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EARLY KORANIC MANUSCRIPTS:

The Blue Koran Debate

EMILY NEUMEIER

THE ART OF CALLIGRAPHY AND ILLUMINATION OF MANUSCRIPTS HOLDS A REVERED PLACE IN ISLAMIC ART BECAUSE MUSLIMS BELIEVE THAT GOD REVEALED TO THEM THE WORD THROUGH THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD IN THE FORM OF THE KORAN. THE BEAUTY OF THE BLUE KORAN, ONE OF THE MOST EXQUISITE EARLY MANUSCRIPTS OF THE KORAN, SPEAKS FOR ITSELF WITH ITS RICHLY DYED PARCHMENT WITH GOLD AND SILVER INKING. BUT THIS OBJECT OF BEAUTY IS AN OBJECT OF MYSTERY AS WELL. A CENTURY-LONG DEBATE AMONG SCHOLARS CENTERS AROUND THE BLUE KORAN AND ITS PROVENANCE. HERE THEIR OPINIONS WILL BE WEIGHED AND NEW EVIDENCE AND THEORIES WILL BE BROUGHT TO LIGHT. THIS PROJECT WAS BEGUN IN ANTICIPATION OF THE EXHIBIT AT THE MCMULLEN MUSEUM IN THE FALL OF 2006 OF THE DAVID COLLECTION, AN IMPRESSIVE AND VARIED COLLECTION OF ISLAMIC ART.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the West the term “artist” connotes a painter or sculptor; in the Islamic lands, however, this title is more applicable to a calligrapher. Muslims revere the message of their sacred text, the Koran, as holy and thus avoid figural iconography for fear of idolatry. Therefore, their artists strive to make the written word itself beautiful.

Muslim calligraphers focused upon copying the Koran, a task both of religious merit and aestheticism. One of the finest and most unusual of Koranic manuscripts is the Blue Koran, thus named because the parchment of the manuscript is dyed blue with indigo. With its gold ink upon a blue ground, the manuscript is not only stunning in its visual appearance, but it is also the center of an ongoing debate among scholars concerning its place and date of origin, method of production, and patronage.

Because the Koran is a fixed text, it is possible to extrapolate the number of folios in an entire manuscript from the number of lines to a page, in this case fifteen. This would show that there should be around 650 folios of the Blue Koran, a testament to its cost of production: one animal skin provides enough parchment for only a single bifolium. Using gold ink outlined with black gallnut ink, the calligrapher wrote in Kufic script without vowelling but with the occasional use of non-systematic diacritical marks.

The McMullen Museum’s exhibition of the David Collection in 2006 will include a folio from this manuscript. The specific page contains the text from the second

surah of the Koran, *al-Baqarah* (“The Cow”). The David folio measures 25.7 x 37.5 cm; it seems that the page has been trimmed because the largest folio from this manuscript measures 31 x 41 cm, found in the National Institute of Archaeology and Art in Tunisia.

II. PATRONAGE

Because most of what we know about Islamic manuscripts has been exclusively derived from the manuscripts themselves, there are few facts about the Blue Koran’s origin of which we can be absolutely certain. However, as time unearths more relevant evidence and folios from the manuscript, certain hypotheses become stronger. The first issue to be dealt with is who may have commissioned the Blue Koran. The extravagant cost of the Blue Koran, as one would surmise from the gold ink, dyed parchment, and the number and size of pages, limits possible patrons to the caliph himself or other high-ranking officials of his court. In 1912, the collector F. R. Martin attributed patronage to the Abbasid caliph Al-Mamun (r. 813-833 CE) who had supposedly commissioned the manuscript for the tomb of his father. This Iranian attribution was accepted by Grohmann in 1929 and repeated consistently in auction and exhibition catalogues until the 1970s when folios from North Africa began to appear.

It seems unreasonable to attribute patronage solely based upon the authority of Martin, who provided no evidence for such a conclusion. In 1986 the Islamic scholar Jonathan Bloom challenged the long-held attribution to Al-Mamun, declaring that the style of writing does not necessarily point

directly to 9th century Iran, and that Martin's attribution is based only on circumstantial evidence. The attribution to the Abbasid caliph seems to originate more from Martin's unsubstantial provenance than anything else.

