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# IBN BATTUTA

BIOGRAPHY

BIG HISTORY PROJECT

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# IBN BATTUTA

MUSLIM TRAVELING  
JUDGE

By Cynthia Stokes Brown, adapted by Newsela

**Born**  
February 25, 1304  
Tangier, Morocco

**Died**  
1368 or 1369  
Location unknown

Ibn Battuta was a Muslim scholar who studied law. He recorded an account of his travels to many lands in the early 1300s. His writings show how vast the Muslim world was at the time.

# The abode of Islam

During the life of Ibn Battuta, Islamic civilization had spread through much of the known world. It stretched from West Africa across northern Africa into the Middle East. It went even further east to India and Southeast Asia. Muslims called this area Dar al-Islam, or "Abode of Islam." They saw it as a space where they could practice their religion freely.

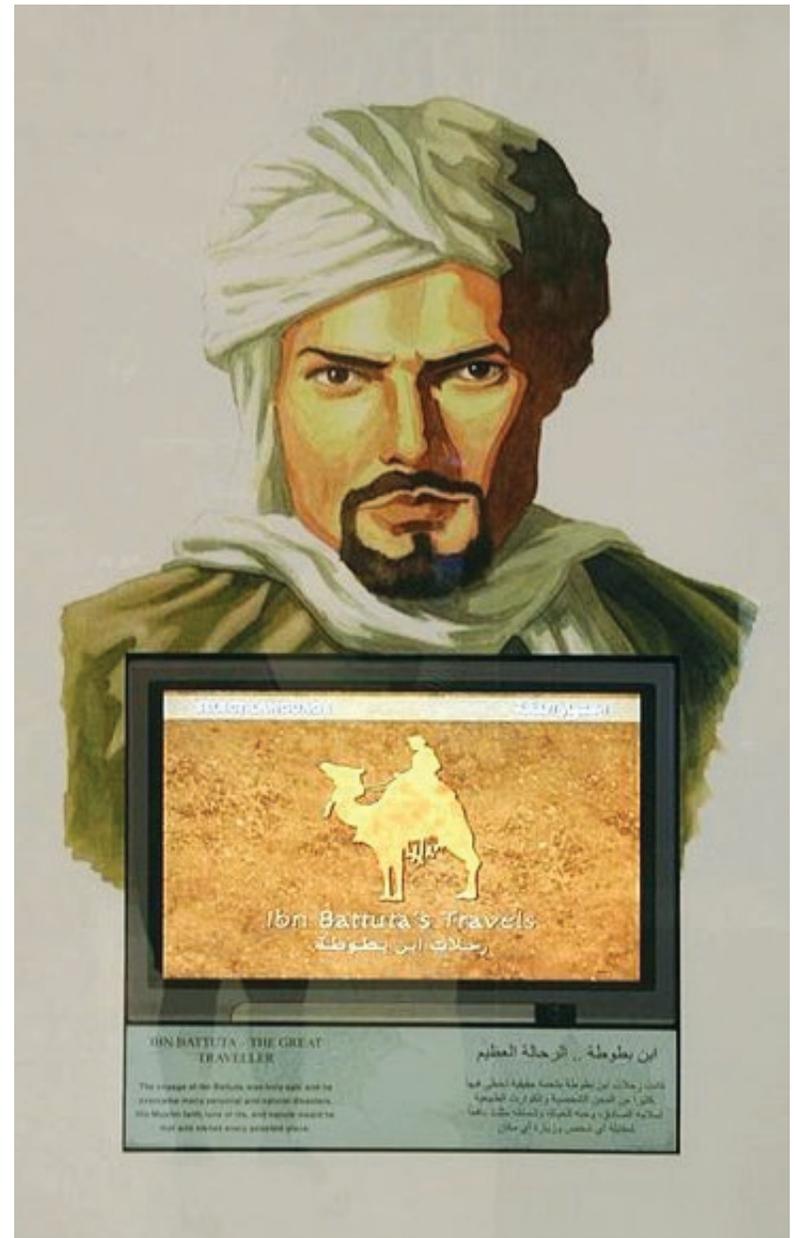
In addition, communities of Muslims lived beyond the frontiers of Dar al-Islam. All followers of Islam are part of the "umma." It is a community of believers that all believed in the same one god. They all lived by his sacred law ("shari'a"). In the early 1300s, this community was expanding dramatically.

