What Ibn Battuta Saw: Damascus and Cairo

"Death has become so great, it has emptied the streets."
Ibn al-Furat (b. 1334, d. 1405) – Cairo historian[1]

Introduction

In the 24 years of his sojourns, Ibn Battuta passed through North Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, India, and China. He even made a brief visit to al-Andalus (Muslim Iberia) in 1350, thus adding one corner of Europe to his list. When Ibn Battuta set off for his journey to Mecca in 1325, we can be sure of one thing: He already knew what plague was.

Ibn Battuta had not initially intended to become a "world traveler." He was simply a pious Muslim intending to perform the *hajj*, the pilgrimage to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina enjoined on every faithful person if they can afford it. As a Muslim, Ibn Battuta would have heard plague discussed throughout his life, because it figured in *hadith* (the collected sayings of the Prophet Muhammad), which discuss contagion, martyrdom, and other topics. This was why al-Ṣafadi, whose poem we read in Lesson 1, could assume his audience readily knew the names of the great plague outbreaks of the 7th and 8th centuries. But did Ibn Battuta think he would encounter the disease in his travels? Probably not.

1.Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, Merits of the Plague, trans. Joel Blecher and Mairaj U. Syed (Penguin, 2023), 216.

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Introduction

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Ibn Battuta has been noted for the coolness, even seeming lack of interest, with which he treated the Black Death. He only mentioned plague episodes a handful of times in his long account of his two and a half decades of travel, and usually only briefly. Yet Ibn Battuta has turned out to be an important source for new understandings of the Black Death for three reasons. First, he gives us numerical information on the extent of the mortality in different cities. Second, his account gives evidence that, at least in regard to the southeastern Mediterranean, plague seemed to be moving from south to north. This turns out to be an important clue for unraveling several nagging questions about the source and timing of the outbreak in Egypt and the Eastern Mediterranean. Third, the fact that his story about the Prayer of Damascus—a communal response of the Muslim, Christian, and Jewish populations of the city when faced with plague in the summer of 1348—differed drastically from what we often see in "standard accounts." That this communal response was corroborated by other contemporary observers gives us the chance to assess Ibn Battuta's reliability.

Even though no *Yersinia pestis* DNA has yet been retrieved from the Muslim Middle East, the testimony that Ibn Battuta provided—together with new archaeological work and, more importantly, new investigations of traditional documentary sources—has given us new and important insights into the arrival and impact of plague in the region.

Scholar Dr. Claudia Tresso with a contemporary statue of Ibn Battuta at the opening of the Ibn Battuta Museum, Tangier, Morocco, 2022.

Key Terms:

