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**DE M. LE BARON DE FÉRUSSAC.**

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**TOME VINGT-TROISIÈME.**

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**A PARIS,**

**AU BUREAU CENTRAL DU BULLETIN, rue de l'Abbaye, n<sup>o</sup> 3,**

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## 220. VOYAGES OF PROFESSOR DESFONTAINES IN BARBARY.

- I. Voyage in the Regency of Tunis.
- II. Journey from Algiers to Tremessen.
- III. Travel from Tunis to Sfax.
- IV. Travel from Algiers to Constantine, Bonne and Lacalle

In finishing the extract of the voyage made in Barbary, in the years 1783 and 1784, M. Desfontaines, member of the Academy of Science, we promised to make known the other fragments that the professor scientist agreed to communicate. We discharge this engagement by publishing the four extracts which supplement this special survey. M. Desfontaines intended to benefit greatly from this voyage in the interior of the land, for the increase in its wealth of botany. Several discoveries were indeed the reward of its efforts. We will not however speak of them here, firstly because they will find their place in another section of the Bulletin, and, in the second place, because almost a half-century ago he enriched science by this information. It is therefore only as a topographic document that we consign here the details that he collected, some interesting that are elsewhere under another report, in the actual circumstances, knowledge that he provides on the Regencies of Tunis and Algiers.

I. Mr. Desfontaines left Tunis on December 23, 1783, with the bey who traveled that year at the head of his camp, to go collect the annual tributes which the Arab tribes pay him who live the southernmost parts of the kingdom; the march was barely as much as 5 to 6 leagues per day.

In the 1800s the French "league", *lieue* varied, but was more or less 4km.

(pages 464-477 are omitted, not referring to Sfax)

(pp 478-481)

III. It was towards the beginning of July 1784 that M. Desfontaines undertook to visit the coast of Tunis as far as Sfax, a distance of approximately 80 leagues. This voyage provides a little on geography, much more with regard to archaeology, but especially for botany and agriculture. We will draw from the documents relating to the first of these sciences.

Three leagues south of Tunis a large plain starts which extends from North to South, between moderately elevated mountains, from where during the winter several brooks rise to water and fertilize it. It contains 3 small towns, Soliman, 5 leagues from Tunis, Crombalia 3 leagues from the last, and Turki one league further. Their surroundings are fertile with corn and decorated with planted gardens of olive-trees, oranges, pomegranates and myrtles. Some miles from Turki, one meets a thick wood of wild olive-trees, caroubiers, and yunes [actually *yeuses*, a species of oak], if one can call the masses of shrubs a wood, when they achieve so little a height, that the pine, which, in our forests grows to 80 and 100 feet, in these regions hardly reaches 15 to 20. This wood extends for nearly 4 or 5 leagues towards Hammamet, a coastal town, whose surroundings have a pleasant aspect. The countryside is covered with olive-trees which provide the main wealth of the country, of which the trade is composed of oil, barley and wheat.

The gulf on which this city sits reaches inland to a depth of more than 10 miles. It is strewn with rocks and shallows, which renders navigation dangerous, especially close to the coast. Also only small commercial ships can there and these still are obliged to be moored offshore. This gulf is only sheltered against the winds from the north. Those from the east and southeast sometimes blow with great strength and excite storms there.

Two leagues from Hammamet and at some distance from the sea, is a large tower whose walls are extremely thick. The Arabs call it *Bererz el Mestarah* (Tower of the lantern). It appears that there used to be a light. Inscriptions that Shaw saw there, but which no longer exist today, attest that this is a work of the Romans.

*Phradise*, the ancient *Aphrodisium*, is 3 leagues from there. This city is 4 leagues distant from the sea. After having walked for 5 leagues, one arrives at *Herkla* (Hergla), which appears to be the ancient *Adrumentum*; it is a small town at the seaside, on a

stony eminence. Its surroundings produce barley, corn, dourah (sorghum), grapes, figs and excellent melons. From there, after having walked alongside the shore, the length of an immense and uncultivated sandy plain, and crossed the mouth of a big lake, which, in the rainy season, communicates with the Mediterranean, one arrives at *Souze*.

