RESEARCH ARTICLE

Motifs in *The Arabian Nights* and in Ancient and Medieval European Literature: A Comparison

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Abstract
This paper is a contribution to the ongoing debate about the origins of parallel motifs in *The Arabian Nights* and in ancient and medieval popular and learned literature about exotic lands of the East. This preliminary survey focuses on seven related motifs: the magnetic mountain, the congealed sea, flying griffins, automatons and genies, the mysterious walled city, the living island, and the underground river. This paper is intended as a contribution toward a motif-index of *The Arabian Nights* in order to facilitate further comparative study of the motifs involved.

Introduction

Scholars and poets of the Romantic period were the first to acknowledge the broad influence of central and south Asian motifs and plots on medieval German folk literature. Modern scholars have since followed suit, but this topic deserves deeper scrutiny, particularly by medievalists. This paper is a contribution to the ongoing debate over the origins of parallel motifs in the body of *The Arabian Nights* and in ancient and medieval popular and learned literature about exotic lands of the East. This preliminary survey focuses on seven related motifs—the magnetic mountain, the congealed sea, flying griffins, automatons and genies, the mysterious walled city, the living island, and the underground river. I hope that medievalists will be encouraged to undertake further comparative studies of these motifs.

Although the work known as *The Arabian Nights* was first translated into a European language (into French between 1704 and 1717 by Antoine Galland [Galland 1704–17 and 1965]), scholars generally agree that the text’s sources are much older and that its genealogy is very complicated. Based on Indian, Persian, and Arabic folklore, this work, as a unified collection, dates back at least one thousand years and many of its individual stories are undoubtedly even more ancient. One of the collection’s forebears is a book of Persian tales, probably of Indian origin, titled *A Thousand Legends*. These stories were translated into Arabic in about 850 AD, and at least one reference from about 950 AD calls them *The Thousand and One Nights*. Arabic stories, primarily from Baghdad and Cairo, were added to the collection, which, by the early 1500s, had more or less assumed its final form. Scholars agree that there has been mutual interaction between *The Thousand and One Nights* and Western stories (cf Elisséeff 1949; Rehatsek 1880, 74–85; Tekinay 1980).
In early European travel and marvel literature, heroes are depicted as journeying to the Orient to obtain treasures and to view wonders. Medieval romances describe a poetic geography with magnetic mountains, congealed seas, wondrous islands, flying griffins, Djin-like figures, mysterious walled or shining cities, and subterranean rivers—all motifs that also appear in The Arabian Nights. These awed travellers in the East, believing they had reached paradise, also encountered monstrous races symbolic of Satan's realms and of the world's vanity. To Western sensibilities, this magical destination in the Orient simultaneously represented beauty and sensual refinement, as well as a paradigm of religious fanaticism, oppression, and despotism. Of The Arabian Nights narratives, the tales of Sindbad the sailor achieved immense popularity in medieval literature (Marzolph 1997, 639–40).

The following sections discuss seven related motifs found in The Arabian Nights and in ancient and medieval folklore.

**The Magnetic Mountain and the Congealed Sea**

The motif of the magnetic mountain (F 754; ATU 322*) is very ancient. Pliny the Elder (23–79 AD) was one of the first to mention magnetic mountains as situated near the River Indus, in his *Natural History*:

_Duo sunt montes iuxta flumen Indum, alteri ut ferrum omne teat, alteri ut respuat, itaque si sint clavi in calcamento, vestigia avelli in altero non posse, in altero sibi_ (Bk. II, c. 98).

[There are two mountains near the river Indus: the nature of one is to attract iron, of the other to reject it; hence, if there be nails in the shoes, the feet cannot be drawn off the one, or set down on the other (Rackham 1969: Bk. 2, 46)].

While medieval European writers were otherwise fond of quoting Pliny, they were apparently unaware of this record. Lecouteux (1984, 35–65; 1999, 24–7) suggested that Pliny's source could be an Eastern one. Ptolemy (Nobbe 1966, Bk. 6, 9–21, and Bk. 7, 2, 31), who lived from 87 to 150 AD, later placed the magnetic mountain near the Manolai Islands, off India. He mentions that travellers heading due East avoided iron fittings on their ships. The mystery of the dangerous Manolai Islands was also referred to in a passage in *Commodiorum Palladii* dated to the early fifth century AD. It located the Islands near Taprobane or Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and repeated the story that the cruising ships sailed without iron materials on board. As the *Commodiorum Palladii* (Küber 1891, 203–37) was part of the body of legends surrounding Alexander the Great (cf. Thiel 1977, 272–81), its stories spread widely and presumably influenced Arabian geographers. An Eastern source, combining a magnetic mountain and a river, is Buzurg ibn Shahrijar's account of the marvels of India. Buzurg ibn Shahrijar was a tenth-century Persian ship's captain who collected anecdotes and tall tales about distant lands, from merchants and seafaring men like himself. His *Kitab 'Aja‘ib al-Hind* ("Book of the Marvels of India") contains one hundred and thirty-four of these tales (transl. Freeman-Grenville 1981; cf. Beckers 1970, 41–55; Marzolph and van Leeuwen 2004, vol. 2, 631–2).

Although the mountain is not explicitly called a magnetic mountain in Buzurg ibn Shahrijar's text, all the characteristic features of the legend are given. In some other versions of the story, this mountain is described as a lodestone, or magnetic...
rock. Such a rock is also dealt with in detail in another tale from *The Arabian Nights* called “Story of the Third Calendar”:

For forty days wind and weather were all in our favour, but the next night a terrific storm arose, which blew us hither and thither for ten days, till the pilot confessed that he had quite lost his bearings. Accordingly a sailor was sent up to the masthead to try to catch a sight of land, and reported that nothing was to be seen but the sea and sky, except a huge mass of blackness that lay astern.