Ibn Battuta's *Travels*

Caspian Sea

Golden Horde

Ta'un

Hadith

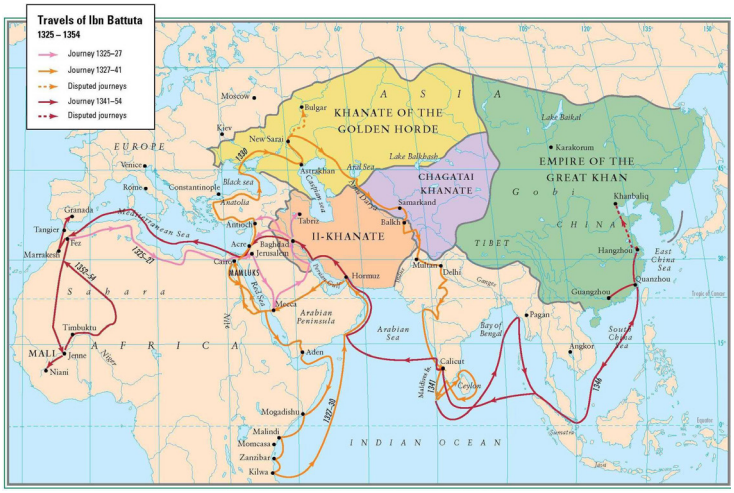
Janaza

Prayer of Damascus

I. Ibn Battuta's references to the plague

Our current understanding of the Black Death wave of plague (that is, the Great Mortality of the middle of the 14th century) sees sustained plague activity arising in the lands of the western Ilkhanate in the 1320s or 1330s, with spread in all directions around the Caspian Sea. Major outbreaks occurred along the southern shore of the Caspian Sea in 1342 or 1343, with subsequent outbreaks on the sea's northern shore carrying the mortality into the lands of the Golden Horde (modern-day western Russia and Ukraine) and connecting river basins by 1345 and 1346. In other words, the testimony that al-Ahri gave of a sudden scattering of populations out of lands to the south of the Caucasus (Reading 1) fits well with other evidence that the larger Caspian basin had become a new focal point of plague.

The dominant narrative of the Black Death, as told from European perspectives, is (as we saw in Reading 1) that it "came from the East." Sometimes, as in Louis Heyligen's letter to his compatriots at Bruges, "the East" was equated with India. More commonly, it was equated with the Black Sea, which had become an extremely active trade entrepot in the later 13th century when Italian merchants from Genoa and Venice established outposts there. Whether the main intrusion of plague into the Mediterranean was via the Black Sea or some other entry point along the Mediterranean (such as the trading port of Ayas near Cyprus) is still unclear. At the moment, the genetics record we have indicates that the strains of *Yersinia pestis* that circulated in Western Europe in the late 1340s are closely related to those found in the Volga River basin.



Map of Ibn Battuta's travels.

However, although Ibn Battuta had passed through both the Ilkhanate and the Ulus of Jochi (the Golden Horde) when he was near the beginning of his sojourn in the early 1330s, when he was on his westward journey home in the 1340s, he passed from Baghdad directly to Damascus, entering the Mamluk Empire. The realms extending from Egypt to Syria were controlled by the Mamluk Sultanate, based at Cairo. It is therefore highly significant that Ibn Battuta characterized the course of the outbreak in the eastern Mediterranean in 1347/1348 not as coming from the north, but as having a south-*to*-north path of spread.

It is important to remember that Ibn Battuta was neither a physician nor a bureaucrat charged with reporting fatalities or other effects of the outbreaks. Nor was he even a historian, attempting to give an objective account of world-changing events. Written six years after his return to Morocco, his *Rihla* ("Travels") was a literary account of his travels composed under the orders of the Marinid sultan Abu 'Inan, with the help of a court scribe named Ibn Juzayy.

There is little in his *Travels* to suggest he paid more attention to medical matters than the average layperson. He only cared about medical matters when he himself was ill.

Nevertheless, even without clinical detail, Ibn Battuta's references to plague are valuable in confirming the epidemiological impact of the outbreak and the direction of its spread. His references are scattered across seven passages mentioning nine different places. Gaza (in the southeast corner of the Mediterranean) is mentioned twice; Homs and Damascus (in Syria) once each; Jerusalem (twice); Alexandria and Cairo and the pilgrimage route from Cairo to Mecca, each once; Tangier (Morocco); and Gibraltar. Occasionally, he reported on mortality levels. His asides on the deaths of his colleagues give us a glimpse of his own sense of loss.

II. Plague in the Islamic tradition

As noted in the introduction to this reading, the fact that Ibn Battuta was Muslim suggests that he was already familiar with plague as a disease and as a historical force. Plague is never mentioned in the *Quran* and it is not clear whether it was present in the Arabian peninsula at the time of Islam's founding. But it was certainly present in the lands that Islamic troops entered in the 620s and 630s, when later waves of the Justinianic Plague were moving through the Mediterranean basin. Hence, it is not surprising to find that plague is mentioned in *hadith* and in commentary traditions on them. Indeed, the majority of what can be reconstructed of the history of plague in the early Islamic period comes from such commentaries. One of the things we never see in Ibn Battuta's statements about the Black Death is surprise.

