

STANFORD'S
COMPENDIUM OF GEOGRAPHY AND TRAVEL

BASED ON HELLWALD'S 'DIE ERDE UND IHRE VÖLKER'

A F R I C A

EDITED AND EXTENDED

By KEITH JOHNSTON,

FELLOW OF THE ROYAL GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY

WITH

ETHNOLOGICAL APPENDIX BY A. H. KEANE, B.A.

MAPS AND ILLUSTRATIONS



LONDON

EDWARD STANFORD, 55 CHARING CROSS, S.W.

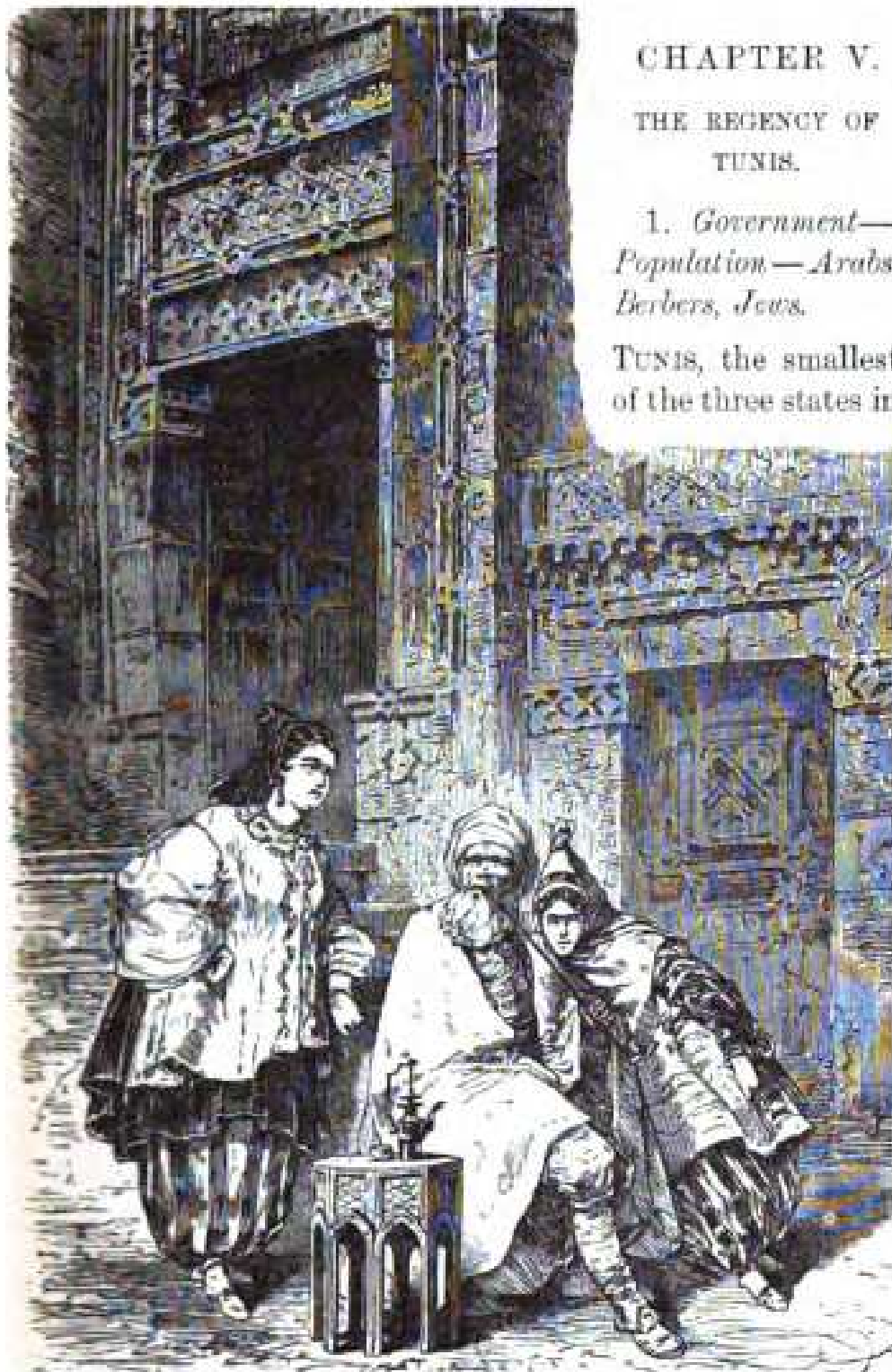
1878

CHAPTER V.

