

Traveler, geographer, historian. Not averse to the odd marvel, he has been aptly compared to Herodotus.

Elephants have a better-documented history on the battlefield. According to Captain Buzurg's more down-to-earth contemporary al-Mas'udi, war-elephants have a weak point: They are terrified of cats. Al-Mas'udi gives the example of Harun ibn Musa,

Al-Jahiz claimed that elephants are also terrified of lions because they resemble enormous domestic cats.

Harun came out to confront the line and made for the mightiest of the elephants, having first concealed a cat under his clothing. He charged the elephant, and when he was near it, he let loose the cat. At the sight of the puss, the elephant turned tail and fled.

'The tusker abandoned his mahout and flew
With cowardly heart and lumbering bulk.
Glory be to the One who alone created him,
The God of men, the Lord of elephants!'

The rhyme in this ode brings to mind the Quran's chapter The Elephant, which recounts the defeat of Abrahah the Abyssinian's pachyderm-reinforced attack on Makkah.

Bestial marvels are not confined to creatures large and exotic. In his *Wonders of Creation*, the 13th-century cosmographer al-Qazwini defines wonderment as "a feeling of perplexity that comes

upon a person on account of his lack of acquaintance with the cause of something." He goes on to illustrate the idea:

Consider a person contemplating for the first time a cell in a honeycomb. If he were unacquainted with what had made it, he would be extremely perplexed. And even if he knew that it was the work of bees, he would still be perplexed at how so feeble a creature could have brought into being these hexagons with sides so precisely equal that an expert draughtsman equipped with compasses and ruler could not produce the like. Such is the meaning of wonder, and everything on earth is analogous to this example.

This passage has echoes of the Quran's chapter The Bees, in which God inspires the insects to make their habitations. "In this is indeed a sign for people who think."

To return to cats, al-Qazwini mentions in another work, *Monuments of Various Lands*, a less heroic feline function than that of routing war-elephants. The city of Ardabil, in northwestern Iran, was, he said, plagued by rats. As a consequence, the city

was home to a cat bazaar where "they hawk the cats around, crying, 'Here's a cat to catch your rat! Guaranteed genteel! Won't bolt, won't steal!' Or so they claimed. The reality was altogether different:

Sindi ibn Shahak, one of the celebrated doctors, said: 'I've never been cheated by market people as thoroughly as I was by the cat-sellers. They get hold of a cat that eats chickens and pigeons and breaks into the cages of ring-doves, partridges and turtle-doves, and they put it in a big covered pot and fix the lid on tightly. Next, they roll the pot around on the ground until the cat gets dizzy. Then they put the cat in a cage together with some chickens, while it's still too dazed to bother about catching them. When a customer sees this, he's amazed. He thinks he's found exactly what he's looking for, and pays a good price for it. But by the time he gets the cat home, the dizziness has worn off, and the cat turns into a devil that eats all his birds and his neighbors' birds too.'

In present-day Iran, southwest of the Caspian Sea. My out-of-date guidebook recommends Ardabil's honey bazaar, but it is silent on the matter of cats.

"Tankiz" is a variation of "Genghis," as in Genghis Khan. All Tankiz's biographers agree that the governor was, like his namesake, "exceedingly severe."

In Damascus, the stray dogs that plagued the city were dealt with more efficiently than the rats of Ardabil. The historian Ibn al-Wardi mentions a ruthless dog-cull initiated by Tankiz, 14th-century

governor of the Syrian capital. Tankiz eventually fell out with his boss, the Mamluk sultan, and was himself culled—but not before he had turned his wrath on another species: frogs.

Before his downfall, Tankiz had been driven to distraction by the incessant croaking of frogs, and had had them removed from the waters of the city. A certain person said this of the affair:

'Ah, Tankiz, in Damascus you've gone sore astray—
A sign, I think, that you have had your day.
They say, "A thousand joyful tidings to the frogs
Upon his death!" I say, "And to the dogs!"'

Tankiz might have benefited from the antidote to noisy frogs mentioned by the 15th-century Cairene scholar al-Maqrizi: Mix crocodile fat with clarified butter; place the mixture in lamps and light these in the offending pond or reed-bed. As long as they remain lit, no frog will croak.

Human-animal antipathy worked both ways. An Andalusian contemporary of Tankiz, the poet and writer Ibn al-Murabi, told the story of a goat in Granada that took extreme exception to people.

In this excerpt, the narrator has been looking for a ram to

slaughter for the post-Ramadan festival meal, but he is strapped for cash. He eventually finds a monstrous billy-goat, "smaller than a mule but bigger than a donkey," at an unexpectedly cheap price. Alarm bells ring in his mind when the goat's owner advises:

You'll need four porters, 'cause there's no way you can carry it yourself, and you'll have a job getting it to follow you—or rather, the other way 'round.

Appropriately, the author wrote his tale when he himself was short of cash and in need of festive mutton. He recited it to a wealthy patron. The story ends with fulsome praise of the addressee, and thus we may assume that the hint worked.

But to save money, the narrator hires only a single porter. This was, indeed, a mistake:

A loose rendering of "Abu Uways," which is a man's name euphemistically given to wolves.

I tell the porter to bring the goat and keep up with me until we get to the slaughterhouse. And when we do—well, the animal's nowhere to be found. So I say, 'Okay, Wolf-Face, what have you done with my goat?' And he says, 'It got away, and I don't know where it is.' ... So I go 'round the market and the whole neighborhood, calling out to all and sundry that whoever finds a goat should let me know, and that there's a reward in it. Then this man comes out of a show-room, all grumbling and mumbling, and says, 'Who's the owner of that damned goat? Whoever it is—damn him too! If I clap eyes on him, there'll be words, I can tell you.' So I say, 'I'm the owner. What's up? What have I done to hurt you?' And he says, 'When that goat of yours broke free, it took off like a lion and went on a rampage around town. It left nobody unharmed, and when it got into my pottery showroom, it went totally crazy and turned the place into a hell's kitchen. In short, it trashed everything!'

"Hell's kitchen" is interpreter's liberty. The original has, "the work it did was cooked and raw."

The unfortunate narrator foots the bill for the broken crockery and, after more disasters, eventually gets the goat home—to the consternation of his wife, who chides him, saying, "You've brought home a demon!"

A few decades earlier, another Andalusian, Abu 'l-Barakat al-Balafiqi, celebrated in verse a happier example of human-animal (though certainly not human-human) relations. The journey described took him and his companion from Almería to the hot springs at Pechina and back:

i.e., of the city of Velesique, in Almería province.

"Qatmir" is the name given by tradition to the faithful dog, mentioned in the Qur'an, that guarded the People of the Cave during their 300-year sleep.

I set off with Qatmir, my dog, a fellow traveler
Whose presence warmed my heart along the way.
For every time I paused to rest, he'd pause by me,
Regarding me with looks of love and tenderness.
Fulfilling all the dues of good companionship,
As if he were of all friends the most true.
And this while my own people—of the human race—
All treat me with a meanness that's insatiable ...
Among them there's no single bosom friend,
No one to show fraternal feelings, true and pure.

A round trip of 15 kilometers (9 mi). The spa is still going strong.

As a tailpiece, Abu 'l-Barakat elsewhere reports hearing these verses:

How cruel it is, I think, that men will take the name of
'dog' in vain,
When of all creatures dogs will least forget good deeds.
Surely, if some person makes you cross enough to curse,
The proper insult is, 'You *man*, son of a *man*!'

*i.e., not "You dog, son of a dog,"
the conventional insult.*

Moving to 14th-century Morocco—but returning to feline vermin control—a scholar and raconteur of Miknas called Ibn Abi Jalla owned a remarkably clever cat:

One day, he went home and found that the cat had
moistened one of her front paws and then dipped it in
some flour, so that the flour stuck to it. She was hold-
ing this paw out in front of a mouse hole in the wall; the other
paw she held up in the air, ready to grab the mouse when it
emerged. Seeing this, Ibn Abi Jalla called her by name—where-
upon she turned her head to him and put a claw to her mouth,
exactly in the manner in which one gestures for silence.

*Take this with a pinch
of salt. It comes from a small
volume compiled by the scholar's
students entitled "Collected
Gems of Ibn Abi Jalla."
According to his biographer, the
students slipped in some of their
own apocryphal tales to poke
fun at their master.*

More conventional ratting methods of a cat called Wardaghan were commemorated in an elegy by her owner, the 18th-century Yemeni poet al-Khafanji:

*When I lived in
Bi'r al-'Azab, al-Khafanji's
quarter of Sana'a, it was still
frequented by prowling cats.
An elderly gentleman I used to
visit was so fond of his own cat
that he would feed her in his
lap at lunchtime, between
his own mouthfuls.*

Wardaghan has made my loneliness complete,
Wardaghan the white, the precious cat.
She's dead, the one who filled the room with life,
Who fussed around it, housemaid-like.
She guaranteed the peace of all who took a nap,
Was diligent in every task she undertook.
Her bravery made cowards of all the other cats,
And when she pounced, she terrified.
She'd spring into the air to catch a moth—
She could have caught a falcon, too!

*Other creatures have been
lamented in Arabic verse.
A 12th-century ruler of Hama,
in Syria, gave a much-
loved falcon a state funeral,
complete with Qur'an-reciters.*

To end on a different elegiac note, we return to goats—but better behaved than that one in the Granada china shop. It is sunset in the highlands of Yemen, on any day over the past millennium and more;

the hour has come to gather in the flocks from the mountainside. The blind poet and folklorist Abdallah al-Baradduni, who died in 1999, collected this *mahjal*, a traditional song chanted while at work:

It's time for home now—night is near,
Sunset's come and we're still here.
You've had your fill of food since dawn
So come, my wattled goat with curling horn! 🌐

*On mahjals, another
commentator notes that
"some are exceedingly powerful
and beautiful." I can confirm
that, having heard them
echoing through remote
mist-filled valleys.*



Even the best efforts at translation often entail some loss. However, the pleasing sound of the original Arabic title of this series, Tanjuman al-Kunuz, makes up for some of the literary shortfall when it becomes the syntactically accurate but less euphonious English "Interpreter of Treasures." Tanjuman is the root of the English word "dragoman," which refers to an interpreter serving in an official capacity. The full title echoes Ibn al-'Arabi's early-13th-century collection of poems, Tanjuman al-Ashwaq (Interpreter of Desires).



Tim Mackintosh-Smith (tim@mackintosh-smith.com) recently appeared in *Newsweek's* list of the top dozen travel writers of the last 100 years. Following his award-winning trilogy of travels in the footsteps of Ibn Battuta, he is working on a history, a thriller set in 14th-century Spain and the translation from Arabic of an early collection of travelers' accounts from around the Indian Ocean.

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