Chapter Six

Musical Beasts: The Swan-Phoenix in the Ibn Bakhtīshūʿ Bestiaries

Anna Contadini

As Robert Hillenbrand has shown considerable interest over the years in the 'reading' of paintings, including those in bestiaries,[1] it seems appropriate to dedicate this paper to him especially as the topic to be discussed also ties in with his love of music.

In what have become known as the bestiaries of the Ibn Bakhtīshūʿ tradition the treatment of each animal is normally divided into two sections: a discussion of characteristics which derives from Aristotle's Zoology; and a listing of medicinal preparations utilising different parts of the animal which derives from Ibn Bakhtīshūʿ himself.[2] The last member of a renowned family of Nestorian physicians who ran the School of Medicine at Jundīshāpūr (south-west Iran), ʿUbayd Allāh Ibn Jibrāʾīl Ibn Bakhtīshūʿ (d. 1058), was a contemporary and friend of Ibn Buṭlān. Of his various works on medicine the most celebrated is the *Kitāb ṭabāʾiʿ al-ḥayawān wa khawāṣṣihā wa manāfiʿ aʿḍāʾihā* ('Book of the characteristics of animals and their properties and the usefulness of their organs'), which, however, only survives as incorporated into the composite text of the *Kitāb naʿt al-ḥayawān* (henceforth *Naʿt*) and the later bestiaries of the same tradition.

A text for the swan-phoenix is present in two of the illustrated Ibn Bakhtīshūʿ bestiaries: the *Naʿt*, where it is called *arghūn* (Plate 13) and the Escorial *Manāfiʿ*, where it is called *suryānās*[3] (Plate 14). It is also found in a fourteenth-century unillustrated version of Ibn Bakhtīshūʿ's bestiary, where it is called *sīrināṣ*.[4] This animal is absent from the somewhat reduced version of the Paris *Manāfiʿ*, and likewise from the Morgan *Manāfiʿ*.[5]

Similar versions to the *Naʿt* and the Escorial *Manāfiʿ* are found elsewhere in zoological literature. For example, we find the following account in the fourteenth century author al-Damīrī in his *Ḥayāt al-ḥayawān* (*A Zoological Lexicon*), where, on the authority of al-Qazwīnī, it is called Abū Sayrās. Jayakar translates the passage as follows:

Al-Kazwînî states in *al-Ashkâl* that it is a certain animal found in thickets and having in its nasal cavity twelve perfect holes. When it breathes, there is heard coming from its nose a sound like the sounds of flutes, and the other animals thereupon gather (round it) to hear that sound; if any of them happens to become confounded with the sound, it seizes that animal and eats it, but if it does not find it practicable to seize any of them, it gives a terrible scream, upon which the other animals separate and flee away from it.[6]

As for al-Qazwīnī himself (end of the thirteenth century), we find in his *ʿAjā'ib al-Makhluqāt* two 'musical' animals represented, in the illustrated copies of this text,[7] not as birds but as quadrupeds, although the text itself does not specify the type of animal. It is only for the second one that we may infer, from the text, that it is a quadruped, as it has a horn. The texts may be translated as follows:

The Sīrānas. It is said that the Sīrānas is a creature which can be found in the thickets of Kabul and Zabulistan. It has twelve holes in its beak. Whenever it breathes, one hears in its breath the sound of the *mizmār* [a woodwind instrument], and it is believed that the *mizmār* was created after this creature's beak. Birds, wild animals and other creatures always gather around the Sīrānas in order to listen to its sound. Sometimes they are overwhelmed by the ecstasy of listening. When the Sīrānas notices that they have swooned away it kills as many as it wants. If it does not want to eat any of them it may be annoyed at them gathering around and so it lets out a fearful screech, from which all the animals flee.

