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THE SPLENDOUR OF ISLAMIC CALLIGRAPHY

with 232 illustrations, 98 in colour



THAMES AND HUDSON

Frontispiece

Detail of a page from a Qur'ān in Karmatian script,
an ornamented version of Eastern Kufic.

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SYMBOL OF CIVILIZATION

Every text, whether sacred or secular, carries within it a desire to imagine the reader who approaches it. Therein lies its dream of eternity. What is the nature of the imagined reader within the ambit of Arab calligraphy? Recall the first words revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, 'Read, recite.' Does not the word Qur'ān also mean the act of reading and recitation? Read the world and the heavens as a table of signs. You are first and foremost a reader, then a believer.

Calligraphy is the art of the linear graphic; it restructures one's visualization of a language and its topography. In this sense, calligraphy in the Arabic language is constructed on a simple spatial principle: the Arabic alphabet is written in the interplay of a horizontal base line and the vertical lines of its consonants. It is read from right to left, with the addition of vowels, diacriticals and loops which are positioned variously above and below the base line. The originality of this written form, which in some respects has no equal, is created by the architecture and rhythm of the letters: here we recognize the force of the 'arabesque' as a plastic form.

Calligraphy can be seen as a reading and a writing in the second degree. It obeys a geometry of the spirit that is created in the opening of a space between the statement contained in a phrase and its realization as a work of art. This happens within the heart of every word, every phoneme, right down to the noiseless musical quality of the text as a whole, rendered by the calligrapher's art in the form of light and shade, the readable and the elusive, the impression of what one sees and the presence of the voice.

Calligraphy reveals the plastic scenography of a text: that of a letter turned into image, caught in the physical act of creating a line which is animated and led onwards by an inner rhythm. This art works by taking a text as a score consisting of strokes created by the graphic artist. For the language which practises it, and which thereby gains beauty, the calligraphic art constitutes a laboratory of signs. As in

Ta'liq script. The letter 'm' in its final form.

the case of Chinese and Japanese writing, the Arabic script derives from a civilization of signs. By 'sign' we mean in this context a conventional mark, arbitrary in relation to the thing designated, which serves to convey the sound of the spoken language.

What calligraphy does is to take the written sign and alter its form and decorative style by changing the treatment of line. This plastic form simultaneously serves both the meaning of the actual statement and the composition of images, of letters that are recreated as image. The actual meaning of the statement here becomes secondary, so that the imagined reader is like a dreamer awakened, whose vision is woven within a context of art. Take a close look at any page of fine calligraphy and you find a delicate balance between matter (the ink and its supporting medium), colour and signs.

The characteristic aspect of this Islamic cultivation of signs and symbols is the pre-eminence of the art of ornamentation, and in this the book has pride of place. We should remember that during the classical Arab era (the ninth and tenth centuries AD) the visual arts embraced the arts of the book (illumination, fine bindings and calligraphy itself), architecture (mosques, religious schools known as *madrasas*, mausoleums, palaces . . .) and the everyday applied arts such as ceramics, carpet-weaving, mosaics and leatherwork. Thus in Persia it would fall to the court calligrapher to design the preliminary sketches for the finest carpets, giving us marvellous prayer mats where the artist, in collaboration with artisans, introduces us to an imagery of Paradise, literally woven into the words of Allah.

Graphic systems may be more or less beautiful in their conception. And, as in every art, calligraphy may be arrived at by skill or by serendipity and improvisation. As indicated above, the Arabic system of writing is created from a range of signs and their variants, combining elements of the vertical and the horizontal. It also features diacritical marks, the

loops which make up the bodies of letters, and the connecting links between them. Letters may be joined together or they may stand alone.

Given that this calligraphy derives from an ancient Semitic alphabet, it is no surprise to find that it still retains pictographic remnants such as ع ('ayn) representing the eye, and ج representing the camel. However, the alphabet has evolved greatly since the early manuscripts of the Qur'ān. It has embraced many forms of ornamentation and decoration, so that the letter recreated as image has become an essential paradigm of the arabesque. Initially an art confined to books, Arabic calligraphy has gone on to adapt itself wonderfully to other media: stone, stucco, mosaics, ceramics . . . This iconic transformation has only been possible thanks to the nature of this system of writing – as a highly flexible mutual adaptation between the sign and the image, between the sign and the act of writing it.

