

Introduction

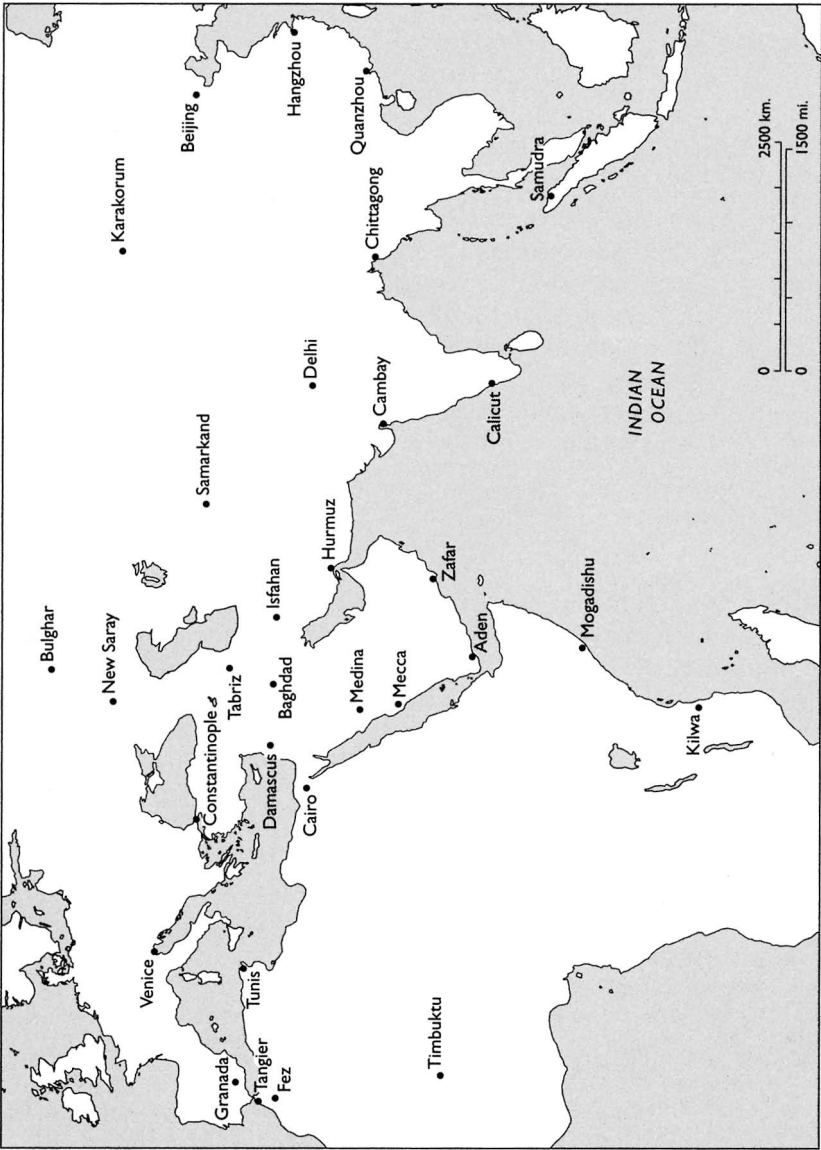
Westerners have singularly narrowed the history of the world in grouping the little that they knew about the expansion of the human race around the peoples of Israel, Greece and Rome. Thus have they ignored all those travellers and explorers who in their ships ploughed the China Sea and the Indian Ocean, or rode across the immensities of Central Asia to the Persian Gulf. In truth the larger part of the globe, containing cultures different from those of the ancient Greeks and Romans but no less civilized, has remained unknown to those who wrote the history of their little world under the impression that they were writing world history.¹

Henri Cordier

Abu 'Abdallah ibn Battuta has been rightly celebrated as the greatest traveler of premodern times. He was born into a family of Muslim legal scholars in Tangier, Morocco, in 1304 during the era of the Marinid dynasty. He studied law as a young man and in 1325 left his native town to make the pilgrimage, or *hajj*, to the sacred city of Mecca in Arabia. He took a year and a half to reach his destination, visiting North Africa, Egypt, Palestine, and Syria along the way. After completing his first *hajj* in 1326, he toured Iraq and Persia, then returned to Mecca. In 1328 (or 1330) he embarked upon a sea voyage that took him down the eastern coast of Africa as far south as the region of modern Tanzania. On his return voyage he visited Oman and the Persian Gulf and returned to Mecca again by the overland route across central Arabia.

