# Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's "Prayer of Damascus"

## A window on to Damascus in the hell of the Black Death (Part Two)[1]

*Claudia Maria Tresso*

Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's famous *Riḥla* [(Chronicle of) *Travels*] is probably the only work of medieval travel literature whose protagonist claims to have personally witnessed the plague pandemic known as the Black Death, which ravaged the Mediterranean world between 1347-1350 (and continued in subsequent waves). The passages describing the scourge include the story of a rogatory – a multi-religious prayer held in Damascus in July 1348. This is probably the most often mentioned passage of the *Riḥla*, the most quoted in the studies on the Black Death in the Middle East, as well in those on relations between religious groups in the Mamluk empire. Nevertheless, to this day it has not yet been the subject of in-depth analysis. This article is an endeavour to contribute to both the studies on Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's *Riḥla* and the Black Death by analysing the story of the Damascus prayer in its historical context and literary aspects, i.e., by answering the questions: how does the story fit into the climate of the pandemic in general and into Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's *Riḥla* in particular? What are its lexical and narrative characteristics? Moving from the story to the narrated event leads to the question on relations between the different religious groups that took part in the rite. Moreover, how did Islamic scholars interpret the prayer gathering? Since the *Riḥla* is not a chronicle but a narrative work, another question arises: to what extent is its information reliable? The answer will be found by comparing it with the main Middle Eastern Arabic sources of the 14th and 15th centuries, which are mostly Chronicle texts. The concluding paragraph investigates whether the story of the Damascus prayer derives from Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's personal testimony, as he claims in the *Riḥla*, or whether he (and/or the editor of the work, Ibn Juzayy) might have taken the information from other sources.

Keywords: Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, Ibn Juzayy, Arabic Travel Literature, Epidemics, Black Death in the Middle East, Medieval Pandemic, *Dhimmī* in the Mamluk Sultanate, Medieval Arabic Chronicles

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## 7. The supplication of the sons of Moses: Muslims and *dhimmī* in Mamluk times

The prayer gathering described in the *Riḥla* takes place when Damascus has just been hit by the pandemic,[2] which starting from Alexandria (where it had now reached its peak)[3] has begun to rage in Cairo and in various cities in the Middle East. The news coming from the places already affected is terrifying and in Damascus "people are afraid that the plague will come to them too."[4]

At the beginning of *Rabīʿ I* of 749 (early June 1348) the lieutenant of the Mamluk Sultan in Gaza informs Arghūn Shāh, his counterpart in Damascus, that in his jurisdiction, in just one month, from the 10th of *Muḥarram* (10 April) to the 10th of *Ṣafar* (10 May), the plague caused more than 20,000 deaths.[5] From that day on, prayers and supplications multiply in Damascus to implore the end of the scourge, but by the end of July, there have probably already been many victims, and fear continues to grow. It is perhaps no coincidence, therefore, that IB concludes the story of this event with a powerful evocative image. In the background, once the prayer is completed, a "white minaret" (*manāra bayḍāʾ*) stands out. It is the so-called *Miʾdhanat ʿĪsā* (Minaret of Jesus) of the Umayyad Mosque, an item that literally looms over the scene not only because of its height (77 metres) – which makes it the tallest of the three minarets of the Great Mosque – but also because of the end-of-the-world vision that it evokes. A famous *ḥadīth* reported by Muslim – though not quoted in the *Riḥla* – states that when that day comes, the Antichrist (*al-Masīḥ al-Dajjāl*) will appear and "God would send the Messiah (*al-Masīḥ*) son of Mary and he will descend near the White Minaret on the east side of Damascus [...], will look for the Antichrist

[2] The plague is attested in Damascus in early June by Ibn Kathīr, who reports that on the 7th of *Rabīʿ I* (5 June) people gathered to recite al-Bukhārī's collection of *ḥadīth* and ask God to ward off the plague (Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, vol. 16, 341; for more information on the Black Death in Ibn Kathīr's work, see Mirza 2020a).

[3] The peak of deaths in Alexandria was probably reached at the beginning of 749, i.e., in the spring of 1348, when the plague may have killed 50,000 people – which out of an estimated 105,000 inhabitants, represents 48% of the population. Borsch and Sabraa (2017: 68-70) also take into account IB, who reports that in Alexandria there were 1,080 dead per day (al-Tāzī IV: 181; Gibb and Beckingham IV: 919-920 [EP 323]).

[4] Ibn Kathīr (2010, vol. 16: 341), where the author reports that in Damascus the news came that the majority of the population had died in Cyprus, and that prayers had begun (see Ibn Qāḍī Shuhba 1994, vol. 1: 542, who quotes him). On the "Panic in Damascus" in those days see Mirza (2020a). On the fear, resignation and confusion among the population, especially in Cairo, during the Black Death and the subsequent waves of plague, see Shoshan (2002: 4-8) and Borsch and Sabraa (2017: 77-78). In Europe, too, there was enormous consternation, and to prevent mass panic, the authorities often went so far as to ban both public mourning and the ringing of bells, except for Sunday masses (Biraben 1976: 99-100).

[5] Al-Maqrīzī 1971, vol. 4: 82, where the author adds that the lieutenant of Gaza had run away, leaving a deserted city (see Ibn Taghrī Birdī 1979, vol. 10: 198, who quotes him). IB relates that at the beginning of June 1348, in Gaza, there were more than 1,000 victims a day – and later, perhaps more accurately, he would say 1,100 (al-Tāzī IV: 179 and 180; Gibb and Beckingham IV: 918 and 920 [EP 320 and 322]).

until he finds him and kills him at the gate of Lod."[6] This is an eschatological reference which, although in Islam there are not figures like the "horsemen of the Apocalypse," at that time encapsulated the idea of many that the end of the world was nigh.[7] Furthermore, popular religiosity still preserves an ancient legend according to which, at the end of time, this event will hail the reconciliation between Christians, Jews and Muslims, on that very same spot.[8] It is perhaps also for this reason that the Minaret is the background to the description of their common prayer on that anguished Friday at the end of July, when the end of the world seemed close at hand.

This episode is all the more interesting when we study European Christian society in that period, already imbued with anti-Semitism as well as serious social tensions.[9] With most of the commercial and financial sectors in the hands of the Jews, it was their own society which experienced persecution. Thousands of Jews were accused of living in sin, or, as in the past, of poisoning the water fountains to spread the disease, thus provoking the wrath of God that fell upon men with the arrows of the plague. Whatever the accusation, they were burned alive (and their properties confiscated) first in the Dauphiné, Provence and other regions of France, then in Catalonia, Aragon, Switzerland, Savoy, Germany, Belgium, Luxembourg and Austria. The attempts of many rulers to re-establish social order by preventing the massacres were of little or no use, nor were the two bulls, papal declarations, that the current Pope Clement VI, in exile in Avignon, issued on 5 July and 26 September 1349 reiterating that the plague did not distinguish between Christian and Jew.[10] On the contrary, as had happened before, in several cases the accusation was extended to the Muslims of Spain, who were accused of having convinced the Jews to ally with them to exterminate European Christians.[11]

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[6] Muslim 2014, vol. 7: 338 (*ḥadīth* 3057). The same *ḥadīth* is related by al-Tirmidhī, *Jāmiʿ*, 834-835 (*ḥadīth* 2394 (2244); Abū Dāwud 2014: 474 (*ḥadīth* 4273); Ibn Mājah 2009: 708-709 (*ḥadīth* 4075). This is why the minaret is also called "the minaret of Jesus" (*manārat ʿĪsā*]) As for *al-Masīḥ al-Dajjāl* (the False/Deceiving Messiah), an eschatological Islamic figure that may be compared to the Antichrist, see Cook (2002: 92-136) and Tottoli (2002).

[7] In chroniclers' texts, the arrival of the plague is sometimes preceded by the rising of a mighty wind and/or a furious swell, which leads people to believe that the Hour (of the end of the world) has come. See al-Maqrīzī (1971, vol. 4: 85; Ibn Taghrī Birdī 1979, vol. 10: 203, who quotes him); Ibn Abī Ḥajala (fol. 76a); Ibn Ḥajar (1993a: 237). For an analysis of disasters as signs of Doomsday in Islam see Akasoy (2007: 393-396). In any case, there have been no Messianic Muslim movements that have associated the Black Death with the end of the world (Dols 1974b: 283-284; Dols 1977: 294; Borsch and Sabraa 2017: 84-85).

[8] Cammelli (2005: 7). Another example of good interreligious relations in Syria mentioned in IB's *Riḥla* is the hospitality given to Muslims by the Christian monks of an unidentified monastery near Latakia (al-Tāzī I: 293-294; Gibb I: 115 [EP 183]).

[9] See, among others, Dols (1974b); Melhaoui (1997); Hanska (2002); Stearns (2009); Speziale (2016).

[10] The text of the second *bull*, translated into English, can be consulted in Aberth (2005: 158-159), as well as other documents of the time relating to these pogroms.

