

Books

The sumptuous Chester Beatty Qur'an with its complex calligraphy by Ruzbihan has received an in-depth study

Lapis and Gold: Exploring Chester Beatty's Ruzbihan Qur'an

By Elaine Wright. 352 pp. incl. 350 col. ills. (Ad Illisvm, London), 2018, £90. ISBN 978-1-912168-04-0.

by MASSUMEH FARHAD

When the sixteenth-century Safavid chronicler Budaq Qazvini visited Shiraz in south-western Iran, he remarked that the city could produce as many as one thousand manuscripts a year but that they were all indistinguishable. The Qur'an by the celebrated sixteenth-century calligrapher Ruzbihan Muhammad al-Tab'i al-Shirazi in the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin (MS CBL Is 1558), is an exception. It is one of only a few manuscripts signed by the calligrapher and stands apart on account of the unrivalled profusion, complexity and exuberance of its illumination. A monographic study of a single Qur'an is rare, and like the manuscript itself, this lavishly illustrated book is a landmark in Islamic manuscript studies.

Elaine Wright, former curator of the Chester Beatty Library, explains that the Qur'an entered the collection by 1929. It had once been part of the Ottoman royal treasury and later belonged to a Russian ambassador in Istanbul. Like other Shirazi manuscripts in the city, it must have originally been either an ambassadorial gift or purchased by a member of the elite for their personal library. In 2012 the Qur'an was disbound for conservation purposes, which permitted an almost page-by-page analysis of its structure and remarkable decoration – a truly Herculean task. After a brief introduction, Wright addresses the question whether the calligrapher Ruzbihan was identical with Ruzbihan the illuminator, a topic of considerable debate in the field in the last decades. Based on the variations in the full names of the two sixteenth-century Ruzbihans from Shiraz, Wright concludes that the Ruzbihan involved in the making

of the Chester Beatty manuscript was only responsible for the calligraphy. The stylistic range of the illumination suggests that it was carried out by a team of artists.

The second chapter is devoted to Ruzbihan's transcription of the Qur'an and offers invaluable insight into the process. The Chester Beatty copy follows a complex layout that became particularly popular in the sixteenth century. The text is divided into five panels and includes three different calligraphic styles (Fig.1): the upper and lower ones are in large *muhaggaq*, the middle one in impressive *thuluth* and the other two spaces are reserved for six to eight lines in smaller *naskh*. *Sura* headings are usually contained within elaborate cartouches. The large-scale scripts, which, according to the author, 'steal the show' (p.39), are penned in either blue or gold ink, whereas the blocks of *naskh* are always in black. The main question concerns the sequence of the transcription, which requires different pens, inks and calligraphic style, not to mention a mental shift from one script to the other. Based on still extant notations in the outer margins of some of the folios, Wright offers a solution. Written in an 'everyday' hand, the notations contain the exact text of the larger scripts and are located opposite the panels that contain them. In the author's opinion, they prompted the calligrapher to transcribe these lines first before turning to the blocks of *naskh*. Although this hypothesis is plausible, it is tempting to propose the reverse, namely, that the calligrapher would begin with the smaller *naskh* script, which was consistently black and copied with the same pen. He would use the marginal notations as his guide to the blocks of text. Once these were completed, he would focus on the more time-consuming, coloured scripts above and below, copying the marginal aid-memoir, and finally proceed to the *sura* headings where necessary.

Another important observation in this chapter is Ruzbihan's masterful spacing of

the different scripts, which lends subtle variety to the rhythm of his lines. Equally fascinating is how the calligrapher deals with omissions of words and phrases. Wright remarks that some of the lacunae occurred when similar words or phrases were repeated; other times, they were probably the result of momentary lapses of concentration. In each instance, Ruzbihan ingeniously tucked the missing words either into the text, into a decorative panel or along the margins of the text to ensure that the Word of God remained complete. In the case of a mistake, Wright suggests that the scribe would have lightened the colour of erroneous letters by licking the ink off the surface. These subtle anomalies both lend Qur'anic manuscripts their singularity and underscore the tremendous effort and concentration necessary for copying the holy text, a task only the best calligraphers would attempt.

