

The Master Calligrapher: Ibn Muqlah

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Abstract:

Calligraphy (Khattati) is an art of producing beautiful handwriting, More frequently this term is used to write in ink and the reed pen having a special cut for the certain style or script. In Islamic world Calligraphy got higher importance than any other type of art for the reason that in Islamic teachings paintings or sculptures of living things were forbidden. So the believers, who had a good taste of arts and devotion to their religion as well, fixed all of their artistic passions towards beautifying the Heavenly words of Allah (Majestic & Exalted). In the first three centuries of Islamic history, ornamental angular scripts remained popular until the period of the Abbasid Vizier Abu- Ali ibn Muqlah. Following on the cursive style, the great calligrapher established a geometric codification according to Euclidean theory and invented the new proportional cursive script. From that time “calligrapher held a position of dignity and honor above the painter”. This article attempts at describing the master inventor of Proportional Script : Ibn Muqlah and his six styles of Arabic calligraphy.

Keywords: calligraphy, , reed pen, kufic script, naskhi script, cursive script, al-khatt al-mansoob, thuluth, rayhani, muhaqqaq, tawaqi, riq'a

INTRODUCTION

From the beginning of Islam, the Holy Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.w) had appointed the educated companions to put in writing the words of the revelation of the Holy Quran. Companions with their keen love and devotion used to write the verses of the Holy Quran very carefully. From the days before Islam, to write the Arabic language angular Kufic and some rounded scripts like the Makkan, Naskhi and

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the Maail¹ were in fashion, as they were in the early stages of their development, they lacked discipline and sophistication.

KUFIC SCRIPT was an angular, geometric script of a Hieratic and monumental nature. In the early days of Islam it was more favored in Basrah and Kufa. This angular Script was more like its Aramaic & Syriac predecessor and was generally used to jot down the Quranic manuscripts. The Archaic Kufic consisted of about 17 letters. To help the reader diacritic dots or accents were added and Arabic letters rose to 29 letters. It was developed in Kufa and Iraq in 7th century. It was more decorative than the rounded one, having several varieties of Floral, Foliated, plaited or interlaced, bordered or squared styles. From 8th to 10th century, Quran was used to be written in Kufic script. The writer of “the seven doors to Islam” narrated that Dost Muhammad, wrote a treatise on the painter and has written in his book that “ Muhammad’s son-in-law ‘Ali invented the first authentically sacred style of calligraphy”. ‘Ali thus bestowed on Kufic script a religious legitimation by its association with a relative of the Prophet’s.”² There was no set rules to write in Kufic script. Different countries, regions and individuals used to write in different ways creatively, ranging from very square and rigid forms to ornamental and embellished ones.

ROUNDED OR NASKHI SCRIPT: In the first century of the Islamic period, the rounded scripts were popular in and around Makkah and Madinah. More rounded scripts were usually used for informal purposes found in poetic, Hadith, and administrative writing. There was however, much overlapping in the function of the different styles of writing as in the actual characteristic of the scripts. The rounded scripts were considered easier to read.

Ornamental Angular Scripts remained popular until in the Abbasid period, the capital city changed from Kufa to Baghdad. In Baghdad, Calligraphy was improved as a result of the growth of the civilization in the city. The scripts of Baghdad differed from Kufic in the way that the letters were fully formed and presented in the elegant and distinguished style. The difference increased by the work of Abbasid Vizier Abu-Ali Ibn Muqlah and his secretary, Ali bin Hillal known as ibn-al-Bawwab. According to some Arab Sources the word “Naskhi” was invented by ibn Muqlah but the point is that, following on the cursive style, the great calligrapher established a geometric codification which was to inspire subsequent school (after the tenth century). He established it according to Euclidean theory. From that time “Calligrapher held a

position of dignity and honour above the painter. Even rulers sought to win religious merit copying the Quran". Arabic books of history and literature, which are preserved for us with honorable mention the names of several Calligraphers but kept their silence in case of architects, painters and mental-workers. The last penman of the Abbasid period after Ibn-e-Muqlah and Ibn-al-Bawwab was Yaqut-al-Musta'simi, the court Calligraphist of the last Abbasid caliph. In the words of, P.K. Hitty, Judging by the surviving specimens of the penmanship of Yaqut and other renowned calligraphers, the artistic merits cannot be placed high. Along with calligraphy and the associated arts, colour decoration. Illumination, and book binding owed their genesis and bloom to sacred book : the Holy Quran. All about Quranic calligraphy ends in the words: purity of writings is purity of the soul.

