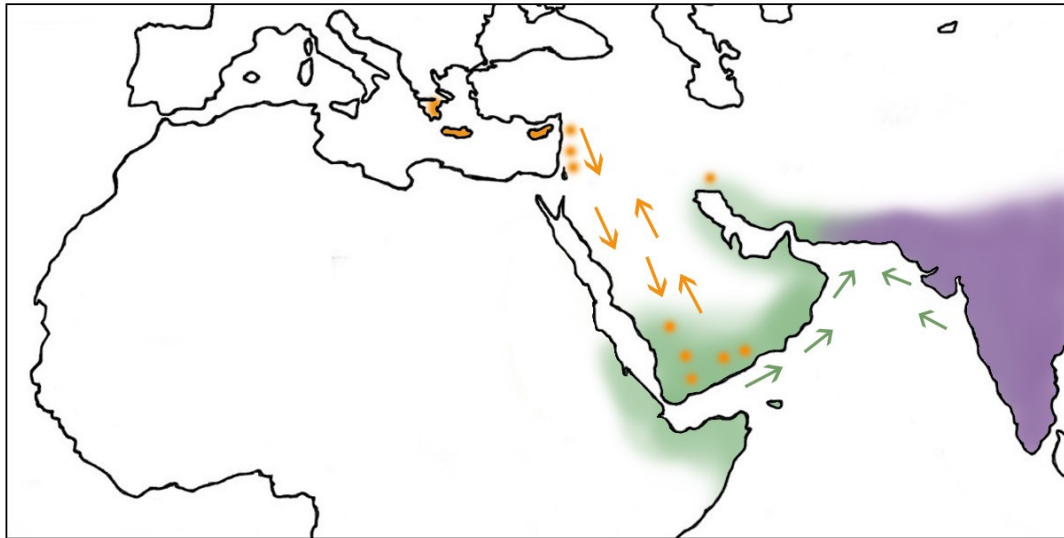


Ancient Sunrise® Henna for Hair Chapter 2

Part 1: The Evolution and Migration of Henna into Cultural Practices

Section 3: Evidence of early cultural henna use in the Arabian Peninsula and along the Arabian Ocean

Transmission routes of cultural use of henna in and around the Arabian Peninsula and the northern coast of the Arabian Ocean 2000 BCE to 500 CE



- ← Sea trade along the Arabian Ocean coast
- Cultural transmission along the Arabian Ocean coast
- ← Bedouin migrations
- Artifacts of brides with henna-marked hands
- Lac and alkalized turmeric used for red body art

Evidence of possible early henna use in the Arabian Peninsula and probable routes of cultural transmission during Bronze Age and the Iron Age

Preservation and archeology are uneven. Some environments naturally preserve artifacts; other environments erase artifacts through the activities of wind and water. Some areas are of great cultural interest, and funding is provided for investigation and analysis; other areas attract little interest and are left unexplored. The eastern coast of the Mediterranean is of great interest to the west, and much of the ancient culture and landscape has been thoroughly explored, curated, excavated, and translated. The history of peoples inhabiting the Arabian Peninsula is less researched, though humans have migrated from the Horn of Africa and area of Kush in the interior, to Arabia, the Indus Valley, and Western India since the Pleistocene Age.¹

¹ Gandini, F., Achilli, A., et al. 2016 “Mapping human dispersals into the Horn of Africa from Arabian Ice Age refugia using mitogenomes” *Scientific Reports* 6, Article number: 25472 (2016)

The Arabian Peninsula would be a logical place to look for early use of henna, as henna can easily grow there in any area with sufficient water; it lies between known areas of early henna use: North Africa and Mesopotamia. The climate of the Arabian Peninsula was arid and cold during the last glacial maximum. At that time climate supporting henna would be in an area further south of its present growing zone; probably between 10° and 15° latitude, south of most of Arabia and India but across the breadth of Africa.



Southern Arabian Rock paintings of women from 500 – 0 BCE; the local Bedouin identify these images as a goddess “Alia”, a prehistoric queen and goddess ruling all over Southern Arabia.²

As the climate warmed between 10,000 BCE and 4500 BCE, the climate in the Arabian Peninsula was cool and humid, inhospitable to henna. Henna is likely to have self-propagated from Kush, the area that is presently Sudan, to the Horn of Africa, crossing the Red Sea onto the Arabian coast during the lacustrine period as the climate continued to warm and favored savannah and grasslands in the Arabian Peninsula.³ Henna would have been able to spread north and eastwards towards Mesopotamia and India as did other species of humans, plants and animals. The gap between Djibouti, Bab-el-Mandeb Island, and Yemen is presently only eighteen miles, and was narrower during the ice age because of lower sea levels. This gap was a corridor to some migrations and a barrier to others. By 4500 BCE, henna was indigenous to the warming Arabian Peninsula, growing alongside tamarinds, almonds, figs and date palms.⁴ The humans appear to have been hunters, gatherers, and pastoralists, constructing settlements by the late Neolithic. Henna was part of their landscape.

² Khan, M. 2013. “Rock Art of Saudi Arabia” *Arts*, 2(4), 447-475; doi:10.3390/arts2040447

³ Parker, Adrian G.; et al. (2006). "A record of Holocene climate change from lake geochemical analyses in southeastern Arabia" (PDF). *Quaternary Research* 66 (3): 465–476

⁴ Parker, A.G., and J.I. Rose. 2008. “Climate Change and Human Origins in Southern Arabia”. Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies 38. *Archaeopress*: 25–42. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41223935>

We can propose that the predecessors of modern Bedouins herding their animals migrated along the western and southern Arabian Peninsula between rainy and dry season pastures as was done in the 19th century CE, with adaptation. The area had settlements by 2500 BCE, and there is archeological evidence of a herding economy.⁵ These people left rock carvings that show humans interacting with bovines, equines, ungulates, camelids, and caprines, generally identifiable species of cows, horses, gazelles, camels, and goats, which the humans hunted, herded, and rode.⁶ Herders would have noticed animals that had been chewing on henna leaves; the leaves would have stained the fur around their lips red-orange. If the herder reached into the animal's mouth to check for an injury, the cud of henna would have stained their fingers, too. At some point, henna was assimilated into Arabian culture much as it is used now: to dye gray hair, to dye fingernails and soles, and to mark women's hands for bridal celebration and other joyous events.⁷



Southern Arabian rock art from between 500 BCE to 0 CE shows a female figure with raised arms displaying open hands, wide hips and deeply marked vulva, her hair is arranged in weighted braids swinging outward as if she is dancing. There are additional outstretched hands carved into the rock face.⁸

⁵Parker, Adrian G.; et al. 2006. "A record of Holocene climate change from lake geochemical analyses in southeastern Arabia" (PDF). *Quaternary Research* 66 (3): 465–476.

