

“Ibn Jubair's Account of his Journey through Syria”
in
Medieval Civilization,
Dana Carlton Munro & George Clarke Sellery
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“We were at Damascus, and ready to set out for Acre. May Allah deliver this city into our hands! It was the time of the new moon and the beginning of the month of Djomada second, or Sunday, the ninth day of the month which the Christians call September. We were planning to embark, with some Christian merchants, on vessels built for sailing in autumn, and named by them *salibiya*. We did set out on Thursday evening, the fifth of this month (Djomada second), with a crowd of merchants who were going to Acre with their merchandise.

“We passed the night at Dariya, a village which was a *parasang* and a half from Damascus, and we set out again on Friday morning at daybreak for another place surrounded by hills and named Beit Djann. Saturday morning we set out for Paneas. When we had gone half the way, we came to an oak with an enormous trunk and large branches, which they told us was called “the tree of the balance.” In response to our questions, they said that the name was given because the tree marked on this road the boundary between security and the danger of attack by Frankish brigands. They seize as prisoners all whom they find beyond this tree on the Muslim side, even if it is only by a span's distance; on the contrary, whosoever is beyond the tree on the Frankish side by the same distance can continue his journey in freedom. This regulation, which had been agreed upon, was observed strictly...

“We left Tibnin early Monday morning by a road which passed a continuous row of farms, wholly inhabited by Muslims, who live in great comfort under the Franks; may Allah preserve us from such a temptation! The terms which are imposed upon them are the surrender of half the crop at the time of harvest, and the payment of a poll-tax of one dinar and five kirats. The Franks demand nothing more, except a light tax upon the fruits; but the Muslims are masters of their dwellings, and govern themselves as they wish. This is the case in all the territory occupied by the Franks upon the littoral of Syria, that is, of all the villages inhabited by the Muslims. The hearts of most Muslims are filled with the temptation of settling there, when they see the condition of their brethren in the districts governed by the Muslims, because the state of the latter is the reverse of comfortable.

“One of the misfortunes which afflict Muslims is that they have always reason for complaint, under their own government, of the injustice of their chiefs, and that they have cause only to praise the conduct of the Franks—and the justice on which one can always depend; but Allah is the only refuge for any one who complains of this state of affairs.

“That same Monday we stopped at a farmstead about a *parasang* from Acre. The head man who was in charge was a Muslim. He had been appointed by the Franks to have charge of the cultivators. He invited everyone in our caravan to a great banquet in a large room in his own house. He had all kinds of dishes served, and did honor to each one.

“After having passed the night there, we set out on Tuesday morning and soon reached Acre. We were taken to the custom-house, a caravansary prepared to receive caravans. Before the gate is a carpeted platform, on which the Christian clerks sit. They have inkstands of ebony ornamented with gold-work. They keep their accounts in Arabic, and also speak this language. Their head, who is chief of the customs, is called simply *sahib*—a title derived from the

importance of his work; for the Christians employ this name for all their important men who are not in the army. All the receipts belong to the chief of the custom-house, who pays a very large sum to the government. The merchants in our company carried their merchandise thither, and installed themselves in the upper story. The baggage of those who had no merchandise was examined, to make sure

that it contained nothing dutiable, and then they were allowed to go where they pleased. The examination was made in a quiet and courteous manner, without any violence or overcharge. We rented from a Christian woman a house which faced upon the sea, and there we stayed.

“Acre is the most important of the Frankish cities in Syria. It is the port ‘for the ships, carrying their sails aloft in the sea, like mountains’ [from The Koran]. All the vessels anchor there, and by its greatness Acre resembles Constantinople. The ships and the caravans resort thither, and it is the meeting-place for Christian and Muslim merchants of all lands; its streets and lanes are full of people, and there is a continual coming and going. But infidelity and arrogance are present everywhere, and the place swarms with pigs and crosses; it is dirty and smells vilely, for it is full of filth and garbage. The Christians took it from the Muslims in the first decade of the sixth century (of the

Hegira), and the eyes of Islam were filled with tears, for this was a deep sorrow. The mosques were then turned into churches, and the minaret became a clock-tower. Allah permitted only one corner of the principal mosque to escape profanation; and this became, in the hands of the Muslims, a little mosque where strangers gathered to obey the obligatory prescription of prayer. Near the sanctuary is the tomb of the prophet Saleh, a holy spot, by virtue of which the divine favor has permitted this position to escape from the unclean touch of the infidel. In the eastern part of the city is the Spring of the Ox. From this Allah caused the ox to come forth for Adam. The descent to the spring is by polished steps. Near this spring there was formerly a mosque, of which the oratory has remained uninjured. To the east of it the Franks have constructed an oratory; thus, Muslim and infidels meet there—although it belongs to the Christians—and each one says his prayers, facing in the direction that his faith prescribes. It is in this venerable and sacred edifice that Allah has reserved for the Mussulmans a place where they can pray.

