The Colonial Adventures of Confiscated Arabic Texts: Ibn Battuta's *Rihla* Manuscript from North Africa to the French National Library

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Abstract

This article documents our attempt, through primary and secondary source research, including French archival sources, to understand how a copy of Ibn Battuta's (d. 1369) *Rihla* manuscript, dictated to Ibn Juzayy (d. 1357) at the request of the Moroccan sultan in the 1400s, made its way from North Africa to the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris during the 1800s. It also seeks to understand why there has been so little interest in the provenance of the *Rihla* manuscript held at the Bibliothèque nationale de France. Herein we describe and analyze the circumstances under which a French government functionary and Arabist, Jacques Denis-Delaporte, took an exemplar manuscript from North Africa during the early years of French colonization, and the many lives the text itself has had in the West.

Keywords

Ibn Battuta, travel narratives, colonialism, North Africa, Arabic manuscripts, France

Introduction

In 1356 C.E., Ibn Juzayy completed the manuscript *Tuḥfat al-nuẓẓār fī gharā ib al-amṣār wa ajā ib al-asfār*. The text, most commonly known as Ibn Battuta's *Rihla*, is based on accounts dictated to Ibn Juzayy by the world traveler commonly known as Ibn Battuta. Ibn Battuta's travels took him from North Africa to the Arabian Peninsula, the Levant, Central and Southeast Asia, and finally West Africa over the course of two decades. In 1835, a French consul to Morocco, Jacques-Denis Delaporte, gave the second half of Ibn Juzayy's autograph manuscript to the National Library of France,

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the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF). This article documents our attempt, through primary and secondary source research, to understand how Ibn Battuta's *Rihla* manuscript made its way from North Africa to the BnF in Paris.

Caravans of Gold as Seen by Ibn Battuta

In 2019, the Block Museum at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, opened the *Caravans of Gold* exhibition. The exhibition was the result of partnerships among the Block Museum and cultural institutions in Mali, Morocco, and Nigeria (Berzock 2019, 23). It was the first major exhibition to explore the "shared history of West Africa, the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe from the eighth to sixteenth centuries" via the connector of Saharan trade. The exhibition "showcased the objects and ideas that connected the medieval Sahara and celebrated West Africa's historic and underrecognized global significance" (Block Museum 2019). Northwestern faculty worked to incorporate the groundbreaking exhibit into their courses. One undergraduate class, which the first author of this essay was invited to visit as a guest lecturer, was reading *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta: A Muslim Traveler in the 14th Century*, an English translation of Ibn Battuta's travel narrative published by Ross E. Dunn (1986).

The course used a book about Ibn Battuta because of the extent of his travels, which spanned North and West Africa, Islamic Spain, the region now called the Middle East, Central Asia and Anatolia, and South and Southeast Asia, including China, over a twenty-four-year period. Dunn had chosen to publish an accessible English version of Ibn Battuta's travel narrative as a way to expose his own undergraduate students to the "idea of Islam in the medieval age as a civilization whose cultural dominance extended far beyond the Middle East or the lands inhabited by Arabs." He saw in the life of Ibn Battuta an opportunity to illustrate the "internationalist scope of Islamic civilization" (1986, ix).

Ibn Battuta and His Travel Narrative

In the mid-fourteenth century, Muhammad ibn Abdullah, also known as Ibn Battuta (d. 1369), a native of the city of Tangier, narrated the accounts of his twenty-four years of travel to Ibn Juzayy (d. 1357), an Andalusian scholar working in the court of the Moroccan Sultan Abū Inān (r. 1348–59) in Fez. Ibn Juzayy completed a manuscript of the travel accounts in 1356, entitled *Tuḥfat al-Nuẓẓār fī Gharā ib al-Amṣār wa Ajā ib al-Asfār* [A precious gift to those who contemplate the wonders of cities and the marvels of traveling]. The text is most commonly known simply as Ibn Battuta's *Rihla* [Journey].

