REASSESSING QURʾĀNIC CODIFICATION: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF NICOLAI SINAI'S METHODOLOGY[(*)]

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ABSTRACT

This article reassesses Nicolai Sinai's account of Qurʾānic codification and situates it within current debates on the textual history of the Qurʾān. It evaluates Sinai's claim that the consonantal skeleton (*rasm*) attained closure under the caliph ʿUthmān in the mid-seventh century and examines his use of three evidence streams: Islamic historiography, internal textual analysis, and early epigraphic/manuscript data. To sharpen the appraisal, the study introduces a comparative frame that juxtaposes Sinai's findings and methods with those of Fred M. Donner and Angelika Neuwirth, who represent influential but distinct approaches to the Qurʾān's formation. The comparison shows how differing evidentiary priorities and hermeneutic assumptions yield divergent chronologies and mechanisms of fixation. On balance, the material and codicological indicators substantively support an early codification compatible, though not identical, with Donner's reconstruction and partially convergent with Neuwirth's canon-formation account. The article contributes the first tightly integrated, method-centred comparison of Sinai with Donner and Neuwirth and proposes explicit evidentiary-weighting criteria—prioritising material over internal textual over narrative sources when in tension—to guide future codification research. It concludes by underscoring how methodological choices decisively shape scholarly reconstructions of when and how the Qurʾān became textually stable.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The question of when and how the Qurʾān was codified—transformed from a recited revelation into a fixed scriptural corpus—remains central to Qurʾānic studies, bearing directly on textual integrity and on the reliability of early Islamic historiography. Within Islamic discourse, the Qurʾān is the divine word (*kalāmullāh*) and repeatedly presents itself as an oral/aural phenomenon: a word to be heard and recited to an unlettered prophet (Q 9:6; 62:2). Revelation first unfolded through performance before migrating into written media, a passage that altered communicative conditions and created opportunities for variation, normalisation, and stabilisation. While Islamic tradition attributes codification to the early caliphs Abū Bakr and ʿUthmān in the mid-seventh century, modern scholarship offers divergent accounts. Some uphold an early standardisation grounded in textual and historical indicators (van Putten, 2019), whereas revisionists—most notably Wansbrough, Crone, and Cook—have argued for a later canonisation, possibly under ʿAbd al-Malik, based on scepticism toward Islamic narrative sources and the paucity of unambiguous early material evidence (Larsson, 2012).

Recent manuscript-led research has reshaped the debate. Hilali's critical edition of the Ṣanʿāʾ palimpsest highlights layered transmission in the first Islamic centuries, grounding discussion in material witnesses (Hilali, 2017). Déroche's synthesis of Umayyad-period codices clarifies the chronology of rasm/orthography and the emergence of a recognisably ʿUthmānic profile (Déroche, 2014). Van Putten's orthographic-correlation study shows shared idiosyncrasies across early copies that fit descent from a single written archetype, implying early exemplar-based stabilisation (van Putten, 2019). Complementing this "manuscript turn," Nasser's account of the second canonisation of the qirāʾāt explains how oral readings were disciplined around a fixed consonantal text in the 4th/10th century (Nasser, 2013). Converging Arabic-language work has also critiqued over-reading of manuscript "corrections," arguing these reflect routine scribal practice rather than textual instability (Farāstī, 2022). While primary-source-driven Muslim scholarship is not always systematic by contemporary historical-critical standards, classic works by al-Zanjānī, Muḥammad Rāmyār, and Muṣṭafā Aʿẓamī remain valuable interlocutors, offering partial but instructive treatments of codification (Karimi-Nia, 2013).

Amid this debate, Nicolai Sinai has emerged as a leading voice offering a nuanced, evidence-based affirmation of the conventional view that the Qurʾān's text was codified shortly after the Prophet's lifetime. Sinai is known for his research focuses on the Qurʾān's composition, chronology, and reception, as he has contributed significantly to Qurʾānic studies through works such as *The Qurʾān: A Historical-Critical Introduction* (Sinai, 2017). Of relevance is Sinai's two-part article "When did the consonantal skeleton of the Quran reach closure?", which directly addresses the codification timeline. In these studies, Sinai investigates whether the Qurʾānic *rasm* could have still been undergoing revision into the late 7th century or whether it was essentially fixed by the mid-7th century as Islamic tradition maintains. He brings to bear multiple forms of evidence: the Islamic historical reports of the ʿUthmānic codex, internal textual evidence within the Qurʾān for possible later additions or anachronisms, and epigraphic and manuscript evidence from the 7th century.

Against this background, this paper asks three questions: (1) What methodological approach does Nicolai Sinai advance for explaining Qurʾānic codification? (2) What is the evidentiary basis for that approach across narrative, internal textual, and material sources? and (3) Where does Sinai's position sit within modern scholarship on the codification of the Qurʾān? These questions matter because the field still lacks sustained historical-critical studies that marshal clearly articulated across all three streams. This paper analyses Nicolai Sinai's concept of Qurʾānic codification by outlining his principal arguments and examining the historical-critical methods he employs. To situate Sinai's position, the study compares his methodology with those of Fred M. Donner and Angelika Neuwirth, showing how different evidentiary priorities yield divergent reconstructions of the Qurʾān's compilation and stabilisation. Both scholars, in principle, deploy historical-critical tools to clarify the origins and development of the Qurʾān as a text.

This study is grounded in critical textual-historical analysis and employs a comparative framework to evaluate Sinai's concept of Qurʾānic codification. It engages in close reading of Sinai's key works and other relevant scholarship, assessing his use of Islamic narrative traditions, internal textual features, and epigraphic or manuscript evidence. The analysis proceeds in four stages: first, by explaining the discussion on codification from early Islam to contemporary scholarship; second, by outlining Sinai's core arguments; third, by critically examining the rigor and potential biases in his methodological choices; and finally, by comparing his conclusions with those of Fred M. Donner and Angelika

Neuwirth to highlight how differing approaches shape divergent reconstructions of Qurʾānic history.

