

# The Missing Manuscripts: A Case for Systematic Research into the Earliest Physical Copies of the Quran

## A Research Proposal

Submitted to:

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## Executive Summary

The Quran is the most revered text in Islam, central to the faith of nearly two billion people. Yet a fundamental historical question remains unanswered and, more troublingly, largely unasked: what happened to the original physical manuscripts of the Quran, specifically the copy held by Hafsa bint Umar (RA) and the official copies commissioned by Khalifa Uthman ibn Affan? No serious scholarly effort has been mounted to trace, locate, or explain the disappearance of these documents. This proposal argues that this gap is not merely an academic curiosity. It is a historical and theological question of the highest order, and it deserves the same rigorous, well-resourced research attention that archaeology and manuscript studies routinely apply to far older and less significant documents.

## The Historical Problem

### What the Historical Record Tells Us

The compilation of the Quran into a single written document is traditionally understood to have occurred in two stages:

**Stage One:** Following the Battle of Yamama (632 CE), Khalifa Abu Bakr commissioned Zayd ibn Thabit (RA) to compile the Quran. Upon completion, the manuscript was entrusted to Hafsa bint Umar (RA), one of the wives of the Prophet, rather than retained as a state document. This is consistent with the argument that Zayd's work was a verification and authentication of a manuscript already in Hafsa's possession by prophetic authority, which was then returned to her rather than transferred to the Khalifate.

**Stage Two:** Khalifa Uthman ibn Affan later retrieved Hafsa's copy, used it as the authoritative reference to produce multiple standardized copies, and distributed these copies to the major Muslim cities. The copy was then returned to Hafsa.

## The Significance of the Chain of Custody

A pattern runs consistently through both stages that is historically significant and underexamined. From Abu Bakr's commission through Uthman's standardization, the manuscript was never retained as a state document. It was never held in an official archive or treated as property of the Khalifate. In both instances, it resided with Hafsa as a private individual, specifically the Prophet's widow, and was consulted by the highest political and religious authorities of the time before being returned to her.

This consistent pattern across two different Khalifas and two distinct historical moments implies something important: that her manuscript held a category of authority recognized as prophetic rather than political. No Khalifa felt entitled to permanently appropriate it because it was understood that it did not belong to the state. It had been entrusted to Hafsa by the Prophet himself, and that original trust created an authority that superseded the political succession. The Khalifas could consult it. They could verify against it. But they could not own it.

This reading also reframes what Zayd ibn Thabit was actually doing. If the manuscript already existed with Hafsa and was already recognized as authoritative, then his commission was not the creation of the Quran's written form from scratch. It was verification and authentication, cross-checking the existing primary document against the memories of huffaz and written fragments held by companions, before returning the authenticated document to its rightful custodian. This is consistent with the Islamic jurisprudential principle that requires multiple witnesses for matters of significant consequence. A single compiler creating the primary document from scratch, however trusted, would conflict with that principle. A single compiler verifying an existing document against multiple sources does not.

## What the Historical Record Does Not Tell Us

No credible account explains when, how, or why Hafsa's copy disappeared. No credible account explains what happened to the Uthmanic copies distributed to Kufa, Basra, Syria, and Mecca. Museums in Tashkent and Istanbul hold manuscripts claimed to be Uthmanic, but their dating remains disputed and no comprehensive scientific analysis has been conducted with full scholarly access. The San'a manuscripts discovered in Yemen in 1972 represent one of the most significant early Quranic finds, and yet access to them has been politically restricted for decades. The Birmingham Quran fragment, dated to approximately 30 Hijra, is celebrated precisely because early manuscripts are so rare, but its existence as a fragment raises the question of what happened to the complete documents from which such fragments derive.

## The Logical Case for a Complete Primary Manuscript

Several lines of reasoning support the conclusion that a complete, high-quality written Quran existed during or immediately after the Prophet's lifetime, and that Hafsa's copy was most likely this document.

## The Material Quality Argument

The Arabian Peninsula in the 7th century was not isolated from advanced civilizations. The Quraysh of Mecca were sophisticated long-distance traders with regular commercial relationships with Byzantine and Sassanid territories, both of which had advanced traditions of document preservation using high-quality vellum and parchment. The Quran itself references the Quraysh trading journeys to Syria and Yemen. It is not credible that a community with this level of commercial exposure, when faced with preserving what they understood to be the literal word of God, would rely exclusively on shoulder bones, palm leaves, and leather scraps as their archival standard.

