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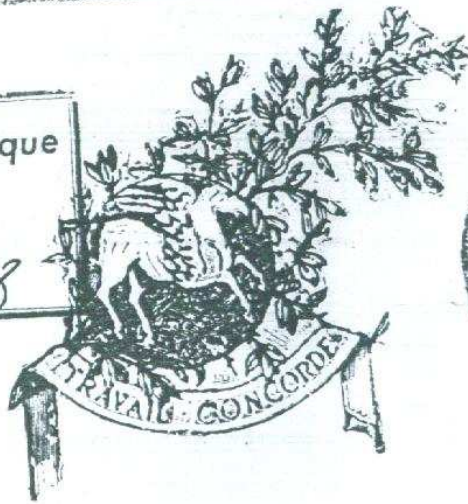
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HÔTEL DES SOCIÉTÉS FRANÇAISES - TUNIS

TUNIS

SOCIÉTÉ ANONYME DE L'IMPRIMERIE RAPIDE

1908

THE EXHUMATION OF A CITY

(THYNA)

*To M. GAU, vice-president of the Municipality of Sfax for twenty-four years,
in homage from one of his fellow-citizens and administrators
who never called in vain upon his friendship and his insight
for clarification on many points relating to Sfax and its area.*

J.B.

Sfax, formerly an unknown city but one whose name had a great impact on July 16, 1881 in consequence of its bombardment by the fleet of admiral Garnault; Sfax, which was then nothing but an indigenous city of little importance, has now become a considerable business center: agricultural, commercial, industrial. We have by no means the intention to tackle in this first article this question, however interesting, of the so extraordinary development, so American - we would dare to say - of the antique city; where Dragut often put to sail to chase after new exploits. Far from it, because instead of speaking about the hive humming with feverish activity that contemporary Sfax has become, these lines are intended to point out the memory of a big city which today has vanished. Sfax of the Roman epoch, located at eleven kilometers further south than the city above whose Kasbah the flag of France has floated for almost twenty-seven years. Later, after having spoken about the dead, we will devote some pages to the living.

The past is always interesting to study, and perhaps the study of archaeology has a very particular charm that uneducated people do not realize very clearly, those whose only concern is the present; but this study procures, to those who obtain from the facts of past History a philosophy which can help them to better understand the events of contemporary life and to develop a concept of other events which, as a logical consequence, will rise from the propagation of the today's ideas. Among the amateurs of the past, those who, in Tunisia, are the most occupied in exhuming the ruins which tell us of the power and glory of the ancient rules of old Tunisia, it is necessary for access to arrange the officers and warrant officers of our valiant army of Africa, of which work of exhumation of the traces of their predecessors, the legates, the centurions, the options and the decurions of the Roman legions are not more to be reckoned. It is to them, mainly, that Sfax, after the example of Tunis and Sousse, will be indebted in the near future to have a museum of antiquities able to attract

within in its walls many tourists who, until now, did not feel the desire to visit a city where nothing unusual attracted their particular attraction.

At eleven kilometers from Sfax, on the road of Gabes, at the place where is raised the lighthouse of 50 meters in height which is used to indicate to navigators the direction of the port of Sfax, are found the ruins of the former populous city of Thyna. It is a rich mine of curiosities of the Roman world that has been for a long time unexploited, but which, now known and appreciated, offers to the archaeologists rich seams of memories of former years. During the first twenty years of our occupation, we did not make much of Thyna: however, it was known that a city, covered by sands, had existed not far from the lighthouse of the same name; but good will and especially finances were lacking for serious excavations, and though from time to time some blows of pickaxe and shovel had been made into the tumuli formed by the debris of the monuments which were at one time the pride of the Roman city. And this occasional research had been without method. The first prospectors of the archaeological wealth of Thyna could not always operate with the care necessary for this kind of work, and often some very extremely beautiful mausoleums were broken for satisfaction of extracting some poor lamps of which the intrinsic value was nothing without the mausoleums themselves, but which, being carried easily, offered tempting spoils for amateurs of ancient objects at a cheap rate.

