

History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

Ibn Batuta

The Rehla of Ibn Batuta (1325-1355 CE)

Contributed by Prof. Dr. Nazeer Ahmed, PhD

Ibn Batuta embodies the universal spirit of humankind to explore, learn, document and teach. Born in 1304 in the Moroccan city of Tangier, he set out to perform his Hajj as a young man of twenty-one. From Mecca, he embarked on a journey that took him, over a span of 25 years, to all the major centers of world culture. Undoubtedly, one of the greatest travelers the world has known, Ibn Batuta belongs to a select group of explorers like Fah-yen (China, 6th century), Ibn Jubayr (Spain, 12th century) and Marco Polo (Venice, 13th century).

The historical importance of Ibn Batuta lies in his *Rehla* (travelogue), which provides a snapshot of the Islamic world, as it existed in the first half of the 14th century and its relationships with the other centers of global and regional power. Ibn Batuta personally met some of the major figures who have left their imprint on history, including Ibn Khaldun of the Maghrib, Ibn Taymiyah of Syria, Sultan Abu Saeed of Persia-Iraq, Sultan Nuruddin Ali of East Africa, Sultan Orkhan of the Ottoman Empire, Sultan Muhammed bin Tughlaq of India, Sultan Al Zahir of Indonesia, Emperor Toghun Timur of China, Mansa Sulaiman of Mali and some of the most prominent Sufi shaykhs of the era. His impressions of these men provide invaluable information about the movers and shakers of the era. His observations on the customs, values and institutions of the societies he visited provide a first-hand account of the unity as well as the cultural diversity in the Muslim world as it existed at that time.

In the first half of the 14th century, the world was in relative peace. The Crusades had ended and the Mongol slaughters were a thing of the past. In the Maghrib, there existed a balance of power between the Muslims and the Christians. The Al Muhaddith dynasty in the Maghrib had broken up and its place taken by four separate powers, the Merinides of Morocco, Wadids of Algeria, Hafsids of Tunisia and the Nasirids of Granada. There was relative quiet between these sultanates and the Christian kingdoms of Castile and Aragon. This equilibrium allowed the Straits of Gibraltar to be open to shipping and Venetian and Genoese vessels were able to cross the Straits and trade with the western shores of France and England. The prosperous city-states of Italy experienced the first wave of the Renaissance. Egypt, Syria and Hejaz were under the Mamlukes of Egypt who had earned the respect of the Islamic world by their victory over the Mongols. Moreover, after the destruction of Baghdad, Cairo had become the seat of the Caliphate. Cairo and Damascus became world-class cities due to their trade with India and China through Yemen. Persia was back in the fold of Islam and there began tremendous reconstruction works

in Persia, Iraq and Khorasan. The Silk Road to China was reopened. The Ottoman Turks were continuing their relentless advance into Europe, while the Byzantine emperors tried to contain them through treaties and marriage ties. In India and Pakistan, the rich and powerful Tughlaq dynasty ruled, heir to the mighty Khiljis who had left a consolidated subcontinent under the military-political control of Delhi. Islam had entered Malaysia and Indonesia and the Sultanate of Aceh eagerly sought scholars and jurists who were fleeing the Mongol devastations of the previous century. China was still ruled by the Mongol (Yuan) dynasty, which had brought the northern and southern halves of China under one flag. West Africa witnessed the great Mali Empire at its zenith.

The cement that held this far-flung Islamic world together was the Shariah. Ibn Batuta was trained in the Shariah and its application in the Maliki School of *Fiqh*. As such, he carried the credentials of a *kadi* that was to serve him well in a world that was at relative peace with itself under the umbrella of a Sunni vision of Islam. Second only to the Law, as a universal binding force was the Arabic language. Even in the eastern parts of the Islamic world wherein Farsi was the literary language, Arabic enjoyed a unique place as the language of the Qur'an and *Hadith* and as the medium of transmission of the Law. The Law and the language were the universal forces that held the Muslims together, even as they fought amongst themselves and with non-Muslims for power and position. Political power and the mastery of the great land mass extending from Mauritania to Bengal gave them control of the trade routes linking the principal seats of civilization, namely China, India, Persia, Egypt, Italy and West Africa. This vast network of trade routes was jealously guarded and protected by the regional monarchs who knew that their own prosperity depended on international trade. A traveler could move from Mali to Delhi without leaving the familiar religious and linguistic framework of the Muslims.

