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# HUNTING IN MUGHAL PAINTING

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India has a very old tradition of hunting as royal sport. As with several other activities the Mughals patronized, they put their own inimitable stamp on hunting too. They indulged in it on a scale hitherto unknown; vast services were mobilized and thousands took part in these activities.

Babur hunted Indian one-horned rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) and wild ass (*Equus hemionus*), among other animals, from horseback regularly and with gusto. He described these exploits at length in his autobiography and recorded in detail the fauna of Hindustan, for he was simply fascinated by the animals he saw.

Humayun continued the tradition, but it was during Akbar's reign that hunting came to be recorded in details hitherto unparalleled in Indian history. Abu'l Fazl, his faithful chronicler, records that Akbar "always makes hunting a means of increasing his knowledge, and besides, uses hunting parties as occasions to enquire, without having first given notice of his coming, into the condition of the people and the army.... He lifts up such [subjects] as are oppressed and punishes the oppressors. On account of these higher reasons His Majesty indulges in the chase, and shows himself quite enamoured of it. Short-sighted and shallow observers think that His Majesty has no other object in view but hunting; but the wise and experienced know he pursues higher aims."

Besides records of Akbar's time, there exist Jahangir's own descriptions of his hunting experiences and record of game taken by him illustrating the scale on which the emperors hunted. But the French traveller Françoise Bernier probably gives the most graphic description and he starts by noting: "I shall now speak of the field sport of the King [Aurangzeb]. I could never conceive how the *Great Mogol* could hunt with an army of one hundred thousand men; but there certainly is a sense in which he may be said to hunt with two hundred thousand, or with any number of which his army may consist."

Such an important court pastime would obviously get prominently reflected in court paintings. The Mughals have given us for the first time in Indian history a profusion of illustrations presenting us with a visual record of these activities. By the time of Jahangir, hunting scenes in paintings had become common and important, though he lamented that his great-grandfather, Babur, who had "described in his Memoirs the appearance and shape of several animals... had never ordered the painters to make pictures of them".

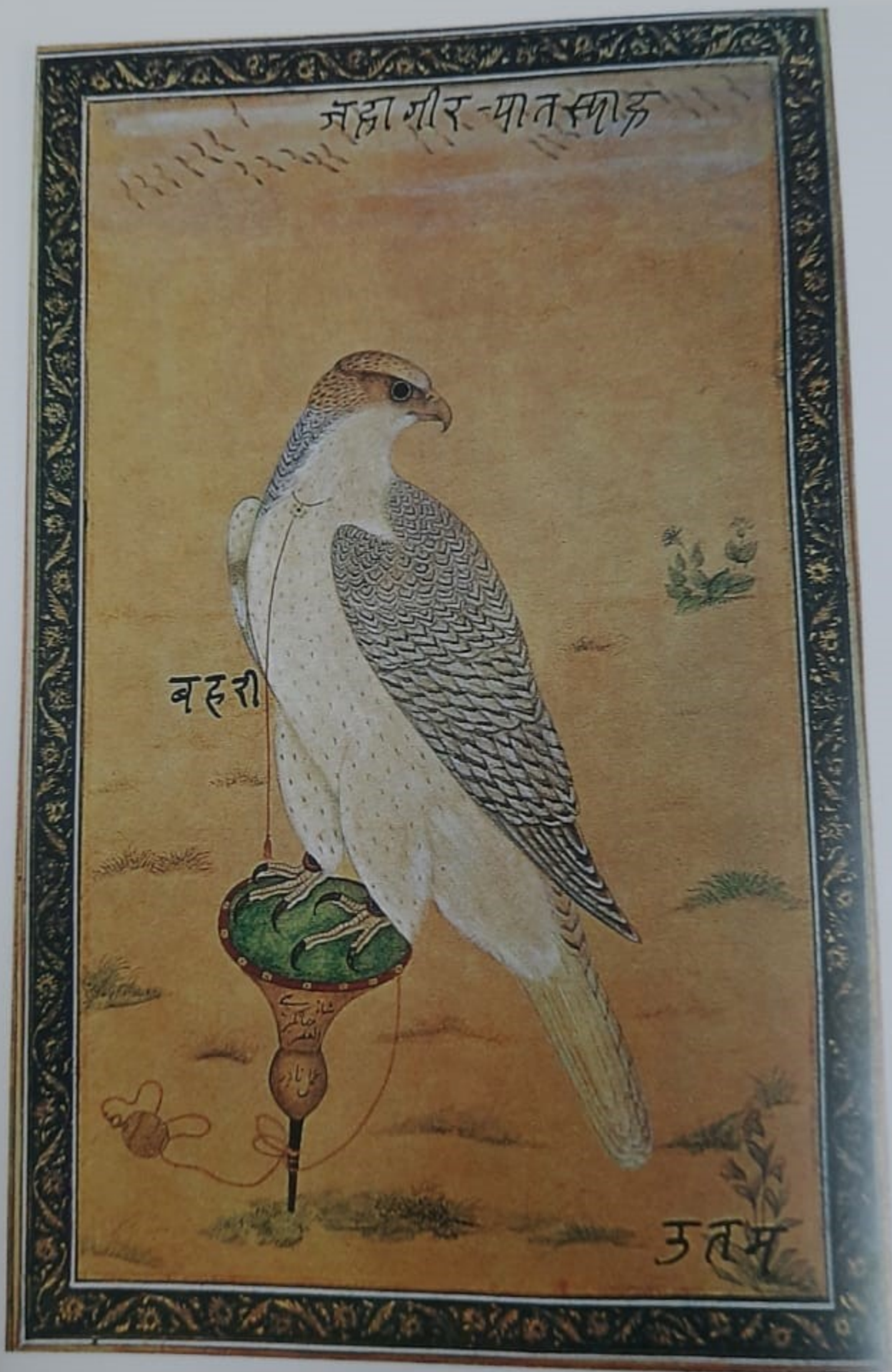
Mughal paintings concerned with hunting may be broadly classified as animal or bird studies and hunting "scenes". The former class of paintings by themselves are of two types. One consists of strange animals that came to the Mughal court such as, among





