

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.