In 1330 (or 1332) he ventured to go to India to seek employment in the government of the Sultanate of Delhi. Rather than taking the normal ocean route across the Arabian Sea to the western coast of India, he traveled north through Egypt and Syria to Asia Minor. After touring that region, he crossed the Black Sea to the plains of West Central Asia. He then, owing to fortuitous circumstances, made a westward detour to visit Constantinople, capital of

Map 1: Cities of Eurasia and Africa in the Fourteenth Century



the Byzantine Empire, in the company of a Turkish princess. Returning to the Asian steppes, he traveled eastward through Transoxiana, Khurasan, and Afghanistan, arriving at the banks of the Indus River in September 1333 (or 1335).

He spent eight years in India, most of that time occupying a post as a *qadi*, or judge, in the government of Muhammad Tughluq, Sultan of Delhi. In 1341 the king appointed him to lead a diplomatic mission to the court of the Mongol emperor of China. The expedition ended disastrously in shipwreck off the southwestern coast of India, leaving Ibn Battuta without employment or resources. For a little more than two years he traveled about southern India, Ceylon, and the Maldives Islands, where he served for about eight months as a *qadi* under the local Muslim dynasty. Then, despite the failure of his ambassadorial mission, he resolved in 1345 to go to China on his own. Traveling by sea, he visited Bengal, the coast of Burma, and the island of Sumatra, then continued on to Guangzhou. The extent of his visit to China is uncertain but was probably limited to the southern coastal region.

In 1346–47 he returned to Mecca by way of South India, the Persian Gulf, Syria, and Egypt. After performing the ceremonies of the *hajj* one last time, he set a course for home. Traveling by both land and sea, he arrived in Fez, the capital of Morocco, late in 1349. The following year he made a brief trip across the Strait of Gibraltar to the Muslim kingdom of Granada. Then, in 1353, he undertook his final adventure, a journey by camel caravan across the Sahara Desert to the Kingdom of Mali in the West African Sudan. In 1355 he returned to Morocco to stay. In the course of a career on the road spanning almost thirty years, he crossed the breadth of the Eastern Hemisphere, visited territories equivalent to about 40 modern countries, and put behind him a total distance of approximately 73,000 miles.²

Early in 1356 Sultan Abu 'Inan, the Marinid ruler of Morocco, commissioned Ibn Juzayy, a young literary scholar of Andalusian origin, to record Ibn Battuta's experiences, as well as his observations about the Islamic world of his day, in the form of a *rihla*, or book of travels. As a type of Arabic literature, the *rihla* attained something of a flowering in North Africa between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries. The best known examples of the genre recounted a journey from the Maghrib to Mecca, informing and entertaining readers with rich descriptions of the pious institutions, public monuments, and religious personalities of the

4 Introduction

great cities of Islam.³ Ibn Battuta and Ibn Juzayy collaborated for about two years to compose their work, the longest and in terms of its subject matter the most complex *rihla* to come out of North Africa in the medieval age. His royal charge completed, Ibn Battuta retired to a judicial post in a Moroccan provincial town. He died in 1368.

Written in the conventional literary style of the time, Ibn Battuta's *Rihla* is a comprehensive survey of the personalities, places, governments, customs, and curiosities of the Muslim world in the second quarter of the fourteenth century. It is also the record of a dramatic personal adventure. In the four centuries after Ibn Battuta's death, the *Rihla* circulated, mostly in copied manuscript abridgments of Ibn Juzayy's original text, among people of learning in North Africa, West Africa, Egypt, and perhaps other Muslim lands where Arabic was read.

The book was unknown outside Islamic countries until the early nineteenth century, when two German scholars published separately translations of portions of the *Rihla* from manuscripts obtained in the Middle East. In 1829 Samuel Lee, a British orientalist, published an English translation based on abridgments of the narrative that John Burckhardt, the famous Swiss explorer, had acquired in Egypt.⁴ Around the middle of the century five manuscripts of the *Rihla* were found in Algeria following the French occupation of that country. These documents were subsequently transferred to the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. Two of them represent the most complete versions of the narrative that have ever come to light. The others are partial transcriptions, one of which carries the autograph of Ibn Juzayy, Ibn Battuta's editor. Working with these five documents, two French scholars, C. Défrémery and B.R. Sanguinetti, published between 1853 and 1858 a printed edition of the Arabic text, together with a translation in French and an apparatus of notes and variant textual readings.⁵

Since then, translations of the work, prepared in every case from Défrémery and Sanguinetti's printed text, have been published in many languages, including Spanish, Italian, German, Russian, Polish, Hungarian, Persian, and Japanese. In 1929 Sir Hamilton Gibb produced an abridged English translation and began work on a complete edition of the work under the auspices of the Hakluyt Society.⁶ The last of the four volumes in this series appeared in 1994, and an index came out in 2001.⁷ However, English translations of various portions of the *Rihla* have appeared in the past century as books or as articles in anthologies and scholarly journals.