1  
Markhor, by an unknown artist. Circa 1615–20. 27.4 x 20.0 cm. This painting is identical to a study of the animal by 'Inayat. This is an excellent example of the study of an animal which was hunted. Courtesy Maharaja Sawai Man Singh II Museum Trust, Jaipur. No. AG 258.





2  
 Falcon on a bird rest,  
 by Nadir ul 'Asr  
 [Mansur]  
 Jahangirshahi. Circa  
 1618-19. 23.7 x 14.6  
 cm. This is a fine  
 study of a Barbary  
 falcon, a  
 comparatively rare  
 visitor to India. The  
 "bird rest" is a tool  
 used in falconry.  
 Courtesy Maharaja  
 Sawai Man Singh II  
 Museum Trust,  
 Jaipur. No. AG 824.



others, a painting of a Grevy's zebra (*Equus grevyi*) and a painting of an African elephant (*Loxodonta africana*) by an unknown artist which obviously came by sea and hence the title of the painting – *Hathi Daryai*, both from the Aurangzeb-period album preserved in the Maharaja Sawai Man Singh II Museum, Jaipur (the latter reproduced in the article by A.K. Das). Or a painting of a Mauritius dodo (*Raphus cucullatus*) attributed to Mansur from the "Leningrad Album" at St Petersburg (see Alvi's article). While these pictures were no doubt portraits of curiosities to be admired and preserved, studies of Indian mammals and birds reveal a remarkable range of the objects portrayed. The uncanny accuracy of animals, birds, or plants drawn, shows familiarity of the painters with their subjects which could only have come from personal observations in the field or close examination of captured specimens, live or dead. Let us look at just two instances in this class of paintings.

The markhor (*Capra falconeri*) by 'Inayat preserved in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (see Alvi's article) and an identical study of the animal in the Maharaja Sawai Man Singh II Museum, Jaipur (figure 1) are instances of this category of paintings. Here is a fine specimen of an animal which could well have been the one brought to Jahangir by Shinwari Afghans who had "killed and brought a *markhor*... the like of which I had never seen or imagined. I ordered my artists to paint him. He weighed four Hindustani maunds [100.4 kg at the rate of 1 Hindustani maund = 25.1 kg]; the length of his horns was  $1\frac{1}{2}$  gaz [1.21 m at the rate of 1 gaz = 81.3 cm]." The animal painted here is of the straight-horned variety to be found in Kabul

region – *Capra falconeri megaceros*. What appears to have impressed Jahangir is its weight and the length of its horns. He must have surely seen several markhor and hunted them. A normal-sized specimen would hardly have caught his fancy. The weight of the Astor markhor, the nominate race, *Capra falconeri falconeri*, varies between 80 to 109 kilograms. The longest recorded horns of a Kabul specimen preserved in the Natural History Museum, London, are one metre though in the same museum there is one solitary horn of a Suleman markhor, *Capra falconeri jerdoni* (also a straight-horned variety), which is 1.22 metres long. The animal seen by Jahangir was obviously an outsize specimen and therefore important enough to have its likeness taken.

"Falcon on a bird rest" by Mansur preserved in the Maharaja Sawai Man Singh II Museum, is another painting of this type (figure 2). Jahangir writes in his memoirs:

At this time the King of Persia had sent with Pari Beg Mir Shikar (Chief Huntsman) one falcon (Shunqar) of good colour. [The word *shunqar* refers to the gyrfalcon *Falco rusticolus* and the bird could have come from its preferred habitat further north, along the trade route through Central Asia, but one cannot be definite about it though this species was among the birds of prey used for falconry during Akbar's time as mentioned in the *A'in-i Akbari* by Abu'l Fazl. Jahangir would have been familiar with it.] There was another which had been given to the Khan Alam. This one was sent along with the Shahi falcon (i.e. the one intended for Jahangir) and it died on the road. The Shahi falcon, too, got mauled by a cat owing to the carelessness



of the Mir Shikar. Though it was brought to Court, it did not live more than a week. What can I write of the beauty and colour of this falcon? There were many beautiful black markings on each wing, and back, and sides. As it was something out of the common, I ordered *Ustad Mansur*, who has the title *Nadiru-l-Asr* ('Wonder of the Age') to paint and preserve its likeness. I gave the Mir Shikar Rs 2,000 and dismissed him.

Jahangir was a keen falconer and he was indeed familiar with various hawks and falcons as is evident from the accurate observations from his autobiography. Among the most used of the falcons in falconry was the *shaheen* (*Falco peregrinus peregrinator*), "king among raptors", a resident bird in India, followed by *bahari* (*Falco peregrinus calidus*), a winter visitor. However, the bird in the picture is red-headed and it was identified by Salim Ali as a Barbary falcon (*Falco peregrinus babylonicus*), a rare visitor to most of the subcontinent though not so on the western coast in winter. Jahangir appreciated its beauty, and hence the painting.

