

**EXCURSIONS**  
**IN**  
**THE MEDITERRANEAN.**

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**ALGIERS AND TUNIS.**

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**BY**  
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*navibus atque*  
*Quadrigris petimus bene vivere :*  
*HOR. EP.*

**IN TWO VOLUMES.**

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TO

SIR WILLIAM GELL,

M.A. F.R.S. F.S.A., &c. &c.

IN ADMIRATION OF

HIS TALENTS, AND LEARNING,

THESE PAGES ARE DEDICATED

BY

THE AUTHOR.

*Tunis,*  
*March 28, 1833.*

# Excursions in the Mediterranean

(pages 140-156)

Late in the afternoon our brig anchored in the roads, when I went on board, and on the following morning made sail for Sfakkus. It had been our intention to proceed from Mahadeah to El Jemm, which is not distant from it, and where is to be seen a magnificent amphitheatre ; but the absence of all the civil authorities, and the unwillingness of the Agha to further our views, by furnishing us with horses and an escort, obliged us to abandon this plan, and to postpone our visit till after our arrival at Sfakkus.

Having passed by Burj Salekhtah, distant eight miles from Mahadeah, supposed by some persons to have been the Turris Hannibalis, and by the conspicuous fort called Burj el Kadijah, built on Ras Kapoodiah, or Caput Vada, we entered the boghaz of the Kerkines.\* This channel of the Kerkines is about one mile wide, with from two to three fathoms of water, and then immediately shoals, both towards the main and the islands, to three or four feet. This dreaded passage actually rendered our captain frantic from fear and despair ; though, as I before stated, we had on board an experienced pilot, who for no less a period than thirty years had been constantly engaged to conduct vessels along the whole of this coast. The Kerkines, or properly speaking the Kerguenah, were known to ancient geographers as the *Circincae insulae*. They are three in number, Shraga to the east, Ramlah, which is the largest, in the centre, and Gherba to the west; they are all extremely low, and are covered with date and other fruit trees.

On the evening of the 13th we anchored in Sfakkus roads. This town, the ancient *Taphrae* or *Taphura*, is said to derive its name, **اسفقص** from the great quantity of **فقوص** or cucumbers, which grow near it. It is surrounded by a wall, and presents from the sea the usual gay, white, and clean exterior of most Moorish towns. In the sixteenth century it was alternately taken and retaken by Dorgooth and Doria. Its present population may amount to about twelve thousand souls, who now pursue quiet and peaceable occupations ; though not many years ago they were mostly all pirates.

Jelooli, one of the richest individuals in the Beylek, and father of the

\* It was at Caput Vada that Belisarius landed his army in 533. This cape may also be the Abrotonum or Aboritanus, which name, perhaps, is derived from "*Trajectus out Vadum*."

present kaeed of Sfakkus, made the great bulk of his fortune by his cruizers, of which he is said to have possessed no less than twenty-three at one time; and so successful were they that eight rich prizes have arrived in one day, to fill his coffers with the plunder of Christians.

Sfakkus possesses no remains of antiquity, except columns and capitals, which are found in the houses of most towns and villages in the regency, but it is a good place to purchase coins and gems, which are brought here for sale by the Arabs from the surrounding country. This trade is, however, monopolized by the Jews, who buy them all up, and re-sell them to Christians at Tunis with great profit to themselves. I was, however, so fortunate as to purchase about forty engraved seals, on cornelians principally.

The town is surrounded at a short distance from its walls by a belt of country villas and gardens, to which the inhabitants retire during the summer; whose number amounts, according to the kaeed's account, to above two thousand, which at first may appear greatly exaggerated ; but when we consider that even the greater portion of the poorer class of the inhabitants are in possession of one, however small, and that this belt varies in depth from six to eight miles, we shall be more inclined to credit the statement. I called upon the kaeed, to announce the intention of the whole party to visit El Jemin, when he immediately, and in the kindest manner, told me that he would do all in his power to render our little trip agreeable ; and it was arranged that we should start the following afternoon, and march a few miles, in order to lessen the fatigue of riding in one day the distance of above sixty Moorish miles. The kaeed, who speaks Italian, asked me if I had seen the great reservoirs of water outside the walls, in which he seemed to take great pride; for, as in all southern and hot countries, good water constitutes, in the eyes of the inhabitants, the principal, if not only attraction of any place ; and often, in subsequent tours, when asking the usual question of what there might be worthy of observation in their neighbourhood, I have invariably received one of the following answers, delivered in one instance with an expression of high pride and self-satisfaction : " Yes, we have an abundant source of fine water;" or, in the other, " None: we are obliged to fetch our water from a distance, and when obtained it is not good : " the features, during the delivery of these words, strongly indicating a feeling of discontent and inferiority to their more fortunately situated neighbours. On my replying to the kaeed's question that I had not, he observed that I ought no longer to delay doing so, and told his physician, a Sicilian, who during our stay at Sfakkus was very kind and of the greatest service, to conduct me to

them. I found them to consist of above three hundred distinct cisterns, some of which are probably ancient, all supplied by rainwater, inclosed by a wall, and are called the Naseri. Scarcely an inhabitant of Sfakkus dies without leaving some of his property either to keep in repair the existing wells, or to form new ones.

