

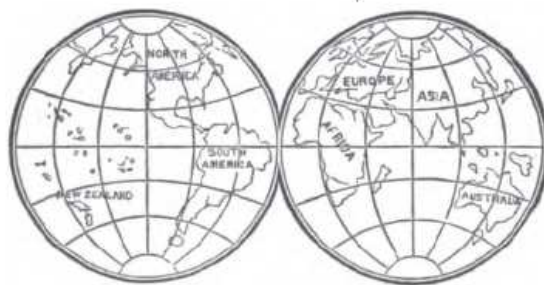
THE
EARTH AND ITS INHABITANTS.

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AFRICA.

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THE BERBERS AND THE ARABS

pp.133-134

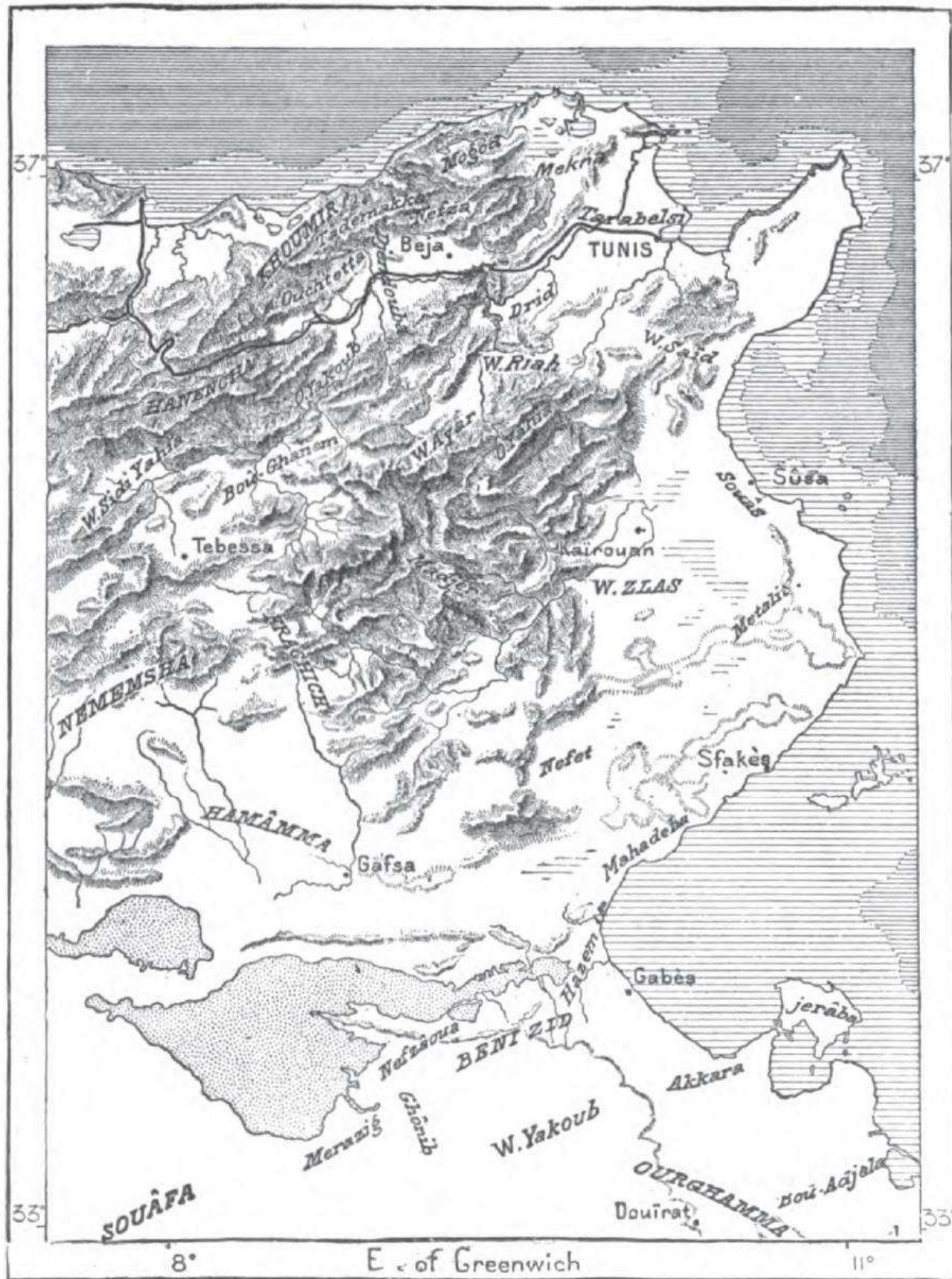
Till recently, before the occupation of the country by the French troops had powerfully modified the internal relations, the whole of the Tunisian tribes as well as the other communities, were split up into two *sof*, or hostile leagues, which frequently changed sides according to the assessment of the taxes or the exactions of the cadis. One of these two great parties, that of the Ahsimîya, claimed to be that of the Bey. In Central Tunis this faction was more especially represented by the great Hamamma tribe, whilst the Beni-Zid were at the head of the Bashiyas, or the party of the independent Arabs. They claim to be the descendants of a French renegade, and on this ground they welcomed the explorer Pellissier, giving him the title of "cousin" The Ulad-Ayars of the Kef district, the Zlas of Kairwan, the Nefets of Bû-Hedma, the Urghammas, and the Akkaras of the Tripolitan frontier, were the allies of the Hammamas, whilst the Metalits of Sfakes the Suâs of Susa, the Majers, the Frashish of the Algerian frontier, and the Hazems of Cebes, were numbered amongst those Beduins who recognise no masters.