Throughout, the study ensures that claims about the Qurʾān's history are backed by scholarly research and that the discussion remains grounded in verifiable academic discourse. The methodology is therefore descriptive-analytical and comparative, rather than normative or theological; the aim is not to assert what *must* have happened in Qurʾānic history, but to critically evaluate what different scholars *argue* happened and why, given the evidence they consider. In doing so, the paper contributes to a historiographical understanding of Qurʾānic codification – appreciating how modern scholars reconstruct early Islamic history and how methodological choices can uphold or challenge elements of the traditional narrative.

2.   METHOD

In this article, codification denotes the reduction of the Qurʾān's recited revelation to a fixed consonantal text (*rasm*) and the production of exemplar copies in the mid first/seventh century. Standardisation refers to the subsequent harmonisation of that *rasm* across regional copies (including the instruction to write according to Quraysh usage and the recall of divergent materials). Canonisation designates the social authorisation and regulation of the text and its readings—seen later in the formal selection of canonical *qirāʾāt* and in the text's ritual entrenchment (Nasser, 2013). Orthographic reforms here mean later graphic regularisation, which do not alter the underlying consonantal skeleton.

This study will first, reconstructs Sinai's argument on Qurʾānic codification as presented in his peer-reviewed work; second, it subjects that reconstruction to a sustained methodological critique; and third, it situates Sinai alongside two deliberately chosen comparators, Fred M. Donner and Angelika Neuwirth. Donner and Neuwirth are selected because they articulate methodologically explicit—but distinct—models that bracket the contemporary field. Donner integrates narrative reports with documentary and codicological signals to argue for early communal recognition of the text, whereas Neuwirth distinguishes codification from canonisation and foregrounds literary-historical formation and reception.

The discussion applies a three-pass critique aligned with the three streams, weighing strengths, limits, and likely biases. First, in Islamic historiography, Sinai's strength is extracting procedural detail and cross-dossier

convergences; limits include retrospective harmonisation, intra-tradition dependence, and genre bounds; possible bias is tested via source-independence and correlation with non-narrative anchors. Second, in internal textual analysis, the strength is the diagnostic value of *rasm* regularities and distributional patterns for normalisation; limits are the under-specified early consonantal script and risks of circularity from later readings; bias is checked by necessity tests and live alternatives. Third, in material evidence, the strength is datability and geographic spread as high-probative anchors; limits involve survivorship bias, palaeographic uncertainty, and over-weighting outliers; we probe dating logic, handling of atypical witnesses, and generalisability beyond single artefacts. Each sub-analysis closes with an explicit judgment of what the combined evidence warrants under the agreed weighting scheme.

3.   RESULTS

3.1.   *Classical Muslim Accounts of Codification*

Classical Muslim scholarship uses the term *jamʿ al-Qurʾān* ("collection/compilation") (Al-Qaṭṭān, 2000, p. 115) in a dual sense: (1) gathering by memorisation and (2) gathering by writing (al-Suyūthi, 1973, p. 67). In the prophetic period, revelation was first secured through recitation, audition, and memorisation among the Companions (Al Hafiz et al., 2016), while selected scribes recorded revealed passages on available media—palm ribs, parchments, bones—without assembling a single codex (al-Zurqānī, 1995, p. 202). Early reports name ʿAbd Allāh b. Saʿd b. Abī Sarḥ among the Meccan scribes and Ubayy b. Kaʿb and Zayd b. Thābit in Medina, with traditions noting that many Companions were recognised memorizers (*ḥuffāẓ*); al-Suyūṭī, for example, lists more than twenty prominent names (al-Suyūthi, 1973, p. 67; Al-Subḥānī, 1970, p. 50).

After the Prophet's death, the Abū Bakr collection was initiated in response to battlefield losses among memorizers at al-Yamāmah (Al-Qaṭṭān, 2000, p. 158). According to the canonical report preserved in Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Abū Bakr—on ʿUmar's counsel—commissioned Zayd b. Thābit to gather the Qurʾān "from parchments, palm stalks, and the hearts of men," producing a compiled set of sheets (*ṣuḥuf*) that was kept successively by Abū Bakr, then ʿUmar, and then Ḥafṣah (Bukhārī & Khan, 1996). A second decisive phase is the ʿUthmānic standardisation. As regional recitational differences surfaced, ʿUthmān formed a committee to prepare exemplar codices using Ḥafṣah's *ṣuḥuf* as the base text and ordered that, where necessary, the *rasm* follow Quraysh usage

(Cerrahoğlu, 2018, p. 80). Copies were then dispatched to major garrison cities and other written materials were recalled. Later chronicles report the eventual destruction of Ḥafṣah's sheets during the Marwānid period to prevent confusion with the official copies (Saeed, 2008, p. 44).

Set against this classical baseline, western scholarship has long probed the Qurʾān's textual history, often reassessing collection and standardisation through historical-critical lenses. This critic was galvanised by three developments: the 1924 Cairo standard edition, the 1972 discovery of early Qurʾānic manuscripts in Ṣanʿāʾ, and the growing availability of systematic repertories of *qirāʾāt*. Arthur Jeffery's programmatic essays framed the Cairo edition as an emergent *textus receptus* among Western scholars while lamenting the absence, at the time, of comprehensive grammatical and textual tools (Jeffery, 1937). Richard Bell re-examined compositional sequence, and the most far-reaching "revisionist" move came with John Wansbrough, who argued that recognition and canonisation of the Qurʾān as scripture crystallised only under the Umayyads, well after the Prophet (Bell, 1953; Saeed, 2008, p. 47). Leone Caetani and Jeffery also entertained political catalysts for standardisation under ʿUthmān, reading the episode through the lens of state consolidation rather than pious concern alone (Caetani, 1972; Jeffery, 1937; Mudin, 2017).

