

Abu Abdullah al-Lawati Ibn Batuta was arguably, the greatest traveler of the medieval world. He was born on 25 Feb. 1304 CE in the red city of Tangier on northern coast of Morocco; his family were descendants of the Berber tribe of Lawita. Very little of his early life is known. By implication from his *Rihla* (travelogue) which he recited to the Andalusian scholar Ibn Juzayy at the end of his career, we know that he received a *Maaliki* education in the sciences and quranic law—the *sharia'a*.

In 1325 CE (2 Rajab, 725 AH), at the age of 21, he decided to go to Mecca for *Hajj*. He writes: 'I braced my resolution to quit all my dear ones, female and male, and forsook my home as birds forsake their nests.' What started as a pilgrimage to the holy lands of Mecca and Medina turned into a fantastic voyage.

By the time he had returned home in 1350, he had traveled for 25 years, traversing more than 70,000 miles. He had traveled extensively through the fast expanding Islamic lands; traveling across North and East Africa, the Levant, the Middle East, Mesopotamia, the Steppes of Anatolia and Russia, India, Maldives, Sumatra, Eastern China and Manchuria and the Karakoram. A remarkable journey by any standards. After his return to Tangier, he could not stay long at one place. He traveled to Andalusia and crossed the Sahara to visit Timbuktu and the River Niger.

In the course of his travels he met several holy sufis, studied law in madrassas across the land, fought alongside the descendants of Genghis Khan, became the chief judge (Qadi) of Delhi under the patronage of Muhammad bin Tughlaq (and almost lost his head to trampling elephants when he lost favor with the whimsical king), served in the courts of the Zamorins of Calicut,

married into the royal family in Maldives and plotted a coup to take over the kingdom, sailed to Sumatra and China as an Ambassador from India, and of course, accomplished his original goal of performing the *hajj*, over a dozen times. While comparisons to the travels of the Polo family are inevitable in the discussion of pre-modern travel, one distinction needs to be made. Unlike the Polos who were traders and had traveled across the lands in search of trade routes, Batuta was a member of the learned gentry, his trip remains one of a personal and spiritual nature. His stated goal was to travel across the fast growing Islamic world, to visit holy sufis and monuments to the Prophet, and to administer the rule of the *sharia'a* in the Islamic frontier.

Batuta's original intention was to never take the same road twice. He tried very hard to stick by the rule, although he was forced to backtrack several times when faced with adversity or opportunity. He married several times in various lands and probably sired many children. He attained great wealth in the courts of Tughlaq and Ujbek Khan, and lost it all in a ship wreck off the Malabar coast.

His travels occurred at a fascinating period of history and is a document to the spread of Islam from the lands of Arabia to far reaches of the world. In a short span of 300 years, the Islamic flag had spread from to the coasts of Europe to China. Spain, the Balkans, the Eastern Roman empire of Turkey and Anatolia, parts of Russia, Mesopotamia, India, Indonesia and even parts of China had been conquered by the invading Islamic armies. Islam had become a potent force in a short period of time.



At the same time another major force was changing the world -- maritime commerce. The technological leaps in the field of marine navigation had had a staggering impact on trade. By the end of the 13th century the Arabs and the Indians had figured out the pattern of the trade winds, the magnetic compass was well known and the skies of the tropics had been charted. More importantly, the Indians had developed the *dhow* — a sailing ship to traverse the Arabian sea, while the Chinese perfected the longer range *junks* to sail the Bay of Bengal and the South China seas. With reliable land routes established and the seas conquered, for the first time in history independent travel across long distances became possible.

Ibn Batuta's *Rihla* is a unique tome casting light on the life and maritime technology in the medieval world. It is often considered as an authority on the social and cultural history of Islam. From the *Rihla* we learn about the workings of the kingdoms of the Mongols under Ujbek Khan, the machinations and politics under Muhammad bin Tughlaq — the Sultan of India, the simplicity of life in the Maldives, the condition in the dhows (cramped for space) and the junks (luxurious if you could afford it. Private cabins for you and your slave women, five course meals), the price of clothes and spices, the unsuccessful attempts of doing away with gold currency, and the vagaries of life across the civilized world.

