

# Tunisia

AND

# Tunisians

BY

**FRANÇOIS BOURNAND**

*Professo rat the Catholic professional school,  
Formerly Vice-President of the Catholic Circle of Saint-Roch,  
Laureate of the National Society of Welfare and Benefits.  
Former pupil of the School of Higher Studies*

Work illustrated with engravings

PARIS

1893

Sfax.  
(pp.110-112)

*Sfax* (the ancient *Taphrura* or *Taparura* of the Romans.) is the second city of the Regency. It is a fortified town with 3,000 inhabitants, located 350 kilometers from Tunis.

One is obliged to drop anchor nearly a mile from the city. "The high and low tides", says Mr. Victor Guerin, "are very sensitive on these waters, and the difference between the high and low tides is about a meter and half. At the time of the equinoxes, this difference is even more considerable: it would be as much as two meters sixty. This phenomenon, is rather rare in the Mediterranean, and very remarkable, being as regular here but less strong than in the Ocean. Without knowing this, navigators could be greatly embarrassed on this coast, which is scattered with shallows, and which, from Ras-Kapoudia, between Monastir and Sfax, is part of Little Syrte, so much dreaded of old." [111]

Sfax is the seat of a civil Control. It has a factory of cotton fabrics. It does a lot of trade in sponges, oil (from 28,000,000 to 30,000,000 liters) and esparto. Its name of Sfax or Sfaxès comes from the word *sfakous*, cucumbers, of which the city has a great quantity (1).

In connection with Sfax, let us recall a curious page written by Mr. Gabriel Charmes: "In Sfax", he says, "the sweeping of the streets was carried out, before the French occupation, in an original manner. *Herd*s of pigs were released through the city, which took care of the removal of the rubbish. By misfortune, the pigs were killed during the siege. It was therefore necessary to find another means to maintain the streets in good condition. From the start, the consuls there are rather well lent. It was believed for a moment that they would agree to be levied a tax on sweeping.

Soon, however, they change their minds. The majority of them live in the countryside and come downtown only for businesses. Consequently, why would they fear the dangers of infection? These miasmas are not likely to go beyond the walls of the enclosure, and if they produce a noxious effect inside these walls, it is the French soldiers that will suffer for it. It does not matter to the foreign consuls if the French soldiers die of the fever or the plague! There was no way to persuade them in favor of the tax, of sweeping."

This page is to be considered for the future of our colony, [112] and doesn't it prove the need for the suppression of the capitulations?

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(1) "One of the vegetables that is cultivated the most in the gardens of Sfax is the cucumber or *fakous*, according to Shaw, Sfaxès would be the 'city of Cucumbers.'" (E. RECLUS).

## FISHING AND HUNTING

### Fishing

Everywhere where we went, we did not find them of course, at a great distance from the coasts, we were sure of finding fish to eat, and not only one species, but a large variety. One evening that we dined in a hotel in Bizerte, ugly to look at, but where the food was delicious and the dishes served, contrary to the normal practice, with a great cleanliness, we started a conversation with the host and hostess, a gigantic cook weighing at least 125 kilos (and her husband almost as much). It should be said that their weight by no means prevented them from speaking freely, and having gone to seek in my bag a bottle of old Champagne I managed to provoke them, and I obtained from them some invaluable information on Tunisian fishing.

Although they fishes throughout the coast of Tunisia, it is especially Lake Balina (between Tunis, the harbour and La Goulette), in the gulf of Tunis, the rivers of Miliana and Medjerdah, in the large lakes of Bizerte, [199] on the coast of Sfax, around the islands of Djerbah and Kerkennah, that are the most productive for fishing, the most abundant...

Though fishing takes place from May to December, it is mainly during May, June, September and October that it is practised.

Among the various fish species that one fishes, the principal ones are: the red mullet (*mullus*), the comber (*serranus*), the anguille (*anguilla*), the sea-bream (*chrysophorys aurata*), the grey mullet (*mugil*), the sole (*solea vulgaris*), the moule (*frutti di mare*), the bass (*labrax lupus*), the whiting (*gadus puntassu*), the tuna (*thynnus-vulgaris*), the orphie (*belone-acus*), the pipe-fish (*sygnathus*), the bonito [striped tuna] or pelamile (*thynnus pelamis*), the ray (*rajah*), the sea bream (*dentex vulgaris*), the common bream (*pagrus*).

On almost all the points of the coast, one finds swordfish and shark (1).

Close to Sfax one also meets tortoises of which the largest weigh sometimes as much as 35 or 40 kilos.

One finds, on the coasts of Tunisia, neither oysters, nor pearls, but more coral, which is 'fished' especially between Bizerte and Tabarca; quantities of this coral come to as much as 25 metric quintals and the price varies from from 85 to 90 francs a kilo. This product is exported to Torre del Greco and Leghorn. The right to take this is granted only to France (2).

