Muslim Travellers
Pilgrimage, migration, and the religious imagination

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Chapter three

The search for knowledge in medieval Muslim societies: a comparative approach

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Anas b. Malik reported that the Prophet said: Those who go out in search of knowledge will be in the path of God until they return.

(al-Tirmidhi, Sunan, 39: 2)

This chapter suggests how three medieval Islamic societies might be studied within a comparative historical framework. To do so, we have selected a prominent feature of everyday life, the rihla or talab al-'ilm (travel for the sake of acquiring religious knowledge), which was common to medieval Muslims throughout dar al-Islam. Talab al-'ilm, given its deep roots in the Islamic tradition, its popularity, and its ability to facilitate movement and exchange among Islamic societies, demonstrates the virtues of the comparative method in studying Islamic history. Its study reveals both universally shared sentiments and the strength of local ties as possibly no other societal trait could.

In an essay on the comparative history of European societies, Marc Bloch (1967 [orig. 1928]: 47) wrote that one use of the comparative method is:

- to make a parallel study of societies that are at once neighbouring and contemporary, exercising a constant mutual influence, exposed throughout their development to the action of the same broad causes just because they are close and contemporaneous, and owing their existence to a common origin.

Though Bloch restricted his analysis to Europe, his formulation makes eminent sense for several reasons when applied to medieval Islam.¹

First, there is the vast physical expanse of dar al-Islam, a broad complex of peoples, geographies, and political structures that owes its existence and inspiration, in a fundamental sense, to a specific time and place: seventh-century Arabia. The Prophet Muhammad,
the Qur’anic revelation, the Arabic language, and the cities of Mecca and Medina acted then as now as historical referents which bestowed a kinship on all Muslims regardless of birthplace or domicile. No matter how distant from Arabia, all medieval Islamic societies could claim a share in this common origin, this common Muslim heritage focused on the natal centre of Islam.

The dispersal of the Arabs and Arabic into the former Byzantine and Sasanid territories and beyond, the acceleration of the pace of conversion in the late third/ninth century, and the multiple influences and contributions of such newly Islamised peoples as the Iranians, Turks, and Berbers created a world civilisation extending from the Atlantic to the Oxus. Out of this vortex developed a multiplicity of local centres for traditional Muslim learning that did not, however, rob the Islamic world of its essential unity. Indeed, one of the most compelling aspects of Islamic history is the continuing dialogue among Muslims over the relative merits of local attachments versus perceived universal sentiments and obligations.

This civilisation—really a network of variegated societies united by their commitment to the shari’a—was one which in the fullest sense owed its vibrancy to constant movement. Travel in all its myriad forms—pilgrimage, trade, scholarship, adventure—expanded the mental and physical limits of the Muslim world, and preserved and nourished the various contacts that Muslims perennially maintained with one another. As Ross Dunn (1986: 5–6) has noted in his recent study of the renowned Muslim traveller, Ibn Battuta, Marco Polo visited China as a stranger and alien, whereas his Muslim counterpart compiled a riḥla on the basis of distant journeys to lands either wholly or to some degree Muslim. Ibn Battuta may not have known the local languages of the places he visited, but he did know the cultural language of Muslims and hence felt at home.

Travel in its broadest definition ensured the unity of the Muslim community, but likewise encouraged appreciation of one’s home. Spain, Egypt, and Iran were medieval Islamic societies each with a distinct character. Yet each region was part of a larger civilisational whole. These societies, to paraphrase Bloch’s formulation, were neighbouring and contemporary, reciprocally influential, and subject to developments in religious learning, politics, trade, and warfare that were generally common to dar al-Islam. Travel bound them together and simultaneously stimulated the appearance of their local and regional identities. It is within the confines of this dialectic that we find the utility of the travel concept for the comparative study of medieval Muslim societies.

