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#B 57 853

FÜHNIS:

The Land & the People.

Hesse-Wurtemberg

Tunis, the land and the people

by Ernst von Hesse-Wartegg, New York : Dodd, Mead, 1882.

CHAPTER 40

SFAX.

SFAX or Sfares is the largest and mightiest town of the southern part of the Regency, and the principal harbour for the export of the dates of the Djerid, as well as for all the produce of the Oases in the Chott (the inland salt -lakes of the lesser Syrta), Though the harbour of Gabes is much nearer to these borderlands of the Sahara, the connection between it and them is so unsafe through the marauding Bedouins that the caravans prefer the longer but safer way via Sfax. The inhabitants of Sfax are the real merchants of the large districts as far as Tripoli and Algiers, and all the wholesale trade is in their hands. Sfax has also her industries the rich garden produce of the environs, and finally the very lucrative revenues of the sponge trade in the Gulfs of Sfax and Gabes ; so that the inhabitants, notwithstanding the oppressions and extortions of the Government, are very wealthy, and are indeed the only population throughout the Mohammedan Maghreb which has not shared in the general decay.

The aspect of the town, however, would not point to that conclusion. Seen from Tunis, Sfax looks like a Turkish town of the Middle Ages, with high walls, towers, and battlements, behind which black cannon point their muzzles toward us. The many large gardens which the town's-people possess, and from which they derive a large part of their income, are several kilometres distant from the walls, in the midst of the desert, and the tract of land situated between them and the town is also a sandy plain, void of all vegetation, which does not improve the aspect of the old town. There are only two gates in the high walls ; they are guarded by ragged Tunisian soldiers, and lead to the Arab quarter. The streets are narrow and comparatively clean, and the houses high. Sfax is, as a town, as little remarkable as any other town in Barbary. It is sufficient to see one to know them all. Every one has her walls, her principal mosque, and her Kasbah, always in ruins, a true symbol of the Turks. The Kasbah of Sfax is the best preserved I have seen throughout the whole Maghreb, from Tetouan to Tripoli. Last year, at the time of my visit, the garrison consisted of an artillery officer and six or eight gunners, who had received no pay for months. The iron cannon date from the times of the Turks, and, no doubt, have neither been loaded nor fired since then.

The most beautiful and imposing building of Sfax is the great mosque, constructed entirely of stone, and containing a great many granite and marble columns, evidently of Roman origin. Sfax seems, like Tunis, to have made use of an old Roman town, perhaps Usila, as a quarry, for the stately buildings there often show fragments of Roman inscriptions, columns with Roman capitals, etc. The bazaar of Sfax is of special interest, for, under the beautifully arched galleries, are piled up all those goods coming from the Oases of the Chott district which find their market here ; also the genuine produce of the Arabic stone industry, of which the whole district of the Oases on the Algerian frontier is the market. Sfax is a very exclusive town. Averse to all foreign influence and to every kind of immigration, and unwilling to amalgamate with any strange elements, even if they be Arabic, the Middle Ages have been preserved here to the present day, the mode of living of the inhabitants and their industrial produce, etc., being a proof of this. The state of affairs here would remind us of those of our free cities of the Middle Ages with their fortified walls, if the turban were not prominent in place of the helmet. Instead of spending their days in idleness, like the Moors in Tunis, the people of Sfax work from morning to night, and the activity noticeable in her streets distinguishes her from her sister towns advantageously ; the ten or twelve thousand inhabitants of the town owe their wealth to their industry. Outside the town, in their extensive gardens, men, women, and children are seen at work. The olive plantations, the date palm-trees, the almonds, oranges, and figs, require frequent tending and watering if they are to produce fruit in these dried-up parts. Every one of these gardens contains deep wells, from which water is got by a winch, and conveyed to the plantations. In walking through this region of enormous gardens I forgot sometimes that I was in Tunis, the industry of the inhabitants rather reminding me of the fellahs in Egypt.

Though not fanatics, the Sfax people are very religious ; the five mosques which the town contains are, unlike those of other places in Tunis, generally filled with devotees, and even women and children join in the prayers, a circumstance which is rarely met with throughout the Maghreb. There are legions of pious foundations, tombs of saints, and holy wells in Sfax, a further sign of their strict piety. Their dress is like that of the Tunisians, except that they do not wear the turban in so many little folds. The women wear the usual white loose garment ; only it is made here of thick wool instead of thin silk. Their feet are shod in the same clumsy wooden sandals as in all other towns of the East, but they have no strap across the top of the foot, but a wooden peg fastened between the big toe and its neighbour, and which gets larger towards the top. Of course

it requires a special knack to be able to walk or run with this instrument of torture. The exclusiveness of Sfax is so great that an Arabian immigrant, whether he comes from Tunis or from the Oases, may not remain long in the town. He is put under a social ban ; he is ignored ; nobody buys anything from him, and he is not received in the houses, so that he is at last compelled to seek shelter and occupation in the quarter of the Franks. Even the Beni M'seb or Mozabites, who are employed throughout the whole of Northern Africa, from Morocco to Arabia, as shampooers and bathing attendants in all the baths, are replaced here by citizens of Sfax. Of course Christians are hated : not one lives in the town; they and the Jews 2000 in number occupy a separate quarter on the sea-shore, which is lower than the town, and called Rabat. It is separated from the town completely by walls, and is itself surrounded by walls. Dirt and rubbish accumulate to such a degree that it is surprising how the Maltese and Jews can live here without being carried off by fevers. Just as unpleasant as the streets of this Christian quarter are its inhabitants are true Levantines, with all the faults and sins of this mixed race. In their hands is the rather lively traffic between Sfax, the Oases of the inner country, and Europe : they load the many steamers and little sailing-boats which come from the harbours of the Riviera, and the export of esparto grass, olives, dates, sponges, and wool, might be lucrative if the export duties had not reached such an enormous height as to make the exportation of some articles quite impossible.