

Introduction | Sfax

Sfax is situated where the Sahel and South Tunisia meet, on the shores of a calm harbour facing the Eastern Mediterranean. Its location grants it an enormous advantage in terms of ready maritime and continental influence, whilst its orientation is turned more markedly towards the countries of Africa and the Levant than towards those of the East. With an advantageous capability of contact with the East via both sea and land, coupled with a spirit of pure dynamism, Sfax was able to become Tunisia's Gate of the Levant, political-economic circumstances permitting, such as in Thyna during the Roman era. Responding to the aims and needs of their town, the Sharfis, prestigious inhabitants of Sfax, established a collection of harbour charts in the 10th/16th century for the sailors and the merchants who desired to venture out as far as the Black Sea. Two examples from this collection can be found, one in Oxford, the other in the Paris National Library.

The commercial activity between Sfax and the Levant, upheld by intense caravan traffic, developed throughout the 12th/18th century. Its commercial pulse led to the creation of funduqs and suqs which are spread along the edge of the town's main thoroughfare. This thoroughfare links the southern gate, Bab al-Jebli, to the northern gate, Bab al-Diwan. The former, which Charles Lallemand called the Gate of the Fields, was composed of a hallway of fair depth, which led into the square in which the caravans were stationed. Bab al-Diwan, elbow-shaped in form, led directly into the mooring. Although it became isolated through the development of the suburb of namely Christians during the 12th–13th/second half of the 18th century, it remained a lively place where money-changers, merchants, porters, fishermen and beasts of burden travelling towards the port collided and mixed with intense movement.

The accumulation of capital provided favourable conditions for the development of agriculture and crafts as well as for urban growth. Outside the ramparts, the zone of gardens encircles the city. The number of burjs, summer residences, increases. Within the town, public and private monuments are: rebuilt – the funduq of the Blacksmiths; enlarged – the Great Mosque, the Mosque of Sidi Boushwaisha; restored and embellished – the Dar Jalluli and the Sidi bel-Hassen Mausoleum. The ramparts themselves are the object of particular attention.

Sfax, whilst continuing to use the same construction materials and its own architectural traditions, enriched its monuments, without exaggeration, using sculpted kadhal, painted wood and faience tiles produced in al-Andalus and Turkey. The architecture of Sfax, sober and well-balanced, reflects the taste which characterises the life of this town.

Viewed from an aeroplane, Sfax looks like an immense agglomeration, flat and squeezed in within the fabric of a spider's web. The fortified town, or medina, rectangular in form, stands out at the centre. Sfax limited itself for over 10 centuries to the boundaries of this historical centre, which was cushioned by a surrounding area of green gardens, the jnans.

In Arabic, the name "Sfax", Safaqs, derives according to popular belief from Safa – the name of the equerry of the Aghlabid Prince, founder of Sfax, and from qus – to cut. "Cut the hide of the beef in fine strips" the master would order. The strips were used to outline the edges of the town, like Carthage with Elyssa before. In reality, Safaqs is a Berber word which means gulf, belt, just like its name "Taphrura" or "Taparura" during the Roman era, a centre of commerce which was supplanted by Sfax. Through the attribution of one of these two names, Sfax and "Taphrura", it became a protected town.

In the 2nd–3rd/ beginning of the 9th century, Sfax remained a small agglomeration of merchants and fishermen farmers, huddled around a ribat. It made its entry into the history books with the construction of its ramparts and its Great Mosque towards the middle of the 3rd/9th century, under the reign of Ahmed Ibn al-Aghlab. The property developer was 'Ali Ibn Aslam al-Jibiniani, a client of the Aghlabid Princes, masters of Ifriqiya. A small village 30 km. from Sfax was named after his grandson, Sidi Abu Ishaq, a great sufi. His mausoleum, visible from the main road, is distinguished by its numerous domes.

From the 3rd/9th to the 7th/13th century, Sfax was a great market selling its oils to Italy, the Maghreb, Egypt and Syria. Its olive groves were described by Arab chroniclers as "unique" and "delicious". During this time, Sfax was also famed for its weaving, including a certain "princely moiré, made from the byssus of sea oysters". Meanwhile, it was not at all an era of calm and peace. During the 5th/11th and 6th/12th centuries, Sfax underwent again and again the challenge posed by the Hilalian invasion, and the trials of an ephemeral independence (455/1063–492/1099) under Hammu Ibn Malil, and the torment of a Norman Occupation (543/1149–555/1160). The resistance put up against this occupation, led by

Abu al-Hassan al-Feriani and his son 'Umar, left its mark in the collective memory. One of their descendants, Sidi Abu Bakr al-Feriani, remains at rest in a small mausoleum in the northern part of town, several meters from the ramparts, at the foot of the Sidi al-Lakhmi Mosque.

The Norman Occupation marked a turning point in Sfax's history. Its Jewish population – who played an active role in its Eastern commerce – sensing that the balance in the Mediterranean was about to tip over in favour of the Normans, left the town to move to Sicily.

Following the long dynastic wars that shook Ifriqiya, as well as epidemics and the resulting economic and demographic recessions, Sfax was in a state of collapse. In the middle of the 8th/14th century, its population was down to 400 households. The Sfaxians were, according to Leo the African, weavers, fishermen and sea merchants.

Although small in number, they remained active, voyaging as far as the Black Sea.

During the 11th/17th century, Sfax experienced the beginnings of a general recovery. Becoming more active within the Mediterranean, it got involved in wars of disagreement and contest with Malta. The Shaykh 'Ali al-Nuri (1052/1643–1117/1706), a knowledgeable educator who was also in the trading business as a silent partner, led and organised the struggle against the cavaliers of Malta. He is still to this day considered to be the man responsible for the Sfaxian renaissance.

In the 12th/18th century, Sfax went through a boom. Its commerce with the Levant reinforced its role as a distribution market. Between 1198/1784 and 1201/1787, it was bombarded by Venice on several occasions. At the heart of these events, occurring all along the Tunisian coastline following the defensive intervention by the Bey of Tunis Hammuda Pasha, was the breaking of a “nolis” contract by the captain of a Venetian boat which the Sfaxians had engaged for a Sfax–Alexandria journey. From the 12th/18th century onwards, Sfax moved progressively from its status as a small town to becoming the second most important town in the country. It relied on its own dynamism in order to further and structure its economy, thanks to constant, sustained work, thrift and the investment of its people. This enabled it to become a regional capital, the Port of the Steppe and of the South, renowned throughout the Mediterranean to be very active. In 1239/1824 Christians and Jews began to settle in Sfax. The town's commerce thus turned increasingly towards the

West. In 1881, in spite of savage resistance against the French Occupation, it capitulated and was submitted to a heavy war indemnity. The sacrifices endured by the town momentarily suffocated its economic vitality. Under the Protectorate, it expanded on the outside of the ramparts. Its olive groves underwent a renewed boom. Its development did not stop once Independence was gained. Today, Sfax is sacrificing its gardens and its agglomeration is growing at their expense. However, a historic area remains: the medina. This historic centre is the beating heart of the greater Sfax. A clear projection of 11 centuries of life and of civilisation, Sfax both preserves its past and steps beyond it.

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