Travel as a meritorious activity is endowed with an ancient
Figure 3.1 Majnun at the Ka'ba with his father and other pilgrims. This miniature, taken from the *Khamseh* of Nizami, is a Herat/Timurid work of 898/1492–3. (British Library Ms. ADD.25900F. 114B. Used with permission.)
pedigree in the Muslim tradition. A rich vocabulary of words related in one way or another to travel is found in the Qur’an and the hadith. Sura Quraysh, 106: 2, refers to the rihla (the sole mention of the term in the Qur’an) in connection with the special accomplishments of the tribe of Quraysh and how much they owe their success to God’s providence. The Qur’an intends us to understand here that the Quraysh above all, with their talents for “journeys south and north” (presumably meaning to Yemen and Syria), should accept God’s commands. Thus, embedded deep in Muslim consciousness is an identification of travel with pious activity, an appreciation that achievement in such endeavour is a sign of divine approval and munificence.

As an organising principle for comparative analysis, only travel for the sake of religious scholarship specifically concerns us here. Initially, we must consider the problem of terminology. In the period under consideration in this chapter (four—fifth AH/tenth—eleventh AD centuries), the expressions rihla (travel) and talab al-’ilm (seeking knowledge) could almost be used interchangeably. Throughout the Spanish tabaqat literature, the two are often linked together, and when they are not they bear the same general meaning (travelling to seek religious knowledge). There are references to the rihla as hajj, but it is the former usage that is dominant. It is not until the late sixth AH/twelfth AD century that the two terms diverge. Rihla becomes identified primarily with the experience of the hajj—the examples of Ibn Jubayr and Ibn Battuta come immediately to mind—while talab al-’ilm retains its original meaning. This change may reflect the institutionalisation of the madrasa system in place of the formerly more individualised, orally-oriented relationships which prevailed between students and teachers in the early medieval centuries of Islamic history. Thus, Ibn Battuta usually looks for buildings—i.e. colleges of Islamic law and Sufi convents—rather than the solitary but renowned scholar here and there on his itinerary. The bulk of the references in the hadith literature are to talab al-’ilm and not rihla. It is evident then that talab al-’ilm, as a concept describing a specific aspect of movement and exchange among Muslims, is the more precise and accurate of the two terms.

The hadith literature reminds the believer that the search for knowledge is intimately tied to the physical act of travel. In this regard, several themes recur in the principal hadith collections: teachers and the learned as the only valuable human beings; the high merit of seeking and spreading knowledge; travelling in order to gather it; and the possession of knowledge as a sign of grace which reduces distinctions of birth and rank among Muslims.
Provided it was done for the right reasons, travel in the classical Muslim conception, to use Paul Fussell’s (1980: 39) words, “was conceived to be like study and its fruits were considered to be the adornment of the mind and the formation of the traveller”.

The best-known hadith on the subject – i.e., “The seeking of knowledge is a fard incumbent upon every Muslim” – is coupled in the collection of Ibn Majah (Sunan, i, no. 224) with the admonition that “He who places knowledge with those with whom it does not belong is like he who gives jewellery, pearls, and gold to pigs”. This report elevates talab al-’ilm to the status of a ritual obligation and stresses the care one must take in disseminating knowledge.4 In his Muwatta (1951, ii: 1002), Malik b. Anas transmits a hadith from the pre-Islamic hero, Luqman, who advises his son: “Oh my boy, sit with the learned (‘ulama’) and mingle with them on your knees. For just as God gives life to people’s hearts with the light of wisdom, so he enlivens the dead earth with the downpour of the heavens”. The ideal company for a Muslim is the learned, for they represent a life-giving (and sustaining) force within the community. If indeed they are the best company, we could assume from this hadith that the believer should seek the presence of the ‘ulama’ wherever they are; hence the importance of travel for the sake of attaining knowledge.

