

Ibn Muqla: The prophet of Arabic Calligraphy

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[Arabic calligraphy is the most prominent art form in Islamic culture, mostly due to the prominence of the Quran. Calligraphers had a higher status than painters well into the 14th century. Some esteemed calligraphers were called "prophets" and even tell of receiving their script or technique in visions. For example, Tabrizi (died 1346) claimed to have received the nastaliq script in a dreamlike vision of the prophet's cousin and 4th caliph Ali. Ibn Muqla was the most famous of all who is called the prophet of Arabic Calligraphy.]

One of the most famous calligraphers in Islamic history was Ibn Muqla who lived in Baghdad in the late 9th-early 10th centuries. His gift as an artist was likened to the inspiration of bees as they build the cells in their beehive. Ibn Muqla set out the initial principles of proportionally perfect script by developing them according to how many rhomboids (the design of the pen nib on the paper) fit on the Arabic letter alif (English letter "a"). He set up what are called the "Six Pens" of Ibn Muqla which include the 6 scripts of rika, muhaqqaq, raayan, naski, thuluth, and tumar.

This greatest Arabic calligrapher of all time was an architect of script. He not only developed and improved several styles of writing (among them Thuluth and Naskhi), but was also first to propose a theory of the dimensions of written characters, keeping them in harmony and symmetry with each other. His doctrine of proportion holds to this day, and can easily be used to check whether or not the proportions of a work of calligraphy are correct or not.

Ibn Muqla was a gifted mathematician, calligraphic scholar and natural scientist, and the author of some remarkably straightforward and candid poems. He also studied the works of theologians and atheists - writers such as Ibn al Rawandi, Ibn al-Muqaffa', al-Rasi and al-Farabi. He was inspired most of all by the polymath scholar al-Jahiz; unlike al-Jahiz, however, Ibn Muqla enjoyed being close to the rulers of his time - whereas al-Jahiz could not endure more than three days at the court of Caliph al-Ma'mun, the great patron of science and literature who reigned from 813-33.

Born and Family Background:

If anyone can be called 'the Leonardo da Vinci of Arabic calligraphy' it is Abu Ali Muhammad bin Hassan bin Muqla, known simply as 'Ibn Muqla', born in the slums of Baghdad in 885. (Ibn Muqla's name is a curiosity in itself: Muqla, a poetic word for 'eye', was the affectionate nickname given to his mother by her father, who loved this particular daughter. When she married a poor calligrapher, the family was called not after him or his clan, but after her - a rare occurrence in Arab culture, then as now.) Ibn Muqla's father, grandfather and brother, as well

as his own children and grandchildren, were all calligraphers; and Ibn Muqla was the most famous of them all.

Learning Life:

He learned the art of calligraphy when young, and at the age of sixteen he became the star pupil of the famous calligrapher Ibn Furat, who later rose to the rank of vizier in the 'Abbasid Empire. Ibn Muqla's former teacher then found him a post in the state civil service as a tax gatherer for the caliph, and the young man grew very rich indeed.

Atmosphere:

Though the 'Abbasid Empire was the most powerful civilisation in the world of its time, the golden age of the first nine caliphs already lay in the distant past. In Ibn Muqla's lifetime, which spanned the end of the ninth century and the beginning of the tenth, Arab culture was very sophisticated. Baghdad produced more paper and books than the whole of Europe put together; there were more bookshops to be found in the city than in the rest of the world. Politically, however, the empire was visibly breaking up. Its peripheries, where local rulers (in Damascus, Aleppo, Cairo, the Maghreb, Andalusia and elsewhere) were practically autonomous, were not the only regions affected: rebellions reached the centre of power and shook it to its foundations. The rebels who made their way to Baghdad and Mecca were often Shi'i Muslims, or drawn from the ranks of non-Arab peoples. They humiliated the Sunni caliph al-Muqtadir, repeatedly destroying his cities (e.g. Basra in 912 and 924, Mecca in 929).

The bureaucrats, the harem and the emirs who led the army and the police all gained more and more power in Baghdad at the expense of the caliph, who was not infrequently deposed and arrested, his property seized by his own party - only to be liberated by the other side and reinstated as the 'new' caliph. It was in this atmosphere that Ibn Muqla lived and worked.

Occupation:

Chief Minister of three Abbasids, inventor of the proportioned scripts.

Writing System:

Ibn Muqla's writing system, known as *al-khatt al-mansub*, enabled the letters of any given script to be in proportion to one another. It required a well cut pen (*qalam*) with a deep slit for holding ink. The nib produced a rhombus-shaped dot that became the basic unit of a geometric letter design system. Writing an *alif* (the long, vertical Arabic A) required a number of dots one on top of the other, resulting in the maximum height of any other letter. The *alif* acted as control: its total height was the diameter of a circle that enclosed all letters of a particular script. Accordingly, letters were in proportion to one another in as much as they were proportional to the circle produced by the *alif*. The proportions held regardless of letter size, which resulted from the actual size of the nib.

