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CATSCAN 7 "My Rihla"

Abu 'Abdallah ibn Battuta, gentleman and scholar, late of Tangier, Morocco, has been dead for six hundred and thirty years. To be remembered under such circumstances is a feat to compel respect.

Ibn Battuta is known today because he happened to write a book--or rather, he dictated one, in his retirement, to a Granadian scribe--called *_A Gift to the Observers, Concerning the Curiosities of Cities and the Marvels Encountered in Travels_*. It's more often known as "The Rihla of Ibn Battuta," rihla being an Arabic literary term denoting a pious work concerned with holy pilgrimage and foreign travel.

Sometimes known as "the Marco Polo of Islam," Ibn Battuta claimed to have traveled some seventy thousand miles during the years 1325-1354, visiting China, Arabia, India, Ghana, Constantinople, the Maldiv Islands, Indonesia, Anatolia, Persia, Iraq, Sicily, Zanzibar . . . on foot, mind you, or in camel caravans, or in flimsy medieval Arab dhows, sailing the monsoon trade winds.

Ibn Battuta travelled for the sake of knowledge and spiritual advancement, to meet holy men, and to listen to the wisdom of kings, emirs, and atabegs. On occasion, he worked as a judge or a courtier, but mostly he dealt in information--the gossip of the road, tales of his travels, second-hand homilies garnered from famous Sufi mystics. He covered a great deal of territory, but mere exploration was not the source of his pride.

Mere distance mattered little to Ibn Battuta -- in any case, he had a rather foggy notion of geography. But his Moslem universe was cosmopolitan to an extent unrivalled 'till the modern era. Every pious Moslem, from China to Chad, was expected to make the holy pilgrimage to Mecca--and they did so, in vast hordes. It was a world on the move. In his twenty-year peregrinations. Ibn Battuta met the same people again and again. An Arab merchant, for instance, selling silk in Qanjanfu, China, whose brother sold tangeri

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in Fez (or fezzes in Tangier, presumably, when he got the chance). "How far apart they are," Ibn Battuta commented mildly. It was not remarkable.

Travel was hazardous, and, of course, very slow. But the trade routes were open, the caravanserais--giant government-supported hotels, sometimes capable of housing thousands--were doing a brisk trade from Cairo to Delhi to Samarkand. The locals were generally

friendly, and respectful of learned men--sometimes, so delighted to see foreigners that they fell upon them with sobs of delight and fought for the prestige of entertaining them.

Professor Ross Dunn's narrative of The Adventures of Ibn Battuta made excellent, and perhaps weirdly apt, reading last April, as I was traveling some thirty thousand feet above the North Atlantic in the boozy tin-can comfort of a KLM 747.

"God made the world, but the Dutch made Holland." This gross impiety would have shocked the sufi turban off the valorous Ibn Battuta, but we live today, to paraphrase Greg Bear, in a world of things so monstrous that they have gone past sin and become necessity. Large and prosperous sections of the Netherlands exist well below sea level. God forbid the rest of us should have to learn to copy this trick, but when I read the greenhouse-warming statistics I get a shuddery precognitive notion of myself as an elderly civil-defense draftee, heaving sandbags at the angry rising foam . . .

That's not a problem for the Dutch at the moment. They do, however, currently find themselves confronting another rising tide. "The manure surplus." The Dutch are setting up a large government agrobureaucracy to monitor, transport, and recycle, er, well, cowshit. They're very big on cheese, the Dutch, but every time you slice yourself a tasty yellow wedge of Gouda, there is somewhere, by definition, a steaming heap of manure. A completely natural substance, manure; nitrogen, carbon and phosphorous, the very stuff of life--unless *there's too much of it in one place

at the same time*, when it becomes a poisonous stinking burden. What goes around, comes around--an ecological truism as painful as constipation. We can speculate today about our own six hundred year legacy: not the airy palaces of the Moorish Alhambra, I'm afraid, or the graceful spires of the Taj Mahal, but billions of plastic-wrapped disposable diapers, mashed into shallow graves . . .

So I'm practicing my Arab calligraphy in my scholarly cell at the Austin madrassa, when a phone call comes from The Hague. Over the stellar hiss of satellite transmission, somebody wants me and my collaborator to talk about cyberspace, artificial reality, and fractals. Fair enough. A month later I'm sipping Coke and puffing Dunhills in tourist class, with a bag full of computer videotapes crammed in the overhead bin, outdistancing Ibn Battuta with no effort more strenuous than switching batteries in a Walkman.

