

THE TOWN OF SFAK'S AND THE KERKENA ISLANDS (TUNISIA)  
TOPOGRAPHY, CLIMATE AND COMMERCE OF S'FAK'S (TUNISIA)  
AND OF THE KERKENA ISLANDS

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Sfâk's, a city in the Regency of Tunis, 94 km. from Mahdia, at 34° 43' north and 8° 20' east, was built by Ben Yolob el Karouï, between the 2nd and 3rd centuries of the Hegira, according to local legends. The materials extracted from the Roman ruins of Thina and Taphrura would have been used to provide the first foundations of Sfâk's.

The Arab city is surrounded by ramparts (Spanish, it is said) which are not very solid and which separate it from the European suburb. It has to the northwest, a door, called Bab-Djebeli, which gives onto the countryside; another opens onto the European suburb. This last itself has two doors opening onto the countryside and [one onto] the sea.

At the time of the construction of the city, the sea came as far as its walls where a wood of olives trees had previously extended, which was entirely destroyed by the Arabs who invaded the region under the Zirid prince El Moëz. Today one can still observe, 600 meters from the gate of Bab-Djebeli, an isolated olive-tree, that Sfâk'siens assure us is approximately a thousand years old.

The remains of the materials employed during the construction of the city, were thrown in against the coast of the sea. It is on this site produced by the debris that the European suburb was later erected. With all this debris, the basin of the sea was limited, as it still is today, to the space between the sea and the European suburb, which will soon create a second suburb if one judges by the new and proposed constructions.

The walls enclosing the current European suburb would have been built, approximately two centuries ago, at the expense and by the Djellouli family of which one of the chiefs was then caïd in Sfâk's.

The *Nadour* (large tower, lookout [lit. "vedette"]) was built by Christian slaves, which would confirm the accepted opinion that Sfâk's was until the 18th century nothing but a den of pirates.

Sfâk's, according to Dr. Shaw, would take its name from the great quantity of cucumbers (*Fakous*) that are cultivated there. Another legend says that a chief had given, to one named *Sfa*, a piece of leather with the order to cut it into bands, to join them together and with them trace a circumference on which the city would be built to which one gave the name of the workman *Sfa*, with the addition of *Kes* which means, "to cut out." The meeting of these two syllables gives Sfakes.

The city has nothing remarkable besides its beautiful mosque. The streets are narrow like those of all Arab cities.

*Climate.* The climate is generally healthy and moderate. The seasons follow one another without abrupt transition. The winter is never very hard and only seldom lasts more than two months. The thermometer drops more, and the cold is felt more, when the winds blow from the south and the southwest, but I do not believe that the thermometer ever descends to zéro. One does not remember having seen snow falling in Sfâk's, the cold is generally humid there.

The heat in summer is also bearable. Apart from the days of the sirocco and in calm days, the heat is not excessive. A breeze which blows from the sea from 9:00 in the morning to 4:00 in the afternoon, refreshes the temperature during the summer.

For little that it rains, the streets become extremely inconvenient, water remains on the ground; it is difficult to leave without being well booted up, and running the risk to get oneself dirty. If the rains are abundant, the

streets are blocked, the stores fill with water, and it is not rare to see boats floating in the European suburb. Add to this that almost all the stores throw their refuse out of their door, that all the quadrupeds used by the Maltese are kept outside the stores, horses, camels, mules, pigs, goats, sheep, flounder or dig in the rubbish and mud, - and you will then understand the state of the streets when it rains. The absence of sewers to drain the water means that this moisture disappears only by the action of the sun; it is therefore not rare in this season to note good number of head colds and bronchitis. The Jewish district is especially inaccessible in winter; even in summer the stinking exhalations which escape it make the walkers move away quickly. On the other hand the rain seldom falls in Sfâk's, so that one forgets its disadvantages quickly, compensated by the immense advantages which it gives to the countryside. The rain is the wealth of the country: also, when a cloud appears on the horizon, the rain starts to fall all the darkened faces are brightened, and all Sfâk'siens approach with a smile, satisfaction and the hope of an abundant harvest.

*Aspect.* - The city, seen from afar, from the the sea, seems to be a large city; but, from closer, it presents only a collection of white houses juxtaposed, squashed against each other. The most pleasant view is the tableau presented by the gardens of the countryside of Sfâk's seen from the top of the Nadour tower. It is estimated that there are approximately 8 or 10,000 orchards in Sfâk's. In general all those that are close to the city have a country house, where the inhabitants will spend the hot periods, which makes the city healthy in summer although it is almost deserted in this season. The view is then really superb. In the middle of each garden is erected a white house surrounded by almond trees, apricots, olives, apple trees, vines, etc All these trees are admittedly laid out haphazardly, but these gardens quite close to each other give the illusion of a second city resembling an immense suburb of the first.

