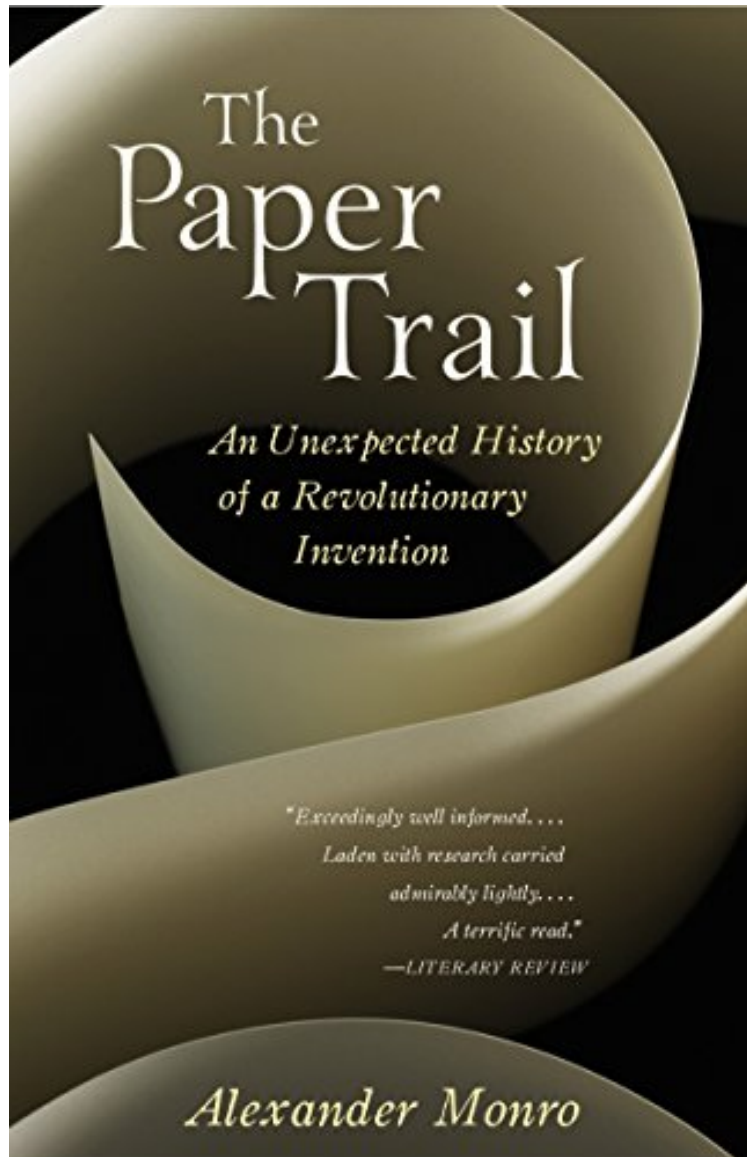


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## The Paper Trail: An Unexpected History of a Revolutionary Invention

Alexander Monro

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**Alexander Monro : The Paper Trail: An Unexpected History of a Revolutionary Invention** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Paper Trail: An Unexpected History of a Revolutionary Invention:

9 of 13 people found the following review helpful. Interesting book to read.By Rod WinderInteresting book to read. A bit heavy on the development of religious understanding through ability of paper as a cheap media to provide access of

