MYTHICAL ANIMALS IN MUGHAL ART: IMAGES, SYMBOLS, AND ALLUSIONS

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> All the princes seek *Huma*'s shadow –
> behold this *Huma* (me, Humayun) who
> enters under your shadow.[1]

Humayun, the second Mughal emperor whose capital was at Delhi 1530–40 and 1555–56, thus alluded to his dilemma when seeking refuge at the Safavid court of Shah Tahmasp in 1540. The image of the *huma*, a mysterious bird who lived only on dry bones yet whose shadow was so full of blessing power that over whomsoever it fell would become king (Humayun regained the throne at Delhi in 1555) was a familiar metaphor to the Safavid and Mughal courts which inherited the Persian literary tradition. Such metaphors composed the very fabric of classical Persian poetry, and a wealth of images of flora as well as fauna contributed to the poetic prism through which the many levels of experience were illumined.[2]

Many literary descriptions of mythical animals were also given visual form. These are found principally in paintings illustrating Persian literary texts and their bindings, such as the works of Hafiz, Sa'di, Jami, Nizami, Qazvini, 'Attar, Amir Khusrau, Firdausi, to name a few; but under the patronage of the early Mughal emperors they also appeared in individual works prepared for *muraqqa'* albums and in other media such as carpets, architecture, and occasionally textiles.

However the mine of classical Persian images was not the only source available to the Mughals, for they were heirs to several cultural traditions in which mythical animals featured – those of the Turkic and Arabic worlds and of the Sultanate courts of India; and of Hinduism. The Mughals consciously drew upon all these fountainheads in forging a cohesive cultural identity through which to unify their pluralist court. Thus mythical images of the Hindu pantheon – such as Ganesha, Hanuman, Jambavat, Garuda, Kesi, the *gaja-simha* – are found in the illustrated Persian translations of Hindu religious texts which were commissioned to promote religious understanding. They also appear in original compositions and in various media, alongside images drawn from the classical Persian repertoire, to create fresh metaphors and symbols appropriate to the new dynasty.

Yet by the late seventeenth century few of these images are found in imperial Mughal art (even if they continued in the repertoire of classical Persian poetry). The relationship between the evolution of poetic images and those selected for illustration, the development of Urdu, and the influence of classical Sanskrit works upon Mughal literature, are questions to be kept in mind while being far beyond the present scope. The aim of this brief article is to reflect upon two particular mythical animals

and their significance in Mughal art from the middle of Akbar's reign circa 1580 to the reign of Aurangzeb circa 1680: the dragon and the *simurgh*.

Literary "reality" and iconography of "mythical" animals

First, however, a few reflections upon the notion of "mythical" animals are appropriate. If many creatures which appear in Islamic sources are not known to have had a physical existence in the material world, they nonetheless had a real presence in the imaginal worlds of poetic and literary traditions where their identity and attributes were elaborated. Different genres of literature tended to focus on particular species in the animal kingdom. Thus birds predominated in poetic images, symbolizing the soul in Islamic as well as in many other and more ancient cultural traditions: the nightingale, the dove, the falcon, the hoopoe amongst many.

Pre-eminent as a symbol in mystical poetry was the *simurgh,* taken as the manifestation of spiritual reality.[3] Farid ud-Din 'Attar, born in Nishapur (north-east Persia) in the twelfth century, described this supranatural bird in his mystical poem "The Conference of the Birds" (*Mantiq ut-Tayr*):

> It was in China, late one moonless night,
> The Simurgh first appeared to mortal sight –
> He let a feather float down through the air,
> And rumours of its fame spread everywhere;
> Throughout the world men separately conceived
> An image of its shape, and all believed
> Their private fantasies uniquely true!
> (In China still this feather is on view,
> Whence comes the saying you have heard, no doubt,
> "Seek knowledge, unto China Seek it out.")
> If this same feather had not floated down,
> The world would not be filled with His renown –
> It is a sign of Him, and in each heart
> There lies this feather's hidden counterpart.[4]

