



A Series of Deccani Miniatures: Imaginary Creatures Invented for a Princely 'Keepsake'*

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Between 1966 and 1972, eleven loose Indian miniatures, said to have been taken from a Deccani astrological treatise (c. 1750) have been dispersed by the London booksellers Maggs Bros.¹ All are rectangular in form and similar in size. In every example a strange creature surrounded by flowers stands in the foreground of a grassy landscape, that extends into a faraway vista filled with various buildings and scenes of tiny people and animals scattered in the distance as a gentle 'Tuscan' type panorama. The unusual changes in scale – large figures juxtaposed with much smaller motifs – is a distinguishing feature of the Deccani School of painting.²

All the Maggs Bros miniatures were acquired by various private collectors and institutions. Thus, one (fig. 1) was purchased by the Brooklyn Museum of New York, in 1971;³ another (fig. 2) was among George Hopper Fitch's gifts to the San Francisco Asian Art Museum, made in 1987;⁴ one formerly belonging to the important collection of Edwin Binney 3rd was bequeathed to the San Diego Museum of Art in 1990 (fig. 3);⁵ a further miniature (fig. 4) in the collection of Dr. P. Formijne was donated to the Rijksmuseum Print Room in Amsterdam in 1993.⁶ Regarding a fifth miniature (fig. 5), all we know is that it was offered twice for sale at

< Fig. 1
A Winged Elephant,
c. 1750, India.
Opaque watercolour
and gold on paper,
197 x 114 mm.
New York, Brooklyn
Museum, Designated
Purchase Fund,
inv. no. 71.120.

auction and reproduced in the 1974 catalogue of the Doris Wiener Art Gallery, New York.⁷ After so many years, it is difficult to keep track of the remainder of the other five paintings (figs. 6-10), known only through the black-and-white images reproduced in *Oriental Miniatures & Illumination*, a bulletin issued periodically by Maggs Bros.⁸ Exceptionally, another miniature (fig. 11) emerged at a 2013 London auction and is now held in a private collection.⁹ Finally, one last miniature (fig. 12), not mentioned in the Maggs Bros bulletins, appeared in a 1977 Christie's sale catalogue and is now preserved in the collection of Kenneth and Joyce Robbins.¹⁰ So, twelve miniatures from the Deccani series have now been identified, and several of these fascinating works of art have been viewed to relate them to each other as a set, providing their order.

Inscriptions on the Back of Five Miniatures

In the Maggs Bros bulletins, brief descriptive entries of the miniatures indicated that ink inscriptions in Persian nastaliq script appear on their verso sides. The texts on the reverse of five of the six located miniatures (figs. 2-4, 11, 12) have been translated and could therefore be studied.¹¹ The lines on the back of the miniature kept



Fig. 2
A Mythical Bird,
 c. 1750, India.
 Opaque water-
 colour and gold on
 paper, 203 x 113 mm.
 San Francisco,
 Asian Art Museum,
 Gift of George
 Hopper Fitch,
 inv. no. B87D16ab.
 Photo © Asian
 Art Museum of
 San Francisco

Fig. 3
A Mythical Peacock with a Woman's Head, c. 1750, India.
 Opaque water-colour and gold on paper, 209 x 117 mm.
 San Diego Museum of Art, Edwin Binney 3rd Collection, inv. no. 1990.531.
 Photo: Bridgeman Images





Fig. 4
A Mythical Bird,
c. 1750, India.
Opaque water-
colour and gold on
paper, 191 x 103 mm.
Amsterdam, Rijks-
museum, inv. no.
RP-T-1993-217, gift
of Dr. P. Formijne,
Amsterdam.

in the Brooklyn Museum (fig. 1), covered for conservation reasons, are currently inaccessible.¹²

Each miniature is framed within a narrow silver border, which through oxidation has damaged the edges of the paper. It is likely that each leaf was originally surrounded by a margin of several centimetres wide on four sides and all were probably bound together in one album. In addition, these delicate pages were left pressed against each other for such a long period of time that, owing to the paper's acidity, this impregnation has resulted in a silhouette of the figure of the recto appearing 'in photographic negative' through the texts written on the verso (figs. 13-17).

It should be noted that the inscription on the reverse of each painting starts with a numeral transcribed into words and a descriptive text with no relation to the image on its front. The note 'Image twenty-one' on the reverse of the two-footed beast resembling a dragon with a multi-coloured, flame like tail (fig. 11), held in a private collection, demonstrates that this is a set of some importance, being composed of at least twenty-one leaves. As it is customary in the East to turn the pages from left to right, the text of an illustrated manuscript is usually placed on the right and the image on the left. As such, the six lines of script on the reverse of the depiction of the dragon (fig. 16) have no relation to its obverse, instead, the text describes an elephant, in precise terms:

Image twenty-one: this is an elephant that is found in the land of Samakhi [Semakha], which is an island next to the sea. Its face is like that of human beings, ears like elephants, and on its head are horns like bulls with a plume in the middle of its head. Around its neck are branches like the beloved's curling locks, it does converse like human beings and has eyes like elephants and has feathers. If it wants

Fig. 5
A Mythical Winged Beast, c. 1750, India.
Opaque water-colour and gold on paper, 209 x 104 mm. Present whereabouts unknown.



Fig. 6
A Mythical Bird with Blue Head, Red Legs and Coloured Body, c. 1750, India.
Opaque water-colour and gold on paper, 209 x 120 mm. Present whereabouts unknown.





Fig. 7
A Mythical Beast
with Claws and
Wings, c. 1750, India.
Opaque water-
colour and gold on
paper, 196 x 111 mm.
Present where-
abouts unknown.



