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The Tunisian coastline  
The Sahel, The Region of Sfax  
The Configuration of the land  
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The Tunisian region consists of three distinct basins: the Medjerdah, the Oued Bagla, and the Chotts. Each river system corresponds to a distinct portion of the country. All of northern Tunisia belongs to the basin of the Medjerdah, central Tunisia to the basin of Wadi Bagla, southern Tunisia to the Chott Basin. Apart from these three main divisions, all around the perimeter of the last blocks raised by the great Atlas, lies a coastal zone independent of the major basins in the interior. The Kroumirie, the Sahel and the surroundings of Sfax, Gabes and the oases of the region of the Tunisian Ksours between Gabes and Tripolitania, belong to this zone, and form many small coastal basins. Between these regions, the most important in terms of soil fertility, the number of inhabitants, the importance of ancient or modern cities which have arisen on its soil, is certainly the one that extends from the mouth of the Oued Bagla in Lake Kelbiah as far as Gabes, that is to say, the Sahel. It is on this land in particular that Italy had cast its eyes. From 1867, the consular officer in Sousa, M. de Gubernatis, now Minister Plenipotentiary to Nicaragua, took it upon himself to inform his countrymen of everything concerning this portion of the coast, so close to Sicily and Naples. His observations were very accurate at the time and were recorded in a series of letters to the Marquis Antinori, being released later by the publisher Civelli in Florence.

The breath of a patriot makes itself felt at every moment. Those who want to be the most well-informed about these events, without having to endure reading a textbook, will do well to consult these "letters". After two years of investigations [162] in the Sahel, the author of the study that appears [here] in the Journal of Geography is surprised at the accuracy of information and sagacity of mind evident on almost every page of the little book of M. de Gubernatis. But the form in which the former consular officer at Sousa felt obliged to publish the results of his observations, the profound changes in the state of the country since 1867, and especially since the French occupation, has decided me to take up the idea of M. de Gubernatis, to give it a more scientific form, to complete the many gaps that were found in his pamphlet, and finally to consider the matter from the French point of view, where he had only considered the Italian point of view. Additionally, in twenty years, a country changes, and the French occupation there, contributing, for good or evil, to the "moral character" of the people is currently undergoing a profound change.

Describing firstly the configuration of the soil, its drainage, its general appearance, recounting the main facts of its history, almost always related to the configuration of the land, talking about the numbers and habits of the natives, the European colonists, Italian, Maltese, Jewish, and French, and the influence gained by them in the country, finally describing the trade and industry of the region, the state of its agriculture and

providing a brief description of the major cities of the coast, this is the task I have imposed on myself.

To try to carry it out, I have had to read the principal works published on Tunisia, but I must acknowledge responsibility for the information and the personal nature of the ideas put forward. The medical profession, so popular in all countries of the Levant and especially in this new country of Tunisia, receives a lot of comments. Members of the European colonies, as well as Muslim families - do not see in the doctor a regular inhabitant, and perhaps of all the Europeans it is probably the doctore who is the least distrusted by the natives, so clever to conceal his true feelings. It is especially to this profession that one must refer, to collect most of the facts contained in this work <sup>1</sup>. [163]

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1. Works consulted: *Lettere sulla Tunisia e specialmente sulle provincie di Susa e Monastir*. Firenze, Stabilimento Civelli, 1868. — *Descrizione geografico-commerciale- agricola del Sahel*. Tipografia Gaston, in Firenze.— *Les Annales tunisiennes*, by Rousseau.—*Description de la Régence*, by Pellissier.— *Description géographique de Tunis et de la Régence*, by Villot.—*Description de la Régence*, by J. Saint-Lager.—*Voyage archéologique dans la Régence de Tunis*, by Guérin.— *La Tunisie autrefois et aujourd'hui*, by Broadley.

When going from Erghéla (Hergla) to Sfax along the coast, consistently, on the right we see a thin line, only rarely interrupted by hills. To the north, from the coast of Erghéla, only thin ridges of land appear, then there are the more pronounced undulations, hills and slopes. The closer you get to Sfax, the more marked the altitude of the chain becomes. In the relief which is drawn over the land, it follows a steady and regular progression, but it does not look the same everywhere or have the same distribution of relief. Sometimes the hills are assembled close against each other, so much so that the roads that run them are always going uphill and downhill, and they are so numerous that they cover the whole coastline and to reach 15 and 20 kilometers inland. Sometimes they deviate substantially from the coast, as below El-Djem, and are arranged in a three or four parallel lines elevations, leaving between them and the sea, over a range of 20 to 25 km, a wide range of sand, clay and silt. This chain, which runs along the coastline, is connected to the general Atlas of which it is, in short, an extended branch. To the North, it is true, between the central mass of the Tunisian Atlas and the branch that is emerging to the south of Erghéla, there is a noticeable gap. It appears that there, the chain has experienced a kind of subsidence or geological strata have undergone a kind of drop, and were covered by sand at a later period. Between Djebel Takrouna and Henchir-Benian in particular, the coast is low, sandy; there is no intermediate height to mark its topography. The whole country is dotted with ponds or *sebka*, the main ones being the sebka Halk-el Mengel and the sebka Djeribi both separated from the sea by a narrow coastal strip.

