

Bat symbolism in Idrīs Bidlīsī’s *Hašt Bihišt* VI

Mustafa Dehqan

Cultural and social set of beliefs of all communities have normally been closely related to animals, which are symbolized in literature and history. Cultural and social definitions of animals as ‘good’ or ‘evil’ have persisted throughout the history of humankind. In the Iranian environment, bats are mostly perceived as symbols of darkness and ignorance. Here, we briefly review the role that bats play in Idrīs Bidlīsī’s unpublished *Hašt Bihišt* (Book VI) and its symbolisms associated with bats. We present shortly Idrīs’ highlighted Arabic verse in reference to the symbolized darkness and ignorance of bats.

Keywords: Idrīs Bidlīsī, *Hašt Bihišt* VI, Murād II, Ottoman, Persian, Arabic.

To Gökçe Mızraklı
kardeşliği ve dostluğu için

1. Introduction¹

The symbolism of the bat is so vast that it cannot be sketched within the limits of this short article. It goes back to Medieval Islamic centuries and had, there, a complex history which has not, I suspect, been traced adequately (apart from the Persian short article by Ğūyā Ğahānbaĥš’s “*Šabpara va Šabpara Čašm*,” published in 2018).²

What I want to discuss is something much more specific: not even a general overview of bat symbolism in Persian and Arabic literature, but the concept of the bat in *Hašt Bihišt* (“The Eight Paradises”) VI which Idrīs Bidlīsī (1457-1520) devoted to the reign of Murād II (1421-1444; 1446-1451).

¹ I thank Huda J. Fakhreddine for generously sharing with me her vast repository of information on Arabic literature. I am also grateful to Mauro Tosco and the anonymous reviewers for their comments and support. Of course, any omission and error is my sole responsibility.

² It is only based on the bat symbolism in Sa’dī’s *Gulistān*. See Ğahānbaĥš (2018: 5-16). For a quick review of the basic issues of animal symbolism in Middle Eastern literature cf. Daneshvari (1986).

It can, I suggest, be conveniently used as a primary step for further critical editions or translations of the unpublished *Hašt Bihišt VI*.³

In Islamic literature, the bat was considered a bird, called in Arabic and Persian *ḥuffāš*, *šabpara*, *mūš-i kūr*, *ḍaʿif al-bašar*, *šabkūr*, and *ḥašāf* (the last is the result of metathesis). Muslim law is almost uniform regarding its treatment. Not only Muslims forbid its flesh, but it is even prohibited to use its feces (cf. e.g., al-Ṭūsī 2008: i, 39).

Although consuming bat flesh is forbidden by Islamic schools of law, medicinal use of various parts of the bat's body is allowed for treatment of variety of conditions (al-Marwazī 2020: ii, 546-549).

Despite the fact that most types of Arabic and Persian folk tales in which the bat appears portray the animal as the symbol of several concepts, it mainly figures as the symbol of darkness, ignorance, and blindness in Islamic literature. These characteristics of the bat have been also reflected in folklore and philosophy (cf. e.g., al-Marwazī 2020: ii, 442 and Ibn Qayyim al-Ğawzīyya 2010: 79-80).

2. Bat and Chameleon: A specific sample of a general symbolism

This study of the use of one of the most important symbols in *Hašt Bihišt VI* is prompted by a desire to have a clearer understanding of the relation of Idrīs' language to symbolism. Idrīs' insight into the nature of darkness and ignorance is characterized by a frequent use of bat symbolism. In his references to the Christians and other enemies of Murād II, the ideal method of Idrīs is dialectic, which proceeds without the aid of symbols; but sometimes when direct reference is repetitive he proceeds with the aid of bats. To him, the opponents of Murād II, Christians and Muslims included, were unable to see and understand his brightness and awareness. Bats only live in darkness, in 'the depth of night,' in their caves, but what Murād II really seeks is to get sight and knowledge of those realities that can be seen only by those who are not 'the followers of darkness.' As Idrīs puts it, if unable to see the sun, it is wise for one to accept the limitations of ignorance and sultan's superiority.⁴

The extraordinary sample of the Persian *Hašt Bihišt VI* which Idrīs displays in his *bawāʿit-i muḥāraba-yi Isfandiyār* ('Reasons for the Isfendiyar War'), may be an Arabic verse. Certainly, it plays a

³ On Idrīs Bidlīsī and his *Hašt Bihišt*, see Genç (2019: chapters i-ii); Markiewicz (2014: 127-145). Idrīs Bidlīsī was a late 15th and early 16th century scholar and historian; his Ottoman chronicle, written in the early 16th century, mainly covers the reign and times of earlier Ottoman sultans.

