

he is killed without mercy, regardless of whether his error was intentional or not.

According to the 12th-century geographer al-Idrisi, the female rulers of the Indian Ocean archipelago of the Maldives cracked down

on sandal-wearers in almost as draconian a fashion:

In these islands no one walks about in sandals, with the single exception of the queen. And if they find out that someone else has worn sandals, his feet are cut off.

Visitors to the archipelago today may go shod with impunity. According to the Arabic History of the Maldives, the sandal ban was repealed by a 17th-century ruler.

Staying with rulers, but turning to the perils of linguistic misunderstandings, the following tale is told by the 13th-century

geographer Yaqut in his gazetteer entry for Zafar:

It was the seat of the kings of Himyar, and the origin of the saying, "When in Zafar, speak as the Himyaris do." According to al-Asma'i, an Arabic-speaking man arrived for an audience with one of the Himyari kings. The king, who happened to be up on a high roof terrace of his palace, said to the man, "Thib! [Jump!]" So the man jumped off and was smashed to pieces. At this, the king said, "We have none of that Arabickte here. When in Zafar, one must speak as the Himyaris do." In the Himyari tongue, thib means "be seated."

A celebrated early Islamic antiquarian.

"Arabickte" is an attempt to imitate the king's quaint and antiquated-sounding rendering of the word-Arabiyyat for Arabiyyah.

Now little more than a village in the central highlands of Yemen, Zafar is still littered with the ruins of its greatness in the early centuries of our era. The Himyaris, whose capital it was, spoke one of the ancient South Arabian languages, related to but distinct from the Arabic of central and northern Arabia.

As for the third of those great perils, the march of Time, even if its consequences are ultimately inescapable, some of them—like gray hair—may be overcome by artifice or wit. The following story is

told of Yahya ibn Hakam, a ninth-century Andalusian poet and diplomat who was nicknamed "the Gazelle" on account of his youthful good looks.

It happened that the Gazelle was sent on an embassy to the land of the Majus. At the time, he was approaching 50 years of age and quite gray-haired, although he was still completely fit and healthy. One day, the wife of the king asked him how old he was. Being in a playful mood, he told her he was 20. She said, "So what's with all this gray hair?" And he replied, "What's wrong with gray hair? Or don't you know that just because a young stallion's coat is gray it doesn't stop him siring foals?" The queen was delighted with this retort.

The Norsemen. It is unclear whether the anecdote is set in their native Scandinavia or in one of their overseas settlements—Dublin, for example.

By Ibn Dihya, a disgraced Andalusian judge who took to traveling and died in Cairo in 1235. Ibn Dihya's reputation as a historian is not high, but I like to think this anecdote is true.

This was clearly going too far. According to Oscar Wilde's Lady Bracknell, the age to be is 35: "London society is full of women of the very highest birth who have, of their own free choice, remained 35 for years."

Some of the perils of Time are, however, insuperable. Here is the nonagenarian 12th-century Syrian nobleman and warrior Usamah

ibn Munqidh reflecting in his memoirs on the effects of old age:

I wonder that my hand, too weak to hold a pen,
Speared lions long ago in its young day;
That when I walk with stick in hand the ground,
Though solid, clings beneath my feet like clay.

As the poet Abu 'l-'Atahiyah is supposed to have said,

If only our young selves could visit us one day
And see what Time has done to us when we are grey.

Isma'il ibn al-Qasim al-Jarrar (748–828), is usually known by this nickname ("Father of Stupidity"). His surname, al-Jarrar, "the Jar-Seller," comes from his day job as a purveyor of pots. Fellow-poets, it is said, would come to his shop and use shards of broken crockery to jot down their latest gems.