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By Arthur Lee

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“Very valuable quarries of marble have been found in the French colonies of Algiers and Tunis. It was from these that the Romans procured their so-called Numidian marbles. Numidia proper is outside of the district in which the greater part of the marbles are found; but it gave its name apparently to all of them. Pliny says that Numidia produced nothing remarkable except marble and wild beasts, and that Numidian marble was first brought to Rome under the consulate of M. Lepidus (B. C. 77), who used it in his own house. These marbles were greatly prized by the Romans, who imported great quantities of them; but after the fall of the empire they were altogether lost sight of, and have only lately been re-discovered and worked. The most beautiful varieties are found in a district about 20 miles northeast of Oran, in the western part of Algeria. Near the little village of Kleber rises an imposing mountain called by the colonists ‘Montagne Grise,’ from its arid, gray appearance. This mountain is one of a chain which extends in a northeasterly direction from Cape Aiguille on the west to Cape Carbou on the east, and is about the center of the range. On its summit there is a level plateau with superficies of some 1,500 to 2,000 acres, and running east and west. It is here that the marble is found. At the extreme east a creamy white marble is produced called ‘Marmor bianco;’ next comes marble of a beautiful flesh colored tint – ‘Rosa carnagione;’ then a fine variety of ‘Cippolino;’ and some yellow marbles of various tints - ‘Giallo ayorio,’ ‘Giallo canarino,’ ‘Giallo paonazro,’ and ‘Giallo antico.’ At the extreme west there are a number of breccias – ‘Breccia sanguine,’ ‘Breccia coronate,’ ‘Breccia dorata,’ ‘Breccia grande’ – a deep red marble, somewhat brecciated, and greatly resembling, if not identical with, the famous ‘Rosso antico’ – and a fine black and white marble, ‘Bianco e nero antico.’ There are numerous depressions to be seen in the ‘Montagne Grise,’ each evidently marking the site of a Roman quarry. Some blocks of stone have been found actually extracted, and some with grooves and wedge holes ready to be raised; but what is somewhat strange, there is no indication of any great monoliths having been prepared, and there is none of the usual debris of a quarry. Colonel Playfair is of opinion that the emperors carefully guarded the secret of these quarries, and that only comparatively small pieces of the precious stone were taken away just as they were separated from the mountain, without even any preliminary hammer dressing. They were probably worked up into mosaics, or used for other finer decorative purposes. Seneca mentions their employment in conjunction with those of Alexandria.

“The rediscovery of these beautiful marbles came about by the finding of some very fine mosaics in excavations made at St. Leu, in the vicinity of Arzen, the ancient Portus Magnus. These were recognized as being very like some of the long lost antique marbles found in Rome, and led to a careful examination of the surrounding country, and the discovery of the treasures on the ‘Montagne Grise.’ Some of the first geologists in the country had carefully examined the mountain on account of the iron ore which it contains; they decided that it was not in sufficient

quantities to make the working of it profitable; but they had failed to appreciate that it had already performed its task by communicating an almost endless variety of tints to the marble rock.

“The beautiful Algerian onyx marble is found at Ain Tekbaleli, near Tlemcen. It is translucent, faintly white and iridescent, and of stalagmite formation, bearing a resemblance to onyx – whence it derives its name. Bands of crystalline white alternate with others of a yellowish-brown, dark brown, or umber color. In ancient times, these quarries supplied the inhabitants of Rome and Carthage with the marble which was much used for monuments and for the internal decoration of houses. It was often cut into small vases for holding precious ointments, and was one of the stones known as Oriental alabaster. It was not an alabaster as we now understand the word; it is a true marble or carbonate of lime. It was very largely used in the beautiful Moorish architecture of Tlemcen, where Numidian marble is never found. Evidently, with quarries of onyx at their doors, neither the Romans of Pomaria, nor their successors, the Moors of Tlemcen, were tempted to transport any other variety for the decoration of that important city, so many, many miles from the sea. Great quantities of Algerian onyx have of late found their way to Paris, where it has extensive employment. With white or any of the red or pink marbles, it forms a beautiful combination.

“The marbles of Tunis consist of three distinct varieties – A yellow marble, the true ‘Giallo antico;’ a fine rose-colored marble, and a small brown breccia.

“The quarries are now being extensively worked by a Belgian company whose headquarters are at Liège. They are situated near Chemtou, on the line of railway between Algeria and Tunis, in the valley of Medjerda. This locality is not far from the eastern boundary of Numidia. A road was constructed by Hadrian, on his first visit to Africa in 128 – 129, between it and Tabarca for the purpose of transporting the marble to the sea coast, and thence to Rome. – *Building News.*”

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For more information about Algeria, visit the online links below:

Algeria, on Wikipedia
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Algeria>

Economy of Algeria, on Wikipedia
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