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DANS
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EXÉCUTÉ ET PUBLIÉ
SOUS LES AUSPICES ET AUX FRAIS
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Chapter 14

(pp155-)

Description of Sfax, generally regarded as the ancient Taphrura.

February 22

The previous day, before sunset, I had had a quick look at Sfax; today I examine this city more attentively, it being one of most important of the Regency. I am accompanied by Mr. Mattei, vice-consul of France in this area and one of the sons of Mr. Thomas Mattei, of whom I had made acquaintance in Djebeliana.

Sfax, chief town of the *outhan* - district - of this name, is divided into two cities, separated by a special enclosure. The high city, the city proper, is reserved for Moslems. It has seven thousand inhabitants. Surrounded by a crenellated wall, it, like Sousse, is flanked with towers, some round, the others square. It has only two doors, one in the north, opening on the countryside; the second in the south, by which it communicates with the suburb or the *Ville Franc*.

It has five mosques, several *zaouïas* (marabouts) and three madrasas. Its bazaars are well furnished. The kasbah or citadel is in a state of satisfactory maintenance, at least compared with the others that I could visit in the Regency. The cannons with which it is equipped are extremely old, but not yet out of service. Clearly, it would not resist the least determined attack; however, the Arabs counter, it could resist long enough. The walls are very thick, and in them I observe many features that must have been removed from ancient monuments. I make the same remark about several mosques, though I have not been able to examine the outside of them all.

156 A high tower called El-Nadour (the *observatory*) rises above the whole city; from the upper platform which crowns it, the view embraces, on one side, along with the city, the vast zone of gardens which surround it; and on the other, the *faubourg* and the sea as far as the Kerkennah islands, on the horizon to the east. The lightning having struck this tower a few years ago on, it is cracked in several places, and it is rather dangerous to go up there.

From the Moslem city, one goes down by a gentle slope to the low city or *faubourg*, where the Jews and the Christians live, numbering approximately two thousand. This city, completely distinct from the first, extends along the shore. A simple wall seals it; it communicates with the outside by means of three doors. The district more especially occupied by the Jews is, when it rains, extremely dirty. They have a synagogue there, and amount to at least thirteen hundred individuals.

The Christians, numbering seven hundred, are composed mainly of Maltese, Italians and some French attracted to this place by the trade of oil and especially by that of sponges.

The Catholic parish is managed by the R. P. Augustin de Lucques, a monk extremely dedicated and who maintains his church with much care.

Close to its presbytery is the establishment of the sisters of Saint-Joseph. These good religious women, reduced to three only, with resources and a satisfactory place, have for their superior the sister Scolastique, who I am very happy to see again, after having known her in Palestine. Dedicated to the relief of the patients and the education of the children, they would render better services in Sfax if their house was less cramped. Having a room devoted to the purpose, they would be better able to serve all those who come to claim their care or their advice, and to admit into their class, to teach them, a larger number of small girls. At the
157 request of the parents, they also take care of the education of a dozen little boys. For a long time the majority of the families have wished for the help of two or three Christian brothers, since their children vegetate in most complete ignorance or devote themselves early to begging.

The *Ville Franc* borders the port; all the trade passes through there. The beach is safe, but not very deep, and the large buildings are liable to be inundated at high tides. It is protected by two batteries, whose most important is known as the *Quarantaine*.

Incoming and outgoing tides are appreciable in this vicinity, and the difference between high and low tide is approximately one meter fifty centimeters. At the time of the equinoxes, this difference is considerably more; it is, I am told, two meters sixty centimeters. This phenomenon, rather rare in the Mediterranean, is both remarkable and consistent here, though less extreme than the ocean. If they were not informed of it, navigators could be in the greatest embarrassment on this coast full of shallows¹, and which beyond the cape *Ras-Capoudiah* forms part of *Petite Syrte* so much
dreaded by the ancients.

Sfax has no springs; the water which feeds the city comes from the separate cisterns that each house and public building has. There are, outside of the ramparts, two immense cisterns known as *Feskings*, located ten minutes to the north, under the name of Nasriah (the help), containing several hundreds of distinct cisterns, founded and maintained by pious legacies. With believing of it the guard who showed them to me, they equalize in a number that of the days of the year.

