

Ibn Fadlan and Other Visitors to the West from Islamic Lands

Richard N. Frye

Early travelers from the lands of Islam may be divided into four categories, some overlapping. First were embassies, then the teaching of Islam, trade, and finally curiosity, or seeking adventure. Moreover the contacts may be divided into periods determined by overall political events such as the Crusades, and the rise of the Ottoman Empire which altered the role of Arabs as representatives of the Islamic world.

An example of an embassy, combined with teaching the faith, would be the voyage of Ibn Fadlan [Ahmad [ibn](#) Fadlān ibn al-Abbās ibn Rašīd ibn Hammād] to the Bulgars on the Volga River in 921. Part of Ibn Fadlan's mission on behalf of the Abbasid Caliph entailed spreading the teachings of Islam.

Teaching Islam, and curiosity, concerned Abu Hamid al-Garnati who set out from Granada in about 1160 to explore the area from Eastern Europe

to Africa. Undoubtedly there were others traveling similar paths but records of travels are scarce. They may have included Arabs concerned with trade, but after the Crusades, trade was mainly in the hands of Jewish or native Christians of the Near East who in any case later dealt with Venetian and Genoese intermediaries in Europe. Muslim scholars among the travelers took advantage of the generosity shown to them and to pilgrims by Muslims among whom they traveled in Central Asia and eastern Europe in particular. Ibn Hawqal (travel dates 943 - 969) a writer, geographer, and chronicler born in Nisibis (now in Turkey) traveled to parts of Asia and Africa, writing about the areas and things he had seen. He visited Muslim-held Sicily and Spain but also wrote about the Byzantine Empire. Although he wrote a description of Kiev and the Volga region, whether he actually traveled there is not clear.

Like Garnati mentioned above, Muslims from Spain were especially active travelers. One of these was Abu Abdallah b. Idris al-Qurtubi al-Hasani (1099- 1166), born in Ceuta, Spain. Idrisi served at the court of Roger II (1095-1154), a post-Muslim ruler of Sicily, where he composed an atlas and the book, *Kitab al-Ruarij* (Roger) . There were many other travelers of this early period, such as Ibn Jubair, Ibn Baitar, and Ibn Batuta, but none of these went to the West

Because of mutual hostility from the 8th to the 11th centuries there was little travel between east and west. The Carolingian state and the 'Abbasid Caliphate being agriculturally centered, were less concerned with trade. In any case we have no other sources, than those mentioned above, concerning travel between the 'Abbasid or the Umayyad Caliphate in Spain and the west. The Byzantines, and later the Italian states, especially Venice, engaged in trade, but piracy and raids on one another flourished in the Mediterranean Sea. The competition between Christianity and Islam on the Byzantine and Spanish frontiers became even more hostile after the Crusades. After the establishment of the Ottoman Empire in the 13th century which dominated the scene, more Turkish contacts with the west especially after the fall of the Byzantines in 1453.

One of the more remarkable of the non-Arab Christians travelers was the 17th century native of Mosul, a priest in the Syriac Catholic Church, [Ilyas Hanna al-Mawsuli](#), who not only left a record of his work in Spain and France, but also of two trips he made to Central America where he conducted mass in his native Syriac to the indigenous people. There were others traveling from the Middle East to the West, such as the 13th century Nestorian monk, Bar Souma, but these were neither Arab nor Muslim.

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