Trade as well as the competition among the rulers for prestige facilitated the movement of scholars, architects, doctors, engineers, poets and men of learning who sought gainful employment at the various courts. This movement provided a powerful engine for the spread of knowledge and the diffusion of faith. The beneficiaries were the peripheral territories that had recently come under the political sway of Islam. These territories included India and Pakistan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Turkey and West Africa. It was during this period that the technology of gunpowder moved from China to west Asia and from there to Europe. The 14th century transformed the Islamic landscape and shifted the center of gravity of Islam from its traditional Arab-Persian heartland to the regions that hold the largest number of believers today: Indonesia, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Nigeria.

The importance of the external links provided by the Divine Law, the Arabic language and trade routes is obvious. Of equal importance was the spiritual unity of Islam, which had asserted itself at the height of the Mongol catastrophe and now was the principal vehicle for religious expression. Like a vast subterranean lake of fresh water linking small islands, this spirituality linked the lands inhabited by the Africans, the Arabs, the Persians, the Turks, the Indians and the Malays. Transcending geography and culture, it provided the motive force for the migration of great Sufi shaykhs into the heartland of Hindustan and the dispersed islands of the East Indies. It was also the engine that propelled the Turkish advance into southeastern Europe, as one Sufic order or the other influenced the ghazi brigades of the Turks.

The Chishtiya order had penetrated the jungles of central India, and Mallams (Arabic: Mu'allim, meaning, religious teachers) traversed the African grasslands carrying with them not just water bags to quench bodily thirst but the universal spirituality of Islam to quench the spiritual thirst of all human beings. By the first half of the 14th century, this spirituality had moved forward from mere contemplation and recitation to social activism and had established powerful institutions to sustain this activism. A traveler could find peace and solace at various stations not only in the *karavanserais* (places of

rest for travelers) built by the rulers, but also in the *qanqahs* (places of retreat) established by the Sufi Shaykhs. Among the better known of the Sufis whose hospitality Ibn Batuta enjoyed were Shaykh Burhanuddin of Alexandria, Shaykh Abdur Rahman ibn Mustafa of Jerusalem, Shaykh Qutbuddin of Isfahan, *Chirag-e-Dehli* of India and Shah Jalal of Sylhet.

Ibn Batuta received his early education in the Maliki School of *Fiqh*, a vocation that was to serve him well in his interactions with the learned men in far-away lands. He was also trained in the urbane manners becoming of a gentleman of the era. *Tasawwuf* pervaded the Islamic social milieu and Ibn Batuta was at home with the Sufi masters. Indeed, Ibn Batuta personified the new Muslim personality, imbibed with Sufi spirituality, which was fully integrated with the rules and regulations of the Shariah. Ibn Batuta, as a native of Morocco, was fluent in the language. Familiarity with Arabic ensured that he would find companionship with the *kadis*, *ulema* and the Sufis who formed the literary and spiritual elite of Islam.

In 1325, he set out from Tangier to fulfill his obligation for Hajj. At that time, performance of the Hajj was not just a visit to Mecca but an adventure through the many cities that lay in the pilgrim's path and an opportunity to visit great mosques, madrasas and to learn from master teachers. It was also a unique opportunity to give expression to the universal brotherhood and sisterhood of humankind. Ibn Batuta's caravan, which included the noted scholar Abu Abdullah al Zubaidi and Abu Abdullah al Nafzawi, Kadi of Tunis, passed through some of the principal cities of the Maghrib including Tlemchen (capital of the Wadids), Algiers and Tunis. Tunis was at the time a major trade depot and a cultural center. From Africa came gold, ivory and nuts. From Egypt it imported embroidery and woodwork as well as transhipped products of the east such as Indian herbs, medicines, spices and Chinese porcelain. These products were sold to the city-states of southern Europe as well as to the other cities of the Maghrib. It was the eastern capital of the Al Muhaddith who embellished it with mosques and built higher schools of learning. With the breakup of the Al Muhaddith Empire, Christian armies had overrun much of Spain and had expelled most of the Muslims. North Africa, Tunis in particular, benefited from this forced migration of scholars, artisans, poets, musicians, horticulturalists and men of letters. The Hafsids, who succeeded the Al Muhaddith, continued the tradition of encouraging learning and Tunis with a population of over 100,000, became a center that attracted noted *ulema* from as far away as Cairo, Damascus and Fez. Ibn Batuta stayed in Tunis for about two months acquiring in the process some of the Andalusian refinement and court manners that would serve him well later in his travels.

