A single empire without borders contributed to culture, science and travel. Baghdad became a unique political and commercial centre and a beacon for scholars. The Abbasids set up schools, hospitals, and bazaars teeming with goods from around the world. There was a souk called “Al-Warraqueen”, which, according to historians, housed hundreds of shops selling imported writing papers and manuscripts. It was visited by scientists, philosophers, men of letters, poets and artists from Islamic countries. This souk was located on present-day Al Moutanabi Street, which was recently burned by terrorists. But the book sellers have returned determined that the enemies of culture will not win.

In medieval times, Muslim travellers were very active and adventurous inside and outside their empire. They took great risks in search of culture and science and wrote about the lands they visited in their quest. Some of them were real archaeologists, who visited ancient sites and cemeteries.
and described them in detail, centuries before the Europeans.

There were several famous Muslim travellers from the Middle Ages: Ibn Wahb Al-Qorashi,Osama Bin Monqid, Abdellatif El Baghdadi, El Harawi As-Sa’ih, Naser Khasrou, Ibn Fadlan, Ibn Battuta and Ibn Jubir.

**Ibn Wahb Al-Qorashi (256 H/870 AD)**

Ibn Wahb Al-Qorashi was an Arab traveller, who made a trip to China in the year 256 of Hegira. He left Basra, which was sacked by the Zinj (the revolt of black slaves in 869), joined an Indian boat at the port of Siraf and travelled extensively throughout the kingdoms of India before reaching Canton in China. Then he went to the Chinese capital, Xi’an, and there was an encounter with the emperor, during which he discussed matters of religion and politics. The emperor showed him a few portraits of prophets, including that of Mohammed on a camel surrounded by his companions.

**Osama Bin Monqid (488H/1098AD)**

The father of Osama Bin Morshid of Bani Monqid was the emir of Shaizar region in northern Syria, who abdicated in favour of his brother. Osama had been an emir, a knight, a man of letters and a traveller. He had contacts with the Muslim men of letters of his time, and with some Christian princes and knights. His book “Al I’tibar” (The Account), contains a detailed description of the lands he visited and their relations with Muslims and Christians. He wrote, inter alia, on the Franks: “They have no sense of pride or jealousy. At home, a man and his wife could meet another man who can take his wife aside and discuss with her in isolation. The husband waits aside until they finish. If she takes long, he leaves her with him and goes...” Osama also said that the moral values and personal qualities of Christians improved as they settled in the East and mixed with Muslims.

**Abdellatif El Baghdadi (557H/1162AD)**

Abdellatif El Baghdadi made many trips across the Islamic world, and described the ancient ruins. Thus, he wrote about cemeteries in Egypt and his writing does not differ greatly from what has been revealed by modern archaeological research, which started more than 700 years after his death. He visited the pyramids, gave a description of them and pointed to the caves (i.e. cemeteries): “…many and deep, these caves, the rider enters with his spear and spends an entire day without reaching their limit, so they are broad and deep…” He also indicated that in his age people destroyed the remnants, breaking statues, and came to the cemeteries in search of treasures and gold buried with the dead.

**El Harawi As-Sa’ih (568H/1173AD)**

He is Ali bin Abi Bakr (or Abi Taleb), Bin Ali El Harawi, born in Mosul. He travelled throughout the Islamic world and beyond. Thus, he visited Damascus in 568H and Alexandria in 570H. The Crusaders plundered his books in 588H when he was in a caravan. When writing about Egypt he said: “The pyramids are one of the wonders of the world; found nowhere on earth, both in East and the West, construction so wonderful... They say Al Mammon had opened a pyramid near the island, and found a large square well. In each side of the well, there was a door giving access to a room where the dead were in their clothes”. It is said that he found at the top of the pyramid a room with a pool of rocks similar to a tomb, where there was a statue in the image of a man and in the middle of it there was a man with a gold breastplate inlaid with pearls and around his head a large oval ruby emitting a light as a fire...” El Harawi also saw the pool he would describe in his book “Wonders, relics, statues and codes”.

El Harawi wrote about the ruins and cemeteries of Upper Egypt, the dead who were well preserved with their shrouds in their original condition. Indeed, recent archaeological discoveries, and the abundant fabrics found by researchers in these tombs confirm what El Harawi described nearly 800 years ago.

