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India's epidemics in the *Rihla* of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa: plague, cholera or lexical muddle?

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Abstract

The famous Moroccan traveller Muḥammad b. Baṭṭūṭa, who left Tangier in 1325, claims to have made a journey that took him across most of the then Islamic world. The country in which he recounts having stayed the longest was India, where he says he remained from 1333 to 1341/1342, mostly in the Islamic Sultanate of Delhi. A long section of his *Rihla* is dedicated to the sub-continent and modern historians of this region ascribe to it an important documentary value, although it has been argued that Ibn Baṭṭūṭa may have borrowed – not to imply copied – information from other sources in other parts of the work. As concerns India, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa speaks of two epidemics and one deadly disease that occurred in 1334–5 and 1344. Some scholars have referred to them as cholera, while others have suggested it was the plague – thus supporting the hypothesis that the medieval plague pandemic had struck India before reaching the Middle East. How did this confusion arise? What exactly does Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's *Rihla* relate? Do Indo-Persian sources confirm these epidemics? Do they and/or Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's *Rihla* allow us to discount the presence of the Medieval Plague in India, or rather do they assert it?

In order to answer these questions, this paper analyses the information on the Indian epidemics in Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's *Rihla* and compares the text with its translations in the principal European languages and with Indo-Persian chronicles. These analyses reveal something of a lexical muddle which, in my opinion, has contributed to some errors and misunderstandings regarding the diseases in question. But another question arises: is it possible to read the information provided by Ibn Baṭṭūṭa and the Indian chronicles in a consistent way, that is, taking into account not only the analysis of written documents, but also the recent and current findings in genetics of plague, and in particular on the Black Death? Finally, an attempt is made to answer a question that has to be asked, particularly in light of the criticism often levelled at Ibn Baṭṭūṭa. Considering that in one of these events he claims to have witnessed the epidemic, is there any reason to suppose that he did not? Regarding the other two events that he did not claim to witness firsthand, is there any cause to doubt his claims?

Keywords: Ibn Baṭṭūṭa; *Rihla*; Black Death; Medieval epidemics in India; Baranī; ʿIṣāmī; Sirhindī; Firishṭa; Islamic Sultanate of Delhi; Translation misunderstandings

Kullu ṭāʿūn wabāʿ
*wa-laysa kullu wabāʿ ṭāʿūn.*¹

¹ “Every plague (*ṭāʿūn*) is an epidemic (*wabāʿ*), but every epidemic is not a plague” (al-Nawawī 1929: 14, 204). Al-Nawawī's description of *ṭāʿūn* and *wabāʿ* is translated into English in Conrad 1982: 296–7.

The *Rihla* of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (and Ibn Juzayy)²

Still in his early twenties,³ on 2 *Rajab* 725 [14 June 1325] Muḥammad b. Baṭṭūṭa recounts having left his hometown of Tangier to make the Pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina, but in reality he spent twenty-four years travelling the length and breadth of the Islamic world. Back home in *Shaʿbān* 750 [November 1349], he made two further short trips to al-Andalus and Sudan and in early 1354 he put a definitive end to his wanderings.⁴ Shortly after that, at the behest of the Marinid Sultan Abū ʿInān,⁵ he dictated the diary of his travels which the court scribe, Ibn Juzayy, edited. As the text says, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa finished his work on 3 *Dhū l-Ḥijja* 756 [13 December 1355] and the final version was completed a few months later, in *Ṣafar* 757 [February 1356]. The text bears the title *Tuḥfat al-nuẓẓār fī gharāʾib al-amṣār wa-ʿajāʾib al-asfār* (“A Gift to those who contemplate the wonders of cities and the marvels of travelling”)⁶ – but it is known as *Rihlat Ibn Baṭṭūṭa* (“The Travels of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa”). However, as we do not know how and to what extent Ibn Baṭṭūṭa and Ibn Juzayy collaborated, it would be more correct to call it “The *Rihla* of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, by Ibn Baṭṭūṭa and Ibn Juzayy”.⁷ Ibn Juzayy probably died a few months later, in 756–8/1356–7, while Ibn Baṭṭūṭa probably lived until 770/1368–9.⁸

As for the text he/they wrote, we do not know much about its fortune in North Africa and the Middle East: some manuscript compendia certainly circulated, but none of them seem to be attested in Arabic sources until the end of the sixteenth century.⁹ Whereas in Europe, some manuscripts were edited and translated in the early nineteenth century: the most relevant were the works by the German Johann Kosegarten, who, in 1818, edited and translated some of its extracts into Latin, and the Englishman Samuel Lee who, in 1829, translated into English a long compendium signed by the Syrian copyist Faṭḥ Allāh al-Baylūnī (d. 1632).¹⁰ Between 1853–8, the Frenchmen Charles Defremery and Beniamino R. Sanguinetti relied on five Algerian manuscripts in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, to edit in Arabic and translate into French the currently most complete

² For their generous and authoritative comments, I wish to thank all those who have contributed useful suggestions and directions for my research and helped me in different ways: in particular Ahmed Ibrahim, Angela Benotto, Elke Spiegl, Joan Rundo, Luca Patrizi, Michelguglielmo Torri, Maurizio Lo Iacono, Mohsen Yazdani, Natacha Maanna, Paul Kozelka and Şemsa Gezgin. I also wish to thank the anonymous reviewers whose advice helped me to improve this paper and, last but not least, I would like to express my gratitude to Monica Green for the extensive, multidisciplinary work she is doing to reread the history of the medieval plague and for her great willingness to proffer me advice and clarification to improve my research.

³ Almost all the information we have about Ibn Baṭṭūṭa is taken from his own works. Three contemporary Arab authors only give very little information about him: Ibn Khaldūn (*Muqaddima*, 1992: 327–29); Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī (*al-Durar al-kāmina*, 1993: 3, 480–1); and Ibn al-Khaṭīb (*Muqniʿat al-sāʾil*, 1863: 9).

⁴ Ibn Baṭṭūṭa’s return home is cited by Ibn Khaldūn (1992: 1, 327–8), who states: “At the time of the Marinid Sultan Abū ʿInān, a *shaykh* from Tangier, called Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, returned to the Maghreb. Twenty years earlier, he had left for the Orient and travelled in Iraq, Yemen and India”. For more information see Tresso 2021b: 221–22.

⁵ Abū ʿInān Fāris was the 11th Sultan (1348–1358) of the Marinid dynasty.

⁶ Al-Tāzī 1977, IV: 280; Gibb and Beckingham 1994: 4, 977. For an in-depth analysis of this title see Ouasti (2006: 63–71), who defines it as “a restricted and overdetermined discursive unit”.

⁷ In this paper I will use “Ibn Baṭṭūṭa” to indicate both the traveller protagonist of the work and its author(s). Furthermore, where not otherwise specified, when speaking of *Rihla*, I will refer to the *Rihla* of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa.

⁸ Ibn Ḥajar 1993: 3, 481. For the controversial date of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa’s death, see Tresso 2021a: 142, n. 46.

⁹ al-Tāzī (1977: 1, 63) mentions the Moroccan ambassador al-Tamgrūṭī who quotes Ibn Baṭṭūṭa’s description of Anatolia in the travelogue he wrote about his journey to Istanbul in 1590–1591. After that, I only find, some forty years later, the Maghribi al-Maqqarī (1855: 1, 96 and 109), who quotes Ibn Juzayy twice as the *murattib* (arranger) of *Rihlat Ibn Baṭṭūṭa* in his history of al-Andalus, which he wrote in Cairo in about 1629.

¹⁰ Kosegarten 1818, with Arabic text, and Lee 1829 (Arabic manuscript in al-Baylūnī n.d.). For the existing copies of al-Baylūnī’s manuscript see al-Tāzī 1997: 1, 64–70 and *passim*; Elger 2010a: 239–240; Elger 2010b.

version of the work.¹¹ One of these manuscripts bears the signature of Ibn Juzayy, this version is considered the “standard” one – or *Editio Princeps* – and is undoubtedly the most widespread edition of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa’s *Rihla*, whether in Arabic or translated into other languages.¹²

The *Rihla* of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa in Indian studies

Ibn Baṭṭūṭa claims to having arrived in India in September 1333. Here he reports having interrupted his journey and stayed for eight (maybe nine) years at the court of the prodigal Turkish-Afghan tyrant of the Islamic Sultanate of Delhi, Muḥammad b. Tughluq (724–52/1324–51). A large part of the *Rihla* is dedicated to this long stay and provides a wealth of historical, political, economic and social news and information, interspersed with anecdotes, *mirabilia* and Ibn Baṭṭūṭa’s or others’ personal adventures and experiences.¹³ Now, the few remaining Indo-Persian sources (i.e. Indian sources in Persian language) on the Islamic Sultanate of Delhi, and on Ibn Tughluq in particular, mainly consist of four chronicles: *Tārīkh-i Fīroz Shāhī*, by the famous Delhi court historian Ḍiyā’ al-Dīn Baranī (d. c. 759/1358);¹⁴ *Futūḥ al-salāṭīn* by the historian and court poet (of the Bahmanid Sultanate) ‘Abd al-Malik ‘Iṣāmī (711/1311–?);¹⁵ the later *Tārīkh-i Mubārak Shāhī*, by the Delhi court historian Yaḥyā b. Aḥmad Sirhindī (d. 1033/1624)¹⁶ and *Tārīkh-i Firishta*, by the Deccan court historian Muḥammad Qāsim Firishta (d. c. 1029/1620), who mostly draws information from Baranī.¹⁷ Therefore it is not unusual that Ibn Baṭṭūṭa’s work is cited as a reliable source in modern studies on Indian medieval history, even though it is a literary text.¹⁸

¹¹ These manuscripts are still preserved at the Bibliothèque National in Paris (<https://archivesetmanuscrits.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cc5683g/cdoe3054>). MS 907 (BN arabe 2291), includes parts II and IV of the work, corresponding to vols. 2 and 4 in the editions by Defremery and Sanguinetti (Arabic and French), Gibb and Beckingham (English) and al-Tāzī (Arabic). It is almost entirely written by a single hand and bears the signature of Ibn Juzayy and the date of *Ṣafar* 757 [February 1356]; MS 908 (BN arabe 2290) is dated 1134/1721; MS 909 (BN arabe 2287) has no date (17th century); MS 910 (BN arabe 2289) is dated 1180/1766; MS 911 (BN arabe 2288) has no date (17th century). The most complete and correct manuscript is MS 910. Manuscripts 909 and 911 have omissions and errors, and manuscripts 908 and 910 are definitely late. For the history of these manuscripts and the reception of the *Rihla* in Europe, see Defremery 1848: 2–4; Janssens 1948: 7–10; Defremery and Sanguinetti’s *Préface* in Monteil 1968: 8–26; Monteil 1968: 9–11; al-Tāzī 1997: 1, 97–108; Ibrahimov 1999: 41–6. A list of 30 further manuscripts of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa’s *Rihla*, including photographs and some descriptive notes, can be found in al-Tāzī 1997: 1, 15–74.