A more historically coherent picture distinguishes between two categories of written material: informal personal notes made by companions during revelations, using whatever was available, and an official primary document prepared with the best materials accessible through trade networks, intended for permanence. The deteriorated fragments that survive today are more likely examples of the former than the latter. A high-quality primary document, stored carefully, could have survived for centuries in good condition. The fragments showing significant deterioration may be telling us about personal copies, not about what the primary document looked like or where it is.

## The Argument from the Scribes of Revelation

The Prophet, peace be upon him, had a number of known scribes of revelation, among them Zayd ibn Thabit, Ubay ibn Ka'b, Abdullah ibn Mas'ud, Uthman ibn Affan, and Mu'awiya ibn Abi Sufyan, may God be pleased with them all. This historical fact raises a fundamental question that has not received adequate scholarly attention: when revelation descended, did the Prophet summon all his scribes so that each produced his own copy, or did he summon whoever was available at that moment to record in a single official manuscript?

The answer to this question carries significant historical implications. If each scribe independently recorded his own copy, this would explain the existence of multiple written versions among the companions, but it would also mean that each individual copy was partial or incomplete, and that Zayd ibn Thabit's mission was to gather these

scattered portions and verify them against a complete reference document. If, on the other hand, there was a principal scribe responsible for the single official manuscript, with others assisting as needed or writing for purposes of transmission and teaching, this supports the existence of one carefully preserved official copy from the time of the Prophet himself.

A historical indicator favors the second possibility. Zayd ibn Thabit is described in the sources as the most consistently present of the scribes and the most regularly engaged in recording revelation. Abu Bakr's selection of Zayd specifically for the task of verification may have been precisely because he had the closest connection to the original manuscript and the most intimate knowledge of it. Furthermore, the return of the document to Hafsa, may God be pleased with her, upon the completion of Zayd's mission was not incidental. It was an acknowledgment that she held the original reference that the Prophet himself had entrusted to her.

The specific research question this argument raises is: do the early Islamic historical sources contain indicators that define the distinct role of each scribe, and was there a clear distinction between writing in the official manuscript and writing for personal or instructional purposes? Answering this question alone would be sufficient to redraw a clearer picture of how the original Quranic manuscript came into being and where the authoritative copy resided.

## The Argument from the Final Review

Islamic sources consistently record that Jibreel, peace be upon him, reviewed the entire Quran with the Prophet, peace be upon him, twice during the last Ramadan of his life, rather than once as had been the practice in every preceding year. This event has traditionally been interpreted as an indication of the approaching end of the Prophet's life. However, it carries a documentary significance that has not received the scholarly attention it deserves.

From a practical standpoint, the verses of the Quran were revealed over twenty-three years, many in response to specific events, with the Prophet instructing his scribes to place each verse in its designated position within its surah. This means that the process of recording was never linear or sequential. It was a continuous process of inserting new verses between already written text. The natural consequence of this process is that the personal copies held by the companions were fragmented and discontinuous, consisting of scattered pieces arranged in a certain order rather than a complete and flowing text.

The final review with Jibreel, peace be upon him, represents a decisive turning point in this context. When the Prophet completed that final review, he had for the first time in the history of revelation a complete, ordered text sealed with divine approval. At precisely this moment it becomes not merely logical but expected that the Prophet would have instructed his scribes to rewrite the Quran in its entirety as a single final

continuous manuscript, reflecting the complete order approved by Jibreel in that last review. This final manuscript would have been qualitatively different from everything that preceded it, because it would have been for the first time a complete and uninterrupted text reflecting the definitive and approved form of the Quran.

This adds a new dimension to understanding the status of Hafsa's copy, may God be pleased with her. If this final manuscript was written in the aftermath of the last review, it was not merely a compilation of what had been written before. It was a new complete document reflecting the final form approved under the supervision of Jibreel and by the command of the Prophet, peace be upon him. Its entrustment to Hafsa afterward carries a deeper meaning than simple preservation: the Prophet did not entrust her with one copy among many, but with the final reviewed and approved manuscript, sealed with divine confirmation in the last Ramadan of his blessed life.

