

# REVUE AFRICAINE

JOURNAL DES TRAVAUX

DE LA

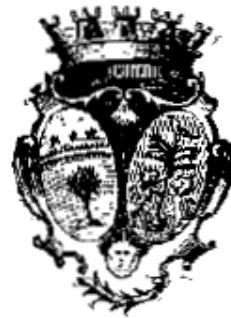
## SOCIÉTÉ HISTORIQUE ALGÉRIENNE

PAR LES MEMBRES DE LA SOCIÉTÉ

SOUS LA DIRECTION DU PRÉSIDENT

---

PUBLICATION HONORÉE DES SOUSCRIPTIONS  
DU MINISTRE DE L'INSTRUCTION PUBLIQUE,  
DU GOUVERNEMENT GÉNÉRAL DE L'ALGÉRIE,  
DU CONSEIL GÉNÉRAL DU DÉPARTEMENT D'ALGER



TRENTE-QUATRIÈME ANNÉE

---

ALGER

ADOLPHE JOURDAN, LIBRAIRE-ÉDITEUR  
IMPRIMEUR-LIBRAIRE DE L'ACADÉMIE

1890



OFFICE DES PUBLICATIONS UNIVERSITAIRES  
*1, Place Centrale de Ben-Aknoun (Alger)*

Arab Inscription Discovered in Sfax

The Arab city of Sfax, which absorbed the Roman city of Taphrura, is today still surrounded of a fortified enclosure forming a quadrilateral of 425 meters in length by 550 meters wide. This enclosure is pierced by two openings, of which the one known as *Porte du Divan (Bab Diwan)*, located beside the sea, puts the Arab city in communication with the European quarter; the other, which opens onto the countryside, is named Bab El-Djebli.

The municipality of Sfax recently undertook construction on the first of two doors, a small minaret intended to receive a clock; and this work brought to light an Arab inscription, on a stone which had been covered with a lime coating. Here is the text of this inscription:

لا اله الا الله محمد رسول الله نسم الله الرحمن الرحيم وصلى الله  
على سيدنا ومولانا محمد النبي الكريم وعلى اله وصحبه وسلم  
تسليما كشييرا لا اله الا الله محمد رسول الله جدد هذا الباب  
المبارك بحمد الله وحسن عونه في زمان مولانا السلطان المعظم  
ابراهيم نصره الله على يد المكرم المحترم ابوكباشي مراكشي عبد  
الله حظه الله من سكر مدنيسته تونس عمهه الله في اواخر شهر  
ربيع الثاني عام ستته وخمسين بعد كالي عرفنا الله خير ما فياه  
وما بعده صنعة المعلم عمر المنيب والمعلم احمد المنيب والمعلم  
عبد اللطيف المنيب رحمهم الله

TRANSLATION

"There is no god but God; Mohammed is the prophet of God. In the name of the lenient and merciful God; who spreads all its blessings on our lord and master, Mohammed, the generous prophet, and on his family and his companions. There is no god but God. Mohammed is the prophet of God. - This blessed door was rebuilt, by divine grace and the favor, under the reign of our sovereign, the glorious Sultan Ibrahim, that God makes him victorious, by the care of honorable and illustrious Bouloukbachi, the Moroccan

*Abdallah, that God protects him (officer) from the army of the town of Tunis, that God renders him prosperous, in the last days of the month of rabia ettani in the year one thousand fifty-six. We can benefit from the events which preceded it and those which will follow it. (The rebuilding of the door has been) the work of the masters Omar El Mounif, Ahmed El Mounif, and Abd Ellatif El Mounif, that God shows them mercy."*

The rectangular stone which carries this inscription has a height of 78cm and width of 40cm. The characters, whose form leaves something to be desired, are in relief and generally very clear. They were covered with a coating of lime more than one centimeter thick. For deciphering it was necessary to clean and wash the stone.

The last days of the month of *Rabià Ettani* of the year 1056 of the Hegira, correspond to the middle of June 1646 of the Christian era (1).

[ Footnote (1): The French Consul in Tunis was then Lange de Martin, predecessor of P. Le Vacher.]

