

HOW TALL MUST A TALE BE TO BE TRULY TALL?

Arabic literature is full of more or less incredible *'aja'ib wa-ghara'ib*, wonders and marvels—pearls formed from raindrops, stones that make you laugh or cry, tribes of half-people with one arm, one leg and so on who hop about secluded wastes and spout spontaneous Arabic verse. Some of these preternatural phenomena might have begun as tall stories, but over time they gained credence in the retelling, and often ended up as parables of the limitless possibilities of creation.

Perhaps to be truly tall a story should not only be utterly

incredible, but also a one-off, and willfully told. The following tales from my library meet those criteria to varying degrees. All of them, though, are indisputably fishy.

Pearls from raindrops were a persistent fancy. The following further addition to the unnatural history of oysters appears in Abu Zayd's supplement, of about 900 CE, to Sulayman the Merchant's *Accounts*. Despite the title, the setting is Arabian; despite the author's claim only a few paragraphs later that he has avoided unbelievable tales, to my mind the last part of the anecdote leaps the bounds of credibility with panache:

In days long past, a Bedouin turned up in al-Basrah with an extremely valuable pearl. Having no idea of its worth, he took it to a druggist of his acquaintance, showed it to him and asked him what it was. The druggist told him that the object was a pearl.

"What's it worth?" the Bedouin asked.

"A hundred dirhams," the druggist replied.

The Bedouin thought this was an enormous sum. "Would anyone actually give me that much for it?" he said.

The druggist immediately paid him a hundred dirhams, and the Bedouin went off and bought provisions for his family. As for the druggist, he took the pearl to Madinat al-Salam and sold it there for a large sum of money, with which he was able to expand his business.

The druggist mentioned that he asked the Bedouin how he had got hold of the pearl. "I was passing al-Samman," the Bedouin told him—this being part of the land of al-Bahrayn, a short distance from the seashore—"when I saw a fox lying dead on the sand. I noticed that something had attached itself to the fox's muzzle, so I went down to it and found the thing was like a dish with a lid, all

This, "the City of Peace," was—and perhaps still is—the official name of the Abbasid metropolis founded in 762. It is more usually known by the Persian name of the village that preceded it on the site: Baghdad.

It's always hard to suggest an equivalent modern value for old currencies. One way is to consider the bullion value, which for 100 silver dirhams would be around \$250 at the time of translation.

Samman in general signifies an area of low rugged hills. At this period, the term "al-Bahrayn" included both the islands known by that name today and a large area of the adjacent mainland.

The idea that oysters come ashore to take the air was another old chestnut.

Called *Tarikh al-Mustabsir*, something like *The History of Him Who Seeks to See Clearly*.

In the next tale, hungry foxes wreak their revenge. The source is Ibn al-Mujawir's wonder-stuffed 13th-century description of the western and southern parts of the Arabian Peninsula, and the setting of the story is my adoptive hometown of Sana'a in the

The source of several (mostly dubious) snippets of information in Ibn al-Mujawir's book, but otherwise, I think, unknown.

"Durayn" is a proper name, like English "Reynard". An old Adeni proverb goes, "When the lion's away, Durayn comes out and strolls about."

The next tale, also from Ibn al-Mujawir's book, doesn't reach the same height of improbability, but it is both metaphorically and

ie. from what is now the west of Saudi Arabia.

Something like \$2500, going by today's bullion prices, and probably more than the buyer himself was worth: 800 dirhams—the sum paid for the future Mamluk sultan, Baybars, at about the time this tale was told—was an unexceptional price for a male human slave. In my local fish market, dayrak can fetch up to \$5.50 a pound (\$12 a kilo).

The story resurfaces a hundred years later in the south Arabian port of Aden, where the traveler Ibn Battuta heard it. In his version, the fish has metamorphosed into a ram, and the price deflated to 400 dinars.

Sailing on from Aden but returning to remarkable fish, my

A dinar being not quite half as heavy again as a dirham, I assume Ibn Battuta means silver dinars (he often does): The gold equivalent would be mind-boggling. And regarding continuity, a certain joke told by Ibn al-Mujawir—unprintable here—is still doing the rounds nearly 800 years on.

gleaming white inside. I found this round thing in it, and took it."

At this the druggist realized what had happened. The oyster had left the sea and gone onto the shore to sniff the wind, as oysters are accustomed to do. The fox had passed by and spotted the meat inside the oyster as it lay there with its mouth open, and had pounced, stuck its muzzle in the shell and got hold of the meat. At this the oyster had clamped shut on the fox's muzzle.... When the fox felt itself being asphyxiated, it had rushed about, hitting the oyster on the ground, right and left, until it had run out of breath and died and the oyster had died too.

mountains of Yemen. Given its altitude of 2250 meters (7400'), water does indeed freeze in Sana'a in cold years. The subsequent claim is, as Ibn al-Mujawir himself notes, magnificently tall.

