



Print of a peacock. Catherine Hettler.

KING OF THE BIRDS: MAKING SYMBOL, SUBJECT, AND SCIENCE IN THE SKIES OF HINDUSTAN

When the Mughals founded an empire in Hindustan, they sought to legitimize their budding dynasty through diverse sources of power. In the texts and art produced by emperors and their courts during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, these performances of power constantly featured birds. Birds, enfolded and imagined, were used as motifs that positioned the Mughals as the cultural descendants of a long Islamic tradition of storytelling and spirituality. Wild and captive birds became an extension of the imperial court as emperors strove to model the legendary rule of King Solomon, who was renowned for his just power over all creatures. During this age of scientist-kings, avians also became catalysts for experimentation and the production of knowledge. This intricate relationship between birds and power reveals a Mughal conception of empire, defined by fluid boundaries between the human and animal kingdoms.

Kristen Hickey
Written for Ruling Hindustan
(HIST 494)
Dr. Lisa Balabanlilar

In the Hindustani empire of the Mughals, birds were companions, partners in the hunt, playthings, and sources of great entertainment. They were fascinating airborne creatures, worthy of great scientific attention. The subject of unimaginable hours of artistic labor, they appeared in countless folios, with their feathers adorning the jeweled turbans of only the most powerful emperors.¹ The presence of birds illuminated and defined the seat of the Mughal emperor as a ruler in an ancient tradition of powerful kingships.

The Mughal empire eventually covered much of the South Asian region, though its borders shifted regularly with each king's attention to the empire's internal and external conflicts. The founding of the empire is generally attributed to Babur in 1526, but the influence and lineage of his predecessors stretched

1. Stephen Markel, "The Use of Flora and Fauna Imagery in Mughal Decorative Arts," in *Flora and Fauna in Mughal Art*, ed. Som Prakash Verma (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 1999), 26.

KING OF THE BIRDS

back as far as the Turko-Mongols. During the successive rules of Babur (r. 1526-1530), Humayun (r. 1530-1540, 1555-1556), Akbar (r. 1556-1605), Jahangir (r. 1605-1627), and Shah Jahan (r. 1628-1658), the empire endured war, peace, expansion, and contraction; most significantly, however, the Mughals fostered a flourishing of culture, resulting in the art, architecture, and autobiographical memoirs that allow for a glance into the world in which these early modern kings lived.

With the diverse and far-reaching terrain over which they ruled, Mughals pulled from numerous constellations of ideas, traditions, values, and symbolism in order to further bolster their rights to rule. Often, this meant identifying and adopting metaphors from varied traditions in order to craft a sustainable cultural identity for the dynasty and each of its individual rulers.² As conquerors and governors of such wide swaths of land, emperors found that conscious and tenable legitimization was a necessary component of the emperorship — a legitimization performed not only for the court and those competitors within the empire, but also for the emboldened rulers of abutting territories and the interested entities at the far reaches of extensive trade networks. Performances of legitimacy took many forms for the Mughals throughout the dynasty's duration: these included reconstructed lineages, traditions of religious rituals, courtly etiquette, hunting parties, demonstrations of knowledge, and patronage of the arts. Legitimization efforts elevated the emperor to a near-divine status, endowing him with the right to rule via descent and a unique set of practically supernatural skills and responsibilities. Legitimizing the dynasty was a conscious effort that required a variety of practices; as such, it is unsurprising that for the Mughals, birds acted as direct conduits to more than one domain of legitimacy. Mughal relationships with birds simultaneously wove the empire into a broader Islamic spiritual and artistic fabric, articulated claims of the emperor's dominion over the natural world, and validated the wisdom and intellect of those scientifically-minded emperors.

The Mughal emperorship held a great and curious concern for the natural world since its founding. The very roots of the Mughal dynasty laid deep within the Mongolian tradition, one bound by the natural landscapes, and the Mughals never quite moved away from this connection with nature. The peripatetic court progress, with its sturdy tents and marvelous journeys, surely bore testament to this regard for the natural world. While the foundation of the dynasty indicated

2. Philippa Vaughan, "Mythical Animals in Mughal Art: Images, Symbols, and Allusions," in *Flora and Fauna in Mughal Art*, ed. Som Prakash Verma (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 1999).

that the Mughals were always well-attuned to the environment, the standards of kingship that the dynasty strove towards highlighted the importance of their relationships with animals.

The Bird as a Symbol: Ties to Islam and Beyond

The model of King Solomon was responsible for much of the structuring of Mughal attention towards animals and, more specifically, birds. Solomon's kingship in the Quran was the reference model for rulers in many Muslim kingdoms.³ The Quran presents King Solomon as a just ruler and maker of laws. The king was a calm arbiter of justice who brought peace to those around him in his every engagement. Beyond such mortal kingly abilities, Solomon is also described as having the ability to communicate with the animal world, and through these interactions he fostered a peace that contested the natural laws of the world. At Solomon's will, predator and prey coexisted peaceably. The theme of "pacified animals" became a barometer for kingliness: if an emperor had the power to soothe even the wildest creatures, his kingship might bear the same Solomonic blessing of divine providence.⁴ In weaving themselves into the natural world, emperors could easily mark themselves as descendants of the Solomonic model, and position themselves as ideal sovereigns that carried on the legacy of the good king himself.

References to the Solomonic model were not subtle. In the *Qanun-i-Humayuni*, Humayun is eulogized as if he were Solomon reincarnate himself. The author writes, "under the protection and shelter of his justice, deer sleep carelessly in the lap of panthers, and fish fearlessly take rest near crocodiles; pigeons become friends of falcons and sparrows chirp fearlessly in front of eagles."⁵ Humayun is remembered as a "just" administrator who equalizes and protects his subjects, bringing an impenetrable peace to his lands. Both Jahangir and Shah Jahan furthered an artistic program that depicted them as Solomonic models, too, aligning the dynasty firmly with the stewardship and rulership of the natural world.