Ibn Muqla applied this system to six modes of writing, producing the six pens (*al-aqlam al-sitta*) of what is known as Arabic calligraphy or, more accurately, *khatt*.

The first letter in Arabic, alif, is a vertical stroke, and was chosen by Ibn Muqla as the criterion for all written characters. Since Ibn Muqla all calligraphers begin by choosing the length of alif as a measure in their script. The calculation is worked out by means of vertically placed diacritical marks – rhomboid ‘dots’, the size of which depends on the width of the pen as it is pressed down on the paper. All the other letters, whether horizontal or vertical, are adjusted to the size worked out by Ibn Muqla and determined by a given number of diacritics. In addition, the curves of many letters lie along a circle with a diameter corresponding to the length of the character alif. This technique is sometimes referred to as ‘proportional script’, because all the letters relate to the size of alif and the width of the pen (that is to say, of the dot it makes). Keeping to these proportions is analogous to maintaining the rhythm of a musical composition. It introduces harmony to the script, making ‘music for the eye’. After years of practice, every master calligrapher does it automatically. However, the dots always allow for a quick check as to whether or not the proportions are correct.

The reform produced a new aesthetic canon; later medieval scribes and connoisseurs judged the beauty of writing according to the degree of clarity and harmony produced through the new system. Although the reforms may have been originally intended for secular texts, their adoption for copying scripture was complete within two generations. The change in the visual appearance of the holy text reflected controversies over the nature of the Quran and its message, which the Abbasids considered eternal and accessible to all. The clarity and legibility of proportioned writing mirrored this ideological position and combated proponents of an esoteric message accessible only to a chosen elite.

Contribution:

- Poet and Calligrapher Ibn Muqla and his brother and calligraphy artist Abu Abdullah Ibn Muqla (died, 949 A.D) consolidated (in the mean of classic) the Calligraphy as a real subject of Fine Arts. They both decorated and beautified the calligraphy in the proportional writhing, which stimulates the value of the Art gradually. Ali Ibn Hilal Ibn Baowab (died, 1022 A.D) pupil of Ibn Muqla was the first prominent Artist of conspicuous art work in the history of Islam. Ibn Baowab was able to establish this art to apex of the fine arts due to being an interior painter and devoted to the calligraphy.
- Ibn Muqla was responsible for inventing or implementing a number of administrative reforms. These included the regularization of scripts necessary for documentation and for copying historical and other cultural tracts and that were later used for copying the Quran. Recent research shows that these reforms disrupted preexisting systems and eliminated the class of professional Quran copyists. These findings revise Orientalist views of Arabic [calligraphy](#) as an evolutionary process and as an Islamic art form that merely compensated for the supposed absence of figural representation.

- Codified the six scripts (al aqlam al-sitta) that became the foundation for the practice of calligraphy to come. The six scripts are: Muhaqqaq, Thuluth, Rayhani, Naskh, Tawqi, Riq'a.

فَلْيَنْفِقْ مِمَّا آتَاهُ اللَّهُ لَا يَكْفُرْ
Muhaqqaq

قِيلَ لِمَ تَلْعَبُ
Thuluth

خَانُوا الْأَرْضَ وَالسَّمَوَاتِ الْعُلَى
Rayhani

أَرْسَلْنَا عَلَيْهِمُ الرِّيحَ
Naskh

بَنَى الرَّحْمَنُ وَشَفِيَ عَنِ الْأَرْضِ
Tawqi'

لَنَا خُلُقٌ جَزَلٌ جَسِيمٌ صَحْمٌ
Riq'a'

- Established a proportional writing system that used a circle with the diameter of the letter alif as its basis.



Ibn Muqla's proportional writing system

- Wrote extensively about the art of calligraphy and devised theories of letter shapes.

Political Life:

Ibn Muqla was a great politician in Bagdad. But Ibn Muqla, too, fell victim to the politics of the Abbasid court at the end of his life. He was imprisoned, suffered the amputation of his right hand, and died in disgrace.

Biography in brief:

- Born in Baghdad in 885 A.D
- Became a scribe in the administration of the 'Abbasid caliphate (750-1258)
- Became head of the state library
- Was made vizier (chief counselor) three times between 928 and 936, all under different rulers
- Was imprisoned three times during periods of political turmoil
- During one imprisonment, his enemies cut off his right hand. When released, he continued to work with great skill using his left hand
- Finally, his left hand was severed, his tongue cut out, and he was cast into prison where he died

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