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Magyar Afrika-kutatás, Bir Bidi (Szudán) mint egy sivatag neve és egy különleges földrajzi terület, a sivatag a nemzetközi szakirodalomban, a sivatag nevének magyarázata, Almásy útjai e területre, a terület földrajzi leírása gazdag adatanyag kíséretében,

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explanations of the desert's name, expeditions by Almásy to this area, geographical description of the area accompanied by data-rich material

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## BIR BIDI

By L. E. d'Almásy  
(Plates III & IV and map)

A DESERT well of this name was shown on several editions of the General Staff map (1 in 3 million scale) of the Anglo–Egyptian Sudan as lying in the neighbourhood of Merga Oasis in the Libyan Desert.

It was first mentioned by Mr. A. J. Arkell in his article “The Southern Route to Kufra” (*Sudan Notes and Records*, December, 1922), in which he rendered the tale of a Darfur guide, Bidi Wad Awad, who claimed to have dug this well himself at a place about two days’ camel march to the north of Merga.<sup>1</sup>

At the time when Mr. Arkell obtained his information very little was known of Merga itself. On the older maps there were Tagua and Ain Kiyeh, shown as lying in that region of the Libyan Desert, but it was not until Prince Kemal Ed Din Hussein first reached the oasis, that Merga was allotted its proper place on the Sudan map. When returning from Merga to ‘Uweinat the Prince was told by his Guraan guides some distance to the north of Merga, that “to the right (east) of their route there was a well with a palm and some bushes, called Bidi after a Biday who had found it.”

Thus two separate informations had been gathered about Bir Bidi and, on the subsequent edition of the Sudan map, the well made its first appearance. I don’t know whether it was placed there on Mr. Arkell’s information – according to which it lay north of Merga – or on Prince Kemal Ed Din’s, which allotted it to the north-west, but for some strange reason it was shown in contradiction to both, as lying to the south-west of the oasis.

In the following years more information was gathered about Bir Bidi by several explorers, but it always struck me that there must be some curious mistake about its allotted position on the map, which never tallied with the travellers’ reports.

Bir Bidi was again mentioned by Messrs. D. Newbold and W. B. K. Shaw in their article, “An Exploration in the South Libyan Desert” (*Sudan Notes and Records*, Volume XI, 1928), and there in a foot-note it was suggested that it might be lying in a north-westerly extension of the depression that the explorers found some 27 kilometres north of the Lake of Merga, which Mr. Newbold called “Wadi Hussein”. The position of Bir Bidi, however, was not altered on the 1928 edition of the Sudan map.

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<sup>1</sup> *Merga* means “broth” or on account of the slightly salt water of the oasis.

Early in 1931 I received a message from Colonel B. T. Wilson, S.D.F., in which he informed me that Bir Bidi had been spotted from an aeroplane about 60 kilometres due north of Merga, but in contradiction to this the well remained marked to the south-west of the oasis on later editions of the Sudan map, as well as in Phillip's Atlas.

Mr. Newbold, who took part in this reconnaissance flight, thought that he had seen the place which might have been Bir Bidi, after 33 minutes' flying on a true bearing of  $1^\circ$  after having passed above "Wadi Hussein". He described it as a sort of small basin with a white patch and a very green tree in the centre, and a tiny *khore* or drainage channel running into it from the north. His pilot, however, did not fly low enough to allow Mr. Newbold a good view of the place, and thus it was impossible to say whether they had actually flown over a water-bearing depression.

Bidi Wad Awad had personally accompanied this expedition, and I do not know why he had not been taken to the place by car, though I later found the car tracks of Wilson's expedition only 12 kilometres from the well.

Major R. A. Bagnold searched the region of Mr. Newbold's "Wadi Hussein" in November, 1932, but he failed to find an open well there. He suggested (the *Geographical journal*, August, 1933) that Bir Bidi might be identical with a place called Oyo, of which native reports have been gathered, and that this may be the "Wadi Hussein" itself, where water can be found by digging. In consequence the name Oyo appeared on the Sudan map added in brackets to that of Bidi, but without moving the position of this evasive well to the north of Merga, where according to every piece of information it ought to have been.

At last, in November, 1933, I found the well without much difficulty by following up some information that I had gathered in Kufra, and I reported its exact situation in the Desert Survey Office in Cairo. If I thought that Bir Bidi was now going to be allotted its proper place on the map, I was mistaken. To my surprise I found that the well was taken off altogether from the 1934 edition of the Sudan map, surely an extraordinary thing to happen, especially when considering the fact that Merga Oasis had been temporarily occupied by a patrol of the Sudan Defence Force early in 1934, which occupation must have certainly led to a thorough exploration of the Merga region.

I felt that after its misfortune with the Sudan map, Bir Bidi deserved some better attention, and I therefore decided to follow up its story more closely in addition to what I had already found out about it.

In the course of my 1935 expedition I was lucky enough to ascertain what I now regard to be definite information on this "mystery well", but when rendering the following account of my data, I have to proceed from the beginning.