Fig. 8
A Mythical Bird
with Yellow Head
Face, Curling Blue
Tail and Coloured
Body, c. 1750, India.
Opaque water-
colour and gold on
paper, 203 x 114 mm.
Present where-
abouts unknown.

it jumps and runs and cannot be caught by anyone. If it sees human beings it runs away. It lives for hundred years. God knows right.

This description corresponds exactly to the miniature on the sheet from the Brooklyn Museum (fig. 1); accordingly, this text (fig. 16) was on its right. It allows us to reconstruct the order of three other pages; as the silhouette of the dragon is visible on this text, the miniature of the dragon (fig. 11) is situated on its right and the text describing the dragon was across from that image, on the right. This reconstructs the sequence of four pages (see Annex: fols. 19v, 20r, 20v, 21r).

By following the hypothesis of a series of miniatures with accompanying descriptions, it is not difficult to arrange some of them in the proper order. The nine lines on the back of the San Diego miniature of a peacock (*ta'us*)¹³ with a woman's head (fig. 3), refer a 'Second image', from which one might conclude that this is the first of the set, and that the first page facing it on the right would then contain its descriptive text. Instead the text (fig. 13) on its verso, which retains the 'ectoplasm' silhouette of that peacock, provides a detailed description of the 'Second image', which can be identified as the one illustrated in the Doris Wiener catalogue (fig. 5):

Second image. Whose name is Kay Ka'il [or Kekabel ?] is an animal found on land. Its food is desert animals. Its head is like an animal and has feathers. Its arms and feet are like human beings. When it sees its prey, it runs like a human being and if it wants to, it flies. If on the coast it is not friendly with men and runs away. Its clothing is from leaves from trees. Its voice is like animals and not like [?] human beings. It lives for hundred years, has children like human beings but do not need nursing. They are very fast and if chased

they cannot be caught other than in a trap. God knows right.

Although we do not know the verso inscription of this miniature, it can be placed directly thereafter, as part of the following spread (see Annex: frontispiece verso, fols. 1r, 1v, 2r, 2v).

The inscription (fig. 14) on the back of the Rijksmuseum miniature (fig. 4) contains a description of a large multi-coloured bird:

Seventh image. This is a strange animal that has a curved beak like a parrot and the colour of the beak is red. Its head, neck and both arms are black and it has feathers on its shoulders. The colour of the feathers is yellow and green and on its head are pink coloured curls. Its ears are white the chest yellow and its belly pistachio-like colour. The colours of the feathers on its tail are red and golden. The feathers on the upper parts of its legs are red and the lower parts yellow. Both arms are like human beings, the eyes glitter like birds. They fly much and they are mainly in the desert of Khahali. Their food is brains from the heads of elephants. They strike the heads with their beaks, take out the brains and eat it. They live fifty years... God knows right.

We can put the miniature of the bird on its recto in the sixth place thanks to the reference 'Seventh image' in the text on its verso. The seventh image which should have followed is missing, but it too would also have shown a 'strange' bird whose 'head, neck and both arms are black', as written in the text (see Annex: fols. 5v, 6r, 6v, 7r).

A comparable bird as the one described in the text above can be seen in the sheet from the San Francisco Museum (fig. 2). Similarly multi-coloured, it has a large crest, a round head and eyes closely matching the description on the verso, but different details are given as follows:

Fig. 9

A Mythical Beast with Body of a Cow, Green Wings and Girl's Head with Red Curved Horns, c. 1750, India.

Opaque water-colour on paper, 206 x 120 mm. Present whereabouts unknown.



Fig. 10

A Scorpion with the Head of a Girl, c. 1750, India.

Opaque water-colour and gold on paper, 187 x 111 mm. Present whereabouts unknown.



Thirteenth image. It is an animal that lives in the island of Siam [now Thailand], near the coast. It has a yellow beak, a round head and on its head a plume and on its arms feathers. Both its arms are like human beings, and the tail is like Simurgh's tail and the entire body like a turkey. It flies much and goes wherever it wishes and eats fruit from the desert or gardens if found on the mountains of Sarandib [Ceylon, now Sri Lanka]. It will not be captured by anyone. The length of life is forty years: and also dies of illnesses.

The San Francisco miniature is most probably the twelfth in the set, while the animal with 'arms ... like human beings' must be the thirteenth (see Annex: fols. 11v, 12r, 12v, 13r).

This analysis is brought to a conclusion by another miniature of a bird (fig. 12), belonging to the collection of Kenneth and Joyce Robbins. The text on the back (fig. 17) describes an 'Egyptian donkey':¹⁴

Nineteenth image. This is a donkey that is found in the land of Egypt. This donkey is an offspring [descendant] of the donkey that His Holiness Jesus – peace be upon him – had ridden on, [and] gone to circumambulate the Noble Mecca. These donkeys are [live] in deserts [plains], no one ever rides [on them], out of respect. A few catch these donkeys and cherish them and honour them. They become extremely energetic runners and their food is creeping things [?] and forest fruit. Its life ... [it is] known as Jesus's donkey.

We can therefore assume that this 'mythical bird' must be the eighteenth miniature and that the donkey (*khar*) is the nineteenth. The donkey miniature would have had the description of the dragon (fig. 11) on its verso (see Annex: fols. 17v, 18r, 18v, 19r, 19v).

One would be taking a risk in trying to position the remaining five miniatures without more proof. The

present whereabouts of these works, formerly part of Maggs Bros's stock, are unknown. Moreover, photographs of their verso sides, which would have helped in this reconstruction were never published. These miniatures consist of the following images: a winged creature with arms, legs and the head of a bird (fig. 6); a hybrid creature possessing the body of a winged child and the head of a lion (fig. 7); another bird (fig. 8) endowed with a rather terrifying owl-like head; a fabulous winged cow with the bejewelled head of a woman (fig. 9); and the last, a creature with the head of an Indian beauty attached to the body of a scorpion (fig. 10).

