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Anna Contadini

*A World of Beasts: A Thirteenth-Century Illustrated Arabic Book on Animals (the Kitāb Na't al-Ḥayawān) in the Ibn Bakhtīshū' Tradition*

Leiden: [Brill](#), 2012. 224 pp.; 86 color ills.; 67 b/w ills. Cloth \$142.00 (9789004201002)



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The focus of Anna Contadini's *A World of Beasts* is the sole extant manuscript of the *Kitāb Na't al-Ḥayawān* ("Book of the Characteristics of Animals"), an Arabic treatise on the distinctive qualities of animals and their therapeutic value. Datable on stylistic grounds to ca. 1225 CE, "the *Na't*" was acquired by the British Museum in 1884 and is now held by the British Library under shelfmark Or. 2784. Contadini's investigation exposes the manuscript as a unique witness to the convergence of Islamic illustrative traditions, pseudo-Aristotelian animal lore, and Greco-Arabic medical knowledge. In eight chapters and three appendices, she offers a reading of this captivating manuscript "as a consciously designed whole" by untangling complex relationships between text, image, and book production processes (9). *A World of Beasts* thus fits squarely into an ever-widening body of scholarship whose growth is due in no small measure to Contadini's longtime advocacy of integrative methodologies in the study of Islamic art.

The opening chapter, which introduces the literary and illustrative traditions to which the *Na't* relates most closely, sets the stage for the detailed analyses to follow. Chapter 2 evaluates the manuscript's physical makeup, condition, and materials. While the *Na't* is in a fair state of preservation, approximately ten folios, some of them illustrated, are lost, as are the colophon and dedicatory inscription. Unmistakable signs of overpainting are also evident in many of the manuscript's illustrations, and its folios were trimmed and rebound nonsequentially at some point in history. The foregoing, compounded by the absence of a critical edition of the text, makes Contadini's reconstruction of the manuscript (provided in tabular form, pp. 25–37) a noteworthy achievement. Resequencing the book's foliation entailed careful observation of internal signs like pigment transference and comparative analysis of external literary sources. The latter are addressed in chapter 3, an in-depth exploration of the *Na't* as a written work.

Authorship of the *Kitāb Na't al-Ḥayawān* is usually ascribed to Abū Saīd 'Ubayd Allāh ibn Jibrā'īl ibn Bakhtīshū' (d. 1058 CE), the last in a distinguished line of Nestorian Christian physicians. Ibn Bakhtīshū' is known to have authored a treatise on the properties and curative powers of animals, but the *Na't* is an anonymous compilation of material drawn from Ibn Bakhtīshū's writings and the pseudo-Aristotelian zoological corpus. The treatise catalogs a menagerie of roughly one hundred animals, including humans and mythical creatures like the unicorn. Individual entries typically consist of a description (*Na't*) of a species's attributes and behavior (the wolf, for example, is antisocial), followed by a list of its beneficial uses (*manāfi'*; e.g., gravy prepared from elephant flesh relieves asthma). The former are traceable to the pseudo-Aristotelian zoological tradition; the writings of Ibn Bakhtīshū' supplied the medico-pharmacological content.

Contadini's textual analysis demonstrates that the compilatory nature of the *Na't* renders contextualization difficult. The

treatise is neither a zoological handbook nor a manual for a practicing physician, even if its sources were predicated on firsthand observation of animal behavior and clinical experience. Rather, the *Na't* is a literary hybrid whose genre Contadini calls “zoological cum medical” (8). Manuscripts in the so-called Ibn Bakhtīshū' tradition are often classified as bestiaries despite the nonappearance of their European counterparts' moralizing qualities. Like the animal compendia of the medieval West, however, the *Na't* was intended by its anonymous compiler (*jāmi'*) to elicit recognition of God's hand in all of creation through the observation of the animal kingdom's wondrous diversity. As explained in chapters 4 through 6, the *Na't*'s illustrations fulfilled the same aim.

The *Na't* holds the dual distinction of being the earliest and the most richly illustrated manuscript of its type still in existence. Eighty-six of the manuscript's one hundred or so original illustrations are preserved. No close analogue to the *Na't*'s pictorial cycle survives; Contadini therefore seeks iconographic affinities, stylistic connections, and typological correspondences in a range of twelfth- and thirteenth-century scientific and literary manuscripts. Paradoxically, the extant illustrated manuscripts whose texts most closely relate to the *Na't* are chronologically distant and stylistically far removed.