Recognised as a Companion by some, Abu al-Darda’ was a younger contemporary of the Prophet and an authority on the Qur’an who served as a qadi in Damascus and died there in AH 32/AD 652–3 (Jeffery 1960: 113–14). On one occasion, a class he was giving in the mosque of Damascus was interrupted by a man from Medina who had come ‘to ascertain the validity of a Prophetic hadith which Abu al-Darda’ had transmitted. The latter asked the man whether he had brought merchandise or anything else with him. When the man gave a negative reply, Abu al-Darda’ responded with the following:

He who follows a road seeking knowledge, God will make the path to heaven easy for him. And the angels will place their wings so as to aid the seeker of knowledge. And all in heaven and on earth, even the snake in the water, will seek forgiveness from such a person. The merit of the learned man over the worshipper is like the merit of the moon over the rest of the stars. The ‘ulama’ are the heritage of the prophets. The latter did not bequeath dinars and dirhams. Rather they left behind knowledge. He who takes it should do so with an abundance of good fortune.

(Ibn Majah, 1972: i, hadith no. 223)
The message here is obvious: God views with great favour those who pursue *talab al-‘ilm* to the point that such activity facilitates entry into heaven. Worship (meaning prayer) undoubtedly brings the believer closer to God, but it is the learned one who enjoys an even more special relationship with Allah. It is the man from Medina who travelled to Damascus seeking to verify a *hadith* who is unstintingly praised, and we may assume that this adulation would apply to all Muslims who would travel for the same or similar reasons.

Given the intense interest in travel for the sake of scholarship in the *hadith* literature, it is no wonder that it became a normative feature of medieval Muslim education, at least until the sixth *AH*/twelfth *AD* century. Though local and regional traditions were always influential in shaping religious and intellectual life, medieval Muslims really knew no boundaries in their desire to master the subjects which comprised the canonical syllabus of learning: among others, they included the Qur’an, *hadith*, *tafsir* (commentary on the Qur’an), and *gira’a* (correct recitation of the Qur’an). Scholarly peregrinations were frequent and often long, in terms of both time and distance.

A man could study in twenty different cities with as many different teachers in each and return home yearning for yet another trip. A representative example is the Cordoban *shaykh* who went east in *AH* 330/*AD* 941–2 at the age of fourteen (Ibn al-Faradi 1966: biography no. 1360). During his trip, he followed an extensive itinerary that included Mecca, Medina, Jidda, Yemen (Sana’a, Zabid, Aden), Fustat, Jerusalem, Gaza, Ashkelon, Tiberias, Damascus, Tripoli, Beirut, Caesaria, Ramla, Farama, Alexandria, and Quzum. This tidal flow of scholars and scholarship across the Islamic lands eventually established the primacy of certain cities and regions as learning centres.

A shifting hierarchy of learning centres emerged. Depending on political and economic conditions, different cities in different periods could vie for pre-eminence in this regard. Whereas, for example, Baghdad set the standard in the third–early fourth *AH*/ninth–early tenth *AD* centuries, it was Cairo under the Fatimids and Nishapur in the succeeding two centuries which attracted Muslim scholars. This hierarchy could also depend to a lesser degree merely upon opportunity—for instance, a scholar might opt for one city as opposed to another because it was closer to his place of origin or had a sufficient number of well-known divines residing in it. But it is evident from our sources that travelling scholars were exceedingly well-informed. They knew where the leading scholars lived and acted accordingly. A scholarly traveller of the type discussed
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eagerly contacted local 'ulama' wherever he went, but he always knew where he would be most rewarded.

Although more research needs to be done on its exact nature, rihla/talab al-‘ilm deserves its status as a unifying theme of medieval Islamic history. For Muslims who undertook it, it was an experience to be relished in a variety of contexts. Yet rihla/talab al-‘ilm also contributed, as already noted, to regionalism and localism. Why is this so? First, the powerful forces that were generated — perhaps as early as the second century after the conquests — blended the ancient traditions of the Near East, transmitted by converts to Islam, with those of the Arab settlers. This blending produced new Muslim communities, each proud of its distinctive heritage, both old and new. The special qualities or merits (fada’il) assigned to Mecca and Medina in the Qur’an and the hadith literature established a precedent and a paradigm for newly-constituted Muslim communities. Mecca, of course, possessed both a privileged pre-Islamic status and a central place in Muslim tradition. This duality of distinction was copied and reproduced — initially perhaps in Egypt — by other Muslim societies, and gave birth to a literary genre called fada’il, which bred cultural competition among cities in particular.

