ANIMALS AND THE MEDIEVAL CULTURE OF EMPIRE

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[W]e must take into account the myriad ways in which animals, wild and domesticated, are entwined in human cultural history: animals, after all, are foes and friends, symbols and signs; they serve as talismans, as objets d’art, as markers of status, as commodities and presentations, as sources of entertainment; clothing, food, and medicine, and even as sources of wisdom and models of human behavior.

Thomas T. Allsen, The Royal Hunt in Eurasian History

In the opening scene of the Chanson de Roland, the pagan king Marsile sends Charlemagne an offer of gifts, tribute, and loyalty if the Franks will lift their siege of Saragossa and go home. The suggestion originally comes from Blancandrin, Marsile’s respected and most trusted advisor:
Mandez Carlun, a l’orguillus, al fier,
Fedeilz servises e mult granz amistez:
Vos li durrez urs e leons e chens,
Set cenz camelz e mil hosturs müers,
D’or e d’argent quatre cenz muls cargez,
Cinquante carre qu’en ferat carïer. (ll. 28–33)¹

[To the proud and haughty Charles, send your
loyal (feudal) service and great friendship.
[Say] you will give him bears, lions, and dogs,
700 camels and 1000 molted hawks, 400
mules loaded with gold and silver, 50 carts to
haul it all away.]

For eleventh- or twelfth-century listeners, this scene (as
I have suggested elsewhere) would likely have evoked
the Iberian institution of parias, the tribute money that
eleventh-century Muslim kings paid to their Christian
counterparts in what one historian has called a
medieval “protection racket.” The early twelfth-century
chronicle, the Historia Silense, records a remarkably
similar scene in which the Muslim king of Toledo
comes in person to offer the king of Castille-León “an
immense amount of gold and silver coin and of
precious textiles” if only he will pack up his tents and go
home.² The one striking difference between that
historical chronicle and the nearly contemporary
chanson de geste is the catalogue of animals carefully
detailed in our Old French “literary” representation.

¹ Citations of the Chanson are from La Chanson de Roland,
2nd edn., ed. and trans. Ian Short, Lettres Gothiques (Paris:
Livre de Poche, 1990); translations are mine.
² Sharon Kinoshita, Medieval Boundaries: Rethinking
Difference in Old French Literature (Philadelphia: University
of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 18–19. The chronicle is named
after its (erroneous) attribution to the monastery of Santo
Domingo de Silos.
This essay explores the resonances of that scene against the context of the role of animals in medieval society. Where the majority of Animal Studies approaches to the Middle Ages examines the ways in which medieval texts put the category of “animal” in conversation with the category of “the human”—a “zoontology,” in Cary Wolfe’s words, that poses “the question of the animal and of species difference in all its various dimensions”—this essay turns instead to a cultural zoohistory that looks at the way animals functioned in and mediated between different medieval cultures. The permeable boundary I will be considering is not that between the human and the animal but between Latin Christendom and the Islamic world. Specifically, I am interested in animals—camels, elephants, falcons—as objects of exchange in a shared culture of empire, as manifested in historical examples and literary representations of a traffic that, even in the age of crusades, succeeded in cutting across political and confessional boundaries in the Mediterranean and throughout Central Asia.

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4 Contrast the 2006 volume, A Communion of Subjects: Animals in Religion, Science, and Ethics, ed. Paul Waldau and Kimberley Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), in which the historical study of animals seems to call forth a kind of taxonomic imagination. Part II of the text,
The kind of procession imagined in the opening scene of the Chanson de Roland was not unique to medieval Iberia. In the late eleventh century, an eastern Mediterranean prince dispatching his daughter to be wed to a foreign ruler had her dowry conveyed by

130 camels, magnificently clothed with Byzantine brocades. Most of the loads consisted of gold and silver and three howdahs. The dowry was also borne on 74 mules, draped in various sorts of regal brocades, whose bells and harness were of gold and silver. On six of them were twelve silver chests, containing jewels and finery that were beyond price. Preceding the mules were 33 horses of excellent stock, whose stirrups were of gold encrusted with various gems. There was also a large cradle, much of it of gold.5

Some 120 years later, another king dispatching his daughter to marry another foreign ruler equipped a baggage train comprising

soisante sommiers tous carkiés d’avoir et d’or et d’argent et de dras de soie et de rikes joiaus;

“Animals in Abrahamic Traditions,” is subdivided into chapters on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—a kind of Linnaean classification not of the animals themselves but of civilizations defined (as for Samuel Huntingdon) by religion. Part III is devoted to “Animals in Indian Traditions” (subdivided into Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism), and Part IV to “Animals in Chinese Traditions” (including Early Chinese Religion, Daoism, and Confucianism).

ne n’i avoit sommier qui ne fust couvers d’un vermel samit qui si estoit lons qu’il trainoit bien set piés ou uit a cascun par derriere, ne ja tant n’alaissent par boe ne par laides voies que j’a en fust nus des samis escorchiés, tout par cointise et par nobleche.  