On hearing this the pilot grew white, and, beating his breast, he cried, “Oh, sir, we are lost, lost!” till the ship’s crew trembled at they knew not what. When he had recovered himself a little, and was able to explain the cause of his terror, he replied, in answer to my question, that we had drifted far out of our course, and that the following day about noon we should come near that mass of darkness, which, said he, is nothing but the famous Black Mountain. This mountain is composed of adamant, which attracts to itself all the iron and nails in your ship; and as we are helplessly drawn nearer, the force of attraction will become so great that the iron and nails will fall out of the ships and cling to the mountain, and the ships will sink to the bottom with all that are in them. This it is that causes the side of the mountain towards the sea to appear of such a dense blackness (Lang 1898, 102–3).

Although in the earliest accounts the magnetic mountain is situated on the mainland, later stories refer to it as an island in the ocean. Because of its inclusion in the Alexander legend, the story of the magnetic mountain not only entered medieval Arabic learned literature, but fiction as well. When exactly it entered the original *Arabian Nights* collection has not yet been determined. The motif may have migrated from geographers’ accounts into the Arabic tales, or the geographers may have adapted the motif from oral seafarer legends. Al-Kazwini (1203–83) in his *Kosmographia* refers to a magnetic rock in the Indian Ocean near Egypt and tells how ships with iron fastenings were attracted to it; therefore all vessels sailing in its vicinity used wooden devices instead (Ruska 1912, 9).

Another widely known tradition of the ninth century AD derives from Pseudo-Aristotelian literature. In a lapidary ascribed to Aristotle, the mountain is located near India (Rose 1875, 410). Later, the French writer Vincent de Beauvais (1184/94-1264), in his famous *Speculum naturale*, repeated this description as fact (Vincent de Beauvais 1964, Bk. 21). The same legend was incorporated into medical treatises, especially by authors of the Salernian School, which taught Arabic medicine and science. For example, the report of Mattheus Platearius († 1161) in his *De simplici medicina dictus Circa instans* (cf Keil 1978, 1282–5) not only mentions the magnetic mountain, but combines it with a shipwreck resulting from iron fittings on board. Two important German works, *Sankt Brandan* (St. Brendan, the Navigator) (1150) (Schröder 1871) and *Herzog Ernst* (c. 1170), cf Gerndt 1999, esp. 474–8; Stammler 1962, esp. 2940), by anonymous authors, described seafaring encounters with the dangerous mountain.

Thus, by about 1200 the motif of the marvellous magnetic mountain surfaced in Middle High German narrative literature. It appeared in combination with another spectacular marvel of nature, the congealed sea (F 711). Some tales include another folk motif—rescue by flying griffins (B 42).

The congealed sea or “*mare concretum*” was first mentioned by Pliny the Elder (Rackham 1989, Bk. XIV, 104; see also Elissèeff 1949, 166; Letts 1946, 47–9; Simek 1996, 68; Blamires 1979, 41–6). It was repeated by Solinus (c. 200 AD) (see Mommsen 1864), and by the very influential Isidor of Seville (c. 560 AD) in his
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Etymologiae seu Origines (transl. Lindsay 1911, Bk. 14, 6, 4). The rescue by a flying griffin or giant bird (discussed later) apparently migrated from unknown oriental sources to the Alexander legends and to the old French “Romance of Alexander” (cf Lecouteux 1979, 320–1; 1981, 210–21; 1990, 939–42). In these tales, sailors trapped by a magnetic mountain are able to escape by sewing themselves up in animal hides and are then inadvertently rescued by griffins.

Two traditions—learned literature and oral folk legends—were merged in medieval travelogues. The most famous of these were the fictitious travels of Sir John Mandeville (1300?–72). He refers to the magnetic mountain in two passages (Ridder 1999, 107–11). The first appears to be based on the well-known allusion in the early fifth-century Commenitorum Palladii, and the second refers to the legend of the marvellous country described by so-called Prester John (c. 1140 AD), introduced by Otto von Freising to the Latin West (Zarncke 1876; Huschenbett 1989, 828–42).

The magnetic mountain legend is also twice mentioned in the German Sankt Brandan text of 1150 (Schröder 1871; cf Intorp 1979, esp. 655; Severin 1978). After the visit to the island of hell, Brendan’s ship crashes in the congealed sea. Brendan sees many ships stuck there and the masts remind him of a forest. God’s voice warns him to travel on further because of a “lodestone” (a magnetic rock) in the sea.

Ein sturm gróz sich gegen in trúć,
dannen er den kiel slác
rehte gegen dem leberner
[…]
dó sach sente Brandán
manchen kiel inne stán
die vor mangen jären
darin versigelt wären.

[A great thunderstorm arose. The strong current drove thee ship to the congealed sea. […] St Brendan observes many vessels that had crashed into each other many years past].

Herzog Ernst, written in German around 1180, combines the loosely-connected motifs from Sankt Brandan into a more coherent and colourful tale:

Herzog Ernst has a disagreement with the Emperor, who is determined to make war upon him unjustly and bring him to ruin. The Duke feels impelled to escape from this untenable relation with the head of the State by taking part in the Crusade to the East. The Duke, in the course of his wanderings, encounters a people with heads shaped like those of cranes. He is driven ashore on the Magnet Mountain, which draws ships with magnetic power, so that people who come into the vicinity of the mountain cannot escape, but are doomed to a miserable end. Herzog Ernst and his followers effect their escape by sewing themselves up in skins, and letting themselves be carried on to a hill by griffins, who are accustomed to capture those driven on to the Magnet Mountain; thence, after cutting the skins, they escape in the absence of the griffins (Sowinski 1970, v. 3935–65; summary and transl. Ch. Tuczay).