If a burning sun did not quickly evaporate the rainwater from the surface of these depressions, or those which, in the period of floods, come from Lake Kelbiah, the coast

would have the same appearance as our coasts of Languedoc, cut into ponds that isolate the sea with a sandy isthmus. Just as on the coast of Languedoc, the coastal strip of Erghéla is pierced in several places by canals or cuts similar to our *graus* and, as with the latter, these cuts connect the coastal lagoons [164] with the sea. The *sebka* of Djeribi receives water from a wadi whose importance, from the hydrographic point of view, had hitherto escaped the attention of explorers: this is the Oued Menfis.

This wadi, the first that we meet as we go south from Erghéla, appears at the opening of the Sahel, while only minor ripples begin to emerge above the ground. In ordinary times, that is to say, every year when heavy rains have not fallen on the land, its bed is dry, and only a dotted green border in the gray and bare country reveals the existence of a trough where water can gather ... If we follow this line of greenery, leaving the boundary of the Sahel and advancing into the interior, we see the bed of the Oued divide into several branches, a mesh network covering the country.

Among these diverse branches, some lose themselves in the shallows, swamps and small inland *sebkas* located in the middle of Enfida, but the main branch leads to Lake Kelbiah. The connection of Lake Kelbiah with *sebka* Djeribi is only an idea during most of the year; but come rain, or when the lake level of the Kelbiah suddenly rises from the input of waters from the Oued Bagla, and immediately all its depressions are filled, the whole plain becomes crisscrossed by channels that meet and flow into the *sebka* Djeribi.

This, in turn, discharges the overflow of its waters into the sea by five openings in the embankment itself, and it is thus that the Oued Menfis becomes the weir, the channel through which water drains from Lake Kelbiah, and these five cuts made in a barrier beach are all that exists as the mouth of Oued Bagla, the widest and longest of the wadis of central Tunisia, the rival of the Medjerdah and the Mellègue, and which the ancients called the Triton river <sup>1</sup>.

If, to the north, the threshold of Erghéla clearly separates the hills of the Sahel from the last rocks projecting to the peninsula of Cap Bon from the extension of the Atlas [165], it is not the same to the south, at the level of Sfax. Here, the folds of land parallel to the coast are still clear by the mounds, limestone undulations, with the plateau of Toual Sheikh, a terrace advancing from the Atlas to the sea and the curtains or beads of soil extending to the foot of the Artsouma, one of the last large blocks of the great mountain chain. From the stony plateau of Toual Sheikh some more or less prominent undulations advance to the north and separate the waters that go into the *sebka* Melahmta el Grara from those approach the *sebka* Cherichira and *sebka* Méchéguigue, dividing the country into a series of cups; others, running southwards in the direction of the Bou-Hedma, Douar and Besbes, form the watershed of the waters of the Oued Leben and Ouen Rann and other coastal basins south of Sfax. One chain, at first very little pronounced, runs to the sea, then straightens into a more prominent line and returns to the north, east of the *sebka* Melahmta el Grara as far as El-Djem, marking the eastern edge of the bowls of this *sebka* and that of Sidi el-Hani and separating the tributaries of the few wadis flowing into them and those that go directly to the sea.

In the territory of the Souassi, at the level of El-Djem, the hills are of a particular aspect. Instead of being formed from limestone, like almost all the prominent Tunisian rocks, they rise in high mounds of sand and clay, this last sediment in such proportions that in the rainy season, men and horses slipped and advance only very painfully. The road from El Jem to Kairouan, which passes through the valley of Sidi Nasseur, becomes impractical for the *arabat* (the local two wheeled carts) and all transport. To the north of El-Djem and at the same latitude as Kessourcef, regular lines of elevations the sharp ridges of which project strongly from the land and isolate a series of valleys from each other, disappearing with the sandy nature of soil. Soft white limestone hills succeed them. This change in view does not take place without transition. On the way from El Jem to the sea, by Kessourcef, for example, the field is initially formed solely of sand, then limestone outcroppings here and there pierce the sandy-masses: you walk on land strewn with quantities of fragments of stone that seem to have been broken with a mallet and [166] could be the remains of ancient ruins or buildings of which the action of time had destroyed the cement and left the stones scattered on the ground. A change in the nature of the geological strata coincides with a change in the direction of the chain of hills.

The heights are much closer to the sea, and will even reach the shore, as at Sousa, or as the Scanes heights, near Monastir. From Kessourcef to Henchir-Benian, south of Erghéla and at an average of 14 to 15 miles inland, the coast is formed of a continuous series of hills and slopes. To the south of Erghéla, to begin with they only cover the first 7 to 8 kilometers from the coast to the interior, but further south, we see them gradually extend more and more. At Sousa, the limestone area retreats up to 15 miles from the coast and in some points it reaches 18 miles. The general elevation of the hills is very low: it is little more than 40 meters above the sea level. Hardly any go beyond that figure, the highest of them, the Belaom, is only 115 meters. All have roughly the same appearance. They are flat or slightly rounded hills, ending with gentle slopes which seem to be thrown in all directions. The ground appears irregular. It is divided by hollows, and by valleys occupied by real rows of olives or by beds of wadis, sometimes by sebka. These hollows, where the rainwater has brought the little land that covered the plateaux, are exceptionally fertile, and the olive trees develop two or three times superior to that of our southern provinces.

