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Goodfeathers: Amazing Pigeons in Arabic Animal Lore

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Abstract

The Arabic word *ḥamām* is used for a large number of pigeon-like birds. In contrast to contemporary prejudices, pigeons were viewed as a very positive animal, central to many aspects of scholarship and daily life in the Mediaeval Arabo-Islamic world.

The Arabo-Islamic tradition elaborates a number of themes about this faithful bird with a melodious coo, which finds safety in the flock, from its many varieties and interaction with men to the scholarly traditions related to these ancient members of the *Columbidae* family. In his *Kitāb al-ḥayawān* (*Book of Living Beings*), al-Ġāḥiẓ, includes a long and almost monographic section that offers readers all sorts of details about the wonders of pigeons: their resemblance to men, their physiognomy, and even the extravagant prices they could command in the 3rd/9th-century market.

Keywords: Pigeons – al-Ġāḥiẓ – *Kitāb al-ḥayawān* – properties

Mitior Columba

Columbina simplicitas ac mansuetudo laudatur etiam in divinis litteris.

Nam hoc est columba in avibus, quod ovis in quadrupedibus.

Ipsa nulli animantium meditatatur noxam nec aliunde praesidium habet adversus milvios quam a celeritate volandi.

Erasmus, *Adagia* [2548]

*Introduction**

Beyond a personal fascination with pigeon, I have always found it unfair that the dove is considered a hopeful symbol of peace and tender love, whereas modern urban life has turned pigeons into pests: mostly a nuisance for citizens, at best a choreographic touch in some public squares. This contribution aims to rehabilitate pigeons with a selection of passages from Mediaeval Arabic literature that reveal just how central their role was in *adab* and daily life. [Fig. 1]

This most ancient of birds is frequently associated with the Genesis flood myth, when a dove returns to Noah's Ark with an olive branch in its beak, heralding the end of the deluge. In Arabic, both the dove and the pigeon, along with other, similar birds, answer to the name of *ḥamām*. This hypernym leaves room for a lexicographical flourishing of specific names for the many different members of the *Columbidae* family, though it is not always possible to identify them with certainty. Al-Ġāḥiẓ (d. 868/869) reports an aetiological tradition that tells how the

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ḥamām received some of its most peculiar features as a reward for the good news brought to Noah.¹

Ḥamām Nūḥ

The expert on pigeons said that the modern and ancient Arabs agreed that the *ḥamām* has been the sign for Noah and his guide. [For this, it] was rewarded with the collar on its neck; for this reason, God the Highest gave it the great honour of this ornament, on Noah's request, since it returned with some vine and its legs were stained with clay and mud. From this clay, it received the colours of its legs, while the collar derives from the goodness of the sign it gave and from its meekness.

The words used in two of the most popular versions of the Scriptures in Latin and Greek—that is the *Vulgata* and the *Septuagint*—cannot be the origin of unfair distinction between pigeon and dove, since they cover the same large semantic spectrum of the Arabic *ḥamām*.² This reminds us that premodern nomenclatures of nature were not as fixed as the idea that we may project on them.

(Gen 8: 6-8) ³	
6. cumque transissent quadraginta dies aperiens Noe fenestram arcae quam fecerat dimisit corvum	6. καὶ ἐγένετο μετὰ τεσσαράκοντα ἡμέρας ἠνέωξε Νῶε τὴν θυρίδα τῆς κιβωτοῦ, ἣν ἐποίησε, καὶ ἀπέστειλε τὸν κόρακα τοῦ ἰδεῖν, εἰ κεκόπακε τὸ ὕδωρ
7. qui egrediebatur et revertebatur donec sicarentur aquae super terram	7. καὶ ἐξελθὼν, οὐκ ἀνέστρεψεν ἕως τοῦ ξηρανθῆναι τὸ ὕδωρ ἀπὸ τῆς γῆς
8. emisit quoque <u>columbam</u> post eum ut videret si iam cessassent aquae super faciem terrae	8. καὶ ἀπέστειλε τὴν <u>περιστερὰν</u> ὀπίσω αὐτοῦ ἰδεῖν, εἰ κεκόπακε τὸ ὕδωρ ἀπὸ τῆς γῆς

In the *Book of Animals* (*Kitāb al-ḥayawān*), al-Ġāḥiẓ has built a literary monument to pigeons and the themes of this anthology reveal to us just how omnipresent pigeons were in daily life, literary lore, and scholarly speculation.

The *Book of Animals*, composed by the 3rd/9th century's greatest polymath and pen, is unique. The nature of the text is so articulated that it is hard to condense it into a synthetic definition. It bears no resemblance to a Western Mediaeval bestiary; rather, it is an enormous collection of anecdotes, verses, quotations, and discussions about all living beings. A few *files rouges* run through the seven volumes of its edition (the dispute between the respective

¹ Al-Ġāḥiẓ, *Kitāb al-ḥayawān*, vol. 3, p. 195.

² Under the lexical umbrella of *ḥamām*, one may name like *warašān* (turtle-dove), *sāq ḥurr* (the way to call a male pigeon from the desert in Arabic poetry) and *fāḥita* (collared-dove), just to mention a few. The interesting lexicographical question of the many different terms referring to the pigeon and its different species is beyond the scope of this article; for the different dedicated treatise and section within multi-thematic works, see Baalbaki, *Arabic Lexicographical Tradition*; and Ullmann, *Natur* pp. 6–8.