The presence of the three motifs—the magnetic mountain, the congealed sea and the griffins—in the oriental romance Herzog Ernst, is suggestive, although this exact combination does not appear in any known Arabic source. Herzog Ernst describes the magnetic mountain arising from the congealed sea and the forest of decayed ships’ masts, and includes the flying iron nails previously only reported
in the learned tradition. As in the Sankt Brandan story, the ships carry treasures, the sailors starve, and griffins carry away the corpses to their young. There is also the motif of using an ox-hide for rescue.

The Flying Griffins

The word griffin is derived from the Greek word "grups." There is a possibility that "grups" is related to Greek "grupos," which means hooked and curved (cf McConnell 1999, 267–87; Bies 2002, 1021–35; Wild 1963, 7–10; Lecouteaux 1982 II, 213–18). Several scholars presumed that the Greek word "grups," together with the concept, were borrowed from oriental languages; for example, from the Assyrian "*k’ rub" meaning "fabulous being" (Ziegler and Prinz 1970, 1902–29). There is probably a connection to the German word "greifen" ("grip"), as well as to the Persian "giriften," to "grip." The lion griffon in Babylonian art, whom Persians and Hittites adopted, was often depicted as warrior in battle against gods or demons, like the Hebrew "ke’ rub" or Babylonian "kuribu" (Wild 1963, 10).

Fabulous birds are favourite topics in many ancient mythologies (Mode 1983, 249–66). The folklore of Persia, Turkey, and Arabia describes a fabulous bird of divine origin, named Simurgh, and there are legends of giant birds called "rukh" or "roc" (Bies 2002, 1027–8; Marzolph 1995a, 595). The earliest written reference to griffins in Western literature is by the Greek traveller Aristeas of Proconnesus, who lived during the seventh century BC. Unfortunately, his writings did not survive—but there are fragments of his work in Herodotus (c. 450 BC) (Bolton 1962, 43–5; Mayor 2000, 29–31).

There is also a story related in a poem by Aristeas son of Caüstrobius, a man of Proconnesus. This Aristeas, possessed by Phoebus, visited the Issedones; beyond these (he said) live the one-eyed Arimaspian, beyond whom are the griffins that guard gold, and beyond these again the Hyperboreans, whose territory reaches to the sea. Except for the Hyperboreans, all these nations (and first the Arimaspian) are always at war with their neighbours; the Issedones were pushed from their lands by the Arimaspian, and the Scythians by the Issedones, and the Cimmerians, living by the southern sea, were hard pressed by the Scythians and left their country. Thus Aristeas' story does not agree with the Scythian account about this country (Godley 1924, Bk. 4,13).

Aristeas had travelled into central Asia in search of the Hyperboreans and the sanctuary of Apollo. During his travels, he encountered a tribe called the Issedonians, who told him about the mountains beyond their territory, the home of cold storms. These have been variously identified as the Caucasus Mountains, the Urals, or even the Altai mountains above the Gobi desert. Rivers of that region were said to bear gold sand, and a race of one-eyed men called Arimaspi was claimed to steal this gold from the monsters that guarded it. The Issedonian name for these monsters is not known but Aristeas called them griffins, using a term that his Greek audience would understand. Most important for our purposes is that the griffins are combined with a mountain and a treasure. Adrienne Mayor has argued that the griffin is not necessarily "purely imaginary and symbolic," but may have been based on ancient nomadic gold prospectors' observations of abundant beaked dinosaur fossils in the old Issedonian gold-mining territory visited by Aristeas (Mayor and Heaney 1993; Mayor 2000: 15–54).
The Greek physician Ktesias (400 BC), who lived in Susa, Persia, wrote about griffins in his geographical treatise on India (referring to all lands east of Persia). He described them as a race of four-footed flightless birds, almost as large as wolves, with legs and claws like those of a lion and covered all over with black feathers except for a red breast (Benjamin of Tudela, 1966). A little before Herodotus’s time, the griffin was mentioned in Aeschylus’s Prometheus Bound (c. 430? BC): “Beware the sharp-beaked hounds of Zeus that never bark/The Gryphons, and the one-eyed mounted host of Arimaspians, who around the stream/That flows o’er gold, the ford of Pluto, dwell” (Aeschylus, transl. Podlecki 2003, 875–8).

In Herodotus (Bk. 3: 116; Bk. 4: 27) Aristaeas’s griffin account is found, which was acknowledged as authentic for many centuries:

The northern parts of Europe are very much richer in gold than any other region: but how it is procured I have no certain knowledge. The story runs that the one-eyed Arimaspi purloin it from the griffins; but here too I am incredulous, and cannot persuade myself that there is a race of men born with one eye, who in all else resemble the rest of mankind. Nevertheless it seems to be true that the extreme regions of the earth, which surround and shut up within themselves all other countries, produce the things which are the rarest, and which men reckon the most beautiful (transl. Rawlinson 1942, Bk. 3: 116).

The regions beyond are known only from the accounts of the Issedonians, by whom the stories are told of the one-eyed race of men and the gold-guarding griffins. These stories are received by the Scythians from the Issedonians, and by them passed on to us Greeks: whence it arises that we give the one-eyed race the Scythian name of Arimaspi, “arima” being the Scythic word for “one,” and “spu” for “the eye” (transl. Rawlinson 1942, Bk. 4: 27).

Later writers relied on Herodotus, Pausanias, Aelian, and Pliny the Elder’s Natural History (transl. Rackham 1969, Bk. 2: 10) for details of griffins. According to Pliny, the griffin was a kind of wild beast with wings that dug gold out of mines that other creatures guarded, and that the Arimaspi tried to take from them. Although the griffin had wings and a beak, no ancient Greek or Latin author described it as a flying creature; later sources speak of griffins as giant raptor-like birds with four legs.