In addition to the portraits of rich and famous, pious and the infidels, we learn about the centrality of trade to the medieval world. We have portraits of traders, of captains, of brigands and pirates, we learn about sea passages and mountain passes, and of the goods that the caravans and the fleets carried. We also learn about gender relations, immigration issues and the balance of

power between the Islamic kingdoms.

In 1354, Batuta returned to settle down in the city of Fez. He stayed in the newer city of Fez-al Jdid, then a bustling medina fashioned after the great Andalusian cities of Granada and Seville. He served in Sultan Abu 'Inan court as a consultant. In his later years, the king commissioned him to dictate his *Rihla* or travelogue. Ibn Juzayy, an acquaintance of Batuta from his visit to Granada would be his scribe and editor. His *Rihla* was written under the formal title '*A gift to the observers concerning the curiosities of the cities and the marvels encountered in travels.*' He lived his last years in the decaying Marinid kingdom of Morocco. The aging globetrotter died in 1369 CE (700 AH). Batuta's *Rihla* portrays a man of many virtues and failings. He comes across as part sinner and part saint, but nevertheless he was a man of great piety and also a consummate opportunist.

One can draw many parallels between Batuta's age and our own world. The defining conflicts of the world are similar, spread of a radical new way of life aided by new technology versus the status quo. Then it was Islam and today it is the culture of consumerism (as Benjamin Barber succinctly puts it "Mc World"). The defining technology of both periods is based upon know-how. Back then it was the mastery of sea routes and today it is the routes taken by electrons and photons. Whatever the rallying calls behind the philosophies and the rhetoric, it is clear the central issue remains the same — trade.



In Batuta's era the rhetoric of Islam was used to control the trade routes and spread the religion. Today we have the culture of consumerism rallying under the sophistry of 'liberty' or 'free markets'. The rhetoric of *liberty* or *jihad* only seeks to obfuscate the true cause of the turmoil — the control of consumer goods, arms and technology trade. Positions of strength may have changed, but the true motives have not.

What we see are battles that have been fought many, many times under different guises. But the central issue is the acquisition of wealth and control of existing hegemonies — not Jihad and not Liberty. Those who have learnt from history have to sit back and watch others commit the same follies and blunders, all over again.

Batuta would find our world and our problems intimately familiar. He would fit right in.

Bibliography


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Some selections from his travels, adapted from the public domain Internet Medieval Source Book. Quotes are from the Gibbs translation.

A visit to a holy man in the country

During my stay at Alexandria I had heard of the pious Shaykh al-Murshidi, who bestowed gifts miraculously created at his desire. He lived in solitary retreat in a cell in the country where he was visited by princes and ministers. Parties of men in all ranks of life used to come to him every day and he would supply them all with food. Each one of them would desire to eat some flesh or fruit or sweetmeat at his cell, and to each he would give what he had suggested, though it was frequently out of season. His fame was carried from mouth to mouth far and wide, and the Sultan too had visited him several times in his retreat. I set out from Alexandria to seek this shaykh and passing through Damanhur came to Fawwa [Fua], a beautiful township, close by which, separated from it by a canal, lies the shaykh's cell. I reached this cell about mid-afternoon, and on saluting the shaykh I found that he had with him one of the sultan's aides-de-camp, who had encamped with his troops just outside. The shaykh rose and embraced me, and calling for food invited me to eat. When the hour of the afternoon prayer arrived he set me in front as prayer-leader, and did the same on every occasion when we were together at the times of prayer during my stay. When I wished to sleep he said to me "Go up to the roof of the cell and sleep there" (this was during the summer heats). I said to the officer "In the name of God," but he replied [quoting from the Koran] "There is none of us but has an appointed place." So I mounted to the roof and found there a straw mattress and a leather mat, a water vessel for ritual ablutions, a jar of water and a drinking cup, and I lay down there to sleep.