⁶ Khan, M. 2013. "Rock Art of Saudi Arabia" *Arts* 2(4), 447-475; doi:10.3390/arts2040447

⁷ Mandavile, J. P. 2011. "Bedouin Ethnobotany: Plant Concepts and Uses in a Desert Pastoral World" *University of Arizona Press*, p.145

⁸ Khan, M. 2013. "Rock Art of Saudi Arabia" *Arts*, 2(4), 447-475; doi:10.3390/arts2040447

The female figures in southern Arabian rock art have a ‘raised hand’ stance similar to the ‘women with uplifted arms’ bridal/fertility figures in the late Bronze Age/early Iron Age eastern Mediterranean cultures to the north.⁹ Bedouin seasonal migration moved between what is now Syria to the highlands in Yemen, so there would have been cultural contact along the western ridge route from north to south. The incense and spice trade moved from south to north from Aden, the port in Yemen to the Mediterranean coast.

The Mediterranean and southern Arabian cultures had trade contact and shared aspects of the Baal and Anath, with the death and resurrect religion of the Bull God and his consort reflecting the seasons of rain and drought. The rock wall art was created on rock cliffs at oases that would have collected water from the winter rains. These would have been crucial stops for herding, not only for provisioning, but for maintaining social connections with the larger group. The end of their rainy season would have been at the same time as the area towards Cyprus and Crete. The end of the rains and the death of Baal were signaled by the Pleiades (the brides) and Taurus (the bull) disappearing into the helical rising. If these oases with their rock wall figures of fertility and celebration were locations for water and pasture before the herds were migrated to higher pastures for the dry season, they may have been locations where people gathered for seasonal harvest celebrations as described in the legend of Baal and Anath¹⁰ before the summer drought set in.



“Israelites Worshipping the Golden Calf” *Raphael’s Bible*, 1483 – 1520, The Perry Pictures 348, Boston Editions

⁹ Cartwright-Jones, C. 2016. “Ancient Sunrise® Chapter 2: The History of Henna Hair Dye, Henna, Astronomy, and the Agro-Ecology of the Mediterranean Bronze Age.” TapDancing Lizard. http://www.tapdancinglizard.com/AS_henna_for_hair/chapters/chap2/Mediterranean_Bronze.pdf

¹⁰ Cassuto, U. 1951. “The Goddess Anath,” translated from the Hebrew by Israel Abrams. *The Magnes Press*, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem

This annual Baal/harvest festival was consistent with the event described in the incident of “The Sin of the Calf” between the Hebrews and the ‘daughters of Cain’ with their henna, as people gathered in a valley for a seasonal fertility festival¹¹ in “The Second Book of Adam and Eve” chapter 20, verses 24 through 38, written from Hebrew oral tradition.¹²

Yemen and the Sabean Kingdom



Left: Painted ceramic figurine of female, Yemen, Marib, Awwam cemetery, Area A, 7th – 4th centuries BCE, The Marib Museum AW 97 A 69

Right: Incense Burner, 1st Century CE. “Treasures of Yemen” Istanbul Archaeology Museum, Turkey

In the southwest of the Arabian Peninsula, along the same high ridge that rises on the western side of the Arabian Peninsula extending northward towards Syria, archeological excavations of villages have uncovered terra cotta figures of young post-pubescent

¹¹ *The Lost Books of the Bible and the Forgotten Books of Eden*, Cleveland 1926; A & B Book Dist Inc, March 1994

¹² Graves, R., Patai, R.; 1983. *Hebrew myths: The book of Genesis*. New York: Greenwich House. The narration of Moses’s rage at finding his group enjoying the harvest festival of the ‘golden calf’, “The Sin of the Calf” (Exodus 32), may also be a narrative of the stresses of a migrating group trying to prevent assimilation by punishing those who dared to fraternize with the surrounding indigenous population.

females with arms outstretched. These figures are between four and ten inches tall, dated between 1200 BCE through CE 275, during the collapse of the Mediterranean Bronze age and the beginning of the Iron Age.¹³ The artifacts were found around small settlements in southwestern mountainous region of Yemen, near Sana'a, Qrnau, Najran, and Aden. When these figures have intact outstretched hands, there is pigment marking the hands with a reddish color,¹⁴ consistent with marked hands on females to the north in Crete, and the Levantine coast from the same period. Statuettes of females from the 3rd – 2nd millennia BCE do not have outstretched or raised hands; their hands are tucked under folded arms, across their bellies.¹⁵

In this group of Yemeni ceramic female figures, the goddess/bride was depicted with hands outstretched or raised; another goddess/mother icon was depicted as seated, often with a child on her lap, both iconography of the Levant. Female figures with displayed hands were also carved on steles and censers. The 'hand display' female figures may demonstrate a cultural linkage of similar figures marked with henna in the Levantine area. The people in the Levant were struggling with increasing aridity and population pressures through the late Aegean Early Iron Age.¹⁶ Arabia Felix, 'Fortunate Arabia' the southwest highlands and ports of Yemen may have seemed a safe harbor for trade and migration.

