

Enchanted Journey

In just a few decades the Hajj has changed drastically. Air transport means that pilgrims can be standing in front of the Ka'aba within hours. But right up to end of the nineteenth century, going to pilgrimage was quite a different story. Most pilgrims walked to Makkah taking months, even years, to complete the sacred journey. Pilgrims joined one of the great caravan routes and entered Hijaz with several days of journey behind them. Convinced that the best way to perform the Hajj is to walk, **Ziauddin Sardar** sets off from Jeddah to trace the old caravan route, with some expected and some not so expected results.

does and will continue to do till eternity. But the journey itself is not as arduous, and need I say adventurous, as it once used to be. For the bulk of the two million pilgrims who perform the Hajj every year, Makkah is only a day's flight away. In less than 24 hours, they will be standing in front of the Ka'aba in the Sacred Mosque.

Before the advent of the aeroplane the story was somewhat different. It took an average pilgrim anywhere from three months to two years to perform the Hajj. That is why unlike today, when the more devout have been on Hajj several times, just fifty years ago it was difficult to find anyone outside the Arabian Peninsula who had performed more than one Hajj. As the word itself signifies, the

MOST people who have been on a pilgrimage to Makkah would remember their journey. After all, the Hajj is a once in a lifetime affair, it's the apex of one's spiritual quest; as such, it is bound to be remembered

for the rest of one's life. But nowadays the sacred journey to Makkah is not as eventful as it was only a few decades ago. I do not mean that it does not have a profound spiritual impact on the pilgrim; that it certainly

Hajj was a real effort; a once in a life time effort.

In those times, the most common mode of pilgrim transport was the caravan. While many rode camels, horses and donkeys, considerable numbers of those who joined the caravans made their way on foot. They walked from their towns and villages to join one of the three main Hajj caravans. The Egyptian caravan set off from Cairo, crossed the Sinai Peninsula and then followed the coastal plain to reach Makkah in about 40 days. Pilgrims from North and North-West Africa joined the caravan in Cairo. The second great caravan assembled in Damascus, and moved south via Medina, reaching Makkah in about 30 days. The third caravan crossed the Arabian Peninsula from Baghdad. In addition to these great caravan routes, there were numerous other routes, for example those from West Africa described by J S Birks in *Across the Savannas to Macca* (Hurst, London, 1978).

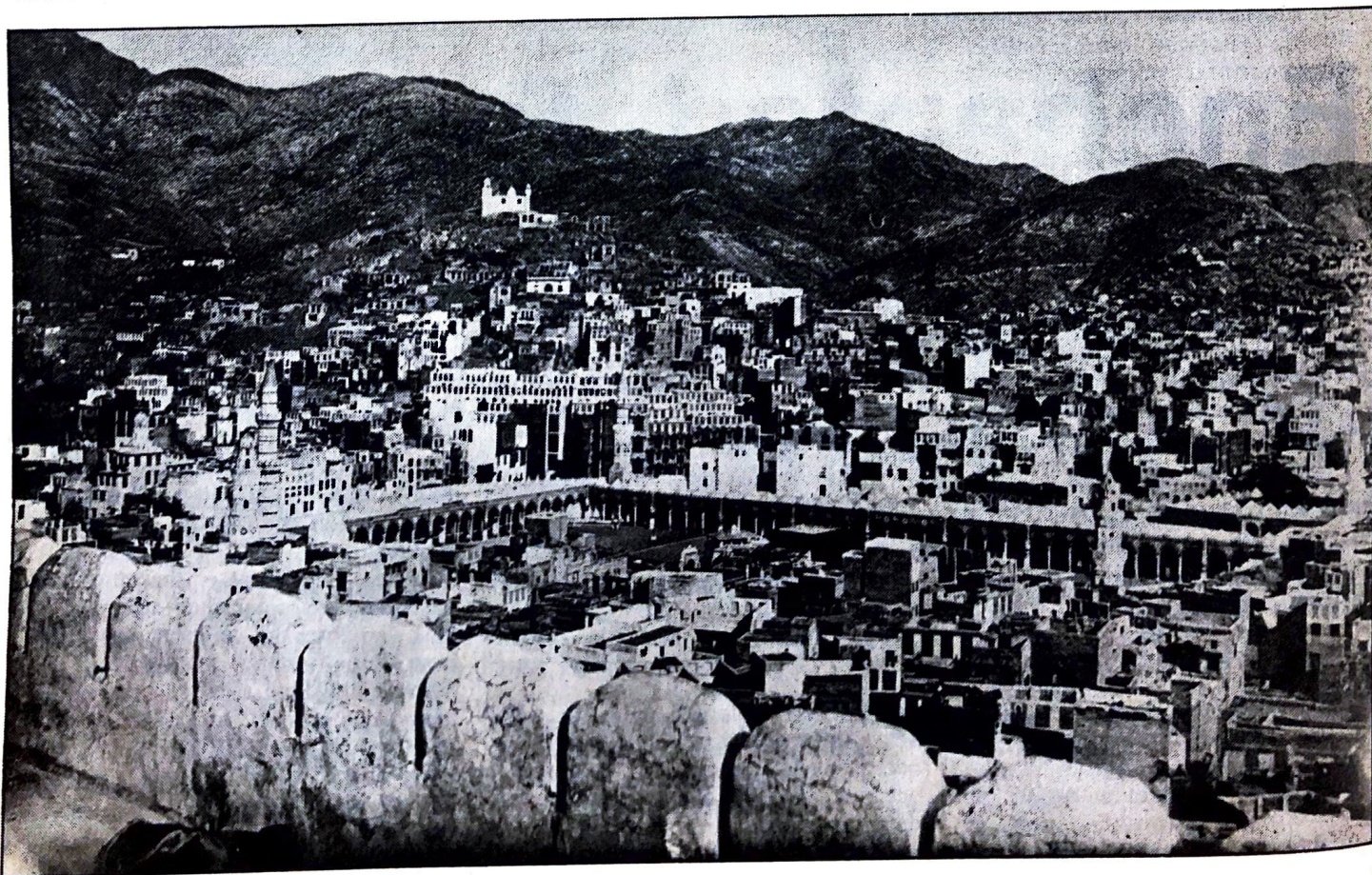
There are numerous accounts of pilgrims' journeys to Makkah, from the classic work of the fourteenth century Muslim traveller, Ibn Battuta, to the pilgrim Ahmad who walked from Mauritania to Makkah, a quest that took him seven years. There are a

number of fascinating accounts of journeys to Makkah during the early nineteenth century when train travel was in vogue. Notable amongst these are the accounts of Nawab Sultan Jehan Begum (*The Story of a Pilgrimage to Hijaz*, Thacher and Spink, Calcutta, 1909), A Majid (*A Malay's Pilgrimage to Macca*, Journal of Malay British Royal Asiatic Society 4 (2) 269-287 (1926)), Eric Rosenthal (*From Drury Lane to Macca*, Low and Morsten, London, 1931; reprinted by Howard Timmins, Cape Town, 1982), O Rutter (*Triumphant Pilgrimage: An English Muslim's Journey from Sarawak to Mecca*, Lippincott, London, 1937), and Mohammad Asad (*The Road to Macca*, Reinhardt, London, 1955; reprinted numerous times, latest edition: Dar Al-Andalus, Tangier, 1984). Then there are notable stories of various Europeans, such as J.L. Burckhardt, Giovanni Finati and Bayard Taylor who, disguised as Muslims, walked around the Hijaz during the nineteenth century. These pilgrims and travellers spent years on the road to Makkah and often lingered for some years in the Hijaz before returning home.

What was it like going on Hajj a hundred or so years ago? I decided to find out by retracing the last leg of the

old caravan route which started its journey from Sa'na in North Yemen, traversed the Arabian Peninsula all the way to Jeddah, and then moved to Makkah. The idea was to walk from Jeddah to Makkah, and then on to Muna, where most of the pilgrims stay during the Hajj. It is a three-day walk, or 80 kilometres as the crow flies, but up and down the mountains and desert patches it is more like a hundred kilometres. In those days I used to work for the Hajj Research Centre of the King Abdul Aziz University - the Centre is now attached to Umm al-Quara University in Makkah - and did not have much problem in persuading the administration there of the research benefits of the journey. Apart from the sheer curiosity of discovering the stress and strains that pilgrims had to endure just a hundred years ago, there was another reason why I wanted to walk. Our research at the Hajj Research Centre had convinced us that walking was the best way to perform the Hajj. The whole of the Hajj environment is designed for walking. Indeed, if every one walked, with the exception of the old and the infirm, there would be a natural, streamline flow and most of the problems of Hajj, associated mostly with congestion and traffic would disappear. I wanted to show that by walking one could perform the Hajj at

Makkah - as it used to be in the early twenties





a natural pace, avoid all the extra hardship associated with modern Hajj and still be at all the ritual points - at Arafat, Muzdalifah and Muna - in good time and shape.