1. (Referring to the alternate French terms for shallows) I use the term *bas-fonds* in the non-technical sense; in seafaring to express the same thing, one uses, on the contrary, the word *haut fonds*.

158 The gardens which border the city form a green belt, leaving between them and the city wall a rather broad sandy zone. They consist of an infinity of enclosures separated one from another by hedges of cactus, where, by means of irrigation, a sandy soil becomes eminently suitable for the cultivation of fruit trees and cereals.

A bordj, or dwelling in the shape of square tower, rises in the center of each one of these gardens, and nearby is dug a well whose more or less abundant water makes more or less fertile the ground that they sprinkle. One estimates the number of these enclosures at several thousand, because there are few inhabitants who do not have one or two of them. It is there that each family is accustomed to settle during the summer, or at least to spend several hours per day.

The trees which dominate there are the olive trees; oil that is extracted is rather good in itself, but which, for lack of sufficient preparation, is much bitterer than refined oils of Provence or Italy. So it is for the majority of oils collected in all the extent of Regency. Also, those which are exported either to Marseilles, or elsewhere, are generally intended for the factory and lighting.

After the olive-tree, the tree which abounds most in the orchards of Sfax is the almond tree. They also contain a great number of pistachio trees, whose fruit is excellent. The fig trees thrive there also extremely well. These different trees and others again here and there are dominated by elegant palm trees, which start to become more common as one advances towards the south of Regency; the dates which they produce nevertheless are of a poor quality.

Amongst the vegetables that are cultivated there, I should not forget to mention 159 cucumbers; it is even claimed that it is the abundance of this vegetable, called in Arabic *fakous*, that gave to the city the name that it currently carries.

What was its ancient name, and did it originally replace an ancient city?

There would be no doubt as one rubs elbows with the sea a short distance to the north of the city. There, indeed, are some remains of Roman constructions over the length of several hundred meters, seemingly the remainders of shops belonging to the maritime environment; and then inside the city, much of the material embedded in modern construction shows an older origin.

Ptolemy and the Table of Peutinger make mention of a city called by the Greek geographer 'Taphrura', and by the Table 'Taparura', located between Usilla at north and Thenae at the south.

However, although the distances indicated by Ptolemy and the Table of Peutinger seem to contradict this, Sfax, by its importance and its intermediate position between Inchilla - very probably the ancient Usilla - and Thina, whose ruins preserved their primitive name, appears to have to be identified with Taphrura or Taparura.

In the Note of the episcopal churches of the Byzantine empire, mention is made of a *Episcopate Taprurensis*.

February 23

Approximately fourteen kilometers to the north of Sfax a tower rises on the edge of the sea, which, being located at the point of a small headland, is visible from a distance. It is called Bordj-Sidi-Mansour. As I had left it two days before on my left at a rather long distance, now I will visit it more closely. It borders the koubba of the figure Sidi-Mansour, 160 which gave it its name. Its current height is twelve meters and its circumference twenty-eight. The main body of the tower is built with stones of a rather beautiful material, and perhaps dates from the Byzantine period. Its top, on the contrary, was rebuilt at a later time with smaller materials. This Bordj is currently abandoned.

From the return to Sfax after this excursion, I make my preparations for the exploration which I must undertake the following day.

Chapter 15

(pages 160-168 are omitted)

February 28

The dawn had not yet appeared, when already the morning drum resounded in all parts of the camp, and all the soldiers hastened to raise and fold the tents. The luggage is loaded on the back of the camels and mules, and the troops are held ready to start with the first appearance of the sun. The tent of the General is still upright; its staff meets around to attend a kind of bed of justice that Sidi-Bahram was in the habit of holding every morning before riding a horse. I go myself near him.

In order to honor the title of foreigner and especially of French that I carry, he asks me to sit down at his side on the same carpet, while a score of Arabs are introduced in his presence, some as indicters, the others as defendants. He listens to them in turn with 169 attention, and his prompt and sure judgment quickly cuts through the causes which are subjected to him.

