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VOYAGE
DANS
THE REGENCY OF TUNIS

BY

DOCTORS TIRANT AND REBATEL
pp.44-47

Sfakes, located on the Gulf of Gabes, opposite the island of Kerkena, is surrounded by a belt of gardens bordered by cactus, where we find all the fruit trees of southern Europe.

Some palm trees contribute to give it the appearance of an oasis. – the oasis of Gabes is like this one, lost on the shores of the Mediterranean, but has a larger number of palm trees.

Sfakes and its suburbs form a city of 40,000 inhabitants. - In its fortifications, which cost 100,000 piastres a year in maintenance, the Arab town contains 12,000, including 2,000 Jews. - It's the most important center of southern Tunisia and the main supply center for the Jerid and the Sahara. - There are five mosques and three zaouias totally inaccessible to Europeans, as indeed are all those of Tunisia. A kasbah occupies the southern corner on the side towards the sea – Just two doors allow access to the enclosure; one of them communicates with the French Quarter. - Every evening at seven o'clock, the closing of this door creates an impassible barrier between the two neighborhoods, and on Friday, a holy day for Muslims, it is also closed during prayer time. The Europeans number about 700, mostly Maltese and Sicilians. - The French are 9 in number. - Almost all the European powers have consular agents in Sfakes; the Republic of San Marino itself has a house there.

Trade is significant and is mostly with Malta, Italy and Tunis. It includes mainly the export of dates from the Tunisian Sahara, the best in Africa; carpets and burnous from the Jerid and the island of Djerba, rose water and the oil of jasmine from Sfakes, sponges from Sfakes, Kerkenah, Zerzis, Bibes, Benghazy [p.45] and Cyrenaica, and finally halfa and esparto from the surrounding deserts.

As in Gabes, we are struck by the phenomenon, unique in the Mediterranean, of a tide of 2.60 meters on average, and 3 meters at the equinoxes.

The bay, which, by the alternations of ebb and flow, has the appearance of an ocean port, always holds more than two hundred ships, mostly of a small size. - One French house, Colombel, of Paris, employs over four hundred fishing boats to search for sponges. - Mr. Mattei, the representative of that house and consular agent of France, whom we are pleased now to count among the corresponding members of the Geographical Society of Lyon, Mr. Mattei is the best known man in southern Tunisia and the one who knows it the best. - His uninterrupted good relations with the Beni-Zid and Ourghemmi, nomadic tribes that hold all the territories between Sfakes and Taraboulous (Tripolitania?), have allowed him to see everything and develop, in the South, a personal influence that he has been able to use to the credit of the French flag. Born in the country, initiated in the language, customs, and the military and religious associations of the Arabs, he can know everything, and his relations in the Sahara extend from Farafrah, where Gerhard Rohlfs was recently, to the Algerian oases.- In recent days, a young traveler from Lyon, M. Augustus

Chabrières, informed us that the name of Mr. Mattei was not unknown even in Morocco.

Not content to take us, at the reception of the caïd, our finding in its interior a hospitality and cheerfulness totally French, he wanted to accompany us to Gafsa himself, that is to say in the most painful and most dangerous part of our trip.

May we be allowed to express to him here our recognition, [p.46] the only testimony that we can offer him from our gratitude.

At Sfakes we had to change the way we travel; it was necessary to have recourse to horses and camels, the only feasible mode of transportation in this region.

Our caravan would lead us to Gafsa, by Sidi Mahedeb and Bou Hedma, returning by Majoura. roads also unexplored. All that tract of country is shown on the map of M. Pricot of Saint Marie, based on information gathered from a distance. After finding gaps or errors on the outskirts of Tunis, we were not too surprised to be little able to depend on it. The distance between Gafsa and Sfakes can be estimated at 250 km and the caravans ordinarily cross the desert in four days. The return route, roughly the same length, is not popular because of the scarcity of wells and offers the singularity of following the old Roman road from Taparura to Gapsa¹.

Immediately after crossing the fertile and cultivated zone around Sfakes you cross these desert plains, to islands of green vegetation, and literally riddled with burrows of gerbils, which by their multiplicity constitute a real danger to the horses. The vegetation is Saharan and over vast expanses shows only a small variety of species of annuals, gradually replaced by new species as one travels further, which prevail in their turn.

A short day's march, at the monotonous and regular pace of the camels, led to the poor village of Al-Mahares, on the coast, where there are some clumps of palm trees and cisterns. But it takes no less than twelve hours to get from El-Mahares to the zaouia of Sidi-Mahedeb, located 12 kilometers from the sea. [p.47]

The geographical position of this point on the map of M. Pricot de Sainte-Marie is obviously erroneous. According to all travelers, from Shaw to Duveyrier, and from our own experience at points of a known distance, the camels travel, at a pace as slow as it is regular, about 5 km per hour. No stop in this endless plain, nothing to alter this pace, and it took us twelve hours to reach the zaouia, which is 60 kilometers instead of the 35 marked on the map. One comment convinced us of this: the distances between Sfakes and El-Mahares and between Mahares and Sidi El-Mahedeb are substantially the same on the map, yet we took six hours to cross the first and twelve for the second.

At 5 kilometers from the zaouia and the tomb of Sidi-Mahedeb, we see the lights of the douars of the universally respected Mahedeba tribe, who live free of any tax and have no obligation to provide hospitality for night travelers in the Sahara. We must say that they received us with great cordiality, and offered us one of their own as a guide to accompany us to Gafsa.

After a day of rest and exploration of the vicinity, we leave Sidi Mahedeb and soon we see the peaks of Bou-Hedma, across a wide sebkra, omitted on the map of Major, but written, though quite at random, on the map of M. Pelissier, as the Sebkra Nail. It took us nearly an hour and a half of walking to cross the sandy plain, covered with a layer of salt. It stretched out of sight to the west, and the distant mountains produced a magnificent mirage effect, by reflecting on the surface of a clear lake.

(See also **1875Rebatal.pdf**)