

Paper

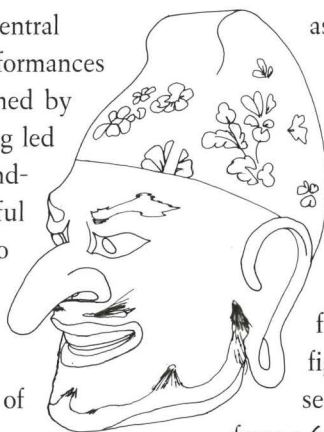
by Valerie Hansen

Philosopher-statesman Francis Bacon (1561–1621) identified paper as one of inventions that separated the modern world from the traditional world: the others were the magnetic compass, gunpowder, and printing. He never realized that every one of them originated in China.

Chinese craftsmen first discovered the secret of making paper when they washed rags and left them out to dry on a screen. This new, flexible material could be used to wrap things, and indeed the first use of paper, in the 2nd century B.C.E., was as a packaging material for medicine. Within a century, paper had begun to displace bamboo strips as China's main writing material, and by the 3rd and 4th centuries C.E. the Chinese used paper for all their writing.

Those in attendance included monks from India, Central Asia, and China. Among the many rituals and performances that took place was a ribald dance-drama performed by masked and costumed dancers. A Chinese lion-dog led the dancing procession. He was followed by a handsome prince from South China and a beautiful Chinese maiden. An ugly, fanged lecher tried to seduce the Chinese lady but was restrained by two fierce, muscular Buddhist guardian deities. Then appeared Garuda, from Indian Hindu and Buddhist mythology, a mythical bird who obtains the elixir of immortality and devours his enemy, the dragon. Garuda was followed by an old Brahmin priest-sage from India and by another elderly figure wearing a Turkish hat. The dancing procession ended with a group of intoxicated, red-faced barbarians and their Persian king. Occasionally the Persian king and his drunken entourage are identified as the Greek god of wine Dionysus and his companions. Most scholars seem to feel, however, that this was really a group of Persians. Probably, for 8th-century Japanese, the distinction between Persians and Greeks was nebulous. They were all “barbarians” from the Western Lands.

Chinese Tang dynasty objects also attest to the cosmopolitanism of the era. Many textiles show Persian motifs, most notably the pearl-encircled roundel with figurative designs such



Chinese paper moved along the Silk Road into Central Asia before the technology of papermaking did. Archaeologists have found paper with Chinese writing on it as far afield as the Caucasus mountains (at the site of Moshchevaya Balka) on an alternate route to Constantinople. Similar paper was in use in the years before 712 at a small fortress on Mount Mugh outside Samarkand. There a local ruler imported Chinese paper that had already been used on one side — so that he could write on the blank reverse when the occasion arose.

From the writing on the back of one sheet of paper found at Mount Mugh we know that it came from Liangzhou, Gansu, an important city on the Chinese silk route, 2,000 miles to the east. Mount Mugh's

as men on rearing horses facing backward to shoot rampant lions or two animals in ritual confrontation with one another. Another West Asian specialty, gold and silver metalwork, was also imported into Tang China. Metal bowls, plates, and cups, decorated with such West Asian motifs as griffins, mouflons, and deer, are found in the graves of the upper classes. These tombs also contain ceramic figures of foreign musicians and dancers. Other figures on horseback — both men and women — seem to be playing polo, a game that may be derived from a 6th-century B.C.E. Persian sport.

In 750, just before that festive consecration of the Great Buddha in Nara, the Muslim Abbasid dynasty established its capital in Baghdad, which became a fabled city of learning. The 9th century saw the building of the Great Mosque of Samarra and the Great Mosque of Cairo. It was during this period that lustre, an opalescent metallic glaze used on ceramics, was developed. The shimmering square lustre tiles set in lozenge patterns on the Great Mosque of Al Qayrawan (ca. 862) are a splendid example.

The 8th century saw the Muslim advance into Central Asia. One of the material results of this conquest was the Muslim adop-

Line drawing of an 8th-century wooden mask representing the drunken Persian king called Suiko-ō. Height of original: 37.7 cm. Shōsō-in Collection, Nara, Japan. Drawing by Linda Z. Ardrey

imported paper was so expensive that the ruler used it only for correspondence. For his ordinary household accounts he used willow sticks, cut from willow branches with the bark removed. Other common writing materials were leather and, in the Islamic world at the time, papyrus.

Legend has it that the secret of papermaking entered the Islamic world with the 751 battle of Talas (in modern Kyrgyzstan) when Islamic armies captured several Chinese craftsmen, who taught their captors how to make paper. Most scholars today think the technology, which was not very complex, could have moved out of China into western Iran before 751, though no examples of early, non-Chinese paper survive. Embracing the new technology, the founders of the Abbasid

caliphate (750–1258) sponsored a papermaking factory in Baghdad in 796. Soon all scholars in the Islamic world were copying manuscripts onto paper, which was transmitted to Europe via Sicily and Spain by the 12th century (Bloom 2001).

Reference Cited

Bloom, Jonathan M. 2001. *Paper Before Print: The History and Impact of Paper in the Islamic World*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

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tion of paper, a substance that had been developed much earlier in China. Muslims began to transcribe onto paper the knowledge that they had gained from many people — including Greeks, Central Asians, and Indians — and made these pages into books. Paper helped link the Islamic Empire across three continents (Asia, Africa, and Europe), and paper itself, the process of making it, and the knowledge written on it were eventually transmitted to Europe, helping to inspire the European Renaissance.

Another great period for cross-cultural interaction along Silk Road lands was the age of the Mongol Khanate (13th and 14th centuries), when the Polo family traveled from Venice to China and back. In the 13th century the Mongols (Turkic-Mongolian nomads) conquered China and pressed as far west as the Ukraine. They entered Islamic Iran and conquered Baghdad in 1258. Although the Mongols massacred tens of thousands of Muslims, soon many Mongols converted to Islam. Within ten years of their conquests Mongol Muslims were building great mosques and stimulating arts and letters by their patronage. One way they encouraged and transformed the arts in West Asia was by importing Chinese artifacts, artisans, and styles. A group of Chinese workmen directed a papermaking establishment in

Islamic Sufi dance from a manuscript of the Divan by Hafiz, present-day Afghanistan, Herat, dated 1523. Opaque watercolor, gold, and silver on paper; 18.8 x 10.3 cm.

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