The brief introduction of the great Master Calligrapher is as follow.

IBN MUQLAH: THE MASTER CALLIGRAPHER

1. FULL NAME: Abu-Ali Muhammad ibn-e-Ali-Hassan ibn-e-Muqlah.
2. EPOCH: (b. 272 A.H. /886 A.D ____ d. 328 A.H / 940 A.D)
3. PLACE OF WORK: Baghdad it was a capital city of the Abbasid era.
4. KNOWLEDGE & PROFICIENCY: He was as expert calligrapher, poet, writer as well as a State official. Vizier of Abbasids: [Al-Muqtadar Billah (d. 320 A.H.), Al-Qahir Billah (d. 322 A.H.) & Al- Raadi Billah (d. 329 A.H.) . He was the first person who introduced proportional script and 'alqalam al sittah' had paved the new ways for Islamic calligraphy.

5. TITLES & RANKING IN CALLIGRAPHY:

Renowned scholars have appreciated his splendorous work in these words:

- "A Prophet in the art of calligraphy." (al.Zariji)

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-“The man who codified calligraphy.” (Arabs affirmation)

-“Son of the white of the eye.” (Muqla)

-“Sahib-ul-Khatt wal Izihab-ul-Faiq-ul Khatt-al-Hasan: The penman of fascinating writing.” (Yaqoot-al-Must’simi)

-“The “inventor” (of the six major styles of writing, the Sittah) (Dr.Loius Lamya al-Faruqi)

. IBN-MUQLAH: THE INVENTOR

Abu Ali Muhammad ibn Ali Ibn Hassan ibn Muqlah (272. A.H – 328 A.H.) The wonderful Calligrapher invented the new proportional cursive script known as al-Khatt al-Mansub, in the Abbasid period. The popularity of Ibn Muqlah was vibrant, even the very famous, Ibn Nadeem has recorded in his book: Al Fihrist that he and his brother Abu Abdullah, Hassan ibn Ali were the most beautiful scribe of the Islamic calligraphy just like their father; Muqlah used to write. Ibn Nadeem made addition in his work, that he had never seen anyone more expert in the art of calligraphy than these two, although their generation worked hard in this field, but no one could achieve the fame of their honorable descendants. Ibn Nadeem has declared that he has seen the beautiful Quran written by Muqlah.³

Ibn-Muqlah, the inventor⁴ of six new styles the sittah lived a very challenging life but these sufferings never became hurdle in way of his aesthetic behaviors. His life exemplifies his devotion to arts despite great personal sufferings.⁵

His problematic life began, when he entered into politics, only in the sixteenth year of age. His career was stormy portion as a result of his own actions. In the beginning he worked under Abbasid vizier Ibn-ul-Farat as “Deewan-ud-dar” but unluckily some conflicts arose between the both.⁶

He worked as a toll collector in the Persian district. In the mid of 316 A.H/ May 928 A.D, he became Vizier of the Caliph Al-Muqtadar. He was appointed for the maintenance of accounts. After two years of the job he got suspended on account of conspiracy, against the government. “Sahib-ush-Shurtah”, Muhammad Ibn Yaqut gave him severe punishment and burnt his house, along with banishing him out of the

country. In fact he was his hidden enemy. In 320 A.H Caliph, Al-Qahir Billah reinstated him on his job, but when after a short period of time, Ibn Muqlah planned against Ibn-Yaqoot and the Caliph, his intrigue unveiled. Now once again he had to runaway to save his life. After him his post was given to a scribe, Muhammad Ibn al Qasim. Even in these circumstances, he operated a powerful movement to dismiss the Caliph al Qahir Billah. Disguising himself, he wandered through the whole city and spread abomination against the caliph.