III. REGION OF PRODUCTION

The next issue that naturally follows the patronage is where the Blue Koran was produced. Paleography is useless in settling this question. The monumental Kufic script, suited ideally for stone inscriptions on buildings, coincides with the Abbasid caliphate (750-1258), but because this consisted of a region unified artistically from North Africa to Persia, it is very difficult to say where the manuscript is from based on this. Because of the attribution to the Abbasid Al-Mamun, scholars assumed for decades that the manuscript was from Iran. Yet, in an exhibit during the 1976 Festival of Islam in London, pages of the Blue Koran surfaced from a sizeable portion of the manuscript in modern day Tunis. This new claim to origins in North Africa caused some confusion, best evidenced by the Hayward gallery's exhibit in the same 1976 festival, which simultaneously attributed their Blue Koran pages to Mesopotamia in the 9th century. After 1976, most scholars attempted to reconcile the Abbasid commission and the North African provenance into one convoluted explanation: "if the manuscript was ordered by Al-Mamun, it must have been produced in North Africa, whence it never left or to which it was later returned."ⁱ Since Al-Mamun's patronage has no real paleographic or documentary support, it is probably best to stop stretching the available facts to associate the Blue Koran with Mesopotamia and, instead, to begin focusing primarily on the possibility of a Western origin.

Jonathan Bloom has brought forth an interesting theory that points to a Western place of production based on the unusual numbering system found in the Blue Koran. He observes that calligraphers from the Maghrib, or Western Islamic lands comprising of Spain and North Africa, sometimes use different letters than their Muslim counterparts in the East to represent numbers in the *abjad* system. Bloom bases his argument upon the differences between

markings on Iraqi and on Andalusian astrolabes made around the same time. He assumes that the same numbering system would be used for the verse markers in a Koranic manuscript. For example, the letter used to mark verse 60 on a Blue Koran folio from the Chester Beatty Library is a *sad*, the Maghribi letter for 60. In the Muslim East, *shin* represents 60, while *sad* stands for 90. If there are such irregularities in the Blue Koran, it may have been produced in the Maghrib.

An inventory of the library of the Great Mosque of Kairouan in Tunisia from 1293 may shed more light on this issue. The first item of the inventory, described as a Koran divided into seven large sections, was first associated with the Blue Koran by the scholar Ibrahim Shabbuh in 1956. It refers to a manuscript in which each page is written on blue-black parchment with five lines of gold Kufic script with verse markers, chapter titles and the number of verses in a *surah* done in silver. There is one inconsistency between this description and the Blue Koran: the Blue Koran has fifteen, not five, lines to a page. Bloom simply rationalizes that this mix-up is an "easy slip in Arabic as it is in English."ⁱⁱ Curator Tim Stanley offers a more convincing explanation to solve this problem. He suggests that due to damage of the inventory document, Shabbuh may have conflated two entries. Stanley's updated version of the inventory places the 7-section Koran dyed blue as the second item, with the number of 5 lines to a page left to the first item.

In order to confidently affirm that it is the Blue Koran described in the 1293 inventory, one must deal lastly with the silver chapter headings and verse numbers mentioned in the entry. The problem until now is the lack of folios with the beginning of chapters on them. Yet the recent observation of two such pages has strengthened the hypothesis that the Blue Koran was in Kairouan as early as the 13th century, and has perhaps uncovered another surprising peculiarity of the Maghribi numbering system. In a catalogue featuring early Korans, Tim Stanley discusses an exciting folio of the Blue Koran which contains the first fourteen verses of *surah* eighteen. Sure enough, on side A there is silver writ-

ing in the top margin adjacent to the first verse of the *surah*. The writing is translated by Stanley as reading “The Cave”, the title of *surah* eighteen, and the number of verses in the chapter, III. This is just as the inventory described.

As exciting as this confirmation is, the fact that the Quaritch page lacks the elaborate chapter separation that one would expect from such an exceptional manuscript is bothersome. There is only one other page of the Blue Koran published which has the beginning verses of a chapter, and it does provide a simple but beautiful decorative band in gold terminating in a marginal palmette with a symmetrical arabesque motif. Stanley suspects that there may be writing in the margin, but he was unable to confirm this fact from the black-and-white reproduction. Upon obtaining a color reproduction of this particular folio and carefully scrutinizing it, the silver writing now tarnished black is obvious. The writing is directly above the palmette and in the margin, exactly as the silver writing in the Quaritch page. If the silver writing contains the chapter heading and the number of verses in the chapter as described in the inventory, the writing should read “*al-Sajdah*” and provide the number of verses in chapter 32, which it does. Thus, scholars now know of a folio from the Blue Koran with both a