Southern Yemen is a mountainous, fertile region with abundant and generally predictable summer monsoons.¹⁷ People farmed the land with a system of terraced fields on the hillsides, and built dams to manage the water supply. Their eco/agricultural/mythological belief systems did not evolve in the same way as the seasonal rain-dependent culture in the eastern Mediterranean. The population of Sheba worshiped a trinity of sun, moon, and Venus rather than a Baal/Anath based religion.¹⁸ The figures of the crescent moon and the ibex on censers from Yemen are linked to the belief system and henna of pre-Islamic Arabia.¹⁹

¹³ Yaseen, G. T., and Dhekra D. Shargabi. 2007. "Terracotta figurines from the National and Military Museums in Sana'a, Yemen." *Arabian Archaeology & Epigraphy* 18, no. 2: 193-207.

¹⁴ Painted ceramic figurine of female, Yemen, Marib, Awwam cemetery, Area A 7th – 4th centuries BCE
The Marib Muserum AW 97 A 69

¹⁵ Granite statues of standing female figures, Highlands and Marib, 3rd – 2nd C BCE, The Say'un Museum, SM 2644: The National Museum Sana'a, YM 12964; The Marib Museum BAR 1.

¹⁶ Drake, B. 2012. "The Influence of Climate Change on the Late Bronze Age Collapse and the Greek Dark Ages" *Journal of Archeological Science* Volume 39, Issue 6, June 2012, Pages 1862–1870

¹⁷ The major precipitation system in southern Yemen is monsoonal, bringing moisture at midsummer as opposed to the Mediterranean seasonal rain system when midsummer is arid.

¹⁸ Mona, Z. 1997. *Bilqīs: Emra'atul alghāz wa Shayṭanatul Jins* (Bilqīs: A Story of Riddles and Satanism) (Riadh el-Rayyes Books, 1997), 65–66.

¹⁹ Sabeen religious and social practices were reset into Islam, "They made the major [hajj] and the minor [umra] pilgrimage to the Ka'ba, performed the circumambulation around the Ka'ba [tawaf], ran seven times between Mounts Safa and Marwa [sa'y], threw rocks and washed themselves after intercourse." — Muhammad Shukri al-Alusi, *Bulugh al-'Arab fi Ahwal al-'Arab*, Vol. 2, p. 122. The cultural use of henna

Bedouin seasonal migrations to find water and pasture for their flocks stretched from Syria, Palestine, western Arabia, to Yemen. These migrations could have been the corridor for cultural dispersion, as well as an economic pathway. The incense and spice trade, including goods from South Asia and East Africa, went north from Yemen, and wine and luxury goods from Syria went to the south. Migrations of the Phoenician cultural groups fleeing the Persian invasions around 800 BCE and climate collapse in the Levant may also have retreated south down this corridor, carrying the Baal/Anath and henna cultural markers with them. This cultural contact may be reflected in the ‘hand display’ female images appearing in Yemen in the first few centuries BCE, a thousand years after they appeared in the eastern Mediterranean. Women in Yemen certainly used henna markings on their hands for celebration by the 7th century CE¹ as recorded by the Caliph of Kinda following the death of the Prophet Mohamed.²⁰

Imagining Bilqis, the Queen of Sheba, with or without henna

One of the challenges of researching the history of henna is evaluating truth statements about who used henna and when. When people imagine ancient or exotic women and make claims about henna, they frame them within their cultural biases, often to support their political or religious position. In the absence of solid scholarship, henna is attributed to women as a writer imagines it to have been, not as it was. When imagined attributions from popular culture are accepted as received knowledge, constructing the history of henna becomes complicated; it is necessary to do critical examinations of people’s assumptions about body scripts, and why people made these assumptions and place these against archeological evidence as well as supporting climate data. One of the legendary women to whom henna is occasionally attributed is the Queen of Sheba, Queen Regnant of Saba, which has been attributed to both Yemen and Ethiopia. She is alleged to have traveled to meet with King Solomon in Jerusalem during his reign from 970 to 931 BCE.

There is no concrete evidence that the Queen of Sheba, (Bilqis in Islamic texts or Makeda in Ethiopia texts), existed, though there are ruins in Yemen named after her.²¹ The rulers in Southern Arabia during the time of King Solomon were exclusively male. The Jewish, Christian, Islamic, and modern imaginings of Sheba construct an allegorical, rather than historical presence, each narrating their own cultural tropes of the dangerousness and attractiveness of exotic, independent women. The Queen of Sheba was presented as an educated and powerful woman from a distant land who led armies to victory and who had boundless wealth; those accomplishments were the birthright of men in the post-Bronze Age monotheistic religions. Biblical narratives cast Sheba as a probable demon rather than human to have these accomplishments. The narrative of her willingness to accept monotheism, feminize her body, (she was required to remove the hair from her legs) and

is among the pre-Islamic social practices adapted into Islam.

²⁰ Beeston, A.F. L 1952, “The So-Called Harlots of Hadramaut” *Oriens* 5, 16 - 22

²¹ Mahram Bilqis, Marib, Yemen.

submit sexually to Solomon softened the Biblical distrust²² and provided a cultural construction for intelligent, powerful, exotic women: they would be dangerous objects of suspicion unless they submitted to the group norm.



The Queen of Sheba as imagined in 1937 by the Imperial Tobacco Co. Ltd

Qur'anic narratives cast Bilqis and Solomon as relative equals,²³ both having an abundance of all good things and who behave respectfully to each other as equals, though entertaining the possibility that Bilqis might be partially supernatural.²⁴ Ethiopian narratives of the Queen of Sheba, Makeda, are written in *Kebra Nagast* (Glory of the Kings), the Ethiopian national saga, take a favorable view of the queen, stating that she founded the capital city of Azeka, and ruled Axum with wisdom and strength for fifty years after her return to visit Solomon. If Edward Ullendorff's interpretation of Makeda is correct,²⁵ the narrative of Sheba may be entangled with Kandake (Candace) of Meroë, the title of queens regnant of Kush, presently known as the country of Sudan.

²² In the Kabbalah, the Queen of Sheba was considered one of the queens of the demons and is sometimes identified with Lilith, first in the Targum of Job (1:15), and later in the Zohar and the subsequent literature. A Jewish and Arab myth maintains that the Queen was actually jinn, half human and half demon.

