

## VARIEDADES

### MANGY CAMELS, NOBLE STALLIONS AND THE DISREPUTABLE TAIL FAT OF LIZARDS. ANIMALS IN IBN GARCÍA'S EPISTLE ON THE *ŠU'ŪBIYYA*

CAMELLOS SARNOSOS, NOBLES SEMENTALES Y LA  
MALA FAMA DE LA GRASA DE LA COLA DE LOS  
LAGARTOS. ANIMALES EN LA EPÍSTOLA SOBRE LA  
*ŠU'ŪBIYYA* DE IBN GARCÍA

GÖRAN LARSSON  
Göteborg University

#### Part I

[...] for there was no better way of describing human qualities in a vivid manner than to compare them with those of the animals, with whose behaviour and properties the inhabitants of the desert were bound to be very familiar, as on that knowledge in many respects their very existence depended.<sup>1</sup>

The above quotation is taken from Lothar Kopf's introduction to his translation of Ibn Qutayba's *'Uyūn al-Akḥbār* ("Book of useful knowledge") and illustrates clearly that animals are often used as vessels of communication in Arabic literature, conveying a deep symbolic and metaphorical meaning that goes far beyond zoology. Irrespective of their importance in Arabic and Islamic traditions, to the best of my knowledge animals have rarely been analysed or viewed as symbolic and literary epitomes. Animals in Arabic literature have rather been studied in relation to influences of the Greek sciences or the Bible.<sup>2</sup> Although their symbolic function is often multi-dimensio-

<sup>1</sup> Kopf, L., *The 'Uyūn al-Akḥbār of Ibn Qutayba*, Leiden, 1949, 5.

<sup>2</sup> For the classical period al-Jāḥiẓ's (776/868) *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān* is indispensable for the study of Arab zoology, and especially for animal names. But other texts should, of course, also be considered, for example, Ibn Qutayba's (828/889) *'Uyūn al-Akḥbār*, and

nal and difficult to grasp, it is clear that animals that feature in literary treatises, poetry or theological texts repeatedly bear meanings that are important to analyse. Carefully analysed literary references to animals can, for example, cast light on prevailing cultural norms as well as specific historical events.

One example of how animals might be used to emphasise political and religious messages can be found in the eleventh-century *shu'ūbiyya* epistle attributed to the Andalusian poet Abū 'Āmir Aḥmad b. Gharsiya al-Bashkunsī (commonly referred to as Ibn García). This writer, who is reported to have lived during the turbulent period of the Taifa kings in Denia in al-Andalus, made extensive use of animals in his written attack on Arab Muslim culture. Since I have dealt with both Ibn García and the *shu'ūbiyya* in al-Andalus elsewhere, this short article is primarily focused on the animals in the *risāla* associated with the above-named writer.

To be able to analyse Ibn García's epistle and his use of animals as symbolic epitomes, it is necessary to have a basic understanding of the *shu'ūbiyya* controversy. First of all, it should be stressed that the so-called *shu'ūbiyya* movement can hardly be seen as united and homogeneous. On the contrary, it was highly heterogeneous in its nature and "we are not sure whether the name *shu'ūbiyya* was applied to it by the partisans or the opponents."<sup>3</sup> Although the literature associated with the *shu'ūbiyya* cause has been understood and analysed along a number of different lines, it is clear that most writers who were in favour of the ideas presented by the *shu'ūbiyya* (or more ac-

