CHAPTER I

Was the Ṣanʿāʾ Qurʾān Palimpsest a Work in Progress?

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MS Ṣanʿāʾ, Dār al-Maḥṭūṭāt 01–27.1, the so called “Ṣanʿāʾ palimpsest”, has been the subject of a great deal of discussion since its discovery in 1981. The manuscript contains two superimposed Qurʾānic texts: an upper text dated to the seventh century or the first half of the eighth century CE, and an earlier lower text. I have recently completed an edition and analysis of the Ṣanʿāʾ palimpsest’s two layers. My edition is based on the natural light and ultraviolet light images of the upper text and the post-processed photos of the lower text. These images were produced by a French-Italian collaborative project between 2002 and

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1 My thanks go to Alba Fedeli, Sarah Novak, Heather Sweetser, Dr. Stephen Burge, Dr. David Hollenberg, and Prof. Sabine Schmidtke, for their feedback on an earlier version of this paper. My work on MS 01–27.1 started within the project “Matériaux pour une édition critique du Coran” at the Centre National de Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) in Paris, between September 2008 and February 2009. I thank Christian J. Robin who made available to me copies of the natural light and ultraviolet photos of the upper text and the post-processed photos of the lower text of the manuscript. Since 2010, my research has been independent of the French project. For earlier results of this project, see Asma Hilali, “Le palimpseste de Sanʿa et la canonisation du Coran: Nouveaux éléments”, Cahiers du Centre Gustave Glotz 21 (2010), pp. 443–448; eadem, “Coran, hadith et textes intermédiaires: Le genre religieux aux débuts de l’Islam”, Mélanges de l’Université Saint-Joseph 64 (2012), pp. 29–44.


2008. In December 2012, I visited the Dār al-Maḥṭūṭāt in Ṣanʿāʾ and verified that the images in question are indeed based on the fragments in the Great Mosque’s Garbiyya library.5

After describing previous scholarship on the Ṣanʿāʾ palimpsest, I present in this article some of the results of my edition, with a special focus on the lower text. I then propose two methodological points that, in my view, have implications for the transmission of religious texts in early Islam. First, I suggest that when considering early sources, we should focus strictly on the palaeographic and philological features of the manuscript and resist overlaying it with later theological considerations. In the study of early Qurʾān fragments, this means resisting the temptation to link the sources systematically with medieval theories of Qurʾānic variants (qirāʾāt), which were produced much later and should not be considered a faithful mirror of the early material. Second, we should consider the early role of the source in situ: in this case, the way that the Qurʾānic text in the manuscript was used and the institutional context of its transmission. We must consider how the parchment was first read, recited, and copied among a specific circle of scholars or students, and then, at a later date, washed and reused; and why it was placed in a false ceiling in the Great Mosque of Ṣanʿāʾ.

**Previous Research on the Ṣanʿāʾ Palimpsest**

Academic interest in MS 01–27.1 began in 1981 with the important research led by the German scholar Gerd-Rüdiger Puin.6 Elisabeth Puin produced an edition of selected passages of the upper and the lower text, based on black-and-white photos produced during the 1980s. Her publications constitute the first attempt to produce an edition of the manuscript.7 The Italian-French project

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6 Many accounts are available about the circumstances of the discovery of the manuscript. For a complete overview of the German mission, see, e.g. Lester, “What is the Koran?”; Sadeghi/Goudarzi, “Ṣaḥaḥ’ 1”, p. 10.