The Greek travel writer Pausanias’s elaborations (200-150/180? AD) sound sceptical, however:

These griffins, Aristaeas of Proconnesus says in his poem, fight for the gold with the Arimaspi beyond the Issedones. The gold which the griffins guard, he says, comes out of the earth; the Arimaspi are men all born with one eye; griffins are beasts like lions, but with the beak and wings of an eagle. I will say no more about the griffins (transl. Jones 1926, Bk. 1: 24, 6).

In 200 AD, Aelian, in his De Natura animalium, had accumulated more information about the Indian griffin from travellers on the silk route. He described it as having four feet and claws of fearsome strength, black feathers along its back and red feathers on its front, white wings and blue feathers on its neck. Its head and beak were like an eagle’s, and it had fiery eyes. It built its lair in the mountains and men were unable to capture the full-grown animal, although they could take the young. Griffins were said to fight all animals except lions and elephants. They dug up gold and lined their nests with it. And the Indians came and collected any of the gold that the griffins had dropped on the way (Scholfield 1958, Bk. 4: 7).
Philostratus in his *Life of Appollonius of Tyana* (c. 170–245 AD) gives the griffin a human face:

“There are,” replied Apollonius, “tall stories current which I cannot believe; for they say that the creature has four feet, and that his head resembles that of a man, but that in size it is comparable to a lion; while the tail of this animal puts out hairs a cubit long and sharp as thorns, which it shoots like arrows at those who hunt it” (transl. Conybeare 1912, Bk. 48).

Pomponius Mela, in his geographical work *De Situ Orbis* (“The Situation of the World,” c. 44 AD), describes the remote landscapes of India, Arabia, and Ethiopia. He places the griffins west of the Issedones near the mountain “Riphey,” in Scythia (Pomponius Mela 1997, Bk. 2: 1). Solinus, in his *Collectanea Rerum Memorabilium* (“Collection of Remarkable Facts,” c. 200 AD), borrowed from Pliny and Mela’s works, as well as from other authors (cf Mommsen 1864). He situates the homeland of the griffins in the mountain Riphey, just as Mela did one hundred years earlier (Pomponius Mela 1997, Bk. 2: 1). Notably, Solinus is the first to change the griffin’s attributes from a colourful animal, protecting its young from outsiders, into a ferocious beast, “cruel beyond all cruelty,” and to the symbol of punishment for those controlled by avarice. But still, the griffin remains flightless despite wings:

The Arimaspes, which are situated about Gesglithron, are a people that have but one eye. Beyond them and the Mountain Riphey is a country continually covered with snow, called Pteropheron. For the incessant falling of the hoarfrost and snow makes it look like feathers. A dammed part of the world is it, and drowned by nature itself in the cloud of endless darkness, and utterly shut up in extreme cold as in a prison, even under the very North Pole. Only of all lands it knows no distinction of times, neither receives it anything else of the air than everlasting winter. In the Asiatic Scythia are rich lands, but notwithstanding that, uninhabitable. For whereas they abound in gold and precious stones, the Gryffons possess all, a most fierce kind of fowl, cruel beyond all cruelty, whose outrageousness stops all comers, so that hardly and seldom arrive any there. For as soon as they see them they tear them in pieces, as creatures made of purpose to punish the rashness of covetous folk. The Arimaspes fight with them to get away their precious stones (transl. Golding 1587: 15, 22. Quoted after Nigg 1999, 82).

Travellers’ tales and historical events intermingled in the many versions of the “Romances of Alexander the Great,” a body of folklore dating to about 400 AD. One episode shows the strength and cunning of Alexander, who can subdue even griffins. When he reaches the end of the known world, Alexander wants to conquer the sky, so he has a chariot built and four griffins tied to it with iron chains. Meat is suspended above their heads, so that when the griffins try to reach it they lift the chariot (Kellner 1996, 1255–60).

It seems that much of the medieval griffin imagery was borrowed from both ancient Graeco-Roman and central Asian sources. Transmission of folklore between Christian Europe and the world of Islam flourished during the Moorish occupation of Spain (from 711 to the fifteenth century), as a result of the Crusades (1095 to the fifteenth century), and during the Turkish Wars.

The *Etymologies* of Isidore of Seville (c. 560–636 AD) is not only the prototype of medieval bestiaries, but also the major reference for, and influence on, similar later works. Isidore presented real and imaginary creatures with a modern, objective perspective, as opposed to the typical Christian allegorical and emblematic
method of the time. In his work, Isidore classifies the griffin under "beasts of prey," winged but flightless:

The Gryphes are so called because they are winged quadrupeds. This kind of wild beast is found in the Hyperborean Mts. In every part of their body they are lions, and in wings and head are like eagles, and they are fierce enemies of horses. Moreover they tear men to pieces (Reydellet 1984, Bk. IX: 12, 2, and 17).

The Voyage of St. Brendan of the ninth century AD (the historical Saint Brendan lived from 484 to 578 AD) is an account of an Irish monk's seven-year sea voyage to discover the Promised Land of the Saints. During his voyage, he and his crew were said to have been attacked by a flying griffin, although they were saved by another large bird (Zaenker 1987, Bk. 19).

In the Middle Ages, the story of the griffin became more elaborate with each recounting. The Middle Ages accepted the veracity of the ancient reports, although no ancient source—not even Aristeas—ever claimed to have laid eyes on a griffin. The four-legged bird was represented in countless medieval bestiaries, together with other animals fabulous or real. The creatures catalogued in these books were classified as good or wicked, to symbolise human virtues and vices.

