

The Travels of Ibn Battutah, edited by Tim Mackintosh-Smith.
Picador, 2002, £20.00.

One of the most romantic Jewish figures of the Middle Ages is Benjamin of Tudela, a twelfth century Jew who travelled around the whole of the Mediterranean world towards the end of the century. His account of his journeying is widely considered to be truthful and his descriptions of the Jewish communities that he visited on his travels are unique.

Ibn Battutah, the most common version of an extremely long name, was a fourteenth century Moslem traveller who was to Islam what Benjamin was to Judaism, but whose travels were far more extensive and of much greater length. He left his home town of Tangier to make the hajj to Mecca, but didn't actually return there for twenty nine years! It was obviously his love of travel rather than poor map reading that kept him away, for during those three decades he visited some forty countries, travelling as far south as Tanzania, as far north as the river Volga, and as far east as China.

His journal, the Rihlah, is extremely long, as one might imagine, probably the longest extant travel book, and we should be grateful to Tim Mackintosh-Smith for producing this excellent abridgement of it.

Ibn Battutah visited many places where there were Jewish communities, though he predictably dwells on the Moslem states and peoples whom he encountered and which were his main focus. He does, however, refer to Christianity and its shrines on occasion. His tales are rich in detail, full of fascinating characters from the holy to the profane and the exalted to the lowly, and will bring pleasure to anyone who has enjoyed reading the tales of the Arabian Nights.

This is a glorious and evocative text, easy to read from start to finish or to dip into from time to time. Everyone will find a story that appeals to them especially, for me nothing could beat that of the Qadi of Shiraz who tamed the man-eating hounds of the Sultan of Iraq.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh