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Before and After *Kalila wa-Dimna*:

An Introduction to the Special Issue on Animals, *Adab*, and Fictivity

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The Abbasid-era textual tradition is full of animals. The variety and range of narratives about animals are brought together here in this special issue. Although *Kalila wa-Dimna* is certainly the most famous work to feature talking animals and fictive humans, it is by no means the only one. This special issue of the *Journal of Abbasid Studies* looks beyond *Kalila wa-Dimna* by bringing together articles engaging with this broader tradition of putting animals to work in Arabic texts and, quite often, giving them the ability to talk. These papers are the first fruits of a 2019 workshop at the Freie Universität Berlin entitled *Animals, Adab, and Fictivity*, organized by Beatrice Gruendler and myself under the auspices of Beatrice Gruendler's ERC project entitled *AnonymClassic*. (A second special issue will consist of articles

devoted more specifically to *Kalīla wa-Dimna*.)¹

The order of these two special issues, with the studies of *Kalīla wa-Dimna* coming second rather than first, might seem like putting the cart before the (speaking or non-speaking) horse. After all, many of the articles in this first issue take up texts that engage with or diverge in important ways from the tales of *Kalīla wa-Dimna*. The reasoning for this unconventional ordering is as follows: *Kalīla wa-Dimna* appeared in Arabic in the 2nd/8th century, translated and adapted from the Middle Persian by Ibn al-Muqaffa‘ (d. 137/755 or 139/756), the famous secretary and translator who served both Umayyads and Abbasids. However, the earliest extant manuscript copy of *Kalīla wa-Dimna* that can be firmly dated is Ayasofya MS 4095c, now housed in the Süleymaniye library. On the basis of its colophon, we know that *Kalīla wa-Dimna* was copied in the summer of 618/1221, over four centuries after Ibn al-Muqaffa‘’s death.² Thus, the manuscript evidence for *Kalīla wa-Dimna* actually comes at the tail end of the Abbasid period.

It is not unusual in itself for a long gap to exist between the life of the author and the

¹ The completion of the workshop and this publication were made possible through the support of the *Kalīla and Dimna – AnonymClassic* research project directed by Beatrice Gruendler and hosted at Freie Universität Berlin. The project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under grant agreement No 742 635. Financial support for the workshop was also provided by the Dahlem Junior Host Program, DHC (Freie Universität Berlin).

² This manuscript was the basis of ‘Azzām’s edition of *Kalīla wa-Dimna*, first published in 1941, reprinted many times, most recently in a free online edition by Hindāwī press. The colophon is at Ayasofya MS 4095c, 242r. Note that there are two systems of folio numbering, one in which the first folio of *Kalīla wa-Dimna* is folio 1 and the other in which it is folio 137. The text of *Kalīla wa-Dimna* was incorporated into a composite manuscript, which includes the commentary of al-Tibrīzī (d. 502/1109) on the *Mu‘allaqāt* and a didactic poem of Ibn Durayd (d. 321/933).

earliest manuscript evidence in Arabic textual culture. However, *Kalīla wa-Dimna*'s temporal lag is not a mere bit of trivia. The case is special because there is a high degree of manuscript variance in the scores of manuscript copies and print editions of *Kalīla wa-Dimna* that survive from the 7th/13th century down to the present. Copyists often acted as anonymous coauthors, reshaping the text by adding, subtracting, and rewording the text that they found in their exemplar(s), participating in what Beatrice Gruendler has called *mouvance par écrit*.³

The methodological challenge is as follows: The copyist-coauthors who produced the surviving versions of *Kalīla wa-Dimna* were themselves active readers of the broader tradition of writing about animals, which itself was often responding directly or indirectly to various versions of *Kalīla wa-Dimna*. This temporal and textual conundrum should not, however, be overstated. The broad strokes and many of the narrative details are identical across almost all copies, but significant changes in wording, creative rephrasings, and lengthy interpolations abound. The producers of these interventions and elaborations were writing with a sophisticated awareness of how Abbasid texts were *putting animals to work* in creative and sometimes surprising (to us) ways. Theological, philosophical, political, and imaginatively fictive books about animals were available to the copyists and readers of our earliest 7th/13th-century manuscripts. From al-Jāhīz (d. 255/869) to the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' (fl. c. 4th/10th centuries) to al-Ma'arrī (d. 499/1058), there was no shortage of animal talk — both in the

3. Gruendler, Relation and redaction (forthcoming). See also Idem., Les versions arabes de *Kalīla wa-Dimna*. Riedel, *Kalīla wa-Dimna*.

sense of talk about animals and in the sense of talking animals.