³ For the Greek text of the *Septuagint*, see <https://www.academic-bible.com/en/online-bibles/septuagint-lxx/read-the-bible-text/bibel/text/lesen/stelle/1/80001/89999/ch/4da82aa3f0b5490117fb7503ba59f4b1/>; for the Latin text of the *Vulgata*, see <https://www.academic-bible.com/en/online-bibles/biblia-sacra-vulgata/read-the-bible-text/bibel/text/lesen/stelle/1/80001/89999/ch/4da82aa3f0b5490117fb7503ba59f4b1/> (last accessed, 22 June 2019).

merits of dog and cock, for instance), but what really ensures its cohesion is a chain of word plays, jokes, and erudite wit. Some of the jokes are, unfortunately, lost on us; we simply do not hold the keys to their comprehension. In this literary *mare magnum*, al-Ġāḥiẓ devotes a large and almost monographic section to pigeons.⁴ The sources of this erudite discourse are incredibly varied: contemporary lexicographers; Aristotle; the greatest pigeon experts of the time; Polemon of Laodicea; and a great number of diverse characters who either remain anonymous or whose name is preserved only in al-Ġāḥiẓ's pages.⁵

1. Daily life in 9th cent. Iraq

The intellectual curiosity of al-Ġāḥiẓ knows no boundary and offers us a rare glimpse of daily life in 9th-century Iraq, including some eccentric and rather juicy details.

1.1 Firstly, it becomes clear that everybody was fond of pigeons. With what seems to be a pinch of social irony, al-Ġāḥiẓ declares that everybody likes pigeons: men, women, eunuchs, young people, and elderly men. Owning a pigeon does not change the owners' actual condition, but it bestows on them the gift of a loving feeling for the bird.

About the virtues of pigeons

Among the virtues of the pigeons are their love for men and the delight that men derive from it. You will never see, in fact, a more balanced and temperate animal than the pigeon, since vile men are not degraded when they have one, nor is the condition of the most noble men improved. There is something in the pigeon that appeals to everybody, from the phlebotomist to the greatest king. The pigeon attracts all the desires of people, and it doesn't matter who, because his love for the pigeon becomes more intense. You can see this among eunuchs and virile men, among boys and grown men, among young ones as well as among old men, among women and men.⁶

1.2 The second passage gives us the measure of the entirely positive and pure perception of pigeons. While most would shudder with disgust at the sight of a dog or of a rooster drinking from a basin, and would never dream of touching that water to quench their parched throat, a man could develop a craving for the water touched by a drinking pigeon, wanting to establish intimate contact with the bird.

The drinking of pigeons

⁴ Considering the lack of systematic order in the succession that al-Ġāḥiẓ gave to his material in the *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*, it is remarkable that a consistent part of the third volume is devoted almost uniquely to pigeons. The presence of this sort of monographic parenthesis and the authorial choice behind it may represent the virtuoso's occasion to collect materials of different origin about a single animal; or, perhaps, it is part of the erudite staccato that al-Ġāḥiẓ impressed on his work.

⁵ Although the *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān* has not yet been fully translated into any European language, different anthologies are available. For instance, see Pellat, *Life and Works* (translated from French); Pellat also described in great detail the social, political and economical context in which al-Ġāḥiẓ lived, see Pellat, *Le milieu basrien*; Pellat also provided a general introduction to the 9th cent. scholar and his work for the second edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, see Pellat, Ch., "al-Djāḥiẓ", in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. Consulted online on 01 August 2019 http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.unibo.it/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_1935. A number of passages have been translated into Italian by Giancarlo Pizzi and Paola Carusi, see Pizzi, *Al-Jahiz* and Carusi, *Lo zafferano e il geco*; in more recent years, James Montgomery has started a long-term project on al-Ġāḥiẓ's text, See Montgomery, *In Praise of Books*.

⁶ Al-Ġāḥiẓ, *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*, vol. 3, p. 147.

If a man seized by a burning thirst sees a rooster or a hen, a dog or a jackal, lapping from some water, his thirst will leave him due to the indecency with which the rooster gulps down water and the way in which the dogs laps it. If, instead, he spots a pigeon that drinks! When the man looks at it, he is seized by a great desire to drink, touching with his mouth that very water that the pigeon was drinking.⁷

1.3 Desire generates commercial demand, which, in turn, leads to prices rising. This basic law of economics applied as much to the already vigorous market of 10th-century Iraq as it does today. There, no other animal is as expensive as the pigeon, a single one is sold for the extravagant sum of 500 dinars. Al-Ġāhiz plays with the disproportion of the prices and the animals involved, and says that the idea of a horse being sold for the same price is unheard of.⁸ [Fig. 2]

The price of pigeons

Among the reasons of excellence attributed to the pigeon, there is the fact that a single pigeon is sold for five hundred dinars; neither a hawk, a falcon, an eagle, a peacock, a francolin, a rooster, nor a camel, a donkey or a mule is sold for this price. And if we wanted to hear the story of a plough horse or a stallion being sold for five hundred dinars, then we would only be able to find it in bedtime stories.