[sixty pack animals loaded with riches: gold, silver, silk cloths, and rich jewels. Every single pack animal was covered with a piece of red samite, so long it trailed a good seven or eight feet behind. They never went through mud or bad roads, for none of the pieces of samite was damaged, all for daintiness and nobility.]

Clearly we are in the presence of a common cultural practice: a bride being conveyed to her future husband is accompanied by a convoy of pack animals laden with gifts or payments consisting of gold, silver, jewels and silks. In the first case, the convoy includes other animals (“33 horses of excellent stock”) that themselves constitute part of the present. All the animals are swathed in magnificent silks, surely the equal of those they transport. Significantly, the two examples come from opposite sides of the Muslim-Christian “divide.” In the first instance, the bride was the daughter of the Seljuk sultan Malikshah, sent to Baghdad to marry the ‘Abbasid caliph.’  


The description comes from the Annals of the historian Ibn al-Athir. On Ibn al-Athir, see Francesco Gabrieli, *Arab Historians of the Crusades*, trans. E. J. Costello (Berkeley:
Adorning the camels and mules may be read as part of the “culturally-determined ‘textile-reflex’ [that] whatever could be draped should be draped,” exemplifying what art historian Lisa Golombek has dubbed “The Draped Universe of Islam.” In the second instance, however, the bride was the daughter of Boris, king of the Vlachs, dispatched to marry the “Latin” Emperor Henry of Hainault in the wake of the Fourth Crusaders’ conquest of the Byzantine capital of Constantinople, in an incident recorded by Robert de Clari—the simple knight whose chronicle of the Fourth Crusade constitutes one of the earliest examples of Old French prose historiography.

That a Muslim sultan and an Orthodox king should equip their daughters’ baggage trains in such similar fashion, described in practically identical terms by writers on opposite sides of the Crusades, marks this scene as a recognizable part of what I am calling the medieval culture of empire: a set of shared courtly forms and practices signifying imperial power. Originating in ancient Mesopotamia and transmitted through the Persian and Hellenistic empires to Rome and to the Islamic world, it constituted a kind of cultural package that—in contrast to the religiously-based identities, institutions, and practices on which historians tend so often focus—passed readily across not just political but confessional lines. Caliphs and

University of California Press, 1984), pp. xxvii–xxviii. Since he died in 1232, the two accounts (as opposed to the incidents they record) are roughly contemporary.


In some ways, this culture of empire forms the complement to the Carolingian and post-Carolingian cultural complex
sultans, emperors and kings presided over magnificent palaces displaying the scope and power of their rule, calculated to awe subjects and foreign visitors alike. They posed as collectors of knowledge and patrons of learning, sponsoring the compilation, translation, and transmission of scientific, medical, and literary texts. They exchanged precious portable objects (today relegated to the category of “minor” or “decorative” arts) such as rock crystal vases, carved ivory caskets, luxurious silks, and other fine artifacts that—given as diplomatic gifts, offered as tribute, or bestowed as tokens of favor—circulated widely, constituting what the late art historian Oleg Grabar dubbed the “shared culture of objects.” Decorated with the same stylized courtly motifs that adorned princely palaces, they created a kind of visual lingua franca linking the courts of the high medieval Mediterranean. Amidst the scenes of seated lords, musicians, dancers, and winepourers, at least two of the courtly motifs—hunters and mounted falconers—bespeak the common obsession with animals, as do the numerous mirror-image representations of stylized birds and beasts: “confronted” or “addorsed” lions, falcons, peacocks, or the widespread image of one animal dominating another, usually read as an expression of raw strength and power.  

The possession and exchange of rare and exotic animals were recognizable elements in the medieval culture of empire. In his magisterial 2006 study, his-


Oleg Grabar, “The Shared Culture of Objects,” in Byzantine Court Culture from 829 to 1204, ed. Henry Maguire (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1997), 115–29. These motifs were first articulated as a cycle under the Umayyads and likely diffused by the spread of portable objects like silks.
antorian Thomas Allsen places the institution he calls the royal hunt at the heart of “the political and cultural life of many of the peoples of premodern Eurasia.” Over a period of nearly four millennia, it radiated out in remarkably homogeneous form from a “core area” centered in Iran, North India, and Turkestan across much of Eurasia, so that “courts and cultures with little direct knowledge of one another nonetheless [came to share] a similar hunting style.” With its “manifold linkages between nature, culture, and politics,” the royal hunt, along with ancillary institutions such as the management of hunting parks and the exchange of animals, became a key component “in interstate relations, military preparations, domestic administration, communications networks, and in the search for political legitimacy” that reveals “the extensive historical connections among the peoples of the Old World.”  