The articles of this special issue therefore focus on these other animal texts that are both before and after *Kalīla wa-Dimna*. That is, they were mainly written or compiled after the life of Ibn al-Muqaffa' but before the first surviving manuscripts of his *Kalīla wa-Dimna*. It is worth dwelling here for a moment on the curious conundrums occasioned by this temporal ambiguity, which can be illustrated with reference to the *Maqāmāt* of al-Ḥarīrī (d. 516/1122), a text with a remarkably stable textual tradition.⁴ Al-Ḥarīrī includes a typology of readers in his exordium in which he contrasts his anticipated ignorant and fawning readers with the ideal readers who use their intellect. That intelligent reader, al-Ḥarīrī says, will consider his *Maqāmāt* to be like the invented stories of about non-speaking beasts (*al-'ajmawāt*) and inanimate objects.⁵ This passage is taken by some medieval commentators and modern scholars to refer to *Kalīla wa-Dimna*, supposedly as a way of justifying the *Maqāmāt*'s fictionality, but it also arguably operates as a signal to the reader about how to appropriately interpret the text. In the Arabic manuscripts of *Kalīla wa-Dimna*, there is a similar statement about about the ideal reader. Like the *Maqāmāt*, it comes at the end of an introduction attributed to Ibn al-Muqaffa' in which the translator offers a series of warnings and exhortations to read *Kalīla wa-Dimna* with care and attention. The last of these warnings contrasts the ideal philosopher-reader who understands the "most remote" aim of the text,

4. Keegan, Commentators. Idem, Elsewhere Lies its Meaning (forthcoming).

5. al-Ḥarīrī, *Maqāmāt*, 5.

while other readers are merely amused by the stories or the illustrations.

Are these two accounts of the ideal reader and their careless counterparts related?

Perhaps. One might assume that al-Ḥarīrī drew inspiration from Ibn al-Muqaffa's exordium.

But this "influence," if it exists, might very well run in the other direction. The earliest

surviving manuscript of al-Ḥarīrī's *Maqāmāt* was made in 504/1111, while the earliest dated

manuscript of *Kalīla wa-Dimna* comes from 618/1221, over a century later.⁶ What is more, this

passage on the ideal reader is entirely absent in that most ancient manuscript of *Kalīla wa-*

Dimna! Instead, the earliest attestation of this passage is found in an undated manuscript that

scholars have identified on the basis of its numerous illustrations as belonging to the first half

of the 7th/13th century (Paris BNF Arabe 3465).⁷ I transcribe and translate below that version

of the passage, following as closely as possible the orthography found there, which differs from

modern standard orthography.⁸

وينبغي للناظر في امر هذا الكتاب ان يعلم انه ينقسم علي اربعة اغراض احدها ما قصد فيه علي

وضعه علي السنة البهايم غير الناطقة ليسارع الى قرآته اهل الهزل من الشبان لتستمال به قلوبهم لان

6. MacKay, *Certificates*. Keegan, *Commentators*.

7. Dating is based on its similarity with a securely dated and illustrated manuscript of al-Ḥarīrī's *Maqāmāt*, Paris BNF Arabe 6094. It was provisionally considered by Buchthal to be earlier than those in Arabe 6094 due to the "higher artistic quality" in the illustrations of the *Maqāmāt*. Contadini's dating to the first half of the 7th/13th century seems more judicious. Buchthal, "Hellenistic" Miniatures, 131. Contadini, *Ayyubid Illustrated Manuscripts*, 184. For debates on this manuscript, see Contadini, *A World of Beasts*, 57-58, note 10.

8. Paris BNF Arabe 3465, *Kalīla wa-Dimna*, 33v.

الغرض النوادر من حيل الحيوانات والثاني اظهار خيالات الحيوان بصنوف الاصباغ والالوان ليكون
أنسًا لقلوب الملوك ويكون حرصهم عليه اشد للنزهة والثالث ان يكون هذه الصفة فيتخذها الملوك
والسوقة فيكثر بذلك انتساحه ولا يبطل فيخلق على مرور الايام ولينتفع بذلك المصور والناسخ ابدًا
والغرض الرابع الاقصى وذلك مخصوص عن الفيلسوف خاصة.