1.4 The ziġl

The *ziġl* (pigeon races) is a great and feverish pigeon-related passion. The ‘envoys’ of pigeons were races of trained pigeons that people betted on. The pigeons were launched from a certain point and were trained to reach a fixed target faraway; the one that comes back first is the winner. The training of pigeons required great expertise (here, just a brief excerpt from a much longer section) and there were different opinions and trends in this regard. Pigeons are capable of recognizing black flags or landmarks and geometrical patterns [Figs. 3 and 4], are accomplished fliers and can orient themselves very well. The two pigeons were trained together, as a pair. One of the two had some of its feathers cut, forcing it to remain in the nest, thereby ensuring that the other bird returned to its partner.

Different preferences for homing pigeons

Concerning homing pigeons, the inhabitants of Baghdad prefer the females, while the inhabitants of Basra prefer the males. The reason given by the inhabitants of Baghdad is that the male pigeon can abstain from sexual activity while he is travelling, whereas the female craves to mate. [...] While the inhabitants of Basra say that the male is more homesick, because his female is there, and for this reason is physically stronger and navigates the way better.⁹

2. Pigeons and Properties

The ‘science of properties’ — *manāfi‘* and *ḥawāṣṣ*, respectively useful and ‘occult’ properties, i.e. properties whose causal relation remains unknown — is one of the most popular themes and elements in Arabic technical literature. These properties are attached to each and every creature in the different realms of nature and the benefits that derive from their application

⁷ Al-Ġāhiz, *Kitāb al-ḥayawān*, vol. 3, p. 148.

⁸ Al-Ġāhiz, *Kitāb al-ḥayawān*, vol. 3, p. 212.

⁹ Al-Ġāhiz, *Kitāb al-ḥayawān*, vol. 3, p. 223. For pigeons employed in the postal service for their great flying skills, see Ragheb, Y., *Les messagers volants*.

influences countless fields of human and animal activity. Many different animals were sources and objects of such properties and pigeons were no exception.

Al-Ġāḥiẓ had already conveyed the perceived cleanliness of pigeons with an anecdote about the mimetic pleasure triggered by the sight of a drinking pigeon. Despite this, it is known that pigeon droppings contain a number of different yeasts.¹⁰ In fact, it is possible that al-Ġāḥiẓ plays with *Dreckapotheke* (lit. 'filthy pharmacy') and code names: 'excrement of pigeon' (*darq al-ḥamām*), for example, can be considered as a code name for a mineral or acid substance with multiple practical usages, from the tanning of skins to bakery.

Cleanliness of the pigeon and its excrement

The pigeon is a domestic bird, widespread and loved, known for its cleanliness, to the point that its excrement is not disgusting and does not smell, like chicken and rooster excrement. Sometimes, the expert [in the treatment] of kidney stones uses its excrement. Farmers find in it many useful applications. The baker adds a bit of its excrement to the leavened dough, so that the bread loaves can rise, and afterwards it is no longer possible to tell what is inside it. Its excrement is useful, as the experts in kidney stones know very well. Pigeon excrement is good for specific phases of the tanning of skins.¹¹

2.1 One of the first and most important fields of application for the properties of natural objects was pharmacology. In this context, pigeons are viewed as possessing useful properties and as providing a number of ingredients. The literature records a number of useful pigeon-related recipes, including for: the protection of pigeon-houses and increasing the pigeon population alongside methods for attracting pigeons and keeping them in the house. But he also includes a recipe for chasing them away from it. Such recipes can be found in the *Book of Useful Properties of Animals* (*Kitāb manāfi' al-ḥayawān*), the first compilation of such materials in Arabic, ascribed to the 3rd/9th century Syriac physician 'Īsā ibn 'Alī, who collected his materials from late-antique lore. These short procedural texts generally provide little information about the context of use, and so the occasion and reason for their application is not always clear.¹²

If you want that the pigeons multiply in the pigeon house, bury there the head of a man who died a long time ago, then this will make the pigeons multiply. [1.32]

Wolf head: if it is hung on a pigeon house, then neither an ichneumon, nor a cat or anything harmful to pigeons will approach it. [3.1]

If you want that a pigeon house is led to ruin and that the pigeons flee from that, then place there the head of a fox and not a single bird will remain there. [13.21]

If you want to disperse pigeons from the pigeon house, fumigate it with the ichneumon's tail, then no pigeon will remain there. [27.1]

¹⁰ In 2017, the *Revista Iberoamericana de Micología* published a paper describing the different zoonotic yeasts found in pigeon droppings, see Rosario Medina et al., "Pigeons and their droppings".

¹¹ Al-Ġāḥiẓ, *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*, vol. 3, p. 253. The 'pigeon's son', for instance, is one of the alchemical code names for mercury. Many more cases still need to be mapped. See Siggel, *Decknamen in der arabischen alchemistischen Literatur*.

¹² 'Īsā ibn 'Alī was of Syriac origin, studied medicine with Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq and served as personal physician of the Abbasid Caliph al-Mu'tamid (r. 870-892). For an introduction to the author and the work, along with the edition and translation of the text, see Raggetti, *Book on the Useful Properties of Animal Parts*. The numbers in squared brackets that follow the recipe refer to the chapter and the recipe as numbered in the edition.