tems also arises from the folio with a gold band. The marginal silver writing reads “twenty-nine”, indicating the number of verses in chapter 32 of the Koran. However, the text literally reads “twenty” and “nine”, differing from the normal Arabic form of “nine” and “twenty.” The scholar Estelle Whelan has also noticed a similar discrepancy, conveniently with the number 29 as well, in a group of early Koranic manuscripts from the Chester Beatty Library. Whelan believed that this order was characteristic of Semitic languages once spoken in Arabia and may have been a remnant before the codification of Arabic grammar in the 9th and 10th centuries. Thus she claims that this unusual rearrangement is an indicator of a Koran created very early on in the days of Islam. However, at the time Whelan wrote her article, she was unaware of the folio from the Blue Koran under discussion. Because it is doubtful that the Blue Koran was created earlier than the late 9th century, as will be discussed later, Whelan’s theory that the descending order of the numbers makes an extremely early date of production unlikely. Rather, this unusual numbering could be a new method for localizing early Islamic manuscripts, since it is reasonable to say now that the Blue Koran was produced in the Islamic West.

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gold separation band and chapter headings in silver. This solidifies the Blue Koran’s connection to the inventory entry from the 13th century. The manuscript’s preservation in entirety in the library of the Great Mosque in Kairouan would be the earliest documentary evidence of the Blue Koran’s existence.

An illuminating development in Magribi numbering sys-

While most articles in the last decade have accepted an Iranian association as doubtful, there is still contention as to where in the Maghrib the Blue Koran was produced. After Stanley made a convincing argument in his article that the Blue Koran is the manuscript described in the inventory from Kariouan, he argued against a North African attribution and proposed a Spanish origin. Stanley noted that the use of the Blue Koran’s archaic features, such as the

lack of diacritical marking and the decorative *surah* band may be a technique by a new regime to connect itself to great dynasties of the past. With this in mind, Stanley concluded that the Neo-Umayyad dynasty in Spain cannot be ruled out as the producer of the Blue Koran. Stanley supports a Neo-Umayyad patronage with the fact that the *mihrab* in the Great Mosque at Cordoba has epigraphy in gold, outlined in red, “just as the text of the Blue Koran is outlined in a reddish ink,” on a blue-black ground. He also cites a story of an Umayyad caliph commissioning a Koran in gold ink in the early 8th century, and suggests that the Neo-Umayyads imitated their ancestors, the Umayyads in Syria.ⁱⁱⁱ

Stanley’s theory of Spanish patronage is possible. Technically, the writing on the *mihrab* in the Great Mosque is not exactly like that of the Blue Koran because the gold writing in the manuscript was outlined in a gallnut ink which was originally black-blue and has only faded to a reddish color. Nevertheless, the key connection of gold writing on a blue ground between the Blue Koran and the *mihrab* remains. In a 1998 article, Jonathan Bloom supported the idea that the Neo-Umayyads “consciously recapitulated the real or imagined Umayyad past in Syria,” at least in the construction of the Great Mosque. Stanley simply expanded on this idea and surmised that the Neo-Umayyads would want to equal their forebears’ production of manuscripts scribed with gold as well.

I believe that there is no evidence as of yet pointing to a place of production with any amount of certainty. The only theory that has been generally agreed upon is that the Blue Koran was in the library of the Great Mosque of Kairouan in the 13th century. There is a centuries-wide gap between the inventory and the production date around the 9th or 10th century. The Koran could have been made in Kariouan, but in that amount of time the manuscript might have been carried from anywhere, including Spain. If the manuscript was not made in Kairouan, its high quality suggests that it was probably a gift from a person of high status from another Islamic dynasty, given not only to show re-