The one who considers the substance of this book ought to know that it is divided into four aims. The first of these concerns that which is intended by placing it on the tongues of non-speaking animals so that youths given to jest (*hazl*) would rush to read it and their hearts might be won over by it because the aim is delightful anecdotes (*nawādir*) about the stratagems of animals. The second [aim] is to display depictions (*khayālāt*) of animals in various hues and colors so that it might delight the hearts of kings and that their desire for it might be stronger by virtue of its entertaining quality. The third [aim] is that, for this reason, kings and commoners will take it up and thus it will increasingly be copied and not fall into disuse and become shabby over the course of time, thus benefiting the illustrators and copyists in perpetuity. The fourth aim is the most remote and that is reserved especially for the philosophers.

This passage also exists with variations in a number of other manuscripts, many of them illustrated. Its absence in many unillustrated manuscripts, including the earliest dated

manuscript which also lacks illustrations, is suggestive. Might this passage have been interpolated by a copyist who knew that his manuscript was destined to be illustrated, or by one who was aware of the tradition of illustrated *Kalīla wa-Dimna* manuscripts?⁹

Whatever the case may be, this passage cannot confidently be associated with Ibn al-Muqaffa' and his supposed intention to have his book illustrated. It cannot therefore serve as solid evidence for illustrated manuscripts in the 2nd/8th century.¹⁰ Indeed, illustrated copies of the text probably did not emerge in Ibn al-Muqaffa's 2nd/8th century but somewhat later. Dagmar Riedel has proposed that they emerged as early as the 4th/10th century.¹¹ Over the centuries, numerous copies of *Kalīla wa-Dimna* were produced both with and without this passage.

Both the bird's-eye view of the contours of the tradition and the more worm's-eye

9. Copyists of illustrated manuscripts produced the text first and left blanks in the places where illustrations would be added later. Sometimes these illustrations were never added, as is the case with the very next manuscript in the Bibliothèque Nationale collection, Paris BNF Arabe 3466. As with Paris BNF Arabe 3465, it is undated, but it does contain a reading note (*muṭāla'a*) dated to Rabī' I, 854/April-May 1450, which means it must have been copied before that date (*pace* de Blois, *Burzōy's Voyage*, 67). In this later manuscript, yet another passage has been interpolated prior to the one translated above, emphasizing the way in which copyists freely engaged in the accumulation of reading directives. The interpolated text reads as follows: "I have put forth this preface so that one does not suppose that the philosophers of India composed this text for its exterior sense without knowledge of its inner sense or that they composed it for subjects rather than rulers or for children rather than adults. The one who examines this book ought to divide it into four aims..." Paris BNF Arabe, 3466, folios 51-52.

10. Rice, *The Oldest Illustrated Arabic Manuscript*, 208-209. O'Kane, *Kalīla wa-Dimna*. Idem., *Early Persian Painting*, 28. Luyster, *Kalīla wa-Dimna* illustrations, EI3.

11. Riedel, *Kalīla wa-Dimna*. A report from the year 225/839-840 in al-Ṭabarī's history refers to a manuscript of *Kalīla wa-Dimna* that had ornamentation (*ḥilya*) made of gold, jewels, and brocade (*dībāj*), but the story only calls the book ornamented (*muḥallā*) and was not necessarily illustrated. Al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh* IX, 107-108; al-Ṭabarī, *History*, XXXIII, 187-188. The earliest illustrated manuscripts to survive come from the 7th/13th century.

insight into the vagaries of *mouvance* are only possible due to the tireless efforts of the team working with Beatrice Gruendler in the AnonymClassic project. They have collected scores of manuscripts, and they have transcribed and compared over a dozen versions of Ibn al-Muqaffa's introduction using a digital interface as they prepare a synoptic digital edition of *Kalīla wa-Dimna*. The digital edition and the forthcoming research on the complex textual field of *Kalīla wa-Dimna* will offer new insights into the unfolding of the *Kalīla wa-Dimna* textual tradition from the 7th/13th century down to the age of print.¹² Also of special note is a new edition and translation by Michael Fishbein and James E. Montgomery, due to be published in November of 2021, which will offer a new perspective on a particularly interesting moment in the *Kalīla wa-Dimna* textual tradition by focusing on a manuscript copy of the 9th/15th century, British Library MS Or. 4044.¹³

Returning to the special issue at hand, there is an even more obvious reason to begin with the broader animal tradition in Arabic, rather than with *Kalīla wa-Dimna*. Namely,

12. Research so far has identified "continua" of related manuscripts. See Gruendler et al., An Interim Report. Earlier editions of *Kalīla wa-Dimna* included the passage about the ideal reader. For instance, it is found in Silvestre de Sacy's 1816 edition, upon which Wyndham Knatchbull's 1819 translation was based, as well as in Louis Cheikho's 1905 edition. It is not to be found in the 1941 edition of 'Abd al-Wahhāb 'Azzām, which was based on the previously unknown Ayasofya MS 4095c. *Kalīla wa-Dimna* (de Sacy), 58. *Kalīla wa-Dimna* (Cheikho), 52. Cheikho does alert his reader to the rather extensive variation in Ibn al-Muqaffa's introduction and the fact that this passage and much else is absent from his oldest manuscript. Ibid, 46.