ceptable books such as Ibn Muqaffa's *Khalīla wa-Dhimna*. Information on zoology and biology is also preserved in the *Qur'ān* and the *ḥadīth* literature, as well as in travel books, for example, in Ibn Baṭṭūta's famous travel journal. On the study of animals in Islamic and Arab society and culture, see Stetkevych, J., "Name and epithet: the philology and semiotics of animal nomenclature in early Arabic poetry", *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 45, 2 (1986), 89-124; Ullmann, M., *Die Natur und Geheimwissenschaften im Islam*, Leiden, 1972; McDonald, M.V., "Animal books as a genre in Arabic literature", in *BRISMES: Proceedings of the 1988 International Conference on Middle Eastern History, held at the University of Leeds between 10/13 July 1988*, Oxford, 1988. A late contribution to this subject is the well-written and informative book by Foltz, R.C., *Animals in Islamic Traditions and Muslim Cultures*, Oxford, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Agius, D.A., "The Shu'ubiyya Movement and its literary manifestation", *The Islamic Quarterly*, XXIV, 3 (1980), 80. See also Szombathy, Z., "Some Notes on the Impact of the Shu'ubiyya on Arabic Genealogy", in E. Apor and I. Ormos (eds.), *Goldziher Memorial Conference*, Budapest, 2005, 255-269. See also Arazi, A., "Abū Nuwā's fut-il Shu'ūbite?", *Arabica: Revue d'études arabes*, XXVI (1979).

curately, who have been associated with this “movement”) used more or less the same arguments, symbols and legends when debating with Arab Muslims.<sup>4</sup> For example, it was mandatory to turn supposed Arab ideals and norms upside down and place the non-Arabs on an equal footing with the Arabs or even higher. According to the basic tenets of those who were associated with the *shu‘ūbiyya*, Islam was perceived as a theological and social system supporting egalitarianism.<sup>5</sup> This reading is supported by the following passage from the *Qur‘ān*:

O mankind, We have created you male and female, and appointed you races [*shu‘ūb*] and tribes [*qabā‘il*], that you may know one another. Surely the noblest among you in the sight of God is the most god fearing of you. God is All-knowing, All-aware.<sup>6</sup>

Besides this reference, the followers of the so-called *shu‘ūbiyya* made extensive use of Byzantine and Persian traditions to glorify the heritage and history of the non-Arabs (*al-‘ajam*). As noted earlier, similarities in literary style should not be taken as an indication that the followers of the ideas of the *shu‘ūbiyya* were united or that they shared the same goals and motives for evoking and emphasising differences between Arab and non-Arab Muslims. As pointed out by H. T. Norris in his brilliant article on the *shu‘ūbiyya* in the *Cambridge History of Arabic Literature*, different groups could use similar arguments for different reasons, and the motives for evoking this rhetoric might vary over time.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, at least regarding style, it is possible to talk about a *shu‘ūbiyya* literary genre. This genre was exploited in questioning Arab domination, in the call for equality and justice

<sup>4</sup> The driving motives for the so-called *shu‘ūbiyya* writers have been much debated, and it is not my intention to determine what caused the tension between Arabs and non-Arabs. On various opinions on the *shu‘ūbiyya* debate, see Gibb, H.A.R., “The Social Significance of the Shu‘ūbiya”, in S.J. Shaw and W.R. Polk (eds.), *Studies on the Civilization of Islam*, London, 1962; Mottahedeh, R.P., “The Shu‘ūbiyah Controversy and the Social History of Early Islamic Iran”, in *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 7 (1976), 161-182.

<sup>5</sup> A detailed discussion on Islam and egalitarianism is given in Marlow, L., *Hierarchy and Egalitarianism in Islamic Thought*, Cambridge, 1997.

<sup>6</sup> Arberry, A.J., *The Koran Interpreted*, New York, 1964, 538.

<sup>7</sup> Norris, H.T., *Shu‘ūbiyyah in Arabic Literature*, Cambridge, 1990, 38. See also Hanna, S.A. and Gardner, G.H., “Al-Shu‘ūbiyyah Up-Dated: A Study of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Revival of an Eight Century Concept”, *The Middle East Journal*, XX (1966), 335-351.

or in criticising prevailing norms. In spite of this, we must also bear in mind that this so-called genre could be attributed to other authors in order to attack and criticise writers who held opinions that diverged from the established order. Although the *shu'ūbiyya* debate is primarily associated with the tension between the Arab and non-Arab Muslims, the issue at stake being Islam and equality, we must remember that it harbours a complex set of ideas and opinions.

