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Topic One

Traveling as a Stranger

Throughout Ibn Battuta’s adventures around the Muslim realms, he visited many different civilizations scattered throughout, most of which were Islamic. Growing up in Tangier, Ibn Battuta was educated in law and other Islamic sciences. His family was well respected and were among the scholarly elite, which allowed him to receive such high education, “one worthy of a member of a legal family (19).” Coming from a respected family and being a well-known educated traveler, Ibn Battuta was able to meet with the different kings and rulers of the civilizations he visited. Although, when he first began his journey, he was not recognized and therefore not greeted and spoken to.

During his travels, he found the Islamic religion all throughout the regions through familiar prayers and the pilgrimages to the Holy City, Mecca. While he traveled, he would come across some unfamiliar aspects of the Islamic civilizations that he found to be different than what he was used to, such as prayer and worship errors. Seeing the foreign aspects of the different Islamic civilizations caused Ibn Battuta to sometimes learn more about the different practices, customs, and behaviors and other times, he condescended the people because their civilization was different, or they were not practicing Islam correctly by his standards.

Traveling throughout the Medieval world, Ibn Battuta visited many Islamic civilizations and participated in many universal aspects of the Islamic culture. The familiar aspects that Ibn Battuta experienced were not foreign to him because he was taught about them and grew up around those practices and customs. One of those familiar aspects that Ibn Battuta knew about, was the hospitality and greetings from different rulers. One of the first cities that Ibn Battuta visited when he first set off on his journey through the Muslim realms, was Tunis. There he experienced his first civilization greeting and hospitality. At first, none of the townspeople greeted him like they greeted the other travelers, which made Ibn Battuta very upset. He writes, “one of the pilgrims, realizing the cause of my distress, came up to me with a greeting and friendly welcome, and continued to comfort me with friendly talk until I entered the city (36).” This was the beginning of warm welcomes and gifts that Ibn Battuta would continue to experience from the different cities he visited. Later, he traveled to the region of the Lurs, where “the little groups of literate men of the villages and hospices treated him well and gave him the usual presents owing to wayfarers (94).” Ibn Battuta always accepted the hospitality because he was given resources and places to stay for a couple nights before he began traveling again.

At almost every civilization Ibn Battuta traveled to and visited, he received gifts, food, slaves, horses and other items that would assist him during his travels. After he became more well-known, Ibn Battuta was greeted and waited on like a ruler. When he visited the Karamanid dynasty in Anatolia, “he was entertained by the sultan himself (148)”, which showed how important Ibn Battuta was throughout the Islamic World because not only was he entertained by the sultan, but his name was widely known throughout the different regions of the Medieval world.

When Ibn Battuta visited the civilization of Sylhet, the shaykh heard news of a great traveler that was going to visit Sylhet and told his disciples to look out for the traveler. When they met, the shaykh was hospitable to Ibn Battuta, who wrote, “Therefore they took me to the hospice and entertained me for three days (255).” Moving on to China, Ibn Battuta found that when he was visiting the country and saw Muslims, he “always felt as though I were meeting my own family and close kinsmen (258)” because they were hospitable and a familiar presence to him. Towards the end of his journey, Ibn Battuta visited the city of Malaga, where “he told the assembled group his story of having barely escaped death or capture himself. They were all astonished at his good fortune, and the qadi and preacher both gave him hospitality (284).” All throughout Ibn Battuta’s journey, he was welcomed and greeted with the best hospitality that the different civilizations could offer. This was the greatest of the many universal aspects he found during his adventure through the Muslim realms.

Another universal aspect of Islamic culture that he found during his journey is the education system. Ibn Battuta had grown up going to the school with the best education and therefore, he took pride in his education and learning. He continued to expand his knowledge as he traveled to the different Islamic civilizations. When he traveled to Damascus, he visited their Great Mosque, where it was filled with lecturers, readers and children learning and reciting their lessons (60). Ibn Battuta describes the Great Mosque “as a place of continuous religious and educational activity, a never-ending celebration of God’s glory and beneficence (60).” This description of the Great Mosque shows that Ibn Battuta was proud that there were so many children and adults coming to the sanctuary to worship and further their knowledge on their religion.

