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# Palimpsesting or Paper Reuse in Islamic Manuscripts of West Africa

**Abstract:** In the Arabic and Islamic manuscript traditions, palimpsests are scarce and confined geographically to the eastern part of the Islamic world, Mashriq; materially to parchment; chronologically to the first centuries of Islamic history; and thematically to Qur'anic content. This paper is the first attempt to describe and examine West African Islamic palimpsests and paper reuse, based on a corpus of seventeen manuscripts from the so-called Timbuktu collections. Through the analysis of the upper and lower text in each case, we explored the reasons for palimpsesting and its methods. A time gap between the upper and lower layers was then estimated, when possible. Several cases offer intriguing insights, and others raise broader questions about whether paper reuse in West Africa could be considered a way of dealing with old and discarded artefacts.

## 1 Introduction

From an etymological point of view, the term 'palimpsest' derives from the ancient Greek word *παλίψηστος*, composed of *πάλιν* ('again' or 'another time') and *ψάω* ('to scrape'), which describes the phenomenon where 'the original writing was scraped and washed off, the surface re-smoothed and the literary material written on the salvaged material'.<sup>1</sup> While Georges Declerq uses *codex rescriptus* as a synonym of 'palimpsest', identifying it as a manuscript whose primary script has been effaced to make way for fresh writing,<sup>2</sup> Alba Fedeli insists on the ambiguity of *codex rescriptus*, since it does not specify the purpose behind the act of writing a second time, which could be to reuse, to restore, or to correct a text.<sup>3</sup> Generally, the Arabic terminology uses the words *ṭirs* and *ṭils* to refer to a text that has been effaced or obliterated.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the words do differentiate between a text that has been erased inefficiently (*ṭils*) and one that has been effaced efficiently

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1 Metzger and Ehrman 2005, 21.

2 Declerq 2007, 7.

3 Fedeli 2023, 255. See also Agati 2004, 66–67.

4 Gacek 2009, 184.

(*ṭirs*), which accordingly allows the writing material to be used again.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, and in terms of terminological clarity and accuracy, *ṭirs* represents the Arabic word for ‘palimpsest’ and *taṭrīs* is ‘the technique of palimpsesting’. A palimpsest is not necessarily and only composed of a lower text, or *scriptio inferior*, and an upper text, or *scriptio superior*, since particularly in the case of parchment, it can be reused once or twice (*bis rescriptus*, *ter rescriptus*) or even more times.<sup>6</sup> Asma Hilali gives the example of a ‘strategic record’, such as Sinai, St Catherine’s Monastery, arab. 514, which contains five layers written in Syriac, Greek, and Arabic.<sup>7</sup> The palimpsesting was mainly done on parchment with some documented cases on papyrus.<sup>8</sup>

Palimpsests in Arabic script are scarce, and although researchers have made continuous efforts and achievements in Arabic and Islamic manuscript history, the available material is mainly limited to the field of Qur’anic studies.<sup>9</sup> In this field, the so-called Mingana-Lewis Palimpsest (Cambridge, University Library, Or. 1287) was the first discovery to generate interest in the scholarly milieu,<sup>10</sup> accordingly making Mount Sinai and its palimpsests the first reference point.<sup>11</sup> Continuing a little bit further south, the second reference point is Šan‘ā’ and its Codex 1.<sup>12</sup> Finally, we

5 In Ibn Maẓūr’s *Lisān al-‘arab* (1993, vol. 6, 121 and 124), the verb *ṭalasa* is associated only with erasure. There is no further action that can be done after that. In addition, this verb correlates with ineffective erasure: *وإذا محوت الكتاب لتفسد خطه قلت طلبت فإذا أنعمت محوه قلت طرست* *wa-idhā maḥawta al-kitāb li-tuḥsida khaṭṭahu qulta ṭalastu fa-idhā an‘amta maḥwahu qulta ṭarastu* (‘And when you erased the book to spoil its handwriting, you would say, *ṭalastu*, [yet] when you erase it smoothly, you say *ṭarastu*). Nevertheless, the verb *ṭarasa* means to ‘erase effectively and to write on the erased material’: *الطرس الكتاب الممحو الذي يستطاع أن تعاد عليه الكتابة*: *al-ṭirs al-kitāb al-mamhūw al-ladhī yustaṭā‘u an tu‘āda ‘alyhi al-kitāba* (‘*al-ṭirs* [is] the erased book that can be rewritten’).

6 Escobar 2006, 16.

7 Hilali 2017, 5; see also Grigory Kessel’s contribution to this volume, p. 190.

8 Hilali 2017, 5; Tchernetska and Wilson 2011, 243.

9 Alba Fedeli (2023, 256) argues that the limited number of Qur’anic palimpsests is the reason why it has never led to the formation of ‘a proper field of research into Qur’anic palimpsests’.

10 Since 2005, Fedeli has been undertaking extensive research on this palimpsest in an effort to contextualise it, present its story and the story of its *scriptio inferior*, and describe its digitalisation project. See Fedeli 2005, 3–7; Fedeli 2011; Fedeli 2019, 174–198. See also George 2011.

11 In her latest paper about the first results of the Sinai Palimpsests Project, Claudia Rapp (2023) studied the religious preference in the practice of palimpsesting and the circulation of erased parchment according to the religious affiliation. Moreover, she underlined the correlation between the erased language and the overtext language.

12 In 1981, Gerd Rüdiger Puin showed the first academic interest in the Šan‘ā’ palimpsest. In 2005, Alba Fedeli traced the ‘lost palimpsest’ in Cambridge and provided initial information about its history. Then, in 2007, Behnam Sadeghi and Mohsen Goudarzi produced the first complete edition

come to the palimpsests found in the Genizah of Cairo and those detected in the Qubbat al-khazna in Damascus.<sup>13</sup> All four of these reference points, together with some others, were deeply scrutinised and discussed by Fedeli in her recent paper on Qur'anic palimpsests.<sup>14</sup>

Despite these continuous attempts, a noticeable gap can be perceived on three levels. Firstly, these studies are geographically delimited. The Mashriq is the core of this academic interest, leaving the rest of the Islamic lands on the periphery.<sup>15</sup> Secondly, chronologically speaking, the available studies have focused mainly on palimpsests dating from the first centuries of Islamic history, thus prioritising them over other periods. Finally, regarding the materiality of the palimpsests, the studies so far have been carried out mainly on parchment with some examples on papyrus.

The early adoption and rapid spread of paper in the Islamic world may account for the scarcity of palimpsests.<sup>16</sup> The same logic could explain the absence or even implausibility of palimpsests among West African Islamic manuscripts.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, paper – the most common writing support in West African manuscripts – is unsuitable for erasing and thus for creating palimpsests.

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of the *scriptio inferior*. From this date on, the Ṣan'ā' palimpsest has been a focus of academic attention, with scholars generating different hypotheses about its codicological nature and many opinions concerning the reconstruction of its *scriptio inferior*. On the one hand, Elisabeth Puin, Behnam Sadeghi, Mohsen Goudarzi, François Déroche and Éléonore Cellard maintain that the fragments of Ṣan'ā' 1 actually form a complete codex that was dispersed over time. On the other hand, Asma Hilali holds that both the *scriptio inferior* and the *scriptio superior* were not intended to be part of a codex, suggesting that the Qur'anic passages were likely written in teaching circles. See Fedeli 2005, 3–7; Sadeghi and Goudarzi 2012, 11; Déroche 2014, 48–56; Déroche 2019, 201–229; Cellard 2021, 1–28; Hilali 2017, 67–70, 141–152; Fedeli 2023, 262.

13 Ronny Vollandt (2023) scrutinises the palimpsests coming from both places and gives the statistics on the languages present in the upper and lower texts and the genres represented in both layers. For a detailed overview of the history and the documents of the Qubbat al-khazna, consult the edited volume D'Ottone Rambach, Hirschler and Vollandt 2020.

14 Fedeli 2023 provides a comprehensive overview of the corpus of Qur'anic palimpsests that have been discovered and studied thus far. Fedeli's analysis goes beyond the upper Qur'anic text, as she also delved into the lower texts of Greek Bible and the Sayings of the Fathers of the Desert, contributing to a deeper comprehension of palimpsests.

15 The Mashriq (the East) is opposed to the Maghrib (the West). Geographically, the Mashriq extends from Egypt and to the region of the Levant (*bilād al-Shām*), comprising modern-day Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the Arabian peninsula (*al-jazīra al-'arabiyya*), Iraq, and some regions in Iran and Central Asia. See Ibn Ḥawqal 1992, 304; al-Jabrānī 2016, 42.

16 Fedeli 2023, 262.

17 For example, Murray Last (2008, 156) suggests that no books or texts in West African collections were lost in reuse, paper being an inconvenient material for that.

However, the British explorer Dixon Denham cites an instance of washing paper in nineteenth-century Bornu: a local scholar, needing a blank sheet to write a letter, washed off some talismanic writings from a scrap of paper and dried it in the sun.<sup>18</sup> Yet this anecdote<sup>19</sup> provides insufficient evidence to draw conclusions about the extent to which paper manuscripts were washed in this way to accommodate new writings. Rather, this exception might prove the rule that palimpsests are rare finds in West African manuscript collections. In fact, none had been identified or reported until now.<sup>20</sup>

At present, the authors have come across seventeen manuscripts (listed in the Appendix) that may qualify as palimpsests or recycled manuscripts.<sup>21</sup> The manuscripts we discuss fall into the category of palimpsests since they represent new

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**18** Denham, Clapperton and Oudney 1826, 111. We are grateful to Michaelle Biddle for bringing this source to our attention. Interestingly, Denham continues his description with the scholar drinking the inked water and rubbing it over his neck and head. This procedure of washing the paper thus resembles talisman-making practices using wooden boards, where selected Qur'anic verses are copied onto the wooden board and then washed off with water. This act is believed to impart healing or protective properties and the resulting water is either drunk or applied to one's body (see e.g. Mommersteeg 2012, 86).

