

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.

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."

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.

"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.