

‘Abd al-Malik, al-Ḥajjāj, and the Composition of the Qur’an

In stark contrast to the disarray of reports concerning earlier individuals, the canonical Qur’an’s composition during ‘Abd al-Malik’s rule (685–705) seems highly credible. Turning once again to Chase Robinson for an acute summary,

Here the events make some real sense. For ‘Abd al-Malik had a clear interest: as we shall see, his imperial program was in very large measure executed by broadcasting ideas of order and obedience in a distinctly Islamic idiom. What is more, unlike previous caliphs, ‘Abd al-Malik had the resources to attempt such a redaction and to impose the resulting text, which, amongst all its competitors, we inherit.¹

The project was largely overseen by one of his deputies, al-Ḥajjāj ibn Yūsuf, who served ‘Abd al-Malik as governor of Iraq and viceroy of the caliphate. Although ‘Ubayd Allāh ibn Ziyād, who preceded al-Ḥajjāj in this position, is said to have begun the editorial process, al-Ḥajjāj was the main agent of the Qur’an’s standardization during ‘Abd al-Malik’s reign. Al-Ḥajjāj was an influential and notorious figure of the period, whom Alfred-Louis de Prémare aptly describes as a “regime strongman.” Among other things, al-Ḥajjāj led the military conquest of Mecca for ‘Abd al-Malik, abolishing the rival caliphate that ‘Abd Allāh ibn al-Zubayr had established there, thereby bringing to an end a ten-year civil war and uniting the caliphate under ‘Abd al-Malik’s authority. As governor of Iraq, he led vicious campaigns against Islamic dissidents there, including the Khārijites, but especially against the supporters of Ali, the Shi’i, whom he regularly subjected to tortures and massacres.² In all things, al-Ḥajjāj played a key role in the consolidation of political and religious authority in the caliphate of his age, and in this capacity he continued to serve ‘Abd al-Malik’s son and successor al-Walid (705–15) until his death in 714.

There is in fact a substantial body of evidence, from both inside and outside the Islamic tradition, identifying ‘Abd al-Malik as the one who, with the assistance of

al-Ḥajjāj, standardized the Qur’an in the unvarying form that has come down to us today. Paul Casanova and Alphonse Mingana were the first to draw our attention to this tradition, and each argued independently that it presented the most probable circumstances for the Qur’an’s standardization and canonization.³ Nevertheless, most scholars responded with quick and curt dismissals of their determinations, continuing to rally around the Nöldekean-Schwallian paradigm. As a result, this alternative, yet well-attested, tradition of the Qur’an’s standardization under ‘Abd al-Malik remained almost completely ignored in scholarship on early Islam for most of the past century, consigned to a kind of heterodox oblivion. As Omar Hamdan observes, ‘Abd al-Malik’s program of standardizing the Qur’an “has scarcely been dealt with in the scholarship on the Qur’an”; likewise, “al-Ḥajjāj’s reforms have rarely been dealt with by scholars, and even when they are mentioned, no systematic approach is pursued.” In fact, only in the last twenty years has the possibility of a Marwanid, rather than an ‘Uthmānic, Qur’an been given much, if any, serious consideration, and Hamdan’s study remains the single best inventory of the relevant reports from the Islamic tradition.⁴ It was de Prémare, it would seem, who first returned our attention to the compelling evidence for ‘Abd al-Malik’s decisive role in establishing the canonical Qur’an, and a number of other scholars have since followed in his wake. Indeed, even Angelika Neuwirth has recently shown some openness to this hypothesis, despite continuing to favor the Nöldekean-Schwallian paradigm.⁵

There seems to be little doubt that ‘Abd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj played a critical role in establishing the text of the Qur’an, although, as with the traditions concerning the first four caliphs, there is some variation in opinion within the Islamic tradition about just what they did.⁶ A number of reports ascribe to ‘Abd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj (and ‘Ubayd Allāh) only rather minor improvements in the text of the Qur’an: most commonly, such accounts relate that they merely added diacritical marks and/or vowels that had long been absent in the Qur’an’s transmission, or perhaps they divided the suras into their current form. Nevertheless, the Islamic historical tradition credits many other individuals with these innovations as well, and the contradictions and confusion on this subject leave us, once again, with the conclusion that there was in fact no established memory of how these amendments were introduced, so that the later tradition could only guess.⁷ Yet, by placing ‘Abd al-Malik and his representatives in this role, it was possible to square the widely held memories of their involvement in standardizing the text of the Qur’an with what would eventually become the canonical tradition of its collection under ‘Uthmān. No doubt the later tradition’s need to harmonize these two accounts supplied the inspiration for limiting the actions of ‘Abd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj to mere cosmetic adjustments in the text, in order to clear a path back to ‘Uthmān.

Not surprisingly, Nöldeke and Schwally, along with their many disciples, emphasize those traditions reporting only minor improvements under ‘Abd al-Malik while disregarding others that describe much more significant interventions

in the text, in order to maintain fidelity to the canonical Sunni narrative.⁸ Yet these reports of only negligible amendments should hardly be taken seriously, since they can be easily disproved by the earliest Qur'anic manuscripts, which demonstrate unambiguously their falsehood.⁹ Many manuscripts written after this point continue to lack these features, while at the same time there is evidence indicating the use of standard spellings and diacritics already before 'Abd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj.¹⁰ Indeed, as François Déroche observes of the material evidence, "If we turn to the reports stating that the diacritics were introduced in the course of al-Ḥajjāj's *Maṣāḥif* project' and that *tā'* and *yā'* were selected in order to distinguish between the second and third person of some verbal forms, we have to admit that manuscript evidence says otherwise."¹¹ Clearly, then, the standardization of the Qur'an text under 'Abd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj did not consist only of such minor changes, since the elements that were allegedly introduced were already in use in some instances and likewise did not become regular features in the material record of the Qur'an until much later.

Other reports from the Islamic tradition instead describe 'Abd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj as making considerable alterations to the Qur'anic text, even if these traditions have been largely ignored by most previous scholarship. Many of these reports involve actions taken specifically by al-Ḥajjāj, although there can be little question that in each instance he would have been acting with authorization from 'Abd al-Malik, whom he faithfully served.¹² For instance, according to a widely circulated tradition, 'Abd al-Malik is reported to have said that he feared death in the month of Ramadan, since "That is the month in which I was born, it is the month in which I was weaned, it is the month in which I gathered together the Qur'ān [*jama' tu l-Qur' ān*], and it is the month in which I was sworn allegiance [as the caliph]."¹³ Of course, that hardly settles the matter, not in the least because, as we have already noted, the verb in question, *jama'a*, can mean either to collect or to memorize. Nevertheless, this tradition provides a wide opening for the many other traditions that indicate the efforts by 'Abd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj to compose the standard text of the Qur'an.

There is a well-attested tradition that al-Ḥajjāj sent codices containing his newly standardized text of the Qur'an to the various imperial centers of the caliphate—Egypt, Damascus, Medina, Mecca, Kufa, and Basra—intending that this version would supplant the local versions then in use. According to some reports, he was not only the first person to send official codices to all the major cities, but also, in the process, he was the first to establish the practice of reading the Qur'an aloud in the mosques. Along with these new codices he also sent instructions that all earlier versions of the Qur'an should be gathered up and destroyed, exactly as 'Uthmān was said to have ordered in the canonical narrative.¹⁴ Al-Ḥajjāj deputized a committee and charged them with "inspecting all the *maṣāḥif* that were in private ownership, and to tear up every *muṣḥaf* that differed" from the new imperial standard. "As compensation, the owner was paid 60 dirham."¹⁵ It would

appear, then, that the original variety with which Muhammad’s early followers remembered his teachings still remained in place even until the end of the seventh century, in the form of divergent collections of his revelations that had been produced and were in use locally in different centers. Hamdan remarks that, although these Qur’anic censors certainly did not succeed in tracking down every deviant copy, again, “the results were so extensive that one could only wonder in disbelief if after the second *maṣāḥif* project any remnant of a differing recension were to come to light.”¹⁶

According to one version of the reports concerning the distribution of al-Ḥajjāj’s Qur’an, the governor of Egypt was reportedly taken aback by such presumption on the part of a fellow governor (al-Ḥajjāj). The governor objected that “He permits himself to send a *muṣḥaf* [codex] to the very military district [*jund*] where I am serving, me!” The Egyptian governor then responded by producing his own edition of the Qur’an, although we are not told what the basis for this Egyptian version was.¹⁷ Yet, as Hamdan observes, this report indicates the total absence of the so-called ‘Uthmānic version in Egypt up to this point, which in itself raises significant questions about the canonical tradition of an ‘Uthmānic standardization.¹⁸ As for Medina, when al-Ḥajjāj’s version reached this City of the Prophet, the members of ‘Uthmān’s family living there, according to Ibn Shabba, sternly disapproved. The people of Medina told them to “get out the *muṣḥaf* of ‘Uthmān b. Ḍaffān, so that we may read it.” Yet ‘Uthmān’s descendants cryptically replied that “it was destroyed on the day when ‘Uthmān was killed.”¹⁹