For some time, particularly, the excavations carried out at Thyna have been given a method which they had lacked, and it is the arrival in particular of Commander Delavau, Captains Ordioni, Berthelon, and Blondont, of lieutenant Taillade of the 4th Rifles, who left a few weeks ago for Morocco, to which one owes the more considerable effort made to exhume Thyna and to make it tell, as much as possible, its past which, to judge from the enormous surface of the necropolis. had to be brilliant. This necropolis formed, after the evaluations of officers of the 4th Rifles, rectangle a thousand meters long and two hundreds wide. It indicates definitively a Roman origin for Thyna, as all the inscriptions to date prove and demonstrate. The tombs and mausoleums already exhumed are of a style which resembles that of the sepulchral monuments of Pompeii and those who have explored the ruins of Pompeii were struck by the similarity that exists between the styles of the mausoleums of Thyna and those which Vesuvius, in the year 79 of our era, buried under its lava and

ashes. The form of their construction, the materials employed, the rich mosaic which decorate them provide the proof that Thyna was built at the time when Rome was with the zenith of its power, at a time when its merchants, civil servants and officers did not care about expenditure to build large, solid and dazzling, with an amazing luxury, the native populations placed under the yoke of Rome, thanks to the courage, to the intrepidity of the Roman soldiers commanded by eminent generals.

Here some of the principal discoveries made in Thyna during these recent years and which today decorate the splendid Town hall that the Sfax has had built and which is incontestably one of the most beautiful public edifices built in the Regency since the French occupation.

First of all, are the mosaics with geometrical drawings and [regular apparatus] which, placed in the cabinet of the vice-president of Municipality de Sfax, Mr. Gau, himself a distinguished archaeologist, and in that of the secretary of the Municipality, Mr. Audibert, another archaeologist, form the most beautiful tiling that one can imagine. Then there is another mosaic illustrating chubby-cheeked cupids which, under the cupola of the municipal monument, still adds to the beauty of this part of the Hotel de Ville. Moreover, arranged in panels on the corridor walls, one can admire mosaics having undergone years of irrevocable insult, but which nevertheless have been rather skillfully restored by specialist workmen whereby one can now easily recognize the subjects which the Roman artists had chosen as motifs: fishing for tuna and a temptation which, without being that of Saint Anthony, has some analogy with that of the famous anchorite of Thebaide.

In the room of the Municipality, intended for the meetings of the various Sfaxien societies, one also sees, forming panels, a mosaic representing Arion playing the lute while riding on a dolphin, and another representing a wrestling match among Romans. One sees fighters, their athletic bodies, seeking each to overturn the other to obtain one of the laurel wreathes which one sees displayed on a table and which waits only until the end of the combat for the gracious hand of a patrician to take and crown the head of the winners with it.

In the office of the vice-president, one sees also a mosaic representing a vestal whose costume resembles that worn today by some of our nuns and a second mosaic having as a motif a disheveled Gorgon, having covered in snakes, and whose

features express very well the harshness of these fabulous monsters sung by the Greek poets of former years. Another superb mosaic, of at least four meters by five, was discovered, a little time ago, by the riflemen. It is admirably preserved and the soldiers, not knowing where to store such a treasure, covered it with ground to protect it from indiscreet hands and feet, intending to unearth it when the Municipality has a room in a museum large enough to place a mosaic of such a dimension.

The riflemen have been fortunate enough to discover a cedar coffin containing the remains of a young officer. One can estimate, indeed, that this officer was extremely young by the dimensions of his coffin which, when it was opened, brought the discovery of a corpse still covered in fabrics which dissolved into dust at the first contact. In one of the hands of the corpse was a sword, in the other a javelin which appears in the embryonic city museum begun in the archives room of the Hotel de Ville.

Very clearly, on the coffin, can be seen the traces of the blood of the victims offered undoubtedly in propitiation to the gods of Rome to appease their anger and to make them favorable to the dead soul. This coffin which, as is right, had suffered much from centuries under ground, has been rehabilitated with the help of fir planks fixed inside by means of wooden pegs. It would be hoped that the Municipality of Sfax, to better preserve this relic, would place it in a window where the air could not penetrate, but where the visitors could still see it.