Albertus Magnus (c. 1200–80), besides his other outstanding qualifications, was also a zoologist, and his exceptional work De Animalibus shows his "enlightened" approach. He remarked sceptically on reports about many "fantastic" creatures, including the griffin. His account appears to be the first reference to the agate egg associated with griffins:

Griffes according to folk tales are said to be birds, but their credibility as real animals is not based on the experience of philosophers nor the evidence of natural science. The tales relate how the foreparts of these birds—i.e. their head, beak, wings, and forefeet—resemble an eagle, though on a much larger scale. The posterior portion of the animal, including the tail and rear legs, looks like a lion. The forefeet have long aquiline talons, while the rear feet have short but massive leonine claws which they use as cups for drinking; thus griffins are said to have both long and short claws. They are supposed to live in the mountains of the extreme North, are especially inimical to horses and men, and are so strong they can carry off a horse and its rider.

Their mountain aeries are claimed to be laden with gold and gems, particularly emeralds. The stories also tell that griffins deposit agates in their nests because of the agate's special beneficial properties (Bk. 24: 46 and Bk. 26: 33; transl. Nigg 1999, 144).

The medieval romances modified the ancient concept of griffins, in which they are imagined as flying and strong enough to carry away heavy animals and/or full-grown men. For example, in Herzog Ernst (c. 1160–290) (Sowinski 1970, v. 4002–310), the shipwrecked hero and his companions observe flying griffins carrying away corpses as food for their young. The knights cover themselves with the skins of sea-cows and are carried across the ocean to the griffins' nest. When they arrive there the men cut the skins open and escape. In the Reinfrid von Braunschweig romance of 1291, the hero Reinfrid is intrigued by gold-mining in the Caucasus Mountains. He and his companions reach the moor located in extraordinarily high mountain peaks, characterised by extreme cold and heat; griffins nest there and breed their young in nests of spun gold. The men slaughter many oxen, place sharp-pointed stones inside the hides and bring them to the griffins. The griffins carry the hides to the mountains to their nests, assuming them to be food. When they discover the deceit, they throw the hides out. Gold from the
nests topples down with the falling stones. Local people collect this gold during the night, to avoid detection by the griffins in the daylight (Bartsch 1871, v. 18198–22575; Sowinski 1970, v. 4002–310).

A dangerous sea and rescue by griffins is combined in the work of Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela (c. 1159–73), a travelling or “Wandering Jew” who traversed Egypt, Persia, the Near East, India, and China. In his Itinerary he gives an account of the stormy Sea of Nikpa in China. When sailors accidentally sailed into these dangerous waters, they were only able to escape by hiding in animal skins and being snatched up by griffins (transl. Adler 1966, 66).

Marco Polo, who journeyed as far as China in the thirteenth century, was one of the first travel writers to attempt a modicum of realism. After hearing about some gigantic birds known to the inhabitants of Madagascar, he decided that they must be the model for the “grYPhe” or griffins described by ancient Greek writers. He took great pains to point out that they were not hybrid creatures involving a bird and a lion, but more like giant eagles. This description of griffins was evidently based on ancient Arabic, Persian, and Islamic folklore of fabulous birds. The people of Mogadishu (not Madagascar, as most translators assume) called this giant bird the “Rukh” (Guignard 1989: 364; see also Marzolph 1995a: 595; 1995b: 449–62; Marzolph and van Leeuwen 2004, vol. 2, 694) or “Roc” bird. According to Marco Polo, these raptors were so strong that they could swoop down on an elephant and carry it up to a great height in the air. Then the “Rukh” bird would let go of the elephant so that it fell to the ground and was killed.

In the fabulous kingdom described by the mysterious figure Prester John, in a fictitious letter dating to approximately the twelfth century, it was claimed that the land held “every kind of beast that is under heaven,” a river of gems flowing from Paradise (see later), provinces that knew not of poverty or war, and a palace made of ebony, ivory, and crystal. These fabulous claims influenced another folkloric account of the marvels of the east, John Mandeville’s Travels. Although Mandeville never actually travelled to the East in person, he wrote vividly about the marvels and exotic races of the Orient. Numerous illuminated manuscripts of Mandeville’s travels attest to the great popularity of his work. Mandeville had this to say about griffins:

In that country be many griffins, more plenty than in any other country. Some men say that they have the body upward as an eagle and beneath as a lion; and truly they say sooth, that they be of that shape. But one griffin hath the body more great and is more strong than eight lions, of such lions as be on this half, and more great and stronger than an hundred eagles such as we have amongst us. For one griffin there will bear, flying to his nest, a great horse, if he may find him at the point, or two oxen yoked together as they go at the plough. For he hath his talons so long and so large and great upon his feet, as though they were horns of great oxen or of bugles or of kine, so that men make cups of them to drink of. And of their ribs and of the pens of their wings, men make bows, full strong, to shoot with arrows and quarrels (Mandeville 1987, 141).

The following episode of the Sindbad tales seems to reflect motifs of classical Greek literature, although there is no evidence that the Arabic and European texts are directly related. In his second voyage Sindbad comes to a diamond valley. He literally tumbles over a slaughtered animal and becomes aware of the trick used by some merchants to obtain precious stones. The same episode appears in the group of tales whose hero is called Hasan of Basra (cf Marzolph 1990, 538–9;
Marzolph and van Leeuwen 2004, vol. 1, 207–10). He escapes with the help of the sheep-hide, which, in his case, is not carried by griffins but by giant vultures:

[...] that in the mountains of the diamonds are experienced great terrors, and that no one can gain access to the diamonds, but that the merchants who import them know a stratagem by means of which to obtain them: that they take a sheep, and slaughter it, and skin it, and cut up its flesh, which they throw down from the mountain to the bottom of the valley: so, descending fresh and moist, some of these stones stick to it. Then the merchants leave it until midday, and birds of the large kind of vulture and the aquiline vulture descend to that meat, and, taking it in their talons, fly up to the top of the mountain; whereupon the merchants come to them, and cry out at them, and they fly away from the meat. The merchants then advance to that meat, and take from it the stones sticking to it; after which they leave the meat for the birds and the wild beasts, and carry the stones to their countries (Lane-Poole 1909, 259).

