



QALAM

QALAM “reed pen.” *Qalam* (قلم) is a common name for a reed (*nay/ney*, نی), a perennial plant of the grass family (*Gramineae*), after its hollow stem is cut and a nib is formed on the tip for calligraphy purposes (Māyel Heravi, pp. 717-18). In a narrative in Greek mythology, two youths, named Karpos and Kalamos, were in a swimming contest in the Meander River when Karpos drowned and Kalamos, overwhelmed by grief, allowed himself to drown too (Nonnus, tr., p. 474). Kalamos was transformed into a water reed, the pen from which is called *kalama* in Sanskrit, *kulmus* in Hebrew, *calamus* in Latin, and *qalam* in Arabic and Persian (Ḥasandust, p. 108). In Persian poetry, *kelk* and *kāma* are used too. References are made to *qalam* in the Qur’ān: “Recite with the name of your Lord, Who ... taught (writing) by the *Qalam*” (chap. 96:1-4), “(swear) by the pen and what (they) write” (chap. 68:1), and “If all the trees on earth were (made into) pens and the ocean supplied ink, augmented by seven more oceans, the words of God would not run out” (chap. 31:27). *Qalam* is the most appropriate tool for Islamic calligraphy (Mandel Khan, p. 7).

Qalam comes from various natural habitats. Master calligrapher Ja’far Tabrizi (fl. 9th/15th cent.), quoted by Ḥabib-Allāh Fażā’eli (p. 59), named *wāṣeṭi* reeds of Wasit in eastern Iraq and *āmuyi* reeds of the *Āmu Daryā* (Oxus River) as the best reeds for calligraphy and considered *başri* (of *Basra* in southern Iraq) and *māzandarāni* reeds (of Māzandarān in northern Iran) to be of little value. *Şirāzi* and *aşqar-e Ahvāz* reeds, both of southern Iran, were later added to the list of reeds (Māyel Heravi, pp. 717-18).

The strong yet flexible reed from *Dezful* in southwest Iran is considered the



best for [calligraphy](#). The reed growers in the Dezful area, often farming in marshlands and damp habitats, are called *qalambor*, literally, the one who cuts *ney* to make *qalam* (Nikbin, p. 60). The descriptions of reeds in most old Islamic sources of calligraphy, for instance, Ebn Moqla (272-328/885-940), match the attributes of today's reed from Dezful (tr., Kešāvarz, pp. 28-29). Superior Dezfuli reeds are limited in growth of diameter, not exceeding the size of an index finger, which makes them unsuitable for larger size calligraphy. In contrast, *keyzarān* reeds from Caspian Sea shores, practically unlimited in growth, are popular for larger size calligraphy. They are hard and inflexible, not quite rounded, and have a flat area suitable for making the nib (Mandel Khan, p. 22). Reeds with short joints from [Gonbad-e Kāvus](#) and [Lāhijān](#) are also suitable for larger size calligraphy.

Length, thickness, diameter, and dryness are the key factors in selecting a reed for *qalam*, as outlined by Ebn Moqla (tr. Kešāvarz, pp. 28-29). A reed for calligraphy should be 12 to 16 fingers long. Longer *qalams* may interfere with the calligrapher's shoulder, while shorter ones are often inconvenient to hold. Reeds should be round, not oval, in cross-section. The thickness of a reed should be comparable to fingers. The preferred reed has a bigger diameter at the bottom, shifting smoothly to smaller diameter toward the top. The reed should be clean and fresh with a straight grain. Desirable is a contrast of color between the bright white inside and the spotless red outside. Dryer reeds make a sound with sharper pitch when dropped from a height of 30 cm onto a hard surface, indicating that they are free of cracks and suitable for making the nib. Heavier reeds with smaller inner space have more area for forming a nib. In general, reeds that are round, straight, dry, and strong with fuller body have potential to be made into *qalams* (Nikbin, p. 62).