Even if plague disappeared from view for centuries at a time, the continuity of cultural traditions about plague (what in Arabic was called *ta'un*), meant that, however fearsome its new manifestation was in the later Middle Ages, it was a known foe. As we saw in Reading 1, al-Safadi could simply assume that the early plagues of Islamic history were known to his audience. First among these was the Plague of Amwas, which devastated Syria in the first century of the Islamic era (*c.* 18 AH/638 CE). The Muslim armies sent to conquer Syria and Iraq, although victorious in battle, were soon decimated by sustained plague outbreaks over the next hundred years across this region. The events raised a classic point of debate in Islamic theology: Whether to stay in a plague-ridden area and accept the will of God, or to flee. A parallel consideration was whether to willingly enter a plague-ridden area.

The tradition of *hadith*—collecting and commenting on the sayings of the Prophet as received by his immediate followers—begin during Muhammed's lifetime. Because the early plague episodes helped date crucial turning points in Islamic history, starting in the 9th century we find the first attempts to assemble lists of the plagues that afflicted the Islamic world. In addition to these concerns about entering or fleeing plague-stricken lands (and the historical precedents of such actions), two other major tenets about plague emerged:

- That plague is a martyrdom and a mercy from God for a Muslim and a punishment for an infidel.
- There is no infection (contagion)

Both ideas connected with the notion that plague came from God; since His will could not be averted, there was no rationale in trying to flee it. Although the question of whether plague was contagious—that is, whether it could be passed directly from one person to another—proved to be an intensely debated issue from the time of the Black Death on, the fact that it was not generally *assumed* that plague came from other people rather than being simply a matter of God's will had great importance for the responses plague evoked in Muslim lands.

Had he been more interested in medicine, Ibn Battuta would have known that plague (*ta'un*) had long been a recognized disease not simply in the tradition of *hadith* but also in the Arabic medical tradition. Although there was some discussion of the characteristic buboes of plague among Greek-speaking medical writers during the Justinianic Plague, the main development of medical theories about plague happened during the emergence of Arabic medical traditions in the 8th, 9th, and 10th centuries. Plague was regularly mentioned in chapters on types of fevers, even though the disease was not common enough for most medical practitioners to have ever seen a case. In the half century before Ibn Battuta was born, however, there had been a notable rise in the detail with which medical writers in Syria and Egypt discussed the disease. That was because the disease had returned to the region.

III. How did they know how many died?

In describing the situation in various towns he passed through on his way home in 1348, Ibn Battuta provided mortality figures several times; in two other instances, he noted the percentage of people in a certain group who died (or were left alive):

Place	Mortality Figure	Other Comments
Gaza (1st report, from Aleppo)	1,000+/day	
Homs	about 300 the day he arrives	
Damascus	2,400/day prior to his 2nd visit[2]	
Jerusalem		'Izz al-Din's banquet (on 1st day with no deaths); "many of the shaikhs I had met .. had departed to be with God Most High."
Gaza	1,100/day	"The qaḍi told me that only a quarter of the eighty notaries there were left"
Alexandria	1,080/day, at its peak	
Cairo	21,000/day	"all the shaikhs I had known were dead"[3]

2. Ibn Battuta recounted the story of his passage through Damascus twice: once near the beginning of his writing, *Rihla*, when he inserted an account of his later visit into his narrative of his original passage through the city in 1326; and again in his narrative of the events of 1348. Is the discrepancy in mortality figures (2,000/day in the first instance, 2,400/day in the second) a function of failed memory? We cannot know.
3. The mortality figures come from: Claudia Maria Tresso, "A Two-year Journey under the Arrows of the Black Death: The Medieval Plague Pandemic in Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's Travels," *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 21 (2021): 137–89.

How did Ibn Battuta, as a traveler passing through these towns, know (and know so quickly) how many people had died? The answer is a unique feature of Islamic urban organization.