In 1835, a French consul to Morocco, Jacques-Denis Delaporte (d. 1861), gave what is believed to be the second half of Ibn Juzayy's autograph manuscript of the *Rihla* to the Bibliothèque nationale de France

Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France. Département des Manuscrits. Arabe 2291

Figure 1. Digital copy of the manuscript believed to be the Ibn Juzayy autograph copy, MS Arabe 2291, Gallica.Bnf.fr, Bibliothèque nationale de France.

(figure 1). While Ibn Battuta's *Rihla* was known in the Islamicate world, only sections of it had come to the attention of European Orientalists. Delaporte's deposit represents an important moment in the social history of the text in the West, as it has since been used to produce critical editions and translations of what is considered to be one of the most important texts in the genre of travel literature. As we will show, Dunn's publication that was being read by American undergraduates can even be traced back to this fortuitous deposit.

Historical Significance of the *Rihla* Text

The *Rihla* text, the result of what is presumed to have been several years of sessions of recounting and note-sharing between Ibn Battuta and his

scribe, Ibn Juzayy, has been described as a "comprehensive survey of the personalities, places, governments, customs, and curiosities of the Muslim world in the second quarter of the fourteenth century." The text circulated in the Arabic-speaking world for centuries in the form of "copied manuscript abridgments of Ibn Juzayy's original text" (Dunn 1986, 4). Despite inconsistencies and mistakes in things such as place-names and chronologies, which have given academics ample fodder for clarifying research, scholars believe that the travel narrative dictated by Ibn Battuta is largely accurate and that to focus on errors "can distract from the astonishing accuracy of the *Rihla* as a whole, as both a historical document and a record of experience" (Dunn 1986, 313).

In his own preface to the *Rihla*, scribe Ibn Juzayy explained that he had

> rendered the sense of the narrative of the Shaikh Abu 'Abdallah [Ibn Battuta] in language which adequately expresses the purposes that he had in mind and sets forth clearly the ends which he had in view. Frequently I have reported his words in his own phrasing, without omitting either root or branch. I have related all the anecdotes and historical narratives which he related, without applying myself to investigate their truthfulness or to test them, since he himself has adopted the soundest methods of authenticating those of them that are wholly acceptable, and has disclaimed responsibility for the rest of them by *expressions* which give warning to that effect. (Gibb, Defrémery, and Sanguinetti [1958] 1994, 7)

Gomez, a respected historian of West Africa, has shown how Ibn Battuta's "evaluative commentary" (2018, 163) is valuable in recovering some portion of historical knowledge about medieval Mali, where orality was privileged as a means of transmission over written records. Gomez utilizes the *Rihla* text as one of the rare sources provided by a contemporary of the period. Even the route Ibn Battuta took when visiting Mali, the places he visited and those that he seemingly circumvented, can be used to understand the political tensions in the area. And as relates to matters of social customs and diplomacy, Gomez says that Ibn Battuta "could not have fully appreciated the significance of what he witnessed" (2018, 144), for example, when reporting on women leaders bidding for power at the royal court.

In order to understand how this eyewitness, cosmopolitan text composed at the behest of Moroccan royalty in the fourteenth century became required reading for American undergraduates in the twenty-first century, we begin by examining how European thirst for knowledge of the East and for the knowledge the East possessed led to the confiscation and relocation of Arabic manuscript copies of the *Rihla* text to Europe. Defrémery and Sanguinetti ([1853] 1994) used these manuscripts to produce a critical Arabic edition of the *Rihla* text as well as a French translation. Dunn (1986) used their work as the basis for his English-language rendering of the *Rihla*. Defrémery and Sanguinetti's translation continues to be the

standard upon which multiple, subsequent derivative works about the *Rihla* are based in the West.