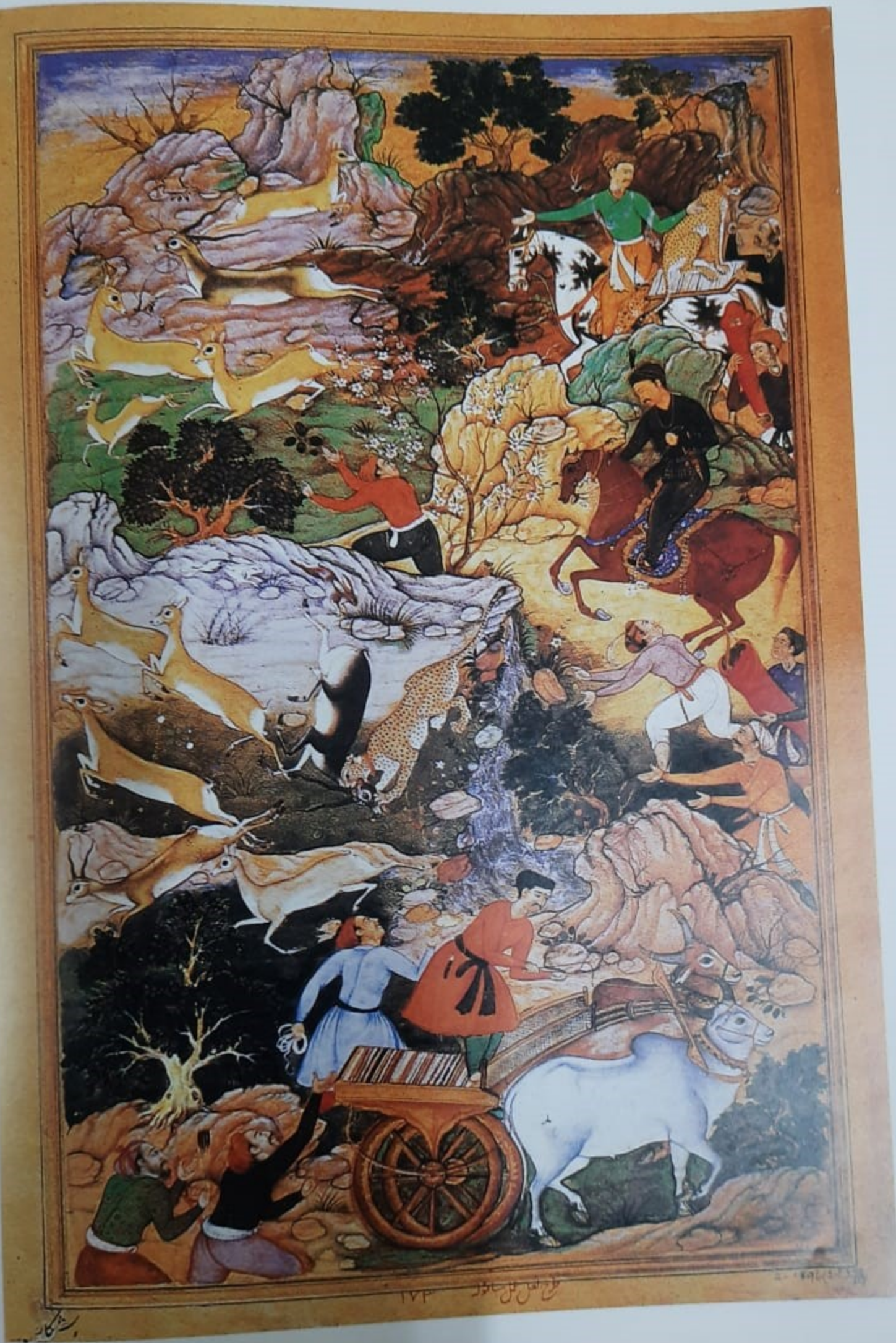
Both the above paintings are connected with hunting; one is an animal that was hunted while the other was used for falconry. Both were painted because they had rare qualities not normally observed and were interesting enough to paint because they were met with in the pursuit of shikar.

Let us now look at some instances of paintings which depict hunting. Abu'l Fazl records a "joyful occurrence" which took place in 1572 while Akbar was out hunting at Sanganer, the area of the present airport of Jaipur. The emperor had taken the field with a "*chita-i-khas*", royal cheetah, by the name of

Chitr Najan. A herd of blackbuck (*Antelope cervicapra*) were given chase and one of them, the largest, leapt across a twenty-five yard (22.8 metres) wide river. The cheetah, against all expectations, leapt across the river and ran it down. It was such an unusual feat that the cheetah was made chief of the cheetahs and Akbar ordered that a drum be played in front of it as a special honour.

