



CROW

CROW, a bird of the family Corvidae, represented in Persia and Afghanistan by six genera (*Garrulus*, *Pica*, *Nucifraga*, *Podoces*, *Pyrrhocorax*, and especially *Corvus*; [Figure 1](#)) including fourteen species, of which the jay (*Garrulus glandarius*) and Pleske's ground jay (*Podoces pleskei*) occur only in Persia and the black-throated jay (*Garrulus lanceolatus*) only in Afghanistan (for details, see Hüe and Échécopar, pp. 511-34; Scott et al., pp. 255-57, 261-64). Except for the magpie (*Pica pica*) *zāḡčā/zāḡī*, the rook (*Corvus frugilegus*) *kalāḡ(-e) sīāh* (lit. "black crow"), and the hooded crow (*Corvus corone*) *kalāḡ-e ablaq* (lit. "piebald crow") the species have been arbitrarily assigned Persian names by D. A. Scott and his colleagues and by S. H. J. Read (p. 17), for example, *ḡorāb* (Scott et al.) and *kalāḡ-e bozorg* (lit., "large crow"; Read) for the raven (*Corvus corax*), *kalāḡ-e gardan-būr* (lit., "blond-necked crow"; Scott et al.) and *kalāḡ-e kūček* (lit., "small crow"; Read) for the jackdaw (*Corvus monedula*). Only those corvine birds called *kalāḡ*, *zāḡ*, and *ḡorāb* in Persian sources are dealt with here.

Terminology. *Kalāḡ* (< Mid. Pers. *warāḡ*) is the generic name for this group; according to Wilhelm Geiger (p. 31 no. 343, s.v. *kārḡā*, metathetic form in Pashto), it is of onomatopoeic origin. Paul Horn's suggestion (*Etymologie*, p. 192 no. 862) that it is related to Avestan *vāraḡna-* (the name of an unidentified bird) seems untenable (cf. Hübschmann, *Persische Studien*, p. 87 no. 862). *Kalāḡ*, with numerous Iranian dialectal or local variants, is also the most common name for the black and piebald species of these birds (*Borhān-e qāṭe'*, ed. Mo'in, III, p. 1669, s.v., n. 7; Mokri, pp. 93-95; Schapka, s.v., pp. 218-19);

among these variants are Baluchi *gorāḡ/g*, Ormūrī *kṛāḡ*, Wazīrī *krāḡa* (Morgenstierne, p. 33 no. 343, s.v. Pašto *kārḡə*), Gilakī *kālāč*, Māzandarānī *kelāj*, Kermānšāhī *ḡalāḡ/k*; Dezfūlī, Šīrāzī, and popular Tehrānī *ḡalāḡ*; Mokrī Kormānjī *qalĀjāv*; Yazdī *kalīč*; Sangesarī *ḡarenč/qarenj*; Zāzā *qalānjek*; Kormānjī *qala*; Semnānī *ka/əlā*; Kāšānī *keló*; Mahābād Kurdish *qal*; Jāfī Kurdish *qol*. The word also seems traceable in the obsolete Persian names for the magpie, *kalāž* and *kalāž[ār]a* and their Ešfahānī variant *ḡalājāra* (recorded by Tonokābonī, s.v. Ar. ‘aq‘aq). The *kalāḡ-e sabz* (green crow) recorded in some sources (e.g., Mo‘īn, III, s.v. *kalāḡ*; Z̤ell-al-Solṭān, p. 350: *sabz[a] kalāḡ*) is the roller, *Coracias garrulus* (from the closely allied family Coraciidae), called *sabza-qabā* (lit., “green-robed”) in Tehran. The *nok-sork* (red-billed) and *nok-safīd* (white-billed) varieties of the *kalāḡ(-e) zangī* (black crow) recorded by Z̤ell-al-Solṭān (pp. 349-50) may refer respectively to the chough, *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax* (Scott et al.: *zāḡ-e nok-sork*), which has blue-black plumage and red legs and bill, and to the alpine chough, *Pyrrhocorax graculus* (*zāḡ-e nok-zard* “yellow-billed *zāḡ*”; Scott et al.), which has black plumage, a yellowish bill, and red legs. Later the common name *kalāḡ* was specified by the addition of epithets or complements to identify particular species or varieties. For example, *kalāḡ(-e) sīāh*, *kalāḡ-e baḡrī* (lit., “grain[-eating] crow”), *kalāḡ-e dašt/dašti* (plain/field crow), and the like were used to designate all crow-like birds with black plumage (rooks, ravens, choughs, etc.), mainly grain-eating and habitually living away from inhabited areas. Similarly, *kalāḡ-e lāša* (carrion crow), *kalāḡ-e ablaq* (formal), *kalāḡ(-e) pīsa* (piebald crow), *kalāḡ-e safīd* (white crow), *kalāḡ-e ma‘mulī* (common crow), and the like designate *Corvus corone*. Nowadays, when used without a determiner, *kalāḡ* refers to the latter species.