If you want that pigeons increase in the pigeon house, then fumigate it with the leg of a hoopoe, and they will increase in number. [49.1]

If three bats are taken and hung on a high three, then the pigeons will gather on this three, and this attracts pigeons. [53.7]

And if it [a bat] is buried under a pigeon loft, then no pigeon will leave the place. [53.13]

Different substances and organs from pigeons are recorded as being the source of medical remedies used to cure a number of diseases. There is even a record of a veterinary application using pigeons to treat hawks.

If the hawk is scared and uncomfortable, take a pigeon chick, tie its body, hang it by its head for one day; then when the morning comes, feed it to the hawk, and then its fear and uneasiness will disappear. [55.1]

Against cataract in the eye: if a pigeon with white legs is taken and slaughtered, its head is taken, and burnt until it becomes ash, ground into a fine powder, and rubbed on the eye affected by cataract, then this will cease, with the permission of God Almighty. [55.9]

A similar recipe is also attested in the 'Book of Occult Properties' (*Kitāb al-ḥawāṣṣ*) by Muḥammad ibn Zakariyyā al-Rāzī (d. 925),¹³ who was among a number of scholars who embraced the study of this particular aspect of nature in order to exploit its advantages in the medical practice. In the chapter devoted to the dog, al-Rāzī says that,

If you throw a stone that has been bitten by a dog inside a pigeon house, then this will disperse all the birds.¹⁴

2.2 In al-Ġāḥiẓ's time, careful attention was paid to the health of pigeons and knowledge about the more common diseases that inflicted them, and he reports in detail the medical knowledge possessed by his contemporaries. A peculiar balance of Galenic qualities in the pigeon – hot and dry – is mentioned to explain the pigeons' vulnerability to certain diseases.¹⁵

Disease of pigeons and their causes

He [the expert of pigeons] said: "It is known that the pigeon is a delicate bird, infirmities strike it quickly; it falls ill because its nature is hot and dry. The most frequent diseases are: the disease of the nose (*ḥunān*), liver ailments (*kibād*), the disease of thirst (*uṭāṣ*), consumption (*sill*), and lice. For this reason, pigeons need a cool and clean place and grains with a cold nature, like lentils, beans, and sieved barley. Wild saffron is to pigeons what meat is to men, since it contains within a faculty that makes [the pigeon] fat."

Therapy for the disease of the nose: saffron, ground white sugar, and chicory water mixed together in a bowl, given to [the pigeon] to eat or pushed into the throat when the pigeon has an empty stomach.

Therapy for the disease of the liver: the tongue must be softened for one or two days with violet oil, then rubbed with ash and salt until the first layer of skin is removed, then it has to be covered in honey and rose oil until it is cured.

¹³ For an overview of the life and work of this great physician, philosopher and alchemist see Goodman, L.E., "al-Rāzī", in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. Consulted online on 01 August 2019 <http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.unibo.it/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_6267>

¹⁴ al-Rāzī, *Kitāb al-ḥawāṣṣ*, MS Cairo DAK ṬT 264.

¹⁵ Al-Ġāḥiẓ, *Kitāb al-ḥayawān*, vol. 3, p. 272.

Therapy for consumption: the pigeon has to eat peeled beans and cow's milk must be poured into its throat, then the neck cut in correspondence with the two upper arteries, the part close to the deep juncture.

Therapy for lice: the root of the feathers must be smeared with quicksilver mixed with violet oil, repeating the application until all the lice have died; the place where the pigeon [is kept] must be swept with a clean broom.

3. Aristotelian Materials

Al-Ġāḥiẓ's long life spreads over almost all the century of the great translations (9th cent.) and his fervent intellectual activity occupied a great part of the subsequent century, too. The newly translated Greek works must have been an important source for his many intellectual interests. For example, Aristotle and, in particular, his *Historia animalium* is mentioned frequently in the *Book of Animals*.¹⁶ This more descriptive of Aristotle's zoological works was also the most successful, although the translation of it by Ibn al-Biṭrīq (active between the end of the 8th and the beginning of the 9th cent.) belonged to the first experiences of translations, and the *verbum de verbo* technique with which it was carried out led to a stiff Arabic text.¹⁷ Al-Ġāḥiẓ's quotations from al-Biṭrīq's version are not always literal, raising the suspicion that perhaps the author may have used a different translation of the Greek text. It is not possible to exclude, however, that al-Ġāḥiẓ simply polished the Arabic of the available translation, which he may have considered inadequate.

The topic of eggs was particularly dear to Aristotle and al-Ġāḥiẓ referred to a consistent part of the Aristotelian materials in his work. In addition to an admirable description of what a chicken embryo undergoes in twenty-eight days, when talking about other birds, he often refers to the number of eggs, the duration of the brood, and the sex of the chicks that hatch.

Knowledge about eggs

He said: "The pigeon – and, likewise, the collared pigeon – lays three eggs, while the turtledove and the dove lay two eggs, sometimes three, but then no more than two chicks are born.