A Brief Digression: The First English Translation of the Rihla

We would be remiss if we did not acknowledge another Western translation of a version of the *Rihla* text. English translation of Ibn Battuta's *Rihla* is also tied to, and rooted in, the colonial institutions of Europe. Before Dunn's 1986 work, there were two translations of the *Rihla* in the English language. One by Hamilton A. R. Gibb, who was responsible for the first fully translated English edition, published by Cambridge University Press as a three-volume project in 1958, and the other by Samuel Lee, a professor at the University of Cambridge. Lee's translation was the very first English translation of the *Rihla*; it was published in 1829. While Gibb's translation used the Arabic critical edition produced by Defrémery and Sanguinetti, Lee's translation was produced using three manuscripts that were themselves abridgments, given to the University of Cambridge under the title *al-Muntaqá mulakhkhaṣ riḥlat Ibn Baṭūṭah*, by the author Muḥammad Fatḥ Allāh Ibn Maḥmūd Ibn Muḥammad al-Ḥalabī Baylūnī.

From 1819 to 1831, Lee, a translator, professor, and minister, served as a professor of Arabic history at the University of Cambridge (Lee [1896] 2002). His translation of the *Rihla* was printed for the Oriental Translation Committee in 1829. Lee's translation is prefaced by a lengthy dedication to a man named Lieutenant Colonel Fitz-Clarence, who served as commander in chief in the Bombay Army until his death in 1855 at Purandar Fort in India, one of Britain's largest colonies (Urban 1855, 304). Lee writes in his dedication: "The principal motive, however, which has induced me to inscribe this work to your name has been, the consideration of public utility. No one, perhaps, can better estimate than yourself the duty incumbent on this country to possess an accurate knowledge of the history, geography, commerce, manners, customs, and religious opinions of the East" (1829, xv). Lee's translating sought to expand England's knowledge capital.

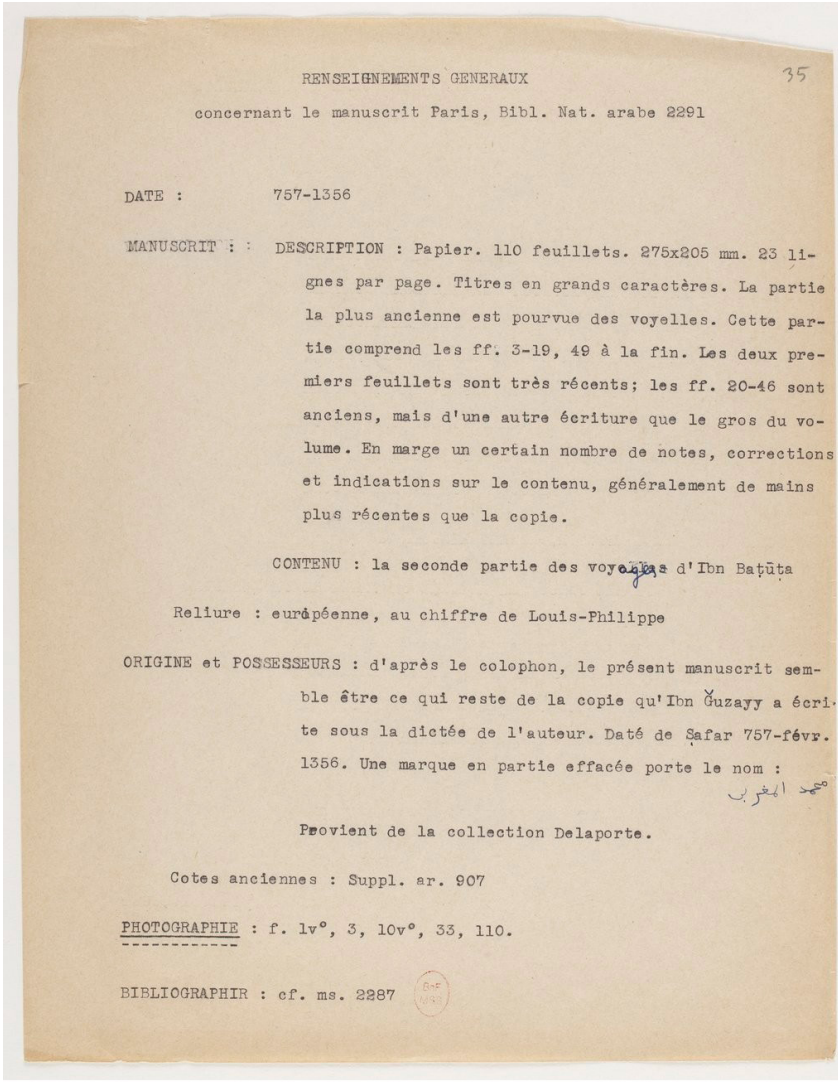
Lee's (1829) translation of the *Rihla* was made possible by the deposit of the three previously mentioned manuscripts at the University of Cambridge from the collection of Johann Ludwig Burckhardt (also known as John Lewis Burckhardt and Sheikh Ibn Abdallah). Burckhardt was a Swiss-born, German-educated, British-funded explorer. He is best known for bringing Petra to Western Europe's attention, as well as writing three travelogues of his explorations, which extended from 1809 to his death in 1817 (Ansorge 2012). Burckhardt's travels were supported materially by the African Association, also known as the Association for Promoting the Discovery of the Interior Parts of Africa. The African Association was founded in 1788 and sent out explorers like Burckhardt to learn about lands not yet encountered. The association specifically stated a desire to