Shihabuddin as-Suhrawardi, a contemporary of 'Attar and a Sufi master whose works were to influence moderate Indian Sufism,[5] described the qualities of the *simurgh* and of the feather, symbol of the divine origin of all earthly beauty:

> Know that all colours derive from Simurgh, although she herself is without colours.... All knowledge derives from the incantation of this Simurgh. The marvellous instruments of music, such as the organ and others, have been produced from its echo and its resonances.... Her nourishment is fire.... The morning breeze stems from her breath. This is why the loving tell her the mystery of their hearts....[6]

The poet 'Aufi (d. after 1236) described the *simurgh* as having "energy from the falcon, power of flight from the Huma, a long neck from the ostrich, a feathery collar from the ringdove, and strength from the *karkadann* (unicorn)".[7]

The *simurgh* was already known through the *Shahnama* (Book of Kings), the monumental epic poem of Firdausi (d. 1020) versifying the traditions of pre-Islamic Iran. This "heavenly" bird intervened in the affairs of men by saving Zal, second of the four great heroes of the work, nourishing him with her

1
The dragon devouring Shah Ardeshir. From the *Darabnama*. Mughal, circa 1580–85. 34 x 20 cm, folio 35 x 22.5 cm. The British Library, London, Or. 4615 f. 3v. By permission of the British Library.

own young after his father had abandoned him. When returning Zal to Sam, his father, she gave him one of her feathers which, if lit in a moment of danger would instantly recall her to his aid.

The attributes and the iconic elements of the *simurgh*'s physiognomy were established in literary sources: it was large enough to carry human beings, held either in its strong beak or by its powerful talons; and had glorious plumage and flowing tail feathers which reflected the colour spectrum of the divine. The *simurgh* was portrayed thus in illustrated Persian texts prepared at the Timurid courts whose pictorial traditions the Mughals inherited.

Similarly a number of "mythical" animals are known through literature where their physical features were also described: the legendary horse Rakhsh who protected Rustam, hero of the *Shahnama,* by killing the lions threatening his master, and Shirin's beloved black stallion named Shabdiz described by the poet Nizami, were depicted in illustrations to such texts. And Buraq, the miraculous steed on which the Prophet traversed the spheres during his night journey to the Divine Presence, almost invariably is represented according to legend with a woman's face and a peacock tail. If Buraq was more frequently illustrated for Shia patrons, and also Duldul, the white mule of 'Ali, which according to tradition was sent to the Prophet by the Coptic patriarch Muqauqis and whose good character led some poets to call the heart a Duldul,[8] the literary iconography appears common to all traditions.

The repertoire of beasts found in didactic or panegyric literature, was composed of animals rather than the birds found in poetic imagery. These animals are known through the fables of the *Kalila wa Damna*, which originated in India and was taken up in Islamic as well as European literature: the cat, fox, gazelle, cheetah, hare. They appear also in the Persian translation which was popular at the Mughal court, *Anwar-i Suhaili* (Lights of the Canopus) and in the Sanskrit collection of fables, *Kathasaritsagara* (Ocean of Stories), and several illustrated versions of each text were prepared in Akbar's atelier.

Last but not least within the Islamic traditions are works such as the cosmography of al-Qazwini: the Wonders of Creation (*'Aja 'ib al-Makhluqat*). In this thirteenth-century text, the magical and miraculous appear as "reality". Amazing and exotic creatures were described, and many illustrated manuscripts have survived reflecting the popularity of this genre. The images were inspired by a number of sources: religious texts, legends, sailors' travelogues. While some descriptions seem today to be purely imaginary, their combination with accurate accounts of geographical phenomena in various parts of the world suggests that some species described might once have existed but have become extinct.

Mughal "mythical" animals: the fate of the dragon and *simurgh*

While virtually all the animals mentioned above appear in Persian manuscript illustrations of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, of which versions were held in the imperial library, few remained important visual images in mature imperial Mughal culture. (Whether they retained their significance deserves consideration but is beyond the scope of this paper.) That this is not simply a natural distinction between the

Persianate culture of Iran and of India is suggested by the fact that such mythical creatures are found more frequently in illustrated manuscripts, paintings, and in calligraphic images of the same period produced in the Deccan.