Aboard the plane, I strike up a discussion with

a young Italian woman--half-Italian, maybe, as her father is an Iranian emigre'. She calls herself a "Green," though her politics seem rather strange--she sympathizes openly with the persecuted and misunderstood white Afrikaaners, for instance, and she insists that the Ayatollah Khomeini was an agent of British Intelligence. I have a hard time following these arguments, but when it comes to the relations of the US and Europe, her sentiments are clear enough. "After '92, we're going to kick your ass!" she tells me.

Unheard of. Europeans used to marvel humbly over our astonishing American highway system and the fact that our phones work (or used to). That particular load of manure is now history. The Europeans are happening now, and they know it. 1989 was a pivotal year for them, maybe the most momentous popular upheaval since 1789.

This century has not been a good one for Europe. Since 1914, the European body-politic has been wheezing along on one lung, a mass of fresh scar tissue when it wasn't hemorrhaging blood and bil

e. But

this century, "The American Century," as we used to call it in 1920 when there was a lot of it still before us, is almost gone now. A lot can happen in a century. Dynasties rise and fall. Philosophies flourish and crumble. Cities rise, thrive, and are sacked by Mongols and turned to dust and ghosts.

But in Europe today, the caravanserais are open. National borders in Europe, which provoked the brutal slaughter of entire generations in '14 and '44, have faded to mere tissues, vaporous films, riddled through-and-through with sturdy money-lined conduits of trade, tourism, telecommunications. Soon the twelve nations of the European Community will have one passport, perhaps one currency. They look to the future today with an optimism they have not had since "the lamps went out all over Europe" in World War One. (Except perhaps for one country, which still remains mired in the Cold War and a stubborn official provincialism: Britain. The Dutch feel sorry for Britain: declining, dirty, brutalized, violent and full of homeless--far too much, in short, like their too-close friends, the Americans.)

My Italian acquaintance introduces me to her mother, who is a passionate devotee of Shirley MacLaine. Mom wears an Iranian gold bracelet the size of rappers' jewelry, a diamond-studded knuckleduster. Her husband, the Iranian emigre', is an architect. His family was close to the Shah, and is now a scattered Moslem hejira in a dozen Western capitals, plotting

vengeance in desultory fashion, like so many White Russians in 1929. They may have a long wait. Father looks rather tired.

Off the plane, jet-lagged to hell and gone, in Amsterdam. A volunteer for the Image and Sound Festival drives me to The Hague in a very small car on a very large autobahn. Windmills here and there. Days later I inspect a windmill closely, a multistory preindustrial power-station of sailwork, levers, gears and thatch. An incarnation of a late-medieval tech that America simply never possessed. A some

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monstrous presence fit to scare the hauberk off Don Quixote.

The Hague is a nineteenth-century government town of close-packed four-story townhouses. The pavements, built on sand, ripple and warp like the sagging crust of an old pie. Advertisements in the bus-stops brutally abolish any air of the antique, though: "Mag ik u iets persoonlijks faxen? De Personal Fax van Canon. CANON--Meeten al een Voorsprong!" Dutch is close enough to English to nag at the ear, but it's landmined with liquid vowels and odd gutturals. The streets--"straats"--are awash with aging Euro baby-boomers, leavened with a Dutch-born populace of imperial emigres -- Dutch-Indonesian, Dutch-Surinamese, Dutch-Chinese.

On Wednesday, Moluccan separatists bombarded the Indonesian embassy, near my hotel, with Molotov cocktails. A dozen zealots were injured. Nobody outside Holland and Indonesia know much about the Moluccans, an Asian Moslem ethnic group with a nationalistic grievance. They'd love to raise hell at home in Indonesia, but when they do they're shot out of hand by fascist police with teeth like Dobermans, so they raise a stink in the old Mother Country instead, despite the fact that Holland can do almost nothing for them. Europe is full of exiles--and full of its own micro-nations: the Flemish, the Magyars, Gypsies, Corsicans and Bretons, Irish who remember Cromwell, Jews who remember Nebuchadnezzar, Basques who remember Hannibal, all like yesterday.

Ibn Battuta's world was similarly polyglot, and divided into "nations," too, run by mamelukes and moghuls who doted on tossing dissidents to packs of ravenous man-eating dogs. Muhammed Tughlug, the radiant Sultan of Delhi, punished rebels (very loosely defined) by having them cut in half, skinned alive, and/or tossed aloft by trained elephants with swords strapped to their tusks. It was bad news to cross these worthies, and yet their borders meant little, and ethnicity even less. A believer was a citizen

anywhere in Islam, his loyalties

devoted to

Civilization--the sacred law of the Prophet--and then to his native city. Ibn Battuta was not a "Moroccan" countryman or a "Berber" ethnic, but first a learned Islamic scholar, and second a man of Tangier.