find the course and origin of the Niger River and then to later be able to capitalize off any lands acquired (Boahen 1961). Through personal connections, Burckhardt was selected to be one of the association's explorers sent out to report on the unknown North African and Middle Eastern regions (Ansorge 2018). During his commissioned travels, Burckhardt visited Syria, Egypt, and Arabia. He sent back reports, letters, drawings, and general information of his ventures while also collecting masses of manuscripts, maps, and even artifacts that, at his request, were eventually sent to the University of Cambridge at the time of his death.

From Poor Abridgments to Autograph Copy

Defrémery and Sanguinetti credit Burckhardt as well as German Orientalist Ulrich Jasper Seetzen for demonstrating to European scholars the importance of the work of Ibn Battuta. They considered the manuscripts Burckhardt acquired, however, to be "poor abridgments," albeit with enough information to "make European intellectuals want access to manuscripts more closely related to the original" ([1853] 1994, ii; our translation). In producing their own critical edition of the complete Arabic text of the *Rihla* manuscript and a French translation, they are clear that they could not have done so without the manuscripts deposited at the BnF. Defrémery and Sanguinetti present the supports they used to establish their text, beginning with MS 907 (currently labeled Arabe 2291) held at the BnF. Citing the authority of the Baron of Slane, they identify MS 907 as being the autograph copy of Ibn Juzayy. And although they mention Jacques-Denis Delaporte, describing him as the former French consul to Morocco, he is depicted as the depositor of another of the *Rihla* manuscripts they consulted (but not of MS 907). He is also described as someone who was known to have more manuscripts in his personal possession (Defrémery and Sanguinetti [1853] 1994). However, according to an internal document of the BnF entitled "Notes on Arabic Manuscripts," written by Georges Vajda (n.d.), MS Arabe 2291 is the second part of the *Rihla* manuscript, copied by Ibn Juzayy in February 1356 (Safar 757 on the Islamic calendar), and it "provient de la collection Delaporte" [comes from the collection of Delaporte] (figure 2).

Defrémery and Sanguinetti attribute the ability of European Orientalists to finally "get their hands on complete copies of Ibn Battuta's *Rihla* narrative" ([1853] 1994, ii; our translation) to the French colonization of Algeria. They seem to make a clear causative connection between the French invasion of Algeria in 1832 and the appearance of complete Arabic manuscript copies of the *Rihla* in France a few years later. They write: "Finally, the conquest of Algeria and the taking of the libraries of Constantine afforded us, almost at the same time, many examples of exemplars of this precious work. This happy circumstance allowed us to consult the original narrative of Ibn Battuta" ([1853] 1994, ii; our translation).