⁴ Other examples of the bat symbolism can be found in other works of the same author. In *the Hašt Bihišt VI*, Idrīs several times refers to the bat symbolism. See for instance Bidlīsī, *Hašt Bihišt*, Istanbul, Süleymaniye Kütüphanesi, Esad Efendi 2199, fol.306v. (...va Muştafā mağ'ül-i ḥuffāš şifat az muqābila-yi āftāb-i ḥilāfat va iğlāl rüy gardān va mustaqar şud...) and fol.318r. (...zirā ka mağāl-i ğilvagarī-yi ḥuffāš vaqtī ast ka ḥurşid-i tābān rā dar ḥiğāb-i zulmat-i şām mutivārī va pinhān bibīnad...).

vital role in Idrīs' framing of his bat symbolism. It is mentioned in the context of the dispute over the question of whether the followers of darkness (i.e. the Anatolian Turcoman *bey*, Isfendiyar of Kastamonu (*Qaṣṭamunī*, d.1440) were able to defeat the followers of brightness (i.e. Murād II) or not:

*wa dağat dukā'un fa-aqbalat ħirbā'uhā
taškū l-aḏā bi-šamātati l-ħuffāšī⁵*

The sun⁶ set and the chameleon complained while the bat gloated

aqbalat taškū does not imply that the chameleon came to sun and complained—it means that as a result of the sun setting the chameleon now has reason to complain. This supports Idrīs' reading of the chameleon as a follower of light or brightness and the bat as a follower of darkness. The bat here is rejoicing at or taking pleasure in the chameleon's misfortune (and hence the phrase *bi šamātati l-ħuffāšī*).

One expects the verse to be gleaned from an earlier poetry collection. Idrīs was a very talented poet as well (both in Persian and Arabic) but he almost always designated his own verses used in the *Hašt Bihišt VI* by the term *li-mu'allifihi* 'by its author.'

Outside of the above-mentioned bat symbolism, Idrīs here made a more specific reference to the same Arabic-Persian symbolism in which the bat as a symbol of darkness and ignorance mentioned against the chameleon. Also known as *ābid al-šams*, *mušammis*, and *āftāb parast*, the chameleon is used in Islamic literature as a generic term to cover brightness, awareness, and mystical knowledge (al-Ġāḥiẓ 1983: i, 145 and al-Marwazī 2020: ii, 613).

The use of chameleon in Islamic symbolism is limited. Though it is used as an indication to reinforce positive emotions against those who like "night, darkness, and ignorance," the chameleon is a perception, not a mere symbolism; it exists as a function of our vision and cerebral function. Hence, a chameleon as 'the animal who likes sun/light' can symbolize anything we want it to symbolize (al-Ġāḥiẓ 1983: vi, 367; Sam'ānī 1989: 19).

⁵ For this, see the manuscript Nuruosmaniye 3209, fol.284v., Hazine 1655, fol.320r., and Tabriz 1874, fol.243v. Interestingly, the earliest autograph manuscript, Esad Efendi 2199, fol.319v., mentions a Persian verse in the same context and in the same place: *yakī guft ān dam ba Isfandiyār / ka bā šāh mikunī kārzār*. This verse is intended here to focus on Idrīs' wondering why Isfandiyār rebelled against the brightness, not to provide a bat symbolism, although it is mentioned in prose.

⁶ The proper noun (*al-ismu l-'alam*) *dukā'* was used by the poet in order to refer to 'sun.' It should not be rendered as 'cleverness, intelligence' here. For *dukā'* 'sun,' see Maluf (1996: 236).

The story of the bat's darkness or ignorance is an episode in the troubled relationship between the bat and the chameleon. Reading it as a straightforward literary record is out of question, both because of the context and because of the theological question of God's preservation of the Sultan Murād II in his conflicts against Isfendiyar of Kastamonu which is involved here. In any case, we can probably employ the above evidence as an indication of the forms of bat symbolism practiced by later Islamic authors.

