# al-Burāq

**Al-Burāq** is, according to Islamic tradition, the flying steed of the prophets, upon which the prophet Muḥammad rode on his nighttime journey *(isrāʾ)* from Mecca to Jerusalem. For example, Ibn Isḥāq (d. c. 151/773), in the section on the *isrāʾ* in his *sīra*, states that al-Burāq is "the animal whose every stride carried it as far as its eye could reach [and] on which the prophets before him [Muḥammad] used to ride." He adds that al-Burāq was brought to the apostle in Mecca and that he rode on it to Jerusalem (Ibn Isḥāq, *Life of Muḥammad*, 182). Ibn Isḥāq includes a separate section on the Prophet's heavenly ascension *(miʿrāj)*, which, during this formative period of Islamic history, was described as an event separate from the *isrāʾ* proper. For the *miʿrāj*, Ibn Isḥāq notes, a ladder was brought to Muḥammad so that he could ascend from Jerusalem to the skies (Ibn Isḥāq, *Life of Muḥammad*, 185).

Soon thereafter, Islamic tales of the *isrāʾ* and *miʿrāj* became connected, and the two events were often interpreted as one continuous event. In such narratives, al-Burāq is described as remaining in Jerusalem or carrying Muḥammad from Mecca to Jerusalem, through the heavens toward God, onward to Paradise and Hell, and back to Jerusalem and Mecca in a single night.

Several authors highlight al-Burāq's role in Muḥammad's *miʿrāj* as a means of underscoring the physical reality of the ascension and to prove that it was not simply a dream vision or spiritual ascent. For example, in his *tafsīr* (exegesis) of Qurʾān 17:1, al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) asserts that al-Burāq was necessary for Muḥammad's ascension, as the steed carries corporeal, not simply spiritual, beings (al-Ṭabarī, 39). This opinion is reiterated by later writers. Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373), for example,

points out that Muḥammad "was carried on al-Burāq, a shining white animal. This indicates a physical journey, because the soul does not need a means of transportation of this nature" (Ibn Kathīr, 5:574). In other words, the inclusion of al-Burāq in many ascension texts provides evidence of Muḥammad's heavenly ascent, executed in both spirit and body.

In early Islamic texts, including Ibn Isḥāq's *sīra* and *ḥadīth* compilations, the steed is described simply as a white animal smaller than a mule and larger than a donkey (e.g., Muslim, 1:101). It does not bear a human face, or, if it does, its visage is described simply as "resembling" or "like" that of a man (e.g., Ibn ʿAbbās, 12: *wajhuhu ka-wajhi ibn ādam*). Its wings help it make great strides from Mecca to Jerusalem but not actually to fly. From the seventh/thirteenth century onwards, however, and especially in various "books of ascension," as well as in Persian *miʿrāj* poems, descriptions of al-Burāq become much more elaborate. Such sources emphasise its human head, its ability to fly, and its hybrid body parts. To cite, in full, one Persian book of ascension of the late seventh/thirteenth century: "Its face was like a human's face, and its ears were like the ears of an elephant. Its rump was like the rump of a horse, its feet were like the feet of a mule, and its tail was like the tail of a bull. Its head was of ruby, its wings of pearl, its rump of coral, its ears of emerald, and its belly of red coral" (Gruber, *Ilkhanid book*, 39). Other authors, writing in various Islamic languages after the seventh/thirteenth century, also describe al-Burāq's body parts as resembling those of the camel and ox and its wings as like those of an eagle (Colby, 197).

Although al-Burāq came, from the mediaeval period onwards, to be described as bearing a human head, its

gender remained ambiguous. The word "al-Burāq" is grammatically both masculine and feminine; it is a diminutive, meaning "little lightning flash," or, following the Egyptian writer and zoologist al-Damīrī (d. 808/1405), "lightning *(al-barq)* that flashes in the clouds" (al-Damīrī, *Ad-Damîrî's Ḥayāt*, 1/1:247; al-Damīrī, *Ḥayāt*, 1:170). This interpretation of al-Burāq's name extols the steed's unrivalled speed. Thus, the name "al-Burāq" does not resolve linguistically the question of the creature's gender. This said, the two most frequently used Arabic words to describe al-Burāq—namely, *dābba* (beast of burden, quadruped) and *baghla* (mule)—are grammatically feminine. These terms were used interchangeably from the time of Ibn Isḥāq onward (see *Life of Muhammad*, 181, and *Vie du Prophète*, 314). This terminology and post-eighth/fourteenth-century Islamic paintings that depict al-Burāq with feminine attributes (such as long tresses, jewelry, and sometimes breasts) apparently gave rise to the idea common today that the prophet Muḥammad's flying steed was female or at least bore some female characteristics.

