

Exploring the materiality of the early Islamic book: Preparing to conserve an early Qur'an manuscript in the collections of Sir Alfred Chester Beatty

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The pressing need to conserve a large early Qur'an manuscript on parchment (CBL Is 1404) has served as the catalyst for significant investigation of both early Islamic manuscript materials, and the most suitable contemporary conservation techniques for this object. This paper will present the initial findings of this project, which is currently underway at the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin, Ireland.

This large 201 folio Qur'an—possibly made in the 8th century—has suffered extensive water damage and subsequent corrosion of the iron containing ink it was written with. It has in turn been subject to numerous layers of previous repairs, many of which are now failing, ineffective, and incurring damage to the manuscript.

This study will review the methodology of repair which has been employed to treat this manuscript, as well as sharing the material information which such a large scale treatment has begun to uncover.

The unique opportunity to closely examine manuscript Is 1404 both in advance of and during repair has provided evidence relating both to the artefacts manufacture and provenance. In particular, the historic repairs and the watermarks they contain offer valuable clues to the manuscripts provenance before it entered the Chester Beatty collection, whilst subtle clues to the manuscripts previous sewing and earlier bindings are preserved alongside evidence of the original parchment preparation throughout the folios. As the number of known extant early Islamic manuscripts is quite small, and the number which retain their original bindings is yet smaller, the study of loose manuscript folios and individual bifolia has been essential in shedding light on a period of manuscript production and bookbinding history previously little studied.

Following experiments using a wide range of materials and techniques, the resulting treatment plan employs a delicate balance of both traditional and modern parchment conservation techniques to stabilise the fragile folios. The decision to remove the failing historic repairs, whilst minimising the introduction of water which would accelerate the deterioration of the unstable and corrosive ink, has required the introduction of modern techniques using formable granular gels. Once the old repairs have been successfully removed, the folios are then gently flattened using minimal amounts of moisture and light pressure to remove the most severe creasing and deformation of the substrate. Losses and tears have then been repaired using traditional adhesives with a toned Japanese paper.

Physical examination of the Chester Beatty manuscript has been complemented by parchment analysis undertaken in collaboration with the University of York's BioArCh (Biology, Archaeology and Chemistry) departments to identify the species of animal used for the parchment, as well as providing a valuable indication of the high quality of parchment production at this time. It is hoped that non-invasive analytical

examination of the 34 illuminated decorative bands in the manuscript will follow, providing the first study of the palette in early Islamic manuscript painting.

Additional evidence collected from 22 early manuscripts in the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, as well as other extant 7th- 10th century Islamic manuscripts in the Chester Beatty Library, has further added to an initial understanding of early Islamic binding structures and manuscript materiality, as well as offering context for the Chester Beatty Qur'an.

The current treatment plan for Chester Beatty manuscript Is 1404 has been designed in light of current best practice in Islamic manuscript preservation, as well as research into the materiality of the early Islamic book.

It is hoped that this paper will offer a first look at the materiality of early Islamic manuscripts on parchment, which will in turn provide an opportunity to contrast these traditions with those in Europe. As such, the treatment of this manuscript continues to be informed by studies in multiple disciplines, and will in time finally make this rare object accessible for display, digitisation, and future access by scholars of the book.