[11] Moreover, the accusation of poisoning water was opposed to the most widespread theories of the time, which attributed the contagion to the unhealthy air – and not to the water. But it was a repetition of what had happened in 1321 with "the

As for the *Dār al-Islām* (the House of Islam), i.e. those territories where the sovereigns, and therefore the institutions and the Law (and possibly the majority of the population) were Muslim,[12] from the beginning it had included more or less large communities of other religions, mostly monotheistic and revealed religions. First and foremost Jews and Christians, therefore, but also Samaritans, Zoroastrians and other groups, depending on places and times, all lived under the protection (*dhimma*) of Muslims (hence they were called *dhimmī*), in return for which they paid a special tax. They were also called *ahl al-dhimma* (the people of the *dhimma*) or *ahl al-Kitāb* (the people of the Book), if they had Holy Texts revealed by God before the Quran. They enjoyed better conditions than other non-Muslim subjects and could organise themselves in communities with their own rules in certain realms such as testamentary and family law. However, they had limited rights and duties as compared with Muslims, and at certain times and places had to wear a distinctive sign.[13] This did not prevent occasional serious episodes of intolerance towards them and scholars agree that under the Mamluks the *dhimmī*, and in particular Christians, were subject to discrimination and abuse. But during the Black Death, there is no evidence of groups or people who, according to their religious affiliation, were held responsible for the fury of the pandemic.[14] On the contrary, in this period the presence of

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lepers' plot," when in France, starting in Périgueux, in the south-western region, and then in Aquitaine and elsewhere, hundreds of lepers were tortured and executed on the charge of poisoning the waters at the instigation of the Jews – who in turn had been pushed by the Muslim king of Granada (and a mythical "Sultan of Babylon") – in order to spread their own disease and make Christianity sick or die. At that time, the King of France, Philip V, also promulgated an edict in Poitiers, accusing the lepers of "injuring his majesty." On the persecution of lepers and religious minorities in Europe before and during the Black Death, see among others Biraben (1975: 57-63: "Les poursuites contre les juifs et les lépreux"); Brossollet (1984: 62-63); Ginzburg (1989: 5-35: "Lebbrosi, ebrei e musulmani," and 36-42); Hanska (2002: 102-105: "Scapegoats and Political Explanations"); Cohn (2007); Nirenberg (2015: 93-125: "Lepers, Jews, Muslim and Poison in the Crown;" and 231-259: "Epilogue. The Black Death and Beyond"), where the massacres of the Jewish population and the reasons for them are analysed with particular attention in the kingdoms of Valencia and Aragon.

[12] For the complex notion of *Dār al-islām* in medieval times, Calasso (2011: 294-295) speaks of "a notion in which a political-territorial dimension and a legal-religious dimension are combined, but to which is entrusted, perhaps before anything else, the expression of the sense of belonging to a unitary reality, of a collective identity."

[13] In the *Riḥla*, for example, we found that in Lādhiq (ancient Laodicea) the men of *ahl al-dhimma* wore "a tall red or white cap" and women "a big turban" (al-Tāzī II: 169; Gibb II: 425 [EP 272]). On the condition of *ahl al-dhimma* in Islamic land see Tritton (1930: 115-126) and Cl. Cahen in *EI2*, s.v. *dhimma*. In particular, among others, see for the Christians Frassetto (2019), for the Jews Lewis (1984) and for the Samaritans, Boušek (2018), where on pp. 124-125 there is the story of the prayer of Damascus as related by Ibn Kathīr (see below).

[14] Dols cites an anti-Christian pamphlet written by the Egyptian al-Asnawī (d. 772/1370) and analysed by Perlmann, where there is news of an incendiary act perpetrated in Syria against Christians at the beginning of the first year of the Black Death (749/1348-1349), but agrees with the author that there is no connection between the events (Perlmann 1942: 854-855 and Dols 1977: 296, note 44). See also Congourdeau and Melhaoui (2001: 96, note 7); Melhaoui (2005: 101-102); Mirza (2020b), who states that the common prayer of Damascus "focused the community on praying to God to end the calamity rather than blaming one segment of the community for its occurrence."

*dhimmī* is attested not only in the religious rites that we are examining, but also in public secular events.[15] Finally, it should be noted that not even in Byzantium, the capital of Eastern Christianity, was any sect, including the Jews, ever held responsible for the scourge.[16] The history of the tensions that characterized economic and social relations between Christians and Jews in Europe probably requires greater attention.

## 8. Religious and juridical aspects of the multi-religious prayer to ward off the plague

The Damascus prayer was unusual and not a common occurrence, even in *Dār al-Islām*. This is confirmed when two contemporary historians, reporting the same event, conclude by commenting: *Kāna yawman mashhūdan* [It was a memorable day].[17] IB also speaks of a "remarkable [*yuʿjabu minhu*]" event. Among their contemporaries, many felt the same.

As already mentioned in the first part of this article (Tresso 2021: 149), there are three main types of prayers in Islam: the canonical *ṣalāt* which is essentially an act of worship and praise to God, the *duʿāʾ* which is a prayer of supplication and imploration, and the *dhikr*, practised in Sufi circles, which consists of "mentioning," with incessant repetition, one or more words of praise and invocation to God.[18] In times of the plague, nobody criticised worshipping and praising God with the *ṣalāt*, but many wondered whether or not it was lawful to invoke and plead with the Most High to ward off the plague. Being the only Creator, in His inscrutable designs, God also creates evil, and man's task is to conform to His *Qadar* [Decree] with *ṣabr* [acceptance]. In addition to this, since *duʿāʾ* is usually understood as an individual act, jurists wondered whether it was lawful to meet for this purpose [*al-ijtimāʿ li-l-duʿāʾ*].[19]

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[15] In the Mamluk period, both in Damascus and Cairo, the presence of representatives of the Christian and Jewish communities (sometimes with their Holy Books in hand) is documented at institutional feasts: see, among others, the events that took place in Damascus for the return to the throne of Sultan Barqūq in 729/1390 (Frenkel 2007: 46-47) and the celebrations for the end of *Ramaḍān* in Cairo in 1515 (Shoshan 2002: 75).

[16] See the paper by Congourdeau and Melhaoui (2001, especially 96, note 7).

[17] The expression is used by Ibn Kathīr (2010, vol. 16: 342; see Ibn Qāḍī Shuhba 1994, vol. 1: 547, who quotes him) and Ibn Abī Ḥajala (fol. 76a): Ibn Kathīr designates the epidemic by the term *wabāʾ*, while Ibn Abī Ḥajala, as IB, uses *ṭāʿūn*. For the analysis of Damascus prayer gathering in the chronicle of Ibn Kathīr, see Mirza (2020a, 2020b).

[18] *EI*², G. Monnot s.v. *Ṣalāt*, L. Gardet ss.vv. *Duʿāʾ* and *Dhikr*.

[19] Ibn Ḥajar dedicates the first chapter of the fifth part of his work to this theme, in which he reports several opinions on whether or not the *duʿāʾ*, individual or collective, is lawful on the occasion of the plague (*Hal yushraʿu al-duʿāʾ bi-rafʿihi aw lā?* [Is it lawful or not to pray to ward it (: the plague) off?]); Ibn Ḥajar (1993a: 195-207). Other opinions of Islamic jurists on this issue can be found in Ibn Iyās (1984, vol. 1: 531). Among modern scholars, see Sublet (1971: 147-149) and Mirza (2020b).

However, Islam also provides for some common prayers to be held in particular circumstances (such as the two great annual festivities, as well as eclipses, funerals, etc.) and these include a solemn rogatory rite called "begging for water" [*istisqāʾ*] in case of drought. The Quran, in fact, twice mentions the episode in which Moses, in the desert, "begged for water" [*istasqā*] for his people[20] and a series of *ḥadīth* attest that on several occasions Muḥammad also asked God to let the rain fall.[21] The same texts reports that the pleas of both were received by the Most High. Therefore, from the early days of Islam, the invocation of water/rain entered the list of "lawful" prayers in times of drought and even if the prayer could be said individually – following the model of Moses' and the Prophet's prayers – the practice of praying in common soon took hold, and the jurists codified its precise rules. Following the Prophet's example, the prayer gathering must be preceded by three days of fasting, and then, after the *ṣalāt al-ṣubḥ* [the prayer of dawn], the faithful go together on foot to an open-air oratory, generally on the outskirts of the city, where the supplication takes place. The presence of high dignitaries is recommended and they, like the all other faithful, must wear plain clothing as a sign of humility.[22] Women, minors and *dhimmī* may participate in the rite, although with some restrictions.[23] Evidence of this rite can be found in some Arab Christian sources too: a rogatory prayer for the rain is mentioned in the Annals that the Melkite Patriarch of Alexandria, Eutychius, wrote in Arabic in the 10th century. In this work he reports that in the year 290/903 "the [level] of the Nile fell to thirteen cubits and two fingers, and Muslims, Christians and Jews went out to beg for rain."[24] The similarities between the rite

[20] Qur 2, 60 and Qur 7, 160: God gave orders to Moses to strike the rock with his staff and twelve springs gushed forth from it: one for each tribe of Israel. The episode is also related in the Bible (Ex 17, 1-7 and Nm 20, 1-11).