²³ Qur'an 27:18–23

²⁴ Ibn 'Arabi, Tarjuman el-Ashwāq, cited in Mona, Z., *Bilqīs: Emra'atul alghāz wa Shayṭanatul Jins* (*Bilqīs: A Story of Riddles and Satanism*) (Riadh el-Rayyes Books, 1997), Bilqīs, 95

²⁵ E. Ullendorff, E. 1991, "BILQĪS", *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2 (2nd ed.), Brill, pp. 1219–1220



“Bilqis, seeing the fishes below the glass pavement, instinctively raises her skirts”; and her attendants from ‘Bilqis visiting Solomon’, Sultan Hussayn Mirza, *The Assembly of Lovers*, (Majalis al-Ushshaq) 1552 CE, Bodleian Library, Oxford, UK, MS Ouseley ADD24 Folio 1270

The image of Bilqis, Queen of Sheba, from Majalis al-Ushshaq (The Gathering of Lovers),²⁶ from 1552 CE century Persia is drawn depicting her and her attendants as having lavishly complex henna patterns on their hands and feet. Bilqis steps onto glass-covered water and lifts her skirts, revealing her beautifully hennaed feet. The glass-covered water was a trick to force her to reveal her feet and legs, as that would prove to

²⁶ Majalis al-Ushshaq (The Gathering of Lovers), Bodleian Library, Oxford, UK, MS Ouseley ADD 24 Folio 1270

doubters whether or not she was a demon or woman. This particular illustrator of *Majalis al-Ushshaq* (there were at least three) seems to have had a particular fondness for hennaed hands and feet, as henna patterned hands and feet are depicted in most of the illustrations by that person.²⁷ It is also possible that the wealthy elite Safavid Persian patron of this book was personally fond of lavishly patterned henna body art. In the minds of the patron, illustrator, and Safavid court, ‘great women’ should have extraordinary henna as a display of their taste, style, capacity for conspicuous consumption, and wealth. Therefore, Bilqis and her attendants were depicted in the fashion of the day for elites and their entourages as women with highly detailed henna, layered silk robes, jewels, and arched eyebrows with a forehead tattoo at the join.



Details of the attendants of “Bilqis, seeing the fishes below the glass pavement, instinctively raises her skirts”; and her attendants from ‘Bilqis visiting Solomon’, Sultan Hussayn Mirza, *The Assembly of Lovers*, (*Majalis al-Ushshaq*) 1552 CE, Bodleian Library, Oxford, UK, MS Ouseley ADD24 Folio 1270

In the original manuscript, these women’s hands are smaller than a pencil eraser, smaller than would be possible to show details of henna patterns. The patterns are similar to decorations in the margins of the manuscript. If that is the intention, the dots would represent flowers, and the stripes would represent a resist band with words worked into the stripe.

²⁷ Other artists who did the illuminations for MS Ouseley ADD 24, there appear to be three to five artists working together in the same manuscript workshop on the same book, appear to be less impressed with henna, depicting women’s hands and feet with little or no indication of henna.



Detail of “Bilqis, seeing the fishes below the glass pavement, instinctively raises her skirts’; and her attendants from ‘Bilqis visiting Solomon’, Sultan Hussayn Mirza, *The Assembly of Lovers*, (Majalis al-Ushshaq) 1552 CE, Bodleian Library, Oxford, UK, MS Ouseley ADD24 Folio 1270

Three thousand miles from Safavid society and the Persian book patrons, Catherine of Cleves commissioned *The Hours* with a miniature illustration of the same scene. The Queen of Sheba steps onto water covered with glass to trick her into revealing her presumed demonic hairy and hooved legs. The Master of Catherine of Cleves (the artist being known by his most famous work) seems to have had no knowledge of henna, nor

any opinion about whether women in Yemen or the Bronze Age Levant would have used henna, but he meticulously records luxurious garments appropriate to a wealthy woman of Utrecht. He does indulge his curiosity about the appearance of African people whom he may have seen in the port cities of the Netherlands.



Queen of Sheba Fording a Stream from The Hours of Catherine of Cleves, M. 917, p 109, Utrecht Netherlands, 1440 CE. Pierpont Morgan Library

A twentieth century portrayal of the Makeba (the Ethiopian version of the Queen of Sheba) and her retinue in Ethiopian traditional art does not show Sheba's elite women as having henna. In the Ethiopian highlands, henna could grow, but could not thrive because high temperatures are moderated by altitude: the trees would grow but would rarely flower and reproduce. These women are depicted with traditional female

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Ethiopian tattoos on their throats, jaw lines, and faces.²⁸ The women's hair is meticulously braided hair in a traditional Ethiopian style; they wear elaborate robes, and ornaments. Doubting that a woman could possibly be wise, powerful and wealthy without being a demon, Solomon tricks her into raising her skirts. Makeba reveals her leg and a lion observes that she has no demonic hoof, though her leg is unshaven.



Ethiopian folk art painting of the Queen of Sheba and her retinue meeting King Solomon²⁹

The 20th century Scottish painter, John Duncan painted Sheba proceeding to Solomon, approaching the river where she will presumably descend her elephant and lift her skirts to reveal her potentially demonic legs. She is accompanied by her retinue and the gifts for Solomon. Duncan painted in the Symbolist style of the Celtic Revival. This tableau gave him an excuse to include five women with what appears to be hennaed hair, fashionable during the 1920's in the UK. He imagines the Queen of Sheba with an assortment of archaic and Orientalist tropes, and eroticizes the elongated exotic female bodies in the company of serenely positioned wild animals.

²⁸ The Ethiopian highlands have milder temperatures than the surrounding areas,. Henna is used at weddings, but the plant does not thrive as it does in Sudan and Somalia.

²⁹ Author's collection



“Ivory, Apes, and Pecoaks,” also known as ‘The Queen of Sheba’ by John Duncan, 1923
Glasgow Museums Resource Centre (GMRC) United Kingdom, Glasgow.