The gradual replacement of classical Persian imagery by new metaphors and an imperial Mughal iconography during the last quarter of the sixteenth century reflects both a change of perception and a cultural re-orientation. This is epitomized by the substitution of the epic genre of the *Shahnama* with the illustrated chronicle of the contemporary imperial ruler: the *Akbarnama* of Akbar (r. 1556–1605), the *Jahangirnama* of Jahangir (r. 1605–27), and the *Padshahnama* of Shah Jahan (r. 1628–58).

These texts not only gave the official version of the reign, they also conveyed the imperial ethic and political theory. The "hero" was the living emperor, whose life exemplified the "ideal" by virtue of his position as God's vicegerent on earth. The chronicles described specific events, most of which were within living memory, and their illustrations required an accurate rendering of historic time and place, and of contemporary material culture, to communicate the essential message with credibility. The emperor had to be perceived as triumphing over real dangers in the form of recognizable enemies vanquished or performing extraordinary feats of valour in slaying ferocious wild animals. To this "reality" was added the imperial Mughal metaphor of the peace of Solomon, in which the emperor was presented as having the power to control the forces of nature by taming apparently "wild" animals. Thus several well-known paintings show Akbar's skills with wild elephants or an elephant run amok, the animals carefully depicted with attention given to detail and to their inherent qualities, a feature which was developed in the natural history studies commissioned by Jahangir.

Such images tapped the emotional springs of epic heroism familiar through the *Shahnama* in which the hero Rustam overcame mortal dangers, many imagined as lions and elephants. But they were presented in "naturalistic" rather than "mythical" form, a context in which the emperor himself replaced Rustam and his legendary steed, Rakhsh, as the chivalrous ideal.

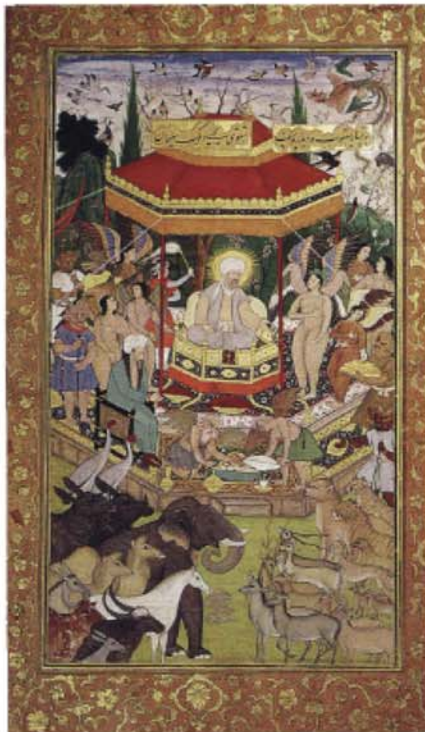
Thus dragons, once the inevitable foe of every serious hero, had no role in the new landscape of "realism". Familiar in Persian epic literature and the pictorial traditions of Central Asia as the natural inhabitants of caves and mountains, they could find no place around the besieged fortresses or in the Indian plains where Mughal military campaigns were conducted. The overpowering vibrance of the dragon devouring Shah Ardeshir in the *Darabnama* of circa 1580–85 (figure 1) continued the pictorial tradition of the early Akbari studio found in illustrations to the monumental epic *Hamzanama* (generally dated circa 1562–77), the first great manuscript produced by the imperial studio. Yet how great is the contrast with the dragon depicted in "The Raven Addressing the Animals" attributed to the master Miskina circa 1595–1600 (figure 2). The creature there appears tamed, still breathing fire as dragons do, but forming part of rather than threatening the animal kingdom, a metaphor for imperial "order". This reflected a conscious change of perception and was not simply a matter of pictorial style.

