

THE 'DISCOVERY OF WRITING' IN THE QUR'AN: TRACING AN EPISTEMIC REVOLUTION IN LATE ANTIQUITY

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Abstract

The present article is to take the Qur'an seriously as a literary text, the first literary text in Arabic language to be almost immediately put to writing and thus to become the trigger of the Islamic "culture of the Book" that soon after was to emerge. To enter the discourse of the Qur'an as a literary text demands first of all to tackle the essential question what the Qur'an is in terms of genre: a compilation of diverse previously circulating traditions, or the transcript of a historically real drama of the emergence of a community. This paper wishes to enter the discussion from another angle, looking at the Qur'an from a perspective which makes it possible to focus its epistemic potential, the dynamics that eventually triggered a fundamental renewal of the Late Antique world. This is a cultural turn which was achieved through the Qur'anic negotiation and re-interpretation not only of the neighboring monotheist traditions but no less of the ancient Arabic lexicon of concepts.

Keywords: literary text, Islamic culture of the Book, epistemic potential, Late Antique world, monotheist traditions, ancient Arabic lexicon of concepts

Methodological approaches

There are many reasons to look at the present state of Qur'anic studies with optimism: the sheer number of scholars, particularly of the younger generation, and the often amazing results of their work is unprecedented. And yet a kind of pessimism hovers over Qur'anic studies, no despair about the future of the thriving discipline, but a kind of epistemic pessimism. There are entire discourses that are regarded inaccessible, impossible to explore, such as the chronology of the Qur'an which is an anathema to many scholars.¹ There are vast corpora of Islamic writing that are unduly rashly dismissed by some scholars as useless for Qur'anic studies, such as the *sīra* and Islamic tradition as such. Though the modern focus on the Qur'an's narrative extension of the Biblical tradition has provided a firm common ground for a large realm of scholarship, current research perspectives are often pursued in isolation from each other. It is true that intertextual reading of the Qur'an such as had been introduced in the beginning of critical scholarship by Abraham Geiger² has again won the day, and there is equally common acceptance of the Qur'an's status as a text surpassing local significance –the Qur'an *is* by now accepted as a text deeply rooted in a more universal late antique culture –yet, there seems to exist no serious reflection on the Qur'an's theological peculiarity, its *Eigengesetzlichkeit*. Indeed, most investigations stop short with the analysis and intertextual documentation of isolated passages, shying

1 To implement the principle of a diachronic reading of the Qur'an is one of the main tenets of the research project "Corpus Coranicum – Textdokumentation und historisch-kritischer Kommentar", presently pursued at the Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften, see Michael Marx, 'Ein Koranforschungsprojekt in der Tradition der Wissenschaft des Judentums: Zur Programmatik des Akademienvorhabens Corpus Coranicum' in Dirk Hartwig, Walter Homolka, Michael Marx and Angelika Neuwirth, eds., *„Im vollen Licht der Geschichte“ – Die Wissenschaft des Judentums und die Anfänge der Koranforschung* (Würzburg, 2008), pp. 41-54.

2 Abraham Geiger, *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen?* (Berlin, 1833).

away from tracing those exegetical negotiations that led up to the text's final shape. Worst of all, there is no consensus on the literary genre(s) of the Qur'an, nor on the question of authorship. The present article intends to take the Qur'an seriously as a literary text, indeed, the first literary text in Arabic language to be almost immediately put to writing and thus to become the trigger of the Islamic "culture of the Book" that soon after was to emerge.

To enter the discourse of the Qur'an as a literary text demands first of all to tackle the essential question what the Qur'an is in terms of genre: a compilation of diverse previously circulating traditions (option a) or: the transcript of a historically real drama of the emergence of a community from a communication process (option b) has seldom been raised; scholars in the majority have simply opted for (a). Thus the Qur'an to some scholars appears as an anthology of 114 unconnected text units, suras, a textual *fait accompli* imagined as an auctorial composition³. A majority of scholars however goes a decisive step further, dismissing the sura completely and looking at the Qur'an as a textual continuum best explained as the compilation of an unknown group of redactors – equally assuming a written composition. Both these parties tend to regard the text as more or less pre-meditated, a *post eventum* or even *sine eventu* report. The difference between these positions and the reading of the Qur'an as a drama (b) is, however, no merely academic trifle but tantamount to the hermeneutical setting of a course: whereas the written, pre-meditated, auctorial text can be approached from whatever angle, since the same author(s) is or are responsible, the drama which involves multiple and changing voices, cannot. It demands a sequential reading of the individual scenes and acts which are built on each other, i.e. it demands a diachronic reading of the text. In this hermeneutical framework – in addition to Biblical

3 Michel Cuyppers, *The Banquet: A Reading of the Fifth Sura of the Qur'an* (Miami, FL, 2008).

intertextuality – intra-Qur’anic intertextuality, the rereading of earlier communications in later ones, calls for attention. The development that the Qur’an passed through is, in view of the ever-changing and steadily increasing group of ‘protagonists’, of interlocutors of the proclaimer, to be assumed to describe not a linear but rather a zigzag movement. Reading the Qur’an as an open-ended drama is a much more arduous and painstaking procedure than reading it as a given text since it presupposes the reconstruction – at least in heuristic terms – of a chronology, a procedure which admittedly bears the risk of indulging in circular arguments⁴. But is the disregard of available evidence, which occurs when this intra-Qur’anic intertextuality remains unconsidered, really an acceptable alternative? To avoid both of the presently popular fallacies – the sidelining of the final Qur’anic text in favor of the alleged sources on the one hand and the teleological reading of the *textus receptus* without regarding the negotiation processes reflected in it – I wish to enter the field from a third angle, looking at the Qur’an from a sort of bird’s eye perspective which makes it possible to focus its epistemic potential, the dynamics that eventually triggered a fundamental renewal of the Late Antique world. This cultural turn – this article will try to demonstrate – was achieved through the Qur’anic negotiation and re-interpretation not only of the neighbouring monotheist traditions but no less of the ancient Arabic lexicon of concepts. Though the Qur’an has not yet been systematically read as a response to contemporary pagan ways of thinking important features of which are accessible to us in Ancient Arabic poetry⁵, a number of poetic intertexts of the Qur’an

4 See for the problems involved Nicolai Sinai, ‘The Qur’an as process’ in Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai and Michael Marx, eds., *The Qur’an in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur’anic Milieu* (Leiden, 2010), pp. 407-439.

5 The extensive corpus of pre-Islamic poetry has not been given due attention in Qur’anic studies, a desideratum lamented by modern scholars such as Thomas Bauer, ‘The Relevance of Early Arabic Poetry for Qur’anic Studies, including observations on Kull and on Q 22:27, 26:225, and 52:21’ in Neuwirth, Sinai and Marx, eds., *Qur’an in Context*,

have been pointed out⁶. I will first turn to the pagan milieu of the Qur'an and – in a second part – discuss some Qur'anic texts that appear to respond to particular challenges of that milieu.