THE REGENCY OF
TUNIS.

1. *Government—*
Population—Arabs,
Berbers, Jews.

TUNIS, the smallest
of the three states in



TUNIS JEWS.

the western part of North Africa, presents no material difference from the neighbouring Algeria either in its physical aspect or the elements of which its population is composed. Politically acknowledging a loose and almost nominal dependence on the Porte, the country is governed by the so-called Bey, who administers it with great complacency entirely to his own personal advantage.

From 1575 onward Tunis has been under the sovereignty of Turkey; but by a firman of October 1871 the Sultan relinquished the ancient right of tribute over it. According to this edict the present situation of Tunis is as follows:—The Bey receives investiture from Constantinople, and may neither make war, nor conclude treaties of peace, nor cede any portion of his territory, without the authorisation of the Sultan. He is obliged to coin money with the name of the Sultan, and to place his troops at the disposal of the Porte in case of war. But in the interior of his country the Bey reigns supreme. The reigning family, which has held its place since 1691 in Tunis, is descended from Ben-ali-Tourki, originally from the island of Candia. The regency comprises forty-one tribes, and is divided into eighteen districts, the special government of which is administered by officials nominated by the Bey.

In an area of about 45,700 square miles there are some 2,000,000 of inhabitants—Berbers or Kabyles, Arabs, Kulugli (the offspring of Turks and Moors), Jews, and a few Negroes. All these various races despise and hate each other mutually, and live as far as possible apart one from the other. Thus the Moors, or town Arabs, here called *Hadars*, intermarry exclusively amongst themselves, never contracting alliances with the nomad Arabs, whom they thoroughly detest, but who are not numerous in Tunis. The same antipathy exists between the Arabs and Kabyles, the latter of whom are here sorely oppressed.

In the same way the Jews live all to themselves, holding exclusively interested and commercial relations with the rest of the people.

In their dress the Tunisian Jews differ entirely from those of Algeria and Marocco. The plumpness especially of the women, the most violently contrasted colours of their dress, the assurance based on tradition that the ancient Jews wore exactly the same garb, all combine to produce the greatest astonishment and curiosity in the stranger at first sight of this costume.

In point of morals, however, the Jews of Tunis occupy a very low position, lower even than that of the Franks (as Europeans are called in Mohammedan countries), who certainly cannot be recommended as models of honesty, propriety, and righteousness. But they have on the whole much improved both materially and in numbers, especially since they have been allowed to reside beyond the limits of their Ghetto, or *hara*, as it is here called.

2. *Industry and Commerce.*

The inhabitants of Tunis are little devoted to agricultural pursuits, though the land is for the most part capable of tillage. They occupy themselves mostly with horticulture and the rearing of trees, which here yield but slight returns. The olive is cultivated in the northern districts, and in Susa and Gafsa, the date (*Phoenix dactylifera*) in the southern plains, the so-called *Belad-el-Jerid* or "land of the date."

Cattle are also bred in large numbers; nor are the industrial arts neglected, especially in the neighbourhood of the coast, though they stand as a rule on a low level. There are manufactured silk fabrics, burnous (mantles), red caps (*fez*), fine and coarse woollen goods, exquisitely dyed Marocco leather, and the far-famed Tunis pottery.

3. *Tunis and its Citadel—the Bardo and Kairwan.*

The centre of the important trade carried on especially with Marseilles, Genoa, Leghorn, and the Levant, is Tunis, the chief town, situated in the neighbourhood of the ruins of Carthage, and the only city in the country challenging special attention.

