

Travels in Tunisia

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TRAVELS IN TUNISIA

With a Glossary, a Map, a Bibliography,
and Fifty Illustrations.

BY

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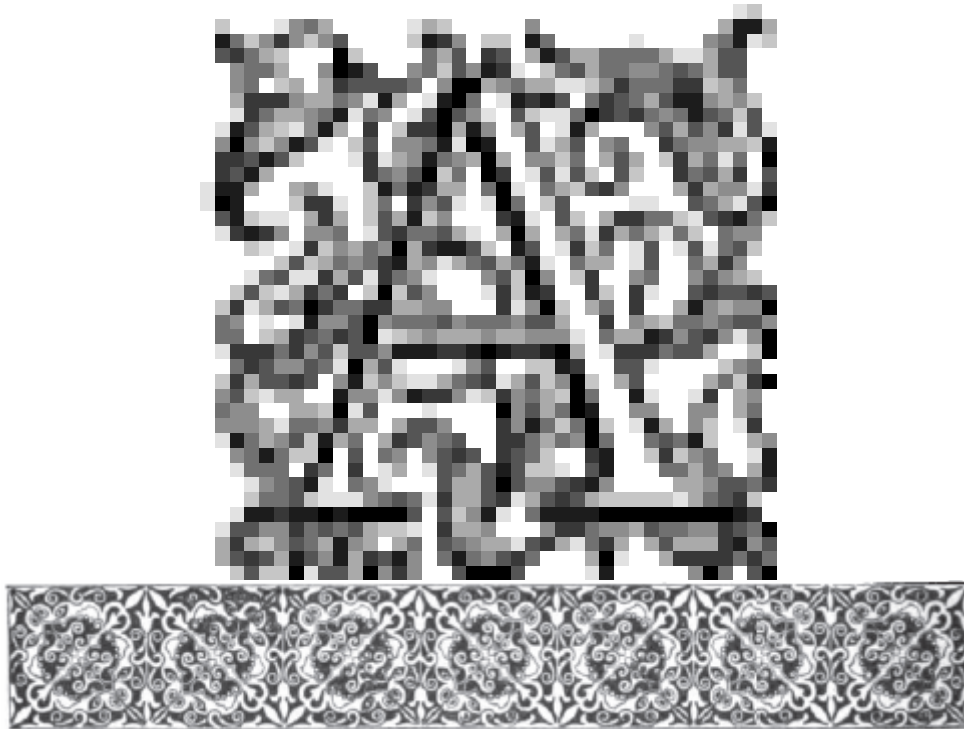
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CHAPTER XIV.

SFAX.

November 14th.

A TOWN BUILT ON THE SAND — THE SPONGE MARKET COMMERCIAL—
ACTIVITY—AN ARAB HOUSE—HADCHIS—JEWISH WOMEN.

AT midnight the *Ville de Bone* got under way, and at 11 o'clock on the following morning, November 14 anchored off Sfax, within sight of the low shores of the Kerkenah Islands, where refractory prostitutes and women guilty of adultery are banished. The roadstead before Sfax is so shallow that the steamer could not anchor within at least two miles of the shore; but a pleasant breeze enabled us to reach the land in about twenty minutes in one of the little boats lying in waiting. To rejoin the steamer at sundown when the wind had fallen took considerably more than an hour.

It has been suggested that Sfax occupies the site of ancient Taphrura, but this seems doubtful. The modern town is literally built upon the sand, a wide belt of sand separating it from luxuriant gardens on the land side. The Romans were not likely to have chosen such a site for a town of any importance, although vestiges of Roman constructions may be traced without the present walls. Only recently some excavations near the shore, in connexion with an extension of the

* The trade in esparto grass ought to be the most important on the coast, but it is being rapidly annihilated, owing to the unwise restrictions placed upon it by the Tunisian Government. This valuable fibre is found in Algeria, Tunis, and Tripoli. It was first brought into use by Mr. Lloyd, owner of the *Daily Chronicle*, who had an establishment at Oran, and up to the present time the trade has remained almost entirely in the hands of the English.—Playfair's *Consular Report on Tunis, Commercial*. No. 3 (1886), Part I., p. 33.