Another Persian (?) name for crow-like birds is *zāḡ* (cf. Pahl. *zāḡ*, recorded by Farahvašī, p. 277, s.v. *zāḡ* as “magpie” [sic; *kalāḡ zāḡī*]; *zāḡ*, recorded by Zamaḡšarī, I, p. 478, as both an Arabic [pl. *zīḡān*] and a Persian word). Unlike *kalāḡ*, *zāḡ* has been almost totally confined to Persian literary works. In contemporary Persian it occurs in a few derivatives, for example, (*kalāḡ-*)*zāḡī* and *zāḡča* (both “magpie”), and in some proverbial expressions. In the oldest extant Arabic-Persian lexicon, *Moqaddamat al-adab* by Zamaḡšarī (467-538/1075-1144; I, pp. 477-78), *kalāḡ* and *zāḡ* are treated as interchangeable synonyms for Arabic *ḡorāb*, but Zakarīyā’ Qazvīnī (d. 682/1283; p. 277) equated *zāḡ* with Arabic *al-ḡorāb al-kabīr* (large crow), having lustrous black plumage, that is, the raven (cf. Fr. “le grand corbeau”), the largest species of the Corvidae (63 cm long). Qazvīnī’s synonymy is confirmed by Tonokābonī (fl.



1077-1105/1667-94; s.v. *zāḡ*): “It is the large black raven (*ḡorāb-e kabīr-e aswad*), called *qozqūn* in Turkish.” However, in the earliest surviving Persian dictionary in which *zāḡ* is recorded as a Persian word, *Şeḡāḥ al-fors* by Nakjavānī (14th century; p. 163), it is defined as “[a bird] resembling a small *kalāḡ*, with an entirely black plumage, red legs and bill,” a description that actually applies to the chough. To avoid the eventual confusion of the *zāḡ* with the *zāḡ-e pīsa* (= *kalāḡ-e pīsa*; see above), the expression *zāḡ-e sīāh* (= *kalāḡ-e sīāh*) has occasionally been used in classical poetry (cf., e.g., Monjīk Termedī apud *Loḡat-e fors*, ed. Eqbāl, p. 341, s.v. *ḡolba* “magpie”; cf. Zamaḡšarī, I, pp. 477-78, where *zāḡ-e/kalāḡ-e tābestān* “summer crow” is given for Ar. *ḡodāf* “rook”).

The adjective *zāḡ* (recorded in *Loḡat-e fors*, ed. Eqbāl, p. 242) “blue” (of human eyes) and “blue-eyed” is believed by some lexicographers to stand for *zāḡ-čašm* “*zāḡ*-eyed”; for example, according to Moḡammad-Pādšāh (III, p. 2184, s.v.), “The *zāḡ* is a black bird having a red bill, and eyes with a white circle [iris]; hence a person with *azraq* [blue] eyes is called *zāḡ-čašm*.” If this etymological connection between the adjective *zāḡ* and the corvine *zāḡ* is valid, the only possible candidate for such a connection would be the jackdaw, which François Hüe and R. D. Échécopar (p. 524) have described as “a small species of the Corvidae . . . with a very conspicuous pale-gray eye In no other bird of this family is the iris ever so light.” The jackdaw’s bill and legs are not red, however (see illustration in Scott et al., p. 257).

Ḡorāb (pl. *ḡerbān*, etc.), the most common Arabic equivalent of *kalāḡ* and *zāḡ*, has also sometimes been used in Persian literature. Several kinds of *ḡorāb* (including *ḡorāb al-bayn*; see below) are mentioned in Arabic and Persian zoological and medico-pharmacological works and the like (see, e.g., Damīrī, I, pp. 101ff.; for modern inventories, see Ma’lūf, s.vv. *Corvus*, chough, raven, rook, etc.; Ghaleb, II, s.vv. *ḡorāb* and its compounds, etc.).