2
The dragon and the *simurgh* in the animal kingdom listening to the raven's address. Attributed to Miskina. Mughal, circa 1595–1600. 27 x 19.4 cm. The British Museum, London, 1920-9.17.05.

The idea of order, a reflection of cosmic order established by the Mughal kings by virtue of being God's Vicegerent or Shadow of God (*Zil-Ullah*) on earth, was a recurrent theme in imperial iconology. Its visual presentation took many forms, including analogy with Solomon (Sulaiman) who according to the Qur'an, *Sura* 27, was master over spirits and animals. Curious individual paintings, such as this composite elephant datable to circa 1600 (figure 3) among several examples, suggest there was a conscious attempt to exploit such imagery: the elephant, formed from many animals and *jins*, is ridden commandingly by a king whose divine powers are indicated by golden wings. Certainly Solomon's court was frequently depicted as part of the illustrated preface to literary works such as the *Diwan* of Hafiz (figure 4), where *jins* and angels, and importantly the *simurgh*, were featured.

The representation of animals in these images reflected both the refined Timurid tradition and the careful study of nature initiated by Akbar and developed by Jahangir. Indeed the interest in natural history and landscape described by Babur in his diaries, and the systematic presentation in the various illustrated manuscripts of the *Baburnama* produced for Akbar, hastened the demise of the dragon as new traditions evolved. Few lairs remained in which its progeny could survive as new perceptions of landscape and the didactic role of manuscript illustration were established.

3
Composite elephant, an allegory of Solomon's rule over the animal kingdom and *jins*. Mughal, circa 1600. 13.4 x 20.0 cm, folio 39 x 25 cm. Collection of Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, Geneva.



4
King Solomon's court, including the *simurgh*. Attributed to Madhu *Khanazad*, probably an illustration to the *Diwan* of Hafiz. Mughal, circa 1600. 27.4 x 15.5 cm, folio 34.5 x 22.8 cm. Collection of Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, Geneva.

The animals of the fables were rendered with increasing naturalism, and under Jahangir's patronage natural history studies prepared for albums replaced such illustrated texts. The "Advice for Princes", in which animals were a favoured medium, became more abstract. Species were studied for their essential nature, and the "portraits" of extraordinary animals beloved by the emperors were painted by imperial artists.

Thus occasionally a dragon might be found lurking in composite arabesques inhabited by grotesques, as in a folio from the Jahangir Album circa 1609–18 in Berlin,[9] but gradually they became confined to the margins of poetic manuscripts, appearing as a decorative motif recalling Safavid illumination of the mid-sixteenth century.

However the dragon's appearance on imperial Mughal carpets (figure 5) in a context alluding to the power of imperial majesty, suggests that their symbolism was being transformed and presented through a more powerful medium. The carpets, which are of exceptionally fine quality and of grandiose proportions, are datable from the later decades of Akbar's reign to the last years of Jahangir

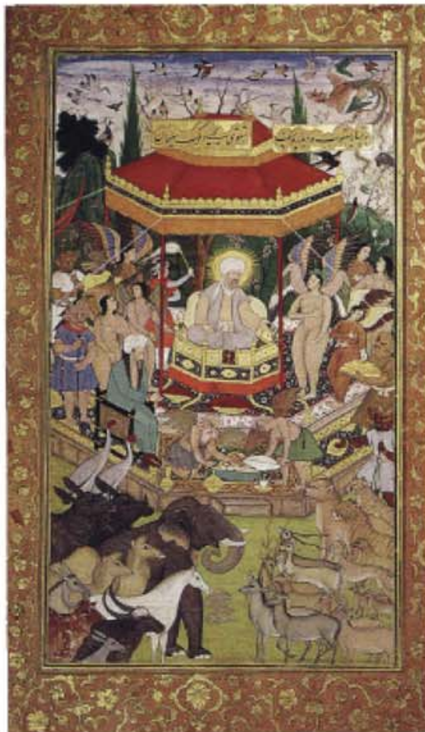
5
Carpet with the animal kingdom including a large dragon, chimera, and other beasts, both real and mythical. Mughal, Lahore, circa 1620–30. 403.5 x 191.2 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; Widener Collection, 1942.9.475 (DA). Photograph © Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington.

