Tunis 1860-1930
The Formation of a colonial town

Introduction

The principal objective of this article is to illustrate the transformation and growth of the city of Tunis, from 1860 to 1930, during the formation of the colonial city. It was a time of economic and political dependence which was fixed definitively in 1881 through the formula of the 'Protectorate'.

The analysis focuses on the spatial organization and the evolution of the physical structure of the city, studying in particular the central city through cartographic documents of the period.

The city of Tunis at the end of the colonial period is a marked example of a two-partite city unlike the tripartite examples which — with some variations — are found all over Maghreb. To the Arab-Moslem ancient city, during the colonial period, a new city on a European model was added. Under colonial domination, two models co-existed uncomfortably in the medina-new city which was not considered to be a functioning unity; modernization, programmed by colonization, accentuated contrasts between the two parts of the city and impoverished and marginalized the historical centre. The colonial organization of the whole country provoked irreversible rural de-structuring; the rural migration towards the capital led to the growth of 'gourbis villes', under-integrated residential areas constituting the third element of this type of colonial city.

This 'polygenique' urban structure, fragmented, without balanced functioning, with its heritage of colonialism, 30 years after Independence, is central to the problems of functioning and growth of Tunis. Studies on urban history which can actively clarify present choices are required.

The Arab-Islamic city of the first half of the nineteenth century.

In 1860, the process which led the Husseinite reign to colonial dependence by the end of the century, was already well advanced. The capitalist and industrial incursions of Europe, exhaustion of public funds, an oppressive fiscal system, the Tunisian state's indebtedness by mid-century, had created the preliminary conditions leading to popular insurrection (1864) and repression on the one hand, and to the rivalry and competition between Western countries, with the definitive loss of financial autonomy and foreign appropriation of the Tunisian state apparatus through the device of the 'Protectorate', on the other.

However, Tunis in the map of 1860, appeared as a 'classic' Arab-Moslem city. The capital of Tunisia had been clearly structured since the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries during the Hafsid renaissance.

The opportunities of the region and the siting of Tunis, motivated its foundation and favoured its growth:

The Gulf of Tunis, near the channel of Sicily, offered remarkable port conditions, along ancient maritime routes between the Eastern and Western Mediterranean Sea; the hilly isthmus between the Sebkha Essijoumi and the lagoon (lake of Tunis or El Bahira) at the end of the gulf was an essential point of passage for the principal land communications of eastern Maghreb between the south-eastern regions (the Cap Bon, the maritime elevation of central and southern Tunisia), and the northern and western regions (the northern coast of the gulf, the site of Carthage, the plains of Tell Moyen, the Algerine coast).

The whole region guaranteed a favourable climate, water resources, and important agricultural and defensive potential.

All this explains why in ancient times Carthage was the first African capital of a maritime empire (IX-XI centuries B.C.), and successively one of the most important cities of the Roman world (I-VII centuries A.D.).

These opportunities explain why Tunis was founded, or rather re-founded, by the conquerors of Islam at the end of the seventh century on the interior isthmus to the west of the El Bahira lagoon, in direct contact with the sea through the lagoon.

One of the first roles assigned to Tunis by the Ommayad Caliphate of Damascus after its refounding by Amir Hassan Ibn An Noman was that of maritime arsenal, linked easily and securely to the open sea by the artificial channel of La Goulette, excavated in the littoral isthmus between the lagoon and the gulf, in the same period and by the same conquerors.

The ancient Arab-Islamic city assumed the role and functions of capital of the Tunisian territory from the twelfth century, and has always maintained this role, with alternating prosperity and decline.

The Hafsid renaissance was followed by a turbulent seventeenth century, with the Spanish conquest (Charles Fifth's expedition in 1535), and the Turkish reconquest (Sinan Pasha's expedition in 1574); at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries, Tunis found relative prosperity as the capital of a state — the Regency of Tunis — whose sovereigns were practically independent from the Ottoman empire, though they were formally Ottoman subjects and within the empire's sphere of influence.

