A Two-year Journey under the Arrows of the Black Death: The Medieval Plague Pandemic in Ibn Baṭṭūṭa’s Travels

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Abstract

The penultimate part of the Rihla [(Chronicle of) Travels] by Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, just before his last journey to Western Sudan, takes place between January 1348 and March 1350 and recounts his return journey to Morocco from the Middle East through North Africa—and another short tour in al-Andalus. During that time, and in all the territories Ibn Baṭṭūṭa claims to have travelled through, the deadliest pandemic of plague in human memory, the “Black Death,” was raging. In the Mediterranean area, 40–60 of the population died in the scourge, and references to the epidemic punctuate this part of the work like a tired refrain. As numerous studies have shown that the Rihla contains borrowings and adaptations from other sources, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa may not have actually made all the journeys he claims. However, to date no one has criticised this part of the work, nor has anyone questioned Ibn Baṭṭūṭa’s journey through the Arabian area in those years. On the contrary, historians of the Black Death regard this part of the Rihla as having an important documentary value for the study of the scourge in the Middle East and North Africa.

In this paper I aim to reconstruct the narrative of the Black Death in Ibn Baṭṭūṭa’s Rihla by taking from the text the seven passages in which the pandemic is mentioned, in order to answer a number of questions: to which places do these passages refer? What information does the Rihla give about the disease, its effects and people’s reaction? Does it correspond to that provided by coeval and posterior Arab chronicles? Does it fit with the information provided by current microbiology, genetics and paleogenetics research? Since the Rihla is not a chronicle but a narrative work, how do Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, who dictated the travelogue, and Ibn Ǧuzayy, who edited it, describe such a devastating scourge? Does his/her description differ from that of the chroniclers?

The concluding paragraph seeks an answer to two more questions: does the Rihla actually report Ibn Baṭṭūṭa’s eyewitness experience and information he gathered in the places he claims to have been or might he and/or Ibn Ǧuzayy have taken information from some other sources, without having actually been in those places? And if Ibn Baṭṭūṭa did make this journey, thus probably being the only traveller who left an account of a “two-year journey under the arrows of the Black Death,” how could he return home unscathed?

Key words: Ibn Baṭṭūṭa – Ibn Ǧuzayy - Arabic Travel Literature – History of Epidemics – Black Death in the Middle East – Medieval Plague Pandemic - ṭāʿūn – wabāʾ.
Introduction

This paper considers the journey Muhammad Ibn Battūta\(^3\) claims to have made in the two-year period between Āṣāwāl 748 [January 1348] and Ḫūṣul 750 [March 1350].

According to his Riḥla [(Chronicle of) Travels], in the month of Ramadān 747 [January 1347] Ibn Battūta set out from Quilon, in the present-day state of Kerala, and embarked on the last leg of a long journey that had begun in 1325 from Tangier, his native city, and had taken him to visit most of the then known world. A year after leaving India, and while travelling towards Mecca, in Āṣāwāl 748 [January 1348] he arrived in Baghdad and from there continued westwards, passing through or staying in present-day Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, the Arab Peninsula and Egypt. In Cairo Ibn Battūta decided to return home and resumed his journey, crossing Libya and Algeria, pausing in Tunis, to arrive in Morocco in 750/1349. That same year, he left for a trip to al-Andalus. Six years later, after a last, seven-month journey in Western Sudan and on the orders of the Marinid sultan Abū Ḥānīn, he dictated his travelogue and the court scribe Ibn Ḥuẓayy\(^4\) edited it. The result of their collaboration was a Riḥla, a “Travel (chronicle)” that came to light in Safar 757 [February 1356]. As we will see, many studies have demonstrated that the work contains information, descriptions, anecdotes and narrative methods borrowed from other sources, which are mostly not cited by Ibn Battūta and/or Ibn Jubayr, neither does their Riḥla seem to have enjoyed much fortune in the Arab-Islamic area in pre-modern times. But this has not prevented it from becoming in contemporary times, and all over the world, one of the most famous and interesting works of (not only Arabic) medieval travel literature. Although we

\(^1\) “In short, compared to this one, all the previous plagues are like a drop in the sea or a point in a circle”, Ibn Abī Ḥāgāla, Daq̤f al-niqma, f. 75b (see Ibn Ḥaẓariq, Baḏī al-ma’dīn, 237, who quotes him).

\(^2\) For their generous and authoritative comments I thank Michelguglielmo Torri and Luca Badini Con.

\(^3\) His full name is Abū Ṭābīl Muḥammad ibn Abī ‘Abd Allāh ibn Muhammad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Lawātī al-Tanḡī [belonging to the Berber group of Lawātī and originally from Tangier]. As for the appellation Ibn Battūta, it is a family name of uncertain origin: perhaps it means “son of the duckling”, from a diminutive of the Arabic ḏaṭṭa [duck], used in the Maghreb as a nickname for the female name Fāṭima (F. Gabrieli 1961: IX; A.-Tazīl 1997, vol. I: 80). For other possible meanings see Mackintosh-Smith 2001: 21-22.

\(^4\) Abū Ṭābīl Muḥammad ibn Muhammad ibn Aḥmad al-Guṭayy al-Kalbī (known as al-Guṭayy), was a versatile and appreciated scholar from an illustrious family of Granada. Born in 715/1315, he was a secretary and poet at the court of the Nasride sovereign Abū al-Haḡāḡ Yūsuf in Granada. In 753/1353, he moved to Fez and entered the service of the Marinid sultan Abū Ḥānīn with the same responsibilities. For more information about him, see Collet 2017.
do not know how the traveler and the scribe collaborated and which of them should be considered the “true author,” their work is known, both in Arabic and in other languages, by the name of its protagonist: Riḥlat Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, the Travels of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa.⁵

Ibn Guzayy probably died in 758/1357, one year after editing the text. As for IB, he died in approximately 770/1368-1369, by then an old man, while holding the office of qādī in a town in Morocco that no longer exists.⁶

As for the text of the Riḥla, until modern times it does not seem to have enjoyed great success in the Arab area, where it circulated mainly in the form of manuscript compendia. In Europe, interest was aroused at the beginning of the 19th century, when the German Johann Kosegarten edited some extracts from one of these manuscripts in Arabic with a translation into Latin. A few years later the Englishman Samuel Lee translated into English another abridged manuscript by the Aleppian copyist Faḍl Allāh ibn Muḥammad al-Baylūnī (d. 1632), and some extracts from a manuscript found in Fez were translated into Portuguese by Antonio Moura.⁷ Later on, and after some other partial translations, between 1853 and 1858, Charles Defremery and Beniamino R. Sanguinetti used five Algerian manuscripts in the Bibliothèque Nationale of Paris⁸ to publish the currently most complete Arabic text of the Riḥla and translated it into French. This Arabic text is still considered to be the “standard” version—or Editio Princeps—and has been published in a large number of editions in both Arab and non-Arab countries. All the complete translations of IB’s Riḥla into foreign languages are also based on this edition, including the English version by Hamilton Gibb and Charles Beckingham (1958-1994), considered the most authoritative and undoubtedly the most widely circulated one in the world.⁹

From Baghdad to Tangier, in all the lands mentioned above through which he passed on his return, and then in al-Andalus, the Riḥla says that IB crossed the path of the most deadly plague pandemic known to mankind, the one commonly referred to as “the Black Death,” which ravaged (not only) the Mediterranean world between 747-757 (1346-1353).⁹

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⁵ In this article I will use “Ibn Baṭṭūṭa” [henceforth IB] to indicate both the traveller protagonist of the work and its author(s). Furthermore, where not otherwise specified, when speaking of Riḥla, I will refer to IB’s work.

⁶ This is probably the city of Anfa (which was destroyed in the 15th century by the Portuguese, and upon whose ruins Casablanca was founded), as assumed by al-Tāzī on the basis of a letter from Ibn al-Ḥāṭib to IB (al-Tāzī 1997, vol. I: 81).


⁸ One of these manuscripts, catalogued under number 907, appears to bear the signature of Ibn Ġuzayy (see Defremery and Sanguinetti’s “Préface” in Monteil 1979, vol. I: XXI).

⁹ In 2000, the work of Gibb, who edited vols. I-III (1958-1971) and Beckingham, who edited with him vol. IV (1994), was enriched by a fifth volume devoted to the Indices and edited by Bvár. Unless otherwise indicated, this paper refers to the Arabic text edited by Defremery and Sanguinetti (1853-1858) in the edition by ’Abd al-Hādī al-Tāzī 1997—henceforth AL-TĀZĪ—and to its English translation by Gibb and Beckingham—henceforth Gibb (vol. I-III) and Gibb and Beckingham (vol. IV). Both these editions respect the so called Editio Princeps (EP) division into four volumes and show its corresponding page number in the margin, which in the notes of this article is quoted in square brackets.
The epidemic is mentioned 12 times in seven passages, with reference to nine different places: Gaza (twice), Homs, Damascus, Jerusalem (twice), Alexandria, Cairo, the Pilgrimage route from Cairo to Mecca, Tangier and Gibraltar. The account of this journey is dotted with reports concerning mainly the number of victims, although it does not overlook mentioning the presence or end of the scourge, a religious ceremony, some of IB’s personal experiences and reminiscences of some distinguished figures and acquaintances who died of the disease, including his mother.

In the Riḥla, the narrative of such a monumental event is fragmented within the main narrative of IB’s journey. In this paper I therefore propose to reconstruct it by firstly putting the event into the context of the three plague pandemics documented in the history of the Mediterranean and the Middle East. The seven passages on the scourge in the Riḥla will therefore be identified and extrapolated from the text in order to reconstruct and analyse IB’s narration of the Black Death. The comparison of the information provided in the Riḥla with that of the most important Arabic sources will then allow studying and examining it for its relevance and reliability and to investigate whether the narrative style of the Riḥla, which is a literary work, differs from that of the other sources, which are mostly chronicles. This leads to two questions, for which an answer will be sought in the conclusive paragraphs. Given the number of studies that have shown that IB and/or Ibn Ǧuzayy borrowed several parts of the Riḥla from other sources, the first question is whether in this case as well he/they could have drawn information from other works without IB having been in the places he claims. Moreover, if IB actually made this journey, he is, to my knowledge, the only person who left an account of a journey where he claims to have witnessed the scourge, on the three continents then known, during the deadly period of the Black Death, travelling from one to another of the most populated (and therefore most infected) cities in the Middle East, North Africa and al-Andalus. How he managed to escape unscathed is a question to which some possible answers will be proposed.

10 This article only considers the Black Death in the Arab-Islamic area where quotes from Ibn Baṭṭūṭa’s Riḥla are placed. As for the origin and geography of the pandemic in the world, it should be noted that after having been studied for centuries by historian, it is now the subject of in-depth microbiology and genetics studies that allow us to establish a new - and indisputable - map of Black Death history. Whereas earlier scholars limited their research to the Mediterranean basin and Western Europe (where written sources are found), the new geography of the pandemic extends from the Tibetan plateau and western China to western Eurasia—and from there to the Indian Ocean basin and most of the regions connected to it, including West and sub-Saharan Africa (GREEN 2015b, esp. 44-48; HYMES 2015; VARLIK 2015b: 160-184; GREEN 2020).


12 Not to mention another very high mortality epidemic that IB claims to have witnessed in Madurai in India a few years earlier (see above).
The three plague pandemics in the Mediterranean and the Middle East

The “plague” is already mentioned in Ancient Mediterranean sources such as the Bible, Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex and Thucydides’ Peloponnesian War, but if the terms used in these texts (Hebrew דבורה, Greek λοιμός) are used later to indicate this specific disease, it seems that in the above-mentioned sources they indicated other epidemic diseases less deadly than the plague, such as measles, typhoid fever, cholera and smallpox. In the Mediterranean area, the plague is attested in Egypt in 541 BCE in the port of Pelusium, an ancient city in the eastern Nile Delta, and we now have molecular evidence that the disease was caused by a strain of the same Yersinia pestis bacillus that, several centuries later, would have caused the Black Death. From Pelusium, the epidemic quickly spread westwards into the Maghreb and northwards into Spain, Gaul and the British Isles. At the same time it spread eastwards and affected the Byzantine Empire, raging in Palestine, Syria and the Anatolian peninsula and reaching as far as Mesopotamia, then ruled by

13 The plague is one of the punishments that God threatens to inflict on those who do not keep His law (Lev 26: 25 and Deut 28: 21) and is one of the punishments that He proposed to King David to atone for the sin he had committed in taking the census of the people (for He alone keeps the records of the living and the dead). Choosing between three years of famine, three months of fleeing before the enemy, and three days of plague, David chose the latter. But after killing 70,000 people, the angel of the plague then stretched his hand out over Jerusalem, and “the Lord repented him of the evil and said to the angel: It is enough, stay now thine hand” (2 Sam 24: 10-16; 1 Cr. 21: 7-15).

14 As is well known, Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex (dated 430/420 BCE) takes place in Thebes during a disastrous epidemic for which the author may have been inspired by the one that was raging in Athens at the time (see note below).

15 This was the so-called “Plague of Athens” (probably an epidemic of typhoid fever or smallpox, see ABERTH 2010: 79), which occurred on several occasions between 430 and 426 BCE. Thucydides (c. 460-400 BCE), who was infected but survived, states that between one- and two-thirds of the population died (THUCYDIDES, Peloponnesian War, Book II, 136 [par. 48] and 139 [par. 53]).

16 MCNEILL 1976: 81 states that “epidemic diseases of the sort that attracted the attention of biblical writers were neither severe nor frequent enough to threaten the fabric of civilized society with disruption”. On epidemics included in ancient written evidence from the Mediterranean area, the Middle East and China see MCNEILL 1976: 78-140, chapter 3, “Confluence of the Civilized Disease Pools of Eurasia: 500 B.C. to A.D. 1200”; DOLS 1974c: 373, note 18) and the more recent study by ABERTH 2011, esp. 22-23. But the subject needs further studies (GREEN 2015b: 43): inter alia it should be noted that there are traces of diseases with bubonic plague symptoms in Africa long before the plague epidemic that broke out in Pelusium—as in the fragments of the texts by the Greek physician Rufus of Ephesus (born c. 70 CE), quoted by DOLS 1974c: 373, note 18 and GREEN 2015b: 41.