Marzolph suggests an Arabian origin for this episode in the Sindbād tales, in combination with the mountain in Herzog Ernst, the magnetic mountain in Sindbād, and, in al-Malik Saif, the mountain of diamonds (Marzolph 2002, 368–9).

The Automaton and the Genie in the Bottle

The earliest legends about moving mechanical figures, flying machines, and so forth, are associated with the legendary Greek architect and sculptor Daedalus (Köhler 1977, 1085–92; Amedick 2003, 9–49). He built several marvellous contraptions, among them the famous Cretan labyrinth for King Minos, and the moving bronze statue of a giant man that terrorised Jason and the Argonauts. The famous winged horse, Pegasus, which emerged from Medusa’s head, and many other mechanical statues of men and animals in ancient Greek myth, correspond to the Arabic figure of a magical automatic horse and other automata (D 1620; Penzer 1968, vol. 3, 56–9; for an Islamic legend of fire-breathing mechanical horses of iron, associated with the Alexander legend, see Mayor 2003, 235–7).

The first scientific inventor of such mechanical objects was probably Archytas, the Greek philosopher (400 BC). He allegedly constructed a flying machine, consisting of a wooden figure apparently set in motion by enclosed air under pressure by a valve of some sort. In the Middle Ages, numerous attempts at inventing automata are recorded. In Europe, the names of Ctesibius, Vitruvius, Heron of Alexandria, Regiomontanus, Roger Bacon, Albertus Magnus, Conrad Bellifortis, and, later, Leonardo Borelli were all connected with flying machines (Amedick 2003, 9–49).

Earlier, the Roman architect Vitruvius (first century BC) devised engineering feats in the time of Julius Caesar. The tenth book of Vitruvius’s De Architectura Dece is entirely dedicated to mechanical inventions. He claims to have constructed the first water organs, and his discovery of air and hydraulic pressure allowed him to make mechanical blackbirds sing and other figures drink and move by the action of waterworks (ed. Rowland 2002).

Heron of Alexandria, who lived in the second century AD, invented marvellous and very complicated magic jug and drinking animals. He wrote treatises on his inventions, including Catoptrica, Pneumatica and Automatopoieta (Greenwood and Woodcroft 1971). Several inventions mentioned in his Pneumatica bear resemblance not only to the figure of the flying horse and other automatic devices featured in The Arabian Nights, but also to numerous other examples in
Middle High German romances and epics. In both the Middle East and Far East, the manufacture of automata of various types was quite common at the royal courts, as demonstrated by the casual mention of such mechanised figures by early travellers such as Friar Odoric and Marco Polo (Odoric of Pordenone 1966, 222).

The work of Al Jazari (1206 AD) is a significant source for reference to these artefacts (Bachmann 2003, 73–91). He was in the service of Sultan Mahmud al Malik as Salih at Amida, and it was on the latter’s orders that, in 1206, Al Jazari wrote his Book of the Knowledge of Ingenious Contrivances (cf. Bachmann 2003, 83–4).

In the German romance Reinfried von Braunschweig, written around 1291, three of the previously mentioned motifs are combined, along with an automaton, a genie in the bottle, and a mysterious walled city (motifs discussed later). Reinfried is shipwrecked in the congealed sea close by the magnetic mountain where the griffins’ nest. He demands to be sewn into an ox hide and is carried to the griffins’ lair. He kills the giant birds, climbs the mountain and enters by an iron gate guarded by an automaton, an iron man. The mountain is surrounded by an iron wall with a gate and an iron guardian at each corner. Subsequently the story of Vergilius (as follows) (ed. Siebert 1952, 193–226) who captured a jinn or genie in a bottle, is related:

When the wooden ship is finished they embark and proceed to the magnetic mountain and reach it quickly. Many a ship and its property have been wrecked there. No human being has come away from there alive except Virgilius and his followers. They take three necromantic books by Savilone and with the grimoire’s help conjure the devil and put him into a small bottle, which they have found there. Virgilius sets the devil free and binds him again. Savilone’s letter in the bottle tells the opener that the devil inside has been enclosed for many a 1000 years. Salomon has power over all devils dwelling in the air and has cooped them up in a bottle. He keeps the bottle in the highest part of the temple (Bartsch 1871, v. 20984–1049; summary and transl. Ch. Tuczay).

The duke and his people step on the shore and reach a small path which leads to the peak of the mountain. They behold an iron door which is ajar so they step in. Inside they notice an iron statue of a man bigger and taller than a giant. Without their swords they do not dare approach the man, because they are not aware of it is a statue. The image carries an enormous shield and an extraordinary long club (Bartsch 1871, 21144–70; summary and transl. Ch. Tuczay).

In the “Story of the Third Calendar,” an iron man with a boat rescues the desperate hero, helplessly stranded on top of the magnetic mountain, carried there not by the griffins but by an automaton. When he breaks the prohibition by praising Allah, however, he is harshly thrown into the sea. The flying horse falls down, living dolls vanish, and so on, whenever Allah’s name is spoken, thus indicating the demonic origin of the devices.

The Walled City and the World’s Vanities

Another motif shared by The Arabian Nights and medieval romances is the mysterious “forbidden” walled city and the dire consequences associated with glancing over the wall (F 761.2). Gustav Roth, referring to bronze cities in Sanskrit literature, suggests an Indian origin for the motif (Roth 1959: 53–76).