\* \* \*

As I have before mentioned, the first information was gathered by Mr. Arkell from the Biday guide, Bidi Wad Awad, at El Fasher. This man had accompanied Sultan Ali Dinar's caravan to Kufra in 1915 and gave a detailed description of the journey to Mr. Arkell.

To comprehend fully the circumstances of this interview, one should bear in mind the opening remarks of the author, in which he emphasises the fact that at that time neither he nor his informant spoke Arabic faultlessly. The following are the two passages of Bidi's narrative concerning his well :

“Then we set out, and after riding for four days, always going due north, we reached the oasis of Tamr El Qusar (? Tamr El Bedai) where there is open water, round which grow numerous date-palms.

Hitherto there had been plenty of grass for the camels to eat, but north of Tamr El Qusar there was very little. The going all the way to Kufra was sandy, with here and there a patch of stones. Henceforward we gave up riding only by day, and instead we rode all the night long, camping for the heat of the day about two hours after sunrise. I led the way, always keeping my right shoulder on Jedi, the Pole Star, and with a man riding out on each side of me. It only took us two days to reach a well, which the people call Bir Bidi. It is so called, because when I was on that raid, I saw where a gazelle had been digging in the ground. So I scooped out the sand, and at a depth less than the height of a man, I found plenty of water. When I left, my friends and I put a large stone over the place. This time, too, when we moved the stone, we found water with ease.

From here it took us nine days to reach Jebel Anwar, which is a large *jebel* like Meidob, and has four springs within a radius of three or four miles, so that there is plenty of water. Here we found about 100 Goraan living, and about 160 Feizan. We stayed at Anwar eight days to rest; and were told by the people there that if anyone came to interfere with them, they would kill them all.

Then we set out again, and from there another seven days brought us to Hajar Kowal, a fairly tall solitary *jebel*, where there is a well, the work of the Goraan and Feizan of those parts. Here we just filled up our waterskins and set out again, and on the eighth night we reached Wadi Gerat, which is full of palms, and gets its name from the bitterness of some of the dates.

Next morning I rode on with a Bedai called Ibrahim to the house of a Feizani called El Khei, which was situated in Tallaf, another *wadi* full of palms.”

\* \* \*

“We returned by the same road, but as our camels were heavily loaded, the journey took us longer, ten days to Hajar Kowal and eleven more to Jebel Anwar. There we stayed four days, and then we reached Bir Hamra after eight days, Bir Bidi after seven more, Tamr el Qusar after four more, and Natrun after five more. Then on the ninth day after leaving Natrun, we arrived at Duani in Dar Unti, Jebel el Meidob, where we stayed three days.”

\* \* \*

When analysing the first part of Bidi's report – that concerning his outward journey – one finds the following points of interest: –

He states that he kept his “right shoulder” on Polaris, which might indicate a *north-westerly* course, as Arabs usually talk about “keeping the camél's head on jedi” when they speak of a due north trek.

He mentions “Jebel Anwar”, meaning evidently ‘Uwei-nat, and states that there are four springs in the mountain within a radius of three or four miles. Now we know that there are actually only three principal springs at ‘Uweinat – Ain Murr, Ain Dowā (or Mn Ghassal) and Ain Zweia, but they are much further distant from each other than three or four miles. Of course, at the time when Bidi visited ‘Uweinat some other springs might have held water as, judging by the number of inhabitants he states to have met there, his visit must have fallen into a period following abundant rain. Thus the fourth well may have been the source that lies some 15 kilometres to the west of the entrance to Karkur Murr, in which I found a little water in May, 1933, but which was completely dry when I re-visited it in March, 1934.<sup>2</sup>

Bidi further says that it took him seven days from “Anwar” (‘Uweinat) to “Hagar Kowal”. Now, seven days will take a caravan from ‘Uweinat to Kufra, but there is no “fairly tall hill with a well” at the southern-most point of the Kufra depression. It is not quite clear whether “the eighth night” means just one more day's march to “Wadi Great” or another eight days between these two places by closer examination, however, there remains no doubt that Bidi meant the latter.

Bidi's “Tallaf” is the first name mentioned by him which can be identified with the village of Talab. It is actually a morning's ride from Talab to Zurk, the southern-most palm grove of Kufra. Therefore Bidi's “Wadi Great” must be Zurk, which is the first oasis that a caravan coming from ‘Uweinat must reach.

From Zurk the distance to Arkenu *may* be eight days if a caravan travels very slowly, or if the guide exaggerates his distances between waters.

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<sup>2</sup> In 1933 I met an old Tibu at ‘Uweinat, a man called Ibrahim (incidentally, the one after whom Karkur Ibrahim has its present name) who told me about this spring, which he called “Ain el Prince”. He said it was in a *wadi* at the foot of the mountain somewhere between Ain Dowā and Karkur Murr, but nearer to the latter. When I set out from Ain Dowā to search for it, I had to walk for some considerable distance over the foothills east of Ras Regim, and I found the spring under a rocky step in a *wadi* bed almost due south of “Triple Peak”.