Arab subtlety is proverbial, and without having learned the tricks of obstruction, the coarsest Bedouin usually has a marvelous creativity to invent some. He also handles the word with a rare facility, and to defend himself he does not need anybody. Under the appearance of the entirely good faith, he can skillfully disguise his feelings and thoughts, and express with no less skill the feelings and the opinions which he does not have. Also, to disentangle in his language truth from error, especially when one has to judge, and that quickly, either to exonerate, or to condemn, calls for an uncommon penetration of spirit.

At seven thirty, we pass in front of a *macera*, or oil press, which someone tells me belongs to the bey, and which is called *Macera-el-Bey*.

At eleven thirty, we meet a small cluster of ruins of which no one can tell me the name.

At midday, we leave behind us the koubba of a famous figure called Sidi-Salah, and, crossing the wadi of the same name, at forty-five minutes after mid-day we reach the ruins of 170 Kasr-Teniour. It is a castle in the most part destroyed. It was built on a hill which commands the plain in the distance. The towers of which it is flanked, some are almost completely demolished, whilst others are still half upright. Around and to the bottom of this hill and this fortress extended a suburb, now overthrown and razed from basement to roof. A well, some cisterns and a great number of materials which strew the ground confusedly, this all that remains of it.

At one forty-five, we arrive at the first gardens of Sfax, and until ten past three we walk on a very sandy road, between two lines of orchards or cultivated fields bordered by cactus.

At three thirty-five, we pass through the gate of Sfax.

Chapter 16

Excursion to the Kerkennah islands. - Description of the two islands, known by the ancients as Cercina and Cercinitis. – Return to Sfax.

29 February.

Face to face with Sfax, at a little distance away, the two Kerkennah islands appear. At eight o'clock in the morning, I embark with Malaspina and one of my hambas for the largest of these islands, on a small boat called a *loud* by the natives. An area of shallow sea with an average width of approximately 40 kilometers separates it from the continent. The loud we are in is operated by a réis, who directs the rudder, and by four sailors. In spite of the knowledge that they have of these difficult waters, scattered with so many shallows, they 171 ground twice, and it is only with the greatest difficulty, and thanks to multiple efforts, that they manage to come through the situation. At around four o'clock finally, we disembark at a place called El-Mersa (the port). Close from there is a bordj or fort which appears Arab origin. It is currently abandoned and in a very poor condition. I found there three old rusted guns and without mounts. Around this fort, one can observe ruins of some extent, but very indistinct, which belonged to an ancient city, and very probably to the old capital of the island. Innumerable remains of pottery are strewn far over the ground; here and there also are found fragments of mosaics. Lying in a field I discover the mutilated trunk of a white marble statue,

[the one] discovered a few years ago by Mr. Espina, vice-consul of France in Sousa, in excavations that he had undertaken in this place. This trunk, which has neither head nor arm, nor legs, represented a warrior covered in his armor.

Not far from there is a Roman columbarium on two floors; each stage contained ten sepulchral niches arranged in the walls of the columbarium, and intended to receive funeral urns. One also observes there a species of furnace which was to contain an entire body, that, very probably, of the main character who was buried in this family tomb. We move then towards the village of Ramleh, where we arrive before nightfall. This village is thus named, because it is located on a very sandy ground; thickets of palm trees surround it. The houses which compose it are spaced quite far apart; it is the same for the seven other villages of the island. We spend the night there.

March 1.

At break of day, guided by an islander, we move north, through large a sebkha, towards 172 a kind of gulf which penetrates quite far inland. Since this gulf forced the former inhabitants to make a considerable turn to pass from the south-western part of the island to the north-western part, they had established at the entrance a long roadway, of which the remains are still clearly seen.

In the northernmost part of the island is an old dilapidated Arab tower.

We then re-cross the sebkha that I mentioned, which is identified indistinctly by the name of Sebka-el-Melah or that of Sebka-m'ta-er-Ramleh (lake of salt or Lake Ramleh). Then we go down towards a small cove where the loud which had brought us the day before had been instructed to await us.