Scientific and Cosmographic Texts and Manuscripts

Early on, Bruce Wannell's¹⁵ transcription made of the Persian inscription on the back of the 2013 London sale led my research towards the Islamic literature of 'Wonders' (*Aja'ib* or *Adja'ib*). Such Arabic scientific studies were the heirs of Greek philosophy and scholarship.¹⁶ This intellectual legacy, safeguarded by the Christians living in the East, was developed by leaps and bounds from the eighth century onward. The Greco-Syrian texts of philosophy, medicine, astronomy, geometry and pharmacology, translated into Arabic, were diffused throughout the Muslim world. It was through the Iberian Peninsula (*al-Andalus*), then under Muslim rule, that European scholars had access to the highly influential works of Aristotle, translated from Arabic back into Greek and Latin. From the fourth century BCE, Aristotle, whose intellectual leadership was acknowledged by the peoples of both Europe and the Middle East, was known to be the tutor of Alexander the Great, whose achievements were recorded by his contemporary Pseudo-Callisthenes. During the Middle Ages, then known by the name of Iskandar, he went on



Fig. 11
A Mythical Beast
with Red Wings
and Coloured
Flame-like Tails,
c. 1750, India.
Opaque watercolour
and gold on paper,
194 x 114 mm.
Private Collection.

to become one of the most famous heroes of Greek and Persian literature. The Macedonian hero's travels and conquests, which took him to faraway places inhabited by strange creatures,¹⁷ inspired great masterpieces of writing such as the *Shahnama* (The Book of Kings), a Persian epic poem by Ferdowsi (c. 940-1020) recounting the mythical, heroic and historical ages of Greater Iran that inspired authors for centuries to come.¹⁸

In fact, the Deccani series of hybrid creatures recalls images illustrating manuscripts of wondrous creatures, which were part of the Indo-Persian culture. Around the year 1000, Ibrahim

Ibn Wasif Shah wrote the *Summary of Wonders* in which he describes fantastic beings.¹⁹ But the most famous of these texts, the *Aja'ib al-makhlūqat wa gharay'ib al-mawjudat* (The Wonders of Creation and the Oddities of Existing Things), is the cosmographical work of Zakariya ibn Muhammad al-Qazwini (1203-1283), born at Qazwin in Iran. Drawn up in Arabic between 1262 and 1283 in Baghdad, his work continued to be popular over the following centuries.²⁰ Only a few versions of Qazwini's original Arabic text survive today, whereas many copies and translations into Persian, Greek and Turkish are still extant in private collections, libraries and museums. A number of these manuscripts were illustrated, many of those made in Iran, and some in India when under Mughal rule.²¹ As was often the case in the medieval Middle East, Qazwini's text was a compilation of works by dozens of earlier authors, among them Ferdowsi.²² Following the Aristotelian method, his encyclopaedia is divided into two parts: the first describes the heavens (sun, moon, planets and stars, as well as the creatures inhabiting them, such as angels), and the second, the earthly elements (fire, air, water), geography (seas, islands, mountains, rivers) and natural history (minerals, flora and fauna). A large part of these manuscripts concerns plant life, trees and various types of vegetation, all painted naturalistically.²³ In addition to the rarer aquatic beasts – narwhals, flying fish, sea serpents – Qazwini lists imaginary types, concluding with an account of several monsters, some with human heads.²⁴ In this respect, he had been preceded by Pliny the Elder (first century CE), who had already included tritons and mermaids in his *Naturalis Historia*.

In his book, Qazwini's observations of earthbound species – men, quadrupeds (ruminants and carnivores), birds, insects and reptiles – are both true to nature and learned²⁵ from



< Fig. 12
A Mythical Bird,
c. 1750, India.
Opaque water-
colour and
gold on paper.
Kenneth and
Joyce Robbins
Collection.

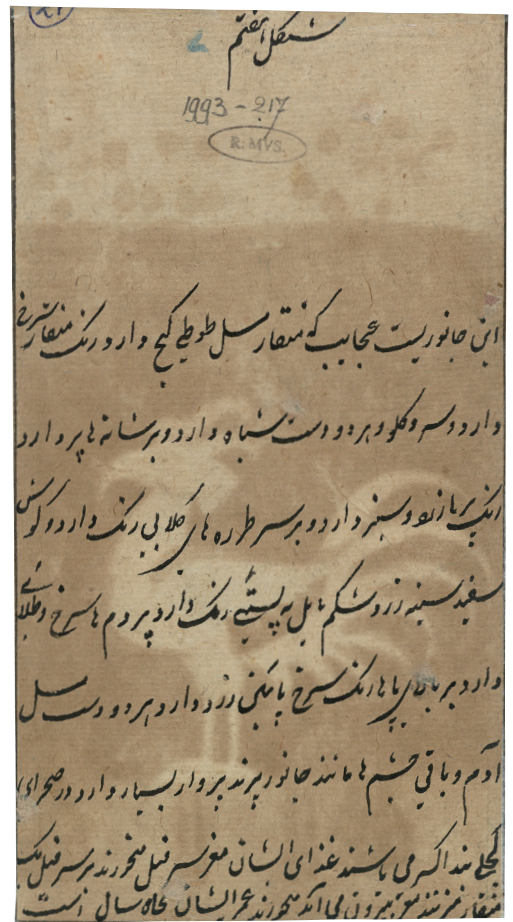
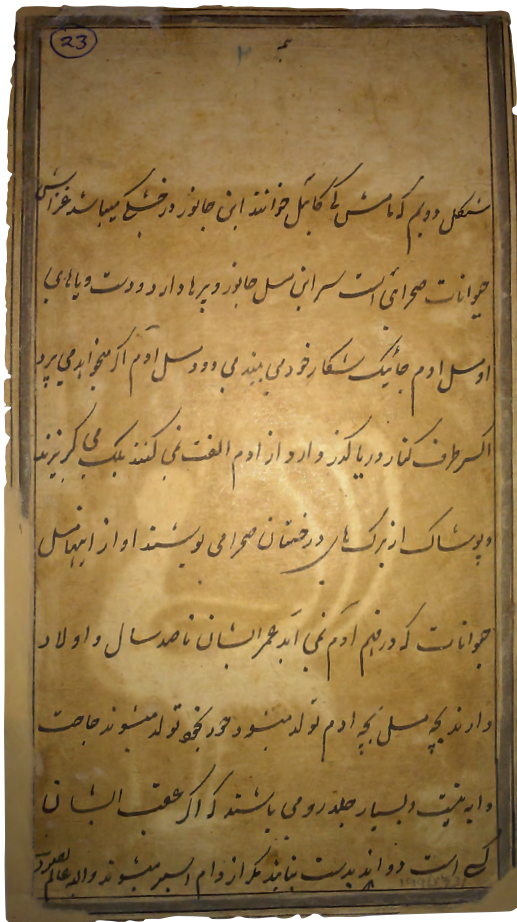
Fig. 13
Verso of A Mythical
Peacock (fig. 3).