In 1934 I went there again with Capt. Arkwright, S.D.F., but this time we approached the place by car coining from Karkur Murr. Though I got into what appeared to me to be the same *wadi*, and found the rocky step again, I could not recognise it for certain as being the place I had visited the year before. There was no trace of any moisture where there had been a cup of water, and we found on the flat top of the rock many rock carvings that I had not noticed on my previous visit. We found, however, the site of a large Tibu encampment close by, which indicated that this dry spring must have been one of importance after rains.

Similarly, the number of marching days between Karkur Murr and Arkenu may be exaggerated to seven days. It is very likely, therefore, that Bidi's "fairly tall Hagar Kowal with its well" was Arkenu, and it is more than likely that all the distances given by Bidi were grossly exaggerated.

If we now take his return journey, there remains no doubt as to the inaccuracy of Bidi's statements.

He says that he travelled *ten* days from Kufra (evidently from El Jof) to Hagar Kowal (Arkenu) – a distance that any caravan will easily do in seven days – and from there *eleven* more to Anwar ('Uweinat), which can be done in three days.

Now he mentions a new name, that of "Bir Hamra", which "lies eight days from 'Uweinat", and it takes him seven more to get from there to his Bir Bidi. He still doubles the number of marching days from his well to Merga and only gives more plausible distances as he approaches his goal.

All this shows quite clearly that Bidi's story, as he told it to Mr. Arkell, was far from being accurate as regards the distances. It is a well-known fact, of course, that desert guides always tend to exaggerate their distances, the admiring exclamations of their listeners being the louder the more days they state to have put in "between waters".<sup>3</sup>

In 1928 Bidi Wad Awad gave an amplified account of how he had discovered the site of his well to Mr. D. C. Cumming, then District Commissioner of Northern Darfur. He stated that in the year 1902, when on a raiding trip to Kufra, he came to a place some 30 to 40 miles north of Merga, where he noticed a gazelle, having scratched the ground, which suggested to him the possibility of water.

This, of course, sounds more like one of those typical desert stories, with their animal legends and miraculous finds (so common amongst Beduins), than a naturalist's observation of the Dorcas Gazelle's habits – an animal known to live in desert regions hundreds of miles from water.

He then describes how he dug a well in that place, and how, finally, at the depth of a man's shoulder, the sand became wet and, when he pushed his arm down into it, the water gushed up "in spasms like blood from the neck of a slaughtered sheep".

This appeared to indicate a fairly strong artesian pressure, and it suggested that Bir Bidi was lying at a different level from the water-bearing strata of the Merga depression, as no such artesian effect was observed by Prince Kemal Ed Din when he dug his wells in the oasis.

Bidi finally closed the well with stones and palm fibre – a noteworthy statement, as he later denied the proximity of palms in the neighbourhood of

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<sup>3</sup> Recently, however, I have been much amused to observe on several occasions the opposite tendency coming into fashion, undoubtedly under the influence of our mechanical age. A desert guide, who had before boasted of seven days between Wadi Haifa and Selima Oasis, now pretends to have covered the distance "almost like a motor car, in three days only!"

his well – and covered it up with a large fiat stone. Thirteen years later he found the well still covered, and he watered 168 camels and filled over zoo water-skins from it, with the well “still overflowing”.

He again mentioned “Bir Hamra”, but this time he stated that it was seven days from Bir Bidi and only some 30 miles from ‘Uweinat, whereas to Mr. Arkell he had given its distance as eight days from there. Thus the description given by Bidi allowed for a certain amount of doubt, and it was not till five years later that I heard some more of the mystery well to the north of Merga.

Early in 1933, and in the autumn of the same year, I paid my second and third visits to Kufra. Thanks to the kindness of our Italian hosts I was able to gather much interesting information about several regions of the Libyan Desert from some Arabs and Guraan at Kufra. Among other things I was given a description of “Tamr” (Merga) and the “secret well to the north of the oasis”.

I may just mention here that I have never heard Merga being called “Nakheila”. My Kufra informants talked about Tamr, Merga or Oyo, but even the name of “Tamr el Qusseir” was unknown to them.

I have questioned quite a number of people about Merga. Some of the fugitives who had returned from there to Kufra, others who had worked their way up to Kharga, some Kababish and Guraan I had met at Bir Natrun in 1933, and again others whom I met there in 1935, as well as a party of Zaghawa, and some Bidiyat whom I met on their way to and from Bir Natrun in the Wadi Hawar. Neither of these ever mentioned the name “Nakheila”, and they invariably called the oasis Tamr or Merga.

On every occasion I finally asked them whether they knew of a place called Nakheila, but they either gave a negative answer, or talked about several places called “Nukheil” or “Nakhlei”, allotting this name to small groups of palm trees in either the Natrun oasis or in Kufra, as well as at Laqqia and in the El Sheb region on the Arbain Road. Prince Kemal Ed Din told me that he had never heard of the name “Nakheila”, except when reading it in Mr. Newbold’s report, and quite recently Hassanein Bey confirmed to me that his Guraan companions had never mentioned this name, though they talked of an oasis called “Tamr”.