Predictably, the vast majority of the *Na't*'s illustrations depict animals, but human figures inhabit seven folios: two double frontispieces preceding the text, and three figural images within it. The *Na't*'s human subjects are examined in chapter 4. The frontispiece figures are the apparent victims of pious iconoclasm; faces were clumsily redrawn in a later style on three of the four folios. In assessing the frontispieces, Contadini entertains several possibilities for the figures' identities and “semiotic value” (55). The opening frontispiece's solitary figures—a cloaked, hooded individual and a scribe holding a book (or the *Na't*'s anonymous compiler)—may represent actual historical personages or generic figural types; regardless, their presence in the front matter signifies the transmission of knowledge. In analyzing the scribe, whose bare torso “remains difficult to explain,” Contadini offers provisional reading of the figure's partial nudity as suggestive of “a possible asceticism, even a reflex of the concept of the spiritual athlete” (67, 68). She contends that the hooded figure, who conforms to the *hakīm* (sage) figural type, can be identified as an ecclesiastical authority of the Syriac church, or perhaps even Ibn Bakhtīshū' himself, largely on the basis of an attribute located to the figure's right. Contadini identifies the object, which consists of a round disc atop a long handle, as a *flabellum* (ceremonial liturgical fan used in the Coptic and Syriac churches), writing, “It is clear that the intention of the painter was to represent an actual *flabellum*, so that when viewed in conjunction with the general iconography of the figure it may be confidently identified as confirming an ecclesiastical link and thereby relating the knowledge enshrined in the book to a figure connected to Ibn Bakhtīshū' confessionally and, possibly, in a double layer of meaning, even representing him symbolically” (70).

A pair of enthroned, princely figures flanked by attendants is represented in the second double frontispiece. Contadini appraises these embodiments of authority as “the ruler-prince and the scholar-prince”; central to her argument is a reading of a bowl of fruit as a metaphor for knowledge, its transmittal, and its reception (72–73). As she notes frequently in her analyses of the *Na't*'s figural iconography, the absence of captions or other verbal cues can give rise to a variety of interpretations. Citing the “need to understand the two figures . . . as somehow engaged both with the text and its visual programme,” Contadini views the princely figures as an enlightened patron and a protector of received knowledge (75). Left open is the possibility of an association between the figures and the act of royal patronage that impelled Ibn Bakhtīshū' to compose his book on animals. The text of the *Na't* is prefaced by discourses attributed, probably falsely, to Aristotle and Ibn Bakhtīshū'. The Arab physician's discourse begins, “When I was ordered by the Amir Sa'd al-Dīn to compose a book which would contain an account of the usefulness of animals, their properties and peculiarities of behavior . . . I obeyed this instruction and put together this book from the writings of reliable ancient authorities” (42). The identity of the *amīr* (governor) is contested, but scholarly consensus holds that Ibn Bakhtīshū' composed his treatise on animals at a ruler's behest.

The *Na't*'s remaining human personages pose fewer interpretative difficulties than the frontispieces. Each discourse is illustrated with an explicit visualization of the transmission of knowledge in the form of its putative author in the company of a pupil. The *Na't*'s last human representation depicts Man and Woman as members of the animal kingdom. Chapter 5 is devoted to the *Na't*'s zoological imagery. Contadini's analysis of the manuscript's mythical creatures and its occasional narrative content demonstrates clearly why the *Na't* should not be regarded as a work of natural history. Iconographically and compositionally, the animals are descendants of the “scientific” illustrative tradition developed in Antiquity, but word and image serve a like purpose in the *Na't*: to fill the reader/viewer with a sense of wonder.

Chapter 6 integrates comparative micro-analysis of the composition, iconography, and style of the *Na't*'s illustrations into a macro-analysis of the manuscript as an illustrated book. Three grids appended to the chapter offer a “motif-based inventory” of iconographic, compositional, and stylistic features (121). Contadini's original approach to the *Na't*'s “*mise-en-page*” takes

into account the manuscript's aesthetic dimensions and spatial organization, as well as technical aspects whose study was aided by the use of near-infrared imaging (103). In sum, her analysis reminds readers of the shortcomings of traditional methods—as epitomized by Richard Ettinghausen's influential *Arab Painting* (Geneva: Skira, 1962)—in which manuscripts' illustrations are studied in isolation from their texts.