Fig. 14
Verso of A Mythical
Bird (fig. 4).

following the *Nuzhat-nama-i-'Ala'i* (Book of Pleasure), a work compiled by the Iranian author Shahmardan ibn Abi al-khayr al-Razi (1048-early twelfth century).²⁶ However, in the chapters devoted to the human race, in which he branches out into teratology, Qazwini takes a different view. He describes monstrous beings:²⁷ winged horses or dog-headed hybrids, men with two heads or several pairs of legs, or even boneless legs called *davalpas*.²⁸ When evoking the journeys of Iskandar, Qazwini describes the amazing creatures that the victorious Macedonian encountered in those distant places. Once again, he follows the example of another, the Greek Ctésias, whose writings on India

from the fourth century BCE include a variety of abnormalities: a man with a single eye in the centre of his forehead, called a cyclops, dog-headed humans called cynocephali, one-legged men called sciapodes, and headless figures with the face appearing on the body, called blemmyes.²⁹

About one century before Qazwini, in 1167, Muhammad ibn Mahmud ibn Ahmad Tusi Salmani, a native of Hamadan, wrote the Persian treatise 'The Wonders of Creation and Curiosities of Existing Things', usually known as the *Ajaye-b-nameh* (Book of Curiosities).³⁰ It is not a scientific work, as it is chiefly concerned with the occult and the freakish. This is a rare text, with only a few surviving

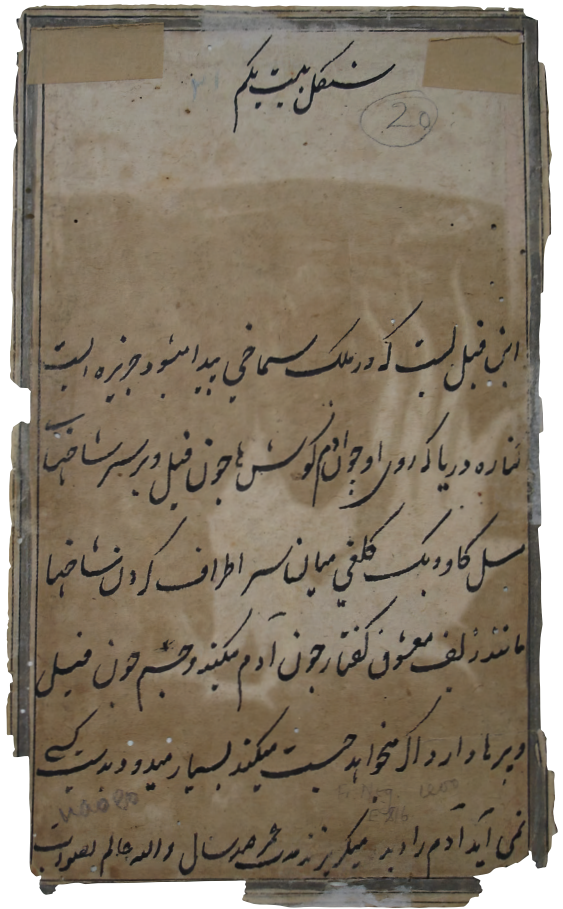
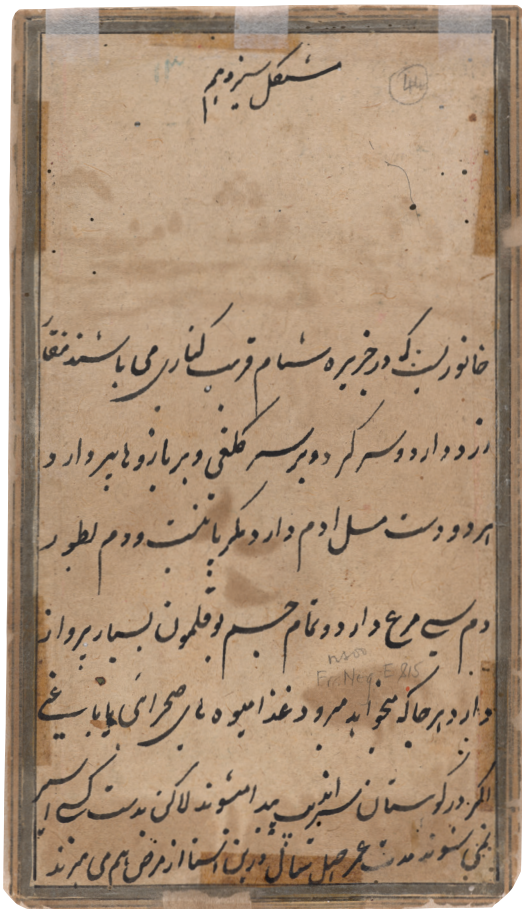