[21] According to a *ḥadīth*, "The Prophet never raised his hands for any invocation except for that of the *istisqāʾ*" (al-Bukhārī 2014, vol. 2: 97 [*ḥadīth* 1040]). Al-Bukhārī dedicates a whole chapter of his work to this prayer (al-Bukhārī 2014, vol. 2: 79-102 [*ḥadīth* 1015-1048], *Bāb al-istisqāʾ wa-khurūj al-nabī fī al-istisqāʾ* [The book of the (prayer) of *istisqāʾ* and the Prophet's going out to perform it].

[22] And also to show God their suffering, in order to arouse His mercy (Melhaoui 1997: 108).

[23] According to Islamic legislation, children had to understand the canonical prayer, only women who were *ʿajāʾiz* ("elderly," see note 39) were allowed to participate and the faithful of other religions were supposed to pray at the same time as Muslims, but in a separate place. On these and other legal aspects of *istisqāʾ* prayer, see the manual of maliki law by Khalīl Ibn Isḥāq al-Jundī (d. 1365) edited by Guidi and Santillana (1919, vol. 1: 139-140; XIX/63); Melhaoui (1997: 108-109 and *passim*), where the slight differences between the four Sunni legal schools are illustrated; Talmon-Heller (2007: 263). Ibn Kathīr records an *istisqāʾ* prayer in Damascus 30 years before the Black Death, when "the problem was not a plague but rather an intense drought" (quoted by Mirza 2020b). In the same paper, Mirza also seems to suggest that, at least in the case of plague, the prayer of *istisqāʾ* is always preceded by the reading of the collection of *ḥadīth* by al-Bukhārī, but I have not found similar information in other sources, while the reading of al-Bukhārī is attested on far more occasions than the prayer for rain and independently of it: see note 50.

[24] However, that time the rite was unsuccessful: "But the level of the Nile did not increase," concludes the Patriarch, "and the water continued to flow" (Cheikho *et al.* 1906: 74). The episode is quoted in Piccirillo (2008: 18), together with IB's story of the prayer of Damascus. Other rites performed in Egypt by Muslims, Christians, Jews and Samaritans from the early times of Islam

"for the water" and the one described by IB are evident, and given the eyewitness accounts of other prayers that took place during the years of the Black Death on this model, it can be deduced that, although with some hesitation and criticism, at least in Damascus and Cairo, the idea prevailed that the plague could be equated to the scourge of drought.[25]

On close examination, IB explains neither the nature nor the purpose of this prayer, but both the context in which it takes place and the repetition of the verbs *taḍarraʿa* [to implore] and *dāʿā* [to invoke, to supplicate], as well as the final comment ("God Most High lightened their affliction…") make it clear that it was a prayer of supplication. This, moreover, is the character of the rites related in the medieval Muslim chronicles, where the prayers are explicitly defined as "a supplication to ward off the epidemic" [*duʿāʾ li-rafʿ al-wabāʾ*]. In Islam, there are no reports of prayers of atonement or penance as there were in the Christian sphere,[26] just as there were no movements that preached penance and mortification similar to that of the flagellants, already widespread in Europe in the second half of the 13th century, and invigorated by the outbreak of the Black Death.[27] In Christianity, the presence of original sin brought about the idea that the Black Death was a punishment sent by God to man, who is

to propitiate the floods of the Nile and safeguard the prosperity of the territory are cited by Patrizi (2019: 74-81: "The rites shared between Christians and Muslims in Islamic times").

[25] For adapting the plea for rain to the plea to ward off the plague during the Black Death in Damascus and Cairo see Sublet (1971: 148); Dols (1977: 248); Melhaoui (1997); Mirza (2020a, 2020b), who notes that these gatherings were criticised especially when they "started to be replicated in other parts of the Empire, such as Cairo." Ibn Ḥajar, for example, in the aforementioned chapter dedicated to the lawfulness of the rogatory prayer on the occasion of the plague, does not condemn it, but referring explicitly to the prayer of Damascus (and to another similar one held in Cairo in 833/1430), states that adapting the rite of prayer for water to the plague is a *bidʿa* (innovation) (Ibn Ḥajar 1993a: 204). The term *bidʿa* describes a practice or belief which is not present in the Quran or in the Prophet's Tradition, so that – as with all other actions carried out by man – it can be judged in various ways: from "recommended" (*mandūb*) to "illicit" (*muḥarram*), but it often sounds like a synonym for "heresy" (see J. Robson in *EI*², s.v. *bidʿa*). For other Islamic rites adapted to the plague, see below and notes 50 and 51. In the Christian area as well, prayers and rites for other disasters and catastrophes were adapted to the Black Death, see among others Hanska (2002: 68-78 and *passim*).

[26] On prayers, masses, processions, relics, etc. in Christian Europe, see among others Biraben (1976: 62-84), Dols (1974b: 272-275), Hanska (2002: 54-60 and *passim*), Stearns (2009: 4-5). The lack of Christian and Jewish sources on both their own prayers and the multi-religious ones in the *Dār al-Islām* during the Black Death should be noted. As for Christians, not even the detailed *Croniche di Terra Santa* [Chronicles of the Holy Land] by Golubovich (1906-1927) report any prayers during the plague. For the reactions of Christians and Muslims of Byzantium at the time of the first plague pandemic, or "Justinian's plague" (mid-5th-7th century), see Congourdeau and Melhaoui (2001). For a comparative study on Muslim, Christian and Jewish responses to the Black Death, see Stearns (2009).

[27] Biraben (1975: 65-71) and related bibliography. Especially because of their anti-Jewish attitudes, the flagellants were threatened with excommunication in the already mentioned *bull* issued by Pope Clement VI in 1349 (Brossollet 1984: 61-62). In this regard, see Dols' critique (Dols 1977: 294, note 37) of Von Kremer (1880: 102), who "uncritically associated the religious fanaticism of the flagellants in Europe with the dervish orders in Muslim society."

born in sin.[28] Conversely, the concept of "original sin" does not exist in Islam,[29] so that the plague was often interpreted as a warning against sin, but the authors tended rather to consider it within an inscrutable divine Design, underlining its "purifying" character, which allowed many to understand it as a *shahāda*, a "martyrdom" that guarantees Paradise for those who die of it.[30]

Despite this, the Arabic sources also testify to a penitent attitude, which led Dols to state that "the Black Death was interpreted, at least in part, as a warning and reproach from God for the communities' moral laxity."[31] As for the sources quoted in this article, in addition to the example cited in the last note about Ibn al-Wardī, Ibn Abī Ḥajala says that in Damascus, when the number of deaths increased, people begged the Most High "asking Him for forgiveness" [*yastaghfirūnaHu*]. Al-Maqrīzī recalls that during the repetition of the Noah sura in the mosques of Damascus, the faithful begged God and "repented of their sins" [*tābū ʿalā dhunūbihim*] – and Ibn Ḥajar, who recounts the same rite, states that on that occasion "people repented" [*ḥaṣala al-nās al-tawba*]. As for Cairo, Ibn Iyās reports a *khuṭba*

[28] Dols (1974b: 272-275), Brossollet (1984: 54-55), Stearns (2009).

[29] Islam affirms Adam and Eve's original fall from the state of innocence in which God had created them, but concludes that after having driven them out of Eden, God forgave them (Qur 2, 36-37), so that "the idea of an original sin transmitted by Adam to his descendants is absolutely contrary to the teachings of Islam" (Anawati 1970: 39-40).

[30] Sublet (1971: 144-147); Dols (1977: 295-299); Congourdeau and Melhaoui (2001: 104-105); Stearns (2007: 123, note 37); Speziale (2016: 76-81 and *passim*); Stearns (2020a, 2020b). There are many *ḥadīth* in this regard: among them, one is reported in both Muslim's and al-Bukhāri's *al-Ṣaḥīḥ* and in the authoritative collections of al-Tirmidhī and al-Nasāʾī: "Five are regarded as martyrs: they are those who die because of plague, abdominal disease, drowing or falling building and the martyrs in God's cause" (al-Bukhārī 2014, vol. 4: 65 [*ḥadīth* 2846]; Muslim (2014, vol. 5: 240 [*ḥadīth* 1967]); al-Tirmidhī (2011: 519 [*ḥadīth* 1086 (1063)]; al-Nasāʾī (2014: 544 [*ḥadīth* 2054]). This is because the plague "was distinguished from other contagious diseases in the narratives of the early Muslim communities" (Stearns 2020a). Among the medieval authors cited in this article, Ibn Ḥajar dedicates the third chapter of his *Badhl al-māʿūn* (101-134) to this subject [*Fī bayān anna al-ṭāʿūn shahāda li-l-muslimīn* (On the Statement that the Plague is a Martyrdom for Muslims)]; Ibn Iyās (1984, vol. 1: 531) states that the Prophet did not pray "to remove the plague from his community [*umma*], but to draw it upon the faithful to offer them an opportunity for martyrdom." It should be noted that even in Christian Europe, the belief that whoever dies of the plague goes to Paradise was established. In the 7th century, for example, in the third of the *Homeliae Toletane*, the author (possibly Ildefonso or Giuliano of Toledo) promised eternal life to those who died of the plague (Tovar Paz 1993: 387-389), and during the Black Death Pope Clement VI granted general absolution from sins to the faithful who died in the pandemic (Brossollet 1984: 58-59). But as noted by Stearns, these were exceptions and not a widespread idea as it was the case for a long time in the Muslim sphere (Stearns 2009: 4-5).

