A Journey to Inner Africa
Aslanyan, Anna, Kovalevsky, Egor

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Chapter IV

The Sources of the Nile in Studies,¹ from Herodotus to the Present Day

The Nile, great and mysterious, worshipped by the ancients, who had temples and numerous priests dedicated to it; the Nile that they chose as a symbol of the superior and life-giving Amon-Ra; the Nile that affords life to present-day Egypt and propels it further . . . Had the famous Albuquerque, the Viceroy of Portugal in the 15th century,² indeed put into practice his bold project, diverting the current of the Nile into the Red Sea (which is not as impossible as it is generally thought to be), the entire Egypt would have turned into a desert, with the wind blowing freely and sand-hills racing around. Is it any wonder, then, that this very Nile has been a subject of studies in every age; that all the peoples of Egypt have striven to lift the veil of a river which remains incomprehensible to them; a river that would suddenly, with no apparent reason, at a time when all the other rivers become low, be filled up to its banks, bursting them and reviving the fertility of the exhausted

¹ In 1863, Jules Verne (1828–1905), renowned French writer widely considered the father of science fiction, published his Cinq semaines en ballon, in which he first referred to the study of the sources of the Nile.
² Afonso de Albuquerque, Duke of Goa (1453–1515), Portuguese aristocrat and imperial statesman.
earth, and then, jubilant after its great good deed, would return to its bed again, its waters reaching their usual level? People have searched for the place of birth of this river in every age: in the ancient times, for the sake of religion, wishing to erect temples by its very cradle, and in the modern times, for the sake of science or trade; yet in all times, the searches have been equally futile.

This is what one of the most ancient historians, Herodotus, who tried in every way possible to learn something about the sources of the Nile, says: “Not one either of the Egyptians or of the Libyans or of the Hellenes, who came to speech with me, professed to know anything, except the scribe of the sacred treasury of Athene at the city of Saïs in Egypt. To me however this man seemed not to be speaking seriously when he said that he had certain knowledge of it.” That was but a lie! Herodotus himself, never believing a word the man said, continued his searches. At Elephantine Island he was told that he was to sail up the Nile for another four months to a place occupied by Egyptian colonists and refugees and that half-way to that place there was Meroë, the capital of Ethiopia. Taking into consideration the difficulty of sailing up the Nile from Elephantine to Meroë, where there are endless submerged rocks and rapids along the way, one cannot but believe this account. Further, Herodotus talks of young Libyan adventurers who were magically transported far south, to a big city inhabited by black people; a large river flowed by the city from dawn to dusk, which in this waterless country could be nothing but the Nile. Sweeping aside any magical additions to the tale, we shall see that the account is not too different from those we later obtained from a number of subsequent travelers, including, most recently, d’Arnaud and D’Abbadie. Even more detailed evidence was collected by the scholar Eratosthenes, one of the keepers of the famous Library of Alexandria. Taking advantage of Ptolemy Evergetes’s campaign in Ethiopia in the 3rd century B.C., he traveled much farther up and wrote a minute description of the Nile on his way to Aswan, as we know it now, and back.

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3 Author's note: Herodotus, book II, 28.
4 Eratosthenes of Cyrene (circa 276–195 BCE), Greek scholar and librarian.
5 Ptolemy III Euergetes (284–222 BCE), monarch of the Ptolemaic dynasty in Egypt.
Emperor Nero sent a number of Romans up the Nile, with the particular aim of finding its sources. After a long journey, they reached Ethiopia, whose ruler, upon giving them a very gracious reception, conveyed them to the neighboring kings. Thus they safely reached “wide marshes overgrown with empty bush” whence they could not proceed by land or by barque. “Here,” the travelers say, “we saw two large cliffs, a river rushing with a terrible force from a gorge between them.” The intelligent Roman centurions would have never mistaken that mountain stream for the sources of the Nile, but as we have noted, they could not proceed any farther. That they were telling the truth about the places they had seen was quite confirmed by d’Arnaud’s expedition, which came the farthest up the White Nile; that is, up to those two cliffs—which, in d’Arnaud’s account also, follow wide marshes covered with bush—undoubtedly the same rocks as the ones that stopped the voyage of the intrepid Romans. And so it was not until now, following all the efforts and the deaths of many a traveler, that we reached the places which had already been reached by an expedition in the time of Nero.