In 322 A.H, Al Razi became caliph and he gave Ibn Muqlah, the post of vizarah once again. Although Ibn - Yaqut was backed by the Caliph yet Ibn Muqlah successfully trampled him with his conspiracies.⁷ All these events played a great role in the destruction of his career. Putting these entire problems aside had a great job in the art of calligraphy. He never left his mission to beautify the words of Allah. In that period 'Kufic' was the most acceptable script for Quranic and other religious writings along-with a rough cursive script for official documents. In this era Ibn Muqlah controlled on mathematical division of Arabic consonants. Arab sources claim that the word 'Naskhi' was invented by Ibn Muqlah, afterwards Ibn-al-Bawwab" followed him.⁸ The geometric codification established by the renowned calligrapher inspired the subsequent schools (after the tenth century). He established it according to Euclidean theory with which he was a certainly familiar.

Abu Hayyan Tawheedi (414 A.H) has described in his magazine that the most appropriate script, having all the good points, is the script of Iraq. Further he narrated the importance of Ibn Muqlah in the words that the special quality of good writing is revealed upon him as it comes in the Holy Quran.

"And we have revealed towards the Honeybee"⁹ Ibn Muqlah wrote a Risalah, as a fundamental work for the legislation of calligraphy.¹⁰ In later days, the name of the great calligrapher became synonymous with "good writings".¹¹ Along with the scholars, poets bear the witness of the quality of his work as it comes that the art of calligraphy. Ibn Muqlah is celebrated in the "Arabian Nights" in the tale of "The second Dervash", where a prince having been transformed into ape by a jinn, or sorcerer, arrived at a stranger port. There he demonstrated his nature by seizing a pen and paper and writing successive verses in Riqa, Muhaqqaq, Rayhani, Naskhi, Thuluth and Tumar scripts.¹² The Poets luckily interprets his name Ibn Muqlah as son of the eye ball. His name is used in the famous Arabic poetry; Qalqashndi quotes verses that were echoed in Iran and Turkey as well:

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My tear makes beautiful lines on the page of the cheek,

and how should it not do so, since it is ibn Muqlah

[= The son of eyeball]?¹³

These are some of the proofs, which show manifestly, the mastery of Ibn-Muqlah in the cursive script and its proportion. In 324 A.H., the great calligrapher, master of the proportional script was imprisoned by Muhammad's brother, Al Muzaffar Ibn-Yaqut. He was dismissed. He paid 10 Lac Dinar for his freedom. His political career terminated when he was again appointed as vizier. This time he again planned against a state official, Muhammad Ibn Raiq. He was imprisoned in 326A.H/936 A.D. During the imprisonment his body organs, including his right hand and tongue was cut off but as the Arabs says "The pen is one of the two tongues", he used his pen more beautifully. It is narrated that when his right hand was cut off as a punishment of his conspiracies against the caliph, he used to weep over his slayed hand and he used to right with his left hand it is said that the calligraphy of Holy Quran and Traditions of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.W) done by Ibn Muqlah's left hand was as beautiful as when he had written with his right one.¹⁴

ANY SURVING MANUSCRIPT OF IBN-MUQLAH

Ibn Muqlah was a Master Calligrapher, the proofs of which are founded in the opinions of his time-period scholars and poets as well, but unfortunately not even a single writing of him is in our hands to appreciate his elegant work.¹⁵ But according to the Urdu Daira Moarif Islami one of its writer, has seen a manuscript in Raampoor (India), which is related to Ibn-Muqlah. The said copy of Quran is complete and is in a fine condition. Its time period is 326 A.H. ¹⁵ The writer of "Splendours of Islamic Calligraphy" has mentioned that "not one manuscript page written by him appears to have survived¹⁶ though certain texts, which are fact skillful Forgeries, attributed to him is an attempt to cash his market value. The proportional script, Khatt al-Mansub of Ibn-Muqlah has its own perfection.

AI KHATT AL-MANSUB (PROPORTIONAL SCRIPT)

Ibn Muqlah set out the principles for a perfectly proportioned script (al-Khatt al-Mansub). He took this as his unit a rhomboid shaped spot of ink left by pressure of

the pen on paper. Depending on the script chosen, the height of the letter on the 'left' might be equivalent to between three and twelve such diamond points.

