

## **The Grand Mosque of Sfax**

(Excerpt)

Article published in the « Diaspora Sfaxienne » no. 17, of June 1983

To interrogate a monument is undoubtedly a business as complex as the interrogation of a suspect. It is necessary to beat about the bush for a long time before approaching it openly and little by little tightening the mesh of a narrowing net; it is necessary to propose unlikely alternatives in order to disentangle the truth. It is necessary, unremittingly, to return to the starting point and return on a new track, it is necessary to make the witnesses speak, weigh the value of their deposition, and confront their accounts, to disentangle the fabrications, collect the smallest indicators which could reinvigorate the investigation while being constantly suspicious of logic, the apparently obvious and sources of multiple errors and, when one believes that one has reached the goal, when the confessions have been obtained, one should ask oneself whether one has really arrived at the truth.

The Grand Mosque of Sfax has a long history. it has experienced many local dramas, it has been the dumb witness of so many events that sometimes affected it to the core that it seemed determined to seal up its past, like an old woman folded up on herself poking some burning brands into the ashes on the hearth, her eyes lost in the flickering of the flames as they revive memories, her own history. She reviews it unceasingly and unconsciously reorganizes it; but the good days return and the worthy monument, restored by skilful hands, recovers its taste for life; it records in stone what Paul Valéry would undoubtedly have called “the remains of the future”, preserving for the generations to come the things to which the witnesses of the time were often indifferent... What everyone sees interests nobody.

To make the mosque speak, it is necessary to probe its walls, to excavate the ground to which it clings, it is necessary to decipher what some pious hand believed good to inscribe in the marble, assertions which will defy time and confuse the writers of history. It is necessary to read the accounts of the authors who visited it at various times, a poor record indeed. The medieval traveler, en route for pilgrimage, only devotes a few lines to it. For him, it is a post, a stage on the long journey which, from Andalusia or Morocco, does not end until this fascinating Mecca. One chronicler, a little more forthcoming, especially wants to display his scholarship. To our horror, he mixes his sources, which he reads poorly, or fantastic accounts which come to him from a verbal tradition unceasingly enriched by new miracles. The worst is the panegyrist licensed with the pay of a little prince with evil ambitions.

Are we sure of the birth date of this venerable monument? the oldest accounts, whose agreement, undoubtedly, is only the reflection of successive plagiarism, nevertheless allow us think that the most probable date would be close to 850... A delightful old man, who died in 948, at the age of 80, whom one imagines quavering [calame] with a grating speech, informs us sententiously that what he recounts is the fruit of an erudite compilation of texts, from which he cites some authors, adding (unfortunately for us) that he abstains from citing those (sources) which were well known! ... Work that out!

850? ... but then a question emerges. Sfax, at this date, has been a Moslem city for more than 150 years. For a century and half, some very pious Moslems, the newly-converted majority all the more convinced since Islam (it is one of its merits) does not exert proselytism; pious Moslem, therefore, carry out each day their five obligatory prayers, most probably with much zeal and punctuality. No text, no testimony, no other index to help us imagine where and how these believers fulfilled their prayers. Undoubtedly, at the beginning of the conquest, they had built some modest oratories, but which the road roller of History has crushed into oblivion, the most probable assumption.

But another assumption (much more adventurous, certainly) haunts us. It rests on the Moslem tradition which is frightened of any innovation not defined or accepted by the law (that is to say the Koran, the sayings of the prophet Mohamed and his actions reported by his companions, and finally the judgements of the most eminent doctors of the faith). By a kind of corollary, anything is lawful, in the long story of Islam, that has been able to create a precedent, that is to say an innovation approved by the *oulémas*. It is on these concepts and "precedents" existing in Syria and Spain, two high-places of expanding Islam, that our argumentation is based. In Syria, the Arab or Greek or Latin texts inform us, Moslems and Christians shared the same place of worship, the church of Saint John the Baptist of Damascus (towards 635); this state of affairs would continue until 705, the time when the Moslems repurchased the church, and demolished it to build the Grand Omeyade Mosque.

In Cordova, Moslems and Christians did similarly, from 715 to 785, sharing the church of Saint-Vincent, until an arrangement made it possible for the Moslems to compensate the Christians and demolish the church to build in its place a Grand Mosque. Other cases of this kind are quoted elsewhere but the silence is complete on what may have occurred in North Africa, where the oldest Islamic monument is the Grand Mosque of Kairouan, founded in 670 (a very rough building which was rebuilt several times before taking its final aspect around 836). Many Christian communities remained in Tunisia (they were to disappear only around the 12th

century) and undoubtedly many churches from the Byzantine still existed that we do not know about.

