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Ibn Battuta's Journey to Bulghar: Is it a
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BY

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Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's Journey to Bulghār : Is it a Fabrication ?

By STEPHEN JANICSEK

THE Moorish traveller Ibn Baṭṭūṭa occupies a peculiar place in medieval geography, not only because his journeys were so extensive, exceeding in length even those of Marco Polo, but because the record of them contains such a fantastic mixture of items of information, some valuable or precise, others worthless or vague in the extreme, regarding the different cities, provinces, and distinguished men that he had seen. Everyone who has traced out his journey step by step must agree that there are serious arguments against the trustworthiness of his statements regarding several of the cities which he claimed to have visited. On the other hand, it is exceedingly difficult to substantiate the suspicions thus aroused. He was a skilful narrator, and did not himself, as is well known, write down the record of his journeys ; consequently the existence of one or two errors in his account of a city or a district does not prove anything against him, since it must be allowed that his memory occasionally played him false. Besides, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa was a typical son of the medieval East, a fact which explains certain systematic faults in his narrative. For example, he is very inconsequent ; sometimes he speaks at length of a small village, and sometimes devotes no more than one or two words to a celebrated city. Sometimes, but not always, he gives an impression of sincerity, saying frankly that he was badly treated by so-and-so, or that he was told about such and such a city or country, but did not himself visit it. For this reason one is naturally inclined to accept his word when he says that he personally visited a place.

In spite of the difficulty of maintaining an objective attitude towards the trustworthiness of his claims, I propose in what

follows to show that his long journey to and from the city of Bulghār is a positive fabrication.

If we study the narrative of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's globetrotting from start to finish we may observe that his system is as follows. In general he describes cities, villages, celebrated localities and countries in a few sentences, which are sometimes very expressive and ingenious. After this his custom is to mention the fruits and other products of these localities, and finally to say something about local customs and the history of celebrated persons of those places, about whom he relates one or two anecdotes. We find, of course, many exceptions to this general method. Sometimes he omits the description of a city and prefers to describe different buildings in it, and on other occasions he says nothing about a locality but relates instead a long history, or a *ḥikaya* referring to some famous shaykh or amīr of the district. In this latter exceptional case, it is important for us to observe that if a city, village, or country does not interest Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, he contents himself with mentioning its celebrated persons, or environs, or some special features, such as its waters, fruits, ruins, intact buildings, or culture, or incidents from its history, or local customs or ceremonies, or some *ḥikāyas* relating to it. There are only about twenty insignificant villages in his entire travels, of which he mentions nothing but the names. In most cases the reason for this was that Ibn Baṭṭūṭa only passed through these villages, or spent the night in them, on his way to some greater city, in consequence of which they did not interest him.

On applying these general principles, however, to the narrative of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's journey to and from Bulghār, and to his account of this famous city, we find that it constitutes a striking and unique exception to his methods in dealing with all other cities and countries mentioned in the course of his wanderings. This narrative, as dictated by himself to Ibn Juzay, runs as follows ¹:—

¹ Ed. Defremery, ii, 398–9; ed. of Cairo, i, 217.

ذكر سفرى الى مدينة بلغار . وكنت سمعت بمدينة بلغار فاردت التوجه اليها لارى ما ذكر عنها من انتهاء قصر الليل بها وقصر النهار ايضا فى عكس ذلك الفصل وكان بينها وبين محلة السلطان مسيرة عشر فطلبت منه من يوصلنى اليها فبعث معى من اوصلنى اليها وردنى اليه ووصلتها فى رمضان فلما صلينا المغرب افطرنا وأذّن بالعشاء اثناء افطارنا فصليناها وصلينا التراويح والشفع والوتر وطلع الفجر اثر ذلك وكذلك يقصر النهار بها فى فصل قصره واقت بها ثلاثا—

This part of his journey is followed by an account of the Land of Darkness. It is important to note that he says expressly that he did not personally visit the Land of Darkness, but only heard about it at the city of Bulghār. The following excerpts from this precious description are of special interest to us ¹:—

. . . والدخول اليها من بلغار وبينهما مسيرة اربعين يوما . . . فان تك المفازة فيها الجليلد فلا يثبت قدم الأدمى ولا حافر الدابة فيها والكلاب لها الاظفار فتثبت اقدامها فى الجليلد . . . وعدت من مدينة بلغار مع الامير الذى بعثه السلطان فى صحبتى فوجدت محلة السلطان على الموضع المعروف ببش دغ وذلك فى الثامن والعشرين من ومضان وحضرت معه صلاة العيد وصادف يوم العيد يوم الجمعة—

I. It is well known that from Bish Dagħ to Bulghār is a distance of about 1,300 km. Ibn Baṭṭūṭa says explicitly that the aim of his journey from Bish Dagħ to Bulghār was to visit the latter city itself. From this one would expect to find in his book a detailed description of this famous city, which must still have been a considerable one at that time. Bulghār lay far out of his direct route, and we know very well that whenever he has occasion to make a special detour to visit some city, he either describes the city itself or else says something about its history, celebrated persons, ruins, waters,

¹ Ed. Defremery, ii, 399–400, 402; ed. of Cairo, i, 217–18.

fruits, etc. To this general rule the sole exceptional case in his whole record is the city of Bulghār, about which he gives no details whatsoever, and has nothing to say of its history or other features. This is a striking point which can by no means be neglected.