The Shādawār. This is a creature that can be found in the furthest regions of the Byzantine empire. It is also called *ars*. It has a horn, and this horn has forty-two hollow branches. When the wind blows, the air collects inside and one can hear a very sweet sound coming from it. The animals gather around the creature to listen to the sound. It is reported that a horn of one of those animals was given to a king as a gift. He placed it in front of him when the wind blew, whereupon it produced a sound such that those who heard it were almost overwhelmed by delight. From the horn came such a wonderful sound that the king's ears almost stopped out of sheer rapture. Then he put it upside down, and out of the horn came a sound so sad that from hearing it people were almost compelled to weep.[8]

The text in the three Ibn Bakhtīshūʿ manuscripts is peculiar, as it does not strictly conform to the bipartite characteristics plus usefulness structure: the second section is missing in the *Naʿt*, and it is only briefly represented in the Escorial and Princeton manuscripts.

The text in the *Naʿt* is briefer than the other two, but congruent with them:

[Fo. 55r:] (*Characteristics of the arghūn*). The authorities on animals and the interpretation of ancient sources say that this is a sea animal

[fo. 55v] with a large beak in which there are various holes producing a variety of sounds (*Representation of the Arghūn*, and miniature) and melodies so marvellous that they render those who listen unable to move. Some claim that from it the Phrygians derived the reed-pipe (*zamr*), with which they used to cure various illnesses. It is also said that it is a sea animal which produces entrancing sounds and that seafarers call it 'the one who plays the reed-pipe (*zāmir*)'.

A more substantial version is related in the Escorial *Manāfiʿ* (and virtually identical in the Princeton manuscript) as follows:

[Fo. 112r:] *The suryānās, which is the one that plays a wind instrument* (miniature of the *suryānās*). According to the authorities on animals and those of musical science and those who interpret ancient sources, this is a sea bird with a big beak [fo. 112v] in which there are various holes producing a variety of sounds and melodies so marvellous that they render those who listen unable to move. Some claim that from it the Phrygians derived the reed-pipe (*zamr*), with which they used to cure various illnesses. It is also said that it is a sea animal which produces entrancing sounds and that seafarers call it 'the one who plays the reed-pipe (*zāmir*)'. We were told by Yānis ibn Iṣṭīfan, the interpreter who brought a missive from the Byzantine emperor to the noble presence of al-Naṣr (may he reign for ever!), that people heard these sounds on certain islands, tried to find them and encountered walls constructed with holes such that when the wind blew through them one could hear these marvellous sounds. The inhabitants of these islands call this *sīrīnā*. It seems that these people built these walls as a trap so that when this animal heard sounds similar to its own it would go there and in this way it could be hunted. [fo. 113r] Authorities on medical science have spoken of the useful properties of this animal, among which is that its bile, when mixed with a little musk and diluted in water of fleawort in the weight of a *qirāṭ* then being given as a nasal injection to the insane, is marvellously beneficial.

To what extent might this story relate to a real animal as well as being a weaving together of various mythical strands; and might one also suspect contamination with knowledge of mechanical contrivances? The names given already suggest a conflation, indeed a confusion, of ideas of differing origins. In the *Naʿt* we have *arghūn*, suggesting an association with an instrument, the hydraulis, a water-powered organ that was less purely musical than a sonorous part of the world of automata familiar with, for example, al-Jazarī, and in this connection one could well imagine a parallel, in the holes of the beak and the imitative sound-producing wall, with mechanical 'musical' or 'noise-producing' animals, not just in Byzantine times but also in the Islamic period, as, probably, witnessed by the Pisa Griffin.[9] The possibility of such a connection is strengthened by the fact that the *arghūn*/hydraulis was never integrated into Arab musical

practice, remaining a curiosity: it was, essentially, a cultural reference helping to display knowledge of the Byzantine and ancient Greek worlds. It was of interest as a cunning mechanical contrivance, and was either understood as an extremely loud instrument used on the battlefield or misunderstood, revealingly, as a string instrument.[10] The various forms *suryānās* or *sīrīnās* bring us back to wind instrument, suggesting an echo of the Greek siren overlaid on *suryānay* (itself a variant of the more usual *surnāy*), a reed-pipe.[11]