Sometimes there is only one egg". He said: "Some birds do not lay any eggs before they are one year old. In the majority of cases, the pigeon has one male and one female. First, the pigeon lays the eggs that contains the male, then she does not brood for one day and one night, and then lays the second egg. The pigeon broods from seventeen to twenty days depending on the different seasons and environments, and the difficulties that it may encounter. The female pigeon cares more for the eggs, while the male pigeon cares more for the chicks.¹⁸

Something may go wrong with the eggs and these can be retained inside the uterus. Along with physical reasons that may explain such dysfunction, the explosion of a thunderclap is mentioned in the list of possible causes too.

The pigeon may withhold the eggs

¹⁶ See al-Najim, *Jahiz quotations from Aristotle*; and Raggetti, "Gli uccelli nel *Kitāb al-ḥayawān*"; for a new edition of the Arabic version of the *Historia animalium*, see also Filios, *The Arabic Version of Aristotle's Historia Animalium*.

¹⁷ See Gutas, *Greek Thought*, pp. 137–138; on this early translator, see also Micheau, Françoise, "Yaḥyā (or Yuḥannā) b. al-Biṭrīq", in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. Consulted online on 10 August 2019 <http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.unibo.it/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_7951>.

¹⁸ Al-Ġāḥiẓ, *Kitāb al-ḥayawān*, vol. 3, p. 176; and Aristotle, *Historia animalium*, VI,2 (560b).

Sometimes it happens to the pigeon that the eggs remain in its abdomen longer than the fixed time. This may be due to their nest, or to a tuft of feather, or to a disease, or to the rumbling of thunder when lightning hits violently.¹⁹

In some cases, eggs may be sterile. The text posits that smaller and sterile eggs were not the result of a missed fertilization, but were produced by the influence of an ill wind. In fact, the idea that a northern wind could impregnate females of different species, while a southern wind – carrier of diseases – could spoil reproduction processes was widespread and remained fashionable for a long time.

Wind eggs and dust eggs

He said: “The eggs fertilized by the wind and the dust are smaller and thinner, but they are delicious to the palate. The hen, the quail, the peacock, and the goose produce wind eggs too”.²⁰

Of the systematic account of eggs and embryos that Aristotle tried to give in the *Historia animalium*, al-Ġāḥiẓ selected the more curious and anecdotal elements among the Aristotelian materials.

4. *Physiognomy*

The physiognomy of pigeons plays an important role in this section of the *Book of Animals* under analysis. On the one hand, pigeon physiognomy is modelled on the parameters codified for this discipline in antiquity, especially in the Greek milieu, such as the physical and moral resemblance between men and animals and the ethnic and climatic approach to defining different human typologies. On the other hand, it considers the practical experiences of experts in Abbasid times.

There are two sources for these different kinds of pigeon physiognomy. Regarding the ancient tradition, the main source is the Greek author Polemon of Laodicea (d. 144);²¹ for the early Abbasid time, the authority in the field is Muṭannā ibn Zuhayr—Basra’s greatest pigeon expert, probably contemporary of al-Ġāḥiẓ—skilled in the preparation of medicaments and in the interpretation of their signs, both positive and negative.²² While the Greek version of Polemon’s work only survives in the indirect tradition, the tradition of the preserved Arabic translation of Polemon is equally complex. In the Arabic abridgement of Polemon’s text, there is only a single sentence to say that he dealt with the physiognomy of several animals, including pigeons. By contrast, in al-Ġāḥiẓ’s text, we find long passages and anecdotes ascribed to Polemon. Robert Hoyland has strong doubts about their authenticity and hence devotes little attention to them.²³ Considering, however, the parallel with other Greek sources – Aristotle’s *Historia animalium*, for instance – and their use in the *Kitāb al-ḥayawān*, these passages can be given a bit more credit, in my opinion. Antonella Gherseti shares this line of

¹⁹ Al-Ġāḥiẓ, *Kitāb al-ḥayawān*, vol. 3, p. 176; and Aristotle, *Historia animalium* VI,2 (560b).

²⁰ Al-Ġāḥiẓ, *Kitāb al-ḥayawān*, vol. 3, p. 171; and Aristotle, *Historia animalium* VI,2 (559b).

²¹ For Polemon in the Arabic tradition, see Witkam, J. J., “Aflimūn”, in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. Consulted online on 10 August 2019 http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.unibo.it/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_8291. For an inclusive and comparative study of Greek, Arabic and Latin sources on physiognomy, see Swain, *Seeing the face, seeing the soul*

²² All the information about this man is derived from al-Ġāḥiẓ itself, and is an example of the detail-oriented way in which al-Ġāḥiẓ recorded contemporary society

²³ See Hoyland, “The Islamic Background to Polemon’s Treatise”, pp. 235–236

thinking, it seems. She considers the possibility that al-Ġāhiz might preserve traces of a lost recension of Polemon's text in Arabic.²⁴ A third hypothesis can be considered in this discussion: al-Ġāhiz might have recorded both materials of Greek origin and pseudo-epigraphic ones ascribed to Polemon circulating in the Arabo-Islamic milieu.

Given that pigeons are analogous to men, this means that, already at a first glance, it is possible to understand their origin. The physical aspect, the qualities, and even their accent are unequivocal signs of their provenance.

