

Reading Plurality on the Page: *Qirā'āt* and Marginal Apparatus in Qur'anic Manuscripts from the National Library of Malaysia

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This study examines how canonical *qirā'āt* plurality is organized in five Qur'anic manuscripts preserved at the National Library of Malaysia (PNM): MSS 4333, MSS 3590, MSS 3599, MSS 5050, and MSS 3592. The manuscripts form a purposive analytical sample in which *Sūrat al-Kahf* (Q18) is legible at 16 loci of comparison. Main-text forms, corresponding marginal readings, and relevant visual markings were manually collated and mapped primarily against Abū 'Amr al-Dānī's *al-Taysīr*, with al-Nashr by Ibn al-Jazarī used to check *riwāyah*-level and ambiguous cases. Of the 80 main-text observations, 76 (95%) are compatible with the reading of 'Āṣim, usually with a clear inclination toward Ḥafṣ. This stability does not remove other canonical readings. MSS 3590 preserves marginal alternatives at twelve of the sixteen loci, most often readings associated with Nāfi' and Abū 'Amr, while retaining an 'Āṣim-oriented MT. The sample displays two marked configurations—marginal annotation and in-line visual layering—and a residual category of unmarked main-text variation. This study argues that these pages establish a hierarchy of visibility: the main text privileges one reading, whereas selected alternatives remain available for comparison. The evidence supports comparative consultation but does not prove classroom use, local recitational prevalence, or the chronology of Ḥafṣ consolidation.

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Public Interest Statement

Qur'anic manuscripts preserve more than written consonantal texts. Their vocalization, marginal notes, corrections, and page layout record how readers distinguished primary recitation from other authorized readings. By comparing the same 16 *qirā'āt* loci in five manuscripts held by the National Library of Malaysia, this study shows how a stable main text could coexist with selected alternatives in the margin or within the written line. The results are relevant to manuscript preservation and Qur'anic studies because cataloguing and digitization that capture only the main text may omit evidence of reading practice and scholarly comparison.



Introduction

Qur'anic manuscripts preserved in Southeast Asian collections have commonly been studied through script, illumination, provenance, ownership history, and other codicological features. This emphasis is understandable because decorated frames, calligraphy, pigments, ruling systems, paper, and binding are among their most visible attributes. However, the same manuscripts may also preserve less immediately visible systems of reading: *qirā'āt*, vocalization, verse division, *waqf* signs, correctional marks, interlinear additions, and marginal annotations. These

elements can regulate how the Qur'anic text is read, compared, remembered, and transmitted ([Déroche et al., 2006](#); [Dutton, 1999](#); [Dutton, 2000](#); [Gacek, 2009](#)).

The methodological problem arises when these bodies of evidence are separated. An exclusively art-historical description can leave the reading apparatus secondary, whereas a list of textual variants can detach readings from the spaces in which a manuscript presents them. Differences may then be reduced either to copying errors or to decontextualized variants. Neither approach is sufficient where recognized *qira'at* forms recur in patterned relationships between the main text, margins, and visual marks.

Accordingly, this study uses the manuscript page as its primary analytical unit and asks how the five PNM manuscripts spatially organize dominant and alternative canonical readings. A form in the main text receives continuous visual priority; a marginal form is separated from that line; and in-line vocalization can layer more than one possibility at a single locus. The article calls this arrangement a hierarchy of visibility, a description of how the page directs attention rather than a claim about the social rank of particular readings.

The analysis concerns MSS 4333, MSS 3590, MSS 3599, MSS 5050, and MSS 3592. From a working set of thirty-three PNM *muṣḥafs*, these five were selected because usable images of Q18 made all sixteen common loci legible. Selection depended on image usability and locus legibility; marginal or in-line apparatus was recorded only after inclusion. The shelfmarks belong to one present institutional collection, and their regional labels are used as catalogue associations rather than verified provenance.

Across the five manuscripts, 76 of 80 main-text observations are compatible with 'Āṣim, with seven Ḥafṣ-inclusive loci in MSS 3590, MSS 3599, MSS 4333, and MSS 5050, and six in MSS 3592. MSS 3590 combines this stable main text with twelve marginal alternatives, most frequently including affiliations with Nāfi' and Abū 'Amr. Together, these observations show a continuous dominant line accompanied by selected canonical alternatives.

The analysis draws on eighty main-text observations and the corresponding marginal or in-line forms recorded at sixteen Q18 loci. This controlled panel allows direct comparison across the five witnesses. Building on earlier work by the present author on calligraphy, illumination, and structural mapping ([Mursyid & Ali Mat Zin, 2024](#); [Mursyid et al., 2026](#)), the article adds a locus-by-locus collation that links each reading to its spatial position.

Literature Review

Southeast Asian Qur'anic Manuscripts beyond Descriptive Codicology

The study of Qur'anic manuscripts from Southeast Asia has developed through documentary cataloguing, art history, codicology, and textual analysis. Catalogues and collection surveys establish shelfmarks, physical descriptions, attributed regions, approximate dates, and institutional locations ([Bafadal & Anwar, 2005](#); [Ricklefs et al., 2014](#)). Where colophons and ownership histories are absent, regional and chronological labels remain catalogue attributions rather than demonstrated provenance.

Art-historical scholarship has identified regional visual idioms through frame structure, palette, calligraphy, layout, and ornamentation ([Gallop, 2007](#); [Gallop, 2015](#); [Gallop & Akbar, 2006](#)). Material studies of nineteenth-century Malay Qur'ans have further examined their paper, ink, pigments, and techniques ([Razak & Trevathan, 2010](#)). Together, these approaches explain production and visual identity; adding textual forms and their graphic placement brings the organization of reading into view.