From Tunis, the caravan traversed the harsh Libyan Desert until it arrived at the city of Alexandria. This city, located at the mouth of the Nile Delta, was a busy commercial center with a brisk trade with Venice, Genoa, Tunis, Tangier, Valencia, Sicily and the Syrian coast. It was here that the caravan routes leading from India and the sea routes from East Africa met. All the products of Asia and Africa passed through the city. In Alexandria, Ibn Batuta met the noted Sufi Shaykh Burhanuddin and spent some time in his *zawiyah*. The elderly Shaykh gave the young traveler robes to signify his initiation into the Sufi order and showered upon him his spiritual radiance. From Alexandria, the Hajj caravan reached the great city of Cairo.

Cairo at that time had a population in excess of half a million, which was more than fifteen times that of the city of London, three times that of the city of Tabriz, twice that of the city of Delhi. It was the capital of the Mamlukes. The Mamlukes, like their counterparts in India, originated from European and Central Asian slaves who were bought and adopted by the Turks, accepted Islam, married into noble families and through their sheer resilience rose up to become kings. The Mamlukes of Egypt were called Bahri Mamlukes because some of them inhabited the islands in the River Nile. They displaced the ailing Ayyubid dynasty in 1250 and brought Egypt, Syria and the Red Sea coasts of Arabia and the Sudan under their control. The Mamlukes proved themselves to be excellent administrators and outstanding

patrons of learning. Ibn Batuta arrived in Cairo during the reign of Sultan Al Nasir Muhammed ibn Qalawun who ruled from 1293 to 1341. A great builder, Al Nasir built more than thirty mosques and numerous schools and hospitals. The great mosque of ibn Qalawun still stands in the old city of Cairo. The Mongol plunders in Persia, Iraq and Central Asia had pushed a large number of scholars, Sufis, poets, linguists, architects, *fuqahah*, mathematicians, philosophers and doctors into Cairo.

Cairo had become the pre-eminent center of culture, art and learning in the Islamic world. After the destruction of Baghdad (1258), a surviving member of the Abbasids had been installed as the Caliph in Cairo and the city had become the seat of the Caliphate and hence the focus of Islamic political life. The hospital (*maristan*, as it was called) of Qalawun was a marvel of the age. It contained more than 300 wards for patients and was equipped with the most advanced surgical tools of the era. The hospital was well staffed with doctors, surgeons and attendants. There were lecture rooms, baths, libraries and dispensaries attached to the building. Recitations from the Qur'an soothed the soul. Music was played to help the healing process. Treatment was free. Rich and poor were treated alike. Madrasas (schools) were attached to the mosques. The concept of a mosque-madrasa grew out of Masjid al Nabawi, the mosque of the Prophet, in Madina. The idea found patronage at the highest level during the intense rivalry between the Fatimids and the Abbasids (969-1100). Both Cairo and Baghdad became great centers of learning. Al Azhar grew in Cairo and the Nizamiya College flourished in Baghdad. The example of these two capital cities was copied by the provincial centers of Merv, Nishapur, Bukhara, Samarqand, Damascus, Fez, Timbuktu and Cordoba, as well as the cities that came under Islamic influence in later centuries such as Delhi, Tabriz, Istanbul and Lahore. Ibn Batuta records that the schools in Cairo were too numerous to count. Each mosque-madrasa had courtyards wherein great teachers gave lectures, and eager students learned the Qur'an, Fiqh, Arabic grammar, mathematics, medicine and philosophy, although the study of more secular sciences such as mathematics, medicine and philosophy was not available in all schools.

