

LA TUNISIE ORIENTALE  
D'APRÈS J. DESPOÏS

The detailed study of eastern Tunisia, which began in 1913 with the thesis by Monchicourt on the Upper Tell <sup>1</sup>, followed by that of Bonniard on the Northern Tell <sup>2</sup>, ends with the important and remarkable work of Jean Despois on eastern Tunisia <sup>3</sup>.

The set of studies includes two regions, the low Steppe and the sea coast, the Sahel, the borders of which, irregular, are not fixed by nature. The same climate prevails, with only 300 mm of rain; Atlantic depressions, spilling all their humidity over the mountains of the Tell, bring NW winds which, in descending S, bring the dry winds of a *foehn*. The steppe has rain only through some secondary depressions from the N which having crossed the Sahara, move slowly and with little wind are stationary in winter over the Gulf of Gabes. During the summer, however, the benefits of coastal breezes from the E and NE, producing the haze that makes the atmosphere difficult for men and beasts, but which is beneficial to plants.

Regarding the arid degradation this climate has not changed since ancient times. The Roman arch bridges are adapted for current floods. It explains the extent of the *endoreism* in the plains of Kairouan and Enfida, where the wadis coming from the Dorsal spread their floods.

The clay soils that cover these depressions are wheat lands, but are hostile to the olive tree. The sandy soils of aeolian origin, which dominate among the basins, these are best able to provide the plants with the humidity they store.

The coastal area of the Sahel is contrasted by its tree crops, its rows of olives, its orchards, gardens stretching to the open steppe, both a land route for herds of sheep and land for tilling in its clay depressions. This is not a physical unit, a natural region, but a human region whose boundaries have changed over the centuries, now crowded with 100 to 200 inhabitants per square kilometer.

It does not appear that the country was been dedicated to the olive tree before Roman times. It produced grain in the vicinity of ports. The settlements were grouped nearby. Caesar mentions only *oppida* or *castella*. This concentration is explained by the insecurity due to nomadism and the restlessness of the Numidians. Only at the end of the second century, under the Pax Romana, did the olive spread and the population were dispersed in *qillae* - hamlets - and farms.

It is not the Muslim invasion of the seventh century <sup>4</sup> so much as the rush of the Hillal and Soleim Bedouin in the eleventh century that ruined the Roman work leaving [134] to this day the contrasting nomadic and sedentary lifestyles.

---

1. Ch Monchicourt, *The Region of the High Tell in Tunisia* (El Kef, Tebourzouk, Mactar, Thala), thesis Letters, Paris, Librairie Armand Colin, 1913, vol. Octo, 487 p.

2. F. Bonniard, *Northern Tunisia, The Northern Tunisian Tell*, thesis Letters, Paris, Geuthner, 1934, vol. Octo, 534 p.

3. Jean Dubois, *Eastern Tunisia, The Sahel and the Low Steppe*, Publications of the Faculty of Arts of Algiers, series II, vol. XIII, Paris, Societe d'Editions Les Belles Lettres, 1940, 1 vol. large Octo, 616 p., 39 fig., 20 Pl. phot.

4. The invasion of the seventh century has confused the routes passing to the east and has created a halt and a caravanserai at Kairouan.

Thanks to their walls, to the resources of the sea, to piracy and and the Mediterranean commerce, the towns of the Sahel have been able to shelter sedentary populations and to

preserve themselves for future expansion. Besides, the life of the nomad is based on herding sheep, a farming that led elsewhere without foresight: the native drinks the milk from his sheep by sacrificing lambs, losses may reach 80% of that produced. The rallying point after the harvest and during the winter is the enclosure made of prickly pears that furnish a winter fodder and whose fruits complement the family provisions. It is there that their grain stores are hidden. In summer, the nomads move north toward the Friguia (Enfida and the plain of Tunis), for the harvest.

They return to their enclosures in the Steppe in August for picking prickly pears. They will then hire themselves out until January in the Sahel for the olive harvest, and then they head south to the oases to exchange their sheep and wool for dates.

The development of the Sahel, based on the extension of the olive tree, is a recent development, but which preceded the French government, due to the alienation of state property (*Henchir*)<sup>1</sup> and due also to being allowed to make use of the property of pious foundations (*habous*) on which they could, by paying a fee per head of beast or per olive tree, graze, sow or plant. We have concentrated, in alienating the Beylical property, on proceeding with the registration of land and providing it with capital.

---

1. Property that is land confiscated from the tribes that had revolted

The European settlers have largely benefited from this development; They cleared and planted olive trees by the system of complementary leases (*mgharsa*). During the ten to fifteen years required for the development of the trees, the indigenous farmer practices intercropping, he sows seeds, keeps half the crop if the cost of the seed has been advanced to him, three-quarters if he provided it himself. After eleven years, intercropping is prohibited. Around the age of twelve to fifteen years, the trees being in full production, the sharing takes place: the tenant farmer, the *mgharsi*, keeps about 200 olive trees.