Collection-based and regional studies further clarify the evidentiary field. [Riddell \(2002\)](#) examines Rotterdam MS 96 D 16 as the oldest known surviving Qur'anic manuscript associated with the Malay world, while [Gallop \(2023\)](#) surveys Qur'anic manuscripts from Southeast Asia in British collections and extends the comparative corpus beyond national holdings. Within Malaysia, [Yusof and Mohd Zarif \(2017\)](#) describe the National Library's digital union-catalogue initiative for Malay manuscripts, clarifying the documentation and access infrastructure surrounding the present collection. Studies of Terengganu Qur'ans and Malay Qur'anic ornaments have mapped regional illumination, calligraphy, layout, and decorative repertoires ([Azmi & Abdullah, 2017](#); [Zain, 2007](#)). Research beyond Qur'anic codicology also shows that scripts and manuscripts carry wider social and intellectual significance. Jawi literacy in Aceh has been linked to religious attitudes ([Zulkhairi & Hajar, 2023](#)), while Sundanese manuscripts in Ciletuh preserve local knowledge and intellectual tradition through inventory, documentation, and digitization ([Darsa et al., 2020](#)). This scholarship situates the present analysis within a regional manuscript culture in which script, material form, and intellectual practice intersect.

A *muṣḥaf* page may combine the main text with reading signs, corrections, marginal notes, verse counts, or interlinear material. Reading these elements together connects codicological description with *qirā'āt* analysis. The central question is how page arrangement distinguishes a primary reading from canonical alternatives that remain materially accessible.

Regional studies already demonstrate the value of integrating textual and material evidence. [Nurtawab \(2020\)](#) and [Nurtawab \(2023\)](#) relate readings, Malay translation, and verse division in eighteenth-century Banten Qur'ans. [Mustopa \(2014\)](#) identifies canonical diversity in the Sultan of Ternate manuscript, while [Omar and Ariffin \(2023\)](#) document MSS 4322 in the PNM collection and [Zahari and Yusof \(2023\)](#) examine a nineteenth-century Qur'anic *sanad*. What remains unexamined is how multiple PNM witnesses position canonical alternatives relative to the main line at the same *qirā'āt* loci.

Qirā'āt, Canonization, and the Problem of Textual Stability

The *qirā'āt* tradition orders Qur'anic recitation through *imām*, *rāwī*, and *ṭarīq*, together with criteria of transmission, Arabic usage, and compatibility with the 'Uthmānic *rasm*. Ibn Mujāhid's *Kitāb al-Sab'ah* helped stabilize the seven-reading canon; al-Dānī's *al-Taysīr* provided an influential compact presentation; and Ibn al-Jazarī's *al-Nasb* systematized the ten-reading tradition and its transmission paths ([al-Dānī, 1930](#); [Ibn Mujāhid, 1972](#); [Ibn al-Jazarī, 1926](#)).

Modern scholarship has complicated simple accounts of canonization and uniformity. [Nasser \(2012\)](#) examines the transmission of variants and the problem of *tawātur*, while [Melchert \(2008\)](#) demonstrates that the ten readings share and recombine features rather than operating as entirely isolated systems. For manuscript analysis, a single form may be shared by several canonical readers, and a witness may exhibit a dominant profile without aligning exclusively with one label.

Recent scholarship sharpens this historical framing at different analytical scales. [Shah \(2020\)](#) synthesizes major debates on the history, transmission, synthesis, and authentication of the *qirā'āt* corpus. [Muna and Ikhwan \(2023\)](#) focus on Ibn Mujāhid, relating *sanad* evaluation and scholarly selection to the political conditions surrounding the standardization of the seven readings. [Déroche \(2022\)](#), drawing literary evidence into conversation with early Qur'anic manuscripts, situates textual and oral plurality within the longer processes through which a dominant written corpus and authorized reading traditions were progressively stabilized. This scholarship explains how plurality was bounded and authenticated within learned traditions. The present study turns to later Southeast Asian manuscripts and examines how a primary body-text reading and selected canonical alternatives occupy the same page.

Each graphic form was assessed against canonical sources, *rasm*, *ḍabt*, *hamzah* notation, scribal convention, spatial placement, and possible later intervention. *Al-Taysīr* provides the common baseline for the seven readings, while *al-Nasb* clarifies *riwāyah*-level assignments and ambiguous compact profiles. The sixteen-locus panel supports classification at this level but not a full *ṭuruq* reconstruction.

A main text compatible with Ḥafṣ can coexist with marginal forms associated with other canonical readers. The body text presents one form as primary, while the margin preserves alternatives for comparison, correction, or learned reference. This spatial contrast is directly observable; the historical use of the page depends on its ownership, pedagogical, and transmission context.

Paratextuality, Margins, and the Spatial Logic of the Manuscript Page

Genette's concept of paratext as a threshold between text and reader serves as a heuristic for elements that mediate access to the main text ([Genette, 1997](#)). Because a *muṣḥaf* is simultaneously sacred, liturgical, pedagogical, and scholarly, Islamic codicology provides the immediate categories for interpreting page layout, annotation, correction, and transmission ([Déroche et al., 2006](#); [Gacek, 2009](#)).

