

## Sfax, Hamamet, Nabeul

by G. du Boscq de Beaumont

(Le Magasin Pittoresque, 1907, p259. Retrieved on October 8, 2007, from <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k34981v>)

Sfax, which was bombarded by our fleet and taken by assault in 1881, does not appear to have maintained its resentment of us, because a French city which grows each day is quickly being raised at the foot of its ramparts.



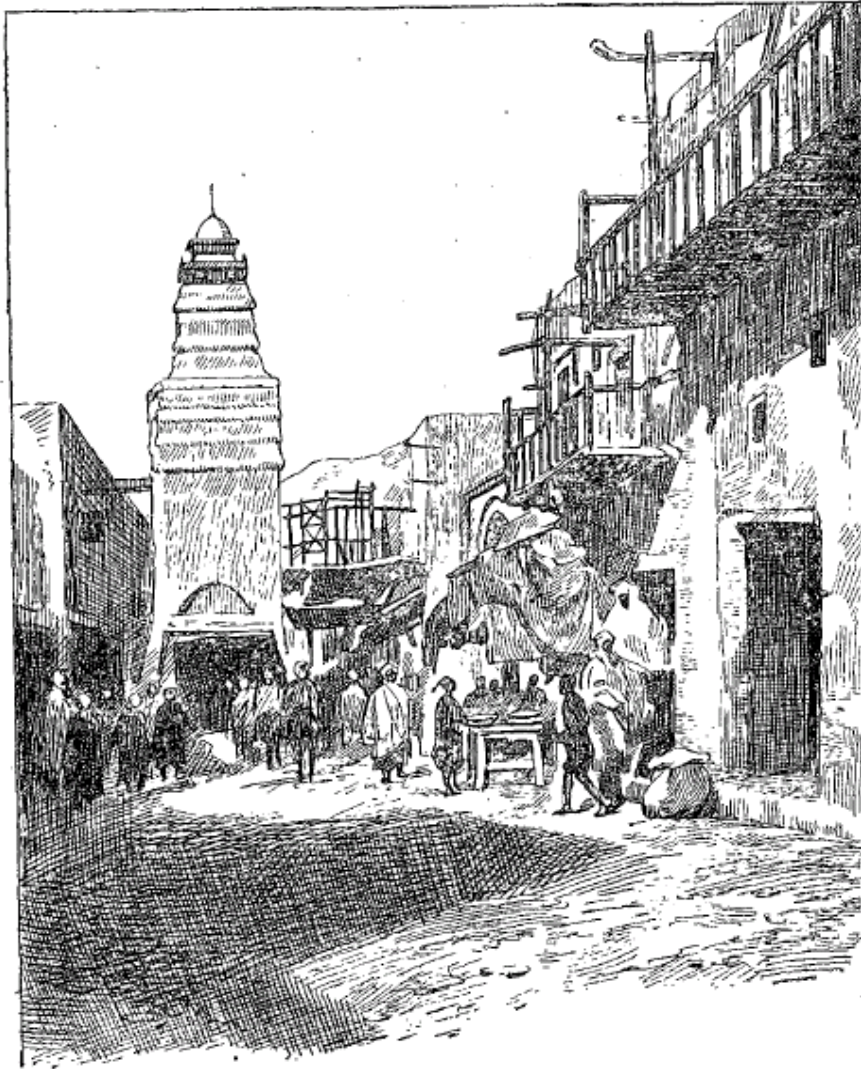
Remparts de Sfax.

Its crenelated wall, an army of square towers at regular intervals, dates from the 16<sup>th</sup> century; it is one of the great charms of this old Saracen town of 60,000 souls built by the Arabs about the second century of the Hegira, not far from the site of an ancient city which would have been absorbed by the sea. This assumption is based on the presence, in the south and in the north-east of Sfax, of two cemeteries containing, superimposed, the tombs of Phoenicians, Carthaginians and Romans, the last dating back, according to certain inscriptions, to the 4<sup>th</sup> century of our era; however, since no old remains were discovered in Sfax, one, from the situation of

the cemeteries, is led to think that the city on which they depended extended to the east, that is to say, currently, in the sea. This opinion is still supported by the frequent lucky finds of earthenware lamps and of coins, on the low tide mark where, contrary with what occurs on other shores of the Mediterranean, incoming and outgoing tides are perceptible in the gulfs of Gabès and Venice which are compensated mutually. Lastly, before the digging of the port, were seen, within 300 meters of the shore, blocks of masonry which tradition claimed to be the ruins of an ancient church. This example of an absorbed city would not be, moreover, unique; the sponge fishermen are very well aware that a small city disappeared under water, to the south of Sfax, between Zarzis and Bihans. Sfax is very animated; it would say that a perpetual fair is conducted in some of these Arab districts, and its district outside the walls is very curious to visit, because of the multitude of nomads which bring their merchandise there, on the back of camels.

If one judges some by the quantity of green turbans met in the streets, the majority of Sfaxiens would descend from the prophet, this religious nobility does not prevent the majority of them from being excellent tradesmen known to be strong in business in which a certain number have gained large fortunes. The principal industry of the country is the manufacture of the olive oil which recently incorporated a very great extension in consequence of the allotment of the *sialine* lands. This measure caused a real fever of planting, they managed to reconstitute in a few years the old Roman forest which now provides Sfax with an admirable green belt.

Sfaxiens have, moreover, the justified reputation of being model farmers; their gardens which occupy a good part of the suburbs present all the possible varieties of fruit trees; they also cultivate the majority of vegetables there in spite of the great scarcity of rain, each garden has a small house surmounted by a terrace from where the view extends across all these flowered gardens. While returning from a visit to them, we met a wedding from where the women were excluded; there were only men, or rather children, because the groom did not seem to be more than fifteen years! beautiful like one night of the East and dark like it, dressed in silk and gold, he walked with a slow step, followed his friends who played music, except two, detached from the group, who danced a traditional step.



Sfax. — La rue des Balcons.

Eager to enter a Sfaxien home I had obtained a letter of introduction for a notable of whom I was unaware of the address. In order to try to find it, I was initially taken in front of the *cadi*, a large boy dressed in the European style, except his *fez*, but who did not understand a word of French. Wanting to give me, at least, a palpable testimony of his benevolence, this magistrate stopped smelling a superb rose which he held at the end of his fingers and offered it to me. He then had me led by a native policeman similar to ours, except for the turban. Though a very young person still, he was a *hadji*, having already made the pilgrimage to Mecque, and spoke our language very correctly, which was invaluable for me to question our host that we met in the street. He made us to wait one moment by his door, in order to make it possible for his wives to be dispersed, and then introduced us into a room

comfortably furnished in the Oriental style, but without luxury - this is only an well-off bourgeois - with, in the middle of the patio, a fountain and the traditional jet of water. After having seat all three of us, in the Turkish style, on carpets, he brought a pedestal table loaded with coffee cups and cakes to the honey to which I could not avoid having to taste, and after exchanging, by courtesy, some banal sentences via my guide, the policeman hadji:

- How many children do you have? my host asked me.

- Two.

With a very interested air: - Boys or girls?

- Boys.

The interest appears to double! - What age? - Six and four years.

Smiling! - When you return to your country, greet them well from myself.

The port of Sfax is particularly animated, thanks to the flotilla of fishing boats which is assembled there, boats of Greek, Sicilian and native sponge fishermen, those of the last easily recognizable by their tilted masts.

The well sheltered channels, thanks to the vicinity of the Kerkenna islands, are accessible to the large steamers which make regular stopovers there, several times per week.



Femme Arabe de Sfax.