

## The Inscriptions from Sfax

Mr. Luciani, legal interpreter in Sfaks, has just communicated to the *Revue* four inscriptions taken down by him from the walls from the Arab city. He provides the accompanying translation of it with interesting comments, to which he will allow me to add some words. But I congratulate him, initially, for having produced these texts: can he find others and be imitated by his colleagues in Tunisia?

The cities of the South of Tunisia, Sfaks and Gabès, on the *littoral*, Touzer, El-Hamma, Gafsa, in the *Djerid* and the country of Kastiliya, offer to the historian very interesting subjects of study.

From time immemorial, even under the Roman domination, but especially as from the Vandal period, then Byzantine, these localities lived almost independently vis-a-vis central government, without ties and generally in age-old rivalry with their neighbors, managing themselves, enjoying complete municipal freedom, and facing, behind their ramparts, tumultuous attacks from their semi-nomadic neighbors, or the better organized attacks of the lords of the country. The aspect of each one of these cities is unique. Those of the littoral maintain an active trade with Europe and the East; from the 10<sup>th</sup> century, Pisans have had a *fondouk*, a true consulate, in Sfaks, to speak only about this locality; too often, also, alongside the regular trade, the populations, yielding to a traditional practice, are given over to piracy...

One sees how much, in such conditions of existence, the good maintenance of the walls was necessary: on them depended safety, the security of all, the maintenance of their cherished municipal freedom and this communal independence which is one of the features of the Berber character. Also the townsmen have assigned special incomes for the maintenance of their walls. And here is what explains the sentiment which carried the reconstructors to take such care to transmit their names to posterity; this pride is not as puerile as it appears it to Mr. Luciani.

It is known that from second half of the 11th century, central Tunisia was entirely delivered over to the Arab immigrants: the Riah, initially, then Athbedj, and finally Soleim which remained the masters of the plains of these areas. The situation of our cities was not much changed, although the trade with the interior became more difficult; but, in consequence of the weakening of the authority of the Ziride princes, any political bond with the North was broken.

Although governed by primarily democratic constitutions, with a town council (Djemaa), these republics transferred local families to take and preserve their authority, which we could call executive power, and to form true dynasties.

There was, at the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century:

Beni er Rend, originating with an old family of the country, at Gafsa;  
Beni Djama, descendants of an emir of Manakcha (Riah), in Gabès;  
Beni Matrouch, in Tripoli;  
and a great number of other less important chiefs.

Sfaks appears then to have remained faithful to Zirides.

But, in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Roger II, Norman king of Sicily, benefitted from general anarchy to seize the principal ports of Tunisia. In 1144, his admiral, George d' Antioche, made himself lord of Tripoli and, in 1148, El-Mehdia. Sfaks then was attacked by the Sicilians, taken by assault, and sacked (July 1148); then a Moslem governor, representing Christian king Roger, was placed there. All the Tunisian littoral obeyed the king of Sicily, but this possession lasted just as long as the life of Roger II. After his death, revolts erupted everywhere and it was the governor of Sfaks, Abou Hacem, who gave the signal; taken along to Palermo as a hostage, he sacrificed himself, in writing to his son Omar, still in Sfaks, to put himself at the head of the rebels (1157).

But, at that time, a man of genius, Abd el Moumen, a highlander of the Moroccan Atlas, comes to complete the foundation of the powerful empire of the Almohades and to bring to the Berber race his strength and his unity. Called to Tunisia, he prepared a formidable expedition, getting under way, in 1159, beating the Sicilians on sea and on the ground, pursuing Africa and reducing to submission the cities of the interior, including Sfaks. The small dynasties are crushed; however they are not long in reappearing, and we see a descendant of the Ben Djanina in Gabes, to retake power, in 1180. Arabs, one moment driven back by the Almohades, reappear and indulge again in all kinds of excess.

Meanwhile, a member of the Almoravide dynasty, Ibn R'ania, leaves the Balearics with a group of brigands, disembarks in Bougie and is not long in threatening the Almohade empire (1185). Beaten, after various incidents, he throws himself on the Djerid, and there groups new partisans, and seizes Gafsa and Tripoli. Then he goes on to Tunisia and is made lord of Gabès. But soon he is crushed in El-Hamma by the Almohade sovereign, Abou Youssof, and constrained to take refuge in the desert, near his friends the veiled Berbers (Tuareg). It was following this long campaign that Abou Youssof decided to transport, to the coast of the Ocean, the Arab tribes of Djochem, Acem and Riah, which had been imperiled.

They were the neighbors of Gabès and Sfaks, and their places were taken, in these areas, by the Arabs of the tribe of Soleïm, particularly the Kaoub (1188).

However Yahïa Ben R'anïa, who had replaced, as chief of the revolt, his brother killed some time before, was not long in making new raids, and, in one of them, he succeeded in seizing Gabès again, from which he struck a strong contribution. Redoubling his audacity and benefitting from the revolt of the Almohad governor, he was made lord of the South-west regions and, finally, Tunis (1202-3).