Graphic and spatial evidence has long mattered in Qur'anic manuscript studies. [Dutton \(1999\)](#) and [Dutton \(2000\)](#) show that colored vocalization can encode reading distinctions. In a different manuscript setting, [Bondarev \(2017\)](#) demonstrates how planned empty space in West African Islamic manuscripts can accommodate annotation and instruction. Against this background, the PNM manuscripts can be tested for patterned relationships between a stable main text and recognized *qirā'āt* alternatives.

In this study, marginal apparatus refers specifically to inscriptions that correspond to recognized *qirā'āt* loci and can be compared systematically with the body text. MSS 3590 is the clearest case: twelve of the sixteen common loci carry marginal alternatives related to canonical profiles. This patterned correspondence distinguishes the apparatus from miscellaneous devotional, ownership, or non-textual notes.

Two marked arrangements appear in the sample. MSS 3590 places alternatives in the margin, outside the written line. MSS 5050 layers more than one reading possibility at a single textual position through vocalization or related graphic treatment. Unmarked main-text variation forms a third analytical category, in which collation reveals a canonical alternative without a dedicated visual signal.

The hierarchy of visibility refers to the unequal accessibility produced by these positions. One form occupies the continuous main text, while other possibilities are separated in the margin, layered within the line, or detectable only through collation. The term therefore describes access on the page rather than the recitational authority of the readings.

Materials and Methods

The analytical sample comprised five manuscripts drawn from a working set of 33 PNM Qur’anic manuscripts. Inclusion required an identifiable shelfmark, usable images of Q18, and legibility at all sixteen common comparison loci. No reliable manuscript-by-manuscript exclusion log survives for the other 28 witnesses. The calculations therefore use the five included manuscripts and the eighty observations generated by sixteen common loci. Marginal or in-line apparatus was recorded only after inclusion.

All five manuscripts are held in one institutional collection, but their catalogue associations span Sulawesi, Aceh, Terengganu, and Borneo. Only MSS 3590 carries a specific reported date, 1822; the chronology of the other witnesses is catalogue-based or uncertain. The metadata therefore support a synchronic comparison across regionally diverse witnesses.

The study held Sūrat al-Kahf constant because it is legible in all five witnesses and contains canonical differences of several kinds. Using one *sūrah* reduces cross-textual variation and allows the same positions to be compared in every manuscript. The resulting profiles describe sixteen loci in Q18 rather than the complete readings of the five *muṣḥafs*.

The analytical panel consists of sixteen loci attested as canonical points of difference in *al-Taysīr* and legible in all five manuscripts. Together, the loci sample vocalic, consonantal, morphological, *hamẓah*-related, and near-lexical variation (Table 2). The denominator is therefore sixteen common legible loci; a *sūrah*-wide total would vary according to whether *uṣūl*, *farsh*, *waqf*, *ḍabt*, and *ṭuruq*-level differences were included.

Collation was manual. For each manuscript and locus, the visible main text was transcribed first, followed by any corresponding marginal or in-line mark. The form was compared with *al-Taysīr* and checked against *al-Nasb* when *riwāyah*-level assignment, shared affiliation, or graphic ambiguity required clarification. One researcher trained in Qur’anic manuscript studies and *qirā’at* performed all assignments. Ambiguous letters or marks were coded only to the level visible in the image, and Table 3 reports every locus-level decision.

Four decision rules governed the quantitative coding. First, a form was counted as ‘Āṣim-compatible when it was attested for either Ḥafṣ or Shu‘bah, even when shared with other imams. Second, a Ḥafṣ-inclusive locus means that Ḥafṣ is among the attested affiliations; it does not mean that the form is exclusive to Ḥafṣ. Third, a Shu‘bah form without Ḥafṣ, such as *buḥū’an* at Q18:106 in MSS 3592, was classified as intra-‘Āṣim variation rather than non-‘Āṣim. Fourth, a form was coded as non-‘Āṣim only when neither Ḥafṣ nor Shu‘bah attests it under the adopted source profile. Table 3 records the locus-level decisions used in the calculations.

A graphic difference was classified as a *qirā’ah* only when a recognized locus, readable form, canonical affiliation, and patterned placement converged. The assessment also considered *rasm*, *ḍabt*, *hamẓah* notation, regional orthography, damage, correction, and later annotation. Because the available images contain no ink, hand, or ownership analysis, the study does not date the annotations or assign them to a documented teaching context.

Table 1. Analytical sample of five PNM manuscripts

No	Shelfmark	Catalogue association	Analytical significance
1	MSS 4333	Sulawesi	Q18 legible at all sixteen loci; 16/16 ‘Āṣim-compatible main-text forms
2	MSS 3590	Sulawesi / Aceh	Reported date 1822; 16/16 ‘Āṣim-compatible main text; twelve marginal alternatives
3	MSS 3599	Aceh	Q18 legible; one non-‘Āṣim main-text form at Q18:85

No	Shelfmark	Catalogue association	Analytical significance
4	MSS 5050	Terengganu	Q18 legible; example of in-line visual layering at Q18:96
5	MSS 3592	Borneo	Q18 legible; non-‘Āṣim forms at Q18:70, Q18:81, and Q18:85; intra-‘Āṣim form at Q18:106

Results

The ‘Āṣim-Ḥaṣṣ Baseline in the PNM Subcorpus

Across the sixteen common loci in five witnesses, 76 of 80 main-text observations are compatible with ‘Āṣim. MSS 3590, MSS 4333, and MSS 5050 are ‘Āṣim-compatible at all sixteen loci; MSS 3599 at fifteen; and MSS 3592 at thirteen. This distribution characterizes the tested Q18 panel and shows a strong ‘Āṣim-oriented main-text tendency.

