

TUNISIA

A Personal View of a Timeless Land

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Chapter VII

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The first thing you notice about Sfax – the most important thing about Sfax – is the olive. Miles before you come to the city you enter the 'Forest of Olives', a huge semicircle of more than a million acres sweeping around the city from coast back to coast. There is no interruption, not a house nor a garden nor any other tree, for these are not farms but plantations. It is capitalism applied to agriculture, impressive but monotonous.

The trees are aligned like crosses in a military cemetery, in intersecting rows that stretch as far as the eye can see. Gone are the arthritic shapes, the exposed roots, the look of iron tenacity. Here each tree is a leafy balloon floating on a uniform, footed column. Even the colour seems less faded and evanescent, no longer "the hue of distance". The branches are powdered pale yellow with flowerets, or hung with bronze fruit each on the end of a little flexible twig like bunches of cherries. Each tree is endowed with its own demesne, seventy-five feet from its neighbours, where the roots can spread without competition and grow into another tree as round and perfect as the one above. The olive trees of Sfax are optimum, like the bodies of well-fed Americans.

Near the city you pass through a smaller semi-circular belt of almonds, pomegranates, aromatic plants and flowers, which Sfax puts to commercial use too. But still the olive is king: storehouses and presses crowd the road, and the air is lubricated with the heavy, sour smell of olive oil. Some of the oil of Sfax is pure and delicious, but the industry does not rely on the table alone. The stones are pressed again and again to obtain the thick, evil-smelling stuff that goes into soap, lubricants, and God knows what other miracles of science. The roads near the city are animated with bicycles, camels, trucks, donkeys, and people. At the presses, camels and trucks jostle anachronistically to deliver their loads. The fruit is placed in flat, beret-shaped mats woven in the villages, and then into imported machinery of dazzling modernity.

Sfax is pre-eminently an economic city. Let other towns be political or holy: Sfax is a producer. In ancient times she exported olive oil and woollen cloth throughout the

Mediterranean. Stationary fisheries are staked out on the coastal shelf as systematically as the olive plantations. Boats from Greece and Sicily come in season for octopus and sponge. Tankers and freighters of all registrations pick up olive oil, salt, esparto grass, and especially phosphates, of which Tunisia is one of the world's top producers. The port has been enlarged since the War, and the depots, docks, and loading gear form a monumental suburb on the shore. The possibility of adding petroleum to the list of Sfax's exports has brought American and French exploration crews to the city.

With all this emphasis on economics, it is surprising to find the old city of Sfax the most beautiful in Tunisia. That English aesthete Ronald Firbank is said to have found it the most beautiful city in the world. Perhaps it hits harder for being unexpected. I first saw Sfax when a great part of the new city was levelled with Allied bombings. It was a stormy day. The sky looked torn in two, and the wind raised the dust from the rubble of buildings as if they had just fallen. The old city reared back from this scene of devastation, impregnable and intact, as if it would outface the trump of doom.

Even on sunny days, Sfax is clothed in authority and power. The walls are like the base of a pyramid : the curtains appear to be leaning backwards and the octagonal towers are thickest at the base. The parapet is spiky with pointed merlons, and the upper walls pierced at intervals with embrasures for cannon.

The magnificent Gate of the Diwan is actually a tunnel that turns a right angle in the deep course of the wall. Inside the walls, the density of houses seems greater even than that of Tunis, and the streets are heavy with sculptured doors and intricate mesharabiyyas. The beauties of Sfax date from many different periods : the walls were first built in the 9th century, though altered and faced with stone since; the Gate of the Diwan dates from 1306 and was restored in the 18th century; the Great Mosque is 10th century work, embellished ever since; some of the finest house fronts are of the 16th century. The style of Sfax has not relaxed or deteriorated. There is nothing soft or seductive. It is one with the rigorousness of the olive plantations, the rationale of the phosphate plants, the hard lure of gain that attracts Greek fishermen and American oil companies alike. The beauty of Sfax is the beauty of success.