

ARABS AND THE QUR'AN
IN THE CONTEXT OF A NON-LITERATE SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

Despite the revelation of the Qur'an in the 7th century CE in the Hijaz region, knowledge about the state of literary practices has not been fully clarified. New studies are needed, and detailed investigation is required. Although it is known that writing began in Mecca with the onset of the revelation of the Qur'an, records related to this early phase of the Meccan period are quite limited and scarce compared to records from the Medina period. The main reason for this is closely related to the fact that the Meccans of the 6th century were a "non-literate society" and the limited information we have in Islamic sources with regard to the level of literacy. With the increase in modern anthropological and archaeological data, it is possible to analyze and reinterpret existing data. In this article, I attempt to interpret existing data with a new approach.

Keywords: Revelation, Qur'an, book, writing, reading, *sahifa*, *mushaf*

INTRODUCTION

While writing was used in regions such as Mesopotamia, Egypt, China, and India, it took centuries for writing to reach other parts of the world. Even today, there are still societies without a writing system. 7th-century Arabia was largely one of the regions where writing had not yet fully developed. Although Arabs are the paternal cousins of the Semites, and considering the writing habits of the Hebrews, it seems puzzling that some Arabs were deprived of this. Nevertheless, the Hebrews' geographical location, owing to the Babylonian exile, held a more advantageous position compared to the arid desert climate occupied by the Arabs. They were situated in proximity to the fertile lands of the Fertile Crescent. The Arabs in Mecca lacked the knowledge and tools of writing. They were not a highly cultured or intellectually active society. Culture, in its essential sense, is an artificial creation of human consciousness, not something inherited from birth. The term *ummi* as used in the Qur'an encompasses not only an individual's lack of reading and writing skills but also a societal dimension of *ummī* indicating that the society itself lacked these

skills. To reveal this, it's essential to consider the difference between oral and written culture. In societies with an oral culture, people rely on what they hear from their fathers and ancestors to understand and adapt to nature and society. On the other hand, written culture is the expression of societies that rely on human intellect and consciousness. Sacred scriptures, at least in terms of their followers, are products of oral culture. In essence, in societies with an oral culture, the term *kitab* refers only to a 'sacred book,' and its most essential characteristic is that it is a product of revelation and carries the attribute of 'address' rather than being primarily a 'text.'

The main proposition of this article is that when the Qur'an was revealed and until a relatively late period after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, the Hijaz region, in general, did not have widespread and well-developed writing. Commencing from this fundamental premise, the focus will be placed on how the societal and cultural underpinnings were articulated within the intellectual paradigm of Prophet Muhammad and subsequently within the Qur'anic context. Literacy skills in the Qur'an should be understood as two distinct areas. While there is a diversity of concepts related to reading in the Qur'anic vocabulary that readily catches the attention of even an ordinary reader, the same does not apply to writing. Although the word *kitab* (book), the object of reading, is frequently mentioned in the Qur'an, the word *daftar* (notebook), which would be the object of writing, is absent. Furthermore, the verb *kitab* meaning 'to write,' in the Qur'an often does not signify writing in the sense of recording. In reality, the word *kitab* itself does not always refer to a specific type of text. In my view, which I will develop later, the words related to *kitab* and *kitab* (script) in the Qur'an do not always signify reading and the associated skills. However, while the Qur'an contains a significant number of words related to trade, one of the most common characteristics of Mecca and the Quraysh, it does not exhibit a similar abundance of words related to writing. This observation might be related to the fact that writing, as an alphabetic system, typically emerges in societies after they have established trade networks. Although the limits of this study revolve around the themes of *kitâb* (reading) and *kitab*, the central focus will be on *kitab*. The subject will be approached in two ways: firstly, based on *Sirah*, I will evaluate the general level of writing during the period when the Qur'an was revealed. Secondly, based on this information, I will attempt to determine the semantic field of words related to *kitab* and *kitab* in the Qur'an, which will involve descriptive, analytical, as well as critical methods.

THE PRESENCE OF WRITING DURING THE PROPHET'S ERA

Writing, after passing through processes of pictograms, logograms, and hieroglyphs, finally became one of the most significant tools in the history of civilization with the invention of the alphabet by the Phoenicians. How this happened and why it was developed by the Phoenicians rather than other nations could be related to their aptitude for trade (Warwick 2014, p. 62). After all, there could be no trade without keeping records of who owed what and to whom. Although the Semites who are of the same lineage as the Arabs, were aware of writing and its existence, the reason why the Arabs, the descendants of the Phoenicians, developed their use of writing at a later stage, in my opinion, is directly related to the development of trade. (Warwick 2014, p. 63).

Some argue that writing entered Arabia from the South, specifically the Yemen region, through the *Musnad* script (Ibn Ashur 1984, vol. 30, p. 440). On the other hand, some claim that it entered from the North through the *Nabatean* script (Asad 1955, p. 24). The language used by the Southerners was different from the Arabic used by the Northerners. The connection between the language used by the Yemenite and the Abyssinian language is clear from historical evidence, as this region was historically a vassal of Abyssinia. In this region, Arabic was divided into dialects spoken by the Ma'in, Saba, and Himyar tribes (Çağatay 1957, p. 30; Günaltay 2006, p. 75). Later, there was a transition from the neighboring Nabatean script to the Arabic script, and Arabic replaced the Nabatean language (For a detailed bibliography on the state of the Arabic script, especially see Gacek 2001).