Between this coastal area and inland, the contrast is striking. If you want to take in a view of a significant part of the country which shows the profound differences in appearance that characterize these two portions of the same territory, we have only to move slightly further away from shore, to climb one of those low hills of the chain, Belaom, for example, and watch the sunset. In front of you, extending out of sight, is a vast sandy plain, monotonous and barren, on which the corrugations ripple whose grayish hue blends with the low ground that, even at your side, the plain appears all flat and uniform. Not a tree nor a house; no appreciable flow of water to the sea. [167]

Two large inland reservoirs, Lake Kelbiah and the sebka Sidi el Hani, absorb water from wadis descending from the mountains which limit the view to the west. To the east, by contrast, is a series of mounds, rows of numerous hills.

In their narrow valleys are hidden pleasant villages; on their slopes olive groves are growing. At sunset, the desert, solitude, the ground without any trace of construction; here is life, movement, the sails going to and fro over the sea, many towns and villages. One of these regions is the plain of Kairouan, the other, the Sahel; the first, a region of nomads, the second, the region of settlements. Without transition, you go from the spectacle of city life to that of the pastoral life, living in houses to living in tents. These two worlds are so different that in spite of centuries of struggle, successes and misfortunes endured in common, they remain strangers to one another. The two are always there, side by side, unchanging, eyeing each other, but not mixing.

This change in the direction and nature of the range of hills that runs alongside the coast, has not been ignored by the natives, who, like all nomads, are quite expert in knowledge of the land. To these two different places on the coast, they have given two distinct names. The northern section, all limestone and dotted with hills, is the Sahel; the southern portion, which includes part of the alluvial land bordered with the hills and undulations of the Souassi which continue to the south of Sfax, is the region of Sfax, just as the region surrounding the city of Kairouan is known in the countryside by the name of Kairouan. The point where this transformation takes place in the zone formed between El-Djem, Kerker and Kessourcef. It is in this triangular space that the limestone surface mingles with sandy soil, the last clay hills are gradually lost in the sands. As with the geological strata, the lifestyle of the inhabitants also varies. The nomads tribes of the Métellits and Souassi there are elbow to elbow with the settled people of Kessourcef and the surrounding communities. Here as elsewhere in Tunisia, and resulting from the same causes with which we are familiar in France, the inhabitants of the countryside are replacing the people in the cities.

The settled population of the Sahel tends to be displaced by [168] nomads. These, independently of the people that they send continuously to the cities, are settled permanently in the interior of the country, and have crossed on all sides the boundary of limestone. Each village abandoned by its inhabitants (and for a century, this has been repeated often, especially in this El-Djem, Kessourcef, Sfax region), is immediately invaded by a Douar-nomad. – On the very edge of the slopes, merging with the settled people, nomads have taken possession of certain localities, the main one being El-Djem. This miserable village, which replaced the ancient Thysdrus, some houses of which have been built with the remnants of his colossal circus, belongs to the Métellits, who have made it their main centre and have here placed their tombs and the Koubbas of the men revered by the tribe. Communities of similar origin (nomads and villagers of the Sahel are Berbers who do only differ by the mode of life adopted), the tendency for sedentary people to desert their villages, a poor tax system that promotes the persistence of nomadic instincts by making life in a tent less onerous: such are the local causes, different from those that produce the same phenomenon in Kairouan, in

which nomadic peoples of the Sahel slowly replace those of the sedentary villages on the edge of the region.

The configuration of the Sahel, unique in Tunisia, bears close comparison with some parts of the Algerian coast. The vicinity of Oran, Algiers, Bone, geographically speaking, have the same appearance as the land surrounding Sousa, Mahédia, Monastir.

At these various points of the Barbary Coast, the natives have used the name of Sahel. As well as Sousa, Algiers has its Sahel, so does Oran, so does the city of Bone. Under this generic name, the natives refer to a series of hillocks and rocky hills near the edge of the sea and dominating all the surrounding plain. On both sides of the heights the land descends with a gentle slope from one side to the sea, the other to lakes, swamps or inland sebkas, so that the country as a whole is in the shape of a mirrored inclined plane in which the limestone occupies the ridge. This ground is clearly visible in the Sahel of Algiers and also in the Sahel of Bone. From the top of the ridge, we see the coastline down towards the sea and to the south the plain of the Metija incline towards Bouffarick, center of ancient swamps, [169] the plain of Bone towards Lake Fetzara, and that of Oran toward a line of sebkas arrayed one after the other below the foot of the first undulations of the Little Atlas. The Sahel of Tunisia also offers the same configuration. Only, the foreground is often reduced to a narrow beach, and sometimes the hills, jutting into the sea, as does the height of Scanes, near Monastir, remove it completely.

In the rear, also, the land is constantly inclining, to the north towards Lake Kelbiah, south to the sebka Sidi el Hani, so that the hills and slopes separate the waters which go into the domestic basins and those that go to the sea.

