



## **A Labyrinth of Kingdoms: 10,000 Miles through Islamic Africa**

*Steve Kemper*

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In 1849 Heinrich Barth joined a small British expedition into unexplored regions of Islamic North and Central Africa. One by one his companions died, but he carried on alone, eventually reaching the fabled city of gold, Timbuktu. His five-and-a-half-year, 10,000-mile adventure ranks among the greatest journeys in the annals of exploration, and his discoveries are considered indispensable by modern scholars of Africa.

Yet because of shifting politics, European preconceptions about Africa, and his own thorny personality, Barth has been almost forgotten. The general public has never heard of him, his epic journey, or his still-pertinent observations about Africa and Islam; and his monumental five-volume *Travels and Discoveries in North and Central Africa* is rare even in libraries. Though he made his journey for the British government, he has never had a biography in English. Barth and his achievements have fallen through a crack in history.

## A Labyrinth of Kingdoms: 10,000 Miles through Islamic Africa Details

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Author : Steve Kemper

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# From Reader Review *A Labyrinth of Kingdoms: 10,000 Miles through Islamic Africa* for online ebook

## Marcus says

This is a fantastic tale of a wild exploration through Africa. Heinrich Barth was a man's man, he was letters, arts and science personified. He wasn't without flaws, but he was clever, rugged and relentless. Perhaps most admirable is that he managed to do what most people never can and he took everyone he met on their own merits.

Kemper detracts from it a little from the journey with his frequent need to editorialize on the political correctness and supposed motives of the various characters in the book, but *A Labyrinth of Kingdoms* is very much worth reading despite that. The work of whittling 5 long volumes down to one book is pretty impressively done and Kemper does a pretty good job of incorporating sources outside the journals to give the big picture.

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## Jeff says

Half expected this to be boring, but it read like some kind of epic adventure Western with Barth as this ahead-of-his-time, sympathetic post-colonial Lawrence of Arabia-type explorer, detached from and opposed to all the mainstream paradigms of colonial, White Man's Burden England of his time.

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## Rex Bradshaw says

This accessible book permits the casual reader to survey and enjoy Heinrich Barth's extraordinary, almost forgotten adventures in Africa without slogging through the explorer's own five volume account. Kemper provides a well-rounded picture of Barth and the Africa that enthused him and almost killed him many times over. Thankfully, Kemper does not sensationalize the events or excessively lionize his protagonist; if his prose is unremarkable, the story has enough inherent interest to satisfy most readers. Likewise, if Kemper becomes at times unnecessarily emphatic about distancing himself and Barth from distasteful racial-cultural attitudes prevailing in nineteenth century Europe, it is understandable and not too much of a distraction. To read *A Labyrinth of Kingdoms* is to open a portal to a lost world, a rich and mysterious Africa already hurting and soon to be ripped apart by imperial powers. That Barth did not anticipate the coming storm is sobering; that he, like so few Europeans of his time, genuinely respected and honored the Africans he studied is heartening. Kemper argues that this determined and resilient explorer's place is not in the shadow of self-aggrandizing celebrities like Stanley, but in the foremost rank of the great scientists and pathfinders of history.

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## Yasmin says

Really quite amazing! Dr Heinrich Barth was extraordinary scientist, explorer and as a man, for his time and for later explorers. It is true that I have never heard of this man before and likely still many others outside of

the study of science. It was one of the rare scientists/explorers of the nineteenth century who put science before all else. And yet far from being constantly with his head down in large tomes of scientific matters he engaged with the people of Central Africa. In fact he truly believed in his mission to create trade between nations, not imperialism, not colonies or empires, but nations peacefully trading and learning from each other. Amazing when one has been lead to believe that when many European nations in the 19th century had dominance and imperialism on their agendas. But as a true man of science Dr Barth left politics to the politicians and that also meant leaving the majority of emotions behind as well! Although by no means always a cold hearted man, he did strive to curb his feelings in order to work, which served him in good stead to survive many hardships including illness, hunger, being taken hostage and having next to no money to trade and so live from one day to the next. A man who was able to achieve so much by going over land to Timbuktu tragically died at a young age of forty-four. He had much riches to share with the world outside of Africa with language studies, religious studies and an indepth history of Africa, which many people for a very long time disregarded. Indeed I think it is only recently that an actual acknowledge of Africa having grand and unique civilizations that existed long before any explorer or even Islamic influence reached the continent outside of Egypt. Despite Dr Barth's explorations his methods were constantly full of controversy and sadly because of the popular culture of high adventure all personalised in future and current (of the times) exploration accounts Dr Barth's writings and methods were largely ignored by the general reading populace. He was recognised eventually by geographical and other scientist insitutes, but as the author said it was too late. After that his name and achievements fell from history. This is a great book that brings Dr Barth back to light, not only for people interested in science, geography, but for people interested in exploration and Africa pre-Colonial times.

