

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.