

**Workshop Report: *Approaching the Qur'an as an Orally Structured Text***  
**(held on 1 October 2019 at Pembroke College, Oxford)**

The initial proclamation of the Qur'anic texts is plausibly reported to have taken the form of oral recitation, and oral delivery has continued to be a crucial dimension of the way in which the Qur'anic corpus has functioned in the subsequent Islamic tradition. How are the various compositional devices structuring Qur'anic discourse geared to speak to aural recipients? How do these devices resemble and differ from those characterizing two other bodies of literature that were orally performed in the Qur'an's milieu of origin, namely, ancient Arabic poetry and the Psalms? These questions were at the heart of QuCIP's first workshop, entitled "Approaching the Qur'an as an Orally Structured Text" and convened by QuCIP researcher Marianna Klar.

Proceedings were opened by Klar, who presented some of the most conspicuous ways in which the Qur'anic corpus can be held to be optimized for oral delivery, such as accentual beat patterning rooted in the tradition of *saj'*, or rhymed and rhythmically structured prose, as well as lexical recurrence and the employment of standardized section openers and closers. As demonstrated by Klar, orally salient features are identifiable not just in the Meccan surahs, but continue to be prominent in the Medinan Qur'an as well. John Screnock (Oxford) then moved the discussion on to the Psalms, starting off by reviewing different scholarly attempts at discerning and codifying the compositional principles underlying psalmic poetry. Based on several detailed case studies, Screnock questioned whether higher-level structural features, such as the grouping of verses into strophes and stanzas, are universally applicable across the entire psalmic corpus, and cautioned against the tendency of much previous scholarship to insist on drawing thematically defined lines of structural division. By drawing attention to ways in which different modalities of compositional shaping, both formal and contentual, may compete rather than align to yield one unequivocal structure, Screnock's presentation resonated with Klar's discussion of the contrapuntal tensions that may arise between content, rhythm, and rhyme in Qur'anic surahs.

Angelika Neuwirth (Berlin) opened the workshop's second session by probing the Psalm's currency in the Qur'anic milieu. After highlighting a number of explicit Qur'anic references to the Psalms (e.g., Q 21:105) and their putative author or transmitter, David (see Q 38:17–20), Neuwirth focussed on the practice of prayer vigils, a cultic setting shared by



the Psalms and the Qur'anic proclamations. As demonstrated by the Medinan addition Q 73:20, nocturnal recitation of Qur'anic texts continued into the Medinan period. Insisting on the importance of understanding how the Psalms were embedded in specific liturgical practices, Neuwirth proposed a re-reading of the Throne Verse, Q 2:255, that links it to Psalm 121 and the rabbinic ritual of "blessing the new moon". The need to discern the *Sitz im Leben* of Qur'anic orality also emerged from the following paper by Devin Stewart (Emory), which undertook an examination of the Qur'an's multifarious mechanisms of textual embedding, serving to integrate, for instance, prayers or oral speech into larger Qur'anic compositions.

The final session extended the workshop's focus to ancient Arabic poetry. Undermining any preconceptions about pre-Islamic poetry as a monolithic body of text, Nathaniel Miller (Cambridge) foregrounded the pertinence of poets' tribal and geographic affiliations. The tripartite form of the *qaṣīdah*, for instance, is very significantly more common in compositions by poets from the Najd region than from the Ḥijāz (as represented, for instance, by the *dīwān* of the tribe of Hudhayl), and may reflect the importance of courtly patronage to the former. Although the poetic material utilized by classical exegetes of the Qur'an shows a clear bias in favour of Najdī authors, earlier attempts to elucidate the Qur'an by recourse to poetry display a considerably higher incidence of Ḥijāzī authors, thus raising questions about the cultural context in which the hermeneutical practice of juxtaposing the Qur'an and poetry emerged and took shape. Finally, Ali Hussein (Haifa) examined the interplay of tradition and variation that governed the composition of ancient Arabic poetry. Through a detailed analysis of two poems, one by Abū Dhu'ayb al-Hudhalī, the other by al-Shammākh, as well as supplementary material, Hussein showed how poets lent individuality to their compositions through variant permutations of a pre-given range of established themes and by executing these in subtly different ways. Of peculiar interest to scholars of the Qur'an was Hussein's statistical survey of popular theme-opening devices in poetry, in which vocatives and oaths – which play a conspicuous structural role in the Qur'an – had a decidedly marginal presence.

The concluding discussion touched on some of the other literary corpora that might be brought into a discussion of the Qur'an's literary features, such as pre-Islamic oratory and oracles as well as Syriac homilies and hymns and other late antique texts. Late antique literary production, however, encompasses a wide spectrum of different genres, many of



which may be pertinent to Qur’anic scholars from the perspective of their conceptual and narrative content but less so from a literary and formal point of view. The potential ambiguity of the term orality – which might be employed not just to highlight literary features geared towards oral delivery, but also to encompass oral composition and transmission – was also remarked upon. Finally, while the general relevance of contextualizing the Qur’an with Arabic poetry and the Psalms was not doubted and indeed substantiated by further examples, Angelika Neuwirth reminded attendees of the importance of the phenomenon of negative intertextuality between the Qur’an and poetry, discussed in a 2010 book chapter by Thomas Bauer.

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