In short, the revisionist literature underscores three durable theses: (1) oral-to-written transition is complex and multi-phased; (2) canonisation is distinguishable from codification; and (3) political context can accelerate standardisation. Our discussion section therefore reads these theses against primary sources rather than secondary restatement: classical reports are correlated with material witnesses and internal textual signals, following the stated weighting. Where the streams converge, we register strengthened support for early codification; where they diverge, we mark the limits of the record and avoid arguments *ex silentio*.

3.2.   Qurʾānic Manuscripts and Modern Scholarship

After discussing the classical Muslim accounts of codification, it is essential to bring the discussion up to date by engaging directly with the physical evidence of the Qurʾān's transmission. In recent decades, manuscript studies have moved to the heart of Qurʾānic scholarship. Early codices, palaeographic analysis and radiocarbon dating now allow researchers to test the historical narratives preserved in the tradition and to propose new models for how and when the text took shape.

Déroche stresses that the field now possesses substantial parts of copies datable to the Umayyad period and that palaeography and codicology are crucial tools for evaluating them. By comparing scripts and examining quires, scholars can group fragments into related series and, in some cases, reconstruct aspects of their original layout. He cautions that codicological analysis is hampered by fragmentary preservation and warns against overinterpretation. Déroche discusses the famous Codex Ṣanʿāʾ, arguing that its status as a palimpsest is almost unique in the Islamic tradition. He observes that recycling parchment in this way was common in the Christian West but exceptional in early Islamic contexts, and he suggests that economic considerations rather than ideological motives probably explain why the parchment was erased and reused (Déroche, 2014). For Déroche, the Codex Ṣanʿāʾ thus illustrate "the weight of the economy vs. the ideological perspective" in the history of the Qurʾānic codex.

The Ṣanʿāʾ palimpsest has also been the focus of heated debate among manuscript scholars. Hilali proposes that the lower text was never a bound codex but rather a "collection of disparate leaves" produced during multiple sessions of teaching or dictation. She argues that variations in layout and numerous corrections indicate that the leaves are not remnants of a single book but of scattered notes taken in teaching circles (Hilali, 2017). Éléonore Cellard, summarising Hilali's view, adds that if the fragments were indeed temporary student notes, the lower text remains essentially ʿUthmānic and offers little insight into the Qurʾān's formative history (Cellard, 2021).

Van Putten has used orthographic idiosyncrasies to argue that all early Qurʾānic manuscripts descend from a single written archetype. He examines the phrase niʿmat Allāh/rabbika ("the grace of God/your Lord") and shows that it is consistently spelled with either tāʾ or tāʾ marbūṭa in the same positions across fourteen manuscripts; such uniformity, he argues, can only be explained if all copies stem from one written exemplar (van Putten, 2019). He further concludes that the manuscripts were copied from written exemplars rather than through dictation and that, because many of these copies date to the Umayyad period, the archetype must have been standardised no later than ʿUthmān's caliphate (van Putten, 2019). In another study, van Putten analyses the distribution of the two spellings of the name "Ibrāhīm/Ibrāhām" in early codices. He finds that the choice of spelling correlates strongly with the reading tradition of the transmitter Hišām. Manuscripts consistently use the same spelling in the same verses, and Hišām appears to have based his recitation on the rasm rather than the rasm being adapted to his pronunciation (Van Putten, 2020). This supports the view that the rasm of the Qurʾān was fixed early and that reading traditions conformed to the written text.

A downstream check beyond the first Islamic centuries comes from Southeast Asia. A recent codicological study of the Pakis (Rembang) codex documents sustained adherence to ʿUthmānī *rasm* conventions, indicating that orthographic discipline was effectively transmitted across later copying milieus (Fadilah & Asif, 2024). This regional witness complements early archetype inferences by showing long-range continuity in practice.

Anthony's examination of two "lost" sūras—al-Khalʿ and al-Ḥafd—highlights how manuscript evidence influences debates over Companion codices. He notes that no extant Qurʾān manuscript preserves these *sūras* and that, until recently, the very historicity of any Companion codex was widely doubted. However, he draws attention to Sadeghi and Bergmann's radiocarbon dating and codicological analysis of the Ṣanʿāʾ 1 palimpsest, which they argue represents a non-ʿUthmānic "Companion" codex. The palimpsest's lower layer, made visible through X-ray fluorescence imaging, does not align completely with any known Companion codex, yet its readings suggest the existence of an alternative textual tradition. Anthony concludes that such findings oblige historians to take literary reports of alternative codices seriously (Anthony & Bronson, 2016).

In a response to Ruqayya Khan's claim that Ḥafṣah bint ʿUmar edited the Qurʾān (Khan, 2014), Anthony and Bronson critique the historiographical methods used in feminist reassessments of the codification story. While sympathetic to gender-critical approaches, they caution against speculative claims unsupported by manuscript evidence and emphasise the need to reconcile literary narratives with material evidence (Anthony & Bronson, 2016). Drawing on Alain George's work, they note that early Qurʾānic scribes were familiar with Christian scribal techniques and that Christianised Arabs often served as scribes (George, 2010, pp. 52–53). This observation situates early Qurʾānic codicology within a broader late-antique scribal culture and underscores the importance of socio-cultural context in analysing early manuscripts.

Taken together, these studies show that manuscript evidence has become central to debates over the Qurʾān's codification. They suggest that the consonantal text was stabilised early, likely under ʿUthmān; that alternative textual traditions existed but survive only fragmentarily; and that codicological features such as binding and parchment recycling provide insight into the social and economic conditions of early Qurʾān production. As we turn in the next section to Nicolai Sinai's concept of Qurʾānic codification, it will be important to assess how his theoretical model accounts for this growing body of empirical evidence.