Reports about the bird. There is a great deal of information (mostly inaccurate or imaginary) about the crow and its congeners in classical Arabic and Persian sources (e.g., Šahmardān, *Nozhat-nāma-ye ‘alā’ī* [probably comp. ca. 490-95/1097-1102], pp. 138-40; Jāḡeḡ [ca. 160-255/775-868], II, p. 318, III, pp. 177, 463; Qazvīnī, p. 282; Damīrī, II, p. 103; cf. Browning, p. 501 no. 8993; ‘Aqīlī Ḳorāsānī, *Maḡzan al-adwīa* [comp. 1183/1769-70], pp. 281-82, 635). Typical of such lore are the following reports. The *kalāḡ-e pīsa* (piebald crow) goes on caring for its offspring, feeding it, and flying along with it, even when it is quite grown up. The *kalāḡ*, when feeling sick, eats human feces and feels



better. Keeping on one's scalp a plaster made from crushed egg(s) of the black *kalāḡ* while staying out of the sunshine or smearing the bird's gall on one's scalp was supposed to blacken one's hair. If someone drinks blood of the *kalāḡ*, he will not want more wine. Applying the blood to piles will heal them. A grain of crow's gall mixed with camphor will prevent drunkenness for one day. The *zāḡ* was said to live more than one thousand years, and the *ḡorāb* is supposedly the first bird to fly promptly after daybreak (Qazvīnī, pp. 281-82). The crow is fond of walnuts; it collects them and buries them in the ground as a reserve. In the desert it approaches large animals like camels and horses and even [sleeping?] human beings, intending to pluck out their eyes. It pierces the shell of tortoises [with its strong bill] and eats their flesh. When a camel's back develops saddle galls, the camel driver sends the animal out to the steppe, where the *ḡerbān* gather on it and pluck the gall off its back to devour it. "There is a [kind of] *ḡorāb* that utters *faṣīḥ* (lucid) words, clearer than the parrot's" (Qazvīnī, pp. 281-82). This "eloquent" *ḡorāb* is probably the common myna (*mīnā*), *Acridotheres tristis* (family Sturnidae), more closely related to starlings than to crows, with blue-black to dark-brown plumage and yellow legs and bill, thus easily mistaken for a variety of jackdaw; it is known and sometimes kept as a pet because of its ability to mimic human speech (for an analysis of its cries, see Hüe and Échécopar, p. 807). The mimicry of the exotic myna (the name is Hindi) seems to be the origin of the legend of the fabulous man-crow called *zāḡsār* (lit. "corvoid") and reported by Ḥamd-Allāh Mostawfī in his *Nozhat al-qolūb* (comp. 740/1339-40; p. 69), allegedly from Zakarīyā' Qazvīnī (but not mentioned in the printed text of Qazvīnī's work) and from 'Awfī's *Jāme' al-ḥekāyāt* (for more elaborate and dramatized fictitious accounts of an eloquent Arabic-speaking man-bird, see Damīrī, I, pp. 529-30).

Several features of the Corvidae are more or less reflected in Persian literature and folklore. In poetry the blackness of some species or, specifically, of their feathers (*par[r]-e zāḡ*) has often been used in similes to emphasize the blackness or darkness of a lock of hair, a certain night, clouds, and the like (cf. 'Emāra Marvazī, in *Loḡat-e fors*, ed. Eqbāl, p. 10; cf. also such obsolete literary compounds as *zāḡ-rang* "raven/rook-colored," *zāḡ-del* "raven-hearted" [= *sāh-del* "black-hearted"], and *zāḡ-e šab* "raven of the night," indicating a tenebrous night). Some poets have used the ungainly *zāḡs* or *kalāḡs*, with their gruesome caw ("*āh o faḡān*," lit., "sighing and wailing," according to Farrokī, p. 281) and dark plumage, as signals of the approach of gloomy autumn and winter, usually as unwelcome substitutes for melodious nightingales, beautiful pheasants, and the like, which enliven nature in the spring (e.g., Farrokī, pp.



