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Arab and Ottoman Menageries | Medieval Animal Data-Network

by Thierry Buquet · June 22, 2015

The history of Arab menageries remains to be written. Gustave Loisel briefly touches upon it in his dusty and mediocre overview, particularly the Ottoman menageries of Constantinople (Loisel 1912, I, 184–187). L. Keimer's long article on Cairo skims over the menageries of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance (Keimer 1954, 87–89). Though only a few pages long, a fine overview of the Mameluke menageries can be found in a recent thesis on veterinary medicine published in 2013 (Shehada 2013, 72–74). The *Encyclopaedia of Islam* does not contain a specific entry on menageries. This is not surprising given that there is no one unequivocal term for "menagerie" in Arabic sources, which mention stables (*iṣṭabl*), gardens, "paradises" (*ǧannat al-arḍ*) and even enclosed parks (*ḥayr al-wuḥūš*). During the Umayyad and Abbassid periods, the term *ḥayr* described vast, walled parks that served as pleasure gardens and occasionally as hunting grounds (Capel 2012; Sourdel-Thomine 1975).

Whether referring to the Western or Arab world, the term "menagerie" is an anachronism when applied to the Middle Ages, for it dates from the seventeenth century. In medieval Europe, the

vocabulary was very varied and often referred to sharply different realities (Buquet 2013a, 100–102).

In both the Muslim and Christian worlds, collections of animals – which generally only the richest princes could afford – had various functions. These can be classified as follows:

- hunting packs including dogs, cheetahs and lynxes, not forgetting birds of prey trained in the art of falconry (hawks, sparrowhawks, gyrfalcons, etc.);
- stables of horses, donkeys and camels for transport, hunting and equestrian sports (racing, polo, etc.);
- pleasure gardens for both the eyes and ears, containing aviaries of native and exotic songbirds or birds sporting distinctive plumage, and sometimes ponds for aquatic species;
- hunting reserves where game (deer, gazelles, wild donkeys, hares, etc.) were kept in pens to be hunted at a later date;
- “menageries” of wild and spectacular animals (elephants, giraffes, lions, panthers, zebras, bears, etc.).

This list shows the diversity of ways in which animals were used, and consequently the diversity of places in which they were kept in captivity.

Menageries and diplomatic gifts

In addition to the pleasure they provide through observation and curiosity, menageries of exotic animals are also external signs of wealth and instruments of power. Possessing animals from distant lands demonstrated the extent of the sovereign's influence – as far afield as Africa or India – and was often the fruit of regular relations with other kingdoms, in which gifts of rare animals were often bestowed alongside other presents. This type of gift could also be the result of a tributary relation: until the thirteenth century, Egypt subjected Nubia to the *baqt*, a yearly treaty that required slaves but also wild animals to be sent to Egypt (Beshir 1975; Løkkegaard 1991; Halm 1998). The *baqt* was one of the main channels through which giraffes were imported to the menagerie of the sultan of Cairo. This strong interdependence between tribute, diplomatic gift and princely menagerie was not an Arab invention and dates back to earlier historical periods. In the Mesopotamian empires as well as pharaonic Egypt, rare animals were often seized from vanquished or tributary kingdoms. In *The Meadows of Gold* (*Les Prairies d'or*, III, chap. 33, p. 3), the tenth-century writer and encyclopaedist Masʿūdī dated the dispatching of giraffes to the kings of Persia, "as [they were] later offered to the Arab kings", "to the first Abbasid caliphs and the governors of Egypt".





Al-Ǧāḥiẓ, Kitāb al-ḥayawān (Book of the animals), Syria, 15th C. Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Ms. arab. B 54, f. 36

From the start of the Hijra to the Ottoman period, the use of animals as diplomatic gifts is well documented, in particular by historians such as al-Maqrīzī and Ibn Ḫaldūn. Elephants, giraffes, zebras and even rhinoceroses and hippopotamuses were given to Egyptian sovereigns: in 1275–1276, Baybars received a substantial Nubian *baqt* of three elephants, three giraffes and five panthers. In turn, the sovereigns sometimes offered the animals to other Muslim kings – whether Maghrebian, Arab, Mongol or Persian – or to Christian kings. We have more testimonies about Baybars than other sovereigns: he gave elephants, giraffes, zebras and many other animals to the king of Spain, the Byzantine emperor and the Mongol khan Bereke (Buquet 2013b).

Menageries in the land of Islam, from Córdoba to Baghdad

The possession of exotic animals did not occur in Egypt alone: from the beginning of the Hijra until the modern period, Muslim sovereigns – from Al-Andalus to Mogul India by way of Baghdad

and Istanbul – had maintained menageries. In the tenth century, a giraffe was sent from Tunisia to Córdoba; several testimonies, including that of Ibn Ḫaldūn, mention the presence of this animal in the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in Morocco and Tunisia (Cuoq 1985, 352, note 1). Ibn Ḫaldūn also states that the Hafsid sovereign al-Mustanṣir, during his rule over the Maghreb, had vast hunting grounds built at Bizerte in 1253. It was here that he hunted his falcons, sighthounds (Sloughis) and cheetahs (Capel 2012, § 25). In Baghdad, the richest testimony is for the year 907, when the caliph al-Muqtadir was visited by the ambassadors of the Byzantine emperor Constantine VII. During their visit to the caliphal palace, the Greek envoys were led to the wild-animal pen (*ḥayr al-wuḥūš*), where they could observe four elephants, two giraffes and a hundred or so "ferocious beasts" (lions and panthers) (Hamidullah 1960, 295–296). Such a zoological park had existed in Baghdad, on the eastern banks of the Tigris, since the early ninth century, and was restored less than a century later by al-Muqtadir during the restoration of the caliphal palace (Capel 2012, § 22).