Four manuscripts—MSS 3590, MSS 3599, MSS 4333, and MSS 5050—contain seven Ḥaṣṣ-inclusive loci in the panel; MSS 3592 contains six. Some forms are shared with other canonical readers. The data therefore support an ‘Āṣim-oriented profile with a strong inclination toward Ḥaṣṣ. [Table 3](#) presents the decision rules, and [Table 4](#) presents the raw counts before the approximate percentages.

Only MSS 3590 has a specific date in the available record, while the dating and regional associations of the other witnesses depend on catalogue descriptions. The results therefore establish the synchronic coexistence of a stable main line and selected alternatives, rather than a chronology of Ḥaṣṣ dominance or print standardization.

Table 2. Q18 comparison loci and normalized main-text readings across the analytical sample

No.	Verse	Reference variant pair(s)	MSS 3590	MSS 3592	MSS 3599	MSS 4333	MSS 5050
1	18:16	<i>marfiqan / mirfaqan</i>	<i>mirfaqan</i>	<i>mirfaqan</i>	<i>mirfaqan</i>	<i>mirfaqan</i>	<i>mirfaqan</i>
2	18:17	<i>tazāwaru / tazāwaru</i>	<i>tazāwaru</i>	<i>tazāwaru</i>	<i>tazāwaru</i>	<i>tazāwaru</i>	<i>tazāwaru</i>
3	18:19	<i>bi-wariqikum / bi-warqikum</i>	<i>bi-wariqikum</i>	<i>bi-wariqikum</i>	<i>bi-wariqikum</i>	<i>bi-wariqikum</i>	<i>bi-wariqikum</i>
4	18:26	<i>yushriku / tushrik</i>	<i>yushriku</i>	<i>yushriku</i>	<i>yushriku</i>	<i>yushriku</i>	<i>yushriku</i>
5	18:55	<i>qubulan / qibalan</i>	<i>qubulan</i>	<i>qubulan</i>	<i>qubulan</i>	<i>qubulan</i>	<i>qubulan</i>
6	18:59	<i>mahlikihim / muhlikihim / muhlakihim</i>	<i>mahlikihim</i>	<i>mahlikihim</i>	<i>mahlikihim</i>	<i>mahlikihim</i>	<i>mahlikihim</i>
7	18:70	<i>tas’alnī / tas’alānī</i>	<i>tas’alnī</i>	<i>tas’alānī</i>	<i>tas’alnī</i>	<i>tas’alnī</i>	<i>tas’alnī</i>
8	18:71	<i>li-tughriqa ahlahā / li-yaghraqa ahluhā</i>	<i>li-tughriqa ahlahā</i>	<i>li-tughriqa ahlahā</i>	<i>li-tughriqa ahlahā</i>	<i>li-tughriqa ahlahā</i>	<i>li-tughriqa ahlahā</i>
9	18:74	<i>nukran / nukuran</i>	<i>nukran</i>	<i>nukran</i>	<i>nukran</i>	<i>nukran</i>	<i>nukran</i>
10	18:77	<i>la-ttakhadhta / la-takhidhta</i>	<i>la-ttakhadhta</i>	<i>la-ttakhadhta</i>	<i>la-ttakhadhta</i>	<i>la-ttakhadhta</i>	<i>la-ttakhadhta</i>
11	18:81	<i>yubdilahumā / yubaddilahumā</i>	<i>yubdilahumā</i>	<i>yubaddilahumā</i>	<i>yubdilahumā</i>	<i>yubdilahumā</i>	<i>yubdilahumā</i>
12	18:85	<i>fa-atba’a / fa-ttaba’a</i>	<i>fa-atba’a</i>	<i>fa-ttaba’a</i>	<i>fa-ttaba’a</i>	<i>fa-atba’a</i>	<i>fa-atba’a</i>
13	18:93	<i>saddayn / suddayn + yafqahūna</i>	<i>saddayn; yafqahūna</i>	<i>saddayn; yafqahūna</i>	<i>saddayn; yafqahūna</i>	<i>saddayn; yafqahūna</i>	<i>saddayn; yafqahūna</i>

No.	Verse	Reference variant pair(s)	MSS 3590	MSS 3592	MSS 3599	MSS 4333	MSS 5050
14	18:94	<i>ya'jūj / ma'jūj + saddan</i>	<i>ya'jūj/ma'jūj; saddan</i>	<i>ya'jūj/ma'jūj; saddan</i>	<i>ya'jūj/ma'jūj; saddan</i>	<i>ya'jūj/ma'jūj; saddan</i>	<i>ya'jūj/ma'jūj; saddan</i>
15	18:96	<i>šadafayn / šudufayn</i>	<i>šadafayn</i>	<i>šadafayn</i>	<i>šadafayn</i>	<i>šadafayn</i>	<i>šadafayn</i>
16	18:106	<i>huzuwan / huzu'an</i>	<i>huzuwan</i>	<i>huzu'an</i>	<i>huzuwan</i>	<i>huzuwan</i>	<i>huzuwan</i>

