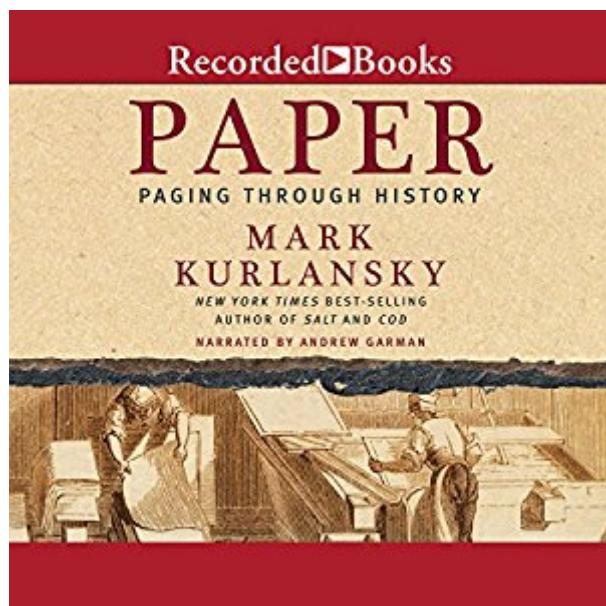


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Paper: Paging Through History



Synopsis

From the New York Times best-selling author of *Cod* and *Salt*, a definitive history of paper and the astonishing ways it has shaped today's world. Paper is one of the simplest and most essential pieces of human technology. For the past two millennia, the ability to produce it in ever more efficient ways has supported the proliferation of literacy, media, religion, education, commerce, and art; it has formed the foundation of civilizations, promoting revolutions and restoring stability. One has only to look at history's greatest press run, which produced 6.5 billion copies of *Mao zhuxi yulu*, *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung* (Zedong), which doesn't include editions in 37 foreign languages and in braille to appreciate the range and influence of a single publication, in paper. Or take the fact that one of history's most revered artists, Leonardo da Vinci, left behind only 15 paintings but 4,000 works on paper. And though the colonies were at the time calling for a boycott of all British goods, the one exception they made speaks to the essentiality of the material; they penned the Declaration of Independence on British paper. Now, amid discussion of "going paperless" and as speculation about the effects of a digitally dependent society grows rampant, we've come to a world-historic juncture. Thousands of years ago, Socrates and Plato warned that written language would be the end of "true knowledge", replacing the need to excise memory and think through complex questions. Similar arguments were made about the switch from handwritten to printed books, and today about the role of computer technology. By tracing paper's evolution from antiquity to the present, with an emphasis on the contributions made in Asia and the Middle East, Mark Kurlansky challenges common assumptions about technology's influence, affirming that paper is here to stay. Paper will be the commodity history that guides us forward in the 21st century and illuminates our times.

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Customer Reviews

One might expect a history of paper to be a little dry. Perhaps a tad flat. But leave it to Mark Kurlansky, whose previous bestselling microhistories include COD and SALT, to make the history of paper --- or, rather, history through paper --- both engaging and three-dimensional. Kurlansky doesn't just trace the history of paper's invention, manufacture and use (although he does all those things). Instead, he uses his exploration of paper as a way to examine a number of different cultures throughout history, learning how the utilization of paper intersected with those cultures' need and desire for technological change. Throughout, Kurlansky takes on what he calls the "technological fallacy," the notion that advances in technology fundamentally change society. Instead, he argues throughout his history, society develops technology to address the changes that are taking place within it. He points out, for example, that in most cultures, the impetus for first developing or adopting the use of paper was the need for more sophisticated methods of accounting. In societies like the Mayans, who had a quite accurate method of using knotted strings for accounting, their satisfaction with existing methods meant that paper was adopted later, if at all. Similarly, Kurlansky shows that paper did not cause the Renaissance or the Reformation in Europe. Instead, paper was simply an effective and efficient means of helping to capture the spirit of creation and questioning of religious authority that was already coursing through European society at that time.

Interestingly enough, some of the more fascinating parts of *Paper*, by Mark Kurlansky, are the contextual bits of history in preparation for the information regarding the ostensible subject of the book. In fact, to be honest, I sometimes found these sections more interesting than its main topic. Kurlansky's exploration of paper is both wide and deep, ranging back thousands of years, well before the invention of paper. He begins with language, moves to the apparent origination of writing in Sumeria, and then continues with an overview of the development of alphabets and pictographic languages in various civilizations, including China, Egypt, Greece, and Mesoamerica. When he shifts gears to the recording material, he starts earlier than paper, discussing its predecessors, papyrus, parchment, and vellum, and a few other lesser known (i.e. non-Western) ones. He shows how the art of paper making arose in China and then how it was

transferred from civilization to civilization, region to region, to Korea, Japan, to Central Asia, to the Islamic empire and then on to Muslim Spain (Andalusia) As he charts paper's evolution Kurlansky frequently warns the reader against what he calls the technological fallacy • the belief that technology changes society. Instead, he argues, society reaches a point where technology is necessitated. It is society that creates or changes technology. With regard to paper, for instance, he makes the point that paper had been in existence for some time before Europe took to it, and it is only when Europe's bureaucracy and other elements meant they had a far greater need for recording that they adopted its use.

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