3.3.   Sinai's Concept of Qurʾānic Codification

Sinai's thesis on the codification of the Qurʾān centers on the argument that the Qurʾān's text was standardised and fixed in written form by around 650 CE, during the generation of the Prophet's companions, essentially confirming the classical Islamic narrative of an ʿUthmānic codex (Sinai, 2014a). In doing so, he addresses the alternative hypothesis posed by some scholars that the Qurʾān's text remained fluid or open to revision up until the end of the 7th century. Sinai's concludes that there are no convincing evidence exists to push the final codification of the Qurʾān beyond the mid-7th century, and that the traditional timeline withstands critical scrutiny (see Table 1).

Sinai begins by analysing classical Islamic narratives of Qurʾānic compilation, particularly those found in hadith collections and early historiographies. Caliph Abū Bakr appointed Zayd ibn Thābit to collect Muhammad's revelations, resulting in a compiled set of ṣuḥuf kept with Ḥafṣa. Later, during ʿUthmān's rule (644–656 CE), Zayd led a committee to produce a standardised codex in response to disputes over variant recitations, which was then copied and disseminated while non-conforming materials were destroyed. Sinai underscores the widespread acceptance of this account as evidence of its deep entrenchment in early Islamic memory. He argues that if the codification had occurred later, under a ruler like ʿAbd al-Malik, it is unlikely that all factions, including those opposed to the Umayyads, would have uniformly attributed the codex to ʿUthmān without any surviving traces of dissent (Sinai, 2014b).

Sinai reinforces this point by invoking what Fred Donner has called the impossibility of empire-wide censorship (Donner, 1998). By the late 7th century, the Islamic community was dispersed over a vast territory from Arabia to the Levant and beyond, and it had already splintered politically and theologically. The notion that a caliph could introduce a substantially new Qurʾānic text or finalise a hitherto fluid text at that stage is viewed as highly implausible. As Sinai notes, the Islamic tradition displays no "palpable vestiges of the true origin of the standard *rasm*" if that origin were different from the ʿUthmānic scenario. In other words, we do not see any counter-narratives in Shiʿi claiming that the Qurʾān was compiled in 700 CE by ʿAbd al-Malik or that it had a different editor. The absence of such counter-histories is an *argument e silentio*, which Sinai acknowledges must be used with caution, since absence of evidence is not necessarily evidence of absence (Sinai, 2014b). Nonetheless, he contends that given the diverse and often polemical nature of early Islamic sectarian literature, it is telling that no group felt the need to preserve or invent an alternative story

of the Qurʾān's codification – suggesting that the memory of an ʿUthmānic codification was already firmly entrenched by the time those sectarian traditions were recorded.

In summary, Sinai's use of historical accounts leads him to uphold the mid-7th century codification as a credible historical event. Unlike extreme sceptics, he does not dismiss the Islamic sources wholesale; instead, he argues their consensus on ʿUthmān is itself a historical data point that any theory must account for (see Table 1). This positions Sinai in a middle ground that values Islamic tradition as *one form of evidence* to be critically evaluated alongside others, rather than either accepting it uncritically or rejecting it outright.

3.4.   *Searching for Anachronisms or Insertions*

The second pillar of Sinai's analysis involves the Qurʾānic text itself. If the Qurʾān had been substantially compiled or edited long after the Prophet, one might expect to find signs of that in the text – for example, references to historical events that occurred after Muhammad's death, or stylistic differences pointing to multiple layers of composition. Like Donner, Sinai notes that the Qurʾān shows no anachronistic references, reinforcing a pre-650 codification. The absence of references to events after 632–650 CE suggests that the text reached its final form by then (Donner, 2007). In Sinai's words, no portion of the Qurʾān has been *"compellingly placed in a late seventh-century context"* based on content or style (Sinai, 2014b). This aligns with Donner's point that the Qurʾān lacks later accretions – had the text still been open, it is likely that the great turmoil and transformations of the later 7th century would have left some mark in the scripture (Donner, 2007).

Sinai emphasizes that possible editorial insertions are very limited in scope and do not alter the overall content of the Qurʾān. Even if one or two verses (like 3:7) were added post-Prophetically, this is a far cry from suggesting entire surahs or large passages were composed long after Muhammad. The style, language, and theological outlook of the Qurʾān is remarkably uniform in a way that would be hard to achieve if it were a patchwork compiled over many decades by different hands. Neuwirth have demonstrated that the Qurʾān's surahs can be meaningfully situated in the context of late antique Arabia and the evolving community of the Prophet – reinforcing that they emerged from Muhammad's milieu, not an abstract later context (Neuwirth, 2019). Sinai aligns with this line of reasoning, finding *no internal textual warrant for a late codification*. On the contrary, he argues that the text shows evidence of being *fully formed by the time*

of the early community's expansion. He notes, for instance, that the absence of any direct mention of Jerusalem or the Dome of the Rock in the Qurʾān implies the Qurʾān's content was closed by then – otherwise one might expect a later editor under ʿAbd al-Malik, who built the Dome of the Rock, to include something emphasizing that sanctuary or the triumph of Islam in those terms. Instead, the Qurʾān remains silent on such later symbols, which is telling.

Sinai finds no anachronistic doctrine or vocabulary that unmistakably betrays a late 7th-century composition. Even the style and grammar of the text fit the linguistic environment of pre-Islamic and immediately post-Muhammad Arabic, with no obvious influence from the developing Arabic language of the later Umayyad period. The thematic unity of many surahs and the cross-referencing within the Qurʾān also suggest a coordinated compilation rather than disparate additions over a long period. In sum, internal textual study, according to Sinai, "is not prima facie fanciful" (Sinai, 2017) in supporting an early codification– in fact, it provides subtle corroboration for the traditional account by failing to provide evidence for an alternative.

3.5.   Epigraphic and Manuscript Evidence

The third category of evidence Sinai scrutinizes is the material and epigraphic record from the 7th century. This is a crucial arena because it offers *potentially objective* data points to compare against the timeline proposed by textual and historical analysis. Over the past few decades, several important finds have enriched this field: early Qurʾān manuscripts and the Birmingham fragments and inscriptions, notably the inscriptions in the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, completed 691–692 CE, and early coinage bearing Islamic phrases.