According to the few preserved sources that deal with the tension between Arab and non-Arab Muslims, the *shu'ūbiyya* controversy was begun in the eighth century CA in Persia and Central Asia and reappeared again in al-Andalus in the eleventh century in the *risāla* of Ibn García and the responses his letter provoked. Even though Ibn García's text is of great importance, especially for our understanding of the Muslim community in al-Andalus and for the study of the ethnic, political and theological tensions of the eleventh century, we do not have much information about the author.<sup>8</sup> Apart from a reference given by Ibn Sa'īd in his book *al-Mughrib fī ḥulā l-Maghrib*, Ibn García is only known through his letter and the five preserved refutations his *risāla* aroused. Still, his letter is very important for our understanding of the *shu'ūbiyya* debate. Compared to most other sources, Ibn García's letter is a primary source describing an author who actually supports and makes use of the anti-Arab sentiment often associated with the *shu'ūbiyya* cause. In most other cases we have to rely on authors who held anti-*shu'ūbiyya* sentiments, such as al-Jāḥiẓ, Ibn Qutayba and Ibn 'Abd Rabbih, which, from a source-critical perspective, are more difficult to use.<sup>9</sup> By emphasising this difference, I am not saying that Ibn García's letter is without problems, but it is still a rare example of an author who supports the *shu'ūbiyya* argument.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Larsson, G., *Ibn García's shu'ūbiyya Letter: Ethnic and Theological Tensions in Medieval al-Andalus*, Leiden, 2003, 124-6.

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of the sources for the study of the *shu'ūbiyya*, see Enderwitz, S., "Al-Shu'ūbiyya", *EF*, IX, 513-516.

## Part II

My aim in this short text is twofold. First I want to survey and study the Arabic nomenclature used for animals in Ibn García's epistle. This overview illustrates clearly that the Arabic nomenclature for animals is rich and varied, and that Ibn García himself was well-versed in classical Arabic. The next step, which is my second focus, is to outline and present tentative and explorative ways of reading the symbolic clusters that can be attached to animals in this particular letter. Compared to the first part, it must be stressed that this section must rely on tentative and explorative methods, making it difficult to reach a firm conclusion. However, since I suggest that it is no coincidence that animals feature so frequently in Ibn García's letter, I will endeavour to demonstrate that animals play an important part in his argumentation.

## Part III

Although Ibn García's epistle has been specifically studied by a number of scholars, from the famous Hungarian philologist and historian of Islam, Ignaz Goldziher (1850-1921), to the distinguished professor, James T. Monroe (who among many contributions has translated the letter), the occurrence of animals in it has, to the best of my knowledge, not previously been studied.<sup>10</sup> This is strange, since animals are actually mentioned, described and invoked directly or indirectly more than thirty times in this relatively short letter. The letter covers only nine pages in the published version by Aḥmad Mukhtār 'Abd al-Fattāḥ al-'Abbādī and 'Abd al-Salām Hārūn (Cairo 1953), and the text attributed to Ibn García is preserved in two manuscripts, one in the Escorial library and the other at La Real Academia de la Historia in Madrid.<sup>11</sup> The following animals are explicitly mentioned in the letter.

<sup>10</sup> Goldziher, I., "Die *Shu'ūbiyya* unter den Muhammedanern in Spanien", *ZDMG*, 53 (1889), 601-620; Monroe, J.T., *The Shu'ūbiyya in al-Andalus: The Risāla of Ibn García and Five Refutations*, Berkeley, 1970; Larsson, *Ibn García's shu'ūbiyya Letter*; *idem*, "Ignaz Goldziher on the *Shu'ūbiyya* Movement", *ZDMG*, 155 (2005), 365-372.

<sup>11</sup> Escorial Manuscript n.º 538. fol. 26r-29r, and Ms. Coll. Gayangos, n.º 12, fols. 120ff (Real Academia de la Historia, Madrid). Cf. also Larsson, *Ibn García's shu'ūbiyya Letter*, 5-6.