17 The presence of the plague bacillus in skeletal remains from the time of the Justinianic Plague has been documented by geneticists (see GREEN 2015b, esp. 35-45). As for its presence in Africa, historians have long wondered whether the bacillus was “indigenous” or had arrived from Asia. Until recent times it has been claimed that the Indian Ocean “it is too vast to allow easy transmission of plague until the tramp steamer” because “on long sea voyages, infected rats and people die; by the time that the ship reaches port, everyone is dead, or recovered and thus reasonably immune” (BUELL 2012: 129; see also MCNEILL 1976: 183-184 and DOLS 1977: 43-44), but current genetics studies show that it may almost certainly have arrived in the East African region from the Indian Ocean via the Red Sea and found there local rodents and other animals that hosted arthropod vectors infected by the plague bacillus, allowing for the establishment of new foci (GREEN 2015b, esp. 45-54; see also MCCORMICK 2007: 303-305).
Sasanians. The first phase lasted until 543, but a series of successive waves persisting until the middle of the eighth century have been verified.18 Because of its particularly virulent onslaught on Constantinople (where sources speak of 40% of the population being killed), this first plague pandemic is called “Justinian’s/Justinianic,” named after the Byzantine Emperor who reigned there from 527 to 565. In Constantinople, the historian Procopius of Caesarea (c. 490-570), who witnessed the scourge, included in his History of Wars what transpired to be the first description of a plague epidemic.19

The three-year period of the epidemic occurred before the Islamic era, but the subsequent waves affected the Islamic Middle East from the earliest years of its formation and are recorded together with a series of customs and theories ascribed in part to the Prophet himself and destined to become the starting point for subsequent Islamic literature on the subject. Between 6/627-628 and 131/750, at least five waves deriving from Justinian’s plague are attested to in the Middle East, leading scholars to speak of an endemic which probably formed in the most populated areas (Syria, Palestine and Iraq) that, at relatively short intervals, when the population and hygienic conditions reached critical levels, gave rise to generalised epidemic outbreaks.21

The second plague pandemic is now known as the “Black Death” and, according to the current hypothesis originated in the Tibetan-Qinghai Plateau, in present-day China.22 In the Mediterranean area it was first attested in Caffa in 747/1346 and broke out in 747/1347, after a long period in which there had been no very deadly outbreaks. This means that throughout the area, in both Christian and Muslim countries, not only was there no living memory of such a scourge among the people, but there was also no scientific record. Doctors relied on purely theoretical knowledge, based mostly on theories developed since Hippocrates (ca. 460-377 BCE) and Galen (ca. 129-201 CE), related to unhealthy air and environments, that were known as “miasmas.”23 On an empirical level, popular medicine

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18 A map of the waves of plague that swept the Mediterranean area between the 6th and 8th centuries has been proposed by BIRABEN and LE GOFF 1969: 1492-1493.
20 Before the advent of Islam, no major epidemics were recorded in the Arabian Peninsula: Congordeau and Melhaoui attribute the cause to the hot, dry climate (CONGOURDEAU and MELHAOUI 2001: 99), but the low population density, a limited international traffic and predominantly nomadic lifestyle, which did not favour the spread of contagion, should also be taken into account.
22 For the origin of the second plague pandemic, see below, note 190. The expression “Black Death”, which was not in use in either European or Middle Eastern sources at the time of the pandemic, is now being criticised by some for its anachronism (see e.g. LINDEMANN 2006: 600), but it is used here to illustrate unambiguously the medieval plague epidemic that devastated the Mediterranean world in 1347-1353. For the origin of this expression, see D’IRSAY 1926, esp. 331-332; VARLIK 2021.
23 The theory mainly accepted by doctors and scholars of the time ascribed the main responsibility for the spread of the scourge to the air and its “corruption” [miasma, from the Greek μίασμα], but during the Black Death, in both the Islamic and Christian areas, the debate re-emerged between this theory and the
had no remedies or lifestyle practices to propose to counter the spread of the disease. In the Arab-Islamic area, the Black Death is the first occasion in which contemporary sources describe a plague epidemic. The Andalusian scholars deal with it mainly from a medical-scientific point of view, while in the Middle East it is the accounts of chroniclers, who had gathered information about plague epidemics in the early days of Islam, and legal treaties, mostly based on the hadīth, that establish the attitudes and rules that the faithful are invited to follow when faced with the epidemic. The mortality caused by the Black Death is "the highest of any large-scale catastrophe known to mankind." It is roughly estimated that 40–60% of the population in the affected areas died, especially in densely populated centres, depending on the environment and on the form of plague: bubonic or septicemic (caused by insects bite), pneumatic (caused by inhalation) or gastrointestinal (caused by ingestion). According to the chronicles, in the

theory of contagion, already present in the Mediterranean since the time of the previous great epidemics. For bibliographical references on this subject see notes 171 and 174.

24 As for the Quranic text, it does not explicitly mention the plague either with the specific term of the disease [nāʿūn] or with the generic term of "epidemic" [wahāb], for which see below. In the treatises on the plague of the 'ulamā' there are only a few quotations of some verses that affirm the qadar, the "decreet" of God on death and life, according to which men can do nothing to delay the former or lengthen the latter. See SUBET 1971: 144-147; CONGOURDEAU and MELHAOUI 2001: 102-103. It is worth noting, however, that some scholars speak of a "possible first mention of the plague" in the cryptic verses of the Sura of the Elephant (Qur. 105, 1-5), "In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful. Seest thou not how thy Lord dealt with the Companions of the Elephant? Did He not make their treacherous plan go astray? And He sent against them Flights of Birds, Striking them with stones baked clay. Then did He make them like an empty field of stalks and straw, (of which the corn) has lengthen the latter. See DOLS 1979: 163-165 and 320-335 ("The Arabic Manuscript Sources for the History of Plague") and MELHAOUI 2005: 20-46 (in particular 24-33 for Middle Eastern sources, 33-41 for Andalusian ones and 41-46 for those of the Maghreb). In addition to interpretations of the 'ulamā' concerning "high" thinking, magical and superstitious practices of various kinds were also widespread during the Black Death: but the anthropological aspect remains largely uninvestigated (see however the study on popular culture in medieval Cairo by SHOSSHAN 2002 and that on popular religious rites during the plague by MELHAOUI 2005: 151-162). For the medieval treatises on magic, with apotropaic formulas, proprietaire use of words and letters, etc., see DOLS 1974b: 281-282; DOLS 1977: 121-142 ("Magical Reliefs and Practices"); CONGOURDEAU and MELHAOUI 2001: 114-117.

25 On Arabic sources dealing with the Black Death, see DOLS 1979: 163-165 and 320-335 ("The Arabic Manuscript Sources for the History of Plague") and MELHAOUI 2005: 20-46 (in particular 24-33 for Middle Eastern sources, 33-41 for Andalusian ones and 41-46 for those of the Maghreb). In addition to interpretations of the 'ulamā' concerning "high" thinking, magical and superstitious practices of various kinds were also widespread during the Black Death: but the anthropological aspect remains largely uninvestigated (see however the study on popular culture in medieval Cairo by SHOSSHAN 2002 and that on popular religious rites during the plague by MELHAOUI 2005: 151-162). For the medieval treatises on magic, with apotropaic formulas, proprietaire use of words and letters, etc., see DOLS 1974b: 281-282; DOLS 1977: 121-142 ("Magical Reliefs and Practices"); CONGOURDEAU and MELHAOUI 2001: 114-117.

26 GREEN 2015a: 9, who specifies "save for the impact of smallpox and measles on indigenous peoples in first-contact events of the early modern period".


28 On the different modes of infection—and manifestation—of the plague, see ZIEGLER 2015, who has recently added the gastrointestinal plague to the three first forms (for which see, among others, BORSCH 2005: 3-4). It should be noted that IB’s Ribāla does not describe any symptoms of the disease, in any of its forms.
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Arab area the plague first arrived in Egypt, probably in the port of Alexandria, in the early autumn of 748/1347\(^{29}\) and from there it spread to North Africa, Upper Egypt and the Middle East, where it broke out at the end of 748 [April 1348], raging until the first month (Muḥarram) of 750 [March/April 1349].\(^{30}\) Then it reappears in a series of waves that, albeit in a less virulent form, will continue until the middle of the 19th century.\(^{31}\)

Following this, the world would experience a third, horrendous plague pandemic, which probably began in the Chinese province of Yunnan in 1855, struck Hong Kong and Canton in 1894, India (Bombay, now Mumbai) in 1897 and in the first decades of the new century reached Africa, Australia, Europe, Japan, the Middle East, the Philippines and both Americas. Subsequent waves continued until the 1960s, but thanks to improved sanitary measures and most notably, in 1950, the discovery of antibiotics, they were less deadly than previous epidemics.\(^{32}\) During this third pandemic, scientists were able to isolate the bacillus responsible for the disease, which was named \textit{Yersinia pestis} after the doctor Alexandre Yersin who identified it,\(^{33}\) and a few years later the scientist Paul-Louis Simond identified the role of a particular species of flea, \textit{Xenopsylla cheopis}, in its transmission.\(^{34}\) But it would take more than a century, until 2011, for the genome of the bacillus to be reconstructed.\(^{35}\) This made it possible not only to identify the presence of the plague bacillus, but

\(^{29}\) See note 98.


\(^{31}\) In Egypt, the last major wave occurred in Alexandria in 1835. For plague waves in the Middle East following the Black Death period see, among others, DOLS 1977: 193-235 and 305-314 and DOLS 1981; SHOSHAN 1981; SCOTT and DUNCAN 2004; VARLIK 2015: 198-200.

\(^{32}\) In India, where it was particularly lethal, an estimated 12 million people died in just over 20 years. For this epidemic see, among others, PERRY and FETHERSTON 1997: 36-37; CARMICHAEL 2009: 69-70; ABERTH 2011: 61-72.

\(^{33}\) The plague bacterium, which is more properly termed a “coco-bacillus” because of its very short stick shape, was isolated in Hong Kong in 1894 by two scientists who independently announced it within a few days of each other: the French-Swiss physician Alexandre Yersin and the Japanese bacteriologist Kitasato Shibasaburo. In 1954 the bacillus, initially called \textit{Pestecullii pestis}, was named \textit{Yersinia pestis} in honour of Yersin, who first established its taxonomic definition (see PERRY and FETHERSTON 1997).

\(^{34}\) Clinically, plague is not a human disease but a zoonosis, i.e., a disease transmitted to humans primarily by contact with an animal, and for a long time this animal was thought to be the rat, but in 1898, the French physician and biologist Paul-Louis Simond demonstrated that the vector from rats to humans is the flea \textit{Xenopsylla cheopis}, which cohabits with infected rats and can infect both human fleas and humans directly: see, among others, HINNEBUSCH et al. 2017 (on flea infection by the bacterium) and HARDY 2019 (on rats carrying fleas). Since then, scientists have identified a large number of animal and ectoparasite species involved in the chain of plague transmission in its various forms. It is necessary to take into account not only the animal species—first of all small rodent mammals (gerbils, rats and marmots)—that created microenvironments suitable for the survival of \textit{Yersinia pestis}, but also any other species involved in the long-distance spread of the disease to humans in epidemic outbreaks because of their ectoparasites (fleas, ticks and lice) or because they were eaten (for an overview of these studies, see GREEN 2015b: 31-34). Some studies according to which the vectors of plague during the Black Death may also have been human ectoparasites, are worth noting: this would increase the responsibility of people’s movements in the spread of the disease (see DEAN et al. 2018; see also ZIEGLER 2015: 266 and 270).

\(^{35}\) BOS et al. 2011. The identification of the genome made it possible to identify with certainty the presence of the bacillus during the Black Death and to put a definitive end to a controversy that began at the end of the last century and was conducted mainly in the first decade of the 2000s, when several
also to trace the history of its evolution.36

The history of the three plague pandemics ends there, but enzootic foci of \textit{Yersinia pestis} are still present on all the continents of the planet except Australia and Antarctica—not to mention the presence of \textit{Yersinia pestis} in arsenals of biological weapons.37 The last epidemic caused by the bacillus in Europe broke out in Marseille in 1720 and killed almost half the population. Worldwide, the last one hit Madagascar in August 2017, causing 2,417 infections and 209 deaths. As for isolated cases and small outbreaks, World Health Organisation reports 1,000 to 3,000 cases worldwide every year.

To date, scientists have not succeeded in creating a truly effective vaccine against the plague but, until one is found, the disease can be treated with massive doses of antibiotics. However, in the late 21st century some antibiotic-resistant strains of \textit{Yersinia pestis} were found in Madagascar, and the plague has been listed as one of the re-emerging infectious diseases globally, with a potential use as biological weapon.38

**IB’s \textit{Riḥla} in studies on the Black Death in the Arab area**

For several decades now, having long been devoted almost exclusively to Christian Europe, documentary studies on the Black Death have focused on other Mediterranean areas affected by the epidemic, in particular the Arab-Islamic one (Middle East, Egypt, al-
Andalus and, to a lesser extent, the Maghreb). For these countries, historians note the lack of public municipal or ecclesiastical documentation, similar to that which exists for Europe, and also of significant studies of material sources: archaeology, epigraphy and paleopathology. However, we have seen that there are quite a number of Arabic texts (sometimes translated), both scientific and historical, from the time of the epidemic and often quoted in later works of the late 14th-15th centuries. Although the Ribla of IB is a literary work, it has often been cited, alone or together with these sources, by historians of the plague as direct—and therefore reliable—evidence of events. For example Dols, to whom we owe the first in-depth study of the Black Death in the Middle East, defines IB as a “historian”; he establishes the arrival of the plague in present-day Morocco based solely on IB’s Ribla, cites it as the only source for the number of victims in Homs and for the presence of the plague in Jerusalem, and considers IB together with Ibn Abī Ḥāgala as reliable sources for the number of victims in Damascus “where they were resident.” Borsch and Sabraa rely heavily on information in the Ribla to calculate the number of victims not only in the Syrian capital, but also in Alexandria and Gaza. Grmek compares Ibn Battūta to Thucydides and Boccaccio and Melhauouï does not hesitate to point out that he is a “privileged witness to the plague pandemic in the Middle East.” Finally, one of the most famous—and probably the most quoted—stories of the Ribla, which takes place during the Black Death and tells of a multi-religious prayer gathering held in Damascus in July 1348 to implore deliverance from the plague, should be noted. Now, the same event is also reported in contemporary and later Arabic chronicles, but most modern scholars who include it in their texts cite IB’s Ribla as a unique source.

In very recent times, Singer has made a contribution to Black Death studies in the Maghreb and suggested directions for further study, noting that “The Black Death in the Maghreb is a glaring hole in plague historiography” (Singer 2020: 4). The fact remains that “the historical scholarship on the Black Death is largely Eurocentric” (Varlik 2015a: 196-201) and “it is time to stop taking the urban European experience of the Black Death as the model to which all manifestations of plague must conform” (Green 2020: 1627).

The widespread circulation of IB’s Ribla, that has so far been translated into about 15 languages, should be noted, making it an accessible source for all scholars, including non-Arabs and non-Arabists, dealing with the Black Death.

Ibid.: 61.
Ibid.: 218.
Borsch and Sabraa 2017: 68 and passim.
“The best descriptions of ancient epidemics were not written by medical professionals, but by historians and writers. We need only recall the description of the plague in Athens by Thucydides and the accounts of the Black Death by Boccaccio and Ibn Battuta”, Grmek 1969: 1474.

Melhauouï 2005: 142 and 148-149.
See below.
However, it should be noted that scholars have found—and continue to find—in the Riḥla many problems of chronology and a series of borrowings and arrangements from other, thus questioning several parts of the journeys that IB claims to have made.\textsuperscript{51} As for this part of the Riḥla where the plague narrative is found, so far no one has questioned it. Furthermore, IB’s return home (maybe not from as far away as he claims, but presumably from the Middle East through North Africa) at that time, after an absence of 20 years, is attested by a very authoritative source such as the Muqaddima by the polymath Ibn Ḥaldūn (732/1332-808/1406).\textsuperscript{52} Last but not least, it should be noted that both IB and Ibn Ǧuzayy lived during the pandemic, so what is reported in this part of the Riḥla is confirmed by the most important Middle Eastern Arabic sources available. This will also allow investigating whether IB actually speaks of his eyewitness experience of the scourge or whether again he and/or the editor of the text, Ibn Ǧuzayy, might have taken information from other written sources—and if so, from which ones.

**Epidemics and the Plague in Ibn Baṭṭūta’s Travels**

To know how many times the plague is mentioned in IB’s Riḥla, we must first find which words are used to designate it. In the oldest Arabic sources, the specific term for plague wasṭāʿūn,\textsuperscript{53} also present in Persian but of Arabic origin,\textsuperscript{54} which, from the verb fa’aṭana [= to strike a blow against someone or something], designates both the various forms of this disease and the swellings of the lymphatic glands characteristic of the form of plague which for this reason is called “bubonic.”\textsuperscript{55} For the same disease, however, the term wabāʾ was also used, which, derived from the verb wabiʿa [= to be contaminated, used for regions

\textsuperscript{51} See above, esp. notes 70 and 194.

