

Pax mongolica and ibn batutta essay sample



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Our world has been largely shaped by intrepid explorers and travelers who dared the unknown and the unfamiliar to enlarge our knowledge of the world. Much of our political and cultural history was defined by explorers at a time when the world was much bigger than it is today.

One of these travelers is Ibn Battuta, a noted Muslim traveler in the fourteenth century. Ibn Battuta was born four years into the fourteenth century. He was born in Tangier, Morocco from a well-to-do Islamic family. As a Muslim, the desire to travel to the Holy City of Mecca was ingrained in Ibn Battuta. When he was twenty-one years old, Ibn Battuta then took the hajj pilgrimage of some three thousand miles to reach Mecca. During this pilgrimage, Batutta became captivated by the sights and sounds that he experienced. Ibn Batutta was never the same since then and on the road, he found his true calling at last. Batutta decided to leave behind his training as a judge and Islamic scholar and to devote his entire life to travelling, vowing to travel only to Muslim places and to never take the same path twice. (Dunn 2004, 9)

Ibn Batutta is probably the most famous Muslim traveler and explorer. His journeys straddled a period of three decades, and covered a distance of over a hundred thousand kilometers. His travels took him to three continents, Africa, Asia, and Europe, covering every known Muslim country at that time. The travels of Marco Polo, Ibn Batutta's more popular contemporary, were much lesser in scope and magnitude. All accounts of Ibn Battuta's travels were documented by another scholar, Ibn Juzayy. Juzayy's documentation along with personal memoirs from Batutta himself remains the primary source of Batutta's notable story of exploration and discovery. Batutta's

travel stories have been compiled in a single volume known as Rihla, which means journey in English. The Rihla is probably one of the most exhaustive sources of the Muslim world in the fourteenth century (Dunn 2004, 10). The Rihla contains first-hand accounts from Ibn Batutta himself, interspersed with some fictional elements to make it more interesting.

Ibn Battuta first exploration lasted twenty years. His first itinerary was the oil-rich lands of the Middle East, going to Saudi Arabia and saw the relics of the ancient civilizations in Iran and Iraq. After some five years, Ibn Batutta then went to the land of Africa and then immediately proceeded to India. In India he stayed for almost a decade before leaving for China. From China he returned home and stayed home in Morocco for three years, after which, he left again for his second wave of exploration. (Dunn 2004, 16).

It might be said that Ibn Batutta lived in an auspicious time. The circumstances of the world when he was born made it an ideal time for travel. When Batutta was born, the Mongols ruled Persia and most of Central Asia. At that time, the Mongol rulers were converting to the Muslim faith. (Dunn 2004, 11) As such, Ibn Batutta grew up at a time when the Mongols provided protection for the Muslims and gave them safe passage all throughout the empire. Ibn Batutta travelled under the auspices of the Islam religion. He was not identified as a Moroccan, but as a Muslim looking to charter the world of the Islamic people, promoting peace and unity among brothers of the faith.

The Mongolian Empire that dominated the thirteenth and fourteenth century was able to establish some sense of peace and stability in all areas of their

dominion, mostly in Eurasia. While generally considered as barbaric, the ruthless and oftentimes cruel Mongol soldiers succeeded in unifying a large swath of land that has long been languishing in conflict and economic depression. At the height of the Mongol Empire, its dominion covered the largest contiguous territory in history. It was spearheaded by Temujin, who in 1206 ascended the Mongol throne. Under his leadership, the Mongols were united and began their quest to invade neighboring lands. The strength and ruthlessness of the Mongols easily cut into Eurasia. By the early fifteenth century, after two centuries of conquest, the Mongol empire ruled over a territory that covers almost twenty-five percent of the world's total land area. (Dunn 2004, 18).

Scholars refer to this period of peace and stability all throughout the Mongolian Empire as Pax Mongolica, based on the concept of Pax Romana. Pax Mongolica gave a renewed resurgence of trade along the Silk Road. This renewal of growth and development of Silk Road commerce under Pax Mongolica was primarily a result of the safe travel conditions that the Mongols provided for its citizens. Protection from violence and crime encouraged more people to take to the road and explore. The trade routes along the Silk Road resulted in the exchange of ideas and culture among its participants. This exposure to different cultures accelerated the cultural development of the participants, with each one affecting and enriching the other.

Safe passage. This was the main condition that allowed Ibn Batutta to travel and explore. Under Pax Mongolica, Ibn Batutta was able to go from one Muslim place to another without any threat of harm. Under the Mongols, it

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was strictly prohibited to steal and damage private property. From end to end of the Mongolian Empire, criminals and thieves were punished, and everywhere, people upheld the Mongol law. A commendable trait of the Mongols was their tolerance for all kinds of religious practices. Religious prosecution was expressly outlawed, and harsh punishment will be swiftly given to those found guilty of such. (Dunn 2004, 15) The dominion of the Mongol Empire was strictly governed by a code of law that was designed by Genghis Khan, which reflected his liberalism and tolerance for other cultures. This tolerance may have been largely a shrewd military tactic as he was able to be in good terms with different leaders of the Muslim world. Genghis Khan's code of law imposed harsh punishments to those found guilty of breaking its provisions. As a result, there was rigid discipline all across the Mongol Empire that made their territories extremely safe and well-organized.