## Background

Ibn Battuta was born in Tangier, part of modern-day Morocco, in 1304. Tangier is a port city near the Strait of Gibraltar. This narrow body of water separates Africa and Europe.

Ibn Battuta came from a family of legal scholars. He was raised with a focus on education. However, there was no "madrasa," or college of higher learning, in Tangier for him to go to. Ibn Battuta needed to travel for his education. He wanted to find the best teachers and the best libraries. At the time, the great centers of learning were in Alexandria, Cairo, and Damascus. He also wanted to make the pilgrimage to Mecca as soon as possible. For Muslims, the "hajj" is a religious duty. All Muslims should make the journey once in life if possible.

On June 14, 1325, Ibn Battuta rode out of Tangier on a donkey. Just 21, he was beginning his journey to Mecca. Unlike the young Marco Polo, he was alone. This passage from his account of his wanderings, The Travels of Ibn Battuta, illustrates his solo trip:



A display honoring Ibn Battuta in Dubai, United Arab Emirates

I set out alone. I didn't have a travel companion or a group of travelers to join. I had just a strong desire to visit these famous places of learning. I had to be strong to have left loved ones. I left my home as a bird leaves its nest.

## Travels

Ibn Battuta was not alone for long. The governor of one city gave him alms (gifts) of gold and woolen cloth. Like the trip to Mecca, giving alms is a pillar of Islam. Along the way, Ibn Battuta stayed at madrassas (religious schools).

Ibn Battuta's next stop was Tunis, the capital of Tunisia. When he left Tunis, he was serving as a judge for a caravan of pilgrims. It was his job to settle their disputes.

Ibn Battuta entered Mecca in October 1326. It took him a year and four months to get there. He stayed a month. He took part in all the ritual experiences and talked with people from every Islamic land. After it was over he left for Baghdad. He traveled in a camel caravan of returning pilgrims. This is when his real globetrotting began.

Ibn Battuta led a complete life while traveling. He studied and prayed. He practiced law. He had astonishing adventures. He married at least 10 times and left children growing up all over Afro-Eurasia.

In Alexandria, Ibn Battuta spent three days as a guest of a respected Sufi holy man named Burhan al-Din the Lame. He saw that Ibn Battuta had a passion for travel. He suggested that Ibn Battuta visit three other fellow Sufis. Two were in India and one in China.

Ibn Battuta wrote of the encounter with Burhan al-Din in his Travels. "I was amazed at his prediction. And the idea of going to these countries having been cast into my mind, my wanderings never ceased until I had met these three that he named and conveyed his greeting to them."

Ibn Battuta visited a saint who lived a quiet life of prayer near Alexandria. There he had a dream of a large bird who carried him far eastward and left him there. The saint interpreted this to mean that Ibn Battuta would travel to India and stay there for a long time. His dream echoed what Burhan al-Din had said.

In Damascus, Ibn Battuta slept and studied in a madrassa. Damascus had the largest number of famous religious and legal scholars in the Arab-speaking world.

Ibn Battuta then fulfilled the prophesies of the various seers he'd met. First he traveled to India. To reach India, he had to cross the Hindu Kush Mountains in Afghanistan. "We crossed the mountains," Ibn Battuta recalled in Travels, "setting out about the end of the night and traveling all day long until sunset. We kept spreading felt clothes in front of the camels for them to tread on, so that they would not sink in the snow." When he arrived in Delhi, Ibn Battuta asked for a job from the Muslim king of India, Muhammad Tughluq.

The king of India often appointed foreigners as ministers and judges. Ibn Battuta traveled to the court in Delhi. Along the way, 82 Hindu bandits attacked his group of 22. Ibn Battuta and his men drove them off, killing 13 of the thieves. King Tughluq appointed him judge of Delhi.