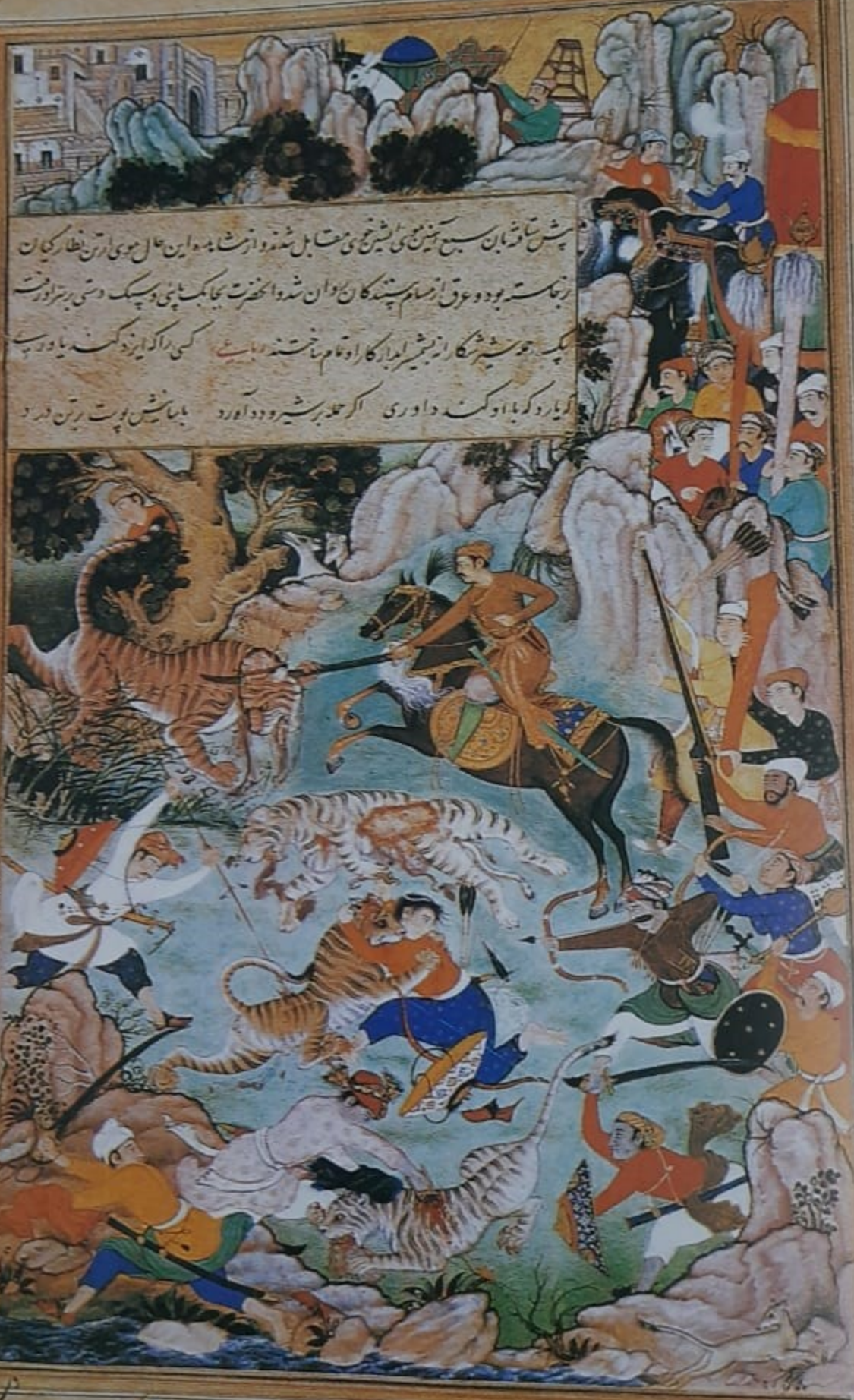
This incident is accurately portrayed in a painting titled "Akbar hunts with trained cheetahs" by Lal and Sanwala in the imperial *Akbarnama* preserved in the Victoria and Albert Museum (figure 3). A close look at the painting shows us some of the finer points of hunting with cheetahs. Akbar is astride a fine mount which he is restraining; obviously he had chosen to observe the chase from horseback so that he could easily follow it swiftly with his horse. An empty bullock-cart is the one from which the cheetah has been released; one of the keepers has in his hand a *satka*, rope, used for securing the cheetah. Another cheetah is seen blindfolded sitting on a platform on a horse. These were standard modes of cheetah transport during Mughal times, the third being a palanquin and the fourth being a platform on camelback, both not shown here. The picture shows eight female blackbucks, two sub-adult males which are barely black, though one is somewhat more so, whereas the cheetah has a full grown male by the throat. It was the accepted norm in India that cheetahs were trained to hunt only black-coloured buck. In other words, only the largest males in a herd were taken. Strangely missing are the knife to perform *halal* so that the prey would be permissible meat, *topi*, blindfold of the released cheetah, and the *hakna*, a long-handled ladle with





3  
Akbar hunts with  
trained cheetahs, by  
La'li and Sarwala.  
From the *Akbarnama*.  
Circa 1590–95. 31.5 x  
19.0 cm. It records a  
specific event which  
took place in 1572.  
The cheetah  
unexpectedly cleared a  
stream to successfully  
hunt a blackbuck for  
which it was elevated  
to a high status by  
Akbar. Victoria and  
Albert Museum,  
London.  
No. I.S. 2-1896-93/  
117. Courtesy V&A  
Picture Library.





پیشتر تا در میان سیح سینه می شیر خج می مت بل شده و از دست بدو این عال موی ارتن نظر کیان  
 رجا سته بود و عوق از تمام پسته کان وان شده و انحضرت می یک پایی و سپک دستی برتر او رسته  
 یک جوش شیر کا از شیر ایدار کا او تمام خسته رهاست کسی را که از دست می آورد  
 گویار که با او کت د ادوی اگر همه بر شیر و دد آورد با ما شیش پرت برن در د

4  
 Akbar slays a tigress which attacked the royal cavalcade, a double-page painting from the Akbarnama. The right-hand side shown here was painted by Basawan and Tara Kalan. Circa 1590-95. 31.5 x 19.0 cm. This is the first record of "white" tigers in the world. The painting depicts a particular event that took place in 1561 at Narwar, near Gwalior. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. No. I.S. 2-1896.17/117. Courtesy V&A Picture Library.

