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## **A Turkish Animal Poem by Aşik Ömer**

**A**NIMAL POEMS AND SONGS have always been popular in western and central Asia. The poem here translated, *Hayvanlar Destanı* [Animal poem] by Aşık Ömer, a noted Turkish folk poet, was composed in the second half of the seventeenth century. Aşık Ömer is said to have come from Aydın, in southwestern Anatolia, and to have lived for a time in Gözleve in the Crimea. He is also said to have been attached to the Janissaries as a *saz* poet. A selection of his songs has been published by Sadeddin Nüzhet Ergun. The version of *Hayvanlar Destanı* here translated is taken from Vasfi Mahir Kocatürk, *Saz Şiiri Antolojisi* [Anthology of lute poems] (Ayyıldız Matbaası, Ankara, 1963).

The animals listed by Aşık Ömer in his poem, and the characteristics by which they are identified, are for the most part both straight forward and traditional. Throughout western Asia the lion is known for its courage and boldness. Strong rulers are frequently referred to as lions, and their counselors as lynxes or jackals. The bear is also known for its courage; once roused it can be very dangerous. As the Russian proverb remarks, "Those who hunt the bear should not sleep." In the seventeenth, as in the present, century, the horn of the rhinoceros was, it would seem, known as an aphrodisiac. Whereas in India it is said that the tiger and the leopard are able to coexist without undue difficulty, in Aşık Ömer's poem the leopard is referred to as an enemy of the tiger.

With regard to the elephant, Aşık Ömer makes the point that, in constructing a litter for its back, iron nails should not be used, as they would not be strong enough to withstand the strain. In describing the camel as angelic, the poet was of course referring, not to its appearance, but to its function. Throughout western Asia the camel is known for its ugliness. As the saying goes, "They said to the camel, 'Your neck is crooked'. He replied, 'What part of me is straight, that you think my neck is crooked?'" Veysel Karani was a renowned follower of the prophet, Muhammad. In Turkish his name is still used in the expression "Yemen ellerinde Veysel Karani," meaning to be completely lost, or utterly at a loss. In Aşık Ömer's poem the frog is referred to

as a preacher, who insists on preaching all night. So annoyed are the frog's neighbors by his incessant preaching that they call for him to be cast out of the world like a demon, far beyond the Kaf mountain range, which, it was once believed, surrounds the world. In adopting this approach Aşık Ömer was no doubt reflecting an attitude to the frog common in western Asia, where the creature is frequently seen as a noisy, conceited fellow, much inclined to boast. As a well-known Persian proverb remarks, "A frog climbed onto a heap of dung and cried, 'I have seen Kashmir'."

Other identifications of animals in Aşık Ömer's poem are straight forward. The musk deer is identified by the musk it secretes, the centipede by its poisonous bite, and the ant by its smallness. The spider is identified by its wondrous skill in spinning webs, the wild ass by its wandering, the cat by its playfulness, and the dog by its fidelity (as the Persian proverb goes, "Fidelity must be learned from a dog"). The mule, the offspring of a he-ass and a mare, is identified by its great strength and endurance, the water buffalo by its luxurious wallowing, and the goat by its impalatable meat. The swarming of the locust, well-known in Mesopotamia and Arabia, is compared with rain. The scorpion should be avoided.

Throughout western Asia, the hyena is known as a scavenger, inclined to eat the dead. Aşık Ömer's juxtaposition of the hyena and the *kağır* (infidel) is by no means accidental.

#### AN ANIMAL POEM

Of animals and birds I sing,  
Each by God created;  
God gave to every one a name.  
His name be exalted!

The lion's bold and dignified,  
He fills his prey with fear;  
They say he is the king of beasts,  
The lynx his grand vizier.

As for the mighty elephant,  
The litter on his back  
Should not be made with iron nails.  
Ask any mailing jack!

Do not look down upon the bear,

His nature is pure fire;  
The rhino's horn, or so they say,  
Reactivates desire.

The jackal is the greatest thief,  
Don't say it isn't so;  
The leopard, having caught his prey,  
Will never let it go.

The tiger is a fiery beast,  
The leopard's enemy;  
The monkey learns his tricks from man,  
As anyone can see.

The camel is a seraphim,  
I'm sure you would agree;  
He too will find a way to God,  
Like Veysel Karanî.

A mighty dragon is the frog,  
All night long he preaches;  
His neighbors wish to put an end  
To his endless speeches.

The musk deer for its musk is known,  
A useful stimulant;  
The centipede is poisonous,  
As is the tiny ant.

Hyenas are great scavengers,  
It isn't merely talk;  
God help us, the Kafir, they say,  
Would sell his soul for pork!

The squirrel jumps from branch to branch,  
The mouse lives in a hole;  
The spider spins a wondrous thread.  
God also made the mole.

Fleet as the wind is the wild ass,  
No use in giving chase.  
What can you say about the bull?  
He roams from place to place.

The mule is very obstinate,  
He's also very strong;  
As for the water buffalo,  
He wallows all day long.

The lamb is sweet, by heaven sent,  
No pleasure in a goat;  
No animals more deadly than  
The polecat and the stoat.

The cat is known for playfulness,  
The dog for loyalty;  
The tortoise is a bashful soul,  
As anyone can see.

A scorpion's bite is poisonous,  
Locusts are voracious;  
They say their swarm resembles rain.  
Weasels are rapacious.

Great men know animals as fur,  
Ermine, fox, and sable;  
Ömer, the poet, made this list,  
As far as he was able.