This context raises a specific research question worthy of serious investigation: do the early Islamic historical sources contain any indication that the Prophet instructed his scribes to rewrite the Quran in its entirety following the final review with Jibreel? And is there a connection between this event and the manuscript that passed into Hafsa's custody? Answering these two questions could fundamentally reframe our understanding of the origin of the earliest Quranic manuscript.

### The Destruction Motive Problem

The most commonly cited explanation for the disappearance of Hafsa's copy is that Marwan ibn al-Hakam, as governor of Medina, ordered its destruction after her death. This account does not withstand logical scrutiny. Destruction serves no plausible motive. A politically ambitious figure would gain more from controlling access to the primary manuscript than from eliminating it. A pious figure would treat it as sacred. The destruction narrative may itself be historically unreliable, or it may have been constructed later to explain an absence that had a different cause entirely. The reliability of this account deserves serious scholarly scrutiny rather than uncritical acceptance.

### Oral Tradition and Written Manuscript: Two Complementary Dimensions of Quranic Preservation

The standard response to questions about physical manuscripts is that the Quran's preservation is fundamentally oral, secured through a continuous chain of memorization by huffaz across generations. This is a serious and legitimate claim. The Quran was transmitted simultaneously by large numbers of people across multiple regions, producing consistent results that could be cross-verified continuously. Any deviation in any individual's recitation would have been immediately caught by the broader community of memorizers. This is a robust collective preservation mechanism that is beyond doubt.

However, the strength of the oral tradition does not mean that Muslims should cease searching for the written manuscript that was set down under the direct supervision of the Prophet, peace be upon him. The two dimensions are not in conflict. They are complementary. This proposal holds with complete conviction that the original written copy of the Quran still exists and is preserved, because God named His revelation both a Book and a Quran, and the combination of these two names indicates that divine preservation encompasses both dimensions together: the written and the recited, which is recited from a book. The Prophet, peace be upon him, was the most diligent of people in ensuring the written recording of revelation, and he instructed his companions not to write down anything he said except the Quran, so that the word of Allah would remain distinct and clear, unmixed with anything else.

## The Research Gap

Humanity routinely invests significant resources in the archaeological recovery and scholarly analysis of documents that are thousands of years older than the earliest Quranic manuscripts, documents with far less living significance to any contemporary community. The Dead Sea Scrolls have been studied, debated, and analyzed for decades. Egyptian papyri, Mesopotamian clay tablets, and Greco-Roman manuscript fragments receive sustained scholarly and institutional attention.

The earliest physical copies of the Quran, a text central to the daily lives of nearly two billion people, have received comparatively limited systematic research attention. The questions that remain unanswered are not peripheral:

- What happened to Hafsa's manuscript and when?
- What happened to the Uthmanic copies and where are they?
- Do early manuscripts exist in private collections, family libraries, or institutional archives across the Muslim world that have not been made available to researchers?
- What do the San'a manuscripts tell us, and why has access been restricted?
- What would scientific dating and material analysis of claimed Uthmanic manuscripts in Tashkent and Istanbul reveal?

These are answerable questions, or at minimum, questions that serious research could bring significantly closer to resolution.

## Proposed Research Agenda

### **Objective One: Comprehensive Manuscript Survey**

Conduct a systematic survey of libraries, private collections, religious institutions, and government archives across Muslim-majority countries to identify uncatalogued early Quranic manuscripts. This should include outreach to family collections and waqf-administered repositories that have never been formally assessed.

### **Objective Two: Scientific Dating and Material Analysis**

Apply radiocarbon dating, multispectral imaging, and material analysis to all claimed early manuscripts, including those in Tashkent and Istanbul, to establish reliable dating and understand the material quality of early copies. This would address the question of whether surviving manuscripts are primary documents or secondary personal copies.

### **Objective Three: Historical Documentation Research**

Commission rigorous historical research into the chain of custody of Hafsa's copy and the Uthmanic manuscripts, tracing all available primary sources including early Islamic historical texts, to construct the most complete possible account of when and why these documents disappeared, and to assess the reliability of competing narratives such as the Marwan destruction account.

