

CITIES OF THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

A Historical Encyclopedia

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Sfax

Population: 340,000 (2005 estimate)

Sfax has been known for more than 2,000 years as a key port for central Mediterranean trade. For the Romans, it was grain. For the Byzantines and Abbasids, Sfax was the olive oil port. For the Ottomans, it was slaves and gold. To the French, it was land for colons establishing plantations. To Rommel and Montgomery, it was a supply base from which to invade Egypt or Sicily. Since independence, its port and phosphates works have supported the Tunisian economy but also provided a hotbed for labor unrest and political organizing.

Sfax (Arabic, *Safaqis*) is Tunisia's second city and is located on the Mediterranean coast of the olive-producing area, known as the Sahel, which extends from the Gulf of Hammamet in the north to the Gulf of Gabès in the south. Off the coast of Sfax are a group of islands called the Iles Kerkenna.

The city is located approximately 178 miles south of Tunis. The climate is mild and relatively dry, with average temperatures of 53 degrees Fahrenheit in winter and 78 degrees Fahrenheit in summer. Average annual rainfall is 7.75 inches.

The city consists of two districts or parts: the madinah and the newer colonial town of European and business construction. The madinah is surrounded by walls dating from the ninth century. Until 1832 no Europeans were allowed to enter. Many of the mosques and private houses inside the madinah are excellent examples of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century architecture, though some are considerably older.

The Great Mosque, with its lofty minaret, was built in 849 and rebuilt in 981, with modifications during the eighteenth century. Located within the madinah is a busy suq.

The site was first settled by the Phoenicians between the eleventh and ninth century BC and became part of the Carthaginian Empire. After Carthage fell to the Romans in 146 BC, the Romans called the town Taparura. Six miles to the south was another town, named Thaenae (Thina); together they were incorporated into the Roman Empire as part of Africa Proconsularis. Julius Caesar won a major battle outside the city walls in 46 BC against the forces of Cato the Younger and King Juba. More than 80,000 troops were involved in the fighting and more than sixty war elephants. During these times, Sfax was part of the commercial networks linking the Mediterranean basin and the interior of Tunisia. For the Romans, the plains of Byzacium outside Taparura produced much of the grain required by their capital city. Pliny the Elder (ca. AD 60) reported on the fecundity of the area, saying it produced yields of 100 to 1. By the fourth century, the area had been shifted to olive oil production and become the foremost oil supplier to the empire, and the city's elites accumulated great wealth and political power in Rome from this production.

The city became part of the Vandal Empire in North Africa after 439 until the Byzantine invasion in 533. With the end of Byzantine control after 656, Islam began to supplant Christianity in the urban areas. For the next 200 years, the area around Sfax was unsettled, with trade routes interrupted by nomadic tribes and by the struggles between the Arabs and the Berbers. Not until the ninth and tenth centuries, particularly under the Aghlabids, did Sfax prosper again economically.

Sfax, like Kairouan and Gabès, became an important market and manufacturing center as it lay at the end of a trans-Saharan caravan route. Slaves and other sub-Saharan commodities, such as ivory, ebony, ostrich feathers, and gold dust, were shipped via Sfax's port to other parts of the Abbasid

Empire, and the harbor filled with ships from Naples, Venice, Genoa, Pisa, and Marseilles. The city's fame as a center for the manufacture of olive oil and cloth (both cotton and woolen), and as a fishing center, continued unabated. As a reflection of its prosperity, the city's ramparts were erected in the ninth century.

Early in the eleventh century, the trans-Saharan trade began to decline, and regional commercial activity shifted toward trans-Mediterranean trade. As a seaport, Sfax benefited from this trend. Under the al-Muwahhids (1160–1227), trade with Europe was increased. Among the commodities traded in the city were salt, copper, and glass beads from Venice; wine from France, Greece, and Spain; European cloths; and local products, including cotton and woolen cloths, olive oil, coral, and pottery. Pisan and Genoese consuls lived permanently in the city in *funduqs* (two-story lodging and storage houses for visiting merchants) established for trading purposes

From the eleventh century onward, however, Europe gradually gained a stranglehold over Mediterranean commerce, resulting in the exclusion of North African Muslims from all but the most minimal participation in legitimate trade.