Among the objects also found at Thyna:

A funerary urn made out of iridescent glass, preserved admirably well, without any break or crack. One would say it had just left the glassmaker's furnace. This vase, so invaluable because of its antiquity, has exactly the shape of the aquariums which one puts on a table and in which live red fish;

Another urn of the same kind, a little smaller, was recently found in a tomb; A third was also, but it was broken in pieces as the result of an accidental pickaxe blow;

A funerary urn made out of terra cotta, in the form of a boat, gives an example of the various urns manufactured by the Roman potters which, like the monumental masons nowadays, sought to give various forms to the vases and tombs that they were charged to build;

A bronze lock with its key, the whole in perfect state, was torn off a very rotted door and constitutes one of the most curious objects exhumed from Thyna. Unfortunately, some time ago, an clumsy visitor, having wanted to take the lock in his hands to examine more closely, put it back with too little care so that it is broken. An extraordinary thing: the key has somewhat the shape of the Fichet keys. [here]

The collection of Roman lamps found in the tombs of Thyna is incredible. Some of them are of forms unknown until now, and, in the opinion of experts, no museum in North Africa or Europe has anything similar. On the handles of these lamps one can see, in relief, the eagles, crescents and other ornaments.

A singular lucky find was the bench of a manufacturer of cork soles. One can still see on this bench soles that one think they had only recently left the hand of workman. Who would have believed that the Romans knew how to make use of cork to protect their feet from moisture? There is nothing else like it under the sun!

In the room of the Municipality archives, now converted into a provisional museum, one can still see on the racks a feeding-bottle, yes, that's right, a pottery feeding-bottle in the form piglet and which, opening only on one side, would not be easy to clean. It is true that the Romans were unaware of the existence of microbes, dangerous enemies of children bred to the feeding-bottle which oblige the mothers to keep clean these utensils that are so necessary for women who cannot nurse their babies and do not want to be separated from them by sending them to a nurse.

Something strange! In Thyna has been found a glass dropper manufactured better than ours. Moreover, the riflemen reported excavations of two pretty amphora of iridescent glass of an amazing delicacy of work and finish, as well as funnels, bottles out of various forms of glass, small and large, and which most probably belonged to the stores of an apothecary. Alongside these objects appear *lachrymatories* of glass, hanging lamps of bronze resembling our spirit lamps, stone urns in a pure Greek style with pediments carrying inscriptions.

In one tomb were found fruits: nuts, figs, pine cones, all petrified, but each fruit having preserved its particular and perfectly recognizable form. These foods were deposited close to the dead, in the tombs, undoubtedly to enable them to make the great voyage towards the elysian delights without suffering from the hunger,.

As for the monuments, the funerary inscriptions, they are as numerous as we expect, since it is in the necropolis of Thyna that the excavations are taking place until now. We would like to reproduce them; but we think that it is to better return to these reproductions another time, when the museum of Sfax, growing out of its embryonic state, becomes a museum of all the parts, with its curiosities catalogued, its divisions organized and each thing in its place, which cannot be done now for want of space. Nevertheless, we believe it our duty to mention this fact, that many of the inscriptions indicate that mortality was considerable in the infant world of Thyna, because many are the epitaphs giving the age of the incinerated corpses as 4,5,10 and 15 years. Some indicate 30, 35 and 40 years, and only one remarks that his lost and grieved person was 83 years old. This leads to the belief that the climate of Thyna was not poor for the children of European origin whose parents had come to Africa to occupy a position in the government or to seek to create a better situation for their life. Thyna, built at the edge of the sea, on the threshold of an immense plain, without the smallest hill to block the painful summer winds from the South, would suffer much from heat and especially from the humidity of September and October, a great slayer of children; that the cemetery of Sfax contains infinitely more tombs of children than adults is not surprising, with it having to suffer from the same wet climate at the end of summer, that the inhabitants of Thyna often had to accompany the convoy of little ones to their last residence where today one finds their names and ashes in the vast necropolis neighboring their city.