**Naser Khasrou (394H/1003AD)**

Naser Khasrou is regarded as one of the sources and references for the description of Muslim societies in the Middle Ages. He visited the province Al Ihsa in Arabia, and appreciated the system of government of the Qaramates, with a socialist outlook: “The Government has mills where people come to grind their wheat free... It lends money to people to help them meet their needs, and if a house collapses and its owner has no means to rebuild it, the governor sends him his slaves to help him for free.”

**Ibn Fadlan 309H/921AD**

The Abbasid Caliph Al Moqtadir Bi-Allah, from a Sassanian noble family, became the caliph in 932H. He was one of the first rulers to actively persecute the Abü'l-Hasanite sect, which was a powerful political influence within the Caliphate. This led to a period of conflict between the Caliph and the sect. In 945H, he was assassinated by his own guards, and the sect was banned and its members were exiled.
sent a delegation headed by Ahmed Ibn Fadlan Ibn Al-Abbas Ibn Rashid, to the king of the Bulgarians, who had embraced the Islamic faith, in response to his request. Authors and historians, foreign and Muslim such as El Massoudi, El Hamoui and others have transmitted to us what Ibn Fadlan wrote on his travels.

Ibn Fadlan noticed that men and women were bathing together in the river completely naked. All the efforts he deployed to ban this practise were in vain. The women of this country were held in high regard. The queen took her place next to the king at official events.

The Russian orientalist, Vladimir Minoresky, said that Ibn Fadlan had shown a keen sense of observation. For example, he describes in considerable detail the funeral ceremony of a Russian leader, so much so that a painter was able to make a drawing, based solely on his description. Today, the painting adorns a wall of the History Museum in Moscow.

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Ibn Battuta 703H/1304AD

Mohamed Ibn Battuta was born in the Moroccan city of Tangiers. He descended from a big family, where many members were judges, or successful in religious sciences. He left Tangiers in 725 to make his pilgrimage to Mecca, but spent nearly 28 years on successive trips. He returned to Fez in 750/1349 and contacted the Sultan Abu Inan El Marini (Merinide), who was amazed by the stories he told about his travels and asked his secretary, Mohamed Ibn Al Jazy Kalbi, to record what Ibn Battuta said. A narrative summary was compiled in an ordered way, by adding some poems and checking sequences with the help of the famous writings of travellers, such as Rihlat Ibn Jubir Al Andalussi (582/1186).

Ibn Battuta cited the following story: “I went one day through a street in Damascus, and I saw a small servant boy who dropped a plate of pottery. People gathered around him, and one of them told him, ‘gather its pieces and take them to the person in charge of utensils. He gathered them and accompanied the man. There, he exchanged it for a similar plate.’” This shows us the economic organization prevailing in Muslim countries at that time. They had security and welfare systems very similar to the ones used now in developed countries.

Ibn Battuta, also mentioned a country known as the Land of Darkness (Siberia and northern Russia), where people exchanged in trade without seeing each other. “They put their wares in a place at night and go home, then they go back and find in their place another commodity, such as leather etc.”

He also said that the Chinese were making transactions with papers the size of a hand bearing the seal of the king. If it is torn in someone’s hand, he has to bring it to the issuing house, such as the one in his country, and he will be given a new one. When reading these stories, we are amazed that the systems they developed are used today in modern banks.

Ibn Jubir (539-614 H/1217-1144AD)

He is Abu Al-Hassan Mohamed Ibn Ahmed Jubir Ibn El Kinani, El Andalussi Achatibi Al Balinsi, born in Valencia. He was taught by his father and learnt the Koran from Al-Shatibi and Abu Al Hassan Abu Al Aish. He was one of the scholars of Andalusia in Fiqh (religious law), Hadith and literary contributions. Ibn Al Khatib described him in his book “Al Ihatah fi Akhbar Gharnata” (The Complete History of Grenada): “He was a brilliant man of letters, a glorious poet, has a good sense of humour and generous.” But his fame is due to his work “Rihlat Ibn Jabir (the Travel of Ibn Jubir), which he wrote after three trips, the most important of which lasted more than three years from 578H/1182AD to 581/1185. He described all the cities he visited, and all the wonders and beautiful scenes he observed, as well as political, social and moral matters. He cited the wars that prevailed in the east between Muslims and Crusaders, as well as good relations between Muslims and Christians during these wars.

Thus, we find that tourism has a long history in the Muslim world and it was a source of science, history and culture.■