Autonomy from European influences was not easy. Sfax was one of the ports occupied by the Spanish between 1535 and 1574; the Jewish community in the city suffered disproportionately during this occupation. By the 1770s, Arab merchants in Sfax were still deeply involved in domestic trade within the Ottoman Empire, but 56 percent of all their shipping was handled by European flag carriers. Sfax was home to Barbary corsairs of the bey of Tunis during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, inviting retribution; Venetian ships bombarded Sfax twice in late 1785, for example. The city remained, however, a major production and trading port throughout this period. The modernizing prime minister, Khair ad-Din (r. 1873–1877) did begin a number of experiments with land reform around Sfax, handing state land to peasants for olive production.

French marines invaded Sfax in July 1881. Sfax was to prosper again economically under the French protectorate (1881–1956), despite being bombarded and pillaged by the occupation troops and later made to pay an indemnity equivalent to about a quarter of a million pounds. Under the protectorate, Sfax was one of five provincial headquarters. The French developed phosphate mining in Gafsa starting in 1896, which provided materials for the Societe industrielle d'acide phosphorique et d'engrais established in Sfax.

Moreover, olive cultivation was substantially extended. On the outskirts of Sfax, in 1892, the French established new olive plantations on the *terres sialines* (lands that were originally owned by the Siala family and returned to the bey of Tunisia in 1871). A decree of 1892 arranged for the transfer of some of these lands to Europeans or local people at ten francs per two and one-half acres on condition that plantations were developed upon them. The city's economic importance was increased by French improvements to the country's infrastructure; as a result, Sfax became linked to the rest of the country by rail. The city's present harbor was constructed between 1895 and 1897 by the French Compagnie des Ports de Tunis, Sousse et Sfax.

The city attracted French settlers and financiers who took over the olive and cotton plantations. It also attracted nomads from the Sahel, who became wage laborers. Thus, the city's population began to grow with rural in-migration; shantytowns and crime began to appear, and the labor force in the port and the phosphate mines also grew.

During World War II, Sfax was occupied by German and Italian troops. The city was General Erwin Rommel's staging point for his drive to the Nile in May 1942 (Operation Aida). British General Bernard Montgomery captured the city on 10 April 1943. The story goes that Montgomery had bet U.S. general Dwight D. Eisenhower's chief of staff a new B-17 bomber if he could take Sfax before 13 April. Eisenhower duly provided the bomber to Monty. The port subsequently was the staging point for the invasion of Sicily later in the year.

Since independence, Sfax has continued to grow economically. The city possesses the second-busiest port in the country. For most of central-southern Tunisia, the city is the most important center for exports and distribution. It is linked to all major towns in Tunisia via road and rail. The major export to pass through its port is that of phosphates brought from Metlaoui and Redeyef (in the region of Gafsa) by train. In addition, salt, seafood, and agricultural products, predominantly olive oil, are exported. The most important destination for exports is Europe, often via flights from its international airport.

Aside from a commercial port, Sfax possesses a busy fishing port, producing approximately 25 percent of the country's seafood per annum and exporting another 10,000 tons.

Sponges were a crucial export for many years. Moreover, the governorate of Sfax is an important industrial center (second only to the Tunis region). The most important manufacturing sectors are textiles and clothing, agro-industries, and mechanical and chemical industries. Sfax is also an important agricultural producer and accounts for 40 percent of national olive oil output and 30 percent of almond output. Despite the fact that rainfall in and around Sfax is lower than the average usually required for agricultural cultivation, proximity to the sea causes condensation, allowing for the cultivation of olives without irrigation.

The large wage-labor population in the city has provided a fertile ground for labor organizing and political movements. In 1956 and again in 1962, the workers at the port and phosphate mines went on strike and expressed their displeasure with national policies. In 1984, in response to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and its directed doubling of bread prices, Sfax residents rioted for four days, helping to start a nationwide uprising that forced the government to cancel the increase. In 2001 the head of the Regional Union of Workers Congress of Sfax presented a public call for greater democracy in the country.

Since the 1970s, the coastal areas close to Sfax have been developed with hotels for tourism. However, the city is geared more toward commerce and industry than to tourism. Today the Sfax Regional Development Authority seeks to attract private investment, including foreign direct investment (FDI), to the city and its governorate through investment incentives, ensuring that Sfax is part of the global economy. One way it will do that is via oil concessions. The company Eurogas has a 45 percent stake in the offshore Sfax oil and gas pool, which is expected to produce significant revenues for the city.

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