Table 3. Locus-level coding decisions used for the main-text counts

Verse	Forms observed in the sample	Coding used in this study	Decision note
18:16	<i>mirfaqan</i>	‘Āšim-compatible	Shared affiliation across several canonical readers
18:17	<i>tazāwaru</i>	‘Āšim-compatible	Shared affiliation
18:19	<i>bi-wariqikum</i>	Ḥafṣ-inclusive; ‘Āšim-compatible	Ḥafṣ is among several affiliations
18:26	<i>yushriku</i>	‘Āšim-compatible	Shared affiliation
18:55	<i>qubulan</i>	‘Āšim-compatible	Shared affiliation
18:59	<i>mahlikihim</i>	Ḥafṣ-inclusive; ‘Āšim-compatible	Ḥafṣ-associated form in the adopted profile
18:70	<i>tas'alnī; tas'alānī</i>	‘Āšim-compatible; non-‘Āšim	MSS 3592 carries the non-‘Āšim form
18:71	<i>li-tughriqa ahlahā</i>	‘Āšim-compatible	Normalized phrase used for all five witnesses
18:74	<i>nukran</i>	Ḥafṣ-inclusive; ‘Āšim-compatible	Ḥafṣ is among several affiliations
18:77	<i>la-ttakhadhta</i>	‘Āšim-compatible	Normalized phrase used for all five witnesses
18:81	<i>yubdilahumā; yubaddilahumā</i>	‘Āšim-compatible; non-‘Āšim	MSS 3592 carries the non-‘Āšim form
18:85	<i>fa-atba'a; fa-ttaba'a</i>	‘Āšim-compatible; non-‘Āšim	MSS 3592 and MSS 3599 carry the non-‘Āšim form
18:93	<i>saddayn; yaḤqahūna</i>	Ḥafṣ-inclusive; ‘Āšim-compatible	Shared affiliation; normalized spelling
18:94	<i>hamzah-marked forms; saddan</i>	Ḥafṣ-inclusive; ‘Āšim-compatible	Orthographic caution retained
18:96	<i>šadafayn</i>	Ḥafṣ-inclusive; ‘Āšim-compatible	Ḥafṣ is among several affiliations
18:106	<i>huzuwan; huzu'an</i>	Ḥafṣ-inclusive; intra-‘Āšim	<i>huzu'an</i> assigned to the ‘Āšim spectrum through Shu'bah

[Table 4.](#) Main-text alignment within the sixteen-locus analytical panel

Manuscript	Loci tested	‘Āṣim-compatible	Approx. share	Ḥafṣ-inclusive	Non-‘Āṣim	Intra-‘Āṣim	Interpretive note
MSS 3590	16	16/16	100%	7/16	None	None	Stable main text; extensive marginal apparatus
MSS 3592	16	13/16	about 81%	6/16	18:70; 18:81; 18:85	18:106	Non-‘Āṣim and intra-‘Āṣim forms
MSS 3599	16	15/16	about 94%	7/16	18:85	None	One unmarked non-‘Āṣim main-text form
MSS 4333	16	16/16	100%	7/16	None	None	Stable ‘Āṣim-compatible main text
MSS 5050	16	16/16	100%	7/16	None	None	Stable main text; in-line visual evidence

Main-Text Variation Across the Sample

Four of the 80 main-text observations are classified as non-‘Āṣim under the stated rules. MSS 3592 reads *tas’alāni* at Q18:70 and *yubaddilabumā* at Q18:81, where the other four witnesses carry ‘Āṣim-compatible forms. At Q18:85, MSS 3592 and MSS 3599 read *fa-ttaba’a*, while MSS 3590, MSS 4333, and MSS 5050 read *fa-atba’a*. [Table 2](#) uses normalized forms for comparison, while manuscript-specific graphic details visible in the images informed the classification.

The four non-‘Āṣim observations constitute 5% of the panel and occur at three loci across two otherwise ‘Āṣim-oriented witnesses. Their distribution is therefore best understood as locus-specific canonical variation rather than evidence of separate manuscript-wide reading systems.

Ḥafṣ and ‘Āṣim represent separate coding levels. At Q18:106, MSS 3592 reads *buḥḥu’an*, a form associated with Shu‘bah as well as other readers. It is therefore counted within the ‘Āṣim spectrum but outside the Ḥafṣ-inclusive category. This treatment explains why MSS 3592 has thirteen ‘Āṣim-compatible loci, six Ḥafṣ-inclusive loci, three non-‘Āṣim loci, and one locus of intra-‘Āṣim variation.

MSS 3592 and MSS 3599 carry these variants without a corresponding marginal note or dedicated visual signal. Collation, rather than page marking, reveals the difference. The images record the final written form but not the act that produced it, leaving exemplar influence, copying choice, recitational memory, and graphic convention as plausible explanations.

Marginal Apparatus in MSS 3590

MSS 3590 provides the clearest evidence for a patterned marginal apparatus. Its main text is ‘Āṣim-compatible at all sixteen loci, while twelve loci carry a marginal alternative. An analysis confined to the body text would therefore miss three-quarters of the *qirā’āt*-related information recorded at the tested positions.

[Table 5](#) aligns each of the twelve marginal forms with its corresponding body-text form and canonical affiliations. The pairs are *mirfaḥan/marfaḥan* at Q18:16, *taḥḥāvaru/taḥḥāvaru* at Q18:17, *bi-wariḥikum/bi-warḥikum* at Q18:19, *qubulan/qibalan* at Q18:55, *mabliḥihim/mublakihim* at Q18:59, *nukran/nukuran* at Q18:74, *yubdilahumā/yubaddilahumā* at Q18:81, *fa-atba’a/fa-ttaba’a* at Q18:85, *saddayn/suddayn* at Q18:93, forms with and without a written *hamẓab* at Q18:94, *ṣadafayn/ṣudufayn* at Q18:96, and *buḥḥuwan/buḥḥu’an* at Q18:106.

Across the twelve marginal loci, affiliations with Nāfi‘ and Abū ‘Amr each occur ten times, followed by Ibn Kathīr and Ibn ‘Āmir at eight. Ḥamzah and al-Kisā’ī occur at four loci each, while ‘Āṣim through Shu‘bah occurs at three. This distribution shows the breadth of canonical affiliations represented in the apparatus rather than the frequency of communal recitation.

The concentration of marginal forms at recognized *qirā'at* loci, without systematic cancellation of the body text, is consistent with deliberate collation rather than random copying error. The apparatus may have been copied from an annotated exemplar, added through comparison with another witness, or preserved as a set of learned alternatives.

MSS 3590 places a continuous body line and twelve selected alternatives within the same opening, allowing direct comparison between the two spatial zones (Table 5; Figure 1). The page therefore supports comparative consultation, although no ownership or teaching record identifies a specific classroom setting.

Table 5. Marginal *qirā'at* apparatus in MSS 3590 at the tested Q18 loci

Verse	Reference variant pair(s)	Main text	Marginal reading	Main-text affiliation	Marginal affiliation
18:16	<i>mirfaqan / marfiqan</i>	<i>mirfaqan</i>	<i>marfiqan</i>	Ibn Kathīr; Abū 'Amr; 'Āṣim; Ḥamzah; al-Kisā'i	Nāfi'; Ibn 'Āmir
18:17	<i>tazāwaru / tazzāwaru</i>	<i>tazāwaru</i>	<i>tazzāwaru</i>	'Āṣim; Ḥamzah; al-Kisā'i	Ibn Kathīr; Nāfi'; Abū 'Amr
18:19	<i>bi-wariqikum / bi-warqikum</i>	<i>bi-wariqikum</i>	<i>bi-warqikum</i>	Nāfi'; Ibn Kathīr; Ibn 'Āmir; 'Āṣim (Ḥafṣ); al-Kisā'i	Abū 'Amr; 'Āṣim (Shu'bah); Ḥamzah
18:55	<i>qubulan / qibalan</i>	<i>qubulan</i>	<i>qibalan</i>	'Āṣim; Ḥamzah; al-Kisā'i	Nāfi'; Ibn Kathīr; Abū 'Amr; Ibn 'Āmir
18:59	<i>mahlīkīhim / muhlakīhim</i>	<i>mahlīkīhim</i>	<i>muhlakīhim</i>	'Āṣim (Ḥafṣ)	Nāfi'; Ibn Kathīr; Abū 'Amr; Ibn 'Āmir; Ḥamzah; al-Kisā'i
18:74	<i>nukran / nukuran</i>	<i>nukran</i>	<i>nukuran</i>	Ibn 'Āmir (Hishām); 'Āṣim (Ḥafṣ); Ḥamzah; al-Kisā'i	Ibn Kathīr; Nāfi'; Abū 'Amr
18:81	<i>yubdilahumā / yubaddilahumā</i>	<i>yubdilahumā</i>	<i>yubaddilahumā</i>	Ibn Kathīr; 'Āṣim; Ḥamzah; al-Kisā'i	Nāfi'; Ibn 'Āmir; Abū 'Amr
18:85	<i>fa-atba'a / fa-ttaba'a</i>	<i>fa-atba'a</i>	<i>fa-ttaba'a</i>	Ibn 'Āmir; 'Āṣim; Ḥamzah; al-Kisā'i	Nāfi'; Ibn Kathīr; Abū 'Amr
18:93	<i>saddayn / suddayn</i>	<i>saddayn; yafqahūna</i>	<i>suddayn</i>	Ibn Kathīr; Abū 'Amr; 'Āṣim (Ḥafṣ)	Ḥamzah; Nāfi'; Ibn 'Āmir; 'Āṣim (Shu'bah); al-Kisā'i
18:94	forms with / without written hamzah	<i>ya'jūj/ma'jūj; saddan</i>	<i>yagūg/magūg</i>	'Āṣim (Ḥafṣ)	Ibn Kathīr; Ḥamzah; Nāfi'; Ibn 'Āmir; al-Kisā'i; Abū 'Amr
18:96	<i>ṣadafayn / ṣudufayn</i>	<i>ṣadafayn</i>	<i>ṣudufayn</i>	Nāfi'; 'Āṣim (Ḥafṣ); Ḥamzah; al-Kisā'i	Ibn Kathīr; Abū 'Amr; Ibn 'Āmir
18:106	<i>huzuwan / huzu'an</i>	<i>huzuwan</i>	<i>huzu'an</i>	'Āṣim (Ḥafṣ)	Nāfi'; Ibn Kathīr; Abū 'Amr; Ibn 'Āmir; 'Āṣim (Shu'bah); al-Kisā'i



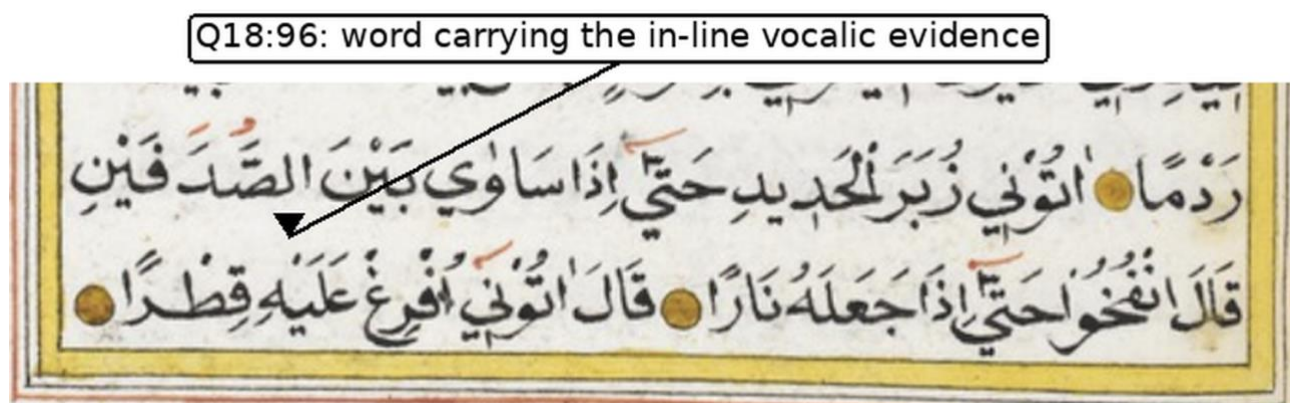
[Figure 1](#). MSS 3590, detail showing a marginal *qira'at* alternative beside the main text. The labels identify the two spatial zones discussed in this analysis. Courtesy of Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia.

Observed Page Configurations and Unmarked Variation

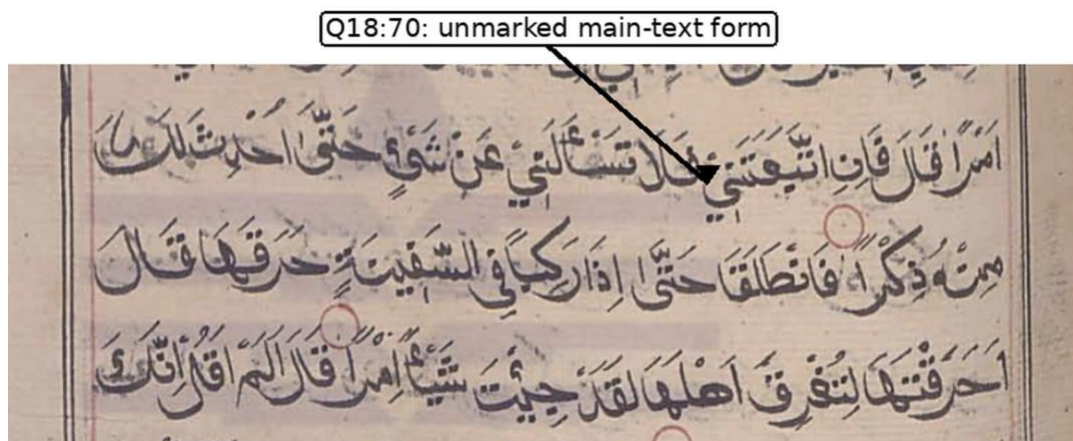
The results show two marked arrangements in the five-witness sample. MSS 3590 presents twelve cases of marginal display, with alternatives placed outside the written line, while Q18:96 in MSS 5050 presents one case of in-line visual layering through vocalic or related graphic treatment.

At Q18:96 in MSS 5050, the vocalic treatment of *ṣadafayn/ṣudufayn* layers two reading possibilities within the written line ([Figure 2](#)). The reproduction identifies the locus but does not resolve whether the relevant marks were written in a single stage or added later.

Unmarked main-text variation appears when a canonical alternative is written in the body line without a corresponding marginal or in-line signal. MSS 3592 contains such forms at Q18:70, Q18:81, and Q18:85, and MSS 3599 at Q18:85 ([Table 2](#); [Figure 3](#)). Because the page provides no visual prompt, recognition depends on collation or prior competence. The three arrangements create different degrees of visibility: an explicit marginal alternative, a possibility carried by in-line visual treatment, and a main-text difference detectable only through comparison. The analysis compares these arrangements synchronically because only MSS 3590 has a specific reported date.



[Figure 2](#). MSS 5050, detail at Q18:96. The label identifies the word whose in-line vocalic treatment is being discussed. Courtesy of Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia.



[Figure 3](#). MSS 3592, detail at Q18:70. The label identifies the unmarked main text form examined through collation. Courtesy of Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia.

Discussion

From Scribal Error to Managed Plurality

Distinguishing managed plurality from scribal error requires convergence among textual form, canonical affiliation, and spatial pattern. In MSS 3590, the main line is stable, the alternatives concentrate at recognized loci, and the affiliations recur systematically. This combination makes undifferentiated copying failure an inadequate explanation for the twelve-locus apparatus.

MSS 3590 remains ‘Āṣim-compatible at all sixteen tested loci, while the margin supplies twelve alternatives without consistently cancelling the body form. The page therefore separates a continuous primary line from supplementary canonical readings. Managed plurality refers to this stable main line accompanied by selected alternatives.

The catalogue associations span Sulawesi, Aceh, Terengganu, and Borneo. This diversity makes the individual manuscript, rather than a presumed homogeneous regional tradition, the appropriate level of comparison.

The page preserves an ‘Āṣim-oriented main line alongside other canonical forms. The continuous body text has visual priority, while marginal and layered forms remain available for comparison. The hierarchy is material and need not correspond directly to the recitational ranking of the readings.

