**Ibn Battuta in Mali and Mogadishu**

**Introduction:**

The Muslim legal scholar Ibn Battuta was one of the preeminent travelers and chroniclers of the Silk Roads. Born in Tangiers, his travels began, after the completion of his legal education, with a pilgrimage to Mecca in 1325. Instead of returning directly home, he trekked back and forth through Mesopotamia, Persia, and east Africa. In 1330, he heard that the Muslim Sultan of Delhi had issued a call for foreign legal scholars; he set out for India on a circuitous route through Central Asia and the great trading cities of Bokhora and Samarkand. After serving the Sultan for several years, he accepted a diplomatic mission to China. When his companions were lost in a shipwreck, he continued by other means to China, where he presented his credentials to the Mongol emperor. While he was well-received and lived handsomely among various Muslim merchant communities in and around the capital, the Mongol empire itself was dissolving into factionalism, internal rebellions, and, after 1330, a severe outbreak of the plague. Ultimately, Battuta chose not to linger there and had returned to Morocco by 1349. Including several subsequent trips to Africa, he visited the equivalent of forty-four modern countries and logged more than 73,000 miles (117,000 kilometers).

**Customs in the Mali Empire:**

Long-distance travelers often encountered unfamiliar customs in foreign societies. The Moroccan traveler Ibn Battuta approved heartily when staying with hosts who honored the values of his own Muslim society, but he had little tolerance for those who did not. Here he describes what he witnessed at the sultan’s court in the Mali empire.

“The Blacks are the most respectful of people king and abase [humble] themselves most before him. They swear by him, saying Mansa Sulaiman ki [the law of Mansa Sulaiman, the Mali sultan]. If he summons one of them at his session in the cupola ... the man summoned removes his robe and puts on a shabby one, takes off his turban, puts on a dirty skull-cap and goes in with his robe and his trousers lifted half way to his knees. He comes forward humbly and abjectly, [utterly hopelessly] and strikes the ground hard with his elbows. He stands as if he were prostrating himself in prayer, and hears what the Sultan says like this. If one of them speaks to the Sultan and he answers him, he takes his robe off his back, and throws dust on his head and back like someone making his ablutions [cleansing liquid] with water. I was astonished that they did not blind themselves.

When the Sultan makes a speech in his audience those present take off their turbans from their heads and listen in silence. Sometimes one of them stands before him, recounts what he has done for his service, and says: “On such and such a day I did such and such, and I killed so and so on such and such a day.” Those who know vouch for the truth of that and he does it in this way. One of them draws the string of his bow, then lets it go as he would do if he were shooting. If the Sultan says to him: “You are right” or thanks him, he takes off his robe and pours dust on himself. That is good manners among them.

Among their good practices are their avoidance of injustice; there is no people more averse [opposed] to it, and their Sultan does not allow anyone to practice it in any measure; [other good practices include] the universal security in their country, for neither the traveler nor the resident there has to fear thieves or bandits ... their punctiliousness [strict observance] in praying, their perseverance in joining the congregation, and in compelling their children to do so; if a man does not come early to the mosque he will not find a place to pray because of the dense crowd; it is customary for each man to send his servant with his prayer-mat to spread it out in a place reserved for him until he goes to the mosque himself. ... They dress in clean white clothes on Fridays; if one of them has only a threadbare shirt he washes it and cleans it and wears it for prayer on Friday. They pay great attention to memorizing the Holy Qur’an.

Among their bad practices are that the women servants, slave-girls and young daughters appear naked before people. I used to see many like this in [the fasting month of] Ramadan, for it is customary for the fararis [commanders] to break the fast in the Sultan’s palace, where their food is brought to them by twenty or more slave-girls, who are naked. Women who come before the Sultan are naked and unveiled, and so are his daughters. On the night of the twenty-seventh of Ramadan I have seen about a hundred naked slave girls come out of his palace with food; with them were two daughters of the Sultan, and they too had no veil. They put dust and ashes on their heads as a matter of good manners.