Similarities between pigeons and men

Pigeons resemble men in the figure, in their good natural qualities, in the meekness of their nature, in the swiftness of their hearts and their changes. In fact, if you were an expert in physiognomy, and there were with you some men from Kufa, some from Basra, some from Medina, others from Syria, and others from Yemen, you would recognize the characteristic features of their aspect, of their natural qualities, of their accents, and know whether they come either from Kufa, or from Basra, or from Syria, or from Medina, or from Yemen. The same goes for pigeons: you will never see a pigeon expert who ignores their genealogies, their variety, or their place of origin when he looks at them.²⁵

The great Iraqi pigeon expert, Muṭannā ibn Zuhayr, stressed behavioural similarities between men and pigeons. The first striking aspect is the different attention that male and female pigeons dedicate to their offspring. Like men and women, female pigeons care more for the brood, while the male gives his attention to the chicks. The comparison with men and women extends to sexual behaviour. In this discourse, there is no trace of the *topos* presenting the pigeon as a monogamous bird, faithful to a single partner. On the contrary, exactly as with humans, you can see all sorts of amorous preferences among them.²⁶

What is similar in pigeons and men

The aspects in which pigeons resemble men include the fact that the female broods for the most of time, whereas the male only broods for a short while in the middle of the day; and the fact that the female, like the woman, feeds the children, weans them, and tends to them when they are sick, watches them closely with solicitude, until the moment when the brood is over and the time is finished, and the egg becomes a chick that — like the children in the house — needs to eat and drink. Then, the male takes care of the feeding for most of the time, as the female used to brood for the most of time.

[...]

Muṭannā ibn Zuhayr said: "I have never seen among men and women something that I had not already observed among male and female pigeons. I saw a female that did not want anyone but her male, like a woman who does not desire anybody but her husband and lord; and I saw a female pigeon that did not forbid anything to the male, as I saw a woman who did not stop the hand that was touching her; and I saw a female pigeon that only surrendered after a long and hard chase, or I saw her stretching her wings to the first male that wanted her, and I saw the same among women; and I saw a female pigeon that has a partner but still wanted another male without leaving the first one, and I saw the same among women; and I saw a female pigeon stretching her wings to another male while her partner was watching her, but I have observed that she does it only if her partner is flying or brooding; and I saw a female pigeon that mounted

²⁴ See Ghersetti and Swain, "Polemon's Physiognomy in the Arabic Tradition", p. 309.

²⁵ Al-Ġāhiz, *Kitāb al-ḥayawān*, vol. 3, p. 211.

²⁶ Al-Ġāhiz, *Kitāb al-ḥayawān*, vol.3, pp. 163–164 and 165.

males, and I saw a female pigeon that mounted other females; and I saw that one female pigeon I had used to continuously mount only females.'

The definition of parameters for evaluating the physical aspects of a pigeon creates a frame with which to assess its value and its price. There are four criteria on which a pigeon is evaluated: its general appearance; how it feels to the touch; its good qualities, and the way in which it moves. This material is also ascribed to Polemon's tradition.²⁷

The selection of pigeons

The entire physiognomy does not extend beyond four aspects: the first is the figure (*taqtī*), the second is the touch (*mağass*), the third are the good natural qualities (*šamā'il*), and the fourth is the movement (*ḥaraka*).

The figure (*taqtī*): the conjunction between the neck and the body, a round shape for the head, neither too big, nor too small, the dimension of the two black dots next to the beak, the width of the nostrils, the corners of the mouth. These [latter] two are the signs of nobility in horses and related to their good temperament and other things. There is also the beauty of the shape of the eyes, the small dimension of the beak that, nevertheless, should not be thin, the width and the fullness of the chest, the length of the neck, the proportionate length of the legs, some feathers should be thinner than others, the hardness of the sinews that should be neither dry, nor swollen, the harmony of the constitution that is neither shrunken, nor rigid, the dimension of the legs, the small dimension of the tail and its lightness in which no division or separation can be detected. There is also the brightness of the iris and the purity of the colour. These are the physiognomic signs that are related to the physical.

As for the signs related to the touch (*mağass*): the robustness of the constitution, the strength of the flesh, the rigidity of the sinews, the hardness of feather canes, the softness of the feathers without them being too thin, the hardness of the beak without it being thin.

As for the signs related to good natural qualities (*šamā'il*): a modest appearance, clearness of the eyesight, the steadiness of the gaze, the elegant prudence, a beautiful way of turning the gaze, the light shiver when it is taken by fear, a light ascension when it flies, and the indulgence to haste when it gleans the grains.

As for the signs related to movement (*ḥaraka*): the capability to fly at great height, the stretching of the neck when it flies high, stability during flight, folding the wings in the air, crossing trajectories without creating confusion, the pure strength in the effort to fly, the stamina to cover long distances.

So, if you attribute all these qualities [to a pigeon], then it is the perfect bird; and if it is not perfect, its value is proportional to the good qualities it possesses, that is to say, its orientation ability and its agility.

