

# IBN BATTUTA - Profile of a world traveller

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- Ibn Battuta was a famous Muslim who travelled the then known world. In 1325 he left his home in Tangier to travel on a religious pilgrimage (*Hajj*) to the holy Islamic city of Mecca.
- His many trips are recorded in a book titled *Rihla* or 'My Travels', which covered 30 years of travel. On his journey to Mecca he passed through North Africa and visited Egypt.
- His goal in travelling was to study Islam but also to learn about other cultures. This was to take him through West and Central Asia, onto South Asia and finally to China (East Asia).
- The Editor of *Time*, Michael Elliott, said 'wherever he went Ibn Battuta found one constant: the shared faith and culture of Islam, which knit together a community around the world long before anyone had thought of the word 'globalisation'.
- Ross Dunn said 'Ibn Battuta was a member of the literate, mobile, world-minded elite and regarded himself as a citizen, not of Morocco, but of Dar Al-Islam (the combined divine community of Moslems), to whose universalist, spiritual, moral and social values he was loyal above any other allegiance'.
- His travels showed him that Moslem practice within varying cultures differed enormously then as they do today. At the time of his travels much of Central Asia, Russia and China was part of the territorial empire of the Mongols. They encouraged the free flow of people and goods along trade routes which covered vast distances between China in the East and Europe in the West. This led to increasing cultural interaction between merchants, scholars, mystics and pilgrims. He was able to move freely along The Silk Road from city to city and from principality to kingdom.
- He first reached Mecca in 1326 and spent several years in all living and studying in Mecca. His final stay in Mecca was in 1348 on his way home to Morocco.
- In 1334 he arrived in India and spent 8 years in Delhi as a judge or Qadi in the Sultan's Court. In 1342 he was appointed as an ambassador for the Sultan and travelled to China on his behalf.
- In China he noted many differences such as the use of animals like frogs in cooking. He visited the 'Mount of the Hermit' in Quanzhou and spent time with a Taoist monk. Part of his journey was on the Grand Canal to Beijing and he described in great detail the countryside through which he travelled.
- Some of the other places that he visited included Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Iran and Iraq, Damascus, Anatolia and Constantinople.
- For many centuries his book was obscure, even within the Muslim world. Early in the nineteenth century extracts were published in German and English. During the French occupation of Algeria in the 1830s, five manuscripts were discovered, two of which were complete versions.
- Two French scholars, Charles Defrémery and Beniamino Sanguinetti published a series of four volumes containing the Arabic text with extensive notes and a French translation.
- 'The *Rihla*, or travel book, was a common form in the North Africa of his day, commissioned by sultans to give readers back home a sense of the great intercontinental network of Islamic fellowship and prayer.' (Pico Iyer)
- Ibn Battuta was a traveller/explorer like others in history. Marco Polo had covered much of the same paths some fifty years before him. Admiral Zheng He of China had travelled as far as Africa. The city of Hangzhou was known to all three. It was a cosmopolitan city where Muslims, Jews and Buddhists were well represented and each followed their faith.
- 'When China was the greatest power on Earth, it was a society open to influences from all the known world.' (Michael Elliott)
- Acknowledgement of the significance of Ibn Battuta exists in many places of the world from a statue in Bamako, the capital of Mali, to the world's largest theme mall in Dubai. There are historical dramas, animated series and even a computer game based on the travels of Ibn Battuta.
- He did not write of his travels as he went but dictated them when he returned home. There are critics today who believe his 'rememberings' are not always accurate and some believe that parts are so 'sketchy' that he probably didn't visit them at all but simply used earlier accounts by others.

Even if true, however, it does not detract from the work as a whole, which presents a view of the world at that time which gives an amazing insight for the modern scholar and reader.

## RESOURCES

□ A very useful source for teachers is the special journey issue of *Time*, 1 August 2011, 'Travels through Islam' and 'Discovering a world of change and challenge in the footsteps of the 14th century explorer Ibn Battuta'.

□ There are two pages of source material from his travels for teachers to use. Topics for questions might include

- historical sites
- religious practices
- social observations
- science and technology.

These could be set up in a table form, and then discussed in class.

□ Maps showing the extent of Ibn Battuta's travels are readily available on the internet. Students can prepare their own maps and compare with those of Marco Polo and Zheng He.

□ Students could complete a timeline of the life of Ibn Battuta.

□ Students could research the lives of others mentioned (eg. Marco Polo, Zheng He).

□ Vocabulary and terminology lists could be completed by students.

## Source Sheet 1 (1 of 2)

**Here begins Ibn Battuta's travels.** (p 43)

I left Tangier, my birthplace, on Thursday, 2nd Rajab 725 [14 June 1325], being at that time twenty-two years of age [22 lunar years; 21 and 4 months by solar reckoning], with the intention of making the Pilgrimage to the Holy House [at Mecca] and the Tomb of the Prophet [at Medina].

I set out alone, finding no companion to cheer the way with friendly intercourse, and no party of travellers with whom to associate myself. Swayed by an overmastering impulse within me, and a long-cherished desire to visit those glorious sanctuaries, I resolved to quit all my friends and tear myself away from my home. As my parents were still alive, it weighed grievously upon me to part from them, and both they and I were afflicted with sorrow.

