Medieval historian, sociologist, philosopher, economist, jurist, scholar, statesman, traveler, and all around beast of founding sciences, Veliyyuddin Abdurrahman bin Muhammad bin Khaldun el-Hadrami, or Ibn Khaldun for short. Born in Tunisia as Ibn Khaldun Abu Zayd on Ramadhan 1, 732 or May 27th, 1332 he came from a wealthy merchant class family, his patrician grandfather held minor political office in Tunisia. Unlike Ibn’s grandfather, his father was a gentleman-scholar studying the Koran and law; living a private life that lasted until his death in Tunisia in 1348 from the bubonic plague. At the time of his father’s death, Ibn was only 17. His family was one that contained many politicians and scholars. In a culture with a strong connection to ancestry, it would propel him to push himself hard; it gave him not only a standard to match, but a standard to surpass.

Ibn’s ancestors hailed from the area where Yemen is situated today, on the Arabian Peninsula. During the expansion of Islam under the Umayyad caliphate, his family immigrated to its furthest extent in the 8th century: Spain. Once there, the family settled in the city Seville as a merchant family who established a foothold in the city in conjunction with powerful families, creating a local oligarchy. From here, not only did they become a prominent family in the arena of business, but they would also produce generations of scholars and astute politicians. However, by the 13th century, it became clear that their interests were threatened with growing pressures from the Christian kingdoms, forcing those of talent to find sanctuary elsewhere; it was clearly time to depart. Before Seville finally fell to the encroaching Christian powers, the family fled en masse to Tunisia, North Africa in 1248.

Upon their arrival, much of the area was nothing like what they had experienced or expected coming from Spain. The decline of the Islamic Caliphates had created many smaller states in its wake. 300 years before the birth of Ibn, the Maghreb region was a declining social, economic, and political power which was continued and further enhanced by the continuous raids from nomadic tribes surrounding the region. Their heirs attempted to create a similar society to that which they had in Spain, but it was never achieved. The rulers held miniscule power compared to that of their ancestors held long ago. This was the results of raids and political decay, stemming from centuries of political disunity and horrendous nomadic attacks;
which were encouraged by the Egyptian Fatimid’s. Ibn would later compare this to “locusts” being released on the land.

Even if this was the result of time taking its toll on the man-made institutions, Ibn would thrust himself into the political realm of the many Islamic Kingdoms. Determined to make a name for himself in the political world, he would play the dangerous game of thrones that was played quite frequently during this time, though with grave consequences.

His youth and inexperience led to boundless political and scholarly aspirations. He would be given the position of Seal Bearer at the ripe age of 20. under the sultan Ibn Tafrakin. This position was his first formal public duty. Although his greatest responsibility was to pen the words “Praise be to God” on all public documents, he was not discouraged; this was his beginning. It was thought from this point he could have advanced in the political ranks in the Tunisian hierarchy. Ibn’s ambition would say otherwise; he would soon exit the position. While stationed in Tunisian military camp during a local campaign, he went absent without leave, deciding that his chances were better westward, especially after his sultan's defeat by Abu Ziad, the Emir of Constantine in 1352 (713 AH). He then decided to begin his slow move westward while utilizing his wide circle of family and personal connections as aid.

After travelling for some time, he would settle in Fez, Morocco. This would mark two years since he first left Tunis. Little is actually known about what he did in that time, but it would seem fitting to conclude that he was developing his understanding of the world. Eventually, he would receive and accept an invitation from Abu Inan, the new Marinid ruler of Morocco, to serve in his court in Fez. This sultan had gained the throne and was surrounding himself with intellectuals from all across the Islamic world. Once Ibn had accepted and become affiliated with the court, he would soon fall under suspicion by the sultan. The sultan’s suspicions were not unfounded, however. Ibn brought them upon himself while conspiring with Abu Abdalla Muhammad to topple Abu Inan’s regime. The conspiracy failed, which put Ibn’s loyalty into question. It also assured the sultan that his upcoming eastward expansion could be
hindered by the bright, young Tunisian. As Abu Inan embarked on his planned invasion of Tunisia, he incarcerated Ibn in a grim medieval version of preventive detention. Ibn was imprisoned for 21 long months before he was finally freed upon the declaration of Abu Inan’s death. Ibn was released in 1358, by the Wazir Al-Hassam ibn Omar or (al-Hasān ibn-Umar), and was promptly returned to his former position in the court. Even with this brush with failure and almost certain doom, Ibn was a very ambitious young man, filled with the ideas of not only grandeur but feeling that he had to strive, as if ordained by some fate. Shortly after being reinstated under a new regime, Ibn would conspire against his leader again, although this attempt was successful. While uprooting the Wazir with Al-Manswe, he helped supplant the sultan Abu Salem in place of Al-Manswe in July 1359, and with this success, Ibn would receive the secretary position. From this position, he would focus on his writings and poetry, and he would excel in his first political position. He excelled in his work to such a degree that in 2 short years, he was promoted to chief justice under Abu Salem. As a pattern begins to emerge throughout his life, it would seem political rivalries and political envy diminish, as well as good standing with his leaders, regardless of his success in his position. Sure enough, his favor with the sultan began to disappear as time passed. He would change sides. A revolt then would take place under the Abu Salem regime which would lead to its end. This was overthrown by Wazir Omar. Always being the ambitious sort and never missing an opportunity for political gain, Ibn sided with the winning side of the revolt. He was greatly rewarded for this decision by receiving his former position with higher pay, though as always with men of ambition, it was not nearly enough to settle his wants; he craved the position of chamberlain. When he approached the Wazir about his ambition for the position, he was declined by the new sultan. Angered, Ibn resigned from chief justice, upsetting the Wazir. Ibn finished with the court with a request to leave Fez and return to Tunis. He was once again denied. Khaldun then requested the Wazir’s son in law to intercede on his behalf to gain him passage to Andalusia.