\textsuperscript{52} Ibn Ḥaldūn was in Fez from 1354-1355 to 1362-1363 (GOUMEZIANE: 15; LACOSTE: 59 and 76). We do not know if he met IB, but he relates: “At the time of the Marinide Sultan Abū ʿInān, a sheykh from Tangier called Ibn Baṭṭūta returned to Morocco. Twenty years earlier, he had left for the Orient and travelled in Iraq, Yemen and India” (IBN ḤALDŪN, Muqaddima, vol. I: 328).

\textsuperscript{53} The scheme faʿal adopted by the name indicates its “intensive form” [bināʾ al-mudhlaqa], for which see WRIGHT 1986, I, 137b. The Arabic term also entered the Spanish language for a time in the medieval medical lexicon, where the term Inān for “plaga” [plague] is attested (MARAVILLAS 2014: 14, note 14).

\textsuperscript{54} GRÜNBAUM and COLETTI 2006: 524a.

\textsuperscript{55} CONRAD 1982: 301. The author also offers an analysis of the term in its origins, compared to the Syriac šarʿīṭā and the Greek Ἀγρίβ, which, like the Arabic ṭāʿūn, designated both the disease and the boils it causes (ibid.: 305-307).
affected by an epidemic), properly indicates any epidemic disease.\footnote{GRÜNBBAUM and COLETTI 2006: 916. The term \textit{wabāʾ} also designates the phenomenon of “contagion” and in some periods had been used for two different specific diseases: plague and cholera (B. SHOUSHAN and D. PANZAC, in \textit{EP}, s.v.). With reference to what has been called a “stainless medicine of ancient Hippocratic and Galenic origin” (SPEZIALE 2016: 16, note 5), the term \textit{wabāʾ} designates first of all a “corruption of the air, earth or water”, while \textit{ṭāʿun} means a “deadly disease which, as a consequence of \textit{wabāʾ}, spreads among men” (CONRAD 1982: 274; see also LANE 1984, vol. 5, 1855-1856 s.v. \textit{ṭāʿun} and vol. 8, 2914-2915 s.v. \textit{wabāʾ}). For “epidemic” in a generic sense, the term \textit{abdīmiyā} is also found in some medieval Arabic texts, which is an obvious borrowing from Greek (see a comparative analysis of \textit{wabāʾ} and \textit{πιδεμία} in MARAVILLAS 2014: 10-11). Finally, Arab chroniclers use several terms for plague such as \textit{ṭāʿin} (from the same root as \textit{ṭāʿun}), \textit{mawtān} [death, epidemic], \textit{marad} [disease], \textit{bālāʾ} [misfortune, tribulation], for which we refer to NEUSTADT 1946: 67, note 2 and DOLS 1974a: 447, note 17.} Be that as it may, the two terms were later certainly applied incorrectly, since in the first half of the 13th century, in a meticulous historical and clinical description of the plague that he included in his commentary on Muslim’s \textit{Ṣaḥīh}, the Syrian al-Nawawī felt compelled to specify that \textit{kullu ṭāʿūn wabāʾ} wa-laysa ṭāʿūn wabāʾ \textit{ṭāʿūn} \textit{= every ṭāʿūn is a wabāʾ}, but every \textit{wabāʾ} is not a \textit{ṭāʿūn}.\footnote{Al-NAWAWĪ, \textit{Bāḥ al-ṭāʿūn}, 204. The passage in which al-Nawawī describes in detail what a \textit{ṭāʿūn} and a \textit{wabāʾ} are, is translated into English in CONRAD 1982: 296-297.} This, however, does not prevent the two terms from being at least partially misunderstood as synonyms a few decades later in the impressive lexicographic work in 20 books, \textit{Lisān al-ʿArab} [The Language of the Arabs], completed by the Maghrebi Muhammad ibn Manzūr in 1290. Here, \textit{ṭāʿūn} is first defined as \textit{marad maʿrāf}, “known/recognisable disease” and then as \textit{marad ʾamm, wabāʾ} \textit{= generalised/spread disease} while under \textit{wabāʾ} we first find \textit{ṭāʿūn} as a synonym and then its definition as \textit{kull marad ʾamm} \textit{= any generalised/spread disease}.\footnote{IBN MANZŪR, \textit{Lisān al-ʿArab}, s.v. \textit{ṭāʿūn} (vol. 1, 184) and \textit{wabāʾ} (vol. 13, 267).} The misuse of the two terms continued until the first half of the 15th century; in his \textit{Baḍl al-māʿūn}, the Egyptian Ibn Ḥaḡar (1372-1448) includes a paragraph entitled \textit{Ḍikr al-bayān al-dālāl al-ṭāʿūn al-ṣaḥīḥ} \textit{ḥayr maradīf li-l-wabāʾ} [Probative explanation of the fact that \textit{ṭāʿūn} is not synonymous with \textit{wabāʾ}], in which he quotes al-Nawawī and suggests an explanation of the term \textit{ṭāʿūn} as a “blow” inflicted by \textit{ġinn}.ootnote{IBN ḤAḠAR, \textit{Baḍl al-māʿūn}, 49-52. Already in pre-Islamic times, it was believed that epidemics were spread by \textit{ġinn} with a large number of arrows that they shot at men (SUBLET 1971: 145) and several medieval texts ascribe the responsibility for the scourge to \textit{ġinn}; see DOLS 1974b: 282 and note; DOLS 1977: 116, note 34 and \textit{passim}; BORSCH 2005: 4-5; BARONE 2020: 9-11; STEARNS 2020a and STEARNS 2020b.} However, the fact remains that in Arabic sources in general, from the Middle Ages up to modern times, the two terms can indicate both a serious epidemic and the plague itself (or sometimes cholera), to the extent that information can often be derived only from the possible (but very rare) presence of a description of the symptoms.\footnote{“Despite the Arab treatises’ assertion that “every ṭāʿūn is a wabāʾ but not every wabāʾ is a ṭāʿūn”, the two terms are clearly interchangeable in Mamluk period chronicles” (SHOUSHAN 1981: 389). For a more in-depth analysis of Arabic plague terminology, see CONRAD 1982. See also DOLS 1977: 315-319 (Appendix 2, “The Arabic Terminology for Plague”); AYLON 1946: 67; SUBLET 1971.}
In IB’s *Rihla*, the term ṭūʿīn appears on only one occasion in the account of the already mentioned multi-religious prayer gathering in Damascus during the Black Death, where the plague is mentioned both in the Syrian capital and Cairo. The term *wabāʾ* occurs 14 times: 11 of them in the Arabic area, where it is used in seven passages and refers to nine different places: it is always preceded by the definite article (al-*wabāʾ* [the plague/epidemic]) and undoubtedly refers to the plague, that thus proves to be the most cited disease in the work. The remaining three (used in two different places) are during IB’s stay in India and it is not clear to which disease they refer. Some modern scholars of India have suggested it might have been the plague and thus provide valid evidence that the Black Death was present in the sub-continent before reaching the Mediterranean, but most probably IB did not speak of this specific disease.

In this paper all the references to the plague pandemic, i.e. the epidemics quoted in the Arab area, are introduced in the context of the work and commented on, then reported in the original Arabic and the English translation and compared with sources, according to the order in which they appear in the *Rihla* (only the former does not respect the chronological order that characterises the whole work). In the footnote, after each quotation, there is the translation of the Arabic term used by IB, as found in the complete versions of Defremery and Sanguinetti’s *Rihla* edition in European languages.

**First passage: The plague in Damascus (Rabiʿ II 749 / July 1348)**

The first mention of the plague is the only one in the text where the term ṭūʿīn is used. The passage is placed at the beginning of the work, in 726/1326, when IB recounts having

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61 In the Arabic area the term *wabāʾ* also appears on a twelfth occasion where it is, however, used in a very general way, in the description of the famous Cairo nilometre: “The first beginning of the Nile flood is in Ḥazīrān, that is June; and when its rise amounts to sixteen cubits, the land-tax due to the Sultan is payable in full. If it rises another cubit, there is plenty in that year, and complete well-being. But if it reaches eighteen cubits it does damage to the cultivated lands and causes an outbreak of plague [wabāʾ]” (*AL-TĀZĪ* I: 208; *GIBB* I: 49 [EP 79]). In this case, the term *wabāʾ* seems to indicate an epidemic in a generic way, rather than the plague disease as translated by Gibb.

62 On the epidemics mentioned by IB in India and their interpretation by modern scholars of the sub-continent, see ANANDAVALLI 2007: 21-23 and TRESSEO 2022. The presence of the *Yersinia pestis* in medieval India was, and still is, the subject of debate. Several studies affirm that no plague epidemic is attested to in India until the 17th century (see among others McNEILL 1976: 183-184; BENEĐICTOW 2004: 40-44; ANANDAVALLI 2007; SUSSMAN 2011: 335-336 and 339-341), but recent studies consider plausible the transmission of the bacillus from the Tibetan highlands to the Indian Ocean through India, whether via the Indus Valley or the Ganges (GREEN 2015b, esp. 49-51).

63 For French: DEFREMERY and SANGUINETTI (1853-1858) in the edition by YERASIMOS 1997 (henceforth YERASIMOS) and CHARLES-DOMINIQUE 1995. For Spanish: FANJUL and ARBós 1993 (henceforth FANJUL). For Italian: TRESSEO 2006. In order not to burden the critical apparatus, these texts will henceforth be cited without the year of publication. It should be noted that among the main European languages, a complete German translation of Defremery and Sanguinetti’s *Rihla* edition is missing, but a partial one (IB’s travels through India and China) has been provided by VON MŽIK 1911 and al-Baylūlī’s compendium of the *Rihla* has been translated into German by ELGER 2010a.
visited Damascus\(^6^4\) a year after leaving Tangier, but the event took place some 20 years later, in \textit{Rabi' II} 749 / July 1348, at the time of IB’s second visit to the Syrian capital. The symptoms of the disease are not described, but both the use of the specific term \textit{ṭāʿūn} and the certainty that Syria was struck by the Black Death on that date leave no doubt that it is the great medieval plague pandemic, and the word \textit{ṭāʿūn} is translated as “plague” in all the versions of the \textit{Rihla} considered in this study.

At that time, Damascus was enduring the ordeal of the plague that had been ravaging the Middle East for months, and one particular passage in the text—one of the most moving in the work—tells of a prayer gathering attended by the faithful of the three Abrahamic religions. Muslims, Jews and Christians gathered in the al-Aqḍām mosque that can still be visited today just outside the walls of Damascus, and together they all raised their prayers to the Almighty to free them from the scourge. With slight discrepancies, the news of the event is also reported by two chroniclers who lived at the time of the events, the Syrian Ibn Kathīr (700/1301-774/1373) and the Maghrebi (resident in Damascus) Ibn Abī Ḥaḡala (725/1325-776/1375), and is quoted in the later works of the Syrian Ibn Qādī Şuhba (779/1377-851/1448), based on the testimony of Ibn Kathīr, and the Egyptian Ibn Ḥaḡār (773/1372-852/1449), who quotes the text of Ibn Abī Ḥaḡala.\(^6^5\) The number of victims in Damascus and Cairo reported in the \textit{Rihla}, as we will see, also agrees with the figures from other sources.\(^6^6\)

\(^{64}\) According to his own account, IB arrived in Damascus on 9 \textit{Ramāḍān} 726 A. H. [9 August 1326] and from there left for Mecca with the caravan “when the new moon of \textit{Ṣawwâl} appeared” (1 September 1326) (\textit{AL-TĀZĪ} I: 297 and 343; \textit{GIBR} I: 117-118 and 158 [EP 187 and 254]). As for the description of Damascus, substantial borrowings have been found first of all from Ibn Jubayr (which is only partially quoted as a source in the \textit{Rihla}, see \textit{AL-TĀZĪ} I: 297; \textit{GIBR} I: 118-119 [EP 188-189]), and also from al-\textit{Umarī} and al-Dimashqī (\textit{ELAD} 1987: 258-259; \textit{ELGER} 2010b: 73-74; \textit{MATTOCK} 1983; \textit{WAINES} 2010: 13-15). Doubts about this date and some episodes reported by IB during his stay in Damascus have been raised by \textit{ALLOUCHE} 1990: 290-293.

\(^{65}\) \textit{IBN KATHĪR}, \textit{al-Bidāya}, vol. 16, 342; \textit{IBN ABĪ ḤAḠALA}, \textit{Daf'}, f. 76a; \textit{IBN QĀDĪ ŚUHBA}, \textit{Ta'īḥ}, vol. 1, 545-547; \textit{IBN ḤAḠĀR}, \textit{Baḍl al-ma'ānī}, 237-238. The prayer gathering of Damascus in Ibn Kathīr’s chronicle has been analysed by \textit{MIRZA} 2020a and \textit{MIRZA} 2020b.

\(^{66}\) For a more in-depth analysis of the Damascus prayer gathering in IB’s \textit{Rihla}, see \textit{TRESSO} 2021a and \textit{TRESSO} 2021b.
I witnessed at the time of the Great Plague at Damascus in the latter part of the month of Second Rabī’ of the year 49 [July 1348], a remarkable instance of the veneration of the people of Damascus for this mosque. Arghūn-Shāh, king of the amīrs 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 amīrs, sharīfs, qāḍīs, 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’āns in their hands—the amīrs 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

67 AL-TĀZĪ I: 325-326.
68 Masgid al-Aqdad [Mosque of the Feet] or al-Qadam [of the Foot], which IB has just described.
two thousand, whereas the number rose in Cairo and Old Cairo to twenty-four thousand in a day.69

From this moment on, the word ḥāʾīn no longer appears in the Travels. The Riḥla reports that after leaving Damascus, IB made his first Pilgrimage to Mecca and then, heading north, visited Iraq and Persia.70 In 1327 he returned to Mecca for a second Pilgrimage and then left again for Yemen and East Africa. He then returned to Mecca a third time in 1332 and from there continued to Anatolia, Crimea and the Russian steppe, back westwards to Constantinople and once more north to the Volga plain. From here, descending southwards through Bukhāra, Samarkand and present-day Afghanistan, IB arrived in India on the first day of Muḥarram 734 [12 September 1333]. A few months later he appears at the cosmopolitan court of Muḥammad ibn Tughluq, the Turkish-Afghan ruler of the Islamic sultanate of Delhi. Here he interrupts his journey and stays eight (or perhaps nine) years, serving first as qāḍī [judge of an Islamic court] and then as administrator of a sultan’s tomb complex.71

According to the Riḥla, in 1341–1342 the Sultan appointed him ambassador to China and entrusted him with a caravan of lavish gifts for the Emperor,72 but the ship on which IB was travelling sanked with its precious cargo. Fearing the Sultan’s wrath, IB headed for the Maldives,73 which had shortly before been converted to Islam thanks to the presence of a

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70 The following is a compendium of IB’s adventures as related by the Riḥla, in order to situate the narration of the Black Death in the story of IB’s travels. In the Riḥla, IB states several times that everything he reports is derived from his personal testimony or from trustworthy oral and written sources. However, the sources are very rarely stated and as already mentioned, many scholars have hypothesised and/or demonstrated that IB and/or Ibn Ǧuzayy borrowed and adapted passages from other sources in several parts of the work, so that today it is impossible to believe that the whole Riḥla is a faithful account of IB’s personal adventures. This topic is not the focus of this article, but in the conclusive paragraph, IB’s narration of the plague will also be considered from this point of view. Some references to the main studies that scholars have made on this subject will be found in the notes, but for more information see especially DUNN 1986: 313-316; ELAD 1987; FAUVELLE AND HIRSCH 2003; EUBEN 2006: 63-85; ELGER 2010b; COLLET 2017; TRAUSCH 2021. The Riḥla also presents many internal chronological problems, some of which will be quoted in the notes: for more information see, among others, HRBEK 1962; HUSSAIN 1976 [1953]: lv-lxxi; DUNN 1986, esp. 132-133, note 2; ELAD 1987: 256-257; ALLOUCHE 1990; WAINES 2010: 10-11. For both problems of borrowing and chronology, see also the notes by Gibb and Beckingham to their English edition of the Riḥla.