طرح بساوان غل آرا کلان ۹۷  
 شکار فرمودن حضرت در وادی زرد کوشن بر سر کوه سیمین



which the cheetah is lured away from its quarry once it has struck it down.

The point of the picture, however, is the remarkable feat of the cheetah in leaping across the river. The cheetah is the fastest animal on earth which attains the speed of a hundred kilometres per hour during a chase. But long leaps are not its forte, whereas the blackbuck can do so easily.

Abu'l Fazl records an incident that occurred when Akbar was returning to Agra from Malwa in 1561. His cavalcade was attacked quite unexpectedly by a tigress and her five sub-adult cubs at Narwar near Gwalior. Akbar slew the tigress with his sword while his soldiers and courtiers quickly despatched the rest. The *Akbarnama* is full of the incident insofar as it records approvingly the young emperor's remarkable feat of bravery. It also records that this was the first time that Akbar had slain a tiger. Abu'l Fazl started writing the *Akbarnama* twenty-nine years after the incident. The text is remarkably silent about the animals – in fact, Abu'l Fazl calls tigers *babri*, a word more appropriate in India for lions or *babbar sher*. Regrettably, one cannot learn much from the text. It was left to the painters to preserve the accuracy of the incident.

Of abiding interest to us is the right-hand page of the double-page painting titled "Akbar slays a tigress which attacked the royal cavalcade" executed by Basawan and Tara Kalan from the *Akbarnama* preserved in the Victoria and Albert Museum (figure 4). Akbar on horseback has slain the tigress. One tiger cub lies disembowelled, another is mauling a soldier, while a third is about to meet its end as a soldier plunges a *khanjar* in its back. Firstly, the painters have no doubt about the tigers,

Abu'l Fazl's statement of *babri* notwithstanding. Secondly, of utmost importance is the colour of two of the tigers – "light fawn" according to Robert Skelton (personal communication). This light colour is quite abnormal. In fact, the animals are mutants and they are the earliest recorded instance of a "white" tiger anywhere in the world. Mughal painters routinely travelled with their royal masters and Basawan may well have witnessed the scene in person though he could have executed the painting much later. Unlike the painting of the Sanganer incident, this one's importance to Abu'l Fazl's narrative is the prowess of the emperor and not the uniqueness of the tigers' colour.

In 1615, Jahangir was at Ajmer when Prince Karan was at his court. Just before he took leave to go home, the emperor was "desirous of showing him my skill in shooting with a gun". The *shikaris* had brought news of a lioness near Anasagar lake. Jahangir decided to shoot it and took Prince Karan with him. On being asked at which part of the body Jahangir should shoot, the latter desired that the lioness be shot in the eye. Jahangir writes, "By chance there was wind and disturbance in the air, and the female elephant on which I was mounted was terrified of the tigress [sic] and would not stand still. Notwithstanding these two great obstacles in shooting, I shot straight towards her eye. God Almighty did not allow me to be ashamed before that Prince, and as I had agreed, I shot her in the eye."

The weapon used by Jahangir is a musket – that is, a smooth bore, muzzle loading, flintlock gun, which does not have the accuracy of a modern-day magnum rifle. To shoot an eye out deliberately at a distance of, say, fifty metres, would be a notable feat at the



5  
 Jahangir showing his hunting skill to Karan. Attributed to Nanha. Circa 1615. 31.7 x 19.0 cm. It records a specific event which took place in 1615 near Ajmer. Jahangir shot the lioness in the eye as was desired by Prince Karan of Mewar. Courtesy Indian Museum, Calcutta. No. R316/S.163.



best of times. To do so in a strong wind which is likely to deflect the ball, and that too while shooting from the back of an elephant which is not a steady perch even without the smell of a lion to unsettle it, is a miracle. Jahangir was a genuine enough *shikari* to acknowledge this and he was humble enough to praise God.

The painting titled "Jahangir showing his hunting skill to Karan" by an unknown artist, preserved at the Indian Museum, Calcutta, commemorates this event and it was first correctly identified by Asok Kumar Das (figure 5). Jahangir has just shot the lioness, who is in her death throes with her right forepaw covering her eye. The emperor looks towards Prince Karan who touches his *pagh*, Mewari turban, in respectful admiration. Others in the picture look on in equal amazement, some of

them pointing at the lioness. This picture, like the one of Akbar at Narwar, is a record of imperial prowess.

While the pictures of hunting scenes so far examined are specific to individual events, there are many others which, though they show hunting scenes, are not of a particular event. They are either composites or – as in one case – a study of a predator and its prey. Let us look at the latter instance first.

Govardhan has left us a painting loosely titled "Antelope and deer hunt", probably executed 1607–10 and now preserved in the Cleveland Museum of Art (figure 6). An accomplished hunter, Jahangir continued his father's grand tradition and surpassed it with his acute observations on wildlife and hunting. Coursing with cheetahs was a favourite activity with him. With accuracy he recorded and described the great hunt at Palam, the present site of Delhi airport, the only instance of a "white" cheetah in the world shown to him by Raja Bir Singh Deo of Orcha in 1608 and the first ever birth of cheetahs in captivity in the world in 1613. It is, therefore, not surprising that Govardhan should make a cheetah the centrepiece of his painting.