RENSEIGNEMENTS GENERAUX 35

concernant le manuscrit Paris, Bibl. Nat. arabe 2291

DATE : 757-1356

MANUSCRIT : DESCRIPTION : Papier. 110 feuillets. 275x205 mm. 23 lignes par page. Titres en grands caractères. La partie la plus ancienne est pourvue des voyelles. Cette partie comprend les ff. 3-19, 49 à la fin. Les deux premiers feuillets sont très récents; les ff. 20-46 sont anciens, mais d'une autre écriture que le gros du volume. En marge un certain nombre de notes, corrections et indications sur le contenu, généralement de mains plus récentes que la copie.

CONTENU : la seconde partie des voyages d'Ibn Baṭūṭa

Reliure : européenne, au chiffre de Louis-Philippe

ORIGINE et POSSESSEURS : d'après le colophon, le présent manuscrit semble être ce qui reste de la copie qu'Ibn Ǧuzayy a écrite sous la dictée de l'auteur. Daté de Ṣafar 757-févr. 1356. Une marque en partie effacée porte le nom : محمد المغربي

Provient de la collection Delaporte.

Cotes anciennes : Suppl. ar. 907

PHOTOGRAPHIE : f. 1v°, 3, 10v°, 33, 110.

BIBLIOGRAPHIR : cf. ms. 2287

Figure 2. Internal document of the Bibliothèque nationale de France entitled "Notes on Arabic Manuscripts," written by Georges Vajda (n.d.), with details on the provenance of MS Arabe 2291.

However, Constantine, the fortress town in Algeria that they name, did not fall to the French until 1837, two years after the BnF documented its receipt of the copy of the *Rihla* manuscript from Delaporte. Of course, the "sophisticated looting" of French civilians in coordination with French military destruction began years before the fall of Constantine and was

a continuation of what had already been done in the Algerian locales of Algiers, Tlemcen, Medeah, and Mascara (Greenhalgh 2014, 147). It was in those cities and towns that Adrian Berbrugger, the founder of the Library-Museum of Algiers (1835), accompanied French military expeditions in order to confiscate "Arabic manuscripts from their Muslim owners and regretted only that he had not been able to gather more items before soldiers destroyed them" (Effros 2016, 250). Jones notes precedents to European colonial appropriation of Arabic manuscripts in the practice of taking Arabic manuscripts as war booty in Renaissance Europe and shows furthermore how later colonial theft of Arabic manuscripts "contributed to the growth of European libraries" and to the development of the text-hungry field of Orientalism (1987, 96).

In Algeria, French soldiers, civilian leaders, and migrants were encouraged to find the ruins of ancient Roman occupation of the land evidenced in the plentitude of antiquities. French veneration of the Romans allowed them to marginalize Arab Muslim and Berber (Amazigh) civilizational contributions in making their own claims to the land. The most prized Roman antiquities "found" in Algeria often made their way to the Louvre in Paris. The majority, however, were destroyed recklessly or used as building materials for new French construction projects (Effros 2016, 245). Although Arab, Berber, and Islamic material culture was decidedly inferior in the worldview espoused by French colonialists, Arabists like Delaporte knew the true value of Arabic manuscripts. French Arabists saw Algeria and other colonies as rich sources of materials that could be used to revitalize motherland France (Effros 2016, 247), including its national library.

Locating the Ibn Battuta Manuscripts at the BnF

In the year 1835, when Jacques-Denis Delaporte deposited the Ibn Battuta manuscript (Suppl. ar. 907, now labeled Arabe 2291) at the BnF, he was serving as French consul in the Moroccan city of Mogador (present-day Essaouira). Yet his career as an official for the French Empire had begun decades earlier. We began this research in order to determine where Delaporte obtained the autograph manuscript of the *Rihla* that he later donated to the BnF and—if possible—to ascertain the details of how he acquired the manuscript. Provenance research is a well-known tool in museum studies for those seeking recourse for colonial confiscation of cultural heritage materials or simply to understand the context by which materials were produced and used. The field of Islamic manuscripts has had a tradition of producing biographies of collections or of individual manuscripts but has only recently begun to consider the use of provenance research as an ethical, reparative method that decenters the Western archives or libraries where the manuscripts are currently held. There are now attempts to use such research to contextualize and historicize dispersed manuscript collections and fragmented manuscripts (Hirschler 2022).