We go up on board at ten o'clock in the morning, and I ask the réis to turn his prow towards the ruins of the old bridge which joined the large island to the small, in other words, the island called Charki, or Eastern, to the island called Gharbi, the is to say Western. The wind helps us, and we sail first of all with full sail towards the goal to which we tend; but soon the shallows of the coast force us to go with prudence and slowly, and to make enough long turnings before being able to think about reaching it. Around eleven thirty-five, we finally enter a wadi, a type of rather narrow channel bordered on the right and on the left by shallows covered by barely a foot of water. As for the wadi, it has a depth of from four to five meters. It seems to be dug by the fast current which flows between the two islands; perhaps also the hand of man has improved and deepened it. The bridge which had been built from one island to the other was at least a kilometer long. The arches have been demolished, and one can now distinguish only the lower part of the piles on which they had rested. Is this

bridge Roman, or is it prior to Roman rule? This is what I am not able to determine, the apparatus of the stones not being very distinct.

173 After casting an eye over this antique works, which alone would be enough to attest to the importance relative of these two islands in a previous age, we sail towards the tower which is located in the south-western part of the island of Gharbi.

This island, smaller than the preceding one, also contains large a sebkha; it has only one village, called Mellita. The tower, not far from which I disembark, is today abandoned. Badly built, it is of Saracen origin and has begun to fall in ruin; its height is 12 meters. Some cisterns and two wells are nearby. The two Kerkennah islands are both covered with palm trees; but the dates which these trees provide are small and not very tasty. After having cut the head of the palm tree, the inhabitants collect the sap which continues to rise, and which forms a kind of liquor, known under the name of lagmi, which they clearly appreciate. At first soft and sweet, it soon turns sour by fermentation and then becomes very intoxicating. One also notices in these islands some olive-trees, a few vines, and where the ground is not too sandy, fields that are sown with barley, of corn and lentils.

The length of largest island is 25 kilometers. Its width is quite variable, because it is pierced by bays; but it can be estimated on average at 7 or 8 kilometers. Several small islands surround it. The second is only 16 kilometers long with 7 at its greatest width. It is almost elliptic in shape.

The population of the two islands together hardly reaches three thousand inhabitants, dispersed over nine different villages. Some are farmers, others shepherds; but the greatest number are devoted to fishing and the sea. Almost all of them also manufacture, with esparto
174 grass, which grows in abundance on their territory, plaits, cords and various objects for basket making.

Fish abounds around their shores, and on all sides they have established fisheries with branches of palm tree inserted in the sea, which is generally very shallow in these waters. These branches form long 'avenues' into which the fish swim, pushed by the tide, and which directs them towards chambers from which they cannot leave. But the most productive fishing is that of sponges. To retrieve them from the sea, the natives make use of a long armed pole, with an iron hook at its end, which they use to detach them from the rocks where they adhere. When they are out of the water, they are covered with a fine and transparent film. They are covered for some time in manure or earth, in order to kill the small animals which are contained there. They are then washed to clean them and remove from them the foreign bodies that they contain; finally they are transported to Sfax, where they are sold and from there exported elsewhere.

In antiquity, these two islands were called, the largest, Cercina or Cercinna, a name identical to the modern name, and the smallest, Cercinitis or Cercinnitis. Agathémère ¹ and Pliny ² each speak of a bridge which put connects them. I have mention their remains. The large one contained a free city of the same name as the island. Do not forget that I have, along with several other travelers, mentioned the remains of an ancient city close to the abandoned fort at the foot of which I disembarked while coming from Sfax.

1 Agathemere, I, 5

2 Pliny., V, 7.

It was in Cercina that Annibal, obliged to flee his ungrateful fatherland, took refuge a short time, before seeking an asylum with king Antiochus. Later, this island saw Marius, ¹⁷⁵ driven out of Italy, land furtively on its shores. At the time of the Caesar's war in Africa, his adversaries there had previously gathered great quantities of corn, he would direct the praetor C. Sallustius Crispus, famous as a historian, to seize it. Cercina was the place of deportation of Sempronius Gracchus, one of the many lovers of Julie, daughter of Augustus.

The Episcopal Notice of Byzacène makes mention of an *episcopus Circitanus* or *Circinitanus*. He probably resided in the capital of largest of the two islands.