With this news, En Nacer, sovereign, Almohade left Morocco and advanced with forced marches. Ibn R'anïa, evacuating the north, waited for him with all its forces at El-Hamma of Matmata, close to Gabès; but was to suffer a complete defeat, following which he had to seek a refuge in the extreme south (1207). His power was thoroughly destroyed, yet it was necessary to pursue the campaign for many more years, this being maintained by an untiring governor, Abou Mohammed, ancestor of the Hafsid dynasty.

What role did Sfaks play in this long period of civil wars? Its name is seldom met, and, while admitting that this city could not be exempted from suffering the common fate, that is to say that of Gabès, we would not be far off to believe that Sfaks knew, most of the time, [to remain with the variation].

In 1228, Abou Yahïa Zakaria, repudiating the suzerainty of El Mamoun, founded the Hafsid dynasty in Tunis, independent of the Almohade empire which broke down quickly in the midst of terrible convulsions. The Beni Ahmar, in Granada; the Beni Merine (Berber-Zenetis), in Fès, and Zeyanites or Abd el Ouadites (cousins of the preceding), in Tlemcen, going, with the Hafsids, to divide and too often to dispute the rule of Africa and Moslem Spain.

We approach the time of our oldest inscription (Sept.-Oct. 1306). Under the firm authority of the first Hafsid sovereigns, Tunisia recaptured its peace and the cities of the South had to be subjected to them. But, towards the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the power fell into weak hands; revolts erupted and the princes of the Hafsid royal family sought to wrest power; this resulted in a fracture in the empire: the Hafsides now have two capitals, Bougie and Tunis (1284). Abou Baka Khaled reigns in the first and Mohammed Abou Aïda in the second. In 1305, a new rupture burst between them, following the revolt of the commander of Constantine.

While Abou Baka Khaled triumphed over this revolt and the Ben Mozni, of Biskra, crushed a religious agitator in Zab, a prince of the royal family obtained from the sovereign of Tunis the authorization to make an expedition against the island of Jerba, which, since 1284, was a possession of Doria (1306). But it was only a feint. After a not very serious attack, he

disembarked and went to the Djerid there to wait upon events. The Arabs of this area had just proclaimed khalif a certain Othmane, son of Abou Debbous, an Almohad prince that Pierre III of Aragon had previously sent to Tripoli, by charging him with raising Tunisia. Finally, he fought in Djerid against the son of the religious agitator killed in Zab by Beni Mozni de Biskra.

Such was the situation in central Tunisia, in 1306, and we will understand without pain why the author of the inscription, or rather his recipient, is delighted to see the door in a state to be closed.

At that time, new dynasties had been formed in the cities of the South. Let us single some of them out:

The Beni Mozni, successors of Beni Roumman, in Biskra.

The Beni Yemloul, in Tozeur.

The Beni Khallaf, Nafta.

The Beni Bou Menià, in El-Hamma.

The Beni El Mekki, in Gabès, relying on Sfaks and before long Jerba and Tripoli.

The Beni Thabet In Tripoli.

In our inscription, the name of Ben Sellam strikes us, and we cannot avoid comparing it with that of Ben Moslem or Ben Selim, indicated by Ibn Khaldoun (1 [Footnote: Vol.III of the translation of Slane, p.158, 159. ]) as that of the rival family of the Ben Mekki, in Gabes.

Let us pass to the inscription of 1619 (the third). Three centuries have passed. The authority or rather the suzerainty of the Turks was substituted, in the north of Africa (except the far western Magreb), by the indigenous dynasties, as Mr. Luciani explains it. Tunis formed a *pachalik*, the seat of a triennial pasha, representing the *Porte* (the Turkish Sultan) or *Beylarbey* (bey of beys). But the real authority is in the hands of the military Republic of *Yoldach* or *janissaries*, represented by the Diwan or council, composed of Boulouk bachi and Odo bachi (captains and lieutenants), ranks through which each one passes to the more senior posts, holding it for a few months.

In 1590, the Boulouk bachi, having become unbearable by their tyranny, were surprised and massacred in Kasba of Tunis.

The Turkish soldiers, divided into 300 sections, then elected 300 deys or veterans (literally: maternal uncles), which formed the council (DIWAN) and designated one as of theirs as *dey of deys*, guard of the interests of the yoldachs, having the right of veto on the orders of the pasha with regard to the army. The dey became soon the true chief of Tunisia,

having under his orders the beys (generals) and coptan (admiral). Consequently the authority of the Turkish pasha was destroyed.

In 1619, Tunis had been ruled by the dey Youssof, son-in-law of Othmane for 9 years. This last held power for 15 years and was able to force obedience from everyone around him, to repulse the attacks of the knights of Maltek, to [develop the race], and execute many expeditions into the interior. Youssof added to the work of his/her father-in-law and concluded the peace with France. The city of Marseilles has a representative in Tunis.

The tenor of our inscription proves to us that all is changed in Sfaks: they are two Turkish chiefs, El Hadj Khelil Bou En Nacer and Mohamed Odobachi, who performed the reconstruction "*by the order of the victorious diwan.*" However, this diwan is, according to us, that of Sfaks, and not that of Tunis.