279, 281, 416, 417). Sometimes, too, the uncouth crow with its raucous cry is contrasted to the musical nightingale or the “eloquent” parrot, usually in allusion to the imposed company of two uncongenial creatures (e.g., Sa’dī Šīrāzī, pp. 362-63, 555). The raven has also sometimes been disparaged by poets because of its predilection for the desert, again usually in contrast to the nightingale, which prefers verdant gardens (e.g., Kesā’ī Marvazī in *Loġat-e fors*, ed. Eqbāl, p. 119). Furthermore, the *zāḡ/kalāḡ* waddles or hops on the ground, a feature deemed unpleasant, in contrast to the graceful gait (*korām*) of the partridge, envied by the crow (e.g., Kāqānī Šervānī, apud Dehḡodā, s.v. *zāḡ*); a similar idea is expressed in the current Persian proverb about unsuccessful imitators “The *kalāḡ* wanted/tried to learn how to walk like the partridge, [but] he forgot his own gait.” The voracious appetite of the crow’s young and its coprophagy are also reflected in some Persian proverbs (see Amīnī, p. 457). However, a few laudable traits of the crow have been recognized, for instance, its early rising (cf. Sanā’ī Ġaznavī, apud Dehḡodā, s.v. *kalāḡ*), and its prudence and shrewdness (Dehḡodā, 1352 Š./ 1973, III, p. 1223; see *būf* for the story of the feud between owls and crows, in which the crow is said to be the shrewdest of all birds). The erroneous belief that crows do not mate as other birds do is derived from the birds’ caution, which couple in secret as a precaution against surprise attacks by predators. (For other proverbs and expressions involving crows, see Haīm, p. 454; Ḥablarūdī, *Jāme’ al-tamṭīl* [comp. 1054/1644-45], pp. 195, 299; Mo’īn, III, s.v. *kalāḡ*; Amīnī, p. 457.)

The Persian attitude toward the *kalāḡ* as a bird of omen has not been, on the whole, so unfavorable as that of the Arabs, in whose ornithomancy and literary tradition the *ḡorāb* was considered “pre-eminently the bird of ill omen” (Pellat, p. 1097). Nor have Persians produced a lore and literature on the *kalāḡ* as augur comparable to that found among Semites (particularly Assyrians, Babylonians, Arabs; see Fahd). In the Zoroastrian literature the *warāḡ* was simply categorized in the *Bundahišn* (tr. Anklesaria, 13.22) as a bird but not as a *xrafstar* (noxious animal). This omission may be explained by the fact that carrion and hooded crows (*Corvus corone*) picked the flesh from corpses exposed in *dakmas* (cf. the Pahlavi treatise *Šāyest nē šāyest* 2.25, where the three “birds which drive off the [*dēv*] Nasūš (Putrefaction)” are said to be the vulture, the black *kalāḡ*, and the *sārīgar* [unidentified; Tavadia’s reading *sār-ī gar* and translation as “mountain buzzard” are uncertain, as is Ṭāwūsī’s identification as “small starling,” p. 174]). In classical Persian poetry there are a few references to this activity of crows (e.g., ‘Onṣorī Balkī [d. 431/1039-40], pp. 129-30; idem, in *Loġat-e fors*, ed. Eqbāl, p. 464; cf. the archaic proverb

“Whoever follows the crow’s cry will end in ruins,” recorded by Ḥablarūdī, p. 299). There are also references to the ominousness of the crow, perhaps reflecting the influence of Arabian ornithomancy (e.g., ‘Onṣorī, pp. 129-30). The most plaintive comment on the crow’s inauspicious cry in Persian poetry is probably that by ‘Onṣorī’s contemporary, Manūčehrī Dāmḡānī, who was influenced and sometimes inspired by Arab poets. He used the hackneyed Arabic motif *ḡorāb al-bayn*, lit., “the crow/raven of separation,” at the beginning of a well-known *qaṣīda* (pp. 82-83; cf. p. 5): “Oh, how woeful are this *ḡorāb-e bayn* and its wail.” ‘Onṣorī used *kāḡ-kāḡ* for the caw of the crow. In a distich (apud Sorūrī, III, p. 1074) the modern onomatopoeic realization of the caw is *qār-qār/ḡār-ḡār* (cf. Dehḡodā, 1372/1953 Š., III, p. 1223; Maḥdī Aḡawān-e Tāleṡ [d. 1369 Š./1990], in his poem “Ey derāḡt-e ma’refat,” pp. 321-23). The *ḡorāb al-bayn* (or its persianized form *ḡorāb-e bayn*) does not designate any particular species of *ḡorāb*. The term was used by Arab poets to indicate the ominousness of the *ḡorāb* in general; its appearance and mournful call were supposed to presage or cause separation or estrangement (*bayn*) between friends. This image originated in the fact that starving *ḡorābs* haunted the desert camps of Bedouins and caravans, vociferously awaiting the departure of the inhabitants so that they could devour their refuse; hence the association of *bayn* (separation) with the *ḡorāb* and its caw (Jāḡeḡ, III, pp. 431, 439; Lane, s.v. *ḡ-r-b*; for another fictitious interpretation, see Damīrī, II, p. 103).