*Olive-trees.* - The number of the gardens of olive trees (*Hueza*) is as many as 80,000 in each one of which the number of the trees varies from 50 to a thousand. The cultivation

of the olive tree is done very well; it is claimed that the olive-trees of Sfâk's are the most famous of the Regency; also, for ten years this cultivation has developed on a great scale.

*Water repositories.* - The majority of the houses in Sfâk's not having cisterns, the inhabitants are obliged to buy drinking water from Arabs, who will obtain it from the various tanks that exist at some distance from the city.

About 1,200 meters to the southwest are found two of these tanks, called Feskias, supplied from the torrent of the wadi which comes from Sidi Aghareb village, 24 kilometers from Sfâk's, inhabited by the Agherba tribe, connected with the caïdat of Sfâk's. This torrent appears only after heavy rain. It then arrives with force, fills the Feskias which are on its passage, and then runs into the sea close to the gate of Sfâk's known as Bab-el-Gharbi, western gate.

Another tank located to the northwest and 500 meters from the city is called Nasria. Nasria is a collection of approximately 300 cisterns, supplied from *oud Ghenater*.

It is at this Nasria that we find the isolated olive tree which we already discussed.

Lastly, a third tank, which is only used that during the great droughts, is comprised of the wells of Sérabouimi, of which there are three location approximately 3 kilometers from Sfâk's to the west. The water from these wells is of very good quality and appears to come from an underground watercourse.

*Population.* - The population of the city is estimated at approximately 30,000 inhabitants, the city is small, but the streets are so narrow and the houses so close together, that this population can be accommodated though crowded together.

The Europeans number approximately 1,000, and are divided thus as follows: 760 Maltese, 200 Italians and 50 French including the Jews under French protection, living in the European suburb and separate from the Arabs during the night. One hour after Magreb (sunset) the doors of the city are closed; the same is true for those of the suburb. This measure makes it possible for Europeans to enjoy a certain peace during the night which would not be granted them if

they were mixed with the Arabs. All these doors are reopened the morning, at daybreak.

*Civil and military authority.* - The Tunisian government is represented in Sfâk's by a caïd who sometimes has the rank of general, and sometimes is a civilian; this depends entirely on the good pleasure of the Bardo. The city does not have a garrison, unless one does wants to include some troops in plain clothes, whose service consists of being guards at the Kasbah, or customs officers at the doors. In spite of that, the military authority is represented in Sfâk's by an executive officer and an artillery officer performing the functions of commandant of the town.

*Caïdat of Sfâk's.* - the caïdat of Sfâk's extends to the southwest as far as *Sidi-Aguereb* 24 kilometers away; to the northeast as far as *Djebiliana* at 40 kilometers and to the north as far as *Masra Abdel-Djouad* 24 kilometers from Sfâk's. The territory is partly planted with olive trees by Sfâk'siens; the remainder is uncultivated or is used for cereals, by the inhabitants of Sfâk's as well as by the Arabs of the *Metelit* tribe, who are ruled by a special caïd, and which is, so to speak, in the enclave of Sfâk's. On the coast of the beach to the northeast the villages of *Louza*, *Mellouléche*, and *Chebba* are connected with Sfâk's, but the ground beyond is inhabited by the *Metelet*. All the surrounding country is flat: the closest hills are with 24 kilometers away. In Louza, a Prussian company (Walker, Rabbé and Flukiger) has bought a Masra and some neighbouring land to devote itself to agriculture. Their goal would be to extend along the shore.

*Industry.* - The products manufactured in Sfâk's include cotton fabrics (Fanta, towels, handcloths, etc) and of woollens (covers and rather coarse *haïks*), as well as silk fabrics, in the form of ribbon 5 centimetres wide and used by the clothing industry for Arab shirts. The principal centers of manufacture of woollen fabrics, wool and silk, etc, are *Jerba* and *Gafsa*, *Touzer* and, in the Tunisian *Djerid*, *Nefta*. The burnous of *Jerba* is highly valued and the covers of the *Djerid* are also highly appreciated.

