

IBN BATTUTA: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Abu Abdullah Muhammad Ibn Battuta, was a Moroccan Muslim scholar and traveler. He is known for his traveling and going on excursions called the Rihla. His journeys lasted for a period of almost thirty years. This covered nearly the whole of the known Islamic world and beyond, extending from North Africa, West Africa, Southern Europe and Eastern Europe in the West, to the Middle East, Indian subcontinent, Central Asia, Southeast Asia and China in the East, a distance readily surpassing that of his predecessors. After his travel he returned to Morocco and gave his account of the experience to Ibn Juzay.

Ibn Battuta often experienced culture shock in regions he visited. The local customs of recently converted people did not fit his orthodox Muslim background. Among Turks and Mongols, he was astonished at the way women behaved. They were given freedom of speech. He also felt that the dress customs in the Maldives and some sub-Saharan regions in Africa were too revealing.

After the completion of the Rihla in 1355, little is known about Ibn Battuta's life. He was appointed a judge in Morocco and died in 1368. Nevertheless, the Rihla provides an important account of many areas of the world in the 14th century.

The paper is consist of the historical analysis of his journeys.

INTRODUCTION

Abu Abdullah Muhammad Ibn Battuta, was born in Tangier, Morocco, on the 24th of February 1304 C.E. (703 Hijra) during the time of the Marinid dynasty. He was commonly known as Shams ad-Din. His family was of Berber origin and had a tradition of service as judges. After receiving an education in Islamic law, he chose to travel. He left his house in June 1325, when he was twenty one years of age and set off from his hometown on a hajj (pilgrimage) to Mecca, a journey that took him 16 months. He did not come back to Morocco for at least 24 years after that. His journey was mostly by land. To reduce the risk of being attacked, he usually chose to join a caravan. In the town of Sfax, he got married. He survived wars, shipwrecks, and rebellions.

HIS JOURNEYS

He first began his voyage by exploring the lands of the Middle East. Thereafter he sailed down the Red Sea to Mecca. He crossed the huge Arabian Desert and traveled to Iraq and Iran. In 1330, he set

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of again, down the Red Sea to Aden and then to Tanzania. Then in 1332, Ibn Battuta decided to go to India. He was greeted open heartedly by the Sultan of Delhi. There he was given the job of a judge. He stayed in India for a period of 8 years and then left for China. Ibn Battuta left for another adventure in 1352. He then went south, crossed the Sahara desert, and visited the African kingdom of Mali.

Finally, he returned home at Tangier in 1355. Those who were lodging Ibn Battuta's grave Western Orient lists could not believe that Ibn Battuta visited all the places that he described. They argued that in order to provide a comprehensive description of places in the Muslim world in such a short time, Ibn Battuta had to rely on hearsay evidence and make use of accounts by earlier travelers.

Ibn Battuta's solitude did not last long, according to his chronicles. The governor of one city gave him alms of gold and woolen cloth, as almsgiving was considered a pillar of Islam. Ibn Battuta stayed at madrasas and at Sufi hospices as he made his way to Tunis. By the time he left Tunis he was serving as a paid judge, a qadi, of a caravan of pilgrims who needed their disputes settled by a well-educated man. Alexandria and Damascus were two highlights on the part of the trip that followed.

Ibn Battuta entered Mecca in mid-October 1326, a year and four months after leaving home. He stayed a month, taking part in all the ritual experiences and talking with diverse people from every Islamic land. While his writings don't provide much detail about what this experience meant to him, after it was over he set out for Baghdad instead of returning home. He traveled in a camel caravan of returning pilgrims, and this is when his real globetrotting began.

Ibn Battuta led a complete life while traveling. He studied and prayed; he practiced his legal profession; he had astonishing outdoor adventures; he married at least 10 times and left children growing up all over Afro-Eurasia. A few examples of these activities provide a good picture of his life's journey.

In Alexandria, Ibn Battuta spent three days as a guest of a locally venerated Sufi ascetic by the name of Burhan al-Din the Lame. This holy man saw that Ibn Battuta had a passion for travel. He suggested that Ibn Battuta visit three other fellow Sufis, two in India and one in China. Of the encounter with Buurhan al-Din, Ibn Battuta wrote in his Travels, "I was amazed at his [Burhan al-Din's] prediction, and the idea of going to these countries having been cast into my mind, my wanderings never ceased until I had met these three that he named and conveyed his greeting to them."

Ibn Battuta visited another saint who lived a quiet life of devotion in a town near Alexandria. It was summer and Ibn Battuta slept on the roof of the man's cell. There he had a dream of a large bird that

carried him far eastward and left him there. The saint interpreted this to mean that Ibn Battuta would travel to India and stay there for a long time, echoing what Burhan al-Din had said.