Tunis, the walls of which are nearly five miles in circuit, has retained the character of an oriental city almost intact. The population numbers from 100,000 to 150,000, but the prejudice of Mohammedans against the census and domiciliary inquiries of every sort renders it impossible to give the figures more accurately. They include 30,000 Jews and 11,000 Europeans. The city stretches in a north-westerly direction along the shallow inlet of Bahira, and on the land side is completely inclosed by a strong wall pierced with nine gateways. Between this and the inner town, also encircled by a wall with seven gates, lie the suburbs of Bab Suyga to the south, Bab Jezirah to the north, and on the east the new quarter in which are to be found the custom-house, arsenal, and fashionable resorts.

The streets, thronged from dawn to night with the most varied and picturesque crowds, are narrow and crooked, without signposts, names, or directions of any sort. The houses are unnumbered, nor are the streets themselves lit up by gas, oil, or other lights after sunset. Yet they are considered perfectly safe from the attacks of thieves or marauders. But, being unpaved and otherwise neglected, they become almost impassable with mud and filth, especially after wet weather.

When the houses are pierced with windows towards the street, these are always protected by gratings, the only exceptions being the two European hotels, some consulates, and a few other houses occupied by the Franks. The suburb of Jezirah is occupied by Moors exclusively. The

kasbah, or citadel, on the west of the town, in spite of the rents in the walls of the great square central building, presents a somewhat imposing appearance from without. This impression, however, vanishes when we set foot in the interior, which offers to the eye little more than the spectacle of a vast heap of ruins, amid which the graceful minaret alone has been preserved in a good condition.



THE BARDO NEAR TUNIS.

About two miles to the north-west of Tunis is the Bardo, or residence of the Bey, forming a little town in itself, including palaces, guardhouses, dwellings, workshops, and bazaars, with about 2000 inhabitants. Amongst these are not only the numerous families of the nobility, but also those of the officials, about 100 in number, besides the military schools, out of which nearly all the higher government officers are taken.

Tunis is connected by rail with the little port of Goletta and with Bardo, and a French company has a

concession from the Bey for the construction of a line westward to Beja.

Though Tunis is the political centre and seat of government, the city of Kairwan, which lies in a barren plain near the inland lake Sidi-el-Heni, about seventy-five miles due south of Tunis, is the religious capital of the regency, and is one of the sacred cities of Islam, possessing one of the finest mosques in northern Africa. Neither Jew nor Christian has ever been allowed to take up his residence within its walls. It is the centre of a large caravan trade, but of the famous traffic which at one time passed between this city and the Sudan across the Sahara little or nothing is left, the trade having passed east and west to Fezzan, Ghadames, Tafilet, or Tarudant.

Besides Goletta, the chief ports of Tunis are Biserta on the north coast, and Susa, Monastir, Mehdia, and Sfax, on the eastern coast.

4. *The Towns of Susa and Sfax.*

Of the coast towns it may be sufficient to mention those of Susa and Sfax. Susa, with its walls, gates, and ramparts all in good preservation, produces a decidedly favourable impression. It boasts of several new buildings of imposing appearance, while its by no means inconsiderable trade attracts a large number of vessels to the roads, all producing a very civilised aspect. It reckons 8000 inhabitants, amongst whom are 1000 Jews and from 500 to 600 Maltese and Sicilians. Its commercial relations are mainly carried on with Italy.

Sfax, the chief town in southern Tunis, is said to have a population of 40,000, including 12,000 in the Arab quarter, amongst whom are 2000 Jews. Its trade is important, and the place is connected with Tunis by a telegraph 217 miles long, and thence with the Algerian

system and Europe. The staple products are the excellent dates from Jerid, the "burnous" cloth made in the Oasis of Gafsa in the south, olive oil from Sahel (the high country inland from Sfax), esparto grass from the surrounding wilderness, sponges from the Syrtes, and lastly the jessamine and rose oil, so highly prized in Tunis and Constantinople, from the gardens of the town itself.