Second, there was the psychology of the traveller himself. For example, a scholar who left Cordoba or Seville to perform the hajj and study with the learned men of North Africa and Egypt did not do so as a peripheral malcontent. He was usually at least a man of solid middle-class background and some local intellectual renown, and one fully imbued with the values of his native land. He marvelled at the sights that he saw in Mecca, cherished the memory of classes that he attended in Fez or Damascus, yet returned home still convinced that the homesickness he experienced was genuine and that no other land surpassed the merits of al-Andalus.

Perhaps all of this conforms to the three stages of Joseph Campbell's myth of the hero (quoted in Fussell 1980: 208): the setting out and separation from the familiar; the trials of initiation and adventure; and the return and re-integration into society. As our hypothetical Spanish scholar passed through these stages, he was reminded of both his citizenship in an international community of Muslims and his ties to his region and city in Spain. Unlike Fussell’s British travellers of the modern inter-war period, most Muslim travellers returned home thankful to be there, and their re-integration was often a measure of how successfully the travel-for-study experience reinforced local identity and pride.

Spain, Egypt, and Khurasan are three examples of intellectual centres with strong local identities. Each contributed to and
participated in the rihla/talab al-‘ilm network. A Muslim in search of religious knowledge could find a warm reception in each region which would cement his ties to the international Muslim community of which he was a member. But he would also encounter that strength of local sentiment which we have described, as the following examples suggest.

Al-Subki (d. AH 771/AD 1369–70), the compiler of the most important biographical collection on the Shafi‘i law school, tells us of a shaykh (d. AH 463/AD 1070–1) from a town near Baghdad who, wavering between a trip to Cairo or Nishapur, received the following advice:

If you go to Cairo, you will go to only one man [Ibn al-Nahhas]. If he escapes you, your trip will be ruined. But if you go to Nishapur, there you will find a group of scholars. If one should elude you, you may obtain the help of one from among the rest.

(al Subki 1964 iv, 30)

Needless to say, the man opted for Nishapur.

Egypt also had its adherents. In the late fourth AH/tenth AD century, the geographer, al-Muqaddasi (1906: 197), extolled the virtues of Fatimid Cairo. He declared it vastly superior to Baghdad, Damascus, and Nishapur in many respects, his most important comment for our purposes being that it was the habitat or breeding ground (ma‘dan) of the ‘ulama’. Naturally we find echoes of this rivalry between cities and regions in the fada‘il literature. Drawing in part on legends surrounding Egypt’s pre-Islamic history, ‘Umar b. Muhammad al-Kindi (1971: 45), the son of the famous Egyptian historian (Abu ‘Umar Muhammad, d. AH 350/AD 961–2), could claim:

Wise people agree that the people of the world strive to travel to Egypt and seek to make a living there. But the people of Egypt do not seek to make a living in any other country, and do not travel anywhere – even if there were a wall separating Egypt and the countries of the world, so much is available in Egypt that its people would have no need of them.

Suffice it to say that on the Egyptian side of that wall was a sufficient and vibrant network of scholars.

Muslim rulers were also drawn into the competition spawned by the rihla. The fourth AH/tenth AD century was the height of Spanish Umayyid power and visits by Spanish Malikī scholars to Egypt. In his invaluable guidebook to Cairo’s tombs and cemeteries, Ibn al-Zayyat (d. AH 814/AD 1411–12) reports that the Caliph ‘Abd al-
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Rahman III al-Nasir regularly sent 10,000 dinars for the maintenance of Maliki fuqaha in Fustat. Not to be outdone, the Egyptian ruler Abu al-Misk Kafur ordered that 20,000 dinars be distributed among the Shafi‘is (1907: 190–1).