It is in this time that Ibn’s interconnections and friendships not only come into play, but they become a huge part of his success and shortcomings. The sultan Muhammad al-Ahamar of Granada was deposed by his brother Ismail, who was in turn supported by brother- in-law. Now this forced Muhammad into exile from his kingdom, but fortunately for him and Ibn, he was
friends with the Moroccan sultan, Salem.

During the revolt in Grenada, the exiled sultan would find refuge in Morocco with his sultan friend, Salem, after he came to power. Upon Muhammad's arrival, there were great parties held in his honor. It was at one of these parties that Ibn would fatefuly meet and befriend Muhammad's associate, Wazir Ibn al-Khafid. With this connection clear, it is revealed that the sultan Muhammad had been crafting an agreement with Pedro the Cruel to assist him in restoring his throne. This agreement was temporarily delayed, due to a coup that took place, resulting in the death of his friend: sultan Salem. With Ibn’s new position, the sultan Muhammad would appeal to him in gaining assistance from Wazir Omar. Ibn acquiesced to his request.

Having gained Omar’s support, Muhammad would be off to fulfill his goal, Ibn would be entrusted with the care of the Grenadian’s family in Fez, and the Wazir Omar would be generous in granting Ronda and surrounding country to sultan Muhammad’s effort. Ibn’s recently acquired friend, Wazir Al-Khafid, would be recalled to Grenada to assist Muhammad, who would continue his efforts in 1361 (763 AH). Ibn would work intensely in Morocco, but again his fortunate would change, and his relationship with Wazir Omar would turn sour. Faced with these new challenges, he looks to Andalusia for a new chance. After finally regaining his throne, Muhammad would hear of Ibn’s request, and would be adeptly accepting of Ibn. When he arrived in Grenada, Ibn would be honored and welcomed by sultan Muhammad, who would admit him to his private council. Soon, Muhammad would appoint Ibn as his ambassador, and his first assignment would send him on an ambassadorial mission to Pedro of Castile. Sadly, the details of the mission itself are unknown, but Ibn would prove to be immensely successful. He impressed Pedro of Castile, who offered him a position in his regime and even offered to restore his family’s former estates in Castile. Ibn would decline. When Ibn returned to Muhammad’s court, he would offer the great sultan a gift from Pedro. In response, Muhammad would bestow upon him the village of Elvira. Even with the favor of the sultan and his many rewards achieved by his abilities and successes, Ibn began to grow restless in the following year. His interests were piqued upon receiving an invitation from his friend, Abu Abdullah (who had reclaimed his throne in Bougie), to join his court. He had fostered this friendship with Abu during his imprisonment. Jumping at the bit for a fresh start, Ibn left Grenada in 1364 (766 AH) for Bougie,
after asking and gaining Muhammad’s permission to leave.