copies.³¹ The facts are set forth incoherently, with tales of wonders interspersed with stories about Iskandar.³² The Macedonian hero encounters strange and monstrous beings, like birds speaking with human voices, a lion-headed child,³³ and the Nasik and Munsik peoples.³⁴ It comprises a series of anecdotes and facts more or less credible about humans, supernatural beings, anthropomorphic animals and demons.³⁵ A manuscript completed in 1388 (probably in Baghdad, Iraq), of which a copy of the text is preserved in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, is full of illustrations.³⁶ The iconographical resemblance between the illustration of the 'angel of the south pole with the

body of an elephant and a large human head' in the manuscript (fig. 18) and that of the Brooklyn miniature (fig. 1) is undeniable. However, the text accompanying the miniature makes no reference to the head as being that of an angel, but instead speaks of an anthropomorphic elephant living on a well-known island. Some of the other illuminations in this manuscript can also be compared to others originating from the present set as well.³⁷ Despite these resemblances we cannot prove conclusively that the various creatures in the Tusi Salmani manuscript illustrate the same contents as those in the Deccani series of miniatures: the similarities could very well be by chance rather than by design.

Fig. 15
Verso of A Mythical
Bird (fig. 2).

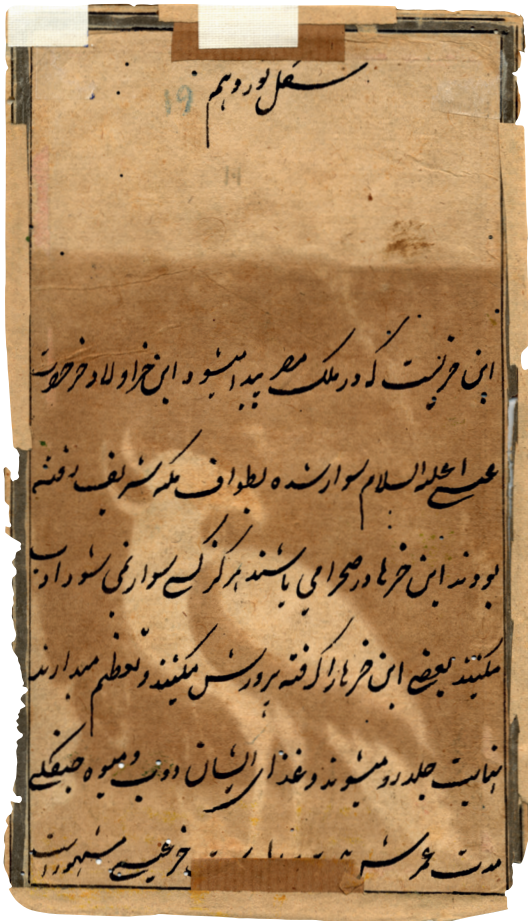
Fig. 16
Verso of A Mythical
Beast (fig. 11).



Travels and Discoveries of the World

Encyclopaedias and scientific treatises appeared in quantity during the medieval period, as did less learned works such as the memoirs of travellers, navigators and adventurous traders. The Abbasid period (750-1258) was a time of great maritime discoveries, leading to the development of trade between India³⁸ and China and extending as far as East Africa and northern Europe. These stories describe how, in search of new wealth, travellers abandoned coastal waters and let the winds carry them across the Sea of China and the Indian Ocean to unexplored lands with the aid of rudimentary maps and astrolabes relying on the stars.

Fig. 17
Verso of A Mythical
Bird (fig. 12).



A scrutiny of the most revered accounts of the heroic journeys of the navigators and geographers soon reveals the degree of their dependence on other chroniclers. So too did sailors and traders embark on their journeys to buy the rarest products of nature. Because perfume was such a highly sought-after luxury in Middle Eastern life, they went in search of the components: camphor, musk, aloes wood, sandalwood, cloves, cinnamon and incense.³⁹ Like a leitmotiv, almost every author mentions finding one or several of these substances in the islands of the Indian Ocean and the archipelagos of the Sea of China.

Fabulous Encounters

Another theme arising from their experiences in these unexplored places is the discovery of strange creatures, that would quickly become legendary. One of the first to describe the giant bird rokh, capable of throwing an elephant up in the air, was Captain Bozorg, also known as Buzurk ibn Sahriyar, as recorded in his collection of narratives in 953 CE.⁴⁰ Other writers were happy to use his story as their own: the Andalusian Ibn Sa'id al-Maghribi (1213-1286),⁴¹ the cosmographer Ibn Mujawir Dimashqi (1256-1327),⁴² the geographer Ibn Al-Wardi (1291-1349),⁴³ and the famous Berber traveller Ibn Battuta (1304-1377).⁴⁴ There was indeed a giant bird actually known to have existed: the Aepyonis. In fact these huge birds could not fly, were three metres tall, and until around 1000 CE endemic to the island of Madagascar, where they lay enormous eggs, much like the 'elephant birds' reported by Marco Polo (c. 1254-1324).⁴⁵ The imaginary bird, a rokh, was composed of both real and invented elements taken from birds in Hindu-Persian mythology, such as Garuda (the vehicle of god Vishnu) or Simurgh, a gigantic bird with peacock features (fig. 19) described in Ferdowsi's *Shahnama* (The Book of Kings).⁴⁶



Fig. 18
The Angel of the
South Pole with the
Body of an Elephant
and a Large Human
Head. 1388.