**19** There is another anecdote related to paper recycling in nineteenth-century West Africa. It concerns the travel journal of Scottish explorer Alexander Gordon Laing (d. 1826). Laing was the first European to reach Timbuktu but was killed shortly after he departed from the city. His journal detailing his travels is believed to have been lost (see Smith 1985, 20). However, the journal seems to have then been found: it was reused by a local scribe as writing support for a work on Arabic grammar. There is conflicting evidence about the manuscript's current location. According to some sources, it belongs to the Mamma Haïdara Library (Hammer 2016, 4); see also the Robert Goldwater Library's Flickr account, <<https://www.flickr.com/photos/goldwaterlibrary/3533760343/in/photostream/>> (accessed on 30 May 2024). However, we were unable to find the manuscript in the digitised collection on the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library website. According to other sources, Laing's 'recycled' travel journal is among the manuscripts of Fondo Kati, curated by Ismael Diadié Haïdara (Molins Lliteras 2015, 139); see also the image <<https://www.alamy.com/ismal-diadi-kuti-fondo-kati-librarymanuscript-from-alexander-gordon-laing-intimbuktu-mali-africa-image385853252.html>> (accessed on 30 May 2024).

**20** For instance, Michaelle Biddle and Dmitry Bondarev shared with us that they did not encounter any palimpsest during their extensive work with manuscript collections of present-day Nigeria, Niger, and Chad. One of the authors of this article, Darya Ogorodnikova, observed a similar tendency while researching manuscripts of the Greater Senegambia region. Khaoula Trad, this article's second author, was the first to flag a manuscript with a talisman written over another text barely visible on the page. Saadou Traore discovered a few more examples while researching manuscripts of the al-ʿĀqib private library in Timbuktu.

**21** We discovered at least three more palimpsests after submitting this article: ABS 00979, ABS 02435, and BMH 30524.

objects created using old materials.<sup>22</sup> In most cases, this entails changes in the manuscript's content, format, and function. Yet we are not always able to determine whether the writing surface was deliberately prepared to receive new content by erasing the previous one. In fact, we have come across some cases where the undertexts seem to have disintegrated due to water or moisture damage.<sup>23</sup> One could describe such instances as recycling or reusing paper.

The manuscripts from the current corpus are from the so-called Timbuktu collections: Mamma Haïdara Library (hereafter: BMH), the private libraries of al-Ṭāhir Mu'ādh (hereafter: ATM), Abū Bakr b. Sa'īd (hereafter: ABS), and al-'Āqib (hereafter: AQB).<sup>24</sup> Our list, however, is not exhaustive, and nor did it result from a systematic search for palimpsests; they were encountered while working with manuscript collections for other research projects.

The major limitation of our study is that we had to rely on digital images, not being able to examine the original manuscripts (except for one) for various reasons.<sup>25</sup> Above all, this affects paper analysis and checking for watermarks to establish dating. Nevertheless, in a handful of cases, the dating of manuscripts in our corpus can be at least roughly estimated. The earliest one can be dated, based on a watermark, to the late seventeenth to early eighteenth centuries (see 'Case study 2' below). A few more manuscripts are written on what looks like wove machine-made paper, which could not predate the nineteenth century.<sup>26</sup> In two other cases, manuscript content helped to determine the mid to late nineteenth century as a *terminus post quem*. Both manuscripts contain texts by local West African authors: one is a text on the Tijānī Sufi order, *Suyūf al-sa'īd* ('The Swords of the Happy') by 'Umar al-Fūtī (d. 1280 AH / 1864 CE), and the other is a poem in praise of the latter by al-Mukhtār b. Wadī'at Allāh al-Māsinī, known as Yirkoy Talfī (d. c. 1862).<sup>27</sup>

22 See Fedeli 2023, 256 for such an interpretation of the term 'palimpsesting'. See also Halle O'Neal's contribution to this volume for a broader definition.

23 The most conspicuous example is the manuscript ATM 01102, where only the upper part of the text was washed off due to water damage, and its lower part is still clearly visible.

24 The history of this library is available in Haïdara 2011, 242–249; see also Molins Lliteras 2017, 154. There is no information about al-Ṭāhir Mu'ādh or Abū Bakr b. Sa'īd, except that their manuscript collections are part of the thirty-five private libraries formerly situated in Timbuktu, Mali, and currently housed in Bamako under the auspices of the non-governmental organisation Sauvegarde et Valorisation des Manuscrits pour la Défense de la Culture Islamique (hereafter: SAVAMA-DCI). Images of the manuscripts are available on the website of the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library, <<https://www.vhmm.org/readingRoom>> (accessed on 22 February 2024).

25 We had a chance to examine the manuscript ATM 01287 in February 2023.

26 See Biddle 2017, 38.

27 Manuscripts BMH 16756 and AQB 02689, respectively; on the authors, see ALA IV, 220 and 233.

In terms of the contents, the majority (ten out of seventeen) are texts on healing and talisman making, in both the upper and the lower layers. However, surprisingly, we also found various texts from the classical Islamic curriculum, ranging from the Qur'an (BMH 19191), legal manuals (ATM 01287), and texts on belief (BMH 17799) to Sufism, prophetic tradition, and even a note recording expenditures or the lending of money (AQB 02153).

The present article is a first attempt to document and analyse palimpsests and paper reuse in West African Islamic manuscripts. Thus, it offers insights into palimpsesting techniques in the Islamic world beyond the boundaries of the Mashriq and the first centuries of Islamic history, as well as on materials other than parchment. Additionally, this article aims to broaden the study of Islamic palimpsests beyond the prevalent realm of Qur'anic studies. In our analysis, we will consider the motivations behind, the methods of text erasure used on, the relation between, and (where possible) the time elapsed between the lower and upper layers.

## 2 Writing support

One motivation typically cited for creating palimpsests is economic considerations linked to a lack or scarcity of writing materials. To evaluate whether this applies to West Africa, the following section provides an overview of various writing supports in the region, focusing on paper supply and availability.

Despite the need for importation, paper served as the primary medium for manuscripts in West Africa. It seems that local writing supports could scarcely substitute it. Animal skins were seldom used as a writing support and only for lavish manuscripts.<sup>28</sup> The limited use of parchment might be explained by its high price: since it involves killing animals, even local manufacturing is expensive.<sup>29</sup> A counter-argument suggests that, at certain times, its fabrication might have been less costly than imported paper.<sup>30</sup>

Another widespread alternative for paper in the West African context, still in use today, are wooden tablets (*lawh*). Washing off the text from their surface

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<sup>28</sup> Parchment manuscripts have been reported in collections in Mauritania (Lydon 2004, 56 and Lydon 2011, 51) and Timbuktu, Mali (Bloom 2008, 48; Haïdara 2011, 247). Neither of the latter two reports specifies whether the parchment manuscripts in Malian collections were produced locally or imported.

<sup>29</sup> Bloom 2008, 46.

<sup>30</sup> Lydon 2011, 51.

allows for multiple reuses, making them an excellent learner's tool. However, given their limited space, thickness, and weight, they are evidently less appropriate repositories for lengthy texts. Thus, wooden tablets served as the primary medium for Qur'anic school pupils and intermediate students, while advanced students and full-fledged scholars preferred paper.<sup>31</sup>

References to wooden tablets intended for elementary learners as a substitute for scarce and costly writing paper abound in the travel accounts of seventeenth- to nineteenth-century European explorers.<sup>32</sup> What stands out even more from these accounts is how much paper was sought and treasured by local scholars: travellers often gave paper as offerings or compensation and even used it as a currency.<sup>33</sup> Remarkably, a nineteenth-century scribe from Fouta Djallon (present-day Guinea) even documented the name of the fellow scholar who offered him paper for the manuscript.<sup>34</sup>

High costs and complicated access to paper resulted from long-distance imports. The region's supply in paper, mainly of European manufacture, was carried out through the trans-Saharan trade routes from northern markets and (by the eighteenth century) through ports of Atlantic trade.<sup>35</sup> Yet, to purchase paper scholars often had to travel to trade hubs – a venture fraught with risk. Two cases

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**31** Classical Islamic education is divided into two stages: elementary, known as Qur'anic school, and intermediate-advanced, known as 'ilm school or else 'study of books'. During the elementary stage, pupils learn the basics of the Islamic faith, memorise the Qur'an, and acquire writing skills. The higher stage includes studying texts on various Islamic disciplines with a teacher. On stages of classical Islamic education in West Africa, see, for example, Tamari and Bondarev 2013, 7–8; Mommersteeg 2012, 48; Tamari 2016, 30; Reichmuth 2011, 215–218. On the usage of different media at various stages of classical Islamic education, see Bondarev 2017; Tamari 2016, 38. See Brigaglia 2017 for a comprehensive analysis of wooden tablets in traditional Qur'anic education.

**32** For instance, Richard Jobson, travelling in the early seventeenth century along the River Gambia, records that no paper was available for local scholars other than imported through trade, and that was of great value (Jobson 1623, 85–86). Durand in the late seventeenth century accounts that, while teachers favoured paper, their pupils wrote on wooden boards, the paper being too scarce and too expensive (Durand 1802, 69 and 260). One finds almost the exact wording in the travel account of the mid-Niger Bend by Mungo Park, according to whom 'scholars wrote their lessons upon thin boards; paper being too expensive for general use' (Park 1864, 119).

**33** See e.g. Michel Jajolet de la Courbe (Cultru 1913, 115 and 169); Hecquard 1855, 135 and 569; Barth 1857; Caillié 1830.