Certainly, then, for the Mughals, an attention to and appreciation for the natural

3. Ebba Koch, "Jahangir as Francis Bacon's Ideal of the King as an Observer and Investigator of Nature," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 19, no. 3 (2009): 293–338.

4. Koch, "Jahangir as Francis Bacon's Ideal of the King as an Observer and Investigator of Nature," 336.

5. Khwandamir, *Qanun-i-Humayuni of Khwandamir*, trans. Beni Prasad (Calcutta, 1940), quoted in Ebba Koch's "Jahangir as Francis Bacon's Ideal of the King as an Observer and Investigator of Nature."

KING OF THE BIRDS

world was not incompatible with the emperorship. In fact, a conscious affiliation with nature became nearly synonymous with the emperorship. Of course, each man brought with him a directionality and intensity in his floral and faunal interests, but the presence of these natural themes and passions in every emperor's rule is apparent.⁶ Emperors kept aviaries, in addition to squadrons of trained cheetahs, lions, elephants, and ungulates; remarkably, Akbar's cheetahs were considered members of the royal court, adorned in golden collars and miniatures of Akbar himself. Mughal elites hunted nearly every class of creature in the empire, and the new acquisition of any exotic animal was cause for celebration. Within this broader context of the animal kingdom, however, the constant presence of birds in Mughal art, poetry, memoirs, hunting expeditions, and the court aviary stands out as conscious and multifaceted extensions of the emperors themselves. The Mughals were surrounded by, and surrounded themselves with, birds of every species — even those birds that we might now consider imaginary.

In Mughal tradition, the realm of imagined birds was a wide one, and one that must be addressed thoughtfully. The imagined was not the counterpart to the real: indeed, in the Mughal Empire, the imagined was often embodied — if not in the living, breathing sense, then through extensive poetry and art.⁷ Here, the concept of the “imagined” bird references birds that existed without physical bodies, acting as motif, symbol, or allegory in the Mughal tradition. The kingdom of imagined birds included those that were mythical and magical, in addition to depictions of scientifically-recognized birds that were recreated primarily to symbolize a virtue or trait, rather than to represent some innate physicality. This trope of bird as motif was born far earlier than the advent of the Mughal empire, and exists far beyond it. In this remarkable longevity, birds became an easy symbol for the relationship that Mughals sought to construct between their own relatively new empire and the ancient traditions of the broader Islamic world.

In Islamic poetry particularly, birds have long symbolized souls — both human and divine.⁸ Nowhere is this better-represented than in Farid ud-Din Attar's *The Conference of the Birds*, one of the most famous and beloved works of poetry in the Sufi tradition. The twelfth century poem is oriented around the birds of the world, guided by the hoopoe, on a quest to find the *simurgh*, a monarchical, phoenix-like bird, to rule them. The bulk of the poem, while beautifully lyrical,

6. Markel, “The Use of Flora and Fauna Imagery in Mughal Decorative Arts,” 25.

7. Vaughan, “Mythical Animals in Mughal Art: Images, Symbols, and Allusions,” 56.

8. Farid ud-Din Attar, *The Conference of the Birds*, trans. Afkham Darbandi and Dick Davis, Penguin Classics (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2011), 56.

KRISTEN HICKEY

operates largely on a much deeper, allegorical level. Like the practice of Sufi mysticism itself, “the meaning does not lie on the surface, but must be dug for; the surface is merely a symbol of the meaning.”⁹

Each bird exists in the poem as an allegorical representation of a human archetype. The hoopoe, as the guide of the flock, “is therefore the equivalent of a sheikh leading a group of religious adepts...along their path.”¹⁰ The nightingale is the lover, obsessed with the temporal thorned beauty of the rose, to the hoopoe’s chagrin. The falcon is desperate for freedom, nervous around the ties that would bind it to God. Attar characterizes the rest of the birds similarly, defining their allegorical identities as the poem proceeds. Over the course of the tale, the majority of the birds find some excuse to fall away, losing sight of their journey, until only thirty birds remain. When the hoopoe and what is left of the flock finally reach Qaf, the home of the *simurgh*, they do not find the great bird. Instead, they see their own faces in a shining mirror of a lake, the representation of that long-desired Sufi goal of unity with God.

The poem establishes allegorical characters for a number of properly embodied birds, but the bird that the Mughals primarily adopt to represent their own kingship is the *simurgh*, which seems to reside firmly in the realm of the imagined.

Attar’s *simurgh* is the sovereign, the king by whom to fix the problem that the birds first gathered to address:

“All nations in the world require a king;
How is it that we alone have no such thing?
Only a kingdom can be justly run;
We need a king and must inquire for one.”¹¹

Here, the *simurgh* represents God, the king of all domains. Understandably, the mythological bird is the symbol that the Mughals were drawn to.

Representations of the *simurgh* often visualize her as a phoenix-like mother-bird. She appears throughout Arabian, Iranian, and Indian poetries, as an aid

9. Afkham Darbandi and Dick Davis, “Introduction,” *The Conference of the Birds*, Penguin Classics (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2011), xiv.

