

Excerpt from **Tamanrasset, Crossroads of the Nomad** by Edward Parr

[The following excerpt involves one of the four protagonists of the novel, Renwick Villere, an American-born, British-trained archeologist and Director of the excavations at Carthage in present-day Tunisia. These events take place in the first decade of the Twentieth Century.]

Ancient texts were sometimes discovered in surprising places—small remote churches, undisturbed tombs, and even caves that had been undisturbed for centuries. While he was in Egypt, Ren had found the study of ancient Semitic languages such as Aramaic and Hebrew to be useful for conducting research, and after moving from Egypt to work on sites in Tunisia, and as excavations continued at the Salammbô site, Ren implemented a languages program for himself and his students: Experts were brought in to teach some of the ancient languages that had been more commonly used in that part of the world such as Tamazight, Punic, and Numidian. But the ancient languages most commonly found on scrolls and tablets were ancient Greek and Latin, and Ren was fluent in reading and writing both.

It was early in spring when, at Delattre's suggestion, Ren undertook an expedition to visit a number of sites on the island of Malta that were thought to be Punic. In fact, it was largely accepted that Malta had been a Punic colony or trading port long before the city of Carthage was first founded. Unfortunately, the journey to the island involved an overnight trip by steamship to Sicily, several days traveling across the island to another port, and a second day-long journey by steamship to the city of Valletta. The trip was far from interesting, and Ren spent much of the journey drinking large amounts of gin and tonic. When unoccupied, he seemed to take inordinate pleasure in drinking alcohol, and he knew, if it were not for his dedication to his work, he would likely have a serious illness.

Père Delattre had arranged for Ren to be met in Valletta by an elderly Italian priest, the custodian of ancient artifacts at the Jesuit's Collegium. It was still early spring and the days were cool and cloudy; Ren missed his home, but spent two weeks surveying sites that had nothing of interest and drinking a large amount of gin. Indeed, the earliest sites on the island had all been so thoroughly built over by succeeding civilizations that very few traces of the Phoenician culture remained to be found. The elderly priest assured Ren that, in the small village of Żurrieq on the southern coast of Malta, there was a Punic-built lighthouse. The building had proven so useful to ancient navigators that the Romans had preserved the structure entirely and even expanded it. The elderly priest had been to the site before and had no interest in returning, but he gave Ren the key and sent him to view the foundations which, the priest claimed, were 3,000 years old. If true, that claim meant that the structure would have been a crucial Punic waypoint long before the founding of Carthage itself.

The building Ren found was far less exciting than he was told to expect: A large building in poor condition, mostly rebuilt as a residence in the late middle ages, on

top of a Roman-era magistrate's villa, on top of late Carthaginian foundations. Ren estimated that the original building was likely constructed in about 300 BC, based on the stonework he had examined at Carthage. The empty building was dark but dry, and as a light rain began to fall, Ren explored the dark building. Certain rooms, he had been told, contained furniture which had been removed to the museum in Valletta, but much refuse and debris remained. One closet-like storage room on a lower level was so stuffed with papyrus scrolls and vellums, broken wooden furniture, and spare pieces of marble, that it was impossible to even get through the doorway to examine the contents within. The scrolls looked interesting.

After a further week of work utilizing local laborers, Ren was able to safely remove the scrolls which, the old priest assured him, would not have been abandoned unless they were worthless. On the contrary, Ren thought, they wouldn't have been saved unless they were precious.

Of course the scrolls could not legally be removed from Malta, but Ren had them all brought to Valletta and spent weeks combing through them. All of the writing was in Latin, and it appeared that most were records of shipments from Hadrumentum, one of the most important cities in Roman Africa, located on the Mediterranean coast south of Tunis. Ren knew that Hadrumentum had been destroyed by the Vandals in 434 AD, but the scrolls appeared to be documents that had been rescued from the fires. One in particular caught Ren's attention. It was written sometime near the end of the reign of Emperor Nero, about 68 AD. It consisted of a list of soldiers and materiel that had arrived in Hadrumentum from somewhere in the interior of the region: A small cohort of soldiers who requested and were granted transport back to Italia for themselves and 3,387 Roman libra of "ore." And it was explained that these men had previously been assigned by the Emperor (Nero) to oversee a mission sent to dig tunnels in the mountains, a failed mission at which all the laborers had died including its leader, whose name was Lucius Titus Bassus.