This slope of the land is consistent along the edge of the Sahel. In the tongue of land located behind Sousa and between Lake Kelbiah and sebka Sidi el Hani, the ground instead of descending to the west rises to the crest of El Homk where it reaches an altitude of 112 meters, while the most advanced Sahel hills in the interior of the country rise from 40 to 50 meters above sea level. This region is the eastern part, facing the sea, of the long plateau of which El-Homk is the center and the culmination, which, thrown between the depressions of Kelbiah and Sidi el Hani, prevents the junction of the two sheets of the lake water and the sebka. While forming the upper basin of the Oued Laya and related geographically to the coastline, it does not belong in the Sahel itself which is distinguished by soil type, appearance, and its products. It has no more in common with it than forming the top of a coastal basin of which the Sahel is the lower part. The name of Sahel only applies to its hummocky, rocky shoreline and the adjacent beach. For natives, the Sahel ceases wherever the stony hillsides disappear.

Included within these limits and from a bird's eye view, the Sahel, from Erghéla to Kessourcef forms a strip of land 85 kilometers long with an average depth of 16 km. Its area can be evaluated approximately 1600 square kilometers. Its coasts, with the curves they describe, the harbour of Sousa, the point at Monastir, Cape Dimas and the

tip of Mahédia, reached an extent of 100 km. Beyond Mahédia and Kessoucef and to the foot of the hills that separate the waters of Oued Rann from Oued Gharfa and Oued Thenae, the countryside of Sfax extends over an approximately equal length, but penetrates further [170] into the interior. From the first hills that run parallel to the coast as far as the sea, the width of this area may be estimated at 22 km on average. In sum, 190-200 km. length, and 4000 kilometers square, are the figures that significantly represent the surface space occupied by the coast of central Tunisia.

While not as rich in materials of all kinds suitable for construction as is the upland plateau of the Atlas, or that of the Cape Bon peninsula, this coastal area, or at least the Sahel, has offered abundant resources for all the peoples who have succeeded each other as builders on the coast. All the raw materials needed to build are found here. In the middle of the limestone deposits dating from the Cretaceous period, we encounter numerous layers of plaster and the terrain provides an abundance of excellent limestone. Several old quarries, now abandoned, are still seen in the Sahel, in Sousa, in Zembra, around Mahédia. Those of Zembra provided a very beautiful stone striped in black and white bands; those of Thoulba, sandstone of a fine saffron yellow or slightly reddish, identical to those furnished by the quarries of the plateaus, cut in large cubes, used in the composition of all monuments erected, [according to the system of large and small equipment]. With such materials, the colossal circus of Thysdrus was built, and thousands of homes for market towns, the "emporia" of the coast. Later, the Arabs first, then the Spaniards, have resorted to these quarries, the first to raise the minaret of the mosque of Kairouan. The second, for the construction of the monasteries they erected along the coast. Today, there is only very limited number of lime kilns still operating, As for quarries, it is with difficulty if, after a long interval, a sheik, wanting a more comfortable building sends a few men to move their blocks. This abandonment is a natural consequence of the impoverished state, the decay of a country that, prior to our arrival, was constantly depopulating and where, on the outskirts of every village, one would find only ruins. Those who takes the fancy to build have only to search the surrounding Roman or Arabic ruins: they find all the materials ready to allow them to satisfy their whims. [171]

## II

This tangled heap of hills which succeed each other from Erghéla to Mahédia makes the country's topography so difficult to understand, we may wonder at first if a well defined water system exists in the country. The topographer's work here is very difficult. We must carefully address each point. It's not like in the Atlas region, where the high valleys emerge so clearly, framed in their horizon of mountains, and where they are so easy to determine that the general configuration of the ground is, so to speak, made tangible. The obscurity of the country allows one only to recognize in the midst of these hills in a certain direction.

So we see that the limestone undulations, longer and higher, framing all others, are aligned perpendicular to the sea; it is precisely on these heights that one finds the ridges separating the coastal basins, and around which all the other hills group themselves, more or less regularly. These are the hills from Belaom that extend the two heights of "Sorelles", such as the long undulation of Ouardenim, the plateau of Bembla, it being all the more important to know that they give the key to the river system of the country.

This system is completely independent from that of the interior. No significant river in the plain of Kairouan crosses the barrier that separates this plain from the sea. All the rivers flowing into the Sahel, and even those in the region of Sfax, are born and die in the coastal region. In addition, all of them progress in a straight line to the sea. Also these rivers are necessarily somewhat extended. The Oued Laya, the largest, is certainly not more than 35 kilometers at its greatest length, from El-Homk to Hammam-Sousa, and the others are much less. In general, the width of the beds are only about 20 to 25 meters. Despite their small size, despite the low altitude of the hills that are sending their waters, their beds nevertheless retain water almost all the year. While the great Wadi Bagla and the other wadis of the interior have only intermittent courses which are almost always dry, the timid rivers from the coast, [172] that are named Oued Hambdum, Oued Djemel, Oued Beni-Hassen, keep a trickle of water that the sand bed does not exhaust. The Oued Laya, which is the longest, is also the one that is almost always dry due to the same causes as the wadis of the interior. It is here that the general configuration of the country is highly conducive to the maintenance of water on the soil and its flow to the sea. If the land is not very elevated, are numerous, are separated only by narrow intervals, and have their slopes only slightly inclined, they act as funnels that collect the water and distribute it in the wadi beds. Heavy rains occur, and, every hollow or depression is filled with water that does not remain stationary, as the in the clay plain of Kairouan, but runs in specific directions with a slow but steady flow. The whole country seems to be covered with a sheet of water from which emerge, like so many islands, hills and slopes.