Of course, a serious historian could not build assumptions on such vague indications, but a dreamer can undoubtedly let himself also dream sometimes, he is not writing for a learned assembly, punctilious, and rightly so; so then, let us dream together... just between ourselves.

One of the facades of the Grand Mosque of Sfax, the most beautiful, has fixed on it a re-used marble plaque which it offers to all who regard it. This witness of another age represents two peacocks, one on each side facing in the middle a basin from which escape two tendrils loaded with grapes, surrounded in spirals, between which small birds flutter. In the upper band of the framework is positioned an inscription, a text written in Greek, of which, unfortunately, we do not have the beginning. What does this message say? "Grant virtue and joy to the company that decorate this worthy residence devoted to you".

And if this vestige collected by Moslems (and honoured by them) came from a vanished Byzantine church? And if, by chance, this ancient monument was erected on the actual site of the current mosque? The permanence of holy places is so familiar that one could set it up as a rule...

Taparura and its Roman and then Byzantine ramparts, occupied, pretty closely, the old city, locked up in its ramparts, which we see today. The old street of the Bey, which goes from Bab Diwan to Bab Djebli, no doubt occupies the main axis of the ancient city; a transverse axis, still distinct, divided this vast rectangle into four and, at the point of meeting of the ways, the forum was erected, and probably the basilica which, in the Byzantine period, would have faced a Christian building. No obvious proof has so far been produced to support such an assumption but the plan that we have just traced is that of all Roman cities.

The mosque does not tell us anything of this past that it nevertheless evokes, and with the chroniclers remaining hopelessly dumb, only the ground could resolve this enigma if one could and if one wanted to question it. Therefore let us bathe in ignorance which at least has the merit of allowing all deviations... May Clio forgive us! ...

The Moslems always liked to inscribe in stone (marble, generally) any work undertaken for a good cause by a generous patron in need of the salvation of his soul. This is done all the more readily since Arab writing, under the chisel of a calligrapher is, without doubt, one of most elegant of all those that we know. Only the ancient Egyptians were able at the same time to benefit from the written word both for his decorative value for that of the transmitted message. Would to heaven

that the Arab writers had been so forthcoming! ... This is not the case, of course, but we can content ourselves with the very precious signs entrusted to stone in an angular writing, without vowels, without diacritics markings which would facilitate the reading of it, a message esoteric, understood only by initiates.

To the left of the plaque of the peacocks, a rectangular marble panel informs us, after the expected praises to Allah, "Master of the creatures", that "its construction" was completed in the year 378, which corresponds to the year 988 AD. The text was hammered with the obvious intention of obscuring the name and the titles of the pious giver, the author of this construction.

Here is a half-consent that it should be accepted, for want of anything better, but which deserves some consideration.

We are far from the assertions collected by the Arab authors who are unanimous in giving the date of the foundation of the monument (850 AD.) No other inscription comes to corroborate their account. Again, we will ask archaeology to come to our help and see if it will answer in a completely fortuitous way.

The curious minaret that we see from everywhere around, a pretty square tower on three floors, ornately decorated with ornamental inscriptions, is dated by a marble plate sealed inside the upper part. No date is detectable there, certainly, but the style of the writing could not mislead a specialist. It is precisely that of the inscription 378 = 988. One can thus deduce that the current tower was built at the same time as the rest of the building.

However, some recent restoration work in the base of the minaret revealed that what we see is only one kind of cover, a stone wall which came to be plated on an older tower, which confirms surveys carried out further up. Some vestiges of writing appeared above the door; they are illegible, but the style of the writing, yet again, could not embarrass a specialist: it is from the 9th century and one can then consider that the inscriptions mentioned previously must date from a very important piece of restoration, even a recasting of the building, but not its primitive foundation.

The ambiguity (undoubtedly not as innocent as it can appear) of terms employed in Moslem epigraphy means that the same word can mean "to found", restore or increase. The Arab language can however establish these distinctions very clearly, but that evades the wealthy founder who wants to see his name appearing to the eyes of History, accompanied by all his merits.

The minaret thereby brings us a second admission, which is in formal contradiction to the first, but which, undoubtedly, leads us in the way of truth.

This one, a local, well-known chronicler of the Sfaxiens (he lived in the 18th century) claims to know it well. The man only has a rather poor knowledge of historical chronology, but he read the medieval authors whose names he cites and who are known to us by other ways. In short, he confirms the date of 850 and, starting from the documents which he cannot classify, he recalls the history of the Grand Mosque. The greatest interest of his narration, is that he a witness to the last great work, a considerable enlargement which would in fact double the surface of the building, and he could see, under the pickaxe of the diggers, the foundations of a much older building appear, which, according to him, could only be those of the first mosque. The restoration of the 18th century would then have restored to the building its earlier dimensions; this appears completely probable to us, because then the whole building finds a perfect balance of the masses which it had lost during the work of 10th and 11th centuries.