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## **Kelsea Dawn Hume says**

I won this book through First Reads.

Steve Kemper pulls from obscurity an often overlooked explorer, Heinrich Barth. Barth, a grumpy German scientist working for the British government, ventured deep into Africa, often traveling without other Europeans. His commitment to science, and his relative lack of jingoism, make him seem more in line with modern sentiments than 19th century European politics.

Kemper's treatment of Barth is personal and detailed, bringing to life a likable character, and a host of explorers and locals with distinctly entertaining personalities. Due to Barth's extreme interest in the people around him, this book is full of information about the various kingdoms he visited, and their people, customs, and history. Kemper also explains why Barth was quickly dropped from the pantheon of European Explorers of Africa. I loved it.

READ IF:

- 1) You like books about explorers, but find 19th century racism to be off-putting.
  - 2) You're interested in the history and cultures of Africa before Europeans came in full-force to screw things up.
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## **Carol Smith says**

If you love history, adventure, cultural explorations, and singular personalities, this is the tale for you. It's a superb account of Heinrich Barth, a mid-19th century German explorer who undertook an arduous five+ year journey through Northern and Central Islamic Africa.

An alternative subtitle for this immensely entertaining book could easily be "The Greatest Adventurer You Never Heard Of", except that Barth himself would severely rebuke you for considering such a moniker. Barth saw himself as a scientist first and foremost. He was a scientist - a remarkably progressive one for the mid-19th century - but he also had a big time, old-fashioned case of wanderlust, always hankering for "new countries and new people", and places "never trodden by European foot." It's a ripping good story with serious film potential.

Kemper's straightforward, highly readable prose made me feel as if I was a member of Barth's caravan, riding right alongside him. Barth examined the languages, history, geography, and cultures he encountered in extraordinary detail and with great respect, but he also displayed the innate curiosity essential in any traveler wishing to develop a truer understanding of the world. As Barth's knowledge of this greatly understudied part of the world expands, ours does as well.

As with most other such books, I found the accompanying maps to be of insufficient detail. Not to worry - just plunk your laptop to one side and follow along on Google Earth, adding placemarks and looking at regional photos as Barth moves on to each new destination. You won't find all the places he visited on a modern map, but you'll find enough to feel like you're right there with him, approaching Jebel Idinin or entering Timbuktu.

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## **Ginger Gritz says**

This a good story and well written but he meanders more than the explorers in the book.

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## **Ian says**

A wonderfully written and long overdue tribute to a man who fully deserves to be acknowledged as one of the best explorers of all time.

The five and a half years that Heinrich Barth spent exploring north Africa resulted in a mass of scientific, cultural, political, and social data that is still being used today and documents peoples and a way of life that was soon subsumed beneath the yoke of European Imperialism.

Barth was in many ways a man ahead of his time, more enlightened and less beholden of the racial and cultural views of his peers and general European society of the time, and above all an overriding obsession with gaining knowledge and scientific accuracy. Not only did he document the various landscapes and geographical features of the region, but he was also a gifted linguist who strove to learn the language of each tribal group he encountered in order to converse more fully with the inhabitants and thereby gain much more intimate details of everyday life than by merely observing.

Although not making any dramatic or headlining grabbing discoveries like other European explorers, what Barth documented was arguably more worthy and valuable to the world of learning than any temporary

triumph and has had a longer lasting impact as an invaluable source of material on a region about to undergo massive change.

It is therefore even more unfortunate that he never received the levels of adulation given to other explorers such as Burton, Speke, Baker, and Livingstone. One reason for this is that Barth was a German (Prussian) on an expedition mostly funded and organised by the English, and during his travels relations between the two nations deteriorated to the point of mistrust and outright paranoia. On his return Barth was at first feted by the establishment but due to his somewhat prickly and unsocial demeanour and habit of writing for a professional audience rather than a general one, as well as issues arising from the expedition and professional jealousy from some of his contemporaries, he quickly found himself out of favour with both the academic community and the general public.

It is pleasing then that Steve Kemper has not only resurrected Barth from obscurity but also restored him into the pantheon of great 19th century explorers. The book has a fluid narrative and captures the sense of the hardship and suffering that Barth endured in the name of scientific discovery. Anybody with an interest in exploration should definitely have this book in their collection.