71 The Riḥla reports that IB arrived in Delhi in September 1333 and from there left for China on behalf of the Sultan on 17 Şafar 743 / 22 July 1342, but some problems of chronology and itinerary lead to the date being put back by one Hegirian year, to 2 August 1341 (CHARLES-DOMINIQUE 1995: 881, note 1). Doubts about IB’s Indian stay have recently been raised by TRAUSCH 2010, who notes some substantial borrowings from the work of the famous Indian historien Barani.

72 Ibn Tughluq’s large gift for Toghon Temur, the last Mongol emperor of the Chinese Yuan dynasty, reciprocated a large shipment of gifts the latter had sent him the year before, probably with the aim of establishing a foothold in Delhi for his “vigorous overseas trade policy”, see DUNN 1986: 213-214.

73 In the text, IB says that he stayed in the Maldives for a year and a half (AL-TĀʾĪF IV, 57; GIBB AND BECKINGHAM IV, 824 [EP 113-114]), but if he really was there, he probably stayed for no more than nine months (YERASIMOS III: 223, note 171). His description of the Maldives seems to be the first detailed one we have of this tropical paradise (GRAY 1994 [1890], although Janssens has noted that
Maghrebi commercial colony. Then he visits Ceylon and probably in September/October 1344, returns to the Indian sub-continent. He next journeys to Sri Lanka, Bengal, Malaysia and Indonesia and afterwards to China, where he claims to have arrived in 1346, i.e. at a time when, according to some medieval Arab chroniclers, the country was ravaged by the Black Death. One of these chroniclers, Ibn Ḥaṭṭīb, even states that IB himself, by then back home, told him that the plague had originated “in the lands of Cathay and China.” In the Riḥla, however, IB does not report this information, and in describing China he does not speak of any past or ongoing epidemic.

From the Far East, IB travels west and, after crossing India, in the month of Šawwāl 748 [January 1348] reaches Baghdad, where the epidemic was probably already underway, but he does not mention it. He proceeds to Damascus, where the plague has not yet arrived.

74 On the sources reporting the Islamization of the islands see Gibb and Beckingham IV, 822, note 1 and 830, note 30 and Bausani 1983: 9. IB reports, among other things, a legend still attested to today among the local population, according to which Islam was brought to the Maldives by a pious and devout Berber man from the Maghreb, who freed the islands from the nightmare of a sea demon by reciting some verses of the Quran (al-Tāhirī, 62-63; Gibb and Beckingham IV, 829-831 [EP 126-130]). The myth nevertheless testifies to “the coming and going of Muslim merchants in the Maldives from as early as Abbasid times and the incorporation of the islands into the commercial network of the western ocean” (Dunn 1986: 229-230). A commercial network connecting Africa to the East via the Indian Ocean that, as suggested by Green, was probably also used by Yersinia pestis to reach Africa (see before, note 17 and Green 2015b: 45-51).

75 According to this information, IB travelled 17-18,000 km by sea and land between the summer and early autumn of that year. This does, however, suggest some inconsistencies (Dunn 1986: 260-261).

76 Ibn al-Ḥaṭṭīb (14th cent.) mentions IB as one of the great travellers “worthy of credit” [yīṭaqqu biḥīm] who reported [ḥaddāṣā] current of the origin of the Black Death, said to have started in Cathay and China in 734/1333-1334, caused by the air that had become unhealthy [jusada] as a result of the accumulation of corpses caused by a war (IBN AL-ḤAṬṬĪB, Muqniʿat al-sāʿīl, 8-9).

77 Many scholars have raised doubts and reservations about IB’s journey to China and Indochina (see Dunn 1986: 262, note 20) and in recent times some have speculated that IB may have drawn some information from Marco Polo’s work (Elger 2010a: 231-233; Elger 2010b: 81-83). As for the Black Death, for a long time historians have supposed that it struck China before reaching the Middle East and the Mediterranean, but in recent times different hypotheses have been formulated: while Sussman excludes the presence of Yersinia pestis in medieval China (Sussman 2011, especially 341-355), Buell states that “possibly there were plague outbreaks in China, but China never suffered the enormous plague epidemics that the West or the Middle East experienced” (Buell 2012: 129). For a more detailed overview of these and other hypotheses, see Hymes 2015: 287-288. In any case, as we have already seen, the current hypothesis, advanced on both epidemiological and genetic grounds, is that Yersinia pestis originated in the Tibetan-Qinghai Plateau, in today’s China (Green 2015b: 37, note 12) and scholars are calling for more studies on local sources about the Gansu corridor and East China, suggesting Mongols’ role as a human vector in bringing Yersinia pestis into both medieval China and some western regions (Little 2007; Hymes 2015; Green 2020; see also McNeill 1976: 132-175, who first discussed the role of the Mongols in the spread of the plague). Recent studies also suggest that the Black Death had its origins in the 13th century rather than the 14th (see note 190). In fact, evidence both from Song China and Iran suggests that the plague was involved in major sieges laid by the Mongols between the 1210s and the 1250s, including the siege of Baghdad in 1258 which put an end to the Abbasid caliphate. (Green 2020 and Green 2021).

78 According to al-Maqṣūrī, the plague arrived in Baghdad with the troops of the (Mongol) Chupanid
and stays there until the end of March. At the beginning of Rabī’ I [June] we find him in Aleppo.

Second passage: The plague in Gaza, Homs, Damascus and Jerusalem (Rabī’ I – Ġumādā I 749 / June – July 1348)

In Aleppo, IB relates that the news reached him that in Gaza yaqa’u al-wabā’, “there is the plague.” From now until the end of the work, this word appears, as we have seen, 11 times. From the beginning, it is clear that this is not an epidemic, but the epidemic: the Black Death. Indeed, according to information from Arab chronicles, at the beginning of June, the disease had not yet reached Aleppo, but had already devastated Gaza.80

The number of victims referred to in Gaza seems to differ from that reported by the chroniclers, but these too offer conflicting figures. In all likelihood, both the chronicles and the Rihla refer to the period of the peak. But while the latter states that on an unspecified day there were 1,000 deaths (later he will say 1,100), the text of the Syrian Ibn Kathīr, who lived at the time of the pandemic, reports that according to the lieutenant [nā’īb] of the Mamluk sultan in Gaza, from 10 Muḥarram to 10 Ṣaḥar [April 10 – May 10] there were between 13,000 and 20,000 deaths.81 The Egyptian al-Maqrīzī who wrote in the early decades of the 15th century, says that, according to the same lieutenant, more or less in the same period (2 Muḥarram - 4 Ṣaḥar [2 April - 4 May]) there were 22,000 victims.82 However, as has been noted, the number of deaths reported in IB’s Rihla may relate to the

79 AL-TĀZĪ IV: 176-178; GIBB and BECKINGHAM IV: 915-917 [EP 314-317]. On the very day of his arrival, IB learns of the death of one of his sons and that of his father; from a litterary point of view, it seems almost to be a grim omen of the tragedy that was soon to strike the city.

80 AL-MAQRIZĪ, al-Suliūk, vol. 4, 82 says that the plague arrived in Aleppo on 1 Ġumādā I (28 July) and so does IBN TAGRĪ BIRDĪ, al-Naḡām, vol. 10, 197, who quotes him. IBN al-Wardī, who as a resident of Aleppo was certainly an eyewitness to the events, states that it arrived in Raǧab (October) (IBN AL-WARDĪ, Taʾrīḥ, vol. 2, 340). In any case, these and other sources agree that the Black Death struck Aleppo after it had already raged in Gaza and Damascus (DOLS 1977: 61, note 94).

81 IBN KATHĪR, al-Bidāya, vol. 16, 341 (see IBN QĀDĪ ŚUḤBA, Taʾrīḥ, vol. 1, 542, who quotes him). Ibn Kathīr gives a very approximate number: naḥwa min biḍ’ā’ asāra al-faḥṣ. The word biḍ’ā (f. biḍ’ā) indicates a figure between 3 and 10 (WRIGHT 1986: 237D), so that the expression corresponds to “not less than 13,000 and not more than 20,000”. BORSCH and SABRAA 2017: 70 translate “tens of thousands” and DOLS 1977: 220 proposes “more than 10,000”.

82 AL-MAQRIZĪ, al-Suliūk, vol. 4, 82, where the author adds that the lieutenant had run away, leaving a deserted town (see also IBN TAGRĪ BIRDĪ, al-Naḡām, vol. 10, 198, who cites him).
worst day, thus conforming to those figures proposed by the chroniclers for an entire month.83

The Rihla reports that, perhaps fearing the arrival of the plague, IB left Aleppo: he passed again through Homs, where he says “I found that the plague had already struck there” and reports that on the day of his arrival there were 300 deaths, thus giving what I found to be the only information we have on the number of the Black Death victims in this city.84 At the end of Rabi’ II (end of July) IB is back in Damascus, where the plague has preceded him. In the Syrian capital, the day after his arrival, he claims having attended the prayer gathering already mentioned in the part of the Rihla devoted to his first visit (August 1326). This second narration relates the essential facts of the event and is much more concise and less emotional than the first, but the number of victims is reported in both passages: 2,000 victims per day in the first telling and then later 2,400. Nor does this figure seem to correspond to that of other Arab authors, who speak of 1,000-1,200 deaths a day, but we cannot exclude that the Rihla refers to a different count of victims, because one of the chronicles specifies that the number of 1,000 deaths for Damascus concerns only the corpses that were brought to the Great Mosque for the funeral rites.85

This time IB does not stay long in Damascus: he soon leaves for Jerusalem. When he arrives, probably in August 1348,86 he reports that the plague is over. This information does not appear in other sources: among the authors considered in this study, only Ibn al-Wardī and al-Maqrīzī report that Jerusalem was struck by the scourge, but they merely mention it in a list of places affected by the pandemic, without giving any information concerning

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83 BORSCH and SABRAA 2017: 70-72. In this case, Dols does not mention IB and between Ibn Kathīr and al-Maqrīzī considers the testimony of the former, who lived at the time of the pandemic, to be more reliable (DOLS 1977: 220).

84 None of the Arabic sources reviewed here mentions Homs, and among modern scholars only DOLS 1977: 61 and BORSCH and SABRAA 2017: 86 report that it was hit by the Black Death, citing IB’s Rihla as the only source. Borsch and Sabraa state that IB speaks of 330 (sic!) dead and estimate a total number of 12,264 victims. But it should be noted that the quotation is somewhat inaccurate: the number of victims is not correct and in the Bibliography there is the translation of al-Baylīnī’s compendium of the Rihla by LIE 1829, where this information does not appear.

85 IBN KATHĪR, al-Bidāya, vol. 16, 342 says that in ʿumādā II (late August-September) in the mosque they prayed almost daily for over 1,000 victims. IBN QADĪ ṢUBĪBA, Taʿrīḥ, vol. 1, 543 quotes al-Husaynī who reports an increase in deaths in the months of Raǧab and Saʿbān (late September-November) and then quotes the figures provided by IBN KATHĪR (ibid.: 545-547). For the month of Raǧab, AL-MAQRĪZĪ, al-Sulīk, vol. 4, 85 speaks of 1,200 victims a day (see also IBN TĀĞRĪ BIRDĪ, al-Nuḡām, vol. 10, 207, who quotes him). As for IBN AḤĪ ḤĀGALA, Daʿf al-niḡma, f. 76a, he reiterates the number of 1,000 deaths per day (see IBN ḤĀGAR, Baǧl al-mūʿān, 238, who quotes him). According to the most recent studies, there were about 36,000 deaths in Damascus during the epidemic, out of a population that, based on the capacity of the city walls and the size of the houses, must not have exceeded 60,000 before the Black Death (BORSCH and SABRAA 2017: 84-85). But both the massive exodus from the countryside to the capital during the pandemic period and the large number of people living outside the walls must be taken into account, which, according to Dols’ earlier calculations, would bring the number of Damascus inhabitants to 80,180 (DOLS 1977: 203-204).

86 IB says that he was in Damascus at the end of July, when the prayer gathering took place (see above) and in Cairo in mid-October, when he learned that the Raǧab caravan had already left (see below).
either the number of victims or the period in which the disease spread, ceased or reached its peak.87

Finally, from a literary point of view, it should be noted that in Jerusalem we found the only personal anecdote of IB set in the pandemic. Throughout the entire Risāla, the description of places and events is continually interspersed with personal observations, hearsay, or the accounts of others, and IB adopts this style when speaking of another epidemic he claims having witnessed in Madurai, India. There, he says that in the town he saw nothing but “the sick or the dead,” he speaks of infected people dying within a few days, of a slave-girl and a child who, apparently healthy, leave overnight.88 The many times he talks about the Black Death, however, IB limits himself to reporting factual information (especially the number of victims), but not anecdotal. In Jerusalem, he relates that the ḥāṭib [preacher] 'Izz al-Dīn, “a pious and generous man” who was the cousin of the grand qāḍī Shafite of Cairo,89 invited him to a reception. When the plague was raging, the ḥāṭib had made a vow to give a banquet on the first day he did not have to recite the funeral oration for someone who had died of the plague. That day had finally arrived, and IB gladly accepted the invitation. In contrast to many other descriptions of feasts and convivial meals, IB does not report what was served at the banquet nor who participated, but comments only his realisation that many of the men of religion he had known in that city at the time of his first visit had died, and implores the mercy of the Most High upon them.

وفي أوائل شهر ربيع الأول عام تسعة وأربعين، بلغني الخبر في حلب أن الوباء وقعت بغرزة، وأنه انتهى عدد الموتى فيها إلى زائد على الألف في يوم واحد. فسافرت إلى حمص، فوجدت الوباء قد وقع بها، ومات يوم دخولي إليها نحو ثلاثمائة إنسان، ثم سافرت إلى دمشق ووصلتها يوم الخميس، وكان أهلها قد صاموا ثلاثة أيام وخرجوا يوم الجمعة إلى جامع الأقدام، حسبما ذكرناه في السفر الأول. فخفف الله الوباء عنهم، فانتهى عدد الموتى عندهم إلى الفين وأربعمئة في اليوم، ثم سافرت إلى عجلون ثم إلى بيت المقدس ووجدت الوباء قد ارتفع عنه [.....].

87 Ibn al-Wardī, Taʾrīkh, vol. 2, 339 (the same information can be found in his Risāla translated into English by DOLS 1974a: 448); AL-Maqrīzī, al-Sulāk, vol. 4, 82. As for the historians of the Black Death quoted in this study, only DOLS 1977: 61 mentions Jerusalem as a city affected by the pandemic, and cites as the only source IB’s Riḥla.

88 AL-Tāzī IV: 96; Gibb and Beckingham IV: 863 [EP 201].

89 As IB reports in his Riḥla, he was ‘Izz al-Dīn ibn Badr al-Dīn, who had recently succeeded his father as the Shafite grand qāḍī of Cairo (AL-Tāzī I: 216; Gibb I: 55 [EP 88]): as Egypt is traditionally Shafite, this role made him the most powerful grand qāḍī in the country.
In the first days of the month of Rabi’ I in the year forty-nine, news reached us in Aleppo that plague had broken out in Ghazza and that the number of dead there exceeded a thousand a day. I went to Hims and found that the plague had already struck there; about three hundred persons died on the day of my arrival. I went to Damascus and arrived on a Thursday; the people had been fasting for three days. On Friday they went to the Mosque of the Footprints, as we have related in the first book. God alleviated their plague. The number of deaths among them had risen to two thousand four hundred a day. Then I went to ‘Ajlūn, and then to Bait al-Muqaddas [Jerusalem], where I found the plague had ceased […]

The preacher ‘Izz al-Din gave a banquet one day and invited me among his guests. I asked him the reason for it. He told me that during the plague he had sworn he would give a banquet if the plague were to cease and a day were to pass during which he did not pray over a corpse. Then he said: “Yesterday I did not pray over a corpse so I arranged the banquet as I had promised.”