I shall forego certain negligible attempts made by the Romans to attain the sources of the Nile, for they added nothing whatsoever to the previously gathered evidence. On the contrary, the inner part of Africa was drifting ever farther apart from the civilized world. It was not until the 10th century that the Arabs appeared here, some coming from Egypt, others from the Arabian shores of the Red Sea; they went far up the Nile, all the way to the Sudan, and in such numbers that they were able to establish entire states, of which Ghana, for instance, was famous for the lavishness and wealth of its court. Abyssinia and Nubia remained Christian countries, and the Arabs were forced to enter into trade dealings with them; yet any accounts provided by the Arab geographers and travelers are confused and full of fairy-tales, similar to those in *One Thousand and One Nights*. Generally, they did not contribute much to science, their studies having been predominantly concerned

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6 Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus (37–68 CE), Roman emperor.
7 Also Wāgadu, a West African imperial formation (circa 800–1200 CE). Earlier, the founders of the Ghana Empire are believed to have resided in western Sudan, where they formed a kingdom.
with astrology and alchemy, for which the Sudan, the foremost land of miracles, had been famous since the ancient times. They changed many names to suit their taste, thus misleading European geographers in some important questions; hence, the Arabic name of the Nile of the Negroes, which present-day scientists resolutely acknowledge to be the Niger, still remains quite mysterious, and it would be much fairer for it to refer to the part of the Nile proper that goes through the land of the negroes.

One of the Arab travelers, however, is to be distinguished here: for the veracity of his accounts, some of which are being confirmed in practice to this day, as well as to show how curiosity, passion for the new—that omnipotent engine of the traveler—can lead him too far once he has stepped onto the slippery road of wanderings. I am talking of Ibn Batuta.8

Abu Abd Allah Muhammad ibn Abd Allah al-Lawati, widely known under the name of Ibn Batuta, went from Tangier to Mecca so as to visit Mohammedan holy men, alive and dead, along the way, being a well-known scholar himself. In Cairo he met Imam Borhan Oddin el-Aaraj, famous in the East for his wisdom and his holy ways of life and even possessed of the power to work miracles.

“I perceive that you are fond of traveling into various countries,” al-Aaraj said to him.

Ibn Batuta “had at that time no intention of traveling into very distant parts,” yet he hesitated to contradict the holy man. “Yes,” he said timidly.

“You must visit my brother Farid Oddin in India, and my brother Rokn Oddin Ibn Zakarya in Sindia, and also my brother Borhan Oddin in China: and, when you see them, present my compliments to them.”9

Ibn Batuta was astonished by such an assignment, yet how could he refuse the most honorable effendi of them all, especially seeing that he himself, Batuta, had expressed his passion for the dangers of travels to far lands? Our traveler gave Oddin his word and kept it most

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faithfully. Moreover, he would not take a straight, well-beaten path to his destination, how difficult soever the path might have been in those days—oh no! Whenever he heard of some miracle occurring out of the way—for instance, the foot of Moses imprinted in stone; or Bulgarian snows, never before seen, and frosts, never before experienced; or indeed, the lavishness of the Tartar court—he would turn off the road and make his way to those places, even though God only knew how far they were; in a word, he became quite an eager traveler.

While in Bulgaria, he heard a lot about Siberia, or the “land of darkness” as he called it, and was about to set off for it, but other travelers distracted him. Batuta tells many stories about Siberia, about its trade and its sable rides, yet he tells of things he has heard rather than seen, and therefore talks nonsense for the most part. Having never seen any Russians either, he has heard that they are a red-headed, garrulous, and treacherous people. It is a pity that we cannot relate here much of his curious tales and adventures, which a traveler is bound to experience in those countries; we cannot do that for we must hasten to our true goal.

Having visited Mecca three times, seen all the three brothers, and presented each with the holy imam’s compliments, Ibn Batuta still was not satisfied; bored of staying at home again, he betook himself to Spain, thence to the coast of Africa, and thence to the Sudan to seek out another of the imam’s brothers, Kawam Oddin, which the former had not even asked him to do.

