

A Dated Qur'anic Manuscript from Kashmir Valley: Stylistic Approach and Decorative Features

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Abstract

Six photographs of a beautifully illustrated manuscript of the Qur'an (see plates 1-6 at the end) along with its Persian translation were provided to the present writers by a private collector in Peshawar for an expert opinion. The photographs were thoroughly analyzed and after close examination, various distinctive features of the manuscript were surfaced. This article is a brief attempt to analyze these stylistic and decorative features of the manuscript.

The photographs reveal that this manuscript of the *al-Qur'an al-Majid* written in *naskh*¹ style has been ornamented with pigments obtained from precious and semi-precious stones. The manuscript has been bounded in leather with carefully drawn floral and geometrical designs over it. The text pages of this manuscript are inscribed in black ink, whereas, the translation is made in the Persian language, which is written in the *nasta'liq*² pattern with red ink. The halt marks³ are beautifully organized in spoke wheel designs wrought in conventionalized floral pattern. The first photo displays a hard back of the manuscript, whereas, the remaining five denote verses from various chapters of the Qur'an. Determination of the quality of the paper is difficult as only pictures are available. Similarly, proper identification of the precious and semi-precious stones from which either the powder was made and used; or perhaps cut and dressed in order to imbed these with the help of glue or embroiled to decorate the surface is indeed difficult to know. The interesting points to note in the work however are as below:

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Frontispiece:

The frontispiece of this manuscript, folded in leather back is elegantly embellished. The title page is classified into four equal compartments through a vertical and horizontal line composed of white pearls, representing an excellent workmanship of the local Kashmiri tradition. The vertical pearl line is further adorned by means of a lob pattern. Its outer line is arranged in a wavy pattern; while its inner part is being finished with gilding work. This central lob design on either side is flanked by a rosette motif, which has been further enriched with gilding work. These on the either sides are further flanked by the similar motif, however, in the former case the petals are circular whereas those at the terminal points are provided with slightly pointed petals. Apart from this, the title page is also garnished by means of border bands, which are six in numbers. The first band from the outer side is showing a brown strip, the second is reddish brown, while the third is indicating a gilding strip whereas the fourth is denoting a white pearl line. The fifth border line is very interesting, which represents a bead and real motif. The sixth border band is showing four white pearl lines. The above stated ornamental features have increased the grace of the entire frontispiece.

Style of Writing:

Two different styles have been adopted for the writing of this Qur'anic. The verses have been elegantly calligraphed in *naskh* character and executed in black color, whereas, the marginal translation is done in Persian language wrought in the *nasta'liq* pattern and illustrated in red color. Similarly, the scribe stamp, information inscription and the explanatory notes are also composed in the *nasta'liq* style. Likewise the use of two different pens can also be seen. A thick nib pen is being used for the writing of verses while a slightly thin nib has been used to inscribe the translation of the text and explanatory notes. In some cases it appears that a thin pointed shape nib is used for the diacritical marks and dots. The initial letters of the chapters are composed in red color. The diacritical marks and dots are

elegantly placed in order to read the text correctly. The halt marks are arranged in stylized floral spoke wheel pattern.

The bottom line of the text page is showing an important inscription in Persian language, which has been calligraphed in *nasta'liq* style. To the right side of this inscription the scribe's stamp can be seen. Inside the stamp there is an inscription in *nasta'liq* style, which reads as, "for the sake of Allah". Whereas, the bottom line inscription is wrought in the *nasta'liq* style in Persian language in which we can see the name of the scribe, "Mehdi Ali Khan the native of Kashmir", who calligraphed this Holy Book and its Persian translation during the time of "Abdul Hamid I" dated CE 1710.

The other significant issue is the explanatory notes inscribed in the *nasta'liq* style in Persian language and executed with the help of slightly thinner nib. Except the first two pages, these explanatory notes have been added to the remaining pages at the required places.

Text pages:

The text pages of the manuscript are inscribed in *naskh* style with black ink, whereas, the translation is made in the Persian language, which is written in the *nasta'liq* pattern with red ink. The halt marks are beautifully organized in spoke wheel⁴ designs wrought in conventionalized floral pattern. Besides, the calligraphic ornamentation as discussed above the whole text is illustriously framed by means of various decorative bands. These have been wrought through different techniques. Apparently we can see three different techniques of (a) Kashmiri Qalam, (b) gilding work and (c) lapidary work⁵.

Border Decoration:

The first two pages and the chapters' beginnings are very beautifully enriched by means of various decorative Hashia border bands. The first broad band is possessing of six different colors lines organized in molded pattern. The first outer line is marked by a grayish light brownish color. The second consists of white pearls line and the third is showing a reddish brown shade, whereas the fourth one is yielding similarity to the second line.

While the fifth is done through the gilding technique and the sixth one is again wrought with white pearls.

Next to the above stated border bands, we can see two floral bands in identical patterns, however, different in colors. Both these bands are showing palmette motifs. These have been arranged as merlon pattern. The one on the right side is the exquisite example of the Kashmiri lapidary work. This pattern is executed through the blue color lapis lazuli stone. Whereas, the left side band is executed through gilding work, however, its outlines are drawn with brown color. This left side palmette band is placed in the alternate space of the right side similar motif. The inner space of these pelmets has been filled with floral scripts. The other important border band of the at issue sides is the depiction of acanthus leaves illustrated in series. Each leaf is filled inside by the same motif.