I found that many of the shaikhs I had met in al-Quds [Jerusalem] had departed to be with God Most High. May He have mercy on them!

Third passage: The plague in Gaza (Ǧumādā I 749 / August 1348)

From Jerusalem, IB says he continued his journey together with the sheikh of the Maghrebi of Jerusalem and a traditionalist from Milyāna (in present-day Algeria). Passing through Hebron, the three arrive in Gaza, where IB had already been at the beginning of his journey and which he had described as “a place of spacious dimensions and large population, with fine bazars.” This time, however, the atmosphere must be ghostly. It is perhaps no coincidence that, unlike any previous occasion on which he mentions the plague, before reporting the number of victims IB comments somewhat laconically on the state of the

90 AL-TĀZĪ IV: 179-180.
92 AL-TĀZĪ I: 239; GIBB I: 73 [EP 113-114].
place stating waḥadnā muʿzīmahā ḥāliyan “we found most of it deserted.” As previously mentioned, the qāḍī informs him that on one day alone there were 1,100 victims. It is interesting to note that IB, unlike any of the other sources, reports that three-quarters of the notables died in Gaza. It could be deduced that the incidence of mortality in the rest of the population must have been just as high, and probably higher.95

Then we went to Ghazza and found most of it deserted because of the numbers that had died during the plague. The qāḍī told me that only a quarter of the eighty notaries there were left and that the number of deaths had risen to eleven hundred a day. We then went by land to Dimyāṭ.97

Fourth passage: The plague in Alexandria and Cairo (Ǧumādā I – Gümādā II 749 / August – September 1348)

The Riḥla reports that from Gaza, travelling in the opposite direction of the Black Death, we do not know whether accompanied or alone, IB crossed the Delta region and reached Alexandria, probably the first place in the Arab lands where the plague had begun. The area he travelled through was one of the most scarred by the pandemic: chroniclers speak of corpses piled up in the streets and deserted towns. On the shores of Lake Burullus, between the Rosetta and Damietta branches of the Nile, fishing was suspended due to the lack of

93 IB does not say, but other sources report that markets were also closed in Gaza at that time due to the epidemic (AL-MAQAŘĪZĪ, al-Sulūk, vol. 4, 82; IBN TAĠIRĪ BRĪDĪ, al-Nuḡūm, vol. 10, 198, who cites him).
For comparison of this figure with the texts of the chroniclers, see above. BORSCH and SABRAA 2017: 72 consider this quote more credible, however, because the figure 1,000 is too neat not to seem suspicious.
95 Although, as noted by Borsch when talking about Black Death mortality, “the vast number of anonymous and propertyless poor were not counted” (BORSCH 2016: 130).
96 Al-Tāzi IV: 180.
98 Al-MAQAŘĪZĪ, al-Sulūk, vol. 4, 80. In fact, the chronicler states the date of the plague’s arrival in Egypt without giving more information. However, in listing the places affected he mentions the port of Alexandria first, reporting how the plague arrived on board a merchant ship (probably coming from the Golden Horn) that entered the port laden with corpses and sick people, all of whom died shortly afterwards (ibid.: 83; see IBN TAĠIRĪ BRĪDĪ, al-Nuḡūm, vol. 10, 199, who cites him). The date is also confirmed by other sources, see DOLS 1977: 57-58, note 80. For the spread of the Black Death in Egypt, see among others ibid.: 57-60; BENEDICTOW 2004: 62-63; BORSCH and SABRAA 2017: 68-70.
fishermen. In al-Maḥalla al-Kabīra the mortality rate was so high that the qāḍī could not
find witnesses to validate people’s final testaments.99

At the beginning of IB’s travels, al-Maḥalla was described as “a place of great
importance, impressive buildings and a large population.”100 But this time, although he
reports having passed through this and other cities of the Delta, IB makes no comment, nor
does he mention any sign of the scourge. He lists only the towns he passed through and
states that he arrived in Alexandria where, after reaching a peak of 1,080 deaths a day, the
plague had weakened considerably. This figure is too precise to have been invented or
rounded up, and in fact other chroniclers speak of 700 funeral rites celebrated on the worst
days:101 the number reported by the Riḥla can be explained by the fact that it also includes
those who had died without funeral rites.102

According to the Riḥla, IB must have arrived in Alexandria in September, because he
says that in July he was in Damascus and in mid-October, as we shall see, he arrives in
Cairo. Again, none of the other sources substantiate IB’s claim that the epidemic had begun
to subside in the city. That Alexandria was devastated is not open to question, but IB does
not say anything about the situation of the city or its inhabitants and heads for Cairo.

He probably arrived there in mid-October, because he subsequently says that on his
arrival he learned that the traditional caravan of pilgrims starting from Cairo in the month
of Raḡāb had already set out for Mecca. That year, the departure took place around 10
October, and IB says that in the caravan there were a number of people infected by the
plague. In October, therefore, the pandemic, now diminished in Alexandria, had arrived in
Cairo, where we know from other sources that it had not yet reached its peak (this occurred
shortly afterwards, in the months of Šaʿbān, Ramadān and Šawwāl 748 [November 1348 –
January 1349].103 It should be noted that IB speaks of a decimated population and states
that “all the shaikhs” he had met there had died. This remark, together with the very high
number of victims he reports (21,000 a day, although in the first account of the Damascus
prayer gathering he had said 24,000), suggests that the epidemic had peaked. In all
likelihood, if he really was in Cairo in those days, he is confused and actually refers to
when he returned to Cairo from Mecca in April-May 1349. Nonetheless, the chronicles

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mortality in the Delta region as reported in the Arab chronicles see DOLS 1977: 155-157 and BORSCH
and SABRAA 2017: 73-74 and passim.

100 Al-Tazi I: 196; Gubb I: 34 [EP 56]. The city, still an important agricultural and industrial centre in
Egypt, lies some 60 km north of Cairo, halfway between Damietta and Alexandria.

101 Al-Maqrīzī, al-Sulik, vol. 4, 84, which speaks of the increase in the number of victims: first a
hundred, then two hundred, but during the peak there were up to 700 funerals a day (see Ibn Tagrī

102 The credibility of the unrounded number reported by the Riḥla about the region, lead Borsch and
Sabraa to rely on this figure to establish how many people died in Alexandria during the Black Death:
50,000 victims out of 105,000 inhabitants, i.e. 48% of the population (BORSCH and SABRAA 2017: 68-70).

reported by al-Maqrīzī, starting from Muharram 749 [April 1348] the plague spreads from Alexandria
to Upper Egypt and strikes Cairo at the beginning of Raḡāb 749 / late September 1348 (DOLS 1977:
60).
confirm that during the peak there was a very high number of casualties in Cairo, although different information circulated about it: Ibn Kathīr says that “there are those who exaggerate and those who minimise: those who minimise say 11,000 and those who exaggerate say 30,000 [deaths] per day,” while al-Maqrīzī speaks of 20,000. According to the most recent studies, however, a figure between 20,000 and 24,000 dead as reported by IB and al-Maqrīzī (which falls within the range proposed by Ibn Kathīr) would be credible if it referred not to one but to two days as well as the entire area of Cairo, i.e. both the ancient part (Fustāṭ) and the modern one (al-Qāhira).

Then I travelled to al-Maḥalla al-Kabīra, then to Naḥrariyya, then to Abyār, then to Damanhūr, and then to Alexandria. I found the plague had abated after the number of deaths had risen to a thousand and eighty a day. Then I went to Cairo and was told that during the plague the number of deaths there had risen to twenty-one thousand a day. I found that all the shaikhs I had known were dead. May God Most High have mercy upon them!

Fifth passage: The plague on the road to Mecca (Raḡāb 749 / October 1348)

In Cairo IB learns that the Raḡāb traditional caravan had left before his arrival, having first brought the plague with them, but at the pass of Ayla the epidemic had ceased.


105 This is the hypothesis of BORSCH and SABRA 2017: 80-81. It should be noted that Cairo at the time had an estimated population of between 250,000 and 500,000 (SHOSHAN 2002: 1 and 38, note 5 and 6).

106 AL-TĀZĪ IV: 181.


108 The caravan left towards the middle of the month, after the important ceremonial feast of the mahlīl (or mahlīm), a kind of mobile shrine containing copies of the Koran which, hoisted on a camel, preceded the pilgrims accompanied by music and songs (GAUDEFOY-DEMOMBRES 1923: 192-204; JOMIER 1953; SHOSHAN 2002: 70-75). On the Egyptian Pilgrimage caravan and the perilous journey of some 1,600 km to the Hijaz see, among others, LOISEAU 2014: 69-73 and AL-RASHED 2014: 28.
Perhaps reassured by this good news, IB soon leaves again, passes through Upper Egypt (probably already affected by the plague),\textsuperscript{110} arrives in 'Aydhab and embarks for Jeddah. From here he continues overland to Mecca, where he claims having arrived on 22 Ša'bān 749 [16 November 1348], at the time when the epidemic reached its peak in Cairo and Upper Egypt.

IB gives just a brief account of his stay in the holy city. He says that he placed himself under the protection of the Malikite imām,\textsuperscript{111} that he met some sheikhs he had known from previous occasions, and that he performed both the rites of the 'umra, the “minor pilgrimage,” and those of the Ḥajj [Pilgrimage], which that year took place between 27 February and 4 March 1349.\textsuperscript{112} He then recounts that he left Mecca, made a brief visit to Medina to pay homage to the tomb of the Prophet and, passing again through Jerusalem and Gaza, returned to Cairo. There is no mention of the plague in this short story.

It should be noted that IB was even more laconic in his account of his previous Pilgrimage (in 1326)\textsuperscript{113} and had already provided many details about rites, places, institutions and people in his account of the first two ones (in 1327 and 1332).\textsuperscript{114} It is surprising, however, that despite having repeatedly mentioned the Black Death, he makes no allusion to it in Mecca. According to the chroniclers, in fact, that year the plague claimed a large number of victims among the inhabitants, the pilgrims and those who resided in the holy city for study or devotion.\textsuperscript{115} The \textit{Yersinia pestis} bacillus probably arrived from Egypt and Syria in the caravans that converged on the peninsula during the

\textsuperscript{109} The Pass of Ayla is located in present-day Jordan at the north-western tip of the Gulf of Aqaba, between Mount Umm Nusayla and the sea. The other sources quoted in this article speak of the plague in Mecca, but they do not report any information on the plague among the pilgrims of the \textit{Rajab} caravan, or when it ended at the pass of Ayla.

\textsuperscript{110} See note 103.

\textsuperscript{111} IB has already mentioned the Malikite imām of Mecca on the occasion of his first Pilgrimage: he was the famous Abū ʿAbd Allāh ibn Abī al-Rahmān, called Ḥāllīl (see \\textit{Gībī} I: 203, note 69). The Malikite \textit{majīhab}, which has always been the most widespread in the Maghreb, was also the one followed by IB.

\textsuperscript{112} The rites of the Pilgrimage take place between the 8th and 13th days of the sacred month of Dū al-Ḥijja, which is the last in the Islamic calendar, and are preceded by the 'umra to which IB refers (VENTURA 1999: 141-142). According to the \textit{Riḥla}, this was probably the fourth, but certainly the last Pilgrimage made by IB after those that he claims to have made in 726/1327, 727/1327 and 732/1332. As for the second, IB reports having stayed in Mecca from 1327 to 1330, and thus made two more Pilgrimages, but such a long period poses a number of dating problems that lead scholars to assume that IB stayed in Mecca only one year at that time (see \\textit{Gībī} II, “Appendix”, 528-537 and DUNN 1986: 132-133, note 2), or to revise the chronology of his stay in India (see HRBEK 1962: 439-sgg and “Addenda”, 483-486).

\textsuperscript{113} Al-Tāzī II: 153-154; \textit{Gībī} II: 410-411 [\textit{EP} 248-249].

\textsuperscript{114} Al-Tāzī I: 343-411; \textit{Gībī} I: 158-248 [\textit{EP} 254-404] and Al-Tāzī II: 88-91; \textit{Gībī} II: 355-359 [\textit{EP} 148-155]. It has been noted that the detailed description of Mecca in IB’s first description of the city reveals several substantial borrowings from the \textit{Riḥla} of Ibn Gubayr (see esp. MATTOCK 1981; NETTON 1986; ELGER 2010b), but this does not exclude the possibility that IB effectively went to Mecca one or more times for the Pilgrimage.

Pilgrimage: if IB was in Mecca, he certainly witnessed its tragic effects, and if not, he and/or Ibn Ḥusayy would certainly have heard the news that the plague had struck the Holy City. The event, in fact, was the cause of much discussion among Muslims because, according to chroniclers, Mecca had never been hit by an epidemic since becoming the most important holy city in Islam. Extraordinary though it seems, considering the tens of thousands of people who travelled there every year, it may have been a result of the rules of ritual purity—and therefore of hygiene—which Muslim pilgrims have always scrupulously followed.

That IB fails to mention the plague in Mecca is a little strange. However, it should also be noted that, as a devout Muslim, he does not rejoice in finding Medina spared from the scourge. Had Medina not escaped the Black Death unharmed, it would have been a most inauspicious event for the Muslims: not only because, like Mecca, until then the city had not experienced any epidemics, but also because the Prophet himself, according to Tradition, had stated that Medina—his beloved Ṭayba [Sweet, Pleasant]—would always remain unscathed by the plague. “There are angels guarding the entrances of Medina: neither the plague [al-tā’īn] nor al-Masih (al-Dagghāl) [the Antichrist] will be able to enter it,” said Muḥammad in a famous ḥadīṯ reported in the most authoritative collections. The Prophet’s saying, therefore, was confirmed to be true: not even the aggressive and contagious Yersinia pestis bacillus was able to reach Medina, whose reputation as a city protected from the plague is attested to by a series of testimonies stretching until the mid-nineteenth century, including in the accounts of some Western travellers. But IB does not mention this: the only news of the Black Death that he reports in the holy places of Islam is that of the Rağab caravan that set out from Cairo with some infected people.

116 It should be noted that most pilgrims travelled in caravans that met in major metropolises. At the time of the Mamluks, the two most important caravans were formed in Cairo (for pilgrims from Africa, especially the Maghreb) and Damascus (for those from Anatolia, Iran, Iraq and Syria), each with up to 40,000 people (see LISEAU 2014: 68; AL-RASHED 2014: 29).

117 DOLS 1977: 63 states that “the Prophet was supposed to have promised that no disease would ever enter the holy cities of Mecca and Medina”, but does not cite the source and if, as we shall see, many ḥadīṯ agree with this observation with reference to Medina, I am not aware of any with reference to Mecca. The fact that Mecca was never struck by the plague is instead reported in chronicles even before the Black Death (see CONRAD 1981: 57-60 and CONRAD 1982: 286-288). See among others Ibn IVAS, Baddā‘ al-suhār, vol. I, 530, who, reporting the arrival of the pandemic in Mecca, said that no one had ever heard of the city being hit by the plague (lam yusma’ bi-aw daḥūla Makka tā’īn).