10. Darbandi and Davis, “Introduction,” xv.

11. Farid ud-Din Attar, *The Conference of the Birds*, 42.

to heroes and confidante to kings.¹² She appears in some renderings of King Solomon's court as a companion and conversation partner.¹³ In Firdausi's *Shahnama*, the pre-Islamic Iranian epic, the simurgh gifts one of her feathers to Zal, the protagonist, and promises that if he finds himself in need, he only needs to burn the feather to call her back to him. Firdausi's *simurgh* is "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 color spectrum of the divine."¹⁴ 'Aufi's *simurgh* in *Lubab al-albab* holds "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 [unicorn]."¹⁵ Sufi master Shihabuddin as-Suhrawardi's "The Incantation of the Simurgh" treats the *simurgh* with reverence: "Know that all colours derive from Simurgh," he writes. "All knowledge derives from the incantation of this Simurgh. The marvelous instruments of music... have been produced from its echo and its resonances...The morning breeze stems from her breath. This is why the loving tell her the mystery of their hearts."¹⁶

Beyond poetry, the *simurgh* is widely represented in paintings, architectural details, and carpets. Jahangir had the *simurgh* depicted in the Kala Burj residential tower. Under his reign, the *simurgh* began to appear on carpets as well, which was significant for the opportunity for public viewership that far outnumbered that of many of the paintings.¹⁷

In all of her incarnations, the *simurgh* is known to have a brilliant ability to reason, deep fount of wisdom, and passionate commitment to the victory of that which is morally good. Her body appeared cobbled together from various entities — much like the Mughal empire itself — and she was an immensely powerful force, imbued with the righteousness of divinity.

On the carpet in Figure 1, the *simurgh* is pictured attacking the *gaja-simha*, an evil mythical creature that preys upon elephants. As the *simurgh* subdues

12. Som Prakash Verma, *Flora and Fauna in Mughal Art*, vol. 50 (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 1999), 6.

13. Sâqib Bâburî, "The Curious Tale of Solomon and the Phoenix," British Library Asian and African Studies Blog, January 16, 2017, <https://blogs.bl.uk/asian-and-african/2017/01/the-curious-tale-of-solomon-and-the-phoenix.html>.

14. Vaughan, "Mythical Animals in Mughal Art: Images, Symbols, and Allusions," 58.

15. *Lubab al-albab* excerpt quoted in Vaughan, "Mythical Animals in Mughal Art: Images, Symbols, and Allusions," 57.

16. "The Incantation of the Simurgh" excerpt quoted in Vaughan, "Mythical Animals in Mughal Art: Images, Symbols, and Allusions," 56.

17. Vaughan, "Mythical Animals in Mughal Art: Images, Symbols, and Allusions," 62;66.

the beast, she prompts the return to palatial order that is depicted at the top of the carpet and protects the emperor and his court.¹⁸ The *simurgh* was a significant symbol within Mughal self-expression for such desirable imperial and intellectual traits. Beyond these particular values themselves, however, the *simurgh* also stood as a symbol of Islam and, more specifically, Sufism. With all their tendencies to lead decadent lives, the Mughals struggled to follow the spiritual laws of Islam, which made their public displays of piousness all the more important to maintain. By publicizing their affinity for the *simurgh*, the Mughal emperors were also able to signal a broad support for Islamic spirituality that extended beyond their personal pieties.

Of course, the *simurgh* was not the only imagined creature that bolstered Mughal claims to power. Of the scores of other imagined creatures in their cultural milieu, the Mughals were deeply drawn to another great and mythologized bird called the *huma*. In the Mughal tradition, the *huma* was a large bird that rarely touched the ground and was known to be reclusive. It would feed on dry bones alone, and its “shadow was so full of blessing power that over whomsoever it fell would become king.”¹⁹ The *huma* became a well-known symbol of a kingship that was bestowed by some higher and deterministic power. To declare selection by the *huma* was to indicate a sort of inevitability of destiny, or a promise from these allegorical birds that represented extensions of the Divine. The *huma* appears in a number of stories and poems, including *The Conference of the Birds*, but the *huma*’s most charming — and powerful — appearance in Mughal courtly culture came during Humayun’s rule.

In the midst of Humayun’s mid-life exile, he sought refuge for a time at the Safavid court of Shah Tahmasp, a court which boasted an inherited Persian literary tradition full of vibrant mythologies. While at the Safavid court, Humayun reflected upon his rule and his less fortunate circumstances of the present. In 1540, he composed a brief verse that holds within it his own ambitions, expressed through the flight of the imagined bird.

All the princes seek *Huma*’s shadow—behold this *Huma*
(me, Humayun) who enters under your shadow.²⁰

18. Vaughan, “Mythical Animals in Mughal Art: Images, Symbols, and Allusions,” 64.

19. Vaughan, “Mythical Animals in Mughal Art: Images, Symbols, and Allusions,” 55.

20. The *Diwan* of Emperor Humayun quoted in Vaughan, “Mythical Animals in Mughal Art: Images, Symbols, and Allusions,” 55.

KING OF THE BIRDS

The verse's sing-song quip almost obscures the profundity of Humayun's declaration that his rule was mandated by the same divinely fortuneed circumstances that decided upon whom the *huma's* shadow would fall. Here, Humayun imagines himself simultaneously as the king-choosing *huma* bird and as a man, declared once-again emperor by a greater *huma*. He blurs the lines between the powerful, mysterious bird and his own individual being, even as the bird exists as an allegory for a flying destiny set by God.

For the Mughals, the language of avian symbolism was a tool used to justify their reigns. As they aligned themselves with the most desirable of the imagined birds, they presented a powerful empire emblazoned with divine blessings and a rule that bordered on godly.