A dream of travels to come


That night, while I was sleeping on the roof of the cell, I dreamed that I was on the wing of a great bird which was flying with me towards Mecca, then to Yemen, then eastwards and thereafter going towards the south, then flying far eastwards and finally landing in a dark and green country, where it left me. I was astonished at this dream and said to myself "If the shaykh can interpret my dream for me, he is all that they say he is." Next morning, after all the other visitors had gone, he called me and when I had related my dream interpreted it to me saying: "You will make the pilgrimage [to Mecca] and visit [the Tomb of] the Prophet, and you will travel through Yemen, Iraq, the country of the Turks, and India. You will stay there for a long time and meet there my brother Dilshad the Indian, who will rescue you from a danger into which you will fall." Then he gave me a travelling-provision of small cakes and money, and I bade him farewell and departed. Never since parting from him have I met on my journeys aught but good fortune, and his blessings have stood me in good stead.

On Slavery

...There was consequently less stigma attached to slavery, and in no other society has there been anything resembling the system by which, as has been shown in the preceding section, the white slaves came to furnish the privileged cadre whence the high officers of state, commanders, governors, and at length even Sultans, were exclusively drawn.

... I saw a slave-boy being auctioned for thirty dinars, and as he was worth three hundred I bought him. I was building a house at the time, and I gave him twenty dinars to lay out on the workmen. He

spent ten on them and bought a garment for himself with the other ten. I said to him "What's this?" to which he replied "Don't be too hasty; no gentleman scolds his slaves." I said to myself "Here have I bought the Caliph's tutor without knowing it."

Later on I wanted to marry a woman unknown to my cousin (i.e. my first wife), so I swore him to secrecy and gave him a dinar to buy somethings, including some of the fish called haziba. But he bought something else, and when I was wroth with him he said "I find that Hippocrates disapproves of haziba." I said to him "You worthless fool, I was not aware that I had bought a Galen," and gave him ten blows with the whip. But he seized me and gave me seven back saying "Sir, three blows is enough as a punishment, and the seven I gave you are my rightful retaliation." So I made at him and gave him a cut on the head, whereupon he went off to my cousin, and said to her "Sincerity is a religious duty, and whoever deceives us is not one of us. My master has married and he swore me to silence, and when I said to him that my lady must be told of it he broke my head." So my cousin would neither let me into her house nor let me have anything out of it, until at last I had to divorce the other woman. After that she used to call the boy "The honest lad," and I could not say a word to him, so I said to myself "I shall set him free, and then I shall have peace." 

Ibn Battuta sails to Mombasa

I embarked at Maqdashaw [Mogadishu] for the Sawahil [Swahili] country, with the object of visiting the town of Kulwa [Kilwa, Quiloa] in the land of the Zanj.

We came to Mambasa [Mombasa], a large island two days' journey by sea from the Sawihil country. It possesses no territory on the mainland. They have fruit trees on the island, but no cereals, which have to be

brought to them from the Sawahil. Their food consists chiefly of bananas and fish. The inhabitants are pious, honourable, and upright, and they have well-built wooden mosques.

Kulwa on the African mainland

We stayed one night in this island [Mombasa], and then pursued our journey to Kulwa, which is a large town on the coast. The majority of its inhabitants are Zanj, jet-black in colour, and with tattoo marks on their faces. I was told by a merchant that the town of Sufala lies a fortnight's journey [south] from Kulwa and that gold dust is brought to Sufala from Yufi in the country of the Limis, which is a month's journey distant from it. Kulwa is a very fine and substantially built town, and all its buildings are of wood. Its inhabitants are constantly engaged in military expeditions, for their country is contiguous to the heathen Zanj.

The sultan at the time of my visit was Abu'l-Muzaffar Hasan, who was noted for his gifts and generosity. He used to devote the fifth part of the booty made on his expeditions to pious and charitable purposes, as is prescribed in the Koran, and I have seen him give the clothes off his back to a mendicant who asked him for them. When this liberal and virtuous sultan died, he was succeeded by his brother Dawud, who was at the opposite pole from him in this respect. Whenever a petitioner came to him, he would say, "He who gave is dead, and left nothing behind him to be given." Visitors would stay at his court for months on end, and finally he would make them some small gift, so that at last people gave up going to his gate.

