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Melons and Mangoes: How Central and South Asian Kings Used Fruits to Showcase their Power

Melons were a popular commodity in Samarkand and in other cities of Central Asia, and their sweet taste attracted merchants from the distant regions of Persia, India, and China.¹ When these merchants came to Central Asia, the local rulers often gave them a tour of their orchards and invited them to special feasts of melons on their private terraces.² In fact, these visitors also encountered locals giving offerings of the fruit to the kings.³ Similarly, just like melons, mangoes were popular in India because of their luscious taste and were already a symbol of prosperity and divinity in Hinduism and Buddhism.⁴ Thus, the Mughal Emperors, who were Muslim, commissioned vast gardens of these mangoes to gain the allegiance and respect of their subjects, who were mostly Hindu and Buddhist.⁵ Furthermore, these emperors received offerings of mangoes from their subjects, and they often gifted the fruit to foreigners to enhance their own recognition.⁶ Hence, through their private orchards, feasts for foreigners, and royal offerings, the

¹ K'iu Ch'ang Ch'un, "Ch'ang Ch'un's Travels," depts.washington.edu, 1888, <https://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/texts/changchun.html>.

² K'iu Ch'ang Ch'un, 1888.

³ Samuel Lee, "The Travels of Ibn Battuta 1325-1354," 1829, <https://web2.qatar.cmu.edu/~breilly2/odyssey/Ibn%20Batuta.pdf>.

⁴ "Mango, Pearl of the Orient: Its History, Myth and Uses.," TasterPlace, August 23, 2021, <https://tasterplace.shop/en-us/blogs/news/pearl-of-the-orient-mango-and-its-history-myth-and-uses>.

⁵ Alia Yunis, "Mango: The Emperor's New Fruit - AramcoWorld," www.aramcoworld.com, October 2022, <https://www.aramcoworld.com/Articles/September-2022/Mango-The-Emperor-s-New-Fruit>.

⁶ Muskaan Chandrapota, "8 Times the Mango Played Diplomat," Condé Nast Traveller India, May 2, 2022, <https://www.cntraveller.in/story/8-times-the-mango-played-diplomat-modi-manmohan-singh-nehru/#:~:text=At%20the%20time%20of%20his>.

rulers of Central Asia and India associate themselves with their local melons and mangoes, respectively, allowing the popularity of those fruits to spread the prestige and recognition of these rulers.

To begin, melons became a popular commodity for Central Asians because the fruit's sweetness attracted people from all over Eurasia via the Silk Road. Firstly, Ambrosio Bembo travels throughout Persia and notes the prevalence and popularity of fruits and nuts from Central Asia in the local markets. He describes, "We found everything we needed there, especially much fruit, including watermelons and other melons ... I was amazed to see the whole caravan eating acorns, which they took from the oak trees with great satisfaction, as if they were the best fruit in the world."⁷ Just like melons, dry fruits and nuts were also popular commodities from Central Asia. By describing the acorn as the best fruit in the world, he incites a desire to acquire more of it, yet he also implies that the Persians referred to any Central Asian produce as fruits, whether they were fruits or nuts. This suggests that the Persians knew that Central Asia was famous for its fruits, which is why many merchants sought to travel to the region to bring these fruits to their local markets.

One such merchant, Kiu Chang Chun, encountered Central Asian melons while in China, and he sought to travel to its origin to buy more: "The chief of the town presented fruits ... He told us that 300 li distant, on the other side of the Yin shan, there was the city of Huo chow; ... and that Huo chou was celebrated for the abundance of grapes."⁸ Later, upon arriving in Central Asia, he writes, "The ruler of the realm of Pu-su-man came out of the city, together with the Mongol ta-lu-huachi [governor], to meet the master. We stopped at a fruit orchard west [of the

⁷ Ambrosio Bembo, *The Travels and Journal of Ambrosio Bembo*, ProQuest Ebook Central (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 386.

⁸ K'iu Ch'ang Ch'un, "Ch'ang Ch'un's Travels," 1888.

city]. The people here call a fruit a-li-ma; and as the place is famed for its fruits, the city received the above name.”⁹ The fact that people named the city after its most popular commodity emphasizes how much foreigners revere A-li-ma for its fruits. Additionally, he describes that the ruler and governor personally gave him a tour of the city, focusing on the orchards as if they were expecting Chun to be amazed. By personally showcasing their most popular commodity, the rulers of Central Asia glorify their own prestige by associating their power with the popularity of the melons. Thus, as these melons become more popular as their sweet taste attracts more visitors, people revere the city of A-li-ma and its rulers more. In fact, when Chun proceeded to another Central Asian city, he writes, “After our arrival there, [the king] presented us a dinner on a terrace . . . They brought also very heavy watermelons and sweet melons.”¹⁰ By personally presenting these traditional melons in a royal banquet on his terrace, the ruler makes his name and kingship more memorable to Chun. This makes Chun remember the power of all these rulers whenever he enjoys another sweet melon.