It is the Tunis of this period which is represented in the map of 1860. Encouraged by the Bey, engineer Colin de Marseille established the plan of the city in order to study its drinking water supply from the ancient aqueduct of Zaghoun (1859-61). At the beginning of the century the city enjoyed a second and more modest period of prosperity, during which it recovered — though did not surpass — its dimen-
Plan of the city of Tunis 1860
sion of the Hafsid period.

All the elements of organization of the Arab-Islamic city are clear: the Medina, the ancient central city, completely walled by ramparts; in its centre the Jama Zitouna, the great mosque, and the surrounding area of suqs; to the West (top of the map), the contiguous Kasbah, the citadel, the princely residence and seat of power; the R'batis, ancient suburbs, grew to the north (R'bat Bab Souika) and to the South (R'bat Bab el Jazira) in the most favoured regional directions, starting from the gates of the Medina; the old territory of market gardens and semirural settlements was linked to the city, place of city-village exchange, surrounded by the incomplete walls of the ramparts.

The ancient city was founded and grew on the hilly isthmus at the end of the lake, far from its shores. It stepped in a gentle slope from east to west, down the ravine dominating the depression of Sebkha es-Sijoumi.

The territory between the city and the lake, a low-lying marshy flood plain near the lagoon, had been rejected by the founders of the Arab-Moslem city for clear reasons of land and climate; it was partly cultivated, crossed by khandaqs, channels open to the sky, discharging the city wastewaters in the lake. The remarkable element in this plain is the Promenade de la Marine: a straight road, planted with triple rows of trees, leading from Bab Bahar, (the Port of the sea), to the lake, to a small dock surrounded by the buildings of the Navy and Customs.

It is one of the most important routes of the city, as it directly relates the city to the lake and beyond, through the port-canal of la Goulette to the Gulf of Tunis and the Mediterranean Sea.

On a slightly more detailed scale, the very coherent development of an urban organization gathers elementary units of buildings in series or clusters, in a looser network of principal ways, tightly anchored to the site, linking the central area of Jamaa Zitouna to the gates and to the most important regional directions.

This urban organization is based on two different and complementary 'principal routes' (leading from the gates to the great mosque and from one gate to the other) essentially grouping the crafts and commercial activities of the suqs and the most important public services, and the 'interior nodes' — inserted in the principal network of 'passages', essentially grouping the houses: in other words, the organization of a public, economic, 'directional' space — where one passes through — and a residential, 'non-directional' space where one enters or lives.

One should underline the marked relationship between urban morphology and the typology of the dwellings, which is based on the central open space (interior courtyard, patio, wust al-dar), organizing the house and the semi-detached buildings. The central courtyard (sahn, seha) and semi-detached building also characterize the spaces of the ancient public buildings, and give coherence to the entire historical centre through a homogeneous and compact urban pattern.

Western influences of the precolonial period.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the premises for colonial domination of Tunisia were already set; but other components within Tunisian culture, were also factors. The need for political reform in the country was obvious as was the need for modernizing its structures.

Some new institutions, should be mentioned for their consequences on the evolution of Tunis:

- The promulgation of the «Fundamental Pact» (Ahd el-Amen, 1857); the political constitution inspired by the Turkish "Tanzimat", which, among other rights, allowed foreigners freedom to trade and practice crafts and the right to own real estate.

- On a more modest scale, yet with many consequences for the city, was a new administrative structure for Tunis, the municipality (1858) requiring a municipal council and espropriation regulations for public utilities.

- In the middle of the nineteenth century, a mostly barren territory extended outside the ramparts, between the ancient city and the end of the lake, marked only by the Promenade (later Avenue) de la Marine.

Yet on this territory in the second half of the nineteenth century, before the political establishment of colonialization, the first railway lines and other "modern" services were installed. These were important both for the territorial growth of the city and for the beginnings of urbanization. Related activities and vehicular traffic along the road from the city to the docks (and, through the lake, to the sea), were the catalysts in these urban beginnings.