Finally, a familiar aspect of Islamic civilizations that Ibn Battuta found was the prayer and worship practices. The Islamic civilizations all believe in the same religion, but sometimes each civilization practices and worships differently. While he was traveling, Ibn Battuta found that in the city of Medina, the Muslims living there, practiced and worshipped the same as Ibn Battuta knew how to worship. “We spent each night in the holy mosque, where everyone [engaged in pious exercises]; some, having formed circles in the court and lit a quantity of candles, and with book-rests in their midst [on which were placed volumes] of the Holy Qur’an were reciting from it (69).” Along with the familiar practices, Ibn Battuta found that many civilizations were making Islam the official religion of their states. Visiting the House of Chagatay, Ibn Battuta met with Tarmashirin and celebrated with him “because, like Ozbeg, he was the first of his dynasty to make Islam the official religion of state (177).” By having the practices and worships universal among the Islamic civilizations, it created a more uniform religion. This made communicating and learning easier between the different Islamic civilizations. Ibn Battuta found many universal aspects of Islamic civilizations during his journey. There were also many unfamiliar and foreign aspects that he saw and experienced because Islam wasn’t practiced the same way in every civilization.

One of the unfamiliar aspects that Ibn Battuta found was the dress among some of the civilizations that he visited. Earlier in his travels, he spent some time in the town of Minya and was surprised by the nudity of the people in the bath-house. “One day I entered the bath-house in this township, and found men in it wearing no covering. This appeared a shocking thing to me (52).” This behavior was extremely foreign to Ibn Battuta, which caused him to go and tell the governor about the situation. When he told the governor, the governor called for all of the bath-house to come to him. The governor created documents that would then give consequences “if any person should enter a bath without a waist-wrapper (52).” Experiencing the nudity in the town of Minya and having an issue with it, Ibn Battuta went and got the laws changed, making the civilization similar to the others.

Another unfamiliar aspect that Ibn Battuta found, was the errors in the Islamic prayer and worship in some of the civilizations that he visited. When he comes across the Shi’is on his journey, he “makes it abundantly clear that he had little time (90)” for them. Their practices were not common among the Islamic culture which made Ibn Battuta take “righteous potshots at their beliefs or recounts disparaging little anecdotes about their fanatical and misguided observances (90).” Ibn Battuta showed no interest in their practices and was condescending because they were practicing the religion wrong according to the common Islamic law that was among the other Islamic civilizations.

Ibn Battuta continued to come across unfamiliar aspects of education when he was traveling through the Medieval world. Visiting Cairo, Ibn Battuta found the education to be unfamiliar because the Shafi’i system of law was implemented instead of the Maliki, the system that Ibn Battuta was familiar with. This was foreign because it “did not nurture people of creative originality (51).” Later, he visited Basra, an Islamic civilization, where he went to a mosque for worship. During worship, “he was appalled to hear the preacher committing dreadful errors of grammar in his sermon (92).” He talked to the qadi Hujjat al-Din about the awful grammar and learned that “there is not a man left who knows anything of the science of grammar (92).” The foreign education horrified Ibn Battuta because it was not the high, scholarly education he was used to experiencing. It also concerned him that some civilizations forgot about grammar, causing miscommunication and furthering its importance in speaking and communicating with different civilizations.

Lastly, a foreign aspect that Ibn Battuta came across during his journey through the Medieval world was the languages of the different civilizations. “Thus, when Ibn Battuta entered Iran, his first excursion beyond the Arabic-speaking world, his inability to speak the native tongue was no particular disadvantage as long as he kept to the network of the learned, where bilingualism was common (88).” This was unfamiliar to him because he could not speak the native language, making communication difficult between him and the rulers. Later, traveling to Persia, he could also not speak Persian, making it hard to speak with other travelers and rulers, similar to when he visited Iran. To make communicating easier, Ibn Battuta tried to stay where both languages were spoken while he was visiting those regions.

Ibn Battuta encountered many different Islamic civilizations during his adventure throughout the Muslim realms. Stopping at different cities and towns, he found familiar and foreign aspects of Islamic culture. When he found a foreign aspect, he would try and fix the issue by telling the ruler that they are practicing their religion wrong. Other times, Ibn Battuta would just make comments and condescend the townspeople about how their practices, customs, and behaviors were wrong. He was a great traveler and an influential Islamic scholar. Because of this, he was welcomed and greeted by many of the Islamic civilizations he visited and had the authority and influence to fix the foreign customs that the different civilizations were practicing.

Works Cited

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