In comparison with the elaborate Arab divination by the *ḡorāb* (see Fahd), only rudimentary corvine ornithomancy is found in Persian folklore. Hedāyat recorded a few: Seeing a *kalāḡ* or a partridge in the morning augurs ill, but seeing two *kalāḡs* is a good omen (p. 130). If the *kalāḡ* caws early in the morning, some news will be received from afar, or a traveler will return home; to propitiate the crow it should be addressed as follows: “May you bring good news! a letter is coming from an absent person” (p. 131). If a hunter shoots a crow in the morning, he will return empty-handed in the evening (p. 131; cf. Ṭāherīā, p. 102; Faḡrā’ī, p. 312; Šakūrḡāda, pp. 322, 340, 342, 627; Ḳosravī, p. 130; Massé, *Croyances*, esp. pp. 195, 200).

The contrast between the supposed baseness of the *zāḡ* and the high-mindedness or haughtiness of another, “reputable” bird has been employed as a moralizing literary theme by at least two Persian poets: the medieval ‘Onṣorī and the modern Parvīz Nātel Ḳānlārī (d. 1369 Š./1990). The former (pp. 129-30) contrasted the lowly black *zāḡ* with the dignified white *bāz*, the falcon. From Alexander Pushkin’s short novel *The Captain’s Daughter* (1837) Ḳānlārī, in his



poem “Oqāb” (“The eagle,” comp. 1321 Š./1942; see, e.g., Ḥamīdī, III, pp. 463-65), borrowed the theme of the crow’s longevity (300 years) and the eagle’s relatively short life (no more than thirty-three years): The former contents itself with eating carrion, whereas the latter feeds on the blood of live animals. In Pushkin’s story the eagle, after having learned this secret, tries to eat some carrion but, disgusted, concludes: “Having one drink of fresh blood is better than three hundred years of carrion eating.” Kānlarī elevated this piece of animal lore into a moralizing allegory; he dignifies the eagle as a soaring creature with superior tastes and aspirations, in contrast to the “ugly, black-faced, misshapen, filthy” *zāg*, an abject creature that owes its longevity to its inclination toward the ground and its fondness for filth and carrion. In the poem, after the *zāg* discloses to the eagle its “secret” of longevity, the latter flies away, saying: “[I prefer] dying at the highest point of the firmament, rather than living [a long life] in stink.”

According to the Zoroastrian *Dēnkard* (ed. Madan, p. 446), the flesh of all birds may be eaten, except the three carrion eaters mentioned above. This prohibition was repeated in the *Revāyāt-e Dārāb Hormazdyār* (I, p. 182), where only birds that feed on grain were declared lawful to eat. The illicitness of eating the flesh of *gorāb* is by no means universally accepted by Muslim theologians (for divergent opinions on this issue, see, e.g., Damīrī, II, p. 110; Majlesī, LXII, pp. 183ff.). In modern Shi‘ite *feqh* (see, e.g., Ṭabāṭabā‘ī Borūjerdī, p. 422 no. 2633; Komeynī, p. 422 no. 2624) the general precept is simply that “eating the flesh of any bird having talons, such as the *šāhīn*, is unlawful”; as the Corvidae have talons, they are forbidden. It appears from the arguments of earlier ‘*olamā*’, however (apud Majlesī, LXII, pp. 183ff.), that the flesh of the *gorāb abqa*’ (= *kalāg pīsa*, the piebald crow) and the *gorāb aswad kabīr* (raven; see above) were generally considered illicit because those species feed on carrion and filthy things but that the flesh of the *gorāb al-zar*’ (= *kalāg-e dašt[i]*; see above) and the *godāf* (rook) were considered licit because they feed mostly (or uniquely) on grains and vegetables.

In dream interpretation the crow represents a negative or unpropitious element. According to the unknown author of *K’āb-gozārī* (“most probably the oldest extant Persian text on oneiromancy”; Afšār, pp. 293-94), in dreams the *kalāg* represents a *fāseq* (nefarious man, libertine) or a lying tradesman; one who dreams that he is fighting with a crow will have a fight with such a man; one who dreams that he has found a crow and wants to keep it will find his project profitless; if he sees in his dream a crow in a certain house or quarter



of town, there is a *fāseq* there; a crow preying [on other animals] for him represents a man telling him a lie or talking idly.

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