

Babylon: The Origin of Bonsai?

by Will Heath



"The Confusion of Tongues" by Gustave Doré (1865)

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The Chinese Connection

It would seem that in almost every written history of bonsai, credit for its invention is attributed largely to China. In the following paragraphs are three quotes I found by searching

the web for "bonsai history." These histories are readily available for viewing on the web.

"Bonsai first appeared in China over a thousand years ago on a very basic scale, known as pun-sai, where it was the practice of growing single specimen trees in pots. These early specimens displayed sparse foliage and rugged, gnarled trunks, which often looked like animals, dragons and birds.... With Japan's adoption of many cultural trademarks of China - bonsai was also taken up, introduced to Japan during the Kamakura period (1185 - 1333) by means of Zen Buddhism - which at this time was rapidly spreading around Asia." -Bonsaisite.com (<http://bonsaisite.com/history1.html>)

"Bonsai pronounced (bone-sigh) was started over two thousand years ago in China. In the beginning bonsai was originally known as aspun-sai, the art of growing single trees in pots. Bonsai was introduced to Japan during the Kamakura period around AD 1195. It was around 1887 when the technique for modern Bonsai was developed." -Bonsaiking.net (<http://www.bonsaiking.net/history.html>)

"There are several references to plants being kept in pots in Egypt and India in ancient times, these were kept for decorative and medicinal reasons. The first reference to what we now call Bonsai was in China during the Tang Dynasty (618- 907), where they created miniature landscapes and trees that they called Penjing, which literally translated means tray scenery." - Bonsai in Asia Guide Book (<http://members.iinet.net.au/~jold/bia/atory.shtml>)

Although there is little doubt that China contributed greatly to the knowledge of cultivating trees in containers and greatly added to the visually pleasing aspects of the art, they did not invent the practice of growing trees in containers. The practice of growing trees in containers started long before the Tang Dynasty in China and even before the oft quoted time period of bonsai being first practiced in that country over two thousand years ago.

Like the Japanese after them, the Chinese took the practice of growing plants in containers and refined it greatly. Bonsai and Penjing would not be what it is today without the refinements made by the Asians, they not only induced art into bonsai, but also a philosophy that shapes the way the world cultivates bonsai to this day.

It is my belief that the Chinese first learned of cultivating trees in containers from other cultures which could include some of those that are often credited for keeping plants in containers in ancient times for decorative and medicinal purposes, such as Egypt and India, or even Iraq as I will explain in detail later.

It is also mentioned often, since By 400 A.D., Ayurvedic works were translated into Chinese, the Chinese learned about keeping plants in containers from these herbalists, certainly the date when the works were translated, precedes any other references to bonsai or penjing but they do not mention cultivating plants in containers directly.

The Ayurveda Theory

There is much discussion lately about Ayurveda and its traveling herbalists taking potted herbs and plants with them on there travels so that they may have ready access to the plants that they used in their medicine.

A brief history of Ayurveda follows; "Ayurveda is the oldest system of medicine in the world. The ancient Classic Atharva Veda (800 B.C.) lists the Eight Divisions of Ayurveda: Internal Medicine, Surgery of Head and Neck, Opthamology and Otorinolaryngology, Surgery, Toxicology, Psychiatry, Pediatrics, Geriatrics and the Gynaecology. Around 500 B.C., Sushruta, a surgeon who developed the operative techniques of rhinoplasty (plastic surgery), wrote the Sushruta Samhita which describes a highly developed surgery. In 100 A.D., the physician Charaka revised and supplemented the Atreya Samhita; the Charaka Samhita is a major work on internal medicine.

By 400 A.D., Ayurvedic works were translated into Chinese; by 700 A.D., Chinese scholars were studying medicine in India at Nalanda University. Indian thought, as well as influencing Chinese spirituality and philosophy through Buddhism, greatly influenced Chinese medicine and herbology through Ayurveda. In 800 A.D., Ayurvedic works were translated into Arabic. A century later, under physicians such as Avicenna and Razi Serapion, both of whom quoted Indian texts, Islamic medicine became very influential in Europe, helping to form the foundation of the European tradition in medicine." -altmedschools (http://www.altmedschools.com/a_ayurvedic.as)

The beginnings of bonsai is lately often contributed to these ancient herbalist with the thinking that they would pot up medicinal herbs in order to have them always handy and for ease of transportation. It is said that these herbs and plants became stunted due to being kept in small pots and by the constant pinching off of leaves for use in medicine and became visually pleasing in the process.