Ibn Muqlah provided the means for replacing more individual calligraphic inclinations with styles based on ordered objective and universally applicable rules. He devised a method of writing, which related every element of the script to the size of Alif. For example if a letter was shaped as a circle, the diameter of the circle was the length of the alif. This geometrically proportioned script was known as al Khatt al Mansub.¹⁷

In the Epistle, Ibn Muqlah defined the general principles of his discipline:

Round off the shape of the characters; observe the laws of proportion; clearly distinguish the geo-metric forms according to forms according to their movement, horizontal, vertical, oblique and curved; observe carefully the thickness and of the line; keep the hand steady but relaxed when handling the pen, so that the line shows no sign of wavering. The principles were to give harmonious form to the art of Calligraphy.¹⁸

It was on this mathematically worked out basis that other calligraphers and in particular Ibn al Bawwab (d.413 A.H./1022 A.D.) were able to write freely and beautifully in Naskhi script.¹⁹ By inventing Proportional script he opened the new horizons for the Arabic script to flourish as a great art form of the Islamic history.

SIX STYLES OF IBN-MUQLAH : Al aqlam al sittah

“The pen is the ambassador of the mind, its apostle, and its furthest reaching tongue. And its best interpreter”. These wordings of Ibn Abi Dawad, shows that Ibn Muqlah’s writings were the mirror of his beautiful mind and pure thoughts. The six scripts explicated by Ibn-Muqlah were: Thuluth, Naskh, Rihan, Muhaqqaq, Rauqi and riqā.

1.NASKHI

The work Naskhi is derived from Nasakha .In Arabic language it means copy by hand. This workhorse scribe’s script is used for paperwork and especially for copying the Quran and for the official work. Another definition of Naskhi is that it has cancelled (Nasakha) other previous forms of writings i.e. Kufic Script.²⁰ Overall

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Naskhi is a normal cursive writing and printing script. The main function of Naskhi is to write in a straight form line, right to left with little or no elongation, heightening or other plastic treatment. Only few decorative additions are used with its combination. The Harakat are used in it. This script remained long in favor and especially in the thirteenth century it was in its apogee.

2. THULUTH

Thuluth: the mother script is curvilinear like Naskhi. But there is a difference between its characteristics and its function. There are different types of Thuluth script (one third) which are nisf (half) and Thuluthyn (two thirds). These types are according to the required time of writing. Another reason of these types is the variety of paper sizes. The script, which accommodates a largest paper-size, is called: Tumar.²¹ Surah headings and impressive pious epigraphs were written in thuluth. The straight across the page position of naskhi is rejected in thuluth in order to allow letters as well as words to move up and down to new levels. It helps to fill the empty spaces between the letters.²²

3. RAYHANI

Rayhani means of the basil plant. According to Schimmel, Rayhani is derived from thuluth but it is distinguished by its sharp ends of the letters.²³ Rihani is an elegant development from 'naskhi' and was quite often used for writing Quran and occasionally for decorating objects. Its long, thin vertical taper has sharp points.

4. MUHAQQAQ

Muhaqqaq means certain with its rounded letters. It was a beloved Quranic Script, its verticles more tampered, its outlines finely sharpened and its endings pointed like five steel. Although it was an attractive scripts but was less frequently seen.²⁴

5. TAWAQQI

Tawaqi means 'Signature'. It was a formal, rather heavy style, chancery script.

6. RIQA

The word Riqā is derived from Ruq'h, which means a small piece of paper with a small message on it. This script was used for the hasty scribbling of memoranda and never for decorative purposes. The large and the heavy Tumar, which was sometimes used for big Qurans, may be added to this form.

Ibn Muqla's work was a major innovation in the history of Arabic penmanship. The order and beauty which Ibn Muqla formulated as visual criteria for the construction of Arabic letter-shapes constituted, first and foremost, an act of worship.

He classified the six scripts: al aqlam al-sitta that became the groundwork for the practice of calligraphy. He established a proportional writing system that used a circle with the diameter of the letter alif as its basis. He wrote comprehensively about the art of calligraphy and formulated theories of letter shapes.

No doubt, those who do any work with love, devotion, care and spend their whole lives for their cause stay alive forever. According to Islamic teachings, the initiator of a good thing is like one who practice upon it with all its dues. Accordingly is the case of the Penmanship or the Calligraphy. The name of the Master Calligrapher : Ibn Muqlah, who invented the proportional cursive script, will be appreciated incessantly till the name of calligraphy remains. The Arabic script will remain thankful to him persistently. Verily he and his disciples had performed a great religious and cultural job for all the muslims of the world till the Day of Judgement.

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