In order to try to reconstruct a richer provenance narrative for this manuscript, we explored the archival record relating to Delaporte's life and career, essentially sketching a time line of his activities in North Africa on the basis of our findings. While we have yet to find the answer to either of the questions that inspired this research, we have been able to construct a richer understanding of the intellectual and political context Delaporte occupied and embodied, and this understanding helps us see how so much provenance information was elided by colonial collecting institutions.

Delaporte studied at the *École Spéciale des Langues Orientales*, which is known today as the Institut national des Langues et Civilisations Orientales (National Institute for Oriental Languages and Civilizations). The school's most influential professor at the time was the highly decorated Silvestre de Sacy. Nearly all members of the so-called men of letters who were a part of Napoleon's Commission of the Sciences and Arts in Egypt were either students or intellectual acolytes of de Sacy. While de Sacy himself was never a member of the expeditions to Egypt, he oversaw the oriental typefaces at the French national press (Imprimerie nationale), which published the famous multivolume *Description of Egypt* (Commission des Sciences et Arts d'Égypte 1809–24), and founded the Société Asiatique, a geographic society in Paris that published the writings of French Orientalists, including those of Delaporte.

Delaporte's career as a French officer and administrator began with the Napoleonic conquest of Egypt. He was recruited as an interpreter from de Sacy's school and made a member of the Commission of the Sciences and Arts. The commission was in essence a team of technocrats ranging in disciplines from engineering to sculpture who would assist Napoleon in developing and administering the Egyptian territory under French occupation. As soon as the French established their occupation, the commission restructured itself as the Institut d'Égypte, a scholarly society located in the palace of Hasan Kachef that regularly published a scholarly journal, *La Décade Égyptienne*, and a propagandist newspaper, *Courier de l'Égypte*. Delaporte served as the institute's librarian.

A few years after the French withdrawal from Egypt, the former members of the Institut d'Égypte as well as other scholars who had accompanied the Napoleonic expedition collaborated to publish *The Description of Egypt*, a multivolume work of multidisciplinary scholarly essays that offered a comprehensive survey of Egypt. *The Description of Egypt* demonstrates how explicitly academic knowledge was viewed as a political instrument in postrevolutionary France. The motivating idea behind its publication was that a full survey of Egypt would streamline its exploitation and colonial development. In fact, the archaeological surveys that served as the basis for the Suez Canal were first published in *The Description of Egypt*. Delaporte contributed a chapter to the second volume of the work entitled

"Abridged Chronology of the History of the Mamluks of Egypt," which he prepared based on a number of manuscripts he obtained while in Egypt and later donated to the BnF. In the political framework of *The Description*, these manuscripts and others like them were appropriated and instrumentalized with the goal of subjugating those from whom the manuscripts were acquired.

Delaporte served as the leader of the French chancery in Tripoli between 1806 and 1816. While there he (1834) continued to contribute to the ongoing surveys of North Africa spearheaded by French politicians and academics alike, including some reports written for the geographic society in Paris on topics such as the merchant caravans of Fezzan and the nomenclature of cities and villages of the Barbary Coast.

After a position as an administrator in Tripoli, Libya, Delaporte served as the French vice-consul in Tangier, Morocco, between approximately 1816 and 1832. These are only probable dates ranging from the end of his posting in Libya to his subsequent posting in Algiers, so it is possible that they are inexact. However, all the documents we consulted from this interval of time have him reporting from Tangier, so we are fairly confident of them. We were not able to gain access to the French diplomatic archives in Nantes to access the pertinent records on Delaporte, as the archives declined to fulfill our request, citing a COVID-19-related backlog. A future on-site visit to the archives may provide more definitive information.

