

## BOOK REVIEW

### **Ibn Battuta and His Journeys to the Border Regions: New Studies on *Rihla Ibn Battuta***

**Hikoichi YAJIMA, Nagoya: Nagoya University Press, 2017\***

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Ibn Battuta (1304-1368/9) was the most well-known traveler of the Islamic world, often dubbed as the “Marco Polo of Islam.” He lived just a half century later than Marco Polo (1254-1324), and his records of his journeys offer valuable information on almost the entire known world of his day, except for European Christendom. His elaborate records of travels were dictated by Ibn Juzayy, a man of letters, and became known as *Tuhfa al-Nazār fī Gharā’ib al-Amṣār wa-‘Ajā’ib al-Asfār* (A Gift to Those Who Contemplate the Wonders of Cities and the Marvels of Traveling), or simply as *Rihla Ibn Baṭṭūta* (Ibn Battuta’s Travels). His full name is Abu Abdullah Muhammad ibn Abdullah al-Lawati al-Tanji. The last parts of his name, al-Lawati and al-Tanji indicate his tribal association to Lawata (or, Luwata), an Amazigh tribe, and his birth place, Tanjier in northern Morocco. While his figure and his travels have been often dealt with in coffee table books and articles, both inside the Islamic world and outside, there has been a lack of serious academic works since the translation and publication of the work in English with notes by Sir H. A. R. Gibb from 1958 to 1971 (Vol. IV was published by C.F. Beckingham in 1994, while Vol. V was indexed to Vols. I-IV).

Hikoichi Yajima is a historian, but is also a fieldworker, who visited virtually all the destinations of Ibn Battuta’s travels. In this sense, he is extensively acquainted with various parts of the contemporary Islamic world, and his fieldwork outshines many of younger field researchers on these places. Yajima outlines the background of his research in the introduction, stating that he spent around 20 years collecting 29 manuscripts of the *Rihla Ibn Battuta*, and then spent a further 7 years translating the works into Japanese, which were published in 8 volumes from 1996 through 2002 (pp.1-2). Ibn Battuta traveled nearly 120,000 km through, in today’s terms, more than 50 countries, which amounts to three times around the globe. Yajima does not claim to cover each and all the destinations of his travels, but he did field trips extensively, and some of the unknown travel routes of the medieval period were confirmed by Yajima’s travels, such as the caravan route in the Egypt-Sudan Eastern Desert. This route and other field trips are actually reported in one of his previous works, *History seen from the Maritime Perspective: A History of the Interactions between the Indian Ocean and the*

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*Mediterranean Sea* (in Japanese, Nagoya University Press, 2006). This voluminous work of more than 960 pages is a wonderful contribution to the history of the world trade system as well as the roles of Muslims in this history.

The contents of the book are as follows:

Introduction

Part I: For the studies of Ibn Battuta

Chapter 1: Ibn Battuta's life and his time

Chapter 2: Contents of *Rihla Ibn Battuta* and various manuscripts

Chapter 3: Proceeding studies on *Rihla Ibn Battuta* and Academic debates on their authenticity

Chapter 4: Mecca pilgrimage records as travel literature

Part II: Journeys to the Border Regions of the Oceans

Chapter 1: The rise of the Indian Ocean World and Chinese ships

Chapter 2: Samudera Pasai Sultanate, Port-State of Malacca Straits

Chapter 3: Ibn Battuta's visit to the Maldives

Chapter 4: Formation of the East African Swahili World and Kilwa Sultanate

Chapter 5: People's interactions over Arabian Sea

Part III: Journeys to the Border Regions of the Land

Chapter 1: Turkicization-Islamization of Anatolia

Chapter 2: The Danube Delta as a border region and the Baba Saltuq legend

Chapter 3: Is the journey to Bulghar a fiction?

Chapter 4: Hindukush transport route between Central Asia and India

Chapter 5: Expansion of the Islamic network over the Sahara

Conclusions

Postscript

It is difficult to present descriptions, evidences, and discussions on all these chapters in a short review, so the reviewer presents the following brief summaries to give a vision of the extent of Yajima's studies.

Part I is about studying Ibn Battuta and his records of marvelous journeys. Yajima's travels in search of the manuscripts resulted in a collection of 29 manuscripts. It is quite interesting that all the manuscripts he found were written in Maghribi (Western Arabic) script, and not even one in any of Mashriq (Eastern Arabic) scripts (p.59). More than 160 years have passed since the last standard Western edition of *Rihla Ibn Battuta*, so the author suggests making a new critically edited version, taking all the manuscripts he found into consideration (p.59).

The author suspects the main reason why *Rihla Ibn Battuta* remained unknown except in the Maghrib region was that the contents of the journeys was too fantastic to be considered as authentic travel literature. Even after it came to be known in the Islamic world and the West after the late 17th century, there have been numerous debates on the authenticity of its data. Certainly, there are mistakes and contradictions in the body of the records. However, Ibn Battuta himself stated that he had lost all his memoirs when he met with a robbery, and so Yajima wonders whether the real question is how he was able to remember the 30 years of his journeys in such precise detail: "I have made a comparison between his records and other historical sources in the course of my translation, and finding factual coincidence was the rule rather than the exception in most cases, so I felt that, except for some

particular parts, the authenticity of the records was beyond doubt” (p.73). As an exceptional case, the author examines Ibn Battuta’s journey to Bulghar in Chapter 3 of Part III, and decisively concludes that the journey was an addition by Ibn Juzayy, the dictator and editor of Ibn Battuta’s records.

