
THE FORTY-SIX FOLIOS OF THE TASHKENT UTHMAN MUSHAF: PROVENANCE, IDENTIFICATION, AND HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

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ANNOTATION

The Tashkent Uthman Muṣḥaf is an ancient Qur’anic manuscript displayed as the principal exhibit in the Qur’an Hall of the Center of Islamic Civilization, established in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it became widely known as the “Samarkand Qur’an” or the “Uthman Muṣḥaf.” In contemporary scholarship, however, the designations “Tashkent Muṣḥaf” and “Tashkent Uthman Muṣḥaf” are more commonly used. Accordingly, the latter term is adopted throughout this article. This exceptional manuscript is regarded as one of the most valuable cultural treasures not only of Uzbekistan but also of the entire Islamic world.

Key words: Tashkent Uthman Muṣḥaf, Qur’an, Islam, manuscript

The folios of the manuscript were prepared from sheepskin parchment¹, with each folio produced from a single piece of skin. Over the centuries, a number of leaves were damaged or lost. The missing sections were initially replaced with additional parchment leaves, although the handwriting on these replacements differs from that of the original manuscript. During a major restoration undertaken in the nineteenth century, Samarkand paper was used to supplement the codex. These soft, cotton-based paper leaves, produced to resemble the colour of parchment, number fifty-five in total. In addition, nineteen original parchment folios were repaired by attaching paper patches, upon which the Qur’anic text was rewritten. The remaining 264 folios consist of polished original parchment.

Today, the manuscript preserved in Tashkent comprises a total of 338 folios, including those added during restoration. These surviving folios contain

¹ Although some earlier sources described the manuscript’s folios as being made of deer or calfskin, scientific analyses carried out in 2025 established that they were, in fact, produced from sheepskin parchment.



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approximately one-third of the complete Qur'anic text. It is estimated that around 680 folios have been lost, suggesting that the original codex consisted of approximately 950 folios in its complete form.

The Tashkent Uthman Muṣḥaf is in landscape format. Its folios are thick and rigid, with one side carefully prepared and polished, while the reverse side is slightly rougher. The recto side of each folio is yellowish with a smooth, glossy surface, whereas the verso is somewhat lighter in colour and slightly wrinkled. Consequently, the script on the verso appears less distinct than on the recto.

Each folio measures 68 × 53 cm, while the written area on the original folios occupies approximately 50 × 40 cm and is consistently arranged in twelve lines of text. Although the replacement folios added during later restoration correspond to the original dimensions, the number of lines on these inserted leaves is not uniform.

The manuscript's exceptional size and considerable weight indicate that it was produced as an official (state-sponsored) codex, rather than as a personal copy of the Qur'an.

Although the principal collection of this ancient Muṣḥaf, one of Uzbekistan's most significant cultural treasures, preserves approximately one-third of the Qur'anic text, an examination at the level of individual sūrahs reveals that, of the Qur'an's 114 sūrahs, 89 are absent, while 25 survive either in complete or partial form.

According to the Kufan system of verse enumeration, the manuscript preserves 2,108 of the Qur'an's 6,236 verses, whereas 4,128 verses are missing.

The fact that approximately one-third of the manuscript has survived in a relatively well-preserved state has naturally given rise to hopes that the remaining missing folios of this sacred codex may one day be discovered.

To date, forty-six folios of the Tashkent Uthman Muṣḥaf have been identified outside Uzbekistan. These are currently preserved in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (1 folio); the Aga Khan Museum, Toronto (1 folio); the Museum of Islamic Art, Doha (25 folios); the Ali Sani Collection, Doha (1 folio); the Tareq Rajab Museum, Kuwait City (6 folios); the Ali Sarikhani Collection, London (1 folio); the Nasser D. Khalili Collection, London (1 folio); the Legoo Collection, London (1 folio); a



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private collection in Roxburghe (1 folio); the Hamid Jaafar Collection, Sharjah (1 folio); and the headquarters of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of the Republic of Bashkortostan in Ufa (1 folio).

In addition to these, a further six folios of the Tashkent Uthman Muṣḥaf have recently been identified through documentary sources. Information on four of these folios was published in the catalogue of a Christie's auction held in London. Another folio was illustrated on 14 May 2025 by the Bukhara Khattot Telegram channel, where it was presented simply as an example of Kufic script. One more folio was discovered on the Internet on 16 June 2025; however, its present location remains unknown.

Compared with the principal collection preserved in Tashkent, these additional folios increase the surviving Qur'anic text by approximately 15%, or by about 17% when calculated in relation to the surviving original parchment folios alone.

All of the identified folios are original leaves from the manuscript itself. They were removed from different parts of the codex and together preserve the complete or partial text of approximately 350 Qur'anic verses from thirteen sūrahs.

Several folios of the manuscript that were still present in the 1905 facsimile edition have subsequently disappeared and have not yet been located. These missing folios are presented in the table below.

Facsimile Folio No.	Qur'anic Passage (Sūrah: Verses)
247	18:17–19
343	41:20–24

Most of the newly identified folios belong to the seventeenth and eighteenth ajzā' (juz's) of the Qur'an, particularly Sūrahs 21–23. Of Sūrah al-Anbiyā', nine folios have been identified, preserving 65 verses, while 47 verses remain missing. This indicates that more than half of the sūrah has now been recovered.

A further eleven folios preserve 52 of the 78 verses of Sūrah al-Ḥajj, whereas the folios containing the remaining 26 verses have not yet been identified.