¹² The first edition of the *Rihla* printed in Arabic was the compendium by al-Baylūnī, published in Istanbul in 1873 by Süleyman Efendi Printing House (see also Strauss 2019: 65–6), which caused it to be mentioned more than the Defremery and Sanguinetti’s *Editio Princeps* version in nineteenth-century Turkish and Arabic literature. As for the editions of the *Rihla* quoted in this paper, the Arabic text of Defremery and Sanguinetti’s *Editio Princeps* is from the edition by al-Tāzī 1997 (vols 1–4) and its English translation is by Gibb (vol 1, 1958; vol. 2, 1962; vol. 3, 1971) and Gibb and Beckingham (vol. 4, 1994). Both of them respect the *Editio Princeps* division into four volumes and bear in the margin its page number, which in the notes of this paper is quoted in square brackets as [EP].

¹³ The Indian section of the *Rihla* is found in al-Tāzī: 3, 71–249 and 4, 7–108; Gibb 1971: 3, 593–767 and Gibb and Beckingham 1994: 4, 773–873 [EP 3, 94–449 and EP 4, 1–228].

¹⁴ Baranī 1862. A partial translation into English can be found in Elliot and Dowson 1871: 3, 193–268.

¹⁵ ‘Iṣāmī 1948. The text is written in *mathnavi* (or *mathnawi*) style (poem in rhyming couplets) and is therefore also called by the author *Shāh Nāmah-i Hind* (the *Shahnameh* of India). It has been translated into English by Āghā Mahdī Husain in a three-volume edition (‘Iṣāmī 1967–77), but only the first one seems to be readily available. Some passages translated into English can also be found in Venkata Ramanayya 1942.

¹⁶ Sirhindī 1931. English version by Kamal K. Basu (Sirhindī 1932).

¹⁷ Firishta 2008. English versions by Jonathan Scott (Firishta 1794) and by John Briggs (Firishta 1829). For other sources relating to Ibn Tughluq’s reign, see Majumdar et al. 1951: 317; Conermann 1993: 3; Jackson 1999: 151–2; Vose 2022.

¹⁸ Sirhindī 1931. English version by Kamal K. Basu (Sirhindī 1932).

Among the scholars of Indian history, Major (1857: liv) gives a prominent place to Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's *Rihla* among the sources for the study of the sub-continent in the fourteenth century; Elliot and Dowson (1871, 3: 586) say that "He [Ibn Baṭṭūṭa] recounted, and no doubt honestly, the information he received from the respectable and well-informed individuals with whom he was brought in contact"; Moreland (1936: 169) cites him as a witness to Ibn Tughluq's cruelty, noting that it is not reported by Baranī; Dunbar (1936: 124) claims that Ibn Baṭṭūṭa gives "a reliable account of Muhammad Tughluq" and argues that Baranī, considering his role as court historian, "cannot be considered to be as good evidence as IB" (Dunbar 1936: 122); Sastri (1939: 35) explains that Ibn Baṭṭūṭa "gives an historical retrospect [...] which is especially valuable from the additional facts which it supplies"; Venkata Ramanayya (1942) quotes Ibn Baṭṭūṭa on several occasions comparing his information with that of Baranī; Majumdar, Raychaudhuri and Datta (1951: 648, Index) cite the *Rihla* as a source (alone or alongside others) on a dozen occasions; Smith (1958: 249) compares Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's *Rihla* with Baranī's chronicle, and remarks: "Although [Baranī] naturally does not exhibit the impartial detachment of the foreign observer, his narrative is full of vivid detail"; Bhattacharya (1960: 435) includes him in his *Dictionary of Indian History*; Raychaudhuri and Habib (1982) quote Ibn Baṭṭūṭa for information about Muslim trade on the western Indian coast; Wolpert (1993: 115) and Torri (2000: 238) cite the *Rihla* as a source for questions related to politics and the army; Jackson (1999: 155) mentions it in his chapter on major sources and quotes it several times.

As regards quotations from the *Rihla* in the aforementioned works, few scholars refer to the original text in Arabic:¹⁹ most of them cite a translation, but do not always say which one it is. In the later works reference is sometimes made to the English versions of al-Baylūnī's compendium by Lee,²⁰ to the complete French version of the *Editio Princeps* by Defremery and Sanguinetti and to its partial version in English by Gibb (1929), while most recent studies mostly refer to the version in English by Gibb and Beckingham (1958–94).²¹

Such intensive references to Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's *Rihla* also concern some epidemic episodes which, mentioned in the *Rihla*, took place in India in approximately 1334–1335 and in 1344 and, as we shall see, have given rise to some misunderstandings.

The epidemics that Ibn Baṭṭūṭa describes in India

The word used by Ibn Baṭṭūṭa to indicate an "epidemic", *wabāʾ*, is present (with the same meaning) in both Arabic and Persian (*wabāʾ/vaba*).²² Formed from the verb *wabiʾa* (= to be contaminated, used for regions affected by an epidemic) it indicates any epidemic disease,²³ but in some periods was used at least for two different specific diseases: plague

¹⁹ Among the authors quoted in this paper, only Dunbar (1936), Raychaudhuri and Habib (1982) and Jackson (1999) quote the Arabic text in their bibliographies.

²⁰ The previously cited compendium, translated into Latin by Kosegarten, does not include the narrative of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's stay in India.

²¹ Raychaudhuri and Habib (1982) refer to the EP's partial translation into English by Husain 1976. Even if al-Baylūnī's compendium has been available in English since 1829, only Sticker (1908) explicitly refers to it.

²² Grünbaum and Coletti 2006: 916.

²³ With reference to Hippocrates' and Galen's theories, the term *wabāʾ* designates, first of all, a "corruption of the air (miasmas), earth or water" (Grünbaum and Coletti 2006: 916; see Lane 1984 [1863–1893]: 8, 2914–2915, s.v. *wabāʾ*). The association between "corruption" (*fasād*) of the air and epidemics in medieval Arabic medical treatises (which often speak of a "pestilential/poisonous wind" preceding the event), has been investigated by scholars: see in particular Conrad 1982 and Fancy and Green 2021. It should be noted that as early as the late tenth century al-Majūsī (d. 383/994) devoted a long discourse of his *Kāmil al-ṣināʾa al-ṭibbiyya* to how the atmosphere can be corrupted in various ways to create "pestilential air" (*hawāʾ wabāʾī*), which in turn causes "pestilential diseases" (*amrāḍ wabāʾiyya*) (quoted by Conrad 1982: 280). The famous Persian polymath Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna)

and cholera.²⁴ In medieval Arabic and Persian sources, therefore, only a description (unfortunately rare) of the symptoms can give a clear understanding of the disease to which *wabāʾ* refers.²⁵

In the *Rihla* of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, the word *wabāʾ* is used 14 times in reference to ten epidemic episodes that occurred in 11 places.²⁶ The first three occurrences are located in India and it is not clear to which diseases they refer. In addition to these, in India the *Rihla* reports another event with a high mortality rate that occurred in the Sultan's army, for which the term *marāḍ* (disease) is used. The remaining 11 occurrences of *wabāʾ* are located in seven passages of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's journey home from Baghdad to Tangier and all undoubtedly refer to the plague epidemic of the "Black Death".²⁷ Ibn Baṭṭūṭa uses *tāʿūn*, the more medically precise Arabic term for plague, only once in the *Rihla*, when he is giving a general description of the pandemic at the beginning of his text, as if he wants his audience to understand that the pandemic is part of the narrative frame of his whole journey.²⁸

This lexical confusion is compounded by the fact that some medieval – not only Arabic – sources relate, quite vaguely, that the plague came from the East and struck India before reaching the Middle East. Among the Arab chroniclers, the Syrian Ibn al-Wardī, who lived at the time of the Black Death and died from it in 1349, reports that the plague (*tāʿūn*) "began in [the land] of darkness (*min al-ẓalamāt*)"²⁹ and immediately adds that "China [*al-ṣīn*] was not preserved from it." Then he states: "it afflicted the Indians in India and weighed upon the Sind."³⁰ The later Egyptian chronicler al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1442) states

(d. c. 759/1358), in his *al-Qānūn fī ʿl-ṭibb*, speaks of *ḥummā al-wabāʾ* (or *ḥummā wabāʾiyya*, epidemic fever) as a very acute, fatal fever, which spreads rapidly among larger populations. He connects it to the corruption of the air (Ibn Sīnā 2016: 1, 259, 368; 2, 386 and *passim*) and mentions three specific epidemic diseases: smallpox (*judarī*), measles (*ḥaṣba*) and plague (*tāʿūn*) (Ibn Sīnā 2016: 1, 568 and 4, 1223–5). In his *al-Mūjaz fī ʿl-ṭibb* (an explanatory and complementary text to Avicenna's *al-Qānūn*), Ibn al-Nafīs (d. 687/1288), explicitly states that the *wabāʾ* (corruption) of the air causes *wabāʾ* (epidemic) fevers (Ibn al-Nafīs 2008: 304–305), but does not mention any specific disease. Both Ibn Sīnā and Ibn al-Nafīs note that the causes of air corruption include rotting corpses left unburied after a battle: in this regard, see the in-depth analysis by Fancy and Green 2021, that refers to the narrative of the epidemic that struck Baghdad in 1258.

²⁴ B. Shoshan and D. Panzac, in *Et*², s.v.

²⁵ For a more in-depth analysis of Arabic terminology on epidemics, see Conrad 1982; Ayalon 1946: 67; Sublet 1971: 141–9; Dols 1977: 315–19 and the recent study by Varlik 2021b.

²⁶ The term *wabāʾ* also appears in one more occasion in the *Rihla*, but Ibn Baṭṭūṭa uses it with a very general meaning when, describing the Cairo nilometre, he states: "If [the Nile flood] reaches eighteen cubits, it does damage to the cultivated lands and causes an outbreak of plague (*wabāʾ*)" (al-Tāzī 1997: 1, 208; Gibb 1958: 1, 49 [EP 79]). In this case, the word *wabāʾ* would probably be better translated into English as "epidemic": see below, n. 107.

²⁷ Gaza, Homs, Damascus, Jerusalem, Alexandria, Cairo, the Pilgrimage road from Cairo to Mecca, Tangier and Gibraltar. For the narration of the Black Death in the Mediterranean area in Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's *Rihla*, see Tresso 2021c.

²⁸ One year after his departure, in 1326 Ibn Baṭṭūṭa arrives in Damascus and while describing the city he reports the story of an inter-religious prayer gathering which took place in one of its mosques twenty-two years later, during the Black Death (15 July 1348), to implore deliverance from the plague (*tāʿūn*) (al-Tāzī 1997: 1, 325–6; Gibb 1958: 1, 143–4 [EP I: 228–229]). From the point of view of narrative style, this passage is very impactful not only because the description of the event is one of the most moving in the work, but also because it is the only case of protracted narrative in the *Rihla* and because it is repeated in the penultimate part of the work, where Ibn Baṭṭūṭa claims to have personally witnessed the event. In the second account, the plague is referred to as *wabāʾ* (al-Tāzī 1997: 4, 179; Gibb and Beckingham 1994: 4, 918 [EP 320]). For an in-depth analysis of this prayer gathering in Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's *Rihla*, see Tresso 2021a and Tresso 2021b.

²⁹ The "land of darkness" is a mythical place mostly identified with a generic expression such as "northern Asia" (Von Kremer 1880, see Dols 1974a: 448) and it is mentioned by several medieval authors. Ibn Baṭṭūṭa reports that "it is reached from Bulghār after a journey of forty days" (al-Tāzī 1997: 1, 236; Gibb 1962: 2, 491 [EP 400]), while Ibn al-Wardī probably uses this expression to refer to the region north of China (Fancy and Green 2021: 175).

³⁰ Ibn al-Wardī 1997: 2, 339. The same passage, from his *Risālat al-Nabāʾ*, can be found translated into English by Dols 1974a: 448.

that the plague (*tā'ūn*) originated “in the country of the Great Qān [...] in the year 742/1341”, then he reports that the plague “killed most of the inhabitants of China (*al-ṣīn*)” and comments: “The disruption in India was less radical than that which struck China.”³¹ As on many other occasions, Ibn Taghrī Birdī (d. 874/1470) quotes, almost verbatim, al-Maqrīzī, only slightly changing the conclusion: the plague (*tā'ūn*) “destroyed the people of China (*al-ṣīn*) to the point that only a few survived, and the same (happened) in India.”³²

Among the several European sources coeval to the Black Death that quote Indians among the first people affected by the plague, it is worth mentioning the account by the notary from Piacenza, Gabriele de Mussis (d. 1356).³³

Some modern scholars have considered that these sources do not prove the presence of plague in India³⁴ – also because in some cases, when speaking of “India” they probably do not refer to what is India now³⁵ – but others also relied on them to assume that the epidemics mentioned by the *Rihla* in the sub-continent were the plague, thus deducing – or leading others to deduce – that the Black Death had struck that area before reaching the Middle East.³⁶ The presence of the medieval plague in India continues to be, in fact, the subject of much debate: while accepting the hypothesis that India may have been affected by plague epidemics in ancient times, scholars note that it is not until the seventeenth century CE that an epidemic of plague seems to be first substantiated by documentary sources³⁷ – and of course we have firm evidence for the nineteenth century, when India was hit by the so-called “Third Plague Pandemic”.³⁸

³¹ Al-Maqrīzī 1971: 81–2; French translation in Wiet 1962: 368–9.

³² Ibn Taghrī Birdī 1979, vol. 10: 197. If, as noted by Wiet (1962: 367–8), Ibn Taghrī Birdī borrowed the information from a first draft of al-Maqrīzī’s chronicle, the question arises what information – and from whom or where – the latter could have obtained prior to concluding his work, where he states that the plague in India had been less severe than in China.

³³ Tononi 1884: 145. In the years of the pandemic, De Mussis never left Piacenza, where his presence is documented by the notarial acts that he drew up every day, but he probably had information thanks to some fellow citizens involved in trade, as Piacenza’s merchants had an emporium in Lajazzo [Ayas], in the so-called “Lesser Armenia” (Tononi 1884: 142). Several quotations of European texts from the years of the Black Death mentioning India among the first plague-infected countries, can be found in Horrox 1994.

³⁴ See, among others, Nathan 1898: 65–8; Biraben 1975: 49–50; Dols 1977: 38–43; Norris 1977: 2; Anandavalli 2007: 24. The most radical criticism is by Sussman 2011. For an in-depth analysis of this topic, see Varlık 2015: 94–7.

³⁵ The geographical area which was mentioned as India in pre-modern European records was used for the vast area “between the so-called central Asia to China” (Anandavalli 2007: 21). For Byzantine references see Sarris (2007: 121–2), who states: “The term ‘India’ would appear to have been used with something of the looseness of ‘America’ in Modern English, signifying any area bordering onto the Indian Ocean or its appendage, the Red Sea”, and Sussman 2015: 328–9.

³⁶ Nathan (1898: 1, 71) cites the *Rihla* as a reference to the existence of plague in the west of India in the fourteenth century. Hankin (1905: 51 and 61–2) relies on both Ibn Baṭṭūṭa and Baranī to affirm the presence of plague in India in 1334 and the same is affirmed by Sticker (1908, vol. 1: 42), who only quotes Ibn Baṭṭūṭa. Ziegler (1969: 15) says that “India was depopulated”. Anandavalli (2007: 20) critically states: “It is now universally accepted by Western scholars that the Black Death originated in Central Asia and spread to Europe via India”.

³⁷ A description of a deadly epidemic in India (Punjab) in Emperor Jahangir’s account of 1615 (or 1617), speaks of plague and reports that it was a “new disease”: see Hankin (1905: 51 and 62), who dates the epidemic at 1611; Benedictow 2004: 40–4; Sussmann 2011: 335–8; Green 2014: 50, n. 31; Green 2018, par. 5–8, 18, 20, 22–5. Green and Jones (2020: 42) argue that there is a fair level of confidence that plague was present in India since the seventeenth century.

³⁸ Recent studies on the Black Death take into account both documentary sources and genetics research and suggest that the strains of the plague bacillus *Yersinia pestis* that gave rise to the first and the second plague pandemics derived from colonies of marmots in – or near – the Tian Shan mountains, on the border between present-day Kyrgyzstan and Xinjiang – that is, further west and north of the previously assumed zone of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau. From there, the so-called “Big Bang” polytomy started the four documented lineages of what Green calls “the four Black Deaths”. For further information on the current state of research about these lineages spread and in particular on the possibility that, in a probably much later period, one of the

In the following paragraphs I will try to explain what the word *wabāʿ* refers to in the Indian section of the *Rihla* and investigate which words have been used in its translations into European languages – which constitute the most cited versions of this text in modern Indian studies.³⁹ To this end, each quotation is introduced in the context of the work, commented upon, and reported in the original language and in its English translation according to the order in which it appears in the *Rihla* (which is chronological). Accompanying each quotation, in the notes there is the word used for *wabāʿ* in the complete versions of the *EP* text in other European languages⁴⁰ and – if present – the quotation from the *Rihla*'s compendium by al-Baylūnī, with the related translations.⁴¹ The information given by the *Rihla* will finally be compared with that given by the above-mentioned Indo-Persian medieval sources.

First occurrence: the Telangana epidemic (735/1334–35)

Immediately after describing the city of Delhi, the *Rihla* devotes a long chapter to the history of the Delhi sultanate, which Ibn Baṭṭūṭa claims to have personally heard from the eminent Great Qāḍī, Kamāl al-Dīn b. al-Burhān⁴² – but later in the text he specifies to have been a witness to the majority of events concerning Ibn Tughluq's reign.⁴³ Towards the end of this chapter there is a report of an expedition that Ibn Tughluq led against the rebel governor of Maʿbar,⁴⁴ and here the word *wabāʿ* appears for the first time. It is an epidemic that broke out in the army in the region of Tiling (Telangana), in central-eastern India. In the subsequent paragraph mention is made that the Sultan was also infected and fell seriously ill, but survived.

ولمّا وصل السلطان إلى بلاد التَّنْكَ وهو قاصد إلى قتال الشريف ببلاد المعبر نزل مدينة بَدْرَكُوت، وهي قاعدة بلاد التَّنْكَ، وبينها وبين بلاد المعبر مسيرة ثلاثة أشهر، ووقع الوباء إذ ذاك في عسكره فهلك معظمهم ومات العبيد، والممالك وكبار الأمراء مثل ملك دولة شاه الذي كان السلطان يخاطبه بالعمّ ومثل أمير عبد الله الهروي.⁴⁵

When the Sultan reached the land of Tiling on his way to engage the Sharif (Noble) in the province of Maʿbar, he halted at the city of Badrakūt,⁴⁶ capital of the province of

branches moved in a north-south pattern from Inner Asia to Tibet to India, see Green 2018, in particular Figure 1 where the full *Yersinia pestis* phylogeny is represented; Green 2020, 1614, 1619 and 1625–1626; Green and Jones 2020: 42.

³⁹ This question has already been noted by Anandavalli 2007: 23–24. It is worth mentioning, in this regard, Varlık's studies of the European plague narrative and the influence that the (not always correct) translations have had on it (Varlık 2015: 72–88, Varlık 2017 and Varlık 2020).

⁴⁰ For French: the translation by Defremery and Sanguinetti in Yerasimos (1997 [1982]) and that by Charles-Dominique (1995: 369–1050); for Spanish, the translation by Fanjul and Arbós (1993 [1987]); for Italian, the translation by Tresso (2006). Among the translations of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's *Rihla* in European languages, the absence of a complete German version of Defremery and Sanguinetti's edition should be noted: in this article I will refer to its partial translation by Hans von Mžik (1911).

⁴¹ Arabic text in al-Baylūnī n.d., translated into English by Lee 1829 and into German by Elger 2010a.

⁴² al-Tāzī 1997: 3, 119–223; Gibb 1971: 3, 628–734 [EP 3, 161–373]. This is one of the rare cases in the *Rihla* where Ibn Baṭṭūṭa quotes his oral sources. The existence of the Great Qāḍī Kamāl al-Dīn is confirmed by both Arabic and Indo-Persian sources: see al-'Umarī 1971, vol. 3: 35 (French version in Quatremère 1838, vol. 13: 167); Baranī 1862: 428 – not included in Elliot and Dowson's partial translation); Sirhindī 1931: 116 (English version in Sirhindī 1932: 119).

⁴³ al-Tāzī 1997: 3, 149; Gibb 1971: 3, 657 [EP 215–16]].

⁴⁴ The rebel, as previously explained in the *Rihla*, was Sayyid Ḥasan Abū Ibrāhīm – who was appointed by Ibn Tughluq as governor of Maʿbar, but rebelled and proclaimed himself sultan with the name of Jalāl al-Dīn Aḥsan Shāh (Jackson 1999: 267).

⁴⁵ al-Tāzī III: 208.

⁴⁶ Badrakūt or Bidar: both the versions are attested (Venkata Ramanayya 1942: 194). At the time of the events, the capital of Telangana was Warangal, not Bidar: perhaps Ibn Baṭṭūṭa is confused because shortly after this

Tiling, which is at a distance of three months' march from the land of Ma'bar. At that moment a *pestilence* broke out in his army and the greater part of them perished; there died black slaves, the mamlūk troopers, and great *amīr* such as Malik Dawlat-Shāh, whom the Sultan used to address by the name of uncle, and such as the Amīr 'Abd Allāh al-Harawī.⁴⁷

The *Rihla* relates a large number of deaths in the army (the greater part of it perished in the pandemic), but does not describe any symptoms, so it is not possible to know which disease is involved. Nor is it possible to date the event, as there is no chronological information in the whole section of the *Rihla* on Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's stay in India, nor is the date mentioned by Indo-Persian sources.⁴⁸ But scholars place it in approximately 735/1334–35.⁴⁹

The news of a *wabā'* during the Telangana expedition is also reported by Indian chroniclers. Baranī, like Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, fails to describe the symptoms of the disease and indicates that the Sultan himself was infected but did not succumb.⁵⁰ Unlike Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, however, he places the event in Warangal, about 250 km east of Bidar, which was the real capital of Telangana. He reports many victims, without explicitly mentioning the soldiers; and he does not mention the name of any of the dead.⁵¹

The epidemic is dramatically described by 'Iṣāmī, who does not specify the name of the city. Like Ibn Baṭṭūṭa and Baranī he quotes the Sultan's illness and his retreat from the city, but reports that the epidemic, preceded by a "poisonous wind",⁵² was a consequence of the arrival of the army – which lost approximately half of its officers. Unlike the other chroniclers, 'Iṣāmī also reports the severity of the disease, which causes infected people to die in one night.⁵³

expedition Ibn Tughluq split up the province into two independent administrative divisions: the eastern, with Warangal as its capital, and the western, with Bidar as its headquarters (Venkata Ramanayya 1942: 159).

⁴⁷ Gibb 1971: 3, 717 [EP 3, 334]. Yerasimos 1997: 3, 80 = *la peste* (the plague); Charles-Dominique 1995: 836 = *une épidémie*; Fanjul and Arbós 1993: 577 = *la peste*; Tresso 2006: 539 = *l'épidémie*; von Mžik 1911: 183 = *die Seuche* (the epidemic). The expedition and the disease in the army are briefly mentioned in the compendium by al-Baylūnī (n.d.: *folium* 41a), where reference is made to the epidemic (*al-wabā'*) that "carried off the greater part [of the army]" (Lee 1829: 147–8). Elger (2010a: 104) translates "eine Seuche (an epidemic)". As for the two notables who died, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa first explained that Dawlat Shāh was a great *malik* of the Delhi Sultanate and 'Abd Allāh al-Harawī was a *faqīh* from Harāt in Khorāsān, but none of them are mentioned in the other sources cited in this paper.

⁴⁸ Scholars often note the lack of firm dates for the period of Ibn Tughluq's reign in Baranī's chronicle: see, among others, Elliot and Dowson 1871: 3, 96 and Jackson 1999: 151.

⁴⁹ Smith 1958: 304; Jackson 1999: 267. Others suggest more or less the same date: Sticker (1908: 1, 42) proposes 1332; Husain (1938: 163) and Venkata Ramanayya (1942: 201) affirm 1336 and Torri (2000: 204) says 1333/1334. Others, finally, place the event later: Charles-Dominique (1995: 836, n. 2) dates it 1341–1342 and Hankin (1905: 61–62) suggests 1344.

⁵⁰ "The Sultan arrived at Warangal, where there was a deadly epidemic (*marg wabā'*). Several people/nobles/soldiers (*khalq*) fell ill and many others (*diḡar*) were infected (*naql kardand*). The Sultan also fell ill" (Baranī 1862: 481). The passage is translated into English in Elliot and Dowson 1871, vol. 3: 243, who translate *wabā'* as "cholera" (see below).

⁵¹ Ibn Baṭṭūṭa calls the rebel *Sharīf* (Noble) or Jalāl al-Dīn Aḡsan Shāh, thus recognising him as the ruler of Ma'bar (see above, n. 44), while for Baranī, Ibn Tughluq's court historian, he was nothing but a rebel, and he mentions him by his proper name (Sayyid Ḥasan Abū Ibrāhīm).

⁵² For the "pestilential air" that causes epidemics, see above, n. 23.

⁵³ "A poisonous (*samūm*) destructive wind blew over the city as a consequence of his [the Sultan's and his army's] inauspicious presence. Many people perished in the calamity and surrendered their souls to God; in every house several people who went to sleep lay dead [in their beds]. The king himself [...] was afflicted by the disease (*bīmār*) and his mind was sorely distressed at the sight of this (disease) and death. Nearly half of the officers of the Delhi army died; and the emperor retired from that city because he was himself in the agonies of death on account of that deadly disease (*naz'*)" ('Iṣāmī 1948: 369; English version in Venkata Ramanayya 1942: 194). It seems to me important to note, at this regard, the association between plague and the coming of the army, which has been documented by Hymes (2014, for China) and Fancy and Green (2021, for Baghdad).

Firishta briefly relates the episode: like Baranī he places it in Warangal and quotes the Sultan's illness, and like Ibn Baṭṭūṭa and ʿIṣāmī he reports that the epidemic broke out in the army and a great part of them fell victim to it.⁵⁴

As for Sirhindī, he speaks of the arrival of the Sultan in Tiling, does not mention the name of the city and merely says that the Sultan fell ill and was forced to retreat, without speaking of any epidemic either in the army or among the inhabitants.⁵⁵

The Indian authors wrote their chronicles in Persian, and they used the term *wabā/vaba* which, as in Arabic, indicates an undefined "epidemic". In spite of this, some modern scholars of Indian history assert that the Telangana epidemic was a "plague", while others speak of "cholera".⁵⁶ By examining the translations of both Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's *Rihla* and the most quoted Indian source, the one by Baranī, I am inclined to believe that these scholars' interpretations have been at least partly influenced by some inaccuracies in the terms used by the translators. In the nineteenth century "cholera", which had only emerged as a globally disseminated disease earlier in the century, was referred to as *wabā/wabāʾ/vaba*.⁵⁷ So it was with this word that Elliot translated the Persian term in his partial version into English of Baranī's work edited by Dowson in 1871.⁵⁸ As for the translations of the *Rihla*, in the first French version by Defremery and Sanguinetti (who were, of course, also writing amid Europe's experiences with cholera in the mid-nineteenth century), the term *wabāʾ* is translated as "peste" (plague), while in English, Gibb uses "pestilence"... but titles the chapter "The outbreak of plague".⁵⁹ This is perhaps due to the chronological proximity to the outbreak of the Black Death in the Mediterranean area and the fact that Arab authors (including Ibn Baṭṭūṭa) often designate the plague by the term *wabāʾ*. Be that as it may, although both Baranī and Ibn Baṭṭūṭa use a generic term such as *wabā/wabāʾ* and do not describe any symptoms, only a few modern scholars remain faithful to the original text and speak, for example, of "some kind of epidemic".⁶⁰ As for the historians of the Black Death quoted in this paper, the few who relate this episode remain sceptical about it being the plague.⁶¹

⁵⁴ "When Muḥammad Tughluq arrived before Warangal, a pestilence (*wabā*) broke out in his camp, to which a great part of his army fell victim. He had, on this occasion, nearly lost his own life" (Firishta 2008: 252; English version in Firishta 1829, vol. 1: 423–4).

⁵⁵ "The Sultan proceeded to Deogir for the purpose of quelling that disturbance, and on his arrival in Tiling was taken ill (*zaḥmat*), and was forced to return" (Sirhindī 1931: 106; English version in Sirhindī 1932: 108).

⁵⁶ Hankin (1905: 51 and 61–62) relies on both Ibn Baṭṭūṭa and Baranī's accounts to establish that the Telangana epidemic represents the first outbreak of plague in India, but does not cite any edition of the *Rihla* and only mentions Elliot's 1871 translation of Baranī's chronicle; Majumdar et al. (1951: 325) mention "cholera" without citing any source, but in the Bibliography the *Rihla* is cited in the translation by Defremery and Sanguinetti – who, instead, translate *wabāʾ* as "peste" (plague); Husain (1938: 131) speaks of "plague" citing both Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (Defremery and Sanguinetti's translation) and Baranī (in Persian); Venkata Ramanayya (1942: 194–6 and 200) speaks of "plague" and, in addition to Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (Defremery and Sanguinetti's translation) and Baranī (in Persian), quotes Firishta (in Persian); Smith (1858: 304) speaks of "plague" without citing any source and the same disease is mentioned by Martinez-Gros (2010: 228 and 238) who cites Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (Defremery and Sanguinetti's translation); Trausch cites Baranī's work in Persian (2010: 171), but translates *wabā* as "plague" (2010: 162).

⁵⁷ See, among others, Azizi and Azizi 2010; Afkhami 2019: 55–6; Ghajarjazi 2022.

⁵⁸ Elliot and Dowson 1871: 3, 243, where the term "cholera" is followed by *wabāʾ* in brackets, probably to indicate the translators' difficulty in translating it unambiguously.

⁵⁹ As can be seen in the notes of this paper, this confusion has also misled some translators of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's *Rihla* into less widely spoken European languages. In my translation of the *Rihla* into Italian, I was mistaken in a couple of cases; in this paper, the quotations of my edition take into account the *errata corrigée* that I gave to the publisher, which will be found in the forthcoming edition.

⁶⁰ Jackson (1999: 268), who writes the word *wabāʾ* in brackets. Husain (1938: 207) speaks of "an epidemic"; Sastri (1939: 218), who quotes Baranī, mentions "a pestilence".

⁶¹ Dols (1977: 44, n. 28) only mentions "an uncertain epidemic that befell the Sultan's army at an undetermined date"; Melhaoui (2005: 66–7) advances the unproven hypothesis that it was bacillary dysentery;

Second occurrence: again, the Telangana epidemic

The epidemic that broke out in Telangana is mentioned a second time shortly afterwards with regard to some associates of the above-mentioned Amīr al-Harawī, who attempted to flee with the Amīr's property after he died in the epidemic. Here, again, no further information is given on the disease. Furthermore, both Defremery and Sanguinetti and Gibb translate *al-wabā'* as "la peste/the plague".

واتفق أن مات أمير عبد الله الهروي فيالوباء بالتلنك، وكان ماله عند أصحابه بهلي، فاتفقوا مع أمير بخت على الهروب.⁶²

It happened that Amīr 'Abd Allāh al-Harawī died in *the plague* at Tiling; his property was in the hands of his associates in Dihlī and they arranged with Amīr Bakht to take flight.⁶³

It should be noted that the idea of "taking flight" in the context of an epidemic in the Islamicate society has been associated with a "plague" almost since the time of the Prophet.⁶⁴ A famous *ḥadīth* attributed to Muḥammad, and reported by both al-Bukhārī and Muslim, in fact states that a Muslim must "neither enter nor flee from a region struck by the plague".⁶⁵ This seems to me a significant detail, although it should be noted that Ibn Baṭṭūṭa uses the verb *haraba* – while all the versions of the *ḥadīth* use *kharaja* (*firāran*) (to leave (a place) escaping). In any case, in the entire *Rihla* – and also on this occasion – Ibn Baṭṭūṭa never quotes this *ḥadīth*: not even when, in the Middle Eastern and Mediterranean area, he repeatedly encounters the Black Death.

The disease during the Qarachil expedition (c. 730–734/1330–33)⁶⁶

Even if it is not included in the references to the word *wabā'* examined in this article, it is worth noting that in a previous episode the *Rihla* briefly mentions the defeat of Ibn

Andandavalli (2007: 24) notes Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's use of the word *wabā'* (instead of the more specific *ṭā'ūn*) and deduces that it cannot be the plague; Sussman (2011: 335) states that, since the information is insufficient, "the epidemic that struck the Sultan's army [...] is unlikely to have been a plague".

⁶² al-Tāzī 1997: 3, 217.

⁶³ Gibb 1971: 3, 728 [EP 3, 358]. Yerasimos 1997: 3, 95 = *la peste* (the plague); Charles-Dominique 1995: 846 = *une épidémie*; Fanjul and Arbós 1993: 586 = *la peste*; Tresso 2006: 549 = *l'épidémie*; von Mžik 1911: 200 = *der Pest*. This episode is not related in the compendium by al-Baylūnī.

⁶⁴ The so called "Justinianic plague" (mid-sixth–eighth century) started before the Islamic era, but the subsequent waves affected the Islamic Middle East from the earliest years of its formation and are recorded together with a series of customs and theories ascribed in part to the Prophet himself and destined to become the starting point for subsequent Islamic literature on the subject. Between 6/627–8 and 131/750, at least five waves of plague are attested to in the Middle East (Dols 1974b and Conrad 1981. See also, among others, Melhaoui 2005: 46–57).

⁶⁵ "God's Apostle said: 'If you hear that the plague (*al-tā'ūn*) has spread in a land, don't approach it, and if it appears in a land where you are present, don't leave that land escaping from it (*lā takhrujū firāran minhu*)'" (al-Bukhārī 2014, 7, book 71 (*ḥadīth* 626). The same *ḥadīth* is reported several times by al-Bukhārī, and the plague is also called *al-wabā'* and *al-waja'* (pain, suffering, disorder) (al-Bukhārī 2014: vol. 44, book 55 (*ḥadīth* 679), 7, book 71 (*ḥadīth* 624), 9, book 86 (*ḥadīth* 103 and 104)). As for Muslim, he reports this *ḥadīth* twice using the term *tā'ūn* (Muslim 2014, book 26 (*ḥadīth* 5494) and book 26 (*ḥadīth* 5493)). On this topic in Islamic medieval thought see, among the most recent studies, Stearns 2020a; Stearns 2020b and the in-depth study by Fancy 2022 (I thank the author for providing me with the draft).

⁶⁶ This date is proposed by Gibb 1971: 3, 713, n. 13. Jackson (1975: 132) states that "a date prior to 734/1333 is supported by Baranī". According to Sirhindī (1931: 103; English version in Sirhindī 1932: 106) and Firishta (2008: 248; English version in Firishta 1829: 416–17), it was 738/1337 and some scholars, such as Bhattacharya (1960: 870), place the event in this year, but they probably confuse with the campaign during which Nagarkot was taken (Jackson 1975: 124, n. 34 and 134, n. 85).

Tughluq's army during an expedition to an unidentified city called Warangal (as the capital of Telangana), placed "on top of Mount Qarachil",⁶⁷ attributing the military loss to the spread of a deadly disease.

فلما كان وقت نزول المطر غلب المرض على العسكر وضعفوا وماتت الخيل وانحلت القسي.⁶⁸
 ... when the rainy season began there was an epidemic in the army; the troops were enfeebled, the horses died and the bows became slack.⁶⁹

In this case the term *marad* is used, which corresponds to "disease". Again, there are no clarifying details and the text only mentions that "the troops were enfeebled and the horses died."⁷⁰ The heavy defeat of the Qarachil expedition is reported by Baranī, Firishta and Sirhindī, and none of them mention either the city or the disease.⁷¹ ʿIṣāmī, however, speaks of an epidemic (*wabā*) decimating the army to the point that when the sultan returned to Delhi, "less than a third [of the soldiers] had survived".⁷² I could not verify the English translation of this passage, but among the modern scholars of India quoted in this essay, only Fouzia Farooq quotes it using the term *wabā* followed by "epidemic" in round brackets.⁷³ As for the translators of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's *Rihla*, some of them rendered the term *marad* as "epidemic", but none of them has used the name of a particular disease, and neither the plague nor any other specific disease is mentioned, in this occasion, by modern scholars. Finally, it is worth noting that in the *Rihla*, the term *marad* appears on about fifty occasions in reference to more or less serious – but never epidemic – diseases, nor is it used in episodes where Ibn Baṭṭūṭa clearly refers to the Black Death.

Third occurrence: the Madurai epidemic (Rabī II–Jumāda I 745/September–October 1344)

About eight years later, following a complex series of adventures that took him along the western coast to Malabar and from there to the Maldives, where he claims to have remained for a year and a half,⁷⁴ Ibn Baṭṭūṭa went to Ceylon and then returned to

⁶⁷ Elsewhere in the *Rihla*, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa uses the name Qarachil (Qarājil) to designate the Himalayan massif, so-called also in Indian sources (Husain 1938: 126, n. 2; Jackson 1999: 129, n. 38). This does not allow, however, the identification of the city.

⁶⁸ al-Tāzī 1997: 3, 204.

⁶⁹ Gibb 1971: 3, 714 [EP 3, 326]. Yerasimos 1997: 3, 76 = *les maladies* (the diseases); Charles-Dominique 1995: 833 = *une épidémie*; Fanjul and Arbós 1993: 574 = *las enfermedades* (the diseases); Tresso 2006: 536 = *una malattia* (a disease); von Mžik 1911: 177 = *eine Krankheit* (a disease). This episode is not related in the compendium by al-Baylūnī. As for the French and Spanish versions, the translators do not explain why they switch from the singular form used by Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (*marad*) to the plural form (*maladies* and *enfermedades*).

⁷⁰ The fact that this disease kills horses does not exclude the plague. On animals that died during the Black Death, including horses and camels, see Dols 1977: 157–60. For clinical studies on animals that may be affected by the plague, see Perry and Fetherston 1997: 35–66; Green 2014: 31–4.