Only one insignificant fact is mentioned by Ibn Baṭṭūṭa in connexion with his sojourn in the city of Bulghār, namely the remarkable brevity or length of the days and nights during the winter and summer respectively, in addition to the fact that he prayed there. We must add that his prayers seem to be mentioned for the express purpose of proving the extreme shortness of the summer nights, as he had himself experienced them at Bulghār.

This phenomenon, as is well known, had already been described in an old account included by Muḥammad 'Aufī in his *Jawāmi' al-ḥikāyāt*,¹ the origin of which is connected by Markwart with the name of al-Jayhānī.² It is referred to also in the works of Mas'ūdī, Iṣṭakhri, Ibn Ḥauqal, Muqaddasī, Idrīsī, Abū Ḥāmid al-Andalusī, Qazwīnī, Abu'l-Fidā, etc. In consequence of this we may assume with certainty that the alternation of long and short days and nights during the summer and winter at the city of Bulghār was widely known in all the lands of Islam in the Middle Ages.³

Now if a careful comparison is made between the text of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's statements on this subject and those of Iṣṭakhri, Ibn Ḥauqal, etc., it will be observed that there is an unquestionable similarity between their expressions. I suggest, therefore, that not only did Ibn Baṭṭūṭa not observe this phenomenon at Bulghār, but that he compiled this part of

¹ Brit. Mus. Or. 2676, fol. 70a; India Office, Nr. 600, fol. 514a.

² Joseph Markwart, *Ein arabischer Bericht über die arktischen (uralischen) Länder aus dem 10 Jahrhundert*. (Ungarische Jahrbücher, Berlin und Leipzig, IV Band, p. 263.)

³ "Die Redensart, durch welche unser Text [i.e. Muḥ. 'Aufī], Ibn Faḍlān und al-Mas'ūdī die kurzen Sommernächte von Bulghār veranschaulichen, ist offenbar ein stereotyper volkstümlicher Ausdruck." (Markwart, op. cit., p. 280.)

p. 793. l. 5. for *اثناء* read : *فب اثناء*
 p. 793. l. 7. for *قصرة* read : *ايضا*

ERRATA

- p. 793 l. 15 : For *تلك* read *تلك*
 ib. l. 19 : For *رمضان ومضان* read *رمضان*
 ib. l. 25 : Delete and substitute : which was still a beautiful place at that time.
 p. 795 l. 19 : For *الصيف للصيف* read *الصيف*
 ib. l. 23 : For *الاربع* read *الاربع*
 p. 797 ll. 3-4 (Arabic text) : Transfer to footnote ¹.

[To face p. 794.]

his text from one of the authors mentioned above. Had he really visited the city of Bulghār, the degree of latitude of which is only about 55°, he would have been forced to observe that the summer nights there are actually much longer than he describes them. It appears to me that, apart from other sources, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa knew the *Risāla* of Ibn Faḍlān, and the *Kitāb Masālik al-Mamālik* of Iṣṭakhri or the *Kitāb al-Masālik wal-Mamālik* of Ibn Ḥauqal, and drew from these works, somewhat transforming it in the process, his account of the brevity of the summer nights at Bulghār. Ibn Faḍlān's statement is as follows ¹ :—

و نحن نتظر اذان العشاء فاذا بالاذان فخرجنا من القبة وقد طلع
الفجر فقلت للمؤذن اى شىء اذنت قال الفجر قلت فعشاء الاخير
قال نصليها مع المغرب قلت فالليل قال كما ترى وقد كان أقصر
من هذا—

Iṣṭakhri's account is as follows ² :—

وأخبرنى الخطيب بها انّ الليل عندهم لا يتهيا ان يسير فيه الانسان
اكثر من فرسخ فى الصيف وفى الشتاء يقصر النهار ويطول الليل
حتى يكون نهار الشتاء مثل ليلالى للصيف —

Finally, Ibn Ḥauqal enlarged Iṣṭakhri's account as follows ³ :—

وأخبرنى الخطيب بها انّ الليل عندهم فى وقت الصيف لا يتهيا
لانسان ان يسير فيه فرسخين وشاهدت ما يدلّ على صحّة ذلك
عند دخولى فى الشتاء اليهم انّ النهار كان بمقدار ما صلينا الاربع
صلوات كل صلاة فى عقيب الاخرى مع ركعات بين الاذان والاقامة
قليلة —

We have seen from the text of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa that he remained in Bulghār for three days.⁴ I suggest that it is not plausible

¹ Yāqūt, ed. Wüstenfeld, i, 725.