One of the basic cultural practices in Islam is that every believer will have a special prayer, the *janaza*, said over their body prior to burial. And since burial is expected to take place almost immediately after death (within a day or two), there are efficient procedures for handling the preparation of the corpse and burial. Moreover, because most Islamic cities were walled communities, oratories (prayer offices) were set up at the city gates. It was at these oratories that bodies would be identified and prayed over. And counted! Moreover, there was also an accounting office, called the *diwan* of inheritance, which would assess the property holdings of the deceased and what taxes they owed. Aside from a fragment of a diwan record from a plague outbreak in 1419, none of the original documentation of these tallies has survived from the medieval period. But daily totals were reported to the sultan's officers and, of these, some figures were then reported by chroniclers.

This bureaucratic infrastructure was normative and not a special accommodation for times of epidemics. But it could be scaled up to deal with times of crisis. So far as we know, there were only two times in the history of Cairo when the number of dead was so overwhelming that the *janaza* prayer was not said over each body. Once was during a major plague outbreak in 1791. The other was during the Black Death.

Thus, when Ibn Battuta was able to report the death counts for several of the cities he visited, sometimes on the day of arrival, it was because that information had already been collected and was circulating among the class of bureaucrats that Ibn Battuta (as a fellow *qadi* [judge]) would have been able to tap into.

IV. The Prayer of Damascus

It is no surprise that even people living in Islamic societies, where there were deeply rooted traditions of thinking about plague, should have experienced horrific dread upon its arrival. But not everyone responds to such calamities in the same way. The episode that Ibn Battuta witnessed when he visited the city of Damascus (in what is now Syria) is helpful to historians because it shows us how people there faced the catastrophe of plague: as a *communal* threat, even as a natural disaster. According to the timeline we can reconstruct from Ibn Battuta's movements between Syria and Egypt, we can pinpoint plague's precise arrival in Damascus in the early summer of

A depiction of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, where Muslims, Jews, and Christians gathered to pray for relief from plague in 1348.

1348, after he had already passed through the city on his way north toward Aleppo. It was there, in northern Syria, where he first heard news of the outbreak to the south in Gaza.

Al-Ṣafadi, the poet, historian, and bureaucrat in Damascus we met in Lesson 1 (who died in a later episode of the disease in 1363), wrote about experiencing the Black Death in Damascus, capturing vividly the manifestations of what we would identify as pneumonic plague:

> Then came the worst calamity that brought tears to every eye. People spat bits of blood, and one was covered with blotches and died. . . . Every person in the morning or evening breathed out blood from his throat as if he had been slain without a knife.[4]

Ibn Abi Hajala, the immigrant from western North Africa who was also living in Damascus at the time, gave another account of the Black Death's arrival there:

> As for Damascus, I was there at the time. I witnessed it in a state of chaos, its walls on the verge of collapse. I saw people's loved ones die, one by one, with buboes, and I saw blood and pustules. The plague dismounted at the stopovers outside the city, and its northerly wind instilled fear in every direction.
>
> In the month of Rabi' I ([June 1348]), people gathered to hear the recitation of al-Bukhari's Authentic Hadith. They read the Chapter of Noah from the Qur'an in the prayer nook of the Companions 3,336 times, in accordance with a vision a man had seen. They called on God to lift the plague, but it only increased.[5]

Also present in Damascus at the time was the local historian and religious scholar Ibn Kathir (d. 1373), who also identified the recitation of hadiths in early June as the beginning of the episode, followed two days later by the reading of the chapter of Noah. But he went on with further details. The initial reading of al-Bukhari's collection of hadiths had been prompted, he explained, by the appearance of plague on the outskirts of the city. The plague got worse, mounting to one hundred, two hundred, three hundred deaths a day. By July 14, local authorities asked for extra supplications during daily prayers. A week later, a Monday, the city's inhabitants were told to fast three days and that on Friday, they should come out as one and implore God to raise the plague from their city.[6]

Map showing location of Damascus (Dimashq).

