

The ORIGINS OF SFAX

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Sfax dates from year 181 of the Hegira, 763 of the Gregorian calendar: but it was born into the modern era in 1881, the date of the French occupation. Sfax is the heiress of old Taphrarura, whose ruins were found within two kilometers in the north-east of the city, and mentioned in the itineraries of Antonin and Ptolémée.

In year 29 of the Hegira, Arabs coming from Mecca met with the (Byzantine) Roman armies which were defeated. They remained in the Tunisian South for approximately a century and this century was enough for them to destroy foundation to roof the marvelous work accomplished by the Romans. Thus they razed the town of Taphrarura which had been of some significance, according to the ruins which were brought to light recently.

About year 130 of the Hegira, the Arabs were, in their turn, beaten and driven out by the Berbers who preserved their independence until 937 when they were replaced by the Spaniards. On the site which was to become Sfax, the *gourbis* and huts had multiplied and, often, village outlaws and sea pirates came. some to raid, the others to disembark, either of which had the same effect, tat of plunder.

The first ramparts of Sfax were built in year 181 of the Hegira, 762 of our era. and they still remain much as they were built.

It was under the rule of the Berber chiefs that the *nasrias* were built, cisterns still in existence at one kilometer from Sfax, to the north-west, and which were abandoned only in 1914, at the time of the utilization of water from Sbétla.

The Spaniards then came, from 937 to 981, and the Turks from 981 to 1117, until finally the Husseinid dynasty reigned until 1881 (Gregorian), that is to say, until the date of the French occupation.

Since this date, the Husseinid dynasty still retains the beylical throne.

The last important event of the history of Sfax was its bombardment in 1881.

The occupation of Tunisia by the French troops had been made quickly, the bold stroke having succeeded Bizerte, and the Bey of Tunis, Mohamed-Es-Sadok Bey, had signed treated of Kassar -, which will be known to history under the name of Treaty of Bardo; it was believed that all was finished and that the remainder of the Tunisian population would submit without protesting our occupation. The Tunisian South did not accept this proposal and insurrection burst forth in the south and center of Regency where the wandering tribes, whose relationship with the Beys was always in a problematic state,

raised the standard of the revolt on the Holy City and Sfax, encouraged by the voice of the marabouts of Kairouan.

The indigenous insurrection did not have time to be organized; the bands of Ali Ben Khalifa, the agitator of the moment, could not assemble without drawing the attention of the Europeans and of the French living Sfax - the government was alerted in time to send ships to take Europeans on board and when Ali Ben Khalifa presented himself in the city, there were only the natives, and the sea lanes were by then covered with warships.

On July 16, after the customary warnings, the bombardment started. Under the fire of the ships, the boarding parties were launched at the European city. They disabled the lower battery with a strong assault and blasted the door of Bab Diwan.

The Arabs quickly realized that the fight was impossible for them; they fled not without having defended vigorously and with the fall of night, the city was with us.

The necessary provisions were made to occupy and defend it. Sfaxiens paid a war indemnity. Ali Ben Khalifa fled to Tripolitania where he died.

From that day, Sfax continues to develop. The sea, which came up to the current Boulevard de France, was driven back and the new European city was built. As we will see, it became a large commercial city, the Economic Capital of the Tunisian South.

SFAX

Population and situation – The *Caidat* of Sfax and that of Skira constitute the Borough (lit: *Contrôle*) of Sfax, with a population of approximately 190,000 inhabitants including 179,000 Arabs, 2,600 French, 2,600 Italians, 1400 Maltese, 450 Greeks, 77 Spaniards, 3,300 Jews, 170 Moroccans and 500 inhabitants of various nationalities.

Sfax itself (European city, indigenous city, suburbs) counts approximately 120,000 inhabitants including 110,000 Moslem natives, 3,000 French and neo-French, 2,300 Italian, 430 Greeks, 3,100 Jews, 70 Spaniards and 400 Maltese and others.

Sfax is located on the edge of the sea at the latitude of 34°45' and 8°18' of longitude East of the meridian line of Paris.

The city extends on a slight incline; it is surrounded by gardens, which, from the roads, gives it a pleasant aspect.

The indigenous city - the Arab city is surrounded by a crenellated enclosure wall, flanked by towers forming an almost regular quadrilateral of which one on the sides is parallel with the shore.

Before the French occupation, just two doors permitted access: one in south-east, Bab Diwan, opening into the European district, the other, Bab Djebli, opening in the north-west on the countryside and the Tunis road.

Since 1881, other doors were opened, one, Bab Djedid, on the sea front, close to the Kasbah, opposite the market to vegetables, the other more to the west of Bab Djebli, also giving access onto the countryside, finally a staircase was built in the east at the foot of Borj en Nar, at the end of the Rue des Ramparts.