The essential innovation introduced with the production and subsequent codification of the extensive and highly sophisticated text of the Qur'an can – without much exaggeration – be termed as “the discovery of writing”. I do not intend here the evolution of a new script, although the development of the Hijazi form of writing (fig. 1) displayed unexpectedly and probably for the first time on a large scale in the oldest codices of the Qur'an is an innovation that still awaits further study. The change I have in mind is still weightier: With the Qur'an – this is my thesis – Arab society underwent a cultural turn from what the German Egyptologist Jan Assmann⁷ has termed the “ritual coherence” of a society to a new form of social and individual orientation, which results in its “textual coherence”. To quote Assmann: ‘It is obvious that in the history of the connective structure of societies it was the invention of writing that caused the deepest break. Writing divides this history into two phases: one of ritual repetition and one of textual interpretation.’⁸ The decisive change from ritual to textual continuity, according to Assmann, however, ‘did not come about through writing but through damming the stream of tradition so that it stopped flowing. The running river

pp. 699-732. Although Josef Horowitz had systematically adduced poetry to document his historical findings related to the Qur'an, see his *Koranische Untersuchungen* (Leipzig and Berlin, 1926), and Toshihiko Izutsu, *God and Man in the Koran: Semantics of the Koranic Weltanschauung* (Tokyo, 1964), pursued poetry as a contrastive backdrop for the Qur'an, it was only more recently that the Qur'an and poetry were read synoptically, see Ghassan El Masri, ‘Concepts of Time in the Qur'an’ (unpublished PhD dissertation, Freie Universität Berlin, 2010).

6 Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike* (Berlin, 2010), pp. 672-722.

7 Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (Cambridge, 2011). For more information on that epistemic turn induced by the Qur'an, see Neuwirth, *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike*, pp. 342-344.

8 Assmann, *Cultural Memory*, p. 80.

became the canonized lake, and originally it was not the “sacred” but the “canonical” text that required interpreting. This was the starting point of the hermeneutic culture⁹. In the Qur’anic case it is of course not the invention of the technique of writing which long antedates the emergence of the Qur’anic text which matters, nor the canonical status of the Qur’an itself, but rather the acknowledgment that the stream of scriptural tradition has come to a standstill with the Qur’an, which figures as the new manifestation of the Bible. This perception is inseparable from the divine investiture of writing. In his comparison between the Ancient Egyptian and Israelite attitudes vis-à-vis writing Assmann states: “Like Greece [...] Israel also turned away from pictures, launching itself into a specific word culture in which writing played a much more important cultural role. God wrote: he was the author and writer of the laws handed over

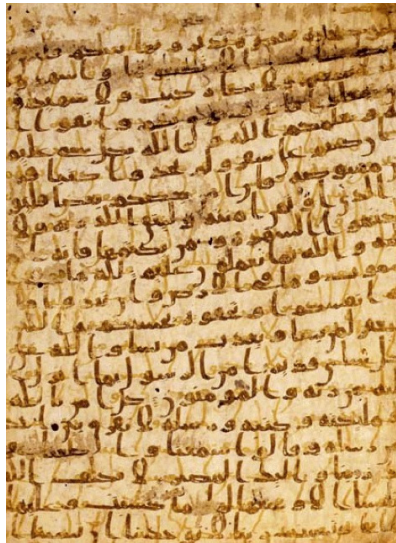


Fig. 1: Palimpsest David Collection No. 86/2003; Sam Fogg, *Catalogue 27: Islamic Calligraphy* (London 2003), No. 1, pp. 6-11.

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 78.

on Mount Sinai, and he keeps the accounts concerning the deeds of men. As in Egypt, Israel developed writing as a key to the word. One might ask whether the actual expansion within society of the ability to write constituted the only or the decisive criterion for what we consider to be a scribal culture.¹⁰ [...] "Commitment" [...] applied to just one thing: the law, the "instructions" (*torah*), which they knew had been given to the people and must be kept and obeyed through all adversity. The connection between writing and obligation, reading and obeying was also valid here, but not in the context of the mundane apparatus of power. In Israel writing was depoliticized, and it became the most important instrument for the exercise of God's power'¹¹. Similarly, the Qur'an –as will be shown– derives the authority exerted by writing ultimately from its divine origin. It was this new awareness of 'writing' as the primary medium to convey authority that radically changed the Arab world view –at least in the circles immediately reached by the proclamation of the Qur'an– from a predominantly tribal culture relying on collective ritual and oral tradition to a new universal –textual and discursive– culture; a development that may be termed –to use a category established by the Oxford historian of religions Guy Stroumsa– a major 'religious mutation of Late Antiquity'.

Late Antiquity

What does the epochal category of Late Antiquity mean in relation to the Qur'an? We are used to understanding the Qur'an as the 'Islamic text' *par excellence*, though historically viewed this is not evident at all. The Qur'an, before rising to the rank of the Islamic Scripture, for more than twenty years was an oral communication. Its message was not addressed to Muslims yet –who would become such only by interiorizing the Qur'anic communications– but to

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 241.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 269.

pre-Islamic listeners whom we might best describe as late antique educated persons, be they pagans or syncretistic believers familiar with monotheist tradition as we should assume for the Meccan period of the Prophet's ministry, or be they even Jews and Christians whose presence appears reflected in the Medinan suras. The necessity to contextualize the Qur'an with Jewish and Christian traditions has long been felt¹²; it is in the very focus of present critical scholarship¹³. An exclusively Biblical focus would however be little in accord with the actual field of tension realizable in the Qur'an. What transpires through the entire Qur'anic text is an urgency not only to dispute Jewish and Christian traditions but, moreover, to confront particular pagan concepts. It is the peculiar –tribally oriented– self-image of the pagan opponents of the message that is one of the main targets of early Qur'anic polemic; it is therefore of essential importance to consider ancient Arabic poetry as an equally relevant intertext. James Montgomery has alerted us that 'it is essentially one theme around which many, if not all, *Jāhili qasā'id* revolve –*muruwwah*¹⁴. Pre-Islamic poetry is, in fact, the poetical statement of how the Bedouins conceived of themselves in relation to the world: it is the expression of an all-pervasive *Weltanschauung*¹⁵. Above all, tribal pride, *fakhr*, is a core issue of pagan Arabic self-awareness, which

12 See the survey of the history of Qur'anic scholarship in Neuwirth, *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike*, pp. 68-119.

13 Numerous examples can be gleaned from the collections of Qur'anic studies edited by Gabriel Said Reynolds: *The Qur'an in its historical context* (London, 2008); Reynolds, ed., *New Perspectives on the Qur'an. The Qur'an in its historical context 2* (London, 2011), and Reynolds' own *The Qur'an and its Biblical Subtext* (London, 2010).