This city is approximately 34 leagues distant from Tunis. It is located on the slope of a hill on the eastern side. This is one of the large cities of the regency. Its walls have at least has 2 miles and a half of circumference; they are very well built and defended by many pieces of cannon of different gauges. On the left is small fort that one can hardly see and whose batteries are at sea level, it is armed with French cannon which could undoubtedly do much harm to any warships which approached to attack the place. The quantity of people is so large in the streets that one can hardly walk there. Many fabrics are manufactured there which are sold cheaply. There are immense plantations of olive-trees around the city; the French traders buy much oil there that they send to Marseilles for the soap factories. There is also a considerable trade in wool, pottery, shoes and fabrics in the fashion of the country.

The gulf is 5 or 6 miles broad. It extends from the south as far as Mnestir (Monastir). The largest ships can approach very close to the city: but they are exposed to winds from the east which from time to time blow with much impetuosity on all the coast of Barbary.

Four leagues to the south is Mnestir, a considerable seaboard town, located at the end of a spit of land which projects more than a mile into the sea. It is surrounded by a very good wall, and from a distance it offers a pretty point of view. The close countryside is planted with beautiful olive trees which each year give a rich harvest. Navigation is dangerous there because of the rocks and the shallows with which the gulf is strewn.

From Mnestir to *Africa*, at an estimated distance of approximately 8 miles, the east coast is sandy with scattered ruins. This small town that the Africans name also *El-Mehedia*, is surrounded by large plantations of olive trees which are most beautiful and the best cultivated of all the coast of Africa.

This region, from *Souze* as far as 7 or 8 leagues beyond *El-Mehedia*, that is to say a distance of approximately 18 leagues, is most fertile of the regency of Tunis. It produces an abundance of olives, wheat, barley, dourah, and corn. Indigo and cotton are

cultivated there, but not enough is harvested to send overseas. It would be difficult to find a more fertile country blessed with such a varied culture.

Eight leagues east of El-Mehedia, and 15 north of *Sfax*, about which we will speak, is *El-Gem*, a considerable village located at the foot of an immense, fertile plain of olives, corn and various country fruits. The land which surrounds it contains much salpetre. After having crossed another uncultivated and uninhabited plain, where one finds here and there some thickets of olive trees which have fallen into disuse, one arrives at *Sfax*, a large and very commercial city, at the edge of the Little Syrte (now Gulf of Gabes), in a flat and sandy place. It is surrounded by a strong and well-built wall. Its streets are paved, the inhabitants are more civilized there than anywhere else. They live in ease and enjoy in peace the fruit of their industry. One can estimate the number at more than 8,000.

Its surroundings produce barley, dourah, corn, figs, grapes, pistachios, melons and watermelons. They trade in oil, of barilla (alkaline salt), sponges, wools almost as fine and as valued as those of Spain. The most valued and beautiful fabrics of all of Barbary are made there. A great number of boats are built in *Sfax*, which trade along the coast, and small corsairs which cross to the coast of Italy. There is no city in all the regency where there is as much industry as in *Sfax*.

The Little Syrte may be 30 miles wide. It extends from *Capoudia* to the island of *Gerba*. The sea has little depth there. Navigation is not easy, because of the sand banks with which it is strewn. The commercial ships which come to *Sfax*, are obliged to moor one mile from the shore. Even though they have no shelter against the winds, they are there nevertheless safe; the shallow depth of the Syrte means that the sea there is never violently agitated, even in the strongest winds. There are rising and falling tides in the Little Syrte. Mr. Desfontaines recognized that on August 1, 1784, the day of the new moon, the water was raised, from 3 to 6:00 in the evening, 7 feet and a few inches. He was assured that at the time of the equinoxes, it rose by 9 feet. The tides are barely felt 25 miles beyond the Little Syrte.

To the east of *Sfax*, approximately 8 leagues away, are two small islands neighboring each other, named *Kerkana*, of which largest may be 6 to 7 miles in circumference. These islands are relatively low above the sea, they produce olives,

barley, poor quality dates. Their inhabitants fish for sponges. The island of *Gerba*, subject to the regency of Tunis, is 24 leagues southeast of Sfax. Our traveler was not able to visit it: he was told that it is very fertile, and that the people who live there enjoy a happy enough life.

While following the edges of the Syrte, towards the west, one arrives at the ruins of Thana (Thina), approximately 3 leagues from Sfax. Close by there is an old port which the sea no longer reaches today. The Arabs believe that the Maltese originate from this place.

From this point to the border of the regency of Tripoli is approximately 40 miles. Mr. Desfontaines was not able to traverse this country although he had intended to, and he took 10 days for his return to Tunis where he arrived on August 18, 1784.