

La France Catholique en Tunisie
Victor Guérin, 1886, pages 149-157.

(See also his document, Voyage à Tunisie, 1862)

One can go from Mahdia to Sfax: maybe by land, following by horse the coast towards the south, then south-west, a distance of approximately one hundred and twenty kilometers; maybe by sea, by means of one of the steamers which follow the coast.

If one prefers the overland route which makes it possible to study the country, one can visit, on the way, not far to the east of Ksour-es-Sef, the ruins of Selektā, formerly Sullecti or Syllectum, referred to by Procopius as the first stage of Bélisaire in his walk from Caput-Vada to Carthage; the vestiges of El-Alia, which passes for the ancient Achilla of Hirtius (*Acholla de Tite-Live*), the peninsula of the Ras-Capoudiah, the Caput-Vada of antiquity, where Bélisaire disembarked in Africa, which he strengthened and where later the town of Justinianopolis developed, itself now destroyed, and which had been founded in memory of the disembarkment and victories of the imperial troops; close to the significant remains of Ruspae, sits one of the many bishoprics of the Byzantines; further south still, to Inchilla that one generally identifies with Usilla de Ptolémée or the Usula civitas of the *Itinerary* of Antonin, seat of another bishopric; finally one reaches Sfax.

The chief town of the *outhan* or district of this name is divided into two cities. The high city, the city proper, is reserved for Moslems; it contains eight thousand inhabitants. Surrounded by a notched wall, it is protected by towers, some round, others square or hexagonal, of which several still carry traces, like the kasbah, of the bombardment that, on July 16, 1881, it underwent from the squadron of admiral Garnault, when it attempted a useless resistance against the French. It has five mosques, several madrasas and three zaouïas. Its bazaars are well stocked and the markets abound in vegetables and fruits, thanks to the vast zone of gardens which surrounds it.

From the Moslem city one goes down by a gentle slope to the low city or the suburb, where the Jews live and the Christians, the former numbering two thousand and the latter fifteen hundred, breaking down as follows: nine hundred Maltese, three hundred and fifty Italians and two hundred and fifty French.

In this figure, of course, the garrison is not included, which is placed apart from the city, in an army camp built to be used as a barracks and hospital, as in Sousse and elsewhere.

For a number of years the suburb of which I have spoken has grown significantly; its population which, in 1860, did not exceed two thousand souls, amounts now to three thousand five hundred individuals, including Jews and Christians. Also, the wall which enclosed it is almost entirely demolished, to make place for new construction.

The gardens which neighbour Sfax surround it like a green belt, leaving between them and the wall of the Moslem city a rather broad sandy zone. They consist of innumerable enclosures, separated from each other by hedges of cactus and where fruit trees and cereals grow admirably on a sandy ground, which, by means of irrigation, becomes very suitable for cultivation. A bordj or dwelling in the shape of square tower rises in the center of each of these gardens; a well is dug close by whose water, according to whether it is more or less abundant, makes the ground that they

sprinkle and fertilize more or less fertile. One estimates the number of these enclosures at several thousands, because there are few inhabitants that do not have one or two of them. Many families have the habit of settling there during the summer. The trees which dominate there are the olives. Oil that is extracted is rather good in itself, but, undoubtedly for lack of a suitable preparation, it is, as in the greatest part of Regency, much bitterer than refined oils of France and Italy.

Among vegetables that are cultivated there, I should not forget to mention cucumbers; some critics claim that it is the abundance of this vegetable, called in Arabic *fakous*, which gave Sfax the name that it has had for a long time.

Regarding the ancient city that it replaced and from which the many remnants, stones and columns of some size, were used to build and decorate the modern city, it appears to have been Taphrura or Taparura, mentioned by Ptolémée, the Table of Peutinger and by the notice of the episcopal churches of the Byzantines.