The medieval German adaptation of the Greek romance about Apollonius of Tyre, Apollonius von Tyrlund, by the physician Heinrich von Neustadt (written in
about 1300), tells a long-winded story of the odyssey of the hero *Tyrländ* (Singer 1906; cf. Lecouteux 1983, 195–214; 1984, 35–65; Ochsenbein 1981: 667–74; Ebenbauer 1986, 311–47; Marzolph 1999: 599–602; Hamori 1974, 145–63; Borchardt 1927, 328–31). The hero travels through numerous exotic countries and visits several islands. He comes to a huge shining wall without any entrance, which appears to be the ring-wall of a town. Then the most puzzling event happens—the curious messenger’s mere glance over the wall causes irresistible fits of laughter and the messenger magically vanishes. The next messenger exhibits the very same strange behaviour. Meanwhile, a sailor high in the crow’s nest of a ship’s mast, who is able to behold the world behind the wall, suddenly dies.

One source for this motif may be learned tradition. In Kazwínís *Kosmographie* (c. 1270) (cf. Ruska 1896), a fragment of a lapidary ascribed to Aristotle, two marvellous stones are described as the Bāḥīt and the Baḥtah. These have the peculiar effects that whoever only so much as glances at them begins to laugh until he dies. Therefore, the stones are identified as a magnet of the flesh or soul, which magically attracts human beings instead of ships, as in the previously discussed motif. In this case, humans are drawn into a tremendously rich town sometimes called the “City of Copper or Brass.” This account blends the notion of a magnetic stone with the fabulous city of copper that, according to old Judaic and Arabic legends, was built by King Solomon, or by the Egyptian King Sāh, according to other versions (Marzolph 1999, 601).

The ninth-century Arabian geographer, Ibn al Fāqīh, refers to the town as the “City of the Bāḥīt Stone” (Massé 1973, 108–11). In his account, the hero, Mūsā b. Nusayr, sets out on a quest for paradise and finds a marvellous town surrounded by shining walls without an entrance (Tekinay 1980, 150) compares the deserted town Grippia in *Herzog Ernst* with the “City of Brass”). Using ladders, some of his companions climb the wall and fall into fits of laughter as soon as they glance over it. The desperate Mūsā eventually finds an explanation—writing on the wall relates that King Solomon built the town with the help of the Jinnīn, djinns, demons or genies, of Arabic folklore.

According to Lecouteux (1983, 199–201) this ninth-century account is the earliest to combine the city of brass or copper with the fatal mad laughter. But this story leaves us in the dark as to what actually lies behind the shining wall.

The elaborate story built around this motif in *The Arabian Nights* unveils the mystery, however:

Accordingly, the man ascended the ladder until he reached the top where he stood and fixed his eyes upon the city, clapped his hands, and cried out with his loudest voice, saying, Thou art beautiful! Then he cast himself down into the city, and his flesh became mashed with his bones. [...] And a second ascended, and a third, and a fourth, and a fifth; and they ceased not to ascend that ladder to the top of the wall, one after another, until twelve men had gone, acting as the first had done. Thereupon the sheikh [...] arose, and after encouraging himself by saying, In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful: he ascended the ladder, repeating the praises of God [...] Then the sheikh ‘Abd-ES-Samad laughed immoderately, and sat a long time repeating the praises of God [...] So the Emir said to him, What hast thou seen, O sheykh? He answered, When I reached the top of the wall, I beheld ten damsels, like moons, who made a sign with their hands, as though they would say, Come to us. And it seemed to me that beneath me was a sea (or great river) of water; whereupon I desired to cast myself down, as our companions had
done: but I beheld them dead; so I withheld myself from them, and recited some words of the book of God (whose name be exalted!), whereupon God averted from me the influence of those damsels' artifice, and they departed from me; therefore I cast not myself down, and God warded off from me the effect of their artifice and enchantment. There is no doubt that this is an enchantment and an artifice which the people of this city contrived in order to repel from it every one who should desire to look down upon it, and wish to obtain access to it; and these our companions are laid dead (Lane-Poole 1909, 328-9).

In The Arabian Nights version, the “City of Brass” is linked to the cities of stone in The Tale of the Portress and Addallāh ibn Fāṭil and His Brothers (Bernhard 1996, 189-93). The story of this city, which is strongly tied to the earlier King Solomon legend (Grotzfeld 1991, 828-30 and 836-9), is intended to be a striking allegorical symbol of the world's vanity. It appears that Heinrich von Neustadt must have heard the story without the homiletic background explanation-otherwise he would have given that concept more emphasis in his romance, since it is brimming with allegorical elements. In his tale, the city is located on an island near paradise, like Iram, the town of pillars in The Arabian Nights (Littmann 1953, vol. 3, 108-15).

One can compare these works with a geographical treatise dedicated to the Prince Mobariz el-Din (1314-58) (see Lecouteux 1983, 207). In this account, travellers reach the “Moon Mountains” near the source of the Nile-where they vanish, one after the other, amid fits of laughter. The travellers speculate about what lies on the other side of the mountains-some believe that a wonderful garden lies there, while others suspect the presence of a devouring monster lurking for victims (Lecouteux 1983, 199-200). Other sources referring to magnetic stones that attract humans are also to be found. In a pseudo-Aristotelian lapidary translated by Gerhard von Cremona († 1187) (Lecouteux 1983, 210), for example, various kinds of magnetic stones are described, and among them is one that draws human beings to it. Albertus Magnus mixed the “flesh magnet” idea with the features of the Bāḥit in his work. We can guess that the educated physician, Heinrich, probably came across this notion in learned literature, rather than in folklore sources. It seems that the motif of the mysterious island or city of laughter replaces the motif of the magnetic mountain in his work, because of the presence of the motif of the congealed sea. Beckers’s assertion that Heinrich’s source was some unknown Latin collection of oriental travel adventures similar to the Sindbād cycle has yet to be proved (Beckers 1970, 41-55).