Robert J. Baran in his article "THE BIG PICTURE: A Summary of the History of Magical Miniature

Landscapes" states, "By the second century, the contemplative Dyana Buddhists from India had brought with them knowledge of Ayurvedic medicine, including the use of trimmed medicinal herb bushes which could then be carried in containers. They had discovered that some plants took on dwarfed characteristics after being so cultivated for a few years."

Since history clearly shows that these herbalists had contact with China as far back as 400 B.C and before, it is easy to assume that they introduced the cultivation of plants in containers to the Chinese along with the herbal medicine practices. Ayurveda certainly dates back to at least 800 B.C. and most likely is much older than this however; there are a few very serious flaws in assuming that Ayurveda is the starting point for cultivating plants in containers.

I don't believe that these ancient herbalist cultivated plants in containers as there is no record what-so-ever of them having done so and no precedent for the practice among herbalists even in these modern times.

Once gardening was invented, many herbalists kept herb gardens for the sake of convenience so as to have a ready source of the herbs and plants they used for cooking and for medical purposes. Digging up and transplanting these important plants or collecting seeds and planting them into their personal or community gardens made good sense and it is still practiced to this day.

When it came to storing or transporting these herbs, the solution used in ancient times was the same as is used to this day, the beneficial parts of the herbs or plants were dried. Dried herbs retain much of the original properties of fresh herbs, they last indefinitely, and they are lightweight and easy to transport. We know from such discoveries as the Iceman and other preserved remains of ancient travelers that carrying dried herbs was common. In the case of the Iceman, he had two dried mushrooms on a string, mushrooms known to produce antibiotics and these antibiotics remain in the flesh of the mushroom for a long time after the mushroom has died.

A single plant in a small pot would not withstand the constant pruning that those that were most used would require and carrying dozens of potted herbs on any journey would be unrealistic when the simple alternative of carrying dried herbs is considered. Imagine carrying one or even a few of your bonsai on a journey that could take months to complete. Walking, on horseback, or even by carriage would be an incredible task to manage, bumps, thickets, and other cargo would no doubt have an inverse affect on them as would the need for sun, air, and water. I personally have a hard enough time transporting my bonsai to local shows in a truck.

To further clarify this point, even herbalists of today do not travel with potted herbs, drying herbs is an ancient practice that is perfect in many ways including the fact that many herbs used for medical purposes have only one part of the plant that is of value, be it the stem, buds, flowers, or foliage. By drying the buds, flowers, or other needed parts of the plant at the prime time, they have the best attributes of the plant available at all times without regard to a growing season or bloom time. Imagine carrying a potted herb whose beneficial parts were only in season for a short period once a year, this just doesn't make much sense and I find it highly unlikely that such effort would have been made by these ancient herbalists when the simple alternative of carrying lightweight and space saving dried herbs was well known and used at the time.

It should also be mentioned that these ancient wanderers traveled many months from destination to destination in and out of different climates. Again, it seems highly unlikely that they would have chosen potted herbs over dried herbs and seeds which, unlike potted plants, needed little care, no valuable water, and were not dependant on climate.

History has given us preserved specimens of these ancient wanderers and their possessions, in many cases the person had dried herbs wrapped in leafs or cloth, dried mushrooms, dried fruit, etc. Not once was a small pot discovered that at one time contained soil and plants.

We can plainly see that the best solution to transporting herbs is to dry them, a practice so efficient that is still used almost exclusively to this day. The hopeful thought of these ancient herbalist carrying pots full of well pruned and visually pleasing plants around the world just doesn't hold water.

The Birthplace of Gardening



Detail of the Ishtar Gate

(The two-dimensional work of art depicted in this image is in the public domain in the United States and in those countries with a copyright term of life of the author plus 100 years.)

Now, let's take a look at where the cultivation of plants in general started. Although cultivation of plants for food long predates history, the earliest viewable evidence for ornamental gardens is seen in Egyptian tomb paintings depicting of an Egyptian lotus pond surrounded by rows of Acacia and palm trees created around 1500 B.C. Yet Egypt is just one of many cities that was located in The Fertile Crescent and of all of these great cities of that time, Babylon was the greatest.

In the article "Babylonian Gardens" at gardenvisit.com the following statement is made; "Though famous for its Hanging Gardens, Babylon has a stronger claim on the garden historian's attention. The Fertile Crescent (an arc from Egypt to the Persian Gulf) had the

richest land in the Ancient world and Babylon was one of its greatest cities. Gardening began here and it stands to reason that the most elaborate gardens were in the most fertile, and therefore prosperous, parts of the area, well-irrigated and low-lying. But the gardens made here have all gone, either cultivated or washed away by floods, leaving a fertile ground for speculation."