[31] Dols (1974a: 454, note 65), where the author comments on a passage from Ibn al-Wardī's *Risāla*, that says: "We ask God's forgiveness for our souls' bad inclination; the plague is surely part of His punishment [...] They said: the air's corruption kills. I said: the love of corruption kills" – which does not prevent Ibn al-Wardī, a little further on, from stating "It has been established by our Prophet, God bless him and give him the peace, that the plague-stricken are martyrs. This noble tradition is true and assures martyrdom" (the same passages can be found in Ibn al-Wardī 1997, vol. 2: 340). See also Congourdeau and Melhaoui (2001: 96) and Melhaoui (2005: 31-32), who considers that for Ibn Abī Ḥajala the plague is the result of "disrespect for morality."

[sermon] at al-Azhar Mosque, where the preacher invited the faithful to "repent of their sins" [*al-tawba min dhunūbihim*].[32]

## 9. Comparison of the figures and information provided by IB with those of the chroniclers

After having introduced and analysed the story of Damascus prayer in the *Riḥla*, we now proceed to compare the figures and information given in the text with those of the most important Middle Eastern Arab chroniclers of the 14th and 15th centuries. These chroniclers describe the same or similar prayers which they have directly witnessed or read about in other works.[33]

The Damascus prayer gathering is recorded by two chroniclers who lived at the time of the events, the Syrian Ibn Kathīr (700/1301–774/1373) and the Maghribi (resident in Damascus) Ibn Abī Ḥajala (725/1325–776/1375). The prayer gathering is also mentioned in the later works of the Syrian Ibn Qāḍī Shuhba (779/1377–851/1448), based on the testimony of Ibn Kathīr, and the Egyptian Ibn Ḥajar (773/1372–852/1449), who says that he derives his information from the chronicle of Ibn Abī Ḥajala.[34]

The different versions of the event are very similar, even though the narrative style and pathos which characterize the story in IB's *Riḥla* are not found in the more stringent renditions given by those chroniclers. The latter merely record the event or at most, as in the aforementioned case of Ibn Ḥajar, comment on the lawfulness and outcome of such a prayer gathering.[35] In any case, both the *Riḥla* and the chronicles report that the rite was preceded by a three-day fast that ended on the Friday, when the people of Damascus gathered together and went to a place outside the city where the common prayer was held to beseech God to ward off the plague.

However, the comparison shows some discrepancies. First of all, the problem of dating should be noted. According to the *Riḥla*, the prayer gathering took place at the end of the month of *Rabīʿ II* of 749 and followed a three-day fast that ended on a Thursday. So it is likely that it took place on Friday 27,

[32] Ibn Abī Ḥajala (fol. 76a); al-Maqrīzī (1971, vol. 4: 85); Ibn Ḥajar (1993a: 238); Ibn Iyās (1984, vol. 1: 531).

[33] The Arabic historical sources on the Black Death (for which see Dols (1977: 320-335, "Appendix 3, The Arabic Manuscript Sources for the History of Plague from the Black Death to the Nineteenth Century") concern almost exclusively the two centres of the Mamluk sultanate, namely Egypt and, to a lesser extent, Syria, from 1347 to the middle of the 15th century. Moreover, since the chroniclers were all city-dwellers, we should note the lack of similar sources to study the epidemic in rural areas (see Borsch 2005 and Borsch 2014, who analyses the impact of the Black Death on the rural economy of Egypt).

[34] Ibn Kathīr (2010, vol. 16: 342), Ibn Abī Ḥajala (fol. 76a), Ibn Qāḍī Shuhba (1994, vol. 1: 545-547), Ibn Ḥajar (1993a: 237-238). Unless otherwise indicated, the same references also include the other information on the Black Death in Damascus contained in this paragraph.

[35] See note 25. As for the style of the four texts mentioned here, it is to be noted that Ibn Abī Ḥajala was not a historian and in his work he quotes several poems on the plague and uses both verse and rhymed prose [*sajʿ*].

which corresponds to 25 July 1348.[36] This is confirmed by the chronicle of Ibn Kathīr, who reports the same event on the same date, but not in those of Ibn Abī Ḥajala, Ibn Qāḍī Shuhba and Ibn Ḥajar, who relate it as being in the previous month, *Rabīʿ I*, i.e. June.[37]

As for the place, Ibn Kathīr, Ibn Abī Ḥajala and Ibn Ḥajar agree that the prayer gathering took place at "al-Qadam" Mosque, while IB calls it "al-Aqdām" and Ibn Qāḍī Shuhba does not name the Mosque, but specifies that the rite took place in "al-Jusūra." However, the two names of the Mosque are still used today and al-Jusūra is the ancient name of the area where this Mosque is located.[38]

Ibn Kathīr confirms the presence of Jews and Christians (*naṣāra*), and adds that there were also Samaritans (*sāmira*), while Ibn Abī Ḥajala, Ibn Qāḍī Shuhba and Ibn Ḥajar speak more generally about the participation of "the people of the *dhimma.*" It should also be noted that if we have seen (note 23) that the prayer of *istisqāʾ* includes the rule that the faithful of other religions must pray in a separate place from Muslims, neither the chroniclers, nor IB, claim that the religious groups were separated.

The other chroniclers also relate the presence of notables, elderly and children: regarding the last-mentioned, IB designates them as *ṣighār* [little ones], Ibn Kathīr and Ibn Qāḍī Shuhba use the word *ṣibyān* [young] and Ibn Abī Ḥajala and Ibn Ḥajar talk about *aṭfāl* [children], but there does not seem to be any disagreement in the means of designating "minors" (Abdesselam 1935, *s.v.*).

As to women, whose participation with men in the prayer gathering was as exceptional as that of the *dhimmī*, IB refers to them as *ʾanāth* [females] and *nisāʾ* [women] and also reports the presence of Jewish and Christian women. Ibn Kathīr and Ibn Qāḍī Shuhba designate the women who participated in the gathering (without specifying their religion) as *ʿajāʾiz* (sing. *ʿajūz*) – a word which today corresponds to "elderly/old person" and in the legal lexicon of classical Islam indicated women who are not of childbearing age because they have passed menopause or even, in some cases, because they

[36] In the second quotation of this same event in the *Riḥla*, moreover, we found that IB had arrived in Damascus the day before, i.e., Thursday (al-Tāzī IV: 179; Gibb and Beckingham IV: 918 [EP 320]).

[37] Ibn Abī Ḥajala says it was the 13th of *Rabīʿ I*, Ibn Ḥajar says the 17th and Ibn Qāḍī Shuhba reports that it took place in the "second decade" of the month. However, it is odd to note that the 13th of *Rabīʿ I* was a Wednesday and the 17th was a Sunday, while the prayer for water, which served as a model for the prayer of Damascus, must take place on a Friday: perhaps they refer to the date of the announcement.

[38] This was the name given to the area near the present al-Daqqāq Mosque (formerly known as Karīm al-Dīn Mosque), in the south-eastern district of Damascus now known as al-Mīdān, not far from al-Qadam Mosque (al-Nuʿaymī 2014: 96). Ibn Taghrī Birdī attests the use of the name in the 15th century citing al-Jusūra as a "place outside Damascus," but without specifying its location (Ibn Taghrī Birdī 1979, vol. 7: 295).

are too young.[39] Finally, neither Ibn Abī Ḥajal nor Ibn Ḥajar mention the presence of Muslim or *dhimmī* women.

IB's *Riḥla* concludes the story of the prayer gathering in an almost triumphant tone saying that "God Most High lightened their affliction" and that in Damascus "the number of deaths in a single day reached a maximum of two thousand." The other chroniclers relate the number of victims without correlating it with the prayer itself while providing partially divergent figures.[40] In the passage immediately following the Damascus prayer, Ibn Kathīr reports that in the month of *Rabīʿ I* (June) the number of deaths in a single day was 100, in the following month 200, and continued to increase until it reached 1,000 (including only those who were taken to the Mosque for the funeral) in the middle of *Jumāda II* (10 September).[41] But in relating these figures he states that "God defended Damascus and preserved it" because, as he repeats twice, the number of victims was not particularly high compared to the number of inhabitants (Ibn Kathīr 2010, vol. 16: 341-342). Ibn Abī Ḥajala speaks of a strong wind that stirred up a great cloud of dust and spread the epidemic even more, and states that from that moment on, the plague continued to rage in Damascus until the beginning of the year 750 (March 1349), claiming 1,000 deaths a day among the population living within its walls.[42] As for Ibn Qāḍī Shuhba, he quotes al-Ḥusaynī who relates 400 victims per day at the beginning and an increase in deaths in the

[39] The noun *ʿajūz* is one of the so-called *al-asmāʾ al-aḍdād* [opposite nouns]. It refers to the fact of "being unable (to procreate or seduce)," so it indicates a woman both before and after her fertile/seductive age (see Lane 1984, vol. 1, 1930a; Monteil 1960: 211). With specific reference to the *istisqāʾ* prayer, in their edition of Khalīl's *Mukhtaṣir*, Guidi and Santillana (1919, vol. 1: 139 (XIX/63), translate *ʿajāʾiz* as "donne attempate, incapaci di sedurre" [aged women, unable to seduce], and specify that participation of unseductive young women is not recommended. Talmon-Heller (2007: 263) translates "women." Wiet, who translated Ibn Kathīr's narration of the plague into French, suggests "vieillards et vieilles femmes" [old men and old women] (Wiet 1962: 382). I do not agree with Mirza, who translates Ibn Kathīr's two words *shuyūkh wa-ʿajāʾiz* [elderly man and elderly women] with the single word "elderly" and does not mention women in either of his two papers on the prayer gathering of Damascus in the chronicle of Ibn Kathīr (Mirza 2020a and Mirza 2020b): one of the aspects that led Ibn Kathīr to say that it was a "memorable day," was precisely the presence of both women and men!

