

Secret History of the Flying Carpet

Azhar Abadi



Long before the broomstick became popular with witches in medieval Europe, the flying carpet was being used by thieves and madmen in the Orient. Factual evidence for what was a long-standing myth has now been found by a French explorer, Henri Baq, in Iran.

Baq has discovered scrolls of well-preserved manuscripts in underground cellars of an old Assassin castle at Alamut, near the Caspian Sea. Written in the early thirteenth century by a Jewish scholar named Isaac Ben Sherira, these manuscripts shed new light on the real story behind the flying carpet of the Arabian Nights.

The discovery of these artifacts has thrown the scientific world into the most outrageous strife. Following their translation from Persian into English by Professor G.D. Septimus, the renowned linguist, a hastily organized conference of eminent scholars from all over the world was called at the London School of Oriental and African Studies. Baq's discovery came under flak from many historians who insisted that the manuscripts were forgeries. M. Baq, who could not attend the conference because of the birth of his child, was defended by Professor Septimus, who argued that the new findings should be properly investigated. The manuscripts are now being carbon dated at the Istituto Leonardo da Vinci, Trieste.

According to Ben Sherira, Muslim rulers used to consider flying carpets as devil-inspired contraptions. Their existence was denied, their science suppressed, their manufacturers persecuted and any evidence about incidents involving them systematically erased. Although flying carpets were woven and sold till the late thirteenth century, the clientele for them was chiefly at the fringe of respectable society. Ben Sherira writes that flying carpets received a favorable nod from the establishment around AD 1213, when a Toranian prince demonstrated their use in attacking an enemy castle by positioning a squadron of archers on them, so as to form a kind of airborne cavalry; the art otherwise floundered, and eventually perished in the onslaught of the Mongols.

The earliest mention of the flying carpet, according to Ben Sherira's chronicle, was made in two ancient texts. The first of these is a book of proverbs collected by Shamsha-Ad, a minister of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, and the other is a book of ancient dialogues compiled by one Josephus. None of these works survives today; however, with their aid, Ben Sherira compiled a story relating to the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon that is not found elsewhere. Located at the southern tip of Arabia, the land of Sheba occupied the area of present-day Yemen, although some geographers claim that Ethiopia or ancient Abyssinia was also part of its territory. This country was ruled by a beautiful and powerful queen who is remembered in history as the Sheba of the Bible, the Saba or Makeda of the Ethiopian epic Kebra Negast, and the Bilqis of Islam.

At the inauguration of the queen in 977 BC, her alchemist-royal demonstrated small brown rugs that could hover a few feet above the ground. Many years later she sent a magnificent flying carpet to King Solomon. A token of love, it was of green sendal embroidered with gold and silver and studded with precious stones, and its length and breadth were such that all the king's host could stand upon it. The king, who was preoccupied with building his temple in Jerusalem, could not receive the gift and gave it to his courtiers. When news of this cool reception reached the queen, she was heartbroken. She dismissed her artisans and never had anything to do with flying carpets again. The king and the queen eventually reconciled, but the wandering artisans found no abode for many years, and eventually had to settle near the town of Baghdad in Mesopotamia in c. 934 BC.

In the Ben Sherira chronicle, certain passages describe the workings of a flying carpet. Unfortunately, much of the vocabulary used in these parts is indecipherable, so little has been understood about their method of propulsion. What is understood is that a flying carpet was spun on a loom like an ordinary carpet; the difference lay in the dyeing process. Here, the artisans had discovered a certain clay, 'procured from mountain springs and untouched by human hand', which, when superheated at 'temperatures that exceeded those of the seventh ring of hell' in a cauldron of

boiling Grecian oil, acquired anti-magnetic properties. Now the Earth itself is a magnet, and has trillions of magnetic lines crossing it from the North to the South Pole. The scientists prepared this clay and dyed the wool in it before weaving it on a loom. So, when the carpet was finally ready, it pulled itself away from the Earth and, depending on the concentration of clay used, hovered a few feet or several hundred feet above the ground. Propulsion went along the magnetic lines, which acted like aerial rails. Although they were known to the Druids in England and the Incas in South America, only recently are physicists beginning to rediscover the special properties of these so-called 'fey-lines'.

