

Thyge C. Bro

Ibn Battuta¹

Pilgrim, traveler and tourist

The Muslim explorer Ibn Battuta traveled across the Muslim world in the early fourteenth century. In this article, Thyge C. Bro tells the story of the nearly thirty years of travelling that took Ibn Battuta from Morocco to India and China and compares him with another famous traveler of the age: Marco Polo.

Ibn Battuta began his nearly thirty year career as a traveler, explorer and author some two hundred years before Columbus would set sail in search of new trade routes to China and one year after the death of the trader and explorer Marco Polo. A devout Muslim, Ibn Battuta's original aim was to fulfill his moral duty and perform the *Hajj*. Traveling from Tangier, Morocco on a pilgrimage, the twenty-one year old Ibn Battuta would not return from his travels throughout the Islamic world for close to thirty years.

Born into an educated family of Islamic legal scholars or *qadi*, Ibn Battuta, whose full given name was Abu Abdallah Muhammad ibn Abdallah ibn Muhammad ibn Ibrahim al-Lawati al-Tanji, undoubtedly would have studied at the Sunni Maliki school. However, his ambitions surpassed what was available to him at home.²

He planned his first *Hajj* most likely with the goal of furthering his education at more prestigious institutions in Cairo and Damascus, but he never really got around to it. A third reason for Ibn Battuta traveling or taking what in our opinion were often massive detours, was his great interest in sufies and Sufism. He visited many of them and he recorded all his visits often in great detail. Another reason for his continued traveling was that Ibn Battuta was out looking for a job. Again he only had limited success and he

1 I am grateful to Teah Bro Goldberg M.A., Claremont Graduate University, California, USA for translating my article into readable English.

2 Ross E. Dunn, *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta. A Muslim Traveler of the 14th Century* (Los Angeles 1989) 19. A *qadi* is a Muslim judge who primarily works with civilian and family law related to religion.

never tells us directly that job-hunting is what drives him on.

But the last reason that got him to travel on was his total insatiable curiosity; his continuous lust for knowledge, to learn something new and travel a route he had never traveled before. And he never had to write a book of his long travels, he relayed his adventures and travels by storytelling along the way.

Therefore spurred by a natural sense of curiosity of the world around him and with an open mind and spirit, Ibn Battuta set out on his first journey to Mecca. Possessing little money, he traveled by whatever means were available to him: horseback, riding camels, by wagon, ship or simply on foot. Of his journeys Ibn Battuta writes:

‘My departure from Tangier, my birthplace, took place on Thursday of the second month of God, Rajab the Unique, in the year 725 with the object of making my pilgrimage to the Holy House at Mecca and visit the tomb of the Prophet, God’s richest blessings and peace be on him, at Medina. I set out alone, having neither fellow-traveler in whose company I might find cheer, nor caravan whose party I might join, but swayed by an overmastering impulse within me and a desire long-cherished in my bosom to visit the illustrious sanctuaries. So I braced my resolution to quit all my dear ones, female and male, and forsook my home as birds forsake their nest.’³

Seek knowledge

Ibn Battuta’s desire for knowledge and experience would compel him to travel across 50 modern countries or 120,000 kilometers, equal to three times around the globe.

‘I have indeed - praise to God - attained my desire in this world, which was to travel through the earth, and I have attained in this respect what no other person has attained to my knowledge’.⁴

As his travels progressed, Ibn Battuta shifted from a poor and humble traveler to a bringer of news. Initially he did not have much to report as his adventures had only just begun, but in time he started to disseminate information and news of the places he had visited. We can only assume that he was a truly gifted storyteller and through this ability gained access to some of the most important and influential people in the towns and villages he

3 H.A.R. Gibb, *The Travels of Ibn Battuta* (London 1958-1971, reprinted 1993) 8. The date in our calendar was June 14, 1325.

4 Gibb, *The Travels of Ibn Battuta*, 282.



Cities of Eurasia and Africa in the fourteenth century. Source: Dunn, *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta*, 2.

traveled through. Through his narrative ability, Ibn Battuta traded stories for the necessities of life; food, shelter, clothes, transportation and money.

As he spent much of his travels going to and from Mecca he frequently received alms and aid from other Muslims, often receiving gifts from local rulers, governors and other important people.