If one refers to the events which took place during the sixteenth century, and first half of the seventeenth, that is to say the period that precedes the date of the inscription, one is authorized to think that the rebuilding of the door of Sfax had been necessitated by some defeat experienced by the inhabitants of this city. It is the time of a long and intense struggle between the Spanish navy and the Ottoman government, a fight which often has for its theatre the Eastern coasts of Tunisia, and in which intervenes the [smoky] characters, *Doria*, the celebrated Genoan admiral, *Kheir Eddine Barbarossa*, the founder of the Oudjak of Algiers, *Dragut*, and *Sinun Pasha*.

1535 was the date of the first expedition of the Spaniards, commanded by Charles-Quint in person, against Tunis. Kheir Eddine, who had deposed the king of this city, Mouley Hassan, of the dynasty of Beni Bouhofs [ Bouhufs?], was beaten. Mouley Hassan was replaced on the throne by Charles-Quint, who imposed a treaty on him, and left a garrison in Goulette to ensure his solidarity. But the populations of the kingdom revolted against the protégé of the Christians, who had to intervene a second time. Several coastal towns, compromised in the revolt, were again reduced to obedience, and amongst others that of Sfax, against which an expedition was directed by the admiral André Doria in 1539. In 1550, a Christian fleet returned to the Tunisian coast, and seized Mehdià. A little time later it pursued the corsair *Dragut* in the gulf of Gabès, though he escaped.

It isn't until 1573 that Sinan Pasha, helped by the Pasha of Tripoli, that of Kairouan and by the Bey of Algiers, put an end to the occupation of the Spaniards, sent captive to Constantinople Mouley Mohammed, the last sovereign of the Hafsids dynasty, and installed in Tunisia under the name of Bey, a representative of the Ottoman government.

From this time until the advent of the Husseinite dynasty, whose descendants still reign today, that is to say until in the last years of the 17th century of our era, Tunisia passes through a period of trouble and disorder, from which the town of Sfax was not necessarily free. "No period of the history of Tunis", says J. J. Marcle, "is less interesting than this period of the government of the elective Beys; none presents fewer memorable facts, no other time offered more small interior revolutions, elections, depositions and even of catastrophes."

[Historical precis of the revolutions of Tunis.]

The Sultans of Constantinople had, within a short time, only nominal authority over Tunisia. The ruler at the time when the gate was erected in Sfax was Ibrahim, whose reign (1639 to 1648) was marked by two important events: the Capture of Azof (1642), and the War of Candie [Crete], begun in 1645, on an insult made against the Moslem house by the Knights of Malta.

It is to be noticed that the author of the inscription, which is prodigal of pious invocations, and who made a point of communicating to posterity the names of the contractors or masons who rebuilt the city gate, does not quote the name of the sovereign of Tunis. The name of the three brothers El Mounif, a veritable trademark, with its pretentious repetition, is spread across the frontispiece of a public building, where we find neither mention, nor homage to the address of the ruler of the country.

This characteristic appears to be easily explained. "The Turkish militia of Tunisia", says J. J. Marcel, "had ended up driving out the city's Ottoman civil servant, and had organized a government in a somewhat republican form. The new agent of power, carrying the title of Dey or that of Bey, was elected by the *Divan*, composed either the principal chiefs of the militia, that is to say simple soldiers, whose only titles were intrigue and audacity."

Also see we written, immediately after the name of the Ibrahim Sultan, that of an officer of the Tunisian army, who had undoubtedly been delegated by the divan to the

command of the town of Sfax. And it is probably at the time of its reconstruction that the door of the city was indicated by the name, that it has preserved, Gate of the Divan, *Bab Diwan*. I say the reconstruction, because the construction of the ramparts of Sfax goes back to a time well prior to 1646, since El Bekri, who wrote in 460 AH (1067 after Jesus-Christ), speaks about it in his description of Northern Africa (1) [Footnote: According to the account of Ettidjani (Journal Asiatique, volume XX, page 1261), the first rampart of Sfax would have been raised by Ali Ben Salem, who had been nominated cadi of Sfax, by the famous Sahnoun jurisconsult. Sahnoun died in Redjeb in year 240 of the Hegira.]