(1) These fish are never exported

(2) In spite of this, they are mainly Italian boats, and Greeks who do it.

[200] Almost all the Tunisian fishery products are for local consumption; one can exclude hardly any of them except tuna, mullet eggs, and the polyps. These food products are exported to Leghorn and Greece. The tuna is exported in boxes and barrels, to Naples, Leghorn and Malta, after being salted or marinaded, in oil.

These are used in Europe, for the greasing of the machines and the tannery, for the oily liquid provided by their fatty parts and the bones of the tuna which are cooked in sea water.

The fishing of sponges and polyps is done mainly around key islands of Djerbah and Kerkennah, on the coasts of, Zerges [Zarzis], Gabès and Sfax. This fishing belongs to the State. For this fishing a harpoon with three branches is used.

In the trade three different species of sponged are distinguished coming from the Tunisian coasts: 1° sponges from Sfax; 2° sponges from Bengasi; 3° sponges from Barbary.

Every year approximately from 100,000 to 125,000 kilos of sponge is fished whose value is from 650,000 to 750,000 francs, and approximately from 65,000 to 75,000 kilos of polyps whose price is of 200 francs for 100 kilos.

The product of fishing is allocated for three years by a public auction. The Tunisian government takes a duty of 25 % on the fishing of fresh fish; this tax is paid by the fishermen; moreover, it receives every year a right of concession of 10,000 francs for the fishing of tuna (the fishing of tuna begins on May 3 and finishes on June 30).

The fishing of the big lakes of Bizerte, Lake Bahira and [201] the Gulf of Tunis contributes from 30,000 to 35,000 francs every year.

Here approximately is the quantity of fish taken annually:

1° 1,500 tons for the gulf, the lake and harbour of Tunis,

2° 300,000 to 320,000 fish for the fishing of the Bizerte lakes;

3° 350,000 to 360,000 fish for the other points of the coast.

Every year close to 10,000 tunas are fished which furnish approximately 70,000 to 72,000 kilos of eggs and from 32,000 to 35,000 kilos of oil.

The price of tuna varies from 80 to 90 francs for 100 kilos. The fishing of the mullet gives from 33,000 to 36,000 pairs of eggs or *boutargues* whose price varies between 70 and 80 centimes a pair (1).

One can say that the annual income of fishing in Goulette, Tunis and Bizerte is from 230,000 to 250,000 francs and that of the south-eastern coast as far as the border of Tripoli is about 200,000 francs. The income of fishing at Gabès and Sfax is 180,000 francs. The number of fisheries on the Tunisian coasts is estimated at from 600 to 700 and gives the figures of 1,200 to 1,500 for small boats manned by three or four man crews, occupied with the transport of sponges and fish.

In the gulf of Tunis and in the harbour, they fish with five [202] or six sailing boats, of twelve ton displacements manned by seven or eight men.

In the Lake Bâhira fishing is done with about thirty boats manned by four men,

In la Goulette there is a boat of two tonnes with fifteen men who haul ground nets having a type of bag.

During the month of September, one fishes also the blue-fish (temnodon; saltatôr), a fish which generally weighs from six to eight and a good average of seven English pounds. It has a strong meaty taste, suited to any kind of kitchen. At the beginning of September one finds it in increasing quantities and sometimes mixing with dolphins. During every day the boatmen take them in great quantities by the indigenous method, which consists in placing a piece of bait (a strip of the bluish hard skin of the bluefish itself or a piece of white rag) on an enormous hook, often without weights, fixed to a strong metal wire and a solid and short bamboo.

With this tool, they beat the water while the boat slips by on all oars, the fishermen shouting and singing. The voracious fish are quickly taken into the boat and the hook released, though ruptures are frequent. While making use of the European machines, this fishing resembles the fishing of salmon at sea.

After October, the surface banks disappear for the most part.

Around the islands of Djerbah and Kerkennah, along the south-eastern and eastern coasts of Tunisia, fishing is practiced by means of [203] holding ponds of alpha grass or palm branches. This fishing is practiced especially in the places where, as with Gabès and Sfax, the tides are significant.

# TUNISIE ET TUNISIENS



PAR

FRANÇOIS BOURNAND

*Professeur à l'École professionnelle catholique,  
Ancien Vice-Président du Cercle catholique de Saint-Roch,  
Lauréat de la Société nationale d'Encouragement au Bien,  
Ancien Élève de l'École des Hautes Études.*

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Ouvrage illustré de gravures.

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PARIS

rue des Saints-Pères, 30

J. LEFORT, IMPRIMEUR, ÉDITEUR

A. TAFFIN-LEFORT, Successeur

rue Charles de Muysart, 24

LILLE

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