quay, brought to light a circular niche lined and paved with mosaic, forming part of a large

edifice, most probably a bathing establishment. The character of the work indicates a late period of the Empire. Situated as it is, Sfax has but a poor appearance from the sea, in spite of its Kasba and white crenelated walls flanked with bastions. In commercial activity it scarcely yields to Soussa. Esparto grass* (better known by its Arab name of Haifa), dates and grain, are exported largely. The land in the vicinity of Sfax is very productive, yielding two crops yearly. The olive is exceedingly fruitful, and trees of two years' growth bear fruit. The date-palm flourishes, although the fruit is not of the best. The chief source of wealth, however, is the sponge fishery; the shallow bay of Sfax, as well as the coasts of the Kerkenah Islands, yielding this zoophyte in large quantities, although not perhaps of the finest quality. In the office of Mr. Galea, our Consular Agent, whose acquaintance we had the good fortune to make here, we saw a sponge well shaped and of the following dimensions: 1 foot 10 inches by 1 foot 8 inches by 1 foot 6 inches — possibly the largest sponge known. The sponge market is on the quay, or rather on the shore, for a quay can scarcely be said to exist in close proximity to the landing-place. It is a scene of great activity. The sponges are exposed for sale in circular groups on the open ground.

Sfax is entered by two gates only. Before reaching that facing the sea one has to traverse the European quarter, peopled chiefly by Maltese and Jews. It is as busy as it is dirty. Hundreds of camels and asses may be seen grouped without the walls, and merchandise of all kinds, as well as bales of esparto grass, encumber the open spaces. Within the gate one finds oneself involved in the usual narrow, tortuous, ill-kept streets, with a mosque enriched with Roman shafts. The souks are well furnished, and quite as characteristic as those of Soussa. Were a proof needed of the prosperity of Sfax, we might point to the handsome private houses, the stone doorways of which are frequently embellished with intricate and varied designs, delicately carved. While admiring one of the doorways belonging to a house in the Rue de la Poste, now occupied by the French as their Trésor, an officer politely invited us to inspect the arrangements of the interior. It is a fairly representative Arab house. From the street one enters through a vestibule into a patio, or open courtyard, furnished with a well. Several apartments open into the patio, in each of which is fitted a richly painted wooden screen, with a Moorish arched opening in the centre. Behind this screen the bed, or sleeping couch, was placed. The ceilings are of wood painted like the screens. A steep and very narrow stone staircase leads to the first floor, consisting of several small rooms destined for the occupation of the women. The windows are small and grated, and an open balcony, overlooking the patio, on to which the upper chambers open, is furnished with a kind of wide projecting ledge, effectually preventing those in the courtyard from seeing any one passing along the balcony. Immediately above the well there is an opening, through which the women were able to draw water without going down to the lower floor.

The men of Sfax appeared more active and busy than in other towns of the Regency, and the life of the people seemed more energetic.* One meets the usual number of blind and one-eyed; but that which will not fail to strike the traveller is the unusual number of green turbans met with at every turn. Nor are these descendants of the Prophet confined to the wealthy class; the humblest servant, if he can prove his lineage, has an equal right with a Cadi to encircle his brows with Mohammed's favourite colour, and to call himself Hadchi.

As we turned the corner of one of the narrow streets on our way to the shore to regain the steamer, we found ourselves suddenly among a bevy of young Jewish women, of whom two were of superlative beauty. They were twelve or fourteen in all, and were returning from the bath, where they had accompanied the maiden who walked at their head, and who was to be married on the morrow. The bride was more richly attired than her companions, and wore gaiters embroidered with gold, and a profusion of jewelry. She was stout, under twenty years of age, and very comely.

* 'The people of Sfakes, or Sfaksika, are distinguishable from their co-religionists of Tunisia. One recognises them by a certain difference of costume, for they do not like to be mistaken for other Tunisians. It is in their force of character, above all, that they differ from other citizens: they have more initiative, more industry, more ingenuity; in everything they are more active and more earnest than their neighbours. They are said to be zealous Mussulmans: the children even frequent the mosques, and the women do not neglect their prayers.'—Nouvelle Geographie Universelle, Reclus, xi. 216.



CHAPTER XVI.

Gabes To Soussa By Sea.

November 17th and 18th.

DEPARTURE FROM GABES—DECLINE OF BRITISH INFLUENCE — STREET NAMING
— RETURN TO SFAX — SERVANT ENGAGED MAHEDI A—PHOENICIAN TOMBS —
MONASTIR SOUSSA.

THANKS to the kindness of Mr. Galea, we had spent two most agreeable days in this beautiful oasis of Gabes, and had obtained much interesting information on many subjects connected with the commerce of the country and the prospects of an extension of trade under the present occupiers of the Regency.