In Anatolia

The day after our arrival at Antaliya one of these youths came to Shaykh Shihab ad-Din al-Hamawi and spoke to him in

Turkish, which I did not understand at that time. He was wearing old clothes and had a felt bonnet on his head. The shaykh said to me "Do you know what he is saying?" "NO" said I "I do not know." He answered "He is inviting you and your company to eat a meal with him." I was astonished but I said "Very well," and when the man had gone I said to the shaykh "He is a poor man, and is not able to entertain us, and we do not like to be a burden on him." The shaykh burst out laughing and said "He is one of the shaykhs of the Young Brotherhood. He is a cobbler and a man of generous disposition. His companions, about two hundred men belonging to different trades, have made him their leader and have built a hospice to entertain their guests. All that they earn by day they spend at night."

After I had prayed the sunset prayer the same man came back for us and took us to the hospice. We found [ourselves in] a fine building, carpeted with beautiful Turkish rugs and lit by a large number of chandeliers of Iraqi glass. A number of young men stood in rows in the hall, wearing long mantles and boots, and each had a knife about two cubits long attached to a girdle around his waist. On their heads were white woolen bonnets, and attached to the peak of these bonnets was a piece of stuff a cubit long and two fingers breadth. When they took their seats, every man removed his bonnet and set it down in front of him, and kept on his head another ornamental bonnet of silk or other material. In the centre of their hall was a sort of platform placed there for the visitors. When we took our places, they served up a great banquet followed by fruits and sweetmeats, after which they began to sing and dance. We were filled with admiration and were greatly astonished at their openhandedness and generosity. We took leave of them at the close of the night and left them in their hospice....

From Burdur we went on to Sabarta [Isparta] and then to Akridur [Egirdir], a great and populous town with fine bazaars. There is a lake with sweet water here on which boats go in two days to Aqshahr and Baqshahr and other towns and villages. The sultan of Akridur is one of the principal rulers in this country. He is an upright conduct.....

He sent some horsemen to escort us to the town of Ladhiq [Denizli], as the country is infested by a troop of brigands called Jarmiyan [Kermian] who possess a town called Kutahiya.....

As we entered the town we passed through a bazaar. Some men got down from their booths and took our horses bridles, then some others objected to their action and the altercation went on so long that some of them drew knives. We of course did not know what they were saying and were afraid of them, thinking they were brigands and that this was their town. At length God sent us a man who knew Arabic and he explained that they were two branches of the "Young Brotherhood", each of whom wanted to lodge with them. We were amazed at their generosity. It was decided finally that they should cast lots, and that we should lodge with the winner.....

After receiving the sultan's gift we left for the city of Quniya [Konia]. It is a large town with fine buildings and has many streams and fruit gardens. The streets are exceedingly broad and the bazaars are admirably planned with each craft in a bazaar of its own. It is said that the city was built by Alexander.....

In this town is the mausoleum of the pious shaykh Jalal ad-Din [ar-Rumi], known as

Mawlana ["Our Master"] {see below}. He was held in high esteem, and there is a brotherhood in Anatolia who claim spiritual affiliation with him and are called after him the Jalaliya.

The story goes that Jalal ad-Din was in early life a theologian and a professor. One day a sweetmeat seller came into the college-mosque with a tray of sweetmeats on his head and having given him a piece went out again. The shaykh left his lesson to follow him and disappeared for some years. Then he came back, but with a disordered mind, speaking nothing but Persian verses which no one could understand. His disciples wrote down his productions, which they collected into a book called The Mathnawi. This book is greatly revered by the people of this country; they meditate on it, teach it and read it in their religious houses on Thursday nights. From Quniya we traveled to Laranda [Karaman], the capital of the sultan of Qaraman. I met this sultan outside the town as he was coming back from hunting, and on my dismounting to him, he dismounted also. It is the custom of the kings of this country to dismount if a visitor dismounts to them. This action on his part pleases them and they show him greater honour; if on the other hand he greets them while on horseback they are displeased and the visitor forfeits their goodwill in consequence. This happened to me once with one of these kings. After I had greeted the sultan we rode back to the town together, and he showed me the greatest hospitality....