Indeed, multiple sources report an unsuccessful search for ‘Uthmān’s missing codex at this time, leading de Prémare to propose—rightly, I suspect—that “in ‘Uthmān’s day, there had been at that time, or possibly later, a collection of ‘Qur’ānic’ writings in Medina, for which he had been considered responsible, just as there had been others elsewhere, under the names of other Companions.”²⁰ This conclusion is further warranted by Sayf’s report that ‘Uthmān seems to have favored the authority of an early Medinan version of the Qur’an, one that he may have even had a hand in producing. Yet such partiality affords no basis for assuming that this Medinan codex was identical with the version of the Qur’an that has come down to us today; nor does it seem at all possible that ‘Uthmān could have established this version of the text (or any other version for that matter) across his vast and rapidly expanding empire, as the canonical narrative would have us believe. Instead, this codex was almost certainly no more than a regional version of the Qur’an that held authority in Medina and perhaps in Mecca as well. As such, it must be understood as simply another of the so-called “companion codices,” standing alongside the other regional versions of the Qur’an that had been collected independently in Syria and Iraq. What this means is that while there may have been an early version of the Qur’an identified with ‘Uthmān, this collection was simply one among many early, independent efforts to remember the revelations that Muhammad had taught his followers and to gather them

in a written volume. ‘Uthmān’s Qur’an, then, was likely nothing more than the regional codex of the Hijaz, which had been produced from the oral and written memories of Muhammad’s followers living there, as was being done in parallel, and independently, in the other major centers of the Believers’ faith during the early caliphate.

Perhaps related to this effort to standardize the Qur’an is another tradition, from Ibn Sa’d, that reports a speech given by ‘Abd al-Malik to the inhabitants of Medina in the context of his pilgrimage to the holy places of the Hijaz in 695. One must bear in mind, of course, that only three years before this these territories had stood in open revolt against ‘Abd al-Malik’s authority, recognizing instead the rival caliph ‘Abd Allāh ibn al-Zubayr. At the end of his discourse, ‘Abd al-Malik turns to address the status of the Qur’anic text. He mentions that the citizens of Medina were concerned by their discovery of some new “hadiths that we do not know.” As the context makes clear, these “hadiths” were alternative versions of Muhammad’s revelations circulating in Iraq that had only recently reached the Hijaz, one suspects, following its recent conquest and reintegration with the rest of the Believers’ extensive polity. Thus, we find ourselves again in a circumstance with competing independent versions of the Qur’an in the main centers of the early caliphate. ‘Abd al-Malik urges the Medinans to cling to the “*muṣḥaf* around which the *imām* so unjustly treated has gathered you,” a figure that de Prémare says should be identified with ‘Uthmān.²¹ It is, admittedly, a fairly puzzling passage, the meaning of which is not entirely clear, and it is perhaps open to various interpretations. Nevertheless, in de Prémare’s reading, which I find persuasive, the episode seems to identify ‘Uthmān’s codex not as an imperial standard from the middle of the seventh century but instead as the regional version of the Hijaz.

One should note that in this account ‘Abd al-Malik appears to speak favorably of this Medinan version of the Qur’an, or at least he does so when addressing the Medinans in what would clearly have been a highly political speech. Such a positive endorsement of Medina’s religious traditions and its citizens’ remembrance of Muhammad’s revelations is likely best understood in this instance as politically calculated praise. His remarks reflect the need to curry favor with a region that only recently stood in rebellion against his claim to rule, an insurrection, one should note, that was motivated in large part by religious differences.²² And so he reassures the Medinans, who were disturbed to learn of alternate memories of Muhammad’s teachings that were circulating in other regions, that their version of the Qur’an is sound. Yet it is also possible that this passage, if it has any basis in reality, may indicate ‘Abd al-Malik’s genuine preference for Medina’s Qur’anic traditions and their “‘Uthmānic” codex. In such a case, one might imagine that this version of the Qur’an perhaps enjoyed some sort of favor in the process of standardization undertaken by the caliph and his viceroy. Nevertheless, this hypothesis offers no basis for simply assuming that this Medinan codex is identical with the version of the Qur’an that has come down to us today. Rather, it would have

been merely one among several sources used to compose a new canonical version of the text, even if it may have made a significant contribution to the final product.

Perhaps, as a part of his campaign to authorize a new imperial version of the Qur’an, ‘Abd al-Malik and his legates first introduced the tradition of an ‘Uthmānic Qur’an along with their codex. Such a legend not only would provide a more impressive pedigree for their text, but it would also assign this important task to the first caliph to come from the Umayyad clan. The Umayyads always considered ‘Uthmān, and not Mu‘āwīya, to be the inaugurator of their dynasty, and ‘Uthmān was also, one should note, the first cousin of ‘Abd al-Malik’s father Marwan I.²³ Al-Zuhri, who seems to be the individual who placed this tradition into circulation, was after all highly favored by none other than ‘Abd al-Malik himself, who recruited him to reside at his court and lavished him with favors and privilege. In addition to being the most admired and influential scholar at the Umayyad court, where he enjoyed high rank, he was also appointed “as a judge, a tax collector, and the head of the caliphal elite troop.”²⁴ Accordingly, “When ‘Abd al-Malik welcomed Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhri into his court and resolved to become the scholar’s benefactor, he created a relationship with profound consequences.”²⁵ Perhaps, then, al-Zuhri introduced this tradition of an ‘Uthmānic collection and standardization acting directly on behalf of his powerful patron.

Al-Zuhri’s status, his influence, and his work were in fact all intimately bound up with the Umayyad patronage that ultimately enabled him to determine much of the Islamic community’s memory of its earliest history going forward. Numerous contemporary reports from the early Islamic tradition rebuke him as a shock trooper or enforcer (*shurṭa*) for the Umayyads and denounce him for serving as “the axle upon which their [the Umayyad’s] mill of falsehood turns, a bridge across their ruin, and a ladder down into their perdition.”²⁶ Not surprisingly, other sources defend al-Zuhri and assert his independence from Umayyad influence, but one suspects that these are later voices attempting to rehabilitate his reputation, particularly in light of the shift to Abbasid hegemony.²⁷ Undoubtedly, Antoine Borrut is correct that the net effect of al-Zuhri’s Umayyad patronage was “to codify and set in place a Marwanid historiographical filter” that would profoundly shape subsequent Islamic memory and historiography. Indeed, “despite attempts to demonstrate that he was a truly independent scholar, it seems on the contrary that he was working in close collaboration with the caliphs.”²⁸

Therefore, we should consider the possibility of the following hypothesis. In order to afford further validation for his new, imperially authorized version of the Qur’an, in the face of numerous existing variant versions, ‘Abd al-Malik promulgated a tradition, with al-Zuhri’s assistance, claiming that his version was not in fact novel. Instead, it was ‘Uthmān, ‘Abd al-Malik’s cousin and the founder of the Umayyad dynasty, who was identified as responsible for standardizing the Qur’an, so that ‘Abd al-Malik’s new imperial standard merely aimed to establish the authority of his forebear ‘Uthmān’s earlier version of the Qur’an across the empire.

Even if this tradition was not deliberately introduced as a part of this program, it is rather easy to imagine how it could have developed almost spontaneously in the process. It would have been highly advantageous to identify an older precursor in the collective memory to ease the novelty of what 'Abd al-Malik was enacting, and, given 'Uthmān's importance for the Umayyad clan and his close family relations with 'Abd al-Malik, in this context he seems to emerge as a particularly obvious target for such attribution. Perhaps Medina's regional version of the Qur'an and a memory of its association with 'Uthmān contributed to the development of this legend. Al-Zuhri, then, serving as the expert mouthpiece on Islamic tradition for both 'Abd al-Malik and the later Umayyad court, bears clear responsibility for placing this tradition into circulation under his esteemed authority, as Motzki has demonstrated, and thus the tradition has come down to us today. Indeed, it remains the case, as Pierre Larcher rightly notes, that "the *muṣḥaf* 'Uthmān is the 'conventional' name of the official version imposed by the Umayyad caliph 'Abd al-Malik."²⁹