[Another bad practice:] Many of them eat carrion, dogs and donkeys.”

**Mogadishu in 1331:**

In 1325, the young lawyer Ibn Battuta set out from his home in Morocco on a pilgrimage to Mecca. A love for travel was born in him along the way. Battuta’s travels eventually took him through Africa, Southwest Asia, and all the way to China, about 75,000 miles, and lasted three decades. In the following excerpt from his book, he describes his visit to Mogadishu, a thriving city on the Indian Ocean in present-day Somalia, and the customs of its inhabitants.

From [Zeila]1 we sailed fifteen nights and arrived at Mogadishu, which is a very large town. The people have very many camels, and slaughter many hundreds every day. They have also many sheep. The merchants are wealthy, and manufacture a material which takes its name from the town and which is exported to Egypt and elsewhere.

Among the customs of the people of this town is the following: when a ship comes into port, it is boarded from sanbuqs, that is to say, little boats. Each sanbuq carries a crowd of young men, each carrying a covered dish, containing food. Each one of them presents his dish to a merchant on board, and calls out: “This man is my guest.” And his fellows do the same. Not one of the merchants disembarks except to go to the house of his host among the young men, save frequent visitors to the country. In such a case they go where they like. When a merchant has settled in his host’s house, the latter sells for him what he has brought and makes his purchases for him. Buying anything from a merchant below its market price or selling him anything except in his host’s presence is disapproved of by the people of Mogadishu. They find it of advantage to keep to this rule.

When the young men came on board the ship on which I was, one of them approached me. My companions said to him: “He is not one of the merchants: he is a lawyer.” Then the young man called his companions and said: “This man is a guest of the Qadi.2” One of the Qadi’s friends came among them, and he told him of this. The Qadi came down to the beach with some of his pupils and sent one on board to fetch me. Then I disembarked with my companions, and greeted the Qadi and his followers. He said to me: “In the name of God, let us go and greet the Shaikh.” “Who is the Shaikh?” I asked, and he replied: “The Sultan.” For it is their custom here to call the Sultan “Shaikh.” I answered the Qadi: “I will visit him as soon as I have found lodging.” He replied: “It is the custom here, whenever a lawyer, or a Sharif or a holy man comes, that he should not go to his lodging until he has seen the Sultan.” So I did what I was asked in accordance with their custom.

As we have said, the Sultan of Mogadishu is called Shaikh by his subjects. His name is Abu Bakr ibn Shaikh Omar, and by race he is a Berber. He talks in the dialect of Mogadishu, but knows Arabic. When a ship arrives, it is the custom for it to be boarded by the Sultan’s sanbuq, to inquire whence it has come, who are the owners and who its captain is. They also inquire the nature of the cargo and what merchants or other persons are on board. All this is told to the Sultan, who invites as his guest anyone worthy of such honor.

When I arrived at the palace with the Qadi, whose name was Ibn Burhan al- Misri, a eunuch came out and greeted him. The Qadi said: “Go and do your duty, and inform our master the Shaikh that this man has arrived from the Hijaz.” He delivered the message and returned with a dish of betel leaves and areca nuts. He gave me six leaves of betel and some nuts, and the same amount to the Qadi: the rest he divided among my companions and the pupils of the Qadi. Then he brought a bottle of Damascus rosewater, and sprinkled some on me and on the Qadi, and said: “Our master orders that he be lodged in the house of the pupils.” This house was built specially for them. The Qadi took me by the hand, and we went to this house, which is near that of the Shaikh. It was decorated with carpets and contained everything needful. Later the same eunuch brought us food from the Shaikh’s house. He was accompanied by one of the wazirs, whose particular duty it was to look after guests. He said to us: “Our master greets you and bids you welcome.” After this the meal was served and we ate. The food of these people is rice cooked with butter, served on a large wooden dish. With it they serve side-dishes, stews of chicken, meat, fish, and vegetables. They cook unripe bananas in fresh milk, and serve them as a sauce. They put curdled milk in another vessel with peppercorns, vinegar, and saffron, green ginger and mangoes, which look like apples but have a nut inside. Ripe mangoes are very sweet and are eaten like fruit; but unripe mangoes are as acid as lemons, and are cooked in vinegar. When the Mogadishu people have taken a mouthful of rice, they take some of these pickles. One of them eats as much as several of us: they are very fat and corpulent.