Calligraphy thus has its own sculptural autonomy as an art which is extremely abstract, and within which one can discern (as certain researchers have done) a geometry, even a mathematical quality, of the sign. For example, the simple dot (.), which signified nought among the Arabs of ancient times who invented it, came to serve as the means of indicating the diacriticals which distinguish various letters that have the same shape, such as ب (b) and ت (t), or س (s) and ش (sh). We shall see shortly how professional calligraphers adopted the dot as a module in developing different calligraphic styles.

The letter recreated as image follows three rules of composition: phonetic, semantic and plastic. Calligraphers create their compositions by joining letters together, and by adding vowels and diacriticals. Thus they give supplementary form to the meaning of the text which one is reading. Such is the ground that we shall be covering in our survey of the calligrapher's art.



Calligraphy means here – in the strict definition of the word – an art which is conscious, founded upon a code of geometric and decorative rules; an art which, in the patterns which it creates, implies a theory of language and of writing. This art starts off as part of the linguistic structure and institutes an alternative set of rules, derived from language but dramatizing and duplicating it by transposing it into visual terms.

The essence of calligraphy lies in its relation to language. Although the aims of the art of the calligrapher and that of the painter who incorporates words or letters into his work may sometimes be the same, the two part company in the way that the written character is given meaning and life.

Calligraphy is here under examination only insofar as calligraphy itself examines the nature of the language in which it resides. Our first concern is the calligrapher's attitude and his approach, which is both emotionally charged and yet rigorously precise. The calligrapher is an

artist who copies and the text which he has to copy already exists. At the point where the meaning unfolds, an image appears which enchants language, in the original sense of incantation, that is, it transforms it into a divine (or magical) formula. Later, we shall determine the nature of this delicate image, whose potency and range had induced one calligrapher to declare – in the excitement of creation – that the tip of the pen is what marks the difference between cultures.

Calligraphy is of course the art of writing, but the practice is by no means universal. Many peoples have not developed it in detail, whereas for others it is regarded as a supreme art. The Japanese describe a person as 'having beautiful handwriting' when they mean he is graceful and handsome. The Arab calligraphers considered that their art was the geometry of the soul expressed through the body – a metaphor that can be taken literally and concretely with the literal design of its inspiring spirit. This metaphor refers back to an established language as, so to speak,



Floral kufic script. *The word kalima, meaning 'word'. Qur'an, 14th-15th century.*

Pages 12-13
Thuluth lettering against a background of floral spirals, by Abd al-Rahman al-Amidi al-Shafii, Yemen (1398).

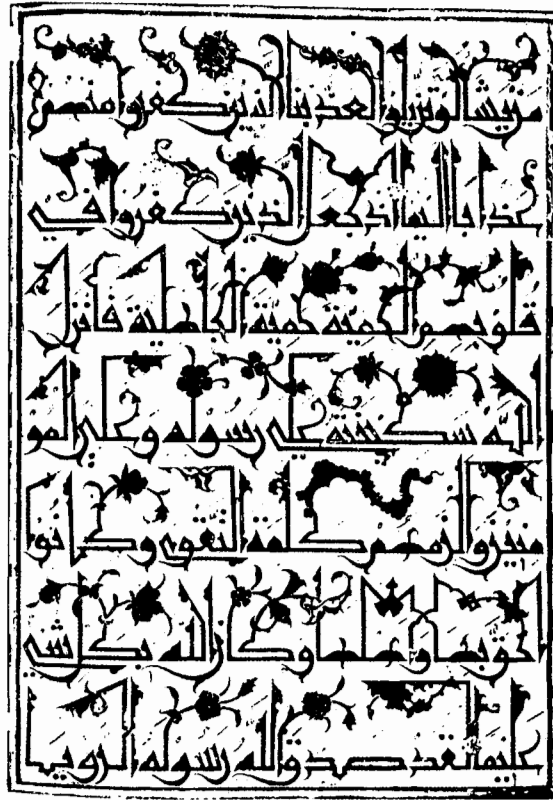
its reflection, its language of love. Among people without a calligraphic tradition beautiful handwriting can of course be found anywhere – in a private letter, for instance. But this comes from an expression of feeling not rooted in a general knowledge and technique of calligraphy. It remains an individual impulse within the totality of a culture. We use the word calligraphy here to denote an all-embracing cultural manifestation which structures the philosophical basis of regular language.