A close examination of this work shows a collared cheetah, obviously a trained one, which has run down a blackbuck. At the bottom of the picture is a spotted deer or a chital (*Axis axis*) with quite inaccurately drawn antlers. Above it are a pair of nilgai (*Boselaphus tragocamelus*), male and female, a female blackbuck, a hare (*Lepus nigricollis*), and urial (*Ovis orientalis*) which is not entirely accurately drawn. All animals are depicted as if running away. A huntsman is about to unsheath a knife to perform halal on the



blackbuck while two others appear to be "beating" the area to start up game.

The picture is not a representation of an event, it does not represent a hunt either, as such a large variety of animals would not be found in one beat or *qamargah*, for these animals prefer vastly different types of habitat. It is, in fact, a study of the cheetah and its prey species. It includes virtually its entire prey base except chinkara (*Gazella gazella*) which is conspicuous by its absence.

In 1567, Akbar staged a great hunt which has been described at some length by Abu'l Fazl. As is usual with him, however, the narrative highlights Akbar's feats in five days of hunting where apparently he used the arrow, the sword, the lance, and the musket during the hunt. He also notes how jealously the sport was guarded for the emperor and the emperor alone. He records that the great officers of empire and the attendants of the harem were allowed in to hunt only after Akbar had had his fill.

This event has a double-page illustration in the *Akbarnama* preserved at the Victoria and Albert Museum, titled "Akbar stages a shikar near Lahore" (figures 7 and 8). The left-hand page was painted by Miskina and Mansur, the right-hand page by Miskina and Sarwan. A close look at the painting is quite revealing of the fauna of the Lahore region at the time of Akbar.

There is a dead Pir Panjal markhor (*Capra falconeri cashmiriensis*) and several Punjab urial (*Ovis orientalis punjabiensis*). The presence of these animals is not surprising as Lahore is close to the Salt Range and urial are found there even today while the markhor could have come down to the Muree Hills. This painting shows a blackbuck being skinned

whole while the carcass is hung up. The object of removing the skin whole could well have been for use as a water container by a *bhishti* (water carrier). Interestingly, a severed head of a blackbuck with a symmetrically circular deformed right horn, lying on the ground, has been uncannily portrayed. Only a painter who had actually seen such deformities could have executed this. The painting shows three cheetahs in the field, all coursing after full grown male blackbucks as they were trained to do, while two unhooded cheetahs are about to be released by their keepers. Among the prey species are nilgai, hare, and chital with characteristically inaccurately rendered antlers, and animals which cannot be identified definitely. In addition, there are