The hajj caravan with whom Ibn Batuta was traveling was delayed. Impatient to reach the Hejaz, Ibn Batuta, took the southern route down the River Nile and through the desert to the Sudanese port of Aydhab. He described the Nile valley as a veritable garden, full of life and vitality, serving as the breadbasket for the Mamluke Empire. Aydhab was a sultry harbor town, dusty, hot, without water, crammed with import-export merchandise. Forced by inhospitable weather, Ibn Batuta turned back to Cairo and from there he traveled through the Sinai to Palestine and Syria. He prayed at the mosque of Abraham in al Khalil (Hebron) and spent several days at Masjid al Aqsa in Jerusalem. By 1326, Jerusalem had ceased to be a bone of contention between the Christians and the Muslims. The Crusades in Palestine had ended and the chief attraction of the city was its pilgrimage sites for Muslims, Christians and Jews. Ibn Batuta spent several nights in prayer at Masjid al Aqsa and at the Dome of the Rock, recalling the events of Isra and Meraj. He also spent many days at the zawiyah of Sufi Shaykh Abdul Rahman ibn Mustafa who belonged to the Rifai order.

After receiving his ijazah (literally meaning permission, also a diploma) from Shaykh ibn Mustafa, Ibn Batuta moved on to Damascus, where he met the well-known reformer Ibn Taymiyah (d. 1328). The two were on different wavelengths. Ibn Batuta was a man of the new Sufic age. Indeed, wherever he went, he sought the company of well-known Sufis. By contrast, Ibn Taymiyah foresaw inherent dangers in the Sufic approach, which had no empirical proofs and lent itself to exploitation by pretenders. The Sufis would respond to this charge by asserting that the best empirical proof of their approach was the noticeable transformation of human character that it brings about. Ibn Taymiyah was very much against the allegorical interpretations given to the Qur'an by certain Sufi schools and felt that the Qur'an had to be understood in its literal sense, as emphasized by Imam Shafi'i. Ibn Taymiyah fought a life-long struggle to alert his generation against the risks that he felt lurked in the Sufi approach. He urged

Muslims to return to what he felt was the vibrant, outward, empirical Islam of the Umayyad and the Abbasid periods. Needless to say, the two men did not see eye to eye. As history would have it, the Islamic world embraced the Sufis and relegated Ibn Taymiyah to scholars respected but forgotten. It is only in the last 200 years, since the advent of European colonialism, that the Islamic world has once again turned to the ideas of Ibn Taymiyah to find some answers to the challenge of the West.

Damascus was the second capital of the Mamlukes and was a great city in its own right. During the struggle between the Mamlukes and the Il Khans of Persia-Iraq (1258-1315), Damascus had suffered. With the onset of peace between the two dynasties in 1315, the city had regained its former preeminence as a pivotal station in the trade routes linking Egypt and North Africa to the Black Sea, Persia, China and India. It had a population of over 250,000 and was known for its high-quality steel, called Damascus steel, which was valued and sought after the world over.

The trade in iron and its processing provides one illustration of how Islam had welded together the old world into a single trading block. Iron ore was exported from East Africa to Gujrat in India where it was smelted into pig iron and re-exported to Syria. In Damascus, it was re-smelted, alloyed and formed into steel, using a process that was only re-discovered in the 1960s and is referred to as super-plasticity. Ibn Batuta records that the bazaars of Damascus were thriving with imported goods which included spices, gems, embroidery, perfumes and medicinal herbs from India, porcelain from China, furs from the Black Sea area and Turkish horses from Central Asia. The nobility in Damascus, emulating the example of the Sultan in Cairo, had built numerous mosques, schools, hospitals, rest houses for travelers, canals and public baths. He spent a great deal of time at the magnificent Umayyad mosque of Damascus, learning among other subjects, the Hadith according to Shaykh Bukhari.

In September 1326, Ibn Batuta finally set out to perform his Hajj. Modern conveniences that Hajjis take for granted these days did not exist and the 800 miles from Damascus to Mecca were a trial for the hardy. Pilgrims usually traveled in large caravans, some as large as 30,000, with full provisions for the journey, led by an emir (leader), accompanied by imams, judges, doctors and protected by soldiers. Even so, many perished on the road, caught in the unpredictable desert sand storms, or attacked by bandits. It took almost a year to perform the Hajj and from some parts of Africa, such as Mali, it took almost two years. Yet they came, the sons and daughters of Adam, from all corners of the earth, to the hallowed sanctuary of Mecca, to celebrate the Name of the Creator and to cement the pristine brotherhood of humankind.