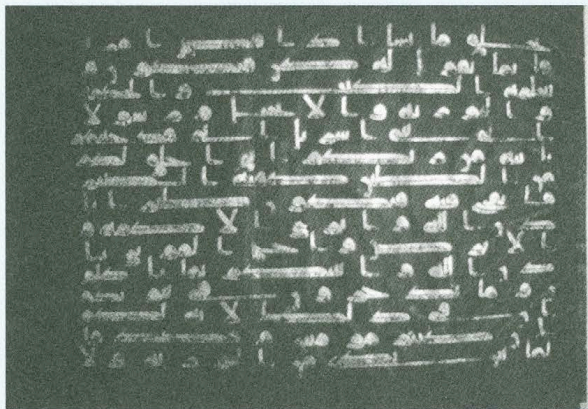
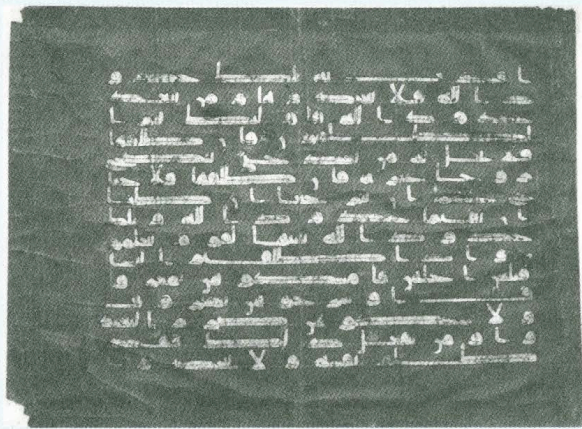
spect but also to demonstrate the giver’s incredible wealth and claim to greatness, as the Neo-Umayyads may have done.

IV. DATE OF PRODUCTION

Dating the Blue Koran proves to be just as difficult as naming a place of production. Calligraphers did not usually sign these early manuscripts. Also, the colophon, a dedicatory page naming the patron, place of production and calligrapher, is not present in this case. To the dismay of scholars, few colophons survive because they are located at the end of a manuscript, a part subject to the most damage. Scientific methods of dating the Blue Koran are few and ineffective; curators are naturally hesitant to burn a piece of the manuscript required for carbon dating, and radio-carbon testing by an electro-spectrometer may have a 100- to-200-year margin of error. The most unobtrusive method of dating is historical analysis. The first Islamic dynasty conceivably wealthy and capable enough to commission such a fine manuscript in North Africa was the Aghlabid dynasty of the 9th century. Many catalogues, including that of the Khalili collection in 1992, do attribute the Blue Koran to the late 9th century, the height of Aghlabid splendor. However, Jonathan Bloom pushes forward the date of production to the middle of the 10th century. He points out that the art of the Aghlabids is “Sub-Abbasid” in that it looks directly to models from Baghdad for inspiration. Considering the amount of time it would take for such models to travel from Mesopotamia to North Africa, Bloom imagines that if the manuscript was made by the Aghlabids, it was produced at the very end of the century. Unfortunately, around this time the Aghlabid dynasty was overthrown by the Fatimid dynasty. Because the first few decades of Fatimid rule were turbulent, Bloom is forced to date the Blue Koran in the middle of the century under the reign of either al-Mansur or al-Muizz li-Din Allah, when the economy and political stability were favorable for the production of such a fine manuscript.

Another method of dating is paleographical analysis, in which scholars identify different styles of calligraphy in

manuscripts. If one manuscript has a colophon or perhaps a *waqf* deed with a certain font, the date of production may be tentatively applied to manuscripts of the same style of calligraphy. The scholar François Déroche has taken great pains to develop his own identification system for early Kufic scripts. In his system Déroche labels the Blue Koran in sub-section IV of Group D, a script characterized by a thick, horizontal line and vertical strokes perpendicular to the base line. There are only two manuscripts with dates in the D.IV grouping; the first is a *waqf* deed from 883-84 CE, and the second is a “surprisingly late” *waqfiyyah* deed from 940-41.^{iv} Unfortunately, this range of a century does not help to narrow the production date of the Blue Koran, and these dates only serve as *termini ad quem* for the script.



V. DIVISION AND DISTRIBUTION OF MANUSCRIPT

Determining how the Blue Koran was divided and distributed after the 13th century is difficult but necessary. In 1986 Jonathan Bloom counted 18 known folios of the Blue Koran in private and museum collections. Today, in 2005, after more publications and pages have come into view, there are as many as 37 separate folios known; of these, 29 are certainly due to their confirmed textual position. That these folios are from the same text can be assumed because the gaps between extant pages are consistent with the logical sequence of pages. This can be observed with a bifolium from the second *surah* from the Chester Beatty Library, one page ending with verse 65 and the other picking up with verse 93. Extrapolation of the text reveals that there should be about 4 folios, or two bifolia, between these pages, which would be the middle of a quire.

