

Qur'an fragments may be world's oldest

by [Trevor Grundy](#) in the [August 19, 2015](#) issue

What could turn out to be the world's oldest fragments of the Qur'an have been found at the University of Birmingham, in the United Kingdom's second-largest city, which has a 28 percent Muslim population.

The manuscripts were brought to England in the late 1920s and were lying in a drawer next to the diaries of English playwright Noel Coward when doctoral student Alba Fedeli decided to take a closer look at them.

Radiocarbon dating found that the two weather-beaten parchments, probably made from sheep or goat skins and covered in neat symmetrical flowing lines of an early Arabic script, were at least 1,370 years old, making them among the earliest pages of the Qur'an in existence—if not the very oldest.

Susan Worrall, the university's director of special collections, said researchers had not expected "in our wildest dreams" that the documents would be so old.

"Finding out that we had one of the oldest fragments of the Qur'an in the whole world has been fantastically exciting," she said.

David Thomas, professor of Islam and Christianity at the university, said he was "stunned" when the tests, carried out by the Oxford University Radiocarbon Accelerator Unit, came back with such early dates. These tests provide a range of dates showing that, with a probability of more than 95 percent, the parchments were from between AD 568 and 645.

"When we were informed that these are likely to be very early fragments, we sent them off for carbon dating and the date came back of 645 AD," he said. "That is a startlingly early date."

He said that the fragments of the Qur'an (which means "recite" in Arabic) came from the earliest days of Islam.

"If the dating is correct, then the person who wrote them might have known the Prophet Muhammad, would have seen him, and maybe heard him preach," he said.

“He may have known him personally and that is quite a thought. According to Muslim tradition, the Prophet Muhammad received the revelations that form the Qur’an between the years 610 and 632, the year of his death.”

The manuscripts were written in Hijazi script, an early form of Arabic writing. They are part of the Mingana Collection of more than 3,000 Middle Eastern documents gathered in the 1920s by Alphonse Mingana, a Chaldean priest born near Mosul in modern-day Iraq.

Mingana was sponsored to take collecting trips to the Middle East by Edward Cadbury of the famous chocolate manufacturing firm.

Members of the Muslim community in Birmingham are delighted to know their city could become famous as a pilgrimage site.

“When I saw these pages I was very moved,” said Muhammad Afzal, chairman of Birmingham Central Mosque. “There were tears of joy and emotion in my eyes. And I am sure that people from all over the U.K. will come to Birmingham to have a glimpse at these pages.”

The University of Birmingham says the fragments will go on display in the Barber Institute in Birmingham in October. —Religion News Service

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