Like the inanimate decorative art objects transported along what Eva R. Hoffman terms “pathways of portability,” animals entered into the complex set of political and social relations materialized by the circulation of gifts. “In exchanging unusual animals,” Allsen speculates, “rulers quite consciously . . . helped to solidify each other’s regimes through a kind of professional courtesy.”

The sender demonstrated generosity and command over Nature, and the recipient’s

status was elevated by a convincing display of distant connections.\textsuperscript{14}

By the Middle Ages, such exchanges were facilitated by “well-established networks specializing in the trans-continental movement of animals” found throughout the Old World, linking the Islamic Mediterranean through West Asia all the way to China.\textsuperscript{15} Egypt became a center of redistribution from which south- and central-African giraffes received as tribute or transported as part of the commercial traffic in exotic animals were “reexported or offered as royal presentations to caliphs and other Muslim rulers,” by the thirteenth century reaching courts in Sicily and Central Asia.\textsuperscript{16} Elephants originally from India or Southeast Asia were often “recycled” in princely gift exchanges that sometimes took them as far as Latin Europe.\textsuperscript{17}

The most famous example is undoubtedly Abu’l Abbas, the elephant that the historical Charlemagne

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{14} Allsen, The Royal Hunt, 234.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{16} Allsen, The Royal Hunt, 236.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{17} Allsen, The Royal Hunt, 253. Two sixteenth-century examples of re-gifted elephants are documented in Silvio A. Bedini, The Pope’s Elephant (Nashville: J. S. Sanders, 1998), on the creature that the Medici pope Leo X received from Manuel I of Portugal in 1514, and The Elephant’s Journey, trans. Margaret Jull Costa (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010), Nobel laureate José Saramago’s posthumous novel on the elephant Manuel’s son Joao III gave the Habsburg Archduke Maximilian in 1551. Both speak to the reterritorialization of power forged by the new Portuguese sea-link to the Indies as well as to the early modern persistence / transformation of a medieval phenomenon.}
received, along with the other “large presents,” from the ‘Abbasid caliph Harun al-Rashid (referred to in the Royal Frankish Annals as “Harun Emir al Mumenin, the king of the Persians”). The fact that Charlemagne had apparently requested such an animal through the envoy Isaac the Jew, whom he had dispatched four years earlier, indicates that “the Frankish ruler had some inkling that elephants were considered proper animals of state by his peers to the east.” As Alessandro Barbero writes,

> the possession of an elephant or any other exotic animal had symbolic importance. It was the prerogative of the imperial figure to whom God had entrusted the government of a large portion of the world and whose name had been heard in infinitely distant lands. Both Charles and Harun were certainly well aware of all these connotations.

As for the other unspecified “large presents,” they may be gleaned from those Charlemagne received from the “king of Persia” in 807. These included a tent, canopy, and curtains “of unbelievable size and beauty;” precious silk robes, perfumes, ointments, and balsam; and an ingenious mechanical water clock featuring “twelve horsemen who at the end of each hour stepped out of twelve windows”—a magnificent display

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indicating how thoroughly the ability to mobilize tributary splendor was on the side of the caliph.\textsuperscript{21}

There was every extravagance the East could provide . . . Charles could not compete with the splendor and ingenuity of such gifts, but he returned the compliment with \textit{hounds, horses, mules, and precious fabrics}, which do not appear to have made a similar impression on Arab chroniclers.\textsuperscript{22}

Already in this ninth-century chronicle, we see the kernel of the cultural practice the \textit{Roland} poet will evoke three centuries later: an embassy between rulers of different religions, mediated by the transmission of rare and expensive objects. Closer to the time of the \textit{Chanson de Roland}, Henry I of England (according to William of Malmesbury in his \textit{Gesta Regum Anglorum})

\begin{quote}
 took passionate delight in the marvels of other countries, with much affability . . . asking foreign kings to send him animals not found in England—lions, leopards, lynxes, camels—and he had a park called Woodstock in which he kept his pets of this description.\textsuperscript{23}
\end{quote}

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\textsuperscript{21} Carolingian Chronicles, 87.
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In 1105, after his victory at Caen, Henry I “paraded a young lion, a lynx, camels, and an ostrich before a populace that followed the animals with exuberant pleasure and wonder. The message was of a ruler so powerful he could acquire and control even these fearsome, wild, and expensive creatures.” Willene Clark attributes this predilection for wild animals to the twelfth-century revival of Classicism:

Among the most effective symbols of Roman might were the wild and exotic animals that the ancient emperor and statesmen imported for ceremonial processions, for the bloody but impressive games of the arena, and for their personal menageries.

Though a self-conscious revival the practices of antiquity may have been involved, another model was closer to hand: that of the medieval culture of empire centered in the Islamic and Byzantine worlds. By cultivating forms and practices associated with the prestigious courts of places like Constantinople, Baghdad, or Cairo, Latin rulers could signify their participation in an ancient discourse of rulership recognizable across the Eurasian continent.

