

Şan‘ā’ 1 and the Origins of the Qur’ān

BEHNAM SADEGHI and MOHSEN GOUDARZI¹

Stanford University / Harvard University

Abstract

The lower text of Şan‘ā’ 1 is at present the most important document for the history of the Qur’ān. As the only known extant copy from a textual tradition beside the standard ‘Uthmānic one, it has the greatest potential of any known manuscript to shed light on the early history of the scripture. Comparing it with parallel textual traditions provides a unique window onto the initial state of the text from which the different traditions emerged. The comparison settles a perennial controversy about the date at which existing passages were joined together to form the *sūras* (chapters). Some ancient reports and modern scholars assign this event to the reign of the third caliph and link it with his standardizing the text of the Qur’ān around AD 650. However, the analysis shows that the *sūras* were formed earlier. Furthermore, the manuscript sheds light on the manner in which the text was transmitted. The inception of at least some Qur’ānic textual traditions must have involved semi-oral transmission, most likely via hearers who wrote down a text that was recited by the Prophet. This essay argues for these

¹) We are grateful to Christian Robin, the Noja Noseda Foundation, and CNRS (UMR 8167, Orient et Méditerranée) for giving us their photographs and ultraviolet images of the DAM 01–27.1 folios. We thank Michael Cook, David Powers, Patricia Crone, and Ursula Dreibholz for reading the essay and providing valuable written comments. We thank Ursula Dreibholz for graciously agreeing to be interviewed by telephone, and Ursula Dreibholz, Lily Feidy, Sharif Kanaana, Sari Nusseibeh, Ghassan Abdullah, Lawrence Conrad, and Alexander Stille for patiently answering our questions by e-mail. We also thank the following persons for their help with various other aspects of the project: Uwe Bergmann, the anonymous owner of the Stanford 2007 folio, Mette Korsholm of the David Collection, Michael Cooperson, Devin Stewart, Robert Waltz, Scott Lucas, M.S.M. Saifulah, Sarah Kistler, Bryce Cronkite-Ratchiff, Robert Gregg, Burçak Keskin-Kozat, the staff at the Abbasi Program in Islamic Studies at Stanford University, Ceci Evangelista of the Office of Development at Stanford University, and the staff at Stanford University Libraries and the Stanford Synchrotron Radiation Laboratory. This essay was submitted for publication on August 31, 2011.