In any case, regardless of whether we embrace such a hypothesis or not, numerous reports from the early Islamic tradition indicate that the changes to the Qur'anic text introduced at the direction of 'Abd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj were in fact substantial. Their actions appear to have moved beyond earlier efforts to collect various memories of Muhammad's revelations in writing, undertaking the process of synthesizing the contents of these various independent collections into the canonical version of the Qur'an that comes down to us today. We perhaps catch a glimpse of their editorial efforts in a report ascribed to al-A'mash (d. 765) that survives in the canonical hadith collections of Muslim and al-Bukhārī. In this account, al-Ḥajjāj appears to be addressing a group of scribes and scholars whom he has charged with the project of composing what will be the new standard version of the Qur'an to replace the competing regional codices. While giving a speech from the pulpit (*minbar*), he instructs these savants to "compose the Qur'an as Gabriel composed it [*allifū l-Qur'āna kamā allafahu Jibrīl*]: the writing that includes mention of the cow [*al-sūra llatī yudkaru fihā l-baqara*], and the writing that includes mention of the women [*al-nisā'*], and the writing that includes mention of the family of 'Imran [*Āl 'Imrān*]."³⁰

One should not be confused here by the use of the word *sūra*, since this term has a broad meaning, even and especially in the Qur'an itself, where it simply designates a writing of some sort. The other key term, *allafa*, means to join, unite, assemble, or collect the parts of something. Clearly, some sort of deliberate composition of the Qur'an under al-Ḥajjāj's direction is in view in this report—presumably, a synthesis of the earlier regional codices.³¹ Other traditions describe al-Ḥajjāj as regularly inspecting the work of these scribes and scholars and considering his own judgments regarding the text of the Qur'an to be inspired on the level of Muhammad himself.³² This report also seems to indicate that various sections or suras now found in the Qur'an were at this time still circulating as

independent collections of Muhammad's teachings. Some of these writings, it would appear, even bore names that would ultimately be given to some of the Qur'an's suras: the Cow (2), the Women (4), and the Family of Imran (3). Material evidence of the Cow's circulation as a discrete and independent text has recently emerged in the form of a newly identified and soon to be published papyrus, directly confirming the words of al-Ḥajjāj in this report.³³ And, as we will see in the following section, the earliest non-Islamic sources that refer to Islamic sacred writings similarly describe these texts as existing in a fragmentary and independent state even as late as the beginning of the eighth century, when the Qur'an was first brought together under 'Abd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj.

JOHN OF DAMASCUS AND THE QUR'AN

The most important non-Islamic witness to the Qur'an's early history is without doubt John of Damascus (675–749), who is also the very first writer to show any awareness at all that Muhammad's followers possessed distinctive sacred writings of their own. We find John's remarks about the "Qur'an" in his most important and widely read work, the *Fount of Knowledge*, which was written around 730. In a section of this treatise dedicated to cataloging various religious errors, John includes Muhammad's followers, whom he considers to be little more than another variety of Christian heresy, naming them the "Ishmaelites."³⁴ In his refutation of the Ishmaelites' faith, he describes certain writings that they attribute to their founder Muhammad, some of which clearly correspond to parts of the Qur'an, and others of which do not.³⁵ Although John's intent here is clearly polemical, one should not on this basis write off his account of this new religious community and their scripture so quickly. John's life experiences positioned him to be extremely well informed about Muhammad's followers, their internal affairs, and the content of their faith.

John's paternal grandfather had been the financial governor of Damascus and Syria during the final years of Roman rule, a role that his father would assume after the transition to the rule of the Believers. John's father, Sarjūn ibn Manṣūr, served as secretary for each of the first Umayyad caliphs—from Mu'āwiya (661–80) to 'Abd al-Malik (685–705), with responsibility for taxation and the caliphal treasury. John himself later followed his father into the caliphal administration, serving also as secretary and chief financial officer for 'Abd al-Malik before he departed for Jerusalem early in the eighth century to live out the remainder of his life as a monk. Indeed, in the 680s and 690s and perhaps beyond, John was effectively the head of the Umayyad civil administration.³⁶ These experiences serving in high office within the Umayyad caliphate ensure that "John was well-positioned to have gathered some of the best information about Islam that could be acquired [in Damascus]." Accordingly, any differences between what John reports about Muhammad's followers and the memories of the later Islamic tradition cannot be

simply pushed aside as polemical falsification. At the time when John was writing there is in fact little reason to assume that "Islamic practice was developed to such an extent to warrant the criticism that John distorts Islamic beliefs and practices."³⁷ Islam was still a work in progress that was trying to find its way among the various monotheisms of the late ancient Near East, and John's account provides a precious witness to how this process was still unfolding in his day before his own eyes. Indeed, it is likely that John would have been better informed than most Muslims regarding the affairs of the caliphate, including any official doctrines or scriptures that they were attempting to propagate.

John begins his description of this heresy of the "Ishmaelites" by noting its origins with a certain "Mamed," who, after having read the Old and New Testaments, began spreading tales that "a writing [*graphē*] had come down to him from heaven," compiling these "laughable things" into a book [*biblos*]. A bit later in his account, John turns to this particular writing in some detail, explaining further that "This Mamed, as was said, composed many foolish things, and gave each of them a title, such as, the writing of the Woman," while there are also other writings with the titles "the Table" (sura 5) and "the Cow." John additionally mentions a fourth writing entitled the "Camel of God," a mysterious reference that has generated much speculation, since there is no such writing in the Qur'an in its present form.³⁸ We are fortunate that in the course of his discussion of Islam, John makes numerous specific references to the Ishmaelites' scriptures, at times even seeming to quote directly from them.³⁹ Despite his polemical intent, it is clear that John is well informed and highly knowledgeable about the sacred writings of this new religious community. Particularly noteworthy is John's reference to the existence of multiple and seemingly independent writings that were being used by Muhammad's followers as scriptures, which seems to confirm the similar indications in al-Ḥajjāj's address. Even more fortuitous is the fact that John identifies two of the three writings named by al-Ḥajjāj with the same title, although, one must note, John's description of the contents of the writing "the Woman" does not seem at all compatible with the sura "the Women," at least in its current form.⁴⁰ In any case, John would have known well what was going on inside the caliphate at this time, and it surely stands as no mere coincidence that he identifies significant portions of the Qur'an as separate writings, seeming to confirm the conditions implied by al-Ḥajjāj's speech. Clearly, we must conclude, the sacred Ishmaelite writings that John knew in this era and describes in his account of their beliefs "cannot have been the Qur'an as we know it in its present form."⁴¹

As for the "Camel of God," this text remains a mystery, and it is certainly possible, given the complex state of Islamic sacred scripture at this stage, that it was yet another early writing alleged to contain some of Muhammad's revelations that was ultimately rejected. Perhaps it included, among other things, a much more elaborate form of the Qur'anic legend of the "She-Camel of God" (e.g., 11.61–68, 26.155–58), augmented with a significant amount of non-Qur'anic material

relevant to this tradition. The Qur’an’s scattered references to this divine she-camel alone cannot suffice to explain the writing that John had read bearing such a title, leaving little doubt that this text must have been a separate, now vanished work. Much of what John ascribes to this writing does not find any parallels in the Qur’an, although we do find traces of similar traditions elsewhere in early Islamic literature. Perhaps during the final separation of the Qur’an from the hadith most of the camel traditions found themselves on the latter side of the divide. But clearly John must have had some sort of Qur’anic “apocryphon” with this title before his eyes that has since vanished. Indeed, John is quite explicit that what he relates is material contained in writings attributed to Muhammad that were available to him. The faint echoes of this writing that we find now in the Qur’an thus reflect “the later result of mental labor aimed at the redaction, selection, and stylistic reorganization of this text, carried out during the final composition, based on various preexisting texts not yet formally fixed and rendered immutable.”⁴² On this basis alone it seems highly unlikely that the Qur’an as we now have it had been completely fixed by the turn of the eighth century, when John, who again was extremely well-informed and well-connected, wrote his description of the writings that Muhammad’s followers ascribed to him and revered as sacred scripture.

Two additional non-Islamic sources also indicate “the Cow’s” circulation as a separate work, and, if taken only on their own terms, their individual witness might not amount to much. Nevertheless, when added to John’s account and al-Ḥajjāj’s address, in addition to a papyrus containing “the Cow” as an independent writing, these reports gain significantly more credibility. The first of these witnesses is a Syriac text widely known as *The Disputation between a Muslim and a Monk of Bēt Ḥālē*. In this debate, the Christian disputant identifies among the sacred writings of his opponent a text named “the writing of the Cow” (*ṣūrat ‘al-baqara*), which he clearly distinguishes from the Qur’an, naming the latter separately as a different writing.⁴³ Scholars long thought that this Syriac text had been written during the early eighth century, so that it would constitute a parallel witness to John’s report that parts of the Islamic sacred scriptures were still circulating independently at this time. Nevertheless, a more recent study has come to the conclusion that this disputation more probably belongs to the early ninth century. The most compelling evidence for this later dating is a reference to Muhammad’s instruction by the Christian monk Sergius Bahira, a Syriac Christian legend not known before the later eighth century.⁴⁴ Yet this same legend of Sergius Bahira also identifies a sacred writing ascribed to Muhammad named “the book of the Cow” that is separate from the Qur’an.⁴⁵ Thus, it seems likely that mention of this “book of the Cow” in the Bahira legend inspired its subsequent appearance in the later Syriac *Disputation*, so that the latter is not necessarily an independent witness. Nevertheless, both texts attest to the survival of this tradition, first attested by John of Damascus, of an independent sacred writing titled “the Cow” that was

distinct from the Qur'an. Inasmuch as John's treatise would not have circulated in the same Miaphysite and East Syrian circles that gave rise to these two documents, we should consider them together as an independent witness to "the Cow's" differentiation from the Qur'an into the eighth century.