Dunn thus describes Pax Mongolica,

The conditions of order and security that attended the Pax Mongolica of the later thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries gave freer play than ever to the movement of Muslims back and forth across Eurasia. (2004, 11)

It was in these conditions that Ibn Batutta set out on his journeys. Ibn Batutta made his remarkable travels during the later part of Pax Mongolica. According to Dunn, Ibn Batutta was able to travel under the guise of four different identities. First Batutta was a pious Muslim who traveled to the Muslim Holy Land of Mecca and Medina. Second, Batutta travelled as a scholar, who went from place to place, engaging in erudite and philosophical conversations among the people he finds company with. Third, Batutta

travelled as a devotee of Mystical Islam or Sufism, and he went to places of renowned mystics to ask for guidance and receive their blessings. Lastly, Batutta travelled for leisure and cultural education. (2004, 11) Having been born to an affluent family, Batutta belonged to the elite in society who can afford to travel for travel's sake.

To facilitate trade and commerce and communication in the vast Mongol Empire, the rulers invested heavily on building roads and developing a sophisticated mailing system. Travelers were not only assured of safety, they were also given provisions to remain in contact with their loved ones back home. For Ibn Batutta, this allowed him to be constantly in touch with the people he has met in all his travels as well as to the people at home who awaited updates and accounts of his travel.

It may be said that Pax Mongolia was a result of economic and commercial concerns. The Mongols regarded their economic relations with neighboring countries because they recognized that this was the only way to maintain peace across the empire. People who lived in prosperity and peace are less likely to take up arms and rebel. For the Mongols, to encourage trade was one of the best ways to protect the empire it has fought so hard to establish. Pax Mongolica was a result of the need to trade and trade necessitated Pax Mongolica. As such, Pax Mongolica facilitated all manners of cultural and economic exchanges from end to end of the vast empire.

Of course a discussion of Ibn Batutta and Pax Mongolica would not be complete without tackling the bubonic plague that may have very well signaled the end of the Mongol Empire. The safe passage and protection for

travelers along the Silk Road and in and out of Islamic countries that allowed Ibn Batutta to explore the Muslim world also served as vectors for all kinds of diseases. Fortunately for Batutta, he was able to return to Morocco before the onset of the bubonic plague. Going by Dunn's account, the plague started in the heart of the Mongolian empire, among the pastoral farmers of Central Asia. In 1331 the disease spread outward along the trade routes (2004, 271). As Asia vigorously traded with European nations, merchants and travelers exchanged not just goods and materials, the trade routes along the Silk Road resulted in the exchange of ideas and culture among its participants. This exposure to different cultures accelerated the cultural development of the participants, with each one affecting and enriching the other. The trade routes that Pax Mongolica protected allowed more and more people to participate in trade and commerce. However, this flourishing of the trade route also facilitated the spread of diseases.

Among the deadliest of these diseases was the bubonic plague that swept Eurasia, killing almost half of the entire population. This pandemic known as the Black Plague killed more people than all of the previous wars combined. The Black Plague sliced thorough Europe and Asia, leaving a trail of some 75 million people dead. The bubonic plague came from Asia and spread to Europe along the trade route. It was this very trade route; the sellers and buyers who were responsible for the spread and development of culture, were also the vectors that spread diseases that halted cultural development.

Countries became wary of strangers because of the fear that they may bring infectious diseases. Trade became limited to neighboring areas, resulting in the isolated development of local culture sans the influence of foreign

countries. The once flourishing trade route became dreaded sources of horrible and fatal diseases. When the plagues hit, this interaction slowed down for several reasons. Those who survived the plague became wary of strangers for fear of catching another life-threatening illness. Moreover, the catastrophic loss of life made trade less viable. There were fewer people willing to buy, as most were preoccupied with rebuilding their lives. When trades slowed down, merchants used to peddling their goods looked for other means to sell their wares. Rather than travel, they set up shops where people went to buy what they need. The bubonic plague changed the face of the world as it was once. And the once mighty Pax Mongolica started to crumble and fall by the wayside, as it was with all other mighty empires of history. As Dunn so puts it, “ The Black Death was the grimly ironic price the world paid for the trans-hemispheric unity of the Pax Mongolica.” (2004, 271)

The world that Ibn Batutta knew no longer exists and it shall never be once again. Fate may have conspired to prepare the road for Ibn Batutta to safely travel so that this magnificent world will be known for all time to come.

References:

Dunn, R. (2004). *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta, a Muslim Traveler of the Fourteenth Century*. University of California Press