In effect, each garrison formed a diwan by means of the officers present, and this assembly ruled on all the military and political questions. As for the djemaa, it still existed near the *hakem el blad*, but its attributions were absolutely limited to the relevant local materials.

Now let us take the first inscription, dated May 15 to 25, 1646 (end of *Rebia Thani* 1056). It is worthy to draw all our attention.

One reads there that the door was rebuilt "under the reign of our lord, the very splendid sultan Ibrahim, by the care of the bouloukbachi" (sic).

Here we kindly request to Mr. Luciani to control the reading of the word Merrakchi, which appears extremely doubtful to us: 1<sup>st</sup> because an adjective of origin in general follows the name to which it applies; 2<sup>nd</sup> because it should be preceded by the article; 3<sup>rd</sup> because the name "Abd Allah" even if it applies to a renegade, is quite short.

But it is a detail. The important thing is to find in Sfaks the name of the ruler on an inscription of this kind, rising up at a time when the authority of the Porte and its representatives in Barbary was about null, for anything related to the interior administration of the country. We ask ourselves whether another example exists, apart from cities like Algiers and Tunis.

At this time, the effective power was between the hands of the *reïs* or *corsairs*. The renegade Ali Bitchenine was the lord in Algiers and had resisted the orders of the Supreme Ruler, whose envoys, charged to restrain him, after having failed to be massacred, had been rescued and collected by him.

The sultan Mourad IV, a few years before, had compelled the combined Barbary fleets to fight against the Venetians; but the admiral Capello, having surprised their galleys in the port of Velone, had taken or destroyed them almost entirely.

On the 13 November 1637 the death of Youssof dey took place, in Tunis, after a glorious 27 years reign, during which he had strictly subjected the country to his authority, including the areas of the South, and attached Jerba to Tunisia. Ozen Khoudja succeeded as *Mani*, was Dey in 1646; but Hammouda (or Mohammed) bey, chief of the troops, whose authority and the influence had become considerable under the preceding reigns, in reality eclipsed the dey. He had organized the *zemala*, in order to use the local forces, and traversed the most remote areas each year, to receive the tax and to render justice.

As for the Ibrahim sultan, in 1640 he succeeded his brother Mourad IV, and was initially occupied of the management of the war against the Cossacks of the Black Sea. But, in 1644, the knights of Malta having pushed their audacity so far as to capture an Ottoman ship carrying an officer of the seraglio and the cadî of Mekke, the sultan resolved to finish with his two irreconcilable enemies, the Order and Venice. In 1645, he crossed 80,000 men to the island of Candie and convened in Navarin the sailors of Barbary. But the *reïs* still remembered the disaster of Velone, and all refused to go there. At this point in time the sultan wanted to arrest Ali Bitchenine in Algiers, and we have said what occurred there.

Thus, it is at the time when Ibrahim sees his authority ignored in Barbary, where his envoys are ridiculed there, where he must abandon the idea of attacking Malta, in consequence of the defection of the *reïs*, that Bouloukbatchi thinks, in a little town, to place his name on an inscription of no importance!

Here is something that deserves mention. Let us hope that this delicate attention softened the bitterness of the Khakan who had been [watered] by his vassal of the Maghreb... if however he knew it.

Here we are now at the last inscription, which is from 1748. We find there the name the name of Sellami, from which one can conclude the power has returned to the hands of the former families of the country. There is not more question of sultan, Bouokbatchi, nor of Odobachi...

Tunisia had been the theatre of an important revolution: at the beginning of January 1706, Hussein-Bey, triumphing over his enemies and the deys, remained the sole power-master and founded the Beylical dynasty which still remains in Tunisia. He replaced the power of the yoldachs, *reïs*, deys, pashas and diwan, powers developed for stability and which produced only anarchy. The bey reigns and rules.

It is true that Ali-pasha, nephew of Hussein, reversed this in 1740; but it would not be long before his descendants were again on the throne.

Let us notice in this inscription the absence of designation of the authority in the name of which construction took place: "... *by the order of those that have the quality to bind or*

*loose, and the order of the appropriate authority in the town.*" Here is a formula indicating well that the author, the "*curator of the ramparts*" did not want to be compromised, having the conviction that the government was not secure, but avoiding making an issue of it. If men had always acted in this way, inscriptions would not have undergone so many scrapings and corrections!

On August 31, 1756, Ali-Bey was to be replaced by his Mohamed cousin, son of Hussein-Bey, supported by the Algerians; but already, in 1746, peace had been broken with Algiers, whose troops, supported by the bey of Constantine, had come to besiege Kef, and after some attempts had been withdrawn. Maybe in Sfaks it was felt, in 1748, that it was not entirely delivered?

Such are the reflections that the article of Mr. Luciani stimulated in me. I intended to be able to formulate them in some lines, but the subject took me well beyond that. I request forgiveness of it from the reader.

Ernest Draper

P.S. - If Mr. Luciani could collect information on the administration of the "funds of the ramparts of the city" and of its "curator" that would not fail to take my interest.