

The inhabitants procure water in a very singular manner. They dig wells at a hundred, sometimes at two hundred fathoms deep, and never fail to find water in great abundance. They remove, for this purpose, various layers of sand and gravel, until they come to a kind of stone resembling slate, which they know is next above that which they call *Bahar toht el erd*, or 'the sea beneath the earth,' a name which they give to the abyss in general. This stone is easily pierced, whereupon the water rises so quickly, and in such abundance, that those who descend to carry out the operation are sometimes surprised and suffocated, although their companions draw them up with all possible speed."*

The old geographer, Ptolemæus, has compared the surface of the Sahara to a panther's skin; the tawny hide represents the sandy plains, the black spots are the oases sprinkled over this immense solitude. The existence of the oasis, and of all the villages grouped around this centre of isolated vegetation, depends on one beneficent tree, the Date Palm. But to live, the Date, like its congener, the Doum Palm, must have, according to an Arab expression, "its feet in the water, and its head in the fire." To find the water which is so indispensable to the life of the palm, the Arab has, from a remote antiquity, excavated wells by removing the bed of sand, and perforating the stratum of gypsum which lies upon the aquiferous strata.

Among the Arabs of the Oued-Rir, the well-sinkers (*R' tuss*) form a particular guild, or corporation, which enjoys a remarkable amount of consideration. The means which they employ are, however, of the rudest description. As they do not know how to carry off the waters of infiltration, they frequently work under water, sometimes under columns 150 feet in height; many perish of suffocation, others die, at the expiry of a few years, of pulmonary phthisis. Each diver remains but two or three minutes below the surface, and then returns to the surface, his basket filled with débris; the reader will, therefore, understand with how much slowness the sinking of a well will proceed under such conditions.

* [Shaw, "Travels in Several Provinces of Barbary" (ed. 1748), vol. i., p. 125. The French are now sinking Artesian wells at various points of the Algerine Sahara.]