The last time the Blue Koran was reported to be in entirety was the 1293 inventory. At some point later, it appears that the first volume, or *sub*, of seven was separated from the manuscript. This can be concluded from the fact that most folios in early 20th century western collections begin before verse 4:55, which is around where the first section should have ended. A good portion of the remaining six volumes is rumored to remain in Kairouan; however, officials of the National Institute of Art and Archaeology have resisted all attempts by western scholars to examine their Blue Koran manuscript pages. After examining the folios of the Blue Koran from the Sackler museum at Harvard and the Boston MFA, both of which have a distinctive vertical fold mark suggesting a surreptitious removal, one can hardly blame the wariness of the Tunisian authorities. The recent, sudden appearance in the art market of folios from later volumes in the text also lends merit to the Tunisians' uneasiness.

After 1293, the Blue Koran left no historic trace until the 20th century, when F.R. Martin reportedly purchased some folios from the Blue Koran in Constantinople. In 1977, Christie's reports some loose pages of the Blue Koran

“within a fine 16th century dark brown tooled morocco binding from Persia.”^v Bloom believes that this binding indicates that by the 16th century the first volume of the Blue Koran had entered into Ottoman hands. It apparently remained there until Martin purchased the folios in the 20th century. The story is complicated by a modern customs stamp found in the top margin of side A of the folio now owned by the Harvard museum. According to the violet stamp, Bloom reports that the folio was “reviewed and passed in the year 1320/1902.” Because the stamp is in Persian, it must be from Iran. Thus, after buying the manuscripts in Constantinople, Martin then traveled to Iran before he returned to Europe, where he sold the folios.

VI. METHODS OF PRODUCTION

Though the Blue Koran’s dyeing of parchment is quite unusual, it is by no means unique. Some other examples include a Koran in the Freer gallery with a light blue ground^{vi} and a leaf at the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Khalili collection that is dyed red with silver verse markers. Of particular interest is a Hafsid Koran manuscript endowed to the Mosque of Kasba in Tunis in March 1405 by al-Mutawakkil, with silver ink on paper dyed in a range of colors from light brown to purple. Because the manuscript was created in Tunis only a century after the inventory of the Kairouan mosque, it may have been directly inspired by the Blue Koran.

The production of an expensive manuscript such as the Blue Koran was very complex. First, the hide of either a goat or sheep was cured, scraped to remove any remaining fat or flesh, sanded, stretched, and dried to create a bifolium of parchment. Then, the parchment was dyed with indigo. The method of the Islamic dyers can be imagined from 15th century instructions on how to tint goat parchment by the Italian Cennino Cennini. He advises soaking the skin until soft, then stretching it over a board like a drumskin and nailing it down. The indigo tint is painted onto the parchment with a soft-bristle brush and must be repeated several times for a darker hue. The skin may also have been dipped like paper.

The dyeing of the parchment itself is unusual, but the use of indigo and the color blue is not. Indigo was an essential part of trade and manufacture in the Islamic world, especially because the area’s economy relies heavily on textiles. The scholar S.D. Goiten, famous for his work on the Geniza documents, testifies: “the supply of dyeing materials and mordants was one of the main branches of international and local trades, with indigo leading the list.”^{vii} We know that indigo was traded in Kairouan at the time of the Blue Koran’s production from a 10th century Hebrew document that recorded the export of indigo from Egypt to Tunisia. After the parchment is dyed and trimmed, the manuscript is ruled in preparation for the text. François Déroche defines ruling as “the system of horizontal, vertical, oblique or circular lines drawn on the page before the copying of a text or the execution of a decorative scheme, with the purpose of allowing the scribe or artists a planned layout.” He asserts that usually gridding is done with a dry point, but that on occasion black lead or ink may be used.^{viii} The Blue Koran may be a very unusual exception to the rule. Scholars including Bloom, Déroche, and Stanley have all stated that the Blue Koran was ruled with a dry point. However, upon examination of the folio from the Boston Museum of Fine Arts under both microscope and UV light, it appears that the ruling could possibly have been done with a white substance, either calcium carbonate (chalk) or white lead. The use of the white substance rather than the usual black makes sense because of the unusual nature of the dyed parchment – white shows up better. Under the microscope, the surface of the parchment does not seem to be cut or disturbed as with a dry point, nor was any shadow apparent due to dry scoring; rather, there seems to be a material sitting on the surface of the skin. This is further supported by observation under UV light where the lines of the grid sit on the surface but do not shine nearly as brightly as damage incised into the parchment itself. In order to conclusively determine how the Blue Koran was ruled, it would be best to carefully extract a minute particle of the substance where there is a small buildup on the surface and to run the sample through an electro-spectrometer. A less intrusive method would be to dye a sample piece of parch-

