Ibn Battuta at Pasai

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Ibn Battuta traveled in the mid-fourteenth century to Pasai, a small coastal city-state in northern Sumatra and the first place in Indonesia to accept Islam. Muslim traders (and perhaps missionaries) had traveled there from India several decades prior to this, but this port of Sumatra had clearly been engaged through trade, envoys, and occasional war with the wider world of the Indian Ocean for a very long time. Ibn Battuta was a Moroccan jurist, and much historiography compares his vast travels to those of Marco Polo; he traveled farther than the Venetian did, however, and his perspectives on life along the maritime routes have a distinctly Muslim flavor. Because of Ibn Battuta’s high status as a man of learning, he was accepted in many places including India, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and perhaps even China. In Pasai, he was a fellow Muslim, so his stories of the wider world were eagerly known by the sultan of that place and the ruling classes, who desired to know more about happenings in the rest of the Dar al-Islam (the abode of Muslim lands). Yet Ibn Battuta was also keen to report on what he saw in Islamic northern Sumatra—a frontier outpost of his religion that fascinated both him and his readers.

Twenty five days after leaving these people we reached the island of Java (Samarra), from which the island called Java takes its name. We saw the island when we were still half a day’s journey from it. It is verdant and fertile; the commonest trees there are the coco-palm, areca, clove, Indian aloe, jack-tree, mango, jamun (jambu), sweet orange, and camphor tree. The commerce of its inhabitants is carried on with pieces of tin and native Chinese gold, unsmelted. The majority of the aromatic plants which grow there are found only in the districts occupied by the infidels; in the Muslim districts they are less plentiful. When we reached the harbour its people came out to us in small boats with coconuts, bananas, mangoes, and fish. Their custom is to present these to the merchants, who recompense them, each according to his means. The admiral’s representative also came on board, and after interviewing the merchants who were with us gave us permission to land. So we went ashore to the port, a large village on the coast with a number of houses, called Sarha.
It is four miles distant from the town. The admiral's representative having written to the sultan to inform him of my arrival, the latter ordered the amir Dawlala to meet me, along with the quill [kadi] and other doctors of the law. They came out for that purpose, bringing one of the sultan's horses and some other horses as well. I and my companions mounted, and we rode to the sultan's capital, the town of Sumatra, a large and beautiful city encompassed by a wooden wall with wooden towers.

The sultan of Java, al-Malik az-Zahir, is a most illustrious and open-handed ruler, and a lover of theologians. He is constantly engaged in warring for the Faith (against the infidels) and in raiding expeditions, but is without a humble-hearted man, who walks on foot to the Friday prayers. His subjects also take a pleasure in warring for the Faith and voluntarily accompany him on his expeditions. They have the upper hand over all the infidels in their vicinity, who pay them a poll tax to secure peace.

As we went towards the palace we found near by it some spears stuck in the ground on both sides of the road. These are to indicate to the people to dismount; no one who is riding may go beyond them, so we dismounted there. On entering the audience-hall we found the sultan's lieutenant, who rose and greeted us with a hakirude. We sat down with him and he wrote a note to the sultan informing him of our arrival, sealed it and gave it to a page, who brought the reply written on the back. After this a page brought a bag of what he called a bag of linen. The lieutenant taking this led me by the hand into a small house, where he spends his hours of leisure during the day. He then brought out of the bag three aprons, one of pure silk, one of silk and cotton, and the third of silk and linen, three garments like aprons which they called underclothing, three garments of different kinds called middleclothing, three wooden mantles, one of them being white, and three turbans. I put one of the aprons in place of trousers, according to their custom, and one garment of each kind, and my companions took the rest of them. After food had been served we left the palace and rode in company with the lieutenant to a garden surrounded by a wooden wall. In the midst of the garden there was a house built of wood and carpeted with strips of cotton velvet, some dyed and others undyed. We sat down here along with the lieutenant. The amir Dawlala came bringing two slave girls and two men servants, and said to me: "The sultan says to you that this present is in proportion to his means, not to those of Sultan of Muhammad (of India)." The lieutenant left after this, and the amir Dawlala remained with me.

The amir and I were acquainted with one another, as he had come as an envoy to the sultan at Delhi. I said to him: "When can I see the sultan?" and he replied: "It is the custom of our country that a newcomer waits three nights before saluting the sultan, that he may recover from the fatigue of his journey." We stayed for three days. Food being sent to us thrice a day and fruits and sweetmeats every evening and morning. On the fourth day, which was a Friday, the amir Dawlala came to me and said: "You will salute the sultan today in the royal enclosure of the cathedral mosque after the service." After the prayer I went in to the sultan; he shook me by the hand and saluted me, whereupon he bade me sit down on his left and asked me about Sultan Muhammad and about my travels. He remained in the mosque until the afternoon prayers had been rested, after which he went into a chamber there, put off the garments he was wearing (these were the robes of the kind worn by theologians, which he puts on when he comes to the mosque on Fridays), and dressed in his royal robes, which are mantles of silk and cotton. On leaving the mosque he found elephants and horses at the gate. Their custom is that if the sultan rides on an elephant his suite ride on horses, and vice versa. On this occasion he mounted an elephant, so we rode on horses, and went with him to the audience hall. We dismounted at the usual place (where the horses were) and the sultan rode on into the palace, where a ceremonial audience was held, the sultan remaining on his elephant opposite the partition where he sits (at receptions). Male musicians came in and sang before him, after which they led in horses with silk caparisons, golden anklets, and halsers of embroidered silk. These horses danced before him, a thing which astonished me, though I had seen the same performance at the court of the king of India.

My stay at his court in Sumatra lasted fifteen days, after which I asked his permission to continue my journey, since it was now the sailing season, and because it is not possible to travel to China at all times of the year. He fitted out a junk for us, provisioned us, and made us rich presents—may God reward him—inviting one of his counsellors with us to bring his hospitality gift to us on the junk.