Some years ago, by a skilful stratagem, the Beni-Zid obtained possession of the Kasbah of Sfakes, and did not evacuate it till they liberated all the prisoners of their faction whom the Bey's government had imprisoned in this citadel. The Mahadebas of the coast, between Sfakes and the Syrtis Minor, are respected by all alike as a tribe of Marabuts or priests. The Bey has exempted them from all taxes, on the condition that they afford protection and hospitality to the caravans.

The Nefzawa, who occupy the peninsula of the same name between the Shott-el-Jerid and the Shott-el-Fejej, are divided between two hostile factions. The tribes composing the independent party attempted to resist the French, but after a few desultory skirmishes they fled into Tripolitan territory. These fugitives, estimated at more than thirty thousand, found it extremely difficult to get a living amongst the southern tribes, and the majority returned to sue for peace. The ringleaders of the insurrection belonged to the tribe of the Nefet.

Fig. 39.—NATIVE INHABITANTS OF TUNIS.

Scale 1 : 3,800,000.



Depths.



0 to 100 Feet.



160 to 320 Feet.



320 Feet and upwards.

60 Miles.

SFAKES

(p149-153)

The second largest town of Tunis is Sfakes (Sfaks, Sfax), situated on the margin of the strait, about 30 miles broad, which separates the Kerkenna Archipelago from the mainland. Its population, which Pellissier calculated at eight thousand souls in 1848, appears to have more than tripled since that time. The people are crowded together in the lofty houses which skirt the narrow streets of the city, and overflow into the new quarter which has been built along the beach outside the south-western ramparts. Viewed from afar, all that is visible of Sfakes are the white walls of its quadrangular enclosure and the tall minarets of its mosques. The towers, battlements, and angular bastions give the whole more of a mediaeval aspect than is presented by any of the other fortified Tunisian towns. At the southern angle of the ramparts stands a citadel said to have been built by Christian slaves. Situated as it is, at a considerable elevation on a sloping ground, Sfakes has no permanent streams, nor even springs or wells, and all the water used in the town is drawn from numerous cisterns within and without the fortifications.

A few Roman remains are to be seen in the suburbs, but no inscription has yet been found which enables this town to be identified with any of the Roman stations mentioned by classical writers, although it most probably stands on the site of the ancient Taphrura. Some 12 miles to the south-west, on the shores of the gulf, is the ruined town of Thini, evidently identical with the Thince of the Romans. This place stood at the extreme point of the ditch which Scipio the younger had excavated in the south of the Roman territory, in order to separate it from the country of the Numidians.