Theological-centered narrations that point to Mecca as the source of writing exhibit certain uncertainties. The tendency of these narratives to trace the matter back to the very beginning of humanity and interpret all developments from this perspective is also evident in the context of writing. For instance, some narratives suggest that writing was first discovered and used by Prophet Adam (Kalkashandi 1956, vol. 3, p. 10). This understanding, which associates writing with Prophet Adam, extends to other prophets as well (for example, the Prophet Enoch-*Idris*) and eventually, the Prophet Muhammad is also included in this approach in a different way. Furthermore, narratives stating that "the spread of writing is one of the signs of the Day of Judgment" (Ibn Qutayba 1925, vol. 1, p. 42) can be found in many sources but it should be added that these narratives originate at a time when society was just beginning to transform into a written one.

The narratives in the sources concerning the unlettered (*ummi*) status of Prophet Muhammad give rise to questions of his inability to read and write and engender various other complexities. In my view, one of the significant aspects of this topic is the association of the term *ummi* in the Qur'an with the Prophet Muhammad. The lexical meanings of *ummi* such as being naturally unacquainted with books, need clarification in the context of the Qur'an (Isfahani n.d., p. 87). The term appears in the Qur'an in six places and is sometimes used to refer to certain Jews, at other times to polytheistic Arabs or non-polytheistic Arabs, and sometimes as a characteristic of the Prophet himself (2:78, 3:20, 75; 62:2; 7:157-158). In these verses, the term *ummi* does not always imply the Prophet Muhammad in the context of the Qur'an (Tabari 2001, vol. 2, p.153).

Another indicator that the term *ummi* primarily refers to the Arabs rather than to Prophet Muhammad is the way the Prophet is presented according to the worldview of the Qur'an. According to this perspective, the Qur'an divides all people into two categories: The People of the Scripture (*ahl al-kitab*) and the non-People of the Scripture, much like believers (*muminun*) and non-believers (*kuffar*). These two groups are opposites of each other. Therefore, those who are not People of the Scripture are referred to as *ummi*. In other words, the term 'the People of the Scripture' is the opposite and antonym of the term *ummiyyun* (Jabiri 2006, p. 89-98).

THE STATE OF WRITING DURING THE PERIOD OF REVELATION

We lack compelling evidence suggesting the existence of a formal educational institution in Mecca for the activities of reading and writing before the revelation of the Qur'an. This applies to the time of Prophet Muhammad as well. However, today we know that in the 3rd millennium BCE, the Sumerians had formal educational schools where students were taught writing (Kramer 1990, p. 1). On the other hand, in ancient Greece, the existence of institutions providing higher education was quite common (For detailed information see Walden 2022). Views in the sources that the pre-Islamic Hijaz Arabs were underdeveloped in terms of reading, writing, and foreign languages are not surprising at all (Amin 1933, p. 140). Therefore, the Meccan period is not very rich in terms of writing. Although the number of literate people in Mecca until the Hijra was greater than the people of Medina, this situation was reversed because of the Hijra. It is known that there were people who could write in Mecca but the numbers mentioned for a city with the designation of *ummu'l-qura* seem to be extremely low. Beladhuri (d. 279/892) mentions 17 people (Baladhuri 1987, p. 660-661). In the sources, it is said that Waraqa b. Nawfal knew

Tuncer: Arabs and the Qur'an

how to read and write and he was even busy translating the Bible into Arabic. His sister Qutayla also read the Sacred Scriptures (Hamidullah 2006, vol. II, p. 763). Again, it is stated in the sources that Umar Ibn al-Khattab could read the Bible, and Aisha, who married Prophet Muhammad at a very young age, could read but did not have the skill of writing (Baladhuri 1987, p. 662). The existence of a physician named Harith b. Qalada is mentioned in the sources and it is said that he had a book on this subject (Kattani n.d., vol. I, p. 352). There are also stories about a young prostitute from the Huzayl tribe who went to the tribe's school when she was a little girl and played with students' pens and inkwells (Ibn Qutayba 1925, vol. IV, p. 103). However, this probably occurred after the period of revelation. Although there are other examples, we would like to take a closer look at some important records related to writing activities in particular.

For instance, there is mention of an inscription attributed to the Prophet's grandfather, Abdalmuttalib, which is said to have been written by his own hand. While classical period writers like Ibn Nadim (d. 385/995) refer to this written record without specifying whether it was a book or a tablet (Ibn Nadim 1971, vol. I, p. 8), more modern researchers approach the reliability of this claim with caution (Gutas 1998, p. 57; Pedersen 1984, p. 10).

The prevalent information about the hanging of the poems of *mu'allaqat* poets on the wall of the Ka'bah in Mecca just before the beginning of the revelation of the Qur'an is often interpreted as an indication of the existence of writing. However, significant issues surround the inscriptions of poems on the Kaba's wall. For instance, there is no consensus on the meaning of the term *mu'allaqat* (Arberry 1957, p. 16-24, 232, 242-254; Beeston 1979, p. 420) and some scholars argue that this term was used much later, perhaps in the fourth century after the Hijra (Dayf n.d., p. 141; Jawad Ali 1993, vol. 9, p. 506-518).