The numerous translations of the *Rihla*, together with the extensive corpus of encyclopedia articles, popular summaries, and critical commentaries on Ibn Battuta and his career that have accumulated since the eighteenth century, are a tribute to the extraordinary value of the narrative as a historical source on much of the inhabited Eastern Hemisphere in the second quarter of the fourteenth century. The book has been cited and quoted in hundreds of historical works, not only those relating to Islamic countries but to China and the Byzantine empire as well. For the history of certain regions, Sudanic West Africa, Asia Minor, or the Malabar coast of India, for example, the *Rihla* stands as the only eye-witness report on political events, human geography, and social or economic conditions for a period of a century or more. Ibn Battuta had no professional background or experience as a writer of geography, history, or ethnography, but he was, as Gibb declares, “the supreme example of *le géographe malgré lui*,” the “geographer in spite of himself.”⁸

The Western world has conventionally celebrated Marco Polo, who died the year before Ibn Battuta first left home, as the “Greatest Traveler in History.” Ibn Battuta has inevitably been compared with him and has usually taken second prize as “the Marco Polo of the Muslim world” or “the Marco Polo of the tropics.”⁹ Keeping in mind that neither man actually composed his own book (Marco’s record was dictated to the French romance writer Rusticello in a Genoese prison), there is no doubt that the Venetian’s work is the superior one in terms of the accurate, precise, practical information it contributes on medieval China and other Asian lands in the latter part of the thirteenth century, information of profound value to historians ever since. Yet Ibn Battuta traveled to, and reports on, a great many more places than Marco did, and his narrative offers details, sometimes in incidental bits, sometimes in long disquisitions, on almost every conceivable aspect of human life in that age, from the royal ceremonial of the Sultan of Delhi to the sexual customs of women in the Maldivian Islands to the harvesting of coconuts in South Arabia. Moreover his story is far more personal and humanely engaging than Marco’s. Some Western writers, especially in an earlier time when the conviction of Europe’s superiority over Islamic civilization was a presumption of historical scholarship, have criticized Ibn Battuta for being excessively eager to tell about the lives and pious accomplishments of religious savants and Sufi mystics when he

6 Introduction

might have written more about practical politics and prices. The *Rihla*, however, was directed to Muslim men of learning of the fourteenth century for whom such reportage, so recondite to the modern Western reader, was pertinent and interesting.

As in Marco's case, we know almost nothing about the life of Ibn Battuta apart from what the autobiographical dimension of his own book reveals. Aside from three minor references in Muslim scholarly works of the fourteenth or fifteenth century that attest independently to the Moroccan's existence and to his achievements as a traveler, no document has ever come to light from his own age that mentions him.¹⁰ To understand his character, his aspirations, his social attitudes and prejudices, his personal relations with other people and, finally, the way he "fits" into fourteenth-century Muslim society and culture, we must rely almost exclusively on the *Rihla* itself. Fortunately, by expressing here and there in its pages his reactions to events, his annoyances, his animosities, and the details of his personal intrigues, he reveals something of his own character.

Western writers have sometimes characterized Ibn Battuta as a brave explorer like Marco Polo, risking his life to discover *terra incognita* and bring knowledge of it to public attention. In fact Ibn Battuta's experience was drastically different from that of the Venetian. Marco traveled as an alien visitor into lands few Europeans had ever seen and whose people knew little, and cared to know little, about Europe. He was an oddity, a "stranger in a strange land," who was given the opportunity to visit China only because of the very special political circumstances that prevailed for a short time in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries: the existence of the great Mongol states of Asia and their policy of permitting merchants of all origins and religions to travel and conduct business in their domains. Marco does indeed herald the age of European discovery, not because the peoples of Asia somehow needed discovering to set themselves on a course into the future, but because his book made an extraordinary and almost immediate intellectual impact on a young Western civilization that until that time had a cramped and faulty vision of what the wider world of the Eastern Hemisphere was all about.