In sum, these examples should remind us of the close links between riḥla/talab al-ʿilm and fadā’il as key ingredients in medieval Muslim self-definition. As noted, travel for the sake of study was a process which could emphasise universal traits common to all Muslims. For the scholar, it meant the exchange of ideas, books, and even addresses of teachers in distant cities; for the merchant, goods, services, and an awareness of new business methods and perhaps even technological innovations in manufacturing and agriculture; and for everyone, the experience of seeing other lands. If we accept Dunn’s assertion that the riḥla was above all “an account of a journey (or journeys) to Mecca”, then the ḥajj was of course the most supremely universal trait of all (Dunn 1986: 310).

The frequency with which medieval Muslims pursued talab al-ʿilm is an excellent indicator of their self-image and how much the riḥla concept owed to the exigencies of time and place. Looking at Egypt first, we find that the term riḥla itself rarely appears in biographies of Egyptian ʿulama. Primary sources for Egypt in our period (fourth–fifth AH/tenth–eleventh AD centuries) are limited to the abbreviated biographical work of Ibn al-Tahhan (d. AH 416/AD 1025–6) and the obituary list of Ibn al-Habbal (d. AH 482/AD 1089–90). But even from these materials we have the distinct impression that Egyptians felt that they were self-sufficient with regard to learning. Egypt’s most celebrated early historian and first known compiler of a biographical dictionary devoted exclusively to Egyptians, Ibn Yunus al-Sadafi (d. AH 347/AD 957–8), never left Egypt. Yet his reputation as an ʿalim was unquestioned and we find his unfortunately lost biographical work frequently quoted by Muslim authors.

As al-Kindi’s observation reminds us, the Pharaonic view of Egypt as the centre of the universe became part of the cultural heritage of Islam in Egypt. As a centre for Islamic studies, Egypt did not match the initial rate of development that Iraq enjoyed. But, by the fourth AH/tenth AD century, it was a much-respected regional entrepôt of learning. Its capital, Fustat (now Cairo), was a magnet for Muslims from all over the Mediterranean. Egyptians themselves saw little reason to seek knowledge elsewhere. The scarcity of Egyptians in the lists of ghuraba (foreign scholars) in Spanish, Iraqi, and Persian biographical works underlines this attitude. Fustat was a teeming, sophisticated way-station, reception
centre, and seat of learning for those making riḥlas. But the riḥla as a self-defining concept in Egyptian Muslim life seems to have played a minor role.

Turning to Spain, we find the exact opposite of Egypt. The riḥla was the central feature of Spanish Muslim intellectual life. We are blessed with a rich biographical literature for Spain (Ibn al-Faradi, Ibn Bashkuwal, al-Dabbi, and Ibn al-Abbar) which is both local and primary in nature. The several thousand biographies in these collections trenchantly document the significance of riḥla/talab al-ʿilm for Spanish Muslims.

Initially, we should note the role of geography. Located at the western limit of the medieval Islamic world, it is very natural that travel for the sake of study would achieve its most impressive development in Spain. With the possible exception of their co-religionists in Sicily, Spanish Muslims had more contact with Christians and Christendom than any other region of dar al-Islam. Muslims, although constituting the dominant culture, ruled a large Christian subject population and, whatever the state of religious and political antagonisms, maintained economic relations with the Christian lands of northern Spain.

Far more crucial is the fact that from the late fifth AH/eleventh AD century, Muslim Spain was increasingly threatened by a militant crusading movement, fervently Spanish Catholic in orientation. Spanish Muslims had every reason to seek spiritual refreshment in areas where Islam was the majority culture. Egyptians could really afford, so to speak, to remain at home, whereas for Spaniards, riḥla/talab al-ʿilm truly meant the survival of Islam as a coherent, shariʿa-based way of life. What began as “refreshment” conferring social benefit in the third AH/ninth AD century gradually became an unavoidable necessity by the sixth AH/twelfth AD, given the changing political and military conditions in medieval Spain and the increasing emigration of the corps of Maliki ʿulamaʾ to North Africa and Egypt. Embattled both physically and mentally, Spanish Muslims looked to other communities, the Maghrib in particular, for intellectual succour.