It is precisely at this moment that we can best monitor and determine the general direction of the water. Between the hills of Belaom to the north and those of Ouardenim, to the south, flow the Wadis Laya and Oued-Hambdum. A series of intermediate hills, projecting between the beds of the two rivers, prevent the junction of the waters. These heights are precisely those which are spread over the course of the road from Kairouan to Sousa, so that, by following this road, you have the whole of the two basins almost constantly in view. Sousa is situated on one of these hills, the last before the sea and in the most picturesque situation between the Oued Laya on one side and the Oued Hambdum on the other. From the top of the tower of the Casbah, the Nadour (observatory, as the Arabs say), we have before us a beautiful panorama that along with the entire basin of the Oued Hambdum includes the entire lower part of the Oued Laya, that is to say, the northern Sahel. In front of you, at the edge of the sea, numerous towns cluster on the beach and mingled with the ruins of the Bordjs, the last

witnesses to a heroic age when the people of the Sahel would go and desolate the coasts of Spain and Italy and feast and stand up to all the fleets of Christendom.

To the right and left, the gray masses of Belaom and Ouardenim intersect the horizon and provide a framework for the landscape. To the north are the two isolated mounds of the Sorelles or *two sisters*, which stand isolated, straight on the same line, equally high [173] and very similar. On their flank are the villages of Kala-Kbiirah and Kouda, and further in the background, behind the curtain of greenery, Wadi Laya, the village of Kala-Sghira. Their houses plastered with lime appear bright white. Large green patches of olives and cactus emerge in the hollows and along the hills, alternating with the gray and barren shades of the hills. Their sinuous lines snake, cross, and encircle the hills, their garnishing their slopes and all converge towards a longer line that goes directly to the sea. Where it disappears into the waves, a series of white points twinkle across the green water; we have before us the bed of the Oued Laya that hides clumps of olives and fruit trees, through which, by rare clearings, the charming village of Hammam Sousa lets us imagine its minarets. To the South, the landscape is no less attractive. Gathered in a narrow space, under your eye is the whole of the little basin of the Hambdum. From their the waters surge, grouped into more compact masses, the olive groves that are interrupted only by the villages of Messadine, Moureddin, Msaken and the little lake of Zaouiet whose gleaming white stands out against the azure of the Mediterranean: it looks like a sheet of snow resting gently on the quiet leafy bed formed by clumps of olive trees. The curtain of the Ouardenim collapses before reaching the sea, and behind it in the distance, one can see the tip of Monastir and the height of Scanes, behind which this city seems to want to avoid being seen. The Oued Laya and Oued Hambdum flow into the sea at almost equal distances from Sousa; from both of their mouths, all the olive trees converge on the town, forming a thick forest where the first trees grow almost at the foot of the ramparts and appear to grip the town in a belt of greenery.

The tops of both basins are far from presenting so picturesque an appearance, but here we are no longer dealing with the Sahel, but the eastern side of the plateau of El-Homk. The two hills that we always see on the horizon meet in the col formed at the peak of El-Homk. As they meet, the two folds of land describe a large circuit whose edges flare out to form a half bowl inclining in a regular slope, which continues as far as the foot of the first hills of the Sahel. At the top of the bowl Oued Laya arises by two arms [174] very distant from each other. The first, much farther north and west, begins at the point where the Belaom is connected to the ridges that detach from the pass, and collects all the waters from the slope of the hills facing the Sahel and the sea. Its bed, that we recognize from afar as a trail of green, is traced in a shallow but very long valley, and stretches in a straight line to Kairouan, so that it forms the shortest route to reach this City and maybe it will because of this be chosen as the most convenient route for the route of the railway from Sousa to Kairouan. The other arm, much shorter and located further north, begins to take shape around Msaken, describes a curve and comes to meet the previous at the first hill of the Sahel. Throughout this half-cup of El

Homk, at the junction of two branches of the river, the country, already different by the nature of its soil, has a different appearance and other products.

In the lower half of the bowl, there are still a few groups of olive trees scattered here and there, but at the top, a distance of 12 kilometers, you can no longer see even one plant. The ground is covered with grain; barley fields dominate, mixed with alfa fields, hiding in tall, dense clumps their remnants of the Roman municipality of Yéïa, which is scattered over an area of more than two kilometers. Alongside these useful plants, grow numerous Umbelliferae and Labiatae, thistles and couch grass, wild carrots and this kind of shrub that the natives call *metnéni*. The Arabs have not made any effort to remove any of the weeds that reduce the yield of the soil by half. Some are even the object of special attention from them, such as couch grass, which is always green, and serves as food for their herds, while others, like Kouka, which is a kind of wild artichoke, maintain themselves.

