

Why did the Qur'an first appear *without* diacritical marks?

Diacritical signs help differentiate many consonants in Arabic – much more so than in Hebrew and Aramean, by comparison. When these marks are missing, the ambiguity can be great: for instance, « *t* » may be read as « *b* », « *y* », « *th* / *ṭ* » and even « *n* ». Yet, experts have known for a long time that, contrary to commonly held opinions, almost all the diacritics were already in use at the time of Muhammad. The vowels appeared later, but their absence never presented a hindrance; at the most it could have caused some slight confusions here or there, especially when the context doesn't clearly say whether the verb is in the active or passive voice. The inscription in Arabic recently discovered on a rock in Saudi Arabia, dated AD 644, provides a perfect example of writing with diacritical marks (but no vowels).



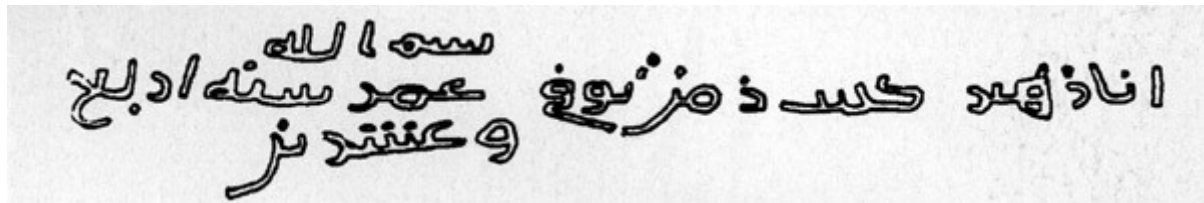
Francois Deroche, a professor of history and codicology of Arabic manuscripts and director of research at the French National Library (BNF), applied the question of diacritics in Arabic to the Koran (*qur'an*) [1]. People have long thought that diacritical signs were invented posteriorly to the first versions of the Koran, and that they were added to remedy the mounting misinterpretations in the oral transmission, because a more rigorous writing system was needed. The reasons given by the Islamic story of the « revelation » are 1) that the « prophet » Muhammad's declamations were allegedly noted on various surfaces, such as camels' scapulas, stones, etc. (strangely, never on paper or parchment); 2) that because of the passing of time and the consequent memory loss, it was necessary to explain the first writings that used no diacritic signs; 3) that besides, there were up to seven possible interpretations; 4) and finally, the "compilation of the Koran" (collecting, *jam` al-Qur'ân*) and then the successive "accommodations" of the Koranic text were such hazardous tasks that 'Uthmân I and the Caliphs after him eliminated several times the Korans that were not deemed "orthodox" enough.

This story is highly improbable and is a fruit of distorted memories. Popular memory is known to have been extremely reliable in oral cultures, so this explains neither the lack nor the apparition of diacritics. The very unlikely props used for the « Revelation » (camels' scapulas, stones, etc.) offer a poor explanation for the disparity of the Quranic

surahs and above all for their origins. Were they initially set on heteroclitc leaflets? And if the reading is so difficult, couldn't it be due to the fact that the primitive leaflets were only legible [2] to their author who had written them as personal memory-aids, in order to prepare his preaching and not with the intention of publishing them some day? The power of the Islamic story lies in burying all these questions under an avalanche of false details. But soon or later, the capital question emerges: how could Muhammad's « dictations » have been so poorly written down if they were considered right from the beginning as inspired by God? And why was a text technically so bad, copied word for word for up to three hundred years without any changes? For, Deroche has remarked, many copyists persisted in leaving out all diacritic signs, or if they added some, it was in a quite anarchical way:

“In fact, the comparison between different fragments, even between different hands – when several copyists joined their efforts to transcribe the Qur'an – underlines the strongly individual character of [diacritical] punctuation; each copyist placed periods where he deemed right.” (p.23).

At any rate, the proto-Muslims were confronted not to problems of memorization but to texts which, in one way or another, were not familiar to them. Did they come from « God », by the channel of an incredibly negligent scribing process [3], or from groups outside their own tribal circles? So if « God » really spoke on that occasion, someone should advise Him to communicate in a better Arabic in the future, and more clearly, since the text is riddled with obscure passages [4]. Fortunately, to address this textual opacity, many researchers have been able to make sense of several of these passages by correcting, or improving, the diacritical rendition: [Christoph Luxenberg](#), and more recently Munther Younès, accomplished this by relying on existing Aramean formulas [5]. The results are unquestionable.