The Arab writers, such as El-Bekri and Edrisi, speak about Sfax only with admiration; they praise its monuments, its bazaars, its trade, its wollen fabrics, the number, the richness and the industry of its inhabitants. Since the time of these two writers, Sfax has undoubtedly lost its importance; however it is still one of the principal places of the Regency. It owes this advantage to its fortunate position, the fertility of its gardens, the quantity of sponge and fish which are fished in its waters, the relative safety of its harbour and its continual links with Gafsa, which put it in communication with the rich oasis of the Djerid.

But we return to the Christian city and stop a few moments there.

In 1880, the Catholic church of Sfax was small. It has since been rebuilt in much more considerable proportions by Monseigneur Bou-Hadjjar, currently bishop of Malta, and who previously had been curate of this parish for a long time. With its simple, but elegant frontage, the two spires that decorate it, it dominates the houses of the Christian city. A very suitable presbytery is attached. Not far from there is the establishment of the sisters of Saint-Joseph. Their house, very inconvenient and very cramped formerly, was also rebuilt and increased by the same priest before his promotion to the episcopate. It is attended by a hundred and twelve pupils, Italian, Maltese and French, to which it is necessary to add some Jews and two Moslem girls. They form three classes, two paying and the third free, under the direction of four sisters, of whom one is at the same time in charge of the care of the patients. This school, properly managed, would be more complete if there was a sanctuary that could receive a flock of poor children, little girls and boys under seven years, that wander in the streets, unsupervised by their parents. But for that a fifth sister, at least, would be essential, and also some new resources.

If the establishment of the sisters of Saint-Joseph of Sfax already counts forty years of existence, the Marianites (Maronite?) College is, on the contrary, of rather recent foundation, since it goes back to 1882. Monseigneur Lavigery, in creating it, entrusted it to five monks of the order of Sainte-Marie. They all French, dedicated, informed and animated, like their fellow-members of the college of Tunis, with a keen desire to fulfill with dignity the civilizing mission, at the same time French and Christian, with which they are charged. Morning and evening they teach the class to a hundred

and fifty children, divided into four different sections, of origin either Italian, Maltese or French; some also are Jews or Moslem. These children, of which barely half pay a very low fee while the others do not give anything, live fraternally together under a firm and gentle discipline, impartial for all.

Unfortunately the prosperity of this establishment is hindered by the limited size and inconvenience of the room. This is why the Marianite brothers of Sfax are currently casting eyes on a large house close to the church and which, though three quarters ruined, is to be sold. The plan would be, after having acquired it, to raze it completely, and on the site which it occupies build a college, worthier of this name than the poor school that is currently decorated with this ambitious title. I ardently promote this project, which Mr. Delpech, director of the establishment maintains, can be realised as soon as possible, so that the opportunity does not escape when it arises. The college, indeed, would be very well placed at the place which I indicate and could then be prepared for further development, in connection with the probable increase of the European population in city in the near future. But, for that, it is necessary that public allowances or private charity assist Monseigneur Lavigerie, who cannot do everything by himself and who suffers at this time under the weight of the crushing loads which he has imposed on himself voluntarily to equip Tunisia with new establishments of great importance, from the French and Christian point of view, and to make the people we have subjected love and bless our country.

I should not forget to add that another school for boys has been just created in Sfax by Mr. Machuel; it is more especially intended to the natives; it has been put under the direction of a French master.

In 1860 in Djebeliana I had made acquaintance with Mr. Thomas Mattei, whose information had been extremely useful to me. In 1885, I had the pleasure of being reacquainted with Sfax and to shake hands cordially with him. At present, he is an old man of eighty-two years, but still green and vigorous. After having initially traversed the seas as captain of a commercial ship, Mr. Mattei, a Corsican of origin, then came to be established in Tunisia, where he has lived for forty-five years. A man of courage and adventure, he accompanied Mr. Pellissier in the majority of his expeditions. Accustomed to the simple and tough life of the Arabs, he was able to acquire a strong influence on them. I also renewed acquaintance with several of the members of his family, and in particular one of his sons, Mr. Jean Mattei, who was for a long time a vice-consul of Sfax and who is well informed in the affairs of the Regency.