So on the 6th of Dhul Hijjah 1399, I started my walk towards Makkah. I was accompanied by my life-long friend Zafar, who at that time also worked with me, and our donkey, Genghis, named after the great Mongolian king because he had a habit of losing his temper at the most inopportune moments and kicking any one who happened to be within reach, and Ali, our Yemeni guide who had the necessary skill to handle Genghis. Initially, we walked along the Jeddah-Makkah rapid transitway and, a few miles outside the city, veered off towards the Hijaz mountain range. In our *kurta*, *pyjama* and a head scarf to protect our eyes from sand storms, Zafar and I walked in front, while Ali pulled Genghis who carried our load - mainly water, some dry nuts and other food, and a couple of local foam mattresses - grudgingly. Every now and then Ali would have to encourage Genghis to move a little faster. We walked till late at night, and on Ali's advice camped at the base of a mountain.

Ali was a lean, short man in his late twenties. Although he looked rather fragile, he had tremendous stamina and could move, as he often said, "swifter than a snake". He lived in Sa'na. Whenever he or his family needed money he would cross the border into Saudi Arabia and work till he had collected enough for his needs. He would then return to his home town.

"During this trip", he told me as we

lay under the clear Saudi sky, "I intend to collect enough money to get married". As he described the qualities he was looking for in his intended bride we were occasionally disturbed by bats making low-level reconnaissance flights from a nearby cave.

We started very early the following morning and had walked over fifteen kilometres by the afternoon when Genghis started to behave strangely. Ali said he couldn't understand what was wrong with the beast, he was becoming increasingly difficult to control. Suddenly Zafar spotted an animal standing on top of a small hill in the distance.

"Ah", he said. "I bet that's why Genghis is excited".

Ali said if we held Genghis he would "shoo" the other donkey. "Hold him as tightly as you can", he advised. We watched as Ali ran towards the other beast, at first throwing some stones at it, and then actually trying to catch it. A few moments later he came back.

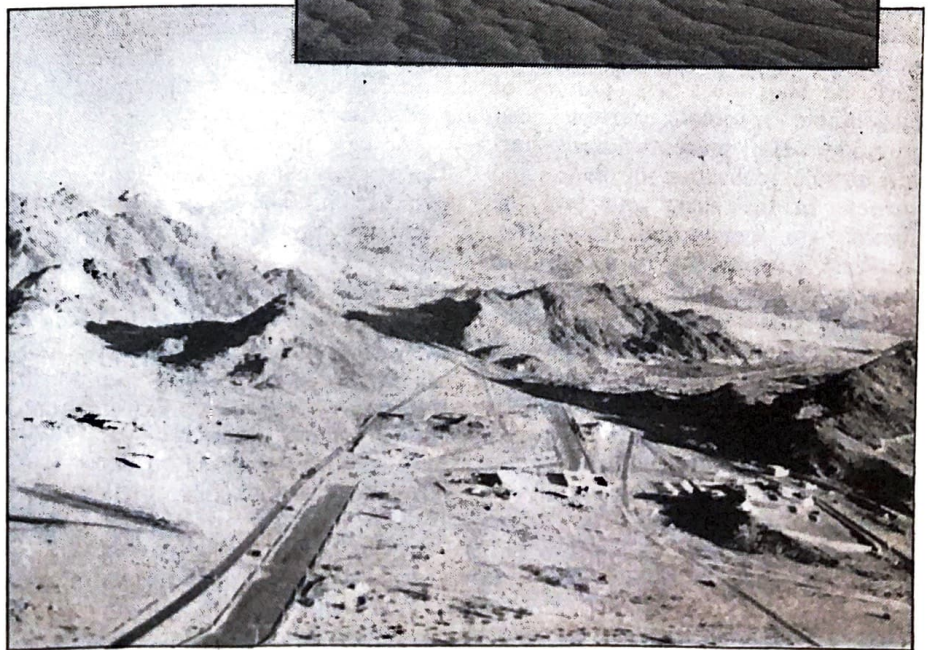
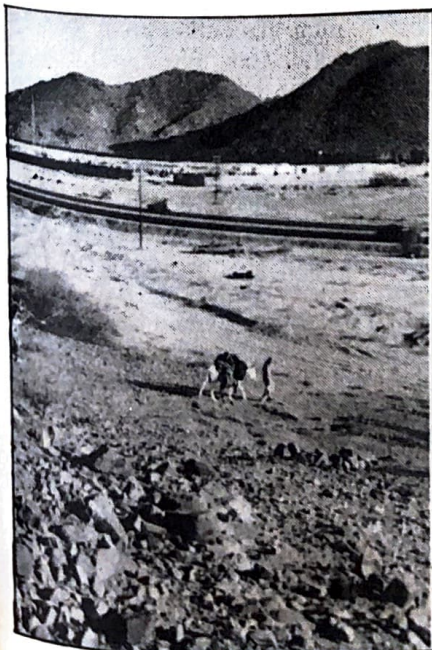
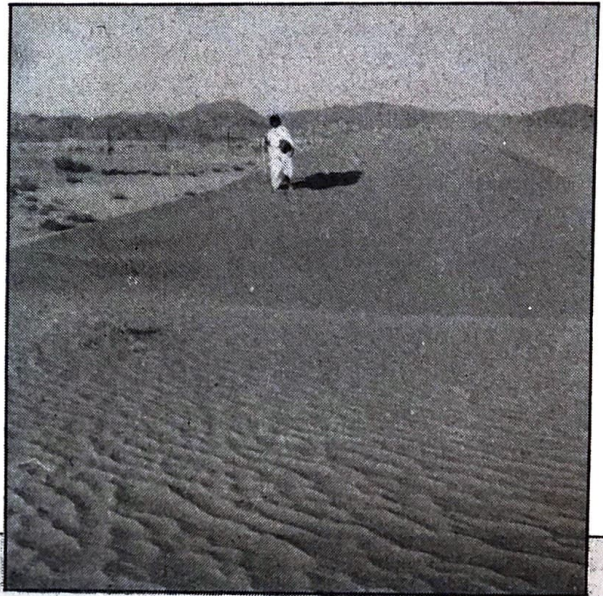
"It's all right. It's a male donkey", Ali assured us.

Relieved we allowed Genghis' reigns to become loose. The other donkey strolled towards us and hovered nearby. Suddenly, Genghis brayed with a loud shrieking noise - at the time it appeared as though he was making a victory declaration - spewed his load everywhere and ran off towards the other donkey. We saw the sun baked stony ground soak up our precious water.

Zafar looked at the spilled water - all our water - as it rapidly spread, evaporated and disappeared. He pressed his lower lip between his teeth, looked reproachfully straight at me and said: "I suppose the old bedouin who sold you Genghis did not tell you that apart from being sex starved he was also homosexual!".

"What are we going to do ...". Before I could finish my sentence I felt a strong malevolent presence. Almost simultaneously, Zafar and I looked at each other and then at the

The terrain one meets walking from Jeddah to Makkah



group of rather surprised bedouins who were now surrounding us.

"What are you doing here?" asked a young, rugged looking man.

"We are going on pilgrimage", Zafar answered.

"Pilgrimage?". The young man looked puzzled. He reflected for a moment. "You should be in a pilgrim bus with other pilgrims. This is not the way to Makkah. There are only mountains and desert patches here."

"We are walking to Makkah", Zafar tried to explain. "We are trying to trace the old caravan route. We are performing the Hajj like it used to be performed in the old days."

"Walking? Walking?". The young man did not believe what he heard. "Why do you want to walk. The government has spent millions and millions of riyals to provide the pilgrims with transport. What's wrong with the bus? Or the car?"

"The Hajj is a journey for spiritual enlightenment", I tried to relieve Zafar from cross-examination. "For full spiritual realization, this journey must be performed at human pace allowing ample time to take in the

looked at the other bedouins. They were all gazing at us as though we were aliens from another planet. I now decided to use some shock tactics.