The Bird as Subject: Companion and Courtier

As noted earlier, the Mughal understanding of empire was never limited to purely human or realistic components. The Mughals were deeply attentive to the flora and fauna that enlivened their landscapes, considering these bodies essential to the empire. This dominion over the natural world was well-documented and expressed in the core tenets of a courtly culture that thrived on cushioned, wealth-mediated interactions with the broader, non-human world. As the court became more stationary, the relationships that emperors were able to build with individual birds in their care became ever more significant. Birds like falcons, pigeons, and the cranes of the aviaries were valued for their roles within the emperor's court, with each contributing to the emperor's claims of rulership over the avian world.

The proliferation of hunting in the Mughal tradition allowed the emperor to interact frequently with nature, exerting his own will upon the animals he encountered. Hunting paintings of the time display the emperor's role "not only as divine king, moral exemplar, and dispenser of justice, but as a ruler profoundly attuned to the subtle ecological balance of the land and its people."²¹ These scenes show a "merging" between the realms that the emperors ruled over, colliding the spiritual, human, and animal worlds. It was in this all-encompassing kingdom that the emperor found himself imbued with the "moral obligation to subdue wild nature in order to protect his people," a role which many emperors relished.²² The

21. Rosalind O'Hanlon, "Kingdom, Household and Body History, Gender and Imperial Service under Akbar," *Modern Asian Studies* 41, no. 5 (2007), 898.

22. Shaha Parpia, "The Imperial Mughal Hunt: A Pursuit of Knowledge," in *Ilm: Science, Religion, and Art in Islam*, ed. Samer Akkach (University of Adelaide Press, 2019), 47.

sport of falconry embodied the intricate web of relationships between the Mughal court and the natural world during the hunt. Birds played the role of both predator and prey for the structured entertainment of the emperors. There was, on the one hand, the raptor, the living extension of imperial control; on the other, the preyed-upon bird, under a less direct form of control, but a player in the imperial hunting theater nonetheless.

Well-trained hawks and falcons were highly regarded in the Mughal court. Jahangir recorded a number of exchanges of beautiful predatory birds as gifts between prominent rulers. Moreover, his son Shah Jahan, encouraged by the elder emperor, also shared Jahangir's love for hawking. The father and son hunted together during long marches, with Jahangir marveling at the power and

***“These scenes show a ‘merging’
between the realms that the emperors
ruled over, colliding the spiritual,
human, and animal worlds.”***

training of his son's hawks: “what a wonderful bird the hawk is to be able to catch such a massive [stork] and bring it down with its talons,” he remarked.²³ In the Mughal theater, hunting birds appeared almost elevated to the status of human courtiers. They were adorned with extravagant accessories, well-cared for by a team of experienced falconers, and celebrated and mourned upon death as individuals. These predatory birds acted much as an extension of the royal body, participating in spectacular hunts that emperors embarked on to elevate their own power.

In portraits, many hunting birds are depicted in royal trappings and symbols of luxury. Figure 2 illustrates a common composition of a barbary falcon perched on a golden bird-rest, tethered with a silken cord, and bedecked in golden lockets and anklets.²⁴ There are several such portraits of the court's birds of prey; in the style of Akbar and Jahangir's courts, these paintings preserved the individuality

23. Jahangir, *The Jahangirnama: Memoirs of Jahangir, Emperor of India*, trans. Wheeler Thackston (New York: Freer Gallery of Art, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, 1999), 289.

24. Asok Kumar Das, *Wonders of Nature: Ustad Mansur at the Mughal Court*, vol. 64, 2 vols. (Mumbai: Marg Foundation, 2012), 107.

KING OF THE BIRDS

and temperaments of the birds. Each hunting bird was managed by a team of renowned falconers, who worked to raise, train, and care for the birds. Jahangir had four chief falconers in his employ — his own chief falconer, the Kashmiri falconer, Shah Jahan's falconer, and Shah Abbas' falconer.²⁵ Each falconer was attached to certain birds with whom they would travel and experience the royal hunt.

Birds were recognized as individuals, and mourned as such, as well. As a gift, in 1619 Shah Abbas of Safavid Persia sent a gyrfalcon and accompanying falconer to Jahangir's court. Before the falcon arrived at the Mughal court, however, a cat attacked the bird so violently that it died a week later. "What can I write of the beauty of this bird's color?" Jahangir wrote. "Every feather on its wings, back, and sides was extremely beautiful...I ordered Master Mansur...to draw its likeness to be kept."²⁶ After this incident, Jahangir dismissed the falconer whose negligence had caused the bird's demise, clearly unwilling to leave someone so careless with his other birds. This event rather tragically parallels the demise of Jahangir's friend Inayat Khan, whose near-dead, skeletal form was drawn at the behest of the emperor in a dual-purposed act of curiosity and memorialization. "It was so strange I ordered the artists to draw his likeness," Jahangir writes, reflecting on the toll that Khan's opium and alcohol dependencies took on both his body and spirit.²⁷

The relationships between Mughals and their birds were not isolated to hunting parties. Training pigeons caused great joy for — and the demise of — Babur's father, Umar Sheikh Mirza, who died after a pigeon-house collapsed on him.²⁸ His love for pigeons passed on to his descendants, blooming into Akbar's widely-professed love for the birds. Abu'l Fazl wrote that Akbar found immense amusement in "the tumbling and flying of pigeons [that] remind[ed him] of the ecstasy and transport of enthusiastic dervishes."²⁹ Imperial pigeon-keepers — whose ranks occasionally included passionate emperors — were responsible for training and tending to the pigeons. Deep relationships were built between

25. Das, *Wonders of Nature: Ustad Mansur at the Mughal Court*, 54.

26. Jahangir, *Jahangirnama*, 314.

27. Jahangir, *Jahangirnama*, 280. Jahangir was, in fact, so adamant that Inayat Khan be sketched before his death that he delayed the man's return to his family, such that Khan died along the route home.