When we had eaten, the Qadi went away. We stayed there for three days, and each day they brought us food three times a day, as is their custom. The fourth day, which was a Friday, the Qadi, his pupils and one of the wazirs of the Shaikh came and brought me a suit of clothes. Their dress consists of a loincloth, which is fastened round the waist, instead of drawers, of which they are ignorant. There was a tunic of Egyptian linen with a border, a cloak of Jerusalem stuff, doubled, and a fringed turban of Egyptian material. They also brought my companions clothes suitable to their rank.

We went to the chief mosque, and prayed behind the maqsurah, the enclosure for the Shaikh. When he came out of the maqsurah, I greeted him with the Qadi. He replied with his good wishes for us both, and talked to the Qadi in the local language, and then said to me in Arabic: “You are welcome: you have honored our country by coming and have rejoiced us.” He went out into the courtyard of the mosque and stopped at the tomb of his son, which is there. He recited a passage from the Koran and prayed. Then came the wazirs, the amirs and military commanders and greeted him. In doing this they observed the same customs as are followed in the Yemen. The man who gives his greeting places his forefinger on the ground, and then on his head, and says: “May God make you glorious!”

After that the Shaikh went out of the door of the mosque and put his sandals on. He ordered the Qadi and myself to do likewise, and set off on foot to his house, which is near the mosque, everyone else following barefoot. Over his head they carried a silk canopy, its four poles topped with a golden bird. He wore a sweeping cloak of green Jerusalem stuff, over clothes of Egyptian linen. He had a silk girdle and a large turban. In front of him they beat drums and played trumpets and oboes. He was preceded by the amirs of the army, and followed by the Qadi, the lawyers and the Sharifs.

With this ceremony he entered his audience hall. The wazirs, amirs and military commanders took their places on a bench set for them. A special carpet was spread for the Qadi on which he sat alone. He was accompanied by the lawyers and Sharifs. There they all remained until the afternoon prayer, which they said together with the Shaikh. Then all the soldiers were drawn up in lines according to their rank, and the drums, oboes, trumpets, and flutes played. While they played, everyone stayed in his place, and anyone, who happened to be moving about, immediately stood still. When the band stopped playing, those present greeted the Shaikh with their fingers in the manner we have described and then went away. This is their custom every Friday.

On Saturday the people come to the door of the Shaikh’s house and sit on benches outside. The Qadi, the lawyers, the Sharifs, the holy men, the shaikhs and those who have made the pilgrimage enter an outer room and sit on wooden benches arranged for that purpose. The Qadi sits on his bench alone, and each of these classes of person has its own bench, which is not shared with any other. The Shaikh then takes his place in his hall of audience, and sends for the Qadi. He takes his place on the Shaikh’s left, and then the lawyers come in, and the chief of them sit in front of the Shaikh. The others greet the Shaikh and go back again. Then the Sharifs enter, and the chief of them sit before him: the remainder greet him and go back outside. But if they are guests of the Shaikh, they sit on his right hand. The same ceremonial is observed by persons of position and pilgrims, and then by the wazirs, the amirs and the military commanders, each rank by itself. Then food is brought, and the Qadi, the Sharifs and those who are in the audience chamber eat in the presence of the Shaikh, and he with them. If he wishes to honor one of the chief amirs, he sends for him and has him eat with them. The rest eat in a refectory. There they observe the same precedence as that of their entering the Shaikh’s audience chamber.

After this the Shaikh retires to his private apartments, and the Qadi, the wazirs, the private secretary and four of the chief amirs sit to hear causes and complaints. Questions of religious law are decided by the Qadi: other cases are judged by the council, that is, the wazirs and amirs. If a case requires the views of the Sultan, it is put in writing for him. He sends back an immediate reply, written on the back of the paper, as his discretion may decide. This has always been the custom among these people.