THE LETTER OF LEO III TO 'UMAR II AND THE QUR'AN

Other non-Islamic sources that are contemporary with the earliest Islamic sources confirm the Qur'an's composition and standardization under 'Abd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj. The single most important piece of evidence in this regard is the complex of writings purporting to be an exchange of letters between the Byzantine emperor Leo III (717–41) and the Umayyad caliph 'Umar II (717–20). Christian historical writers of the ninth and tenth centuries refer to just such an exchange of letters between these two leaders, and it is now well established that these historians have drawn this information from a still earlier report of the exchange in a now vanished chronicle by the eighth-century polymath Theophilus of Edessa that was their collective source.⁴⁶ The original account of this exchange dates, accordingly, to sometime around 750, not long at all after the lifetimes of the two alleged correspondents. According to Theophilus's report, 'Umar II wrote to Leo III inviting him to convert to Islam, and Leo replied by sending a response to 'Umar's arguments for his conversion with a critique of Islamic faith and practice.⁴⁷

As it turns out, we have letters from each of these two rulers addressed to the other, preserved within their respective traditions: Leo's letter survives in Christian sources, while 'Umar's has come down through the Islamic tradition. The transmission of these "letters" is a bit complex, however, since neither missive is completely extant in the language of its original composition—Greek and Arabic, one would assume—and likewise the texts reach us through an assortment of different channels. Scholars of course are not so naïve as to assume that we have in these two documents writings from the actual hands of Leo and 'Umar themselves. Nevertheless, there is now a fairly broad consensus that what has come down to us in this correspondence "is an amalgamation of several letters written either by the two leaders, or two persons living in the early eighth century."⁴⁸ The letter of Leo III, which is the writing that concerns us, survives in the Armenian *Chronicle* of Łewond, a text was written in the later eighth century, around 789.⁴⁹ There seems to be little room for any doubt, then, that the letter from Leo III to 'Umar II, whoever may have written it, is a Christian critique of Islam that was composed during the first part of the eighth century, and most likely sometime before 730, as Peter Schadler persuasively argues.⁵⁰ Thus, Leo's letter effectively ties John of Damascus as the first non-Islamic witness to the existence of an Islamic sacred text.

'Umar's letter, as we have it, opens with an attack on the Christian scriptures, maintaining that the Old Testament was falsified by the Jews, and that the

Christians then falsified the teaching of Jesus in their gospels.⁵¹ Leo's letter responds with an extended defense of the scriptures, arguing that their witness has not in fact been falsified by the Jews, the apostles, or the leaders of the church. At the conclusion of this topic, before turning to a new subject, the Trinity, "Leo" addresses the collection of the Qur'an.

But you are yourself wont to make such falsifications, especially in the case of a certain al-Ḥajjāj, who was appointed governor of Persia by you, who gathered all your ancient books and wrote another according to his taste and distributed it throughout all your lands. For such a thing was quite easy to accomplish with a single people with a single language, as it was in fact done—excepting only a few works of Abu Turab [i.e., Ali], for al-Ḥajjāj was not able to destroy them completely.

Such a thing would be impossible among the Christians, Leo explains, not only because God has strictly forbidden it, but because Christianity has been established among so many different peoples and languages.⁵²

Leo's letter is an extremely high-quality source, even if it is, once again, a polemical one. By all accounts, it was written close to the events in question, during the first half of the eighth century and very likely a little before 730. Al-Ḥajjāj himself had died just over a decade before this in 714, and his efforts to compose and disseminate the standard version of the Qur'an presumably took place during the two decades from 694–714, while he served as viceroy in Iraq first for 'Abd al-Malik and then for his son al-Walid (705–15).⁵³ The events referred to in this letter thus appear to have transpired likely within the lifetime of its author. If Leo himself were in some sense its author, the Qur'an's standardization and canonization would have taken place while he was between the ages of ten and thirty, with al-Ḥajjāj's death coming only three years before Leo assumed the imperial throne at the age of thirty-three. Clearly, whoever the author was, he knew about al-Ḥajjāj's composition and enforcement of a new standard version of the Qur'an from his own lived experience within the same world that saw these events take place. Al-Ḥajjāj was a very prominent and well-known figure of the era, such that during his tenure as viceroy of the caliphate and governor of Iraq he stands as "the dominant figure in the sources" for this period.⁵⁴ Undoubtedly, this vice caliph of the Islamic empire would have been a familiar figure to Leo and other members of the Byzantine court, and likewise, an endeavor as momentous and convulsive as establishing a revised, mandatory version of the Islamic sacred text certainly would not have escaped their attention.

We have here, then, a contemporary report from outside the Islamic tradition that confirms what the Islamic sources relate about al-Ḥajjāj's production of a new standard Qur'an to replace the various regional versions and their divergent memories of Muhammad's revelations. Leo's account closely matches the description in these sources of al-Ḥajjāj gathering together the regional codices that had emerged independently in the main centers of Islam and harmonizing their differences into

a new official, standard version, which presumably was more or less identical with the Qur'an that has come down to us today. Leo's letter also notes, like the Islamic sources, that this program of standardization involved the destruction of these older regional versions, although he notes that some of these traditions managed to survive al-Ḥajjāj's purge. In this regard, Leo singles out certain works of Abū Turāb—that is, Ali. One imagines that Ali's mention in this particular context signals the author's awareness that Ali's supporters vigorously contested the accuracy and authority of the Umayyad Qur'an in this era, as noted in the previous chapter. Indeed, according to Hamdan, "the real motive" for this project of producing and enforcing a standard version of the Qur'an "should be sought in the political conflicts between the Shi'ites in Kufa and the ruling Umayyads which had escalated since the rule of Ibn Ziyād (r. 55–66/675–685)."⁵⁵ As already noted, it would appear that al-Ḥajjāj and his committee of official censors enjoyed great success in eliminating these divergent records of Muhammad's revelations, so that they have effectively vanished from the earth. In contrast to 'Uthmān, who is said to have attempted the same, al-Ḥajjāj and 'Abd al-Malik were actually in a position to accomplish this, with a powerful and effective state apparatus—even if they did not initially succeed in eliminating every trace of the older codices. For what it is worth, Leo's letter says nothing about any sort of prior collection of the Qur'an by earlier figures from Islamic history, 'Uthmān or otherwise.

THE *DIALOGUE* OF ABRAHAM OF TIBERIAS, THE *APOLOGY* OF AL-KINDĪ, AND THE QUR'AN

Two other Christian writers from roughly a century later, Abraham of Tiberias and the apologist al-Kindī, likewise affirm the Qur'an's final revision and standardization by al-Ḥajjāj. Abraham of Tiberias appears as a disputant in an Arabic text purporting to record a dialogue between this Melkite Christian and the emir 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Hāshimī in Jerusalem sometime around 820. Although the text is certainly not a transcript of any such dialogue, it does seem to have a connection with the historical context that frames this literary exchange.⁵⁶ In it, Abraham at one point addresses the matter of the Qur'an's lineage. In contrast to Leo's letter, the author of this dialogue is well aware of the Islamic tradition's many different accounts of the Qur'an's origins. He notes that although Muhammad claimed to be the recipient of its revelations, only after his death did his followers begin to compile the words that he had taught them, and, mirroring the confusion of the Islamic sources, Abraham names the full range of the various alleged instigators: Abū Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthmān, Ali, Ibn 'Abbās, and Mu'āwiya. Yet Abraham then explains that "after them, it was al-Ḥajjāj ibn Yūsuf who composed [*allafa*] and arranged [*rattaba*] it [the Qur'an]."⁵⁷ Clearly, according to this witness, the final composition and edition of the Qur'an was achieved by al-Ḥajjāj. While others

may have made earlier efforts to gather Muhammad’s teachings together, it was al-Ḥajjāj who produced the final authoritative version of the Islamic sacred text.