It should be noted here that a codified Arabic calligraphy presupposes the existence of an earlier graphic convention, including diacritical signs and vowels, which was developed gradually both before and after the appearance of Islam, and was applied to the painstaking and laborious task of transcribing the Qur'an. But calligraphy was the work of a hieratic bureaucracy, who were keen to impose on society a political order inspired by the Qur'an. The new discipline was established by Ibn Muqla, a man who, according to legend, was thrice Vezir, thrice went on a holy war, and whose

remains were thrice interred: first in the prison where he died, second in his house, and third in the cemetery. He will reappear in our story in a less legendary form, a pen in his right hand – the hand that the Caliph Rādi billāh ordered to be cut off.

As a historical phenomenon Arabic calligraphy dates, in its codified form, from Ibn Muqla (ninth century AD), and its decline coincides with the spread of printing. More than ten centuries of calligraphic tradition are represented in this growth and decline of Arabic culture.

It is to be understood that our concern here is not to compile a catalogue, large or small, of this art, but simply to honour it. Such a catalogue would be virtually impossible in any case, since it would have to cover ten centuries of history and a vast geographic area embracing the Muslim world. Indeed, Persian and Swahili, and Urdu too, are written in Arabic characters, as was Turkish before the drastic reforms of Kemal Atatürk after the fall of the Ottoman Empire.



Karmatian kufic script.
Page from a Qur'ān.

Right. Karmatian kufic script.

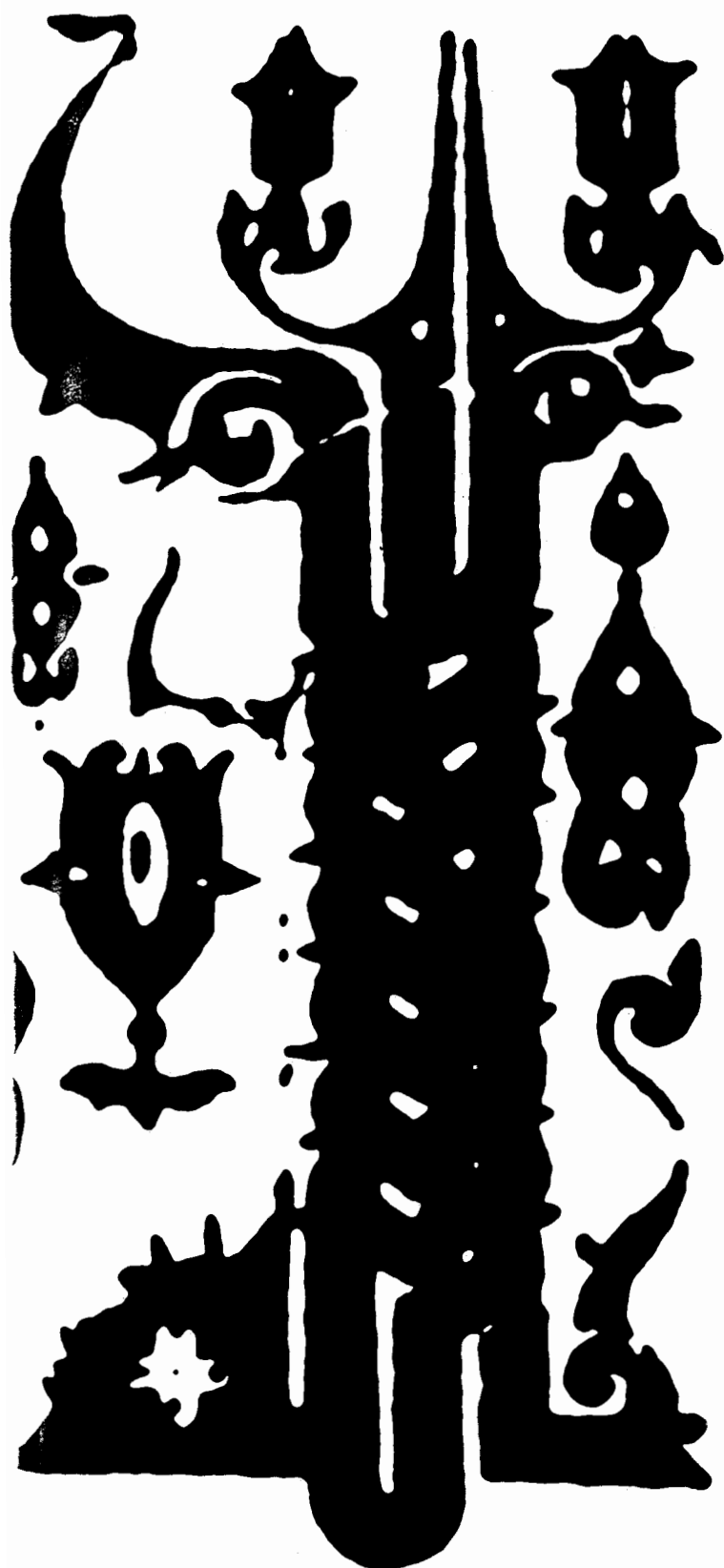
Pages 16–17
Archaic Kufic script on
parchment (9th century).