Shoe manufacture in Sfâk's is done on a vast scale, mainly for the assembly of *Balghas* (Arab slippers). The tannery is also a rather flourishing industry, and saddlery has experienced, in the same way, some expansion. Apart from the goldsmiths which are monopolized by the Jews, all the various trades are represented by the Arabs, but imperfectly.

*Trade.* - The importat and export trade is rather extensive. The following figures roughly represent the trade to and from of various powers.

IMPORTATION			
Angleterre	France	Italie	Belgique
2,000.000 <sup>f</sup>	20.000 <sup>f</sup>	40,000 <sup>f</sup>	90,000 <sup>f</sup>
EXPORTATION.			
Angleterre	France	Italie	Belgique
750.000 <sup>f</sup>	600.000 <sup>f</sup>	150,000 <sup>f</sup>	60,000 <sup>f</sup>

The principal articles for import are the fabrics from Manchester, structural timber, boards, iron, pig iron and cast iron, steel, colonial products, wines and spirits, rifles from Belgium, etc

For three years the import of Belgium rifles into Tunisia has taken on quite some importance.

The year 1875 appears to be the one in which the sale of these weapons was most considerable.

One calculates that during these three years, there would have been imported from 8 to 10,000 (Lefauchaux, pistons and guns for flintlock rifles), of which 3,000 would have been sold in Sfâk's either separately, or in quantities of 20, 25 and 30.

This important sale appears to be provoked by the short insurrection, en.1876, of the Hamemas against the cavalry of the Tunisian government after the extraordinary collection of the taxes or perhaps also, and I believe this rather, by their introduction in Algeria through Djerid, Tozer, Nafta and the Souf; because, at this time, the tribes of the interior are quiet and rifles are sold constantly. The 22nd of this month a sale of 35 rifles already took place.

These rifles leave Belgian manufactures, the majority from the Dumoulin house and

Colombier of Liege. Their price varies from 40 to 120 piastres Tunisian. (The piastre equals 0,60 centimes). This sale is almost all in the hands of two French companies established in Sfâk's. At this time a new salesman of rifles has begun this trade in Chebba. He is also a Frenchman, formerly a guard at Saint-Louis of Carthage, today employed by an Italian firm, which has an agricultural establishment in Chebba, a village 50 miles to the north of Sfâk's.

The principal articles of export consist of oils, greasy wools, sponges, dates, almonds, dry pistachios, grapes, figs, octopus, cereals, esparto, ropes manufactured from esparto and wool fabrics; these various products can be distributed as follows:

The territory of Sfâk's exports: Olive oil, almonds, raisins, dried figs;

The island of Kerkena: sponges, octopus and ropes manufactured from esparto;

Tribes in the vicinity of Sfâk's as far as Gabès (the Little Syrte): esparto;

The Tunisian Djérid: dates.

*Relations with Tripoli.* Commercial relations between Tripolitaine and Tunisia take place by the overland route and by way of the sea. The first, which is limited to transport on the back of a camel of Tunisian products to Tripolitaine, and vice versa, constitutes an Arab trade quite difficult to specify. The Arabs come and go between the two countries and return. The greatest commerce is in the sale of wool animals exported to Tripolitaine, and of horses which people from Tripoli bring to Tunisia.

This trade is almost nil in the years of good harvest, the Arab selling only when need presses. If there is a food shortage in Tripoli, the inhabitants come to sell their cattle in Tunisia; if harvest is weak in the two provinces, then it is towards Algeria that the natives move.

The maritime commerce is done by small coasters (*Chabeks*), measuring from 16 to 25 tons. The articles that are exports from Sfâk's to Tripoli include wool fabrics, cotton, ropes manufactured from esparto (*Alfa*), Chechia from Tunis, and other products of Tunisian industry: oil, wool, soap, etc. Those that are imported are: hot red pepper (*Felfel*), *Alizari* or the madder plant from Tripoli, *Bekrari*

dates (ordinary quality), weaving from Misurate, oranges and lemons.

This trade is not very significant, and it is almost monopolized by the natives: it is a local market which Europeans could not enter.

*Relations with Algeria.* - Frequent and quite important commercial relations are established between Sfâk's and Algeria. Our export to Algeria is especially made up of:

English products from Manchester (Malta), olive oil, *Balghor* (local industry), red bonnets; from Tunis, ordinary haïks, gunpowder and Belgian rifles.

It is very difficult to give this export even an approximate figure, I will limit myself to saying that the relations are very close and that Sfâk'siens make a good profit.