During his time in Tangier Delaporte regularly sent correspondence and reports to the geographic society in Paris about topics such as local botanical practices and general descriptions of Morocco. Among these is a letter written to the geographic society about explorer René Caillié, which we requested to have digitized by the archives. René Caillié was the first known European to visit Timbuktu and return alive. In volume 3 of his own published account of his travels, Caillié (1830) recounts being hidden by Delaporte in the French consulate from a band of locals he had angered. Delaporte eventually organized Caillié's return to France aboard a French ship and had him taken to the port under cover of night. Caillié speaks very highly of Delaporte, and Delaporte spoke highly of Caillié in turn when writing to the geographic society. Delaporte told them that they should award Caillié the prize money of 9,000 francs for his accomplishments. Although he does not mention the prize by name, we assume that Delaporte is referring to the Grande Médaille d'Or des Explorations et Voyages de Découverte (Great Gold Medal of Exploration and Journeys of Discovery), which the geographic society had just begun to award that year and which it awarded to Caillié in 1830 (Société de Géographie, n.d.). Notable for the context of our research, in the letter Delaporte writes that Caillié "will present you with . . . documents, materials taken on-site, etc." (1828; our translation). The French leaves it unclear whether Delaporte

meant personal documentation, as in a travel journal, or documents such as manuscripts. We do know, however, from volume 2 of Caillié's (1830, 131–39) own account, that he brought back a trove of material goods, including ivory, gold, and cloth from Timbuktu, in addition to some enslaved people.

There is less material about Delaporte's time in Algiers, Algeria, in 1833, where he only spent one year in an official capacity. This year in Algeria, however, was the focus at the start of our research because of a section in Dunn (1986), based on Defrémery and Sanguinetti's assertion, that mentions that the autograph manuscript of Ibn Battuta's *Rihla* was acquired in Algeria. While there are several other *Rihla* manuscripts at the BnF that can be directly tied to Algeria, we were not able to link the *Rihla* manuscript deposited by Delaporte to Algeria. The Duke of Nemours, a son of the reigning French monarch at the time who was sent to Algeria as a military commander both in 1836 and again in 1837 to lay siege on the city of Constantine, somehow acquired a manuscript of a portion of Ibn Battuta's *Rihla*, which was subsequently donated to the BnF in 1838. Delaporte served as chief interpreter to the French Army of Africa and as the director of the Bureau Arabe in Algiers while in Algeria. This was a position with a high turnover rate, and Delaporte was no exception to the trend, lasting in the position only to the end of 1833. His functions at the time were described as "centralizing Arab affairs, gathering and organizing documents [most likely administrative documents], and translating official correspondences in order to inform the indigenous population of the decisions of the commander in chief" (Behaghel 1865, 383; our translation).

At the end of Delaporte's time in North Africa, he was stationed as the French consul in Mogador (present-day Essouira), Morocco. This is another point in his life when his engagement with material texts produced in the region becomes clear, similar to his time spent in Egypt. We know from an obituary in the archive of the geographic society, written by his son-in-law, who was himself a French consul in Constantinople, that Delaporte's main project while he was living in Mogador was a treatise on the Berber language (Tamazight) and its grammar. Interestingly, that same year, the French Ministry of War's office in Algiers published a French-Berber dictionary of the Kabyle dialect of Algeria with Delaporte cited as a major contributor (Jaubert et al. 1844), suggesting that his treatise was prepared in assistance to the Ministry of War. Here, we again see the way in which colonial hegemony and academic knowledge were deployed in tandem. We are told by Delaporte's son-in-law that Delaporte spent his time studying the Berber language of the region surrounding Mogador and that all of the Berber manuscripts he used were eventually given to the BnF (Belin 1861).