TABLE I.—Animals mentioned in Ibn García's letter

Animals referred to in the English translation of James T. Monroe	Arabic name for animals used by Ibn García	Number of occurrences in the letter
Camel/Camels	<i>al-nāqah; ba'īr</i> (pl. <i>bur'ān</i> )	Seven times
Horse/Horses (and stallions)	<i>khayl</i> (pl. <i>khuyūl</i> ); <sup>12</sup> <i>ḥiṣān</i> ,	Seven times
Sheep/Sheep - Goat/Goats	<i>bahma; ma'z; na'ja</i> (pl. <i>na'ajāt</i> ); <i>shiyāh</i>	Five times
Lizard/Lizards (including reptiles and serpents)	<i>ṣill</i>	Once
Elephant/Elephants	<i>fīl</i> (pl. <i>fuyūl</i> )	Three times
Hawk/Hawks	<i>ṣuqūr</i>	Once
Lion/Lions	<i>ḍarāghim</i>	Once
Wild Ass (donkey)	<i>nahaqa</i>	Once
Crow/Crows	<i>ghirbān</i>	Once
Gazelle/Gazelles	<i>ghazāl</i>	Once
Ant/Ants	<i>naml</i>	Once
Cows	<i>bahma</i>	Once

From the above list, it is clear that the text makes frequent use of synonyms when discussing a particular animal. The variations found in the text have most likely been used both for rhetorical as well as rhythmic reasons to make the letter correspond to the norms for classical Arabic poetry and literature. The language, the words selected

<sup>12</sup> According to François Viré, the concept of *khayl* is a collective word that forms the basis of nomadic life and it covers the whole range of terms comprising the activities based upon the use of the horse. See Viré, F., "Khayl", *EP*, IV, 1143. It is interesting to note that Ibn García is not using the more common Arabic word for horse, *faras*. On Arabic horse terminology, see also Raswan, C.R., "Vocabulary of Bedouin words concerning horses", *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 4 (1945), 97-129; Watson, J.C.E., *Lexicon of Arabic Horse Terminology*, London and New York, 1996.

and the content reveal clearly that the letter is addressed to an educated audience versed in both classical Arabic literature and Islamic history. Furthermore, the content demands of the audience a fairly good acquaintance with Persian and Byzantine history. For example, the letter contains references to figures such as Chosroes (Akāsira), Caesar (Qayāšira), Anūshīrwān and Ardashīr, as well as to the kingdoms of the Ghassanids and Hira. However, the references to Persian and Byzantine history are not unique to Ibn García but are quite typical of the *shu'ūbiyya* genre. Although it is difficult to reach a conclusive understanding of the function of the above-named historical and mythical figures, it seems quite clear that they were used to mock the Arabs or to demonstrate that the non-Arabs (*al-'ajam*) were equal or even superior to them.

#### Part IV

Thus animals are frequently mentioned in Ibn García's letter. Although the animals are associated with both good and bad habits and qualities, it is clear that the Arabs are primarily linked to the "mangy camels" (*'aynuq<sup>in</sup> jurib*) while the non-Arabs are presented as "not herders of sheep or cows" (*lā ru 'āh shuwayhāt<sup>in</sup> wā-lā bahma*).<sup>13</sup> Accordingly the Arabs are depicted as primitives who follow barbaric and uncivilized costumes and traditions associated with the harsh life in the desert. The differences between the non-Arabs and the Arabs are described in the table below.

TABLE II.—The dichotomy between non-Arabs and Arabs expressed in Ibn García's letter

Non-Arabs	Arabs
Horses	Camels
Noble Stallions	Mangy Camels
Brave warriors	Nomads with weak morality
Fine lineage	The offspring of the slave girl Hājar
Pure wine/Roasted meat	Colocynth seeds/eggs of lizards, tail fat of lizards
Brocade/Silk cloths	Coarse woollen garments

<sup>13</sup> All quotations from Ibn García's letter have been taken from the English transl. by Monroe, *The Shu'ūbiyya in al-Andalus*, 24 (Arabic text 247).