In Iraq

We then entered the territories of the king of Iraq, visiting Aqsara [Akserai] where they make sheeps wool carpets which are exported as far as India, China, and the lands of the Turks, and journeyed thence through Nakda [Nigda] to Qaysariya,

which is one of the largest towns in the country. In this town resides one of the Viceroy's khatuns, who is related to the king of Iraq and like all the sultna's relatives has the title of Agha which means Great. We visited her and she treated us courteously, ordering a meal to be served for us and when we withdrew sent us a horse with a saddle and bridle and a sum of money. At all these towns we lodged in a convent belonging to the Young Brotherhood. It is the custom in this country that in towns that are not the residence of a sultan one of the Young Brothers acts as governor, exercising the same authority and appearing in public with the same retinue as the king.....

We journeyed thence to Amasiya, a large and beautiful town with broad streets, Kumish [Gumush Khanah], a populous town which is visited by merchants from Iraq and Syria and has silver mines, Arzanjan where Armenians form the greater part of the population and Arz ar-Rum. This is a vast town but is mostly in ruins as a result of civil war between two Turkmen tribes. We lodged there at the convent of the "Young Brother" Tuman, who is said to be more than a hundred and thirty years old.....

We journeyed next to Bursa [Brusa], a great city with fine bazaars and broad streets, surrounded by orchards and running springs. Outside it are two thermal establishments, one for men and the other for women, to which patients come from the most distant parts. They lodge there for three days at a hospice which was built by one of the Turkmen kings. In this town I met the pious Shaykh Abdullah the Egyptian, a traveller, who went all round the world, except that he never visited China, Ceylon, the West or Spain or the Negrolands, so that in visiting these countries I have surpassed him. The sultan of Bursa is Orkhan Bek, son of Othman Chuk. [SA: founder of the

Ottoman empire]

He is the greatest of the Turkmen kings and the richest in wealth, lands and military forces, and possesses nearly a hundred fortresses which he is continually visiting for inspection and putting to rights. He fights with the infidels and besieges them. It was his father who captured Bursa from the Greeks and it is said that he besieged Yaznik [Nicaea] for about twenty years, but died before it was taken.....

We set out next morning and reached Muturni [Mudurlu] where we fell in with a pilgrim who knew Arabic. We besought him to travel with us to Qastamuniya which is ten days' journey from there...He turned out to be a wealthy man, but of base character....We put up with him because of our difficulties in not knowing Turkish, but things went so far that we used to say to him in the evenings "Well, Hajji, how much have you stolen today ?" He would reply "So much" and we would laugh and make the best of it. We came next to the town of Buli, where we stayed at the convent of the Young Brotherhood. What an excellent body of men these are, how noble-minded, how unselfish and full of compassion for the stranger, how kindly and affectionate they are to him, how warm their welcome to him! A stranger coming to them is made to feel as though he were meeting the dearest of his own folk. Next morning we traveled on to Garadi Buli, a large and fine town situated on a plain, with spacious streets and bazaars, but one of the coldest in the world. It is composed of several different quarters, each inhabited by different communities, none of which mixes with any of the others.....

We sent on through a small town named Burlu to Qastamuniya, From Qastamuniya we traveled to Sanub [Sinope], a populous town combining

strength with beauty.....

We stayed at Sanub about forty days waiting for the weather to become favorable for sailing to the town of Qiram.[Crimea] Then we hired a vessel belonging to the Greeks.....At length we did set sail....We made for a harbour called Karsh [Kerch], intending to enter it....

The place was in the Qipchaq desert[steppe] which is green and verdant, but flat and treeless. There is no firewood so they make fires of dung... The only method of travelling in this desert is in waggons; it extends for six months' journey, of which three are in the territories of Sultan Muhammad Uzbek. The day after our arrival one of the merchants in our company hired some waggons from the Qipchaqs who inhabit this desert, and who are Christians and we came to Kafa, a large town extending along the sea-coast, inhabited by Christians, mostly Genoese, whose governor is called Damdir [Demetrio].....

We hired a waggon and traveled to the town of Qiram, which forms part of the territories of Sultan Uzbek Khan and has a governor called Tuluktumur...