28. Abu'l-Fazl, *The Akbarnama Of Abu'l Fazal*, trans. Henry Beveridge, vol. 1 (Calcutta: The Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1907), <http://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.469729> 220, <http://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.469729>.

29. Abu'l-Fazl, *The A'in-I Akbari*, trans. Henry Blochmann (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1873), 298, <http://archive.org/details/ainiakbarivolum00mubgoog>.

individual pigeons and their keepers — of Akbar's 20,000 pigeons, he remarked that his favorite was a well-trained, bluish-gray pigeon named Mohana.³⁰ In the training of pigeons, emperors not only found companionship, but also articulated the boundaries of their kingly abilities, which included control over even the flight of birds.

The Mughal dominion over the bird world was also manifested through the aviaries kept in pleasure gardens. These were enclosures of birds maintained by eunuchs and used by emperors and their courtiers; moreover, they were spaces of entertainment, education, and controlled interaction with the animal world. Birds were generally kept long-term not for conservation or rehabilitation purposes, but largely to impress and amuse courtiers. Aviaries marked, again, the Solomonic ideal of animals made peaceful neighbors under the watchful eye of the emperor. In 1618, Jahangir wrote of a pair of wild cranes that descended upon his courtyard and began to attack his own tamed cranes. None of his courtiers made any note of it, but Jahangir himself separated them and calmed them. "With my own hand I put rings in their noses and on their feet...[they] quieted down," he wrote, asserting the power of his presence over even wild birds.³¹

Another example of the relationships that emperors developed with individual birds plays out across a series of entries on saras cranes in the *Jahangirnama*. There are a great many popular stories that revolve around the mating style and emotionality of saras cranes, resulting in a human-esque personality complex that enchanted Jahangir. He recounted stories of saras cranes that seemed to melt into "just a handful of feathers and a few bones" after the death of their partners, imagining how devastating a sorrow must be that would result in a crane's death by heartbreak.³² These ruminations were caused by the capture and taming of a mated pair of saras cranes. Jahangir named the birds Layli and Majnun, after the famous Persian lovers, and they remained in the gardens for over five years before Jahangir witnessed their mating. Jahangir wrote that "it is often said among the people that no one has ever seen it...[but] one day one of the eunuchs told me they were going to mate again...I immediately ran out to watch."³³ The female crane lay two eggs. "Whenever it was possible, they were to be brought to me," Jahangir wrote.³⁴ In moments like this, Jahangir's enduring

30. Das, *Wonders of Nature: Ustad Mansur at the Mughal Court*, 105.

31. Jahangir, *Jahangirnama*, 279.

32. Jahangir, *Jahangirnama*, 266.

33. Jahangir, *Jahangirnama*, 274.

34. Jahangir, *Jahangirnama*, 274.

KING OF THE BIRDS

concern for his cranes and the other birds of his aviary reflects an emperor's concern for his subjects.

The birds of the Mughal court were well-kept companions for the emperor. They were named as individuals, and their unique personality traits and personal histories were understood and remembered. Though not human, they were enfolded into the court much as human courtiers were — always at the beck and call of the emperor, provided for by the empire, and kept within the garden or palatial walls of the court itself. For the Mughals, kept birds represented an extension of the Mughal kingship over the wild world itself, blurring the boundary between the natural and human dominions and allowing the emperor to claim a more profound rulership over the land and skies of his territory.

Bird as Science: Acquiring Knowledge & Producing Art

In addition to their places as imperial symbols and subjects of the Mughal court, birds were studied intently by ornithologist-emperors, constantly contributing to the court's ever-growing body of knowledge.

Ebba Koch sketches a model of the kingship derived from the proclamations of Solomon, defined in Francis Bacon's England, and paralleled in Jahangir's India. For Bacon, Solomon becomes "not only the just and wise ruler but also an investigator of nature...the glory of God is to conceal a thing but the glory of the king is to find it out."³⁵ In the vein of Solomonic investigations, Mughal emperors used the hunt to observe behavioral patterns of the birds they encountered, build a stunning repository of scientifically accurate avian portraits, and construct experiments in order to further solidify the emperor as the most knowledgeable and inquisitive figure in the region. Salim Ali, one of India's foremost ornithologists, once remarked that Jahangir's "memoirs reveal him not only as remarkably observant but also as an extraordinarily rational student of birds."³⁶

Even from the founding of the dynasty, the Mughals used a profoundly developed sense of observation to explore and interpret the physical world as they interacted with it. In Babur's autobiographical memoir, he recorded his travels,

35. Proverbs 25:2, quoted in Koch, "Jahangir as Francis Bacon's Ideal of the King as an Observer and Investigator of Nature," 296.

36. Salim Ali quoted in Das, *Wonders of Nature: Ustad Mansur at the Mughal Court*, 15.

KRISTEN HICKEY

wars, conquests, and relationships. It is, however, largely in Babur's musings on the natural world as it existed and changed about him that he became a poet, a scholar, a thoughtful emperor against a backdrop of skull towers and brutal warfare. In a later portrait, he is represented as a young man seated outside, flocks of birds littering the skies and his complete attention given to the book in his hands — a soft, worldly painting that seems a far cry from the stately, wealth-centric portraits that so often define monarchs (Fig. 3).



Figure 3. *Portrait of Babur on a chair*. Ca. 1605-1615. Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper, 33 cm x 22.9 cm. London, The British Museum.