After eight years, Ibn Battuta was eager to leave the court. The king agreed to send him as an ambassador to China. He asked Ibn Battuta to take shiploads of goods to the Yuan emperor.

Ibn Battuta was set to sail from Calcutta with a large ship holding the goods for the Chinese emperor. A smaller ship held his personal entourage. Everything and everybody was loaded for departure. On his last day in Calcutta, Ibn Battuta attended Friday prayers in the city. That evening a powerful storm blew in. The large ship with the presents sank.

The smaller one, with Ibn Battuta's friends and personal belongings, went to sea to escape the storm. Ibn Battuta was left behind. He only had his prayer rug and the clothes on his back. He needed to catch up with his ship.



A 13th-century illustration of a caravan headed to Mecca

Thus Ibn Battuta's travels continued. He later learned that his ship had been seized in Sumatra. He decided to go to China anyway. He stopped along the way at the Maldives, a group of islands 400 miles southwest from India.

In the Maldives, Ibn Battuta enjoyed the company of women even more than usual. Usually, he married one woman at a time. When he left to travel, he would divorce her. Ibn Battuta often had concubines. Some were purchased, others were given as gifts. In the Maldives he married four women, the legal limit under Muslim law. As he wrote in his Travels:

It is easy to marry in these islands because of the smallness of the dowries and the pleasures of society which the women offer... When the ships put in, the crew marry; when they intend to leave they divorce their wives. This is a kind of temporary marriage. The women of these islands never leave their country.

Ibn Battuta continued on to China. His description of China is sketchy and confusing. Some scholars doubt that he even went there. He claims to have gone as far north as Beijing. But his description is vague. In any case, he admits in Travels that in China he was unable to understand much of what he saw. It was not part of his familiar Dar al-Islam:

China was beautiful, but it did not please me. On the contrary, I was greatly troubled thinking about the way paganism dominated this country. Whenever I went out of my lodging, I saw many blameworthy things. That disturbed me so much that I stayed indoors most of the time and only went out when necessary. During my stay in China, whenever I saw any Muslims I always felt as though I were meeting my own family and close kinsmen.

