

Le Petit Parisien



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FRANCE IN SFAX

In a few days, on April 24, there will be a great celebration on the coast of Tunisia: the French Protectorate will inaugurate the port of Sfax.

It would be to ignore the Regency to disregard the importance of this event. Sfax is the third city - after Tunis and Sousse. From 8,000 inhabitants that it had in 1848, its population has risen to 30,000. An exceptional situation favors it. It forms the terminus of both the Tunisian Sahel where the Mediterranean washes the shore, and also of the Lesser Syrtis of which Gabes is the center, the eastern end of which marks the separation of Tunisia from Tripoli.

And placed between two seas, so to speak, linking the area of olive trees to the area of palm trees, Sfax has always been one of the bulwarks of Muslim power.

There, in 1881, the troops of General Logerot met enemies more determined than the legendary Kroumirs. Here the independent tribes gathered, warlike in character, who were not afraid to make the ultimate fight for independence. This resistance of the Sfaxiotes, as they are still called, was repulsed. Feeling defeated, they preferred exile to surrender, and several years later the voluntary outlaws still threatened reprisals in the vague region, of the South, a haven always open to Muslim fanaticism in French Africa.

They were greeted by the sword when they returned, these valiant Berbers who, until the last hour, had not despaired of the cause of the Bey, and whose absence was a protest of loyalty.

Since then, how eagerly these insurgents have begun to work.

What activity has their country rediscovered! And how noble and generous it is to help these brave people in their peaceful restoration! Because they were more heroic in war, they are the most industrious in peace.

Their city, with its narrow winding streets, perpendicular to the shore, with its tall minarets of mosques, with its quadrangular enclosure and white walls, emerging from a basket of greenery, has quickly evolved. Water is the element that it lacks most. There is very little besides the cisterns. But the intelligent munificence of France will do well to bring some down from the mountains to the Fesguia. When you go to the lower city, which stretches along the beach, a small pipe leaking a little water invites the traveler to refresh himself.

Is it true that on this spot the Roman Taphrura once stood. The fact remains that we have identified the ancient city with the nearby ruins of Enchir Mesrani.

Already it appeared, in the Middle Ages, as a hotbed of murderous Islam. Its governor, Omar, in 1150, burned all the Franks who lived there. But as famous as it is, the fables constructed from the Arab imagination do not help us to reconstruct it, and its Saracen fortifications, bristling with battlements and towers, capable of receiving their guns on their bordj [forts] attest to its former strength. To enter the city, on July 16, 1881, our sailors had to assault a battery that complemented the defense of the Sfax-the-Strong.

Inside, amongst the white houses of slag and ceramics of hardware swarmed the Moorish armies of blacksmiths, the motley crowd, , industrious, wearing

green turbans, which are still visible today and where commercialism rubs shoulders with the Moor, the Arab tribesman wandering wrapped in his brown woolen burnous, the half-naked negro, the serious Maltese, wary, with swarthy complexion, the Greek in perfect profile, awake and smelling the wind, and the flood of people so mobile leaving the Arab city or returning by the only two gates opening to the outside, the Gate of the Divan [Bab Diwan], which leads to the European quarter, and the Porte des Champs, which opens onto the countryside.

It is in the R'bat that the European quarter has formed. Before the French conquest, this quarter was closed every night at three exits, the keys were brought to the caïd, and the story is even told, in Sfax, of a bishop, M. Buhagiar, who, after the closing of the doors, was forced, to get to his home, to climb the wall that skirted the other city of the lepers. The wall collapsed under the pick of our miners and the two cities currently fraternize for the greater prosperity of all races gathered on this corner of African soil.

Everything calls them to enjoy the blessings of fortune. Around them, there are only gardens loaded with trees of delicious fruit that rivals Tunis and Italy. Stone is not used for their enclosures, but instead they have planted and encouraged the growth of strong hedges of "cactus" or prickly pear [figuiers de Barbarie - Barbary figs], the tasty pulp of natives and animals alike, but the tree *par excellence* is the olive tree. It loves the Sfaxien earth. The thousands of trees that have been planted have succeeded marvelously. Ask the olive oil plant in Marseille

what it thinks of the fine and fragrant oil of Sfax.

Not far from there, offshore, stand the islands of Kerkemet [sic. 'Kerkennah'] with their fisheries of sponge and fish, which arouse the greed of the Sicilians and Greeks, bargaining with the natives most of their wealth.

Does all this does not give you an idea of the location of Sfax, harvesting the products of both land and sea? No population of the regency better understands the benefits of the protectorate than this industrious town, once in rebellion. Is not the testimony of this remarkable and continuous growth due to our initiative?

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This vast bay, as sheltered as it is from the storm, with waves so gentle that they seem to die, but where the phenomenon of the tide sometimes exceeds two and a half meters at the equinox, still needed to be fitted for navigation. Thanks to France, this is now a fait accompli.

The port, about one hectare in area, that preceded a channel 1,800 meters long, has been transformed. The basin has been increased to ten hectares, 6.50 meters deep, about 500 meters of quay was built, covered warehouses served by rail lines have been raised, modern equipment has been adapted, and all this work, the execution of which the Resident General, Mr. René Millet, has followed in person, were performed with marvelous rapidity.

This is the port that the new French government will inaugurate. Several Ministers will

participate in the baptism of the French Sfax, whose recognition is testament not only the past but looks also to the future. Indeed, everything combines to make this sea resort the Harbour of South Tunisia. If we disregard the railway from Tunis along the coast, with the branch that extends from Sousse to Kairouan, there is still no line connecting the interior with the Sahel

Before much time passes, the coast will be directly related to the southeast by the route granted to the Gafou [Gafsa] phosphates concession holders. The result of this combination, which will not cost a penny to the Beylical treasury, will be to attract to the best port of the Tunisian coast all the products not only of the region of Gafou but also the oases of the Djerid. It is, indeed, these perpendicular lines leading from the shore to the most remote cities in the land that will constitute the Tunisian rail network.

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While waiting for the public works program designed to ensure its agricultural, commercial and maritime development to be fully fulfilled, which itself requires from the French State a reasoned confidence as much as a firm resolution, the colony of ours where the mixed regime of the protectorate blooms the most contentedly in the world, that of Tunisia has visibly progressed. Grapes, cereals, vegetables, livestock, fishing, each year these have a greater importance. If the simple colonists do not appear to have multiplied easily, the exploitation of the abundant

resources of the plains, mountains and beaches already compensate for the lack of settlement. It is, at this moment, exotic France that attracts or retains most of the French capital.

And this prosperity does not slacken. In 1885, imports and exports together accounted for 48 million; in 1894, they reached 78,855,000 francs.

In total, France accounts for nearly 51 million; below it is England at 12 million, Italy at 8 and other countries 7. Suffice it to say that the sacrifices made by France in Tunisia were not lost and it has been the first to benefit, since its share in trade has risen in nine years, from 38 % to 66 % to the detriment of England and even more of Italy and Malta.

It remains for us to continue this work of economic conquest. The day the railway network is complete, when the ports destined to supply the traffic are able to receive it, when the immense properties of the Crown, the famous Habbous property, has been allotted and delivered to the society, when the wisdom and availability of the metropolis has taken advantage of so much wealth dispersed at sea, buried in the ground or scattered in the middle of the oases, on that day France will be able to be as proud of Tunisia as Rome was of Carthage. What am I saying? it does not count in the world, even in comparison to Algeria, this possession which has become more French and in less than sixteen years!

JEAN FROLLO