During his travels, Babur carefully noted the diversity of avifauna in the Hindustani landscape, sparing no detail in his descriptions. In his consideration of the peacock, he counted and measured head and tail feathers, at the same time wondering how the bird survived in its forest. He wrote, “with a tail a fathom

“For the Mughals, kept birds represented an extension of the Mughal kingship over the wild world itself, blurring the boundary between the natural and human dominions...”

long, how can it run from forest to forest and not fall prey to the jackals?”³⁷ Babur also compared the features of a series of parrots, discussing which could be taught to speak, and which had the most pleasant voices. He recorded the cries of various partridges, which ranged between calls that seem to sound like “I have milk and a little sugar” in Persian, to “quick, they have seen me” in Turkish.³⁸ For consummate observers like Babur, the interest in the natural world could not be contained, even when one might expect his mind to be elsewhere. “When I made a bridge across the Ganges and crossed to rout my enemies, in the vicinity of Lucknow and Oudh a kind of starling was seen that had a white breast, spotted head, and black back,” he wrote, barely differentiating between his role as a leader in war and an avid birdwatcher.³⁹

Babur’s intense observational interest in birds was certainly inherited by his successors. Humayun’s chronicler once wrote of a bird that flew into Humayun’s tent while Humayun was resting. Intrigued by the unexpected visitor, “the emperor trapped the bird by closing the tent’s flap and had an image of it drawn by an artist present in his entourage before releasing it.”⁴⁰ Jahangir, too, kept detailed notes and ordered intricate paintings made to keep record of those birds he encountered. He noted that the black cuckoo would lay her own eggs in the nest of a raven after destroying the raven’s young. “I have seen this strange thing myself in Allahabad,” Jahangir wrote, recording his knowledge of the world in the *Jahangirnama*.⁴¹

37. Babur, *The Baburnama: Memoirs of Babur, Prince and Emperor*, trans. Wheeler Thackston (Washington, D.C.: Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1996), 337.

38. Babur, *The Baburnama: Memoirs of Babur, Prince and Emperor*, 337.

39. Babur, *The Baburnama: Memoirs of Babur, Prince and Emperor*, 338.

40. Excerpt from *Tezkereh al Vakiyat* quoted in Das, *Wonders of Nature: Ustad Mansur at the Mughal Court*, 13.

41. Jahangir, *Jahangirnama*, 260.

To facilitate the materialization of imperial knowledge, the Mughal emperors developed a workshop of prolific painters and artists, ready at any given moment to recreate that which the emperors deemed worth immortalizing. The Mughal artistic style developed along with the individual traditions of the empire. Most early Mughal art was influenced by stylized Chinese or Persian landscapes, brightly colored and with an eye to the composition rather than the individuality of those people or creatures represented therein. Over the course of Akbar's reign, however, artists began to make noticeable shifts towards creating more specific portraiture that closely represented individuals. Das writes that the paintings featured in the *Akbarnama* were the "forerunners of a new genre... in which individual specimens or groups were selected as subjects of special attention."⁴² Akbari paintings sought representations of the natural world using more realism than in Persian, Timurid, or Deccani traditions.⁴³ During Akbar's reign, artists defined the future direction of artistic stylizations.⁴⁴

One of the most prolific artists of his time, Ustad Mansur was lauded for his distinctive approach to floral and faunal portraiture. He first entered Akbar's court in the early 1590s, illustrating the *Baburnama* and *Akbarnama*, then continued to flourish in Jahangir's court as he pursued more complex studies.⁴⁵ Under Jahangir, Mansur and his peers began to perfect the representation of individual birds and animals. Mansur's ability to capture the personality and traits of animals and birds led Jahangir to entitle him *Nadir-al-'Asr*, or Wonder of the Age.⁴⁶ Mansur was usually present in Jahangir's court, ready at any moment to paint a scene or animal that Jahangir directed him towards.⁴⁷ It is through Mansur's portraits that we retain such delightful representations of Jahangir's dodo and turkey, exotic birds that Jahangir collected from the port at Goa. "I both wrote of them and ordered the artists to draw their likenesses in the *Jahangirnama* so that the astonishment one has at hearing of them would increase by seeing them," Jahangir wrote.⁴⁸ In the realm of bird-based artwork, the creations of Mansur and his peers is striking — of the 17th century bird portraits that survive today, a great many are identifiable by ornithologists down to species and sex. Some of the avian portraits in the *Jahangirnama* are, in all likelihood, the very first pictorial

42. Das, *Wonders of Nature: Ustad Mansur at the Mughal Court*, 14.

43. Koch, "Jahangir as Francis Bacon's Ideal of the King as an Observer and Investigator of Nature," 299.

44. Parpia, "The Imperial Mughal Hunt," 45.

45. Das, *Wonders of Nature: Ustad Mansur at the Mughal Court*, 12.

46. Das, *Wonders of Nature: Ustad Mansur at the Mughal Court*, 21.

47. Das, *Wonders of Nature: Ustad Mansur at the Mughal Court*, 22.

48. Jahangir, *Jahangirnama*, 133.

depictions of the species in the world.⁴⁹

The focus of these bird portraits is obvious — the individual bird is usually centered in the foreground, with the landscape in which it was discovered sprawling in the background.⁵⁰ When possible, the birds were painted while they were alive. An artist might spend hours with their subject, noting the energy, color, behavior, and personality of the birds that sat before them. These portraits became an externalized visual repository of the birds that the emperor himself had seen and understood. Beyond its beauty, artwork represented a physical embodiment of the emperor's understanding of his natural dominion and the acumen of his artists. As Koch writes, a Mughal emperor would claim "nature as his own...[by] mark[ing] his territories with artistic means."⁵¹ This was a conscious assertion of ownership over and insight into the landscape and its independent entities, creating a tradition of animal-focused art that would further "the legitimacy that was engendered by a continuity of older traditions."⁵²