This document was a fascinating corroboration of the story about Bassus' search for the lost treasure of Dido, and a strong and exciting indication that gold had in fact been found. The soldiers traveling with the "ore" would have been returning to Rome just after Nero's death as the Roman empire descended into civil war, and they possibly chose to hold on to their cargo not knowing who would remain in power to receive it. Even more amazing, however, was the soldiers' written request for transport which accompanied the scroll. Submitted by a Roman Legionary, the request stated that Bassus and the deceased laborers had been interred in a cavern at "the quarry for the aqueduct." Ren paused after he read this. There was only one major aqueduct in Tunisia, one hundred-thirty kilometers long from the Zaghouan mountains to Carthage. Did this mean that the place where Bassus searched for Dido's treasure could be located? If there was gold ore found, could there be more? Ren decided to keep his hopes private but to follow up when he returned to Tunisia.

Very little was known about the long abandoned aqueduct, but after Ren had returned to the Palais d'Hamilcar, he asked his students to begin studying the Roman structure. When was it built, what were its water sources, and (most importantly)

where was the stone quarried? He assigned pairs of students to ride out along the path of the aqueduct to the southwest of Tunis to see what they could find.

After weeks of searches, two students returned from a lengthy search with exciting news: They had found the quarry where the aqueduct's stone was cut. In addition, they found what appeared to be the famous Roman "Temple of Water" built at the site of the mountain spring that was the source of the aqueduct's waters. It was known that the temple was a popular spot for vacationing Roman tourists in their day because of the spring water. Ren was determined to ride out and see it for himself. He selected one of his more dedicated and discrete students, Tom Childers, to accompany him on the three day ride out to the Roman temple. Tom, a recent Oxford graduate, had turned down an opportunity to be one of Petrie's minions in Egypt in order to work at Carthage, so Ren felt a special obligation to bring the young man along.

The temple was situated at Djebel Zaghouan, a lonely mountain some one hundred-twenty kilometers from Carthage. Ren and Tom arrived after dark and made camp just beside the Temple of Water, but at first light its beauty was breathtaking: Built on a wide stone terrace and covered with an enormous shallow pool of clear, sparkling water, the temple was built of fine white limestone. On the south end there was a crescent-shaped Roman portico with an ornate opening that led to a stately chamber. This chamber had been dug into the side of the mountain and was still decorated with magnificent statues of the Roman gods. An overflowing spring in the rear wall of this interior chamber was the source of the water that flowed out the portico to the shallow pool that covered the terrace. The water flowed gently north across the terrace and then flowed into a natural cistern which would have fed the aqueduct.

Ren and Tom spent days exploring the mountain as if they were on holiday: They climbed and hiked around the entire massif, bathed in water collected from the spring, took turns preparing their meals, and spent the cool evenings drinking wine and entertaining each other with mythological tales as the Sun set and the Moon rose. Tom quickly became Ren's favorite student. Still, Ren declined to mention the tales of Bassus or the writings he had seen in Malta. He was still uncertain whether this was the same aqueduct and same place where Bassus had allegedly searched for treasure.

They quickly located the quarry where the stone used to build the aqueduct and the temple had been cut, and they did indeed locate a number of vertical shafts cut deep into the mountain which suggested there had been attempts to mine the mountain for ore—but by whom? Was this really where Bassus had looked for Dido's treasure? Had he mined the mountain's core seeking gold ore? Or were these shafts dug at another time, later or earlier, for an altogether different purpose?

One morning Tom came running excitedly into camp. "Professor, I've found a horizontal shaft," he said, "it looks like the entrance to a mine. I couldn't get into the opening, but I think together we can clear the debris that blocks it."

Ren returned with him at once to examine the find. The perfectly square entrance to the tunnel was obscured by rubble and a dense thicket of trees that had grown up at the base of the ascent, but the shaft into the mountainside was obviously man-made: It was precisely ten pedes wide and ten pedes high (roughly ten feet by ten feet), and it ran absolutely straight and level into the heart of the mountain. After clearing a few stones and chopping down a small tree, Ren and Tom were able to squeeze into the shaft. Inside, they lit their torches and walked in side by side. Dust, sand, and debris littered the smooth floor, but the trees outside had largely protected the tunnel. There were no forks in the path, no rooms, no openings—it was merely a straight, empty shaft. Then the tunnel came to an abrupt end.