The initiative was mostly in the hands of the European colony, settled in the Medina, around Bab Bahar, in the Place de la Bourse, and extending to the nearby streets of Ancienne Douane, Glacières and Commission.

Already before the Protectorate, the following railway lines were established:

- from Tunis to Bardo (1872), linking the capital to the small fortified city, a residence with government functions of the Husseinenite Beys since the eighteenth century;

- from Tunis to la Goulette and to La Marsa (1871-1876), along the northern shore of the lake, reaching the English (later Italian) station, to the north of Promenade de la Marine, and branching towards the dock on the lake:

- the Tunis-Algiers line (1876-1880) through the
Plan of the city of Tunis and surroundings 1882
Manoubia tunnel to the south, followed by the Ham-mam Lif line (1882), reaching the ‘French’ station, south of the Promenade, also branching towards the dock of the Marine. It is interesting to note that this line separated and isolated from the ancient city, a part of R'bat Bab ed-Djazira, which extended in the flat area in the east.

Amongst the services the following are to be mentioned:
— the new Consulate of France, built by engineer Colin according to a design by Architect Caillat began in 1862, on Avenue de la Marine;
— the Central Market, in the southern quadrant, near the old city;
— the Gas factory, for public street lighting, belonging to an English company (1874), built in the southern quadrant towards the lake;
— other services can be seen on the map.

The modernization of plants and urban services, preceded and accompanied by the modernization of institutions was, at times ambiguous if not contradictory, in its motivations and objectives. On the one hand, during this period, Tunisian inclination towards modernization proceeded on a largely, but not exclusively, Western pattern; on the other hand, European capitalist forces, aggressive towards the Tunisian state and competitive between themselves, were at work. Autonomous modernization and the beginning of colonial domination were tightly interlaced. The complex result, was the restructuring of the organization of the old city, which started in this period to loose its functions and become marginal.

Formation of the colonial city

Since 1881 Tunis — confirmed as capital of the Protectorate, connecting the principal political and economical decisions of the metropole and the country, and being the centre of re-distribution of imported goods — clearly took form as a two-partie city. Besides the ancient historical city, impoverished in its major functions, where almost all the Tunisian population lived, — was the modern city, built on a European pattern, inhabited by a foreign population, connected with the colonial government. Here the services and facilities (banks, commerce, industry and transport, head-offices and stores...) were rapidly installed.

The maps of Tunis ranging between 1893 and 1906-1909 show how in the 25-28 years, since the beginning of colonial dependence, the structure of the central newtown was already between the historical city and the lake, starting from the hill of Belvedere, organized as a public park (1896) on the north, to the old cemetery of Jellaz on the slopes of the hill of Sidi Belhassen to the south.

The regulating layout of perpendicular hierarchically organized avenues, streets, and passages was firmly established in outline, starting from the old Promenade de la Marine, which became the main avenue, and the perpendicular axis of Avenue de Paris to the North and avenue de Carthage to the south (1890).

The blocks thus defined, started to be built, according to municipal building regulations, from the western extreme of the principal axis to beyond Bab Bahar.

The definition (1888-1893), connected to la Goulette by a channel excavated from the mud of the lagoon, bordered by banks and crossing it in a straight east west line, fixed the organization and structure of the colonial new town on the partly silted lands of the marshy shores.

The historical city (Medina and R'batis), partly deprived of its administrative and commercial functions, by the European new town, underwent some transformations which created necessary connections between the two cities.

The most important operation was the planning of a ring boulevard around the Medina, replacing the inner walls, with, along its alignment, new 'European' buildings. An analogous operation was built along certain streets around or crossing the R'batis and their extensions, towards the new town, which had started before 1881 (R. Algérie, R. Bab El Khdra, R. Malta-Srira,...).

During the first period of formation, new services were installed in the perpendicular pattern of the new town: the St. Charles college (1882, after 1892 Carnot high school), the PTT. Hotel (1888), the Municipal Market (1891), the General Treasurer (1900).