Some two or three thousand Jews and Europeans (Maltese, Italians, and French), dwell in Sfakes, nearly all in Rabat, or the lower town, where the trading interests are chiefly concentrated; a recently planted boulevard now connects this quarter with the camp situated north of the town. The Mussulmans live in the upper town, within the ramparts. The "Sfaksika," or people of Sfakes, differ in some respects from their Tunisian co-religionists, with whom they are unwilling to be identified. Hence they may be at once recognised by a special costume, although the chief difference lies in their mental characteristics. They are more enterprising, fonder of work, much more intelligent, and altogether more active and

solid than their neighbours. They are said to be zealous Mussulmans, the very children frequenting the mosques, and the women never, as elsewhere, neglecting their prayers. At the time of the occupation of Tunis by the French troops in 1881, the Sfaksikas also gave proof of their patriotic spirit: almost single-handed they resisted the invasion, and fought desperately during the bombardment, which they might have easily avoided. Many of the institutions of Sfakes show the extent of the public spirit of the people; not only have they founded mosques and convents, but also a hospital, which is well supported. Outside the walls a central reservoir, called the " Help," is due to the munificence of one citizen. The " 365 " secondary cisterns which surround it, disposed like the crypts of a necropolis, also bear witness to the brotherly feeling by which the rich are animated towards their poorer Mussulman brethren. Other vast reservoirs have been constructed in the suburbs of the town, and some houses are provided with an apparatus which enables the wayfarer to quench his thirst by drawing through an open pipe the water of a hidden cistern. A project is now in hand to construct an aqueduct some 36 miles long, which is intended to supply the town with water from the Bu-Hedma heights. The people of Sfakes show their love of work by their agricultural labours, which, beyond a zone of sand surrounding the town like a circular road, have brought under cultivation an extent of land varying in breadth from 4 to 12 miles. Some years ago over 1,000,000 olive trees were planted round the town, and in 1874 the total yield of oil in the Stakes district was estimated at upwards of 5,500,000 gallons.