⁷¹ Baranī (1862: 478; English version in Elliot and Dowson 1871: 3, 241–2) reports that "[the army] marched into the mountains and encamped in various places, but the Hindus closed the passes and cut off its retreat. The whole force was thus destroyed at one stroke". The same reports Firishta 2008: 248 (English version in Firishta 1829: 416–17). Sirhindī (1931: 103; English version in Sirhindī 1932: 106) just says that "when they entered the mountains of Qarachil, the scarcity of provisions and the narrowness of the passes began to be severely felt".

⁷² ʿIṣāmī 1948: 471, where the author also reports that, after returning to Delhi, the Sultan "let the surviving [soldiers] die of starvation (*jafā*)".

⁷³ Fouzia Farooq 2016: 171, but the quotation is incorrect: it refers to Raychaudhuri and Habib, who do not speak of this event.

⁷⁴ For chronological problems about Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's stay in the Maldives and some possible borrowings suggested by scholars from the works of al-Masʿūdī, al-Birūnī and al-Idrīsī, see Tresso 2021c: 152, ns 73 and 74.

India heading for the capital of Ma'bar, Mutra, present-day Madurai. It would have been September/October 1344⁷⁵ and shortly after his arrival the spectre of an epidemic, *wabā'*, re-emerges. The *Rihla* speaks of a disease with a very high mortality rate, but again does not give details of symptoms and signs that would allow identification. It relates that infected people died within a few days and the city was full of corpses.

ولما قدمتها وجدت بها وپاء يموت منه الناس موتا ذريعا، فمن مرض مات من ثاني يوم مرضه أو ثالثه، وإن أبطأ موته فإلى الرابع. فكنت إذا خرجت لا أرى إلا مريضا أو ميتا. واشتريت بها جارية على أنها صحيحة، فماتت في يوم آخر. ولقد جاءت إلي في بعض الأيام امرأة كان زوجها من وزراء السلطان أحسن شاه، ومعها ابن لها سنه ثمانية أعوام، نبيل كيس فطن. فشكت ضعف حالها، فأعطيتها نفقة، وهما صحبحان سويان. فلما كان من الغد جاءت تطلب لولدها المذكور كفتا، وإذا به قد توفي من حينه.⁷⁶

When I arrived there [at Mutra] I encountered a *plague* from which people died suddenly. Whoever fell ill died in two or three days. If death was delayed it was only till the fourth day. When I went out I saw only the sick or the dead. I bought a slave-girl there on the understanding that she was healthy, but she died the next day. One day a woman came to me whose husband had been one of the *wazīrs* of Sultan Aḥsan Shāh,⁷⁷ she had her son with her, who was eight years old, talented, clever and intelligent. She complained of her impoverished state and I gave them a sum of money. They were both healthy and fit. Next day she came asking for a shroud for the afore-said son who had suddenly died.⁷⁸

The disease that raged in Madurai is a *vexata quaestio*. Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's *Rihla* is the only document we have that, together with a set of coins, attests to the brief history of the small Islamic Sultanate of Ma'bar,⁷⁹ so no comparison with other sources is possible. Perhaps because of the high mortality rate and the chronological proximity to the outbreak of the Black Death in the Mediterranean area, however, some scholars have considered it to be the plague.⁸⁰ But not for the first time translators may also have played a role confounding matters, for while Defremery and Sanguinetti translate *wabā'* as "*maladie contagieuse*" (contagious disease), Gibb and Beckingham translate it as "plague".⁸¹ Subsequent studies have strongly doubted – not to say ruled out – that it was the plague. Dols excludes

⁷⁵ Dunn 1986: 243, esp. n. 6.

⁷⁶ al-Tāzī 1997: 4, 96.

⁷⁷ This Sultan was the rebel against whom the Telangana expedition was conducted (see above, n. 44).

⁷⁸ Gibb and Beckingham 1994: 4, 863 [EP 4, 201]. Yerasimos 1997: 3, 276 = *une maladie contagieuse* (an infectious disease), but in n. 287, he states that this was probably the plague; Charles-Dominique 1995: 954 = *une épidémie*; Fanjul and Arbós 1993: 697 = *una peste* (a plague); Tresso 2006: 670 = *un'epidemia*; von Mžik 1911: 386 = *eine Seuche* (an epidemic). This epidemic is also mentioned by al-Baylūnī (n.d.: *folium* 56a), who speaks of a *mawt 'aẓīm* (high/great mortality): "I then proceeded for the purpose of presenting myself to the Sultan at the city of Maturah [...]. In this I found a great mortality, which had destroyed the greatest part of the inhabitants" (Lee 1829: 193). Elger (2010a: 138) translates *mawt 'aẓīm* as "eine schwere Krankheit (a serious disease)". Neither Lee nor Elger note that the Arabic expression *mawt 'aẓīm* (and its Latin equivalent *mortalitas magna*) were widely used in fourteenth century – and later texts (also in European vernacular languages), to designate the medieval plague pandemic (Dols 1974a: 443, n. 2 and 447, n. 17; Varlık 2021b: 14 and *passim*).

⁷⁹ Aiyangar 1921: 169; Majumdar et al. 1951: 306, n. 1.

⁸⁰ The hypothesis that it was "der Pest" (the plague) has been first suggested by Sticker (1908, vol. 1: 41–42) who speaks of a plague that ravaged India between 1325 and 1351. Sticker quotes the *Rihla* in both Lee's translation of al-Baylūnī and Defremery and Sanguinetti's *EP* – but the first speaks of "a great mortality" and the latter of "*une maladie contagieuse*" (a contagious disease) (see above, n. 78). Defremery and Sanguinetti's translation is also mentioned by Aiyangar (1921: 168) who, however, speaks of "an attack of cholera": perhaps he consulted the Arabic text and interpreted *wabā'* as "cholera".

⁸¹ This word's translation is certainly due to Gibb, who introduced this passage in the anthology of the *Rihla* he edited some 30 years before the complete edition, and even then translated *wabā'* as "plague" (Gibb 1929: 264).

this possibility on the basis of two main observations,⁸² but neither of them is probative. The first is that Ibn Baṭṭūṭa does not give precise information about the symptoms of the disease and the second is lexical: since in Damascus Ibn Baṭṭūṭa refers to the plague by the term *ṭā'ūn*, what he calls *wabā'* cannot be the same disease. However, throughout the *Rihla* Ibn Baṭṭūṭa never inserts a “clinical” description of an epidemic: not even when, in the Mediterranean area, he knows for certain that it is the plague. As for the word *wabā'*, Dols seems not to have noticed that, in Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's *Rihla*, *ṭā'ūn* is a *hapax* which only occurs in the first account of the prayer gathering in Damascus:⁸³ in the other 11 occurrences in which Ibn Baṭṭūṭa mentions the plague in the Middle East, North Africa and al-Andalus, he uses the word *wabā'* (even when, at the end of the work, he concisely repeats the story of the prayer gathering). What can be deduced from the lexicon, is that in this single episode in all his work, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa does not use *al-wabā'* (with the definite article, “the epidemic”), but *wabā'*, which corresponds to “an epidemic”: therefore, it could be said that this expression is too general to suggest that it might have been the plague.⁸⁴ In addition to Dols' arguments, Anandavalli notes that Ibn Baṭṭūṭa claims to have purchased in Madurai a slave girl who was supposed to be healthy but died the following day and to have personally seen a child apparently “healthy and fit” who died of the disease in the space of a day – thus deducing that it was neither the bubonic nor the pneumonic plague, both of which have visible symptoms (buboes or expectoration of blood).⁸⁵ However, we should point out that, when talking about the plague in the Mediterranean area, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa never mentions the buboes, nor the expectoration of blood, and in Madurai he does not mention having examined the child, nor the slave girl he purchased: regarding the latter, he complains that he was deceived by the seller, since he states: “I bought a slave-girl on the understanding (*alā anna*) that she was healthy.”

Epilogue: from which disease did Ibn Baṭṭūṭa suffer in Madurai?

Shortly after relating the epidemic, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa recounts that he had such a strong attack of fever (*ḥummā*) that he thought his time had come. Fortunately, the problem was remedied by taking – by divine inspiration – a massive dose of tamarind, the laxative effect of which cured him within three days.⁸⁶ The fever, however, must have debilitated him because, determined to resume his journey, he left Madurai and immediately stopped at Quilon,⁸⁷ where he says: “I still had some of my illness left in me”, staying there for three months before leaving.⁸⁸ Ibn Baṭṭūṭa does not say that he contracted the disease of the Madurai epidemic, but some scholars claim that he fell ill with that very disease, some arguing that he caught the plague, but recovered.⁸⁹ Whatever the disease that

⁸² Dols 1977: 43–44.

⁸³ See above, n. 28. Dols also seems not to have noticed that in the *Rihla* Ibn Baṭṭūṭa repeats this story twice.

⁸⁴ It should be noted that al-Baylūnī too, in this passage, uses the expression *mawt 'azīm* without the definite article.

⁸⁵ Anandavalli 2007: 23. On the different modes of infection – and manifestation – of the plague, see Ziegler 2015, who has recently added the gastrointestinal plague to the three first known forms (bubonic, pulmonary and septicemic, for which see, among others, Borsch 2005: 3–4).

⁸⁶ al-Tāzī 1997: 4, 97–8; Gibb and Beckingham 1994: 4, 864–5 [EP 4, 205]. Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's illness is concisely related in the compendium by al-Baylūnī, where Ibn Baṭṭūṭa states: “In this place, too, I caught a fever (*ḥummā*) which nearly destroyed me; but Providence restored me to health” (al-Baylūnī n.d., *folium* 56a; Lee 1829: 193–4; Elger 2010a: 138).

⁸⁷ Probably in January 1345 (Yerasimos 1997: 3, 279, n. 289).

⁸⁸ Ibn Baṭṭūṭa most likely spent some time in Quilon also because he had accumulated a number of diplomatic problems and had to decide what to do next (Dunn 1986: 246).

