

**THE NEGROLAND OF THE ARABS
EXAMINED AND EXPLAINED; OR,
AN INQUIRY INTO THE EARLY
HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY OF
CENTRAL AFRICA, PP. 1-141**

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The Negroland of the Arabs Examined and Explained; Or, An Inquiry into the Early History and Geography of Central Africa, pp. 1-141 by William Desborough Cooley

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WILLIAM DESBOROUGH COOLEY

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BY

WILLIAM DESBOROUGH COOLEY.

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1841.

TO SEÑOR

DON PASCUAL DE GAYANGOS.

MY DEAR GAYANGOS,

THE following Essay owes its origin wholly to the extracts from the writings of Ibn Khaldún and Ibn Bařúřah, which you had the kindness to communicate to me. Not only did you occasion the present developement of my speculations, but you have also at all times cheerfully aided me in the researches to which they gave birth; you have placed at my disposal, as it were, your perfect knowledge of the Arabic language, and, from the abundance of your learning, have in some measure made good my deficiency. To whom, then, can this little work be dedicated so justly, as to you? Nor, while acknowledging my obligations, can I forego the pleasure afforded by such an opportunity of expressing towards you the friendship and esteem of

Yours sincerely,

WILLIAM DESBOROUGH COOLEY.

London, March 8, 1841.

PREFACE.

THE following Essay has for its object to establish the early geography of Central Africa on a solid basis. It aims at offering a clear and well-grounded explanation of the geographical descriptions of Negroland, transmitted to us by Arab writers; and, by thus connecting the past with the present, at giving an increased value to the historical information derived from the same sources. The attainment of that end will throw a steady light on the past condition of a country now awakening a general interest. It will enable us to trace some important political revolutions; to discern the nations which have stood forth politically eminent, and to estimate correctly, by means of a lengthened and authentic retrospect, the progress of civilization in Africa.

The task here undertaken has more of novelty in it than may be at first suspected. Hitherto no attempt whatever has been made to explain the Arab geography of Negroland by treating it as a whole, and as the immediate subject of investigation. Yet no department of the wide field of literature stands more in need of critical labour, or appears more justly entitled to it. The Arabs in the Middle Ages were copious and cir-

cumstantial writers, though neither profound nor exact. Geography was one of their favourite studies. The interests of trade and religious zeal led them across the deserts of Northern Africa to Negroland, of which they have left us accounts bearing in every lineament the expression of unaffected sincerity. Yet such has been the difficulty found in recognizing the places described in those accounts, that, up to this day, scarcely any addition to our positive knowledge of Negroland has been derived from the writings of the Arabs.

Ibn S'aíd, a writer of the thirteenth century, has enumerated thirteen nations of Blacks, extending across Africa, from Ghánah in the west, to the Bojá on the shores of the Red Sea in the east. Yet it is not till we arrive at the tenth of these, or Kánem, that we are able to identify satisfactorily the nomenclature of Ibn S'aíd with that of modern geography. The first nine nations towards the west, or nearly three-fourths of the whole, remain undetermined.

The Arab geography of Africa lies, at present, a large but confused heap of materials, into which modern writers occasionally dip their hands, each selecting what appears to serve his purpose, and adapting it to his views by an interpretation as narrow and partial as his mode of inquiry. Modern geographers—D'Anville and Rennell not excepted—have allowed fancied resemblances of sound to lead them far away from fact and the straight path of investigation. They have, for example, unanimously assumed the Kanó of the present day to be the Ghánah of past ages. The disorder introduced into the early geography of Central Africa

by this false method of proceeding, has deprived it of all its value. It seems incapable of combining with the results of modern discovery; and instead of the harmony which ought to subsist between our present information and the ample accounts of Negroland written five or six centuries ago, we find in almost every application of the latter, the jarring consequences of false assumptions.

To give a new value to such confused materials, we must have recourse to a new and improved method of treating them.

The course here followed is, to examine the Arab authors of greatest value, and to develope, as completely as possible, the information found in them, their meaning being collected altogether from internal evidence, and without any regard to extrinsic systems. Where their statements are clear, natural, and consistent, no attempt has been made to interfere with or strain them by arbitrary conjectures. Where, on the other hand, they are obscure, absurd, or contradictory, care has been taken to inquire,—1st, What were the sources or channels of the author's information? 2ndly, How far it must be taken in strictness, or may claim the latitude allowed to the language of ordinary discourse? 3rdly, The state of knowledge, and prevalent geographical systems in the writer's time? 4thly, What portions may be looked upon as original or authentic, and what as founded on inference or surmise?—The point of greatest difficulty, and which demands the utmost care and perspicacity, is to distinguish between the language of experience and that of system; to separate the original information from the supplementary additions

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made to it, for the purpose of filling up or rounding the description, or of reconciling it with theoretical conceptions.

In all parts of the world, and in every age, the human mind moves in a constant cycle. In like stages of its progress it occupies similar positions, and goes through the same round of error. This truth is exemplified in the history of Geography, as well as in that of every other branch of human knowledge. The corrections made in our maps of Africa during the last three centuries; those made by Ptolemy in the geography of the same quarter of the globe, written by Marinus Tyrius; and those of which the great Alexandrian himself stands in need, are nearly all reducible to one common rule. The errors to which systematical geography tends, while it is not as yet founded on science, are so fully shown by experience, that we can safely derive from our knowledge of them a principle of rectification, applicable to all the materials of unscientific geography, presented to our notice, and obviously needing correction. The endeavour to trace errors according to fixed analogies, will at least lead us from mere conjecture towards a rule of reason.

The most vexatious and frequently recurring hindrance in researches of the kind here undertaken, arises from the defects of the Arabic written character, and the uncritical servility of Arab copyists and compilers. In Arabic writing, some of the characters closely resemble one another, and are distinguished only by diacritic points: the vowels likewise are chiefly indicated by points, which, like those of the former