It is known that some modern Muslim researchers have found the accounts of written Arabic poetry, especially the *mu'allaqat*, to be excessively exaggerated (Husayn 1926, p. 42, 144). However, similar debates can be found among classical-era authors. The view of Ibn Abd Rabbah (d. 328/940), who suggested that the poems were selected through a certain process in the famous fairs held annually and then hung on the wall of the Ka'bah is contradicted by his contemporary Nahhas (d. 338/950). It is claimed that the stories about poems being hung on the walls of the Ka'bah are based on fabricated narratives (Ibn Abd Rabbah 1983, vol. VI, p. 118; Nahhas 1973, vol. I, p. 45-48, vol. II, p. 682)

The reports suggesting that some treaties were also written and hung on the wall of the Ka'bah apart from the *mu'allaqat* are similarly problematic. For example, in one of these reports, it is mentioned that the people of Mecca imposed an embargo on the Prophet and his companions and that they hung this in written form on the wall of the Ka'bah (Ibn Hisham 1990, vol. II, p. 5; Ibn Sa'd, 2001, vol. I, p. 178; Bayhaqi 1988, vol. II, p. 315). Undoubtedly, this represents a form of written activity. However, there are serious uncertainties in the narratives related to this event.

The written document consists of two clauses. It contains instructions about whether the Hashim clan members should marry among themselves and whether food and drink should be brought into the area known as Abu Talib's district (Shi'b Abu Talib). The reports also mention that this written document, which was said to have been hung on the Ka'bah, contained seals from each tribe and information about who wrote it, when it was removed and where on the Ka'bah it was hung (contrary to common belief, it was on the inside, not the outside). This document is referred to as *sahifa* and it is said to have had 3, 80, or even 40 seals on it. It was supposedly written by a person named Mansur Ibn Ikrima who, according to some accounts, suffered a stroke after writing it. It is also mentioned that all the information written after the embargo was erased (eaten by a worm), leaving only the phrase *bismikallahamma* (In Your name, O Allah) intact (Ibn Sa'd 2001, vol. I, p. 179).

It should be noted that there are inconsistencies and even exaggerations in some of the accounts regarding the *sahifa*. For instance, some reports suggest that the *sahifa* was written but not hung on the Ka'bah and that it was kept in the house of Umm Julas, the aunt of Abu Jahl (Ibn Sa'd 2001, vol. I, p. 178). Additionally, the narratives about the person who wrote the *sahifa*, Mansur Ibn Ikrima, losing the use of his hand, especially after writing this *sahifa* and that the *sahifa* was eaten by insects contain some inconsistencies.

A final example concerning the Meccan period presents the narrative of Umar's conversion to Islam. This event, considered one of the most significant indicators of the presence of Qur'anic script in Mecca, is accompanied by two distinct narratives in historical sources regarding Umar's conversion to Islam. In other words, there are two different narratives regarding the conversion of Umar Ibn al-Khattâb to Islam during this period. The more common version, which describes the incident with the tablet, states that Umar intended to go and kill the Prophet but upon learning that his sister and brother-in-law had converted to Islam became very angry at first. However, he later softened, read the Qur'anic pages (Surah Ta-Ha) that his sister

Tuncer: Arabs and the Qur'an

had brought to him and embraced Islam (Ibn Hisham 1990, vol. I, p. 370; Ibn Sa'd 2001, vol. III, p. 270).

In the second narrative, it is recounted that Umar randomly went to the Ka'bah one night and saw the Prophet praying. While the Prophet was reciting the Surah Haqqa, Umar thought that the Prophet might be a poet or a soothsayer. However, when the Prophet recited the relevant parts of the Surah Haqqa, Umar converted to Islam (Ibn Athir 2012, p. 897; Suhayli n.d. vol. II, p. 125). The first narrative is not found in hadith collections but appears in biographical sources. The second narrative, although found in reliable hadith collections, has not gained as much popularity as the first. One of the primary reasons for this difference may be that the first narrative includes the presence of a written page during the dramatic scene of Umar's conversion. The presence of a written page is not mentioned in the second narrative.

We have examined several illustrative examples from the Meccan period and this should suffice for our present purpose. Now, before delving into similar instances from the Medina period of Prophet Muhammad, we will briefly address a matter of paramount significance that transcends the examples previously discussed. This issue revolves around the fact that, despite nearly three-quarters of the Qur'an being revealed in Mecca and, considering the fact that the development of written records showed only partial progress after the migration to Medina, serious uncertainties arise regarding the precise transmission of written revelations from this early period to Medina, excluding those that were memorized.

THE MEDINA PERIOD

The Medina period appears to have been somewhat more advanced in terms of writing. However, it is essential to approach some of the records with caution, despite the abundance of written letters for the spread of Islam mentioned in early sources and in certain modern sources (Ibn Hisham 1990, vol. II, p. 186; vol. IV, p. 231, 243; Baladhuri 1996, vol. 2, p. 387). Before taking a closer look at some of the well-known records from the Medina period, let us first examine the general context.

