and cross-cultural comparisons. It is less likely to provide satisfactory answers to the major chronological issues that still divide the antagonists and protagonists of radiocarbon dating techniques in the ancient Mediterranean and Near East.

References


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Christoph Luxenberg’s Die Syro-Aramäische Lesart des Koran is a page-turner — if you know Arabic, some Aramaic or Syriac, and are roughly familiar with Koranic studies and traditional Muslim Koran interpretation.

The shape of a large number of Arabic characters does not allow the reader to decide which of the letters of the Arabic alphabet he is confronted with. The reader frequently needs diacritical (“distinguishing”) dots. These dots are added to the letter, and are physically separate from it, like the German Umlaut. These added dots decide which character precisely a shape represents. One shape has no less than five possibilities (b, t, r, n, y) if the dots would be omitted, many have two (r, z).

The earliest manuscripts of the Koran do not have these dots. The earliest occurrence of diacritical dots is in an inscription from 568 AH. Added diacritics in these dots became more and more common in the second and third century of the Muslim era (Groehmann, Arabische Paläographie, II. Vienna 1971, p. 41).

So now the question arises: Are these dots nevertheless already part of the divinely inspired text of the Koran, or could it be that Muslim scholars in the past have made mistakes when adding them to the dot-less but inspired skeleton of the text of the Koran? If there would have been a perfect oral transmission of the text of the Koran from the days of the Prophet, this question, of course, is meaningless and superfluous. But the bulk of traditional Muslim Koran exegesis suggests that there has not been such a perfect oral transmission. Even a relatively simple traditional Koran commentary like the one known as Al-Galālāy (ca. 1500 AD) often admits that more than one possibility exists as far as the dots are concerned. The commentator, in such cases, is not embarrassed to show that he does not know whether it should, e.g., be yaqqûl or naqûl. “He says” or “We say”. Nevertheless, in traditional popular piety no allowances are made for such ambiguities in the holy text.

But if one, if only for the sake of argument, would accept the possibility of mistakes in the placing of diacritical dots in the text of the Koran, several obscure or odd passages start to look as good as new. For instance, the son of Zacharias (Luke 1, Koran 19) is called Yahyā in the present punctuation of Koran 19:7, but the consonantal shape certainly allows us to read Yūḥannā, or ‘John’ (Luke 1:13). It is hard indeed to imagine that traditional Yahyā is the correct reading. If it were not for the sensibilities of orthodox Muslims, few scholars would be willing to consider the possibility that Yahyā is the correct reading (see R. Bell, A commentary on the Qur’an, vol. 1 (University of Manchester 1991; Journal of Semitic Studies Monograph 14, eds. C. Edmund Bosworth & M.E.J. Richardson), p. 502.

Christoph Luxenberg (a pseudonym) offers a startling number of repunctuations that need to be considered seriously. By far the most spectacular case he adduces is Koran 44:54 and 52:20. Here we read in a description of the fate of the pious dead the phrase “We have paired them [with maidens]”, zawwānāhām. With different dots the same characters could easily be read as “We gave them rest”, rawwānāhām (p. 226). Few would disagree that resting, at least for the pious dead, is an activity much more proper than marrying maidens. Nevertheless, for young men who want to sacrifice their lives for what they see as true Islam, this is bad news.

Whether the dots necessary to read and interpret the text of the Hebrew Bible are as inspired as its sense, words and letters, has been debated widely in Christianity. For instance, in 1678 the Calvinists of Geneva
by a special canon, forbade that any minister should be
received into their jurisdiction until he publicly confessed that
the Hebrew text, as it today exists in the Masoretic copies, is,
both as to the consonants and vowel points, divine and authen-
tic (A.D. White, *A History of the Warfare of Science with The-
ology in Christendom*, New York 1896, quoted from repr.

As late as the eighteenth century this debate was settled,
and it is since then that the old sacred theory as to the origin
of the Hebrew vowel points may be considered as dead and
buried. The Arabic dots, however, are still very much seen
as sacred, with, of course, the exception of a small number of
cases that are enshrined in the traditional Koran com-
mentaries. Few people are familiar with these exceptions, and
the cases that tradition tolerates, anyhow, do not seriously affect
the sense of the verse in which they occur.