14 For an understanding of the term which etymologically denotes something like "manliness", "virile pride", see James Montgomery 'Dichotomy in Jāhili Poetry', *Journal of Arabic Literature* 17 (1986), pp. 1-16, p. 2, note 4: "I see *muruwwah* as [...] not a definite system but rather a fundamental view of reality which arose naturally from a society such as that of the Bedouins: *muruwwah* was felt rather than enunciated. [...] The word *muruwwah* is used in an attempt to capture the quintessence of their interpretation of life, the basic data of which were tacitly assumed."

15 Montgomery, 'Dichotomy', p. 7.

has been given poetic expression in numerous verses. 'In *fakhr* of the personal type the poet extols his own worth, whereas in tribal *fakhr* the tribe becomes the paradigm of *muruwwah* and the poet, without losing his individualism, merges with the tribe'¹⁶. These efforts are not unrelated to deeper individual aspiration; they may indeed be viewed as attempts to overcome the fear of extinction, of death. Reading ancient Arabic poetry one can hardly ignore the perception that powerful perception of death hovering over the living, which has inspired in poets a multiplicity of reflections on the transitoriness of life¹⁷ and even instigated the development of devices to attain *khuld*, "eternity", or, more precisely, to achieve individual survival in tribal memory. Though expressed in more urban terms, a comparable awareness was not alien to late antique city dwellers: 'Outside the city, the inscriptions on the graves spoke incessantly to the living, that the chain of human life had not been snapped by death. The dead remained "exemplars of virtue" to the living. They had been decked out with the virtues of their ancestors. Their *eutaxia* – the faultless deportment of the well-to-do men and women who effectively controlled the cities of the Empire – would be replicated exactly by the living, and would be passed down, yet once again, to their children. It was a world determined to admit no break in the easy flow of civilized life from generation to generation."¹⁸ This mundane stance—as Peter Brown has shown—was radically challenged by counter models developed in the third century and attested in the writings of the Fathers who called for defying family life and giving oneself up to a living in sexual abstinence and social

16 Montgomery, 'Dichotomy', p. 6.

17 For the imagination of death as the ultimate truth, *haqq*, see Andras Hamori, *The Art of Medieval Arabic Literature* (Princeton, 1974), p. 22.

18 Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York, 1988), p. 7.

seclusion¹⁹. Though the Qur'anic message as such never advocates a denial of social bonds but insists on respecting family structures it does found excellence, "nobility", not on blood bonds, on a noble pedigree, but on piety: *inna akramakum 'inda'llāhi atqākum*, "the noblest among you with God is the most pious among you"²⁰. It thus transfers the inherited chief token of privilege from its embedding in blood relations into the universal orbit of an egalitarian religion²¹. Membership in a divine covenant takes the place of the loyalty towards one's genealogical family and progenitors.

The Qur'anic polemical debate about the ideal principle of *nasab*, family genealogy, which figured so highly in the ancient Arabian canon of values, and by extension about the adherence to a clan or tribe, seems to have begun quite early²². It is noticeable that the need to deal with the ideological power of a thinking centered on genealogy and kinship by far antedates considerations about the ethical social discourses such as the desirable attitudes towards one's kin, expressed in recommendations how to deal with wives, children, parents, slaves and others.²³

This Qur'anic position can gain in plausibility when contextualized with some thoughts presented recently by Guy Stroumsa²⁴ who describes the transition from Antiquity to Late Antiquity not primarily as a transition from a pagan to a monotheistic cult, but as a complex "process of transformation" where a position of individual

19 For the theological tenets pursued by the individuals living in continence and often isolation, see Brown, *The Body*, pp. 6-32.

20 Q. 49:13.

21 Neuwirth, 'Genealogie vs. Gottesbund: Eine religiöse Mutation der Spätantike' (in print).

22 See Neuwirth, *Der Koran I: Frühmekkanische Suren* (Berlin, 2011), pp. 106-112, 125-132.

23 See for a „list of virtues“ Q. 70:22-35.

24 Guy G. Stroumsa, *Das Ende des Opferkults: Die religiösen Mutationen der Spätantike* (Berlin, 2011).

"care for the self" takes the place of the previous collective, public and identity-laden cult. A new type of religion emerges, based on verbally conveyed piety and on the recognition of scripture as the highest authority. Thus, new religious observances –in particular, the personal orientation to God through prayer and asceticism– come to occupy the position animal sacrifice previously held. A religious community thus emerges, no longer attached to a 'civic religion' but practicing the new form of a 'communitarian religion,' 'established through voluntary pious acts of individuals and based on a mutually shared belief'²⁵. Although Stroumsa only occasionally refers to Islam and excludes inner-Qur'ānic transformation processes from his study²⁶, his observations nevertheless prove to be pioneering for a religio-historical analysis of the Qur'ānic communication process. In the Qur'ān we observe a shift of authority, which can be described by the categories Stroumsa proposes, perhaps with the sole modification that in the Qur'ānic transformation process the pagan attitude is less manifest in the supersession of cultic practices than it is in the replacement of genealogical orientations by spiritual ones. The authority of spiritual ancestry and, at some later discursive level, the consciousness of belonging to God's chosen people takes the place of genealogical authority. This turn is, as we shall see, achieved through the introduction of the medium of writing into the process of proclamation which forcefully connects between the transcendent and the mundane world.

25 Stroumsa, *Das Ende des Opferkults*, p. 28.

26 Walter Burkert's flawed thesis about sacrifice in Islam is an obstacle in properly understanding the decisive transformation process in the Qur'an. Burkert, in his otherwise groundbreaking work *Homo Necans: Interpretationen altgriechischer Opferriten und Mythen* (Berlin, 1972), p. 19, incorrectly understood the continued practice of animal sacrifice during the pilgrimage as proof of the never interrupted adherence to a theologically founded sacrificial cult; see Stroumsa, *Das Ende des Opferkults*, p. 88. This balks at verse Q. 22:36f., which explicitly deals with the theologically exclusive relevance of the sacrificer's piety, thus sublimating the act of sacrifice; see Neuwirth, *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike*, pp. 554-557.

1. The discovery of writing

1.1 *Written and not-written texts before the publication of the Qur'an*

Once we turn to the Arabic written testimonies transmitted from pre-Islamic time, we are confronted with a conundrum: Although recent archaeological expeditions have brought to light innumerable rock inscriptions dispersed over wide regions of the Arabian Peninsula (fig. 2), there are hardly any written units attested that would deserve the qualification of a significant "text". Most of the rock inscriptions, some of which are at least partly in North Arabian language, employ the Nabataean script²⁷; they are extremely short and mostly dedicated to private, ephemeral issues. So writing is existent materially, even in the desert. Writing should have been familiar to some of the ancient Arabic poets – not only from visual experience reflected in their poems but – as Gregor Schoeler²⁸ claims – from practical use as well. Moreover, thanks to Khalil 'Athamina's²⁹ studies we know of reliable testimonies for the fact that many of the urban contemporaries of the Prophet did command a knowledge of writing. Furthermore, the necessity to assume that contracts and treaties such as are reported in Islamic tradition were concluded in written form point to the same assumption of writing as a familiar tool used in everyday life. And yet, the practice of writing was obviously not employed to create an archive of collective memory. On the contrary, as we shall see, the phenomenon of writing – exhibited most prominently on the rocks in the nomadic landscape and consequently observed and reflected upon by the Bedouins and their literary spokesmen,

27 Laila Nehmé, 'La géographie des inscriptions de Pétra', *Antiquités Sémitiques* 2 (1997), pp. 125-143.

28 Gregor Schoeler, 'Schreiben und Veröffentlichen: Zur Verwendung und Funktion der Schrift in den ersten islamischen Jahrhunderten', *Der Islam* 69 (1992), pp. 1-43, Mohammed Maraqtan, 'Writing Materials in pre-Islamic Arabia', *Journal of Semitic Studies* 43 (1998) pp. 287-310.