The rites of Hajj have not changed in the fourteen hundred years since the Prophet perfected them. A pilgrim today would experience the same emotions and express himself the same way, as did Ibn Batuta in the year 1326. Approaching from the north, the caravan from Damascus first stopped in Madina, the City of the Prophet. There, surrounded by the radiance of the Prophet's Mosque, Ibn Batuta prayed, remembering often the name of the beloved Apostle of God. At Dhul Halifa, he discarded his urbane attire, donned the Ihram and marched forth with his companions reciting Talbiya: "Here I am, O Lord, Here I am! Indeed, Thee alone is worthy of all Praise. Thine is the Bounty. Thine is the Sovereignty. Here I am at your Command, O Lord!". Emotions swelled in him as he first saw the Haram (the word Haram is used only for the sanctuaries around the Ka'ba in Mecca, the Prophet's Mosque in Madina and the Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem), circled by thousands, invoking the name of God in a hundred different tongues. He melted into the human mass, completing the circles.

Thereafter, he marched forth to the hills of Safa and Marwa, recalling the struggle of Hajira to find water in the desert, after Prophet Ibrahim left her there with her infant son Ismail. He remembered that moment when Divine mercy intervened to answer the supplication of a mother and caused water to gush forth from a rock. The mother, Hajira, cried out, "Zumi, Ya Mubaraka" (Stop! O, blessed water!).

After traversing the hills of Safa and Marwa seven times, Ibn Batuta drank to his heart's content from the well of Zamzam. (The word Zamzam derives from Zumi, the exclamation of Hajira when she saw water burst forth from a rock).

From Mecca, he proceeded to Mina and on to the great gathering at Arafat. On this plain stood the children of Adam, black and white, rich and poor, Arabs and Turks, Persians and Spaniards. Where in this gathering were the kings and where the mendicants? All were equal in the sight of God and equal in the sight of man, in supplication before the Creator, celebrating only His Name, invoking His mercy and His munificence. From Arafat, Ibn Batuta returned to Muzdalifa and on to Mina and Mecca to complete the rites of the Hajj and joined his fellow Hajjis in celebration of this blessed opportunity. He had now fulfilled the goal he had set for himself when he set out from Tangier, but farther horizons beckoned him.

In 1326, Ibn Batuta joined a caravan of Persian pilgrims returning home from Hajj. The caravan took the northerly route from Mecca to Madina, through central Arabia to Kufa. Along the route, Ibn Batuta saw the many wells, aqueducts and rest stops that had been built by Empress Zubaida, wife of Harun al Rashid, during her celebrated Hajj (799). Najaf and Karbala were pilgrimage sites. From Najaf, the young traveler turned south in the direction of Basra, visiting along the road the tomb of Shaykh Ahmed ibn Rifai, founder of the Rifai Sufi order. He stayed at the zawiyah, participating in the Sufi rites of the order, including prayer, music and rapturous movements of the dervishes. Farther south, in the city of Abidjan, Ibn Batuta spent more time in the company of Sufis. Ascending the Persian plateau, he crossed the Zeros mountains to the beautiful city of Isfahan. Isfahan had escaped the Mongol devastations, partly because it was far from the main route of the advancing Mongol armies and partly because it had avoided taking a defiant stand and had accepted a measure of Mongol overlordship. Ibn Batuta stayed with Shaykh Qutbuddin Hussain of the Suhrawardi order. He then proceeded to the magnificent city of Shiraz, which, like its sister city of Isfahan, had escaped the Mongol devastations and had become the hub of Sufi activity in Persia. Shiraz was referred to as "Burj e Awliya" (bridge to the Beloveds of God, the great Sufis) and it was here that the well-known Farsi poet Shaykh Sa'adi and the venerated Sufi Shaykh Ibn Khafif were buried. Ibn Batuta found the Persian people to be generous, given to culture and good deeds and the cultivation of piety.

Turning around, Ibn Batuta visited Baghdad but found the city struggling to lift itself out of its ruins. Persia was at this time ruled by the Mongol prince, Abu Said (1316-1335), an accomplished scholar, a pious man, a master builder and an able administrator. Under him Persia had prospered and had started to dig itself out of the ashes of the Mongol onslaught. The Mongols had made Tabriz their capital. Ibn Batuta visited this city and found it to be a prosperous commercial town comparable to Damascus, embellished with gardens, mosques and palaces.