The two arms of the Oued Laya reunite, the river cuts right through the Sahel, pushing its bed through the maze of hills which follow each other as far as the sea. On the right, the village of Kala-Sghira ( little Kalaa) was built on its route and near its bed. On the left, but at a greater distance, lie the villages of Kala-al-Kbiirah and Kouda, and at its mouth that [175] of Hammam-Sousa, only 4 km from the city. On nearly all the way, but especially at the top, the bed of the Wadi is lined with country houses and gardens belonging to the people of Kala-Sg'ira or Sousa. Well watered, carefully cultivated, these orchards give us an idea of what this country could be and what it has been formerly in the hands of a people more industrious. All the fruit trees from the Mediterranean area, those from the shores of Provence and Naples, as well as the warmer zones of Tunisia and Tripoli, are all there together.

Of the two rivers of the Sahel, Oued Hambdum has a course much shorter than that of the Oued Laya and collects water from the hills to the south of the curve described by the southern branch of the Oued Laya. The North Slope of the Ouardenim also sends its waters; all these merge into two arms situated one to the north and one to the south of Msaken and have their junction to the east of this city. It is a river that is entirely in the zone of the Sahel and perhaps is more picturesque than Oued Laya itself. Mourredin village, located at the north end of the first arm, is buried in the hills surrounded by olive groves. It is the same for Msaken, the holy city of the Sahel, but this one, placed on a small hill, is visible for many kilometers, while at only 150 or 200 meters you would not suspect the presence of Moureddin. The river flows at a roughly equal distance between those communities, and then between the lake of Zaouiet and the sebka of Saalim, leaving a forest of palms on the right, the only one encountered elsewhere in the region.

All the waters which descend from the hills to the south of Ouardenim are collected in the two beds of Djemel and Beni-Hassan, the two rivers flowing into the southern half of the Sahel. As with Hambdum, the Djemel basin lies entirely within a maze of hills, but the Beni Hassan, in its upper course passes through a country reminiscent of the upper basin of the Oued Laya. The nature of the terrain is similar, but less stony however;

furthermore the soil there is no longer as uniformly inclined, it is no longer a half cup, but a flat terrain, dotted with peaks and troughs, bumpy and strewn with ravines. The first fissures are already appearing [176] at the height of Djemel between Menzel and Zeramdini. Further south, they become more and more pronounced; around Kerker and El-Djem these irregularities are the most prominent. Near this locality, one of them skirts the road from Sousa to Sfax via El-Djem for several kilometers. It is a serious obstacle to routes of communication: for lack of a bridge over the ravine, the tourists, who have taken this route to go to El Jem to admire the ancient amphitheatre of Thysdrus, are forced to follow this serpentine route and thus significantly extend the the journey. We meet many of these cracks in the ground, much farther north, near Sousa, but not so extensive, more shallow, they are hardly noticed, and if one is not observant, they can be passed without being seen. Here, on the other hand, they form sinuous lines, several kilometers long, very deep and one can, as it were, catch them *en flagrante* in the process of formation. Under the action of rains that collapse the soil, the land surrounding the sandy banks of the ravine settles, it forms a zone of depression that forms cracks and crevices. On both banks, blocks of land are about to detach and fall into the ravine.

Except in the upper part of the Beni-Hassan, all the land in these two basins is still covered with olive trees and dotted with villages. The vicinity of certain localities, Mahédia and Kessour-Cef, for example, are more picturesque than Sousa. At the height of Beni-Hassan, groves of olives disappear. Even the trunks of isolated olive trees become scarce, and on the road from El-Djem to Kessourcef, we found more than around these two locations. Souassi and Métellits nomads invaded this portion of the coast that they had recognized as their own and no inhabitant of the Sahel thought to dispute them.

Kerker, one of the most picturesque places in the country, is no longer a village built of stone, like all other places of the Sahel, but a cluster of tents sitting on a set of hillocks, the base being surrounded by hedges of cactus. These tents belong to the nomadic tribe of Souassi. It's like a protest of the nomadic against the sedentary life. El-Djem itself, although built of stone and inhabited by sedentary, belongs to a nomadic tribe, the Métellits.

Someone who wants a view across the southern half of the Sahel, and even much of the [177] northern half, has only to climb the height of Bembla that crosses the road from Sousa to Muknin. This is the highest point in the country after the hills of Belaom. At its feet are the basins of Djemel and Beni-Hassen, the towns of Muknin and Bembla and in front of them, the sheet of Sahalim, so dazzling that the eyes can not bear the brightness and the less bright of the lake of Muknin. To the north, the view extends as far as Monastir, to Sousa, inland as far as Djemel up to Menzel-Kmel, and to the last hills which hide the origins of the wadis. To the south, the eye wanders from Muknin to Cape Dimas, Mahédia and the extreme confines of the Sahel.

With the limits of the basin of Beni-Hassan, coincides roughly the limits of the Sahel. After passing through the pretty village of Kessourcef and walked sometime through olive and fruit trees that surround this village, you enter the region of Sfax.