One of the most important manuscript finds is the Ṣanʿāʾ palimpsest, whose lower text differs slightly from the standard Qurʾānic text and has been paleographically dated to the 7th century. Radiocarbon analysis by Sadeghi and Bergmann places the parchment between 606 and 662 CE, suggesting that a written Qurʾān circulated during or shortly after Muhammad's lifetime (Sadeghi & Bergmann, 2010). Sinai sees this as strong support for a mid-7th century codification, though he acknowledges the limitations of dating techniques. The palimpsest may reflect a companion's codex or an early compilation predating the ʿUthmānic standard. Similarly, the Birmingham manuscript, containing parts of Surahs 18–20, likely dates to this same early period (Fedeli, 2015).

Epigraphic evidence, particularly the Dome of the Rock inscriptions (691–692 CE), is central to debates on Qurʾānic codification. These inscriptions include verses or close paraphrases from Surahs 17, 4, and 112, indicating that substantial portions of the Qurʾān were in circulation and held authoritative status by the early 690s (Shoemaker, 2012). While Shoemaker suggests this marks the canonisation moment, Sinai argues it reflects a preexisting, recognised scripture. The choice and confident display of verses suggest that the text was already fixed and accepted by the community. Minor stylistic variations likely stem from epigraphic convention rather than textual instability. Supporting this, coins from ʿAbd al-Malik's reign also feature Qurʾānic phrases, reinforcing the Qurʾān's public authority by that time. For Sinai, such evidence aligns with an ʿUthmānic codification and does not support a later, Umayyad-era canonisation. As he notes, "neither the epigraphic nor the literary evidence examined is incompatible with the conventional dating" (Sinai, 2014a).

Sinai also gives attention to the reports of variant codices. These reports indicate that some Companions had personal copies of the revelations that slightly differed in arrangement or minor content. However, by the time of ʿUthmān's canonisation, those were suppressed in favour of one standard text. The existence of these variant traditions, far from suggesting a later chaotic compilation, underscores that the editing and selection into a single text was an issue already in the first generation. Sinai argues that the ʿUthmānic project can be seen as the moment when this issue was resolved. If codification had only occurred in 700, we would likely find evidence that prior to that, Muslims were unsure of the Qurʾān's contents or that major disputes persisted. Yet, after ʿUthmān's time, the extent of variation is remarkably small (Sinai, 2014b). This historical trajectory, in Sinai's view, confirms that the decisive codification happened earlier and was broadly accepted, even if details of that process are imperfectly known.

In conclusion, Sinai's concept of Qurʾānic codification is that the Qurʾān was collected and standardized in the decades immediately following Muhammad's death and that this text then remained stable thereafter. To quote Sinai's own summary: "as long as no Quranic passages with a distinct stylistic and terminological profile have been compellingly placed in a late seventh-century context, the traditional dating of the standard rasm … to 650 or earlier ought to be our default view" (Sinai, 2014b). This encapsulates his stance that the onus is on late-dating theories to provide evidence, and until such evidence is produced, the mid-7th century codification stands as the most plausible historical scenario.

To consolidate the foregoing Results across historiography, internal textual signals, and material witnesses, we present a comparative synthesis below:

Table 1
Comparative Methodological Frameworks on Qurʾānic Codification

Dimension	Sinai	Donner	Neuwirth
Chronological thesis	Early codification; rasm essentially closed by end of ʿUthmān's caliphate.	Early codification; text essentially complete by ʿUthmān's caliphate.	Early codification; separates codification from canonisation.
Inferential procedure	Triangulates by cross-checking textual, material, and narrative evidence.	Proceeds from text to context: internal coherence first, then early community.	Literary–contextual analysis with emphasis on composition and reception.
Evidentiary prioritisation	High: material + internal; narrative used as corroboration.	High: internal + historical context; cautious with narrative reports.	High: literary/internal; material for public presence; narrative contextualised.
Position on late-codification hypotheses	Critical; finds no compelling evidence for very late fixation.	Offers explicit rebuttals; deems late codification unconvincing.	Rejects maximal delay; allows staged canonisation processes.
Distinctive contribution	Comprehensive convergence across evidence streams.	Critical-contextual reading of a seventh-century community.	Clear codification–canonisation distinction with rich literary framing.

4.   DISCUSSION

Having outlined Sinai's position, it is important to evaluate the methodological foundations of his analysis. This section examines three key aspects of his method: (1) whether he places too much trust in Islamic historical narratives, (2) whether his interpretation of internal textual features admits alternative readings, and (3) the extent to which epigraphic and manuscript data can substantiate or limit his claims.

4.1.   *Use of Historical Traditions*

Sinai's use of the classical Islamic accounts reveals his underlying methodological principle is a critical utilisation of later narratives. He treats the compilation accounts in works like Bukhārī's *Ṣaḥīḥ* not as sacrosanct truth, but as historiographical data that can be evaluated alongside other evidence. Wansbrough argued that much of early Islamic history in Islamic literature is salvation history *retrojected*, meaning the tradition about ʿUthmān could be a back-projection to give the text an aura of antiquity (Wansbrough, 1977). Sinai acknowledges this possibility in theory, as he notes that arguments from silence can be fallible and draws the Biblical analogy that absence of alternate accounts doesn't prove historicity (Sinai, 2014b). Yet, in practice, he leans toward trusting the broad outline of the Islamic account.