Upon seeing the Nile (not for the first time, of course), he compares it to other big rivers of the world; which comparison shows him as a man knowledgeable in geography, a subject he studied during his travels; yet his account of the upper reaches of the Nile is so confused as to make the scholar Cooley claim that the river in question is definitely the Niger, even though the Nile is clearly mentioned by its name, and the very description of the people inhabiting the river suffices to confirm that the river in question is the Nile. As we have noted, that was not the first time that scholars confounded the Nile with the Niger, for

no serious reason but predominantly owing to the name “the Nile of the Negroes,” as if the White Nile was anything but the Nile of the Negroes.

This, by the bye, is what Ibn Batuta says.

Having crossed a wide desert, he reached Abu Latin, the first district of the Sudan. “No one is named after his father, but after his maternal uncle; and the sister's son always succeeds to property in preference to the son: a custom I witnessed nowhere else, except among the infidel Hindoos of Malabar.”

The custom has quite survived to this day in a negro tribe known by the name of Homed, or Abu Homed, living not far from Roseires, near the foot-hills—one could say, at the entrance to the land of the negroes in the East Sudan.

The Arab narrator further adds that, while traveling from Abu Latin to Mali, he encountered trees so enormous that an entire caravan could fit inside one of them. Despite the exaggeration, it is clear that he is talking of the baobab, which, as we have already said, grows in abundance near Roseires and along the route to the White Nile. Following this river downstream, Ibn Batuta saw numerous hippopotamuses in its wide inlet, or in a lake. Here, as you can see, Batuta's route is designated with ever more clarity. He sailed from the White Nile into the el-Ghazal river, which in the past everyone recognized—although nowadays few do—as the Nile proper, its bed being wider than that of the White Nile. The el-Ghazal abounds with lakes. Along it—namely, in its upper reaches—lives a negro tribe of which, incidentally, Ibn Batuta writes that they eat people but only those as black as themselves, the whites, in their view, being still unripe and therefore difficult for the stomach to digest.

Thus Batuta is clearly mistaken when he calls the river he followed the Nile.

From thence Batuta betook himself to Tambuktu via Bornu. Bornu must have been much easier to reach in the past, for caravans and travelers very often took that route to Tambuktu and farther, into Inner Africa and to the Niger.

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12 Timbuktu, a city in today's Mali.
13 Borno, in the northeast of today's Nigeria.
Eventually, Batuta must have felt fatigued after 28 years’ wanderings round the world. Having returned to Fez\textsuperscript{14} in 1354, he settled there. I have forgotten to say that he did indeed find the brother of the imam in the Sudan and passed on his compliments, naming Fez as his abode. Let us also mention Abd al-Latif’s\textsuperscript{15} journey to the above-mentioned countries.

Finally, at the end of the 16\textsuperscript{th} century, Portuguese Jesuits living in Abyssinia as missionaries, and especially a Portuguese by the name of Neez,\textsuperscript{16} announced with great pomp their discovery of the sources of the Nile. The scholarly society was so glad to hear of their answer to this important riddle, which so many peoples had spent so many centuries trying to solve, that the glory of the great deed was attributed to them without further investigation; later, however, d’Anville,\textsuperscript{17} followed by many others, disappointed the scholars, claiming that those were the sources not of the Nile but of one of the rivers flowing into the Nile—namely, the Blue River.

Bruce\textsuperscript{18} was to make the same mistake later. An odd fate was to be-tide the man, showing all the vanity of our fame, all the fickle and petty nature of the public, who would rather laugh at a traveler’s idle story or an error than take pride in the fame of their fellow-countryman. It is time the name of Bruce was displayed in the glorious light it quite deserves and cited alongside the names of the most famous travelers of recent years, such as Burnes, Conolly, Lander, Ross,\textsuperscript{19} &c.

Bruce had been blessed with the same relentless will-power and the strength of character that allows one to never surrender in the face of catastrophe—the same dedication, quick wit, and patience as the mentioned travelers—but in comparison with them, he was better prepared to accomplish the chosen aim and had more luck; they paid with their

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{14} A city in the north of Morocco.
  \item \textsuperscript{15} Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi (1162–1231), medieval Muslim scholar and traveler.
  \item \textsuperscript{16} A mistake by Kovalevsky; most likely he means Pedro Páez Xaramillo (1564–1622), a Spanish missionary in Ethiopia who described the source of the Blue Nile.
  \item \textsuperscript{17} Jean Baptiste Bourguignon d’Anville (1697–1782), French geographer and cartographer.
  \item \textsuperscript{18} James Bruce (1730–94), British explorer and writer.
  \item \textsuperscript{19} Alexander Burnes (1805–41) and Arthur Conolly (1807–42), British military explorers of Central Asia; Richard Lemon Lander (1804–34), British explorer of Africa; (most likely) John Ross (1777–1856), British explorer of the Arctic.
\end{itemize}
lives for their unreserved commitment to science or to political projects of their governments, whereas he returned to his homeland . . . only to be greeted with mockery and ungratefulness.