"Do you know, brothers", I said, "that some fifty tons of exhaust fumes are produced every day by all the cars and buses in Muna. Imagine what that does to all those innocent pilgrims. That's why they are always coughing. Almost every pilgrim spends more time coughing than praying. And you have seen the congestion. A car or a bus takes over nine hours to cover one mile in the holy areas during the Hajj season. And the noise! Sirens. Hooters. Engines starting and stopping. Now, tell me, in such a nightmarish situation, how can anyone concentrate on spiritual matters. Physical survival becomes the paramount concern of pilgrims; they return not spiritually enriched just physically drained. The well-off pilgrims, in the private, closed environment of their cars, suffer little discomfort; even amongst two million pilgrims, they seldom meet others from different countries. The poor pilgrims spend

sappeared.

"Do you have permission for this research from the government. Do you have permission to walk. And what are you doing with that donkey. He has just attacked my animal". The old man roused himself to anger.

Before either of us could reply, two police cars, with their lights flashing, sirens blasting, pulled up beside us, almost knocking us both down. A helicopter hovered above us. Two policemen, accompanied by the young man who had been cross-examining us, came out of one of the cars and demanded to see our papers. I looked at Zafar who was smiling. He took out a letter from his pocket and handed it over to one of the policemen. The other policeman leaned over his shoulder to read the letter.

When they finished examining the letter the policemen turned to the assembled bedouins. "Go back to your dwellings. These people have the permission of His Majesty to walk to Makkah".

The helicopter disappeared over the horizon. The bedouins left almost as silently as they had appeared. The policeman handed the letter back to Zafar, wished us "Good Luck" and drove off.

It took us over three hours to track down and catch Genghis. After a couple of hours' walk we arrived at the Miqat, the border where the Haramain, the holy area, begins. To enter the holy area pilgrims have to be in a state of *ihram*: physically, they have to cast off their garments and cover their bodies with two unsewn pieces of cloth; spiritually, they must be contained, by prayer and meditation, in complete respect for the environment and its natural and wild life, and a state of total abstention from worldly wishes and desires. We found a mosque where we had a shower, offered our prayers, acquired a fresh supply of water and changed into our *ihram*.

We continued our walk till late at night. After a meal of nuts and dried fruits, we slept in the desert. The following morning we woke up just before dawn to discover that during the night we were visited by a number of snakes and lizards. The snakes were too shy to reveal themselves in the morning. But a number of curious lizards were still running around. After a breakfast of bread, cheese and olives, we set off once again towards Makkah. At around noon we had crossed the desert and reached the sun baked, rugged mountain range wherein lies the barren valley of Makkah.

"They have removed our mountain", he said totally perplexed.

"Don't be daft", I said. "How can they move a mountain?"

"They have removed our mountain. I tell you it was right here. They have removed it."

history and the rugged and stark beauty of the environment. As you know, the very word Hajj means to exert; the Hajj must be a journey of considerable spiritual exertion. But the modern Hajj presents notable hurdles to true realization of the sacred journey. In the buses and cars the pilgrims are transported like cattle. The vast complex of roads, bridges and spaghetti junctions, built to transport over two million pilgrims every year to the holy areas, have destroyed and scarred the natural environment. They have also destroyed our historical sites and cultural inheritance. By walking to Makkah and Muna we are trying to show we do not need all this destructive technology. We would rather walk than see our holy environment bulldozed to build roads and flyovers."

The young man turned round and

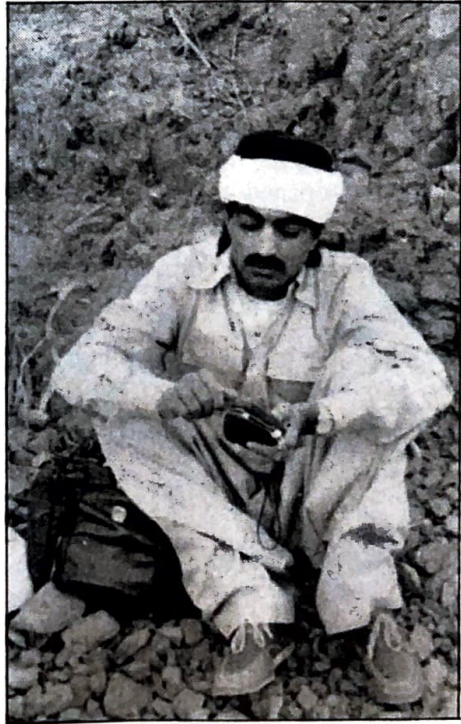
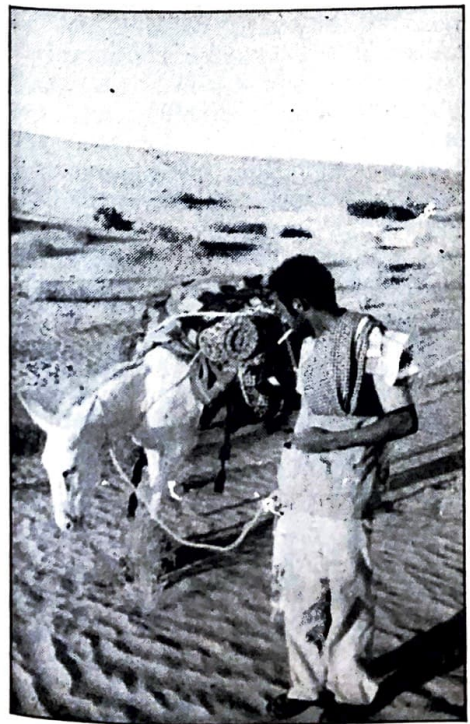
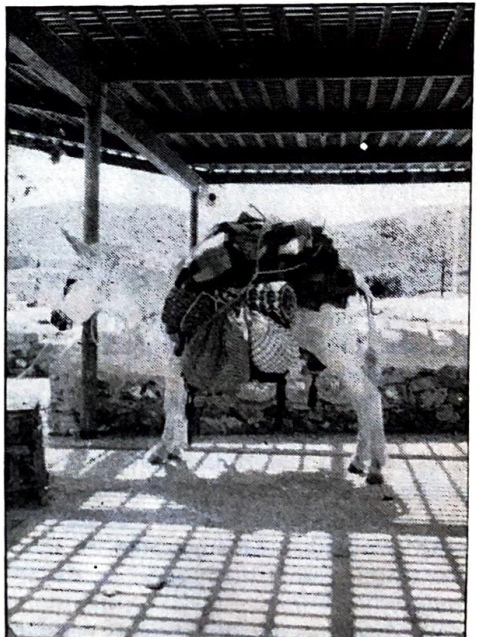
most of their time preoccupied with dodging cars, finding a place to rest, and suffocating from the exhaust fumes. Where is the brotherhood Hajj is supposed to express?"

The new approach seemed to work. The young man appeared less aggressive. Encouraged, I continued.

"You see brother, our research has shown that if every one, with the exception of the old and infirm, walked there would be an orderly flow. No cars, no congestion, no pollution. No pilgrim would then return without experiencing the sublime spiritual impact the pure Hajj can have. We are walking to show it is still the best way to perform the Hajj."

"Research? What research?", said an older bedouin who had stood there, expressionless, the entire time.

I noticed the young man had dis-



That's Changiz the donkey taking a rest by Makkah Intercontinental (above); Zafar having breakfast and changing his film; and Ali (far left) guiding and being guided.

We started our slow, arduous climb of the first peak. Genghis proved to be the slowest and most reluctant of climbers. Every few steps, Ali had to intimidate him into movement. At one point Zafar stopped. "What are you doing? We are supposed to be in *ihram*. You can't beat that donkey", he told Ali. It seems that Genghis too understood what was said for now he simply refused to move. He stood there motionless. We tried to coax him with nuts and dried fruit. He ate the food and stood his ground. Zafar even tried to tickle him. Then, on his own accord Genghis started to climb down from the mountain. We followed him. He came down the mountain and started running towards the motorway. We ran after him and tried to catch him. The harder we tried to catch him the faster he ran. Eventually he ran into the Makkah Intercontinental, on the outmost limits of the city.

The staff at the Intercontinental were shocked to see a donkey reeking havoc in their lobby. Several porters eventually over powered the beast and proceeded to evict both him and us from the hotel. Zafar tried to plead with them.

"It is the Hajj season, brothers. Time to show friendship and love to all creation", he argued.

"You love the donkey if you want to", said the head porter angrily. "But do it outside the hotel".

After a long debate, they allowed us to tie the beast to a well in the inner compound of the hotel. I now decided to get rid of Genghis who was only slowing us down, and causing too many problems. Ali suggested we take him to our camp in Muna in a pick-up truck.

