

Aja'ib al-Makhlūqat: Demystifying the Marvellous Creations of Islamic Cosmography

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From ancient designs on pottery and textiles to the medieval obsession with illustrating manuscripts, mythical and hybrid animals as marginal drollery have long fascinated kings, wealthy patrons, scribes and illuminators. Often represented in zoomorphic, anthropomorphic and theriomorphic forms, animals are artistically utilized in Arabic and Persian calligraphy and manuscript illustrations to create a world of phantasmagoria and shape-shifting. The manuscript in discussion in this essay, the *Aja'ib al-Makhlūqat wa Ghara'ib wa-Mawjudat* or *The Miracles of the Creatures and the Marvels of Existing Things*, was written in Arabic by the Iran-based Zakariya al-Qazwini in 1203 CE. A comprehensive work on Islamic cosmography, Qazwini was a famous Arab thinker and a known cosmographer, philologist, scientist and philosopher. In the codex, he sourced various Islamic theologians, geographers and historians to reveal the order of the universe and its living beings through wit and poetic verses. One of the thrusts for scribing the codex can also be studied through the shifts in interests and ideologies -- from divine wonders to the human intellect -- witnessed in the 13th-14th centuries among Central Asian thinkers, as trade and commerce flourished and different geographies came into contact with each other.

Inspired by pre-Islamic lore and Quranic references to the universe and its beings, the text defines the cosmos in two sections. The first section discusses its celestial and astronomical workings. The second section looks at seasons, water bodies, bestiary, flora and fauna, and supernatural beings like djinns and angels. Humanity is at the top of the hierarchy of terrestrial beings, followed by djinns and animals of diverse classifications. From mounting, grazing and riding animals to birds, insects, mythical and anthropomorphic animals, the text partially functions as a zoological encyclopaedia of God's creations. Over the centuries, the popularity of the manuscript caused its text be copied in Persian and Turkish languages, accompanied with a host of illustrations recreated in vernacular styles. However, a few later

recensions were produced as shortened and abridged versions of the original Arabic text. As one of the most scribed and illustrated codices of medieval Islamic kingdoms, the *Aja'ib* also holds a unique place in defining the trends of intellectual advancement in these empires.

From the 16th century onwards, illuminated copies of the text were widely produced in Mughal and Deccani coteries. This essay focuses on manuscripts of the *Aja'ib* that roughly date to the 16th and 18th centuries in India and are now preserved at the National Museum, New Delhi, and the US National Library of Medicine, Maryland. Additionally, the representation of Qazwini's marvellous creatures and cosmographic balance is also studied in Akbari-period paintings of the *Hamzanama* and miniatures from Jahangir's atelier. Finally, a popular rendition of this manuscript from the 20th century is commented upon in an Urdu translation of the manuscript from the Naval Kishore Press, Lucknow, to study the continuity of Islamic iconography in vernacular sources in India.

The purpose of creating the *aja'ib* (wonderous) and *ghara'ib* (supernatural) marvels and creatures of the Islamic world catered to visualizing the wonders of God's creation. The text made a significant contribution to the rise of Islamicate art history and a distinct iconography. Predating the Indian versions, Qazwini's manuscripts in the British Museum and Munich Archives created a fabric of calligraphic text interlaced with sections of illuminated craftsmanship. The scientific and philosophical inquiry of the manuscript further adds to the unique ways of *qissa nigari*, or narration and storytelling. From a more systematic knowledge of the universe and its celestial phenomena to the hybrid representations of humans and animals, the illustrations appear as important insertions occupying half the size of the folios, adding a unique visual dimension to the text. Most of the text revolves around the optical apparatus of an illustration, which also points to medieval inquiry's focus on the scientific study of natural phenomena and bestiary. The author also weaves the simplistic and schematic ways of storytelling through an interaction between scientific observations and *adab* or narrative literature. Scholars like Mahmood Farooqi recall the shifting geographies and historical eras associated with the text as those that marked a digression from the Anthropocene to the political and scientific advancement of the Humanist period.

The three Indian versions of the *Aja'ib* manuscripts referred to here bear a distinct native character seen through the depiction of human physiognomy. The choice of colour palette looks back to the aesthetics of Indian miniatures with the stylistics of vernacular draftsmanship. The National Museum manuscript of the *Aja'ib* (Acc. No. 58.48) dated to c. 1570 CE has 307 folios with over 257 illustrations. The seal at the end of the text mentions the name of the scribe, Noor Mohammad, and ascribed to the scriptoria of Mohammad Shah of Bijapur. Among the many illustrations of the amphibian creatures in the text is a description of an *Azdaha* or a dragon eating a ram in a forest environment, indicated by a large tree in the background (Fig. 1). The story narrates the woe caused by the *Azdaha* to a village where it keeps eating supplies and poses as a threat to the livestock. The depiction of dragons in medieval Islamic manuscripts conjures the presence of a flaming monstrous creature which Qazwini also carries forward as he mentions a white dragon with a flaming mouth, red eyes and fangs with black spots. The iconography of the *Azdaha* has been widespread, from monuments to manuscripts across Asia. The representation of dragons in Indo-Islamic art can be seen in one of the most famous paintings of “Umar Defeating a Dragon” from the *Hamzanama* (Fig. 2). Made by Daswant, one wonders if the illustration took inspiration from Qazwini’s dragon, which could throw light on an iconographic style that the *Aja'ib* established.