(d. 1627). If the carpets with imperial symbolism did not invariably include dragons, most depict mythical animals of some sort (such as the chimera) which formerly were the preserve of landscape tradition in manuscript illustration and illumination.[10] Dragons were used to allude to the power of imperial sovereignty in the 1620s: in the well-known "Portrait of Nur Jahan entertaining Jahangir and Shah Jahan" in the Freer Gallery of Art, a dynastic allegory datable to 1621,[11] the figures are seated on a carpet in which a dragon is prominently and self-consciously depicted.

Such images on carpets were major public statements, in which imperial symbolism was presented on a scale suitable for public darbar and not confined to the rather private medium of illustrations in *muraqqa'* albums. Designed to impress the signs of majesty upon all who might see them, they drew upon sources based in Hindu as well as Islamic traditions. Persian translations of the Hindu epics commissioned by Akbar had been prepared in illustrated copies in the imperial studio. The *Razmnama* (*Mahabharata*, or Book of Wars) and the *Harivamsa*, one of the earliest presentations of Krishna's life expanding details of the *Mahabharata*, were completed in 1584 and 1586 respectively. The depiction of an episode from the *Harivamsa* (figure 6) shows the ambivalence of the painter, perhaps caught in the transition between two traditions when required to depict realism and epic drama. The miraculous jewel Syamantaka, stolen by Jambavat, king of the bears, is here guarded in Jambavat's palace before being stormed by Krishna after a siege of twenty-one days in order to restore the jewel to Shatrujit, the rightful owner, who had received it as a gift from the Sun.

The subtle exploitation of Hindu mythical animals by the imperial Mughal image-makers went far beyond translations of Sanskrit texts. How great is the contrast between the *Harivamsa* illustration and the vigorous design on a carpet dated to circa 1590–1600 in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (figure 7): the mythical *gaja-simha*, with elephant head and winged lion's body so strong that it can hold seven elephants in submission, is attacked by a *simurgh*. The allegory of Mughal rule,

6
Bears guarding the Syamantaka in the palace of Jambavat. From the *Harivamsa*. Mughal, circa 1586. 28 x 19.8 cm. Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, 32.2.12. Reproduced by kind permission of the Trustees of the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin.



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7
Carpet with a *simurgh* attacking the *gaja-simha*, or *rukh* (a mythical enemy of the elephant) in a landscape filled with themes of the chase including a hunting cheetah on an ox-cart. The upper section depicts palaces and a temple symbolizing "order". Mughal, Lahore, circa 1590–1600. 243 x 154 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Gift of Mrs Frederick L. Ames in the name of Frederick L. Ames, 93.1480.

8
Flight of a *simurgh*, whose form has echoes of Vishnu's vehicle, Garuda. Attributed to Basawan. Mughal, circa 1590. 32.8 x 21.0 cm, folio 38.8 x 25.2 cm. Collection of Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, Geneva.

symbolized by the *simurgh* through which good manifestly triumphs, is presented on a grandiose scale.

Moreover the form of this "heavenly" creature known through Islamic sources could resonate with the Hindu image of Garuda, vehicle of Vishnu. An early version produced in the imperial studio, attributed to Basawan circa 1590 (figure 8) appears in this manner, and while the similarity may be an idiosyncrasy of the artist, the image of a "heavenly" bird associated with good and the triumph over evil was clearly a symbol accessible to both Muslims and Hindus alike.

The *simurgh* was a motif used by Jahangir not only in carpets but also in architectural decoration. The finest surviving example is in the Lahore Fort, to which Jahangir made many additions, reconstructing both public and private space particularly between 1617 and 1620. In the residential tower known as the Kala Burj, the painted vault presents a Solomonic programme with a *simurgh* at the centre surrounded by angels and birds (figure 9).