Al-Maqrīzī's description of the menagerie at Cairo

Though historical mentions of Muslim menageries are generally rare and allusive, al-Maqrīzī nevertheless bequeathed us a long and precise description of Ḫumarāwayh's menagerie at Fusṭāṭ, near Cairo, in the late ninth century. Purpose built within the palace of the Tulinid prince, it held various stables for horses, mules and dromedaries, as well as different "houses" (*dār*, pl. *diyār*) for leopards, panthers, elephants and giraffes. The lions were kept in the prince's own palace, where he had a "lion house" (*dār al-sibāʿ*)

built. This *dār al-sibāʿ* came complete with vaulted bedrooms, each one containing a lion and his lioness. These led on to a larger room, thereby allowing each cell to be isolated for cleaning or for food to be brought in safely. Staff assigned to this task had specialist knowledge of their particular species and received an annual salary and considerable food provisions. Thus, from the ninth century onwards, there were highly structured menageries with distinct and specialized wings for each species (al-Maqrīzī, ed. 1906, III, 219–222). In the fourteenth century, again according to al-Maqrīzī, elephants were confined to their own quarters, the *Raḥbat al-afyāl* ("Elephant compound", cited in Beshir 1975, 22).

The incomplete testimonies of Western visitors to Cairo

Though we know of no equally detailed description of the Egyptian menageries for the following centuries, the richness of Cairo's zoological collections was confirmed by Western visitors. Between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries, descriptions of the sultan's menagerie were par for the course in accounts of travels in the Holy Land: we have identified over forty such descriptions. Alas, these brief mentions do not give such a precise description as al-Maqrīzī does. Generally, the travellers describe only the two rarest and most spectacular animals that could be admired in the menagerie: elephants and giraffes. In most cases, they do not mention other better-known species such as lions, panthers, etc. Some accounts suggest that in the fourteenth century, the sultan had up to six giraffes, including males, females and calves (Buquet 2013c, 26). In 1335, Iapopo da Verona saw five elephants

in the sultan's citadel (*castrum soldani*) (Jacques de Vérone, ed. 1895, 239–240). Antonio da Cremona said that he saw six elephants, eight lions and a giraffe in 1330 (Reboldi da Cremone, ed. 1890, 163–164).

According to the testimony of Simeonis (ed. 1960, 58), in 1323 part of Cairo's menagerie was located close to the citadel (*castrum soldani*), which confirms Jacques de Vérone's account. Maqrīzī tells of the birth of a giraffe calf in captivity in Cairo's citadel in 1271 (al-Maqrīzī, ed. 1837, 106, note 128). Does this mean that the animals were kept in several different places, both within and outside the citadel? Ogier d'Anglure relates that in 1398 he saw six elephants in the city of Cairo, outside the citadel, but that five giraffes were living in another part of the city (Ogier d'Anglure, ed. 1878, 61–62).

The Ottoman menageries of Constantinople

Visitors to Constantinople after the fall of the Byzantine Empire left slightly more detailed accounts (Mikhail 2014, 112–113). Pierre Belon du Mans explains that animals could be seen in several places: the Great Palace of Constantinople and an ancient church close to the hippodrome (Tinguely 2000, 134–136). This church has now been identified as the Church of St John at the Dihippion. It is mentioned by many travellers, who were struck by the sight of a place of worship transformed into a menagerie of wild animals, where, according to Belon, lions, panthers, lynxes, wolves, bears and tigers were confined. Belon adds that the elephants and hippopotamuses were kept in the ruins of the Great Palace, along

with the camels (Tinguely 2000, 135–136). Fynes Morison also saw a giraffe there in 1597 (Moryson, ed. 1907, II, 96).



Matrakci Nasuh,
Constantinople: Hagia Sophia and the Hippodrome, 1536

A prisoner held by the Turks, Giovan Maria Angiolello, describes several churches in the Hagia Sophia area –close to the hippodrome– being converted to menageries during the 1470–1481 period. Some of these churches housed the Great Turk's elephants, and others his lions (Asutay-Effenberger & Effenberger 2004, 57).

Several visitors describe one of these churches as an old dilapidated tower. The Church of St John at the Dihippion was indeed partially destroyed during an earthquake in 1510; later on, in the early seventeenth century, the remaining structure was destroyed and the animals transferred to another old nearby church, close to the hippodrome. This church had perhaps already been used as a menagerie since the fifteenth century, for travellers

had often confused the two buildings. The Turks called this new menagerie the *Arslan Hané* (Lion Hotel). The church (which has been identified as the Church of Christ the Saviour at Chalke) was destroyed by the great fire of 1808. The animals were transferred to the hippodrome before being sent to the Yedikule Fortress in 1831 (Mango 1950, 158–161; Asutay-Effenberger & Effenberger 2004).

The Ottomans had installed their menagerie in several buildings, where the animals were arranged by species. Larger animals (elephants, giraffes and camels) were dispatched to either the palace or the church at Chalke, while the big cats went to St John at the Dihippion, which was perhaps more modest in size.

The decline of the Ottoman menageries?

Judging by the rarity of sources –which itself needs to be reconsidered (Keimer 1954, 89)– the Ottoman menageries seem to go into decline in Egypt from the seventeenth century onwards. Yet in Istanbul and in Cairo, numerous sources still exist in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These attest to the ongoing splendour of the imperial Ottoman court throughout the nineteenth century (Buquet, 2014, 18; Mikhail 2014). The decline of this long tradition –which lasted from the beginning of the Hijra to the end of the Ottoman Empire– may therefore have been overstated.

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Note: this paper had been originally published in French (Buquet 2014, in the *Bulletin of the SSMOCI* (PDF of the special issue Tiere/animal). Helen Tomlinson had translated this shortened and

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