James Bruce was a descendant of a good and wealthy family in Northern England.\(^{20}\) As a mere school-boy, he would be inflamed at the thought of the sources of the Nile and their discovery, a thought that never left him wherever he went. Traveling in Europe, he aimed all his studies, all his inquiries at the achievement of his goal. He had a sojourn in Holland, where the school of languages was flourishing at the time, and became an eager student of the Arabic language, as well as of mathematical sciences and astronomy. In 1762 he gladly accepted the post of Consul in Algeria, where he hoped to be closer to the object of his explorations and, most importantly, to learn colloquial Arabic and some of the dialects of Abyssinia. Yet haunted as he was by his thought, Bruce did not remain in Algeria for long; having visited Barbary,\(^ {21}\) he went to Cairo. In those days a journey through Egypt was not easy, the principal obstacle being the government itself, untrusting and avaricious; however, Bruce was fortunate in his fight with it and was soon able to set forth. In Keneh he parted with the Nile and traveled to Cosseir through the desert. Alas, here we must forego a great many curious things seen by Bruce. From Cosseir he betook himself to the Emerald Isle,\(^ {22}\) and then to Jedu,\(^ {23}\) from whence he set off for the Abyssinian coast, going to Massau.\(^ {24}\) Despite having letters of recommendation for the governor of the place, he nearly fell victim to suspiciousness, but he was saved by the firmness of his character. Thence his journey in Abyssinia commenced. Having overcome the obstacles presented by the Christian ruler of Gondar,\(^ {25}\) he reached Alata,\(^ {26}\) the second cataract of the Blue River, which he always mistook for the Nile proper, talking of it with rapture. “It was a most magnificent sight, that ages, added to the greatest length of human life, would not deface or eradicate from Mr. Bruce’s

\(^{20}\) Kovalevsky mistakes Scotland for the north of England.
\(^{21}\) The North African coast.
\(^{22}\) Most likely one of the Brothers Isles (Al Ikhwa Isles) in the Red Sea.
\(^{23}\) Jeddah, a city in today’s Saudi Arabia on the Red Sea.
\(^{24}\) Massawa, a city in Eritrea on the Red Sea.
\(^{25}\) A city and a region in Ethiopia.
\(^{26}\) A tributary of the Blue Nile near the rapids.
memory; it struck him with a kind of stupor, and a total oblivion of where he was, and of every other sublunary concern.”

Then, upon learning that the Galla had taken over Gondar, he had to go and pay his humble respects to Fasil,28 the savage ruler of the half-naked tribe. Notwithstanding a bad reception, Bruce managed, however, to procure the patronage and protection of this new ruler of Abyssinia too, and then he resumed the journey to attain his goal, the goal of his whole life. This time, attain it he did, or so he believed, and he was happy—as happy as a man whose hopes and ideas have all come true at last; and it is not mockery that his rapturous description of the sources of the Nile should provoke but rather sympathy. Here is what Bruce is reported to have said, reveling in his triumph:

It is easier to guess than to describe the situation of Mr. Bruce’s mind at that moment—standing in that spot which had baffled the genius, industry, and inquiry of both ancients and moderns, for the course of near three thousand years. Kings had attempted this discovery at the head of armies, and each expedition was distinguished from the last, only by the difference of the numbers which had perished, and agreed alone in the disappointment which had uniformly, and without exception, followed them all. Fame, riches, and honor, had been held out for series of ages to every individual of those myriads these princes commanded, without having produced one man capable of gratifying the curiosity of his sovereign, or wiping off this stain upon the enterprise and abilities of mankind, or adding this desideratum for the encouragement of geography.29