4.3 Assessing the quality of a pigeon is not just a theoretical exercise. Different kinds of pigeons are suited to different contexts: some are good pets, some are good for racing.²⁸

Polemon, the master of physiognomy, maintained that pigeons are selected on the basis of their varieties: some are taken as pets, for company, some for women and the house, some for racing (*ziğl*) and competitions.

²⁷ Al-Ğāhiz, *Kitāb al-ḥayawān*, vol. 3, p. 270.

²⁸ Al-Ğāhiz, *Kitāb al-ḥayawān*, vol. 3, p. 144.

These feathery companions of humankind need to be sheltered, but not everywhere is suitable. Polemon describes the ideal structure for a pigeon house: it must have a cylindrical shape, with well-spaced openings in its lower part, made in a way that allows only one bird at a time to go out, and it must be kept clean. The best place to locate the pigeon loft is next to a field, in order to provide them with a natural abundance of grains.²⁹

The pigeons for the women and pigeons for the chicks

Polemon, the master of physiognomy said: “Consider female pigeons, with legs covered in plumage, very agreeable, they are superb, they move in a bold way and coo. Consider, then, the pigeon chicks that have noble descent and high genealogies; in fact, the chicks are the most crucial to take care of. Make for them a house shaped like a silo, with openings in its lower part – at about one third of its height – the openings have to be large and well-spaced: it is appropriate, in fact, that the openings are made following this example. Take care of the tower, sweeping it and spraying it with water; ensure that the height and width of the openings are balanced in a way that allows the pigeons out one by one. If you have the opportunity to build it close to a field, I encourage you to do so!”

The similarity between men and pigeons is also based on the fact that they live in the same environment and climate, and that they are equally influenced by both. This is particularly noteworthy with regard to colours: total white and black are distortions produced by the scarcity or the excess of solar radiation. Slavic and black people are given as the human counterparts in this example. Here, the pigeon expert builds an empirical argument: the fact that black people are burnt, it is stated, is clear from their hair, i.e. frizzy like a hair that we can test burning on a flame.³⁰

The pigeon expert said: “There is no species that does not have fundamental features and marks, among these the main colours are the unmixed one and the jet-black. Among the qualities that make pigeons beautiful are unmixed green, unmixed red, unmixed black, unmixed white, and nuances of these colours, all of them pure, unless [the coloration] tends to a green hue or if it has speckles.

If the pigeon is completely white then it is like Slavic people — in fact, Slavic people are sort of ‘unleavened’ and have a foul pungent smell because their internal organs are not properly ‘baked’ — since they happen to be in a country that is not sunny.

If the pigeon is, instead, black then this is just because it is burnt, as a result of an excess beyond the limit of ripeness. The black of pigeons is the same as that of Negros, since their internal organs surpass the limit of ripeness until they almost burn, since the sun burns their hair, and so they become frizzy. In fact, if hair is put close to fire, it becomes frizzy; but, if you prolong the exposure to fire, then it becomes black like pepper.

In the same way that the intelligence of black people and their red variety is different from that of brown ones, likewise the black and the white pigeons are different, as far as knowledge and inclination are concerned”.

Al-Ġāḥiẓ records a rich anecdote, attributed to Polemon, which exemplifies the practical therapeutic application of the principle of proximity between pigeon and men in the treatment of a recalcitrant young wife.

²⁹ Al-Ġāḥiẓ, *Kitāb al-ḥayawān*, vol. 3, p. 269. By modern standards, this section and the following one can make for uncomfortable reading.

³⁰ Al-Ġāḥiẓ, *Kitāb al-ḥayawān*, vol. 3, p. 244.

A friend of Polemon's is quite at a loss because the young woman whom he has married rejects him and her marital duties. The man has tried to be kind to her, but nothing has worked. Polemon confidently suggests a cure: the girl must be deprived of all the ornaments of life that women find pleasure in, and segregated in a small room from which she can only see the pigeons. Her isolation must be complete; even her servant must be incapable of talking to her in Arabic, sign language must be the only way to communicate.

There is a theoretical explanation of the effect that the forceful observation of pigeons produces: the mind has to process — either by accepting or rejecting — what comes from the senses, so that this can act on the soul and change it.

If the young woman, led by the example of the pigeons, softens, an experienced woman can be sent to her in order to instruct her in the art of seduction. If she behaves, the husband should reward her; if, instead, she misbehaves, stricter segregation must resume.

After a while, Polemon goes back to his friend's house to check on the young wife, because apparently the treatment is not entirely successful. The woman candidly confesses that, in spite of all the intensive observation of pigeons, she has not yet understood how to do it herself, and here Polemon snaps impatiently.