Al-Kindī discusses the Qur’an at much greater length in his *Apology*, which he composed in the early ninth century during the reign of the caliph al-Ma’mūn (813–33).⁵⁸ Like Abraham, al-Kindī also knows the muddle of Islamic traditions concerning the Qur’an’s origins, and he adduces this multiplicity to a polemical end, identifying all of the hands that are reported to have had a turn at altering the text of the Qur’an. He notes that Ali is alleged to have collected the Qur’an soon after Muhammad’s death, although he insists to his readers from the very start of this discussion that “you know that al-Ḥajjāj ibn Yūsuf collected [*jama’a*] the codices [*maṣāḥif*], and he removed things [*‘asqala*] from them.”⁵⁹ Nevertheless, al-Kindī also notes the tradition of an initial collection of leaves under Abū Bakr, further explaining that Ali’s supporters did not accept this version but remained faithful to Ali’s version. Other collections were also independently produced at this time, he explains, including those of Ubayy b. Ka’b and ‘Abd Allāh ibn Mas’ūd. Then ‘Uthmān was troubled by the various versions of the Qur’an that had established themselves already among the Believers in different regions, and, as in the canonical narrative, he undertook to establish an authoritative version, sending copies to Mecca, Medina, Syria, and Kufa. Of these, only the Syrian copy of ‘Uthmān’s Qur’an is said to have escaped destruction fairly soon thereafter. “Then there was the intervention by al-Ḥajjāj ibn Yūsuf, who left no copy [*muṣḥaf*] that he did not acquire, and he removed many things from it.”⁶⁰ Clearly, al-Kindī, like Abraham, has drawn his information about the Qur’an from the Islamic tradition, and yet both writers show that the collection of the Qur’an, at least as these Christian writers had learned of it, was largely the work of al-Ḥajjāj, who made some substantial changes to the contents of the text and established its final form. And what these Christian authors were hearing from their Islamic contemporaries in the early ninth century clearly indicates that al-Ḥajjāj did far more than merely add some diacritics and arrange the suras in their current form.

Before moving on from these witnesses, it is worth emphasizing in the strongest terms, I think, that prior to John of Damascus and the letter of Leo, which appear to be roughly contemporary works from the early eighth century, no writer, Christian or otherwise, shows any awareness *at all* that Muhammad’s followers had a sacred book of their own. This long silence should certainly give us pause, and it raises significant questions about the history and status of the Qur’an during the first Islamic century. The Jews and Christians of late antiquity were peoples for whom the authority of a sacred book was paramount. Surely, they would have been curious and inquisitive to learn whether these newly arrived Abrahamic monotheists had a scripture of their own. And yet they show complete ignorance of any distinctive corpus of scripture claimed by Muhammad’s followers until the early eighth century. This lengthy collective silence is quite telling: such silence, as

they say, speaks volumes. Nicolai Sinai, in his otherwise thoughtful article defending the 'Uthmānic tradition, can only give this evidence a curt dismissal as being "of course easy to impugn." Yet such judgment is, to borrow Sinai's own words, "worryingly cavalier."⁶¹

Sinai's only support for this position is reference to one of Harald Motzki's articles, where Motzki alleges that the use of *argumenta e silentio* in Mingana's articles on the collection of the Qur'an represents a weakness in his case for the text's standardization under 'Abd al-Malik. Yet Motzki himself does not bother to give any explanation whatsoever for the stunning absence of any mention in any source from the first century of this new religious movement's existence of what is purported to be the centerpiece of the Believers' faith. Instead, Motzki blithely notes "the fact that the Qur'an is not mentioned in the few early Christian sources reporting on the Muslims," as if this simple observation should somehow suffice resolve the matter.⁶² Yet this remark is, frankly, both empty and inaccurate. To describe the number of contemporary "Christian sources reporting on the Muslims" as "few" is utterly absurd and disingenuous. Surely at the time of his writing Motzki was at least aware of Robert Hoyland's *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*. In this more than 870-page volume, Hoyland catalogues over one hundred and thirty non-Islamic sources that make reference to the religious movement founded by Muhammad at various stages in its early history. Around sixty of these witnesses were written during the first Islamic century: sixty, I believe, is well more than a few. None of these first-century witnesses so much as mentions any sort of sacred writing used in any capacity at all by Muhammad's followers. This is nothing short of incredible if, as many would suppose, the Qur'an was already collected by 650 in a standard canonical form and was believed by Muhammad's followers to be direct revelations from their God. If this striking, consistent pattern from the earliest evidence is truly so easy to impugn, as alleged, then by all means, it would be helpful if someone were to put forth the negligible effort to do so. To the contrary, it is solid evidence that is deeply problematic for accepting the canonical narrative of the Sunni-Nödekean-Schwallian paradigm, evidence that has accordingly been widely ignored.

Sinai further maintains, again following Motzki, that while Casanova and Mingana had previously argued for the Qur'an's composition under al-Ḥajjāj and 'Abd al-Malik on the basis that this tradition appears in the historical record before the canonical Islamic version, this assumption, he maintains, is no longer valid. It is true that Motzki has made a solid argument that some basic version of the tradition of an 'Uthmānic collection goes back to al-Zuhri (d. 741–42). Yet one must note and even insist that the reports from the letter of Leo and John of Damascus are just as old if not even older, as is the alternative account of the Qur'an's origins related by Sayf ibn 'Umar described above.⁶³ Likewise, we should not discount Abraham of Tiberias or al-Kindi, particularly since their accounts concur with both Leo and an important thread in the Islamic collective memory regarding the

Qur’an’s standardization under ‘Abd al-Malik. Motzki unfortunately misevaluates al-Kindī’s witness as negligible (ignoring Abraham of Tiberius entirely), regarding it as nothing more than “distorted summary of several Muslim traditions” that is of more recent vintage than the tradition he attributes to al-Zuhrī.⁶⁴

Such an appraisal of al-Kindī’s witness is indeed unfair and inconsistent. As Guillaume Dye observes of Motzki’s inequitable judgment in this instance, “it is necessary to compare what is comparable: either the dating of the composition of the works, or the dating of the traditions that they reproduce—but one cannot compare the dating of the letter of al-Kindī with that of the traditions of al-Bukhārī,” which is what Motzki in fact does.⁶⁵ Al-Kindī’s apology is roughly contemporary with Bukhārī’s *Ṣaḥīḥ* as a witness, and there is no reason to assume that al-Kindī does not, like Bukhārī, transmit a tradition that is older than the writing in which it appears. Moreover, in the case of the letter of Leo III, we have clear evidence from an early eighth-century source—a much more direct and certain witness than the ins and outs of Motzki’s preferred method of *isnād* criticism can afford. It is true that al-Kindī uses every tool at his disposal, since he wants to show that the Qur’an has been falsified, but every tool in his kit is, so to speak, taken from the Muslim tool bench. In this regard al-Kindī is true to his remarks from the conclusion of this section on the Qur’an’s composition: “All that I have said is drawn from your own [i.e., Islamic] authorities, and no argument have I advanced but what is based on evidence accepted by yourselves.”⁶⁶ Accordingly, we should look on al-Kindī’s witness to this early tradition about al-Ḥajjāj no differently than the reports of al-Bukhārī and other later Muslim writers. Like al-Bukhārī, al-Kindī—and Abraham of Tiberias as well for that matter—bears witness in the early ninth century to a tradition from the early eighth century that was circulating in both Christian and Islamic circles.

DELIBERATE DECEPTION OR COLLECTIVE MEMORY?

Ultimately, even Sinai must concede that “the fact that two [three actually] Christian texts which are not obviously interdependent, as well as various Islamic reports, concurrently ascribe to al-Ḥajjāj measures of textual dissemination and suppression strongly indicates that something of the sort really was afoot.”⁶⁷ Thus, we have here a tradition that satisfies one of the highest standards for evaluating the worth of historical evidence: multiple independent attestations. As biblical scholars have long recognized, a higher degree of historical probability inheres in observations attested by several independent sources, since this pattern makes it highly unlikely that a particular writer has invented a given report.⁶⁸ We have in this instance three early, independent witnesses from the Christian tradition, one of which, the *Letter of Leo*, is almost contemporary with the events in question and seems to originate from the Byzantine imperial court. One imagines that Byzantine officials would likely be fairly well-informed concerning major developments

in the caliphate, particularly those undertaken by an individual as prominent as the imperial viceroy, al-Ḥajjāj. In addition, we have multiple reports from various sources in the Islamic tradition that similarly ascribe the Qur'an's composition to al-Ḥajjāj and 'Abd al-Malik. By comparison, the tradition of the 'Uthmānic compilation, it would appear, ultimately has but a single witness, al-Zuhri, whose individual account all of the later sources merely reproduce with some variations, as Motzki has demonstrated. To have it otherwise in this case would be to fall prey to the common fallacy identified by Lawrence Conrad, according to which "a report generated in a particular time and place, and then cited 30 times subsequently in other later texts, will be cited for all 30 attestations as if these were independent witnesses."⁶⁹ They are not, and in this case there seems to be only one witness for this particular account of the Qur'an's formation—al-Zuhri.