**34** Diallo Lélouma and Salvaing 2017, 77.

**35** For in-depth studies on paper trade in West Africa, see e.g. Bloom 2008; Walz 2011; Lydon 2009; Lydon 2011.

are known – that of Ayuba Diallo and Lamine Kebe – who, while travelling for trade purposes, including to procure paper, were kidnapped and sold into slavery.<sup>36</sup>

However, with the development of paper-manufacturing technologies and centres in Europe and the diversification of trading markets in West Africa, by the second half of the nineteenth century paper became more readily available, stimulating the production of manuscripts.

### 3 Techniques of text deletion

Creating palimpsests involves eliminating previous text from the writing surface. Since paper absorbs ink, it cannot be as easily erased as parchment or papyrus.<sup>37</sup> The following section discusses possible methods used in the broader Islamic tradition and West Africa.

Various methods of cancelling or erasing texts on parchment and paper have been documented in Islamic manuscript production.<sup>38</sup> For instance, writing can be left in place, but covered with another layer of ink by crossing it out or blackening it. Alternatively, it can be eliminated from the writing surface by rubbing it out or washing it off with water or acidic liquids.

West African manuscripts also exhibit some of these techniques. Cancelling or erasing writing is usually associated with correcting scribal errors. However, it also occurs with a change of manuscript ownership to invalidate or obscure previous possession records.<sup>39</sup> Crossing out or blackening the irrelevant or unwanted parts appears to be more common (probably because it required less efforts). Occasionally, the writings seem to have been rubbed out, perhaps with the aid of some liquid, as the ink of the affected writing looks pale and slightly smudged (Figs 1a–b).

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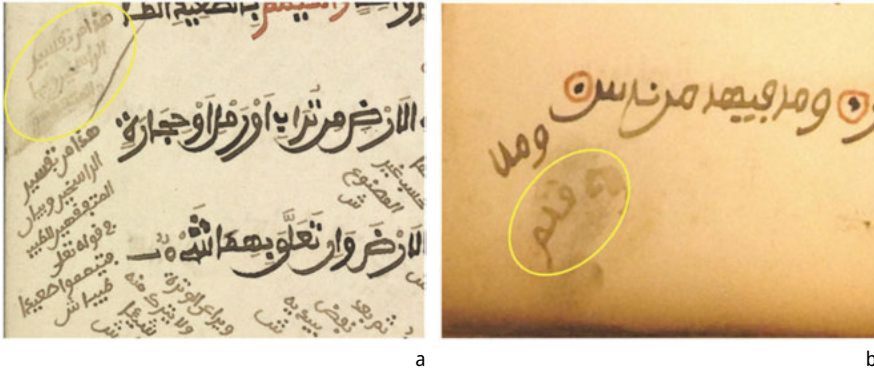
<sup>36</sup> See Diouf 1998, 58, citing these two cases. On the biography of Ayuba Diallo, see Bluett 1734. On Lamine Kebe, see Dwight 1835.

<sup>37</sup> Bloom 2001, 49. Interestingly, he also notes that since paper cannot be erased as easily as parchment or papyrus, officials considered it more advantageous as a medium to prevent document forgeries.

<sup>38</sup> See Hilali 2017, 7–13 and Vollandt 2023, 238–239 for a survey of the principal sources and techniques described therein.

<sup>39</sup> See e.g. Molins Lliteras 2017, 170–172.





**Figs 1a–b:** Scribal correction by erasure of a marginal commentary and a catchword. Left: Dublin, Trinity College, MS 2689, fol. 34<sup>r</sup>; The Board of Trinity College; right: Paris, Bibliothèque universitaire de langues et civilisations, MS.ARA.219bis, fol. 214<sup>v</sup> (excerpts).

These examples of rubbing out or washing off concern primarily a few words or sentences rather than entire texts. Other occurrences exist where manuscript folios (including those discussed further in this article) have been entirely ‘cleared’ of previous writings. However, it is not straightforward to determine whether earlier layers were purposefully destroyed. In some cases, water stains (Fig. 2a) or patches of intact writing (Fig. 2b) may suggest unintentional water damage as opposed to deliberate soaking of pages in water.<sup>40</sup> In manuscripts with barely discernible writing and no traces of moisture damage or erasure, a possible explanation is ink deterioration or fading.<sup>41</sup> It becomes even more plausible that some unintended processes caused text to vanish when only some folios within a manuscript are impacted and no subsequent text has been added to them.

<sup>40</sup> According to our communication with the manuscript conservation specialists Michaelle Biddle and Maria Luisa Russo, washing or soaking entire sheets allows ink to be removed without water leaving traces or stains on the sheets. However, the paper might get warped after drying and should be placed under a press to flatten out.

<sup>41</sup> For instance, one may think of inks fading over time or when exposed to sunlight. Saadou Traore (unpublished thesis draft) mentions a traditional technique adopted by the manuscript owners in Timbuktu, which consists of spreading the manuscripts out in the sun and in the shade for several days after each rainy season to protect them from humidity and insects. However, according to Biddle and Russo (see n. 40), considering the typical West African ink compositions, washing off the text is more probable than fading ink.



**Figs 2a–b:** Manuscript pages where water damage has caused the writing to wash off. Images courtesy of the Melville J. Herskovits Library of African Studies, Umar Falke Collection (uncatalogued), Northwestern University Libraries.

However, the text disintegrating naturally from the manuscript's pages likely would take considerable time, whereas washing the ink off the paper with water, as seen above from Dixon Denham's account, could yield quick results.

Among the examined manuscripts, we observed surfaces with underlying layers varying from barely visible to highly apparent. While in some cases we can suggest that the surface was deliberately cleaned, in others we can assume that the scribes reused worn-out materials where the first layer of writing disintegrated naturally. The following sections provide detailed case studies, which also seek to estimate the time gap between the lower and upper layers of writing.

## 4 Case studies

### 4.1 Case study 1

Manuscript BMH 19191, from the Mamma Haïdara Library, comprises 293 loose-leaf folios.<sup>42</sup> It is a composite manuscript consisting of three (unrelated) units with texts on Mālikī law, none of which are dated.<sup>43</sup> Only the first unit, on fols 1<sup>r</sup>–4<sup>v</sup>, has two overlapping layers of text.<sup>44</sup> The thick light-cream paper was paginated by the archivist in pencil at the middle-bottom of the folios (i.e. pages 1–8). Each folio measures 188 mm high × 140 mm wide, with traces of wear and tear and water stains (mainly in the margins). There is a hole in the lower margin caused by insects, which, however, does not impede the reading.

#### 4.1.1 The *scriptio inferior*

The recto of the first folio bears unclear traces of the previous text, but they remain undecipherable by the naked eye. However, the writing is more visible on the folio's verso side, leading us to recognise Qur'anic verses from several subsequent Qur'anic chapters. At first glance, one can notice a distinctive feature, which is the poor material realisation of the text, keeping in mind its nature as Qur'anic text. The layout is irregular, and the slanted base lines testify that the scribe did not use a ruling board (*mīṣṭara*) to carry out the ruling. The number of lines ranges between fourteen and sixteen. The text is written in a thin, unsteady hand in *sūdānī* script (Masina hand) in brown ink. The absence of the *sūra* headings is notable, yet the *basmala* is present and in all instances separated from the

<sup>42</sup> For more details on the notion of loose-leaf manuscripts in West Africa, see Bondarev 2023.

<sup>43</sup> The three units are a part of the introduction of *al-Risāla* (fols 1<sup>v</sup>–4<sup>v</sup>) by Ibn Abī Zayd al-Qayrawānī (d. 386 AH / 996 CE), the entire *al-Risāla* (fols 5<sup>r</sup>–257<sup>v</sup>), and an unknown Mālikī treatise (fols 258<sup>r</sup>–293<sup>v</sup>). Within this unknown treatise, we were able to identify some quotations from *Mawāhib al-jalīl fī sharḥ mukhtaṣar Khalīl* and from *Kitāb al-dhakhīra fī furū' al-mālikiyya*. For further information about Ibn Abī Zayd al-Qayrawānī and his *al-Risāla*, see Muranyi, 'Ibn Abī Zayd al-Qayrawānī', *Encyclopaedia of Islam Three Online*, <[http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912\\_ei3\\_COM\\_30680](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_30680)> (accessed on 28 January 2024).

<sup>44</sup> Ángel Escobar (2006, 17) argues that a palimpsest can be the entirety of a codex, a quire or quires, or a folio or folios.

previous Qur'anic chapter by a blank space.<sup>45</sup> The verse dividers are also absent. To accommodate the lines within the writing frame, the scribe used line fillers,<sup>46</sup> the elongation method (*madd*),<sup>47</sup> and word splits.<sup>48</sup> Instances of scribal negligence have been detected where letters,<sup>49</sup> and sometimes single words<sup>50</sup> and sequences of words,<sup>51</sup> were omitted and some words were crossed out.<sup>52</sup>

The four folios examined contain the shorter chapters towards the end of the Qur'an, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Sequence of Qur'anic chapters identified in the four palimpsested folios.

Fol.	Recto	Verso
1	[Illegible]	Q. 80:36–42, Q. 79:1–24
2	Q. 85:10–22, Q. 84:1–12	Q. 86:3–17, Q. 85:1–9
3	Q. 83:17–36, <sup>53</sup> Q. 82:1–9	Q. 84:13–25, <sup>54</sup> Q. 83:1–16
4	Q. 91:13–15, Q. 90:1–12, Q. 89:1–15 <sup>55</sup>	Q. 92:5–21, Q. 91:1–13

<sup>45</sup> Like on fol. 1<sup>v</sup>, l. 5; fol. 2<sup>r</sup>, l. 9; fol. 2<sup>v</sup>, l. 8; fol. 3<sup>r</sup>, l. 12; fol. 3<sup>v</sup>, l. 8; fol. 4<sup>r</sup>, ll. 4, 9, and 10; fol. 4<sup>v</sup>, l. 9. The blank spaces might have been left to insert the *sura* headings at a later time, in an ink of a different colour.