[40] In the second mention of the prayer, IB's *Riḥla* speaks of 2,400 victims a day (al-Tāzī IV: 179; Gibb and Beckingham IV: 918 [EP 320]). On mortality in Egypt and Syria during the Black Death, and on the various (and often contradictory) estimates related by Arab chroniclers, see Dols (1977: 193-204, "General mortality of the Black Death," and 212-223, "Medieval and Modern Estimates of Mortality caused by the Black Death"); Ayalon (1985) and Borsch and Sabraa (2017).

[41] See also Ibn al-Wardì, who speaks of "1,000 and more" victims per day (Ibn al-Wardī 1997, vol. 2: 339). These same figures are related by the Syrian historian Ibn Ḥabīb al-Ḥalabī (710/1310–778/1377) in a compendium of his work in Latin cited by Ayalon (1985: 4).

[42] According to the most recent studies, during the pandemic, in Damascus there were about 36,000 deaths out of a population which depending on the capacity of the walls and the size of the houses, probably did not exceed 60,000 inhabitants before the Black Death (Borsch and Sabraa 2017: 84-85). Dols takes into account both the massive exodus from the countryside to the capital and the large number of people living outside the walls, and estimates the number of inhabitants as 80,180 (Dols 1977: 203-204).

months of *Rajab* and *Shaʿbān*, i.e. late September – mid-November (Ibn Qāḍī Shuhba 1994, vol. 1: 543). In subsequent pages, he quotes the figures provided by Ibn Kathīr, without considering the impact of these figures on the total population. After describing the ritual, Ibn Ḥajar notes that "the dead increased and the situation only worsened," specifying that "before prayer, it was much less heavy."[43] Then he quotes Ibn Abī Ḥajala. With respect to Ibn Ḥajar, finally, it should be noted that, as we have seen (note 25), he does not hesitate to define the rogatory prayer on the occasion of the plague as a *bidʿa* [(heretical) innovation], and perhaps it is also for this reason that he is the most sceptical about its effectiveness. He is sceptical to the point that not only, as we shall see, does he describe a nefarious outcome for another similar prayer held in Damascus during the Black Death, but he also mentions a third one held in Cairo in 833/1430, during a subsequent wave of the epidemic. Even that prayer did not have the desired effect: on the contrary, Ibn Ḥajar says that "the number of deaths was forty a day and then it increased to a thousand."[44]

Regarding the number of victims of the Black Death in Cairo, the *Riḥla* reports that it was 24,000 per day, without specifying the time of year.[45] Chroniclers agree that the peak in the number of deaths occurred in the months of *Shaʿbān* and *Ramaḍān* (November and December) and speak of figures similar to those provided in the *Riḥla*.[46] Ibn Kathīr relates that "there are those who exaggerate and those who minimise: those who minimise say 11,000 and those who exaggerate say 30,000 per day." The same numbers are related by al-Sakhawī, who quotes Ibn Kathīr and concludes by saying that, according to some, about half of all living beings perished in the Black Death.[47] Ibn Abī Ḥajala speaks of 20,000 dead,

[43] During the Black Death, prayer gatherings with a large attendance were occasions for contagion, and the problem also affected Europe. In 1350, for example, in order to give comfort to Christians during the epidemic, Pope Clement VI proclaimed a Jubilee Year and granted absolution from Purgatory and access to Paradise to pilgrims who had gone to Rome. The number of participants was very high (possibly 1,200,000 people) and according to the chronicles of the time, only one out of ten survived (Brossollet 1984: 59).

[44] Ibn Ḥajar (1993a: 204); see Mirza (2020b). Other sources also report similar numbers of victims in Damascus: al-Maqrīzī (1971, vol. 4: 85) states that during the month of *Rajab* there were 1,200 deaths per day (see Ibn Taghrī Birdī 1979, vol. 10: 203, who quotes him) and Ibn al-Wardī (1997, vol. 2: 339) speaks of "over 1,000" (but does not specify in which period).

[45] Later in the *Riḥla*, we find that in Cairo the Black Death killed 21,000 people a day (al-Tāzī IV: 181; Gibb and Beckingham IV: 920 [EP 323]).

[46] In addition to the authors cited for the prayer of Damascus, from now on we will also consider the chronicles of the Syrian Ibn al-Wardī (691/1292–749/1349) and the Egyptians al-Maqrīzī (766/1364–845/1442), Ibn Taghrī Birdī (813/1411–874/1470) – of Turkish origin, which repeats almost verbatim the text of al-Maqrīzī, al-Sakhāwī (830/1427–902/1497) and Ibn Iyās (852/1448–930/1524).

[47] Ibn Kathīr (2010, vol. 16: 10 and 342), Al-Sakhāwī (1992, vol. 1: 97). Like some other scholars, al-Sakhāwī also cites a number of animals that were affected by the plague: not only mammals (dogs, cats, camels, dromedaries, donkeys, etc.) but also various types of birds (including ostriches) and fish (see al-Maqrīzī 1971, vol. 4: 81; Ibn Iyās 1984, vol. 1: 530; Ibn Abī Ḥajala, fol. 75b). On animals that died in the pandemic, see Dols (1977: 157-160). For clinical studies on animals that may be affected by the

but adds that according to some it is 25,000 and according to others 27,000 and he goes on to state that in the two months of the peak there were 900,000 victims. Ibn Ḥajar relates the same and quotes Ibn Kathīr and Ibn Abī Ḥajala. Ibn Qāḍī Shuhba (who quotes al-Ḥusaynī) talks about 11,000 deaths and says that others relate more than 20,000, while al-Maqrīzī, Ibn Taghrī Birdī and Ibn Iyās relate that there were 13,800 victims in two days, including only those who were taken to the Mosque for funeral rites. According to them, during the peak months there were 20,000 victims per day and 900,000 funerals took place.[48]

Finally, unlike IB, none of the chroniclers mentioned speaks of the ban on selling cooked food at the market,[49] nor do they mention the white minaret of the Umayyyad Mosque, or the *ḥadīth* which evokes the end of the world.

## 10. Other prayer gatherings in Damascus and Cairo during the Black Death

The prayer gathering at al-Aqdām Mosque is mentioned among other rites and processions which took place at that time of the tragedy in Damascus to beseech the Most High to ward off the plague. Equally renowned and related by various sources are, in the month of *Rabīʿ I* [June], the already mentioned recitation of al-Bukhārī's *Ṣaḥīḥ* in various mosques in the city[50] and a ritual that took place in the Umayyyad Mosque at the *miḥrāb* called "of the Companions [of the Prophet]," following the fact that

plague, see among others Christie *et al.* (1980), Chomel *et al.* (1994), Perry and Fetherston (1997: 50-56), Green (2015: 31-34), Varlik (2015: 19). It has been noted that none of the sources, neither Arabic nor Western, mention rats among the animals killed by the Black Death – which is quite surprising, given that rats (thanks to their fleas) are the first victims of the plague bacillus *Yersinia pestis*.

[48] Ibn Abī Ḥajala (fol. 75b), Ibn Ḥajar (1993a: 237), Ibn Qāḍī Shuhba (1994, vol. 1: 543), al-Maqrīzī (1971, vol. 4: 86-87; see Ibn Taghrī Birdī 1979, vol. 10: 207-208, who quotes him), Ibn Iyās (1984, vol. 1: 528). Such a high number of deaths has long been considered improbable by scholars, but it should be noted that Cairo, at the time, had a population estimated at between 250,000 and 500,000. See the hypothesis of Shoshan (2002: 1 and 38, notes 5 and 6), obtained by comparing different proposed estimates: the population would then be reduced to 150,000-300,000 in the 15th century, that is after the waves of plague that began with the Black Death. See also Borsch and Sabra (2017, especially 80-81) where the authors state that the figure of 20,000 victims is possible if it refers to a period of two days and includes the entire city (which means including the ancient capital Fusṭāṭ).