The variety of olive cultivated is the *Chemlali* that gives small and oval fruits, containing 75 per cent pulp, which makes 20 to 35 per cent of oil. Between 30 and 60 years, the olive tree of the Sahel is in full production and gives 4-6 decalitres providing the a fifth of olive oil by weight.

The cultivation is practiced in two ways. In areas where the atmospheric moisture is sufficient, a catchment area (*Meska*) is set up, two times larger than the olive tree, which collects water, distributed through channels to the olive trees laid out in terraces (*mankas*) that retain the embankment of earth lined by a hedge of cactus (*tabias*). The trees are spaced 12 to 15 m apart. In the Sfaxien region, it is necessary to have recourse to *dry farming*, the space between the olive trees (24 m in every direction), and rid the earth of couch grass by a kind of harrowing using the *maacha*, a blade 60 cm. wide, drawn by a camel, which digs 7 to 8 cm. into the soil, and cuts the roots of the quackgrass.

To the olive tree is added, on the outskirts of Sousse and Sfax, to a radius of 12-15 km. the garden. For irrigation, water is drawn with the *dalou* in [135] a cowskin *guerba* with a capacity of 30 to 50 L., which is emptied into a basin. It is between Sousse and Monastir on the beach strip that the most beautiful gardens prosper, cultivated with chickpeas, beans, barley, carrots, peppers, tomatoes, cucumbers, zucchini, melons, watermelon, fennel, peach, apricot, citrus. The dry farming area (*Djenane*) of Sfax is dominated by orchards of almond, figs, apricots.

Olive groves and gardens are not enough, there should be Sahelian cereals. On the communal lands (*henchir*), barley is cultivated or, from the beginning of October, the land is leased by auction by the *media* of 10 hectares in the clay depressions of the Enfida.

This culture gives rise to a true nomadism, the Sahelian leaves with his son, equipped with a *guitoune* (a rectangular two-sided tent) or a hut of removable branches, covered and wrapped in a mat, the *kib*. Wheat cultivation is done after flooding by the diversion of water from the wadis that run into these depressions.

Despite these resources, the Sahel remains overcrowded (100 to 200 inhabitants per square kilometer). Most of the natives have from 10 to 50 olive trees and work as farm laborers and have to do their utmost, peddling seasonally, their women weaving carpets.

But the olive tree remains the essential resource. It is into olives that they place the savings gained in trade. The broken kernels from which the oil is extracted are used as fuel. The cake can feed the camels. The inferior oil goes into the manufacture of soaps. The olive wood is used for heating and in the construction.

Olive fever has conquered the nomad. In the steppe, he also plants olive trees, surrounds his plantation by a moat, the embankment of rejected earth bristles with a *zerriba* of dead branches from jujube trees, until the hedge grows cacti. But the extension of tree cultivation is detrimental to livestock farming.

The habitat of the nomad, the tent, has also become fixed, the small fly tent, the *guitone*, or the *kib*, the *gourbi* of the poor, tends to be replaced by the hut of stone covered with olive branches and thatch.

In the Sahel, the habitat has long remained concentrated for safety reasons since the eleventh century. The streets end in cul-de-sacs which are easy to barricade in the event of invasion. The house is blind, deprived of windows on the street. The reception room is isolated from the house. The key piece, the *maghzin* serves as storeroom. No stable, a simple shed to shelter animals.

A terrace onto which the winter rooms and summer rooms open, a court on the first floor.

The habitat is scattered again with rediscovered safety, but the olive tree does not accept men who only work half the year.

The towns that spread along the coast make their living from oil. Sousse (28,500 inhabitants) owes it his trade. It exported 102,000 quintals. The port provides two-thirds of the export of the alfa from the high steppe. But it is above all Sfax which is the real capital of the South (43,000 inhabitants). The port exported twice the amount of Sousse (206,000 quintals); four-fifths of the people have olive trees. Its rise dates from the time of the opening of the railway from Gafsa (1897). Sfax is the port from where phosphates are exported (1.2 million tons in 1934 and 1938). [136] A superphosphate plant has been installed there. Connected by rail to Tozeur in 1913, it is also the port of dispatch for the oases (3,300 quintals of dates). The Sfaxien was born a businessman, a rival of the Jew, the inheritor of the Punic spirit.

Oil therefore supports the economy of the Sahel, and it is the olive tree that has changed the character of life in the steppe, to the detriment of livestock, but the oil has to compete with petroleum for lighting, and with peanut oil as food.

Urban life is grafted onto the olive cultivation in the country, but the colonization front has reached its limits.

Paul Marres.

Retrieved on March 18, 2011, from

[http://www.persee.fr/web/revues/home/prescript/article/geo\\_0003-4010\\_1945\\_num\\_54\\_294\\_12906](http://www.persee.fr/web/revues/home/prescript/article/geo_0003-4010_1945_num_54_294_12906)