Following the great caravan of pilgrims first to Cairo and after an abandoned attempt to cross over to Saudi Arabia, Ibn Battuta traveled on to Damascus to continue his education. While in Damascus, he attended a number of lectures in connection with his scholarly pursuits before setting out again across the desert to Mecca. Soon he learned that even traveling in the company of a large caravan had its hazards. Once safely in Mecca he relates:

‘The caravan then sets out from Tabuk and pushes on speedily night and day, for fear of the wilderness. Halfway through is the valley al-Ukhaidir, which might well, being the valley of Hell; God preserve us from it. One year the pilgrims suffered severe distress in this place, by reason of the samoon-wind, which blows there, their water supplies dried up, and the price of a drink of water rose to a thousand dinars, but both seller and buyer perished.’⁵

5 Ibidem, 161.

Hazards aside, Ibn Battuta reached Mecca for the first time in 1326 after eighteen months of travel. Participating in the pilgrimage he visited the mosques of Mecca, cemeteries and other holy sites. Having completed his *Hajj*, he decided to spend a year exploring the Near East instead of returning to Morocco.

From pilgrim to traveler

In 1328 he traveled by ship down the coast of East Africa as far south as Kilwa in what is modern day Tanzania. Continuing on he returned to the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula, then on to the Persian Gulf and finally across to Asia Minor, in modern day Turkey. Early on he had made the incredible decision that he would never take the same route twice and astonishingly he succeeded in adhering to this during the majority of his travels.

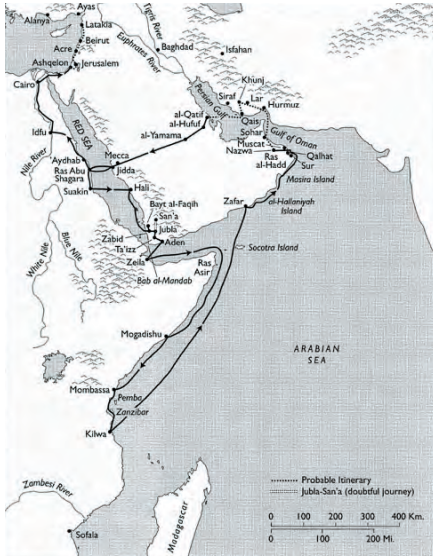
In many ways Ibn Battuta was a tolerant and open-minded traveler. However, occasions did arise in which he found himself frowning upon local customs and after traditions some of which he believed barbaric and uncivilized. As a curious traveler he was eager to learn the histories and beliefs of the places he visited but was sometimes displeased by what he discovered. In the city of Kaffa in Crimea, he had such an experience. Upon hearing church bells for the first time he writes:

‘When we alighted at this mosque and stayed in it for an hour or so, we heard the sounds of church bells on every side, and never having heard them before I was alarmed at this and bade my companions ascent the minaret and chant the Quran and praise to God, and recite the call to prayer. They did so, when suddenly a man came in wearing a breastplate and weapons and saluted us. We asked him what his business was, and he told us that he was the *qadi* of the Muslims there, and he said, “when I heard the chanting and the call to prayer, I feared for your safety and came to see you.” Then he went away, but no evil befell us.’⁶

Unknowingly Ibn Battuta had entered into a predominantly Christian town. His spontaneous reaction to the sound of church bells was foolish but luckily the chanting of himself and his companions was drowned out by the sound of the same startling bells.

Traveling on, he visited Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine Empire. Accompanying the wife of a local Tartar Khan, the illegitimate

6 Gibb, *The Travels of Ibn Battuta*, 470-471.



Ibn Battuta's itinerary in Arabia and East Africa, 1328-30 (1330-32). Source: Dunn, *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta*, 107.

daughter of the Byzantine emperor Andronikos III, the Muslim Ibn Battuta gained entrance to the overwhelmingly Christian city. Guided by an imperial escort, he was able to visit the historical and cultural landmarks in Constantinople. There is evidence that while in Constantinople he happened to meet the retired former emperor himself. In his description of what he encountered during his sojourn in the Byzantine Empire, he appeared impressed by the wonders discovered in this last outpost of ancient Greek and Roman culture. However,

we must not be deceived by his descriptions. Byzantium at the time it was visited by the traveler was on the verge of total collapse due to continued hostility and aggression at the hands of the Ottoman Turks.