It may soon be much the same in Europe--a vague attachment to "Western democratic ideals," while one's sense of patriotism is devoted, not to one's so-called country, but to Barcelona or Amsterdam, Marseille or Berlin. (Cities, mind you, with populations every bit as large as entire nations of the medieval world.) At this period in history, the aging institution of the nation-state is being torn from above and below--below by ethnic separatists, above by the insistent demands of multinational commerce and the global environment.

Is there a solution for the micronations--besides, that is, the dark horrific example of the "Final Solution?" Maybe. Let the Lithuanians "go"--give them "freedom"--but with no local currency, no local army, no border tariffs or traffic control, no control over emigration, and with the phones and faxes open 24 hours a day. What is left? City-level government, in a loose ecumenicum.

A good trick, if anyone could pull it off. It's contrary to our recent political traditions, so it seems far-fetched and dangerous. But it's been done before. Six hundred years ago, in another world . . . The fourteenth century, what Barbara Tuchman called A Distant Mirror.

In Alanya, a city of medieval Anatolia, Ibn Battuta had his first introduction to the interesting organization known as the fityan. He was invited to dinner by a remarkably shabby man in an odd felt hat. Ibn Battuta accepted politely, but doubted that the young fellow had enough money to manage a proper feast.

His interpreter laughed, for the shabby young man was a powerful sheik of the fityan. "The fityans were corporations of unmarried young men representing generally the artisan classes of Anatolian towns . . . The code of conduct and initiation ceremonies were fo

unded on a set of standards and values that went by the name of futuwwa . . . referring in concept to the Muslim ideal of the `youth' (fata) as the exemplary expression of the qualities of nobility, honesty, loyalty and courage. The brothers of the fityan were expected to lead lives approaching these ideal qualities, including demonstrations of generous hospitality to visiting strangers . . . By the

thirteenth or fourteenth centuries, the fityan associations existed in probably every Anatolian town of any size. In an era of political upheaval and fragmentation . . . the fityan were filling a crucial civic function of helping to maintain urban cohesiveness . . ."

Far from humble poverty, Ibn Battuta found his medieval youth-culture hosts occupying a fine downtown lodge crammed with pricey Byzantine rugs and Iraqi glassware. The lads were dressed to the nines in long cloaks, boots, knife-decked cummerbunds and snazzy white bonnets with pointed white peaks two feet high. "They brought in a great banquet, with fruits and sweetmeats, after which they began their singing and dancing." He was "greatly astonished at their generosity and innate nobility."

No more so, perhaps, than myself and my Canadian caravan companion when we found ourselves in a retrofitted nineteenth-century stove factory downtown in The Hague. Now a filmhouse, it was crammed with young Dutch media-devotees in the current multinational fityan get-up of black jeans and funny haircuts. Their code of conduct was founded in a set of standards and values that goes by the name of "cool." Six hundred years from now, the names of Mark Pauline, Laurie Anderson and Jean Baudrillard may mean little, but at the moment they are the stuff of a Sufi-like mystical bond.

We gave them a few names and second-hand homilies: Mandelbrot, ART-MATRIX, _Amygdala_, Jaron Lanier, Ryoichiro Debuchi--with addresses and fax numbers. We are pagans, of course, and we have video screens; but basically little happened that would hav

e surprised the lads of the fityan--except for the shocking anomaly that many of us were women.

In his travels through Anatolia, Ibn Battuta stayed with no less than 25 separate fityans. But then, he was a professional.

In my time off, I tramped the streets seeking the curiosities of cities and the marvels encountered in travels. Would the hashish have surprised Ibn Battuta? I rather doubt it. You can buy hashish in The Hague in little plastic bags, for about six bucks a pop, quite openly. A hole-in-the-wall place called The Jukebox offers a varied menu: Senegalese marijuana, Swazie, Columbian, Sensemilla . . . and various global subspecies of hash: Chocolata, Ketama, Kabul, Sputnik, Zero-Zero . . . It's a teenage thing, bubblegum. They're not allowed in bars, Dutch teenagers. They have to smoke this harmless hashish stuff instead. They seem rather moody and somber about it, for they

don't kick up their heels, scream, giggle, or frighten the horses. They just get red-eyed and a bit sluggish, and listen to old Motown records while sipping orange soda and playing of all things, backgammon. They huff hash like monsters and nobody thinks a damn thing of it. Shocking.

