

## ANIMALS AND THEIR RELATIONS WITH PEOPLE

have a long history in Arabic literature. Pre-Islamic poets often described favorite horses; the ninth-century master of prose al-Jahiz compiled a monumental *Book of Animals*. What follows is a kind of literary menagerie captured and corralled on my own bookshelves.

Al-Jahiz, who recognized that sailors were generally “not

respecters of the unvarnished truth,” would have sniffed at *The Wonders of India* by the 10th-century sea-captain Buzurg ibn Shahriyar. One of the captain’s fellow seamen told him that, in an Indian market, he had seen elephants carrying baskets containing shopping lists and the local currency—cowry shells. The animals were heading for the vegetable stalls, the captain reported:

*All this counting of cowries must have been time-consuming. In later times, at least, exchange rates varied from around 1000 cowries to a gold dinar in West Africa to 1,000,000 per dinar at source, in the archipelago of the Maldives. Given that the story is set not far from their Maldivian origin, even a daily grocery run would presumably have cost hundreds if not thousands of cowries. Perhaps the elephant was needed merely to carry them.*

**W**hen the grocer sees the elephant, he stops whatever else he may be doing—even if he is in the middle of serving a customer, whoever that may be—and takes the basket from the elephant. He counts the cowries that are in the basket and looks at the list to see what provisions are needed, then picks out for the elephant the very best of what he has in stock, charging the lowest price possible. If the elephant indicates that he wants more for his money, the grocer gives him extra. Sometimes the shopkeeper makes a mistake in counting the cowries, and if this happens, the elephant will shuffle the cowries about with his trunk until the grocer does a recount. When the elephant takes his purchases home, his owner will sometimes think he has received too little for his money and will give the elephant a beating. Then the elephant goes back to the grocer and starts laying into his stall, turning all the goods topsy-turvy, until the grocer either gives him extra or returns the cowries.

*The captain's yarns probably inspired elements of Sindbad's fictional adventures.*

*Such elephants could apparently cost 10,000 dirhams—apparently the cost of a couple of dozen top-quality slaves, if we go by other prices in the captain's book. Wouldn't it be cheaper to do the shopping yourself? But then, what you'd save in money you'd lose in style.*