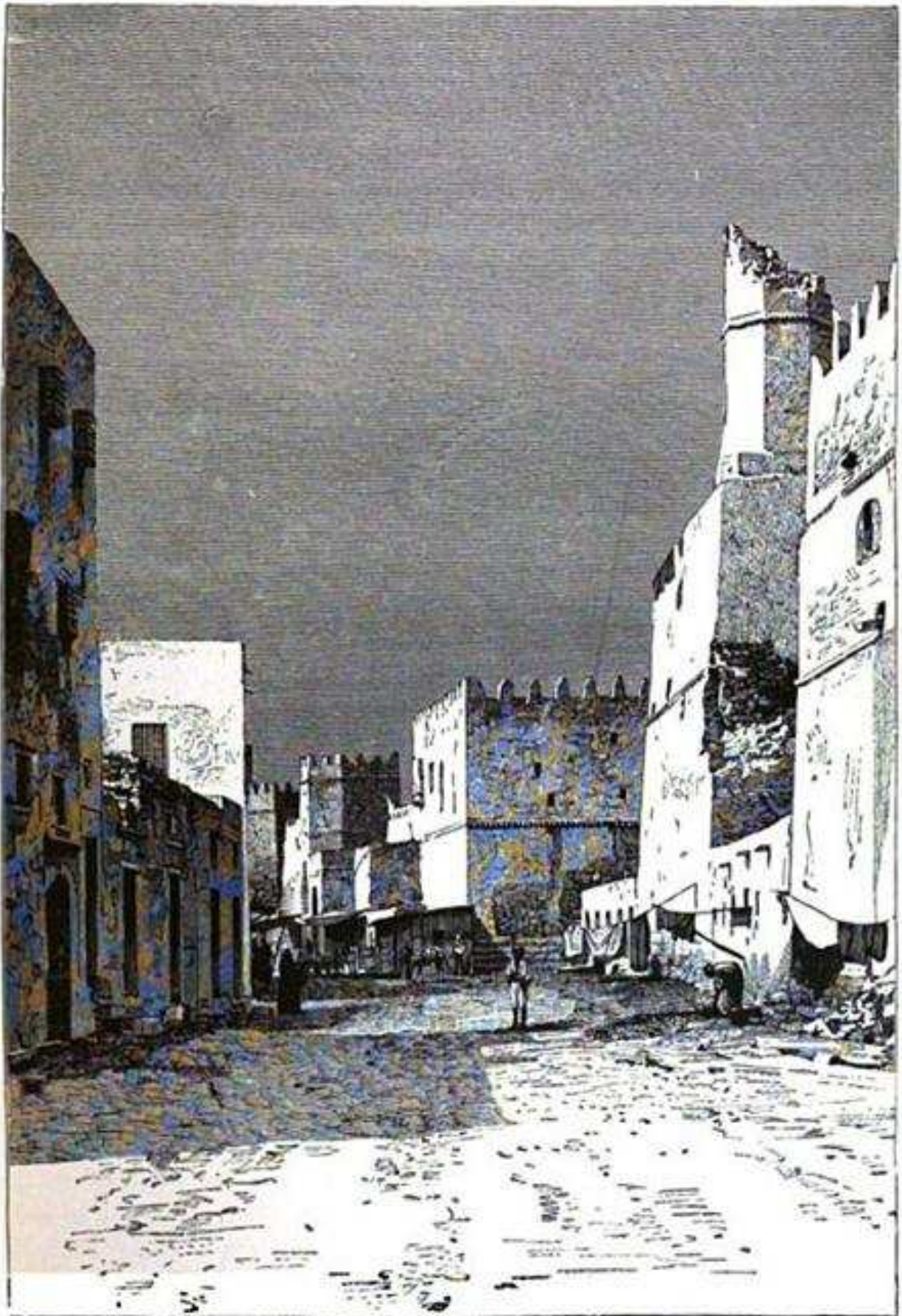
In the outskirts there are said to be from eight to ten thousand enclosures, all separated from each other by cactus hedges, above which rise fruit-trees and a borj, or square tower, in which the proprietor keeps his implements, and which is strong enough to resist the attacks of marauders. The plain, bristling with thousands of these little forts, resembles the cultivated districts in North Persia, which are kept in a state of defence against the raids of the Turcomans. In summer nearly all these landowners dwell in their respective enclosures, leaving the town almost deserted.

Sfakes lies on the natural boundary between the olive and palm regions. These two trees are not found here in such great numbers as they are in the north and south respectively. But there are all the more fruit-trees of other varieties, such as the almond, fig, apricot, peach, pistachio nut, and vine; however, for some years past the culture of the olive, more profitable than all the others, has been on the increase. The zone of the olive plantations is yearly extended by several hundred yards, and if the same rate of progress continues, the Sfaksika

will soon absorb in their gardens all the isolated clumps of olives which, having no recognised masters, are known as the " Bey's trees." Their plantations will then reach as far as El-Jem. Owing to the frequent rains, the fruit of the palms seldom ripens thoroughly, hence is mostly used as food for the animals. The vegetable most generally cultivated in the gardens of Sfakes is the fakus, or cucumber, a word from which the name of the town is supposed to be derived. According to Shaw, Sfakes is equivalent to the " City of Cucumbers."

Besides agriculture, the Sfaksika are also very actively engaged in industrial and commercial pursuits. They do not despise any description of work, like the Mussulmans of so many other cities. The market of Sfakes is as well supplied with provisions as that of Tunis itself. The chief imports are wool, leather, and European merchandise, taken in exchange for oil, fruits of all kinds—grapes, figs, and almonds—sponges and dried fish, obtained from the Kerkenna fishermen. Of late years English vessels also visit this port to take in cargoes of alfa grass, which is gathered in the western plains and valleys inhabited by the peaceful Metalit and Nefet Arab tribes. Unfortunately, Sfakes has no port in which to receive vessels of any size. Hence ships of large draught are compelled to anchor at a distance of nearly 2 miles from the shore. Smaller craft are able to approach close to the town with the rising tide, which at ebb leaves them high and dry on the mud. The harbour, however, is perfectly safe, being well protected from the east winds by shallows and the Kerkenna Archipelago.