The discovery of the archaeological richness of Thyna satisfied the heart of all the amateur historians and some, such as M. Novack, director of the Saltworks of Mahdia and Sfax, had already tried to expose at their own expense the secrets of the tumuli which one finds on the plain where the Roman city undoubtedly disappeared following being razed in the invasion of Tunisia by the Barbarians. It is necessary that the excavations achieved by these researchers of good will, by some officers always in quest of occupations being able to widen their intellectual horizon, do not remain any more at the mercy of the lack of money on behalf of the first or of ceaseless changes of garrison on behalf of the second. Not all of our officers are archaeologists and they do not all have the concern of making the past speak, however fully, being able to inform us with facts and be used by us as lessons for the present. It is now up to the Management of Antiquities to officially take in hand the excavations of Thyna,

to make use of the army for these excavations, provided that the General commanding the occupation in Tunisia does not oppose it, and then, in the event of refusal on behalf of the latter - what we cannot admit as possible - it is necessary that teams of workmen directed by qualified men will establish themselves at Thyna and there, with pickaxe and dustpan, with prudence, with method, seek to remove the centuries of accumulated from the enchanting mosaics which must still be hidden there and which, later exposed in an palace designed for the purpose, will attract scientists of the whole world to Sfax who, through their scholarship, will perhaps manage to rebuild the history of Thyna.

Rome, the powerful Rome of Caesar, Augustus, and Tiberius; republican and then imperial Rome which formerly made the known world tremble, not only the people living around the basin of the large inland sea, but also well beyond, Rome existed not far from Sfax; its wealth penetrated as far as the borders of Sudan, many centuries before us, the products of its industry. Its famous men, its learned personages, came to settle themselves on the land of Africa, clarified their intellectual ideas in the subjected territories to influence contemporary politics even today, and it is necessary that Sfax, like Tunis, Sousse and other cities and Tunisian areas, has its share in resurrection of a glorious past.

Is necessary that the forum emerges from the plain of Thyna, centuries ago a meeting place where politicians came to discuss their various ideas there on the progress of political events, negotiators coming there to perform business and loiterers seeking in the evening, under the shade of the arcades, rest necessary for their tired spirit after a day of concerns and for their body exhausted by the African heat. It is also necessary to unearth the thermal baths, place of congregation of the Romans, of Romans who, like wealthy Moslems of our time, spend long hours in conversations there on the incidents of the urban life or on the new fashions which surely made them think of the children of Eve of the first centuries of the Christian era just as has those of the 20th century. The palace of the municipality, where, as today, one would go to register the births and deaths, the arrivals and departures of this world, the happy and unhappy events of the life, must also be opened to the light of the sun, because these ruins doubtless lie covered by meters of sand, hidden in the plain of Thyna. It is necessary that the temples of the gods of Latin mythology, the

gods of Rome finally leave the dust and, by the beauty of their marbles, the piety of their inscriptions, come to attest to the blasé world of our time that the Romans honored their multiple divinities and bestowed a worship on them whose magnificence is recognized even by those which now declare dead for always these spirits of faith which lift the man in despair to lift his eyes towards the sky to seek there the help which he needs, the balsam with which his moral wounds demand to be cured.

It is necessary as far as possible, to reconstitute the plan of the city of Thyna, to know the length of its quays of which one sees the traces to the south of the necropolis and in the walls of which one still sees the traces of the iron rings which were used to moor the war galleys and the trading ships in which Italy, Spain, Greece and Gaul brought to Africa what the African ground did not produce and gained oil there, corn and barley that, thanks to intelligent hydraulic work, the Tunisian plains were to produce in abundance each year.

In short, alongside the many pages already reopened elsewhere through the large book on Roman History, Sfax must make a claim to fame in reopening a novel, yielding nothing of its description as an enchanter, tempting and palpable, of an epic which is worth that of heroic ancient Greece and which exceeds in splendor and power that of Carthage, destroyed by Scipio the African in the fields of Zama. To finish this first article written by us in the Tunisian Review, we form the following wish: it is that, as in Tunis and Sousse, Sfax creates for itself a society of archaeology having for goal to seek all possible ways to emphasize the archaeological riches that are nearby and which must one day constitute a new element to attract tourists to our area and to show that in Sfax the struggle for life does not make us forget the proof of an intelligent man is that he has to seek to instruct himself more each day.

JOCELYN BUREAU.