It is mentioned in the sources that one of the conditions for the release of captives taken at the Battle of Badr was that they were required to teach ten children how to read and write in exchange for their freedom (Ibn Sa'd 2001, vol. II, p. 20). Before the Battle of Uhud, Abbâs secretly wrote a letter to inform the Prophet Muhammad of events in Mecca. Although the letter was supposed to be kept secret, it was read

to Ubayy Ibn Ka'b, with a warning not to disclose it to anyone (Ibn Sa'd 2001, vol. II, p. 33).

While the existence of the "Medinan Pact," also known as the Constitution of Madina, is certain, there are doubts about whether it existed in the form of a single, unified written document (Azimli 2022, p. 260-262). There are reports that Mu'az b. Jabal was sent to Yemen by the Prophet Muhammad to teach not just reading and writing but also to propagate Islam (Ibn Athir 2012, p. 1139). Acceptance of the writing of *hadiths* toward the end of the Medina period along with the increase in revenues from sources such as *zakat*, *jizya*, and taxation likely contributed to the need for writing (Hamidullah 1998, p. 99).

There is a notable incident known as the "*Qirtas* event" where, during a severe bout of illness shortly before his passing, the Prophet Muhammad asked those around him to bring him paper and pen. But there are serious questions about the narratives concerning this event (Ibn Sa'd 2001, vol. II, p. 214).

The case of Mu'awiyah, who is known to have become a Muslim after the conquest of Mecca and later served as a scribe for recording revelation, was apparently instructed by the Prophet to write. This record presents some significant challenges (Qadi n.d. vol. I, p. 313).

In addition to this general information, we can take a closer look at the following examples from the Medina period. The subject of the scribes of revelation and the number of them presents some uncertainties regarding the state of writing in Medina. There is no doubt that the revelation was put into writing from the moment it began to be revealed (Tabari 2001, vol. XXIII, p. 498) However, both the number of scribes of revelation and the materials they wrote on present some uncertainties, especially with regard to the information conveyed in those sources which give the impression of making exaggerations. These exaggerations pose significant challenges in understanding the general state of writing in the Medinan period. For instance, the variations in the number of scribes of revelation mentioned in the transmitted reports create an interesting picture upon closer examination. In the early written sources, the number of scribes of revelation is relatively low but over the years the number curiously increases.

In the 3rd century after Hijrah. Beladhuri (d. 279/892) mentions 10 individuals (Beladhuri 1996, vol. II, p. 192-193); Yaqubi (d. 292/924) lists 13 individuals (Yaqubi 2010, vol. I, p. 401-402) and Tabari (d. 310/922) names 10 individuals

Tuncer: Arabs and the Qur'an

(Tabari n.d. vol. III, p. 173) who were the scribes of revelation. However, by the seventh and eighth centuries, this number doubled. Ibn Kathir (d. 774/1372) mentions 24 individuals (Ibn Kathir 1998, vol. VIII, p. 321-356) while Nawawi (d. 676/1277) states that there were 23 individuals (Nawawi n.d. vol. I, p. 29). As time progresses, the number continues to increase: Iraqi (d. 806/1403) reports 42 individuals and Ibn Hudayda (d. 783/1381) mentions 44 individuals (Ibn Hudayda 1985). In the modern era, this number can even reach 50 or 60 individuals (A'zami 1978, p. 11).

Considering that among the mentioned sources Baladhuri is the oldest, his information becomes more significant due to its proximity to the period of revelation. He not only provides the names of the ten individuals but also categorizes them into two groups in line with the title *kuttab al-rasul* (the scribes of the Prophet): those who were involved only in the writing of the Qur'an, called *kuttab al-wahy* (scribes of revelation) and others who handled various correspondence, referred to as *kuttab* (scribes). Therefore, according to him, there were only three scribes of revelation, namely Ubayy Ibn Ka'b, Zayd Ibn Thabit, and Abdallah Ibn Sa'd Ibn Abi Sarh (Baladhuri 1996, vol. II, p. 192-193). These names can be considered as scribes during the Medinan period. Ibn Abd Rabbih and Jahshiyari (d. 331/942) also support this perspective by mentioning five names (Ibn Abd Rabbih 1983, vol. IV, p. 161; Jahshiyari 1980, p. 13-14). Although Mu'awiyah Ibn Abi Sufyan's name is mentioned in sources in connection with scribes of revelation, there is doubt about whether he transcribed the Qur'an (Jawad Ali 1993, vol. VIII, p. 129, 131). Even with the addition of specific names such as Ibn Mas'ud, Ibn Abbas, Abdallah Ibn Amr, Abu Musa al-Ash'ari, and Hafsa, it does not seem possible to elevate this number to the claimed 50-60 individuals.