<sup>46</sup> The line fillers appear in various forms: one straight horizontal line in fol. 2<sup>v</sup>, ll. 8 and 9; two straight horizontal parallel lines in fol. 4<sup>v</sup>, l. 2; three straight horizontal parallel lines in fol. 2<sup>v</sup>, ll. 7 and 11.

<sup>47</sup> Also called *maṭṭ* and *mashq*. It consists in elongating the final letters or words until the end of the line; see Gacek 2009, 146–147. This method can be seen in fol. 3<sup>r</sup>, l. 16 and fol. 4<sup>v</sup>, l. 2.

<sup>48</sup> Such as in fol. 1<sup>v</sup>, ll. 9 and 10; fol. 2<sup>v</sup>, ll. 10 and 11; fol. 3<sup>v</sup>, ll. 3 and 4. Notwithstanding, in many instances, the scribe disregarded the word-splitting rule. As per the rule, the first part of the word is written at the end of a line and the remaining part at the beginning of the next one. However, the manuscript's scribe wrote the first part of the split words repeatedly: at the end of one line and again at the beginning of the following line. In fol. 3<sup>v</sup>, *asāṭi-* is written at the end of l. 14 and *asāṭir* at the beginning of l. 15. Another example is in fol. 4<sup>v</sup>, with *wa-sa-* appearing at the end of l. 5 and reappearing again at the beginning of l. 6, in *wa-sayujannabuha*.

<sup>49</sup> In fol. 4<sup>r</sup>, l. 14, *al-atād* instead of *al-awṭād*. The letter *wāw* is missing.

<sup>50</sup> In fol. 3<sup>r</sup>, ll. 4 and 5, *مِسْكٌ فِي ذَالِكِ* *misk<sup>um</sup> fi dhalika* instead of *مِسْكٌ وَ فِي ذَالِكِ* *misk<sup>um</sup> wa-fi dhalika*. The coordinating conjunction *wāw* is missing.

<sup>51</sup> On fol. 3<sup>v</sup>, l. 16 reads as follows: *هَذَا يَكْسِبُونَ كَلَّا إِنَّهُمْ لَصَالُوا الْجَحِيمِ ثُمَّ يُقَالُ هَذَا يَكْسِبُونَ كَلَّا إِنَّهُمْ عَنْ رَبِّهِمْ يَوْمَئِذٍ لَمَحْجُوبُونَ* *yaksibūn kallā innahum la-ṣālū al-jahīm thumma yuqāl hadhā yaksibūn kallā innahum 'an rabbiḥim yawma'idh<sup>in</sup> la-mahjubūn thumma innahum la-ṣālū al-jahīm thumma yuqāl hadhā*.

<sup>52</sup> On fol. 4<sup>r</sup>, l. 9 starts with a crossed-out *وَبِسْمِ اللَّهِ* *wa-bi-ism all*.

<sup>53</sup> The first word of Q. 80:36 is missing.

<sup>54</sup> The scribe omitted the last five words of the verse.

As Table 1 demonstrates, the text contains some lacunae.<sup>56</sup> Most are due to missing manuscript folios wherever the text discontinues at the end of the folio.<sup>57</sup> However, it appears the scribe also made some omissions (deliberate or accidental) when copying the Qur'anic chapter only in part and continuing writing another chapter on the same folio. In addition, the arrangement of the Qur'anic text shows that the scribe wrote the chapters in reverse order: from the shortest to the longest ones. Such ordering is a hallmark of the Qur'anic school's elemental educational methods.<sup>58</sup> The original order of the folios containing the lower text can be reconstructed as:

fol. 4<sup>v</sup> → fol. 4<sup>r</sup> → [lacuna] → fol. 2<sup>v</sup> → fol. 2<sup>r</sup> → fol. 3<sup>v</sup> → fol. 3<sup>r</sup> → [lacuna] → fol. 1<sup>v</sup>

Considering that at least two folios are missing and the Qur'anic text on the available folios is fragmentary, the original manuscript might have consisted of more folios.

#### 4.1.2 The *scriptio superior*

The *scriptio superior* comprises varying content. The recto side of the first folio has a talismanic figure and the instructions or formula are written in black ink.<sup>59</sup> The talismanic figure consists of a group of twenty-five perpendicularly intersected repeated expressions – *الحس* *li-l-ḥiss* (lit. 'for the sense') – arranged in five horizontal and vertical lines. As for the instructions, three lines explain how this talisman would make the blind see again. The four lower lines of fol. 1<sup>r</sup> are a talismanic formula for getting money (*ṭalab al-māl*) in a *sūdānī* script, in black ink.

Starting from fol. 1<sup>v</sup> until fol. 4<sup>v</sup> is the introduction of *al-Risāla* by Ibn Abī Zayd al-Qayrawānī (d. 386 AH / 996 CE).<sup>60</sup> The text is written in a bold *sūdānī* (Masina hand) script in dark-brown ink, except for some words written in red ink.<sup>61</sup> De-

55 The last line of fol. 4<sup>r</sup> contains only the beginning words of this verse, while the rest of it is missing.

56 Q. 92:1–4, Q. 90:16–20, Q. 89:14–30, Q. 88, Q. 87, Q. 86:1–3, Q. 82:10–19, Q. 81, and Q. 80:1–35.

57 Based on the layout of the manuscript and the amount of missing text, we estimate that it would account for about two folios.

58 The method involves reading, reciting, memorising, and writing on wooden boards the Qur'anic chapters from the shortest (Q. 1, Q. 114–87) to the longest ones. See Brigaglia 2017, 81; Butler 2016, 290; Fortier 2016, 68; Tamari 2016, 39; Reichmuth 2011, 216.

59 For further information about the composition of talismans, see Rahal 2007, 115–121.

60 See n. 43 above for details.

61 These are *Muḥammad* (fol. 1<sup>r</sup>), the two letters *jīm* and *bā'* of the word *wājib* (fol. 3<sup>r</sup>), and the expressions *wa-ṣallā* (fol. 1<sup>r</sup>) and *ammā ba'd* (fol. 3<sup>r</sup>).

spite the change of ink colour, it seems that this text was penned by the same scribe as penned the talismanic content on fol. 1<sup>r</sup>.

The layout of this part of the artefact is regular and consistent. Despite the absence of ruling (*miṣṭara*), seven lines are written on each page, in a writing frame of more or less steady dimensions.<sup>62</sup> The scribe arranged the body of the text in a way so that the lines appear justified, using line fillers<sup>63</sup> and splitting the words between the end of the line and the beginning of the next one.<sup>64</sup> As for the catchword, it is written horizontally, on the left inferior corner of all the versos, and even though it is traced with less care than the main text it remains accurate.

At the beginning of the text (fol. 1<sup>v</sup>, l. 2), the scribe made a mistake and crossed out the three wrong words (*‘alayhi wa-sallam*). In addition, several corrections to the manuscript's main texts have been added by a different hand. This reader-cum-corrector added the diacritics, corrected some errors,<sup>65</sup> and crossed out some unnecessary word splits.<sup>66</sup> Besides, on fol. 1<sup>v</sup> in the left and inferior margins, another hand in black ink inserted two notes, possibly in *‘ajamī*<sup>67</sup> (unidentified).<sup>68</sup>

62 Fol. 1<sup>v</sup> superior margin: 27 mm, inferior margin: 36 mm, right margin: 18 mm, left margin: 27 mm; fol. 2<sup>r</sup> superior margin: 36 mm, inferior margin: 54 mm, right margin: 20 mm, left margin: 27 mm; fol. 2<sup>v</sup> superior margin: 36 mm, inferior margin: 54 mm, right margin: 18 mm, left margin: 27 mm; fol. 3<sup>r</sup> superior margin: 36 mm, inferior margin: 54 mm, right margin: 18 mm, left margin: 27 mm; fol. 3<sup>v</sup> superior margin: 27 mm, inferior margin: 58 mm, right margin: 22 mm, left margin: 27 mm; fol. 4<sup>r</sup> superior margin: 27 mm, inferior margin: 58 mm, right margin: 31 mm, left margin: 27 mm; fol. 4<sup>v</sup> superior margin: 27 mm, inferior margin: 58 mm, right margin: 31 mm, left margin: 27 mm. In fol. 4<sup>r</sup>, l. 2, the last word *ta’ālā* was likely forgotten and then inserted outside of the writing frame in the left margin.

63 The scribe used two wavy horizontal parallel lines: fol. 1<sup>v</sup>, ll. 1 and 2, fol. 2<sup>v</sup>, l. 1; three wavy horizontal parallel lines: fol. 2<sup>v</sup>, l. 4, fol. 3<sup>r</sup>, ll. 1 and 2; an intersection of two wavy horizontal parallel lines with three wavy vertical parallel lines: fol. 3<sup>v</sup>, l. 1; two vertical small circles: fol. 3<sup>v</sup>.

64 For instance fol. 2<sup>v</sup>, end of l. 4 and beginning of l. 5.

65 In fol. 2<sup>r</sup>, l. 2, the reader-cum-corrector added the missing *rā’* in the word *al-arḥām*. Thereafter, in fol. 3<sup>r</sup>, l. 7, he replaced *mīm* and *rā’* in the word *amr* with *mīm*, *wāw*, and *rā’* to get *‘umūr* (i.e. the plural of *amr*). In addition, despite the presence of the two dots of the letter *tā’*, apparently the hole prevented the reading of the ending part of the word *al-diyāna*, which made the reader-cum-corrector add the plural suffix *yānāt*. Afterwards, he likely realised that the correct form is *al-diyāna*, so he crossed out his own correction and drew a circle on the missing part in reference to the correct word *al-diyāna*. On fol. 3<sup>v</sup>, he added the letter *rā’* missing in the word *jawāriḥ* (l. 3) and added the *alif madda* in the word *dhalika* (l. 4).