Ibn Battuta, by contrast, spent most of his traveling career within the cultural boundaries of what Muslims called the Dar al-Islam, or Abode of Islam. This expression embraced the lands where Muslims predominated in the population, or at least where

Muslim kings or princes ruled over non-Muslim majorities and where in consequence the *shari'a*, or Sacred Law, of Islam was presumably the foundation of the social order. In that sense Islamic civilization extended from the Atlantic coast of West Africa to Southeast Asia. Moreover, important minority communities of Muslims inhabited cities and towns in regions such as China, Spain, and tropical West Africa that were beyond the frontiers of the Dar al-Islam. Therefore almost everywhere Ibn Battuta went he lived in the company of other Muslims, men and women who shared not merely his doctrinal beliefs and religious rituals, but his moral values, his social ideals, his everyday manners. Although he was introduced in the course of his travels to a great many Muslim peoples whose local languages, customs, and aesthetic values were unfamiliar in his own homeland at the far western edge of the hemisphere, he never strayed far from the social world of individuals who shared his tastes and sensibilities and among whom he could always find hospitality, security, and friendship.

Today, we characterize the cosmopolitan individual in several ways: the advocate of international cooperation or world government, the sophisticated city-dweller, the jet-setter. The Muslim cosmopolite of the fourteenth century was likewise urbane, well traveled, and free of the grosser varieties of parochial bigotry. But, above all, he possessed a consciousness, more or less acutely formed, of the entire Dar al-Islam as a social reality. He also believed, at least implicitly, in the Sacred Law as the proper and eminently workable foundation of a global community.

To understand the intellectual basis of Ibn Battuta's cosmopolitanism, we must re-orient ourselves away from the conventional view of history as primarily the study of individual nations or discrete "cultures." In their writings more than twenty years ago the world historians Marshall Hodgson and William McNeill introduced and developed the "global" concept of the Eurasian, or preferably Afro-Eurasian, *Ecumene*, that is, the belt of agrarian lands extending west to east from the Mediterranean basin to China.¹¹ It was within this region that the major sedentary civilizations of the Eastern Hemisphere arose, where most cities sprang up, and where most important cultural and technological innovations were made.

Beginning in ancient times, according to McNeill, the *Ecumene* went through a series of "closures" which involved increasingly

8 Introduction

complex interrelations among the civilizations of the hemisphere. Thus there evolved a continuous region of intercommunication, or, as we will call it in this book, the intercommunicating zone, which joined the sedentary and urbanizing peoples of the Mediterranean rim, the Middle East, Greater India, and China into a single field of historical interaction and change. Important innovations occurring in one part of the zone tended to spread to the other parts of it through trade, military conquest, human migration, or gradual diffusion. Moreover, the intercommunicating zone “grew” over the course of time by incorporating peoples in peripheral areas — sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, Europe north of the Alps — into the web of interrelations. Thus, the history of Africa and Eurasia in premodern times becomes more than the stories of individual, geographically bounded nations, cultures, or empires. It is also the history of the “unconsciously inter-regional developments,” to quote Hodgson, which “converge in their effects to alter *the general disposition of the Hemisphere*.”¹²

One of the most important dimensions of this “hemispheric history” was the role of pastoral populations who inhabited the great arid belt which ran diagonally from southwest to northeast across the intercommunicating zone, that is the chain of steppes and deserts extending from the Sahara through the Middle East and Central Asia to the Gobi. Contact between the herding peoples of the arid zone and sedentary societies tended in normal times to be mostly beneficial to both, involving the exchange of goods and elements of culture. However, the pastoralists, owing to their mobility and ethos of martial strength, were always a potential threat to the far richer settled civilizations. At periodic intervals beginning in the eighteenth century B.C. or earlier, nomadic invaders poured into neighboring agrarian lands, pillaging cities, terminating dynasties, and generally upsetting prevailing cultural and social patterns over wide areas of Eurasia and Africa. The last great nomadic movement occurred in the thirteenth century, when the Mongols and their Turkish-speaking allies erupted out of Central Asia and conquered China, Russia, and most of the Middle East, creating the largest territorial empire the world has ever known.