Chapter 4 is about the pilgrimage literature of the Islamic world. Yajima’s conclusion is that Ibn Battuta used Ibn Jubayr’s pilgrimage record as a guidebook when he started his journey. Ibn Battuta exceeded the literature’s limits, becoming a world traveler. Nevertheless, it was part of this literary tradition.

Part II is about his journeys to the Border Regions of the Oceans. As in the title of the book itself, the “border regions”, or *thughūr* in Arabic, were the attractive destinations for Muslims in the expanding abode of Islam, for which Ibn Battuta, as a seeker of knowledge and spiritual experiences, set out (pp.100-101). By this time, the Islamic trade network, established during the eighth to tenth centuries, was connected with the Mongolian trade network during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (pp.102-103). Yajima showed the actual realities of the connected international networks through Ibn Battuta’s observations on various parts of those networks.

Chapter 1 examines very carefully all words related to “ships” in Ibn Battuta’s records, and how they contributed to the rise of Indian Ocean trading. Doubtlessly Ibn Battuta wanted to go to China, but seems to have failed. Yajima concludes that his descriptions of the Chinese journey were adopted from other sources, not his own, collected most probably during his stay in Delhi (pp.137-143).

Even when there is doubt as to whether some parts of his journeys were his actual experiences or not, the information he brought back was mostly accurate and useful. Yajima reconstructs in Chapter 2 the context and historical stages in which Islam expanded into the Indian Ocean World, by examining Ibn Battuta’s records on Southeast Asia, especially that of the Samudera Pasai Sultanate in Malacca (152-164). In particular, their adoption of the Shafi‘i School of Islamic law has had an enduring influence in Southeast Asia to this day.

Chapter 3 deals with Ibn Battuta in the Maldives. He moved from India to these jewel-like islands. Ibn Battuta served as a qadi (judge) in India, and earned respect for his Islamic knowledge in the Maldives. In his examination of Ibn Battuta’s description of the legend of the king’s conversion to Islam, Yajima utilized an inscription on neglected remains of the pillar of a mosque, which he “found” in a courtyard of the National Museum in Malé, today’s capital of the Maldives. He identified this item as the source of Ibn Battuta’s description (pp.173-181). The witnessing of the same inscription by Ibn Battuta and an Ibn Battuta researcher from Japan more than 630 years later must be a tremendous reward for the researcher for his endurance in research, rather than the result of a mere luck.

In Chapter 4, Yajima analyses the Swahili world of East Africa. Ibn Battuta was the first person to describe this part of the Islamic world by the word “Swahil” (p.190-191). Here the case of the Kilwa Sultanate is examined. This sultanate is a contemporary of the Malaccan Sultanate dealt with in Chapter II-2 on the other side of the Indian Ocean. Yajima contends that the introduction of the word “Swahil” by Ibn Battuta corresponded to his understanding of the rise of a new region, and his naming was accepted in later Arabic sources (pp.199-200). In Chapter 5, Yajima describes human interaction over the Arabian Sea, between the Arabian Peninsula, India, and the Swahili world in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, utilizing resources related to the Yemeni Rasulid dynasty, on whose research Yajima spent much time in his younger days.

Part III deals with Journeys to the Border Regions of the Land, namely, Eurasia, Sahara, and Sudan. Chapter 1 deals with 13 small monarchies in Anatolia. While Ibn Battuta’s ignorance of Turkish and Persian languages limited the information he was able to gather, his being able to lodge in

hostels of brotherhood organizations in Anatolian cities attracts our attention (pp.268-274).

Chapter 2 inquires into the legends of a Sufi saint, Baba Saltuq, who contributed much to the Islamization of Anatolia and the Balkans. Ibn Battuta was the first to record this saint. Yajima's judgment on a journey further to the north in Chapter 3 is mentioned above. The importance of the Hindukush route in connecting Central Asia with India had increased in the course of the Islamization of adjacent regions, and Ibn Battuta's crossing this steep mountain pass in Chapter 4 is particularly interesting. Chapter 5 presents his new journey into the Sahara, after he returned home from his main journeys to the East. He seems to have decided to terminate his life as a traveler, but a Marinid Sultan based in Fez estimated his capabilities and experiences as a man of journeys, and asked him to bring back information from the Sahara, south of Fez. He responded to the request positively, and his last journey into the Sahara and sub-Saharan regions tells us valuable information on these areas, which were providing salt, gold, copper and cacao to the Saharan trade.

In the conclusion, Yajima argues that there was a complex system of international trade, connecting eight trade channels and covering Asia, Africa, and Europe, in the time of Ibn Battuta, and his journeys covers virtually the entire "world" under this system. Therefore, his records are crucially important to understanding the world system of the day, and their value is quite comparable to those of Marco Polo (pp.380-381). However, compared with studies on Marco Polo, the case of Ibn Battuta calls for more detailed studies and poses new challenges to researchers (p.283).

If Ibn Battuta spent nearly 30 years witnessing the world of his time, Yajima has spent a similar period of his life clarifying Ibn Battuta's travels and the world he saw. In this book Yajima summarizes his new findings in recent decades, aiming not only to continue his own research on this subject but also to invite younger generations to join in this mission.

Generally speaking, one of the major problems of Japanese scholars is that they have been receiving more academic findings from the outside than reciprocating to them. Unfortunately, Yajima's outstanding findings also remain mostly in Japanese thus far. The reviewer truly wishes that there will be an initiative to share Yajima's findings with researchers of other countries on a global scale.