thought to the masses and loss of power of those controlling by ignorance<sup>16</sup> of 23 people found the following review helpful. In depth history of paper, but also very long and not enough pictures!By KiwifloraIt is highly unlikely that you are reading this review on a piece of paper held in your hand. And yet, it was the invention of paper that enabled mass communication and exchange of information quickly and effectively. Now we have the internet rapidly replacing the likes of the daily newspaper, but we must cast a thought back to where it all began. First produced over 2000 years ago in China, paper very quickly replaced bamboo as a writing surface and from then on was unstoppable in its spread. Although, it was not till over 1000 years later that paper made its way in a westerly direction to what is now Iran, Iraq, then Turkey to Europe. The movement and development of paper has been integral to the history of these regions over the last 2000 years. As a form of storing religious texts, whether they be Buddhist as in the early centuries of paper use in China, the Koran or the Bible; as a means of distributing religious messages amongst the populace as seen in the work of Martin Luther in the 1500s looking for an alternative to the Catholic church, or as fuel to the French Revolution in the late 18th century, paper has been at the centre of it all. Even New Zealand's very own Treaty of Waitangi has two pages in this book devoted to it. Apparently the Treaty was a very rare type of document in British imperial history, in that it was a bilingual document - Maori and English - drawn up for both sides to sign. Which is what happened. Although as we now know, the two versions actually had two different meanings. However it is considered remarkable for its time, as it attempted to come to a political settlement without going to war. The author also points out that when the Treaty was signed in 1840, the Maori had only had maybe 20 years of exposure to the written word, their entire means of communicating and passing on history up to that time being oral in nature. Is it any wonder they are such marvellous story tellers? This research undertaken for this book is enormous, and how much the author has put in is mind boggling. The author has studied Chinese and lived for a time in Beijing, so it is hardly surprising that half of this book is about the invention, development and spread of paper in China, Eastern and Central Asia - the first 1000 years. I am not entirely sure how one makes 1000 years of paper making interesting and riveting, and at times I found myself nodding off. The second 1000 years is easier to digest as it has much more relevance to history that we already know about. Nevertheless, I wouldn't say this book is an 'easy' read. The detail and minutiae of his subject is at times overwhelming, to the extent that I felt the thread of many of his stories was getting lost. There has been a trend in recent years for non-fiction writers to undertake histories of items/inventions that have been crucial to the development of the world we know and live in, and write about it in a way that makes it accessible to the average reader. For example "E=mc<sup>2</sup>" by David Bodanis takes Albert Einstein's famous equation and explains it in such a way the most unmathematical persons in the world could understand. This book is not on the same accessible level as the likes of "E=mc<sup>2</sup>". My biggest criticism - the almost total lack of illustrations. In a book of 368 pages there are only seventeen illustrations. I don't understand how a book about paper and its place in modern history can only have seventeen, low quality illustrations. There is whole chapter devoted to the Renaissance and the use of paper in the creation of some of the beautiful art works from that time. Any illustrations from this time? No. Any pictures of some of the beautifully and crafted Bibles of the Middle Ages? No. Or the copies of the Koran produced by the Islamic Caliphate? No. I kept wanting to see pictures of what the author was writing about. Disappointing for a book with so much research and information in it. But if you have the time and want to know where paper, the development of script, binding, typography, the printing press, the concept of reading, the disbursement of knowledge sprang from, then you will get a lot out of reading this book.

A sweeping, richly detailed history that tells the fascinating story of how paper—the simple Chinese invention of two thousand years ago—wrapped itself around our world, humankind's most momentous ideas imprinted on its surface. The emergence of paper in the imperial court of Han China brought about a revolution in the transmission of knowledge and ideas, allowing religions, philosophies and propaganda to spread with ever greater ease. The first writing surface sufficiently cheap, portable and printable for books, pamphlets and journals to be mass-produced and distributed widely, paper opened the way for an unprecedented, ongoing dialogue between individuals and between communities across continents, oceans and time. The Paper Trail explores how the new substance was used to solidify social and political systems that influenced China even into our own time. We see how paper made possible the spread of the then new religions of Buddhism and Manichaeism into Japan, Korea and Vietnam . . . how it enabled theologians, scientists and artists to build the vast and signally intellectual empire of the Abbasid Caliphate and embed the Koran in popular culture . . . how paper was carried along the Silk Road by merchants and missionaries, finally reaching Europe in the late thirteenth century . . . and how, once established in Europe, along with the printing press, paper played an essential role in the three great foundations of Western modernity: the Renaissance, the Reformation and the Scientific Revolution. Here is a dramatic, comprehensively researched, vividly written story populated by holy men and scholars, warriors and poets, rulers and ordinary men and women—an essential story brilliantly told in this luminous work of history. From the Hardcover edition.

