THE PAPER TRADE OF EGYPT AND THE SUDAN
IN THE EIGHTEENTH AND NINETEENTH CENTURIES
AND ITS RE-EXPORT TO THE BILĀD AS-SŪDĀN

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Paper has more varieties than cloth.
–ʿAbd al-Munʿim Sālim, a paper merchant in Cairo, 1972

Paper was an everyday article that was often traded in eighteenth and
nineteenth century Egypt and the Sudan, but unlike textiles it is rarely
described in the sources most familiar to historians. While dozens of
varieties of cloth are mentioned by name in travelogues and mercantile
handbooks and dictionaries, only a few types of paper—fine, writing,
wrapping, or coarse—are listed. Yet in the eighteenth century,
paper ranked only after cloth as the most important article of trade
among European exports to the Middle East and North Africa, and
the profit derived from selling paper was as high as that earned on the
sale of any European-crafted product.  

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1 This chapter is an updated and revised version of an article originally published
under the same title in M.W. Daly, ed., Modernization in the Sudan (New York: Lilian

2 Richard Rolt, A New Dictionary of Trade and Commerce, Compiled from the
Information of the Most Eminent Merchants, and from the Works of the Best Writers on
Commercial Subjects, in All Languages (London: Keith, Crowder, Woodgate & Brooks,
1761); Jacques Savary des Bruslons, The Universal Dictionary of Trade and Commerce,
trans. Malachy Postlethwayt (4th ed., London: Strahan, Rivington, Hinton, etc., 1774);
William Anderson, The London Commercial Dictionary, and Sea-port Gazetteer,
Exhibiting a Clear View of the Commerce and Manufactures of All Nations (London:
E. Wilson, 1819); John Ramsay McCulloch, A Dictionary, Practical, Theoretical and
Historical of Commerce and Commercial Navigation (London: Longman, Brown,
Green, and Longmans, 1854): entries for “Leghorn” and “Genoa” contain prices for
“floretta, media, al Masso, wrapping;” in contrast, many specific names of Indian
textiles to the Hijaz can be found in William Milburn, Oriental Commerce Containing a
Geographical Description of the Principal Places in The East Indies, China, and Japan
with their Produce, Manufactures, and Trade, 2 vols. (London: Black, Parry and Co.
1813). The French consul M. Delaporte mentions seventeen specific varieties of tex
tiles but only one of paper (tre lune): “Commerce du Darfour avec l’Egypte,” enclosed
in Delaporte au Ministre, 5 August 1852 (France, Archives du Ministère des Affaires
This study stems from research on the trans-Saharan trade of northeast Africa in the eighteenth century and focuses on the paper trade of Egypt and the re-export of European-made paper to Egypt’s Sudanic trading partners. It was sparked by the many, if brief, references to paper among articles purchased by Sudanese merchants in Egypt and by merchants and pilgrims traveling to and from the Bilād al-Sūdān, including the western Sudan, then known as Bilād al-Takrūr. Paper is not an article of trade normally associated with trans-Saharan commerce, and yet its use among Muslim rulers inhabiting the southern rim of the Sahara was a sign of their governments’ growing complexity as well as the extension of Islamic institutions among their peoples. Egypt was only one of several sources of paper for Sudanic rulers and their clerics. The more direct commercial routes via Tripoli and the Libyan oases southward would have been a principal source. Yet so treasured was paper by West Africans that they often purchased it in Cairo on the return leg of their long pilgrimage journeys to Mecca.

At this time and during much of the nineteenth century most paper bought and sold in Cairo was imported from Europe. Egypt thus acted as a distribution point, to use a phrase employed by Jonathan Bloom, for paper being traded into the Sudan, Arabia and elsewhere. The extensive Islamic court archive of Cairo from the Ottoman conquest through the end of the nineteenth century, whose scribes employed European-made paper for their documentation, offers a rich datable resource of paper types that were quite possibly re-exported to the Sudan.

In this chapter, I show the use of European paper in Egyptian Islamic court documentation and in manuscripts, the varieties of

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