Detour to India

As an author of travel narratives, Ibn Battuta is often frustrating. The actions he takes and places he visits appear to be chosen on a whim. There is no discernable pattern or reasoning, he merely goes where his mind and heart take him. Therefore, readers are left stymied by his seemingly aimless wanderings. He offers little to no explanation as to how he chooses his destinations nor why he suddenly changes those same plans preferring instead to venture in a different direction. It is left to his readers to find a reason on their own.

With this in mind we now find Ibn Battuta leaving Constantinople and stating a desire to visit India. Traveling by way of Crimea, he moved across the steeps of Russia into Central Asia. After many odd and unexplained detours he and his small group of fellow travelers finally arrived in India. He relates:

‘Everybody eats and sleeps in his wagon while it is actually on the move, and I had in my wagon three slave-girls. It is the custom of travelers in this wilderness to use the utmost speed, because of the scarcity of the herbage. Of the camels that cross it the majority perishes and the remainder is of no use except a year later when they are fattened up’.⁷

Travelling in a Mongolian wagon that was essentially a tent on wheels Ibn Battuta spent a good deal of the trek hidden from prying eyes in his moveable tent with only his books and his three slave-girls. In fact, he was rarely without female companionship during his nearly thirty year adventure. It was only during his journeys to Mecca that he traveled forth without the company of women. Included in his descriptions of the places he visited were lavish descriptions of the women he encountered paying special attention to their beauty and dress, or in some instances the lack of dress, of the local women. Interestingly he tells his readers that the women he met often wished to marry him which he happily obliged only to comment on the ease with which he later divorced them when he was ready to continue on his travels.

India

Ibn Battuta makes no mention of how he came to visit India and seek employment from a local Sultan. It can be assumed that he had at some point heard tales of the generous terms of employment offered to qualified foreigners by the Sultan of Delhi. It was the practice of the Sultan to employ non-Indians in his administration as government officials. The position was well compensated with the pledge to be loyal only to the Sultan himself and not the people he governed. By filling his administration with foreign Muslim employees with no personal or cultural ties to the local citizens, the Sultan was able to control and oppress the local Hindu population.⁸

Reaching India in 1330 Ibn Battuta gained employment as a *qadi* by the eccentric and violent local Sultan Muhammad Tughluq who reigned from 1324-1351. He recalls:

‘This king is of all men the most addicted to the making of gifts and the shedding of blood. His gate is never without some poor man enriched or some living man executed, and there are currently amongst people (many)

7 Gibb, *The Travels of Ibn Battuta*, 539-541.

8 Dunn, *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta*, 189-191.

stories of his generosity and courage and of his cruelty and violence towards criminals. For all that, he is of all men the most humble and the readiest to show equity and to acknowledge the right'.⁹

Working for such an unpredictable ruler was not ideal, but Ibn Battuta made the best of his time in the Sultan's employ, eventually marrying. The work load was light and he had plenty of time to explore his surrounding area, often visiting the Islamic ascetics and mystics the Sufis. On one occasion he visited a Sufi who happened to be a fierce opponent of the Sultan.¹⁰

Upon learning of Ibn Battuta's visit with his foe the Sultan of Delhi had him arrested. Fearing his own execution was imminent; Ibn Battuta was later brought before the unpredictable ruler and tells us:

'When I presented myself before the Sultan, he showed me greater favor than before, and said to me: "I have expressly sent for you to go as my ambassador to the king of China, for I know your love of travel and sightseeing." He then provided me with everything I required, and appointed certain other persons to accompany me...'¹¹

Why the Sultan of Delhi appointed Ibn Battuta for this diplomatic mission we will never know. What we do know is that the mission was to commence in 1342, but was over before it even got started. Ibn Battuta was given lavish private compartments and his own restroom to share with his slave-girls onboard the ship bound for China, but the trip was doomed from the start. Before the ship was to set sail he visited a local mosque to participate in evening prayer when a violent storm hit the coast. His ship bound for China and all the other ships in the harbor were destroyed and scattered over the sea. Undeterred and conscious of his diplomatic duties given to him by a capricious Sultan, he decided to find an alternate route to China.