Fig. 1. “Azdaha Eats Livestock”, folio from the *Aja'ib al-Makhluat*, 1570 CE, Bijapur, Deccan. Paper; 36.6 x 24 cm. Courtesy National Museum, New Delhi, Acc. No. 58.48.

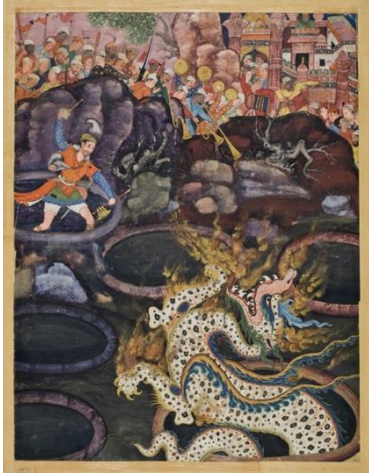


Fig. 2. Daswant, "Umar Defeats a Dragon", *Hamzanama*, 1555-57 CE. Cotton, paper, tempera, watercolour and India ink; 70 x 55 cm. Courtesy Museum of Applied Arts, Austria, Inventory No. BI 8770-15r.

Another marvellous creation from the *Aja'ib* manuscript is in folio M.73.5.585a-b from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) collection (Fig. 3). Attributed again to the Bijapur school, the folio depicts a *Khail* or a mythical horse with wings. While there is no narrative on the dispersed folio, a cross-referencing with the Urdu text mentions several such creatures, including an imaginary winged animal that resides in the deep blue waters of the River Nile and the mountains of Khorasan. The text also mentions the magical qualities of the *Khail's* teeth and fat which are associated with healing and recovery. In the folio, the horse is painted with a blue body and red wings and below the horse is a floating *Hoor* or angel wearing an embroidered cloak painted with a Persianate flare. Such depictions are seen from pre-Islamic times; however, in Islamic art, the representation of the hybrid form of *Buraq*, associated with Prophet Mohammad's journey to heaven, seems to have taken over the winged horse iconography.



Fig. 3. “Khail and Hoor”, folio from the *Aja'ib al-Makhlūqat*, 1570 CE, Bijapur, Deccan. Paper; 27.94 x 21.59 cm. Courtesy LACMA, Acc. No. M.73.5.585a-b.

In a dispersed folio from an Ottoman Turkish manuscript in the Topkapi Palace collection, dated to 1595 CE, the balance of the universe is created through a unique depiction of a *Bahamut* or the cosmic fish supporting *al-Rayyan* or the cosmic bull, which is held by an angel who balances the axis of the world on his shoulders, holding up the Qaf Mountains (Fig. 4). The delicate balance of order on earth as explored by Islamic theologians continues to be represented in Mughal miniatures. However, a corruption of this form, or rather an assimilation of Islamic cosmography within royal portraiture was engineered during the reign of Jahangir. In allegorical paintings of Jahangir, the court artists adopted a unique feature wherein the Emperor stands on top of the earth and balances the cosmographic phenomenon. As seen in two of these miniatures, the Emperor triumphs over poverty (Fig. 5) and shoots the head of his adversary, Malik Ambar (Fig. 6). The Mughal ingenuity shines through in these experiments with theological and cultural morphing of Central Asian and Indian artistic influences. In the former image, the artist substitutes the cosmic bull with a sage, also interpreted by scholars as Vaivasvata Manu, the Hindu primogenitor, who was saved by the *Matsya Avatar* of Vishnu from the deluge. However, the latter painting maintains the cosmic order with a royal decree. The only difference is the metal orb/globe, which stands as an outstanding example of the Mughal interest in metallurgy. Here, the angelic figure is replaced by the imperial portrait of the Emperor ruling over the world as he stands on top of it, defeating any threat to his empire.

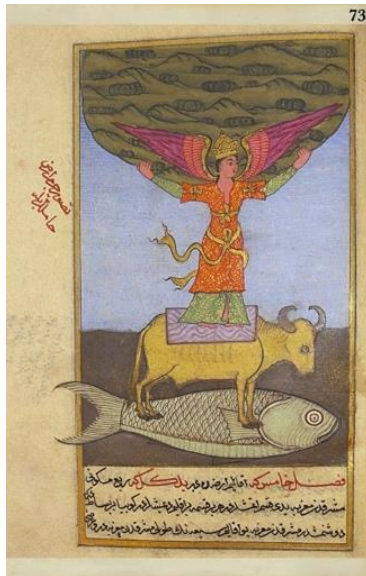


Fig. 4. “Balance of the World/Earth and its Holder”, folio from the *Aja’ib al-Makhlūqat*, 1595 CE. Paper; 25.0 x 17.0 cm. From the Topkapi Palace Collection, MSSA A 3632, folio 131a. Courtesy Wikimedia Commons.