Opaque water-
colour on paper,
c. 100 x 160 mm.
Paris, Bibliothèque
nationale de France,
inv. no. Supplément
Persan 332, fol. 15r.

The bird-like creatures in the Deccani collection (figs. 2, 4, 12) might be references to birds like these.

In the same way, some of the other creatures are conjured from elements found in different traditions. The fabulous winged cow (fig. 9) with the bejewelled head of a woman might be Buraq, the mount of Prophet Muhammad, in an Islamic context, but the fragmentary landscape supported by her long horns evokes both the Vedic goddess of the celestial vault Aditi (fig. 20) associated with sacred cows,⁴⁷ and Kamadhenu, the Hindu divinity symbolizing abundance who emerged from a sea of foamy milk, to be identified with the cosmological role of Mother Earth. The figure with the head of an Indian female beauty attached to the body of a scorpion (fig. 10) is according to treatises of astronomy and astrology, the traditional sign of the constellation of Cancer (fig. 21) following the sun's path in the direction of the southern latitudes.⁴⁸ Other creatures from the Deccani miniatures cannot be linked to existing iconographies and may simply have sprung from the imagination of the artist.

A New Era in India

Even though it is not easy to fully understand the entire subcontinent because of the distances involved, from antiquity onwards all India has

long been associated with the fabulous. From the Middle Ages onwards, great advances were made in the knowledge of the natural world. For instance, at the end of the sixteenth century, the learned historian Abu' l-Fazl (1551-1602), grand vizier and secretary (*Munshi*) of the Mughal Emperor Akbar (r. 1556-1605), as part of his *Ain-i-akbari* (Administration of Akbar), compiled an 'Account of the Hindu Sciences' bringing together the best knowledge accumulated from the past to which he added the work of contemporary researchers, leaving the early Arabic encyclopaedias far behind.

Nevertheless, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries interest in the *Aja'ib* (Wonders) continued strong throughout South Asia. In the sultanates of the Deccan, which remained bastions of Indo-Persian culture, the writings of Qazwini were still much appreciated.⁴⁹ The bibliophile, literary and art loving Sultan Ali Adil Shah I (r. 1557-79), of Bijapur was keenly interested in *miracula et mirabilia*. As an intellectual fascinated by the exotic,⁵⁰ in 1570 he wrote a treatise on astrology, alchemy and magic, the *Nujum al-ulum* (Stars of Science).⁵¹ His successor, Sultan Ibrahim Adil Shah II (r. 1579-1627), mystic, poet and musician, respected this unusual cultural tradition, which combined strong Shiite Islamic

elements imported from Iran, with a deep Hindu influence brought in from the nearby Kingdom of Vijayanagara.

Probably inspired by Qazwini, Sultan Muhammad ibn Darvish, *mufti* (magistrate) of Balkh, wrote the *Majma' al-Ghara'ib* (Collection of Things Strange and Rare) in the mid-sixteenth century. Two illustrated copies, one from the mid-seventeenth century and the other from 1698, are full of bizarre and charming illustrations depicting the eccentricities of

creation. At this time, the purpose of these images was not to inform but to entertain and delight the reader.⁵²

Patrons for these miniatures could be found amongst the many courts of combatant rulers. In north-eastern Deccan, the town of Khirki was occupied by the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb (r. 1658-1707). During his campaigns against the Deccani sultanates, the town was given the name of Aurangabad and designated as court city. At some point after the



Fig. 19
The Simurgh Carries off Baby Elephants,
 c. 1720-30.
 Opaque water-colour on paper,
 230 x 180 mm.
 London, The Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, inv. no. RAS 053.008.

emperor's death in 1707, his general Nizam al-Mulk established the Asaf Jahi dynasty and as Asaf Jah I (r. 1724-48) ruled over the Deccan. He was succeeded by his third son, Salabat Jang (r. 1751-62), an art lover and collector, who following a war of succession seized power with the support of the French commander Marquis de Bussy and governor-general of French India, Joseph François Dupleix.⁵³ Salabat Jang was deposed in 1762 by his young brother, Nawab Asaf Jah II (r. 1762-1803), who established his court further south at Hyderabad. Despite unrest, the imaginative spirit and taste for fanciful and entertaining illustrated literature was maintained by members of the refined courts of

the Deccani sultanates and by the elites close to the court of Aurangabad and later that of Hyderabad alike.

Style and Origin of the School of Aurangabad

Traditionally, the members of the Asaf Jahi dynasty were very interested in cosmology, astronomy, astrology, magic and wonder, and they also patronized works of art. The series of miniatures produced in the mid-eighteenth century at Aurangabad court have in common the poetic scenery behind a central figure in the foreground. These landscapes are animated by tiny white buildings of various types – palaces, tombs, wells, villages, minarets, mosques, temples, forts – scattered across a succession of hills, some mountainous, punctuated with bushes and trees, mottled shrubberies or palm-lined paths, in which wild and domestic animals, riders, huntsmen, cowherds and travellers wander. These gouaches epitomize the Deccan style at its most imaginative, as interpreted by the School of Aurangabad.

There are four large painted canvases, which despite their difference in scale and medium, closely echo the style of the Maggs Bros miniature series. In 1926, two of these compositions representing the seasons, *Summer* and *Winter*, the theme of the *Barahmasa* (the twelve months), were published as works from the School of Jaipur.⁵⁴ They feature views of both the Amber Fort and the town of Jaipur, the newly built capital established by Sawai Jai Singh (r. 1699-1743) of the Kingdom of Amber. More recently, the other two important paintings (figs. 22, 23) have also been studied.⁵⁵ In all four paintings, the composition is identical, comprising a tall figure of a woman standing in the foreground surrounded by flowering shrubs and beds of flowers. Three of the portrayed women hold a branch of the tree, alluding to the romantic theme

Fig. 20
*A Cow Carrying
the Earth on her
Horns*, c. 1700-20.
Opaque water-
colour on paper,
300 x 214 mm.
London, British
Museum, inv. no.
1936,0411,0.27.

