The Forgotten Tangerine: IBN Battuta

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Ibn Battuta's book *The Rihla* gives us a unique insight into life of a 14th C travelling scholar in the golden age of Dar Al Islam (the world of Islam). This paper is a reflection on Ibn Battuta focusing on three curious things we don't know about him. First, we don't know what he looks like—what does this tell us about visual culture, ethnicity and the idea of self-image in 14th Century. Second, we don't know if he really went to China—if not why would this section be included? Third, we don't know how his story became lost to history, which it certainly was for close to 400 years—what does this tell us about the man, the book, its intended audience and the changes happening within Dar Al Islam at that time.

Keywords: Ibn Battuta, Rihla, Islam, history, culture

Introduction

The decades after Genghis Khan swept across from China into eastern Europe were a period of peace and security for travel and trade. Genghis and the four great Khanates he left behind opened a brief but safe *land-bridge* across Eurasia and numerous travellers crossed it in both directions. Only a few, however, wrote about it and of those who did only two significant stories have come down to us in the present era—the remarkable stories of Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta and of these two Ibn Battuta is by far the lesser known.

Ibn Battuta's journey is in the medieval literary tradition of a Rihla, a journey of scholarly enlightenment. In a Rihla the traveling scholar journeys to far places to meet other scholars to discuss learned matters, to access each others' libraries, and to have adventures along the way. The Rihla can be seen in the evolution of the modern college as the early networking tradition between centers of learning (Makdisi, 1981).

Ibn Battuta (1304-1368/9) lived and travelled about a generation later than Marco Polo (1254-1324) and he covers some similar territory although there are some notable differences. Marco Polo saw himself as a "stranger in a strange land" whereas Ibn Battuta never strayed far from Dar Al Islam (the world of Islam).

Dar Al Islam in the 1300s was the dominant global economy and culture with a reach from the Atlantic coast of Africa to the Pacific Coast of China—roughly equivalent to the present geo-political reach of Islam.

From the early explosion of Islam out of the Arabian peninsula and across Northern Africa in the 7th & 8th Cs, Islam had continued to expand in a more consolidated way by trade and colonization through the 9th-12th centuries. Bagdad, at the time Genghis Khan sacked it in the 1258, had been the largest, most technologically advanced and most prosperous city in the world for about 400 years.

The Mongol conquest, far from inhibiting expansion, further accelerated the reach of Dar al Islam as three of the four great Khanates Genghis Khan left behind converted to Islam.

There has been a lot of retelling and analysis of Ibn Batuta's tale and the purpose of this paper is not to retrace the known path but to revisit some of the things we don't know about Ibn Batuta and look for insights these gaps reveal about the man and his Rihla.

The three unknowns the author will focus are:

- (1) What did Ibn Batuta look like?
- (2) Did he really go to China?
- (3) How did his story get lost?

What Did IB Look Like?

A Google search for images of Ibn Batuta returns 9 million images of a turbaned young Arab but the reality is that we have no idea what he looked like (Dunn, 2004). As a Berber and resident of Tangier in the 14th C he could just as easily have appeared as a black African or a blonde Norseman.

Ancient trade routes across the Sahara produced a strong representation of the very dark Sub-Saharan in the Moorish population—think Shakespeare's Othello. More recently (since the 11th C) the Vikings had been present in the Mediterranean, raiding and setting up trade routes and the Norman Kings of Sicily and Southern Italy had established their Kingdoms from this time introducing blondes and redheads into the population.

Apart from a single reference in the Rihla to his beard IB does not describe his own appearance. In this age of the *selfie* it appears odd that he never describes his own appearance though he is meticulous, almost obsessively self-absorbed when it comes to his describing his experiences, annoyances, and achievements.

Nor do we have any first hand contemporary description of IB, in fact here is no known mention of any kind to IB or his writing until the 15th century. It seems almost inconceivable that there is no reference to IB or his Rihla until 200 years after that attest to IB's existence. This will be investigated further when we look at the third unknown—how was IB lost to history.

Finally the artistic portrait has had a troubled place in the history of Islam. Although in various contexts and periods of Islamic history artistic portraits were produced, generally the prevailing doctrine of Islam proscribes against the creation of images of living and sentient beings (aniconism). It is not hard to imagine that in IB's situation as a scholar in the Madh'habi law tradition any form of aniconism would be rejected.

So we are left with assumptions and probability. We do know he was a legal scholar of Madh'habi tradition hence the artists depictions showing him wearing a large turban probable. The depiction of him as an Arab however is unfounded and simply fits with the modern perception of the Islamic scholar.

Did IB Go to China?

The second question is whether IB went to China. The Rihla clearly states that he did but more than any other part of his journey—the China journey has skeptics.

China after Ghengis Khan was Kublai Khan's Khanate and gave rise to the Yuan dynasty. Although Kubla Khan was the only one of the four post-Ghenghis Khans who did not convert to Islam, both he and his Yuan dynasty successors encouraged new immigrants of diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds and often placed them into positions of authority over candidates from the Chinese establishment. In IB's time China was going through a time of prosperity which combined with the Yuan "Open Door" policy to be a powerful magnet for Muslim traders. Muslim traders founded settlements by sea routes on the Southern Chinese coast and by

overland routes into Northern China. Historically the idea that Dar Al Islam extended into China at that time is defensible and that IB travelled within it is plausible.