Since al-Burāq was open to interpretation and elaboration, it also could convey symbolic ideas that were important to various social groups and religious communities, which were expressed through the legitimating language of *miʿrāj* narratives. In such tales, for example, al-Burāq often serves as a confirmation of Muḥammad's prophecy: previous prophets had ridden the steed, and Muḥammad was thereafter to receive it as a blessing and confirmation of his position as the final and highest-ranking prophet. One way in which al-Burāq functions as a proof-of-prophecy motif is through the description of its first encounter with Muḥammad, when it shies away anxiously upon the Prophet's

approach. The angel Gabriel calms al-Burāq, assuring it that Muḥammad is a worthy rider (Ibn Saʿd, 1:143–4), upon which it ceases to be refractory and offers its services in return for Muḥammad agreeing to intercede on its behalf on the Day of Judgement. This episode, which is often found at the beginning of ascension texts, thus validates Muḥammad's prophetic status and underscores his role as intercessor; it also supports Blochet's theory that al-Burāq may be derived from hybrid "apocalyptical beings" found in pre-Islamic Iran (Blochet, 206–8).

Several ascension narratives, produced in both eastern and western Islamic lands, state that al-Burāq remained in Jerusalem. Some narratives say that the angel Gabriel attached the steed to the Rock itself (*Liber scale Machometi*, 104) or used his finger to pierce a hole in the Rock, which served as evidence of "an animal having been tethered there" (Ibn Kathīr, 574–5; al-Ghayṭī, The story of the night journey, 625–6; al-Ghayṭī, al-Isrāʾ wa-l-miʿrāj, 26). Other narratives state that Gabriel tied al-Burāq to a column in the "Jerusalem mosque," and "the trace of the rein will remain on that column until the Resurrection" (Gruber, *Ilkhanid book*, 43). Still others describe the "tethering ring of al-Burāq" *(ḥalqat al-Burāq)* in Jerusalem (Muslim, 1:101). Several sites in Jerusalem linked to al-Burāq thus became the subjects of visitation and devotion: for example, in his handbook for visitors to Jerusalem's holy sites, Ibn al-Firkāḥ (d. 832/1429) recommends that the pilgrim go down to the place where "Gabriel made a hole with his finger and tied up al-Burāq. It is right outside the Gate of the Prophet" (Ibn al-Firkāḥ, 19). Thus, along with Jerusalem's wide array of prophetic traces, al-Burāq increased the sacrality of the third most holy city in the Islamic world.

Although al-Burāq is mentioned in various texts, it is especially in Persian paintings that vivid elaborations of this flying steed are found. Pictorial sources thus shed much light on al-Burāq's imagination and reception in various Islamic cultural spheres, from the early eighth/fourteenth century onwards. Representations of al-Burāq appear in several illustrated manuscripts and paintings, beginning with Rashīd al-Dīn's universal encyclopedia, *Jāmiʿ al-tawārīkh* ("Compendium of chronicles") of 706/1306–7 (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Library, MS Or. 20, fol. 55r; Talbot Rice, 110, fig. 36). In this Īlkhānid illustrated historical manuscript, al-Burāq is represented as a wingless steed with a human torso and arms holding a closed codex and with a tail whose shape terminates in a warrior angel (for an interpretation of the image, see Gruber, The prophet Muhammad's ascension, 87–98). Al-Burāq's human torso and arms and its unique tail disappear in subsequent Īlkhānid paintings; in their place, the steed often bears wings and a peacock's tail (Istanbul, Topkapı Palace Library [TPL], MS H. 2154, 62r; Gruber, *Ilkhanid book*, plate 3). With slight variations, Jalayrid, Tīmūrid, and Ṣafavid paintings continue this pictorial trend (see Illustration 1 in this article; Séguy; Gruber, *Timurid book*; Gruber, When *nubuvvat* encounters *valayat*.)