A critic might contend that Sinai's "default view" approach risks circular reasoning: assuming the traditional narrative is accurate unless disproven could predispose him to interpret evidence in its favour. While Sinai cites the consensus across Sunni, Shiʿi, and Kharijite sources as support for early codification, one may argue that by the 8th–10th centuries, the ʿUthmānic account had become dominant, with dissenting views potentially erased or unrecorded. Although Sinai and Donner question the feasibility of empire-wide suppression (Donner, 1998, p. 28), the early historiographical tradition was not immune to bias. Another potential critique is Sinai's treatment of Ḥajjāj's role. He interprets the reports of Ḥajjāj's textual interventions as minor and not indicative of an open canon. But what if those reports are themselves truncated memories of a more significant standardisation process? One could argue that perhaps the text was not entirely uniform before Ḥajjāj – maybe regional codices were brought fully into line under Ḥajjāj. This would still be a milder scenario than a late codification, but it suggests Sinai's claim of perfect stability post-650 might be a little overstated. In fairness, Sinai does allow that certain "orthographical features" were standardised later – which could encompass the likes of Ḥajjāj's changes, like writing *tābūt* with *wāw*

instead of *alif*, etc., as some lists indicate (Sinai, 2014b). Therefore, his stance isn't that absolutely nothing happened after 650, but that the consonantal skeleton wasn't altered.

In summary, regarding historical sources, Sinai's methodology is to critically sift them but ultimately to incorporate them as valid historical testimony. It must be noted that Sinai's position is increasingly supported by a trend among scholars acknowledging that the broad outline of the Qurʾān's early compilation is likely historical. Even, Patricia Crone later conceded it's "difficult to doubt" that Muhammad's followers preserved and compiled his revelations (Crone, 2010). Thus, Sinai's use of the sources might be seen as appropriately cautious. Sinai does not take them literally at every turn, but he gleans the big picture from them and checks it against other evidence.

4.2.   *Internal Evidence*

Sinai's internal analysis of the Qurʾān is methodologically sound, treating the text as open to historical scrutiny. However, critics may argue that the absence of anachronisms is not definitive proof of early codification; it is suggestive but subjective. A skilled redactor in the late 7th century might have deliberately avoided references to post-Prophetic events to create the impression of continuity. The Qurʾān's silence on events like the first civil war could reflect the general nature of earlier verses that were reinterpreted rather than revised. Shoemaker, extending Donner's reasoning, even suggests that the Qurʾān may have been completed before some Medinan events raising the controversial possibility that portions of its pre-date the Prophet (Shoemaker, 2012, p. 107). While speculative, such views highlight the methodological caution needed when interpreting silence as evidence.

Sinai is cautious not to present internal evidence as proof of early codification—only that it does not support a later one. Wansbrough identified genre layers suggesting composite development (Rippin, 2022), while Neuwirth notes stylistic evolution and editorial features like prologues (Neuwirth, 2003). Although Sinai acknowledges limited insertions (e.g., Q 3:7), critics might question whether his framework allows for broader editorial activity that early compilers could have executed seamlessly. Still, given the lack of consensus or clear evidence for major interpolations—such as those proposed for *surah* 9 or the *basmala*—Sinai's conservative reading remains methodologically defensible.

Another area to probe is Sinai's reliance on the coherence of the Qurʾānic text. By stressing its stylistic unity, he undercuts theories of long-term compilation. A critic could assert that the order of verses and surahs—an aspect of codification—was not entirely set by the Prophet. Thus, codification did involve a human decision process on ordering; this could be seen as part of "codification" too. Sinai doesn't dwell on the order question, as he's more concerned with the textual corpus itself. But one could argue that even if all verses were present by 632, the act of compiling them into a *mushaf* was an editorial act that could subtly change context. This is more a nuance than a direct challenge to Sinai, since he would likely agree the ordering was finalized by ʿUthmān's group.

4.3.   Epigraphy and Manuscripts

Sinai's engagement with epigraphic and manuscript evidence is generally rigorous and judicious in its use of scientific data. A fair critique, however, is that he deploys these materials more to undercut late-dating scenarios than to provide a positive demonstration of early codification. He would likely respond that the absence of public inscriptions does not entail the absence of the text itself, since early Islam did not necessarily require scriptural display in official media. On balance, the record coheres with a Qurʾān already established by the 690s, yet it still falls short of decisively proving a mid-seventh-century closure—hence Sinai's reading remains cautious, if arguably optimistic.

Regarding manuscripts, Sinai acknowledges anomalies like the Ṣanʿāʾ palimpsest but interprets them within an ʿUthmānic framework. A different scholar, Behnam Sadeghi, posited that the lower text of the Ṣanʿāʾ palimpsest might descend from a companion codex different from ʿUthmān's text (Sadeghi & Goudarzi, 2012). If so, that suggests that even after ʿUthmān, some divergent copies hung on. That indicates ʿUthmān's codification process, while broadly successful, might not have immediately eliminated all variants. Sinai's focus, however, is on the result – that eventually only ʿUthmān's text survived. Codification was likely a process, not a single event. Sinai's phrasing sometimes ("closure by c. 650") could imply a cut-off point, but he admits things like orthography continued to be refined. The critique here is more about emphasis: Sinai emphasizes the end-state whereas some would emphasize the process.

In summary, key methodological critiques of Sinai include his reliance on the coherence and unanimity of Islamic tradition—possibly underestimating the role of later myth-making—his interpretation of textual consistency as

evidence for early origin, and his confidence in limited material evidence. Nonetheless, his approach is broadly rigorous and marked by methodological caution. Rather than depending on any single source, Sinai builds a cumulative case from intersecting lines of evidence—a strength that distinguishes his work. While critics may raise plausible alternatives, such as suppressed dissent or hidden interpolations, these often involve speculative scenarios that introduce more complexity than clarity.

5.   COMPARATIVE   PERSPECTIVES   ON   QURʾĀNIC CODIFICATION

5.1.   Early Codification and the Need for Contextual Coherence

Fred M. Donner, a leading historian of early Islam, supports an early completion of the Qurʾān, aligning with the traditional timeline but for distinct reasons. His analysis emphasizes the Qurʾān's internal content, which he argues shows no indication of post-Prophetic events like civil wars or the rise of the Umayyads (Donner, 2007, p. 35). This absence of anachronisms and later theological developments suggests, for Donner, that the text was finalised early—within the Prophet's community or shortly after (Donner, 2007, p. 29). He also notes that the Qurʾān avoids using "Muslims" as a distinct communal label, favouring more general terms like *muʾminūn* and *muslimūn*, which he interprets as evidence of an early, formative stage of the community (Donner, 2012).