Leaving aside possible considerations about the role played by pigeon mimesis and segregation in obtaining the desired results, some elements in the story bring us back to the discussion about its origin and transmission. The fact that a non-Arabic speaking maid is involved in the first phase of the treatment may point at an Arabo-Islamic milieu of origin. On the other hand, the detail of the linguistic indication is very easy to adapt to the context of reception in the process of translation. The question remains open.³¹

Another story, attributed to Polemon, about the usefulness of pigeons

He said: "I will tell you another story about pigeons, which deals with the issue of women, men, their voluptuousness and the positive aspects of their actions". He said: "Once a man came to me to complain about his situation with a young woman whom he had liked and married. The young woman was beautiful, an intelligent and lively virgin, but she had no experience of the things that arouse men's desire — and that usually women master — nor of the acceptance of her share of women's voluptuousness. So, when he approached her, she refused him and pushed him away from her. He tried to please her in every way: he introduced her to the women of the house, with the idea that she would become close to them, but she annoyed them so much that they neglected her, in spite of the intense love that the man had for her. So, he once came to me complaining. I told him to segregate the young woman from other people, so that nobody could reach her; I also told him to limit his kindness towards her, as well as the presence of food, drinks, clothes, perfumes, and of all the other things in which a woman finds her delight and pleasure. I also ordered him to give her a foreign maid with whom she could not communicate verbally, but who would be clever enough to be able to communicate with signs alone, until the young woman began to crave the presence of this servant and of the other women too, and until she wished to find someone to talk to, and with whom she could complain about the wild condition of her solitude.

I also ordered him to give her some pairs of pigeons — beautiful, capable of triggering her fancy, cooing — put them into a clean pigeon house, give them doves in the house, and a clean segregated cell in front of the pigeon house for the woman; then make for her a small opening so that the pigeons could be directly in front of her eyes so that their observation could be her only distraction. And I also ordered that their coming back to their loft during the day should be

³¹ Al-Ġāhiz, *Kitāb al-ḥayawān*, vol. 3, pp. 287–289.

immediate and in front of her, so that looked even more at these pigeons, to cheer herself up with them, and so that she called them to coo for a while. Then, the pigeons would leave, but she would keep thinking about their behaviour after having observed their condition.

In fact, nature would have not done its work until it had affected [the woman], and so the most suitable place for her was where she could be close to the pigeons, and that the greatest part of her amusement came from them, because the senses do not produce anything in the soul — from the hearing, the sight, the taste, the smell, and the touch' — except for what is moved by the mind, to accept or refuse these sensations, the effort to obtain them or let them go, aversion or enjoyment for this in proportion to how the soul has been moved".

"And when you see that the proximity of the pigeons and the thought of them has become the most important thing for her, send to her a woman who has experience of segregation, who can be friendly to her and explain the bird's behaviour to her, and arouse her admiration for them, and turn her thoughts to them; a woman who can describe to her the delight of the senses, in proportion to the agitation of the desire that she can observe in the young woman. Then, send this woman away and try to approach her yourself. If you detect aversion, segregate her again and send the woman back to her, so that she will not make you wait long for another possibility. If, instead, she does as you wish, she will allow you to do something. But if you do not obtain what you wish, please, let me know".

After a while, I said to him: "Bring the woman to me, so that I can question her on the condition of her soul, your status in her eyes, because it is possible that there is in her a natural shyness that prevents her from delight, or perhaps a lack of experience that does not let her accept the defloration". He did so, and ordered the woman to reveal what she had in her soul, and in fact she had doubts about her defloration.

I made her agree to go on and then I said: "You have learned from what you have seen from the pigeons and you must have certainly seen pairs of pigeons and how they do!".

She replied: "I have already observed them with great attention indeed, and I have been amazed by what I saw, but I do not know how to do it properly myself!".

Then I told her: "Do not stop his hand, do not let your soul be filled with fear, if you find something that inspires you with delight, then do it, because, in this way, his heart will be taken, his affection will increase, and this part of him will be moved with more energy than that he could have by himself alone. So, do not hesitate to satisfy his needs, let go of your modesty, and drop your hesitations. And there will be a reason to do these things, a reason for leaving the wild isolation and going back to familiarity and intimacy, to pass from a condition that calls for separation into a condition of being inseparable from someone: that is the condition of the pigeons".

Concluding Remarks

Apart from offering a completely different outlook on pigeons, this anthology is an example of how varied animal lore is in Arabic literature. A common and homely creature is enough to move through different themes and textual genres, especially thanks to al-Ġāḥiẓ's *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān* and its broad and inclusive collection of materials, from Aristotle to the opinion of anonymous pigeon trainers.

The themes traditionally connected to pigeons and turtledoves in ancient and late-antique literature — faithful love, ability in flight, and fear of the hawk, the cry, the craft of pigeon trainers — are magnified and enriched in the *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*. If animal literature sometimes strikes us as repetitive — and when observed across the centuries, it may convey the impression that everything is similar without being really the same — al-Ġāḥiẓ is can be seen as immune to this occasional tediousness, with its fresh, erudite, and ironic report of literary themes and daily life. These passages also show how important *belles lettres* are for

the study of the history of knowledge and premodern science and crafts. The essentially dry nature of technical literature may find a wider and more detailed context in the anecdotes and stories recorded in literary texts.

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Captions

Fig. 1: The population of pigeons around the Mekkah Masjid in Hyderabad, April 2017. Photo: Lucia Raggetti.

Fig. 2: Pigeons for sale in the market of Alexandria, April 2013. Photo: Lucia Raggetti.

Fig. 3: Pigeon loft on the roof tops around Ibn Ṭūlūn mosque in Cairo, April 2013. Photo: Lucia Raggetti.

Fig. 4: Pigeon loft with geometrical patterns seen from Ibn Tulun mosque in Cairo, April 2013. Photo: Lucia Raggetti.