Henry I’s compound of Woodstock provides a northern European echo of what Allsen identifies as an important component of the culture of empire: the cultivation of hunting parks—“secured, artificial environments . . . found in some form almost everywhere royal courts mounted royal hunts.” Though dating as far back as Egypt in the third millennium BCE, it was in ancient Persia under Achaemenid rule that such parks

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coalesced as an imperial institution. “[F]our or five times larger than any of its predecessors,” the Achaemenid empire became

the model for statecraft and kingly government in the core area. Everything associated with their state was consequently imbued with special properties; its very success . . . magnified the importance of all Achaemenid institutions and promoted them near and far as essential attributes of sovereignty and majesty, and as necessary ingredients for, and the ultimate measure of, political success.”

Achaemenid forms and practices were imitated and appropriated by rulers of client states (such as the Orontids of Armenia) and successor states (notably the Sasanian rulers of pre-Islamic Iran), moving from there into Islamic, especially ‘Abbasid, culture, becoming wide-spread in the medieval culture of empire. A suggestion of the symbolic capital invested in the royal hunting park may be glimpsed in Relatio de Legatine


27 Allsen, The Royal Hunt, 37. The “selective appropriation and adaptation of hallmark Achaemenid Persian forms” have recently been identified among the first century CE Nabataeans, attesting to the “longevity of the Achaemenid legacy . . . in regions that were once strategic zones of its vast empire,” in this case deployed in “conscious resistance to Roman cultural hegemony through the deployment of eastward-resonating visual paradigms”: Björn Anderson, “Imperial Legacies, Local Identities: References to Achaemenid Persian Iconography on Crenelated Nabataean Tombs,” Ars Orientalis 32 (2002): 163 [163–207].
Constantinopolitana—Bishop Liudprand of Cremona’s first-person account of his embassy to the court of the Byzantine emperor Nicephoros Phocas on behalf of the German emperor Otto the Great in 968. During the course of his visit, Liudprand tells Otto,

Nicephorus asked me whether you had preserves, that is, hunting grounds, or if, instead of preserves, you had wild donkeys or other animals. When I affirmed to him that you had preserves, and animals in the hunting grounds, with the exception of wild donkeys, he said: ‘I will lead you to our preserve, whose enormity, as well as the wild, that is woodland, donkeys, you will marvel to see.’

From the standpoint of the medieval culture of empire, we easily discern that Nicephorus’s question represents not mere idle curiosity but a gambit in an aggressive game of cultural one-upmanship. (An eleventh-century Central Asian “mirror for princes” describes hunting parks as “a major attribute of majesty, like conquest, generosity, and the bestowal of justice.”) Led to a preserve that he finds “hilly, overgrown, [and] unpleasant,” Liudprand continues, he was shown a herd of “wild” donkeys of the very same kind, he rather petulantly asserts, that are found domesticated in the markets of Cremona, “not bare-backed, but bearing

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loads.”30 His stubborn insistence on the domestication and hence utility of western (in contrast to Byzantine) donkeys turns a willfully blind eye to the widespread conventions of the medieval culture of empire.31

It is to the Italian-born emperor Frederick II, the *stupor mundi* whose exploits and antics dominated the first half of the thirteenth century, that western Europe’s first great menageries are attributed.32 Frederick’s maternal grandfather was Roger II, the upstart Norman king of Sicily (r. 1130-54) who was the first Latin Christian ruler systematically to exploit the resources of the medieval culture of empire, cannily constructing a discourse of monarchical legitimacy out of elements (visual representations, titulature and coinage, administrative practices) drawn not from Capetian France or imperial Germany but from the Byzantine Empire and Fatimid Egypt. Roger’s coronation cloak, a magnificent semi-circle of red silk woven (according to the Arabic inscription embroidered in gold thread around the lower hem) in the royal

30 *Liudprand of Cremona*, 261. Today Liudprand’s best-known work, the *Embassy* was little circulated in the Middle Ages. Its highly sarcastic tone, Paolo Squatriti argues, should be read as a calculated rhetorical strategy “better suited to literary analysis than to psychoanalysis.” Given the admiration for Byzantine society and letters that Liudprand expresses elsewhere, “the unprecedented, persistent, and explicit anti-Byzantinism” he displays throughout the text is likely an attempt to justify to Otto “why he had failed to reach an accord with Nicephorus” (*Liudprand of Cremona*, 7, 32).