29 Khalil 'Athamina, 'Al-Nabiyy al-Umiyy: An Inquiry Into the Meaning of a Qur'anic Verse', *Der Islam* 69 (1992), pp. 61-80.

the pre-Islamic poets– rather aroused ambivalent feelings and even seems to have exerted a destabilizing, indeed sometimes deterrent effect. It represented –to borrow a formulation from Robert Alter– ‘a discomfiting or even menacing language of otherness’³⁰. We will come back to this observation immediately.



Fig. 2: Nabataean inscriptions covering a rock near Umm Jadhāyidh; *Catalogue Roads of Arabia: Archäologische Schätze aus Saudi-Arabien* (Berlin, 2011), p. 143.

But let us first return to the issue of literary texts which were not available in writing: Orally transmitted texts not only existed in considerable quantity but also - in the shape of both poetry and

³⁰ Robert Alter, *Necessary Angels: Tradition and Modernity in Kafka, Benjamin, and Scholem* (Cambridge, MA, 1991), p. 61.

heroic tales, *ayyām al-‘Arab*³¹ – attest a keen stylistic and rhetoric interest and competence on both the side of their composers and of their recipients. Their importance as expressions of collective identity, their impact on the social coherence of pre-Islamic society can hardly be overestimated. Hence it comes as no surprise that poetry by virtue of its cache of panegyrics on particular tribes and lampoons on others has been labeled the *dīwān al-‘Arab*, “the archive of the Arabs”³². The realm of ideas put forward in these texts is however limited to their particular milieu which can be captured through an equally limited scope of literary genres: the narrative (mainly to report heroic tales), the panegyric, *madh* (employed in final sections of the poem extolling the poet’s tribe, *fakhr*, as well as in the *ghazal* sections which hyperbolically describe the beloved) and the descriptive, *wasf* (most frequently in the middle part of the standard long poem which depicts the poet’s camel or his itinerary through the desert, *raḥīl*, which ‘is a test of his hardiness, the difficulties encountered whilst on such a journey which the poet revels in surmounting’³³)³⁴. Important to note is the almost total absence of discursive speech, if we put aside of the occasional and rather rare instances of *ḥikma*, i.e. aphoristic and didactic verses³⁵: there are no theological, legal or cultic debates in pre-Islamic poetry. Indeed little theoretical thinking can be traced –if we do not concede *one* important exception: there is arguably a serious philosophical interest lurking in the introductory part of the *Qaṣīda*, the *nasīb*. This section, however, –in James Montgomery’s words– ‘expresses

31 James Montgomery, *The Vagaries of the Qaṣīdah: The Tradition and Practice of Early Arabic Poetry* (Cambridge, 1997).

32 Saleh S. Agha and Tarif Khalidi, ‘Poetry and Identity in the Umayyad Age’, *Al-Abḥath* 50-51 (2002-3), 55-120.

33 Montgomery, ‘Dichotomy’, p. 4.

34 Renate Jacobi, ‘The Origins of the Qasida Form’ in Stefan Sperl and Christopher Shackle, eds., *Qasida Poetry in Islamic Asia and Africa, vol. I*, (Leiden, 1995), pp. 21-34.

35 The most prominent example is extant in a long section of the *Mu‘allaqa* of Zuhayr b. Abī Sulmā, see Montgomery, ‘Dichotomy’, p. 3.

a pessimism and sadness which sow the seeds of doubt concerning the validity and general relevance of living one's life according to the dictates of *muruwah*, of Bedouin ethic³⁶. It is here that the already mentioned ambivalent perception of writing is to be traced, in the words of the poet Labīd:

*Balīna wa-mā tablī l-nujūmu l-ṭawālī 'ū / wa-tabqā l-jibālu
ba 'danā wa-l-maṣānī 'ū. [...] Wa-mā l-nāsu illā ka'l-diyāri wa-
ahlihā/ bihā yawma ḥallūhā wa-ghadwan balāqi 'ū.*

'We vanish but the rising stars do not / Mountains remain when we are gone, and fortresses. [...] People are just like abodes, one day filled with folk / the next day barren wastes.'³⁷

We will return to this issue in the discussion of the ambivalent perception of writing.

It is a striking fact then that the Qur'an appears—seemingly—out of the void, out of the 'empty Hijaz'³⁸ as a full-fledged

36 Montgomery, 'Dichotomy', p. 9. It is noteworthy that a more general change in paradigm did occur in the poetry contemporary with or slightly later than the Qur'an. Thus, Renate Jacobi, 'Bemerkungen zur frühislamischen Trauerpoesie', *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* 87 (1997), p. 3-99, has shown that the poetry of the *mukhaḍramūn* displays a strikingly new interest in the human condition, paying high attention to individual emotions like love or sadness – a shift in focus that even paves the way for the emergence of an independent genre of love poetry, the *ghazal*. The poet turns away from the stereotype of lament about the lost beloved that was a core topic of the *nasīb*, redirecting his focus on her role as his partner in the present. Similarly elegy, the lament of the dead, having been a ritual performance carried out by female poets, rises to the rank of an artistic genre in its own right, the *marthiya*, which is henceforth adopted by male poets. Sadness and the mourning of a lost relative or friend are acknowledged as a genuine psychological disposition worth poetical treatment and thus promulgation to the wider public.

37 Text and translation quoted after Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak: Pre-Islamic Poetry and the Poetics of Ritual* (Ithaca, NY, and London, 1993).

38 This term has been coined by James Montgomery, 'The Empty Hijaz' in idem, ed., *Arabic Theology, Arabic Philosophy: From the Many to the One: Essays in Celebration of Richard M. Frank* (Leuven and Paris, 2006), pp. 37-97 and idem, *Vagaries*, to designate the stereotype perception of pre-Islamic Arabia.

discursive text, extensive in range and replete with theological and philosophical queries. This observation has been tantalizing Western scholars for generations. The Qur'an's surprising richness of ideas and its consummation of form have even aroused doubts about the genuineness of the Islamic narrative of the Qur'an's origin as such. How can an intellectually sophisticated literary text emerge from a remote space like the Arab Peninsula? The conventional image of the 'empty Hijaz' has only been corrected in more recent scholarship thanks to Peter Brown³⁹, Glen Bowersock⁴⁰, Christian Robin⁴¹, Garth Fowden⁴², James Montgomery, Robert Hoyland⁴³, Jan Retsö⁴⁴, Lawrence I. Conrad⁴⁵ and others, who have provided historical, epigraphic and iconic evidence for the fact that a transfer of late antique knowledge from both the northern and the southern neighboring regions to Arabia had been going on during the centuries

39 Peter Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA, 1978); idem, *The World of Late Antiquity, AD 150-750* (London, 2002).