Mogador, Morocco

Abdelhadi al Tazi (d. 2015), the late Moroccan historian whose 1997 critical edition of Ibn Battuta's *Rihla* is now considered to be "the only reliable [Arabic] edition" (Meri 2011), believes that Delaporte's time in Mogador was crucial to him taking possession of the *Rihla* manuscript and identifies it as the location where he most likely took possession of the codex. In his critical edition of the *Rihla*, al Tazi writes, "It seems to me that he managed to obtain this copy of the Rihla when he [Delaporte] was in Essaouira" (Ibn Battuta [1356] 1997, 51).

Al Tazi's interest in the provenance of the *Rihla* manuscript is noteworthy. He is the only person we have come across who approaches Delaporte's, and therefore the BnF's, acquisition of the *Rihla* manuscript as a question to be answered. As a historian of Moroccan history, al Tazi would have known the extent to which many Moroccans went to avoid colonial confiscation of their books during the time of French colonization of the country (1912–56). Even in the years prior to the invasion of their country and throughout the colonization of Morocco, many Moroccans consciously hid their manuscript collections from the French through tactics such as burial or the building of fake walls (Binebine 2004). In fact, the private and coveted nature of manuscript ownership in Morocco continues to this day (Ahmed 2023).

Al Tazi supports his belief in Delaporte's acquisition of the *Rihla* manuscript in Mogador based on the levels of literati culture that were flourishing in the town, which would have been a vibrant diplomatic and trade center during the years in which Delaporte served as the French consul there. Al Tazi offers no more conclusive evidence; however, we have archival optimism that perhaps this provenance mystery of the Ibn Battuta manuscript may one day be solved. Conceivably, further analysis of marginalia or ownership seals in the manuscript could offer clues. What is important for us to do now is to continue to ask questions.

Conclusion

In 2017, French President Emmanuel Macron commissioned a report on the possible restitution of cultural heritage materials stolen from sub-Saharan Africa during colonization. The result, published in 2018, is what has come to be known as the Sarr-Savoy Report. The official title of the account written by Feline Sarr and Benedicte Savoy is *Rapport sur la restitution du patrimoine culturel africain: Vers une nouvelle éthique relationnelle* (*The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics*) (2018). While the report is primarily concerned with artifacts, it does bring up the manuscript book collections seized by the French as well. It discusses the multidecade (unsuccessful) quest by the descendants of El Hadj Omar Tall to have returned to them the artifacts taken from their ancestor's residence in Segou, Mali, in 1890 during a battle. They also request the

digitization of 517 manuscripts taken from Tall that are now held in the Fond Archinard (Archinard was a French colonel) at the BnF (Sarr and Savoy 2018, 33). According to the Sarr-Savoy Report:

> The family indicated that its requests for restitutions were met with a staunch refusal invoking the inalienability of the French National Collections. The family also requested that his manuscripts be digitized but they were merely told that they would have to wait until the Bibliothèque Nationale de France finally reached to the Fonds Archinard as the library continued efforts to digitize its various collections. (2018, 118)

It is notable that the report intentionally focuses solely on the specific case of French colonial confiscations in sub-Saharan Africa. It declines to address other parts of Africa, mentioning specifically the situations in Algeria and Egypt and considering them to represent "very different contexts of appropriation" (Sarr and Savoy 2018, 3). To our knowledge, no one in Morocco (or Algeria) has officially asked for the return of the Ibn Battuta manuscripts. However, there still exists a memory and a lingering feeling among the public of having had their culture exploited for the sake of European cultural aggrandizement.

In forgetting the colonial past, or in downplaying its significance to the modern day, Burke believes that we become "ill-placed to understand the institutions of modern states [which includes libraries and archives] . . . or the complex political compromises and bargains with which modernity has been organized" (2009, 29). What is elided and what questions go unanswered when the private collections of military generals or colonial bureaucrats are listed as the provenance of manuscripts like those of Ibn Battuta's *Rihla* that are held by the BnF and the University of Cambridge? Libraries, archives, and museums are often called "memory institutions," and yet they have often willfully neglected retaining information on how materials in their care were acquired. Provenance research as a step in the repatriation process holds promise to help us remember and recover from colonial looting of cultural heritage materials and forced forgetting.

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