In the Maldivian Islands, Ibn Battuta was appointed a judge. The lax and easy life of the tropical Indian seas offended his sense of propriety. Once he sentenced a thief to have his right hand severed, a standard punishment by the sacred law, and several sissy Maldivians in the council hall fainted dead away at the sight of it. The women were worse yet. Most Maldivian women, he related, "wear only a waist-wrapper which covers them from the waist to the lowest part, but the remainder of their body remains uncovered. Thus they walk about in the bazaars and elsewhere. When I was appointed judge there, I strove to put an end to this practice and commanded the women to wear clothes; but I could not get it done. I would not let a woman enter my court to make a plaint unless her body were covered; beyond this, how

ever, I was unable to do anything."

Poor fellow. Later in his career Ibn Battuta had the good luck to accompany a slave-train of six hundred African women as they were force-marched across the blistering Sahara. There was a great deal of money in the slave-trade; its master-traders were very well-respected. Ibn Battuta owned several slaves in his career, but he was an unlucky master; they could not keep up with his restless migrations, and drowned, or froze, or fell ill, or were sold. He does not keep count of the number of children he sired, but there were many, mostly by slave-women.

What atrocities are we committing today, that we too take in stride?

History lives in the Mauritshuis, shelter to a horde of Rembrandts and Vermeers. Portraits--with that pre-photographic intensity that an image had when it was one-of-a-kind, likely the only visual record of the sitter that would ever be made. The portraits are formalized, flattering, very studied, and they lie a lot. The children of the rich pick garlands of flowers in unlikely getups of velvet and chiffon, expensive fabrics that a grass-stain would ruin forever. This kind of portraiture is a dead visual language now, and when the language no longer works, the lies become evident, like someone else's old propaganda.

It was a rich and earthy life. Leather, wood, wool, bloody still-life heaps of slaughtered game. A woman in satin rides side-saddle with a boar-spear in

one dainty gauntlet. Huntsmen let fly with flintlock muskets at a foam-snorting pig. The sky has never known an airplane; these are clouds that have never been seen from above, fleecy and untainted by smog.

But there is honesty, too. Vermeer's famous Girl in a Blue Turban is not posed, but caught in an instant in the mind's eye. She is plainly dressed, and her sweet frail face strikes the viewer in a sudden rush, the very opposite of all those formal images of Dutch aristos with unearned power and too much jewelry.

Here are Rembrandt's se

lf-portraits--a big-nosed kid of twenty-two or so, striking a pose in fake-looking armor, the detail excellent, but perhaps a bit forced. Transmuted by time and experience, he becomes a big-nosed saggy-eyed veteran, a gold pendant in one earlobe. Less youth--but more gold. And a lightning-quick brushwork that catches the play of light with an almost frightening ease.

Flattery was their stock in trade. They knew it was a shuck, a stunt, a trick. Ever notice how good artists can make each other look? With their palettes hooked over their thumbs they resemble philosopher-kings. The big money was in flattery, but they were restless. Here and there real-life boils out in a rush. J. V. D. Heyde (1637-1712) paints the Jesuit Church of Dusseldorf. A couple of black-clad Jesuits tramp the street talking, very likely up to no good. A beggar-woman nurses a baby, with an older kid taking alms in the gutter. Who is the father? Ibn Battuta? Some working-stiff and his wife push a monster wheelbarrow up the hill, putting their backs into it. Dogs piss and tussle, and loungers bowl ninepins in the public square.

F. van Mieris (1635-1681) clearly spent a lot of time in bars. Here, taken from low-life, is a wasted blonde barmaid in a white dress, pouring wine for a redheaded captain-at-arms. In the doorway, a red dog fucks a white bitch, a symbol as stone-obvious as being hit in the head with a bung-starter.

A block away from the Mauritshuis is a shopping district, the streets bent and skinny and pre-automotive, an open-air mall. MEGA WORLD COMPUTERWINKELS, reads the sign outside the software shop. Soon all Europe will be mega world computerwinkels, cool nets of data, a cybernetic Mecca. Our Mecca will be electronic, and you'll be a nobody 'till you've made that sacred pilgrimage.

We look to the future. Extrapolation is powerful, but so is analogy, and history's lessons must be repeated helplessly, until they are seen and

understood and deliberately broken. In 54 Javastraat,

the Ambassade van Iran has telecameras trained on its entrances. A wounded Islam is alive and convulsing in fevered spasms.