Luxenberk describes the method which he used in this vol-
ume in detail (pp. 9-15). He has not chosen at random the
Koranic passages he wishes to clarify with the help of Ara-
maic — which usually implies newly reconstructing the dots.
He selected passages marked as problematic by both West-
ern Koran translators and in the encyclopaedic traditional
commentary by At-Tabari (839-923 AD). He then, neverthe-
less, tried to find an Arabic solution with the help of the great
Arabic dictionaries like the *Lisân al-‘Arab*, that had not been
available to At-Tabari. Then he checked whether an Aramaic
homonym of the Arabic could supply a satisfactory solution
to the meaning of the verse under consideration. Then he tried
a number of hypothetical possibilities of pointing the text dif-
frently, only using Arabic vocabulary. This, he says, often
produces convincing results. If it did not, he tried the same,
now also using Aramaic. In innumerable cases this produced,
according to the author, a meaning that was definitely more
logical, “einen entschieden logischeren Sinn” (p. 11).

If the same would be merely possible with any other text
known to mankind in general and scholarship in particular,
such a text, and especially such a new possibly fruitful
approach to it, would be in the centre of interest all over the
world. It is not difficult to see why pious traditional Muslims
might have great difficulty with Luxenberk’s work. But why
would non-Muslim scholars hesitate to debate his views and
to applaud him for his original approach — even if he might be
wrong some of the time?

Back to the fate of the souls of the pious in the Afterlife.
Are they out for a sexual treat or are they simply resting from
their manifold toils? Parallels to both can be found. Luxen-
berg mentions convincing parallels taken from St. Ephraem
the Syrian (fourth century AD). The texts to which Luxen-
berg refers must have been widely known in the milieu in
which Islam came into being. On the other hand, I found one
example of “girls in silk shawls”, supplying the pious dead
with “full cups of red wine”. This, however, is taken from
an Athenian play, probably around 438 BC (see J.N. Brem-
mer, *The Rise and Fall of the Afterlife*, London/New York
2002, p. 7, and pp. 119-21, where it is pointed out how lux-
uriant growth and meadows — both frequently implied or
mentioned in the Koranic description of the Afterlife — may
evoke sexual associations.). Someone who wants to argue in
favour of the reading that is now the traditional Muslim one,
so it appears, can find oriental parallels as well.

It cannot be doubted that Luxenberk’s book will cause dis-
tress to many pious Muslims. That is a sad thing. But, on
the other hand, it is not the duty of Western scholarship to
protect the Muslim masses from spiritual distress. Moreover,
nobody will dare to accuse the *‘ulamâ* of not being able to
protect the Muslim masses adequately against such distress.
It is, then, to be hoped for that Christoph Luxenberk will
take a look at the whole text of the Koran, apply his unique
method, and will soon publish his findings, that will conse-
quently become the subject of a wide debate.

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**FUESS, Albrecht. — Verbranntes Ufer. (Islamic History and
0929-2403. € 137,-/US159,00.

Port cities are essentially different from inland cities. As
other towns, they are related to regional urban networks and
administrative configurations which make them part of their
hinterland. They are also directed at the sea, however, and
integrated in networks of other coastal towns, sometimes at
a considerable distance, with which they share the ‘culture’
of the sea, trade activities, specific industries, linguistic par-
ticularities, layout and architecture, culinary traditions,
etcetera. These relationships set them off from the core
regions of their nations and place them into an economic and
cultural margin which often determines the course of their
history. They are vulnerable to attacks from outside, since
they are border towns of a specific kind and because they are
focal points of infrastructures and economic interests, as
entrepreneurs and centres of trade and transit. But they can also
easily seek support from the outside against domination by
the administrative centres of their hinterland, enabling for-

ey powers to interfere in domestic politics.

The special nature of the port towns justifies a separate
treatment of coastal urban networks in historical research.
Several questions can be formulated to illustrate their spe-
cific position and to explain their relationship with forces
from the inland and from the outside. They are part of dif-
ferent domains which overlap and interact mainly through
their function as links and places of exchange. An effort to
describe such a ‘coastal history’ is made by Albrecht Fuess
in his study *Verbranntes Ufer: Auswirkungen mamlukischer
Seepolitik auf Beirut und die syro-palästinensische Küste
(1250-1517)*. As the title indicates, his aim is to analyse the
historical development of the Syrian coastal towns from the
perspective of Mamluk maritime policies. Therefore, in spite
its regional focus, the book covers a broad historical range,
linking regional history to imperial politics and the vicissi-
tudes of world trade and international rivalries. As loci of
economic and military penetration, the port towns of Syria
were the focus where these forces converged.

The author has analysed a large amount of historical
sources not only to reconstruct Mamluk policies towards such
towns as Beirut, Tripoli and Acre, but also to give an image
of the social structure of these towns and the many events
which influenced their history in the period under study. The
information derived from these source results in a mass of
historical data and details. Although the wealth of historical
details is profitable in itself, it should be remarked that their
analysis as part of historical processes is rather shallow. The