1. Zeila: a port city in northwest Somalia on the Gulf of Aden

2. Qadi: judge

Source: Excerpt from East African Coast, edited by G.S.P. Freeman-Grenville (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1962). Reprinted by permission of Dr. G.S.P. Freeman-Grenville.

**QUESTIONS:**

1. Based on this account, what qualities do you think made Battuta such a successful traveler?

2. How are the accounts of Mali and Mogadishu similar and different? (think about geography and how location connects to historical characteristics)

3. Are there themes present throughout the observations of Battuta? (what did he seem to pay a lot of attention to)

4. How do the observations made show Battuta’s strong connections to Sharia law?

**Marco Polo**

“Excerpts from the books of Ser Marco Polo: The Venetian Concerning Kingdoms and Marvels of the East”

**Introduction:**

Marco Polo (1254-1324) was born in Venice, an Italian city-state, to a powerful merchant family with extensive trade contacts. Marco Polo had the standard education for a young gentleman of his time—knowledge of classical authors and the basic beliefs of the Catholic church, a good grasp of French and Italian, and skills in accounting.

In 1260, Marco Polo’s father and uncle traveled through the Mongol empire, all the way to its capital in China. There they requested trade and missionary contacts. Tradition has it that on a second trip, taken in 1271, on which they carried messages from the Pope, the elder Polos took along young Marco, who was then seventeen. Many years later, Marco Polo, with the assistance of a romance novel writer, composed a book entitled The Travels of Marco Polo, or, A Description of the World. If the book is to be believed, Marco Polo spent seventeen years in China, during which time he not only conducted business, but also was hired by the Mongol Yuan emperor to serve as the governor of Yangzhou, a large southern Chinese port city.

The veracity of Marco Polo’s account is hotly debated among scholars. Some uphold Polo’s claim to have been to China, while others argue that he simply picked up tales of China from Arab traders and compiled them into a book. None dispute, however, that the book does contain descriptions of Yuan-dynasty China, albeit with the embellishments and inaccuracies that one would expect from text that has been copied and recopied since the thirteenth century.

In the excerpts that follow, Marco Polo (or his Arab sources) describes the cities and urban life of Yuan-dynasty China.

Selected Document Excerpts with Questions From The Book of Ser Marco Polo: The Venetian Concerning Kingdoms and Marvels of the East, Volumes I and II, translated and edited by Colonel Sir Henry Yule (London: John Murray, 1903).

BOOK SECOND. PART I.  CHAPTER X. CONCERNING THE PALACE OF THE GREAT KAAN

You must know that it is the greatest palace that ever was. ... The roof is very lofty, and  the  walls  of  the  Palace  are  all  covered  with  gold  and  silver.  They  are  also  adorned  with  representations  of  dragons  [sculptured  and  gilt],  beasts  and  birds,  knights  and  idols,  and  sundry other subjects. And on the ceiling too you see nothing but gold and silver and painting.  [On each of the four sides there is a great marble staircase leading to the top of the marble wall,  and forming the approach to the palace.] The  Hall  of  the  Palace  is  so  large  that  it  could  easily  dine  6000  people;  and  it  is  quite  a  marvel to see how many rooms there are besides. The building is altogether so vast, so rich, and  so beautiful, that no man on earth could design anything superior to it. ...

BOOK SECOND. PART I.  CHAPTER  XXX.  CONCERNING  THE  BLACK  STONES  THAT  ARE  DUG  IN  CATHAY,  AND ARE BURNT FOR FUEL

It  is  a  fact  that  all  over  the  country  of  Cathay  there  is  a  kind  of  black  stone  existing  in  beds in the mountains, which they dig out and burn like firewood. If  you  supply  the  fire  with  them at night, and see that they are well kindled, you will find them still alight in the morning;  and  they  make  such  fine  fuel  that  no  other  is  used  throughout  the  country.  It  is  true  that  they  have plenty of wood also, but they do not burn it, because those stones burn better and cost less.