The siren element of the narrative is incontestible, however brief the reference to the seductive voice that enchants those who hear it. As for the instrument on to which the voice is projected, the *nāy* element of the name will later denote a rim-blown flute, but although it is by no means easy to relate the early vocabulary of wind instruments to particular types, it seems likely that *nāy* could also designate a reed instrument, and the probability that the *surnāy* was such an instrument is reinforced by the introduction of the term *zāmir*, both in the narrative and in the title of the Escorial miniature. In more recent times the related forms *mizmār* and *zummāra* have been used to designate single-reed instruments, while *zurna*, *sorna* (*surnāy*) are associated with double-reed instruments of the shawm type. But irrespective of whether a single or double reed was intended, the association is reinforced by the reference to the Phrygians, who are, indeed, reported in Greek sources as having had a particular relationship with the aulos.[12]

Classical authority is, in any case, explicitly invoked at the beginning, through the reference to 'those who interpret ancient sources', and indirectly claimed for the later part, by couching it as information supplied by a contemporary Byzantine visitor, and classical derivations may reasonably be proposed for other elements in the narrative. The siren theme, for example, generates both the identification with a sea bird or animal, mention of seafarers, and the location of the sound lures on islands. Also of ultimately classical origin are the medicinal properties attributed to the reed-pipe, although these could well have been mediated through earlier Islamic texts, as the doctrine of affect/*ta'thīr*, including the notion of the power of music to influence the various humours and hence restore their equilibrium, is one that is discussed by both al-Kindī and the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' and will later be elaborated into a specific theory of musical therapeutics.[13]

What remains is the crucial conversion of the siren into a musical bird. According to the Physiologus and Isidoro di Siviglia, the siren was half-woman and half-bird, of a type similar to a goose. This is the way three sirens are represented in a Roman mosaic of the third century AD within the 'Ulysses and the Sirens' panel: half-woman and half-bird (although evidently not a goose), one holding two aulos, one singing and one holding a lyra.[14] It seems that the image of half-woman and half-fish is a later version that appears in the *Liber monstrorum*.[15]

Particularly instructive is the contemporary portrayal of the *qaqnus* in Farīd al-Dīn *'Aṭṭār's Manṭiq al-Ṭair* ('The Speech of the Birds'):

There is the Qaqnus, a peerless bird, heart-enrapturing;
This bird's abode in Hindustan.
It has a strong beak of astonishing length,
Like a reed-pipe, in it many apertures;
There are about a hundred holes in its beak.
It has no mate: it functions entirely virginally.
There is in every stop a different note,
Beneath every note of its, a different mistery.
When on all the stops it moans its plaintive song,
On its account birds and fishes are filled with ecstasy.
All the birds fall mute; In rapture at its lament, senseless do they fall.
There was a philosopher, he took to its harmonies:
The art of music from its singing he took.
The years of its life were about a thousand.
It clearly knew the time of its death.
When, the time of dying, it divorced its heart from itself,
Round itself it collected ten or more loads of brushwood bundles.
In the midst of all this kindling it set up a great commotion;
It emitted a hundred notes, its own mornful dirge;
Then from each of those stops, for its pure soul
Another keening wail, filled with awful grief, it uttered.
While from every hole, like the paid mourner,
It made a different lament in another key,
In the middle of the dirge for the sorrow of death,
All the time it was seized with trembling like a leaf.
At its shrieking all the birds of the air,
And at its piping all the beasts of the field
Came towards it as the onlookers.
Their hearts all at once divorced from the world:
Because of its grieving that day in its agony,
A multitude of living creatures with it would die.
All at its laments into confusion fell.
Some through lack of strength did expire.
It was a most amazing day, that day of its;
Tears of blood dripped at its soul-searing wail.
Then, when its life reached the final breath,
Its wings and flight feathers would it flap backwards and forwards.
A fire sprang out from under its pinions.
Then this fire changed the phoenix's state:
The fire quickly falling into the kindling faggots,
So that it flares up, completely to set the firewood alight.
The bird and the wood both turn to embers.
After the embers come the ashes too.
When no live embers are left to be seen,
A phoenix rises from the ashes to be seen.
Once the fire reduces that kindling to cinders,
From the midst rises up a baby Qaqnus.[16]

The parallels with the text of the bestiaries are striking. But what we encounter here is an actual identification, and a conflation of the phoenix legend with that of the swan-song.