Babylon was an ancient civilization long before many others were developed; the people there led a life in a very fertile area next to the Euphrates River. The city has a history dating back as far as the 24th century B.C. The people of the Fertile Crescent had a love of trees that is also well known as the following quote from the article "Babylonian Gardens" at gardenvisit.com attests to, "Many of the world's religions originated in this region (Egypt, Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Iran). Temples were built and there was planting in the temple precincts. A respect for trees is attested by both textual and archaeological evidence."

We can see that in this area called the Fertile Crescent, gardening was started and gained a foothold among a people who had a deep respect and love for plants and trees. Cultivation of plants for ornamental purposes was started and perfected here. In this area the greatest of all the cities no doubt drew many visitors from the surrounding regions and some even from far away countries that could see the great gardens and innovations present and take the stories as well as the knowledge of such back home.

The Hanging Gardens of Babylon



Hanging Gardens of Babylon by Martin Heemskerck

(The two-dimensional work of art depicted in this image is in the public domain in the United States and in those countries with a copyright term of life of the author plus 100 years.)

The Hanging Gardens of Babylon is where I believe the origins of bonsai lie. If we take the literal translation of a tree in a pot or tray, certainly no other place has a history dating further back in time of cultivating trees in containers than Babylon does.

The Hanging Gardens of Babylon which are also known as the Hanging Gardens of Semiramis and the walls of Babylon (present-day Iraq) were considered one of the Seven Wonders of the World and were visited by people from many countries, both near and far. They are reputed to have been built by Nebuchadnezzar II around 600 B.C., a time that pre-dates any other record of plants cultivated in containers of any type.

The Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hanging_Gardens_of_Babylon) gives a description of the Hanging Gardens as, "The Greek geographer Strabo, who described the gardens in the first century BC, wrote, "It consists of vaulted terraces raised one above another, and resting upon cube-shaped pillars. These are hollow and filled with earth to allow trees of the largest size to be planted. The pillars, Vault, and terraces are constructed of baked brick and asphalt.""" Hollow and filled with earth to allow trees to be planted and to survive in...sound familiar?

I can not imagine taking on such a monumental endeavor as building so grand of a structure meant to grow trees and other plants in containers without a working knowledge of cultivating such in containers. Certainly a vast knowledge of plants, trees, and what they need to survive in containers would have been necessary and no doubt gleaned from many years of container cultivation experience went into these gardens.

Certainly these gardens were not the experiment to see if growing trees in containers could be done, they must have been based on actual experience which would mean that cultivating trees in containers pre-dates the gardens themselves and since this area invented gardening, one can only imagine that container gardening followed.

The knowledge that different watering needs other than relying on nature as plants in the ground do must have been on the designers mind when they created the gardens and they incorporated unique aqueducts and even something similar to an Archimedes' screw in order to raise water up to the gardens. We can only guess as to what solution was used for soil and drainage.

In Babylon we have the first recorded instances of trees being cultivated in containers,

containers of a large size certainly, but still containers. These gardens were one of the Seven Wonders of the World and they were located in the area's largest city at the time. They certainly attracted visitors from around the area and the known world at the time and there is little doubt the effect the gardens had on these visitors who would tell the stories of the wonderful Hanging Gardens wherever they went.

It is not unimaginable that those who seen these wonders would want to duplicate them or that gifts of plants in containers were given to surrounding royalty or even sold in the street markets. Certainly these traveled to nearby areas like Egypt and many attempted to duplicate the growing containers, even if only on a smaller scale.

Could Babylon be where bonsai originated? Could Iraq be where the cultivation of trees and pots in containers first started, in what was once known as the Hanging Gardens of Babylon?

Bonsai evolved, as everything does, to what is today. It had to have had a start and if we look to where plants were first pruned, then Babylon would be a contender as the inventor of gardening. Babylon would also be a contender if we look to where trees were first kept in containers.

As to who first cultivated trees in containers for the visual joy of it, well it would appear Babylon is the first in written history and as such the origin of bonsai lays in Iraq, in Babylon.

In closing, as mentioned above, the Chinese must still be credited with inventing Penjing and introducing it to the Japanese who, with their minimalistic approach, refined the art of cultivating trees in containers to what we easily recognize as bonsai today.

In this article I have not attempted to state that the Babylonians invented bonsai but instead stated historical references to the fact that not only did they invent gardening for visual pleasure but container gardening as well.

Babylon is the first in recorded history to have cultivated trees in containers and based on this, the origins of bonsai can be traced back to the innovations made by these people and shown to the world in the hanging Gardens of Babylon.

As we can trace the origins of cooking back to those who first used fire and the origins of the human race back to Africa, we can also trace the practice of cultivating trees in containers back to the earliest recorded source, Babylon.

Original article at <http://artofbonsai.org/forum/viewtopic.php?f=22&t=611>