4. Michael W. Dols, *The Black Death in the Middle East* (Princeton University Press, 1977), 80.
5. Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani, *Merits of the Plague*, ed. Joel Blecher and Mairaj Syed (Penguin-Random House, 2023), 210.
6. Younus Y. Mirza, "'It Was a Memorable Day' – How the Black Death United the Population of Medieval Damascus," *Maydan*, March 30, 2020, https://themaydan.com/2020/03/it-was-a-memorable-day-how-the-black-death-united-the-population-of-medieval-damascus/

It was this communal procession that Ibn Battuta witnessed upon his arrival in Damascus in July. Here is his account:

> I witnessed at the time of the Great Plague at Damascus in the latter part of the month of Second Rabi‘ of the year 49 [July 1348], a remarkable instance of the veneration of the people of Damascus for this mosque [that is, the Mosque of the Footprints].[7] Arghun-Shah, king of the amirs and the Sultan’s viceroy, ordered a crier to proclaim through Damascus that the people should fast for three days and that no one should cook in the bazaar during the daytime anything to be eaten (for most of the people there eat no food but what has been prepared in the bazaar). So the people fasted for three successive days, the last of which was a Thursday. At the end of this period the amirs, sharifs, qaḍis, doctors of the Law, and all other classes of the people in their several degrees, assembled in the Great Mosque, until it was filled to overflowing with them, and spent the Thursday night there in prayers and liturgies and supplications. Then, after performing the dawn prayer [on the Friday morning], they all went out together on foot carrying Qur’ans in their hands—the amirs too barefooted. The entire population of the city joined in the exodus, male and female, small and large; the Jews went out with their book of the Law and the Christians with Gospel, their women and children with them; the whole concourse of them in tears and humble supplications, imploring the favour of God through His Books and His Prophets. They made their way to the Mosque of the Footprints and remained there in supplication and invocation until near midday, then returned to the city and held the Friday service. God Most High lightened their affliction; the number of deaths in a single day reached a maximum of two thousand, whereas the number rose in Cairo and Old Cairo to twenty-four thousand in a day.[8]

The practice of making supplications—special prayers—for alleviation of droughts is (and was) very common among societies around the Mediterranean. What is remarkable about the plague prayers of Damascus in 1348 is that, instead of provoking inter-community violence or blaming, plague elicited a communal response involving all the community’s religious groups. As we will see in Lesson 4, while the plague was universal, such communal responses were not.

V. Ibn Battuta’s travels through Cairo

When Ibn Battuta first arrived in Cairo as a young man in 1326, he was overwhelmed by its wealth, size, and vitality. Uncharacteristically, Ibn Battuta even noted how impressed he was with one of Cairo’s hospitals. When he returned, however, in the fall of 1348, after having visited Damascus, he saw a city already devastated by the pandemic. This passage bears close inspection. For Alexandria, on the Mediterranean coast, he described the outbreak as still in the process of abating. For Cairo, in contrast, he talked as if it were already over:

> I found the plague had abated [in Alexandria] after the number of deaths had risen to a thousand and eighty a day. Then I went to **Cairo** and was

7.This location is reported to be about two miles outside of the center of Damascus.
8. Claudia Maria Tresso, “Ibn Baṭṭūṭa’s ‘Prayer of Damascus’: A Window on to Damascus in the Hell of the Black Death (Part One),” *Kervan: International Journal of African and Asiatic Studies* 25, no. 1 (2021): 131–61, at 147–48.

told that during the plague the number of deaths there had risen to twenty-one thousand a day. I found that all the shaikhs [scholars] I had known were dead.[9]

Cairo was by far the largest city in the western Islamic world at the time of the Black Death. The narrative generally given of the Black Death outbreak is that plague was brought by ship from the Black Sea across the Mediterranean to Alexandria, and then moved upriver to Cairo. The colorful story of a single "plague ship" that brought plague to Egypt comes from al-Maqrizi (1364–1442), an Egyptian market inspector and prolific historian who is known for embellishing his accounts. In another context, al-Maqrizi provided an account of plague's arrival in Egypt and the devastation it caused:

Map showing location of Cairo (al-Qahira).

