Writing material: parchment & paper

An Introduction to Islamic Manuscript Culture | Session 1 pt 2

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Evyn Kropf
In this session

Looking at writing material = material selected for writing on, also referred to as “writing surface” or “support”

For use in codices, we mainly encounter parchment and overwhelmingly paper (local products and later European imports) as the writing materials of choice within Islamic manuscript cultures.

Papyrus is also attested for scant codices, but was used mainly for unbound documents. *Dluwang* (beaten tree bark or tapa nearer to papyrus in preparation but often referred to as “Javanese paper”) was used for writing in Java and environs.

Beyond the codex, we also encounter wooden writing boards / tablets as writing material used for training in literacy (eg even today in Qur’anic education in Nigeria)
Parchment

In Arabic, mainly رق (raqq / riqq)

Prepared skin of an animal, often goat, sheep, or even gazelle

Flesh and hair removed, stretched and dried, but untanned (in contrast with leather)

Extremely durable and long-lasting but also expensive and somewhat limited in terms of sizes (function of the size of the animal)

Occasionally dyed (even greater expense / luxury)

Both hair and flesh sides can be used for writing and have quite distinct characteristics (hair side more receptive to ink, follicles may be observed, flesh side often paler in color)

Arrangement of the folios is significant, suggesting whether folded or cut

Can be scraped and reused for writing (palimpsest) or as-is in binding elements
Parchment: chronology

Already long in use in the ancient world at the advent of Islam and utilized in the earliest extant Qur’anic codices

In fact, prior to the 10th century, parchment was writing material of choice for virtually all Qur’anic codices (some Qur’anic fragments on papyrus are attested but unclear whether or not they are from codices)

Paper was being used for other contexts (following introduction in 8th century) but parchment was preferred for transcribing the Qur’an until the 10th century

Parchment persisted in use in the Islamic West until the 14th or even 15th century, otherwise quite exceptional to encounter it after the 10th century
Wa la i'di fe'la ma siddi qal bi yad al-wa
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isl. Ms. 1049 (recto), Early 'Abbāsid Qur'ānic fragment, 9th or 10th century
Paper

In Persian کاغذ (kāghaẕ from Soghdian), Turkish kağıt, Arabic ورق (waraq) / کاغذ (kāghidh)

Complex organic product of felted fibres formed into a sheet against a mould

Fibres may be from rag / rope or raw sources (bast fibre, plant inner bark) and require significant processing (cleaning, washing, cooking / soaking / retting, beating) to prepare the pulp which is added to a vat of water to form sheets

Sheets are then couched, pressed, parted, and dried

A sizing agent may be added to the vat or to the surface (often starch, gum arabic, glair), and in Islamic manuscript cultures the paper is almost always burnished (polished) to prepare the surface for writing

Inexpensive and can be easily fashioned in a range of sizes and thicknesses including extremely large or remarkable thin

Rahumudin Kagzi forming a sheet at the vat (reproduced from Alexandra Soteriou, Gift of Conquerors: Hand Papermaking in India, 1999)
Papers vary by morphological features (inherent in mould construction = laid or wove, chain line distribution, rib shadows, dimensions, presence of watermarks / countermarks, etc), surface characteristics (treatment, color, later decoration), pulp characteristics, estimated sheet dimensions, thickness, fibre type

Important to report mould characteristics: measured spacing of laid and (any visible) chain lines, any groupings of chain lines, any watermarks / countermarks, furnish (cloudy / clear), color, thickness (to the extent possible), and surface characteristics (if burnished and to what extent, presence of surface size if possible to confirm, etc)

By elaborating these distinctions across dated / localized corpus, we can develop typologies useful for further dating / placement. At this stage, watermarks / countermarks and grouped chain lines are particularly useful.
Paper : chronology

Likely introduced from Central Asia (having reached Samarqand and Khurāsān from China) into the Persianate and central Islamic lands in the 8th century. Thereafter the technology spread, eventually reaching Europe by way of Sicily and Spain. The earliest known Arabic documents on paper are from 8th century Khurāsān (cf Haim et al 2016). Earliest confidently dated Arabic manuscript codex on paper is from 866 (= Dhū al-Qa‘dah 252, MS Leiden Or. 298)*. Earliest known dated Persian manuscript codex on paper is from 1055 (= Shawwāl 447, No. AF 340, National Library of Austria, Vienna)

Most widely attested writing material in the Islamic manuscript corpus, almost exclusively after the 10th century

*Malachi Beit-Arié claims that preserved in Alexandria is a manuscript copy of Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim dated 233 but this is unverified (cf Hebrew Codicology preprint p.214)
Initially regional products were used. European imports became increasingly utilized from 15th century and by the latter 16th century had overtaken the market in Arab lands (overwhelming local production)

Local production continued in Persianate areas, India, Central Asia (appearing in manuscripts into the 20th century) though both local products and European imports were utilized in manuscripts
Studies investigating the papers produced in the Islamic lands have addressed

- historical developments of the craft through interrogation of written sources
- typologies elaborated from assessment of accessible features in the extant manuscript corpus (especially morphological studies)
- combination of physical evidence in the manuscript corpus with evidence in historical treatises and practical knowledge of papermaking techniques
- attempts to replicate techniques and resulting features
- material studies addressing fibre type, sizing agents & fillers

Important (still-evolving) typologies have emerged from these studies
Paper : local types (Baker / Loveday 2001)

“Syro-Egyptian papers” (produced in Arab areas)
- clustered chain lines (predominantly groups of three from the 15th century)
- shades of cream
- tend to be fairly thick
- often unclear formation with uneven fibre distribution
- burnished, but often lightly, and not always surface sized

“Persian papers” (produced in Persianate areas, into India)
- chain lines often indiscernible
- sometimes single chain line only occasionally visible across the sheet, groups of two have been occasionally observed
- verging on shades of beige / brown (grey in the Qajar period)
- from 15th century especially thin and crisp
- furnish and fibre distribution can appear fairly clear and even
- often heavily surface sized and burnished
Regional products are most plainly distinct from European imports in manner of mould construction, sheet formation, & surface preparation.

Most obviously: European papers typically incorporate watermarks and countermarks while such marks in regional products are almost unheard of.

Even so, a remarkable exception has just been reported by Alice Shafi-Leblanc in our edited volume *The Trade in Papers Marked with Non-Latin Characters* (2018). This Arabic script mark appears in a 14th century Qur’an MS produced in Shiraz.

Instead in regional production distinguishing arrangements of grouped chain lines are more common, at least for papers produced in Arab areas.

Can turn to catalogues / databases of watermarks and data on grouped chain lines to make approximate determinations for dating / placement.
Essential Reading


*Resources for the study of watermarks* (E Kropf), 2012- including *Watermark Wednesdays blog series (E Kropf) 2014-2016*