The opening of a new door is also projected.

Its monuments - the large mosque which, according to El Lobeidi. in his biography of Chéik Abbou Ishak el Djebeniani, was built by Ali Bou Salem, about year 200 of the Hegira. It is in the center of the Arab city and is surmounted by a minaret which dominates all those of the city.

In the souk of the blacksmiths (*Souk des Forgerons*), the antique mosque known as Bouchouïcha is of Arab foundation about year 240 of the Hegira. This building is in a perfect state of conservation.

The mosques Sid Ali El Karray and Sidi Ben Hassea are of a more recent time, going up only in the year 1100 of the Hegira.

Among the interesting characteristics of the Arab city, it is necessary to include beautiful souks going up in year 1150 of the Hegira and restored over a score of years by the care of the French Administration.

These roomy and comfortable souks shelter many tradesmen and craftsmen and ensure the indigenous population the most complete provisioning, such as Eastern clothing and fabrics, carpets, furnishing, precious metals, drinks, syrups, objects of consumption, etc....

The European city - the European city is built between the shore and the ramparts to the south-east; it was formerly surrounded by an enclosure that was demolished after the bombardment of 1881; new districts were then built on the land conquered from the sea.

The grounds, reserved for the new European city, cover a surface larger than that of the Arab city; they were parceled out in the American style according to a plan which gives wide arteries and plazas and public gardens which are to the credit of the new city.

The majestic Town hall, of Moorish style, with a bold 80 meters [sic] high minaret which rises in the center of the city, is a completely remarkable monument, as much by its architecture and appearance as by its decoration and rich interior.

The halls of the various rooms of the monument are embellished with mosaics retrieved from Thyna, grouped in a museum with all kinds of ancient pieces. The principal

mosaics are: a square of a Christian Basilica of the 4th century discovered at Taphrarura, ancient Sfax; a victorious lion with the medal of the Circus (Roman period 1st century before J.C.) coming from the excavations of Thyna; Orphée charming the animals (the same time and source); a subject of the Circus with lovers carrying fruits and foods which were consumed during the spectacle (found around the Circus of El-Djem); mythological scenes; Silene on an ass being teased by a fauna and a satyr: heads of gorgons and vestals; scenes of fields with the Erycine Goddess in the center, receiving the first fruits of spring: flowers, fruits: Arion on a dolphin; Roman and indigenous fights; Daniel surrounded by lions, etc...

The other monuments of the European city are: a Theatre of Moorish style, very vain, the Hotel of Civil Control and the Hotel of the Company of Phosphates of Gafsa. The Hotel des Oliviers equipped with all the modern comfort of the large deluxe hotels and which recently has been just inaugurated.

Primary schools and higher; the building of Finances and Public works, the Post office building and Customs.

The Military Circle, the Military Hospital and a barracks for maritime mobile defense finish the nomenclature of the public buildings of Sfax. Let us not forget to mention the Park installed at the end of Picville, arranged very well and where Sfaxiens go, during the months of heat, to seek a little shade and freshness.

The research garden where studies are done into the acclimatization of the European plantations, supplements the Park.

Beautiful houses rise on the grounds captured from the sea. Some affect a composite style and contribute to the embellishment of the new city.

The Port - Sfax currently has a port of first order, which succeeded a defective earthwork until 1885 and the wall of quay built in 1886, but quite insufficient; Sfax is today the second port of Regency.

Its shipping lanes accessible to the ships of any tonnage, are sheltered naturally by the Kerkennah islands and high mud flats on which the most violent seas break.

Thanks to this exceptional shelter, thanks to the underwater richness of the surrounding zone (fish, sponges, octopuses, shells), the number of small boats which from time immemorial had gathered in the port of Sfax, reached an proportion unknown in the rest of the Regency; that being the result of the unique and attractive aspect of this port, so favored by nature. The current port was inaugurated on April 25, 1897.

It is the Company of the Ports of T. S. S. which captured from the sea all the ground of the city, dug the access channel for the ships, the principal basin, built the quays, in a word organized all the apparatus of the maritime trade of Sfax. But already the current port no longer meets the increasing daily needs of Sfaxienne trade and industry, and the Company of the Ports is in process of increasing the principal basin, to create a basin for the small fishing boats and to fill the small channel whose presence prevented the urban expansion on the western side.

The Phosphates - the prosperity and the importance of the port of Sfax are due mainly to the continuous development, since 1899, of the export of natural phosphates of lime from the area of Gafsa, exploited by the Company of Phosphates and the of the Railway of Gafsa. This company has at the port of Sfax installations with a surface area of several thousands of m² for the storage and the loading of phosphates.

Handling and the loading are done by means of belts actuated by electric motors supplied with a special power station.