31 The Byzantines collected exotic animals at least from the eleventh century, when Constantine IX received an elephant and a giraffe from the caliph of Fatimid Egypt. In the twelfth centuries, Byzantine emperors awed visiting crusaders with the display of wild lions and leopards. See Gustave Loisel, *Histoire des menageries de l’antiquité à nos jours*, vol. 2 (Paris: Octave Doin, 1912), 142–43.

workshop in Palermo featuring mirror-image representations of a lion dominating a camel, ostentatiously proclaimed his participation in a visual discourse of power legible across the medieval Mediterranean and western Asia.33 When Roger’s grandson William II died in 1189, his successor (and Frederick’s father), the German Emperor Henry VI, found a menagerie (including a giraffe and camels) that subsequently “excited great wonder from Rome northwards to Germany.”34 Reared in Sicily amidst the remnants of Roger’s multicultural kingdom, Frederick II, like his grandfather, was entirely at home in the medieval culture of empire. The celebrated manuscript of De arte venandi cum avibus not only attests Frederick’s lifelong passion for falconry but also fits a recognizable model of the sovereign as promoter of learning.35 The diplomatic and cultural relations he maintained with Muslims in Egypt and the Levant that so scandalized the pope and the rest of Latin Europe also ensured him “a supply of weird and wonderful beasts” that stocked his zoological garden in Palermo and leopardarium, tended by Muslim slaves, at Lucera.36 Among these was

33 While the motif of one animal dominating another is widespread in the shared culture of objects, the particular choice of a lion and a camel has sometimes been read as a declaration of Roger’s triumph over Islam. William Tronzo, The Cultures of His Kingdom: Roger II and the Cappella Palatina in Palermo (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 142–43.
36 Abulafia, Frederick II, 54; Loisel, Histoire des menageries, 146. Abulafia notes that “contrary to general assumption,” Frederick’s court expenditures were much smaller than those of his Norman predecessors or his Angevin successors; among
a giraffe from the sultan of Egypt, “the first to appear in mediaeval Europe.”

Historian David Abulafia reads Frederick’s delight in rare animals “as evidence for the endless wonders of the natural world.” Clearly, however, such animals were also part of a calculated display of imperial power meant to awe the emperor’s subjects and enemies alike, one of his “semi-Arab habits of leadership.” In 1231, Frederick visited Ravenna “with many animals unknown to Italy: elephants, dromedaries, camels, panthers, gerafalcons, lions, leopards, white falcons, and bearded owls,” then crossed the Alps (using the camels for transport) “with monkeys and leopards, to the wonder of the untraveled Germans.” In 1237, an elephant received from the sultan of Egypt played a starring role in the triumphal procession at Cremona celebrating Frederick’s victory over the Lombard

the exceptions were expenditures on hunting lodges and “fabulous gifts to Mediterranean rulers,” such as the polar bear he sent the Egyptian sultan al-Kamil in 1232 in exchange for a “gorgeous planetarium, said to be worth 20,000 marks” (Abulafia, Frederick II, 266–67).


Abulafia, Frederick II, 54.


Haskins, Renaissance of the Twelfth Century, 328.
League: “topped by a wooden tower bearing Frederick’s pennant,” it dragged the enemy’s broken *carroccio* (an ox-drawn cart bearing the Italian cities’ relics and civic banners, symbolizing divine protection) “to which various high-ranking captives were shackled.” And in 1238, when Frederick married the English king Henry III’s sister Isabelle at Worms, he was accompanied (in a variation of the bridal cortège we saw earlier) by

> numerous quadrigas [two-wheeled victory chariots] laden with gold and silver, very fine linen, purple silk, gems, precious ceramics; camels, mules, and dromedaries led by Saracens; and, finally, monkeys and leopards tended by Ethiopians.

In such carefully choreographed spectacles, exotic animals, material finery, and human captives or retainers all contributed to the strategic performance of Frederick’s imperial power.

With all this in mind, let’s circle back to the *Chanson de Roland*’s colorful inventory of creatures in the passage with which we opened:

> Mandez Carlun, a l’orguillus, al fier,
Fedezl servises e mult granz amistez:
Vos li durrez urs e leons e chens,

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41 Abulafia, *Frederick II*, 303–4. The *carroccio* was an ox-drawn cart bearing saints’ relics and sacred banners, solemnly drawn into battle by the Italian cities, a symbol of the divine protection they craved and a source of morale to the troops.

42 Loisel, *Histoire des menageries*, 146 (my translation). Frederick’s gift of three leopards is credited as being the origin of Henry III’s Tower Menagerie. Later, Henry III received an elephant (famously documented by Matthew Paris) from another brother-in-law, French king Louis IX, who purportedly acquired it while on Crusade.
Set cenz camelz e mil hosturs müers,  
D’or e d’argent quatre cenz muls cargez,  
Cinquante carre qu’en ferat caríer.  
(ll. 28–33)

[To the proud and haughty Charles, send your loyal (feudal) service and great friendship.  
[Say] you will give him bears, lions, and dogs,  
700 camels and 1000 molted hawks, 400 mules loaded with gold and silver, 50 carts to haul it all away.]

