



THE UNDERGROUND VILLAGE OF MATMATA, SOUTHERN TUNISIA, SHOWING 'BEAR-PITS'
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Editorial Notes

ONE sometimes wonders whether these first few pages may not often be thought dull. It is not always easy to avoid preaching a sermon, but there are times—and the present is one of them—when there is no such temptation. The inexorable moment arrives when copy must be provided for the printer and it finds us in an oasis of southern Tunisia, in the land of the troglodytes. It is an almost rainless region with an ideal winter climate, and is little frequented by tourists, though the blight of the C.G.T. has to some extent affected it. When Bruun came here in 1893, the tourist was quite unknown, and the natives unspoilt. Railways and motor-roads have altered this, but one has only to go away a few miles from the track to shake off the less attractive results of 'western' influence.



The troglodytes live in the Matmata hills, whose chief 'town' is 27 miles south of Gabes, in that angle of the coast where it turns from south to east. The hills are reached by car from Gabes, along a rough but serviceable road. The first sight of the 'town' of Matmata is a very strange one, for one sees no houses! The people live underground like rabbits, in rooms excavated in the rubble soil and opening out on to a central courtyard like a bear-pit. Entrance is by a narrow passage,

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with side-chambers for stabling donkeys and camels and for storage of fuel. There are openings all round the bear-pit, each closed with a wooden door. These are the living rooms—long barrel-vaulted excavations, exactly similar to the Bronze Age burial-caves of Majorca.* There are shelves along each side for storage-jars and occasionally for beds, and across the end is another shelf for smaller jars. Shallow cup-shaped depressions are made in the earthen shelving for the pots to stand in. At the end is a kind of 'dresser', like those which used to be so common in English cottages, and on it are the flotsam and jetsam of western civilization—empty wine bottles, old mirrors, empty picture frames, lids of biscuit tins—together with the finer products of native culture such as glazed plates. Facing the entrance is the loom, on which a burnous is being woven; beyond it is the bed, a structure of baked clay raised some three feet above the ground on clay legs.



Each bear-pit has several living rooms, with at least one kitchen, and a fowl-house. Each of the rooms has a bathroom consisting of a tiny side chamber with a bucket-shaped pit for the water. The camel, donkey, and watch-dog live side by side with the rest of the establishment, and the usual smaller parasites live in even closer association with everyone.



Now it is obvious that the unit is the single cave-room, and that the group of rooms opening on a bear-pit is a later development. It is equally obvious that this artificial cave has evolved from the natural cave. The existing structures are mostly of modern date, the oldest we saw being alleged to be 220 years old; but they are all constructed on a definite, traditional plan of great antiquity. May it not be that there is preserved in these remote hills a direct link with the cave-dwellers of palaeolithic times? Tunisia was the home of the Capsian industry, and Matmata is only 100 miles from Gafsa.



Such dwellings are only possible in regions of soft compact earth. Elsewhere in the district the cave has petrified into stone. All over the plains of the Medenine region are scattered shepherds' huts with

* See W. J. Hemp, 'Rock-cut tombs and Habitation-caves in Mallorca', *Archaeologia*, 1927, LXXVI, 121-60.

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barrel-vaulted roofs, clearly modelled on the cave-room. Occasionally the hut is round and the roof dome-shaped, recalling perhaps the side-chambers of the cave. Medenine itself is a granary and market town which consists wholly of barrel-vaults placed one above the other, sometimes four stories high. They are again placed round a central square or courtyard, and the whole town consists of groups of such courtyards, the equivalent of the bear-pits. Even the modern town of Houmt Souk on the island of Djerba is built on this plan, though many of the houses themselves are of more normal type.



To one who has studied both it is obvious that there must be a close connexion between the caves of Majorca and those of Matmata. The Majorcan burial-caves are modelled on artificial habitation-caves, so that the antiquity of the plan goes back at least 3000 years, and may be far older. Is it not probable that the long-chambered tombs of the Mediterranean and of northwest Europe have a similar ancestry?—that the navetas of Minorca, the giants' tombs of Sardinia, the grottes of southern France and of the Marne, the *allées couvertes* and long barrows of Spain, Brittany and Britain are but translations into stone of a primitive cave-house?—and that the tholos-tombs of the Aegean and of Crete, and the round-chambered tombs of the West (from Gavr Inis, La Houge Bie, New Grange, and Maes Howe to the humbler structures of Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly) are similarly descended from the domed hut, which may in its turn be modelled on the less common round cave?



Is it not also probable that the megalithic temples (if such they be) of Malta—Hajar Kim, Mnajdra and Hal Tarxien—are but stone bear-pits? That they were built by a people who migrated thither from some North African region where the bear-pit type of house was usual? (Malta is only 280 miles from Matmata). The essence of the plan is the same in both.



We hope later on to expand these ideas into an article. What is required is for someone to make an intensive survey of the whole range of hills, for Matmata is merely a single village of a large group extending southeastwards into Tripoli. What is most needed is a series of

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accurate plans of a few bear-pits. In the time at our disposal we could make only rough sketch-plans. To do more would require adequate preparation (the inhabitants are not always too friendly though they can usually be appeased in the time-honoured fashion). There could be no better subject for an anthropological student.



With the present number we begin our fifth year. We do so with no small satisfaction, for we feel that Number 17 at least maintains, if indeed it does not surpass, the standard achieved hitherto. It is no light task to keep afloat a journal devoted to pure science during a period of unparalleled industrial depression; and we are profoundly grateful to our supporters, who alone enable us to carry on. We would remind them yet once more that our 'margin of safety' is a narrow one, and that each subscription counts. The present year must necessarily be an anxious one, but we confidently look for a continuation of the support we have received during the past four years. The circulation of a journal like ANTIQUITY can only be maintained by continual effort; the Editors do not spare themselves, and they like to think that their work is appreciated. (One practical form of expressing appreciation is indicated below).

The SUBSCRIPTION to ANTIQUITY for 1931 is now DUE. We would remind our Subscribers of the form and envelope inserted in the December number and we shall be glad to have an early response. Many have been kind enough to send their cheques in advance and a large number pay by orders on their banks. This is much appreciated and *we hope that the remainder will save us avoidable trouble in having to send direct reminders to them.*

Payment should be made to

The Assistant Editor, 24 Parkend Road, Gloucester.