centre of the monotheistic service and, similarly, of the fully developed sūra of the middle and late Meccan period is occupied by a biblical reminiscence – in the case of the liturgical service, a scripture reading (*lectio*), in the case of the sūra, a narrative focusing on biblical protagonists. Ritual coherence has thus given way to scriptural coherence, the more complex later sūras referring to scripture both by their transmission of scriptural texts and by their being dependent on the mnemonic technicalities of writing for their conservation. Already in later Meccan sūras, however, the distinct tripartite composition often becomes blurred, with narratives gradually being replaced by discursive sections. Many compositions also display secondary expansions – a phenomenon that still needs further investigation. Yet, for the bulk of the middle and late Meccan sūras, the claim to a tripartite composition can be sustained.

Types of Medinan sūras

In Medina, however, sūras have not only given up their tripartite scheme but also display much less sophistication in the patterns of their composition. One type may be summarily termed the 'rhetorical' sūra or sermon (Q 22, 24, 33, 47, 48, 49, 57, until 66); they consist of an address to the community whose members are called upon directly by formulas such as 'O people' (*yā ayyuhā l-nāsu*, Q 22:1). In these sūras, which in some cases (Q 59, 61, 62, 64) are stereotypically introduced by initial hymnal formulas strongly reminiscent of the biblical Psalms, the Prophet (*al-nabī*) appears no longer as a mere transmitter of the message but as personally addressed by God: 'O Prophet' (*yā ayyuhā l-nabiyyu*, Q 33:28), or as an agent acting in combination with the divine persona: 'God and his messenger' (*Allāhu wa-rasūluhu*, Q 33:22). Unlike these intended monolithic addresses, the bulk of the Medinan sūras are the most complex. Most of the so-called 'long sūras' (Q 2–5, 8, 9) cease to be neatly structured compositions but appear to be the result of a process of collection that we cannot yet reconstruct. As pointed out earlier, a systematic study of these sūras is still an urgent desideratum in the field.

Notes

1. M. Sells, 'Sound, spirit and gender in Surat al-Qadr', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 11 (1991), 239–59.
2. J. Wansbrough, *Quranic studies: Sources and methods of scriptural interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).
3. M. Cook and P. Crone, *Hagarism: The making of the Islamic world* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).
4. Ch. Luxenberg, *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran: Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache* (Berlin: Das Arabische Buch, 2000).
5. G. Lüling, *Über den Ur-Qur'ān: Ansätze zur Rekonstruktion vorislamischer christlicher Strophenlieder im Qur'ān* (Erlängen: H. Lüling, 1974).
6. K. Vollers, *Volkssprache und Schriftsprache im alten Arabien* (Strassburg: K. J. Trübner, 1906).
7. Cf. W. Graham, *Beyond the written word: Oral aspects of scripture in the history of religion* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
8. M. Parry, *Studies in the epic technique of oral verse-making* (n.p., 1930–2).
9. A. Lord, *The singer of tales* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960).
10. These have been collected by the author in 'Vom Rezitationstext über die Liturgie zum Kanon: Zur Entstehung und Wiederaufloesung der Surenkomposition im Verlauf der Entwicklung eines islamischen Kultus', in S. Wild (ed.), *The Qur'ān as text* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), pp. 69–105.
11. N. Sinai, 'From qur'ān to kitāb', forthcoming in M. Marx, A. Neuwirth and N. Sinai (eds.), *The Qur'ān in context: Historical and literary investigations into the cultural milieu of the Qur'ān* (Beirut).
12. K. Nelson, *The art of reciting the Qur'an* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985; repr. Cairo/New York: American University in Cairo Press, 2001), p. xiv.
13. These have been analysed by A. Neuwirth in *Studien zur Komposition der mekkanischen Suren* (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1981).
14. Sinai, 'From qur'ān'.
15. See J. D. McAuliffe, '"Debate with them in the better way": The construction of a qur'ānic commonplace', in A. Neuwirth, B. Embalo, S. Guenther and M. Jarrar (eds.), *Myths, historical archetypes and symbolic figures in Arabic literature: Towards a new hermeneutic approach* (Beirut: Orient-Institut der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft, 1999), pp. 163–88. See also R. Gwynne, *Logic, rhetoric and legal reasoning in the Qur'ān* (London: Routledge, 2004).

Further reading

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Fig. 6 Folio from a ninth-century Kūfic Qur'ān on dyed blue parchment (the so-called 'Blue Qur'ān'). Depicted here is Q 2:120–4 (Khalili Collection, KFQ 53, 1a). Courtesy of the Nasser D. Khalili Collection of Islamic Art, London