

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 Qur'an'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 Qur'an'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.