Ben Sherira writes that the great library of Alexandria, founded by Ptolemy I, kept a large stock of flying carpets for its readers. They could borrow these carpets in exchange for their slippers, to glide back and forth, up and down, among the shelves of papyrus manuscripts. The library was housed in a ziggurat that contained forty thousand scrolls of such antiquity that they had been transcribed by three hundred generations of scribes, many of whom did not understand the dead alphabet that they bore. The ceiling of this building was so high that readers often preferred to read while hovering in the air. The manuscripts were so numerous that it was said that not even a thousand men reading them day and night for fifty years could read them all. Although the library had been damaged in the civil war under the Roman emperor Aurelian, its final destruction is attributed to a Muslim general. He burnt the papyrus to heat the six hundred baths of Alexandria, and the carpets, which frightened the wits out of his Bedouin Arabs, were thrown into the sea. Ben Sherira comments bitterly that the knowledge of Alexandria went down the drainpipe in 'washing the dirt of philistines'. Flying carpets were discouraged in the Islamic lands for two reasons. The official line was that man was never intended to fly, and the flying carpet was a sacrilege to the order of things, an argument that was spread enthusiastically by a zealous clergy. The second reason was economic. For the establishment, it was necessary to keep the horse and the camel as the standard means of transport. The reason was that certain Arab families, who had access to the inner chambers of successive rulers, had become rich because of their vast stud farms, where they bred hundreds of thousands of horses each year for the army, merchants and the proletariat. It was the same with camels. Certain Egyptian king-makers (listed by Ben Sherira as the Hatimis, the Zahidis and the progeny of Abu Hanifa II) owned camel farms, and enjoyed a total monopoly on the supply of camels in the whole of the Islamic empire. None of these old families wanted their privileges usurped by a small group of poor artisans who could potentially wreck their markets by making flying carpets popular. Thus they were undermined. Thanks to the mullahs' propaganda, the Muslim middle class was beginning to shun flying carpets by the mid-eighth century. The market for Arabian horses flourished instead. Camels were also fetching high prices. Ben Sherira notes that a curious

incident, which happened around this time, damaged the reputation of the flying carpet beyond salvation:

On a bright Friday afternoon in Baghdad, when the white disc of the sun blazed in the third quarter of middle heaven, and the bazaar bustled with people buying fruits and cloth and watching an auction of fair-skinned slaves, there appeared across the sun the shimmering wraith of a turbaned man gliding towards the highest minaret of the Royal Palace.

The devil was no other than a poor soldier who had once served in the palace. He had been caught holding the youngest princess's hand, and was thrown out by the eunuchs, disgraced and defeated. When news about this affair reached the caliph, he was furious. He had the princess locked up in a tower, and to humiliate her, decided to marry her off to his royal executioner, a towering black slave from Zanzibar. The soldier, a Kurdish youth by the name of Mustafa, now returned. He glided up to the minaret and helped a girl climb out of the window. Then in full view of the public below, he glided away. The bazaaris cheered. As the young lovers eloped on their carpet, a battery of the elite guard, mounted on black Arabian stallions, charged out of the palace and gave chase. But the flying carpet disappeared in the clouds above.

The establishment retaliated by hunting down everyone even remotely involved with the business of flying carpets. Thirty artisans were rounded up with their families in a public square. A paid audience was assembled. The men were accused of being libertines, and their heads rolled in the dust, all chopped off by the black executioner from Zanzibar. Next, the caliph sent his spies to every corner of his empire ordering them to bring back every remaining flying carpet and artisan to Baghdad. The small community of artisans, who had lived near the Tigris for several centuries, packed their possessions and, with only three male survivors, fled.

After wandering for many months through the moon-like wastes of Iranian marshlands, they reached, ragged and near death, the shining city of Bukhara, where the emir, who did not take orders from Baghdad, gave them refuge. This exodus, Isaac notes, happened in AD 776, a decade before the celebrated reign of Harun ur Rashid, when *The Thousand and One Nights* was written. Isaac believes that the inspiration for at least one of the tales in the *Arabian Nights* comes from the incident of the eloping lovers on that bright Friday afternoon in Baghdad.

Ben Sherira describes the genealogy of the artisans in great detail. Some of these families later migrated to Afghanistan and established themselves in the Kingdom of Ghor. The most renowned family of carpet weavers, the Halevis, settled in the town of Merv, where they began to introduce patterns into their carpets. The mandala in the centre was a trademark of the master, Jacob Yahud Halevi — the same Jacob

who appears in history as the teacher of Avicenna. Artisans also wandered (or flew) into Europe, where their recipes were subsequently employed by a feminist secret society, that of the witches. Their persecution, meted out by the church, was equally swift. Ben Sherira claims that the witches' trademark, the broomstick, with its phallic symbolism, was developed because of their lack of male company.