One way to understand the relationship between writing and the Muslims during the Medina period is to compare two educational institutions: one belonging to the Jews called *Bayt al-Midras* and the other, where the *Ashab al-Suffa* resided, belonged to the Muslims. The sources mention that in *Bayt al-Midras*, which was owned by the Jews in Medina, the Jewish people of Medina wrote Arabic in Hebrew script and that educational activities for children were conducted there (Baladhuri 1987, p. 663; Hamidullah 2006, vol. 1, p. 187). Besides the Jews, not much is known about the number of individuals from the Aws and Khazraj tribes who knew how to write and naturally, the Jews represented the educated segment of Medina (Hamidullah 1988, p. 97). On the other hand, as implied by its name, the *ashab al-suffa* of the Muslims was not an institution like *Bayt al-Midras*. While one emphasizes the name of the

institution (*bayt*), the other qualifies the individuals residing there (*ashab*). Many sources suggest that the establishment of *Suffa* in Medina accelerated the process of learning how to read and write. It is said that up to 70 individuals could stay there at the same time and that the total number of people who stayed there at different times was close to 400. It was also used as a guesthouse for visiting delegations. It is reported that in the evenings, the recitation of the Qur'an was practiced and the Prophet assigned teachers like Abdallah Ibn Said Ibn As and Ubada Ibn Sâmit to teach reading and writing there (Ibn Athir 2012, p. 630; Hamidullah 2006, vol. II, p. 770). However, it is understood that the place where the *ashab al-suffa* stayed was not an educational institution but rather a place where poor companions found shelter. Modern interpretations that describe *Suffa* as an educational institution, a school building, and even the "first Islamic university" (Hamidullah 2006, vol. II, p. 768-77) appear to be exaggerated, especially considering the fact that formal educational institutions were first established during the time of Caliph Umar.

There are significant doubts regarding the accounts of "the letters of invitation" sent to neighboring state leaders in the 7th year after the Hijra. It is understood that these accounts, even in the most reliable sources, were transmitted without undergoing any critical evaluation. It is noteworthy that Muhammad Hamidullah, who is known for his cautious assessments of these letters, did not offer any criticism regarding the authenticity of the content of these letters in contrast to the approach of M. Watt (Watt 1956, p. 221; Hamidullah 2006, vol. II, p. 343, 349).

Discussing each of these letters individually would be lengthy so I will briefly address a passage from Ibn Sa'd concerning all of them with a specific focus on the letter sent to the Byzantine Emperor. The exaggerations surrounding these letters are evident in the claim that the envoys miraculously (!) learned the language of the destination within one day (Ibn Sa'd 2001, vol. I, p. 222). The fact that these letters allegedly sent to regions with different languages such as Egypt, Byzantium, Persia, and Abyssinia but were written in Arabic, highlights certain gaps in the accounts. The absence of any mention of these letters in Byzantine sources, particularly the one sent to Byzantine Emperor Heraclius raises additional questions. In short, both the chains of transmission and the content of these letters pose serious issues (Umari 1988, p. 221). The presence of non-Muslim Christian names in the chain of narrators, coupled with the lack of diplomatic etiquette in their content, also raises doubts about the reliability of these letters. For instance, mentioning the payment of *jizya* to the world's greatest and most powerful ruler and phrases like "I would wash your feet if I were with you" in the context of the Sasanian Emperor's language, all

Tuncer: Arabs and the Qur'an

indicate that these letters cannot be considered trustworthy. Furthermore, historical inconsistencies in these letters are numerous (For detailed information, see; Avcı 2003, p. 54).

Lastly, in the context of the Medinan period and writing, one of the first names that comes to mind is Zayd Ibn Thabit. Zayd has significant importance for our discussion due to his prominent role in the collection and transcription of the Qur'an into a written text (*mushaf*). According to the information available in sources about him, Zayd acquired his literacy skills by supervising the captives taken at the Battle of Badr. It is said that he acquired this ability at the age of 12 and became the second most famous companion among the scribes of revelation. He was assigned tasks such as organizing the spoils of war and keeping records (Dawudi 1999, p. 70).

Particularly noteworthy are the uncertainties and inconsistencies found in the sources regarding the number of foreign languages he learned and his ability to speak and write in these languages, which was partly due to the encouragement he received from Prophet Muhammad to learn Hebrew. For instance, it is claimed that he knew Greek, Persian, Coptic, and Abyssinian languages, with some sources suggesting that he learned some of these languages in as little as 15 days (Ibn Athir 2012, p. 424-425; Ibn Kathir 1998, vol. VIII, p. 338; Kattani n.d., vol. I, p. 151). The common feature of these narratives is the claim that he learned some of these languages in a very short time, like 15 days (Ibn Sa'd 2001, vol. V, p. 87; Beladhuri 1987, p. 663; Tabari n.d. vol. II, p. 561; Ibn Kathir 1998, vol. XI, p. 170; Ibn Athir 2012, p. 425). So it is doubtful whether these extraordinary narratives are reliable.

Furthermore, some of these narratives suggest that he learned Persian from an envoy of the Sasanian king, Greek from a Byzantine envoy and Coptic and Abyssinian languages from servants in the Prophet's household (Dawudi 1999, p. 78-80). Nevertheless, based on the frequent use of the term *qila* (a word with various meaning such as perhaps, said, narrative), certain ambiguities remain. For instance, while there is mention of Mariya al-Qibtiyya and her sister Shirin sent by Muqawqis, there is no information about any other individuals in Medina who could have taught Zayd these languages. Even if it is assumed that he learned these languages from these two individuals, there is no record of such an occurrence. The same considerations apply to other languages. Given the presence of Salman al-Farisi, the idea that he would learn a language from an envoy of the Sasanian emperor appears rather astonishing.

Up to this point, the examples found in the early sources about the Meccan and the Medinan periods leads us to the conclusion that the state of writing during the period of revelation was not as advanced as one might assume. Many of the narratives regarding writing raise concerns and necessitate a degree of caution, if not outright skepticism. Even if we were to accept all of the narratives presented as true, this would not demonstrate a high level of literacy particularly in terms of reading and writing. Perhaps they represent a basic level of literacy, at best. It cannot be claimed that there was a widespread literacy campaign in which everyone participated, especially because literacy seems to have been limited to certain individuals.