We tried to negotiate with several drivers of pick-up trucks, but no one was willing to transport the donkey. Ali found one driver prepared to do



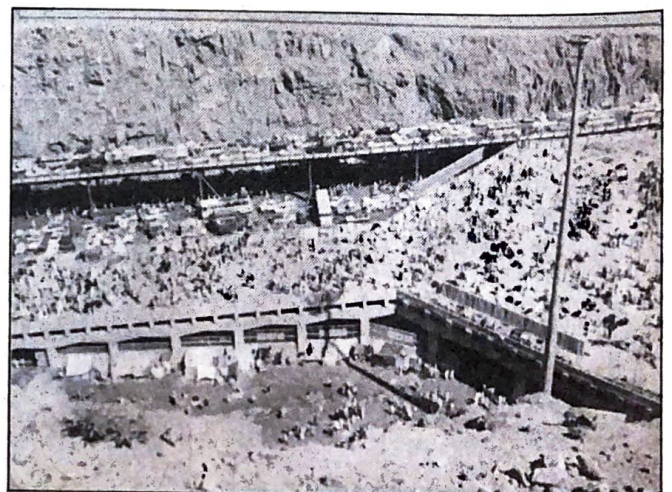
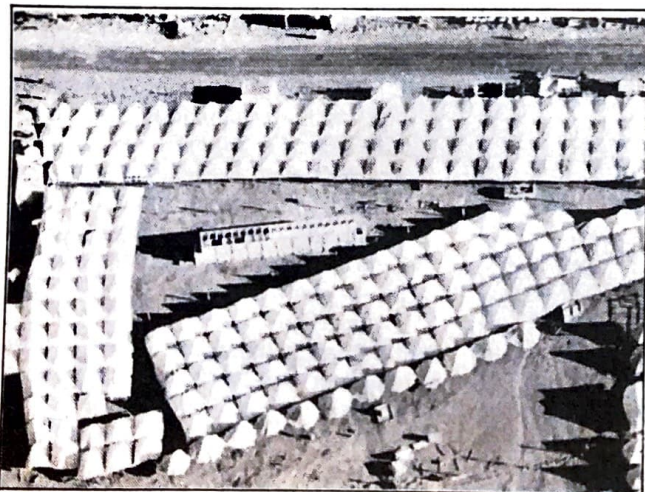
the job at an astronomical price. "Look at it this way", the driver explained. "I take up to 50 pilgrims in one trip. Now with a donkey in the back, I am not likely to get any other passengers. Who would want to share his seat with a donkey. You must pay for the full load." We knew we had no choice.

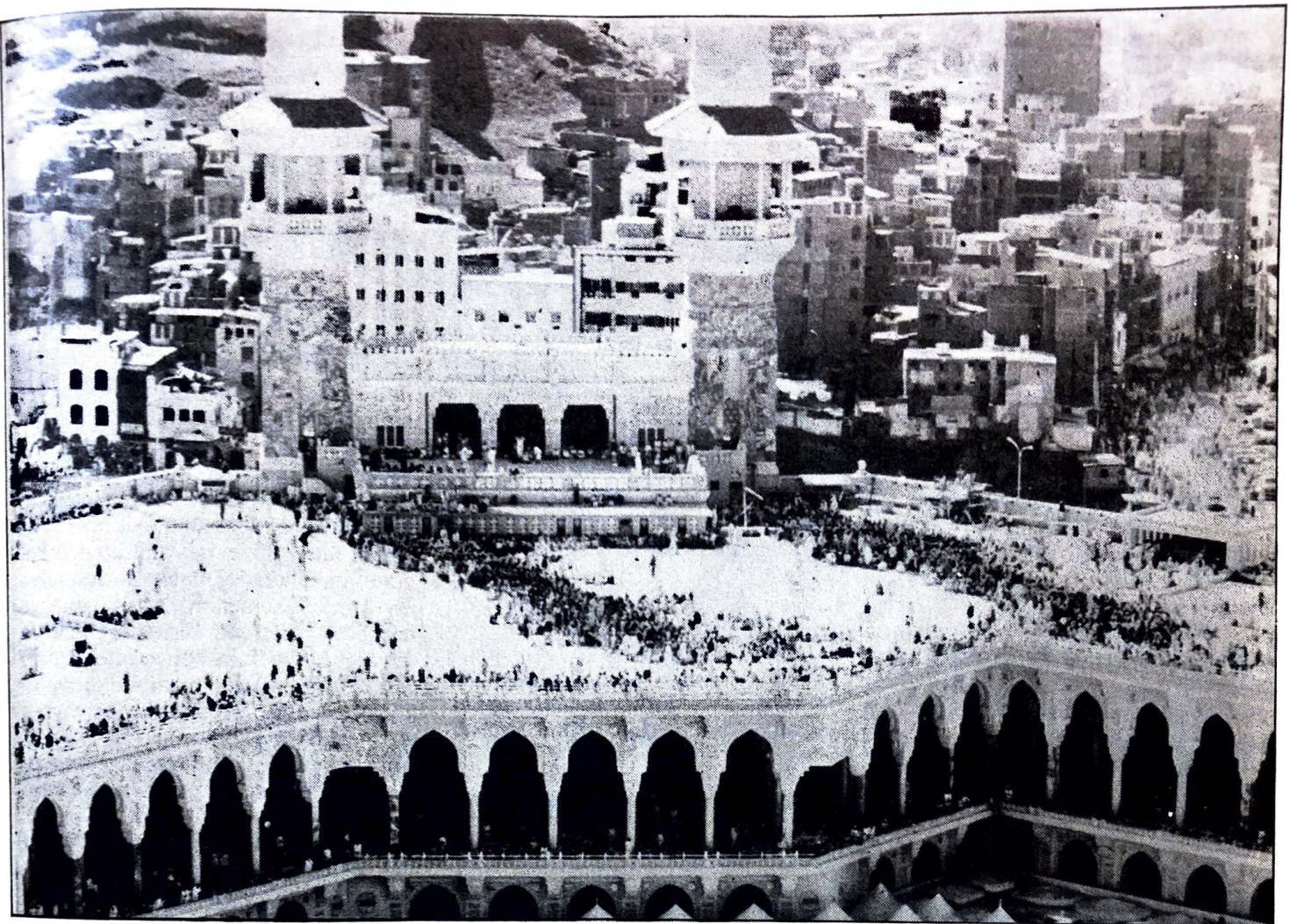
The pick-up truck reversed into the inner compound of the hotel. The driver joined Zafar, Ali and myself to install Ghenghis; but he did not want to know. We pushed. We pulled. We even tried to pick him up. But the stubborn beast would not budge. Then Ali asked all of us to stand back. "Hajj or no Hajj, there is only one way to deal with a donkey", he announced. He rolled his sleeves, spread some spit on his hands with some determined rubbing together and picked up a large walking stick. Zafar made to stop Ali, then changed his mind. I closed my eyes.

When I opened them Genghis was

standing on the pick-up truck. Ali sat next to the driver and waved good-bye. First slowly, and then swiftly, the truck ran towards our research camp on the hills of Muna.

By now neither of us had the energy or the motivation to get back to the mountains and trace the final leg of the caravan route. Moreover, we feared that without the expert guidance of Ali we would forever dwell in that complicated range of mountains unable to find the appropriate routes. We decided to walk to the Masjid-e-Haram, the Sacred Mosque which houses the Ka'aba at the centre of Makkah, the first call for most pilgrims, and standing on the main road. We regretted our decision almost immediately. Walking on the main road to Makkah was a hazardous endeavour. It was slow, much more laborious than climbing up the mountain range, and, there was the ever present danger of being hit by a car, bus or truck. Indeed, by the time





Hajj today has become a battle amidst machines and hideous concrete structures: One of the modern gates to the Haram (above); on the way to Arafat (top left), in Arafat and at the Jamarat in Muna (below left)

we reached the Sacred Mosque we had had several near misses. We were also out of breath, and thanks to the lead-based exhaust fumes, quite dizzy.

We entered the Sacred Mosque, and at last went through a metamorphosis. Although the Mosque was full to capacity with pilgrims - some 80,000 - the atmosphere inside was the zenith of peace and tranquility. A small proportion of the pilgrims were praying, sitting or standing up, under the colonnades that circumscribe the entire Mosque. But the majority were in the open area at the centre, performing the *tawwaf*: going round and round the Ka'aba. For over an hour, we watched the phenomenon of the flood of some 70,000 pilgrims, circum-ambulating the Ka'aba in unison, enchanted. Looking straight down at the Ka'aba - which symbolises the unity of all Muslims - from the first floor of the Mosque is breathtaking. The pilgrims in their white *ihrams* - sans splendour, sans worldly concern - are

like drops of water in a whirlpool, gyrating at a great, but controlled, speed. We dissolved ourselves in this ocean of devotion, and allowed the momentum of the fervour to carry us around the Ka'aba seven times, as prescribed.