My Kufra informants were a Zueia and a Guraan, who had left Kufra at the time of the Italian occupation (20th January, 1931) and had gone to Merga together with a number of other fugitives. They told me how they had reached ‘Uweinat after seven days from Kufra and how they had been led to Merga by three Guraani, by name Herri, Iza and Sugu, whom they had met at ‘Uweinat.

They gave me a description of Merga oasis, or Tamr as they called it, and of their life in some palm-leaf huts which they had erected to the west of the lake. Three men of their party left soon after their arrival with five camels, to try to reach Egypt, but they were never heard of again. Later, some more Guraani arrived in Tamr led by one Aremi Gongoy. This man soon assumed



the leadership of the small community and they “believed” that he was a brigand. In the following year it became necessary for them on two occasions to abandon their camp and to move to a place about one day’s march to the north of the lake, which is called Oyo. They had seen aeroplanes and motor-cars at Tamr and thought that the Italians were pursuing them.

At Oyo there are some “red palms” (*taw hamra*) and water can be got by digging, but farther north in a *wadi* there is an open well called “Bir Aremi” or “Bir el Haush”, because it is the secret well of Aremi Gongoy, and there grows a palm bush (*haush*) above it.

Though I had not been to Merga then, I thought that the place called Oyo must be either Mr. Newbold’s “Tamr el Qusseir” or his “Wadi Anag”. We had arranged with my companion, Wing-Commander H. G. Penderel, that he should locate this “Bir Aremi” – which I believed to be Bir Bidi itself – on his excursion to Merga. Unfortunately, he found no time to carry out this reconnaissance to the north of Merga Oasis.

When Penderel returned from Merga the two drivers he had engaged in Kharga spread the news there, that they had to withdraw from Merga because they had found the oasis occupied by what they thought were brigands. This story reached some of the Kufra fugitives who had settled down in Kharga, and it aroused the particular interest of three men who had actually come to Kharga from Merga. These were the three of whom my Kufra informants had reported that “they left right in the beginning, but had never been heard of again”. They knew that the people whom Penderel’s party had seen in Merga were their friends and relatives and they decided to go and rescue them. This one of them carried out in July and August, 1933, and the last party of Kufra fugitives that had been marooned for two-and-a-half years were thus brought to Kharga and Egypt.

In September, 1933, on my way out for another expedition, I was lucky enough to get hold of the man who had carried out this rescue. He was a sinister-looking chap, finely built and with the face of a vulture. He said he was a Mogharba and that his name was Abu Naas. I questioned him about his desert travels and he reluctantly told me how he had reached Merga with the other fugitives, and how he had ridden with two companions and five camels from Merga to Bir Natrun to reconnoitre the further way to inhabited territory. From Bir Natrun they picked up the Arbain Road and got to a well with some clay brick houses near it (*Laqqia Arbain*). From there they followed the old caravan road to the north for a very considerable distance, until at last they found a well with tall grass round it (*Bir Safsaf*). They lost three camels on this part of their journey. The caravan road had become very indistinct after this oasis, but they found some car tracks further north that they followed to the north-east, until they got once more on to the great caravan route which finally led them into Kharga. Abu Naas wanted to return immediately to Merga with fresh camels to fetch his friends, but the Egyptian authorities did not allow him to do so.

When two-and-a-half years later he heard from Penderel's drivers that his people were still in Merga, he left secretly and alone and rode again along the same route-Bir Murr, Bir Safsaf, Laqqia Arbain, and Bir Natrun to Merga. He told me that he found his friends in the southern part of the oasis, where they had just returned from a well which lies one to one-and-a-half day's journey to the north of the lake. He said that he himself had not been to that place, but that his people had told him that it lies on the other side of the hills that surround Merga, in a narrow *wadi*.

This corroborated the information I had got in Kufra, but on the whole I could not get much more out of Abu Naas concerning Merga. In fact, he was eager to hear from me about his two former companions, whom I had met at Kufra, and he repeatedly asked me why and how they had returned there, but I found him rather wary and reluctant to give me any information on Merga. I now know that this was because of the murder of Aremi Gongoy, which had taken place shortly before his arrival at Merga and in which his friends were involved, but ... "that is a different story".