Today, in the Kerkennah islands, it is women convicted of adultery that are exiled to the island, and the streetwalkers of Regency who have incurred the wrath of authority. For a few years, however, only a very small number of these unhappy have been sent here.

At two hours, we embark for Sfax, and around five fifteen in the evening, we place our feet on the quays of the city.

March 2.

This day passes in visits I make to the Mattei family, and in particular to the vice-consul of France, to the nuns of Saint-Joseph, the R.P. Augustin and the khalife. I also make again and for the last time the tour of the city.

It is, indisputably, one of the most important areas of the Regency. With a better administration and a field crop in the surrounding country, it would improve still more. Arab writers, such as El-Bekri and Edrisi, refer to it with admiration; they praise its monuments, its bazaars, its trade, its wool fabrics, the number, the wealth and the industry of its inhabitants. Since the time of these two writers, Sfax undoubtedly lost ¹⁷⁶ dramatically, and its port is no longer attended as it was then. However, it is far from to being given up; and fortunate location of this city, the fruitfulness of its gardens, the abundance of fish and sponges that are caught in its waters, its continuing communication with Gafsa, which puts it in communication to the oases of the Djerid,

these causes and others mean that Sfax is less in decline than the majority of the cities of Tunisia, and it still remains one the most populated.

Chapter 17

Departure from Sfax. - Henchir-Thina, formerly Thenae. - Mahrès.

March 3.

Mr. François Mattei, who had already accompanied me in my penultimate excursion, proposed to travel with me as far as Mahrès, where he has to speak to the sheik, a proposal that I accept eagerly. At seven forty in the morning, we leave the walls of Sfax.

At ten past eight, we cross a small waterless wadi, called Wadi-el-Akareb (wadi of scorpions). Extending to the right and left of the route that we follow, are the gardens of the southernmost suburbs of the city. At eight thirty, another small wadi which we cross is identified for me with the name of Wadi-Bir-el-Mao.

At eight forty-five, we leave behind us the last gardens of Sfax, on the southern side.

At nine o'clock, we distinguish on our right, one kilometer away, the koubba of Sidi-Abid. The locality where it is located is, I am told, infested with scorpions and vipers.

177 At nine forty-five, we reach the ruins of Henchir Thiné. They belong to the ancient town of Thaena, Thaenae or Thenae, which, with its uninhabited ruins, has preserved almost without deterioration its ancient name.

To the northwest of the site that it occupied a hill rises quite covered with debris. In all probability that was where there had formerly been a fortress to defended this part of the coast.

I only found the small and confused materials, the largest having been transport to Sfax a long time ago. Nevertheless, I observed the section of a marble column.

From there stretches a plain strewn with ancient remains. As these remains are not contiguous, I suppose that they must belong to a simple suburb of populated country houses rather than uninterrupted dwellings.

Further to the south, one can make out the traces of a very-thick and well built wall, that one recognizes at once as having been the wall of enclosure of the city itself. Although it was completely demolished in many places, one can follow it, with some sides still upright, for a considerable distance, and the enclosure that it bordered would have had circumference of more than three kilometers.

Inside this enclosure one can no longer make out any signs of streets nor even of public buildings, but only of materials of all kinds, and mainly an innumerable quantity of small fragments of pottery which strew the ground. These remains of vases are, in general,

remarkable by the beautiful varnish which still covers them, and by their lightness and smoothness. By examining all the various fragments attentively that I walk over, I see on a piece of broken marble the five following letters

178

28.

DIVI A

This piece, only the size of my hand, is the remainder of a beautiful white marble plate on which an inscription had been engraved; in honor of some emperor probably belonging to the family of the Antonins.

Elsewhere, on site of the old necropolis, I collect another marble fragment on which one reads

29.

DIS

This word, as one knows, is the beginning of the standard consecration which preceded funerary inscriptions among the Romans

Dis manibus sacrum.

Such are the two only epigraphic scraps which caught my eye in the middle of the ruins of Henchir Thiné. They are undoubtedly quite unimportant. Nevertheless, as they are engraved in splendid characters on a white marble with a perfect polish, they testify, along with the pretty fragments of pottery which abound in this place, to a certain splendor in this ancient city.