Methodologically, Donner shares similarities with Sinai in treating the Qurʾān as a historical document, though he is more sceptical of early Islamic narratives. In *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, Donner questioned the reliability of later historiography without rejecting the ʿUthmānic codification itself. He argues that even without Islamic reports, the Qurʾān's content and early non-Muslim references point to a largely complete text by the mid-7th century (see Table 1). Some 7th-century external sources, such as the Doctrina Jacobi, do not mention the Qurʾān but describe an Arab prophet preaching divine guidance—suggesting a scripture-like presence. Though vague, Donner interprets this absence as a sign the Qurʾān may have existed but was not yet widely visible outside the early community (Donner, 2012, p. 83).

In sum, Donner's view is that the canonisation date was in the time of ʿUthmān. He supports this early date by emphasizing the Qurʾān's consistency with a 7th-century Arabian context and the impracticality of a much later canonisation given the evidence. In one of his arguments, Donner notes that had

the Qurʾān still been undergoing major changes into the late 7th century, we might expect to see traces of sectarian debate or regionally competing versions in that era's historical record, which we do not (Donner, 2007, p. 42). This is very similar to Sinai's argument about lack of alternate accounts – although Donner bases it more on logical expectation from context than on the Islamic narratives themselves (see Table 1).

Both Donner and Sinai conclude early codification, and both use internal evidence as key support, but their emphases differ. Sinai systematically examines both internal and external evidence and uses the Islamic tradition as supporting testimony. Donner relies more on the internal evidence and the logic of historical context, being a bit more agnostic about trusting Islamic tradition directly. Yet, both see the Qurʾān as essentially complete by the end of ʿUthmān's caliphate. Indeed, Donner has directly rebutted claims like those of Crone and Cook (Crone & Cook, 1980), calling the idea of a late codification less convincing considering the Qurʾān's content (Donner, 2012, p. 67). Donner's methodology is critical but ultimately contextualist – he seeks to place the Qurʾān in the context of the community that produced it, which he situates in the 7th century. Sinai's methodology is similarly critical but with a more evidentiary cross-checking approach. We might say Donner started from the text outward, whereas Sinai starts from all angles and sees convergence (see Table 1).

One difference is that Donner has also argued that the initial community of Believers included Jews and Christians, and that the Qurʾān's content fits a document emerging in that inclusive community (Donner, 2012, p. 90). This somewhat affects how he views the Qurʾān's early use (it may not have been immediately a closed canon for a separate religion but became one as the community evolved). Sinai doesn't delve into that aspect; he is more concerned with when the text was fixed, not how the community interpreted it initially. In conclusion, Donner's perspective reinforces Sinai's from a complementary angle: both favour an early codification, using the Qurʾān's internal coherence with early history as a foundation.

5.2.   *Literary-Historical Analysis and Late Antique Continuity*

Angelika Neuwirth, a German scholar and one of the foremost experts on Qurʾānic literary structure and context, has approached the Qurʾān with a methodology that might be called historical-literary. She emphasizes understanding the Qurʾān in the context of Late Antiquity, viewing it as a text that engaged with the religious and cultural milieu of late antique Arabia and the

broader Near East. Neuwirth's work has involved painstaking literary analysis of Qurʾānic surahs, attempting to reconstruct a chronology of revelation and to discern layers of composition. Through this lens, Neuwirth has contributed to the codification debate by arguing that while the Qurʾān certainly has a history of development, the compilation of those components into a canonical text was an early accomplishment of the Muslim community, not a later editorial project(Neuwirth, 2003).

One of Neuwirth's key contentions is that the Qurʾān reflects a profound unity and *"self-referentiality"* that signals it was deliberately collected and edited as a scripture within the first community. She draws a distinction between what she calls the "pre-canonical Qurʾān" (the state of the revelations during Muhammad's life) and the "canonical Qurʾān" (Neuwirth, 2003). By her assessment, the canonical Qurʾān was in place by the time the Islamic tradition says it was in ʿUthmān's era (see Table 1). She does not see a centuries-long evolution of the text itself (as Wansbrough did); rather, she sees the text as a product of the late antique period, which needs to be studied with tools similar to those used for Bible scholarship but with an appreciation that the Qurʾān, unlike say the Bible, did not undergo redaction over centuries of community life – it was canonised much closer to its point of origin (Neuwirth, 2003).

Neuwirth's methodology places heavy emphasis on internal evidence correlated with historical background. For example, she analyses surah structure to identify possible editorial insertions or links. She often finds that features which might look like later interpolations can be explained as intentional rhetorical strategies or as part of the prophetic proclamation context (see Table 1). She has also engaged with the Qurʾān's engagement with earlier scriptures, concluding that the Qurʾān's form and content make most sense in a 7th-century context where an emergent community is negotiating its identity vis-à-vis Jews and Christians (Neuwirth, 2019, p. 105). This, indirectly, supports an early codification: if the Qurʾān's content is so tied to that era, it's unlikely to have been substantially reshaped later when those context dynamics had changed.

When it comes to the process of codification, Neuwirth acknowledges it and even suggests that we can observe traces of it in the text's organisation. For instance, she discusses how the arrangement of surahs and the final form of the text might reflect liturgical or didactic priorities of the early community (Sinai & Neuwirth, 2009). She does not propose that any major new text was written at that point—only that existing revelations were ordered and perhaps given titles, divisions, etc. Neuwirth does explore the idea that some editorial comments (like

the one in Q.3:7 or the addition of the *Basmala* at surah starts) indicate the compilers' hands, but these to her are part of the canonisation moment under the early caliphs, not evidence of an Umayyad overhaul.

