Johann Ludwig Burckhardt Biography

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Biography

Johann Ludwig Burckhardt (1784-1817) was a Swiss-born, British-sponsored explorer of the Near East and Africa who anticipated the great explorers of the 19th century.

Johann Ludwig Burckhardt was born in Lausanne and grew up in his ancestral city, Basel. After study at the universities of Leipzig and Göttingen, he went to England in 1806. A letter from the anthropologist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach introduced him to Sir Joseph Banks, the moving spirit in the Association for Promoting the Discovery of the Interior Parts of Africa.

Failing to find other employment, Burckhardt offered his services to the "African Association" for an attempt to penetrate the Moslem-dominated central and western Sudan, and he was accepted. To prepare himself, Burckhardt went to Cambridge, where he studied Arabic, attended lectures on science and medicine, and adopted Arabian costume.

Burckhardt left England for Aleppo, Syria, in 1809. At a safe distance from the intended scene of his endeavors, he perfected himself in Arabic and in Moslem customs. As a test of his disguise, he made three journeys, traveling as the poorest of Arabs, sleeping on the ground, and eating with the camel drivers.

His apprenticeship completed, Burckhardt journeyed to Cairo, became the first modern European to visit Petra, and wrote an account of his journeys for the association. As no westbound caravan was available at Cairo, Burckhardt followed the Nile southward, hoping to reach Dongola. After he had traveled over a thousand miles by donkey, insurrectionaries blocked him less than a hundred miles from his goal.

Burckhardt then returned to Isna and decided to follow the caravan route over the Nubian Desert and cross the Red Sea. He crossed from Suakin to Jidda and explored the northeast coast of the Red Sea. His report on the Hejaz and the holy cities of Islam was the fullest and most accurate then available in Europe.

In 1815 Burckhardt returned to Cairo, suffering from the dysentery which had cut short his Arabian explorations. Burckhardt wrote up his later journals, continued to collect manuscripts and antiquities, and, to escape the plague, made a 2-month journey to the Sinai Peninsula, where he took notes on manuscripts at the Mount Sinai monastery. He also traced the Gulf of Aqaba.

In late 1817 Burckhardt's illness recurred. He died at Cairo on October 15 as he was preparing to join a caravan for Timbuktu. "Sheikh Ibrahim," as the Moslems knew him, was buried with Islamic rites.