Fig. 5. Abu’l Hasan, “Emperor Jahangir Triumphant over Poverty”, c. 1620-1625 CE. Opaque watercolour, gold and ink on paper; 36.83 x 24.61 cm. Courtesy LACMA, Acc. No. M.75.4.28.

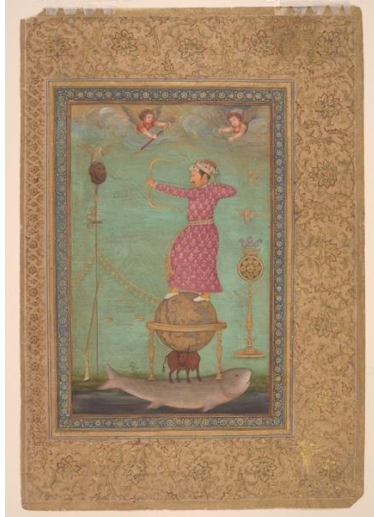


Fig. 6. Abu'l Hasan, "Jahangir Shooting the Head of Malik Ambar", c. 1660 CE. Opaque watercolour, gold and ink on paper. Courtesy Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian, Washington DC, Acc. No. AF.1948.19a.

The tradition of scribing copies of the *Aja'ib* manuscript continued with equal zest even in later centuries. However, based on the crudely rendered illustrations and calligraphy style in these manuscripts, it can be inferred that the text was not created in the royal scriptoria. The US National Congress has four different manuscripts of the *Aja'ib* attributed to Punjab, wherein two have been dated to 1546 CE (M.S.P. 1 and M.S.P. 29) and the other two to the 17th and 18th centuries (M.S.P. 2 and M.S.P. 3). The manuscripts are not as aesthetically illuminated as their Central Asian counterparts, but are extensively laid with pockets of illustrations which define the visual content in tandem with previous versions. There are no frontispieces leaving information about the scribes and the historical eras during which these manuscripts were written. The depiction of human forms and the delineation of clothing seem to stylistically suggest men wearing Sikh turbans, *angarkhas* and *pyjamas*. A lively description in M.S.P. 2, Folio 187, depicts a *Simurgh* or the Persianate counterpart of the mythical phoenix (Fig. 7). Also known as *Anqa*, as written on the folio, the mythical bird is a cross-breed between a hoopoe and a magpie. The text describes the bird as "a monstrous creature of gigantic proportion" and capable of lifting heavy animals and prey. Another illustrated narrative from the text tells the story of a man from Isfahan who held on to the *Simurgh's* claw which rescued him from tumultuous ocean waves and carried him off to an island. The colourful feathers on the *Anqa* again point to an artistic continuity

established from the days of the *Hamzanama*, as seen in a rare painting from the Christie's collection (Fig. 8). Painted by Daswant and Shraavan, this miniature depicts a *Rukh*, another giant mythical bird carrying Amir Hamza, in the stylistics of Qazwini's narration of the "Simurgha and the Man from Isfahan" tale. The visual iconography continues in the lithographic prints made till the 20th century, as seen in the Urdu translation of the manuscript from the Naval Kishore Press, Lucknow (Fig. 9).



Fig. 7: "Anqa", folio from the *Aja'ib al-Makhluqat*, 1789 CE, Punjab. Courtesy US National Library of Medicine, M.S.P. 2, Folio 187b.



Fig. 8: Daswant and Shraavan, "The Rukh Carries Amir Hamza to his Home", c. 1564 CE. Opaque watercolour, gold, and ink on paper; 63.5 x 53.1 cm. Courtesy Christie's, London.



Fig. 9: “Man from Isfahan Riding the Rukh”, lithographic print from the Urdu translation of the *Aja’ib al-Makhlooqat* (Lucknow: Naval Kishore Press, 1920), p. 177. Courtesy Archive.org.

The *Aja’ib al-Makhlooqat* represents an array of genres from the scientific and literary to the political and artistic. Qazwini wrote the text to archive the real and imaginary creations of the world in their diverse and exotic forms. Informing and entertaining his readers with anecdotes, myths and parables, he made a commendable effort to elucidate the civilizational temperament of the Islamic world towards documenting the marvellous beyond the human purview. However, over centuries, under different rulers and political regimes, the narrative and the illustrations were tweaked as per the reigning monarch’s command or the prevalent styles of scribing and illumination. In India, the text gained popularity during the Mughal period, as seen through the miniatures prepared in Akbar and Jahangir’s atelier. The *Aja’ib* may have been treated as an iconographic manual to visualize the Mughal flare for storytelling in India. Through handwritten copies of the manuscript, its dispersed folios in museum collections, miniature paintings and *hashiyas* inspired by mythical and imaginary creatures, and later local versions that circulated in Urdu, the text offers new insights into medieval scribing and scientific inquiry and its re-reading through more modern technologies and vernacular styles.

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