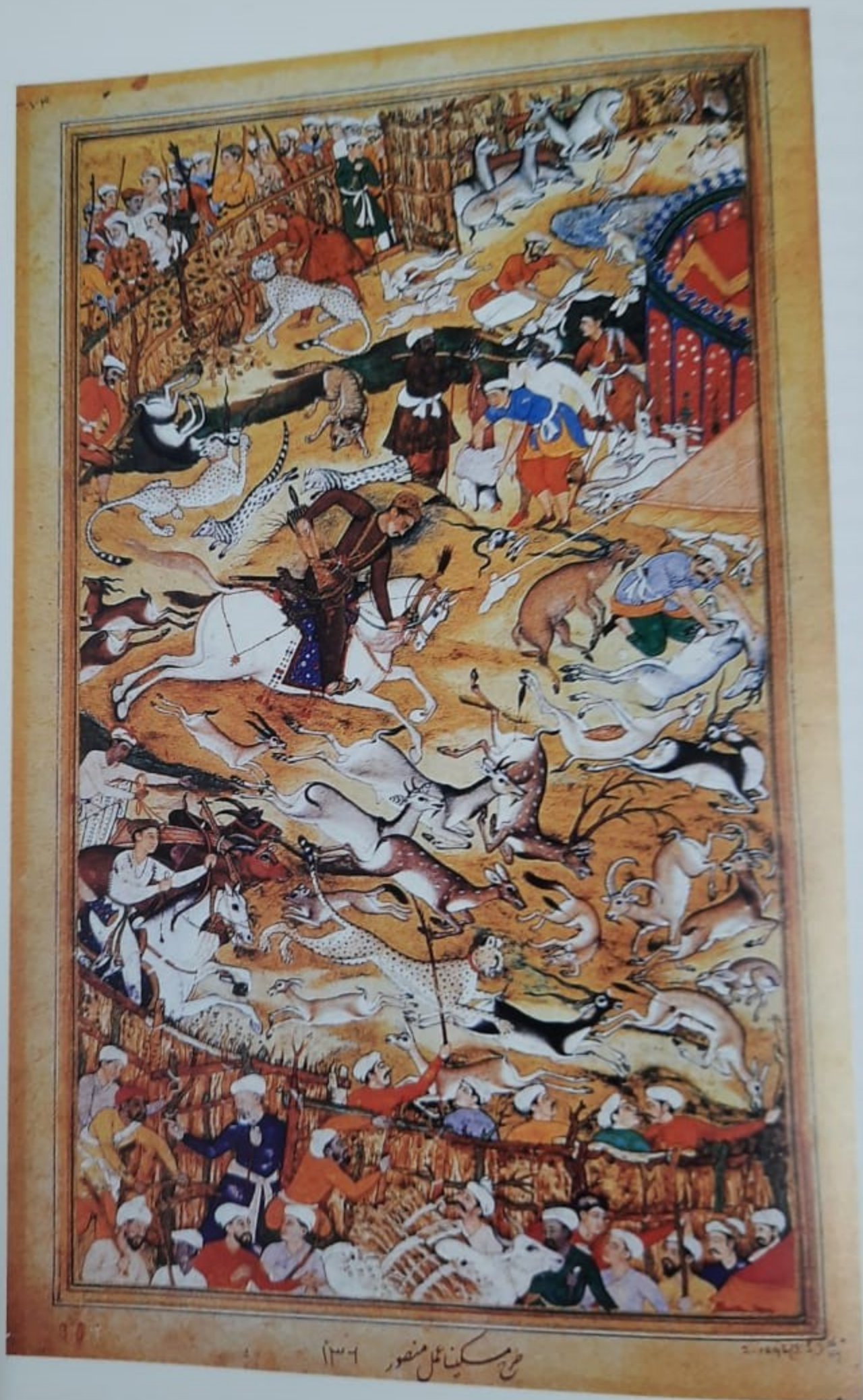


6  
Antelope and deer  
hunt, by Govardhan.  
Circa 1607-10. 20.0 x  
11.8 cm. This is a  
study of the cheetah  
and its prey base  
animals. It does not  
represent a particular  
shikar event. © The  
Cleveland Museum of  
Art, 1993; Dudley P.  
Allen Fund, 1939.66.

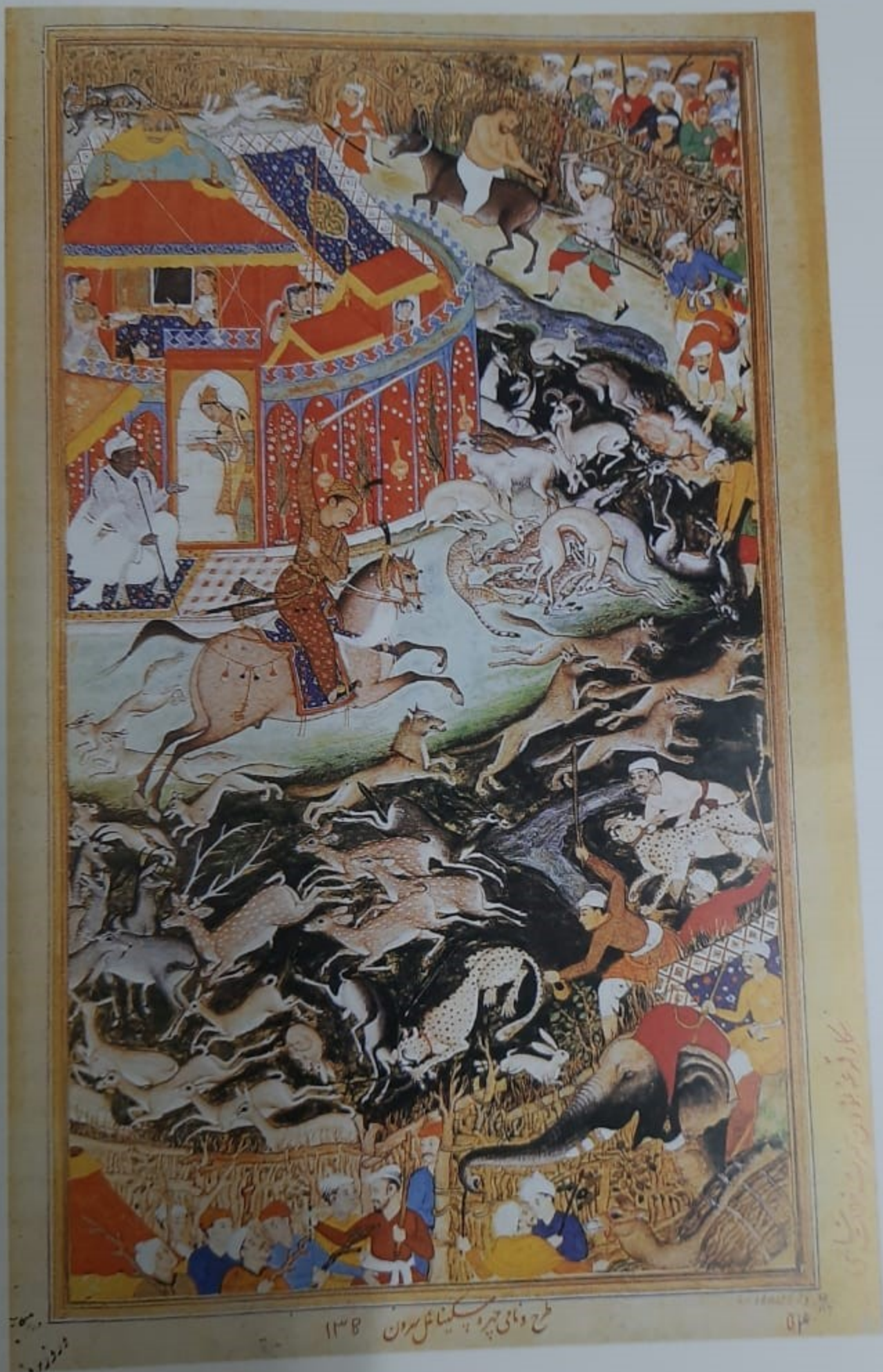


7, 8

Akbar stages a shikar near Lahore, a double-page painting from the *Akbarnama*. The left-hand page is by Miskina and Mansur and the right-hand page by Miskina and Sarwan. Circa 1590–95. 31.6 x 19.5 cm. The painting is a composite of five days of shikar Akbar made in 1567 and gives a good idea of the fauna of the Lahore region of the time. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. No. I.S. 2-1896.55/117 and 56/117. Courtesy V&A Picture Library.