Returning back to Baghdad, the world traveler took an excursion north towards Mosul where he visited a great Sufi, a lady named Sitt Zahida, who was the patron saint and teacher for a great many Sufis. In early Islamic history, tasawwuf was not a privilege only of men. A great many women stand out as towers of light, beckoning all men and women to that spirituality that is innate in humankind. Rabia al Adawiyyah (d. 802) was one of the earliest women Sufis in Islam who expressed the love of God in exquisite and sublime Arabic poetry and was a teacher to many a great shaykh. It was much later in Islamic history that Muslim women were pushed into the background and were largely denied the privilege of learning and teaching.

After returning to Mecca and studying there for two years (1327-1329), Ibn Batuta embarked on a journey that took him to the coastal cities along the western shores of the Indian Ocean. Since the time of the Prophet, Muslims had sought their economic well-being in trade. The location of West Asia astride

the major trade routes between Asia, Europe and Africa provided them a strategic geographical position. The East African coast was connected by sea to India, Indonesia and China. Towns such as Abadan and Muscat on the Persian Gulf, Zafar on the southern shores of the Arabian Peninsula and Aden in Yemen were principal seaports. Included in this trade network were Mogadishu, Mombasa, Kilwa and Shofala along the African coast. These became thriving cities ruled by local Muslim emirs.

The land further south was called the land Zanj. The movement of people and goods was two-way. As early as the 8th century, there was a Zanj colony in southern Iraq. Ibn Batuta's itinerary took him from Mecca to Suakin (Sudan), Aden (Yemen), Zeila (Eritrea), Mogadishu (Somalia), Mombasa (Kenya) and further south to Zanzibar and Kilwa. East Africa exported gold, ivory, animal hide and hardwood. In turn it imported spices, fine cotton fabrics and medicines from India, porcelain and silk from China, steel from Damascus, brocades and brass-work from Cairo. The African seacoast was integrated through Sufi missions with the rest of the Muslim world. Scholars as well as merchants from as far away as Samarqand immigrated, intermarried with African women and created the rich, composite culture of the Sahel. Ibn Batuta found the inhabitants of these cities quite affluent. They wore fine cotton clothes and fine gold jewelry, prayed in domed mosques, dined on fine porcelain from China. Their cities were peaceful, with no outer fortresses, offering a warm and open welcome to the merchants from far-away lands. This peaceful, no-walled character of the African coastal cities was to prove their undoing in the 16th century, when Portuguese ships appeared offshore and mercilessly bombarded the towns into submission one after the other.

The year 1332 saw Ibn Batuta explore the Anatolian plateau and the lands around the Black Sea. Three of his observations about Anatolia are noteworthy. First, the spirit of ghazzah (struggle) was widespread among the Turks. By 1332, the Turks had conquered most of Anatolia and the budding Ottoman principality was soon to blossom into a world empire. Ever since the 9th century, Turkish tribes had burst forth from their homeland on the outskirts of Mongolia, first into Khorasan, then into Persia and onwards into Anatolia and beyond. These migrations were later sanctified in the form of a valiant struggle (ghazzah) for faith.

Islam provided an over-arching faith for the Turkish tribes whose intercontinental movements would have been inevitable with or without their mass conversion to Islam. Secondly, Ibn Batuta noted the participation of women in public life. Turkish women rode horses, went to war, attended state functions and engaged in trade on an equal footing with men, a situation not known in the strict atmosphere of the Maliki Maghrib from which Ibn Batuta came. It was no surprise that the only women sovereigns, the queen-monarchs of Islam came from the Turks. (In the 16th century, there was a succession of five Muslim queens in Indonesia). Third, Ibn Batuta records the strong presence of youth movements in Anatolia, attached to Sufi brotherhoods. The akhi (meaning, brother) youth movement reinforced fraternal bonds and taught young men the virtues of integrity, generosity, courage and nobility. Akhi fraternities provided hospitality to scholars and wayfarers. The akhi movement was to the youth what the ghazi movement was to the general population.