66 Such as crossing out the *‘ām* in fol. 2<sup>v</sup>, l. 7 and inserting *‘ā* in fol. 3<sup>r</sup>, l. 1. Another example is on the same fol. 3<sup>r</sup>, end of l. 1, the striking out of the letter *qāf*. In addition to these examples, the reader-cum-corrector repeats the first fragment of the split word in the next line in fol. 4<sup>r</sup>, ll. 1 and 2.

67 The term *‘ajamī* (derived from *‘ajam* ‘foreign’ or ‘non-Arab/Arabic’) is applied to sub-Saharan African languages written in Arabic script. For more details, see Bondarev 2021, 708.

### 4.1.3 Some observations

As can be seen in the study of the lower and upper texts, despite the accentuated contrast in the scripts' size,<sup>69</sup> the distinguishing features of the letter shapes and strokes are remarkably similar. The handwriting of both layers is likely of one and the same person, with its typical features shown in Table 2.

Aside from the handwriting, other signs bolster the claim that the same scribe wrote both layers of the palimpsest. These include writing techniques and mistakes such as the word splits,<sup>70</sup> omission of letters, and spelling errors. Given the content, it can also be suggested that the palimpsest was created during the scribe's educational period. Writing the Qur'an on paper marks the end of the elementary phase of the Qur'anic school.<sup>71</sup> Copying and studying *al-Risāla* belongs to the advanced levels of classical Islamic education.<sup>72</sup> This being the case, the time lapse between the creation of the two layers would span between ten and twenty years.<sup>73</sup>

68 This hand used three points in a pyramidal disposition as textual dividers. The annotations read as follows: inferior margin: دوس دوس معوس .: ت تنوس *diwisi dawusi mu'usi .: tu tunūsi*, and left margin: سمكيايل .: معوس تنوس .: دوس .: دوس *diwisi .: dawusi .: mu'usi .: tunūsi samakyā'il*. While it is difficult to figure out the sense of this note, the last word on the left margin is *samakyā'il*, the name of one of the eight angels known as bearers of the throne (*ḥamalat al-'arsh*). The presence of such a term is a strong indication of invoking a spiritual power, which might give a magical or esoteric character to both annotations. In the left margin of the same folio appears a word that we could not decipher due to the damage. Moreover, in fol. 4<sup>r</sup>, two verses in Arabic were written untidily in the superior part of the right margin in black ink and they are likely connected to the phrase *mā ashkala* ('what sounds problematic') in the main text. The verses are: سبعة و ستة و ثمانية | فهذه بيان ما أشكله // تسعة و خمسة و واحدة | ثمانية و اربعة و ثالثة; 'Nine and seven and one | eight and four and three // Seven and six and two | so, this is the explanation of the issue'.

69 The lower text is written in small, slim letters, contrasted with large, bold letters in the upper text.


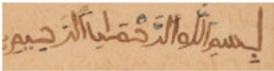












70 In the lower and upper texts appears the same way of splitting the words by repeating what was already written at the end of the previous line.

71 The elementary stage culminates in reciting and writing the Qur'an from memory without mistakes (on wooden tablets or paper). Students are then introduced to advanced stages and study the religious sciences, grammar, and literature. See Tamari 2002, 92; Reichmuth 2011, 216.

72 Tamari (2016, 41–42) notes that the advanced level is divided into three sublevels: the first is where the student begins to study introductory legal works such as *al-Muqaddima al-qurṭubiyya*, *al-Ashmawiyya*, *al-Muqaddima al-'izziyya* and *al-Mukhtaṣar fi-l-ibādāt*. Later on, some students move to advanced works such as *al-Risāla*. Finally, very few students study the most complex texts, e.g. *Tuhfat al-ḥukkām*, *Mukhtaṣar Khalīl*, the *Muwaṭṭa'* and al-Bukhārī's *Ṣaḥīḥ*.

73 According to Tal Tamari (2016, 41), the student does not begin the advanced phase before the age of twenty-five (eighteen for the most precocious cases), and generally study of the advanced books starts for students between twenty-five and forty years old. Based on this, one could suggest that the time lapse between the two layers is between seven and twenty-two years.

**Table 2:** Similarities of the handwriting of the *scriptio inferior* and *scriptio superior*.

Description	<i>Scriptio inferior</i>	<i>Scriptio superior</i>
The major features of the <i>basmala</i> are identic.		
	fol. 3 <sup>r</sup> , l. 12	fol. 1 <sup>v</sup> , l. 1
The preposition <i>fī</i> looks like the cypher ‘9’. The ‘tail’ of the letter <i>yā’</i> is ‘returned’ ( <i>mardūda</i> ). <sup>74</sup>		
	fol. 3 <sup>r</sup> , l. 15	fol. 2 <sup>r</sup> , l. 2
		
	fol. 4 <sup>r</sup> , l. 13	
The upper stroke of <i>kāf mabsūṭa</i> is curved. The haste is wavy and connected to the horizontal base stroke.		
	fol. 3 <sup>r</sup> , l. 14	fol. 3 <sup>r</sup> , l. 6
Medial or initial <i>hā’</i> resembles the cypher ‘8’ bending to the right.		
	fol. 3 <sup>r</sup> , l. 9	fol. 3 <sup>r</sup> , l. 3
		
	fol. 3 <sup>r</sup> , l. 3	
The <i>ṣād</i> has an ovoid form and looks like a rectangle.		
	fol. 3 <sup>r</sup> , l. 16	fol. 1 <sup>v</sup> l. 2
The isolated <i>yā’</i> is retroflex.		
	fol. 3 <sup>r</sup> , l. 16	fol. 2 <sup>v</sup> l. 1

<sup>74</sup> The letter *yā’* is called *mardūda*, when its horizontal stroke is extended to the right, as opposed to *yā’ muḥaqqāqa*, with its tail to the left.



However, assuming that the two texts were produced at different stages of the scribe's studies, it is challenging to explain why the handwriting and errors in the two layers are remarkably similar. Improvement of writing skills is to be expected as students advance in their studies. It is possible, then, that the Qur'anic chapters on the extant four folios was written for reasons other than educational. The manuscript might have been made for personal use, given its plain materiality, the simplicity of the layout, the absence of the text's vocalisation, and its unembellished presentation. It remains unclear why the scribe wrote the Qur'anic chapters in reverse order.

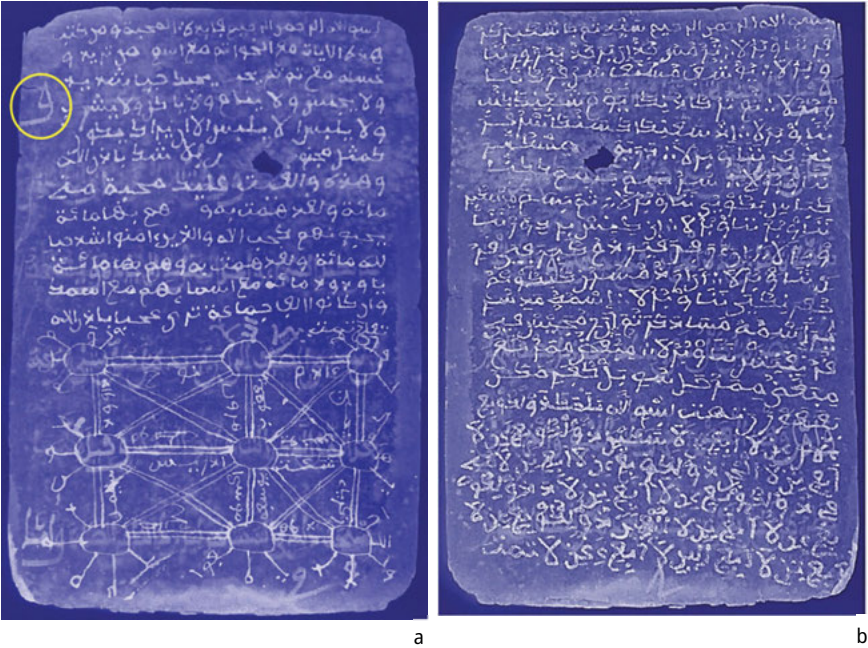
As for palimpsesting techniques, considering the time gap of about twenty years or fewer, it can be argued that the scribe deliberately washed off the lower text. In a less likely scenario, the ink could have faded naturally, for instance, if component proportions of the ink were not respected during preparation.

## 4.2 Case study 2

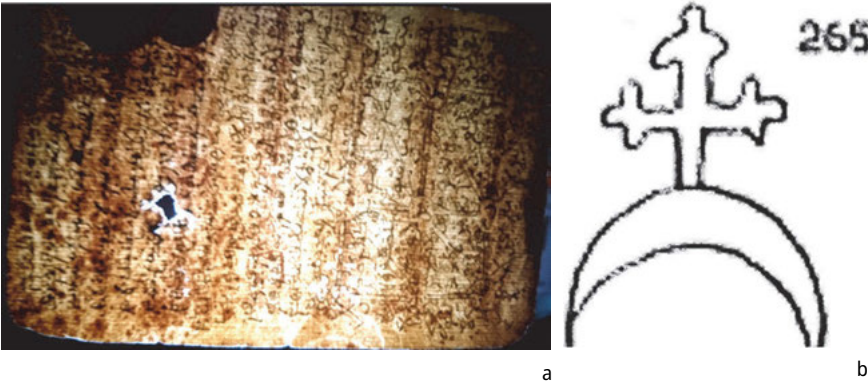
Manuscript ATM 01287 consists of a single folio and belongs to the library of al-Ṭāhir Mu'ādh. Both the recto and the verso of the manuscript were palimpsested (Figs 3a–b) and contain an extract from *al-Risāla* by Ibn Abī Zayd al-Qayrawānī (d. 386 AH / 996 CE), an incantation, and an esoteric text written in Arabic, with a plant name in Manding '*ajamī*. The manuscript is small, but, as will be shown later, its original size was larger. The folio measures 128 mm high × 85 mm wide. During our examination of the manuscript *in situ* in February 2023, its physical condition was worse than expected, as was its appearance in digital images.<sup>75</sup> The foxed, yellowish paper was very fragile, thin, and brittle. In addition to moisture and water stains, the upper part of the folio is damaged and has a hole. The page numbers were marked in pencil at the bottom of the recto and the verso.