In such paintings, al-Burāq's human head most often bears a golden crown; at some times its wings are invisible and at others its body speckled. It is usually represented as carrying Muhammad through the heavenly spheres rather than tethered in Jerusalem, but in some illustrated Ṣafavid manuscripts, the steed is shown standing in Mecca, as in illustration 2 (TPL MS H. 800, fol. 44r; TPL

H. 1223, fol. 60r; Gruber, The prophet Muhammad's ascension (miʿraj) in Islamic painting, 27, fig. 2). In one rare (perhaps unique) case, a one-page painting probably of eleventh/seventeenth-century Ottoman production depicts al-Burāq chained to the Gate of the Prophet in Jerusalem, while Muhammad leads prophets in prayer (Cleveland Museum of Art MS inv. no. 1930.2000). Other manuscripts represent al-Burāq without the prophet Muhammad, as in post-tenth/sixteenth-century Ottoman Turkish translations of the *ʿAjāʾib al-makhlūqāt* ("Wonders of creation"), in which the steed is included among other angelic beings (e.g., London, British Library MS Add. 7894, fol. 61r), and a range of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Kashmiri paintings that show al-Burāq alone or carrying Muhammad, represented as a bundle of golden flames (see, inter alia, British Library MSS Add. 7765, fol. 21r, and Or. 2936, fol. 9v). Other modern representations of al-Burāq include Qājār lithographed books (Boozari), popular prints (Centlivres, 43–7, plates 31–8), mural paintings (Parker and Neal, 90–1, 148–9), Persian paintings (Illustration 3), sculptures (Bernus-Taylor, 291, pl. 193), and children's books (Illustration 4; Demi).

Scholars have tended to see the development of al-Burāq as a persistence of earlier religious thought and artistic conventions (Paret). Indeed, Arnold points to examples of hybrid animals abundant in the pre-Islamic Middle East, such as winged sphinxes, centaurs, and man-headed bulls (Arnold, 119–20). As the many extant texts and images make clear, however, al-Burāq—as described in fullest detail—essentially develops from the seventh/thirteenth century onwards and so should be understood as evidence of

Illustration 1. The prophet Muḥammad ascends on al-Burāq, Niẓāmī's *Makhzan al-asrār ("Treasury of secrets")*, western Iran, 790/1388. Copen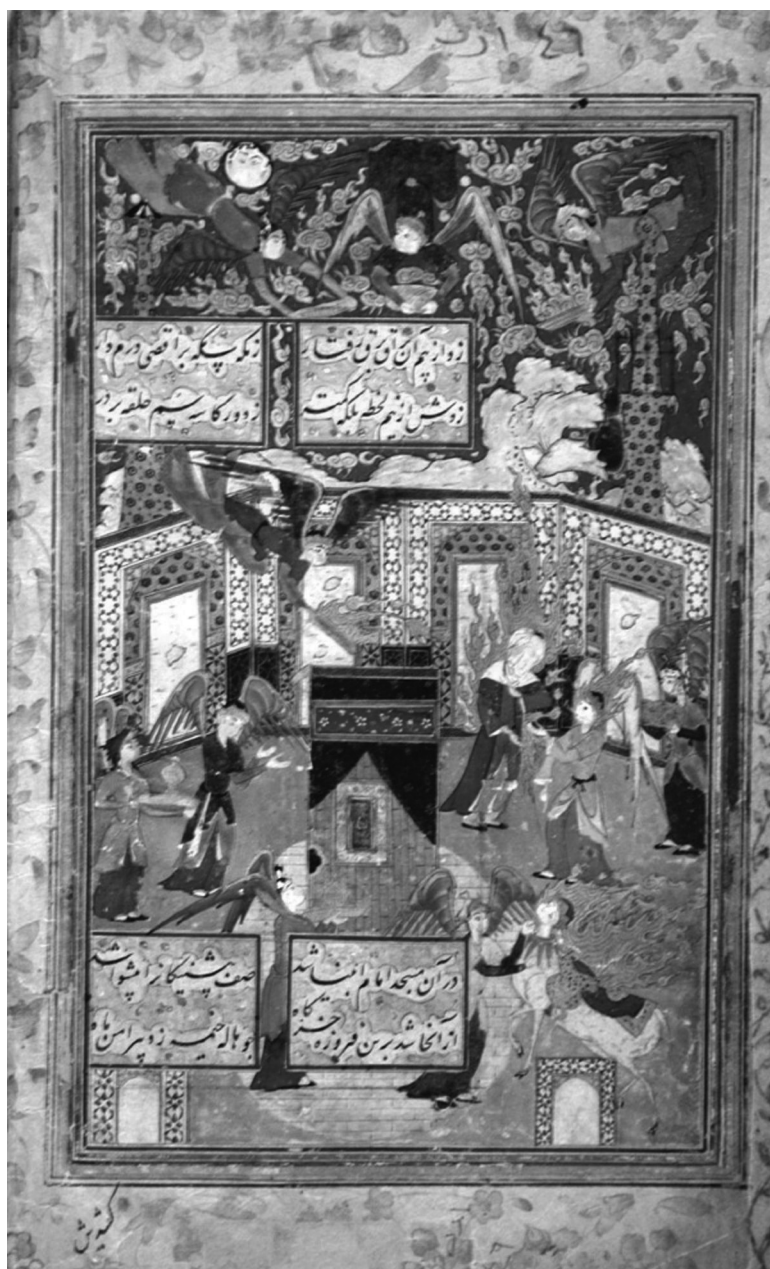hagen, David Collection, MS inv. no. 20/2008. http://www.davidmus.dk/en/collections/islamic/dynasties/il-khanids/art/20–2008