The power of loading can reach with the three chargers 1,200 T per hour.

The fishing of sponges - a very special product at Sfax is the sponge, whose fishing is done by Greek divers (fishing with a diving-suit), by the Italian *gangaves* (fishing with the *gangave*) and the fishermen with the three-pronged Kerkenien and Djerbien fork (fishing with the *kamaki*, a kind of hand-held harpoon).

Each year the commercial firms sell, in France, Belgium, and England, sponges from Sfax, Gabès, Djerba which produce sums reaching ten million.

The fishing of octopuses and the bones of cuttlefish - the fishing of octopus is the object of a special industry. The octopus is dried and sold in Greece and in the United States. It constitutes a food having some analogy with lobster. The bones of cuttlefish collected on the edge of the sea give place to a rather important trade. These bones of cuttlefish are employed in jewelry and clock industry as moulds for certain delicate parts.

The Suburbs - To the town of Sfax are attached two more suburbs which every day grow more extensive: Picville in the South and Moulinville to North, both crossed by the main road from Tunis to Gabés.

The Surroundings of Sfax - the Sfaxienne communal development includes a great number of olive presses scattered around the city, European and native factories provided with the latest improvements of the olive-growing industry. Behind this belt of factories, of which the number and importance increase each year, extending approximately seven kilometers in depth, in semicircles around the city, are the Gardens of Sfax, of which there

are more than 6,000. These gardens are enclosures closed by banks of earth (*tablas*) surmounted by cactus, of one or two hectares each, with a construction in masonry in the middle. They are connected one to another and together they constitute a continuation of the city.

The forest of olive-trees - Beyond these gardens, over a 40 km length and in a radius of 50 km, the extensive forest of olive-trees is one of the principal sources of wealth and the most powerful element of prosperity in the region. The concession of the *sialines* lands made it possible to thus develop the culture of the olive-tree and the recent plantings carried out these last years are extended at certain points to a distance of more than 70 kilometers. These grounds, previously used by natives as nomadic lands and for ploughing, presents a desert appearance. The extension of colonization brought many colonists who built farms and dwellings there with the use of their grant.

Plantations of olive-trees which were less than 530,000 feet in 1890 reached 1,655,670 feet in 1900; in 1910: 2,781,346 feet and in 1920: 4,500,000. The principal richness of Sfax thus lies in its oleiculture and the statistics of last oil exports of 1,244,410 kilos in 1890 to 18,233,339 in 1920 are a tangible proof.

Excursion to the forest of olive -trees - At the geographical point of "*Touil-el-Cheridi*" at 17 km of Sfax, over the road of Triaga one distinguishes as far as the eye can see the green plain of olive trees. It is a spectacle which astonishes all visitors and which they recognize as unique in the world. This point was, until recently, the only place where the tourists were directed. One reaches it by a track of approximately 250 meters and at the summit a masonry shelter is built.

The Tourist office of Sfax, whose goal is to facilitate the observation of the forest of olive-trees, arranged a second viewpoint and set up a minaret viewpoint at Bogaâ-el-Beyda.

Bogaâ-el-Beyda (the White Place) is located 17 km from Sfax, on the Gremda road. Its altitude is 120 meters. It is found at the limit of the old forest of olive trees of Sfax, that is to say of that existing before French colonization.

By a beautiful sunlit morning, the panorama of this point is immense and splendid; one discovers there not only everything that one sees from Touil-el-Cheridi, but also and especially, all of the new forest created in major part by the French colonists. One also sees the city, the gardens of Sfax, the sea and, by good weather, the Kerkennah islands.

An automobile drive of 75 km makes it possible to visit in the same excursion these two geographic location: the tourists can stop en route at Bogaâ-el-Beyda, lunching at the Roman cisterns of Maajen ed Dry and returning to Sfax by Touil-el-Cheridi, thus carrying

out a most interesting walk in the beautiful part of the forest of olive trees. The tourists will see, at the beginning, the first olives trees, which will seem to them poor. They are placed rather tight, badly aligned and hardly different from those which they could see elsewhere; they are oldest, going up at the beginning of the 19th century, before being given the current methods, but they will observe soon a change: the trees are spaced wider until they are about 25 meters apart and are ordered in rigorous rectilinear rows; they are trimmed, taking an extraordinary appearance of vigor and the traditional shape of enormous balls.

As far as the eye can see in continuous lines the greenish-grey trees are profiled on the yellow and red subsoil. No clearings, nor villages, nor even of detached houses. The spectacle is imposing and unforgettable.