In the pursuit of an all-encompassing knowledge of the world, emperors became active scientists within their courts. Akbar's experiments were largely human-driven, oriented towards learning more about how men came into their religions and languages.⁵³ Jahangir's attention, however, was focused on animals and the origin of their diverse behaviors. Jahangir developed a personal methodology that he used to collect information about the world around him. The knowledge that Jahangir created was tied explicitly to his imperial personage. Parpia notes that Jahangir's methodologies were selective and the attention of his scientific interests was bound to what he alone deemed interesting, as Jahangir — and the scientist-Mughals in general — did not "feed the results of [their] empirical research into a theoretical framework...[their] observations do not lead to a systematic body of knowledge."⁵⁴ The emperors, then, commanded much of knowledge production; they not only retained control over the directionality of investigations, but also, through each emperor's individual methodological styles, centered themselves as the creators and holders of great — yet scattered — worldly knowledge.

49. Koch, "Jahangir as Francis Bacon's Ideal of the King as an Observer and Investigator of Nature," 317.

50. Das, *Wonders of Nature: Ustad Mansur at the Mughal Court*, 22.

51. Koch, "Jahangir as Francis Bacon's Ideal of the King as an Observer and Investigator of Nature," 327.

52. Parpia, "The Imperial Mughal Hunt," 40.

53. Koch, "Jahangir as Francis Bacon's Ideal of the King as an Observer and Investigator of Nature," 327.

54. Koch, "Jahangir as Francis Bacon's Ideal of the King as an Observer and Investigator of Nature," 328.

KRISTEN HICKEY

There are dozens of examples of an inquisitive Jahangir's experimental interactions with the avian world recorded within the *Jahangirnama*. Jahangir weighed and measured individual birds, noting the habitat in which they were found, their dietary habits, anatomical details, and behavioral expressions.⁵⁵ Often, these birds were found unexpectedly during imperial hunts, during which Jahangir was in direct contact with the natural world. Hunts became a source of knowledge production in the field, wherein Mughals recorded anatomical, taxonomical, and psychological traits of those individual birds which they encountered.⁵⁶

Through the records he kept in the *Jahangirnama* on his experiments with birds, the way Jahangir both perceived and portrayed himself as an imperial fount of knowledge is clear. Jahangir often had birds dissected in order to learn what each had eaten and how their anatomical systems compared to other species.⁵⁷ In the case of one black quail, Jahangir found a whole, undigested mouse still in the bird's crop. "Really," he wrote, "if anyone else had told the story it wouldn't have been possible to believe it, but since I saw it myself it has been recorded for its strangeness."⁵⁸ Jahangir was also a proponent of tasting the meat of the birds that he caught. He held tastings of the meat of black and white quails, as well as large and small quails. "Purely as an experiment," Jahangir had each bird "cooked in the same manner so that a real discerning comparison could be made. Therefore it is recorded."⁵⁹

In a final telling excerpt, Jahangir encountered a quail with a spur on only one leg. When questioned as to the bird's sex, Jahangir declared that it was a female, which was confirmed with a dissection. Jahangir noted that "those who were in attendance asked in disbelief, 'How did you know?' 'The female's head and beak are smaller than the male's,' I said, 'and with much observation and perseverance one gets the knack.'"⁶⁰

In each excerpt, it is clear that Jahangir's natural interpretations and knowledge were central within the court. That which he declared strange was recorded, and that which he recorded became the truth. In this particular example, his

55. Parpia, "The Imperial Mughal Hunt," 43.

56. Parpia, "The Imperial Mughal Hunt," 39.

57. Jahangir, *Jahangirnama*, 371.

58. Jahangir, *Jahangirnama*, 412.

59. Jahangir, *Jahangirnama*, 411.

60. Jahangir, *Jahangirnama*, 416.

immediate understanding of the quail's sex elevated the sense of his individual relationship with the environment. He explained his knowledge by the longevity of his natural studies, not by an innate sort of knowledge defined by his kingliness. It was the experiment-based, scientifically-mindedness of the king that brought him to knowing the avian world, and knowing the nature of birds bolstered his claim to a power that resonated with the models that Solomon set forth so long before.

“Beyond its beauty, artwork represented a physical embodiment of the emperor’s understanding of his natural dominion and the acumen of his artists.”

The three spaces in which Mughal emperors interacted with birds are not so clearly defined as the theoretical model put forth in this essay. Often, physical birds were understood as symbols, too: Jahangir writes of an owl, which appears often in poetry as a bearer of evil. Upon seeing the bird, Jahangir reached for a gun and aimed over the roof of a nearby building. “The ball hit the ill-omened bird like a decree from heaven and blew it to pieces,” he wrote. The symbolic nature of birds was, then, understood to be embodied in physical individuals, and not isolated to literature or art alone.⁶¹

The fluidity of the imagined and the embodied, too, was encapsulated in the records of emperors. In 1625, Jahangir recorded the discovery of a bird in the Pir Panjal Mountains that fed on bones and rarely landed on the ground — a bird that perfectly fit the mythological descriptions of the *huma*. A local huntsman shot the bird at Jahangir’s request and brought it to the emperor, who examined it: “when the crop was opened, small bones came out of its gullet, just as the people of the mountains had said...it always flew in the air with its gaze upon the earth, and wherever it spotted a bone it would pick it up in its beak.”⁶² He weighed and measured the bird, described its feather patterning and colors, and recorded the encounter with no small excitement:

61. Jahangir, *Jahangirnama*, 201.

62. Jahangir, *Jahangirnama*, 435.

KRISTEN HICKEY

“In this case, the prevailing opinion was that this was the famous *huma*, as is said, ‘The *huma* is superior to all birds because it eats bones and harms no creature.’”⁶³ Ornithologists today believe that this *huma* is what we have since named the bearded vulture — an odd bird that cracks open bones for their marrow and far prefers the skies to the land.⁶⁴ The formerly imagined mythologies of the *huma* bird were embodied, then, and the Mughal emperor was responsible for the collection and classification of the bird itself, drawing the imagined and the embodied as one into the court of the knowledgeable Mughal emperors.