> It was then that an epidemic of plague broke out unlike any seen since [the beginning of] Islam. It entered Egypt at the end of the season when the meadows turned green, so during the autumn, in the year 748 (1347 CE). It infiltrated throughout the country from the beginning of Muharram 749 (April 1348) and reached its maximum in Egypt during the months of Shaban, Ramadan and Shawwal (from November 1348 to January 1349), to cease in the middle from Dhu al-Qidah (around February 5).
>
> The daily mortality in Cairo and Old Cairo [the neighborhood of Fustat, to the south] was ten, fifteen and even twenty thousand people. Stretchers and benches for washing the body were made free of charge. In fact, people transported the dead, most of the time, on simple planks, on ladders, on door leaves: they dug pits into which they threw thirty, forty corpses, or even more. The plague victim coughed up blood, screamed and died. Famine was felt throughout the world as well.[10]

Al-Maqrizi's detail that plague broke out around the time that the Nile was receding from its flood and land was being allocated for cultivation (which pinpoints November 1347 as the beginning of the outbreak) is intriguing. Environmentally, it means that the lower Nile valley and the Delta region would have just had its most sustained annual contact with the waters (and the animals) of the Upper Nile valley. And those waters would have touched the entire lower Nile and the entire Delta.

9. Claudia Maria Tresso, "A Two-year Journey under the Arrows of the Black Death: The Medieval Plague Pandemic in Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's Travels," *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 21 (2021): 137–89.
10. Gaston Wiet, "La Grande Peste Noire en Syrie et en Égypte," *Études d'Orientalisme dédiées à la mémoire de Lévi-Provençal* (G. P. Maissoneuve et Larose, 1962), t. 1, 368. Translated by Monica H. Green from the French translation of al-Maqrizi, *Suluk*.

Why does that matter? Think about the enormity of the outbreak in Cairo, which (according to current estimates) is thought to have killed up to 54% of a city of about a million people, prompting the creation of cemeteries up to a kilometer long and two kilometers wide. Think about Ibn Battuta's own report, which recorded deserted villages *across the Nile Delta* and not just along the channels that connected Alexandria to Cairo. Could such devastation all be due to one "plague ship" arriving in the Alexandrian port and introducing the disease in a direction opposite the river's flow? According to a precisely documented reconstruction of plague's dissemination out of the northern Black Sea, because of a trade embargo no transmission of (presumably contaminated) grain would have even started before the summer of 1347. Here's a timeline:

1347 April: Venice allows grain exports from Tana
1347 May: Rumors of Venice-Golden Horde peace
1347 August-September: Plague in Constantinople
1347 October: Plague in Messina

We will examine the origin of the "Quick Transit Theory" in Lesson 3, which posits a single and sudden introduction of a new lineage of plague into the lands of the Golden Horde in the 1340s, which then spread southward and westward across the Mediterranean from there. As we will note there, the Quick Transit Theory has been supported by the use of *maps* with arrows that fill in parts of the narrative currently not conveyed by documentary evidence. The uncertainty about the course of an event so cataclysmic as the Black Death's devastation of the largest city in the Islamic world should give us pause. New evidence raises the possibility that there is an alternate story to be told about plague in Cairo. Archaeological evidence recently unearthed at a cemetery in Cairo has even raised the possibility that plague there may have dated back to the 13th century. More research needs to be completed before we can make conclusions about this site. But based on the research that has already been conducted, we can be confident that there are more reversals of older pandemic thinking to come.

Further Reading

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Image Citations

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Dr. Claudia Tresso, at the opening of the Ibn Battuta Museum, Tangier, Morocco, July 2022.

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The Umayyad mosque at Damascus, from Kitab al-bulhan or "Book of Wonders," folio 36b, between 1390 and 1450, Bodelian Library, CC BY-SA 4.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Book_of_Wonders_folio_36b.jpg

Page 7:
Damascus highlighted on map detail of eastern Mediterranean, in Hugh Kennedy, ed. *An Historical Atlas of Islam*, second revised edition, Brill, 2002, pg. 24.

Page 9:
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