Unfortunately, I could not find an attribution for this verse. My first hunch was to look in *dīwān Dū l-Rumma* (d.735) who is known for his images of the chameleon as a worshipper with different inclinations.⁷

The use of the present Arabic verse also brings to mind a detail from the works of Šihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī (d.1191), the Iranian philosopher who several generations before the time of Idrīs Bidlīsī composed a Persian treatise, entitled *Luġat-i Mūrān* ('The Language of Termites'), in which he presented an eminently symbolic story of the bats and the chameleon. Accordingly, enmity arose between some bats and a chameleon. The bats decided to take a harsh revenge on the chameleon. After they took him to their cave, they decided that the worst punishment for a chameleon was to put him in the sun (...*hīč ta'dīb batar az mušāhidat-i āftāb nīst...*). They compared him to themselves, who hate the sun, and did not know that for the chameleon the sun is not a punishment but a blessing (...*va ān ta'dīb ihyā'-i ū būd...*).⁸

With this symbolic story Suhrawardī was referring to the dramatic killing of al-Ḥallāğ (d.922). He is remembered to have endured brightness and 'knowledge of God.' In a sense, Idrīs had put Isfendiyar of Kastamonu on trial, for Murād II was marked by divine wisdom, truth, and morality.

Concerning this specific sample of bat symbolism we have another Arabic verse from the poet Amīn al-Dawla ibn al-Tilmīd which deals, from the same peculiar angle, with ignorance and the bat. The reference to this verse is gleaned from Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a (d.1270).⁹

3. Conclusion

The *Hašt Bihišt* VI is first and foremost a panegyric understanding of the Ottoman Empire, mediated by the concepts of the unity of God and the sultanate of Murād II. The Islamic sense of the Empire and of the role Murād II plays in it is bound up with the readers who accept this sense as part of Murād II's

⁷ Obviously, a play on its epithet *'ābid al-šams*, as is the case here: *yazallu bihā l-ḥirbāu li-l-šams mātilan / 'ala l-ğadli ilā annahu lā yukabbiru / idā ḥawwala l-dilla l-ʿašiyu raʿaytahu / ḥaniyfā wa fī qarni l-ḍuḥay yatanaşşaru*. See *Dū l-Rumma* (1994: 74).

⁸ For this story, see Suhrawardī (2001: iii, 301-302).

⁹ See Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a (2009: i, 161): *wa naqīşatan li-l-aḥmaqi l-tayyāşi / nūran wa yağşā a'yuna l-ḥuffāşa*.

divine legitimacy. The divine legitimacy that Idrīs Bidlīsī granted to the Sultan Murād II is to be sought not only in his panegyric descriptions but also in his pure historical accounts. With his extra-sophisticated language, Idrīs used several terms, symbols, and concepts to stress on the knowledge, superiority, and morality of Murād II. The symbolism of light and darkness, which Idrīs mostly uses the term *bat* to express it, is one of the ways to indicate Murād II's superhuman power and acceptance.

It is necessary to give due emphasis here to the point that what Idrīs wrote is not only symbolism. Nor is it simply a matter of putting Persian words and phrases into the Arabic language. The bats establish a theme that runs parallel to the story and may have served as a key to the understanding of the text. In *Hašt Bihišt* VI, Idrīs' use of bat symbolisms also has a decidedly Ottoman legitimacy to them. One cannot list them all here, a notable instance will suffice to make the point. For example, in the early chapters Idrīs speaks of the *Muṣṭafā mağ'ūl-i ḥuffāš šifat*, using the negative aspect of symbolism for Düzme Mustafa, an Ottoman illegitimate prince who struggled to gain the throne of the Ottoman Empire, when he refers to the Ottoman Sultan Murād II as *āftāb-i ḥilāfat* 'the sun of the caliphate' (EE 2199, fol.318r.).

Many aspects of the vocabulary of the *Hašt Bihišt* are complex, but traditional philological inquiry is of some use in considering it. The general sense of the term *bat* is, for example, clear, but there is good reason to consider it in a broader sense. Arabic and Persian concepts used by Idrīs are of great importance in understanding the *Hašt Bihišt*, and especially in producing a translation of the text. It is of great importance whether the terms and symbols utilized by Idrīs do or do not occur in the literature of the pre-Ottoman period. Admittedly, these seemingly small and unimportant points will help scholars to prepare a critical text of the *Hašt Bihišt*. Regardless of the fact that the translation of such a problematic text without a critical edition is completely wrong, it is not possible either. Any translation not only requires a critical edition, but also needs something beyond that. The translator must pay serious attention to understanding symbolisms such as the one discussed here. Many words and terms in the book of *Hašt Bihišt* have a history. Reading them or translating them without considering their background will lead the reader or translator astray.