Despite the small size, the page contains a watermark. It is only partially visible and represents a circle with a cross on top. This fragment corresponds to the so-called Circles watermark type (Figs 4a–b); however, the visible portion is insufficient for precise identification. The samples presented in Edward Heawood's catalogue (1950) are dated between the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. This time period could be retained as a *terminus post quem* to tentatively date the writing support for *al-Risāla*, and later the talismanic text.

<sup>75</sup> This manuscript was digitised on 17 January 2017, according to the HMML Reading Room website data <<https://www.vhmml.org/>>.



**Figs 3a–b:** Two overlapping layers of text. Bamako, SAVAMA-DCI, ATM 01287, fol. 1<sup>r-v</sup>. Ultraviolet photo by the authors.



**Figs 4a–b:** Partial watermark ‘Circle’. Bamako, SAVAMA-DCI, ATM 01287, fol. 1<sup>r</sup>. Photo by the authors.

#### 4.2.1 The *scriptio inferior*

Although no ruling traces are discernible, the writing frame is uniformly sized, with six sparse lines visible on each side.<sup>76</sup> Despite the generous interlinear intervals, the margins (except the upper one) are relatively narrow, at least in the folio's current state. The undertext is written in an expert hand, in large characters of the *sūdānī* script, which remains neat and consistent in all the lines. The text and vocalic diacritics are in brown ink with some highlights in red.<sup>77</sup> The examined fragment is part of the chapter on prayer times and denominations (*Bāb fi awqāt al-ṣalāt wa-asmā'ihā*) from *al-Risāla*.

Fol. 1<sup>r</sup> starts with the line *و قيل أما في شدة الحر فالأفضل له أن يبرد بها و أن* ('Another opinion is that in the intensity of the heat, it is preferable to do the *ṣalāt* [prayer] when it is cooler') and ends with l. 6 *أن يصير ظل كل شيء مثليه بعد ظل* ('when everything's shadow is twice as long as itself, exclusive of the [north-south] shadow of midday').<sup>78</sup> On the folio's verso side, the first line states *منها بدأ حاجب الشمس و ما بين هذين وقت واسع* ('to the appearance of the aureole of the sun. The time between these terms is long and') and the sixth line follows with *يستحب ذلك في المساجد ليذكر الناس الصلاة و أما* ('this delay is desirable only for mosques, so that people can get there on time for the *ṣalāt*, but'). Cross-checking the manuscript text with the published *al-Risāla*<sup>79</sup> revealed that the current arrangement of folios is in reverse, and the original sequence should be fol. 1<sup>v</sup> → fol. 1<sup>r</sup>. It also showed that a portion of the text between l. 6 on fol. 1<sup>v</sup> to l. 1 on fol. 1<sup>r</sup> is missing. It can be reconstructed as *الرجل في خاصة نفسه فأول الوقت أفضل له* ('for a man by himself the beginning of the time is preferable'). Given the script size and page layout, the missing portion would have fit on exactly one line.<sup>80</sup> Therefore, it is quite likely that there were originally seven lines per page, and the last line and inferior margin were either trimmed or deteriorated. That the margins were once wider follows from looking at the end of the first line on fol. 1<sup>v</sup>, where the tail of the *wāw* is cut (Fig. 3a, encircled in yellow).

<sup>76</sup> In West African Islamic manuscripts, one often finds the text of *al-Risāla* written in spaced lines with wide margins, which was planned space to accommodate explanatory commentaries and glosses; see Bondarev 2017.

<sup>77</sup> For instance in fol. 1<sup>r</sup>, l. 1, *wa*; l. 2, *wa-waqt*; l. 5, *wa-qīla*; l. 6, *wa-ammā*. In fol. 1<sup>v</sup>, l. 1, *wa*; l. 3, *wa*; l. 5, *wa-awwalu*.

<sup>78</sup> The translation is from Kenny 1992.

<sup>79</sup> See al-Qayrawānī 2001, 23.

<sup>80</sup> At the bottom of fol. 1<sup>v</sup>, we could discern some shapes that could be the remains of the diacritic marks and letter dots of the missing seventh line. Unfortunately, the inferior margin is stained, so it is difficult to draw clear-cut conclusions.

Other ‘missing’ elements of the undertext are the *lām* strokes in the words *awwaluhu* and *‘alayhi* (fol. 1<sup>v</sup>, l. 2 and fol. 1<sup>r</sup>, l. 2), consumed by the hole in the folio’s upper part. This means that the text was laid on the page before damage occurred and a hole developed.

#### 4.2.2 The *scriptio superior*

The upper text is organised in two parts. The first one on fol. 1<sup>v</sup> is a talismanic formula consisting of thirteen lines of text in Arabic with one *‘ajamī* word and a talismanic figure, referred to as *khātīm* (Fig. 5). The text is written in informal handwriting<sup>81</sup> in black ink. It explains the talisman’s use, that is, attracting love (*al-maḥabba*), and the *khātīm* involves the mediation of the spiritual entities concerned to intervene and compel them to carry out the request.<sup>82</sup> The only *‘ajamī* word is the name of the plant in Manding to be used for washing oneself; it is *timitimi* (spelt as *tmtm*), ‘liquorice weed’ (*Scoparia dulcis*).<sup>83</sup>

The second part of the upper text on fol. 1<sup>r</sup> contains twenty-one lines and seems to be an incantation in the form of tail-rhymed sentences (without any clear meaning),<sup>84</sup> separated by three points in the shape of a triangle: ∴. The incantation is possibly meant to complement the talisman. Thus, it appears that the page numbers, added during digitisation, do not correspond to the sequence of the upper text’s parts, and the implied order should be fol. 1<sup>v</sup> → fol. 1<sup>r</sup>. The examination of both the recto and the verso of our artefact shows regular textual features which corroborate that they were written by the same scribe.

81 This informal handwriting is a peculiarity not only in the West African talismanic tradition but also in the Arabic one.

82 The *khātīm* is in the form of a square that is divided into four squares (with small circles in the edges) with a diagonal subdivision of the whole. This produces sixteen triangular sections, each with a prophet’s name. The structure is made through the process of *tarbi’* (squaring) of Q. 112: *‘qul; huwwa; allāh; aḥad; allāh; al-ṣamd: lam yalid; wa-lam; yūlad; wa-lam; yakun; lahu; fukfu<sup>un</sup>; aḥad*. These fourteen Qur’anic verses are arranged in lines: starting with the horizontals, then the verticals, and finishing with the diagonals (from right to left).

83 Fol. 1<sup>v</sup>, l. 3.

84 The sentences end in نَنَا وَ بُرْ لَا *nanā w buru lā*.

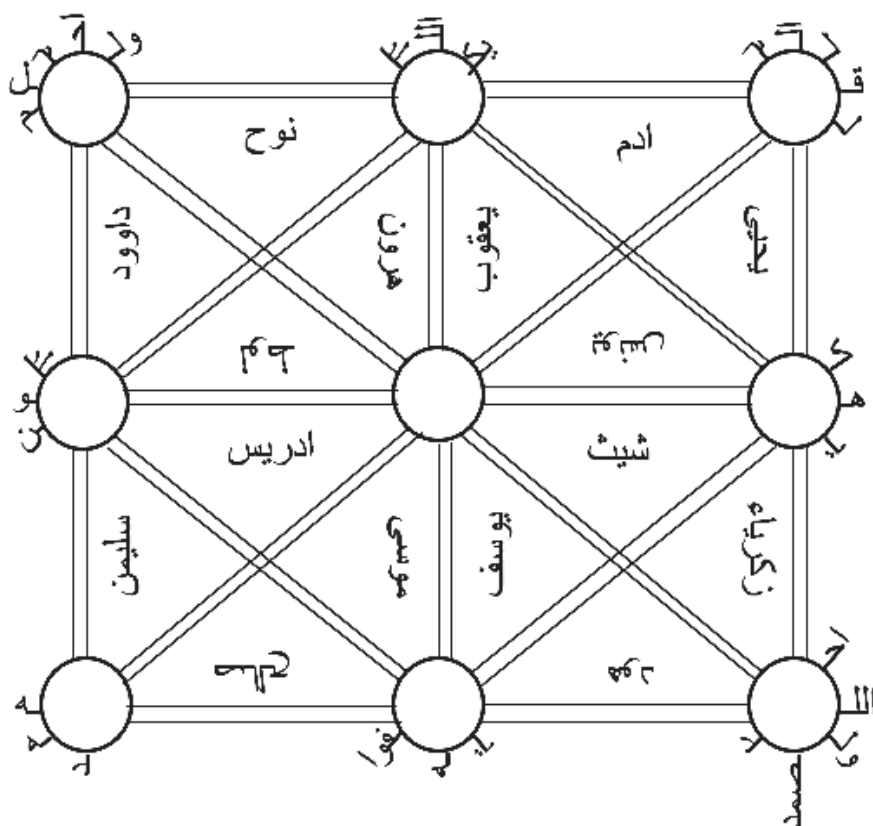


Fig. 5: *Khâtim* for attracting love. Bamako, SAVAMA-DCI, ATM 01287, fol. 1<sup>v</sup>.

Interestingly, the scribe wrote this talisman on already damaged paper, since he avoided the hole. Thus, he wrote two ‘words’ of the incantation, *مسكبر* *miskubari* and *دریم* *darayama*, on both sides of the hole (fol. 1<sup>r</sup>, l. 6) and split the word *مجنون* *majnun* (‘madman’) (fol. 1<sup>v</sup>, l. 6), putting *مجنو* *majnu-* before the hole and the *ن* *-n* after (Fig. 3a).