LEGEND AND EPIGRAPHY

Present throughout Islam, calligraphy raises the question of writing at its original source in religious belief. The Prophet Muhammad said that the Qur'ān was revealed to him in 'pure Arabic'. What can we wager on knowing the 'agency' of this written sign?

First of all we must rid ourselves of the idea that calligraphy developed as compensation for the prohibition placed by Islam on the representation of the human or divine form. As the religion of an invisible god, early Islam had to compete with the pre-existing totemistic religions, which encouraged figural representation; it had to eradicate and blot out the memory of such established practices. But this prohibition, which has incidentally been little elaborated, conceals another approach, no less influential, which fits absolutely into a fundamental theory of the divine origin of writing: the human body is a progression in four stages: death (the inanimate), life, death again, and finally life in the beyond, be it in Paradise or Hell. The Qur'ān is the site of this migratory separation. And Allah

speaks Arabic first: so the Qur'ān is not seen as a gospel to be revealed in any language. Hence the belief that the Arabic language, occurring in the Qur'ān, is to be considered as a miracle. How can a miraculous language be transcribed without giving the lie to its implicit perfection? And since all revelation enjoins silence and hushed voices, the scribe's sublime task is beset with grave problems. From the inception of Islam conflicts broke out over different recensions of the Qur'ān, which did not acquire its definitive form until after the death of the Prophet. The recensions themselves were transcribed in an orthographically incomplete form of writing: the system of vowel and diacritical signs – so important in calligraphy – was deficient. This is a major (but not the only) reason for the custom of chanting and reciting the text. It was not until the third Caliph, Uthmān (23/644–35/655) that an 'authorized' version was produced. Calligraphy, though not yet codified, was born at that moment, to establish the miraculous nature of the Qur'ān's origin.



MYTHS OF ORIGIN

The origin of writing may be explained – or it may be a matter for reverie and meditation.