40 Glen Bowersock, *Roman Arabia* (Cambridge, MA, 1983).

41 Christian Robin, 'Himyar et Israël', *Comptes-rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* 148 (2004), 831-908.

42 Garth Fowden, *Qusayr 'Amra: Art and the Umayyad Elite in Late Antique Syria* (Berkeley, CA, 2004).

43 Robert Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs: From the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam* (London and New York, 2001).

44 Jan Retsö, *The Arabs in Antiquity: Their History from the Assyrians to the Umayyads* (London and New York, 2003).

45 See for his forceful plea for the assumption that such late antique cultural diversity in the *Hidjāz* should be accepted as the backdrop of the genesis of the Qur'an, 'Qur'anic Studies: a Historian's Perspective' in Manfred S. Kropp, ed., *Results of Contemporary Research on the Qur'an: The question of a historio-critical text of the Qur'an* (Beirut, 2007), pp. 9-15, particularly p. 11: 'There is ample representation of Ethiopic loan-words in the Qur'an. In what context did this transfer of vocabulary occur? By the eighth century [according to the revisionist position the time of the Qur'an's genesis, A. N.] the Hijaz was an economic and political backwater, overtaken by dramatic shifts to Syria and Iraq that drew the laments of contemporary Arabian poets. Contacts with Ethiopia were insignificant. However, the context of the late sixth century gives us a literary tradition that makes frequent reference to Ethiopia, and to an Islamic scripture reflecting such contacts.'

preceding the appearance of the Qur'an, though our knowledge of these processes is still incomplete. Yet, the fact remains that the Qur'an comes as a sudden disclosure in Arabic language of until then unspoken or at least unattested discursive ideas.

1.2 *The anti-image of writing: Wahy*

To return to the ambivalent perception of writing in the eyes of those nomadic individuals who are represented by the ancient Arab poets: We owe a most useful overview to James Montgomery⁴⁶ who has collected a corpus of *jāhili* verses that mention a writing, called by different names such as *khaṭṭ zabur*, "the writing of a writ", *mā khuṭṭa bi'l-qalam*, "the writing of the reed-pen", *khaṭṭ al-dawāt*, "a writing with ink from an inkhorn", *rasm*, "a writing", and other designations. One name for writing frequently used in poetry, however, stands out: *wahy*. *Wahy* is no technical term for writing but rather denotes a non-verbal communication through signs, such as may take place between animals or—if between humans—involving a foreign, incomprehensible language. In pre-Islamic poetry, however, *wahy* is applied to the writings found by the observer, that is the persona of the poet, engraved in a rock or applied to it as a graffito –though sometimes also written on other materials such as parchment. It is a writing which he does not or cannot decipher. It serves as a sign system devoid of meaning. The strangeness of this unintelligible communication is spelled out in some cases, such as the verse by 'Antara⁴⁷ who compares the devastated encampment that he is revisiting after long years of absence to a writing which is perceived as both faded, old, and unintelligible:

46 James Montgomery, 'The Deserted Encampment in Ancient Arabic Poetry: A Nexus of Topical Comparisons', *Journal of Semitic Studies* XL/2 (1995), pp. 283-316.

47 Wilhelm Ahlwardt, ed., *The Divans of the Six Ancient Arabic Poets* (London 1870), 'Antara 27.2, p. 52, cited and translated by Montgomery, 'The Deserted Encampment', p. 297f.

ka-waḥyi ṣaḥā'ifin min 'ahdi Kisrā / fa-ahdāhā li-a 'jama ṭimṭimīyī

‘Like the writing on pages from the era of Kisrā which he gave to one whose speech is barbarous, unintelligible.’

The poet talks about a foreign language text obviously written in a foreign alphabet.

But in most cases *waḥy* denotes an inscription immediately visible in the landscape, that is taken up as a metaphor for the ruinous state of the deserted encampment, which is as unrecognizable as a faded writing or which is reduced to mere linear traces like those of a writing, see the verse of Zuhayr:⁴⁸

li-man ṭalalun ka'l-waḥyi 'āfin manāziluh / 'afā l-rassu minhu
fa'l-rusaysu fa-'āqiluh

‘Who now inhabits a remnant like writing, its dwellings effaced – effaced, there, are al-Rass, al-Rusays and ‘Āqil?’

And again Zuhayr:⁴⁹

li-mani'l-diyāru ghashītohā bi'l-fadfadi / ka'l-waḥyi fī ḥajari'l-
masīli 'l-mukhlidī

‘Who now inhabits the abodes which I chanced upon in the hard ground, like the inscription upon the perdurable rock in the torrent-bed?’

And ‘Abīd b. ‘Abd al-‘Uzzā⁵⁰:

li-mani'l-diyāru talūḥu bi'l-ghamri / darasat li-marri'l-rīḥi wa'l-
qaṭrī

48 Wilhelm Ahlwardt, *The Divans*, Zuhayr 15.5, p. 91, cited and translated by Montgomery, ‘The Deserted Encampment’, p. 284.

49 Wilhelm Ahlwardt, *The Divans*, Frag. Zuhayr 4.1, p. 189, cited and translated by Montgomery, ‘The Deserted Encampment’, p. 285.

50 Yaḥyā al-Jubūrī, ed., *Qaṣā'id Jāhiliyya nādīra* (Beirut, 1982), p. 200, cited and translated by Montgomery, ‘The Deserted Encampment’, p. 298.

Fa-bi-shaṭṭi Busyāni'l-riyāghi ka-mā / kataba'l-ghulāmu l-wahya
fi'l-ṣakhrī

'Who now inhabits the abodes that are visible in al-Ghamr, faded
by the passing of the wind and the rain, And on the lush bank of
Busyān, like writing made by a slave on stone.'

Mentions of writing and often of *wahy* are always found in the introductory section of the *qaṣīda*. This introductory part, termed the *nasīb*, conventionally starts with the '*ʿaṭlāl* motif': the poet's lament at the site of the ruined encampments where he earlier on spent time in the company of his friends and his beloved. The nostalgic first part of the *qaṣīda* is uniquely open to poetical introspection; it invites reflections on the transitoriness of emotional fulfillment and moreover of human life as such. We owe Suzanne Stetkevych⁵¹ a suggestive insight into the poet's stance vis á vis the '*ʿaṭlāl*: Since the rocks with their writings on them do not speak for themselves, but bear messages that must be deciphered, the poet—in Labīd's *Muʿallaqa*—stops to query the rocks and the ruins, well aware that the "mute immortals", *ṣummun khawālidu*, will not speak. Yet—Suzanne Stetkevych argues—they do offer an answer to the poet's aporia aroused by 'the permanence of nature, and the impermanence of culture, and thus, ultimately, nature's immortality and man's mortality'⁵². The rock inscriptions as well as the other kinds of writing which are ultimately indecipherable are evoked to illustrate the delusiveness of culture, their lines and shapes in the poet's eyes represent not a valid sign system but an empty signifier reflecting the devastated state of the encampment which is erased to the ground and reduced to the linear traces of its foundations. Writing then, represented by *wahy* in pre-Islamic poetry, plays a rather ambivalent role, it evokes the consciousness of aporia and the perception of loss.

