

## THE EUROPEANS DISCOVERY OF XINA

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#### **MARCO POLO'S WORLD**

#### **IBN BATTUTA'S TRAVELS**

Muslims were drawn into China in three different steps and by three different motives.

In the first step they were attracted by trade during the Tang and Song dynasties. They settled mostly in the active ports of the South East and in the cities standing along the Silk Road. This is the China that described Sulayman.

In the second step they were brought to China as political allies by the Yuan dynasty. They settled mostly in the new conquered territories, like Yunnan, in the capital, Beijing, and were also scattered everywhere as tax-collectors and local supervisors. This is the China described by ibn Battuta.

In the third step they were incorporated inside China by conquest by the Qing or manchu dynasty. They lived in the newly incorporated north west, Xinjiang, and where a differentiated ethnic population, the Uyghurs. This is the China that we'll encounter when talking about the 17th and 18th centuries Qing dynasty.

The greatest medieval traveler, as far as itinerary's length is concerned, is no doubt a Moroccan Muslim, Ibn Battuta. Born in Tanger in 1304, he received a thorough education in Muslim law, that would secure him easy contact with the educated elites of the vast Islamic world. He left Tanger at age 21 to make the Hajj, the one-time peregrination to Mecca, and this he did many times. He was impelled by the urge to visit the great Sufi centers and the tombs of famous Sufi mystics and saints, and he loved travel as much as religious learning.

His travels, that would last 30 years and would keep him on the road for more than 75,000 miles, covered

the Dar al-Islam, that is the lands where Islamic law was the foundation of the social order, as well as countries with significant minorities of Muslims.

His travels took him to the Western coasts of Africa, Egypt, Asia Minor, the Middle-East, Central Asia, India, China, Central Africa and Grenade. The span of his travels covers 40 modern countries, and gives witness of the extraordinary mobility and cosmopolitanism within the Dar al-Islam in the late Middle Ages.

He always travelled in a familiar Muslim world, in touch with people that not only shared his religious beliefs but also his moral values, his social ideals, and his everyday manners.

Sometimes he joined the huge caravans of pilgrims heading for Mecca,

that could group tens of thousands of pilgrims, but most of the time he went by himself,

with his growing retinue of camels, slaves and women. He married constantly, at any time, at any stage, with many women at once, and he divorced as constantly as he married leaving behind him an impressive trail of abandoned wives and children.

He supported himself with the gifts of Muslim scholars, who listened with amazement to the stories of his travels. The title of al-Hajj, gained with the peregrination to Mecca won him access to the influential network

of judges, teachers and juridical scholars into which he always endeavored to travel. He certainly had a gift for self-promotion.

He went to the great intellectual centers of Islam, Damascus, Cairo and Delhi, the great urban centers that had avoided the Mongols' massacres and had been enlivened by the massive migrations that had fled the Mongol tide. In spite of his repeated allusions about his excellent juridical formation, he could not compete with the legal scholars of the great Islamic cities: he only found a permanent position in Delhi, at the fringes of Islam.