65 Zeestraat contains the Panorama Mesdag, the nineteenth century's answer to cyberspace. Tricks of light are harnessed to present a vast expanse of intricately painted, cunningly curved canvas, 360 degrees in the round. It presents, to the stunned eye, the seaside resort of Scheveningen, 1881 A.D. You stand on the center on a round wooden platform, a kind of faux-beachhouse, fenced in by railings; at your feet stretches an expanse of 100% real sand, studded with torn nets, rusting anchors, washed-up wooden shoes, fading cunningly into the canvas. This must surely be Reality--there's trash in it, it has to be real. The Panorama's false horizon will not sit still for the eye, warping in and out like a mescaline trip. Coal smoke hangs black and static from a dozen painted stacks, the bold ancestry of our current crimes against the atmosphere.

There used to be dozens of these monster Panoramas, in Paris, Hamburg, London. The Panorama is a dead medium, as dead as the stereograph, whose ungainly eye-gripping tin hood is now reborn as the head-wrapping Sony Watchmans of Jaron Lanier's Virtual Reality.

It all returns. The merchants and pilgrims of Ibn Battuta's flourishing Islam push their trade-routes farther, farther. Trade expands, populations swarm, laws and libraries grow larger and more refined. At length trade opens to an obscure corner of Siberia, where a certain species of rodent harbors a certain flea.

Ibn Battuta witnesses the result, without ever understanding it. June, 1348: travellers tell him of a virulent unknown disease raging in Gaza, a thousand people dying every day. Swellings appear in groin and neck and armpits, with nausea and delirium. If it takes to the lungs, the victim spits blood and dies within hours. In the town of Homs, in Syria, Ibn Battuta is engulfed by the wave of Black Death. Three hundred die on the day o

f his arrival there.

In Damascus, two thousand are dying each day and the great polyglot metropolis has shuddered to a halt. The amirs, the sharifs, the judges, and all the classes of the Moslem people, have assembled in the Great Mosque to supplicate God. After a night of prayer, they march out at dawn, barefoot, the Holy

Koran in their hands. And then:

"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 their Gospel, their women and children with them; the whole concourse of them in tears and humble supplications, imploring the favor of God through His Books and His Prophets."

As the pestilence lurches from city to city, from mosque to caravanserai, the afflicted scatter in terror, carrying their fleas like pearls throughout the vast linked network of the civilized world. From China to the Atlantic coast, Ibn Battuta's world is one, and therefore terribly vulnerable. The Great Wall of China is no defense; and Europe's foremost traders, the cosmopolitan Genoans and Venetians, will ship a cargo of death throughout the Mediterranean. Paris, Barcelona, Valencia, Tunis, Cairo, Damascus, Aleppo and Bordeaux will all suffer equal calamity in the dreadful spring and summer of 1348. Their scientific experts, those doctors who survive, will soberly advise their patients to apply egg yolks to the buboes, wear magical amulets, and have their sickbeds strewn with fresh flowers.

Ibn Battuta is now forty-five. Perhaps unnerved by the plague, he decides to return home to Tangier after twenty-five years on the road. For a while, the seasoned traveller outruns the horror, but it soon catches up with him again. When he reaches Tangier at last, the Death has come and gone. His father has been dead for fifteen years. But the plague has killed his aged mother. He misses her by mere months.

The havoc is unspeakable, beyond imagination. The Plague will return again in t

he next generation,
and the next again, emptying cities and annihilating dynasties. The very landscape will change: irrigation canals will silt up, grass will grow over the trade-roads, forests will grow in old villages. It is Apocalypse.

Life will, nevertheless, go on. Civilization, pruned back bloodily and scourged by God Himself, refuses to collapse. History lurches under the blow, changes course--and moves on. A century of horror will fade, and, unguessed by anyone, a Renaissance beckons

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Ibn Battuta will meet a young Muslim poet from Spain, named Ibn Juzayy. Together they will compose a formal rihla of his travels. He works from memory--a vivid and well-trained memory, for Ibn Battuta, as a scholar of repute, can recite the entire Koran unaided, as well as many canons of the sacred law.

Nevertheless, some poetic license will be taken, some episodes distorted, mis-remembered, or confused, some outright lies told. The great traveller will be regarded by many as a charlatan, or as a mere entertainer, a spinner of fantastic tales.

His Rihla will be little known until the nineteenth century, when European scholars discover it with astonishment and wonder.