

Quartier Franc Faouzi Mahfoudh

The history of the urbanization of the town of Sfax starts with Aghlabides; indeed the texts of the historians and Arab geographers attribute the foundation of the enclosure and the Grand Mosque to this dynasty, which ruled in *Ifriqiya* throughout the 9th century AD (1). If one believes the medieval texts, Sfax appeared in the shape of a rectangle surrounded by ramparts marked out by strategic towers and angles. For centuries, the urban framework was essentially contained within the fortified city, the urban life was also found within the framework of the ramparts. Apart from this enclosure constructions were rather rare, the country behind was above all an agricultural zone rather than residential (2). This medina had been also occupied exclusively by the natives, no foreign immigrants could settle there, especially after the Norman occupation of the 12th century. This situation had been remarked upon by the Historian R. Tourneau in its work on Fès (3). However starting from the 18th century, a change will take place, set in motion by the enlargement of the urban layout and its extension. In fact the beginning of the rule of the Husseinites. This dynasty had established a well-respected security; allowing economic activity to resume (4)... It is within this framework that the town of Sfax will grow. Thus, from the northern side of the ramparts the countryside develops a belt of fortified summer residences (5), preceded by a multitude of funerary cupolas – **Zawiya** – at the foot of the ramparts, and a great number of water cisterns. It is in this way that the Sfaxiens started to leave the fortified city become established in the zone of gardens.

On the southern side, that which opens onto the sea, a new district sees daylight. It is in effect a suburb, **Rabat**. It is this last development which occupies us here. However, it is not useless to note, that the **Rabat** was built on a ground which was partly strewn with funerary cupolas of which some could date from the 16th and 17th centuries; such as the cupola of Sidi Nùshi, of Sidi Amar Kammùn, or of Sidi Sha'ban Zayn al Din. In some of this narrow coastal fringe, a part of the sea was buried, its ground served for the establishment of the new district (6).

Unfortunately, this new city was bombarded at the time of the Second World War and rebuilt after 1949 almost entirely. For its study we have only some accounts of historians and travellers or some diagrammatic statements.

1. History

We know the history of this faubourg especially by a small passage that the Sfaxien chronicler, Magdish, has preserved (7). The author had noted that the **rabat** did not exist until Ali Bey Husseinite gave the order to found it in 1188H (1775-76). According to Magdish, the occupants of the new city were the Sfaxiens themselves; the presence of a foreign colony is not indicated. But the plague which

struck the city in 1199H (1784-85) causing the deaths of fifteen thousand people, had brought about according to Magdish, a decrease in the occupation of the faubourg. Without wanting to return in a debate over the real number of deaths, the testimony of our source leaves us persuaded that the Sfaxienne population had increased considerably at the end of the 18th century. It is this population which had sought to find refuge in a new area, and which asked permission of the Bey to build the new **Rabat**.

The character, of a "Moslem city" appears again, clearly, in the construction of an oratory. Magdish has described this with great precision: the founder of the Masjid (mosque) was the merchant Hammuda Al-Sellàmi; the beginning of work, 1189H/1775; the end, 1189H/1784; and the beginning of the occupation of the oratory and its operation in 1203H/1779-80. The date of the construction of the oratory corresponds perfectly to the date of the foundation of the entire faubourg. It is therefore part of the same campaign of work which constitutes a whole architectural and urban program aiming at extending the space inhabited by the Sfaxiens. But the writings of Europeans do not agree with this conclusion. The European travellers, especially those of 18th century, hardly speak about a suburb. Rene Desfontaine, for example, whose voyage occurred in 1784, i.e. a decade after the foundation of the **Rabat** (1775), does not make any mention of it, he even seems to be unaware of its existence (8). It is only at the beginning of 19th century that we have a series of descriptions from travellers who testify at that time about the change of the occupants of the faubourg and its organization.

The first account must be that of Filippi (9) the consul from Sardinia in Tunis who in 1829 wrote that the "new district, the European suburb is well maintained and rather beautiful." Pellissier in 1840 indicated that "the South-eastern angle of the ramparts is hidden by an exterior construction enclosing a faubourg inhabited by the Jews and the Christians (10)".

A score of years later, the traveller Guerin (11) in 1860, wrote that "from the Moslem city one goes down a gentle slope into the lower town, or the suburb where the Jews and the Christians live, numbering approximately two thousand." He adds that "this city is completely distinct from the first and extends along the shore..."

The district especially occupied by the Jews is, when it rains, extremely dirty. They have a synagogue there... The 'ville Franque' borders the port, and consequently, all the trade flows through there."

The description of these various travellers was confirmed by the employee of the telegraph lines, the Frenchman Chauvey (12), who resided in Sfax in 1873 and who left us an interesting description of Sfax and of the suburb (13). While speaking about the latter, he specifies that it is inhabited by the Christians and the Jews, each of which had their own district. Chauvey also insists on the state of insalubrity of the new city and in particular the district of the Jews. According to his

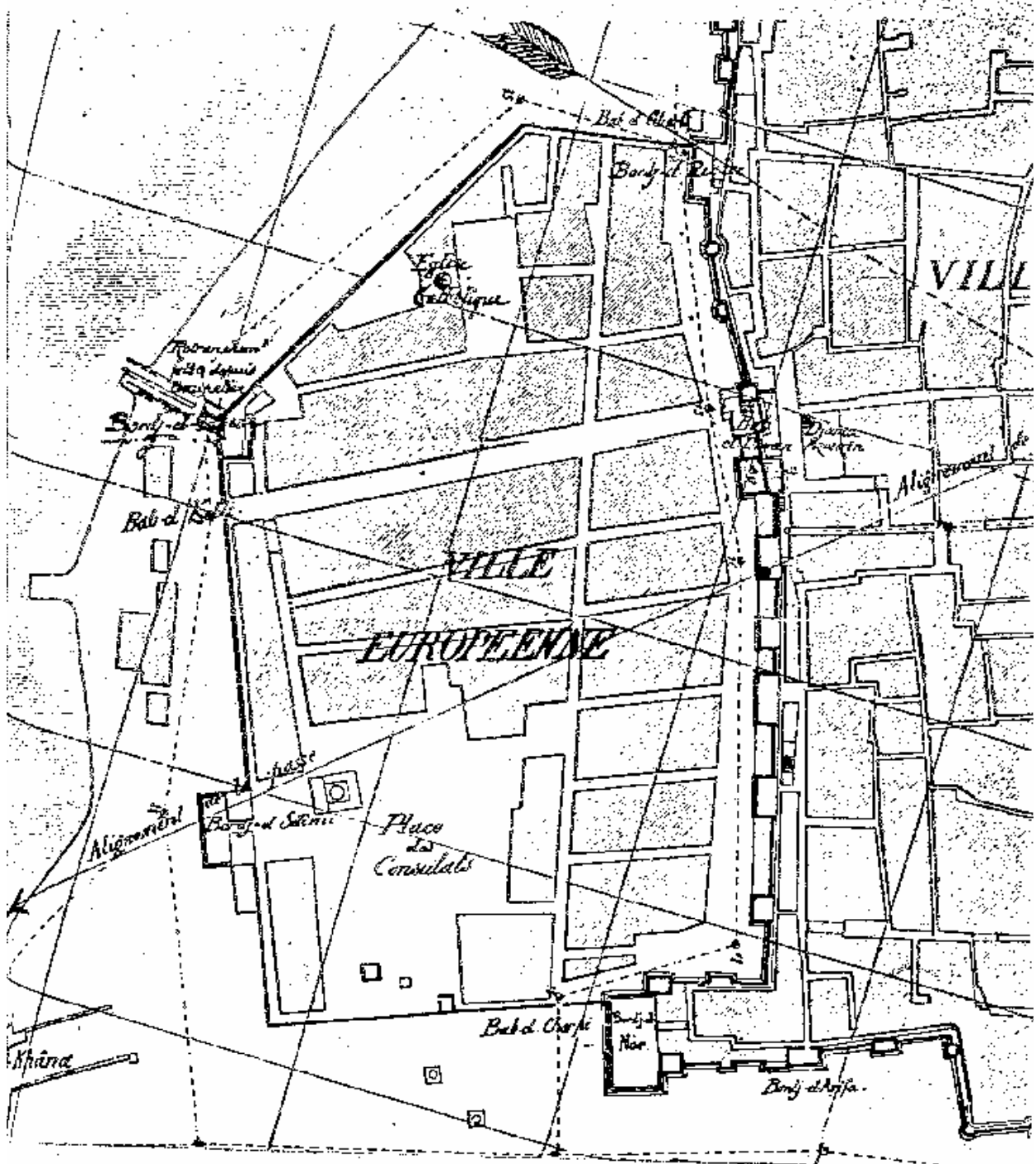
statements "it is not rare to see boats floating in the European suburb in times of rain." From various testimonies of European travellers, it arises that the suburb became inhabited exclusively by the Christians and the Jews. There were in fact two cities, one reserved for the Moslems - the medieval médina - and the other occupied by Europeans. Guerin speaks about upper city and low city (the suburb). These accounts, compared with the city of Magdish, reveal an evolution and a change of the nature of the occupants of the **Rabat**. Sfaxiens yielded the place to the Christians. No text gives us the date of this change. Only the text of Magdish authorizes us to think that after the plague of 1784-85, the Rabat was neglected following the demographic crisis.

But, we do not have any proof to confirm this dating. The European sources do not speak about a change of population. In spite of this silence, the observation of the plans and statements of the district show well that even towards the end of 19th century, the character of a Moslem city remained preserved. Thus the streets preserve the names of Moslem Saints and with the funerary cupolas are strewn inside the enclosure with the suburb.

The change of the street names and the aspect of the suburb takes place in an obvious way only after the colonial occupation into 1881. (see figs. 1, 2 and 3).

2. An attempt at description:

The best descriptions of the now vanished 'Quartier Franc' we owe to the explorers Pellisier and Guerin. They had specified that it is in effect a city opening onto the shore having its neat wall pierced by three doors. But these descriptions, as detailed as they are, and in spite of their historical importance, do not enable us to perceive the plan of this new city. Fortunately for us this lack of information is filled by graphic documents which have inestimable value for our point. These documents, of which the oldest goes back to 1873, contribute precise details of the arrangement of the city, its organization, constructions, roadway system and toponyms. It is therefore on them that we rely to learn and to restore the initial plan of the suburb (See figures attached).



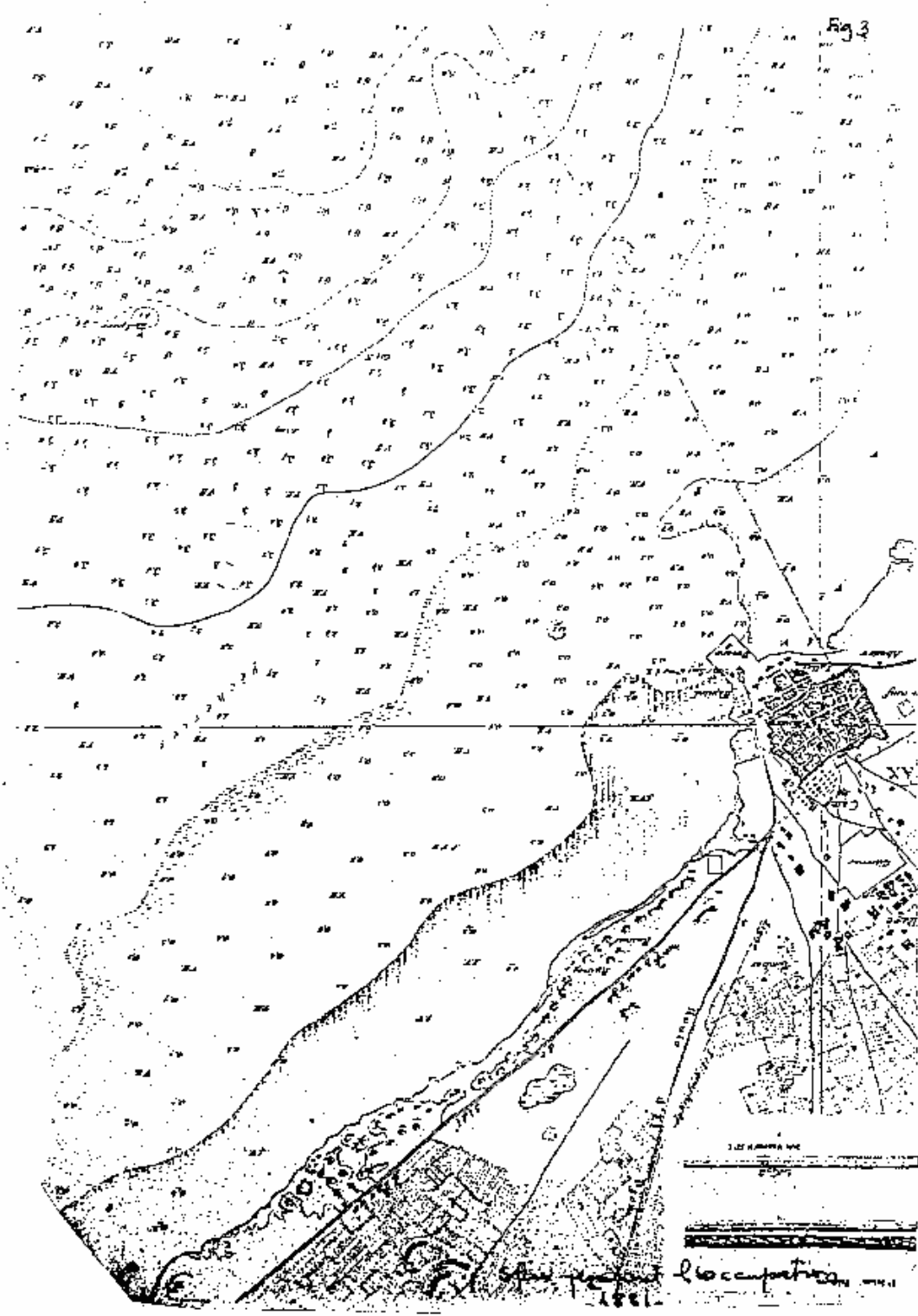
La ville européenne en 1881 -
après l'occupation française

All the documents draw a trapezoid with an irregular outline towards the west. The **Rabat** is connected to the wall of the medina: commencing at its eastern end with an projection adjoining Burj al Nar, (also known as Burj Al-Rabat) (14), and terminating on the western side at the large bastion of Burj Al-Reçace (15). This makes a distance of 300m, east to west. The length of the eastern side is about 150 to 170m, and the southern face approximately 250m. It was reinforced also by two bastions, the eastern one projecting from the wall takes the name of Burj Al-Sallàmi, whereas the western one occupies the angle of the suburb and is named Burj Al-Tabbàna. That is confirmed by the text of Guerin which affirms that "the roads are protected by two batteries whose most important is known as the 'battery of forty' " (16). On the diagram of the occupation of Sfax in 1881 the battery of forty would be Burj Al-Tabbàna itself (17), owing to the fact that it was equipped with five pieces of artillery, whereas Burj al- Sallàmi has only four of them. This observation is confirmed by the inventory of the pupils of the Polytechnic School of Bardo who speak at the same time about Burj Al-Tabbàna and the quarantila.

These four angles were connected by a screen consisting of a simple wall which had no projections (18). The height of the screen wall is not known. But if account is taken of the old photographs, it would have a maximum height of approximately 4m. Entry to the suburb from the east and west was by gates at the foot of Burj Al-Reçace and Burj Al-Rabat. These gates are Bàb Al-Gharbi and Bàb Al-Sharqi (19). The Southern gate, Bàb Al-Qibli, on the plan of Sfax in 1881, is penetrated by the axis which terminates at Bàb Al-Diwàn.

The interior of this large enclosure was organized according to a rational orthogonal plan. Chauvey had drawn three parallel axes in the east-west direction. The outer ones border the medina and the southern wall, whereas middle axis crossing the faubourg is the Rue de Télégraphe in the west and the Rue de France in the east (see chart of Chauvey). Other axes - ten or more - cross perpendicularly. The most important is the Rue de la Marine which runs towards Bàb Al-Qibli on the same line as Bàb Al-Diwàn. According to Magdish this street takes the name of Nahj Bab Al-Bahr. Parallel to the Rue de la Marine it meets Rue Amar Kammun. This diagram of the suburb reveals a perfectly regular checkerboard plan. The plans clearly show the parcels of land which form rectangles. Those of the South are very long being almost double of those of North (fig. II). In the interior the space was not completely occupied. At the south-eastern angle was a place that Chauvey clearly marked on his diagram while giving it the name of the "Khoubizza de Sidi Hariz" (20). It is in this place that the **qubba** of Sidi Hariz and di Sidi Amar Kammun were, men of the 17th century. Elsewhere one is not very well informed about the buildings which made up the **Rabat**. The plan of the occupation of Sfax in 1881 shows that the eastern side also has an empty space. This becomes "Place des Consulates". Towards the west, a church is located, aligned perpendicular to the Rue de Telegraph (fig. II). The suburb had its own shops indicated by the European travellers and comprised also a certain number of houses. According to pupils of Bardo, that would be 350. At the end of the

19th century, Sarvonnet and Laffite mention three hundred only (21). In the actual state of knowledge and documentation, we cannot study the architecture of various constructions. One can suppose that the on Rue de la Marine, by its central position, its width and his relationship with the médina and the port, is concentrated the majority of the shops.