Mandel Khan (p. 22) outlines the preparation of reeds for calligraphy, most applicable to *dezfuli* reeds. Reeds are cut off plants approximately 25 cm long, after the leaves have turned yellow and joints are fully grown. They are cut down further to the individual joints and bundled together to avoid warps during the drying process. Dried reeds are buried in bull's excrement to get hardened by its methanol content, before they are washed and further prepared for use as *ney qalams*. [Jean Chardin](#), the 17th-century French traveler, recalls that reeds in Mesopotamia “are cut in March, tied in bundles, laid six months in a manure heap, where they assume a beautiful color, mottled yellow and black” (Chardin, apud Carvalho, p. 252). Not all reeds prepared as such will necessarily turn into very good *qalams*.



To cut a reed and form a nib, one must proceed through several stages of preparation (Johnston, pp. 17-20). A reed pen is cut off obliquely. The soft inside part is shaved away by means of a knife laid flat against it, leaving the hard outer shell. The sides are trimmed and the nib is laid, back up, on the slab, and the tip is cut off at a slant into a nib. A short longitudinal slit (*fāq-e qalam*) is made in the middle of the tip (Figure 1, Figure 2, Figure 3, Figure 4: points a-b). A pencil or a brush-handle, held under the nib, is gently twitched upwards to lengthen the slit. This encourages better flow of ink, when the tip is pressed on the surface. A right-handed person presses the left thumbnail against the back of the pen, about 2 cm from the tip, to prevent it from splitting too far up (Figure 5). The nib is laid, back up, on the slab, and the tip is cut off vertically at an angle of about 70° to the shaft, removing the first rough slit (A thin strip of tin or clock spring, as wide as the nib and about 5 cm in length, is folded into a “spring” (Figure 7: a-b-c-d). The spring is inserted into the pen, and the loop (a-b-c) is “sprung” into place (Figure 8). The flat loop (c-d) holds the ink in the pen, while the point (d) should be about 3 mm from the end of the nib. The reed pen produces very powerful, stubby strokes. It leaves intense lines of ink when full, but a speckled linear trace when dry.

Qalams may be categorized by tip size, comparable to modern font sizes: *qalam-e ġobār* (dust), up to 0.5 mm; *qalam-e kafī* (small), 0.5 to 0.75 mm; *qalam-e ketābat* (book writing), 0.75 to 1.5 mm; *qalam-e sar-fašli* (headings), 1.5 to 2 mm; *qalam-e mašqi* (practice, most common), 2 to 6 mm; *qalam-e jali šafha* (large), 6 mm to 20 mm; and *qalam-e katiba* (inscription), more than 20 mm (Amirkāni, II, p. 56; Šaluti, p. 37). Fažā’eli (pp. 57-61) defines some terms related to the reed pen: a *dong* is one-sixth of the tip width and *šeš* (six) *dong* refers to the full nib; *mejdān* (field) or *arż* (width) is the length of the cut area to the tip; and *waḥši* (wild, savage) and *ensi* (human) refer to the right and left corners of the tip, respectively, while *mejdān* is facing down. For descriptions of *qalamtarāš* (penknife), *qaṭṭ* (the tip of the nib), *qaṭṭzan* (nib cutter), *qaṭṭzani* (nib cutting) and *qalamdān* (pen case), see CALLIGRAPHY. Reeds are periodically dipped back into the inkwell (*dawāt*) containing ink (*morakkab*) and wadding (*liqa, porz*). After writing, the nib should be cleaned with a cloth of wool or silk to prevent ink from drying on it.

Qalams from animal sources, quills, are often made from the primary wing-feathers of large birds such as geese, swans, or turkeys. The left wing is favored by right-handed users, because the feathers curve out to the right, away from the pen-holding hand, and vice versa for left-handed users (Child,



p. 25). They have some sort of hair on the tip and are often used by painters and illustrators (Māyel Heravi, pp. 717-18). The quill is also used for small writing with ink as a dip pen, after it is cut down to 20-25 cm and the barbs are stripped off. The nib already has a slit about 5 mm, which is usually sufficient. The tip of quill is cut off obliquely to the slit, like a reed pen, forming an angle of about 70° with the line of the shaft (Child, p. 16; Johnson, pp. 20-22). The hollow shaft of the feather acts as an ink reservoir, and ink flows to the tip by capillary action.

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