Finally, the famous traveler Ibn Battuta reaches the city of Khorazm, present-day Urgench in Uzbekistan, and he describes, “The peel of this melon is green, the interior red. It is perfectly sweet and rather hard. Its most remarkable property is, that it may be cut in oblong pieces and dried, and then put into a case, like a fig, and carried to India or China. Among dried fruits there is none superior to this. It is occasionally used as a present to their kings.”¹¹ He notes how sweet the melons of Central Asia are, and he further adds that they are often used as presents to the kings, which signifies how people associate these tasty fruits with the royalty. Hence, this allows the Central Asian kings to patronize these fruits to assert their power.

⁹ K’iu Ch’ang Ch’un, 1888.

¹⁰ K’iu Ch’ang Ch’un, 1888.

¹¹ Samuel Lee, “The Travels of Ibn Battuta 1325-1354,” 1829.

High in the mountains, north of Samarkand, archaeologists have recently discovered ceramics with traces of the seeds of these fruits that were sold and grown in Samarkand.¹² These included seeds of apples, peaches, melons, pistachios, apricots, and many other fruits and nuts native to the arable lowland region around Samarkand.¹³ These fruits must be native to Samarkand because they do not grow in the high altitudes of the mountains.¹⁴ Hence, since these fruits and nuts are very dense and heavy, this archaeological find reveals that people valued these products so much that they were willing to spend the intense energy in hauling them up the mountains. The fact that people are willing to bring its fruits to distant places alludes to the commercial power of Samarkand, which in turn enhances the recognition of the local rulers, who patronize these fruits. From all these examples, we can conclude that Central Asia's prime location on the Silk Road allows its fruits to spread throughout Eurasia, and their sweetness inspires many merchants to travel to the region themselves. There, these visitors are treated with personal feasts by the royal family, an effort by the rulers to associate their kingship with the popularity of the melon.

Later on, Babur, a native of Central Asia, conquers North India to establish the Mughal Empire.¹⁵ Yet he misses the sweet fruits of his homeland and thus commissions some merchants to bring him some, leading many Indians to give offerings of fruits to the Mughal Emperors.¹⁶ However, the mango was already a popular fruit in India as the local Hindus and Buddhists

¹² Robert N. Spengler et al., "Arboreal Crops on the Medieval Silk Road: Archaeobotanical Studies at Tashbulak," ed. Xiaoyan Yang, *PLOS ONE* 13, no. 8 (August 14, 2018): e0201409, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0201409>.

¹³ Robert N. Spengler et al., 2018.

¹⁴ Robert N. Spengler et al., 2018.

¹⁵ Alia Yunis, "Mango: The Emperor's New Fruit - AramcoWorld," 2022.

¹⁶ Alia Yunis, 2022.

believed it to be a symbol of divinity and auspiciousness.¹⁷ This inspired Emperor Akbar to commission huge mango orchards, which allowed him to gain the respect of his Indian subjects, the majority of which were Hindu and Buddhist.¹⁸

One Mughal Emperor, Jahangir, writes in his memoir about how Samarkand had lots of fruits and later says, “My revered father [Akbar] had a great liking for fruit, especially for melons, pomegranates, and grapes. During his time the Kārīz melons, which are the finest kind ... had not been brought to Hindustan. Whenever I see these fruits they cause me great regret. Would that such fruit had come in those days, so that he might have enjoyed them!”¹⁹ As he mentions that his father, Akbar, really enjoyed those fruits, he associates the wanting of fruits with the Mughal Crown. This encourages other Indians to give offerings of fruits to the Mughal emperors: As seen in Figure 1, Babur is receiving offerings of his favorite melons. When Jahangir became emperor, more fruits were available, so Figure 2 shows two plates of offerings for him, the left one with Central Asian fruits and the right one with Indian fruits, including mangoes. These offerings showcase how the Indian people started to associate fruits with the Mughal emperors.

¹⁷ Alia Yunis, 2022.

¹⁸ Alia Yunis, 2022.

¹⁹ Jahāngīr (1569–1627), “The Tūzuk-i-Jahāngīrī, Or: Memoirs of Jahāngīr, Volume 1 of 2,” www.gutenberg.org, December 6, 2016, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/53674/53674-h/53674-h.htm>.