[49] Some sources speak instead of the closure of markets due to the pandemic: both because of the lack of products to sell and the high mortality rate that decimated farmers, customers and sellers. See for example al-Maqrīzī (1971, vol. 4), who mentions the closure of markets in Gaza (: 82), Alexandria (: 84) and Cairo (: 87).

[50] The recitation of al-Bukhārī's *Ṣaḥīḥ* or parts of the Quran is reported by Ibn Kathīr (2010, vol. 16: 341), Ibn Abī Ḥajala (fol. 75b), Ibn Qāḍī Shuhba (1994, vol. 1: 544, who quotes Ibn Kathīr), Ibn Ḥajar (1993a: 237-238, who quotes Ibn Abī Ḥajala), al-Maqrīzī (1971, vol. 4: 86-87), Ibn Taghrī Birdī (1979, vol. 10: 204-205, who quotes al-Maqrīzī). This prayer gathering is attested since the early days of the Mamluk era on festive occasions (such as the appointment of a new sultan) and on occasions of suffering (such as non-flooding of the Nile). It became a common practice in Syria and Egypt at the time of the Black Death and was maintained during the subsequent waves of plague (Dols 1977: 247-248). See also Mirza (2020a, 2020b).

"somebody" [*rajul*] saw the Prophet in a dream urging him to recite the Noah sura (Cor 71) 3,363 times.[51] Scholars express different opinions about the outcome of the prayers in these cases as well: Ibn Kathīr confirms his judgment that there were many dead but God defended and protected the city, while Ibn Abī Ḥajala and Ibn Ḥajar report that, far from ending, the plague spread even further and Ibn Qāḍī Shuhba refrains from giving his opinion. Both these rites are also related, albeit with slight differences, by other authors. According to al-Maqrīzī's description (later taken up by Ibn Taghrī Birdī), they took place in the month of *Rajab* (25 September – 24 October), when the plague killed more than a thousand people a day, but after the first prayer "the scourge decreased day by day, until it stopped," while after the second "the epidemic, on the whole, decreased." As for the Noah sura, al Maqrīzī relates that it was read 3,360 times and for the reading of al-Bukhārī he says that it was followed by a procession to an oratory outside the city, for a three-day rogatory rite in which the minors [*ṣibyān*] also participated – which is very similar to the prayer gathering at al-Aqdām Mosque. Still on the subject of the Noah sura, al-Sakhāwī reduces the number of recitations to 3,063 times.[52]

Similar prayer gatherings and processions took place in the western capital of the Mamluk sultanate, Cairo, in the months of *Shaʿbān* and *Ramaḍān* (November and December 1348), when the plague reached its height and there were so many dead that at the beginning of *Dhū al-qaʿda* (last decade of January 1449) "the city was completely deserted (*khāliya muqfira*)."[53] Among these rites, Ibn Iyās reports a prayer he explicitly describes as "similar to the one of "begging for water" (*istisqāʾ*), in which people gathered outside the city of Cairo, under the Red Mountain, and then went to al-Azhar Mosque. "But the plague," comments Ibn Iyās, "increased and spread even more."[54] Also near the Red Mountain (at the Qubbat al-Naṣr)[55] and at the Khawlān Oratory in the Qarāfa cemetery, al-Maqrīzī relates the final moment of a series of rites and prayers that took place in Cairo from Friday 6 to Sunday 8 Ramaḍān (28-

[51] Ibn Kathīr (2010, vol. 16: 341-342), Ibn Abī Ḥajala (fols. 75b-76a), Ibn Qāḍī Shuhba (1994, vol. 1: 544), Ibn Ḥajar (1993a: 237-238). For this rite in Ibn Kathīr's chronicle see Mirza (2020a, 2020b). As for the Prophet who appears to someone in a dream recommending a particular prayer to ward off the plague, it is a recurring story already attested during Justinian's plague (Dols 1977: 127) and often related in the chronicles of the Black Death and subsequent waves of plague, as well as other forms of visions and supernatural events (Dols 1974b: 281-282).

[52] Al-Maqrīzī (1971, vol. 4: 85; see Ibn Taghrī Birdī 1979, vol. 10: 203-204, who quotes him); al-Sakhāwī (1992, vol. 1: 98).

[53] Al-Maqrīzī (1971, vol. 4: 87; see Ibn Taghrī Birdī 1979, vol. 10: 206, who quotes him).

[54] Ibn Iyās (1984, vol. 1: 531). The so-called Red Mountain [*al-Jabal al-Aḥmar*] is a hill that has long since been incorporated into the northeastern part of Cairo.

[55] In another of his famous works, al-Maqrīzī reports that the Qubbat al-Naṣr (which can still be visited today and is called Qubbat Naṣr Allāh) was a *zāwiya* [monastery, convent] located just outside Cairo, in the desert, under the Red Mountain – which lies to the north of the Muqattam hill relief, where the famous Qarāfa cemetery still stands today (al-Maqrīzī 1998, vol. 3: 312).

30 November). These prayers, however, did not have the desired effect either: according to al-Maqrīzī, in that month "the epidemic grew so strong that it was no longer possible to count the dead."[56]

Finally, only for the prayer gathering of Damascus do the chroniclers specify that women, children and the *ahl al-dhimma* took part, as the Islamic norms exceptionally allow for the prayer for water [*istisqāʾ*]. In the case of the other rites, the chroniclers do not mention their presence. But it should be noted that they always designate the faithful who participate by the terms *al-nās* [the persons, the people], *ahl al-bilād* (the people of the country) or *al-miṣriyyūn* (the Egyptians), and not by words such as *al-muslimūn* (the Muslims) or *al-muʾminūn* (the (Muslim) believers). Therefore we might suppose that, by using these words, the authors intended to communicate that believers of other religions – so well as women and children – could also have been present. However, it is a supposition that, as far as I know, remains unverifiable.[57]

## 11. Conclusions

The *Riḥla* recounts that IB loved to tell his stories and bewitch his listeners: "The Sultan [of Ceylon] was delighted with the tales I told him of kings and countries," he says with satisfaction.[58] Ibn Juzayy himself, who met IB in a garden in Granada in 1351, describes the first impression he had of him: "*Shaykh* Abū ʿAbdallāh [IB] delighted us with the story of his travels (*akhbār riḥlatihi*) and we profited greatly from him."[59] This information is also confirmed by some sources. First and foremost the eminent historian Ibn Khaldūn, who probably never met IB but relates that "At the time of the marinide Sultan Abū ʿInān, a *shaykh* from Tangier called Ibn Baṭṭūṭa returned to Morocco. 20 years earlier, he had left for the Orient and travelled in Iraq, Yemen and India. [...] He used to tell of (*ḥaddatha*) his travels and the marvellous things (*ʿajāʾib*) he saw" (Ibn Khaldūn 1858, vol. I: 328). Ibn Ḥajar also reports that according to al-Khaṭīb, IB had travelled all around the world and after returning home told (*ḥakā*)

[56] Al-Maqrīzī (1971, vol. 4: 86; see Ibn Taghrī Birdī 1979, vol. 10: 204-205, who quotes him). For these and other prayers during the Black Death and the following waves, see Dols (1977: 246-252).

[57] The only reference I have found in this respect is by Mirza 2020b, who quotes an *istisqāʾ* prayer recorded by Ibn Kathīr in the same Mosque of Foot in Damascus 30 years before the Black Death (early *Ṣafar* 719 / April 1319), in a period of severe drought. In this case, Ibn Kathīr does not specify whether non-Muslims attended it (see Ibn Kathīr 2010, vol. 16: 141, where the terms *al-nās* and *ahl al-bilād* are used) and Mirza suggests that given the "inclusive" language of Ibn Kathīr, non-Muslims could also have been present. But in this case, i.e., the prayer for water, the participation of non-Muslim faithful (as well as that of women and children) is provided for in Islamic law (see note 23).

[58] Al-Tāzī (IV: 79); Gibb and Beckingham (IV: 848 [EP 168]).

[59] Al-Tāzī (IV: 226); Gibb and Beckingham (IV: 943 [EP 372]).

stories about his doings and what he had learned (*mā istafāda*) from the people he met.[60] From Ibn Khaldūn and Ibn Ḥajar we also know that IB's stories were considered exaggerated and unbelievable by some of his audience, who accused him of lying.[61] But Ibn Khaldūn concludes his passage on IB by stating: "One day I met the Sultan's famous vizier, Fāris ibn Wadrār. I talked to him about this matter and intimated to him that I did not believe that man's stories [...]. Whereupon the vizier Fāris said to me: 'Be careful not to reject such information [...], because you have not seen such things yourself'" (Ibn Khaldūn 1858, vol. I: 328-329). And from Ibn Ḥajar and Ibn al-Khaṭīb we know that some prominent figures of the time respected IB and considered him a great traveller.[62]

What we do not know is whether IB ever thought to put these stories in writing: no information on this is found in the *Riḥla*.[63] Ibn Juzayy reports that it was the Sultan Abū ʿInān who decided to have them recorded: when IB came back to Fez from his last journey in Western Sudan, he ordered him to dictate his travelogue and Ibn Juzayy to edit it.[64] We can thus deduce that although some of IB's stories were exaggerated and unbelievable (as claimed by some of his contemporary audience) and others were borrowed from his reading or invented (as proven by modern *Riḥla* scholars), the Sultan – and his advisors – certainly found them particularly interesting and fascinating. After all, it is not often that a ruler orders a traveller to dictate an account of his journey and commands a scribe to edit it. If he gave such an order, IB certainly was a good storyteller and a good part of his audience appreciated him. As for the scribe, Ibn Juzayy, he was the son of a famous scholar of Granada and was a court scribe, first in Granada and then in Fez.[65] He was therefore a man of culture and a courtier, with a somewhat pompous

[60] Ibn Ḥajar (1993b, vol. 3: 480). A translation in English of this passage could be found in Gibb (I: IX-X).