On reaching the city of Tilimsan [Tiemsen], whose sultan at that time was Abu Tashifin, I found there two ambassadors of the Sultan of Tunis, who left the city on the same day that I arrived. One of the brethren having advised me to accompany them, I consulted the will of God in this matter, and after a stay of three days in the city to procure all that I needed, I rode after them with all speed. I overtook them at the town of Miliana, where we stayed ten days, as both ambassadors fell sick on account of the summer heats. When we set out again, one of them grew worse, and died after we had stopped for three nights by a stream four miles from Miliana. I left their party there and pursued my journey, with a company of merchants from Tunis.

**Arrival at Alexandria** (pp 47-50)

At length on 5 April (1326) we reached Alexandria. It is a beautiful city, well-built and fortified with four gates and a magnificent port. Among all the ports in

the world I have seen none to equal it except Kawlan [Quilon] and Calicut in India, the port of the infidels [Genoese] at Sudaq [Sudak, in the Crimea] in the land of the Turks, and the port of Zaytun [Canton?] in China, all of which will be described later.

**The famous lighthouse, one of the 'wonders of the ancient world'**

I went to see the lighthouse on this occasion and found one of its faces in ruins. It is a very high square building, and its door is above the level of the earth. Opposite the door, and of the same height, is a building from which there is a plank bridge to the door; if this is removed there is no means of entrance. Inside the door is a place for the lighthouse-keeper, and within the lighthouse there are many chambers. The breadth of the passage inside is nine spans and that of the wall ten spans; each of the four sides of the lighthouse is 140 spans in breadth. It is situated on a high mound and lies three miles from the city on a long tongue of land which juts out into the sea from close by the city wall, so that the lighthouse cannot be reached by land except from the city. On my return to the West in the year 750 [1349] I visited the lighthouse again, and found that it had fallen into so ruinous a condition that it was not possible to enter it or climb up to the door.

Al-Malik an-Nasir had started to build a similar lighthouse alongside it but was prevented by death from completing the work. Another of the marvellous things in this city is the awe-inspiring marble column [an obelisk] on its outskirts which they call the Pillar of Columns. It is a single block, skilfully carved, erected on a plinth of square stones like enormous platforms, and no one knows how it was erected there nor for certain who erected it.



## Source Sheet 1 (2 of 2)

### Arrival at Cairo (pp 50-55)

#### Religious institutions

The mosque of 'Amr is highly venerated and widely celebrated. The Friday service is held in it and the road runs through it from east to west. The madrasas [college mosques] of Cairo cannot be counted for multitude. As for the Maristan [hospital], which lies 'between the two castles' near the mausoleum of Sultan Qala'un, no description is adequate to its beauties. It contains an innumerable quantity of appliances and medicaments, and its daily revenue is put as high as a thousand dinars.

There are a large number of religious establishments ['convents'] which they call khanqahs, and the nobles vie with one another in building them. Each of these is set apart for a separate school of darwishes, mostly Persians, who are men of good education and adept in the mystical doctrines. Each has a superior and a doorkeeper and their affairs are admirably organised. They have many special customs one of which has to do with their food. The steward of the house comes in the morning to the darwishes, each of whom indicates what food he desires, and when they assemble for meals, each person is given his bread

and soup in a separate dish, none sharing with another. They eat twice a day. They are each given winter clothes and summer clothes, and a monthly allowance of from twenty to thirty dirhams. Every Thursday night they receive sugar cakes, soap to wash their clothes, the price of a bath, and oil for their lamps. These men are celibate; the married men have separate convents.

At Cairo too is the great cemetery of al-Qarafa, which is a place of peculiar sanctity and contains the graves of innumerable scholars and pious believers. In the Qarafa the people build beautiful pavilions surrounded by walls, so that they look like houses. They also build chambers and hire Koran-readers who recite night and day in agreeable voices. Some of them build religious houses and madrasas beside the mausoleums and on Thursday nights they go out to spend the night there also on the 'Night of midSha'ban' and the market-people take out all kinds of eatables. Among the many celebrated sanctuaries [in the city] is the holy shrine where there reposes the head of alHusayn. Beside it is a vast monastery of striking construction, on the doors of which there are silver rings and plates of the same metal.

## Source Sheet 2 (1 of 2)

### Ibn Battuta visits the holy sites of Medina (pp 74-77)

That same evening [the third day after leaving al-Ula, on the route from Syria and Damascus] we entered the holy sanctuary and reached the illustrious mosque, halting in salutation at the Gate of peace; then we prayed in the illustrious 'garden' between the tomb of the Prophet and the noble pulpit, and reverently touched the fragment that remains of the palm-trunk against which the Prophet stood when he preached. Having paid our meed of salutation to the lord of men from first to last, the intercessor for sinners, the Prophet of Mecca, Muhammad, as well as to his two companions who share his grave, Abu Bakr and 'Omar, we returned to our camp, rejoicing at this great favour bestowed upon us, praising God for our having reached the former abodes and the magnificent sanctuaries of His holy Prophet, and praying Him to grant that this visit should not be our last and that we might be of those whose pilgrimage is accepted.