Islam had come upon the world scene in the seventh century in connection with the explosion of Arabic-speaking, horse-mounted warriors out of the Arabian desert under the leadership of the

Prophet Muhammad and his successors. Western historical writing has given a great deal of attention to the early evolution of Islamic civilization, that is, the “classical” age of the Abbasid Caliphate (or High Caliphate) centered on Baghdad between the eighth and tenth centuries. For this period the astonishing contributions of Muslims to world history in art, science, medicine, philosophy, and international commerce have been recognized, especially in so far as they were a major formative influence on the rise of Christian European civilization in the early Middle Ages. But precisely because historians of the West have been interested in Islam mainly in terms of its effects on the development of European institutions, the subsequent periods of Islamic history up to modern times have been given less heed. Indeed, the conventional perspective in European and American textbook writing has been that Islamic civilization reached its “peak” during the Abbasid age and thereafter went into a gradual but inexorable “decline.” This notion that Islam somehow atrophied after the tenth or eleventh century has largely turned on the Western perception (considerably exaggerated) that Muslims rejected the intellectual heritage of Hellenistic rationalism about the same time that Europeans “rediscovered” it. Consequently, so the argument runs, the West, having adopted a “scientific” and “rational” view of the natural world, was able to “progress” in the direction of world dominance, while “traditional” civilizations such as Islam languished and fell further and further behind.

In fact, the period of hemispheric history from 1000 to 1500 A.D., what we will call the Islamic Middle Period, witnessed a steady and remarkable expansion of Islam, not simply as a religious faith but as a coherent, universalist model of civilized life. To be sure, the intense, concentrated, innovative brilliance of the Abbasid Caliphate was not to be repeated in the subsequent half millennium of Islamic history. Yet if many Muslims did turn intellectually conservative by the standard of modern scientific rationalism, the religion nonetheless pushed outward from its Middle Eastern core as an attractive, satisfying, cohesive system for explaining the cosmos and for ordering collective life among ever-larger numbers of people, both sedentary and pastoral, both urban and rural, all across the intercommunicating zone.

The spread of Islam into new areas of the hemisphere during the Middle Period was given impetus by two major forces. One of these was the advance of Turkish-speaking Muslim herding

10 Introduction

peoples from Central Asia into the Middle East, a movement that began on a large scale with the conquests of the Seljuk Turks in the eleventh century. In the ensuing 300 years Turkish cavalry armies pushed westward into Asia Minor and southern Russia and eastward into India. The second force was the gradual but persistent movement of Muslim merchants into the lands rimming the Indian Ocean, that is, East Africa, India, Southeast Asia, and China, as well as into Central Asia and West Africa south of the Sahara.

Yet the principal contribution of both warriors and merchants, establishing in some places Muslim military dominance and in other places only communities of believers under non-Muslim authority, was to prepare the ground for influxes of Muslim religious and intellectual cadres. It was they, over the longer term, who founded the basic institutions of Islamic civilization in these new areas and who carried on the work of cultural conversion among non-Muslim peoples.

A close look at the patterns of travel and migration in the post-Abbasid centuries reveals a quiet but persistent dispersion of legal scholars, theologians, Sufi divines, belle-lettrists, scribes, architects, and craftsmen outward from the older centers of Islam to these new frontiers of Muslim military and commercial activity. At the same time, the members of this cultural elite who were living and traveling in the further regions consistently maintained close ties with the great cities of the central Islamic lands, thereby creating not merely a scattering of literate and skilled Muslims across the hemisphere, but an integrated, growing, self-replenishing network of cultural communication.

Moreover, the most fundamental values of Islam tended to encourage a higher degree of social mobility and freer movement of individuals from one city and region to another than was the case in the other civilizations of that time. Islamic culture put great stress on egalitarian behavior in social relations based on the ideal of a community of believers (the *umma*) having a common allegiance to one God and his Sacred Law. To be sure, a great gulf separated the rich and powerful from the poor and weak, as was the case in all civilized societies until very recent times. But Islam mightily resisted the institutionalizing of ascribed statuses, ethnic exclusivities, or purely territorial loyalties. The dynamics of social life centered, not on relations among fixed, rigidly defined groups as was the case in Hindu India or even, to a lesser degree, the medieval West, but on what Hodgson calls “egalitarian con-

tractualism,” the relatively free play of relations among individuals who tended to size one another up mainly in terms of personal conformity to Islamic moral standards.¹³ Consequently, wherever in the Dar al-Islam an individual traveled, pursued a career, or bought and sold goods, the same social and moral rules of conduct largely applied, rules founded on the *shari’a*.

The Islamic world in Ibn Battuta’s time was divided politically into numerous kingdoms and principalities. Rulers insisted that their administrative and penal codes be obeyed, but they made no claims to divine authority. For the most part, Muslims on the move — merchants, scholars, and skilled, literate individuals of all kinds — regarded the jurisdictions of states as a necessary imposition and gave them as little attention as possible. Their primary allegiance was to the Dar al-Islam as a whole. The focal points of their public lives were not countries but cities, where world-minded Muslims carried on their inter-personal affairs mainly with reference to the universalist and uniform standards of the Law.

