

THE AUSTRALIAN

Koran find could rewrite history of Islam

OLIVER MOODY THE TIMES AUGUST 31, 2015 8:29AM



The Koran manuscript could rewrite early Islam history.

A copy of the Koran that may predate the Prophet Muhammad could rewrite the early history of Islam, scholars believe.

Scientists at the University of Oxford said last month that carbon dating of a fragment of the holy text held by a Birmingham library suggested that it was among the oldest in the world.

At the time the discovery was hailed as confirmation that the Koran had faithfully preserved the words passed on by Muhammad for more than 1,350 years. Now, several historians think the parchment appears to be so old that it contradicts most accounts of the Prophet's life and legacy, and may "radically alter the edifice of Islamic tradition". These claims are strongly disputed by Muslim scholars.

If the dating is correct, the "Birmingham Koran" was produced between AD568 and AD645, while the dates usually given for Muhammad are AD570 to AD632. At the very latest, it was made before the first formal text of the Koran is supposed to have been collated at the behest of the caliph Uthman, the third of the Prophet's successors, in 653. At the earliest it could date back to Mohammed's childhood, or possibly even before his birth.

Some academics believe the text's impact could be comparable to discovering a copy of gospel sayings that date back to the infancy of Jesus

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Tom Holland, the historian and author of *In The Shadow of the Sword*, said evidence was mounting that traditional accounts of Islam's origins were unreliable or even wrong.

This would be especially challenging for the Salafist branch of Islam, whose offshoots include al-Qa'ida and Islamic State, and which attempts to rebuild the politics and lifestyles of Mohammed's contemporaries as described in later historical sources, most of which were only compiled after AD800.

"It destabilises, to put it mildly, the idea that we can know anything with certainty about how the Koran emerged — and that in turn has implications for the historicity of Mohammed and the Companions [his followers]," Mr Holland said.

Other very old Korans — particularly one found in the roof of the Great Mosque in Sanaa, the capital of Yemen and carbon-dated to the sixth or seventh century — seem to confirm that holy verses were circulating in written form at least before the Prophet's death.

Keith Small, from the University of Oxford's Bodleian Library, said that carbon dating was not always reliable and the dates announced last month applied not to the ink but to the parchment. The provenance of the text is also unclear and its calligraphic script is characteristic of later inscriptions.

Yet Dr Small believes that the dates are probably right and may raise broad questions about the origins of Islam. "If the [radio carbon] dates apply to the parchment and the ink, and the dates across the entire range apply, then the Koran — or at least portions of it — predates Mohammed, and moves back the years that an Arabic literary culture is in place well into the 500s," he said.

"This gives more ground to what have been peripheral views of the Koran's genesis, like that Mohammed and his early followers used a text that was already in existence and shaped it to fit their own political and theological agenda, rather than Mohammed receiving a revelation from heaven.

"This would radically alter the edifice of Islamic tradition and the history of the rise of Islam in late Near Eastern antiquity would have to be completely revised, somehow accounting for another book of scripture coming into existence 50 to 100 years before, and then also explaining how this was co-opted into what became the entity of Islam by around AD700."

Muslim academics are more sanguine about the dates of the Birmingham Koran. Mustafa Shah, from the School of Oriental and African Studies, in London, said it was important to be wary of revisionist claims. "If anything, the manuscript has consolidated traditional accounts of the Koran's origins," he said.

Shady Hekmat Nasser, from the University of Cambridge, said: "We already know

from our sources that the Koran was a closed text very early on in Islam, and these discoveries only attest to the accuracy of these sources.”

The Times

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Majin

4 DAYS AGO

It isn't rewriting Islam history, it's Islamists trying to rewrite history for non-Muslims. Like Mohammed, they're trying to make falsities as canon and then push everyone to accept it. You really think 'canonizing' this book as predating Mohammed is a good thing? No, it only validates Mo's claim that Islam is the Truth, and they'll use this 'canonizing' as 'proof of the truth'. Mo retconned Judeo-Christian lore for Islam, and now Islam is trying to retcon our own history.

LIKE REPLY



Mark

4 DAYS AGO

In 2010 I was walking up a wadi in Saudi Arabia when I came across a burning bush that wasn't being consumed by the flames. Rather than fall on my knees in wonder I went to investigate. Turned out that the plants reddish coloured, translucent bark was peeling and with sunlight shining through the bark it looked just like it was on fire. So many (all?) of the 'miracles' in the ancient religious texts could be explained with a little knowledge. It's a shame that humans feel the need to rely on 1500 year old texts to live their lives.

LIKE REPLY



linda

4 DAYS AGO

Does this mean Islam is based on a lie?

LIKE REPLY



James

4 DAYS AGO

Didn't anyone read the fine print in this story?

"Keith Small, from the University of Oxford's Bodleian Library, said that carbon dating was not always reliable and the dates announced last month applied not to the ink but to the parchment. The provenance of the text is also unclear and its