As the bestiary texts nowhere identify a particular species, we need to turn to the two miniatures to see if there is any reflex of ʿAṭṭār's identification with the swan or, more generally, whether there was agreement as to what sort of bird this was thought to be.[17]

The Miniatures

The miniature in the *Naʿt* is very impressive (Plate 13). It is of a light-blue bird with the characteristic gold roundels to mark the upper part of the wings. There is only a red line to mark the lower part of the miniature, but despite the absence of landscape elements which would have given scale, the bird depicted is clearly meant to be rather large, as indeed occupies a large part of the page. Considered in relation to the other birds, the features that may provide identificatory clues are body shape, beak and feet. With regard to the feet, it may be noted that text and miniature are discrepant: for what is described as a seabird one would expect webbed feet, but although webbed feet were certainly part of the painter's repertoire, being given on the duck (fo. 10r), the feet of the *arghūn* are the generalised claw type given for all other birds, predatory or not. As far as the shape of the body is concerned, it is to be connected not with birds of prey, but, rather, with the heron, crane, duck or hen.

The gold beak has numerous holes in it, represented by black dots, and its shape is curved, similar to most other birds depicted in the manuscript, and, unlike the body, is not connected with that of the duck, but rather with birds of prey such as the falcon or the eagle (fos 29v and 27r).

In the Escorial *Manāfiʿ*, as is usual, the miniature is framed by thin blue lines with decorative devices at the corners, and the bird is set against a gold background (Plate 14). It is again rather large, but this time orange in colour. The neck and body bear a resemblance to a goose, a duck or a swan, but again it has not got webbed feet, but feet with claws. The beak is particularly long here, similar to a goose and some types of duck, thickening towards the end. The holes in the beak are rendered as small, regular circles. In this manuscript too webbed feet are only given to the duck and the goose (fo. 16r).

Although much more could be said about the miniatures, their composition remains analogous to that of the text, differing only in the range of motifs available to the painter. The text is a complex combination of multiple themes, shaping into a new form of narrative elements derived from myths of the sea and the sky, of sound and enchantment, endlessly reprocessed since classical antiquity and, for all the gaps in documentation, leaving a trail of textual residues that allow for detailed scholarly investigation of connections and origins. In echoing this material the miniatures also call upon a repertoire of

pictorial conventions for which analogies and antecedents can be located, but have the harder task of creating a depiction of the imaginary through a playful combination of a relatively limited stock of visual conventions. Moreover, the imaginary elements to which the miniature must respond are primarily narrative: to help visualise the creature the only clues the text offers are that it is a seabird and has a large beak. Although by no means ornithologically naive (herons are not portrayed like grouse nor hawks like geese), the various bird miniatures can be viewed as variations on a set of types, each characterised by the standardised shapes of its various body parts and by size. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that both painters should have settled for a bird of imposing size and with the substantial plump body-type associated with ducks and geese, and that as much in order to accommodate the depiction of numerous holes as to follow the statements about the size of the beak both painters emphasise this feature, even if differing in the type chosen. That the feet of this seabird are not webbed can then be read as a further clue: if all the morphological features (apart from the holes in the beak) occur in the depiction of real birds, it is the abnormal combination of them that signals the imaginary.