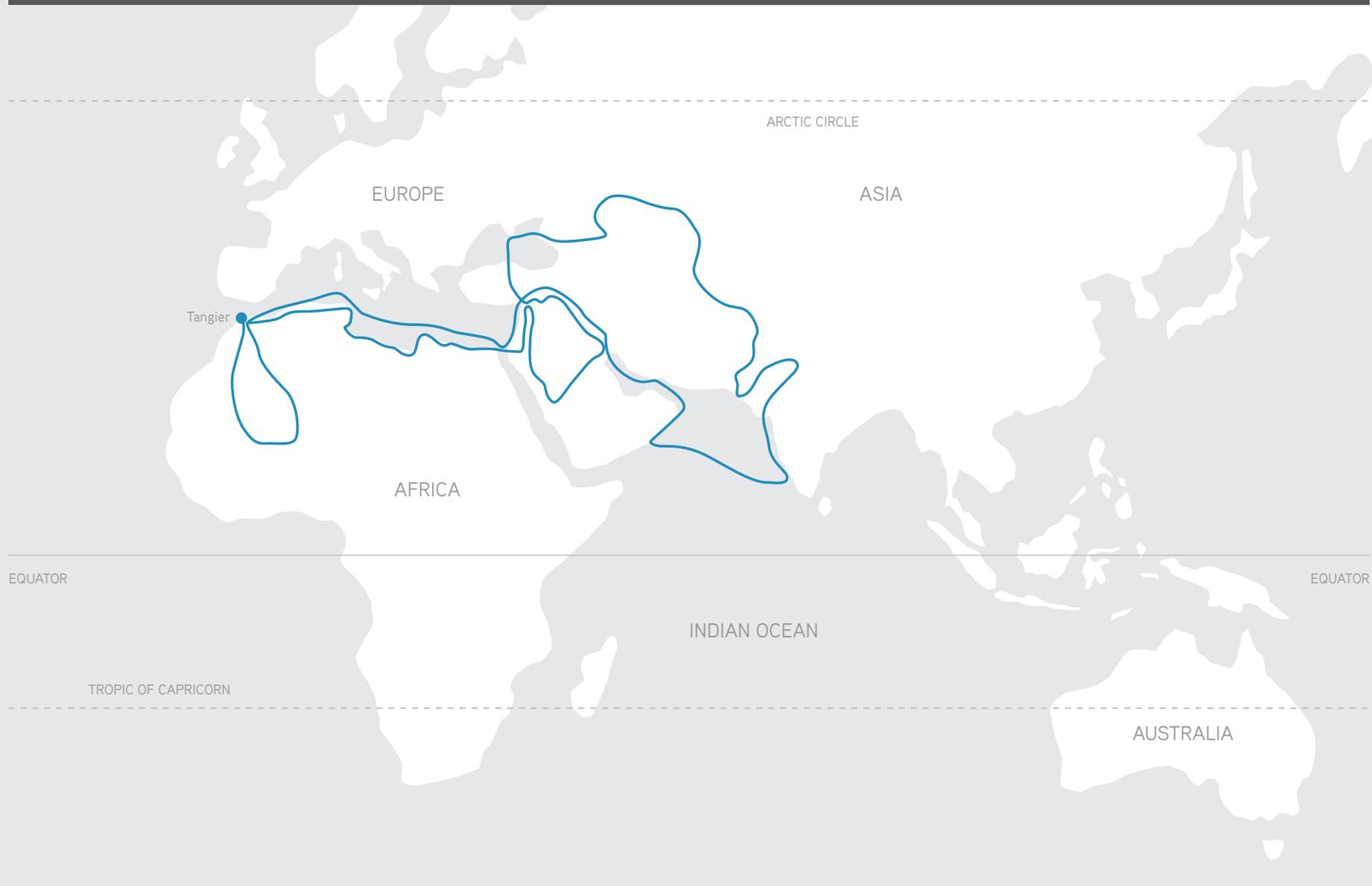
## His writing and his last years

Ibn Battuta returned home in 1349 to Tangier. Only a few months before his return, his mother died of the Black Death (plague). His father had died 15 years earlier. Ibn Battuta stayed in Tangier only a few days. Then he went off to visit North Africa, Spain, and Mali in West Africa.

He returned from that trip in 1354 to Fez, Morocco. While in Fez, the local sultan had a scholar record Ibn Battuta's experiences. The two men collaborated for two years, with Ibn Battuta telling his story. Ibn Battuta had an extraordinary memory. But we now know that he also misremembered some facts and dates.

# THE TRAVELS OF IBN BATTUTA

1325 TO 1354



After Ibn Battuta wrote his book he worked as a judge. He was not yet 50 when he stopped traveling. It is thought that he married again and had more children. He died in 1368 or 1369. The place of his death is not known.