Here there are more hills, more forests of olive trees, more villages huddled against each other, but an empty plain, devoid of vegetation or almost everywhere covered with scrub. On the coast, more mouths of wadis, more lakes. The waters that descend from the heights along the coast will be lost in small sebkas located between the hills and the sea will lose themselves in small sebkas situated between the heights and the sea; of them, the most important is that of Ruga, located near the ruins of the Roman city of Bararus. The only two important watercourses of the region, Oued Melah, Oued Néjem are intercepted by this sebka, south of El-Djem. It is not until we get south of Sfax, that we finally meet the mouths of three insignificant wadis, Oued Akareb, Oued Bir-Nao, Oued Chefar, the largest of the three. The first two traverse the gardens of Sfax, the latter can be regarded as forming the boundary of central Tunisia. Beyond them begins the coastline of southern Tunisia, a sandy coastline, cut by oasis, the most important, of which is - or rather, are - those of Gabes.

You can hardly, in this whole stretch of the Sfaxien coast, larger than all the basins in the Sahel together, find eight villages outside the city of Sfax. They were more likely a half-century ago, but the poverty contributing to it, they were abandoned, and their location, is seen to be only in ruins.

As for olive trees, we only find them now and then, scattered in groups in the hollows of the hills, on the other side [178] of the mountains. They form numerous small islands lost, which the people of the country compare to oases. The special property of the Bey, the trees are almost all left in the wild state. It is different for those found in the vicinity of villages. In the vicinity of Gheber, and El-Kheribi, for example, fig, carob, olive trees three centuries old extend their thick tight tufts above fields of vegetable or grain and are the sole source of income for the inhabitants. Unfortunately, except for those few localities, all the rest of the region is today a country traversed by the nomadic tribe of them Métellits. Their tents are everywhere, to the right and left of the road from El Jem to Sfax, in the hollows, in the gorges, on the slopes of hills, and in a word in any place that still has a few. coolness. In the rainy season, while the land is covered with a bit of greenery, the Métellits descend into the plain and come here to graze their flocks; once the heat returns, they fold up their tents and take shelter in the mountains.

If you feel sad seeing the state of the country, which, like the rest of central Tunisia, was once so rich and populous, the feeling you get when you reach about 15 km from Sfax is totally different. The nature of the ground has not changed, but the soil has been turned over by human hands, and this hand has worked a marvel, it has created the gardens of Sfax. These gardens are on sandy ground, which, thanks to a wise irrigation, lends itself admirably to the cultivation of cereals and fruit trees. We know that the dry and calcareous land of the south, and even the fine and penetrating sand of the coast of Africa, is transformed, under the influence of water, into a silt of incredible fertility.

The gardens of Sfax are squares, enclosures encircled with fences of cacti, in regular lines. Side by side with olive trees, grow all the kinds of fruit trees which can grow on the Mediterranean coast. Here also, as in the Sahel, olive trees dominate, then, second in line, come the almonds, mixed with pistachios, with citron, with fig trees. Above all the fruit trees, the palms raise their baskets of flexible leaves swaying gently in the caresses of the breeze; at their feet grow cereals, vegetables, and notable in a Muslim land, the people of Sfax, less scrupulous than those of the Sahel, [179] cultivate grapes in quantity. No less remarkable for their extent than for the variety of their products, these gardens surround the city on all sides, north, south, and west, to an average radius of 15 km, and this area, already so large, is steadily increasing especially in the north, because every year the people of Sfax add several hundred meters of cultivation to the land that is already being cultivated. With the energy that they bring to this, before a quarter-century has passed they will certainly have included in their gardens all the isolated groups of olive trees, known in the country as the Bey's trees, because in reality they have no recognized owner, – those that grow close to villages, and perhaps they will reach the olive groves of El Jem, the last, that is to say the olive trees of the Sahel that are the furthest south. According to the inhabitants of the coast, natives and settlers, this work would have already resulted in the complete transformation of the country, would have been a *fait accompli*, were it not for the unfortunate insurrection of 1864, which for many years exhausted the Sahel and all that portion of the coastline.

Cumvbered with war taxes and other additional taxes, the people of Sfax have had to stop their advance, their work flowing northward. Among the natives the misery was such that any cultivation work had to be suspended and only the Jews grew rich from the general impoverishment, and, through usury, could, at that time, consider themselves the true owners of the land. Despite this unfortunate setback, it is still possible today to foresee the time when, thanks to the activity, to the intelligence of the natives, the whole coast from Kala-Kbira and the mouth of Oued Laya as far as Sfax, will be covered with olive and fruit trees. Then the central coast of Tunisia may be cited, rightly, as the largest nursery in the Mediterranean basin and perhaps the world <sup>1</sup>.

Dr Rouire

(To be continued.)

1. The map of the Sahel, attached to this issue, has been compiled according to the map of Kiepert (Berlin, 1881, Dietrich Reimer), itself composed on the information provided by maps of Algeria and Tunisia, published by the French war department, and the route itineraries of European travelers. Along with the particular map of the Sahel given by M. de Gubernatis, the map of Kiepert was, in 1881, the least inaccurate of all those that have shown this part of Tunisia. The new map, published today in the *Revue de Géographie*, [180] includes all the geographical discoveries that have occurred since the French occupation: it complements some of the gaps and rectifies many mistakes of the German map. Kelbiah Lake, the lake of Sidi el Hani, the sebka of Muknin, that of M'ta-Grara, are represented with their true dimensions. It gives the first, a precise idea of the river system of the country. The large rivers of Central

Tunisia which passed downstream of Kairouan, Oued Bagla, emptying into Lake Kelbiah (not as all the maps indicated, into the sebka Sidi el Hani) then, under the name Wadi Menfes, into the sebka of Djeriba. The Oued Bagla is none other than the river Triton of the ancients: the sebka of the Djeriba and Lake Kelbiah together are all pieces of Triton Bay, the inland sea in Africa mentioned by Herodotus, Scylax, Pomponius Mela and Ptolemy, that, quite wrongly, Mr. Roudaire went looking for on the Chott. (See the *New Review*, July 15, 1883.) It reproduces for the first time the location and boundaries of that same old Gulf of Triton, bounded on the east by the chain of Soualirs, on the west by Sorelles and the El-Homk plateau, and sinking into the interior, by its extension with two sebkas of Oued Bagla, as far as Kairouan.