Figure 1. *Babur Receives a Courtier* (Washington D.C.: Farrukh Beg, 1580), from the National Museum of Asian Art.



Figure 2. *Jahangir Entertains Shah Abbas* (Washington D.C.: Bishandas, 1620), from the National Museum of Asian Art.

However, these Indian mangoes already had a divine purpose in the nation: In 1874, archaeologists uncovered a stone pillar with a carving of a holy mango tree from before the 2nd century BCE, a Buddhist symbol of relaxation and divinity, as seen in Figure 3. This shows that because many Indians were Buddhist in the Mughal era, people in India were already accustomed to associating mangoes with the divine and with kingship. In fact, mangoes are also revered in Hindu culture since many Vedic texts relate the mango as representing love and eroticism.²⁰ In fact, when Ambrosio Bembo arrives in India, he writes, “The most appreciated fruit in India is the mango. They call it the king of fruit,” which emphasizes how much the Indian people enjoy eating it and associate it on a higher level than other fruits.²¹ Thus, Emperor Akbar, who was Muslim, decided to promote the cultivation of the mango to gain the allegiance of his Indian subjects, the majority of which were Hindu and Buddhist and already cherished the fruit.

²⁰ “Mango, Pearl of the Orient: Its History, Myth and Uses.,” 2021.

²¹ Ambrosio Bembo, *The Travels and Journal of Ambrosio Bembo*, 2007, 237.



Figure 3. *Sculpture Piece Excavated from the Stupa at Bharhut: Pillar with Jetavana Scene* (London: Colin Wright, 1874) from the British Library.

Akbar used the Portuguese knowledge of grafting to his advantage to commission huge mango gardens to gain the allegiance of his mango-loving Indian subjects. In 1510, the first Jesuits landed in Goa, and they were amazed at the mango's sweetness.²² One Portuguese wrote, "This fruit has a stone within like a dry almond, and is much better than the Damascus plum. A preserve is made of this fruit, such as we make of olives, but they are much superior."²³ Akbar thus summoned them to his court and told them to make a garden of 100,000 mango trees, Lakhi

²² Alia Yunis, "Mango: The Emperor's New Fruit - AramcoWorld," 2022.

²³ Ludovico di Varthema, "The Travels of Ludovico Di Varthema," *The Public Domain Review*, 1510, <https://publicdomainreview.org/collection/the-travels-of-ludovico-di-varthema-1863>.

Bagh, where they grafted the existing mango trees to create new varieties of the fruit.²⁴ Eventually, hundreds of new varieties of mangoes were created in Akbar's garden.²⁵ Since mangoes were already popular in India due to their sweet taste and religious significance, commissioning such huge gardens made him more prominent among his Indian subjects as it significantly boosted the quantity of mangoes available. By doing this, since the fruit was a divine symbol of kingship and auspiciousness, Akbar was able to reassociate the superior connotation of mangoes with the kingship of the Mughals.

In fact, Aurangzeb, a later Mughal emperor, even named two new varieties of mangoes: One of them he named *Sudhara*, which means "divine nectar," and the other he named *Rasnavilas*, which means "tasty," showing how Aurangzeb is associating the new mango varieties with his own power.²⁶ Furthermore, when Shah Abbas became the new leader of Persia's Safavid Empire, Aurangzeb sent him a gift of some mangoes.²⁷ Since Shah Abbas will forever cherish eating the sweet mangoes, this gift reminds him about the dominance of Mughal power since mangoes were a symbol of Aurangzeb's royal authority.

Overall, it appears that the sweetness of melons and mangoes brought many travelers to Central Asia and India, respectively, and the rulers of those regions asserted their power by associating themselves with the fruit. Some rulers like Akbar commissioned huge orchards, other rulers like those in Samarkand held feasts of the fruit on their private terraces, and others received royal offerings of the fruit. Central Asia's prime location allowed the melons to spread to China, India, and Persia, making visitors come from all three sides to witness the power of the

²⁴ Alia Yunis, 2022.

²⁵ Alia Yunis, 2022.

²⁶ Alia Yunis, 2022.

²⁷ Muskaan Chandrapota, "8 Times the Mango Played Diplomat," 2022.

Central Asian kings as they royally promoted their melons. In contrast, India does not have as much of a central overland location. However, since the majority of the Indian population already revered mangoes since it was an important symbol in Hinduism and Buddhism, the Muslim Mughals could gain their allegiance simply by royally sponsoring the mangoes and commissioning new orchards to boost their cultivation.

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