It was already dark when we left the Sacred Mosque. We walked ten kilometres or so to Muna, avoiding the main roads. When we reached Muna we found ourselves hopelessly lost. Both Zafar and I knew Muna well. We had been here a number of times, not least on three previous pilgrimages. But now it looked strangely unfamiliar. In part the landscape had been changed by the emergence of countless shops, stalls and eating places that mushroom overnight to cater for the pilgrims. Familiar spots lurked behind their awnings. In part the landscape had been physically altered. A new spaghetti junction of hideous complication had appeared. Several old landmarks had had to give

way to the new roads. "It shouldn't be too difficult to find the research centre camp", Zafar said confidently. "It is on the mountain right opposite the Jamarat. All we have to do is to find the Jamarat and we will find the camp".

The Jamarat contains one of the main ritual areas of the pilgrimage. It is here the pilgrims "stone the devils" as a symbolic gesture of casting out the evil within them. It consists of three pillars a few yards apart; the pillars symbolise the "devil".

We approached a pious looking member of the Saudi National Guard who was passing the time with his worry beads.

"Which way to the Devils?", Zafar asked.

The guard curled his worry beads in the palm of his right hand. He then swung them around his index finger. "Devils?", he reflected. "This is Saudi Arabia. There are devils here everywhere. There is even evil within the

pilgrims. That's why they are here. To seek forgiveness. To seek Mercy of their Creator".

"We are looking for a more specific manifestation", I said.

"Ah!", the guard nodded. "We have three specific ones. A Big one. a Medium one, and a Small one. Which one are you looking for?"

"The Big one".

"He is that way", the guard pointed in a particular direction.

We walked in the direction he suggested; and eventually arrived at our intended destination. But there was no large mountain in front of the big devil. Indeed, there were no mountains in the vicinity at all.

I looked at Zafar. Bewildered.

"They have removed our mountain", he said totally perplexed.

"Don't be daft", I said. "How can they move a mountain?"

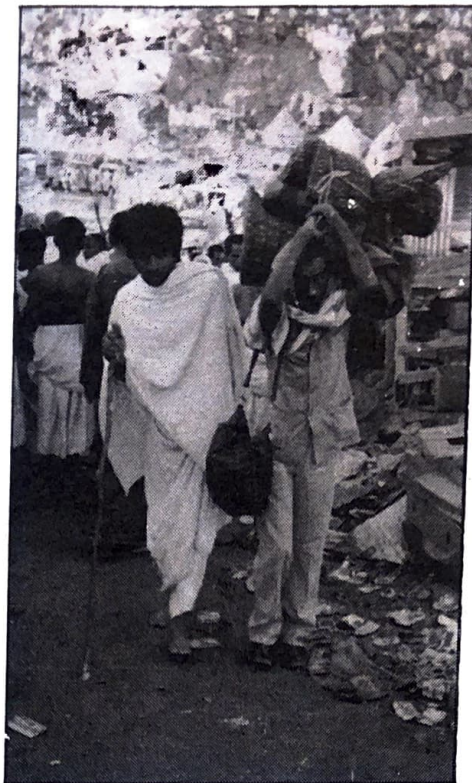
"They have removed our mountain. I tell you it was right here. They have removed it".

By now I was very tired. Very hungry. And very sleepy. I suggested we lay down wherever we could find enough room. But Zafar was not very keen on the idea.

"They would have set up the research camp on the highest peak. Look for the highest peak. That's where our camp will be."

The suggestion made sense. So we wondered about Muna looking for the highest mountain in the area. Finally we settled for the one mountain both of us agreed would be a good place to set up a research camp. Our colleagues, following a logic similar to ours, would have established the camp on top of this mountain.

We began to climb. It was a rugged peak, about five, six hundred metres straight up. In pitch darkness, we moved carefully and slowly. Pilgrims were sitting, sleeping, praying on every available spot. Many were just hanging from the cliffs. On several occasions I nearly stepped over the face of a sleeping pilgrim. On a number of occasions I stepped right on the effluent other pilgrims had left behind. A number of times my lion cloth - the second half of my *ihram* - threaten to come off. But we persevered. A few steps from the top we heard familiar noises. Indeed, one of them was very familiar and rather close. As I took my final step, secured a foothold on the flat top of the mountain, and came face to face with Genghis. Even in all that darkness, I could detect the silly derisive smirk on his face. Clearly, he was laughing at us.



The final steps: All helps Zafar whose feet show the strains of the journey (below)

We had been climbing the wrong side of the mountain. We had climbed up the cliff, while we could have easily walked up the gentle slope on the opposite side. The spaghetti junction and the new roads had confused us so much we failed to realise we were on the wrong side of the Jamarat area. This was our mountain.

The following morning was the 9th of Dhul Hijjah, the Day of Arafat. In its bare essentials, Arafat is the Hajj. We slept late and left Muna around nine o'clock. Two hours later, we were on the plain of Arafat. It is a vast stretch of land, over-shadowed by the Mount of Mercy. It is here the pilgrims spend their supreme hours.

When the sun passes the meridian, pilgrims on Arafat start the ritual of *wquf*, their sojourn at the pinnacle of their life making their presence known to God. They stand and pray like they have never prayed before. Humility and brotherhood reaches its peak. Row after row of pilgrims in white, as far as the eye can see. Over two million of them in one stretch. All bowing down in unison. Then standing up, and bowing down again. Within this regiment of collective behaviour, the overriding experience is personal. It is I, and my Lord; and the noblest hours of my life. I felt an inner peace which cannot be described by words. At Arafat, I felt a part of the total environment. The mountains I had climbed, the desert I had crossed, the

valleys I had walked - the very geology of the region. And all its history - a great deal of which I had soaked up. And the pure and profound simplicity of this, the ultimate spiritual experience.

Immediately after sunset we joined the *nafrāh*: the mass exodus of the pilgrims out of the plain of Arafat towards Muzdalifah. Muzdalifah is an open plain sheltered by parched hills with a sparse growth of thorny bushes. We spent the night under the open sky of the roofless mosque of Muzdalifah and walked back to Muna just after dawn the following day.

The elation I experienced back in Muna was not purely spiritual. Despite all the prayer and reflection, meditation and casting out the "evil within me", there was still an ego not quite annihilated. I could not suppress my pride. Somehow my pilgrimage had been different. Inside my tent on the highest peak in Muna, after a bath and having changed from the *ihram* to my usual attire, I sat shaving myself for the first time since leaving Jeddah. And I thought: my pilgrimage was an achievement rather different from those who have not walked. Zafar entered the tent with another pilgrim and looked at me as though he read my innermost thoughts.

"I thought you ought to meet Brother Sulaiman", said Zafar.

He was a tall, slim African with shiny skin. On his left shoulder he carried a tote bag. He leaned on a large, wooden stick cut from the branch of a wild tree.

"He has come for pilgrimage from Somalia. Walking all the way. It took him seven years to get here".





Map of the World: Muslim geographers had mapped most of the globe by the twelfth century. Above an artist's impression of Idrisi drawing his famous map.