On this journey, our stay at Medina lasted four days. We used to spend every night in the illustrious mosque, where the people, after forming circles in

the courtyard and, lighting large numbers of candles, would pass the time either in reciting the Koran from volumes set on rests in front of them, or in intoning litanies, or in visiting the sanctuaries of the holy tomb.

#### From Medina to Mecca through a final desert, the vale of Bazwa

We then set out from Medina towards Mecca, and halted near the mosque of Dhu'l-Hulayfa, five miles away. It was at this point that the Prophet assumed the pilgrim garb and obligations, and here too I divested myself of my tailored clothes, bathed, and putting on the pilgrim's garment I prayed and dedicated myself to the pilgrimage. Our fourth halt from here was at Badr, where God aided His Prophet and performed His promise. It is a village containing a series of palm-gardens and a bubbling spring with a stream flowing from it. Our way lay thence through a frightful desert called the Vale of Bazwa for three days to the valley of Rabigh where the rainwater forms pools which lie stagnant for a long time. From this point (which is just before Juhfa) the pilgrims

## Source Sheet 2 (2 of 2)

from Egypt and Northwest Africa put on the pilgrim garment. Three days after leaving Rabigh we reached the pool of Khulays which lies in a plain and has many palm-gardens. The Bedouin of that neighbourhood hold a market there, to which they bring sheep, fruits, and condiments. Thence we travelled through 'Usfan to the Bottom of Marr, a fertile valley with numerous palms and a spring supplying a stream from which the district is irrigated. From this valley fruit and vegetables are transported to Mecca.

We set out at night from this blessed valley, with hearts full of joy at reaching the goal of our hopes, and in the morning arrived at the City of Surety, Mecca (may God ennoble her!), where we immediately entered the holy sanctuary and began the rites of pilgrimage.

### The cleanliness of the people of Mecca

The Meccans are very elegant and clean in their dress, and most of them wear white garments, which you always see fresh and snowy. They use a great deal of perfume and kohl and make free use of toothpicks of green arak-wood. The Meccan women are extraordinarily beautiful and very pious and modest. They too make great use of perfumes to such a degree that they will spend the night hungry in order to buy perfumes with the price of their food. They visit the mosque every Thursday night, wearing their finest apparel; and the whole sanctuary is saturated with the smell of their perfume. When one of these women goes away the odour of the perfume clings to the place after she has gone.

On the caravan route to Basra from Mecca to Medina (pp 86-87).

Three days' march through this district brought us to the town of Wisit. Its inhabitants are among the best people in Iraq—indeed, the very best of them without qualification. All the Iraqis who wish to learn how to recite the Koran come here, and our caravan contained a number of students who had come for that purpose.

### The customs of the Ahmadi dervishes at Umm 'Ubayda

As the caravan stayed here [Wisit] three days, I had an opportunity of visiting the grave of ar-Rifai which is at a village called Umm 'Ubayda, one day's journey from there. I reached the establishment at noon the next day and found it to be an enormous

monastery containing thousands of darwishes [dervishes]. After the mid-afternoon prayer drums and kettledrums were beaten and the darwishes began to dance. After this they prayed the sunset prayer and brought in the meal, consisting of rice-bread, fish, milk and dates. After the night prayer they began to recite their litany. A number of loads of wood had been brought in and kindled into a flame, and they went into the fire dancing; some of them rolled in it and others ate it in their mouths until they had extinguished it entirely. This is the peculiar custom of the Ahmadi darwishes. Some of them take large snakes and bite their heads with their teeth until they bite them clean through.

### *Ibn Battuta returns to Mecca with the Baghdad pilgrim's caravan (pp 104-07)*

*When we arrived at Baghdad [after touring Tabriz and other cities in Iran and Iraq] I found the pilgrims preparing for the journey, so I went to visit the governor and asked him for the things which the sultan had ordered for me. He assigned me the half of a camel-litter and provisions and water for four persons, writing out an order to that effect, then sent for the leader of the caravan and commended me to him. I had already made the acquaintance of the latter, but our friendship was strengthened and I remained under his protection and favoured by his bounty, for he gave me even more than had been ordered for me.*

*As we left Kufa I fell ill of a diarrhoea and had to be dismounted from the camel many times a day. The commander of the caravan used to make enquiries for my condition and give instructions that I should be looked after. My illness continued until I reached Mecca, the Sanctuary of God (may He exalt her honour and greatness!) I made the circuit of the Sacred Edifice [the Ka'aba] on arrival, but I was so weak that I had to carry out the prescribed ceremonies seated, and I made the circuit and the ritual visitation of Safa and Marwa riding on the amir's horse. When we camped at Mina I began to feel relief and to recover from my malady. At the end of the Pilgrimage I remained at Mecca all that year, giving myself up entirely to pious exercises and leading a most agreeable existence. After the next Pilgrimage [of AD 1328] I spent another year there, and yet another after that.*