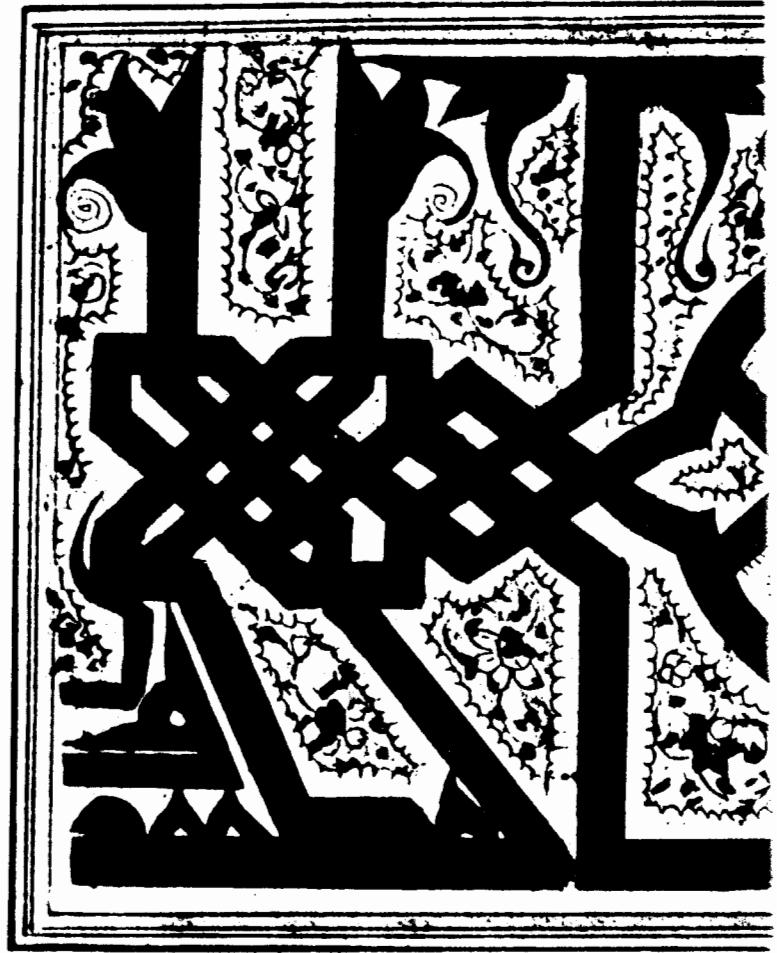
From the outset the Muslim finds himself mysteriously confused. For while Arabic script is definitely revealed in the Qur'ān as a miracle, we also know – from the other side of the looking-glass, so to speak – that it existed as the successor to Nabato-Aramaic, and therefore to Phoenician, beginning with the first letter *alif*. What can such a discrepancy mean? Is the truth of the Qur'ānic script above and beyond the evidence of its own past, with pre-Islam nothing but its crude semblance?

Further on we shall consider a factual, though perfunctory, explanation offered by some Muslim thinkers, written, as it were, in a clandestine script. Let us for the moment consider the origin of the Arabic language as it occurs in imagination and legend.

According to Abu al-Abbas Ahmed al-Bhūni, letters arose from the light on the pen that inscribed the Grand Destiny on the Sacred Table. Allah had ordained that therein should be recorded the deeds of all creatures, till the Last Judgment. After wandering through the universe, the light became transformed into the letter *alif*, from which developed all the others.

In another variation of the myth, Allah created the angels according to the name and number of the letters, so that they should glorify him with an infinite recitation of the Qur'ān. Allah said to them: 'Praise Me! I am Allah, and there is none other but I.' The letters prostrated themselves before him, and the first to do so was the *alif*, whereupon Allah said 'You have prostrated yourself to glorify My Majesty. I appoint you to be the first letter of My Name and of the alphabet.'

Another myth, which frequently appears in Arabic treatises, connects Adam with the origin of writing. Adam is said to have written a number of books three centuries



before his death. After the Flood, each people discovered the book that was destined for it. The legend describes a dialogue between the Prophet Muhammad and one of his followers, who asked: 'By what sign is a prophet distinguished?'

'By a revealed book,' replied the Prophet.

'O Prophet, what book was revealed to Adam?'

'A, b . . . ' And the Prophet recited the alphabet.

'How many letters?'

'Twenty-nine letters.'

'But, O Prophet, you have counted only twenty-eight.' Muhammad grew angry and his eyes became red.

'O Prophet, does this number include the letter *alif* and the letter *lām*?'