February 1364, Khaldun would leave Spain for the last time, and return to North Africa. He next arrived in Bougie, Algeria at the age of 32. His new task was not one of ease. He was to collect taxes from the dangerous Berber clans in the mountains of Algeria. As always, he proved more than capable in his field of work, yet he would soon feel the effects of time play on his human position. As it became customary and seemingly constant in Ibn’s life, his benefactor/ruler would die shortly after his appointment into office. Soon, Emir Muhammad arose to power, and Ibn was given the position of Hajib, under his reign. In the neighboring kingdom of Tlemcen, a new ruler rose to the ranks of Sultan of Abū l-Abbas. After the death of Abū ‘Abdallāh in 1366, the new sultan would wage war with his friend Muhammad of Algeria. Though seeing the writing on the wall, Ibn Khaldūn would change sides once again and ally himself with the new sultan. Abbas would capture and kill Emir Muhammad the following year. Seemingly consistent, with his newest ruler slain, Ibn handed over the city and retreated to village of Biskra. Even in his current fresh start, Ibn would still have a hand in the political arena, thus his political work would continue as would his shifting alliances until he would finally retire to the frontier outpost of Castle Qalʿat ibn Salāmah, south of Constantine in Algeria.

Feeling insecure, repelled, and undecided in the “morass of politics”, he would find that in this absence of political work, he would throw himself into what he was born to do: complex scholarship. In 1375, he moved into the castle Qalʿat ibn Salāmah, under the care of the tribe of Awlād ʿArīf, who lodged him and his family in safety. They were housed in the province of Oran, Algeria, near what is now the town of Frenda, Algeria. There he spent four years, “free from all preoccupations,” and wrote his massive masterpiece, the Muqaddimah, an introduction to history. His original intention, which he subsequently achieved, was to write a universal history of the Arabs and Berbers. Before doing so, he judged it necessary to discuss historical method, with the aim of providing the criteria necessary for “distinguishing historical truth from error.” There he spent four years putting together and organizing his thoughts, ideas, theories, and complex analyses of the world and heavenly beings into his Universal History and in his more famously known introduction: The Muqadimmah. He soon realized that he needed more
access to information and knowledge, as well as to indulge himself in vast libraries. He also felt scholarship review and mediation was critically beneficial for his current work. Fortunately for him, Ibn would have access to his old home again, upon Abul’s conquest of Tunisia. Ibn decided to travel to Tunis. This was to be the first time he would see Tunis, after setting out on his own over 27 years ago. Ibn would stumble from his position of favor with his rivals (teachers of law, and jealous court officials), always working to undermine him, or by simple misjudgement in choices. They strongly set their will against him and ultimately turned the sultan against him and his work, thus forbidding him to leave. His entrapment forced him to declare a personal Hajj to Mecca, which would allow him to make a safe exit from North Africa in 1382, to leave and never return.

In October 1382 (15th Shabaan 784 AH) at the age of 50, Ibn Khaldun finally lands in Alexandria on his pilgrimage. Once he arrived in the city he began preparing for his hajj, which took him over a month to pack, gather gear, and muster his strength to endure his trek. Unfortunately, he miscalculated his preparations and ended up missing the caravan traveling to the holy land. Thus, he instead decided to head to Cairo. The city of Alexandria, however, made a grandiose impression upon him. Not only did the wealth and prosperity of the city entice him, but most importantly and most exciting to him was, according to him, “The moons and stars shining among its scholars”. The city and its many revered colleges, universities, as well as its overwhelming wealth of knowledge loaded in its numerous libraries was a paradise in the harsh desert sands. Soon after his arrival, he would meet with Fatimid Sultan Barquq, which would result in an almost spontaneous friendship between the two. As what tended to occur with most sultans, he enjoyed favorable treatment/placement. In 1384, the Egyptian Sultan, Barquq, made him Professor of the Qamhiyyah Madrasah, and grand Qadi of the Maliki school of Fiqh (one of four schools, the Maliki school was widespread primarily in West Africa). Welcomed by scholars and students due to his already famous writings, he would lecture at Al-Azhar and other schools. It was said that his inaugural lecture was a triumph and a famous historian, by the name Taqi-ad-din-al Maqrizi, was quoted saying, “Nothing like it has been done (before), and it would be difficult for anyone who might try to achieve something like it… It informed about the reality of happenings and events”. (Brown, 21). His placement would allow him easy access to
everything, private conversations and public smiles with the elite of the elite, and all the friends that the powerful could afford. It can be said that he was a man of court, for he savored introducing visitors from Maghreb to the Egyptian sultan, emphasizing his expatriate status, wearing his Maghrebi robes in court, not rising for Egyptian judges, and slapping his secretaries until their necks were red. Barquq would also place him as a Malikite chief cadi. Ibn unsurprisingly proved capable for the role and began a mission to fight corruption and favoritism. His efforts would eventually create rifts, forming conspiracies that found Ibn relieved of his duty.