Nevertheless, Sinai remains unwilling to allow that the actions of al-Ḥajjāj and 'Abd al-Malik could have amounted to actually composing the text of the Qur'an in the final form that it has now come down to us. For instance, Sinai argues that the lack of any clear anachronisms in the Qur'an showing the influence of developments from the period after 650 is an indication that the text must have been fixed by this point. In a previous study, I noted that in the Christian Gospel of John, Jesus does not offer any anachronistic predictions beyond his lifetime, and yet scholars have generally dated the composition of this Gospel to some seventy years after his death; this is roughly the same interval as from Muhammad to 'Abd al-Malik.⁷⁰ In response, Sinai notes that the Gospel of John does have at least one anachronism, in 9:22, where the Gospel (but not Jesus) refers to the expulsion of Christians from the Jewish synagogue, an event that post-dates the life of Jesus.⁷¹ Well, by this measure, then, the Qur'an is indeed replete with anachronisms.

In the same way that this verse from the Gospel of John reflects later developments in the relationship between nascent Christianity and early Judaism, so we find innumerable passages in the Qur'an that clearly reflect later adjustments—almost certainly post-650—in the relationships between Muhammad's new religious community and Judaism and Christianity. In their early decades, Muhammad's followers seem to have welcomed Jews and Christians into their community, even as they remained Jews and Christians and despite certain differences in doctrine. Many passages in the Qur'an indicate that this was the nature of the earliest community, as Fred Donner in particular has persuasively demonstrated.⁷² Muhammad and his followers do not seem to have conceived of themselves initially as "a separate religious confession distinct from others" during the first several decades of their movement's existence.⁷³ Instead, the earliest "Islamic" community appears to have been a loosely organized confederation of Abrahamic monotheists "who shared Muhammad's intense belief in one God and in the impending arrival of the Last Day, and who joined together to carry out what they saw as the urgent task of establishing righteousness on earth—at least within their

own community of Believers, and, when possible, outside it—in preparation for the End.”⁷⁴

The only question, it would seem, is when did the boundaries of the community of the Believers change to exclude members of these antecedent traditions? When did the Believers, like the Jews before them, expel the Christians from their assembly? It would appear that this shift was not at all complete by 650, as evidence from the reign of Mu‘āwiya (661–80) seems to make unmistakably clear.⁷⁵ This means that the Qur’anic passages referring to Jews and Christians and their beliefs in a negative and polemical manner—in contrast to the many others that, to the contrary, speak very favorably of the Jews and Christians—must have entered the tradition only after the boundaries between these communities had solidified and intensified. This certainly seems to have happened sometime after ‘Uthmān’s reign by just about any estimation.⁷⁶ In addition, we would note that effectively all the Christian lore found in the Qur’an must have entered into its corpus after Muhammad’s followers reached the Near East, since there was no Christian presence in Mecca and Medina during the lifetime of Muhammad that could account for these traditions before then. We will return to this particular topic in more detail in the final chapter.

Sinai also insists that if we do not accept the tradition of an ‘Uthmānic collection, then we must postulate a coordinated later effort to replace the memory of al-Ḥajjāj and ‘Abd al-Malik’s composition of the Qur’an with “fictitious narratives about ‘Uthmān’s promulgation of the Quranic *rasm*.”⁷⁷ Sinai resorts instead to the explanation that the reports concerning al-Ḥajjāj and ‘Abd al-Malik merely refer to their introduction of minor diacritical clarifications and divisions within an otherwise unchanged consonantal text. Yet, as we have already seen, these reports are clearly and easily falsified by the evidence of the earliest Qur’anic manuscripts.⁷⁸ Likewise, as we have also already seen, one can identify credible means and motives for ‘Abd al-Malik and al-Zuhri to have collaborated in order to achieve exactly the introduction of such a manufactured narrative. Yet at the same time, the charge that the tradition of ‘Uthmān’s collection could have arisen *only* through the spread of deliberately false reports to this effect is too simplistic for it to carry much weight. One not infrequently finds this kind of false “either/or” from time to time in traditionally oriented studies of early Islamic history: either it must be the way the tradition says it was, or there must have been a deliberate and concerted effort to spread false information later on.⁷⁹ Yet such objections simply fail to understand how collective memory works within a community, particularly with regard to how a religious community will remember the events of its origins.

We will have much more to say about the roles that individual memory and collective memory have to play in the formation of a religious tradition in chapters 6 and 7. But for now, it suffices to say that memory, collective or otherwise, operates in the present—whenever and wherever that time and place may be—and, with great regularity across human cultures, it remembers the past in a

manner that is suited to contemporary needs and interests. Modern scientific studies of human memory have shown repeatedly that our memories are surprisingly inaccurate, particularly in the absence of any written record, and at best we can over time remember only the bare bones “gist” of an event from the past.⁸⁰ Yet, since we remember the past solely for the sake of understanding the present, as these memories are recalled and transmitted, they are quickly reshaped according to the present concerns of those remembering and transmitting them. Memory science has in fact revealed that every time the mind remembers an event, it actually recomposes the memory anew from scratch, with the “original” growing quickly and steadily weaker over time. “Sometimes,” as Daniel Schacter notes, “in the process of reconstructing we add on feelings, beliefs, or even knowledge we obtained after the experience. In other words, we bias our memories of the past by attributing them emotions or knowledge we acquired after the event.”⁸¹

It turns out that “of all forms of memory, the autobiographical memory is the most susceptible to disruption,” a finding that applies no less to communities, whose autobiographies are a fundamental part of their collective memory.⁸² As Maurice Halbwachs writes of the latter, collective memory “does not preserve the past but reconstructs it with the aid of the material traces, text, and traditions left behind by the past, and with the aid moreover of recent sociological and social data, that is to say, with the present.”⁸³ Thus, there is no need to invent and insert a grand conspiracy of forgery into Islamic history in order to explain altered memories of the past: individual and collective memories take care of that well enough on their own. Our memories are extremely pliable and are constantly adjusting to make sense of what we believe and experience in the present. Likewise, oral transmission, which largely characterizes the Islamic tradition for at least the first hundred years of its existence, involves not the rote transmission of a literary artifact from the past but also a constant process of recomposition, as specialists have regularly demonstrated. As we will see in chapter 7, this is no less true of pre-literate cultures than literate ones.⁸⁴

Therefore, we do not need some sort of pervasive mendacity to explain the existence of traditions attributing the collection of the Qur'an to 'Uthmān, 'Umar, Abū Bakr, Ali, and/or others, even if in the case of the 'Uthmānic tradition the insertion of such a legend seems entirely advantageous and achievable. Without a doubt the collective memory of the community would have naturally gravitated toward such early authority figures over time in order to provide the Qur'an sanction and to bring its standardization closer to the lifetime of Muhammad, both of which serve to validate the authenticity of the sacred word contained therein: no fraudulence or conspiracy, then, is required. Consider, for instance, the fact that it is all but certain that Jesus of Nazareth was not actually born in Bethlehem, and yet billions of Christians across the ages have known with great certainty that he was in fact born in Bethlehem. Was this the product of a massive campaign to spread a false tradition to mask over the truth? Of course not. Christians came to remember

Jesus's birth in Bethlehem because that is where the messiah would be born. Because he was the messiah, he *had* to be born there even if he had actually been born elsewhere—any other sort of memory was incompatible with the convictions of their faith.⁸⁵ Or consider again the matter of the authorship of the gospels themselves, mentioned above. Their true authors were not known, and yet, during the second century, Christians came to the widespread agreement that they had been written by apostolic or subapostolic figures on the basis of eyewitness testimony. Even though this is not historically true and does not reflect the actual origins of the gospels and their traditions, it was not established through a coordinated campaign of falsehood. It was instead an altogether ordinary and expected result of the development of collective memory. Unquestionably similar dynamics underly the various shifts in the Islamic collective memory to identify the Qur'an's fixation with one of its early luminaries, which can ensure the accuracy and authority of its record of Muhammad's divine revelations.

By the same token, there seems to be little reason why the collective memory would have invented a tradition that al-Ḥajjāj and 'Abd al-Malik composed the Qur'an into its final received version if this had not in fact happened. Why would later Muslims remember them as dramatically revising the text in the form of a new edition on the basis of various regional collections that had been in circulation for decades, which they aimed to destroy and displace, unless this had actually taken place? Why, if 'Uthmān truly had already established the final, definitive version of the Qur'an and this fact were widely known, would the tradition arise that al-Ḥajjāj, a ruthless strongman for the regime, was responsible for establishing the Qur'an? Al-Ḥajjāj hardly strikes one as the sort of figure that pious memory would seek out to identify as the inaugurator of the most sacred and revered foundation of the Believers' faith, the Qur'an. Instead, one imagines that this tradition was remembered despite the difficulty that it posed for the expected patterns of piety because it relates events that had actually transpired very close to the time when Islamic traditions first began to be written down, and so it could not be easily denied or completely forgotten. It is hard to imagine another reason for the existence of this tradition—which runs so clearly against the grain of the collective memory's effort to anchor the Qur'an in a revered early authority—than a basis in genuine and significant historical events.