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### **Roger DeBlanck says**

Heinrich Barth is an oftentimes forgotten explorer, but author Steve Kemper gives Barth's discoveries and his significant contributions to science the recognition they deserve. In 1853 Barth became the first European to reach Timbuktu and live to recount his journey. Starting in Tripoli, he headed south and crossed the treacherous Sahara Desert before traveling west across northern Africa to enter the fabled golden city of Timbuktu. His observations throughout the kingdoms of Bornu, Songhai, Fezzan, and many others worked to counteract the ethnocentric view that Africa was an uncivilized and barbaric continent. Barth saw Africa and its people in all their vibrancy, diversity, complexity, history, culture, and intelligence. He understood Africa as possessing the same human flaws and glories as Europe, and he looked at Africa's sophistication as vital to learn from and not something merely to possess. He also recognized the greatness of Islam as it was practiced by many of the learned and scholarly men he met, not by those few who corrupted the Prophet's message and teachings in order to excuse their violence and inhumanity. Kemper chronicles the wonder, thrills, and dangers of Barth's adventures in immersive fashion. He creates a mood and atmosphere for each of the places Barth visits and gives character to the individuals he encounters. This was an enchanting book that leaves you admiring Barth's achievements.

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### **Andrew says**

Try to picture a European toward the end of the nineteenth century espousing the concept that sub-Saharan Africa already has a culture and civilization, and doesn't need European "guidance" to help them past "savagry".

A radical concept at the time. Perhaps that's one reason why so few folks have heard of Heinrich Barth or know of his 5 year journey of exploration and discovery from Chad to Timbuktu. Nor had I, at least not until I had read Steve Kemper's "A Labyrinth of Kingdoms: 10,000 Miles Through Islamic Africa".

The book is much shorter than Barth's 5 volume scientific description of his travels. However, its 370 pages (plus introduction, end notes, and bibliography) still provide an in-depth look at his trip, along with a little about his years before and after his African adventures. It took me awhile to get through the book, although

that was more a factor of my availability than the readability of the book (which apparently was definitely more readable than Barth's allegedly dry description of his travels).

I would recommend the book to anyone interested in African studies, or European colonialism (as preparatory material), or Islamic / European relations, or just anyone that would like to read a travelogue not confined by modern day tools and thoughts.

DISCLOSURE: This book was provided to the reviewer free of charge through the Goodreads.com FirstReads program.

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### **Sean says**

In my quest this year to delve back into some more non-fiction reading, this book jumped out at me from the library display. (I'm sure I just mixed a metaphor or two there.) This was a fascinating read about a previously unknown - to me, at least - explorer and era of the history of exploration. I confess that before this book, what I knew about the exploration of Africa during the 18th and 19th centuries was limited to Heart of Darkness and Stanley and Livingstone, only one of which really counts in terms of history.

A Labyrinth of Kingdoms not only sheds light on a little-known German explorer (acting on behalf of the British), but also shines the spotlight on norther Africa, an area that often is overshadowed by the more glamorous jungles of central Africa or the plains of southern Africa. Reminding readers that this, too, was once unexplored territory to Europeans, traveled through only at great cost, the author does an excellent job of chronicling the toils of the German explorer Barth and his fellow companions.

My only complaint was that the author does perhaps too thorough a job, and sometimes the narrative bogs down much as the expedition itself bogged down in various towns. Overall though this was as entertaining as it was educational.

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### **Heather Fineisen says**

Here is what I appreciate about this book by Steve Kemper--I am constantly referencing it in other readings, fiction, non-fiction, the news. This is what makes a book a great addition to a personal library. In addition, this is a well researched and well written biography not only of Heinrich Barth, but the land as well. Kemper shares significant facts about the issue of slavery and how it evolved from the cultures he encounters. A great story, and a great truth that you will find yourself referencing and recollecting.

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### **Michelle says**

Utterly captivating! It's hard to put to words how incredible this book is...I simply loved every page of it. The people, the environment, the danger, are all woven into an incredible journey. My son read the highlights and keeps asking when he can read it too! Thanks to Goodreads for my copy!

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## **David Cavaco says**

Fascinating account of Saharan and African exploration in the mid-nineteenth century. German explorer and academic Heinrich Barth travels to lands not seen by Europeans in the quest of knowledge. Sadly, his adventures and achievements have been forgotten by the masses due to many factors but I am glad that this book neatly tells us about this incredible journey. Would have been nice if it contained better and more detailed maps.

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## **Justin Heinze says**

A journey of the first explorers through the dusty, foggy, murderous, primeval deserts of Islamic Africa. You will be left in awe not so much of what was achieved but of the sheer bravery it took to achieve it. While what came after Barth is well known - the disease of colonialism - Africa could scarcely have had a more careful, curious, intellectual first emissary from Europe. His travels were essentially a flip of a coin; if his expedition caught the wrong tribe in the wrong mood, he would be brutally killed. Perhaps more important than Barth's bravery, however, is the magic of the desert, the magic of the good people who have always lived there, as though a certain stretch of desert were the only world that ever existed.

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