He was on the point of setting out for the town of Sara, the capital of the Khan, so I prepared to travel along with him and hired waggons for this purpose. These waggons have four large wheels and.....on the waggon is put a light tent made of wooden lathsand it has grilled windows so that the person inside can see without being seen. One can do anything one likes inside, sleep, eat, read or write during the march...

At every halt the Turks loose their horses, oxen and camels and drive them out to pasture at liberty, night or day, without shepherds or guardians. This is due to the severity of their laws against theft. Any

person found in possession of a stolen horse is obliged to restore it with nine others; if he cannot do this, his sons are taken instead, and if he has no sons he is slaughtered like a sheep. They do not eat bread nor any solid food, but prepare a soup with kind of millet, and any meat they may have is cut into small pieces and cooked in this soup. Everyone is given his share in a plate with curdled milk and they drink it, afterwards drinking curdled mare's milk which they call qumizz. They also have a fermented drink prepared from the same grain, which they call buza [beer] and regard it as lawful to drink....

The horses in this country are very numerous and the price of them is negligible. A good one costs a dinar of our money. The livelihood of the people depends on them, and they are as numerous as sheep in our country, or even more so. A single Turk will possess thousands of horses. They are exported to India in droves of six thousand or so....

From Azaq [Azov] I went on to Majar, travelling behind the amir Tuluktumur. It is one of the finest of the Turkish cities and is situated on a great river.

...A remarkable thing which I saw in this country was the respect shown to women by the Turks, for they hold a more dignified position than the men. The first time that I saw a princess was when, on leaving Qiram, I saw the wife of the amir in her waggon. The entire waggon was covered with rich blue woolen cloth, and the windows and doors of the tent were open. With the princess were four maidens, exquisitely beautiful and richly dressed, and behind her were a number of waggons with maidens belonging to her suite. When she came near the amir's camp she alighted with about thirty of the maidens who carried her train..When she reached the amir, he rose before her and sat her beside him, with the maidens

standing around her. Skins of qumizz were brought and she, pouring some into a cup, knelt before him and gave it to him, afterwards pouring out a cup for her brother. Then the amir poured a cup for her and food was brought in and she ate with him. He then gave her a robe and she withdrew. I saw also the wives of the merchants and commonality. One of them will sit in a waggon which is being drawn by horses, attended by three or four maidens...

The windows of the tent are open and her face is visible for the Turkish women do not veil themselves. Sometimes a woman will be accompanied by her husband and anyone seeing him would take him for one of her servants; he has no garment other than a sheep's wool cloak and a high cap to match.

On Uzbek Khan

The illustrious Sultan Muhammad Uzbek Khan is the ruler of a vast kingdom and a most powerful sovereign, victor over the enemies of God, the people of Constantinople the Great, and diligent in warring against them. He is one of the seven mighty kings of the world, to wit: [first], our master the Commander of the Faithful, may God strengthen his might and magnify his victory! [the sultan of Morocco]; [second] the sultan of Egypt and Syria; [third], the sultan of the Two Iraqs; [fourth], this Sultan Uzbek; [fifth], the sultan of Turkistan and the lands beyond the Oxus; [sixth], the sultan of India; and [seventh], the sultan of China [the emperor].

The day after my arrival I visited him [Uzbek Khan] in the afternoon at a ceremonial audience; a great banquet was prepared and we broke our fast in his presence. These Turks do not follow the custom of assigning a lodging to visitors and giving them money for their

expenses, but they send him sheep and horses for slaughtering and skins of qumizz, which is their form of benefaction.

Every Friday, after the midday prayer, the sultan holds an audience in a pavilion called the Golden Pavilion, which is richly decorated. In the centre there is a wooden throne covered with silver-gilt plates, the legs being of pure silver set with jewels at the top. The sultan sits on the throne, having on his right the Khatun Taytughli with the khatun Kebek on her right, and on his left the khatun Bayalun with the khatun Urduja on her left. Below the throne stand the sultan's sons, the elder on the right and the younger on the left, and his daughter sits in front of him. He rises to meet each Khatun as she arrives and takes her by the hand until she mounts to the throne. All this takes place in view of the whole people, without any screening.

