



THE INCREDIBLE GEOGRAPHY OF IBN BATTUTA

Scholars marvel at Ibn Battuta's extensive 14th century world travels and detailed geographic analyses, accomplished more than 150 years before Christopher Columbus. An interesting series of articles about Ibn Battuta appeared recently in Saudi Aramco World (July/Aug. 2000) (formerly Aramco World), documenting his exceptional travelogue.

In 30 years, Ibn Battuta traveled more than 75,000 miles (120,000 km.), averaging seven miles (11 km) a day for 11,000 days as he crisscrossed North Africa and Asia. His travels occurred during a time when there was no mechanical transportation and the fastest animals for traveling long distances were the horse and camel.

Ibn Battuta was born in 1304 to a family of judges in Tangiers, an African coastal city and trading port located just west of the Strait of Gibraltar. Although little is known about his childhood, he was obviously well educated, even beyond his study of the Koran. The Koran (or Qur'an), the holy book of the Islam religion, was the centerpiece of education throughout the Muslim world.

Ibn Battuta lived during the height of Islam's geographic influence, which began its spread from the Arabian Peninsula in the seventh century A.D. By the time he was an adult, Islam's regional coverage included North Africa, part of Europe's Iberian Peninsula (Spain), and Southwest, Central and Southern Asia.

In 1325, at age 21, Ibn Battuta departed Tangiers on a Hajj, a pilgrimage to the Muslim holy city of Mecca, as mandated by the Koran. He seldom stopped traveling thereafter. Ultimately, he vis-

ited Mecca four times, but he otherwise tried not to travel the same route twice.

His ability to recite the Koran by heart and his understanding of the subtleties of the Koran and Islamic law (sharia) made Ibn Battuta a wandering Muslim scholar and judge. As was common throughout the Muslim world, such scholars were welcomed into towns and cities where, for room and board and a stipend, they would teach. In the case of Ibn Battuta, as his reputation grew, Muslim rulers hired him to serve as a geographically knowledgeable and respected qadi, or legal advisor.

The mid-1300s was a vibrant time within the Muslim sphere of influence. Arabic was the language of commerce and education. Arabs largely controlled trade that had to pass through the Mediterranean between Europe and the East.

Ibn Battuta passed through territories that today would be included in 40 modern countries, met 60 heads of state, served as advisor to at least a third of them and probably taught thousands of students from the Mediterranean to China.

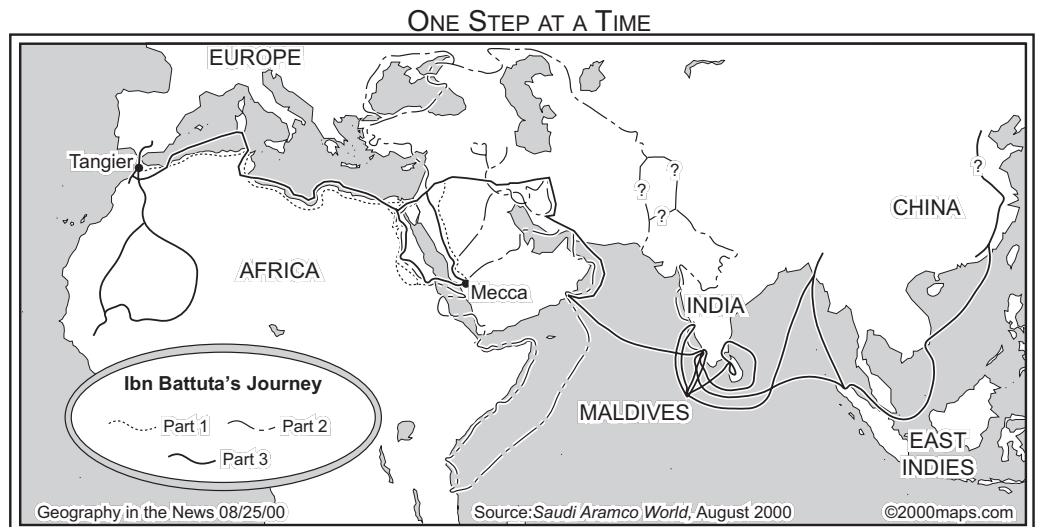
Saudi Aramco World authors Douglas Bullis and Norman MacDonald divide Ibn Battuta's travels between 1325-1354 into three segments based upon time

travel.

Instead of returning home in 1327, Ibn Battuta began the second segment of his travels, traveling to Damascus, then to Mecca a second time and south along Africa's east coast. Then he revisited Mecca for a third Hajj before setting off to Anatolia (Turkey), around the Black and Caspian seas southeastward to the Silk Road, through the great Hindu Kush and into India, arriving in 1333.

After some harrowing adventures around India, Ibn Battuta embarked on his third segment in 1341 for Bengal (Bangladesh and Burma), Sumatra (Indonesia) and China. Although there is some suspicion about his actual travels in China, he apparently spent a year there. He left China and sailed to the Arabian Peninsula, making his way north to Baghdad and returning for his fourth Hajj to Mecca. He returned home through the Mediterranean, followed by two more side trips, one to Granada in Spain and the other deep into the Sahara to Timbuktu.

When his 30 years of travel ended, he and a scribe (secretary) wrote Ribla, a memoir of his travels. He named more than 2,000 people whom he met or whose tombs he visited. He also gave vivid descriptions of the physical and human ge-



and geography.

The first segment began in Tangiers and followed the North African coast to Cairo, then southwest to the Red Sea. Unable to reach Mecca, his real destination, from southern Egypt, he returned to Cairo, then to Damascus. Joining an annual Hajj—an 850-mile (1,350-km.) camel caravan from Damascus to Mecca—Ibn Battuta arrived there in just over a year after his departure from Tangiers. This Hajj only whetted his appetite for more

geography of exotic places, which stand today as the most scholarly works available for many of the locations during his time period.

Ibn Battuta's memoirs are a legacy to his geographic experiences and a treasure of knowledge about the Muslim world in the 1300s.

And that is Geography in the News. August 25, 2000. #534.

(The author is a Professor of Geography at Appalachian State University, Boone, NC.)