In contrast to the sultan of Rum or the king of the Vlachs, Marsile promises his conversion and feudal obeisance, guaranteed not by a daughter given in marriage but by sons proffered as hostages (ll. 40–42). Given the formulaic style of Old French epic, this passage is repeated virtually verbatim twice more; first, when Blancandrin delivers the proposal to the emperor Charlemagne:

De sun aveir vos voelt asez duner,  
Urs e leuns e veltres enchaignez,  
Set cenz cameilz e mil hosturs muëz,  
D’or e d’argent .III. cenz muls trussez,  
Cinquante care que caríer en ferez.  
(ll. 127–31)

[He wants to give you a good part of his wealth: bears, lions, and chained greyhounds,  
700 camels and 1000 molted hawks, 400 mules loaded with gold and silver, 50 carts you will use to cart it away.]

And again when Charlemagne reports the offer to his vassals:

De sun aveir me volet duner grant masse,
Urs e leuns e veltres caeignables,  
Set cenz cameilz e mil hosturs muables,  
Quatre cenz muls cargez de l’or Arabe,  
Avoec iço plus de cinquante care.  
(ll. 182–86)

[He wants to give me a great quantity of his wealth: bears, lions, and shackled greyhounds, 700 camels and 1000 molted hawks, 400 mules loaded with gold and silver, along with more than 50 carts.]

Except for the shift from “dogs” to “greyhounds,” the list remains remarkably stable—its slight variations attributable largely to changes in assonance. That this represents the conscious reflection on the part of vernacular French literature of a recognizable cultural package is confirmed in Thomas of Kent’s later twelfth-century Alexander romance, Le Roman de toute chevalerie. There, as Alexander prepares his mighty expedition to Persia, General Tholomé attempts to dissuade him by reminding him of the copious booty that the army has already amassed: “Your men,” he says, “are loaded down with the wealth they have won” [“Vos ostz sunt mult chargé de ceo qu’il ont conquis,” l. 5184]. And what is this wealth that Tholomé hopes will suffice to deflect Alexander’s dreams of conquest? “Gold . . . and silver, purple and greyish-brown silk, elephants, camels, and Arabian horses” [“Or . . . e argent, pailles purprins e bis, / Olifanz e chameals e chevals arabis,” ll. 5182–83]—adding to the precious metal coin and exotic animals of the Chanson de Roland the fine silks of both the Historia Silense and the dowries of the Seljuk and Vlach princess-brides described above.43

43 On the role of silk in the medieval culture of empire, see Sharon Kinoshita, “Almería Silk and the French Feudal...
Donkeys, as Richard Bulliet observes, are “much more interesting as symbolic animals than as beasts of burden.” In this light, what can we make of the particular animals Marsile offers the Franks? Clearly, the bears and lions given pride of place stand in for the even more exotic giraffes and elephants that historical rulers received from their Muslim counterparts. “The cultural history of lions is,” notes Allsen, “quite complex.” In contrast to other “powerful predators,” the lion, transported throughout Eurasia, “had meanings and well-articulated cultural niches far beyond its home range,” including China; its symbolic meanings were “diffused through varied cultural media—art, literature, and religion.”

Both dogs and molting hawks belong to the courtly culture of the hunt cultivated among ruling classes across Europe and Asia. Unlike great exotic animals like lions, elephants, and giraffes, they came from a variety of locations and thus made natural objects of exchange between sovereigns or lords of high rank. The particular prestige of birds from the far north spawned a “truly transcontinental market for raptors,” especially the gyrfalcon from the subarctic taiga—a passion shared by thirteenth-century Mongol rulers and the western emperor Frederick II. (When the khan of the Golden Horde sent Frederick a letter demanding that he surrender his empire in exchange for a position at the Mongol court, the emperor is reputed to have joked


Allsen, The Royal Hunt, 243–44.
that “with his experience he was well qualified for the post of the khan’s falconer.” Greyhounds—specifically named in lines 128 and 183 of the *Chanson de Roland*—were the oldest, most widely diffused, and (along with the mastiff) most prized of hunting dogs. Attested in desert rock drawings in predynastic Egypt, they spread to the Mediterranean and southern Europe in Greco-Roman antiquity, becoming the “canine of choice” across the Islamic world and into medieval India and Georgia. Significantly, hunting dogs were the one area in which Europeans had something unique to offer their Muslim counterparts. The Latin West developed a rich tradition of indigenous sleuth-hounds that tracked, flushed, and pursued by scent and sound. . . . no other region bred so many specialized hunters, each dedicated to a specific type of terrain or prey.

Such dogs were first sent east by the Carolingians as princely gifts; in the twelfth century, bird dogs were introduced via the Crusader states. In sum, Marsile’s offer of *veltres* participates in a millenium-long tradition that resulted in “the dispersal of specialized

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breeds across Eurasia,” resulting in “the accumulation of a great diversity of canine types at major courts.”

