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MAJOR GORDON LAING, AND THE CIRCUMSTANCES ATTENDING HIS DEATH.

From the Narrative of M. Bonnel de Mézières.

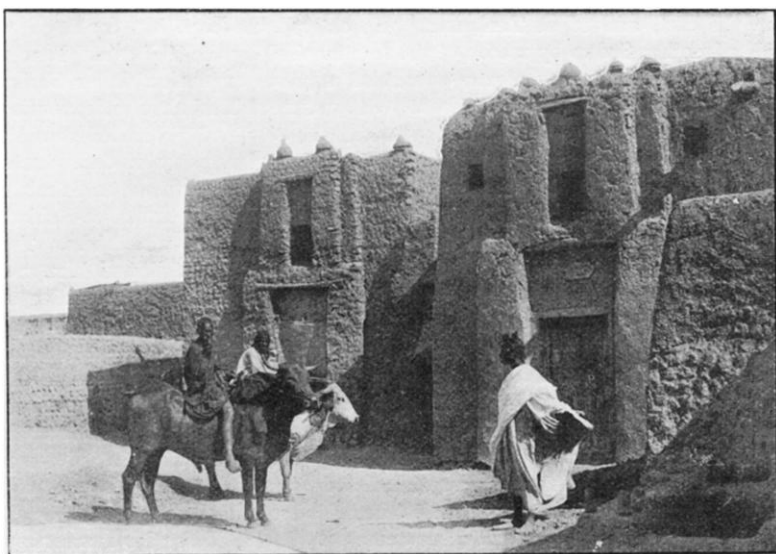
WE alluded last year (*Journal*, vol. 37, p. 316) to the discovery of the grave of the Scottish explorer, Major A. Gordon Laing, who was murdered near Timbuktu in 1826. We have since received from M. de Mézières a narrative of the circumstances under which the discovery was made, preceded by a sketch of Laing's career and of his last fatal journey, from which the following brief account is extracted.

Laing, it may be recalled, was born at Edinburgh in 1794, a scion, on the mother's side, of the Scottish family of Gordon. After serving at Waterloo, he set out in 1820 for Sierra Leone, where he acquitted himself with success in a mission into the then unknown interior undertaken on behalf of the governor, with a view to checking the slave-dealing of the chiefs. The Ashanti campaign, which soon afterwards broke out, claimed his services and left him in impaired health; but no sooner was this re-established than he set out once more for Africa with the sanction of the British Government, this time purposing to reach the Sudan from Tripoli. He left this town for the interior on July 17, 1825, having only a few weeks before become united in marriage to Miss Emma Warrington, daughter of the British Consul. The journey, for the details of which we have to depend almost solely on the letters sent home by him during the march, went fairly well, in spite of delays and the excessive heat, until first Ghadames and afterwards Insalah had been passed, but Laing was then treacherously attacked by Tuareg, who pillaged his caravan and left him for dead, wounded in twenty-four places. Cured as by a miracle in the camp by the Kunta chief, Sidi Mohammed, he suffered a second misfortune through an epidemic of infectious fever, which tried him severely and proved fatal to his two European attendants. Undaunted, he resumed his perilous advance, almost without resources, and on April 18, 1826, thirteen months after leaving Tripoli, he sighted the buildings of the mysterious city of Timbuktu, which no European had reached before him.

During his stay, in a house which is still standing, and of which we here reproduce a photograph taken by M. Fortier, he occupied himself with a survey of the city and in collecting information from the inhabitants, among whom he established a reputation of which the memory is kept alive to this day. Dissuaded from taking the route down the Niger, he thought to reach the coast by way of the upper river, but these plans were frustrated by the state of affairs in that quarter, where the Fulas of Massina (the so-called Tukulors), under their Sultan Ahmed ben Mohamed Labbo, were then extending their sway. At the demand of this truculent chief, Laing was required to leave Timbuktu, and he set out for Arauan, but was treacherously attacked and murdered at a spot some 30 miles from

Timbuktu, the exact position of which has been hitherto unknown, as have also the exact circumstances of the murder, which was perpetrated by a Berabish chief, Ahmed or Ahmadu Labeida.

The opportunity for renewed inquiry arose through the flight to Morocco, after defying the French authorities, of the late chief of the Berabish, Mehemet uld Mehemed, grandson of Ahmadu Labeida, an old man who exercised a harsh authority in the Timbuktu region. M. de Mézières was charged by the French governor with such an inquiry, and he reached Timbuktu fortified with letters of recommendation from the religious associations of the Senussi and Tijania. Able to converse with the chiefs in Arabic, and assuring them of immunity from punishment, he soon obtained information on the facts of the murder, which are still well remem-



THE HOUSE IN TIMBUKTU WHERE THE LATE MAJOR ALEXANDER GORDON LAING STAYED BEFORE HIS MURDER ON OCTOBER 3, 1826.

bered in the country. In particular he obtained news of a *tarikih* or chronicle, preserved at Arauan, in which the events of each day are written down. Here he found the murder of Laing duly narrated, and was able to obtain a copy of the passage in question. It stated that the murder was committed at a spot called Sahab, beneath a tree known as *Athile*, on the 21st day of the month Safar, 1242 (*i.e.* A.D. 1826). M. de Mézières found an old Berabish of 82, named Mohamed-uld Moktar, nephew of Ahmadu Labeida, by whom he was conducted to the place, in company with Sheikh Aruaka, who had already been helpful in the matter. Sahab lies on the road to Arauan, 30 miles north-west of Timbuktu, and forms a large depression in which, the sand being mingled with clay, some moisture

remains after the winter season. Digging beneath the tree, the traveller came upon fragments of human bones, and at a little distance traces of a fire with remains of boxes, etc. These were carefully collected and taken to Timbuktu, where the bones were pronounced by Surgeon-Major Lefevre to be those of two individuals, an adult bearing the characters of a European, and a youth. This harmonized with the native statement that, of Laing's two servants, one had been wounded and taken to Timbuktu, while the other shared the fate of his master. The remains were carefully separated and placed in coffins.