During the afternoon of the 14th, after having lunched with the Kaeed's doctor, we left the town for Sidi Salah, where we were to sleep. A chariole, the common two-wheeled and covered carriage of the country, drawn by a mule, in the shafts, on which sat the driver, and by two horses abreast in front, was provided for the ladies of the party ; but as it could only conveniently contain two at the same time, they were alternately to ride on horseback. For my own use, the Kaeed had lent me his own favourite mare, and all the rest were also well mounted. A chaoosh and six soldiers formed our escort, and two Arabs on bât horses carried water and provisions, the whole party consisting of eighteen persons.

After leaving the villas and gardens, we entered on a vast untilled plain, only broken by a few gentle undulations, and almost totally devoid of trees. After riding twelve miles, we arrived at the marabet of Sidi Salah, near which we found, ready pitched, a capacious and commodious tent, which the Kaeed had sent on, in the morning, for our use. By some inexcusable mistake, our wine had been left on board, and we were now fain to satisfy ourselves with some not very clear water.

The following day we pursued our course over a continuance of the same sort of uninteresting country, varied only in some places by a few scattered wild olive trees. Our ride was several times enlivened by the appearance of small parties of gazelles, which we amused ourselves by galloping after; and, during one of these chaces made on the left, I came upon the traces of a Roman villa or village, of which, however, but little more than the foundations, and part of a mosaic floor were visible. These trifling remains may probably indicate the situation of Baranis, which I think must have stood in a line between Taphra, Sfakkus, and Tysdrus, El Jemm.

Within two miles of this latter place, the land is cultivated, and inclosed by hedges of the *cactus opuntia*, or prickly pear, through an avenue of which we soon after beheld the great amphitheatre towering loftily over the miserable mud hovels of the village, and appearing still more colossal from the lowness of the plain, and smallness of all surrounding objects. Having, on leaving Sfakkus, been told that the Saheb-el-taba's palace at El Jemm should be prepared for

us, I had sent back the tent from Sidi Salah as an unnecessary incumbrance. This we all now extremely regretted ; for " the Saheb-el-taba's palace," which it must be confessed is a name promising well, we found to be nothing more than one small room, and that not over clean. The whole of the cavaliers were therefore obliged to sleep with the horses in the open yard ; this, however, and a few little other inconveniences, are matters of no import, and of course attendant on a visit into the interior of Africa : the Sheikh was also, it must be confessed, excessively remiss in his duty, and threw us entirely upon our own resources and capabilities of obtaining what we stood in need of. I found, however, that those who slept in the open air, obtained by far a greater degree of repose than those who occupied the interior, where, tormented by a vast multitude of fleas, they were incapacitated from obtaining even the shortest period of sleep.

Immediately after we had dismounted we proceeded to view the amphitheatre, and to ascertain, by inspection, what other remains existed of the former Tysdrus ; but the only one of any consequence, was this great edifice. Shaw says, that it dates its origin from the reign of the Gordians, who were here first recognised as chiefs, if not by the whole, at least by a great majority of the vast Roman empire, tired by the cruelty and despotism of Maximinus, and who for this support may have erected as a memorial of their gratitude this splendid monument. All this is, however, conjecture, for not the vestige of an inscription, at least that I could discover, remains to prove or contest the supposition. I entertain, nevertheless, no doubt, that if excavations were judiciously made round the spot, and the interior of all the surrounding hovels minutely examined, the stone bearing the dedication to the Emperor who erected it, would perhaps be discovered. Deprived, however, of the information which such an inscription would convey to us, we are compelled to satisfy ourselves with beholding an edifice which, though yielding in magnitude and splendour to the Coliseum, is still one of the most perfect, vast, and beautiful remains of former times, that exists - at least to our knowledge - combining in itself more of these united properties, than any other building which I can at this moment bring to my recollection. The amphitheatre of Nismes I have never seen ; that of Pola in Istria is perfect in its exterior, though completely the reverse interiorly, whilst on the contrary, the one at Verona is diametrically the opposite, possessing the range of seats as entire as at the time when admiring citizens witnessed the sports performed in the arena for their gratification, but, with the exception of

four arches, completely deprived of its exterior facade, the principal and most beautiful feature of these stupendous edifices.

The length of the amphitheatre of Tysdrus, which extends nearly east and west, is four hundred and twenty-nine feet, by three hundred and sixty-eight, and that of the arena two hundred and thirty-eight by a hundred and eighty-two. These two latter measurements are taken from the inner existing wall, the real boundary of the arena being entirely destroyed. The height of the level of the first gallery is thirty-three feet, and to the summit of the edifice, ninety-six.