“Look, Professor,” Tom said, pointing to a crude, blackened etching in the smooth stone wall, more scratched than chiseled: “*Hic Requiescit Bassus, Stultorum Dominus,*’ Here lies Bassus, Lord of Fools,” he recited. “How fascinating. Do you have any idea who this man Bassus was?”

Ren stared at the inscription incredulous. He knew of only one Bassus, but he was still attempting to understand what had happened here. Perhaps Bassus *was* a fool: Had he really found gold ore in this mountain as he had told the emperor? Had he committed suicide or died of an illness, or had he been murdered? Had the Legionaries stolen the gold ore from Bassus and killed the laborers? Ren examined the blunt end of the tunnel. It was far too smooth to merely be the end of an excavation, and indeed it proved to be constructed of stones that had been placed to seal the tunnel. Was this shaft dug merely to entomb Bassus? No Pharaoh of Egypt had ever had such a large, well-constructed tunnel entrance to his tomb. Bassus was back there behind the wall, surely, but he was very probably not alone. As Tom watched, Ren examined every inch of the wall. There was no indication that the floor had been harmed when the stones were pushed into place. It must have been carefully constructed, the joinery appeared perfect. Ren reached up as high as he could and pressed on the stone at the top of the wall. The stone moved.

“Come, let’s get this wall down,” he said.

Tom leapt forward, and together they pushed the stones starting at the very top. Those stones were quite large and heavy, but with significant effort they together were able to push the stone into the void. The stones below were even thicker, but soon the two men had opened a hole just large enough for them each to pass individually through into the space beyond, where the tunnel continued for only a few more yards before opening upon a large, pitch black cavern.

The darkness in the cavern was absolute, the air was still, and the odor of death remained after more than 1,800 years. The two men stepped forward into the wide space with torches raised high. Bodies lay everywhere. In the sealed dry air of the desert mountain, desiccated leathery skin remained on many skeletons. These people could have easily escaped from the cavern unless they were already dead when the shaft was sealed. Some showed signs of knife wounds. These were the laborers who had searched for gold, executed for their failure to find any or perhaps because they had found too much, and Bassus was certain to be among them.

“There is an incident recorded by Audollent,” Ren told Tom at last, “that a Roman named Bassus promised to find Dido’s lost treasure for the Emperor Nero. Bassus is said to have failed, and the emperor ordered his Legionnaires to execute Bassus and his laborers. This find seems to substantiate that account.” But Bassus had previously told the emperor that he *had* found gold ore, and he must have believed there was more, Ren thought. Perhaps the soldiers killed them in order to steal the ore. Had they found it all? Ren and Tom searched the cavern extensively and found trinkets and bones, but there was nothing of value whatsoever and no indication that there ever had been.

The day had gotten late. They returned to their camp and decided to depart in the morning and return to Carthage. The search had been fascinating but not everything Ren had hoped. They had seen a beautiful mountain and an unparalleled Roman temple, but there was no evidence of any treasure. Ren sat admiring the temple as the Sun began to set. The building remained gorgeous after nearly two thousand years, the mineral waters still flowing from the mountain into the shallow pool and spreading evenly over the wide terrace before flowing off the end. The sky turned red, and the sparkling waters of the temple’s pool glittered like gold.

Ren was suddenly struck by a thought: He had heard of miners panning for gold, allowing the heavy particles of gold dust suspended in water to sink to the bottom of a pan, separating the gold from other materials. What if the entire temple terrace was built to act like such a pan? Mineral water flowed from the mountain, and any heavy gold particles in the water would sink to the bottom of the pool before the water flowed into the aqueduct. Ren quickly took off his boots, socks and pants. He walked across the edge of the terrace and gingerly stepped into the pool. His foot sank at once into a thick, heavy sludge on the bottom, maybe a foot deep. He reached down and pulled up a handful of the heavy sand-like sludge. The wet sediment in his hand glittered. It was full of gold.