An English visitor of 1608 said of Sana'a, "I never felt soe much cold in any place as by the waye in the mornings before sonne risinge, with a hoare frost on the ground." I had frozen water-pipes two winters ago—not a common occurrence in most of Arabia.

Water freezes there. I was informed by Sulayman ibn Mansur, who said, "The water freezes around geese and cranes, so that the only parts of their bodies that are visible are their heads. When this happens, Durayn—that is, the fox—comes over the ice and bites off the birds' heads." Ibn al-Mujawir said, "This is an impossibility, because nothing can freeze around any body in which the vital spirit is present, since its innate heat overcomes the cold. Therefore, water can only freeze around something dead, for life is by nature hot and moist, while death is cold and dry."

"Geese and cranes" is the Arabic editor's guess. Much of Ibn al-Mujawir's text is notoriously corrupt. Neither makes much ornithological sense—which only adds to the authentic tallness of the anecdote.

"...hot and moist... cold and dry," according to ancient notions of biology and medicine, deriving from ideas about the four humors, the four elements and their qualities.

literally fishy. I include it to show how such anecdotes did the rounds of suqs and centuries, shifting shape along the way.

I was informed by a Hijazi man, who said, "The particular food of the Persians living at Siraf was the dayrak fish. In certain seasons, however, it was in very short supply. During such a period, two young slaves belonging to two different merchants went out to buy a dayrak, as the fishermen had brought one in. The two slaves bid against each other for it, and one of them ended up paying a thousand dirhams for the fish. When the slave took the fish home, his master was so delighted with what he had done that he freed him, and also gave him a thousand dirhams more, to live on. As for the other slave, his master was so angry with him for letting the other man's slave outdo him in cleverness that he treated him with the utmost contempt."

Sometimes known in English by its Anglo-Indian name, sea-fish, the dayrak belongs to the mackerel family and was rightly deemed by Captain Hamilton in 1727 "as savoury as any Salmon or Trout in Europe." Until its destruction by an earthquake in 977, Siraf was the major port on the Iranian coast of the Gulf.

favorite maritime raconteur, the 10th-century Captain Buzurg ibn Shahriyar of Ramhurmuz, was—unlike the narrator of the tale of the deadly oyster above—an unrepentant yarn-spinner. Believe, if you will, this story told him by a seagoing friend:

He heard one of the seamen telling how he once set sail from Aden on a vessel bound for Jidda. When they were level with Zayla', a fish rammed into the ship and gave it such a devil of a blow that the crew were sure it had smashed the hull. But when the crewmen went down into the bilges, they found that the water had not risen above its normal level, and were amazed that a tremendous blow like that had had no effect. When they

On the northern Somali coast.

reached Jidda, they unloaded the vessel, took it out of the water and beached it—and discovered the fish's head in the ship's hull! When it had rammed the ship, its head had got stuck fast and sealed the hole it had made, leaving not a single gap. The fish had been unable to free itself, and its head had broken off at the neck and remained in the hole.

I once quizzed an expert on the marine life of the seas around Arabia about the possibility of such an incident. His first reaction was to smile; but then he recalled the case of a dhow arriving in Dubai with a curious "figurehead"—an enormous whale-shark that had managed to impale itself on the vessel's prow. So perhaps

we shouldn't entirely dismiss Captain Buzurg's kamikaze fish.

Another piscine peril, however, which the 12th-century traveler Abu Hamid of Granada encountered in the Black Sea, sounds like a definite escapee from the teeming waters of the mariner's imagination:

A cubit is the distance from elbow to middle fingertip, about 47 centimeters (19").

Bulghar, the capital of the Volga Bulgars, was situated south of Kazan in what is now the Republic of Tatarstan, Russia.

Even on dry land, however, the credibility of Abu Hamid's informants doesn't necessarily improve. Staying in Bulghar in 1136, the Andalusian became friendly with a certain Danqi, a gigantic

I also saw in this sea a fish like a mountain, whose head, back and tail were visible. From head to tail it had a row of black spines like the teeth of a saw, each of which appeared to the eye to be more than two cubits long. There was more than a farsakh of water between us and the fish. I heard the mariners saying that this fish is known as "the saw," and if it happens to strike against the bottom of a ship, it slices the hull in half.

A farsakh is about 5 kilometers (3 mi). Abu Hamid must have had good eyesight to estimate the length of those spines.

man "of the lineage of 'Ad, who was more than seven cubits tall." If that is too tall to be comfortably credible, the postscript to the account of Danqi is worthy of a Monty Python sketch:

This may be the judge of Bulghar said elsewhere to have written a history of the city, now lost.

The ruler of Bulghar had a coat of mail made for him that was so heavy it had to be carried on a cart, as well as a helmet as big as a cauldron. In time of war, Danqi would fight using an oak log that he could wield as easily as a walking stick, but which could have killed an elephant at a single blow. Yet he was a kindly and modest soul, and whenever he met me he would greet me in a most welcoming manner. My head did not even reach his waist, God have mercy on him.... He had a sister of similar stature, whom I often saw in Bulghar. While I was there, Judge Ya'qub ibn al-Nu'man told me that this giantess had killed her husband, a man by the name of Adam who was one of the strongest in Bulghar. She gave him a hug that smashed his ribs, and he died instantly.