“After remaining two days at Acre, we set out for Tyre, on Thursday, the twelfth of Djomada second [September 20]... Tyre is a city so strongly fortified that it is spoken of proverbially as a city which refuses obedience or submission to every conqueror. The Franks have planned to make it an asylum in case of ill fortune, and they regard it as their chief safety. Its streets and lanes are cleaner than those in Acre; the infidel belief of its inhabitants is of a more courteous character, and their habits and feelings more generous toward foreign Muslims; their manners are more refined, their dwellings larger and more comfortable, and the lot of the true believers is more quiet and peaceful. (But Acre is larger, and the infidels are more boastful and more numerous.) The

strength and impregnability of Tyre are of the most marvelous character, and depend mainly upon the fact that there are only two gates. One opens upon the mainland; the other upon the sea, by which the city is entirely surrounded except on one side. The first of these gates is reached only after passing three or four others, all of them surrounded by strong ramparts ; the second, which gives access to the harbor, is between two fortified towers. The situation of the harbor itself is different from that of any other maritime city; the walls of the city surround it on three sides, and arches of strong masonry form the fourth side, so that it is under the very ramparts that vessels enter and go to their anchorage-ground. A strong chain is stretched between the two towers of which we have just spoken, and then all entrance and exit become impossible as long

as the chain is there. The gate itself is entrusted to guards and watchmen, under whose eyes all who enter or depart from the port must necessarily pass. All this makes a marvelous position. The harbor at Acre, undoubtedly, resembles it; it is equally well arranged and protected, but only vessels of a small tonnage can enter it ; large ships anchor in the open sea. The situation of the harbor at Tyre is, therefore, better, more inclusive, and better arranged.

Our stay in this city lasted eleven days; we entered it on Thursday, and we left on Sunday the twenty-second of Djomada second [September 30]. The reason for our delay was that the vessel upon which we hoped to embark seemed too small, and we did not think it prudent to risk ourselves upon it.



Above: The *Krak des Chevaliers*, Syria. The original fortress, built in 1031, was abandoned after the First Crusade. It was later given to the Knights Hospitaller, who dramatically enlarged it and occupied the site from 1142-1271. Both Nur ad-Din and Saladin failed, on separate occasions, to wrest it from the defenders. King Andras II of Hungary further added to its walls during the Fifth Crusade. King Edward I of England, visited the castle during the Ninth Crusade and studied its defenses. Returning home, he built a series of castles modelled after it, e.g. Beaumaris.

“One day, while we were at Tyre, we had an opportunity to see, near the harbor, one of the most pompous spectacles imaginable—a wedding procession. All the Christian men and women present at the fete were drawn up in two lines before the bride's door. Trumpets, flutes, and all kinds of musical instruments resounded. They awaited thus the bride's departure. She appeared, at length, conducted by two men, who supported her on either side and appeared to be her kinsmen. She was splendidly attired, according to their usual mode of dressing, and wore a magnificent silk robe embroidered with golden thread, whose long train swept the ground. Upon her forehead rested a diadem of gold, covered with a fillet of cloth of gold, and her bosom was adorned in the same manner. Thus clad, she advanced trippingly, with measured steps, like a turtle-dove, or like the dust moved by a gentle breeze. May Allah preserve us from the temptations which such spectacles excite! She was preceded by Christian magnates, and followed by Christian women, who advanced mincingly, with their most beautiful ornaments trailing behind them. The procession started, the orchestra at the head, while the simple spectators, Muslims and Christians, ranged themselves in two rows, to be present at the march. The, cortege

proceeded to the house of the bridegroom, which the bride entered, and the whole company spent the day in feasting. Such was the magnificent spectacle at which chance permitted me to be present. May Allah preserve us from its seductive influence!

“During our whole stay at Tyre, we found repose only in the mosque which has remained in the hands of our brethren, although there are other mosques. Among the principal citizens of Damascus, there were two extremely wealthy merchants. All their trade was carried on along the Frankish coast, where their names were held in high esteem and they had agents under their orders. Caravans which bore their merchandise were constantly going and coming; they had colossal fortunes, as well as great influence both with the Muslim and Frankish princes. The lord of Acre, whom his subjects call king [Baldwin IV*], was invisible, concealed from every one, for Allah had inflicted him with leprosy. His treasurer [Joscelin III, count-in-exile of Edessa] had charge of the administration in his place; he was called the count, and he had the oversight of the taxation. All the revenues are paid to him, and, by his rank and authority, he has power over everything. It is this accursed count, lord of Tripoli and Tiberias, who is the most important person among the Franks, with whom he enjoys great power and high rank; he is worthy of the throne for which he seems born, and his intelligence and cunning are remarkable. For about a dozen years, perhaps even longer, he was a prisoner of Nur ad-Din; finally, at the beginning of the reign of Saladin [a Kurd whose Muslim name was Salah al-Din], he bought his liberty for a large ransom. He acknowledged Saladin as his lord and liberator.

“In the plain of Tiberias, because of the convenience of the road, there is a great passing of caravans from Damascus, for mules have to be used only in going by the Tibnin road, because of its difficulties. The two cities of Acre and Tyre are not surrounded by gardens; they are situated in a vast plain, which reaches to the sea, and the fruits which they need are obtained from the orchards in the neighborhood. Each city has extensive lands, and the neighboring hills are covered with villages, which send their fruits to these two cities because they are the most important. To the east of Acre, on the side of the mainland, there is a valley in which a river flows, and between the river and the sea there is the most beautiful plain of fine sand that can be seen anywhere. There is no race-course that can be compared with it. The master of the city goes there every morning and evening, to ride horseback, and it is also the parade-ground for the troops. At Tyre, near the gate which opens upon the mainland, there is a spring with steps leading to it, and, in addition, there are many wells and cisterns in the city—every house has its own.”

*Baldwin—he became King of Jerusalem at the age of 13—is noteworthy for both his good character and his intelligence. He was one of a select few that inflicted a defeat upon Saladin (The Battle of Mount Gisard).