[61] Ibn Khaldun quotes some of IB's anecdotes on the rich and prodigal Sultan of Delhi (Muḥammad Ibn Tughluq) and notes that they did not seem possible in the court of Fez, where people "confabulated that he was lying" [*tanājā bi-takdhībihi*] (Ibn Khaldūn 1858, vol. I: 328). Ibn Ḥajar reports two testimonies. The first is by Ibn al-Khaṭīb, who related [*qāla*] a detailed summa of IB's travels and added that the Andalusian *qāḍī* al-Balfīqī had personally heard the "strange things" [*gharāʾib*] IB used to tell – especially about Constantinople, where he claimed to have seen twelve thousand bishops in the Great Basilica. The second is a manuscript by Ibn Marzūq, a prominent scholar of Tlemcen, who wrote that al-Balfīqī accused IB of lying [*ramāhu bi-l-kadhb*] (Ibn Ḥajar 1993b, vol. 3: 480-481).

[62] Ibn Ḥajar (1993b, vol. 3: 480-481), where Ibn Ḥajar refers that in the same manuscript, Ibn Marzūq states having cleared IB (of al-Balfīqī's accusation of lying) [*baraʾahu*] and does not know of anyone who have made such a journey around the word [*lā aʿlamu aḥad jāla al-bilād ka-riḥlatihi*]. As for Ibn al-Khaṭīb, as we have seen, he speaks of IB as "one of the great trustworthy [*yūthaqu bihim*] travellers" who related news [*ḥaddatha*] of the plague (Ibn al-Khaṭīb 1863: 9, see Tresso 2021: 143, note 53).

[63] Gibb notes that IB "seems to have entertained no idea of writing his experiences down" (Gibb 2004 [1929]: 11).

[64] As we have seen, this information is confirmed by both Ibn al-Khaṭīb and Ibn Marzūq in Ibn Ḥajar's *Al-durar al-kāmina* (see Tresso 2021: 142, note 44). It should be noted that there is no information on the Sultan's order to IB and Ibn Juzayy in the abridged manuscripts of the *Riḥla* edited by Kosegarten (1818) and Lee (1829).

[65] For more information about Ibn Juzayy see Collet (2017).

style and a penchant for panegyrics. He finished writing the *Riḥla* at the age of 35 and probably died the following year.

At this point, a question arises: who is the real author of the *Riḥla*? The narrator or the editor? In his "Introduction" to the work, Ibn Juzayy says that IB "dictated a narrative which gave entertainment to the mind and delight to the ears and eyes." Then, as we have already seen, he relates having complied with the Sultan's order to "prune and polish" the language of the text dictated by IB (Tresso 2021: 142, note 44), but he also states: "I rendered the sense of the narrative of IB" [*naqaltu maʿānī kalām al-shaykh*].[66] At the end of the *Riḥla*, he speaks of "the epitome I made of the composition" of IB (*mā lakhkhaṣtuhu min taqyīd al-shaykh*),[67] but in the *Riḥla*, no mention is made of whether and how IB contributed to the writing, or whether he read and approved the final manuscript by Ibn Juzayy. In short, we do not know how the two men collaborated, but given the aforementioned testimonies, it is possible to assume that at least in several parts of the work, the rhythm and pathos of the story is due to IB's great experience and storytelling skills, while the literary form is due to Ibn Juzayy. As I have tried to show, the story of the Damascus prayer gathering may be one of these passages, as it reveals not only good stylistic and lexical choices (perhaps due to Ibn Juzayy), but also great storytelling skills. It is only a suggestion, but whoever the author of "The Prayer of Damascus" was, the fact remains that this tale is a masterpiece of Arabic medieval literature.

As for the reliability of the information it gives, i.e., both the description of the prayer and the figures regarding the victims of the pandemic, comparison with Arabic sources reveals minimal discrepancies and essentially confirms them. In this regard, however, we cannot fail to note the statement that opens the story: "I witnessed [*shāhadtu*] at the time of the Great Plague at Damascus [...] a remarkable instance of the veneration of the people of Damascus." Nobody can prove whether IB was in Damascus or not on that day, but given the number of studies that have demonstrated that IB and/or Ibn Juzayy borrowed several parts of the *Riḥla* from other sources, another question arises. Whether or not IB was in Damascus, is it possible that the story does not derive from his personal experience or from an oral source that he could have met there, but from the combination of his storytelling skills with Ibn Juzayy's literary ones, and that he/they drew the information from other sources?[68]

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[66] al-Tāzī (I: 152); Gibb (I: 6 [EP 10]).

[67] al-Tāzī (IV: 280); Gibb and Beckingham (IV: 977 [EP 449]).

[68] Ibn Juzayy probably knew more sources than IB did (we have seen that Ibn al-Khāṭīb's said that IB had "a modest share of science;" Tresso 2021: 142, note 44), and might therefore bear more responsibility for borrowing from other sources. Scholars generally agree that he played a substantial role in the writing of the *Riḥla*. See among others Gibb (2004 [1929]: 11-12), who suggests that "Ibn Juzayy has often substituted (possibly at Ibn Battùta's desire or with his permission) an abridgment of Ibn

As we have seen, both his/their contemporary scholars Ibn Kathīr and Ibn Abī Ḥajala report more or less the same information, so we could assume that yes, he/they could have drawn the information from these works. If, however, according to Ibn Juzayy, the writing of the *Riḥla* was completed in the month of *Ṣafar* 757/February 1356, it should be noted that Ibn Kathīr and Ibn Abī Ḥajala had not yet completed their works by that date. Ibn Kathīr closes his chronicles with a description of events relating to the year 768/1366-1367 (Ibn Kathīr 2010, vol. 18: 468-472), and Ibn Abī Ḥajala describes some events that occurred after 757/1356.[69] This is a consideration that has to be made, but it does not exclude IB and/or Ibn Juzayy having had access to parts of these texts that may have circulated before the final writing of the *Riḥla*,[70] nor having consulted other sources that remain unseen and/or unexamined so far. It should also be noted that, even if Arab chroniclers who reported on the Black Death after the pandemic often cite previous sources, none of them, as far as I am aware, mentions IB as a witness of the scourge.

Conversely, in order to corroborate the hypothesis of IB's direct testimony, it should be noted that a comparison with both Ibn Kathīr's and Ibn Abī Ḥajala's chronicles reveals five details of particular importance that "personalize" the story of IB's *Riḥla*, and which can therefore lead us to believe that the information has not been taken from these sources:

1. The *Riḥla* is the only source to report that the lieutenant of Damascus, Arghūn Shāh, ordered proclaiming the rite to ward off the plague.
2. It is the only one to assert that the lieutenant established the prohibition of selling cooked food at the market during the three days of fasting before the prayer gathering.
3. Only the *Riḥla* states the positive outcome of the prayer ("God Most High lightened their affliction").
4. Only in the *Riḥla* is the mosque called "al-Aqdām" (all others source call it "al-Qadam").
5. Only in the *Riḥla* is mention made of the white minaret and the *ḥadīth* evoking the end of the world.

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Jubayr's work;" Elad (1987: 258), who speaks of "the obvious reliance of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (or more precisely, his editor, Ibn Juzayy) upon Ibn Jubayr;" Euben (2006: 219, note 8), who states: "Indeed, Ibn Juzayy's role in creating the *Riḥla* was closer to that of ghostwriter than editor;" Elger (2010b: 71) who says that "even if we do not know how these two exactly cooperated, certainly Ibn Juzayy played a major part in the project."

[69] For example, he reports the death by plague of the Great *Shaykh* [*Shaykh al-Shuyūkh*] Zakī al-Dīn in 764/1362-1363 (Ibn Abī Ḥajala, fol. 87a). According to Dols, Ibn Abī Ḥajala wrote his work in this same year (Dols 1977: 324, see also 327) and Conrad (1981: 73) suggests "sometime between 764/1362 and 776/1375." As for the other two authors who report the prayer of Damascus, Ibn Qāḍī Shuhba and Ibn Ḥajar, both wrote their work in the first half of the 15th century, long after the *Riḥla* was written.

[70] This hypothesis has also been put forward by scholars with regard to other possible borrowings in the *Riḥla*: see for example Trausch (2010: 141), who, comparing IB's Indian journey with Baranī's chronicle, notes that "such elaborate chronicles were not written in one go but developed over many decades, in some cases even generations."