Contents:

Folio one (plate-2) contains complete s^lrat al-F^lti F^lah along with its Persian translation, folios 2-4 (plate-3) the first 23 verses from s^lrat al-Baqarah, folios 5-6 (plate-4) verses 29 to 43 from s^lrat al-Anf^ll, folios 7-8 (plate-5) the last two verses from s^lrat al-Bur^lj, s^lrat al-^lriq and s^lrat al-A'l^l (complete) and the first nineteen verses from s^lrat al-Gh^lshiyah, while folio 9 (plate-6) comprises of the last three s^lrahs, i.e. s^lrat al-Ikhl^l, s^lrat al-Falaq and s^lrat al-N^ls.

Conclusion:

This manuscript of the holy Qur'an has a clear date and name of the scribe at the end. He writes: كتبه العبد المذنب مهديعلي خان ساكن كشمير في عهد 1132 سن حميد الأول (Written by the sinner slave [of God] Mehdi Ali Khan, resident of Kashmir). The scribe says that he accomplished the work in the reign of Hamid I. The reference here, probably, is to the Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid-I (1774–1789⁶), although there is a gap of six years, as the work was completed in 1719. This gap also indicates that Mehdi Ali Khan himself did not translate the Qur'an into Persian, but copied it from someone

whom he did not mention. The exact wording for authoring a work in Arabic is: **كتبه** and not **ألفه**.

A complete Persian translation of the Qur'an has been provided. It is normally thought that Shah Waliullah (born, 1703) was the first to have translated the Qur'an into Persian. He at this time was only a boy of 16 years.

The Calligrapher does not seem to be a scholar, as numerous mistakes are found in the small portion of the text available in these pictures. He has scribed **الديننا** (al-duyn) instead of **الدنيا** (al-dunya) in **سُرَّاتِ الْاَلْهِيَا**, **نَاصِيَه** (navsiyah) instead of **نَاصِبَه** (navsiyah) and **'اليس** (al-ays) instead of **لايس** (lays) in **سُرَّاتِ الْغِيَا** shiyah. Further he has not been able to put the required halt marks in some of the **سُرَّاتِ** rahs. For instance he writes on the top of **سُرَّاتِ الْاَلْهِيَا** riq that it has seventeen **يَاتِ**, but has put only eight symbols at the end of the various verses. Similar is the case with **سُرَّاتِ الْاَلْهِيَا** where he has put twelve symbols instead of nineteen.



Pl. 1: Frontispiece of the manuscript showing decorative details.



Pl. 2: Chapter 1 (complete) and the beginning of chapter 2 of the Qur'an along with ornamental details.



Pl. 3: Portion from s¹rat al-Baqarah (chapter 2 of the Qur'an) representing the text alignment, the explanatory notes and geometrical design on the margin.



Pl.4: Portion from s^lrat al Anf^l l (chapter 5) of the Qur'an.



Pl.5: Showing the last two verses from s^lrat al-Bur^l j (chapter-85, s^lrat al-||^l q riq (chapter-86) and s^lrat al-A'l^l (chapter-87) and the first nineteen verses from s^lrat al-Gh^l shiyah (chapter-88)



Pl.6: Showing the last three chapters (112-114) of the Qur'an. The last line written in *nasta'liq* shows name of the scribe and date and place of completion.

End Notes

¹.Naskh is a cursive style in which the width is double of the length of *thulth*. In this writing style full width of the nib is used at the centre, while at the angles, the nib is curving, as a result of which this point becomes slightly thinner as compare to the central strokes. Similarly, towards the terminal points the nib of the pen is used lengthwise therefore, it is becoming pointed in shape. According to sources, naskh style was introduced by 'Ali A F mad ibn Muqla, an eminent calligrapher of the Abbasid caliphate during CE 940. On origin and development of *naskh*, see: 'Abb dah, 'Abd al-Fatt F , *Intish r al-Kha* = = *al-'Arabi f* l ' L lam al-Sharqi wal ' L lam al-Gharbi, Egypt, 1915 (pages: 10-20).

² For the origin and development of *ta'liq* style, see: 'Abb dah, 'Abd al-Fatt F , *Intish r al-Kha* = = *al-'Arabi f* l ' L lam al-Sharqi wal ' L lam al-Gharbi, Egypt, 1915 (pages: 21 ff.).

³ The halt marks of the Qur'an are part of its punctuation signs "*Rum* z *al Awq f*" developed for facilitating its proper reading. It indicates end of an yah.

⁴The spoke wheel pattern is an indigenous element, which may be recorded for the first time on the Asokan column at Sarnath. The under discussion pattern can be clearly noticed in the monuments at Makli Hill near Thatta. In this case the Madrasah of Sheikh Hamad Jamali CE 1388-92 is showing spoke wheel motif. Later on, this motif was successfully continued by the Tarkhans CE 1555-1613 as well as by the

mughals during their domain. For details, see: Qazi MN, *Tarkhan Dynasty at Makli Hill, Thatta (Pakistan): History and Architecture of the Selected Monuments* (P.174-75). PhD Thesis (unpublished), Institute of Archaeology and Social Anthropology, UOP, 2010.

⁵ See for detail of lapidary work: Sufi GMD, *Kashir Being A History of Kashmir* from the Earliest Times to our own, vol:2, p.523-24, Lahore, 1949.

⁶ See Bosworth, C.E., *The Islamic Dynasties*. Edinburgh University Press, 1980 (p. 137).

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