It had not been in my programme to visit Merga on this trip, but circumstances finally led me to an excursion to the south. I drove to Merga from Newbold's "Burg el Tuyur", having no other map than the 1 in 2 million scale map published in *Sudan Notes and Records* with Messrs. Newbold's and Shaw's article. I chose the straight line from the Burg to the lake of Merga for my bearing and drove on the compass as straight as I could manage over those atrocious "stone fields" that we met soon after leaving the Bird Rock. This course (250° Mag.) took me over the country to the east of Messrs. Newbold's and Shaw's route and I did not expect to find anything "new" in this region. Having come 65 kilometres from Burg el Tuyur, however, I suddenly found myself on the edge of a fairly deep (40 metres) depression. I drove down into it and, as its general direction did not force me to alter my original course very much, I remained in it for some 20 kilometres. There are many Tundub trees and even some Selim bushes in this depression, which is covered with dry grass tussocks. I saw gazelle and what may have been barbary sheep tracks, and at about half-way we passed a typical Arab grave with two stone slabs put up to mark it. There were potsherds and flint implements as well, and when finally I climbed out of the depression – which appeared to extend towards the east – to turn on to my original course again, I found myself on an old camel road with occasional "alarnat" (cairns) leading straight along my course to Merga.

Nearing Newbold's "Nussab el Hadud" the going improved and the cannel track disappeared, but I crossed some fresh Addax tracks and even passed one of these fine antelopes that was on its way from Merga to the north. Nearing the broken rocky ridges that lie to the north of Newbold's "Wadi Anag" the camel road became visible again, and as its bearing did not differ much (2200 Mag.) from my set course, I followed it right down into the latter.

I now found Messrs. Newbold's and Shaw's route report, which I luckily happened to have with me, invaluable and strikingly correct. My companions afterwards said that I was driving with one hand, holding the copy of *Sudan Notes and Records* in the other, and while keeping one eye on the compass, I was reading with the other my "Desert Baedeker". In fact, I had no difficulty in finding the pointed hill with the rock pictures in Wadi Anag and near it the palm-leaf huts of the Guraan camp. I climbed the hill and found a brand-new camel saddle and two spears hidden away on its top. I then drove round the depression of Wadi Anag, taking bearings and distances for a sketch map. One kilometre from the Guraan camp I came across the lowest spot of the valley, and there at the foot of two large Terfa bushes and an Arak (Shau) tree, I found the sites of two sanded-up walls. From the top of the rock picture hill I had seen Newbold's "Wadi Hussein" quite close to the north, so I did not follow the line (due west) along which his camel caravan had come from "Tamr el Qusseir" but I drove over a slight rise beside the hill into that other depression which I found covered with grass tussocks.

I now kept a sharp look-out for a "haush" (date-palm bush without stem) which, according to my Kufra informants should indicate the position of the "mystery well", and I first followed the Wadi to the northeast, from where it appeared to descend. Keeping along the edge of the grass tussock area, I came to a group of white hillocks, then I turned to the south-west, following the northern bank of the valley. Some 4 kilometres from the white rocks I at last caught sight of two small palm bushes. Close to the foot of the south-western one there was indeed an open well cut into the hard pebbly ground. No doubt this was Bir el Haush or Bir Aremi, and very probably Bir Bidi itself!

The water lies at a depth of five feet in an oval-shaped hole and there is a low mound overgrown by fairly tall grass beside the well. Many camel droppings, bits of rope, and water skins indicated that the well had been used for some considerable time. Of the two palm bushes the one near the well is quite small, but the other "haush" is fairly big and my Sudanese said that it must be at least 15 years old.

We found the water abundant and very good indeed, the depth of the well and the narrow rocky mouth allowing it to remain cool. To the south of the well a conspicuous longish hill separates the two depressions of "Wadi Anag" and "Wadi Hussein" from each other, and a group of isolated conical hills was visible to the south-west (at a bearing of 240° Mag.). Driving towards them I soon realised that these must be the hills on which Messrs. Newbold and Shaw had found the coloured rock carvings. The most conspicuous of these hills, a fine tall sandstone pyramid, lies at exactly 4.2 kilometres from the well. I found the coloured carvings on it, and some others on a big rock to the near south.

Some 4 kilometres further south-west I reached Mr. Newbold's "Tamr el Qusseir", a group of ii dry palm trees with some sanded-up Guraan huts

beside them. No doubt this was the place that my Kufra informants had called Oyo, and where the party of marooned fugitives had dwelt for some time. The place looked as if it had not been visited by humans for years. As I searched about round the huts, I did not know that I had come to the spot where that “last Gentleman of Desert Roads”, Aremi Gongoy, had met his fate by the hands of his companions only five months before

We camped two days near “my well”, and I dive twice from it to the Lake of Merga, trying every time a different route in search of better going over the watershed that separates Oyo from the oasis. The shortest route – almost in a straight line – was 40 kilometres, but it took me over some very bad going. Passing the Pyramid Hill, and driving through the dunes to the south of it, I made it 45 kilometres, while driving past the palms of Oyo and over the hills to the west of Merga – the easiest route – the distance was 48 kilometres.

It may be of interest to note how evasive this well had been until then. Messrs. Newbold and Shaw had passed in 1927 some 4 kilometres to the south of it, and I found the double-tyred tracks of Colonel Wilson’s 1930 convoy some 8 kilometres further south. Major Bagnold was the least lucky one, as his 1932 tracks crossed the depression only 1 kilometre to the west of the well, but I believe that he will think himself even unluckier when learning that at the time when he crossed the “Wadi Hussein” he was being anxiously watched by Aremi Gongoy himself!