As illustrated in the table above, the primitive habitats of the Arabs are contrasted with the non-Arabs, who are linked either to the “descendents of Caesar” or the Persians. The dichotomy between the civilized non-Arabs and the primitive Arabs is upheld throughout Ibn García’s entire letter. For example, when the Arabs are associated with the camel (especially mangy camels), the non-Arabs are linked to the horse, a noble and fine animal compared to the shabby camel. Consequently, the non-Arabs were “princes on horses as if the latter were elephants” (*quyūl ‘alā khuyūl, ka-anna-mā fuyūl*).<sup>14</sup> Because of their lineage, the non-Arabs were not tempted by the “flag-showing prostitutes” (*ṣawāhib al-rāyāt*), and “by riding on that saddle were they removed from their concern for greed and the pleasures of the flesh” (*bi-rukūb al-surūj, ‘an al-kalab, wa al-furūj*).<sup>15</sup> Compared to the moral and intellectual weakness of the Arabs, the non-Arabs were proud warriors who lead their horses into battle for the right cause and without hesitation.

These non-Arabs were warriors, not guardians of palm branches or planters of palm shoots; kings who recognized no overlords, not one of whom in quenching his thirst drank of the milk of milch camels [*shurab darī al-liqāh*]; nay, their drink was wine, and their food roasted meat, not the mouthful of colocynth seeds in the deserts or the eggs of lizards taken from their nests. Not one of them filled himself with the disreputable tail fat of lizards...<sup>16</sup>

The only thing that the Arabs could boast of is their relationship with the Prophet Muḥammad. It was he who saved and delivered both the non-Arabs and the Arabs from ignorance and blindness. It was he who “delivered us [i.e. the non-Arabs] from the worship of the Trinity and the reverence of the Cross; whereas you [i.e. the Arabs] he delivered from the followers of an abominable religion and from the worship of idols.”<sup>17</sup> Ironically, the author tells us, the most precious of all prophets was found among the primitive and uncivilized Arabs. Then again, “pure gold is found in the dirt, and musk is a part of the secre-

<sup>14</sup> English transl. by Monroe, *The Shu‘ūbiyya in al-Andalus*, 25 (Arabic text 248).

<sup>15</sup> English transl. by *ibidem*, 25 (Arabic text 249). Although prostitution is a grave sin in Islam, it “remained a major social phenomenon in the Islamic world throughout the medieval period.” Bulmus, B., “Prostitution”, in J.W. Meri (ed.), *Medieval Islamic Civilization: An Encyclopedia*, New York and London, 2006, II, 646.

<sup>16</sup> English transl. by Monroe, *The Shu‘ūbiyya in al-Andalus*, 25-26 (Arabic text 250).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, 27.



tions of the gazelle.”<sup>18</sup> In his veneration of the Prophet Muḥammad, Ibn García includes a prayer that encompasses the total of all grains of sand and the smallest of God’s creation (in this case illustrated by the *naml*, i.e. the ant).<sup>19</sup>

## Part V

From the inventory of Ibn García’s epistle, it is clear that animals play a vital role in his way of putting forward an argument and debating with the Arabs. Animals are used as literary devices to demonstrate, on the one hand, the superiority of the non-Arabs and, on the other, the weaknesses of the Arabs. Without forcing the argument too much, it is clear that the animals in Ibn García’s letter are included in the text because they suit the author’s motives. His way of using animals also corresponds to the general norms of the *shu’ūbiyya* literary genre. Consequently, while the Arabs are associated with mangy camels and the harsh life of the desert, the non-Arabs are associated with noble animals such as the stallion and the horse. The dichotomy between Arabs and non-Arabs is demonstrated and strengthened by the references to the animal kingdom. From this point of view, I suggest that it would be wrong to argue that the animals are included in the text without any purpose or meaning, “for there was no better way of describing human qualities in a vivid manner than to compare them with those of the animals.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> English transl. by Monroe, *The Shu’ūbiyya in al-Andalus*, 27.

<sup>19</sup> English transl. by *ibidem*, 28. A detailed discussion of the metaphorical use of various ants in Arabic literature is given in Sadan, J., “Ants, miracles and mythological monsters: a literary study of ant narratives between a Jāhīẓian atmosphere and Munājāt Mūsā”, *JSAI*, 30 (2005), 403-449.

<sup>20</sup> Kopf, *The’Uyūn al-Akhhbār*, 5.