

The Qur'an

By Patricia Bjaaland Welch

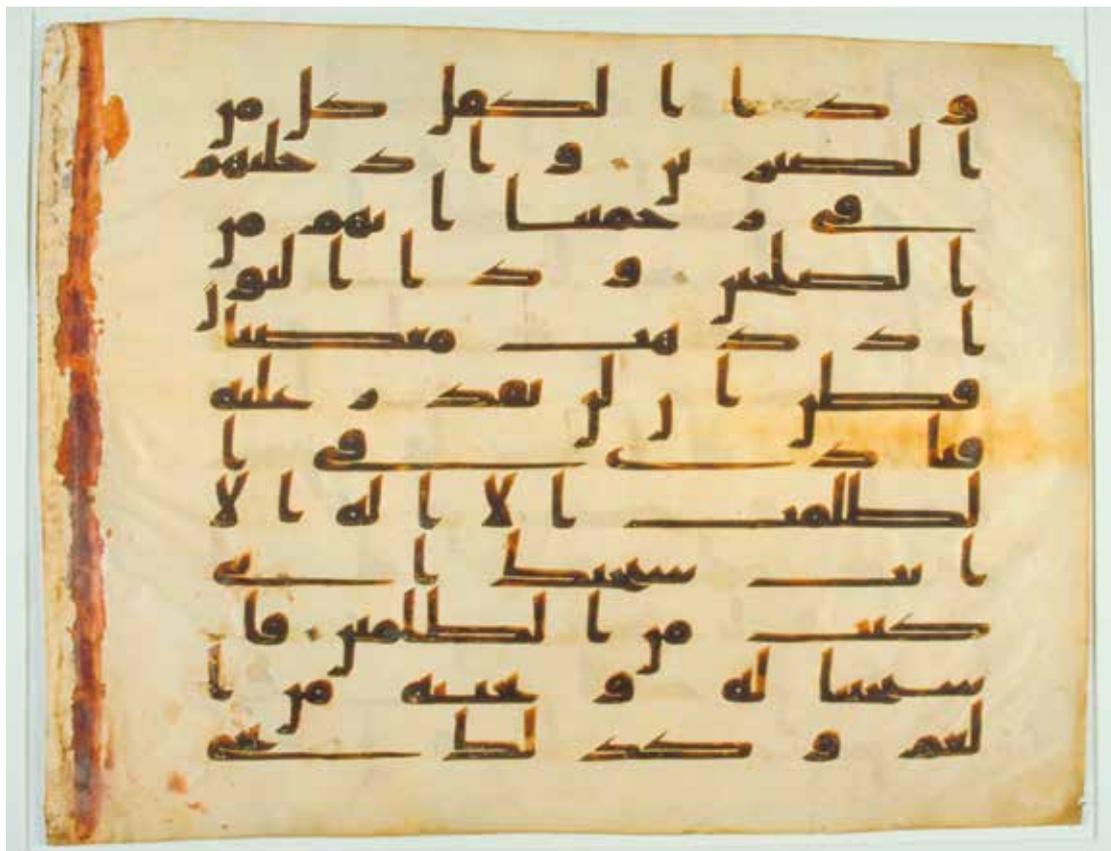
When we think of agents of social change, we tend to think of people – politicians or inventors – yet books can also be agents of social change and none perhaps fits this criterion more wholly than the sacred text of Islam, the Qur'an.

Its 114 *surahs* or chapters, are arranged from longest to shortest (each consisting of three to 287 verses) with the exception of the first *surah*, an opening text that praises Allah, and the last two, which are sometimes referred to as 'charms'.

The Prophet Muhammad's teachings were originally orally transmitted, but with the deaths of many of the men who had

served as custodians of these recitations, they began to be transcribed. Caliph Uthman (644-656 CE) is given the most credit for their final recension as it was under his caliphate that the verses underwent their most thorough scrutiny; the men of Uthman's council were meticulous in examining the collected verses and in ensuring that none of the Prophet's words had been omitted.

These collected *surahs* focus on Allah and urge the faithful to practise righteous lives, to perform "commendable deeds and to refrain from what is objectionable in the sight of God", but they did much, much more. They transformed what was basically a land of tribes – pagan peoples often at war with one another – into a nation of believers and thereby created a brotherhood of all its faithful. The Qur'an's *surahs* cover such broad social legislation topics as the treatment of women, children and slaves, the destitute and needy, thieves as well as saints. In them, one finds the basic laws of Muslim society. In short, the Qur'an, the 'Word of God' as revealed to its Prophet, "instilled in wild tribes the will to fraternise rather than to continue their fratricidal wars and vendettas; to cohere rather than to pull apart when there was no precedent for cohesion in Arabia". For many believers, the Qur'an remains the main reference for matters mundane as well as



Qur'an folio, written in Kufic-Abbasid script, text from verses 85 to 88, early 8th century, North Africa

spiritual. "Indeed no book, sacred or nonsacred, has served, and continues to serve, so utilitarian a function to so many millions as the Qur'an, Allah's gift...through His prophet Muhammad." (Caesar E. Farah, *Islam*)

The Asian Civilisations Museum contains many Qur'ans and Qur'an pages in its extensive collection. The oldest is the beautiful eighth century Qur'an page written in Kufic-Abbasid script, preserved to this day because it was written on durable parchment (dried animal skin). In its time, it served only as a short-hand memory-jogger to its readers as it contains no diacritical or vocalisation marks. Today, the Qur'an is regarded as the single most-read religious text of all the world's religions and still serves as Islam's most revered 'go to' reference.

Patricia Bjaaland Welch spent the summer travelling around the Aegean area in search of ancient Greek and Roman links to early Buddhist art. She was especially excited to find two objects in the Delos Archaeological Museum that she hopes to share with readers in an upcoming article.

Photo courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum, collection of the National Heritage Board