A traveler who has endured so many tribulations on his journey, presently standing at the sources of the Nile, can almost be forgiven for delivering such a rapturous speech. True, that was not the real Nile, yet Bruce took it for the real thing, believing in his heart of hearts to have discovered it, while nearly everyone shared his erroneous view at

27 Samuel Shaw, An Interesting Narrative of the Travels of James Bruce, Esq., into Abyssinia, to Discover the Source of the Nile (London, 1790), 247.
28 Fasil, Ethiopian nobleman of Oromo descent, governor of Damot; important figure in the Ethiopian dynastic crisis of the 18th century.
29 Shaw, Interesting Narrative, 280.
that time, and so it is no wonder that he gushed out quite a stream of exaltation. Some, including Cooley, will ask “Why, then, did he keep silent about the sources of the Blue River discovered by the Jesuits?” Firstly, it is possible that Bruce did not know about that, for it had occurred 200 years before his time; secondly, there are so many streams and little rivers flowing into the lake and the inhabitants of those parts treasure their fame so much, proud to be in possession of the sources of the Nile, that it could easily have happened that the Jesuits took one river for the Nile proper, while Bruce took another for it. As for the truthful nature of Bruce’s accounts, at least of the principal ones, those concerning his journey through Abyssinia were fully acknowledged by travelers enjoying everyone’s trust, such as Lord Valencia and Mr. Salt,\(^{30}\) to say nothing of the others; and with regard to Sennaar, Nubia, and Egypt (Bruce returned via the Peninsula of Sennaar), I was able to quite convince myself, while traveling there, of the observant and precise nature of the facts related by this learned traveler.

Society seemed not to have noticed these explorations; particularly affronted by one of the stories Bruce told, it mocked him, which alone sufficed to subvert all the merits of the book.

This is how it went. Bruce, having already reached Abyssinia, had scarcely left Axum\(^ {31}\) when he saw three men, half-naked, their aspect provoking extreme suspicion; they were chasing a cow and soon caught up with it; one of them delivered such a strong blow to the cow’s head that it fell down, whereupon he grabbed it by its horns, another man, by its front legs, while the third commenced to cut out soft lumps of flesh from under its skin, having made an incision in it. A piece of beef-steak obtained from each side, he covered the wound with skin, applied some soil to its edges, made the cow stand up, and drove it onward.

Such a method of obtaining beef-steak from a live animal is, of course, not quite natural; however, we do not know if the men did not

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\(^{30}\) George Annesley, 2nd Earl of Mountnorris (1770–1844), known as Viscount Valentia (1793–1816), British aristocrat and traveler; explored the Red Sea region. Henry Salt (1780–1827), artist and amateur antiquarian; Viscount Valentia’s secretary on the eastern tour.

\(^{31}\) A city in northern Ethiopia, the historical capital of the Aksumite Empire, which ruled the region from the 4th century BCE to the 10th century CE.
wish to mock the master of the cow or take revenge on him. Bruce merely needed to say a word by way of explanation; yet he—already prepared for such cruelty to some extent, having seen that many in Abyssinia eat raw meat, he therefore perhaps believed there could be some who, possessed of a refined taste, preferred the flesh of a live animal to that of a dead one—he himself appears to have been mistaken. Also, he had already witnessed so many miraculous and incredible things whose veracity he had confirmed by touch, so to speak, that he readily believed this extraordinary folly of the Abyssinian taste, too.

Among the latest travelers to the upper reaches of the White and Blue Nile, the greatest number of facts about these territories and the adjacent lands were provided by Caillaud, who was in the service of Mohammed Ali and took part in the conquest of the East Sudan. He went farther than anyone who had visited the East Sudan theretofore, namely, to the Singhe Mountains. The only one to later approach this point was Russegger. The journey of the latter and that of Rüppell were important in the facts they gathered with regard to natural sciences. Having already mentioned d’Arnaud and D’Abbadie, I shall add to them the name of Werne, d’Arnaud’s companion, who contradicts him in every detail, whilst foregoing as irrelevant Pückler-Muskau and others, who never once ventured beyond the lands already explored quite well. However, allow me to pay special attention to a recently published description, written in Arabic, of a journey to the Sudan, by Sheikh Zain al-Abidin, a conscientious and inquisitive man, albeit at times inclined to superstitions—a trait inseparable from the nature of an Arab—which often presented him with perverse notions of things. Indeed, the very object of his journey was to study alchemy in the Sudan, a place generally famous for its magic in the East. His Journey was translated from Arabic into Turkish and from Turkish into German