Translation: In the name of God, I, Zubayr, wrote [this] at the time of 'Umar who died in the year 24 (= 645)

www.dsc.discovery.com/news/2008/11/18/inscription-trace-zoom.html

Let us now consider things under a different angle. Let us suppose that the goal, from the time of 'Uthman, was to have a text to oppose to the Jews and the Christians, and that the only material accessible to the Caliph were the memory-aids (plausibly *without* diacritics) left in Arabic by the Judeo-Nazarene teachers (including Waraqa) and dating from the time of Muhammad, or even before. The content of these memory-aids was not well-known. Besides, the author of Surah 39 (verse 27) complains that the Arabs aren't making any effort to commit things to memory (he is referring here to the *lectionary* translated into Arabic, and not to his own commentaries or preachings). If someone actually read these memos, the absence of diacritical points would automatically have led to divergent readings. But the first point of discord was evidently the choice of one of these texts over another. Because time was an issue, a compilation was quickly assembled – in fact, several competing compilations existed, as the Islamic traditions report – by copying a quite arbitrary selection of these memos whose content, more or less known, seemed to meet everyone's expectations: to constitute something to oppose to the book of the Jews and Christians and to magnify God's election of the Arab nation.

As one may suspect, the texts resulting from these hasty « selections » only partially met 'Uthman's standards, and after him the standards of the Caliphs of Damascus, since they couldn't withstand their Jewish and Christian critics (who were therefore forbidden to read the Qur'an!), or even the critics coming from both the opponents and close advisers of the Caliph. This is why multiple and successive interventions were necessary

on the part of the public authorities who imposed successive new versions and periodically burned the obsolete « qur'ans ». Possession of older, condemned versions was punishable by death. In their own way, the various Islamic traditions evoke these successive eliminations.

— CONCLUSION —

Uthman gave its name of « Qur'an » (from the *lectionary-qur'an* in use at the time of the Nazarene tutorship) to the reference book that he was assembling. The editing efforts paired with the growing sacralization of the text contributed to the conservation of the defective transcription. Even more than the (uncertain) meaning of the text, it was the meaning **to give it** that hampered the addition of diacritic signs, which were nonetheless needed: what was at stake was to hide the source of the original leaflets and to guarantee the justification and perpetuation of the sacred and totalitarian power of the Caliphs. For all of these reasons, it was in the copyists' best interest to maintain the ambiguities.

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[1] DEROCHE François, *Beauté et efficacité : l'écriture arabe au service de la révélation* [« r » with a lower case] in KROPP Manfred ed., *Results of contemporary research on the Qur'ân. The question of a historical-critical text of the Qur'ân*, Orient-Institut Beirut/ Würzburg, Ergon Verlag, 2007. These are the partial acts of a Conference held at the University of Mayence on September 8-13, 2002.

[2] According to Christoph Luxenberg (*Relikte syro-aramäischer Buchstaben in frühen Koran-Kodizes*, in *Der frühe Islam. Eine historisch-kritische Rekonstruktion anhand zeitgenössischer Quellen*, Berlin, 2007, p.377-414), an added difficulty of interpretation (for Arabs) was the existence of leaflets written in Garšuni (or *Karshuni*). i.e. in Arabic with the Syro-Aramean alphabet (known as the *Syriac alphabet*). It is possible that the majority of the primitive leaflets of the Qur'an were in that alphabet. It is a fact that most ancient manuscripts in Arabic – particularly all the books of the Bible, for example the Arabic ms *L* – are written in this way, and the Arabic alphabet began to be predominant only during the reign of the Caliph 'Abd al-Malik (end of 7th century). Certain words that are incomprehensible in today's coranic text could be explained by an erroneous reading of the Garšuni (especially the confusion between two letters that are similar in Syriac but not in Arabic, whose correction sends the reader back to a word from one of those languages). For instance, in Aramean, *g* is easily confused with *l*.

Another example (p.394-395): without diacritics (and vowels), the three consonants ح may be read three ways : as in Yuhannan (the first name *John* in Aramean and in Christian Arabic – without any diacritics, the final letter *y* bears a resemblance to the final letter *n* ; and the double consonant [*n*] is itself a later diacritic sign); as in Yahya (the name of *John* according to the Koranic text); and *tahana*, *hardening*, which makes no sense in the context. The "Quranists" (those who "accommodated" the Koranic text) wished to prove that the Arab Christians and their gospels were mistaken with the name "John" (and its interpretation); therefore, they invented the vowels imposing the reading Yahya (that has a meaning in Arabic: "*he is living*"). This conclusion not only is perfectly credible, it is also the only conceivable one.

In the first Korans, the graphemes in use led to confusions between a final *n* and a final *y* ; interestingly, Luxenberg pointed out that this final *y* – at least what appears to be a final *y* – strongly looks like an Aramean *n* occurring at the end of a word (for example in the BNF 328a conserved in Paris).

[3] Between God and the written transcription, the (late) Islamic dogma postulates the action of a "Prophet" who dictated the text and who, at first, received from the Angel Gabriel what he had to dictate.

[4] As far as the content, the difficulties are even more numerous. For example, can "God" swear by something less than Himself, "by Mount Tûr" or "by Mount Sinai", instead of swearing "by Himself" as He does in the Bible?

[5] He established that verse 3 at beginning of Surah 100 was an addition. Cf. YOUNES Munther, *Charging Steeds or Maidens Doing Good Deeds? A Re-Interpretation of Qur'ân 100 (al-'âdiyât)*, in *Arabica* 55, 2008, p.362-386.