The following list may, perhaps, as showing the rank in magnitude which this amphitheatre holds among similar edifices of the same nature, prove interesting.

	Extreme Length	Extreme Breadth	Length of Arena	Breadth of Arena	Height
Coliseum	619½	510	281	476	164
Verona	506	405	247	145	
El Jemm	429	368			96
Nismes	430	338			76
Pola	416	337			
Utica	463	240			
Paestum	211	151			
Capua					
Pompeii	420	335			
Syracuse					
Carthage	300	230	180	100	
Thapsus	240	200	150	110	
Tucca Tereben	160	133			

It possesses four ranges of pillars and arches, sixty in number on each, or rather on the three lower ones, for the fourth is a pilastrade elevated on a stylobata, with a square window, in every third interpilaster. The capitals are of the species of the composite order which we see on Diocletian's pillar at Alexandria, with a slight variation in the second range to those composing the first and third. At each extremity was a grand entrance, but the west one, together with an arch on each side of it, was destroyed, together with the same portion of the whole superstructure, about one hundred years ago, by Muhammed Bey, who thereby wished to prevent the possibility of the amphitheatre being converted into a strong and vast fortress by some tribes of Arabs then in open revolt against his authority. A very small portion also of the exterior wall of the fourth or upper story remains to this day. The interior of this

magnificent building is in a far more dilapidated state than the exterior, which, with the above-mentioned exceptions, may be stated to be in complete preservation ; but great part of the vaulted and inclined plane which supports the seats, the galleries, and the vomitoria, are still left ; the galleries and stairs leading to the different stages were supported by arches and vaults, composed, not like the rest of the building, of large picres de faille, but of a mass of small stones and mortar, and have consequently in many places fallen in. Under the surface of the arena, like those of the Coliseum and amphitheatre of Capua, are seen the same sort of passages, little chambers for containing the wild beasts, as well as square apertures opening upon the arena, up which were raised the lions and tigers, enclosed in boxes made on the principle of the pigeon-traps used at shooting matches, whose sides, on reaching the summit, being unsupported by the walls of the tunnel, fell to the ground, and working on the hinges which joined them to the bottom of the box, left the ferocious monsters at once exposed to the view of the spectators. The key-stones of the outward arches of the lower order were intended each to have borne some figure sculptured in relief, for on one we see the bust of a female, and on the other the head of a lion ; this design was, however, never completed, for on all the others we only see the projecting part of the stone which was to have assumed the shape of different figures or devices. I could discover no inscription on any part of the building except some in Coptic and Arabic characters : the one which doubtlessly existed to commemorate its founder, was probably placed over the gate, since destroyed, which faced the town of Tysdrus to the west. This town, the foundations of whose walls can distinctly be traced, was built round the spot now occupied by the marabet of Sidi Ahmed Bejenani, near which are the substructions of a very fine temple, and in different directions are seen the trifling remains of other edifices. Numerous columns of cipollino, granite, white and Numidian marble, and brescia corallata, are often discovered by the Arabs, who, cutting them into three or four blocks, send them for the purpose of being converted into mill-stones to different parts of the country.

I heard that an Arab had, not long ago, discovered a vase containing gold and silver coins, and engraved stones ; but from the fear of their being all seized from him, reburied it, though he has probably taken opportunities gradually, and in small portions, to dispose of its contents. Small fragments of porphyry, giallo antico, serpentino, &c. are found plentifully scattered on the surface of the ground.

There is also seen a well-executed statue in white marble, of a young Roman emperor, but the head and feet are wanting ; and under one of the arches of the amphitheatre is also found a female draperied statue, also deprived of the head ; for the Arabs, immediately on discovering any of these beautiful specimens of ancient sculpture, actuated by a religious and superstitious feeling, break off and destroy this part of the human figure. The village of El Jemm\* <sup>الجم</sup>, has a population of about five hundred inhabitants, who, during a great portion of the year, live entirely on the prickly pear or Indian fig; but with the exception of a spring of very fine water, it contains nothing remarkable.

At one o'clock in the morning of the 17th, we mounted our horses, and arrived at Sfakkus at midday; but all, with the exception of myself, so sore and tired, as to be perfectly incapacitated from accepting the Kaeed's invitation to dine\* with him at his country-house. He, however, sent large presents on board, consisting of sheep, poultry, gazelles, fruit, vegetables, and bread.

We were detained at Sfakkus by contrary winds till the 22nd, when we sailed for Jerbeh, crossing the gulf of Gabs, Syrtis minor ; the wind blew so fresh, that we scudded along with only a close-reefed foresail ; and, having passed by Burj el Jelis, Girba, on the western end of the island, anchored in the afternoon at the distance of four miles from Burj es-Sook, and on the following morning went on shore.