The environmental limitations of henna [*Lawsonia inermis*] cultivation around the Arabian Ocean

From 9000 BCE through 7000 BCE, the Indian subcontinent was a rainforest, moister and cooler than it is at present. Henna could not have originated in these cool, damp South Asian ecosystems following the ice age and spread westward.³⁰ It is probable that henna was indigenous to the area that is presently the southern Sahel at the height of the most recent glacial maximum and spread north throughout North Africa to the Mediterranean shores during the ‘Green Sahara’ phase from 9500 BCE through 4500 BCE during favorable climate conditions. As people, plants, animals, and their cultures migrated away from the desertification of the Sahara following 4500 BCE, henna pharmacological, skin and hair dye culture gradually developed by the beginning of the Bronze Age on the shores of the Mediterranean, in Egypt and the Levant, and by the end of the Bronze Age in Mesopotamia and the Arabian Peninsula.

³⁰ Adams, J. 1998. Environmental Sciences Division, Oak Ridge National Laboratory, Oak Ridge, TN
<http://www.esd.ornl.gov/projects/qen/nercEURASIA.html>
http://www.esd.ornl.gov/projects/qen/NEW_MAPS/eurasia6.gif
http://www.esd.ornl.gov/projects/qen/NEW_MAPS/eurasia4.gif
http://www.esd.ornl.gov/projects/qen/NEW_MAPS/eurasia5.gif

There was coastal trade and cultural contact along the northern rim of the Indian Ocean and into the Persian Gulf from the sixth millennium BCE³¹ when the Persian Gulf region had abundant rainfall, Iraq was forested, and the Sarasvati River had not been diminished by Himalaya uplift. Henna was being used to dye graying hair in Egypt in the fourth millennium BCE, and mark the hands of fertile pubescent women in the Eastern Mediterranean by the end of the third millennium BCE. However in Mesopotamia the use of henna seems to have been limited to an aspect of pharmacology in the second or third millennium BCE making use of its antifungal properties, cognized as a plant which to be used to avert the Evil Eye.³² There does not seem to be any evidence of a henna dyeing culture among the peoples of the Northern Indian Ocean shore prior to the second millenium BCE,³³ and there may not have been a henna culture in South Asia before 500 CE.



Figurine of woman nursing an infant, 31-16-733, Ubaid Period pre-flood era.

In the Ubaid culture³⁴ of the Persian Gulf region, pottery figures of women from around 4500 BCE have markings on the wrists in a position correct for bracelets.³⁵ These

³¹ Carter, Robert (2006). "Boat remains and maritime trade in the Persian Gulf during the sixth and fifth millennia BC". *Antiquity* 80 (307).

³² Scurlock, J., Andersen, B. 2005. *Diagnoses in Assyrian and Babylonian medicine: ancient sources, translations, and modern medical analyses / translated, and with commentary* University of Illinois

³³ 4.2 kiloyear BP aridification event

³⁴ 6500 to 3800 BCE

³⁵ British Museum/University Museum Expedition to Ur, Iraq U.15385, Field No SF B19141 Legrain, Leon. 1950. The Babylonian Collection of the University Museum, University Museum Bulletin Vol.:

markings are unlikely to represent henna markings as henna does not stain wrist skin as well as thicker, keratinized skin: as palms, knuckles and fingertips. The Ubaid civilization ecosystem would have been too moist for henna to thrive.



Aphids infesting henna in damp soil³⁶

There are comparable terracotta female figurines from Mohenjo Daro, the Indus Valley Civilization, 2800–2600 BCE which have representations of bracelets but nothing that is definitively a representation of henna. There is no colorant on hands or feet, though there is a red color applied to the "manga", the central parting of the hair from crown to forehead, as is still used by women in the area today.³⁷ That red colorant would represent either red alkalized turmeric or lac being used in the part, not henna. The general climates of the Ubaid and Indus Valley Civilizations may have been warm enough to support henna; both had soils too moist for healthy *Lasonia inermis* root growth.³⁸ Statements such as "... carts pulled by water buffalo³⁹ jauntily decorated with henna carried luxury goods along the wide, paved streets,"⁴⁰ in 2200 BCE in the Indus Valley are imaginings just as the Queen of Shebas' henna is an imagining based on the tendency of people to say, "It is this way *now*, so it must have been this way *then*." There were bulls pulling carts, and some representations of them indicate that they were ornamented with garlands or drapes, and they may have had red alkalized turmeric applied to their foreheads, but

10:3-4. : Page/Fig./Plate: 33

³⁶ Singh, M. P., & Lodha, S. (2005). Plant Protection in Henna and Henna for Pest and Disease Management *Henna, Cultivation, Improvement and Trade*: 35 – 38. Jodhpur, India, Central Arid Zone Research Institute

³⁷ Lal, B. B. 2002. *The Sarasvatī flows on: the continuity of Indian culture*. Aryan Books International, University of Michigan, p.83 <https://books.google.com/books?id=4ultAAAAMAAJ&focus=searchwithinvolume&q=hair>

³⁸ Dixit, Yama, David A. Hodell, and Cameron A. Petrie. 2014. "Abrupt weakening of the summer monsoon in northwest India ~4100 yr ago." *Geology* 42, no. 4: 339-342.

³⁹ The bullocks represented in Indus Valley figures more resemble both the Brahman or Brahma breed of Zebu cattle (*Bos indicus*) and the river buffalo which originated in India, rather than the domestic Asian water buffalo (*Bubalus bubalis*) or wild water buffalo (*Bubalus arnee*).

⁴⁰ Pokharia, Anil K., Jeewan Singh Kharakwal, R. S. Rawat, Toshiki Osada, C. M. Nautiyal, and Alka Srivastava. 2011. "Archaeobotany and archaeology at Kanmer, a Harappan site in Kachchh, Gujarat: evidence for adaptation in response to climatic variability." *Current Science* (00113891) 100, no. 12: 1833-1846.

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there is no physical evidence that henna was in the region at that time or was used as a colorant for skin or hair.