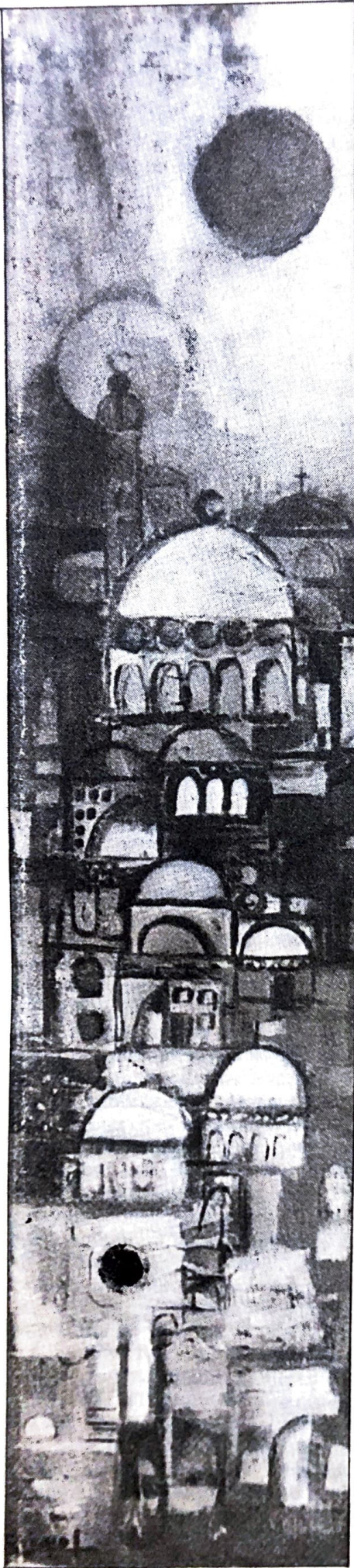
with the *Talbiyat* ('Here am I, O God, here am I'), from all sides, and tongues were loud in invocation, humbly beseeching God to grant them their requests, sometimes redoubling their *Talbiyat*, and sometimes imploring with prayers. Oh night most happy, the bride of all the nights of life, the virgin of the maidens of time'. As is to be expected, Ibn Jubayr then describes the Ka'ba and its environs in great detail; a descriptive masterpiece that has become a classic of Arabic prose. For our readers, we have selected the following passage in which Ibn Jubayr gives an account of the opening of the Ka'ba:

'The door of the sacred Ka'ba', he says, 'is opened every Monday and Friday, except in the month of Rajab, when it opens every day. It is opened at the first rising of the sun. The

custodians of the House, the Shayba advance, seeking to forestall each other in moving a big stairway that resembles a large pulpit. It has nine long steps, and wooden support that reach the ground and have attached to them four large wheels, plated with iron as against their contact with the ground on which the ladder moves until it reaches the Sacred House. The highest step reaches the blessed threshold of the door. The chief of the Shayba, a mature man of handsome mien and aspect, then ascends it, carrying the key of the blessed lock. With him is a custodian holding up a black veil that is (hung) before the door and under which his arms sag while the aforesaid chief of the Shayba opens the door. When he has opened the lock, he kisses the threshold, enters the House alone, closes the door behind him and stays

there the time of two *rak'ah*. The other Shayba then enter and also close the door and perform the *rak'ah*. The door is then opened and men compete to enter. While the venerated door is being opened, the people stand before it with lowered looks and hands outstretched in humble supplication to God. When it is opened the cry, '*Allahu Akbar*' (God is Great), raising a clamour and calling in a loud voice, 'Ah, my God, open to us the gates of Your mercy and pardon, Most Merciful of Merciful.' They then 'enter in peace, secure.' (Qur'an 15:46).

Ibn Jubayr has also left us with an eye-witness account of the visit of the Amir Saif-ul-Islam ibn Ayyub, brother of the Sultan Salah-ud-Din of Egypt, who came to Makkah on his way to the Yemen. Here is how it is reported by our traveller-writer: 'As the Emir dres near to the sublime House,



swords were sheathed, spirits contracted, the fine clothing was cast off, necks were depressed, and their naps enhumbed, and minds were bereft of steadiness, in awe and reverence of the House of the Kings of Kings, the Powerful, the Mighty, the One, the Conquering, who grants possessions to whom He wishes, and takes them away from whom He wills. Praise be to Him. Great is His strength, glorious His power.

This troop of Ghuzz (Seljuk Turks) hurled itself into God's Ancient House with the impetuosity of moths at a lamp. Humility had bowed their heads, and tears bathed their moustaches. The Qadi and the chief of the Shayba performed the *tawaf* with Sayf al-Islam.... When Sayf al-Islam had ended his *tawaf*, he prayed behind the Maqam, and then entered the Zamzam dome and drank of its waters. After this he left the Bab al-Safa to perform the *sa'i*. He commenced to march on foot, that he might show humbleness and submission to whom humbleness is due. Swords were drawn before him, and from one of the mas'a to the other the people had drawn themselves up in two ranks as they had done for the *tawaf*. He performed the *sa'i* on foot both ways, from al-Safa to al-Marwah and from al-Marwah to al-Safa. He ran between the two green mil, and then, seized by fatigue, he mounted his horse and finished the *sa'i* in the saddle.'

Space does not permit us to taste any more of Ibn Jubayr's enchanting prose, whose charm unmistakably reaches us even through Broadhurst's 'literal translation'. Suffice it to say that the Spanish traveller did return home after paying his penance in the House of God and encountering many adventures on the way back. He visited Iraq, where he saw the reigning caliph, Nasir, 'the lustre of whose reign consists only in pages and negro eunuchs' to proceed to Syria - parts of which were still in the hands of the Crusaders. Of course, Ibn Jubayr has also bequeathed to us a very informative account of the odd state of no-truce, no-war that prevailed in those times. 'To all his story, with its abundance of detail and interest', so sums up his English translator, 'he brings a perspicacity and soundness of judgement, a precision and vividness of descriptive power (as in his picture of medieval sea travel and the terrors of shipwreck), that may, perhaps, be expected in a scholar and writer of his repute; but in his balanced comments on Crusader Syria and] Norman Sicily,

despite the perfunctory malisons that by convention he must pronounce upon the Christian enemy, I can discern a moderation most rare in that fanatic age. And his portraits of these Christian outposts, otherwise mostly known to us from strongly biased Western and clerical sources, are for this reason most revealing and instructive.' To this a Muslim may willingly add that the impartiality and moderation which holds for Ibn Jubayr's account of the alien also holds for his views on, what was to him, the genuine and authentic.

Before we recount fascinating tales told by other travellers, however, it would be proper to have a quick glance of the geographical and travel literature which has been produced within our Muslim civilisation. Like the Ancients, for instance, early Muslims made a distinction between *descriptive* and *mathematical* geography, though the master geographer of Antiquity, Strabo, certainly seems to have been unknown to them. One of the earliest works on mathematical geography is by Musa Al-Khwarizmi (ca 780-850 C.E.), from whom we derive the modern mathematical term *algorithm*, is *Kitab Al-Surat al-Ard*. Though deriving in part from earlier Greek studies, it is quite an original work that treats Ptolemaic materials with much independence. The next milestone of Muslim geographical literature, first of a series of works on descriptive geography, is Ibn Khurdadbih's well-known *Kitab al-Masalik wa'l-Mamalik* that was composed as early as 232/846-7. Indeed, this tome is the forerunner of a set of works by the same name among which the one by al-Istakhari, compiled between 320/932 and 340/951, is the most renowned, though apart from the title al-Istakhari seems to have borrowed nothing from Ibn Khurdadbih. From our point of view, however, the most interesting thing about the earlier geographical work is the narrative of a journey, made by a certain Sallam at-Tarjuman that it also contains, thus making it one of the earliest specimens of Muslim travel literature.

Sallam the Interpreter, a formidable linguist credited to have known 'thirty languages', we are told, dealt with the caliph Al-Wathiq's (227/832-242/847) Turkish correspondence. On caliph's instigation, he was sent to Central Asia to check whether the Wall of Gog and Magog (*Yajuj* and *Majuj*) still held. Since the Dyke of Dhu'l-Qarnain (Alexander the Great?) is mentioned in the Qur'an (18:88 ff) and it has always figured prominently

in the imagination of Muslims, it is not inconceivable that such indeed may have been the reason for this expedition. However, it is more plausible that the rumors of the movements of tribes in Central Asia might have reached the caliphate and as the powerful Uigur state had been overthrown shortly before this time, the caliph decided to send a 'reconnaissance mission'. Under the leadership of Sallam the Interpreter, the expedition of about fifty persons first proceeded to the Khazar country north of the Caucasus and then further afield into Central Asia. They may even have reached as far East as the Great Wall of China, though the more plausible identification of their destination as conjectured by the Turkish scholar Zeki Velidi Togan, seems to be the mountain pass known as the Iron Gate, Talka which is situated in the north of Kulja in eastern Tien Shan.

Whatever be the case, there seems to be no reason to doubt the authenticity of Sallam's account, which even the critical Ibn Khardadbih, whose expertise in these matters is firmly established, accepted as genuine. Sallam's narrative was also taken over by later geographers such as Ibn Rusta, Al-Muqaddasi, Al-Idrisi and others and indeed is first of the Muslim accounts of the remote races of the North. Among his followers, we must quickly pass over the journeys of Al-Muttawwi'i and Abu Dulaf Mis'ar b. al-Muhalhil. The former travelled to the Uigur capital probably in the year 206/821 and even returned there on a later occasion to proceed in the general direction of river Irtysh and Siberia. The latter, Abu Dulaf, who went there around 340/950 has left an account of his travels in two *Risalas* that have been extensively used by the eminent geographer Yaqut in his standard geographical dictionary, *Mu'jam al-Buldan*. The most renowned and well authenticated among the Muslim explorers of the North was, of course, the legendary Ibn Fadlan. We shall, however, return to him later, after finishing our survey of Muslim geographical literature.