A friendship with the Egyptian sultan continued to prove even greater in value than what he initially expected. While Ibn was in Alexandria, the sultan of Tunis had discovered Ibn’s misleadings, and forbade his wife and children from joining him, but at the behest of the sultan of Egypt’s request, Tunis would release them. Sadly, a commonality in Ibn’s life was that his great fortune would lead to great misfortunes, for he would be removed from his judged position while nearly at the same time being confronted with a family disaster: the ship carrying his wife, five daughters, and all of his worldly belongings would be sunk in a storm off the coast of Alexandria. Although he still had two sons, this was a devastating blow to the historian, ever increasing his sense of loneliness, insecurity, and isolation from the world around him. During this dark period of his life, he would get permission to make a true Hajj to the holy lands of Mecca and Medina. Once he returned to Cairo, he was well received, and once again appointed to a teaching position, this time at the school of Bein Al-Qasrein. The lectures covered subjects in Hadith focused on Imam Malik’s Muuatte, but his role as a professor would not stop there. His future advancements would lead to a new appointment at the Beibers Sufi Institute, with a handsome salary to match. During his appointments to the institutions, he would take advantage of their resources to focus his energies on lecturing, studies, and completing his universal history.

His period of scholarship was soon ended when Egyptian state of affairs were thrown into upheaval with sultan Barquq’s rival, Yulbugha, organizing a successful revolt. While successful in his revolt, Yulbugha’s reign would be very short lived. Rising from his defeat, the former sultan, Barquq, would stage an uprising and reclaim his former throne. During this crisis, Ibn
was directly affected, first losing his position, and then regaining it upon Barquq’s restoration. Shortly after being reinstated into his role as a professor, Ibn would begin writing again, and ultimately finish his concept of Asabiyyah, and its role in the rise and fall of dynasties. He would introduce this theory into his work over the Egyptian theater, from the time of Salah al-din to the present.

It had been 14 years at this point, since he was first placed in the position of Chief Maliki cadi. Ibn found himself assigned the position upon the death of the presiding cadi. He would be appointed to the position of chief cadi no less than six times in his life, each time, though, it would be no easier. For being an expatriate, it was usually an uphill battle for him to achieve anything. Although he did not shrink from encouraging the thought, it was nearly impossible for him to reform the corrupt local bar. Thus with each effort, he would find himself denounced and his appointment withdrawn. Soon, though, the state would fall into disarray once more, upon Barquq’s death and the ascension of his son. It was not to be an easy ascension. It resulted in confusion from those in power, and new struggles for personal power. In 1389, sultan Burquq was temporarily forced out of power by a rebellion, where during his absence, Ibn unwisely signed his name to a document of charges against his former friend. Later, after the sultan’s return to power, he uncovered the information and promptly dismissed Ibn from his positions, and refused to give him audience. Although he was out of favor, Ibn was visited by fortune once more. A new threat appeared, and following the death of Sultan Barquq, Egypt was chaotically without any leader or unity. The citizens remained in fear of an invasion from mongols from the east. The mongols, under the lead of Tamerlane (or Timur the Lame- a man who emulated Genghis khan), were pressing westward toward Damascus. The mongol threat would not be realized until late after Burquq’s death. It was in 1401, under Burquq’s successor- his son Faraj- that he requested Ibn Khaldūn take part in a military campaign against the Mongol conqueror Timur, who besieged Damascus. Ibn was sternly asked to accompany the sultan’s army. While accompanying sultan Faraj, he would find himself at the mercy of political shifts and intrigue. While on his travels, he was relieved of his judge position. This series of events would happen while he was journeying to Damascus; a journey which would prove to be not only perilous, but fate bound.
Meeting Tamerlane

Due to growing threats back in Cairo, the sultan Faraj would only stay in Damascus for two weeks, leaving Ibn to deal with Tamerlane. Ibn had suggested for them to consider the terms of Tamerlane, but upon the return of one envoy to Tamerlane, they would disagree and ultimately decline the terms set by the great khan. During a negotiation of an armistice, Tamerlane asked about Ibn and was intrigued, thus encouraging a determined interest to meet said conqueror. Though he was refused permission to leave the city, Ibn would scale the city walls of Damascus and be led to the Mongol camp to meet Timur. Ibn ended up meeting with Tamerlane, personally. Being the shrewd and knowledgeable diplomat that he was, Ibn brought along gifts for his meeting that included a beautiful Koran, and four boxes of Cairo halva that he presented to the Islamic conqueror. Ibn, along with his gifts, were well received. During the course of the armistice, Ibn spent 35 days in Tamerlane’s camp. What occurred and was discussed in the camp was well documented. They spoke of events, histories, legacies, and more. Ibn would later write a memorandum for Tamerlane, reminiscing on such topics.