The area of the Indus Valley Civilization was swampy⁴¹ from the wetlands of the Sarasvati River prior to the aridification of the region. The Indian subcontinent ecology was tropical rainforest, unlikely to support the growth of henna [*Lawsonia inermis*]. At present the annual precipitation for the subcontinent averages over 1000mm per year. Henna thrives in areas with 200mm – 300 mm precipitation per year; henna is presently commercially cultivated in the Punjab on either side of the Thar Desert. The Thar receives Rainfall is limited to 100–500 mm precipitation per year. Henna will grow in the Thar but is not commercially cultivated. Pollen samples from deep wells show wet-soil tolerant tropical plants grew on the southern and eastern Indian subcontinent; henna was not found among those late Quaternary fossil pollens.⁴²

Henna might have grown in some relatively dry places and been used in the South Asian pharmacopeia as an antifungal as it was in Mesopotamia; this could be determined if the Harappan script is deciphered, and if medical information is among the documents. Henna might not have propagated into the subcontinent until the climate became drier through the gradual southward migrations of the monsoons, as henna is vulnerable to aphids and root rot when it is not in a strictly semi-arid environment.⁴³ The practice of dyeing skin and hair with henna is more likely to have arrived in later centuries through trade, migration, and cultural exchange with Arabia and Persia, especially during the Mughal period in the northwest.

Ambiguation and disambiguation of hair dye in South Asia

The traditional South Asian hair mixtures to restore black hair in the “Ashtanga Hriyada,” a compendium of the Ayurvedic system from 500 CE, were materials other than henna.⁴⁴

Take equal quantities of Kadunimba (*Azadirachta indica* Juss.) leaves, Maka (*Eclipta alba* Haask.) leaves, Mundi [*Gorakhmundi*] (*Sphaeranthus indicus* Linn.)

⁴¹ The Saraswasti River basin was a wide river system with wetlands that disappeared late in the 2nd millennium BCE, ending the ecological support for the Indus Valley Civilization. This is theorized to be because of an uplift of the Himalayas and repositioning of fluvial systems, or because of a change in the course of the monsoons.

⁴² Kumaran, K.P.N., et al. "Vegetation response to South Asian Monsoon variations in Konkan, western India during the Late Quaternary: Evidence from fluvio-lacustrine archives." *Quaternary International* 286, (February 12, 2013): 3-18.

⁴³ Dixit, Yama, David A. Hodell, and Cameron A. Petrie. 2014. "Abrupt weakening of the summer monsoon in northwest India ~4100 yr ago." *Geology* 42, no. 4: 339-

⁴⁴ Patkar, Kunda B. 2008. "Herbal cosmetics in ancient India." *Indian Journal Of Plastic Surgery* 41, S134-S137.

leaves, Niragundi [Nagoda, Nirgundi and Nirgunada] (*Gitex anedundo* Linn.) and Volva (*Carum copticum* Benth.) leaves.

Dry all the five ingredients in the shade. Then powder this mixture. Take internally two pinches of this powder twice a day. While the subject is under this treatment, the diet should mainly consist of milk and rice only. Quite soon the person will look younger, the skin will become lustrous and even the gray hair will turn black.”⁴⁵

The traditional recommendation for coloring prematurely gray hair was also not henna:

“Juice of Bhriaggaraja or Maka (*Eclipta alba* Hassk.) together with Lohakitta (iron rust), Phalatrikam or Triphala - Collection of three fruits, viz. Harada [Hirida: *Chelubic myrobalan*] (*Terminalia chebula* retz.) Behada [Behada: *Belleric mrobalan*] (*Terminalia bellerica* retz.) and Avala [Amla: *Emblic myrobalan*]⁴⁶ (*Phyllanthus emblica* Gaertn.) cooked in oil and applied to the scalp would cure dandruff, itching, alopecia and would darken the hair, which have become grey prematurely.”⁴⁷

Alain Danilou’s translation of a hair care recommendation from the Kama Sutra (7th or 8th century CE) mentions henna, but this seems to be a mistranslation of madder root, as henna roots are not useable for hair dye, and madder root which is crushed to extract dye, “Crush the roots of henna, yellow amaranth, dark-flowered mountain chameli, [*Clitoria ternatea*], and [*teramnus libialis*]. Used to wash the hair, the hair regains its natural (black) color.”

In the Ajanta caves the depictions of South Asian people, the Buddha and his retinue from the fifth to sixth centuries CE, are all depicted with uniformly black hair. Depictions of male foreigners from the north-west, possibly representing Persians, have reddish beards.⁴⁸ Ogresses are depicted as having white hair.⁴⁹

Ambiguation and disambiguation of red body markings in South Asia

There is evidence of red body markings on the subcontinent of India dating back to the third millennium BCE.⁵⁰ These red cosmetics are produced from materials indigenous to the South Asian tropical rainforest ecology, not the semi-arid tropical ecology that

⁴⁵ Rao SA, Krishnaswami Mahadick ed. Sri Sabhendra Vaidya Ratnavali. (Saraswati Mahal Library, Tanjore 1952, P 277, 351, 3359, 381.

⁴⁶ Khory RN. The Bombay Materia Medica And Their Therapeutics. Mumbai: Ranina’s Union Press 1887, p. 479, 226, 303

⁴⁷ Gaud K., Sharangadhara – Samhita – Sharagadharacharya virachita (14th c CE) Lucknow: Tejjkumar 1967. Chapter 2(9): 161 – 162, p 419

⁴⁸ Behl, B. 1998. *The Ajanta Cave: Artistic Wonder of Ancient Buddhist India*. Abrams. p. 108 Campeya Jataka, back wall, Cave 1, Ajanta, 500 CE.

⁴⁹ Ibid, Cave 17, Simhala Avadana, 500 CE. p. 214, 220-222.

supports henna. If golden-yellow turmeric root powder is dampened and spread on a smooth limestone surface, it will turn vivid red as the pH shifts to alkalinity. The alkalized turmeric root powder was used to mark the part of a woman's hair and to create forehead (and other) markings to signify marital or religious devotion, and was applied to hair and forehead as needed for a well-groomed appearance. Red iron-oxide bearing powders, and madder root compounds were also used as red cosmetics.