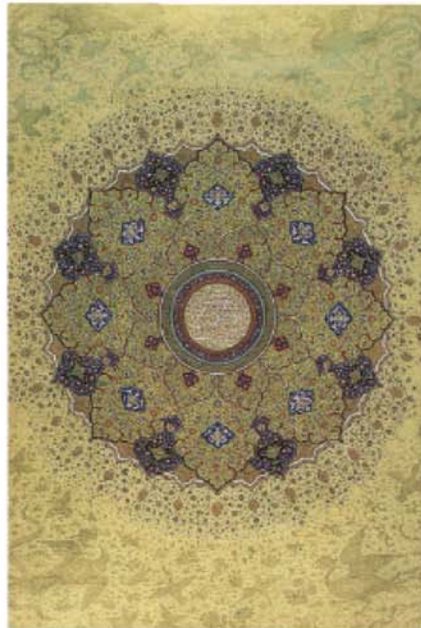
This is not to suggest that all mythical animals known through literary traditions disappeared. In versions of the *'Aja 'ib al-Makhluqat* there appear to be many images familiar from Persian illustrated manuscripts. A Mughal version of *Majma 'al-Ghara'ib* (A Collection of Things Strange and Rare), a work of the genre of Wonders of Creation which was written by Muhammad al-Mufti of Balkh for presentation to the new ruler of Balkh in the mid-sixteenth century, is datable to the last years of Shah Jahan's reign circa 1650–60. In this illustrated folio (figure 10) Qitmir, the dog who accompanied the Seven Sleepers into the cave, often seen as a symbol

9
A *simurgh* depicted as part of a Solomonic programme in the central vaulting of the Kala Burj, Lahore Fort. Mughal, circa 1610–20. Photograph: Philippa Vaughan.

10
Qitmir, and a beast of the approaching Day of Judgement, from the *Majma 'al-Ghara'ib* (A Collection of Things Strange and Rare). Mughal, circa 1650–60. Folio 27.5 x 16.5 cm. Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, MS. 9f. 64v. Reproduced by kind permission of the Trustees of the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin.

of witness to the true faith, is represented above. Below is the Beast of the Earth (*dabbat ul 'arz*), the creature which will manifest as a sign of the approaching Day of Judgement. Its features are detailed in texts, although the iconography varies as do the illustrations. It is described by Rafi 'al-Din as having a human face, a stag's horns with twelve branches, a deer's hooves, a camel's tail, a horse's mane, a monkey's hands – here the last two are lacking and elephant ears are added to the curious long-necked body. The creature will speak eloquently, hold Moses' staff in one hand and Solomon's seal in the other, travel across the world so fast that none can chase it, touch all grazing animals, draw an illuminating line on the foreheads of believers, and affix Solomon's seal on unbelievers.[12] In presenting this beast, and mythical animals in general, artists were required to respond to literary and visual traditions while also exercising their imagination.

Such a framework could be a source of inspiration for the truly creative artist. Among the finest examples of the *simurgh*, showing the manner in which this image and metaphor was absorbed into imperial Mughal art, is the *shamsa* (image of the sun) at the opening of a *muraqqa'* album prepared circa 1640 for Shah Jahan (figure 11). The motif associated the symbolism of light with the imperial persona, expressed by Akbar's historian, Abu'l Fazl: "The shamsa... is a divine light, which God directly transfers to kings, without the assistance of men...."[13] The centre, inscribed with the emperor's titles, is surrounded by exquisite illumination expanding through a sunburst design into a landscape inhabited by birds with a *simurgh* at each corner. The unique image reflects the classical literary



11
Shamsa with *simurgh* in an inhabited landscape, prepared for Shah Jahan. Mughal, circa 1640. 91.5 x 63.0 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 55.121.10.39.

tradition: it resonates with the echoes of the mystical poets, and perhaps especially 'Attar's Conference of the Birds (*Mantiq ut-Tayr*) in which thirty birds – *si-murgh* – embarked upon the arduous journey in their search for the *simurgh,* a metaphor for the spiritual quest through which individual souls recognize their identity in the Divine Soul.