The two would have many meetings, accompanied by an interpreter named Abd Al-Jabbar Al-khwarizmi (d.1403). Ibn’s record is the only surviving record of the meetings. Some topics were documented, others were not, but the several that were documented are as listed:

* On Maghreb and Ibn’s land of origin
* Heroes in history
* Predictions of things to come
* The Abbasid caliphate
* Amnesty and security for Ibn and his companion
* Ibn’s intention to stay Tamerlane

Fully impressed by Ibn, the conqueror asked him to join his court. Speculation suggests that Ibn accepted the offer, but requested to return to Egypt for his belongings. Though this could be true, other sources (more numerous and sufficiently supported by data) would say he politely
declined and left on good terms with the people of Damascus and with Tamerlane. Ibn’s departing words to Tamerlane:

“Is there any generosity left beyond that which you have already shown me? You heaped favors upon me, accorded me a place in your council among your intimate followers, and shown me kindness and generosity which I hope allah will repay to you in like measures.”

Although Ibn left on good terms with both the Mongolian khan and the city, the citizens he left were not so fortunate. When Damascus finally surrendered to the Mongolian ruler, he would rain death and destruction on the city. In this effort, he would inflict terrible damage upon the great Umayyad mosque of the heroic first years of islam, causing the roofs and walls in the mosque to collapse and be utterly destroyed in this fire. Ibn, in character, would condemn the abominable deed, but in his belief that it was Allah’s will. He saw the mongol pillaging as being similar to the habits of nomadic pillaging of Bedouin tribes in his dynastic theory.

Final Days in Egypt:

Ibn Khaldun’s return journey back to Cairo was immensely difficult; he and his companions were intercepted and robbed of all their supplies by marauding bands, who just barely left them with the clothes on their back to make their way to a nearby village. It was there that they recovered and continued their journey back. Seemingly common for Ibn, no sooner had he arrived back to Cairo in 1401, he would again be appointed and rapidly dismissed from his position of Malikite chief cadi for a total of 3 more times. The back and forth occurred until his final appointment to the position in March 1406. Ibn would die in his office, two weeks later on Wednesday, March 17th, 1406 (Ramadhan 25th, 808). His final resting place would be in the Sufi cemetery outside Bab an-Nasr, Cairo at the age of 74.

True to his beliefs and aspirations, his work began to circulate in the Islamic world. His scholarly efforts and the Muqaddimah would become legend: A legend of a scholar intellectual from Northwest Africa, who in the 14th century Maghreb had founded a “new science” of historical change.
Ibn Khaldun’s Legacy

Al-Muqaddimah

The introduction to his universal history alone would take five months to complete. This document would contain the core of his wisdom and hard earned experience. His firsthand understanding of the political games and his knowledge on the people of Maghreb would be the principle of his idea, while going into details around his understanding. It would be a summary of all the fields of knowledge that Ibn possessed. It was him challenging and debunking historical claims with calculated logic. He would go into grave detail on the current sciences of his day, astronomy, astrology, and numerology; he discussed his scientific thought about chemistry, alchemy, and magic. He gave his opinion with great detail to the other schools of thought, in an effort to eliminate bias. His discussions of Tribal societies and social forces would take the center stage of his thesis. He would illuminate the world with insight into the workings and makings of kingdoms and civilizations. One of his core theories, asabiyah (group feeling), would be an absolute key in understanding societies that emerged in Bedouin society, and other societies. Khaldun’s theories on the science of sociology are pearls of wisdom. Ibn’s introduction is considered by many to be one of his greatest legacies, or perhaps the greatest legacy he left behind. It is considered one of the most instrumental works that has come out of the Islamic world during the 14th century.

Ibn predicted his own work’s demise in the face of an ever changing world, especially for a man who was ambitious. He would develop and hypothesize about theories over labor, markets, prices, and more. Ibn would prove to the world that one can be devout while still remaining objective to the physical world in which we dwell. Fierce determination in a world that was in decay all around him, ambitious to a fault, genius to the point of damnation by his fellow man: A near legend in his own time. There is a mix of information in the world pertaining to his theories, writings, and concepts, but little is truly known in great detail about the man himself. His autobiography has yet to be translated; it was not until the late 1890’s that his Introduction/ The Muqaddimah was translated into English. It goes without saying that we must look to all cultures that surround us, all nations, from those decaying into the sands of time to those that are rising like the sun. We must not forget a man who was a father of so many sciences
and an inspiring long lost historian.

Ibn Khaldun: Forgotten Historian
Aaron Farmer
05/5/15