Excursion with Thyna - Thyna is 12 km to the south of Sfax. One can reach it by the road and the Gafsa railway. A Roman necropolis visible there reminds one that in this point of the coast had been located a large city which was, in the year 23 of the Hegira, conquered by the Louata tribe. They themselves were driven out by bands of plunderers which destroyed everything following the Arab practice, of razing to the ground. The Louata who were driven out of Thyna took refuge some in Malta, the others in Louza where they are still.

The archaeologists who visited these ruins recognized among them the vestiges of an amphitheatre and a fortress of great dimension which seems to prove that the city held an important place in ancient Tunisia. The beautiful mosaics which decorate the municipal Museum of Sfax, the halls of the Town hall and several rooms of this building come for the majority from Thyna. A lighthouse rises at some distance from the Gabes road, in the middle of the ruins. It is a tower of great size, 50 meters high, which indicates to the navigators who have just sailed round the Kerkennah islands the road to be followed to gain the port of Sfax.

The Fesguias and Nasrias – Outside of the city one can visit the *fesguias* and *nasrias*, tanks and cisterns which, formerly, supplied water for the population of Sfax. Neglected by the townsmen since the sources in Sbétitla now send their water to us, the *fesguias* and the *nasrias* are used only by the indigenous inhabitants of the suburbs of Sfax. The *fesguias* are, as we have just said it, of immense tanks originally intended to collect water from the Wadi Aquareb when abundant rains make it run. One of them was built approximately two centuries ago; the other more recently; they can each contain 20,000 cubic meters of water.

As for the Nasrias, it is on approximately two hectares, several hundreds of cisterns, with an average capacity of 15 cubic meters each. Surrounded by walls, these cisterns, which number exactly 597, receive water from the sky, consumed mainly by the suburban population.

They are pious foundations made by rich Arabs; they are maintained by the City and constitute a most interesting tourist curiosity. Other groups of cisterns, of less importance than the nasrias, are also spread along the roads leading to the gardens surrounding the city.

Excursion in the Kerkennah islands - This walk is very interesting for fishing enthusiasts and the seaside stroll. The Kerkennah islands, where Hannibal took refuge at one time, and which were under the Roman emperors a place of deportation, emerge, to the north-east from Sfax, from a sand bank dangerous for navigation, which obliges the steamers to make a log turn to the south and which required warnings everywhere by a system of luminous buoys. There is a question of digging a channel between the Kerkennah islands and the mainland to avoid these disadvantages.

The two principal islands are Gharbi ("West") and Charqui ("East"). The point nearest to the coast, Sidi Youssef on Gharbi island, is only 20 km from Sfax.

These islands are cultivated and planted with rather many palm trees. But the population, of approximately 9,000, lives especially from the fishing of sponges and octopuses which Kerkenniens sell off at the market in Sfax.

It is to be noticed that the Kerkennienne people, one of most industrious of Tunisia, differs from the other indigenous races by features which indicate very diverse types, Spanish, Norman, Sicilian mixed with the Arab race.

The assignment of the islands, under the ancient regimes, as place of exile for the women and the men who had attracted the ire of the authorities in the large cities, is perhaps not strange to this modification of the race.

To go to Kerkennah, one uses small sailing ships which reach the island into two or three hours by a good wind, of 24 or 48 hours if the wind is contrary. It is a chance to take.

Sfax, by the evidence of its commercial and industrial activity, by the courageous effort of its colonists, as much as by the originality of its native city and the beauties of its monuments, deserves to attract and retain the tourist, who will acquire on a visit to the city and its surroundings a full and beneficial harvest of documentation and will find an inexhaustible source of artistic interest.

Moreover, we propose to reconsider at greater length the tourist curiosities of our city and its beautiful area.

We will also speak about the picturesque territories of the south, their mines of phosphates, their marvelous oases, of all that would be, in the end, likely to interest the visitor.

By the creation of a special heading "Tourist Notebook" (lit: *Le Carnet du Touriste*) which started to appear in our columns a few days ago, we will achieve the goals that we propose, which is to make known the Tunisian South and to make a tourist centre of it.

Mr. PERRIOLLAT Director

(*) In other words natives, i.e. the inhabitant of Sfax.

The BERBERS: Populations of North Africa which speak one of the Berber dialects (masmuda, sannaja, zanata): Morrocans, Algerians (Kabyles) Tuaregs. After fifteen centuries of Arabisation, the Berber element has been maintained in the mountains and the deserts.

INDIGENE: Who was born in the country in question = aborigine, native

Extract from: THE PETIT ROBERT

Whereas our birthplace is scorned by tourist operators, which, between us, could be worse when one sees certain condition of hotels in the areas known as tourist, it is refreshing to see that some, long ago, had discovered the beauty of our area and the still famous "forest of olive-trees" before it had yet reached its current size.

Provided that the major projects necessary for improvement will eliminate the defects while keeping the unforgettable charm intact.