33 Author’s note: I reached 1.5° farther than he had.
34 The Semien Mountains.
35 Author’s note: Joseph Russegger, Reisen in Europa, Asien und Africa. . . , Stuttgart: Schweizerbart, 1846.
36 Wilhelm Peter Eduard Simon Rüppell (1794–1884), German explorer and naturalist who visited Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia.
by Rosen, the Grand Dragoman of the Embassy of Prussia at the Ottoman Porte.

The sources of the Nile were long confounded with the Niger, many maintaining until very recently that it was the same river. Thus the dutiful and hard-working author of the book _Égypte Ancienne_, Champollion-Figeac, wrote as early as in 1846, “It is believed to be quite true that travelers used to reach Cairo from Tambuktu, a big city in Inner Africa, and since this last is situated near the Niger, it is therefore concluded that either this large river is the Nile itself, flowing from Tambuktu to Egypt, or that there is another river between the Nile and the Niger, yet undiscovered, which serves as a means of communication between the Niger and the Nile.”

The discovery of the mouth of the Niger leaves no doubt whatsoever about the unique nature of this river, which has been disputed for so long, first in favor of the Senegal, and then of the Nile; as for the travelers reaching Cairo from Tambuktu, that would only be true if by “travelers” M. Champollion meant very few Arab missionaries or Mecca pilgrims, some of whom do, indeed, come from Tambuktu, although they hardly ever reach Cairo, instead turning off the Nile to go to Sawakin or to Cosseir; we saw one such and conversed with him about the Nile at length. The _hajji_ insisted—confirming what I had never doubted, having read about the travels of mediaeval Arabs—that pilgrims go from Tambuktu to Kordofan, via Darfour and Bornu.

As numerous parties strove to reach the sources of the Nile—whether it be governments or expeditions under protection of army detachments or brave individuals, many of whom sacrificed their lives for the sake of their devotion to science—a great many travelers, encouraged by the enterprising and generous London African Society, set forth in various directions from Cairo, Tripoli, Maroc, and Tangier toward the sources of the Niger, which had always been believed to be close, if not related, to the sources of the Nile; alas, very few of them returned! Most

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39 Suakin, a city port on the Red Sea in Sudan.
perished of fever, while some fell victim to the cruelty or suspiciousness of the natives. The history of their travels is a veritable Odyssey of contemporary times, similar to the history of travels to Central Asia, where, it must be added, the primacy in the glorious field of geographical discoveries does not belong to the English alone. The names of Mungo Park and Clapperton, along with his loyal companion Lander—a comrade rather than a mere servant, who was the first to put the mouth of the Niger on the map—these names shine there with glory as bright as those of Burnes, Conolly, Muravyev, and others do here.

I mention the sources of the Niger not without intention; gathering the facts in the course of my travels there, rereading the accounts of other travelers, contemplating the subject, and considering every possible aspect of it, I have convinced myself from all the evidence that the sources of the Nile are, indeed, not far from those of the Niger; and I propose a new route to the discovery of both, a route that, in my view, is more passable. I say “propose” with sadness, for I myself am unlikely to ever find any relief from the diseases that I have brought from my travels to distant lands, especially contagious African fever, and . . . But enough of me! There are many people in God’s world who—being courageous, healthy, and capable—know not in which direction to apply their activities; so here is a glorious aim the equal of which you can hardly find in our day and age: an aim that would open up all kinds of prospects, requiring great audacity and courage, patience and profound research. The world would be enriched not only by scientific discoveries but also by an example of heroic dedication. Here is the route I propose.