51 Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals*.

52 Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals*, p. 21f.

It is all the more striking to find that this ‘*wahy* of loss’, a *wahy* that remains mute, has been inverted in the Qur’an. *Wahy* in the Qur’an, as is well known, denotes inspiration, it even successively acquires the meaning of revelation as such. But the Qur’an not only “de-demonizes” the pre-Islamic *wahy*, it at the same time re-establishes writing as highly meaningful. Before turning to the Qur’anic *wahy* let us first examine how the Qur’an discovers the significance of writing for itself.

2. The discovery of writing as a major authority

1.1 The early Qur’anic evidence

The idea of writing as an authoritative source of knowledge although ubiquitous in the later parts of the Qur’an was not a given when the proclamation of the Qur’an set in. There is no reference to writing in the earliest suras. We can trace its entrance into the Qur’anic discourse more or less precisely thanks to a recent attempt to re-arrange the early Meccan suras chronologically which builds on diversified criteria regarding both the development of form and of discourse.⁵³ Let us briefly follow the Qur’anic sequence and check what references to writing and oral performance are first, and in what context they are embedded.

Where writing appears first is in a cluster of quite early *suras*, though not the earliest that establish a relation between the prophet’s proclamation and a celestial *writing* on the one hand and earlier prophecies on the other. It is in *Sūrat al-A ‘lā*, Q. 87:18-19⁵⁴, that the Qur’anic message is credited with an indirect participation in the written literary monotheist tradition for the first time – through

53 This attempt at arranging the suras chronologically is documented in Neuwirth, *Der Koran I*. The procedure is explained in the introduction, pp. 15-72.

54 For a commentary on the sura see Neuwirth, *Der Koran I*, pp. 253-264.

a reference to *al-ṣuḥuf al-ūlā*, "the earliest scrolls". The sura is concluded by the verses:

19 *inna hādihā la-fi'l-ṣuḥufi l-ūlā*

20 *ṣuḥufi Ibrāhīma wa-Mūsā*

'Surely this is in the most ancient scrolls

The scrolls of Abraham and Moses.'

The Qur'anic message thus claims to be substantially identical with earlier –written– messages⁵⁵ conveyed to or transmitted by Abraham and Moses. The reference to the two prophets is to be understood as an expression of the community's new relation to the Biblical tradition, to its newly developing consciousness of being part of the Biblical history. It is worth noting that the same sura (*al-A'lā*, Q. 87) also contains the first reference to the act of communicating the message which is described as a performance *not* of recitation, i.e. the act of chanting words by heart, but of 'reading', explicitly designated as *qara'a*, "to read"; Q. 87:6:

sa-nuqri'uka fa-lā tansā

'We will make thee read to forget not.'

This 'reading', however, raises the question as to the particular template that the reader is drawing on, which remains unmentioned in the text. This gap in information is however filled by the immediately ensuing *Sūrat al-'Alaq*, Q. 96,⁵⁶ which projects a non-earthly writing as the source of the prophet's 'reading'. The sura starts (Q. 96:1-5):

1. *iqra' bi'smi rabbika'lladhī khalaq*

2. *khalaqa l-insāna min 'alaq*

3. *iqra' wa-rabbuka'l-akram*

4. *alladhī 'allama bi'l-qalam*

5. *'allama'l-insāna mā lam ya 'lam*

⁵⁵ It is hard to determine whether *ṣuḥuf* designates scrolls or leaves, pages.

⁵⁶ For a commentary on the sura see Neuwirth, *Der Koran I*, pp. 264-279.

‘Read in the name of thy Lord who created,
 Created man from a blood-clot.
 Read, since thy Lord is the most generous
 Who taught by the pen,
 Taught man that he knew not.’

If God “taught by the pen”, *al-qalam*, definitely intended as a celestial tool of writing, we may justly assume that the source of the prophet’s reading should be a text produced by those celestial scribes who are endowed with the use of the *qalam*. They are evoked in the introductory verses of the somewhat later *Sūrat al-Qalam*, Q. 68:1-2: *nūn. wa-’l-qalami wa-mā yasturūn*, ‘Nun. By the pen and what they inscribe’⁵⁷. In other words: the Prophet is taught to read onto his community from a materially absent, transcendent writing. It is this scenario that should be imagined whenever the text raised the issue of its performance. The scenario at first glance evokes the scene presented in the *sīra* report about the Prophet’s call which equally features the technical act of ‘reading’⁵⁸.

The *sīra* tradition on account of the sura’s initial imperative *iqra’* which is derived from the same root from which *qur’ān* is derived, establishes Q. 96 as the first communication of the prophet. The scene depicted in the report however differs from the Qur’anic scenario in a substantial detail: it presupposes not a transcendent but a material writing as the prophet’s master copy to be read from: ‘He came to me, said the apostle of God, while I was asleep, with a coverlet of brace whereon was some writing, and said, “Read!” I said, “What shall I read?” He pressed me with it so tightly that I thought it was death; then he let me dog and said; “Read!” I said, “What shall I read?” He

57 For a commentary on the sura see Neuwirth, *Der Koran I*, pp. 566-585.

58 Cf. ‘Abd al-Malik Ibn Hishām, *Al-Sīra al-nabawiyya*, ed. Muṣṭafā b. Muḥammad al-Saqqā’, Ibrāhīm al-Abyārī and ‘Abd al-Ḥafīẓ Shalabī (Cairo 1955), p. 236f., and the English translation by Alfred Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishāq’s Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* (Oxford, 1955), p. 105f.

pressed me with it again so that I thought it was death; then he let me go and said: "Read!" I said "What shall I read?" He pressed me with it a third time so that I thought it was death and said: "Read!" I said, "What then shall I read?" and this I said only to deliver myself from him, lest he should do the same to me again. He said: "Read in the name of thy Lord who created..." So I read it, and he departed from me. And I awoke from my sleep, and it was as though these words were written on my heart.⁵⁹ The Qur'anic text of *Sūrat al-ʿAlaq* as against that alludes to a transcendent divine writing – it reports a mode of 'virtual reading' from an elevated, coded text, which in the shortly later sura Q. 55:1-4 will even reappear as the pre-existent Word of God.