This group has no centres of population beyond a few villages and hamlets inhabited by fishermen. Hannibal and Marius found a temporary refuge in these islands, which were used as places of exile under the Roman Government, and until recently by that of the Bey. For some time past the natives of Kerkenna have cultivated the vine, and freely drink of its fruit, notwithstanding the precepts of the Koran.



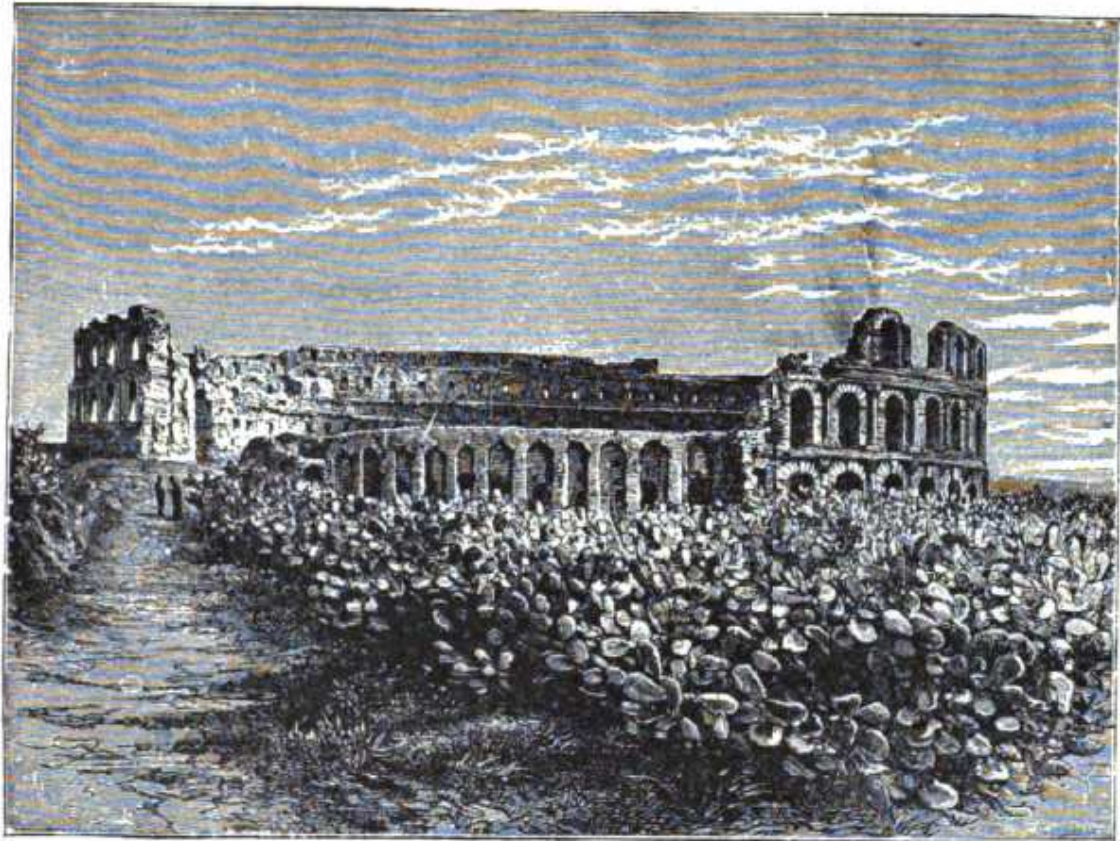
SFARES – VIEW TAKEN IN THE LEONEC STREET

While the coastland route runs north-eastwards, skirting the Ras Kapudiah, the most easterly promontory of Tunis, the route from Sfakes to Susa—that is, the ancient Roman road—pursues a northerly direction across the territory of the Metalit tribe. Towards the middle of this route stood the two important towns of Bararus and Thysdrus, which have now become the henshir or "farm" of Ruga, and the wretched village of El-Jem. The ruins of Bararus cover a space of about 3 miles in circumference, and comprise the remains of a theatre, a triumphal arch, and other edifices, whilst Thysdrus still possesses one of the finest monuments in the whole of Africa, the best-preserved amphitheatre which has been left us by the ancient world, not even excepting that of Pompeii itself. When this region of Tunis, at present almost uninhabited, supported a numerous population, the central position of Thysdrus rendered it one of the best sites for celebrating public feasts and games. From all parts visitors flocked to its great amphitheatre, which is supposed to have been, if not built, at least founded by Gordian the elder, in return for having been proclaimed emperor in the city of Thysdrus. The amphitheatre was also the spot where the chiefs and delegates of the southern Tunisian tribes met in 1881 and decided on a general rising against the French. Visible for a distance of 6 miles from all points of the compass, this vast pile towers above a broad isolated eminence itself rising 615 feet above the surrounding plain. Looking at a distance like a mountain of stone, on a nearer approach it disappears behind the thickets of tall Barbary fig-trees, between which the path winds. According to the measurements of M. Pascal Coste, the Coliseum of Thysdrus, one of the vastest of the Roman world, has a total length of 500 feet in its longer axis, and 430 feet in its shorter axis, which is disposed nearly due north and south. It was probably modelled after the Flavian amphitheatre in Rome. The elliptical facade, formerly composed of sixty-eight arcades, supported three stories ornamented with Corinthian columns, and presents in its general design a great unity