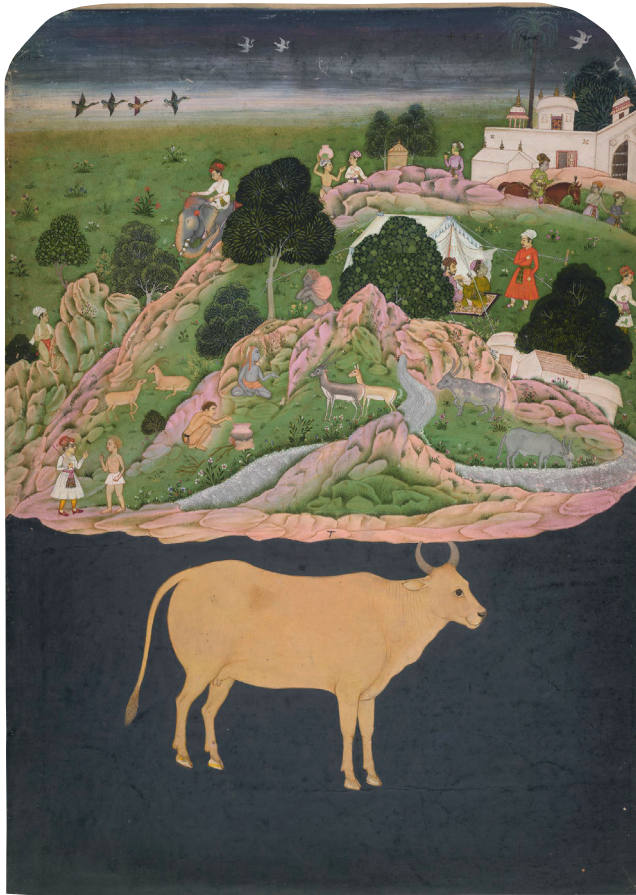




Fig. 21
Constellation of
Cancer, in *Traité
des nativités* by
Abu Ma'shar, 1300.
Opaque water-
colour on paper,
230 x 320 mm.
Paris, Bibliothèque
nationale de France,
inv. no. Mss Arabe
2583, fol. 11v.

of awaiting the lover's return. Beyond that, rising in the background is a detailed landscape, including hills full of small buildings animated by many people and animals, very similar to the set studied here. Raja Har Govind,⁵⁶ minister of Salabat Jang, presented the four paintings to Maharaja Sawai Madho Singh I of Jaipur (r. 1751-68), on the occasion of his accession. The purpose of this royal gift, recorded in the Jaipur archives, was probably to obtain the goodwill of the powerful sovereign.

Three of the paintings are in the style of the Indian painter Muttan. The fourth is slightly different and attributed to his son, Kishan.⁵⁷ Formerly known as the 'Jaipur painter', Muttan and his son have only recently been identified thanks to their signed

works. There are five paintings with Muttan's signature and more than forty works attributed to him.⁵⁸ Trained in the School of Bijapur but based in Aurangabad, it is from his small family workshop (*karkhana*) that Muttan was patronized by Salabat Jang. Most probably the set of (at least) twelve miniatures (figs. 1-12) also originated there. Upon the death of Salabat Jang, a majority of the artists moved to Hyderabad with the court. The continuation of the style of the Aurangabad School is confirmed by the delicately painted, mountainous landscapes, with numerous white buildings on the hills amidst palm groves and shrubberies that appear on the pages of a *Ragamala* (Garland of Musical Modes), a set of miniatures, visualizing verses on melodies, made in Aurangabad, after 1762.⁵⁹

Lastly, one other miniature has a similar background of mountains and hills, many different types of buildings, diminutive people and animals sheltering amidst clumps of trees, with the foreground almost entirely occupied by a princess and her entourage (fig. 24). However, it was attributed to Punch in 1952, with its attribution changed subsequently to Chamba⁶⁰ and to Nurpur in 1973, all three being small Himalayan states situated along the Kashmir, on the borders of the Punjab plains, which region has its own distinctive style.⁶¹ In tiny letters in the centre of a clump of trees, it is signed 'Har Jaimal'.

Curiously, recurring motifs such as symmetrical cascades of banana leaves and the ever-present palm trees (*Borassus flabellifer*) with leaves resembling the vanes of a windmill, appear in the landscapes filling the backgrounds of other miniatures attributed to Har Jaimal. These motifs are typical of the Deccan.⁶² Similar palm trees, for instance, stand out on the horizon of the panoramic views painted by the Deccani artist Venkatchellam.⁶³ One sees the same



Fig. 22
Attributed to
MUTTAM, *Lady
beneath a Mango
Tree*, c. 1751.
Gouache on canvas,
276,6 x 148,8 cm.
Jaipur, Maharaja
Sawai Man Singh II
Museum Trust,
The City Palace,
inv. no. AG 1390.
Photo: courtesy
The Maharaja
Sawai Man Singh II
Museum Trust,
The City Palace,
Jaipur / Image
courtesy Jaigarh
Public Charitable
Trust, Jaipur

idiom in Pahari miniatures from the lower Himalayan hill kingdoms and the plains of Punjab, but rarely before 1790. It seems quite possible that Har Jaimal or other artists have travelled the long way from the Deccan after the loss of Aurangabad's privileged position as capital, bringing the Deccan style up to the north.