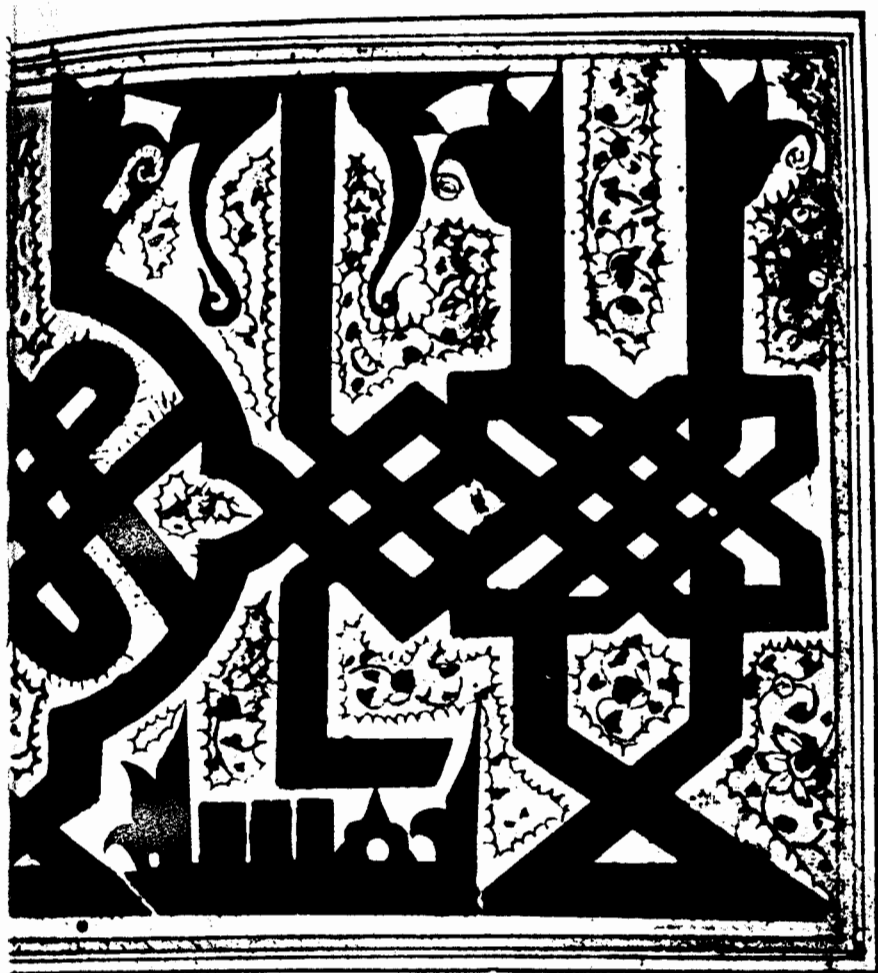
'*Lām-alif* is a single letter . . . he who does not believe in the number of twenty-nine letters shall be cast into Hell for all eternity.'

According to another tradition, the names of six kings of Madyan made up the letters of the Arabic alphabet. In fact, these imaginary names form the *abjad*, a mnemonic device to establish the order of the Arabic alphabet.

Like the Greeks, the Arabs gave a numerical value to each of their letters, classifying them in three series of nine: units

from 1 to 9, tens from 10 to 90, hundreds from 100 to 900, and finally 1000. This system is still in use in popular treatises on divination.

Our purpose in providing a reminder of these myths is not to consider their emotive appeal: every culture records this interplay between myth and Logos. Our intention is to ensure that the myths should not be abruptly consigned to the limbo of 'pure illusion', in contrast to science, since the idea of myth, as well as that of science, is involved in the metaphysics of sign and symbol. This approach to the origin of writing is thus a way of setting it down in its metaphysical and theological origin. In Islam, writing is an absolute, *the Absolute*, the *Sanctum Sanctorum*. True, there may also be discerned in it the Greek theory of writing, formulated differently, that writing is the fine garment which clothes meaning, but the status of writing is nevertheless given a sacred character, and in a fundamental way. When writing is seen as an aspect of the Absolute, then scientific thought itself partakes of and prolongs the nature of revelation. Beyrūni wrote: 'As surprising for a science to be considered eternal as for a camel to be found in the channel of the Ka'ba.' Islam builds up science and philosophy from the basis of the Qur'ān and its miraculous rhetoric.



Interwoven floral kufic script. *Qur'ān*, Afghanistan (18th century).

Aristotelianism was to come to Islam and then depart from it, but its descendants, the schools of scientific materialism, have never ceased to plague us since the nineteenth century. And now technology once again presents a challenge to the foundations of religion.