From *A World of Beasts*'s first page to its last, Contadini builds a continuous argument for the inseparability of text and image in the making of illustrated books and the uniqueness of the *Kitāb Naʿt al-Ḥayawān*. In so doing, she spells out many of the critical issues facing students and scholars of Islamic manuscripts today. Chapters 7 and 8 take up some of the most vexing problems (date, provenance, patronage, and production center) as they relate to the *Naʿt*. The *Naʿt*'s closest visual analogues are the well-known but dispersed herbal of Dioscorides dated 621/1224 and an undated copy of an astronomical treatise attributed to Ibn al-Ṣūfī in Tehran's Reza Abbasi Museum. The numerous and often striking similarities between the three manuscripts' illustrations suggest that they hail from the same artistic milieu. Contadini tentatively, but tantalizingly, proposes that they might even have been produced by a single workshop, but admits that a “common environment” or “artistic circle” is more likely to account for their resemblance (131). She also attributes the Ibn al-Ṣūfī manuscript and the *Naʿt* to the same artist on the basis of “the uncanny closeness of their pictorial vocabulary” (131); other possibilities, such as shared iconographic models, should not be dismissed.

The precise location of the *Naʿt*'s artistic circle or hypothetical workshop is as yet unknown. Contadini tests several possibilities for the manuscript's provenance, providing readers with a superb overview of pre-Mongol “schools” of painting. She concludes, as Hugo Buchthal did in “Early Islamic Miniatures from Baghdad” (*Journal of the Walters Art Gallery* 5 (1942): 19–39), that an attribution to Baghdad or its environs is reasonable, even though “the fact remains that there is little hard evidence” for the so-called Baghdad School's existence (154). Since only one pre-Mongol manuscript—a *Kitāb al-bayṭara* (“Book of Farriery”) dated 605/1209 and now in the Egyptian national library (Cairo, Dār al-Kutub, Khalīl Aghā F8)—bears incontrovertible evidence of a Baghdadi origin, “Baghdad School” is better understood as a stylistic designation than a geographical provenance.

Contadini's discussion draws to a close with an exploration of potential production sites, methods, and patrons (monastic scriptorium, royal atelier, commercial workshop, or private commission; various divisions of labor among scribes and illustrators; royal vs. scholarly patronage). Even if physical evidence and the current state of scholarly knowledge preclude definitive conclusions, it is apparent that the *Naʿt*'s patron or dedicatee was someone to whom luxury books, Ibn Bakhtīshūʿ's medical writings, and the Aristotelian legacy held great appeal. One can easily imagine the manuscript as the prized possession of a bibliophilic member of the thirteenth-century intellectual elite, given that, “the quality of its illustrations and the care lavished on them certainly suggest that it was an object of study, contemplation, and even wonder” (164).

*A World of Beasts* is based largely on Contadini's dissertation at London's School of Oriental and African Studies (1992), where she is now professor of Islamic art. In preparing the revision, Contadini widened her scope of inquiry to include technical analyses that vastly improve an understanding of the modalities of manuscript production in the medieval Islamic sphere. A central theme of her dissertation—that the *Naʿt*'s text, pictorial cycle, and uniquely harmonious text-image relationship set it apart from other extant “bestiaries”—is presented here in a more nuanced form. Manuscripts are, by definition, unique productions, but she builds a persuasive case for the *Naʿt*'s incomparability, and masterfully applies Socratic reasoning to the available evidence before drawing her conclusions. A wider search for iconographic witnesses to the zoological illustrative tradition might have further clarified the variability in the *Naʿt*'s text-image relationships (e.g., the text describes the viper as having a human face, yet the creature illustrated lacks anthropomorphic features), but her attention to detail is otherwise paramount.

A large body of notes, up-to-date bibliography, full index, and technical analyses of the pigments and inks employed by the manuscript's copyist and illustrator(s) supplement the volume. The color catalogue of the *Naʿt*'s illustrations in their entirety (and numbered according to the reconstructed foliation) is a major asset. Some of the *Naʿt*'s illustrations are duplicated in the text's black-and-white figures and the color plates, most of which reproduce comparative material. Non-specialists will appreciate the volume's accessibility. Arabic terms are given in transliterated form, and passages quoted from the *Naʿt* and its textual analogues are provided in translation; specialists may wish to consult Contadini's dissertation for excerpts of the Arabic originals. Observant readers will notice the introduction of some information well after first references, the overuse of the word “similar,” and the occasional transposition (“fruit of bowl”; p. 74, n. 65) or error of fact (the *Kitāb al-diryāq* and the *Mukhtār al-ḥikam* are biographical, not bibliographical, as described on p. 7), but these minor distractions do not diminish the substance of this important contribution to the study of the arts of the Islamic book. Contadini's wide-ranging and flexible

methods have broad implications for those who examine the ways in which pre-modern texts found visual expression. And, like the *Kitāb Na't al-Ḥayawān* itself, *A World of Beasts* is sure to appeal to readers' intellects and imaginations. Scholars and students of Islamic art, literature, history, and science will find it of interest, as will Western medievalists, Classicists, and folklorists.

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