A third plate with inscriptions is on the beautiful frontage of the mosque and this one is intact. It carries the name of the "founder", Abou Mansour Hammou Ibn Mellil, and a date: 468 = 1085. The mystery of the mutilation of the preceding inscription is then cleared up. Abou Hammou Ibn Mellil is well-known to us: he was a kind of independent kinglet, at the time when Tunisia was experiencing a painful period of its history in complete political anarchy. This character has chosen to erase the name registered on the first place, which, with a religious formula (it has also been hammered), recalled too strongly the Shiites, the Orientals known under the name of Fatimids, who had reigned in Kairouan from 908 to 970, and who had left for Egypt to establish Cairo. In 988, Tunisia was under the supervision of Shiite Egypt ... In 1085, on the other hand, many events had occurred, including the rupture with Cairo and the invasion, in successive waves, of Arab nomads sent by the Caliph of Cairo to punish the Tunisians. It was a dreadful drama for the country. Abou El Mellil was orthodox, he caused all the vestiges of a detested Shiism disappear naturally from Tunisia. Undoubtedly had he been able to completely remove the inscription, and especially to erase the date of it, why did he not do it? ...

You see, a stone can say many things when it is interrogated, but it never completely delivers its secrets.

Other inscriptions have been found elsewhere, in particular in the court and the niche of orientation, the mihrâb, which reveals us the date of its construction: 1172, that is to say 1758-59, which corroborates the account of the Sfaxien author (Ibn

Magdiche, not having named him). In short, the history of the monument could be held in a few words:

1. In the 9th century, its construction is decided; the constructed building will occupy approximately: 50 X 45 meters;
2. At the end of 10th century, it will undergo a very important restoration, even a total recasting, which will reduce half its surface;
3. In the 18th century, a considerable campaign of work will restore to the Grand Mosque its initial dimensions.

These events are very much the same as the accounts of the historiographers, and undoubtedly with more accuracy, translate the broad outlines of the history of Sfax during the Moslem period.

A mosque of 2000m<sup>2</sup> in the 9th century is an indication of obvious prosperity; one does not need much imagination to know the nature of this wealth: it is, initially, ensured by the olive-tree. The work of Magon, the agronomist of antiquity, survived the misfortunes of the Romans, the problems of the Vandals, and the rout of the Byzantines. In the 9th century, Tunisia knew one of its most brilliant dynasties. This is the time when very beautiful mosques were built almost everywhere. In addition to the Grand Mosque of Kairouan, we know the Grand Mosque of Tunis (Zitouna), the Grand mosque of Sousse, and still others. This is the time when, for the palaces of the sovereigns, the fine basins of the Aghlabides were built in Kairouan. In the suburbs of the capital (Kairouan), true satellite towns were founded, whose splendour is praised by all the travelers. The ramparts of the cities are restored, that of Sfax rebuilt, fortifications are raised throughout the coast, of which we know only the ribat of Sousse, that of Monastir and that of Maharès (the current mosque). There were forts of this type every forty kilometers! Sousse had its lighthouse, a tower which still exists.

An Andalusian “geographer”, who wrote in 11th century, using accounts from 10th century, has written:

“Sfax, a coastal town surrounded by a wall and containing a great number of souks, several mosques and a cathedral mosque. The wall of Sfax is built of stones and bricks. This city has baths, caravanserais, extensive suburbs, numerous fortified country houses, several castle-forts and some ribats, located at the edge of the sea... Sfax, in the center of a forest of olive-trees, the oil that is manufactured there is exported to Egypt, Sicily, Europe... traders arrive there from all directions, with large sums of money, that they employ in the purchase of oils and other

goods. In art of pressing cloths and giving them gloss, the inhabitants of Sfax follow the methods employed in Alexandria, but they excel the inhabitants of that city. ”

Another “geographer”, also Andalusian, but who, in the 12th century went to settle in Palermo, called by the Norman king Roger II, presents a rather different scene, although his account begins by evoking the wealth of the city, where one finds the echoes of the preceding note, but he adds: “this city was taken by the great king Roger II in 545 (1148); although it is still well populated, its prosperity is no longer what it was before.”