Our sources do not explicitly indicate that Spanish Muslims clearly perceived themselves as peripheral or marginal. However, given their distance from the early centres of Muslim scholarship, it is reasonable to assume that during the second–early fourth AH/eighth–early tenth AD centuries they would look eastward for appropriate models of learning in hadith. We may find a parallel in the early medieval Jewish communities of Spain, North Africa, Egypt, and the Franco–German region. These communities were initially dependent to one degree or another upon famous yeshivot.
(academies) of Iraq. So too were the Muslims of Spain, Tunisia, and Egypt upon their counterpart centres of learning in Iraq. Whereas the study of *fiqh* developed locally in Spain (inspired no doubt by the development of Maliki *fiqh* in North Africa) from an early date, *hadith* did not, hence the relatively substantial percentage of biographies of Muslims who went east to immerse themselves in that field. If a sense of intellectual periphery (Spain) and of centre(s) (Iraq and increasingly Egypt and Tunisia) did exist, it certainly was not something about which Spanish Muslims wrote. However, the biographies provide evidence of a perception of periphery that cannot be denied – at least as far as *hadith* study is concerned. On the other hand, this attitude was exaggerated and intensified by the political turmoil which prevailed among Spanish Muslims and by the accelerating advance of the Reconquista in the early sixth AH/twelfth AD century.

None the less, we should not assume that *talab al-‘ilm* achieved acceptance as a *fard* in al-Andalus, despite the gravity of the situation. We referred earlier to the Prophetic *hadith* on the subject of *talab al-‘ilm* as a *fard*. This *hadith* was hotly debated throughout the medieval Muslim world. For evidence of this, we need look no further than the Spaniard Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr’s (d. AH 464/AD 1071–2) *Jami‘ bayan al-‘ilm wa-fadluhu* (*The Exposition and Excellence of Knowledge*). The author was the most famous *hadith* specialist of his time in Spain and North Africa and achieved his reputation without every having studied outside of Cordoba!

Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr devotes the first nine pages of his work to the question of whether or not *talab al-‘ilm* is a *fard*. As we read his presentation of the opinions of various early scholars, we realise that there was no consensus on the legal status of travel for the sake of study. For example, when asked about the problem, Malik b. Anas says: “How admirable is *talab al-‘ilm*! As to its being a *fard*, no”. And in a different transmission, he answers: “No. But it means seeking from a person that which one can put to good use in his religious faith” (Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr 1975: 5). There is no doubt about the crucial importance of *talab al-‘ilm*, but every doubt concerning its status as a ritual obligation. At best, the authorities quoted by Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr are ambivalent, their commentary occasionally cryptic.

*Talab al-‘ilm* may have come to represent a *fard* in a *de facto* sense, a way of dealing with an increasingly insecure and disturbing political, social, and intellectual reality for Spanish Muslims. It is likely that it reinforced both communal feeling *within* Spain and the bonds which Spanish Muslims maintained with their co-religionists in other regions. As such, *talab al-‘ilm* was the Andalusian method
of expressing how their peripheral Islamic society related to the more central heartlands of the umma, especially after the fall of Toledo (AH 478/AD 1085–6) and the steady progress of the Reconquista.

However, what one brought back, rather than the original motivation for going, could have been a decisive factor here. The physical search for religious knowledge was both an adventure and a religious duty. The ‘ulama’ were, of course, not the only Muslims who undertook journeys, but the overwhelming testimony of the biographical literature shows that they were by far the most likely to do so, given their needs and vocations. The search for religious knowledge also conferred distinction. Those who completed the journey returned home not only with an expanded religious knowledge, but also – and perhaps more importantly – with the experience of other lands and other Muslims, which heightened their appreciation of their native land. The sections specifically set aside for foreign-born scholars in the biographical collections show a “diaspora” of Spanish and other Muslims who never returned home. The majority did return, however, to the merit of both themselves and the cities and regions which they had left. Undoubtedly, their perceptions of centre and periphery changed in the course of their travels; that is to say, the cultural enrichment and expansion of the periphery blurred the distinctions which had of necessity existed formerly between it and the centre.