¹³ Many thanks to Michael Fishbein for sharing details about this new edition prior to publication and for offering very helpful comments on a draft of this introduction. As he notes, this manuscript does not contain the typology of readers discussed here or any discussion of illustrated manuscripts. However, it is a composite manuscript that contains both a copy of *Kalīla wa-Dimna* and then a copy of the *Subwān al-muṭā'* of Ibn Ḍafar, discussed below.

writing about talking animals in Arabic precedes the 2nd/8th-century translation of *Kalīla wa-Dimna*. The essays gathered here make ample reference to the animals of the Qur'ān and of the *ḥadīth*. In both cases, we find animals being given the power of speech. In Sūra 27 of the Qur'ān, the Prophet Solomon is taught the language of the birds (Q 27.15). In fact, the hoopoe speaks for himself in the Qur'ān, and other non-avian species likewise speak and are understood. As Solomon's army of jinn, humans, and birds gather, an ant addresses his fellows: "O Ants! Enter your dwellings so that Solomon and his armies will not trample you while they are unaware" (Q 27.18). Solomon also understands the speech of the ant, so he "smiled, laughing at her speech" (Q 27.19).¹⁴

The talking animals in the Qur'ān bring us to the rather fraught question of fictivity, the third term in our workshop title. I use the term "fictivity" to signify a more expansive sense of imaginative writing that our own notion of "fiction" (as opposed to "non-fiction") usually implies. It has often been supposed that there is a generalized hostility to "fiction" or simply an absence of the concept altogether in the Arabic Islamic tradition. That view has more recently been called into question, and several contributions to this special issue and the next provide important insights into the various ways in which fictivity has been theorized across

14. For an extensive overview of animals in the Qur'ān and selected exegetes, see Tlili, *Animals in the Qur'an*, 138-220. Animals are also common to other traditions, which cross-pollinated with the Islamic tradition. Ginzberg, *Legends*, IV, 123-176; Ziolkowski, *Talking Animals*; Stone, *Reading the Hebrew Bible*. On the relationship between the Haggadah and Islamic lore, see Heller, Ginzberg's *Legends*; Pregill, *Golden Calf*. The reference to Ginzberg is thanks to Michael Fishbein.

the Abbasid textual tradition.¹⁵ In addition, it has been suggested that talking animals are an unmistakable sign of fictivity in Arabic literature, but the situation is more complex in light of the Qurʾān, the *ḥadīth* corpus, and the Islamic interpretive tradition. As Jeannie Miller has pointed out, al-Jāḥiẓ argues that speaking animals as reported in the Qurʾān are a historical reality, even though he says that only humans possess intellect (*ʿaql*) and moral responsibility (*taklīf*).¹⁶ By contrast, the Ashʿarī theologian and exegete Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210) explains the speaking ant by saying that "it is not implausible (*ghayr mustabʿad*) because God is capable of creating within [the ant] intellect and speech (*nuṭq*)."¹⁷ It is certainly true that some instances of talking animals were understood as fictive, but other talking animals were understood to be part of attested reality!

Geert Jan van Gelder's article takes up a largely overlooked genre of Arabic writing: the very short animal story. His survey of material shows that speaking animals fulfil many functions, from the philological explication to the hagiographic narrative to the moralizing tale to the "just-so story." Many of his examples are drawn from pre-Islamic lore and were ascribed by Abbasid compilers to "the time of *al-Fiṭaḥ*!... when stones were still wet, when all

15. A detailed discussion can be found in Keegan, *Commentarial Acts*, 231-302. Further discussions of fictivity can be found in Noy, *The Emergence of *ʿIlm al-Bayān**, 269-302. See especially the contributions of Ali Adnan Sakr and Johannes Stephan in the forthcoming special issue. Some sources for the traditional view include Bonebakker, *Nihil Obstat*; Heinrichs, *Arabische Dichtung*, 40-43; Drory, *Three Attempts to Legitimize Fiction*; Idem., *Models and Contacts*, 14-57; Leder, *Conventions of Fictional Narration*; Zakharia, *Norme et fiction*.