Every Englishman must be struck with dismay at the decline of British influence in a country where, not many years ago, we were respected and our counsels were followed. In spite of what may be said to the contrary by those who may be prompted possibly by jealousy, it cannot be denied that British influence is salutary. The most superficial observation of those parts of the world where the English dominate will suffice to demonstrate this. Although the natives of North Africa are pleased when they learn that the traveller is an Englishman, they have little or no faith in our ability to serve them, or of our weight in the councils of nations. Englishmen are nowhere to be met with; very few English commercial houses have factories or branches in the country; there is no market for British manufactures; and even the esparto grass, which is shipped almost exclusively to Great Britain, is hampered with a vexatious export duty. Consular reports give ample evidence on this subject.

As in France, so in Tunisia, the French continue their mania for rechristening streets. Here they change the Arab names for those of the officers who may have been engaged in capturing the towns in question, so that the native may be reminded at every turn in his path of the nation he loves the least. Here we see Boulevard Boulanger, there Rue General this or Colonel that.

At one o'clock in the morning the steamer left for Sfax, reaching that port in five hours. Hitherto we had managed fairly well without an interpreter; but as we now contemplated a journey right across Tunisia, we were prudently advised to take one. Such an individual we obtained at Sfax, through the kind assistance of Mr. Gatte. Francois, so he called himself, our future interpreter, cook, and servant-of-all-work, was a Maltese, who spoke no English, and only a very little bad French. He might have been taken for a bandit, a sea-captain, a horse-keeper; for anything, in fact, but what he really was—a cook. He wore a small felt hat, a loosely-fitting coloured shirt without any necktie, a looser jacket, no vest, and trousers, over which he drew a pair of high jack-boots. His appearance was altogether free and easy, and he looked as if he could turn his

hand to anything. His capabilities were, however, as experience subsequently proved, very limited.

The arrangements necessary for the engagement of Francois, and another ramble through the streets of Sfax, occupied our time until 6 p.m., when we steamed off again, anchoring the following morning before Mahedia. The sea had been perfectly calm during the night, and the loveliness of the weather remained unchanged.

Before taking leave of M. Novak on the previous occasion, he requested us, should we desire to make an excursion to some Phoenician tombs recently discovered in the vicinity of Mahedia, and the weather permit our landing, to telegraph to him before leaving Sfax. Of this we gratefully availed ourselves, and on landing found at our disposal a private carriage, well equipped with three stout mules. Nor was this all, for a friend of M. Novak was good enough to accompany us, in order to insure our seeing all that could be seen during the short time the steamer lay at anchor. Not an instant was lost; the coachman gave the word of departure to his sturdy animals, who started off at a good round pace and, following closely the sea-shore, we found ourselves in less than an hour at our destination.

The tombs lie within half a mile of the sea, about four miles south of Mahedia, and as nearly as possible equidistant between that town and Sallecta. They are cut in a spur of the rock, from which was quarried the stone of which the Thysdrus amphitheatre was built, and which here rises about twelve or fourteen feet above the general level of the shore. About a dozen tombs, out of many hundreds which no doubt may be found here, were explored a few years ago by M. Melon, and have been fully described in a paper entitled *La Nécropole Phénicienne*, and published in the *Revue Archéologique*, 1884. This necropolis, which extends along the shore for about three or four miles, has been ransacked by Arabs at different periods, and consequently few objects of interest or of value were met with during the recent exploration. The tombs are very similar in plan and arrangement, but with varying dimensions, and the entrances are all on the east side. A sharp descent by a flight of steps cut on the left or south side of a square trench conducts to a stone door, averaging three feet square, forming the entrance to the sepulchral chamber, the floor of which is some two or three steps lower down. On either side is a bed of stone, on which the bodies were placed, and at the end is a small niche for a funereal lamp. The walls of these chambers are not quite vertical, but incline inwards towards the top. The late M. Renan, to whom M. Melon's drawings of these tombs were submitted, was of opinion that they belonged to a class of sepulchres rarely met with, the formation being different from those discovered at Tyre, as well as other Phoenician settlements on the coast of Africa.

After an examination of as many tombs as our limited time would permit, we hastened back to the steamer, and at a quarter-past one p.m. were off Monastir. Some fifty casks of oil were here waiting for shipment, so that we had ample leisure to enjoy the lovely panorama along this part of the coast. Little of the town of Monastir is visible from the sea; but the coast, clothed with olives apparently down to the water's edge, presents a striking appearance. On rounding the cape, with its islands and forts, Monastir becomes more prominent, and presents an enchanting picture with its white crenelated walls, its towering Kasba, and its numerous white koubbas, encircled by olives and palms, the peak of Zaghouan rising boldly in the distance. Crossing the bay, we anchored off Soussa at 8 p.m.