The slightly later *Sūrat al-Infīṭār*, Q. 82:10-12⁶⁰ turns to another, different, product of supernatural writing: It evokes the celestial scribes in their activity of producing the registers of men's deeds; they are to provide the evidence for the knowledge to be disclosed to the humans resurrected on Judgment Day:

- 10 *wa-inna ʿalaykum la-ḥāfiẓīn*
- 11 *kirāman kātibīn*
- 12 *ya ʿlamūna mā tafʿalūn*

'Yet there are over you watchers,
Noble writers,
Who know whatever you do.'

The subsequent *Sūrat al-Takwīr*, Q. 81:10⁶¹, accordingly conjures the *fait accompli* of heavenly registers prepared for the ceremony of judgment, that will be unfolded on the Last Day:

wa-idhāʾl-ṣuḥufu nushirat
'When the scrolls shall be unrolled'

59 Alfred Guillaume, *The Life*, p. 105.

60 For a commentary on the sura see Neuwirth, *Der Koran I*, pp. 280-290.

61 For a commentary on the sura see *ibid.*, pp. 291-298.

Sūrat al-Inshiqāq, Q. 84:7-12⁶², which follows next, depicts two contrary scenarios when on Judgment Day the individual registers will be handed over to the just and to the evil-doers:

- 7 *fa-ammā man ūtiya kitābahu bi-yamīnihi*
- 8 *fa-sawfa yuḥāsabu ḥisāban yasīrā*
- 9 *wa-yanqalibu ilā ahlihi masrūrā*
- 10 *wa-ammā man ūtiya kitābahu warā 'a ṣahrihi*
- 11 *fa-sawfa yad 'ū thubūrā*
- 12 *wa-yaṣlā sa 'irā*

‘Then as for him who is given his register (‘writing’, ‘book’), in his right hand

He shall surely receive an easy reckoning

And he will return to his family joyfully.

But as for him who is given his register (‘writing’, ‘book’) behind his back,

He shall call for destruction

And he shall roast at a blaze.’

The most significant writing, however, is the comprehensive corpus of knowledge kept on the preserved tablet (*al-lawḥ al-mahfūz*), typologically to be understood as the celestial “book of the divine decrees”⁶³, the source on which the reading of the Prophet draws. Though the concept of such a celestial writing is known from diverse ancient Near Eastern traditions, the Qur’anic concept is particularly complex. It comes close to the idea developed in the Book of Jubilees which again builds on earlier traditions:

‘The idea of heavenly writings, and even the phrase “heavenly tablets” are found in texts going back to ancient Mesopotamia, and the tablets are mentioned frequently in 1 Enoch (81:1-

⁶² For a commentary on the sura see *ibid.*, pp. 309-329.

⁶³ Ancient Oriental lore distinguishes between a Book of Divine Decrees and a Record Book or register of the good and the evil deeds of men; see Arthur Jeffery, *The Qur’an as Scripture* (New York, 1952), pp. 3-17.

2, 93:2, 103:2, 106:19, 107:1) and elsewhere in the biblical pseudepigrapha⁶⁴. But in these other texts, what is recorded on high are future events, or the good and bad deeds of human beings. The Interpolator [of the Book of Jubilees, A.N.] adopted the idea of the heavenly tablets but turned it to a new purpose; they would be the place in heaven where God had also inscribed the Torah's laws from the beginning of time.⁶⁵

The Qur'anic concept of the Preserved Tablet comes close to this, it both comprises the celestial "book of the divine decrees" and the Record Book or register of the good and the evil deeds of men⁶⁶. It had however, until reaching the Qur'anic community, passed through a momentous development and become related to the Jewish perception of tablets which contain instructions to be communicated to men through prophets⁶⁷ which is the celestial archetype of Scripture. *Sūrat al-Burūj*, Q. 85:21-22⁶⁸ concludes:

21 *bal innahu qur'ānun majīd*

22 *fi lawḥin mahfūz*

'But it is a glorious Qur'an, a glorious reading,
(from a text) preserved in a guarded tablet.'

64 see Robert H. Charles, ed. and tr., *The Book of Enoch*, Oxford 1912, p. 91f.

65 James L. Kugel, *A Walk through Jubilees: Studies in the Book of Jubilees and the World of its Creation* (Leiden, 2012), p. 13.

66 The Qur'anic concept of the Preserved Tablet comes close to this, it both comprises the celestial "book of the divine decrees" and the Record Book or register of the good and the evil deeds of men, see Jeffery, *The Qur'an as Scripture*, pp. 3-17.

67 Jeffery concludes, *The Qur'an as Scripture*, p. 17: 'Kitab as heavenly book was a concept that had had a long history in the religious thought of the Near East. Kitab as Scripture had had a special development in Jewish thought and had given rise to a theory, current not only among Jews but also among other religious communities, as to the nature of Scripture.' See for more about the Qur'anic development Neuwirth, *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike*, pp. 120-181.

68 For a commentary on the sura see Neuwirth, *Der Koran I*, pp. 330-344.

It is in this context that the name of *al-qur'ān*, which by now conveys the meaning of “a reading from a celestial text” is first mentioned in the Qur'anic text. It will soon become the standard self-designation of the message.

A little later again, in *Sūrat 'Abasa*, Q. 80:11-16⁶⁹, the Qur'anic communications are presented as kinds of excerpts from the celestial *urtext*:

- 11 *kallā innahā tadhkirah*
- 12 *fa-man shā'a dhakarah*
- 13 *fī ṣuḥufin mukarramah*
- 14 *marfū'atin muṭahharah*
- 15 *bi-aydī safarah*
- 16 *kirāmin bararah*

‘No indeed; it is a reminder
– And who so wills, shall remember it –
Upon pages high-honored,
Uplifted, purified,
By the hands of scribes,
noble, pious”.

This heavenly writing, which was already alluded to in Q. 96:1-5, *iqra' bi'smi rabbika* is the subject of one of the latest early Meccan suras, Q. 55:1-4⁷⁰:

al-rahmān
'allama'l-qur'ān
khalaqa'l-insān
'allamahu'l-bayān.

‘The Merciful
He taught the Qur'an (the “reading”),
He created man,

69 For a commentary on the sura see *ibid.*, pp. 378-394.

70 For a commentary on the sura see *ibid.*, pp. 586-620.

He taught him clear understanding.'

It strikes the eye that this text puts the creation of man second to that of the text, the word of God, thus suggesting that *qur'ān* should be the preexisting *logos*. The extraordinarily ceremonial form of the section, furthermore, appears as if it was due to a textual challenge, that is the necessity to pit itself against an already existing, similarly prominent text. Such a text, equally ceremonial and devoted to the preeminent authority of the Word of God, immediately comes to mind: the prologue to the Gospel of John (John 1.1-5). As Daniel Boyarin has shown⁷¹, this text reflects a wisdom midrash on creation preserved in the *targumim* that tells of the *memra* (*logos*) which again and again descends to the world to strengthen the tie between God and man, only to fail, and which thus can only complete its work through incarnation. The *qur'ān*, mentioned here though in contrast to the Gospel text not possessing any creative power, does however manifest itself in imparting knowledge in so far as it is "taught", as v. 2 states. The Qur'anic *logos*, thus, appears – following the Jewish notion – no different to the Torah before it in the form of Revelation. Its fate among man is not explicated in Q. 55, but nothing indicates its failure. From the Qur'anic perspective, divine intervention has averted the failure of the *logos* which looms so large in the older traditions. The addressees were prepared for its reception, as v. 4 shows, featuring another trace of the *logos*: '*allamahu'l-bayān*, 'He taught him clear understanding'. The image of *qur'ān* in this section thus comes close to the perception of a pre-existent Torah, as mentioned in Proverbia 8:22f. 'The Lord created me as the beginning of his way, the first of his works of old': *adonay qanani reshit darko qedem mifalav meaz* ⁷².