of style. But it is no longer complete. In 1710, after an Arab insurrection, Mohammed, Bey of Tunis, blew up five arcades on the east side, and since then the breach has been incessantly widened by the Metalit tribe of El-Jem, who use the materials of the amphitheatre in the construction of their wretched dwellings, besides selling them to the builders of the surrounding district. Inside, the rows of seats have mostly disappeared, and their remains have fallen in confused heaps on the arena. This havoc has been attributed to the transformation to which it was subjected by the famous Kahina, or " Priestess," who converted it into a stronghold against the Arab invaders in the year 689. The traditions of the neighbouring tribes, which commemorate the glories of the Priestess, although she was hostile to the Arabs, relate that this heroine, probably a Jewess, like so many other Berbers of that period, placed herself at

the head of her fellow-countrymen and of their Greek allies. Forced to shut herself up in the amphitheatre, which from her took the name of Kasr-el-Kahina, she here sustained a siege of three years. A subterranean passage by which the arena was flooded for the naval engagements of the Roman games is pointed out by the Arabs as the remains of a secret gallery by which the garrison communicated with the coast and received its supplies.

The town itself has left but few ruins, but excavations have brought to light columns of vast size, and deep cisterns. According to M. Rouire, the nomads of this region are gradually displacing the settled populations. Every village deserted by its inhabitants is immediately seized by the native Beduins, who make it their chief market and remove thither the shrines of their saints.

According to the Metalit people, the sandstone employed in the construction of the amphitheatre was obtained from the quarries of Bu-Rejid, situated on the seashore, not far south of Mahdiya (Mahdia, Mehedia), the "City of the Mahdi," so called after its founder or restorer, Obe'id Allah, in the year 912. Mahdiya soon became an important place, thanks to its strong military position. The Christian seafarers for a long time called it Afrika, regarding it as pre-eminently the stronghold of the continent. Hence it was subjected to frequent attacks. In 1147 the Norman, Roger of Sicily, obtained possession of it, but it was retaken by the Mohammedans thirteen years later. In 1557 Charles V. captured the place after several sanguinary assaults, and caused the ramparts to be dismantled.



Amphitheatre of El Jem, viewed from the ruined side. (p153)

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