[Moreover with the vast number of people and the number of baths they maintain—for  every one has such a bath at least three times a week, and in winter if possible every day, whilst  every  nobleman  and man  of  wealth  has  a  private  bath  for  his  own  use—the  wood  would  not  suffice for the purpose.]

BOOK SECOND. PART III.  CHAPTER LXXV. OF THE NOBLE CITY OF SUJU

Suju is a very great and noble city. The people are Idolaters, subjects of the Great Kaan,  and  have  paper  money.  They  possess  silk  in  great  quantities,  from  which  they  make  gold  brocade and other stuffs, and they live by their manufactures and trade. The  city  is  passing  great,  and  has  a  circuit  of some  60  miles;  it  hath  merchants  of  great  wealth  and  an  incalculable  number  of  people.  Indeed,  if  the  men  of  this  city  and  of  the  rest  of  Manzi had but the spirit of soldiers they would conquer the world; but they are no soldiers at  all, only accomplished traders and most skillful craftsmen. There are also in this city many great  philosophers and leeches, diligent students of nature.

BOOK SECOND. PART III. CHAPTER  LXXVI.  DESCRIPTION  OF  THE  GREAT  CITY  OF  KINSAY,  WHICH  IS  THE  CAPITAL OF THE WHOLE COUNTRY OF MANZI

When  you  have  left  the  city  of  Changan  and  have  travelled  for  three  days  through  a  splendid  country,  passing  a  number  of  towns  and  villages,  you  arrive  at  the  most  noble  city  of  Kinsay,  a name  which  is  as  much  as  to  say  in  our  tongue  “The  City  of  Heaven,”  as  I  told  you  before. And  since  we  have  got  thither  I  will  enter  into  particulars  about  its  magnificence;  and  these  are well  worth  telling,  for  the  city  is  beyond  dispute  the  finest  and  the  noblest  in  the  world. In this we shall speak according to the written statement which the Queen of this Realm  sent to Bayan the conqueror of the country for transmission to the Great Kaan, in order that he  might  be  aware  of  the surpassing  grandeur  of  the  city  and  might  be  moved  to  save  it  from  destruction or injury. ...

First  and  foremost,  then,  the  document  stated  the  city  Kinsay  to  be  so  great  that  it  hath  an hundred miles of compass. And there are in it twelve thousand bridges of stone, for the most  part so lofty that a great fleet could pass beneath them. ... The document aforesaid also went on to state that there were in this city twelve guilds of  the different crafts, and that each guild had 12,000 houses in the occupation of its workmen. ... The  document  aforesaid  also  stated  that  the  number  and  wealth  of  the  merchants,  and  the amount of goods that passed through their hands, was so enormous that no man could form  a just estimate thereof. ...

Inside  the  city  there  is  a  Lake  which  has  a  compass  of  some  30  miles:  and  all  around  it  are erected beautiful palaces and mansions, of the riches and most exquisite structures that you  can  imagine, belonging  to  the  nobles  of  the  city.  There  are  also  on  its  shores  many  abbeys  and  churches  of the  Idolaters.  In  the  middle  of  the  Lake  are  two  Islands,  on  each  of  which  stands  a  rich,  beautiful  and  spacious  edifice,  furnished  in  such  style  as  to  seem  fit  for  the  palace  of  an  Emperor.  And  when  any  one  of  the  citizens  desired  to  hold  a  marriage  feast,  or  to  give  any  other entertainment, it used to be done at one of these palaces. And everything would be found  there  ready  to  order,  such  as  silver  plate,  trenchers,  and  dishes  [napkins  and  table‐cloths],  and  whatever else was needful. The King made this provision for the gratification of his people, and  the place was open to every one who desired to give an entertainment. [Sometimes there would  be  at  these  palaces  an  hundred  different  parties;  some  holding  a  banquet,  others  celebrating  a  wedding;  and  yet  all  would  find  good  accommodation  in  the  different  apartments  and  pavilions, and that in so well ordered a manner that one party was never in the way of another.]