16. Miller, *Man is not the only speaking animal*, 96.

17. al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr*, XXIV, 187.

things could speak." According to some, this period took place in a time before the creation of humans, although one story suggests that the softness of stones in that time is what allowed the Prophet Abraham to leave a footprint at the devotional site in Mecca known as the Station of Abraham (*Maqām Ibrāhīm*).¹⁸ Van Gelder also takes up some of al-Ma‘arrī’s very short animal stories in *al-Qā’if*, a text that only survives in excerpts. We return to al-Ma‘arrī’s long text on talking animals in the final contribution of the issue.

Ignacio Sanchez also makes reference to "the time of *al-Fiṭaḥl*" in his article where he offers a new interpretation of the animal story composed by the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’*, known in English as *The Case of Animals versus Man before the King of the Jinn*. This complex narrative epistle has invited a number of divergent interpretations, particularly with regard to the surprising conclusion. The story recounts the case of the enslaved animals of a particular island who are endowed with human speech. They present their case for freedom before the king of the jinn, and the epistle narrates the events and arguments of the trial. All the arguments presented seem to weigh heavily in favor of the animals, but there is a stunning reversal at the end. Sanchez analyzes various directives given to the reader of this tale while drawing especially on the Arabic tradition of stories about the Prophets (*qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā’*) and, in particular, the depiction of the pre-Adamic era of *al-Fiṭaḥl*.

18. al-Tha‘ālibī, *Thimār al-qulūb*, 643. Thank you to Geert Jan van Gelder whose contribution to this special issue brought this passage to my attention.

Guy Ron-Gilboa's contribution focuses on the mythical creature called the 'Anqā' and the different functions of this creature across various genres. Ron-Gilboa points out that this animal exists textually and intertextually, without an actual referent in the world. The 'Anqā' is used as a translational vessel into which was poured mythical creatures from other traditions, as a metaphor for something scarce or non-existent, and thus as an important signifier of the imaginary. By exploring the 'Anqā's "semiotic pliability," this article also reveals the richly intertextual world of imagination, leading us from the poetry of Abū Nuwās (d. ca. 200/815) to the wonders of al-Qazwīnī (d. 682/1283) to the Sufi visions of the 'Anqā' described by Ibn al-'Arabī (d. 638/1240). Depending on how the 'Anqā' was put to work in the text of a given author, it might signify non-existence or, for someone like Ibn al-'Arabī, be the very stuff of existence.

Francesca Bellino's article explores a very different way in which the fictive and the real intermingle through a discussion of the *Sulwān al-muṭā'* of Ibn Zafar (d. 565 or 567-68/1170 or 1172). This mirror for princes work is similar in some ways to *Kalīla wa-Dimna* in that it contains talking animals and fictive, anonymous humans. However, the work departs in significant ways from the model of *Kalīla wa-Dimna* in its organization and in its introduction of historically attested characters from the Umayyad and Abbasid past. To illustrate the proper course of political action, characters sometimes offer up stories with a mix of anonymous and historically attested characters and at other times narrate stories of talking

animals. The article examines both the text's theory of politics and its varied reception in the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods.

Kevin Blankinship's contribution also discusses a text in which historically attested figures appear to share a space with fictive ones, although in a rather different mode. Blankinship examines the question of fictivity through a study of al-Ma'arrī's (d. 449/1057) *Risālat al-ṣāhil wa-l-shāhij*, one of his lesser-known works. As Blankinship shows, this epistle features talking animals with ambiguous ontological statuses, but it is language itself that becomes the star of the show, much like al-Ḥarīrī's *Maqāmāt*. The epistle dramatizes a mule's petition to the Fatimid governor of Aleppo 'Azīz al-Dawla (d. 413/1022) who is also al-Ma'arrī's addressee from whom he is seeking familial tax relief. However, as this article shows, the text pushes against any straightforward allegorical reading and plays with the limits and misprisions of language and biology while invoking the language of Ibn Sīnā (d. 428/1037) on essence and existence.

All these articles are important contributions to our understanding of the broad tradition of putting animals to work in imaginative ways in Abbasid texts. They also are (and were at the Berlin workshop in 2019) interconnected in numerous ways. I would like to express my sincere thanks to all those who participated in and helped to organize the workshop, particularly the co-organizer Beatrice Gruendler, the indefatigable administrative guru Agnes Kloocke, and the entire AnonymClassic team. Thanks are also very much due to

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