Like all transcribed Qur'ans, the Chester Beatty volume was meant to be recited. The third chapter in *Lapis and Gold* is devoted entirely to the types of markers that guided the reciters to correctly pronounce and pause the text according to long established rules, a subject that few art historians have addressed. The variant reading systems (*qira'at*) in the Ruzbihan Qur'an probably suggest regional, dynastic and sectarian preferences.

The manuscript's spectacular programme of illumination and its dizzying variety occupy much of the rest of the book. Sixteenth-century Shirazi codices are known for their exuberant illuminations, but they are usually confined to the beginning and the end of the text. As Wright demonstrates, the Ruzbihan Qur'an is once again a remarkable exception. In addition to the dazzling opening and closing folios, each page is embellished with decorated vertical panels, some of which are pasted onto the surface. The author offers detailed analyses of practically every decorative motif and design element, and the accompanied illustrations present an invaluable body of references. One of the most intriguing characteristics of the Qur'an is a change in design towards the end of the manuscript. Here, lines of text are framed in gold, the surfaces are covered with tiny floral motifs and the colours appear more intense and vibrant, lending the pages a pulsating energy. Although it is unclear what prompted this shift, the more exuberant decoration of the final pages underlines the degree of experimentation in the production of the Chester Beatty Qur'an.

St Paul's Outside the Walls: A Roman Basilica, from Antiquity to the Modern Era

By Nicola Camerlenghi. 396 pp. incl. 126 col. + 82 b. & w. ills. (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2018), £90. ISBN 978-1-108-42951-1.

by JULIAN GARDNER

In his epistle to the Romans, 15:28, St Paul announced that he would travel to Spain, and the earliest surviving evidence suggests that he likely died there.¹ Nonetheless, by the early fourth century his tomb was venerated in Rome, where his bones had allegedly been recovered and were preserved in a sarcophagus. Subsequently a basilica sponsored by the late fourth-century Emperors Theodosius, Valentinian III and Arcadius was built at the presumed site of burial on the road towards Ostia. Through a workman's negligence this basilica caught fire on the night of 15th July 1823 and was replaced by the present church – in the judgment of Henry James 'gorgeous and useless, on its miasmatic site'. The architectural and decorative history of the church from its inception until modern times is the subject of this comprehensive, thought-provoking and lively book. It is the first scholarly treatment of the building as a whole since the still useful volume by Ildefonso Schuster, the abbot of St Paul's, published in 1934. Another fundamental contribution was the chapter on the church in volume 5 of Richard Krautheimer's *Corpus Basilicarum Christianarum Romae* (1977), but subsequent excavation and discoveries have necessitated revisions. Nicola Camerlenghi provides a battery of digital reconstructions, produced by Evan Gallitelli, which present many phases of the building history in a new light. These visualisations, it is claimed, 'enable a holistic spatio-temporal understanding' (p.9) of St Paul's. More conventionally, the monograph contains a refreshingly thorough review of visual as well as written sources, with a particularly valuable discussion of the excavation notes of Virginio Vespignani, who also played a part in the nineteenth-century rebuilding.

Paul's burial is treated as if an ascertained fact. Although the appearance of the grave and immediate vicinity is admitted to be elusive, the author asserts that 'the apostles' followers aimed to establish a fitting place for Paul' (p.39). Vestiges of a first 'Constantinian' church were excavated between 2002 and 2006 and provide the



In addition to a number of appendices, the study of pigments by Kristine Rose-Beers, deserves a mention. It offers new insight into Shirazi luxury manuscript production, especially the artists' masterful manipulations to expand their palette. If some readers find Wright's monograph of this extraordinary Qur'an overwhelming in its details and minutia, they can revel in the beauty and originality of the manuscript. By deconstructing the codex and

1. Folio from the Ruzbihan Qur'an, mid-sixteenth century. Paper, gold pigment, pigment and ink, 44.2 by 31 cm. (Chester Beatty Library, Dublin; MS CBL Is 1558, fol.185).

patiently analysing every physical feature, the author has opened new avenues of art-historical research and fostered greater understanding and appreciation of the distinctiveness and originality of Qur'anic manuscripts.