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IBN BATTUTA'S ACCOUNTS OF CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

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Ibn Battuta (Abu Abdullah Muhammad ibn Abdullah al-Lawati al-Tanji) is considered one of the most famous Muslim travelers of the 14th century. He was born in 1304 in the city of Tangier, Morocco. His journeys extended far beyond the borders of the Muslim world, covering nearly all prominent regions of his time. Ibn Battuta set out in 1325 initially for pilgrimage (Hajj), but this journey turned into a series of long and far-reaching explorations. Over the course of 25 years, he traveled more than 130,000 kilometers by land and sea, through deserts and mountains.

He visited Africa (Morocco, Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Mali, the Sahara, Mozambique), the Middle East (Medina, Mecca, Syria, Iraq, Yemen), Central Asia (Volga region, Khiva, Bukhara, Samarkand), India and South Asia (Delhi, Malabar, Maldives, Sri Lanka), China (under the Yuan dynasty), and Europe (Byzantium – Constantinople).

The main source of his journeys is the work *Tuhfat al-Nuzzar fi Gharaib al-Amsar wa Ajaib al-Asfar* (“A Gift to Those Who Contemplate the Marvels of Cities and the Wonders of Travels”), commonly known as *Rihla* (“The Journey”). He dictated this book in 1356 in the city of Fez, and it was edited into literary form by the scholar Ibn Juzayy of Granada. The work contains not only geographic data but also detailed descriptions of the customs, religions, laws, trade, and daily life of various peoples.

During his 28-year journey, Ibn Battuta visited hundreds of towns and villages in North and West Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, India and Spain, Turkey and Iran, Central Asia, Eastern Europe, and finally China. His *Rihla* contains such an abundance of fascinating accounts of distant lands and peoples that many of his



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contemporaries viewed some of the stories with skepticism, considering them to be imaginary or exaggerated¹.

In his work, Ibn Battuta describes Constantinople as follows: “The city is extremely large and is divided by a great river, where the rise and fall of water is observed. There used to be a stone bridge here, but it has collapsed, and now people cross the river by boat. The part of the city on the eastern bank of the river is called Istanbul. This is where the imperial palace, the nobles, and the general population reside. Its markets and streets are spacious and paved with stone; each market is secured with gates that are closed at night. Most of the merchants and artisans are women. The city is situated at the foot of a hill that stretches about nine miles along the sea, and its width is about the same or even more. On top of this hill are a small fortress and the emperor’s palace. The city is surrounded by strong walls, and it is nearly impossible to conquer from the sea. Within this area, there are about thirteen residential settlements — villages. The main church is located at the center of this section of the city. The western part of the city on the opposite shore is called Galata, and it is inhabited by Frankish Christians. Here live Genoese, Venetians, Romans, and French. They are under the rule of the king of Constantinople, but they elect one of their own as a leader, who is called a comes (count). Each year they are required to pay tribute to the king, though they often rebel, and the king wages war against them. Then the Pope intervenes to restore peace. These Franks are engaged in trade, and their port is among the largest in the world. The markets in this area are good, but dirty. A polluted stream with little water flows through it. Their churches are also unclean and modest in appearance.²”

On another page of the work, the author states: “I only saw the exterior of this large church, not its interior. It is called Hagia Sophia. According to legend, it was built by Asaf ibn Barkhiya, the cousin of the Prophet Solomon. This is one of the most sacred churches of the Greek Christians, and it is surrounded by such a large wall that it resembles a small independent city. It has thirteen gates and a sacred

¹ Неъматулло Иброхимов. Ибн Баттута ва унинг Ўрта Осиёга саёхати. // Универсал илмий-бадний матбаа маркази, Тошкент. 1993. Б. 4.

² Ibn Battuta, *Travels in Asia and Africa 1325-1354*, trans. and ed. H. A. R. Gibb (London: Broadway House, 1929) P. 160.



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courtyard. The courtyard is about a mile long and is closed with a large gate. No one is forbidden from entering this courtyard; I entered it together with the emperor's father. The place looks like a large marble-covered assembly hall. Inside flows a spring originating from the church. Outside the courtyard, there are wooden stalls and shops, where their judges and scribes sit. Only those who have prayed in front of the great cross are allowed to enter the church's interior. According to their claims, this cross includes a piece from the cross upon which Jesus was crucified. It is enclosed in a gold box about ten cubits tall. Another gold box is placed perpendicularly, forming the shape of a cross. The gate itself is covered with gold and silver, and the handles are made of pure gold. It is said that thousands of monks and clergy live in this church, some of whom are even descendants of the apostles of Jesus. Inside the church, there is a separate area for women only, where over a thousand virgins and many elderly women live in devotion. Every morning, the king, nobles, and common people visit this church. The Pope, however, visits this place only once a year³," he emphasizes.

In the same work, Ibn Battuta writes: "There are many monasteries in the city of Constantinople. Among them is a monastery built outside of Istanbul, opposite Galata, by King George. Additionally, to the right of the main church (Hagia Sophia), there are two monasteries built along a stream flowing through a garden — one for men, and one for women. Each monastery has its own church and is surrounded by cells for the men and women devoted to religious life. Each monastery has endowments (waqf) that cover the clothing and living expenses of the ascetics. Also, each monastery has a special room designated for a king who wishes to devote the rest of his life to worship. Many kings, upon reaching the age of 60 or 70, hand over the throne to their children, put on woolen clothes, and live out the rest of their days in religious devotion. They exhibit great enthusiasm and splendor when building these monasteries — adorning the buildings with marble and mosaics. I visited one such monastery with a Greek man assigned to me by the king. It housed five hundred virgin girls, all wearing woolen garments, with shaved heads and wearing felt bonnets. A young man sat at the pulpit reading the Gospel

³ Ibn Battuta, *Travels in Asia and Africa 1325-1354*, trans. and ed. H. A. R. Gibb (London: Broadway House, 1929). P. 161.



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in a beautiful voice, surrounded by eight other young men doing the same, along with a priest. As soon as one finished reading, another would begin. The Greek man with me said: ‘These girls are daughters of kings, who have dedicated themselves to service in this church. The boys reading scripture are also children of kings.’ I also visited other churches where the daughters of viziers, emirs, and prominent city figures, as well as elderly women and widows, resided. In other churches, monks lived, each housing around a hundred people. A large portion of the city’s population consists of monks, ascetics, and clergy. The number of churches there is so great, it defies counting⁴”, these lines provide valuable information about Christian communities.

Based on the above analysis, it can be concluded that the works of 14th-century Muslim travelers serve as valuable and reliable sources for understanding the existence, living conditions, religious practices, and interactions of Christian communities in the medieval world.

⁴ Ibn Battuta, *Travels in Asia and Africa 1325-1354*, trans. and ed. H. A. R. Gibb (London: Broadway House, 1929) P. 163.