Notes

1. Robert Hillenbrand, 'Mamluk and Ilkhanid Bestiaries: Convention and Experiment', *Ars Orientalis* 20 (1991), 149–87.
2. For an account of the text and textual tradition of the so-called Ibn Bakhtīshūʿ bestiaries, see Anna Contadini, 'The *Kitāb Naʿt al-Hayawān* (Book on the Characteristics of Animals, BL, Or. 2784) and the "Ibn Bakhtīshūʿ" Illustrated Bestiaries', Ph.D. thesis, SOAS, University of London, 1992, and Contadini, 'The Ibn Buḫtīšūʿ Bestiary Tradition: The Text and its Sources', *Medicina nei Secoli. Arte e Scienza*, 6/2 (1994), 349–64.
3. For the *Naʿt (Kitāb naʿt al-hayawān)*, British Library, Or. 2782, datable to c. 1220, see Anna Contadini, 'The *Kitāb Naʿt al-Hayawān*' and Contadini, 'A Bestiary Tale: Text and Image of the Unicorn in the *Kitāb naʿt al-ḥayawān*' (British Library, Or. 2784), *Muqarnas* 20, 2003, pp. 17–33. For the *Kitāb manāfiʿ al-ḥayawān*, probably Damascus, dated 755/1354 in the Biblioteca Real of San Lorenzo del Escorial, Ms 898, see Contadini, 'The *Kitāb Manāfiʿ al-Hayawān* in the Escorial Library', *Islamic Art* 3 (1988–9), 33–57.
4. Princeton, University Library, Ar. Ms. Garrett 1065, fo. 175v.
5. Ibn Bakhtīshūʿ, *Kitāb manāfiʿ al-ḥayawān*, dated 700/1300, probably Egypt, now in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, Ar. 2782: see Anna Contadini, 'The *Kitāb Naʿt al-Hayawān*', 166–70; also *A l'ombre d' Avicenne: la médicine au temps des califes*, exhibition at the Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris, 1996, no. 32 with col. pls at 125–6 and 232; *Kitāb manāfiʿ al-ḥayawān*, in Persian, dated between 1295 and 1299, produced in Maragha, now in New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, M. 500, fo. 54r: see Contadini, 'The *Kitāb Naʿt al-Hayawān*', 153–61; Barbara Schmitz, *Islamic and Indian Manuscripts and Paintings in the Pierpont Morgan Library*, (New York, 1997), cat. no. 1.

6. *Al-Damīrī's Hayāt al-Hayawān (A Zoological Lexicon)*, tr. from the Arabic by A. Ś. G. Jayakar (London and Bombay, 1908), vol. 2, pt 1, 96.
7. See, for example, the Qazwīnī manuscript in the National Library in Munich, Cod. Arab. 464, fo. 181v, where miniatures of both the Sīrānas and the Shādawār are found. For this manuscript and its illustrations, see H. C. Graf von Bothmer, 'Die illustrationen des Münchner Qazwīnī von 1280 AD', Ph.D. dissertation, Universität München, 1971. For reproductions of the Shādawār, which is sometimes identified with the unicorn, from various Qazwīnī manuscripts, see Richard Ettinghausen, *The Unicorn*, Freer Gallery of Art Occasional Papers, vol. 1, no. 3, Washington, 1950, pls 42 and 43.
8. Ferdinand Wüstenfeld, *Zakarija Ben Muhammed Ben Mahmud el-Cazwini's Kosmographie*, Dieterische Buchhandling (Göttingen, 1849), 397 and 398 (Arabic text).
9. See Anna Contadini, Richard Camber and Peter Northover, 'Beasts that Roared: The Pisa Griffin and the New York Lion', in W. Ball and L. Harrow (ed), *Cairo to Kabul: Afghan and Islamic Studies Presented to Ralph Pinder-Wilson* London, 2002, 65–83.
10. Henry George Farmer, 'Ibn Khurdadhbih on Musical Instruments', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1928) 509–18 (esp. 512 and 516).
11. Henry George Farmer, *Studies in Oriental Musical Instruments*, first series (London, 1931), 56–8, also mentions the name *suryānayi* and says that this form occurs in al-Mas'ūdī and in the *Kitāb al-mūsīqī al-kabīr* of al-Fārābī (d. c. 950). Also, he says that 'As far back as 1840, Kosegarten suggested that it was intended for surnāyī' (57). He suggests that *suryānayi* would appear to have been the original form, and it was due to the fact that it was a Syrian instrument (*nāy rūmī*), the word being derived apparently from *Suryā* (Syria) and *nayi* or *nāy* (reed). The Syrians had long been noted for their 'wood-wind' instruments (58).
12. M. L. West, *Ancient Greek Music* (Oxford, 1992), 330–1: 'The aulos is first attested at the end of the eighth century [BC]. From at least the fifth century the Greeks believed that they owed the introduction of aulos music to a Phrygian or Mysian piper called Olympus . . . Another Phrygian, Hyagnis or Agnis, was held to [331] have been the first aulete of all . . . But certainly the Greeks felt the aulos to be especially appropriate to the Phrygian mode, and Phrygian slave auletes were not unfamiliar figures in Archaic Greek society.'
13. See Eckhard Neubauer, 'Arabische Anleitungen zur Musiktherapie', *Zeitschrift für Geschichte der Arabisch-Islamischen Wissenschaften* 6 (1990) [pub. 1991], 227–72.
14. M. Blanchard-Lemée et al., *Mosaics of Roman Africa: Floor Mosaics from Tunisia* (London, 1996) fig. 185.
15. 'De Sirenis. Sirenae sunt marinae puellae quae navigantes pulcherrima forma et cantus decipiunt dulcitudine. Et a capite usque ad umbelicum sunt corpore virginali, et humano generi simillimae: squamosas tamen piscium caudas habent, quibus in gurgite semper latent', as in *Liber monstrorum de diversis generibus* ed. C. Bologna (Milan, 1977), 42, no.6.
16. Farīdu'd-Dīn ʿAṭṭār, *The Speech of the Birds. Concerning Migration to the Real. The Mantiqu't-Tair*, presented in English by P. W. Avery, The Islamic Texts Society, Cambridge 1998, 208–10. For the Persian text, see the edition by Goharin (Tehran, 1374), 129–31. About the name Qaqnus, Avery gives the following explanation: 'Qaqnus or Qaqnūs, for the Greek *kúknos*, Latin *cycnus*, or *cygnus*, the "swan", especially

