

**THE CHOTTS OF TUNIS:
OR, THE GREAT
INLAND SEA OF NORTH
AFRICA IN ANCIENT TIMES**

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The Chotts of Tunis: or, The Great Inland Sea of North Africa in Ancient Times by Edward Dumergue

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John Hunt
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THE CHOTTS OF TUNIS.

ALONG the northern coast of Africa, from Cape Bon to the Straits of Gibraltar, run the Aures mountains, of varying height, the highest part in the Regency of Tunis being about 6,000 feet, diminishing in height through Algeria and terminating in what are called the Atlas mountains, in Morocco, with the greatest height of 12,000 feet.

South of the Aures mountains, running from west to east in Algeria, south of Biskra and east of Chegga, and extending through Tunis in a continuous line to the Gulf of Gabes on the Mediterranean, are numerous chotts, the native name for shallow saline lakes, the three principal ones called Chott Mel-rir, Chott Rhassa, and Chott Djerid, the last separated

from the Gulf of Gabes by a narrow isthmus about twenty-five miles broad, the highest part of which being about 130 feet above the sea, called Mela, the Chott Djerid being about *sixty feet above* the Mediterranean. Chott Rhassa is separated from Chott Djerid by an isthmus called Kriz, also about 130 feet *above* the sea, the chott itself being about sixty feet *below* the Mediterranean, as also are the smaller chotts between it and Chott Mel-rir, the Chott Mel-rir being about 150 feet *below* the Mediterranean. So that if the *isthmus* of Kriz were pierced through, the Lake Djerid would be diminished in size, but the Chotts Rhassa and Mel-rir would consequently become, with the other small chotts intervening, one *vast inland sea*. It is supposed that by a gradual *upheaval* of nature was created this isthmus of Mela, thus cutting off the great flow of salt water from the Mediterranean into Lake Djerid, and so evaporation under a hot sun removed more water than the inflowing rivers supplied. The salts of the sea were left behind, and we see the condition of these lakes as described by Captain Roudaire in the fourth part of the "Revue des deux Mondes" of 1874. In

1876 this able officer of the Engineers was instructed by the Government to ascertain the levels of these chotts as given above, and in 1880 a model of such, showing their present condition, was exhibited in the Paris Exhibition in a little court under the Ministry of Public Instruction, as made by Captain Roudaire. This model, roughly executed, was the complement to what he wrote in the "Débats" in 1874, showing how these chotts could be formed into one great inland sea, extending from near Biskra and Chegga in Algeria, through Tunis, to the Gulf of Gabes, about 300 miles in length and about 60 in breadth, forming a new gulf into the Mediterranean, with an area somewhat greater than the Irish Sea.

Travellers and writers on North Africa had noticed these chotts or inland lagoons and depressions south of the Aouess and Atlas mountains, and towards the Great Sahara, many years previous to the notice of such by Captain Roudaire, and notably by Dr. Tristram, in his book entitled "The Great Sahara: wanderings south of the Atlas Mountains," published in 1860. In this book many interesting particulars

are given about these chotts. At page 66 he observes :—“ The Chott Mel-rir, though fed by so many lines of drainage, is generally dry for seven months of the year, and yet it is the lowest depression in the whole of North Africa. There is a tradition among the Bedouins that formerly it contained a much greater supply of water, and that it was habitually navigated by boats. If this be correct of even the most remote epoch of historic memory, the steady elevation of the great central plateau must have continued long after the continent assumed its present character.” And at page 374 :—“ This basin or depression extends eastward as far as the Gulf of Gabes. The Chott El Mela (Tritonitis, marked on the map as Chott Djerid) is certainly at a greater elevation than the Mel-rir, from which it is separated by a weary waste of shifting sand-hills or dunes, and is only separated from the Mediterranean by about thirty miles of sand-hills and rocks.” Dr. Tristram suggests, at page 277, “ whether this depression at Chott Mel-rir, so much lower than the Mediterranean, may not have been caused by the great but gradual *elevation* of North Africa draining this ocean into the Mediterranean at

the Gulf of Gabes. It seems probable that this gulf between Tunis and Tripoli formed the outlet, since on this coast, for a space of nearly 200 miles, there is no high land between the Mediterranean and the Sahara, merely long ranges of drifting sand-hills."

The more exact survey of Captain Roudaire more than confirms Dr. Tristram's remarks, and gives a firm foundation for his view of utilizing these lagoons by piercing the isthmus of Mela at the Gulf of Gabes, and thus in a degree reproducing the Gulf of Tritonitis, under which name it was known to the ancients, and alluded to by Herodotus in his history of North Africa, then called Libya, and by other writers subsequent to him to the time of Ptolemy. There can be little doubt but that these chotts are remains of a great inland sea; and when we examine the notices, beginning with Herodotus, we shall find beyond any doubt that this great congeries of lakes did once communicate with the Mediterranean, and formed an immense gulf, and which, in conjunction with the present Gulf of Gabes, or the Lesser Syrtis, was known under the name of the Great Lake or Bay of Triton, and that

the separation occurred from about the commencement of the Christian era to the wars under Belisarius.

Accompanying this is a copy of the map of Captain Roudaire, which appears in a pamphlet by Mr. B. A. Irving, M.A., reproduced in this work with his kind permission, read before the Cumberland Association for the Advancement of Literature and Science, in 1880, relating to these chotts, and giving many particulars as regards their ancient and modern aspect from a geographical and geological point of view; noticing also the ruins of cities scattered throughout Tunis and Algeria of the Roman, Grecian, and perhaps even of a more remote people than they, evidencing a very advanced state of civilization, with a sketch of the Argonauts, the great puzzle of all geographers and writers of modern times.

Herodotus, writing about 460 B.C., is the earliest writer known in history on geographical details about the Lake Triton. Under the head of Melpomene, part iv., he describes it as a vast lagoon, or gulf belonging to the sea—as extending from east to west. Where it leaves the sea he fixes the country as that of the lotos-eaters.