The historical quality of this tradition thus also receives validation from the criterion of embarrassment or dissimilarity, a cornerstone of historical analysis. According to this principle, material that is sharply at odds with the received tradition is unlikely to have been invented by the later community. Such divergences from established belief and practice instead likely reflect remnants of an older formation, preserved in spite of their deviance and on account of their antiquity and accuracy.⁸⁶ Indeed, as Chase Robinson observes, "discordant reports have a special claim on our trust, especially when they fit a broader pattern."⁸⁷ Moreover, it is not at all uncommon for such dissonant reports to survive along the

margins of the received tradition, discordant as they are with the canonical narratives. Yet in this case we must again note that this tradition is confirmed by an almost contemporary source from outside the Islamic tradition, indeed by one of the two first non-Islamic sources to even mention the Qur'an's existence, Leo's letter to 'Umar. This witness, along with two other independent witnesses from outside the Islamic tradition, offers compelling validation to an already highly probable memory, which likely relates the oldest and most historically accurate account of the Qur'an's production. The fact that no source prior to the eighth century even so much as mentions the Qur'an or any sacred text belonging to Muhammad's followers similarly suggests the veracity of these reports.

So what about the 'Uthmān tradition? As already mentioned, the success of this tradition owes itself largely to al-Bukhārī's creation of the now canonical narrative on the basis of older traditions and its authorization and promulgation through the unique prominence he afforded it in his esteemed collection of hadiths. Where, then, did the story of 'Uthmān come from, if it was in fact al-Ḥajjāj and 'Abd al-Malik who composed the Qur'an? Quite likely not out of completely thin air. We noted already above the distinct possibility that some sort of early collection may have been made under 'Uthmān's authority or at least that the regional codex of the Hijaz was believed to have his endorsement. Yet again, as already noted, this early version of the Qur'an, if it indeed existed, should be identified as, in effect, merely one among several early versions of the Qur'an that were clearly in circulation in the mid-seventh century. Any such 'Uthmānic Qur'an must be understood as simply another among the competing companion codices, in this case one with authority limited presumably to Medina and perhaps Mecca. It also bears repeating that, even if there was such an 'Uthmānic codex, 'Uthmān simply was not in a position to have achieved what the Islamic tradition ascribes to him: the establishment of the final version of the Qur'an for all Believers throughout the caliphate and beyond. Given the current state of our evidence, this reality simply cannot be ignored or denied. Indeed, even Sinai, who is determined to vindicate 'Uthmān's establishment of the invariable consonantal text of the Qur'an, must ultimately allow that the limited conditions of 'Uthmān's rule "create a strong impression that 'Uthmān did not achieve, or did not entirely achieve, the establishment of a uniform version of the Quran, but it hardly implies that he could not have tried."⁸⁸ Try as he may have done, what 'Uthmān would have accomplished in such a case is little more than another companion codex with regional authority, one that was presumably used, along with the others, by al-Ḥajjāj in composing the now canonical version of the Qur'an.

As for the specific contours of the 'Uthmānic tradition of the Qur'an's collection, we can effectively draw on an hypothesis offered by Sinai, who, in an effort to explain the traditions involving al-Ḥajjāj, proposes that his "destruction of codices and the dissemination of others, could perhaps be read as oblique reverberations of the distressing memory that the Quranic text had once undergone a significant

makeover.”⁸⁹ Yet it makes much more sense, I think, to understand these aspects of the ‘Uthmānic legend as projecting elements from al-Ḥajjāj’s composition and imposition of the canonical Qur’an into an earlier time. Comparing the two stories certainly gives the impression that the shared elements of seeking to displace rival versions with a new standard and then using the apparatus of the empire to round up and destroy all the competing antecedents is no mere coincidence. One imagines that these reports of destroying and displacing the divergent versions with a new standard were transferred, along with the action of collecting the Qur’an itself, back to ‘Uthmān in the collective memory, with or without deliberate assistance from ‘Abd al-Malik and al-Zuhri. One should further note that in the memories of ‘Uthmān’s assassination, as preserved in the early Islamic historical tradition, there is little mention at all of any anger directed toward him on account of his alleged destruction of rival Qur’ans. Although his elimination of variant Qur’ans is occasionally mentioned in these accounts, in such instances it appears as a relatively minor detail alongside much more forceful censures of his corruption—his nepotism, favoritism, embezzlement, taxation, and so on. By comparison, as de Prémare observes, “the grievances expressed regarding the Qur’an appear almost as additions, for good measure.”⁹⁰ Such a secondary quality is of course to be expected if the tradition was adopted only later as a revision of an earlier memory of the Qur’an’s composition and forced standardization by ‘Abd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj.

THE QUR’AN OF ‘ABD AL-MALIK AND AL-ḤAJJĀJ

One should add to these considerations the fact that despite the apparent efforts of al-Ḥajjāj and ‘Abd al-Malik, it would still be sometime before an invariable text of the Qur’an would be universally established within the Islamic world. We hear that furtive copies of some of the companion codices managed to survive al-Ḥajjāj’s purge, even into the tenth century in some instances.⁹¹ Just how much these remained identical with their seventh-century ancestors is highly uncertain. Furthermore, there remain the “thousands” of variant Qur’anic readings preserved by early Islamic authors or recorded on coinage.⁹² The degree to which the Qur’an remained an unstable text in Islamic usage during the first few centuries of Islam remains effectively still unknown in the absence of concerted study of these variants and their relation to the invariable, now canonical, text. Yet their mere existence raises questions about the state of the Qur’an well beyond al-Ḥajjāj and ‘Abd al-Malik. So, too, do the Qur’anic inscriptions of the Dome of the Rock that were installed by ‘Abd al-Malik. These inscriptions are our earliest surviving evidence for the text of the Qur’an, and yet they differ from the now canonical version of the Qur’an. How can this be, especially if the text of the Qur’an had already been firmly established already for forty years since the reign of ‘Uthmān? It would appear that even at the close of the seventh century, as al-Ḥajjāj’s efforts were

presumably about to get underway, the official version of the Qur'an, in Jerusalem at least, was different from the received text. Some scholars wish to understand the differences between the two versions as reflecting adaptations for a missionary purpose. Nevertheless, I maintain, as I have before, that this seems to amount to special pleading, wanting to allow a special exception for this earliest witness to the Qur'an simply because it does not conform to what has already been assumed to be true: an invariable 'Uthmānic Qur'an that had already been widely established for several decades.⁹³

As numerous scholars have noted, 'Abd al-Malik's reign was transformative on a number of fronts, but it was especially so in regard to the nature of the religious beliefs and practices of the new religious movement founded by Muhammad and the relation between this religion and the caliphal state. Prior to 'Abd al-Malik's rule, the caliphate appears to have shown a remarkable degree of tolerance for other monotheist faiths; and, as noted above, there is even good evidence to suggest that they were welcomed within the fold of the Believers' religious community, even as they remained in their own religious faiths. This inclusion of Jews and Christians, as Jews and Christians, within the community of the Believers seems to have persisted for decades beyond Muhammad's death, as Donner and others have persuasively argued. Whether or not one agrees entirely with this hypothesis, the evidence on which it rests—which is substantial, particularly given the limitations of what we know about earliest Islam—indicates fairly broad tolerance and inclusion of other monotheists within the early history of the Believers movement.⁹⁴

Things appear to have changed abruptly as a result of 'Abd al-Malik's civil war with the rival caliph Ibn al-Zubayr. Although victorious, 'Abd al-Malik appears to have been inspired by the conflict itself to consolidate and clearly define the faith of the Believers and join it intimately with the state and its ruling authority. Thus, we witness during 'Abd al-Malik's rule a concerted move to establish a distinctively "Islamic" version of monotheism as the ideological basis of his state. There was, moreover, a related move to thoroughly Arabicize this new religion and its conjoined polity as well. While the state increasingly began to conduct its official affairs solely in Arabic, in the religious sphere the effect was a new and profound emphasis on a distinctively Islamic monotheism defined by an Arabic prophet who brought a unique revelation in Arabic in the Arabian Hijāz that is now preserved in an unequalled Arabic sacred scripture.⁹⁵ These were the markers of a new Islamic identity that would distinguish this nascent religious tradition from the fellow monotheists with whom it had once freely associated. Accordingly, we find in 'Abd al-Malik's deliberate program of Islamicizing and Arabicizing the faith of the Believers and their polity a highly credible context in which to situate the final composition and establishment of a new Islamic scripture in the Qur'an. Not only, then, did 'Abd al-Malik have a clear motive for establishing such a text; he, unlike 'Uthmān and his other earlier predecessors, also had the means to enforce it.