The 700 camels, on the other hand, stand out as a wrinkle in this otherwise seamless show of inter-confessional exchange. While the 400 mules mentioned in line 32 are clearly pack animals, the camels’ position between the hunting dogs and the molted hawks seem to mark them as part of the gift. In the Middle Ages, camels were widespread across the Islamic world, but for utilitarian purposes—particularly as a mode of transport, an alternative to the carts and pack mules alluded to in the last two lines of our quotation. In antiquity, desert cities such as Petra (capital of the Nabataeans) and Palmyra became transit centers for camel caravans crossing from the Arabian Peninsula or Persia to the Mediterranean. Somewhere between the third and the seventh centuries, the one-humped camel (likely native to the southern Arabian Peninsula) became the standard pack animal for the transport of men and goods from Morocco to Afghanistan, even in areas where horse-drawn carts and chariots had

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49 Allsen, The Royal Hunt, 241. In his Antapodosis [Retribution], Liudprand of Cremona reports that King Hugh of Italy included in a gift sent to the Byzantine emperor Romanos “two dogs of a kind never seen before in that region” (Liudprand of Cremona, 119).

50 The importance, or not, of Mecca in camel caravan routes in pre-Islamic Arabia is a fraught point in the historiography of Islam. For a summary, see Robert Irwin, Camel (London: Reaktion Books, 2010), 150–52. Under the ‘Abbasid caliphate, she-camels (more efficient than mules, because requiring fewer relay stops) were used for the state postal network. Irwin, Camel, 152.

51 Irwin, Camel, 145–46. The Nabataeans, as we saw above, self-consciously used and transmitted forms of the Achae-menid culture of empire.
flourished in antiquity. In Central Asia, Richard Bulliet has speculated, the southward migrations of the Oghuz Turks, bringing them within the political and cultural orbit of the Muslim world, were prompted by climatic changes that affected their camels. Converting to Islam (and becoming known as Seljuk Turks from an eponymous ancestor), they thrived politically and economically by developing a hybrid one-humped camel used for military campaigns and for supplying the caravan trade at Silk Road centers such as Bukhara and Samarqand.

Notably, the one exception to the camel’s predominance in the Muslim world was al-Andalus (conquered and settled by non-camel-raising North Africans), where native mules remained the pack animals of choice and the cart never entirely disappeared. Only briefly under the Almoravids (c. 1090-1170), Sanhaja Berber tribesmen from Mauritania, did camel breeding take hold. (This dating coincides with the moment when Henry II of England received a gift of camels from the Muslim king of Valencia and has also been used in attempts to date the Chanson de Roland.) In Latin Europe, there are sporadic references to camels (perhaps introduced by the Visigoths)

52 Richard W. Bulliet, The Camel and the Wheel (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 28. Bulliet points out that Arabic had only one (rarely used) word for “cart” until the fourteenth century, when there was a sudden proliferation of loanwords from several languages. Depictions of ancient or mythical scenes including carts or chariots betray medieval artists’ unfamiliarity with basic modes of harnessing.
in the early Middle Ages (including an anecdote that the seventh-century Merovingian king Clotaire II had his queen paraded on a camel before having her executed). Correspondingly, camels figure little in the Latin European cultural imaginary, in striking contrast to their prominence in Arabic and Islamic culture and society. Two, Robert Irwin notes, play “walk-on roles” in the late twelfth-early thirteenth-century *Roman de Renart*, including one who came from Lombardy to bring my lord [the lion king] Noble tribute from Constantinople. He had been sent by the pope as his legate and friend, and he was very wise and a good jurist

pressed into service in the lawsuits of Isengrin the Wolf and Bruin the Bear. As late as the fifteenth century, in his account of his visit to Egypt, the German pilgrim Felix Fabri gave a long description of camels he saw “in which detailed and accurate observation mingled with learned misinformation from literary sources.” As we are now in a position to see, the mingling of accurate observation and misinformation likewise characterizes the *Chanson de Roland*’s account of Marsile’s offer of tribute. The camels that, historically, might have been used for the transportation of tribute are here miscast

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57 On the centrality of camels in medieval Arabo-Islamic cultures, see Irwin, *Camel*, 68–100. For visual representations of camels in Islamic art, see Bulliet, *Cotton, Climate, and Camels*, 123–26.


59 Irwin, *Camel*, 155.
as part of the tribute itself. For all its apparently formulaic simplicity, the catalogue of animals in Marsile’s offer of submission to Charlemagne reveals the commonalities, but also the differences, forming the backdrop for historical and literary-historical examples of interconfessional ex-change.