⁸⁹ The first scholar to support this hypothesis was Sticker 1908: 1, 41. For other quotations see Dols 1977: 44 and Aberth 2011: 34.

caused the Madurai epidemic, the symptom of a very high fever that Ibn Baṭṭūṭa had already suffered in the Maldives and was to suffer again in Morocco, when a bout of fever forced him to stop for another three months in Ceuta, leads me to consider the hypothesis of Dunn, that Ibn Baṭṭūṭa was not infected by the deadly disease of Madurai but, as on other occasions, he probably had a severe attack of malaria.⁹⁰ To confirm this, it should be noted that tamarind's laxative effect is also mentioned by Ibn Sīnā, who describes it as “a purgative drug, useful in vomiting and thirst in febrile states”, but does not recommend it as a treatment for plague, nor for what he calls “epidemic fevers”.⁹¹ Tamarind leaves are still used in traditional antimalarial therapy (for treating the vomiting caused by high fevers) in the Philippines and several African countries.⁹² Finally, the emphasis on laxatives also suggests that it may not have been cholera or the gastrointestinal plague, since both cause diarrhoea.

Some necessary observations

Some necessary observations should be made, that are not related to the subject of this article, but to the reliability of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's testimony which, as already mentioned, has often been questioned and is still being investigated. Over the years, a number of scholars have suggested that Ibn Baṭṭūṭa and/or Ibn Juzayy may have borrowed and adapted passages, information and literary devices from other sources in several parts of the *Rihla*,⁹³ and in this perspective the chapter on the history of the Delhi Sultanate has been investigated by Tilmann Trausch (2010). Noting the concise style of this chapter, that makes it similar to a chronicle, Trausch analytically compared Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's *Rihla* with the *Tārīkh-i Feroz-shāhī* by Baranī,⁹⁴ and the substantial number of similarities that he found in both the content and the structure, led him to conclude that Ibn Baṭṭūṭa had very probably never been to India since he and/or Ibn Juzayy could have written the Indian chapter of the *Rihla* based on “a body of possible sources”, first of all the chronicle by Baranī.⁹⁵ Since Baranī seems to have concluded the first version of his work in 1355,⁹⁶ shortly before the conclusion of the *Rihla* (February 1356), it would have been quite impossible for Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (by then settled back in Morocco, after having left India definitively in late 747 [February–March 1347])⁹⁷ and/or Ibn Juzayy, to access the text, but Trausch suggests that he/they may have had recourse to a partial version of the work or some documents by Baranī's informants.⁹⁸ It is a hypothesis that cannot be discounted with certainty, but personally it seems to me very improbable, also because, as noted by Trausch himself, “such a [partial] copy must be searched for” – and if Ibn Baṭṭūṭa had access to such a copy before his departure from India, it would involve drafts made at least eight–nine years in advance and their translation (we actually do not know if Ibn

⁹⁰ Dunn 1986: 232, n. 29 and 245.

⁹¹ Ibn Sīnā (2016: 2, 124–5). For the “epidemic fevers” see above, n. 23.

⁹² Bhadoriya and others 2011.

⁹³ For more information see, among others, Dunn 1986: 313–16; Elad 1987: 256–72; Euben 2006: 63–85; Elger 2010c: 71–88; Trausch 2010: 139–140.

⁹⁴ Trausch cites Baranī's text in the original Persian version and Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's *Rihla* (vols 1 and 3) in Gibb's English translation (Trausch 2010: 171).

⁹⁵ Trausch does not analyse any other Indo-Persian sources and suspects Ibn Baṭṭūṭa of “plagiarism” (Trausch 2010: 142 and *passim*): a concept that does not seem to me to be appropriate in a period in which books were not considered *personal*, but rather *common* property.

⁹⁶ Conermann 1993: 34.

⁹⁷ al-Tāzī 1997: 3, 35; Gibb 1971: 3, 567 [EP 3, 51].

⁹⁸ Trausch dates to 1355 both the finishing of the first version of Baranī's chronicle and “the completion of the *Rihla*” (Trausch 2010: 141): perhaps he is confusing with the date when Ibn Baṭṭūṭa finished dictating his account: see above, *The Rihla of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (and Ibn Juzayy)*.

Baṭṭūṭa knew Persian). Not to mention the many and sometimes considerable differences noted by scholars of India between the information given by Ibn Baṭṭūṭa and Baranī about the sultanate of Delhi.⁹⁹

As for Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's account of the Telangana and Qarachil expeditions, which falls within this very chapter, Trausch compares it with that by Baranī.¹⁰⁰ In these cases as well, he argues his thesis that nearly all of what he calls the "hard" facts (i.e. historical events, names of rulers and governors), and also some of the "soft" ones (anecdotes, stories of holy men, accessory information) related in the *Rihla*, may have been borrowed from Baranī.¹⁰¹ However, Trausch does not thoroughly analyse the differences between Ibn Baṭṭūṭa and Baranī's report on the Telangana epidemic, nor does he note that Ibn Baṭṭūṭa attributes the failure of the Qarachil expedition to a serious disease that Baranī does not mention.

Be that as it may, what I do disagree with Trausch on, is his conclusion that Ibn Baṭṭūṭa was not in India. Given the many well-founded criticisms of the truthfulness of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's personal testimony, it is not possible today to claim that the *Rihla* is a complete personal travel diary, but I agree with the thesis of some scholars, that it is rather a work of "haute couture", a "collage" bringing together the personal experiences and knowledge of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa and Ibn Juzayy, oral or written information he/they received from witnesses, met on site or elsewhere, and news extrapolated from other works.¹⁰² As for Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's stay in India, it should be noted that Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's contemporaries never questioned that he had travelled extensively in India: they just judged the stories he told about the sub-continent to be exaggerated and unbelievable – as authoritatively reported by Ibn Khaldūn, who may also have personally met him.¹⁰³ Perhaps Ibn Baṭṭūṭa was not so assiduous at court nor in confidence with the Sultan and other dignitaries as he claims – and this could explain the strange and oft quoted fact that neither the Delhi court historian, Baranī, mentions him, nor does he mention Baranī – but I do not see any clue suggesting that he had not been in the sub-continent.¹⁰⁴ Finally, it is worth noting that even Baranī's direct testimony to some events he claims to have personally witnessed has been questioned. So that we cannot exclude the hypothesis that, at least on some occasions, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa and Baranī may have drawn information from the same source/informant or from what Jackson calls "a common folk memory".¹⁰⁵

The fact remains that, in this and in many other cases, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's information mostly conforms with that reported by local sources: whether he learned it, as he says, from the Great Qāḍī of Delhi, or whether he and/or Ibn Juzayy took it, as Trausch claims, from other sources, is not relevant to the aim of this paper, moreover it is probably that this question cannot be resolved with certainty.

⁹⁹ See, among others, Elliot and Dowson 1871: 3, 586; Venkata Ramanayya 1942: 102, 105, 108 (n. 13) and *passim*; Janssens 1948: 103–104; Majumdar et al. 1951: 315, n. 1 and 316–17; Habib and Habib 2002: 210. See also above, *The Rihla of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa in Indian Studies*.

¹⁰⁰ Trausch 2010: 161–2 and 169–70.

¹⁰¹ Trausch 2010: 142–4 and 162.

¹⁰² The expression "haute couture" is proposed by Collet 2017, while "collage" is suggested by Touati 2000 : 307–308. Fauvelle-Aymar and Hirsch (2003: 93 and *passim*) use "bricolage".

¹⁰³ See above, n. 4.

¹⁰⁴ To confirm Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's presence in India we should not overlook the thorough and well-known work of Tim Mackintosh-Smith, who in recent times replicated much of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's travels including India, and verified many of his claims. See Mackintosh-Smith 2002b (on Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's travels between Morocco and the Eurasian steppe), 2005 (on Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's long residence in India) and 2011 (on Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's adventures on the shores of the Indian Ocean and in the Sahara). See also his abridged, introduced and annotated English edition of the *Rihla* (2002a), based on the translation by Gibb and Beckingham 1958–94.

¹⁰⁵ Jackson 1999: 51. See also Hardy 1957 and Mahdi's *Preface* to his translation of 'Iṣāmī's *Futūḥ al-salāṭīn* ('Iṣāmī 1967–1977: 1, 17).

Conclusions

Ibn Baṭṭūṭa reports two epidemics (in the Telangana and in the city of Madurai) and a high mortality disease (during the Qarachil expedition) that occurred in India in the 1330–40s. In Madurai he claims having personally witnessed the event, while for the other two cases he says he received the information from the Great Qāḍī of Delhi. The Telangana epidemic is confirmed by other sources and the disease of the Qarachil expedition is reported by ʿIṣāmī as an epidemic (*wabāʿ*), but neither Ibn Baṭṭūṭa nor the Indian chroniclers provide sufficient information to determine which diseases were involved. Despite this, in many modern studies on the Delhi Sultanate, the epidemics of Telangana and Madurai have at times been interpreted by scholars as outbreaks of the plague (because of some analogies between the description of these events and that of the almost concomitant Black Death pandemic) or cholera (because of a translation error due to the meaning assumed by the term at the time of the translators).

The reason undoubtedly also lies in a sort of lexical muddle: when reporting on epidemics in India, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa always uses the term *wabāʿ*, which in Arabic mostly corresponds to “epidemic” but – especially with the definite article – can also encompass the plague,¹⁰⁶ and with this meaning he uses it eleven times when reporting on the Black Death in the Middle East and Mediterranean area. The term is present in Persian (*wabā* or *vaba*), also defined as “epidemic”, but, starting in the early nineteenth century, shifted to indicate “cholera”; it has been translated with the name of this specific disease in some European versions of the Indo-Persian chronicles. As for the *Rihla* of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, Defremery and Sanguinetti, who edited the *Editio Princeps* and its French version, translate *wabāʿ* as “*maladie contagieuse*” (contagious disease) for the epidemic of Madurai, but use “*peste*” (plague) in the account of the Telangana expedition. In their later (and much quoted) English edition, Gibb and Beckingham always translate *wabāʿ* as “plague”, with the exception of the Telangana epidemic, where they use a less precise term, “pestilence” – yet, at the same time they title the paragraph “The outbreak of plague”.¹⁰⁷ As for the account of the Qarachil expedition, the term *marād* (disease) used in the *Rihla* is translated as “*maladie*” (disease) by Defremery and Sanguinetti, while Gibb translates it as “epidemic”.

