

Quill Pens

Persona Pentathlon Category 6: Tool Making
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Quills were used for writing in 11th cen. England.

No goose or swan quills survive in the archaeological record, but they are attested in the art and literature of the period:



Figure 1: St. Matthew writing with a curved quill, Grimbold Gospels¹, f. 10v. c. 1012-1023.

The late 10th century Exeter Book² contains among its riddles two for quill pens and one for a reed pen, indicating that both were familiar to the Anglo-Saxons and likely were in use.

No instructions for making quill pens survive from period.

Anyone who could read instructions on how to make a quill had probably already been taught how to do that very thing. I followed Donald Jackson's instructions in his essay "Preparation of Quills and Reeds."³

Method and Materials

I made three quills: two of (not-period) turkey feathers from Michael's, and one of a goose feather from John Neal, Booksellers. The turkey feathers were entirely intact. The goose feather had been cut open and the membranes removed, but it was uncured.

My pen knife was a Finnish whittling knife by Iisakki Jarvenpaa. I bought it years ago, and do not see it in their current catalogue, but I think it's some kind of puukko. It is not a true pen knife, with one side of the edge flat and one curved, but it worked for me. It looks similar to some of the smaller knife finds I've seen from period, but I haven't any images to authenticate.

All quills were soaked in water overnight. The turkey quills were first cut open, at an angle.

Before curing, the quills were removed from water and shaken dry. I used a bamboo skewer to pull out the interior membrane from the turkey quills. They were left to sit and dry slightly (45 min) while the sand heated.

I heated a coffee can of sand (from my kids' sandbox) in the oven at 350 F for 30-45 min. After that time, I removed it. Using a large spoon, I shoveled sand into each quill, then stuck them down into the hot sand for 60 seconds. This cured the turkey quills, leaving the barrels clear. The goose quill required another 60 seconds.

I did the turkey quills first, to gain practice, and everything went smoothly. So of course, it was the goose quill that had problems. Upon removing it from the sand, I found that the tip was squashed and splintered. I hoped to be able to trim that bit off, but it didn't turn out that way.

I proceeded according to Jackson's instructions, stripping the barbs, splitting the quills, cutting the scoop out of the bottom, shaping the sides of the nibs, and squaring the tip. I left a good amount of barb on the turkey quills since it was above where I held the barrel, and I didn't want to risk slicing into the pen.

- The first turkey quill split a bit oddly, and the nib is a little raggedly shaped – but this is the quill that ended up working best of the lot.
- The second turkey quill turned out nicely. I left it with a wider nib, and I liked the smaller one better for writing the will.
- The goose quill just continued to split up the barrel as I tried to trim the splits off. I was able to put a nib on it and write with it, but something about it is off. I started the will with it – I had hoped to use the more appropriate goose quill for the will – but gave up in favor of the first turkey quill after three words.

After I knew my will was done, I got brave enough to cut off the rest of the barbs, and I tried to smooth the barrels with my knife.

Results

The first turkey quill worked the best for me, and I used it to write the will.

Conclusions

Making quills isn't as easy as falling off a log, but it also isn't rocket science. I got a usable quill my first time out, but more practice would make the process faster, more certain, and more precise. Aside from the prep time (12 hour soak, 45-min oven warming), it is a fairly fast and simple procedure, and it allows total customization of the nib size. I can see this becoming my preferred way to do calligraphy.

Resources

¹Grimbald Gospels. Digitized by the British Library. http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Add_MS_34890

²*The Exeter Book Riddles*. Trans. Kevin Crossley-Holland. Penguin Books: New York, 1993.

³Donald Jackson. "Preparation of Quills and Reeds." In *The Calligrapher's Handbook*, ed. Heather Child. Taplinger Publishing Company: New York, 1985, pp.15-36.