We find also in the following inscriptions the proof that the enclosure of Sfax was not its first repair.

After having gone beyond the first gate, passing on the right and left some small shops leaning against the rampart, shops used by the corps, the guard, one arrives in front of an arcade whose arch is surmounted by an inscription:

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ صَلَّى  
اللَّهُ عَلَى سَيِّدِنَا مُحَمَّدٍ وَعَلَى  
آلِهِ وَصَحْبِهِ وَسَلَّمَ تَسْلِيمًا  
لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ مُحَمَّدٌ رَسُولُ  
اللَّهِ لَا غَالِبَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ اسْتَجِدْ  
هَذَا الْبَابَ الْمُبَارَكِ عَلَى يَدَي

الشيخ المكرم الأجدد أبوا  
عبد الله محمد بن الشيخ الأ  
جل المنس البرحوم إبراهيم  
أبو القاسم ابن سلام رحمه الله  
ع شهر ربيع الأول المبارك  
من عام ستة بعد سبعمائة

#### TRANSLATION

*"In the name of the lenient and merciful God. That God spreads blessing and safety on our lord Mohammed, his family, and his companions. Is it not true that there is no god but God, that Mohammed is the prophet of God, and that there is no victor but God. This blessed door has been rebuilt by the care of the sheik (master, professor), the honorable, valorous Abou Abdallah Mohammed, son of the illustrious sheik, of the saint, who has been received by the clemency of God, Ibrahim Abou El Kassem ibn Selam, to whom God shows mercy; in the blessed month of Rabià Elaouel, in the year seven hundred and ten."*

The words **ستة بعد** which I highlight in the text are almost entirely effaced, unfortunately the word **سبعمائة** though well used, is read very clearly. The month of *Rabià Elaouel* of year 706 (sic) of the Hegira corresponds to September-October 1306 of the Christian era. It is just a few years before this date that an agitator of the name of Ahmed Ben Merzouk Ben Abou Omars, originating in M'sila had succeeded in making himself pass for a son of El Onathek, who had been put to death by the sultan Abou Ishak, to take from the latter the kingdom of Tunis. The town of Sfax, like that of Mehdià and Soussa, one of the first to acknowledge the sovereignty of this character, even before he took control of Tunis (1233) [ 1283? ]. Ibn Khaldoun recounted the different phases of the fortune of Ben Abou Amara.

[Footnote: translation of Mr. Slane, volume II, pages 388 to 397]

Stopped in the town of Tunis, by the sultan Abou Hafs, successor of Abou Ishak, and questioned in the presence of grandees of the empire, he had to acknowledge his imposture, and was put to death after having undergone all the torture that men without mercy were capable of inflicting (July 1284).

At about the same time the arrival of a Christian fleet in front of Mehdia, which resisted, says Ibn Khaldoun, three unfruitful attacks.

It is finally during this same year 1306 that the expedition of Abou Yahia Ben Ellihani took place, against the island of Jerba, occupied by the Christians.

During these events Sfax more than one once had to receive the visit of enemy parties; and perhaps is it necessary to see in the pious invocation of the inscription that we gave "*there is no victor but God*", an allusion to some recent defeat.

While leaving the arch where second inscription is found one arrives at the entry of a vaulting of the rampart. In all probability one notices there a thick beam placed above the entry. In the wall, above the entry, is embedded a third inscription, whose first two lines, in very big letters the formula *بِسْمِ اللَّهِ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ مُحَمَّدٌ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ*, and some words that it was not possible for me to decipher. The remainder of the inscription is 29cm wide and 45cm high. The characters also in relief are accompanied by vowels, but in rather bad condition.