طرح و نقاشی چهره و سینه اش سرودن ۱۳۳۸



9  
 Prince Salim hunting rhinoceros, by an unknown artist. Circa 1600–05. 19.8 x 11.9 cm. It may represent four different shikar events or more likely is a portrayal of the Prince's outdoor life. Present ownership of the painting unknown to the author.



dead jackals (*Canis aureus*), many small Indian civets (*Viverricula indica*), possibly foxes (*Vulpes bengalensis*), and a dead hyena (*Hyaena hyaena*).

The paintings show Akbar hunting with a bow and arrow astride a white mount on the left-hand page while on the right-hand page he is shown using a sword astride a fawn-coloured steed. Interestingly Abu'l Fazl says the hunt took place in an ever decreasing circle of human beaters of a *qamargah* whereas the painters have painted a stockade of branches and trunks, a *shakhbandh*. This is yet another discrepancy between the written account and its illustration. Unlike the paintings examined earlier, here is one which does not depict a

particular event but is a collage of five days of spectacle, including a picture of Akbar's tent and illustration of the punishment given to an erring courtier.

"Prince Salim hunting rhinoceros", a painting by an unknown artist in the style of Mansur, dated 1600–05, is of interest apart from its artistic merit for another reason as well (figure 9). A close examination of the painting shows that it is not a representation of a single event of a rhinoceros hunt. It depicts either Prince Salim's outdoor life in general or four different events. The top left-hand side of the picture shows five dead blackbucks, two more being carried by hunters. Towards the middle upper right-hand side of the painting there are three dead chital with the usual inaccurately rendered antlers. These animals appear to have been shot with muskets as these are the only hunting weapons seen in the upper part of the picture. But these animals are not likely to be found together in the wild. The centre portion shows Prince Salim shooting a female rhinoceros which has attacked the male elephant of an attendant while the rhino calf shows signs of distress. Prince Salim is mounted on a female elephant which is usually more easy to control than a male. The bottom left corner shows a cheetah which has run down a blackbuck and a hunter who approaches it with a knife to perform *halal*. Blackbuck would not be found in the habitat preferred by rhinoceros. It may be noted that Prince Salim hunted rhinoceros in Nuh forest near Aligarh. The forest itself has gone and the animal survives only in West Bengal and Assam on the brink of extinction. Following Robert Skelton's lead, Amina Okada in a recent essay suggested that this painting was a part of a *Shikarnama*



commissioned by Prince Salim. The presence of the cheetah strangulating a blackbuck is taken as a "curious leitmotif" of the artist or artists who painted a group of five or more paintings depicting Prince Salim at the hunt. Their hypothesis is ingenious; but coursing with cheetahs was a very important part of Jahangir's hunting activity and it is therefore not surprising that the artist should have painted the cheetah strangulating blackbucks over and over again.

Similarly, the painting titled "Prince Salim in the hunting field" by an unknown artist, dated 1600–05, preserved in the Victoria Memorial Hall, Calcutta, is of this type. The upper portion of the painting shows four cheetahs coursing blackbucks. The lower middle portion depicts Prince Salim inspecting two dead males and one female nilgai. The right-hand side bottom shows a nilgai – obviously tamed – being milked! These separate incidents are simply a depiction of Prince Salim's outdoor activities and not of any particular shikar. There is no evidence to support the conjecture of Salim's commissioning a work on shikar – at least, these pictures do not reveal this.

The paintings selected here have all been published and described before. Yet it will become evident that a fresh look at them from the point of view of the examination of their content rather than just their artistic style and merit, gives a totally fresh dimension to our knowledge of fauna at the court of the Great Mughals. One startling revelation became evident when Asok Kumar Das examined, at this author's instance, eighty-nine Mughal-period paintings in which cheetahs were shown. In sixty-seven of these, the tip of the cheetah's tail was visible. It was found that it

was black in all cases, thus throwing up the single largest body of evidence known to scientific enquiry showing a morphological difference between cheetahs of India and those from Africa. Indian cheetahs' tails usually had black or predominantly black tips. Cheetahs from Africa, on the other hand, generally have white-tipped tails. As the Indian cheetah has become extinct and written records are scanty, the pictures are the only source of evidence, apart from six cheetah skins of animals from India and one stuffed specimen probably of Indian origin known to us. While the tip of the tail in each of these specimens is predominantly black, seven specimens is too small a sample size to indicate conclusively a predominant pattern by itself.

The hunting methods of the Mughals were highly developed and varied. An extensive examination of paintings from each different mode of hunting is beyond the scope of this chapter. The writer has attempted to present here but a few paintings to illustrate some lesser known items of information that they hold. A comprehensive study is long overdue.

#### NOTE

1. On his accession in 1605, Jahangir increased the standard weights by 20 per cent. It is not clear from the *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri* if measures were also increased. Jahangir went back to the original Akbari weights in the sixth year of his reign. However, for the purpose of this chapter, Akbari standard maund and gaz, weights and lengths respectively, have been stated though Jahangir came across the markhor in his second regnal year. It may be noted that he mentions a *Hindustani* not a *Jahangiri* maund. If 20 per cent is added to the weights and measures, then the weight of the animal would have been 120.4 kg and the length of its horns would have been 1.45 m. I am grateful to Dr Sumit Guha for information on weights and measures.



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