

THE TRAVELS OF IBN BATTUTA

The greatest traveller of the Old World before modern times was undoubtedly Abu `Abdallah ibn Battuta. In the course of 29 years, he travelled across the eastern hemisphere for a total distance of roughly 116,800 km and he visited regions which today comprise 44 modern countries. When his epic journeys were complete, his adventures were dedicated to a young scholar of literature named Ibn Juzayy and recorded in a book titled the *Rihla*. This is a descriptive work that does not attempt to present his itinerary in a rigidly detailed fashion, so some of the dates of his travels remain unclear.

He was born in 1304 CE to a family of Islamic legal scholars in Tangier, Morocco. After spending his youth studying law, he left home in 1325 to undertake the pilgrimage, known as the hajj, to the holy city of Mecca in Arabia. Along the way he visited North Africa, Egypt, Palestine, and Syria before arriving at his destination. With the completion of this, his first hajj, in 1326, Ibn Battuta began a tour of Iraq and Persia. After returning to Mecca in either 1328 or 1330, he voyaged by sea down the eastern coast of Africa to modern-day Tanzania. On his return trip, he sailed to Oman and the Persian Gulf and returned overland across central Arabia to Mecca. Around 1330 or 1332, he decided to set out for India in order to seek employment with the government of the Islamic Sultanate of Delhi. But instead of travelling by ship, he journeyed north through Egypt and Syria, and then to Asia Minor. He then crossed the Black Sea and travelled to West Central Asia, and after spending some time there, made an abrupt detour west to visit Constantinople. After returning to West Central Asia, he finally proceeded to India, venturing through Transoxiana, Khurasan, and Afghanistan along the way. He finally reached the Indus River in either 1333 or 1335.

Ibn Battuta spent the next eight years in India, where he worked as a qadi, or judge, in the government of the Sultan of Delhi. In 1341 he was appointed by the Sultan to lead a diplomatic mission to the court of the Mongol emperor of China. Unfortunately, the mission ended in disaster as he was shipwrecked off the southwestern coast of India. Once more unemployed, he decided to do some more travelling, and spent the next two years moving throughout southern India, Ceylon, and the Maldivian Islands, where he did find a temporary position, again as a qadi. In 1345, he resolved to make his own journey by sea to China, and visited Bengal, Burma, and Sumatra before finally reaching Canton. The details of his sojourn in China are not entirely clear, but his travels were probably limited to southern China. In 1346-47 he returned again to Mecca via southern India, the Persian Gulf, Syria, and Egypt. After performing the hajj one final time, he at last made his way back to Morocco, arriving in Fez in 1349. But he did not remain sedentary for long. In 1350 he made a short trip to the Muslim kingdom of Grenada on the Iberian peninsula, and in 1353 he took his final great

journey by caravan across the Sahara to Mali in West Africa. He made his final return to Morocco in 1355, where he stayed until his death in 1368.

In his account of his travels, Ibn Battuta left a wealth of descriptive detail about many of the places he visited. Although he tended to gravitate more to the educated and urban classes throughout his journeys, there were very few aspects of life that escaped his attention. He spoke of everything, from the royal ceremonies of the Sultan of Delhi, to the social customs of ordinary people in the Maldivian Islands, to coconut harvesting in southern Arabia. Although Ibn Battuta was cosmopolitan and generally tolerant of different customs and peoples, his account periodically betrays personal attitudes and biases. For instance, during his stay, he admitted that

China was beautiful, but it did not please me. On the contrary, I was greatly troubled thinking about the way paganism dominated this country. Whenever I went out of my lodging, I saw many blameworthy things. That disturbed me so much that I stayed indoors most of the time and only went out when necessary. During my stay in China, whenever I saw any Muslims I always felt as though I were meeting my own family and close kinsmen.¹

If he was uncharacteristically intolerant in his description of China, it was because Ibn Battuta intended that his book be an account of the successful expansion of Islam. His journeys, vast as they were, took him, for the most part, through regions which had come under Muslim rule, or in which a significant segment of the population had undergone conversion to Islam. This greater Muslim world, known as the Dar al-Islam ("Abode of Islam"), was the real focus of the *Rihla* of Ibn Battuta.

The critical attitudes in his book were levelled mostly at peoples whom he considered to be unbelievers, such as the Chinese. He tended towards greater open-mindedness while moving within the Dar al-Islam, where the multitude of differing cultures and the mosaic of social customs fell under the rule of the shari'a, the code of Islamic law.

Although the exploits of Marco Polo remain more well known to western readers, Ibn Battuta far outdid Polo in terms of the number of places that he visited and reported on. But the contrast between the two is greater than the mere distances that each covered. Marco Polo was essentially exploring regions that were little-known to his fellow Europeans, while Ibn Battuta never strayed far from the world of Islamic culture; a world in which he could always find hospitality and companionship with individuals sharing sensibilities similar to his own. He was a member of the literate elite, a class that could be found throughout the Islamic world. His travels illustrate the remarkable extent of Islamic expansion throughout the Old World, and they

display the possibilities for long-distance travel that existed in the fourteenth century. The figure of the "globe-trotter" is not one that is unique only to the modern world.

¹C. Defremery and B.R. Sanguinetti (trans. and eds.), *Voyages d'Ibn Battuta*, 4 vols. (Paris 1853-58; reprint edn., Vincent Monteil, ed., Paris, 1979), vol.4, pp. 282-83, in Ross E. Dunn, *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta, A Muslim Traveler of the 14th Century* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), p. 258.

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