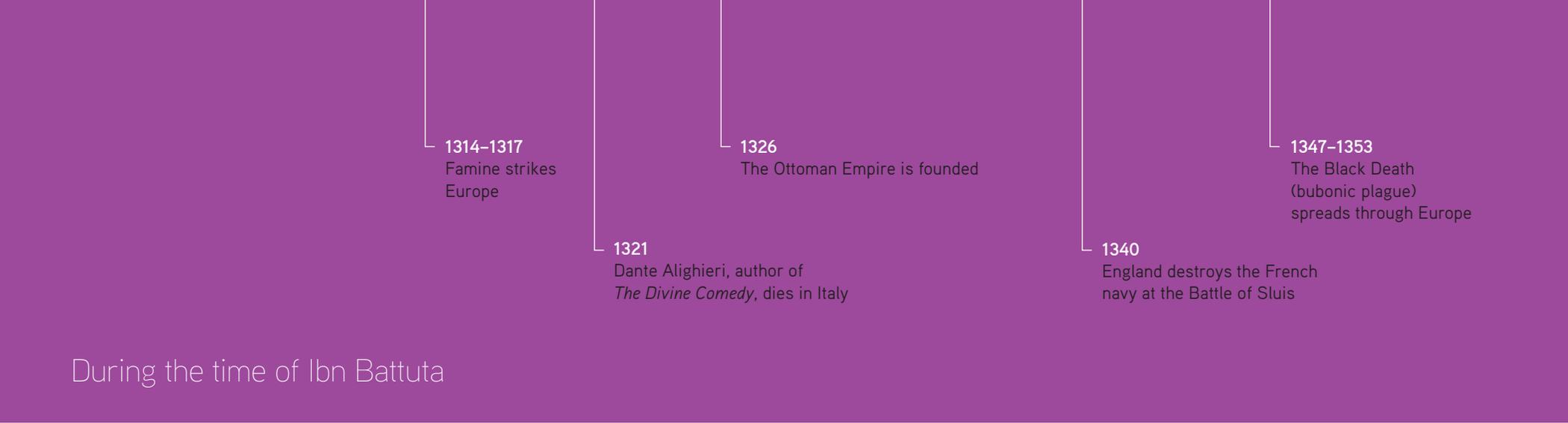
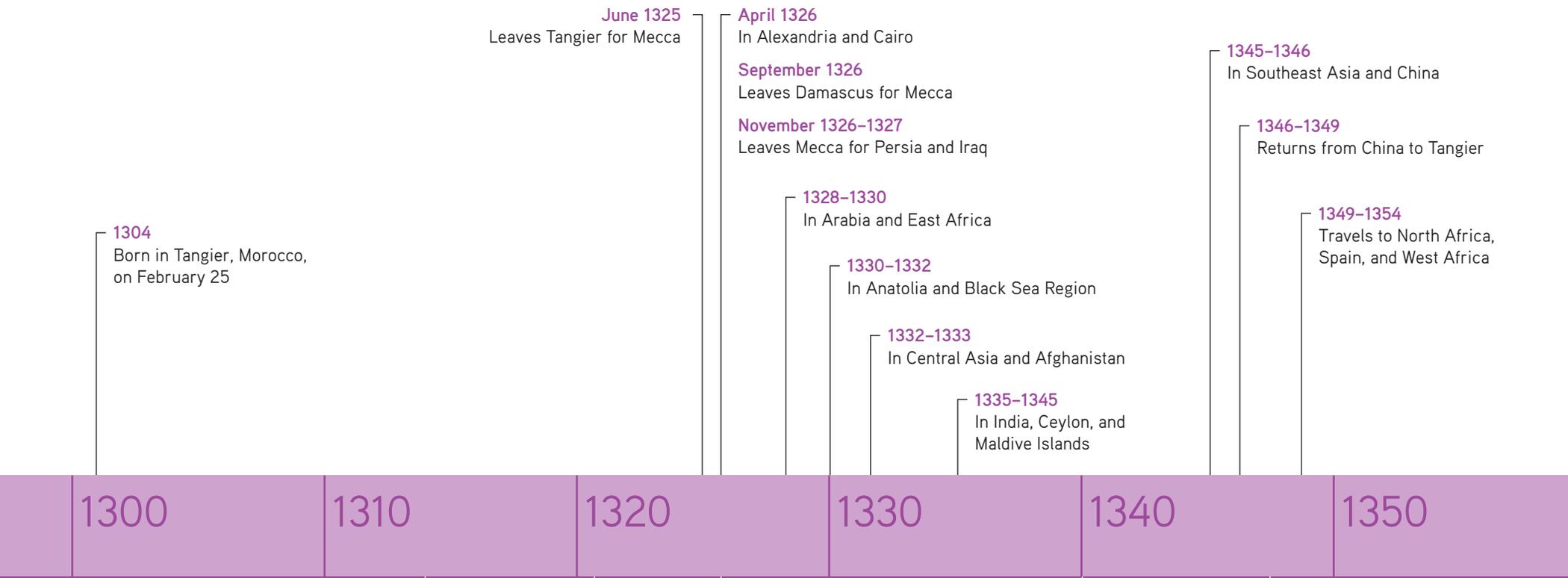
## The legacy of Ibn Battuta's Travels

How does Ibn Battuta's account compare with that of Marco Polo's? Both travelers lived by their wits. Each enjoyed new experiences. And each exercised amazing persistence to complete their travels. Incredibly, they both returned to their home country.