Ibn Batuta's vision now turned east towards Delhi, which had become a magnet for Sufis, scholars and merchants. Setting out in late 1332, he traveled through the Volga region, which was even in his time noted for its brisk trade in slaves. Then through Khorasan and the Khanate of Chagatai, Ibn Batuta saw the ruins of Bukhara, Samarqand, Balkh and Herat. These were cities that were once the crown jewels of Islamic civilization but were laid waste by the Mongols. Ibn Batuta visited Kabul, Ghazna and Multan where he stayed with Shaykh Ruknuddin Abul Fatha of the Suhwardi order. Arriving in 1334, he was pressed into service as the chief kadi by the Emperor Muhammed bin Tughlaq, a monarch noted for

his intellectual and literary attainment as well as for his impulsiveness. During the previous century Delhi had grown from a small Rajput garrison town into a bustling world-class cosmopolitan city and the seat of a mighty empire. The consolidation of the subcontinent under the central power of Delhi had brought unparalleled power and prosperity to India. Embassies from all of the Asian powers frequented the capital. The Qutub Minar was already a hundred years old and the great mosque of Quwwatul-Islam served as the Jamia Masjid for the metropolis.

Indeed, it was Ibn Batuta's description of the wealth and magnificence of the Delhi court that made him suspect in the eyes of his contemporaries when he returned home to Morocco. No less a person than Ibn Khaldun thought that the stories of Ibn Batuta ("the Shaykh from Tangier") were not credible. Ibn Batuta records that in 1340, an embassy arrived from the Emperor Toghon Timur, Yuan Emperor of China, seeking the Sultan's permission to establish a Buddhist monastery near Delhi. Muhammed bin Tughlaq denied the request. In historical hindsight, the denial prevented a more vigorous interaction between the Muslim Sufis of India and the Buddhists of the Yuan Empire and the spread of Islam into the Chinese mainland. So as not to send the Chinese ambassadors empty handed, the Sultan entrusted Ibn Batuta to accompany them to Beijing, along with gifts of gold, diamonds and pearls. As ordered by the Emperor, Ibn Batuta set out with a large entourage in 1340, visiting Gwalior, Gujrat and Daulatabad on his way to Surat in western India from where he planned to embark on his voyage to China. But his ships capsized in a great storm off the coast of Malabar and Ibn Batuta found himself moving from city to city along the coast. Further travels took him to the Maldives Islands, Sri Lanka and Bengal where he visited with Sufi Shaykh Jalal of Sylhet. Traveling eastward to Indonesia, he was received by Sultan Ahmed al Malik al Zahir of Sumatra. Finally, he did make his way to Beijing Canton where he found a thriving community of Muslim traders.

Returning home to Morocco in 1349, the restless Ibn Batuta found himself on a journey to the south, to the great empire of Mali. During the years 1351-1355, his travels took him through the trade centers of Sijilmasa, Walata, Timbuktu and Gao on the Niger River. At this time Mansa Sulaiman, successor to the great Mansa Musa, ruled Mali.

Ibn Batuta's account of Muslim life in Mali is noteworthy for the differences in the way women were treated in African and Arab societies. In Mali, Ibn Batuta found that women were not secluded from men as they were in North Africa. Like their sisters in Turkish Anatolia, the Muslim African women frequented the markets, participated in court life and were free to consult with kadis and ulema without hiding their faces in hijab, a situation Ibn Batuta, a Maliki jurist, found objectionable. Ibn Batuta found the great cities of the Niger River rich and prosperous. The people were pious and steadfast in prayer, the scholars well versed in the Qur'an and Sunnah, the universities frequented by great scholars from Fez and Cairo and its great mosques filled with worshipers. Ibn Batuta returned home in 1355 and spent the remainder of his life in the service of his sovereign, Sultan Abu Inan of the Merinides. It was at the orders of this Sultan that the Rehla was composed and recorded by Ibn Juzayy using firsthand accounts from Ibn Batuta.

The world that Ibn Batuta knew was soon to vanish, engulfed by the great plague of 1346, which moved like a black spider across the globe, obliterating entire cities with its sting and arresting the growth of Afro-Eurasian civilizations for more than a generation. It was this spent world that faced the invasions of Timur of Samarqand, circa 1385.

[Blog at WordPress.com.](#)