Paradise lost

Obtaining passage on a different ship, Ibn Battuta disembarked in the Maldives in the Indian Ocean. Learning of his arrival the local government, lacking a *qadi* with Ibn Battuta's qualifications, appealed to the traveler to remain there and become their chief-*qadi*. By his own report the Maldives

9 Gibb, *The Travels of Ibn Battuta*, 657.

10 A Sufi is a Muslim mystic, often ascetic in lifestyle and a typical member of a religious order. Dunn, *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta*, 23-24.

11 Gibb, *The Travels of Ibn Battuta*, 767.

were a new paradise:

‘It is easy to get married in these islands on account of the smallness of the dowries and the pleasure of their women’s society. The majority of people do not specify a dowry; only the act is witnessed and a wedding gift conformable to the bride’s station is given. When ships arrive the crews marry wives and when they want to sail they divorce them; it is really a sort of temporary marriage, and the women never leave their country.’¹²

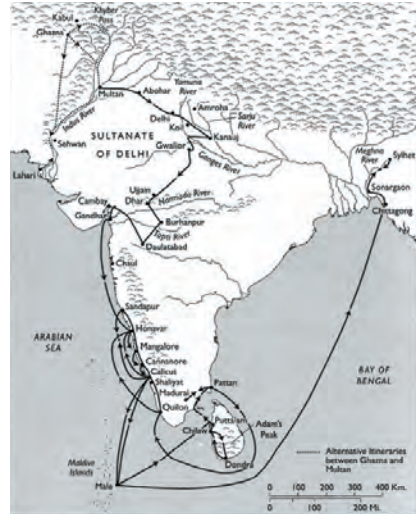
Ibn Battuta continues to tell his readers of this real world paradise in the middle of the Indian Ocean:

‘I have never found in the world any woman more agreeable to consort with than they are. Amongst these people the women never entrusts the service of her husband to anyone but herself; it is she who brings him his food and removes it from his presence, who washes his hands and brings him the water for ablutions, and who covers his feet when he sleeps.’¹³

In fact he married multiple different women during his stay in the Maldives and had numerous slave concubines as well. Ibn Battuta comments:

‘I had there four different wives, and concubines as well, and I used to visit all of them everyday and spend the night with the wife whose turn it was, and this I continued to do the whole year and a half that I was there.’¹⁴

However, even the most seemingly idyllic of locations, this paradise on earth, had hidden dangers. Finding himself in the middle of a local power struggle and being accused of plotting a rebellion against the local ruler, he made a hasty retreat from the conflict.



Ibn Battuta’s itinerary in India, Ceylon, and the Maldive Islands, 1333-45. Source: Dunn, *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta*, 184.

12 H.A.R. Gibb and C.F. Beckingham ed., *The Travels of Ibn Battuta* (London 1994) 828.

13 Ibidem, 828-829.

14 Ibidem, 823-824.

China

In 1344 he returned to the original diplomatic mission the Sultan had given him. In 1346, four years after the assignment was bestowed, Ibn Battuta finally reached China.

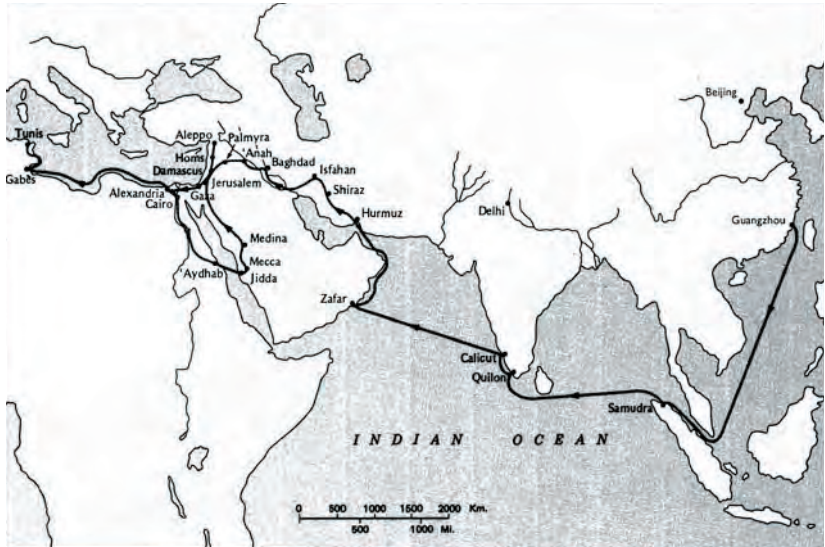
He moved throughout China as a self-appointed ambassador without any real credentials and found that his status was never questioned. Of his time in China he states:

‘The Chinese are infidels. They worship idols and burn their dead as the Indians do....The Chinese infidels eat the meat of pigs and dogs and sell it in the bazaars. ... Silk is extremely plentiful for the worms attach themselves to the fruit, eat it and need little care. This is why it is plentiful and the poor and the destitute dress in it. If it were not for the merchants trading in it, it would have no value.....The people of China do not do business in dinars and dirhams....They buy and sell with pieces of paper the size of the palm of the hand... All the people of China and Khita use for charcoal an earth which has the consistency and color of clay. Loads of it is brought by elephants and it is cut into pieces the size of pieces of charcoal with us. They set it alight and it burns like charcoal, but it gives off more intense heat...’¹⁵

Ibn Battuta already relates the intense heat from the coal, when he was traveling through the ice-cold desert of Central Asia. But not finding much in China that pleased him, he left the country the same year he arrived and he reached the southern tip of India sometime in 1347. He had fulfilled his diplomatic mission by going to China but he had been unable to gain access to the local ruler. This failure made his return to the Sultan of Delhi impossible as he dreaded the Sultan’s displeasure would ultimately lead to his own execution.

Fearing for his life, Ibn Battuta joined a caravan of pilgrims heading to Mecca. In all he made the pilgrimage to Mecca at least seven times during the many years he spent as a traveler. Reaching Mecca he continued on through the Middle East, passing through Syria and Egypt which were gripped by the Black Death in the years 1347-1348. He recalls the havoc the pathogen wreaked on the population leaving enormous numbers of people dead. In Damascus the death toll in one day reached 2,000, in Alexandria 1,080 fell in one day and in Cairo a staggering 21,000 people died in a single day. Amazingly, Ibn Battuta himself escaped the ravishes of the Black Death,

15 *Ibidem*, 889-891.



Ibn Battuta's return itinerary from China to North Africa, 1346-49. Source: Dunn, *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta*, 267.

this may be due in part to his obsession with personal hygiene and the frequency with which he changed his clothes.¹⁶

Securing passage on a ship crossing the Mediterranean he arrived back in Tangier after 24 years and 7 months of continued travel on December 1st 1349.

Home but not yet home

Unaccustomed to a sedentary lifestyle Ibn Battuta was soon traveling again. He journeyed to Granada in what was Muslim Spain encountering the man who would become his personal secretary, Ibn Juzayy. Granada as a Muslim outpost was in decline following a Christian re-conquest of the remaining Muslim held areas of the Iberian Peninsula.

Returning to Morocco he joined during the fall of 1351 a salt trading caravan traveling across the Sahara to the Western African kingdom of Mali. The aim was that the caravan would trade salt to the locals in exchange for gold, ivory and slaves. It was a long and dangerous journey through the desert with little water. Why he went on this journey across the Sahara we can only wonder; did he want to visit the last part of the Muslim world

¹⁶ Dunn, *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta*, 270-273.

that he had not visited so far? Or was he on a special observation mission for the Sultan of Morocco? We do not know and he does not tell us. But he writes of the dangers of travelling in the desert:

‘In those days we used to go in front of the caravan and when we found a suitable place we pastured our animals there. We went on doing this till a man called Ibn Ziri was lost in the desert. After that I did not go ahead or fall behind the caravan.’¹⁷

The caravan made its way through the Sahara eventually stopping in black Africa. Ibn Battuta was displeased by the reception he received from the local dignitaries. He had been expecting to be given gifts of fine cloth, money or food as he had become accustomed to such treatment throughout his extensive travels. Instead of riches, he received gruel with a bit of honey and curdled milk. This did not please him but he never the less continued his travels through Mali again remarking on the many beautiful and agreeable women he encountered along the way.