² Ed. de Goeje, 1870, p. 225.

³ Ed. de Goeje, 1872, p. 285.

⁴ Markwart (op. cit., p. 287) calculates the date of his visit to Bulghār as 16-18 Ramaḍān, 732 = 11-13 June, 1332.

to make a long journey in wagons occupying 30 to 35 or more days (Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, as we have seen, makes it 10 days), then after a short rest of three days to travel again by "telega" for 30 to 35 days. Probably he was wrongly informed, or he thought that it was no more than a ten days' journey from Bish Dagħ to Bulghār. A rest of three days for a double journey of ten days is quite sufficient, but not for a long journey of twice 30-35 days (which is the actual distance between Bish Dagħ and Bulghār.) We know very well that Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, though a zealous globetrotter, was a man fond of comfort, and that, judging by what he reveals of his character and psychology in his works, he would have remained at Bulghār at least ten or fifteen days, had he actually gone there. We shall see, moreover, from the dates of his stay at al-Mājar, Bish Dagħ, and Ḥājj Tarkhān (Astrakhan), that the limitation of his stay at Bulghār to three days is intentional, and cannot be attributed either to the defect of his memory or to an error on the part of the copyist.

Further, it is curious to note that he does not mention that the Volga (Etil) flows not far from the city of Bulghār. From the records of his travels it seems to be evident that he visited three cities close to or on the Volga—as-Sarā, Ḥājj Tarkhān, and Bulghār. (About the identification of the Ukak which he mentions there are some difficulties.) In the cases of as-Sarā¹ and Ḥājj Tarkhān² he states that they lie on the Volga, but in speaking of Bulghār he does not mention the river. *This, too, is a fact which cannot be overlooked by anyone who knows how scrupulously and exactly Ibn Baṭṭūṭa mentions the names of rivers, of streams, and even of rivulets flowing by the places which he visited. We see, moreover, from the text that he visited the city of Ḥājj Tarkhān after his journey to Bulghār, in consequence of which he must have seen the Volga before his journey to the former city. Yet, when we study his account of the Volga, as a river which passes by

¹ Ed. Defremery, i, 79, and ii, 446 (Cairo ed., i, 22, 230).

² Ed. Defremery, ii, 411 (Cairo ed., i, 220).

Astrakhan, it appears that it was there that he saw it for the first time.¹ This seems to suggest that he was not conscious

وهي من احسن المدن عظيمة الاسواق مبنية على نهر اتل وهو من انهار الدنيا الكبار

of the fact that the Volga flowed near Bulghār, and therefore that he never saw the city.

II. There are other curious features to be observed in Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's account of his journey to and from Bulghār. Elsewhere on his travels, if he undertakes a journey to a place lying so far out of his predetermined route, he always mentions some localities lying between the starting-point and the place for which he is making, or he describes the physical features, rivers, mountains, forests, etc., or the races and tribes of the almost uninhabited territories lying between these two points, or else narrates some anecdotes referring to the journey. In this respect again the solitary exception is offered by his journey to the city of Bulghār, about which he says nothing at all. This point also cannot be neglected. Further, on his way from Bish Dagh to Bulghār, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa was bound to cross the Volga, which elsewhere he mentions among the ten greatest rivers in the world.² Now in the other sections of his text, when he crosses a river on such a long trip as that to and from Bulghār, and this river is one which he has included among the ten greatest rivers in the world, he invariably mentions the crossing. In most cases, indeed, if he crosses even a rivulet, he notes the fact. Here, too, we find the journey to Bulghār constituting an exceptional case, for he omits all mention of his crossing of the Volga.

Yet another point worth noticing in this part of his text is that Ibn Baṭṭūṭa does not mention the name of the amīr who, he says, was his companion on the journey to and from Bulghār. Elsewhere, however, he is always exceedingly careful to give the name of his companion, or that of a caravan, or of a tribe, on such a long uninterrupted excursion.

¹ See ii, 411 (Cairo ed., i, 220):

² Ed. Defremery, i, 79 (Cairo ed., i, 22).