Comparatively, Neuwirth and Sinai share a broad agreement on early codification. Neuwirth, like Sinai, does not find compelling evidence that the Qurʾān remained unwritten or malleable long after Muhammad. However, her justification comes more from demonstrating the embeddedness of the Qurʾān in its original context and the lack of any new thematic material that would betray later development. She notes, for example, that the Qurʾān lacks reference to the doctrine of *ṣalāt* (prayer) in any detail beyond what would have been known early, or that it doesn't include later Islamic legal developments – implying a closure before those arose (Sinai & Neuwirth, 2009, p. 19).

Neuwirth exemplifies a primarily textual and philological method, supplemented by historical context. She is somewhat less concerned with the *isnād*-based Islamic historiography than Sinai is. It's not that she ignores historical reports, but her arguments seldom depend on trusting or not trusting al-Zuhrī or others on ʿUthmān; instead, she constructs a narrative of how the Qurʾān likely came to be canonised by analysing the text's internal evidence of editorial planning. In doing so, she often corroborates what the Islamic narrative says. One could say she reconstructs the process from inside out. In *Qurʾān and History – a Disputed Relationship*, Neuwirth indeed argues that a textual history of the Qurʾān can be studied and that doing so does not undermine the canon but rather illuminates it. She advocates seeking *"historical evidence in the text itself"* – a motto Sinai would also agree with (Neuwirth, 2003).

Interestingly, Neuwirth has addressed the revisionist claims as well. She finds the extremely late codification theories unconvincing because they disregard the Qurʾān's profound integration in late antique discourse – something harder to fabricate much later. She also engages with the early manuscripts and concludes that they, along with the content, confirm an early canonisation (Neuwirth, 2019, p. 150). If anything, Neuwirth tends to think the Qurʾān was essentially closed at the Prophet's death or very soon after. She is open to some editing by companions, but she emphasises continuity—sometimes to the extent that one might get the impression she thinks the text was almost entirely arranged by Muhammad himself except maybe final touches by the community. In contrast, Sinai clearly attributes a decisive role to the companions in collecting and standardising after Muhammad. This might be a subtle distinction of focus,

as Neuwirth often speaks from a literary perspective whereas Sinai speaks historically (see Table 1).

Accordingly, the comparative contribution is twofold. First, both Sinai and Neuwirth defend an early codification, but they differ in emphasis: Sinai foregrounds empirical evidence and historical argumentation, whereas Neuwirth prioritises literary analysis and contextual framing. Second, the two approaches are complementary; Sinai repeatedly engages Neuwirth's work for insights into the text's pre-canonical phase and the dynamics of canonisation (Sinai & Neuwirth, 2009). Taken together, they converge on viewing the Qurʾān as a product of the seventh-century Arabian milieu that was rapidly canonised, with no persuasive evidence of later tampering beyond minor variants.

In conclusion, comparing Sinai to these two: Donner shares Sinai's conclusion and reinforces it via internal textual logic; Neuwirth shares Sinai's conclusion and reinforces it via literary-contextual analysis. The comparative analysis shows that Sinai is aligned with a growing consensus among many scholars that the Qurʾān was codified early. Sinai's unique contribution is the comprehensiveness of his argument – he brings together traditional narrative analysis, textual criticism, and material evidence in one framework. Donner and Neuwirth each focus more on one or two of those areas. By addressing all angles, Sinai's methodology appears robust. It validates a view also held by Donner and Neuwirth that the Islamic tradition's claims about the Qurʾān's codification.

Consequently, the historical-critical approaches to Qurʾānic codification advanced by modern scholars are both necessary and fertile for further development. Through the foregoing comparison, Sinai contributes (1) substantive findings on the chronology and mechanics of codification and (2) a methodological toolkit—triangulating narrative, material, and internal textual data—that subsequent studies can adopt. It is evident that Sinai departs from polemical, reductionist, and strongly revisionist strands in non-Muslim Qurʾānic studies. For Sinai, the Qurʾān functioned as a revered and authoritative scripture in the early community; its existence from the Prophet's lifetime is defensible on traditional reports cross-checked with material and internal evidence. Accordingly, the post-revisionist approach he exemplifies is not merely sceptical but adaptive, encouraging hybrid methods that integrate traditionalist materials (*riwāyāt*) with modern historical-philological criticism.

6.   CONCLUSION

This article has reassessed Nicolai Sinai's account of Qurʾānic codification through a method-centred critique that juxtaposes narrative reports, internal textual features, and material witnesses. The discussion showed that placing material and codicological indicators at the top of the evidentiary hierarchy yields a coherent picture of early rasm closure compatible with a written archetype and structured copying practices. At the same time, outlier phenomena are best explained as bounded, early parallel transmissions rather than proof of a late or open-ended codification. The comparative frame with Donner and Neuwirth clarified that, despite different, there is practical convergence on an early stabilisation of the consonantal text—while genuine uncertainties remain about regional variance and standardisation dynamics in the early Umayyad period. Finally, the article underscored the need for transparent, reproducible handling of manuscript evidence and for making high-quality documentation available for independent scrutiny.

This study advances the discussion in three ways: it offers a replicable evidentiary-weighting schema that makes explicit how conflicting witnesses are adjudicated (prioritising material over internal and narrative evidence when in tension); it synthesises the data by normalising apparent outliers as bounded, early strands within an otherwise consistent textual stream; and it articulates a clarified middle position between maximal scepticism and uncritical harmonisation, defending early codification on cumulative material grounds while specifying where uncertainty remains. Building on these contributions, future work should prioritise deeper manuscript, orthography-at-scale mapping of recurrent features, *rasm–qirāʾāt* interaction inventories that enable cautious quantification, comparative studies of early Umayyad standardisation dynamics, and targeted case studies that distinguish textual from ritual canons. Taken together, these trajectories shift the field beyond binary affirmations or denials of "early codification" toward a granular, testable history of how an early written archetype became the dominant textual canon and how bounded alternatives were progressively delimited.

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