Other services were on the perimeter of the settlement: to the south, the municipal slaughterhouse (1888) and the Italian Hospital; to the west, the Professional School (1906), the Civil Hospital, and the Civil Prison; to the north, the Institut Pasteur (1900).

A barren area, comprised between the two city walls to the north of the Kasbah was occupied by administrative buildings like the Direction of Public Works and Finances (1892), the Direction of Agriculture, and the Justice Palace (1900). The Kasbah, which had already partly lost its governmental functions, was occupied by the garrison barracks.

In this period, the outskirts of the settlement started to be organized as garden-cities: to the west, between the outer city-walls and the dense traditional settlement of R'bat Bab Jazira, was the Montfleury quarter; to the north-west, beyond the ramparts and the boulevard surrounding the R'bat Bab Souika, the Millet-ville (later France-ville) quarter.

In the plans of 1906-1909, a complete network of (at first horse drawn and later electrified) tramways appeared which served the new town along its principal axis, connecting it to the nearby suburbs to the north and south. It ran around the Medina on the
Plan of the city of Tunis and its region 1928
outside boulevard and crossed the Bab Souika and Bab Bou Sadour suburbs.

The city and the settlement in the 1930s

The evolution of the central city until the 1930s — when colonisation celebrated its illusory apogee — continued on the pattern we have just described. In comparing the 1928 map of Tunis or the 1930 municipal map (1) with earlier plans, no fundamental changes occurred in the structure of the city. There was clearly an increase in building, which completed and filled in the new town blocks — only defined by building regulations and alignments in the maps at the beginning of the twentieth century — starting from the central area, the axis of Avenue J. Ferry (formerly Allée de la Marine), both north (to Pasteur square) and south (to Carthage bridge, Merchandising Station). In the central city there were also other changes resulting from the railways: the abolition of the Tunis-Bardo line and the two branching lines towards the old port, substituted by tramway lines (2), whose trace was later absorbed by the perpendicular pattern of street and blocks of the new town.

On the northern outskirts of the central city, on both sides of Belvedere Park, and southwards, beyond the older Montfleury quarter, the plots of the garden city were designed and developed. Here villas a new type of individual, secluded dwelling, on a European model, were introduced by colonization.

Outside the city suburbs had existed from ancient times, with different territorial organization, always centered on a town. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, some localities became more populated being linked to the capital by their different functions (La Goulette, La Marsa, le Bardo, l’Ariana, Radès, Hamman Lif.). Around 1930, these suburbs emerged from their isolation, or developed new functions, and were more directly connected to Tunis by daily traffic through routes of regional importance, railways (3) and electric tramways, and by municipal organization, on the model of the capital, which was adopted by the different settlements (4).

The new element which did not yet appear in the plans of the 1930, is the impact of increasing the rural migration. The de-structuring of the socio-economic traditional organization of the rural world, was provoked by the impact of colonization, and by a new capitalistic relation to production in agriculture (land tenure, modernization, mechanization...) Since the early 1930’s, the proletarization of small Tunisian agriculturists occurred, and a growing, massive migration towards the great coastal cities, especially towards Tunis. This rural migration, saw the populating of the Medina, and the first areas of spontaneous under-integrated settlement, the ‘gourbivilles’ (5). These rose on the marginal lands of the central city, for many reasons not suitable for urbanization and without any planning regulations.

The areas of Jebel Lahmar on the clay hills to the west of Belvedere, of Mellassine on the marshy shores of Sebkret es-Sejoumi, of Manoubia on the hilly heights to the south of the city, became the main sites where the older ‘gourbivilles’ grew. Besides the twopartite city of the first years of colonization, the third fundamental component is the under-integrated settlement, of disinterested migrants, which to this day has become characteristic of the growth of many cities of the Maghreb.

The first master plans

Compared to the analysis of urban growth of Tunis up to the 1930s, the analysis of the first master plans sets further limits: in these plans of the first colonial period, the ancient city and its relationships with the new town are analysed.