71 Daniel Boyarin, 'The Gospel of the Memra: Jewish Binitarianism and the Prologue to John', *Harvard Theological Review* 94 (2001), pp. 242-284.

72 See for the Qur'anic traces of a *logos* theology Neuwirth, *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike*, pp. 158-163.

It is ultimately because of this pedigree of the prophet's reading, his relation to the heavenly writing, the pre-existent word of God – in late antique terms: the *logos* – that writing in early Meccan suras rises to the rank of the most authoritative vehicle of power. It is made present in a double manifestation: primarily in the shape of the lofty “book of divine decrees”, of the Preserved Tablet, the transcendent scripture that is successively communicated to prophets and which encompasses the divine will according to which man is supposed to lead his life. Somewhat more lowly, there is the “register of human deeds”, which documents man's heeding or not-heeding these precepts. Thus, two manifestations of writing taken together, as it were, ‘bracket’ human life. Man is ‘encircled’ by writing. This ubiquity of the concept of writing – to remind of Jan Assmann's discourse – creates a strong social coherence that comes to replace the earlier amalgamating force exerted by tribal lore⁷³ and heathen cult.

1.2 Reading Scripture, “*qur'ān*”, and the Qur'anic *waḥy*

Qur'ān is at once the act of reading and the corpus of texts to be read – not from a material but from a virtual writing, which would have been undecipherable to a non-prophet. This unique act of supernatural reading thus resembles the decodation of an otherwise unintelligible writing, a *waḥy*. Indeed, in the *Qur'an* the receiving of *waḥy* occasionally figures in the position of the Prophet's act of reading; *Sūrat al-Nadjm*, Q 53:1-5⁷⁴, again among the latest early Meccan texts:

- 1 *wa-'l-najmi idhā hawā*
- 2 *mā ḍalla ṣāhibukum wa-mā ghawā*
- 3 *wa-mā yanṭiqu 'ani'l-hawā*
- 4 *in huwa illā waḥyun yūḥā*
- 5 *'allamahu shadīdu'l-quwā*

⁷³ See for the power of genealogy Neuwirth, ‘Genealogie vs. Gottesbund’.

⁷⁴ For a commentary on the sura see Neuwirth, *Der Koran I*, pp. 642-685.

'By the Star when it plunges,
 Your comrade is not astray, neither errs,
 Nor speaks he out of caprice,
 This is naught but an inspiration inspired (*wahyun yūhā*),
 Taught him by one terrible in power.'

The Egyptian exegete Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid explained *wahy* as a sign system employed by the divine speaker whose understanding is reserved to his elect⁷⁵. God's language is a 'coded non-verbal language', a *wahy*, which needs to be "translated" into human language. This new ranking of the non-verbal, commonly unintelligible sign system turns the pagan '*wahy* of aporia and loss' into a Qur'anic '*wahy* of fulfillment': *Wahy* as the divine revelation –the most elevated form of communication humans can aspire to– radically reverses the poetical use of *wahy* as the mirror image of the devastated encampments and as the emblem of the muteness of the material world.

If this refiguration⁷⁶ of the poetic mute *wahy* in the shape of the Qur'anic communicative *wahy* which we have traced through the formative period of the early Meccan suras is not accidental but a purposeful conceptual stratagem, as already Josef Horovitz has speculated⁷⁷, this would indicate that there is an intentional reversal of the pagan world view involved. The Qur'an not only presents a re-reading of earlier monotheist traditions –as historical scholars use to stress– but equally a re-thinking of pagan Arab positions –as philological research reveals. The Qur'an thus should not be regarded as a piece of re-written Bible but rather as a text deeply anchored in its Arabian societal milieu. In the Qur'an, the thoroughly pessimist world view of the ancient poet –his nostalgic '*ubi sunt qui*

75 See Navid Kermani, *Offenbarung als Kommunikation: Das Konzept wahy in Nasr Hamid Abu Zayds Maḥmūn an-nass* (Frankfurt am Main, 1996).

76 For a more extensive discussion see Neuwirth, *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike*, pp. 711-722.

77 Horovitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen*, p. 67f.

*ante nos in mundo fuere*⁷⁸ – is rigorously reversed, it gives way to a positive attitude, confident in the sustained grace of human-divine communication made possible though the prophetic power of decoding and reading *wahy*, the non-verbal language of the ‘other’. This theological achievement is inseparable from the discovery of writing as a divinely established medium of meaningful and authoritative communication.

This early phase of development, of course, marks only the beginning of the Qur’an’s successive mutation into a Scripture. *Qur’ān*, the reading from a transcendent template, in a somewhat later phase will give way to the concept of *kitāb*, the perception of the presence of the transcendent Scripture within the message as such. The word *kitāb* in Qur’anic use is homonym, it denotes both the transcendent Scripture, the source of the prophetic readings, and the materially real volumes or scrolls that can be observed as highly venerated containers of the Word of God, indispensable in the services of the Jews and Christians⁷⁹. The visual and audible proofs of their extraordinary status as writings lavishly adorned, carried around ceremonially and read out publicly underlaid with a festive cantilena, cannot have gone unnoticed by the emerging community. It is little surprising then, that the act of reading reflected in the early Qur’an is presented as highly ceremonial as well: the proclaimer is constantly admonished to keep to particular rules⁸⁰, indeed *qur’ān*, as we saw, is often viewed in relation with a heavenly scriptorium, where scribes are active codifying divine decrees. The act of reading, *qur’ān*, thus is obviously held sacred from the very beginning: Not only is the reading practice of the older traditions adopted – the Qur’an is

78 Cf. Carl Heinrich Becker, ‘Ubi sunt qui ante nos in mundo fuere’ in idem, *Islamstudien*, vol. I (Leipzig, 1924), pp. 509-519.

79 See Daniel Madigan, *The Qur’ān’s Self-Image: Writing and Authority in Islam’s Scripture* (Princeton, 2002), p. 177.

80 See e.g. Q. 16:98; 20:114, 73:4, 75:17-18.

equally read with a cantilena– but it is furthermore –I would dare to claim– hypostasized: The receiving of revelation itself is conceived as a process of “reading” and thus of making sensually present the eternal and transcendent Word. There is an osmotic relation between the celestial written source and the revealed text, which however, in contrast to the earlier Scriptures, remains oral – a “reading”.