'Ad, a proto-Arab people mentioned in the Quran, are popularly believed to have been giants. At seven cubits plus, "Danqi" (the reading of his name is uncertain) would have stood at over 3.3 meters (11').

From one doomed marriage to another—this one contracted by the 13th-century Andalusian wit and poet Ibn al-Murahhal with financially disastrous, if not fatal, results. Visiting the Moroccan town of Sabtah, he meets some women who offer him the hand of a beautiful girl. Enticed by her alleged charms, he sinks most of his fortune in the "bride-price"—a house—and blows the rest

on a lavish wedding feast. Eventually the groom is conducted to his bride and the marriage consummated. At this point, Ibn al-Murahhal realizes that the girl is still covered, and asks her to unveil the beauty of which he has heard so much. (Warning: The poet lived long before our disability-sensitive age....)

For his sake I hope, as does his biographer, that the marriage took place only in the poet's imagination. Ibn al-Murahhal's poems include one, apparently a party-piece among lisp-sufferers, in which all the s sounds can be changed to th without a loss of meaning. He described his addiction to verse as "a chronic illness."

And there she was, revealed—bald as a coot!

And with a head you'd think was shaped by cudgel blows, to boot.

Squint-eyed, she saw the world all upside-down—
Just picture her at large with gape-mouthed stare about the town!

Snub-nosed—you'd think her schnozz had lost its tip.
(If so, all power to the hand that gave her snout the snip!)
Deaf as a post, as well—she'd only come
If summoned with a screech, a cattle goad or banging drum.

Plus she could barely speak, and when she did
You'd think a nanny-goat was bleating to a suckling kid,

Currently the Spanish-administered enclave of Ceuta.

Literally, "May the hand not become unsound..."

Barik, if the reading is right, is specifically a raven's croak.

And that her gap-toothed whistling was the wind
One sometimes hears emitted by an overstuffed behind.
Besides, she was so lame it was her fate
To limp about lopsided and to lope with crooked gait.
I stared in disbelief, spat in disdain,
Then made my getaway into the night and pouring rain.
Lost and confused, I dashed from place to place
Like an escaping robber when the cops are giving chase,
Until the light of dawn brought a reprieve,
The city gates were opened and I was the first to leave.
Since then I've had no news of my ex-spouse,
Or, come to think of it, of that lost property—my house.

To end, a most blatant (and literal) tall tale, capped by an even taller, though horizontal, one, from a book on the dialect of my adoptive hometown. I have found no information about the

original narrator, Colonel Hilmi ibn 'Ali Ruhi, but I suspect from his name—and the comeuppance at the end of the story—that he may have been of Turkish origin.

An Iranian and a Turk met in a café. The Iranian said, "Our Shah has built a palace so tall that no one knows how tall it is."

"How many floors does it have?" the Turk asked.

"Oh, far too many to count," the Iranian answered. "But a builder dropped a hammer from the top of it two months ago, and it still hasn't reached the ground."

"Well," said the Turk, "our Sultan ordered some cucumber seeds from America and sowed them in his vegetable garden. When the cucumbers appeared, one of them started growing at a rate of 10 meters a day. The Sultan gave orders that no one should interfere with it until they knew how long it would get. Anyway, it grew out of the garden and through the streets of Istanbul and eventually reached Lake Van—the Sultan had sent 10 policemen to keep track of it, you see. The cucumber went down from Lake Van, along the mountains of Kurdistan and across the Great Zab, and then arrived at the River Tigris. It then grew all the way down to Shatt al-'Arab, entered al-Muhammarah on the Iranian shore . . ."

"Hey, you can't expect me to believe this!" the Iranian interrupted.

"Okay then," said the Turk, "you bring your hammer down to earth. And if you don't . . ."

But the Turk's threat had better remain unspoken. Suffice it to say that it involved the rogue cucumber continuing its relentless

progress and only stopping when it had reached the most private part of all the Shah's domains.

Since the account clearly predates the abolition of the Ottoman sultanate in 1923, this and the subsequent claims for the cucumber's remarkable growth (modest though they are in comparison with the figures above) suggest the need for a reassessment of the history of genetically modified vegetables.

Depending on the hammer's precise terminal velocity, this could give a height for the palace of as much as 461,000 kilometers (288,000 mi). The lost tool is therefore probably either a) still in orbit somewhere beyond the moon or b) has burned up on re-entry into the Earth's atmosphere.

In the east of Turkey. Of the further points on the cucumber's route, the Great Zab is a tributary of the Tigris rising east of Van, and Shatt al-'Arab the combined waterway of the Tigris and Euphrates. Al-Muhammarah is the former Arabic name of Khurmanshahr, on the left bank of Shatt al-'Arab.