The 1920 municipal plan

The master plan entrusted in 1919 to the Architect V. Valensi and probably printed in 1920 as a preliminary project submitted by the administration to the municipal council, is likely to be the first municipal plan completed in all its details (6). Evidently it was preceded by other master plans, or at least by a building layout to which the first regulations, since 1889 were applied, which organized the new town and the central city (7). The 1920 plan, was already too late to be able to modify the new town. Concerning the ancient city, the general view and vocabulary were those of the colonial period — the «indigene city» as opposed to the «European city» and coloured with a taste for the picturesque, a mannered orientalism «This old picturesque city which makes our city incomparable to all the oriental cities of the Mediterranean basin, and which attracts tourists and artists». Nevertheless there was, respect and a will to safeguard the entire historical city (8).

New planning proposals should be made «with the greatest prudence», «avoiding major alterations and adopting only small intervention», and should not be a comprehensive program but piecemeal.

The 1931 municipal plan

In the plan included in the essay, «L’urbanisme à Tunis», by the Municipality, which appeared in the proceedings of the «Congrès International de l’Urbanisme aux Colonies», held in the International Colonial Exposition of Paris in 1931 (9), the quarters classified under the supervision of the service of historic monuments appear to be considerably reduced.
in comparison to those envisaged in the 1920 plan. Actually, both the Medina and the R'bats, all the area to the east of new town, was not protected. Here and there renovation penetrated deeply: "It seems quite unlikely to think of building today the separation between the ancient and the new city, where the ramparts are no more". Particularly regarding La Hara, the old ghetto to the north-east of the Medina, the planning provisions affirmed: "the area of La Hara, where there are plenty of indigent buildings, often in ruins and of a frequently remarked insalubrity, will be condemned to make place for a new European quarter, crossed by 35 meters wide thorough-fares from Porte de France to the Bab Bou Sadoun» (evidently by Bab Souika). The thoroughfare, from Porte de France to Bab Souika, continuing to the Bou Sadoun gate by enlarging the existing street, was shown in a map likely to be a more recent one, which well illustrates the program: this program seems to be the origin of operations realized in 1943-44, partial demolition of La Hafsia and the building of three collective buildings on three blocks on a European pattern in the heart of the Medina.

The historians, Medina and R'bats — notwithstanding the serious loss of functions and the doubling of the new town — maintained, the statute which safeguarded its total unity; but in a second phase of reduced functions and population of the historical centre, a considerable fringe to the east was annexed to the European city and aggressively renovated.

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1 Treaty of Bardo, establishing the protectorate of France on the Regency of Tunis, signed on 12 May 1881.
2 See list of maps and plans used.
3 J. Berque, Médinas, villégiatures et bidonvilles in «Cahiers de Tunisie», T. IV, 1958, pp. 5-42.
5 A. Desoulati, Tunis sous les Hafsides, évolution urbaine et activité architecturale, Tunis, 1976.
6 P. Selbag, Les travaux maritimes de Hassan ibn Numan. IBLA 33° year, n. 125, 1970/1.
11 On 10 Sept. 1857 by Sidi Mohamed Bey (1855-1859); followed on Jan. 1861 by the proclamation of the constitution, by Mohamed es-Sadok Bey (1859-1862), accomplishment of the reformist policy.