You have to go from Cairo, via Khartoum and Sennaar, to Fazoglu. This route presents no difficulties except for the climate and means of travel, there being no obstacles from people; you become accustomed to said difficulties; and, when all is done, what are they? The heat attaining 40 degrees Reaumur at high noon, camel rides, the crossing of the Great Nubian Desert, which at any rate can be circumvented by those

40 Mungo Park (1771–1806) and Hugh Clapperton (1788–1827), British explorers of West Africa.
41 Nikolai Nikolaevich Muravyev (Karsskii, 1794–1866), Russian officer; made a trip to Khiva in 1819–20.
42 50°C.
who do not hasten to their goal. In two or three months, you shall be at Fazoglu—naturally, not during the rainy season, for you cannot survive it unless you accustom yourself to it in advance. Henceforth, it is a four days’ journey to Khassan, where you shall, so to speak, be in the centre of the negro population, strike up relationships with all the meleks of the area, and make friends with them by means of small gifts and kind treatment. Then you will turn to jellab Arabs: do not become friendly with them, for they are an unpleasant lot; always keep yourself high above them, buying any favors for money only. Among them, especially those who come from Benishangul, you shall find many people who have been to Fadasi. I have already described the difficulties of going to Fadasi, but for a brave traveler, especially when aided by friendly meleks, they are insignificant. The most important thing is to decide which of the jellabs to entrust yourself to; yet whomever you have decided upon, call someone of the authorities to be witness to your deal: in that case the family of the guide shall, as it were, remain as a pledge of your safety; as for the word of an Arab or his honesty, you should never rely upon it.

In Fadasi you shall find people from all over Africa; introducing yourself as an Arab (you must, needless to say, learn Arabic in advance), you shall meet and make friends with Galla chiefs, thus acquiring some initial patronage and learning their language somewhat; neither task being difficult. The journey thence shall depend entirely upon chance and upon your luck: you shall make your way to wherever friendship, benefit, or the connexions of your patrons shall take you. While the object of the journey may be discussed confidentially, you must use any excuse possible to keep to your chosen direction. Finally, as you wander from one patron to another, and having gone far inside the country—for instance, to Tambuktu—you can introduce yourself as a native of Guiana and then proceed thereto, now quite openly. The title of a hajji, a worshipper of Mohammed’s tomb, shall bring you some respect from the Arabs, whom you have to fear most of all; as for the negroes, as I have already said, it suffices to acquire patronage in Fadasi, and then they will pass you from one onto another as a welcome guest, especially if you learn their customs. Doubt not, the proposed
route is also difficult and dangerous, and yet it seems to me that it is still far easier than all the others. The worst dangers along the way are African fever and dysentery, which no-one new to these parts is able to protect oneself from, but there are medicines that can relieve your sufferings, albeit temporarily; I myself traveled for three months while ill of a fever of a most painful variety, halting only when completely deserted by energy. And yet, what countries you shall visit! The whole of Inner Africa, where even the bravest of travelers have never trodden; this, of course, being the most certain way to discover the sources of the Nile and the Niger, which are too famous among the natives for you not to hear about them, even without any inquiries on your part. Suffice it to recall the numerous countries that Ibn Batuta visited, traveling along the route I have described.43

Yet another note: it is Bahr-el-Abiad, the White River—or the White Nile, as we call it, which flows south as far as its course is known—that has recently been mistaken for the Nile proper; yet Bahr-el-Ghazel, which merges with it, is both larger and wider at its mouth than the White River; it has scarcely been explored; its water is too unwholesome and was pernicious for d’Arnaud’s expedition, which did attempt to go up this river; its current is so quiet that it is barely noticeable; it sprawls itself in immense reaches and lakes abundant with fish: it is of those that Ibn Batuta must have spoken. El-Ghazel has its source in the mountains of Darfour. So having answered one question—that it is not the Blue River but the White River that constitutes the Nile—one has to answer another: namely, which of the two tributaries is indeed the White Nile, the so-called Bahr-el-Abiad or Bahr-el-Ghazel?

43 Author’s note: It was not until after my return to St. Petersburg that I learned from foreign journals about a French traveler, one Dr. Raffenel, who decided to cross the African Isthmus, west to east, between lat. 10° and 15°. I have no doubt that everyone is avidly awaiting any news of this hero of science, who follows in the footsteps of so many fallen predecessors with patience, firmness, and self-denying devotion worthy of the glorious object he has dedicated himself to. Following some news sent by him from the peaks of the Senegal in 1846, another letter has recently been received from Koghe, the capital of Kaarta, dated the 3rd of May 1847. Many scholarly societies and the government of France have taken an active part in his enterprise.

Editor’s note: Anne-Jean-Baptiste Raffenel (1809–58), French colonial officer and explorer of Africa.