The Spanish biographies yield a variety of characteristics that enable us to profile rihla/talab al-‘ilm as it was understood in al-Andalus. First, it was the most important aspect of Spanish learning. The concept permeates the language of the Spanish biographical dictionaries. The experience was a multi-faceted intellectual endeavour, with neither hadith nor fiqh always enjoying primacy. It occupied a very special position in Spain in that those who travelled (ahl al-rihla) represented a distinct category of individuals. These men were heavily urbanised, ethnically heterogeneous, and solidly middle class in vocation and social outlook. They were drawn from the corps of Maliki fuqaha’, or jurists, which socially and politically stood between khasha (upper class or elite) and ‘amma (the “masses” or lower classes) in Muslim Spain (Benaboud 1980–1: 5–45). They were objects of praise but also had advantages of a practical nature in the sense that public offices such as the post of qadi were reserved for them by the ruler and his high officials. A famous teacher’s reputation increased when he made a trip and, in addition, returned with a new or rare text previously unknown in Spain.

People of all ages engaged in rihla/talab al-‘ilm, although those
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between the ages of 20 and 50 appear most often in the *tabaqat*. Trips were often family-oriented. Learning began at home and one's renown was based on the intellectual foundation initially passed on within the extended family unit. Sons (and occasionally daughters) accompanied fathers and often then made a trip of their own, usually in the company of a brother, cousin, or close friend. We should add here that these customs were not peculiarly Spanish. Muslims the world over pursued study for the same reasons and in the same manner, whether they lived in Cordoba, Cairo, or Nishapur.

In Muslim Spain, many travelled for the sake of study. In Egypt, by contrast, it would appear that a minority among the corps of ‘*ulama*’ did so. Khurasan, through the example of its great city of Nishapur, occupies a unique intermediate position between al-Andalus and Egypt. In the fourth AH / tenth—eleventh AD centuries, Nishapur was a wealthy and powerful urban entity under the successive rule of the Samanids, Ghaznavids, and Saljuqs. A strategic nexus on the trade routes to China and India, Nishapur was home to an affluent and influential network of ‘*ulama*’ families who, during our period, controlled political activity within their city. They are known to us through the *Ta’rikh Nisabur* by al-Hakim al-Nisaburi (d. AH 405/AD 1015–16) and its continuation by ‘Abd al-Ghafir al-Farisi (d. AH 529/AD 1135–6). The several thousand Arabic biographies in these works provide us with a very different perspective on medieval *rihla/talab al-‘ilm*.

Unlike the Egyptians, people from Nishapur did not stay home. But the nature of their travels seems to have been different from that of their Spanish peers. Spanish Muslims travelled all over al-Andalus. Likewise, Nishapuris journeyed the length and breadth of Khurasan and Iraq and Central Asia too. What is striking is the contrast in linguistic usage between the Spanish and Nishapur biographical notices. Very rare is the phrase *lahu rihlatun* or the verb *rahala* itself. Instead, we see the verbs *kharaja* and *qadama* frequently. *Talab al-‘ilm*, of course, is a major concern but not in an explicit manner. For example, there is the following except from the biography of Nasr b. al-Hasan b. al-Qasim al-Shashi (d. AH 487/AD 1094–5):

He went to Nishapur as a young man on business . . . he went to lands west of Nishapur (*bilad al-gharb*) . . . and God blessed him with his acquisitions and commercial activities to the point that he had an abundance of wealth . . . then he returned to Nishapur and made his home there.

(Frye 1965: 127)
Obviously, there is plenty of movement and exchange here and we should add that this example is not untypical of the Nishapur biographies. We find important information as well in this biography on the man’s training in hadith study. Travel for the purpose of study is present but it somehow does not convey the intensity present in the Spanish sources.