### **Objective Four: San'a Manuscript Access**

Pursue formal scholarly access to the San'a manuscripts with the cooperation of Yemeni authorities and international academic institutions, to allow full analysis of what are potentially the most significant early Quranic documents currently known to exist.

### **Objective Five: Interdisciplinary Scholarly Forum**

Establish an ongoing interdisciplinary forum bringing together Islamic scholars, historians, archaeologists, and manuscript scientists to treat these questions as a coherent research program rather than isolated inquiries.

## **Why This Matters**

This research represents the highest respect and honor for the Quran. A faith community that takes its scripture seriously should want to know everything knowable about its history and preservation. Unanswered questions do not protect faith. They create vulnerability. When serious historical questions go unaddressed by Muslim scholars and institutions, the space is filled by others whose motivations may be less respectful and whose conclusions may be less careful. Proactive, rigorous, Muslim-led scholarship on these questions is both intellectually honest and strategically wise.

Furthermore, the absence of the original manuscripts is not a settled matter. It is an open question. The assumption that they are gone may itself be premature. The history of manuscript discovery, from the Dead Sea Scrolls to the San'a find to countless rediscovered documents in Mali, Yemen, and private European collections, tells us that what is assumed lost is sometimes simply unfound. The Quran deserves the same presumption that we apply to every other significant ancient document: that absence of

evidence is not evidence of absence, and that serious search effort produces serious results.

## The Spiritual Dimension: What This Discovery Would Mean

Throughout history, Muslims have felt blessing and closeness to the Prophet, peace be upon him, through everything associated with him: places where he lived, relics attributed to him, ground upon which he walked. How much greater would that feeling be if a Muslim could look upon the very Quran written under the Prophet's own supervision, or know with certainty that these words were set down in his time and in his presence?

The recovery of this manuscript, or the confirmation of its existence, would not be merely an academic achievement. It would be a spiritual gift to every Muslim on earth. It would be a physical embodiment of revelation, a direct connection between the believer today and the moment the word of God descended. There is no artifact in Islamic history that could match this in significance or in the depth of what it would give to hearts.

This is ultimately the true motivation behind this proposal. The Quran deserves to be searched for with every effort that the greatest of all trusts deserves.

## Conclusion

The disappearance of the earliest physical copies of the Quran, the manuscript held by Hafsa bint Umar (RA) and the copies standardized and distributed by Khalifa Uthman ibn Affan, is one of the most significant and least examined questions in Islamic historical scholarship. The logical case for their having existed as high-quality, carefully preserved documents is strong. The explanations offered for their disappearance are thin and in some cases implausible. The research tools and scholarly frameworks needed to investigate these questions seriously exist and are routinely applied to far less significant historical documents.

This proposal calls for a structured, well-resourced, and intellectually honest research program to investigate what happened to these manuscripts, whether any survive, and what their recovery or confirmed absence would tell us about the earliest history of the Quran's preservation. The question is not whether the Quran is preserved, because we believe that Allah guaranteed its preservation, but whether we have done everything within our capacity to honor that preservation by searching for what He protected. The most revered book in the world deserves nothing less.

*Note: All arguments in this proposal are derived from historical reasoning, logical analysis, and the available manuscript record.*

## Possible Recipients for This Proposal

**Academic Institutions:** The Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies, Harvard Divinity School's Islamic studies program, the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris, and the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies in Riyadh all have the scholarly credibility and resources to take this seriously.

**Muslim World League and OIC:** The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation has the institutional reach to coordinate a multi-country research effort and the standing to open doors in countries where manuscripts may be held privately or in restricted archives.

**University Manuscript Centers:** The Bodleian Library at Oxford, the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin, and the Bibliothèque nationale de France all hold significant Islamic manuscript collections and have established relationships with Muslim-majority institutions.

**Yemeni Cultural Authorities:** Given the significance of the San'a manuscripts, a direct approach to Yemeni cultural and religious authorities, ideally through an international academic intermediary, would be valuable.

**Independent Islamic Scholars:** Scholars like Mustafa Akyol, who works at the intersection of Islamic reform and historical inquiry, or researchers affiliated with the International Quranic Studies Association, would be natural allies and potential co-signatories who could give the proposal scholarly credibility within Muslim academic circles.