

Dear colleagues,

The work below is a rough draft of a talk I hope to give at MESA on Zakariya al Qazwini's *Wonders & Rarities*, as I shorthand it here. It is a 15 minute version of a 40 page paper on what I self-consciously call the parallel *racialization* of real-world Others and wondrous/monstrous races in ZQ's famous cosmography. Please excuse the unfinished footnotes and references to Powerpoint slides. Any feedback is welcome. I look forward to focusing on how our workshop can best accommodate everyone else in the coming weeks!

– Alexa

Slide 1: I start with a blank Facebook picture, because as in the case of the user who maintains a profile but refuses to show their face, our protagonist is *online* in the field of medieval Islamic studies, so to speak, yet remains something of a mystery. Raised in Qazwin as his *nisba* would suggest, Qazwīnī was born in 1203 to an established family of jurists of likely Arab descent. He re-appears in the historical record in Baghdad in 1233, where he studied under the famous Sufi Ibn Arabi. He trained as a *qadi*, and served in that role in Wasit and Hilla under Al-Musta'sim. In 1258, when Qazwīnī was fifty-five years old, the Mongols famously took Baghdad.¹ It is difficult to say how much Qazwīnī's everyday life in the city would have changed, but the new order did provide him with an opportunity to continue pursuing intellectual work: the recently installed governor, 'Aṭā' Malik ibn Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad Juwaynī, commissioned Qazwīnī to write a book of wonders. Books of wonder were already a well-established genre of courtly gifts by this time, and Juwaynī and his powerful brothers were known to be generous to their inner circle of artists. The governor's patronage led to Qazwīnī's most famous work *'Ajā'ib Al-makhlūqāt Wa-gharā'ib Al-mawjūdāt*, here and after referred to as *Wonders and Rarities*, to borrow the title from Professor Travis Zadeh's forthcoming book on the topic.²

Slide 2: This book of wonders has fascinated Western scholars since Ferdinand Wustenfeld first edited the text in 1849. 172 years later, massive logistical issues remain unresolved, and some still consider Wustenfeld's edition to be the most thorough. This is due in large part to the fact that dozens of Qazwini manuscripts in Persian, Arabic, and later Turkish, are currently held in libraries from D.C. to India, in part because new manuscripts of *Wonders & Rarities* continued to be produced in the Islamic world for nearly 500 more years, well into the 1700s.

¹ Netton, Ian Richard. "Al-Qazwīnī." In *Encyclopedia of Islamic Civilization and Religion*. Routledge, 2013.

² *Wonders and Rarities: How a Book of Marvels Shaped the World*. Forthcoming, 2021, p.1

Slide 3: In her monograph on the topic, art historian Professor Persis Berlekamp reminds us of two critical facts about this small yet chaotic world of Qazwini studies: “There are several published printed versions, but not one of these represents a version of the text that exists in any surviving manuscript....” and “whenever a professor shows a piece of Islamic art, there is a high likelihood they’re showing Qazwini....”³ What to do, then, with a figure too famous to be ignored, yet too successful to be documented in full, all at once? Even now, Professor Karen Ruhrdanz is arguing that the text we previously believed to be the very first Arabic Qazwini manuscript is actually later than a Persian one. There are discrepancies even between these earliest extant Persian & Arabic manuscripts, all of which were composed in Qazwini’s lifetime or shortly after. It’s actually quite possible that Qazwini himself added a particularly fantastical *jinn* chapter to a Persian copy, and neglected to include it in the contemporary Arabic version. Perhaps our only comfort in this manuscript mess can be that Qazwini’s ideas of authorship were profoundly different from our own, anyway. He himself was a compiler, drawing heavily from contemporaries like Yaqut al Hamawi, back to the earliest Muslim geographers of the 800s, even back to Aristotle. So let’s press forward, cautious but secure in the knowledge that *Wonders & Rarities* never had an ur-text, and see what delights Qazwini had in store for his princely patron.

Slide 4: We’ve now met the man behind the empty profile picture. We know he wrote a book of wonders, something roughly comparable to a European *natural history*. What remains to be seen is what any of this wonder has to do with *race*. Many scholars might contend that nothing in the 1200s, never mind anything in 1200s Iraq, could be *racist* in the way we mean it now. They might maintain, as Michel Foucault and his interlocutors sometimes did, that to have race one needs modern biology⁴. But of course, not everyone read their theory so carefully, or read the same

³ Berlekamp, Persis. *Wonder, Image, and Cosmos in Medieval Islam*. Yale University Press, 2011. P. 34 (check)

⁴ Was There Race before Modernity? In *Neighboring Faiths: Christianity, Islam and Judaism in the Middle Ages and Today*. University of Chicago, 2014. 230 (check pg number).

theory. For example, three hundred years before Qazwini, his city saw another conflict: the Zanj rebellion, an uprising of black slaves. In the 60s, Alexandre Popovic submitted a study of this Zanj rebellion for his PhD dissertation in France. This was then translated into English with an introduction by Henry Louis Gates Jr. Gates unselfconsciously characterized the Zanj rebellion as an uprising of **black** slaves to be compared, albeit carefully, to the slave revolts of the Atlantic world.⁵ Gates did not see himself as weighing in on the question of whether race can be discussed in the medieval era, yet his implicit certainty about a transhistorical black identity, a certainty shared with other African American authors who discussed black people in antiquity without any misgivings, led him to come down hard on one side of the question. More recently and directly, Geraldine Heng's *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* has made it impossible to ignore this question of race before modernity, in the Medieval era, etc. So a small but growing group of us in the North American academy now agree that race is found in the medieval inheritances of the French, the English, the Spanish, well before contact with the peoples of the so-called New World. But now I ask, what happens if we follow the lead of Professors Rachel Schine and Eve Trouett Powell and study race not only in pre-modernity, but also outside the West, outside those cultures who we know will eventually go on to build the racial societies of this hemisphere? What if just as we can see Western European views of the parts of Africa they will one day dominate in Marco Polo or the like, we can see connections to the Arab-run slave trades in a 1200s book of wonders? Too often, Qazwini's *Wonders and Rarities* has been discussed as the author says it is, as *just wonderful*. When we do this, we unnecessarily take on the subject position of the princely patron.