Why then is there skepticism? First there is the sheer distance 18,000 kms and the vagueness of the itinerary. Descriptions of places are muddled and where the trip is measurable it does not appear plausible. It would appear his journey from the Maldives to far north China and back again to India took about 20 months which skeptics consider implausible (Ferrand, 2010).

Second the descriptive style is inconsistent with other parts of the Rihla. In other journeys IB's detailed personal observation is the strongest evidence of his authenticity. In the journey to China this detail is suspiciously lacking. Is it simply that IB's memory is failing? Possibly, but he is able to describe with great clarity his travels in Persia, Africa, India and the Maldives which occurred decades earlier than his alleged Chinese experience.

Although it would be hard to imagine how one might conclusively prove the authenticity or otherwise of IB's Chinese voyage let us assume for a moment that the skeptics are correct, that it is a fiction, and turn instead to the question of why it would be included.

Like Marco Polo, IB was not the author of his own story but rather retold the events to another. In IB's case this other was one Ibn Juzayy from Granada who was commissioned by the Sultan of Fez to eloquently shape IB's story into its intended form. The intended form—a Rihla—was a recognized literary genre and it was expected that a good Rihla would draw on earlier Muslim historical and geographical authorities, sometimes crediting them and sometimes not. Fez had become an important center of learning after the fall of Baghdad and IB and IJ would certainly have had a wealth of historical and geographical source material available to them if they needed it. IJ was not commissioned simply to tell IB's story. At the broadest level the Rihla was meant to be an overview of Dar Al Islam in the 14th C and from IJ's point of view it was unfortunate that IB had not gone everywhere. The remedy for this would have been for IJ to fill in the gaps, although again we can never be sure. Dunn (2004) concludes:

Even if small parts of the Rihla are fabricated we can never know for sure how to parcel out the blame. It is conceivable that Ibn Juzayy added certain passages without Ibn Battuta even knowing that he did. Nor can we discount the meddling of later copyists.

How Did the Rihla Get Lost?

The third question is perhaps the most fascinating of all. How did the Rihla become lost to history for close to 400 years?

There is little evidence of anyone being aware of the Rihla's existence from the time of writing until it is re-discovered in the early 19th C. It was never, as might be expected, cited as a valuable historical or geographical source.

A short passage in a biographical work from the 15th C describes a person who is assumed to be IB but does not name him (Rosenthal, 1958) or mention the Rihla. There is some evidence that at least some excerpts of the Rihla were known in Sudan in the 17th C and Egypt in the 18th C (Houdas, 1964).

Finally in the mid 19th C five manuscripts containing two complete copies of the Rihla turn up in an archive in Constantine during the early years of the French occupation of Algeria. These manuscripts were taken to Paris, studied, translated, and published in French in 1853 (Defrémery & Sanguinetti, 1853), to the amazement of the academic and general public.

Compare the Rihla's journey to that of Marco Polo's book. From its publication the *Travels of Marco Polo* was translated, distributed, printed, reprinted, challenged, discussed, studied, and quoted from decade to decade down to the present day.

Part of the answer to this question may lie in the emergence of what we now call the age of reason. Examined through a lens of scientific method and objectivity the Rihla would appear flawed—it's uncritical rhetoric and advocacy for the status quo, its lack of authenticity, and the subjective self-absorption of the author. IB always places himself at the center of any story he is telling. Marco Polo by contrast has more of a modern sociologist's approach to describing the cultures he encounters and we learn almost nothing of him as a person.

Marco Polo's readership was an expanding literate population of Renaissance Europe, hungry to have their world view challenged.

Ibn Battuta's target audience was the intellectual elite of Dar Al Islam amongst whom he always had credibility problems (Houdas, 1964). There is something almost comical (Basil-Fawlty-ish) about the way IB projects himself as a legal scholar when there is no evidence he put in any serious study after he began his journeying at the age of 22. It is not hard to imagine how his credibility problems with his target audience would have equated to credibility problems with the Rihla.

The audience that IB most wanted to impress was not at all impressed. The intellectual world was also changing and so the Rihla was not well received and fell into obscurity eventually becoming lost to history. It is a wonderful irony that his story was only finally re-discovered and given its deserved recognition 500 years after it was written, by scholars from Europe—the one populated region of Eurasia that Ibn Battuta never travelled.

The Real Value of the Rihla

The journey of discovery is a universal narrative (Campbell in Cousineau, 2003). In various cultures and contexts the journey takes the form of a passage from apprentice to master, a pilgrimage, or a Rihla.

The Rihla of the 14th C serves the role of a scholarly nomadic culture that eventually evolves into the sedentary culture of the modern University College. The nomadic culture is older, more about action than theory, more about the journey than the destination. The rediscovery of the Rihla is one of the little unexpected gems of history that sometimes turn up unexpectedly and illuminate a brief period of history that had previously been in shadow. Through IB's Rihla and in particular the tantalizing unanswered questions it raises we glimpse an intellectual world long past, which however distant shaped the world that followed it.

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