Illustration 2. The prophet Muḥammad at the Kaʿba in Mecca, on the night of his ascension, approached by the angel Gabriel, with al-Burāq standing in the lower right corner, Jāmī's *Yūsuf va Zulaykhā* ("Joseph and Potiphar's wife"), Iran, late tenth/sixteenth century. Cairo, Dār al-Kutub, MS Adab Fārsī 46, p. 9. (photograph courtesy of Dār al-Kutub)

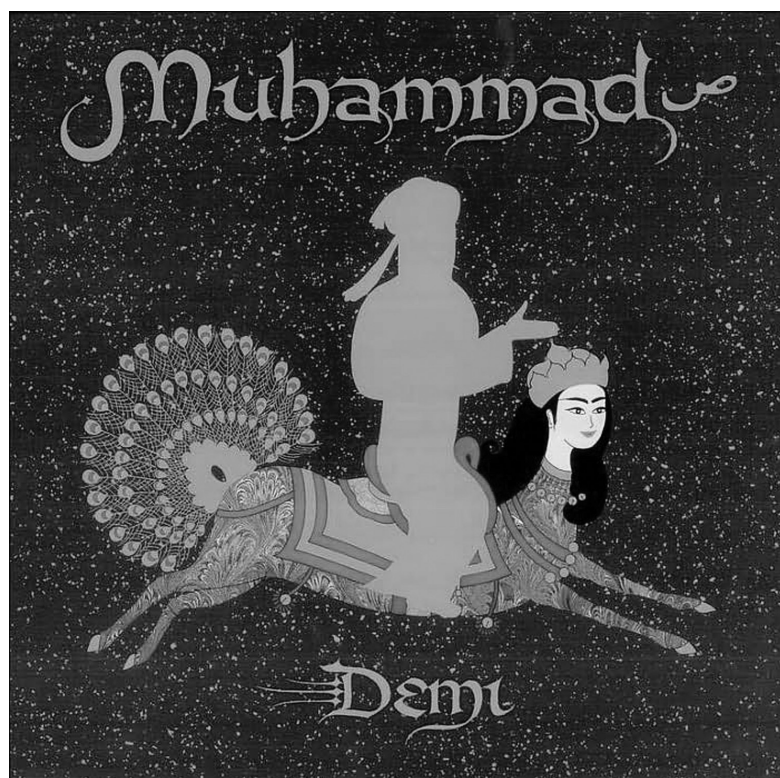Illustration 3. Ala Ebtekar, *Ascension series*, acrylic and ink on book pages mounted on canvas, Iran, 2007. http://www.torandj.com/works/Ascension.html



Illustration 4. The prophet Muḥammad (in gold outline) ascends on al-Burāq, front cover, Demi (author and illustrator), *Muhammad*, New York 2003[1].

the richness of Islamic bio-apocalyptic thought and artistic imagination during the post-mediaeval period.

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