

*The following is a brief extract from the writings of the great fourteenth-century Muslim traveller Ibn Battuta covering part of his journey up the river Nile. It has an approach and a style which is surprisingly modern – it probably would not be out of place among travel accounts published today. Few, however, would consider it a work of history. Having said that, although it is not a narrative of the past, it is informed by a deep sense of the histories of civilizations, by religions and places; much of which is enriched by a comparative perspective.*

#### The great river Nile

The Egyptian Nile surpasses all rivers of the earth in sweetness of taste, length of course, and utility. No other river in the world can show such a continuous series of towns and villages along its banks, or a basin so intensely cultivated. Its course is from South to North, contrary to all the other great rivers. One extraordinary thing about it is that it begins to rise in the extreme hot weather at the time when rivers generally diminish and dry up, and begins to subside just when rivers begin to increase and overflow. The river Indus resembles it in this feature. The Nile is one of the five great rivers of the world, which are the Nile, Euphrates, Tigris, Syr Darya and Amu Darya; five other rivers resemble these, the Indus, which is called Panj Ab [i.e. Five Rivers], the river of India which is called Gang [Ganges] – it is to it that the Hindus go on pilgrimage, and when they burn their dead they throw the ashes into it, and they say that it comes from Paradise – the river Jun [Jumna or perhaps Brahmaputra] in India, the river Itil [Volga] in the Qipchaq steppes, on the banks of which is the city of Sara, and the river Saru [Hoang-Ho] in the land of Cathay. All these will be mentioned in their proper places, if God will. Some distance below Cairo the Nile divides into three streams, none of which can be crossed except by boat, winter or summer. The inhabitants of every township have canals led off the Nile; these are filled when the river is in flood and carry the water over the fields. From Cairo I travelled into Upper Egypt, with the intention of crossing to the Hijaz. On the first night I stayed at the monastery of Dayr at-Tin, which was built to house certain illustrious relics – a fragment of the Prophet's wooden basin and the pencil with which he used to apply kohl, the awl he used for sewing his sandals, and the Koran belonging to the Caliph Ali written in his own hand. These were bought, it is said, for a hundred thousand dirhams by the builder of the monastery, who also established funds to supply food to all comers and to maintain the guardians of the sacred relics.

Ibn Battuta (1929) *Travels in Asia and Africa 1325–1354*, tr. and ed. H.A.R. Gibb. Available at: [www.fordham.edu/hallsall/source/1354-ibnbattuta](http://www.fordham.edu/hallsall/source/1354-ibnbattuta).