Caravan going to Mecca, from The Maqamat by Al-Hariri © The Gallery Collection/CORBIS

In Damascus, Ibn Battuta boarded in one of the three madrasas. During his 24-day stay he settled down into some formal studies. Damascus had the largest concentration of famous theologians and jurists in the Arab-speaking world. They taught by reading and commenting on a classical book, then testing their students' knowledge of it and issuing certificates to those who passed their tests.

Ibn Battuta then fulfilled the prophecies of the various seers he'd met by traveling to India via Afghanistan, where he had to cross the Hindu Kush Mountains at one of several high passes. His group crossed at the 13,000-foot (4,000-meter) Khawak Pass. "We crossed the mountains," Ibn Battuta re-called in Travels, "setting out about the end of the night and traveling all day long until sunset. We kept spreading felt clothes in front of the camels for them to tread on, so that they would not sink in the snow." Upon arriving in Delhi, Ibn Battuta sought an official career from the Muslim king of India, Muhammad Tughluq.

The king of India made a practice of appointing foreigners as ministers and judges. As Ibn Battuta traveled to the court in Delhi, 82 Hindu bandits attacked his group of 22; Ibn Battuta and his men drove them off, killing 13 of the thieves. King Tughluq appointed him judge of Delhi, but since Ibn Battuta did not speak Persian, the language of the court, two scholars were appointed to do the work of hearing cases. After eight years, Ibn Battuta was eager to escape the political intrigue. The king agreed to send him as an ambassador to China, and made him responsible for taking shiploads of goods to the Yuan emperor, in return for the emperor's previous gifts of 100 slaves and cartloads of cloth and swords.

Ibn Battuta was set to sail from Calcutta with one large ship holding the goods for the Chinese emperor and a smaller ship filled with his personal entourage. Everything and everybody was loaded for departure, but Ibn Battuta spent the last day in the city attending Friday prayers. That evening a storm blew in, and the large ship with the presents ran aground and sank.

The smaller one, with Ibn Battuta's servants, concubines, friends, and personal belongings, took to sea to escape the storm. Reduced to his prayer rug and the clothes on his back, Ibn Battuta could only hope to catch up with the ship carrying his group.

Thus Ibn Battuta's travels continued, with narrow escapes and dramatically varying fortunes. Eventually he learned that his ship had been seized by a non-Muslim ruler in Sumatra. He decided to go to China anyway, but stopped on the way at the Maldives, an island group 400 miles southwest off the coast of India.

In the Maldives, Ibn Battuta enjoyed the company of women even more than usual. Usually, he married one at a time and divorced her when he left on further travels. He often had concubines, too, purchased or given as gifts. In the Maldives he married four women on one island, the legal limit under Muslim law. As he wrote in his Travels:

It is easy to marry in these islands because of the smallness of the dowries and the pleasures of society which the women offer... When the ships put in, the crew marry; when they intend to leave they divorce their wives. This is a kind of temporary marriage. The women of these islands never leave their country.

From there, Ibn Battuta continued on to China. Battuta's narrative about China occupies less than 6 percent of his whole story. It is so sketchy and confusing that some scholars doubt that he even went to China and believe he merely fabricated this part of his account. He claims to have gone as far north as Beijing, but his description of that is even vaguer than the rest, so perhaps he only got as far north as Zaitun, now Quanzhou. In any case, he admits in the Travels that in China he was unable to understand or accept much of what he saw; it was not part of his familiar Dar al-Islam.

CONCLUSION

Unlike the impact of the Travels of Marco Polo on the European world, the account of Battuta's travels had only modest impact on the Muslim world before the 19th century. While copies circulated earlier, it was French and English scholars who eventually brought The Travels of Ibn Battuta the international attention it deserved.

How does Ibn Battuta's account compare with that of Marco Polo's? Each traveler lived by his wits — they had that in common. Each took joy in discovering new experiences, and each exercised amazing perseverance and fortitude to complete extensive travels and return to their home country.

Yet there were many differences. Ibn Battuta was an educated, cosmopolitan, gregarious, upper-class man who traveled within a familiar Muslim culture, meeting like-minded people wherever he went. Polo was a merchant, not formally educated, who traveled to strange, unfamiliar cultures, where he learned new ways of dressing, speaking, and behaving. Ibn Battuta told more about himself, the people he met, and the importance of the positions he held. Marco Polo, on the other hand, focused on reporting accurate information about what he had observed. How fortunate we are to have accounts from two contrasting intercontinental travelers from more than 600 years ago.

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