The Margin as a Qirā’āt Paratext

In a *muṣḥaf*, margins can guide recitation, record correction, preserve ownership, or carry learned annotations. In MSS 3590, twelve notes align with recognized canonical *qirā’āt* loci. The notes function as a *qirā’āt* paratext by giving access to alternatives without incorporating them into the continuous body text.

The continuous body line gives one form sequential and visual priority, while the margin keeps alternatives within the same field of view. This arrangement supports comparison and distinguishes the inscriptions, but it does not reveal which form a particular reader actually recited.

Comparable uses of margins and planned space occur in other Islamic manuscript cultures ([Bondarev, 2017](#); [Gacek, 2009](#)). MSS 3590 provides a Southeast Asian example in which a stable main text is paired with canonically identifiable alternatives at twelve common loci. The other witnesses extend the comparison by showing in-line and unmarked forms of visibility.

Southeast Asian Comparative Context

Studies of Banten, Ternate, and other Southeast Asian witnesses provide the comparative context. Banten manuscripts combine readings, translations, and verse divisions in different ways ([Nurtawab, 2020](#); [Nurtawab, 2023](#)), while the Sultan of Ternate manuscript preserves canonical diversity beyond a universal Ḥaṣṣ assumption ([Mustopa, 2014](#)). Together, these studies show regional diversity and multiple material arrangements of Qur’anic reading.

Within the present panel, the main texts are strongly ‘Āṣim-oriented, while MSS 3590 retains numerous alternatives in its margins ([Table 5](#); [Figure 1](#)). Affiliations with Nāfi’ and Abū ‘Amr are especially prominent. Their prominence

shows that the apparatus represented canonical forms beyond the dominant line, without establishing how frequently those readings were recited locally.

Layered *qirā'āt* ecology describes the material co-presence of a dominant written line, marginal alternatives, in-line visual evidence, and unmarked variants. Here, the term refers to coexistence within the sampled pages rather than a historical sequence leading to print standardization.

Connections with the Haramain and other centers of learning are historically documented for Southeast Asia ([Azra, 2004](#); [Bradley, 2014](#)) and provide a plausible context for the circulation of several readings. The PNM manuscripts, however, contain no ownership, colophon, or *ijāzah* evidence linking a particular marginal hand to those networks.

The PNM manuscripts place Southeast Asian material pages within the broader canonical *qirā'āt* tradition. Determining whether their spatial arrangements are regionally distinctive will require securely dated comparison with Ottoman, South Asian, West African, and other Southeast Asian corpora.

Comparative Use and Production Scenarios

Because the main and marginal forms are visible on the same page, MSS 3590 allows direct comparison. The apparatus could have served instruction, collation, correction, scholarly display, or the copying of an already annotated exemplar. Hand, ink, and ownership evidence would help distinguish among these production and use scenarios.

No classroom note, teacher's certificate, *ijāzah*, or explicit instruction accompanies the apparatus in the inspected materials. The page therefore documents comparative access, while a teaching function remains unconfirmed.

Hand-and-ink analysis, ownership and *naqf* notes, colophons, *ijāzah* records, local *qirā'āt* manuals, curricula, and related manuscripts can discriminate among these production and use scenarios. Such evidence can separate annotations made during correction from those produced for study or teaching.

Page-Based Analysis of Qirā'āt

Recording each variant with its spatial location and visual treatment reveals relationships that a list of readings alone cannot show. Philological identification remains central, but the body text, margin, and in-line marks become distinct forms of evidence rather than interchangeable containers.

Earlier work by the author examined calligraphy, illumination, and the structure of scholarship on Southeast Asian Qur'anic manuscripts ([Mursyid & Ali Mat Zin, 2024](#); [Mursyid et al., 2026](#)). The present collation adds sixteen common Q18 loci, explicit coding rules, and a comparison of main-text, marginal, and in-line forms across five witnesses.

The two concepts operate at different scales. Hierarchy of visibility distinguishes continuous, marginal, layered, and unmarked access at the locus and page level, while layered *qirā'āt* ecology describes the coexistence of those positions across the sample. Larger and securely dated corpora can test how widely these patterns recur.

Conclusion

This article traced the spatial organization of canonical *qirā'āt* at sixteen common loci in five Qur'anic manuscripts preserved at PNM. Of the eighty main-text observations, 76 are compatible with 'Āṣim. The distribution defines an 'Āṣim-oriented panel with a strong inclination toward Ḥafṣ and characterizes the tested Q18 loci rather than the complete readings of the manuscripts.

MSS 3590 supplies the clearest evidence of managed plurality: its main text is 'Āṣim-compatible at all sixteen loci, while twelve loci carry marginal alternatives, most often including affiliations with Nāfi' and Abū 'Amr. MSS 5050 adds one case of in-line visual layering, and MSS 3592 and MSS 3599 preserve unmarked main-text variants. The sample therefore combines marginal display, in-line layering, and unmarked main-text variation.

The hierarchy of visibility summarizes the page-level result. A continuous body form receives material priority, selected alternatives remain available in margins or visual marks, and other differences emerge only through collation. This arrangement documents comparative access; classroom use, local recitational prevalence, annotation chronology, and the historical consolidation of Ḥafṣ remain separate historical questions.

The study is based on one institutional collection, five purposively selected witnesses, one *sūrah*, and a sixteen-locus panel. Because the surviving screening record does not document the other twenty-eight manuscripts individually, no collection-wide prevalence estimate is offered. Secure provenance, high-resolution images, hand-and-ink analysis, and broader Qur'anic collation can extend the comparison and clarify the chronology of the configurations identified here.

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