

Document 10: Travels of Ibn Battuta

Background

Moroccan explorer Ibn Battuta is known for his extensive travels throughout the Middle East, Africa and Asia. His travel account, written after his return home to Tangier in 1355, offers historians insight into social, political, economic and cultural context of the 14th century.

I left Tangier, my birthplace, on Thursday, 2nd Rajab 725 [June 14, 1325], with the intention of making the Pilgrimage to the Holy House [at Mecca] and the Tomb of the Prophet [at Medina].

Tripoli

Some time later I joined a pilgrim caravan. We left Tunis early in November [1325], following the coast road through Susa Sfax, and Qabis, where we stayed for ten days on account of incessant rains. Then we set out for Tripoli, accompanied for several stages by a hundred or more horsemen as well as a detachment of archers, out of respect for whom the Arab robbers kept their distance. . . . There is an uninterrupted chain of bazaars from Alexandria to Cairo, and from Cairo to Assuan [Aswan] in Upper Egypt.

Cairo

I arrived at length at Cairo, mother of all cities and seat of Pharaoh the tyrant. It is said that in Cairo there are twelve thousand water-carriers who transport water on camels, and thirty thousand hirers of mules and donkeys, and that on the Nile there are thirty-six thousand boats belonging to the sultan and his subjects which sail upstream to Upper Egypt and downstream to Alexandria and Damietta, laden with goods and profitable merchandise of all kinds. . . . The madrasas of Cairo cannot be counted. . . . As for the Maristan, which lies "between the two castles" near the mausoleum of Sultan Qala'un, no description is adequate to its beauties.

Crossing the border into Syria (1326)

At the station of Qatya customs-dues are collected from the merchants, and their goods and baggage are thoroughly examined and searched. There are offices here, with officers, clerks, and notaries, and the daily revenue is a thousand gold dinars. No one is allowed to pass into Syria without a passport from Egypt, nor into Egypt without a passport from Syria, for the protection of the property of the subjects and as a measure of precaution against spies from Iraq.

Damascus

I entered Damascus on Thursday 9th Ramadan 726 [9th August, 1326], and lodged at the Malikite college. Damascus surpasses all other cities in beauty, and no description can do justice to its charms. The Cathedral Mosque, known as the Umayyad Mosque, is the most magnificent mosque in the world. When the new moon of the month Shawwal appeared in the same year [1st September, 1326], the caravan left Damascus and I set off along with it. . . . On the third day after leaving Damascus the great caravan halted at Tabuk for four days to rest and to water the camels and pack water for the terrible desert between Tabuk and al-Ula.

Mecca

I got rid of my tailored clothes, bathed, and putting on the pilgrim's garment, I prayed and dedicated myself to the pilgrimage. The inhabitants of Mecca have many excellent and noble activities and qualities. They are good to the humble and weak, and kind to strangers. When any of them makes a feast, he begins by giving food to the religious devotees who are poor and without resources.