It is quite clear from historical records that independent reading and writing activities apart from the Qur'an were rare in Mecca and Medina. One of the clearest examples of this comes from Ibn Qutayba, who lived in the 3rd century. After mentioning that Abdullah Ibn Amr among the Companions knew how to read and write, he writes that "other than him among the Companions, there were only one or two who could write" (و كان غيره من الصحابة اميين لا يكتب منهم الا الواحد والاثنان), offering an important perspective on our topic (Ibn Qutayba 1999, p. 412).

THE SEMANTIC FIELD OF *KITAB* AND *KITABA* IN THE QUR'AN

Much research has been conducted on the concept of *kitab* within the Qur'an. Among these, Madigan's study is a prominent example. (For detailed information, see Madigan 2001). However, in this article, I intend to approach the term *kitab* not in the manner described by Madigan but rather within the framework of its relationship with *kitaba* and by adopting a more constrained and distinct interpretation.

When the Qur'an began to be revealed, it is clear that writing in the Hijaz and Mecca region was at an initial, somewhat primitive level. In fact, this observation can also be extended to the Medinan period. However, the distinctiveness of Medina lies in the fact that, especially after the Hijra (migration), writing gradually became a necessity. Despite the small number of scribes, the onset of regular writing can be attributed to the Medinan period. Additionally, during this time, it is evident that the Prophet Muhammad encouraged some young and talented individuals to learn reading and writing. However, what did the people of that time understand by the word 'book'? Was the command '*iqra*/read' as the first revelation referring to reading a book? The first command in the Sura al-Alaq *iqra*, does not mean reading a written text in the conventional sense; rather, it is interpreted to signify 'recite',

Tuncer: Arabs and the Qur'an

'proclaiming' and 'announcing' its meaning. (For detailed information, see, Sell 1905, p. 2-3). In truth, what we understand as a 'book' today is undoubtedly different from what was understood at that time. For instance, for a contemporary reader who has read about the evolution of the book, the existence of a PDF-format book might seem unbelievable to someone living in the 19th century. Similarly, the sudden ability to print dozens of identical copies of books due to the invention of the printing press would have appeared far-fetched to a scholar in 8th or 9th-century Baghdad. Therefore, the concept of *kitab* in the 7th-century Arab mindset when referring to the Qur'an does not correspond to the concept of a book in our own day.

Another issue is the book's journey. The invention of the printing press greatly emphasized the sense of space but marginalized the art of oratory, which was the foundation of the oral tradition. Until the invention of the printing press, a book was something read aloud to a community almost everywhere. Reading a text meant enunciating it (Ong 2002, p. 154). This perspective should also be considered in the context of the 'culture of poetry and oratory,' which is one of the most characteristic features of the period of revelation. As the revelation process progressed, a significant difference emerged in the context of writing and scripture between Meccan and Medinan verses of the Qur'an. The poetic nature of the Meccan verses seemed to transition into a more straightforward written form with the advent of the Medinan period. Whether the Companions were aware of this transformation is uncertain but it can be assumed that they became aware of the distinction between poetic *manzûm* and prosaic *manthur* styles when the Qur'an became a *mushaf* (the written Qur'an). One of the most significant differences between poetry and prose is that poetry is the product of oral culture while prose is the product of written culture. (For an important explanation regarding the difference between poetic writing and prose, see, Thomson 1949, pp. 454-455). Analytical thinking and logic developed with the invention of written language, as seen in ancient Greece. Therefore, it should be remembered that during the Age of Ignorance (*jahiliyyah*) in Arabia, poetry, which developed independently of writing, especially the *mu'allaqat* poets like Imru' al-Qays (d. 540?), thrived in this context. In the Medinan period, when addressing the People of Israel, despite the subtleties of oral culture, sentences in the Qur'an are more prosaic. The Qur'an text itself, as a book, stands somewhere in between oral and written cultures and acts as a distinguishing feature (Nasr 2021, p. 91).

TWO DIFFERENT CONCEPTS

When it comes to writing, the terms *kitab* (book) and *kitabā* correspond to two different concepts. One involves an action performed by the subject visually (*kitab*, book), while the other is an action performed manually (*kitabā*). We read one and write the other. Parallel to this distinction in the Qur'an, *kitab* and *kitabā* represent two different domains. In the Qur'an, reading (*kitāb*) and writing (*kitabā*) are quite distinct. The former is frequently used in the Qur'an and, along with its derivatives, constitutes a significant part of its vocabulary. On the other hand, the subject of writing is not as prominent in the Qur'an. As mentioned earlier, this might be because the Meccan and Medinan societies were not highly developed in terms of writing and consequently, the limited use of vocabulary related to writing can be attributed to this. The frequent use of words like *katabna* (we wrote), *yaktubuna* (they write), *taktubuna* (you write), *naktubu* (we write) does not undermine this principle because all these usages are linked to the nominal form of *kitāb*. Therefore, in the context of the Qur'an, the concept of *kitab* is one of the central terms and it is often synonymous with revelation. While there are numerous words such as *suhuf* (scrolls), *zabur* (psalms), *lawh* (tablet), *sifr* (script), *nuskha* (codex) associated with the *kitab* concept, it is difficult to find a central term that directly corresponds to the concept of *kitabā* or *kitabah* in terms of writing. Moreover, the number of synonymous and closely related words is quite limited.