famed in ancient legend for its dying song, but the word might also be translated "phoenix". For, in addition to its having the power to produce amazing music by letting the wind on a mountain-top blow through, some accounts say, as many as three-hundred and sixty holes in its powerful beak, it is a bird that, after living a thousand years, collects a mound of brushwood, and then by ecstatically flapping its wings, produces fire which lights the faggots so that the bird is burnt away, but it parthenogenetically produces an egg that is left in the ashes so that, in its offspring, this bird may rise again.' See also M. H. Ibn al-Khalaf al-Tabrizī, *Burhān-i Qāṭiʿ*, ed. M. Moʿīn, 4 vols (Tehran, 1951–6), 3:1535–6.

17. C. R. Bravo-Villasante, *Libro de las Utilidades de los Animales* (Madrid, 1980), 100, identifies the bird as a pelican, but there is no supporting evidence for this identification either lexicographical or textual. The story of the pelican as is found in the medieval bestiaries of the west and in their predecessor the *Physiologus* is totally different from the *suryanas/arghūn* story in our bestiaries. In the *Physiologus* we find the very famous story which will then be repeated almost unchanged in the medieval bestiaries of the west: that the Pelican greatly loves its young, but when these grow up they rebel or attack their parents, who, becoming very angry, kill them. But after three days the parents regret what they have done and so the mother picks at her right side so that blood flows all over the young and in this way they are revived. This, in the moralising *Physiologus* and bestiaries, is a metaphor for Christ, who shed his blood to save humanity and so forgave its mortal sins.

Plate 13 *The* arghūn *(or swan-phoenix), Ibn Bakhtīshūʿ,* Kitāb naʿt al-ḥawayān, *probably North Jazira, c. 1220. Miniature 80 × 120mm.*

(© British Library, London, Or. 2784, fo. 55v.)

Plate 14 *The* suryānās *(or swan-phoenix), Ibn Bakhtīshūʿ,* Kitāb manafiʿ al-ḥawayān, *probably Damascus, dated 755/1354. Miniature 72 × 120mm.*

(Biblioteca Real, San Lorenzo del Escorial, MS 898, fo. 112r.)

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