### 4.2.3 Some observations

As mentioned above, the size of the original folio, accommodating the *al-Risāla*, was larger. Its current dimensions correspond to the regular small size of amulets, known as *ḥamā'il*.<sup>85</sup> Hence, it is possible that the format was adjusted by trimming the margins to correspond to the upper layer's contents. Yet, given the hole in the top part of the page, which the scribe notably avoided, he might have been working with already damaged paper, resulting in the margins being cut. It is left to guess whether the barely visible undertext was erased or disappeared as a result of damage or the manuscript's ageing.

## 4.3 Case study 3

Manuscript ABS 03046 is a single leaf of laid paper measuring 140 × 87 mm. The paper seems to be in good condition, except for some ink corrosion. The *scriptio inferior* in brown ink is easily readable. It is an unidentified text discussing miracles of the prophets, which appears on both sides of the folio. Although the text fits the folio's width, it is incomplete along its length, which suggests that the original folio was bigger and that the surviving fragment once formed part of a larger unit. Additionally, the text lacks a few words, with gaps in the middle of some sentences. However, one may still notice diacritic marks (in brown ink) hovering over blank spaces, hinting that something was written there.<sup>86</sup> A close inspection reveals barely discernible traces of words in red ink.

It is possible that the red ink dissolved when the paper was washed or soaked in water, either in an attempt to erase the text or as a result of water damage.<sup>87</sup> Even if deliberate, the attempt to erase the text did not seem to be effective. As mentioned above, the undertext remains readily visible and likely was also visible to the scribe of the new layer. The scribe used ink of saturated black colour to

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<sup>85</sup> The term *ḥamā'il* designates a magical object carried by a person, an animal, or even a thing; see Hamès 2007. In this case, we do not see any traces of folding, which means that the amulet was carried as it is, likely in a small bag or sewed into a cloth or a turban or just hanging on the wall of a house. Alternatively, one could suggest that it was not an amulet per se but a manual for making one and was stored with other manuscripts of that type in a leather binding holder.

<sup>86</sup> Fol. 1<sup>r</sup>, ll. 2 and 3; fol. 1<sup>v</sup>, ll. 3, 5, and 7.

<sup>87</sup> As Maria Luisa Russo pointed out to us, red ink is generally much more water soluble than brown or dark ink. Interestingly, in other cases (ATM 01287, BMH 17799), we observed the reverse tendency: the writings in red ink persisted on the page, while those in brown ink were barely visible.

make the upper text more prominent. Rotating the sheet 90° might have been another strategy to distinguish between the two layers.<sup>88</sup>

The *scriptio superior* is a recipe against leprosy, mentioning a local plant in Manding (*bāransan*, spelt as *brsn*; ‘*Acacia albida*’ or ‘*Faidherbia albida*’).<sup>89</sup> The text fits on one side of the folio and its layout matches the page’s format. This could indicate that the scribe deliberately used only part of the ‘original’ folio for his short text. However, it is also possible that he only had the ‘remaining’ scrap of paper. Furthermore, it appears that the paper probably would have been rather old when the *scriptio superior* was applied since there are traces of its black ink bleeding through the ink-corroded areas.

#### 4.4 Case study 4

BMH 16587 is another single-leaf manuscript on laid paper, measuring 232 × 140 mm. The paper shows signs of wear and tear and moisture damage. Only one side of this folio (fol. 1<sup>r</sup>) has overlapping layers of writing. Both layers in brown ink are of esoteric content: the *scriptio superior* is a formula for overcoming enemies, and the *scriptio inferior* is an invocation (*du‘ā*). The ink of the undertext, although faint, is still apparent.

Interestingly, the writings (also in brown ink) on this folio’s other side (fol. 1<sup>v</sup>) remain perfectly legible, but with some uneven traces of water damage, excluding the possibility that someone tried to soak the page in water to wash it off. This side contains the closing lines of a poem and a colophon. Thus, the now single folio once was part of a larger manuscript.

This manuscript seems to have changed hands several times: the last two lines of the initial colophon are crossed out with dark-brown ink. According to the visual impression, the ownership mark was added with the same ink to the left of the colophon but was subsequently crossed out with black ink. The black-ink scribe, a certain Imām Tanapo (*Tanfū*), penned his possession mark to the right of the colophon.

The hands of the upper text and undertext on fol. 1<sup>r</sup> and the fragment of the poem on fol. 1<sup>v</sup> are different, although all are in brown ink. It may be speculated that Scribe A penned the poem ending on the recto side of the last folio (current fol. 1<sup>v</sup>). Scribe B then used the blank verso side (which is now fol. 1<sup>r</sup>) to write a

<sup>88</sup> The scribe could have rotated the page for a more convenient format, however.

<sup>89</sup> Fol. 1<sup>r</sup>, l. 5.

prayer (*du'ā*).<sup>90</sup> Yet another scribe, Scribe C, at some point overwrote this (water damaged? Or faded?) text, either when the last folio was still a part of a manuscript or when it began circulating as an independent entity.

## 4.5 Case study 5

Manuscript BMH 32670 consists of five folios of blue laid paper measuring 210 × 150 mm. The original paper colour can be guessed from fol. 5, while other folios show mild to severe discoloration. Overall, the paper appears to be in poor condition, bearing traces of moisture damage and ink corrosion. However, the margins of fols 2–4 were repaired by gluing on strips of white or cream and blue paper, some of which bear traces of writing.

The *scriptio inferior* is a religious poem, written in a calligraphic hand in (apparently) dark-brown ink with some words highlighted in red. The ink colour intensity ranges from faint to saturated (especially on fol. 5). The text is laid out in seven lines per page with wide interlinear spaces and generous margins, which accommodate annotations. The five available folios contain only a fragment of the poem in disorder in the current folio arrangement.

In contrast, the upper text, entitled *al-Sab' al-mathānī* ('Seven oft-repeated verses') is complete. It finishes with a colophon, but without mentioning the scribe's name or the date of copying. The text is written in dense lines, ranging from eighteen to twenty-one per page, and narrow margins. Several lines overlap the previous text, while others are written in blank spaces. Thus it appears that the scribe made no specific effort to avoid the underlying text. It is possible, however, that his ink was so intense as to outweigh the previous layer of writing. Although at present degraded due to moisture damage, it appears intensely dark brown on unaffected areas.

The manuscript likely suffered water damage more than once, and some folios were affected prior to the application of the *scriptio superior*. This would explain the uneven discoloration of the pages and ink within the manuscript. Another hint that the scribe dealt with damaged material is his attempts to repair the tears of the margins by gluing over patches of paper. The patches were clearly

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<sup>90</sup> The handwriting of the undertext shows strong similarities with the possession note in brown ink of the manuscript's 'intermediary' owner. However, this suggestion remains tentative, lacking comprehensive and clearly visible material for comparison.



added before the new text was applied, as it wraps around the contours of the added material (otherwise, some text would have been lost beneath it).<sup>91</sup>

Some of the paper patches bear traces of previous writing, suggesting they were taken from an older manuscript. Because several patches are blue – the same colour as the writing support – the same paper source for both can be assumed. Thus, one could surmise that pages of a discarded manuscript with the religious poem were repurposed by another scribe as writing support and repair materials.

## 5 Concluding remarks

In this article, we presented our analysis based on the corpus of seventeen manuscripts with overlapping layers of writing added by the same or different individuals. This may appear a significant number, given that since the early nineteenth century, when Dixon Denham mentioned an instance of paper washing in Bornu, nothing had been reported of palimpsests in West Africa until now. On the other hand, is this number significant considering the thousands of manuscripts that are *not* palimpsests? Is this evidence enough to call it a palimpsesting tradition? And, if so, should it be considered a regional one, since all manuscripts in our corpus come from the Timbuktu collections?

Another question that may arise is whether the discussed artefacts are palimpsests in the restrictive meaning of the term. For many of our examples, it is impossible to determine whether the previous layers were intentionally destroyed. The evidence is limited to what we can say about techniques of eliminating written marks from the surface. However, one can observe some scribal ways of dealing with materials where previous texts are still discernible. These include rotating the page, using spaces that are less covered with the previous writings, and using intensely coloured inks to make the *scriptio posterior* stand out on the page.

There is some doubt as to whether paper reuse was linked to scarcity or difficulty accessing paper. It has been shown that the writing support of the upper layers is from the nineteenth century, when paper was readily available in West Africa. Regarding the samples of earlier papers, it seems that the upper texts were added after the paper was worn out or damaged. Furthermore, most manuscripts consist of a single or only a few folios.

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91 Fol. 2<sup>v</sup>, ll. 3 and 4; fol. 4<sup>r</sup>, l. 9; fol. 4<sup>v</sup>, ll. 8 and 9.

It is unlikely that the undertexts were obliterated due to their obsolete nature: they include texts such as the Qur'an and didactic manuals of the scholarly curriculum that persisted over time and are still relevant today.

From our corpus, we can see that paper was often recycled into talismanic writing. It cannot remain unnoticed that there is a striking similarity to talisman-making practices using wooden boards and washing sacred verses off them. Could this serve as an explanation as to why talismans appear on the palimpsested folios? Or it is rather because healing and talismanic recipes are usually short texts, apt for fitting on small pieces or even scraps of paper? Could the reuse of single folios be linked to the loose-leaf formats of West African manuscripts, where the pages are easily detached, go astray, and then find another life as talismans? Given that some manuscripts in our corpus display wear and tear prior to reuse, could this reuse be regarded as a way of dealing with old and discarded manuscripts?

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### Abbreviations

ALA IV = John O. Hunwick (ed.), *Arabic Literature of Africa: The Writings of Western Sudanic Africa*, vol. 4, Leiden: Brill, 2003.