**QUESTIONS:**

1. As you read these descriptions, what can you conclude about the degree of sophistication and wealth of the author and his native land as compared to the sophistication and wealth of the land that he describes?

2. What seems most impressive to the author? Why?

**Margery Kempe**

Taken from:<http://www.vlib.us/medieval/lectures/margery.html>

I: Background

An eight-page pamphlet was published by Wynken de Worde in a 500-copy edition entitled A Short treatise of contemplation taught by our Lord Jesu Christ, taken out of the book of Margery Kempe of Lynn. All but one copy, in University College, Cambridge, perished, and scholars placed Margery among the English mystics of the period, of whom there were many, such as Hilton, Rolle, and Juliana of Norwich. In 1934, Miss Hope Emily Allen was allowed to look at a manuscript in the library of Col. Butler Bowdon of Pleasington Old Hall in Lancashire. A scholar of Robert Rolle, she soon discovered that it was the book from which de Worde had derived his pamphlet, but that it was not a book of devotion. Instead, it was a rather massive autobiography; the first written in English, and one of the few deep personal insights we have into the life and thoughts of a member of the middle class of the period. It gave us an amazing picture of a peculiar person.

II: Birth and youth (1373-1393)

Margery Kempe was the daughter of John Burnham, five times mayor of the town of Lynn, a flourishing town of Norfolk.

One could digress upon the growth of the prosperity of Lynn: The flatness of East Anglia, the draining and development of the salt marshes, the growth of the wool industry in the thirteenth century coincident with the towns of Flanders outstripping their own sources of raw materials; the use of tides and currents to reach either Flanders or the Low Countries, the increased importance of the town with the growth of the Hanseatic League.

There is little remarkable about Margery's youth to be noted, except for two things. The first is that, for some reason or another, she was not taught to read. This was a normal accomplishment for a middle-class girl of the times, since society was becoming generally literate, at least among the well to do. This was to affect Margery later in life, throwing her upon her own mental resources to an unusual degree, for better or for worse. One could also develop the theme of the importance of the ability to read in avoiding self-delusion. The second remarkable thing is something of which we know little, since it was a secret sin, of which Margery would not speak. More than likely it was something relatively minor, and there is some reason to believe that it was in the nature of a sexual pecadillo. It was, however, to have an immense effect upon Margery's later life.

In 1393, Margery married John Kempe, a young merchant of the town, and a member of the same Corpus Christi guild as her father. Marriages were not exactly made in heaven at this time, but Margery and John seemed to get along well together. He was understanding and kind, and Margery took immense pleasure in physical love. This being the case, it was not unusual that she quickly became pregnant.

III:Struggle for Freedom (1394-1413)

Childbirth was at that time a far more difficult proposition then than now. Pain was regarded as the curse of Eve, and no attention was paid to the agony or to the possibility of complications. Gynecology and obstetrics were not only ignored, but the suggestion that there should be some concern in these fields was regarded as evidence of a sick mind. As a consequence many women died in childbirth -- and many more went mad.

Even if one survived the birth, childbed fever -- a term almost unknown now -- killed a significant percentage of mothers. Even if the mother survived, there was a good chance that the infant would die. The low life expectancy of the middle ages was largely a result of infant mortality. All in all, it was a very hard experience, and few had any real sympathy for the mother. The women deserved all of this torment, as partial expiation for the sexual pleasure which had led to the birth, and, at a greater remove, for Eve's sin of having tempted Adam and so led to humankind's fall from God's grace.

With this background, it is understandable that after her first, difficult childbirth, with a period of personal illness ensuing, and with a sickly child, Margery was somewhat disturbed. Fearing death and an eternity of exactly the sort of thing she had been experiencing -- pain without dignity or understanding -- she asked for a confessor. She wanted to confess the sin of her youth which she had never had the courage to mention before and of which she had never been absolved. Perhaps the confessor had a headache, perhaps he was in a hurry, in any case he had no sympathy with Margery, and began to bawl her out even before she got to the big sin. He yelled so much that she couldn't get to it. She broke. She tried to throw herself out of the window, screamed, blasphemed, and struck out at all who approached. John hired some keepers, who locked her in a storeroom. Here she bit through the veins in her wrists. They then chained her to the bed, and she fell to raving. She was kept tied up in the storeroom for eight months. One day Margery looked up from her bed, and Jesus Christ was sitting there. He said, "Daughter, why have you forsaken me when I never forsook you?" and went back to Heaven.