*Harbour.* - Sfâk's has excellent and broad sea lanes, but the ships are obliged to anchor in the open sea at approximately 1,200 to 2,000 meters, because the shallows do not allow the large ships to approach. On the sea shore it is all beach; however, if the Tunisian government wanted to experiment, it could transform the harbour of Sfâk's into a very important port. It would be enough to construct a quay, with a few months of dredging, to allow the ships to approach. The expenses of loading and unloading of goods would thus be greatly reduced.

Such as it is now; these roads are the most secure of the coast. Every year the bey of Tunis sends his two boats to winter in Sfâk's, the mooring at Goulette not presenting enough safety for him.

*Tides: tidal gauge.* - The tide is very sensitive on the coast of the gulf of Gabès. At low tide, the ships touch the bottom and they float during the high tide. The strongest tides go up by several feet, but exact measurements are lacking in this respect. A tidal gauge would obviously give us precise information, but this is perhaps a lot to ask of a local authority room, that it would extend to an installation of this kind. However, the importance of an observatory of this kind would clearly justify the expenditure that it would occasion (1).

*Postal service.* - The postal communications with Tunis take place by land and sea. The surface delivery is made

on foot by Arab mails which carry the letters to *Soussa* once per week, Thursday, and which return with the mail from France, brought to *Soussa* on Monday, by Arab mails also.

This service has been organized by some traders from *Sfâk's*, but it is far from being secure, and also one never confides to it money nor valuable objects.

The service by sea is provided by an Italian steamer serving the coast of Tunis to *Sfâk's*, leaving Tunis on Wednesday to arrive at *Sfâk's* the next Friday.

*Telegraph service.* - The telegraph communications terminate at *Sfâk's*. It is of great interest, and there are many requests for the extension of the line to *Gabès* and *Jerba*. The need of it is well recognized, but for it to be demonstrated it would be necessary to make these two localities better known, their trade and their industry; it would be to leave the groundwork that we traced ourselves. For the rest, a request should be made by the Tunisian government and by our consul.

We hope that it will have a happy result and that soon we will see, by these poles, our French relations extending as far as the doors of Tripoli, where our wire should arrive. With the words of M. Mattei, consular agent of France at *Sfâk's*, we would acquire the safety of this line and would almost guarantee it.

*Thina.* - 12 kilometers from *Sfâk's*, to the south-southwest, the ruins of *Thina* are found. At the time of the passage of *Kléber*, M. Captain Bernard, aide-de-camp of the governor general of Algeria, visited this post and carried out archaeological research.

*Roman Itinerary.* - *Sfâk's* has never been a Roman city. Rather, the port of *Tébessa* was *Thina*; there only, or in *Macomadès* (today *Mahares*), the ships could moor. It would be quite difficult to find the Roman way which connected the old *Thina* with *Tébessa*, but while following the current road of the caravans, by the many ruins that one meets there, it is easy to judge that the Roman way was not far away from the current road.

The caravans leaving *Sfâk's* to go to *Tébessa* pass by *S.-el-Aguerba*, *S.-Ali-Bel-Aabda*, *Djebel-Matelégue*, *Dj.-Hamra-*

*Kamouda*, *S.-Bou-el-Aaba*, *Fedj-Oum.el-Houts* and *Tébessa*.

All these points are indicated on the chart of *Pricot* of *Sainte-Marie*, and one meets ruins quite frequently on this course.

The Roman way from *Tébessa* to *Gabès* is better known leaving from *Tébessa*, it crosses the territory of *Frachich-Ouâzaz*, to arrive at *Thelepte* or *Feriana*; then it goes down directly to *Gafsa*, and from there one moves to *Tacape* crossing *Beni-Aïssa*, *Beni la'k'oub*, passing beside a well of *Sebka el-Fedjedjo*, until *Dabdaba* to go then directly to *Gabès*.