Conclusion

Monsters and strange hybrids haunt the human imagination. The sight of extraordinary beings gives pleasurable thrills and takes the mind into a magical dream world. The twelve miniatures, so different one from the other, do not seem to allude to a specific text or form part of a particular programme. Following his imagination, the artist has composed a bouquet – a kind of 'keepsake' – of mythical marvels: a planetary image, a lion-headed infant, a Hindu deity, a sign of the zodiac or a talisman, a rokh-like bird and



Fig. 23
Attributed to
KISHAN, *Lady under
a Tree*, c. 1751.
Gouache on canvas,
237 x 132 cm.
Jaipur, Maharaja
Sawai Man Singh II
Museum Trust,
The City Palace,
inv. no. AG 1389.
Photo: courtesy
The Maharaja
Sawai Man Singh II
Museum Trust,
The City Palace,
Jaipur / Image
courtesy Jaigarh
Public Charitable
Trust, Jaipur

strange looking creatures all inspired by ancient folklore, encyclopaedias, travellers' tales, religious traditions, and above all, by his own highly productive fanciful imagination and inventive genius. Even after knowledge of the natural world advanced, creatures like these were seen as entertaining and in high demand at the sultanates' courts of the Deccan. Stylistic similarities enable us to conclude that these strange (*Ghara'ib*) and wonderful (*Aja'ib*) miniatures were created by an artist painter from Aurangabad, and that the set was intended as a 'keepsake', a gift to be perused with pleasure, page by page, for a Deccani prince like Salabat Jang. Yet whether this hypothesis will be confirmed or dismissed in the future, is a question that can only be answered by the emergence of other pages originating from this intriguing series of Deccani miniatures.

Fig. 24

HAR JAIMAL,
*A Lady and her
 Attendants on
 a Terrace, c. 1760.*
 Opaque water-
 colour with
 gold on paper,
 258 x 145 mm.
 Present where-
 abouts unknown.



ABSTRACT

The *Mythical Bird*, preserved in the Rijksmuseum (inv. no. RP-T-1993-217), belongs to a series of Deccani miniatures showing varied and hybrid creatures dispersed by Maggs Bros between 1966 and 1972. All the miniatures share the same composition, in the foreground featuring a strange creature standing in a grassy landscape that extends into a faraway vista filled with a variety of comparatively diminutive buildings, tiny people and animals. On the verso of the miniatures that could be consulted, we find an inscription in Persian script describing a creature very different from what is depicted on the recto, enabling us to reconstruct the original sequence of the set. Some of the miniatures remind us of illustrations in the manuscripts forming part of Qazwini's encyclopaedia, the *Aja'ib al makhluqat*, one of the most famous works from the Islamic medieval period. Translated into Persian, Greek and Turkish, this book remained popular for centuries. Qazwini includes stories about Iskandar (Alexander the Great) but also tales of imaginary creatures and monsters. The Abbasid period is an era marked by great maritime discoveries, when navigators and adventurous traders wrote their memoirs describing unexplored lands and strange creatures that became legendary. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, courtiers in the sultanates of the Deccan patronized art and were traditionally very interested in literature, magic, cosmology, astronomy and strange and wondrous creatures. Members of the Asaf Jahi dynasty in the city of Aurangabad, for instance, were great enthusiasts. On the basis of large painted canvases produced in an Aurangabad workshop, depicting the theme of *Barahmasa* (the twelve months), Sultan Salabat Jang is suggested as the possible patron of the present set of miniatures.

FOL. 5V	FOL. 5R	FOL. 4V	FOL. 4R	FOL. 3V	FOL. 3R
Text referring to the bird in fig. 4.	Picture	Text	Picture	Text	Picture

FOL. 11V	FOL. 11R	FOL. 10V	FOL. 10R	FOL. 09V	FOL. 9R
Text referring to the bird in fig. 2.	Picture	Text	Picture	Text	Picture

FOL. 17V	FOL. 17R	FOL. 16V	FOL. 16R	FOL. 15V	FOL. 15R
Text referring to the bird in fig. 12.	Picture	Text	Picture	Text	Picture

FOL. 23V	FOL. 23R	FOL. 22V	FOL. 22R	FOL. 21V	FOL. 21R
Text	Picture	Text	Picture	Text	

Fig. 1

FOL. 2V	FOL. 2R	FOL. 1V	FOL. 1R	FOL. 0V	FOL. 0R
Text				Text referring to the bird with woman head in fig. 3.	Frontispiece or sarlowh

Fig. 5

Fig. 13

Fig. 3

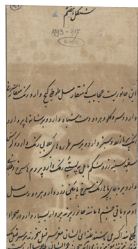
FOL. 8V	FOL. 8R	FOL. 7V	FOL. 7R	FOL. 6V	FOL. 6R
Text	Picture	Text	Picture of a strange bird, referred to in fig. 14.		

Fig. 14

Fig. 4

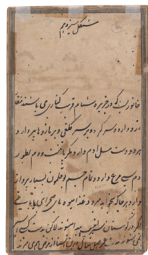
FOL. 14V	FOL. 14R	FOL. 13V	FOL. 13R	FOL. 12V	FOL. 12R
Text	Picture	Text	Picture of an animal with human arms, referred to in fig. 15.		

Fig. 15

Fig. 2

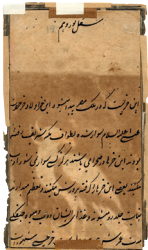
FOL. 20V	FOL. 20R	FOL. 19V	FOL. 19R	FOL. 18V	FOL. 18R
		Text referring to the dragon in fig. 11.	Picture of an Egyptian donkey, referred to in fig. 17.		

Fig. 16

Fig. 11

Fig. 17

Fig. 12

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