This was not an unusual thing. The Church had for many years been finding it more and more difficult to administer the sacraments in an effective manner. The waves of plagues following the Great Plague of the l340's, the administrative breakdown of the Church following the Great Schism of 1378, and the increasing venality accompanying failing discipline among clerics were causing many to seek a pathway to God outside the sacraments. One of the more important such was the Oxford professor of divinity, John Wycliffe, whose teachings laid the foundation for the Lollard and Hussite movements. His convictions were born out of study. Margery couldn't study, but she, too, had to find a way out of a sacramental system that was supposed to be essential but which offered her no help or comfort. Hence, Jesus Christ dropped in one day for a chat.

The effect was miraculous. Margery was suddenly sane once again. Although the keepers were upset, John saw and trusted her. He ordered her unchained and gave her the keys to the storeroom where she had been imprisoned. That night she sat down to supper once more mistress of her own house. She plunged back into the secular world with great joy. She bought new clothes, and became the town clothes-horse, she went into the brewing business, and for two or three years became the biggest beer-maker in town. Business declined, however, and she formed a horse milling company. This too failed, however.

These failure were the source of some humiliation for Margery. Her failures could not be for lack of business sense, since she was John Burnham's daughter and couldn't possibly lack business sense. It might have been because she couldn't read or write, but others had succeeded under such a handicap. It could have been that she had to take time out to have her second, third, fourth, fifth, and so forth child -- she had fourteen all told. This was only natural for a woman, however, and Margery was not willing to admit that was any disadvantage. She couldn't be just a housewife, was a failure as an entrepreneur, and couldn't see what else she could do. It was at this point that Jesus Christ dropped in again to mention that he were prefer her to devote herself to his service. Margery found it hard to understand why she had not thought of that herself.

Devotion to Christ at this time meant chastity, and Margery suggested to John that they should start sleeping apart. John agreed that it would be a good idea someday, but meanwhile the children kept coming. Margery finally grew desperate, and one night when John was making amorous advances, she screamed "Oh Dear Jesu Christ, Save me, Jesus!" A miracle happened, and John didn't feel amorous any more. This chastity wasn't a joke with Margery, and she found it difficult to keep up. Once she slipped so far as to proposition a young man outside church. He ran away, yelling that he would rather be cut up for the stewpot than sleep with her. Margery asked God about it, and God told her that she had to sin in order to have something to do penance for.

She began to attend church longer and more often, she began some personal fasts (For some reason, her refusing herring and snapping up pike seemed hilarious to people of her age and this story about her became extremely popular), she began to chat with God more frequently. Jesus, being only a boy somewhat younger than herself, gradually receded into the background. Most important, she began to cry. Here she began to encounter trouble, for seizures of this sort could either be the work of God or of the devil, and opinion was split in Lynn. In addition, Henry IV had succeeded Richard III and the Inquisition came to England. Margery began to search for credentials in the event she had to defend herself against charges of demonic possession or the like. Finally, in 1413, Margery's chance for freedom came.

IV: Pilgrimage to Jerusalem. (1413-1414)

John Burham had died, and left Margery a substantial inheritance. At the same time, Henry V had taken over and decided to renew the war with France. Business was bad, and John Kempe had gone into debt. Times were troubled and there were hints of a Lollard rebellion. At this point, Margery told John that she would rather see him killed than ever again yield to him. This time she had some bargaining power. John agreed to a contract of chastity and that she should be her own woman, if she would pay his debts. She agreed.