120 See Johann Burckhardt who, having converted to Islam, made the Pilgrimage in 1814 during a wave of plague and reports how “Medina remained free from the plague” (BURCKHARDT 1829, vol. 1, 327) and Richard Burton, who, in his account of his famous Pilgrimage in disguise in 1853, devotes several pages to the health situation in Medina and notes how “It is still the boast of Al-Madinah, that the Taun, or plague, has never passed her frontier” (BURTON 1893, vol. 1, 384). For further information on this topic, see CONRAD 1982: 284-291.
Sixth passage: The plague in Cairo and Morocco (Ṣafar 750 / April – May 1349)

After visiting Medina, IB leaves by land for Cairo and the Rihla reports very briefly that he passed one last time through Jerusalem, Hebron and Gaza. In 742/1341, in Delhi, he had expressed the wish to return to the holy cities of Islam and after a long time he finally succeeded: he made what he claims to be his fourth (or perhaps sixth) Pilgrimage to Mecca and paid a holy visit to Medina. In Cairo, the atmosphere must have been at the very

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121 Al-Tāzī IV: 181-182.
122 The month of Raǧab in 749 corresponds to the period from 25 September to 24 October 1348.
124 IB says that he left Mecca immediately after the Pilgrimage, which as we have seen ended on 4 March 1349, so he probably arrived and left Medina in the first half of the month.
126 See note 112.
least desolate and probably because of this, IB decides, after 24 years away from home—and having already seen 45 winters—to return home. Until then he had never spoken of his return, but on arriving in Cairo he pronounces a brief panegyric on the new Marinid Sultan of Fez, Abū ’Inān, and concludes: “I sought to make my way to his exalted capital.” Then, without giving up the melancholic pathos that distinguishes him every time he speaks of his beloved country, he explains to the reader: “The memory of my homeland moved me, affection for my people and friends, and love for my country which for me is better than all others: A land where charms were hung upon me, whose earth my skin first touched.”

In the month of Safar 750 [April-May 1349], according to the Rihla, IB boarded a small galley and sailed for Jerba, in present-day Tunisia. From there, again by sea, he went on to Gabes, Sfax and finally Tunis, where he stayed for a month. A year earlier, the city had been struck by the Black Death, and in the month of its peak, Rabi’ I [June] it had probably killed between 700 and 1,000 people a day. However, he mentions neither the event nor the damage it caused and although he claims having attended the sultan’s court and had long discussions with many local notables, he does not mention either the pandemic or the debates it provoked in highly-educated Muslim circles.

After leaving Tunis, IB resumes his journey home and about a hundred kilometres from Fez he makes one last stop in Tāza, a small town in present-day Morocco perched on a hill where the Rif chain joins the Middle Atlas. Here the memories of his country moved him, and probably because of this, IB decided to return home. Until then he had never spoken of his home, the memory of his homeland moved him, affection for his people and friends, and love for his country which for him is better than all others: A land where charms were hung upon me, whose earth my skin first touched.”

In Tunis, the Black Death probably arrived from Sicily (Benedictow 2004: 227; Melhaoui 2005: 71). The number of 1,000 victims per day in the month of June 1348 is reported by Ibn Abī Dīnār (cited in Dols 1977: 64, note 114), while Ibn Ḥātimah speaks of 1,202 deaths, but does not specify either in which period or whether this figure refers to one or several days (cited in ibid.: 204, note 33; Melhaoui 2005: 184-185). The plague in Tunis is also attested by Ibn Ḥalḍūn, who lived there at the time of the pandemic (see below, esp. note 170).

The sultan in question is the Marinid Abū al-Hasan, who conquered Tunis in the autumn of 1347 with the ambition of bringing the Maghreb countries under his rule. Sources report that al-tā‘īn al-gārif [the Overwhelming Plague] appeared among the ranks of his army during a battle against a coalition of rebellious tribes that took place at Qayrawān on 8 Muḥarram 749 [10 April 1348] (Ibn Ḥalḍūn, al-Tā’īf, 27-29). Having survived, Abū al-Hasan reached Tunis by sea and was forced to barricade himself in the citadel, where the rebels besieged him, but in Fez they presumed that he was dead. At the beginning of 1349 his son Abū ’Inān Fāris took over as sultan, and refusing to relinquish his position upon learning that his father was still alive, effectively usurped him. On the unification policy of North Africa by the Marinids and in particular on Abū al-Hasan, see Dunn 1986: 275-280.

Biraben 1975: 430 says that the plague arrived in Tangier in 1348, but does not cite his sources. Dols 1977: 65 relies on IB’s information to establish the arrival of the plague in Morocco in 1349 and he states that “Plague overtook Tāzāh in Morocco, for Ibn Battutah learned in 750/1349 that his mother had died there of it”. In fact, IB does not say that the plague arrived in Tāzā, but that in Tāzā he was told that his mother had died of the plague: nothing suggests that she did not live in Tangier, where she probably spent all her life and, as related in the Rihla, was buried.
father had been dead for 15 years, while his mother was still alive. But *Yersinia pestis* bacillus, probably among the ranks of the Marinid army, found its way from Tunis and/or al-Andalus to Fez and preceded IB to Tangier—thus preventing him from seeing his mother ever again.

I reached the city of Tāzā, where I learnt that my mother had died of the plague. God Most High have mercy upon her.

### Seventh passage: The plague in Gibraltar (*Ḏū l-Ḥiǧga* 750 / March 1350)

The *Rihla* states that IB arrived in Fez on the last Friday of *Ṣaḥbān* 750 [13 November 1349] and went to the palace of Sultan Abū Ṭīnān, who had succeeded his father earlier that year. The ruler may have been absent, for IB did not meet him but he was greeted by the vizier, who gave him a number of gifts and asked him about Egypt. After that he left for Tangier.

Back in his hometown, IB was reunited with his family, the several friends and acquaintances he had left behind and whom he greeted again with joy. They would mostly have welcomed him with warmth and honours, but he does not speak of them, nor does he mention his home or the places to which he returned after so many years away. He only says that he visited his mother’s tomb, thus suggesting his affection for her. And it

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133 For Morocco, the scholars note that “the precise impact of the Black Death cannot be assessed due to a lack of documentation” (Benhima 2010: 286, see also Singer 2020: 4). Ibn Ḥātimā reports that there were more than 700 victims in Tlemcen, but he does not say in which period, nor whether this figure relates to a single day (cit. in Dols 1977: 204, note 33; Melhousi 2005: 184).

134 Al-Tāzi IV: 192.


136 See note 130. It should be noted that IB saw three successive rulers of the Marinid dynasty. He was born and began his journey at the time of Abū Saʿīd (1310-1331), met his son Abū al-Ḥasan (1331-1348) in Tunis and returned to Fez a year after the latter’s son, Abū `Inān (1348-1358), had been proclaimed sultan.

137 IB probably arrived in Tangier the following month, Ramaḍān, which began on 13 November (Dunn 1986: 288, note 20).

138 IB does not say that he visited his father’s tomb, which leads Dunn to assume that his father had died elsewhere (Dunn 1986: 280). It is curious to note, however, that in the *Rihla’s* abridged version by al-Baylūnī, IB states that he went to Tangier to visit his father’s grave, but does not mention his mother’s (al-Baylūnī, f. 79a). See the English translation by Lee 1829: 226 and the German one by Elger 2010a: 168.
should be noted that for someone like the author(s) of the *Rihla*, who knew how to combine mysticism with an innate propensity for pathos, the inclusion of this visit is probably more literary device than accident. Like many other Muslim travellers, IB visited hundreds of tombs: the first one he claims to have visited, in Upper Egypt, is of the famous Sufi al-Ṣādīlī, one of the highest representatives of Islamic spirituality. Having returned to his place of origin—his own as well as that of his journey—the last tomb he visited was that of his mother.

From Tangier, IB reports that he went to Ceuta and stayed there for several months, during three of which, he says, he was ill. What this illness was, we do not know, nor do we know how he recovered. He may well have been struck by the plague and recovered from it, but no one has put forward this hypothesis; given the precedents, it is likely to have been another bout of malaria. What is certain is that after regaining his health IB sets off again and heads north to the European Muslim territories, al-Andalus. The reason for his departure is explicit: “I wanted to take part in the holy war,” he says, “and in the frontier fighting.” The infidels IB was referring to were those of the coalition led by Alfonso XI of Castile (1302-1350), who in the battle of Rio Salado (30 October 1340), inflicted a heavy defeat on the Muslim he met in Baghdad in the month of Ṣawwāl (13 October 1339). IB claims to have acquired a couple of years earlier, from a Moroccon he met in Baghdad in the month of Ṣawwāl 748 (January 1348), of its recapture and the battle of Rio Salado (al-Tāżī IV: 174-176; GIBB and BECKINGHAM IV: 915 [EP 313-314]).

Gibraltar was founded in 1160 by the Almohad ‘Abd al-Mu’min. Conquered in 1309 by Ferdinand IV of Castile, it was retaken by the Marinid Abū al-Ḥasan in 1333. It returned definitively to Christian

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139 “IB and other [Muslim] travellers headed for tombs in the places they visited as we might head for art galleries” (MACKINTOSH-SMITH 2001: 18). The visit to the tombs [ziyāra] grants *baraka* [blessing] to those who perform it: it is a ritual recommended in Islam, but above all very “Moroccan” (see EICKELMANN and PISCATORI 1990: XXI).

140 The first tomb that IB mentions, in Sfax, is that of the Malikite *imām* al-Laḥmī (d. 1085), but he does not say that he visited it (AL-TĀŢĪ I: 169; GIBB I: 15 [EP 23]).

141 Al-Tāţī I: 229-230; GIBB I: 68 [EP 109]. The tomb of al-Ṣādīlī is located in Ḥumayyirī and is still a place of pilgrimage today (MACKINTOSH-SMITH 2001: 126-127). As for IB’s attraction to Sufi environments, see below, note 180.

142 After his mother’s grave IB mentions the grave of a rich and famous merchant from Alexandria in Timbuktu, but does not report having visited it (AL-TĀŢĪ IV: 269; GIBB and BECKINGHAM IV: 969 [EP 431]). It is probably another literary device, thus IB visits neither the first nor the last of the many tombs he mentions in his *Travels*.

143 Since, according to the most recent studies, the Black Death killed an average of 70-80% of those who fell ill in Europe, 20-30% of those infected survived (ABERTH 2011: 59), but scholars are still searching for an answer to how and why these latter did recover (for an overview of studies by both historians and immunologists see CRESPO and LAWRENZ 2015).

144 This is the hypothesis of DUNN 1986: 281, which is based on the fact that IB claims that he already had two bouts of malaria: one in the Maldives and one probably in Madurai, India. See also TRESSO 2022.

145 Conquered in 711 by the Arab-Berber troops of the Umayyad governor of North Africa, Mūsā ibn Nuṣayr, Tarifa was recaptured in 1292 by the Castilian king Sancho IV.

146 Algeciras, the first Iberian city conquered by Mūsā ibn Nuṣayr’s army in 711, remained under Muslim rule for over six centuries. According to the *Rihla* IB had learned a couple of years earlier, from a Moroccan he met in Baghdad in the month of Ṣawwāl 748 (January 1348), of its recapture and the battle of Rio Salado (al-Tāţī IV: 174-176; GIBB and BECKINGHAM IV: 915 [EP 313-314]).

147 Gibraltar was founded in 1160 by the Almohad ‘Abd al-Mu’min. Conquered in 1309 by Ferdinand IV of Castile, it was retaken by the Marinid Abū al-Ḥasan in 1333. It returned definitively to Christian
So it is not difficult to imagine IB in Ceuta, the general headquarters of the Marinid fleet, feverish and weak, intent on contemplating the Rock of Gibraltar.\textsuperscript{148} in Arabic \textit{Ǧabal Ṭāriq}, the “Mount of Ṭāriq,” also known as \textit{Ǧabal al-Fath}, as he calls it, “the Mount of the Conquest [of al-Andalus].”\textsuperscript{149} Perhaps it was because of a vow he had made to the Most High in the days of his illness, or maybe there were calls for help from Gibraltar, volunteers were needed for the defence of the promontory, the city and its ramparts. IB, though not a man of action, but easily overcome by ardour, left for Spain. But in those very same days, the unthinkable happened: the plague struck “the Christian tyrant” in Gibraltar and on the night of 26-27 March 1350 it put an end both to his life and to the siege of the city.\textsuperscript{150} IB does not judge the event\textsuperscript{151} but merely reports: “God took him unprepared and he died of the plague.” In reality, however, the sentence ends with a brief comment: “which he feared more than anyone else.” This detail is not found in other Muslim sources: indeed, Christian sources state the opposite. According to the chronicles of Alfonso XI’s private secretary, Fernán Sánchez de Valladolid, the King of Castile had no fear of the epidemic. On the contrary, he remained in Gibraltar and besieged it despite the high mortality rate among his troops and regardless of pressure from the Castilian nobles to desist.\textsuperscript{152} So it cannot be ruled out that the voice of the brave king, contemptuous of the epidemic, had reached IB’s ears, and that he wanted to overturn it in contempt of the “Christian tyrant” who had defeated the Muslims at Rio Salado. But it is more likely that this biting comment is due to Ibn Ḥuzayy, first because at that time he was a scribe at the court of Granada, so that more than IB he could have heard this voice, and then because his father Abū al-Qāsim al-Kalbī, a panegyrist of the Emir Yusuf I of Granada, died in this very battle.\textsuperscript{153}

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\item \textsuperscript{148} On IB’s state of mind in Ceuta see NORRIS H. 1959: 187.
\item \textsuperscript{149} On 30 April 711 Ṭāriq ibn Ziyād (d. 720), at that time governor of Tangier, led the Arab-Berber army that, having crossed the strait between Morocco and Spain, conquered the fortress (which was named after Ṭāriq or the conquest) and the city of Algeciras.
\item \textsuperscript{150} The Iberian Peninsula was hit very hard by the pandemic: the most recent studies estimate the number of victims at 50-60% of the population in the years 1348-1350 (see, among others, ABERTH 2011: 37). Alfonso XI of Castile, known as \textit{el Justiciero} [the Avenger] because of the ferocity with which he suppressed the unrest caused by the nobles who opposed him, was the only European ruler to die of the plague during the Black Death. See FERNÁNDEZ 2015, and in particular SANJUÁN’s article on him in Muslim sources (including IB). IB’s information that the siege of Gibraltar lasted ten months is roughly confirmed by the sources, which report that Alfonso XI’s expedition began in August 1349 (JACKSON 1986: 52).
\item \textsuperscript{151} Only once in the entire work does IB ascribe someone’s death to some sort of divine “justice”: when in Madurai the cruel (Muslim) sultan Giyāṯ al-Dīn succumbs along with his wife and child in an epidemic. In that case, in fact, referring to the infamies committed by him, IB adds: “This was an abomination which I have not known of any other king. That is why God hastened his death” (AL-TĀZĪ IV: 94; GIBB and BECKINGHAM IV: 860 [EP 194]). On this episode, see TRESSO 2022.
\item \textsuperscript{152} ROSELL 1875: 390-391. I thank Professor Manuel Garcia Fernández of the University of Seville for pointing out this information and its source to me.
\item \textsuperscript{153} A. Miguel in in \textit{EP}, s.v. Ibn Ḥuzayy.
\end{footnotesize}
\end{flushleft}
When it happened to me to see this noble residence and I had been overwhelmed by the favours of his universal benevolence, I sought to visit my mother’s grave. I reached my native town of Tangier, visited it, and went to the city of Saba [Ceuta], where I stayed for some months. I was ill for three months. Then God cured me and I wanted to take part in the holy war and the frontier fighting. I sailed from Ceuta in a shaffī belonging to the people of Aṣīlā [Arzila] and reached al-Andalus, God Most High guard her, where the reward of those who live there is abundant and where recompense is treasured up for those who stay or travel there. This was just after the death of the Christian tyrant Adfūnus [Alfonso]. He besieged the mountain [Gibraltar] for ten months and supposed he would get possession of all of al-Andalus that still belonged to the Muslims. God took him unprepared and he died of the plague, which he feared more than anyone else.  