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم  
صلى الله على سيدنا محمد  
كتب السعد على  
ابوابها ادخلوها بسلام  
امين استجد هذا الباب  
المبارك جميعه من  
منفعة السور بامر  
الديوان المنصور على يد  
المعظمين الحاج خليل ابو  
النور و محمد و طباشي بعد تجديد  
الفوس في حجة عام تسعة  
وعشرين و الی

#### TRANSLATION

*"In the name of lenient and merciful God. That God spreads his blessings on our lord Mohammed. Happiness is written on its doors: Enter there in peace, and to the shelter of the fearful (Coran, XV, 46) - This blessed door was remade entirely by means of the revenues from (goods assigned to) the ramparts, on the order of invincible Diouan, by the care of worthy El Hadj Khelil Abou Enour and Mohammed Adabachi, after repair of the arch, in the month of Dou El-Hedja of the year one thousand and twenty-nine (1)."*

[Footnote (1): In the year 1029 of the hégire (1619 after J-C) the sovereign of Tunis was the dey Youssouf. The vice-consul of France was Mr. Claudio Senert.

This inscription antedates the first by only twenty-seven years. It shows that the door of the town of Sfax was double. We here have mention of the sovereign power which rules from Tunis: it is the Diouan. It also makes it clear that the ramparts of the city benefited at this time from revenues which were reserved for them, and were maintained, as the doors, with the product of the *habous* (tax) especially instituted for this use.

The two last lines of the text are tangled up one in the other, without doubt because of the lack of space; and this circumstance makes it possible to believe that the word

حجبه was put for **ذِي الْحِجَّةِ**, the month of *Dou Elhedja*. However this abbreviation is hardly used, and the title of El Hadj which precedes the name by one of the authors of the inscription would authorize another translation: "By the care of worthy El Hadj Khelil Abou Annour, son of Mohammed Adabachi, in the year of his pilgrimage to Mecque one thousand and twenty-nine." An attentive examination of the stone leads me to prefer the first interpretation.

Finally here is a fourth, placed above the interior door, at the extremity of the vault of the rampart and corresponding with the preceding one while entering the Arab city. The characters, traced much better than in the others, are also better preserved.

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ وَصَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَى سَيِّدِنَا مُحَمَّدٍ  
رَبِّ اجْعَلْ هَذَا بَلَدًا آمِنًا وَارْزُقْ أَهْلَهُ

من الثمرات من امن منهم بالله واليوم الآخر  
جدد بناء هذا الباب المبارك على يد بن ميين  
الحاج عبد العزيز السلامي مقدم سور البلد  
منهفا عليه من مال السور المذكور عن اذن اهل  
الحل والعقد واذن من يجب بالبلد على يد  
بانيه الراجي بنو ربه اللطيف اليعام  
طاهر ابن الهرجوم الدعلم احمد النبيه وبنه  
اعمامه واخوته اوائل شوال المبارك عام ١١٦١

## TRANSLATION

*"In the name of the lenient and merciful God. That God blesses our lord Mohammed. 'Lord, grant security to this city, and the nourishment of your fruits to those of its inhabitants whom believe in God and in last day.' (Coran, II, 120). - This blessed door was rebuilt by the care of... El Hadj Abd Elaziz Esselami, appointed (with the monitoring and maintenance) to the ramparts of the city, by means of the incomes of (goods affected by) these ramparts, with the authorization of the various authorities of the city and of all those to which it pertained to order the execution of this work, and by the care of the constructor, who hopes for forgiveness from his generous Lord, the master Tahar, son of late the master Ahmed Al Mounif, aided by his cousins and brothers, in the first days of the blessed month of Chaoual in the year 1161."*

I leave blank in the translation a word of the text which I could not decipher, and which does not appear to me to be important.

Here we rediscover the name of El Mounif. The new builder is obviously a descendant of one of those whose names finish the first inscription. Imitating the example of his precursors he makes a point of speaking about his brothers and his cousins.

The beginning of the month of *Chaoual* in 1161 corresponds to September 24, 1748.

The sovereign of Tunis was then Ali Pasha, of the current dynasty. The French Consul in this city was Mr. Fort.

N. LUCIANI

Legal interpreter.

Document retrieved on 18 January, 2008,

from <http://www.algerie-ancienne.com/livres/Revue/revue.htm>