“Fascinating.” —The Wall Street Journal  
“Monro dives deep into the Asian and Middle Eastern cultures to examine how the discovery and spread of paper permitted civilizations to blossom and also how paper

broke down isolation. . . . Chicago Tribune. . . . Elegantly presented. . . . Monro's focus is China, which he knows well. When the Greeks and the Romans were carving on stone and writing on papyrus scrolls, Chinese scholars were using paper. . . . The Economist . . . Page-turningly readable. . . . The chronological narrative, beginning with prehistoric charcoal scribbling on cave walls and ending with e-paper, is laden with research carried admirably lightly. . . . A terrific read. . . . Literary . . . Timely. . . . Monro's expertise as a European historian and scholar of Chinese gives this book a uniquely broad perspective, which would mean less if he were not also a picturesque writer with an eye for a good story. . . . The Times (London)

About the Author Alexander Monro has worked as a Parliamentary researcher, on The Times (London) foreign desk and wrote general news and features for Reuters Shanghai. He was previously a China analyst at Trusted Sources, where he wrote on political risk in China. Monro has edited a classical poetry collection, Laments of Four Cities of China, and has coedited an anthology of poetry about 'the East' called Desert Air. In 2002 he was sponsored by the Captain Scott Society to trace the route of Genghis Khan through Mongolia on horseback. His articles have been published by The Times (London), The Sunday Telegraph, The Guardian Arts blog, The Washington Post, The Times Literary Supplement, New Statesman, New Scientist, Agence France-Presse and Reuters. He speaks French and Mandarin Chinese, having studied the latter at the universities of Cambridge and Peking, and continues to write on contemporary China.

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1 . . . Tracing Paper . . . The city of Cambaluc has such a multitude of houses, and such a vast population inside the walls and outside, that it seems quite past all possibility. . . . Marco Polo, The Travels (trans. Sir Henry Yule) . . . In 1275 Marco Polo arrived at the capital city of the most expansive and unlikely empire the world had yet seen. In the stories he dictated on his homecoming, Marco called it Khanbaliq (or Cambaluc, as in the translation above), the city of the khans, but sixty years earlier it had been a Chinese city with a Chinese name, before the Mongols besieged the city and razed it to the ground. When the Mongols rebuilt it as Khanbaliq, it was just one city among several in the expanding kingdom of Greater Mongolia. But by the time the Polos arrived it had become the capital of an empire that spanned much of Eurasia, from Korea to Eastern Europe. Today it is called Beijing. . . . For several pages, Marco's travelogue professes his amazement at the scale and splendour of Khanbaliq. He wrote that the four innermost walls of the palace complex were each a mile long, and the four outer walls each ran to eight miles. Eight palaces placed around the inner walls served as arsenals, while a further eight sat between the inner and middle walls. Among them was the khan's own palace, fenced in by a marble wall. The rooms of the palace were covered with gold and silver, and decorated with gilt images of dragons and birds. Six thousand men could sit for dinner in its main hall. . . . Marco, as a merchant and a Venetian, was well acquainted with desirable objects, and yet even he was astonished by the luxury and grandeur of Khanbaliq. Numbers pepper his description of the Mongol capital, from the twenty-four-mile circumference of the city wall to its sixteen palaces and twelve gates, each gate manned by a thousand guards. Khanbaliq, he recorded, buzzed with commerce and was 'laid out in squares like a chessboard with such masterful precision that words cannot do it justice'. Marco wrote that the city had 20,000 prostitutes and that more than 1,000 cartloads of silk entered it each day. On New Year's Day, the khan received gifts of more than 100,000 white horses and held a procession of 5,000 elephants. Polo's numbers are the stuff of travellers' tales, but the mark Khanbaliq made on him is unmistakable. . . . Yet something far less magnificent than the city's palaces also caught his attention: the Royal Mint. His diary records what he discovered: . . . you might say he [the emperor] has mastered the art of alchemy . . . . You must know that he has money made for him by the following process, out of the bark of trees . . . to be precise, from mulberry trees (the same whose leaves furnish food for silk-worms). The fine bast between the bark and the wood of the tree is stripped off. Then it is crumbled and pounded and flattened out with the aid of glue into sheets like sheets of cotton paper, which are all black. When made, they are cut up into rectangles of various sizes, longer than they are broad . . . all these papers are sealed with the seal of the Great Khan. The procedure of issues is as formal and as authoritative as if they were made of pure gold or silver . . . . Of this money the Khan has such a quantity made that with it he could buy all the treasure in the world . . . with these pieces of paper they can buy anything and pay for anything. . . . It is an imperfect and inexact description of Chinese papermaking and Chinese printing on paper, but it quickly became the best-known account across pre-Renaissance Europe. Within the first twenty years of the book's publication, fresh editions appeared in at least five different languages. All this took place within Polo's lifetime, a remarkable success in a Europe not yet familiar with printed books; each fresh edition of The Travels was copied out by hand. . . . Here was Europe's most famous visitor to Beijing marvelling at the Chinese papers of the Mongol empire. Just as paper was pioneered in China, so too was paper money. By the end of the tenth century, several centuries before his visit, China's paper money in circulation had already reached the equivalent of 1.13 million tiao . . . a tiao was a string of 1,000 coins; thus China's currency in circulation could be counted in the millions before papermaking had even reached Christian Europe. Under the Yuan dynasty, in power when Marco made his visit, that number increased substantially. The result of this glut of paper would be hyperinflation. . . . Yet the earliest mention of significant papermaking even taking place on the Italian peninsula was made in 1276, a year or so after Marco's arrival in Beijing. Before that, Europe's only paper mills were in Muslim-ruled Iberia.