With their simultaneous reference to pack mules (quatre cenz muls) and carts (Cinquante carre), the final two lines of our quotation (ll. 32–33) move us back toward the camelless world of Latin Europe. Carts figure prominently in another twelfth-century epic, Le Charroi de Nîmes. Heading south from Paris to “the kingdom of Spain” [“Espaigne le regné,” l. 450] to conquer the Saracen city of Nîmes, the landless hero Guillaume Fierebrace and his nephews devise the strategy of disguising themselves as merchants and sneaking their men and arms, Trojan-horse style, through the gates of the city in barrels mounted on ox-drawn carts. Their efforts make for some of the poem’s many moments of comic relief:

“Niés,” dit li cuens, envers moi entendez.
Fetes ces bués trestot cel val aler.”
Et dit Bertran: “Por neant en parlez.
Ge ne sai tant ne poindre ne bouter
Qe je les puisse de lor pas remüer.”
Ot le Guillelmes, s’en a un ris gité.
Mes a Bertran est molt mal encontra,
Qu’il ne fu mie del mestier doctriné,
Ainz n’en sot mot, s’est en un fanc entré,
Trusqu’as moieus i est le char entré;
Voit le Bertran, a pou n’est forsené.
(ll. 996–1006) 60

[“Nephew,” said the count. “Listen to me. Get these oxen across this valley.” Then Bertrand]

60 See also lines 1002–5, 1012–14.
said, “You’re wasting your breath. I can’t jab or whip them hard enough to get them to change course.” Guillaume heard him and let out a laugh. But Bertrand had a hard time of it. Not being the least bit schooled in the discipline and not knowing the first thing about it, he got the cart into the mud up to its hubs. Seeing this, Bertrand almost went crazy.]

For the poem’s audience, Bertrand’s incompetence at his task undoubtedly evoked the huge social and economic gap separating the knight—however poor and landless—from the peasant from whom he has confiscated this cart. Named for the horses indispensable to their military function, chevaliers are by (cultural) definition helpless at driving oxen with their unwieldy carts. Here again, if in a much different register, animals prove key indicators of social and cultural distinction in the vernacular world of the French feudal nobility.

CONCLUSION

In a brief episode in his autobiographical memoir, the Libre dels feyts (Book of Deeds, c. 1244), the Aragonese king, Jaume I “the Conqueror” recounts how, in the midst of his campaign against Muslim Valencia, a swallow built her nest atop his tent pole. Thereupon, he writes, “I ordered that the tent not be removed until she and her children had gone, since she had come under

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61 On some of the resonances of horses in the constitution of knighthood, see Jeffrey J. Cohen, “Chevalerie,” in Medieval Identity Machines (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 35–77.
our protection [in our faith].” Modern readers, as critic Samuel Armistead writes, invariably take this as a “delightful vignette” revealing “an attractive note of personal intimacy and kingly compassion” on the part of a ruler better known for his campaigns of conquest. However, an early thirteenth-century Arabic geographical dictionary slightly antedating the *Libre dels feyts* tells a remarkably similar tale about the seventh-century general ‘Amr ibn al-‘As. According to this source, during the original Muslim conquest of Egypt, a dove laid her eggs atop the general’s tent pole, leading him to declare: “She is inviolable in our proximity [jīwari-na]. Let the tent remain standing until she hatches her chicks and makes them fly away.” From an Islamic point of view, Amr’s act signifies “the sacredness of the client,” evoking “a whole system of values” rooted in ancient Arabian and earlier Semitic traditions. Without venturing into the question of intentionality and Jaume’s (possible) manipulation of an important Arabo-Islamic social and cultural convention, Armistead underscores the richly intercultural ambience of medieval Iberia, in which narrative motifs, anecdotes, and episodes could easily have migrated . . . from one linguistic community to another, insisting that

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62 Samuel G. Armistead, “An Anecdote of King Jaume I and its Arabic Congener,” in *Cultures in Contact in Medieval Spain: Historical and Literary Essays Presented to L. P. Harvey*. Ed. David Hook and Barry Taylor (London: King’s College London, 1990), 1 [1–8]. This section is adapted from my own previous citation of Armistead’s reading in “Medieval Mediterranean Literature,” *PMLA* 124.2 (2009): 603 [600–8].
our perspectives on the development of medieval Hispanic literature . . . cannot be complete unless . . . the possibility of such exchanges is taken into account and . . . exhaustively explored.\(^\text{63}\)

In the *Libre dels feyts*, as in Marie de France’s lai “Yonec,” a bird turns out to be a kind of shifter between civilizations—a node of intersection where Arab-Muslim convention imperceptibly breaks the surface of a royal Catalan memoir or the ruler of an occluded Celtic kingdom disrupts the border world of Anglo-Norman Wales.\(^\text{64}\) In this essay, I have tried to demonstrate the way a half dozen lines at the outset of the *Chanson de Roland* likewise point us toward a shared culture that, hidden in plain sight, was capable of producing remarkable confluences across apparent religious and cultural divides. Providing a common language that facilitated contact and communication, exotic animals were at the heart of a long-standing political-cultural practice that stood alongside the philosophical and theological texts constituting the prehistory of “humanist” thinking.

\(^{63}\) Armistead, “An Anecdote,” 3.
\(^{64}\) For this reading of “Yonec,” see Kinoshita, *Medieval Boundaries*, 110–24.