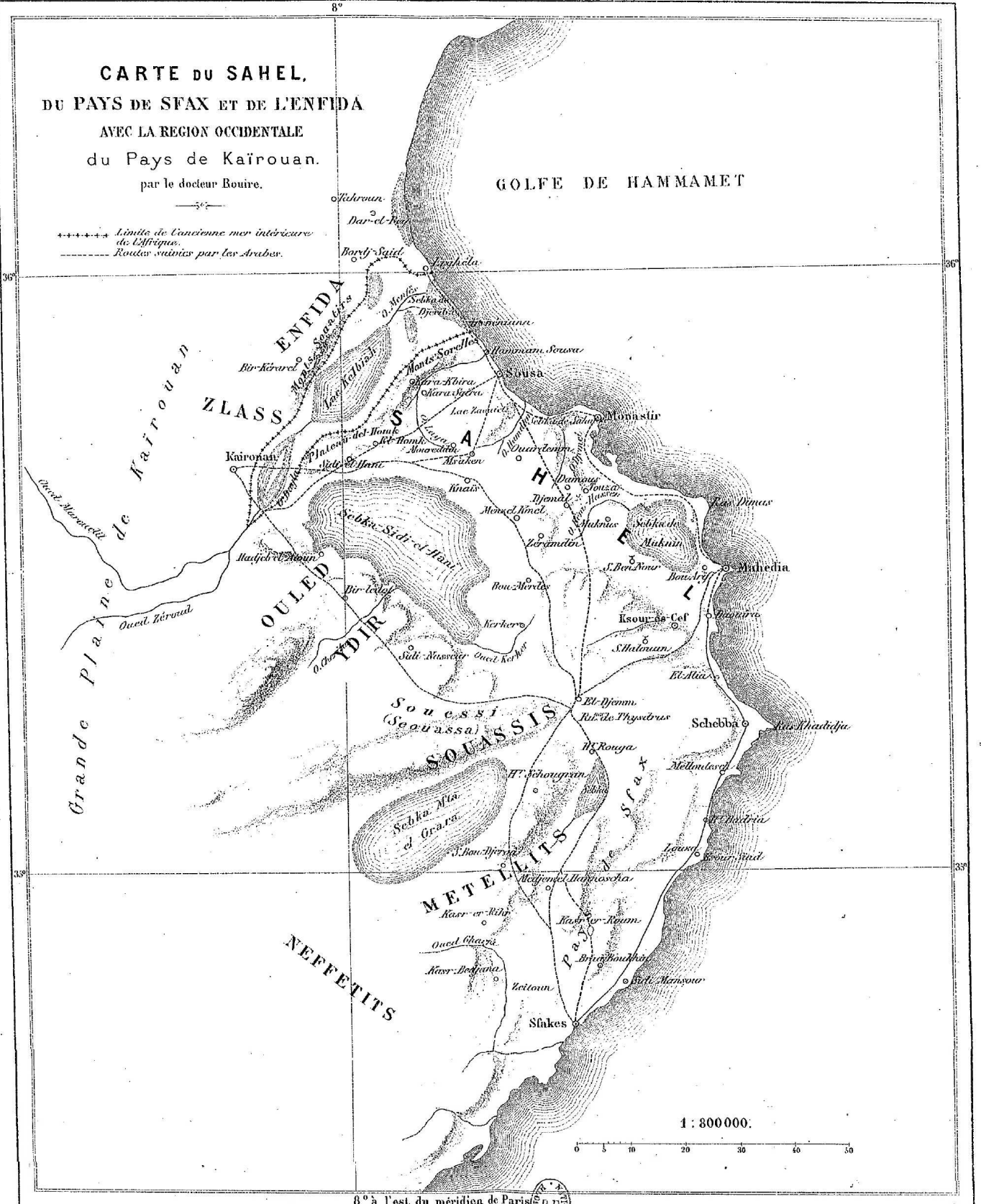
(Retrieved on April 4, 2011, from Gallica)

**CARTE DU SAHEL,  
DU PAYS DE SFAX ET DE L'ENFIDA**  
AVEC LA REGION OCCIDENTALE  
du Pays de Kaïrouan.

par le docteur Bouire.

----- Limite de l'ancienne mer intérieure  
de l'Afrique.  
----- Routes suivies par les Arabes.

GOLFE DE HAMMAMET



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DIRIGEE PAR

M. LUDOVIC DRAPEYRON

SEPTIEME ANNEE

TOME XIII

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