The word *kitab*, frequently in its plural form, is one of the most frequently used words and occurs around 274 times in the Qur'an (Abdulbaqi 1364, p. 591- 594). None of these usages directly point to a known sense of a book and in most instances, the word *kitab* does not even refer to the Qur'an as a specific book. In the context of the Qur'an, the word *kitab* is used in various ways, and these usages can be categorized into three main contexts: 1. *Lawh mahfuz* (preserved tablet). 2. Sacred scriptures (Torah, Bible, Psalms, Qur'an). 3. Written document, letter, decision, judgment, agreement.

In the context of the *lawh mahfuz*, there are quite a large number of usages. Among these usages, the terms *kitab mubin* (43:2, 44:2, 27:1, 28:2), *kitab maknun* (56:78), *kitab mastur* (17:58, 33:6), or *umm al-kitab* (13:39, 43:4) do not denote the known book. Instead, these usages seem to imply the concept of the *lawh mahfuz* (Tabari 2001, vol. XX, p. 547; Zamakhshari 1998, vol. VI, p. 351). Due to the Qur'an's need to be understood, when expressing a concept that lacks an equivalent in the minds of the audience, the Qur'an prefers to speak of the sacred and the heavenly. Therefore,

Tuncer: Arabs and the Qur'an

in this context, these usages seem to imply a workbook rather than a book, in a sense akin to the meaning of a 'record book'. Their usage in the sense of 'records of deeds' is also similar in meaning (17/14, 71; 45/29; 69/19, 84/7, 10). In these verses, it is emphasized that everything people say and do is recorded in a 'heavenly record book,' where everything, big or small, is documented, leaving nothing out. The one responsible for this recording is Allah Himself (43/49, 54/53). However, there are also celestial scribes alongside Him. (10:21, 43:80, 50:17, 82:11).

KITAB AS SACRED SCRIPTURE

The term *kitab* is also used in the context of the sacred scriptures including the Torah, Psalms, Bible, and the Qur'an. These books are considered divine revelations sent to various prophets throughout history. In this context, *kitab* refers to a sacred scripture revealed to guide humanity (Jeffery 1950, p. 45). Additionally, the word *kitab* can be used in the Qur'an to refer to written documents, letters, decisions, judgments, or agreements made by individuals or authorities.

Use of the term *kitab* outside of the two previously mentioned categories is less common. The concept of written documents playing a role in divine-human relationships has been known in the history of Mesopotamia and the Middle East from very early periods (Jeffery 1950, p. 45). The existence of such an understanding among the Arabs prior to the advent of Islam probably comes from this historical background. Therefore, when referring to written documents, it is important to remember that the context may not only relate to communication and information as understood today but also as referring to decisions, judgments, agreements and perhaps even the act of writing itself.

For example, in the context of written documents, in two places, namely in Surah al-Naml (27:28) when referring to the letter sent by Prophet Solomon to the Queen of Sheba, *kitab* is used in the sense of a "letter" (Tabari 2001, vol. XVIII, p. 45; Qurtubi 2006, vol. XVI, p. 148). In Surah al-Nur (24/33), when mentioning "mutual correspondence," *kitab* carries more extensive meanings such as "God's decree, judgment, and decision." For instance, the phrase "if it were not for a decree (*kitab*) from Allah that preceded" (8/68) is one usage in the context of Allah's decrees. Similarly, in Surah al-Nisa (4/103), the phrase "the prayer is enjoined (*kitab*) on the believers at fixed hours" implies that it is a set of rules (judgments) established by Allah to be followed (Zamakhshari 1998, vol. II, p. 601; Razi 1981, vol. XIII, p. 209).

As already mentioned, the term *kitab* has a distinct connotation within the context of the Qur'an. Nevertheless, in the verses where this term appears, its usage does not refer predominantly to a written text in the sense that we understand this today. When the Qur'an was revealed, apart from sacred books like the Torah and the Bible, there were no written texts that could be read in the way we comprehend them today. Arthur Jeffery questions the understanding of Prophet Muhammad in his use of the term *kitab* (Jeffery 1950, p. 45). Obviously, the various forms of books that we understand today (such as history books, literature, novels, poetry, and scientific books) were not present in the mind of Prophet Muhammad or in the mind of people at that time. Furthermore, except in referring to the Torah and the Bible, it is not possible to assert that Prophet Muhammad had the concept of *mushaf* in mind. The Qur'an frequently employs the term *kitab* to refer to sacred texts.

SEMANTIC ANALYSIS

Another aspect to consider is that although the term *kitab* at the lexical level during the period of revelation implies reading, this is not the same as the term's conceptual meaning. This transformation took place over a certain period of time. Given that the Qur'an is considered to be the first book by the Arabs of the Hijaz, two different disciplines of semantics are needed to trace the evolution of this word. According to *synchronic semantics*, the usage of *kitab* in the Qur'an does not correspond to the term *book* as we understand it today. However, it can be argued that the *diachronic semantics*, which refers to the period after the Prophet's death when codification began, the term *kitab* began to correspond to the word *book* as it is commonly understood today. Izutsu (d. 1993) suggests that the term's meaning in the Qur'an, which is a partial meaning of a written text, is less important than its relative meaning (Izutsu 1964, p. 11).

