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The Red Sea to East Africa and the Arabian Sea: 1328 - 1330



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The Red Sea and East Africa

After Ibn Battuta had lived and studied in Mecca for about one year, he started another adventure. From Mecca, he went to Jidda on the Red Sea coast where he and other pilgrims were crammed onto a small ship. The image shown here is a dhow. Dhows were one of the earliest types of boats to sail the Indian Ocean. They were made from planks sewn together with no deck. The design proved so seaworthy that they are still used today.

This was Ibn Battuta's first time at sea travel and he probably wasn't looking forward to it. The Red Sea was not easy to navigate with coral reefs and rocks just under the waterline. Storms were common, as were pirates who waited patiently for ships with rich travelers to rob and kill. Ships were weak in a storm - made of wooden planks that were stitched together with cords. Moreover, the winds could keep the sailboats from reaching their destinations. Truly the travelers' lives were in the hands of God.

The trading ships made their way down the east coast of Africa stopping at towns to trade for African goods such as ivory, gold, myrrh to make a fine skin oil, animal skins, frankincense and ambergris used to make perfumes, and slaves. His first stop was Zeila, a port of the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia with a large Muslim community. He felt Zeila "the dirtiest, most disagreeable, and most stinking town in the world. The reason for its stink is the quantity of fish and the blood of the camels they butcher in its alleyways." To avoid the smell, Battuta spent the nights on his ship, even though the water was rough.

He continued southward and fifteen days later they reached Mogadishu, the busiest and richest East African port. The Indian Ocean ports had long been active trading centers for Persian, Arabic, Indian and some European merchants. These merchants brought their languages, culture and religion to the region. For example, Ibn Battuta found that Mogadishu's sultan spoke both his native Somali and some Arabic and his chief legal advisor was Egyptian. But the East African trading ports were not isolated communities of foreign merchants. They were largely populated by black Africans speaking African languages like Somali in Mogadishu and Bantu further south). There was a great deal of intermarriage into the local families by the single Arab men who sought their fortunes along the coast of Africa. In some areas this coastal mingling of languages would finally develop into the language of Swahili which combines elements of Arabic, Bantu, and even some European languages.

Since Ibn Battuta was a real scholar of Islam religion and law now, he was made a welcomed guest of the local officials. This feasting and meeting of important people continued for about a week before the ship continued southward to Zanj and then Mombasa. They continued on to the islands of Pemba and Zanzibar, and finally arrived at Kilwa - today part of Tanzania.

Who were the people in the trading towns?

Settlers from Arabia and the Persian Gulf first introduced Islam into the little ports and fishing villages along the coast when they came to trade. The great majority of immigrants were males who married into local families. In Kilwa one family took control of the trading and gold markets from Zimbabwe. This family became very wealthy. They ate off Chinese porcelain, wore silk garments, and had indoor plumbing! Look at the ruins of the palace in which they lived.

What about slavery?

Ibn Battuta tells us several times that he was given or purchased slaves.



SIDE TRIP: EXPLORE THE MANY FACES OF SLAVERY IN IBN BATTUTA'S WORLD.

([HTTPS://ORIAS.BERKELEY.EDU/RESOURCES-TEACHERS/TRAVELS-IBN-BATTUTA/TRAVELS-IBN-BATTUTA-SIDE-TRIPS#SIDE TRIP SLAVERY](https://orias.berkeley.edu/resources-teachers/travels-ibn-battuta/travels-ibn-battuta-side-trips#side-trip-slavery))

He also tells us very briefly how slaves were taken and given as gifts.

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