5. *Tunisian Fisheries.*

Coral is found more or less abundantly all along the coasts of Tunis, Algeria, and Marocco, as well as on the opposite Mediterranean coasts of Italy, France, and Spain; but the banks which furnish the best quality of coral are those which lie off the islet of Galita, which belongs to Tunis, and is situated about thirty miles from its north coast. In 1832, after many disputes as to the right of fishery, a treaty was concluded between France and Tunis, by which the former power obtained the perpetual and exclusive privilege over the coral fishery in Tunisian waters on the condition of an annual payment to the Bey. About ninety coral-fishing boats, chiefly owned by Italians who are permanently resident in Algeria, make their headquarters at Bona and La Calle. From eighty to one hundred vessels are also equipped in the Bay of Naples, and arrive annually, at the proper season, on the fishing-ground, some making Biserta their station, and paying dues to the French Government. The coral of the Barbary coasts is principally red, but white and black, as well as the much-valued pink, are also found. A dredge, formed of two pieces of olive wood each about $6\frac{1}{2}$ feet long, lashed crosswise and hung with unravelled bunches of hempen ropes, is dragged over the banks to entangle the pieces of coral. The produce of the coral-fishery on these coasts varies from £200,000 to £600,000 a year.

Round the coast of Tunis are a number of lakes, which are partially separated from the sea by narrow strips of sand, and to these large quantities of fish resort for breeding purposes. The Biserta lake is the most important of these, and it is affirmed that every month of the year furnishes it with a different species of fish. Tunny fish, in their annual migration in May and June from the ocean to the archipelago and the Black Sea, follow either the southern or northern shores of the Mediterranean in all their windings, and advantage is taken of this circumstance for their capture. A "tonnara," or series of barriers of nets, is placed off a promontory so as to present an obstruction to the advancing shoals, and their migratory instincts are so strong that they never retrace their course, but always endeavour to find a way to the east; thus they pass from one inclosure of nets to another, till as many as 700 fish are occasionally secured in a single catch, and in a single season the chief Tunisian fishery furnishes from 10,000 to 14,000 tunny. "Scabeccio," or tunny flesh preserved in oil, is largely used in the countries bordering on the Mediterranean, and the oil extracted from the heads and refuse of the fish is much used by curriers and tanners. Sponges are found along the whole length of the coasts of Tunis, but are not of fine quality. They are fished for chiefly in the winter months, when the dense marine vegetation has been swept away by the storms of November and December, and are either obtained by spearing with a trident, by diving, or by dredging. (*Report by Vice-Consul Green on the Tunisian Fisheries, 1872.*)

the Jerid country from the shores of the Gulf of Gabes in Tunis to the eastern part of the Algerian Sahara, through the publication of a project for submerging this district by means of a canal to be cut through the narrow belt which separates it from the Mediterranean, a scheme which has led to the examination of the marshes by several French and Italian scientific commissions, and, later, to their accurate survey by Captain Roudaire for the French Government. The most easterly of these large "sebkhas," or marshes, is that of Fejjj (meaning "dread," from its quicksands which are apt to engulf caravans deviating from the beaten track), the eastern corner of which approaches to within about ten miles from the Mediterranean. This sebkha is a branch of the extensive Faroun Jerid, or Kebir marsh, the ancient *Palus Tritonis*.

Next to this, westward, is the Gharnis, crossing the frontier of Algeria, and beyond that in Algeria the Melghir "shott," the terminal marsh of the great Wady Ighar-ghar, the level of which is about forty-five feet below that of the Mediterranean. There appears to be little doubt that these marshy depressions, which extend across a distance of 240 miles, represent the relics either of a once much more extensive series of lakes or of a large gulf of the Mediterranean, which, through the operation of a gradual process of drying up, have been reduced to their present state. There are many evidences in support of the Arab legends which tell of former running waters and fertile lands in this part of the Sahara, and the change may in part be due to the clearing away of the forests by the Arabs on the plains and high lands subsequent to their conquest of the land; the consequence being that the periodical rains which in earlier times fertilised the country are now replaced by heavier but rarer showers, the waters of which rush down the slopes and disappear in the sands, or mix with the noxious waters of the lagoons.

The admission of the Mediterranean waters over the depressed area of the marshes would, by affording a large evaporating surface, in the form of a great shallow lagoon, perhaps as long as Lakes Ontario or Erie, tend to give a permanent moisture supply and restore fertility to the lands round its borders. This project for submerging a comparatively small area of the interior of Tunis and Algeria, which is based on examination of the ground and known conditions, must be distinguished from an ignorant scheme recently projected in England for the inundation of the whole western Sahara, the practicability of which is not only not supported by any known facts, but is shown to be futile by the most superficial acquaintance with them.