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The twelve recovered folios belonging to Sūrah al-Mu'minūn contain 93 verses, representing approximately two-thirds of the sūrah. Given that each folio preserves, on average, about eight verses, it may be inferred that the remaining 25 verses were originally contained on approximately three additional folios, which have yet to be located.

Overall, the recovery of more than half of these three sūrahs, which were entirely absent from the principal Tashkent collection, constitutes a significant scholarly discovery. It also provides strong grounds for expecting that future research may lead to the identification of additional folios, thereby further restoring these and other portions of the Tashkent Uthman Muṣḥaf.

Determining when these folios were separated from the original manuscript is an important subject for further research. The evidence gathered thus far suggests that they were removed during the nineteenth century. This conclusion may be supported by several lines of evidence.

The renowned Tatar scholar 'Abd al-Raḥīm Utyz-Īmānī², who travelled in Bukhara and Samarkand between 1788 and 1798, mentions the ancient Qur'anic manuscript known as the Uthman Muṣḥaf of Samarkand in his poetic work *Gifts of the Age*. He records that the manuscript had undergone restoration and notes that, at that time, its thickness was approximately two handspans³. Today, however, the manuscript measures only about 30 cm in thickness, which corresponds to roughly one and a half handspans.

This comparison indicates that, although the manuscript was already incomplete at the time of its restoration in the late eighteenth century, it nevertheless contained considerably more folios than it does today. It follows that the folios identified in recent years were still part of the principal

² 'Abd al-Raḥīm ibn 'Uthmān Utyz-Īmānī (1167–1252 AH / 1754–1834 CE) was one of the leading Tatar scholars and intellectuals of the Enlightenment period. He was born and died in the village of Utyz-Īmān, located in what is now the Cheremshan District of the Republic of Tatarstan. He received his education at the madrasas of Bukhara and Samarkand and attained mastery of both Arabic and Persian. He was recognized as a distinguished faqīh (Islamic jurist) and a representative of the Sufi tradition, while also earning renown as a classical poet. Approximately ten works are attributed to him, written in Arabic, Persian, and Turkic. Many of his writings are composed in verse, and several of his works have been published.

³ 'Abd al-Raḥīm Utyz-Īmānī, *Awārif al-Zamān* (عوارف الزمان). Kazan Federal University, Kazan, Inventory No. 1402T, p. 18. The information is presented in verse:

اولوغدر قطعی طول تورث قارشدان
دخی عرضین قلیذر اوچ قارشدان
یوغانلغی اولور ایکی قارشدک
آغرلغی اولوبذر پنج سیردیک

Its length was more than four handspans, And its width measured three handspans.
Its thickness was approximately two handspans, And its weight amounted to about five sīrs.



manuscript at that time. Their remarkably good state of preservation further supports this conclusion.

In earlier periods, the commercial sale of sacred objects or the treatment of manuscripts as valuable commodities was not a common practice among Muslims. In other words, the concept of an antiquarian manuscript market, as it developed in Europe, was largely unknown in the Muslim world. Such a market emerged in the West only during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Moreover, handwritten books were then commonplace within Muslim societies and were generally regarded as ordinary scholarly works rather than objects of exceptional monetary value.

A striking illustration of this phenomenon is provided by Egypt and the Levant, where numerous rare manuscripts including some of the oldest surviving Qur'anic codices dating from the seventh and eighth centuries, which are now considered priceless – were sold to European travellers for negligible sums. The peoples of Central Asia became familiar with the international trade in rare antiquities only during the nineteenth century. Until then, although manuscripts were carefully preserved and respected, they were not viewed as commercial assets of high monetary value.

This historical context suggests that the number of folios in the Tashkent Uthman Muṣḥaf declined gradually through natural causes before its restoration in the late eighteenth century, whereas by the nineteenth century individual folios had begun to acquire commercial value. It is therefore reasonable to associate the removal of these folios with the widespread looting that accompanied the Russian conquest of Central Asia, when valuable objects could be transported out of the region in the unchecked baggage of Russian military officers and subsequently sold. The same process was facilitated by European travellers, who visited Central Asia and purchased manuscripts and other objects of particular interest.

To avoid attracting attention or provoking official investigations, highly valued manuscripts were generally not stolen in their entirety. Instead, when an opportunity arose, those involved typically removed only a substantial portion of a manuscript by cutting out one or more folios. Similar patterns of dismemberment are evident in the histories of the Katta Langar Muṣḥaf and the Paris Qur'anic manuscripts, both of which likewise survive today in fragmentary form.

The fact that the identified folios were separated from the principal manuscript only in relatively recent centuries strengthens the possibility that the adjacent missing folios may still be located. At present, however, the limited amount of available information can be explained by several factors: the absence of sufficiently comprehensive research, the incomplete cataloguing of holdings in certain museums and private collections, the preservation of some folios in the possession of individuals lacking specialist knowledge, and the illicit nature of the trade in such objects, which discourages their owners from disclosing their existence for fear of legal consequences.

Accordingly, future searches for additional folios should not be confined to well-known institutions but should also extend to lesser-known museums and private collections, where previously unrecognized fragments may still be preserved.

The search for additional folios of the Tashkent Uthman Muṣḥaf and the scholarly study of this manuscript require highly qualified specialists as well as broad-based, interdisciplinary research efforts. In this regard, the Center of Islamic Civilization of Uzbekistan, established at the initiative of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, provides an effective institutional framework for coordinating and implementing such large-scale research projects.

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