Arab historians give us more specifics on the misfortunes of the area beginning from the second half of the 11th century; we know from them that all the back country suffered considerably from the arrival of the hordes of plundering Arab nomads from Egypt. The great historian Ibn Khaldoun does not hesitate to compare this invasion with a flight of grasshoppers. These invaders plundered the peasants, and, horror! , they cut the olive-trees to make firewood of it! ... The country folk then retreat towards the cities of the coast. A sudden revolt shakes Sfax. A military chief, the governor of the city, takes the head of the uprising; it is this Hammou Ben Mellil whose name is engraved on the wall of the mosque. He declares himself independent of the sovereign of Kairouan, who has taken refuge in Mahdia and practically cannot leave it again. Hammou will naturally have to satisfy the nomads and to pass them a tribute.

Anarchy leaves the country without forces to come against the foreigner. Sfax, like Jerba, Mahdia, and many other cities of the coast, will fall into the hands of the Norman from Sicily.

Certainly, the walls of the Grand Mosque do not say all of that in precise terms, but the testimony of the inscriptions is far from being negligible.

In 988, it is still the era of prosperity announced by our Andalusian “geographer”. The worthy monument has been restored, it has been embellished, probably even entirely rebuilt, but by reducing half its surface for unknown reasons, since the quality of construction excludes any idea of decline. On the other hand, the prayer room is enlarged considerably, to the detriment of the court. Although more reduced as a whole, the new building offers more place for the faithful.

In 1085, Hammou Ben Mellil marks his difficult reign by other work on the Grand Mosque, but we are unaware of the nature and the importance of this intervention. Admittedly, the history of Sfax does not stop after the transitory conquest of Roger II, but the stone keeps silent for a few centuries, obliging us to have confidence in the chroniclers, who, very fortunately, are numerous and

sometimes of high value. Archaeology will not learn any more until the work carried out in the 18th century and commemorated in the niche of the new *mihrab*.

It is time to look at what the centuries have preserved. Observe therefore this Eastern facade, directed towards the market place, the most beautiful of the frontages known in Tunisia, with its decoration of niches, its arcades which undergird rows of notched borders and connect the horizontal lines. On the broad benches of masonry which interrupt the passages leading to the doors, merchants of shoddy goods, street hawkers and peasants bringing farm products were formerly installed. Imagine there the market days, this undulating movement of brown "kadrouns", with the undertow of white burnous or djellabas, these agitated turbans, peaks on the top of a chechia reddened with kermes, the small bouquet of jasmine slipping towards the ear, these calls of the salesmen in the auction, goods on the shoulder, threading quickly between the groups, stopping to pass a bid, shouting an amount, breathless, returning, setting out again, untiring, and the red of pimentos on a green bed of sweet peppers, these onions spread out, dishevelled carrots, lying under the indifferent eye of the Byzantine peacocks, deep in their eternal bliss, these discussions punctuated with curses, this laughter, these slaps on the shoulder, those indefinable odors of spices which prick the nostrils, the scent of grease, filth, olives, and from time to time, wrapped in his long black coat, his head wrapped in a flat, immaculately white turban, a learned character, threading the passage towards the holy place, without diverting his glance, head inclined, already contemplating his message or his confession which no intermediary will receive, besides the Prophet Mohamed (may Allah bless him!).

The cold mornings of winter bathed in humidity, the benches empty, quiet, count the rare shadows bundled against the cold, slipping into the street towards the covered souk nearby, leading to Bab Djebli. But at midday, from the top of the minaret with three levels, the sound voice of the muezzin cries out for the third time since daybreak: "there is only one God, Allah, and Mohamed is his Prophet! ... Come to prayer! ..."

Over the four points of the compass, the thousand-year-old call rings out, begun again by the echo from the prayer rooms of the district, life is suddenly revived, the deserted benches see them filing in one by one, then soon in groups, the theory of serious men channeled by the streets towards the open doors that absorb this human flood.

Inside the sanctuary, no jostling. One is distributed without being aware, without choosing a preferred place, any place is sacred and nobody would dare to claim a place which, by some favor, would be reserved for him. Only the Imam knows where he must be placed. He is there, in front of the *mihrab*, his back to the faithful ones aligned behind him, between the forest of columns, a forest of ancient columns, collected in the “quarries” offered by the ruins of Thyna, the large Roman city: cylinders of veined marble capped with beautiful capitals, mostly composites (Byzantine period), supporting large Moorish arches. A veritable network of wooden ties ensures the solidity of the whole. Through some stained glass windows, placed high, the sunlight of midday enters, lighting up the rear wall, which indicates to the faithful the direction of Mecca, leaving the remainder of the vast room - filled with the continuous buzz of the voices in unison - in a half-light favorable for meditation and prayer.