But the well remained true to its evasive rôle, even after I had drunk from its waters. In February, 1935, I re-visited it, coming this time from Laqqia Arbain. I found numerous tracks of the Sudan Defence Force patrol (1934) only 2 kilometres to the west of it, but no other car tracks than my previous ones at the well itself and the notice-board that I had left beside the “haush” with the inscription, “This is Bir Bidi”, bore no additional remark either. A fortnight later I met, at El Fasher, Bimbashi Prendergast, who had been in charge of that convoy, and he said that he had seen no palm bushes anywhere in Wadi Hussein.

I was now really anxious to make sure whether my well was Bir Bidi, and I decided to try to find Bidi Wad Awad himself. Once more my luck held out by providing me with the invaluable help of Mr. A. J. Arkell, the original “author” of Bir Bidi.

How he managed to find, within 24 hours, a man who knew the remote dwelling-place of the old desert guide, remains one of those mysteries that ordinary mortals who are not initiated into the magic powers of Sudan officials should not attempt to solve. However, on the 20th February, 1935, I was on my way to Mellit and Sayyah, accompanied by a young Zaghawa whom Mr. Arkell had produced and who was to guide me to old Bidi’s *ferig* somewhere near Tigilma Wells in the Wadi Um Minakhar.

Beyond Sayyah I left the Malha Road and drove over the *goz* to the west. Soon after Sigiro the going became too bad for the car, so I finally left it in a rocky *chor* that descends towards Tigilma, and we continued our way to the

wells on foot. We reached the wells after an hour's brisk walking and there learned from some Teigo that Bidi had watered his cattle only the day before and had gone back to his *ferig* in the hills. I hired the only camel which happened to be there, and with my guide mounted behind me, we continued our way on the wildly protesting beast over some tortuous mountain paths. Two hours later we descended into Wadi Um Minakhar and there met a small party of Teigo, who informed us that Bidi and his family had moved to another *ferig* still farther away in the mountains. One of the men possessed a horse and he was willing to accompany us. I changed over to the back of the sturdy little mare, hoping for a more comfortable ride than I had enjoyed on the vicious camel, but, as there was no saddle available, the following hours were not too comfortable either.

Towards noon we at last reached the half-dozen huts of the Bidivat, where the men of the *ferig* greeted me and my two companions with some suspicion. As luck would have it, old Bidi was of course away "somewhere in the mountains", and I realised that I had to be careful about my further proceedings, as Bidi Wad Awad is one of those gentlemen whose business affairs are sometimes connected with that kind of free trade in camels that cannot always be appreciated by a Government anxious to put an end to camel raids.

I was amused to see how we were ushered to a place just outside the grass-mat enclosure of one of the huts. Certainly the arrival of a white man in such a remote place was of such interest that the women-folk had to be allowed to overhear the ensuing conversation from behind the grass screen. I knew that if I showed myself too anxious to see Bidi a messenger would slip off to warn the old man that he was being wanted by authority. I therefore said that though I had come to see the famous guide about a certain desert well, I was sorry to have to return without having met him, as my time did not permit me to await his return.

I was now tactfully questioned about that well, and I told my story how I was occupied in writing-up all the important routes between the Darfur, the Fezzan and Egypt. I also told how I had passed a well which I thought to be Bidi's well, and which I was going to "write down with Bidi's name", but as I could not see Bidi about it, I should have to give it the name which the people in Kufra had called it : Bir Aremi.

"But Aremi Gongoy was a thief and a bad man", came an indignant woman's voice from behind the straw wall, "and he's dead now, anyhow, so why call the well after him?"

I answered that Aremi had been "drinking from it" before his death, and that without seeing Bidi I could not tell whether he had ever been to that well at all.

"Bidi knows every well in the desert", the snappy lady retorted, "and are there no young men here to mount the camel to go and fetch Bidi himself who could be here after sunset?"

This was exactly what I had wanted, but to disperse all possible suspicion I declared that I had to be back at El Fasher to-morrow, so I could not stay to await Bidi, but was going to ride back to my car. If Bidi wanted to enlighten me as to his well, he would find me in Khor Sigiro till to-morrow morning.

So one of the Biday boys mounted the camel, together with my Teigo companion, and they trotted off to the north while Bidi's own horse was saddled for my return journey. My Zaghawa guide mounted the mare on which I had come, and we left the *ferig* amidst the promises of the Bidyat that Bidi would certainly follow me after the moon had risen. The ride in a comfortable saddle was a real pleasure after the three hours that I had spent on the mare's backbone. Bidi's pony, a typical Darfur countrybred, climbed over the boulder-strewn ridges like a goat, and when darkness fell I left it entirely to my mount to keep to the tortuous path.