First they went to the shrine of St. Thomas a Becket in Canterbury. Now she could let herself go, and spent the whole day moaning and crying full length at the shrine. The people were amazed, and suspected her a being a Lollard, John fled to the hotel. At a local Monastery, a monk challenged her, asking what she knew of God, and she answered that she knew. The monk asked her to name his secret sin, and she replied "Lechery." He was taken aback, and asked "With single women or married." "Married," she replied, and he cried, "She is a right holy woman!" Even so, she had to slip away from Canterbury with a mob after her. It became clear to her that she needed unimpeachable credentials. Especially since God had told her to wear a white dress. She and John went to the Bishop of Lincoln. Phillip Repingdon, the cultured bishop of Lincoln, had been a student of Wycliffe's and was now very wary. He witnessed the contract between John and Margery, but told her that she should go to the archbishop of Canterbury for permission to wear white. She spent some time sermonizing at him, add he gave her money "to further her pilgrimage" at least out of Lincoln. She now embarked upon her great adventure: a pilgrimage to Rome and Jerusalem.

She passed through Constance, where they were busily preparing for the council that would meet there during the coming year, reached Rome, and visited all of the shrines and viewed all of the relics that the city had to offer. She wept often and long, and seems to have been inwardly pleased at the attention this sign of her special status attracted. One might suppose that this was the result, in some complex psychological way, of the long imprisonment and deep isolation she experienced during her period of madness, but this is a modern point of view that might be quite inappropriate for the circumstances of her times. This was an age in which spectacular demonstrations of personal piety were relatively common, for whatever reason. Juliana of Norwich had walled herself into a small tower to isolate herself by brute physical means from the outside world. Although she was generally available for conversation and consultation with visitors and received meals through a slot in the wall, her contemporaries saw no contradictions in these arrangements. Flagellants formed long processions in which they marched along in pairs with one person whipping his companion and, after a period of rest, exchanging places with him (or her) and continuing the dreary rehearsal of Jesus' way to the cross. Although such pious demonstrations required considerable secular planning and management, and although the participants were often moved to such penance during public festivals in which they formed a major attraction, again their contemporaries found little fault with these displays.

This is perhaps overstating the case. It could not have escaped the notice of many that such displays were often carried out without ecclesiastical sanction or direction. In fact, such manifestations of personal piety implied that the individual lacked a conviction that the sacraments and the established Church provided sufficient means of salvation or avenues for penance. That being the case, those prone to public displays often opened themselves to the suspicion that their dissatisfaction with the Church may have gone deeper, perhaps as far deep as actual heresy.

Margery gives no indication that she recognized that many observers of her transports may have had serious misgivings of her orthodoxy. She seemed blithely unaware that she was traveling alone through a world teeming with Beguines and Beghards, Friends of God, Spiritual Franciscans, Lollards, Hussites, and others for whom the execution block and stake were never far away. She did know, and it bothered her greatly, that many people suspected that she was merely putting on a show to draw attention to herself. Then, too, there was always the possibility, although she would scarcely admit this to herself, that the God who was such a close friend of hers was merely one of those deceits by which Satan snares the souls of the unwary and gullible, and drags them off to Hell.

This may have been what drove her to the sanctuaries and shrines. Since ecclesiastical authorities would not reassure her and accord her official license to wear white and weep, she may have hoped that, in one of these holy places, before a crowd of on- lookers, God would mark her in the sight of all with some unmistakable sign of His grace.

Or it may simply have been that, once having tasted it, she enjoyed the adventure of travel and the excitement of new things to see. In any event, her tour of the Holy Land seems merely to have whetted her appetite. Much of her book is the story of her travels to various English shrines, to Santiago de Compostella in Galicia, and to distant Danzig. Finally, God suggested to her that it might be time to slow down. She returned to Lynn, hired a lady who could write by dictation, and settled down to record her life and preserve for future generations how extraordinary that life had been.

I have heard it said that autobiographies provide a very poor reflection of the times in which their authors lived, if only because the writers of autobiographies are eccentrics. res ipse loquitur. On the other hand, one must admit that the eccentrics are rarely boring.