12 CRESM Les influences occidentales dans les villes maghrébines à l'époque contemporaine Aix en Provence, 1974, (for communications and discussions concerning the Tunisian city, chapter IV, Tunisia).
14 The first building regulation is dated 24th Nov. 1889, and has been modified without important changes until 1947 for what concerns the division of the territory. In its first drawing the urban area of the municipality was divided in three parts: European quarter, Medina, suburbs.
15 The decision to create a modern port on such a contentious site raised ardent arguments about the technical absurdity of the choice. Two railways companies and their lines undoubtedly weighed on the decision.
16 Part of these ramparts, between Bab Jazira and Bab Carthage had already disappeared before 1881. In the new organization the principal gates, Bab Bahar (which was cleaned in 1936-38), Bab Jadir, Bab Menara are preserved.
17 Most of the streets which compose the boulevard surrounding the Medina and crossing the ancient suburb were linked by the European quarter, in the first draft building regulations.
18 This plan, which is included in: L'urbanisme à Tunis in L'urbanisme aux Colonies..., 1932 (see list of maps annexed, 2.2), presents the city in the 1930's with some indications of town planning.
19 The 1928 plan, shows a clear cartographical mistake, the branch towards the ancient port (or from the northern network is missing; this is shown in the previous and following plans; and it was still a principal road of the urban network.
20 To the railway lines, the 'agricultural' lines of Nabeul-Grombalia, Cretèville (Mornag) and Pont du Fahs, and the 'mining' lines of Kalaa Jerda-Jerissa have been added.
21 It is interesting to analyse in what order and by which dates the 12 cities in the outskirts of Tunis become municipalities (except Tunis, which was organized on a western pattern in 1858, before the protectorate); nine cities were transformed into municipalities between 1984 and 1919 — La Goulette, Sidi Bou Said, Hammam Lif, Rades, l'Ariana, le Bardo, St. Germaine (Za Zara after Independence), la Marsa and Carthage, only in 1942 did la Manouba, and in the second post-war period Méqina and Ben Arous become municipalities.
22 The spontaneous settlement of the first generation is called 'gour-biville' after the 'gourbi', a type of rudimentary and precarious rural dwelling. In most cases in Tunis this type of dwelling, developed into a type with central courtyards, permanent rural 'touch' and traditional urban 'star'.
25 To maintain this unity, it would be suitable to avoid the brutal cuts which would cut into pieces the indivisible whole Municipalité of Tunis, op.cit., p. 10.
27 Ibidem, p. 54.
28 Ibidem, p. 54.

Bibliography

Besides the books and articles quoted in the notes, it would be useful to refer to the following works on the urban history of Tunis in the colonial period:


b) F. Beguin and other: Arabiances, Limites et grands tračés, Paris, n.d. (1974); R. Berardi, Tunisie e l'occupazione
coloniale. Società e spazio tradizionale nell'urto con la cultura occidentale in: M. Balbo and others. La città tra colonialismo e nuova dipendenza. Il caso del Maghreb, Milano 1981.

On present day Tunis the most recent and complete geographical studies are:

List of maps and plans used
1.1. Colin, 1860
Map of the city of Tunis drawn in the scale of 1/5000.
1.2. Plan Tocanne, 1882
Map of the surroundings of Tunis and Carthage. Scale 1/20000 survey done...under the direction of Mr le Sa. Lieut. Tocanne July-October 1882
1.3 Plan Le Français, 1893
Map of Tunis drawn by Henry le François. Scale 1/8000 in: Henry le Français, Guide Annuaire tunisien. 1894
Subs.by la Chambre de Commerce de Tunis. Tunis-Marseille
1.4. Plan de Tunis, 1896
1.5. Plan Proust, 1906
Tunis and its surroundings in 1906. Scale 1/10000

Paul Proust, Tunis. June 1906
1.6. Plan Picard, 1909
Map of Tunis, edited in 1909 by the library J. Picard &C.ie
1.4. Avenue de France, Scale 1/5000
1.7. Plan IGN, 1928
Surroundings of Tunis. Scale 1/50000
IGN Publ. by le Serv. géogr. de l'Armée. Revis. of 1920
Completed in 1928
2.1. Plan Valensi, 1919-20
in: Municipalité de Tunis. Notice sur le projet d'aménagements, d'embellissements et d'extension de la ville de Tunis.
2.2. Plan Municipal, 1931
in: L'urbanisme à Tunis. By the Municipality. p. 57
La Charité sur-L. 1932
2.3. Plan Municipal, 1932
Tunis. Present state with the transformations considered by Services Techniques.
Plan n. 2 of a dossier of pictures of plans, no date.
1.1b Plan IGN, 1928
Surroundings of Tunis. Scale 1/5000
IGN Publ. by le Service Géographique de l'Armée. Revision of 1902. Completed in 1928. issue of 1941