Contrary to our cathedrals which rise towards the sky, in these gigantic naves which direct the enthusiasm of the believers towards the Almighty, the mosque extends horizontally. It invites humility, it demands prostration. The faithful, upright, turned towards the sacred wall, look directly in front of them, then they bend, they kneel, they bow, embracing the ground. All the thoughts converge towards this blessed place between them: Mecca and its mysteries. In the first line, the Imam (who is not a priest) leads the prayer. A wise man and of good council, he was selected for his moral qualities as much as for his knowledge. Leaving the mosque, he is only one of many, lost in anonymity...

Formerly, the Grand Mosque was the place where teaching was given at the secondary level. Prior to this, one should have learned the Koran, reading it and writing it in the district prayer rooms, or in the village mosque, under the cane of a Master who knew no other pedagogy than the “by-heart”, sung in unison. At the Grand Mosque, one learned, in addition to religious science (the seven readings of Koran, hadiths, sources of Koranic law), the classic literature. The best students were prepared at the great University of Tunis, the famous Zitouna, where a higher education was given and where famous scientists taught... And at that time, every Friday, it was the meeting place, a kind of forum where the official news was diffused, orders from the Head of State, those of the local governor, mobilization, victories; from the top of the pulpit, the preacher it could launch an anathema against enemies. They also came for their own business, questioning, squatted on a mat, the *cadi* or a *uléma*, which, also squatted, listened to the versions of the plaintiffs attentively, meditating in silence and returning his verdict which, generally, was a piece of advice. There a plot could develop, to organize the movements of the opposition, to work out the tactics.

In the cold of the mute columns, all these risks of the history have slipped away, what they have seen leaves them as indifferent as what they see today; they shine in the half-light, imperceptively, they shine... on the head of some of them appear curious silhouettes of birds with wings hanging, like owls which wanted to be eagles, no doubt. Moslem piety has crushed their heads... It is not legal to tolerate here a competition with the work of Allah; cursed is he who claims to give life to the inanimate, at the day of the last judgment, he will have to pay for his audacity! ... And peacocks, will you say? .... Yes, but they are outside, and besides, they also no longer have heads, one of them even disappeared under the pious hammering... Curious, nevertheless... The historian is less surprised, knowing how much flexibility was enjoyed from the point of view of iconographic rigor during the reign of the Fatimids (may God curse them!). In 988, they were relatively unsurprised by these suggestive presences. Very fortunately, orthodoxy was restored, the heretics set out again towards the East, and anything that could express real life was removed from these effigies, the soul being in the head, of course. The mutilated birds remained and people paid no more attention to them, except the curious foreigner who sticks his nose everywhere! ...

A pulpit out of finely crafted wood, the only piece of furniture in the sanctuary, draws up to the right of the *minbar* on which the Imam ascends, at midday on Friday, for a sermon now broadcast across the whole city by loudspeakers. Exhortations to faith, Koranic morals, but quite often other things concerning current events, official policy. Invocation to the Almighty who has been too miserly of rain, etc.

To the side, out of the reach of glances of men occupied in their duty, a high platform which one reaches by a wooden staircase is reserved for the women. A very serious question and rather embarrassing whether or not it is legal. According to the time, according to the country, this distressing problem has never really been dealt with. Some doctors of the Faith formerly solemnly decreed that they were never to penetrate into such a holy place; others, more lax (as one would say today), are less dogmatic. They can attend the prayer, they say, provided that they are in a physiological state of purity and that their presence does not disturb the prayer of the men... But, in fact, in our Christian Middle Ages, don't we quote the anathema of savage monks who curses the satanic female for whom they deny the reality of a heart and thus the right to the sacraments? So, what do you say to that?

In Sfax, a place was provided for them (for a long time past) where they could accomplish their religious duties in conformity with the blessed word of the Koran (the voice of God), if they have no judgment of a sexual nature. But where are we today about these old taboos? The old grumpy beards, are they dead? Some

excited youth, being persuaded that God wants, for eternity, the light to come from the east, inflame passions with the hateful speech of another age... The marble columns have heard others of them! ... They emit their coldness, indifferent to the agitation of mortals, images of eternity....

At the time when Tunisians, molded in their uniform, take care of the circulation in the city streets, at a time when a civil code ensures them of rights often superior to those of women of other countries, one would think poorly of one who refuses them the right of access to places of prayer that the selfishness of men has reserved for themselves.

**But Allah is greatest and only He knows where the truth is.**

**Lucien Golvin**

**Marçais, George and Lucien Golvin. 1960. *Le Grande Mosquée de Sfax, Tunis.***