



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
2007 Volume II: Voyages in World History Before 1500

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## Introduction

As anyone who has ever tried it knows, teaching world history is almost impossible. There is simply too much to cover. Our seminar tried to make world history more digestible by focusing on a specific traveler rather than attempting to cover everything about a given society. Our seminar embarked on over ten different journeys -- starting with Kennewick man's walk to the New World some 8400 years ago and ending with a Muslim traveler who covered more ground than anyone else before 1500 (75,000 miles). In between, we traveled to Mesopotamia with Gilgamesh, to the New World with the Vikings, to China with a woman poet, and to the Mongols during the time of Chinggis Khan. The narratives of these travelers offered an entrée into both the home societies of the travelers and the new civilizations they visited.

Five members of the summer 2007 seminar chose to focus on an individual traveler or society or on two travelers. Kristen Grandfield's unit "Teaching the *Epic of Gilgamesh*" takes the hero of the epic poem as the focus of her language arts unit. Her breakdown of the plot, tablet by tablet, is particularly helpful to anyone teaching the epic. Barbara Natale's unit, "China: Soldiers, Sudoku, and Stories," offers grade-school teachers an interdisciplinary introduction to Chinese civilization, including the writing system, the terracotta warriors, and Chinese numbers (which are also used in the Japanese game of Sudoku). This unit also emphasizes fun reading. Sarah Black's unit, "Fact versus Film: How Hollywood Depicts the Crusades in the *Kingdom of Heaven*" takes advantage of high school students' interest in film to teach them how to read and analyze primary sources, both from the Crusaders' point of view and from that of their Islamic opponents.

Justin Boucher's "The 1183-1185 Hajj of Ibn Jubayr and teaching Islam" focuses on a single Islamic traveler, Ibn Jubayr. This unit allows high school history teachers to teach the broad tradition of Islam by focusing on a single traveler, who left an extremely detailed account of his hajj pilgrimage to Mecca, which has been fully translated into English. By the end of the unit, students will come to know Ibn Jubayr extremely well. Niki LaMontagne's unit, "Two Twelfth-Century Couples: Heloise and Abelard of France and Li Qingzhao and Zhao Mingcheng of China," is designed to teach students in high school about relationships by studying two relationships far from their own time and place.

Six members of the seminar were drawn to the last group of travelers that we encountered, including Ibn Battuta (1304-1368/69), who covered 75,000 miles in Afro-Eurasia in the 1300s. Ibn Battuta's account of his travels is available in translation and makes fascinating reading; in addition Ross Dunn has written an excellent book about his travels that is required reading for anyone interested in world history. Ibn Battuta is also the subject of numerous children's books and innovative Web sites.

Christine Elmore's unit, "An African Pilgrim-King and a World Traveler: Mansa Musa and Ibn Battuta," aims to strengthen students' reading skills by focusing on two Africans: Ibn Battuta and the king Mansa Musa. Her unit

ends with a play that grammar school students can perform to improve their fluency in reading. Paula Ranciato's unit, "Ibn Battuta's Journey by Land and by Sea: Investigating Cultural Landscapes" seeks to broaden her students' personal landscapes by encouraging them to read, to make beads, and to learn in multiple ways about Ibn Battuta and Africa. Christopher Bostock's unit, "The Expansion of Maps and Minds Before 1500: Ibn Battuta, Christopher Columbus, and Google Earth," harnesses technology -- the downloadable program Google Earth -- to the study of history and geography. His unit asks middle school students to follow the routes of two travelers in order to learn about the geography of the entire world as well as the study of history. It offers an ideal introduction to social studies. Marialuisa Sapienza's unit, "Who First Reached America: the Vikings, the Chinese admiral Zheng He, or Columbus?" focuses on maritime travel (and does not examine Ibn Battuta). Her unit pushes language arts students in high school to read primary source accounts carefully in order to answer the question posed by the title of her unit. (Warning: the answer to the question is not what you expect!) Mary Lou Narowski's unit, "The Voyages of Kennewick Man, Gilgamesh, Ashoka, Leif Eriksson, Li Qingzhao, and Ibn Battuta," embraces world history with her characteristic enthusiasm: her unit asks her middle-school students to make journals so that they can personally experience the thrill of doing their own research in both language arts and social studies. Brad Magrey's unit, "Traveling with Ibn Battuta and the Plague through the Islamic World, China, Europe and Mexico, 1325-1350," seeks to expose seventh and eighth-graders to the entire world in the 1300s by focusing on four different places in the 1300s and learning about these same places today.

As a group, these units eloquently demonstrate how many people traveled in the centuries before Columbus's voyage.

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