We have already mentioned about Ibn-Khurdadbih and his trend-setting work, *Kitab al-Masalik wa'l-Mamalik* that was recompiled later by Abu Ishaq al-Farisi, better known as Al-Istakhari, and revised and enlarged by Ibn Hawqal, both of them belonging to the second half of the tenth century. A very early geographical description of *Dar al-Islam* is found in Ibn-Hawqal as such: 'The length of the Empire of Islam in our days ex-

tends from the limits of Farghana, passing through Khurasan, al-Jibal (Media), 'Iraq and Arabia as far as the coast of Yaman, which is a journey of about four months; its breadth begins from the country of the Rum (the Byzantine Empire), passing through Syria, Mesopotamia, 'Iraq, Fars and Kirman, as far as the territory of al-Mansura on the shore of the sea of Fars (the Indian Ocean), which is about four month's travelling. In the previous statement of the length of Islam, I have omitted the frontiers of the Maghrib (northern Africa) and Andalus (Spain), because it is like the sleeve of a garment. To the east



A break in the journey for reading and discussion.

and the west of the Maghrib there is no Islam. If one goes, however, beyond Egypt into the country of the Maghrib, the lands of the Sudan (the Black) lie to the south of the Maghrib and, to its north, the sea of Rum (the Mediterranean) and next the territory of Rum.' Clearly, the Muslim's interest in the geography of *Dar al-Islam* has remained constant throughout its changing historical fortunes and was as strong before as it is today.

Two more names of renowned Muslim geographers must be mentioned before we could return to Ibn Fadlan's fabulous tales of the North; Al-Idrisi

and Ya'qub. Al-Idrisi (d. 1154 C.E.) was born at Ceuta, studied at Cordoba, but worked most of his life at the court of a Christian ruler, the Norman King Roger II of Sicily, at the very meeting-point of the two great medieval cultures so to speak. That he was entrusted by the Christian king to compose a description of the known world is a clear testimony to his prestige but also to the expertise of Muslim scientists in this field. The first European translation of Al-Idrisi's work was published in Rome in 1619, though the translator did not even know the name of the author! Perhaps the greatest Muslim geographer of the past was Yaqut b. 'Abdallah (1179-1229 C.E.) who composed the majestic *Geographical Dictionary Mu'jam al-Buldan*. This work has appeared in Europe in six volumes, edited by Wustenfeld (Leipzig, 1866) and has been hailed by the Orientalist Le Strange as 'a storehouse of geographical information, the value of which it would be impossible to overestimate.' In this connection, it is also important not to disregard the efforts of other scientists like Al-Biruni who not only composed geographical tables of longitudes and latitudes but who has also left us with an unsurpassable description of India. In short, Muslim travellers were heir to a rich tradition of geographical literature some of which was composed even by genuine globe-trotters like Al-Mas'udi.

Against this background, it is perhaps fair to claim that the fourth tenth century was an age of exploration in the history of Islam. It was in this age that Ibn Fadlan set out to explore the remote North. This is how the opening paragraph of the caliphal emissary's letter is the book of Ahmad ibn Fadlan ibn al-'Abbas, ibn Rashid, ibn Hammad, an officer in the service of the general Muhammad ibn Sulaiman, the ambassador of Caliph Al-Muqtadir to the King of the Bulgars, in which he relates what he saw in the land of the Turks, the Khazars, the Rus, the Bulgars, the Bashkirs and others; their varied kind of religion, the history of their kings, and their conduct in many walks of life.

The letter of the King of Bulgars reached the Commander of the Faithful, Al-Muqtadir; he asked him therein to send him someone to give him religious instruction and acquaint him with the laws of Islam, to build a mosque and a pulpit so that he may read prayers in his name (the Khutba in the caliph's name) throughout his realm. He also entreated the caliph to build him a fortress so that he may

defend himself against hostile kings. The caliph granted everything that was asked for by the King. Nadhir al-Harami was responsible for (the planning of) this mission. I was chosen to read the caliph's message to the King, to hand over the gifts the Caliph sent him, and to supervise the work of teachers and doctors of Law. From the estate in Khurasan that is known as Artha Khushmithan and which belongs to Ibn al-Furat, a subsidy was given to the King, who was to use it for the afore-mentioned building enterprises as well as to pay teachers and interpreters of law... And so we started on Thursday the 11th of Safar of the year 309 (June 21, 921) from the City of Peace (Baghdad). (All quotes from Ibn Fadlan's *Rihla* represent a reworking of Zeki Velidi Togan's German rendering (Ibn Fadlan's *Reisebericht*, in *Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes*, Bd. 24, Nr. 3, Leipzig, 1939) as well as that of Professor Stig Wikander's Swedish translation (*Araber, Vikingar, Vaeringar*, Lund, 1978). The partial English translation by R.P. Blake and R.N. Frye, 'Notes on the *Risala* of Ibn Fadlan' in *Byzantina Metabyzantina*, vol I, Part II, 1949, was not available to me at the time of writing this article.)

Notwithstanding our age's fascination with Ibn Fadlan's 'exoticism', the chief merit of his travel accounts lies in the historical light it sheds on a dark epoch in the history of the North. Indeed, the discoverer of the text and undisputed authority on Ibn Fadlan, Zeki Velidi Togan, correctly senses the historical import of this travelogue when he remarks that it 'takes its place at the head of the works of Muslim geographers of the ninth-tenth century as one of the most trustworthy sources for the study of the ethnic and cultural relations of the Aral-Caspian regions, which bridges the gap between the times of the rule of the pre-Christian Scythians, on the one hand, and of the Mongols of the thirteenth century, on the other, of whom we have better knowledge.' Moreover, Ibn Fadlan is one of the earliest and most reliable source on the social customs of the Scandinavian vikings whom he calls the Rus (the term originally denotes eastern regions of the present day Sweden and has given us the modern word for Russia) and whom he met at the banks of Volga. It is because of this that Ibn Fadlan has been extensively studied by Scandinavian scholars and his *Rihla* even translated into Swedish as indicated above. Moreover, there

are peeps into the problems of following the Sacred Law at those higher latitudes, a common enough experience in our days as well, which makes Ibn Fadlan's ancient testimony to be of much interest for the Muslim reader today. For instance, here are the problems of the Salah as com-



pounded by the brevity of the summer night at higher latitudes: 'One day (evening) I entered my tent with a tailor from Baghdad, who was in the service of the King and had come to this area by chance, for conversation. Whilst we might have talked for the time that takes to recite a half of one-seventh of the Qur'an, the prayer-call was heard, and we came out of the tent - the dawn had set in! I asked the muezzin: 'Which prayer are you calling now?' 'But of course the morning prayer', he replied. 'What about Zuhr and 'Asr?', (I asked again). 'We call them at sunset'. 'When is it night here?', (was my next question). 'As you are seeing it now', he responded, 'though it has been even shorter before and now it has started to become longer again.' And he told me, that one month he did not dare go to sleep (at night) being afraid that he might miss the morning prayer. And this is because that you may put a cooking pot over fire at sunset and before it has started boiling, and lo!, it is time for the morning prayer!'

The *Rihla* contains other observations of 'anthropological' nature which do not cause any modern eyebrow to rise but which must have shocked Ibn Fadlan's medieval readers, as for instance, his remarks about the lack of modesty, 'a remarkable mixture of liberalism and savagery', among the Ghuzz women. He

says: '(The Turkish) women do not veil themselves in the presence of their men or strangers. They do not hide any part of their bodies from people. One day we visited one of them (the Ghuzz) and were sitting around. The wife of the man (the host) was also present. As we were conversing, the woman uncovered her private parts and scratched them, and we were able to see it all! Thereupon we covered our faces and cried: 'May God forgive us'. The husband started laughing (at this) and said to the interpreter: 'Tell them, that she bares them in your presence that you may see them, whilst she can protect herself and you have no access to them. Surely, this is better than her concealing them (now) in your presence and then allowing you access (in secrecy)! Adultery is unknown to them; yet when they discover an adulterer, they split him into two halves. This is done by bringing together the branches of two trees, tying the offender to the branches, and then letting the trees go; so that he is torn in two.'