ment and compare a dry scoring and a white chalk-ruling to the Blue Koran manuscript under microscope. I attempted such a test, but unfortunately under time constraints I could not produce a satisfactorily dyed sample. I did at least compare the semi-dyed sample to a un-dyed piece of parchment and noticed that the chalk ruling appears well on the darker surface, while the deep lines on the parchment from dry scoring are not very noticeable on the Blue Koran folio. No matter how exactly the parchment was ruled, once it was prepared, the calligrapher would ply his art in gold ink in

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Kufic script. Kufic, named after Kufa in south Mesopotamia, has pronounced horizontals and stunted verticals pen strokes. Clearly, the function of the Blue Koran is intended more to visually please than to act as a functional text. The lack of vowelling and limitation of diacritical marks, as well as the habit of the calligrapher to stretch out the same word to different lengths to suit his preferences shows that the Koran is a poetic text that was originally meant to be recited, not read. There are also words and letters which are broken apart and continued onto the next line. This lack of readability is not surprising, as luxury texts such as the Blue Koran would be used for ceremonial purposes in large congregational mosques by readers who had memorized the Koran. Close examination of the inking reveals how the calligrapher enjoyed stretching out his words on the right side of the page, but the text gets more and more cramped on the left side as he runs out of room on the line. The calligrapher is also particularly fond of creating “columns” of isolated letters at the begin-

ning of a line. The gold ink is obviously very expensive. The Fatimids in Cairo, after moving there from their capital from Kairouan, were said to have several Korans in gold in the great mosque in 1012-13, around the same time as the production of the Blue Koran .

Once the pages had been inked, bookbinders would arrange the quires into their respective volumes. All of this arrangement requires an impressive amount of organization; it is a small wonder that the Great Mosque at Kariouan was also well known for its expert bookbinders. A strange issue about the arrangement of the pages has arisen with the recent appearance of what seem to be an end-piece of the first volume of the Blue Koran. Quaritch’s catalogue features a folio with normal writing on one side and with a fully illuminated gold panel on the other. The gold panel, roughly the same size as the ruling grid on other folios, has a design consisting of three bands radiating from a central field, consisting of vegetal and geometric designs. A large palmette with arabesques blossoms into the right margin, very similar in design to the palmette on the folio with a gold band. Tim Stanley believes this panel represents the end of the first *sub* of seven of the Blue Koran. This supposition is logical because the text ends at verse 4:62, very close to the approximate ending of 4:55 for the first volume calculated.

The fact that the panel seems to have covered verses 62 through 65 indicates that this piece was not originally intended. There could have been an error by the copyist, or more likely, the decision to bind the manuscript into sevenths was made later and alterations for finished pieces were executed. On that note, it is also possible that the silver writing is a later addition as well. This is evidenced by the silver chapter titles hastily scribbled into the margins. If anything, there was a period between the gold and silver inking wherein the illumination was created, because on the illuminated folio the writing underneath has the gold text, but no detectable silver verse markers.

VII. CONCLUSION

Sotheby's describes the Blue Koran as "one of the most luxurious manuscripts ever produced in the early medieval period in the Islamic world."^{ix} I would argue that it is also one of the most important. The Blue Koran deserves attention for two reasons. First, the unusual nature of such a sumptuously made manuscript excites by sheer novelty. The deep, matte royal blue paired with glittering gold has a certain glamour that begs the question to be asked- why make such a fantastic object? Second, as can be seen above, the Blue Koran has proven to be a key point of reference in many issues of the field of early Islamic manuscripts, a field in which much remains unknown.

ENDNOTES

- i. Welch, 49.
- ii. Bloom, "Al-Mamun's Blue Koran?," 68.
- iii. Stanley, 14.
- iv. Deroche, 36.
- v. Christie's
- vi. Atil, 17.
- vii. Balfour-Paul, 24.
- viii. Deroche, 20.
- ix. Bloom, Jonathan M. "The Blue Koran, An Early Fatimid Kufic Manuscript From the Maghrib," 98.

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