The terrible Mongol conquests of Persia and Syria that occurred between 1219 and 1258 appeared to Muslims to threaten the very existence of Islamic civilization. Yet by the time Ibn Battuta began his traveling career Mongol political dominance over the greater part of Eurasia was proving conducive to the further expansion of Islam and its institutions. The powerful Mongol *khans* of Persia and Central Asia converted to the faith, and the conditions of order and security that attended the Pax Mongolica of the later thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries gave freer play than ever to the movement of Muslims back and forth across Eurasia.

It was in the late decades of the Pax Mongolica that Ibn Battuta made his remarkable journeys. In a sense he participated, sometimes simultaneously, in four different streams of travel and migration. First, he was a pilgrim, joining the march of pious believers to the spiritual shrines of Mecca and Medina at least four times in his career. Second, he was a devotee of Sufism, or mystical Islam, traveling, as thousands did, to the hermitages and lodges of venerable individuals to receive their blessing and wisdom. Third, he was a juridical scholar, seeking knowledge and erudite company in the great cities of the Islamic heartland. And finally, he was a member of the literate, mobile, world-minded elite, an educated adventurer as it were, looking for hospitality, honors, and profitable employment in the more newly established centers

12 Introduction

of Islamic civilization in the further regions of Asia and Africa. In any of these traveling roles, however, he regarded himself as a citizen, not of a country called Morocco, but of the Dar al-Islam, to whose universalist spiritual, moral, and social values he was loyal above any other allegiance. His life and career exemplify a remarkable fact of Afro-Eurasian history in the later Middle Period, that, as Marshall Hodgson writes, Islam “came closer than any other medieval society to establishing a common world order of social and even cultural standards.”¹⁴

Notes

1. Henri Cordier, quoted in Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China*, vol. 4, part 3: *Civil Engineering and Nautics* (Cambridge, 1971), p. 486.
2. Approximate. Henry Yule estimates that IB traveled more than 75,000 miles during his career, not counting journeys while living in India. *Cathay and the Way Thither*, 4 vols. (London, 1913–16), vol. 4, p. 40. Mahdi Husain (MH, p. liii) suggests 77,640 miles.
3. On *rihla* literature in North Africa see M. B. A. Bencheekroun, *La Vie intellectuelle marocaine sous les Merinides et les Wattasides* (Rabat, 1974), pp. 9–11, 251–57; André Michel, “Ibn Battuta, trente années de voyages de Pekin au Niger,” *Les Africains* 1 (1977): 134–36; A. L. de Prémare, *Maghreb et Andalousie au XIV^e siècle* (Lyon, 1981), pp. 34, 92–93.
4. Samuel Lee, *The Travels of Ibn Battuta* (London, 1929). See also D&S, vol. 1, pp. xiii–xxvi.
5. C. Défrémery and B. R. Sanguinetti (trans. and eds.). *Voyages d'Ibn Battuta*, 4 vols. (Paris, 1853–58; reprint edn., Vincent Monteil [ed.], Paris, 1979).
6. H. A. R. Gibb, *The Travels of Ibn Battuta A.D. 1325–1354, Translated with Notes from the Arabic Text Edited by C. Defremery and B. R. Sanguinetti*, 5 vols. Vols. 1–3: Cambridge University Press for the Hakluyt Society, 1958, 1961, and 1971. Vol. 4: Translation Completed with Annotations by C. F. Beckingham. London: Hakluyt Society, 1994. Vol. 5: Index, A. D. H. Bivar, Compiler, Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2001.
7. The final volume was translated by C. F. Beckingham, Gibb's former student.
8. Gibb, *Travels in Asia and Africa*, p. 12.
9. A. G. Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa* (New York, 1973), p. 78.
10. On the medieval sources that mention IB see Chapter 14.
11. Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in World Civilization*, 3 vols. (Chicago, 1974); William H. McNeill, *The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community* (Chicago, 1963). The concept of trans-regional “intercommunicating zones” is also important in the writings of Philip D. Curtin, notably *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History* (Cambridge, England, 1984).
12. Marshall G. S. Hodgson, “Hemispheric Inter-regional History as an Approach to World History,” *Journal of World History* 1 (1954): 717.
13. Marshall G. S. Hodgson, “The Role of Islam in World History,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 1 (1970): 116.
14. Marshall G. S. Hodgson, “The Unity of Later Islamic History,” *Journal of World History* 5 (1960): 884.