The caliphal emissary's account of the marauding Rus, barbaric forefathers of modern Swedes, is far from flattering. Particularly embarrassing to their modern heirs is the following description of the sanitary habits of the Rus - or the lack of them: 'They (the Rus) are the filthiest of God's creatures: they do not wash, neither after urination or defecation, nor after sexual intercourse.; nor do they wash their hands after eating food.... Everyday they wash their faces and heads in the filthiest possible water. It is done so, that every morning the female servant comes with a basin of water. She stretches it to her master, who washes his hands, face and hair in it and even dips his comb in it. Then he blows his nose and spits into it; yes, there is no filthy cleansing that he does not do in the same water. When he has finished, the slave-girl hands the basin over to the next and he does the same as his friend before. And so do they all in the household, from one to the other, till the basin has completed a round. And each one of them blows his nose and spits in the basin as well as washes his face and hair in it! On this passage of Ibn Fadlan, the Swedish translator, my late friend Professor Stig Wikander, comments: 'One must not however forget that as a fanatic Muslim, he (Ibn Fadlan) has his prejudices. Promptly and uninhibitedly, he gives vent to his sense of modesty as soon as he meets women who do not carry the veil and are not locked up in the

harem. Moreover, he believes, just as Muslims often do to this day, that any foreigner who does not observe the ritually prescribe ablutions (ie *Ghusl* and *Wudu*), must be incredibly filthy.' Quite so, quite so!

Though there are other masterpieces of Muslim travel literature, as for instance the highly readable 'Book of Travels' (*Safar-Nameh* by the erudite Isma'ili missionary Nasir-i-Khusraw (394/1004-481/1088), we shall conclude our survey by making acquaintance with the greatest traveller of Islam, a bona fide globe-trotter and a master narrator, Muhammad b. 'Abdallah b. Muhammad. b. Ibrahim b. Muhammad. b. Ibrahim. b. Yusuf, of the tribe of Luwata and the city of Tanja, Abu 'Abdallah, better known to posterity as Ibn-Battuta (703/1304-770/1368). Though for the westerner, there is always the temptation to compare him with Marco Polo, to which indeed some gullible Muslims have also succumbed, there is no comparison between the two. Marco Polo was an incorrigible liar and exaggerator and was nicknamed *Il Milione* - referring to his gift for 'talking big' and 'blowing' everything a millionfold; whereas scholars have found no reason to question the authenticity of Ibn Battuta's narrative. With the exception of his account of the lands of the Bulghar, which he probably never visited, nothing of his Travels that has come under the scrutiny of critical scholarship has ever been questioned, let alone discredited. As there exists enormous literature on Ibn Battuta, just as his famous *Rihla* has been translated into English *in toto* by H A R Gibb (*The Travels of Ibn Battuta*, 3 vols, Cambridge, 1958 ff), where one may also find an excellent introduction to Muslim globe-trotter's life and adventures, we would be content with some general observations concerning this *magnum opus* of Islamic travel literature and with the desultory tasting of its variegated flavours.

The Muslim world in which Ibn Battuta was born and which he criss-crossed a number of times during his travels had lost its erstwhile political unity. Muslim societies and states were now held together by common religious traditions, a sacred law that was universally applied and the knowledge of literary Arabic which was common to all the learned of the time. The most important institution of Islam, where the bonds of this trans-national religious and cultural unity could be actually strengthened by an intimately physical and personal experience, was of course the Hajj.



A tired traveller washes his feet - and Richard Burton in his Arab garb. (opposite)

Here, the unity of the Muslim Umma did not appear as a theoretical concept but a lived reality. Thus, it appears that though every Muslim was heir to the religious and cultural unity of Islam, only a religiously tutored person could enjoy its actual benefits and partake of its rewards. It is not accidental, then, that our world-traveller, who had not only made a number of pilgrimages but who also came from a family in Tanja which had a tradition of supplying judicial experts, could act as a *Qadi* in most diverse parts of the Muslim world. His own narrative provides ample evidence of his stern judicial temper. For instance, this is what he has to say when he introduced Hudud punishments in the Maldives: 'The people of the Maldivian Islands are upright and

pious, sound in belief and sincere in thought; their bodies are weak, they are unused to fighting, and their armour is prayer. Once, when I ordered a thief's hand to be cut off, a number of those in the room fainted.' (All quotes are from H A R Gibb's translation).

Ibn Battuta's other experiences of the natives were more daunting, and of course, relate to women - invincible daemons of the psyche of a Muslim judge. Thus, he narrates: 'Their womenfolk do not cover their hands, not even their queen does so, and they comb their hair and gather it at one side. Most of them wear only an apron from their wastes to the ground, the rest of their bodies being uncovered. When I held the qadiship there, I tried to end this practice and ordered them to wear clothes, but I

met with no success. No woman was admitted in my presence in a lawsuit unless her body was covered, but apart from that I was unable to effect anything.' Then follows a remark which shows that even the dour moralist was not without the faculty of reflection and self-doubt. 'I had some maids', he continues, 'who wore garments like they wore at Delhi and who covered their heads, but it was more of a disfigurement than an ornament in their case, since they were not accustomed to it.' May such thoughts never enter the head of a modern Qadi!

There were more surprises in store for the stern and authoritarian judge. He found that the ruler of that place was 'a woman, Khadija. The sovereignty belonged to her grandfather, then to her father... and so they raised Khadija to the throne. She was married to their preacher, Jamal ad-Din, who became Wazir and the real holder of authority.' In a milieu like this, the inevitable had to happen. 'Immediately after the Ramadan fast', he narrates later, 'I made an agreement with wazir Sulayman to marry his daughter, so I sent to the Wazir Jamal ad-Din requesting that the ceremony might be held in his presence

at the palace. He gave his consent, and sent the customary betel and sandalwood. The guests arrived but the wazir Sulayman delayed. He was sent for but still did not come, and being summoned a second time excused himself on the ground of his daughter's illness. The Wazir then said to me privily 'His daughter has refused, and she is her own mistress. The people have assembled, so what do you say to marrying Sultana's mother-in-law?' (It was her daughter to whom the Wazir's son was married.) I said "Very Well," so the qadi and notaries were summoned, and the profession of faith recited. The Wazir paid her dowry, and she was conducted to me a few days later. She was one of the best of women. After this marriage the Wazir forced me to take the office of the qadi.' What happened later was a bit more turbulent except for the fact that meanwhile Ibn Battuta 'had married' three other wives, one the daughter of a wazir whom they held in high esteem, and whose grandfather had been sultan, another the former wife of Shihab ad-Din. After these marriages, the islanders came to fear me...' Who says travelling cannot be fun!

Travellers may come and travellers

may go but the lure of travel goes on. Journeys may end not only with the acquaintance of new peoples and places, but in the discovery of new faiths as well. And so it happened to a young correspondent from Vienna: he came to Arabia but 'returned home' to Islam. The story that he recounted later has also become one of the classics of modern travel literature and testifies to the power of faith above the lure of travel. In his renowned *The Road to Mecca* Muhammad Asad describes the call to prayer, the same call that was heard countless times by the pilgrim Ibn Jubayr, the ambassador Ibn Fadlan and the globe-trotter Ibn Battuta, as such:

'THE LIBRARY IS SILENT; the old *shaykh* and I are alone in the domed room. From a little mosque nearby we hear the call to the sunset prayer; and a moment later the same call reverberates from the five minarets of the Prophet's mosque which, now invisible to us, watch solemnly and so full of sweet pride over the green cupola. The *mu'azzin* on one of the minarets begins his call: *Allahu Akbar* in a deep, dark, minor key, slowly ascending and descending in long arcs of sound: *God is the Greatest, God is the Greatest* ... Before he has finished this first phrase, the *mu'azzin* on the minaret nearest us falls in, in a slightly higher tone, ... *the Greatest, God is the Greatest!* And while on the third minaret the same chant grows up slowly.... *I bear witness that there is no God but God!* and *I bear witness that Muhammad is God's Messenger!* (In the same way, each verse repeated twice by each of the five *mu'azzins*, the call proceeds: *Come to prayer, come to prayer. Hasten to everlasting happiness!* Each of the voices seem to awaken the others and to draw them closer together, only to glide away itself and to take up the melody at another point, thus carrying it to the closing verse: *God is the Greatest, God is the Greatest! There is no God but God!*

This sonorous, solemn mingling and parting of voices is unlike any other chant of man. And as my heart pounds up to my throat in excited love for this city and its sounds, I begin to feel that all my wanderings have always but one meaning: to grasp the meaning of this call.....

'Come,' says Shaykh Ibn Bulayhid, 'let's go to the mosque for the *maghrib* prayer.'

Sooner or later all travellers return home! ■

Travellers may come and travellers may go, but the lure of travel goes on.