Mahajanaka Jataka: The King announces decision to seek Dharma. Ajanta Caves, Aurangabad, Maharashtra, India. Ajanta Caves, Cave I, 5th – 6th century CE⁵¹

A varnish-like red paint was made from aphid-like lac insects and their resinous excretions.⁵² The insect species are *Laccifer lacca*, *Lacca indiana*, and *Lakshadia communis* which live in colonies of thousands on Dhak (*Butea monosperma*, Ber (*Ziziphus mauritiana*), and Kusum (*Schleichera oleosa*) branches. Lac was produced in Eastern India for millenia, but since its recent replacement by cheaper chemical dyes, the production of lac in India is now one tenth of what it was.⁵³ Lac red is a more vivid blood

⁵⁰ Lal, B. B. 2002. *The Sarasvatī flows on: the continuity of Indian culture*. Aryan Books International, University of Michigan, p.83

⁵¹ Behl, B K. 1998. *The Ajanta Caves: Artistic Wonder of Ancient Buddhist India*. London: Thames and Hudson. Fig. 97

⁵² Brunello, F. 1973. *The Art of Dyeing in the History of Mankind*. Neri Pozza p. 188

⁵³ Green, C. L. 1995. "5: Insect Dyes". *Non-Wood Forest Products 4: Natural colourants and dyestuffs*. Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. Retrieved 3 July 2014.

red color than henna and can be several colors depending on the hosts and on the insects. The most desirable lac color is deep apple-red with a magenta tone. Henna stains are in the rust range of colors from orange to dark brown. The color red is regarded as auspicious in India; the colors of henna less so than turmeric and lac.

Lac was used to paint men's and women's soles, palms, palms, nails and fingertips of their hands solid, vivid red. King Mahajanaka, a pre-incarnation of the Buddha is represented in 500 CE as having lac-painted palms in Cave 1 of the Ajanta cave Buddhist paintings. In these paintings, men, women, cherubs, royalty, and servants all may have lac, so red marked hands and feet were not identified with brides or marriage. The marking seems to have been a matter of personal style or choice.

Females and cherubs also have palms painted or lined with lac in many of the Ajanta cave tableaux. Lac was stenciled into patterns on arms, breasts, shoulders, forehead, cheeks and chin and feet, "With the aid of a small stick dipped into an oil of aloe-wood (*agura*) possessing adhesive qualities, leaves cut and perforated to make decorative designs, and brown or red lac, they executed patterns on her arms, breasts, shoulders, forehead, cheeks and chin."⁵⁴



Left: Lovers with Lac-painted hands and feet, Orissa, 19th century⁵⁵

Right: Feet painted with vermilion, Ahraura, Uttar Pradesh, India⁵⁶

These designs, called *vise-paka* and *bhakti*, continued to be used in marriage ceremonies in Rajputana and Mathura until modern times.⁵⁷ These patterns can be found in fifteenth

⁵⁴ Auboyer, J. 1965. *Daily Life in Ancient India from 200 BC to 700 AD*. London: Phoenix Press. p. 181.

⁵⁵ Comfort, A. (1966). *The Illustrated Koka Shastra*. NY, NY: Simon and Schuster Editions

⁵⁶ Leen, S. 2006. Visions of Earth. *National Geographic*, Vol. 209. No. 3: 18. Washington, DC.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, p. 327

through twentieth century descriptions and miniature paintings of South Asian women;⁵⁸ the designs included the sun, the moon, a star, a trident, an elephant hook, flowers, stylized foliage, and patterns of dots.⁵⁹ Lac was also used to draw a red line above the sole of the foot.⁶⁰ Fashionable well-dressed adults in the Indian Subcontinent applied red skin lacquer and blackened their hair as part of their daily toilette, “Once out of her bath, her (the princess’s) hair was dried and black incense brushed through it...and painted the soles of her feet with diluted lac; now, a trail of red footprints on the floor-tiles would mark her leisurely movements.”⁶¹

To the casual observer of Mughal South Asian miniature paintings, red and orange skin markings are often presumed to be henna patterns. When on Hindu people in India (or in earlier centuries, Buddhist people) vivid red markings represented the use of lac, not henna. Henna was used by South Asian women of Persian or Arab descent, or converts in the Sunnite Muslim courts of northwestern Punjabi India.⁶² In the mid twentieth century, henna and lac were conflated in India, notably after the partitioning of Muslim Pakistan and Hindu India.

Saksena’s post-partition folkloric work on the art of Rajasthan deliberately conflated henna and lac to claim that Hindu India originated henna. Henna could not have originated in India because the late Holocene ecology of South Asia could not have supported *Lawsonia inermis*. Saksena offers the red body markings shown in paintings of Ajanta and Ellora as proof of early henna use; he does so by deliberately conflating lac and henna,⁶³ “Mehndi is said to have been once used under the names *laksaras* or *alaktak* (lac pith).” The Ajanta and Ellora wall painting skin markings are consistent with lac, and early documentation of South Asian body art as well as ecology supports lac as the red cosmetic represented in the paintings.

Saksena’s imagining that ‘if henna is in Rajasthan in this way now, henna has always been in Rajasthan in this way, and for all of the rest of India as well’ is a common form of historical revisionist imagining that can be found in many politically motivated writings and paintings, but it should be recognized that Saksena’s claim is an imagining and not supported by evidence. It is at least disingenuous to assert that lac is the same as henna, and at worst, it is a cynical political attempt to erase Persian and Arabic influence on Indian culture following the violence of India-Pakistan partitioning. He asserts, “Mehndi ... flourished in India and attained its glorious heights in this land In other lands, where it was adopted later on, it has now become an art of the past, lost and

⁵⁸ Upadhyaya, B. S, 1947. *India in Kalidhasa*. Allahabad p. 206

⁵⁹ Auboyer, J. 1965. *Daily Life in Ancient India from 200 BC to 700 AD*. London: Phoenix Press. P. 327

⁶⁰ Vatsayayana, tr. Danielou, A. 1994. *The Complete Kama Sutra, The First Unabridged Modern Translation of the Classis Indian Text by Vatsyayana*, Park Street Press, Rochester Vermont., p. 60

⁶¹ Raghu Vamia VII, 7 from Auboyer, J. 1965. *Daily Life in Ancient India from 200 BC to 700 AD*. London: Phoenix Press. p. 270.