Epilogue

Despite the end of the siege, IB leaves Ceuta, but in Gibraltar he finds a completely different situation from the one he had imagined: the siege has been lifted and if there is an enemy to deal with, it is the plague. He realises—or someone explains to him—that his
help is no longer needed. In any case, he tells of having visited, together with the qāḍī, the system of fortifications and the stores of war material that the Marinid rulers had set up there.\(^\text{156}\) Then he sighs: “I would have liked to be one of those serving there till the end of my life.”\(^\text{157}\) But he resumes his journey and heads east, where he visits Ronda, Marbella, Malaga and Granada. Then he returns to Morocco and from there makes a final journey across the Sahara from north to south until he reaches the sultanate of Mali, in the Western Sudan: we don’t know if the plague had arrived there too, but he does not say anything about it.\(^\text{158}\) In 1354 he returns definitively to Fez and a year later the Sultan orders him to dictate the chronicle of his travels and the court scribe, the Andalusian Ibn Ġuzayy, to edit it. The Riḥla sees the light in 1356: from Gibraltar onwards, there is no further mention of plague and epidemics.

The description of the Black Death in the Riḥla of IB: Comparison with chronicles

In all the situations in which IB speaks of ṭāʿūn [plague] or wabāʾ [epidemic] in the Arab area, he undoubtedly refers to the Black Death. A comparison of the information given in the Riḥla with the main Arab chronicles of the 14th-15th centuries confirms, on the whole, IB’s reports: although there are many discrepancies in the numbers of victims, we have seen that they can be explained by the different ways in which the deaths were counted (only the town or also the surrounding area, the number of funerals or the number of deaths, etc.). With regard to the various information in the Riḥla which is not confirmed by other sources, it is absolutely plausible and widely cited as reliable in modern and contemporary studies on the Black Death. However, some considerations emerge from this comparison.

The first is that later authors, who did not witness the pandemic, often refer to information from works written at the time of the scourge,\(^\text{159}\) but none of them quote IB’s Riḥla or make any mention of him. Of course, it could be that they knew his work and did not consider it a reliable source, but this hypothesis is disproved by the fact that many of

\(^{156}\) On the complex defensive system which first the Almohads and then the Marinids of Morocco set up in Gibraltar and its region, see Norris H. 1959: 188-190, where the author describes the atmosphere of great participation in the defence of al-Andalus in Gibraltar at that time.

\(^{157}\) AL-TĀZĪ IV: 211; GIİR and BECKINGHAM IV: 935 [EP 355].

\(^{158}\) For IB’s journey to Sudan see the analysis by COLLET 2017, where all previous studies are cited. The plague in Africa is a topic that remains to be studied: a survey of possible sources (both internal and external) has been proposed by CHOUIN 2018 (see also GREEN 2015b: 43-45 and GREEN 2018). Chouin also examines IB’s journey to Sudan and hypothesizes that the plague had not yet spread in/near Mali in the years 1352-1353 when IB was there, because the Riḥla does not mention the plague: “Looking at the fact that IB did mention the disease in other places […] the absence of any mention in the southern margins of the Sahara suggests that he did not observe or hear about the disease in that part of the world”. The doubt remains, however, since we have seen that IB does not mention the scourge in some places (Mecca, Baghdad, Tunis, the Delta region) affected by the plague where he claims to have been during the pandemic.

\(^{159}\) Al-Maqrīzī, for example, quotes Ibn Abī Ḥāǧala and Ibn Kathīr; Ibn Taǧrī Birdī quotes Ibn al-Maqrīzī; Ibn Qāḍī Šuhba quotes Ibn Kathīr and al-Husaynī, etc.
the figures and information provided by IB agree with those of the chroniclers who witnessed the pandemic. It should be noted that IB had already been accused of lying by some of his contemporaries, who listened to him telling the stories of his travels at the court of Fez and considered some of them exaggerated and unbelievable.\footnote{Ibn Ḥaldūn quotes some of IB’s anecdotes on the sultan of Delhi (Muḥammad Ibn Tughluq) and notes that they did not seem possible in the court of Fez, where people “confabulated that he was lying” \([\text{タンャーヒ ブタシフリビヒ}]\) (Ibn Ḥaldūn, Muqaddima, vol. I: 328). Ibn Haḡar reports that both Ibn al-Ḥaḍīb and Ibn Marzūq related that the Andalusian qāḍī al-Balṭīfī had personally heard the “strange things” \([\text{ガダーイブ}]\) IB used to tell and accused him of lying \([\text{ラマハン ブタシフリカフブ}]\) (Ibn Haḡar, al-Durar al-kāmina, vol. 3, 480-481. The passage is translated into English in Gibb I: IX-X). Ibn al-Ḥājj al-Balṭīfī (1264-1366), was the teacher of important scholars as Ibn Ḥaldūn, and also of Ibn Guẓayy. The \(\text{リーブラ}\) refers that IB met both him and Ibn Guẓayy in 1351, in a garden of Granada (Al-Tāzī IV: 226; Gibb and Beckingham IV: 943 [EP 372]). Ibn Marzūq (c. 1311-1379) was born in Tlemcen (in present-day Algeria) and was a famous expert in Islamic law who also played an important diplomatic role as advisor and secretary of the sultan Abū Ḥanīf, so he probably met IB at his court.} If those chroniclers writing after the epidemic were aware of this and believed it to be true, it is likely that at least some of them would have voiced their criticism—although it should be noted that in this case IB’s information is neither “exaggerated” nor “unbelievable.” Instead, it seems more probable that they knew neither the work nor its author, and that the absence of the \(\text{リーブラ}\) among the sources on the Black Death used by Arab chroniclers after the pandemic confirms Dunn’s hypothesis that “the \(\text{リーブラ}\) appears to have had a very modest impact on the Muslim world until modern times.”\footnote{This is the opinion of Dunn 1986: 317. Waines 2010: 6 notes that given the presence of a number of manuscripts of the \(\text{リーブラ}\) found in the Maghreb and Egypt, at least in this area IB’s travelogue must have enjoyed a certain popularity, but he does not provide any proof of this. As to the circulation of IB’s \(\text{リーブラ}\), in the Middle East it seems to have been documented for the first time at the end of the 16th century (Al-Tāzī I: 63), while in Africa we know that a manuscript of the \(\text{リーブラ}\) had been copied in Raḡab 1043/January 1634 in Timbuktu (Collet 2017, who notes that the manuscript was certainly present there some time before this date).} The reason for this still remains an enigma, and more research should be carried out on this subject.

The second consideration concerns the narrative style of IB when he talks of the Black Death. If we exclude the first account of the multi-religious prayer gathering in Damascus, a brief anecdote in Jerusalem (which takes place when the plague is waning) and two occasions on which he implores the mercy of the Most High on friends and relatives who died in the pandemic, IB relates the news with a neutral, detached tone, speaking little or nothing of his own experiences of the scourge. This is a detail that clashes with the style of most of the \(\text{リーブラ}\), where IB shows a passionate character and an innate ability to tell his adventures involving the reader with anecdotes and stories, even at the expense of “technical” information and data. As has been noted, he often refers to the merchants and never to the goods they traded,\footnote{Dunn 1986: 139-140.} and even when reporting on history, he is more concerned with the biographical or legendary events of the characters than with the chain of events: he gives detailed accounts of the lives and deaths of the protagonists, but with no intention of analysing causes and consequences.\footnote{“Mentality alien to any \(\text{l’etropia}\),” as put by Gabrieli 1975: XIV.}
In the majority of the cases in which he mentions the plague, however, IB merely gives the number of death with a few brief comments: he does not describe scenes of tragedy, nor does he speak of corpses and only when talking about Gaza does he say that it was “half-deserted.” Yet the chroniclers, especially those who witnessed the scourge first hand, usually unaccustomed to commenting on the dramatic nature of the news they recount, describe the apocalyptic scenes of the Black Death most disturbingly. When he talks about Damascus, Ibn Abi Ḥağala (who lost a son in the pandemic and died of the plague in a subsequent wave) writes: “I witnessed the terrible [ḥārāl] state it was in” and concludes “In short, compared to this one, all the previous plagues [ṭāʿūn] are like a drop in the sea or a point in a circle.” Also in Damascus, Ibn Kathīr reports that one day he saw with his own eyes such a number of coffins that the great Mosque could not accommodate all of them and the ḥāfīl [preacher] had to go out and recite the funeral prayer over those that had been left outside. Ibn al-Wardī, who died in Aleppo of the Black Death, was a poet and in the short treatise on the plague that he wrote in rhymed prose [ṣaḡ'] he compares the disease [ṭāʿūn] to a lion, a storm, a lover who kisses and embraces his victims while poisoning them. Al-Maqrīzī, who lived a century later, reports that such an epidemic [wabā'] had never before happened and says that at the beginning of Raǧab 749/October 1348 there were no more places in the cemeteries of Damascus, so that a number of corpses were abandoned “in the orchards and by the roadside.” The same happened in Cairo, where dogs roamed among the corpses piled up in the streets and in the markets—which were closed due to a lack of customers and goods. After the peak, in the first days of Ḍū al- qa’dā [second half of January 1349] the city was deserted, the streets were littered with rubbish, the faces of the few passers-by were distraught [ṭunakkiru wuǧūh al-nās] and there were moans and cries from the houses. The call to prayer no longer resounded from the minarets, because the plague had decimated the muezzins and most of the small mosques [masǧīd] and monasteries [zāwiyā] were closed. In the countryside there were no longer any farmers to cultivate the land and almost all the fishermen were dead. Ibn Qādī Šuhba, a contemporary of al-Maqrīzī, recalls a witness who, having survived the scourge, repeated: “Before ‘49 [1348], we did not know what the plague [ṭāʿūn] was.” Even in the first half of the 16th century, Ibn Iyās still comments on the plague [ṭāʿūn] by saying kāna fanāʾan ‘azīman [it was an enormous destruction]. The polymath Ibn Ḥaldūn, who was not a

164 Ibn Abī Ḥağala, Daq‘ al-niqma, f. 75b (see Ibn Ḥağar, Baṣīl al-māʿūn, 237, who quotes him).
165 Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, vol. 16, 343. For an in-depth analysis of Ibn Kathīr’s report on the Black Death see Mirzā 2020a, who notes that “Throughout Ibn Kathīr’s description he constantly invokes the Qur’anic phrase (Qur. 2: 156) ‘To God we belong, and to Him we return’ [Innā li-l-lāh wa-innā ilayHī rāḥiḍūn] which is typically said after a death or great calamity”.
168 Ibn Qādī Šuhba, Taʿrīḥ, vol. 1, 541.
169 Ibn Iyās, Badāʾiʿ al-zuhūr, vol 1, 523.
chronicler but when an adolescent, in Tunis, lost both his parents to the pandemic, states that as a result of the plague “the entire inhabited world changed.”

Besides not speaking of the signs of the epidemic either in the cities where he resides or in the countryside he passes through, IB does not mention the debate of the time on how a good Muslim should interpret the scourge and how he should behave. Without investigating such a vast and complex subject, which does not appear in the Riḥba, it should be noted that, based on a number of ḥadīt, the debate started from three fundamental principles. 1. The plague is a mercy and the Muslim who dies from it is a martyr who will be welcomed into Paradise; 2. A Muslim must neither enter nor flee from a region struck by the plague; 3. There is no contagion in the plague because the disease comes directly from God. The varying opinions expressed by the scholars together with people’s own behaviour did not always fall within these guidelines. Regarding the first point, there were those who did not regard the plague as a mercy but as God’s punishment for man’s bad behaviour, so that many rites and prayers gatherings took place, such as that of Damascus, by which the faithful begged God asking Him to ward off the scourge for His forgiveness. As for the second, it should be noted that during the Black Death there was a continuous exodus from the countryside to the cities, even when it was known that in urban centres the epidemic was at its height. Finally, in both Christian and Muslim societies, (some) men of science noticed that those who came into contact with infected people almost always fell ill, and developed a series of theories based on the concept of contagion. However, IB

170 “… in the middle of the eight [fourteenth] century, civilization both in the East and the West was visited by the destructive plague [al-tūʿ al-gharif] which devastated nations and caused populations to vanish. It swallowed up many of the good things of civilization and wiped them out. It overtook the dynasties at the time of their senility, when they had reached the limit of their duration. It lessened their power and curtailed their influence. It weakened their authority. Their situation approached the point of annihilation and dissolution. Civilization decreased with the decrease of mankind. Cities and buildings were laid waste, roads and way signs were obliterated, settlements and mansions became empty, dynasties and tribes grew weak. The entire inhabited world changed [tabaddala al-sākin/al-masākin]” (Ibn Ḥaldūn, trans. Rosenthal, vol. I: 64; Arabic text by Quatremère, vol. I: 51-52).


172 See, among other chroniclers, al-Maqūzī who repeats it on several occasions (al-Maqūzī, al-Sulīk, vol. 4, 84, 89, 90 and passim) and for modern scholars see Dols 1977: 84-142, 291-293 and passim; Conrad 1998; Congourdeau and Melhaoui 2001; Melhaoui 2005; Stearns 2007; Sabbatani et al. 2012b: 226-229; passim; Barone 2020 and Stearns 2020a; Stearns 2020b, who actualize his extensive studies by examining the issue in the time of Covid-19 pandemic.

173 For prayer gatherings during the Black Death see Sublet 1971: 147-149; Dols 1997: 246-252; Stearns 2009: 4-5; Mirza 2020a; Mirza 2020b; Tresso 2021a; Tresso 2021b.

174 Of significance is the work of the Andalusian Ibn al-Ḥabīb (713/1313-776/1374), who on the basis of his own empirical experience supported the transmissibility of the plague—but in order not to violate Islamic dogma that considers God to be the primary cause of all effects, stated that the disease is
does not mention these topics in the *Rihla*. He does not speak of “martyrs” when referring to victims of the Black Death, nor declare the scourge as a punishment from the Most High.\(^{175}\) He unhesitatingly travels to places affected by the scourge, and never appears interested in how and why the plague is transmitted. Of course, scientific or religious debates on such matters concerned only small circles of intellectuals and men of religion, but as always in his *Travels*, it is precisely these circles that IB claims he frequented during the pandemic: in Damascus where he claims to have stayed in the summer of 1348, in Mecca from November 1348 to the beginning of March 1349, and at the court of Tunis for a month just before returning home.\(^{176}\) And in the *Rihla* there are numerous episodes which describe theological disputes.\(^{177}\) As for the editor (or co-author) of the *Rihla*, Ibn Ǧuzayy, who was court scribe first in Granada and then in Fez, he too had certainly listened to, attended and taken part in debates on information and issues about the pandemic.

In short, the narrative of the Black Death in IB’s *Rihla* reads like a “casualty bulletin,” of the kind being broadcast on the news today, in the time of Covid-19. Yet, in the remainder of the *Rihla* there is not much information of this kind, since although describing many battles and various massacres (past or present), only on two occasions does it report the number of deaths.\(^{178}\) Of course, even bulletins can be very incisive,\(^{179}\) but the reasons for this change in style are difficult to identify, and a careful investigation of the still unpublished manuscripts of the *Rihla* may yet provide some explanation.\(^{180}\) It may be, contagious by the will of the Most High, and not by its nature. On the theory of contagion at the time of the Black Death, and particularly in the Muslim area, in addition to the works cited in note 171 see Dols 1974b: 269-287; 295-299; Conrad 1982: 268-307 and Conrad and Wujastyk 2000; AkasoY 2007: 387-410; Stearns 2009, Stearns 2011; Reich 2012; Speziale 2016; Buzzard 2017; Butler 2018.

In India, IB ascribes the death of Ǧiyāṭ al-Dīn during the above mentioned Madurai epidemic to a divine punishment (see note 151), but this does not mean that he interprets the disease as a punishment from the Most High against an entire people.

Alongside these debates, much remains to be investigated about reactions to the Black Death in popular culture and rituals (Sufism circles and personalities, preachers’ sermons, religious celebrations of various kinds, etc.). See the above-mentioned work by Shoshian 2002, on popular culture in Cairo in the medieval period.