However, regarding the first detail, it can be challenged that Arghūn Shāh is mentioned by several sources as the Mamluk lieutenant of Damascus at that time (Tresso 2021: 147, note 68), and from this IB and/or Ibn Juzayy could have rightly deduced that he was the one who made the announcement. As for the ban on cooked food, even though the chroniclers do not mention it, in moments of common fasting it seems appropriate. As for the epilogue of the prayer, the other sources do not mention it, but we have seen that in reporting the figures of the dead, Ibn Kathīr makes the same consideration as IB: in Damascus, the percentage of victims was not particularly high. Finally, an answer to the last two points is not to be sought in the chronicles but in the already mentioned *Riḥla* of Ibn Jubayr, from which we have seen that most of the description of Damascus is drawn (Tresso 2021: 139, note 33). In fact, Ibn Jubayr calls the mosque "al-Aqdām," and with its description he concludes the list of "Sanctuaries and outstanding monuments" of the Syrian capital: just as IB does. A few lines later, Ibn Jubayr lists the gates of the city: the first, it says, stands "next to a white minaret," and he reminds the reader that it is the place where "the Messiah will descend" (Ibn Jubayr n.d.: 229).

We can therefore reiterate that yes, IB and/or Ibn Juzayy could have collected and assembled information drawn from other works.

However, a final consideration adds one more verse to this refrain of "it could be... but ..." Both the Arabic text of IB's *Riḥla* and its translation in English quoted in this paper refer to the *Editio Princeps* edited by Defremery and Sanguinetti that, as we have seen, is based on the five Algerian manuscripts from the *Bibliothèque Nationale* in Paris. Although other manuscripts exist, most of them have not been edited so far and the few that are available are rarely mentioned in IB's *Riḥla* studies. A comparison with other manuscripts is not the aim of this paper, but I have only seen the two already mentioned compendia of the *Riḥla* translated by Kosegarten and Lee in the early 19th century.[71] The story of the Damascus prayer gathering is not mentioned in the Latin translation by Kosegarten (Kosegarten 1818), but it is in the compendium by al-Baylūnī that Lee translated into English. In this text, the mosque is called "al-Qadam," the event is dated on 746/1345 and the rite does not seem similar to an *istisqāʾ* prayer. The numbers of twenty-four thousand victims refers to Damascus instead of Cairo; the outcome of the prayer is a real miracle, and the final image is not the white minaret, but Mount Qāsiyūn,[72] near

[71] As already mentioned, the compendium by al-Baylūnī has been translated into German by Elger, who used both the manuscript Qq 205 of Cambridge (used by Lee) and the manuscript 1541 of Gotha (Elger 2010a: 239-240; see also Elger 2010c).

[72] It should be noted that, according to Ibn ʿAsākir (12th century), the place of choice in Damascus for the *istisqāʾ* prayer was the *Maghārat al-damm* (the "Cave of the Blood"), the alleged site of Abel's murder, which is located on Mount Qāsiyūn (cited by Talmon-Heller 2007: 263, note 71). However, the manuscript by al-Baylūnī translated by Lee only mentions another

Damascus. "I myself was present at the Mosque of the Foot (*Masjid al-Qadam*) in the year 746[73] when the people were assembled for the purpose of prayer against the plague (*ṭāʿūn*): which ceased on that very day. The number that died daily in Damascus had been two thousand: but, the whole daily number, at the time I was present, amounted to twenty-four thousand. After prayers, however, the plague entirely ceased. On the north of Damascus is the mountain Kisayun, in which is the cave where Abraham was born."[74] In this case, no borrowing can be found from Ibn Jubayr, nor can it be assumed that the author drew information on the prayer from Ibn Kathīr or Ibn Abī Ḥajala. One of the five manuscripts on which Defremery and Sanguinetti's *Editio Princeps* is based appears to bear the signature of Ibn Juzayy.[75] Are we to assume that, in writing his compendium of the *Riḥla*, al-Baylūnī[76] deliberately removed the two pieces of information borrowed from Ibn Jubayr and the description of that "memorable" prayer gathering borrowed from Ibn Kathīr, Ibn Abī Ḥajala or other sources? How do the other manuscripts of the *Riḥla* tell this story?

A collection of all the manuscripts of IB's *Riḥla* that have been found and the analysis of the variants from the *Editio Princeps* has still to be done. This is something that many have hoped for,[77] but so far has not been achieved.

In short, in this case too, it is highly probable that there have been some borrowings but it is not possible to prove them. However, this is not essential to appreciate the quality of "The Prayer of Damascus" from the literary point of view. I personally agree with those scholars who do not question the fact that IB traveled to the areas where he says he was, but suggest that he and Ibn Juzayy would have done a work of "haute couture" (Collet 2017) or "bricolage" (Fauvelle-Aymar and Hirsch 2003) bringing together personal experiences, information received from witnesses met on site and news

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sanctuary on this mount, which is "the Cave of Abraham" [*al-ghār allādhī wulida bihi Ibrāhīm*] (Lee 1829: 31; al-Baylūnī, fol. 10a; Elger 2010a: 35).

[73] This date is not correct: no plague is attested in Damascus in 746/1345.

[74] Lee (1829: 30-31); al-Baylūnī (fol. 9a); Elger (2010a: 34-35). Detailed notices on both Kosegarten's and Lee's translations and manuscripts, as well as on some other manuscripts of the *Riḥla* and their translations, can be found in Defremery and Sanguinetti's "Préface" (Monteil 1979, vol. I: XIII-XX). As for Elger's translation, see Elger (2010c) and Masarwa (2014).

[75] For more details on these manuscripts see Monteil (1979, vol. I: XXI-XXVI).

[76] The three-copies manuscript translated by Lee was found in Egypt by Johann Burckhardt and placed in the Cambridge University Library after his death. All the copies are signed by Muḥammad ibn Fatḥ Allāh al-Baylūnī (Monteil 1979, vol. I: XVI; Lee 1829: IX-XII; al-Baylūnī, fol. 2a; Elger 2010a: 16).

[77] See, among others: "A full apparatus of variants has still to be produced" (Hamdun and King 1998: 9); "The level of research on IB is so low, that not even a well edited version has been produced yet" (Elger 2010b: 72); "A comparison of all copies [of manuscripts] is necessary – a task that has yet to be undertake" (Trausch 2010: 154); "A separate comparison of all transcripts could quickly provide clarity" (Masarwa 2014: 352, note 4).

extrapolated from other works. Like all arts, literature allows elements from previous works to be continually revived by fitting them in an harmonious new whole. There is no doubt that, if IB (with the substantial or minimal help of Ibn Juzayy and maybe of some posterior copists) had not written this masterpiece, the news of this prayer would have remained buried in books of chronicles accessible to only a few specialists. And the fact remains that none of the chroniclers would have been able to narrate this event so engagingly that even today, more than seven centuries later, it still fascinates readers all over the world. "The Prayer of Damascus," as I have tried to show, is perhaps the most beautiful tale of the *Riḥla* because of its narrative style, its literary and lexical features, and because it reflects, like a kaleidoscope, a constellation of cultural references and people's feelings in such a difficult time as that of the most deadly of pandemics known to mankind.

Whether IB participated in it or not, *Allāhu aʿlamu*, as he would say: God knows more.

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[79] The alphabetical order takes into account the name by which the author is known, which appears before the comma. For information on the manuscripts of many of the cited works see Dols 1977: 320-335, Appendix III, "The Arabic Manuscript Sources for the History of Plague from the Black Death to the Nineteenth Century."

[80] Ibn Ḥajar's work was analysed by Sublet (1971). See also Dols (1977: 110-121). Dols (1974b: 374) defines it as "perhaps the most comprehensive and best-known plague treatise in the later Middle Ages," and it is a summa on the behaviour of a good (educated) Muslim of the 15th century during an epidemic.

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[81] The *Riḥla* of Ibn Jubayr has been translated into English by Broadhurst (1952).

[82] Wiet (1962) translated Ibn Kathīr's narration of the plague into French. Some passages translated into English can also be found in Aberth (2005: 112-114).

[83] The part of Ibn Taghrī Birdī's work related to the Black Death is quoted from the chronicle of al-Maqrīzī.

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Claudia M. Tresso is Associate Professor of Arabic Language and Literature at the University of Turin. Her main fields of research concern Translation, Arabic Travel Literature, Teaching Arabic to non-Arabic speakers, and Graphic Arts. She has been the first to translate into Italian the complete version of the *Riḥla* of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (Turin, Einaudi, 2006) and has translated several works of contemporary Arabic literature (Djebar, Habibi, Jibran, Khalifa, Mernissi, Mokeddem). Her books include a manual of contemporary Arabic language (Milan, Hoepli, 1997, 2nd revised edition 2019), a book on Arabic verbs (Milan, Hoepli, 2002), an Italian-Arabic dictionary (Milan, Hoepli, 2014) and an essay on contemporary graphic arts in the Mediterranean (Il Leone Verde, 2020) with the Anzaar research group that she co-founded at the Department of Languages of the University of Turin.
She can be reached at claudia.tresso@unito.it