⁶² “Mughal Lady”, signed Maddhu Hurd, India 16th century, Musee Guimet, Paris. Inv. No. 3619. HC

⁶³ Saksena. J. 1979. *Art of Rajasthan*. Sundeep Prakashan, Delhi p. 43

forgotten.”⁶⁴ He claims, “Mehndi has no place in Arabian customs,” and that all Muslim use of henna was acquired in India by Muslim converts and culturally dispersed outward from India is clearly not supported by historical documentation of henna use nor by ecological distribution of the plant.

Saksena’s ambiguation of lac and henna unfortunately informed the western misconception that henna originated in India because his book was the first widely distributed English language book on South Asian henna and because in the mid-20th century, North African, Arabian, Ottoman, Levantine, and Persian henna traditions were submerged under modernity and European colonial influence. His politically motivated misinformation was widely repeated in English language publications on henna after henna body art emerged in western popular culture at the end of the twentieth century, whereas before his publication, henna body art was largely identified with Levantine, Arabic, and North African culture in scholarly works by Westermarck⁶⁵ and other sociological and anthropological researchers.

⁶⁴ Ibid p. 44

⁶⁵ Westermarck, E. 1926. *Ritual and Belief in Morocco*. 2 Vol. Macmillan, London

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Ibn 'Arabi, Tarjuman el-Ashwāq, cited in Mona, Z., Bilqīs: Emra'atul alghāz wa Shayṭanatul Jins (Bilqīs: A Story of Riddles and Satanism) (Riadh el-Rayyes Books, 1997), Bilqīs, 95
 Beeston, A.F. L 1952, "The So-Called Harlots of Hadramaut" Oriens 5, 16 – 22

When the Prophet Mohammed died in 632 CE, many Arab tribes refused to pay taxes to the Prophet's successor, Abu Bakr, the first Caliph. In some regions, there was open rebellion against the recently established, fragile, Islamic state. In the Kinda and Hadramaut regions of Yemen, a group of six women celebrated the Prophet's death with feasting and joy. They hennaed their hands, sang victory songs, danced, and played their tambourines. Twenty two other women came out to join the political rebellion. They also hennaed in celebration of the victory.

Two of these rebellious women were grandmothers, one was a mother, and several were young girls, three of noble class, and four of a royal tribe. The leaders of Yemen came from this royal tribe. Their rebellion against the Islamic state was significant, as women in Yemen were politically powerful, and their sons would rule the region.

The ruler of Kinda in Yemen wrote a complaint to the Caliph about the women's victory celebration, as it threatened to undermine his authority and destabilize the region. The Caliph received these complaints of insurrection, and ordered the women's hennaed hands to be cut off as retaliation for their rebellion. He also ordered that anyone who defended these rebels, or interfered with soldiers coming to enact the Caliph's judgment, be beheaded. The fact that the women had hennaed their hands was crucial evidence of their guilt, because the henna stains would remain on the women's hands for some time as evidence. Their palm stains would last for a month, and their fingernails would betray their participation in the insurrection for up to six months. Those who participated in the act of rebellion would be easily identified by their henna stains. Women who had mourned for the death of The Prophet would not have used henna, as henna is eschewed during the period of mourning.

The Caliph declared that it was blasphemous for women to henna in joy for the death of the Prophet of God. This edict is important in several respects. It implied that there was a known tradition of hennaing for victory over an enemy, it implied that henna was associated with victory and joy rather than mourning, and designated this specific act as a blasphemy because it placed the death of the Prophet as an occasion for joy rather than mourning. The women's action was therefore interpreted as defying God's will, delegated by the Prophet Mohamed and enforced through the Caliphate's military rule. This was a crucial political interpretation of divine word, through the Prophet, enacted by the Caliph. Therefore, though this linkage, their action was determined to be blasphemy against the will of God, and not a political rebellion. To support that determination, and to discredit these women, the Caliph referred to these women as harlots and whores. However, the grandmothers and girls were not of an age to be sex workers, and seven of the women were of noble birth. The violence and swiftness of this punishment implies that the women's social status and implicit family connections made them a potential political threat to the Muslim military authority in Yemen. Their sexual activities were probably of little concern, but when the Caliph termed them whores, this negated their status as noble born women, and politically influential. Their hands committed a blasphemous act, and their henna bore witness to their refusal to submit to God's will. Their hands were to be removed.

The murder of honorable, noble women would have been an unforgivable crime, and kinsmen would have rushed for vengeance, destabilizing the political structure in the region. With only their hands were cut off, God's mercy potentially allowed them to survive the mutilation. The punishment was delineated as a punishment for the hands which celebrated a blasphemy, carefully sidestepping their nobility and deterring further rebellion. With the women's honor impugned, mutilations went uncontested, and the potential military insurrection was crushed. The ruler of Kinda in Yemen wrote a complaint to the Caliph about the women's victory celebration, as it threatened to undermine his authority and destabilize the region. The Caliph received these complaints of insurrection, and ordered the women's hennaed hands to be cut off as retaliation for their rebellion. He also ordered that anyone who defended these rebels, or interfered with soldiers coming to enact the Caliph's judgment, be beheaded. The fact that the women had hennaed their hands was crucial evidence of their guilt, because the henna stains would remain on the women's hands for some time as evidence. Their palm stains would last for a month, and their fingernails would betray their participation in the insurrection for up to six months. Those who participated in the act of rebellion would be easily identified by their henna stains. Women who had mourned for the death of The Prophet would not have used henna, as henna is eschewed during the period of mourning.

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