In Transoxiana, the flying carpet enjoyed a brief renaissance before being erased forever by the Mongol hordes of Genghis Khan. Two incidents are worthy of mention here. In 1213, Prince Behroz of the state of Khorasan in eastern Persia, took to heart a young Jewess, Ashirah. Her father was an accomplished carpet-maker. Behroz married Ashirah against the wishes of his family, and requested his father-in-law to weave two dozen flying carpets using the best wool and the best clay, specially wound on a bamboo frame to make them more robust. Next he had forty-eight of his handpicked archers trained by a Japanese master by the name of Ryu Taro Koike (1153-1240?).

When the archers were ready and the carpets delivered, he assembled his men and gave each man his weapons: twenty steel-pointed arrows tipped with rattlesnake venom, longbows made of layers of deodar and catgut, and Armenian daggers. Two men were assigned to each carpet: one fore, one aft. Some carried fireballs. Behroz thus conceived four squadrons of the first airborne cavalry of the world, which went into action when his father waged a war against the neighboring Khwarzem Shah. The archers led the assault: they attacked the castle, dived in and flew out, felled the defenders and threw fireballs inside its compound, setting it ablaze. The Toranian military brass were awed. They sensed that the prince could become a threat to their oligarchy, and with his father's consent, blinded him. The prince's wife, heavy with child, and her ailing father were banished from the kingdom. Around this time, the Abbasids no longer wielded the same power as in the days of Harun ur Rashid. Many local kings and emirs were taking matters into their own hands. As the grip of the empire on its states weakened, a cult of the flying carpet flourished. Young dissidents, political refugees, hermits and agnostics went airborne for their escapades. Merchants also began to see the advantages of the flying carpet. The flying carpet was not only a much speedier form of transport than the camel but also a safer one since bandits would not waylay a flying trade caravan — unless they themselves were on a fleet of flying carpets.

Artisans began to weave bigger carpets, but with more people on board these became sluggish and lost height. But there is one episode, witnessed by many people on the ground, where a party of turbaned men flew from Samarkand to Isfahan at whirlwind speed. This incident is corroborated in the facsimile of another rare text, produced in the seventeenth century, in which one witness is quoted as saying 'We saw a strange whirling disc in the sky, which flew over our village [Nishapur],

trailing fire and sulphur', and another: 'A band of djinn appeared over our caravan, heading towards the Straits of Ormuz.'⁵ (The thirteenth-century original of this text is impossible to find.) The next incident, before the terrible invasion from the steppes, was the last straw in the ill-fated history of the flying carpet. In 1223, a dragoman of Georgia arrived in Bukhara with his harem to shop for Chinese silk. Ben Sherira's source, the guardian of Minareh Kalyan, describes what eventuated:

On a pleasant evening, when the suk was bustling with people, and the veiled ladies from Georgia had just disembarked from their litters and were being escorted to the silk merchant, a madman appeared from behind a dome and swooped down at them. The flier was a giant of a man with a magnificent black beard and long hair trailing in the wind behind him. He was wearing a loincloth, his eyes were a luminous green, an eagle was flying by his side, and he was laughing madly. The women saw this apparition heading towards them and froze with terror as he tore away his loincloth and started urinating in their upturned faces.

This man was the mathematician-royal of Samarkand, Karim Beg Isfahani. Betrayed by his Georgian mistress, he had drunk a goblet of fermented grapes and gone insane. The incident caused pandemonium. A spear was launched that caught him in the chest, and he fell, dead, into a palm tree. But the outrage caused in Bukhara was understandable. Fearing another massacre, the artisans burnt their laboratories, left their possessions, and fled in all directions. Ben Sherira writes that on that fateful day they swore never again to weave together a flying carpet.

The story almost ends here. In 1226 Genghis Khan laid waste most of the cities in Central Asia. Their inhabitants were massacred; their treasures plundered. The towers of skulls outside Herat, Balkh and Bukhara — so vast that the whole countryside reeked with their stench — included the skulls of the artisans. In their loot, the Mongols found flying carpets. When a prisoner told them that these contraptions were more agile than the steppes pony (a blasphemy to Mongol ears, if ever there was one), the great Khan beheaded him and had his skull made into a drinking mug. He ordered all flying carpets in his vast empire confiscated.