Conclusion

Mughal imagery both developed classical traditions and also transformed them to create new symbols and allusions. Visual metaphors were carefully selected from the many sources accessible through the traditions of their heritage and of their new empire, both Hindu and Muslim. The imperial studios, guided by their patrons, carefully spun a fresh cultural identity for the new dynasty. In this endeavour, which was pursued over the course of a

century, the dragon and the *simurgh* were endowed with additional powers of metaphor and allusion, used as a synechdochic representation – the whole referring to a part or a part to the whole – characteristic of Persian poetry and illustration. Thus during the century from Akbar to Shah Jahan new meanings were absorbed, often existing concurrently in a single image, reorientating their significance in the process.

However Emperor Aurangzeb (r. 1658–1707) did not continue the systematic elaboration of an imperial visual imagery in the manner of his predecessors, and under his successors patronage of the arts became a form of private pleasure rather than the necessary expression of imperial persona. The dragon and the *simurgh* no longer held allusions to imperial power. Their stereotyped forms were but glancing shadows or decorative motifs, usually confined to the margins of literary texts. And thus by the eighteenth century their life-blood had ceased to flow.

NOTES

1. *Diwan* of Mughal Emperor Humayun in "The unique *Diwan* of Humayun", *Islamic Culture* 24 (1951), p. 236.

2. The wealth of imagery and its multiple adaptation to form subtly distinct meanings according to the context within the oeuvre of a particular poet, or various uses in the work of different poets, are brilliantly presented by A.M. Schimmel in *A Two-Coloured Brocade: The Imagery of Persian Poetry*, University of North Carolina Press (1992). I am indebted to this work for my general comments about Persian literature but any mistakes in understanding are entirely my own.

3. Schimmel, op. cit., pp. 178-89.

4. Farid ud-Din 'Attar, *Mantiq ut-Tayr* (The Conference of the Birds), completed circa 1177, tr. A. Darbadni and D. Davis (London 1984), pp. 34-35.

5. A.M. Schimmel, *Islam in the Indian Subcontinent*, Brill (Leiden 1980), p. 23.

6. "The Incantation of the Simurgh", tr. H. Corbin, quoted in J.C. Burgel, *The Feather of Simurgh: The "Licit Magic" of the Arts in Medieval Islam* (New York 1988), p. 7.

7. *Lubab al-albab*, eds. E.G. Browne and Muhammad Qazvini, 2 vols., Luzac (London 1903) and Brill (Leiden 1906), Vol. 1. p. 320, quoted in Schimmel, *A Two-Coloured Brocade*, p. 192.
Karkadann is also rhinoceros.

8. Schimmel, *A Two-Coloured Brocade*, pp. 104, 192 et seq.

9. Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin-Orientabteilung (*Libri picurati* A-117.f.2b) illustrated in Daniel Walker, *Flowers Underfoot: Indian Carpets of the Mughal Era*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York 1997), fig. 71, p. 76.

10. Ibid., fig. 38, p. 47.

11. Fol. 07.258, illustrated in M.C. Beach, *The Imperial Image: Paintings for the Mughal Court*, Freer Gallery of Art (Washington, DC 1981), cat. no. 32, p. 205; see also Philippa Vaughan, "Begams of the House of Timur and the Dynastic Image" in Sheila Canby, ed., *Humayun's Garden Party: Princes of the House of Timur and Early Mughal Painting*, Marg Publications (Bombay 1994), p. 130.

12. Shah Rafi 'al-Din, *Zalzalah al-Sa'ah*, Urdu tr. Muhammad Ibrahim Azam Danapuri (Delhi 1894). It is not suggested that this source is an accurate description of the required iconography, or that the features cannot be varied.

13. *A'in-i Akbari*, Persian text edited by H. Blochmann, 2 vols. (Calcutta 1867–77); tr. in 3 vols., Vol. I by H. Blochmann, revised and edited by D.C. Phillot, 1927 (reprint New Delhi 1977–78), p. 52.