Moreover, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa puts the distance between Bish Dagħ and Bulghār at a ten days' journey, a mistake so glaring that it arrests attention. If we study all the distances given in his text, we find that on the whole they are fairly accurate, allowing for the fact that he was a true son of the Orient and lived six hundred years ago. Where he is mistaken about distances, he errs generally on the side of overstatement rather than understatement. It may be noted that in this very case of Dasht-i Qipchaq he always gives the distances correctly (e.g. those between Qiram and Azāq,¹ between Bish Dagħ and al-Mājar,² between Ḥājj Tarkhān and as-Sarā,³ etc.). From the time taken on these journeys we know that Ibn Baṭṭūṭa travelled 30–40 km. a day on Dasht-i Qipchaq. Consequently, if he had actually gone to the city of Bulghār, we must allow for his journey from Bish Dagħ not, as he says, 10 days, but at least 30–40 days. On this calculation the total time occupied by the journey from Bish Dagħ to Bulghār and back, including the three days spent in Bulghār itself, must have been 60–70 days, instead of the 23 days which he explicitly allows for it. Such a striking error in time cannot be found elsewhere in all the distances which he records.

Nor can it be argued that the source of this error is that Ibn Baṭṭūṭa forgot the real distance between Bish Dagħ and Bulghār, or that it is the fault of the copyist. If we examine the text cited above, we see that Ibn Baṭṭūṭa was fully convinced that his journey to and from Bulghār took no more than 23 days, and he seemed to be quite unconscious of the fact that it required two months at the very least. This is clear from the following dates which he gives. He arrived at the camp at Bish Dagħ on 1st Ramaḍān (ii, 380), and thereafter set out for Bulghār; he mentions that his stay at Bulghār also occurred in Ramaḍān; he was back at Bish Dagħ on the 28th of the same month, and still there on 1st Shawwāl, while

¹ ii, 367–8 (i, 209).

² ii, 379 (i, 212).

³ ii, 446 (i, 230).

on 10th Shawwāl he started for Constantinople from Astrakhan (ii, 412).

III. Finally, when we examine the excerpts cited above from Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's text referring to the Land of Darkness we shall find in them some items of interest to us. He says, as we have seen, that he did not himself visit the Land of Darkness, but only heard about it at the city of Bulghār. In regard to this Markwart has already observed: "Der zweite Abschnitt [i.e. the article on the land of Yūra excerpted by Muḥammad 'Aufī for his *Jawāmi' al-ḥikāyāt*] enthält Nachrichten über das Land Yūra (Jugra), die grosze Übereinstimmung zeigen mit der Erzählung des Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (1332 n. Chr.) über das Land der Dunkelheit ¹ . . . Angesichts der Armut der zeitgenössischen Berichte sind drei Punkte in der Erzählung Ibn Baṭṭūṭas höchst auffällig:

1. die Naturwahrheit seiner Schilderung,
2. demgegenüber seine Miszverständnisse—er glaubt, dasz das Land Jugra auch im Sommer mit Schnee und Eis bedeckt sei und die Reisen dahin auch im Sommer stattfinden, und vermengt es mit dem Lande der Finsternis—und die Unvereinbarkeit seines Berichtes mit denen der Zeitgenossen,
3. andererseits seine weitgehende Übereinstimmung mit unserem Texte.

Daraus erhellt, dasz er seine lebendige Schilderung nicht etwa vom Hörensagen hat, sondern einer älteren *schriftlichen* Quelle verdankt, sowie, dasz Ibn Baṭṭūṭa und 'Aufī fast mit Notwendigkeit auf eine gemeinsame Quelle zurückweisen." ²

It is clear, as Markwart has observed, from the text of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, that he really thought that from Bulghār to the Land of Darkness the ground was covered with snow and ice during both winter and summer. Yet he claims to have visited Bulghār in late spring or early summer, and we must add that if he had actually been at the city of Bulghār he was bound to have

¹ Op. cit., p. 262.

² Ibid., p. 302.

seen for himself or to have heard there that the ground in the environs of Bulghār was not covered with snow and ice during the summer.

* * * *

In conclusion, it may be asked: what reason had Ibn Battūta for deliberately telling a falsehood about his journey to Bulghār?

The answer would be as follows. If we study the whole narrative of his travels, we see that his principal intention in undertaking them was to visit all the countries of the earth inhabited by Muslims. Probably he had heard, or had read in the works of Ibn Faḍlān, Iṣṭakhrī, Ibn Ḥauqal, or other writers, that at that time the most northerly city inhabited by Muhammadans was Bulghār. In consequence of this I suppose that he was very eager to visit this famous city, and on reaching the camp at Bish Dagħ he proposed to do so. But when he heard that it was so far away, instead of going to Bulghār in person, he preferred to write or dictate his trip to Bulghār as if he had actually accomplished it.

When his statements on the city of Bulghār and on the Land of Darkness are carefully investigated it appears very probable that it first occurred to him to claim to have made this journey at the time when he dictated the story of his globetrotting to Ibn Juzay in Morocco.

In my opinion, the trip to and from Bulghār which Ibn Battūta claims to have undertaken is the only narrative in the whole record of his wanderings which seems to be, beyond all doubt, a falsification.

Heteri (1923-24 & 1928)

summary and conclusion.

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