## II KERKENA ISLANDS

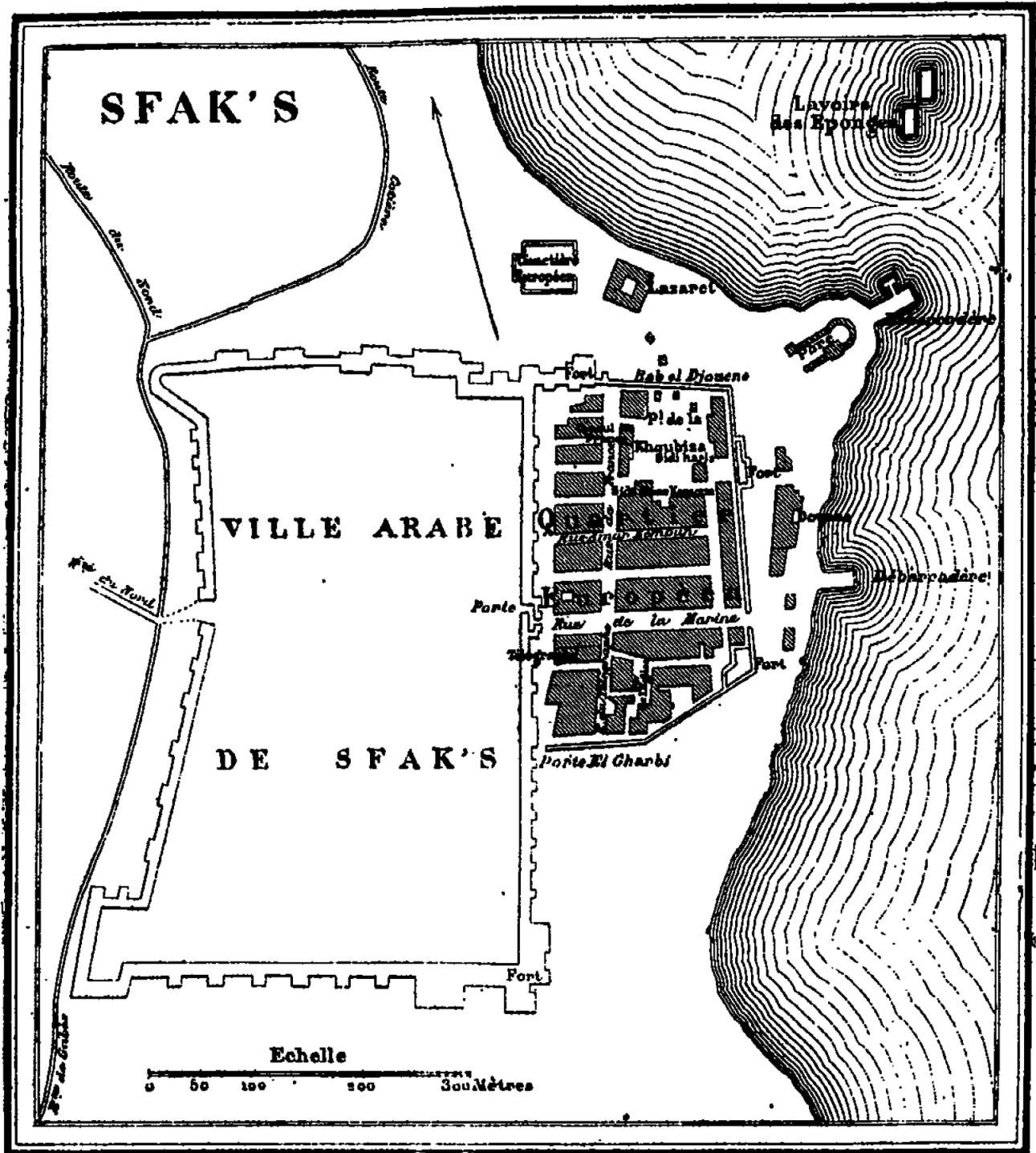
*Kerkena.* - Approximately 13 kilometers from *Sfâk's* are found the *Kerkena* islands, *Cercina* and *Cercinitis* of old: two islands relatively close to sea level which were formerly connected by a bridge of which one can still see remnants today. They are favoured with an excellent climate.

Under the Romans, *Kerkena* must have been quite important, if one judges by the ruins which still exist. At four places on the island a tower is found which was undoubtedly used as signal to the ancient navigators. In the interior of the island there are many cisterns; at other places some *Columbaria* [funerary urns], and, here and there some quite important buildings (ramparts, square house, temple, etc).

The inhabitants are all hard workers. With the clusters and branches (*Djerid*) of the date palm, they manufacture couffes ["Kufa," basket], hats, mats, and especially some *Bordigues* [fish traps] to capture fish in the shallows which surround the island to a circumference of approximately 30 miles. The largest that one meets is, it is said, 4 meters long. These shallows are very rich in fish and sponges, which are fished during the winter. The fishing of *Kerkena*, in one year, is estimated at approximately 100,000 FR.