To add drama to his travel narrative, Ibn Battuta recalls an incident that happened with some local cannibals. As punishment a local Sultan had sent one of his men to the cannibals hoping he would be eaten, but the cannibals sent the man back claiming that his white skin was an indication that he was not ripe. Ibn Battuta claims:

‘A group of these Blacks who eat the sons of Adam came to the sultan....The sultan treated them with honor and gave them as a hospitality gift a slave woman, whom they killed and ate....It was reported of them that they used to say that the best parts of the flesh of human females were the palms of the hand and the breast.’¹⁸

Embarking on his final journey, Ibn Battuta re-crossed the Sahara meeting up with another caravan that was transporting 600 slave women to the north. He reached Morocco in late January of 1354.

The Rihla

The tales of his travels and adventures reached the Sultan who appointed Ibn Juzayy to be his secretary. Unfortunately, Ibn Battuta had lost whatever notes he kept with him during his adventures and therefore had to recall it all from memory, which can often be faulty. But he had a very good and

17 Gibb and Beckingham, *The Travels of Ibn Battuta*, 947-948.

18 *Ibidem*, 968.

often very precise memory of people and places.

After almost two years of writing his travel narrative was finally complete. He had written a *Rihla*, a type of travel narrative that focused on the journey to and from Mecca and included all the important religious sites and people he had encountered along the way. After completing the book, Ibn Battuta took a position as a *qadi* in a small provincial town in Morocco where he remained until his death in 1369.

There is no evidence of the *Rihla* being widely quoted or used as a source in Muslim historical or geographical works written after 1355. But a number of copies must have been in circulation since there are some known references and quotes and a number of manuscripts that are known today.¹⁹

The story of Ibn Battuta and his travels was virtually unknown outside the Arabic-Muslim world until the beginning of the 1800s when the first translated versions appeared in Europe. Since its first arrival in Europe, the *Rihla* has been translated into countless languages and has been embraced by scholars and critics alike. In the Western world the Venetian merchant Marco Polo has the reputation of being ‘the greatest traveler in world history’, and Ibn Battuta has been placed right behind him in the order of honor and respect.

We must remember that neither of them actually composed their own book; Marco Polo dictated it to a writer of romantic novels while being a prisoner of war in Genoa. Interestingly, Marco Polo has long been known as the best source for information on early Chinese and other Asian cultures in the thirteenth century; but it is Ibn Battuta who has given a much more extensive and detailed first person account of his travels through many of the same areas. Moreover Ibn Battuta’s account is much more personal and humanly engaging than Marco Polo who remained very factual in his account.

Marco Polo was seen as a representative of what was to become the Renaissance and its lust for knowledge and the later explorations that were to come. He was the brave traveler that ventured into *terra incognita* and bringing back information to public attention. Christoffer Columbus took Marco Polo so literally that he sailed west to find China and Japan, but he did not know that the American continent was laying on his route west.²⁰

19 Dunn, *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta*, 317-318.

20 Ibidem, 5-6.



A photo of an interactive display of Ibn Battuta's travels that can be found in the Ibn Battuta Mall in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, (2 June 2007).

Historically Marco Polo has been championed by scholars and historian who often criticized Ibn Battuta who according to them spent too much of his writing on religious matters. By focusing on the religious aspects, historians claimed, Ibn Battuta largely neglected the political and economic systems he encountered. The critics, however, failed to account for his intended audience. The *Rihla* was written for the learned Muslim traveler of the Fourteenth century, not as a historical record.

Ironically both Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta have been criticized for more or less the same omissions of what historians today regard as obvious facts. For example, they do not mention chop-sticks in China or tea! This has brought forward the theory that neither of them ever was in China or anywhere east of Persia, since all earlier travel-narratives of Asia were in Persian and they simply copied them. This is a theory that must be disregarded as nonsense because almost all the information they both have in their narratives can only have been gathered on a first-hand basis.

Undoubtedly both Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta were courageous travelers who exposed themselves to great personal risks on their respected adventures into the unknown.

Ibn Battuta chose to spend the majority of his nearly thirty years of travel within the Muslim world meeting countless Muslims with the same religion, lifestyle and language.

This was a great help to him and part of the explanation on how he did it. As his secretary Ibn Juzayy remarks:

Bro

‘It is obvious to anyone of intelligence that this sheikh is the traveler of the age. If anyone were to call him ‘the traveler of this (Muslim) community’ he would not exaggerate.’²¹

21 Gibb and Beckingham: *The Travels of Ibn Battuta*, 977; Thyge C Bro, *Ibn Battuta. En arabisk rejsende fra det 14. århundrede* (Copenhagen 2001).