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## Appendix: List of the seventeen examined manuscripts

### ABS 00657

**Material:** 1 fol. Laid paper with traces of moisture damage, 145 × 100 mm.

**Scriptio inferior:** Fol. 1<sup>v</sup>: a talisman for love (*al-maḥabba*). The recto and verso are written by the same scribe in brown ink. However, on fol. 1<sup>r</sup>, the text is less visible or more damaged and overwritten by another text.

**Scriptio superior:** Fol. 1<sup>v</sup>: the text starts towards the middle of the page, where the previous layer is less visible. It is a talisman for livestock written in black ink in Arabic, including the name of a plant in Bamana 'ajamī. The writing direction of this layer is the same as the lower one.

### ABS 01251

**Material:** 1 fol. Laid paper, 135 × 100 mm.

**Scriptio inferior:** Fol. 1<sup>r</sup>: a text about *qiyām al-layl* (voluntary night prayer) in brown ink.

**Scriptio superior:** Fol. 1<sup>v</sup>: a talisman known as *ḥirz al-ḥadīd* (talisman protecting from iron weapons), together with a *khātīm* written in brown ink in Arabic with some plant names in 'ajamī.

### ABS 03046

**Material:** 1 fol. Laid paper, traces of ink corrosion in several places, 140 × 87 mm.

**Scriptio inferior:** Fol. 1<sup>v</sup>: a text on some prophets' miracles written in brown ink. Some words in red (?) ink are discoloured.

**Scriptio superior:** Fol. 1<sup>v</sup>: a recipe against leprosy; plant name in Manding 'ajamī. Text written in black ink, which bled through the places of ink corrosion.

## ATM 01102

**Material:** 1 fol. Laid paper, traces of water damage, 140 × 100 mm.

**Scriptio inferior:** Fol. 1<sup>v</sup>: texts on habits of the Prophet written in brown ink. Water damage has erased the text at the top of the folio, but the lower part is intact.

**Scriptio superior:** Fol. 1<sup>v</sup>: a talisman related to the female body is written on the recto in black ink. A talisman for the *jihād* with a *khātim* is written with brown ink on the verso. Two different scribes.

## ATM 01287

**Material:** 1 fol. Laid paper, 128 × 85 mm. Original page was bigger. Partial watermark: 'Circles' (Italian); *terminus post quem*: late seventeenth–early eighteenth centuries.

**Scriptio inferior:** Fol. 1<sup>v</sup>: legal manual *al-Risāla* by Ibn Abī Zayd al-Qayrawānī (d. 386 AH / 996 CE) in brown and red inks.

**Scriptio superior:** Fol. 1<sup>v</sup>: talismanic content written in black ink.

## ATM 02277

**Material:** 1 fol. Laid blue paper, with traces of discoloration on fol. 1<sup>r</sup> and a small hole in the lower part of the folio, 130 × 70 mm. Original page was bigger.

**Scriptio inferior:** Fol. 1<sup>r</sup>: a *taṣliya* (invocation of God's blessing on the Prophet) in brown ink.

**Scriptio superior:** Fol. 1<sup>v</sup>: a talisman for separating a couple (unfinished?). Fol. 1<sup>r</sup>: a talisman that prevents alcohol consumption. Rotated by 90°. Both texts seem to have been written by the same person, in brown ink. The scribe wrote the text avoiding the hole in the folio.

## ATM 02357

**Material:** 3 fols. Wove paper, 160 × 110 mm.

**Scriptio inferior:** Fol. 1<sup>rv</sup>: magic squares and talismanic content in brown ink.

**Scriptio superior:** Fols 1<sup>r</sup>–3<sup>v</sup>: a collection of *fawā'id* (pl. of *fā'ida* ('useful information')) with some (unvocalised) *'ajamī* words in brown and red ink. Possibly the same scribe as that of the undertext.

## ATM 12544

**Material:** 1 fol. Wove paper, 160 × 100 mm. Original page was bigger.

**Scriptio inferior:** Fol. 1<sup>rv</sup>: a jurisprudential text. The available part concerns the testimony (*al-shahāda*). It is written in calligraphic hand, small script, and tight lines, with some annotations in the margins. The writing in brown ink appears unevenly on the page (some parts are more visible than others), as if damaged by humidity or water.

**Scriptio superior:** Fol. 1<sup>v</sup> and fol. 1<sup>r</sup>, ll. 1–6: a *du'ā'* (invocation) in black ink. Fol. 1<sup>r</sup>, ll. 7–10: an unfinished recipe against albinism (*al-baras*) in dark-brown ink by another scribe. Rotated by 90°.

## AQB 02153

**Material:** 1 fol. Wove paper, 175 × 115 mm.

**Scriptio inferior:** Fol. 1<sup>r</sup>, ll. 1–6: an esoteric text in brown ink. Fol. 1<sup>r</sup>, ll. 7–10: a note recording expenditures or the lending of money in brown ink.

**Scriptio superior:** Fol. 1<sup>r</sup>, ll. 1–4: a talismanic formula for getting pregnant in brown ink. Fol. 1<sup>v</sup> and fol. 1<sup>r</sup>, ll. 4–8: a talisman for healing an insane person in black ink. Fol. 1<sup>v</sup> lower part: testing of the *qalam* (black ink). Two different scribes.

## AQB 02689

**Material:** 1 fol. Wove paper, 170 × 110 mm.

**Scriptio inferior:** Fol. 1<sup>rv</sup>: a short text of esoteric content in black ink.

**Scriptio superior:** Fol. 1<sup>rv</sup>: a poem by Mukhtār b. Wadī'at Allāh al-Māsīnī (d. 1279 AH / 1864 CE) in praise of 'Umar b. Sa'īd al-Fūṭī, written in black ink. *Terminus post quem*: mid nineteenth century.

## BMH 16587

**Material:** 1 fol. Laid paper, with traces of insect damage and stains, 232 × 140 mm.



Fol. 1<sup>v</sup>: closing lines of a versified treaty ending with a colophon (crossed out). Two possession notes in brown and black ink.

**Scriptio inferior:** Fol. 1<sup>r</sup>: an invocation (*du'ā*) written in brown ink.

**Scriptio superior:** Fol. 1<sup>r</sup>: talismanic content, a *fā'ida* against enemies written in Arabic including passages of *'ajamī*.

## BMH 16756

**Material:** 9 fols. Wove paper, with traces of water damage, 215 × 150 mm. Original pages seem to have been larger.

**Scriptio inferior:** Fols 1<sup>r</sup>–9<sup>v</sup>: a Sufi manual on the Tijāniyya order (*al-Ṭarīqa al-tijāniyya*) entitled *Suyūf al-sa'īd al-mu'taqid fī ahl Allāh ka-al-Tijānī 'alā raqabat al-shaqī al-ṭarīd al-muntaqid al-jānī* by 'Umar b. Sa'īd al-Fūṭī (d. 1280 AH /1864 CE). *Terminus post quem*: mid nineteenth century.

**Scriptio superior:** Fols 1<sup>r</sup>–9<sup>v</sup>: the first fourteen chapters of *Kitāb Zabūr Dāwūd* (the Holy Book of David). Written in dark-brown and red ink.

## BMH 17799

**Material:** 6 fols. Laid paper, damaged margins, 204 × 142 mm.

**Scriptio inferior:** Fols 1<sup>r</sup>–6<sup>v</sup>: a text on faith (*fī ṣifāt Allāh*) written in brown and red ink. Some interlinear and marginal annotations in brown ink.

**Scriptio superior:** Fols 1<sup>r</sup>–6<sup>v</sup>: a collection of *ḥadīth* (on intercession, the Day of Judgement, *al-ṣirāṭ*, Heaven and hell) in black ink. The text's layout sometimes adjusts to the margin damage's shape. Complete with a decorated colophon on fol. 6<sup>v</sup>. The owner is Baba Yaro b. al-Faqīh al-Sanūsī Yaro.

## BMH 18220

**Material:** 3 fols. Wove thick paper, 172 × 110 mm.

**Scriptio inferior:** Fol. 1<sup>r</sup>: medicinal content written in Arabic with some *'ajamī* Manding plant names.

**Scriptio superior:** Fols 1<sup>r</sup>–3<sup>v</sup>: magic squares in black and red ink.

## BMH 19191

**Material:** 4 (out of 293) fols. Wove paper, 202 × 145 mm.

**Scriptio inferior:** Fols 1<sup>r</sup>–4<sup>v</sup>: Qur'an (fragment).

**Scriptio superior:** Fol. 1<sup>r</sup>: talismans written in black ink. Fols 1<sup>v</sup>–4<sup>v</sup>: *al-Risāla* written in brown and red ink by the same scribe as the *scriptio inferior*.

## BMH 19649

**Material:** 5 fols. Laid paper, 215× 160 mm.

**Scriptio inferior:** Fols 1<sup>r</sup>–5<sup>v</sup>: manual on conduct entitled *Tanbīh al-ghāfilīn* by Naṣr b. Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Samarqandī (d. 373 AH / 983 CE) written in brown ink and clearly visible on the pages.

**Scriptio superior:** Fols 1<sup>r</sup>–5<sup>v</sup>: *Malḥamat* attributed to 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 40 AH / 661 CE) written in black and red ink. The text ends with a colophon by al-Faṭḥa Siyabana. The colophon is crossed out, and another ownership note by a certain Maḥmūd appears in brown ink.

## BMH 32670

**Material:** 5 fols. Blue (discoloured) laid paper, with traces of severe water damage, and patches of paper glued to repair the torn margins, 210 × 150 mm.

**Scriptio inferior:** Fols 1<sup>r</sup>–5<sup>v</sup>: a poem with marginal annotations; dark brown and red inks.

**Scriptio superior:** Fols 1<sup>r</sup>–5<sup>v</sup>: an exegesis of the seven verses of the first Qur'anic chapter *al-Fātiḥa* entitled *Mas'alat al-sab' al-mathānī*. Written in dark-brown and red inks. The text ends with a colophon with no name of the scribe.