

Ibn Battuta – one of the greatest medieval travelers

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Ibn Battuta Muhammad ibn Battuta (1304-ca. 1368) was a Moorish traveler whose extensive voyages as far as Sumatra and China, southern Russia, the Maldives, the East African coast, and Timbuktu made him one of the greatest medieval travelers. Muhammad ibn Battuta was born in Tangier.

His family was of Berber origin and had a tradition of service as judges. After receiving an education in Islamic law, Ibn Battuta set out in 1325, at the age of 21, to perform the obligatory pilgrimage to Mecca and to continue his studies in the East.

He reached Mecca in 1326 by way of Egypt and Syria. This journey aroused in him the passion to see the world. From Mecca he made a trip to Iraq and western Persia as far as Tabriz and in 1327 returned via Baghdad to Mecca, where he spent the next 3 years. Ibn Battuta then traveled by ship along the Red Sea shores to Yemen and from Aden to Mogadishu and the East African trading ports. He returned by way of Oman and the Persian Gulf to Mecca in 1332. Next he passed through Egypt and Syria and by ship reached Anatolia, where he visited local Turkish rulers and religious brotherhoods.

He crossed the Black Sea to the Crimea in the territories of the Golden Horde and visited its khan in the Caucasus. He then journeyed to Sarai, the capital of the Golden Horde east of the lower Volga, and then through Khwarizm, Transoxiana, and Afghanistan to the Indus valley. From 1333 to 1342 Ibn Battuta stayed at Delhi, where Sultan Muhammad ibn Tughluq gave him a position as judge, and then he traveled through central India and along the Malabar coast to the Maldives.

His next trip took him to Ceylon, back to the Maldives, Bengal, Assam, and Sumatra. He landed in China at the port of Zayton and probably reached Peking. Returning via Sumatra to Malabar in 1347, he took a ship to the Persian Gulf. He revisited Baghdad, Syria, Egypt, Mecca, and Alexandria, traveled by ship to Tunis, Sardinia, and Algeria, and reached Fez by an overland route in 1349. After a visit to the Moslem kingdom of Granada, he made a final trip through the Sahara to the black Moslem empire on the Niger, returning to Fez in 1354.

During his travels Ibn Battuta sometimes lost his diaries and had to rewrite them from memory. His travel book was written from his reports by Ibn Juzayy, a man of letters commissioned by the ruler of Fez. These circumstances may account for some inaccuracies in chronology and itineraries and other shortcomings of the work which affect some parts in particular. However, the book contains invaluable and sometimes unique information on the countries Ibn Battuta visited.