Even to a prosperous Venetian merchant, thirteenth-century Beijing and its wares were uniquely ingenious and glamorous. The paper money of China's Yuan dynasty, produced by its Board of Revenue and Rights, was used as far afield as Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam (as we now call them). It crossed social and economic barriers too: notes came in twelve denominations, from ten to two thousand. One surviving Great Yuan Treasure Note, as it calls itself on its obverse side, warns that anyone caught counterfeiting the note will be decapitated while the informer will receive a reward of 20 taels of silver, equal to perhaps 17 pounds. The Mongols had learnt to govern by paper. Illiterate until just a few decades before Marco arrived, the invaders had chosen Khanbaliq as their capital and quickly established an enormous bureaucracy across what is now Tiananmen Square, one that filled three square miles and employed some 10,000 (largely Chinese) artisans. They produced seals, scrolls, brushes, ink, stones and paper; the machinery of the second largest empire in history. (Only the British empire, seven centuries later, was larger.) The medium of this empire was paper, from money to diplomatic letters, from official histories to property records and from palace accounts to imperial decrees. This is the story of how that soft and supple substance became the vehicle of history and the conduit for landmark innovations and mass movements across the world. For two millennia, paper has allowed policies, ideas, religions, propaganda and philosophies to spread as nothing else. It was the currency of ideas in the most important civilizations of the day, enabling not merely their easy dissemination within their own cultures, but also their absorption by foreign cultures. This role was key to paper's future; just as money, which had been made of clay or metal for millennia, allowed the transfer and exchange of goods and services, so it was that paper fuelled the trade in ideas and beliefs. What began in Han China 2,000 years ago reached new heights in the Tang dynasty during the eighth century, just as it was spreading into the Islamic Caliphate with its imperial capital at Baghdad, a hub of scientific research and artistic outpourings, before eventually passing into Europe, where it became the tool of the continent's own Renaissance and Reformation. From its East Asian beginnings, this smooth surface rose to become the writing and printing medium of the modern world.