

REPORT AND COMMUNICATIONS.

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PRESENTED TO THE

Cambridge Antiquarian Society,

AT ITS THIRTY-SIXTH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING,

MAY 15, 1876,

WITH AN ABSTRACT OF THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE SOCIETY
(INCLUDING THE ANNUAL REPORTS XXXIV, XXXV),
1873—1876.

ALSO

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No. XVIII.

BEING THE FOURTH AND CONCLUDING NUMBER OF THE
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XXXVI. A DESCRIPTION OF THE MEDRÁSEN, IN ALGERIA. Communicated by J. W. CLARK, Esq., M.A., Trinity College.

[November 8, 1875.]

THE Medrásen¹ is a remarkable sepulchral monument in Algeria, situated about 50 miles south of Constantine. There are two others, called respectively El Djedar ('the enclosures'), in the province of Oran, and Le Tombeau de la Chrétienne, in a conspicuous situation on the cliff, west of Algiers. These three have certain features in common; being all built of enormous blocks of limestone, fitted together without mortar, and of pyramidal shape, with a square or circular base. The base of the Medrásen is circular, about 18 feet high, and 193 feet in diameter. Sixty engaged columns, without bases, and with plain capitals and square abacus, support a massive cornice, consisting of a 'fillet and cavetto' molding repeated twice, of which the second half projects considerably beyond the first. Above this rises a truncated cone, consisting of 23 steps, each two feet high and three broad: the entire structure being 60 feet in height. The summit is a circular platform, 37 feet

¹ A model of the Medrásen was exhibited and presented to the Society by Mr Clark at the meeting at which the present communication was read.

in diameter, having a hole in the centre, about the use of which much controversy has arisen. Mr Blakesley was of opinion that it had never been closed by a stone, and that the aperture extended to the interior. Subsequent explorations, however, have shewn the fallacy of this view: and as an observer in the last century (Peysonel), who visited the monument in 1724, records the fact that a tree grew on the summit, it would appear likely that the central stone had either never been placed, or been removed by some of those who have used the Medrásen as a quarry.

The monument has suffered a good deal from this kind of spoliation, most of the cornice and nearly all the first row of steps having disappeared. Besides this there are in three or four places vast rents in the conical portion, indicating attempts to penetrate into the interior.

The French have made many attempts to explore it. In 1849 an entrance was discovered on the eastern side, upon the third row of steps, which had apparently been closed originally by a trap door; but progress was soon arrested by débris fallen from above. In 1855 fresh explorations revealed the existence of a sort of vestibule on the east; but all attempts to reach the interior failed.

In 1866, M. Bauchetet, an officer of engineers, employed to make a model (of which the one exhibited is a copy) for the Exhibition of 1867, discovered certain mason's marks at equidistant points on the circumference; and on digging, found at one of those points a passage which seemed to lead into the interior. He was, however, recalled to Constantine, and the work was abandoned.

Lastly, in 1873, the Société Archéologique de Constantine took the matter up seriously, with ample authority and sufficient funds. They found that M. Bauchetet's passage ended abruptly, and had probably been made by previous explorers. Abandoning this, they concentrated all their energy upon the

entrance from the third row of steps. After a labour of two months they cleared out the passage to which this led, and found in the centre of the monument a chamber about four yards wide by two broad, with a bench of stone round three sides. The walls and roof of this were of blocks of stone, put together like those of the exterior, while the passage leading to it was partly of stone, and partly plastered. Wherever there was plaster it had been coloured purple. The roof was supported on beams of wood, most of which appeared to have been placed there by previous explorers. There was evidence that the whole had been set on fire, as the wood was charred, and quantities of lime, the remains of calcined blocks of limestone, blocked up the sepulchral chamber. Neither bones nor coins were met with, and only a few fragments of rude pottery. It was, therefore, clear that the tomb had been rifled previously, and that it had been fired by its explorers, indignant at finding nothing in it to reward their labour. Examination of the vestibule on the east revealed a pavement of plaster, coloured purple like the passage, but no columns or ornaments of any kind. It was further discovered that a vast quantity of tombs had existed in the neighbourhood, one of which seemed to be a miniature copy of the Medrásen, and contained a skeleton. A wall of enclosure had surrounded the whole. It was therefore concluded that the Medrásen was the centre of a necropolis of considerable extent.

The latest opinion respecting the name is that it is the plural of Madrès, a legendary ancestor of the tribes of that part of North Africa, from whom Massinissa, whose capital was Cirta (Constantine), claimed descent. If this be so, the legend that the Medrásen is a royal tomb may be true, the plural number indicating that several persons were there interred.

Of the three monuments, the only one mentioned by an ancient author is 'Le Tombeau de la Chrétienne,' which Pomponius Mela calls '*commune sepulchrum regie gentis.*'

The architecture would appear to indicate that the tomb was constructed by an artist who had seen Roman work, and who blended it with the traditional style of his country. Otherwise it is difficult to explain the union of the columns and cornice—which are classical in character—with the barbaric design of the truncated cone. A very remote date cannot, therefore, be assigned to the monument.

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