18th and 19th centuries, especially with the Christian world, increasingly present in the Regency of Tunis. It is thus that the consuls of the foreign countries resided there, undertaking to provide reports on the trade of their country with the port of Sfax. In addition, the defensive concern was not neglected. In addition to the concentration and the isolation of the non-Moslem population (22) the suburb was used as a buffer zone and shield with the European maritime powers. This role showed itself very effective, especially at the time of the opposition to the French occupation of 1881 (23). In the field of town planning, the new city adopted the fashion of the orthogonal plans, in vogue at the time. Indeed, constructions of the Moorish cities of 16th and 17th centuries, such as Testour, Al-Alia, Soliman, had been made according to this type of plan – a triumph of geometry. The ‘Quartier Franc’ is the ancestor of the contemporary European city, announcing since the end of the 18th century the broad outline of the urbanization of Sfax which remains unchanged until today.

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Retrieved by email on 8/12/2007. Article taken from Revue d'histoire maghrebine.

Footnotes:

1. On the political history of this dynasty, Mr. Talil, the Emirate aghlabide, Tunis, 1966
2. See our thesis. The town of Sfax: research of monumental archaeology and urban evolution, Paris, 1988
3. R. Tourneau, Fès with day before of Protectorate, Casablanca, 1949, p451.
4. Over the time Husseinite work is numerous: one will consult especially Cheril (M.H.) Capacities and Company in Tunisia of Hussein B Ali, 2vol., Tunis, 1983-84.
5. Masmoudi (M): "the Traditional Dwelling in the suburbs of Sfax"; Books of Arts and traditions Popular, No 1, Tunis, 1965, p1-26
6. Magdish (M), Muzhat Al-Anzar fi with ja' ib At-Tawarikh wal-akhbar, ED. Ali Zouari and Mr. Mahlouch, Beirut, 1988, p.186
7. Magdish, Nuzhat, p.186-187.
8. Desfontaines, R, Voyage in Regencies of Tunis and Algiers, Paris, 1883 One can also note that in 1853 Espina is satisfied only to notice the existence of a Rabat, he gives us no other indication, Espina (A), "descriptive Note on Caïdat de Sfax", Revue of the East, of l"Algery and the Colonies, XIII, 1853
9. Monchicourt (P), new Relations of Nyssen, Filippi el Calligaris (1788-1829-1834), Paris.
10. Pellissier (E), Description of the Regency of Tunis, Paris, 1853, p101.
- 11 Guerin, archaeological Voyage in the Regency of Tunis, T 1, p. 155, Paris 18862.
12. Chauvey (M), "the Town of Sfax and the Islands Kerkena", Bulletin of the Company of the natural and climatological Physical sciences of Algiers, 2 Trim, 1873, p70-85.
- 13 *ibid.*
14. *Ibidem*
15. For the archaeological study of Burj Al Folds back and Burj Al Qasr, to see our thesis, p93-96.
- 16 Guerin (V), Voyage... T 1, p.155.
17. Al Tabbana could be well a deformation of the Turkish term which the inventory of the pupils of the military academy of Bardo mentions. V Abdelmoula, Madrast Bardo Al-Harbiya., p66.
18. This is observed on all the plans.
- 19.
- 20 "Khoubizza de Sidi Hriz" for Qubbat Sidi Hriz
21. Servonnet and Lafitte, the Gulf of Gabès, p19,20.
22. It is certain that at the time of laying down sun Christians and Jews were locked up in the Reduction and did not have the right to leave. Servonner er Lafitte, C\$op cit., p20, Paris, 1888.
- 23 See on the occupation of Sfax, files of Vincennes, box No 1323 account on the catch of Sfax. See also Re-examined Geography of Lille, 1889.