Located on the edge of the sea, it had a port which was shaped like an ellipse which is today three quarters filled with sand. This port, it remains to be said, would never receive any but the smallest ships, which chose to enter there at the time of the highest tide, the largest being limited to moor out to sea, because of the shallows of the coast.

179 Thenae was probably a maritime trading post founded originally in this place by the Phoenicians; but the ruins that can be seen there are Roman, and some even indicate a time later than the Romans.

The Itinerary of Antonin teaches us that this was a colony. In a stone inscription published by Gruter ¹, we read: "*Decuriones et coloni coloniae Æliae Augustae mercurialis Thenitanorum.*"

1. Gruteri *Inscript.*, p. 363, n°3.

We know from Pliny that Scipion the Younger, by dividing the kingdom of Numidia between the sons of Massinissa, had an immense ditch dug from the mouth of the Tusca as far as Thenæ, in order to mark the limit of the Roman territory and the country of the Numidians. Later, when Rome seized Numidia, this ditch became, in truth, useless; however,

it was still regarded as forming, on the side of Thenæ, the boundary line between [the Roman province of] Old Africa and New Africa. "Ea pars, says Pliny ², quam Africam appellavimus, dividitur in duas provincias, veterem et novam, discretas fossa inter Africanum sequentem et reges Thenas usque perducta." In the Christian era, Thenæ was the residence of a bishop. After the Arab invasion, it still continued to be inhabited for some time, because some old Moslem tombs can be found in the southernmost part of the site that it occupied.

At eleven hours thirty minutes, we recommenced our march.

2. *Hist. Nat.*, V, 3.

At fifteen minutes after noon, we cross a small wadi called Wadi-Ed-Dir-el-Heugla. We halt there for twenty minutes close to a well.

180 At one o'clock, we pass not far from the marabout Sidi- Bouiah.

At half past two, we pass on our left, close to the sea, the small village of Nekta or Négueta, because these two pronunciations are used.

At two forty-five, we cross l' Wadi-ech-Chefar; it is dry. This is the same one obviously that Shaw calls Wadi-el-Thainee and that he identifies, but wrongly, with the Tana river which is mentioned in Salluste ¹ and where this historian teaches us that the Roman army made provision of water, in the expedition of Marius against Capsa.

1. Bell. Jugurth., c. 96 et 97.

At a quarter past three, we come to a well called Bir-el-Aouïna or Bir-el-Achana.

At three forty-five, before arriving at Mahrès, I observe on a hill on the right road, something like Roman constructions.

Mahrès is a borough which borders the edge of the sea and which contains approximately seven hundred inhabitants. Formerly it was more populated, because many of the houses are destroyed or abandoned.

One notices there an old fortress, probably of Saracen origin and currently partly demolished. Having climbed one of the towers which still flank it, I could from there contemplate at a distance the immense loneliness which surrounds this town, a desolate solitude where the tired glance finds only rare traces of culture. Everywhere else, there are only vast steppes covered with wild grasses and esparto; the wells which were dug there from place to place for the majority contain only a brackish yellow water.

In Mahrès they manufacture plaits and various other objects of basketmaking with esparto and bulrushes.

This borough seems to be the old town of Macomades Minor, thus called to distinguish it
181 from another city, with the name of Macomades which is located on the edge of the Grande Syrte. Nevertheless, the distances indicated by the Itineraries report it as being further to the south, and probably at with the ruins of Oungha, as Mr. Tissot ¹ supposes.

1. Voir dans la *Revue Africaine* (avril 1857) l'article de M. Tissot sur les routes romaine du sud de la Byzacène.

The day being already well advanced, we decide to spend the night in Mahres. About evening, I notice that the camel drivers of a large caravan which arrives hasten to bind the two feet of front of their camels with a padlocked iron chain. They take these precautions in fear of the nocturnal petty thieves. This way, indeed, these animals cannot be removed very easily.

Voyage à Tunisie (Guerin) 1862, pp155-160, 168-181

(See also his document La France Catholique en Tunisie, Victor Guérin, 1886)