While various terms such as *tilawa*, *qiraa*, *tartil* are frequently repeated in the Qur'an in relation to the act of reading, apart from the singular occurrence of *takhatta* (29/48) and the twice-mentioned *imla* (2:282, 25:5) in the context of writing, there are also diverse uses of the term *kitaba*. The phrase *fa'ktub* (write) used in the command form in three instances (3:53, 5:83, 7:156) does not indicate a known writing. Perhaps only in the context of the *mudayana* (debt) verse (2:282) where *fa'ktubu* is mentioned and in the constraint for the third person singular "Let him (the debtor) who incurs the liability dictate!" (فليكتب بينكم كتاب), do we find an example of a reference to the activity of writing. The verbs *kataba*, *yaktubu* and *taktubu* all meaning "to write," appear a total of 51 times in the Qur'an. However,

Tuncer: Arabs and the Qur'an

except for a few instances, most of these usages of the word do not imply the conventional act of writing. For example, the phrase *kutiba ala* (prescribed for you) is mentioned 13 times in the passive form and does not refer to the act of writing (2:178, 183, 216, 246, 282, 3:154, 4:77). Similarly, approximately forty occurrences of words such as *kataba Allahu*, *kataba rabbukum*, *kataba ala nafsihi*, *katabna*, *naktubu*, and *sa-naktubu* are not related to the conventional act of writing. Instead, they convey meanings such as Allah's decree, instruction or command (Tabari 2001, vol. IX, p. 167; Zamakhshari 1998, vol. II, p. 328; Qurtubi 2006, vol. VIII, p. 329; Razi 1981, vol. XII, p. 176). For instance, "He has prescribed Mercy for Himself" (كتب علي نفسه الرحمة) (6:12) probably should not be understood as an act of writing.

THE ACT OF WRITING IN THE QUR'AN

When examining the Qur'an for words related to writing and the vocabulary associated with writing, it becomes apparent that the word *kitab* is not frequent. While there are references to reading a written book in the Qur'an, terms that could signify a book in which something is written such as *daftar* (notebook), do not appear. Among the words related to writing, *qalam* is undoubtedly the most important. In fact, the word *qalam* was known among Arabs even before the advent of Islam. (Asad 1955, p. 39). However, we know that the word passed into Arabic through Greek *kalamos* (χαλαμος). (Jeffery 2007, p. 243) Considering the fact that the Greeks are indebted to the Phoenicians for writing and that this word exists in many Semitic languages, it is possible to trace the origin of the word in this context. (Abu Ude 1985, p. 459).

Among the terms to be discussed in this section, including *suhuf*, *zubur*, *sifr*, *sijjil*, *lawh*, *satir*, *khat*, *imla*, *qalam*, *qirtas*, *nuskha*, *raqq*, and *raqim*, they are used either in the context of *lahw mahfuz*, holy/divine/celestial books, or within various other nuances encompassing the concepts of *kitab* and *kitaba*. None of the words related to writing are focus terms in the Qur'an. They remain in the background and on the periphery in relation to the aim and purpose of the Qur'an. These words can be associated with both *kitaba* (writing) and *kitab* (book). On the other hand, words like *suhuf*, *zubur*, *sifr*, and *lawh* are reminiscent of a book while *qalam*, *satir*, *nuskha*, *qirtas*, *raq*, *khat*, *imla* evoke associations with a book as well and are partially related to writing.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have argued that during the period when the Qur'an was revealed, Mecca was a non-literate society and that this is reflected in the Qur'an. While it is true that there were individuals in both Mecca and Medina who knew how to read and write, only very few people could engage in these activities. This only confirms the fact that Mecca and Medina were non-literate societies. Secondly, while more people could read as compared with those who could write, writing was considered a more advanced skill. Hence, the number of those who could write was even smaller than the number of those who could read.

This fact is also reflected in the majority of Qur'anic verses. In the Qur'an, the number of words associated with books and reading is higher than words related to writing and writing tools. Although words related to reading, such as *qiraa*, *tilawa*, and *tartil* are frequently used, there is not as much use of words related to writing. Furthermore, while the word *kitab*, which is the object of reading, is one of the most frequently used words in the Qur'an, the word *daftar*, which would be the object of writing, does not appear in the Qur'an at all. Additionally, it is not certain whether words like *suhuf*, *zukur*, and *sifr*, which are interpreted as similar terms, refer to a written object.

In this context, it is important to note that the word *kitab*, which refers to the object of reading in the Qur'an, does not necessarily mean a text as we understand this word today but rather, depending on the context, it can refer to revelation, the *lawh mahfuz*, a decree, a letter, etc. The presence of words related to reading and writing in the Qur'an can be considered in two ways: firstly, there are not as many words related to reading and writing in the Qur'an as is commonly believed, and the majority of their usages in the Qur'an do not pertain to the acts of reading and writing as understood today. Secondly, some of the words related to writing, such as *qalam*, *raq*, *raqm*, and *khat*, are believed to have entered the Arabic language at a later time.■

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