We are not directly concerned here with analyzing the interdependence (in Arabic script) between the different usages of religion, philosophy and science. But we must define, however briefly, the question of calligraphy in the field of a language which claims to be revealed by God. In such an investigation we cannot allow facts and images to fall into the province of punditry or aesthetics. Instead of analyzing Arab culture and its linguistic base, this type of image-making leads to ignorance. At best it is as lifeless as a photograph album – or a corpse embalmed in preparation for burial.

It has been well said that what will remain of the Arabs in the end is to be found, firstly, in the *Qur'ān*, secondly, in pre-Islamic poetry and, finally, in calligraphy and architecture. There remains the question of the Arabs themselves and their body of knowledge, past and present.

A consideration of calligraphy without further development of these philosophic issues limits our range. But at

least there is no question of composing an obituary for corpse of Arabic thought. Students of oriental sensuality and Muslim exponents of nostalgia, have already done better than we can.

Calligraphic art, operating at the edge of language, makes systematic use of the laws of rhetoric and in particular the *al-Adab*, a very subtle concept which acts upon the whole range of the Arabic language and its linguistic structure. The *Al-Adab* combines the logical and the imaginative approach – two methods which should never have been separate and rejects the primacy of any single system, summoning instead, a whole range of disciplines (science, literature, education, legend, etc.). Thus the text becomes parently ical, stylized by its calligraphy (as we shall try to show some well-known phrase or sentence, taken from *Qur'ān*, with its forcefulness delicately veiled for our greater enjoyment.

To return to the beginning, the concept of the *Qur'ān* as a miracle has been marginally disputed by some Muslims and perhaps even by the great al-Ma'arri (973–1057); but its basic sense it has affected the whole process of writing. Rhetoric (al-Bayān) has emphasized the unique character of the *Qur'ān* and the nature of its composition, which ensues

that certain elements remain permanently obscure. Hence those isolated and mysterious letters which preface some of the Suras. Allah speaks through the Prophet. The Qur'ān has revealed its message in Arabic characters. If the Qur'ān has been revealed in 'pure Arabic', what are the presuppositions and the effects of this theory?

With or without a mystic formulation, the question of the origin of writing is that of the origin of language itself. Our synthesis of the subject has confined the Qur'ānic structure to a simplified theocentric discussion. There remains, in fact, a series of questions on the divinely created character – or otherwise – of the Qur'ān. Classical Arabic learning, especially in its grammar and philology, has been deeply influenced by it, particularly with the rationalistic Mu'tazila which, in the reign of the Caliph al-Mamūn (d. 218/833), accepted the thesis. Nazzām (d. 231/845) has even written, 'The structure of the Qur'ān and the beauty of its prose are not a miracle of the Prophet, nor proof of the truth of his mission. But what proves the truth of his mission is the fact that the Qur'ān contains the revelation of hidden things. As for the beauty of its language, men are capable of producing works of similar, and even superior, composition.'¹



The word 'women' from a lithographed Arabic Qur'ān, with translation into Urdu. Probably mid-19th century.



This crucial point is decisive as regards the issue of writing. Let us consider, in outline, some questions arising from it: on the one hand, if God speaks Arabic in the absolute sense, what is the value of pre-Islamic Arabic? How can non-Arabs appreciate the inimitable beauty of the Qur'ān? What is to be said about the diffusion of all the other languages? We would suggest that Arabic may remain in a sense 'dormant' in all language, including that of other monotheistic cultures. But how can the 'dormant' or 'awakened' condition of a miraculously inspired grammar be evaluated? Ibn 'Askari has written: 'The language of Adam in the Garden of Eden was Arabic. After his disobedience he was deprived of it and spoke Syriac. Then, after Adam's repentance, God restored Arabic to him once more.'²² Thus Arabic is seen as the prelapsarian language, which human sinfulness has caused to become latent in all other tongues – even here, in this text.

On the other hand, if the Qur'ān was transmitted to Muhammad by Allah, the terms of the process by which it came into existence need to be specified, and the importance of the human word in relation to the divine voice. How is the human origin of language and writing to be justified without departing from the theological framework?