References

Primary sources

Bidlīsī, Idrīs ibn Ḥusām al-Dīn. *Hašt Bihišt*. Istanbul, Süleymaniye Kütüphanesi, Esad Efendi 2199.

Bidlīsī, Idrīs ibn Ḥusām al-Dīn. *Hašt Bihišt*. Istanbul, Süleymaniye Kütüphanesi, Nuruosmaniye 3209.

Bidlīsī, Idrīs ibn Ḥusām al-Dīn. *Hašt Bihišt*. Istanbul, Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi Kütüphanesi, Hazine 1655.

Bidlīsī, Idrīs ibn Ḥusām al-Dīn. *Hašt Bihišt*. Tabriz, Kitābhāna-yi Markazī-yi Tabrīz, Maǧmū'a-yi H. Hussein Nakhdjvani, MS 1874.

Secondary sources

Daneshvari, Abbas. 1986. *Animal Symbolism in Warqa wa Gulshāh*. Oxford: Oxford University Press for the Board of the Faculty of Oriental Studies.

Ḍū l-Rumma, 'Abd al-Raḥmān Ḥasan. 1994. *Dīwān*, ed. Abū l-Ḥarīṭ Ḡaylān ibn 'Uqba. Bayrūt: Dār al-Kitāb. Genç, Vural. 2019. *Acem'den Rum'a Bir Bürokrat ve Tarihi: İdris-i Bidlīsī (1457-1520)*. Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu.

al-Ġāḥiz, Abī 'Uṭmān Amru ibn Baḥr. 1983. *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*, ed. 'Abd al-Salām Hārūn. al-Qāhira: al-Maktaba al-Ḥānġī.

Ġahānbaḥš, Ġūyā. 2018. "Šabpara va Šabpara Čašm." *Ā'ina-yi Pažūhiš* 173: 5-16.

Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a, Aḥmad ibn Qāsim. 2009. '*Uyūn al-Anbā' fi Ṭabaqāt al-Aṭibbā'*, ed. Muḥammad al-Nāġī. al-Qāhira: Dār al-Miṣrīyya.

Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawzīyya, Abū 'Abdallāh Muḥammad ibn Abī Bakr ibn Ayyūb. 2010. *Iğtimā' al-Ġuyūš al-Islāmīyya 'alā Ḥarb al-Mu'aṭṭilati wa l-Ġahmīyya*, ed. Zā'id ibn Aḥmad al-Naširī. al-Makka: Mu'assasa Sulaymān ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Rāġihīyya l-Ḥayrīyya.

Maluf, Luwis. 1996. *al-Munğad fi l-Luğat*. Tehran: Islām.

Markiewicz, Christopher. 2014. *The Crisis of Rule in Late Medieval Islam: A Study of Idrīs Bidlīsī (861-926/1457-1520) and Kingship at the Turn of the Sixteenth Century*. PhD dissertation, The University of Chicago.

al-Marwazī, Šaraf al-Zamān Ṭāhir. 2020. *Ṭabāyi' al-Ḥayawān*, ed. Yousef al-Hadi. Tehran: Mīrāth Maktūb.

Sam'ānī, Šihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad. 1989. *Rūḥ al-Arwāḥ fi Šarḥ Asmā' l-Malik al-Fattāḥ*, ed. Naġīb Māyil Hiravī. Tehran: Intiṣārāt-i 'Ilmī va Farhangī.

Suhrawardī, Shihāb al-Dīn Yaḥyā. 2001. *Maǧmū'a-yi Mušannafāt-i Šayḥ-i Išrāq*, ed. S. Hossein Nasr. Tehran: Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies.

al-Ṭūsī, Abī Ġa'far Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan. 2008. *al-Mabsūt fi Fiqh al-Imāmīyya*, ed. Muḥammad Taqī al-Kašfī. Tehran: al-Maktab al-Murtaḍawī.

Mustafa Dehqan received a BA in History and an MA in Historical Linguistics from the University of Tehran. He is an independent scholar whose research interests include Kurdish history, early modern Ottoman empire, Kurdish literature and religions, Kurdo-Syriac contact zones, and Garshuni manuscripts. He has published several articles on Kurdish history, literature, and religions in *Journal of Kurdish Studies*, *Der Islam*, *Iranian Studies*, *Oriente Moderno*, *Journal of Eastern Christian Studies*, *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies*, and *Manuscripta Orientalia*, as well as numerous other journals and edited volumes. He is also the author of *Index to Sharaf-nāma* (Istanbul: 2014). Mustafa can be reached at: mustafadehqan@yahoo.com