Finally, and no less importantly, the composition of the Qur’an by al-Ḥajjāj and ‘Abd al-Malik also comports with one of the more bizarre features of the early Islamic tradition—that is, the almost complete absence of the Qur’an from the religious life of the Believers or Muslims for most of the first century of their existence. As Jack Tannous has recently observed, there is persistent and considerable “evidence for confusion about, lack of knowledge of, and disregard for Prophetic and Qur’anic teaching in the early decades of Muslim rule in the Middle East.” Tannous further notes that other than perhaps a small number of scholars, “significant numbers of the Prophet’s community only took a real interest in his example and message long after he and those who knew him, or knew him best, had died.”⁹⁶ Indeed, the near complete absence and ignorance of the Qur’an among Muhammad’s followers for most of the seventh century seems widely acknowledged. As Sinai, for instance, writes: “the Quran may well have reached closure as early as 650, but nevertheless remained absent from Islamic history until c. 700, when it was secondarily co-opted, without much revision, into an existent religious tradition.”⁹⁷ Even Theodor Nöldeke was compelled to acknowledge that “as far as the Koran is concerned, the ignorance of the average believer in the early years of Islam was beyond imagination.”⁹⁸

Given such widespread acknowledgment of the Qur’an’s almost total absence from the early Islamic tradition across the seventh century, how could we possibly believe that ‘Uthmān established the Qur’an as a new Islamic sacred text on par with the Jewish and Christian scriptures? If the Qur’an had already been collected by 650 in a standard canonical form, was then disseminated throughout the caliphate by state officials, and was believed by Muhammad’s followers to be a direct revelation from their God, how can one possibly explain the near total ignorance of its contents or even significance among Muslims of the seventh century? Frankly, it defies all credibility—all the more so given that the non-Islamic sources from this period, as noted above, join the evidence from the early Islamic tradition to confirm that, in effect, the Qur’an was in many respects nonexistent before the end of the seventh century. Nevertheless, if we put the legend of an ‘Uthmānic—or earlier—compilation to the side as historically improbable, which it seems we must, then the whole matter suddenly comes into view with great historical clarity and credibility. Once again, the Qur’an’s composition and dissemination under the supervision and authority of al-Ḥajjāj and ‘Abd al-Malik makes perfect sense. Their production and distribution of the Qur’an at the turn of the eighth century matches perfectly with the Qur’an’s first appearance in the historical record only at this rather late date.

A FIN DE SIÈCLE QUR’AN

Let us return to a quotation from Alford Welch cited in the previous chapter, only this time slightly adjusted in light of what we have now seen. On the basis of the evidence presently available to us, we may conclude that

the unanimity with which an official text is attributed to 'Abd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj, in the face of a lack of convincing evidence to the contrary, leads us to accept that the Qur'ān we have today, at least in terms of the number and arrangement of the *sūras* and the basic structure of the consonantal text, goes back to the time of 'Abd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj, under whose authority the official text was produced.⁹⁹

The myth of 'Uthmān's establishment of the now canonical Qur'an seems by comparison highly improbable. There is, in fact, no unanimity in the early Islamic tradition on this point, despite the frequent assertions of modern scholars otherwise. Rather, the Islamic tradition instead brings a chaotic tangle of inconsistent traditions, which it has often sought to harmonize in one way or another. One draws from this manifest confusion a clear sense that there was no early tradition of the Qur'an's definitive collection by one of the first four caliphs, and presumably there also was no such authoritative collection. Instead, we witness various strands developing in the collective memory of the Islamic community that sought to establish an anchor for its sacred text in the person of one of these early authorities, in close chronological proximity to the life of Muhammad. There is, moreover, despite the claims by Welch and other scholars as well, considerable evidence raising serious doubts about the historicity of reports alleging 'Uthmān's collection of the Qur'an, from the Islamic tradition and elsewhere. The tradition that 'Uthmān is responsible for the consonantal text of the Qur'an as we now have it is simply not as quotidian and uncontested in the tradition as scholars have long convinced themselves that it was. The Nöldekean-Schwallian paradigm has lived a good life up until now, but it seems that the time has come to lay it to rest.

By comparison, however, the Qur'an's composition under 'Abd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj carries a high degree of historical probability. It is attested by a source very close to the event in question, the *Letter of Leo III*. Likewise, it comports well with the Qur'an's near complete absence from any sources—Islamic or non-Islamic, during the seventh century. The conditions of 'Abd al-Malik's reign, in contrast to those of his predecessors, make such an undertaking entirely feasible. The project fits well within 'Abd al-Malik's program of Islamicization and Arabization. It corresponds with the very first witness to the text of the Qur'an—the inscriptions of the Dome of the Rock. And it seems highly unlikely that the later Islamic collective memory would spontaneously invent such a tradition, particularly given that al-Ḥajjāj was a very cruel and severe ruler, whose reputation was unlikely to spark an association with this hallowed task in pious memory. As for the traditions ascribing only rather minor refinements of the Qur'anic text to 'Abd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj, such as diacritical marks or textual divisions, these are clearly later attempts to harmonize an earlier memory of the Qur'an's composition under 'Abd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj with emergent canonical Sunni traditions that would ascribe the foundation of Islam's sacred text to more esteemed figures, closer in time to Muhammad. That they are such is clearly in evidence from the

fact that the early Qur’anic manuscript tradition falsifies these reports, leaving us to conclude that the actions of ‘Abd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj in composing the Qur’an were of a much more substantial nature, as reported again in both Islamic and non-Islamic sources.

It is no surprise, I think, that recent years have seen some scholars begin to move away from the older Nöldekean-Schwallian paradigm and move instead toward understanding the Qur’an as a text that finally came together in its current form only at the end of the seventh century.¹⁰⁰ Déroche, through careful paleographic and codicological study, has confirmed that the earliest extant Qur’ans were in fact produced in the imperial chancery during the reign of ‘Abd al-Malik.¹⁰¹ Only the so-called *Codex Parisino-petropolitanus* poses a possible exception to this courtly context. Déroche dates this manuscript, which was written by five different hands, to sometime during the last thirty years of the seventh century, on the basis of its orthographic differences from the *textus receptus*.¹⁰² Nevertheless, I am not entirely persuaded that these variations alone can securely date the manuscript before ‘Abd al-Malik’s standardization campaign. It is true that this codex does not conform perfectly to the new imperial standard, but it certainly is not out of the question that this manuscript could be a work from the early eighth century that had not yet been impacted by the new reforms.¹⁰³ Moreover, as Robinson rightly reminds us, “there is not a single Qur’anic manuscript, Yemeni or otherwise, that has been dated to the seventh century on anything other than palaeographical grounds, which, given the paltry evidence that survives, remain controversial in the extreme. One scholar’s seventh-century leaf, another may assign to the eighth or ninth.” And even if this manuscript truly is from the end of the seventh century, its witness remains, according to Robinson, “a far cry from establishing the traditional account of Qur’anic origins or, for that matter, its collection and editing.”¹⁰⁴

Nevertheless, whether this manuscript was written in 685 or 705 or 715, any of which years could be possible judging from the paleography alone, there is no question that it does not fit with the canonical narrative of an ‘Uthmānic standardization, which it also belies. As Déroche rightly maintains, “When looking at the transcription of the *Codex Parisino-petropolitanus*, one sees that this copy as well as all those which belong to these chronological strata of the transmission are unable to prevent what the ‘Uthmānic edition was supposed to achieve”—that is, variation in the Qur’anic text.¹⁰⁵ Therefore, rather than validating the Nöldekean-Schwallian paradigm, this manuscript instead affords evidence, as David Powers persuasively argues, that “the consonantal skeleton of the Qur’an remained open and fluid for three-quarters of a century between the death of the Prophet and the caliphate of ‘Abd al-Malik.”¹⁰⁶ Thus, with the historical evidence for an ‘Uthmānic collection now looking shakier than ever, there remains one bulwark behind which its proponents still seek refuge—namely, the radiocarbon (¹⁴C) dating of certain early manuscripts of the Qur’an. As we turn now to the next chapter,

however, we will see that this method, at least when applied to the dating of early Qur'anic manuscripts, is not in fact all that it is frequently made out to be. The process, it seems, is still not precise enough to date artifacts from this particular context accurately, at least not to the level of specific years and decades, which is what would be necessary to validate an 'Uthmānic collection. For the moment, then, it remains the case that if one gives precedence to the manuscript evidence, the view of the Qur'an's gradual development and final composition under al-Ḥajjāj has the best support.¹⁰⁷