In such a babel of signifiers, signified and equivalence, it is not surprising that some scholars have been led to believe that Ibn Baṭṭūṭa personally witnessed – or even contracted – the plague in India before its arrival in the Mediterranean area, not least because since the time of the Black Death it has been assumed that the plague raged on the sub-continent before reaching the Middle East.¹⁰⁸

Unfortunately, the philological analysis of the *Rihla* and other documentary sources does not allow establishing which was/were the disease(s) that caused these epidemics. Neither Ibn Baṭṭūṭa nor the Indo-Persian chroniclers mention the name of the diseases or describe their symptoms. However, some observations can be made.

Regarding the disease quoted during the Qarachil expedition, no clue suggests that it might have been an epidemic of plague. On the contrary, some details lead to excluding it. First of all, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa uses the term *marād*, which appears dozens of times in the *Rihla* in reference to non-epidemic diseases. As for the Indian chronicles, which also report on the failure of this expedition, only ʿIṣāmī mentions an “epidemic”, without providing any details about the disease. Since Ibn Baṭṭūṭa specifies that the disease occurred in the rainy season, I am inclined to think he refers to a tragic event similar to others reported

¹⁰⁶ Just as it happened in 2019–20, when the expression “the pandemic” was unambiguously used to refer to the particular disease Covid-19.

¹⁰⁷ It should be noted that Gibb always translate *wabāʿ* as “plague” in the *Rihla*: also, when it appears in the description of the Cairo nilometre (see above, n. 26).

¹⁰⁸ See above, *The Epidemics that Ibn Baṭṭūṭa describes in India*.

during this season by Indian historians among the soldiers (and the horses), due to sudden floods and subsequent famine.¹⁰⁹

With regard to the other two events, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa does not mention the diseases or their symptoms and some clues suggest that they were not outbreaks of plague; but even without being conclusive, other indications do not allow us to definitively exclude this possibility. First of all, in the rest of the *Rihla*, whenever the word *wabāʿ* appears, it indicates the plague during the Black Death pandemic: no other *wabāʿ* is mentioned either among men or among animals. It could be a coincidence, but since both Ibn Baṭṭūṭa and Ibn Juzayy, who personally witnessed the epidemic, unquestionably knew what the plague was, the fact that they use the same term for these epidemics might offer a lexical clue.¹¹⁰ In any case, it is worth noting that, with the exception of the narrative of the Black Death in the Mediterranean area, India is the only place where Ibn Baṭṭūṭa does mention some epidemics during a journey of more than 120,000 km that took place over some thirty years in an area encompassing 44 modern states. The idea that emerges from the *Rihla*, and it is likely to have been widespread, is therefore that India was *a* – not to say *the* – country of epidemics.

As for the epidemic in the Telangana, we have seen that it is confirmed by Indian sources, which report a very deadly disease (ʿIṣāmī speaks of people dying during the course of one night), and Ibn Baṭṭūṭa refers to some people fleeing, calling to mind the debate about fleeing plague-stricken areas, one that was present in Islamic legal-religious texts from the earliest times.¹¹¹

As for the epidemic in Madurai, no comparison is possible with other sources, but the terms used by both Ibn Baṭṭūṭa/Ibn Juzayy and al-Baylūnī, the high mortality rate of the disease and its very rapid course (very similar to the information in Mediterranean chronicles at the time the Black Death),¹¹² do not allow us to rule out the possibility that it might have been an outbreak of plague.

As we have seen, a first serious plague epidemic in the sub-continent is not attested before the seventeenth/nineteenth century, but several medieval chroniclers state that the Black Death hit India before reaching the Mediterranean area: among them, the Aleppian Ibn al-Wardī seems to be the only Arabic author coeval with the Black Death. It can thus be assumed that, given the connection (via trade routes) between India and Syria, Ibn al-Wardī could have heard the news of some deadly disease outbreaks in India from some merchants arriving in Syria in the 1330s or, as suggested to me by Monica Green (whom I thank), he may also have met Ibn Baṭṭūṭa in Aleppo during the latter's return home in June 1348, and received the information from him, or from some acquaintances they had in common. In other words, it is possible that Ibn al-Wardī (and other medieval, not only Arabic chroniclers) included India among the plague-affected countries by

¹⁰⁹ See for example, with reference to some other Ibn Tughluq expeditions, Baranī (1862: 300; English version in Elliot and Dowson 1871: 3, 189): “On their arrival there the rainy season began, and proved such a hindrance that the army [...] returned, greatly reduced in numbers, to Hindustan”; Firishta (2008: 249; English version in Firishta 1829: 417): “The rain began to fall in torrents. The cavalry were up to the bellies of their horses in water [...] The Indian army fell a prey to famine”; Sirhindī (1931: 104; English version in Sirhindī 1932: 106): “When the rainy season drew in, most of the horses in the army of [the commander] ʿAḍr Khān died”.

¹¹⁰ Green (2018, par. 25) uses a similar framing to assume that plague was not in India in the sixteenth–early seventeenth century because European visitors at that time – who totally knew what plague was – do not report its presence in the sub-continent.

¹¹¹ See above, n. 65.

¹¹² The *Rihla* reports that infected people die “in two or three days”, and the same information is often found for people dying of the pulmonary plague in the Middle East and Mediterranean area. See, among others, Brossollet 1984: 53–4; Dols 1977: 193–223; Dunn 1986: 271. For the mortality rates (from 50 to 100 percent of people infected) in the various types of plague, see Green 2020: 1604, n. 9.

referring to the Telangana epidemic, whose news might have been highly widespread since the Sultan himself fell seriously ill and – maybe because of this – the news is reported not only by Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, but by both coeval and posterior Indo-Persian sources.

I therefore subscribe to the evidence of other studies on medieval documentary sources and conclude that the analysis of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's *Rihla* provides no firm evidence for either the presence or absence of plague in India.¹¹³ Certainly, only genetics will be able to unequivocally establish or exclude the presence of the *Yersinia pestis* in medieval India, but until then, historians and philologists can try to carefully examine every detail in those places and situations where the bacillus can have arrived and even small clues can be found. Green has gathered evidence on the role the Mongols played in the spread of the plague bacillus from a long-term reservoir in – or near – the Tian Shan mountains into several new ecological landscapes – although, mainly due to the nomadism they practiced, they were rarely affected by a plague epidemic.¹¹⁴ The chaotic situation in the central Mongol area in the second half of the thirteenth century,¹¹⁵ allows us to suggest that plague outbreaks might have evolved in the northern areas of the Tibetan Plateau,¹¹⁶ so there remains the possibility that plague was also carried south into India. Plague is not a human, but rather a zoonotic infection adapted best to rodents and transmitted by a flea vector: as Fancy and Green have recently argued in connection with the epidemic that followed the fall of Baghdad, the bacillus can arrive somewhere via fleas present in grain supplies and cause a human outbreak, but if no local rodent reservoir is established, the outbreak can fade out quickly.¹¹⁷

Be that as it may, current scholars on the Black Death – Green, Varlık, Fancy, Stearns and others quoted in this paper – show that “to confidently track plague strains through time and space, we need to have as much consilient data as possible.”¹¹⁸ With this study on the Indian epidemics quoted in the *Rihla* of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa – which completes my research on all the occurrences of the words *wabā'* and *ṭā'ūn* in this text¹¹⁹ – I hope I have shed some light on the epidemics mentioned in India, the Middle East, North Africa and Andalusia in the *Rihla*: one of the most cited – and sometimes misinterpreted – texts in Black Death studies. And I hope that my research can be one of the “breadcrumbs” that contribute to drawing a new map of the Black Death: the map of a story that is far more complex and global than believed so far, which incites scholars to look for all the clues that can trace the path of the plague. Even when there is no evidence because there were not widespread epidemics with a high mortality rate or because we do not have – or have few and incomplete – documentary sources.¹²⁰

¹¹³ See, among others, Biraben 1975: 50; Norris 1977: 6–7 and n. 27; Dols 1977: 44; Anandavalli 2007: 20; Aberth 2011: 34. In this regard, the note by Green and Lori (2020: 27) should be taken into account, that not enough philological work has yet been invested in the Indian corpora of medical writings to make them reliable sources of historical information (see the study, quoted in Green and Lori (2020: 27), by Meulenbeld 1999–2002).

¹¹⁴ Green 2014; Green 2018; Green 2020; Fancy and Green 2021.

¹¹⁵ In this regard, see McGrath's analysis and translation of the *Vase of Ambrosia*, a Tibetan cycle of scriptural revelations about a devastating epidemic transmitted in manuscript and oral form since the thirteenth century, where the author defines this text as “an account of the bubonic plague in thirteenth-century Tibet” (McGrath 2021: 215).

¹¹⁶ See Jackson 1978: 239–44 and *passim*; McGrath 2021: 216–17.

¹¹⁷ Fancy and Green 2021: 176.

¹¹⁸ Green 2018, where the scholar also defines the consilience (meaning literally “jumping together”) as “a kind of intense multidisciplinary, especially linking the sciences and humanities”. The need to adopt an interdisciplinary, consilient approach in plague studies is now strongly emphasized by scholars: see among others Varlık 2021a: 9–19.

¹¹⁹ See Tresso 2021a; Tresso 2021b; Tresso 2021c.

¹²⁰ Just to mention a mantra that Green (2014: 49 and *passim*), with the bioarchaeologists, is wont to repeat, “absence of evidence is not evidence of absence”.

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