

# **The Birmingham Qur'an manuscript: An introduction to the radiocarbon dating and conservation**

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In July 2015, the University of Birmingham made an announcement regarding the radiocarbon dating of a Qur'anic fragment held in its Cadbury Research Library (Mingana Islamic. Arab. MS 1572a). The announcement captured the world's imagination and received extensive international press coverage, including featuring as the lead story of the New York Times. The manuscript was heralded as one of the earliest surviving fragments of written evidence of the Qur'an and possibly the oldest Qur'anic fragment in the world (Dan Bilefsky, New York Times, 23 July 2015)

The press attention, whilst global, was often misleading and did not reflect the substantial programme of conservation activity which was involved behind the scenes. To the outside world the news appeared to be a sensational discovery; however the radiocarbon dating, the conservation treatment of the manuscript and the press announcement had been a managed process over the preceding two years. In this paper I will explore what issues and questions surround the approach of uniting scientific analysis in the form of radiocarbon dating and multi spectral analysis with more traditional methods of palaeographical research in relation to a religious manuscript of worldwide significance and reputation.

Historically the manuscript had been bound for over 70 years amid leaves which were subsequently identified as being from another Qur'an. This paper will examine the subsequent conservation treatment decisions and the separation process of two manuscripts which had previously formed Mingana Islamic Arabic Ms 1572 into Ms 1572 a and b. It will look at the removal of the manuscripts mid-20th century western binding and their individual conservation, as well as briefly introducing the manuscripts characteristics and context within the wider Mingana Collection of Middle Eastern Manuscripts.

Radiocarbon dating of a religious manuscript, specifically a Qur'an is a relatively unusual activity and one which comes with many challenges for the conservation professional. This paper will briefly outline the decisions leading to the radio carbon dating analysis which took place in 2013, and considerations of undertaking this form of destructive testing.

The paper will examine how the institutional context influenced the policies and practises which were applied to the care and management of this manuscript. The collection from which this manuscript originates is part of the holdings of the University of Birmingham's Cadbury Research Library, a world class research library attracting a wide range of international visitors. The care and management of this manuscript is embedded within this environment. The conservation department seeks to balance the conflicting demands of appropriate professional practise with an institutional desire for engagement and exploitation for reputational gain.

The publicity surrounding the radiocarbon dating of the manuscript has led to increasing demands for exhibitions and VVIP viewings. Demand to see the manuscript continues to remain high. This demand was initially met in 2015 with a three week exhibition of the manuscript at the University which attracted over 9, 000 visitors. This paper will look at the challenge of how a religious manuscript of great significance can be both made accessible to the public whilst also preserved appropriately. This will include looking at issues around exhibition, digitisation, handling and preservation and appropriate access policy and institutional strategy and policy.

Most recently the Cadbury Research Library commissioned multispectral imaging work on the manuscript to add another layer of information to knowledge around provenance and condition. One of the most frequent questions raised by enquiries is whether this manuscript is actually a palimpsest. The commissioning of the multispectral analysis sought to provide information to clarify this issue and to provide a marker to inform subsequent preservation condition reporting.

This paper will provide a critical self-assessment of the work which has been undertaken by the Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham in relation to Qur'anic fragment MS 1572a. It will suggest how this might inform best practise in the management and care of Qur'anic manuscripts.