The following is a slightly abridged translation of the extract from the *Tarikh* supplied to M. de Mézières :— *

“In the year 1242 Othman ben El-Kaid Bubakar came into power as Emir and Kaid. During this same year a Christian, of English nationality, coming from the east, arrived at Timbuktu. He entered the city, but could go no further into the Sudan by reason of the fear inspired by the Tukulors. It was, in fact, at the beginning of the successful religious expansion under Sheikh Ahmadu Labbo. This Christian stayed a certain time at Timbuktu, endeavouring to keep his presence secret, then he quitted the city and proceeded towards Arauan. At once mounting his horse at the head of a party of dependants, Ahmadu ben Labeida took the same route and joined the Christian at Sahab, a spot on the road to Arauan. The Christian having camped at Talhat-er-Rahhal, Ahmadu took up his quarters in the same place in order to watch him. The Christian having started again after a short halt, Ahmadu followed him, and having overtaken him at Sahab, killed him in the middle of the morning of Tuesday, the 21st of the month Safar, in the year above indicated. The murder took place near a small *Ethel* west of the *mejbed* (road), at a spot generally known as Gueblat-el-Meraier. Neither Ahmadu nor any of the notables with him appropriated any of the objects belonging to the Christian, nor did they even come near them. But the common people threw themselves upon the effects of the traveller, and broke open his two boxes. They found only 10 to 20 pieces of silver, and these one of them appropriated and concealed among his property, as was afterwards discovered. All that remained of the baggage was buried, after burning all the papers and other contents. In forbidding his companions to take possession of anything, Ahmadu acted under the persuasion that the whole was under a magic spell, of which they might be the victims. Another version has it that Ahmadu was merely the instrument of the masters of the country, the Ruma and Tuareg. This is more likely to be the true story, as Ahmadu was not powerful enough to put to death one in possession of the passport of those in authority.”

The following is taken from a declaration made by Mohamed-uld Moktar, above mentioned :—

“I was brought up by Ahmadu Labeida, and have often heard him give the following account: In the year 1242 the Englishman, being at Timbuktu, and wishing to go to Arauan, readily obtained permission, as his presence caused discontent among the people. Ahmed Labeida agreed to act as guide, and Laing

* The extracts appear to be given not quite literally, but to include also the comments of M. de Mézières' informant, or of an earlier copyist.

started for Arauan on the 21st of the moon Safar, stopping at a place called Sahab, under a large *athile* tree. The next day he was joined by Ahmadu, Mohamed Feraji, and two other Berabish. The Englishman, thinking himself in security, allowed them to approach, whereupon Feraji and the two others threw themselves upon him, and Ahmed Labeida struck him with his sword. It was the 21st day of the moon Safar (which then fell in October). They left him on the spot, but collected his property, and as they accused him of coming to the country to poison it, and were suspicious of all that he had, they made a hole, kindled a fire, and threw in all his effects, stopping their noses as they did so. They only kept the money and jewels, among which was a little golden bird with outspread wings, which afterwards fell to Uld Mehemeh, grandson of Ahmed Labeida. Shortly afterwards a Berabish passed by, and seeing some human remains being eaten by birds, he buried them. Long afterwards he declared that he thought them to be the remains of a Musulman, and that if he had known the truth he would have left them as they were. A few years ago, when returning from Timbuktu in company with Feraji and Himid, son of Labeida, I asked the former to take me by the *athile* tree. We were in a valley between Timbuktu and Awssei. He pointed out a large tree at no great distance, and we went to it. . . ."

M. de Mézières declares that all the persons from whom he obtained the information entirely agreed in their statements. There seems, therefore, full reason for believing the above account to be correct.

Since the above was in the printer's hands, we have received from Captain C. Braithwaite Wallis, H.M. Consul-General for French Western Africa, an article on M. de Mézières' discovery, based on the documents submitted to him by the French authorities on behalf of that traveller. The two narratives naturally agree in all essential particulars, though some few details are given by Captain Wallis which supplement the narrative sent to us by M. de Mézières. Thus reference is made to two distinct *tarikhs* containing the record of the murder, and more precise statements are made as to the exact positions of the various remains dug up. These included additional bones found at a little distance from the first, but no conclusion seems to have been arrived at as to their identity. The papers sent to Captain Wallis were forwarded by him to the British Foreign Office, and he was subsequently commissioned to convey to M. de Mézières and the French authorities the thanks of His Majesty's Government for the interest and trouble taken by them in bringing to light new facts respecting the tragic death of the intrepid explorer. Captain Wallis also forwarded various photographs of localities in Timbuktu, taken by M. Fortier of Dakar—among them that of Laing's house reproduced above.