Yet there were many differences. Ibn Battuta was an educated, upper-class man. He traveled within a Muslim culture that he understood. Wherever he went he met people who thought like him. Polo was a merchant and not formally educated. He traveled to strange, unfamiliar cultures. He had to learn new ways of dressing, speaking, and behaving.

Ibn Battuta told more about himself. He described the people he met, and the importance of the positions he held. Marco Polo, on the other hand, focused on reporting accurate information about what he observed. We are fortunate to have accounts from two very different travelers from more than 600 years ago.

# Timeline of Ibn Battuta's life



During the time of Ibn Battuta

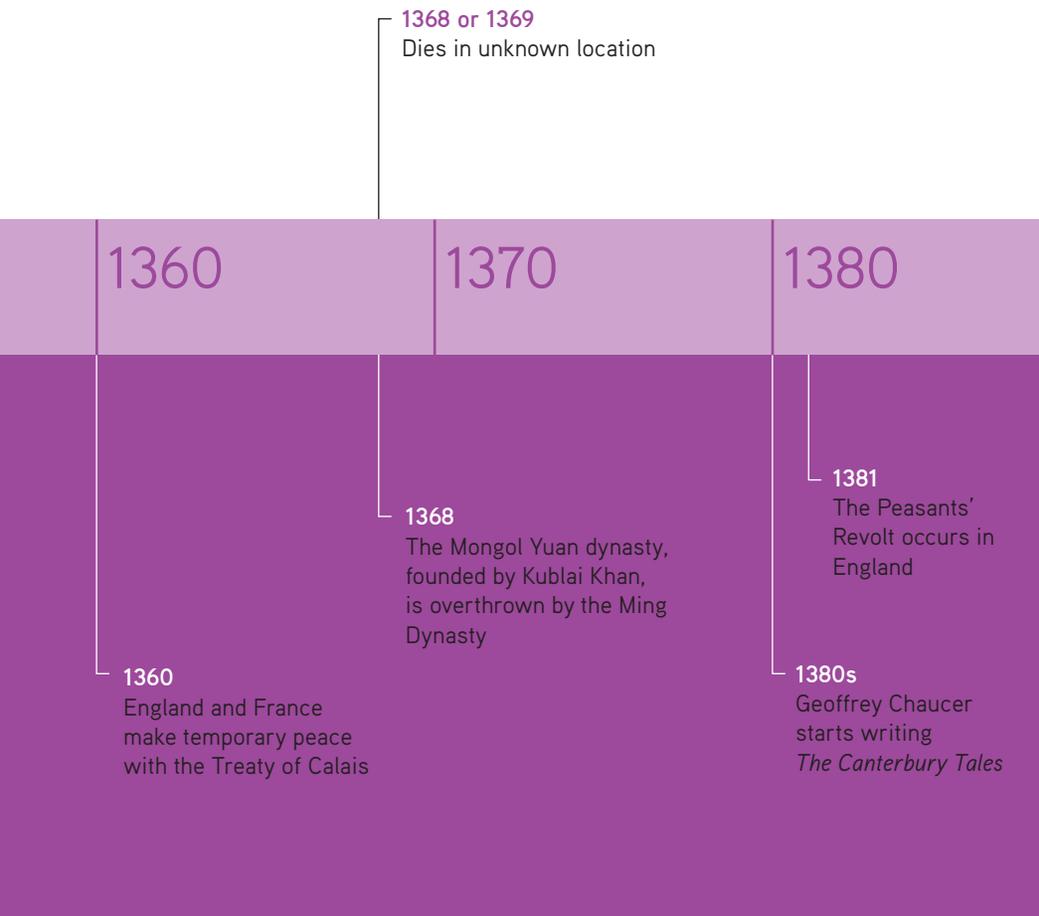
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A 1605 painting of a young holy man

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An interactive display at the Ibn Battuta Mall in Dubai,  
Dubai Construction Update, Imre Solt

Caravan going to Mecca, from *The Maqamat* by Al-Hariri

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