In Yemen, for example, we read about the debate between a Sunni holy man of Zabīd and a group of Zaydite Shiites on the *qadar*, the decision, the “decree” with which God intervenes in the creation of the universe (Qur. 41, 12) and of all things (Qur. 54, 49), which constitutes a central concept in the discussions on predestination and free will (*al-Tāzī’ II: 106; Gibb II: 368 [EP 170-171]). For the concept of *qadar*, see among others Guillaume 1924; Zarkaria 2015.

The first is when, passing through Jabala, in present-day Syria, he recalls the *Nīṣāqīr* (or Alawite) revolt that broke out there in 717/1317 and reports that the combined armies of the governors of Latakia and Tripoli, intervening to suppress it, killed some 20,000 people (*al-Tāzī’ I: 292; Gibb I: 112 [EP 179]). The second concerns the invasion of Iraq by the Tatars in 1258. In this case it is Ibn Ǧuzayy who speaks, and he reports having heard that “there perished in the Tatar massacre in al-‘Iraq twenty-four thousand men of the class of scholars” (*al-Tāzī’ III: 24; Gibb II: 553-554 [EP 27]).

See Gibb’s laconic comment on the description of the plague by IB: “In a few terse sentences he reveals its frightful ravages” (Gibb 2004 [1929]: 8).

In this regard, I have only looked for the plague in the two already mentioned compendia of the *Rihla* translated on the basis of manuscripts other than those of by Defremery and Sanguinetti edition. The manuscript translated into Latin by Kosegarten does not mention the plague (*Kosegarten 1818*).
however, that when IB dictated his travelogue and Ibn Ḫuzayy edited it, they were thinking not so much of posterity as their audience at the time; those, who knew even more about the plague than they did and did not want to hear more. Or, alternatively, given that the plague is almost always mentioned in the final part of the work, might perhaps IB and Ibn Ḫuzayy both have been tired? The sultan was pressing for delivery of the commissioned work and therefore they were anxious to conclude and preferred to shorten the story in order to complete the task? Since Ibn Ḫuzayy probably died less than one year after the edition of the ʿRihla, someone has even suggested that he was in a hurry to conclude because he was seriously ill.\footnote{\textsuperscript{181}} If we look at the ʿRihla as a literary text, however, we can also assume that IB and/or Ibn Ḫuzayy deliberately did not include an overly strong description of such recent destruction and death, which fits poorly into a story where all sorts of adventures and misadventures happen to IB, but he always comes out unscathed.\footnote{\textsuperscript{182}}

**Personal testimony or not?**

As already often mentioned, in IB’s time there were those who criticised the “exaggeration” of his stories and to this day scholars continue to examine the authenticity of his testimony with regard to many passages of the ʿRihla. It therefore seems necessary to subject his narration of the Black Death to the same scrutiny, comparing it with that of the chronicles cited in this paper.

With regard to IB’s two-year journey during the Black Death, there seems to be no reason to suppose that IB and/or Ibn Ḫuzayy borrowed information from these sources. Although the literary style is very similar to that usually adopted in chronicles, the narrative of Black Death chroniclers is much more exciting and engaging. In this regard, therefore, the ʿRihla does not reveal external influences. We do not find any external influences regarding the numbers of victims, which, although they may be interpreted as “not discordant” with those of the chroniclers, vary considerably from them. As we have seen, some important information reported by the chroniclers—the epochal outbreak of the plague in Mecca during the Pilgrimage, Medina that remains unscathed, the ravage of the complete the task? Since Ibn Ḫuzayy probably died less than one year after the edition of the ʿRihla, someone has even suggested that he was in a hurry to conclude because he was seriously ill.\footnote{\textsuperscript{181}} If we look at the ʿRihla as a literary text, however, we can also assume that IB and/or Ibn Ḫuzayy deliberately did not include an overly strong description of such recent destruction and death, which fits poorly into a story where all sorts of adventures and misadventures happen to IB, but he always comes out unscathed.\footnote{\textsuperscript{182}}

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\footnote{\textsuperscript{181}} Al-Ṭazī I: 130.

\footnote{\textsuperscript{182}} Just to mention a few examples: in Anatolia IB almost perishes in the snow (Al-ṬazīII: 201-202; GIBB II: 456-457 [EP 329-332]); his ship is in danger of sinking off the coast of Sinope (Al-ṬazīII: 210, 215; GIBB II: 468-469 [EP 354-355]); in Punjab, together with some 20 companions, he is attacked by brigands and hit by an arrow (Al-ṬazīIII: 97; GIBB and BECKINGHAM III: 613 [EP 134]); on the road from Delhi to Dawlat Ābād he falls prisoner to a group of Hindus (Al-ṬazīIV: 11-12; GIBB and BECKINGHAM IV: 776-778 [EP 8-12]) and on arrival in al-Andalus he accidently escapes an ambush by Christians near Marbella (Al-ṬazīIV: 218; GIBB and BECKINGHAM IV: 939-940 [EP 364-365]).
Black Death in the Delta region and in Tunis, the markets closed in Gaza—does not appear in the Riḥla, nor does it describe any of the scenes of tragedy reported by chroniclers. Conversely, in the Riḥla we found several pieces of information that, although credible, are not reported by other sources: the number of victims in Homs, the end of the plague in Jerusalem and Alexandria, the percentage of deaths among Gaza’s notables and the presence of the plague in the Raḡab caravan—not to mention the precise number of 1,080 victims per day in Alexandria. Finally, some details suggest that IB speaks from personal experience: in Damascus, shortly before the outbreak of the epidemic, he says he met a jurist from Tangier who gave him news of his parents. Some months later, when he leaves Jerusalem for Cairo, he states that he travelled together with the sheikh of the Maghrebi of Jerusalem, Taḥḥā al-ʿAbd al-Wādī, and the traditionalist Ṣarāf al-Dīn Sulaymān al-Milyānī, which means “from Milyānī,” a city in present-day north-western Algeria, a few hundred kilometres from Fez. All three of these characters could have denied it, but if they did, no trace of it remains.183

To conclude this comparison with a typical expedient of classical Arabic literature much used in the Riḥla, however, I must temper this assertion with a counterbalancing observation:184 with regard to all the information contained in the first account of the Damascus prayer gathering, I myself, in a previous study, have demonstrated that it cannot be ruled out (but neither proved) that IB and/or Ibn Ǧuzayy drew information from other sources.185

Good health or divine inspiration?

A final question remains to be answered. As we have seen, the Riḥla, in chronological order, mentions the Black Death in Gaza, Homs, Damascus, Jerusalem, Alexandria, Cairo, the road from Cairo to Mecca, Tangier and Gibraltar: all places through which IB claims to have passed during the raging of the scourge. Not to mention that the plague also raged in Mecca and Tunis, where IB claims to have stayed, and in the Delta region, which he

183 See in this respect Gibb’s and Monteil’s argument that IB’s trip to China should be true because he claims to have met a compatriot from Ceuta, whose brother lived in Sijilmasa, in the Tafilalt oasis, who could easily have verified the information and discredited him (GIBB 2004 [1929]: 14; MONTEIL 1968: XIII). See also Levitzion and Hopkins, who suggest some borrowing from al-ʿUmarī’s work in IB’s description of Western Sudan, but do not question his journey to this area also by noting that he claims having met some compatriots there who, if not true, could have contradicted him (LEVITZION and HOPKINS 1981: 280).

184 The search for a counterbalance to weaken an assertion is undoubtedly one of the most recurrent Arab literary devices in IB’s text: thus, for instance, the Shiite inhabitants of al-Najaf, in Iraq, are said to be “…courageous and open-handed” and the period ends “…but they are fanatical about ʿAli” (AL-TĀZĪ I: 423; GIBB I: 258 [EP 419]). See also in the Maldives, when IB complains about the women’s clothing (“most of them wear only one apron from the navel to the ground, the rest of their bodies being uncovered”), but on reflection adds: “I had some slave-girls who wore garments like those worn at Dihlī and who covered their heads, but it was more of a disfigurement than an ornament in their case, since they were not accustomed to it” (AL-TĀZĪ IV: 60-61; GIBB and BECKINGHAM IV: 827-828 [EP 123]).

185 See TRESSO 2021b.
crossed to reach Alexandria (and maybe also in Western Sudan, where he made his last journey). His account of the epidemic in the first person and in so many places is exceptional, if not unique: given our current knowledge of contagion, if IB really made this journey the question arises, how did he remain unscathed?186

It is almost impossible to find an answer and this could simply be due to chance, but I will try to put forward two hypotheses.187 The first is that IB may have acquired a number of empirical hygiene skills from the many Sufis he liked to frequent, adopting the habits of their ascetic life. The assiduous observance of the rules guaranteeing the ritual purification necessary for prayer, the sober diet and the many periods of spiritual retreats he claims to have undergone during his travels, may have protected him even minimally from the risk of contagion.188 The second is that in the period between 1333 and 1346, during which he claims to have travelled in the Indian sub-continent and South-East Asia, IB could have at least partly protected (not to say immunised) himself from the plague. For some time, scholars believed that the Black Death bacillus belonged to the same strain as that of Justinian’s plague,189 but in recent decades it has been shown that between the first and second plague pandemics, probably between 1142 CE and 1339 CE, in the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau (modern China), the bacillus underwent a series of mutations that, in the years immediately preceding the Black Death, gave rise to an array of new strains, which were much more aggressive than the original one.190 These new, highly contagious bacilli spread extremely rapidly in the Middle East from many places and directions, until appearing in Egypt, Iraq and Syria in 1348. So it could be noted that IB claims to have travelled in different areas close to those where, at that very time, new strains of Yersinia pestis were

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186 This question has already been raised: see DUNN 1986: 273, who reports that IB leaves Damascus “in good health” but notes that “he says nothing of any personal measures he may have taken to keep from falling ill […] and he does not seem to have taken to the road to escape it”.

187 I have already partly put forward these hypotheses with Marco Rivalta in TRESSO and RIVALTA 2009.

188 Although he was never affiliated with a particular Sufi brotherhood, IB recounts having visited all the main places and personalities of Sufism and in his travels there are many occasions when he claims having shared the thoughts and practices of the Sufis: attending their meetings, staying in their monasteries [zāwiyā], paying homage at the tombs of sheikhs and pious people. Not to mention that, in the most difficult moments, we found him retreating to some Sufi hermitages to pray and fast. For example in India, perhaps in order to escape the sultan’s wrath, he recounts that he gave away all his money and possessions to the faqīr and the poor and led an ascetic life together with a Sufi, ‘Abd Allāh al-Gārī, for five months, concluding this retreat with a forty-day fast (AL-TĀZĪ III: 248-249; GIBB III: 766-767 [EP 445-447]). On IB and his relationship with Sufis, see GIBB 1929: 33-39; DUNN 1986: 20-23; MANDUCHI 2000: 108-122.

189 Among the most recent, see ECHENBERG 2007.

190 Green 2015b: 39. Recent paleo-genomic research has shown that, for reasons that are not entirely clear, the strain of Yersinia p. that caused Justinian’s epidemic has gradually died out (WAGNER et al. 2014). The second pandemic caused by Yersinia p., the Black Death, is said to have been caused by what scholars call a “Big Bang”, a polytomy with four branches (bacilli lineages). These newly generated strains were responsible for the Black Death and for the third pandemic—and all of them have living descendants today in rodent colonies in different parts of the world. As we have seen (note 77), scholars have recently suggested that the four explosive Yersinia pestis proliferations in new environments (i.e. the epidemiological process) started in the 13th century—and not in the 14th century where we customarily place the onset of the Black Death (CUI et al. 2013; WAGNER et al. 2014: 325; GREEN 2015b: 35-39; HYMES 2015; DEMEURE et al. 2019; GREEN 2020: 1610-1615).
progressively supplanting older, less virulent ones. Although the epidemic did not break out in India—at least not as strongly as in the Mediterranean area,\textsuperscript{191} it cannot be ruled out that some bacilli arrived there and claimed a small number of victims. That is, there may have been individual cases of the plague in several of the areas that IB frequented, or where he met people with whom he talked, slept and ate. A series of contacts with some of the bacillus carriers may therefore have enabled IB to develop some resistance to attacks by their new, very dangerous successors. But these answers are no more than hypotheses. Many others could be made: perhaps IB has not actually been in all these places, or he was simply very lucky or he has been blessed.

**Conclusion**

We cannot be certain that IB really followed the itinerary and made the stops he claims in this two-year journey “under the arrows of the Black Death.” That is, the hypothesis suggested by several scholars, that the Rihla is not a personal travelogue but rather a work of “haute couture” that brings together the personal experiences and knowledge of both IB and Ibn Juzayy, information received from witnesses met on site or elsewhere and news extrapolated from other works, might apply also to this part of IB’s travels.\textsuperscript{192}

Be that as it may, sources confirm that IB returned home at that time after twenty years of travelling.\textsuperscript{193} In his case, “return home” meant crossing the Arabic area during the rage of the pandemic and witnessing it. As for Ibn Šuzayy, who edited the text from the notes that IB dictated on his adventures, he too certainly witnessed the scourge in al-Andalus, where he was resident until 715/1353.\textsuperscript{194} Like all their contemporaries, they certainly heard—and like some of them also read—a lot of information about the Black Death and witnessed its fury.

The narration of the Black Death in IB’s Rihla is therefore certainly how two educated Moroccan Muslims who personally experienced the most shocking event of the Middle Ages decided to describe it. Some scholars have identified borrowings from other sources in some of the literary devices of the Rihla.\textsuperscript{195} In this case no one else, to my knowledge, has described the plague in the Mediterranean using a travelogue as a literary framework. If describing the Black Death with a two-year journey in the three continents then known, passing through and staying in the most affected places, is not a direct testimony but a literary procedure, it is certainly unique and of great impact.\textsuperscript{196}

\textsuperscript{191} See note 62.

\textsuperscript{192} The expression “haute couture” is proposed by Collet 2017. See also Faivelle-Aymar and Hirsch 2003: 93 and passim, who use “bricolage”.

\textsuperscript{193} See note 52.

\textsuperscript{194} For Ibn Šuzayy moving to Fez, see note 4. For the Black Death in al-Andalus, see note 150.

\textsuperscript{195} On the borrowing techniques allegedly used by IB and/or Ibn Šuzayy in the Rihla see esp. Mattock 1981, esp. 212-213; Euben 2006; Elger 2010b.

\textsuperscript{196} As for Arab travellers, I do not know of any other reports during the Black Death: Ibn al-Ḫaṭīb mentions IB as “one of the great travellers” who gave news about the plague, suggesting that he had heard or read other reports, but IB is the only one he cites (Ibn al-Ḫaṭīb, Muqniʿat al-sāʾil, 9). As for
Whether the Riḥla’s narration of the scourge is the truthful account of a traveller or how two educated men decided to narrate the scourge in the world they lived in, it remains a reliable documentary source on the history of Black Death in the Arab Mediterranean area and a unique and interesting masterpiece of (not only Arabic) medieval literature.¹⁹⁷

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travellers from other areas, the only one I am aware of is the Italian Franciscan friar Niccolò da Poggibonsi, who travelled throughout the Middle East between March 1346 and December 1350, but who apparently does not mention the epidemic in his memoirs (see Golubovich 1927, vol. 5, 1-12, who gives a detailed summary of them).

¹⁹⁷ Elger, who does not hesitate to call IB “a liar (and forger and plagiarist)” (Elger 2010b: 71), concludes his comparison of IB’s and/or Ibn Ǧuzayy’s Riḥla with different Arabic sources by stating: “If they did use these sources, they did it cleverly and produced a masterpiece, like the German author and famous liar Karl May” (ibid.: 86). Together with Karl May (1842-1912), and among others, we can recall the famous Travels of Sir John Mandeville, from the 14th century, and the Italian novelist Emilio Salgari (1862-1911).

¹⁹⁸ EF (Encyclopedia of İslâm, 2nd edition) has been consulted and sometimes quoted in the notes, but is not listed in the Bibliography.
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