Though subject to periodic political upheaval and economic dislocation, Nishapur and its Perso-Islamic culture area were never even remotely threatened by the likes of a Christian Reconquista (although the initially pagan Mongols devastated Khurasan in a manner that Christian knights never did in Spain). In our period, however, it was almost wholly Muslim – confident, prosperous, and self-assured. Nishapur scholars sought knowledge, particularly in the realm of hadith, as readily as their Spanish counterparts, but perhaps without that urgent sense of “mission”, which may account for the Spanish preoccupation with rihla/talab al-ilm. Travel for the sake of knowledge was possibly routine for the ‘ulama’ of Nishapur. It was taken for granted in a way that it was not in Spain, hence its elevation to such a lofty status among Spanish Muslims.

Spain, Egypt, and Khurasan all embraced the ideology, which was the basis of travel for the sake of study. But, for a variety of reasons, they experienced it differently. In Spain, it was a primary aspect of one’s identity as an ‘alim and reflected the country’s peculiar status on the periphery of the Islamic world. For the Egyptians, it was just the opposite. They too respected the concept but felt little obliged to pursue it. With Nishapur and, in general, the Iranian/Central Asian culture region that looked towards not the Mediterranean but China and India, we encounter a corps of scholars who rarely used the “key term” itself but did engage in the process to which it was applied. They circulated within a “local” network and, to a greater degree than their Spanish and Egyptian peers, used the status conferred by their education effectively to influence and sometimes to dictate the political affairs of their cities.

In using this particular comparative approach, we have returned not to an “essentialist” or “reified” view of Islam or being Muslim. Instead, we have utilised rihla/talab al-ilm as a means of comprehending how one activity fundamental to early medieval Islamic education was understood in three distinct Islamic societies so distant in time and place from our own.
Notes

1 The periodisation of medieval Islamic history remains a subject of debate. For the purposes of this paper, the approximate chronological boundaries are AH 236–545/AD 850–1150. It was during these centuries that the distinct characteristics of the fluid network of religious learning studied here developed and flourished.

2 *Tabqaqat* literally means “classes” or “generations”. It is a label for one of the most characteristic genres of historical writing in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish – the biographical dictionary. Usually arranged alphabetically, the *tabqaqat* collections deal with all manner of individuals (such as caliphs, poets, and saints), but here we refer exclusively to those collections devoted to religious scholars (*‘ulama*).

3 It is interesting to note that in Morocco after the tenth/sixteenth century, the *rihla* shifts from association with the *hajj* to travel only within Morocco.

4 Though the question of *talab al-‘ilm* as a fard (ritual obligation) is discussed on p. 60, it is worth noting at this point that an *‘alim*’s status did not depend on the journeys that he pursued in order to acquire learning. The problems of which characteristics defined an *‘alim* has generated substantial debate in recent years. Knowledge of *hadith* above all was a quality which certainly distinguished an *‘alim*. But loyalty, status, reputation, and responsibility figured prominently as well. Making a *rihla* did of course enhance one’s status and reputation but sanction for it was a local/regional matter. The need for and value of it depended upon time and place. Thus it is difficult to be precise about the criteria for an *‘alim*’s status. As Richard Bulliet (1972) and Roy Mottahedeh (1980) have shown, access to religious learning was largely unrestricted and open to talent. There was an egalitarian sense to the process, yet this did not preclude the influence of inherited distinction and wealth. In the case of Nishapur, what mattered was not who learned but who taught. Moreover, there were identities and affiliations – membership in urban socio-political factions and Sufi brotherhoods, or ethnic bonds – which could co-exist with or even supersede one’s being an *‘alim*. These identities varied considerably over time and place. Bulliet’s “patricians of Nishapur” had no counterpart in Egypt, although the Egyptian *‘ulama* possessed a cohesion which was encouraged by the country’s geographic, economic, and intellectual significance in the fourth–fifth/tenth–eleventh centuries.

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