It was nearing midnight when we reached the car, where my Sudanese boy had erected the usual windscreen for my camp bed, and after a short meal I turned in, wondering whether I ought not to have waited for the old Biday, who seemed to be as evasive as his well. I woke two hours later at the sound of shuffling camel steps, and in the moonlight saw three camel riders approaching our flickering camp fire. When they had dismounted and squatted round the logs, I ordered my boy to prepare tea for the visitors and give them all our spare blankets, of which I had luckily brought quite a number, so that they could rest comfortably till the morning.

We all rose before sunrise, and I now went to greet the "great old man" who had arrived during the night. Bidi Wad Awad is a finely-built man who carries his sixty-five years with the ease of a youngster. There is a pleasing dignity in his movements and his eyes sparkle with the self-confidence of a man used to be respected. We talked Arabic, of course, and I found it particularly easy to understand him, as his knowledge is not too good either, which saved me the difficulty of intricate forms of speech.

The following is the information I got from Bidi, having carefully avoided to put any names of places or descriptions of locality into his mouth:

"I have been twice to Kufra and several times to Tamr (Merga). Though I have not been out there for some years I remember the route very well and I could guide a caravan any time."

"It takes two days from El Fasher to Melit and one day from there to Sayyah. From Sayyah it is two days to Malha and there one should water the camels well, because there is no water between Malha and El Atrun, though there is plenty of grazing the first three days and again on the fifth day in the Wadi Shau, but very little after that until one reaches El Atrun on the seventh or eighth day."

"From Atrun it is three days to Tamr, with no grazing between. Tamr is a large oasis, the first place being one with many palms and some big Sayal trees. From there it is a '*shidd*' to a lake, which is surrounded by tall grass and many palms. From this lake Bir Bidi is reached in one day!"

“Leaving the lake there are small hills on the left and ‘*Wahda-wahda*’ (single) palms and Sayal trees on the right. One rides over stones and sand with grass until one reaches a fiat place, where there has been a lake before, because the earth is mixed with salt like at El Atrun, only the salt is not so plentiful. A broken aeroplane now lies on the north side of this salt plain. From here one has to ride up over the mountain, the going being bad ‘*dogag-dogag*’<sup>4</sup> until one descends again into a *wadi* with much sand in it. This *wadi* is called Oyo, and one can dig for water beside some ‘red palms’ (*tamr hamra*), but the water is salt and causes illness. Further up the *wadi* turning to the right shoulder (north-east), there is plenty of grass and riding through this ‘*hashasha-hashasha*’<sup>5</sup> one comes near a white hill, and there are white hills a little further on, some of which are striped. South of the first white hill lies my well, which I cut through the stones and covered with a large slab that I brought from this white hill. The slab is of the length of my outstretched arm and I dragged it from the rock to the well with a rope attached to my camel. Bir Bidi lies about two hours from the palms of Oyo.

There are no palms near my well or anywhere in the *wadi*, but two Tundubs between the well and the group of white hillocks. The water is good and sweet and it was always plentiful. I have been four times to my well. The first time when I dug it with two companions, and again when we returned from Kufra on that journey. The third time on my way to Kufra with Sultan Ali Dinar’s caravan and the fourth time on our return. I always covered the well with the stone and the last time I tore out the grass that had grown beside it.

“From Bir Bidi there is no water till Anwar, a distance of seven days. Anwar are three tall mountains, the first one s pointed and very high, but there is no water there (Gebel Kissu?). On the second one, which lies two ‘*shidds*’ from this Gebel, there is a well up in the mountains (Karkur Murr?), but I have not been there, as it belongs to the Guraan. It is one ‘*shidd*’ from there to the second well, which lies at the foot of the mountain (Ain Dowa), and again one ‘*shidd*’ to the third well (Ain Zweia), which lies high up in rocks.”

“From here it is two ‘*shidds*’ (a short day) to the fourth well, which is called ‘Mungash’ (Arkenu?). This lies far up in a Karkur and the water is salt. These are the four wells of Anwar.

“After Mungash there is no water till Kuira, which is reached in seven days.”

I had listened to Bidi without asking any questions other than such as were necessary to obtain more detailed description, and the above are my

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<sup>4</sup> An expression for rain-drops, also used for anything that is crumbled up into pieces, small stones, pebbles, etc.

<sup>5</sup> Cut grass.

notes as I have taken them down word by word).<sup>6</sup> I now began to question him:

“Do you know Bir Hamra?”

“Yes, Hamra Koila of the Kababish.” It lies north of Teiga in a *wadi* with earth (*ard*) in it and many Tundubs. There is water only after rains, also the water stands in a pool for a while, but has to be dug for later. There is no water after a year when the rains have failed.”

This answer was given to me without a moment’s hesitation and I believe that it definitely accounts for “Bir Hamra”.

“Are there any other wells near Tamr?”

“Yes, from the Lake of Tamr one day to the east there is a *wadi* running north-east. From Bir Bidi it can be reached in one-and-a-half days, going on an old road that comes from Selima I have been *told* that this road comes from there, but I have not been to Selima. There are a few Tundubs and two or three Selim in this *wadi*. The water has to be dug for. After one day from this *wadi* one comes to many hills, from these another day over stones takes, one on to *Serir* (flat desert) and two days going over this, with the hills to the left, brings one to Laqqia, where there are few palms, a well and some ruined houses.”