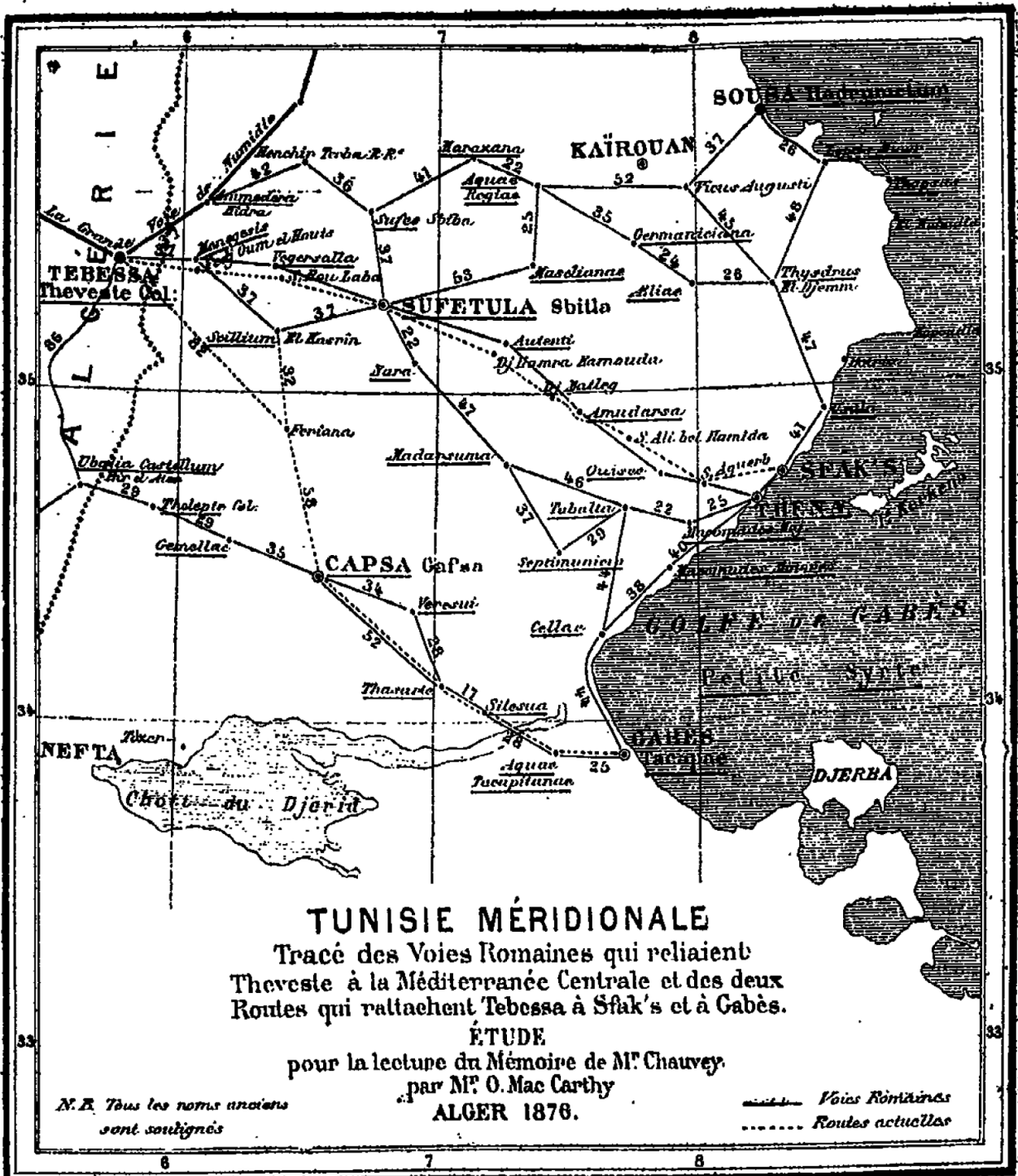
(To be continued)

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*Dessiné par R. Boursiermann.*

Map  
Ville Arabe de Sfak's



Gravé par R. Hausermann

Map  
**TUNISIE MÉRIDIONALE**  
 Tracé des Voies Romaines qui relient  
 Theveste à la Méditerranée Central et des deux  
 Routes qui rattachent Tebessa à Sfax's et à Gabès.  
 ÉTUDE  
 pour la lecture du Mémoire de Mr. Chauvey  
 par Mr. O. Mac Carthy  
 ALGER 1876