Hugh Clapperton Biography

Hugh Clapperton

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Biography

A Scottish explorer of Africa, Hugh Clapperton (1788-1827) extended knowledge of the Fulani empire in what is now northern Nigeria and reached the Niger River in an effort to solve the mystery of that river's course and terminal point.

Hugh Clapperton was born in Annan, the son of a surgeon. He received little formal education and at age 13 went to sea. He joined the Royal Navy and saw service in the Mediterranean, the East Indies, and Canada.

Clapperton returned to Scotland on half pay in 1817 and 3 years later met Dr. Walter Oudney, who was preparing an expedition to west-central Africa. Clapperton accepted Oudney's invitation to accompany him, and in 1822, with Maj. Dixon Denham, they set out from Tripoli to cross the Sahara. On Feb. 4, 1823, they reached Lake Chad, being the first Europeans to see it. Thinking it the key to western African river systems, they explored the kingdoms around the lake and discovered the Shari River, which emptied into Lake Chad.

Quarreling over leadership of the party, the three parted, Denham going southeastward and Clapperton and Oudney going west, through the Hausa states, toward the Niger River. Oudney died at Murmur in January 1824, but Clapperton continued, visiting Kano and then Sokoto, where the Fulani Sultan Muhammed Bello refused to allow him to continue on to the Niger, only 150 miles away. Bello, however, was friendly to Clapperton and expressed interest in developing trade with Britain. Clapperton and Denham met near Lake Chad and returned to England on June 1, 1825.

Only 3 months later Clapperton left again on a second expedition, this time starting from the Bight of Benin and traveling through Yoruba lands in what is now western Nigeria. He crossed the Niger River near Boussa and reached Kano by July 1826. At Sokoto, Clapperton found that Sultan Bello had become suspicious of British imperialism and refused to enter into agreement with him. Clapperton became ill, and the failure of his expedition helped destroy him. He died on April 13, 1827, near Sokoto. Clapperton's belief that the Niger emptied into the Atlantic at the Bight of Benin was proved by his servant, Richard Lander, in a later expedition.