Slide 5: I argue that the text's racial vision can best be understood by paying new attention to

⁵ Popovic, Alexandre & Gates, Henry Louis. *The Revolt of African Slaves in the 3rd/9th C.* Princeton University Press. 1999, p. xii.

wonder. In my larger article, I define race as David Nirenberg does in his discussion of events that took place just over a century after Qazwini's death, half a world away, in Spain: "All racisms are attempts to ground discriminations, whether social, economic, or religious, in biology and reproduction. All claim a congruence of "cultural" categories with "natural" ones. None of these claims, not even the most "scientific" ones of the twentieth century, reflect biological reality."⁶ Although Qazwini's world is rife with these reproductive anxieties, as I hope to one day show, here I will offer just a taste of some more immediately obviously racial moments.

Slid 6: My first and final example will be Qazwini's conclusion. By Wustenfelds 448th page, most of these beings have already been introduced to the reader, in some form or another. But Qazwini takes one final opportunity to taxonomize and delight. Note here the switch between subject headings; if Wustenfeld is following the manuscript as we hope, Qazwini is slipping freely from talking about حيوانات and أمم : animals, and peoples, often translated as nations. We don't have time for the following two subsections, which are on "mixed animals" like mules and simply "rare" animals, but we must look more closely, if only for a moment, to see what Qazwini wants us to in these groups. Translations and numbers are my own:

Slide 7: Group 1. And among these groups are **Gog and Magog**, and their number cannot be counted except by God almighty. The height of one of them is half that of a man, and they have fangs like predator animals, and talons in the place of fingernails, and they are covered in hair...⁷

Slide 8: Group 2 Among these groups are also the **Mansak**, and they are on the Eastern side of Gog and Magog's wall, and they have ears like the ears of an elephant. Each ear is like a garment, they cover one ear with the other, and wrap themselves in the other.

⁶ Was There Race before Modernity?" In *Neighboring Faiths: Christianity, Islam and Judaism in the Middle Ages and Today*. University of Chicago, 2014. 235.

⁷ Wüstenfeld, Frederick. *Zakariya Ben Muhammed Ben Mahmud El-Cazwini's Kosmogrophie*. Göttingen, 1849. 448-452.

Slide 9: Group 3 And among these groups is a people on one of the mountains near Alexander's dam. They are short of stature, and broad of face, and they have black skin spotted with white and yellow. Each of them are five handspans tall, they are brutish... and they climb trees.

Slide 10 Group 4: And among these groups are an island people, called the **Zanj**, and they are in the form of people, speaking a language not understood, eating and drinking like people, and they have wings with which they fly, and [those wings] are white, black and green.

Slide 11 Group 5: And among these groups are the people of the **Ramani**, and they are naked, and their language is not understood—it's like whistling. One of them is four handspans tall, and they have red hair and red fuzz.

Slide 12 Group 6: And among these groups are a people on one of the islands of the **Zanj**, and their height is the length of a forearm. Most of them are blind, and the blind among them fight cranes, taking them and kidnapping them, and killing those among them that God wills.

Slide 13 Group 7: And among these groups are a people on an island in the Zanj! (wustenfled v other edition) sea, and their faces are like the faces of dogs, and the rest of their body is like the body of people. They feed on the fruits of the trees of that island, and if they find some animal, they eat it

Slide 14 Group 8: And among these groups are a people on an island in the form of beautiful people, but they don't have bones in their feet, so they crawl around. And if they find a person walking, they jump on his back and twist their legs around the neck of the walking person, and if the walker shakes them off, they deal him blows and scratch

Slide 15 Group 9: And among these groups are a people on one of the islands, and they have wings and thin and wispy hair, and they walk on two legs or on four, and they also fly, and it's

said that they are made from the **jinn**...

Slide 16: The **Zanj** are not the only real-world racial group mentioned in these stories, but they are the ones that come up the most often in this section. Zanj was a medieval arabic term for black people, broadly understood to be from the coast of East Africa. Hans Wehr in English defines the term more simply: negro..

Slide 17: These stories sit uncomfortably at the intersection of climatology, wonder and real-world ethnic groups. Climatology was basically the antique world's environmental determinism. As Hippocrates first wrote in the 4th century BCE, the globe is divided into climates, and those climates determine the possibilities of life for the people born there.⁸ For Ptolemy, the second century author who had a more direct impact on Islamic thought, islands had a special role to play in defining those climes. In short, for the Greek geographers and their medieval readers, there was a deep synergy between the essences of places, and the races that called them home, and Qazwini was no exception. This Greco Roman material might be found in a French or Latin text from a similar time period. For example, dog headed people will famously factor into the Travels of John Mandeville, hundred years later. However, Qazwini's work also includes material that is specific to the medieval Islamic world. The jinn, which are of course found in the Quran, are just the tip of the iceberg. This diverse confluence of influences is just one of many reasons why we must begin to write histories of race that are capacious enough to include the courtly encyclopedias of medieval Islamic empires.

⁸ See Kennedy, Rebecca F., C Syndor Roy, and Max L. Goldman, eds. *Race and Ethnicity in the Classical World: An Anthology of Primary Sources in Translation*. Hackett Publishing Group, 2013. (check page numbers)

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