“Any wells to the west of Tamr?”

“Not near Tamr. Riding three days west from the Lake over flat *Serir*, one comes to a very big Tundub, which is called ‘Manda’. There is no water there. Two days further west one comes to the hills of Goru Goru, but riding south-west over stony ground, one reaches Haramba also after two days. This is a *wadi* with Sayal trees and grass. One has to dig for the water, but there is always water there. To the north-west from Haramba a big red mountain can be seen very far away. It is called Gebel Akhdar or Gebel Erdi. There are no ruins or houses at Haramba, but Aremi Gongoy used to hide there. Two ‘*shidds*’ to the west lies ‘Bir Kharga’ and farther west ‘Adarda’, which lies north of Kapterko.”

“I have been to the red palms north of Tamr, the place you call Oyo, and in the *wadi* to the north-east I have found, not very far from a white hillock, an open oval well with grass round it and of about a short man’s depth.”

“Wallahi, my well, Bir Bidi!”

“But there are two palm haushes near the well. One a man’s height, the other about twice that size!”

“Maybe they have been planted by the Guraan, Ya Sidi, but did you find the big stone?”

“No, Bidi, there is a mound of sand that has been cleared out of the well beside it, but I did not notice any big stone.”

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<sup>6</sup> These statements and distances are astonishingly correct. It is interesting to note that Bidi applies the name Anwar (which has a plural form) to all three mountains together: Kissu, ‘Uweinat and Arkenu.



“Maybe it’s covered by that sand next time dig into it and surely it will be there. It must be my well, because it is deep and in the middle of the wadi to the north-east from Oyo. My well lies between the red palms and the old road to Selima. It is one day, or one-and-a-half, from the Birket el Tamr (the Lake of Merga), and though Aremi Gongoy may have watered at it, it is my well, *Bir Bidi!*”

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One month later Mr. W. B. K. Shaw visited Bir Bidi and searched the country to the north of it for some 60 miles. When we later met in Cairo I was lucky enough to get a photograph of Bir Bidi from Shaw, after I had found that the well had tried to keep its secret from me by the fact that the films I had taken there had gone wrong.

Mr. Shaw told me that according to his barometer readings it was out of question that any water bearing depression should exist anywhere to the north of Bir Bidi. He found what he thought must be the Tundub bush seen by Mr. Newbold from the aeroplane, and he thinks that the story of “Bir Hamra” as another “mystery well” between Merga and Uweinat can be definitely discarded through his search, and the information I had gathered from Bidi Wad Awad. Thus we definitely decided to identify the evasive Bir Bidi with the well that I had found, and future travellers who should visit the place will have to accept the statement of my notice-board, which now bears a confirming note of Shaw’s: –

“This is Bir Bidi.”

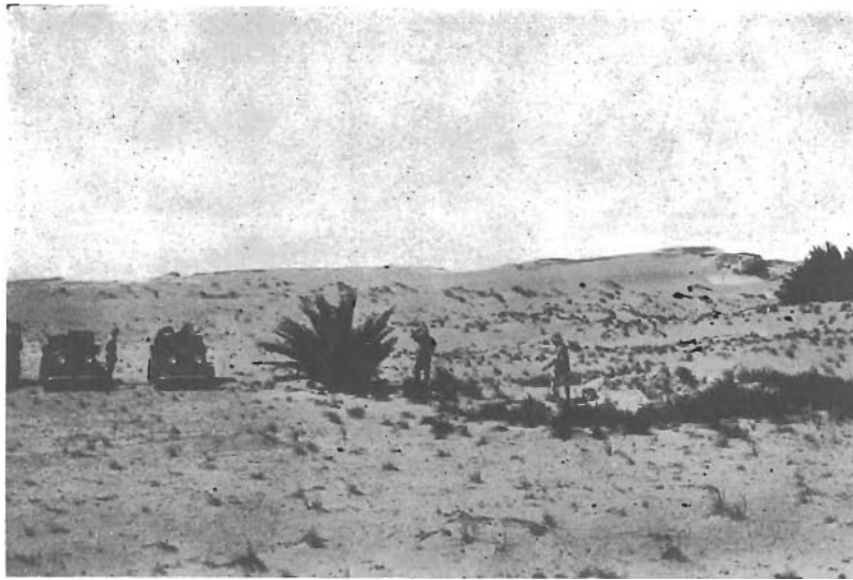
“There is no other well to the north from here.”



**Lake Merga seen from the East**



**„Pyramid Hill”  
A conspicuous landmark half-way between Oyo and Bir Bidi  
(4.2 kms. from latter at 240° Mag.).**



The Well is in front of the Figure on the Right (Photograph by W. B. K. Shaw)



Bidi Waid Awad (March, 1935.)