The Living Island

One of the favourite imaginings of early chroniclers was the living island involving the motif of the whale island (J 1761.1) (Schenda 1965, 431-48; Gerndt 1999, 475). The notion of a sleeping whale, with its dark rocklike back being mistaken for an uncharted island, is presumably as old as maritime literature itself. An early reference to such an occurrence can be found in Chinese literature in the fourth century BC (cf Horn 1993, 193-200). The Greek Physiologus (cf Velculescu and Anton 2002, 1035-47) of the second century AD, a collection of anecdotes dealing mainly with natural history, relates a story about a gigantic fish mistaken for an island:
Here is a certain whale in the sea called the aspidoceleon, that is exceedingly large like an island [...]. Ignorant sailors tie their ships to the beast as to an island and plant their anchors and stakes in it. They light their cooking fires on the whale, but when it feels the heat it urinates and plunges into the depths, sinking all the ships (Curley 1979, 45–6).

This legend appears to have originated in India. In the Zend-Avesta (gathered in the fourth to the sixth century AD; Mills 1887/1994, Yasna 10. 10–11), a gigantic horned monster appears, over whom flows a yellow poison a fathom deep. The story later surfaces in the supposed letter of Alexander to Aristotle in the Alexander romances (ed. Stoneman 1994) in which the setting is still India but the monster is a sea-beast. The Greek text of this letter was originally composed in Egypt during the third century AD, and the water-beast version of the story is found in the Babylonian Talmud composed by Rabbi Rabbah bar bar Hana (257–320 AD) (Coulter 1926, 32–3; Schenda 1965, 435–8; variants listed by Runeberg 1902, 343–95).

Johann von Würzburg (cf Glier 1983, 824–7; Rehbock 1963) adopted this motif for his romance, Wilhelm von Österreich (1314). The supposed island looks so inviting that the hero plucks fruit on it and enjoys the beautiful flowers. Suddenly, the island begins to sink and the hero, who has incidentally climbed a tree to have a good view, becomes aware that the island is alive, an experience he shares with Sindbad who encountered the giant whale island on his first voyage. Here is the passage from Sindbad’s adventure:

From time to time we landed at various islands, where we sold or exchanged our merchandise, and one day, when the wind dropped suddenly, we found ourselves becalmed close to a small island like a green meadow, which only rose slightly above the surface of the water. Our sails were furled, and the captain gave permission to all who wished to land for a while and amuse themselves. I was among the number, but when after strolling about for some time we lighted a fire and sat down to enjoy the repast which we had brought with us, we were startled by a sudden and violent trembling of the island, while at the same moment those left upon the ship set up an outcry bidding us come on board to save our lives, since what we had taken for an island was nothing but the back of a sleeping whale. Those who were nearest to the boat threw themselves into it, others sprang into the sea, but before I could save myself the whale plunged suddenly into the depths of the ocean, leaving me clinging to a piece of the wood which we had brought to make our fire (Lang 1898, 126–7).

Western and Arabian accounts both show the ambiguity of the paradise island—there is more to it than meets the eye. Floating islands are often unreachable paradise-like places of joy—like in the hagiographic legends where saints like Brendan and others even celebrate Mass on the whale island—but they can also be places of doom (Runeberg 1902, 343–95).

The Subterranean River

The tunnel or underground river motif (F 721.1) is one of the most striking elements in the medieval German romance of Herzog Ernst. At the end of a hazardous ride in an underground passage, the hero notices that they are rafting on a river in a tunnel full of precious stones. He breaks one of the largest gems out of the rock and it becomes one of the biggest luminescent jewels that later formed part of the emperor’s crown.
In The Sindbād cycle, Sindbād’s “Sixth Voyage” has a similar tale. Sindbād discovers a river that flows out of sight beneath a rocky archway. Exploring further, he notices that the area around this subterranean river is encrusted with diamonds, rubies, and emeralds. Sindbād builds a raft, collects some of the precious stones and floats off into the darkness of the tunnel. Hours of perilous travel pass. He falls asleep and later awakes to find himself in a beautiful exotic country surrounded by friendly-looking people. Sindbād makes friends with the country’s king and observes the ruler’s wealth and marvels (Lang 1898, 175–7).

It is noteworthy that in the French Chanson de Eslarmonde (Brewka 1977, v. 1440) an angel advises the hero, Huon, to follow the river, which is full of precious stones, that discharges into the mountain Tenebree (Tekinay 1980, 155–6; Lecouteux 1984, 59–60).

The similarity of Sindbād’s and Herzog Ernst’s (and Huon’s) adventures with the underground river of gems point to a mutual source for the tales (Tekinay 1980, 155–6).

Conclusion

Studies involving the origins and influence of the body of tales known as The Arabian Nights or The Thousand and One Nights must cope with several difficulties. Scholarly consideration of the surviving manuscripts has not resulted in a standard text or survey of motifs. Over the centuries, new stories were not only added to The Arabian Nights literature, but it is likely that many of the ancient stories were changed. Despite these obstacles, a motif-index is still a desideratum and this paper is intended as a contribution toward that goal (cf Bolte and Polivka 1918, vol. 4, 417–18). Such studies may help reveal the prototype of The Thousand and One Nights and its sources in medieval texts. Continuing analysis of analogues, similarities, and comparative motifs are likely to yield further valuable insights into these wonderful tales of exotic wonders.

Abbreviation


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**Biographical Note**

Christa A. Tuczay received her doctorate in 1981 for a dissertation entitled “The External Soul in Folktales.” Since 1981 she has been a research worker on the Motif-Index of the Secular German Narrative Literature up to 1400 (in press) at the Austrian Academy of Science. She has published studies on medieval magic, witchcraft, urban legends, and revenants, and numerous articles in several international scholarly journals.