Amongst all its sprawling interests, the Mughal dynasty was steadfast in its association with birds. The imperial body was replete with the motifs, companionships, and observations of birds, using each thought of and interaction with a bird to further ongoing efforts to sculpt the emperor in the shape of Solomon. Emperors tied themselves to imagined birds like the *simurgh* or *huma* that represented divine kingships, hoping to draw from powerful spiritual allegories. Emperors surrounded themselves with both trained birds and wild birds kept in aviaries, creating loyal and dependent flocks that acted as an extension of the human court. And as rulers explored the birds of the empire, they expanded their personal foundations of knowledge, positioning themselves as the wisest men in any room. As the Mughals used birds to elevate the kingship, they defined the dynasty as one inextricably intertwined with the natural world, where the boundaries of the human kingdom and animal kingdom were not so clear-cut as imagined today, and where the dominion of the emperor encompassed every last starling.

63. Jahangir, *Jahangirnama*, 435.

64. D.C. Phillott, “Note on the Huma or Lammergeyer,” *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 2 (1906): 532–33.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abu'l-Fazl. *The Ain-i Akbari*. Translated by Henry Blochmann. Calcutta : Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1873. <http://archive.org/details/ainiakbarivolum00mubgoog>.
- Abu'l-Fazl. *The Akbarnama Of Abu'l Fazal*. Translated by Henry Beveridge. Vol. 1, 1907. <http://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.469729>.
- Attar, Farid ud-Din. *The Conference of the Birds*. Translated by Afkham Darbandi and Dick Davis. Penguin Classics. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2011.
- Babur. *The Baburnama: Memoirs of Babur, Prince and Emperor*. Translated by Wheeler Thackston. Washington, D.C. : Freer Gallery of Art : Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 1996.
- Bâburî, Sâqib. "The Curious Tale of Solomon and the Phoenix." British Library Asian and African Studies Blog, January 16, 2017. <https://blogs.bl.uk/asian-and-african/2017/01/the-curious-tale-of-solomon-and-the-phoenix.html>.
- Das, Asok Kumar. *Wonders of Nature: Ustad Mansur at the Mughal Court*. Vol. 64. 2 vols. Mumbai: Marg Foundation, 2012.
- Jahangir. *The Jahangirnama: Memoirs of Jahangir, Emperor of India*. Translated by Wheeler Thackston. New York: Freer Gallery of Art, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, 1999.
- Khwandamir. *Qanun-i-Humayuni of Khwandamir*. Translated by Beni Prasad. Calcutta, 1940.
- Koch, Ebba. "Jahangir as Francis Bacon's Ideal of the King as an Observer and Investigator of Nature." *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 19, no. 3 (2009): 293–338.
- Markel, Stephen. "The Use of Flora and Fauna Imagery in Mughal Decorative Arts." In *Flora and Fauna in Mughal Art*, edited by Som Prakash Verma, 25–35. Mumbai: Marg Publications, 1999. https://www.academia.edu/4034805/The_Use_of_Flora_and_Fauna_Imagery_in_Mughal_Decorative_Arts.
- O'Hanlon, Rosalind. "Kingdom, Household and Body History, Gender and Imperial Service under Akbar." *Modern Asian Studies* 41, no. 5 (2007): 889–923.
- Parpia, Shaha. "The Imperial Mughal Hunt: A Pursuit of Knowledge." In *Ilm: Science, Religion, and Art in Islam*, edited by Samer Akkach, 39–58. University of Adelaide Press, 2019. www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvb4bt41.11.
- Phillott, D.C. "Note on the Huma or Lammergeyer." *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 2 (1906): 532–33.
- Vaughan, Philippa. "Mythical Animals in Mughal Art: Images, Symbols, and Allusions." In *Flora and Fauna in Mughal Art*, edited by Som Prakash Verma, 55-68. Mumbai: Marg Publications, 1999.
- Verma, Som Prakash. *Flora and Fauna in Mughal Art*. Vol. 50. 3 vols. Mumbai: Marg Publications, 1999.

FIGURES

Due to copyright restrictions, not all figures referenced were reproduced within this journal.

Figure 1: *Lahori Pictorial Carpet*. Ca. 1590-1600. Cotton warp with wool knotted pile, 243 cm x 155 cm. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts Boston.

Figure 2: Ustad Mansur. *Barbary falcon perched on a rest*. Ca. 1618-1619. Opaque watercolor on paper. Jaipur, Maharaja Sawai Man Singh II Museum.

Figure 3: *Portrait of Babur on a chair*. Ca. 1605-1615. Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper, 33 cm x 22.9 cm. London, The British Museum.



KRISTEN HICKEY (AUTHOR)

Jones College, '20

Kristen Hickey is a senior at Jones College studying Anthropology, History, and Medieval & Early Modern Studies. In her spare time, she writes fiction, much of which is inspired by her academic research on landscapes and medieval Europe. She plans to take a gap year before pursuing a graduate degree in some convergence of her majors.



CATHERINE HETTLER (ARTIST)

McMurtry College, '22

Catherine Hettler is a sophomore from McMurtry College studying Psychology and Visual and Dramatic Arts with a concentration in Studio Art.